

## Public Trust in Science and Academic Freedom: A European Perspective

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Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a privilege to have been invited to reflect on those important issues in such a company. I would like to thank the entire IVA team for the invitation. I can probably take for granted, in this room, that we all believe in the importance of science and in the essential role of a strong and independent University. Throughout modern history, Universities have stood as sanctuaries for scientific inquiry – spaces where knowledge is pursued freely, rigorously and critically. They have nurtured the kind of deep understanding, bold innovation and critical thinking without which neither meaningful progress nor resilient democracy would be possible.

I will structure my remarks around two main issues. First, I will explore current dynamics contributing to the erosion of public trust in science. Second, I will turn to the state of

academic freedom. In both sections, I will draw comparisons between developments in Europe and in the United States. Finally, I will conclude by referencing a recent French report that offers a comprehensive set of proposals to counter the current decline in academic freedom and to restore public confidence in science.

## **Current Trends and the Erosion of Public Trust in Science**

A good place to start is to ask:

### *What Sustains Public Trust in Science?*

Trust in science does not just happen: it rests on a number of essential foundations. First, it requires integrity – both of the scientific process and of the scientist. Second, science needs to remain independent – both of political agendas and economic interests. It should serve the public interest and the common good, not ideology or profit. Third, science must be meaningfully engaged with society – as a collaborative effort to address real-world challenges. It should not be a detached and elite pursuit. Finally, trust in science also requires transparency and accessibility. Scientific knowledge should be communicated clearly, shared openly and made available to all – demonstrating rigor in the process but also relevance.

Yet, there is a paradox here. The moment science steps out of its ivory tower to engage with society, it becomes vulnerable to the very pressures that threaten to undermine its legitimacy – political or ideological instrumentalization, economic capture, but also its inherent dynamics as a social field.

### *Internal Trends Eroding Trust in Science*

Let me unpack this last point. What is implied here is that some of the forces that undermine the legitimacy of science come in fact from its own internal dynamics. The way science is organized, evaluated and published can create distortions that erode public trust. The increasing hyper-specialization of science, along with rigid disciplinary and even sub-disciplinary boundaries, has contributed to a research system that often appears disconnected from the complex, systemic nature of contemporary challenges.

At the same time, intense competitive pressures (such as the publish or perish culture), and the outsized influence of gatekeepers can foster a sense of opacity and exclusion. Layered hierarchies, growing bureaucratic demands, and a pervasive audit culture – coupled with peer review and publishing norms that tend to favor conformity have their advantages and strengths. But they can also stifle innovation, discourage intellectual risk-

taking and limit the diversity of perspectives that science needs to thrive and remain relevant.

Let me give a few illustrative examples. The imperative to “publish (or perish)” can, in practice, incentivize quantity over quality, pushing scholars towards safer, shorter-term projects at the expense of scientific curiosity and of more ambitious, longer-term explorations that carry greater intellectual risks and delay publishing and career rewards. Moreover, double-blind peer-review processes, while designed to ensure fairness, often reinforce prevailing paradigms, leading to a normalization and homogenization of knowledge. As research metrics, evaluation standards, and even the language in which we publish, become increasingly standardized across the globe, so too does our collective understanding of what constitutes “valuable” or “high quality” research. One of the most troubling consequences of this trend is a gradual erosion of intellectual diversity – at a time when bold and creative thinking is more necessary than ever.

It is essential to acknowledge the self-generated dynamics that can instill doubt and even suspicion about the value of science, eroding public trust in the process.

Let me also briefly underscore, though it is far from anecdotal, the damaging impact of scientific misconduct on public trust. Breaches of integrity are more than isolated incidents. They often reflect deeper systemic pressures embedded in today’s research environment. Intense competition and accountability-driven governance explain many cases of misconduct. The relentless pursuit of publication, recognition, and funding can create conditions where ethical boundaries are tested or ignored. I will not cite specific cases here; there are unfortunately many, across disciplines. Each case serves as a stark reminder that integrity in science is non-negotiable. When the scientific community fails to uphold and enforce its own standards, public confidence inevitably falters, and the credibility of science as a trustworthy societal institution is put at risk.

### *External Trends – Financing*

Beyond the internal dynamics that arguably contribute to the erosion of trust in science, there are also powerful external forces at play. Here, the question of financing is particularly critical.

The sources, structures and conditions of research funding exert a profound influence on the scientific enterprise – shaping not only what gets researched and for what purpose, but also how questions are framed, and even who owns the results of that research. I will only mention here a number of well-known trends. In western countries, a well-documented trend since the 1980s has been the growing dominance of private sector

investment but also of private-sector logic within public funding. This shift has had significant implication. One of the most notable consequences is a reinforced emphasis on hard sciences – particularly those fields that promise rapid innovation and commercial application. As private funding or private-funding logic increasingly drives the research agenda, disciplines that yield marketable technologies or immediate economic returns tend to be prioritized, often at the expense of more exploratory or socially oriented research, let alone of humanities. And yet, it is quite clear that we have never needed quality research in social sciences and humanities as we do now.

Another well-established trend that deserves mention is the foundational role military research and development has played in shaping modern science and technology. A significant portion of the scientific advances we rely on today were originally conceived and developed within the context of war and defense, to meet strategic military objectives. It is worth pausing a moment to ask ourselves what our science and research would look like if it had been framed and financed for peace and long-term human security and well-being rather than for war and short-term military security.

In reality, the financing of science – whether it comes from public institutions or private entities – inevitably shapes its trajectory and influences its outcomes. No funding source is neutral; each carries priorities, expectations, and constraints that leave a mark on what is studied, how it is approached, and how it is shared. Arguably, the growing prominence of private financing – often driven by short-term goals and expectations of immediate returns – intensifies the perception that science increasingly serves narrow interests rather than the public good. Whether or not this perception reflects reality, it carries significant consequences. It can erode public trust in scientific institutions and undermine the legitimacy of science as a neutral, reliable resource for society.

#### *A Socio-Cultural Trend*

In September 2024, the UN Secretary General's Scientific Advisory Board published a [Statement on Trust in Science](#). It was noted in this statement that public trust in science is increasingly undermined by perceptions of elitism, politicization, misinformation, the erosion of evidence-based thinking and conflicts of interest. Strikingly, the document did not address what may be a deeper socio-cultural explanation for the erosion of public trust in science.

Let me now turn to this trend, with origins both inside and outside the scientific community. At its core lies a profound paradigm shift in the epistemological framing of science itself. We might describe this as the end of positivism and the growing recognition that all scientific knowledge is situated and contextual. This epistemological shift has, in

many ways, opened a kind of pandora's box. The idea of a single, objective truth has been unsettled, and science has, to some extent, been dislodged from its pedestal.

Let me be clear: this is not a call to reverse course or to suppress the critical insights that have emerged from this evolution – insights that were both necessary and long overdue. The genie cannot – and should not – be put back in the bottle. But if we are to fully grasp the current crisis of trust in science, we must not overlook the fact that this evolution has had an impact on the perception of scientific authority.

This epistemological shift parallels another profound societal evolution: the democratization of education and the unprecedented direct access to information enabled by digital technologies. Today, vast amounts of knowledge are available directly to individuals, often bypassing traditional scientific intermediaries. This obviously does not mean that knowledge is unmediated – if anything algorithms are the new intermediaries and we need to do serious work on this. But the dominant perception is one of direct and unmediated access. Arguably, this development could be seen to represent, in the realm of knowledge, a functional equivalent to the protestant reformation: a move away from centralized, elite and top-down authority toward individual, horizontal appropriation.

Individuals now have the confidence and the means – at least so they believe – to access and interpret information independently, without relying on traditional gatekeepers of scientific knowledge, on the priests of science, on scientists. This shift has fundamentally challenged the traditional authority of science and scientists, marking a departure from an era of unquestioned trust. In its place, we see the rise of individual agency, where people feel empowered to form their own judgments. While this democratization has positive dimensions, it also creates a path for manipulation and group dynamics.

The covid-19 crisis vividly illustrated this. Scientific doubt and inconsistencies, visible disagreements among experts led to widespread confusion and growing skepticism. In the absence of clear, consistent messaging, alternative narratives started to flourish, including in the form of conspiracy theories, as individuals sought to make sense and create coherence by themselves and outside traditional scientific channels. This environment has been fertile ground for populist actors, who have exploited these dynamics to undermine trust in scientific institutions and to promote their own agendas.

In a June 2025 [interview with Tucker Carlson](#), Robert F. Kennedy Jr., US Secretary of Health and Human Services made a provocative statement: “Trusting the experts is not a feature of science or democracy, he said. It is a feature of religion and totalitarianism”. This is a striking claim – one that flips conventional wisdom on its head. Kennedy's

rhetorical maneuver echoes Orwellian Newspeak from [1984](#), where language was being weaponized to invert meaning—Freedom became Slavery, War became Peace, and Ignorance became Strength. By reframing public trust in science as a surrender of personal judgment rather than a mark of informed citizenship, Kennedy taps into and amplifies existing skepticism. Mistrust in that context is reinvented as virtue – an expression of democratic agency and intellectual independence. What makes this strategy both fascinating and deeply troubling is the deliberate manipulation and weaponization of real concerns – instead of trying to address issues of transparency and governance, the dynamic at work is to weaponize them to further erode public confidence in science. This, in turn, paves the way for disinformation and ideologically driven narratives that can altogether bypass rigorous validation and scrutiny since those processes have been rebranded as corrupt.

### **What is the Situation Regarding Academic Freedom?**

Let me now turn to the issue of academic freedom. I am using [UNESCO's definition](#), where academic freedom is the “the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.” Crucially, this freedom is inseparable from institutional autonomy, which guarantees that Universities can govern themselves independently and foster an environment conducive to the unfettered pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

#### *Measuring Trends*

Globally, academic freedom is under threat. According to *Scholars at Risk's* [Free to Think 2024 Report](#), 391 attacks on higher education communities were recorded across 51 countries between July 2023 and June 2024 – a sharp increase from 297 incidents in the previous year. The [Academic Freedom Index](#), produced since 2019 by a coalition of organizations that includes Scholars at Risk and the Swedish V-Dem Institute, only confirms this trajectory. Over the past decade, 34 countries have experienced statistically significant declines in academic freedom, while only eight have shown improvement. This marks the first sustained global decline in academic freedom since World War II, reversing decades of progress. The impact is widespread: 3.6 billion people – roughly 45.5% of the global population – now live in countries where academic freedom is severely restricted.

It is interesting to note that organizations such as *Scholars at Risk* or the *Academic Freedom Index* focus on documenting formal violations of academic freedom. Yet, beyond these overt breaches, a more subtle and pervasive trend is emerging : a rise in self-censorship within universities, a phenomenon that is clearly global in scope. The European Parliament has developed an [Annual Academic Freedom Monitor](#), which complements quantitative data with qualitative studies. The report shows that even in countries with strong formal protections for academic freedom, informal pressures and fear of backlash can lead to widespread self-censorship. In 2025, the Council of Europe launched a series of ten policy briefs under its [Academic Freedom Insights](#) initiative – one of which focuses specifically on [self-censorship in academia](#). This brief identifies key drivers, such as political pressure, social backlash and institutional constraints, and warns of the emergence of a « spiral of silence » that can take hold even in the absence of formal censorship. It calls for proactive measures to cultivate environments where diverse ideas can be expressed freely, emphasizing that self-censorship undermines Universities' role as « the critical conscience of society ». Despite its significance, the phenomenon of self-censorship remains insufficiently documented and studied. Yet the trend is broad and increasingly visible. American Universities too have been significantly affected – particularly over the past year. According to the [Inside Higher Ed 2025 Survey](#), 62% of Faculty members now modify or avoid certain terms when speaking with students, and 25% refrain from assigning controversial texts, reflecting a climate of caution and even, in some cases, fear.

### *The Role of Denunciation Practices*

Denunciation practices have emerged as a powerful driving mechanism of self-censorship, playing a central role in the broader erosion of academic freedom. These actions – ranging from online harassment and public shaming to formal complaints – can originate from colleagues or students but are also increasingly amplified and orchestrated by political groups, media outlets and advocacy organizations. They create a chilling effect, prompting scholars to avoid politically sensitive or controversial topics and spreading dynamics of self-censorship. In the process, this undermines the core principles of free inquiry and open debate that are essential to academic life. Social media has significantly intensified these dynamics, enabling rapid and far-reaching campaigns that can inflict lasting reputational harm. In the United States, such denunciation practices have become particularly pervasive. They have been institutionalized further by political decisions that restrict what can be taught or researched – deepening the climate of caution and constraint within academia.

Although less pervasive than in the United States, denunciation practices are also present across Europe. These actions may target individual scholars or entire academic groups working on specific topics. While the European media landscape is generally less polarized, both traditional and social media play a significant role in amplifying such campaigns. Despite a prevailing belief in parts of Europe that its academic traditions and public university systems offer protection against these pressures, this sense of exceptionalism risks obscuring real vulnerabilities to a trend that is, in essence, global.

### *The Trump Effect*

Returning to the United States, it is crucial to highlight the rapid escalation of attacks on academic freedom since Donald Trump's return to power. The Trump administration, and its MAGA-aligned allies, have intensified a sweeping campaign against American universities, portraying them as hubs of "woke ideology" and leftist indoctrination. This campaign had been prepared for a while. As early as November 2021, Vice-President J.D. Vance delivered a [keynote at the National Conservatism Conference](#) titled *Universities are the Enemy*. In that speech, he argued that universities, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences, had become ideological strongholds hostile to traditional American values. He portrayed universities not as centers of knowledge and debate but as producers of « deceit and lies ». This vision has since been embedded in [Project 2025](#) – the roadmap to policy making in the current Trump administration – and is being implemented through the [Compact for Academic Excellence](#). This Compact has been proposed to leading universities and framed as a voluntary agreement—but in practice, it conditions Federal funding to adherence to conservative policy priorities. By mid-October 2025, [several leading universities](#), including MIT, Brown University, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of South Carolina had publicly rejected the compact – citing serious concerns over its implications for academic freedom and institutional autonomy. These decisions are expected to have significant consequences for their access to Federal research funding. Meanwhile, in Arizona, the Senate President has actively urged the university to sign the Compact, framing it as a strategic opportunity to secure increased funding and align with conservative values.

The Trump administration has also aggressively weaponized Federal agencies to suppress dissent and reshape the landscape of higher education. The Department of Education has launched investigations into dozens of universities, targeting programs and scholarships deemed to violate new federal interpretations of civil rights law – particularly those related to race and gender. Simultaneously, the Department of Homeland Security has begun [scrutinizing international students](#) for their online political activity, with some facing visa revocation or even deportation for participating in campus protests. These actions form part of a broader campaign to dismantle critical scholarship, particularly in fields such as race, gender, and colonialism. But they also target scholars working on anything related to environmental challenges and even on some important biological and medical issues. Talking in front of a group of scientists at the World Meteorological Organization, in October 2025, [UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres](#) urged them to



continue working – praising WMO for being “a barometer of truth... a shining example of science supporting humanity”. And, he added: “Scientists and researchers should never fear telling the truth. I stand in solidarity with you and all scientists and I always will”.

The [American Association of University Professors](#) (AAUP) and other academic bodies have warned that the MAGA movement’s assault on higher education goes far beyond efforts to silence dissent – it represents a deliberate attempt to fundamentally restructure the university system to serve nationalist and ideological ends. As historian Ellen Schrecker has put it, this wave of repression “attacks everything that happens on American campuses,” posing a direct threat to the foundations of intellectual inquiry, academic freedom and democratic culture.

### *Diffusion to Europe and Mimetism*

It is important to note that the ideological blueprint laid out in *Project 2025*—with its aggressive targeting of universities and academic freedom—is beginning to [echo across parts of Europe](#). While the institutional structures and political cultures differ, the rhetorical strategies and policy impulses are increasingly familiar. In several European countries, conservative and far-right actors have begun to frame universities as breeding grounds for ideological bias, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. This narrative is often imported from American discourse, through the action of [dense networks of actors](#) (including think tanks, intellectuals and politicians). The result is a growing willingness to question the legitimacy of entire academic fields – particularly those defined as threats to national identity and cohesion.

The convergence of ideological agendas across the Atlantic signals a troubling shift—one that threatens the foundational principles of academic freedom and the role of universities as spaces for critical inquiry and democratic debate.

## Concluding Remarks

Let me try to summarize some of the key points I have made so far and how they connect with each other. I will then end with some reflections on what is to be done.

We are living through a period in which the erosion of public trust in science is converging with a powerful assault on academic freedom – one of the essential conditions for ensuring the quality and integrity of research and science. This assault on academic freedom comes through very conscious and coordinated efforts at curtailing the autonomy of the very institutions that have historically safeguarded academic freedom – universities.

As I have tried to show, the erosion of public trust in science stems in part from internal dynamics – most notably, a growing perception of elitist detachment, a lack of transparency in how scientific knowledge is produced and communicated and persistent concerns about funding models and their potential influence on research outcomes. These issues are compounded by the corrosive effects of accountability-based governance and of an increasingly competitive landscape, which can distort priorities, reduce risk-taking and innovation, and foster hyper specialization.

Rather than addressing these internal weaknesses by rethinking governance and funding structures to better support scientific integrity and societal relevance, the prevailing political trend has been to weaponize these shortcomings and turn them into vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are exploited to further erode public trust – by portraying science as a biased institution and scientists as unaccountable elites. This instrumentalization not only undermines the credibility of scientific research but also casts doubt on the legitimate role of science in informing public policy. While this trend is particular pronounced in the United States, it is increasingly gaining traction across Europe as well.

The assault on academic freedom and universities runs parallel to that. As I have argued, it is a highly politically motivated drive – particularly visible and violent again in the United States. Quoting J.D. Vance in his 2021 [speech](#) at the National Conservative Conference: “We have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities in this country”. In a 2024 [interview with CBS](#), J.D. Vance clarified that his intention was «not to eliminate universities» altogether but rather to compel them to choose between survival and ideological alignment. In the same interview, he praised Viktor Orban’s approach to higher education, stating that «his way has to be the model for us».

Since then, this approach to higher education and academic freedom has been explicitly incorporated into *Project 2025* and has shaped actual policy-making in the United States. It is essential to recognize the reciprocal, mimetic dynamics at play across the Atlantic – dynamics that travel in both directions and are actively nurtured by international networks of think tanks and political actors.

It is essential to remember that universities are not merely centers of knowledge production or training grounds for future professionals —they are foundational pillars of democratic resilience. They are vital counterpowers in any healthy democracy – they nurture critical thinking, foster informed citizenship, and offer protected spaces where dissent and debate can thrive.

So, what is to be done? I will end with a reference to a recent report titled [Defending and Promoting Academic Freedom](#), published last week in France. Commissioned by *France Universités*—the alliance of French University Presidents—this report was written by Sciences-Po professor Stéphanie Balme. Although written in a national context, its ambition is clearly European. The report is being shared with European institutions and proposes a set of actionable proposals for coordinated implementation across the continent.

The report warns that academic freedom is no longer under threat solely in authoritarian regimes—it is now under strain within democratic societies themselves. Drawing parallels with developments in the US, it documents concerning trends in France: political interference in university governance, conditional public funding tied to vague ideological conditions, social media attacks on scholars, and growing restrictions on access to research sites and grants. These developments reflect a broader shift towards the politicization of knowledge and the erosion of university autonomy, echoing the American narrative that frames critical scholarship as ideological activism. The report also warns that, despite France’s democratic tradition, legal and cultural protections for academic freedom are quite weak, leaving universities vulnerable to both political and private pressures. Many of these concerns likely resonate beyond France, across many other European countries.

The report puts forward a total of 65 recommendations, which I cannot detail here, but which can be broadly grouped into three categories – legal, organizational and governance, and finally cultural. I will highlight just a few key recommendations from each of those categories.

First, the legal recommendations. One key proposal is to enshrine academic freedom as a fundamental legal and constitutional principle. The report also underscores the need for complementary legislative measures, including a framework law that would define the scope of academic freedom, establish procedural safeguards, and reinforce institutional autonomy for universities. Additionally, it calls for the creation of a legal regime protecting the confidentiality of research sources, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, modeled on the protections afforded to journalistic sources.

Second, the organizational and governance recommendations. To make academic freedom operational, the report calls for a structural overhaul of university governance and support systems. Key proposals include the automatic activation of protective measures for academics under threat, and the appointment of dedicated “academic freedom representatives” within each institution. Universities are encouraged to adopt academic freedom charters, establish ethical funding committees, and implement

training programs for both staff and students. These reforms aim to shift from reactive to preventive and systemic approaches, ensuring that academic freedom is embedded at the heart of organizational structure, governance and practice.

Finally, beyond legal and institutional measures, the report emphasizes the need to foster a broader societal culture that values and defends academic freedom. Among its proposals are a national awareness campaign, the transformation of France's annual Science Festival into a "Science and Academic Freedom Festival," and the establishment of an Academic Freedom Award to honor exemplary initiatives. At the European level, the report urges France to take the lead in creating a European observatory for academic freedom, integrating academic freedom indicators into university rankings, and promoting a European label for institutions committed to its protection. These initiatives are framed within a broader vision of science diplomacy, positioning academic freedom as a strategic asset for democratic resilience and international cooperation.

I will end here and I am looking forward to our discussion.