Abstracts

Academic Freedom and the Challenges of Humanism(s)

Harrison for Fox Photos Ltd, *Holland House library after an air raid*, London, 1940. Seattle, Getty Images. Wikimedia Commons

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Abstracts

"A Critical Review of African Documents on Academic Freedom," Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atua (Africa Coalition for Academic Freedom)

The task for the design and development of academic freedom principles in Africa to promote and protect this right has largely fallen on the shoulders of academics, and less by other actors such as the State, universities and students.

Records indicate that Somalia was the only African country whose 1960 independence constitution guaranteed the autonomy of universities. And it was only in the post-Cold War return-to-democracy era in Africa which saw the introduction of academic freedom in a number of African constitutions which were adopted in that period.

The key documents on academic freedom championed by African academics are the Dar es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility adopted in 1990 by six Tanzanian academic staff associations. This was followed by the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility which came into being a few months later in the same year before, in 2007, the Juba Declaration on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy also emerged. The Council for the Development of the Social Sciences in Africa (CODESRIA) was heavily involved in organising the conferences in which the Kampala and Juba Declarations came into being. Then in 2025, the Annex to the Kampala Declaration was adopted.

My presentation will analyse the critical role that these documents have played in promoting academic freedom on the continent. At the same time, the presentation will highlight some gaps in these documents, especially with respect to the extent to which they recognise the rights of students in general, female academics and students in particular, the university itself, minority groups, the LGBTQ community, and students with special needs, among others. The presentation will also touch on the emphasis of these documents on responsibility of academics, especially in the Annex to the Kampala Declaration and whether and to what extent that reflects the African reality.

"The Impossible Academic Freedom of Israeli Critical Social Scientists: 'Lefty Arab-lovers' or 'Genocidal Maniacs'?," Nir Avieli (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev)

Israeli critical social scientists find themselves in recent years in an impossible deadlock: accused by the Israeli regime and its representatives as "insane progressives," by some university authorities and colleagues from other disciplines as wasting public money and as a threat to the mere existence of Israeli Academia, by our students for being "lefty Arab-lovers," by significant echelons of Israeli society as traitors that wash the nation's "dirty laundry" in public, by diaspora Jews as antisemitic self-hating Jews, and by our colleagues overseas as collaborators, war criminals or "genocidal maniacs" (as argued in a message on "Anthropology Matters" recently) — to be avoided and boycotted. While the domestic critique is based on our critical analysis of the situation in Israel and the fact that many of us are actively engaged in the struggle to stop the insane violence and somehow curb the regime, the international critique is based on denying the very same practices. These attacks from all directions leave us overwhelmed and violently silenced. While each of these accusations is based on vague, inaccurate or irrelevant facts, they challenge and undermine the very notion of academic freedom as described in the CFP: "the right to critically examine the very structures and categories that shape our societies. . .". In this paper I present a series of cases that demonstrate how each of these accusations cast at Israeli critical social scientists further erodes our academic freedom and along with it, our ability to conduct, publish, teach and present sound, empirical, up-to-date critical research on Israel and, for that matter, on any society we might be studying. This all-encompassing boycott is self-defeating also in the sense that it pushes Israeli scholars away from the academic and public spheres in Israel and abroad, leaving the ground for populist, unfound and biased readings of the situation by Israelis and outsiders, including the international academic community.

"Academic Freedom vs Academic Freedom: A South African Case," Sindre Bangstad (KIFO – Institute For Church, Religion & Worldview Research)

In August 2024, a professor of history at the University of Cape Town, Adam Mendelsohn, filed a lawsuit against his own employer, the University of Cape Town (UCT), at the Cape High Court.

Mendelsohn argued that when the highest decision-making body of the university, the Council of the UCT, in June 2024 adopted a resolution on Gaza in which it rejected the controversial antisemitism definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) (2016) in favour of the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (2021), it violated Mendelsohn's academic freedom.

Mendelsohn also argued that university managers had neglected to inform council about the potential consequences for UCT's funding should the resolution be adopted. In November 2025, the Cape High Court reserved judgement in the case; the case will be decided in March or April 2026.

In the almost six thousand pages of legal documents submitted, it is noteworthy that both parties to the case (the UCT and Mendelsohn), as well as the *amicus curae* (the South African Board of Jewish Deputies and South African Jews for a free Palestine), invoke principles of academic freedom in support of their arguments. UCT was the university at which the 2014-15 #RhodesMustFall-protests originated; UCT's arguments lean towards an understanding of academic freedom which might be characterized as "decolonial," whereas Mendelsohn's understanding of academic freedom leans towards a European Enlightenment understanding of the term and its implications. Following Butler (2015) and Scott (2019), I argue that what is missing from the latter is an account of the structural and material conditions required for the realization of academic freedom. I also outline the different concepts of academic freedom involved in the case.

" 'The Striptease of Our Humanism': Questioning European Culture from Africa in the Early 1960s," Erica Bellia (University of Cambridge)

In his preface to Frantz Fanon's cult anticolonial book *Les Damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*), Jean-Paul Sartre debunks Eurocentrism, advocating for "the striptease of our humanism" (Sartre 1963, p. 24), an act of radical questioning of European categories. This evocative image complements Fanon's own claim that the new humanity growing out of decolonisation and the Third World could not "do otherwise than define a new humanism both for itself and for others" (Fanon 1963, p. 246).

Fanon's and Sartre's words resonate powerfully with the title and discussions of the congress *Lo spirito dell'umanesimo africano* (*The Spirit of African Humanism*), which took place in the very rooms of the Fondazione Cini in that same year, 1961. The congress was promoted by the Fondazione's Centre of Culture and Civilisation and brought together prominent intellectuals and artists from four different continents—from Aimé Césaire to Alioune Diop and Wole Soyinka, among many others—to discuss the idea of multiple humanisms and related epistemologies. Thanks to a residential fellowship at Fondazione Cini in March and April 2026, I will have the opportunity to study the congress in depth, accessing fundamental archival materials on the networks behind it and its aftermath.

The aim of this paper is therefore threefold:

1. to contextualise the 1961 congress in geopolitical, historical, and cultural terms;
2. to present it as a key moment, with all its contradictions and hypocrisies, in the "striptease" of European humanism and the debate on multiple humanisms;
3. to reflect on the importance of the congress for the present and, methodologically, on the value of studying congresses and other collective practices of knowledge production from an interdisciplinary perspective, in order to design new epistemologies and even, provocatively, a new field: that of Congress Studies.

"Showing, Not Saying: Academic Freedom beyond the Logocentric Paradigm," Joseph L. Clarke (University of Toronto)

Traditional theories of academic freedom have a blind spot. The AAUP documents that established the concept and much subsequent scholarship have adopted speech and text as the paradigm: classroom utterance, written scholarship, the freedom to publish unpopular conclusions. Academic freedom has rarely been formulated in relation to images, even though the display of images is

often a key flashpoint in academic freedom debates. Images can elicit visceral responses that outrun propositional processing. They often prove more volatile in the media than text, and carry unstable meanings as they travel across cultural boundaries. Consequently, the academic treatment of images may be the canary in the coal mine for academic freedom more broadly.

Freedom to display art for scholarly purposes requires explicit defense as inquiry under norms of evidence and context. Two recent institutional failures in North America reveal the category error of treating display as equivalent to assertion. At Hamline University, an instructor lost her job after a student complained that she showed a fourteenth-century Persian painting of the Prophet Muhammad. At Cooper Union, a scholarly exhibition on the Soviet design school Vkhutemas was postponed after it was presumptively branded as Russian propaganda. In both cases, interpretive authority was relocated from scholarly judgment to claims of sacrilege, harm, or complicity.

Pressures on the exhibition of images are not new. Cultures that take representation seriously have often argued over the proper relations between viewers and what they see. The discipline of art history, which took shape in parallel with the modern idea of academic freedom, developed distinctive ways of holding images at critical distance, neither smashing nor sanctifying them.

These art historical methods for displaying images as objects of analysis rather than instruments of provocation or devotion are worth defending even as their claims to universality are questioned.

"Leo Strauss and the Post-Liberal Return to Esotericism: Academic Freedom in an Age of Compulsory Engagement," Federico Dal Bo (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia)

This paper examines whether Leo Strauss's concept of esoteric writing retains critical relevance for academic freedom under contemporary ideological constraints. Strauss recovered Maimonides' "writing between the lines"—enabling philosophical inquiry within hostile environments—recognizing its applicability to any culture demanding conformity. Have post-liberal progressive movements paradoxically recreated conditions requiring such esotericism?

Strauss occupies an ambiguous "post-liberal" position, recognizing liberalism's achievements while diagnosing its self-undermining tensions. His critique anticipated how liberal pluralism might collapse into ideological homogeneity. Contemporary emancipatory movements—LGBT+, Queer theory, Woke discourse, Cancel Culture—ostensibly advance civil rights yet demand ideological adhesion producing conspicuous shortcomings: systematic silence regarding jihadist violence, October 7th massacres, Iranian theocratic repression, resurgent theological politics. This echoes Foucault's catastrophic 1979 romanticization of Khomeini's revolution, misread through anti-imperialism while blind to its theocratic character. Contemporary progressive discourse consistently misapprehends religion through reductive economism or liberal privatization, producing systematic blindness to theological-political dimensions—precisely what Strauss considered most urgent for political philosophy. The result: discourse culture championing critical inquiry while enforcing boundaries on what can be examined.

The paradox: movements rooted in Enlightenment emancipation reproduce ideological constraint their ancestors opposed. Compulsory demonstrative political engagement—demanding scholarship align with approved causes—creates environments where certain questions invite professional sanction. Has erosion of dispassionate critical distance made "writing between the lines" again a condition of intellectual survival?

This paper asks whether Strauss's post-liberal diagnostic remains viable: Can careful writing preserve philosophical inquiry under renewed ideological hegemony? Or does academic culture's transformation—peer enforcement, social media surveillance, institutional compliance—render traditional esotericism obsolete? If universities cannot sustain intellectual pluralism, what possibilities remain for critical thought in democratic societies?

"Akbarian Humanism: The Perfected Human, Perpetual Self-Disclosure, and an Islamic Epistemology of Serendipity," Peter Dziedzic (Harvard University)

This paper proposes a novel concept of "Akbarian humanism" as an Islamic metaphysical contribution to the advancement of a multipolar, global philosophy of academic freedom and humanistic inquiry. Rooted in the Akbarian philosophical school of the Andalusian Sufi Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), one of the most influential thinkers in Islamic history, this framework reimagines academic freedom not merely as a legal right, but as an ontological necessity derived from the nature of what Akbarian scholars call the "Perfected Human" (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*), an anthropological proposal which posts humans as necessary intermediaries between the Absolute Reality (God) and the world of multiplicity. At the core of this proposal is the concept of "Divine Breath" (*nafas al-rahmān*), which

provides a metaphysical basis for curiosity, creativity, and serendipity as the drivers of human experience and inquiry. In Akbarian thought, the cosmos is in a state of "perpetual self-disclosure" (*tajallī*), where the Divine never repeats a single manifestation. In this paper, I argue that this creates a mandate for a pluralism of humanistic inquiry, as no single discipline or ideology can exhaust the infinite forms of reality. Academic freedom, therefore, becomes the liberty to witness and articulate these ever-changing disclosures without being subsumed under one tradition. Furthermore, the paper explores how the Akbarian "Perfected Human"—the microcosm who mirrors all levels of existence—serves as a bridge for cross-cultural knowledge exchange. By moving away from a Western, secular framework, Akbarian humanism offers a model where intellectual autonomy is grounded in a sacred responsibility to truth. This paper explores how the Akbarian tradition suggests diverse epistemologies can maintain mutual intelligibility. This paper concluded by suggesting that this fluid, non-static understanding of the human provides a vital safeguard against capitalistic logic in the context of emerging technologies that threaten to reduce human inquiry to predictable, algorithmic outputs.

"Rethinking the Role of Academic Libraries in the Age of ChatGPT," Andrea Alessandro Gasparini (University of Oslo)

Some time ago, Generation Z initiated a decline in accessing and using knowledge from reliable sources, such as newspapers, opting for social media, blogs, and podcasts. Nowadays, "I will ask Grok . . ." is a recurring sentence when younger library patrons seek knowledge. Academic libraries have always democratically given patrons access to high-quality knowledge. Unfortunately, knowledge creation has again changed with the arrival of services based on artificial intelligence (AI), such as ChatGPT and Grok. More recently, a new generation of web browsers has used both autonomous AI-based agents and generative AI. These web browsers provide new opportunities to combine web searches and generative AI, allowing users to find information dynamically and analyze, summarize, and weight results. Those AI-based technologies and their owners (e.g., companies) have created a new space to trade knowledge and information as a commodity. For them, knowledge has become capital.

For academic libraries, the situation is novel and complex. Patrons are challenging libraries' role as knowledge providers, and AI technologies are offering new, concurring services. In academic libraries, this invites questions such as the following:

- What does "knowledge production" mean when generative AI participates in literature summarization and synthesis?
- How should libraries care for the social construction of knowledge when generative AI shapes what can be known and by whom?

This paper uses critical posthumanist knowledge theory to provide academic libraries with a toolset to support human authority over AI technology. Since generative AI creates knowledge without disclosing its origin, libraries must react with unbiased and quality-checked information.

Posthumanist knowledge theory is based on an interdisciplinary entanglement of nature–culture–technology, allowing the re-humanization of knowledge creation in the generative AI era. Creating an awareness of inequality, based on gender, race and class, environment, discrimination, and marginalization, posthumanist knowledge theory can help libraries show how they can give rich and balanced information, placing humans in the entanglement of nature, culture, and technology.

"The Invisible Governance of Knowledge: Rethinking *de facto* Academic Freedom in Switzerland," Maryna Lakhno (Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology)

Academic freedom is often invoked as a universal value, yet its meaning is rarely interrogated beyond its legal and institutional formulations. In systems such as Switzerland—frequently presented as exemplary in terms of constitutional protection and academic autonomy—academic freedom tends to appear as a settled condition rather than a contested practice. This research challenges that assumption by approaching academic freedom as an epistemic and behavioural phenomenon: something that is continuously enacted, negotiated, and recalibrated within everyday research environments.

Focusing on Swiss STEM universities, the paper examines how contemporary governance arrange-ments—evaluation regimes, performance metrics, and competitive funding structures—shape not only what researchers *do*, but what they come to regard as legitimate, intelligible, or worthwhile knowledge. Rather than framing constraints in terms of censorship or ideological repression, the analysis attends to more subtle processes of anticipatory alignment, through which

researchers in-ternalise evaluative expectations and adjust their intellectual ambitions accordingly. Academic free-dom, in this reading, is neither simply granted nor withdrawn; it is modulated through the normal-isation of criteria that privilege certain forms of inquiry, temporalities, and epistemic styles over others.

Conceptually, the paper advances the notion of an "invisible governance of knowledge" to capture how autonomy is reordered within formally free systems. This perspective opens an epistemologi-cal question central to the conference theme of multiple humanisms: if academic freedom is shaped by governance logics that reward particular modes of knowing, whose epistemologies are rendered visible, and whose remain marginal or unarticulated? The Swiss case thus serves not as an excep-tion, but as a critical lens through which to examine how liberal, high-performing research systems subtly delimit the plurality of humanistic and scientific inquiry.

Empirically, the paper draws on an ongoing mixed-methods study combining survey data and qual-itative interviews with STEM researchers across career stages. It uses this material to reflect on how academic freedom is narrated, rationalised, and quietly redefined in contemporary knowledge production—raising broader questions about autonomy, pluralism, and the future of academic humanism under metricised governance.

"Defining Academic Freedom in Europe: Courts, Soft Law and Integration Tools in Higher Education," Alessandra Lazzarini (University of Padua)

In the European context there is no common definition of academic freedom. The European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice have only recently begun addressing academic freedom and they have developed two different concepts of this value. In the ECtHR jurisprudence academic freedom is conceptualized as an individual right to freedom of expression in the academic context, under Article 10 of the ECHR. Conversely, the ECJ addressed this issue for the first time in *Commission v Hungary* (C-66/18), in which it identified an institutional dimension of academic freedom, the institutional autonomy, under Article 13 of the EU Charter.

Moreover, the concurrent rise of populism and processes of autocratization has reshaped the context of European higher education, prompting EU institutions to substantially increase the frequency and scope of official declarations and policy interventions aimed at safeguarding academic freedom. This paper analyzes the ECtHR and ECJ's case law, as well as EU soft law, to highlight the different approaches to the topic. Furthermore, the article examines the various mechanisms employed by the European Union to connect distinct higher education systems and to fund research initiatives, such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Research Area (ERA), and the Bologna Process, in order to evaluate the extent to which these instruments constrain or enhance academic freedom.

"Theological Roots of Anti-Academic Sentiment in Contemporary Religious Zionism," Mordechai (Mordy) Miller (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev)

This paper examines the theological foundations underlying the contemporary Hardal (an acronym in Hebrew for Haredi-Leumi, meaning ultra-Orthodox nationalist) resistance to academic institutions in Israel. While public debate often frames this resistance in sociological or political terms, I argue that its deepest sources are theological. Drawing on sermons, pamphlets, closed-group recordings, and widely circulated videos produced by leading Hardal rabbis, including Rabbi Zvi Thau, I map the conceptual world that positions the humanities and social sciences as spiritually threatening.

Within this worldview, the modern university is associated with a Christian intellectual lineage and is therefore considered impure. Academic inquiry is portrayed as carrying a hidden intention to undermine the metaphysical sanctity of the State of Israel, conceived as the initial stage of redemption and the future revelation of the Messiah. Critical academic methods are framed as tools that erode the Jewish character of the state and replace it with a Western Christian identity.

I also show how, in the past decade, these theological arguments have intersected with global populist currents. Borrowing rhetoric associated with the notion of a deep state, Hardal leaders describe Israeli academia as an elite institutional network that seeks to weaken religious authority and obstruct the redemptive process.

By integrating qualitative analysis of primary sources with comparative perspectives on religion and political theology, the paper illuminates a case in which academic freedom becomes entangled with metaphysical conceptions of national destiny. Understanding this theological logic is essential for grasping current debates in Israel over the legitimacy, purpose, and future of academic life.

"Politicizing the Academy: Academic Freedom in the Netherlands," Annelies Moors (University of Amsterdam)

Debates on academic freedom in the Netherlands emerged in 2017 when parliamentarians called for greater diversity of (political) views within academia. In June 2024, university administrators dismissed a critical analysis of the war on Gaza as "only one point of view." In both cases, academic freedom is conflated with freedom of expression, obscuring the fact that academic freedom is a qualified right, grounded in scholarly expertise and accompanied by responsibilities to both science and society.

In my contribution I trace how these debates on academic freedom are entangled with discussions about the politicization of the academy and broader shifts in the relationship between scholarship and politics. This includes both negative freedom (freedom from coercion) and positive freedom (the capacity to act). Enacting academic freedom requires secure funding and employment, as well as protection against both internal and external harassment. It also requires a critical perspective on expertise, including a commitment to the value of a diversity of epistemic positions.

The issue at stake is not whether the academy is politicized, but how it is politicized. When politics and science are treated as fundamentally distinct professions that should remain separate, critical scholars have shown how such a stance obscures the taken-for-granted politics of mainstream scholarship and is hence in itself political. In a similar vein, claims of institutional neutrality function to naturalize the status quo.

In the context of the war on Gaza, university administrators have invoked academic freedom to argue against suspending institutional ties with Israeli universities. I argue that such suspensions do not violate academic freedom; rather, academic freedom is upheld by them. In this case, (selective) concerns about security and social safety have been instrumentalized to curtail academic debate, while concerns about violations of academic freedom are unequally distributed. Taking the academy's responsibility towards people and society seriously is, at the very least, contingent upon the protection of basic human rights.

" 'Professors Are the Enemy'? Two Faces of Academic Freedom in the USA," Pippa Norris (Harvard University)

The early twenty-first century has seen growing concern about risks to academic freedom in America and worldwide. To understand these issues, *Part I* of the paper distinguishes two threats to academic freedom. Restrictions on independent scholarship can arise from outside institutions of higher education, through state laws and external regulatory bodies. They can also be due to internal cultural processes within the academy which limit viewpoint diversity. What is the relationship between these embedded dimensions? The study theorizes that legal regulations can exert a direct effect on academic freedom and also have an indirect chilling effect, through encouraging practices of self-censorship. To address these issues, *Part II* draws upon the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) Academic Freedom Index (AFI) in 179 nations worldwide. Net change in the Index is estimated since 2000 and it is illustrated by selected cases, including the United States.

Part III builds upon this foundation to understand subjective perceptions of self-censorship within academia. Cross-national survey data from over 100 countries is used to examine the attitudes and behavior of scholars within the discipline of political science, a field dealing with issues at the forefront of culture wars in higher education. The conclusion in *Part IV* summarizes the core findings and considers their broader implications. The evidence suggests that 1) growing limits on academic freedom are associated with broader processes of backsliding in liberal democracy, evident in many parts of the globe. Equally importantly, 2) legal constraints on academic freedom encourage processes of self-censorship, thereby silencing unorthodox voices, suppressing debate, and weakening viewpoint diversity in higher education. Institutions of higher education need to resist pressures on academic freedom to fulfil their classic mission of advancing human knowledge.

"The Double-Edged Algorithm: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Technologies, and the Transformation of Academic Freedom," Arie Perliger, and Randi Froude (University of Massachusetts)

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence and digital technologies into higher education presents profound implications for academic freedom and scholarly inquiry. This study examines the multifaceted relationship between emerging technologies and the foundational principles

of intellectual autonomy, employing a mixed-methods approach that combines document analysis of institutional AI policies, semi-structured interviews with faculty across disciplines, and computational text analysis of academic discourse surrounding technology adoption.

Findings reveal a complex tension between technological affordances and traditional academic norms. On one hand, AI-powered research tools, large language models, and computational methods have democratized access to sophisticated analytical capabilities, enabling scholars at under-resourced institutions to engage in previously inaccessible forms of inquiry. Digital platforms have similarly expanded opportunities for knowledge dissemination and collaborative research across geographic boundaries.

Conversely, this study identifies significant concerns regarding algorithmic governance of academic work. The proliferation of AI detection software, automated plagiarism systems, and platform-based learning management creates new forms of surveillance that may constrain pedagogical experimentation and intellectual risk-taking. Additionally, the concentration of AI development within private technology firms raises questions about corporate influence over the tools increasingly central to scholarly production. Faculty respondents expressed particular concern about the opacity of algorithmic decision-making, which affects research visibility, funding allocation, and peer review processes.

The analysis further documents emerging inequalities in AI literacy and access that threaten to exacerbate existing hierarchies within the academy. Early-career scholars and contingent faculty face heightened pressures to adopt technologies without adequate institutional support or clear normative frameworks.

This research contributes to ongoing debates about technology governance in higher education and offers policy recommendations for preserving intellectual autonomy while harnessing the genuine benefits of digital innovation. The findings underscore the necessity of faculty participation in shaping institutional technology adoption and the development of shared ethical frameworks for AI in academic contexts.

"Universities and Academic Freedom in Wartime Russia: A Genealogy of Authoritarian Control," Giovanni Savino (University of Naples Federico II)

Academic freedom in the Russian Federation is today one of the domains in which the authoritarian transformation of the Putin regime appears most rapid and most visible. Following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, universities have become not merely objects of repression but full-fledged instruments of ideological mobilization, tasked with producing consent, disciplining future elites, and neutralizing all forms of youth dissent. This proposal reconstructs that process within a long-term historical perspective, showing how the tension between the autonomy of knowledge and political control has been a constant feature of Russian history from the imperial period through the Soviet era and into post-Soviet Russia.

Starting from nineteenth-century university reforms and Soviet policies that subordinated higher education to the state, the paper analyzes how the Putinist system has reworked these precedents into a model of university governance based on the "vertical of power": the top-down appointment of rectors, binding ethical codes, administrative surveillance, and the progressive elimination of spaces of academic self-government.

Particular attention is devoted to the period 2019–2025, examining the selective repression of faculty and students, the destruction of independent university media such as *Doxa*, the forced exile of scholars and teachers, and the introduction of new mandatory courses of nationalist indoctrination such as *Foundations of Russian Statehood*. These measures are interpreted as a systematic restructuring of academic freedom, redefined as a threat to political security in a militarized society.

In conclusion, the paper argues that contemporary Russia offers an extreme yet paradigmatic case of the erosion of academic freedom under conditions of war and authoritarianism, and that educational initiatives in exile, such as *Svobodnyj Universitet* (Free University), now represent one of the few remaining spaces of intellectual resistance.

"The Political Economy of Knowledge: Market Forces, Funding Pressures, and the Limits of Academic Autonomy in Bangladesh," Ala Uddin (University of Chittagong)

In contemporary higher education, the pursuit of knowledge is increasingly shaped not only by scholarly curiosity but also by broader political and economic pressures. In Bangladesh, universities and research institutions operate within a complex landscape of government oversight,

donor-driven funding, and market-oriented imperatives that often constrain academic autonomy.

This paper examines the political economy of knowledge in Bangladesh, exploring how market forces, funding pressures, and institutional hierarchies influence research agendas, pedagogical practices, and scholarly freedom. The central research question guiding this study is: How do economic and political structures shape the scope, direction, and autonomy of academic inquiry in Bangladesh?

Drawing on cultural anthropology, the paper situates academic freedom within the lived experiences of faculty, researchers, and students, emphasizing the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency. Methodologically, the study relies primarily on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in multiple Bangladeshi universities, including in-depth interviews, and document analysis, complemented by a small-scale survey to capture broader trends. This mixed-method approach allows for a nuanced understanding of both systemic pressures and everyday practices that mediate academic autonomy.

The findings reveal a tension between knowledge production driven by curiosity and research shaped by external imperatives. Donor priorities, government policies, and the marketization of higher education often determine which research topics are valued, funding is awarded, and careers advance. Yet, the study also highlights pockets of resistance, where scholars negotiate constraints creatively, sustaining spaces for critical inquiry and intellectual experimentation.

The paper argues that academic autonomy in Bangladesh is neither absolute nor uniformly limited but contingent on political, economic, and institutional factors. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for developing policies and practices that protect scholarly independence while fostering locally relevant knowledge production. The study contributes to debates on the global political economy of knowledge, offering insights for scholars, policymakers, and institutions striving to balance market imperatives with the humanistic ethos of research.

“Academic Freedom and Academic Boycott: An Analysis of the Debate in Norway,” Maja van der Velden (University of Oslo)

Nine days after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, on February 24, 2022, the Norwegian government called for a freeze of all institutional relationships with Russian academic institutions. The leaders of Norwegian academic institutions publicly supported the decision, which was not understood as infringing on institutional or researchers’ academic freedom. On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched its brutal attack on Israel. Within months, Israel’s response to the Hamas attack was considered a plausible genocide in Gaza by the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

On November 12, Norwegianacademics launched a call for an academic boycott of Israeli universities. As in the case with Russia, the call explicitly targeted institutional relationships, not relationships between researchers. From the start, the call for an academic boycott was resisted by leaders of Norwegian academic institutions and criticised in public debates as an attack on academic freedom. This paper examines how the notion of academic freedom is understood and deployed in the debates about the proposed academic boycott of Israeli universities. Data was provided by thirty-eight letters to the editor published in Khrono, the online national academic newspaper, in the period November 2023 – December 2025. The letters are examined using a qualitative document analysis. The analysis focuses on the diUerent understandings of academic freedom and the arguments used to promote one of the three main frames found in the debate: I) an academic boycott undermines academic freedom, II) an academic boycott promotes academic freedom, and III) ethics limits academic freedom. The arguments are discussed and elaborated with examples.

“Reclaiming the Right to Research: Academic Freedom, Tacit Knowledge, and Exile,” Lidia Yatluk (University of Groningen), and Sofya Smyslova (University of Cambridge)

The right to research is central to academic freedom and is commonly framed as an individual’s freedom to critically examine reality through scholarship. This view, however, assumes full epistemic autonomy of the researcher. This paper argues that such an understanding neglects a key dimension of academic freedom: scholarship as embedded in shared, informal group knowledge, including tacit knowledge—experiential knowledge that sustains research communities (Michael Polanyi).

The study addresses a gap: existing accounts of the right to research largely overlook the role of the relationship between scholarship and broader knowledge (related to norms, approaches, and practices) within the groups that sustain this scholarship. This gap becomes especially visible in

the exiled academy, where scholars may formally retain the freedom to continue their scholarship, yet lose access to the organisational, relational, and pedagogical infrastructures that were core to a particular research group. The central research question is: How do exiled researchers reclaim their academic freedom, understood as scholarship within a specific shared knowledge that also enables the transfer of tacit knowledge? To address this question, the study combines an expanded concept of research freedom with Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge, focusing on the organizational conditions that enable the continuation of scholarship in exile.

Empirically, the study draws on 33 interviews with founders and members of para-academic organisations formed in exile by researchers who left Russia under repression and war. These organisations function as environments for the reproduction of previous research approaches and practices: they enable the exchange of tacit knowledge, restore mentorship, and create spaces for collective research practice. Sustaining these spaces occurs through three mechanisms: institutional legitimation of the organisations, the bridging role of early-career researchers entering PhD programs, and the integration of research into non-profit initiatives that apply scholarly expertise.

"Academic Freedom in China's Hong Kong since 1997," Simon Yin (Hefei University of Technology in China)

After the handover of sovereignty from UK to China on July 1, 1997, the world watched and waited to see how Hong Kong was to be transformed from a free, open—albeit undemocratic—society, to one under the banner of communist China. The first academic freedom "incident" occurred within a month of July 1, 1997, when a member of the Hong Kong Legislative Council aimed to remove academics from their posts at two universities for what he viewed as "unpatriotic" views. The incident unfolded before the watchful public through front-page press coverage by Hong Kong leading newspapers. In this case, two university presidents stood their ground and defended academic freedom. Three years later, Hong Kong was rocked by a second major academic freedom "incident" which led to the resignation of the president of Hong Kong's premier university. A third "incident" in 2007 occurred at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (now known as the Education University of Hong Kong) in which the Secretary of Education was blamed for interfering in the Institute's autonomy. Each of these three incidents re-affirmed the protection and durability of academic freedom in Hong Kong, even after the return of sovereignty to communist China.

However, new threats to academic freedom in Hong Kong stem not only from changes within China, such as a tightening of the political environment, but also from a decline of academic freedom and institutional autonomy around the world. Since the implementation of the impactful National Security Law in 2020, academic freedom in Hong Kong has been subject to securitization increasingly.

This paper examines the relationships between politics, academic freedom, and civic engagement in higher education in Hong Kong since 1997. It focuses on government-funded (via the University Grants Committee [UGC]) public institutions, which dominate the higher education sector. Academic freedom and university autonomy in UGC-funded institutions are challenged by increasing UGC oversight of their management, teaching and research, and by changing social and political contexts caused by closer economic, social, and political interactions between Hong Kong and mainland China. Developments in Hong Kong suggest that academic freedom and university autonomy are socio-political constructions shaped, interpreted, and/or exercised by different actors in their social and political contexts. Moreover, this paper discusses how Hong Kong's higher education sector is managing in this new and increasing complex atmosphere of national and international challenges to academic freedom.

"Research Freedom as a Foundational Value of the European Epistemic Communities: Policy Frameworks, Stakeholder Responses, and Institutional Practices," Silvia Zabeo and Dario Pellizon (Ca' Foscari University)

Research freedom has increasingly been recognized as a foundational value of European epistemic communities and a prerequisite for scientific excellence and long-term innovation. In recent years, the European Union has articulated this principle through a growing body of policies and normative instruments aimed at protecting the autonomy of scientific research from political interference, economic instrumentalization, and structural constraints. The heightened attention to the freedom of scientific research in Europe—exemplified by the first Conference on Scientific Freedom co-organised by the European Commission and UNESCO in December 2025—underscores how

research freedom functions not merely as an individual academic right, but as a collective value underpinning the European Research Area (ERA).

This presentation/paper situates research freedom within an emerging European policy framework and shared value statement, examining how EU-level initiatives translate normative commitments into concrete governance mechanisms. Particular attention is devoted to the European Research Council (ERC) model of individual, bottom-up funding, which operationalizes research freedom through investigator-driven agendas, open thematic choice, and strong peer-review autonomy. The ERC thus represents a paradigmatic instrument for safeguarding scientific independence while fostering frontier research across disciplines.

The analysis further explores the *Choose Europe* initiative as a strategic umbrella under which the European Commission promotes research freedom, academic autonomy, and talent attraction in a shifting global context. This framework is examined in contrast with recent developments in the United States, where research freedom has increasingly been challenged by political interference in scientific agendas, withdrawal from international agreements, restrictions on international researchers, defunding of universities, and cuts to major public research programmes such as the National Institutes of Health.

From the overarching European framework, the presentation maps selected national and local initiatives that translate these values into institutional practice. Universities such as Aix-Marseille Université and the University of Vienna have launched targeted programmes aimed at attracting international scholars, including researchers from the United States, by positioning Europe as a safe and supportive environment for free and independent research. These initiatives demonstrate how universities act as key stakeholders in reinforcing European epistemic communities and embedding research freedom within local governance structures.

By bringing together policy frameworks, value statements, and stakeholder responses, this presentation/paper contributes to current debates on how research freedom can be effectively protected, promoted, and enacted across Europe as a shared epistemic and civic commitment.

"Academic Freedom Beyond the State: Diasporic Pressure, Digital Intimidation, National Identity, and Iranian Scholars after 'Woman, Life Freedom,' " Shirin Zakeri (Unitelma Sapienza University of Rome), Minoo Mirshahvald (University of Copenhagen), and Ehsan Kashfi (University of Copenhagen)

This paper examines an increasingly under-analysed challenge to academic freedom: pressures exerted not only by states and formal institutions, but also by politically polarised diasporic publics operating through digitally networked environments. Focusing on Iranian scholars and journalists working in Europe and North America, it shows how diaspora-based activism and ideological contestation can evolve into intimidation, reputational violence, and epistemic policing that constrain critical inquiry and public scholarship.

Adopting a socio-historical lens, the article situates these dynamics within the long-standing fragmentation of Iranian diasporic communities, shaped by revolution, war, forced migration, generational change, and divergent political imaginaries. It argues that the diaspora is not a homogeneous space of "opposition" but a contested field in which national identity is continuously negotiated and enforced. In such settings, academic interventions on Iran are often evaluated through implicit loyalty tests, authenticity claims, and expectations of ideological alignment, rather than through scholarly merit alone.

The paper traces the escalation of these pressures across successive moments of heightened mobilisation and conflict, including the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, the brief escalation widely referred to as the "Twelve-Day War," and more recent waves of protest and repression inside Iran. These episodes have intensified binary alignments, strengthened boundary-making practices, and expanded informal mechanisms of control. Accusations of complicity, public blacklisting, coordinated harassment, and demands for ideological conformity operate as forms of transnational disciplinary power that foster self-censorship and undermine the conditions for pluralistic knowledge production.

Methodologically, the study combines qualitative digital ethnography with discourse analysis of selected online campaigns and public controversies, supported by anonymised testimonies from targeted academics. It concludes by outlining ethical, legal, and organisational responses needed to protect vulnerable scholars, safeguard academic autonomy, and sustain epistemic pluralism under conditions of algorithmically mediated political conflict.