

Pocket Guide

for Academics
under Attack

Written and edited by Benoît Josset,
Anita Lunić, Andrea Pető & Rose Sikkink

Imprint

Publisher: Stiftung Dokumentationsarchiv
des österreichischen Widerstandes
Wipplingerstraße 6 – 8, 1010 Vienna, Austria

Responsible for the content: Benoît Josset,
Anita Lunić, Andrea Pető & Rose Sikkink

Partner: COST. European Cooperation in Science
& Technology (cost.eu), Democratisation at Stake.
Comparing Anti-Gender Politics
(comparing-antigender-politics.eu),

Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen
Widerstandes (doew.at), OPEN COST
Action (au.dk/opencostaction) & Österreichische
Hochschüler_innenschaft (oeh.ac.at)

Graphic design: lwz.studio

DOI doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19730171

ISBN 978-3-901142-82-6

Printed in Austria, 2026

Versions in languages other than German and
English are based on the original English text.
The publisher accepts no responsibility for the
translation.

***Pocket Guide* for Academics under Attack**

INDEX

Forewords

Introduction

HOW DO YOU RECOGNIZE ATTACKS?

WARNING SIGNS

- 22 On the personal level**
- 23 On the institutional level**
- 24 On the structural level**
- 25 Field-specific warning signs**
- 26 Communication-related warning signs**

TYPES OF ATTACKS

- 28 Attacks on personal safety**
- 28 Financial or career-based attacks**
- 29 Psychological or emotional abuse**
- 30 Attacks on research integrity**
- 30 Digital Attacks targeting researchers**

HOW DO YOU RECOGNIZE WHEN YOU ARE UNKNOWINGLY COMPLYING OR ENGAGING IN SELF-CENSORSHIP?

- 33 Self-censorship in your research**
- 34 Self-censorship inside the classroom**
- 35 Self-censorship in the public debate**
- 36 The effects of self-censorship on
your body and mind**

INDEX

WHOM TO REACH OUT TO?

- 39 At the university**
- 40 For legal support**
- 41 For collective action**
- 41 For safety**
- 42 For external or international support**

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

- 44 Despecification**
- 44 Diversification**
- 45 Collective shielding strategies**
- 46 Financial security**
- 46 Developing connections**
- 47 Mental Health and Wellbeing Support**
- 48 Use the power of communication**
- 49 Exit or mobility strategies**

DIGITAL RESILIENCE AND DATA PROTECTION

- 51 Protecting your data in everyday life**
- 51 Protecting your data when traveling**
- 52 Protecting data related to your research**
- 53 What to do if your data has been compromised / stolen?**

Selected readings

Helpful links

“Erosion of academic freedom rarely appears overnight”

Professor Katja Brøgger, *Chair of Cost Open*
& Dr. Reina Zenelaj, *Vice Chair*

Across Europe, higher education is being reshaped by geopolitical reordering, austerity agendas, illiberal political steering, and the slower, subtler forms of erosion within liberal democracies. This reconfiguration recalibrates university governance and constrains the conditions under which academic work is conducted, placing growing pressure on institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and the openness of research systems. The challenge is not only institutional, positioning higher education institutions within shifting power and governance structures, but also deeply personal. It concerns how academics and others in higher education perceive the value and purpose of their work amid increasingly contested political spaces shaped by national, regional, and geopolitical forces. Although scholarly analyses, policy reports, and indices documenting such pressures have proliferated, many academics still find themselves disoriented amid these accelerating transformations.

This Pocket Guide responds to that gap. It does not offer a universal checklist or a prescriptive set of instructions. Instead, it provides a selective, practical resource that academics, administrators, and students can consult based on their institutional position and political context. Different sections speak to different roles, environments,

and levels of risk. For those who seek more direct engagement, OPEN also offers Academic Resilience Trainings, developed and tested in Tirana (2025) and Vienna (2026), which continue to inform this guide.

Developed within the framework of two COST Actions, this guide synthesizes collective reflections across our networks. A central premise of this guide is that erosion of academic freedom rarely appears overnight. Threats to academic freedom and institutional integrity often begin subtly: a procedural change here, a shift in expectations there, a quiet narrowing of acceptable speech or scholarship. What seems like an isolated incident may, over time, signal a deeper structural transformation. For this reason, the guide offers tools to help identify warning signs, distinguish ordinary institutional friction from more serious risks, and consider proportionate responses.

Ultimately, this Pocket Guide aims to strengthen academic capacity to navigate these pressures and to foster reparative approaches that help rebuild trust, autonomy, and professional dignity where they have been eroded. By equipping individuals and institutions with clearer frameworks, available support pathways, and practical strategies, we hope to contribute to a European higher education landscape where openness, critical inquiry, and academic freedom remain protected, even in times of geopolitical uncertainty and democratic backsliding.

The OPEN COST Action addresses these challenges through a combination of research coordination and capacity-building activities. OPEN explores how the rise of new nationalisms and geopolitical tensions

exerts a growing pressure on the openness of European higher education and research and examines its implications for the future of Europe. These developments have implications for fundamental values and rights such as academic freedom and university autonomy. By bringing together researchers from across 40 European countries, OPEN converges pan-European and interdisciplinary perspectives on the university in times of crisis.

This Pocket Guide specifically contributes to OPEN's capacity-building dimension by providing individuals and higher education institutions with practical tools and perspectives to navigate these evolving pressures. The practical tools presented in this guide are the result of two years of collaborative work within the Action, particularly in Working Group 4, including data collection, expertise exchange across the network, and stakeholder engagement.

A warm thank you to the always dedicated WG4 for your unwavering commitment and engagement.

“Safeguarding science means safeguarding democracy”

Eva-Maria Holzleitner

*Austrian Federal Minister for Women,
Science and Research*

Higher Education Institutions are not only places of learning and discovery; they are vital democratic institutions. They foster critical inquiry, enable open debate, and create the conditions for holding power to account. It is precisely for these reasons that they have increasingly come under pressure.

In recent years, universities and researchers have become targets in a broader struggle between democratic resilience and authoritarian resurgence. Attacks on scientific knowledge and the people who produce it are rarely isolated incidents; they are part of a wider effort to undermine trust in institutions that sustain open societies. When science is under attack, democracy erodes.

At the same time, trust in science has become more fragile. Political polarization and the normalization of terms like “fake news” and “alternative facts” have blurred the line between evidence and opinion. In highly contested fields such as climate science, public health, and gender studies, scientific findings are increasingly challenged.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought these dynamics into sharp focus. Scientists and public health experts were not only questioned but often harassed, threatened, or discredited. The crisis demonstrated how quickly

trust can erode—and how profoundly this erosion can affect a lot of dimensions in the effective governance, social cohesion and public trust in political decisions, guided by scientific evidence.

Against this backdrop, academic freedom emerges as an essential condition for resilient and vibrant democracies. It enables the production of reliable knowledge, supports informed decision-making, and sustains the public sphere as a space of reasoned debate. This guide responds to a growing need: to support researchers facing hostility, repression, and disinformation. By offering practical tools and guidance, it contributes to strengthening those who stand at the forefront of evidence-based inquiry and public engagement. I extend my sincerest appreciation and gratitude to the authors and editors, whose expertise, dedication to scientific engagement, and thoughtful contributions have made this guide possible.

Safeguarding science means safeguarding democracy. The defense of academic freedom is not only a matter for researchers or institutions—it is a shared responsibility in ensuring that open societies endure.

“This Pocket Guide draws on lived experience and supports scholars”

Carsten Q. Schneider

*Interim President and Rector,
Central European University, Vienna*

Academic freedom lies at the core of CEU’s mission and is a central element of its positioning within the European higher education landscape. CEU actively contributes to European debates on democracy, the rule of law, and the future of knowledge production through, among other channels, as a member of CIVICA, a European university alliance. This Pocket Guide should therefore be understood not only as a practical resource for individual scholars, but also as a contribution to the broader European discussion on how open academic environments can be protected.

The Central European University (CEU) has developed particular expertise in navigating challenges to academic freedom. In recent years, the university itself became the target of political measures that significantly constrained its work in Budapest and ultimately led to the relocation of its main campus to Vienna. These experiences have not only heightened CEU’s awareness of the vulnerabilities of academic work but have also strengthened its commitment to actively contributing to the protection of academic freedom, institutional resilience, and open knowledge production in Europe.

One highly visible example of such pressures was the prohibition of Gender Studies programs in Hungary,

which also affected CEU. The institutional and personal experiences that followed demonstrated the importance of equipping scholars with practical strategies to recognize and respond to political pressure, delegitimization, or restrictions on academic work.

Since establishing its campus in Vienna, CEU has also worked closely with partner institutions in Austria to promote academic excellence, civic engagement, and academic freedom. In this context, the Pocket Guide for Academic Resilience is intended as a practical tool: a resource that draws on lived institutional experience and supports scholars in sustaining open inquiry even under challenging conditions.

“Authoritarianism divides, atomizes and isolates”

Andreas Kranebitter

*Director of the Documentation Centre
of Austrian Resistance*

Authoritarianism is genuinely anti-scientific. Nowadays predominantly existing in its far-right form, it seeks, for example, a view of history without any contradictions and constructs a fascist origin myth imagining an ethnically homogeneous and “natural” people that is led to national greatness by authoritarian means. The political program of far-right authoritarianism consists of restoring this supposedly lost original state, politically turning back the clock on a threatening present—changing everything so that nothing changes.

Far-right extremism thus follows an intrinsic logic when it rigorously opposes emancipatory struggles for equality by a wide variety of minorities, whether these are the demands of social movements, queer initiatives, feminist movements or ethnic minorities. Authoritarianism perceives all of them as a threat to the origin myth. Representatives of these minorities are marked as enemies because they are supposedly to blame for the loss of original greatness—and are fought against alongside those who regard the origin myth as an imaginary figment of the imagination, who expose the myth as a myth. These, in turn, are primarily critical journalists and (social) scientists, whether in gender studies or research on far-right extremism, historical studies or climate science. Their search for the truth

is incompatible with the need to construct myths. Therefore, emancipatory movements and critical scholarship have at least one thing in common—they are met with vehement hostility.

This authoritarian rhetoric is as violent as it is banal. One might think that humanity has come to know and understand the banality of far-right aggression well enough over the course of the 20th century. That learning from history means putting a stop to authoritarian aggression by democratic means early enough. Yet with every resurgence of authoritarianism, the same social processes seem to repeat themselves: large segments of society act like a rabbit caught in the headlights of aggression, distancing themselves from those under attack in a helpless attempt to save their own skins, choosing to remain silent, to refrain from publishing or speaking out loud about what is happening.

Authoritarianism divides, atomizes, isolates and erodes solidarity. If we want to prevent this, we must tackle it through international, interdisciplinary and multifaceted efforts. We must come together, build alliances and show solidarity. That is what this “Pocket Guide for Academics under Attack” is all about.

I would like to thank Andrea Petö and her project team for bringing this guide to life with such enthusiasm—and I did not hesitate to pledge the DÖW’s support. After all, we could also sing songs about attacks on our academic integrity and the very right of our institution to exist, about distancing and a breakdown of solidarity, but also about the opposite of all that. Let us hope, then, that the Pocket Guide finds a wide readership—and many imitators.

“Science is indispensable for a functioning, democratic society”

Selina Wienerroither, Viktoria Kudrna & Umut Ovat
Executive Committee of the Austrian Student Union

Science is under attack all over the world, as we can see in countries like the United States and Hungary. Due to the growing spread of right-wing populism across the globe, ever more countries face the risk of increasing attacks on science in the near future. This also applies to Austria and Germany, given the rising influence of the FPÖ and AfD, respectively; parties that consider fact-based discourse to be a disruptive factor.

For this reason, universities and free education are repeatedly under fire. As the Austrian Student Union (ÖH), it is among our central concerns to advocate for free and open access to higher education. Currently, however, we run the risk that the trend is moving in the opposite direction. Academic freedom and free education are interlinked, and as ÖH, we feel a responsibility to ensure that both remain secure in the future. Therefore, it is particularly important to us to be able to publish this Pocket Guide in collaboration with the COST Association and the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW).

Science is indispensable for a functioning, democratic society. We need universities and academics who will continue to work towards advancing knowledge in various areas of society. This knowledge is the cornerstone upon which our democracy is built.

We need people-centred knowledge ensuring that society continues to develop in the best interests of all. However, we are already today seeing that universities are increasingly evolving from places of education into training centres for the labour market, and that the influence of corporations is growing ever stronger. All of these are symptoms of the ever-increasing neoliberalization of universities. Above all, however, we are now facing the immense threat of right-wing populism and extremism, which are fundamentally opposed to science. Science is a major thorn in the flesh of right-wing populism because it can quite simply expose its fabricated “facts” for what they are. Consequently—in an attempt to delegitimize them—universities are labelled as bastions of left-wing hegemony and “wokeness”

As long as no effective measures against right-wing populism are implemented across society as a whole, these attacks will continue to intensify in the future. Until structural measures have restored greater trust in science, there must be publications such as this one that start to bring about improvements on a smaller scale. This Pocket Guide is therefore intended to offer academics who experience or witness such attacks a resource to help them understand the nature of the attacks or through concrete suggestions for action.

Now more than ever, we need academics with backbones who remain committed to scientific and critical discourse even in such times, as populists intensify their attacks. And we must ensure that teaching is equally critical, equipping students—and thus future

academics—from the very beginning with the tools to combat right-wing populism. With a strong education in this area, students can then make an important contribution to safeguarding critical scholarship.

This Pocket Guide is just one of many important measures in the fight against right-wing populist and extremist attacks on science in Austria. As ÖH, we are very pleased to be part of this important project and to be able to contribute to strengthening universities, academia and science.

Introduction

Higher education is undergoing intense pressure as financial austerity, authoritarian political influences, and AI-driven managerial systems converge. Together, these forces are fundamentally reshaping how universities operate across the European Higher Education Area and beyond. These pressures affect everything from institutional autonomy and academic freedom to research priorities and staffing practices. As a result, universities face growing instability and must adapt quickly to maintain their core educational and scholarly missions.

These attacks are often characterized as attacks on academic freedom, which is increasingly understood not only as a professional norm but also as part of the broader rights to freedom of expression and education. International frameworks (UNESCO, Council of Europe, UN, etc.) emphasize that it requires both institutional safeguarding mechanisms and effective remedies. This guide offers ways and resources to practice academic freedom and to act when institutional mechanisms fail.

This guide aims to help academics and staff working in higher education navigate this challenging context marked by a central paradox: while academic literature on attacks against academic freedom—alongside conferences, policy papers, and indices—continues to expand, individual academics often remain disoriented and without accessible support amid the storm. Universities rarely change overnight. The erosion of academic freedom and institutional integrity typically

begins with small shifts, such as subtle procedural changes, altered expectations, informal pressures, or quiet redefinitions of what constitutes legitimate scholarship. But what appears at first as an isolated incident may, over time, reveal a deeper structural transformation. This guide is designed to support orientation in such moments. Its purpose is not to assume bad faith, but to sharpen perception and judgment. Distinguishing between ordinary institutional friction and patterns that signal more serious deterioration requires attentiveness and preparedness.

This Pocket Guide is based on an analysis of flashpoints over the past 15 years in which academic freedom and institutional autonomy were attacked. These cases provide concrete examples of how external pressures—political, financial, and administrative—can rapidly escalate into broader threats to the academic environment, and which strategies individual and institutional actors can use to preserve the status quo. Based on these patterns, the guide offers insights that help readers recognize early warning signs in their own contexts, maintain a conscious record of their resources, and shape their resilience strategies.

The pages that follow provide a framework for recognizing emerging challenges, considering proportionate responses, and identifying possible avenues of support. The analysis shows that academics are often unprepared and that the supporting infrastructure remains weak. Simply knowing whom to contact—and whether there is someone who will listen—can make a crucial difference when an academic is forced to operate in crisis mode.

It is not a checklist or a “how-to” manual, but rather, it is a service guide: a resource to consult selectively, depending on your institutional position and political context. Different sections will address different actors and circumstances, as no single solution fits all.

Learning to practice academic freedom does not stop with this guide. In addition to offering a two-hour online introduction to this guide, the authors also offer Academic Resilience Training, delivered in eight two-hour modules to explore ways to build resilience within the academic community. Although the program is primarily aimed at early-career researchers and academics, it is also open to university staff and faculty, academic administrators and leaders, and advocates for academic freedom. The training addresses legal, digital, mental health, practical, and research-related challenges faced in hostile environments.

If you are interested in these training courses, please get in touch: www.academicresilience.eu and via email: academicresilience@proton.me

The pages that follow provide a framework for recognizing emerging challenges, considering proportionate responses, and identifying possible avenues of support.

How
do you
recognize
attacks?

Warning
signs

Attacks on academic freedom and institutional integrity often begin with signals that are easy to dismiss as isolated incidents or misunderstandings. This subsection outlines early warning signs at multiple levels (personal, institutional, structural, and cultural), helping you identify patterns before they escalate into more direct forms of pressure or abuse.

On the personal level

Personal targeting often appears first and may involve subtle or overt attempts to intimidate, isolate, delegitimize, or exhaust. Individual warning signs may reflect normalized aspects of academic life in the current, personalized, difficult, and competitive labor market. However, the risk increases when several indicators emerge simultaneously or begin to appear in a systematic pattern.

This may manifest as

- ▶ ambiguity or lack of clarity from academic institutions regarding individual rights, responsibilities, and available protections
- ▶ shaming or delegitimizing of individual researchers, their work, or their academic standing
- ▶ gaslighting and belittling, especially when concerns are dismissed or reframed as personal shortcomings
- ▶ online attacks or targeted harassment on social media, often aimed at silencing or discrediting scholars

- ▶ intimidation or coercion, ranging from subtle pressure to overt threats intended to influence behaviour or research trajectories
- ▶ cyberbullying and other forms of digital harassment, including coordinated campaigns

On the institutional level

Institutional warning signs include irregular or opaque procedures and decision-making, censorship, and efforts to reshape governance, weaken internal checks and balances, or marginalize specific academic areas.

This may manifest as

- ▶ appointment of representatives that bypasses established procedures or rules, undermining transparency and trust
- ▶ favoritism, including preferential treatment in hiring, promotion, workload distribution, or access to resources
- ▶ avoidance of providing clear institutional policies or accountability mechanisms, creating uncertainty and vulnerability
- ▶ budget cuts that disproportionately affect certain departments or research areas, often targeting those seen as inconvenient or politically sensitive
- ▶ centralisation of power and the introduction of top-down decision-making, reducing academic participation and oversight
- ▶ sudden procedural changes that affect evaluation, funding, promotion, or disciplinary processes without proper consultation

- ▶ imposition of strict protocols on what can be said publicly (e.g., social media, interviews), limiting academic voice and autonomy
- ▶ institutional censorship of research outputs, events, or academic discussions that challenge dominant narratives
- ▶ closure or merging of departments without academic justification, often weakening critical or vulnerable fields
- ▶ intimidation or the creation of a culture of fear, discouraging dissent and suppressing legitimate concerns

On the structural level

Structural attacks on academic freedom occur through reforms and changes in laws or policy frameworks.

This may manifest as

- ▶ university mergers carried out without adequate academic consultation or clear strategic justification
- ▶ governmental intervention in university governance, undermining institutional autonomy and academic self-rule
- ▶ closure of English language programs as a means of restricting internationalisation, limiting global engagement and mobility
- ▶ forced closure of universities by governmental decree, disrupting academic continuity and dismantling institutional structures

Field-specific warning signs

Public delegitimization, uneven or disproportionate resource allocation, publication barriers, and other forms of institutional neglect can signal attempts to limit academic freedom and restrict certain areas of research.

It includes


- ▶ lack of institutional support for specific research topics, fields, or disciplines, leaving scholars isolated or unable to advance their work
- ▶ disproportionate budget cuts that target particular scientific fields or topics, weakening their capacity to operate
- ▶ public embarrassment or delegitimizing of certain research areas, undermining their credibility and discouraging inquiry
- ▶ reduction or elimination of funding opportunities for specific research topics, fields, or disciplines, effectively narrowing the scope of permissible research
- ▶ restrictions on publication or collaboration within certain fields, disciplines, or topics, limiting academic exchange and intellectual freedom

Communication-related warning signs

Shifts in communication culture can signal emerging threats to academic freedom.

It includes

- ▶ lack of transparency in decision-making processes, leaving staff uncertain about how and why key choices are made
- ▶ ambiguity in assigning roles, responsibilities, or rights, creating confusion and enabling arbitrary interpretation
- ▶ exclusion from meetings, including no longer being invited to discussions relevant to research work
- ▶ increasing reliance on informal or undocumented decision-making channels, bypassing accountability
- ▶ avoidance of proper consultation, reducing opportunities for input and shared governance
- ▶ ghosting or gaslighting, where communication is withheld, concerns are dismissed, or realities are distorted

A white, multi-pointed starburst shape is centered on a solid orange background. The starburst has eight main points, with smaller points between them, creating a jagged, star-like appearance. The text is centered within this white shape.

Types of attacks

Not all attacks take the same form. Attacks on academic freedom may be direct (sanctions), indirect (institutional pressure), or reputational (public targeting and delegitimization). This subsection categorizes attacks by their primary target or mode of harm.

Attacks on personal safety

Such attacks aim to silence through fear and may extend beyond the workplace into private life.

They include

- ▶ harassment or stalking, including persistent unwanted attention, monitoring, or intrusion into personal or professional spaces
- ▶ doxxing, meaning the publication or dissemination of private or sensitive personal information with the intent to harm, intimidate, or silence
- ▶ physical violence or intimidation, ranging from threats to actual acts of aggression aimed at creating fear or preventing academic work

Financial or career-based attacks

Financial or career-based attacks are often difficult to prove but highly effective in creating vulnerability.

They include

- ▶ nondisclosure of employment or funding information, creating uncertainty about one's status, security, or potential conflicts of interest

- ▶ preventing scholars from carrying out their projects by refusing to grant them leaves of absence for fieldwork or conferences
- ▶ use of numerous fixed-term contracts, fostering a climate of fear and vulnerability around contract nonrenewal
- ▶ unclear or manipulated review, promotion, or hiring processes, allowing arbitrary decisions and limiting fair progression
- ▶ career sabotage, including blocking access to grants, collaborations, leadership roles, or new positions

Psychological or emotional abuse

These tactics erode confidence and credibility.

They include

- ▶ ghosting or isolation within the institution, including exclusion from communication, meetings, or decision-making
- ▶ gaslighting, where concerns are dismissed, distorted, or reframed to undermine confidence
- ▶ intimidation, harassment, or coercion, aimed at influencing behaviour or discouraging legitimate academic activity
- ▶ public humiliation or smear campaigns, designed to damage professional credibility and silence researchers

Attacks on research integrity

These attacks strike at scholarly autonomy and credibility.

They may include

- ▶ assigning excessive or repetitive administrative tasks, preventing researchers from focusing on their core academic work
- ▶ silencing scholars by requiring them to teach curricular courses removed from personal interests and competencies
- ▶ interference with publications, research outputs, ideas, or academic activities, including delays or obstruction
- ▶ delegitimisation of specific research topics, fields, or disciplines, often to discourage inquiry or reduce visibility
- ▶ undermining credibility, such as questioning competence, spreading doubts, or circulating discrediting narratives
- ▶ false accusations of misconduct, used to intimidate or destabilise researchers
- ▶ censorship or silencing, including suppression of research outputs, ideas, events, or academic discussion

Digital Attacks targeting researchers

Digital attacks aim to disrupt, discredit, or intimidate researchers by exploiting their online tools and platforms.

They usually take the following forms

- ▶ disinformation campaigns: targeted spread of false information on social media to undermine a researcher's work or reputation (e.g., misquoting, fake accounts)
- ▶ leaking sensitive data: unauthorized release of private emails, unpublished manuscripts, or confidential peer reviews (e.g., leaking draft papers to damage credibility)
- ▶ cyberharassment and doxxing: online harassment (threats, abuse) or publishing personal details (address, phone number) to intimidate (e.g., researchers in contentious fields like public health or social sciences)
- ▶ phishing and impersonation: fraudulent emails or messages mimicking colleagues or institutions to steal credentials or spread misinformation (e.g., fake grant updates to access data)
- ▶ DDoS attacks: overwhelming a researcher's website or platform to make it inaccessible (e.g., blocking a lab site during a critical conference)
- ▶ ransomware: encrypting critical files (manuscripts, datasets) for ransom (e.g., losing years of research without backups)
- ▶ password theft: unauthorized access to professional accounts (emails, databases) to manipulate or delete work (e.g., altering results on collaborative platforms)

How do you
recognize
when you are
unknowingly
complying
or engaging
in self-
censorship?

Direct attacks on individuals, fields of study, or universities can undermine academic freedom. Still, it can also be threatened in more insidious ways, forcing academics and/or students to engage in self-censorship, sometimes even without realizing it. Restrictions do not only come from outside; they can also arise when researchers internalize perceived risks and adjust their behavior in advance. It is easy to miss the tipping point when one begins to impose limits on their work.

This self-censorship can spread through friendly warnings from other academics, through harassment, or as a pre-emptive silencing mechanism:

Self-censorship in your research

In academia, self-censorship refers to scholars refraining from pursuing or sharing controversial ideas, or from expressing professional views on contentious issues, in anticipation of disagreement (Norris, 2025).^① Recognizing self-censorship can be difficult, particularly in countries where academic freedom is not directly impeded.

Warning signs may include

- ▶ anticipatory obedience (*see The Anti-Autocracy Handbook for more details*)^②

^① Norris, P. (2025). Cancel culture: Heterodox self-censorship or the curious case of the dog which didn't bark. International Political Science Review, 46(3), 422-441.

^② Lewandowsky, S. et al. (2025). The Anti-Autocracy Handbook: A Scholar's Guide to Navigating Democratic Backsliding. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15696097>

- ▶ shifting your research focus away from what genuinely interests you and toward topics more likely to attract private funding
- ▶ avoiding research topics you wish to explore out of fear that funding may be withdrawn or jeopardised
- ▶ collaborating with certain journals primarily for their prestige, following institutional pressure rather than academic relevance
- ▶ refusing or avoiding supervision of Master's or Doctoral theses because the subject matter could harm your career or provoke institutional backlash
- ▶ withholding research findings when they conflict with a private funder's political agenda or the beliefs of institutional leadership
- ▶ avoiding collaboration with another academic due to their political stance, activism, or perceived reputational risk
- ▶ refusing or avoiding collaboration with an (*international*) organisation out of fear of possible retribution or negative consequences

Self-censorship inside the classroom

Self-imposed restrictions on academic freedom can begin in the classroom and alter the relationship with students. Self-censorship often develops gradually as scholars adjust teaching, language, or content in anticipation of possible consequences.

This may include

- ▶ choosing or agreeing to change the name of a course for fear of reprisals
- ▶ avoiding use of certain words or vocabulary in class (*This does not include discriminatory words that could offend certain individuals and/or communities present in the class.*)
- ▶ forcing yourself not to use certain references and quote colleagues not only for academic reasons
- ▶ avoiding topics that may be controversial (e.g., gender studies; critical race theory) for fear of negative feedback/complaints from students

Self-censorship in the public debate

The emergence of your own restrictions on academic freedom can also be illustrated in public debate, such as avoiding association with certain topics for fear of reprisals.

This may include

- ▶ refusing to sign a petition out of fear that doing so could negatively affect your employment or professional standing
- ▶ lacking confidence to present your research publicly (e.g., on radio, in newspapers, on television) due to concerns about backlash or misinterpretation
- ▶ withdrawing from your expert role in sensitive public debates (e.g., health crises, human rights issues) to avoid personal or professional repercussions

- ▶ stopping the public denunciation of misinformation, even when within your area of expertise, because of fear of retaliation
- ▶ withdrawing from or avoiding participation in political life, including civic engagement, advocacy, or public commentary, due to perceived risks

The effects of self-censorship on your body and mind


Complying with restrictions on your freedoms at work, particularly under an autocratic regime, can have serious repercussions on your physical and mental health. These effects are cumulative, and the consequences can be amplified if you are a victim of online harassment or if you belong to a community already subject to systemic discrimination (women, people of colour, etc.).

This may include

- ▶ constant stress about your work or funding, creating a sense of ongoing uncertainty and vigilance
- ▶ loss of motivation to go to work, accompanied by growing resistance to daily tasks
- ▶ isolation and withdrawal, reducing contact with colleagues, friends, or support networks
- ▶ no longer finding meaning in your professional activities, feeling detached from your purpose or values
- ▶ feelings of anxiety or low mood, affecting focus, energy, and overall wellbeing

- ▶ persistent physical tension, such as pressure in the chest or a chronically overstimulated nervous system
- ▶ periods of mental fog or confusion, making it difficult to concentrate or make decisions
- ▶ a recurring desire to leave the country, driven by exhaustion, fear, or a search for safety
- ▶ suppression of your identity, including pressure to hide core beliefs, values, or parts of yourself to avoid negative consequences

While it is easy to overlook many of these warning signs, they should not be ignored. If any of these signs remind you of your personal situation, do not hesitate to seek help or adopt survival strategies. You can find useful links at the end of this Pocket Guide.

The image features a solid orange background. In the center, there is a white speech bubble with a tail pointing towards the top-left corner. Inside the white bubble, the text "Whom to reach out to?" is written in a bold, black, serif font, arranged in three lines.

**Whom
to reach
out to?**

When warning signs or attacks occur, early action and documentation are essential. Keep detailed records of dates, emails, decisions, witnesses, and screenshots (note that this isn't always possible, particularly when using a work email address). Support may be sought at institutional, professional, legal, and international levels, depending on the situation. It may include:

At the university

It is important to bear in mind that, in certain situations, a formal complaint may lead to further negative reactions. It is therefore necessary to think carefully before taking such action.

- ▶ talk to trusted colleagues, especially those who can offer perspective, confidentiality, or practical guidance
- ▶ gender equality or diversity officers, who can provide support in cases involving discrimination, bias, or unequal treatment
- ▶ local or university-based trade union associations, which can advise on rights, protections, and collective action
- ▶ file a formal complaint or contact the ethics committee (or its equivalent) when misconduct or procedural violations occur
- ▶ HR department, particularly for issues related to employment conditions, workplace harassment, or procedural irregularities
- ▶ request explanations from supervisors or department heads, especially when decisions lack clarity or transparency

- ▶ university ombudsperson, an independent and confidential resource for mediation, advice, and problem solving
- ▶ reach out to colleagues who recently left the university, as they may feel freer to speak openly about their experiences

For legal support

- ▶ keep a copy of your employment contract, social security status and internal regulations, ensuring you can verify rights, obligations, and procedures
- ▶ review contracts, employment rights, and institutional regulations to understand the protections and processes available to you
- ▶ consult trade unions, academic unions, works councils, or staff councils, which can offer guidance and advocacy
- ▶ reach out to the ombudsperson network at your university
- ▶ seek legal advice or representation, especially when dealing with complex or escalated situations
- ▶ contact national equality or antidiscrimination bodies, which may provide formal support mechanisms and oversight
- ▶ contact national accreditation committees, particularly when institutional practices raise concerns about standards or governance
- ▶ reach out to other organisations that provide legal or rights based advice (e.g., Amnesty International), especially when external expertise or protection is needed

For collective action

- ▶ trusted colleagues, faculty associations, or research networks, who can offer perspective, discuss challenges confidentially, and provide collective support
- ▶ professional associations or unions, which can advocate for academic freedom, fair treatment, and workplace protections
- ▶ university based trade unions, offering guidance on rights, procedures, and institutional mechanisms
- ▶ trusted media contacts or journalists, who may help responsibly highlight systemic issues when appropriate
- ▶ establishing new networks, especially with peers facing similar challenges, to reduce isolation and build resilience

For safety

- ▶ go to occupational healthcare services, especially when experiencing stress related symptoms or workplace related health concerns
- ▶ keep a record of all medical documentation related to the case, including reports, diagnoses, and treatment recommendations
- ▶ set boundaries to avoid “taking work problems home,” protecting your mental and emotional space outside the institution
- ▶ consult trade unions to safeguard workplace safety, ensuring you understand your rights and available protections

- ▶ seek advice from experts on digital security, particularly if facing online harassment, data breaches, or cyberthreats
- ▶ report threats to the police and keep detailed records, including screenshots, dates, and descriptions of incidents
- ▶ share information with external professionals (e.g., psychologists, doctors, police) who can provide independent documentation and support
- ▶ identify trusted colleagues and a medical professional who could, if needed, speak to your situation or testify to its impact

For external or international support

- ▶ academic freedom organizations (eg, Scholars at Risk, academic freedom monitoring bodies); civil society and human rights organizations (e.g., Amnesty International); observatories and advisory bodies (e.g., Magna Charta Observatory, Venice Commission)
- ▶ accreditation and quality assurance bodies nationally and the European: ENQA
- ▶ Council of Europe, European Commission, European Parliament, and related academic freedom bodies
- ▶ national government representatives (e.g., Ministry of Education or Science)
- ▶ national research councils or science foundations

The image features a stylized graphic of an open book. The background is a solid orange color. The pages of the book are represented by two large, white, rounded shapes that meet at a central point at the top and bottom, forming a V-shape. The text "Survival strategies" is centered on the white pages in a bold, black, serif font. The word "Survival" is on the top line, and "strategies" is on the bottom line.

Survival strategies

Academics facing institutional pressures can adopt multiple strategies to maintain resilience, security, and professional continuity. These strategies should be adapted to the context and risk level. It falls into the following complementary areas:

Despecification

These despecification strategies apply particularly to people working in countries where their safety is directly at risk, as it may ultimately end up in self-censorship.

Strategically reduce political or institutional exposure by adjusting the framing of your work

- ▶ broaden or reframe research topics to make them appear less politically sensitive while still pursuing core scholarly questions
- ▶ avoid keywords or labels that may attract unwanted attention, using neutral or technical terminology when appropriate
- ▶ organise closed conferences and workshops, creating safer spaces for discussion, collaboration, and exchange on sensitive issues

Diversification

Increase professional and funding resilience

- ▶ try to situate your work within a less targeted or less politically vulnerable field, creating safer intellectual space while maintaining your

broader research trajectory

- ▶ expand collaborations, especially internationally, to diversify support systems, enhance visibility, and reduce dependence on a single institution
- ▶ seek funding from multiple sources, building financial resilience and reducing vulnerability to any single funder's agenda or pressures
- ▶ develop an interdisciplinary research profile, increasing flexibility, mobility, and opportunities across different fields and institutions

Collective shielding strategies

Leverage teamwork to reduce individual vulnerability

- ▶ contact your unit or university leadership, and expect institutional protection for the work you are carrying out on their behalf
- ▶ publish and apply for grants as a team, strengthening collective visibility, shared credit, and mutual support
- ▶ share institutional knowledge and mentorship among colleagues, ensuring that expertise and experience circulate rather than remaining isolated
- ▶ reach out to colleagues outside your country, but note that they might be working under the same pressure as you are

Financial security

Work on personal and professional financial stability

- ▶ check your institutional pension funds and entitlements, ensuring you understand what you have accumulated and what protections apply
- ▶ seek financial advice before taking any major action, particularly when considering job changes, relocations, or legal steps
- ▶ save a small amount each month, no matter how modest, to build long-term financial resilience and independence

Developing connections

Strengthen your professional network and external support

- ▶ maintain relationships with colleagues at home and abroad, strengthening academic support networks across institutions and borders
- ▶ keep in contact with trusted journalists, who may help responsibly draw attention to systemic issues when appropriate
- ▶ build and reinforce guilds, professional associations, and research networks, creating collective resilience and shared advocacy
- ▶ use the resources of existing organisations strategically, leveraging their tools, expertise, and visibility
- ▶ forge unexpected alliances and identify supportive influencers, broadening your circle of allies

- beyond traditional academic structures
- ▶ establish connections with legal advisors or lawyers, ensuring access to informed guidance when institutional or external pressures arise

Mental Health and Wellbeing Support

Collect resources to protect your mental health

- ▶ access to a trusted and available therapist or counsellor who can help you process stress, anxiety, or burnout.
- ▶ form a support group or peer circle where you can speak openly without institutional consequences.
- ▶ plan a safe space for emotional decompression, regular time and settings that allow you to step outside academic pressure (e.g., hobbies)
- ▶ listen and cultivate trusted colleagues and friends who can help you recognize early signs of overload and encourage protective boundaries, and whom you can turn to for reassurance, stability, emotional grounding, and remind you of your identity outside work
- ▶ build a network that provides practical help when crises arise (e.g., logistics, daily life support, no access to VPN, lack of office computer, etc.)
- ▶ build relationships that reinforce your sense of belonging and dignity, regardless of institutional challenges, and help you to move to the next stage

Use the power of communication.

Communication initiatives, although beneficial as they may reduce vulnerability in some contexts, can lead to negative feedback, and you must be prepared to deal with this when deciding to speak publicly.

Use of communication to protect your position and influence outcomes includes

- ▶ avoid overly technical language when engaging broader audiences, ensuring your message is accessible and clearly understood
- ▶ participate in public debates to discuss issues rather than taking sides, contributing nuance instead of polarisation
- ▶ leverage your academic authority strategically, using expertise to advance well considered objectives with credibility
- ▶ maintain a presence on social media while safeguarding personal information, balancing visibility with digital safety
- ▶ use strategic silence, choosing when and how to speak in order to reduce conflict, avoid escalation, and protect emotional wellbeing
- ▶ rely on legal and institutional frameworks to support your position, grounding your actions in established rights and procedures
- ▶ use debate, reporting, and formal complaints cautiously and strategically, assessing potential outcomes before taking action
- ▶ prepare for possible labelling or negative characterisations (e.g., being called a “traitor”) when taking principled and evidence-based stances

Exit or mobility strategies

Create options for relocation or career mobility as a safety net, whilst bearing in mind that certain obligations, such as those relating to caring for relatives, may limit these options

- ▶ explore visiting positions or affiliations abroad, creating temporary academic homes that offer stability and intellectual continuity
- ▶ seek alternative institutions or employment opportunities, keeping options open in case a transition becomes necessary
- ▶ apply for international fellowships, which can provide financial support, academic recognition, and mobility
- ▶ build external networks to support future transitions, ensuring you have contacts who can help with references, collaborations, or opportunities
- ▶ learn about your rights both inside and outside your current institution, including employment protections, visa rules, and academic freedom frameworks
- ▶ have a digital copy of your documents, certificates and diplomas scanned and with you on a USB stick and in a safe cloud.



Digital Resilience and Data Protection

The confidentiality of your personal data is crucial, especially in turbulent times.

It is therefore important to know how to protect your personal data and build digital resilience:

Protecting your data in everyday life

These few precautions can help you avoid data leaks or theft

- ▶ use a privacy screen
- ▶ block the USB connection when your phone is locked
- ▶ use a USB data blocker
- ▶ install a password manager
- ▶ do not use the same password for every website
- ▶ do not store business data on your personal phone (and vice-versa)
- ▶ do not save any passwords in the browser on your workstation
- ▶ do not use a public Wi-Fi to connect to important servers (e.g., data, Cloud, etc.)

Protecting your data when traveling

When travelling outside the Schengen area, particularly to a country with restricted freedoms, you should follow certain data protection best practices.

These include

- ▶ always keep your computer in sight
- ▶ switch off your electronic devices when in transit
- ▶ if you are travelling to a country with limited freedoms, remove all traces of you opposing the regime from the internet
- ▶ do not resist local authorities if they ask for your devices, personal data, research subjects or identification details
- ▶ do not store your important data on your laptop; store them in an GDPR friendly cloud

Protecting data related to your research

As a researcher, your work data may contain personal and other sensitive data of many people. Protecting this data is essential, particularly if your research topics involve sensitive subjects/areas.

This includes

- ▶ use pseudonymisation (e.g. Counter, Random Number Generator)
- ▶ use a USB token to store sensitive information securely
- ▶ use multi-factor authentication to access sensitive databases (e.g., questionnaire responses, contact forms, etc.)
- ▶ do not store confidential data in storage facilities that do not comply with GDPR (e.g., Google Drive, Unencrypted External Media, etc.)

- ▶ try always to use European Alternatives for digital services
- ▶ keep the data only as long as necessary for analysis

What to do if your data has been compromised/stolen?

Despite precautions, your personal/research data may be stolen or compromised.

Here is what to do in such a situation

- ▶ change the relevant passwords
- ▶ cut off access to the database/server if necessary
- ▶ assess the severity of the situation (e.g., what data, how many people are affected)
- ▶ notify the supervisory authority within 72 hours

Selected readings

- 1. Academic Freedom Index. Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) & V-Dem Institute (2020).** <https://academic-freedom-index.net>
- 2. Agasisti, T., et al. (2018). Academic resilience: What schools and countries do to help disadvantaged students succeed in PISA.** OECD Education Working Papers, No. 167. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e22490ac-en>
- 3. Brøgger, K., & Dakowska, D. (2026). Academic Freedom, Openness and the Shifting Geopolitics of European Higher Education.** In K. Brøgger, H. Moscovitz, S. Robertson, & J. J. Lee (Eds.), *World Yearbook of Education 2026: The Shifting Geopolitics of Higher Education: Knowledge, Power, Protest*. Routledge.
- 4. Cassidy, S. (2016). The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A new multidimensional construct measure.** *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 1787. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01787>
- 5. Council of Europe. (2012). Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy.** <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=09000016805ca6f8>
- 6. Darian-Smith, E. (2025). The global attack on academic freedom: The limits and potentials of international law.** *London Review of International Law*, 13(2), 135–145. <https://doi.org/10.1093/lril/lraf012>
- 7. Ergas, Y., Kochkorova, J., Pető, A., & Trujillo, N. (2022). Disputing “Gender” in academia: Illiberalism and the politics of knowledge.** *Politics and Governance*, 10(4), 121–131. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5529>
- 8. Frangeville, V. Merlin, A. Sfeir, J. Vandamme, P-E. (2021) La liberté académique, enjeux et menaces.** *Maison des Sciences Humaines*. <https://msh.ulb.ac.be/fr/publications/la-liberte-academique-enjeux-et-menaces>

9. GATE, (2024) “Recognizing, Documenting, and Addressing Anti-Gender Opposition” https://gate.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2024-GATE-Recognizing_Documenting_and_Addresssing_Anti-Gender_Opposition.pdf
10. Joint Statement on behalf of a group of 74 countries on academic freedom. (2023, 52nd Session, Human Rights Council). <https://onu-geneve.delegfrance.org/Joint-declaration-on-Academic-freedom>
11. Lewandowsky, S., Kempe, V., Armaos, K., Hahn, U., Abels, C. M., Wibisono, S., Louis, W., Sah, S., Pagel, C., Jankowicz, N., DiResta, R., Markolin, P., Schönemann, H., Hertwig, R., Crull, H., Mauer, B., Holford, D., Lopez-Lopez, E., & Cook, J. (2025). The Anti-Autocracy Handbook: A Scholar’s Guide to Navigating Democratic Backsliding. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15696097>
12. Maassen, P., Elken, M., & Jungblut, J. (2025). De facto Academic Freedom in the European Union – Threats and Trends. *European Review*, 33(S1), S28–S43. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798725000134>
13. Pető, A. (2024). Four reasons why Gender Studies has changed because of illiberal attacks, and why it matters. *Berliner Blätter*, 88, 111–115. <https://doi.org/10.18452/27986>
14. Pető, A., Dragolea, A., & Florian, B. (2025). Illiberal politics and threats against academic freedom. In *World Yearbook of Education 2026* (1st ed., pp. 14–). Routledge.
15. Roberts Lyer, K. (2025, October 17). Academic freedom as a human right: Academic freedom in Europe. *VerfBlog*. <https://verfassungsblog.de/academic-freedom-humanright> <https://doi.org/10.59704/c46ec42249da7ec2>
16. Roberts Lyer, K., Saliba, I., & Spannagel, J. (2022). *Decline in university autonomy: Causes, responses, and implications for academic freedom*. Routledge.
17. Slowey, M., & Taylor, R. (Eds.). (2024). *Academic freedom in higher education: Core value or elite privilege?* (1st ed., pp. 226). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003363262>

18. UNESCO. (1997). Recommendation concerning the status of higher-education teaching personnel. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-status-higher-education-teaching-personnel>

19. Working Group on Academic Freedom. (2024). Principles for implementing the right to academic freedom. A/HRC/56/CRP.2. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc56crp2-principles-implementing-right-academic-freedom-working-group>

Helpful links

More links and links to the different trade unions by country are available at www.academicresilience.eu

International

www.scholarsatrisk.org

www.academicssolidarity.com/en/supporting-persecuted-or-war-affected-scholars-through-academic-solidarity

www.amnesty.org/en

Europe

www.magna-charta.org

www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission

www.coe.int/en/web/portal

France

www.afsp.info/activites/observatoire-oala

USA

www.silencingscience.org

www.aaup.org



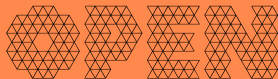


This Pocket Guide was developed within the framework of the COST Actions “Rising nationalism, shifting geopolitics, and the future of European higher education/ research openness” (OPEN), and “Democratization at stake? Comparing Anti-Gender Politics in CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) and NME (New Member Economies) countries” (Antigender-Politics). It builds on our Academic Resilience Trainings held in Tirana (Albania) in June 2025 and in Vienna (Austria) in February 2026, and on the collective reflections that emerged from them.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank the reviewers of this Pocket Guide: Rebecka Lettevall, Friedrich Cain, Elena Mandaji, Paula Silvén, Otilia Torda, Reina Zenelaj, Katja Brøgger, Mentor Beqa, Hannah Moscovitz, Andreas Oberprantacher and Bernhard Weidinger.

Across Europe and beyond, higher education is being reshaped by austerity, political interference, and AI driven managerial systems, transforming governance, research priorities, and everyday academic life amid growing uncertainty. This Pocket Guide bridges the gap between critical scholarship and practical support, offering a grounded, flexible framework—drawn from 15 years of institutional flashpoints—to help diverse academic actors recognize early warning signs, understand their structural causes, and respond proportionately and effectively.



Österreichische
Hochschüler_innenschaft