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Academic freedom is under threat. Around the world, the freedom to teach, study, and disseminate scientific work, and to engage in evidence-based communication is being increasingly questioned. A disturbing trend is emerging both the freedom of *individual* researchers as well as the freedom of *academic institutions* are coming under increasing pressure.

In [their most recent report](#), the [Academic Freedom Index \(AFI\)](#) shows that the decline in academic freedom is present around the world. Globally, an estimated 3.6 billion people live in countries where academic freedom is completely restricted. Academic freedom is losing ground across the world, and in a number of European countries—including the UK, the Netherlands, and Austria—academic freedom is in active regression. Those in power are exerting increasing, inappropriate influence over our research.

Across the continent, safeguards that many assumed were strong enough to protect free academic work are now showing cracks. Governments tightening control over universities. Politicians reshaping research agendas to fit their own views. European academia is not immune to undue political influence. Change is happening now, and it is happening at an alarming pace.

We—young academies in the Nordic-Baltic region—view this political interference with dismay, and we stand by our colleagues around the world calling for the preservation and protection of academic freedom. Restrictions on academic freedom threaten the very foundation of academia and our ability to produce the high-quality research needed to address current and future societal challenges.

Academic freedom is not merely an abstract principle; it is a prerequisite for society to produce high-quality research in response to our changing needs and circumstances. Younger researchers are particularly vulnerable to the erosion of academic freedom. We, more than others, do not have the security that would allow us to weather abrupt shifts in basic research opportunities. Undue politicization of research funding and restrictions on the ability to research and disseminate freely undermine the ability of the next generation of scientists to establish themselves and to pursue high-quality research.

However, the negative consequences do not stop there. When politicians determine what research may be conducted, which curricula may be taught, or which researchers may speak, it is not only a challenge to academic freedom, but also an active erosion of our open democratic society.

Free academia is one of the pillars of a functioning democracy. A free judiciary is another: it exists to ensure that we citizens can exercise our freedoms and protect our rights—not least

the freedom and right to express varying opinions, even when those opinions may be uncomfortable for some. Universities and colleges serve a corresponding function: freedom in research and higher education create the conditions for critical evaluations of public decisions, decision-making processes, and of those in power. Academia generates knowledge and a culture of open exchange that defends society from political manipulation and strengthens the legitimacy of political processes. Independent, fact-checking experts are essential personnel in a free and open society. When policies constrain academic freedom, our democracies are threatened.

The developments we see around the world as well as at home demand action. The rapid rate at which infringements have been imposed shows that our academic system in its current form is not safe. Academic freedom must be strengthened.

We, Young Academies of the Nordic-Baltic region, have identified three key areas where our leaders should act to defend academic freedom and create institutional safeguards to ensure long-term protection of free and open scientific exchange:

Academic freedom must be protected by law. It should be given full legal protection as a democratic principle, equal to freedom of speech, press, and religion. In a free society it is imperative that we safeguard the freedom of teaching, research, and dissemination—all [central elements of free and open academic institutions](#).

An ombudsman for academic freedom and integrity must be established. As an independent body, it should be given the mandate to investigate and address issues relating to the free pursuit and dissemination of knowledge within higher education. The ombudsman should also serve as an indicator to our leaders on the current state, and development, of academic freedom.

Long-term vision and continuity must permeate all research policy. The entire academic system—from governance to career paths and funding—needs to be designed with the understanding that research and education are inherently slow-moving. Scientific innovation develops over years, not months, and academia must be shielded from undue and abrupt changes imposed by sudden political winds.

The restriction of academic freedom is increasing—and rapidly so. Urgent countermeasures are needed to avoid serious consequences for our open societies. We, young academies of the Nordic-Baltic region, urge our politicians to act decisively to strengthen the frameworks that protect academia and secure the pillars of democracy. A free society requires free academic institutions—and like all freedoms, it must be defended in advance, before it is lost.

The Estonian Young Academy of Sciences
The Latvian Association of Young Researchers
The Polish Young Academy
The Young Academy Finland
The Young Academy of Denmark
The Young Academy of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences
The Young Academy of Norway
The Young Academy of Sweden