

INFORMAL MEETING OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH MINISTERS

16-17 SEPTEMBER 2024, BUDAPEST

BACKGROUND PAPER – PLENARY 3: ‘THE CONTRIBUTION OF FREEDOM OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH TO THE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION’

TOWARDS A CLEAR AND OBJECTIVE MEASUREMENT SYSTEM: RETHINKING METHODS AND MONITORING MECHANISMS OF FREEDOM OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

The European Union has to regain its competitiveness in research and innovation, it has to be able to mobilize and keep talent, as well as to ensure that creative ideas are transferred into results that can be transferred to society. In order to achieve the highest quality of research results and mobilize the best talents within and from abroad, the Union has to design and implement an area of free movement of knowledge, as provided in Article 179 TFEU. But in order for knowledge to move freely, researchers need to be free to carry out their research – everywhere in the Union. Freedom of scientific research, protected by Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, is therefore an integral part of the European Research Area (ERA).

As defined by the Bonn Declaration, freedom of scientific research refers among others to the freedom to define research topics, the freedom to choose methods to find answers, the freedom to debate and the freedom to present results publicly.

While there is a common understanding on the significance of freedom of scientific research as a value, many aspects remain subjects of current hot debates. The definition and scope of freedom of scientific research, how and from what it should be protected, and how its implementation should be monitored, are high on the agenda of the Commission, the European Parliament and also of the Member States.

Most recently Enrico Letta’s report on the Future of the Single Market emphasized the importance of the autonomy of researchers and called for protecting their right

to pursue curiosity-driven inquiries free from undue political or commercial pressures. It is therefore a good moment to consider how, in order to develop the ERA, we can further promote and protect the freedom of scientific research in Europe.

Both the Commission and the European Parliament consider it necessary to set up and implement a monitoring system on freedom of scientific research in order to track and assess the status situation of freedom of scientific research in Member States. The Commission is expected to issue a study to provide a solid evidence base and a de jure and de facto assessment of the protection and promotion of the freedom of scientific research in the 27 Member States. The aim of the Hungarian Presidency is to discuss this crucial issue at ministerial level and make heard the voice of the Member States.

In light of the above, ministers are invited to give their views on the following questions:

- ***What concrete characteristics could signify the existence of freedom of scientific research? Could you provide examples or best practices to illustrate this?***
- ***How to set up an objective and unbiased monitoring system of freedom of scientific research filtering out subjective elements and what are sources of information that can feed this system with credible data? What are the „tangible” characteristics of the freedom of scientific research?***

NEW CHALLENGES SINCE THE BONN DECLARATION

In 2020, during the German EU Presidency the 27 EU Ministers for Research and Innovation of the 27 Member States took a powerful commitment towards safeguarding freedom of scientific research as a value. The unanimously signed Bonn Declaration laid down the basic principles that determine the EU's attitude to freedom of scientific research.

Four years might not amount to a lengthy time period, however the world has been changing swiftly in the past years. We are witnessing new major changes: new potential threats have emerged to freedom of scientific research such as foreign

interference, AI related aspects or fake news, as well as how to increase competitiveness of the Union to reinforce its position among its global competitors.

The relationship between competitiveness and the freedom of scientific research is complex and should not be taken for granted. Some argue that the freedom to identify research topics, determine their TRL level, and engage in international collaboration significantly contributes to competitiveness. Others suggest that an overemphasis on competitiveness can lead to imbalances in the innovation ecosystem, while protecting competitive advantages might lead to knowledge silos, where valuable information is restricted to certain institutions or countries.

International collaboration in research and innovation increasingly necessitates consideration of research security issues. Some fear that advanced know-how and valuable knowledge may be leaked to competitors, on the other hand restrictions on international R&I collaboration can have real costs in terms of scientific and technological advancement, potentially limiting competitiveness. The Council Recommendation on enhancing research security, adopted during the Belgian Presidency, provides valuable guidance by suggesting a balance between openness in research and the protection of national interests, and highlighting instruments that can ensure competitiveness.

The Hungarian Presidency wishes to contribute to the discussion with inducing joint thinking on how freedom of scientific research as a pivotal value contributes to strengthening the European competitiveness.

In light of the above, ministers are invited to give their views on the following questions:

- ***Are new ways of cooperation needed?***
- ***How is the notion of freedom of scientific research connected to other objectives and core values of growing importance such as competitiveness and research security?***

MINISTERS ARE INVITED TO SPEAK FOR 3 MINUTES ON THE ABOVE QUESTIONS.

MAJOR RELATED DOCUMENTS

- Art. 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU
- [Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research October 2020](#)
- [Annex to the European Higher Education Area Rome Ministerial Communiqué November 2020](#)
- [European Research Area Policy Agenda, 2022-2024 Action 6 Deepening the ERA through protecting academic freedom in Europe](#)
- [Enrico Letta: Much more than a Single Market April \(Report\) 2024](#)
- [European Monitoring report on the freedom of scientific research \(European Parliament\)](#)
- [European Parliamentary Research Service \(2023\). State of play of academic freedom in the EU Member States](#)
- [Horizon Europe: Protecting academic freedom Strengthening and improving implementation of Recital 72 Study June 2024](#)