

The Defence of Democracy Package - the university perspective

To face situations where democratic culture and structures are under internal and external pressures, Europe must develop resilience.

The [Defence of Democracy Package](#), as presented by the European Commission in February, is a welcome opportunity to take concrete steps towards protecting and strengthening democracy in the European Union. That said, the instruments used for its implementation must be carefully balanced to fully empower civil society as democratic actors, as well as to enable mutual, global understanding and dialogue.

The European University Association (EUA) therefore urges the European Commission to be mindful of not letting the notion of protection stand in the way of dialogue between a multitude of actors, both within European societies and globally.

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

Universities play an important role in democratic societies. In particular, they promote informed citizenship and evidence-based public debates and provide spaces of creative and critical thought. (Please refer to EUA's position [Pathways to the future, September 2021](#).)

To fulfil this role, universities must develop, test and disseminate new ideas. Universities provide a forum for open and critical discussion, debate and analysis of societal issues. This intellectual environment is essential for democracy as it ensures that citizens have access to scientific knowledge. Europe's universities are engaged in cultivating this environment in society at large, [fostering general scientific literacy and communicating new scientific knowledge](#) well beyond the academic community. The Covid-19 pandemic illustrated the importance of [scientific advice for democratic decision making](#) in crisis situations, as well as for empowering citizens to act on the basis of scientific knowledge. In this example, to avoid spreading the virus. To achieve this, universities and their communities require academic freedom, i.e. the right of scholars, educators and learners to pursue research, teaching and scholarship without fear of censorship, repression or retaliation.

UNIVERSITIES NEED ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Unfortunately, academic freedom is under pressure. In too many places, including in Europe, researchers, educators and learners who wish to develop an academic understanding of core societal issues are being silenced and face threats of legal and financial obstacles in conducting their research. This can be the case for research on gender or ethnicity and race, for example. The instruments used to silence academics are often introduced as 'protective' measures that provide accountability and limit foreign interference. In such scenarios, NGOs or universities are accused of being foreign agents, or government officials are introduced in university governance to provide 'accountability.' For the defence of European democracy to be effective, it must safeguard and strengthen rights such as academic freedom against interference from a wider range of forces, including governments that aim to silence critical voices and different points of view.

Furthermore, academic freedom must be shielded by institutional autonomy. EUA's recent report on [University Autonomy in Europe](#) (March 2023) demonstrates that governments may still exert excessive and unnecessary influence on universities.

AVOIDING FOREIGN INTERFERENCE, STAYING OPEN TO THE WORLD

The academic community, which is both globally engaged and at the forefront of developing strategic technologies, is highly aware of the trade-offs between openness and geopolitical risk. [Universities welcomed](#) the European Commission's 2021 'Global approach to research and innovation' and its principle of 'open by default,' while acknowledging the need to develop risk management systems. This risk-based approach should continue with the Defence of Democracy Package. To limit global dialogue, there must be a concrete and identifiable risk; blanket bans will undermine the long-term benefits of openness to the world. Here, the people-to-people aspect of academic exchanges remains an essential instrument for mutual understanding. This must not be hampered by general bans and obstacles unless there is a clear risk for foreign interference against the interest and values of Europe's democracies.

While protection and care are necessary, this is not a reason to restrict global contacts and exchanges to 'like-minded countries,' and political systems and societies that share similar democratic cultures and values. Such a restriction would again violate academic freedom and diminish the richness and relevance of Europe's research and education. It would also hamper the resilience of Europe's democracies by depriving European citizens and decision makers of global knowledge.

In conclusion, EUA believes that it is important to use the Defence of Democracy Package and other frameworks as a basis for ongoing discussions and debate. This includes the development of strategies and measures to enhance the contribution of higher education and research to democracy and civil society, both in European and global settings.