

# **Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research – A Common Core Principle of the European Research Area and its International Partners**

(Draft text from 18 September 2020  
for adoption at the  
Ministerial Conference on the European Research Area  
on 20 October 2020 in Bonn)

The freedom of scientific research is a universal public good. It is a core principle of the European Union and as such anchored in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. It has constitutional status in most EU Member States. Freedom of scientific research stands for openness, exchange, excellence, internationalism, diversity, curiosity and reflexivity. It is therefore a pillar of any liberal democracy.

Research and the freedom to conduct research are indispensable prerequisites for our social, political and economic progress. They are crucial tools for shaping our future and for empowering the next generation of researchers. They stand for courage. They stand for hope.

Freedom of scientific research is an indispensable prerequisite of trusting, open and effective research cooperation not only within the European Research Area, but also between the European Research Area and its international partners. It applies to all types of research organisations<sup>1</sup> and scholarship.

It is a building block of innovation, progress and social cohesion. Without the freedom of scientific research and its protection, there will not be a dynamic, global and lively research and innovation landscape. Therefore, it is one of the foundations upon which the European Research Area is based.

First and foremost, freedom of scientific research is the right to freely carry out research, in particular to freely choose research topics. It entails the right to disseminate and publish the results thereof. It is the freedom of researchers to express their opinion without fear of reprisal from the institution or system in which they work or from governmental or institutional censorship. It is also the freedom to associate in professional or representative academic bodies. Freedom of scientific research also requires physical mobility, freedom to interact with colleagues and travel to any destination relevant for their research and academic work. Institutional autonomy coupled with reliable and stable financing are necessary prerequisites for scientific freedom.

Freedom of scientific research is a necessary condition for researchers to produce and transfer knowledge as a public good for the benefit of society. Scientific research serves the society,

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<sup>1</sup> The term research organization is used in its widest sense to include publicly- and privately-financed research funding and performing organisations as well as higher education institutions.

serves the people. The misuse of scientific research for political purposes and the distrust in scientific research caused by fake facts endanger the very purpose and benefit of science.

Freedom of scientific research is considered a form of freedom of expression. As well-founded scientific knowledge and perspectives are derived transparently and are refutable, they deserve our highest degree of protection. Freedom of scientific research is informed by the standards of academic disciplines. At the same time, it enables researchers to challenge these standards when and if new research results begin to question their validity.

We stand committed to the freedom of scientific research, especially in times when there are increasing reports of violations of this freedom around the globe. We strongly condemn all violations of the freedom of scientific research and will oppose them with vigour. We will continue to express our conviction that scientific ideas are not crimes and that critical discourses are not disloyalty, but essential elements of a democratic society. Freedom of scientific research is inseparable from a pluralism of voices.

We recognise the importance of having strong legal frameworks in place, based on the rule of law and guaranteeing and protecting the freedom of scientific research of research performing and research funding organisations.

Freedom of scientific research is also an important link to other areas of action, insofar as these are relevant to research. This applies in particular to the European Higher Education Area, whose 48 participating countries are particularly committed to protecting freedom of scientific research.

We encourage close cooperation between the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area. We acknowledge and support the development of more effective instruments for monitoring and safeguarding the freedom of scientific research in the context of the Bologna Process within the European Higher Education Area.

We will follow closely the establishment of a monitoring system on academic freedom in the European Higher Education Area and assess its implications for research in particular with respect to potential indicators and monitoring methods and their relevance for monitoring freedom of scientific research within the European Research Area.

We highly value the full circle of knowledge production, dissemination and transfer in industry and society for the overall performance, relevance and impact of the European Research Area. The knowledge circle provides the means to deliver on the advancement of knowledge, to address societal challenges and to ensure the quality of life of future generations.

The exercise of rights derived from the freedom of scientific research should take into account the specific requirements of the entire research spectrum. We therefore consider a healthy equilibrium between bottom-up and top-down funding approaches necessary and in line with the freedom of scientific research.

We acknowledge that science has a responsibility towards society to ensure clarity, transparency and comprehensibility when communicating research findings, and to explain the difference between non-scientific opinions and scientifically verifiable findings. We encourage and support our research organisations in their efforts to communicate scientific processes and results and to engage with society in order to cut the ground from under distortions of facts and disinformation campaigns. Trust in science is key for an integrative, open and democratic society. In the long run, scientific freedom can only be maintained as long as science enjoys the understanding and trust of society.

We understand that the exercise of scientific freedom is necessarily linked to a professional system of responsible self-regulation of academic and research institutions. We encourage and support high standards of good scientific practice, guidelines and advisory structures for safeguarding integrity and ethical boundaries, including transparent and excellence based competitive funding procedures. This includes creating incentive and reward systems that do not restrict independence and transparency of research, but promote them.

Freedom of scientific research should be a visible common value guiding any research cooperation involving EU Member States and international partner countries. It should be understood, practiced and promoted by all Member States of the European Union, including as an integral part of our science diplomacy activities.

Freedom of scientific research should therefore be recognised as an indispensable basis for cooperation with the international partners of the European Research Area. It is an essential element in developing the global dimension of the European Research Area to mutual benefit. We call on our global partners to find common ground in the protection of freedom of scientific research to enable a flourishing and open research cooperation. Global research networks of excellence, joint responsibility for global challenges and the protection of democratic values thus have a reliable basis.

We encourage our research organisations and their researchers to establish strong research cooperation around the world while upholding and promoting the freedom of scientific research even in collaborations with researchers from challenging countries. We will provide full support to our research organisations in this endeavour and encourage them to anchor the principles of scientific freedom in individual cooperation agreements with international partner organisations.

We invite the European Commission to include freedom of scientific research as a precondition in future negotiations of agreements on scientific and technological cooperation.

We see Europe as a guardian of democracy, equality and the rule of law. We understand the European Research Area as the safeguard of freedom of scientific research, as the

precondition for a dynamic research and innovation landscape which strives for the advancement of knowledge and the benefit of society.

We, the Research Ministers of the European Union and the European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, met at the Ministerial Conference on the European Research Area in Bonn, Germany on 20 October 2020 to affirm the central role of freedom of scientific research as a common core value for research cooperation within the European Research Area and for its international cooperation. We extend our gratitude to the [list of INCO partners] for their determined efforts in upholding the principles of this declaration in their countries. Other countries are invited to express their support for the Bonn Declaration in the future.

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