Promotion of the freedom of scientific research in the EU

2023/2184(INL) - 17/01/2024 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted, by 461 votes to 34 with 140 abstentions, a resolution containing recommendations to the Commission on the promotion of the freedom of scientific research in the EU.

Members reaffirmed the Union's commitment to defending fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of scientific research in all scientific and artistic disciplines.

Parliament recognised that the current **precarious situation** in the sector has serious repercussions on the freedom of scientific research. It drew attention to the particularly precarious situation of researchers at the start of their careers and stressed the need to create clearer and more structured career prospects to increase the number of young researchers. Equal opportunities, particularly those fostered by gender equality, are also essential to promote freedom of scientific research.

Members stressed the importance of having a framework that is conducive to the **effective protection and promotion of freedom of scientific research** throughout the EU. They called on the Commission to take all possible measures to protect and promote the freedom of scientific research in the EU and to ensure that the ethics and integrity of research are not compromised.

Proposal on the act of freedom and scientific research

Parliament requested that the Commission submit a proposal following the principles and aims set out below to guarantee, protect and promote this freedom at the level of research organisations and of researchers all along their careers.

Defining the freedom of scientific research

It is recommended that the proposal should build on the definition of the freedom of scientific research, **in line with the Bonn Declaration**, which stands for openness, exchange, excellence, internationalism, diversity, equality, integrity, curiosity, responsibility and reflexivity and that it is, therefore, a pillar of any democracy.

The term ‘scientific researchers’ should be defined broadly.

The freedom of scientific research entails the right for individual researchers to freely define research questions, choose and develop theories, gather empirical material, and employ sound scientific research methods, to maintain scientific integrity, to challenge conventional wisdom, to publish and communicate freely, and to propose new ideas and theories as well as disseminate them freely.

The rights of individual researchers include at least:

- the **right to freely access public information**, and the right to access private information needed for scientific purposes, which is to be balanced with the rights of information holders and the nature /sensitivity of information;

- the **right to keep specific information or data**, as well as the source for that information or date **confidential** in order to abide by ethical and scientific standards, to achieve a scientific or other legitimate objectives;

- the **right to publish, share, disseminate and communicate openly**, both intramural and extramural, the right to speak freely and critically about work and politics of scientific research institutions and the results and data of their research, without fear of reprisal.

Rights and obligations of scientific research organisations

To guarantee the freedom of scientific research for scientific researchers, scientific research organisations should enjoy **effective institutional autonomy**. Scientific research organisations should have the freedom to engage in international collaboration.

The definition of institutional autonomy in the proposal should not be static, but rather should allow adaptation to different national, regional and institutional contexts in particular by allowing for emphasis to shift between different aspects of institutional autonomy by incorporating a gradual rather than binary appreciation of the different aspects. Institutional autonomy should come with an obligation for research organisations to provide some form of involvement of scientific researchers in decision-making.

Governmental obligations

Members recommended that governmental bodies in Member States, at all levels of government including Union institutions, agencies and bodies, should have the obligation to **respect, protect, promote and ensure the freedom of scientific research**, including institutional autonomy.

Respect for the freedom of scientific research means that governmental bodies refrain from **arbitrary interferences** in and imposing undue restrictions on the freedom of scientific research, as well as refrain from active or complicity participation in violations of the right.

Moreover, ensuring the freedom of scientific research means that governmental bodies have to actively create all the preconditions needed for the exercise all aspects of the freedom, including institutional autonomy. This includes policies for **sustainable research careers** providing quality jobs at all career stages as well as long term, reliable and stable institutional financing.

Parliament considered that the proposed act should be **legally binding** across the Union. The proposal should create a starting point for the development of legal minimum standards for the freedom of scientific research through case-law from European courts, including the Court of Justice of the European Union.