

Researchers at Risk as Human Rights Defenders

7 August 2025

***Summary:** Support for human rights defenders is a long-established part of the European Union's human rights external relations policy. The purpose of this brief is to highlight that a significant number of researchers at risk are HRDs, whether by the nature of their academic work, extramural advocacy work, or expressive activities.*

Defining Human Rights Defenders

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders states “[e]veryone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels” (article 1).¹ The EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders surmises that HRDs “are those individuals, groups and organs of society that promote and protect universally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms”. HRDs include, for example, activists, lawyers, journalists, as well as researchers, when their work contributes to the defence of human rights. A HRD is not a fixed category but rather a status determined by the peaceful exercise of activities aimed at defending universally recognised human rights. Therefore, the fundamental idea is practical: it is not who the individual is but what they do that counts.

Researchers at Risk: When are they considered HRDs?

Researchers at risk include researchers, scholars, and scientists at all stages of their careers who are experiencing threats to their life, liberty, or research career and those who are forced to flee or have been displaced because of such threats.² While the exact numbers of researchers at risk who qualify as HRDs are not systematically collected, organisations working to support them, including Inspireurope+ partners, have found that **a significant portion are HRDs**, whether through the nature of their academic work, extramural advocacy work, or expressive activities, even if they don't formally identify as HRDs. While the EU has included explicit references to academics and researchers as HRDs in its policy documents and human rights training programmes,³ difficulties can arise when an overly narrow interpretation of HRD eligibility is applied. One that focuses solely on the specific targeting of work content will exclude from consideration many at-risk researchers who experience systemic restrictions (e.g., on travel) or situational violations of human rights.

Researchers at Risk can be HRDs when:⁴

- (i) Their academic research, publishing and/or teaching explicitly incorporates rights-focused education and/or advocacy, especially in fields such as women's rights, children's rights, minority rights, land rights, religious freedom, environmental rights, and others.

¹ For more information and details on who is considered a HDR, please refer to OHCHR Fact Sheet No. 29, Human Rights Defenders: Protecting the Right to Defend Human Rights.

² Inspireurope+, “Researchers at Risk: An Update on National level Actions in Europe 2024” para. 1.2, available at: https://sareurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/k6_AvH_Inspireurope_A4_1-2023_FINAL.pdf

³ See https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/human-rights-defenders_en

⁴ This content substantially draws from two sources: R. Quinn & J. Levine “Intellectual-HRDs and claims for academic freedom under human rights law”, The International Journal of Human Rights, 18:7-8, 898-920, (2014), and Free Online course, “Dangerous Questions: Why Academic Freedom Matters”, available here: <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/academic-freedom>. Further reading see Annexe I.



- (ii) The specific content of their scholarly work directly challenges power structures and exposes human rights abuses. For example, a professor of public health conducting research on an epidemic publicises findings that challenge government orthodoxy and refuses to acquiesce to a campaign to silence them.
- (iii) They are targeted due to their prominence in the intellectual community. Because of the often public-facing, international nature of their work, scholars and researchers can become attractive targets for authoritarians seeking to leverage their prominence to advance a particular political agenda; a scholar's refusal to allow their work to be utilised for that purpose may lead to persecution.
- (iv) They are targeted due to their peaceful exercise of, or advocacy supporting, fundamental human rights, in particular, academic freedom, the right to freedom of expression or freedom of association.

The growing role of researchers as human rights defenders

Academic freedom is a human right grounded in international legal frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Articles 19, 26, and 27), which protects freedom of expression, the right to education, and the right to benefit from scientific progress.⁵ It is explicitly recognised by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 13), which guarantees that “the arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint” and that “academic freedom shall be respected.” Academic freedom is essential not only to research, learning, innovation, and excellence, but to democracy, pluralism, health, economic prosperity, and social and cultural understanding and cohesion. However, global monitoring efforts, such as the [Academic Freedom Index](#) and Scholars at Risk’s “[Free to Think](#)” reporting series, document a clear decline in academic freedom worldwide, driven by factors including conflict, authoritarianism, and democratic backsliding. In response to these pressures, more researchers are being compelled to act in the defence of academic freedom.⁶ In doing so, they increasingly function as *de facto* HRDs, resisting censorship and political interference in order to safeguard the integrity of education and research and values such as inquiry, dissent and knowledge. Recognising and protecting these individuals as HRDs is essential to ensuring that academic freedom and the broader human rights it supports are upheld.

Recognition as HRDs brings tangible benefits.

Several EU instruments are mobilised to ensure the protection of HRDs. The EU provides emergency funds through Protectdefenders.eu to HRDs at risk. Scholars at Risk and its partners refer a small number of candidates for emergency grants implemented by ProtectDefenders.eu, (estimated at less than 5 candidates referred per year). Such emergency grants have ranged from 10,000-50,000 euro and can be useful in the provision of living expenses for a few months until a temporary position can be organised for the HRD-researchers at a university to extend an already-arranged position for 1-2 months, or to lend additional support to activists relocating with several dependents.⁷

Additionally, the EU shares information with Member States regarding cases where HRDs require visas for temporary relocation within the EU. The revised [2024 EU Visa Code Handbook](#) offers operational guidance

⁵ For a brief overview of legal standards relating to academic freedom, see SAR brief “Academic Freedom and Its Protection Under International Law”, available, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/academic-freedom-and-its-protection-under-international-law/>

⁶ Threats to researchers manifest through a wide range of conduct, from violent or coercive attacks to administrative actions or legal coercion. For example, a new EU directive (2024/1069) is designed to support individuals, including academics and researchers, who participate in public discourse and face manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings, commonly known as SLAPPs (‘Strategic lawsuits against public participation’). see https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202401069

⁷ This type of support is not comparable, however, to the fellowship support currently needed in order to place at-risk scholars in temporary positions of safety, which can range from 35,000 euro to 100,000 euro per year depending on where the scholar is temporarily relocated, and the stage they are at in their academic career.

and best practices for consular staff managing short-term visa applications. This updated Handbook includes specific guidelines designed to address the unique needs of HRDs. The EU also has dedicated Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders to support practical suggestions for enhancing EU action on this issue. Recognising at-risk researchers as HRDs, therefore, creates tangible support pathways and emphasises that defending knowledge is inherently linked to protecting human rights.

Recommendations for the European Commission

- The *EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy* includes commitments related to HRDs. But it runs only until 2027. In any extension or follow-up to the current action plan, it should be ensured that measures to support HRDs also account for at-risk researchers and that they retain academic freedom commitments.
- The EU Special Representative (EUSR) for human rights plays a central role in addressing HRD concerns in dialogues with third countries. The EUSR should focus on addressing new restrictive laws that are affecting the work of researchers, express support for higher education institutions and researchers, who are at risk or have been victims of coercion or violent attacks, and publicly condemn such acts, as well as collaborate with authorities in third countries to secure the release of imprisoned researchers.
- Ensure EU guidance and internal practices clearly outline how to identify, engage, and support the eligibility of at-risk researchers under the HRD framework, especially within country-level EU Delegation actions and protection mechanisms, including emergency grants, public diplomacy, and relocation support.
- Encourage EU delegations to utilise dedicated tools for HRDs, including the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, which set out specific measures to ensure the protection of HRDs at risk. The guidelines encourage EU diplomats to adopt a more proactive approach by reaching out to HRDs and advocating for them when they are at risk.
- Ensure all human rights training programmes focusing on HRDs include a focus on at-risk researchers to ensure delegates feel confident in identifying violations and advocating for researchers under pressure. This will strengthen the ability of delegations to report on local situations.
- Encourage EU Delegations to include threats to academic freedom and researchers' safety in their annual human rights reports and programmes, as well as in EU Country Human Rights Strategies.
- Support the development of research in this area, particularly to address gaps in understanding and knowledge related to researchers at risk being considered HRDs, through regular calls in existing EU funding programmes, such as Horizon Europe and Erasmus+.

Conclusion

A significant number of researchers at risk are HRDs, whether through their academic work, extramural advocacy, or expressive activities. Clearly recognising that researchers at risk can be HRDs provides tangible support to those at risk but also reinforces the EU's stance as a supporter of academic freedom and open research, legitimising the role of research in a democratic society.

Annex I: Additional reading on researchers at risk as HRDs

- Academia at risk. *Nat Hum Behav* 7, 1–2 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01526-8>
- Alice M. Nah, Karen Bennett, Danna Ingleton, James Savage, A Research Agenda for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 5, Issue 3, November 2013, Pages 401–420, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/hut026>
- R. Quinn & J. Levine “Intellectual-HRDs and claims for academic freedom under human rights law”, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 18:7-8, 898-920, (2014)

Annex II: Academic Freedom

- [Academic Freedom Index](#), Update 2025
- [Free to Think](#), 2024
- [Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom](#), (A/HRC/56/CRP.2)(2024)
- [SAR's Scholars in Prison Project](#)

Annex III: Relevant EU Instruments

- EU Guidelines on [Human Rights Defenders](#) (2008)
- [MSCA Guidelines for the Inclusion of Researchers at Risk](#) (2021)
- European Parliament recommendation on Defence of academic freedom in the EU's external action (2018/2117(INI))

Annex IV: Inspireurope+ Related Resources

- [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about researchers at risk.
- [Compendium of resources](#) for researchers at risk and their supporters

About [Inspireurope+](#)

Inspireurope+ is an EU-funded project that works to strengthen and coordinate support in Europe for researchers at risk. Researchers at risk are scholars, scientists, and researchers who face threats to their life, liberty, or research careers, including those who have been displaced because of such threats. Building on the work undertaken by Inspireurope (launched under MSCA in 2019), Inspireurope+ proceeds from the view that excellence in research depends upon free and open scientific debate and requires a diversity of perspectives and methodologies to flourish. The need to expand support for researchers at risk is urgent, and the value of a coordinated effort across countries and institutions that is dedicated to providing support for researchers at risk has never been clearer.

To join the Inspireurope+ mailing list, sign up [here](#).

