

Academic Freedom Index

Update 2022



Main Findings

This year's update of the *Academic Freedom Index* provides an overview of the state of academic freedom in 177 countries and territories. Based on an assessment of the *de facto* protection of academic freedom as of December 2021, it details two concerning findings. First, the latest data reveal a substantial and statistically significant decline in academic freedom in 19 cases, with improvements registered in only two cases compared with 2011. Thirty-seven percent of the world's population live in these 19 countries and territories with major recent drops in academic freedom. Second, the decline in academic freedom accompanies an accelerating and deepening wave of autocratization.¹

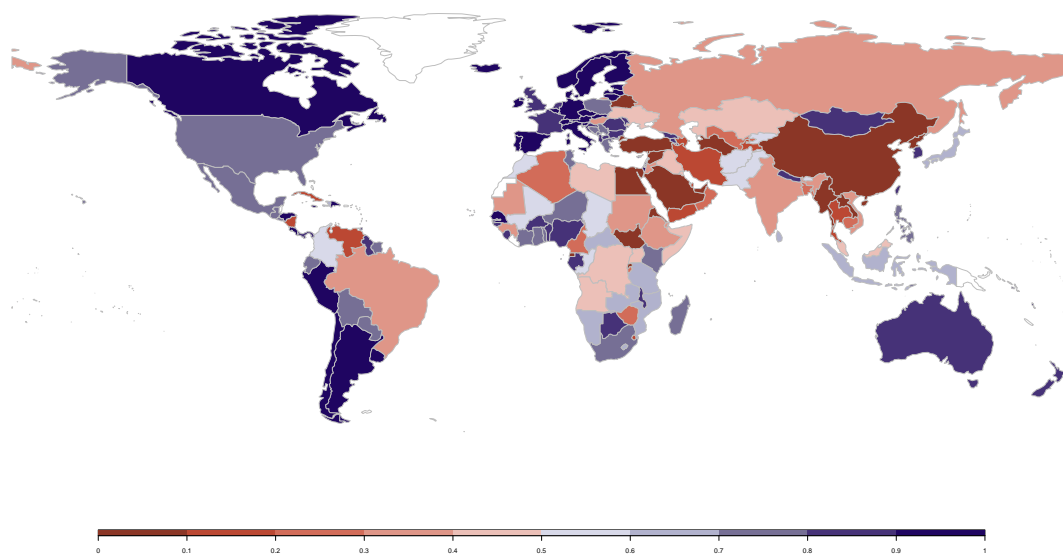


Figure 1: The state of academic freedom in 2021 (0-1, low to high)

Figure 1 shows the state of academic freedom in 2021, based on the latest version of the *Academic Freedom Index* (AFI).² The AFI is the result of a collaborative research project led by researchers in Sweden and Germany. It builds on assessments by more than 2,000 experts around the globe and is freely available at <https://v-dem.net>. Figures 5 and 6 below list the exact values and confidence intervals for all assessed countries at year-end 2021.

¹For the latest data on autocratization, see Vanessa A. Boese et al. *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022*. Gothenburg, 2022; as well as last year's report Sebastian Hellmeier et al. "State of the World 2020: Autocratization Turns Viral". In: *Democratization* 28.6 (2021), pp. 1053–1074. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1922390.

²Curated in version 12 of the V-Dem dataset: Michael Coppedge et al. *V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v12*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, 2022. DOI: 10.23696/vdemds22.

Academic Freedom Declines

Academic freedom is under pressure in an increasing number of countries and territories. On average, scholars still enjoy more academic freedom than in the 1960s and 1970s, yet a decline in academic freedom has been noticeable over the past 10 years.

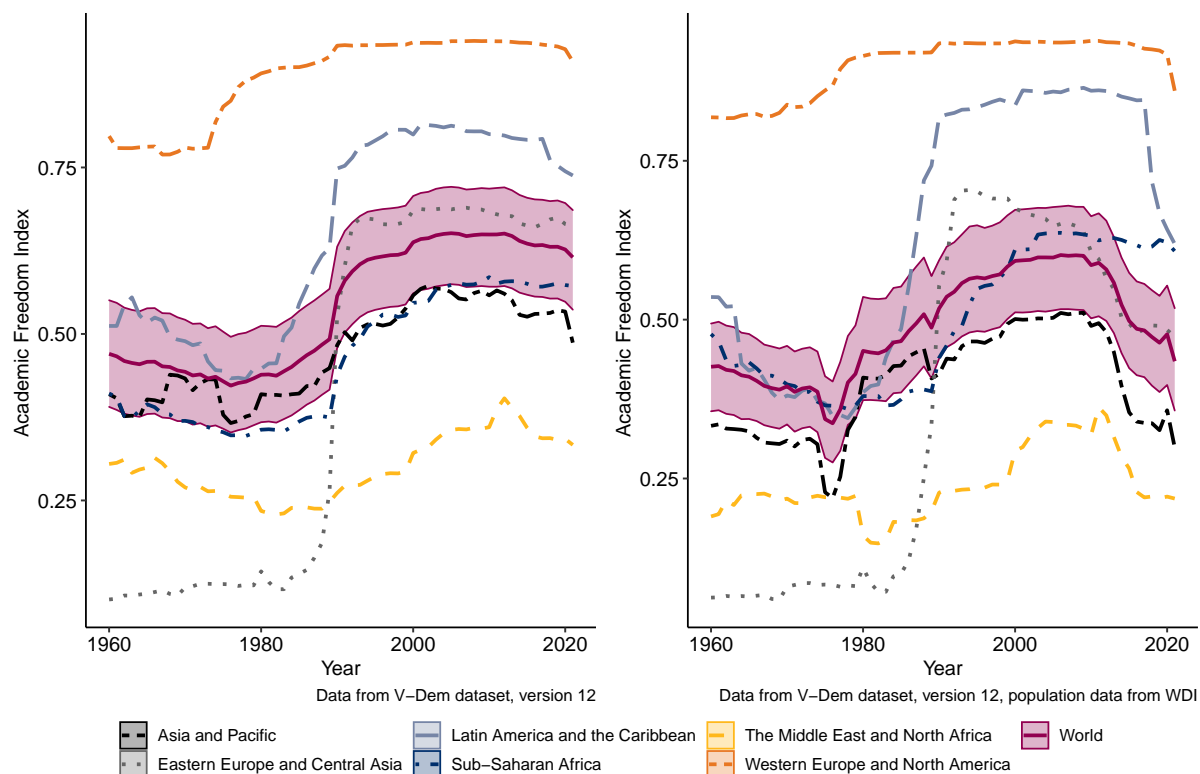


Figure 2: AFI, global and regional averages, 1960-2021 (right-hand side: population-weighted)

Figure 2 provides two perspectives on the average level of academic freedom in the world from 1960 to 2021. It is based on country-based averages on the left and population-weighted averages on the right. The thick pink line represents the most likely global average value of the *Academic Freedom Index*, with the confidence interval shaded light pink. We see a clear increase in the level of academic freedom in the 1990s, which parallels the third wave of democratization; academic freedom then started to decline around 2008. However, when looking at the country-based global average, this decline remains within the confidence interval – meaning this finding is statistically uncertain. Beyond the global average, some global regions are clearly more affected than others: Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa show the most visible declines; Western Europe and North America also fall back.

According to international human rights law, governments are responsible for upholding the right to science, including the “freedom indispensable for scientific research”.³ With this in mind, it is instructive to assess the *de facto* protection of academic freedom at the country level. At the same time, this conventional measure glosses over the different size of countries, attributing the same weight to populous countries (e.g. India with more than 1.3 billion inhabitants) and to countries with very small populations (e.g. the Seychelles with under 100,000 inhabitants). Since academic freedom concerns people’s right and opportunity to freely pursue and

³ *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article 15.3. United Nations General Assembly. 1966. URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>.*

benefit from science, how many people are affected matters. We therefore provide a second illustration that weights the average academic freedom levels by population size.⁴ The right-hand side of Figure 2 shows these population-weighted global and regional averages. From this perspective, the decline in academic freedom is much more pronounced. Here, all world regions except Sub-Saharan Africa show substantial declines in academic freedom. Asia and the Pacific has been thrown back to a level of academic freedom last registered in the region around 1978; Latin America returns to a situation last recorded in 1987; while Eastern Europe and Central Asia has fallen to a record low since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Populous countries such as Brazil, China, India, and Russia exhibit substantially less academic freedom today than in 2011. They were recently joined by the United States of America, which has lost more than 0.15 points on the AFI scale (0–1). Thus, 37% of the world’s population now live in countries with recent drops in academic freedom: almost two in five people globally.

More Losers than Winners

Figure 3 identifies the 19 countries and territories for which the data reveal a substantial and statistically significant decline of at least 0.1 points on the *Academic Freedom Index* between 2011 and 2021. In this period, Hong Kong lost more than 0.56 points, resulting in a score of 0.208 in 2021. Other major declines are seen in Brazil, Turkey, and Thailand, which each lost more than 0.4 points, indicating potential danger zones for researchers and students. Russia lost 0.245 points between 2011 and 2021, and Cameroon also lost more than 0.2, resulting in a score of 0.426. The decline in academic freedom also appears to have accelerated in Western Europe and North America, including in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, which have long been bastions of academic freedom and scientific excellence.

Compared to the 19 cases with declining scores, only two countries show a major and significant increase in the AFI between 2011 and 2021. Among those with an AFI increase, The Gambia shows the best improvement with an increase of more than 0.3 points after the transition of power to President Adama Barrow in 2017. However, as indicated by Figure 4, The Gambia’s improvement seems precarious, due to the declining indicator for campus integrity. In the case of Uzbekistan, the second country with significant improvement, the level of academic freedom remains in the bottom 20% of countries ranked by AFI score (see Figure 6).

The decline in academic freedom in Hong Kong, depicted in Figure 4, began with a dip in the institutional autonomy and freedom of academic and cultural expression indicators in 2010. This accelerated with a decline in the freedom to research and teach dimension, and with a continuous decline in all indicators, including notable dips in the campus integrity indicator (see Figure 4). This disaggregation illustrates the potential of *Academic Freedom Index* data for detailed analysis of sequences of major declines and improvements in academic freedom.

⁴The population data come from the World Development Indicators.

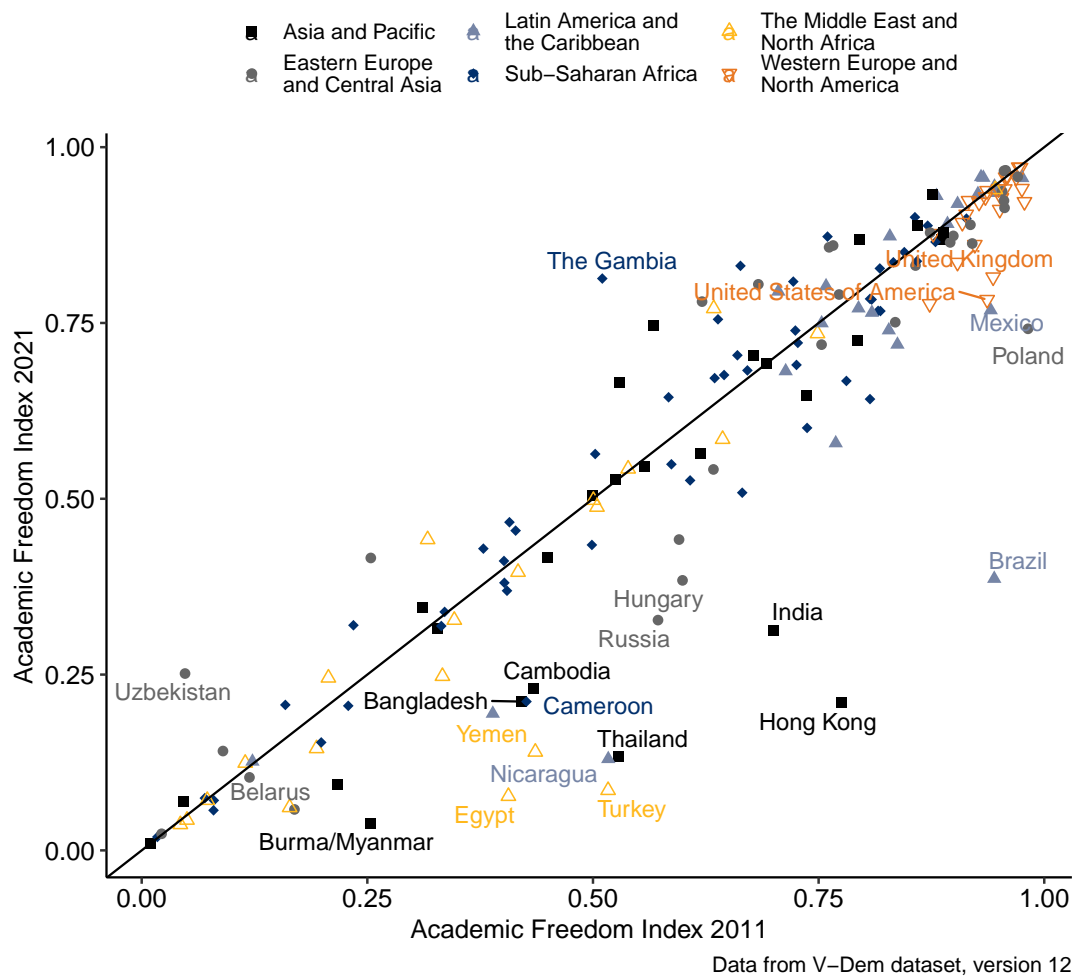


Figure 3: Countries and territories with substantial AFI changes, 2011-2021. Country names are shown where the differences from 2011 to 2021 is statistically significant and substantially meaningful (>0.1)

Academic Freedom and Deepening Autocratization

Is the recent decline in academic freedom related to the accelerating and deepening decline in the level of democracy? As the *V-Dem Democracy Report 2022* notes, the “level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2021 is down to 1989 levels – the last 30 years of democratic advances are now eradicated.”⁵ Figure 2 in this report also shows that the level of academic freedom enjoyed by the average global citizen is down to a level last reported in the 1980s. A first clue that the declines in academic freedom and democracy are related is that the 19 cases with substantial and statistically significant declines in academic freedom also fall from an average Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) score of 0.52 down to a score of 0.37; that is, a 28% drop in the average democracy level. In addition, of these 19 cases, 16 exhibit an autocratization episode between 2011 and 2021.⁶

⁵Boese et al., *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022*, p. 12.

⁶An autocratization episode is defined as a major and statistically significant drop in the EDI by at least 0.1 as discussed in Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) and Pelke and Croissant (2021). Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg. “A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?” In: *Democratization* 26.7 (2019), pp. 1095–1113. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029; Lars Pelke and Aurel Croissant. “Conceptualizing and Measuring Autocratization Episodes”. In: *Swiss Political Science Review* 27.2 (2021), pp. 434–448. DOI: 10.1111/spsr.12437.

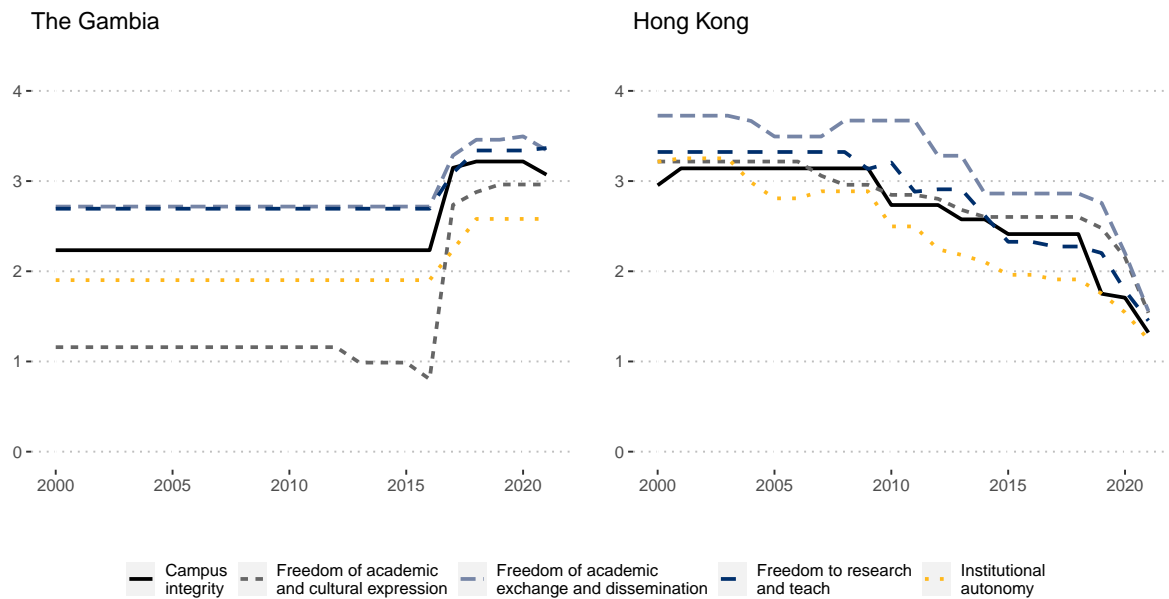


Figure 4: Hong Kong and The Gambia, indicator-level data

The V-Dem Democracy Report 2022 further argues that freedom of expression is one important component of democracy, and shows that the level of this very freedom has deteriorated substantially in 35 countries since 2011, while only 10 countries are making advances. Although freedom of expression and academic freedom are by no means identical concepts, they are of course related. Accordingly, one of the indicators used for the aggregate *Academic Freedom Index* is “the freedom of academic and cultural expression”, and it is indeed this particular AFI indicator that drops most visibly on average. Another relevant finding is that among the top five declining EDI indicators,⁷ there are three indicators that relate to the deliberative component of democracy, i.e. the range of consultation, and the respect for counterarguments and an engaged society. All these appear directly relevant to the deliberative power and persuasiveness of science.

However, the causal sequences and connections between autocratization and major declines in academic freedom remain unexplained. Future research should therefore analyze whether autocratization and major declines in academic freedom are mutually reinforcing, and exactly if and how the two phenomena are causally connected. In light of the ongoing global deterioration in democracy, more scholarship in this area is highly relevant, not only for researchers but also for the population at large.

⁷See Boese et al., *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022*, Figure 7.

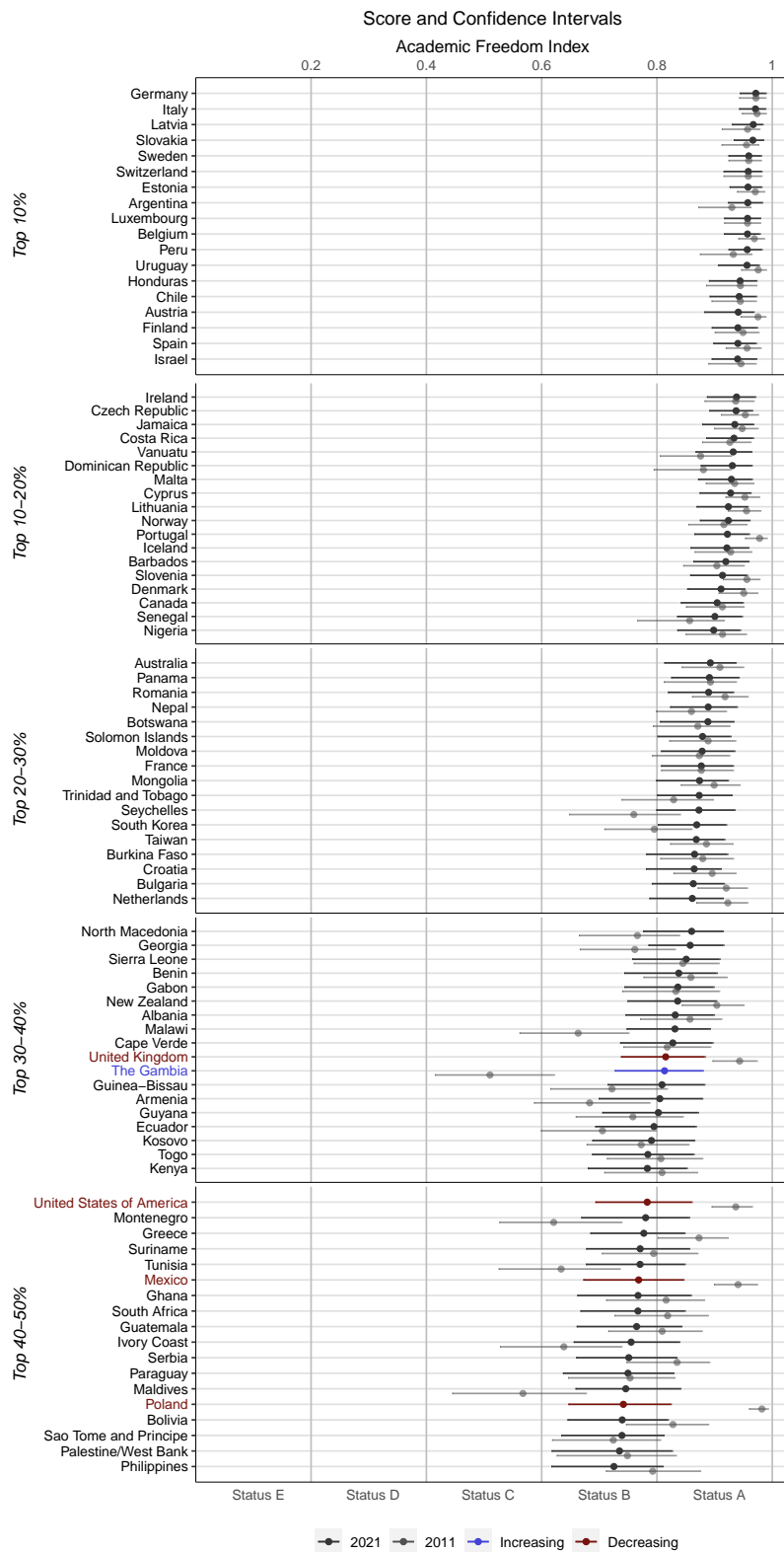


Figure 5: Countries by score, Academic Freedom Index, 2011 compared to 2021.

Notes: Red country names indicate cases of substantial, statistically significant decreasing cases of academic freedom over 10 past ten years. Blue country names indicate cases of substantial, statistically significant increasing cases of academic freedom. Horizontal lines indicate the confidence intervals around the point estimates drawn from the V-Dem Bayesian IRT method. Countries with overlapping confidence intervals are statistically indistinguishable. Status groups represent the quintiles of the AFI.

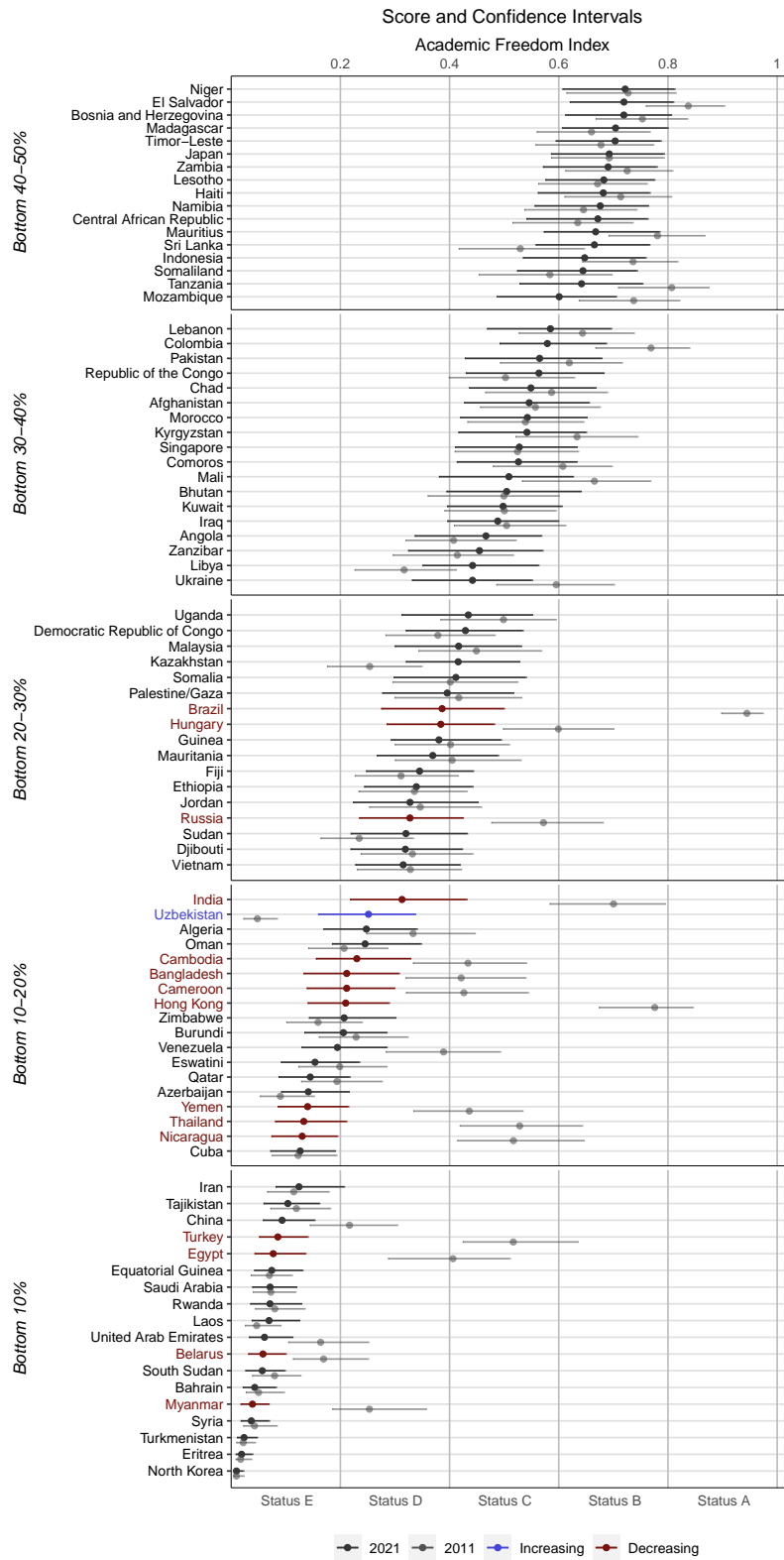


Figure 6: Countries by score, Academic Freedom Index, 2011 compared to 2021.

Notes: Red country names indicate cases of substantial, statistically significant decreasing cases of academic freedom over the past 10 years. Blue country names indicate cases of substantial, statistically significant increasing cases of academic freedom. Horizontal lines indicate the confidence intervals around the point estimates drawn from the V-Dem Bayesian IRT method. Countries with overlapping confidence intervals are statistically indistinguishable. Status groups represent the quintiles of the AFI.

Background: Assessing Academic Freedom

In this update, we present the third iteration of *Academic Freedom Index* data, drawing on contributions by 2,056 country experts from around the world. The report covers 177 countries and territories (compared to 144 in the first edition and 175 in the second). The data cover the period from 1900 to 2021. All data are publicly available and include a total of 132,302 observation points, five indicators, and an aggregate index on academic freedom, based on a Bayesian measurement model.⁸ The index defines a range of components “often considered essential to the *de facto* realization of academic freedom based on a review of the literature and in-depth discussions with transnational policymakers, academics and advocates in the higher education field”.⁹ Specifically, the *Academic Freedom Index* rests on five key indicators, namely the freedom to research and teach; the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; the institutional autonomy of universities; campus integrity;¹⁰ and the freedom of academic and cultural expression. By adopting these five indicators, we believe the AFI focuses on elements of academic freedom “that are a) *comparable* across different university systems around the world and b) *specific* to the academic sector”.¹¹

Users of our data can benefit from the open data approach adopted by the V-Dem project, which also enables the disaggregation of the AFI. Furthermore, we provide comparative data on additional aspects of academic freedom, notably factual information on *de jure* commitments to academic freedom under international human rights law. As of today, 171 states have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights without reservation on the right to science (Article 15).

As stated above, the *Academic Freedom Index* rests on assessments provided by more than 2,000 country experts around the world. In the coming years, this effort will require an even higher number of committed experts – even for countries that are already covered by the index. We call on scholars with country-specific knowledge to contribute their expertise to the collaborative AFI coding. Apply to become a new coder by filling out the expert call [here](#).

We also call on higher education policymakers, university leaders, and research funders to promote academic freedom in their countries and institutions. The Global Public Policy Institute and Scholars at Risk have published policy recommendations on how to use the Academic Freedom Index data for this purpose.¹²

⁸Daniel Pemstein et al. “The V-Dem Measurement Model: Latent Variable Analysis for Cross-National and Cross-Temporal Expert-Coded Data”. In: *V-Dem Working Paper No. 21. 7th edition*. University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute. 2022. URL: https://v-dem.net/media/publications/Working_Paper_21.pdf.

⁹Janika Spannagel, Katrin Kinzelbach, and Ilyas Saliba. “The Academic Freedom Index and Other New Indicators Relating to Academic Apace: An Introduction”. In: *V-Dem User-Working Paper No. 26*. University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute. 2020. URL: https://v-dem.net/media/publications/users_working_paper_26.pdf, p. 4.

¹⁰The absence of security-infringements and surveillance on campus.

¹¹Spannagel, Kinzelbach, and Saliba, “The Academic Freedom Index and Other New Indicators Relating to Academic Space”, p. 5.

¹²Katrin Kinzelbach et al. “Free Universities. Putting the Academic Freedom Index into Action”. In: Global Public Policy Institute. 2020. URL: https://gppi.net/media/KinzelbachEtAl_2021_Free_Universities_AFI-2020_upd.pdf.

Impressum

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not reflect an official position of the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, the V-Dem Project, or the V-Dem Steering Committee.

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