This report was prepared by Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, acting as chair of the ISA Academic Freedom Committee. The other committee members include Galia Golan, Erin Jenne, Mahmoud Monshipouri, Shogo Suzuki, Manuela Lavinas Picq and Shareen Hertel. ISA Executive Director Mark A. Boyer and ISA President Cameron Thies are ex officio members. This report was submitted on November 29, 2019 for the 2020 Governing Council meeting in Honolulu.

FULL REPORT

CASES CONSIDERED

The Academic Freedom Committee (AFC) has considered four completed cases with concerns expressed over threats or violations of academic freedom. Following discussions in the committee, the AFC has either reported the various possible viewpoints or proposed possible courses of action to the ISA Executive Committee (ExComm). The ISA Executive Committee eventually issued statements on two of the cases raised by the committee. We discuss the cases considered below.

1. Hungarian Academy of Sciences

We have received a number of expressions of concern over the proposed changes in funding and governance of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The concerns were discussed, and the committee eventually recommended that the ISA should make a statement affirming the principle of autonomy for academic institutions as an essential component of academic freedom. The ISA eventually issued a statement, expressing concern over reports on government interference with the independence of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and reaffirming the ISA’s commitment to academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The statement is available at https://www.isanet.org/News/ID/5694/Concerns-expressed-over-changes-in-funding-structure-for-the-Hungarian-Academy-of-Sciences.

2. Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act in Singapore

The AFC received a number of expressions of concern over a proposed bill in Singapore, which would make it illegal to produce or disseminate false information online. The concerns expressed noted that the implementation of such legislation could impinge on academic freedom, and that the proposed bill lacked appropriate safeguards against misuse. The ISA issued a statement, available at https://www.isanet.org/News/ID/5725/ISA-Statement-Regarding-Academic-Freedom-in-Singapore.

3. Travel restrictions, harassment and the ISA annual convention

We received some expressions of concern from ISA members, who complained about problems obtaining the required visas to attend the 2019 ISA conference, or perceived harassment from immigration officials in Canada or other countries in transit, including the US. A number of committee members considered it appropriate for the ISA to make a statement on the importance of travel to conference in exercising academic freedom, and urged the ISA to consider a general statement highlighting the potential problems arising from travel restrictions in countries of origin as well as hosting countries.
4. Defunding of academic institutions in Brazil

A number of concerns have been expressed over reports on efforts to defund social sciences and humanities in Brazil, often justified by allegations that these subjects are “not useful” and should not receive public support. There were divergent views in the AFC on whether funding cuts by themselves could be considered attacks on academic freedom, unless there are clear efforts to suppress research, even if decisions on funding and contracts eventually ultimately may influence opportunities for conducting research. The divergent views of the committee members were communicated to the executive committee. It was also noted by the AFC that the ISA as a professional association for scholars in international studies may be considered to have some duty of care to engage in support for professional activities and advocacy for adequate funding for the discipline, outside concerns over academic freedom as this is conventionally defined. The AFC committee chair recommended that the ISA should consider mechanisms for raising policy or advocacy concerns other than academic freedom.

Panels for the 2020 Annual Convention

The AFC has two panel slots for the 2019 conference.

1. WA23: Academic Freedom and International Collaboration amid Rising Authoritarianism
2. FD23: Academic Freedom and Threats Arising from Government Regulation of “Fake News” and “Online Falsehoods”

Other Activities

The committee has encouraged participants in 2019 committee panels to try to make the material available to the scholarly community more widely as symposia or special sections. Two such symposia are currently under review.

The committee chair Kristian Gleditsch was invited to attend a roundtable on academic freedom organized by the International Political Science Association (IPSA), held as part of the 70 anniversary for the IPSA in Paris on 22 November 2019. IPSA has also organized a roundtable for the 2020 ISA meeting as a participating organization (SD18: Coping with Academic Freedom issues). Gleditsch has agreed to be a panelist.