



COMMENT

The erosion of academic freedom in Venezuela: international human rights law, authoritarian practice, and implications for knowledge communication

Commentary on

Scholars under attack — Navigating the dark side of public engagement and science communication in a politicised (online) environment

Ricardo Villalobos Fontalvo and David Gomez Gamboa

Abstract

This commentary examines the tension between the recent consolidation of academic freedom as a human right in international and Inter-American law and its systematic erosion under authoritarian regimes, using Venezuela as a paradigmatic case. Drawing on General Comment No. 13, the Inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy, and an operational framework developed in regional monitoring, it analyses how Venezuelan state policies, legal and institutional engineering, criminalisation and repression, economic strangulation and judicial interference, undermine core attributes of academic freedom [United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021a]. It shows how these measures reshape the ecosystem of science communication by narrowing who can speak, what can be researched and how knowledge circulates in society. The commentary concludes by identifying gaps in regional and international protection, highlighting comparative data from the Academic Freedom Index, and proposing pathways to strengthen academic-freedom safeguards and democratic science communication in the Americas.

Keywords

Policy-making, communication and governance of science; Science and policy-making

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1 - Introduction

The progressive recognition of academic freedom as an autonomous human right [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021a] marks a significant development in international human rights law and in global debates on democracy and knowledge. Long treated primarily as an aspect of the rights to education and freedom of expression, academic freedom is now increasingly understood as a multidimensional condition that enables the pursuit, development and transmission of knowledge through research, teaching, study, discussion, documentation, creation and writing, without fear of repression or discrimination [United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999, para. 39]. This understanding highlights both its individual and collective dimensions: it protects scholars, students and all those engaged in the production of knowledge, while also safeguarding society's right to receive information, ideas and scientific findings and to benefit from independent expertise in public debate [Shaheed, 2024, para. 4]. As such, academic freedom is not only a professional prerogative, but a foundational element of democratic public life and of science communication as a practice that connects academic communities with wider publics [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021a].

This normative consolidation, however, stands in sharp contrast with the deepening erosion of academic freedom across regions, particularly in contexts where human rights and the rule of law are being eroded [Kinzelbach et al., 2025]. In many contexts, governments have combined legal reforms, administrative control, budgetary strangulation and the deployment of security forces to subordinate universities, stigmatise critical scholars and restrict the circulation of independent expertise [Scholars at Risk, 2025]. These processes have direct implications for science communication: they narrow who can credibly speak as an expert, constrain what topics can be investigated and discussed, and diminish the capacity of academic institutions to contribute to informed public deliberation [Shaheed, 2024, paras. 46–47]. The resulting gap between international recognition and domestic practice raises urgent questions about the effectiveness of existing protection mechanisms and about the tools available to monitor and contest attacks on academic freedom.

The Venezuelan case offers a particularly stark illustration of these tensions. Since the late 1990s, Venezuela has undergone a profound process of democratic backsliding, marked by the concentration of power in the executive, the instrumentalisation of the judiciary and electoral authorities, and the progressive closure of civic space [Corrales, 2024]. Within this broader trajectory, universities and academic communities have become central arenas of contestation and targets of state control [Gómez Gamboa, 2019]. Public universities have historically played a key role in shaping critical public opinion, hosting student movements and producing independent analysis on issues such as economic policy, human rights and governance [Romero, 2024]. As democratic institutions have weakened, these functions have increasingly been perceived by the authorities as threats rather than contributions, leading to the use of legal, financial and coercive instruments to discipline, fragment or neutralise academic actors [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2019, para. 100, 111; Gómez Gamboa, 2019; Aula Abierta, 2025c]. The Venezuelan experience thus makes visible how attacks on academic freedom and on science communication are intertwined with wider strategies of authoritarian consolidation [Aula Abierta, 2025a].

At the same time, Venezuela is not an isolated anomaly. Recent documentation by civil society organisations and international bodies suggests that different, though related,

pressures on academic freedom have emerged across the Americas, including in contexts that formally retain democratic institutions [Scholars at Risk, 2025; Kinzelbach et al., 2025]. Examples range from budgetary crises and politicised appointments that undermine institutional autonomy, to targeted harassment of scholars working on contentious topics, to legal initiatives that conflate critical research and advocacy with threats to national security [Scholars at Risk, 2025]. Situating Venezuela within this broader regional landscape allows us to see it as a critical case at one end of a continuum: an extreme scenario that helps to identify warning signs and possible trajectories of deterioration elsewhere, including for science communication infrastructures.

Academic freedom is now acknowledged as an autonomous human right intrinsically linked to democracy and development [Shaheed, 2024, para. 4; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021a, Principle I; Gómez Gamboa & Villalobos-Fontalvo, 2023; Spannagel et al., 2020]. General Comment No. 13 on the right to education clarifies that members of the academic community, individually or collectively, must be free to pursue, develop and transmit knowledge and ideas through research, teaching, study, discussion, documentation, production, creation and writing, to criticise their institutions and systems, and to participate in representative academic bodies, without discrimination or fear of repression [United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999, para. 39; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021a, Principle I]. Building on this interpretation, Aula Abierta has operationalised academic freedom into five interrelated attributes: freedom of research, freedom to publish and disseminate, freedom to teach, freedom to study, and collective freedoms of participation in representative and governance bodies [Aula Abierta, 2023]. These attributes provide a concrete set of indicators for assessing whether academic freedom is effectively protected in practice and for understanding how restrictions on different activities and roles accumulate to erode both individual rights and the collective capacity of academic communities to contribute to public life [Aula Abierta, 2023].

Drawing on international legal standards and cross-national expert assessments, the AFI is composed of five expert-coded indicators: freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, and freedom of academic and cultural expression, whose conceptual foundations and measurement approach are set out in Spannagel et al. [2020] and further validated in Spannagel and Kinzelbach [2022]. AFI data make it possible to locate specific national trajectories within global patterns and to identify wider trends in the shrinking or expansion of academic space [Kinzelbach et al., 2025]. Venezuela scores among the countries with the lowest levels of academic freedom worldwide, registering 0.2 on the AFI in 2025, and has experienced a pronounced decline over the past two decades, which mirrors the qualitative patterns documented by regional human rights organisations [Kinzelbach et al., 2025; Aula Abierta, 2025c]. In this commentary, we primarily rely on the Aula Abierta framework, anchored in General Comment No. 13 and the Inter-American Principles, to analyse concrete practices and their implications for academic freedom and science communication in Venezuela, while drawing on AFI data to situate the Venezuelan trajectory in comparative perspective.

Against this background, the commentary pursues three aims. First, it outlines in a concise manner the recent consolidation of academic freedom as a human right in international and Inter-American law, highlighting the normative expectations this creates for states such as Venezuela. Second, it examines how Venezuelan state policies and practices — legal and

institutional engineering, criminalisation and repression, economic strangulation, and judicial interference — have combined to erode academic freedom across its different attributes, and how this erosion reshapes the conditions for science communication and civic knowledge production. Third, it reflects on the limitations of current regional and international mechanisms in preventing and remedying such deterioration and proposes avenues for strengthening the protection of academic freedom, with particular attention to its communicative and democratic functions. The Venezuelan case is thus used both as a lens to understand the vulnerabilities of academic freedom under contexts of severe civic space restriction [Corrales, 2024] and as a warning for other societies in the Americas that seek to avoid similar trajectories.

2 - Academic freedom as a human right and democratic condition

2.1 - *From principle to autonomous human right*

For a long time, the legal nature of academic freedom as a self-standing human right remained neglected within the international human rights law, as it was considered rather a dimension of the rights to education and to freedom of expression [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, Art 13; United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999, para. 39; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, Art 19], despite its long-standing recognition in academic practice as a cornerstone of the university's social function [Russell, 1993] and the growing scholarly attention to its international dimensions [Altbach, 2001].

In light of this, legal and philosophical scholarship, including Rajagopal [2003, p. 28], Vrieling et al. [2010, p. 18] and Villalobos-Fontalvo and Gómez Gamboa [2021], among others, argued that academic freedom was already implicitly protected within the existing human rights framework and called for clearer recognition and standards.

Over the past decade, this normative landscape has begun to change. In the Inter-American system, a series of thematic and country hearings before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), including those addressing the situation in Venezuela [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2017] and the situation in The Americas [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2019, 50:42], brought academic freedom concerns onto the regional agenda and highlighted the need for specific standards. These processes, in which the authors of this contribution had the opportunity to participate, converged in 2021 with the adoption of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [2021a], the first regional standard-setting instrument explicitly recognising academic freedom as a human right and elaborating its content and state obligations.

At the United Nations level, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression dedicated a report to academic freedom, underscoring its autonomy and its close relationship to freedom of expression [Kaye, 2020]. This was followed in 2024 by the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, who presented a comprehensive report on academic freedom [Shaheed, 2024, para. 4] and a set of principles for its implementation [United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024]. Taken together, these developments mark a shift from viewing academic freedom merely as a professional norm or derivative interest towards

acknowledging it as a self-standing right with both individual and collective dimensions and with specific implications for state conduct.

This normative shift reflects the sustained advocacy of civil society organisations, such as Aula Abierta, Scholars at Risk and the University of Ottawa's Human Rights Research and Education Centre, among others, which have systematically documented from an international perspective how attacks on universities intersect with broader democratic erosion. Employing established human rights methodologies, Aula Abierta's documentation of the Venezuelan crisis — a paradigmatic case of state-led academic suppression and the need to recognise academic freedom as a human right — has served as a primary evidentiary catalyst for international standard-setting and is authoritatively relied upon by the IACHR and UN mandates [Shaheed, 2024; Scholars at Risk, 2025].

Therefore, the consolidation of academic freedom as an autonomous right is not only a legal development but also the outcome of a broader epistemic and political struggle to reframe academic freedom as a matter of human rights, democracy and public interest.

2.2 ■ *Academic freedom, democracy and science communication*

Recognising academic freedom as a human right has significant implications for how we understand its relationship to democratic governance. Academic institutions and communities constitute one of the principal sites where evidence, methods and expertise are developed, contested and communicated, and where competing interpretations of social realities are tested against scholarly standards rather than solely political or market logics [Shaheed, 2024]. When scholars, students and institutions are able to research, teach, study and speak freely, they contribute to pluralism and civic values in public debate, to the scrutiny of governmental decisions and to the generation of independent knowledge relevant for policymaking [Shaheed, 2024; Darian-Smith, 2025].

Conversely, when academic freedom is curtailed, the quality of democratic deliberation deteriorates: fewer independent voices can credibly contest official narratives, critical research may be discouraged or suppressed, and public access to diverse sources of expertise is narrowed [Shaheed, 2024, paras. 46–47]. Collins and Evans [2009] argue that expertise functions as a system of checks and balances within democratic regimes: independent scientists and scholars are among the few actors capable of credibly contesting the political elites' monopoly over representing the public interest, for instance by demonstrating that a given policy does not promote the well-being of the majority. Eyal [2019] extends this argument by showing that the crisis of expertise in contemporary democracies is not merely a problem of public trust but a structural condition produced when the institutional bases that sustain expert autonomy are weakened or captured. Venezuela illustrates precisely this trajectory: as universities have been subordinated to executive control and independent scholars have been criminalised, the structural conditions for credible expert contestation of official narratives have been systematically dismantled, with direct consequences for both democratic deliberation and science communication.

From this perspective, academic freedom is closely intertwined with science communication. Science communication is not limited to the popularisation of “hard” sciences; it encompasses the communication of knowledge and methods across disciplines, including social sciences and humanities, to broader publics, media, policymakers and civil society.

The ability of academics to publish, speak to journalists, engage with civil society organisations, participate in public hearings or use digital platforms to share analyses depends on the protections afforded by academic freedom and related rights. When states criminalise certain forms of public speech by academics, stigmatise scholars as “enemies of the nation” or “terrorists” [Aula Abierta, 2025c, para. 2; Gómez Gamboa, 2019], or create legal risks around collaboration with international partners, they directly affect the channels and content of science communication [Aula Abierta, 2025c]. Under such conditions, self-censorship can become pervasive, particularly in disciplines whose findings bear directly on contested political issues such as human rights, economic policy or environmental governance [Shaheed, 2024, para. 46].

International standards acknowledge this communicative dimension explicitly. General Comment No. 13 stresses that members of the academic community must be able not only to conduct research and teach, but also to express opinions about their institutions and systems and to participate in representative bodies without fear of repression [United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999, para. 39]. The Inter-American Principles underline that academic freedom includes the right to disseminate and debate information and ideas, to assemble and demonstrate peacefully on issues under discussion, and to use analogue and digital media to communicate knowledge and critique [Principle I Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021a]. These formulations implicitly recognise that academic freedom is a precondition for robust science communication ecosystems, in which academic voices can contribute to public understanding, accountability and informed decision-making. The Venezuelan case, where the state has combined legal, financial and coercive tools to reshape who can speak and what can be said [Aula Abierta, 2025c], makes visible the consequences of undermining this link between academic freedom, democracy and science communication.

2.3 ■ *Conceptual and measurement frameworks for academic freedom*

Building upon already discussed legal definition of Academic Freedom provided by General Comment No. 13 on the right to education [United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999, para. 39] and the theoretical propositions from Vrieling et al. [2010], Villalobos-Fontalvo initially operationalised academic freedom into five interrelated attributes in his master’s research, which were subsequently adopted and further developed in Aula Abierta’s regional monitoring work [2023].

To systematically examine the authoritarian erosion in Venezuela (detailed in section 3), this commentary adopts Aula Abierta’s framework and we structure our qualitative analysis around the five concrete attributes proposed by the latter:

- Freedom of research refers to the right of all those engaged in the search for knowledge, not only formally appointed researchers, but also students and other knowledge-seekers, to define research questions, select methodologies, collect and analyse data, and reach their own conclusions, without illegitimate political, commercial or other interference; it also protects cooperation with peers and the sharing of data and analysis, as well as the possibility to withdraw from projects on ethical grounds.
- Freedom to publish and disseminate refers to the ability to communicate research results and ideas derived from academic activity within the scholarly community and

towards broader publics, including the media and public institutions, without fear of reprisals by state or private actors.

- Freedom to teach protects the capacity of academic staff to design syllabi, select teaching materials, choose pedagogical approaches and evaluate students according to academic criteria, and it extends beyond the physical campus to extra-mural teaching activities grounded in their expertise.
- Freedom to study encompasses the right of students to choose their field of study among available options, to develop and express independent views about what they are taught, and to be assessed on the basis of academic, rather than ideological, standards.
- Freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies is expressed in the right of members of the academic community to form and participate in representative bodies, to engage in shared governance and collective bargaining, and to influence decisions on higher education policy and institutional life; this collective dimension underpins a legitimate expectation of participation in institutional governance, which in turn reduces the risk of external political interference.

The mentioned analytical framework is completed by the standards set by the Inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy. The principles further elaborate on the individual and collective dimensions of this right, including society's entitlement to receive knowledge and opinions produced through academic activity and to access the benefits of research, innovation and scientific progress. The Principles also underscore that academic freedom is protected inside and outside educational centres, in formal and non-formal settings, and across analogue and digital spaces, and that it includes the right to express oneself, assemble and demonstrate peacefully, and participate in professional or representative academic bodies on issues related to academic life.

The analysis is also strengthened by other authoritative frameworks, such as the Academic Freedom Index, which offers an authoritative comparative quantitative tool to assess the de facto enjoyment of academic freedom worldwide [Kinzelbach et al., 2025]. Drawing on international legal standards and cross-national expert assessments, the AFI is composed of five expert-coded indicators, freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, and freedom of academic and cultural expression, whose conceptual foundations and measurement approach are set out in Spannagel et al. [2020] and further validated in Spannagel and Kinzelbach [2022]. These dimensions capture closely related aspects of academic freedom and make it possible to compare countries and track changes over time [Kinzelbach et al., 2025].

In this commentary, the authors rely primarily on the Aula Abierta's framework [2023], anchored in General Comment No. 13 and the Inter-American Principles, as the analytical grid for examining specific practices affecting academic freedom in Venezuela, while using AFI data to situate Venezuela's trajectory within the broader regional and global landscape. This combined approach allows for both a normatively grounded, qualitative analysis of concrete restrictions and a comparative perspective on how far and how fast Venezuela has diverged from regional and global patterns.

3 - Academic freedom under siege in Venezuela

3.1 - *Methodological note and sources*

Documenting violations of academic freedom in authoritarian contexts poses specific methodological challenges. Official statistics are scarce, fragmented or unreliable, and many incidents go unreported because victims fear reprisals or have limited access to complaint mechanisms. In this context, the analysis presented here relies primarily on triangulation across three distinct categories of sources.

The first category comprises reports issued by civil society organisations, including Aula Abierta's thematic reports on academic freedom in the Americas [Aula Abierta, 2021, 2023, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c] and monitoring data from university-based observatories such as the Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad de Los Andes [2021]. The second category consists of documentation and decisions from international human rights bodies. This includes the Inter-American Commission's annual reports, thematic reports, and press releases concerning Venezuela and academic freedom [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2017, 2019, 2021a, 2021b], as well as UN fact-finding and special-procedure reports [Kaye, 2020; Shaheed, 2024; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022]. Finally, the analysis draws on independent academic research regarding Venezuelan higher education and authoritarianism [e.g. Corrales, 2024; Gómez Gamboa, 2019; Gómez Gamboa & Anjel-van Dijk, 2022; Gómez-Gamboa & Villalobos-Fontalvo, 2019]. These sources are complemented, where available, by Venezuelan legislation, policy documents, and jurisprudence, which provide insight into the legal and institutional architecture shaping academic life.

The aim is not to offer an exhaustive database of incidents, but to identify patterns and mechanisms through which the state has eroded academic freedom across its different attributes: freedom of research, publication and dissemination, teaching, study, and collective participation. The cases and examples discussed are selected because they are well-documented, illustrative of broader trends and directly connected to the indicators outlined in section 2. The opacity of the Venezuelan state and the risks faced by academics and students mean that some violations undoubtedly remain undocumented; the analysis should therefore be read as a conservative account of a wider phenomenon.

3.2 - *Legal and institutional engineering: subordinating universities and shrinking civic space*

At the structural level, the Venezuelan state has reshaped the higher education system and the legal environment in ways that subordinate universities to executive control and restrict the space for independent academic activity. Since 2003, the creation of the Sucre Mission has established a parallel system of higher education directly subordinated to the state, absorbing institutions without autonomous status and consolidating a "single thought" model under ministerial oversight [Gómez-Gamboa & Villalobos-Fontalvo, 2019]. In 2009, the Organic Law on Education entrenched the concept of the "Teaching State" (Estado Docente), granting the executive extensive powers over university governance, admissions and training standards, thereby weakening institutional autonomy and the capacity of universities to self-govern according to academic criteria [Hocevar et al., 2017].

This institutional reconfiguration has been accompanied by ideological steering of research and teaching priorities. The Plan of the Homeland 2013–2019, later reaffirmed in the Plan of the Homeland 2019–2025, subordinates university transformation to the “radicalisation of the revolution under Bolivarian socialism” and explicitly states that scientific research should serve the construction of a socialist production model and socialist ethics [Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad de Los Andes, 2021, p. 11–12]. In practice, this implies that research agendas, funding decisions and curricular reforms are evaluated not only on academic grounds but also on their alignment with government ideology. While the consequences vary across disciplines, fields such as law, political science, economics and social sciences more broadly have been directly excluded from the Ministry of Education’s public policy on priority and even complementary university career offers [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Special Follow-Up Mechanism for Venezuela, Office of the Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights, & Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, 2021, PR 192/21; Ministerio del Poder Popular para Educación Universitaria, 2021], as their analyses bear directly on public policy, rights and governance. This politicisation of academic content directly affects the attributes of freedom of research and teaching, and narrows the range of knowledge and perspectives that can be legitimately communicated to students and society. As of March 2026, the Plan has not been renewed, but its impact on the policies from the public authorities continues in place.

In parallel, a proliferation of laws regulating national security, hate speech and the operation of civil society organisations has created a hostile environment for universities, research centres and academic NGOs. Instruments such as the Law Against Hate [*Ley Contra el Odio, la Intolerancia y la Discriminación* Asamblea Nacional de Venezuela, 2017], whose article 20 provides a crime of “instigation of hate” whose definition has been criticized for being ambiguous and instrumentalized to criminalise dissenting voices. Likewise, Articles 7 and 11 of the Simón Bolívar Law [*Ley Simón Bolívar para la Dignidad, Soberanía y Paz* Asamblea Nacional de Venezuela, 2024] provide criminal, civil and administrative sanctions for those who interact directly or indirectly with the international community and engage in challenging the legitimacy of the public authorities or their actions, for instance, human rights research and advocacy before international human rights bodies could fall within this provision.

For academic actors, the above mentioned legal framework increases the risk that engagement with contentious topics, participation in national public debates or collaboration with international partners may be re-framed as illicit activities. A concrete illustration of this disciplinary targeting is the case of the Venezuelan Academy of Physical, Mathematical and Natural Sciences (ACFIMAN): in March 2020, when the Academy published a report questioning official COVID-19 statistics, the President of the National Constituent Assembly publicly called for state security forces to “pay the scientists a visit” — an episode that demonstrates how even natural sciences become vulnerable when their findings contest politically sensitive claims, and how the risk extends beyond the social sciences whenever research results bear on government performance [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021b, para. 1108].

This targeted disciplinary suppression directly illustrates the ‘crisis of expertise’ articulated by Eyal [2019]. The authoritarian interventions in Venezuela do not merely attack science indiscriminately; rather, they intentionally dismantle the institutional autonomy of those specific disciplines capable of acting as democratic checks and balances [Collins & Evans,

2009]. By subordinating research to ‘socialist ethics’ and threatening physical scientists who publish contradictory COVID-19 data, the state actively neutralises the capacity of independent experts to credibly contest the political elite’s monopoly over official narratives, thereby extinguishing the democratic function of science communication.

3.3 ■ *Criminalisation and repression: targeting academic voices and campus integrity*

Beyond structural reforms, the Venezuelan state has resorted to direct repression of scholars, students and university staff who engage in public affairs. Since at least 2015, Aula Abierta and other organisations have documented repeated incursions by police and military forces into university campuses, as well as arbitrary detentions and criminal proceedings against members of the academic community [Hocevar et al., 2017; Aula Abierta, 2017]. During the 2017 protests, for example, Aula Abierta registered at least 21 state security forces raids on campuses, at least 339 students and 17 scholars arbitrarily detained, many of them brought before military courts, signalling that universities were not treated as protected spaces of debate but as extensions of the broader security landscape [Aula Abierta, 2017, para. 61, para. 17, para. 33]. The United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Venezuela [United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022, para. 58] has identified that all individuals or institutions perceived as a critical voice are attacked by the Venezuelan State, and students are one of the specially target groups due to their critical stands against State policies.

In recent years, these practices have intensified and taken a particularly stigmatising form. Aula Abierta [2025c] has documented a practice from the Minister of Interior and Justice of labelling detained academics and students as “terrorists” [Aula Abierta, 2025c, para. 2] with a growing proportion of cases being brought before courts with jurisdiction over terrorism-related offences. By 2025, a significant share of university members detained were indicted or prosecuted under terrorism frameworks, and more than half had experienced enforced disappearance at some stage of their detention [Aula Abierta, 2025c, para. 3]. Many of those targeted share a common profile: they use their expertise to criticise government policies, document human rights violations, mobilise university communities, or provide analysis to journalists and international human rights bodies. Cases such as those of Juan Pablo Guanipa [Aula Abierta, 2025c, para. 25], a lecturer and politician demanding transparency in the 2024 presidential election results, Carlos Correa [Aula Abierta, 2025c, para. 7], a university lecturer and researcher forced disappeared due to his human rights and advocacy work, or Ricardo Berrios [Aula Abierta, 2025c, para. 45], a lecturer in Economics detained after expressing often critics on the economic policies from the State to news outlets, illustrate how the state focuses on individuals whose academic work and public communication directly contest official narratives on governance, rights and economic management.

These practices have profound implications for academic freedom and science communication. They directly violate the attributes of freedom of research, publication, teaching and study, as academics and students face legal and physical risks for pursuing certain lines of inquiry, sharing findings or participating in public debate. They also erode campus integrity, understood as the protection of universities as spaces free from coercion by security forces. More broadly, the use of terrorism labels and enforced disappearance against members of the academic community functions as a chilling effect others who might

consider speaking out, contributing to a climate of fear and self-censorship. In such a context, media outlets and civil society organisations lose access to independent expertise from within the country, and the channels through which scientific and scholarly knowledge can reach broader publics are progressively closed. Moreover, the targeting of members of the academic community also highlights how in the current Venezuelan context, scholars are subjects in a condition of vulnerability.

3.4 ■ *Economic strangulation, labour rights and brain drain*

A further dimension of the erosion of academic freedom in Venezuela lies in the deliberate financial weakening of public universities, who rely solely on the State's funding due to de facto and legal frameworks, and the degradation of academic working conditions. Since the early 2000s, universities have reported chronic budget deficits, which have deepened over time and by 2026 reached levels that made it practically impossible to maintain basic infrastructure, laboratories, libraries and support services [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Special Follow-Up Mechanism for Venezuela, Office of the Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights, & Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, 2021, PR 192/21; Aula Abierta, 2021, para. 82]. This prolonged underfunding has severely limited the capacity of universities to sustain research programmes, renew equipment and ensure adequate teaching environments, directly affecting the freedom to research and to teach in meaningful ways.

At the same time, salary policies and labour-relations strategies have undermined the socio-economic conditions necessary for academic work. University professors' wages have fallen to levels far below international poverty thresholds, and the Federation of University Professors' Associations of Venezuela (FAPUV) has been excluded, due to their critical stands against the State's policies, from collective bargaining processes and other fora where their rights and interests should be discussed [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021b]. This combination of extreme salary erosion and marginalisation of faculty associations has pushed many academics into multiple jobs, informal work or migration, and has weakened the collective dimension of academic freedom by reducing the capacity of academic bodies to influence institutional and policy decisions. For students, deteriorating living conditions and the inability of universities to provide adequate support have contributed to high dropout rates, particularly in regional institutions and disciplines requiring significant material resources.

These dynamics have contributed to a significant "brain drain" from Venezuelan universities, with substantial proportions of experienced academics leaving the country or the sector altogether. The loss of staff, especially in key disciplines, has cumulative effects: it reduces the diversity and density of academic communities, limits mentoring for younger scholars and students, and diminishes the volume and quality of research and teaching that can be offered. From a science-communication perspective, this hollowing out of the academic workforce means that fewer independent experts are available to provide analysis, engage with the media or participate in regional and international networks. The exodus of scholars has generated important diaspora communities that contribute to documenting and communicating the Venezuelan situation from abroad, but it also signifies a profound weakening of the domestic infrastructure for producing and sharing knowledge with local publics [Gómez Gamboa & Anjel-van Dijk, 2022].

3.5 ▪ *Judicial siege and managerial paralysis*

The judiciary has played a crucial role in constraining university autonomy and, by extension, academic freedom. Since around 2010, Venezuelan courts have issued a series of decisions that interfere with core aspects of university governance, including electoral processes for rectors and other authorities, appointment and promotion of academic staff, and internal regulatory frameworks [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021b]. Although the Constitution formally guarantees university autonomy, these rulings have effectively suspended or invalidated elections in many public autonomous universities, leading to extended periods in which the university communities remain without the possibility to renew their representatives [Gómez Gamboa et al., 2019].

This “judicial siege” has several consequences. It undermines the collective dimension of academic freedom by restricting the ability of academic communities to participate in the governance of their institutions and to renew the leadership who can defend academic standards and autonomy. In the University Simón Bolívar, after the permanent absence of its academic Vice-rector and due to the impossibility of celebrating elections, the Government arbitrarily appointed a military officer who did not have the academic credentials as the new Vice-rector [Universidad Simón Bolívar, 2017]. In such conditions, it becomes more difficult for institutions to protect at-risk scholars and students, to resist externally imposed curricular or staffing decisions, or to maintain programmes and initiatives that support engagement with society.

The use of judicial mechanisms to control university governance also has symbolic and deterrent effects. It signals that appeals to constitutional guarantees of autonomy will not be effective, and that attempts to exercise self-government may be reversed or sanctioned. This contributes to a broader perception that legal avenues for defending academic freedom are blocked, reinforcing a sense of vulnerability among academic actors. For science communication, the consequences are indirect but significant: universities with fragile governance structures are less able to support public-facing activities, host contentious debates or provide institutional backing to scholars who engage in critical communication with the media and civil society.

3.6 ▪ *Interim synthesis: Venezuela in regional and global perspective*

Taken together, these legal, institutional, coercive, economic and judicial dynamics reveal a comprehensive strategy of erosion that affects all core attributes of academic freedom. Freedom of research and teaching is constrained by ideological steering, underfunding and the risk of criminalisation; freedom to publish and disseminate is chilled by the stigmatisation of critical voices and the threat of terrorism-related charges; freedom to study is undermined by deteriorating conditions, high dropout and the narrowing of curricular offerings; and the collective dimension of academic freedom is weakened by restrictions on representative bodies and judicial interference in governance. Campus integrity, as a dimension of academic freedom emphasised in comparative indices, is compromised by the recurrent presence of security forces and the absence of effective protection against raids and arrests.

Comparative data from the Academic Freedom Index place Venezuela among the countries with the lowest levels of academic freedom globally and document a marked decline over the past two decades, coinciding with the period in which the legal, institutional and coercive

measures described above have intensified [Kinzelbach et al., 2025]. When viewed alongside developments in other countries in the Americas, such as budgetary crises affecting universities in Argentina [Aula Abierta, 2025b], or politically motivated interferences in higher education in the United States and elsewhere [Aula Abierta, 2025a], the Venezuelan case appears as an extreme point on a broader continuum of threats. It illustrates how, if left unchecked, episodic or sectoral pressures can evolve into a systematic reconfiguration of the academic field, with profound consequences for democracy and for the ecosystems through which scientific and scholarly knowledge reach society. In the next section, I turn to the implications of this trajectory for science communication and for the design of more effective regional and international protection mechanisms.

4 ▪ Implications for science communication and international protection

4.1 ▪ *Science communication under authoritarian erosion of academic freedom*

The Venezuelan case shows how the systematic erosion of academic freedom can reconfigure the ecosystem of science communication. When research agendas are subordinated to ideological plans, when critical disciplines are underfunded, and when scholars who speak publicly are stigmatised or prosecuted, the range of issues that can be addressed and the diversity of viewpoints that can be voiced in public shrinks dramatically. In such a context, the public sphere is deprived of independent analyses of key policy areas, such as the economy, public health, human rights or environmental governance, that depend heavily on academic expertise. The attributes of academic freedom discussed earlier, particularly freedom of research and dissemination, and the collective dimension of participation in representative bodies, are thus directly connected to whether societies have access to plural, critical and methodologically grounded knowledge in moments of crisis.

These dynamics also reshape who can credibly speak as an “expert” in public debate. As universities and scholars are increasingly brought under political control, state-aligned voices and institutions are more likely to receive resources, media access and international visibility, while independent academics face obstacles or exile. Inside the country, many scholars engage in self-censorship, avoid contentious topics or reduce their public communication to technical aspects that can be framed as neutral, in order to minimise risk. Outside the country, exiled Venezuelan academics play an important role in documenting violations, producing analyses and informing international audiences, but their distance from local publics and institutions also limits their ability to influence domestic debates. The result is a fragmented landscape in which science communication is either systematically constrained within Venezuela or displaced abroad, with significant losses in terms of public accountability and informed deliberation.

4.2 ▪ *Gaps in regional and international protection*

The Venezuelan trajectory also exposes important gaps in regional and international protection mechanisms. Despite the adoption of the Inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy, and the growing attention to academic freedom in the work of UN special procedures, monitoring and follow-up remain sporadic and fragmented.

In the Inter-American system, public hearings and thematic reports have documented the situation of academic freedom, and some country reports include dedicated sections, but there is no regular, institutionalised mechanism for tracking states' implementation of academic freedom standards or for issuing early warnings when deterioration accelerates, as an example, between the first public regional hearing before the IACHR on Academic Freedom and the second one, five years passed [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2019, 2024]. At the UN level, academic freedom has been addressed within broader mandates on freedom of expression and the right to education, but there is no specialised mandate focused exclusively on academic freedom that could provide sustained attention, thematic guidance and rapid responses to emerging crises.

At the domestic level, the legal architecture of higher education across the Americas often lacks explicit recognition of academic freedom and clear judicial remedies to protect it. Only a minority of states in the region enshrine academic freedom as a specific right in their constitutions or framework laws, and even fewer provide accessible procedures for academics and students to challenge violations. This normative vacuum facilitates the use of ordinary legislation- such as security laws, NGO regulations, budgetary acts or decrees on university governance – to restrict academic activities without triggering constitutional review. In Venezuela, the combination of constitutional guarantees of university autonomy with ordinary laws and judicial decisions that undermine that autonomy illustrates how formal recognition, in the absence of effective remedies and institutional independence, is insufficient to prevent or reverse the erosion of academic freedom. From the perspective of science communication, these protection gaps mean that there are few institutional avenues for defending the communicative roles of academic actors when they come under attack.

4.3 ■ *Pathways forward: law, policy and practice*

Addressing these challenges requires action at multiple levels. At the international and regional level, academic freedom should be more systematically integrated into the agendas and working methods of human rights bodies. In the Inter-American system, this could include regular thematic reports on academic freedom, the incorporation of academic-freedom indicators into country reviews, and the use of the Inter-American Principles as benchmarks in cases and precautionary measures. At the UN, the creation of a dedicated special procedure by the Human Rights Council on academic freedom, either as a new mandate or as a strengthened component of existing mandates, would signal the centrality of academic freedom to the human rights system and provide a focal point for documentation, guidance and engagement with states. Integrating data from tools such as the Academic Freedom Index into these processes could help identify countries at risk of rapid deterioration and prioritise preventive diplomacy and technical assistance.

At the domestic level, legislative reforms are needed to explicitly recognise academic freedom and university autonomy as protected rights, to define their content in line with international and regional standards, and to establish effective judicial remedies for individuals and institutions. This includes ensuring that academics, students and their representative bodies have standing to challenge laws, policies and practices that undermine academic freedom, and that courts have the independence and capacity to provide meaningful redress. Academic freedom should also be integrated into broader frameworks for the protection of human rights defenders and civic space, recognising scholars and

students as actors who are particularly exposed when their work touches on politically sensitive issues. In contexts like Venezuela, where the rule of law is severely weakened, international and regional bodies, as well as foreign states, can scale up support for existing protective mechanisms for at-risk academics. Initiatives such as the Scholar Rescue Fund of the Institute of International Education, the Scholars at Risk Network's placement programme, and European university solidarity frameworks have demonstrated that targeted relocation, emergency fellowships and institutional hosting can provide meaningful protection for individual scholars. Strengthening, expanding these mechanisms and adapting their selection criteria to contexts in emergency like the Venezuelan, and connecting them more systematically to early-warning data from tools such as the AFI, would improve the international community's capacity to respond before individual situations become irreversible [Scholars at Risk, 2025; Kinzelbach et al., 2025].

Within the field of science communication and academic practice, there is also scope for more proactive strategies. Universities, scholarly associations and funders in the region and beyond can strengthen partnerships with Venezuelan institutions and scholars, both inside and outside the country, to sustain research collaborations, co-authored publications and joint communication initiatives that keep Venezuelan academic perspectives present in regional debates. Media outlets and civil society organisations can invest in building long-term relationships with independent academic experts, including those in exile, to ensure that coverage of Venezuela is informed by rigorous analysis and local knowledge. Finally, science communication initiatives can explicitly foreground academic freedom as a theme, helping broader publics understand why the ability of scholars and students to research, teach and speak freely is not a corporatist demand, but a precondition for informed democratic debate. The Venezuelan case, read through this lens, underscores that defending academic freedom is integral to defending the university as a democratic institution and to preserving the conditions under which knowledge can contribute to pluralism and resilience across the Americas.

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About the authors

Ricardo Villalobos Fontalvo, he is a Venezuelan Scholar, with a degree in Law (*Cum Laude*) and holds a LLM in International Human Rights Law by the University of Essex. He is a Board member and the Research and International Advocacy Coordinator of Non-Governmental Organization *Aula Abierta*.

✉ rvillalobosf@aulaabiortalatinoamerica.org

David Gómez Gamboa is an Associate Professor in the School of Law at the University of Zulia (LUZ), Venezuela. He holds degrees in Law (*Summa Cum Laude*, LUZ, 2000) and Journalism (*Cum Laude*, Catholic University Cecilio Acosta, 2007), alongside postgraduate credentials in Human Rights from the Complutense University of Madrid (2001) and a PhD in Political Science (LUZ, 2008). Additionally, he leads the non-governmental organization *Aula Abierta* and coordinates the Human Rights Commission at University of Zulia's School of Law.

✉ dgomezgamboa@gmail.com

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