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Undermining Academic Freedom and Environmental Research in the US: How European Institutions and Researchers can Fill the Gap

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Abstract: The current US administration's actions have increasingly undermined academic freedom and environmental research, posing significant challenges not only domestically but also globally. This commentary provides a European perspective on the consequences of these developments for scientific inquiry, data availability, and evidence-based policymaking. While our US colleagues document the direct harms within the United States, we emphasize how European researchers and institutions can respond constructively. We discuss strategies for mitigating the impact of reduced US leadership in environmental economics, including strengthening transatlantic collaboration, safeguarding open data, and advancing independent research. Ultimately, we argue that Europe has a critical role to play in sustaining scientific rigor and policy relevance in the face of political disruptions abroad.

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Introduction

The second Trump administration has introduced a series of measures that significantly undermine academic freedom, environmental research, and international cooperation. These developments have raised concerns well beyond the United States across the global scientific and policy communities. Politically motivated funding cuts, discontinuation of critical datasets, and pressures on federally funded institutions have created a chilling effect on research. This is particularly relevant for politically sensitive areas such as climate change and environmental economics. At the same time, the administration's retreat from international climate agreements and its embrace of protectionist trade policies have disrupted global supply chains and weakened multilateral efforts to address environmental challenges. These actions threaten the integrity of scientific inquiry, the availability of critical data, and the effectiveness of evidence-based policymaking.

This commentary offers a European perspective on the implications of these developments. While our U.S. colleagues document the domestic consequences, we focus on how European institutions and researchers can respond constructively. We examine the broader global context of declining academic freedom, including in democratic societies, and highlight the importance of safeguarding open data, supporting displaced scholars, and reinforcing international research networks. We also explore the policy implications of U.S. trade disruptions and the opportunities they present for Europe to strengthen its leadership in climate policy. By investing in open-access infrastructure, fostering global partnerships, and building inclusive coalitions for climate action, Europe can help sustain the global infrastructure for environmental research and policy – and reaffirm its commitment to democratic values and scientific integrity.

The Role of U.S. Research Institutions and the Challenge to Academic freedom

Since World War II, U.S. research institutions and universities have played a central role in driving global scientific progress, innovation, and economic development. Supported by a model that combines generous federal research funding with institutional autonomy and a strong commitment to academic freedom, American universities have become world leaders in research and higher education. As Princeton University President Christopher L. Eisgruber recently wrote in The Atlantic, this model has made the United States "home to the best collection of research universities in the world, with contributions that have significantly advanced prosperity, health, and security - both in the United States and internationally. The openness of science and the global mobility of scholars have allowed research findings, methods, and data to flow across borders, benefitting researchers and societies worldwide.

At the core of this success lies academic freedom, which is fundamental to the mission of universities and a cornerstone of democratic societies. It allows researchers to question accepted wisdom and bring forward new ideas by independently defining research questions and applying appropriate methods – free from political or ideological interference. Equally important is the ability to openly share, disseminate, and publish findings without censorship or fear of sanctions. Together with institutional autonomy, these principles are essential for ensuring integrity and quality of research, especially in politically sensitive fields like climate science and environmental economics, where evidence-based inquiry often intersects with contentious political debates.

However, these core principles are under growing threat. In the United States, the second Trump administration has intensified efforts that erode these values. Actions include politically motivated funding cuts, especially to federal agencies such as NASA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Department of Energy's Office of Science (Science, 2025). These

agencies have experienced layoffs, hiring freezes, and the redirection of funds away from climate and environmental research (Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, n.d.). In addition, universities have reported pressure to align with federal priorities under threat of funding withdrawal (Tollefson et al., 2025). Climate science remains a key target, and in some cases, scientific reports have been delayed, downplayed, or suppressed. While legal protections for academic freedom still exist in the US, the current climate has produced a chilling effect, particularly in federally funded research institutions.

The United States is not alone in facing these challenges. According to recent reports, academic freedom is in decline globally (Scholars at Risk, 2024; Academic Freedom Index, 2025). While authoritarian regimes have historically suppressed academic freedom, a troubling new trend is the rise of restrictions imposed by democratically elected leaders. According to Scholars at Risk (2024), such leaders are increasingly enacting illiberal policies that erode university autonomy and constrain academic expression. This erosion of liberal norms has been accompanied by isolationist tendencies that hinder international research collaboration and the open exchange of ideas. The consequences are profound: diminishing quality of research and teaching, reduced ability to address societal challenges, and a weakening of the role of universities as a foundation for democracy and progress.

Academic freedom is increasingly challenged also in Europe despite strong commitments in frameworks such as the Magna Charta Universitatum (2020) and the Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research (2020). In several countries, populist rhetoric targeting institutions of higher education, attempts to influence curricula, and funding restrictions on politically controversial research have emerged. At the same time, the rise of populist movements and disinformation campaigns has fueled public skepticism toward science, especially in areas such as climate change, energy transition, and biodiversity loss. Such pressures may reduce the willingness of researchers to pursue politically sensitive or controversial topics, and as a result weakening the evidence base needed for effective policy making.

Closely linked to academic freedom is the availability of high-quality, open research data – another area under threat in the U.S. The availability of research data has suffered significant setbacks under the second Trump administration (Kling et al., 2025). Several federal datasets – including critical climate and environmental data, as well as tools for tracking climate risks and environmental justice indicators – have been removed from government websites (Environmental Data & Governance Initiative, 2025). These data have been widely used by researchers around the world. The shutdown of global air quality monitoring at U.S. embassies and consulates is another significant example, limiting access to reliable information in many regions (Friedman & Plumber, 2025). This represents a significant loss of important information for both local users around the world and the global research community.

Preserving access to high-quality, open datasets is essential for scientific progress. Initiatives such as the recently launched Public Environmental Data Partners (https://screening-tools.com), which aims to preserve and provide public access to U.S. federal environmental data, and Europe's long-established Copernicus Earth observation program can play crucial roles in this regard. Expanding these efforts and creating new, internationally coordinated platforms could help secure data availability in the case of political shifts. Independent monitoring systems, supported by global partnerships, could help fill the gaps left by U.S. cuts in environmental data sharing.

These challenges present an opportunity – and a responsibility – for Europe and its partners to lead. With budget cuts, hiring freezes, and the risk of censorship and political interference threatening research institutions in the U.S., there is an opportunity for Europe and other regions to step forward (Koundouri et al., 2023) and reaffirm their commitment to academic freedom, open data, and international collaboration. This is particularly relevant in areas such as clean energy and climate change, where the Trump administration has signaled reduced support (Yourish et al. 2025). Concrete steps might include establishing joint research centers, creating positions for scholars affected by U.S. cuts, and launching funding mechanisms for displaced researchers. Investing in open-access infrastructure

and global partnerships can help ensure continued access to knowledge and foster a resilient, inclusive research ecosystem.

By reaffirming the commitment to academic freedom and international collaboration, European institutions can attract global talent, protect vulnerable researchers, and take a leading role in advancing knowledge. For this purpose, the European Union has announced a €500 million investment package for 2025-27 as part of the EU's Choose Europe initiative aimed at boosting its research sector and attracting scientists, especially those affected by recent funding and job cuts in the United States (European Commission, 2025a).

This strategic move is intended to enhance the EU's competitiveness in science and technology, drawing top global talent and fostering innovation across member states. The funding will be channeled into research grants, infrastructure, and talent recruitment, with a focus on areas such as green technology, AI, biotech, and space science. This comes as the U.S. science sector faces instability due to congressional budget disputes and reallocations away from federal research programs, causing concern among researchers about long-term prospects.

US Tariffs and Global Environmental Goals

The Trump administration’s introduction of substantial tariff hikes represented a dramatic shift in US trade policy, erecting new barriers that disrupted global supply chains and increased economic uncertainty. These tariffs, often justified as protective measures for domestic industries, targeted a wide array of goods including steel, aluminum, and various agricultural products. The ensuing trade tensions strained relations with key trading partners and triggered ripple effects within environmental economics by altering production incentives, commodity prices, and international cooperation on resource management.

Additionally, rising economic nationalism complicated collaborative research efforts, clashing with the inherently global nature of environmental challenges.

The recent hike in “reciprocal” tariffs by the Trump administration (currently paused as of April 2025) continues to disrupt global trade dynamics, with significant implications for progress toward environmental goals. China, at the epicenter of US efforts to address bilateral trade deficits, faces increased costs that threaten its dominant role in global renewable technology manufacturing, particularly in solar panels. Given the intricate interdependencies within global value chains, trade diversion to alternative routes remains unlikely, potentially impeding the global expansion of renewable energy infrastructure. Furthermore, a potential redirection of Chinese exports to the EU market could strain local manufacturing capacities and complicate the EU’s green industrial policy. Nonetheless, elevated costs for US firms might inadvertently slow fossil-fuel expansion, yielding some environmental benefits.

Tariffs affecting agro-industrial supply chains can raise food prices and limit access to sustainable agricultural inputs, undermining climate-resilient farming especially in emerging and developing economies, and disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. Trade tensions and retaliatory measures threaten to reduce the financial flows from developed to developing economies crucial for meeting climate adaptation and mitigation targets. The global progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) associated with the environment is very much contingent on green technologies and green innovation (Koundouri et al., 2024). Restrictive trade policies, such as tariffs, hinder technology transfer and knowledge spillovers vital for the green transition of many countries.

Despite these challenges, the disruptions caused by US trade policies have the potential to stimulate a response from global partners, particularly Europe, to strengthen their actions to accelerate the green transition. Germany’s recent abolishment of the “debt brake” marks a paradigm shift in fiscal policy and could bolster investments in e.g. green investment. Similarly, the EU’s *Clean Industrial Deal,* launched in February 2025, reaffirms the European

Commission's commitment to improve the competitiveness of European manufacturing while maintaining ambitious decarbonization targets. These developments position Europe to play a pivotal role in addressing the gaps left by US trade retrenchment and advancing global environmental objectives.

Strengthening Europe's Climate Leadership in a Fragmented Global Landscape

Given the new fragmented economic order and its likely effect on the global climate policies, the EU needs to step up and fill the gap left by the exit of the US from the Paris Agreement. The EU already proved its ability to do so in the past playing a leading role in international climate policy, but it needs to relaunch this role now to avoid the detrimental effect of the current geopolitical tensions on global environmental progress and on its own energy transition.

Indeed, the energy crisis revealed the vulnerability of the EU, casting doubts on its capacity to pursue its climate ambition. Moreover, the EU accounts for less than 7% of global emissions, which has generated inner opposition to increasingly costly decarbonization efforts.

This generates the following question: how to relaunch the EU leader role internationally and gain support internally? As with any crisis, the international crisis following the US abrupt policy change and the US withdrawal from Paris Agreement also bring opportunities that may help to address the question above.

On the international stage, the EU should lead the way in creating a long-desired coalition of the willing, united not just by a shared desire, but by the urgent need to adopt a policy approach that contrasts the current US model (in environmental policies and beyond). Ironically, the US trade tariffs can serve as a catalyst for the creation of such a coalition, strengthening ties among countries adversely affected by these measures. Rather than

remaining isolated and divided, this group of countries needs to collaborate and form a coalition without the current US administration, while leaving the door open for future dialogue and potential US participation should a different approach be adopted. This collaboration should also engage US companies that have been at the forefront of the environmental efforts. These firms should be welcomed as partners of the coalition of the willing and be encouraged to continue their decarbonization efforts through appropriate policy instruments adopted by the coalition that can support their green investments.

Which countries should the EU link to?

A key role could be played by China for its capacity to rapidly adopt and pursue climate policies, as well as for its economic power and potential role as trade partner. Furthermore, it appears crucially important to regain a strict collaboration with the UK. Indeed, the UK was a leader within the EU in terms of climate policies before Brexit, and keeps sharing largely similar views and targets as the EU after Brexit. Linking back the European Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) with the UK ETS as recently considered by both administrations (European Commission, 2025b; UK Government Cabinet Office, 2025) would be highly desirable in this sense to give a signal of common views and policies and reinforce cooperation. It would also be important to have countries such as Canada and Japan on board: they both share similar views on decarbonization policies, and in some regions they have already implemented similar instruments in line with the European ones (think, for instance, of the Emissions Trading Systems in Quebec and in the Tokyo metropolitan area, respectively).

The larger the coalition the better, hence the need to get emerging economies on board. At the end of the day, given the limited share of global emissions generated in Europe, leading by example and helping other countries achieve their climate targets is more important than decarbonizing at home. Among emerging economies, a particularly important role can be played by Brazil and Latin America. Brazil is a crucial hotspot for biodiversity and will be hosting the next COP so it has the potential to steer next climate policies. Moreover, it is an influential member of the BRICS and a very large market. Furthermore, Latin

America (including Brasil) has been historically more critical towards the US policies than other Western countries, and can favor the relationships with the Global South.

Having the support of the Global South will be key in the new fragmented international context. In this regard, Africa can also play an important role for its natural resources and projected demographic trends. The relationships between Europe and Africa have long suffered from past colonialism. African countries have frequently accused European ones of imposing their choices even in the climate arena following a post-colonialistic approach. This has clearly emerged also at the recent COPs in which African countries have looked for an agreement with BRICS rather than with Europe. The EU needs to show that it is committed in the recovery of the African economies and in their fight against poverty. If the EU misses this opportunity, other countries will fill the gap and exploit African resources, possibly without directing them towards any climate target.

In operational terms, this means adjusting some EU policies having global effects like the CBAM. To show CBAM is a truly non-protectionist measure and depart from the new protectionist world set by the Trump administration, the EU should use part of CBAM revenues for conditional financial support to emerging economies (Perdana and Vielle, 2022; Borghesi and Ferrari, 2023). This is particularly important for Africa that encompasses many of the countries that are likely to be more vulnerable to CBAM, like Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Morocco (cf. Smith et al., 2024). It could be argued that CBAM is expected to generate a limited amount of resources, but using them for vulnerable emerging economies would provide a strong signal on the non-protectionist nature of the EU policy. To reinforce the signaling effect and mobilize the financial flow that is needed for the African policies, CBAM revenues should be topped up with capacity building activities in African countries and with technological transfers that speed up their progress in decarbonization policies.

If the EU manages to form a broad international coalition along the lines described above and induces other countries to take climate action, this will also help to reduce inner opposition to climate policies. In fact, much of this opposition is based upon the argument

that European decarbonization efforts are isolated and, therefore, useless, if not counterproductive. Showing that Europe does not operate unilaterally, but on the contrary leads a multilateral effort that brings along trade and economic advantages among the coalition members would be a powerful response to the opposite narrative that has been fostered by Eurosceptics and populist parties.

Efforts to establish a coalition of the willing must take into account the increasing geopolitical tensions, which includes a deepening rivalry between the United States and China across several areas. In this context, the EU must design coalitions and international policy instruments that both deliver on limiting global warming and are resilient to geopolitical tensions and shocks.

Conclusions

The measures adopted by the second Trump administration in its first months mark a significant discontinuity with the past in all respects: in terms of trade policy, data access policy and academic freedom, and climate policy. All these measures are likely to have detrimental effects on global environmental progress directly or indirectly.

Trade tariffs are highly disruptive to global trade. While lower trade can reduce transport emissions, it generally also causes a fall in GDP at the international level that has negative effects on the environment due to lower technological spillovers and less financial resources being available for environmental policies. The periods of deglobalization between the two World Wars experienced in the last century were accompanied by deep economic recession and high unemployment rates in many countries, which fostered the birth of totalitarian political regimes and the outburst of international conflicts. We should, therefore, look carefully at (and learn from) the past, to avoid repeating the same mistakes, especially at these difficult times.

Reducing or preventing access to data or discontinuing data collection can have a large long-standing negative impact on the environment by hindering ongoing research. It took

researchers several years to have sufficiently long time series of data that could allow more refined econometric analysis. If such data are discontinued or even cancelled, our understanding of the environmental problems will be compromised, and thus also the capacity to intervene to solve them. Even worse effects may come from the attacks on academic freedom. Without good data one cannot pursue good empirical research, but without academic freedom there will be no research at all on politically sensitive topics like climate change. This is not simply ethically unacceptable, it is environmentally crucial. Financial resources risk shifting away from climate studies for many years to come, with a consequent loss of knowledge and human capital in this research area where these are urgently needed.

Finally, the reversal of the US administration in its climate policy will obviously have direct detrimental effects on the environment at the global level, given the high emissions level of the US and the key role they play in the international arena.

There is much the EU can do to counterbalance the negative effects provoked by the US policy described above. First, it should not follow the same tariff path adopted by the US, certainly not with the basic (to say the least) and oversimplifying criterion adopted by the Trump administration. Retaliation, as tempting as it can be, would lead to trade wars that are self-defeating. On the contrary, it should strengthen collaboration and trade agreements with the other countries so as to foster an alternative cooperative model.

Second, the EU should strengthen its open access resources and research collaborations, possibly replacing those currently discontinued by the US. In this regard, the EU can stress and build upon its success stories, like the Copernicus and the Galileo programs, to show it can lead the way in data collection and diffusion. And it can facilitate and capitalize on the brain drain from the US observed after the Trump administration's cuts to science (Udesky and Leeming, 2025), by increasing investments in R&D and thus sowing the seeds of future robust economic growth. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that at the moment most European countries are not properly equipped to take advantage of the opportunity, due to low salaries, job security and funding opportunities. This is, therefore, a unique opportunity to reverse this trend and lead the peloton rather

than be part of the chasing group in research, especially in environmental and climate research where new patents' applications and growth opportunities are particularly large.

Third, the EU should relaunch its role as champion of multilateralism that has long played in the climate policy arena. This somehow goes hand in hand with the previous argument on reinforcing collaboration with its trade partners. In fact, the EU needs to prove -both internally and externally- the trade, economic and environmental benefits that such a climate and trade coalition would generate for its members. The much debated European CBAM measure can become instrumental for this purpose. By sharing part of the revenues with its trade partners, the EU would make a highly symbolic move, showing that CBAM is a truly non-protectionist measure and clearly departing from the new protectionist world set by the Trump administration.

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