

Statement regarding the Wave of Student Protests in Europe

Introduction

In many European countries, students have taken to the streets to protest injustice, inequality and the lack of democratic accountability. Students are raising their voices against political inaction, systemic failures and decisions that directly impact their rights and futures e.g. in [Serbia](#), [Georgia](#) and [Greece](#) to [Germany](#), [Türkiye](#), [Slovakia](#), [Austria](#), [Romania](#) and many other European countries. These mobilisations are not isolated, rather, they reflect wider, interconnected issues affecting youth, democracy and higher education as such across Europe. The right to peaceful protest, as outlined in ESU's [Student Rights Charter](#), is a basis of democratic participation and ESU stands firm in its commitment to defending the rights of student protesters.

Guided by the principles of ESU's [Fundamental Values and Solidarity Policy Paper](#) and [Human Rights and Solidarity Strategy](#), ESU continues to advocate for democratic student participation, protection of civic space and stronger support mechanisms for students at risk. ESU emphasises the critical role of students in advocating for accountability and democracy and highlights our responsibility to support student activism and ensure their voices are heard in the fight for a more just and democratic society.

Root Causes of Student Protests in Europe

Across Europe, student protests are often fueled by frustration with systemic issues like corruption, unethical financing, lack of accountability or transparency and democratic backsliding. These protests are frequently triggered by tragedies exposing state failures, such as the Tempri train crash in Greece, which highlighted concerns about transportation infrastructure and alleged cover-ups. Similarly, in

Türkiye, student protests erupted initially in response to President Erdoğan's jailing of the leader of the main opposition party.

Students are demanding democratic change not only in education but also in state-level governance. Protests are often driven by the erosion of academic freedom and democratic principles, anti-intellectualism, shrinking civic space and exclusion from decision-making processes. When corruption diverts resources from public services, students face underfunded Higher Education Institutions, unaffordable living costs and unsafe environments. Additionally, the backsliding of democracy impacts higher education as well, leading to interference with educational and research programmes, access to education and accessibility and equality-related policies, amongst others. Anti-intellectualism and erosion of academic freedom are often the first signs of the erosion of democracy.

Connections Between Protests

Despite their different national contexts, recent student protests across Europe share common concerns: the state of democracy, shrinking civic space and the suppression of youth voices, highlighting students mobilising when democratic values are at risk.

Students often lead the charge when freedoms are under threat, feeling the consequences in both education and daily life. These protests, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, are driven by institutional neglect, censorship and civil rights violations. As political repression, state violence, and disinformation campaigns grow, the right to peaceful protest becomes more important than ever. ESU defends this right and works to support students at risk of retaliation for speaking out. These protests unite students in solidarity, understanding that their struggles are part of a broader European movement.

Student Involvement and Leadership

In many recent protests, students have been more than participants – they have led the charge. Student communities and youth-led movements have been at the forefront, demanding accountability in the face of corruption and democratic decline. But this is not new: throughout history students have played a pivotal role

in shaping political and social changes – from the 1956 revolution in Hungary, the 1968 student uprisings in Paris and the anti-apartheid student movements in South Africa, to the Velvet Revolution in former Czechoslovakia and more recent mobilisations like the 2018 March For Our Lives protests. These moments are part of a long-standing tradition where young people, especially students, step up when those in power fail to listen.

Challenges to Change

Student protests in Europe are vital for driving change, but they face significant obstacles. Fear of repercussions is a major deterrent – students may hesitate to protest because of the risk of expulsion or other penalties. Furthermore, the safety of student activists is regularly threatened by police violence and repression, and more often than not, student protests face harsher restrictions and backlash than other protests. In addition, several European countries have started deportation activities, which constitute a gross violation of the right to education and protest by international students.

Another challenge is the lack of institutional accountability. Many higher education institutions lack systems to protect students, particularly student representatives, when they face threats, creating an environment where concerns are dismissed. Furthermore, dependencies on public authorities and private investors often lead higher education institutions to remain silent or to take actions against their students and academic staff rather than protecting them.

The wave of student protests across Europe is a powerful reminder of the critical role young people play in shaping the future and the historical importance student protests have had in shaping the political, social and cultural change across Europe. While challenges remain, ESU remains committed to supporting these student movements and ensuring that their voices are heard, their rights are protected, and their participation in shaping a democratic society is upheld.

Therefore, ESU stands firm in calling for:

- The fundamental right to protest to be protected as part of democratic participation, in line with international human rights law for both domestic and international students
- Higher Education Institutions to remain free from state interference, protect and defend their institutional autonomy and uphold democratic governance structures.
- The European community to unequivocally condemn the unjust and undemocratic force used by authorities against students, academics and wider civil society standing up for democratic values.
- The European Parliament and Commission, the Council of Europe, the European Higher Education Community and other relevant actors of the international community to condemn the unlawful persecution of student protesters, to take meaningful steps to support affected students and to explore consequences for public authorities violating academic freedom and the rights of students.
- The rights of students to free expression and peaceful organization to be upheld without fear of persecution or academic repercussions.
- Higher Education Institutions to never exploit academic qualifications as political tools - the revocation of diplomas for political reasons is unacceptable and must be promptly reversed wherever it has occurred, including through legal intervention at the European level, if necessary.
- All Higher Education Institutions to adhere to the fundamental values enshrined within the Bologna Process, including academic freedom, student participation, academic integrity and democratic values.
- The immediate resignation of those who are responsible for ordering or enabling the use of violence to suppress student protests, or who engage in the intimidation, blackmail or coercion of students to prevent them from exercising their democratic rights.

ESU urges international solidarity with democratic (student) movements across Europe.