

## KEY RESULTS OF THE PLENARY TABLE

### **“ACADEMIA UNDER ATTACK: ACTION AGAINST ANTIDEMOCRATIC THREATS”**

*— Universities face growing political pressure – experts urge Europe to act now to defend academic freedom, diversify funding, and build democratic resilience on campus.*

Rising populist and authoritarian movements are turning universities into political battlegrounds. Under budget cuts, culture wars and narrow “impact” demands, academic freedom is being squeezed both by open political interference and by quieter shifts in funding, careers and bureaucracy. At the plenary table “Academia under Attack: Action against Antidemocratic Threats”, panelists warned that this is no longer a remote or purely American problem, but a live European challenge.

They stressed that academic freedom, the rule of law and democracy stand or fall together. Direct attacks from blocked appointments to politicised funding combine with subtler pressures: insecure careers, excessive reporting requirements and performance metrics that discourage risky research. At the same time, universities risk weakening themselves when they stay silent in the face of disinformation, treat themselves as neutral service providers, or reduce scholarship to measurable output rather than civic responsibility.

### **THE PANEL CALL TO ACTION:**

#### **1 — Reduce bureaucratic barriers and strengthen the state’s capacity to support science.**

Streamline funding and administrative processes so researchers regain time, flexibility and trust, essential conditions for innovation and for preventing a “lost generation” of scientific talent.

#### **2 — Diversify and internationalise research funding and partnerships.**

Build a plural, resilient funding ecosystem and expand cross-border collaborations to protect science from political capture and ensure that academic freedom does not hinge on any single government.

#### **3 — Invest in democratic literacy and public understanding of science.**

Introduce structured education on academic freedom, the scientific method and the constitutional role of research, both within universities and for society at large, to counter misinformation and strengthen shared democratic values.

#### **4 — Build broad alliances and act early against anti-democratic threats.**

Form coalitions with journalists, civil society, schools and other institutions before crises escalate, and replace silence or false neutrality with clear, evidence-based responses to disinformation and extremist narratives.

#### **5 — Reaffirm universities as civic institutions rooted in freedom and responsibility.**

Encourage active, not partisan, engagement from researchers; defend universities as spaces where careful, rigorous inquiry is protected, and where academic citizenship contributes directly to sustaining democracy.

*This plenary table is supported by Volkswagen Foundation and assembled in the framework of the Falling Walls Science Summit 2025 in Berlin. The Falling Walls Science Summit is a leading international, interdisciplinary, and intersectoral forum for scientific breakthroughs. It commemorates the fall of the Berlin Wall and aims to promote dialogue between science and society.*



### **PANELLISTS**

**Patrick Cramer**  
*President, Max Planck Society*

**Maria Leptin**  
*President, European Research Council*

**Anna-Sara Lind**  
*Professor, Uppsala University*

**Eva Inés Obergefell**  
*Rector, Leipzig University*

**Daniel Ziblatt**  
*Eaton Professor of Government, Harvard University*

**Jens Martin Gurr**  
*Member of the University Council, University of Duisburg-Essen, Moderator*

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