

## **EVENT BY THE SCHOLARS AT RISK IN WALLONIA- BRUSSELS FEDERATION SECTION – “UNIVERSITIES IN ACTION: ADAPTING SUPPORT, STRENGTHENING INTEGRATION, DEFENDING FREEDOM”**

**JUNE 3D, 2025, BRUSSELS**

On June 3d, 2025, the Scholars at Risk section in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (SAR FWB) - comprising ARES, CRef, ULB, UCLouvain, and ULiège - organised an event in Brussels that strongly resonates with current challenges: *“Universities in Action: Adapting Support, Strengthening Integration, Defending Freedom.”* In a tense geopolitical context marked by armed conflicts, political repression, and rising nationalism, the event brought together representatives from higher education institutions, international organisations, public and political bodies, and field actors committed to defending academic freedom.

### **A Collective Mobilization in Response to Urgency**

From the outset, speeches by **Prof. Laurence Ris** (UMONS), **Charline Cauwe** (ARES), and **Gianna Hegarty** (SAR Europe) laid the foundation for a powerful message: academic freedom is a fundamental right, and its defense is inseparable from that of democracy.

**Prof. Laurence Ris**, Vice-Rector at UMONS and Chair of the International Relations Commissions of ARES and CRef, delivered a powerful and direct speech. In light of multiple crises - war in Ukraine, repression in Palestine, rollback of academic freedoms in the U.S. - she issued a clear call:

*“We must act. We must stay true to our values. Universities are not just places of learning, they are vital ecosystems for free discussion, debate, and exchange of ideas. They are sanctuaries for those whose voices are silenced elsewhere. Hosting an at-risk researcher is not just a moral imperative - it is an act of resistance. It is also an act of rebuilding.”*

She praised the commitment of the SAR FWB member universities, which recently renewed their Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), demonstrating their shared will to strengthen and sustain their actions. CRef and ARES, she added, are fully invested in supporting these institutions, not only as facilitators but as clear and committed defenders of academic freedom.

**Charline Cauwe**, Director of International Relations at ARES, emphasised the central role of Belgian Francophone coordination in this dynamic. ARES, as a platform bringing together all higher education institutions in the FWB, acts as a catalyst for academic solidarity.

The support of the FWB for this initiative, through the presence of Thierry Zeller, Deputy Chief of Staff to Minister-President Elisabeth Degryse (in charge of higher education), reinforced the political legitimacy of this approach. He reminded attendees that hosting at-risk researchers is an ethical, scientific, and societal issue that must be addressed at all levels of governance.

## Adapting Support Systems to the Realities of Displaced Researchers

The first panel, moderated by **Prof. Sébastien Van Drooghenbroeck** (UCLouvain), explored the challenges of adapting support systems to the crises. **Prof. Eric Florence** (ULiège) emphasised the diversity of backgrounds: some researchers flee wars, others authoritarian regimes, and not all identify with the term “refugee.” Academic displacement, often valued in scientific careers, here becomes forced exile, marked by loss of bearings, erasure of prior achievements, and deep emotional trauma.

**Gianna Hegarty** (SAR Europe) presented the MSCA4Ukraine program, funded by the EU, illustrating the desire to reconcile academic mobility with international solidarity. She stressed the importance of maintaining active ties between Ukrainian researchers and their home institutions to limit brain drain. She also emphasised the need for programs that allow these researchers to contribute to their country’s reconstruction while integrating into European networks.

**Emily Borzcik** (Scholar Rescue Fund) highlighted the importance of adapting evaluation criteria to local contexts and promoting hosting in institutions geographically close to the country of origin when possible.

**Elodie Decostre** (ULB) shared the support provided by ULB’s Solidarity Fund since 2017, including short stays that offer a breather for hosted researchers to regain footing without excessive pressure.

## Sustainable Integration into Francophone Communities

The second panel highlighted best practices for integration into French-speaking institutions. **Laura Lohéac** (PAUSE, Collège de France) reminded that hosting goes beyond a scholarship: it involves administrative, psychological, and linguistic support. She stressed the importance of preparing researchers from the outset for the post-scholarship period through training - linguistic or professional - to facilitate sustainable integration. PAUSE also organises workshops with organisations specialising in non-academic integration. The program, which has supported over 600 researchers and 100 artists so far, also acts as an advocate for academic freedom.

**Véronique Larosa** (ULiège) presented the “Hospitable University” initiative, adopted in 2022 by ULiège. This policy is driven by a dedicated working group that meets monthly to design and adjust support measures for at-risk students and researchers. This structured framework reflects the university’s commitment to inclusivity, resilience, and academic excellence. She also emphasised the importance of building bridges with the industrial sector to open professional opportunities beyond academia.

**Aleksei Pleshkov**, former ULB Solidarity Fund fellow (2022–2024), shared a personal testimony about his experience as a researcher in exile and the challenges of academic and social integration. He highlighted the importance of early organisational support, especially for navigating local administrative systems; engaging in French language learning from the start; setting realistic expectations for academic careers; and proactively exploring non-academic career opportunities. His testimony shed valuable light on the human dimension of academic exile and the need for structured, long-term support for at-risk researchers.

## Preserving Academic Freedom in International Partnerships

The third panel, moderated by **Prof. Anne Weyembergh** (ULB), addressed a complex but essential question: how can universities integrate the defense of academic freedom into their international collaboration policies?

**Prof. Vanessa Frangville** (ULB) reminded that ending a partnership with a university does not mean opposing its national government, but rather affirming one's own values. It is about preserving academic integrity, especially when certain institutions violate fundamental principles of freedom and safety.

**Prof. Édouard Delruelle** (ULiège) emphasised that decisions to end or maintain partnerships are always political and must be made on a case-by-case basis, considering the local context. He also noted the lack of a reliable tool to assess academic freedom at the university level, as the existing Academic Freedom Index operates at the country level.

Finally, **Prof. Sébastien Van Drooghenbroeck** (UCLouvain) highlighted the collateral effects of such decisions: suspending a partnership can directly impact local researchers, who become indirect victims. He advocated for a balanced approach that denounces human rights violations while maintaining ties with individuals engaged in research.

All speakers emphasised the complexity of these decisions and noted that distinguishing between institutional partnerships and individual collaborations is essential but difficult to implement.

### **A Dynamic to Continue and Expand**

In conclusion, speakers called for continued structuring of the SAR FWB section, expanding the circle of engaged institutions to include actors beyond national borders, deepening research on academic freedom, and ensuring sustainable funding for support programs. The Wallonia-Brussels Federation, through its representatives, expressed its willingness to support this dynamic in coordination with other levels of government and European partners.

This event highlighted inspiring initiatives, created new synergies, and above all reaffirmed a collective commitment: to make universities spaces of freedom, solidarity, and hope for those around the world whose right to research and education is under threat.