

**4-5 November 2026, Aachen
Program**

The program is subject to change.

Freedom of Research (FoR) – A European Summit 2026
Innovation and Competitiveness

Our freedom and democracy are under pressure. How can we safeguard Europe's capacity for innovation, competitiveness, and resilience – and what role does academic freedom play in this?

Our Summit brings together people and perspectives from across Europe to explore pressing questions: How can we create space for free thinking, scientific collaboration, and innovation? What political and societal conditions are needed to build a Europe ready for the future?

An opportunity for dialogue, fresh perspectives, and looking ahead.

Festive Evening Event

4 November, 7:00 PM – 9:30 PM, Coronation Hall, Aachen Town Hall
Languages: English and German (with live interpretation)

Welcome Remarks:

- Prof. Dr. Thomas Prefi, Chairman of the Charlemagne Prize Foundation
- Prof. Dr. Ulrich Rüdiger, Rector, RWTH Aachen University
- Dr. Michael Ziemons, Lord Mayor of the City of Aachen

Keynote:

Manuel Heitor

Former Minister for Science, Technology and Higher Education of Portugal, Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Instituto Superior Técnico, University of Lisbon, and Author of “Align, Act, Accelerate”, the so-called “Heitor Report”

Awarding of Scholarships: Fellows 2026/27 of the Charlemagne Prize Academy

Music: tbd

Moderation: Dr. Angela Maas, Journalist and Moderator, Deputy Spokeswoman of the Executive Board of the Charlemagne Prize Foundation

Symposium

5 November, 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM, Generali-Saal, SuperC, RWTH Aachen University

Language: English

9:00–9:15 | Words of Welcome

- Prof. Dr. Gabriele Gramelsberger and Prof. Dr. Stefan Böschen, Directors, Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re)
- Prof. Dr. Thomas Prefi, Chairman of the Charlemagne Prize Foundation

9:15–10:00 | Opening Keynote and Moderated Q&A

Prof. Dr. Carsten Reinhardt, Historian of Science, former Senior Fellow of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re)

Q&A moderated by Prof. Dr. Gabriele Gramelsberger, Director, Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re)

BLOCK I:

10:05–10:35 | Policy Conversation

Can Europe Innovate More While Strengthening Academic Freedom?

Europe is under pressure to strengthen its innovation capacity and avoid falling further behind leading global economies, such as the United States and China. Reports such as Draghi, Heitor and EFI point to structural weaknesses: regulatory complexity, fragmented markets, bureaucracy, limited risk capital and insufficient institutional flexibility. Yet Europe's innovation challenge is not only structural, but also geopolitical: strategic autonomy, research security and technological sovereignty are reshaping the conditions for global scientific collaboration. At the same time, innovation depends on institutional and cultural conditions: the freedom to pursue open-ended questions, the patience to support long-term research, and the openness to attract talent and enable cross-border partnerships. This conversation asks how Europe can strengthen its innovation systems and address geopolitical and security demands without weakening the openness and pluralism on which excellent science depends.

10:40–10:55 | Coffee Break

10:55–11:55 | Interactive Fishbowl

From Open Knowledge to Societal Impact: Transfer, Trust, and Tensions

Knowledge transfer is often presented as the bridge between research and societal impact. In practice, this bridge is built through relationships, contracts, expectations and trust. This fishbowl turns from the policy level to the concrete settings in which universities cooperate with industry, public institutions and society. The discussion will look at the everyday tensions created by publication rights, confidentiality, intellectual property, third-party funding and pressure for immediate applicability, asking how governance and collaboration models can generate societal impact while safeguarding the independence of researchers, the openness of scientific work and curiosity-driven research.

12:00–13:00 | Panel Discussion

Academic Freedom Under Pressure: Evidence, Trust, and Institutional Resilience

Academic freedom is increasingly under pressure across Europe — through political interference, legal and administrative constraints, attacks on researchers, and growing distrust in scientific expertise. This panel asks where these threats are most visible, how they can be measured, and why they matter beyond academia. Drawing on the empirical research behind the Academic Freedom Monitor Europe and preliminary findings from its next edition, the discussion will examine how difficult it is to address threats to academic freedom with existing laws and procedures. It will also explore how restrictions on

science and knowledge communication affect public trust, democratic institutions and societal resilience. The panel brings together empirical, societal and institutional perspectives to ask what universities, funders, policy-makers, and civil society can do to halt the erosion of academic freedom in Europe.

13:00–14:00 | Lunch Break

BLOCK II:

14:00–14:30 | Talks

What Freedom Depends On

Discussions of research and innovation freedom often proceed at a high level of abstraction. This session grounds them in three concrete conditions on which autonomy depends in practice: physical survival, control over industrial supply, and control over data. Three short interventions introduce the analytical categories the afternoon will return to.

14:30–15:15 | Deep Dive I

“Freed from Desire”: Confronting Europe’s Dependencies in Medical Supply

Around 80% of Europe’s imported pharmaceutical ingredients come from just five countries, with China alone accounting for nearly half. The Critical Medicines Act, agreed in May 2026, is Europe’s first serious attempt to reverse this dependency — but reshoring production is not simply an industrial policy question. It is a question of what genuine sovereignty in healthcare requires: not only where medicines are made, but who controls the decision of what counts as critical, and who bears the cost of building resilience. This session asks what it would take for Europe to secure its own supply — credibly, sustainably, and without merely shifting dependency from one external actor to another.

15:15–15:30 | Coffee Break

15:30–16:15 | Deep Dive II

“Freedom’s Business Case”: Funding Cuts in Academia

Academic freedom depends not only on principles, but on the resources that make independent research possible. Across Europe, universities, research institutions, and international cooperation organizations are facing growing financial pressure. What happens to Europe’s capacity for knowledge, innovation, and independent expertise when funding is cut? Representatives from North Rhine-Westphalian Academies, including IDOS and the academic institutions from the UN and GIZ, will discuss the broader consequences of shrinking research budgets — and make the case for why academic freedom is not simply a value to protect, but an investment in Europe’s future.

16:15–16:45 | Closing Remarks

Stand-up FoR Science NIGHT

5 November, from 6:30 PM, Apollo Kino & Bar, Aachen

Unless stated otherwise, this part of the program will be conducted in German.

18:30–18:45:

Opening

Cinema 4: Professor Matthias Wessling

18:45–19:45:

Block #1 A:

Cinema 1: Poetry Slam by Simon Middelkoop

- Slammer 1: Katharina Willems
- Slammer 2: Luise Wolff
- Slammer 3: Leon Hanke
- Slammer 4: Evgenija Kosov

Block #1 B:

Cinema 3: Discussion: “The Midterm Elections – The Political Situation in the United States” (in English)

- Dr. Mayssoun Zein al Din, Executive Director Academy of International Affairs NRW
- Anca Agachi, Defense Policy Analyst at RAND and Charlemagne Prize Academy Fellow 2025/26

20:00–21:00:

Block #2:

Cinema 4: Late Night Talks

Moderation: Luca Swieter

Music: RWTH BigBand Combo (tbc)

- Dr. Insa Thiele-Eich, Meteorologist, Astronaut and Spaceflight Expert
- Khalid Bounouar, Comedian (RebellComedy)

From 21:15:

Block #3:

Cinema 1: Film screening of “Die Schwimmerinnen” (tbc)