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European Commission  
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Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri  
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**Sent by email: [presidente@pec.governo.it](mailto:presidente@pec.governo.it)**

25 July 2023

Dear President von der Leyen,

Dear President Meloni,

Following the decision to pardon Mr Patrick George Zaki, we write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) and on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Italian Society for the Study of the Middle East (SeSaMO) to express our deep concerns regarding the ongoing detention of thousands of other students, academics, researchers and human rights defenders in Egypt.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. Both societies are committed to supporting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region. SeSaMO is a leading Italian organisation devoted to the study of the Middle East in several disciplines and time periods.

Mr Zaki is an Egyptian student who recently graduated from the EU Erasmus Mundus-funded GEMMA Masters programme at the University of Bologna. He is also a human rights researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). He was detained on 7 February 2020, after returning to Egypt from Italy for a family visit. He was subsequently sentenced to three years imprisonment for ‘spreading false news’ and for ‘terrorism’, amongst other charges, for merely publishing his writings about the discrimination Coptic Christians face in Egypt. While we are heartened to hear he has now been pardoned, the circumstances of his arrest, detention, trial and sentencing underscores the plight of thousands of other political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, many of them academics and human rights defenders, who are still being held in detention.

Both Societies have previously written to you noting their deep concern at the systematic violations of human rights in Egypt, including harassment of human rights defenders, political prisoners and prisoners

of conscience and of their lawyers, friends and families, who are subjected to arrests on flimsy charges, practices such as ‘detention rotation’, and who when detained are often targets of violent treatment both in pre-trial detention and after sentencing. These practices patently aim to undermine freedom of conscience, academic freedoms, and the work of human rights defenders.

Cases such as Patrick Zaki’s and those of thousands of prisoners of conscience in Egypt suggest that authorities are failing to uphold the principles of academic freedom and of legitimate academic activity that are enshrined both in several international treaties to which the Egyptian government is a signatory and in Egyptian law itself, and instead that the treatment of human rights defenders is being guided by the objective of repressing dissent. Alaa Abd El-Fattah, for example, remains in prison, and the Egyptian government has yet to cooperate with investigations into the torture and assassination of Giulio Regeni.

We also call upon the EU and its Member States – first and foremost the Italian government – to respect the spirit and letter of the Lisbon Treaty and of its own Neighbourhood Policy, in which human rights, democracy and fundamental values including academic freedom and freedom of research are enshrined and to which they are avowedly central. Under these instruments, as well as according to the principles of human rights in international law, the Union has an obligation to defend and promote academic freedom and freedom of research on human rights in all its actions. The EU explicitly espouses the principle of ‘conditionality’ in its Agreements with third countries, including with Egypt, according to which the pattern of human rights violations – of which Mr Zaki’s case is exemplary – should be met with a slowing or reversal of economic and political cooperation. We call upon European governments and upon the EU to take action exercising the legal, diplomatic and commercial levers available to them in a manner coherent with their proclamation of ideals of human rights and fundamental values.

Yours sincerely,



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