European Review, Vol. 33, No. S1, S102–S118 © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Academia Europaea. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/S106279872500016X

Hungarian Academia in a Deep State

BALÁZS MAJTÉNYI & ANDREW RYDER

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
Emails: majtenyi.balazs@tatk.elte.hu; ryder.andrew@tatk.elte.hu

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798725100392 - Published online by Cambridge University Press:

Authoritarian populism can be defined by anti-establishment attitudes, exclusionary identity politics and anti-pluralism. It denies and derides diverging opinions. Authoritarian populism rejects the legitimacy of opponents, both political and academic, and is susceptible to post-truth politics often steered by tropes and conspiracy theories. It poses a real danger to academic freedom and scientific standards. This article supports this assertion and describes higher education under the authoritarian populist government of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. He has centralized the authority over higher education, and has in effect created a deep state, nurturing not just cronyism, but efforts to reorient the mindset of a generation of young Hungarians in an attempt to guarantee the populist and traditionalist ideological legacy of his regime. The article notes that forms of hierarchal political control over the universities and research institutes are falsely presented under the facade of the global process of marketizing universities. However, even in authoritarian Hungary, prompted by dissonance and commitments to academic freedom and scientific standards, there have been progressive counter-movements. These counter-movements provide insights into alternative visions of higher education that seek to preserve the integrity of academic standards, deliberation and intellectual plurality.

Introduction

In the interwar/postwar years, Michael Polányi was a key champion of academic freedom, which he felt was being seriously challenged by the authoritarianism and the interference of the Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes, where an obsession with party loyalty and a science subservient to the political needs of the regime were attitudes deemed highly damaging to notions of proper and good science. Polányi (1936) felt science needed to be free from political, ideological and economic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

influences. For him, in an ideal world, there would be an academic marketplace where, in an environment of open debate and deliberation, ideas would be tested. The best science would emerge as measured by academic peer support and endorsement (Beddeleem 2020).

Such Socratic notions of knowledge production have been undermined by the sacralization and position-taking of academics. Bourdieu (1988) noted in his book *Homo Academicus* that academics try to bolster and preserve their status through the sacralization of knowledge production, where positivist claims are made that they have the requisite scientific expertise to exert complete control over the analysis and framing of research results. In the minds of academic positivists, alternative research relationships such as collaborative research 'with' and 'for' communities of 'experts by experience' can taint and distort research findings. Such positivist and hierarchical notions have tended to maintain the elitism of universities and the control of knowledge production by a small and privileged academic elite, creating what is sometimes described as the 'ivory tower' of academia. The disconnection between academic elites and society has facilitated the erosion of academic freedom by authoritarian regimes.

Bourdieu's depiction of academic power structures reveals how the modern academic has become a manager and entrepreneur reliant on connections with power that deliver contracts and funding. Hence, the modern academic relies upon marketing, patronage and clientelism, in some cases trumping the impact and quality of their academic outputs. Such an academic certainly does not speak 'truth to power'. In recent times, the elitism of universities has been accentuated through forms of Academic Capitalism where forms of audit culture centred on quantifiable outputs such as appraisal, student reviews, citations and research income generated are used to classify and categorize who is a successful academic and, by contrast, who is failing. Such assessments are linked to reward and promotion and driven by a line-management system of monitoring and surveillance. It has been claimed that academics are increasingly faced with a stifling tsunami of metrics and technologies of governance, changing the contemporary university from a platonic academy to a commercial mall (Wood 2010). In addition, profit generation from student admissions, especially foreign students paying high tuition fees, has added to the marketization of academia.

The commodification of higher education and audit culture was pioneered in countries such as the USA and the UK. Critics have denounced the corporate university as being at odds with inclusivity by creating profit-driven and customer-orientated learning experiences that sacrifice quality and marginalize less conventional subject areas and outlooks within academia. Universities are thus mimicking corporations with formulae, targets and principles guided by forms of 'new managerialism' (Miller 2010). Academics have become line managers and entrepreneurs, and students have become customers, as universities have become training institutions for work roles. Intellectual activities outside of these realms become marginal and peripheral (Lojdová 2016). As will be noted, working in tandem with commercial pressures are ideological ones, which fear the challenges

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

presented by subjects such as sociology and gender studies. In Hungary, the emphasis on market considerations in public funding of research and teaching is partly motivated by a suspicion of the social sciences – namely, that social science research could be dangerous for the political system. This suspicion also existed concerning sociology (e.g., research on poverty) under another authoritarian regime in the era of state socialism.

Critics argue that, in Hungary, forms of political authoritarianism in universities are being fused with academic capitalism to create a crisis in the university sector, where not only academic freedom, but also sound scientific standards are being undermined.

Creating a Deep State in Hungary

The first Orbán administration (1998 to 2002) had been within what can be described as the liberal mainstream; Orbán supported and navigated Hungary's membership of NATO and the EU and contributed to the transition politics of turning Hungary into a neoliberal democracy. However, a series of election defeats led Orbán to pivot his Fidesz Party towards the right and forge a coalition with the leadership of churches, oligarchs and right-wing and extremist parts of civil society. He increasingly began to use elements of authoritarian populism in his politics (anti-establishment attitudes, exclusionary identity politics and anti-pluralism). Reflecting this populist turn, Orbán has been zealous in the creation of what he describes as an 'illiberal democracy', removing democratic checks and balances, most notably attacking the formerly independent institutions, e.g., the judiciary and universities. Today, Hungary is classed as a 'Transitional or Hybrid regime' by Freedom House (2024).

Cronyism has also worked in tandem with authoritarian populism, leading to the Orbán regime awarding close friends and supporters lucrative contracts not only in, for example, large swathes of the media, but also in most of the universities, which are now controlled by allies of Orbán. Concerning cronyism, Hungary is the most corrupt Member State of the European Union, according to Transparency International's (2023) Corruption Perceptions Index, which focuses on corruption in the public sector. The fusion of corruption, cronyism and illiberalism has led some commentators to classify Hungary as a 'mafia state' (Magyar 2016).

In the form of agonistic framing. Orbán justifies these actions through securitization, where liberalism, feminists, LGBTQ people, the philanthropist George Soros, and the European Union are framed as hostile forces working to subvert the authority of the Hungarian government and its national sovereignty, seeking to dilute and weaken the Hungarian identity in a culture war. These agonistic acts of polarization often rely upon tropes and conspiracy theories. Soros is framed as a proponent of replacement theory, a supposed desire to flood Europe with immigrants and forge a European identity, in the process undermining national identities and sovereignty. Similarly, the Orbán government has been enthusiastic in promoting tropes that the LGBTQI wish to indoctrinate school children; hence, a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

law was proposed banning such activities. Anti-pluralism, cronyism and ideological partisanship have been features of Hungary's higher-education reforms.

Authoritarian populism in Hungary clearly contains an element of anti-intellectualism, exalting so-called 'common sense' thinking. In contrast, groups such as feminists are framed as tainted by 'cultural Marxism', agitational politics and forms of 'political correctness', creating an intellectual tyranny (Grzebalska *et al.* 2017). Orbán's desire to be perceived to be following the 'popular will' and 'common-sense' thinking rather than 'expert' opinion is evident in national consultations on topics such as migration, the Covid pandemic and a clampdown on so-called LGBTQI propaganda using highly distorted questionnaires with leading questions designed to elicit hostile responses. An example of a leading question is the following: 'There are some who think that mismanagement of the immigration question by Brussels may have something to do with increased terrorism. Do you agree with this view?' (Miles 2015). Orbán's conception of common sense demonizes liberal democracy and human rights, in effect a consensus on equality issues that has been highly influential in Europe and North America since 1945 (Pető 2020).

Universities in the Deep State

In 2014, the Hungarian government created, at all universities, the position of Chancellor. These Chancellors were appointed by and answerable to the ministry responsible for education that had major control over the finances of universities, and was seen as a major act of centralization (Berács *et al.* 2017). Orbán also gained international attention in 2017 by banning MA programmes in gender studies at universities; the subject was derided as a non-scientific subject and an affront to the sanctity of heterosexual marriage and the conventional family. In 2018, international attention was drawn to the legal manoeuvrings of the Orbán government to adopt legislation (Lex CEU) which sanctioned only one institution: the Central European University (CEU), a university funded by George Soros. Eventually, the CEU under its own volition transferred its teaching operation from Budapest to Vienna, arguing that it could no longer operate under a hostile regime such as Orbán's.

Probably the most far-reaching higher-education reform has been the model change for public universities, where universities are ostensibly given independence from central government control. Instead of public control they have been placed under the control of Foundation trustee boards, which are able to override the authority of university senates. Now, virtually all Hungarian universities can be classed as Foundations. Advocates of this reform argue that there is nothing controversial in this measure. Similar processes are happening in other countries – in Finland, for example – as part of the marketization of the universities. However, in contrast to the Finnish model, individuals that are highly connected to the government have been chosen to sit on Hungarian Foundation boards, so, rather than extending the autonomy of universities, this can be seen as establishing political control over them (Zsatku and Kováts 2022). The influential Hungarian magazine

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

HVG described the measure as equivalent to a feudal monarch handing out gifts to loyal vassals (cited in Ryder 2022: 137).

The academic Kim Lane Scheppele has noted that the Foundations in Hungary greatly undermine transparency and public scrutiny, as the funds utilized are no longer open to the same level of public scrutiny as public bodies, because these universities are now classed as private and not public institutions (cited in Ryder 2022: 138). The model change has been falsely described by the government as privatization, but the fact that the state, through its appointees to Foundation trustee boards, still exerts considerable control and foundations still receive state funding means the 'privatization' label is a misnomer. Critics argue that the fact that the great majority of universities – but also museums and other cultural institutions – are under the control of a cabal of Orbán loyalists, with lifetime mandates in their positions, alongside Orbán's other acts of cronyism, essentially comprises the formation of a deep state. This would allow Orbán to exert considerable control over the country even if he were to lose power in an election.

Part of the rationale for the reforms has been the argument that universities are not sufficiently boosting the economy via research findings that can be transformed into profitable economic activities. Government ministers and supporters have called for a more pragmatic form of science, hence arguing that the links Foundations can forge with the world of business and their emulation of business practices should be welcome and create learning programmes and student graduates more closely matching the needs of business.

Research Institutes in the Deep State

In tandem with this viewpoint, the Orbán government centralized control of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' former research institutes, arguing that state funding spent on research must generate concrete returns for the Hungarian economy and society. It was further claimed that Hungary's main economic problem was dual: poor performance in innovation and the weaknesses of universities. Consequently, the Government portrayed centralization of research as a necessary means to improve innovation and to increase the number of Hungarian patents (Szűcs 2019). In a statement, the Hungarian holders of European Research Council grants challenged the government's assertion, arguing that genuine scientific breakthroughs are not produced by seeking immediate answers to today's innovation challenges. Rather, they widen the scope for future solutions to these challenges, lay the foundations for emerging fields of science or highlight unexplored trends in our societies. The statement concluded by arguing (Joint Statement of Hungarian ERC Grant Winners and Hungarian Academy of Sciences 2018):

> Therefore, it is essential that scientific excellence remain the only criterion for funding decisions at the only Hungarian institution dedicated to basic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

> research. It is also essential that the funding for basic research should not be reduced at the expense of industry-driven applied sciences.

It is feared that the funding taken away from the control of the Hungarian Academy of Science will be available only to highly ideological research institutes established by the Orbán government and its allies, which serve political purposes (Hungarian Spectrum 2019). The dangers of government interference in scientific research decisions were highlighted when projects not supported by the scientific committee were selected by the ministry for financial support. One of the scholars involved in these evaluations, the academic László Acsády, stated that he did not consider the unprecedented intervention to be compatible with the principles of scientific evaluation that he represented, and consequently he resigned (Spirk 2020).

The Orbán government's rationale for reform can be compared to the arguments of the Soviet minister Nikolaj Bukharin who argued that pure science, if left to its own devices, would be less adept at producing knowledge to help the economy. Bukharin argued for the state to steer science towards the needs of the Economic Five-Year Plans, ideas that Polányi felt were anathema to scientific freedom. Notions around the need for universities to emulate business and form close links with it are most clearly evident in the case of Corvinus University.

A Special Case in the Deep State: Corvinus University

Even after the advent of Foundation governance, universities continue to be financed by the Hungarian state. However, Corvinus University differs in this regard in that it has a different funding arrangement, receiving the bulk of its income from former Hungarian state stakes in MOL, the Hungarian Oil Company, and Richter, a pharmaceutical chain, which were transferred to the university. The President of Corvinus University, until recently, was Anthony Radev, a former partner at the elite business consultancy McKinsey & Company. The chair of the Foundation board is Zsolt Hernádi, chair of the MOL oil company, who incidentally was charged with corruption in Croatia. Both men are close to Orbán.

A key objective for Corvinus University was a performance-based valuation system to increase competitiveness. The central aims were focused on getting Corvinus listed within the top 200 global universities, making it responsible for its own income generation, creating a new career-evaluation and remuneration structure and forging new links with industry (Somfai 2020). A central theme for the model change were calls for more practical teaching and meeting the needs of the economy by producing graduates with the skills required by the economy (Radev 2020). According to Radev, Hungarian graduates did not have the skills needed to hold a position in a world-leading company today. As far as he was concerned, skills such as problem solving, managing performance pressure and managing top-down communications were becoming increasingly important for companies. In Radev's opinion, Hungarian graduates lacked these skills, but the new Corvinus would address these problems. At the same time, certain social science programmes, in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

which Corvinus has traditionally been one of the strongest in Hungary, such as sociology, now have a diminished presence.

Reflecting the business leadership of Corvinus and its philosophy rooted in business principles, the university has also adopted an audit culture system of appraisal where the teaching and research outputs of staff are closely monitored by line managers, and this, in turn, affects the bonuses that staff receive; the bonus can constitute a large proportion of Corvinus staff wages. Some of the academic staff felt this company-like performance appraisal system did not tally with the nature of education, and especially not research. The Corvinus trade union leader Gábor Toronyai argued that such appraisal regimes would lead to academics adapting their research to the will of leaders: 'Freedom of research and education becomes illusory'. In his opinion, in such a regime, teachers cannot fulfil their mission to serve the common good (Ballai 2021). Cole and Heinecke (2020) note that the neoliberal university has a propensity to favour hierarchical leadership and an audit culture with an increased focus on outputs, especially publications. At the core of the neoliberal university is the belief that universities should effortlessly transition students to the needs of the economy and be harnessed in terms of knowledge production to the interests of business.

It was also hoped that with the 'privatization' of the university there might be a chance to attract new private resources through a more flexible regulatory environment that would facilitate links and partnerships with business and external agencies (Berbas & Institute, 2020). A fear of some critics is that this model change reflects a wider trend in the commodification of higher education that forces university curricula and the institutional ethos into a narrow job training mission. Critics deride such narrow objectives for moving away from the academic mission of preparing citizens for critical participation in democracy and society (Cole and Heinecke 2020).

The case of Zoltán Ádám highlights some of the dangers of the Foundation universities. Zoltán Ádám was an Associate Professor at Corvinus, who protested after a student classified as not eligible to sit for a final exam was granted the right by several senior managers. It turned out that the student's parents were major shareholders in MOL, the company with close financial and leadership connections with Corvinus. The case was brought to the attention of the university ethics committee, and it censured the actions of the senior managers, who had authorized the student classified as ineligible to sit the exam. This was followed by the resignation of the rector, although he claimed his resignation was not linked to the exam matter. Consequently, the Foundation Board of Trustees decided to override the decision of the Ethics Committee and dismiss Zoltán Ádám, taking advantage of the weaker labour law that exists in Foundation universities, where academics no longer have civil-service status. At the time of writing, this matter is under investigation by an employment tribunal. Critics argue that Corvinus is no longer a proper university, as a proper university would not sideline the ethics committee or dismiss a legitimate whistleblower who was trying to maintain academic standards (Halmai *et al*. 2023). However, academic resistance persists at Corvinus, as

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

evidenced by the protests organized by students and professors in response to the dismissal of Zoltán Ádám, which aim to protect the remaining academic freedom within the university.

Despite the serious situation facing Hungarian academics and the decline in academic freedom, there are some dissenters and attempts to nurture alternative visions of the function and role of higher education. Some academics in Hungary have experienced a process of dissonance, where alienation from the Hungarian higher-education reforms and growing despondency about the impact on academic freedom and quality has prompted forms of dissent that constitute scientific and ideological counter-movements.

Counter-movements in a Social Science Institution

The predecessor of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) was established in 1635, and ELTE is the oldest continuously operating university in Hungary. It has played a key role in the country's intellectual development. ELTE's Faculty of Social Sciences (ELTE TÁTK), in particular, is considered by some to be the last bastion of social science education. Nevertheless, social science has a chequered history at ELTE.

In 1919, two sociologists, Karl Mannheim and Oszkár Jászi, were appointed as Professors at ELTE. From 1919, Mannheim, Jászi and other sociologists involved in liberal or radical politics had to leave the country, as it was drifting into authoritarianism under the Regent Admiral Horthy. A new Institute of Social Sciences was established in 1946 by Professor Sándor Szalai, a radical Social Democrat. However, the Institute was dissolved in 1949, and Szalai was imprisoned by the Communist regime, as part of the Stalinist purges.

It was only in the 1980s that Social Sciences at ELTE were able to return to some of their earlier pioneering ideals, developing innovative programmes in sociology, social work, social policy and minority studies. The Faculty of Social Sciences was established as a separate faculty within ELTE in 2003, having previously operated as an institute within the Faculty of Humanities.

A key group in student protests in Hungary was the Hallgatói Hálózat (Students' Network), which became known as HaHa. This student movement was formed in 2006 and expanded in 2012 following the Government's education reforms; a central slogan was 'a free country, a free university' (Füzessi 2013). The slogan is still used by movements of students and professors defending university autonomy. The Students' Forum on 10 December 2012, organized by the Students' Network, triggered a wave of actions (e.g., retreats after student forums, university room occupations and flash mobs). The movement developed rapidly. HaHa had activists at major universities across the country (Gerő and Susánszky 2014).

HaHa originated at Corvinus University, but an influx of ELTE students, mainly from the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Social Sciences, shifted the centre of operation and action to ELTE, developing a 'collective action frame' reliant on more participatory, innovative protest strategies. Due to the specificities of Hungary,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the HaHa did not only focus on university autonomy but also addressed the problems of Hungarian society in general. Its activists were involved in organizing several protests against the Orbán regime. However, although there were heated discussions about the strategy within the movement, they did not take radical steps; for example, they did not occupy the whole university but only teaching rooms. The organizers grew tired, and the network activity declined by March 2013 (Bíró 2017). The Oktatói Hálózat (OHA) Professors' Network was established in December 2012 at the initiative of ELTE professors as a movement supporting HaHa to take action against the restriction of autonomy in higher education. As with HaHa, the members of the organization have grown tired or have retired.

In April 2015, with the introduction of the chancellorship system, the government increased its influence over universities. The Secretary of State for Higher Education decided to revise the Bologna system in a non-transparent process, including the removal of some BA courses, e.g., International Studies BA and Social Studies BA, from the list of accredited courses. The preparatory material for the decision and its justification were not made publicly available, and it is also questionable whether they even existed. The possible abolition of the two largest BA programmes, especially the BA programme in International Studies, would have threatened the survival of the Faculty of Social Sciences at ELTE. These programmes provided 60% of the faculty's income. The government originally planned to have the International Studies (IS) BA programme only at the government-controlled National University of Public Administration, partly unaffected by the accreditation requirements. Certain courses (e.g. BA in International Administration) were only allowed at this university (Majtényi 2015). The protests against the abolition of the BA courses were organized by students, with a leading role played by Fruzsina Csonka (head of the student organization of international students) and Flóra Takács, as well as professors of the Faculty of Social Sciences at ELTE, with the help of former HaHa members and with the support of OHA.

As the right to strike is restricted in Hungary, protests initiated on 18 April 2015 included an information strike – later a popular form of protest among those fighting for the autonomy of the universities – where students and professors discussed the possible consequences of the higher-education reform in the classroom. On the same day, they organized a forum of students and professors entitled 'We want to decide what we learn'. At the request of the dean of the ELTE Faculty of Social Science, the university leadership (rectors and deans), who did not want to confront the government, also attended the forum. However, the university leadership could not control the events, and students and professors marched to the ministry. This was followed by other student marches and demonstrations.

As a result of this resistance (student forums, marches), the government decided to remove the International Studies BA from the list of abolished courses. After that, fewer and fewer students took part in the resistance (Csonka 2015). Therefore, protestors organized performative publicity stunts, such as building a fortress of educational autonomy out of paper boxes in front of Parliament on 14 May 2015 and publishing a petition on how to restore the autonomy of higher education with the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

involvement of stakeholders. On 5 July, protestors including students and staff from the ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences organized another performance in front of the Hungarian Parliament: a simulated football match between the universities and the government to demonstrate that the government, in rewriting the rules of the game according to its will, was playing a one-sided unfair game with the universities. The organizers displayed a billboard saying: 'Fewer stadiums, more education'. This was a clear message to Orbán, who is a huge football fan and has a penchant for building football stadiums, even in his home village.

The students and lecturers of the ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences continued to raise their voices when in 2017 the government, through the 'Lex CEU' directed at the Central European University, sought to push this institution out of Hungary (as mentioned above); students and staff staged initiatives in support of the CEU and joined wider protests. In 2018, the government-controlled newspaper, *Figyelő*, published a blacklist of 200 members of civil society and academia, including students and professors of the ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences, calling them 'Soros mercenaries'. ELTE Faculty of Social Science's Institute of International and Political Studies then declared its support for those attacked on 14 April 2018. When the government's draft legislation to abolish gender studies MA courses at universities was published, the Dean of ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences issued a statement on 11 August 2018 saying that the draft legislation gave the impression that gender studies MA courses, which academic communities had evaluated, could be abolished without any substantive debate. On 14 November 2018, professors and students of ELTE's Faculty of Social Sciences organized a solidarity and information strike in protest against a series of interventions and economic restructurings affecting the autonomy of higher education and academic freedom, as well as the ban on the Master's Programme in Gender Studies.

On 16 June 2021, the ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences Doctoral School issued a declaration signed by the programme leaders prompted by the adoption of an extremely homophobic so-called 'Child Protection Act' that conflates paedophilia with homophobia and the governmental anti-LGBTQI campaign, stressing that whatever happens, the doctoral school welcomes students and professors from the LGBTQI community and welcomes LGBTQI topics. In October 2022 – as part of the civil disobedience against the restriction of the right to strike in public education – the professors of ELTE, initiated by staff in the Faculty of Social Sciences, did not hold classes in Hungarian-language courses. They only carried out their other teaching and administrative duties to a limited extent, protesting against the situation in public and higher education. They also protested against the salaries of teachers working in public and higher education and the dismissal of teachers who protested against those salaries.

In 2023, ELTE and Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME) faculty members initiated a petition in support of Zoltán Ádám, who was dismissed from Corvinus (see above), and the 7000 signatures collected were symbolically handed over to Zoltán Ádám at an event on 9 November 2023 at Corvinus on an academic freedom conference. On 19 February 2024, more than 1000 ELTE workers

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

demanded, in an open letter, an immediate pay rise. On 15 April 2024, a protest was organized by ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences professors; employees from the few remaining state universities marched to the Ministry of Culture and Innovation with their pay slips to negotiate and demand fair wages (an immediate 50% pay rise and wages linked to inflation). The demands were rejected by the Ministry.

The above events show that the ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences has been able to maintain its autonomy: as a sign of this, the faculty has not only spoken out against government measures that directly affect university autonomy but has also expressed its criticism of important social issues, thus confronting government policy. A key factor in the faculty's ability to maintain its autonomy is that students and teachers have often been able to work together to achieve their goals. Even though they have retained their autonomy, many ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences teaching staff have been working with high teaching loads and poor infrastructural conditions; many of them often compare their salaries and workloads with other universities and academic institutions with less autonomy but a much better financial situation. While the government has achieved its goals by exerting financial pressure on most universities, the remaining autonomous institutions are still struggling with poor funding conditions, which creates internal tensions and sours the atmosphere within the universities.

However, the Social Sciences Faculty of ELTE can be considered one of the last autonomous social sciences faculties in Hungary, not only because it is located in one of the last publicly funded non-foundation universities in the country and has a record of dissent, but also because of its approach to delivering higher education. In addition, it seeks to protect not only academic freedom but also the essential facets of a culture of liberal arts learning. Liberal arts education can be defined as an expansive and open intellectual grounding in humanistic inquiry, which involves critical thinking and analysis rooted in scientific reasoning, encouraging not only rationality but also ethical considerations. Some would argue it embodies Enlightenment thinking. In this sense, Social Sciences at ELTE aligns itself with the philosophy of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the nineteenth-century pioneer of the modern-age university who emphasized the importance of *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom to teach) and *Lernfreiheit* (freedom to learn), both of which were encapsulated in *Akademische Freiheit* (academic freedom) (Anderson 2004). The Social Sciences Faculty has a deep commitment to academic freedom as noted by the above summary of dissent.

Within foundation universities, there is a growing trend for staff meetings to be no more than opportunities for line managers to give instructions on new directives coming from increasingly centralized administrations. At ELTE, in particular the Faculty of Social Sciences, there remains a more deliberative approach to decision-making. Actions and decisions tend to be formulated collectively, and management decisions can be challenged. Deliberative decision-making processes are complemented by academic pluralism. For example, within the Faculty of Social Sciences, there is a broad spectrum of academic outlooks held by the teaching staff, ranging from left-wing to liberals and conservatives. Furthermore,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the classroom, students are encouraged to express a similarly broad range of views, a key component of good science, where ideas and concepts should be open to debate and criticism.

The Institute for Political and International Studies within the ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences has also sought to avoid audit-culture-style appraisals as practised at the Foundation universities such as Corvinus. Such audit culture has made modern universities 'anxiety machines' (Hall and Bowles 2016). Instead, appraisal, which is titled 'support and reflection', focuses on how the institute can support staff and enable them to reach career goals, largely avoiding metrics and measurement. The Institute for Political and International Studies mission statement notes that the institute values human rights and the rule of law and encourages respect and tolerance between staff and students as well as wider society. This commitment is a central part of the ethos of the Faculty of Social Sciences, especially important as the faculty contains a wide array of international students and ethnicities, somewhat at odds with the monoculturalism of the Orbán government that has railed against what it perceives as the dangers of multiculturalism. In a recent student survey, the Hungarian students stated that they greatly welcomed the diversity and international environment. In a survey of student opinion in the Institute for Political and International Studies, the great majority declared that they had not experienced racial, sexual, or gender prejudice at ELTE, and the great majority supported the institute's mission statement with its commitment to an egalitarian ethos and academic freedom.

In the foundation universities, despite their opposition to the foundation model, some staff have opted to stay and try to preserve the integrity of their institutes and departments. The Zoltán Ádám affair, discussed earlier, suggests such struggles may have limited success. However, it is important not to be blind to the flaws of ELTE. Some ELTE Senate members, outside of Social Science, have clamoured for foundation status as a means to alleviate the chronic underfunding of ELTE. These voices were only silenced when the EU, in response to concerns about academic freedom, sanctioned foundation universities by barring them from the Erasmus mobility programme and Horizon research funding.

Counter-movements in an Institution of Performing Arts

One of the most dramatic moments of resistance in Hungarian higher education occurred in 2020 when the University of Film, Theatre and Arts (SZFE) was informed that it would be turned into a foundation. Its senate decided to try to work within the proposal and attempt to retain the values and traditions of the university as best as they could, making a number of proposals for the new Foundation Board of Trustees and a delay in the scheduled transformation, as they felt the time frame was not sufficient for the change to be achieved. In response, the government actually shortened the timetable for the transition and ignored the recommendations for the Foundation Board, instead placing figures on the board who were highly hostile to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the philosophy of the SZFE. The new foundation board chair was Attila Vidnyánszky, held in high regard by the ruling Fidesz Party because he has frequently called for the arts to give greater focus to the national identity and the Christian values of Hungary.

The heavy-handedness of the government also seemed to be a factor in triggering a militant response from the staff and students at the SZFE, something that was unprecedented given the near silence from staff and students at other universities transformed into foundations. At a farewell party for the previous SZFE leadership that resigned in protest against the government's plans, a spontaneous decision was made by hundreds of people to occupy the SZFE building. Key demands were expressed in a declaration, including the reinstatement of the independent institutions of the university, such as the Senate.

The occupation was to last 71 days, and using police caution tape and other imagery, the building itself became an art installation, framing itself as an institution under siege. Other forms of carnivalesque expressions characterized the protests. In one protest, a chain of thousands of supporters relayed by hand, from the SZFE building to the Hungarian parliament, a charter of commitment to academic freedom. Another performative event was the delivery of a formal complaint to the Constitutional Court, carried by a student costumed as the goddess of Justice, Justitia. The complaint noted that both the manner and the conduct of the change to the model of the organization of the SZFE violated the constitution (Ryder 2022).

The actions of what became known as the Free-SZFE Association were important on a number of levels; first, they demonstrated that even in a highly authoritarian country such as Hungary resistance was still possible. They also demonstrated that public opinion could be mobilized in support of academic freedom, especially through imaginative forms of carnivalesque direct action. Third, the Free-SZFE protest and communal, student-centred and egalitarian learning and decision-making processes, in what became known as the Education Republic, could present a radical alternative to elite and corporate visions of higher education that currently prevail in Hungary and across the world.

The 'Education Republic' created learning spaces within the protest. Some of the teaching there followed standard academic conventions; other methods were said to provide a more open, transparent approach to teaching (Komjáthy 2020). The learning programmes had an element of interdisciplinarity, where students could attend classes other than those in which they were enrolled, and interdisciplinary projects were created; the occupation itself became the subject of certain projects and an active learning experience. Within the university, new conventions were introduced, with decisions being made collectively by a forum of teachers and students (Kalan 2020). These approaches to learning and institutional learning were very much in contrast to what Freire (1972) describes as 'banking education', where the teacher deposits information into their students as they might deposit money into a bank account – in other words, didactic forms of teaching that minimize the capacity for learning through critical thought and challenges.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The far-right journalist László Szentesi Zöldi (2020), writing in *Magyar Demokrata*, denounced the protest as 'liberal (communist, anarchist, feminist, homosexual and other)' activism to preserve the hold of an elite over the arts (Kentish 2020). In contrast, the radical Methodist priest and social worker Gábor Iványi, a prominent critic of Orbán, told the SZFE students at a demonstration, 'You are our future – you are our hope, I know this is a terribly big burden, an unbearable burden, but I would like to thank you all for thinking this through and taking it on.' Eventually, the occupation ended, as the students and staff decided to comply with government Covid lockdown orders, issued just before the end of the occupation. The resisters founded the Free SZFE Association which, in partnership with a number of foreign universities, continues to offer arts-learning undergraduate study outside of the now Foundation-controlled University of Film and Theatre (Upor 2024).

Conclusion

This article started with a pessimistic overview of the nature and impact of the Orbán government's higher-education reforms. A key argument presented is that there are dangers when the world of science is colonized by economic and political interests. Science embraces fundamental principles of (self-)organizing and autonomy that it does not share with other institutional spheres of society. The economy maintains a balance between supply and demand through the price mechanism, and innovation is driven through profit accumulation. Politics in a democracy distributes power based on persuasion and is shaped by the popular vote and majority view. Science is shaped by functional descriptions and manipulations of the physical and social world where ideas and intellectual outputs can confer status and recognition. These three spheres are not identical, and it can be dangerous to transfer principles from politics and business to the world of science (Hallonsten 2021). It is in defence of high scientific standards that this article is critical of the colonization of higher education by institutional political power and neoliberal practices. In Hungary, these processes are evident, but what is most evident is the presence of authoritarian political institutional power. The Hungarian populist regime referred to 'privatization' mainly to hide its original intention of political capture.

Despite the pessimistic tone of the first section of the article, it concludes with a sense of hope, indicating that resistance and alternatives are possible. The article makes a case not only for the value of academic dissensus and deliberation, but also for that of autonomy. However, the article suggests that in defence of academic freedom and scientific standards, there may be moments when academics need to vociferously speak truth to power. As noted earlier, Michael Polányi argued there was a strong interconnection between independent science and political liberty. Clearly, the case of Hungary but also wider global trends eroding the autonomy of academia and research through authoritarianism and commodification are a serious cause for concern, but, as is evident from this article, in the Culture War raging around the role of academia in Hungary, the champions of scientific standards, academic freedom, liberal arts and social science education have not surrendered!

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Disclaimer of Financial Support

This paper was published as part of an open access supplement in the journal, European Review, with financial support provided by the Wenner-Gren Foundations. All papers included in this supplement were presented at the International Symposium, Academic Freedom in the Twenty-First Century, held at the Wenner-Gren Center in Stockholm, Sweden from 15–17 May 2024, as part of a series arranged by the HERCulES group within Academia Europaea. Each paper has undergone the journal's standard formal peer review process and is therefore citable. The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views, decisions, or policies of the institutions with which they are affiliated.

References

Anderson R (2004) *Germany and the Humboldtian Model: European Universities from the Enlightenment to 1914*. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship.

Ballai V (2021) Egyetemi puding: megnéztük, mi a tapasztalat az elsőként modellt váltott Corvinusnál. *HVG*. https://hvg.hu/itthon/20210402_corvinus_modellvaltas_tapasztalatok (accessed 8 September 2024).

Beddeleem M (2020) Recoding liberalism: philosophy and sociology of science against planning. In Plehwe D, Slobodian Q and Mirowski P (eds), *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*. London and New York: Verso, pp. 21–45.

Berács J, Derényi A, Kádár-Csoboth P, Kováts G, Polónyi I and Temesi J (2017) *Hungarian Higher Education 2016 Strategic Progress Report. Centre for Higher Education Studies*. Budapest: Corvinus University.

Berbas H and Republikon Institute (2020) From public to private universities: model change in Hungarian higher education. 4Liberty.eu. http://4liberty.eu/from-public-to-private-universities-model-change-in-hungarian-higher-education/ (accessed 8 September 2024).

Bíró Z (2017) Interjú a Hallgatói Hálózat egyik aktivistájával. *Educatio* **26**(1), 87–93.

Bourdieu P (1988) *Homo Academicus*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Csonka F (2015) Lángokban áll az egyetemed – Na, ez már érdekel? https://kettosmerce.blog.hu/2015/06/19/langokban_all_az_egyetemed_na_ez_mar_erdekel (accessed 8 September 2024).

Cole R and Heinecke W (2020) Higher education after neoliberalism: student activism as a guiding light. *Policy Futures in Education* **18**(1), 90–116.

Freedom House (2024) Hungary Report. Available at Hungary: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report | Freedom House (accessed 8 September 2024).

Freire P (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.

Füzessi K (2013) Hungary in chaos over higher education plans. *University World News*. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20130220151416428 (accessed 8 September 2024).

Gerő M and Susánszky P (2014) A Hallgatói Hálózat mobilizációs jellemzői. *In Racionálisan lázadó hallgatók II.: Apátia – radikalizmus – posztmaterializmus a magyar egyetemisták és főiskolások körében*. Budapest: Belvedere Meridionale, pp. 135–151.

Grzebalska W, Kováts E and Pető A (2017) Gender as symbolic glue: how Gender became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order. *Political*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Critique. https://politicalcritique.org/long-read/2017/gender-as-symbolic-glue-how-gender-became-an-umbrella-term-for-the-rejection-of-the-neoliberal-order/ (accessed 8 September 2024).

Hall R and Bowles K (2016). Re-engineering higher education: the subsumption of academic labour and the exploitation of anxiety. *Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor* **28**, 30–47.

Hallonsten O (2021) Stop evaluating science: a historical-sociological argument. *Social Science Information* **60**(1), 7–26.

Halmai G, Majtényi B and Ryder A (2023) The chilling dismissal of Hungarian academic Zoltán Ádám. *The Loop. ECPR Blog*. https://theloop.ecpr.eu/the-chilling-dismissal-of-zoltan-adam/ (accessed 8 September 2024).

Hungarian Academy of Sciences (2018) Joint statement of Hungarian ERC grant winners regarding Government plans concerning the budgetary funding and operation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. https://mta.hu/english/joint-statement-of-hungarian-erc-grant-winners-regarding-government-plans-concerning-the-budgetary-funding-and-operation-of-the-hungarian-academy-of-sciences-108866 (accessed 8 September 2024).

Hungarian Spectrum (2019) *The Agony of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences*. Hungarian Spectrum.

Joint Statement of Hungarian ERC Grant Winners and Hungarian Academy of Sciences (2018) https://mta.hu/english/joint-statement-of-hungarian-erc-grant-winners-regarding-government-plans-concerning-the-budgetary-funding-and-operation-of-the-hungarian-academy-of-sciences-108866 (accessed 8 September 2024).

Kalan D (2020) Orban's Macbeth: the tragic figure behind the Hungarian populist leader's efforts to remake his country's theater. *FP*. https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/13/orban-hungary-theater-vidnyanszky-populism/ (accessed 8 September 2024).

Kentish P (2020) Viktor Orbán's latest victim: Budapest's University for Theatre and Film. *Emerging Europe*. https://emerging-europe.com/analysis/viktor-orbans-latest-victim-budapests-university-for-theatre-and-film/ (accessed 8 September 2024).

Komjáthy B (2020). Free SZFE: the arts university on the frontline of Orbán's culture war. *New East Digital Archive*. https://www.new-east-archive.org/features/show/12317/hungary-university-protests-free-szfe-orban-culture-war (accessed 8 September 2024).

Lojdová K (2016) The end of academic freedom in the era of neoliberalism? *Pedagogická Orientace* **26**(4), 605–630.

Magyar B (2016) *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary*. Budapest: Central European University Press.

Majtényi B (2015) Megszűnnek a nemzetközi szakok – kivéve a Nemzeti Janicsárképző Egyetemen. https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2015/04/16/megszunnek-a-nemzetkozi-tanulmanyok-szakok-kiveve-a-nemzeti-janicsarkepzo-egyetemen/ (accessed 8 September 2024).

Miles T (2015) U.N. office outraged by biased Hungarian survey on migration. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/world/un-office-outraged-by-biased-hungarian-survey-on-migration-idUSKBN0O71N6/ (accessed 8 September 2024).

Miller B (2010) Skills for sale: what is being commodified in higher education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education* **34**(2), 199–206.

Pető A (2020) After resistance: lessons learned from banning gender studies in Hungary. *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research* **1**(1), 91–95.

Polányi M (1936) The struggle between truth and propaganda. *The Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies* **7**(2), 105–118.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Radev A (2020) President of BCE: We can truly make it real. https://www.uni-corvinus.hu/anthony-radev-president-of-bce-we-cantruly-make-it-real/?lang=e (accessed 8 September 2024).
Ryder A (2022) *The Challenge to Academic Freedom in Hungary: A Case Study in Authoritarianism, Culture War and Resistance*. Berlin: De Gruyter Press.
Somfai P (2020) Vállalat vagy egyetem? – A Corvinus Egyetem magánosításának okait máig homály fedi. *168.* https://168.hu/itthon/budapesti-corvinus-egyetem-alapitvany-maganositas-palkovics-laszlo-188186 (accessed 8 September 2024).
Spirk J (2020) Még a Kádár-rendszerben sem történt ilyen: Palkovicsék belenyúltak az OTKA pénzosztásába. 24.HU. https://24.hu/belfold/2020/08/31/kadar-rendszer-palkovics-belenyultak-otka-penzosztas/ (accessed 8 September 2024).
Szentesi Zöldi L (2020) Hitbizomány és einstand. *Demokrata*. https://demokrata.hu/velemeny/hitbizomany-es-einstand-285531/ (accessed 8 September 2024).
Szűcs Z (2019) The battle of the academy: the war on academic freedom in Hungary enters its next phase. https://cz.boell.org/en/2019/03/12/battle-academy-war-academic-freedom-hungary-enters-its-next-phase (accessed 8 September 2024).
Transparency International (2023) Corruption Perceptions Index. https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023?gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIjLvmoab5hwMVv5KDBx3huSQPEAAYASAAEgKuuPD_BwE (accessed 8 September 2024).
Upor L (2024) *Majdnem lehetetlen: Az SZFE autonómiaharcának története*. Budapest: Magyar Narancs könyvek, Tea Kiadó.
Wood F (2010) Occult innovations in higher education: corporate magic and the mysteries of managerialism. *Prometheus* **28**(3), 227–244.
Zsatku B and Kováts G (2022) The impact of institutional governance reforms on organisational culture – two case studies from Finland and Hungary. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal* **13**(1), 64–85.
Zubașcu F (2018) Hungary's plan to ban gender studies sparks international backlash. *Science-Business* 22 August 2018. https://sciencebusiness.net/news/hungarys-plan-ban-gender-studies-sparks-international-backlash (accessed 8 September 2024).

About the Authors

Balázs Majtényi is Professor and Head of the Department of Human Rights and Politics, UNESCO Chair in Human Rights and Peace, Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Budapest; Research Affiliate, CNR-ISGI, Rome. His research interests include nation building, citizenship and human rights, with a focus on issues of minority, migrant and refugee protection and academic freedom.

Andrew Ryder is Professor and Director of the Institute of Political and International Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary. Prior to this, he held academic positions at Corvinus University in Budapest and the universities of Bristol and Birmingham. Ryder has a longstanding history of social justice activism and campaigning, in particular for Roma communities.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872500016X Published online by Cambridge University Press