

Academic Freedom Under Pressure: The Transformation of Hungarian Universities and Their Role in Society

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Abstract: The rule of law and academic freedom are in a bidirectional relationship. The core values at the heart of the rule of law are essential to guarantee academic freedom, while academic freedom itself is a key driver in promoting and protecting these values. Despite formal recognition, governments in some European countries have increasingly interfered with academic freedom over the last two decades. Hungary is a case in point, where a number of government measures since 2010 have had a negative impact on higher education institutions. As of 2021, 21 Hungarian universities are maintained and operated by so-called public interest trusts (PIT universities). This new model means de facto private universities under public law, whose operation continues to be financed overwhelmingly by state subsidies and the majority of board members are stakeholders with friendly relations with the government.

The hypothesis of the study is that although PIT universities' links with local politicians and businesses have been strengthened, this has not served the interests of local communities better, and the change in the operational model has actually had a negative impact on the quality of local public services that these universities are involved in providing. This is not only because universities operating under the new model, and therefore not meeting the rule of law criterion of university autonomy, have been deprived of significant amounts of EU funding by an EU Council decision, but also because the reform has reduced the incentives for universities to effectively serve the interests of local communities.

The hypothesis will be tested through a multiple case study of four PIT universities (Semmelweis University Budapest, University of Debrecen, University of Szeged, University of Pécs) involved in public health care in Hungary. The research will be based on publicly available financial and operational data of the selected institutions and interviews with relevant stakeholders.