How the Destroyers of Academic Freedom Masquerade Themselves as Its Victims

The Battle for Hearts and Minds in Hungarian Academia

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Under the authoritarian leadership of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the government has started a culture war to dismantle the independence of academic institutions, including universities and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, arguing that they represent a threat to their proudly proclaimed illiberal ideology. Ironically, after dismantling academic freedom in the country, Orbán's administration started to claim that actually the liberals are the ones who, through "cancel culture", threaten academic freedom. This accusation draws on the work of Viktor Orbán's favorite political theorist, Patrick J. Deneen of the University of Notre Dame, who propounds a theory on liberalism's totalizing claims on its citizens, arguing that liberals are authoritarians. Here, we tell a story from contemporary Hungary, where the destroyers of academic freedom humiliate university scholars who have already been deprived of their autonomy.

Hungary was once considered to be one of the first and most thorough political transitions after 1989, which provided all the institutional elements of liberal constitutional democracy: rule of law, checks and balances and guaranteed fundamental rights. Twenty years later the same country became the first, and probably the model case, of backsliding to an illiberal system dismantling the rule of law. Ever since the Orbán government's second term in office and its electoral victory in 2010, the EU has increasingly found itself in conflict with Hungary for failing to comply with the original admission criteria. As part of this conflict, several infringements actions and the Article 7 procedures have been triggered. In 2022, the newly introduced economic conditionality mechanism for the violations of Article 2 of the Treaty and certain provisions of the Charter of Fundamental Rights have been invoked and consequently 28.7 bn Euros were suspended from Cohesion as well as Recovery Funds. The country has also been cut off from the Horizon Europe and the Erasmus+ programmes because of concerns over the impact of the universities' 'privatization' on institutional autonomy.

Ways to dismantle academic autonomy: 'foundationalization' and privatization

Among the European Union's actions, significant attention has been directed toward academic freedom. Hungary has witnessed a serious erosion of academic institutional autonomy, with universities being taken out of public control and supposedly 'privatized'. These institutions are now managed as Foundations overseen by boards of Trustees. However, the term privatization is a misnomer, as these boards consist of government appointees chosen for their loyalty to the Orbán government. This state-led power grab casts serious doubt on whether proper academic freedom and autonomy now exist in Hungary. The most recent development concerns a case that appears to be an actual privatization effort. On 9 December 2024, the Senate of the 242-year-old Budapest University of Technology and Economics, the world's oldest such institution in higher education, decided to initiate the transfer of the state's rights as maintainer to a business company. According to press news, MOL Group, a major Hungarian multinational oil and gas company directed by Hernádi Zsolt, one of the Prime Minister's closest allies, are likely to be one of the shareholders. The decision may have been motivated by the chronic underfunding of public universities in Hungary. Tibor

Czigány, a former rector of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, noted in a letter to the government that the real-term funding allocated for the university's operations in 2024 was about 40 percent of what the state provided 20 years ago. The neo-liberal idea of a marketized self-sustaining university model is not unique to public higher education (and not only in Hungary). However, such changes must be accompanied by statutory guarantees of institutional autonomy. In Hungary, no such safeguards have been provided in the case of the 'foundational' universities, neither in the really privatized ones (nor are they anticipated in the foreseeable future). In another recent development, the Gáspár Karoli Reformed University, maintained by the Hungarian Reformed Church with very close ties to Viktor Orbán, has just announced a decision to close 18 university degree programmes in social sciences and humanities (sociology, anthropology, history and philosophy among other), starting next academic year. This is also part of the culture war, which views these disciplines as instrumental in the training of liberal intellectuals. Such hostility to social sciences, especially sociology, is typical of the radical right and extends beyond Hungary's borders. For example, Florida's radical right Governor, Ron De Santis, controversially removed sociology as a core class from college campuses in Florida.

The Hungarian state has made higher education something of a political battleground, taking up culture war frames employed by authoritarian populists globally. These narratives claim that higher education is dominated by an intolerant liberal-left elite employing a "woke" agenda to indoctrinate students. To counter this (alleged) agenda, the Hungarian state has poured huge resources into radical right think tanks and the pockets of its academic allies for projects and research with little scientific merit.

One prominent example is the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, a pro-Orbán intellectual network (think tank) considered by some a kind of boot camp for young Christian nationalist researchers. One of its principal tasks is to nurture a more patriotic Hungarian intelligentsia, which it does through generously funded stipends. The Mathias Corvinus Collegium based in Brussels has organized events titled: "How did the LGBTQ lobby take over the EU?" "The Diversity Obsession: Can Europe survive multiculturalism?," "Grooming gangs and the dangers of political correctness," and "The EU's gender obsession: undermining education and families?"

The Mathias Corvinus Collegium has huge financial backing, receiving more than £1.3bn in Hungarian state funding. The foundation controls assets worth more than the annual budget of the country's entire higher education system. It is a form of Hungarian soft power operating from offices in London and Brussels and staging international events reflecting far-right thinking on migration and identity. The Mathias Corvinus Collegium spends huge sums on foreign parties, events, hotels and hosting international guests sympathetic to the government. One notable example is Yair Netanyahu, the son of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (a close ally of Orbán), who was paid 7000 Euros for participating in two one-hour panel discussions.

The case of Balázs Orbán

Here, we need to turn to another Orbán, namely Balázs Orbán (not related to the prime minister), who serves as Political Director to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Chairman of the Board of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium. In December 2024, Balázs Orbán defended his PhD thesis at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), the last major public university in the country. ELTE, the home university of the authors of this article, is funded very poorly compared to the 'foundation' universities. The university is facing a financial crisis with plummeting staff morale caused by receiving wages significantly lower than in many of the 'foundation universities'. The staff are anxious and apprehensive about the future because of their financial precarity and fear that the university will lose its autonomy.

Starting the doctoral procedure for Balázs Orbán was not unanimously supported as is usually the case, with five votes for, two against, and one abstention by the Doctoral Council of ELTE's Faculty of Law. The principal objection stemmed from the conflict of inter-

est, given Orbán's position as a powerful governmental official capable of deciding on the fate of the state university. Additionally, some were concerned about the result of the plagiarism software checker, which revealed that nine pages of the thesis were identical to an unreferenced co-authored article by the candidate.

The arguments around plagiarism and whether ELTE could impartially assess a thesis from a public official who is part of a government known for undermining university autonomy caused a great deal of controversy in Hungary. Ironically, Balázs Orbán is now framing the whole incident as one where a powerful progressive academic network, steered by "cancel culture", has ganged up against him.

The best defense is offense against liberal academics

Ominously, the Foundation for Transparent Journalism, one of the government-loyal GONGOs (Governmental Non-Governmental Organizations), has launched an initiative called 'Transparent Education,' which will assist those who are in a supposedly similar situation as *Balázs Orbán*. The programme will offer guidelines, workshops, and a dedicated hotline. Balázs Orbán has publicly backed this initiative, reportedly expressing that he now understands firsthand the challenges of pursuing academic work under such adversarial conditions. This is how the destroyers of academic freedom become its victims. Some observers fear that this is the prelude to a campaign to further intimidate Hungarian academics, casting those concerned about the rule of law as 'enemies within'.

Universities are an important safeguard in bolstering democracy and the rule of law and have acted as a fulcrum of dissent when these principles have been violated. In 1956, Hungarian universities played a prominent role in resisting Soviet dictatorship during the revolution that took place that year. This is why the Orbán government fears independent universities and has sought to control and tame them.

In recent years, the Orbán government has become increasingly close to Russia. Tellingly, Balázs Orbán in an interview claimed that today Hungary would be foolish to follow the actions of Ukraine if invaded by Russia. According to many, this statement implies that the resistance against the Soviet invasion in Hungary in 1956 was futile. Such comments reveal his true views on democracy and the rule of law, and ultimately raise the question as to who the real patriots are in Hungary: The demagogues working to undermine the rule of law and acting as apologists for Putin or those who seek to defend the autonomy of Hungary's academic institutions and ensure the country upholds its European Treaty obligations?

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