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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Stellungnahme / comment

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

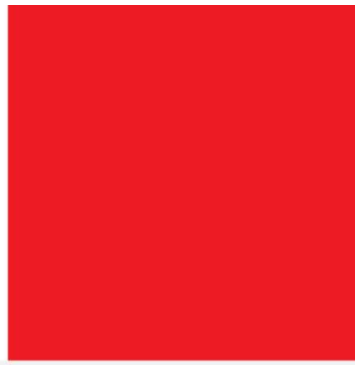
Petó, A. (2018). *De-Democratization of European Higher Education: It is Time to Act!* (FEPS Policy Brief). Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-72093-6>

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# De-Democratization of European Higher Education. It is Time to Act!

**By Andrea Petö**

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The concept of academic freedom guarantees the liberty of individuals to fulfil their functions without discrimination or fear of repression by the State or any other actor. Yet, political interventions in the functioning of higher education institutions and the work that their staff are carrying out have occurred in Europe, most recently in Hungary. Prof. Andrea Petö argues that these interventions are a de-democratisation of European Higher Education with severe democratic consequences and calls for immediate action.

**FEPS**  
**BRIEF**  
October  
2018

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN  
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES  
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE  
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



## Higher Education as a Fundamental Public Good and Principle of Academic Freedom

Higher education is a fundamental public good, and while the debate about this notion often focusses on the public access to it, it also includes what is being taught at it, and how it is taught. Members of the academic community, individually or collectively, should be free to pursue, develop and transmit knowledge and ideas, through research and teaching, orally and in writing. The concept of academic freedom guarantees the liberty of individuals to fulfil their functions without discrimination or fear of repression by the State or any other actor.

## De-Democratisation of European Higher Education

Political interventions in the functioning of higher education institutions and the work that their staff are carrying out have occurred in several countries of the EHEA (European Higher Educational Area), most recently in Hungary. These interventions are a de-democratisation of European Higher Education. As Lesley Wilson, Secretary General of the European University Association (EUA) argued: “[This] creates a legal framework to suppress knowledge that those in power dislike. It blocks citizens from being informed and from creating and acquiring knowledge - a key feature of Europe’s pluralistic societies and one of the reasons they cherish academic freedom (...). In terms of undermining academic freedom, we have seen similar things in Turkey and Russia, but this is the first time that such a broad and fundamental attack has happened within the European Union.”

Attacks on gender studies as a scientific discipline has become a central rhetorical tool of those efforts that try to determine for the wider audience what “science” should mean, and thereby try to create a new consensus of what should be seen as normal, legitimate and scientific.

## Alarming tendencies in the European Union

1. Government decrees revoking license of study programs on Gender (decree number), without explanation and without consulting with professional institutions like in Hungary. Making statements about scientific matters without consulting with representatives of the profession.

2. Government pressure on public universities to deny funding from Gender studies master programs as they do not fit to Christian values in Hungary. [The European University Association issued a statement](#) on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2018: “If the Hungarian government goes ahead, this would constitute a case of state intervention into higher education that is unprecedented in the European Union.”
3. Government [privatises public universities](#), which gives them – through their relation with the new owner – a means to define curricula, select faculty and staff – and it does so to align the institution with its own ideological goals, and to ban anything that it suspects to contradict Christianity.
4. Set-up of new decision making institutions on the distribution of public research funding and other academic matters, resulting in direct appointment of 50% political appointee outsiders and only 50% elected from academia like in the case of Hungarian Academy of Sciences and [Poland](#).
5. Denying the right of higher education institutions to accept foreign funding for research in [Bulgaria](#).
6. Intimidating, harassing and [attacking academics](#), especially female academics to construct one, united enemy to hate, in this case, the gender studies scholars and practitioners listing them in press as [enemies of the state](#).
7. Preventing universities to exercise their third mission – by criminalising NGOs, and engagement on burning social issues such as integration of refugees.
8. Policies focusing only on financial aspects of higher education is reducing universities to pure training centres, producing corporate cadres but not free thinkers with promoting industrial interests, financial zero sum logic and impact factor as a basis of scholarly assessment unfair to humanities, social sciences and women and other minorities.
9. Creating an atmosphere where academics and institutions either retreat, leave the country, if they can, or start to self-censor themselves.

## Consequences

1. Ad hoc ideological interventions undermine the rule of law. The direct government intervention in the field of education sets a dangerous precedent violating the Fundamental Law of Hungary 9.1. “Hungary shall ensure the freedom of scientific research and artistic creation, the freedom of learning for the acquisition of the highest possible level of knowledge and,

within the framework laid down in an Act, the freedom of teaching.”

2. De-democratising of European Higher Education is also dangerous for the European Higher Education Area as governments find ways to interfere into the institutional autonomy and academic freedom, e.g. directly and formally in line with legislation through
  - a. licensing of study programs, which contradicts and undermines the spirit and the goals of the common [European framework for quality assurance](#).
  - b. By criminalising civic activities, such as support to refugees – which has an impact on NGOs but also universities and their members.
  - c. [By delaying decisions indefinitely, creating legal uncertainty and preventing institutions and their members to continue their activities \(the case of the CEU, which has fulfilled all the requirements that the changed law demands – but still is not allowed to continue\).](#)
3. Undermining the international collaboration, as international scholars and students would may refrain from engaging in an environment where autonomy and academic freedom are violated.
4. Quality of European academic research will decrease in spite of the European Union funding getting to these countries violating principles of academic freedom.
5. Some countries serve as [“laboratories”](#) of higher educational policies spilling over to other countries as a dangerous precedent will be instrumentalized to create a majority for the populist forces in the upcoming EP elections.

### Call for action

- The European Union should consider revisiting funding exchange programs with countries ignoring European framework of quality assurance and value of freedom of education.
- National governments should review bilateral exchange programs with countries violating academic freedom.
- Higher education institutions should be vigilant and uncompromising about autonomy of education rejecting self-censorship and government threats.

- All academics should be vigilant for preserving autonomy and institutions of education together with sharing information about the de-democratisation process.