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University Autonomy and Governance

Introduction

Education serves as a foundation of a healthy society that can define and follow its own principles and core values, while also adapting to new challenges. That is why the future of education often evokes lively discussions. During the last few decades, various trends have shaped the autonomy of the educational system. New actors have entered into the provision of education, and the system has been influenced by political interests, but the pandemic has also played a key role in its current transformation. This strategic foresight aims to provide a brief summary of the topical challenges and transformational powers that are of concern for the freedom of universities from a perspective of the Danube Region. While defining the influences that shape levels of academic institutional autonomy, we consider technological, political, social and economic challenges. From a methodological perspective, for the analysis of such a multifaceted topic as the autonomy of universities and their governance, we have chosen to approach it from both theoretical and practical perspectives. From a philosophical perspective, autonomy refers to self-determination and self- governance. Translated to the functioning of universities, it means that each institution should have its own value system that is independent of national or global ideological narratives. In practical terms, university autonomy – as identified by the European University Association – has the following four dimensions: academic, financial, staffing and institutional autonomy. While exploring the topic, opposing currents have been identified, such as the privatisation and de-privatisation of universities. After identifying topical trends and challenges as entrepreneurial thinking in university governance or corruption, which is especially present in the Danube Region, four scenarios have been developed with various likelihoods

of realisation. The main trigger of our possible scenario is the marketisation of education, including universities. Our probable scenario is characterised by the influence of political and ideological perspectives in the field of education, such as war, ideological tensions, and the like. Meanwhile, the preferable scenario is one of inclusivity and easy access to university education, with the help of technological breakthroughs. Last but not least, our wildcard scenario leads us to a situation of absolute power of NGOs and think tanks to determine education, where no central institutes exist and education takes place in a fully decentralised manner. Indicators are identified for each of these scenarios, and possible methods of prevention or encouragement are proposed.

Megatrends

Political influence in academic affairs. The political polarisation of society in the Danube Region did not leave higher education unaffected. Academic affairs, such as the defavorisation of certain degree programs, and the favorisation of others are highly influenced by the topical political power and interest.

Shift in the role of higher education. Higher education institutions merely serve market interests and reshape degree programmes by market demands, which leads to an indirect power of influence coming from the market and causes an ambiguous effect on the ecology of higher education.

Dependence on research metrics. The position of policymakers throughout CEE on "as-much-as-possible" implementation of research metrics indicators turns into an imitation of reform, violates academic freedoms and does not contribute to progress of the academic community in the Danube Region.

Corruption and other symptoms of power abuse. Power abuse is still an issue in disguise in all European countries and the problem of academic integrity polarises the Danube Region. It remains in old control governmental systems, but also adapts to new highly autonomous environments. Further diversification without action leads to bigger gaps between certain countries. The issue to consider is how to eliminate all kinds of power abuse at all levels of its life cycle.

Hybrid warfare. The nature of war has changed fundamentally over the last few decades. The growing probability of regional military conflicts, with their disastrous consequences for infrastructure, students and employees, drives governments to provide incentives for the prompt adjustment of educational processes to the warfare circumstances.

Dramatic decrease in student numbers. The reduction of budget revenues from students' financial contributions (national, EU and non-EU students at BA, MA and

doctoral level) has an impact on staffing autonomy – the reduction of the number of students leads to the decreasing of teachers' workload and reduction of staff.

Lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is an important area of any modern education system worldwide and especially in developed countries. The ultimate goal of the development of this approach is the idea of creating a "learning society". In the Danube Region this segment of education does not have mutual trust between its informal and formal branches. There is also no single universal and lifelong learning model in the Danube Region, nor is there a clear conceptual framework.

Digitalisation fosters diverse tools for university management. With the right to decide on formats of learning, universities can allocate finances, balance the number of working staff and start renewing degree programmes more flexibly.

Decentralised educational platforms. The growth of NGOs and think tanks is a result of global processes, such as decolonisation, globalisation and the rise of differentiated social and political issues that governments do not address. These independent units are not only involved in policy making, but also offer educational services in different formats. On the one hand, they are more easily accessible than degree programmes, which partially solves the problem of inequality in access to education. On the other hand, there is no global quality assurance policy created to allow a centrally defined system to measure the standards.

Inequality in access to education is growing. Equitable access to education is considered to be the cornerstone of increased community capacity for societies throughout the world and poses a deep challenge for higher education. The current environment of COVID-19 and the resulting distance learning has made equality of access to education a more pressing issue.

Future scenarios and policy recommendations

Atlas Shrugged (the possible scenario)

With the growing trend of marketisation, the university is no longer perceived as a community of scholars and knowledge-seeking students, but as a marketplace for ideas where valuable knowledge is produced, exchanged and consumed. In other words, it is transformed from a public good into a market-based commodity. There is a withdrawal from publicity that extends to values, budget and governance. Public universities are run as if they were private, with contempt for the public interest, and gradually are transferred to private ownership. University autonomy as a tool is directed to satisfying clients' needs. If there is no market demand for a certain course/programme,

it is excluded from the curriculum. All of the latter are developed aiming to answer private sector demands. As such, academic institutions offer more and more English programmes and classes to increase fee-paying international student numbers. Important to note, without the government's intervention, the costs of education services are unaffordable for a great many individuals. The university funds, coming from the standpoint of financial management generating an attitude towards different university departments as assets, are based on borrowed money and risky investments. Universities now have more capability to diversify study programmes and manage internal resources. On the other hand, 'autonomous' decisions are viewed as not legitimate enough and the product of one's own interests. The part of privatised universities that came from the public sector serves as a 'safe pillow' against poor education services. However, more autonomy, which has stimulated overall accountability, has in fact also caused the opposite effect on education quality in some Danube Region countries. Without established values and transparent work, it has divided the region into peripheries and broken the cohesion in autonomy evolution. Individual salary levels at universities are differentiated and given in larger amounts to higher-ranked academic staff. Excess of freedom to run recruitment and promotion procedures weakens the quality of the human resources and keeps the society away from transparency and trust. However free it may seem, in fact, the corporatisation of university transforms it into an integral part of the industrial complex and closely ties it with strong economic and political interests. Academic success is measured with globally applied tools and academic institutions lose their autonomy, which means that no real autonomy is cultivated and factual dependence on the market and big corporations is ensured.

Policy recommendations

Organisational autonomy: to organise a structure of internal governance of universities it is necessary to transition from the traditional self-governance model to a model of managerial self-governance focussed on efficiency and results; avoid any imbalance in the multi-dimensional cooperation between the state, business, and civil society, as it complicates the implementation of the general educational strategy, as well as the transparency and democracy of the educational process;

Financial autonomy: regulate university funding criteria; develop clear rules for universities to get permission from the government for borrowing money; develop legislation for the long-term planning of university budgeting and the use of block grants; avoid inadequate legal regulation in defining criteria for university funding and limiting the possibilities of long-term planning of university budgets;

Academic autonomy: ensure long-term thinking when introducing or terminating degree programmes; consult with heterogeneous advisory boards with policy officers, researchers and policymakers to identify long-term social challenges when subjects do not get funding, particularly affected are subjects related to identity politics in the CEE region; avoid using the current market situation as a reference for the role of education that has to serve them, and ignoring coming social challenges, such as migration issues and questions of identity;

Staffing autonomy: it is important to assure high-quality professional staff on the stage of factual work rather than controlling recruitment processes; it is recommended to set minimum salary regulations for academic and administrative staff; professors and senior lecturers should be the only regulated positions;

The Empire Strikes Back (the probable scenario)

In the coming decades, the global environment will undergo qualitative shifts. Due to a number of internal and external challenges, Europe has reached a critical time. An integration policy will not work anymore, and that means the end of the "European dream" with all the disastrous consequences and unprecedented costs no European citizen is yet aware of. There is the breaking-up of the European Union and the rapid decline of Europe in a dramatically changing world, accompanied with polarisation, fragmentation, the emergence of new powers and increasing uncertainties, threats and catastrophic events. Rising assertiveness from Russia, geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, and the unstoppable rise of populism may lead to a full-scale war in Europe, thus triggering the numerous erosion processes in education throughout the whole Danube Region. Academic institutions are shaped by political interests, national narratives are reinforced, and the distance between universities and public authorities falls sharply; special guidelines are developed into domestic policy to protect universities from military use; the society is polarised, and inequality in access to education is getting more common. Interrupted or abandoned education is another devastating side-product of war, and universities are targeted for attacks and relocated. A lack of solidarity complicates coordination, enables de-democratisation of governance and accountability management. The academic community and the public are excluded from university management. Traditional proportions in the structure of university are shifting with a decrease in the share of teaching staff and an increase in the share of administrative staff. Universities have more administrators than academics, which predicts the emergence of "all-administrative university" and, at the same time, leads to the destruction of university autonomy in its traditional sense. The main challenges that become relevant for relocated students and universities are logistics, coping with

refugees and IDPs, lack of technical facilities, as well as bureaucratic obstacles that arise at a new place of study, poor communication and adaptation in society. Insufficient funding directly affects other dimensions of the educational system. For many countries in the region, questions on who is the main investor in education and what are the proportions of funding from various sources become crucial. Extra-budgetary revenues remain in higher education institutions, and universities have the right to manage them independently. However, as financial autonomy is constrained by the state, universities lose many if not all rights to recruit, dismiss and set salaries for academic staff. Staff reduction is also controlled by the state. The turbulent economic situation causes strict governmental control over salaries. All academic and administrative staff have their civil status retained or renewed.

Policy recommendations

Organisational autonomy: fix the university governance model by adjusting managerial mechanisms for the terms of martial law; provide access to education for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees; launch special legislative procedures for the relocated universities, considering their special needs; As universities are in fact not able to meet certain common standards, it is inappropriate to keep strict requirements for accreditation and licensing in view of the lack of infrastructure, staff and other facilities, number of students and faculty relocation, etc.

Financial autonomy: further reforms of financial autonomy should be aimed at increasing the funding period of universities, and they need to develop their own long-term financial strategies; it is also important that measures of rigid autonomy, applied by governments as a result of the economic crisis, do not lead to increased control and direct intervention in university budgets; spraying expenses for science and education should be avoided in the economy of the Danube Region; To solve the problem of financing education it is necessary to develop the mechanism of distribution of these funds and the diversification of funding sources.

Staffing autonomy: the main strategic aim is to assure the work of institutions and staff under long-term conditions of uncertainty. It is necessary to: 1) Set national regulation on salaries and recruitment to ease formal processes for long-term work. 2) Make unified recruitment procedures for displaced academic staff to be hired by other universities. 3) Ensure back-up staff availability in case of disruptions in education processes.

Academic autonomy: curricula do not reflect the short-term needs of the job market and students are more attracted by more fast-paced learning pathways, such as on-the-job learning, short individualised workshops etc.;

Make University Great Again (the preferable scenario)

In the future, universities will be open and socially involved, their core values will be preserved. In 2040 universities of the Danube Region enjoy a good level of autonomy and have the opportunity to make strategic choices regarding issues related to organisational, academic, staffing and financial autonomy. The structure of universities will be hybrid (influence of COVID-19 and war), and they will be both physically and virtually open. The physical universities will remain vitally important as a place for social interaction and communication. The virtual universities make the university ubiquitous. The mission of the Universities of the Danube Region will be a unique combination of different activities, including teaching, learning, research, innovation and culture (synergies), and actively promote lifelong learning. In 2040 universities became engines of social change. They provide an open space for research, education, innovation and culture. In collaboration with stakeholders, the future society will be formed and driven by knowledge. Those collaborations will actively promote lifelong learning. The future of universities in the Danube Region is transnational. The cooperation of the universities of the Danube Region will ensure high-quality teaching, learning, research and various innovations. Universities of the Danube Region will keep working in partnerships in order to build capacity and will form a teaching, learning, research and innovation community in order to develop their potential and exchange opinions on various areas of university management. They will provide quality teaching, research and innovation and at the same time they will contribute to the expansion of knowledge for everyone.

Policy recommendations

Financial autonomy: the Danube Region needs additional investment in education, research, and innovation to meet today's challenges. Only a clear idea of a well-thought-out budget can succeed in defending any effective financial autonomy. For universities in Danube Region to achieve their strategic goals, financial autonomy is crucial, and so limitations in this area are considered particularly significant. Universities need to develop their own long-term financial strategies. It is also necessary to regulate the retention of excess funds by universities, on which there are strong restrictions. It is also important that austerity measures implemented by governments as a result of the economic crisis did not lead to increased government control and direct intervention in university budgets.

Staffing autonomy: universities of the Danube Region need good leadership to take universities into the future; constant professional development of university staff in all

areas of university management is needed; investment in academic and professional staff and their development is essential to support them (financial incentives, free access to international work, personalised professional and/or academic growth);

Academic autonomy: improve provisions on the protection of the rights of scientists and students, which constitute academic freedom; use academic freedom barometers as a tool for measurement; emphasise the importance of academic freedom to the public by reinforcing science communication; providing universities with the necessary conditions for the acquisition of skills, knowledge, additional qualifications for applicants from the business environment, including outside the student age and at any stage of life; cooperation between the university and business in the formation of a fixed programme of courses, modules, major and minor disciplines, plans for guest lectures by delegates from enterprises and public organisations for students of bachelor's, master's, doctoral and advanced training courses; introduction of conditions for student internships to gain practical experience in the field of business and provide conditions for further employment;

Organisational autonomy: improve regulatory frameworks at the national and European level regarding financial, staffing, organisational, and academic autonomy, this will help strengthen and protect university autonomy, enabling institutions to make strategic decisions.; universities of the Danube Region need the constant professional development of university staff in all areas of university management to ensure good leadership; strengthening collaboration among universities and overcoming legal barriers to cooperation between universities through the establishment of a legislative framework facilitating transnational cooperation in research and innovation between universities;

Universities are so 20th century (the wild card scenario)

In this low-probability, high-impact scenario, universities completely lose their current status of acting as centralised educational platforms. Instead, think tanks and non-governmental institutions representing different political and social-economic interests take over the ancient role of universities, offering a wide range of curricula shaped by those spheres of interest that founded them. In this scenario the question of academic autonomy does not play a role anymore, as we are talking here about fully autonomous actors and their sources of power, be they political or economic. As NGOs and think tanks depend on the financing of their founders and supporters, they more or less represent the viewpoint of those interests. The view that only public higher education provides equal access and social elevators for the population, whereas other forms of higher education (HE) pose a threat of withdrawal from this ideal, does not exist an-

ymore. Universities will, rather, become co-working places for experimentation and networking for people and companies. An increasing proportion of higher education enrolments will come from company-sponsored, short-term certificate programmes and boot camps.

Dangers

As we can already see misuse of power in cases where academic freedom is threatened by state politics, the same is likely to happen when the curriculum is defined and managed by decentralised entities. However, these entities also have the potential to abolish the barriers that HE sets against less privileged members of society. On the other hand, there are no policies set to grant equal funding that would ease access for everyone equally. Corruption may arise without central tracking of spending and source of fundings.

Policy recommendations

Avoid the fragmentation of university structures into self-interested departments within faculties in higher education institutions (HEI), especially in those with revenue-based budgeting, rendering them more inefficient and less capable of harnessing institutional potential.

Design a well-thought-out budget and a new institutional structure to defend effective financial autonomy.

Prevent those from disadvantaged backgrounds being excluded from education by expanding NGO presence in rural environments.

Keep quality control of services through establishing a common agency for quality control of educational services to ensure mechanisms for accreditation of some curricula and programmes for domestic universities.

Introduce a policy setting clearly indicating the funding sources of every think tank, NGO and academic institution in their imprint.

Ensure the code of conduct of non-academic educational institutions by authority control or policy settings; in this scenario NGOs and think tanks have total freedom in choosing their methodologies and which "students" should be accepted.

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