

Teaching Sociology in Contemporary Hungary

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Abstract

Over the past 15 years, Hungary has undergone a series of political transformations that have had a profound impact on higher education. The government has begun to strengthen its loyal right-wing conservative academic regime, which helps to propagate its neo-conservative agenda; it has meanwhile restructured and steadily narrowed the scope of higher education and especially of the social sciences, converting most state universities into public interest trusts and tightening the budget of the few remaining state universities. Some university programmes, such as gender studies, have been banned, and recently there have been serious cuts in publicly funded university places, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. As a result, most sociology lecturers are underpaid and feel the pressure of the government's hostility to critical social sciences. The move towards internationalization may improve the financial situation, but it further narrows the space for addressing the social problems of local society.

Keywords

academic freedom, higher education in Hungary, illiberalism, neoliberal higher education

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The General Landscape of Higher Education and Academia in Hungary

Since 2010, Hungary has undergone a transformation characterized by state capture, the erosion of democratic institutions, media and cultural control, the restructuring of the legal framework and growing systemic corruption (Csanádi et al., 2022; Enyedi, 2024; Gerő and Szabó, 2024). These developments by prioritization of neo-conservative and traditional ideologies have had profound implications for academic life, particularly higher education. This illiberal turn (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Jenne and Mudde, 2012) is characterized by a continuous attack on academic freedom (Enyedi, 2018).

One of the central elements of this forced transformation process has been the gradual restriction of the autonomy of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the step-by-step strengthening of state control over them. An important first milestone of restricting institutional autonomy and increasing the financial control over universities was the appointment of government-aligned chancellors in 2014, which expressed the centralized institutional control over the universities. The chancellor, a manager appointed by the prime minister, is responsible for the budget and administration of the HEI, having veto power in these issues against elected bodies of the HEI, such as the Rector or the University Council (Kováts and Rónay, 2021). The chancellor reports to the relevant minister and is not accountable to the university's governing bodies (OHA, 2025). Many government actions are specifically aimed at further restricting academic autonomy; to name just one, the Hungarian Accreditation Committee, which had been an autonomous quality assurance body for universities, has come under full government control and lost much of its importance (OHA, 2025).

The political power has increasingly extended its ideology-driven aims over higher education: the Gender Studies MA programme was banned in 2018, while shortly afterwards, the foundation of an Interdisciplinary Family Studies MA programme was initiated as an ideologically acceptable successor to the Gender Studies MA for the government (Lannert and Nagy, 2020). Moreover, as an integral part of growing illiberalism, a legal manoeuvre of case-by-case legislation forced the Central European University out of the country in 2018 (Corbett and Gordon, 2018; Enyedi et al., 2019; OHA, 2025).

The general deterioration in institutional autonomy between 2011 and 2017 resulted in Hungary's worsening rankings in the European University Association (EUA's) autonomy scorecards (Pruvot and Estermann, 2017). The further aggravation of the situation is reflected in the fact that the latest EUA report, dated 2023, no longer even ventures to place Hungary in the scorecards, because recent changes in the legal framework have 'far-reaching consequences in the different autonomy dimensions, which cannot be adequately captured by the Scorecard methodology' (Pruvot et al., 2023: 13).

While state institutions have come under attack, the government has started to strengthen and reinforce its loyal conservative right-wing academic regime. Major academic programmes were transferred to newly established institutions, like the National University of Public Service, or even to parallel institutions that exist outside the traditional university system and research institutions. The flagship of these institutions is the Mathias Corvinus College (MCC), headed by Balázs Orbán, the Prime Minister's political director. The MCC received around €1.7bn in public assets in 2020, which is roughly the same amount as the

state spent that year on higher education in Hungary overall (Gárdos-Orosz and Szente, 2024; Hajdu, 2023). These institutions also have the media and political power to influence the academic discourses, for example on migration. They also have further tools, such as a generous fellowship programme (Budapest Fellowship, n.d.).

The government took a more radical approach in 2019, converting most state universities into public interest trusts, with a board loyal to the current government and an indefinite mandate. These boards were nominated by the government without consulting the universities or any other form of public control. By international standards, the power of these boards is unprecedentedly broad (OHA, 2025).

Consequently, the long-term influence of the current government is secured. This so-called ‘model change’ affected 21 universities, leaving only two large Budapest universities (BMGE, Budapest University of Technology and Economics, and ELTE, Eötvös Loránd University) and two small arts universities under state ownership (K-Monitor, 2025; Kormany.hu, 2021). (In 2025, BMGE also became a non-state institution, but unlike the other universities, it is not maintained by a public interest trust, but by a commercial company.) Legally, this shift constitutes privatization and commodification, prioritizing business considerations in university governance while retaining considerable state funding. However, organizational and financial transparency has significantly declined, and political control over higher education has been solidified (Bucsky, 2025).

The academic faculty at universities governed by public interest trusts lost their public servant status, placing them in unpredictable, precarious employment conditions. The system of checks and balances has been completely removed from the operation of universities. Real decision-making power has been displaced from the Senate to the Board of Trustees and the university’s top management.

In response to concerns over governance transparency, the European Council suspended these universities’ access to Horizon and Erasmus programmes in 2022: ‘no legal commitments (including grants and contracts) can be signed with Hungarian public interest trusts established under Hungarian Act IX of 2021 or any entity they maintain’ (EC, 2022). However, staying out of the EU funding not only has a negative impact on those researchers working at these universities. Recent research has shown that the loss of funding reduces young scholars’ overall scientific output in Hungary (Koltai et al., 2024). Moreover, the highly centralized funding system for scientific research serves governmental preferences and discourages research in social sciences and humanities (OHA, 2025). The situation is further complicated by the new initiative of the Sovereignty Protection Office, founded in 2024. The Office, whose declared aim is to protect Hungary’s political sovereignty, is seen by many as a political tool for domestic political control and intimidation. In a recent document, this Office claimed that a significant part of Horizon programmes might serve to hide and mask the globalist political pressures (Szuverenitásvédelmi Hivatal, 2025).

Meanwhile, the research institutes that previously belonged to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences have also undergone significant legal and academic changes. The Hungarian Research Network (HUN-REN), as they are called today, works in a new system under a chief executive officer (CEO). The process called ‘revival’ follows the principles of neoliberal academy, placing importance on commodification, internationalization, competitiveness and the dominance of income-generating activities and English-language publications.

Additionally, the Hungarian Research Council (OTKA), which has played an important role in financing small-scale, original research, and contributed to the development of young academic excellence, has also undergone serious transformation and the new system is less transparent than it used to be. A series of restructurings of scientific areas across disciplines and the lack of transparency, both in terms of working mechanisms and panel members do not increase trust in the new system. This distrust has been restrengthened by the fact that in 2024 only one sociological and no political science projects received financial support from this fund (NKFIH, 2024). This result was highly contested and criticized by social scientists.

Social Science Programmes in the Universities

Access to human and social sciences degree programmes has been constantly narrowed by governmental education policies. Ideologically undesirable programmes, such as the MA in Gender Studies and the BA in Social Studies, were either terminated or downsized by the government (ECREA, 2018; Pető, 2020). In the 2025 admissions cycle, both state and the recently privatized universities have seen serious reductions in publicly funded seats in non-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields, particularly in the humanities, social sciences, law and business programmes (OHA, 2025).

In general, there is a growing tendency of quantification and datafication of quality assurance techniques both in higher education and in academia. Professional success is measured by quantitative indicators, that is, the number of students, high scores at entrance exams, income-generating activities, corporate relations, students' future salaries ('clients') and publication output measured in English-language Q1 journals – the position of sociology is weak in this competition.

In addition, also as a sign of neoliberal turn, it is the university top management, and not the academic leadership, that has the final word on the future of programmes of the newly privatized universities. Hence, they might decide, in the name of excellence, not to run programmes that attract young people coming from less well-off families.

All of this has had a profoundly negative effect on the atmosphere in these institutions and has contributed to the widening of the already existing differentiation within the higher education sector: although university teachers in general feel underpaid and many of them must have multiple jobs, often to the detriment of their scientific research, this is particularly true for those in the humanities and social sciences, and even more so for those sociologists in the remaining state-run universities (which, by spring 2025, basically means solely the ELTE University).

Teaching: Practice-orientedness and Internationalization

The critical approach to sociology, encompassing the micro- and macro-level study of social inequalities and the most diverse social problems, constitutes an integral part of the tradition of Hungarian sociology, which is rooted in the period of socialism.

However, the present general political atmosphere of growing populist political rhetoric can result in a pervasive sense of stress among teaching staff: they can become reluctant to address controversial subjects in the classroom, as this could be interpreted as an

expression of political stance. Faculty members are also confronted with the constant dilemma of whether to prioritize their formal professional duties or to engage in activism, such as organizing protests in the form of spreading information on the banned programmes during regular class hours (information strike) or similar events (Index.hu, 2018).

Another way of coping with this threatening situation for sociology as a university subject is for teachers to try to offer a pragmatic pedagogical approach. There is a tendency to move away from classical theory-based lectures or reading seminars towards very practice-oriented, co-creative, project-based courses based on collaborative research. Such courses seek to develop skills that help students to think socially, critically and empathetically. These courses are welcomed by teachers and students alike for also providing general skills that are not particularly ‘sociological’ but are very useful in the labour market. This shift in teaching practice is partly a response to the decline in the number of jobs available to BA graduates who wish to pursue careers as sociologists. However, it further reduces the scope for university sociology education to fulfil its function as a breeding ground for a new generation of highly qualified social researchers and ultimately strengthens the power of those ‘market-based ideologies that reduce education to training and redefine schools as investment opportunities’ (Giroux, 2012: 333). Moreover, a considerable proportion of university students work half or even full time, which, again, further reduces the energy they can be expected to invest in their studies. Given the constant decline in publicly financed social studies university places available, this tendency is expected to get accelerated in the future.

There is an increasing emphasis on the (fee paying) internationalization of academic programmes, primarily driven by the pursuit of ‘competitiveness’ in the global educational sector, and also by the constantly tightening budgetary situation, especially for social science studies.

These new programmes lead to a shift in the composition of students: on the one hand, the English-language social science programmes (BA and MA) are attended by many international students from very diverse backgrounds (many of them from the Global South); and on the other hand, many Hungarian students opt for these programmes, not necessarily because of the subject matter of the programme, but mainly because they consider the English-language degree to be a valuable asset. This diversity of students emphasizes the need for a more global and globalized sociology to be taught; on the other hand, the exchange of knowledge about social phenomena within local society is becoming more and more restricted. In the meantime, we may even lose sociology programmes and the possibility of teaching sociology in the mother tongue (Hungarian) at some universities. This leads to a limited influence on public life and on political and social decision-making processes.

Conclusion

Higher education has undergone a significant transformation, giving rise to numerous conflicts. The positive effects promised by these transformations are not yet visible. However, there are several negative effects, such as declining funding and student numbers, partly due to demographic reasons and partly due to government measures. Sociology, and the critical social sciences in general, have been externally adversely affected by these developments.

The increasing commercialization and marketization of higher education, coupled with the pressure towards internationalization, are tailored to STEM subjects. Consequently, social sciences face ongoing challenges due to underachievement and underperformance against these benchmarks. The government's ongoing mistrust of social sciences, particularly critical social sciences, further exacerbates these challenges.

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