

A Toolbox for Autocrats

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Ten Commandments to Stifle Academic Freedom

Since 2010, the beginning of the populist takeover and the authoritarian transition, Hungary has gathered a lot of experience on how to dismantle academic freedom. This knowledge can be useful for other autocrats as well. But even if we don't want to give them tips on how to repeat what happened and is happening in this country, it might still be worth reconstructing how it all took place. At least sometimes, it may be worthwhile to use a kind of reverse reasoning to understand the way of thinking of those who strive to destroy the values that are fundamentally important to us. This can be especially useful for calculating what to expect from autocrats and preparing how to defend against them.

So, if today's autocrats, like their Hungarian friends, are thinking about ways to restrict or destroy academic freedom, they should consider the following recommendations.

#1: Ignore the scientific results ...

...at least those that are not useful to you. This can be an especially beneficial approach in the social sciences, where researchers may cause you a lot of trouble. They tend to question almost everything: your goals, your means, your performance, and sometimes your entire system of governance. This is why they are proposing all kinds of things that are contrary to everything that you have achieved so far in order to maintain and expand your own power.

In Hungary, for example, constitutional scholars are not asked how to restore the rule of law and democracy (since this would be contrary to the government's aspirations). Sociologists and other social scientists are not consulted about how to promote social equality (since in the eyes of the government there exist suspicious and even hostile minorities and social classes, from "Soros agents" through LGBTQ propagandists to the Roma). Finally, the government does not seek the opinion of theoretical economists on economic policy (because the latter want to introduce the euro, demand a balanced budget, a reduction in the national debt, and oppose the state's interventions in the market).

#2: Deliberately confuse research and innovation

If you need arguments for transforming or downsizing scientific institutions that you find troublesome, refer to the protection of taxpayers' money and the lack of the social utility of science. On the contrary, support and propagate as scientific achievements, technical improvements and innovations that will likely make a profit (increasing battery production, for example). In addition, classify historical, sociological, ethnographic, archaeological, etc. research as the hobby of a closed elite group. Further, conceal the fact that innovation and applied research make use of the results of basic research.

In Hungary, for example, while scientific infrastructure is being whittled away, the innovation and development capacities of some industries are being spectacularly developed, achieving results such as building a number of football stadiums and becoming a serious player in the car battery market.

#3: Build a parallel system of scientific institutions...

If you cannot tame the inherited scientific infrastructure, create your own research institutes in parallel with existing ones. This can be useful in several ways: you can dictate “scientific” results, demonstrate that you take science and its results very seriously, and finally, give your fellow politicians (or even your relatives) secure jobs.

In Hungary, for example, in recent years, the government has created alternative institutes for history, ethnography, and legal science, as well as a political recruitment institution as an alternative to secondary and higher education.

#4: ... or capture existing ones...

If your power is already sufficiently consolidated, you can choose an even more promising solution: place scientists loyal to you (or those you want to be scientists) into existing institutions. If you have been in power for a long time, this solution will almost resolve itself, but you can also do this through institutional reorganization. In many cases, it is enough just to replace the leaders; the rest will take care of itself. You may want to organize the “screening” of research institutes; surely, you will always find renowned foreign scientists for this job if you are willing to spend enough money for this purpose. According to a recent Hungarian saying, “Whoever rules the media rules the country” – this applies to science, too.

In Hungary, for example, in 2019, the state took the entire research institute network away from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (an independent scientific body) and placed it under the supervision of a government agency. Later, as part of the “model change of higher education”, it put most state universities under the maintenance of “public interest foundations”, which are run by managing boards full of government politicians and businessmen close to the government.

#5: ... or, possibly, persecute them

If creating your own loyal institutions is not enough, or you cannot capture every institution, it is best to hound them out of the country. There are many ways to do this: you can withdraw budgetary support, organize a smear campaign and administratively harass them, or, ultimately, define legal conditions that cannot be met. Sometimes it can be enough to exclude members of certain groups (for example, liberals, gays, certain nationalities) from being university lecturers or researchers. Of course, this may lead to a harmful legal battle, but if the relevant high courts are stacked with friends, you shouldn't have a problem with that either.

In Hungary, for example, the American-founded Central European University was burdened by impossible and unfulfillable legal conditions. This was accompanied by fierce negative campaign. Accordingly, for example, even the European Union was implementing the will of the university's founder – the so-called “[Soros Plan](#)”, which intends to destroy European Christian culture by settling foreign peoples. The Hungarian Constitutional Court, all of whose current members owe their mandate to the government, did not make a decision about the relevant law for years, and after CEU moved from Budapest to Vienna, it simply terminated the procedure as a moot case.

#6: Train your own scientists

This is, in fact, a procedure similar to the creation of your own loyal institutions and even goes hand in hand with it. You can make your own work more straightforward if you also occupy the bodies that carry out university accreditation and decide on scientific qualifications and awards.

In Hungary, for example, the new research institutes mentioned in #3 employ many researchers who were socialized after 2010 and owe their entire careers (which are financially much more advantageous than those of people working in the traditional institutional system) to the regime that has prevailed since 2010. The former (and some universities) provide the scientific background and appropriate image for many “[analysts](#)” and “[experts](#)” who actually engage in political propaganda for the ruling parties or the government and can be used for any purpose.

#7: Buy the scientists or intimidate them

If scientists don't say what you want them to, you have two options. One is to simply buy their loyalty. This is always easier for scholars from politically indifferent scientific fields since their research does not directly affect politics. Hence, it will be easier for them to give up their independent, politically relevant views. But you can be sure a significant number of social scientists will also offer their loyalty, especially if their personal interests demand it. The range of benefits you can offer them is almost unlimited: from giving them leading positions in scientific life to well-paying public contracts, there are many options. Often, even maintaining the status quo (the retention of an established position) is sufficient.

Intimidating or “correcting” individuals is undoubtedly a more radical approach than the previous ones, but there are always recalcitrant scholars (mainly social scientists, but, *horribile dictu!* sometimes even natural scientists) who will not read the signs of the present times and fail to adapt to your expectations. In these cases, you can isolate, threaten, or even fire them.

In Hungary, for example, abolishing the autonomy of the University of Theater and Film Arts proved morally unacceptable for many of the university’s lecturers. Apart from this case, there have been dismissals from universities due to political or other dissenting opinions.

#8: Keep scientific publications under control

If you don’t want to allow scientists to irresponsibly think whatever they want, take control of their publication channels. This process will partially resolve itself if you obtain control of the research institutes and universities that run academic book publishers or journals. However, other methods are available too. The publication of scientific works is not commercially profitable, and most publishers depend on state subsidies that you decide on. Moreover, by making this approach obvious, editors will sooner or later practice self-censorship and refrain from publishing politically sensitive or critical work. All this can be done while maintaining the appearance of scholarship: the proper application of the double-peer-review system, for example, is a better method than simple editorial rejection. Simply postpone the final evaluation for a long time (before finally rejecting it), benefitting from the fact that these high-quality but critical works cannot be published elsewhere.

In Hungary, for example, the leading book distribution company was purchased by a pro-government foundation. Since then, the availability of books classified as “LGBTQ propaganda” has been restricted in the related bookstores, stigmatizing certain children’s books and literary works.

#9: Define for yourself what real science is

Even the most loyal scientists can’t always figure out how to support you, and if they keep company with other (real) scholars, they may easily be infected by genuine scientific principles and independent ways of thinking. It is best to determine for yourself what is and is not real science or scientific results.

In Hungary, for example, the government has successfully pushed gender studies out of high education and replaced it with the more patriotic “family studies” (whatever that is). Moreover, great energy is being mobilized to prove the “Turkic” origin of the Hungarian people to contribute to the “opening to the East” foreign policy project.

#10: Eliminate science altogether

If you cannot achieve your goals with the above methods, eliminate science from social life, deprive it of all its instruments and influence, and use its resources as you wish. If you manage science with a science policy corresponding to the above recommendations, then sooner or later, only politics will remain. The good news is that you won't necessarily have to make this public: as a cumulative effect of implementing the respective steps, it will happen by itself, so to speak.

Although this has not yet happened in Hungary, there are many examples of anti-science measures, such as the denigration of science, which also prevail in the symbolic space. For instance, most scientific and cultural institutions have successfully been removed from the former royal castle in Buda, although the building of a new government quarter in their place is progressing only slowly.

+1 Golden Rule

However, if none of this works or you simply don't have the patience to follow the above, then... create a "Sovereignty Protection Authority".

A few months ago, the Hungarian Parliament adopted a so-called sovereignty protection law and established a Sovereignty Protection Authority stating that "[i]n recent years, Hungary's sovereignty has come under increasing attack". For an authoritarian government, protecting sovereignty in this way may well be worth, because it can provide an opportunity for basically anything ... for example, stifling academic freedom at once.

Based on a careful study of the Hungarian example, the autocratic toolbox for dismantling academic freedom is complete and ready. So, the next task for democrats, unless they want the Hungarian scenario realized in their own country, is to put together their "how to protect academic freedom" toolbox.

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