

Mapping Institutional Changes in Higher Education: The Comparative Analysis of the Effects of Democratic Backsliding

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ABSTRACT

The world has witnessed a democratic decline in 29 countries worldwide during the last decade in the context of rising nationalism and right-wing populism. Political transformations of this scale can reshape the higher education field because governments have legislative power, financial tools, and control over political and economic environments. My research investigates the effect of democratic backsliding on the university autonomy in countries with worsening democratic conditions. This study employs the comparative case study method of Turkey, Hungary, and Poland. The friction between external political pressure and university autonomy offers a unique opportunity to observe how the universities change owing to slow and steady political transformations and

represents an essential field for current and future research. This study contributes to the emerging literature of crisis and precarity in higher education by offering interdisciplinary analysis of institutional change and resistance.

Keywords: academic freedom, democratic backsliding, university autonomy

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has been described as a period of democratic regression worldwide (Diamond, 2021). Many new democracies stopped growing (Freedom House, 2019) and began to roll back while experiencing populism and right-wing nationalism (Fraser Institute, 2017; Robertson, 2018). Today, 29 countries worldwide are classified as being in democratic decline. As a result, the world has fewer democracies now than at any time since 1995 (Freedom House, 2020). Instead of coups, which were characteristics of twentieth-century democratic breakdown, the most prevalent feature of contemporary democratic decline is democratic backsliding. Democratic backsliding is the incremental stripping away of constitutional guarantees and fragmented dismantling of democratic institutions by elected officials and frequently illiberally inclined populists (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021). Democratic backsliding coincides with a rise in populism and illiberal nationalism, corruption, and a weakened civil society (Tomini, 2017). While the problem of democratic backsliding has come under increased scrutiny in the recent decade, some of its implications have received only modest attention. For example, its effects on legislative and executive forces, human rights, and media have been widely studied, while the impact on public sector has remained under-researched because these changes cannot be easily detected as the changes in political institutions.

The transformation of higher education does not pose a difficulty for democratically backsliding governments, as the state remains the leading provider of the legislative framework for higher education activities (Pachuashvili, 2011), the largest funder of higher education (Mettler, 2014), the regulator of access to higher education (Perry, 2015), and, finally, the definer of the political and economic atmosphere of higher education (Levy, 2009). To ensure better service to the regimes' objectives, governments have the privilege

of owning and employing the different measures to consolidate control and power over both public and private universities. However, during several centuries the norms of academic freedom and university autonomy have shielded universities from external pressure. The friction between external political pressure and university autonomy offers a unique opportunity to observe how the higher education landscape changes as a result of the slow and steady political transformation of political institutions as democratic backsliding. Given that university autonomy is a comprehensive term that encompasses the practices undertaken by universities to operate, researching its aspects and assessing the true implications of democratic backsliding on universities are essential for current and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the relationship between the government and universities, university autonomy has a distinct position in which the government is considered a primary political institution with the power to design, reform, and dismantle institutions. Furthermore, democratic logic recognizes that universities are neither entirely autonomous nor independent. Their special status stems from governments' willingness to secure autonomy, notwithstanding the fact that universities heavily depend on governments for funding, legislative support, and access (Olsen, 2009a). Even private universities that are assumed to enjoy more financial and administrative autonomy (Christensen, 2011) rely on governments for maintaining political and social order and for protecting them from coercion and external pressure. However, in some countries, university autonomy is seeing a surge of transformation as a result of the restructuring of political institutions, changing political priorities, and expectations from universities. Furthermore, recent policies initiated by the leaders of right-wing/nationalist/populist governments suggest that the rationale for the changes could also be the political incentive to increase control of HEIs to neutralize opposing views (cripple academic freedom) and ensure the conformity of scholars ("educated acquiescence") (Perry, 2020). Another unexplored field is that, although the effects of democratic backsliding are often debated as having a detrimental impact on intellectual freedoms and university autonomy, multiple facets of autonomy take different paths under new realities. For example, although institutional autonomy to elect/appoint rectors often diminishes, financial autonomy expands (Christensen, 2011).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To answer my research questions, I will use two general concepts: authoritarian neoliberalism (AN) (Bruff, 2014) and historical institutionalism (HI) (Hall & Taylor, 1996). AN would allow me to investigate how democratically backsliding governments under the preposition of neoliberal policies (changes to governance, funding, research, and faculty rights) try to establish supervision of government directly and indirectly (Peck 2010, Crouch 2011). HI will let me successfully explore the punctuated equilibrium – democratic backsliding (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994) and define moments that result in different effects on institutional autonomy depending on the formal or informal practices, rituals, norms, and principles embedded in the institutional structure.

RESEARCH METHOD

My research investigates the impact of democratic backsliding on the university autonomy by examining the cases of Turkey, Hungary, and Poland. These countries were considered democracies until the 2010s, but they are increasingly moving away from democracy (Freedom House, 2020). On par with other changes taking place in the backstage, governments are also altering higher education policies to expand government leverage over universities and preserve compliance. While higher education landscape in these countries was structurally distinct before democratic backsliding started, universities pass through similar phases of policy changes, face similar forms of oppression that force them to transform and conform to new conditions.

To evaluate the consequences of democratic backsliding on university autonomy, I will employ Ordorika's (2003) framework of autonomy: appointive (hiring, promotion, and dismissal of staff), financial (funding levels and criteria, preparation and allocation of the university budget, and accountability), and academic (access, curriculum, degree requirements, and academic freedom) dimensions will be studied in depth to map out the comprehensive picture of changes and to find out the causal relationships for the increase of autonomy on some dimensions even though the negative trend is expected. In particular, I intend to have answers to the following questions:

- 1) What tools do democratically backsliding governments use to expand control over universities?
- 2) How do political transformations affect different dimensions of university autonomy?
- 3) How do universities negotiate their autonomy differently based on the existing institutional characteristics, missions, and political cultures?

RESEARCH DESIGN

To examine the consequences of democratic backsliding, this research uses a comparative case study of Turkey, Hungary, and Poland. This approach would allow me to investigate the problem through various tools, explore the whole phenomenon and its repercussions (Peters & Fontain, 2020), and discover contextual factors defining the shape of response from universities (Yin, 2003).

The benefit of case study analysis is the ability to use many data sources, which increases data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). The initial review of academic literature that has already finalized and will be supported by both primary and secondary data sources to further enrich this analysis. To get necessary secondary data, I will perform process tracing (Beach, 2020) by reviewing grey and white papers in the higher education field related to the democratic backsliding, archival data wherever appropriate, online media outlets showcasing public officials' views, university mission statements, decrees, and other documentations. This step would enable me to identify the known effects of democratic backsliding on higher education. The next step will be to complete the site visits to the case study universities and obtain primary data. During fieldwork, my aim is to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with faculty, university personnel and administration, and students, as well as collect statistical data on governance, administration, management, and funding dynamics. This step would help me to analyze the dynamics of changes of different dimensions of university autonomy and to cross-check the findings and understand cases better.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

While discussions about the state's role in higher education continue (Valimaa, 2014; Pusser, 2016), the pressure on universities increases. Academic freedom and university autonomy in the countries experiencing democratic backsliding are increasingly attacked depending on the major and minor political events that occur in these countries. The impact of democratic backsliding,

especially repression, has intensified the structural transformations of higher education and created a transformational juncture in various country contexts (Dönmez & Duman, 2020), even though this phenomenon has not been studied substantially except in critical literature (Giroux, 2011; Szadkowski & Krzeski, 2019; Vatansever, 2020). This comparative study will enrich the literature that is mostly based on single case studies. Furthermore, it will contribute to the newly emerging field of research in higher education as nationalism, populism, and political cleavage studies (Aboye, 2021).

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