

Academic freedom in the re-imagined post-Humboldtian Europe

Abstract

This editorial presents the special issue on challenges of academic freedom in Europe, predominantly in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The volume provides a novel empirical stream of research, urging scholars to face the emerging discourse and problems of academic freedom in the contemporary higher education systems that were largely overlooked in the analyses dominated by the West-oriented global neoliberalism following the collapse of the USSR. Acknowledging collision and collusion between global competition for excellence and predominance of national interests, we propose to re-conceptualize the premises and prospects of academic freedom in the discourse of global higher education. We advance the idea of a post-Humboldtian university, assuming that modern universities are increasingly influenced by the geopolitical imperatives that depreciate academic freedom. The special issue exemplifies these concerns by detailed analyses in such contexts as Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Georgia, and a comparative analysis across Great Britain and continental Europe.

The concept of academic freedom is increasingly construed in geopolitical terms. Contexts and cultures of global higher education shape disparate interpretations of the freedom to teach, learn, and govern in the academia. Yet, connotational convergences begin to emerge as universities worldwide are affected by power struggles and political legacies. Telling truth to power has been increasingly difficult for many academics with the rise of populist and authoritarian regimes. Meanwhile, amidst unyielding fascination with the concept of the world-class research university as a pinnacle of organisational and intellectual excellence (Altbach & Salmi, 2011), there have been more discussions about the roles and responsibilities of the professoriate in the critical assessment of the gains and losses resulting from the growing hierarchization and peripheralization of academic positions and relations. Geopolitically, these debates are implicated in a gamut of competing views on the roles of governance, democracy, standards, and the nation-state—values that are interpreted contradictorily in disparate parts of the world (Douglass, 2021; Tierney, 2021a).

In this Special Issue, we are conceptually re-examining the challenges of academic freedom in the construct of Europe that has changed significantly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The end of the Cold War spread hopes for open science and borderless higher education. As an intellectual and geopolitical stratagem of the time, European universities and higher education systems re-emerged as exemplars of cross-border mobility and collaborative science for their counterparts of post-totalitarian societies. In the formerly rigid and closed post-Soviet academia, faculty members found it difficult to get rid of tight governmental control and respective “iron cage” bureaucracy. Many institutions on periphery of Europe were struggling with the concepts and practices of institutional autonomy. The Humboldtian freedom of teaching and learning appeared to be a threat for authoritarian governments. Individual academics' autonomy from the state, industry or other stakeholder groups, has

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been generating ambivalent readings that were often difficult to understand, as well as to conceptualise, within the eastward-shifting space of higher education. The influence of neoliberal narratives of globalisation and competition played a significant role in changing the idea of Europe as much as the idea of university (Kwiek, 2001; Neave, 2012).

Meanwhile, in the post-Humboldtian world of higher education in Europe, the advance of profit-oriented managerialism began to undermine the ideas of academic freedom. In the EU, where traditions of private universities were weak (unlike in the US), the values of traditional self-governance, democracy and liberalism have been, at least indirectly, challenged (Morphew et al., 2018). At a time when the EU expanded and invited new members, the higher education discourse shifted closer to the Euro-Atlantic narratives, where the US have been playing an increasing influence with regard to corporate rationality and competitiveness, hierarchization of status goods and positionalities dictated by the global interests in university rankings. This generated concerns about global resource asymmetries and inequalities. Europe entered the age of post-Humboldtian re-imagining, where new geopolitical and academic spaces and relations emerged to integrate the idea of American university and money-making science. In the process of re-imagining, European universities saw the rise of discriminative and biased connotations derived from global competition for institutional statuses. For example, the conceptual "Wild East" (Dobbins & Khachatryan, 2015), a Cold-War scarecrow on the European sub-continent, was viewed as a periphery nurturing tensions as well as nourishing narratives of the Democratic West and Autocratic East. The centre-periphery dilemmas remain and raise concerns on the sub-continent and beyond. While the geopolitical and conceptual frontiers of western democracy expand and make the former peripheries of Europe more anxious about the futures and freedom of teaching and learning in their countries, hybrid practices emerge as Europe also learns from the new or aspiring members of the EU. The ideas of university and academic freedom undergo a discursive re-evaluation that requires attention in the complicated web of enduring legacies across disparate manifestations of the European academe.

1 | DOES THE NEW PERIPHERY CONTRIBUTE ANYTHING TO RE-INVENTING THE OLD WESTERN DISCOURSE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM?

Academic freedom has become a challenging concept, especially in the European discourses that became influenced by the neoliberal US higher education, where the term of academic freedom per se was minted. Academic freedom represents the academic community's capacity to create: (i) a leeway for university faculty members to speculate beyond conventions, and (ii) autonomous organisational and epistemological norms to arrive at innovative solutions in research and teaching. This definition resonates with the Humboldtian model adopted by a range of research-intensive universities emerging in the US at the end of XIX century (Hofstadter & Metzger, 1955). Yet, the American concept of academic freedom relates ultimately to the rights and responsibilities of university professors to speak "truth to the power", and thus challenge the hierarchical controls inside and outside campuses. The American model of research-intensive university emerged on periphery of the dominant Humboldtian discourse in Germany, when the US was both a laggard of higher learning, as well as a minor economy. Harvard's Charles Eliot spent several years in France and Germany in the 1860s, exploring the European idea of the university before becoming the university President, and converting Harvard from a provincial college to America's, and hence the world's, preeminent research institution (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). With a growing appetite for intellectual inquiry and the pursuit of inconvenient truths in building a new state and open society, American universities and prominent scholars cultivated the idea of freedom *from* political and/or religious constraints, in conformity with the European original idea of university (Berlin, 1958; Hofstadter & Metzger, 1955). As relations with the new state and its governmental bodies were becoming crucial in their higher education policies, American universities and their units sought stronger autonomy in relations with industrial, civic and religious stakeholders, each urging for their priorities in knowledge development (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). At the same time,

beyond the primordial multi-denominational frameworks, American universities developed stronger connections with economic, social and political bodies (Hofstadter & Metzger, 1955). President of Harvard Eliot, for example, was fascinated by the European idea of merging scholarly and industrial interests. French *Polytechniques* of that time were reported not only to generate and transmit knowledge. They were also seeking to apply technologies for economic purposes of their nation. Likewise, the German idea of academic freedom at the ultimate service of the Prussian State was infiltrating the American discourse, along with the French understanding of industrial engagement, ending up to shape a service-oriented academic institution. This produced a rejuvenated model of university, in which academic freedom was reconfirming *partial autonomy*, blending and keeping together feasibility and utopia (Barnett, 2011).

After two self-destroying world wars triggered in and by Europe, unsurprisingly it was the US, rather than Europe, that became interpreted as a world leader in shaping the research university model in the 21st century. The traditions of German universities such as Humboldt University or Heidelberg University, or Swiss technological powers such as ETH-Zurich became somehow peripheral to the American discourse. One could argue that the global media powers were shaped by the US newspapers and journals, and some influential global marketeers such as the US World News in collaboration with the Shanghai Jiao Tong University rankers, which were fascinated with the American model, began to reshape the idea of centres and peripheries in global higher education. In pursuit of global competitiveness for “research excellence”, the positions of universities, as well as of the whole nation-states, were measured by prestigious journals and ranking tables (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Hazelkorn, 2011; Kwiek, 2021; Morphew et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, this was fueling “international status anxiety” (Oleksiyenko, et al., 2018). The globally-significant research university became a trite term to define nationalistic competitiveness, unconcerned with the state of democracy inside and outside campuses (Tierney, 2021b, December 6). The discussion of academic integrity declined in major researchers of Europe and even more so on the peripheries controlled by authoritarian regimes (Oleksiyenko, 2021a). Concerned about prestige and hegemony, many of the new participants in the rankings-concerned university systems could turn oblivious to the fact that universities can be places of authoritarian cultivation as much as places of free teaching and learning. The European discourse has had plenty of legacies to contemplate about: e.g., professors serving Nazism, as in the case of Heidelberg University (Remy, 2002), or the Stalinist dictatorship, as experienced by universities in the Soviet Union (Kuraev, 2016) and in the Czech Republic, East Germany and Poland (Connelly, 2014).

So, when academic freedom is discussed in the European context, we have to keep in mind the diversity of legacies that contain both benign and malignant amalgams. Some universities justify a seemingly noble purpose—to restore national pride and power through competition for exogenous, imperially-oriented prestige; others will be defying post- and neo-colonialism by all means (Oleksiyenko, 2021b). With academic freedom stifled, usurped, or eliminated by the corporate powers, either in industry or in governments, which prefer dogmas and selective truths, the post-Humboldtian model of the freedom to teach, learn and govern implies self-censorship, post-truth and fear to speak. The failure to defend the basic rights of academics for freedom of speech can be deliberately propelled by authoritarian regimes in order to re-orient research purposes from local and critically minded investigations to the global discourses steered by the hierarchies of research journals comfortably facilitating “surrogate academic freedom” (Oleksiyenko, 2020). Given that many national ministries in Europe still struggle to find agreement on defining and adopting “academic freedom” as an overarching principle for the EHEA (Maassen, 2020), it is not clear to what extent the idea of academic freedom is understood or welcome on the continent at all. While their American peers increasingly perceive academic freedom as an individual determination (e.g., the quest for tenure), rather than state permission to stand up for their rights in speaking truth to power, the Europeans tend to prioritise the nation-state's interests and legitimation, while paradoxically undermining them.

Alas, competition in prestige-oriented knowledge production has become a prerogative that is prioritised over academic freedom across the world. Concerns about resources and reputation have overpowered concerns about ethics and integrity, favouring evidence generated by metrics, which is certainly interesting but is only partially valid. Hence, the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn have given way to utilitarian anxieties about

program and course enrolments, evaluation scores, economic feasibility, and graduate employment rates. The freedom to conduct research is undermined by fascination with journal hierarchies, impact factors, and strategic collaborations (Kwiek, 2021). Professors become fearful to speak on, engage, or even cite papers that may be viewed as problematic for their position in the hierarchies of knowledge making. The modern university is concerned about targets set by corporate managers, rather than about critical thinking and the resilience required by their students and staff in increasingly unpredictable environments. Global competition validates and urges managers to re-engineer their universities to become efficient results-oriented organisations (Neave, 2012). In this scenario, for many post-Humboldtian universities academic freedom, which used to be a *given*, has to be *deserved or proven*. Instead of being considered valuable intellectuals, academics are turned into mere employees and service-providers, risking their careers if they decide to act as freedom-seeking or truth-seeking intellectuals (Tomusk, 2007).

As the post-Humboldtian universities strive to rejuvenate themselves through neoliberal (arguably intrinsically Americanised) control of performance, academics in the re-imagined Europe cannot but be increasingly afraid of the competitive managerialist approaches. Despite the belief in usefulness of the Weberian “iron cage” applied to Humboldtian universities making them post-Humboldtian, scholars even in the post-totalitarian parts of Europe increasingly ask why they should be fascinated by some forms of dilution of academic freedom, as promoted by their corporate powers via regulating national agencies. Meanwhile, it is difficult for most Europeans to say whether the following questions are rhetorical or retrospective: i.e., why not follow the traditions of the Humboldtian university, or re-examine the legacies of Bologna or Paris? Why not treasure the European legacy of intellectuals who re-emerged after authoritarianism and world wars, and advocate democratic ideas rather than commercial interests? Why to seek ‘retribution’ by restoring imperial legacies, while some nations still struggle to fend off the exogenous imperialisms? Why not to resist the naivete and neo-nationalism of protection-seeking and populism-supporting masses that end to purge academic truth-tellers who denounce inequality, dishonesty, and corruption?

The provocative nature of these questions inevitably politicises the contextual dimensions of the idea of academic freedom. As observed by Douglass (2021), among others, it is difficult for universities to disengage themselves from malignant political contexts.

Within the broader political landscape of the European higher education, these questions are often overlooked. In this Special Issue, we have tried to address these issues and discuss the complexities from disparate contexts (including the old European democracies such as the UK as well as new post-communist democracies such as Hungary, Poland, Ukraine or Georgia, or autocracies such as Turkey). We examine these questions from multiple political and cultural angles of interpreters contributing to the new construct of Europe, while seeking opportunities to understand how cross-cultural perspectives are shaping the contemporary concept of academic freedom in the re-imagined contexts of post-Humboldtian university.

2 | ARTICLES IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The following articles provide an exciting range of analyses seeking to address the questions we have raised.

Rafael Labanino and Michael Dobbins consider the burning issues of contemporary Hungarian higher education. The spotlight on this country in relation to academic freedom is logical, given the prominent case of Hungarian populists (once sponsored by the American billionaire philanthropist, George Soros) purging the Central European University (which is largely funded by Soros). Nonetheless, the authors eschew any facile interpretation that would draw on the limitations that the Hungarian government has enforced gradually in the academic system. They pose a more argute question: Why did the grassroots movements led by academics with the intention of curbing the governmental intervention not engender an effective counter-balance mechanism? Moreover, why were the more formal and legal actions organised by academic actors largely ineffective against the governmental

restrictions? Providing analysis in an engaging narrative mode, the authors share an illuminating story about the relationship between the Hungarian academic system as a whole, and the professoriate's intrinsic expectations of being entitled to negative freedom, i.e., the freedom *from* government intervention. Alas, if a country pursues a trajectory from fair and effective democracy to an authoritarian state, universities are *not* in a position to be effective in stopping this from happening. Within the legalist paradigm of thinking, universities cannot give academic freedom to themselves. They cannot have academic freedom if the legislative body entitled with assuring this does not genuinely want freedom to be granted. Instead, what universities are capable of doing as part of their individual and collective actors' agency is to assign blame and denounce limitations on academic freedom. Although largely ineffective, such protest is not entirely useless. The authors conclude that the Hungarian academic world has at least succeeded in unveiling the true authoritarian nature of the government, which had been disguised by a legalist posture. This tale mirrors the historical narratives of the rise of authoritarianism in the XX century, and presents striking similarities to the accounts described in the papers on liberty-seeking universities in Georgia and Ukraine.

Burhan Findikli depicts the situation in Turkey, an alarming newsmaker in the international academic community. His analysis is not limited to contemporary events. Instead, Findikli's ambition is to understand if academic freedom could be possible, given the Turkish legacies. He investigates the university roles defined by the late Ottoman Empire and early modern Turkish Republic. Similarly to Western European countries, Turkey viewed universities as learning institutions for the elites, and research as a mean to benefit the governing apparatus. This idea tied universities to the state. Although contemporary Turkish debate about higher education focuses on institutional autonomy as a paramount pathway towards more efficiency and competition in consonance with global parlance, the Turkish system serves as an impediment. In a nutshell, Findikli sees the pitfalls for academic freedom in Turkey in the collective assumption that has always existed in modern Turkey: that universities have to implement the official political ideology of the day, rather than remain at least partially detached from political pressures. Without denying the tricky relations between the university and the state, and the difficulty of reforming the system, the author lets us see that the ebbs and flows in the degrees of academic freedom are the result of different moments of crisis in politics. Inevitably, universities must deal with greater constraints and suffer more when the state happens to be in turmoil. Ultimately, universities have limited academic freedom if the state views universities as places that have to be loyal above all else.

Krystian Szadkowski and Jakub Krzeski analyse the status of academic freedom in Poland using relative and relational approaches. This perspective allows them to unpack the extent to which academic freedom is granted by political powers directly, and indirectly by wider public opinion, which defines the relational nature of academic freedom. The authors argue that academic freedom and the common good are more effective concepts, if contextualised and unveiled in their partiality (referring to the relative nature of academic freedom). They denounce current attempts to dilute academic freedom in contemporary Poland, which are disguised as modernisation of the system. By analysing Polish constitutional and respective higher education reforms over the span of a century, the authors note that high degrees of discretion (as observed in post-Soviet era) do not necessarily guarantee freedom from the state. They also point out that institutional autonomy and other neoliberal novelties contribute to confusing academic freedom with whatever is perceived at the time as Westernisation of the system ("the faceless authority of the market"), in opposition to an upsurge in "right-wing authority". As a net result of implicit ideologies rooted in absolute academic freedom, higher education policies manifest a malicious interpretation of the role of academia in its wider societal context: that of intelligent expert versus the ignorant masses—a typical aporia of current Westernisation. The authors believe that this dynamic, which reverberates in many Western countries, is the by-product of a short-sighted idea of universities being entrusted to produce something specific, rather than to make an unspecified broader contribution to society.

Terence Karran, Klaus Beiter and Lucy Mallinson provide fresh analysis of the status of academic freedom in Great Britain, the oldest democracies of Europe. The authors adopt the viewpoint of academics who are members of the University and College Union, the UK's leading association protecting the rights of academic employees.

By using data from an extensive survey on the island and on the continent, they compare UK and the EU faculty experiences in legal and actual manifestations of academic freedom. The authors find what many have advanced only in the form of speculation: while some sort of Americanization, or Euro-Atlantic Westernisation is fairly widespread throughout Europe, it is the UK which is at the forefront of fully absorbing the neoliberal agenda, restricting leeway of freedom in both teaching and research. This paper compels the community of higher education and its leaders to reflect upon the advantages and disadvantages of adopting neoliberal practices at universities. Whilst one may argue that accountability may incentivise academic productivity, tightening such forms of control may simultaneously prevent the academics from producing more, and, above all, the best that they could. This dilemma in British universities serves as a warning to wider Europe: academic freedom can be lessened via internal managerialism, which is a result of indirect external drivers. Although the legal framework for academic freedom in the UK is substantially different from most other European countries, the *de facto* situation today is that of a tide coming from the US via the UK, which is possibly irresistible. Yet, analyses of the outcomes and consequences of such trends should deepen, rather than wane, as much is at stake; maximising the usefulness of higher education in the best scenario, diluting such capacity in the worst scenario.

Anatoly Oleksiyenko gives insights into the role of critical thinkers and public intellectuals in Ukrainian universities which have been fighting with the Soviet legacy. The unprecedented examples of resistance to the Russian empire, which had been growing over the decades and became prominent in the recent war with Russia, are shown in his article not only as a precursor for academic freedom but also as a greater push for freedom pursued by the Ukrainian society. In this struggle, critical thinkers often have to stand against the system-wide overbearing officialdom and bureaucracy—a lingering legacy of Russian/Soviet authoritarianism that used to shape Ukrainian institutions and leadership styles. Having been engulfed in a war with Russia, which annexed Crimea and occupied Donbas in 2014, and later spread the military operation across the whole country, many Ukrainian universities had a challenge in redefining their rhetoric and programs, with a focus on decolonisation as well as sufficient subtlety and captivating discourse for democratic governance in academia. Despite earnest efforts to build an independent state, scholars and administrators were often affected by politics that oscillated between neo-Russian dominion and Westernisation ambitions. As a result, many universities could not but struggle with fulfilling public expectations of full liberalisation and academic freedom. As in the Soviet era, the manifestation of the freedom to be a public intellectual, or simply an outspoken truth-seeker, constituted occasional and heroic, rather than a regular or professional behaviour. This article maintains that, although Westernisation did not fully happen in terms of wholesale adoption of democratic practices or full European integration (i.e., accession to the European Union), the desire to pursue the discourse of Westernisation has been strong among critical thinkers who related the institutional transformations in academia to major reforms in the Ukrainian society.

Nutsa Kobakhidze and Lela Samniashvili also delve into the problems of the Soviet legacy, examining Georgian perspectives on advancing the academic freedom in the process of building an independent state. Notwithstanding legislative acts in support of academic freedom, Georgian academics face constraints in reconciling the idea of a liberated university with the growing corporate powers of the nation-state, which prioritises economic needs and interests over the right of criticism or disobedience. The neoliberal agenda has been overriding the hopes of academic free-thinkers for a financially secure and autonomous existence. While some Georgian policy-makers look for Western support, and even play an active role in advancing EU frameworks, such as the Magna Charta Universitatum, their expectations that Western Europe will be an active advocate of academic freedom may be futile. In COVID-19 times, when most European economies and universities are suffering a blow to their financial mechanisms, calls to prioritise academic freedom over economic rationality are faint indeed. Besides, it is not easy for many Georgians to overcome the Soviet legacy—academics and administrators still lack the skills necessary to navigate among governance and bureaucracy, human rights, and personal interests. Managerialism has been thriving and using punitive mechanisms to counteract academic dissent. The concerns of Georgian scholars about fulfilling the aspirations for academic freedom, which are coming from the West, are justified: the idea is still unsubstantiated, and it mostly constitutes empty words, rather than well-developed academic practice.

These are all intriguing papers that enrich our understanding of the challenges of academic freedom and democratic governance in contemporary universities. The Special Issue lays a solid ground for delving deeper into the problems associated with expanding the geopolitical and conceptual boundaries of academic freedom without thinking critically about what makes a good university, and how the roles and responsibilities of academics should be shaped in order to protect the genuine meaning of the freedom to inquire, teach, learn and self-govern. We thank our contributors for providing these insights.

KEYWORDS

academic freedom, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Humboldt, research-intensive university

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflict of interest to declare from both authors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Giulio Marini: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; investigation; supervision; project administration; writing – review and editing. **Anatoly Oleksiyenko:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft and revisions.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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