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Universities as Places of Democratic Resistance

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Abstract

This paper argues that universities are not only affected by democratic erosion but can also become central arenas in which it unfolds. Through mechanisms of repression, co-optation, and legitimization, political authorities may seek to weaken university autonomy and bring institutions of knowledge under greater control. At the same time, universities serve as important reservoirs of democratic resistance by preserving independent knowledge, professional networks, public credibility, and spaces for collective deliberation and action. Drawing on examples from Serbia, Hungary, Turkey, and the United States, the paper examines how universities contribute to democratic resilience, particularly during periods of political crisis. Special attention is given to the Serbian student movement, which demonstrates how university communities can foster new forms of participation, deliberation, and collective organisation, being reservoirs of democratic resistance. The paper concludes that the democratic value of universities lies not only in academic freedom and institutional autonomy, but also in their capacity to sustain the relationships, practices, and resources that make independent judgement, public criticism, and collective action possible.

Key words: Democratic Erosion; University Autonomy; Democratic Resilience; Democratic Resistance

1. Universities, political pressure and democratic erosion

A few weeks ago, the Serbian government replaced four members of the governing board of the research institute I direct at the University of Belgrade. On its own, that might sound like an ordinary administrative decision. Governments appoint representatives to governing bodies, and those people change. But this was not our first experience of political pressure. In 2020, we faced a similar attempt to interfere with the institute's independence and successfully resisted it. In the years that followed, particularly during the student protests, we took an active public role in documenting and explaining developments in Serbia to international academic and wider audiences, drawing on our research and professional expertise.

Against that background, the replacement was difficult to read as an isolated administrative act. We began to ask what it might mean for our activities, our research programmes, and our ability to keep speaking publicly and independently. We do not yet know what the consequences will be – they depend on election greatly – and that should not be the case.

What interests me here is that an institution can begin to change before any formal decision about its future is taken. People start weighing possible consequences and adjusting their behaviour in anticipation of decisions that may never actually come. Anyone who has worked in an institution under political pressure will recognize this.

I begin with this experience because it tells us something about democratic erosion and why universities matter to it. We are familiar with the conventional signs of democratic decline: elections that become less fair, courts that lose their independence, media brought under political control, and parliaments that gradually cease to exercise oversight. Universities usually appear in these accounts as another sector affected by the same developments. Academic freedom is restricted, autonomy is weakened, and researchers are dismissed or intimidated.

I want to make a stronger claim. Interference with universities can also **advance** democratic erosion, because it changes the conditions under which a society produces independent knowledge, questions authority, and organizes collective action.

Universities have a particular place in democratic societies. They produce knowledge whose credibility should rest on professional standards rather than political approval, and they carry intellectual traditions, institutional memory, and professional networks across generations. They also bring together people who are learning to question established ideas, discuss public problems, and organize with others. These resources matter in any society, but become especially important when other institutions lose their independence. That helps explain why governments seeking to concentrate power may want universities under closer control.

In Hungary, restrictions introduced in 2017 led Central European University to relocate its principal US-accredited degree programmes from Budapest to Vienna. In Turkey, thousands of academics were dismissed following the attempted coup of 2016. More recently, in the United States, the Trump administration sought changes to Harvard's governance and policies while withholding federal research funding; Harvard challenged the measures in court.

These cases differ considerably, above all in the forms of pressure used, the legal protections available to universities, and their opportunities to contest government decisions. Yet they show how legislation, funding, and administrative procedures can become instruments of interference with institutions whose authority is meant to remain independent of political power.

2. Authoritarian consolidation

We can distinguish three ways in which universities become part of authoritarian consolidation. **Repression** is the most direct: governments dismiss academics, restrict their work, or punish dissent, as we saw in Turkey. **Co-optation** is less visible. Through appointments, funding, and control over governing bodies, political authorities gradually bring universities into line with their interests, often without openly restricting academic freedom. **Legitimation** concerns what governments gain from this control. Universities possess scientific authority, public credibility, and international recognition. When they become politically dependent, governments can use that reputation to lend credibility to their own policies and decisions. In this way, universities can simultaneously lose their independence and help sustain the political authority that is undermining it.

Interventions are often justified in the language of efficiency, accountability, or political neutrality. Universities are portrayed as elitist, ideologically biased, or disconnected from the society that supports them. Some criticisms identify genuine problems in higher education, which is part of what makes them persuasive. But the same language can be used to justify political control over research, teaching, and institutional governance. In some cases, restrictions are even presented as a defence of academic freedom against the supposed politicization of knowledge. The problem is that research on contested subjects, such as gender, racism, or climate change, can then be dismissed as political simply because its findings are uncomfortable.

Restrictions on universities can appear alongside, and sometimes even before, restrictions on the media and courts. This is one reason I think of universities as diagnostic arenas of democratic erosion. Their treatment tells us something about the extent to which political authorities are willing to tolerate independent institutional judgment.

3. Democratic resistance

Universities matter for another reason, which interests me even more: they can be reservoirs of democratic resistance.

By this I mean that universities hold resources capable of supporting democratic action even when no such action is underway: independent knowledge, established networks, organizational experience, public credibility, and places where people can meet and discuss common problems. They also sustain practices of testing arguments, dealing with disagreement, and revising decisions. None of this makes a university democratic by itself, or means that it should become a political organization. Its responsibility is to preserve the conditions in which independent judgment and collective action remain possible. In a political crisis, students, academics, and wider social groups may draw on what has accumulated there.

Here it helps to distinguish the university's formal organization from the community within it. A government can replace a governing board, pressure a rector, or redirect funding, but the relationships and organizational experience built up among students and staff are harder to remove. They can sustain independent initiatives even when the formal institution is under pressure, whether through legal challenges, professional solidarity networks, or independent public debate. Students and staff may also take part in broader political movements, but they do so as civic and political actors, not automatically as representatives of their universities.

At Berkeley in 1964, students challenged restrictions on political advocacy on campus. Many had already gained organizational experience in the civil rights movement and brought it into the university. The Free Speech Movement helped change the university's own rules on political expression. Here, the university was a place where experience developed elsewhere could be used to challenge and revise institutional rules.

Czechoslovakia in 1989 offers a different example. Student demonstrations in Prague helped initiate the mobilization that became the Velvet Revolution. University spaces and networks mattered at the beginning, but the movement quickly connected with theatres, dissident circles, and wider civic organizations. Civic Forum then provided a structure for coordination and political negotiation. Students helped start the process; the transition itself depended on much broader forms of organization and representation. The university offered resources for mobilization, while political transformation took place through actors and institutions beyond it.

The two cases suggest that the democratic significance of a university cannot be measured simply by counting campus protests or reading statements issued by its leadership. We also need to ask what **collective action a university community makes possible**, which democratic practices develop within it, and what happens when those practices reach beyond the campus.

Sometimes the result is a change in university rules; sometimes it is a contribution to a broader movement. At other times, the achievement may be the less visible preservation of independent knowledge and professional networks under pressure.

4. The Serbian case

This brings me to Serbia. After the railway station canopy in Novi Sad collapsed on 1 November 2024, killing sixteen people, students began protesting and demanding accountability. The movement widened into a debate about corruption, institutional responsibility, and the functioning of the political system. Faculties became places of collective organization, while students built relationships with teachers, farmers, lawyers, professional associations, and local communities across the country. Their marches through towns and villages were particularly important in connecting the movement with people who had no previous connection to the university.

What interests me most about the Serbian case is how students used the university as an existing space for collective organization. Faculties provided meeting places, established networks, relationships of trust, and a degree of institutional protection. Students drew on those resources and developed their own political arrangements. Distrustful of political parties and conventional student representative bodies, they established plenums in which they discussed proposals, made decisions, and coordinated activities across faculties. The university did not design these arrangements. It provided much of the infrastructure that made their development and expansion possible.

5. Democratic innovation

This is where the idea of a reservoir connects with democratic innovation. When established democratic channels of representation lose credibility, resources accumulated within universities can help people develop alternative forms of collective decision-making. The Serbian experience shows how resources accumulated within universities can become the basis for new forms of democratic participation. Students used existing spaces and networks to develop their own ways of organizing, deliberating, and making collective decisions. These practices emerged in response to a political crisis, but their significance may extend beyond the protests themselves. They demonstrate how universities can provide the conditions for democratic experimentation without directing it. What interests me particularly is whether the relationships, organizational experience, and democratic practices developed during such moments can survive the immediate crisis and become lasting resources for the university community and wider society.

This also affects how I understand democratic resilience. For universities, resilience should mean more than surviving a crisis and returning to normal. It includes preserving the resources that allow independent knowledge, public criticism, and collective organization to continue: academic freedom and institutional autonomy, certainly, but also professional networks, organizational memory, solidarity, and **workable** procedures for disagreement and collective decision-making.

6. University Governance

This brings us to the universities themselves. If we understand them as reservoirs of democratic resistance, we need to examine how these capacities are developed and sustained. Resistance does not necessarily take the form of protest. It can involve professional solidarity, independent academic networks, critical teaching practices, or efforts to preserve intellectual communities under pressure. We have seen this in the transnational networks established by scholars forced into exile, and in universities that have contributed to public debates about historical memory, justice, and democratic transition. These practices matter because they allow academic communities to maintain their independence and capacity for collective action even when formal institutional protections are weakened.

But this also raises questions about university governance. An institution can be autonomous and still give its students and staff very little influence over decisions. The Serbian student movement has made this contradiction particularly visible. Universities do not need to adopt the organizational model of student movements, but they can learn from the practices of participation, deliberation, and collective responsibility that have developed within their communities and that protects them from authoritarian pressure. Such practices can strengthen universities as democratic institutions in their own right.

At my Institute, we have spent years considering what it means to be an engaged institution. I have come to understand engagement as an institution's capacity to address questions of public importance through independent research, bring different perspectives into dialogue, and contribute its knowledge and expertise to public debate. This may also require taking a public position when fundamental democratic principles are at stake. But where the university's public responsibility ends and political action begins is not always easy to determine. It is a tension that universities must continually confront, particularly in times of democratic crisis. Universities have no mandate to represent society or determine political outcomes. Their contribution lies in sustaining the knowledge, critical debate, and institutional independence on which meaningful democratic participation also depends.

7. Conclusion

Let me return to where I began. At our institute in Belgrade, we successfully defended our independence in 2020, and we are now facing another period of uncertainty. These experiences have taught me that institutional resilience depends on more than legal guarantees. It also rests on the relationships, practices, and collective commitments that institutions develop over time, and on their ability to draw upon them when their independence is threatened.

This is ultimately what I mean by universities as reservoirs of democratic resistance. Their significance for democracy lies in preserving resources that society can draw upon when established institutions fail, while maintaining the independence that gives those resources their value. Universities do not need to lead political movements to make an important contribution to democratic life. But they do need to take responsibility for the institutional conditions that allow independent judgment, public criticism, and collective action to remain possible.