The Hungarian government to curb the autonomy of the Academy of Sciences

Background information as at March 18, 2019, provided by Hungarian Academy Staff Forum

The Hungarian government is continuing its crackdown on academic freedom. The government first placed all state universities in the country under the direct supervision of university chancellors, administrators appointed directly by the government. More recently, it forced Central European University to move most of its programs from Budapest to Vienna from September 2019. Now, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) is subject to a so far unspecified structural reorganization by the government which will lead to the complete loss of academic independence in the Academy specifically and Hungarian science in general.

The Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), a national symbol of scientific endeavour was founded in 1825 to promote scientific research in Hungary. The MTA is a public body functioning as a self-regulatory legal entity which carries out a national civic duty by practising, supporting, overseeing and representing science. This duty is carried out by the 11 scientific sections consisting of academician and non-academician members who altogether constitute the General Assembly (approx. 800 members). This overseeing role is practiced for the sake of MTA’s public body including all scholars holding a science degree obtained or accredited in Hungary (almost 17 thousand members).

The Academy also maintains a research network, the largest in Hungary, of 15 research centres employing 5000 people and covering a large variety of disciplines in both humanities and natural sciences. Until 2018, academic freedom was guaranteed by the autonomy of the Academy, which was based on two pillars affirmed by Law No. XL/1994. First, the Academy was led by a self-governing body of distinguished researchers who played an important role in managing the research centre network and supervising its work. Second, funding was negotiated on non-partisan grounds every year. In more general terms, the Fundamental Law of Hungary (Article X) protects the freedom of scientific research in general and recognises the autonomy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in particular.

Over the two centuries of its existence, the Academy has undergone many reforms so as to meet new requirements posed by social, scientific, and technological change. The latest reform of the institution was pursued in 2012 by the President of the Academy, introducing a more thorough evaluation of scientific performance and increasing the role of tender-based financing in the budget of the research network. Earlier reforms after the regime change have been painful to certain research institutes as well as individuals, however, they were based on elaborate concepts and sought to achieve clearly defined goals.
However, since June 2018 László Palkovics, the minister for Innovation and Technology (MIT) is striving to deprive the Academy, one of the last few public independent institutions, of its research network and put it under government control. The minister has failed to provide clear reasons behind the institutional reforms resulting in such reduction of academic freedom. One of the identifiable motivations behind the restructuring is that government can control EU funding, available for research and innovation, more easily without the interference of the academic community. Second, by financial control the government can eventually influence research activities and restrict those that do not support measures and ideology of the government.

Following the model of the reorganisation of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2013–14, the fundamental goal of Palkovics’ manoeuvre against the MTA President was to reduce HAS to an innocuous “academic club” of mostly retired members. As a first step, in June 2018, the annual financial support for the academic research network of MTA was reallocated to the new ministry in an amendment to the 2019 budget law following a note sent to the MTA 54 minutes before it was finalised.

In autumn 2018, several meetings took place between Minister Palkovics and the leadership of MTA driven by the Academy’s hope for an acceptable compromise. The Academy agreed to take part in conceiving the reform and establish fast-track evaluation commissions to assess the scientific performance of the MTA research network by March 31, 2019. However, in December 2018 when the Academy’s Assembly passed a resolution rejecting the location of its research network outside the organisation of MTA, MIT withheld the disbursement of aid covering material expenses of research centres for 2019 and threatened to withhold salaries of employees from April 2019 onwards in an effort to force Presidency of the Academy to agree to the handover of its research network to the government. Consequentially, the research network, the most valuable asset of MTA with approx. 5,000 active staff members at an average age of 41, would either be transferred to universities and state-controlled research centres or simply eliminated. Entire institutions – mostly in the human and social sciences – would be labelled “unproductive” and dismantled.

On January 31, 2019, the National Office for Research, Development, and Innovation, which is controlled by MIT, launched a so-called “program of excellence.” According to this new model, MTA research centres must apply for their entire budget by submitting tenders which are assessed according to unclear evaluation principles, allowing for arbitrary, politically motivated decisions. The budget of the program was created from the annual financial support of MTA, previously reallocated to the ministry, and additional financial sources from universities. In the excellence program, not only MTA institutes, but also universities and state institutions were eligible. The latter however could apply for additional financial support as they have permanent basic funding while MTA institutes would have applied for the entire budget including utilities. By and large, this system would have replaced the old model of normative financing of the MTA research centre network based on the legally affirmed managerial autonomy of the Academy. The new system could have created an unfair competition and would have allowed the ministry to decide on research topics.
Facing the dilemma of whether to apply for short-term financial support within this new scheme, on February 12 the presidency of MTA decided that they apply to the call of the Ministry only in case the Ministry confirms MTA will be provided its budget for 2019 as stipulated in the Act on the National Budget. Given that the ministry has never given any written guarantee required by the presidency of MTA so far, the Academy did not take part in the excellence program.

MTA’s Presidency, Assembly, and its employees have so far not succumbed to government pressure. On February 12, 2019 MTA’s employees organised a demonstration against government’s efforts, and an overwhelming majority rejected the government plan to place the research network under government control through an online vote organized by the Hungarian Academy Staff Forum.

Severely hit by the arbitrary retention of its 2019 funding, the Presidency of the Academy is under an increasing pressure to accept the government’s terms of restructuring the research network. On March 8, 2019 the President of the Academy and Minister Palkovics issued a common statement (“a memorandum of understanding”) highlighting that the President of MTA “takes note of the Minister’s intention to operate the research network outside the organisation of the Academy” and parties agree to elaborate further the institutional framework of the research network to be governed by a body consisting of an identical number of delegates by MIT and MTA. Even though the leadership of the Academy is still convinced that the freedom and quality of scientific research can be best guaranteed in a research network which still operates under the Academy, maybe with a renewed structure, they were forced to sign “this agreement of intent”. As the Academy admitted in a letter to the researchers (on the March 11), the minister – not for the first time – blackmailed the Academy that if they would not accept this agreement, the government would change the law and unilaterally carry out its plans. Salaries and overhead funding are now guaranteed but only until May 31, 2019. Any further allowances have been made subject to the acceptance by MTA of the dominant role of the government in the future governance of the Academy.

The following weeks are crucial for the independence of the Academy as the Presidency and General Assembly of MTA will have in May either to endorse this agreement securing funding until December 2019 while giving up the research network and its independence, or to reject the handover of its research network while jeopardizing funding for the network in the future. This might lead to the collapse of the research network due to retention of its funds: an unprecedented situation in an EU-member country.


Consult also the English website of MTA: https://mta.hu/english