

Academics Facing Autocracy: Devising Sustainable Pedagogical and Institutional Alternatives in Illiberal Times

Autocracy attacking universities and research institutions severs the educational sector twofold. Most visibly, it pushes educators abroad or into inner exile. Less accounted for but with dire consequences as well is the fact that under autocratic pressure students lose access to critical scholarship. *Academics Facing Autocracy*, a Global Fellowship designed by the CEU Democracy Institute, in collaboration with the Invisible University for Ukraine and OSUN Threatened Scholars Integration Initiative and supported by OSUN for two cohorts of Fellows (Spring and Fall 2023) brought together academics from universities threatened by autocratic attacks with an experience and interest in alternative higher educational programs. Our aim was to think through various models of providing emancipatory education to those excluded from it by political oppression, war, or global structural inequalities. Based on our discussions and workshops, we started to work out models for non-conventional hybrid forms of higher education involving scholars and students at risk, which in the future can be rendered globally accessible with flexible adaptation to local contexts.

During the last decade, laudable efforts had been made, including by the Open Society University Network, to set up programs for displaced students and academics especially from Afghanistan, Myanmar, Russia, Syria, Turkey, and Ukraine. However, with some exceptions, most of these schemes focused on one national community. There were also inbuilt ambiguities inherent in the model of rescuing individuals through in-residence grants mostly in the German, UK, and US academic systems. One such ambiguity was the timeline of these grants, as scholars who make it to a safe Western haven thanks to such fellowships may fail to stay within academia if the support they receive is only short-term. In addition, they may lose contact with the original academic and educational community they were part of, from where not everybody is able to leave. We believe, moreover, that beyond scholar-at-risk programs there is a need for crafting innovative thinking about supporting academic and educational resistance against autocracy “on the field” in countries where universities have been forced out of their function of advancing critical thinking.

In order to address these issues, the second round of the *Academics Facing Autocracy* program (August-December 2023) worked on two tracks: one to assess existing European scholars-at-risk programs and another one to develop course curricula organized around the crucial topics of decolonization, memory politics, and democratic resilience which could be made accessible to students from various national and regional backgrounds and would also involve “local knowledge” in different contexts. We draw on the experience of the Invisible University for Ukraine program, launched by CEU with international partners, offering a hybrid educational program (with online and offline components), currently having over 300 students, as well as on our cooperation with the Open Society University Network and, in particular, the OSUN Threatened Scholars Initiative.

In order to take this discussion forward to creating a platform of transnational exchange on such educational programs involving scholars and students at risk, we organize a workshop in Budapest at the Democracy Institute on 14-15 December, 2023. We will present the preliminary results of work on both thematic tracks (assessing existing scholars-at-risk programs and devising innovative transnational curricula), involving other stakeholders who develop and operate alternative programs of higher education in the context of global autocratic upsurge and radical inequality of access. The CEU Democracy Institute itself is keen on leading such an initiative, with the Invisible University for Ukraine, which has provided relevant experiences for the last two academic years, as a model and pilot site.

Engaging with the fellows’ research, the workshop will endeavor to address the following questions:

- National and transnational features in the attacks on higher education – how to develop a context-sensitive comparative framework of interpretation?
- Forms and strategies of resistance from within the higher education institutions – the dilemma of exit, internal voice.
- Alternative and hybrid educational programs integrating students and scholars at risk – lessons to be drawn from the existing projects and possibilities of transnationalization.
- The interplay of academic reflection and civic engagement in scholars-at-risk programs – rethinking key scholarly paradigms of the 21st century (on decolonization, memory politics, democratic resilience) in the framework of alternative educational programs.

Conveners: Agnes Katalin Kelemen (CEU DI), Daniel Palm (CEU DI), Vladmir Petrovic (Boston College), Renáta Uitz (CEU DI and Royal Holloway College, London) and Balázs Trencsényi (CEU).

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Conference Program

December 14 Thursday

Arrival in the morning

2-2:30 p.m.	Welcome and introduction
2:30-4:00 pm	ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: Autocratic attacks on higher education – A discussion of individual stories as well as structures
4:00- 4:30 pm	coffee break
4:30-6:00 pm	PANEL 1: Resisting autocratic pressures within the university
6:00-6:15 pm	break
6:15-7:45 pm	PANEL 2: National and transnational hybrid educational programs
8 pm	conference dinner

December 15 Friday

10-11:30 am	PANEL 3: The ethnography of scholars at risk programs
10:30-10:45 am	break
10:45-11:45 am	PANEL 4: Building a transnational curriculum 1: „Memory politics”
11:45-12:05 pm	coffee break
12:05-1:35 pm	PANEL 5: Building a transnational curriculum 2.: „Decolonization”
1:35-2:45	lunch break
2:45-3:45 p.m.	PANEL 6: Building a transnational curriculum 3.: „Democratic resilience”
3:45-4:00 p.m.	break
4:00-6:00 p.m.	PANEL 7: Institutional views and strategies on alternative education &Final discussion (1 hour panel and 1 hour discussion)

Confirmed participants

- Daniel Palm (University for Continuing Education, Krems & CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest)
- Balazs Trencsényi (CEU Institute for Advanced Studies & CEU Democracy Institute)
- Renata Uitz (Royal Holloway, University of London)
- Maksym Snihyr (National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy)
- Ruzha Smilova (Sofia University)
- Eren Paydas (Off University, Berlin)
- Rafael Labanino (University of Konstanz)
- Agnes Katalin Kelemen (CEU Democracy Institute)
- Julia Szekely (ELTE University, Budapest)
- Saniia Toktogazieva (American University of Central Asia, Bishkek)

- Noemi Levy-Aksu (Hafiza Merkezi, Istanbul)
- Karolina Koziura (European University Institute, Florence)
- Adrian Matus (ELTE University, Budapest)
- Elzbieta Kwiecinska (University of Warsaw)
- Vladimir Petrovic (Boston University)
- Aleksandar Pavlovic (Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, Belgrade)