



BEING A SOCIAL SCIENTIST IN HUNGARY: A PERSONAL NARRATIVE



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HUNGARY

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Returning to Budapest after finishing my BA in Government at Harvard University did not feel like a difficult choice in 2002. Hungary was set to join the European Union as a result of a decades-long commitment to political and economic liberalization. I was excited to gain admission to the International Relations and European Studies MA program at Central European University (CEU). My first year at CEU felt like the best of all worlds – I was at home in Budapest, close to my family and events in Hungary, while I met interesting people from all over the world every day. I wanted to stay, and I started my PhD there in 2003. My research focused on Hungary's convergence with the EU, in particular the enormous fiscal imbalances, which appeared to prevent fast economic convergence. I found that lack of trust in the system makes policy-makers prone to short-term decisions, and fiscal deficits are the symptoms of this problem. In my research and publications, I was highly critical of government policy, but that had no bearing on finding my place in Hungarian academia.

Over a decade later I am asked to write about convergence from a personal perspective. Convergence is a multi-faceted process, and it is felt more strongly in some areas than in others. In higher education the composition of students shows the most evident impact of European accession. The consequences of the EU are



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weaker in the composition of the faculty, while to me, the steady narrowing of academic freedom in the country has been the most unexpected development following accession.

Students

I started my academic career at the University of Debrecen in 2006. While the medical faculty traditionally had many foreign students, students in the economics programs were mostly Hungarians from Debrecen and the neighboring areas. The situation did not feel very different after I returned to Budapest to the Péter Pázmány Catholic University in 2011. Students were predominantly Hungarian, from regions outside Budapest, and international (primarily Erasmus) students were a barely visible minority.

Much has changed in less than a decade. Today I teach half of my courses in English at Pázmány and the Corvinus University of Budapest. International students come to both schools from all over the world from Germany to China. It is not only Erasmus students now – both universities have several dual degree programs with European and non-European partners, and there are also students from the developing world studying with the Stipendium Hungaricum program initiated by the Hungarian government. My impressions reflect a clear macrotrend in the

country – between 2012 and 2017 the number of international students grew by 79% and their share among the students grew from [7 to 12 percent](#).

While I truly enjoy teaching foreign students with a wide variety of perspectives, it is hard to forget that the number of Hungarian students in Hungarian higher education [decreased by 28% between 2008 and 2017](#). The reasons are multiple and include demography, the pulling effect of the EU as well as government policies. Students from top high schools in Hungary study abroad in large numbers. Government policies also contribute to this state of affairs – while in 2011 the share of higher education expenditure in terms of GDP was 3,46%, by 2018 it was only 2,85% (Polónyi, 2018: 83), a decline of almost 20%. Reduction in financing was done partly through restricting entry into social sciences and law. Today only around the top 10 percent of students receive state funding in 16 social science fields, which limits the opportunities for students coming from less privileged backgrounds – a clear deviation from European guidelines.

Teaching and research

The growing internationalization of the student body has not been accompanied by a similar internationalization of faculty. The reasons are rather straightforward. The teaching load is very



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high – even a professor must teach four 90-minute classes per week, while an assistant professor might teach six or even more. The Bologna process has not changed this state of affairs – in comparison to the US higher education system, which relies more on independent work outside the classroom, the number of classes per week is very high both for students and professors. At the same time the pay is very low especially at the entry levels, well below 1000 euros per month. Above all, Hungarian represents a substantial language barrier for non-Hungarians. Research under these conditions is highly challenging; there is simply no time for it, especially if someone gets a second job, which is common given the low wages. At the same time promotion is almost exclusively based on research quality. In social sciences this implies publishing journal articles and books both in English and Hungarian.

Given the challenges for young scholars in Hungarian academia, there are clear traces of adverse selection. For Hungarians who obtain their PhD at top US or European universities, CEU is the only place where they do not face the above constraints. Publication quality and quantity at other Hungarian universities is low and declining – according to the calculations of Polónyi (2018: 98) the number of Hungarian publications in international journals ranked by SCIMAGO went from 61% to 55% of the 49 most developed countries' average between 2009 and 2016.

The publication requirements at most Hungarian universities can be fulfilled with Hungarian articles, where competition is much more limited than in highly ranked international journals. This difficult setting however also offers rare opportunities, which are not provided elsewhere. Given the low level of expectations, there is enormous freedom to think outside the mainstream, and ask new questions. There are no pressures to conform to various schools or publish in the highest ranked journals. During my career I felt completely free to choose subjects, come up with ideas and analyze the most interesting developments. The global financial crisis offered unusual cases to examine the impact of trust on macroeconomic policies, while these days I am completely absorbed in the research on populism, which also has strong links with trust.

Various individual fellowships in the system, which allowed me to focus on my own research instead of taking a second job, also helped to navigate the difficult environment. I received a 3-year Bolyai fellowship from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) - an individual grant for young scholars to prepare for the Doctor of Science degree (DSc), which is often considered a pre-condition for a full professorship. After my son was born in 2009, and I took leave from university, I also spent five months at the Collegium Budapest, where I did not have to teach and was able to finish my book, *Institutional Trust and Economic Policy*, which



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became the basis for my dissertation for the DSc. As I continued my teaching at Pázmány, the university had an EU-funded Social Renewal Operation Program, which also consisted of individual research support. After these projects and after translating my English book into Hungarian, I successfully defended my DSc at HAS and was appointed full professor in 2016.

Nowadays I observe with growing concern the crumbling of almost every institution that had helped me on my path.

The attacks on academic freedom

The first casualty in 2011 was the Collegium Budapest, an institute of advanced study where scholars from all over the world spent their sabbaticals and wrote books. I was there during its last semester. I remember our daily conversations over lunch growing increasingly dark as the fate of the institution was being sealed because of the significant distrust between international donors and the government. Remnants of the institution were taken over by CEU.

The Collegium was an institution for the cosmopolitan elite, so its fate was not completely surprising. However, the same year the government announced severe restrictions on funding students in social sciences. There were also rumors that Corvinus

would be closed as well. While student protests prevented this happening, the National Bank of Hungary soon announced a well-funded program to promote a new paradigm for economics and get rid of neoliberal ideas.

The greatest shock and the deepest sense of loss for me is the fate of CEU. It was the school I came home to from Harvard, it has the library I use even after I finished studying there, and it is the place to go to if I want to listen to the foremost thinkers in the world. The school means so much in Hungarian academic life, especially in the social sciences, that for a long time I could not believe its ouster was really happening

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Most recently HAS has been attacked, and it is currently in danger of losing its research institutes. The official reason is to improve innovation, but the government is also communicating a desire to dictate research topics, especially in the humanities and the social sciences. The space for the kind of freedom I have experienced during my career is narrowing every day. I could never have imagined that all this would be possible within the EU.



15 years in the EU

Looking back at the past 15 years, I feel an enormous sense of disappointment as a Hungarian citizen. The accession to the EU provided great opportunities, which were abused rather than used by successive Hungarian governments. At the same time, it is also hard to overlook how thrilling it is to teach and research social sciences in such an environment. Life seems to have a deeper meaning when nothing is predictable and adhering to the traditional calling of academic life – researching and teaching of reality - is considered a suspicious activity. While nothing turned out the way I expected back in 2002, my old research question about convergence with the EU remains intensely relevant, and I expect it will keep me occupied for the next decades.

References

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