

After the defeat of PiS: Academic freedom in Poland is heading for yet another turn

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In October 2023, the rule of the PiS-government came to an end, easing some fears of ideological influence. However, eight years of state capture has left the Polish higher education sector in a desolate condition.

It is hard not to feel frustrated when trying to assess the state of Polish academia in the last weeks of 2023. On the one hand, the elections of October 2023 brought an end to the rule of the national-conservative Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), which had governed the country for two terms and which many, including myself, regarded as an imminent threat to academic freedom and university autonomy. Among those who opposed the PiS government's relentless promotion of a state-centred, nation-oriented and religion-based vision of academia, fears of ideological influences have been eased. On the other hand, Polish academia seems to be making yet another rapid turn in its winding post-1989 trajectory.¹

Higher education policy does not win votes

Eight years of national-conservative rule have sown a great deal of uncertainty in higher education, but also in the other levels of education, the judiciary, health care, etc. Still, political intervention has cut into university autonomy and research funding even more deeply in other countries, such as Hungary under the Orban government. Poland did not see its government seize control of state universities and politically motivated harassment of academics, although

Zusammenfassung

Mit dem Ende der Herrschaft der PiS-Regierung (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość für «Recht und Gerechtigkeit») in Polen kam es Ende 2023 zu einem Machtwechsel. Da die Partei während ihrer Regierungszeit ein patriotisches Verständnis von Wissenschaft gefördert hat und die Universitäten weitgehend auf staatliche Finanzierung angewiesen sind, herrschte unter Akademikerinnen und Akademikern ein pragmatischer Konformismus, um Budgetkürzungen zu vermeiden. Eine Forschungsförderung, die meritokratisch geprägt ist und nur über wenig Mittel verfügt, wirkt sich insbesondere zum Nachteil der Nachwuchsforschenden aus. Gewisse Sorgen vor ideologischem Einfluss auf die akademische Forschung und Lehre im Land sind zwar angesichts des Regierungswechsels zerstreut worden, aber die acht Jahre staatlicher Vereinnahmung haben den polnischen Hochschulbereich in einem desolaten Zustand hinterlassen.

spectacular at times, has been limited in scope.² In the zero-sum game of deficits that is Polish research funding, even the substantial budgets of a number of newly established, government-friendly scientific institutions have not caused much direct damage. In fact, many had been surprised by PiS's leniency towards academia, and feared that a third term in power would see the party taking more decisive action against universities. The first signs of an increase in political pressure on academic freedom during the 2023 election year included repeated threats to cut funding for researchers studying politically unwelcome topics, such as anti-Jewish crimes committed by Poles or sexual practices incompatible with the traditional heteronormative image of the family. On the eve of the elections, PiS widely promoted its vision of «patriotic science» and promised to begin realising it as soon as it had won the elections. PiS lost, but its higher education policy was at most only a minor factor in its defeat. The issue of academic freedom and research integrity has never carried much political weight in Poland.

The politicisation of science leads to academic precarity

Now, in early December 2023, the country awaits the formation of a new government by parties that have almost no common denominator other than their opposition to PiS. And the tentative balance sheet of national-conservative rule in higher education seems to be made up, for the most

1 For a detailed report on the state of academic freedom in Poland, see Bucholc, Marta (2022): Academic Freedom in Poland.

2 See Koper and Mohamadhossen (2020).



After the end of the national-conservative government in Poland, there seems to be no consensus on which direction reforms of higher education policy should take.

part, of the significant negative impact of the overt and crude politicisation of science since 2015. Every government worth its salt has an agenda in higher education: to believe otherwise would be to reproduce the neoliberal myth of impartial administration producing value-neutral efficiency. The PiS-sponsored reforms of higher education, launched in 2018 under the lofty banner of the «Constitution for Science», were also introduced in the name of neoliberalism. They were supposed to enhance the international competitiveness of Polish science and promote better management of higher education institutions by improving the quality of research and disposing of relics of the past. Instead, what followed was political hand-steering that made the fiction of merit-based, predictable science management utterly untenable.

The showdown came with issue of the report «Evaluation of the Quality of Scientific Activity» in 2022. Due to its distorted and biased assessment procedures, and in particular the absurd and flagrantly politicised rankings of scientific journals, the findings of the «evaluation of science», a state-run assessment of Poland's research institutions and institutions of higher education, seriously called into question possibility of planning for meaningful institutional development of higher education in Poland. Repeated ministerial threats to starve or simply close politically undesirable institutions as well as the few competitive, merit-based national grant programmes, with desperately low success

Résumé

La fin du règne du gouvernement PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość pour « Droit et Justice ») en Pologne a entraîné un changement de pouvoir à l'automne 2023. Comme le parti a promu une vision patriotique de la science lorsqu'il était au pouvoir et que les universités dépendent largement du financement public, un conformisme pragmatique a prévalu dans le milieu académique afin d'éviter les coupes budgétaires. Un financement de la recherche de type méritocratique et disposant de peu de moyens a eu un effet particulièrement délétère sur les chercheuses et chercheurs de la relève. Certaines inquiétudes face à l'influence idéologique sur la recherche et l'enseignement académiques dans le pays ont certes été dissipées à la suite du changement de gouvernement, mais les huit années de mainmise de l'État ont laissé le domaine des hautes écoles polonaises dans un état de désolation.

rates due to insufficient funding, shook the confidence of thousands of Polish academics. Early career researchers were particularly hard hit, as the scarcity of tenured positions mean that they are usually employed in fixed-term positions dependent on third-party funding. Moreover, the significance of the state-funded grant system extends far beyond career planning: many research studies, whose expenses exceed the meagre resources of research institutes, are entirely dependent on grants. As flawed as the system may be (it reproduces the Matthew effect and operates under constant financial pressure), the prospect of its elimination was a chilling one.

Stoicism in the face of constant reform

When considering the impact of national-conservative policy making since 2015, it is important to remember that higher education in Poland is almost entirely public. As a rule, state universities do not charge tuition fees. However, student numbers are declining, and the interest of foreign students willing and able to pay to study in Poland is very moderate. Needless to say, universities do not have any endowment funds. Therefore, the lion's share of their funding comes from the state. Other sources are negligible, there is little in the way of private sponsorship of science or public-private partnerships in research. This dependence on the state reduces the resilience of the research and higher education system, and the internal solidarity of the academic community. At the same time, the negligible level of government expenditure on the research and higher education system (1.46% of GDP in 2022) and the chronically low priority given to it in political negotiations work against any significant change for the better.

This situation creates an interesting paradox: although politically marginalised, higher education has been the object of one reform or another almost constantly since the early 1990s, fuelled by «the dispositif of the reform».³ However, while the Polish higher education sector has apparently been stoically complying with the series of regulatory changes, it has at the same time proved «largely reform resistant».⁴ There have been no academic strikes in post-1989 Poland and virtually no collective opposition to the serial reforms beyond expressions of indignation in open letters to various authorities. Individual and institutional strategies have always been adapted promptly in the ever-changing legal environment. In the midst of this, there has been little promotion of the concept of academic freedom as a principle that must be actively defended against political intervention in any polity, even a democratic one. The fear of being deprived of resources tends to override all other considerations, and conformism appears to be the only viable strategy for avoiding added hardship. However, this is a conformism that does not extend beyond lip service and adaptive behaviour, which, though it can involve a significant expenditure of funds, energy and time, is always half-hearted at best.

How to build back trust after eight years of paralysis?

In December 2023, there is an overwhelming sense in the Polish academic world that the era of national-conservative threats to academic freedom has come to an end. While the academic beneficiaries of the PiS's higher education policy – and there were quite a few – may well feel frustrated, the majority of Polish academics are simply bracing themselves for change, yet again. The dismantling of the PiS-sponsored «science evaluation» system is widely expected, as is an increase in funding opportunities and an improvement in the financial prospects of those working in the academic sector, especially early career researchers. But there seems to be no consensus on the direction of further reform. Worse still, the very idea the involvement of the academic community in the reform has been compromised by the PiS, whose science ministers repeatedly rejected expert advice. For many, it will not be easy to trust the intentions of politicians. After eight years of state capture, Polish universities will take a long time to recover.

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3 Ostrowicka, Spychalska-Stasiak and Stankiewicz (2020).

4 Antonowicz, Kulczycki and Budzanowska (2020).

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