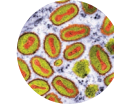


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Worrying changes in Hungary

The European country's autocratic government has made a disturbing grab at the nation's scientific institutions.

Travel writers like to call Hungary a land of contrasts. But the cliché has been true there in recent years, as the ultranationalist government of Viktor Orbán has tightened its grip. Although European Union politicians have watched Hungary's increasingly anti-democratic tendencies with mounting concern, researchers have seen the nation's research base begin to flourish, with new internationally competitive laboratories.

This juxtaposition has been achieved because, until now, Hungary has left science in the hands of its own experts. And for the most part, they have done a splendid job. That situation has now changed. The authoritarian government is snatching away scientific autonomy — and this should provoke alarm.

The storm has been gathering since an April election brought a landslide victory for Orbán's Fidesz party. In its path is the proud Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which has stood independent of politics for more than two decades, since the collapse of communism in the region. The academy has done sterling work, including creating major research grants that allowed many researchers who had been working abroad to return to Hungary and establish independent labs. Yet the government's budget proposal for next year, announced earlier this month, would transfer the majority of the academy's financing into the newly created Ministry for Innovation and Technology.

And last week, Orbán dismissed József Pálincás from the leadership of the National Research, Development and Innovation Office, a post he has held for three years. Since 2015, Pálincás, a physicist and former academy president, has created from scratch a broad portfolio of funding programmes ranging from basic science to near-industry research. The scheme was a model for how to build a science base founded on excellence, and it triggered a welcome reversal to Hungary's previous brain drain (see *Nature* 551, 425–426; 2017).

According to innovation minister László Palkovics, the changes are to unify innovation and science policy, and to eliminate fragmentation of research budgets. On the face of it, that's reasonable. Palkovics promises that the academy money will be filtered back to its various research institutions. And any incoming government in a democratic country, of course, has the right and mandate to replace key members of staff.

Yet many researchers in Hungary tell *Nature* they are worried academy money might be returned with strings attached — maybe instructions that it should be spent to serve the economy more directly, or that historians should glorify their country's past. Trust is at a low ebb. The government's actions in other areas are becoming ever more extreme. On the day of Pálincás's dismissal, for example, the parliament approved a law that makes helping refugees to apply for asylum in Hungary a crime punishable by up to 90 days' imprisonment. It also approved constitutional changes that require all state institutions to protect Hungarian cultural and Christian values, and that make homelessness illegal.

Orbán has never felt comfortable with what he sees as academia's international and elitist air. A particular bugbear for him has been the Central European University (CEU), which was founded in 1991

by Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros, and is registered in New York state but located in Budapest. A law rushed through in April last year required international universities to operate as higher-education institutes in their country of origin as well as in Hungary.

That law affected only the CEU, whose agreement to remain in Hungary expires at the end of this year. The change attracted an impressive 70,000 protesters to the streets of Budapest, and the CEU quickly

“The authoritarian government is snatching away scientific autonomy.”

arranged higher-educational activities in the United States to be compliant with the law. But the government has still not signed off on a new agreement for the university to stay in the country, drafted last September. Negotiations are continuing, but the CEU has organized an alternative home for itself in Austria, and a transfer there seems increasingly likely as deadlines for recruiting next year's students approach.

That would deprive Hungary of a valuable intellectual hub, and would mark another significant step backwards for the country.

The message to Hungary should be clear: ensure that the government's new management and methods continue to uphold the principles of meritocratic funding. And maintain the possibilities of long-term funding for excellent basic research, to help ensure that a strong scientific community can continue to feed the government's laudable innovation ambitions. Meanwhile, the 2019 budget, with its plan to take control of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' funds, is scheduled to be approved by mid-July. There is still time for the government to reverse its course. It should do so. ■

Local science

Researchers in five Asian economies are working to address communities' needs.

One of the most commonly stated goals of science and scientists is to work to improve society. But which society? The needs and circumstances of people, communities and regions across the world are very different — from energy use and disease threats to natural-resource availability and pollution.

In a special issue this week, *Nature* explores how some of these local needs are being addressed across five strong science centres in East Asia: Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. Over the past few decades, each member of this diverse group has evolved its own model of how to pursue research successfully. Impressively, some of their key achievements are those in which they have matched the science agenda to explicit and unique local requirements.