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## INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE: “FOCUSING ON FREEDOM”

Viera Žúborová\*

After the recent Scholars at Risk Global Congress in Berlin, the German Federal Foreign Minister, **Heiko Maas**, noted: “*Not only wars and crises, but also autocratic governments are increasingly curtailing the freedom of the arts, science, and opinion worldwide*”. Such historical global challenges are not only a threat to higher education, but to liberal democratic society in general. These include the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, China and beyond; the resulting refugee crises; the resurgence of authoritarianism and ethnic nationalism; and related attacks on higher education including the dismissal of over 4,000 academics in Turkey. In Central and Eastern Europe, legislative and administrative actions over the last year have threatened the autonomy and continuing operations of universities and research centres, including especially in Russia, the Levada Center and the European University in St. Petersburg, and in Hungary, the CEU. Democratic values themselves are under pressure.

Yes, also here in our lands academic freedom is under pressure, we are witnessing a shrinking space in academia for longer time; and Slovak republic is not an exception. It just looks away to avoid seeing the truth and to see dangerous wolves hiding of Slovak academic environment. Why is that, and are we willing to change something, or we will just remain in shadow and secure zone that will just protect the position of the so-called scholars but will refuse to re-brand the true education values and academic freedom that was actually never so welcomed in our lands.

International Scientific Conference Focusing on Freedom which was organised by Bratislava Policy Institute with the cooperation of Hanns Seidel Stiftung Slowakei and Matej Bel University, specifically Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations opened the floor to response to the global trends on scholars at risk and on our academic freedoms. On the 3<sup>th</sup> of October

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2019, scholars, experts and analysts met in friendly and open environment to discuss various question on academic freedoms, academic autonomy and educational values. It was the pilot conference on this topic and participants, but also me as an observer, had feeling that this specific event was needed. After 30 years of building our liberal democratic system, strengthening our freedoms (especially the social and political ones) we somehow forgotten to speak about specific freedoms that are needed for a better society, and need to be protected and heard out. As an observer I had the feeling that I was sitting in the middle of a massive psychological sessions where the patients were completely free to speak about their problems, limits, barriers and expectations towards their academic freedoms and academic autonomy in Slovak environment. Some of you could blame us to not to be strict on the outputs that should be received as participants, and maybe you are right, if you are expected that this was a scientific conference. But it was what it needed to be and not what was accepted by Slovak scholars.

In Banská Bystrica we made paradigmatic shift towards what is usual in West, we created a conference that was focusing on something that was common to all of the scholars, without any barriers or expertise, because academic freedom should matter to all of us, not only to social scientists, sociologists, lawyers or political scientists. And so, we gave that space to whole academia in Slovak republic, and we give it also to former scholars who left the academic environment for various reasons. And the results were that we came back to the beginning where we can define again the values and identity of academic freedom, values of education and also our academic autonomy. To sum up, I will identify the weaknesses and strengths of this conference that the reader could observe the limits and barriers, that we still have in our lands when it comes to the discussion of our freedoms.

The weaknesses of the conference could be divided into two main areas, the first the type of participants and second was the general title of the topics. Nevertheless, these weaknesses could be seen also as a positive sign what to improve in the communication towards academia in Slovak Republic and how to promote the values of education, and importance of academic freedom in Slovakia in the negative process of commercialization of higher education and the impact on our autonomy, academic freedom and future society.

The first weakness was related to the structure of participants, as I already highlighted academic freedom should matter to all of us, not only academics from various types of social sciences. However, after the first look on the

participants list I can confirm that social sciences dominated. Why is that? There are many reasons for this state, the first is the easiest, there was lack of promotion about this conference, without any relevant scientific input for the scholars that is measured by “number of impacts in the CV” no intellectual outputs, as one of the core values of “being a scholar”. Low / zero level of other scholars could be influenced also by the level of imagination, sensitivity and that they could also speak out about their academic freedom and autonomy, since there is no specialisation in this area of interest. And this is the core problem, the non-ability and unwillingness to recognize the true mission of academics and the position of academics in the society and democratic system. The scholars in Slovakia should recognize their position and impact on the society and system, and they should also recognize their role into defining the academic autonomy and academic freedom in Slovakia, before it will be swallowed up by commercialism and market. The next aim for us will be to promote academic freedom as a general value, research interest and intellectual object for the Slovak academia as whole, not only for social scientists.

The second weakness was related to the subject of the conference. For some of the participants it was too general without any specific focus. They have the feeling that they are lost in the translation and they were consuming various concerns and areas of interests. Our intention was to bring together scholars that are interest in the areas of academic freedom, and without limitations we gave them the space to show to the audience what topics are most interesting for them and about which they are most concerned. We also agreed with other participants that the future conferences will be particularly oriented on specifics that are focusing on “at the moment”. Without the involvement of a majority of scholars towards the discussion on the values of education and academic freedom we will not be able to protect them in the future. The aim is to rebuild the relations of academics with their academic freedom, as the core value of the society, but until that time their freedoms needs to be observed and secured by the society as a whole. As one professor during the last Scholars at Risk Congress noted, “*academic freedom is so precious that it should not remain in the hands of scholars only, but we need to protect it as a whole society*”.

The conference with the title Focusing of Freedom had more strengths than weaknesses, and in general it was seen as a positive step towards future cooperation at various levels and institutional partnerships. One of these

partnership had its first official meeting after its establishment in May 2019 called the Scholars at Risk Section Slovakia. Four of five members of this section (Bratislava Policy Institute, BISLA, UMB Banská Bystrica and FMK UCM Trnava) launched a round-table on the future cooperation in the area of academic freedom. SAR Slovakia celebrated officially during this round-table the accession of new member into the section - UPJŠ from Košice. The discussion brought up various problems and limits in the area of academic freedom. First of all, the members agreed, that the main problem is the public knowledge of the term, which is too general to be discussed, and their preferred to focus mainly on the academic autonomy of Universities and research centres and towards the negative impacts on commercialisation of higher education in Slovak republic. They agreed that current threats to academic freedom can only be solved if scholars, Universities, academics, professionals and international bodies (like Scholars at Risk) come together and work for the same purpose. The Slovak Section also agreed to common approach and future cooperation in the monitoring of academic freedom in Slovakia, and after this crucial move we will be also able to uncover the main problems, limits and barriers of Slovak scholars in our academia, because we need to not only think, that there is a problem but also to act on it.

It will be a low value report from a conference if we will not speak about the areas of interest of the speakers who were active and the strengths of it. The conference with the title *Focusing on Freedom* was divided into three main panels and round-table SAR Slovakia Section, which was already discussed above. The first panel with the title *“Freedom and Universities: where are we and where are we heading?”* was focusing on the main barriers and problems of Slovak academics in general, but during the discussion the speakers got divided into two groups. The speakers **Miroslav Řádek**, **Lucia Rýsová**, **Petra Rendková**, **Norbert Vrabec** and panel discussant **Jozef Michal Mintal** discussed the negative development of academic freedom/autonomy in the areas of latest transformation and negative medialization of higher education. They raised the questions on funding and commercialisation of Universities, and noted, that the main problem of current Slovak academia was the fact, that they are acting like competitors at the market that is defined by various rankings and number of Scopus articles. As we were listening closely the speakers, talking about this main threat, we figured out that it goes beyond the borders and it can be observed in whole region. The rankings make Universities blind towards their academic freedom and autonomy, they

are becoming servants of the system, which formed such rules and procedures, that the violation of them is often needed to give chance to opposing voices.

The second panel with the title "*Academic freedom in Slovakia: a myth or sleeping beauty?*" was focusing on specific case studies in Slovak academia from various perspectives and levels. The speakers **Martin Martovič**, **Martin Klus**, **Ivana Klimentova** and me as discussant (**Viera Zuborova**) discussed the main problems of our rights in the academia. The panel was focusing on various individuals in the Slovak academia (from University senators, to academics who became politicians and practitioners who became academics without affiliations) and their problems in this rotten system. From the first look the titles of presentations differ but they have something in common that was visible not only between the lines of the discussions but particularly in the final conclusions. The common sign of all the inputs of this panel was the lack of inclusion of the academia in Slovakia. The non-inclusivity is visible in the area of recognition of different opinions towards the so-called mainstream that is rotten, or more say frozen in the nineties. In Slovak academia it is not suitable to wear different "dress code" than the majority of the scholars community, and if you wish to or you try to, you will be persecuted, not like a witch during the Middle Ages but as a lunatic who still believes in positive change.

The third panel with the title "*Special focus on ....*" was associated to particular case studies visible in a global perspective and Central Europe as a whole. The speakers **András László Pap**, **Veronika Valkovičová** and the discussant **Dagmar Kusá** discussed the main problems of academic commercialisation, censorship and politicization of academic research, especially the position of gender studies and their area of interest. Both speakers have one particular case in common, and it was academic freedom in Hungary in the view of recent developments. Both speakers confirmed that various types of illiberal regimes and autocrats have in their "wanted list" figures from academic environment. They also confirmed that events in Hungary were related to the commercialisation of higher education and the apathy to act in the academic community in Hungary, despite their position from a global perspective and the position of CEU in it. They are willing to renounce some of their rights in exchange for better funding opportunities. Autocrats are becoming more sophisticated also when it comes to the financing of special areas of interest which are in opposition towards their political culture and the rule of majority. The restriction put on gender studies were beginning, and some

governments already claimed, that there are more areas similar to gender studies, which are not welcomed on the market, because of their low level of competence. This is no coincidence, this is a real political fight about the ideological context and “DNA” of the illiberal and populist governments. These research areas “similar” to gender studies will shortly receive more restrictions, since they are questioning the perceptions and social structures of societies, living conditions and our lives in open democratic societies. What is happening now is the politization of academic autonomy, which attacks individuals whose lives do not cope with strong conservative, populist and religiously founded ideologies and their old fashioned traditional values.

Focusing on freedom brought together scholars, academics and professionals from higher education, research institutions and nongovernmental sector, which have been witnessing the restriction of academic freedom and academic autonomy for a while. Personally, the conference was filled with emotions, feelings of apathy and distrust towards to future of academia on one hand and hope and beliefs that something has changed and will be changing towards an open, inclusive environment that stands on healthy values and ideas. Focusing on freedom showed us that there are still gaps that needs to be filled out with the cooperation and communication. It confirmed that these values and ideas are not general in the academic society as a whole, and that the research area “academic freedom” is still being dominant issue mainly for social scientist, which we considered to be wrong perception. The second, academic freedom is seen by various scholars and experts as something abstract and general, and not personal towards their daily struggles. They tend to use the term academic autonomy to describe the limits and barriers towards their work, research and teaching.

Focusing on freedom confirmed that the commercialisation of higher education is seen as the main threat towards the academic freedom and academic autonomy of scholars in Slovakia. They are calling for joined forces in the common future of Slovak academia. I agree that the common threats can be solved when academics, scholars, experts and international initiatives (like Scholars at Risk) join forces and bring their ideas and potential together. To beat commercialisation and negative trends towards shrinking space of our scholars in Slovakia, Universities need to stop acting as competitors in the market that is built on the blind perception of international and national rankings. We need to start to protect Universities which should be seen as islands where new ideas are developed and where interesting and maybe a little controversial and

controversial issues and themes are discussed for the sake of our societies. We need to communicate towards the society the main message that our academic freedom is the essential driver of a healthy and free higher education sector, which in turn is essential to a functioning democracy. To support academic freedom means to make a long-term investment in the society.