

**In defense of democracy and academic freedom
– Lessons from Hungary and the USA
16 December 2025**

The illiberal playbook in higher education

Andrea Peto

Why me? (first sight: failure story)

- 2 Year MA program in Gender Studies deleted from accredited study list
- LexCEU: moving a university from EU member country to another
- Resignation Hungarian Accreditation Committee
- Resignation from Sabanci University International Advisory Board, Gender Studies



Hungary as a laboratory

Weaponizing students and international cooperation, manipulating international rankings, exploiting financial vulnerabilities, and corrupting quality assurance mechanisms, together with simultaneously constructing parallel, illiberal structures of knowledge production, constitute a comprehensive, global strategy for authoritarian control.

Structure

1. The Hungarian model
2. Why does higher education matter?
3. Why is higher education so vulnerable to illiberal attacks?
4. The Double Strategy of Illiberal Transformation: Destroy and Build
5. Coopting the language of neoliberal commodification for illiberal takeover
6. The Illiberal Hijacking of Academic Authorisation
7. Remasculinisation of science and higher education
8. Buying a Place in the International Ranking
9. Students as a security risk
10. From Global to National Science
11. Gender Studies as the Canary in the Coal Mine
12. The Broader Implications

Strategies and tactic

- Students, faculty and staff should be allies
- Communicate and listen to the experts
- Strengthen ties to local community
- Look for non-state funding
- Emotions and appreciation matter
- Organise and network among allies
- Read and observe your enemies
- Forget orthodoxies: such as for example internationalisation and mobility are good and requirements of excellence.
- Get prepared for what is coming

Unexpected alliances

“Why are you afraid of the education?”

