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Research we don't like

FRA REDAKTØREN

ARE BREAN

E-mail: are.brean@tidsskriftet.no

Are Brean, PhD, Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association. He is a specialist in neurology.

Independent research institutions and universities are key elements of a well-functioning democratic society. However, the principle of academic freedom is under pressure. It is felt in Norway as well.



Photo: Einar Nilsen

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has gradually seized increasing control of the country's academic institutions and research that are not to his liking. In 2018, the government called a halt to all gender research, declaring it to be 'non-science', and pressured the renowned Central European University to leave the country (1). Now, the grip is tightening even further. In Hungary, as in many other countries, the academy of science plays a key role in the funding and organisation of research. In the summer of 2019, President János Áder ratified a bill that subjects the country's academy of science to government control (1). The authorities have thereby put themselves in a position to decide who will receive funding and for what kind of research. 'Our goal is to prevent billions of government funds disappearing without tangible results,' stated László Palkovics, Hungarian minister of innovation and technology (2). A number of European research institutions have fervently denounced the bill, claiming that it will mean the end of independent science in Hungary. The European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities (ALLEA) has referred to it as an 'attack on academic freedom' (3).

But Orbán and his populist Fidesz party are not alone in attacking universities and research institutions they do not like. In the UK, Nigel Farage of the populist Brexit party has promised to shut down all European studies and repeatedly accused British universities of 'brainwashing' their students (4). In the Netherlands, the EU-sceptic populist leader Thierry Baudet, who won 14,5 % of the votes in the last general election, has vigorously attacked the universities for 'subversion and indoctrination' (5). On the American continent, Donald Trump's scepticism of scientific evidence is well known, while the Brazilian right-wing

populist president Jair Bolsonaro is cutting support to the country's universities and accusing government research institutions of lying about research results that are not to his personal liking (6).

That populist parties target universities and research institutions is perhaps not wholly unexpected: a key element of populism as a phenomenon is the idea of an 'elite' that is in opposition to 'the people' – that the populists claim to represent (7). And if there is one thing academic institutions are replete with, it is experts of all kinds. They are therefore exactly what the populists need to fulfil the role of the despicable 'elite', especially when their research results contradict 'true popular opinion'. This kind of association has been postulated as a main reason why populist movements reject climate research (8). Similarly, a recent study found a significant positive correlation between vaccine scepticism and the proportion of votes for populist parties in different European countries (9).

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In the debate on research in Norway, the recent proposal from the Progress Party's committee on immigration and integration fits nicely into this European pattern. The committee, chaired by Sylvi Listhaug, minister for the elderly and public health, proposes that political requirements for diversity of opinion be introduced in research on 'immigration, integration and criminality, in collaboration with the Research Council of Norway and the universities and university college sector' (10). How this should be achieved in practice remains unclear – whether requirements for specific political affiliations should apply when hiring researchers, or whether requirements for a specific political agenda should apply to the allocation of research funding. The reactions from the academic world have been predictably vehement. Svein Stølen, rector at the University of Oslo, writes that the proposal 'shows with abundant clarity that not even in Norway can academic freedom be taken for granted', and he claims that 'an attack such as this threatens ... the core of liberal democracy' (11). This time it was immigration research. The next time it might be research on public health or ageing that fails to come up with the 'correct' answers and needs to be politically guided. It was not without reason that in 2018 the European Parliament adopted a detailed defence of academic freedom – not least from political interference (12). It is only when knowledge production and sharing are not subject to political or commercial control that societal development can be ensured, and in the final account also the freedom of each citizen. This applies in Hungary as well as in Norway.

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