

Managing Institutions in Difficult Contexts

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This group discussion will start with two examples of how academic institutions in Central and Eastern Europe navigate political pressure, institutional transformation, and social crisis while striving to preserve autonomy, integrity, and community.

In Hungary, recent reforms have transferred many state universities to foundation-based governance models (“public interest trusts”), creating uncertainty about access to EU higher education funds and raising concerns about political influence. The Liszt Academy in Budapest stands out as one of the few institutions that has resisted this transition, choosing instead to remain a state university. In December 2022, its Senate unanimously reaffirmed its commitment to university autonomy and academic freedom, rejecting the foundation model despite governmental attempts to influence leadership elections. The case illustrates both the vulnerabilities and the resilience of institutional governance in a politicized environment, as well as the moral stance of faculty members defending academic principles.

In Serbia, the Department of Musicology at the University of Arts in Belgrade faced a different form of crisis when national protests erupted after a tragic public accident in 2024. Amid widespread student demonstrations, prolonged university closures, and restrictive government decrees, the department confronted the challenge of sustaining academic and artistic life under severe constraints. Through initiatives such as the student-led movement “Defending (with) Knowledge,” the academic community sought to reaffirm the value of dialogue, empathy, and shared purpose in times of moral and institutional uncertainty.

Together, these cases illuminate how universities and their leaders respond to external pressures—political, social, and ethical—while managing the fragile balance between institutional survival and the defense of academic freedom.