

THE AUTONOMY OF THE UNIVERSITY BETWEEN SCIENCE AND POLITICS

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Abstract: From the perspective of systems theory, the university is a system. Like any system, it is composed of multiple subsystems. Its subsystems are faculties, institutes, colleges and other higher educational and scientific institutions. Like any being, it exists in a certain space - environment and at a certain time. Its environment is composed of numerous entities: the state, political parties, economic organizations, non-governmental organizations, citizens, etc. The environment influences the university. The influence of the environment can stimulate the development of the university, stagnate it, direct it in directions contrary to its goals and regress its development.

The state is undoubtedly the most powerful entity that can influence the university. After it come the other social subjects among which, in the first place, are political parties, then economic organizations (enterprises, banks, etc.), non-governmental organizations and, finally, prominent intellectuals.

The influence of the environment is reflected in the autonomy of the university. It acts inversely proportional to its autonomy. The greater influence is, the lower its autonomy is. Therefore, the autonomy of the university can be treated as freedom from external influences.

The autonomy of the university as freedom from external influences is one of the most essential dimensions of academic freedom. This does not mean that the university should be isolated from society as its environment, but that its essential decisions and activities must not be conditioned and dictated by external centers of power.

The autonomy of the university, as freedom from external influences, is achieved by freeing it from those influences. Understood as freedom from external influences, its autonomy manifests itself as normative autonomy, autonomy in teaching and scientific activity, organizational autonomy, financial autonomy and personnel autonomy.

The paper provides a review of the autonomy of the university from the influences of the state and political parties. Starting from the notorious fact that institutions are made up of people and that there is no better institution than the people who make it up, the paper places special emphasis on the influence of political parties on professors and students.

Keywords: university, autonomy, state, professors, students.

1. INTRODUCTION

The autonomy of the university is one of the greatest achievements of European civilization. It is a guarantee that its educational and scientific activity will be able to develop freely, without political, ideological or economic pressures.

Historically, the idea of university autonomy appears in the Middle Ages (Dimić, 2019). The first European universities, such as the University of Bologna and the University of Paris, received special charters from rulers or the Pope. They recognized the right to independently, with their own statutes, regulate internal relations, elect and promote their professors themselves, regulate curricula, decide on internal issues, etc. Thus was born the idea that the university is a free community of professors and students, and not an ordinary state institution.

In the 19th century, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) had a great influence on the development of the idea of university autonomy. His model applied to the University of Berlin (Humboldt University), established in 1810, was based on the freedom of scientific research and freedom of teaching. According to this idea, the professor should investigate the truth, without external restrictions, and the student should be free to learn and think critically. The state should provide the university with financial support and a legal framework, and not interfere with the teaching and educational process and scientific activity. For Humboldt, the scientific activity of the university takes place without interruption. It is an environment where new scientific questions and problems are constantly being raised and old knowledge is being re-examined. That is why, according to him, the university must not be an instrument of anyone's politics and any ideology. In short, Humboldt gave the autonomy of the university a deeper philosophical meaning, seeing it as a necessary condition for free scientific creativity, and thus for the development of knowledge and science.

In the 20th century, especially after the experiences with totalitarian regimes, it became clear that when the government controls science, both truth and society suffer. That is why the Humboldt's model became the basis of the autonomy of many European universities, and the autonomy of universities became one of the fundamental democratic principles.

Humboldt's model of university autonomy is embodied in the Magna Charta Universitatum, adopted in 1988 in Bologna, on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of Bologna's University, and amended in 2020. The basic principles of this Charter are:

1. institutional autonomy - the university must be independent of political power and economic interests in order to be able to freely carry out its tasks;
2. academic freedom - teaching and scientific research must be intellectually and morally independent of political, ideological and economic pressures;
3. inseparability of teaching and research - quality higher education is inextricably linked to scientific work and students should actively participate in the creation of new knowledge and
4. openness and international cooperation - universities should transcend national borders and encourage the exchange of ideas, professors and students.

In the amended version of 2020, which contains the same principles, greater emphasis is placed on the social responsibility of universities, global cooperation, the protection of academic freedom in the face of new challenges and the role of universities in solving contemporary social problems. The Charter has been signed by rectors of more than 1000 universities on the Planet, including the rector of the University "St. Cyril and Methodius - Skopje," the rector of the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - Bitola and the Rector of the South East European University. However, by signing, the rectors do not assume legally binding international obligations, but rather publicly commit themselves on behalf of their universities to respect and promote the basic principles of the Charter. Accordingly, signing the Charter, in itself, does not guarantee that autonomy will always be implemented in the constitutions and laws on higher education of countries. It is an expression of institutional determination and moral obligation of the universities - signatories. The actual realization of autonomy, according to the principles of the Charter, depends on the constitutional precedent of the state and the laws, as well as on the attitude of the state government, and even the attitude of the universities towards those principles.

Today, in most European constitutions and laws regulating higher education, the autonomy of the university is based on Humboldt's ideas. Thus founded, it allows for freedom of scientific research, freedom of teaching, institutional self-government and independence from political and ideological influences.

However, autonomy does not mean that the university is above constitutions and laws. It always goes hand in hand with public accountability, transparency and high ethical standards. Universities have an obligation to ensure quality education, scientific results and rational use of public funds (Kivisto, Velamo, 2023).

The university should be a place where argument is stronger than authority, and truth more important than political or personal gain. When the university is free, it creates knowledge, critical-thinking citizens, and progress. When its autonomy is limited by politics, be it state or party politics, science suffers first, and in the long run, suffers the whole of society (McNeely, Ian, 2025).

2. THE STATE AND THE AUTONOMY OF THE UNIVERSITY

From a legal and philosophical perspective, freedom of education and scientific work is one of the essential features of university autonomy. The state has the right and obligation to determine the system of higher education but, in accordance with the principle of university autonomy, it cannot subordinate the content of teaching and scientific research to political, ideological or other interests. This is confirmed by the provisions on university autonomy in several constitutions of European countries based, more or less, on the Humboldt's model of university autonomy. The most consistent followers of this model are, without a doubt, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Austria.

The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany (Grundgesetz) is completely clear, and therefore unambiguous. It states in Article 3, paragraph 5: "Art and science, research and teaching are free." In this regard, the German Federal Constitutional Court, in its extensive case law, has firmly established that the freedom of science does not only protect individual professors and researchers, but also requires the institutional autonomy of universities, which includes: freedom of scientific research, freedom of teaching, the right of universities to independently organize their academic activities, and protection from political and ideological pressures.

In Austria, the autonomy of universities has a constitutional guarantee that sets it apart from most European Union member states. It is granted to them by Article 81b (Art. 81c) of the Federal Constitutional Law (Bundes-Verfassungsgesetz), which stipulates that every public university has the right to autonomy. This constitutional provision was later elaborated in the University Act of 2002 (Universitätsgesetz 2002). It follows from the provisions of this law that the autonomy of Austrian universities includes organizational autonomy, academic autonomy, personal autonomy, and financial autonomy. The Austrian model is based on the idea that the university is a public institution that serves the state and also serves society. Therefore, it is not subordinated to daily political interests, and the constitutional guarantee of autonomy serves to protect the freedom of scientific research, freedom of teaching and critical thought.

Italy, on whose soil the first modern university was born (in Bologna), just like Germany, is a country in which the autonomy of universities has a clear constitutional basis, although the Constitution does not explicitly use the expression "autonomy of the university." The provisions of Article 33 of the Constitution of the Republic (Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana) are crucial for the autonomy of Italian universities, according to which: "Art and science are free, and their teaching is also free." Furthermore, the same article stipulates that

"Higher education institutions, universities and academies have the right, within the limits established by the laws of the State, to regulate their own rules." This means that the Italian constitution dedicates special attention to the normative autonomy of the university, which places Italy among the rare countries that constitutionally regulate the issue of normative, and thus institutional, autonomy of universities.

After the collapse of the SFR Yugoslavia, all newly created states accepted the statement that the university must have a certain degree of autonomy. However, the degree of constitutional guarantee of university autonomy varies significantly from state to state.

The Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia is, in this regard, the most decisive in the region. In Article 58, it expressly establishes that state universities and state higher education institutions are autonomous. The law regulates the manner of their financing, but it must not violate their constitutionally guaranteed autonomy. Thus, the Constitution requires the legislator, when normatively regulating higher education, to be careful not to violate the principle of their autonomy.

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, in Article 68, stipulates that the autonomy of the university is guaranteed, and the state encourages the development of science and higher education. Encouragement implies support.

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, in Article 72, stipulates that the autonomy of universities, higher education and scientific institutions is guaranteed. They independently decide on their organization and work, in accordance with the law. This constitutional provision is an important constitutional guarantee for academic freedom and university autonomy.

The Constitution of the Republic of Montenegro, in Article 75, guarantees the autonomy of the university. It independently decides on its internal organization and work within the framework established by law.

The Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, in Article 46, stipulates that autonomy is guaranteed to the University. This is a fundamental constitutional guarantee for the freedom of higher education and scientific research activity. The content of autonomy is further elaborated, in detail, in the Law on Higher Education and the Law on Scientific Research Activity.

The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not contain an explicit provision on universities. Due to the complex constitutional arrangement, the normative regulation of higher education is within the competence of the entities and cantons. The autonomy of universities is regulated by the entity and cantonal constitutions and laws. Decentralization as a democratic principle is good, but it prevents the unity of the system at the state level.

The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo does not mention university autonomy, but in Article 13, it stipulates that citizens are guaranteed scientific and artistic creativity and academic freedom. Such a constitutional provision allows the state wide room for maneuver in the legal regulation of the legal status of the university which, from the perspective of its autonomy, is not good.

The constitutions of the states guarantee the autonomy of the university. They leave the detailed regulation of the organizational structure, relations and financing of the university to the laws. Each state has one or more laws that regulate higher education and scientific research activities. In accordance with the constitutionally guaranteed principle of university autonomy, the laws should regulate the framework foundations of the organization of the educational and scientific research activities of the university, its internal organization, its financing and its staffing. Unfortunately, states, with their laws, often go broader and deeper than what is required by the constitutions to regulate the framework foundations of the university's establishment, in accordance with the principle of autonomy. This is actually demonstrated by the normative regulation of higher education in the Republic of North Macedonia with the several laws on higher education adopted after its state independence, because each of them, from the perspective of university autonomy, seems more restrictive than the previous one is. The culmination of state interference in university autonomy will be reached with the adoption of the new Law on Higher Education, which, in the proposal (www.sobranie.mk, 2026), among other things, provides the possibility for the minister to repeal decisions of university bodies, political consent for the statute of the institution and periodic re-election of full professors. It is nonsense from the perspective of the principle of university autonomy. At first glance, these are mechanisms of "control of legality" and "improvement of quality", but when the executive power becomes the final authority in academic matters, and professors enter a cycle of regular re-evaluation, autonomy as a principle is lost and it becomes a conditional category, dependent on the executive power, i.e. the state. A university that loses autonomy gradually ceases to be a corrective to the power of the government and begins to function as its technical partner. Such a university produces compliance with the government and clientelists and apparatchiks, not people with free thought. The law should not be a tool for disciplining the university, but a framework that protects its freedom.

According to the knowledge from the past, and to some extent also according to modern knowledge, the state can influence the autonomy of the university in several ways:

- through legislation, when it prescribes by law what must be taught, which scientific positions are "permitted" or limits the topics for scientific research;
- through funding, if the allocation of funds depends on political loyalty, and not on the quality of teaching and scientific results;

- through appointment of managers, if state authorities directly appoint rectors, deans or members of university bodies, instead of them being elected by the academic community;
- through censorship or pressure – when professors and researchers are exposed to verbal attacks and even sanctions due to scientific positions that do not suit the holders of power, which, unfortunately, is still present today and
- through administrative control, if bureaucratic procedures, and especially supervisory bodies, are used as a means of restricting scientific and teaching freedom (Roberts, Saliba, Spanagel, 2022).

In a democratic society, the state should:

- provide a legal framework and financial conditions for quality higher education;
- establish standards for quality and accountability;
- guarantee equal access to education and
- respect the academic freedom of professors, researchers and students.

As Humboldt pointed out, the university fulfills its mission only if scientific truth is sought freely, without fear and without political dictate. There is no scientific truth if its seekers – professors and other scientists work according to political dictates and fear of responsibility for deviations from such dictates.

From the above, it can be concluded that the greatest danger to the freedom of higher education and scientific work is not the very existence of the state, but overstepping of the boundaries of its legitimate regulatory role (Roberts, Saliba, Spanagel, 2022). When the state, through its mechanisms of influence on the university, becomes the arbiter of scientific truth or teaching content, the autonomy of the university turns into a formality, and academic freedom loses its essence (McNeely, Ian, 2025).

3. THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES ON THE AUTONOMY OF THE UNIVERSITY

Political parties can influence the autonomy of the university from the position of parties in power and from the position of parties in opposition. Parties in power exercise their influence through the instruments of the state, which was discussed above. Sometimes problems can arise due to the influence on the university by some coalition parties that are not in a leading position in the coalition. However, problems are, almost always, resolved by consensus within the framework of the coalition agreement.

In contrast, parties in the opposition always have a great interest in exercising influence on the university.

One of the ways of political parties influence to the university is the recruitment of professors. The membership of university professors in political parties is not unconstitutional. Professors have the right to political conviction, party membership and participation in political and public life. The problem arises when the recruitment of professors by political parties is used to influence teaching and university decisions. For example, if a professor is required to:

- favor certain candidates in the title election process;
- influence the election of a rector or dean according to party interests;
- exert political pressure on colleagues or students;
- adapt teaching or scientific work to party interests.

Of course, membership of professors in political parties does not automatically threaten the autonomy of the university. Many professors manage to clearly separate their political beliefs from their academic work and to perform their duties professionally. Therefore, the essential question is whether the political views of professors influence their academic work.

A university remains autonomous only if decisions about teaching, science and election for titles are made according to professional and scientific criteria, and not according to political affiliation (Leisute, Matquina, Jones, 2025). When a professor is in a podium, his only obligation is to educate students based on scientific knowledge, critical thinking and reasoned debate, and not to engage in party propaganda. It is unacceptable for him to:

- persuade students to support a particular party;
- belittle students or colleagues because of their political beliefs;
- use the authority of the professorial position to promote party interests;
- allow political affiliation to influence the assessment or treatment of students.

These are gross violations of professorial ethics. Most often this is done in a perfidious manner – indirectly, in lectures in the fields of social sciences when, through the analysis of social processes and events, positive attitudes and feelings towards a particular party, or negative attitudes towards its opponents are expressed, often accompanied by antipathy towards them, etc. Such behavior of the professor undoubtedly violates academic freedom and creates an atmosphere in which students do not feel free to think and discuss.

Of course, not every discussion about politics, political decisions and processes is propaganda. For example, a professor of constitutional law, administrative law, political science, sociology, philosophy, etc. can and should critically and argumentatively analyze political parties, their programs, state institutions and political processes. But the analysis should always be based on objective facts and scientifically argued. In this way, it will realistically present the different political views and will not turn into a call for support or opposition to a

particular party. A good university professor does not teach students what to think, but how to think critically and, thinking so, to recognize the objective truth. This is the essence of the academic freedom of professors, and thus the essence of the autonomy of the university.

As for the influence of political parties on students, in a democratic society they have the right to be interested in politics, to be members of political parties, to establish their own organizations and to participate in public life. This is part of the freedom of association and expression. But there is a huge difference between participation in political life and the political instrumentalization of students.

History has shown on many occasions that students can be a powerful factor in political life. If we briefly take a look at the student movement in Yugoslavia before the two world wars, we will see the student party cells and organizations in which Ivo Lola Ribar, Mirce Acev and others were members and worked devotedly, mobilizing and preparing students for the fight against the unpopular regime. Moving our thoughts to the more recent past, we will encounter the large student demonstrations in Western countries in 1968, especially in France, directed against the authoritarian and consumerist society and motivated and led mainly by leftist and related ideologies (Marcuse, Bloch, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, etc.). In the same year, we will also see student demonstrations, in the capital of Yugoslavia, motivated by the desire to eliminate the high level of bureaucratization of society, which solidly shook the federal government and led to the involvement of the highest state and party leadership to calm the passions. In the recent historical past of the Republic of North Macedonia, we will see Student plenum, "Student occupation" at the Faculty of Law "Justinian I," 2014, then students supporting the "Colorful Revolution," from April to summer 2016. Finally, For two or more years now we have been seeing student demonstrations in the Republic of Serbia, which, with their massiveness and activity, have shaken and are still shaking the current government.

However, when political parties try to win over students with arguments, through public debates and voluntary participation, it is a legitimate part of the democratic process. But when students, by political parties, are exposed to pressures, promises of privileges, clientelism and other political influences related to academic status, then the principles of university autonomy are violated. Such influence can have several negative consequences:

- student organizations stop representing student interests and become an extension of political parties;
- divisions among students on a party basis are created;
- trust in student representation is reduced;
- critical thinking is replaced by political loyalty.

Of course, a university, while protecting its autonomy, should not isolate students from political life. It should encourage them to study different political ideas, to participate in political debates and, on the basis of facts and arguments, to form their own positions, and not to form them under political influence and pressures.

From a legal and philosophical point of view, the greatest value of a free autonomous university is that it enables young people to become free and critically thinking citizens, and not followers of any political party. Therefore, the role of the university in a democratic society is not to create supporters of political parties - a phenomenon characteristic of totalitarian regimes, but rather individuals who can independently, on a scientific basis, evaluate political ideas, phenomena and processes, criticize them when it is necessary, make proposals and participate responsibly in democratic life.

The autonomy of the university is best protected if it manages to preserve its independence from all political centers of power, whether ruling or opposition parties. The university should not be an instrument of any political option, because its mission is free education, free scientific research and critical, scientifically based, participation in public debate.

4. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

The autonomy of the university in terms of freedom from political and party influences is, probably, the most critical dimension of its autonomy, because it directly protects the objective, critical and free search for truth that constitutes the essence of science and education.

In an ideal model, which unfortunately does not exist, the university should be an institution in which politics enters only as a subject of scientific analysis, and not as a power that dictates results, personnel decisions or scientific positions. This means that the election of professors, deans, rectors, the creation of curricula and research projects, as well as scientific achievements should be based on expertise, scientific results and academic integrity, and not on party affiliation and political loyalty.

Historically, the greatest violations of university autonomy occurred in periods of strong political control over education. In totalitarian systems, such as fascism and Stalinism, universities were often used as tools for ideological propaganda. In such conditions, science ceases to be free and becomes a means for exercising political power.

But even in democratic societies there is a risk of more subtle forms of influence through party employment, pressures in the election of managers, allocations of state projects or budgets, as well as through informal networks and centers of power. That is why, the formal legal autonomy of the university is not enough, if there is no real institutional culture of respecting its autonomy.

The autonomy of the university as freedom from political and party influence implies several key principles:

- a high degree of autonomous normative regulation within the framework of the normative regulation for higher education established by the constitution and laws (normative autonomy);
- transparent and meritorious procedures for the selection and promotion of academic staff;
- clear separation between state political bodies and university bodies;
- protection of academic decisions from external interventions;
- readiness and courage of universities to resist pressures, even when they are indirect;
- strengthening of professional ethics and internal academic culture.

In this regard, it is necessary to emphasize that the autonomy of the university does not mean its isolation from society or the state. The university as a public good is often financed from public funds; therefore there must be democratic control over it in terms of legality, accountability and quality (Kivisto, Velamo, 2023). However, in accordance with the principle of university autonomy, this control must not be transformed into political management of education and science (Liisute, Matquina, Jones, 2025).

The autonomy of the university is not an administrative privilege, but a civilization guarantee that knowledge will remain independent of daily politics and economic interests. The university is an institution that must have the right to criticize politics, to question social models and to raise uncomfortable questions. If the university becomes dependent on the government and daily politics, then the balance between knowledge and power in society changes, of course, in favor of politics.

In short, the true value of university autonomy is seen precisely in the university's ability to say "no" to political pressure, no matter from which side it comes. A university that is protected from party influence not only produces high-quality science, but also creates educated, critically minded, free and socially active citizens - which is the basis of prosperity in any healthy democratic society in the Fromm's sense of the word.

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