

## EUROPEAN UNION PROJECT ERASMUS

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### TRENDS IN UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY IN THE EU IN THE PRE-PANDEMIC DECADE

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*The pre-pandemic decade (2010–2019) is likely to have become an era of rapid spread and development of university autonomy in the EU. Therefore, the article makes an effort to reveal the trends in developing university autonomy in the pre-pandemic decade, which could contribute to understanding this phenomenon in the post-pandemic times. The systematic examination of 24 scientific resources published primarily on the Web of Science Core Collection database in 2010–2019 makes it possible to reveal the following trends in university autonomy development on organizational, financial, academic and staff levels. The research covers the time frame from 2010 to 2019 – the official beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research insights show that in the pre-pandemic decade, university autonomy is characterised by diverse implementation and uneven distribution in the EU, as well as different access to financing. This diversity and unevenness may have affected the universities' decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research results can contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of university autonomy. This research is made within the framework of the implementation of the European Union project Erasmus + “University autonomy in the development of democratic values in higher education: experience of EU countries for Ukraine.”*

**Keywords:** university autonomy; higher education policy; trends; the pre-pandemic decade; the EU.

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### INTRODUCTION

The pre-pandemic decade (2010–2020) is likely to have become an era of rapid spread and development of university autonomy in the EU. Since 2011, the European University Association (EUA) has released four comparative reports on the topic of university autonomy in higher education systems in Europe. The reports aimed at evaluating and ranking the higher education systems along four dimensions of

autonomy – organisational, financial, staffing, and academic autonomy. They have concluded that due to the diversity of national legislative frameworks in the EU member-states, there is no unique model of university autonomy (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). In addition to these reports, there is evidence of university autonomy development in scientific literature, where authors discuss trends and challenges to new forms of university management in Europe. Among them, are the following trends and challenges: 1) different understanding of the university autonomy at the national and transnational levels. New political, social and economic conditions impact the policy of the EU member-states and European universities, which should respond to this changing context. In the case of England and the EU, Alexiadou & Findlow (2014) point to the tensions between the humanistic role of the university and “the pressures for the creation of the ‘knowledge economy’ that are shared at the national and transnational levels” (p. 371); 2) Brexit brought new challenges and even threats to the higher education sector, particularly to the university autonomy. Among these threats are “loss of research funding from EU sources; loss of students from other EU countries; the impact on the ability of the sector to hire academic staff from EU countries; and the impact on the ability of UK students to study abroad” (Mayhew, 2017, 155).

Additionally, in the scientific literature, there is an attempt to investigate trends in university autonomy. Although, the recent EUA’s report (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017) makes an effort to “review and summarise a series of trends identified in the respective dimensions of university autonomy” (p.53), it considers cross-cutting trends in increasing and decreasing levels of university autonomy in the certain countries in the EU. Namely, the report shows that “there is no natural trend towards increased university autonomy in Europe” (p. 59). Besides, Krüger et al. (2018) identify major trends in the reforms undertaken in the EU member-states. Nagy et al. (2014) highlight general trends in financing higher education.

Based on the said above, this paper assumes that the pre-pandemic decade is likely to demonstrate both positive and negative trends in developing university autonomy in the EU. On the other hand, diverse understanding and lack of a unique

model of university autonomy could affect the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This evidence could be valuable for describing the pre-pandemic state of play of the phenomenon of university autonomy, as well as understanding the issues of its development.

Therefore, the **research objective** is to reveal the trends in developing university autonomy in the EU in the pre-pandemic decade (2010–2019), which could contribute to understanding this phenomenon in the post-pandemic times.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This theoretical research aims at the systematic examination of assumptions of the research issue – university autonomy in the EU in the pre-pandemic decade, and revealing the trends in its development. The research covers the time frame from 2010 to 2019 – the official beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to scarce evidence about university autonomy in the scientific literature, the data is gathered from 24 scientific resources (12 articles, 7 proceedings paper, 4 book chapters, and 1 report) found, primarily on the Web of Science Core Collection database, and published from 2010 to 2019. However, despite the limited amount of publications, we believe that this material may be sufficient for featuring the state of play of university autonomy in the EU in the pre-pandemic decade (2010–2019).

The thematic literature review is applied to reveal the trends regarding four dimensions of university autonomy – organisational, financial, staffing, and academic autonomy. Besides, the thematic literature review makes it possible to track geographical distribution of university autonomy.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

**Phenomenon of university autonomy.** University autonomy is considered as “the legal, political and financial relationships between state authorities and universities in different national contexts” (Kohtamäki & Balbachevsky, 2018, 180), or as “university governance and the relationship between the state and higher education

institutions” (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017, 7). According to Pruvot & Estermann (2017), “university autonomy has four dimensions:

1. Organisational autonomy (academic and administrative structures, leadership and governance).

2. Financial autonomy (ability to raise funds, own buildings, borrow money and set tuition fees).

3. Staffing autonomy (ability to recruit independently, promote and develop academic and non-academic staff).

4. Academic autonomy (including study fields, student numbers, student selection, as well as the structure and content of degrees)” (p. 7).

It is worth mentioning, that there is a lack of interconnection between these four dimensions of university autonomy, except for staffing and academic autonomy, which are significantly linked to each other (Orosz, 2018). Consequently, in this research the trends in developing university autonomy will be revealed on four levels – organisational, financial, staffing, and academic.

**Scope of spreading university autonomy in Europe.** This paper makes an effort to trace the spreading of university autonomy in Europe in the pre-pandemic decade as well. Table 1 shows, that 24 countries evidence the spreading of this phenomenon. However, the distribution of university autonomy in Europe is likely to impact countries in different ways as there are some countries in Europe (Romania, the UK, and Portugal), which frequently report their experience and challenges.

*Table 1*

**Evidences of geographical distribution of university autonomy in Europe  
(2010–2019)**

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Evidences</b>	<b>Years of evidences</b>
Spain	(Elena, & Sánchez, 2012)	2012
Sweden	(Teelken & Deem, 2013)	2013
the UK	(Teelken & Deem, 2013; Alexiadou & Findlow, 2014; Mayhew, 2017)	2013-2017

the Netherlands	(Teelken & Deem, 2013; Krüger et al., 2018)	2013-2018
Portugal	(Magalhães et al., 2013; Marques, 2014; Krüger et al., 2018)	2013-2018
Hungary	(Nagy et al., 2014; Erina & Erins, 2015)	2014-2015
Germany	(Massih-Tehrani et al., 2015; Shattock, 2014)	2014-2015
Latvia	(Erina & Erins, 2015)	2015
Bulgaria	(Erina & Erins, 2015)	2015
the Czech Republic	(Erina & Erins, 2015)	2015
Cyprus	(Erina & Erins, 2015)	2015
Estonia	(Erina & Erins, 2015)	2015
Slovakia	(Erina & Erins, 2015)	2015
Poland	(Erina & Erins, 2015)	2015
Malta	(Erina & Erins, 2015)	2015
Slovenia	(Erina & Erins, 2015; Bohinc, 2017)	2015-2017
Romania	(Butum et al., 2015; Erina & Erins, 2015; Marinas & Prioteasa, 2015; Cojocaru et al., 2018)	2015-2018
Lithuania	(Erina & Erins, 2015; Bileviciute et al., 2019)	2015-2019
Norway	(Maassen et al., 2017)	2017
Austria	(Krüger et al., 2018)	2018
Denmark	(Krüger et al., 2018)	2018
France	(Krüger et al., 2018)	2018
Finland	(Krüger et al., 2018; Kohtamäki & Balbachevsky, 2018)	2018
Kazakhstan	(Milosz, 2018)	2018

Consequently, based on the evidences presented in Table 1, we can assume that the middle of the pre-pandemic decade (2015) is likely to have become an intensive phase of distribution and implementation of university autonomy in Europe.

Furthermore, the thematic literature review makes it possible to reveal the trends regarding four dimensions of university autonomy – organisational, financial, staffing, and academic autonomy in the EU in 2010–2019.

**Organisational autonomy.** The decade before the COVID-19 pandemic, the universities in the EU experienced governance reforms in higher education. Namely, Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands and Portugal, were the countries in which significant reforms had been introduced since the 1990s. The reforms aimed at reducing the direct state control and promoting mechanisms that could give more autonomy to higher education institutions (Krüger et al., 2018). The state initiated governance reforms and introduced them through legislation. University autonomy has been distributed from central government, but on central government's terms, as in Italy, or in Germany (Shattock, 2014). Elena & Sánchez (2012) worries, that "introduction of a new model of management – a collegial model, that can be a constraint of a necessary changes in quality teaching and research" (p.48). According to Krüger et al. (2018), the policy reform and a new governance model at the university were implemented by "several actors with diverse interests" and depended on external factors. For example, in Kazakhstan a model of decentralization of the university was implemented with the support of the consortium of 17 partners – the EU universities, ministries and non-governmental bodies (Milosz, 2018).

Analysing the impact of governance reforms on university autonomy in Portuguese, Magalhães et al. (2013) assumed that "the regulation efforts undertaken at the European and national levels reflect a trend towards coordination of devolved governance processes (meta-governance)" (p. 234). The authors also believe that governments need to guarantee that increasing university autonomy and self-governance could achieve the goals of the governance reform.

It is worth mentioning, that university autonomy is interpreted in various ways and "practices of autonomy within the university" are also implemented differently (Maassen et al., 2017). It is likely to occur due to imbalance of legislation on national and international levels. Namely, Bohinc (2017) evidences the gap between the EU documents regarding the questions of university autonomy and national legal framework. In the case of Slovenia, "the current university system as regulated by the

Higher Education Act is inadequate” ... and “requires the higher education legislation to be amended” (p. 508).

As a result of the governance reforms, university alliances have been established in Europe in an attempt to influence the R&D in higher education. These alliances (namely, EUA, EURASHE, LERU, UNICA, Coimbra group) are “new players in the increasingly complex multi-actor, multi-level governance in this policy domain” (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018, 349). The university alliances have differences and commonalities in the structures, identities, and roles of the transnational actors in European knowledge governance. Fumasoli et al. (2018) revealed these types of actors – an expert group, university alliances, student unions, the academic associations, and an advocacy coalition of individuals.

In addition, research universities with autonomous status are becoming the centres of technology development and economic innovation. Their academic and administrative structures include external stakeholders – trustees or regents from the USA and external board members from the EU. These governance structures are seen as a marker of university autonomy. Taking into account, that “a number of trustees of US research universities sit on the boards of directors of large corporations with research interests”, Mathies & Slaughter (2013) found that trustees are “an important channel connecting universities to innovation and economic development” (p. 1286). Besides, an executive science network plays a significant role in relations among universities and industry.

Other investigations show the effectiveness of the governance reforms regarding new management. Bileviciute et al. (2019) believe that a new management model of university governance have helped the university in Lithuania survive in the situation of greater competition and reduced state funding.

*Academic autonomy* brings the universities both benefits and challenges. On one hand, universities receive freedom in organizing programmes, particularly a higher degree of autonomy in organizing doctoral programmes by comparison to bachelor and master programmes (Cojocarui et al., 2018). On the other hand, the inconsistency between national and the EU-research policy and short-term employment contracts may

create obstacles in receiving benefits.

Thus, Massih-Tehrani et al., (2015) revealed the gap between national and the EU-research policy. Namely, “European research policy is guided by the discursive model of a global knowledge economy”, while, in the case of Germany, the national model of academic autonomy finances diverse research topics and universities (p.55). The opposite policy between 'Global Research Universities' and the German Research Foundation could impact the future of German higher education – while technical universities receive benefits from European competition, “universities focusing on social sciences and the humanities are losing ground” (p.55).

Alpatov & Bortnikova (2016) believe, that academic freedom must be protected by employment guarantees – tenure. Tenure ensures the continuity of scientific cooperation, which is impossible with short-term employment contracts and the constant movement of scientists from university to university in search of a job.

**Staff autonomy.** Despite the contemporary management approaches in the universities which should stimulate equality of opportunities and diminish regimes of inequality, there is evidence of inequality in the universities of the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK. Teelken & Deem’s data (2013) show “that these new governance approaches actually re-emphasise the existing status quo in various ways and enable more subtle forms of discrimination despite the existence of a veneer of equality” (p. 520).

**Financial autonomy.** Analysing higher education financing models in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Erina & Erins (2015) found significant differences in financing models, i.e. differences in the volume of financial support, study crediting systems, and tuition fees. However, they revealed common features as well: “1) increase of the state funding for higher education; 2) granting of larger autonomy in financial resource management; 3) ensuring of direct correlation between performance results and the allocated funding; 4) promotion of diversification of the sources of finance, as well as establishment of cooperation among research institutions, enterprises and municipalities” (Erina & Erins, 2015, 186).

Nagy et al. (2014) highlight general trends in financing higher education based on the evidences from the universities of Germany, Great Britain, France, Poland and Slovenia. Among them, are the following ones: diversification of the sources of funding; significance of tuition fees and third-stream incomes; allocation of funds in the form of state loans or favourable taxation regulations. Besides, the allocation mechanisms of direct institutional support have been changed in terms of separate funding of teaching and research; wide spreading the formula funding; block grants as a form of allocation of state funds; significant freedom of universities in spending financial resources; increasing the significance of performance contracts. However, the main trend in financial autonomy is that, “the mixture of funding elements varies from country to country” (Nagy et al., 2014, 181).

The option of diversifying funding for EU universities may challenge university governance and determine which key areas of university governance need to be influenced. Marinas & Prioteasa (2015) point to the increased competition for funding among universities under the scarcity of public resources in order to enhance efficiency and quality. They believe, that “in the future, shifting priorities for public funding to sectors like social protection, health, environment, climate change, energy is likely to occur because of the demographic trends, ageing population and other global challenges” (p. 801).

For example, universities in Portugal are mainly financed by the State Budget. However, the universities are encouraged to search for an alternative revenue “through the provision of specialized services, or by means of signing agreements” (Marques, 2014, 151). The universities in Romania attempt to access financial resources as beneficiaries or research partners in innovation projects. For this reason, Romanian universities are focused on adapting curricula to meet the labour market demands and harmonizing their programmes with those in the universities in Europe. Besides, the public policy in higher education in Romania makes an effort to increase the autonomy of financial management and to encourage the diversification of financing sources and inter-university partnerships (Butum et al., 2015).

**Conclusions.** The literature review makes it possible to reveal general trends

regarding university autonomy in the EU in the pre-pandemic decade, as well as specific trends in terms of four dimensions of university autonomy.

Thus, in the pre-pandemic decade in the EU the following general trends regarding university autonomy were observed: 1) different understanding of the concept of university autonomy at the national and transnational levels; 2) cross-cutting trends in increasing and decreasing levels of university autonomy in the EU; 3) threats to the university autonomy from Brexit due to loss of research funding and students from other EU countries; reduction in the ability to hire academic staff from EU countries; and the ability of UK students to study abroad.

In terms of four dimensions of university autonomy, the other specific trends were traced:

#### *Organisational Autonomy*

- University autonomy is seen as a collegial model of management initiated and distributed from central government through legislation.
- A new governance model at the university is implemented by transnational actors (regents from the USA and external board members from the EU) with diverse interests.
- The university alliances established in Europe attempt to influence the R&D in higher education.
- University autonomy is interpreted in various ways at national and international levels.
- University autonomy within the university is implemented differently.
- The gap between the EU legislation regarding university autonomy and national legal framework.

#### *Academic Autonomy*

- Universities receive freedom in organizing degree programmes.
- There is a gap between national and the EU-research policy.
- Uneven distribution of benefits from European competition between technical universities and universities of social sciences and the humanities.

- Lack of protection of academic freedom due to short-term employment contracts.  
*Staff Autonomy*
- New governance approaches may enable more subtle forms of discrimination and inequality.  
*Financial Autonomy*
- Significant differences in financing models, i.e. differences in the volume of financial support, study crediting systems, and tuition fees. These models vary from country to country.
- The option of diversifying funding for EU universities.
- Increasing competition for funding among universities under the scarcity of public resources in order to enhance efficiency and quality.

The research insights show that in the pre-pandemic decade, university autonomy is characterised by diversity of implementation and uneven distribution in the EU, as well as different access to financing. This diversity and unevenness may have affected the universities' decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research results can contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of university autonomy.

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## ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ УНІВЕРСИТЕТСЬКОЇ АВТОНОМІЇ В ЄС У ДЕСЯТИЛІТТЯ ПЕРЕД ПАНДЕМІЄЮ

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*Десятиліття перед пандемією COVID-19 (2010–2019), ймовірно, стало епохою швидкого поширення та розвитку університетської автономії в ЄС. Тому в статті зроблено спробу виявити тенденції розвитку університетської автономії в десятиліття перед пандемією COVID-19, що могло б сприяти розумінню цього явища в постпандемічний час. Систематичне дослідження 24 наукових джерел, опублікованих переважно у базі даних Web of Science Core Collection у 2010–2019 роках, дає змогу виявити наступні тенденції розвитку університетської автономії на організаційному, фінансовому, академічному та кадровому рівнях. Дослідження охоплює період з 2010 по 2019 рік – офіційний початок пандемії COVID-19. Отже, на підставі отриманих даних, можна припустити, що середина десятиліття (2015 р.) перед пандемією, ймовірно, стала інтенсивною фазою поширення та впровадження університетської автономії в Європі. Результати дослідження показують, що в десятиліття до пандемії університетська автономія характеризується різним впровадженням і нерівномірним розподілом в ЄС, а також різним доступом до фінансування. Ця різноманітність і нерівномірність ймовірно могли вплинути на прийняття рішень університетами під час пандемії COVID-19. Результати дослідження можуть сприяти розумінню феномену університетської автономії. Це дослідження виконано в рамках реалізації проекту Європейського Союзу Erasmus+ «Університетська автономія у розвитку демократичних цінностей у вищій освіті: досвід країн ЄС для України».*

**Ключові слова:** університетська автономія; політика вищої освіти; тенденції; десятиліття перед пандемією; ЄС.

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