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Public debate about the model change in Hungarian higher education: The representation of radical changes in university governance in Hungary in politically opposing online newspapers between 2019 and 2021

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Abstract

The Hungarian higher education (HE) system has undergone a transformation, or so-called ‘model change’, in recent years. During this process, the majority of public HE institutions were transformed into institutions maintained by public interest asset management foundations. This paper focuses on the media representation of this transformation by analysing all relevant articles about the transformation (169 in total) published between 2019 and 2021 in two of the most active online newspapers on the topic, one that represents pro-government (mno.hu) and the other government-critical (hvg.hu) opinions. Our analysis reveals the main actors as well as the arguments for and against the model change. This media representation in the Hungarian context is essential because there was no governmental white paper about the process. Therefore, Hungarian media served as the primary source of information for the public about the goals (and later, the critiques) of the model change. However, the internal structure of the representations of pros and cons exposes how the two sides talked at cross-purposes, minimally reacting to the arguments of the ‘other side’. Furthermore, our results illustrate the changing nature of the arguments concerning the model change process that started with one university, continued with seven more, and then affected 13 more institutions.

Keywords: Hungarian higher education sector; model change; media representation; autonomy

1 Introduction

The Hungarian higher education (HE) system has undergone transformation, or so-called ‘model change’, in recent years. During this process, public HE institutions were transformed into institutions maintained and run by a unique type of foundation, so-called ‘public interest asset management foundations’ (also translated as ‘public interest trusts’), leading to a radical overhaul of their governance structures. The Hungarian institutional restructuring process was distinctive compared to similar reforms in other countries regarding a number of its characteristics. The scope of decision-making these foundations

were awarded was exceptionally broad. Moreover, board members of the foundations were granted lifelong appointments, which is also highly unusual in the regulation of these kinds of bodies (EUA, 2023).

The transformation process started in 2019 with one institution, but in 2020–2021, the process accelerated, and another 20 public institutions were transformed (Keczser et al., 2022). Changing university governance and legal structures may be identified in other European countries, mainly with the appearance of New Public Management reform (Broucker & De Wit, 2015). However, less attention has been paid to the media representation of the introduction of boards or (internal) radical governance changes. The media representation in the Hungarian context is critical because no official and public governmental white paper about the model change was created. Hence, information about the plans, possible directions and intended outcomes of the model change was not directly accessible in official documents. Therefore, the media served as the primary source of information for the public about the goals (and, later, critiques) of the transformation process.

To shed light on this dynamically changing public space, this paper focuses on the media representation of the Hungarian transformation by analysing related articles between 2019 and 2021 from two of the most active online newspapers that published articles about the model change, typically voicing pro-government (mno.hu) and government-critical (hvg.hu) views. Accordingly, our research questions concentrate on the inner structure of this discourse by focusing mainly on the pro and con arguments on the one hand and the actors whose voices appeared in them on the other. Furthermore, we attempt to connect the timeline of policy changes to the appearance of the specific arguments.

This paper contributes to the literature by not only being the first to analyse the media representation of the model change in the Hungarian higher education sector but also providing the first analysis of the media representation of policy debates related to the ideology of promoting the use of boards in higher education (called ‘boardism’ by Veiga et al., 2015). Some research papers about narratives related to new managerialism and related higher education reforms in European countries already exist (Cabalin, 2015; Rönnerberg et al., 2013), but their data do not stem from news media but from interviews (like Santiago & Carvalho, 2012) or policy documents (e.g., Arreman & Holms, 2011; Tarlau & Moeller, 2019). Therefore, the unique contribution of this paper is that it describes the media representation of a higher education reform that targets university boards, where the debate is transmitted by the media. However, we wish to emphasise that the paper aims to shed light on a transformation process in the HE sector in which the position of foundations vis-à-vis the HE institutions was quite peculiar. To delineate these changes and their timeline, as well as the respective arguments for and against them, we utilised media data since other reliable sources of information were unavailable from that period.

Therefore, in the first section, we briefly discuss the characteristics of the boards and foundations in higher education, then focus on the Hungarian model change, including the question of why this transformation process differs from similar processes in other countries. Next, we briefly introduce the specifics of the Hungarian media landscape. The second section gives details about the methodological aspects of our research, followed by our findings, which highlight the arguments for and against. After discussing our results in light of the conceptual background, we summarise the paper’s main points in the conclusion section.

2 Conceptual background and context

2.1 Boards and foundations – international landscape

The governance of higher education institutions across Europe has undergone significant transformation in recent years. A notable trend is the widespread adoption and proliferation of governing boards (Pruvot & Estermann, 2018), which have emerged as key decision-making bodies. Such boards, mainly or exclusively composed of external stakeholder representatives and experts, play a pivotal role in shaping institutions' strategic direction, funding and supervision, and selecting institutional executives. The move towards establishing boards is usually justified by the need for greater efficiency, transparency, accountability, entrepreneurship, and responsiveness to societal needs. These arguments are mostly in line with the concept of New Public Management (NPM), which entails the adoption of a business and market logic in higher education (Broucker & de Wit, 2015).

Although such boards sometimes have only advisory roles, when they have decision-making competencies, this usually strengthens management. Therefore, the introduction of boards challenges the traditional European (continental) university governance model characterised by solid academic self-governance, where decision-making authority is shared only among various internal stakeholders, such as academics, administrators and students, and external parties (except for the state) play a relatively limited role (Donina & Paleari, 2019). Critics of these processes argue that the role of the board and management is legitimised by powerful ideologies and reinforced by different organisational practices and highlight their ideological nature by referring to this phenomenon broadly as 'boardism' (Veiga et al., 2015) or 'managerialism' (e.g., Deem et al., 2007). Critics discuss several possible negative consequences of state policies that promote boardism and managerialism, such as academics' loss of democratic control over institutional decision-making, a decrease in academic freedom (e.g., Poutanen et al., 2022; Rowlands, 2020), and the increase in the bureaucratisation of daily operations (Halffman & Radder, 2015). It is important to note, however, that it is not the emergence of boards or professionalised management per se that is the root of criticism but the (less consensual) power shift in the decision-making process that this involves.

The introduction of boards has been accompanied in some countries (for example, in Portugal, Finland, Sweden, and some German *Länder*) by the possibility of transforming public institutions into foundation universities. Some of the typical reasons given to explain such transformation are ensuring even greater autonomy, flexibility, financial sustainability, and diversification, as well as fostering entrepreneurship and innovation and enhancing global competitiveness (e.g., Poutanen et al., 2022).

2.2 Hungarian model change between 2019–2021

Similar trends have taken place in recent decades in Hungary. Boards have been present in the governance of public institutions since the early 2000s. Although the previous (social-liberal) government attempted to establish strong boards (in which, however, external members would have been in the minority) in 2005, this was blocked by the Constitu-

tional Court on the grounds of the violation of institutional autonomy. Thus, the first boards had only an advisory role. Since 2010, however, their powers have increased, and since 2015, they have gained veto power over some issues (for example, budgets and strategy). In addition, since 2010, the ministry responsible for higher education has delegated most members (Kováts et al., 2017).

Another turning point in the process occurred in 2019 when the first public university (the Corvinus University of Budapest) was transformed into a foundation university. Although this transformation was initially planned only as a pilot project involving three other universities, 20 universities underwent this change in the next two years (see Figure 1). By 2021, 21 of the 28 public higher education institutions had become foundation universities, so the share of students studying at public universities fell from 86 per cent (2018) to around 20 per cent.

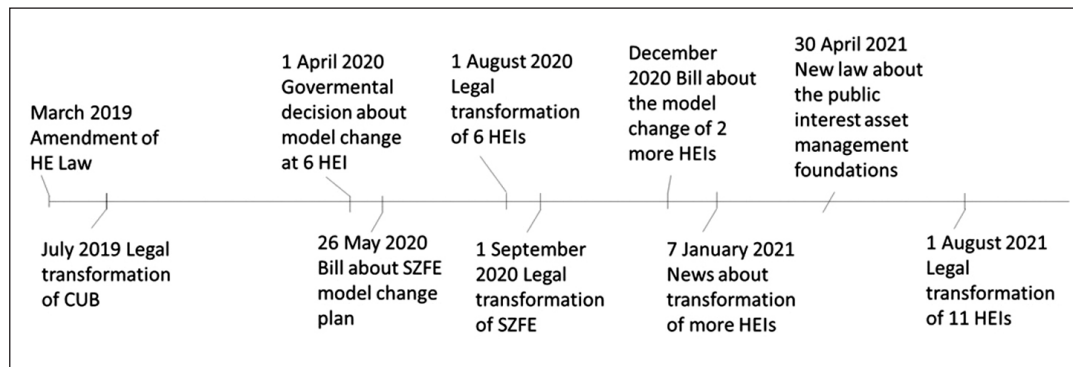


Figure 1 Main events between 2019 and 2021 related to the model change in the Hungarian HE sector

Regarding the main events, starting with an amendment of the Higher Education Act in March 2019, the first phase started with the legal transformation of Corvinus University of Budapest in July 2019. This was followed by the model change of six other universities, which decision came to light in April 2020. This was soon followed by a bill about the plan for the model change of the University of Theatre and Film Arts (*Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem*, SZFE) in May 2020, which led to a unique situation in 2020 and utterly monopolised the news connected to the model change that year (see below). This period, dominated by the so-called ‘SZFE case’, may be seen as the second phase of the model change. The third phase started when, in December 2020, news appeared hinting at a general extension of the model change throughout the HE sector to include 13 additional universities. An important moment was 30 April 2021, when the Hungarian Parliament created a new legal structure through a specific law on public interest asset management foundations, which could be amended only by a two-thirds majority (Act IX of 2021). Such foundations have now been established not only in higher education but also in the cultural sector, and the government has transferred a significant proportion of national assets to them.

In higher education, these foundations became the owners and maintainers of institutions and their assets instead of the state. The boards of these foundations have gained

unprecedented powers in Hungarian HE, allowing the complete redefinition of institutional operations. These areas include internal governance (such as the powers of senates), the management and organisational structure, budget and resource allocation processes, and the educational and research profile. They can also define HR and teaching and learning-related policies and regulations (such as promotion criteria, student admission regulations and exam regulations) (Kováts et al., 2023). The government has completely detached the new foundations from governmental bureaucratic control by transferring the founding rights and creating a self-directed structure.

During the transformation, all university employees lost their public servant status. The Labour Code now regulates their employment. However, their remuneration has increased since 2021 due to the new funding system. The government incentivised the model change by promising a higher level of funding, which was realised in 2021 when the government signed six-year funding contracts with foundations, which increased their previous budgets by between two and four times. (Funding for public institutions has been left at its previous low level.) Although model-changing universities have legally become private universities, they are still predominantly funded by the state (except for Corvinus, whose owner foundation received a one billion EUR endowment). For this reason, there is some question whether these universities can be considered private (Kováts et al., 2023).

Board members of the foundations were appointed for life by the government, and appointment and recalling rights were transferred to the foundations. The composition of the board members was initially characterised by a large proportion (over 30 per cent) of active pro-government politicians (ministers, MPs, etc.). Other members also include businesspeople and intellectuals with open sympathy for the governing party. The share of university employees was around 20 per cent (primarily active rectors), also selected by the government, not by the academic communities. The boards include no international members (Kováts et al., 2023).

In December 2022, the EU excluded Hungarian model-changing universities from the Horizon and Erasmus programs. As the Council of the European Union put it: ‘There are concerns regarding the non-application of public procurement and conflict of interest rules to “public interest trusts” and the entities managed by them, and the lack of transparency about the management of funds by those trusts’ (Council Implementing Decision 2022/2506, point 11). Although serving ministers and secretaries of state gave up their seats on foundation boards in 2023, concerns remain about the governance and transparency of these universities (and public interest asset management foundations more generally).

The SZFE case

Regarding the timeframe of our research (2019–2021), we should draw attention to a specific situation in 2020 concerning the model change of one of the universities, namely, the University of Theatre and Film Arts (Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem – SZFE). In this case, the affairs related to the model change resulted in serious opposition from stakeholders that turned into open resistance by most students and some of the professional staff (Kirs, 2023; Kováts et al., 2022; Ryder, 2022; a documentary was even published entitled ‘Stupid Youth’). This took the form of not only heated disputes and public debates but also demonstrations throughout the city and the mobilisation of resistance and sympathy by the general public. Accordingly, this case almost exclusively defined the public discourse about effective model change in 2020. However, several conflicting interests in this particular situation, not just the

institutional changes, provoked the antagonism between the opposing sides. Therefore, this is a unique case wherein actual film-art- and theatre-related politically laden changes and the lack of constructive dialogue between stakeholders became mixed with concerns related to the model change of this university. Nonetheless, we have decided to include the articles related to SZFE in our database. However, they were coded as relevant (and analysed in detail) only if they discussed the higher-education institutional aspects of the case (and excluded if they focused solely on the other elements of the case or actual demonstrations).

While the transformation of most public institutions into foundation universities was a drastic change in the Hungarian HE system, no official white paper defined the goals of the transformation. In our view, this is highly unusual with regard to structural reforms of this magnitude in Europe. Because of this deficiency, it is essential to examine the media representation of the issue since this is where the supporting arguments by the proponents of the transformation, including the government, can be identified and discerned. Furthermore, due to the lack of organised public discussion and debate, critical remarks and opposition to the changes could only appear publicly in media outlets. This media-mediated public discourse, nevertheless, could have led to constructive dialogue between proponents of the arguments for and against. Unfortunately, this was not the case, as we will see below. However, before we dive into the details of the media discourse, we should consider the specifics of the Hungarian media landscape to understand the context in which this topical discourse took place.

2.3 The Hungarian media landscape

The Hungarian media landscape has undergone significant structural change since 2010, that is since Viktor Orbán's second government took office (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019; Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). Bajomi-Lázár (2019) refers to the current system as a patron-client media system, in which the ruling parties, Fidesz and KDNP, have 'taken control of almost the entire public sphere, while rival parties have been almost completely excluded' (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019, p. 43). As Bajomi-Lázár (2019) points out, even though clientelism has characterised the Hungarian media landscape since the first democratically elected government (1990–1994), there is a crucial difference between the clientelism before and after 2010. Namely, before the second Orbán government took office, Hungarian media was characterised by multiparty clientelism, while after 2010, the media was and is still characterised by single-party clientelism, the single-party being the alliance of Fidesz and KDNP.

The post-2010 media system was built in several 'steps' by the Fidesz-KDNP government and relied mainly on the redistribution of media resources (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017; Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). These practices have led both to the dominance of pro-government media and the erosion of media critical of the government (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019; Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). As a result, as Bátorfy (2017) highlights, by 2017, 59 per cent of all Hungarian media was pro-government, while 20 per cent remained neutral, and 21 per cent could be defined as opposition/critical of the government. The situation further deteriorated after the 2018 national election, which Fidesz won again (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019).

The radical state intervention in the media structure led to the overwhelming and uncritical promotion of some characteristically government-friendly views and the mar-

ginalisation of other views, typically government-critical ones (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017). There still exists some press that is critical of the government, and there are independent media, but they are fewer and fewer in number and in an increasingly difficult position, while the predominance of pro-government outlets, and thus pro-government media content, has been apparent and growing since 2010 (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019; Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). This claim is further underpinned by press freedom rankings such as The World Press Freedom Index created by Reporters Without Borders, which ranked Hungary 23rd among the 180 countries listed in the world in 2010 and 72nd in 2023 (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). To put this in a more familiar context, among the 27 EU member countries, Hungary was 14th in 2010 and 25th in 2023.¹

In such a media context, media outlets critical of the government and pro-government press may represent radically different perspectives, opinions, and voices, and the journalists of these outlets may engage in radically different journalistic procedures (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019) regarding government decisions and proposals, such as the model change in Hungarian higher education. To capture this duality, we chose *hvg.hu* and *mno.hu*, two online newspapers, to represent these two different sides. However, our aim is not to compare them but to delineate the general argumentation in the media discourse related to the model change.

3 Our research: sample and methods of analysis

Based on the outlined conceptual framework, the main aim of our research is to explore the portrayal of the model change in Hungarian online newspapers. Even though we have included two news sites that could represent pro-government and government-critical opinions, our aim is not to undertake a comparison but to understand the internal structure and characteristics of the discourse related to the model change. Thus, our research questions are the following:

RQ1: What were the main arguments for and against the model change in the corpus?

RQ2: Which main groups of actors were primarily quoted or paraphrased in the media portrayal of the Hungarian model change in articles published on the two selected news sites?

RQ3: How did the arguments about economic effectiveness and autonomy take shape in the selected media during the different phases of the three-year transition?

To answer these research questions, we employed qualitative content analysis. However, our methodological approach is connected to discourse analysis (Hardy et al., 2004) in three ways. First, we regard the collected corpus as a discourse (or at least a sample/slice of a discourse) about the model change. Second, we concur with methodological and theoretical claims stemming from discourse analytical approaches that meanings are not inherent to texts but are constructed in relation to the social context, especially the cir-

¹ However, it should be noted that the member countries have changed since 2010. Namely, Croatia joined the EU in 2013, and the United Kingdom left in 2020.

cumstances of production and the related social practices. That is, social reality is constructed by discourse, i.e., language in use (Gee, 2011) and, at the same time, social reality shapes discourse (Wetherell, 2001). Third, we regard discourse analysis ‘as a collection of methodological tools and procedures—stemming from these considerations—used to analyse the formation and production of meaning-making processes, and individual and collective representations in and through communication that is crystallised in discursive and social structures’ (Géring, 2021, p. 162). Therefore, in the following, the expressions ‘discourse’ and ‘discourse analysis’ mirror these understandings.

3.1 Sample and data collection

The main corpus of the analysis consists of articles published in Hungarian online newspapers between 2019 and 2021. This period was chosen because the so-called model change of Hungarian higher education institutions has (so far) taken place during these three years. Since the analysis was done on Hungarian data, the sampling of articles was based on Hungarian keywords (Lacy et al., 2015). News articles were included in this main corpus if they contained the phrase(s) 1) *modellváltás* (model change), which was exclusively used in Hungarian media to refer to this systematic change of operation of the higher education institutions; 2) *felsőoktatás* (higher education) and *átalak** (transform*); 3) *felsőoktatás* (higher education) and *alapítvány* (foundation); 4) or contained at least one of the affected HEI’s names and the phrase *átalak** (transform*). Articles containing these predefined keywords were obtained with the help of the media-monitoring company Observer from Hungarian online newspapers. More than 6,000 news articles were published in the chosen period that matched these criteria, so we narrowed down the main corpus to create a more manageable, smaller sub-corpus for manual analysis (Krippendorff, 2019).

We selected one pro-government and one independent online newspaper to create a diverse sub-corpus in terms of their political positions and, thus, presumably, the perspectives, opinions and voices they represent (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019). Criteria for categorising news mediums as independent or pro-government usually include an examination of their ownership and of the role and extent of state advertising in the media company’s revenues (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020; Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, 2021). In addition to taking into account the political affiliation of the selected media, we also considered it important to choose from among those that publish frequently on the subject of our analysis, i.e., that supposedly treat the model change of Hungarian higher education institutions as a public issue of high priority.

Therefore, we selected the two online newspapers that published the most articles on model change in the main corpus among the independent media and pro-government media. These are *HVG* (hvg.hu) and *Magyar Nemzet* (magyarnemzet.hu). Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2021) has categorised *HVG* as an independent and *Magyar Nemzet* as a pro-government online newspaper. These online newspapers published altogether 293 relevant articles. These articles form the sub-corpus of our analysis.

3.2 Research strategy

In our analysis, we first defined a priori six main coding categories we believe are of structural importance in representing the model change (Krippendorf, 2019; Neuendorf, 2002). In alignment with our research questions, these categories are 1) arguments for the model change and its positive effects, 2) criticism and arguments against the model change as well as its negative effects (van Leeuwen, 2008), 3) the HEIs mentioned, 4) actors mentioned in connection with the model change (van Leeuwen, 2008), 5) actors quoted (verbatim or paraphrased), and 6) the geographical scope within which Hungarian HE is portrayed. Based on whether an article contained information regarding the first two coding categories, the relevancy of the news article was also coded.

Qualitative content analysis with a discourse analysis approach was carried out, focusing on the predefined coding categories in the articles of the sub-corpus. Two researchers carried out the coding of the sub-corpus, treating each article as a unit of analysis. In the coding process, the researchers focused on the predefined coding categories in the articles and applied emergent coding (Krippendorf, 2019), after which they reviewed, aggregated, and summarised the codes. In analysing and interpreting the results, they considered both the circumstances of production as interpretive context (e.g., the publication date of the coded arguments) and reflected on the socio-political context of the discourse (Gill, 2000), with particular emphasis on the Hungarian higher educational context and actor groups involved. After the joint review of the coding, we found that the sub-corpus contained 169 relevant articles that provided arguments for or against the model change.

4 Results

In the following, we discuss the media discourse about the model change based on our analysis of the selected corpus, following the logic of our research questions. Accordingly, 1) we first introduce the opposing argument structures; 2) then we identify the main actors that were quoted and their main arguments; and last, 3) we illustrate how the arguments were formed in relation to the events of the model change by focusing on appearances of economic- and autonomy-related arguments.

4.1 Opposing arguments in the media

In the media corpus of content published between 2019 and 2021, we could identify 62 *arguments supporting the model change*. Looking at those mentioned in at least 15 articles (Figure 2), the most prominent argument was ‘increasing autonomy and freedom.’ Figure 2 illustrates that the main arguments that favour the model change, except for autonomy, revolved around typical management or corporate topics, like flexibility, competitiveness, effectiveness, financial issues, and so on. These are management themes that are so general that, without explicitly mentioning the universities, one would not detect that they refer to higher education.

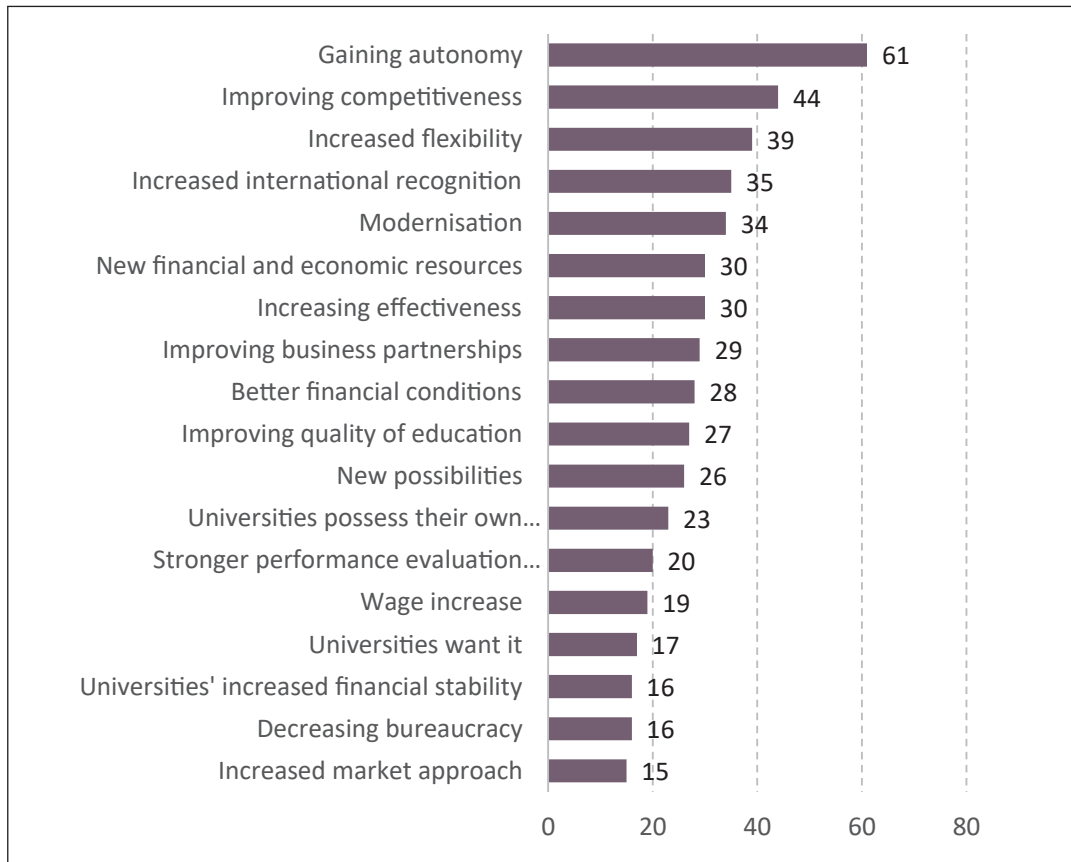


Figure 2 Most frequent arguments supporting the model change (number of articles)

However, when we look at the most frequent *arguments against the model change* (Figure 3), it is clear that the central concern is the damage or even loss of autonomy instead of gaining it. Furthermore, these arguments focus mainly on the legal processes and consequences of the model change both at the individual and the institutional level, like the lack of consultation, critiques related to board members and their rights, etc.

Regarding these two lists of arguments, three characteristics are noticeable: 1) the most crucial point in the debate is the question and definition of autonomy, 2) the issues and themes that are addressed differ considerably between the two sides, and 3) the two sides address the issue at different levels.

Regarding the *autonomy* issue, it can be seen that this topic leads the arguments on both sides; that is, while the supporting side argues that model change will lead to greater autonomy and independence, the opposing side argues that it will damage or even erase the autonomy of universities. Naturally, this means that the two sides define autonomy differently and are not necessarily referring to the same definitions when using the expression in their argumentation (see Kováts et al., 2023). Topics related to autonomy will be discussed in more detail later.

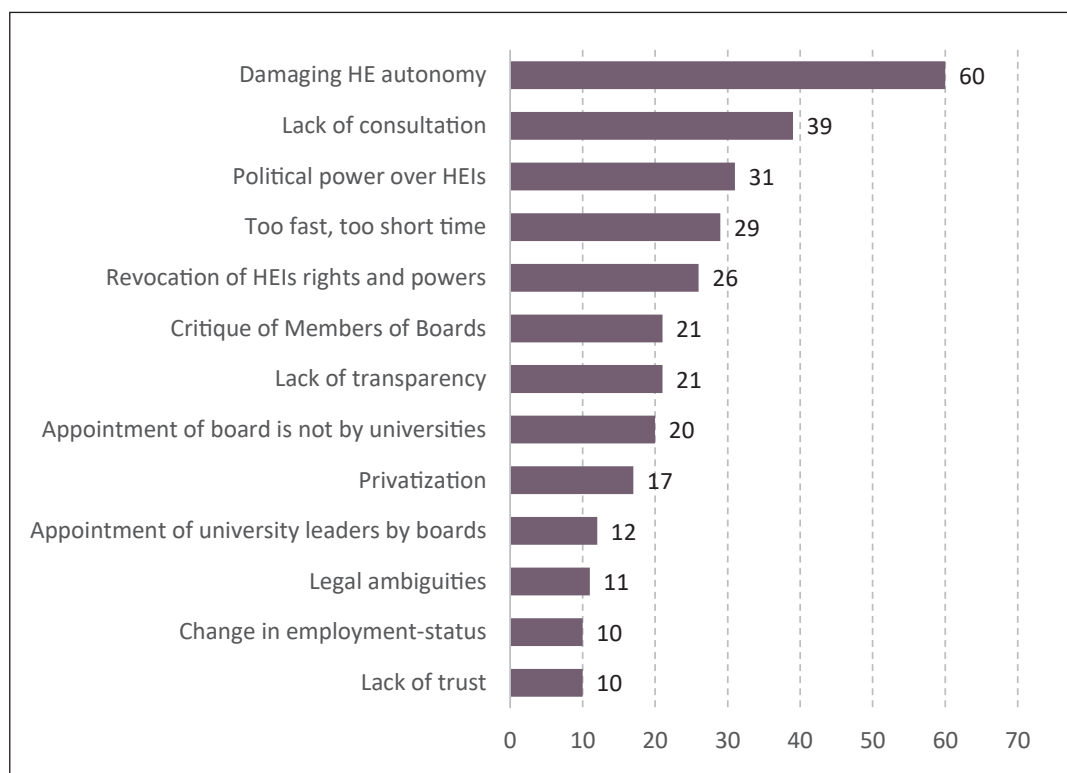


Figure 3 Most frequent arguments against the model change (number of articles)

As for the different themes according to each side, Figures 2 and 3 illustrate clearly how the opposing sides rely on different themes in their argumentation. While pro-government, supportive communication revolves around management- and corporate-type arguments related to market, performance, effectiveness, and competitiveness, the opposing side criticises the model change based on problems with the process, institutional and legal rights, and some financial issues. That is, a general technical and positive approach meets a process-oriented, legal, and negative approach. Furthermore, the supporting arguments portray the model change as a technical, effectiveness-related issue, while the opposing arguments highlight its political, power-related features.

However, not only are the topics and approaches entirely different, but in relation to these, the *level at which the two sides thematise the model change* is not juxtaposed. That is, meso-, or even macro-level argumentation on the government side (regarding the whole of the Hungarian HE sector, the whole of society, or even the international context) is typically pitted against micro or, at maximum, sector-level argumentation on the opposing side (typically addressing the higher-education institutions themselves, their legal rights, or sometimes the interest of the Hungarian HE sector).

These characteristics demonstrate how the two sides seem to be speaking a different language. However, this is a frequently used discursive strategy (Hansson, 2015; Kakisina et al., 2022): addressing the issue at hand from different angles, which may help avoid

criticism and, at the same time, make it possible to repeat one's arguments and delegitimise those of others. This is even more pronounced if we look at the main arguments of the different actor groups in the discourse.

4.2 Actors in the media and their main arguments

Concerning the actors whose voices were represented in the sub-corpus, the results show that some groups were frequently quoted, while most voices were somewhat fragmented and sometimes quasi-non-existent in the 169 relevant articles.

The analysis found that a total of 122 actors (specific people, groups of people, and institutions) were quoted either verbatim or paraphrased. These actors were categorised into five main groups, namely:

- higher education actors (49 actors, quoted in 67 articles),
- political/higher education actors² (13 actors, quoted in 67 articles),
- politicians, including political groups and state institutions (41 actors, quoted in 54 articles),
- cultural actors (16 actors, quoted in 20 articles)
- and economic actors (3 actors, quoted in 7 articles).

In sum, the representation of the quoted actors is fragmented so much that 63 per cent of the latter are quoted in only one article, and even the voices of those most often quoted (László Palkovics, Minister for Innovation and Technology, and István Stumpf, Government Commissioner) are represented in less than 10 per cent of the relevant articles. Quasi-non-existent groups in terms of the portrayal of their opinions include, for example, higher education students, whose voices only appear in eight articles, non-academic employees in the higher education sector, and economic actors, of whom only three were quoted in seven articles altogether.

Concerning the arguments most characteristic of each actor group, Table 1 shows the arguments that most often occur in the quotations of actors from each defined group. That is, it represents the 'proportion' of each argument mentioned in relation to the total number of articles quoting the given group.

² This category covers actors with strong academic backgrounds (which are usually mentioned) but who also adopted a political role. For example, László Palkovics, the minister responsible for higher education, was also a professor, vice-rector, and an ordinary member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. József Pálincás, a professor of physics and a former president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, was also a former Minister of Education (in the first Orbán government), but he also founded an (opposition) party in 2020. Similarly, József Bódis was the State Secretary of Higher Education during the model change. Previously, he was a professor, a former rector of the University of Pécs, and the former president of the Hungarian Rectors' Conference.

Table 1 Most often quoted arguments of the actor groups (% of argument related to total number of articles quoting the given group)

Higher education actors	Mixed: political/HE actors	Political actors, state institutions	Cultural actors	Economic actors
Damaging HE autonomy (-) 28.4%	Improving competitiveness (+) 32.8%	Modernisation (+) 18.5%	Damaging HE autonomy (-) 25%	Improving competitiveness (+) 71.4%
Lack of consultation (-) 16.4%	Gaining autonomy (+) 31.3%	Gaining autonomy (+) 14.8%	Political power over HEIs (-) 20%	Long-term prosperity (+) 42.9%
Political power over HEIs (-) 11.9%	New financial and economic sources (+) 22.4%	Improving competitiveness (+) 14.8%	Critique of Members of Board (-) 20%	Talent management (+) 42.9%
Revocation of HEIs rights and powers (-) 11.9%	Improving financial state of HEIs (+) 20.9%	Increased flexibility (+) 13%	New possibilities (+) 20%	Improving financial state of HEIs (+) 8.6%
New possibilities (+) 10.4%	Improvement in business partnerships (+) 19.4%	Privatisation (-) 13%	Erasure of the past (-)/lack of consultation (-) 15%	

Note: (+) and (-) indicate whether the argument is for or against the model change.

As can be seen in Table 1, higher education actors mostly voiced their concerns and criticism about the model change. Of the five arguments most often made in statements by higher education stakeholders, four criticised the process in one way or another. The most frequent argument in favour of the model change voiced by HEI actors (appearing in 10.4 per cent of the articles quoting them) argued that the model change might create new possibilities for HEIs. In contrast, the mixed-actor group of political/higher education actors was most active in voicing their opinions about the model change. Table 1 shows that the five arguments that occurred most often in their quotations were connected with the funding of HEIs and/or their ties to the market and business sector.

Politicians also frequently mentioned the positive effects of model change in their statements. However, (opposition) politicians often voiced their opinion that the model change actually involves the expropriation of public property; thus, this also appeared among the five most frequently quoted arguments of this actor group. Regarding cultural actors, arguments criticising the model change are in the majority. Furthermore, four of them are the same as those that higher education actors voiced. Economic actors' voices appeared so infrequently that only their four most frequent statements are represented in Table 1, all of which favour the model change.

Overall, arguments supporting the model change stem mainly from political, economic, and mixed (political/HE) actors. In contrast, opposing arguments are mainly connected to cultural actors (probably in connection with the before-mentioned SZFE case) and higher education actors.

These results again show that the topic of higher education autonomy was among the most frequently quoted arguments on both sides. Table 1 illustrates that this argument was equally important to most actor groups, even if they interpreted the possible change in HE autonomy very differently. The other important overarching theme that was prominent among the most often quoted arguments is related to financial and economic issues. Furthermore, this mirrors the topics of new managerialism in higher education (such as competitiveness, flexibility, prosperity, etc. – see, for example, Morrish & Sauntson, 2020). These results indicate that the arguments related to autonomy and the economic rationale are the most prominent in the analysed corpus. Therefore, in the following, we illustrate the formation of these two themes between 2019 and 2021 in this media discourse.

4.3 The formation of economic rationale and autonomy arguments in light of the events of the model change

Two overarching topics are present throughout the whole discourse from 2019 to 2021, namely, economic issues and the question of autonomy concerning model change. However, as Figures 4 and 5 illustrate, the emerging arguments constantly change in relation to the actual events of the given period.

As can be seen in Figure 4, during the years of analysis, finance, property, and wage-related issues were shuffled around. In the first year, several economic-related arguments appeared in the discussion. They were about market orientation and performance evaluation, which were the main arguments connected to the model change of Corvinus University of Budapest.

Event	Pro/contra arguments	First appearance	
March 2019 Amendment of HE Law			
July 2019 Legal transformation of CUB	Better financial conditions (+)	2019.04.26	Pro: financial issues – performance-evaluation
	Stronger performance evaluation approach (+)	2019.05.22	
April 1 2020 Governmental decision about model change at 6 HEI	Market-approach is not fit for HE (-)	2019.09.06	Contra: market-approach is not fit for HE
	Independent wage-management (+)	2020.04.01	Pro: independent management and property at HEIs
	Increasing funds from the market(+)	2020.04.01	
	Universities possess their own properties (+)	2020.04.07	
May 27 2020 News about SZFE model change plan	Decreasing of financial sources, instability(-)	2020.04.08	Contra: unstable financial source
	Dividend-based financing is vulnerable(-)	2020.04.08	Pro: increasing wages
	Wage-increase (+)	2020.05.19	
	Not all HEIs could have market incomes (-)	2020.06.05	Contra: privatisation
	Universities' increased financial stabilities (+)	2020.06.12	
Privatisation (-)	2020.06.16		
August 2020 Legal transformation of 6 HEI	Withdrawal of the state from funding is problematic (-)	2020.06.30	Contra: loss (theft) of property
September 2020 Legal transformation of SZFE	Independent property-management (+)	2020.09.07	
January 2021 News about transformation of 11 more HEIs	Loss of HEIs' property [from HEI to Board] (-)	2021.01.13	Contra: wage-increase is not enough
	Embezzlement of university property (-)	2021.01.13	
	Increasing wage-tension (-)	2021.01.21	Contra: wage-increase is not enough
	Not enough increase in wages (-)	2021.01.21	
	Theft of state-property (-)	2021.02.05	
	Unknown financing structure (-)	2021.04.05	

Figure 4 Events associated with model change and formation of economic arguments (with date of first appearance)

The second wave of model change in 2020 brought into the conversation another group of arguments promoting an economic rationale, emphasising the growing economic independence of the new formation. However, during this period, the newly emerging critical arguments focused on the instability and vulnerability of this new financial construct. The SZFE case led to the inclusion of wage-increase and financial stability arguments on the pro-change side (the latter may have been a response to earlier critiques). However, on the opposing side, the new economic-related arguments highlighted that not all types of HEI may easily accumulate a market income. Furthermore, decreasing state funding and privatisation arguments appeared during this period, presumably in connection with the SZFE case.

When the model change was extended considerably by involving 11 more HEIs in 2021, we can see the proliferation of new critical economic arguments that problematise the loss of property, uncertainty about the financial structure, and the insufficient wage increase. This proliferation of new critical arguments about economic issues is understandable because, in this phase, the number of institutions and employees concerned multiplied by two to three times compared to the previous periods. Therefore, issues related to property, wages and monetary conditions became relatively central.

The formation of the arguments in Figure 4 not only demonstrates the changes in the public debate considering the actual events but clearly illustrates the lack of responsive dialogue and delayed reactions between the two sides. This was even more prominent concerning the autonomy issue (see Figure 5).

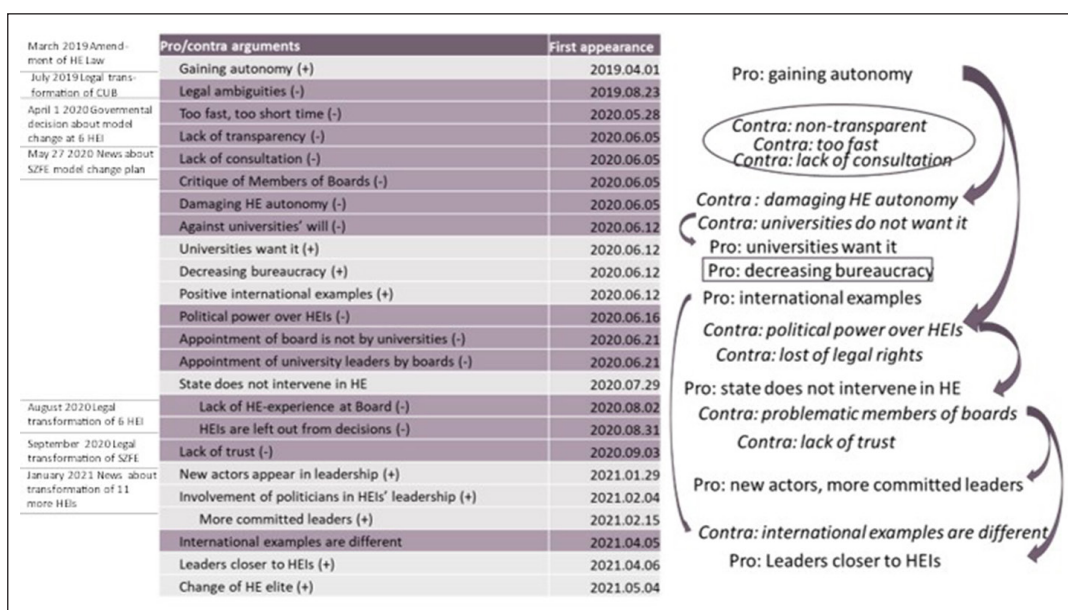


Figure 5 Events associated with model change and formation of autonomy arguments (with date of first appearance)

As Figure 5 illustrates, different topics and issues related to autonomy appeared. Regarding autonomy, the first phase was associated with only one argument from each side. The first supporting argument for model change on the governmental side was the expansion of autonomy. The first reactions from the opposing side, however, did not question this; they only reacted to the non-transparent and rapid features of the process. These arguments were not answered or denied during the discourse.

However, in the second phase, when seven more universities were involved – especially the SZFE case, which started in May 2020 – almost all of the critical autonomy-related arguments were put on the table. In this period, more than a year later, the pro ‘autonomy-gaining’ argument led to the ‘loss of autonomy’ argument of the opposing side being included in the public debate. The ‘answer’ to this was decreasing bureaucracy – one of the few arguments not contradicted or questioned. The supporting side then threw into the discourse reference to international examples – which were contested almost a year later by the opposing side. However, during 2020, the opposing arguments focused more and more on the ‘content’ of the model change instead of the process, bringing into the discourse the question of the accumulation of political power over HEIs and the loss of legal rights. The reaction to this was the argument that it would be a positive change if the state did not intervene in HE; however, the opposing side did not react to that point and continued to criticise the members of the boards.

During the expansion of the model change in the third phase, almost only supporting arguments emerged. These were typically answers to previous critiques and focused solely on leadership-related issues, arguing that the new board members would be more committed and closer to HEIs.

As the formation of these two examples illustrates, in the public discourse associated with the model change, the sides for and against were not involved in a transparent dialogue involving questions and answers. Instead, the rotation and repetition of arguments were typical. The two sides did not react to each other immediately but introduced newer arguments and topics into the discourse. During the three years, there was constant change in the reasoning and topics of the argumentation structures and pushing different topics around. Although, over time, this included some reactions to the ‘other side’, the latter typically did not recognise the truth of the other’s arguments but threw in new topics, trying to move the discussion towards those themes and topics that presented the given side’s main arguments and opinions.

5 Discussion

This paper demonstrates that it is essential to investigate the media representation of changes in the public sector. Such a research strategy may not only show that there are different discursive strands and strategies which can be attributed to various actors but can also generate a detailed map of the arguments mobilised concerning the changes. This latter point is crucial concerning the model change of Hungarian HEIs because there was no official white-paper type of communication that could have led to a well-informed public debate about these changes. Accordingly, we could only use the media as a public

source to analyse and understand the arguments related to the changes in the policy process. If we regard the media as an arena for both political and non-political actors to convey arguments and engage in public debate (Habermas, 1985; 1991), which in turn can affect social understanding, it is vital to analyse and understand how this particular case was portrayed.

Our research results show that while the media could have been an arena in which the missing public debate and lack of stakeholder participation were implemented, this only occurred in a lopsided way. The for-and-against argumentation structure cannot be considered a real form of public dialogue where different opinions meet, clash, and shape each other. Instead, the actors talked at cross purposes without listening to each other. There were minimal reactions to the arguments of the 'other side' with the intention to understand opposing viewpoints or reflect on them. This can be described as a form of 'monologising', where each actor emphasises their own arguments in a shouting contest.

Nevertheless, the topics on both sides tended to appear and be present simultaneously in the temporality of the unfolding discursive space. This shows some coordination in this regard, giving the argumentation a quasi-debate structure without real dialogue. The lack of stronger coherence may have resulted from the vast number of quoted or referenced actors in the discourse that appear sporadically or only once. It seems that there was no natural 'face', 'hero' or 'spokesperson' for the model change on either side (even the two 'official' leaders of the model change, László Palkovics and later István Stumpf, were quoted in less than 10 per cent of the articles). Whether this mirrors the fragmentation of the Hungarian political arena (at least on the non-governmental side) or the result of the media processes at the respective news sites is a question for further research.

Looking at the arguments, we can see that the supporting ones somewhat mirror those found in the literature. For example, among the arguments supporting the Hungarian model change are increased efficiency, financial sustainability, and enhanced entrepreneurship with higher innovative potential and competitiveness (mentioned, for example, by Broucker & de Wit, 2015). However, a higher level of transparency or accountability or a greater capacity to respond to social needs were not among the supporting arguments in the Hungarian debate, even though these have appeared in the academic literature (Broucker & de Wit, 2015). Similarly, the critiques collected from the international academic literature (see above) only partly parallel the critical arguments of the Hungarian actors in the media. That is, the concern about a decrease in academic self-governance and institutional autonomy (Poutanen et al., 2022; Veiga et al., 2015) is prominent in the Hungarian discussion as well as in the literature. Nonetheless, related to the amount of bureaucracy, for example (Halffman & Radder, 2015), the international literature sees this increasing as a consequence of new management, while in the Hungarian media discourse, 'decreasing bureaucracy' was an argument deployed by the supporting side that was not questioned or contested at all by opposing actors.

After examining the nature of the arguments, we found that most remain shallow and lack real content. They do not have an elaborate and well-formed argumentative internal structure. Instead, these arguments are but relatively empty 'tokens' that were thrown into public debate without specifying what the given actors meant by them. So, as mentioned before, there could be no real debate since the actors talked about different issues

even if the latter remained within a given topical range. This ‘underspecificity’ of the terms that were utilised may even mean that the actors themselves lacked the intellectual rigour to define their own terms. A more cynical take on the situation is that keeping terms fuzzy could have been a discursive strategy, suggesting that actors may have strategically utilised ambiguity to undermine the other side’s viewpoints, emphasising one or another layer of meaning as the given situation requires.

Because of the characteristics of the media representation of the model change mentioned above, the discussion did not lead to any conclusions, closure, or clarifications that might be the outcome of a constructive debate. Thus, we do not see this so much as a debate as an attempt at persuasion on both sides aimed at shaping public opinion. This means that this media discourse failed to reduce uncertainty and concern about the model change. Several different types of argument appeared in the media, but because of their shallowness, they did not become persuasive or lead to a consensual ideal-type model concerning the model change. This is in line with the fact that no overarching and dominant organisational template characterised the model change process; only local organisational solutions arose that were shaped by idiosyncratic local political and institutional circumstances. We suppose that the process and direction of the model change were themselves fuzzy and underspecified since there were no central guidelines or detailed organisational templates to be implemented.

This claim is even stronger in relation to the arguments that emerged in the light of actual events during these three years of the model change. As our results illustrate, the first wave of change, which included only one university, led to only a few economic and autonomy-related arguments, mainly on the supporting side. The second phase, in which at first six more institutions were involved, led to the appearance of more new arguments; however, the real spark was the SZFE case. This brought the bulk of the critical autonomy-related arguments to the surface that dominated the year 2020. In the third wave, however, when the number of affected universities and employees doubled, the focus was on newly emerging economic arguments connected to wages, property, and monetary issues. It seems as if the SZFE case exhausted the topic of autonomy; in 2021, only a few supporting arguments arose in this area concerning leadership topics. This moving landscape and the constantly changing arguments corroborate the assumption that a coherent and clearly elaborated plan that directed changes from the very beginning of the process was lacking. Based on our data, it seems much more likely that policy ideas were constantly shaped and changed by ad hoc events and political intentions throughout the three years.

In terms of future research directions, it would be interesting to identify not only how and according to what rhythm different topics appeared in the discourse (which we have analysed in the case of the autonomy and economic arguments) but also how and when they disappeared. This would allow us to examine whether given discursive strands crowded out other topics and which topics remained significant in the period under investigation. Finally, we believe that the arguments raised in the media discourse on the transformation of the Hungarian university governance structure can serve as a resource for analysing media discourse accompanying similar transformations in other countries.

6 Conclusions

The model change in Hungary is an exciting and controversial process in European higher education. As we have mentioned earlier, due to the lack of any official strategy or white-paper document, we used the media discourse to unfold the main arguments and objectives in support of and against the model change. Furthermore, through the analysis, we identified parallel, non-intersecting conversations about the model change and its objectives in the two online newspapers that we analysed. In addition, the connection between the events of the model change and the respective arguments illustrates the ever-changing nature of this process, supporting the assumption that the three-year process was not a well-planned system transformation but rather an ad hoc process deeply affected by changing political agendas.

Regarding the limitations of the research project, we should note that we focused on the analysis of media texts, while reactions to the criticism of model change may also take non-textual forms – for example, the appointment of political actors responsible for the process. That is to say, our research explicitly focused only on the media representation of the Hungarian model change and did not analyse the political discourse, academic discourse, or the discourse of any other specific field. These limitations suggest possible future research topics, such as analysing the political discourse associated with model change or putting the academic discourse under the spotlight.

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