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Journal

Research and Occasional Paper Series

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Publication Date

2026-10-01

Peer reviewed

Research & Occasional Paper Series: CSHE.5.2026

Academia and Authoritarianism: A Framework and Research Agenda

October 2026

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests a research agenda and proposes a conceptual framework for analyzing the evolution of academia within regime changes: democratization and backsliding. We ask two overarching questions: (1) how does academia itself change during regime transitions and (2) how does academia influence the democratization of authoritarian regimes? For this purpose, it first suggests a theoretical framework for this type of research by combining several influential concepts from various disciplines: epistemic communities, access orders and triangle of coordination. Then, it identifies and briefly describes a number of cases, which can be used to study the transition of academia during regime change episodes - post-Nazi Germany, post-Communist East Germany, as well as Hungary, Poland, and Russia after the collapse of socialism. Through these case studies, the paper shows how the suggested framework forms a foundation for future in-depth research, which potentially has implications beyond the Eastern and Central European cases.

Keywords: academia, epistemic communities, authoritarianism, institutional transition, democratization, access orders

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes often try to restructure academia into an instrument of ideological reproduction, curtailing autonomy, and isolating institutions from global knowledge networks. Yet history shows that academia can withstand such pressure, preserve enclaves of independent thought, and provide resources for future democratic transitions. This resilience stems not only from deliberate opposition

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*The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Eastern Academic Alliance and the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg (HWK), Delmenhorst, whose backing made possible the August 2025 seminar that laid the foundation for this working paper. For Andrei Yakovlev this work at final stage was supported by the ESRC Network Plus Shifting Global 78Q03 Polarities: Russia, China, and Eurasia in Transition [REF: ES/Z503009/1].

but also from academia's inherent characteristics: its commitment to truth-seeking, evidence-based inquiry, peer review, and the international circulation of knowledge.

These practices create structural barriers to political capture by embedding academic judgment in transnational networks of peer recognition that escape direct state control. This internal resilience of academia makes the interaction between it and authoritarian regimes a complicated, multi-faceted phenomenon and at the same time makes academia a potentially important arena, or even actor, in the context of regime transition, whenever it occurs.

The interaction of academia and authoritarian regimes, especially in the context of the transformation of the latter, including transition from authoritarianism to democracy, can be studied from the perspective of two research questions. Each of these is associated with its own direction of influence in the interplay between politics and academia.

First, how does academia itself transform during episodes of regime change, including both democratization and authoritarian backsliding? The balance of power in academia is impacted by political shifts, which also affect the positions of various groups within the academic community and the creation or dissolution of institutions. On the one hand, under conditions of democratic transition, part of academic community can, try to change the academia and its institutions and practices, especially when facing the challenge of structures created by autocracy. Other parts of academia can try to reproduce old patterns and survive without any change under new conditions. On the other hand, the consolidation of an authoritarian regime is also likely to be accompanied by the change in the academic community and the structure of academic institutions.

Second, how does academia influence the (in)stability of an authoritarian regime and contribute to a possible transition to democracy? This direction of impact assumes that research institutions, universities or individual actors in academia are capable of becoming influential players leading to the destabilization and the collapse of authoritarian regime, affecting the path of transitioning or, conversely, stabilizing authoritarianism. Examples of this logic include researchers acting as experts in the process of political and economic transition, political activism of researchers, or student protests which accompanied or triggered the fall of many autocracies.

Both research questions are obviously closely tied to each other. The ability of academia to influence politics during regime transition is strongly influenced by the change academia itself experiences. And the change in academia, in turn, is affected by the political role it takes, or is perceived by other actors to have taken, during political transition.

The goal of this paper is to lay down a *conceptual framework* for studying the *interaction between academia and politics during the periods of political transformation*. While our framework takes both research questions into account, the main attention is on the first one: *changes in academia during the periods of political transition*. Our main focus is, furthermore, on the changes, or lack thereof, in academia during the periods of *democratic transition* – induced by internal factors or by external forces. Many arguments developed in this context are potentially relevant for studying academia under conditions of authoritarian consolidation as well, but we concentrate on democratic transitions at the first stage of our research program.

More specifically, the paper aims to (a) present a set of empirical cases potentially suitable for studying our research questions and (b) identify theoretical concepts and approaches, which can be used for such research. From the very large universe of cases, we focus on those associated with the fall of two major

authoritarian projects in the twentieth century Europe – NS dictatorship in Germany and Communism in Eastern Europe. We therefore identify five possible cases, which can be used to study the phenomena in question, and briefly describe their main characteristics.

Certainly, the relevance of the proposed research program extends beyond the countries that can be presented in the case studies.¹ The last two decades, first, have shown an astonishing resilience of authoritarian regimes, which successfully manage to stabilize their rule even under adverse conditions, and second, the fundamental problem of democratic backsliding many countries are facing. Democratic backsliding and authoritarian encroachment have become global concerns in recent years.² From this point of view, studying how ‘isles of independence’ survive in the academic communities of authoritarian countries and how they can affect the transformation of academia during the periods of eventual political change is a topic with substantial academic and policy relevance beyond the region we look at.

In terms of theoretical approaches, we suggest three frameworks, which have rarely been applied in combination with each other before, especially in the research on higher education and academia: the concept of *epistemic communities*, the theory of *open / limited access orders (OAO and LAO)*, and Clark’s *triangle of coordination*. We will demonstrate how these three frameworks can be connected and role they can play in studying our research questions.

The suggested framework goes beyond the debates about academic freedom and whether and how it is affected by authoritarian consolidation or democratic transition. Academic freedom, while certainly an extremely important concept (Levy 2026), captures only part of phenomena associated with the interplay between academia and politics in authoritarian regimes and during political transition. An equally relevant but rarely studied aspect is the existence of informal structures, coalitions and networks, i.e., epistemic communities, and their role. Our research shifts the attention from looking at the constraints individual researchers are facing, as the debate on academic freedom suggests, to the collective and institutional conditions under which epistemic communities can sustain their norm-securing and knowledge-producing function. Post-authoritarian renewal requires new incentive structures that rebuild trust and diversify funding. Together with growing political competition during the period of weakening of the state, economic competition may provide a driving force for the renewal of academia. Conditions need to be created where competition, and not political loyalty, decides survival and influence; epistemic communities in academia can become important actors in shaping such institutions.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the framework, integrating epistemic communities, access orders, and Clark’s triangle of coordination, and returns to the cases to draw preliminary observations. Section 3 introduces five motivating cases – post-war West Germany, post-1989 East

¹ Even the universe of cases of post-Communist transition is much larger than the cases covered in this paper. While countries like China and Kazakhstan did not experience transition towards democracy – even a temporary or an intended one – they also can be studied as examples of complex interplay of political change and organization of academia.

² In 2024, Freedom House reported, “Global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023.... Political rights and civil liberties were diminished in 52 countries, while only 21 countries made improvements” (Freedom House, 2024). This has been frequently linked to an increase in nationalism and right-wing populism. Turkey and countries of Central and Eastern European nations, like Hungary, Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia, are experiencing democratic backsliding, evolving into semi-authoritarian regimes (Labanino & Dobbins, 2022). Finally, the United States, while still a democracy by the measures of Freedom House, is facing risks of democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarian populism, even in academia (Gardbaum, 2024).

Germany, Hungary, Poland, and post-Soviet Russia – described briefly, since they serve to motivate rather than to test the framework. Section 4 discusses cross-case mechanisms and links the argument to the democratic-backsliding literature. Section 5 sets out the research agenda – its guiding questions, propositions, and proposed methods. Section 6 concludes.

A. Theoretical Framework

In this section we elaborate on the key concepts that lay the foundation for the research agenda: epistemic communities, access orders and the “triangle of coordination” and explore theoretical implications of the historical analysis.

Epistemic communities

Since our primary goal is to look at academic communities in direct connection with the societal and political evolution in authoritarian regimes and during their transition to democracy, we need a theoretical framework underscoring the interconnections between changes in academia and society. An adequate approach in political science stresses the role of **epistemic communities (ECs)** (Ruggie, 1975; Haas, 1992). While in political science it is typically used in the IR scholarship, we apply it in the context of domestic politics, and, more broadly, state-society interactions.

Epistemic communities are defined as networks of professionals recognized for their expertise and competence in a specific area, united by shared normative and causal beliefs, common problem-solving approaches, and internally validated standards of knowledge production (Haas, 1992). Our paper focuses in particular on academic ECs, which are the most relevant ones for our research question. Historically, these ECs are anchored in what we may call a centuries-old epistemic pact between academia, state and society: a shared, though evolving, agreement on how claims to truth should be formulated, tested, and validated. This pact is institutionalized in peer review, methodological standards, disciplinary canons, and the international circulation of results; it allows scientists in different regimes and centuries to recognize each other’s work as “knowledge” rather than opinion. The political and economic utility of science – its capacity to generate technologies, growth, and strategic advantages – rests on the integrity of this epistemic pact, rather than on any particular ideological alignment of scholars with rulers.

Authoritarian regimes can attempt to discipline or repurpose academia, but they remain structurally dependent on epistemic communities that abide by this pact. Once scientific procedures are subordinated entirely to ideological loyalty, knowledge production degenerates into false science, which may serve short-term legitimation but undermines long-term problem-solving capacity; in this sense, knowledge is both a resource for democratizers and a power resource that autocrats cannot fully abandon.

These communities are central actors in the production and legitimization of policy-relevant knowledge. They do not merely offer technical advice but interpret social and political realities, help shape state interests, and narrow the range of policy options examined by those making decisions (Dunlop, 2012; MAI’A K, 2013). Academia, along with think tanks and NGOs, is a rational focal point for the consolidation of epistemic communities. This is because academia in most societies is seen as a legitimate source of knowledge. Significantly, epistemic communities contribute not only to the generation of knowledge but also to the redefinition of states’ self-interests by clarifying the cause-and-

effect relationships of problems. This process can lead to revising preconceived interests or discovering new ones (Haas, 1992). They can influence both domestic elites and foreign partners by clearly articulating the costs and benefits of certain social reforms, such as advancing free and open research, and the drawbacks of academic repression. In this way, national reform initiatives and global academic standards are mediated through epistemic communities.

In this research, epistemic communities and their “meaning-making” activity are defined in a broad sense: they do not necessarily operate through policy advice and direct interaction with politicians but also through indirect tools of influencing society, such as participation in public discourse or educational activities (Laruelle, 2025) and the creation of new organizations. While Haas studied epistemic communities in the context of international relations, they have much broader relevance for society and become particularly important in periods of uncertainty and crisis, when they play a vital role in defining alternatives, advocating institutional reform, and framing ideological premises of a new order (Morisse-Schilbach, 2015). Importantly, epistemic communities are not limited to social sciences and humanities with their obvious link to societal topics: natural scientists, equipped with a very high level of perceived legitimacy in society, can also become essential voices advocating societal transformation (as it is happening in many Western societies amidst the climate crisis or COVID-19 pandemic). In some authoritarian societies, like the Soviet one, sciences, perceived as less ideological and at the same time highly esteemed, provide a natural platform for formulating general recommendations on the development of society. Epistemic communities may thus act as “institutional entrepreneurs” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), supporting societal and academic change.

As already mentioned, we extend the notion of epistemic communities beyond the narrow setting of international relations theory, which Haas envisioned it to be applied to. We also extend it to yet another, very important aspect. Most studies on epistemic communities focus on direct interaction between them and the political sphere. At the same time, academia can influence politics in another, highly significant way: through transmitting ideas to students and the general public. This channel allows numerous academics at a large variety of educational institutions to exercise a *de facto* influence on societal and political evolution. Frequently, these educational institutions lack the attention of politicians or the high status necessary to engage in policy advice or play the role of public intellectuals. However, this channel allows them to engage in “meaning making” through content transmitted to students and the general public. This may be more important than communicating with politicians or the media. We explicitly acknowledge the role of this factor.

Furthermore, we are open to a complex interaction between epistemic communities and institutions, which we discuss in the next section. Epistemic communities can emerge within institutional boundaries, with the latter serving as focal points for the consolidation of communities. They can, however, evolve as informal networks that try to escape the prying eye of the regime in autocracies, and only at a later point in time, possibly, develop certain institutional structures or take over the existing ones.

The scholarship on epistemic communities' role in autocracies is relatively limited (Bakir, 2023). Generally speaking, the position of epistemic communities in this context is difficult and sometimes two-fold. Some authoritarian regimes invest substantial effort in establishing control over “meaning-making” and thus over knowledge production in academia. Other authoritarian states are less interested in controlling academia, allowing the existence of isolated isles of independent thought and discussion. In some authoritarian regimes, epistemic communities exist only within informal, fragmented, or exiled networks (Anderson, 2021). While quite a few scholars investigate how the regime captures academia and is forced to support its propaganda efforts (Beidollahkhani, 2025; Ignatieff, 2024; Nguyen, 2022;

Salajan & Jules, 2025), the interaction between academia and regimes is more complex than generally assumed (Bégin-Caouette et al., 2016; Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2022). Even in highly ideological regimes, epistemic communities can try to reinterpret the dominant ideology or "fill the loopholes" in it. In many modern autocracies, the interaction between the regime and epistemic communities is a bidirectional one (Yom, 2014).

While the regime attempts to capture epistemic communities to make them support its legitimacy claims, it also depends on the expertise and knowledge of the communities, which therefore can influence the regime. Even under restrictive conditions, scholarly exchange tends to reconstitute itself through informal communication and professional ties. This pattern corresponds to Diana Crane's (1972) concept of the "invisible college" – loosely organized networks that maintain the circulation of knowledge when formal institutions are constrained. In many authoritarian contexts, such invisible colleges sustain the epistemic coherence and credibility of academic communities, enabling them to persist as latent structures of renewal. At the same time, even these weak and defunct epistemic communities can gain new relevance in the context of a major crisis. It depends on a broader social context and internal academic debates that exist in academia before the transition point, which we will explore in our analysis (Österman & Robinson, 2023).

Our study focuses on academia's inherent structural and cultural traits into our research agenda as a vital "third element" of its capacity for democratic revival. Our framework aims to investigate how these latent resources, such as evidence-based inquiry and peer-review, sustain the "invisible colleges" that preserve intellectual autonomy even under intense authoritarian pressure. By examining these traits alongside the agency of epistemic communities, we intend to demonstrate how academia functions as a crucial catalyst for transitioning from limited to open access orders.

After the fall or during the decline of authoritarian regimes, academia often faces a crisis in epistemic trust and authority. As the process of institutional recovery may take some time, according to Heydemann's concept of recombinant authoritarianism, authoritarian regimes may selectively adopt a facade of academic freedom, such as establishing "independent" research councils, to simulate pluralism while closely managing intellectual autonomy (Heydemann, 2007). In this hybrid academic system, where epistemic authority is manufactured rather than earned, the integrity of epistemic communities may be jeopardized. Anti-democratic epistemic communities can emerge, attempting to delay and even reverse the processes of institutional recovery in academia and society's transition.

Again, the empirical cases we plan to examine have the potential to demonstrate this logic effectively. Importantly, we do not regard epistemic communities as merely intellectual phenomena. First, they often have a well-established organizational form and can be important institutional actors. Second, they consist of real people who experience the hopes and challenges of transition not only as scholars or intellectuals but also as humans. This influences the stance they adopt during the transition.

During major political and societal transitions, academia is experiencing a double debate. One is about the overall transformation of society: the democratization process and the role intellectuals can play in it. Another is about the development of academia itself: its integration into global scholarly discourses and practices, (re-)establishment of ties to foreign actors, etc. These debates are interconnected yet not necessarily identical: actors can advocate for democratization while being skeptical of what they perceive as foreign intellectual practices. At the same time, nationalist discourse offers a powerful tool for recombinant authoritarianism to keep academia and epistemic communities under control. According to Douglass, even in nominal democracies, nationalist regimes can exert control over academia through appointments to leadership positions, financial pressure, and the shaping of cultural

mandates, transforming it from a global player into a custodian of "national essence (Douglass, 2021). This is of substantial importance for many cases we plan to study.

Access orders

As the second element of our theoretical framework, we draw on the distinction between open and limited access orders (North et al., 2009) (NWW). Limited access orders maintain stability by restricting entry into political, economic, and social organizations, thereby generating rents for elites and suppressing competition. Open access orders, in contrast, allow broad entry into organizations and rely on competition and the rule of law to secure cooperation. We incorporate this framework to illuminate how authoritarian regimes construct academia as a limited access domain, restricting institutional autonomy, academic freedom, international integration, and organizational innovation, including transformation of existing and creation of new organizations, while post-authoritarian transitions aim to expand access and embed competition in knowledge production. This perspective enables us to situate the struggle of epistemic communities not only as a cultural or normative conflict but also as a structural shift between two distinct equilibria of social order.

According to NWW, Open Access Order (OAO) societies are those that provide opportunities for all members to participate in political decision-making. In contrast, Limited Access Order (LAO) societies are those in which there is "a pervasive sense that not all individuals were created or are equal" (NWW, p. 12). OAO societies have institutions that ensure a smooth transition of leadership. Leaders change, but political organizations, such as competing parties, remain and continue functioning. Institutions and personalities are separated, and, at least in theory, anyone has the chance to participate in the self-governance of society. The ruling elites remain somewhat open, and one does not require personal connections to gain entry. LAO societies, on the other hand, operate on the basis of personal connections. The power in such societies resides not in institutions but in personalities. Consequently, leadership change is a considerable problem. Leaders stay in power until their death, and political life is but an imitation. NWW conclude that OAO societies are more resilient.

Access Orders theory has generated a rich body of literature, including studies on the current political regimes in post-Soviet countries (Flikke, 2021; Kennedy, 2017; Pyzhev & Rutskiy, 2018; Schulmann & Galeotti, 2021; Yakovlev, 2021). For our purposes, what matters is not the classification of regimes per se, but how LAO and OAO conditions differently structure the organizational landscape within which epistemic communities must operate. The progression from LAO to OAO is not automatic, and transition can go both ways (Ademmer et al., 2020; Langbein & Ademmer, 2019). OAO societies may experience authoritarian backsliding and closure of the political elites to outsiders. Originally, NWW conceptualized a set of conditions for the transition from LAO to OAO. They formulated a set of "doorstep conditions" necessary to transition from LAO to OAO. Among them is "the adoption of perpetually lived organizations" (Franke & Quintyn, 2014, p. 212). Organizations that can smoothly transition from one leader to the next create conditions for the emergence of the OAO.

As Hermann-Pillath observes, NWW views the shift from LAO to OAO "as an outcome of intra-elite political conflict," and thus, NWW focused predominantly on the dynamics of elites (Herrmann-Pillath, 2019). This observation is crucial for our analysis as we draw on Clark's Triangle of Coordination for juxtaposing the roles of academia, market, and the state in governing academia and its positioning in the process of institutional change.

Building on NWW's distinction between limited and open access orders, our contribution is to specify how epistemic communities operate under these different institutional logics. We treat access orders as

environments that shape both the emergence and the agency of epistemic communities. In LAOs, where political and economic rents are controlled by elites, dissenting epistemic communities may survive as enclaves, constrained in their ability to articulate broader societal alternatives. At the same time, LAOs may capture epistemic communities through mechanisms of co-optation, fragmentation, and dependence. Dissenting epistemic groups may be marginalized or forced into exile. Epistemic communities are not passive products of access orders but are reshaped through continuous negotiation with the regime.

ECs in LAO practice what we may call “bounded technocracy”: they deliver technical expertise in “safe” arenas while avoiding topics that would politically contest rent-seeking coalitions. In OAOs, by contrast, broad organizational entry and competition may reposition ECs into sources of contestation. Newcomers can form organizations without elite sponsorship, and pluralism is sustained through merit and competition. Under these conditions, ECs not only produce knowledge but also institutionalize fair procedures, thereby linking epistemic authority to transparent, rule-bound competition rather than to personal networks.

Despite these constraints, epistemic communities retain distinctive contributions even in LAO contexts. In moments of transition, these communities can facilitate the move from LAO to OAO by providing expertise, reform blueprints, and legitimating narratives for democratic consolidation, playing the role of the “vanguard” of democratization. Conversely, when democracies backslide, epistemic communities may become “canaries”, the early targets of repression, signaling the advancement of authoritarianism, precisely because of their capacity to contest LAO discourses. This dual perspective clarifies how access order theory can be juxtaposed against the concept of epistemic communities and the role of academia in regime change.

In this perspective, authoritarian rulers face a structural dilemma. They seek to enclose academia within a limited access order, using appointments, funding, and legal constraints to integrate universities into elite coalitions, while at the same time relying on the expertise generated by epistemic communities that require at least partially open, rule-bound epistemic orders to function. This contradiction helps to explain both the recurrent efforts of autocratic regimes to co-opt or fragment epistemic communities and their recurrent dependence on them for policy advice, technological innovation, and international legitimacy.³

Clark’s triangle of coordination

Epistemic communities function within the set of academic institutions: universities and research institutions. However, as noted above, they are not identical to these institutions, but may overlap with their boundaries or form informal groupings within them. Therefore, to study epistemic communities and their formation and evolution, our paper investigates the environment in which they emerge – the universities and research institutes, and their governance and organization. Here, to focus on our analysis, we draw on Burton Clark’s “triangle of coordination” that offers a classical model for analyzing

³ Wilhelm von Humboldt’s quote is relevant here: “As soon as one ceases really to seek science, or imagines that it does not need to be created out of the depths of the spirit ... everything is irretrievably and eternally lost; lost for science ... and lost for the state”(Sobald man aufhört, eigentlich Wissenschaft zu suchen, oder sich einbildet, sie brauche nicht aus der Tiefe des Geistes heraus geschaffen ... so ist Alles unwiederbringlich und auf ewig verloren; verloren für die Wissenschaft ... und verloren für den Staat), *Über die innere und äußere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin* (1809/1810).

governance in higher education (Clark, 1986). He distinguishes three poles of authority: the state, the market, and the academic oligarchy.

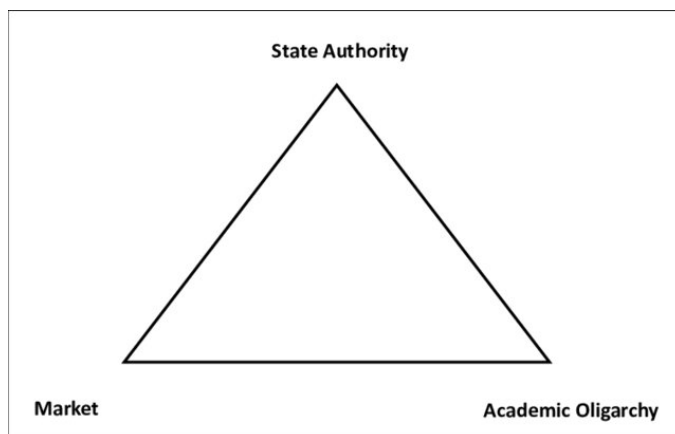
In Clark's view, universities are shaped by the shifting balance among these three forces. The state provides regulation and resources but also exerts political control; the market introduces competition, demand from students and employers, and pressures for efficiency; the academic oligarchy maintains professional norms, peer-based authority, and disciplinary traditions. Each national system embodies a different configuration of this triangle, with some leaning heavily toward state control, as in France, others toward academic self-rule, as in Germany's Humboldtian model, and still others toward market steering, as in the United States.

Clark's framework is particularly useful for understanding post-authoritarian transitions and the period of authoritarian encroachment, because such periods often involve dramatic rebalancing between these poles: authoritarian regimes typically strengthen the state's dominance and weaken both markets and professional autonomy, whereas democratization tends to reintroduce competition and academic self-governance. During transitions, academic systems typically move from state-dominated coordination toward greater market influence and professional self-governance. This shift introduces competition as a mechanism of renewal, linking academic reform to the broader transformation of political and economic institutions. In individual countries, the configuration of the triangle determined the speed and depth of change: where market mechanisms and external demand for expertise strengthened, universities and research institutes acquired new autonomy, while in contexts where state control persisted, epistemic communities remained constrained within limited access frameworks.

We also take into consideration the economic dimensions of these regime transitions. Business actors are key to the distribution of resources and evolution of institutions. Particularly, market reforms, market pressure, and competition within economic systems may contribute to regime change. The market may serve as a powerful source of competition for funding that acts as a measure of quality for academic projects. Academia that relies on business for its funding is markedly different from that which sees the state as its only source of funding. Partial replacement of state funds with private money may serve as a safeguard against authoritarian attack on academia. Business itself, however, can be connected to the state and play a role in the process of democratization or autocratization; we will take it into account in our analysis.

Recent work in the economics of higher education reinforces this perspective by emphasizing the specific organizational form that has enabled universities to survive and adapt over nearly a millennium. Cutler and Glaeser (2026) characterize universities as hybrid entities that combine a "professors' cooperative," which grants substantial autonomy to faculty with a strong taste for discovery, with a separate capital-controlling body of trustees and administrators that manages endowments and long-term investments. This hybrid emerged from medieval teachers' guilds and donor-controlled corporations, and it has persisted because it attracts curiosity-driven scholars while reassuring external funders; at the same time, it generates chronic conflict between faculty, university leaders, and political authorities.

Figure 1. Clark's triangle of coordination. Adapted from Clark (1986).



Clark's triangle adds a further dimension, situating epistemic communities at the intersection of state regulation, market pressures, and academic oligarchy. The balance of these three forces determines the room for maneuver available to epistemic communities and explains why the same type of academic group may act differently in diverse national contexts.

Science and epistemic communities

The credibility of epistemic communities depends on internal qualification, professional independence, social reputation, and international embeddedness. They serve as reservoirs of reliable knowledge for policymakers. Yet, political authorities often attempt to capture or replicate these networks of knowledge producers by creating quasi-epistemic communities that function as instruments of legitimation for autocrats.

While epistemic communities in the humanities are difficult to delineate due to the subjectivity of their outputs, scientific communities operate under more clearly defined professional norms and standards of validation. Our research concentrates on epistemic communities in science and education. Our framework helps to assess whether epistemic communities' function in an open, competitive environment, indicative of an open access order, and whether they preserve a balance between state, market, and academic self-governance, which form the three poles of Clark's coordination triangle).

In this perspective, an epistemic community thrives under conditions of intellectual contestation and pluralism – features characteristic of open access orders. It seeks persuasion through argument rather than monopoly and institutional power. Conversely, in limited access orders, epistemic communities' risk being subordinated to rent-seeking elites or transformed into instruments of ideological control. This distinction has major political implications: genuine epistemic communities tend to reinforce democratic environments, while dependent or co-opted ECs contribute to backsliding. Some groups may present themselves as scientific communities while promoting ideologically driven or pseudoscientific views. In open and competitive academic systems, such actors remain marginal unless supported by the state or private interests. Thus, the integrity of science –and its capacity to serve as a critical force within society –depends on the autonomy and pluralism of its epistemic communities.

B. ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

As already mentioned, our proposed research agenda is motivated by several important case studies, mostly from the Central European and Eastern European context. In this section, we briefly present these case studies through the lens of main concepts introduced above. The selection of countries' cases for comparison follows from the study's comparative logic: each case represents a society that underwent democratization after a period of authoritarian rule, in which academia was shaped by the process of rebuilding democratic institutions, the direction of causality we are particularly interested in, and itself influenced it, which is a secondary interest of our project.

Germany after WW2, post-Communist East Germany, Poland, and Hungary, as well as post-Soviet Russia, provide a spectrum of experiences that illuminate different trajectories of transformations, and some of them are even cases of backsliding (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007; Waldner & Lust, 2018). They all illustrate the importance of epistemic communities, which partially emerged during the era of authoritarian rule, as well as how provide a fruitful foundation for illustrating the application of the concept of access orders.

Post-Socialist societies constitute a particularly interesting case from the point of view of our research agenda. Socialist countries created or already had large academic communities, due to ambition of Communism to foster education but also due to the demands of the Cold War, when academia played an important part in maintaining military potential in the competition with the West. Our project reflects the commonality of political history of the former Eastern Bloc.

Post-World War II West Germany: Denazification and Rebuilding Academia

Following the end of World War II, German science and education underwent a comprehensive process of gradual denazification. (Grüttner, 2024; Lobkowicz, 1987), which, however, took more than two decades, until the second part of the 1960s. This transformation was guided by the Allied powers and supported from below by some German actors committed to academic renewal (Paletschek, 2002). Epistemic communities – including the Freiburg School, resistance networks, - contributed significantly to developing a new socio-economic framework, while individual exiled scholars also played an important role in this respect, notably Wilhelm Röpke and Alexander Rüstow. Esteemed scientists who maintained their independence from the Nazi regime, such as Otto Hahn and Werner Heisenberg, led major research institutions, playing a crucial part in the revitalization of Germany's scientific community. Academia served as a witness by recording past abuses and preserving narratives of repression and resistance. Scholarly communities played pedagogical and political roles in rebuilding the post-authoritarian society; for example, German political science as *Demokratiewissenschaft*.

At the same time, critical voices highlight a substantial level of continuity of the post-World War 2 German universities with the NS era; quite a few actors important in the Third Reich period were able to pursue their career after the fall of the Hitler regime, and the networks created by them turned out to be highly resilient. The subsequent phase of academic reforms and continued denazification in the 1960s, driven by the student protests, therefore highlighted the ongoing complexity of this transformation, which continues to offer valuable methodological insights. The German case can provide key lessons on the importance of external oversight, namely the role Allied forces, international partnerships such as the Marshall Plan, new approaches to governance of academic institutions (Kieser, 2004) and the leadership of local epistemic communities in institutional renewal.

Post-Communist East Germany: Integration and Tension

Within our project, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) stands out as a particularly instructive case - almost a “control case” - where communist ideologization was especially strict and systematically enforced. The close coordination between the KGB and the Stasi, alongside the rigid imposition of Soviet academic models, resulted in an exceptionally tight grip over intellectual life. This made the GDR a kind of laboratory for authoritarian knowledge production, where deviation from ideological orthodoxy was both institutionally suppressed and personally dangerous. German reunification in 1990 triggered a sweeping restructuring of East German academia (Mau, 2024; Sabel, 1993), including the dismissal of thousands of Marxist-Leninist-trained faculties and the rapid imposition of Western standards. The triple transformation –democratization, marketization, and the direct implementation of West German law– created an institutional shock for East Germany’s academic communities (Önder et al., 2021). The Kultusministerkonferenz and institutions like the Berlin–Brandenburg Academy of Sciences led the integration of East German universities into the democratic system.

At the same time, Klaus Offe criticized this “institutional transplantation” as an uncritical adoption of Western models, ignoring local contexts. Replacing local scholars with West German staff and excluding them from reforms disrupted epistemic continuity and eroded trust. Delegitimization led to the loss of institutional memory, professional networks, and entire research traditions, weakening academia’s civic role, which is vital for democratic consolidation, according to (Offe, 1997). Mau (2024) points out the negative consequences of the import of elites, including intellectual ones, to East Germany. Debates on this transformation remain active (Oschmann, 2023). The East German case highlights the benefits of democratic integration and the costs of abrupt reform. While governance improved, the marginalization of East German scholars fostered resentment and identity loss, underscoring the need for reforms that balance change with inclusion (Günther & Schmerbach, 2010).

Hungary: Reform Followed by Backsliding

Today, Poland and Hungary exemplify distinct cases of democratic backsliding (Bernhard, 2021; Holesch & Kyriazi, 2022; Kim, 2023); in the 1990s they both were seen as examples of very successful political and economic transformation. Their shared histories of state socialism and swift post-1989 changes transformed academic institutions in similar ways, making their trajectories to some extent comparable to that of Russia. Both nations provide important perspectives for understanding how universities and research communities respond to increased illiberal pressures.

Hungary presents a case of successful academic reforms in the 1990s, later reversed under a nationalist-populist regime. Diverse epistemic communities, including the semi-autonomous Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) and liberal and nationalist dissidents, played key roles in post-communist academic transformation (Bozóki, 2022). Reforms included restructuring the MTA, raising PhD standards, and establishing the independent Hungarian Accreditation Committee (Mosoni-Fried, 2004).

The establishment of the Central European University (CEU), the Bologna process, and EU funding reintegrated Hungary into global academia. However, democratic backsliding under Fidesz has halted earlier reforms, targeted CEU, defunded the MTA, and created ideologically driven institutions (Enyedi, 2018). Yet liberal epistemic communities continued to play a vital role in defending academic freedom, pluralism, and institutional memory. The 2026 elections could potentially mark an important milestone in the further political development of Hungary, although at the moment this paper is written little can be said specifically about the post-Orban transformation of the country.

Poland: Retaining Academic Autonomy

Polish academia was less isolated than in other communist countries and, by the late 1980s, intellectually and institutionally prepared for systemic reform. Since the 1970s, many academics have been involved in opposition movements, supported by a strong academic diaspora in the West. Pro-reform epistemic communities, including economists and social scientists, played a key role in shaping Poland's post-communist transition. After 1989, the government aimed to restore academic autonomy and reduce ideological control. However, reforms over the next two decades were slow and lacked a unified policy for universities and the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN). Efforts to boost accountability while preserving autonomy gained momentum only in the late 2010s. Despite persistent issues like low researcher visibility and declining standards, Polish academia upholds one of Europe's highest degrees of autonomy. Even with the rise of right-wing populism, there have been no serious attempts to politicize universities or PAN. However, academia's influence on policymaking has significantly diminished.

Post-Soviet Russia: Early Liberalization and Decline

Finally, we turn to the Russian case, which is better familiar to most of the authors of this paper and therefore is described in somewhat greater detail. In Russia, the democratization process, which started in the late 1980s and early 1990s, has been hindered and reversed, at the very least after the end of the Boris Yeltsin era. Shortly after Vladimir Putin came to power in the early 2000s, Russia began to slide democratically. Incremental authoritarian initiatives hampered political plurality (Jakobson et al., 2018). Liberal academic reforms have been gradually reversed since 2008, following two decades of integration into the global academic community and the development of progressive governance in research and education. Repression and international isolation increased significantly with the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

In Russia, the 1990s brought unprecedented autonomy but also a collapse of funding, leaving newly created grant agencies⁴ underfinanced. In the 2000s, rising state revenues revitalized universities, yet state oversight grew steadily. By the late 2000s, the focus shifted to performance metrics and international rankings, culminating in the 5/100 Program after 2012 that aimed to make Russian universities globally competitive. These reforms expanded resources but tied them to conformity with central priorities, progressively eroding academic autonomy.

Today, Russian academia faces extreme pressure: censorship, ideological conformity, repression of dissent, and attempts of the state to isolate it from global science (Dubrovskiy, 2017; Oleksiyenko, 2021, 2025). Yet, even after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, some enclaves of free thought remain, resisting the broader trend of voluntary and coerced co-optation by the regime, a process analogous to the German term "Gleichschaltung". Some academic collectives remain in "inner emigration" preserving academic standards while working "under the radar" of state oversight (Pavlova 2026; Smirnov 2025).

Unlike Hungary and Poland, academia in Russia in the last decades of the Soviet era could not rely on any significant epistemic communities abroad. There were certain ones in the USSR, since the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the country's ruling party, needed ideas that these

⁴ The Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR), the Russian Humanitarian Foundation (RHF), and other development institutions in the field of research and innovation, such as the Bortnik Fund, were inspired by Western models but had limited impact due to chronic underfinancing.

epistemic communities could provide. In return, they were given a certain degree of freedom within the ideological framework (Brovkin, 1990).

During perestroika, a search for alternative ideas and approaches continued within these structures; representatives of the Academy of Sciences and creative unions took part in the attempts to reform Soviet society undertaken in the 1980s. Moreover, there were some informal circles and networks which appeared at that time and tried to influence the processes of democratization on science, culture and in the political sphere (Lubrano, 1993). However, not all epistemic communities survived the transition: some, more ideologically driven, ceased to exist, while those that found conceptual ground and funding emerged and began to flourish (Smolentseva, 2012; Smolentseva et al., 2018, p. 202). These were both liberal institutions and more conservative, pro-government structures.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Russian academia experienced liberalization. Institutions like the Higher School of Economics (HSE), the New Economic School (NES), the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences and the European University at St. Petersburg (EUSP) introduced Western-oriented programs in social and humanitarian sciences and attracted international support. In the second half of the 2000s, the state expanded its control over academia to increase its international competitiveness (Kuzminov & Yudkevich, 2022). However, this influence soon turned into a limitation of autonomy.

Liberal institutions gradually sacrificed academic freedom to increase state funding, which led to the replacement of the rectors by pro-government external managers and harmed the content of education and research as government policies became more authoritarian (Chirikov & Fedyukin, 2021). A radical reform of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which transferred administrative management of scientific institutes to the government, was carried out. Initiatives in the academic sphere were transferred mainly into the hands of the state.

Comparison of cases

The cases presented above exemplify an enormous variation in the patterns of development of academia under conditions of regime change, which is also a complex and – if one applies a somewhat longer-run perspective – not a unidirectional process. By synthesizing Haas's epistemic communities with North et al.'s access orders, and incorporating Burton Clark's triangle of coordination to analyze governance rebalancing among state, market, and academic oligarchy, this study proposes a theoretical framework for understanding how academic networks influence regime change. As preliminary illustrations rather than systematic evidence, these cases suggest that recovery depends not only on external reforms and resources but also on the resilience and agency of epistemic communities. They can promote democratization, but without institutional protection can be co-opted.

Table 1. Summary table of the cases

Case	Access Order Shift	Position in the Clark's triangle during the transition period	Key Epistemic Community Role	Outcome for Academia
Post-WWII West Germany	LAO to OAO via Allies/Marshall Plan	Dominance of academic oligarchy	Exiled scholars, denazification networks	Strong renewal with external aid
Post-Communist East Germany	LAO to OAO but abrupt transplantation from the West to the East	Dominance of academic oligarchy with certain evidence of increasing influence of the state	West German integration vs. local exclusion	Improved governance, lost continuity
Hungary	Initiated transition from LAO to OAO with new backsliding to LAO under Viktor Orban rule	Mixture of academic oligarchy and market; increasing role of the state under Orban	MTA/CEU liberals vs. Fidesz capture	Reforms reversed, resistance ongoing
Poland	Initiated transition from LAO to OAO with new backsliding to LAO but with retained autonomy of many elite organizations	Mixture of academic oligarchy and market; attempts to strengthen the role of the state	Diaspora/opposition networks	Policy influence declined
Russia (post-Soviet)	Transformation of Transition from the Soviet LAO to more mature forms in 1990s with regress to basic LAO during the rule of Putin	Dominance of the market (1990s) and the state (increasingly from 2000 on)	HSE/NES liberals co-opted post-2000s	Enclaves persist in "inner emigration"

C. DISCUSSION

Generalizable mechanisms: lessons from the cases

Sources of competition are not neutral. In Russia under authoritarianism academia has suffered from corruption, moral compromise, and a total dependence on state funding that has weakened its autonomy. For epistemic communities to contribute to democratization, they must be connected to political liberalization and new sources of competition. A possible source of funding for this competition

can become the business elites interested in scientific expertise and forecasting of economic, social, and political processes, and therefore interested in establishing think tanks and funding programs for applied and, in some fields, also fundamental research.

Russia illustrates a broader situation: traditional lustration, such as in post-Nazi Germany, will not apply. In this context, academic renewal may be driven by intrinsic actors and networks, gradually replacing the entrenched academic oligarchy that has formed mutually beneficial ties with the regime.

In such situations, transnational epistemic communities may play a critical role, as illustrated by cases where large numbers of researchers leave a country due to political repressions and subsequently form external networks supporting domestic renewal.

Unlike political competition, which in authoritarian regimes is discredited, market mechanisms can help reshape academic life on new competitive grounds. Academia should be re-oriented to seek funding from independent sources, involving private and international sources. Relying on these sources, along with minimal state funding, would encourage quality, transparency, and performance. This would counteract the clientelism and centralization. It aligns with Burton Clark's "triangle of coordination," where the market can balance the state.

In order for market competition to "kick-start," business elites need to have strong incentives for this. In LAO contexts where property rights remain insecure, business elites may develop strong incentives to support institutional reform. The Russian case illustrates this logic vividly: the threat of expropriation by the regime of assets privatized in the 1990s⁵. These insecure property rights of large businesses create potential for elite revolt⁶.

This combination of epistemic communities, market competition, and the self-interest of businesses may become crucial for the democratic transition. The fear of losing property may push elites to support reforms, while academia, oriented at competitive funding, can reclaim its role as a space for intellectual independence. In this way, the political liberalization and economic competition may enable academia not only to endure the transition but also to act as a catalyst for democratization.

Academia and democratic backsliding

While the main focus of our empirical research is going to be on the transformation of academia during the periods of democratic transition, our research can be linked to the democratic backsliding debate, which has been ongoing in the political science literature. The study of democratic backsliding has

⁵ Several noticeable cases have already established precedent, and property rights are now not secured, particularly so for large businesses. This uncertainty of elites' property rights is functionally similar to the unresolved "land question", that is, the absence of property rights on land for peasants, which was key in mobilizing the masses by the Bolsheviks and the toppling of the Czarist regime. In that case, the precarity of property rights on land ignited the revolution.

⁶ This existential threat that business elites face presents an unexpected chance (Yakovlev, 2025). Afraid of losing their assets, businesses might unite in supporting reforms that provide legal protections, fair competition, and reliable rules. Under such conditions, businesses may develop incentives to support broader institutional reforms that guarantee legal protections and fair competition, potentially including investment in independent academic institutions.

become a vibrant subfield in comparative politics, driven by increasing evidence that democracies erode gradually rather than collapse through abrupt coups or revolutions.

In her seminal paper “On Democratic Backsliding,” Nancy Bermeo (2016) reframed democratic decline as a process of institutional erosion whereby incumbents exploit legal and electoral mechanisms to consolidate power. Subsequent scholarship has sought to explain the varieties and causes of this process. Waldner and Lust (2018) critique long-standing theories of democratization and democratic breakdown, arguing that these older frameworks fail to fully account for contemporary backsliding’s incremental character. Comparative research by Haggard and Kaufman (2021) situates backsliding within broader structural pressures such as polarization, shifting party systems, and economic inequality, showing that these factors can weaken institutional constraints on executive power over time.

Gerschewski (2021a) differentiates between exogenous and endogenous drivers of democratic backsliding: erosion resulting from external pressures on democratic institutions, and decay arising from internal vulnerabilities within democratic systems. Another of his publications (Gerschewski, 2021b) expands this into a broader typology that considers both causal origin, endogenous vs. exogenous, and temporal dynamics, rapid or gradual, in institutional transformation. This framework enhances the ability to map how academic institutions might shift under both democratic and autocratic pressures.

Empirical evidence points to a “third wave of autocratisation” in which democratic erosion unfolds within nominally electoral democracies rather than through coups. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) document this pattern globally, showing how restrictions on civil liberties weaken democratic checks and balances. Cassani and Tomini (2019) further analyse how hybrid regimes embed autocratic control within democratic forms, emphasizing how institutions can persist in appearance while decaying in practice. More recent work has begun to examine resilience and resistance to backsliding. Riedl et al. (2025) argue that democratic institutions and societies often exhibit resilience, and that understanding these countervailing forces is critical to explaining why some democracies survive periods of erosion.

A notable emerging area of inquiry focuses specifically on academic institutions and academic freedom during democratic erosion. In the 2025 article “Can free academia withstand democratic backsliding? Why some universities wither while others survive” (Lott et al., 2025) employ data from the Varieties of Democracy project to analyse how episodes of autocratisation affect academic freedom. They find that academic freedom shows remarkable resilience even in backsliding contexts: while autocratisation slightly reduces resilience, the probability that academic freedom endures remains high compared to the much lower resilience of democracy itself. This work provides one of the first systematic empirical assessments of how academia withstands democratic backsliding and highlights heterogeneous trajectories across countries.

Together, this recent body of research establishes backsliding as an incremental, gradual, and multi-dimensional phenomenon that requires frameworks beyond the concept of democratization. It also points to important variation in how civil society and other institutional actors, including academia, experience and respond to democratic backsliding. Yet despite the increasing number of case studies and comparative data, the role of academic institutions as both potential sites of resistance and targets of repression remains underdeveloped. There is still a need to focus on academia and how epistemic communities interact with political pressures in shaping regime trajectories. Mechanisms of backsliding

We do not aim to produce immediate, ready-to-apply policy recommendations. Rather, we seek to deepen our understanding of how the transformation of academia is viewed in comparative perspective.

Such comparative insight can offer colleagues in other countries a set of analytical reference points for developing their own context-specific responses to the challenges that academia faces today.

One of the strategies that authoritarian regimes use during backsliding may be termed “piecemeal devouring”. The state aims to receive the loyalty of academia by providing resources: money, contracts, and property. Resources give academic institutions an opportunity to expand, but at the same time make them dependent on government support. Step by step, the academic institution becomes dependent on state funding and re-shapes its structure and processes to secure even more funding in line with resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2015). The state then demands greater and greater loyalty to the point of complete subjugation of the institution. In authoritarian regimes, this involves gradual moral corruption to the point where the institutions turn into “coercers” (Mazzero, 2025) and oppress their employees in line with state demands.

This process is not a neutral economic or political process; it has a moral dimension. Autocratic tradeoff of money for loyalty forces university administration to engage in moral compromises, undermining not only the abstract academic freedom but also the moral atmosphere in the organization. This can be observed vividly in Russia today where universities gradually became key supporters of the war in Ukraine.

The process of authoritarian encroachment may be understood as a process of moral corruption that, if not stopped, results in moral degradation and succumbing to the corrupt forces of authoritarianism, curtailing of academic freedom and the right to dissent, and complete political docility of universities and epistemic communities.

Thus, it is important to see what moral corruption lies down the road and fight against it with academic solidarity and institutional design. Diversification of incomes that prevents over-reliance on government funding, supporting the market as a source of competition, and incentivizing businesses to invest in foundations that fund academic research may create favorable conditions for academic independence.

D. GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The presented theoretical framework offers a good foundation for studying the transformation of academia in conjunction with political transformation during the regime transition periods. We recommend the following guiding questions for future research on this topic.

1. How do epistemic communities persist under authoritarianism, and what strategies do they employ to preserve autonomy and maintain transnational ties? How do epistemic communities in authoritarian contexts secure resources, protect minimal autonomy, and transmit knowledge under limited access orders?
2. What role do epistemic communities play during systemic transitions from limited to open access orders, and how do they function as institutional entrepreneurs in rebuilding democratic academia?
3. How does the shift from state-controlled to democratic academic governance unfold, and what institutional arrangements, such as funding mechanisms, peer-review systems, international partnerships, facilitate this transition?
4. How does the shift from democratic academic governance to authoritarian control over academia affect epistemic communities?

5. How do different configurations in Clark's triangle of, whether dominated by the state, by academic self-rule, or by market or donor influence, condition the vulnerability or resilience of academia under democratic backsliding?
6. Which indicators of higher-education governance, autonomy, and internationalization can be used to trace these processes comparatively across our five cases?
7. What lessons can be drawn from historical comparisons of post-authoritarian academic transformations, such as Germany after 1945, post-Communist Central Europe, and Russia in the 1990s, for contemporary contexts facing democratic backsliding or recovery?

Building on this paper, future research could also:

Broaden the geographic and regime scope. The cases examined here, drawn primarily from post-communist Europe, represent one cluster of authoritarian and transitional experiences. A future research program could extend to non-European contexts. The mechanisms identified here — co-optation, "piecemeal devouring," epistemic exile — may operate differently across various contexts, and cross-regional comparison will yield generalizable findings.

Investigate the role of diaspora epistemic communities. The cases suggest that émigré scholars play important roles in sustaining knowledge production and enabling post-authoritarian renewal. Research could examine under what conditions diaspora networks maintain influence in their home countries.

Study the mechanisms of academic co-optation. The concept of "piecemeal devouring" requires empirical development. What are the decision thresholds at which institutions cross from accommodation to active complicity? How do individual scholars navigate these pressures? What is the role of individual actors, such as university rectors?

Examine backsliding in established democracies. Recent developments in the United States raise the question of whether the mechanisms identified in post-communist transitions are comparable to backsliding pressures in long-established democracies.

Assess the role of market diversification empirically. The argument that funding diversification protects academic autonomy is theoretically plausible and consistent with the cases but lacks systematic empirical testing. Cross-national analysis of funding structures and academic freedom indicators would allow this hypothesis to be evaluated rigorously.

Build an open framework. A productive research agenda is one that invites collaboration. The conceptual choices made in this paper, the concept of epistemic communities, the theory of access orders, and historical case methodology are selected to allow connection with other fields and disciplines. Political scientists, sociologists of higher education and science, historians, and other specialists can relate to the framework. We therefore regard the research agenda as collaborative and multi-disciplinary and invite scholars from across these fields to extend it.

Indicative methods and datasets

A framework paper cannot substitute for the research designs that individual projects will have to develop, and the questions listed above are deliberately formulated so that they can be pursued with different instruments and at different scales. It is nonetheless useful to indicate what kinds of evidence these questions call for. At least three complementary datasets appear promising.

The first is qualitative interviewing with those who administered, advised on, or implemented academic reform: university and academy administrators, experts on higher education, and policymakers. What distinguishes this group is the first-hand experience of how economic and political transformation, and regime change itself, reached into the everyday work of running academic institutions and think tanks — how budgets, appointments, curricula, and international contacts were handled at moments when the rules governing them were themselves in flux. Semi-structured interviews with such respondents, conducted in the field or, where domestic fieldwork is unsafe, with émigré scholars, allow mechanisms such as co-optation, “piecemeal devouring”, and the persistence of enclaves to be traced at the level at which they were actually experienced.

A second avenue is biographical analysis of the career trajectories of those who shaped reform. In several of the cases discussed above, reform agendas were carried by individuals who moved between academic and policymaking careers, or between think tanks and government positions; that mobility is itself evidence of how permeable the boundary between expertise and authority was at a given moment, and of which epistemic communities were able to convert recognition into influence. Reconstructing such trajectories — who moved where, at which point in the transition, and with what consequences for the institutions left behind and those entered — offers a way of observing epistemic communities in operation rather than inferring them from declared beliefs. This work can be done through qualitative data collection, but it does not depend on it: archival and documentary sources such as appointment records, institutional histories, membership lists of advisory and expert bodies, and published biographies allow careers to be reconstructed independently of respondents’ retrospective accounts, and permit the two to be read against each other.

A third avenue relies on objective data. The position of a national academic system over time can be described with figures on the share of government funding in the financing of science, the share contributed by business and other non-state sources, expenditure on research as a share of GDP, and the distribution of that expenditure across fields. Grant allocation is a particularly rich and variable source: who received funding, through which channels, and on which topics, tracked across a transition, registers shifts in the balance between state, market, and academic self-rule that Clark’s triangle describes, and can indicate whether diversification of funding accompanied the preservation of autonomy. These three avenues are complementary. We list them not to prescribe a method but to indicate the range of evidence available to those who take up the agenda, and to make clear that the framework proposed here is intended to be testable.

E. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while our analysis has been motivated by the challenge of rebuilding academia in post-authoritarian contexts such as Russia, its implications extend beyond this single case. Recent developments in the United States and Europe demonstrate that even long-established democracies are not immune to pressures of authoritarian encroachment. We propose to look for insights among the historical cases of countries that went through democratic transition.

These cases of post-authoritarian transformation can illuminate the strategies required to safeguard academic autonomy under conditions of democratic backsliding. In this sense, our research offers broader outcomes: it not only surveys scenarios of recovery after authoritarian collapse but also provides hints at the source of the resilience of academic institutions among democratic backsliding. Understanding how epistemic communities persevere under authoritarian rule and how academia changes when this rule comes to an end is therefore an important task; providing a framework and an agenda for such research, like our paper did, is equally relevant. Epistemic communities not only adapt

to the regime but also contribute to regime evolution. They thus should be studied as important actors of institutional change.

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