

Hungary scientists 'alarmed' at planned government takeover

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Prime Minister Viktor Orban has argued that Hungary needs to boost its performance in international innovation rankings and create more economic profit from science

Hungary's top scientific body warned Wednesday that a planned

takeover of research institutes by Prime Minister Viktor Orban "threatens" academic freedom and provides an "alarming" blueprint for other EU governments to follow.

Last week Orban's [government](#) tabled a bill in parliament that would give it control of a vast network of research institutes currently run by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA).

The move is "against European principles of research funding and threatens academic freedom," Laszlo Lovasz, MTA president, told reporters in Budapest.

"An unbalanced role for government priorities and control in science may soon become an alarming example that could be followed by other EU governments wanting to exert influence over researchers," he added.

Under the legislation, which could be voted on as soon as next week, a new institution with [board members](#) appointed by Orban would allocate funding for research.

This body would also use the MTA's properties and part of its administration.

Founded in 1825, the MTA is the country's oldest and largest scientific institution but the government views it as an inefficient relic of communism.

Its institutes currently employ some 5,000 staff nationwide including around 3,000 researchers, and perform a vast range of research ranging from philosophy to music, [animal husbandry](#) to space research.

Orban has argued that Hungary needs to boost its performance in international innovation rankings and create more economic profit from

science.

Last year, he set up a new Innovation and Technology Ministry (ITM) to begin moving control of scientific funding away from the MTA in favour of new "innovation-driven" projects.

The reforms will produce "more researchers efficiently helping the Hungarian economy," the ITM said after the change was debated in parliament Wednesday.

Lovasz said the reforms have alarmed "the vast majority of Hungarian scientists," arguing that the shake-up is partly because MTA experts have criticised government policies in recent years.

The government has accused the MTA in turn of "engaging in politics", an echo of its long-running feud with the Central European University (CEU), founded by Orban's bete noire, liberal US-Hungarian billionaire George Soros.

The CEU is moving most of its programmes out of Budapest to Vienna after it said it was targeted by government legislation steamrolled through parliament in 2017.

"The MTA cannot move to Vienna; Hungarians should support us," said Lovasz.

Many researchers have already left Hungary due to the uncertainty and fear for their jobs, with others mulling their options abroad, Lovasz said.

Thousands demonstrated in Budapest in solidarity with the institution last week.

Orban's critics say that since coming to power in 2010 he has tightened

his power over most key institutions in Hungary, including public media, the judiciary and the education sector.

"The government's taste for centralisation can be seen in every area," said Lovasz.

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