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## Conference brief on “Higher education and academic research in Kosovo – *Qou Vadis?*”

### **Background:**

On October 14, 2022, Centre for Political Courage (CPC) – part of the Coalition for Integrity and Transparency at the University (KITU), held a conference with the theme “The future of higher education in Kosovo - *Qou Vadis?*”, where participants included representatives from the University of Prishtina (UP), academics, members of civil society, and Prof. Joseph Marko, guest speaker from the University of Graz.

The conference was followed with a series of questions and discussions where participants had the opportunity to share their thoughts and recommendations. Four major themes emerged during the discussion. The first theme examined the state of research and higher education at the UP; the second featured a presentation of a scholarly article on historical connections between higher education and politics in Kosovo during the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s; the third theme examined the key findings from the CPC interventions regarding the monitoring of higher education throughout the years; and the last theme covered the state of higher education and the role of research in Europe and beyond and how could Kosovo learn from these cases.

### **Theme I**

The very first theme of the discussion was regarding the state of research in Kosovo, more particularly the state of research at the UP. It was noted that since the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) started applying stricter criteria, the number of PhD programs has recently decreased in the UP. Hence several programs were unable to get accreditation from the Agency. Unfortunately, not much scientific research is conducted, since usually the scientific activities at the UP are closely related and connected only to academic promotion formalities.

Nowadays, the UP has a regulation for doctoral studies, which determines the criteria based on which the doctoral students shall publish their academic articles. Based on this 2020 regulation all doctoral students are required to have papers indexed on Web of Science or Scopus platforms. The regulation further stipulates the level of support given to students as an incentive for publishing articles. The financial support is given to each academic staff for two publications each year, which ranges from EUR 200 - 1000, depending on the quality of the index, for each publication. Financial support is given to academic staff for participating in scientific conferences as well. In 2021, the UP has supported financially a total of 156 publications, whereas in 2022, it has supported around 180 research activities.

However, besides the progress made so far, participants highlighted that the state of research activities can and should be improved. This can be achieved by increasing the level of support given by the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI). MESTI supports research activities through grants, however, the level of support is not satisfactory and needs to be increased, in order for the academic staff to participate in international projects and establish more international cooperation. This is to be achieved by increasing the budget dedicated in Research and Development, which at the moment is very low at 0.01%.

## **Theme II**

The second theme of the conference examined the historical role that institutions of higher education played in the political and national emancipation of Albanians in Kosovo during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was argued that the link of historical connections between politics and education in Kosovo made each ethnicity interlink the educational sector with the objectives of its own political domination. UP at that time, was seen more like a place that inspired political actions instead of an academic institution. That is why, for Albanians, depending on the period, education was linked with either a fear of assimilation or regarded as a tool for political and national mobilization. Further, it was highlighted that higher and university-level education in Kosovo were especially (mis)used by politicians, where as a result, it was not academic principles but the purpose of nurturing political beliefs and ideologies that seem to have been the main interest of multiple parties involved in the struggle for the „establishment and development” of the UP. This theme was concluded by stating that to some extent the UP managed to train doctors, engineers and other professionals which were on demand, but the symbiosis of politics and higher education often was not beneficial to much needed active and critical thinking generations.

## **Theme III**

The third discussion theme of the conference scrutinized the key findings about research in higher education and the state of higher education in Kosovo due to the CPC monitoring work and interventions over years. For example, on July 2021, the UP had only 24 PhD dissertations available to the public, while on July 2022, UP managed to publish 391 PhD dissertations. This is a notable achievement since the UP is finally respecting transparency policies as stipulated in its regulation on doctoral studies. However, the criteria for student admission to PhD programs are still not sufficient, leaving room for non-objective evaluation of applicants. In order for PhD students to be able to conduct legitimate scientific research, one of the recommendations made in relation to PhD studies was to determine actual research standards.

Another cluster of this presentation was transparency. Based on CPC’s monitoring and research, more than 90% of students at the UP are not active part of student organizations, which is caused by either lack of interest and/or lack of information regarding student’s organizations role at the university level. Academic integrity was another interesting topic presented in this conference. One of the findings presented stipulated that the Statute of the University of Pristina, the Code of Ethics, as well as the Regulation for Disciplinary Measures and Procedures, do not necessarily encompass key aspects of good research practice. Further, the denunciations of the academic staff for publications in scam journals come from the media and not from the academic circles themselves. In addition, some of the main challenges impacting the state of research in UP are among others: lack of finances; inadequate capacities for research; lack of research centers and ineffective governance structure.

## Theme IV

The conference's concluding theme looked at the state of research and the organization of higher education throughout Europe, which may be used to draw lessons about the UP and Kosovo in general. Contrary to Kosovo, where the private higher education institutions flourish, in Austria for instance, the number of private higher education is quite limited, only two (2) private higher education institutions and around 21 public universities. All these public universities are financed by the state, since universities collect little to no money from students, considering that the student fees are about EUR 30 per semester. Student representation at the university level is regulated via a public law which is why students have a strong influence in decision making in Austria. Even when it comes to hiring of professors, students make up 30% of the commissions.

An important discussion point was related to *three types of universities* that continue to exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century across the world and how each state should have a mix of these. One model of universities is one which aims to generate knowledge in all fields. Basically, this model aims to discover the truth and find the purpose in the main issues. For this model also known as the *Humboldtian model of higher education*, universities seek complete political independence, and its basic value is academic freedom. In France, however, there is an opposite model, where with the development of the *Grand Ecole*, students are trained to become good civil servants for the state. Finally, the third model is the Anglo-Saxon model across the United Kingdom and the United States where universities are formed by *colleges and specialized schools*. For instance, in the U.S., PhD programs serve mainly as a tool that provide further training to university professors, therefore, there is a limited number of actual PhD students in those universities.

Nevertheless, in Austria for instance, the state had entire control over universities until 2002. Prior to that, nothing could be done without obtaining an approval from a public administration employee. Nowadays the state and the university negotiate over which university should receive more funding and for what purposes. Contrary to Kosovo, students participate actively in student organizations. One suggestion for increased cooperation between schools or departments at the university level was to combine some departments into one, when it was practicable to do so, or to foster cooperation between faculties and institutes. Since it can be challenging to persuade employees from various department to work together without financial compensation, merging similar departments can help.

### Closing remarks

The closing remarks were followed by questions from participants about the CPC's follow-up actions and the role of student organizations, which are, in some way, hindering students from participating in decision-making because they are so heavily impacted by politics in Kosovo.