



Protests against the Lex CEU in Budapest in spring 2017: the slogan reads "new regime change, European democracy!"

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## Open Society v. Illiberal State: Europe, Hungary, and the 'Lex CEU'

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As part of the special issue on 'Lex CEU', the present article revisits the history of the Central European University, its founding mission, and achievements. It surveys the Orbán regime's policies since 2010, focusing on its education reforms and the CEU affair. The article thus contextualizes the 'Lex CEU' within recent national and international developments. The CEU affair is the latest battle in a 'Kulturkampf' between two mutually exclusive visions of Europe's past, present, and future.

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## Open Society v. Illiberal State: Europe, Hungary, and the 'Lex CEU'

"Nobody knows what the CEU is", grumbled Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, on his weekly radio broadcast called Index on 30 March 2017. Two days earlier, an amendment to the Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education had been tabled. As it stands, it would terminate the operation of the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest. Struck by this statement, László Kontler, the CEU's former Pro-Rector for Hungarian Affairs, wrote an open letter posted on his personal facebook page reminding Orbán that he had witnessed its foundation first hand: in the fall of 1989, they had "hung out together in Oxford [...] revelling in the idea of an 'Oxford at the Danube'". Less than two years later, in 1991, the CEU was founded, aspiring to be just that: an outstanding institution of higher learning and open dialogue. Today, the Fidesz government seeks to close it down. The law puts the final touches on Orbán's attempt to make Hungary the cornerstone in a new world order dominated by "illiberal states". To that end, a meritocratic university like CEU, the model of, and for, an open society, has to be eliminated.

The following article revisits the history of the university, its founding mission, and achievements. It surveys the Orbán regime's policies since 2010, focusing on its education reforms and the CEU affair. The article thus contextualizes the 'Lex CEU', as the amendment is known, within recent national and international developments. The EU crisis, Brexit, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, and the subjugation of higher education at home has emboldened the Hungarian leader. So far, the European Union, Hungary's greatest benefactor, has failed to hold him accountable. The CEU affair is the latest battle in a 'Kulturkampf' between two mutually exclusive visions of Europe's past, present, and future.

### The End of the Cold War

The idea for the CEU was born on the Adriatic Coast. Since 1976, the Inter-University Centre (IUC) in Dubrovnik had hosted workshops for scholars and students from both sides of the Iron Curtain. The IUC's founding mission was to prepare "the ground for a better world, the world of human understanding and peace".<sup>[1]</sup> In non-aligned Yugoslavia, its founder's vision to bridge national borders and ideological barriers was an almost instant success. Between 1972 and 1991, the IUC hosted 598 courses and 266 conferences with almost 40 000 participants. Intellectual heavyweights, such as Paul Ricœur, Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Charles Taylor, had made voyage to Dubrovnik.

In the late 1970s, in New York, the Hungarian-born financier and Holocaust survivor George Soros got acquainted with the members and supporters of the newly founded Helsinki Watch group (today's Human Rights Watch); among them were émigré intellectuals like Vassily Leontieff and István Deák, defenders of civil liberties like Aryeh Neier, and activists like Richard Bernstein and Jeri Laber. Eager to assist their anti-totalitarian Cold War efforts, Soros started funding opposition groups behind the Iron Curtain, most famously the Charta 77, Solidarność, and their Western support organizations, e.g. the Jan Hus Fund in Oxford and the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. To oversee his rapidly expanding activities, Soros created an umbrella structure in New York, the Open Society Fund, named after the theories of his erstwhile mentor, Karl Popper (1945).

By 1984, Soros had rediscovered his native Hungary. There, the "happiest barrack in the Eastern bloc" suffered from a failing economy, a shortage in hard currency, and mounting foreign debt. Soros

managed to sway the authorities to permit a private foundation. In return, he was willing to give up the name “open society” and agreed to co-leadership by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA). The agreement for the Soros-MTA Foundation was signed on 28 May 1984.<sup>[2]</sup> Its programs targeted education, public libraries, local art and cultural programs, literature, and research projects. Soros enabled individuals in state-run institutions to pursue their own goals, thus exposing the regime’s failure to provide for its people. The foundation aspired to lead by example: it upheld strict rules of transparency and published all calls for applications, its budget, and the names of grant recipients.

Under Soros’ local representative Miklós Vársárhelyi, most of the money went to Hungary’s youth; the Soros-MTA also established a visiting program with Oxford University. Other notable Western universities became partners as well, and soon the Soros-MTA functioned as liaison for the IUC, too, funding Eastern European students and scholars eager to go to Dubrovnik. The two institutions benefitted from one another and amplified each other’s success.<sup>[3]</sup>

Being on the forefront of events, Soros and his Eastern European friends noticed the winds of change early. In the crossover period between 1988 and 1989, Vársárhelyi and Soros envisioned a meeting of scholars and students to debate the region’s historical and cultural trajectory, its present crisis, and possible solutions.<sup>[4]</sup> They decided on the IUC as the venue and April 1989 as the target date, the IUC’s busiest time of the year. They convinced a hesitant IUC Executive Committee with their commitment to cover all costs for participants from the Eastern bloc and any overhead expenses as well.<sup>[5]</sup>

Notable scholars from Hungary such as Endre Bojtár, György Litván, János Mátyás Kovács, Tamás Bauer, Márton Tárdos, Péter Hanák, and a doctoral student by the name of László Kontler participated in the workshops in Dubrovnik in April 1989. During a break, Miklós Vársárhelyi brought up the idea of founding a new university modelled on the IUC; his proposal met with enthusiasm. The only one who needed convincing was George Soros, who resented large institutions and their lethargic bureaucracies.<sup>[6]</sup> Ultimately, the bustling atmosphere and excitement in Dubrovnik won him over.

Soros held talks with officials in Prague, Budapest, and Warsaw in early 1990, and signed a first agreement with Václav Havel, Árpád Gönz, and Bornisław Geremek in March. The CEU’s initiators discussed further details at another workshop in Dubrovnik in April 1990. After the collapse of state socialism, they aspired to prepare a new generation of democratic leaders for the coming challenges. The university was to be a miniature version of an open society. The spike in ethnic nationalism throughout the region was of grave concern and they wanted to counter ethnocentric parochialism and isolation with openness, internationality, and comparative approaches. By developing new curricula and a new culture of academic learning, Soros wanted the future university to be a trailblazer for reforming the region’s education systems. The chosen name, Central European University, circumscribed less the precise geographic area from where faculty and students would be drawn, but more an adherence to the region’s intellectual tradition of modernism.<sup>[7]</sup> The founders thought of Central Europe as the space that had endured both totalitarian dictatorships, fascism and Stalinism, the ideal-typical closed societies.

Initially, the idea was to set up campuses in all Central European capitals. With President Havel’s support, Soros struck a deal first in Prague: the Czechoslovak government matched Soros’ USD 25 million for five years with CZK 36 million (then just under USD 1.2 million) in rent and utilities. Joint degree programs with Charles University, Eötvös Loránd University, and the University of Essex were devised. The Prague campus housed the departments of art history, philosophy, and economics. Jacques Rupnik and Ernest Gellner taught seminars in sociology and politics in Prague and laid the foundations for the future departments of sociology and nationalism studies. András Sajó – currently a

judge at the European Court of Human Rights – initiated the department of legal studies in Budapest, where Péter Hanák headed the new history department and Endre Bojtár the department for literature studies.

Despite the support from Bronisław Geremek, then chairman of Poland's parliamentary foreign committee, negotiations in Warsaw stalled. The plan for a campus in Bratislava quickly evaporated. Vienna proved difficult, too, and had to be abandoned – much to the dismay of the deputy mayor of Vienna, Erhard Busek, who had participated in the April 1989 workshops. In addition to structural and financial disputes, the initiative faced significant political backlash. "The real motives [...] lay in the suspicion of and aversion towards a regional project whose values were liberal", argued the CEU's chronicler Béla Nóvé.<sup>[8]</sup> When the Czechoslovak federation collapsed in 1992, the then Prime Minister Václav Klaus wanted to rescind the agreement and its financial obligations. As a result, the Prague campus was shut down, the sociology department moved to Warsaw, and the remaining offices were relocated to Budapest in 1993.

The situation in Hungary was not ideal either. The ruling party at the time, MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum), had some notorious anti-Semites in its midst who despised the Jewish-born philanthropist George Soros and the CEU's 'Western' traditions of modernism and the Enlightenment, the promotion of multi-ethnic polities, democratic processes, and the critical dialogue. Nevertheless, the government still owed the Soros-MTA money. As a last resort, it offered Soros two building complexes: one in the city centre between the Danube and Saint Stephan's Basilica, the other a hotel and conference complex on the outskirts of the city. Soros approved of the exit deal and pledged USD 200 million and another USD 50 million for the construction of the CEU's premises in Budapest.

In July 1994, Hungary and Poland granted the CEU full legal status as a foreign university chartered by the Board of Regents of the US State of New York. That summer, a new rector, Alfred Stepan, former dean at Columbia University, arrived in Budapest. By then, 450 students from over 20 countries were enrolled. The opening ceremony in September 1994 took place in Budapest's city hall. Karl Popper had just passed away; Soros delivered the commencement speech in his stead. Stepan reiterated Popper's hope that students would be "the democratic critics of democracy". The use of reason in all endeavours paved the way to open societies and guaranteed security and freedom, he declared. The CEU fulfilled its founding mission in creating open societies through "intellectual battles instead of armed conflict". Board member István Rév even advanced the notion that "the heated nationalist discourse" of earlier days was subsiding, "its disappearance unexpected like the fall of communism".<sup>[9]</sup>

## The Post-Cold War Era

Although the programs and organizations Soros supported around the globe did not always succeed, his philanthropic network expanded rapidly. For better or worse, he became known as a "statesman without a state", and his Open Society Institute, renamed Open Society Foundations in 1993, became known as "the Soros Empire".<sup>[10]</sup> His financial activities earned Soros further, at times dubious fame, particularly when he "took down the Bank of England", as the Daily Mail suggested in 1992.

Towards the late 1990s, Soros turned homeward and started funding programs in the United States for needle exchanges, drug rehabilitation, political campaign finance, and immigration reforms. American media suddenly took notice of his philanthropy. In September 1997, Time Magazine ran the cover story titled: "Saint George and his unlikely Crusades." Stunned, it noticed that in 1996 the Open Society

Foundation had outspent the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Belarus. The rest of its USD 360 million annual expenditures had gone to Russia, Ukraine, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Bosnia, and Poland.

The election of George W. Bush in 2000, the 'war on terror' following 9/11 and the misleading media coverage in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq challenged Soros' faith in an open society.<sup>[11]</sup> The all-powerful broadcaster Fox News discovered in him a perfect target for the slander culminating in an episode of The Glenn Beck Show in 2010 with the telling title "[Soros Exposed: Research on the Progressive Puppetmaster.](#)" The host reinterpreted Soros' contribution to toppling the communist regimes in Eastern Europe as part of a scheme of deliberate destabilization. Beck claimed that Soros sought to wreak havoc in the United States and that he maintained a shadow government that controlled President Obama. Such anti-Semitic undertones and allegations of a Jewish world conspiracy followed Soros from Eastern Europe to the United States and back again.

## The Real Viktor Orbán

In the late 1980s, the Soros-MTA also supported Hungary's kollégium movement, self-managed student dormitories grouped around discipline. Out of such a kollégium grew Fidesz, the Alliance of Young Democrats, then led by Viktor Orbán and Gábor Fodor. Soros and Miklós Vásárhelyi put faith in the aspiring liberal radicals.<sup>[12]</sup> A Soros fellowship sent several of them to Oxford University.<sup>[13]</sup> This is how Orbán and László Kontler met in Oxford in the fall of 1989; the latter told the Fidesz leader about the workshops in Dubrovnik that spring and the plans for a new university. After a few weeks, Orbán went back to Hungary: too much was going on there for him to miss out.

Nine years later, in 1998, Viktor Orbán was elected prime minister. In previous years, he had moved the party to the right and consolidated his power within it.<sup>[14]</sup> Increasingly, Fidesz perceived and portrayed critics as enemies. Once in power, it abandoned any attempt to attain political consensus in parliament.

Seeking to restore the country to its mythical greatness, the administration announced costly plans for the millennial celebrations of a Christian-Hungarian kingdom to take place in the year 2000. Faith in Hungary's God-given glory went hand in hand with a belief in the country's historic martyrdom for Europe for which it selflessly endured oppression by foreign powers: the Ottoman Turks, the Habsburgs, the Germans in the Second World War, and the Communists and Soviets after 1945.<sup>[15]</sup>

A recurring point of contention has been the post-First World War Treaty of Trianon, which in 1920 conceded two-thirds of Hungary's pre-war territory to new neighbouring countries. Irredentist right-wingers have since been trying to reclaim those areas, particularly Transylvania, for Hungary. A revision of Trianon was one of the reasons why Hungary allied with Nazi Germany and allowed the ghettoization and extermination of its Jewish citizens. Fidesz' preferred narrative, on display since 2002 in the [House of Terror Museum](#), prioritizes Magyar victimhood over the Holocaust.<sup>[16]</sup> In 2001, Orbán's 'concern' for Hungarians abroad inspired him to propose the 'Status Law', i.e. the preferential treatment of those living in Romania. The EU intervened and Orbán conceded, but sneered that there would also be "life outside the EU".<sup>[17]</sup>

Fidesz lost the 2002 elections and again – despite several scandals in the ruling Hungarian Socialist Party – in 2006. In 2008, with Hungary's economy in free fall, the then prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány began to negotiate a bailout with the IMF, the World Bank, and the EU. In return for austerity measures,

the troika extended a credit line of over USD 25 billion. The harshness of the deal played towards Orbán's claim of foreign oppression. With strong support in several media outlets, particularly the national daily Magyar Nemzet and countless regional papers, Orbán won a stunning two-thirds majority in 2010.

## Orbán's Regime and the Rise of Illiberal Democracies

The regime moved quickly to cement its rule. First, it revamped Hungary's media laws, threatening its freedom and independence. Protests from inside and outside the country changed nothing. Fidesz' standard rebuttal to critics was that it instituted rules already in place in other European countries. Intrigued, the Centre for Media and Communications Studies at CEU took the government at its word. With a grant from Open Society Foundations, it [compared Hungary with twenty other European states](#). Its findings proved the law and the government's claims to be incorrect. Journalists in Strasbourg covered their mouths with tape and held up the blackened covers of newspapers when Orbán visited the EU parliament in January 2011 to take over the presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Undeterred and in the shadow of the crises in Southern Europe, the Orbán government raced on and changed the judicial and electoral laws, subordinated the National Bank, replaced the chief prosecutor, degraded the role of the president, and dwarfed parliament to a place of affirmation.<sup>[18]</sup> The opposition was never consulted. In 2011, the administration drafted a new constitution. The Council of Europe's [Venice Commission investigated](#) the newly proposed Basic Law and expressed serious concerns about the separation of powers and checks and balances, but to no avail. The Basic Law came into effect on 1 January 2013. EU officials, Western politicians (mostly), and legal scholars took issue with the content of the new constitution. Public intellectuals frowned upon the disappearance of the word 'Republic' and the new National Avowal, which has been displayed in all public offices since. The Basic Law's preamble reflects Fidesz' conservative values, its preferred narrative of Magyar martyrdom and foreign oppression, and its faith in Hungary's Christian heritage.

## Reigning in the Young and Bright

The grievances against these major changes were so stark that most foreign observers failed to notice the reforms in higher education. To understand the conundrum, one has to step back a few years. In 2001, paving the way for EU membership, Orbán joined forces with Austria and the German Länder of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria to found the German-speaking Andrassy University. Accredited through Baden-Württemberg, it specializes in law, political science, economics, and history. Without discrediting Andrassy University's credentials, Orbán probably conceived of it as properly his brainchild and a 'counter-model' to the CEU.

Meanwhile, the CEU aspired to better integrate itself into Hungary and successfully negotiated the administrative and legal steps to comply with Hungarian legislation. In 2004, its parallel legal entity of Közép Európai Egyetem (meaning Central European University in Hungarian) was founded and accredited in Hungary. Since then, the share of Hungarian students has increased, reaching about 20 per cent by 2016. Regardless of their rank at the CEU or their list of publications, several CEU professors – per US standards – have undergone the arduous task of writing another dissertation to acquire the additional 'Hungarian' status of professor. Only then have they qualified to pass 'Hungarian' doctoral titles to their students, who in turn can, only then, pursue an academic career in Hungary.

In 2007, aged 77, Soros decided to scale down and resigned his chairmanship of the CEU's Board of Trustees. He bestowed the university with a lavish endowment to guarantee its financial independence and academic freedom.<sup>[19]</sup> In 2009, he gave a series of lectures at the CEU in which he reflected on globalization, global challenges, and the failures and future of open societies. Recent developments had given him cause to rethink and modify Popper's theories, but he still believed in the significance of university training and research to find new, "glocal" solutions to the challenges of the twenty-first century.<sup>[20]</sup>

In July 2011, on the occasion of the CEU's twentieth anniversary, Provost Katalin Farkas and Professors Zsolt Enyédi and László Kontler went on Kossuth Radio to highlight their university's role and its contribution to Hungary. Farkas reaffirmed the commitment to promoting open societies, that is, "the protection of democracy, the rule of law, the freedom of expression and the media, and the values of tolerance". For the university, this meant that "students come to [CEU] from a great many places [...] from countries or nations that might traditionally be in opposition to each other. What they learn here at CEU is to respect each other's values and backgrounds".<sup>[21]</sup>

In 2012, the Fidesz government passed new education laws. The age for secondary school graduation was reduced to 16 years. School curricula were nationalized, teachers' salaries cut and made contingent on evaluations. The budget for higher education was slashed to half of that of 2008. The office of chancellor, appointed by and accountable to the government, was created to oversee universities' finances. The government secured for itself the final word in the appointment of university presidents. State-financed scholarships were cut, and a requirement to work in Hungary after graduation was added. Sixteen faculties, particularly in the arts, were singled out to receive no government-funded places at all. The overall goal was to limit the number of university students, increase vocational training, and turn universities into "self-financing" entities.<sup>[22]</sup>

Resistance to the plans erupted immediately. In December 2012, students at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) submitted "six points" protesting the changes. Students founded the independent Hallgatói Hálózat (HaHa) to coordinate their efforts. Some government-friendly outlets claimed that Soros funded the [HaHa](#) to disrupt Hungarian politics.<sup>[23]</sup> The official student body Hallgatói Önkormányzatok Országos Konferenciája also opposed the plans. The students' offer to contribute to the reform process was largely ignored. Instead, closures and layoffs followed. University enrollment decreased by a quarter between 2010 and 2014; last year, applications dropped to 110 000.<sup>[24]</sup> The European Commission and the OECD evaluated the new Higher Education Act and found plenty of reasons to be concerned – but nothing changed.<sup>[25]</sup> Instead, like in other public spheres, the Orbán regime founded new, supplementary structures staffed with Fidesz loyalists: future bureaucrats are now trained – not at Andrásy but at the [National University of Public Service](#). The new [Klebsberg Institution Maintenance Centre \(KLIK\)](#), part of the Ministry of Human Resources, maintains central control over teachers' employment. The [National Research, Development and Innovation Office](#) oversees research and funding.

Rumors swirled in 2012 that the CEU would be targeted, too. The university administration responded promptly. At the time, Zoltán Balog, the minister of human resources in charge of education, repeatedly came to the CEU for public and informal talks. Supposedly, then US Ambassador to Hungary, Eleni Tsakopoulos-Kounalakis, a regular at the CEU, intervened. To pre-empt problems, the university opted for hyper-transparency and has since published its annual budgets, its contribution to Hungary's economy, [data](#) on its student population, research, and academic accomplishments. Then Pro-Rector for Hungarian Affairs, László Kontler, went on the radio to once again explain the CEU's role. He emphasized the considerable portion of Hungarian students with full or partial scholarships, the benefits of

internationality, the CEU's open "institutional culture", and cooperation with Hungarian universities.<sup>[26]</sup> The tensions subsided, at least temporarily.

In July 2014, Viktor Orbán gave a speech at Fidesz' summer camp in Băile Tușnad, in which he laid out his vision of Hungary's future as an "illiberal state". The era of the West was over, and liberalism had run its course, he declared. To prevail in the global competition, one ought to look "to the stars of international analysts today [...] Singapore, China, India, Russia, and Turkey".<sup>[27]</sup> For Orbán, concepts like diversity, dialogue, and openness mean weakness, disorientation, and decline. Instead the future belongs to strong, male leadership, ethnic kinship, and tribal loyalty: it is this understanding of the world order that explains the undoing of Hungary's post-1989 democratic system and the current erosion of its education system.

## The CEU Affair

In the years since the 2014 Băile Tușnad speech, several major phenomena have emboldened the Hungarian Prime Minister: Putin's ascendancy, the refugee crisis, Brexit, and Trump. Even at the height of the Ukraine crisis, the Russian President – Orbán's illiberal role model – was a welcome guest in Budapest. In the summer of 2015, thousands of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran passed through Hungary. The Fidesz government refused to provide any assistance and cut transport to Austria. Instead, it spent millions on a Hungarian-language poster campaign defaming refugees.<sup>[28]</sup> Citizens of Budapest, CEU students, staff and faculty among them, rushed to the Eastern train station to offer food, water, blankets, and medical assistance. The [Hungarian Helsinki Committee](#), which receives thirty per cent of its budget from the Open Society Foundation, [monitored and reported](#) on the [human rights violations](#).

After German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened Germany's borders to let in refugees on 4 September 2015, Orbán found a new ally in Bavaria's Prime Minister and CSU party chair Horst Seehofer. At a joint [press conference in Munich](#), Orbán declared himself a European border guard and the true guardian of a Christian Europe. In his eyes, Hungary was meeting its political responsibilities and fulfilling its historic destiny.

For months, right-wing outlets, Fidesz politicians, and their cronies had invoked George Soros as a public enemy.<sup>[29]</sup> The propaganda blog [888.hu](#) and others have stigmatized non-governmental organizations that receive funding from the Open Society Foundation as traitors.<sup>[30]</sup> The blogs [Pesti Srácok](#), [Magyar Idők](#), and [Látószög](#) contribute their share to the demonization of the "Soros network". Some take their clues from an obscure hackers' website called DC Leaks and the US alt-right website [Breitbart News](#) which has vigorously supported Donald Trump's candidacy and presidency.

Signs of a coming crisis intensified. In February 2017, ELTE announced a graduate program in gender studies. The only other institution in Hungary to offer gender studies is the CEU. Orbán's regime reinforces traditional gender roles and family values and disparages the idea of socially constructed identities. Fidesz' coalition partner, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), spearheaded the attack on ELTE.<sup>[31]</sup> Minister Balog even claimed that Corvinus University was to offer a counterprogram in "family studies", only to have the university deny any such plans the following day.<sup>[32]</sup>

On 28 May 2017, the government tabled the amendment to the Higher Education Act known as 'Lex CEU'. The university administration protested promptly and called for a [press conference](#) the following



day. [Letters of protest and solidarity](#) from all over the world have poured in since. Several cities, most notably Vilnius and Vienna, offered the CEU the chance to relocate. Within days, the Fidesz government tabled another bill, which forces NGOs to name all their foreign donors. It aims at discrediting their independence and defaming them as foreign agents. Foreign Minister Péter Szijartó went on the Putin-friendly international broadcaster Russia Today (RT) to [declare](#) that foreign-funded organizations would conspire against the Orbán government and the Hungarian people.

In an expedited process, the Hungarian parliament passed the 'Lex CEU' on 4 April 2017, despite a last-minute intervention by newly elected German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who on the morning of the vote urged the defense of academic freedom in a speech to the European Parliament. He named the CEU alongside Turkish universities and the European University in Saint Petersburg. On 9 April 2017, between 60 000 and 80 000 people went out on the streets of Budapest protesting the anti-NGO bill and calling on President János Áder to veto 'Lex CEU'. Fidesz-friendly outlets diminished the significance of the protest.<sup>[33]</sup> But they could not gloss over the strong support for the CEU from Hungarian academics, including the Hungarian Rector's Conference, the Academy of Sciences, and Andrásy University. Orbán was irritated and indignant. The head of ELTE's law department, Miklós Király, a former Fidesz member, clarified their position: "Now that the bill has been passed, the whole Hungarian university sphere feels endangered."<sup>[34]</sup>

Regarding the question of the possibility of the CEU remaining in Hungary, Orbán proposed a state treaty between the United States and Hungary, something that is actually not legally possible. The Governor of the US State of New York, in which the CEU is chartered, Andrew Cuomo, has offered to mediate, yet to date no substantial progress has been made.<sup>[35]</sup> So far, reactions and threats by the European Commission, EU Parliament, and the EU party group to which Fidesz belongs – the EPP – have also not shown much effect in persuading the Hungarian government to at least engage in a constructive dialogue over the fate of the CEU.

## Conclusion

As of 2017, the CEU has a student population of more than 1 400 students coming from over 110 countries, and a faculty from over 40. Such numbers make the affair seem disproportionate, but it is far from it: the CEU represents the polar opposite of Orbán's illiberal state. On 1 June 2017, in response to the attacks on his person, the CEU, and the NGOs his foundation supports, George Soros declared Orbán's Hungary a "mafia state": "I am the proud founder of the Central European University. I have generously endowed the university [...] to defend its academic freedom not only from interference by the Hungarian government but also from [myself]."<sup>[36]</sup> Orbán considered this a "declaration of war" and proof of Soros' ill intentions.<sup>[37]</sup>

Today, the same forces against which the CEU was founded confront the university again: ethno-centric nationalism, anti-Semitism, reactionary gender roles, and anti-Western sentiments. The CEU represents a meritocracy built on the legacy of Central European modernism. Just like right-wing opponents in the past, the Orbán government resents the university's cosmopolitan profile, diverse student body and faculty, and commitment to open societies. Soros as well as the CEU have been welcome targets for right-wingers and anti-Semites alike, who feel their tribal identities and ethnic loyalties threatened.

Orbán envisions Hungary's future as an illiberal state modelled on Putin's Russia and Erdoğan's Turkey, both antagonists of open societies. Both have quashed and silenced their opposition. To that same end,

the Fidesz government has dismantled Hungary's post-1989 democratic order and subdued the country's higher education system. The attack on the CEU and the independent NGOs, two cornerstones of an open society, has been in the making for a long time. In the Hungarian case, George Soros, the nemesis of ethno-nationalists throughout the region, has tied the university and NGOs together and invited the construction of a public enemy reminiscent of anti-Semitic allegations of a "Jewish world conspiracy". The 'Lex CEU' puts Hungary and Europe at a crossroads. Whatever happens to the university will be decisive for the future of Europe at large.

## Footnotes

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