



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

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'Lex CEU', Anti-Soros Campaigns and the State of Civil Society in Serbia

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As part of the special issue on 'Lex CEU', the article examines the broader situation of liberal democracy and civil society in Serbia today. Particular attention is paid to the recent anti-Soros campaigns and political attempts to thwart liberal-minded civil society, these incidents will be placed in a broader historical and present-day political context. Indeed, the events surrounding 'Lex CEU' were situated in a period of heightened political rhetoric in Serbia: the presidential elections.

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'Lex CEU', Anti-Soros Campaigns and the State of Civil Society in Serbia

Since its foundation in 1992 the Central European University in Budapest has attracted quite a number of students from Serbia. While there, they have learned to see the broader context of the events they grew up with – the war and the nationalist euphoria of the 1990s. Meeting professors and students from all over the world, as well as from the other former Yugoslav countries, has enabled them to identify and question the nationalist paradigms that led ultimately to the wars in the 1990s.

In the years leading up to the wars, a strong sense of unity had been created among Serbs by de-humanizing Croats and Albanians in particular, and by stressing their own Serbian national vulnerability; one that ultimately prevented most people from revolting against their government or even just thinking rationally. Young people in those years either escaped the country to avoid mobilization, or they succumbed to war propaganda. The high degree of societal homogenization narrowed the space available for the free expression of thought and dialogue. On a very basic level, the dominant atmosphere of xenophobia and bigotry, combined with a renewed patriarchalism in society has continued since then. The result being that young people are prevented from meeting others and, on a broader scale, society has been unable to open up to the liberal values that have come from joining the European Union. Those who had the opportunity to get their education at the CEU did not always return to Serbia as died-in-the-wool liberals, but they did acquire the skills of cultural dialogue, critical thinking, and often they found jobs in civil society, international organizations or in foreign companies.

The consequences of the radical nationalism of those years, and the unwillingness of people to distance themselves from the war propaganda can still be an obstacle for Serbian integration into the surrounding area and Europe itself. It also affects the work of civil society, the autonomy of academic and cultural institutions and the media. The space of freedom is becoming narrower every day.

It is no surprise then that the Hungarian government's move to shut down the CEU in Budapest was condemned by only a small community of former CEU alumni^[1], NGO representatives and academics in Serbia. For example, students and alumni of the Belgrade Open School, which has cooperated with the CEU since 2003, published a statement of support on the day that the Hungarian Parliament adopted the anti-CEU law. The statement, published on [the institution's website](#), makes the case that 'Lex CEU', as this piece of legislation came to be known, runs contrary to the values of an open and democratic society. Serbian print media did not publish a single statement in support of the CEU and rather applauded Orbán's move against independent organisations. Both, pro- and anti-government tabloids welcomed Orbán's clamp down on civil society organisations who were supported by the Open Society Foundation of George Soros.^[2] The defence of the CEU was not addressed by the Serbian public or by the media in any serious way. If it was reported on, then it was simply as a part of the news coming from Hungary; there was no critical reflection or examination of the possible repercussions in the wider region.

Rather than discussing the public or political reactions to Hungarian politics in Serbia, this article therefore, sets out to examine the broader situation of liberal democracy and civil society in Serbia today. Particular attention will be paid to the recent anti-Soros campaigns and political attempts to thwart liberal-minded civil society, these incidents will be placed in a broader historical and present-day

political context. Indeed, the events surrounding 'Lex CEU' were situated in a period of heightened political rhetoric in Serbia: the presidential elections. The campaign was largely dominated (and ultimately won in April 2017) by then prime minister, Aleksandar Vučić, a rather polarizing right-wing politician and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS).

Nationalist Continuities and Historical Denial

Unlike many of the Central European countries that joined the EU in the mid-2000s, Serbia never managed to reach even a minimal popular or political consensus on liberal values. The political elite has been largely divided along pro-European liberal and national-conservative lines for the past three decades, the national-conservative orientation clearly dominating the political landscape and discourses.

In order to understand the conflict between liberals and national-conservatives in Serbia and the current dynamics, it is necessary to look into the past. Serbian academia and media were first instrumentalized for nationalistic purposes in the 1980's with Slobodan Milošević and his nationalist/populist movement. The Serbian Academy of Art and Science, Belgrade University, the Serbian Orthodox Church and most of the media became Milošević's main allies as proponents of nationalist ideology and as war propagandists. These institutions, as well as Milošević's movement, shared the same goal – a union of "all Serbs in one state". This concept "drew its strength from the patriarchal, collectivist model of state and society, from an ethnic-religious understanding of a nation, and from an emotional reliance on the glory of [the] medieval Serbian empire", as human rights expert [Sonia Biserko observes](#).^[3] Indeed, many scholars have ascribed the 1991 outbreak of violence "to Greater Serbia ideology and efforts to create [a] Serb state".^[4] In 1986 a memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences appeared and was widely perceived as a blue-print of Milošević's nationalistic strategy. To this day, the academy has not distanced itself from this document, not even during the recent thirtieth anniversary in 2016.

In the 1990s Serbian cultural politics continued to embrace the ideology of a closed society that was heavily controlled by the state and its institutions, as well as by an ideology that was built on ethnonationalism and the stereotyping of others. Core elements of this new ideological construct included images of collective trauma, victimhood, heroism, suffering, betrayal and the vulnerability of the Serbian nation.^[5] At the same time the historical narrative of the Second World War was being revised, replacing the dominant communist-era anti-fascist narrative with a new nationalist reading that included recasting the Serbian nationalists who had collaborated with the Nazis as heroes. This also had a crucial impact in the construction of new identities that were based exclusively on ethnic belonging and religion (Serbian/Orthodox).

Since the decline of the Slobodan Milošević regime the tensions between liberals and national-conservatives, between pro-Europeans and pro-Russians, can still be felt. To be liberal in Serbia means to be tolerant towards ethnic and sexual minorities and support inter-confessional harmony, gender equality and the rule of law, and see citizenship as the basis for the political community regardless of ethnic background. These are the values promoted by the EU, but in Serbian society they are hard won because there is a substantial resistance to such values. Those who advocate for an "all-Serbian state" with ethnicity at its core are only waiting for international circumstances to change in favour of re-organising the Balkans.

Almost 20 years after the Milošević regime ended, the political discourse in Serbia is dominated by

Euroscepticism and anti-Americanism, pro-Putinism, ethnocentrism, as well as by a significant amount of defamation directed at minorities and other vulnerable groups. Public culture today is marked by a refusal to enter into dialogue with opposing groups and ideas, a “culture of patriotism”, triviality of topics, and by reality TV programs with vulgar and degrading content, trash and kitsch. Contemporary Serbian nationalism continues to thrive, and its history of violence is something a new generations have grown up with, without ever questioning. Serbian nationalism today builds not only on the wide-spread denial of any responsibility for the wars of the 1990s, it also makes multiple references to “the glorious past” and historical revisionism^[6]. While the history of anti-fascist struggles are being repressed, some of the most notorious Nazi collaborators and reactionary figures of the recent Serbian past, like Draža Mihailović, Milan Nedić and others, are still being celebrated as national heroes. The unwillingness of the Serbian elite to take responsibility for the brutal breakdown of Yugoslavia further limits the possibility for re-considering and understanding the past. Nationalism that does not confront the past becomes a closed circle. This was once summed up by independent journalist Dejan Ilić: “the average man is dragged [down] by the trauma of committed crimes which he did not face up to, hence an escape to nationalism is a recipe that always proves to be effective”. The search for identity, which is mostly projected in ethnic and religious terms, has led to a resistance to liberal values and ideas of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism; consequently it continues to generate bigotry towards ‘new’ and traditional minorities.

‘Learning from the Neighbours’ and Political Alliances

Faction of the Serbian elite appear to draw inspiration from anti-liberal and populist leaders outside the country’s borders. One main ally assisting in the ‘work’ of preserving an exclusive national identity is Russian president Vladimir Putin. In recent years, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, former Macedonian prime minister Nikola Gruevski, and more recently, American president Donald Trump, can also be counted as sources of inspiration.

Once, in an interview, the president of the [Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia](#), Sonja Biserko, suggested that states such as Russia and Serbia share an inability to transform their societies due to a strong feeling of frustration that is borne out of a sense of loss – in the Serbian case, the loss of Yugoslavia; in the Russian case, the loss of the Soviet Union and the status of a world power. This frustration has, in [Biserko’s opinion](#), translated into a heightened sense of pan-Slavic nationalism – the idea that Slavic identity is somehow superior to Western European values. It is precisely the pro-Russian right wing in Serbia, composed of a diverse spectrum of non-governmental organizations and political parties, that has the potential to endanger the process of European integration and is a crucial player in the destabilization of the Western Balkans. These groups (and the supporting media outlets) regularly call on Serbs to listen to “[Putin’s brotherly advice](#)” and to emulate the Russian “experience” coupled with a call to crush any kind of “coloured revolution”. State and party officials from United Russia are quoted in Serbian media praising Russian anti-NGO legislation that helps to clamp down on the initiators of anti-government demonstrations.

There are demands for introducing similar laws in Serbia (known as ‘Putin’s Law’) that would stifle organizations who receive funding from abroad, although these are heard only sporadically in the Serbian public and may only be backed by ultra-right wing groups, like the organization “[SNP Naši](#)”.^[7] However, occasionally such ideas are also supported by certain individuals, who by virtue of their public positions exert a certain degree of influence. Thus, some three years ago Milos Jovanovic, a professor at Belgrade Law School, claimed that non-governmental organizations financed from abroad are “the promoters of the interests of foreign governments” and that they should thus be banned.^[8]

Apart from Russia, inspiration for the Serbian right-wing has recently come also from other sources, in particular from Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán. The anti-Soros sentiments voiced in public discourses in the US, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Macedonia are often especially welcomed with enthusiasm in Serbia. In January 2017, a vast majority of media outlets conveyed the message from Fidesz' vice president, Silard Nemet, that "Soros will be 'squeezed out' [of] Hungary and that non-governmental organizations will be [put] under [a magnifying glass] in order to see whose interests they represent". The Hungarian politician was quoted at length stating that "these organizations have to be pushed down with all the means available", he continued saying that "the international circumstances at the moment are perfect for that because the new president of the USA was elected".^[9] Moreover, various media outlets happily declared Trump's victory in the US presidential elections as "the beginning of the end of Soros",^[10] who in turn was accused of conspiratorially planning to "attack" and "overthrow" the Trump presidency.^[11]

Serbian policy-makers and the media also tend to borrow from with anti-liberal campaigns in the immediate neighbourhood. Thus, local Serbian media in partially emulated an anti-Soros campaign initiated in 2016 by the Macedonian government under Nikola Gruevski.^[12] Serbian media aligned itself with the Macedonian attacks on critical NGOs and human rights activists; together, they were united against a common 'enemy', the Albanians, but also by a widely-shared narrative that depicts George Soros as supporting the disintegration of the Balkans. In both countries, the core accusation against Soros – voiced by mostly right wing, but also government-friendly (i.e. Vučić-friendly) media – was that he had sided with the Albanians and was undermining the national governments of Serbia and Macedonia. In May 2017, after months of popular protests following the parliamentary elections in December 2016, the leader of the oppositional Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, was elected prime minister with the help of Albanian minority parties. At this point [right-wing media accused](#) Soros of having supported the protests, and declared Zaev a confidant of the West and an "Albanian lobbyist". SNP Naši quickly allied with its Macedonian counterparts and launched an initiative called "Stop Operation Soros" that targeted the civil and NGO sector, with accusations of working towards "[the collapse of sovereignty and integrity of Serbia](#)". The ultra-right were, moreover, supported in their efforts by media outlets close to Prime Minister Vučić, among them the tabloid [Informer](#). Vučić, though not openly joining in the anti-Soros rhetoric, [was quoted accusing](#) his opponents of trying to instigate a local version of the "Macedonian scenario" and of causing instability in Serbia.

Anti-liberal Political Discourses and the Narrowing Space for Civil Society

Indeed, Vučić's party, the SNS, does not flinch from using tough measures and inciting rhetoric against opposition leaders and government-critical NGOs. In January 2017, the local branch of the ruling SNS organized a public talk in the town of Beska, in northern Serbia. The featured speaker of the evening was Veselin Slijivancanin, a former officer in the Yugoslav army, who in 2007 was sentenced by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague for war crimes committed in Croatia. As Slijivancanin began his speech, activists of the [Youth Initiative for Human Rights](#) (YIHR) unfolded a huge banner with the words "[w]ar criminals should be silent so we can speak about the victims" written on it. Immediately the protesters were physically attacked and removed from the premises.

Party representatives reacted to this incident by calling the young activists extremists and resorting to insults. An SNS member of parliament, Vladimir Djukanović, appeared on TV calling the YIHR protesters "[a group of idiots from some kind of Soros organization](#)" and the Vučić-friendly tabloid [Informer](#) referred

to them as “[Soros’ hissing dive bombers](#)” who were aiming to create chaos in Serbia. Members from one of the extreme right-wing groups put stickers on the door of YIHR premises which said “for a handful of Soros’ money, you sold out the motherland, mother and father”.^[13] This example demonstrates that in Serbia even war criminals are legitimate participants in public life, as opposed to the young people who advocate for shedding light on war crimes.

Since 2015, the government-friendly daily Politika has regularly published a series of reports about the financing of NGOs; this topic is constantly on the agenda in Serbian media and public life. The attacks on George Soros that appear in Serbian media often conclude their defamation with a list of NGOs that have received, or are still receiving, support from the Open Society Foundations. Moreover, some newspapers have even published the full names and photographs of government-critical civil society activists who allegedly receive money from Soros.^[14]

It is interesting to note that right-wing organizations demand transparency from liberal non-governmental organizations, while their own financial sources are kept secret. A common response to this observation by right-wing organizations is that they are financed through membership fees. Following a series of news features about financing the NGO sector in 2015–16, Zeljko Mitrovic, the owner of the powerful pro-government TV station Pink, wrote [an open letter to Soros](#), saying that his donations to Serbian NGOs would not succeed in destabilizing Serbia and its government. He called Soros’ donations “tips”, suggesting that his Open Society Foundations were only giving a small amount of money to Serbian NGOs. The letter was also published in other media outlets.

Independent civil society organizations represent mere islands of liberalism in Serbia nowadays and their political representation has been significantly weakened since the recent presidential elections. By attacking NGOs, other topics such as corruption, the Serbian responsibility for the war, the status and discrimination of minorities (ethnic, religious and sexual) are avoided, as well as the proper deconstruction of the conservative narrative of the closed society. The strong link between ultra-right organizations and most of the political elite is best reflected in the delegitimizing, demonizing and labelling of the independent civil society organizations as traitors and foreign mercenaries and as “belonging to Soros”.

Creating a “Patriotic Culture”

The Serbian trend of nationalism and self-isolation started in the 1980s and has remained ever since. A [2013 report by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights](#) noted that in the past few years many government funded cultural programs, for example, those issued by the ministry of culture openly prioritize “patriotic art” that is considered to be creative and representative of the national culture.^[15] The director Emir Kusturica, who was once world renowned for his films, is currently one of the most prominent representatives of an anti-Western elite in Serbia and he benefits from the patronage of the authorities. In a Serbian newspaper interview in early 2016, he agreed with an idea advanced by right-wing US media, that George Soros was destroying the identity of European nations by helping to bring a million people to the European continent (i.e. refugees from the Middle East). Referring to this notion, [Kusturica proclaimed](#): “Once European identity is lost, which Soros is working on, then he would turn the people into rabble and into a pagan mass which would consume everything that corporate capitalism has to offer, without any questions.”

Although there is no formal censorship in Serbia, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for artists

who do not fit the framework of “patriotic culture” or who criticize President Vučić. Artists, especially playwrights, who critically assess social reality in their works are often faced with obstacles, either in the process of production or in the presentation of their work. The mechanisms of control are subtle but obvious. For example, in 2016 the management of the National Theatre in Leskovac cancelled a planned play by the Bitez theatre group called “[RED: Suicide of a Nation](#)”, directed by Vojislav Arsić. In this play, 14 young actors speak openly about violence against women, women’s rights and about the treatment of the topic in Serbian tabloids. According to the director of the national theatre, the play was an “insult to Serbia and the Serbian people” because of the rather drastic language used. Subsequently, the group had great difficulties performing in many other cities. Scheduled performances were suddenly cancelled without any explanation.

Another case that epitomizes the ruling elite’s disapproval of critical artistic expression is that of the well-known writer and anti-war activist Filip David. In early 2016, he received the prestigious prize for the ‘best book in the public libraries network’ in Serbia (mreži javnih biblioteka u Srbiji). In his acceptance speech [he openly distanced himself](#) from the then Serbian president, Tomislav Nikolić, who was present at the ceremony. David justified his stance against Nikolić by drawing attention to his involvement with the extreme nationalist and warmonger Vojislav Šešelj during the 1990s. The reactions to David’s speech were immediate and fierce. The editors of right-wing news outlets did not shy away from using anti-Semitic slurs. For example, the editor of Večernje novosti, Ratko Dmitrović, [publicly accused David](#) of insulting not only the president but all Serbs, adding further that he was ungrateful, because Serbs had saved his family from being sent to the concentration camp.

One of the latest incidents against the freedom of expression occurred in Belgrade in June 2017 when right-wing groups attacked several events during the festival of [Kosovo culture “Mirëdita, Dobar Dan”](#). This festival was organized by a group of NGOs supported by international donors, including the [Kosovo Foundation for Open Society](#) who’s aim is to promote reconciliation and cooperation as well as to introduce the contemporary Kosovo art scene to Serbian audiences. At about the same time the screening of a new documentary film called “Albanian Women Are Our Sisters” ([Albanke su naše sestre](#)) was cancelled in several Serbian towns after the organizers were threatened by extreme right-wing organizations.^[16] The documentary examines anti-war activists and Serbian individuals who refused to go to war in Kosovo in 1999 therefore posing critical questions of individual conscientious objection and responsibility for what happened during the war.

Conclusion

In Serbia today, anti-liberal organizations that are more or less openly backed by the government can freely promote their nationalist and bigoted values, thereby receiving a positive reception in society. According to a [2013 report by the Serbian Helsinki Committee](#),

what nationalists offer as an identity for the Serbs is, in reality, a retreat into national myths and illusions (albeit an attractive one) meant to repress the war crime trauma of the 1990’s and the existential trauma of the present. [...] Such identity is based on false interpretations of history and on wholehearted embrace of archaic myths.^[17]

At the same time, the space for action and freedom of expression of the NGOs that advocate for human rights and tolerance is shrinking. The level of public discourse has fallen to its lowest level, and this has

brought about the flourishing of conspiracy theories and the creation of an atmosphere of impending danger that has the potential to lead to different kinds of conflict.

Civil society organizations, professional media outlets, liberal artists and intellectuals are exposed to risk as a result of the specific questions they address as they operate in an unfavourable socio-political context. Political violence, hate campaigns and verbal attacks in which both state and non-state actors participate have intensified, targeting those who have differing opinions in an effort to silence them and marginalize the 'liberal voice'.

Critical debates and studies of the state of media and academic freedom are almost impossible in this context. The 'Lex CEU' in Hungary brought some of these issues, in particular the infringements on academic freedom, to the attention of a wider international audience but more is required. It is only through a long-term commitment to the promotion of liberal values and human rights, both within the country and on an international level, that the regressive trends in the region and beyond can be overturned. The CEU is of great importance in the establishment of young liberal elites in the region.

Footnotes

1. The CEU Alumni Chapter in Serbia today counts more than 250 members who have attended one of the Master or PhD study programs at CEU. Also, a number of professors from Serbia lectured at the CEU. See: <http://www.bos.rs/as-eng/central-european-university-alumni>
2. [ORBAN DOAKAO SOROŠU: Mađarska usvojila zakon o NVO što se finansiraju iz inostranstva](#), Kurir, (13 June 2017); also: [ŽESTOK UDARAC SOROŠU: Mađarska usvojila zakon o NVO finansiranim iz inostranstva](#), Vecernje novosti, (13 June 2017). Both articles were retrieved 10 September 2017.
3. Sonja Biserko, [Yugoslav's Implosion: The Fatal Attraction of Serbian Nationalism](#), Oslo/Belgrade: Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2012, p. 16
4. See Nena Tromp, Prosecuting Slobodan Milosevic: The Unfinished Trial, London: Routledge, p. 27.
5. See Aleksandra Đurić-Bosnić, *Kultura nacije između krvi i tla*, Sarajevo: IKD University Press, 2013.
6. On current memory politics in Serbia see Momir Samardžić, Milivoj Bešlin, Srđan Milošević, eds., [Politička upotreba prošlosti o istorijskom revizionizmu na postjugoslovenskom prostoru](#), Novi Sad: AKO, 2013.
7. SNP stands for [srpski narodni pokret](#) (Serbian people's movement).
8. R. Dragović, [Evladine organizacije: Žestoko kritikuju Srbiju, a dobijaju privilegije](#), Vecernje Novosti, (11 April 2014), retrieved 10 September 2017.
9. Tanjug, [Potpredsednik Fidesa: Zbrisati Soroseve NVO](#), Blic, (11 January 2017).
10. To name just a few examples: [Trampova pobjeda je početak propasti Soroša: Američka nova politika trn u oku tajnog vladara sveta](#), Kurir, (18 November 2016); [Svet Džordža Sorosa se raspada](#), pravda.rs, (11 January 2017). Both articles were retrieved 3 September 2017.
11. See [Sponzor haosa: Džordž Soros na ulici želi da sruši milijardera Trampa](#), Kurir, (12 November 2016); [Opasne igre: Sorosev udar na Trampa!](#), Kurir, (14 November 2016); Vladimir Filipović, [Soroseva tajna večera. Okupio bogataše sa samo jednim ciljem: Srušiti Trampa!](#), Blic, (14 November 2016); [Monstruozno: Soros otvoreno napao Trampa, on je najveća pretnja novom svetskom poretku](#), Informer, (1 January 2017). All articles retrieved 10 September 2017.
12. While he was still prime minister in early 2017, Gruevski accused Soros in an interview of direct, personal involvement in fomenting the Macedonian crisis and of creating a modern army out of the "army of non-governmental organizations". Moreover, according to him these "battles" are no longer fought with rifles and guns but via NGOs, corrupt media, intellectuals, professors and analysts financed by Soros. Gruevski announced a process of "de-sorosizing" Macedonia: "In the future, the civil sector must not remain only in the hands of Soros and foreign governments [...]. Ways and means must be found to aid the development of an independent civil sector in Macedonia", cited in: Ruza Cirkovic, [Širi se Putinova koalicija protiv Sorosa](#), Danas, (14 January 2017), retrieved 10 September 2017.
13. See [Poruke mržnje na vratima kancelarije Inicijative mladih](#), Radio Slobodna Evropa/Radio Free Europe, (27 January 2017), retrieved 10 September 2017.
14. [Tramp hapsi Sorosa](#), Srpski Telegraf, (24 January, 2017).
15. ['Iskonski otpor liberalnim vrednostima'](#). Report by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade 2014.
16. See [U Nišu i Kraljevu otkazane projekcije filma 'Albanke su naše sestre'](#), Insajder, (22 June 2017), retrieved 10 September 2017.
17. ['Iskonski otpor liberalnim vrednostima'](#). Report by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade 2014, p. 300.

