

Losing the Central European University would be a tragedy for Hungarian public life

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Protests took place in Hungary on 9 April in support of the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, which is under threat of closure due to new rules passed by the Hungarian Parliament.

Michael Stewart argues that the government's actions reflect Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's personal and ideological antipathy toward CEU's founder, George Soros, and that the closure of the university would be a tragedy for both Hungary and the rest of Europe.



Credit: [CEU / Zoltan Tuba](#) (CC BY SA 2.0)

If guests ever questioned the significance of a university to its founder, the former President and Rector of Central European University (CEU), John Shattuck, liked to remind them that unlike most human institutions, universities can boast longevity. Which significant institutions live on, he would ask, from the years of renaissance glory in Florence, Venice or Padua? Their universities. Or, to put the matter in more familiar terms, what other British corporation founded in 1421 survives and thrives 600 years on, as does King's College Cambridge?

But after recent news from Budapest, it may be that the distinguished diplomat and former head of Harvard Library, spoke too soon. On 4 April, the Hungarian parliament passed an amendment to its Education Bill which is expressly and solely intended to close CEU, the most successful university in Central and Eastern Europe.

The act of parliament – now popularly known in Hungary as Lex CEU – has already provoked outrage across Europe and the world with hundreds of academics [signing the main petition](#) including [20 Nobel Laureates](#). It is to all appearances a self-harming act, with both the European Commissioner for Culture, Tibor Navrocsics (a Hungarian government appointee, as it happens), and leading conservative Hungarian academics including László Lovász, president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, [standing by CEU](#).

So, what on earth is going on? According to Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, talking on his Friday morning Radio show, CEU has been 'cheating' the system. The new Act – the relevant clauses of which were published late on a Friday night less than two weeks before the vote and were then debated in parliament in an

accelerated procedure – re-establishes ‘the law’ that foreign universities operating in Hungary must have a fully operational campus in their home country. Something is wrong here in that CEU is a both an institution domiciled in the State of New York and a fully accredited Hungarian University. At the time of the onerous and bureaucratically watertight Hungarian accreditation procedure – under Mr Orbán’s administration – no one noticed that CEU had been acting illegally.

Some interpreters believe that Mr Orbán meant to say that since most of CEU’s master degrees are awarded after one year of study (unlike most Hungarian Universities that demand two years [the UK has had exceptional status in Europe for many years]) CEU is competing unfairly (‘cheating’) against local competitors. But this does not make sense since those who are losing out in the supposed competition are not complaining.

CEU has the best library in the region and allows Hungarian university staff and students to use it, and the university maintains outstanding relations with its Hungarian neighbours who recognise it as the main site through which Hungarian Higher Education finds a window to the wider world. Numerous joint research projects are currently running and the university provides a welcome home to star Hungarian academics seeking a return home, like the world leading network scientist, Albert-László Barabási, inventor of the [scale-free network](#) concept, or the world class team that lead Cognitive Science there.

So, the puzzle remains. Now, it is famously difficult today to work out what the Hungarian government’s next moves are in any particular field. With a strangulated media, an enfeebled opposition, and a political elite held hostage by an apparently unbeatable premier, analysts are reduced to speculating about the mental disposition of the erratic Mr Orbán. For what is certain is that nothing gets done by his government without his express permission. But there are reasons to think that the Hungarian government is seriously intent on wounding or even killing off CEU – at least in its Hungarian embodiment.

Key to the issue is the personal and ideological antipathy the Hungarian Prime Minister and his circle bear toward CEU’s founder, George Soros. Soros’ endowment of CEU – to the tune of over \$880 million – makes it Europe’s richest university and so a powerful and independent force. As a private university, moreover, its governance lies beyond Orbán’s famously meddling hands.

Zoltán Balog, whose Ministry of Human Capacities covers much of the Hungarian state administration, told parliament: *“The existence of a strong, autonomous and internationally-recognised university is in Hungary’s interests. But it is not in our interests to have players in the background who are conspiring against the democratically elected government or for example to support Soros-organisations. Soros’s organisations are not above the law.”* The former Presbyterian minister then added that George Soros was engaged in a “worldwide smear campaign” against Hungary, noting that the current bill, or presumably the opposition to it, would “uncover the power of the network.”

Mr Orbán has proclaimed that he is building a European version of the ‘illiberal democracy’ championed by Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. This represents the literal inversion of the Popperian Open Society that Soros’ NGO network and his university has championed and promoted. Mr Orbán’s vision is for a national ‘social’ democracy with a strong, interventionist state and open preference for ethnic compatriots in all public matters.

Only a few days before the vote, Orbán had said he wants to see only Hungarians in Hungary. CEU, an institution with faculty from 30 countries and students from over 100 countries, represents all that the Orbánistas disdain. Worse, with this profile and teaching only in English, the graduate only university sits in the top 200 universities worldwide, with its best departments in the top 50. Not one of the Hungarian language universities today reaches into the world’s top 500. To a heartfelt ethnic patriot and passionate Hungarian nationalist this hurts. More, it represents a challenge to the very ideology he espouses.

While trumpeting at full volume their own anti-communism (many of Mr Orbán’s economic policies are designed to

'steal back from the communists all they stole from us'), the style in which they conduct politics smells of nothing so much as the Bolshevik rulers of the region. Since 2010, Orbán's government has, inter alia, devised a law formally designed to lower top civil servants' salaries to squeeze out the independent head of the National Bank; used retirement legislation to force out disloyal elder judges from the judiciary; through dubious financial means closed overnight the leading opposition paper, *Népszabadság*; and through administrative pressure brought cultural institutions, local governments and even schools under the fist of the government.

Universities represent a last bastion of free thought. And CEU sits on top of the pile. Indeed, it has been one of the sites where young thinkers from around the region have met, talked together, and tried to work out how to take the transformation promised in 1990 through to its conclusion. The higher echelons of Ukrainian and Georgian civil services and political life have a disproportionate number of CEU graduates, as do those of the former Yugoslav states. Three weeks ago, Mr Putin shut down the European University in St Petersburg by executive order. He and Mr Orbán are famously close, though it is not likely that they have formally coordinated their moves.

Many commentators have been worrying over a Le Pen presidency in France, but in Mr Orbán, the European Union has already met its nemesis. A revanchist, ethno-nationalist authoritarian is now openly challenging the 'liberal values' that the British prime minister extols at the heart of our continent's modern history. Or, as the conservative Hungarian political scientist, Zoltán Balázs – who happens to be an Orbán supporter and an elected deputy Mayor of Budapest's XV district – put it in an interview, "if the government gets its way, Hungary will become "a darker, more balkanic country of less interest to the west and, from a social, economic and scientific point of view, we will slide back into the ranks of countries that can barely even claim to be 'also rans'."

It would be a tragedy for Hungary and the whole of European public life were Mr Orbán to win this battle.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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