

The Clash of Realities Behind the CEU Affair

Apr 07, 2017 by [Kata Szabó](#)

With the adoption of the ‘Lex CEU’ in the Hungarian parliament, the 4th April 2017 might turn out to be a decisive moment for Hungarian history. Another 4th April, because through the ironies of history, the country’s ‘liberation’ by the Soviet army on 4th April 1945 had been celebrated as the most important festive day during the years of communism. Nearly twenty-eight years after the change of regime, the Hungarian parliament voted in favour of the **crackdown on a university** for purely political reasons. This law marks another decisive step on the country’s return to authoritarianism.

What the Hungarian Parliament voted on was an amendment to the Act on Higher Education in order to ensure the lawful operation of foreign universities in the country. In the era before ‘post-truth politics’ readers would probably have fallen asleep after reading this sentence. But in 2017, the story of the Budapest-based Central European University has become a major battleground for conflicting realities.

Until last week, the Central European University’s (CEU) was recognised as a synonym for excellence even by those who had never heard about Hungarian higher education. Students and teachers from all around the world felt honoured to get a scholarship at this private university founded by the Hungarian-American billionaire György Soros in 1991. Teachers from Hungarian state-run universities sent pupils to the legendary library of the CEU, saying ‘we are sorry that our institution cannot afford the book you need for your thesis, but you will surely find it over there at the CEU’. The CEU itself proudly announced and is still announcing on its homepage that ‘critical spirit can be sustained best in societies where citizens have the freedom to scrutinize competing theories and openly evaluate and change government policies’.

What seems to be the problem with the CEU?

- Its obscure legal background, says the Hungarian government.
- The fact that it is linked to Soros, considered the number one enemy by the government, says the Hungarian opposition.
- Nothing at all, because CEU is an outstanding success story of Central European higher education, say the leaders of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the British Academy, Oxford, Princeton and Harvard Universities, many Nobel laureates and 53 thousand more scientists, researchers, university teachers and students. (Check out the growing number at this [Hungarian news site](#)).
- We don’t care – if Hungary doesn’t need the CEU, we are happy to welcome it, says Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern speaking for Vienna and two other Austrian towns, competing with the mayors of Lithuanian capitol Vilnius and Słupsk in Poland.

The CEU has indeed a bit of a tricky legal background, because it was founded and registered in the State of New York, USA, but it doesn’t have any campus or other physical facility on US territory, and therefore no teachers and students at the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. All its programmes and courses are provided by the Közép-Európai Egyetem (literally Central European University in Hungarian language) founded, registered and operating under Hungarian law. This legal construction also implies that graduates of CEU/KEE get a Hungarian and an American diploma, even though they never physically went to study in the US.

In the last twenty-six years, all the Hungarian governments accepted this legal construction, which actually is widespread practice in the higher education all around the world, and there exist 27 other foreign universities functioning on a similar logic in Hungary.

But at the beginning of last week, the National Office of Education presented the results of its five yearly reviews. The agency concluded that only one – the basically unknown McDaniel College – is operating according to the rules. Some mistakes were discovered at all the other 26 foreign universities, including the CEU, which did not respect accurately the accreditation procedure related to some of its programmes.

Not above the law

In the era of ‘truth politics’, the story would have ended with the CEU amending and correcting its accreditations. But in the world of post-truth politics, the clash of realities has only just started.

The pro-government media outlets quickly presented the findings of this at first sight rather tedious investigation as ‘the Soros University is working unlawfully’. Fidesz politicians immediately started to echo this statement. Even Prime Minister Viktor Orbán entered the debate saying that ‘cheating is cheating’ and that ‘even a billionaire cannot place himself above the law’.

At the same time, the Ministry of Human Resources proposed an amendment to the Act on Higher Education demanding the physical existence of a campus from all foreign universities present in Hungary on unfeasibly short notice. Despite manifestations, the law was adopted by the Parliament in an accelerated procedure. Many government officials presented this as an act to ‘defend the interest of Hungarian students’ and, therefore, defending ‘Hungary’s national interest’, one of Orbán’s favourite expressions.

In the last few days, government officials and Fidesz-affiliated Members of the European Parliament went even further in the ‘construction of reality’. By now, the story has become so insane that it is almost impossible to pick out the most absurd element.

For example, the coordinator of the Hungarian EPP delegation Márton Vajna sent an absurdly ironic letter to the whole conservative group, claiming that ‘in the normal world, when you subscribe to a university degree course, you get one diploma. In the magic world, you got two by absolving only one course.’ Making things worse, he even made a reference to Orwell’s Animal Farm and its system of equals and more equals. But he forgot to mention that, for example, the daughters of Orbán and President János Áder have also studied in US-accredited universities, accidentally in Lausanne and London, paying considerable tuition fees that 90 percent of the Hungarian population could never afford.

Another gem in the CEU-saga is Hungarian government spokesperson Zoltán Kovács’s reaction to the criticism of German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier, stating that ‘Soros’s lies mislead the German government’. In fact, Kovács himself might have been misled by Soros, because he defended his PhD at the CEU in 2002, whereas Orbán studied at Oxford in 1990 on a Soros scholarship.

Biting the hand that fed

Soros, as is well-known, is a philanthropist billionaire supporting the values of liberal democracy and the rule of law through his foundations. It needs to be said that he gained his 25-billion-dollar fortune mainly by highly controversial hedging. His most famous short sale transaction actually broke the Bank of England in 1992.

Nevertheless, Soros has only done good for Hungary by investing in numerous projects related to democracy-building. In the 1990s, Fidesz also belonged to this category, therefore not only Orbán, but a good number of the party's membership could study abroad thanks to Soros, who even bought printers for the young politicians so that they could disseminate their ideas.

But twenty-five years was enough for Orbán and his party to drift away from the values they once learned and embraced. Last year the Hungarian government openly declared war on Soros, accusing him of 'financing the arrival of 500 thousand migrants at our borders' by his obscure 'international organisations that seek to intervene in Hungary's sovereignty'. No matter that they could not prove their claims, the narrative smoothly infiltrated into the public speech and the everyday conversations of people.

One can only guess why Orbán has chosen Soros as his number one enemy. Some say that he only needed a scapegoat for domestic political purposes in his attempt to get back his disappointed voters from the far-right Jobbik party, and Soros representing the values of liberal democracy was a perfect choice for that role.

Others say he wanted to do Vladimir Putin another favour. The Russian president has been cracking down on NGOs and civil liberties for a long time, and perceives Soros as a threat to his world. An even more bizarre theory suggests that Orbán wanted to attract US President Donald Trump's attention. Had this been his intention, he most certainly succeeded, but maybe not in the way he wanted to: the entire American administration and academic world stood up for the CEU, so for the moment there isn't any sign that Trump will congratulate Orbán on cracking down on a well-reputed university, even though Trump cannot be considered a big fan of liberal democracy either.

Stop Brussels or stop Orbán

Drawing on the ideas above, the weirdest hypothesis says that finally Orbán is targeting the European Union itself, because he wants to position Hungary as a non-aligned power between the US and Russia. Even if this theory implies that he hasn't looked at the world map for several decades, by now one can actually imagine that Orbán really wants to cut the ties with the EU.

Last December, he gave an interview to Hungary's most openly pro-government news site 888.hu, where he explicitly stated: '2017 will be the year of revolt against Brussels'. These days, the country is full of billboards calling for another pointless 'national consultation' with the government (a questionnaire sent to every single citizen) on EU policies targeting Hungary's sovereignty. The fact that this 'national consultation' is not a real dialogue is also reflected by the header of the letters sent around saying 'Stop Brussels'. The same message appears on billboards, financed of course by tax-payers' money.

Still, the full extent of the insanity of the situation can only be understood in the light of the 500-page [report](#) on the impact of EU funds on Hungary, recently published by one of the world's biggest professional service and auditing company KPMG. It concludes that the country's 4,6 % GDP growth between 2006 and 2013 is exclusively due to EU funds. In the absence of EU money, there would have been a recession of 1,8 %. Similarly, the consumption of individuals declined by 5,3 % in the given period, but it would have dropped by 11 % without EU funds. These are statistical facts that can hardly be denied.

And what does Brussels do to stop Orbán's EU-financed revolt against the EU? Basically nothing. There was some kind of rather tame debate in the European Parliament referred to as 'civil war' by Brussels media, but then it was decided to discuss the 'situation in Hungary' at the next plenary session in late April.

There were also strong voices in the EPP calling to exclude Fidesz from their political family. But maybe out of fear to lose votes and the privilege of being the biggest group in the EP, they put settled for talking about their anger by the end of the week.

Last Sunday, more than 60 thousand people took to the streets in Budapest to protest against the 'Lex CEU'. It was the biggest anti-government rally in the country since Viktor Orbán came into power in 2010. Of course, the government's propaganda machine started to work right after the rally. While the organisers were still amazed by the number of participants that happened to be 6-8 times higher than they initially expected, pro-government media outlets were not impressed with the numbers of demonstrators and spoke of 'not enough people'. The slightly controversial tabloid *Ripost* even claimed that 'Soros paid bus and plane tickets for the protesters'. Sunday's march meant much more than a sign of sympathy for a university whose existence is threatened for purely political reasons. People in Hungary know all too well that now is the time to raise their voices against another step further on the country's way back to authoritarianism. But will the European Union be able to stop Hungary from backsliding?

Also read [Lex CEU: Orbán's attack on academic freedom in Europe](#) and have a look at the [petition to save the CEU](#).