




Commentary


As Soros University leaves Hungary, so does
academic freedom

VOCAL
EUROPE

*This Commentary was written by **Elisa Telesca**.

 Rue de la Science 14, 1040 Brussels

 office@vocaleurope.eu

 + 32 02 588 00 14

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCALEUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevoicaleurope)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://facebook.com/voicaleurope)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://youtube.com/voicaleurope)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://instagram.com/voicaleurope)

AS SOROS UNIVERSITY LEAVES HUNGARY, SO DOES ACADEMIC FREEDOM

On 3 December 2018, Hungary's Central European University (CEU) declared that it has been forced out from its campus in Budapest by the far-right government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The decision came after months of attempts by the U.S. government and the EU to pressure Budapest to sign an agreement that would allow the university to remain in Hungary. CEU will no longer be able to accept new students to its U.S.-accredited programs starting from 1 January 2019.¹

The University was founded and funded by American billionaire George Soros in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it aimed to spread principles of democracy and free society, in a bid to build bridges between East and West.² It has dual accreditation, in the United States and Hungary, and it is regularly ranked as the top university in Hungary. The CEU has given a chance for students from post-communist countries to gain a U.S. graduate degree. The institution currently has 1,400 students, and it has attracted students from over 110 countries.^{3 4}

“CEU has been forced out”, said Michael Ignatieff, the University President and Rector. “This is unprecedented. A U.S. institution has been driven out of a country that is a NATO ally. A European institution has been ousted from a member state of the EU.” “Arbitrary eviction of a reputable university is a flagrant violation of academic freedom. It is a dark day for Europe and a dark day for Hungary,” the statement added.⁵

The forced leave of the institution is the culmination of a two year-long struggle between George Soros, who promotes liberal causes through his charities, and the nationalist, anti-immigrant government of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The latter has marginalized political and intellectual dissent and consolidated control over much of Hungarian life.⁶ Last year, changes to a Hungarian higher education law established that a foreign-registered university could no longer operate in Hungary unless it also provided courses in its home country.⁷ CEU tried to comply with the new regulation by creating a program at Bard College in New York, which was certified by state authorities.

However, the Hungarian administration refused to acknowledge this arrangement and to sign the document which would recognize such course and would allow CEU to stay in Budapest. Officials deliberated in October that they would *never* acknowledge the arrangement because the University had not complied with all aspects of the law.

¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/george-soros-founded-university-to-leave-hungary/>

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2018/12/04/why-hungary-forced-george-soros-backed-central-european-university-to-leave-the-country/#5f129f71533e>

³ <https://euobserver.com/political/143577>

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2018/12/04/why-hungary-forced-george-soros-backed-central-european-university-to-leave-the-country/#5f129f71533e>

⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/soros-funded-university-says-it-is-being-forced-out-of-hungary/>

⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2018/12/04/why-hungary-forced-george-soros-backed-central-european-university-to-leave-the-country/#5f129f71533e>

⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/soros-funded-university-says-it-is-being-forced-out-of-hungary/>

They declined to describe overtly exactly how the compliance should have been implemented.⁸ Critics say that these changes to the higher education legislation deliberately challenged and targeted CEU. Orbán has been accusing Soros of encouraging mass immigration into Europe, which the U.S. billionaire philanthropist denies.

CEU will start enrolling students at its new campus in Vienna for the next academic year. Students already enrolled will complete their studies in Budapest. The university retains accreditation as a Hungarian university and will seek to continue teaching and research activity in Budapest as long as possible, it said.⁹

Orbán's offensive against CEU was and is at the core of the worsening relationship between Hungary and the EU. In October 2018, Commissioner Tibor Navracsics, former Hungarian deputy Prime Minister and responsible for foreign affairs and justice in Orbán's government, said that the problem with CEU was "that there was not an American branch, and according to the new law they have to make it. [...] They are [now] launching the American branch so there will be no problem with that."¹⁰ However, this did not happen, and problems did arise.

Contrasting reactions and declarations

Hungary's government called the CEU move a "Soros-style political bluff", arguing that some of CEU's programs will remain in Hungary. Orbán's spokesman, Zoltán Kovács, said that "CEU is going to remain", and that the university's decision to move is a bluff. He added that the institution will ultimately "back down".¹¹

The European Commission launched a probe into the new legislation that forces CEU out of Budapest, but the case is still pending at the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Whatever the ECJ will rule, that will have no impact on CEU's move.¹²

Reactions to the forced move of the University have been mixed. The fate of the institution was supposed to be a "red line" for the center-right European Parliamentary group European People's Party (EPP), to which Orbán's Fidesz party belongs. However, there was little response from EPP politicians to CEU's announcement. EPP's Spitzenkandidat leader Manfred Weber tweeted to be "extremely disappointed by the refusal of the Hungarian government to agree with CEU on their double degree program". "It is unacceptable that a university in EU

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/soros-founded-university-says-it-has-been-kicked-out-of-hungary-as-an-autocrat-tightens-his-grip/2018/12/03/26bdfc28-f6ed-11e8-8d64-4e79db33382f_story.html?utm_term=.55a89b1b8c9d

⁹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/soros-funded-university-says-it-is-being-forced-out-of-hungary/>

¹⁰ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/interview/fri-navracsics-i-am-deeply-interested-in-keeping-the-ceu-in-hungary/>

¹¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/soros-founded-university-says-it-has-been-kicked-out-of-hungary-as-an-autocrat-tightens-his-grip/2018/12/03/26bdfc28-f6ed-11e8-8d64-4e79db33382f_story.html?utm_term=.55a89b1b8c9d

¹² <https://euobserver.com/political/143577>

today is forced to move elsewhere with their curriculum," Weber added and urged the ECJ to fast-track its procedure.¹³

Frustration has been growing within the EPP with regard to the behavior of Orbán in his home country, in particular concerning matters of rule of law and the state of democracy in the country. This situation has led to a fault line in the party, although Orbán still does enjoy support within the EPP.

MEP Judith Sargentini commented that it is “a very sad day for academic freedom in Europe, particularly in Hungary, of course, but all of Europe. If a European government can actually bully a university out of its country, and the others stand by and watch and don’t act, and I am particularly pointing at the other Member States that have not been acting on things happening in Hungary for years now, we are in deep trouble.”¹⁴

She also urged the EPP to take action: “Forcing the Central European University to close shatters the last illusions that Hungary is anything other than an autocracy. So long as the EPP continues to keep Fidesz within their ranks, they are endorsing and supporting Orbán’s assault on the rule of law,” the Dutch lawmaker said. “This was a supposedly a red line for the EPP, now Manfred Weber must clarify how he expects to reconcile the actions of the Hungarian government with Fidesz’s role in the group.”¹⁵

The CEU’s Rector stated that despite the rhetoric, EPP and the U.S. administration have done little to prevent Hungary's government of pushing out the university. "No leverage have been exerted on the Hungarian government from the outside, that's why we have to move this institution, where there is rule of law," he told journalists in Budapest. "Academic freedom and rule of law are inseparable, we tried to make this clear to our European partners," Ignatieff said.¹⁶

In Budapest, thousands of protesters have marched in favor of keeping the CEU in the city. In December 2018, hundreds of people occupied Kossuth Square next to the Parliament building. “Even Voldemort didn’t kick Hogwarts out,” read one sign, in reference to the Harry Potter series.¹⁷ The demonstrators were worried not only about CEU, but also about what they see as growing attacks on other institutions that embody freedom of thought, i.e. universities, high schools, and Hungary’s Academy of Sciences. “This is not just about CEU, but also about the other universities and our

¹³ <https://euobserver.com/political/143577>

¹⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2018/12/04/why-hungary-forced-george-soros-backed-central-european-university-to-leave-the-country/#5f129f71533e>

¹⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/soros-funded-university-says-it-is-being-forced-out-of-hungary/>

¹⁶ <https://euobserver.com/political/143577>

¹⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2018/12/04/why-hungary-forced-george-soros-backed-central-european-university-to-leave-the-country/#5f129f71533e>

whole life,” said one protester, adding that “if things continue as [they are], then there is no hope for Hungarian education.”¹⁸

Orbán vs. Soros: why?

George Soros, originally from a Jewish family, was born in Hungary and left the country for London at 17, when Hungary was occupied by Soviet troops. A graduate of the London School of Economics, he immigrated to the U.S. in 1956. In 1970, he launched Soros Fund Management, through which he amassed his \$8.3 billion fortune. Through his Open Society Foundations, he has given away at least \$18 billion in grants, well more than his personal net worth. Moreover, Soros has given aid to Hungarian rights organizations.¹⁹

Soros himself has been a target of Orbán’s government for since a while, being attacked of pushing for open borders. The Hungarian PM has been particularly ruthless in targeting anything associated with the American billionaire, whose open and liberal philosophy is deeply in contrast with Orbán’s nationalist and nativist line.²⁰ Orbán’s Fidesz party has run a number of campaigns against the supposed threat to Hungary and Europe posed by Soros, accusing him of funding a “Soros Plan” to erase national identities and increase migration flows to Europe.²¹

During the 2015 migrant crisis, Soros’s reputation in Hungary indeed took a particular hit. His advocacy for humane treatment for refugees contrasted with the Hungarian government line. In early 2017, Orbán described Soros as someone who had “ruined the lives of tens of millions of people” with currency speculation.

Soros hit back with a speech in June 2017, in which he referred to Orbán’s government as a “mafia state” and described the Hungarian PM as someone who had “sought to frame his policies as a personal conflict between the two of us and has made me the target of his unrelenting propaganda campaign.” Orbán’s spokesman, Zoltán Kovács, said that such a speech was a “declaration of political war on Hungary”. Soros-funded organizations, Kovács said, were engaged in “political activism camouflaged as NGO work”.²²

Much of Soros’s funding has been dedicated to development and education, with, ironically, Orbán himself being the recipient of a Soros-funded scholarship to study at the University of Oxford in 1989.²³

¹⁸ <https://www.politico.eu/article/george-soros-founded-university-to-leave-hungary/>

¹⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2018/12/04/why-hungary-forced-george-soros-backed-central-european-university-to-leave-the-country/#5f129f71533e>

²⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/soros-founded-university-says-it-has-been-kicked-out-of-hungary-as-an-autocrat-tightens-his-grip/2018/12/03/26bdfc28-f6ed-11e8-8d64-4e79db33382f_story.html?utm_term=.55a89b1b8c9d

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/25/university-founded-by-george-soros-forced-out-of-hungary>

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/22/hungary-viktor-orban-george-soros>

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/22/hungary-viktor-orban-george-soros>

In June 2018, the Hungarian administration passed a legislation called the “Stop Soros” law. The bill is known as such as it targeted some organizations funded by Soros. Crafted by Orbán himself, the new measure created a new crime, called “promoting and supporting illegal migration,” banning organizations from helping illegal immigrants. Under the new law, distributing information about the asylum process or giving migrants financial help, could result in a 12-month jail sentence.²⁴ The campaign included adverts and billboards denigrating the philanthropist.²⁵

Human rights activists have been worried about the bill as any NGO working to give legal or other type of aid to migrants could potentially fall under the definition of “supporting illegal migration”. “Those who provide financial means [...] or conduct this organizational activity on a regular basis will be punishable with up to one year in prison,” read part of the law.²⁶ Additional provisions make it impossible for anyone to claim asylum in Hungary if they passed through a country deemed safe prior to their arrival.

Soros’s Open Society Foundation has also been forced out of Hungary this year. It announced it was fleeing Hungary because it could no longer guarantee the safety of its staff. In the end, in Hungary, the anti-Soros discourse has become mainstream, feeding into the populist anti-migrant discourse.²⁷

Hungary-U.S. relations: Ambassador Cornstein’s position

At his arrival in Budapest in June 2018, U.S. Ambassador to Hungary David Cornstein had declared to peg the issue of CEU as his top priority, and that his top mission was to keep CEU in the country.²⁸ During his first week on the job, he visited the institution to demonstrate his support.

Rather than try to shame the increasingly authoritarian regime into backing down, Cornstein sought to “charm” Orbán. The U.S. Ambassador told a Hungarian magazine in August 2018 that he saw no problem with human rights or liberties in Hungary. After a meeting with Orbán, Cornstein announced that the two had used their easy relationship to reach a deal that would keep CEU in Budapest. However, in the end, Budapest snubbed Cornstein’s attempts to mediate a deal on CEU.²⁹

After months of ignoring CEU’s requests for a negotiation, the Hungarian administration finally sent a representative for a meeting at the U.S. Embassy.

²⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2018/12/04/why-hungary-forced-george-soros-backed-central-european-university-to-leave-the-country/#5f129f71533e>

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/25/university-founded-by-george-soros-forced-out-of-hungary>

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/29/hungary-criminalises-migrant-helpers-stop-george-soros-legislation>

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/22/hungary-viktor-orban-george-soros>

²⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/soros-founded-university-says-it-has-been-kicked-out-of-hungary-as-an-autocrat-tightens-his-grip/2018/12/03/26bdfc28-f6ed-11e8-8d64-4e79db33382f_story.html?utm_term=.55a89b1b8c9d

²⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-trump-administration-tried-to-save-a-us-university-by-playing-nice-with-an-autocrat-it-failed/2018/11/30/f028718a-e831-11e8-8449-1ff263609a31_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.afd12e900d7c

However, this representative turned out to be an official with little authority to make a deal.³⁰ Cornstein confirmed that he had never tried to use incentives or threats to sway Orbán. In fact, he blamed Soros for the CEU's ejection and refused to criticize Orbán. Cornstein also minimized the institution's importance and appeared puzzled by the reason why the school's fate had created such big interest at the international level.

When it became clear that there would be no deal between the institution and Orbán, Cornstein broke with previous U.S. policy on the issue. During an interview with the *Washington Post*, he described Orbán as his "friend" and accused Soros of being insufficiently cooperative with the government.³¹

Ultimately, Cornstein said that the conflict is nothing but a grudge between Orbán and Soros. "It had to do with two men", Cornstein added, "it doesn't have anything to do with academic freedom."³² "That contradicts previous statements from the United States and many of its European allies, which have cast the university's fate as a matter of principle," Grief Witte writes for the *Washington Post*.

Cornstein compared the university's fight to his own experience selling jewelry at department stores. "I was a guest in another guy's store," Cornstein said. "The university is in another country. It would pay to work with the government."³³

According to a *Washington Post* analysis, the Trump Administration has played nicely with Orbán's autocratic regime. As Witte comments, "as has been true with Russia, North Korea and other governments long considered unsavory in Washington, Trump has taken a markedly friendlier line. Yet the results have been mixed, at best".

"But the affection does not seem to have made Orbán any more inclined toward Washington. CEU's departure is just one among a series of setbacks for U.S. interests as Orbán steers the country closer to Moscow [...] and away from a Western orbit". Witte defines the forcing out of CEU as "perhaps the most blatant example yet of Orbán's unwillingness to bow to U.S. wishes."³⁴

³⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-trump-administration-tried-to-save-a-us-university-by-playing-nice-with-an-autocrat-it-failed/2018/11/30/f028718a-e831-11e8-8449-1ff263609a31_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.afd12e900d7c

³¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/soros-founded-university-says-it-has-been-kicked-out-of-hungary-as-an-autocrat-tightens-his-grip/2018/12/03/26bdfc28-f6ed-11e8-8d64-4e79db33382f_story.html?utm_term=.55a89b1b8c9d

³² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/soros-founded-university-says-it-has-been-kicked-out-of-hungary-as-an-autocrat-tightens-his-grip/2018/12/03/26bdfc28-f6ed-11e8-8d64-4e79db33382f_story.html?utm_term=.55a89b1b8c9d

³³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/soros-founded-university-says-it-has-been-kicked-out-of-hungary-as-an-autocrat-tightens-his-grip/2018/12/03/26bdfc28-f6ed-11e8-8d64-4e79db33382f_story.html?utm_term=.55a89b1b8c9d

³⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-trump-administration-tried-to-save-a-us-university-by-playing-nice-with-an-autocrat-it-failed/2018/11/30/f028718a-e831-11e8-8449-1ff263609a31_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.afd12e900d7c

What does the CEU forced leave mean for Hungary and the EU?

Viktor Orbán's government has been at the center of heightened debates regarding the state of democracy in Hungary. On 12 September, the majority of lawmakers in the European Parliament supported a resolution calling for the triggering of the Article 7 procedure over concerns about the state of democracy and failures to uphold fundamental EU values in Hungary.^{35 36} Article 7 of the Treaty on the European Union is a mechanism employed when the concerned EU Member State is accused of violating the EU values of “human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.”.

The European Council will now have to vote as well on whether to continue proceedings over a “serious breach” of the EU's core values in Hungary.³⁷ The Hungarian government is accused of silencing media, targeting NGOs and removing independent judges. A report by MEP Judith Sargentini, which triggered Article 7, found that Orbán's attacks on independent media, academics, the judiciary, women, migrants and refugees and the rights of minorities pose a “systemic threat” to the EU's fundamental principles.³⁸

The forced ejection of CEU only reinforces worries over the state of democracy in the Hungarian state. Perhaps, this would lead to enhanced political will and momentum within the European Council to go ahead with the Article 7 proceedings. However, consensus is needed for the Article to be triggered, and Poland is likely to back up its ally as the Article 7 procedure was triggered against the country as well in December 2017 by the European Commission.

In the meantime, the CEU's departure from Budapest has been creating a scandal at the international level. Not only concerns over “migrant abuse, restrictions on press freedom, corruption and conflicts of interest, and ‘stereotypical attitudes’ towards women”³⁹, but now also over academic freedom are putting Hungary in the spotlight for deficiencies regarding the respect of core EU and international values.

In the end, the University was attacked and forced to leave its home country most likely due to a personal fight between the country's Prime Minister and a philanthropist. This should not have involved the academic sphere. Personal matters and education should belong to two different, parallel lines, which should never touch and used against each other. Although the Hungarian government has called the CEU statement a “bluff”, the University had no other choice. To stay and to be constantly

³⁵ <https://euobserver.com/political/143577>

³⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-parliament-votes-to-trigger-article-7-sanctions-procedure-against-hungary/a-45459720>

³⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/meps-trigger-article-7-against-hungary-after-evasive-juncker-speech/>

³⁸ <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-parliament-votes-to-trigger-article-7-sanctions-procedure-against-hungary/a-45459720>

³⁹ <https://www.euronews.com/2018/09/12/european-parliament-votes-to-trigger-article-7-sanctions-procedure-against-hungary>

be attacked by Orbán, or to leave to a better future in a more welcoming environment?

As CEU President and Rector Ignatieff stated, the issue of the forced leave of the CEU goes beyond academic freedom, as it has broad implications, which ultimately touch the respect for and preservation of the rule of law in the country. “You can’t have academic freedom without the rule of law, and we’re in a lawless environment”, he added. “In a year, if you come back here, you’ll be looking at a university that has been the victim of a premeditated act of political vandalism.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-trump-administration-tried-to-save-a-us-university-by-playing-nice-with-an-autocrat-it-failed/2018/11/30/f028718a-e831-11e8-8449-1ff263609a31_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.afd12e900d7c

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCAL EUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevoCALEUROPE)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://facebook.com/voCALEUROPE)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://youtube.com/voCALEUROPE)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://instagram.com/voCALEUROPE)

