

Academia under fire in Hungary

On 10 April, Hungarian President János Áder signed into law an amendment to the National Higher Education Law that would outlaw the Central European University (CEU). Although portrayed by the government as a purely administrative step, the “Lex-CEU” law is a strident attempt to curtail academic freedom and limit the independence of academic institutions.

Accredited in both the United States and Hungary, and operating in Budapest since 1991, CEU offers English-language master’s and doctoral programs in fields from public policy to network science. CEU ranks around 300 in the World University Rankings, with several programs in the top 100 (no other Hungarian university reached the top 500, likely due in part to severe underfunding of higher education). CEU has become the school of choice for the region’s brightest students, many of whom populate governments and nonprofit sectors of Eastern Europe.

CEU’s academic independence, modeled on its U.S. peers, has angered the government, which portrays it as a hotbed of liberal thinking. It is hard to point to any event or action by the university that triggered this crisis. The official reason offered by the government remains puzzling. It argued that U.S.-based degrees offered by CEU are a comparative advantage, unmatched by local institutions. In its view, the new law creates an even playing field. This reasoning fooled no one. The law is widely seen as an attempt to gain electoral advantage by picking a fight with the university’s founder, the Hungarian-born U.S. philanthropist George Soros, whose long-standing advocacy for open societies and migrants is at odds with the isolationist stand pursued by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The law’s political nature is made manifest in the impossible, and potentially unconstitutional, conditions it imposes. It requires CEU to open a campus in New York State, where it is accredited, by October 2017, which is a practical impossibility. It also requires the university to be regulated by an agreement between Hungary and the U.S.

federal government—ignoring the fact that education in the United States is under the jurisdiction of individual states. Unable to meet these requirements, CEU will lose its ability to admit new students next spring.

Lex-CEU follows the playbook of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who used similar legislative tactics against the European University in St. Petersburg, and mirrors attacks by members of the U.S. Congress against funding of political science. The masterminds of these attacks do not realize that academia is not a set of isolated interest groups but a tightly interconnected network committed to advancing knowledge. An attack on one of academia’s nodes—an institution, a field, or a researcher—threatens the advancement of knowledge as a whole.

The heartwarming response to Lex-CEU reaffirms the power of this interconnectedness. Most academic leaders in Hungary, at great professional and personal risk, have spoken up in support of CEU, and the law prompted large street demonstrations in Budapest.

Despite the law’s apparent finality, the battle is just beginning. The university’s president has vowed that research and scholarship will continue. The European Parliament has opened an investigation into the law’s legality and harmony with

European Union laws. Within Hungary, the Supreme Court has been asked to rule on the law’s constitutionality, although independence of the courts has been questionable. None of these efforts are likely to conclude by the fatal October deadline, which means that only coordinated and meaningful U.S. and European political pressure, at the highest level, can restore CEU’s ability to enroll its next cohort of students.

CEU offers a test of Hungary’s ability to guarantee academic institutions’ long-term viability and commitment to educational excellence. It is a battle whose outcome will reverberate around the world. A loss will embolden those who aim to limit education and restrict free speech; a win will reaffirm academic freedom.

—Albert-László Barabási



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