



**UNIVERSITY VALUES FOR TODAY:
CENTRAL EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES
Pécs, 30-31 August 2017**

**Universities supporting each other:
learning from the Central European University's experience in 2017**

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

*Liviu Matei
Provost
Central European University, Hungary*

In 2017, the situation of Central European University (CEU) attracted attention worldwide as a case of resistance to an unprecedented attack against academic freedom and university autonomy. Hundreds of universities from Hungary and around the world mobilized themselves in support of CEU. It can be argued this was both unexpected and unparalleled.

The discussion at this table will focus on the following questions:

- What was the nature of the situation/what really happened?
- Who came to the support of CEU and why? Were the other universities facing risks themselves when coming to the support of CEU?
- Was this support effective? It can be argued it was, unlike in other cases (for example the international mobilization in support of Turkish academics under attack by the Turkish regime). Why was it effective and in which way?
- What general lessons can be drawn from this case, regarding the relevance of inter-institutional solidarity in face of the attacks against academic freedom and university-autonomy?



REPORT

Table hosted by:

Professor Liviu Matei Provost of CEU

Rapporteur:

David Lock, Secretary General, MCO

The challenges faced by the Central European University (CEU) following the amendment to the Hungarian Higher Education Act were discussed along with the significance of the support received from universities globally and some of the implications of this.

By way of background information, on 28 March 2017, the Hungarian Minister of Human Resources Zoltán Balog, who was also responsible for education, submitted a bill to Parliament to amend Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education. The bill aimed to introduce new regulations for foreign-operating universities, several of which affected CEU. Notably, such universities could only operate if the Hungarian government has an agreement with the university's other country of operation. In the case of CEU the law required an agreement with the US federal government, which is not even possible under the US Constitution. In addition, universities operating outside of the European Union should have a campus in their other country of operation, where comparable degree programmes should be offered (currently not the case for CEU). Furthermore, both existing and new non-EU academic staff would be required to apply for working permits. This requirement was seen by critics as placing CEU at a particular disadvantage, given that it relied largely on non-EU faculty. Finally, the law would also prohibit both the American and Hungarian entities from sharing the same name.

(Source: Spike, Justin (March 29, 2017). "CEU faces existential threat under proposed legislation". The Budapest Beacon. Retrieved 3 April 2017.)

The purpose of this table session was *not* to focus on the details of the legislation and the consequences for CEU, *but* to explore some of the issues and ways in which other organisations had supported CEU and the effect which it has had.

CEU, although it was a group of different legal entities in different countries, operated as one university, private and not for profit, under a single Board of Trustees and administration. It followed US and European traditions in its governance and operational structures.

It provided masters and doctoral programmes. PhDs were fully funded (fees and stipends by the university itself). Most Master's students receive financial aid from CEU as well. It had 1500 students from over 100 countries.

The University had no national agenda. It was formed in 1991 'for the region' – Central and Eastern Europe. For example, history was taught in a comparative way. The University was a European idea. George Soros gave money to it, but its formation was not his idea. The endowment fund is held in Holland. Previously there had been campuses in Prague, Warsaw and Budapest but these were small and were consolidated in Budapest.

The 'attacks' on CEU started without warning. The trigger point for them was not known – although there had been speculation. While the scope of the new law was 'all international universities' it felt as if it was being drafted 'at' CEU. There had been no consultation with CEU.

As drafted it was technically impossible for CEU to comply with the terms of the new law. It required agreement with a federal government – whereas in the US education was the responsibility of the States individually. Although registered in the US, degrees were not taught in that country – and the new law required programmes to be delivered in the home country. The deadlines were punitive with prohibition on recruiting students if they were not complied with by 6 September. The new legislation was seen as an attack on autonomy.



The Constitutional Court has not yet ruled on the law. All opposition parties contested the new law. The Hungarian Rectors' Conference protested along with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and several universities in Hungary. Many letters were sent to the Prime Minister.

The government did not expect such a wave of international support. There were also street protests. 70,000 people participated in one single rally. It was a very heated period. It was not easy for academics to speak up, particularly regarding a move.

CEU received 12 invitations to re-locate to other countries. Multi-nationals and international media were interested.

By mid-June the government had moderated its stance. Discussions were held with the Governor of the State of New York. The prospect of a moderation of the law seemed possible.

CEU had made contingency provisions to move within one year. But, with 600 faculty and staff and 2000+ people involved when their family members were included – it would have been a large group of people to move – indeed the largest group of people to be caused to move in Hungary since 1956. It was a very stressful period for staff. Generally, faculty were prepared to move but not administrative staff.

During the discussion it was noted that Hungary was moving down the autonomy league table dramatically, as documented by the EUA Autonomy Scorecard. CEU paid taxes and attracted international students to Hungary. CEU had seemingly been legal for 25 years. What changed suddenly?

The expressions of solidarity had been very strong. These came from international education bodies, universities, European bodies and others. CEU had alumni in senior places in Hungary and internationally and they were vocal against the new law and in support of CEU. This solidarity had encouraged the faculty, staff and the university and seemingly caused the Prime minister to modify the law. The Magna Charta Observatory had expressed its support. A suggestion was made that the MCU should seek to make it explicit that signatories should express solidarity with universities facing difficulties of this kind.

CEU had joint faculty appointments with the national bank. While CEU was open about the importance of critical thinking and its liberal tradition, it was not a political organisation and would not oppose or antagonize the government. It refused to host political rallies.

Inside the University the atmosphere was united. Small conflicts disappeared and the level of excitement was high. The community had met and felt that they were in good hands under the Rector's leadership. The excitement of resistance became stress after about 2 months. The university stayed quiet and made no public statements that would inflame the situation since the negotiations were started by the Hungarian Government with the Governor of New York State.

Outside the University – CEU is probably now one of the best-known universities in the world. It is possible that its position will be boosted in those league tables which are based on reputations.

At one stage a bishop came out in favour CEU – a secular institution.

It was the view of some that the Government had been damaged by the issue, as manifest through a reduction in its support.

At the time of writing this note (early September 2017) it is not known how the situation in Hungary for CEU will be resolved. What we can learn from it is that the principles of autonomy and academic freedom are strong. The evidence for this is that when there was a perception that they have been infringed there was international solidarity in opposing the causes of the infringement. Those standing in solidarity seemingly had impact, certainly in causing the original decision to be reviewed. The MCO should consider how this effect might be featured in a new MCU.

DJL, 10-9-17