

Letter from Budapest (4th April 2017)

On March 29th I received an email from Michael Ignatieff, the President and Rector of Central European University in Budapest. He informed all faculty, students and staff that our university was severely threatened by a proposed amendment to the Hungarian law that would make maintaining the university's full operations impossible. A plenary meeting in the main auditorium was scheduled in three hours: participation urgently requested.

This message marks the beginning of a week that culminates in an expedited majority vote of the Hungarian Parliament to pass a new law that effectively destroys a legitimate, successful, modern, and internationally renowned university.

Central European University (CEU) is a private university in Budapest, funded by Open Society Foundations (OSF). It was founded in 1991 by George Soros, a Hungarian-born US citizen, in response to the end of the communist era and with the aim to support the creation of an open, democratic society. These values, however, are not in line with those of the current Hungarian government. Although Prime Minister Viktor Orbán himself had, ironically, once received OSF funding Soros is nowadays considered a key public enemy whose non-profit organizations are frequently exposed to political attacks. Being the target of such attacks is also nothing new for CEU. For instance, only weeks before the first word was heard of the proposed amendment, a number of false allegations appeared in the media. The messages spread unfounded claims about the university's supposedly illegal operations and unfair competitive advantages. From conversations with Hungarian friends I know that CEU (or "Soros University", as it is often incorrectly referred to) is either not covered by most of the media or intentionally portrayed in a negative light. The Hungarian government restricted the independence of the media many years ago.

Now it is a university – my university – that has become the victim of the Hungarian government's nationalistic aspirations. The consequences of these developments, however, cannot be measured by a single university's fate. With their actions, the Hungarian nationalistic government has created an unprecedented situation. Never before in the history of the European Union has a member state so bluntly attacked freedom of education and academic independence. Thus, this is not an issue that only concerns one university, but instead it fits well into the long sequence of populist actions in Hungary and other countries that aim to restrict basic democratic values. Hungary might simply be at the forefront of such a movement.

I am writing this letter on the evening of April 4th, the day that saw the Parliament pass the new amendment. The week that led to this day was a week of protest. CEU received numerous declarations of solidarity from all over the world and countless local actions and demonstrations were made. But it was also a week where everyone, from the CEU community to my international network of friends and family, alternated between hope and dispiritedness. We were aware from the beginning that our chances to avert the amendment were small. Still, the support we have seen over the past couple of days is beyond imagination. Despite my anger and consternation, this support allows me to also see positive aspects of these recent events. Thousands of scientists and friends from all over the world have expressed their solidarity in letters and with their signatures, among them several Nobel Prize laureates. The support we have received has been enormous.

The personal experiences I have had over the past few days have been equally important, highlighting the potential of this country and the Hungarian people. I was impressed by the doctoral students in

my department who recycled their academic conference posters as protest banners; by the 10,000 people who brought their kids, dogs, and bikes to peacefully demonstrate in the streets of Budapest; by the constant, yet careful and critical exchange of information in the social media; or simply by my colleague who, in spite of her serious worries about potential assaults, allowed her determined 9-year-old son to wear a #IStandWithCEU badge to school. The list of people speaking up for academic freedom is long and admirable.

In the end all these efforts were not sufficient to avert the law against my university. This fact fills me with deep sadness. Still, I hope that the enormous amount of national and international solidarity will bring about a new direction. A change that might not only give CEU the necessary support to continue its operations and maintain its important academic and societal role in Hungary, but that above all will create an environment that can reliably protect our liberal, open Europe against any such attacks.

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Further information and possibilities for support: www.ceu.edu/istandwithceu