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ACADEMIC SOLIDARITY AND THE CULTURE WAR IN ORBÁN'S HUNGARY

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DOI:10.1017/S1049096522000129

Recently, it has become customary to be concerned about the impact of the culture wars on academic freedom in established liberal democracies. In fact, the contexts in which culture wars can inflict the most profound damage are autocratizing settings. In these contexts, the supporters of liberal democracy are treated as traitors and can no longer count on the solidarity of those colleagues whose priority is to fight globalization and stop progressive cultural change.

This logic is well illustrated by the debates that followed the Hungarian government's decision to force Central European University (CEU) to move its educational programs to Austria.[1] In 2017, the license for operation of foreign universities in Hungary was made dependent on the existence of intergovernmental treaties (Enyedi 2018). Because the government was unwilling to sign such an agreement with the State of New York (where the university originally had been registered), CEU was forced to

discontinue its programs in Hungary.[2] This dramatic situation—involving the movement of hundreds of students, faculty, and administrators across a national border—presented a moral, intellectual, and political challenge to the academics in the country, particularly those studying political science.

The Hungarian political science community has a checkered past. During communism, political science could not be offered as an academic subject. It was established at the end of the 1980s by a diverse coalition of social scientists, legal scholars, professors of "scientific socialism" and "dialectic materialism," philosophers, economists, journalists, and dissident intellectuals. The coalition was fragile and the ideological and methodological differences were enormous. However, convergence within the community was rapid and, by the mid-1990s, political science achieved all the attributes of a consolidated academic discipline.

During communism, political science could not exist as an academic subject. It was established at the end of the 1980s by a diverse coalition of social scientists, legal scholars, professors of "scientific socialism" and "dialectic materialism," philosophers, economists, journalists, and dissident intellectuals.

The radicalization of the Orbán regime after 2010 placed this community under stress. Some political scientists took positions in the vast think-tank world directly or indirectly paid by the government and ceased publishing in traditional academic venues. Other scholars became divided between vocal critics of democratic backsliding and those promoting a neutral orientation. The two schools of thought maintained amicable relations but advocated different behavior vis-à-vis the political establishment.

The test of solidarity came after the government's attack against CEU. Remarkably, the majority of officeholders in various political science institutions came out in support of CEU and against the governmental repression.[3] Solidarity and commitment to academic freedom prevailed over fear of reprisals. The fact that many of the signatories of the solidarity declarations were conservative and had been critical of the more liberal orientation prevailing at CEU suggested that collegiality and democratic orientation override ideological diversity.

However, the solidarity was not complete. Virtually all of those supporting the ruling party opted out of it. To understand why, we need to consider the interaction between academia and the "culture wars"—that is, the politically relevant disagreements about values concerning fundamental issues such as religion, family, nation, gender relations, and gender identities (Hunter 1991; Jacoby 2014). The overlap is best illustrated by the example of three prominent academics who decided not to support the protest or who came out explicitly against CEU.

First is the 2016–2021 Rector of Corvinus University of Budapest, Andras Lánczi, the translator of the works of Leo Strauss and informal ideological adviser to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Before the governmental attacks, he publicly praised CEU for welcoming local academics to its library and for fostering the integration of Hungarian scholars into international academia. However, when he was asked by a journalist in 2021 whether the departure of CEU is a major loss to Hungarian academia, he answered: "I don't think so. CEU has a clear political credo and if one exposes oneself politically, then it will be dealt with by political means."[4] One aspect of the political problem with CEU was explained in a conversation with Ronald Daniels, President of Johns Hopkins University. Lánczi described to him the conditions under which CEU could have stayed in Hungary: if its founder, George Soros, gave less support to the Roma and Syrian refugees.[5]

The second prominent intellectual conspicuous by his silence was Frank Furedi, emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Kent and senior analyst of the Hungarian pro-government think tank, "XXI Century." Furedi is a vocal advocate of freedom of speech in general and academic freedom in particular. In his works, he devotes much space—in my view, rightly—to the criticism of the various manifestations of "cancel culture" in Western academia: for example, excesses of political correctness, bans on controversial speakers on campuses, and sidelining of right-wing academics (cf. www.frankfuredi.com/academic-freedom-free-speech). However, in his writings, Furedi fails to condemn CEU's expulsion or any other aspects of Hungarian higher-education policy constraining academic freedom. These aspects include the fact that the government imposes leaders on universities, that certain social science degrees either are banned or allowed to be taught only by certain universities, and that universities have been privatized with boards composed of political appointees who received their position for life.[6]

The third intellectual in question was George Schopflin, a member of the European Parliament until 2019 and previously a professor at University College London. In correspondence involving dozens of academics, CEU professor Laszlo Bruszt reprimanded him for repeating the government's blatantly false claims against his university and accused him of being a foot soldier in the war fought against CEU.[7] Schopflin replied, "For the purposes of this letter solely, I accept your metaphor of 'war.' You lost." Then Schopflin criticized CEU's management, among other issues, for not establishing contacts with the "center right" and for not circumventing the new regulations with behind-closed-doors negotiations but rather publicly challenging the government. He wrote, "If you are going to pick a fight, make sure that you are, at best, evenly matched. A university can never win against a sovereign state" and "If you are a private university, stay out of the politics of the country of location" (Schopflin 2018).[8]

The position of these pro-government academics may be puzzling, but there is a good—and relatively benevolent—explanation for it: they consider the issue of CEU as part of the culture war fought against the global establishment—a formidable enemy. They even may feel pity for those hundreds of colleagues who had to leave the country. However, whether or not they have these private sentiments, they feel obliged to focus on the "big picture": the assumed global dominance of the cosmopolitan liberal mainstream. In that narrative, the rightful claim for victimhood belongs to the marginalized conservative scholars.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522000129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The fact that the local Hungarian and the global narratives are seen as interrelated was reflected by Furedi's claim: "Critics of the Orbán government's campaign against the institutional integrity of the Central European University in Budapest rarely raise concerns about the illiberal and censorious climate that prevails on Anglo-American campuses" (Furedi 2017). He was wrong on the specific point because a first reaction of CEU and its supporters was to convene a series of conferences at which the campaign against CEU and the freedom-of-speech issues in Anglo-American universities were explicitly brought together (Ignatieff and Roch 2017). However, the larger point is clear: the centralizing and oppressive policies of the Orbán regime must be exempted from criticism because of the heroic fight that this government wages against the increasingly powerful progressive elite. Instead of finding fault with the policies of the Hungarian government, Furedi condemns the conservative parties of Europe for neglecting the culture wars that must be fought against the left, American "soft power," cosmopolitanism, and "sexual neutrality" in defense of homogeneous cultures, traditions, and families.[9] In his book, aptly titled *Populism and the European Culture Wars* (Furedi 2017), he discusses the tensions between Hungary and the European Union (EU) as the manifestation of the clash between multiculturalism and the traditionalist and sovereigntist approach to nation. In this context, references to rule of law, media freedom, and corruption issues by the critics of the Orbán regime are simple distractions. Seen from the nationalist side of the culture war, academic institutions committed to the values of open society are on the wrong side of history.

The reactions of these three intellectuals indicate that the real problem with CEU was not that it protested the discriminatory regulations—which were later struck down by EU judges. The problem was rather that it represented values that are at odds with the ongoing illiberal counter-revolution (Enyedi 2020). Academics who support the latter opinion simply have a more important cause than solidarity. ■

NOTES

1. Although it received the most international attention, the so-called Lex-CEU was only one of the many controversial decisions of the Orbán government in the field of culture and education. Kovács and Trencsényi (2020) provide a comprehensive review of these policies.
2. The law was justified with various, often contradictory arguments. The official justification, included in the bill, was to increase quality control—as if quality depended not on accreditation but rather on intergovernmental agreements. The other justification provided publicly was that CEU has an unfair advantage vis-à-vis ordinary Hungarian universities because it can provide its students with a US degree. At the same time, many leading government politicians admitted that the move against CEU was part and parcel of the anti–George Soros campaign. Orbán considers Soros a hostile political actor whose purpose is to undermine traditions, national sovereignties, and Christian values, in line with the culture-war template.
3. See www.ceu.edu/category/istandwithceu.
4. See https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20210324_orban_a_rendszervaltas_garanciaja.
5. See www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/central-european-university-is-a-remarkable-school-it-should-stay-in-hungary/2019/01/22/518a2fc6-1e61-11e9-9145-3f74070bbdb9_story.html.
6. See https://collegenews.org/half-of-hungarian-universities-privatized-by-government.
7. See https://hungarianfreepress.com/2017/05/12/george-gyorgy-schopflin-a-member-of-the-european-parliament-attacks-ceu.
8. See https://standpointmag.co.uk/features-december-2018-george-schopflin-george-soros-central-european-university-fidesz-budapest.
9. See the speech in Hungarian titled, "How to Establish the Intellectual Prestige of Hungary Among the Conservatives and Populists of Europe." www.xxiszazadintezet.hu/europa-mi-vagyunk.

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FUNDING-MODEL CHANGES AT HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITIES: GREATER AUTONOMY?

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DOI:10.1017/S1049096522000130

This article examines financial aspects of the recent funding-model changes at Hungarian universities, using Corvinus University of Budapest (CUB) as a case study. Although the broader political implications of these funding-model changes have received much media attention, discussions about their potential financial impacts have been sidelined. We argue that the funding-model change in the case of CUB would allow the university to increase its financial resources (and thus its autonomy); however, the university would need to actively manage the investment portfolio of its endowment.

In recent years, the Hungarian government has attempted to exert greater control over academic institutions in the country. Its successful campaign to push the Central European University out of the country has been well documented (Enyedi 2019), and it also has eroded the independence of the research institutes of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. These actions were labeled by critics as government attacks against academic freedom (Human Rights Watch 2019). Given this context, it is somewhat surprising that the government simultaneously increased the autonomy of other academic institutions, starting with a "model change" at CUB, which was announced in 2018. CUB's restructure was meant to be the pilot project of the government's broader ambitions to transform the structure and funding of higher education in Hungary. CUB, previously known as the Budapest University of Economic Sciences, generally has been viewed as the country's leading higher-education institution in social sciences, economics, and business studies, with especially strong programs in international relations dating back to 1969.

Since 2018, two types of funding models have been explored by the Hungarian government and were codified into law in 2021, affecting 11 public universities (Euronews 2021). In the case of CUB, a foundation—the Maecenas Universitatis Corvini Foundation (MUCF)—was created to oversee the university operations. MUCF was gifted an endowment by the state that was composed of shares of two leading Hungarian companies: Mol, a multinational oil and gas company, and Richter, a pharmaceutical company.