



THE BLUE AND WHITE PIN THAT MATTERS

In the 1980s, when I was in my early twenties, living and studying in communist Hungary, there was a blue and white pin which was cool to wear. That was the pin of the Danube circle (Duna Kör), the independent, oppositional circle founded in 1984 to fight against the planned dam on the Danube. Wearing this pin was not without political risks in the 1980s, but it was definitely 'cool'. When I saw a colleague wearing it in the coffee shop of the university I immediately asked him where he got it, trying not to look very suspicious in asking, as I was sure the secret police also wanted to get that piece of information too.

History repeats itself in a strange way. In April 2017, the Hungarian government passed with extraordinary speed the Lex CEU which makes it impossible for CEU to operate in Hungary. The amendment to the higher education law requires, besides other clauses, that curriculum, hiring faculty, and recruitment be regulated directly by the Hungarian and US governments. The changes impose political control over one of the success institutions of European higher education. CEU was founded in 1991 to fight for freedom and to stand against such policing of ideas. From the minute the proposal became public on 28 March, 2017, resistance started. The resistance, which also included producing a blue pin, as blue is the official CEU color, with the slogan, written in white in two languages, "I stand with CEU". The story of this pin very much resembles the story of the pin of my political socialization in the 1980s.

FIRST, IT IS COOL now again to wear that pin. People shout at you with a wide smile from the other side of the street, repeating the slogan "Free Country, Free University", or "I stand with CEU". Or they just ask you openly, even on the street, where they could get a pin. Luckily this is not classified information at the moment, as at the reception at the newly renovated campus of CEU in Budapest each person is given two pins. (Do not ask me why two, and not one or three, but that is the



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instruction from the administration.) By the end of April more than 10,000 pins were handed out there. Second, in spite of the overwhelming support, it is not necessarily safe to wear that pin in public. One of our graduates was recently hit in a bar, and the pin he was wearing was torn off his sweater. Another student while standing in the subway was astonished to see that an elderly man took out a pencil and started to rewrite the pin he was wearing on his chest. These stories show that the fight for freedom is a continuous fight. Freedom was the most important guiding principle of CEU's founders in 1991. Those founders were Péter Hanák, Miklós Vásárhelyi, and György Litvánó, to name only those who are no longer with us. Those founders personally experienced direct political control and the policing of their ideas. The same freedom of thought is at stake now with the new higher education law which threatens the very existence of CEU.

As in the case of the Danube Circle, international support and contacts proved crucial to stop the construction of the dam, they are also crucial in the case of CEU. It is enough to look at all our alumni in the 117 countries where CEU

students come from to study in Budapest, or the hundreds of international letters of support we have received, to see that the whole world is watching, helping, and supporting the resistance. From Pécs to Szeged, from Cambridge to Cluj or Singapore, our graduates are sending CEU letters and organizing protests. Several important Hungarian conservative intellectuals and state institutions have already expressed their solidarity with CEU, such as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

CEU's mission statement declares its basic principles as the principles of open society. The Hungarian government communicated that these values are dividing Hungary or other nations of Europe along party lines. They are wrong. It is clear that the universal values of liberty and democracy are at stake. If we are looking for models and allies, we look to Delhi, Johannesburg, London, and Berlin – whose struggles inspire us in our defense of academic freedom. CEU wants to become free, successful, and open to the world. This is a struggle that must be connected with solidarity and social justice.

IN 1989, WE HAD a common dream. The founders of CEU, politicians, including PM Orban, had a common dream back then. That dream was that we would build a free and successful country where not party apparatchiks, but academics decide who can study at a university, and what institution can call itself a university. A country where you do not need to wear a pin, but if you choose to do so, you do not meet violence and anger on the streets. This Lex CEU is the betrayal of our common dream, and the hopes of 1989 are being betrayed by Fidesz. They forget, but those who are wearing the blue "I stand with CEU" pin do not. And they are definitely more numerous than we were back in 1984. At least that can give us hope for the future. ❌

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PHOTO: PÉTER BALOGH

Street view outside the university during the protests against Lex CEU.



CEU'S FATE A SYMBOL OF WHAT WENT WRONG in Hungary and Central and Eastern Europe

Many of us have been shocked by the Hungarian government's intention to close CEU. However, it was not such a hasty decision as it appeared. Changing the laws on higher education and on organizations cofunded from foreign sources has for a while been on the hidden agenda.¹ Interestingly enough, a number of influential members of the Fidesz government opposed Lex CEU (as it was soon called) at an early stage. Members including the Minister of Human Resources, the State Secretary for Higher Education, and even the party's vice-president. It may recall historic times – or purely reflect ancient power-exercising tactics – that in the end it was the Minister of Human Resources who had to work out the technical details of the new legislation.

Either way, the Hungarian government has been bashing George Soros for weeks before announcing Lex CEU. In February, the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán said that "[i]nternational organizations operating in Hungary and calling themselves 'non-governmental' – though in fact attempting to influence Hungarian politics while representing the interests of global capital with paid activists using money from abroad – must be made accountable and transparent",² implicitly calling for legislation like that in Russia. Orbán added that "[o]ver the past twenty years we have tolerated the existence of these organizations, but their behavior in relation to migration is the final straw".

For months, Hungarian public media have been more and more explicitly conveying the message that George Soros is largely to blame for "the migrants" and that NGOs supported by him cooperate with human smugglers in North Africa.

AS AN INFLUENTIAL American financier with roots in Budapest, Soros makes a particularly welcome enemy representing global domination in Hungary³ but also beyond. While it is true that several mayors across Central and Eastern Europe have invited CEU should it have to leave Hungary, there is at least as much opposition against such a move, for instance in Slovakia⁴ and the Czech Republic.⁵ In the midst of its huge and long-lasting domestic political crisis, Macedonia in particular has seen the rise of an anti-Soros movement,⁶ vividly reported on by Hungarian public media.

In Hungary, the amount of protest to follow the announcement of Lex CEU was probably underestimated by the government, yet one relatively unexpected feature was that even a number of influential conservative public figures went against the prime minister and showed their support for CEU.⁷ This is particularly important in a society as ideologically divided as Hungary.

At the same time, one of the most surprising yet interesting commentaries came from Róbert Braun, a leading researcher at the Vienna Institute for Advanced Studies and professor at the Lauder Business School. Up until 2005,

Braun also held strategic positions as advisor to the prime ministers of the Hungarian socialist government, but he is now looking more critically at his and others' roles in shaping the country. According to Braun, CEU has created a Western elite power ghetto, which he sees as justified but carrying huge risks.⁸ Whereas the institution's teaching and research achievements are unquestionable, CEU has also become a symbol of the failures of integration and Westernization: a few have succeeded, the majority has not; those inside have research funding, an ideal working environment, etc. Braun reminds us that symbols can be destroyed even if they carry great value.

In the end, the dramatic fate of CEU has shown us at least three important things. One, power concentration in Hungary may now be at its peak, but is unlikely to remain so for long, due to growing protest from within. Second, large-scale bottom-up mobilization is not dead in Hungary. Last and not least, a dramatic event such as this has the side effect of delivering some critical self-reflection by elites, past and present, on the socially diverging effects of Westernization and transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. ❌

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