

THAI STUDENTS RIDE ACADEMIC STORM

Scholars at Central European University protest against the right-wing Hungarian government's plan to close down the prestigious institution *By Tibor Krausz*



UNITED THEY STAND: Students protest in Budapest against the Hungarian government's plan to close Central European University.

Last August Darika Bamrungchok relocated from Bangkok to Budapest. The young Thai human rights advocate, who worked for Amnesty International Thailand, decided to pursue a master's degree in public administration at Central European University in the Hungarian capital.

One of the region's most prestigious institutions, CEU operates out of several well-endowed, newly renovated Habsburg-era buildings in Budapest's historic centre within sight of numerous landmarks, including the country's flamboyant Gothic Revivalist parliament. The university has students from 130 countries.

To Darika, the institution, which offered her a full scholarship, looked like an excellent choice. "It seemed CEU provided a perfect balance of academic inquiry and practical experience," she recalls.

In relocating to a member state of the European Union in the heart of Europe, the young Thai also hoped to get away from the political constraints placed on academic freedom and freedom of speech in her homeland by Thailand's military regime. Darika could now pursue her studies in public policy with a focus on human rights far from home but free from academic restraints and political interference.

Or so she thought.

In April, Hungary's right-wing government passed a law that has effectively outlawed CEU after a quarter of a century of unimpeded operation in the country.

Spearheaded by Hungary's pugnacious and increasingly autocratic prime minister, Viktor Orban, the legislation specifically targeting CEU was rushed through parliament, where Orban's ruling coalition enjoys an unassailable majority. The new law makes it mandatory for foreign-funded universities like CEU to have a campus in their home country by January next year or face closure. It's a requirement that CEU, a Budapest-based institution that is chartered in New York but has never operated a campus there, cannot fulfil, especially at such short notice.



FRIENDS: Daranee Sukanan, left, and Darika Bamrungchok at a Thai restaurant in Budapest.

VICIOUS: A Hungarian government poster says 'Let's not let Soros have the last laugh' under text that says '99% reject illegal immigration'. Graffiti on his forehead says 'Stinking Jew'.

The government's move has drawn vocal condemnation worldwide, while tens of thousands of Hungarians recently took to the streets of Budapest in support of the beleaguered educational institution.

Senior Hungarian government officials — led by Orban, who has pledged to create an "illiberal state" in Hungary modelled on Vladimir Putin's Russia — have remained undeterred. In state-controlled media, they have been accusing CEU (which is Hungary's highest-ranked institution internationally) of "cheating" and engaging in "fake instruction". CEU's representatives, including Rector Michael Ignatieff, a Canadian academic and ex-Liberal Party leader, have strenuously denied those charges.

Yet it clearly isn't the university itself that has drawn the ire of Hungary's government but its founder. CEU was set up in 1991, in the heady days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, by the controversial Hungarian-born American billionaire George Soros with the stated aim of spreading liberal democracy and "critical patriotism" in the former communist countries of Central-Eastern Europe.

Although the institution now operates



independently of Soros, thanks to an endowment of some US\$900 million from the billionaire, CEU has been irrevocably linked with him. Prominent Hungarian government officials derisively refer to CEU as "the Soros university".

Many of these officials themselves, including PM Orban, once enjoyed Soros's largesse during their student days and some of them even obtained advanced degrees at CEU on Soros-funded scholarships. Yet they now accuse the institution of having acted as the centrepiece of what they call "the Soros-mafia", which allegedly "wants to undermine the legal order in opposition to the nation's goals", in the words of Balazs Hidveghi, director of communications for Orban's ruling Fidesz Party.

"He [Soros] embodies certain values — liberalism, democracy, openness, human rights," retorts Andras Kovacs, a professor of sociology who is a lecturer in CEU's nationalism studies programme. "That has made him the target of a propaganda campaign in right-wing circles."

On government-sponsored billboards and posters that have been widely displayed around Budapest and the countryside, Soros has been depicted, with distinctly anti-Semitic

undertones, as a rich puppet master pulling the strings behind an opposition party and, more recently, as a sinister schemer out to harm Hungary.

The American billionaire, 86, was born in Budapest into a Jewish-Hungarian family and survived the mass murder of Jews as a teenager in World War II before he emigrated and struck it rich as an investor and currency speculator. In the process, he's earned plenty of enemies worldwide, including such prominent politicians as Malaysia's former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who accused Soros of masterminding the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Soros is now being accused by Orban of similarly vile legerdemain — which is to flood Hungary with Muslim migrants from Africa and the Middle East. Soros's Open Society Foundations, which sponsor numerous liberal and left-wing causes globally, have been supporting pro-migrant NGOs in Hungary. The country's outspokenly Eurosceptic government, however, remains fiercely opposed, with popular backing, to the EU's quota system, which would see hundreds of Muslim refugees from countries like war-torn Syria resettled in Hungary.

CEU's thousand or so foreign students, including a handful of Thais, have become casualties in the Hungarian government's war on Soros. Many have been taken aback by the sustained and virulent campaign against the university.

Some students have even reported being attacked in public by irate locals simply for wearing "#IstandwithCEU" badges. A leading government politician has dismissed such reports as "provocations" orchestrated by Soros.

Government representatives didn't respond to requests for comment. However, a Hungarian diplomat with experience in Southeast Asia conceded, on condition of anonymity, that the government's campaign against CEU is part of a coordinated strategy to stoke "anti-liberal" sentiments in Hungary. "Few people [in the government] seriously believe that Soros is an evil genius, but he's a convenient target," the diplomat said. "CEU is a victim of his notoriety."

When the law against CEU was passed, Darika says she was in disbelief. "I thought, 'What the hell is going on in Budapest?'" she says. "It's kind of like something that could happen in my country."

If anything, she adds, the situation of academic freedom seems worse in Hungary in some respects. "[In Thailand] we might experience a crackdown on civil society and the media," she says. "But in Hungary the government is taking even tougher steps against academic freedom by wanting to close down an entire university."

Another Thai student at CEU is Daranee Sukanan, an alumna of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok who is about to graduate with a master's degree in environmental sciences and policy. She, too, is exasperated.

"This university does a lot for students like me," says Daranee, who comes from a family of farmers in the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat. "CEU has provided me with a full scholarship, a monthly stipend and free accommodation. I could never have afforded to study in Europe without their help," she says.

"Yet the Hungarian government will deprive thousands of disadvantaged Hungarian students and foreign students of similar benefits if they force CEU to close."

The future of the university remains in doubt. Hungary's government may yet decide to allow CEU to continue operating in Budapest. Failing that, CEU will have to relocate elsewhere.

Whatever the outcome, the Hungarian government's assault on her school has taught Darika a valuable lesson. Recently she participated in rowdy student protests in Budapest against the government's plan to shut CEU down.

"Perhaps the most important thing I've learned is that academic freedom and freedom of speech are of truly profound value," she says. "That value is rarely appreciated fully until these freedoms are gone." ■

PHOTOS: TIBOR KRAUSZ