



# Gunning for George

A prestigious university in Budapest falls victim to the Hungarian government's vendetta against the Jewish billionaire

**By Tibor Krausz, Budapest**



# Soros

**THE CENTRAL** European University in Budapest is Hungary's top-ranked institution of higher education and home to some 1,500 students and hundreds of lecturers from 116 nations in its various graduate and postgraduate programs, Jewish Studies among them.

Occupying a smattering of three lavishly equipped Habsburg-era and two ultra-modern buildings, the university boasts ideal settings in the very heart of Hungary's picturesque capital. On one side, within a few hundred meters, lies the city's famed Chain Bridge over the Danube. On the other, the magnificent St. Stephen's Basilica looms large with its towering spires. Within easy walking distance are Budapest's historic Great Synagogue with its onion domes and Hungary's gaudy neo-Gothic Parliament House.

The university was founded by Budapest-born Jewish-American billionaire philanthropist George Soros in 1991 with the aim of inculcating liberal democratic values in young people across Central-Eastern Europe after the fall of communism, in which Hungary played a pivotal role in 1989. Thanks to an endowment of nearly \$900 million from Soros, CEU has long been the country's best-financed academic institution and now operates independently of the Jewish billionaire.

Over the years CEU has offered scholarships to thousands of students from Hungary and around the world, including Israel and the Palestinian territories. Among its alumni are intellectuals, artists, government

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Students bear a banner that says 'CEU now, but who's next?' during a protest against the Hungarian government's plan to shut down a local university founded by George Soros

ministers and diplomats.

"CEU is not just any university in Budapest," stresses Shlomo Avineri, a prominent Israeli historian and political scientist who is a recurring visiting professor at CEU. "It's a pluralistic institution with international standards and an atmosphere of tolerance, diversity and openness," he tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "Hungary should be proud of it."

But Hungary's right-wing government isn't proud of it. It wants the university gone – along with its vaunted tolerance, diversity and openness.

The prestigious university may seem like an unlikely site for a political battle ground. Yet, it has just become a new proxy in an ideological tug of war between Soros and the country's pugnacious, erratic Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose government promptly and without warning amended the country's higher education act in early April to effectively outlaw CEU, which it derisively calls "the Soros University."

The new legislation forces the binational institution, which is accredited in New York but has a campus only in Budapest, to stop enrolling new students from January 1, 2018, and to close down by 2021, unless Hungary and the US can agree on new terms for the university. The law is set to be followed by similar legislative legislation aimed at crippling civil society groups funded by the Jewish billionaire – or "sweeping them out," in the words of one of Orbán's deputies.

Speaking on public radio last March, Orbán sounded a nativist tone and accused the Budapest-based university of "cheating" by offering degrees that are accepted both in Hungary and the US – unlike degrees issued by other Hungarian universities that are only accepted locally. "It's inexplicable,"

he griped, “why we should place our own universities at a disadvantage” by allowing “a foreign university” to enjoy “an unfair advantage.”

Yet, it clearly isn’t that “unfair advantage” that vexes Orbán. “It makes no difference if someone is a billionaire in Hungary,” he elucidated, in a jibe at the New York-based Jewish financier. “This university also has to respect the laws,” Orbán said, referring to “laws” that did not yet exist at the time because his party’s proposed new legislation had yet to be passed in Parliament.

In an interview with a right-wing online publication last December, Orbán dispelled any doubt about his true motivation. “The coming year,” he warned ominously, “will be about the exclusion of Soros and the forces he represents [from Hungarian society].”

**SHORTLY THEREAFTER**, when the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Hungarian government had illegally detained two asylum seekers from Bangladesh in 2015 at the height of the migrant crisis that was engulfing the country, Hungary’s prime minister predictably lashed out at Soros. Orbán has taken a hard-line stance against all migration into Europe, while several locally based nonprofits funded by Soros’s Open Society Foundations have been openly campaigning on behalf of migrants from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa.

“It is a collusion of human traffickers, Brussels bureaucrats and the organizations that work in Hungary financed by foreign money,” insisted Orbán, echoing a commonly held view in Hungary that attributes Europe’s migrant crisis to a shadowy global conspiracy overseen by rich, scheming Jewish bankers pulling the strings from behind the scenes. “Let’s call a spade a spade: George Soros finances them.”

In case anyone missed his point then, the politician reiterated his claims in another diatribe a few weeks later. “Let’s not underestimate George Soros,” Orbán huffed. “He’s an all-powerful and unscrupulous billionaire who knows neither God nor man when it comes to his interests.”

Such scapegoating and conspiracy mongering, which ascribe an outside ability to Soros to influence global geopolitical developments, has found a receptive audience

in Hungary, where lurid phantasmagorias about the endless machinations of foreign Jewish financiers are commonplace. Once these alleged manipulators were claimed to belong to the Rothschild banking dynasty, now they are seen to be embodied by Soros.

### The greatest value of CEU is its independence. It's one of the last bastions of free thinking in Hungary

“[This law against CEU] is a covert form of antisemitism,” Attila Mesterházy, an opposition lawmaker, stressed. When Orbán and members of his Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance party “keep harping on about George Soros, surely, [his Jewishness] is on their minds.”

It’s also on the minds of numerous other Hungarians. Thanks to his high-profile philanthropic work with a decidedly left-wing political slant, Soros has become a handy stand-in for the fictive Bond villain-like Jewish banker of fevered conspiracy myths. His larger-than-life rags-to-riches life story has added to his aura of preternatural perfidy in the eyes of his countless detractors in Hungary and elsewhere.

Born György Schwartz in 1930 to a well-to-do family of assimilated Jews, Soros survived the Holocaust in Budapest as a teenager with fake documents. By his own admission, as part of his wartime cover Soros, then 14, helped a local fascist catalogue confiscated Jewish property during Hungarian Jewry’s mass deportation to Auschwitz (a fact that has opened Soros up to charges that he was a Nazi collaborator, which he wasn’t). He emigrated to London, where he studied philosophy, and after several false starts in banking he set up a hedge fund. He turned to currency speculation, earning \$1 billion in a single day in 1992 in a high-stakes gamble against the Bank of England. He then worked his way up in the world of high finance in New York to become one of the world’s richest men, now worth \$25 bil-

lion, and one of its most prominent philanthropists.

His Open Society Foundations, which has a budget of \$1 billion and has over the years given away \$12 billion to various causes in more 100 countries, has benefitted millions of people worldwide, including Hungary’s prime minister. In 1989, when he was still an up-and-coming young liberal politician with strong anti-Russian leanings, Orbán received a scholarship from the Jewish billionaire to study at England’s Oxford University. Several members of his inner circle also enjoyed Soros’s munificence back in their student days.

Today, the onetime beneficiary of Soros’s largesse is hardly a poster boy for the values that the billionaire seeks to foster through his foundations whose ideals were inspired by the Austrian thinker Karl Popper’s work of political philosophy, “The Open Society and its Enemies.” Orbán is now a self-avowed “enemy” of the very idea of a Western European-style “open society.”

The politician, whose right-wing coalition enjoys a seemingly unassailable parliamentary majority that allows it to pass laws at will, has pledged to create an “illiberal state” modelled on his ally Vladimir Putin’s stranglehold on Russia. He has done much to undermine the rule of law in Hungary and eliminate nascent democratic checks and balances, partly by rewriting the constitution.

Nor does Orbán, one of whose advisers is the Jewish-American conservative political consultant Arthur J. Finkelstein, hide his nativist and autocratic tendencies. His government has been relentlessly pushing a revisionist view of history, which is now taught in state-run schools. It portrays Hungary, a staunch wartime ally of Nazi Germany, as the hapless victim of first German aggression, then Soviet occupation – thereby absolving Hungarians of responsibility for the fate of their country and the death of 600,000 Hungarian Jews in the Holocaust.

“Hungarians have still not come to terms with their 20th-century history,” says Michael L. Miller, a Jewish-American academic who specializes in Central European Jewish history and teaches at CEU’s Nationalism Studies and Jewish Studies programs. “In the eyes of Hungarians, it was



LUKE MACGREGOR / REUTERS

communism that was the century's greatest crime," he explains. "In the eyes of Jews, it was Nazism and Hungarian fascism."

Meanwhile, in the style of jumped-up tinpot despots, Orbán has been enriching his friends and relatives through lucrative government contacts and has entrenched his cronies in key political, financial and judicial positions. He's now declared war on Soros, whom he sees as standing in his way by funding dissenting voices. "I don't think Orbán is antisemitic, but many of his supporters are," Miller tells *The Report*. "Orbán isn't going after Soros because he's a Jew but because he's a billionaire financier who is trying to influence politics" through his philanthropy.

Yet, the fact that Soros is Jewish "feeds into prevalent antisemitic tropes about Jewish bankers," Miller says. "Orbán is a populist who appeals to the worst instincts of Hungarians. He's found a convenient bogeyman in Soros and in CEU he's found an easy target to get back at Soros."

Or make those Jewish bankers scheming Zionists, if you will. Cockamamie home-grown conspiracy theories about "the global Zionist mafia" continue metastasizing into ever more bizarre allegations. According to one fantastical conspiracy theory currently making the rounds in Hungary, Israelis are clandestinely drilling artesian wells to si-

phon off Hungary's mineral water resources into the Jewish state. According to another, Israelis are snatching up real estate in Budapest in order to drive ethnic Magyars out and repopulate the city with Jews.

**A POPULAR** anti-Soros calumny in his native land – spouted in nationalist media, on comment threads and over dinner tables – has it that Soros seeks to undermine Hungary in the interests of Israel, partly through the university he founded.

"This is a silly idea. If anyone is anti-Zionistic, it's Soros," observes András Kovács, a professor of sociology at CEU who is an expert on antisemitism in Hungary. "But he embodies certain values – liberalism, democracy, openness, human rights," he explains. "That has made him the target of a propaganda campaign in right-wing circles."

Soros's foundations have donated millions of dollars to advocacy groups, both inside and outside Israel, that openly advocate against the Jewish state and even question its legitimacy – often in the guise of campaigning for "Palestinian rights." The Jewish philanthropist's funding of such groups has earned him plenty of enemies among pro-Israel Jews.

Yet, CEU has hardly been an anti-Israel institution. For a decade until 2009, the

Jewish-American billionaire George Soros funds worldwide endeavors that promote liberalism, democracy, openness and human rights

university had an Israeli rector: the late Hungarian-born Jewish historian Yehuda Elkana, who survived Auschwitz as a child. The university's Nationalism and Jewish Studies programs headline Israeli scholars such as Avineri, a professor of political science at Hebrew University who served as the director general of Israel's Foreign Ministry in the government of Yitzhak Rabin in the mid-1970s. At the Budapest-based institution, Avineri teaches courses on modern Jewish history, Zionism and the Middle East conflict.

The Israeli professor has joined hundreds of prominent academics and intellectuals from around the world, many of them Jewish, who have lambasted Hungary's government over its targeted new legislation against CEU. "Over the years we've got the best academic minds in Central Europe," says Avineri, 84, whose mother was born in Hungary. "The university has played a vital role in the democratization of Central and Eastern Europe after decades of fascist and communist oppression."

Now both that process of democratization and the university's future are at risk in Hungary. Orbán appears to see a kindred spirit in US President Donald Trump, whom Soros, a staunch Democrat, has decried as "an impostor and a conman and a would-be dictator." The Jewish billionaire has been funding several high-profile initiatives, from vocal gay rights groups to pro-immigrant advocacy projects to Black Lives Matter, to counter the "hateful acts" of Trump's political agenda.

With Trump in the White House, Orbán clearly saw a golden opportunity to eliminate Soros's influence from Hungary once and for all. Both Orbán and Szilárd Németh, a deputy leader of his ruling Fidesz party, have publicly said as much. The latter has called for all Soros-financed projects in Hungary to "be repressed by all means," explaining that "they must be culled altogether. I think there is an international opportunity to do that now."

Hungary's ruling party may have misread

the US's political landscape, however. The American Embassy in Budapest has issued a strongly worded statement against the Hungarian government's attempt to curtail academic freedom by shutting down CEU. The State Department and several US senators have followed suit.

So have several prominent Western European politicians, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Europe, insisted German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in his address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, "must not be silent when civil society and even academia as the Central European University in Budapest are deprived of the air to breathe."

**THE HUNGARIAN** government's response came courtesy of its petulantly obtuse spokesman Zoltán Kovács. "George Soros's lies mislead even the German government," he huffed. In the 1990s Kovács himself studied at CEU on a scholarship funded by Soros, but brazen hypocrisy is routine among Hungarian government politicians who are driven not by principles or even common decency but by sheer self-interest.

In an open letter to Orbán, György Konrád, a prominent Jewish-Hungarian novelist and Holocaust survivor, has likened the government's orchestrated campaign against Soros to anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda. "[I]n the interest of holding on to power, you've availed yourself of large doses of shrewd antisemitic innuendo" by targeting "a man who has done more for Hungarian youth ... than you and your circle of friends put together," Konrád seethed.

Tens of thousands of Hungarian academics, intellectuals, teachers and students have likewise been crying foul over the government's heavy-handed attack on CEU and Soros. A series of mass demonstrations in support of the university has drawn well over 100,000 people in the Hungarian capital, calling for CEU to stay and Orbán to go. On a recent Sunday, in the largest anti-government demonstration in more than a decade, some 80,000 people took to the capital's streets in support of the beleaguered institution. They held signs and chanted slogans in defense of free speech and academic freedom, both of which are under threat in Hungary.

Echoing the conspiracy-merchant mind-



set of the country's ruling party, which accuses what it calls "the Soros empire" of seeking to undermine it, a state-run television station theorized, without offering any evidence, that Soros bussed in thousands of foreigners from abroad to stage the anti-government protests.

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Unfazed by the attacks on him, the Jewish billionaire has pledged to keep CEU in Budapest. For that, he has the support of much of the country's intellectual elite, which sees the university as a vital part of Hungary's academic scene. "The greatest value of CEU is its independence. It's one of the last bastions of free thinking in Hungary," says István Földes, a Jewish-Hungarian physicist at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences who participated in the protest march. "There is no more [state-owned] free media in Hun-

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has spearheaded efforts to outlaw the Central European University, which he sees as disseminating critical voices against his government

gary," he adds. "With CEU, the regime now wants to shut down one of the last independent places for free thinking."

This state of affairs has appalled Daniel T. Berg, a student at CEU's School of Public Policy. Berg's mother escaped communist Hungary in 1977 by crossing into Austria hidden inside the truck of a Trabant, an East German jalopy with a two-stroke engine mounted inside a hard-plastic body. Berg, who was born in New York, returned to Hungary last year to study at the university. But it's no longer the kind of Hungary he thought he would find.

"I came home because I love Hungary," Berg said at a protest outside the university the same day the anti-CEU law passed in Parliament in early April. "Today [because of this] law that is a death sentence to my university, I felt that I might have been mistaken in coming home."

He added, "This isn't just about the future of one university. This is about the future of Hungarian youth and about the future of Hungary itself." ■