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The anti-Soros campaign in Hungary

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On 4 April, the Hungarian parliament passed an amendment to the higher education act, imposing additional requirements on higher education facilities operating in Hungary which are also accredited abroad. These include the obligation to enter into an intergovernmental agreement as a condition for the functioning of this kind of school and also their educational activity in the foreign country in which they are accredited. The Hungarian government claims that the amendment only tidies up the functioning of 'foreign higher education schools' in Hungary, but in practice the changes will affect the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest most of all. The rector of the CEU emphasises that the changes will in fact make it impossible for the university to continue its operation. This English-language university was funded in 1991 by the financier George Soros, an American of Hungarian-Jewish background. Around 1,500 students from over one hundred countries (mainly from Central and Eastern European countries) enrol at the university each year.

Commentary

- There has been a governmental campaign against institutions linked to Soros which has intensified over the past few weeks and the government's moves against the CEU fit in with this. In February this year, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán recognised that combating the 'Soros empire' is one of the three main tasks for the state in 2017 (along with counteracting migration and the 'diktat of Brussels'). Politicians from Fidesz and the pro-government media present Soros as 'public enemy number one' and accuse institutions linked to him of promoting liberal values and fostering immigration. This is accompanied by promises to introduce stricter regulations concerning non-governmental organisations. According to leaks, the obligation to register and make public any foreign support will be imposed on such organisations.
- The campaign against institutions linked to Soros is aimed above all at building public support for Fidesz ahead of the election in spring 2018. Fidesz is mobilising its electorate by creating an atmosphere of external threat. In this context, Soros is a convenient opponent because he is associated with large foreign currency speculation and to a section of the electorate he is a symbol of the influence of the 'global financiers', liberalism and cosmopolitanism. At the same time, by attacking Soros, Fidesz discredits the criticism from the non-governmental organisations operating in Hungary supported by his foundation. Since the Fidesz-friendly media outlets have dominated the market, these organisations have taken over some of the functions of the media and have been

engaged, for example, in investigative journalism and revealing corruption in government circles.

- The moves directed against the Central European University have provoked the largest public protests in three years and a wave of criticism inside and outside Hungary. Thousands of people took to the streets in Budapest, seventeen Nobel Prize laureates were among those to sign a petition in defence of the university, and many Hungarian intellectuals (including those from conservative circles) stood in defence of the CEU. The attack on the CEU has been sharply criticised by the US Department of State and this has clearly surprised the Hungarian government. Politicians from Fidesz openly claimed that they understood Donald Trump's victory as a 'green light' for restricting Soros's influence in Hungary. If the political costs of combating the CEU grow, the government will most likely look for a solution that will enable the university to continue to operate in Budapest. However, Orbán has declared that the partner for talks on the future of the CEU will not be the university management but the US government. It may be expected that Orbán will use the CEU issue as a bargaining chip in relations with the US.