

What's going on here?

Is teaching always political? Hedvig Turai and Michaela Handke report the case of CEU in Budapest and a debate in London.



[Michaela Handke](#)



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In July 2017, [PATTERNS Lectures](#) was part of the [8th ELIA Academy](#), which took place in London at the inspiring campus of [Central Saint Martins](#), a college of the University of the Arts London. The University has recently moved to a restored granary building at the heart of King's Cross, close to the famous international railway station of London St. Pancras.

The whole area around this Victorian railway station has been re-developed, from what was once a “dodgy” neighbourhood into a hub for art and culture, hosting fancy places for eating and drinking and the headquarters of big companies such as Google. Amidst the ongoing development project the key question of the event, *What's going on here? Exploring Elasticity in Teaching and Learning in the Arts*, was well placed against a matching background of smaller and bigger building sites, illustrating a landscape that is experiencing upheaval.



8th ELIA Academy

8th ELIA Academy, 5-7 July 2017

What's going on here? Exploring Elasticity in Teaching and Learning in the Arts.

PATTERNS Lectures at the 8th ELIA Academy in London: Hedvig Turai, Elke Krasny, Boris Buden, Andrea Braidt (PATTERNS Lectures advisors), Christiane Erharter/ERSTE Foundation and Michaela Handke/WUS Austria (PATTERNS Lectures team)

Curiosity, Hybridity, Research and Social Change

Our own question “Is teaching always political?” was part of a cluster of sessions that explored “social change”. We discussed the question with a large audience that was looking for controversial answers in what seems a right-or-wrong setting – for tolerance and diversity, and against discrimination and prejudice.

The discussions were embedded in a series of four inputs that provided cases from different contexts and countries, inter alia on the current situation in Hungary and the [Central European University](#) (CEU) in Budapest, which has been politicised in the recent past. Have we been building islands of tolerance that do not connect with the non-liberal world? And we asked ourselves – how can we close the gap between academia and the outside world?

Should universities be a safe space?

And how about Hungary?

It was around the political transition in 1989 that education was transformed, and freedom reached education at all levels. Academic freedom was enthusiastically welcomed after the 40 years of the state-controlled education system. In Hungary there were very few private universities. After the fall of the wall and the socialist regimes, freedom within education meant especially the freedom to choose the books and the materials to be taught; new books were written and there was freedom to choose what to teach. In particular, taboos around the 1956 revolution or the Soviet occupation were broken. Within a few years private universities were founded, CEU among them in 1991. Thus not only the general framework of academic freedom but also the birth of private universities in Hungary was “political”, that is, connected to the euphoria of political changes in the aftermath of socialism. Now CEU is connected to politics once again.

“After the fall of the wall and the socialist regimes, freedom within education meant especially the freedom to choose the books and the materials to be taught.”

CEU is a private university founded by Hungarian-born U.S. business man and millionaire George Soros. CEU is unquestionably the best university working in Hungary. Because it has a dual legal identity. It is accredited by the [Middle States Commission on Higher Education](#) in the US and is also accredited in Hungary. It is based on an endowment, market changes or state finances do not really have an impact on its activity. It has been working and flourishing for 25 years. A lot of outstanding high intellectuals teach at CEU; it also gives work to many people, and pays taxes in Hungary.



CEU Budapest front of the main building (c) Daniel Vegel, Zoltan Tuba / CEU

At the end of 2016, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán began to say in interviews that 2017 would be the year of revolt: revolt against political correctness, revolt against Brussels; two types of revolt, the revolt of the middle class and the revolt of the nations. The nation states, he said, have enough of accepting orders from Brussels. He also said that 2017 would be the year “of Soros”. Not that it would be Soros’s year but rather a year about Soros. Orbán promised to make a theme of what Soros represents, particularly his views on immigration and migration. Soros, as Orbán presents it, allegedly wants migrants to settle down in Hungary, as if by some kind of conspiracy. It is important to note that Soros was not only the founder of CEU but also the founder of the [Open Society Foundation](#), which supports and helps NGOs. Education, the migrant crisis, and the issue of NGOs were thus connected in one person, George Soros. In interviews given by state representatives, CEU has been consistently and always referred to as “Soros University”. He became a symbol, the representative of everything that the government did not want. A poster campaign was launched against him, embodying Soros as

a figure of evil, and sadly we should add, painfully evoking the anti-Semitic rhetorical strategies and visual imagery of anti-Semitic visual materials of the 1930s.

The timeline of events

At the end of March 2017, the minister of Human Resources submitted in a suggestion to parliament to alter legislation, to introduce a new higher education law. Given that the governing party has a majority in the parliament, there was no question that the proposal would be accepted. On April 4, the law had already passed, and on April 10, the president signed it. The two crucial elements of the law, which sets up requirements affecting only CEU (and thus appearing discriminatory to many legal professionals) are, 1. a requirement to establish a bilateral national level agreement about the operation of the university between the two governments, 2. to set up a campus in the U.S., since according to the law it is not enough that CEU have its location in Budapest. The first requirement cannot be fulfilled because higher education in the U.S. is not organised at the national level, but rather at federal state level; there is no national university system. The second requirement seems unjustified and unnecessary, as if crafted simply to give the government cover to act against CEU “legitimately”.



Supporters of Central European University protest in front of European Parliament headquarters in Brussels on 26.04.2017 © Wiktor Dabkowski / eyevine

In the meantime

The largest demonstrations of the last couple of years happened in Budapest demanding that this law be vetoed and later in response to this legislation, while objection to the law reached international proportions. It was clearly felt that the legislation signified even more than closing down a university, which in itself was senseless and intolerable; the law was not just about higher education in Hungary, but about politics in its deepest sense.

Academic freedom

In this atmosphere, the teaching of courses is once again political. One might think that teaching in a private higher education institution, a financially independent institution, these days, is freer than in a state institution. And there is of course a difference. At the same time it seems that financial independence is not enough. If there is an existential threat to professors it casts a shadow on teaching as well as the other activities that go on in institutions of higher education.

How to teach in a political way?

In Hungary it is difficult to avoid being political. The correct question would rather be, how could one not be political? One example: After many years it seems that a gender studies department will be launched at [Eötvös Loránd University](#). Teaching gender is political, as clearly reflected by the opposition that this announcement raised from many, and not only from official circles. The minister of Human Resources began to talk about the need of counter-balancing the gender department with a so-called family studies department at another university, as if a department of gender studies would be the headquarters for destroying families, and family values. So simply teaching gender is a political statement.

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Coda

Although the demonstrations and protest have weakened, ...well, in truth, there are none. There are no big crowds at present on the streets of Budapest, there is a silence around CEU, and nothing has really happened in terms of discussions or governmental agreements. Or perhaps the public simply does not know about it, since the media in Hungary is strongly consolidated in the hands of the government. We thus still do not know how this will be resolved, whether CEU can stay in Hungary or will be ousted. It would be a big intellectual loss, and a dismaying sign of the politics to come.