



Weekly Briefing

Hungary Political briefing:
Shaping the Political Discourse-The Case of the CEU
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Shaping the Political Discourse-The Case of the CEU

Over the last months, the political landscape in Hungary hasn't changed significantly, as we pointed out in our earlier political briefings. After the parliamentary elections in April 2018, the Fidesz-KDNP has shaped the Hungarian political discourse by putting further emphasis on the migration debate and enforced its standpoint. At the same time, one should bear in mind that European Parliamentary Elections are to be held next year, which means the Hungarian political forces are already preparing for the coming political campaign. As part of these efforts, in recent months small opposition forces have attempted to gather ground by focusing on smaller issues, such as the debate around the Central European University. After shortly analyzing survey data on party political support in Hungary, this briefing looks at the CEU debate in detail and how this discussion is systematically being used to shape the political discourse by opposition forces.

The summary of the survey data collected by five Hungarian pollsters still shows the asserting dominance of the Fidesz-KDNP and the figures vividly demonstrate that none of the opposition forces or party clustering is able to challenge the power of the Fidesz-KDNP for the time being. Based on the figures of Nézőpont Intézet, Publicus Intézet, Századvég, ZRI-Závecz Research, Medián, the average survey results show that the political support of the Fidesz-KDNPP is around 55 percent in the group of the likely voters. That means a sharp rise in the party's political support by 8 percent compared to April 2018 (47 percent in April – 55 percent in September)! The Jobbik has been losing ground in recent months; its political support steeply dropped by 6 percent (20 percent in April – 14 percent in September), even if one adds the support of the “Mi Hazánk Mozgalom” (Our Fatherland Movement), that has separated from the Jobbik meanwhile, the loss is around 4 percent. The former difference between the two main left formations (MSZP and DK) seems to be closing,

since the DK has gained 1 percent plus support from April to September (6 percent in April – 7 percent in September), while the MSZP is slowly sliding into irrelevance, and it has lost 1 percent of the support in the group of likely voters (12 percent in April – 11 percent in September). The LMP would get around the same number of votes, if elections were held now, its support remains around 5 percent.

As it can be observed, data basically show the inefficiency of the opposition parties when it comes to their efforts to noticeably change the political discourse and gain more traction among electives. One of the issues, recently often touched upon by the opposition forces and used to shape the political discourse, is the debate around the Central European University.

The Central European University (CEU) announced last week that it will move its campus to Vienna, if problems around the university cannot be solved until December 2018. However, if looking at the details, it becomes clear the CEU will only move the programmes awarding American diplomas to the students to Vienna, since programmes accredited in Hungary will remain in the Hungarian capital. Responding to the communication of the CEU, the government spokesman said last week “Up to now, CEU has operated here, it does so now, and we think that it will continue to do so in the future ...”

In the government’s opinion, the announcement of the CEU seems to be rather a political bluff, and it only attempts to put the government under pressure. The Hungarian government emphasized the CEU operates here in Budapest, and the Hungarian law regarding upper education allows for the so called joint degrees. It must be added that regulation how joint degrees can be accredited, doesn’t impose high requirements on universities, since it only requires the consent of the Hungarian Accreditation Commission.

At the same time, there are clear signs that not only the opposition, but international news portals and media outlets try to set the Hungarian government under pressure in this question:

— The British Independent covered an article on the struggles around the CEU 26, October 28, 2018. The article refers to the CEU that says it cannot “secure the guarantees we need from the Hungarian government to preserve our academic freedom”.

— The Washington Post goes further and it maintains in its article October 25, 2018: “Academic freedom in Hungary came under question Thursday as Central European University said it will move its U.S.-accredited programs from Budapest to the Austrian capital of Vienna because of the “uncertain” academic environment in Hungary.”

— The New York Times also published an article on the story, however, it includes other discussion points with the EU as well. The article concludes: “Now, as Hungary drifts toward authoritarian rule under Prime Minister Viktor Orban, the university says it is being forced to close its Budapest campus, portraying itself as a victim of Mr. Orban’s efforts to vilify Mr. Soros and to stifle dissent and academic freedom.”

As we can see based on these quotes, the debate revolves not only around the future of the CEU, but there are clear attempts to widen the debate to questions such academic freedom, even though there are no proves for breaching academic freedom in Hungary. At this point it should be definitely underlined, that academic freedom doesn’t equal to freedom of speech; freedom of speech is an individual right, while academic freedom applies to a discipline where knowledge is produced by a community and this knowledge can only be judged by the peers of the community. In other words, academic freedom would be breached by the Hungarian government or politicians if they attempted to exert influence on topics, teaching material in Hungarian universities. That is obviously not the case!

The alleged agreement between the government and the State of New York was posted on the Facebook by a member of the Hungarian Parliament, the politician also states that the Hungarian government only needs to conclude the agreement to settle the dispute and legalize the CEU’s U.S.- accredited

programmes in Hungary. According to the Hungarian education law, only those foreign universities can offer degrees to students in Hungary, that

— are involved in education activities, and are entitled to award diplomas in the mother country,

— furthermore, there must be an international agreement between Hungary and the other state in question.

According to the Hungarian news portal, Magyar Idők, the Bard College (the cooperating American partner of the CEU) and the CEU seem to have agreed on a feigned contract since the location of the education programme in the US would be a small building (60 square meter) awarding an ‘advanced certificate in inequality analysis’. The deputy rector of the CEU, Mr. Enyedi responded to the allegations, and he said: “The joint program of the CEU and the Bard College has the administration in this house, however, I cannot tell you, which course is being held in which building. The location obviously changes from semester to semester, adjusted to the local needs.”

It is clear that the details of the joint programme can easily be changed and adjust it to the requirements specified in the law, this is no question, in our opinion this is no problem. However, there is another element of this debate too, often neglected in the media, but this piece of truth brings us closer to the real cause of the scandal. The privilege that the CEU enjoys at the moment, is that it can award U.S.-accredited degree without having a mother-institute in the US. That helps the CEU to extra profits in the Hungarian upper education market. This is a privilege that other Hungarian universities cannot enjoy at the moment, and it is very likely that concluding the agreement would mean that the government accepts this privilege and it makes it perpetual.

As the case of the CEU vividly shows, discussions of legal and business nature can be easily turned into seemingly serious political disputes in Hungary and they can also be widened to other areas, such as academic freedom. Articles focusing on the CEU debate often echo the words of the CEU president and rector, Mr. Ignatieff as well: “We have taken all necessary actions in order to

comply with Lex CEU. We have repeatedly indicated our openness to find a solution that guarantees our institutional integrity and academic freedom.” As underlined before, there is no proof for breaching academic freedom, the reference at this point are often made to an August decision of the Hungarian government, that doesn’t support the academic programme “gender studies” anymore. The programme started in 2016, but it was never popular, in the first year after launching the programme, only ten students applied for the programme nation-wide, thus the Hungarian government scraped the programme and it argued there is hardly any market demand for this programme.

To understand the story fully, it must be emphasized that Vienna signed an agreement with the CEU about establishing the new campus in April, 2018, in other words, the Central European University has already decided to move the campus to Vienna before this latest scandal broke out, therefore it can be argued that the international scandal around the CEU is part of a political campaign or business strategy.