Democratic Backsliding and Academic Freedom in Hungary

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The Hungarian government’s discriminatory actions against the Central European University constitute one of the most prominent conflicts between an academic institution and a government today. My contribution gives a detailed account of how the conflict has unfolded so far. Various frameworks of interpretation, including democratic backsliding, cultural war, and international politics are discussed. I place the story of the university in the context of the polarized cultural climate of Eastern Europe and draw attention to the power of universities in collaborating across borders in defense of academic freedom—and freedom in general.

In many countries, universities are regular arenas of political conflict: both academics and students challenge governments and frequently take sides in partisan conflicts. The voluntary departure or removal of professors for political reasons is also relatively common, even in developed democracies. Direct confrontations between specific universities and governments are, however, rare. The conflict between the Central European University and the Hungarian government is perhaps the most notable such conflict in contemporary Europe.

The conflict has an important international dimension, aligning the U.S. State Department, various bodies of the European Union, and several other international political and academic institutions against the Hungarian Prime Minister and the ruling Fidesz party. The motives of the decision-makers, the way the controversy was handled by the various actors, and the reactions of the public illustrate well the state of democracy in the region, a deepening culture war across the globe, and the precarious position of universities in polarized political contexts. It also reveals the power of the international network of universities and the role of academic freedom in supporting other forms of freedom.

The Conflict in a Nutshell

At the end of March 2017, the Hungarian government introduced a bill issuing new criteria which foreign universities need to meet in order to operate in Hungary. The most demanding new condition is an international agreement between the government of Hungary and the government of the respective university’s country of origin. This requirement practically means that the right to conduct educational activities will no longer depend on professional criteria (e.g., on the decision of accreditation boards), but on the preferences of the government. Furthermore, the bill restricts the possibility for non-European universities to enter into cooperation with Hungarian universities. It also requires that foreign universities wishing to operate in Hungary must conduct actual education activities in their home country. Finally, it eliminates exemptions for work permits and requires that the name of the university differs clearly from the name of already registered universities even in foreign languages. Universities that do not meet even one of these new criteria will lose their license to operate. The bill was quickly named “Lex CEU” because most of these criteria affected only a single institution: Central European University (CEU).

CEU is a U.S.-chartered university that was established, along with another two dozen higher education institutions, with the explicit goal of delivering American-style education outside of the United States. It connects to the Hungarian higher education system through a legal entity whose name is the direct Hungarian translation of CEU. Its large number of non-European (mainly American and Canadian) professors benefited from then-existing work permit exemptions.

The events that surrounded the bill’s introduction made it abundantly clear that the changes in the regulations had a political motive. A couple of hours before the bill was made public a pro-government website accused CEU, and other foreign universities operating in Hungary, of cheating on the basis of an unpublished government audit that was not even shared at that time with the
affected universities. The bill itself was prepared in complete secrecy and was pushed through the legislature within a few days—relying on an expedited procedure—giving lawmakers fewer than twenty-four hours to debate the new rules. In the following days government officials and the representatives of the ruling party, Fidesz, accused CEU (or as they suddenly started to call it, the “Soros university”) of being a “virtual” or “fake” university. Some officials alleged that CEU, as part of a network of NGOs sponsored by the Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros, is part of an international conspiracy against Hungary.

Despite the immediate negative reactions from domestic and international academic institutions and from American and EU diplomats, the parliamentary procedure was used by the ruling party to amend the law to make it even more difficult for CEU. As a university based in a federal state, its continuous operation now required the successful negotiation of two treaties, one between the Hungarian government and the State of New York, and another one between the Hungarian government and the U.S. federal government. The date of compliance was moved earlier, to January 1, 2018.

All requests for more reasonable deadlines, or for removing the necessity of federal-level agreements (given that education is not a federal matter in the United States and therefore the executive branch has no authority to sign such an agreement) were brushed aside. The protest of more than 20 Nobel laureates, many hundreds of universities and university associations across the globe, and a demonstration of close to 80,000 citizens in Budapest on April 9 in defense of CEU and academic freedom were dismissed as a coordinated campaign against the Hungarian government for its bravery in daring to reject the pro-refugee policies of the European Union. While some officials claimed that the purpose of the new regulation is simply to keep low-quality foreign universities out of the country, on April 5, the Minister of Human Capacities in a radio interview bluntly stated that “we do not want Central European University to continue operating in this form. There is no need to deny it. It must be openly stated.”

Widespread public and international criticism of the law followed. During visits to CEU at the height of the crisis, both former German President Joachim Gauck and Nobel Prize-winning writer Mario Vargas Llosa, condemned the law. Many other public figures contributed to the growing worldwide protest. On April 19, nine American senators, including John McCain and Chuck Schumer, sent a letter to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, arguing that the legislation threatens academic freedom and calling on him to work with CEU to find a solution.

The most important political statements came from the European People’s Party (EPP, the center-right bloc in the European Parliament) and the spokesperson for German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The U.S. State Department also expressed its clear support for CEU and for academic freedom, and rejected the threat to an American university abroad. The Hungarian authorities came to understand that the attempt to blacken the reputation of the university with the new American administration by associating it with George Soros was not effective and they gradually shifted back to calling the university by its proper name.

Parallel to American diplomatic efforts, the European Commission condemned the law as a violation of EU regulations and core European values, including academic freedom. Subsequently, the People’s Party called on Hungarian authorities to drop the law, in line with the Commission’s recommendations. After meeting with the Hungarian Prime Minister, Joseph Daul, the president of the EPP made a strong statement to that effect on April 29:

After an open and frank conversation with Prime Minister Orbán during the EPP Presidency meeting this morning, EPP asked Fidesz and the Hungarian authorities to take all necessary steps to comply with the Commission’s request. Prime Minister Orbán has reassured the EPP that Hungary will act accordingly. The EPP Presidency sent a clear message to Prime Minister Orbán and his party, Fidesz, that we will not accept that any basic freedoms are restricted or rule of law is disregarded. This includes academic freedom and the autonomy of universities. The EPP wants the CEU to remain open, deadlines suspended and dialogue with the U.S. to begin.”

The conflict remained frozen in the subsequent months despite attempts to negotiate a resolution. The European Commission filed a lawsuit against the Hungarian government at the European Court of Justice. The university launched—through a cooperation agreement with Bard College—a new certificate program in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. The government decided not to demand a formal agreement from the U.S. government (though it kept the relevant clause in the bill, further undermining legal certainty), and agreed to conduct negotiations with the Governor of New York. The negotiations concluded in early September 2017 with a mutually accepted draft-agreement. Yet the Hungarian government declined to sign the treaty and prolonged the university’s legal limbo by extending the deadline of compliance to January 1, 2019. Despite this, CEU continued to recruit and admit students, not knowing when—or whether—its license to operate would be renewed.

A Culture War?

One way to interpret the conflict between CEU and the Fidesz government is as a Cultural war (or in “good” Central European tradition—kulturkampf). CEU’s mission statement contains a commitment to the values of an open society. Being one of the most diverse international universities in the world, it is widely seen as embodying the spirit of multiculturism and cosmopolitanism. In contrast, Hungary’s ruling party Fidesz is a conservative
and nationalist party that has moved sharply to the right in the last decade, and has adopted most of the ideological characteristics of a far-right party.5

Curiously, the issue that angered pundits and politicians on the right was not the university’s attitude towards nationalism, but the fact that it has a Gender Studies Department with both MA and PhD programs. This fact was presented as evidence that CEU is not a serious university (otherwise why would it teach pseudo-sciences?), and as an indication that the university intends to undermine family values in the region. The pro-government press discussed the titles of the theses written at CEU on LGBTQ issues with such regularity and fervor that the ordinary Hungarian reader must have thought that all other departments, from Mathematics to Environmental Sciences, are maintained only to provide a platform for “homosexual propaganda.” In some Eastern European countries, particularly in Poland, the gender-debates have robust religious underpinnings, but in Hungary, a more secular country, the salience of this issue within the conservative right rather signals opposition to the moral-cultural transformation of developed societies. CEU became a symbol of the West’s “moral decline.”

The media attacks against CEU are part of the growing climate of anti-intellectualism. Because most of the fields taught at CEU belong to humanities and social sciences, its detractors often claim that nothing useful—such as medicine, veterinary sciences, engineering, chemistry, etc.—is taught at the university. This line of attack was surprising as humanities traditionally are highly valued in Hungarian culture, but this approach accords with the Orbán government’s policy of tying priorities in education to the needs of business.

Similar themes emerged in the attacks on the European University at St. Petersburg, another higher education institution originally supported by the Open Society Foundations. The administrative ruling that led to the loss of its license to teach started with the complaint of an MP, Vitaly Milonov, who initiated the “anti-gay propaganda” bill.

Compare the arguments against the European University:

The university, which positions itself as a leading non-state university and creator of professionals for the Russian state . . . deals in very dubious “scientific” activities . . . . Staff and students at the “European University” are seriously studying the values of the LGBT movement [and] neo-liberal development strategies for Russia . . . . One gets the impression that the true goal of this “university” is not scientific breakthroughs and discoveries, but to train elite fighters for the “democratization” of our country.6

with the arguments against CEU:

How can one praise a university that has fake disciplines, with curricula that emphasizes gender-theories, homosexuality and it teaches similar “soft” subjects?7

One can easily judge how “fantastic academic work” is done at the university by simply checking the topics of the dissertations. Many of the “scientific works” are about twisted gender-theories and other fashionable, pseudo-scientific liberal topics.8

Despite the position of these universities’ in comparative international educational assessments, they are frequently dismissed by the right-wing forces in their countries as “intellectual bootcamps” of liberalism.

**Soros, the Ideal Scapegoat and the Campaign against Civil Society**

While clearly relevant, the culture-war frame cannot fully explain the attacks on these universities. After all, both are small, graduate institutions. In the case of CEU, 80% of its students are foreigners. These universities are hardly threatening to the harmony of patriarchal families favored by the right-wing ideologues. The campaign against George Soros, the founder and honorary chairman of CEU and an early supporter of the European University in St. Petersburg, adds to our understanding of what is at stake. Both Orbán and Putin have been self-declared opponents of the idea of an open society for many years. Within Europe they are among the most established advocates of the strengthening of national sovereignty and of hierarchical governments.

The long-standing tensions between Orbán and Soros, his erstwhile mentor,10 escalated into an open conflict in 2015, at the beginning of the refugee crisis. Since then virtually the entire discourse of Orbán’s party, Fidesz, is structured around the issue of migration and the person of Soros, as allegedly responsible for the wave of migrants to Europe. The government’s opposition to further European integration is also pursued through its anti-Soros campaign, often by allusions, if not outright recapitulations, of long-standing conspiracy theories.

The redeployment of this ideological construct is apparent in a recent radio-interview given by Zsolt Semjén, the deputy Prime Minister of Hungary. In the interview, after claiming that the European Commission is in the pocket of George Soros, he blamed freemasonry for the refugee crisis. Freemasonry, he reminded the listeners, had Jacobin and Bolshevik versions, and now it had mutated into “the Soros-type extreme liberalism which hates Christian traditions and, if possible even more, nation states.” The minister concluded that leftist and liberal parties needed to import millions of foreigners in order to defeat their nationalist opponents and, in cooperation with immigrant Islamic forces, to rule over the nations of Europe.11

This discourse is not only an expression of the ruling party’s ideological preferences but also serves its electoral goals given the present domestic political configuration. By the time of the introduction of the Lex CEU, Hungary had become a one-party state. Fidesz loyalists occupied all relevant political, judicial, and financial institutions,
including the office of the public prosecutor, the central bank, the auditor general, and supervisory boards of public radio and television and the opposition was in disarray. The outcome of the April 2018 election was widely seen as a foregone conclusion, and the biggest worry of the government was whether enough of its supporters would bother to vote. The mythical figure of George Soros, a Jewish financial speculator who can single-handedly move millions of immigrants to Europe, served as a mobilizing device for the party’s core electorate.

The issue also had the potential to split Fidesz’ strongest opposition—the erstwhile radical right party Jobbik. The party had been openly anti-Semitic for many years and it defined itself as the opponent of everything for which George Soros and his foundations stood. After the publication of the bill, the party’s hardline vice president called for the immediate closing of CEU for being a threat to national security and for ploughing its ruins under with salt. Yet the party leadership condemned Lex CEU and its MPs joined left-wing and liberal MPs in petitioning the Constitutional Court to examine the law’s constitutionality. This move was widely considered in Hungary as a signal that Jobbik was serious about its ambition to become a moderate party.

The hope that the treaty with the State of New York would be signed in the fall of 2017 was crushed by the escalation of the anti-Soros campaign. In the run up to the elections of April 2018 the whole country was covered with large anti-Soros billboards and the citizens received questionnaires from the government in which they were asked whether they rejected Soros’ plan to flood Hungary with millions of migrants. By this time it became obvious that George Soros was assigned the role that Fetullah Gülen fulfills in Turkey, and any person or organization associated with him was treated as a public enemy.

The most vehement attacks targeted NGOs, especially the ones active in areas such as government transparency, corruption, rule of law, human rights, and minority rights. These watchdogs have been critical of government practices for many years, no matter which party was in power. Orbán often relied on these organizations when in opposition, but during his current term in government he “discovered” that all of them were directed by foreign interests. The meetings of the parliamentary committee on national security, for example, were boycotted by the governing party simply because one of the opposition MPs had worked, ten years earlier, for an NGO that supported (legal) immigrants and accepted donations from Soros. The president of the supervisory board of the relevant NGO became the target of a governmental smear campaign because he noted that immigrants have higher education and better employment rates than natives. He made this statement as a sociologist of migration, but this fact did not stop the Prime Minister to describe him in his 2018 State of the Union speech as a typical “Homo Sororensus” who despises Hungarians. The professor’s photograph was used in a 2018 electoral campaign video of Fidesz to illustrate the danger posed by Soros agents.

The “observation” that civil-society organizations backed by Soros are part of a global conspiracy is not unique to Hungary. Other countries in the region, such as Russia, Romania, and Macedonia, have also sponsored anti-Soros campaigns. In Macedonia even a “Stop Soros” movement was established. Developments in Russia had a particularly heavy influence on the strategies and techniques of the Fidesz government. The Lex CEU was launched shortly after Putin visited Orbán in Hungary, and two weeks later a Russian undercover TV crew filmed a report alleging that CEU trains activists to impose cosmopolitan values on all the nations of the world. In the parliamentary debate of the Lex CEU, the minister responsible for education stated that “we are committed to use all legal means at our disposal to stop pseudo-civil society spy groups such as the ones funded by George Soros.”

Next to singling out specific organizations supported by the Open Society Foundation, the conflict between the government and the NGOs led to a profound reconceptualization of what democracy means. While earlier officials paid at least lip service to the importance of a civil society, by 2018 the governmental rhetoric questioned the legitimacy of NGOs. The new argument was that in order to have the right to influence politics, one needs to be elected.

**Playing the American Card**

Hungary’s authoritarian government not only received encouragement from Eastern Europe but also was encouraged by developments in the United States. As the think tank *Policy Solutions* stated in its yearly report, “while CEU was clearly part of Soros’ overall vision of an open society, it is nevertheless first and foremost an academic institution. It has never meddled in Hungarian politics or even in policy debates . . . . But there is a growing perception that Orbán is now using the window of opportunity created by Trump’s election to ‘localise’ Putin’s authoritarian programme, including an all-out attack against Soros-supported activities and institutions.”

Viktor Orbán was the only European head of government openly supporting Donald Trump. Tired of Obama’s scolding on matters such as corruption and press freedom, Orbán celebrated Trump’s victory as an endorsement of his own nationalist course and as an opportunity to free himself from the yoke of political correctness. The timing seemed perfect for a clampdown on NGOs, particularly those which are supported by one of Trump’s opponents. Fidesz’s Vice President Szilárd Németh openly said that “every means must be employed to hold back such organizations, and I believe they should be cleaned out.”
out of here. And to this end, I feel, the international opportunity has arrived with the election of the new U.S. president.”

American influence is present not only in the timing but also in the ideological content of the confrontation with Soros. In Macedonia the founder of operation “Stop Soros” claimed that “our inspiration comes from the United States, from the American conservative organizations, media and congressmen with the same views, especially the new administration of President Trump.”

Consequently, the move of the Hungarian government against CEU appeared first as a safe and clever gesture: either the American administration would care little about it, or, if the Americans did mind the fact that an American university was discriminated against, then the Hungarian government could ask for a quid pro quo in exchange for allowing the university to continue to operate in Budapest. A personal meeting between Orbán and the American president, something that had so far been denied to the Hungarian Prime Minister, was widely rumored to be the price for the compromise.

Eventually the American authorities, led by the State Department, groups of senators and congressmen—and ultimately the White House—did not react in the manner expected. They all called upon the Hungarian government to suspend the new rules and treated the CEU affair as a major obstacle to the improvement of U.S.-Hungarian relations. The Orbán government’s hope that this position would change once Obama-appointees were replaced has not materialized so far.

Having said that, it is undeniable that the CEU conflict is part and parcel of the same phenomenon that led to Trump’s victory: the backlash against elite liberal institutions, the rise of populism, and the general weakening of the self-confidence of liberal democracy. The crisis of European integration also added to the removal of the existing taboos, making universities potential targets for political maneuvers.

Universities Strike Back

Democratic backsliding affects universities as much as any other institution in a society. A former minister in the first Orbán government—and former rector of the prestigious Corvinus University—has recently claimed that “striking examples of political influence, not only on the operational, but also at the academic level in some cases” are visible in Hungarian higher education. Since 2010, education has become strictly centralized. In some instances the Minister of Education imposed his own candidate for rector of universities and political appointees without any academic record were promoted to professorship at state-controlled universities. The allocation of scholarships and tuition waivers has also become a ministerial prerogative, and a mandatory system of government-appointed financial directors (“chancellors”) was established. “Chancellors are not only hired and employed by the Minister, but they are regularly invited to conferences in the Ministry, where they get their instructions,” reported a leading expert.

University leaders operating in such an environment need to be very careful in defending the remnants of academic freedom. Understandably, confrontational strategies are avoided. The European University in St. Petersburg, for example, appealed directly to Vladimir Putin for support against the state apparatus. While this accommodative strategy contributed to the survival of the university as a research institute, the license for teaching was temporarily withdrawn and the university’s original building was seized.

Hungary is not Russia, and CEU’s international connections allowed the university to follow a different course. The university authorities protested against the new law, presenting counter-arguments to the media. CEU received overwhelming support from fellow universities. The Prime Minister was particularly surprised to see the solidarity of Hungarian students, academics and university administrators because he originally framed the governmental intervention as a response to the “unfair advantage” that CEU has vis-à-vis Hungarian universities. But even professors known to support Fidesz condemned the blatantly political intervention in the academic sphere. The interpretation of the spokesperson of Human Rights First that “this is a brazen attempt to score political points on the backs of students” became the dominant one in the streets of Budapest where tens of thousands of demonstrators, many of them students, marched under the slogan of “Free country! Free University!”

CEU was also helped by its double membership in American and European higher education. It received strong support from many liberal institutions such as Berkeley, Yale, Harvard, MIT, NYU, Duke, Princeton, Columbia, etc., but from some conservative ones like Brigham Young University as well. In Europe the protest campaign was supported by many individuals and universities, but also by a number of educational associations such as the European University Association, the Academia Europaea, and the European Students’ Union.

The public discourse triggered by the struggle went beyond letters of support addressed to CEU and letters of condemnation addressed to the Hungarian government. It also provoked a number of discussions on how to effectively defend academic freedom at the international level. Many academics saw the issue as a challenge to the pan-European Bologna aimed at ensuring comparability in the standards of higher-education qualifications. In one particularly passionate article, two London School of Economics professors wrote that "the attack on academic freedom at a university at the heart of Central Europe could be a call to arms for Bologna."
Some of these reactions indicate that universities increasingly realize not only that they have a common social and political agenda, clustered around the defense of academic freedom, but also that this agenda converges with the protection of freedoms in general. Moreover, the cross-national cooperation of students, professors, and university administrators around a particular cause reveals that together they form a significant social force. After centuries of national isolation, universities are discovering the power of working together for goals that go beyond the research and teaching of particular subjects. Whether the worldwide protest and collaboration among academics will save CEU is an open question at the time of this writing (May 2018), but the fact that academic freedom became one of the most talked about criteria for judging the Hungarian regime shows the impact of collective action by students, professors, and university administrators.

Conclusions

The current attack against academic freedom in Hungary is less severe than those in in Russia or Turkey, and it pales in comparison with how academic institutions were treated under Communist or Nazi regimes. The fact that CEU was in position to mobilize support and was able to turn the one-sided administrative action of the Hungarian state into an actual conflict indicates that democracy in Hungary is not a lost cause—despite the unprecedentedly sharp decline in the democratic quality of the regime in the last decade.26 In the context of this conflict the Hungarian government was forced to engage with the administrations of the United States, the Council of Europe, and the European Union, and ultimately with the European Court of Justice, triggering a protracted legal/political process that exposed its attitudes to academic freedom and the rule of law to the national and international public.

Such configurations are unlikely to emerge in consolidated authoritarian or consolidated democratic regimes. The specificity of the “battleground regions,” where Hungary—and to some extent the wider region of Eastern Europe—belong, is that the forces of authoritarianism and the forces of democracy can both count on the sympathies of the public and on the active support of foreign powers.27 But even in such settings the harassment of universities—as opposed to the attacks on civic organizations, opposition parties, and critical mass media organizations—is infrequent. This is partly because higher education is largely under the direct control of the governments. The administration of the universities may lobby for more freedom, but they know that governments tend to prevail when push comes to shove. Caution and the search for amicable relations prevail over uncompromising insistence on autonomy.

Open political struggles between universities and governments are also rare because, as the examples of many great universities operating in semi-authoritarian countries attest, governments are more reluctant to constrain academic freedom than to censor speech, curtail freedom of association, or freedom of religion. Some degree of autonomy is widely seen as prerequisite for the production of knowledge even in hybrid regimes. Furthermore, the vilification of a university is a more complicated process than the denunciation of a directly political organization.

The case of CEU reveals the way the Orbán regime functions. First, it shows that campaign-considerations override sectoral interests, such as maintaining the competitiveness of the higher education sector, and that the ruling party considers the polarization of the society as its principal strategy for mobilizing supporters. The negotiations following the spring of 2017 also show that the regime is sensitive to the threat of sanctions. The eventual modifications of the criticized measures must be achieved without a loss of face for the leader, but the option of adjusting policies to international pressure is always on the table. The more general governmental strategy seems to be to manufacture conflicts that demonstrate to the citizens where the limits of social autonomy are. When institutions not directly controlled by the governing party are busy with their struggle for survival, the chances for alternative intellectual or political centers to emerge are kept at minimum.

In the case of CEU, the escalation of the anti-Soros campaign took the Hungarian government into uncharted territory, i.e., the use of a university as a hostage in a political battle. As in any hostage situation, amateur hostage-takers face serious dilemmas in the process and, together with the hostage, may pay high costs once the deal fails to materialize. The experts of Policy Solutions have summed up the conflict thus:

Its extremism is causing Fidesz a growing number of defections among previously loyal intellectuals, who would like to remain in the center. There is a widespread perception that in particular the anti-CEU campaign, coupled with the vulgarity of the anti-refugee and anti-EU propaganda, has substantially diminished Fidesz’s support among the most educated segments . . . . Regardless of the outcome of the fight over CEU, however, the affair in general is a signal that Viktor Orbán is not only bent on pushing his authoritarian agenda further but is willing to raise the stakes and move into areas where mainstream European conservatives will find it hard to follow. This is a bad omen for the remaining vestiges of Hungarian democracy.28

My conclusions are more optimistic. The conflict revealed that academic institutions are able to fight for each other. And when they are united they can count on the support of the political institutions of liberal democracies, irrespective of the personal preferences of an American president or of setbacks in the European integration process.

Even more importantly, the vocal support of the tens of thousands on the streets demonstrated that institutions
normally seen as elitist can become—from one day to the
next—symbols of fundamental rights. The link between
the autonomy of the universities and the autonomy of
citizens is often hidden, but in crisis situations it becomes
both apparent and inspiring.

One of the most practical lessons from the plight of
CEU is that when we think about academic autonomy
we must consider not only obvious political constraints
such as censorship, but also the biased and instrumental
use of regulations. Once an institution is deprived of its
license to teach, no censorship is needed. Therefore, it is
imperative to make the courts understand that executive
can silence academic institutions by simply
rewriting the rules for academic certification.

Notes
1 Czinkóczí 2017.
2 EPP 2017.
3 Byrne 2017.
5 Mudde 2015.
6 Weir 2017.
7 Alvincz 2018a.
8 Alvincz 2018b.
9 E.g., CEU 2018a and SPB 2018.
10 George Soros’s foundation financially supported
    Fidesz prior to 1990 and gave scholarships to many
    Fidesz leaders, including Viktor Orbán.
11 Balogh 2017; for more details (in Hungarian) see
    Flachner 2017.
12 Hír TV 2017.
13 The legislative initiative “Stop Soros” introduced in
    February 2018 included strong restrictions on civic
    organizations, such as the necessity of receiving
    a special license from the minister of interior affairs in
    order to provide assistance to refugees.
15 Bayer 2017.
17 Keszthelyi 2017.
18 Dunai 2017.
20 Chikán 2018, 114.
21 Kenesei 2018, 125.
22 Moscow Times, 2016, December 12.
24 CEU 2018b.
27 One may argue that many of the established
democracies became recent battlegrounds of the
struggle between the forces of liberal democracy and of
authoritarian populism. But while the influence of
populist forces has increased worldwide, the
institutional framework and the normative status of

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