

# Elite Hungarian university may be saved

Hungary-New York agreement could allow Central European University to sidestep law change.

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*Bernadett Szabo/REUTERS*

Seventy thousand people protested in Budapest last April against a law apparently targeting the Central European University.

The prestigious Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, Hungary, seems to have found a way around a threat to close it down. The university had been affected by a law change that is widely thought to be politically motivated.

The threat arose in April, when the government rushed through an amendment to its higher-education law, requiring that all international universities operating in Hungary had also to operate as higher-education institutes in their countries of origin.

**“It’s no secret that it has been a hell of a way to treat a university.”**

The law change seriously affected only the CEU, which is legally registered in New York state. The university was founded in 1991 by Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros, whom Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has described as an enemy, because of Soros’s statements in support of refugees, which run counter to

Orbán’s policies. The revised law, which includes other, smaller amendments, comes into effect on 11 October.

### **New York connection**

A CEU spokesperson said on 3 October that the university has now signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, to provide educational activities. She added that negotiations between the State of New York and the government of Hungary, which opened at the end of June, have now concluded, although the agreement still has to be signed off by Hungary’s government and Parliament.

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The law change sparked immediate protest last April, when 70,000 protestors took to the streets in Budapest, and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences expressed concern. The European Commission is pursuing an infringement procedure against what it sees as an illegal restriction of academic freedom, and an investigation by legal experts of the Council of Europe, a powerful human-rights organization with 47 member states, published a preliminary opinion in August indicating that the law was inappropriate.

“It’s no secret that it has been a hell of a way to treat a university,” says CEU rector Michael Ignatieff.

The university has nearly 1,500 mostly postgraduate students from more than a hundred countries, including a large number from Hungary. It operates mainly in the humanities, but recently expanded to include the cognitive and network sciences.

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