

Brussels, 3rd April 2017

Dear Commissioner Navracsics,

The Young European Federalists [JEF] and AEGEE/European Student's Forum would like to draw your attention to the amendments recently submitted by Viktor Orbán's government to the Hungarian law on higher education. Indeed, they threaten the very existence of the Central European University (CEU), located in Budapest.

We call on you, the European Commission, to immediately engage with the Hungarian government, asking it to withdraw the amendments and to consult and negotiate with all the affected universities. It is essential that the European Commission does not let itself be outpaced by fast political moves and closely monitors the political situation in Hungary.

The CEU has been the home to many JEF and AEGEE members. It is a university that delivers high-quality content in the Central-Eastern European region and offers high-reputation educational courses to thousands of students. This knowledge institution has proven to be of great value for Hungarian academic life as it has acquired an international reputation. Not only does it allow many students from the Visegrád countries to access higher education thanks to a dedicated scholarship programme, but it also plays an important role in including Central and Eastern European perspectives in the pan-European discourse. Throughout the years, it has contributed to the strengthening of democratic foundations of societies within the new Member States.

The CEU declared in a press release that the proposed amendments were discriminatory against non-European and foreign universities as several new regulations are squarely targeted at shutting them down. The CEU is especially under threat as it is the only university which would fail to meet the requirement to also have a campus in its home country, the United States. The CEU should not be discriminated against by means of arbitrary and unjustified changes in legislation.

The actions of the Hungarian government are hindering academic freedom and autonomy in Hungary, reflecting its hostile position towards the values of knowledge, democracy and the rule of law. Orbán's government has already proven to be opposed to liberal values when it started to crack down on civil society organisations in January by announcing a legislation restricting the freedom of assembly and the ability of NGOs to work.

This new clampdown is taking place in a wider context of worrying practices from European governments which attempt to suppress dissenting, independent voices within their local civil society, their national media, and in cultural spheres. As with the recent attacks on civil society organisations by the ruling party in Macedonia, including JEF Macedonia, institutions and organisations linked to George Soros and the Open Society Foundations (OSF) are mostly targeted. While George Soros might be considered a controversial figure, the OSF has always supported events and organisations promoting democracy and rule of law. Any attempt to outlaw their activities does not belong to Europe's democratic values.

JEF, a transpartisan youth NGO active in over 30 countries, and AEGEE, one of the biggest European interdisciplinary student networks, have always advocated for liberal and democratic values as well as the freedom of education and will continue to do so. We are fighting against any restriction of civil liberties and any attempt to undermine democratic pluralism.

We think it is paramount that European institutions and governments uphold the values on which our Union is founded and which were recalled by President Tusk at the ceremony of the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome: "Today it is not enough to call for unity and to protest against multiple speeds. It is much more important that we all respect our common rules such as human rights and civil liberties, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, checks and balances, and the rule of law."

Sincerely yours,

Christopher Glück
President of JEF Europe



Réka Salamon
President of AEGEE Europe

