Harvard's Battle Is Familiar to a University the Right Forced into Exile

A school founded by George Soros fled Hungary after it was targeted by an authoritarian leader. Academics at the school say President Trump is using a similar playbook against Harvard.

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By Alan Blinder
Alan Blinder, who covers American higher education, reported from Vienna.

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In a former bank building, away from Vienna's palaces and opera houses, Central European University lives in exile.

The school, founded by George Soros, was once an example of academia flourishing in post-Soviet Europe. Now, less than a decade after Hungary's right-wing government forced it to move out of Budapest, people there are sounding warnings as President Trump seeks to bring America's top universities to heel.

"It's like we keep screaming at the void, and no one is listening," said Sepphora Llanes, a graduate student from Colorado.

But some are.

As the Trump administration escalates its pressure campaign, more people in American higher education — and in Vienna — believe the U.S. government is borrowing from a playbook refined in recent years by Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who used state power to menace a university he disdained, upend academic independence and strengthen his ideological grip on Hungary.

“At the abstract level, it’s the same,” said Carsten Q. Schneider, a German scholar who has worked for C.E.U. for more than 20 years and will become its interim president and rector in August.

After its founding in 1991, C.E.U. built an international reputation, especially in the social sciences. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

Michael Dorsch, an applied economist at C.E.U. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

The Trump administration has vowed to transform American campuses, which many Republicans routinely condemn as leftist citadels of bigotry and indoctrination, and it has defended its tactics to force change.

"Our universities should be bastions of merit that reward and celebrate excellence and achievement," the education secretary, Linda McMahon, told Harvard University's president in May. "They should not be incubators of discrimination that encourage resentment and instill grievance and racism into our wonderful young Americans."

Trump officials have particularly relished their fight with Harvard. The administration moved last month to keep the university from enrolling international students. On Wednesday, Mr. Trump issued a proclamation to try to bar international students from the school. A federal judge has blocked those efforts for now.

Before that clash, the government stripped Harvard of more than $2 billion in grants after the school defied the government's demands that it, among other steps, change hiring and admissions practices, ensure "viewpoint diversity" and end diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

"These demands, these requirements, they are a scale of detail that Orban never bothered with," Tim Crane, a Britain-born philosophy professor, said at C.E.U., where the entrance hall features a photograph of Mr. Soros above the words "pushing back

against the rising tide of authoritarianism worldwide.”

C.E.U. is in a former bank building in Vienna. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

“It’s like we keep screaming at the void, and no one is listening,” said Sepphora Llanes, a Colorado-raised cultural heritage student. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

Some American academics believe that comparisons between Mr. Trump and Mr. Orban are overwrought, partially because the federal courts have rebuffed some of the U.S. government’s tactics and because no university has felt forced out of the country.

But as the Trump administration’s crusade has intensified, current and former American university officials have begun speaking more often, usually in private, about how much C.E.U. should be regarded as a warning for the United States.

Amy Gutmann, a political scientist who led the University of Pennsylvania for nearly 18 years and then served as President Joseph R. Biden Jr.’s ambassador to Germany, said C.E.U. was “not a replica of what we’re going through, but it’s an informative case study.”

“Universities and their allies need to speak up in defense of core values,” she said, adding that “the C.E.U. experience warns against the instinct to make concessions to an administration that’s intent on punishing the political opposition.”

C.E.U. is much smaller and has never had the clout of Harvard, America’s oldest and wealthiest university, or other schools the Trump administration has explicitly targeted. After its founding in 1991, though, C.E.U. built an international reputation in the social sciences and eventually settled in Budapest, Mr. Soros’s birthplace.

Mr. Soros, among the world's richest men, has been a prolific donor to liberal causes. That largess, which has flowed to everything from Democrat-backing super PACs to migrant support groups, has stirred antisemitic tropes and won him enmity from the European and American right wings. He has long framed C.E.U. as a way to cultivate fledgling democracies after the Iron Curtain's collapse.

The school drew sporadic criticism, including charges of antisemitism because of lectures it hosted after Hamas's 2023 attack on Israel that included speakers who support divestment from Israel. Like many American college campuses, it also saw pro-Palestinian activism among some students and reports of harassment or intimidation of Jewish people. The university said that "antisemitism and all forms of hate speech have no place at C.E.U."

Mr. Orban, who has closely aligned himself with Israel, saw the university as a rival long before the war in Gaza erupted.

By mid-May, C.E.U. had recorded a 40 percent increase in applications from American students compared with last year. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

Tim Crane, a philosophy professor at C.E.U., said President Trump has been more aggressive than Premier Orban. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

In the 1980s, he received a scholarship underwritten by Mr. Soros to attend Oxford University. But he became one of Europe's foremost voices for "illiberal democracy" in the years after he returned as Hungary's premier in 2010.

In Mr. Orban's Hungary, sometimes described as a "propaganda state," the government transferred control of public universities to foundations — controlled by the ruling party's allies — and gender studies essentially became a forbidden academic discipline.

C.E.U. was more than a mere thorn in Mr. Orban's plans. As a passion project for Mr. Soros, whom the premier came to view as one of his greatest foes, it was an enemy. C.E.U., a graduate school for most of its history, specialized in fields like international studies and philosophy. It sometimes riled the Hungarian authorities by allowing opposition figures to speak.

In 2016, Mr. Orban declared that "the next year will be about squeezing out Soros and the powers that he symbolizes."

In 2017, the Hungarian government, which some prominent figures on the American right have praised, stepped up its effort to undermine the American-accredited university. The campaign was built on legal maneuvering, including a hastily passed

law, struck down years later by the European Court of Justice, effectively requiring C.E.U. to open a new campus in the United States.

Kristina Veskovic, a sophomore from the United States, sees similarities between how President Trump and Mr. Orban targeted universities. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

A class called "Turning Conflicts Into Collaboration" meets at C.E.U.'s campus in Vienna. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

In a radio interview at the time, Mr. Orban said the university had enjoyed "utterly unwarranted privileges." He accused it of "serious irregularities," a charge the university denied.

The university tried to negotiate, but talks with the Hungarian government failed in late 2018. Thousands of Hungarians protested the government's tactics that year — "Even Voldemort didn't kick Hogwarts out," read one sign — but C.E.U. said it had no choice but to leave. It moved most of its operations to Vienna, where it already had plans for a satellite campus. (It still maintains campus space in Budapest, Mr. Soros has said, "out of a sense of moral obligation.")

"In light of growing societal and economic challenges, the Austrian government highly values the C.E.U.'s strong commitment to promoting democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the development of open societies," Austria's Federal Ministry for Women, Science and Research said in a statement last month. The ministry added that the university's "long tradition of transferring knowledge to the wider public and making a positive contribution to the development of society" was "very much appreciated by the government."

This spring, Michael Dorsch, an applied economist at C.E.U., recalled what he had told

his peers as his university’s struggle unfolded in Budapest.

“Imagine,” Professor Dorsch would say, “that Trump decides to kick Harvard out of the U.S.”

Carsten Q. Schneider has worked for C.E.U. for more than 20 years. He says his university’s experience is basically the same as what American universities are currently experiencing under President Trump. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

The number of American students applying to C.E.U. is up. Marylise Vigneau for The New York Times

Mr. Trump, who publicly lauds Mr. Orban, has not done that and is not expected to try. But since he returned to the White House in January, he has pursued a far-reaching strategy that employs more brazen tactics than the ones Mr. Orban used.

So far, the Trump administration has fought Harvard and extracted a capitulation from Columbia using a murky, contested process to freeze or rescind billions of dollars for federally funded research projects.

Dozens of universities are facing federal inquiries. And Mr. Trump’s administration has also sought to expunge diversity programming from campuses, to limit international students and to target accreditation bodies.

Watching from Vienna, C.E.U. professors and students have been astonished.

Eva Kiser, a museum studies student at C.E.U. who is from Knoxville, Tenn., said she had been counting on political firewalls in the United States to hold and that things would “blow over.”

“But that’s not really looking probable,” she said.

People at C.E.U. say the American turmoil may be only beginning. Professors, for example, said their university’s own trials suggested a swaggering government was unlikely to reverse its approach without ferocious pushback.

"Don't expect mercy, or that this is normal and you need to sort of be nice and then they come to their senses," Dr. Schneider, the incoming interim rector, said. "It is unhinged. There is no end to it unless you firmly put boundaries."

Others said the Trump administration's aggressiveness could backfire and rally public opinion around universities. And Professor Crane said it was perhaps fortunate for academia that the Trump administration was so vigorously attacking Harvard, a university better positioned than most to square off with Washington.

Borrowing an idea from the German economist Albert O. Hirschman, Professor Dorsch, an American, said universities had three options: leave, obey the government or speak up.

The exit option would be unfathomable for most American schools. Loyalty, he suggested, could hasten the end of American democracy.

He hoped universities would choose the last option, as he said Harvard had: stand their ground and "set a really good example for society."

The repercussions of the American turmoil are being felt in places like Vienna.

By mid-May, C.E.U. had recorded a 40 percent increase in applications from American students compared with last year.

Kristina Veskovic, a sophomore from the United States, said she had heard from "more than a handful" of people suddenly interested in studying overseas. Officials at other universities in Europe have also reported rising inquiries from the United States.

In interviews, C.E.U. officials are careful not to offer definitive explanations for the surge, but many suspect it has to do with Mr. Trump.

In the past, Professor Crane said, he had met with American students and pitched them on the varied virtues of an education in Europe.

The thrill of living in Austria's capital. A research university with small classes and a student body of more than 100 nationalities. The undergraduate tuition rate, which, at about $9,000 a year, is a fraction of private education's sticker price in the United States.

He would make a different argument now: "There's not a risk that your program is going to be shut down because the government decides suddenly it doesn't like the sort of things you want to study."

After all, he said, "If universities are going to be anything at all, they have to be independent. They have to have their autonomy."

Alan Blinder is a national correspondent for The Times, covering education.