

University chief appeals for EU help to fight Hungarian clampdown

Rector of Central European University hopeful EU will launch infringement proceedings against Orbán government



People protest in support of Central European University in Budapest. Photograph: Laszlo Balogh/Reuters

Daniel Boffey in Brussels

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The head of a leading university threatened with closure in Hungary has made an emotional plea for help from the EU and accused the country's rightwing, authoritarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, of effectively putting a gun to his head.

Michael Ignatieff, rector of the US-linked Central European University (CEU), said he was "cautiously optimistic" that the EU would launch infringement proceedings against the Hungarian government for its "outrageous" attack on academic freedoms.

The CEU was founded by the Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist George Soros after the fall of communism in Hungary. A higher education law approved this month and set to enter force in October sets out numerous tough conditions under which the university must operate. The law's passage through parliament prompted 70,000 protesters to flood the streets of Budapest.

Days later the European commission launched an investigation into a potential breach of EU law, and its vice-president Frans Timmermans described the CEU as "a pearl in the crown" that should continue to operate in Budapest undisturbed.

However, Ignatieff, a former leader of the Liberal party in Canada, said the Hungarian government appeared willing to brush off the infringement proceedings.

Speaking during a visit to Brussels, Ignatieff said: "Take the gun away from my head please. It is just outrageous and these people around here need to understand just how outrageous it is.

"This will be the first time since 1945 that a European state had actually tried to shut down a free institution that conforms to the law, that has good academic standards, operates legally.

"It is a free institution and this attack on academic freedom is unprecedented in a European state and it is outrageous. My job is not to tell Europe what to do about it but to say: here are the stakes, this is why it matters."

Ignatieff called for politicians in the European People's Party group, which includes Orbán's Fidesz party as well as Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, to do more to put pressure on Orbán, who is visiting Brussels this week.

Orbán has said the CEU is "cheating" because it issues diplomas accepted both in the United States and in Hungary, where it has been operating since 1993, but he denies that he wants to shut it down.

The university is accredited in New York state but has no campus there, and Orbán says this gives CEU an unfair advantage over other Hungarian universities.

The government has insisted staff working at the CEU will in future require work permits. It has also demanded that the university open a wing in America and no longer teach US-accredited courses.

Hungarian officials argue the changes mean the university would be treated in the same way as other higher education institutions in the country, with its status “unchanged”. The university’s leadership believes they are designed to shut it down.

After a meeting with Timmermans in Brussels on Monday evening, Ignatieff said it had “become clear that the commission believes there are EU law grounds to launch proceedings on the CEU issue”.

He added: “Last night I was at a public event with the Hungarian ambassador at the Free University of Brussels, and he seemed to be preparing. He spoke quite a lot about infringement proceedings.

“He basically said: ‘Happens all the time, we are used to it.’ I took that to mean - I don’t want to put words into his mouth - but I took that to mean that they are expecting proceedings. I don’t know what the consequences of that will be.”

Brussels and the Orbán government have been at loggerheads over migration quotas and the detention of refugees in barbed-wire-fringed camps on the Hungarian border.

Senior figures in the European People’s Party, such as the leader of the bloc in the European parliament, Manfred Weber, a German MEP with close ties to Merkel, have spoken of their concerns about Orbán’s recent moves.

Asked what Orbán hoped to achieve in persecuting the CEU, Ignatieff responded: “You have really got to ask him. I can’t characterise what the agenda is with confidence and for me that is not the issue. I don’t care what the agenda of Mr Orbán is, actually. My point is you don’t take an institution hostage to serve your political agenda, I don’t care what it is. That’s the fundamental.”

He added: “It’s a legally crafted strategy to shut down a free institution. Period. That is what is going on. They can pretend otherwise but everyone has to know that on October 11 2017, legislation comes into force and after that date they can pull my operating licence at any time.

“If this isn’t shutting down a university, I don’t know what it is. I have to get this legislation withdrawn or amended or changed or dropped or something and I need it pretty quickly.”