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NEWS

Central European U. Faces Dilemma as Its Benefactor Limits His Support

By Theresa Agovino October 16, 1998

Now called an intellectual powerhouse, it struggles to augment the backing of George Soros

Sorin Antohi had hit upon what he thought was a good way to enhance the scholarly standing of the Central European University, of which he is the academic vice-rector. He wanted to establish a network of research centers throughout central Europe, which would assist the graduate institution's students and scholars in their research. He proposed the idea to George Soros, the Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist, who founded the university and has been its sole benefactor.

Mr. Soros thought the idea had merit, and agreed to support it. But he did not want his funds to be the only money behind the project. He said his support would come in the form of matching grants.

The tale illustrates the conundrum that confronts the university as it begins its eighth academic year. Originally founded to help college graduates from central Europe round out their education so that they could qualify for graduate programs in the West, the institution has been redefining its mission and redesigning its programs. In the process, it is becoming what some observers call a regional intellectual powerhouse, one that now grants its own doctorates as well as masters' degrees. The transformation, however, is taking place as Mr. Soros slowly tries to wean the university from his exclusive patronage.

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That would not be an easy transition under any circumstances. But the process is complicated by the relative youth of the university. It is still developing standards and procedures, adding new programs, discarding others. The result, say some students and faculty members, is confusion. That the university does not award tenure, and that many of its professors are on short-term appointments, also make planning for the future and establishing an identity challenging.

"One wouldn't think you would need to have reforms in a university that was only started in 1991," says Josef Jarab, who has been the institution's president and rector for just over a year. "But we need to retune the mission and stabilize the university."

In spite of the work that still needs to be done, Mr. Soros has decided it is time for the institution to secure additional financial support. While several European organizations provide funds to sponsor scholarships to the university, Mr. Soros's money remains its lifeblood.

Mr. Soros was not available for an interview, but he did agree to answer some questions in writing.

"C.E.U. is now on sound footing with a proven track record, producing excellent graduates and establishing itself as a first-rate graduate institution," he says. "When I launched the university, I felt the region was in a critical period, and things needed to happen quickly in order not to miss the great window of opportunity for change. That is why I was willing to go it alone.

"That period is over," he goes on. "In the long term, it is better for a university to have more than one donor.

"I have given the university an attractive building, a student residence, a library and archives, and insured its existence for 20 years," he adds. "I felt it was enough to start with."

Mr. Soros gives at least $10-million a year to support the university's operations. But he has not given any funds for an endowment. While it is difficult enough to raise money for an institution financed by one of the world's richest men, some observers say the task is more complicated when the benefactor has not provided the financial cornerstone.

"Sometimes you get the feeling that George doesn't trust his own creation," says Mr. Jarab.

Mr. Soros says he is ready to consider establishing an endowment, but only on a matching-funds basis. He notes that some U.S. universities that

were started by wealthy benefactors, such as Duke and Stanford, managed to attract outside donors.

But the whole notion of fund raising and charitable donations is still very new in Eastern Europe. In contrast to university boards in the West, where trustees are largely donors, the C.E.U. board is heavy with academics who have scant fund-raising experience.

And while successful alumni of universities in the West often become major donors to their former institutions, the Central European University has had just seven graduating classes, and it established an alumni office only this year. A recent survey of 500 alumni found that 36 per cent are still students, most pursuing doctorates. Of the 64 per cent who are employed, the majority are still in central Europe and work in education or research, or at non-profit organizations. They don't make big salaries.

So last year, the university established an international council to solicit donations in its behalf. The council's chairman, or "chancellor," is Donald Blinken, an investment banker, former U.S. Ambassador to Hungary, and a former chairman of the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York. Lynn P. Fried, who headed the University of Oxford's North American fund-raising activities for seven years, has been hired to work with the group, which Mr. Soros says has his full support.

The university also hopes to bolster its financial position by attracting more fee-paying students. Only 32 of the 640 students who have graduated were from Western countries. All students from eastern and central Europe receive full scholarships from the university. The institution would eventually like to have an enrollment that is 25 per cent Western.

Some students say the institution will have to change if it expects to please paying customers.

Ryan Davis, an American studying political science here, says all big organizations are a bit bureaucratic. "But in an American bureaucracy, there is still a sense of accountability that doesn't exist here," he says.

Mr. Davis almost dropped out when he realized many of the courses that interested him had been moved into the international-relations department, and the university would not allow him to switch majors.

"The programs are so structured. It's hard to take classes outside your major," he says. However, he says he's been very impressed by the quality of the faculty and, especially, the students.

The university abandoned its original mission of remediation when it became clear that the students coming from the region's universities did not need such help. An undergraduate education in central Europe is typically five years long.

The students from the region "are much better educated than the American graduate students," says Kim Lane Scheppele, co-director of the university's Program on Gender and Culture.

However, the English-language skills of many of the entering students were found lacking. Since the university is an English-language institution, courses were added to help students improve their competency.

In recent years the university has raised its requirements for admission and broadened its academic offerings. In addition to programs leading to a master's degree, it now offers doctorates in history, legal studies, sociology and political science, and the administration is considering adding doctorates in two more fields. Some 60 Ph.D. candidates are now enrolled, a number that officials would like to double in the next few years.

"We want to be a center of special excellence," says Mr. Antohi. "We want to open Ph.D. programs to the region."

The doctoral programs are recognized by the Board of Regents of the State of New York, which granted the university its charter, and by the Open University in Britain.

Observers say the appointment of Mr. Jarab will benefit the university as it works to raise it academic profile, attract top professors, and expand its pool of donors. Mr. Jarab is a highly respected academic who was formerly rector of Palacky University in the Czech city of Olomouc. His predecessor, Alfred Stepan, was American.

"Stepan was good -- he got the university accredited," says Gabor Klaniczay, the rector of the Institute for Advanced Study in Budapest, who also teaches in the university's medieval-studies department. "But I'm glad the rector is now from the region. It is an asset. He has close contacts to the local academic structures and sends a message that this an international university," and not an American one.

Criticized in its first years for being too American, the institution is now considered by some to be too Hungarian. Today, about one-third of the teaching staff is Hungarian. The faculty is made up of 70 full-time

members and 70 visiting professors. About half of the visiting professors teach short courses that are compressed into a few weeks.

Because the university does not offer tenure, academics have been reluctant to make long-term commitments to it. The longest contract for a teaching post is for five years; the average contract is for three years.

"We don't have the luxury of thinking about two years from now," says Ms. Lane Scheppele. But she maintains that a long view is crucial as the university shifts its focus to doctoral programs, which require an extended commitment from both students and faculty members. "Those programs require a huge change in philosophy," she says.

Mr. Jarab acknowledges that the university needs to improve its long-range planning and its administrative procedures, and it has hired an outside consulting firm to help.

Mr. Jarab has been praised for trying to develop a more congenial atmosphere and a sense of intellectual community at the university. "I miss having academic commitment and loyalty to the institution," he says.

Mr. Jarab and Mr. Antohi, a Romanian who joined the administration a year ago, plan to build a more permanent faculty base by using their contacts to establish joint appointments with universities in the region. Some arrangements of that sort now exist on a de facto basis, but they often have resulted in professors shuttling between Budapest and their home institutions -- and not being able to give their best to either. Under the plan that C.E.U. is now devising, the professors would spend one semester each year at each university.

Mr. Jarab says that approach is better than hiring scholars away from other institutions. "You do not want to take professors from other universities in the area," he says. "You do not want to be a brain drain."

But he says he is not sure how others will react to the proposal. He worries about resentment toward his university, which he says did not forge links with institutions in the region as quickly as it should. The university was originally founded in Prague and had a second campus here in the Hungarian capital, but it left the Czech Republic when a new government there refused to honor some agreements that had been made with the institution. Mr. Jarab says negative feelings toward the university linger in the Czech Republic.

"I think there is indifference toward C.E.U." in the region, he says. "And a lack of knowledge."

Mr. Jarab says the institution now needs to reach out more to make itself better known and better understood. That's especially true if the university wants to attract new donors.

"I believe I have given the C.E.U. a good start," says Mr. Soros. "Others will decide whether they also consider it an institution worthy of support."

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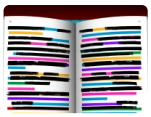

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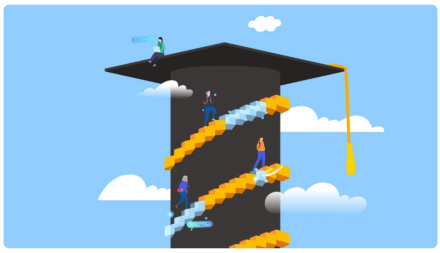

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