

# An Attack on the Open Society

## The Orban Government's Closed Society Turn and the Central European University

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*"How afraid sometimes I was of my freedom, how afraid most of us are of freedom, how hard it is to maintain the sovereignty of our own judgment. To see the world as it is, not as we would wish it to be, how truly we must all struggle to be free men and women in a world saturated with manipulation and lies. Yet to call ourselves free and to actually deserve it is the prize that matters most in a life."*

- Michael Ignatieff



Illustration by Namya Kohli

### Abstract:

During the twilight hours of Soviet influence over Eastern Central Europe, a young Viktor Orban called for respecting "open society" ideals, like democracy, for Hungarians. However, since taking power in 2010, Orban has become a political juggernaut by championing illiberalism and openly criticizing the ideas he advocated for in his youth, for which he may still win the 2026 election. This illiberal turn is particularly represented by his attacks on universities in Hungary, notably the Central European University (CEU). The literature on this topic is vast, though most papers fail to properly analyze the theoretical arguments for an "open society" versus a "closed society" in Hungary. As a result, this paper's central question is why Orban has attacked "open society" values and its leading representative, the university, and what messaging he uses for that success. To do so, I will analyze primary sources of writings by influential philosophers on the concept of "open" and "closed" societies and secondary sources that demonstrate how Orban has mobilized the "revolution of resentment" – the economic and cultural changes of Hungarian society – to mobilize the Hungarians against the CEU, causing the CEU to leave Budapest. "Closed society" ideals are on the rise. The case study of Hungary is an essential way to understand the rationale behind that rise and to demonstrate how "open society" values can fightback.

## Introduction

In the summer of 1989, the Soviet empire's grasp on the nations of Central Eastern Europe began to falter. Momentum was with the opposition forces across the Iron Curtain who took advantage of the declining power of the Soviet Union. One movement, a protest of over 250,000 people in the remnants of the still intact Hungarian People's Republic, challenged this three-decade-long government's repressive "closed society" apparatus. One demonstration leader, a young activist with a scruffy beard, gave a seven-minute speech about the courage of standing up to tyranny, the movement's goal for an "open society" of free elections, and that Hungary's future is democratic. That man was Viktor Orban, now president of Hungary and head of the right-wing Fidesz Party, whose youthful calls for a bright, open democratic future for Hungary have vanished with age and power. With hindsight, it is shocking that once the man who publicly advocated for ideas of what Karl Popper would call the "open society" became a leading advocate of illiberal democracy and a turn towards a "closed society," particularly symbolized by his adamant attacks on the exemplar of the "open society" ideal: universities. Through an analysis of the core ideas of "open" and "closed" societies from leading intellectuals Karl Popper, Hannah Ardent, Isaiah Berlin, and Michael Ignatieff, this paper will demonstrate how the Orban government's anti-university policies, particularly aimed at the Central European University (CEU) symbolize a direct attack on the "open society." Pursued through Orban's mobilization of Hungarian citizens' resentment and legacy, his government has turned towards a "closed society" where many freedoms that the protests in 1989 called for have disappeared. Overall, this paper argues that through his mobilization of Hungarian citizen's "revolution of resentment," the Orban government's attack on the CEU was an attack on the "open society" and represents Orban's desires for a Hungarian revival through an illiberal "closed society."

## Methods

An illiberal democracy, according to János Kis, is a democracy in the sense that the government is elected; it is illiberal through its use of a weak constitution to take over institutions (2018, 181). As an institution, universities in this paper are viewed as a rule-governed community of scholars whose identity is a commitment to scholarship, learning, and a search for the truth irrespective of its utility (Olsen 2007, 29). The Orban government is a strong case study to demonstrate the illiberal turn, through his open pronouncements that he is a proud illiberal and the famous attack on the CEU as essential components of this case study. Hungary is one of the leaders of the international illiberal movement, and if we want to understand the turn to "closed societies," then Hungary is essential to the analysis. Further explanations are below.

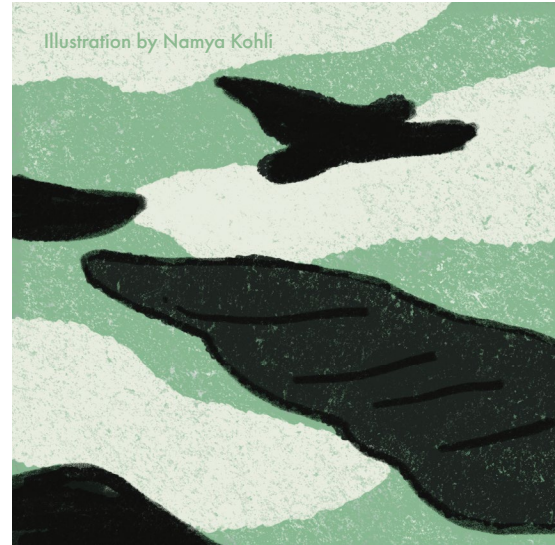
## Freedom, the University, and Society

Karl Popper (1902-1994), an Austrian from Jewish ancestry, fled from the Nazi Anschluss of Austria and wrote his tour de force: *The Open Society and its Enemies*. The values of what Popper calls the "open society," that of "free minds, free politics, and free institutions" (Ignatieff 2018, 1), have existed since the Greeks. Pioneered by figures like Socrates, they taught that we must have faith in human reason and beware of dogmatism, avoid the distrust of theory and reason, and follow the spirit of science in our criticism of ideas (Popper 2020, 176). These concepts of reason have constantly been challenged by the elements of the "closed society." For example, Plato's "Just City" is a utopian dream that divides individuals into collective castes, where free thought and the truth are challenged, and political miracles and superstition are defended (Popper 2020, 189). Similarly, Marx's historical determinism created a prophet in Marx, who unquestioningly accepted the morality of the future and the state's determination of moral standards (Popper 2020, 411–412). For Popper, both figures tried to create an innocent "closed society" to create the dream of heaven on earth. In reality, we must accept the

strain of civilization, and the uneasiness felt in times of significant social change. "Open society" is complex; the demands of being rational and existing as rugged individuals are a tremendous emotional challenge. However, this is the price we must pay to be human Popper argues (Popper 2020, 168).

In a similar vein, Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), a Latvian-born Jewish intellectual, escaped Soviet tyranny and became a leading voice of "open society," particularly in his unapologetic preference for freedom. In the work *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Berlin argues for negative freedom over positive freedom. Specifically, there is negative freedom in that each individual is given a minimum set of personal freedoms, and the state or other individuals cannot use deliberate coercion to interfere in your pursuit of the goods and rights you hold sacred (Berlin 1958, 9). For Berlin, some part of human existence must remain independent so the free market of ideas can emerge, where "spontaneity and originality" can take hold in each of us; this is the creative scientific mind Popper argues Socrates advocated for (Berlin 1958, 11-12). Similarly to Popper, Berlin warns us about the manipulation by proponents of the "closed society" and their utopian thinking. Positive freedom is when people become slaves of their unbridled passion, and people's "lower nature" takes hold, where individuals can manipulate this nature and argue they know what you want, resulting in the individual disappearing in the collective (Berlin 1958, 19).

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), who also came from a Jewish background, this time in Germany, where she escaped to America, became the leading figure in the criticism of the "closed society." In her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she demonstrates how the totalitarian regime was created and how it perpetuates its evils. Through a narrative of a "great task," the totalitarians recruited their members from the masses of neglected people from the traditional political camps who argued they were too stupid for politics (Arendt 1973, 344). They mobilized people through the use of memory, the memory of a glorious past; they created a falsified history that argued the democratic state was not representing them (Arendt 1973, 346). Popper



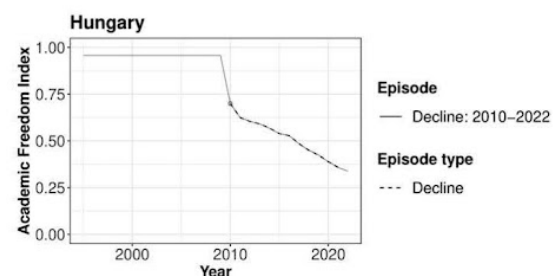
warns that the "closed society" reimagines history through the lens of superstition and historical determinism, arguing that they are the ones to make the state "great again." This process resulted in the abandonment of the individual to the masses; the totalitarian broke down the independent people and made a fabricated mass "the people." The negative freedom of Berlin is replaced by positive freedom, where the creative and independent mind of the individual disappears. This homogenization is symbolized in what Heinrich Himmler defined as the "SS Man" who under no circumstances will do "a thing for his own sake" (Arendt 1973, 356). Overall, resulting in the total control of the state, they create a narrative that following their "great task" means being part of the "people" while designating enemies as the "other" who must be eliminated if the ideal way is to be achieved (Arendt 1973, 380).

Michael Ignatieff brings together the core ideas of an "open society" from these philosophers. The key ideas are the upholding of the respect and dignity of others, especially of those we may disagree with, the anti-majoritarian principles, the gradualist defense of negative freedom that is critical of utopian and determinist thinking, and the practice of scientific methods resulting in the constant falsification of theory, and an ethic of tolerance (Ignatieff 2024, 4). The university represents a sustaining principle of "open society" through the freedom of

publishing, the tolerance of differing opinions, looking at the individual for what they say, not what they look like, and processes where theory and ideas are tested and replicated (Ignatieff 2024, 194-195). They value merit based on fair opportunity according to ability; they create and disseminate knowledge by challenging established doctrine, which helps create a democratic culture (Grigoriadis and Canpolat 2024, 434-435). It creates critical thinking and a value for your voice in the "negative freedom" sense, where it's about what you say, not who you are. It's the ideal representative of what Popper, Berlin, and Arendt have argued for what an "open society" can demonstrate. Establishing a successful "open society" is represented by the freedom of its academic institutions. However, the "open societies" traditional enemies have not disappeared; they have shifted from the totalitarian to the illiberal (Kis 2018, 179). The absolute totalitarian regimes Popper, Berlin, and Arendt witnessed in the 20th century, notably Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, are now only represented by North Korea in the 21st century. However, their warnings of the "closed society" still resonate with the illiberal turn. In contrast with totalitarian states, these illiberal states are not "closed societies" in the classical Popperian sense; they are members of the EU, NATO, and the WTO. Though minimized, opposition voices can still be heard, and these states legitimate themselves through free but highly manipulated elections (Ignatieff 2024, 12). However, particularly represented by Hungary, the rise of right-wing populists has defied "open society" norms many thought were sacrosanct after the fall of the totalitarians. Though they were elected, they continuously ignored constitutions, depriving citizens of fundamental rights and liberties in the negative freedom sense, limiting academic and media freedom, and suppressing human rights (Rosenblatt 2021, 24). As the totalitarians Popper, Berlin, and Arendt warned about, the illiberal denigrates "open society" ideals through the manipulation of history by arguing that migrants and "woke" ideology are trying to destroy "traditional values" and that they are the only ones to fix it. Therefore, they try to ban "open society" values, establishing a historical determinist, utopian, and anti-independent thinking

ideology like the totalitarian leaders before them (Rosenblatt 2021, 25).

Therefore, academic institutions tend to be some of the most targeted by the representatives of the "closed society"; they have been drawn to the center of democratic struggle. Represented by the CEU, whose founding mission statement was to defend the "open society" by furthering these ideas in post-communist states like Hungary (Ignatieff 2024, 2), the Orban government has systematically targeted this independent institution, arguing it is a political institution masquerading as a university. By mobilizing the angry segments of Hungarian society, Orban initiated the illiberal counterattack. Which represented a cultural backlash of Hungarian's changing society and the economic insecurity the Hungarian people faced due to 2008, notably directed towards the EU and the liberal norms from which they have existed since the end of 1989 (Greskovits 2018, 296). As a result, the Orban government had the excuse to target institutions that he argued did not represent "true Hungarians," who instead represent foreign interests and are controlled by elites from Brussels. The CEU was his main target; a law passed in 2017 required foreign universities to pass specific criteria to operate in Hungary. Specifically, it required a deal between the Hungarian and university state governments (Enyedi 2018, 1067). This means that the right to conduct educational activities is not based on merit but on Orban's relationship with the government. Figure 1.1 *Academic Freedom Decline in Hungary* demonstrates the steady decline of academic freedom, with Fidesz's electoral win in 2010 signifying a dramatic decrease, and the closing of the CEU in 2019



**Figure 1.1. Academic Freedom Decline in Hungary.**  
Source: Larri Tott 2023, 1007.

resulted in a sharp decline representing a shift to the high .20 in the academic freedom index (Lott 2023, 1010).

Orban has proudly called himself an opponent of the "open society" and has called for respecting the Hungarian right to national sovereignty and majoritarianism in the name of illiberal democracy (Enyedi 2018, 1069). Therefore, his attacks on the university represent an attack on the principles of the "open society," which he truly distrusts. How the Orban government was able to target the "open society" and why he is turning towards a new form of "closed society" through his preference for illiberal democracy is an essential question about legacy.

### The Revolution of Resentment

Since the end of the Second World War, the liberal order, through the practice of the "open society," has prospered. Liberalism was at the root of inclusion and tolerance, where they were represented as the "adults" of governing. A belief emerged that as long as you follow the liberal ideals in economics and social politics, your society will succeed. However, these ideas have faced dramatic and intense pushback from the populist right, which has taken the ideas of national sovereignty, economic equality, and traditional culture as fundamental principles that the "open society" has tarnished through their cosmopolitan alliance with migrants (Lendvai 2019, 53). Even though Hungary was a full democracy from 1990 to 2010, disillusionment with the political system increased due to the Hungarian liberal-socialist government's mistakes in handling the 2008 recession and the controversial movement toward the EU (Bozoki 2024, 6-7). This has allowed Viktor Orban to mobilize this "revolution of resentment" in his last three election wins—the legitimate concerns Hungarian citizens have about the economic problems, cultural change, and elite judgment of Hungarian society.

If the tragedy of Central Eastern Europe was, as Milan Kundera wrote, "a kidnapped West," "culturally in the West and politically in the East," 1989 signified a rebalancing (Rupnik 2018, 25). The "closed societies"

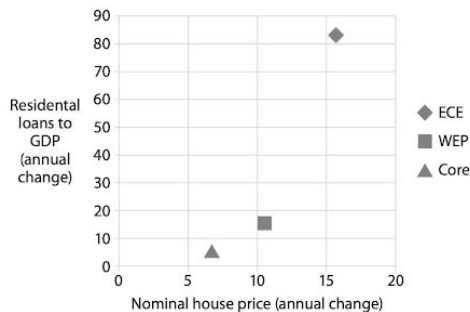
of the *ancien régimes* of the Soviet empire collapsed, and a new sense of European identity with "open society" ideals came hand in hand (Rupnik 2018, 25). However, since the Hungarians joined the EU, rhetorical continuity from the days of the Soviet Union has returned through figures like Orban. Specifically, the limited sovereignty given by the Soviet Union under Brezhnev in 1968 to Hungary has just been replaced by the EU government in Brussels (Bickerton 2009, 732). EU accession required states to incorporate 80,000 rules and regulations into domestic law; therefore, the EU asked states to give up their claims to political autonomy in the name of material interdependence (Bickerton 2009, 744). The EU is just another part of Hungary's long history of being a subject to foreign powers, forcing their ideology onto the Hungarian people. As a result, like the "closed societies" of the past, Orban has reconstructed Hungarian history to proclaim a sense of national sovereignty that directly challenges the "open society." Orban has used Miklos Horthy (1868-1957), the former autocratic leader of Hungary, as a symbol for "true Hungarians," the rural country folk who represented traditional Hungarian culture and opposed the Treaty of Trianon that reduced Hungary's traditional borders after the First World War (Toomey 2018, 88). Through revisionist history, Orban has argued that the Horthy government represented a desire for self-determination and that Orban himself is the successor to this tradition, ignoring the Horthy government's role in the Holocaust and Terror campaigns (Toomey 2018, 100). Instead, Orban represents the "great task" of achieving national sovereignty for Hungary and if you don't follow this idea, he argues you want Hungary to fail and are not part of the "people."

The failure of the liberal-socialist government in Hungary to properly best the debt crisis caused by the 2008 recession created an immense amount of political capital for Orban. In short, from 2002-2006, a mortgage boom occurred in Central Eastern Europe. Figure 2.1. *House Price and Mortgage Lending* demonstrates how, from 2002 to 2006, East Central Europe states (ECE) received substantial mortgages with increased house prices (Bohle 2018, 290).



Foreign banks from states like Austria gave out mortgage loans to citizens of Hungary in foreign currency like Swiss Francs but at a flexible exchange rate (Bohle 2018, 290). As a result, when the 2008 financial crisis hit, it left Hungarian homeowners in a precarious position, resulting in a dramatic increase in the distrust of foreign banks and financial elites in Hungary, which Orban and Fidesz took advantage of in 2010 (Bohle 2018, 291). Those left behind due to the economic crisis were the ones who couldn't afford to go to higher education, causing resentment of the university elite, who were able to scramble to the middle class while leaving the "losers" in the dirt.

Overall, Orban has been able to mobilize the Hungarian people's resentment over the sovereignty and economic crisis to target the CEU. He has revived tools of the *ancien régime* of the "closed society" to attack academic freedom. Specifically, through his mobilization of history, Orban designated



**Figure 2.1. House Price and Mortgage Lending.**  
Source: Bohle 2018, 290.

the rural folk of Hungary as the "people" and that the "urban elite" were not true Hungarians (Toomey 2018, 88). Orban framed the CEU as part of this "urban elite" thanks to its connection with George Soros, who, through the CEU's Gender Studies program, was supposedly trying to "weaken family values" in Hungary (Enyedi 2018, 1069). The Fidesz Party has used its propaganda apparatus to attack George Soros as the enemy of all "true Hungarians," using terms during the 2018 election like "don't let Soros have the last laugh" and that Soros's "open society" belief was in reality about "open

borders" both of which are recycled anti-Semitic tropes from the 1930s (Ignatieff 2024, 201). Like the "closed societies" of the past, Fidesz's power resides in its ability to create imagined national fictions. Through mobilizing resentment, Orban used the deep emotions of the Hungarian people to make people say and do things that they would usually not do. This has allowed him to limit the freedom to pursue an independent education and the freedom to think in an alternative way. Like "closed societies," Orban values one road of thought; the ideas that come with the illiberal majoritarian system cause the destruction of diverse independent thought that creates rational beings (Applebaum 2018, 249).

Nevertheless, even with the laws weakening academic freedom and the mobilization of the "revolution of resentment," in April 2018, a demonstration of support for the CEU occurred in Budapest, with 80,000 people coming to the defense of the "open society" (Enyedi 2018, 1068). However, Fidesz quickly dismissed them as "a coordinated attack on Hungary's bravery for standing up for itself" (Enyedi 2018, 1068). Fidesz continued to implement anti-intellectual rhetoric and specifically attacked social sciences, which they argue are just "intellectual boot camps for liberalism"; they were training activists to impose cosmopolitan values on Hungary (Enyedi 2018, 1068). Through these arguments and the Hungarian people's resentment towards elites, Orban could stack the Hungarian Supreme Court with allies so that it would strike down the CEU's challenge to these laws (Ignatieff 2024, 200-201). Doing away with the constitutional guarantee for free and independent universities and stacking the Supreme Court and other institutions with Fidesz loyalists caused the CEU to leave the country; it was Hungary's most significant attack on academic freedom since the 1930s (Ignatieff 2024, 200-201). However, CEU was just a blueprint for what Orban did to other academic institutions. Hungary stripped the Hungarian Academy of Sciences of its vital research role. It privatized domestic Hungarian universities, placing Fidesz loyalists on the boards of the universities, greatly affecting university autonomy—a fundamental pillar for a democratic society (Ignatieff 2024, 202). Finally, Orban invited Fudan University

to take over the remnants of the CEU's old campus in Budapest (Ignatieff 2024, 202). Demonstrating his allegiance to the "strong man" states of the world and training a new generation of Hungarians not in the "open society" ideals that the CEU championed but a new class of elites who subscribe to the ideology of illiberalism, a new generation living under a "closed society."

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how the Orban government's attack on the Central European University represents an attack on the "open

society" and a return to a "closed society." Through its mobilization of the "revolution of resentment" of the Hungarian people, Orban has cemented Hungary as an illiberal state that is against the "decadent Western" ideals the CEU stands for—that being the "open society." Specifically, Orban mobilized the people who believed their societies were changing too fast by the inclusion and tolerance of the "open society" and felt neglected by the liberal elite. Popper warns that the "open society" is not an easy place to live; life in the "open society" requires us to be rational, independent individuals who are free to speak and think critically. However, this is the price we must pay to be human. Though the illiberal "closed society" may sound like a "utopia on Earth," it, in reality, weakens the very nature of being human. Nevertheless, the illiberal turn in states like Hungary represents a significant challenge for these "open society" notions. There is hope. In Poland, we saw the election of Donald Tusk, a significant victory for the "open society," which demonstrates if citizens mobilize to protect liberal values, they can beat the "closed society" turn. A lesson from Socrates demonstrates that we must avoid misology and value our reason and freedom over dogmatism. Therefore, we can't lose hope in change; if we value the ideas of an "open society," no matter how difficult these ideals may be, we must not compromise and strive to continuously protect them.

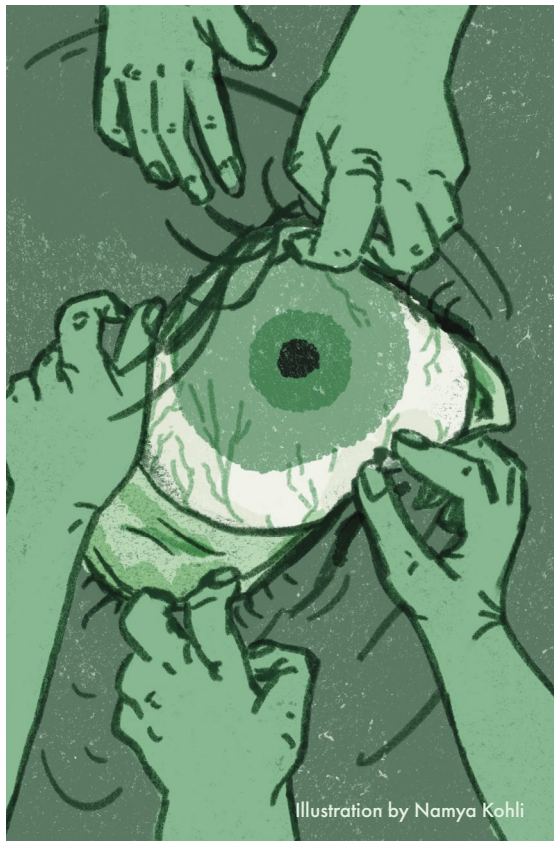


Illustration by Namya Kohli

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