Central European University in Budapest wants to convey more than knowledge – it wants to change the world. This hall with cushioned chairs may be the most unlikely place for someone like him. This is what they told him at home in Bosnia. Mersud Selman quickly fetched a coffee before the start of the academic conference. Experts from the U.S. came to Budapest specifically for this, as well as many researchers from all over Europe. And he, the young man from a Roma minority, is proud that he is allowed to sit here.

“My English is not very good,” he says apologetically. That is the reason why he is here at the English-speaking CEU. He should swiftly learn the language to prepare for an international education. The courses for which every year a handful of students are selected are called the “Roma Access Program.” It takes in members of minorities who often suffered discrimination since childhood. The program is meant to open doors for them. Selman says, “My sister was here a couple of years ago too – she is my role model.” Now, she studies in New York.

According to the relevant rankings, this university in Hungary’s capital is among the best institutions in the world. Its researchers are also rated highly within their fields. Still here, where applicants need a Bachelor’s degree as a minimum requirement like at other American graduate schools, everything is a bit different compared to Harvard, Oxford and others. There is, for example, its relatively brief history. CEU was founded in 1991 to provide Eastern Europe with new political initiative after the transition in 1989. In contrast to the socialist elite institutions [of the time], this university aimed to promote human rights, civil society and public engagement. The finances for its foundation came from George Soros, the U.S. investor with Hungarian roots who back then, in the midst of transition, wanted to provide a service to his old home. Even today, he still feels close to CEU and its mission and subsidizes some programs, after all these years. In exchange, he smiles on everyone who enters the university from a black and white photo in the entry hall.

The campus covers nearly a whole block in one of Budapest’s prime downtown neighborhoods. The main building reflects Hungary’s unsteady history: it was built as a palace in 1820 for the Hungarian aristocratic family Festetics. In communist times, the military police had its headquarters here. The prison cells were in the cellar. After the transition, CEU became the new owner. A happy ending, as it seemed at the time – CEU stood for societal progress, freedom and prosperity in Central Europe.

The mood was euphoric: applicants came not only from Romania, Poland and Lithuania but also from the Arab world, Africa and Asia where many others longed for societal change. Then several central European countries left their liberal trajectory, previously regarded as irreversible. Poland now has a government that restricts freedom. A couple of hundred meters away from the campus, Viktor Orban is in office, in coalition with the extreme right, and who has repeatedly attacked George Soros and civil society actors: “We explore the frontiers of democracy,” was the motto of CEU in its early years. It seems to be relevant again. Although the Hungarian extreme right increasingly attacks Roma, CEU holds on to the Roma Access Program. Through such programs, CEU tries to influence society, as well as through conferences and lectures. Nobel Prize winners, ministers and EU commissioners are common guests at CEU. When they speak, not only the academic community, but the wider public is invited. The conference Mersud Selman is attending explores the similarities between discrimination of African-Americans in the U.S. and Roma in Europe.
CEU Business School Dean Mel Horwitch says, “I am sure you will ask me the same question I always get.” He goes ahead and asks himself, “How in God’s name does a business school belong to [a university with] a human-rights approach?” He pauses briefly – Horwitch knows the use of effective rhetoric. The answer is simple: “You cannot have open society without a functioning economy. People in poor countries are more worried about their daily food than human rights. Thus one has to foster an entrepreneurial spirit, small companies, the ability to innovate. That is what we do.” When Horwitch stands on his roof terrace overlooking Budapest, he is sometimes still surprised how he ended up here. His CV contains a long list of prestigious universities. He taught at Harvard, Oxford, New York University and the London Business School. So now it’s Budapest.

The 200 students at his business school deliberately choose the location of the university in the east of the European Union. The curriculum is unique. During a course addressing “Business and Society” for example, problems are discussed that businesspeople face in new markets. This includes the lack of legal security or the question of how to deal with contacts that demand bribes. The topic “Finance” deals for example with the question where one can source investments from as far away as London, Tokyo or New York to develop an economy. “We have something that no other business school has,” says Horwitch: “We have all these challenges right at our front door.”

Most of the graduates of CEU’s MBA program go back to their home country. And what are they doing there? Horwitch’s favorite example is a graduate who built up a company finance network in Nairobi, so young companies can get started there. “You see, this is precisely the connection between open society and our business school.”

No Ivory-Tower Kind of Research!

The University employs top researchers on a variety of themes: Nick Sitter, for example, is a professor from Norway who specializes in terrorism. In his seminars he simulates an example with students: How should a head of state react in his country after a terrorist attack? What would be the consequences if he called for prudence? What would be the consequences if he called for retaliation? The process of finding an answer touches upon domestic and foreign policy issues, on military capabilities and psychological processes. An entirely different discipline is represented by Judit Sandor: The law professor specializes in law and ethics in biotechnology. For decades she has been active in expert panels and works relentlessly to push her topic into the public realm.

The different focal points beyond current research trends that CEU also pursues, lead regularly to exceptional projects – for example, a team works on preparing the reconstruction of the Syrian town of Aleppo. Architects, sociologists, political scientists, archaeologists and professionals from several other disciplines are participating. Some researchers were already involved in the reconstruction of Sarajevo, and their experiences now flow into the current project.

Classical subjects taught at CEU include the ones Constanze Jeitler and Stefan Roch are studying: history and public policy. The Austrian Jeitler studied heritage, theatre, film and media studies in her home country. She studied one semester at the university in Prague and took an internship in Warsaw. Because she wanted to focus on Central Europe, she applied to CEU. Since last fall she’s been a student there.

Roch has been there for five years, working on his doctoral thesis. He earned his bachelor's degree in the U.K. and his master's in Dresden – “and as I was in Brussels for a trainee program with the EU, a considerable amount of my colleagues came from CEU. They were impressive people.” As a result, he applied to CEU. “What I find particularly valuable are contacts with
other people throughout the university. You are not caged into your own subject but you meet
different professors at conferences or research projects that you would normally not have
encountered.” Jeitler and Roch met at a project, too, which is typical for CEU. When she came to
Budapest, the refugee crisis reached its peak. Thousands were stuck. The Orban government
barely responded. Jeitler got active and founded a Facebook group called “CEU helps.” Within
no time, 200 people from the university became active in the group.
They carried backpacks full of food to the train station. At one stage, CEU’s Kate Coyer posted a
call: she wanted to provide free wifi-hotspots at Keleti station and organize chargers so refugees
could charge their cell phones. Via crowd-funding the money was raised. On Facebook, students
signed up for time slots so that someone was always on site. Arabic-speaking students designed
signs so everyone could find the charging stations. “I only realized afterwards,” said Jeitler, “that
Kate, who had this idea, was not a student but a professor. And Bernhard, who was active too,
was the director of a research centre at CEU.”

Here, No Cutbacks on Social Sciences

How can a university work that is mainly driven by its mission and not pure research? “Whoever
decides to study with us,” says John Shattuck, “does not only come here because of our mission
but because we are among the best universities.” He sits upright in his antique chair in the corner
of his office. He’s been president of the university for nearly seven years. Universities, he says,
have always had a societal purpose. “In previous years there was a change: Many did not
prioritize the development of thought anymore but a product that fulfills a purpose.” He calls this
“money-driven product.” According to his analysis, in the academic world people are rather
trained than educated. This also holds true for top universities.
“Of course it’s important that graduates find a good job,” he says. “But a university’s underlying
purpose – conveying values – is often reduced or entirely cut off.” When a university has to
make savings it often cuts down on humanities and social sciences – “yet these are the areas we
invest in.”

John Shattuck is not a naïve idealist, nor a professional savior of the world. He taught law in the
U.S. at Harvard, later he became assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and
labor under Bill Clinton. He first arrived in Central Europe at the end of the 1990s, as U.S.
ambassador to Prague. Ten years later he returned to the region. In 2009 he became president of
CEU, not expecting the turbulence that was to come. A couple of weeks later, the Hungarians
voted in Viktor Orban to become their new prime minister. Orban has been outspoken against
George Soros, who built the Open Society Foundations: a network of organizations that advocate
human rights and a strong civil society, independent of the university. Orban’s most recent attack
took place two weeks ago. Talking about the refugee crisis, he said, “This invasion is on the one
hand steered by trafficking businesses and on the other these activists that support anything that
weakens the nation-state.” This includes George Soros and his people. There are similar
arguments coming from Russia where Vladimir Putin has prohibited the Open Society
Foundations.
When it comes to mighty opponents, University President Shattuck reverts to his previous role as
a diplomat: “I did everything to keep our autonomy and make the government understand that
the university is a great advantage for Hungary. We do not receive any money from the state but
we bring good people into the country.” He gets up and walks to a drawing, framed on his wall.
“This is from my time as ambassador to the Czech Republic. A former dissident gave it to me as a
present.” It shows the panorama of Prague, the Vltava River, the castle and the towers of the
old town.” Take note of the sky: A mighty storm is coming from the east with rain and lightning.
From the west, the sun shines through.” That is how the world looked in the 80s when the picture was made. “When our university was found right after transition,” Shattuck says, “the overarching belief was that the transformation of the previous Eastern bloc was, although bumpy, inevitable.” He takes a short break: “Now I will show you that back then we underestimated the centrifugal forces that are now coming over the EU.” Shattuck’s conclusion is: Central European University and its mission are today just as relevant as they were after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The Main Aim: Learning How to Think

Still, the university is a different one today than at the time of its creation. Agnes Batory knows the transition from her own experience. At the beginning, she studied here. Now she teaches public policy, a subject at the intersection of politics, economics and society. “Back then, most of my peers came from Central Europe: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland or, like me, from Hungary. When you look at my seminars today, you can see people from the U.S., Africa and from the Arab world.” This suits CEU’s program. It wants to educate people to stand up for freedom and civil rights, everywhere where this is necessary. About two years ago, Central Europe faced the challenge of having to reinvent itself. Now, new world regions have joined: “We don’t preach values,” says Batory. “We don’t teach them what to think but how to think - we encourage them to critique and question.”

Her fellow graduates have successful careers: A Czech friend is in Geneva with the United Nations, a German friend is working at the EU Commission in Brussels and a Hungarian peer is working for an NGO in China. On the CEU website one can find similar success stories. The alumni include ministers, high governmental advisors and EU parliamentarians. Spreading the basic ideas of the universities through graduates that work in important positions seems to pay off. Yet a diploma from CEU does not always push one’s career – sometimes it may even be obstructive. “One who wants to work within the state apparatus of a less liberal country may face obstacles,” she says. This does not only include faraway countries but also the public service of many European states.

The university does not want to move away from Budapest, although its mission already extends beyond Central Europe. “Nobody ever considered moving to Africa or Asia,” says Shattuck. CEU is pushing further into Hungary’s capital. The campus is being expanded so that in a couple of years the whole university will be united in the city center. Behind the facades of a row of old aristocratic palaces that are connected through inner-courtyards, construction workers are currently closing a gap. The new building will feature an intricate facade and a lot of glass. On the top of the building there will be a blossoming rooftop garden from which one can view the whole city. A clear vision has always been a characteristic of this university.