

09.14.

**Kontler on CEU's Initiatives in Response to the Refugee Crisis**

<http://www.atv.hu/video/video-20150914-megnyitja-kapuit-a-menekultek-elott-a-ceu> - Hungarian ATV's morning show Start interviewed Laszlo Kontler, Pro-Rector for Social Sciences and Humanities & Hungarian Affairs, and Professor at CEU's Department of History, about initiatives past and present organized by CEU in response to the current refugee crisis and refugee issues.

English translation:

**Good morning. We are continuing with Mr. Laszlo Kontler, Pro-Rector of Central European University. Good morning.**

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation and good morning to the viewers, too.

**Refugee crisis. The universities, the academic world have been trying to stay away from this issue so far— or at least, this is our impression as outsiders. Except for you, who have been doing the opposite: basically, CEU has been continuously expressing its solidarity since spring, while also trying to do something about the problem. What is the difference between CEU and the academic scene in general?**

I wouldn't draw such a strict line between Central European University and Hungarian universities as such. I would like to put into a broader context the reason for my being here and our topic of discussion today. To begin with, it is worth pointing out that universities are not only educational institutions, merely housing academic programs among their walls: they also function as civil communities with social responsibilities. Let me emphasize that it was not only CEU that took certain actions concerning the refugee issue. It wasn't publicized that much, but for example, the University of Szeged or Pazmany Peter Catholic University are also among those institutions that have been trying to offer help to the refugees. Obviously, the University of Szeged is on the spot as a result of its geographical location, while Pazmany Peter Catholic University is affected because of its commitment to the values of charity. Now in the case of CEU, our situation is special because in our mission statement – and each university has one – our commitment to open society plays a key role. In the given situation, it means that probably more emphatically than others, we are trying to represent the values of integration and solidarity much more firmly and much more in the context of our social and academic mission. Indeed, this has been going on since spring, or maybe even earlier; we have tried to raise our voice and do certain things about the refugee crisis.

**You had an initiative concerning the inclusion of immigrants or refugees: taking on their education within certain limits. To what extent is that feasible? When someone arrives in the heart of Europe as a refugee, how much do they long for sitting in a classroom and studying? Or do they have completely different plans?**

Apparently, such needs do arise. Our call was published last week. In fact, this is not an original idea: we are trying to adapt the initiative of Humboldt University of Berlin to the Hungarian context. Humboldt University announced two weeks ago that it would open its gates before registered refugees, which means that those refugees who had to interrupt their studies in their home countries due to the war or other critical situations (and who can justify that by making some kind of a statement, at least) will get limited access to the university's courses. Of course, they need to go through some kind of admission procedure first, so their background needs to be checked, i.e. how long they have studied at which university. Obviously, this is not a critical mass, especially in Hungary.

**Yes, I was going to say that putting forward such a proposal in Berlin has a lot of weight as the refugees, or most of them, are headed there, whereas they are just passing through Hungary.**

Still, I consider this a very important gesture. The day after this announcement was made, a Reformed Church charity organization that has been aiding refugees for 10 years in Hungary contacted us, and they said that they helped several refugees who indicated that they would be interested, and we also received individual enquiries within a few days. Obviously, there are certain limits to this initiative and its usefulness; nonetheless, we assume that no matter what situation these people are coming from, they are most likely trying to reconstruct their life in the place where they are going to spend a certain length of time. They have various plans concerning their lives, and part of those plans is probably academic education and a professional career, so even in this temporary

situation, it is important for them to continue what they have started at home, to go back to school. What the future holds for them is a different matter.

**So you are not promising them a degree.**

Of course not.

**What you are offering then, is the feeling of getting back their integrity in this transitory period.**

That's right. This is a simple humanitarian gesture if you like.

**You are engaged in two kinds of activities as far as I can see: on the one hand, humanitarian, including offering and setting up collection points and buying medicine, and on the other, academic, i.e. organizing meetings and conferences. You discuss the topic and have people discuss it. What does the latter reveal? To what extent are researchers better informed and what solutions can they see that politicians clearly cannot?**

Central European University is in a special situation because at our school, the faculty is just as international as the student body. Regardless of the refugee crisis, we have several research centers such as the Center for Conflict Negotiation and Recovery or the Center for Media, Data and Society whose work is closely related to such questions as the ones generated by the refugee crisis in Hungary. For instance, the Center for Conflict Negotiation and Recovery is hosting some scholars this fall who are working on Aleppo's future reconstruction plans, which are unfortunately a long time ahead. The initiative to set up and operate wifi hotspots and portable mobile charging stations for migrants was proposed by the Center for Media, Data and Society. So I wouldn't just focus on the fact that we are talking about the conflict and suggesting various possible solutions, even though our international lawyers, international studies experts and political scientists, and even philosophers are also engaged in that. We are also offering direct, hands-on assistance to ease the everyday life of the refugees.

**How divided are the opinions of the faculty members and students? Does it show the same dichotomy as the Hungarian society in that matter?**

I think it's very hard to talk about that because the previous classes already left in the summer and the new academic year is just about to begin. I think that regardless of what people might think about the reasons of the crisis, the possible solutions of recovery, or the intentions of the individual migrants who are staying in our country temporarily, just like in other cases, it is the solidarity and giving a hand to those in distress that cements together the CEU community very firmly.

**Aren't you afraid that since you have joined those who are supporting the refugees and not those who are trying to evict them, you might lose some of your potential students, those who do not agree with offering help to the refugees? Or perhaps you don't mind losing those students?**

Just like in the past, CEU has quite openly stood up for those values we have discussed before. I don't think this should have scared away those segments of students and applicants which we are counting on.

**That's a diplomatic answer. John Shattuck has published an essay on historical amnesia. Concerning the current migrant situation, he points out that Central Europe won't learn from its own history: apparently, we are reacting to this influx of refugees as if we had never been in the same boat in the past. Given that this is what it looks like from abroad, do foreign researchers working here share this view as well?**

I think that if there is one dominant opinion that you could put your finger on within the CEU researchers' community, it is that we generally agree with this view. But let me add that our Rector and his op-ed published in the Boston Globe puts forward a much more balanced opinion in which the responsibility of EU refugee policies is equally raised. But as for historical amnesia in Central Europe, that is, indeed, the other key point he makes in his letter.

**Thank you for joining us this morning. I wish you a successful academic year.**

Thank you very much.