

Hungarian Illiberal Democracy and the Role of Children



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It is commonplace that a state's success, from the point of view of economy and social stability, depends on its youth. And the key to future generations and forming how they see the world is in education. At the end of the 1980s, the countries which freed themselves from Soviet authority faced the challenge of reforming educational policy that had until then rested on communist principles. Now, they had to develop a society open to democracy and capable of establishing and maintaining it. The expected breakthrough, however, has not happened.

Using Hungary as an example, the opposite of those aims have happened due to the conservative/right-wing government coalition. The regressive effects of this situa-

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tion have been shown in the results of the 2016 PISA test. The results make the review of Hungarian education policy more urgent than ever. The world acknowledges the success of the Nordic educational systems (especially Finland). Moreover, several OECD countries demonstrated an incredible improvement in recent years. As for Hungary, the tendency is the opposite: the results of the 2016 test astonished even the experts, despite the worsening tendency of the past years. They show a devastating picture of the country's educational system.

ASPIRING TO A NORDIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Nordic education models and their education policy show that the implementation of liberal principles has a great impact on the development of public education. The economic and social stability of a country that excels in PISA tests and other independent international surveys, as well as the citizens' standard of living show that the liberal practices make a country's society work well and creates an opportunity to develop the human capital necessary for economic development. In contrast, Hungary almost completely lacks that human capital. And with regard to democracy in Hungary, the situation could hardly be more devastating. According to a 2014 survey from the research group Active Youth¹, almost two-thirds of Hungarian young people doubt a democratic political system would be better than a dictatorship.

Apart from Finland, there is another country worth analyzing in a greater detail because it reinforces our assumption about the necessity of liberal principles in education policy. Estonia presents a shining

¹ Szabó, A. (2014) *Racionálisan lázadó hallgatók II. Apátia – radikalizmus – posztmaterializmus a magyar egyetemisták és főiskolások körében*. Budapest/Szeged: Belvedere Meridionale – MTA TK PTI.

counter-example to Eastern European countries moving to the right especially because it achieved remarkable success in a few decades after regime change that had serious economic and social impacts.



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Estonian education policy is the result of a wide consensus among governments and political ideologies which aims to serve its citizens rather than the political leader-

ship. An effective integration policy made it possible to avoid social differences between children within a classroom. In other words, students with poorer backgrounds have equal opportunity to perform well in school and advance in society as do their peers with better family circumstances. Estonian public schools do not separate those who perform worse, but they make an extra effort to help the pupils catch up with the others².

We can continue listing the characteristics and merits of the Estonian education policy, but one conclusion is clear: an efficient liberal education policy serving current demand is the backbone of a well-functioning and developing economy and society. PISA results of the country support this claim.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN HUNGARY

On the other hand, the deficiencies of the Hungarian educational system become apparent beyond PISA results. Overloaded children, teachers, and parents who demonstrate for months and express their dissatisfaction prove that education in Hungary today – similar to many post-socialist countries – is not able to provide its participants with what is needed to ensure development and social stability.

In the years after the change of the regime there have been some significant reforms within education, but due to different opinions of various governments, the reforms were not able to become successful and had little impact in society.

The first Orbán government, in power from 1998 to 2002, had indicated that they shall not tolerate the previous government's liberal measures for symbolic and political

² See: Mihkel Lees's article featured in this issue: *Estonian Education System 1990-2016: Reforms and Impact*.

reasons. So rigid control over educators and emphasis on frontal instruction came back, while programs for developing IT skills were abolished. The situation became even clearer after the current prime minister's second win: despite the convincing arguments for a liberal education policy, the right-wing Christian conservative leadership sees the success of Hungarian education through institutional centralization and uniformity.

The only explanation for this can be that the government sees the role of education differently from how it should function in a 21st-century European country. The aim of the current government is to create and maintain a class system burdened with inequalities which would preserve the power of the political elite and keep new generations from the possibilities of innovation and creativity. In parallel to this approach, Hungary exhibits a total centralization of the education system, depriving municipalities of their means and taking away the freedom of education workshops.

THE EDUCATION POLICY OF ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

After the fall of communism and the democratic transition in 1989, the Hungarian socialist-liberal coalitions in power³ had the objective to include international practices in Hungarian education (e.g., civic education, more independent and decentralized public schools) to enable democratic development and to catch up with the West. Therefore, the measures and programs which were born between 1994 and 1998 emphasized the fight against segregation of Hungarians and Roma people, accommodation to the rapidly changing global political and economic situation, and



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changing labor market needs. Globalization, digitalization, and advancing technology require different knowledge and individual skills. Thus, a new type of education is needed, different from the methods and curricula from the past.

Those states that are willing to keep pace with this rapid development and create a stable and fair social situation need to form their education policy accordingly.

³ The MSZP-SZDSZ coalition first came to power in 1994.

The Orbán-led Fidesz party, however, withdrew vital measures based on liberal principles in 1999, when the socialist-liberal coalition was defeated. Considering the Fidesz-KDNP coalition's measures related to education, the government's goal was to do whatever it took to extinguish the last spark of liberalism in Hungarian public schooling.

The second Orbán government, which came to power in 2010, distanced itself on an ideological level and on an active level from previous trends, which had a greater tradition in Western European education than in Hungary. Viktor Orbán's statements and the personal beliefs of the people he nominated for leadership posts in public education demonstrated the change in the direction of education policy. The new regime criticized competence-based education and emphasized the importance of "basic knowledge" according to traditional Prussian values, which entails inter alia frontal teaching and memorization as a learning method.

The illiberal state proclaimed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán represents a permanent political pursuit of restoration in practice: experiments to bring back authoritarianism in politics and social interactions typical prior to World War II. The nostalgic and sentimental feelings regarding the Horthy era permeate everyday life. They are at the same time anti-democratic, since the period considered exemplar in Hungarian history is about strong segregation in education and serious limitations on basic human rights; as such, it was perfect ground for Nazi ideology. This era is characterized by an authoritarian educational system which, until 2010, no Hungarian government after the democratic transition considered as an example to follow. However, this is not evident anymore. Now in Hungarian schools

there is retrograde, direct instruction and passive learning, which have been proven as a false direction by academic research⁴.



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To understand the Orbán government's attitude to education and power, we shall take (a non-exhaustive) stock of educational measures put into action since 2010. Reducing the capacity of secondary grammar schools for the benefit of vocational

⁴ See: Benware, C.A. and E.L. Deci (1984) "Quality of Learning with an Active versus Passive Motivational Set", [in:] *American Educational Research Journal*, 21(4), p. 755; Hwang, N-Ch.R., Lui, G. and M.Y.J. Wu Tong (2005) "An Empirical Test of Cooperative Learning in a Passive Learning Environment", [in:] *Issues in Accounting Education*, 20(2): pp. 151-65.

schools and decreasing the compulsory schooling age from 18 to 16, the Orbán government reinforces the social segregation of already disadvantaged people. Although the fight against social segregation in Hungary was never as efficient as the closed social stratification would have demanded, the abovementioned measures serve the purpose of the government conserving this class system. One of the fundamentals of illiberalism is to preserve control over social mobility, which ensures that power is centralized in the current political and economic elite. A study published in 2015 by a research group at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences shows that the rate of segregation in terms of social class and status is continuously increasing in Hungarian schools⁵.

RESTRICTED SOCIAL MOBILITY

Apart from preventing or hindering social mobility, schoolchildren from higher social classes also suffer disadvantages due to changes within the education system. Although it is true that the performance of pupils from vocational schools plays a significant role in deteriorating overall performance, it cannot be the sole explanation for the tragic results in the international tests. Competence assessment – as it attempts to react to the challenges in real life – demands skills which Hungarian children are lacking. For instance, the deficiencies in digital literacy are not being tackled by the current curriculum. Quite the contrary: the number of IT education classes have been drastically reduced in order to have space for more physical, Christian, and moral education classes.

Based on the statements of government representatives and experts close to the decision-makers regarding PISA results⁶

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⁵ Varga, J. (2015) *A közoktatás indikátorrendszere*. Budapest: MTA KRTH KTI.

⁶ According to the Ministry of Human Capacities, the

we can conclude that the leadership does not consider it a problem that Hungarian children's digital competence lags behind that of the neighboring countries. All the changes in the world are connected to digitalization and technological development, and it is almost impossible to succeed in the labor market without IT knowledge. Meanwhile, even solving basic exercises as a part of the competence survey conducted via computers poses a real challenge to Hungarian children.

There is therefore a huge demand for motivated and well-trained educators who could provide pupils with education that prepares them for real-life challenges. However, the burden (more compulsory hours and administrative tasks) imposed on educators has increased to the extent that teachers have neither the time nor the energy to help students falling behind or to transfer knowledge beyond the compulsory curriculum. A well-observed increase of the teachers' burdens only reinforces their dependency on the state, which already exists due to a continuous and forceful centralization of education system.

LIMITING TEACHERS' AUTONOMY

The relatively independent and autonomous institutions (primary and secondary schools, secondary grammar schools, and vocational schools) operated by municipalities had the opportunity to react to problems and demands quickly and efficiently. The result of the government's centralizing policy is that the schools have been taken out of the jurisdiction of those familiar with the local situation. Now, even the supply of light bulbs depend on a mammoth organization. Principals are not appointed by educators familiar with the local conditions, but the Ministry of Human Capacities, which does not confer enough power

capitalize Digital tests were unusual for pupils.



NOW, FINAL DECISIONS ABOUT EDUCATIONAL MATTERS ARE MADE BY PARTY POLITICIANS LACKING RELEVANT EXPERIENCE WHO IMPLEMENT GOVERNMENT DIRECTIVES WITHOUT ANY PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE

in its own appointees to give them rights to hire and fire. Those rights are exercised by district leaders. In an ideal situation, a school is a dynamically developing institution based on its citizens' equal partnership. Today, however, parents, teachers, and students feel they are destined to a common fate only inasmuch as they are all subject to and suffer from the central educational directive.

Compared to the conditions before 2010, this centralization process represents a huge step backwards: the liberal education policy empowered the National Public Education Council with 20 members, out of whom only three are nominated

by the ministry, with veto rights, ensuring autonomy within this professional organization. Previously, the members of the National Public Education Council have been elected by professional organizations, institutes of teachers' training, and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Now, final decisions about educational matters are made by party politicians lacking relevant experience who implement government directives without any professional expertise. Almost no communication occurs with professional organizations such as unions or subject teachers' voluntary associations.

With regard to school or educator autonomy, we are not only talking about the fact that the institution is not able to satisfy its own demands out of its own resources. It is also about a certain ideological indoctrination. The market-based choice of textbooks was replaced by unified national textbooks, thus making the teaching materials (which were widely criticized based on content and methodology) compulsory by destroying the competition is a clear message that the government's ideology has to be infused into the classroom. The plan to merge state and church is outlined in the support for religious schools and in the introduction of ethics classes – or their alternative, religious classes, mainly Catholic. Those measures, apart from curtailing the freedom of conscience, show an over-involvement in the moral education of children. The aim of the government is to transmit its own value system, disregarding the interests of pupils of different religions or atheists.

We do not dispute the right to maintain religious schools, but an intertwining of church and state of this proportion violates the basic principles of a secular state in a 21st century democracy which cannot be allowed. Merging church and state is also

against the fundamentals laid down in the Hungarian constitution. The state's over-involvement in the moral education of children and their education *per se* does not only happen in ethics and religious classes – the National Curriculum valid from 2012 also features this trend.

The measures listed here and present since 2010 demonstrate how and in what form the Hungarian government is trying to fight liberal educational principles and their impact in society. The right-wing Christian-conservative leadership has voiced its opinion about liberalism countless times. In 2015, Viktor Orbán labelled the system he planned to introduce as illiberal democracy. The actual task of the Hungar-

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ian education system, instead of preparing students for real life, is to adjust them to an authoritarian and rigid system known from dictatorships.

After 2010, the Hungarian government's legislation in various fields does not follow policy interests, but political, legislative, and decision-making processes according to power preference. This tendency can be observed in different areas of life, not only in education policy. The worsening of the situation of sectors subject to arbitrary restrictions, is by all means a reason to worry – not only from the point of view of this country, but of the region.

Nevertheless, it is also true that, from the point of view of the Hungarian society, the educational system will experience the biggest short-term and long-term effects. If the Hungarian government disregards the warning signs that can be deduced from international comparisons, it will have catastrophic consequences on a generation and on the country as a whole. It is clearly visible that the development of new policies serves neither the education, nor the children and the society, but those currently in power.

CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Unfortunately, the government's education policy amplifies the anti-democratic attitudes which are present due to the lack of a democratic tradition in the country. Hungarian youth cannot rely on becoming acquainted with the basic principles of democracy through a narrowly interpreted socialization because of the historical background. The hypothesis that a democratic system will generate its own democratic citizens is not enough: to maintain this political system, we need to educate politically active and open-minded young people who are aware of the importance of democratic institutions and the need for democracy.



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This attitude of a European democratic minimum does not seem to be self-evident in Eastern Europe, and particularly Hungary. Surveys and opinion polls conducted among young people show that a large proportion of them stays passive regarding civic rights and political participation. Moreover, among the minority of active and interested youth, there is a surprisingly large number who do not rule out dictatorship as a possible political system. This tendency coincides with the strengthening of extreme right-wing, exclusionary, and populist parties⁷.

⁷ According to the results of the Magyar Ifjúság Kutatás 2016 (Hungarian Youth Research 2016), 33 percent of the respondents between 15 and 29 years old were indifferent about the political system or would accept dictatorship under "certain circumstances".

CONTINUOUS WITHDRAWAL OF RESOURCES

Withdrawing funds from education played a huge role in forming the abovementioned regressive situation besides the ideological parameters. Even OECD research conducted in 2015 emphasized that each year Hungary spends less and less on education.⁸ What is more, state expenditure on education is the lowest of all OECD countries. The proportion of GDP spent on education decreased after 2010 (i.e., during the Orbán administration) to the extent that not even 2016's real growth could compensate from the point of view of real value. Educators' salaries are extremely low compared to their colleagues in the CEE region, whereas the social prestige of their profession is the lowest in history and cannot be compared to other countries.

Apart from losing their self-determination rights, compromising their freedom as educators, and a severe increase in administrative workload, the profession also faces low salaries. The low remuneration and lack of necessary tools leads necessarily to a poor quality of education. The development of educators, ensuring them the possibility of continuous professional advancement, is generally indispensable when it comes to improving the quality of education.

The International Institute for Management Development shows in its 2015 report that Hungary has lost a great deal of competitiveness compared to its position in 2005⁹. The report takes into consideration the resources put into education, the attractiveness of the cost of living in a given coun-

⁸ If we define the expenditure per student in 2008 as 100, then in 2013 the same index was 82 in Hungary, while 114 in Czech Republic, 123 in Poland and 132 in the Slovak Republic. Source: Education at a Glance 2016 OECD Indicators.

⁹ IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook 2015.

try, quality of life, and the ability to retain a skilled workforce, as well as the degree to which education meets the demands of economy. Hungary was ranked as 16th in 2005 and dropped to 56th in 2015.

CONCLUSIONS

Philosopher Mihály Vajda once said: "Things have taken a terrible direction, but it does not mean everybody should forget about their principles. If others don't need them, let's keep our European values to ourselves. We may need them in the future"¹⁰. It has become clear in Hungary and in other Eastern European countries that standing up for European values in a direct way has become a necessity. To ensure peaceful living as a community and the possibility of further development in the region, we need to protect our values and make them seem attractive.

In order to achieve this, we need to take stock of how far we got from our set goals during the Fidesz government in Hungary and other extremist regimes in the region. We need to restore the confidence in the European Union in those countries for the sake of the continent. Education itself can serve this purpose.

In Hungary, there have been some promising signs from civil society: in the recent period, the stance the teachers took has induced previously unseen activity. The educators are not at war with the government only for a just remuneration, but they also take action for other critical matters. They are protesting publicly on the streets of several Hungarian cities for their educational and professional beliefs to put society on a more sustainable path. Namely, education can ease rigid social stratification and achieve economic prosperity. Parents

¹⁰ Farkas, G. (2015) "Dübörög a demagógia, Európa Orbán nyomában", [in:] 24.hu, July 16. Own translation.

actively taking part in the demonstrations prove that there may be a new approach to democratic participation in the society, according to which a parent is as much a part of the school system as a teacher or a child.

While it is obvious that young people in Hungary today are not in the position to acquire the skills and competences necessary in everyday life, it has become more evident that parents get out of touch with their children's studies during secondary education. The communication between families and school is therefore narrowed down to the electronic school register, despite the fact that parents still play an extremely important role in their children's education at the moment.

The goal of education policy would be to create a school system in which the development of respective institutions is a common concern of students, educators, and parents.

This is in line with another important issue: that the principles of democracy should not be learnt as a dry part of the curriculum from history books, but should be acquired from the real operation of the institution. Constructive involvement in the life of a school, such as creating the possibility to express criticism without fearing the consequences, either as a student or a teacher. A friendly atmosphere, positive attitudes, and education based on teaching skills makes it possible to apply customized educational methods and real and efficient work within the classroom. The responsibility of schools in the 21st century is not to make dependents who subject themselves to the system, but to raise children who, after graduating, live their lives as free citizens fully aware of their rights, duties, and possibilities.

Unfortunately, however, we cannot expect changes or reforms which would put the current situation in public education on

a better track to come from the Hungarian government. The political elites opposing modernization will not be discouraged to step away from its path even due to deteriorating results. The political establishment will pertain to the autocratic way of operating in schools, which is a method characteristic of the whole political arena, and it seems that the political elite is incapable of taking responsibility, too. After the devastating results of the PISA tests, instead of revising their own principles, they have blamed the educators.

Since for the time being we cannot expect improvement in education nor in other areas of politics, we have to ask ourselves: as responsible citizens, civilians, parents, or educators, what is it that we can do for the youth of Europe and to preserve liberal ideas in Eastern Europe? We need to form a dialogue among the countries affected by extremism that endangering education and liberal ideas. We have to fight with all our means to ensure that those principles in education prevail in these countries. That is the only way democracy can survive unscathed against extremist ideologies that are currently being strengthened in Europe. ●



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Chairman of the Board at Republikon Foundation since 2010. At the time of the regime change, he was a prominent figure of the union movements. After that he joined the SZDSZ (the Alliance of Free Democrats) and became an MP in 1994 and the campaign director of the party. Between 2002 and 2008 he worked as under-secretary for coordination in the Hungarian Prime Minister's office as well. For 10 years, he was teaching economics and finance and then took part in the founding of the Economic Polytechnic Foundation School, where he worked as director of curriculum until 2002.