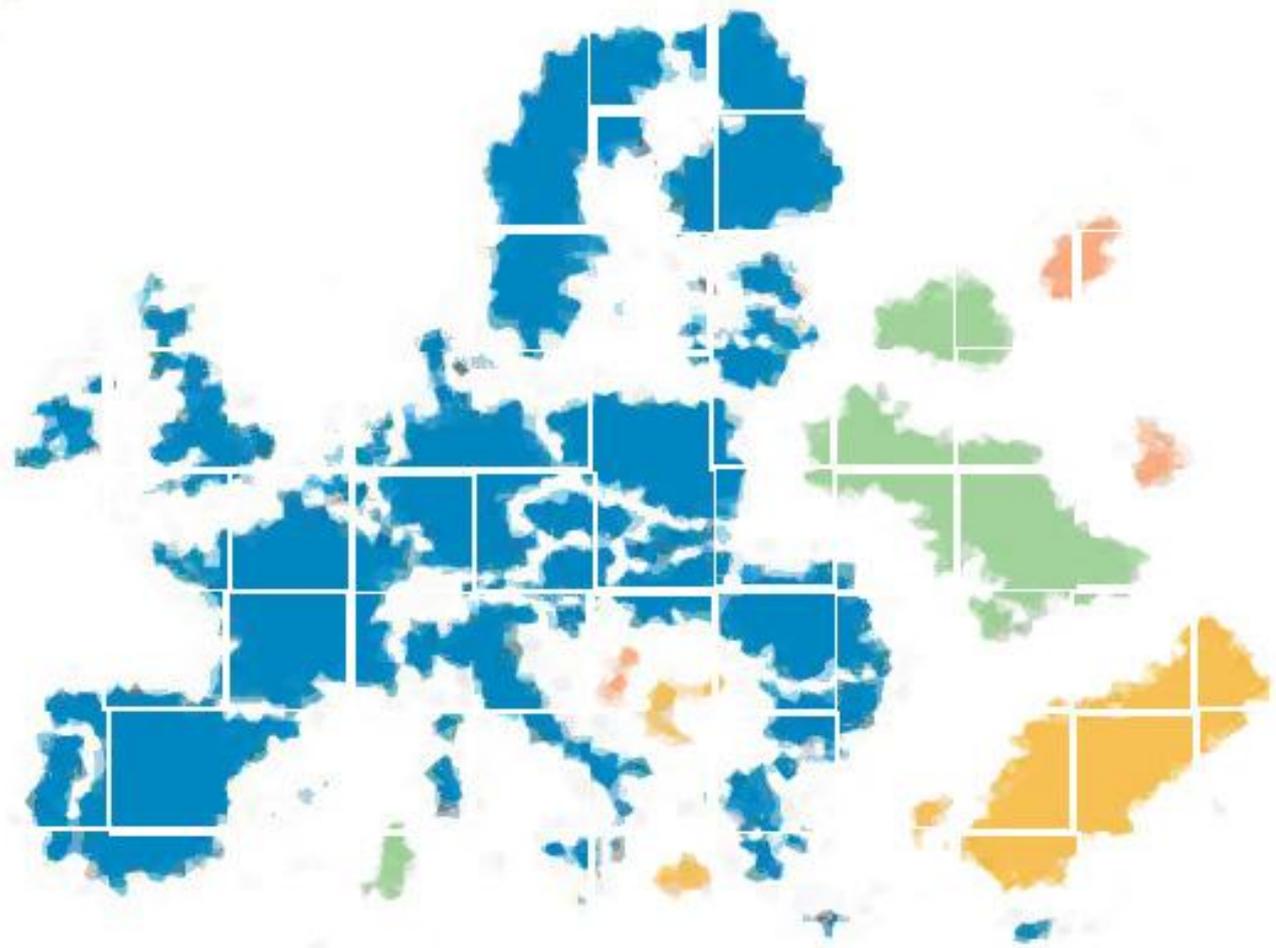


Frontiers of Democracy

Krétakör Free School
A democratic education program

Bálint Juhász



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Center for European Neighborhood Studies

The Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) is an independent research center of the Central European University (CEU) located in Budapest, Hungary. Its main goal is to contribute to an informed international dialogue about the future of the European Union in the world, while capitalizing on its Central European perspective and regional embeddedness.

The strategic focus of the center is academic and policy-oriented research on the place and role of the European Union in its rapidly changing and increasingly volatile neighborhood. Through its research, CENS seeks to contribute to the understanding of the environment where the EU, its member states and partners need to (co)operate, and it aims at supporting the constructive development of these relations by providing opportunities for discussion and exchange. The center's geographic focus areas are Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Russia.

Frontiers of Democracy

Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine

Moldova and Ukraine, countries of the European Union's Eastern Partnership program, are undergoing complex processes of democratic transformation, but with weak embeddedness of democratic values and principles drawbacks can occur. It is embeddedness that helps to overcome the challenges of transformation and pushes countries beyond mere frontiers of democracy towards becoming strongly committed democratic communities. The goal of the [“Frontiers of Democracy: Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine”](#) project of the CEU Center for European Neighborhood Studies is to facilitate embedding democratic values in the societal ethos in Moldova and Ukraine by providing a forum for discussion of the difficulties of such a complex process and by drawing on the transition experience of the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia).



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The opinions expressed here are those of the author.

About the author

Bálint Juhász

Bálint Juhász is a cultural and educational developer. He was born in Budapest in 1982. He studied Hungarian language and literature at ELTE University, Budapest, and theater arts at Vestjyllands Højskole, Ringkøbing, Denmark. He was founder and director of Föld Theater, an independent and experimental company, between 2003 and 2011. From 2009, he collaborated with Árpád Schilling and Krétakör in several projects and became the head of Krétakör's Free School, a democratic engagement program for secondary school students. The Free School program promotes active participation of teenagers in politically relevant issues. In recent years, students from all over Hungary were involved in the program, organizing forums and campaigns. In 2015-2016, he was a fellow of the Education Activist Networking Group of Open Society Foundations.

Krétakör Free School *A democratic education program*

Krétakör, a performing arts company from Hungary with a solid commitment to community development, launched a civic education program in 2013, called Krétakör Free School (Krétakör Szabadiskola). The program aims to train young people (teenagers) to get informed and to voice their opinion publicly. Innovation in performing arts and advocacy, empowerment of young people and creativity can go hand in hand.

One characteristic of adolescence is the gradually increasing need for self-determination. The opportunity and the ability to understand and influence the continuously expanding context are often brought to a halt before young people could have an impact on public life. The legal voting age, the infantilizing trends in public education systems that make taboo out of political issues in schools all send the same message to students: politics is for adults, it is inconceivable and inaccessible for youngsters. Even if civic education forms part of the curriculum - as it is required in many countries in Europe - it usually remains within the traditional school setting: with the aim to achieve performance by the students, without regard to their real engagement.

The discouragement of students to commit themselves to civic issues caused by the education system sadly fits into a larger pattern in Hungary, where escalating anti-democratic trends reinforce social disinterest among the entire society, and especially among young people.

According to a representative survey among young people,¹ based on complex interviews with 8000 participants within the age group of 15 to 29, a large majority of the Hungarian youth has neutral opinion about determining principals of public life. As an informative example, only 40% percent believe that democracy is better in any case than dictatorship. According to 31% of young people, these systems are alike. 24% cannot or do not want to answer the question, and 5 % think that in some cases dictatorship is more appropriate than democracy. In other words 60% have unclear or negative views about democratic society.²

It is also apparent from the survey that a large number of teenagers do not have any involvement in extracurricular activities or communities outside school. Most (around 80%) of their leisure time is spent in a home

¹ Levente Székely ed., *Magyar Ifjúság 2012* (Budapest: Kutatópont, 2013)

² Levente Székely ed., *Magyar Ifjúság 2012*, 302.

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environment, for example using internet or watching television.³ They do not participate in activities of different organizations (sport, cultural, political, religious, etc), only 3% do occasionally, and 4% in a frequent manner.⁴

The Hungarian school system has gone through several reforms during the different governments since 1989. But none of these was able to bring major change and address its fundamental problems. It is an authoritarian system that includes neither school principals nor teachers or students in shaping their schools. It does not build on the individual characteristics of students and does not take care of those who need special attention. It isolates them instead.⁵

These tendencies were unfortunately reinforced in the past few years. Fidesz, the governing party of the second and third Orbán government, won the parliamentary elections with two-third majority both in 2010 and 2014. It meant a supermajority for Fidesz, which allowed any kind of change in legislation. This power was eminently exploited. Just to mention the most radical change: the constitution of Hungary was replaced. The new version, which is titled Fundamental Law, was adopted within 3 months from the introduction of the first draft, and the process took place without any public consultation.⁶

The official policies of these years brought major changes in all parts of the society. The following examples are from the field of education:

- The National Curriculum was restructured and the amount of material increased in 2011. The curriculum became more definite and descriptive, and it is focusing on lexical knowledge rather than competence building. This allows less opportunity to develop critical thinking, which does not appear as a supported competence in the current official pedagogical concept.
- A significant number of schools were centralized in 2013. The administration of the institutions was taken from local municipalities to a central administration organization, Klik.⁷ The process and the new institution were highly criticized by the teachers unions, education experts, and last but not least, by the students and their parents. They argued that it damaged the autonomy of schools and led to everyday maintenance problems, as well. The headmasters of the schools are no longer the legal employers of the staff; they simply

³ Levente Székely ed., *Magyar Ifjúság 2012*, 217-218.

⁴ Levente Székely ed., *Magyar Ifjúság 2012*, 225.

⁵ Experts from different fields of education continuously report about the lack of adoption of a contemporary pedagogical approach, about segregation and the increasing economical deficit in the Hungarian public education system. For example: "Nahalka István blogja" <http://nahalkaistvan.blogspot.dk/>; "A nyomor széle" <http://nyomorszeleblog.hvg.hu/>; "OktpolCafé" <http://oktpolcafe.hu/>

⁶ "The Fundamental Law" <http://www.kormany.hu/en/hungary/the-hungarian-state/the-fundamental-law/>; „Opinion on the New Constitution of Hungary”

<http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD%282011%29016-e>

⁷ "Klebsberg Intézményfenntartó Központ" <http://klik.gov.hu/>

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cannot choose with whom to work. Since the sufficient funds were not allocated to Klik, the schools constantly struggle with the absence of materials necessary to run the institutions.

Unfortunately, Hungarian schools reinforce the isolation of different social groups, and there is governmental support for segregation tendencies. The most outstanding case is the situation of the Roma, the largest ethnic minority in Hungary with approximately one million people. 45% of Roma students study in a segregated school environment.⁸ Several schools, which were segregating Roma students, were reopened with the government's approval. Despite the fight of civil liberties and anti-segregation NGOs against these trends, as well as the increased attention of the media, the education law was finally modified in 2014 to allow segregation on occasion by ministerial decree.⁹

During the first 13 years of its existence, Krétakör was a theater with a strong focus on social questions in its productions. Following a change in the profile of the organization, initiated by the artistic director in 2008, the reorganized team of Krétakör believed it was important to go beyond solely artistic aims, and to combine the company's projects with activism, social development and education. As the internationally recognized organization's achievements were disregarded by Hungarian cultural policy-makers, and the target groups of Krétakör's artistic-social projects were facing rising oppression, the company engaged itself in promoting cultural policy change and launched a fight for civil rights on several grounds. Krétakör took a leading role in setting up advocacy organizations, organizing protests and promoting the advancement of policies towards vulnerable groups in the society in several different ways.

For several years now, the education and the improvement of the situation of young people have been essential objectives of Krétakör. Numerous 'theatre in education' performances, programs for and about public schools, and other participatory projects designed for young people mark the way of the organization's developing engagement in youth programs.

Bringing together experiences from advocacy work and youth projects, and the aim to address the shortcomings of the Hungarian education environment paved the way for the company's political education program, Krétakör Szabadiskola (Free School). For Krétakör, as an experienced performing arts company, it was a creative challenge to design a program that makes dealing with public issues attractive for students, that motivates and helps them to voice their opinion in a remarkable way.

⁸ "Roma survey – Data in focus, *Education: the situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States*" (Vienna: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014) 45.

⁹ The case that led to this legislation was a school reopening in Huszártelep, Nyíregyháza, orchestrated and supported by the Ministry of Human Resources. The administration of the previously shut-down school was assigned to the Hungarian Greek Catholic Church, and it was reopened. The Chance for Children Foundation (CFCF) sued the church for segregation.

"The Hungarian government supports school segregation for Roma" <http://arhiv.cfcf.hu/hu.html?start=48>

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The program was launched in 2013 and had 3 editions since. It welcomed 150 secondary school students from nearly 50 different schools mainly from Hungary, but also from Germany, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden.

As schools typically foster students coming from a narrow spectrum of society, it was among the main objectives of the Free School to invite participants from very different backgrounds. Students with different ethnic background came from various high schools, schools with a recognized status, vocational and technical schools, institutions that are administrated either by the state, a church or NGOs, schools representing traditional and alternative pedagogical approaches, schools from the capital and from small settlements. The objective was for students to meet and work together within the program, discover means of cooperation and to cope with the diverging experiences and aims of their peers.

The Free School offered participants tools to investigate social and political issues that are in the spotlight of the ongoing public discourse. The situation of Roma and other ethnic minorities, the discrimination of homeless people, the refugee crisis, oppression based on gender, LGBTI rights, information security and youth participation were among the topics. It was an educational goal to engage with debated trends in order to learn about accessing and evaluating information and to enable young people to get involved in a discourse that usually excludes them. The program encouraged participants to become familiar with specific situations and to place them in a larger context in order to look for solutions that target the root of the social issue.

In 2014, as a part of our cooperation in the program with the Goethe Institute - Budapest, one of the Free School groups launched a large-scale guerrilla poster campaign on the issue of homelessness in the downtown of Budapest.

According to the estimates of involved NGOs in Budapest, there are around 15,000 homeless people. At the same time there are only 10,000 beds available in shelters. Some fabricate huts illegally in the neighboring forests and remote areas of town, or live in basements or other premises originally not meant for human accommodation, but still many people spend the nights on the streets. Existing shelters offer very different conditions, but beds in private rooms or rooms for couples are very rare in the system. Many institutions are only open during the night and clients must leave in the morning taking with them all their belongings.

Despite the rough conditions and the insufficient number of beds, living on the street became a crime over the past years. One can get a fine or even be taken into custody for spending the night or even resting during daily hours on the street.¹⁰

¹⁰ “Hajléktalanságról” <http://www.menhely.hu/index.php/hajlektalansagrol/tanulmanyok>; “A Város Mindenkié” <http://avarosmindenkie.blog.hu/>, “Criminalization of homelessness in Hungary” <http://www.helsinki.hu/en/criminalization-of-homelessness-in-hungary/>

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The program lasted three months, and the poster campaign was the result of the investigation of the issue. After a general overview of the situation of homeless people, students began to work closely together with them. They took part in discussions led by homeless people with the aim to present their living conditions and the regulations concerning people without a permanent address and a place to stay. The youngsters met the advocacy organizations of the homeless, visited shelters and a cottage built in the forest. They talked to sociologists and urbanists, and after processing these experiences, they designed posters. Their task was to picture the prejudices about homelessness and other challenges faced by affected people on a daily basis. They had a professional photographer (Máté Tóth Ridovics, the co-leader of the program), a designer and the group of homeless people they had worked with to consult about their plans. When the plans were finalized, program leaders organized the printing and they hung out around 90 giant images on the walls of downtown buildings.

It was unusual not only because normally we do not see so large images about homeless people on the street, but also because in another cases, students do not get involved in ongoing issues so directly. This program used their messages, and they even agreed to become models for some of the posters. By doing so, they gave their faces to the issue publicly.

It is important that the Free School's aim is to encourage students to get informed and also directly involved in current, burning issues. The program is not trying to protect teenagers from participating in ongoing debates. These issues concern them the same way as they concern older generations.

Furthermore, youth is a marginalized group in society. They need more creativity and energy to make themselves heard. This is why the Free School - together with the participants - designs its projects in a way that there is a part when public attention focuses on young people, on their work or statements. At the same time, this is a really good motivation for the participants, and it allows the program leaders to structure the learning process and to hand out responsibilities.

When it comes to the engagement of youth in public issues, the lack of civic education in the Hungarian curriculum is not only a shortcoming of the educational environment. In many cases, schools try to avoid talking about politics in general. Teachers are afraid of influencing their pupils (as a good scenario). However, in reality it is not possible to eliminate political statements from the classrooms. We all make them with all of our decisions. By how we dress, what language we use or what holidays we celebrate. The Free School promotes the idea that it is better to be conscious about this, and puts an effort into encouraging students to reflect on themselves, their choices and their environment.¹¹

¹¹ A short film presenting the program: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-cZfPuDz0Q>

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