

Connecting Student Housing With the Struggle for Democracy in Hungary

Article by Nóra Schultz

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Throughout history, universities have been birthplaces of new ideas and movements. In the late 20th century, student movements such as that of May '68 shook the world and reshaped society for generations. Today, universities continue to play their critical role as laboratories for social and political change, but their capacity to do so is waning. Between government control and the pressures of cuts, fees, and precarity, many students and academics are on the back foot.

This text is part of *Struggles in the University*, a panorama bringing together the voices from movements in and around the university. We hear from representatives of campaigns to keep students out of debt in the [Netherlands](#), oppose chronic student housing shortages in [Hungary](#), and demand a decolonised education in [Belgium](#), as well as academics resisting worsening working conditions in the [UK](#). Their experiences reveal an ongoing struggle to stand up for the emancipatory promise of education and reach out beyond the walls of its institutions to build a better society.

In June 2021, 10,000 people [marched through Budapest](#) to protest against government plans to build a campus for China's Fudan University. Some carried signs reading "treason", while [Budapest's Green mayor](#), Gergely Karácsony, denounced the government's decision as "the final and complete moral suicide of Fidesz" in a speech at the protest. The government was effectively breaking its promise to build a "Student City" for the sake of a project funded by Chinese loans, and public outrage was palpable. The march was the first large-scale anti-government action after a year of strict Covid-19 rules, and it took place at a time when China's human rights abuses were earning it strong rebukes from the EU.

Young people, who have the most to lose from the government's broken promise, were strongly represented at the march. Students are increasingly forced into the primary housing market or into paying exorbitant rents to private landlords because of a shortage of appropriate accommodation, and Budapest's housing supply cannot keep up with demand. The planned Student City project was therefore a welcome change. Beyond providing new accommodation, cultural, and sports facilities, as well as public transport networks, for approximately 8000 students, the project was expected to push rents down across the city, reducing living costs not only for young people and the families that support them but also city residents in general.

[Szikra](#) (Spark), the political movement behind the protests, struck a chord with students and the opposition. While the liberal mainstream media highlighted the national security

risks of hosting a Fudan campus within the EU, and some even raised racist concerns about Chinese people gaining influence in the country, Szikra framed the issue in terms of the material consequences for Hungarians. We chose to highlight the government's hypocrisy, as it would rather be indebted to China than provide affordable housing to thousands of young people moving to Budapest from across the country for their studies. This became a rallying cry for the opposition ahead of the April 2022 elections. A referendum bid on housing proposed by the opposition parties and spearheaded by Karácsony and then-parliamentary candidate András Jámber gathered 200,000 signatures. However, on 18 May 2022, the Constitutional Court threw out the referendum bid. This decision was made on a political basis and leaves the opposition without any legal means to appeal.

Students and teachers have tried but largely failed to make their voices heard in the last 12 years of Fidesz government. Their appetite for radical action and deep organising in the educational sector is understandably increasing. This spring, for example, hundreds of teachers were on a rolling strike, most of them participating in "wild strikes" which, under Fidesz-introduced laws, means sacrificing their wages and risking their jobs. Szikra takes this as a further sign that people want to exercise democratic control over their lives.

If the government refuses to compromise, Szikra will continue to fight for the Student City project. We believe that the lack of funding for public schools, low teacher wages, and the ideological control of teaching materials are issues that cannot be divorced from Hungary's political crisis. With our campaigns, we hope to show Hungarians that if they organise, they can challenge the Fidesz hegemony, even when the political alternative seems to have collapsed after the 2022 parliamentary elections.



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