

# **Cultivating Authoritarianism: Orbán's Political Education Project**

**Article by Péter József Bori**

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In Hungary, the policies of Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz government have placed the schooling system under immense pressure. In such a repressive environment, what prospects can there be for a green education that could raise environmentally conscious pupils with the capacity to tackle climate change? Péter József Bori sets out to identify the forces working to carve out a brighter cultural and political future for the country, while untangling the complex relationship between top-down environmental narratives, neoliberal market policies, and the rural-urban divide.

Once again ruling with a two-thirds majority, Fidesz is likely to continue the controversial educational policies that have dominated their rule for the past 12 years. Throughout this decade, Viktor Orbán's regime has taken an already beleaguered schooling system and made it more centralised, less flexible, and less resilient. The regime's restructuring measures have resulted in massive shortages in teachers and Hungarian pupils constantly ranking below the OECD country averages in [PISA tests](#).

## **A brief history of the Hungarian schooling system**

Hungary's education system has gone through several radical changes after the fall of the Soviet Union and the country's subsequent independence. In that brief historical moment when parties were united in their opposition to the communist state, it was clear to all what was needed: the schooling system had to become modern and free, and that required confronting the legacies of the socialist era. However, the lack of a clear strategy for achieving this meant the issue quickly became bogged down in party politics.

The first 10 years of independence saw inadequate measures aimed at decentralising the system. Municipalities became responsible for the administration of schools and the new National Curriculum provided a generous manoeuvring space for schools to devise their own teaching plans. However, without sufficient guidance, these progressive reforms created an overly segmented institutional set-up that failed to alleviate the issues it tried to solve. Schools in municipalities with better resources improved at the detriment of others, widening the gap between minority Roma and ethnic Hungarian pupils significantly. Furthermore, the sudden freedom given to schools did not necessarily translate into new and revolutionary curricula. Many school boards just adopted a curriculum much like that of the Soviet era.

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When Orbán assumed control in 1998 with his first election victory, his party reversed this process of decentralisation. One of their main educational measures was to introduce a so-called framework curriculum (or “*kerettanterv*”) which dictates to schools what they should teach. Critics at the time noted that these frameworks were developed without expert input and failed to provide curricula that furthered liberal, open values. Orbán lost the following 2002 elections, but these measures indicate his party had early designs for central governmental control of the education system.

Between 2002 and 2010, the socialist governments in charge attempted to liberalise the schooling system once more, but without the necessary means and pedagogic support, it failed. As a result, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the Hungarian educational system became highly segregated. Schools in rural areas and in disadvantaged neighbourhoods were more neglected and hosted a disproportionately large number of disadvantaged pupils, many from minority Roma backgrounds.

In 2010, Viktor Orbán’s pre-election messages accordingly called for a fairer schooling system with higher wages, better curricula, affordable higher education and less segregation. Yet, when he assumed control, he disregarded many of these promises and used his new-found two-thirds parliamentary majority to effect damaging changes to Hungarian schools.

His regime introduced paid higher education and adopted an expanded framework curriculum that limited what schools could teach their pupils. They further centralised the administration of schools, arguing it would help dissolve segregation. They introduced the *életpályamodell*, a portfolio-based wage-setting system that not only put significant administrative burdens on teachers, but also failed to improve their salaries in the long term. The Fidesz government also introduced financial measures that allowed religious schools to prosper and gain a lot of ground. In many villages and rural towns, religious schools became the only option for children seeking education. As Gábor Fischer [explains](#), today’s educational system is “segregated, selective, ideologically ruled, crushes societal mobility, and is detrimental to equality. All of it with teachers working on minimum wage.”

## **Education and authoritarianism**

In a truly democratic system, a healthy, free and contemporary education forms the cornerstones to societal progress and resilience against political corruption. According to educational scholar Antoni Santisteban, schools have a great responsibility to teach democratic skills and can be a key tool to combat populist discourses. If schools are indeed an important arena for combatting divisive authoritarian populist rhetoric, it is unsurprising that Viktor Orbán keeps it suppressed. In his effort to create an “[illiberal democratic society](#)” the suppression of a modern and free schooling system is an important front for discursive and socio-political war against enemies of the state.

There is perhaps also an economic motivation behind this. In a recent article, Tamás Totyik, deputy director of the Hungarian Teachers' Union explains that as Orbán has gradually distributed most of the Hungarian pie to his family and loyal ring of oligarchs, knowledge has become one of the few pathways to emancipation. But Orbán's loyal oligarchs – with stakes in the food processing industry, raw materials, real estate, and agriculture – are not interested in intellectuals. Their worship of the neoliberal economic model requires only cheap labour.

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### **Forcing eco-consciousness**

So, how can political ecology materialise in a system aimed at conveying strict materials that often mirror highly nationalistic rhetoric? Theoretically, it's possible.

The framework curriculum adopted in 2012, which sets teaching guidelines, includes several environmental themes. For instance, science and lifestyle classes for pupils aged 10 to 12 include lessons on kitchen and eco-consciousness; recycling; folk Architecture and natural building materials; and creating items using recycled materials. In natural sciences (e.g. physics, biology) and geography, teachers can focus on things like conscious clothing, urbanisation, eco-villages, and national parks. The framework also requires walks in nature and one-week school trips to one of the country's national parks.

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Yet, there is a catch. Despite the highly centralised nature of the education system, these topics do not come with detailed instructions; they rely on teachers or the faculty to transform these topics into comprehensive teaching plans. Teachers have to do the required research, compile the material, and fit it into the structure of their classes. While this could be perceived as a much-welcomed creative freedom, the reality is that most teachers are overburdened with more traditional subjects, which come with deliverables that are already difficult to convey in the given teaching hours. Teachers are also overburdened by the administrative load that comes with the new wage-setting system and many earn a salary that keeps them on the verge of subsistence.

The combination of these factors means that teachers are often unable to fit in their schedule the work that comes with incorporating these environmental topics. And even if they could, these topics are generally just not seen as important as the more mandatory ones. Gergő, a biology teacher in a small rural primary school, explained that "The problem

is that if we take the kids out to the nearby creek to teach them about rescuing frogs, they will fall behind on memorising poems of Sándor Petőfi or learning the Roman numerals.”

While these issues are widespread, rural areas are hit the hardest. In these areas there is an even higher shortage of teachers which increases the workload on those who remain.

## **Sparks of hope**

Despite the structural constraints – from poverty, administrative overload, to burnout – some teachers are pushing for progress because they believe in the need to raise children who are better stewards of our planet. Sharing their stories is important not because they are active representatives of a particular and deliberate eco-political project. Rather, their efforts need highlighting precisely because they act out of a core belief in the benefits of green education – and it is this bottom-up resistance that should be harnessed by the opposition as a vehicle for countering the Fidesz rhetoric of hate, misinformation and oppression.

For instance, Gergő regularly goes out of his way to take his students out of the classroom and into the neighbouring protected areas. He complained about the lack of real-life experiences within the schooling system, so he convinced the school’s principal to secure funding for an aquarium, in which he taught students about ecosystems, the importance of algae in absorbing emissions and aquatic life in general.

The school where he taught is in a small rural town in East Hungary and has a high rate of segregation, creating extra challenges to introduce these topics. Yet, the open-minded approach of the school’s principal, Katalin made it possible. She believes that children in such a disadvantaged area require more than just dry memorising and benefit from non-traditional teaching methods. She encourages these excursions, and often works hard to secure municipal funding for the 1 to 2 euros bus fare that parents often cannot afford.

Or take László, an Arts and Handcraft teachers in a mid-sized country town east of the capital, Budapest. László was one of the first teachers in the school to take the topic of environmental thinking seriously, when over 20 years ago he began organising an annual recycling competition. The event encourages students to deliver as much recyclable material as possible, which is weighed and added to every class’ gross recycling product. The healthy competition has led to thousands of tons of recycling in the past decade and has motivated students to become more environmentally conscious. László also incorporates the use of recycled materials into his classes and teaches pupils on the issue of plastic pollution. He takes students on visits to hydroelectric dams, nuclear power plants, windmills and talks about the importance of alternative energy sources. The remarkable thing about his work is that, for most of these 20 years, he had little support from the faculty and had to push these topics into the curriculum with hard work and devotion that often had to be done on top of the existing workload – and was therefore also unpaid.

## **The Fidesz rejection of political ecology**

These acts of resistance are particularly important considering the discursive paradox that dominates the Orbán-regime’s environmental rhetoric and the complex relationship he nurtures with education. His government preaches the importance of teachers on National

Teachers' Day but promotes policies that keep the schooling system in a perpetual state of crisis. Similarly, it heralds the importance of protecting Hungarian natural resources, but embarks on infrastructural mega-projects that gradually diminish the country's natural wealth.

The existence of a wide range of environmental themes in the centralised framework curriculum gives the impression that the government is interested in promoting environmental values in the country's schools. Hungary's former President, János Áder even nurtures an organisation called the Blue Planet Foundation that aims to expand green initiatives for school children. While this might have something to do with the appearance of these topics in the national curriculum, it is worth remembering that, as president, Áder was a politically insignificant, symbolic figure chosen by the ruling party – and would only push the topic to a point where it does not create a conflict of interest with Viktor Orbán.

On the one hand, including environmental themes in the curriculum can be used to show the global – and especially the European – community that the country is willing to address the environmental crisis. European Union funds aimed at promoting environmentalism in schools are abundant, and so are those that can be used to make schools more environmentally friendly. Today it is common to see a primary school with roofs covered in solar panels next to crumbling shanty towns occupied by the Roma minority. And in a system where European funds can be funnelled directly into the pockets of government-friendly oligarchs, it pays to paint a good public image.

On the other hand, much of the environmental curriculum is focused on individual actions that can improve one's relationship to nature. Of course, it is useful to teach the importance of recycling, using bamboo toothbrushes and correctly disposing of batteries. But a truly democratic educational system that aims at raising environmentally conscious critical thinkers should also explain the intricate connections between governments, large transnational corporations, and top-down responsibilities. It should untangle the fact that our current economic model cannot indefinitely support continuous growth, and that new ideas of social and economic organisation are needed to preserve human and non-human life on the planet.

In its current state, the curriculum is mostly concerned with raising eco-conscious consumers who are expected to mitigate climate change through individual choices that stand no chance against the corrupt construction of yet another stadium, railway line or luxury marina.

The ruling party has taken a seemingly low-risk gamble to include environmental topics. Yet devoted teachers, principals and students can defy the limitations imposed from above and steer society towards a greener future. Opposition parties must acknowledge this potential if they are to present a meaningful challenge to the Fidesz-regime in the coming years. Effectively lacking parliamentary power, the opposition should unite with civil society and better establish themselves through local and rural school initiatives. Identifying and supporting trailblazer teachers is key; through them, there might be a chance to undermine Fidesz' political hegemony.

Orbán's grip on power is in many ways maintained by misinformation through propaganda and stymieing critical thought through an education system in ruins. In such an uneven

playing field, any strategy for resistance requires thinking long-term. And education policy offers opportunities to do that.

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