

Fighting Orbanism in Budapest

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October 6, 2023

Illiberal democracy, autocracy, or even dictatorship – there is no shortage of terms for the lack of plurality of opinions, the absence of freedom of expression and the oppression of minorities in Hungary. But even in such a difficult context, local initiatives make it possible to put social justice, ecology and democracy at the heart of Hungarian politics from within and outside its public institutions.

From 1867 to 1918, Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a powerful force in Central Europe ruled by the Habsburg monarchy. The Hungarian People's Republic was proclaimed in 1949, after oscillating between being a republic and a monarchy (a regency) allied with the Nazis. It was a totalitarian Communist regime and a member of the Warsaw Pact – a military alliance established by the Soviet Union.

In 1956, a revolutionary wave swept the country, with citizens protesting the regime and the USSR's influence on public policy. The Hungarian government violently repressed the protests, leaving an indelible mark on Hungarian society.

Despite maintaining the official rhetoric, Hungary began a gradual liberalisation of its social and economic sectors in the 1960s. The name of the traditional Hungarian soup inspired the nickname "goulash socialism" for this unusual policy within the Soviet bloc. The term also became shorthand for the gap between political speech (always strict in form) and the everyday reality of citizens.

From an economic point of view, Hungary was a bridge between West and East from 1960 to 1989. It was the gateway to the East for many Western companies, and Hungarians benefited from goods unavailable in the other Communist dictatorships of the time. In 1989, with the dislocation of Eastern Europe, Hungary began a democratic transition from above. A multi-party system was introduced without any popular movement demanding it (as had been the case with Solidarność in Poland, for example). The newly established republic had no popular foundation to establish its legitimacy.

The legacy of "goulash socialism" combined with the republic's lack of popular legitimacy, are two important elements for understanding the current Hungarian political context. But these keys are far from sufficient. Hungarians' strong disinterest in politics is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Orbanism and the return of autocracy

In the parliamentary election of 2010, Viktor Orbán's party, Fidesz, took over two-thirds of the seats in the Országgyűlés (National Assembly). They had enough power to amend the constitution. Then, he gradually and skilfully set Hungary on the path to autocracy.

Although Orbán himself has claimed a positive meaning of illiberalism, as opposed to what he calls liberal non-democracy, in reality his government has increasingly restricted democratic rights. While universal suffrage is still present in Hungary, plurality of opinion is not respected, and the independence of the judiciary and media is abused. However, illiberalism is not incompatible with neoliberal economic policies such as privatisations of healthcare and tourism.

Despite being criticised by most member countries, Hungary continues to play a major strategic role

within the European Union, particularly in reindustrialisation policy. The country has successfully positioned itself as a key player in the production of batteries and electric vehicles which are necessary for decarbonising the transport sector and central to achieving the EU's ban on the sale of combustion engine cars as of 2035.

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By strengthening his powers, Viktor Orbán has left his opponents with few options. One option for opposition forces is to take power at the local level and try to act from within public institutions. However, this gives the impression that plurality still exists under Orbán's regime. Another option is to act outside government institutions at the local level, but this extends the "culture of diversion", expanding the gap between government and local reality.

One foot in, one foot out

Szikra (Spark) is a left-wing environmental movement that emerged in the wake of struggles for social rights and access to housing in Budapest. The movement relies on a tight-knit community of activists to connect and give a voice to local initiatives and struggles. Their aim is to challenge the government's narratives with new ones particularly on access to housing.

Before the 2022 parliamentary elections, all parties opposed to Viktor Orbán came together under a common banner, Egységben Magyarországért (United for Hungary), stretching from the radical left to the conservative right. The electoral system is such that half of the deputies are designated by proportional representation (cumulative results on a national scale) and the other half by obtaining a majority in one constituency.

In a bid to nominate a unified candidate for constituencies, opposition parties conducted primaries. András Jámbor, the founder of independent media outlet *Mérce* and a member of the Szikra movement, was nominated for Budapest's 8th and 9th working-class districts. After the 2022 national elections, he became the only representative from a radical left-wing group in the Hungarian National Assembly.

This "one foot out, one foot in" strategy of András Jámbor allows him to act as a megaphone for alternative policies. For example, when speaking in Parliament, he promotes participatory democracy initiatives, campaigns for a better distribution of wealth and calls for the introduction of subsidies for the renovation of energy-draining buildings.

Outside the institution, Szikra multiplies links with local trade unions and international movements. They maintain relations with citizens' movements operating in similar political contexts, as in Poland.

The real impact of the movement is difficult to quantify. The political obstacles are numerous and often

insurmountable. Having a deputy sitting in the National Assembly is the most they can do in such a blocked political context. However, with nearly 300 members, the Szikra Movement has no intention of stopping there, and hopes to increase its influence over the coming years. In the words of Áron Rossman-Kiss, member of the Szikra movement, “If we continue to refuse politics, we will never change anything”.

If political action in Hungary seems compromised on a national scale, the municipal level is no exception. In Budapest and elsewhere, many are fighting the Orbán system on a daily basis.

Ecologists in local government

Another strand of the opposition is represented by Párbeszéd-Zöldek (Dialogue for Hungary – the Greens). Allied with the other left-wing parties, they won the 2019 municipal elections in the capital and have a majority in most of the capital’s 22 districts.

The green-left administration has been under constant pressure from the state during its tenure. Through his control of the legislative body, Viktor Orbán prevents elected representatives from enacting ambitious local policies. He has also stripped local power over public services. For example, elementary schools used to be run by municipalities, but following a constitutional amendment, the Hungarian constitution now stipulates that they must be administered by the state. The same is true for the midwifery network or certain town-planning competencies.

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Land ownership is another battleground. By buying up land and buildings through the national parliament, Viktor Orbán is “nationalising” many plots of land and buildings originally owned by municipalities. This strategy is part of his wider strategy of applying financial pressure. By restricting national subsidies and directing European subsidies to Orbán supporters, or targeting them with special taxes, the ruling party keeps opposition municipalities, particularly those on the left, on their toes. This is happening to such an extent that the city of Budapest has to go into debt to pay for its operating expenses, such as the public transport network. The Orbán-controlled national media blame opposition municipalities’ supposed incompetence for the budgetary crisis and ignore the financial manipulation by the Orbán government.

Despite the obstacles, the mayor’s office has launched a number of initiatives, including a participatory budget. The removal of parking spaces to make the neighbourhood streets more user-friendly is just one example of the projects selected by citizens. The town council is also working on equal opportunity programs in (nursery) schools, to increase social diversity and fight against the segregation of gypsies from an early age. On issues of biodiversity and adapting to climate change, local green politician Gábor Erőss is campaigning for an urban forest project. Though the initiative is unlikely to succeed, as the land has been reclaimed by the state to build soccer fields with synthetic turf.

Political commitment to “change things from within” in

Hungary requires a certain amount of courage and self-sacrifice.

Like many Hungarian intellectuals, Gábor Erőss studied abroad and remains deeply imbued with European culture. In particular, he draws inspiration from cities like Paris for its cyclo-mobility policy and energy poverty measures. When asked how the European Union can support opposition municipalities in the face of Orbán's state, he replies: "It's ambiguous. Before there was this dominant nationalist discourse which was to say that we, the opposition, are "traitors to the fatherland" because we ask the European institutions to condition European subsidies on democratic criteria. Today, the debate is over, and the fact of addressing European institutions has become legitimate and easier to defend."

He believes that Europe is not federal enough, and that democratic criteria should take precedence over all else. At present, European funds negotiated as part of the European Recovery and Resilience Facility in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic are "blocked" in Brussels for Hungary.

Political commitment to "change things from within" in Hungary requires a certain amount of courage and self-sacrifice. In this context, another form of commitment becomes particularly relevant: political action outside of public institutions.

Commons and the culture of diversion in Eastern Europe

Budapest has proved conducive to "bottom-up" citizen initiatives. From their communist heritage, these countries, including Hungary, retain a certain tradition of solidarity, empathy, and care outside public or private institutions. This culture of the "commons" is central and alive in a country where public institutions are subject to an authoritarian regime.

This reality begs the question: what if Eastern European countries were in fact the best positioned for the necessary paradigm shift required by the ecological transition? In a degrowth world, for example, the values of simplicity, conviviality and mutual aid promoted by the culture of the "common" would be the foundations on which society would function.

Although constantly threatened by the liberalisation of the economy that increased in the 1990s, many of Budapest's commons still exist. The large number of abandoned buildings has enabled the emergence of alternative spaces over the past 30 years. Very much alive in the 1990s and 2000s, a dense network of alternatives (bars, citizen initiatives, cooperatives, etc.) was structured and reached its apogee in 2016-2017. Far from having disappeared, Budapest's counter-culture has nevertheless been weakened by the Covid-19, generational change and the city's touristification process.

In this context, the Cargonomia project was officially launched in 2015 (the project had already begun to take shape in 2010). A group of five friends, steeped in this alternative lifestyle, decided to leave the dominant model behind and experiment with something new. Using their respective knowledge and networks, they created an initiative combining bicycle culture, agroecology, degrowth, politics and research.

In concrete terms, Cargonomia is defined as the convergence of several existing initiatives: Cyclonomia, a bicycle self-repair workshop, Zsámbok Biokert, an organic farm, and Kantaa, a self-organized courier service.

From 2010 onwards, the members of a bike workshop started training in welding and began building,

among other things, cargo bikes to transport heavy goods in urban areas. In addition to demonstrating a different way of moving in the city and proposing an alternative logistics system free of polluting thermal vehicles, the cargo bikes made Cargonomia a meeting point for different projects and a place for socializing. This low-tech mode of transport helps to shape new exchanges, based on balanced economic and social relations, and to design a slower and more desirable future. Far from being reduced to a “bike store”, Cyclonomia is first and foremost a “social center”, a place where citizens can buy or borrow a cargo bike for a move, for example, or simply repair their own bike autonomously. Cyclonomia also offers a cyclo-logistics service, delivering baskets of local organic fruit and vegetables from the Zsámboki Biokert farm to the city, thus ensuring continuity between urban and rural areas. The self-organised courier service is provided by the small company “Kantaa”, also part of the Cargonomia universe.

Located in the village of Zsámbok, about 50 kilometres from Budapest, the 3.5-hectare Zsámboki Biokert farm was established in 2010. Based on an organic and biodynamic farming model, the farm produces fruit and vegetables that are sold at the market (40 per cent) and in baskets in cooperation with Cargonomia in the city (60 per cent). Delivery is based on a pre-order system inspired by Community-supported agriculture (CSA). Every week, the Zsámboki Biokert farm distributes a hundred baskets. With five employees, the farm creates a dynamic within the village of Zsámbok, and offers higher wages than those usually earned by Hungarian farmers. Thus, Zsámboki Biokert is a social and convivial space, reconciling social and ecological issues and proposing an alternative economic model, emancipated from the logic of profit. The link with Cargonomia ensures the farm’s stability and connection to the city.

Cargonomia members take part in numerous events to promote their cargo bikes and the degrowth values they embody. Like many of the initiatives we met during our trip, the members of Cargonomia face the challenge of generational shock, the new Hungarian generation being less steeped in the culture of the commons (and conversely, more steeped in Western individualism) than their elders (some of whom have emigrated to other European countries). Aware of this need to pass on knowledge, the team welcomes many visitors from different backgrounds such as school children and international students.

By providing a common narrative for their initiatives, Cargonomia bridges the gap between practice and theory. Strategically, they assume their status as a simple, concrete utopia and a front for spreading the ideas of degrowth, without falling into the trap of the quest for profit and the race for subsidies. “You have to be careful with utopias. The risk is in taking too many people with us, and if it collapses, it’s a disaster. We’re trying small experiments... If Cargonomia falls apart, there aren’t millions of people behind it, so we’re taking it one step at a time” explains Vincent Liegey, co-founder of Cargonomia

This constant juggling between ideas and action makes Cargonomia an example of degrowth in action. When asked what strategy to adopt to avoid the coming ecological crash, Vincent Liegey replies that the crash is inevitable. The real challenge is to make people understand what is happening, to reinforce local production and solidarity, and to prepare people’s minds in a “pedagogy of catastrophe”.

Contrary to catastrophism, this pedagogy argues that we need to make society sufficiently familiar with a political idea so that, in the wake of a deep crisis, our society takes the path of degrowth rather than the path of an increasingly totalitarian neoliberalism. This strategy seems particularly relevant in view of the effects of the Covid-19 crisis, which, despite the ephemeral debates on “the world after”, has only tightened control of citizens and corporate power.

Behind the façade of freedom

Paradoxically, Budapest is one of the most festive cities we visited: the many European tourists and Hungary's urban youth can all have fun, dance and celebrate. From this rich and lively counter-culture springs a strong sense of freedom. The apparent simplicity, lightness and humility of the Hungarian way of life suggests a relatively gentle and peaceful life when you live to the rhythm of the city for a few days, months or years as a tourist, trainee or white worker from Europe or the United States. This paradox specific to the city of Budapest is both a cause for hope and concern. Firstly, hope: even in an authoritarian state, creativity and festivity persist. This is a far cry from the grey and sad everyday life of twentieth-century totalitarian countries as portrayed in films or history lessons. This counter-culture, although weakened, remains a space for the dissemination of new political ideas that can spark citizens' movements.

Above all, it's a source of concern, because this façade of freedom hides a very different reality: the political and civil freedoms of minorities are being eroded and dissenting opinions are not welcomed. Even if it allows us to maintain a form of hope, getting involved as elected representatives requires extreme courage and a certain resignation: the left-wing parties cannot bring about any major political change. Commitment outside the institution probably enables people to last a little longer, but it eventually breaks. Generally speaking, more and more elected representatives and opposition activists are fleeing the country every year, in the knowledge that they are leaving a little more of Hungary in the hands of the far right.

Ultimately, the greatest cause for concern seems to lie in the long-term nature of the situation, and the tendency of many European countries to follow the illiberal path pioneered by Hungary.



In a gap year in the middle of her Master's degree in ecology "Societies and Biodiversity", Cléa is involved in social and ecological issues. She is active in LUPA at Sorbonne University and participated in the People's Summit for Climate Justice in Glasgow during the COP26. She also contributes to the citizen project "La Route en Communes" which focuses on the municipal level.



After studying geology, Hugo did a master's degree in economics with a specialization in renewable energies. He has been involved in a student representative association, working on the integration of climate issues in academic programs before joining the CliMates research team as a research coordinator.



As a student in ecology, she started getting involved politically within her university, before becoming interested in the local level by interviewing mayors on issues of democracy and ecology. In 2021, she attended the COP26 to learn about international negotiations. She was also part of the Relais Jeunes.

Published October 6, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/fighting-orbanism-in-budapest/>

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