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# ENTHUSIASTIC CONSUMERS, NON-COMMITTED DEMOCRATS

**A study about the relationship of youth to  
democracy in Hungary**

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**The aim of our study was to get a better grasp of young Hungarians' relationship to 'democracy' as a system of rule, their commitment to what are generally considered 'democratic values', and to uncover the reasons behind the low levels of political activity among young people in Hungary (defined as people between 16 and 35 years of age). In this summary we present the key findings of the Hungarian study.**

**Our study was based on secondary analysis of existing research and databases. We used the results of relevant analyses and academic literature on this issue in Hungary, complementing these with data gleaned from Hungarian and international polls.**

**One of our key aims was to provide proposals and recommendations for political actors and civil society groups aiming to strengthen young people's eagerness to participate in the political process, their commitment to democratic values, and their commitment to democracy as a system of rule. This summary ends with the full translation of the recommendations formulated by our experts.**

## Key Findings

The majority of Hungarian youth can be characterized as good consumers, but non-committed democrats. Since the transition, the free market democratic system has produced a strong economic socialization effect on the young, educating them to become relatively "good consumers". Political socialization, however, has proved to be an absolute failure: Youth have not been educated to become "good democrats". One reason for this could be that with respect to generational political differences, there is not much difference between the young and the elderly, although the former definitely possess a more developed consumer mentality than does the older generation.

- Since the transition, neither the family nor the schools have been able to fulfil the task of political socialization in Hungary. In the family, a great majority of children tend to learn to distance themselves from politics. In the school, the topic of the society and politics is hardly mentioned.
- Because of this, Hungarian youths are barely interested in politics. They are partly indifferent, and in part consciously distance themselves. They barely trust any political institutions.
- In international comparisons, the proportion of politically indifferent young people is the lowest in the northern European and some western European countries. Lagging behind these countries, of the "Visegrád Four", Czech youth are the least politically interested, while Hungary is in the middle, just ahead of "moderate" Slovakia and Poland.
- Hungarian youth make a sharp distinction between politics and public life. While they associate the politics with parties and power struggles, they regard public life as dealing mainly with the problems of society and common issues.

- The young tend to reject politics more than the elderly. They are less interested in it and they also understand it less.
- Youth knowledge about politics is poor. Although their lexical knowledge is above the international average, they perform badly when using this knowledge in practice or demonstrating understanding of information. According to international comparisons, the level of political knowledge does not depend on the democratic past and traditions of a certain country, but on the students' reading comprehension skills.
- Based on available research, it is difficult to establish differences in political attitudes between men and women. Although certain studies revealed that men tend to demonstrate greater political interest in and knowledge of political issues than women, this did not bear an influence on democratic commitment or attitudes in these datasets. The most that can be said at this point is that data gender aspects should be examined in the framework of a separate research dedicated to these questions.
- Hungarian youths have a statist-individualistic perception of the state: Democracy is considered a "protective shield" against the influence of the state, not as an opportunity to participate and give one's opinion. It is more important for them to have personal and financial security than to pursue political and social values (e.g., of tolerance and solidarity). This "materialistic" perception makes them different from the youth of the other Visegrád countries.
- As a result, the democratic commitment of the young is rather low-key: About 40% regard democracy as the best political system, while for about one-third it is totally irrelevant what political system they live in. Besides this, they are paternalistic, lack trust, and are opposed to competition; in this respect they are not different from the older generation.
- Competition is considered a kind of coercion. Youth fear it and are frustrated with it, which indicates their lack of self-confidence. They both envy and look down on successful people. This could be linked to their demand for a nanny state, as well as to the fact that they are averse to political competition, which is an indispensable part of democracy.
- Just like society as a whole, Hungarian youth also are prejudiced, but compared to the elderly they are somewhat more open and accepting. They are less authoritarian, less "male-chauvinist" and lean less towards parties of "order".
- Of the Hungarian youth subcultures that are relevant to public life, the most significant is the extreme-right subculture. Besides this, an ideologically mixed, green-left-liberal group also seems to exist which has several elements of a subculture but lacks a strong, identity-forming community force similar to that of nationalism in the right-wing radical camp.
- In many cases, what lies behind youth belonging to an extreme-right group is not some spectacular attraction to nationalist ideology, but individual psychological factors (e.g., feelings of rebellion, anger, and the need for protection). The main attractive force of the extreme right is that it offers the opportunity to rebel against the canon of "tolerance" and "being politically correct" through strong, functional communities in the name of tradition.
- In building the extreme-right youth movement and creating an attractive image, fashion plays a significant role, as does a successful "civic" self-definition through which the movement separates itself from the "detested" political sphere.

## Summary

### 1. Actors of socialization

Here we examine the factors that shape youth democratic commitment in Hungary.

#### 1.1. Socialization within the family

It is the family that plays the most important role in shaping the social personality of children. The patterns youth see in the family and the values acquired there become deeply entrenched in their personalities. In the family environment they take on several competencies that are important as far as civic consciousness and an active role in public life are concerned ( e.g., being conscious of the media, committed to democratic values, to co-operation, to representation of one's interests, debating culture, conflict resolution, etc.) A number of pieces of research prove that family background has an enormous influence on youth opinions of politics (e.g., the more present politics are in the life of the family, the greater the chance that a child will turn to politically-related phenomena earlier and with greater interest). **Since the transition, however, families have been unable to fulfil their roles concerning socialization for political participation in Hungary. In the family, the majority of Hungarian children learn to keep a distance from political life, and they are socialized to be politically passive.** This is mainly because the family prepares the young first to develop a relationship with politics that avoids conflict. As a result, the conveying of potentially conflicting political values is put aside and conformity prevails.

#### 1.2. School socialization

The failure of political socialization through the family could be one reason why Hungarian society deems schools more important with respect to politics than the family. The school system in fact plays a more significant role in shaping youth trust towards politics and the development of their political emotions and knowledge. Public education, in theory, can also help to decrease the differences arising from differences in family background. By conveying political knowledge, acquiring political competencies, schools also prepare students to cope at work, in society, and in public life. However, almost all studies of youth reveal that **the Hungarian school system lacks the ability to teach civics and public education is unable to educate the young to be conscious citizens.**

At the time of the transition, the schools aimed to introduce a new system, different from the pre-transition schools, which had been politicized and emphasized the socialist role model. However, there was no consensus in Hungarian society about the new political educational role of schools, the political values to be conveyed, or the set of mutual common core values of parents and schools. **The new system depoliticized these institutions; however, by excluding party politics, politics in general was removed from the schools.** Every kind of knowledge or thinking connected to politics was declared suspicious. In addition to excluding political (or public affairs) topics, **there are several structural items in the school system that are counterproductive as far as democratic commitment is concerned** (e.g., Hungarian education is centred around teaching about the past, around frontal teaching, and on exclusively theoretical knowledge; children are not taught how to represent their own interests, the inner structure of the schools is hierarchical, and students are not involved in school management).

All of these factors tend to reproduce the differences children bring from home when it comes to learning about political culture instead of decreasing them. It is interesting to see that neither parents nor teachers think civic education should be an important role of schools. This data reveals that **a precondition for efficient civic education would be the adequate training of teachers** at the level of knowledge, methodology, and motivation.

### *1.3. The influence of the political environment*

Although democratic structures have been born in Hungary, the parties that appeared at the time of the transition did not prove successful in the political socialization of the young. They were not able to communicate with them or make the majority of youth politically active. Even in the case of the first Orbán administration, which was supposed to be closer to the young, we cannot say that youth interests prevailed or that there were any messages or actions aiming at involving young people in politics. Hungarian governments and political role-players have traditionally targeted the older generations. This contributes to the fact that the majority of youth hold repugnant feelings towards politics, have no trust in it, and feel indifferent to it. In the long run, there is a danger that as this generation grows up, its disappointment with economic and political situations and actors could spread to the political system as a whole. It can be clearly seen now that, contrary to the new Constitution movement initiated by Fidesz-KDNP, the young have not become involved in creating a well-founded democratic order.

#### **1.3.1. The radicalization of the young**

Since 2006 there have been a lot of changes in Hungarian political life that have contributed to the rise of the extreme right. The economic crisis has also strengthened the latitude of the extreme right, as continuous existential fear and *de facto* impoverishment made disappointment with the system stronger. There are three factors to the politics of Jobbik that have made it possible for the party to address those disillusioned with or rejecting parliamentary parties (including the young): (1) the symbolic force of the party's ideas and rhetoric, (2) the use of a volunteer "civic" force as opposed to party politics, (3) the party's monopoly on the issue of Roma. The subculture of the extreme right also plays a major role in addressing the young. The popularity of Jobbik can also be attributed to the failure on the part of other parties with respect to their youth policies, as well as the lack of political socialization in Hungarian society.

## **2. Values and democratic attitudes**

In this section we examine the factors that express the relationship of the young to democracy and related topics such as democratic systems, the free market, nationalism, and the youth attitude towards minorities.

### *2.1. Attitudes towards democratic systems*

#### **2.1.1. Political interest**

Young people in Hungary are generally indifferent towards politics. In part, they reject it consciously or keep their distance from it. This phenomenon is not a product of the transition, as political passivity was a recognized pattern during the Kádár era. After a rise in youth political interest at the time of the transition, such interest had significantly declined by the mid 1990s (even compared to the Kádár era).

After 1989-90, the majority of the young almost immediately turned away from politics and looked at what was happening with indifference and alienation. They looked at public life as an undesirable territory that was hard to judge, and they formed a very condemnatory, negative opinion about the operation of political parties. The reason for this very negative image of politics among Hungarian youth is that they identify the term with party politics and power struggles, distinguishing it from the term “public life”, which they associate with addressing social problems and public affairs. Their indifference to politics, although it is not a unique phenomenon, is comparatively extreme in the international context.

### 2.1.2. Knowledge about politics

Youth knowledge about politics is shallow and in many cases distorted. Although youth lexical knowledge of politics is above the international average, their application of this knowledge in practice, their understanding of political information, and their ability to think independently are not their strong suit, and they perform badly on international tests of those skills. It is not surprising, therefore, that the data show many youth have problems understanding politics.

### 2.1.3. Trust in politics

At the European level, Hungarian young people’s lack of trust in politics is extraordinarily high. They place the least trust in those institutions that are considered a means of party and power politics (the parties and Parliament) and they place the most trust in institutions that are independent but still form a part of political life (the Constitutional Court and other courts). Youth do not think highly of politicians’ attentions in their direction, of their own political weight, or of their chances for participating in political debate either. Many feel politicians do not care about the opinions of the young and that they can have no say in public affairs.

### 2.1.4. Image of democracy

When analyzing the youth interpretation of democracy in Hungary, we see the same kind of passive, statist-individualist attitude that was characteristic of the Kádár era. They regard democracy as a personal “protective shield” against the influence of the state, not as an opportunity to speak up and participate. In their image of democracy, the most important issues are personal and financial security, and little is mentioned about political and social values. There is very little emphasis on solidarity or tolerance for minorities and the disadvantaged, and youth do not find minority rights to be important. However, this is no different from international trends.

### 2.1.5. Authoritative instincts

The democratic commitment of Hungarian youth: About 40 % of them believe democracy to be the best political system, while one-third are indifferent towards what kind of system they live in. It is surprising to see that while those who think highly of democracy have proportionally high academic achievements, college graduates and currently enrolled college students whose parents also have a higher education have the most extreme attitudes *against* democracy. Those who accept the use of violence and the “leader principle” can not only be characterized as having more political knowledge than those who reject such anti-democratic views. They also often graduate from the more prestigious high schools. These results show that better school qualifications and a greater degree of political knowledge do *not* guarantee a commitment to democracy.

## *2.2. Free market attitudes*

Hungarian youth are strongly paternalistic, lack trust in politics, and are anti-competition, but in this they do not differ from older generations. At the same time they have a very developed consumer mentality, and in this respect they show a significant difference from the attitude of older generations. The biggest difference is not that Hungarian voters, including the young, expect the state to provide for their welfare, but that they are not aware of the implications of this expectation, namely, that a more active role for the state means higher taxes and more sacrifices from the citizenry.

The youth demand for a nanny state might contribute to the high level of distrust that youth report of each other (and supposedly of themselves as well): Since these individuals hold a low opinion of people in general, their self-confidence is weak and they expect the state to improve their life. They find competition to be compulsory, they fear it and are frustrated with it, and they envy and condemn successful people at the same time. The attitude of their general environment toward competition is the same, so there is no chance they will learn from their home or their school about why competition can be good for community. It is therefore not surprising that youngsters do not think highly of political competition either. What is more, because of their prejudice towards politics, their knowledge of and experience with the competitive political system is even worse than their understanding of economic competition.

## *2.3. Opinions on nationalism*

Since the new nationalism does not fully represent the ideology of extreme-right politicians, the over-representation of youth among their supporters does not suggest that a rigid, ostracizing attitude is characteristic of everyone. Many times surveys of youth have shown there is distrust, incoherence, and disturbed thinking about national identity. This increases the latitude of nationalist political forces, as they can give direction to a rather broad social group as far as national consciousness is concerned, and the young are easily manipulated. In many cases it is not necessarily an attraction to nationalist ideology, but individual psychological factors that make extreme-right groups more attractive to youth, such as feelings of rebellion, anger, the need for defence, the need to belong, or a desire for higher social status.

## *2.4. Prejudice and attitudes toward minorities*

We believe prejudice and attitudes toward minorities do not derive primarily from socio-economic structures, but in many cases are a means of compensating for a lack of national self-esteem which has been destroyed by various political offences and collective frustrations. As most prejudices are inherently symbolic, they are good tools for forming community. Although Hungary, compared to other European countries, is more prejudiced (including its youth), compared to the older generation in Hungary we can see that the young are more open and accepting than the old.

The most widespread prejudice in Hungary is towards the Roma population. Prejudice towards Jewish people is weaker than prejudice against Roma. Although Hungary does not have a significant inflow of immigration, the majority of the population is prejudiced towards immigrants for public security, labour market and cultural reasons. This, too, shows the symbolic nature of prejudice. The prejudice of Hungarian society, including the young, provides broad latitude for political movements that are dangerous for democracy, movements that are trying to articulate, create room for and intensify people's hard feelings towards minorities.

### 3. Subculture identities

Here we introduce cultural factors that influence the political opinion and democratic attitudes of the youth (rebellion, fashion, community-forming power and subcultures).

#### 3.1. *The role of rebellion and fashion*

Since the active part of the younger generation looks to politics for the opportunity to rebel, it is often easier for radicals to address them. All across Europe, movements that defy the 1968 ideology of acceptance and equality are getting stronger. In several countries, the extremes are the only political space to give youth the opportunity to rebel in the name of tradition against the canon of "tolerance" and "political correctness". These movements efficiently combine basic values, based on traditions, with modern means of expression. This can explain why Jobbik is so popular among the young, although among the youngest those attractive values are not the same as those featured in the mainstream communication of the party (e.g., prejudice, a right-wing value orientation related to authoritarianism, and fear). In recent times, radical right-wing ideology has been recreated as a new youth culture with its own music bands, brands, festivals, intellectual circles, and alternative publicity. This ideology helps make the extreme right fashionable, together with the supposed (or real) opposition to it from the rest of society, which ostensibly condemns the followers of radical ideas.

#### 3.2. *The community-forming power of the extreme right*

Symbolically, the year 2006 in Hungary is as important for the self-consciousness of the extreme right as is the Trianon Treaty of 1920. Their successfully-defined "civic" self-image has played an important role in building the extreme-right movement and making it attractive to the younger generation. Paradoxically, even though most extreme-right supporters espouse political goals, they consider themselves to be "civic", not "political".

#### 3.3. *Youth (public life) subcultures*

Of all the youth subcultures, the most significant and spectacular in Hungary is the right-wing subculture. Nationalist rock music is at its core. For most young people, this music is their first point of contact with nationalist radicalism and opens the door to the "counter-culture". The following factors play an important role in the success of the extreme-right subculture: (1) the crowding of public education and problems with finding jobs, (2) mainstream parties' weakness at attracting and integrating youth, (3) the vacuum on the political left, (4) a strong consumer culture which has created "good consumers", (5) efficient communications and self-organized alternative publicity.

Besides the radical nationalist subculture, there is also a recognizable cultural grouping that has formed around subcultural elements associated with big-city life. While those who are identified as belonging to this group also share cultural preferences, value orientation, and in particular an attraction to certain cultural events (the so-called "Critical Mass" bike rides and the Sziget music festival), they are not as united as their ultranationalist counterparts. The main reason behind this is that this group lacks the strong cultural glue (nationalism) and political party (Jobbik) that unite radical nationalist youth. For this reason while the "Critical Mass" group can be defined as a loose "lifestyle group" constructed around liberal and alternative values, the nationalist subculture can be defined as an "identity group".

## Recommendations

### Further research directions

Since the transition in Hungary there have been several studies conducted about the young, but there are several questions left to be answered. There needs to be further research on the following topics:

- What are the distinctive features of the young compared to the older generation?
- What are the deeper reasons behind the separation of “public life” from “politics” among the young generation?
- Will judgements about democracy ever become separated from those about politics in general in the mind of the young?
- What is needed for “public life” activism to turn into “political” activism?
- What is needed for the political and/or public life activism seen on the Internet to turn into actual (real-world) activism?
- What do the young think about the major issues focused on by the political parties that concern their generation?
- What is the attitude of Roma youth toward democracy?
- What is the relationship between the image young people have of themselves and how others view them?

### Recommendations concerning education

#### *The introduction of Civics as a subject in high school education*

Just like in Germany, it would be advisable to introduce this subject in Hungarian high schools (as a supplement to History) in order to indirectly draw students’ attention to the advantages of democracy and democratic decision-making procedures using a review of the dominant political ideologies of the 20th century. The subject would convey some political knowledge so students can comprehend the basic logic of democracy in an understandable way.

#### *“Debate is good!” – “Public life at schools and universities!”*

It would be good to start a campaign so that high schools and universities do not reject the organization of public debates on political issues (by introducing debating programs, for example).

#### *“Honesty about public life in the school!” - Training for teachers*

It would be good for civic organizations and education experts to train teachers in methodologies and options for education about public life.

#### *Ethical code on civics education*

Based on the German Beutelsbach Consensus, it would be good for teachers and parents’ organizations to establish the foundations of an ethical code to serve as the basis for civics education.

## Recommendations about socialization in the family

### *Education about public life with the help of a television series*

It would be good to develop a popular TV series where every month a topic or question about the relationship between a parent and a child would come up for one year. Possible topics: The past of one's own family (e.g., what grandparents experienced during World War 2, how the transition has affected the family existentially and psychologically), unemployment, the chances of being able to study at university, elections (not from the aspect of party politics, but from the aspect of exercising one's suffrage), and so on. Besides these topics, it would be important to convey the message that while such topics between parents and children are not necessarily part of the daily routine, the young are also interested in them and may not know when and how to ask about them.

## Recommendations about politics

### *"You are needed!"/"We count on you!" – including young people in shaping youth policy*

Local-level politicians should, without any media attention, visit youth organizations and talk to youngsters. The relationships that develop at these meetings could later continue with the help of the Internet.

### *Student asks, politician answers – Live debate*

High-ranking politicians should hold debate forums, especially with students. The moderated debate would take place as follows: The students can ask questions and express their opinions and the participating politician then answers. The event could be broadcast live on TV, radio or the Internet, so anyone could easily join the debate from anywhere.

### *Academic competitions by political foundations*

Foundations linked to political parties should announce competitions on various topics and through various formats (e.g., writing essays, photo contests, team contests) for high school and university students. The topic of the competition would fit the ideological framework of the foundation (e.g., the political role of the community, solidarity, traditions, environmental issues, or the role of competition in politics)

## Issue-related recommendations (and others)

### *Shaping the relation to the transition could be done by producing*

- Viral videos about the main events of the transition.
- Short video messages from actors in the transition about what the change meant for them and in which young people today would talk about how they view 1989/90.
- An interactive website about the history of the transition providing an historical summary, a daily chronology of events at that time, a "who's who" section, advanced search functions, documents from the time, and personal accounts.
- Living libraries at youth festivals and mass events: Creating a living library of people who were active during the transition, but who were not well-known and who hold no public office today.

*Competition, co-operation, debate culture*

In order to strengthen the democratic commitment of youth, the most important task would be to explain the roles and the complementary characters of competition and co-operation on the one hand, and to develop a culture of debate on the other hand. Therefore, trainings, debate contests, and youth camps would be necessary in order to train parents, teachers, and young people in competition, co-operation and debate culture. Scholarships as rewards for writing essays about these issues would be a useful tool as well.

*Involving the young in cultural life*

Research shows there is a connection between consumer culture and public activism. Culture can therefore be an entry point into public life and politics. There is a need to urge youth involvement in cultural life and to broaden their knowledge about culture.

*“The rebellion of democrats”*

The extreme-right myth is that they are oppressed. Democratic youth should openly declare that today it is actually they who are in the minority and that being a democrat means rebelling against totalitarian societies.

*Online public life directory*

People could ask questions about public life by e-mail, through a website, on Facebook or by using a smart phone application to receive quick answers (for example, “Who’s who?”, explanations of expressions, what happened and when, etc.)

*Collective website about civics education*

It would be good to design a website to collect domestic and international news, information, examples of civic organizations, best practices in civic education, and civic education programs on.

*“Argue here” – online debate on Facebook*

Since young people spend a lot of time on Facebook, which is also a significant source of social orientation for them, Facebook may be the most efficient channel through which to reach them. This platform should be used for developing youths debate skills, too. Therefore, a Facebook page could be launched in order to generate debates and help youth practice debate methods. Debates can also be generated through Facebook profiles created for this purpose.

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