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Path dependency and education in Hungary



Historical experiences profoundly influence the social and political dynamics of all countries, including Hungary. Elements such as political culture, social interactions, and even policy-related matters—like the development of the healthcare system—are shaped by the past, a phenomenon known as path dependency. This path dependency can have both positive and negative implications. For instance, in the United States, the enduring democratic traditions serve as a positive example,

helping to unify the nation even during times of significant polarization. For many, the value of democracy outweighs party allegiance. Conversely, negative aspects of path dependency are evident in the legacy of slavery and segregation, which continue to create tension and frustration within American society, sparking protests and movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM).

This brief review highlights that path dependency has both positive and negative aspects. The critical question is how we can enhance the positive effects while minimizing the negative ones. Education emerges as a key method in this endeavor. It can help eliminate detrimental societal reflexes, address deep-seated traumas, and simultaneously promote positive attributes. This objective becomes even more crucial during systemic transitions. As Dahrendorf [stated](#), it takes six months for the rule of law to establish, six years for an economic system to stabilize, and up to sixty years for society to fully adapt to a new system—in Hungary's case, to democracy.

The Hungarian education system often faces criticism, not only regarding its efficiency but also for its inability to adequately prepare students—future adults—for life in a democracy. Many aspects of the educational style still reflect the legacy of the socialist era and even earlier times. Hierarchy remains a

significant feature in Hungarian schools, where students are subordinate to teachers, who in turn answer to the leadership of the educational district. Parental involvement can also complicate matters at various levels. As a result, it becomes exceedingly difficult for Hungarians to develop into effective democratic citizens, as they are never taught how to be one. Moreover research showed, even teachers often struggle to define the key attributes of good citizenship. Unfortunately, the education system primarily emphasizes the transfer of factual knowledge across subjects, lacking the ambition to reinforce the positive aspects of path dependency or to address its shortcomings.

This shortcoming, among others, is depicted in the new Hungarian film "[Lesson Learned](#)," where young teacher Juci strives to challenge the outdated practices at her school. Meanwhile, Palkó, a new student who recently moved from Germany, struggles to adapt to the demanding educational system. The film explores many underlying reasons why the educational system has been unable to overcome the so-called [Distorted Hungarian Character](#). The echoes of the socialist era are still evident in the film, showcasing a hierarchical, non-student-centered approach. Civic education has always been a central focus of our interest, and we have consistently highlighted its essential role in nurturing a democratic society in

our previous [works](#). Although democratic institutions and a market economy have been introduced, the foundations of democratic norms remain tenuous. Consequently, the effectiveness of these imported systems remains questionable, and the fragility of democratic norms undoubtedly undermines democratic resilience. Thus, we can assert that the Hungarian education system does not contribute to alleviating the sixty-year timeline identified by Dahrendorf, rather, it maintains the contradictions between historical and contemporary norms. Despite these significant contradictions, the coexistence of these norms serves as a key driver of the country's broader political development and profoundly influences daily politics. Therefore, to fully grasp the dynamics and logic of the current political landscape, it is essential to explore the nation's historical context, allowing us to uncover deeper connections.