

Don't Take Democracy for Granted

What does living in an authoritarian country and a frog have in common?

I am sure you have heard the metaphor of the boiling frog that gets slowly cooked until it dies without even noticing.-

This is what Hungary has felt like for the past 13 years.

After 40 years of state socialism, we started out with a lukewarm democracy in the 1990s. It was not a democratic paradise, but it was a more or less functioning democracy. In 2010 a right-wing government came to power and they have won the elections three more times since. This government has taken the most dangerous aspects of our culture and made them the main pillars of their politics: nationalism, racism, homophobia, a disdain for poor people and a general suspicion and hatred of Others. Today Hungary is in the gray zone between a dictatorship and a democracy.

This did not happen overnight. The heat was turned up under us slowly but with a very firm hand. I can't count how many times I have heard people say: they will not go that far, this will never happen.

We said this before they made homelessness a crime in the Constitution.

We said this when they created one of the most anti-worker labor laws of Europe nicknamed the slave law, which among other things, allows an extreme exploitation of workers.

We said this before they started turning our LGBTQ friends and family into internal enemies, reduced same sex couples to second class citizens and banned sexual education in schools in the name of protecting children from pedophilia.

And we also said this before they intimidated, fired and censored teachers for speaking the truth about their wages and working conditions and tear-gassed high school students for protesting for quality education.

But in the end, these things - and many more - have all happened.

Hungary is not the worst country in the world. It is a member of the European Union. It is considered a high-income economy. It has regular elections. It still has some independent media. But it is definitely an authoritarian country when it comes to how the government relates to the people and how most people relate to the government. Many people give up and leave our country not only for economic, but also for political reasons.

I also often get the question: why are you still here? My answer is very easy: this is my home, this where I belong. This is where I was fighting for social justice and democracy before this regime came to power and this is where I will continue to work for the same things even after they are long gone. If you ask government propaganda about me, I am a public enemy and a foreign agent who

is trying to destroy Hungary. This is why I have been targeted, harassed and smeared over the past 10 years.

If you ask me about the government, they are a bump in the road. A Himalaya-size bump, but one that we will definitely overcome.

I want to stop for a moment here: I am not talking about my country to make you feel sorry for us. Instead, I would like you to think about what is happening where you live. Do you have a say in how things are happening? Do you feel you have power? I am not asking if you can vote or if you have a Constitution. We have both, but there is still no democracy. What I am asking you is whether it is ever possible to achieve change from below?

“Democracy is not a noun, but a verb. It only exists if we do it.”

This is the slogan of the School of Public Life, an activist school that I co-founded. We believe that democracy is not about consent but about dissent – it is not about being a big happy family where everyone loves and agrees with each other. If there is conflict, struggle and change, there is a space for democracy to exist. It is always in the making. And we are the ones making it.

When I go abroad and tell people that I am from Hungary, I usually get some sad looks and a question: oh, what’s the name of your dictator again? And yes, our prime minister has become a symbol of anti-democratic leadership. But there is also another Hungary. This Hungary is hardly visible to the outside world and you may never read about us in the New York Times, but it is there and it is made up of many-many people and organizations working for social justice, environmental justice, workers’ rights and public services among many other things.

In fact, many Hungarians are not aware of this other side of Hungary either. And I think that this is a real obstacle to change. What we see as our reality determines what we believe is possible. If we see only fear and passivity, it will be difficult for us to imagine anything beyond that. But if we experience the alternatives to social and political oppression, we will also be able to imagine and create a different future for all of us.

Let me give you an example of this other Hungary that is especially close to my heart. The City is for All has been a pioneer of the Hungarian housing movement where homeless people and their housed allies work together for housing justice. What makes it really special is that it takes the message “Don’t talk about us, talk with us!” extremely seriously. In this group, many homeless people gained back their self-confidence, sense of belonging and political identity, which are all essential for us to exercise our rights as citizens. People like my friends – Gyula, Jutka, Jani and Erika – have all become movement leaders even as they were living in self-made shacks, homeless shelters, rented

rooms or on the street. This is also the community where my own political journey started.

In 2011, the activists of The City is for All occupied the mayor's office of the 8th district of Budapest.

With the sit-in we tried to stop the violent criminalization of homelessness by the chief anti-homeless strategist of the government – who was also the mayor of this district at the time.

I was one of the organizers of the protest and in the end we were dragged out of the building by the police.

With a really unexpected turn of events, today I am actually working in the very same building that we had occupied more than 10 years ago. Every day I walk the same corridors and I have meetings in the mayor's office.

But how is this possible? How did this all happen?

In 2019 a progressive candidate from a local grassroots organization challenged the anti-poor mayor in the local election. To everyone's biggest surprise, including our own, he won. I was on the mayor's team and today I work with him as the head of a brand new office called the Office of Community Participation. In this office, our mission is to create a new relationship between the municipality and local residents. A relationship based on mutual trust, power sharing and respect. This is the complete opposite of what the central government is doing!

Let me give you an example.

In our district, we have a small community garden.

A year ago, it was surrounded by a fence and there were plans to build a luxury condo here.

Everybody thought that it was private property because of the fence. But then came a group of active citizens who discovered that the fence was built illegally. They started to lobby the municipality to pull it down. They were adamant and - from a bureaucratic point of view - very annoying but in the end, they reached their goal: the fence was removed and they created a garden that is now sustained by neighborhood residents.

This is a small everyday example. And this is exactly my point. Democracy emerges out of the everyday struggle we call politics. It is created both from above and from below. Those in power have to be open, responsive and responsible. People, on the other hand, have to be smart, organized and focused on getting what they need. This is exactly what the story of this garden is all about.

Let me give you another example. In Hungary, the central government is all about concentrating power and resources for its own interests. People have

absolutely no say in how they spend public money. But things are radically different in Budapest and also our small 8th district, which are both led by the democratic opposition.

A few years ago, participatory budgeting was introduced in both the whole city and our own district. Participatory budgeting means that regular citizens get to make the decision about how to spend a certain amount of the municipal budget. In reality, this means that politicians give up some of their power because they believe that local residents know best what they need. And they do: very often people vote on things that elected representatives are otherwise reluctant to do. People in Budapest are using this power to build new bus stops, public toilets and crosswalks or to launch new social and environmental programs among many other things.

You may be thinking: I have never had a say in how my city spends my tax money. Why are you complaining about Hungary? But remember: I am showing you a small island of freedom in the middle of a country where there is less and less political oxygen to breathe. By opening up the municipal budget in Budapest, we are modeling, learning and teaching each other a new kind of politics that builds an alternative to authoritarianism.

Let's go back to the metaphor of the boiling frog: Have you ever felt like this frog? Why is the frog not doing anything? Where are the other frogs and why are they not doing anything?

You can never just be sitting around and wait for democracy to work miraculously on its own. It will not. And you can never wait for somebody else to make democracy work for you. They will not. Only you can make it work by standing up, organizing and pushing the boundaries of what is possible politically. Just like, we Hungarians have to fight for our own freedom and rebuild our own democracy, you will all have to do the same no matter where in the world you are sitting in lukewarm or boiling water. Enjoy your democracy when you have it, but don't ever get too comfortable with it. Remember the frog and never take the temperature of the water for granted!

Thank you.