

Lajos Somogyvári - *Autonomy and Democracy: Debates in the Crisis of Socialism (Hungary, 1985)*. História. Revista da FLUP. Porto. IV Série. Vol. 14 nº 1. 2024. 200-214 DOI: [https://doi.org/10.21747/0871164X/hist14\\_1a10](https://doi.org/10.21747/0871164X/hist14_1a10)

## **Autonomy and Democracy: Debates in the Crisis of Socialism (Hungary, 1985)**

### **Autonomia e Democracia: Debates na Crise do Socialismo (Hungria, 1985)**

### **Autonomie et démocratie: débats dans la crise du socialisme (Hongrie, 1985)**

### **Autonomía y democracia: debates en la crisis del socialismo (Hungría, 1985)**

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**Abstract:** The mid-1980s was a period of significant growth and change in Hungarian education, with numerous debates discussing the potential transformation of the schooling system. These discussions took place years before the political regime changed in 1989/1990, were primarily focused on the issue of school autonomy and the promotion of workplace democracy. This modernization trend, which was allowed and supported by some reform-socialist politicians in the Cultural Ministry and experts from the Pedagogical Institute, was not without its critics. In this study, I aim to unveil a forgotten and unanalyzed national dispute based on discourse analysis. This is a significant and yet unexplored chapter in Hungarian education history, in which many educationalists, teachers, and principals have played a pivotal role.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Socialist Democracy, Hungary, Debates

**Resumo:** Os meados da década de 1980 foram um período de crescimento e mudança significativos na educação húngara, com numerosos debates discutindo a potencial transformação do sistema escolar. Estas discussões ocorreram anos antes da mudança de regime político em 1989/1990 e centraram-se principalmente na questão da autonomia escolar e na promoção da democracia no local de trabalho. Esta tendência de modernização, que foi permitida e apoiada por alguns políticos reformistas-socialistas do Ministério da Cultura e por especialistas do Instituto Pedagógico, não ficou isenta de críticas. Neste estudo, pretendo desvendar uma disputa nacional esquecida e não analisada com base na análise do discurso. Este é um capítulo significativo, mas ainda inexplorado, da história da educação húngara, no qual muitos educadores, professores e diretores desempenharam um papel fundamental.

**Palavras-Chave:** Autonomia, Democracia socialista, Hungria, Debates

**Résumé:** Le milieu des années 1980 a été une période de croissance et de changement significatifs dans l'éducation hongroise, avec de nombreux débats sur la transformation potentielle du système scolaire. Ces discussions ont eu lieu des années avant le changement de régime politique en 1989/1990 et étaient principalement axées sur la question de l'autonomie scolaire et de la promotion de la démocratie sur le lieu de travail. Cette tendance à la modernisation, autorisée et soutenue par certains politiciens réformateurs socialistes du ministère de la Culture et des experts de l'Institut pédagogique, n'a pas été sans critiques. Dans cette étude, mon objectif est de dévoiler un conflit national oublié et non analysé basé sur l'analyse du discours. Il s'agit d'un chapitre important et encore inexploré de l'histoire de l'éducation hongroise, dans lequel de nombreux pédagogues, enseignants et directeurs d'école ont joué un rôle central.

**Mots clés:** Autonomie, Démocratie socialiste, Hongrie, Débats

**Resumen:** La mitad de la década de 1980 fue un período de crecimiento y cambios significativos en la educación húngara, con numerosos debates sobre la posible transformación del sistema escolar. Estas discusiones tuvieron lugar años antes de que cambiara el régimen político en 1989/1990 y se centraron principalmente en la cuestión de la autonomía escolar y la promoción de la democracia en el lugar de trabajo. Esta tendencia modernizadora, que fue permitida y apoyada por algunos políticos reformistas socialistas del Ministerio de Cultura y expertos del Instituto Pedagógico, no estuvo exenta de críticas. En este estudio, mi objetivo es revelar una disputa nacional olvidada y no analizada basada en el análisis del discurso. Se trata de un capítulo importante, aunque todavía

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inexplorado, de la historia de la educación húngara, en el que muchos educadores, profesores y directores han desempeñado un papel fundamental.

**Palabras-clave:** Autonomía, Democracia Socialista, Hungría, Debates

### **Introduction: The Historical-Political Background**

Democratic education or democratized schooling is an unfinished project that inherited the openness and critical nature from different theories (Friedrich, Jaastad & Popkewitz, 2010). Hungary's political tradition of how to do this was largely missed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This knowledge deficit complicated the democratic institutionalization processes in different ways after the regime changes in 1989/1990 (Andersen, 2000). It is an interesting question to reveal the effects of different political regimes in educating democrats or autocrats in the schooling system (Östermann & Robinson, 2022) – this article will show an example of this problem in the form of a case study.

My timeframe, the so-called Kádár Era lasted from 1956 to 1989 in Hungary, led by János Kádár, who was the first secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP). This period may be interpreted as a continuous attempt to consolidate and stabilize one-party state socialism after the 1956 Revolution. This socialism was based on a constantly rising standard of living and growing consumption in the framework of the official ideology. The concept (sometimes called “soft dictatorship” or “goulash-communism”) reached a deep crisis until the mid-1980s, starting with the 1973-1975 economic recession, including Hungary's increasing backlash from the developed Western World (see more details: Romsics, 1999).

The key idea of socialist democracy functioned as a tool for the system's legitimation. According to its definition, it was a non-Western form of democracy rooted in the de-Stalinization period of the Soviet Union (during and after Khrushchev) and Eastern Europe. It was established under the rule of one Party, which unified the working classes (proletariat and working farmers of the cooperatives), expressing the socialist vision and the route by central directives. The practice of socialist democracy tolerated participation in the preparation phase of the decision-making to a certain degree. By incorporating some professional competencies, the system could more effectively adapt to social and technological challenges from the 1960s (Kalmár, 2023). In a retrospective view, it was a limited and manipulated form of democracy, or in other words, a “directed democracy” (Pap, 2023).

This is the starting point of my study, the different meanings of how to connect local authorities and the center precisely, harmonizing with Marxism-Leninism simultaneously – this

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was a crucial problem for the supporters of the socialist democracy. Géza Sáska pointed out that the main slogans of the 1980s Hungarian education reform movement were somehow more radical than before and spoke about self-regulation, autonomy, and decentralization, emphasizing the role of communities in schooling (Sáska, 2002). Most teachers and officials agreed to loosen the state control, and the new Educational Law in 1985 confirmed this attitude, as it first entered the way to school experiments after the communist takeover (1948). It was a stage in a “marathon reform,” a roller coaster of reforms and stopping reform from the early 1970s, which was influenced by the fight between educational experts, reform socialist politicians, orthodox ideologists, and the representatives of the economy (Báthory, 2000). It was both a reaction to the accelerating crisis and a resource race.

The word autonomy resonated differently amongst the participants of these debates. Educational politicians might remember the 1956 uprising when many teachers and students appeared in the spontaneously developed local and regional self-governing bodies with a strong anti-Soviet sentiment. This was a tabooed memory of real autonomy, forced to forget: instead of this, a vision of reformed socialism emerged in the mid-1980s, in its way, within the Eastern Bloc. The start of the change was Gorbachev, the new Soviet leader, who initiated perestroika (transformation of the system, especially the economy) in 1985.

Hungarian education underwent a similar perestroika from that time, discovering the original Marxism and the experimenting nature of the early Soviet schooling in the 1920s (Trencsényi, 1989). This fruitful contribution met the effects of Western influences, mediating by the new generation of educational scholars, who had connections with researchers from the other side of the Iron Curtain (Kozma & Tózsér, 2012). According to the world-famous economist Professor János Kornai, this was when Hungary and Poland turned away from the Soviet direction, emphasizing autonomy, decentralization, and the aspects of the free market (Kornai, 1992, 383-528.).

### **Sources and methodology**

The National Pedagogical Institute (Országos Pedagógiai Intézet, OPI) and the Institute for Educational Research (Oktatáskutató Intézet, OKI) made several proposals in 1985 and published them to the broader audience of teachers to speed up the democratic transformation of schooling in Hungary (before the political system renewed). Ferenc Gázsó, the deputy cultural minister between 1983 and 1989, encouraged the process (Gázsó, 1987) of the experts

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from these Institutes. Professor Gábor Halász worked at the OKI during the 1980s; his generosity made it possible to use the materials (namely the comments and minutes of these debates) for this research. The sources are in the grey zone between private and public archives (Gilliland & Štefanac, 2018), as they are not registered in the archival lists and have not been used or published until now. This is a blind spot in the Hungarian history of education: the typewritten transcripts, which Professor Halász gave me, may be the only remaining ones because I do not know other versions in the archives (another example of such sources: Somogyvári, 2023). The reason for this is that there were continuous structural changes in these institutes around and after the regime changes (1990), which impeded the archiving of their materials and documents in an organized way.

In 1985 May, the OPI issued four drafts about democratizing schools as public materials for discussing them with practicing teachers. By doing this, they prepared for the decision-making activities of the politicians. These were the proposals:

- 1) Developing institutional autonomy and democracy at the workplace (Az intézményi önállóság és a munkahelyi demokratizmus fejlesztése);
- 2) Proposal to the slow transformation of the structures of elementary and secondary levels (Javaslat az alsó- és középfokú iskolák szerkezetei modelljeinek fokozatos átalakítására);
- 3) Shaping the consultant system (A szaktanácsadói rendszer fokozatos kialakítása);
- 4) Debates about the school councils (Iskolatanács-vita).

The titles tell us the concept of a gradual evolution into a democratic society by affecting parents, students, and teachers at once. The researchers tried to build connections to actors of education on the field, establishing alliances and coalitions to achieve the common goal: a new democratic school. I will focus only on the first corpus in my analysis to highlight the diverse ideas about autonomy and democracy amongst kindergarten, elementary, and secondary school teachers, headmasters, and principals. My research questions were these at the beginning of my research:

- How did the OPI's draft material determine the debates' focal points? What would be an imagined reform, including the keywords of autonomy, decision-making competencies, democracy, and responsibility?
- What did the teachers say publicly about self-regulation and the new functioning of schools? The answers are crucial as teachers were representatives of an influential social group in contemporary Hungarian society.

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- How was the local teaching staff divided? What controversies arose between them? Many variants might exist, from conservative opinions to liberal and progressive views.

- How could teachers articulate their interests in real debates (and not in manipulated ones, like before) and interact with the academic field?

There are altogether 346 pages, mostly typewritten, a few in handwriting. 26 locations were detected, of which one is the capital city of Hungary, and the other 25 are smaller or bigger towns outside Budapest, mainly in the Western part of the country. The documents can be divided into two types: the comments about the proposal belonged to the first option (156 pages), while the minutes of debates consisted of the second one (190 pages). In my interpretation, I choose the latter genre to analyze, as these records might be closer to real, spontaneous opinions and quick and direct reactions. I use the methodology of historical discourse analysis (Landwehr, 2008), designing my research in four steps: revealing the historical reality through a thematic context, defining the corpus and its genesis, and finally, revealing the repeated sentences with significant meanings and functions in the discourses. These sentences or focal points are the different understandings of democracy, leadership/responsibility, and the levels of autonomy. Before that, let's see how a debate began when the experts from Budapest arrived at the administrative center of Baranya County, southern Hungary, and they collected the local teachers in the hall of the local institute for further training.

### **Beginning the debate: distrust between the experts and teachers**

The subsequent transcript of a tape record is an essential addition to the context from the debate in Pécs, which is symptomatically related to the contemporary, local interpretations of the concepts of democracy. In the quoted passage, the head of the Further Training Institute in the county (A.) introduces the scientific colleague from the capital city, OPI (B.), to the audience:

“A.: Please express any opinion you have openly and honestly, and in clear terms. If it is true (which has not always been proven by the previous practice), then this will not be a pseudo-democratic debate, but these colleagues will take our words into account. So, do not worry that they take it on a tape recorder; it is not directed toward later imprisonment, but the purpose of this is to give the possibility to re-write the draft. I also know that we are stressed by everyday problems, not only because it is the end of the year and there is even more work than usual. However, I don't think we could ever find a suitable time for that, but also because we live everyday life, and this concept is a distant development from where we want to go. That is why I ask you to give sound your interests. After this, it will not be possible to say that in the capital,

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Budapest, they prepare work plans at their desks. The opinions of the practicing teachers who implement this in the field are not taken into account [...] So I will now introduce our county manager to the colleagues here [...] And then I will give the floor now over to B.

B.: ...I apologize again for convening you at the end of the academic year and thank you for agreeing to come and express your opinion. It's not ... it's a statement of opinion [some words are missing in the transcript, maybe because of sensitive content or due to technical reasons]. We want to confirm that we want to strengthen our proposal, using as many sources as possible, so I would like to request the following. Since our time and the capacity of the tapes are limited, the colleagues have approx. 5-7 minutes to speak, primarily according to the aspects of the published draft; then, if they have an opinion that does not fit into it, please tell them. We have not come together to argue, but we are interested in your perspectives, and we believe these are not empty words. They will not be empty words. Based on this, we will be able to work through the material and consider them. I would like the following. The authors will receive the tape. The names and positions are only interesting, especially the position is interesting so that we know the function of the person who comments on the material. So practically, in which area do you carry out your daily activities? That's why I ask you to say your names and positions very loudly, as loud as possible, to ensure these will be clearly on the tapes.”

From this part of the text, we can learn a lot about intentions, typical moods, and the conduct of debates, anticipating many important aspects for later analyses. In Hungary, teachers often felt and still feel that decisions are being made over their heads from a center, the capital, so first of all, these experts had to dissolve the distrust toward themselves, who are coming from outside. Presumably, this also influenced the number of reviews and comments, and the accumulated tasks at the end of the year may have even reduced the willingness to respond. Recording and typing on the tape (the technical conditions) are mentioned several times, which may have increased the assumed negative feelings of the teachers (see the opening reference about imprisonment). It was essential to make the participants feel that this procedure does not serve the purpose of later identification or possible prosecution but rather the positioning of different intentions.

Both speakers tried to distinguish this forum from the previous quasi-debates and defined the current one as not pseudo-democratic, not a word shouted into the wilderness, but a safe space to express impressions and ideas freely. Many negative experiences might have accumulated in connection with similar events, from which they tried to distance themselves. We get to know the intentions of the organizers: they want to get support and confirmation for the changes they consider important and to incorporate different opinions. The debates were organized, and the aspects were given to the participants before the discussion – unfortunately, in the current state of the research, these have not yet been found; the tapes are not available either, only the typed transcripts. In the following chapters, I will look at the main thematic

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focus points and statements, which were created in a field between three main actors: teachers, administrative staff, and scholars.

### **Different democracy-ideas**

The key concepts of the system transformation were democracy and democratic functioning – it is crucial to what the teachers understood under them in 1985. The expressions are very scattered in this regard: they apply to the way of management, the decision-making process, and the allocation of the necessary competencies. One of the most common discourse-organizing motifs is the distinction between real and mechanical/formal democratic functioning. The “on the one hand, on the other hand”-like phrasing was typical in this sense:

“Only the school itself can develop school democracy – if no regularly operated internal forums will be added to the school council, and activities that help and develop expertise and protecting interests, then only formal solutions can be created (secondary grammar and vocational high school principal).”

“My opinion is that schools should create their own democratic forums... I expect [the OPI] to represent us in such a way that we have the possibility to do this... (vocational secondary school principal).”

“Nowadays we see the expanding roles of teacher communities, the internal structure of teachers’ society is discussed every day, representative democracy and autonomy are increasingly expressed as a demand. It would complicate the unfolding situation by placing another organization over the teaching community, which would only create further confusion (elementary school director)”

We do not know what kind of organization was mentioned in the last quotation – maybe a future umbrella body to assemble the local democratic boards? Feelings of fear and misunderstanding are evident here since the actors strayed into unknown territory by proposing real, grassroots democratic ideas based on the intentions of local actors. Furthermore, they did not know what consequences the debates and comments would have. It is important that these sentences express various requests for real, professional democratic modes of functioning, starting from the real needs of schools. Here and elsewhere, the tasks of trade unions and professional/researching organizations are mixed (indicating that the official trade union does little to fulfill its task) with self-managing ideas. The speakers attributed OPI to a role that is not necessarily a characteristic of a scientific institute: representing the schools and creating/supporting internal democratic forums (which is an inherently contradictory message). A secondary grammar school principal went even further by deducing the political consequences, saying; that if we change the education system, it will have an impact on the other subsystems as well:

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“Is the political leadership prepared for the consequences of this?... Let's acknowledge that socialism is organized in all societies, and let's also acknowledge, whether we like it or not, that even if there is democracy – it is democracy now, let it be –, socialism precisely differs from previous societies in the fact that it is a much better-organized society. Will the central will bear this? Will it be so tolerant that the schools do not sometimes come up against the political leadership? What about if the educational, cultural, and scientific aspects conflict with the political dimension?”

The feasibility of socialist democracy was questioned by the principal since the existing socialist system was set up in the central direction in Hungary (and in other Eastern European countries as well), and the planning mechanism did not allow alternatives. The principal could clearly declare the fundamental problem at this point: it is not possible to introduce pluralism in one sphere while the others remain unchanged. The dangerous situation may even arise when some schools come into conflict with the political leadership, like in the hot autumn of the 1956 revolution. No one spoke about it, but the ghost of the suppressed uprising was there. Others also expressed doubts about the democratic plans:

“The proposal does not even perceive the problem of what is inside the schools, so the nature of the whole thing is a utopian one... This material supposes well-behaved democratic communities and school work communities, qualified, responsible teachers, and great professional standards... (Member of the County Pedagogical Institute)”

It is typical that a professional educationalist articulated these thoughts: it was almost impossible to expect well-trained, accountable teachers (or, in other words, free, creative intellectuals) and competent professionals in the system (although these expectations would be natural in a normal world). In reality, it would be illusory for scholars to expect such a degree of freedom in an unfree educational structure (to the connections between utopias and intellectuals, see Mannheim, 1991). The lack of citizenship traditions, the missing independent communities, and solidarity would make all similar attempts insular since the democratic school could only function in a democratic society.

A headmaster of a vocational secondary school also considered the development of school democracy to be too advanced, for which, the conditions have not yet been met:

“The material aims to ensure that self-management prevails in the institutions to a greater extent. I think we want to go much further than it is possible. Just as long ago, we flagged self-management in society. It doesn't work. It's not going as well as it should. Then why do we want to impose a degree of self-management in institutions that cannot be found in society as a whole? We will be an island again, full of conflicts. I definitely think this should be avoided.”

The basic position of the speaker is very similar to the previous, although here the democratic functioning is defined as self-regulation: possibly thinking of the Yugoslav model,

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which really did not work either here or in Yugoslavia (the truly existing examples of the workers' councils of 1956 had to disappear from the memories). The overall ideas about democracy and school democracy could be summed up mostly with the sentence, "It would be nice, but it is not manageable in the current situation." An average teacher said it like this:

"I became extremely excited after reading, because it gives me such wonderful opportunities and perspectives. And then, in the end I realized that this is not for us. Because we, who are already spoiled, I don't think we can live with such opportunities... This requires such a new perspective from everyone, and there is such vanity in us, including me; even though I am nobody, I just lead a [school] class [...] I am already not capable of this, but if the next generation can start with completely new foundations, then something wonderful is ahead of us (a woman teacher)."

Why the Hungarian teaching society was not suitable in its current state? What would be the task of the next generation? According to the optimistic plans, they have to create individual pedagogical programs and incorporate local characteristics into them, bringing new contexts and activities into the educational content (e.g., education for democracy, learning different practices of coexistence and public life, increased participation in the management of affairs). There is a big question and challenge about what has been realized from all of this so far, and what remains as promises.

### **Leadership, responsibility, and competences**

The "insufficiently elaborated, often castles in the sand-like" goals (high school supervisor) were condemned by many speakers, since "we do not need to adapt Western forms, because we have to find our own specific forms in our specific system" (County Pedagogical Institute, director). Many people did not want any reform, as the unknown always carries dangers, and future changes usually cause harm to interests. They could also oppose such modernization and school development from a different point of worldview, presenting this opinion on a professional surface:

"Where the principal works well, democracy is a living reality in the school. We don't have to beat the horse to make him go [a Hungarian idiom about irrelevant requirements]. It is not necessary to create a new management model but rather to say that the director is not working well and makes mistakes here and there. Someone has to say this, to do his or her job better. [...] I see huge reserves in the current school movement communities, in their involvement in school management (high school principal)."

The socialist democracy in Hungary was actually a controlled political system, unimaginable without the leading role of the Party (HSWP): someone has to be told who leads well and who doesn't on the local levels. And here we are talking about leadership, the skills

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and responsibilities required for leadership. The quote above-understood democratization as a better utilization of available HR resources (like youth movement and pioneers), which can result in better-organized socialism. This is the classic "good king" dilemma, as Tamás Kozma put it on the table when talking about the centralization of education: "You know, the kingdom is the best. If (...) the king is good." (Kozma, 2014, 3.). But what if the king is not good? What mechanisms are able to block the activities of a bad king? The director saw the solution as a better use of the Party's control (through the organizations made by the Party), which threatened the very freedom that arose again and again during the debates. A system with more freedom, transparency, and participation could, of course, also have been a guarantee against bad management, but that would have been a different establishment. The structural problems are expressed in the following comment:

"The school principals do not have as much decision-making power as they believed – and this has been true for decades. Formally, there was only one decision point... One of the peculiarities or main causes of the malfunctioning of the Hungarian economy and society... is that the decision points are much higher than it has to be. In reverse, independence must be increased, and democracy must be broadened. I believe that in the coming period there will be much, much more far-reaching decisions at the schools. And if there are really impacting decisions here, the weight of decision preparation increases (County Pedagogical Institute, director)."

It is important that a person in a leading position made this statement: the Hungarian society and economy are dysfunctional, and there is a crisis. The decision-making powers are not where they should be, but much higher (this includes the system of informal negotiations and non-transparent decision-making mechanisms). The specialist actually formulates the principle of subsidiarity: decisions must be made at a lower level, closer to the stakeholders. In terms of responsibility, the planned reform has received many criticisms:

"I turn now to the political leadership, which is now dangerously falling apart. I always believe that the best ruling model is when economic, pedagogical, and state official management is concentrated in one hand. Because what will the pedagogical institute do now? Tell the schools to say, "Well, well, please do this and this"? Will the institute report the problems to the cultural department of the county council? And at the same time, all of the participants will say: "They made that decision, not us." Will the teachers form an opinion about their leaders? Who evaluates the work of the elected officials? Who will decide about the bonuses? Ad absurdum: the head of the school will be elected next year as well by the staff, and we will accept him, despite the fact that somewhere in his or her work, the educational officials have listed many negative aspects. Yet they [the educators] say that they trust him or her. It is not certain that two types of values coincide (vocational secondary school principal)."

Again, an honest speech, which also condemns the undesirable consequences, raises the issue of quality assurance and accountability: What if different bodies evaluated the work of

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the elected officials differently? The other important aspect can be the disintegration of control and the instability of the political leadership, which could only strengthen the conservative side of the teachers, who acted as defenders of the social order. In such uncertain situations, they could mainly oppose major transformations.

“The entire democratization process, despite being necessary and desirable, contains many dangers. Regarding the school organization, I have to tell you that I have a concern. An autocratic leadership or an insufficiently organized school is a very bad model, but an over-organized one is at least as bad. And if over-organization leads to loss of people, loss of responsibility, or isolation of the teaching staff [...] then it is at least as much of a danger as the one that preceded it. That is precisely why I think it is most important to clearly state that whichever community or leader decides on something is solely responsible for the implementation of the decision. The responsibility for the decision should belong to one category, to one place. Otherwise, there will be chaos (head of general school work community)”.

This is the „good king” concept and its controversy, the chaos. Behind the confusing sentences, there seems to be no other option than single-person driving or anarchy. "The director certainly knows his stuff... That's why he or she is in that position. Even if he or she didn't understand at first, he or she will learn over the years. The director knows what needs to be done... Labeling things with different titles is not a democracy." Someone else is speaking here who absolutely trusts the mechanism of cadre selection and does not necessarily consider expertise a necessary prerequisite since the person will "learn" anyway. However, if democracy is just a label, it says everything about such a mindset.

“What I did not like about the draft was the whole spirit and atmosphere in it, the problem of power relationship, this kind of approach... In our school system, in the Hungarian school system, regardless of the type of school, the principal, the education department, and the supervision are not the enemy and not the main obstacle to independence and democracy (county general inspector).”

Many participants were left with a negative impression. The possibility of such experiments also triggered defensive reflexes, as we can see in the inspector's example. The apparatus may have felt that it was under attack and that its work was being criticized—which was the case since every development plan suggests that something can be done better compared with the actual practice.

### **Towns and villages: different levels of autonomy**

In connection with self-government and autonomy, many comments touched on the differences between the countryside and the capital. They emphasized anti-centralized

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tendencies, thus displaying their own interests. "Different possibilities (city, village) [...] different traditions" could result in specific solutions if the system were not too rigid – concluded the problem a teacher from a primary school in Székesfehérvár. Over-bureaucratized centralism (Pusztaszabolcs), the duality of the county and local management, and unification efforts of the local economic management also caused many problems; the solution could have been the independent financial framework for the schools (Mór). In the case of vocational schools, the issue of stakeholder involvement, own budget, and the lack thereof arose in countless cases - the economic-productive function of educational institutions was highlighted in the concept of OPI and caused a lot of debate. From this point of view, for example, village schools were at an advantage, as they could more easily build personal relationships with plants and farm cooperatives. In other respects, however, "rural schools face a very difficult situation", since, unlike city schools, there was no appropriate administrative body or expertise available to deal with the many problems of education.

Extreme and polarized voices were heard about the issue of autonomy. Like in the "conservative" views: "It is our interest, all of us, that decentralization does not lead to anarchy" warned an inspector from Várpalota, defending centralization from his official function. Excessive independence can lead to local arbitrariness, as can be read in other posts. However, most of them argued in favor of increased autonomy. The need for independence appeared at different levels: from the institutional micro-level (own pedagogical programs) to different decision-making levels at the large-community/town, county management, regional and territorial autonomies. "We should really get to the point where no one in our settlements can be an outsider who doesn't care. The immediate social environment should be interested in the intellectual and material support of the institutions," said a utopian voice from Hajdú-Bihar county. A school director from Hajdúszoboszló directly spoke about the possibility of "reviving the district, social and educational management" of schools, in which the local council member, the doctor, the nurse, the police, the representative of the People's Front, the company representative, the youth leader and the school would have played a pivotal role. The referred managements only functioned in the post-war situation of 1945, when communities ruled themselves in a base democratic way, as the state collapsed and was eliminated.

A certain degree of prudence can be observed in the minutes when displaying the specific aspects of the countryside. Perhaps not by chance, since at these meetings, specialists from Budapest sought the opinion of the local intellectuals: the experts of the OPI were not always

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received with complete confidence, and the teachers certainly did not speak with full honesty with them. There was rarely a direct, concrete manifestation, such as in Tatabánya, where the director of Almásfüzitő put it like this: "When power does not trust because it cannot trust in its power, it controls in a highly centralized, direct way [...] Feedback from below is only evaluated well if they are not of local value, but everyone could articulate only local value [...] the feedback process is long and time-consuming. It is often pointless." The manager touches on the root of the problem, which explains the general phrases and the constant voicing of local needs without any detail – they were useless, so they usually did not elaborate on them.

### **Conclusions**

This case study may have a broader context if we use the theories related to teaching professionals in future research, in global (Freidson, 2001) and Hungarian dimensions (Fónai & Dusa, 2014; Garai & Németh, 2018) On a different level, these unique documents give the possibility to show actors and aspects of the „history from below” (Port, 2015) in a changing period, during a crisis. Despite the sometimes unprofessional behavior of the scholars (which was uncomfortable for the teachers), valuable and differentiated, quasi-authentic reflections have been produced through the debates. A new generation of educational researchers stood behind organizing these (like Gábor Halász or Géza Sáska from the cited actors): they arrived with a previously unknown attitude on focusing educational politics and sociology, conflicts, and actors instead of “pure” pedagogy and theoretical ideas. The above-analyzed debates also fit into this framework.

The main benefit from these was perhaps that the researchers had to understand that there was no standard terminology on democracy. On the other hand, awareness of the crisis had already reached the lower levels, and thirdly, there was the insight that a real change would have far-reaching political consequences. We do not know many details about the political-social background of the participants (e.g. if they were party members or not), which is a limitation of this study, but the discourses speak clearly themselves. Issues far beyond the schools were discussed in the sources. However, the historiography of this is still largely unexplored. Its later reflection and interpretation are missing - as if this decade is eliminated from our past. The fragile democracies of the Eastern European countries after 1989/1990 (Andersen, 2000) have everyday vague and complicated experiences about participation in

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decision-making, autonomy, communities, and transparency. The lack of this tradition casts a long shadow on recent trends in Hungary.

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