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## **Zigzagging in a labyrinth – Towards “good” Hungarian youth work**

Understanding the history of youth work is an important aspect of understanding its social and political function. Yet to approach youth work from a historical perspective is not an easy enterprise. Which historical methods do we use to gain a better understanding? Do we use a timeline approach, thus putting events into chronological order? Or do we try to understand the psychological effect of past events on people’s attitudes? In other words: do we talk about the changing methodology in youth work or do we examine changes in youth policy on which youth work is built? It is like a labyrinth. I would like to illustrate this dilemma using the example of the history of youth work in Hungary.

If we want to examine people’s attitudes in the past, we can use “tags”, which will identify the most important events, and political and ideological influences on Hungarians. Perhaps these tags could be widely applied to other countries in central and eastern Europe as well. They symbolise the wide range of influences that shaped people’s political minds in the region. Consequently, they also influenced youth issues.

## Our tags

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<b>Soviets</b>	<b>Berlin Mauer</b>	Cold War	Communism
Poznan	<b>1956</b>	Pluralism	‘Sovietization’
		Oppression	
	<b>Stalinism</b>	1981	<b>Fascism</b>
	Socialism with a human face or reform-communism		
Gdansk	1968	Solidarnosc	Revolution
1953	Prague	<b>Tanks</b>	Molotov cocktail
	Communists	<b>Iron curtain</b>	
	<b>Communist youth organisation</b>		

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(KISZ, FDJ, Комсомо́л)

What does history mean in this context? I would like to share three quotations with you to illustrate different perspectives:

- Aristotle said: “Poetry is finer and more philosophical than history, for poetry expresses the universal and history only the particular.”
- George Santayana said: “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”
- And thirdly, Friedrich von Schiller said: “The history of the world is the world’s court of justice.”

So do we use history to understand the path which has led us to the position in which we find ourselves presently? Or do we use history as a base for judging how relevant the contents and messages of the previous generations were?

We know that *Romeo and Juliet* is a history of love. Every love has its own history and this is how young people deal with the past in their present.

The last decades of Hungary could be called a “history of interruption”. At the beginning of the 20th century Hungary’s youth organisations and those of most countries in Europe had very similar landscapes: Scouts and Girl Guides, Catholic or Protestant young people’s movements, workers, rural youth or those against the consumption of alcohol. Yet this relatively linear development was interrupted by the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles, when Hungary lost two thirds of its territory, 65% of its population and approximately 70% of its natural resources. This strongly affected the youth movements, because the nationalists and revisionists defined the political and social role of youth work. For example, after Trianon (the Hungarian reference to the Treaty of Versailles), it became compulsory to start the day in elementary schools with a prayer: *Hiszek egy istenben, hiszek egy hazában, hiszek Nagy-Magyarország feltámadásában*, which means “I believe in one God, I believe in one country, I believe in the resurrection of Great Hungary.”

The Second World War and the Hungarian way of participating in the war, on the side of the German Army, was a logical continuation of the post-Trianon period. The consequences of the Second World War for Hungary were tragic: 1 million lives lost, approximately half of which were Hungarian Jews. After the war, optimistic attempts were made to join the western European community of democratic states. However, this ambition could not be fulfilled, as the process was interrupted

by the communists, supported by a Stalinist Soviet Union: the comrades arrived in 1948 and stayed until 1989.

The youth-led 1956 uprising and revolution were only a short “intermezzo”, yet its consequences were tough: some 280 people were executed, more than 30 thousand were arrested and imprisoned for many years, and around 300 thousand Hungarians emigrated. The influence of 1956 on young people and youth movements was enormous: the political establishment was afraid of the potential of young rebels, and set up an airtight control system to direct all aspects of young people’s lives, from leisure time to education. The Hungarian communist youth organisation (KISZ) was created in March 1957 by the Communist Party, and it remained the only youth movement permitted until 1989. It was the state’s most effective tool for exercising control over young people and it co-operated closely with the secret police. Hungary’s single political party followed the philosophy: “Who controls the youth, controls the system.” And so it did.

The year 1968 stood for different things in divided Europe: in central and eastern Europe it meant “Prague Spring”, another failed attempt to achieve democracy. In western Europe youth and student revolts challenged and changed existing democratic systems. They affected Hungarian youth policy in a contradictory manner: in 1971 Hungary passed one of the first youth laws in Europe, but it still remained a tool for controlling young people, and yet certain freedoms were accorded in small niches of leisure time. “Let’s give them a bit of Jimi Hendrix, but no Cohn-Bendit!” Big Brother kept an eye on young people and made it impossible for them to become active citizens. New institutions were established during that period, for example, youth research became legal again, the KISZ established a new youth leaders training scheme and the term “youth policy” found its way into political speeches.

If we imagine history as a curriculum vitae, we can illustrate how succeeding generations of young people were exposed to the influence of the respective older generations.

### History is a CV? Do we need another hero?

Yes, we can... in...	1956	1968	1989	2004
Born in:				
<b>1940/45</b> war generation	11/16	23/28	44/49	59/64
<b>1950/55</b> - - - - - baby boom generation	1/5	13/18	34/39	49/54
<b>1960/65</b> generation of consolidation	0	3/8	24/29	39/44
<b>1970/75</b> accessed generation	0	0	14/19	29/34
<b>1980/85</b> crisis generation	0	0	5/9	19/24
<b>1990/95</b> generation of democracy	0	0	0	9/14

our kids  
↓  
in Europe

The economic depression of the 1980s created new tensions against the political regime and became the starting point of the erosion of the establishment. This time, intellectuals led the protest, not youth. Young people took to the streets only in 1988, when the first public mass demonstrations took place.

The biggest change in youth policy during that period was the establishment of the State Office of Youth and Sport, symbolising the party's intention to share power with the government, that is an attempt at (re-)establishing a somewhat neutral state. The "Party-State" had started to dissolve. New legislation was passed in 1989 to allow the setting up of non-governmental organisations; new youth organisations were created that were independent of the KISZ. The Miszot, a kind of national youth council, was the very first pluralistic, representative body of civil society in Hungary.

The year of all years was 1989. More and more laws were passed to guarantee the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. This legislation helped society determine its role in the new democracy and participate in negotiations between the Communist Party and the democratic opposition.

The public funeral of Imre Nagy in June 1989, the Prime Minister during the 1956 uprising, who was executed in 1958 and declared *persona non grata* for decades, marked the definite end of the socialist regime.

Only a few weeks later, the first pluralist Hungarian youth delegation participated in the last (communist) World Youth Festival in Pyongyang, North Korea and shocked the other Socialist bloc delegations by joining a Scandinavian organised demonstration against the killing of student protestors in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. In the meantime, Hungary opened the Iron Curtain to allow thousands of East German refugees to leave for Austria and West Germany.

On 23 October 1989, the Republic of Hungary was declared and the newly established democratic constitution entered in force. It reestablished the role of the state as based on rule of law and could have opened the way for the creation of a new youth policy, reflecting the real needs of young people.

The first free elections in 1990 resulted in a Conservative/Christian-Democrat coalition government. The first years of the new democracy and the transition period were dominated by economic reform and setting up a free market economy. Between 1989 and 1995, approximately 80% of the previously state-owned industries, services and properties were privatised; around 1.6 million people had to change their work place; and some 1.2 million people lost employment. The National Youth Council was occupied with their claims to receive their share of the so-called "youth property", that is the estate of youth camps, training centres and office buildings previously owned by KISZ. This situation was not favorable to the development of a new youth policy as youth issues were low priority on the political agenda.

A new government was elected in 1994 and the coalition of socialists and liberals was in office until 1998. The political philosophy changed again, and with it the understanding of the importance of youth policy. *Mobilitàs*, the Hungarian National Youth Service was established in 1995; later on *Mobilitàs* took on the function of the National Agency for the European Commission's Youth for Action programme. The National Youth Council was transformed into the Children and Youth Council of Interests, a corporative body working with the government. One

youth department was established within the Ministry of Education under a liberal minister, but another youth department was created within the socialist-led Prime Minister's Office. Party politics had a strong effect on planning and implementing measures in favour of youth. The Council of Europe's European Youth Centre Budapest was inaugurated in December 1995, but it had little effect on national youth policy development.

Between 1998 and 2002, the former opposition took on government, a coalition of liberal conservatives, Christian-Democrats and the Smallholders Party. Again, the political philosophy changed and families were given priority. At the same time, far reaching structural reforms were implemented in favour of the youth field: a Ministry of Youth and Sports was founded and a decentralised infrastructure was set up, based on youth offices in the seven regions of Hungary. The *Mobilitàs* National Youth Service enlarged its scope of action and took on youth research and a drug prevention centre. In 2002, a national youth workers training scheme was created.

After the following national elections in 2002, once again the government changed and a Socialist-Liberal coalition returned to power. It changed youth policy and its underlying philosophy; some elements of the previous structures were kept, others discontinued. A Ministry of Children, Youth and Sports operated until 2004; youth affairs moved to the Ministry of Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, which was in operation until 2006. Joining the European Union in 2004 had a strong positive impact on the dynamic of youth work, mainly through the European Commission's Youth for Action programme. During this period, party politics divided civil society into "winners", or those loyal to the government, and "losers", or those who were not part of the ruling political circles. This situation opened the way to corruption involving support budgets for youth NGOs, which generated a lot of attention in the media.

For the first time since 1990, a government was confirmed in office, as a result of the general elections held in 2006. Youth issues disappeared from the list of political priorities; a small youth department operated within the huge Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. The state budget for youth issues was dramatically reduced; the *Mobilitàs* National Youth Service lost its independent status and more than half of its staff. The initiative to create a national youth action plan started in 2007. A national youth policy report was drawn up with the Council of Europe youth sector, based on the work of an international review team. Two years later, in October 2009, the national youth action plan was adopted by the Hungarian Parliament, however the plan does not take into account the Council of Europe's recommendations to the desired extent and many of the support structures needed for its implementation have disappeared in the meantime.

The media called this government the "KISZ government", meaning that the prime minister and several of his cabinet ministers were previously leaders of the communist youth organisation during its last years of existence. This historical fact gives us insight into the reasons for the incoherent development of youth policy in Hungary. National and international experience, evaluations and examples of good practice do not necessarily lead to a youth policy based on commonly agreed democratic values.

In 2009, the Hungarian youth sector reflected the confusion and lack of orientation characterised by its long zigzagging route: it is scattered, vulnerable, and incoherent and its protagonists are insecure about its future. There are as many good to

excellent examples as there are bad ones in Hungarian youth policy, youth work and research practice.

A question that clearly needs to be asked to the present and future actors in the Hungarian youth field: "Can we learn together from our common history?"