

# Back to the past

## The Education System of Hungary After 2010

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- The Hungarian education system is in crisis from many aspects because old structures and old ways of functioning have returned since 2010.
- The most serious problem is the total centralization of the system accompanied by the elimination of almost all autonomies of teachers and schools.
- Inequality of opportunities in the system always was a significant feature of schools but the situation has worsened since 2010.
- An additional crisis within the crisis is the situation of vocational education, which is not able to adopt to new ideas of training for the future workforce.

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## Introduction

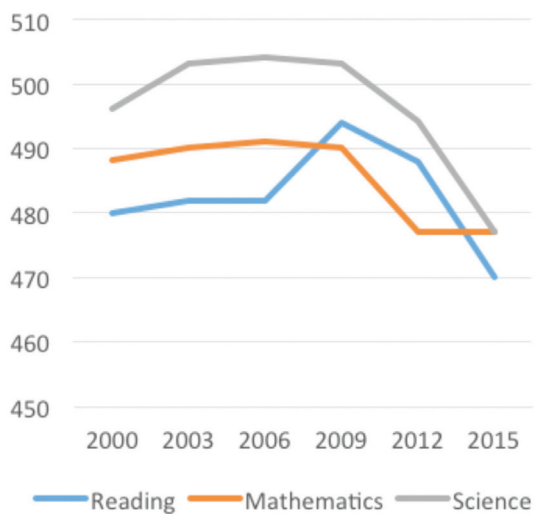
The education system of Hungary is ill. All important indicators of its efficiency are falling. More and more children and young people go schools abroad if their parents are able to pay for the expenses, or if their families have already left the country. Since 2009, the PISA performance indices of Hungarian fifteen year olds have been declining (Figure 1). The proportion of early school leavers, i.e. 18-24 year-old people who are not learning in any school and have no any secondary school qualification increased (Figure 2). Thus, expectedly, Hungary will not achieve the target of the EU2020 Strategy, namely will not be able to keep this rate at 10%. Vocational education, by the opinion of employers does not equip employees for the requirements of a rapidly changing market. This is, besides the high rate of emigration, one of the main reasons of the shortage of labour revealing itself more and more forcefully in Hungary, too. The group of people not able to accommodate to the changes of technology and not able to acquire the skills of lifelong learning is large. The number of students in higher education is decreasing annually. Hungary has one of the lowest rates of youth achieving tertiary educational attainment in the group of 25-34 year olds among OECD countries (Figure 3). The efficacy of appropriation of EU financial support for the development of education, flowing continually into country since 2005, is extremely low. The spending of these development resources, with unprecedented amounts, has not increased the quality of teaching. Hungary is one of the OECD countries characterized by the biggest inequality of opportunities in education (e.g. Figure 4 shows how the socioeconomic status of pupils affects their science performance in PISA tests). Additionally, Hungary has one of the most selective school systems of all OECD countries: the homogeneity of schools according their pupils' socioeconomic status is a common situation.

How has this situation evolved? Are there any deeply rooted factors that have exerted an effect for a long time, almost independently from political regimes? What is the role of current decisions? It is an undoubtable fact that the change of government in 2010 eventuated remarkable structural,

functional and regulatory shifts in the educational system as it did in numerous fields of social life. The Fidesz-KDNP right-wing alliance, both parties designating themselves conservative, won the parliamentary elections held in April of 2010 with two third majority, and also acquired the absolute majority in the 2014 year elections. Today, independent international political experts and politicians on various sides assert that the Fidesz-KDNP government is a populist, corrupt regime that continually induces conflicts in the European Union and confronts with the main principles of the organization.

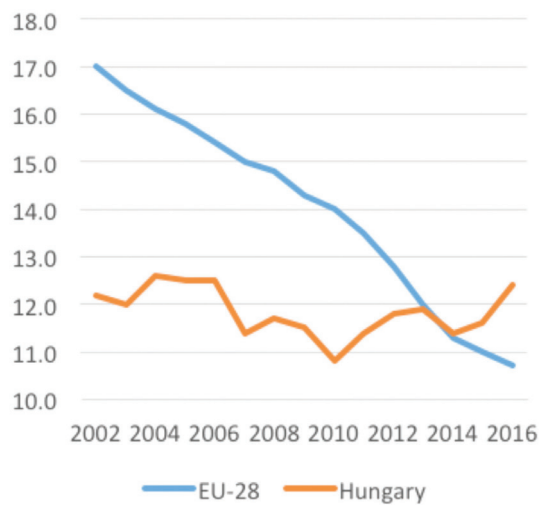
Government representatives label the changes in the education system after 2010 as reform, claiming that education has changed in the right direction. Experts critical of the government and of the actual educational administration see this conversely. They complain that education policy has completely lost its orientation since 2010, and they mainly refer to the facts described above. The author of the current paper also belongs to this latter group. However, the following analysis will not only be a critique of the educational policy of the government that has been in power for seven years. There are deeper processes behind the crisis of Hungarian educational system that have affected the system for a long time that no thorough analysis can ignore.

Figure 1: Hungarian PISA test performance in reading, mathematics, and science (2000-2015)



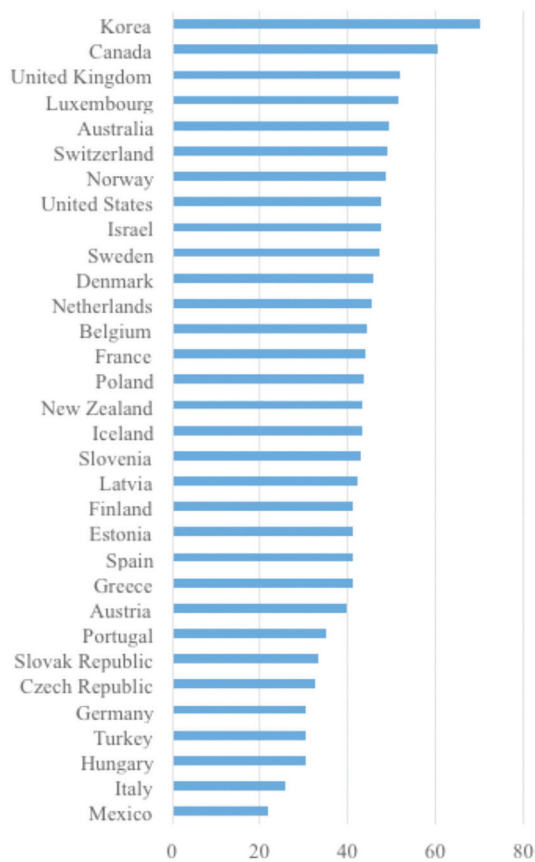
Source: OECD PISA reports

Figure 2: Rate of early school leavers in EU-28 and Hungary (2002-2016)



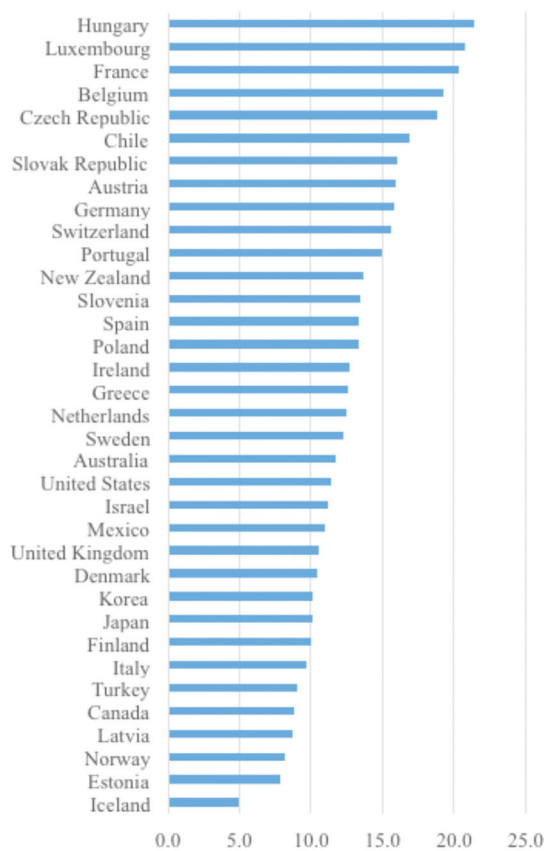
Source: Eurostat

Figure 3: Tertiary school attainment of 25-34 olds in OECD countries (2016).



Source: OECD 2017, p. 51.

Figure 4: Percentage of variation in science performance explained by students' socio-economic status in PISA 2015 study in OECD countries.



Source: OECD 2016, p. 46.

## Changes in the last decades

The Hungarian education system forcefully adapted to the traditions of German speaking and East-European countries. In Central and Eastern Europe, the educational characteristics of countries are very similar, as data from the PISA study show. We find here firmly selective school systems characterised by an outstanding inequality of chances, the domination of traditional pedagogical ideas; and, as a result, these countries mostly lag behind concerning the performance in learning compared with other groups like Nordic, Far Eastern, and Anglo-Saxon countries. Some of the countries in this region, have carried out significant educational reforms, which had positive results in the last one or two decades. Germany, also on account of the PISA shock in 2001, wants to make its education system more efficient. Slovenia created an education system that takes pride in good PISA results today. The modernization implemented in Poland at the end of the 90's was of particularly great benefit. Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania, the Slovak Republic and Hungary, however, rank the lowest in the European Union or OECD countries concerning the indicators of efficiency of education.

The Hungarian education system has gone through three major change processes in the last three decades.

The first one occurred in the years immediately before and after the change of regimes. The essence of this change was the democratization of the operation of the school system in parallel with the termination of the rule of the state party. In the era of so-called socialism that built a remarkable centralization of education, the definitive role of the party exercising power and representing communist ideology hindered the modernization of Hungarian education system like it had happened in many developed countries. Contrary to the statements of political propaganda, there were outstanding inequalities in schools, and modernization processes of the content and methodology of education could not evolve because of the suppression of innovative actions by teachers and schools. However, significant transitions started

already some years before the change of regimes. The establishment of schools was liberalised, new systems of training and institutions implementing new pedagogical methods were enabled. In 1993, a new education law was passed declaring the professional autonomy of educational institutions. This act changed the funding and governance systems of schools, allowed the establishment of new educational institutes for churches, civil organizations, persons and economic enterprises. The local governments, acting on behalf of the central government, became the owners and maintainers of schools and kindergartens. The creation of a new central curriculum, the new National Basic Curriculum (Nemzeti alaptanterv, NAT) started, which assigned broad freedoms to schools in the setting of the contents, outcome, and methods of teaching and learning.

The second outstanding change of the Hungarian education system happened between 2005 and 2010. Its driving force was, to a large extent, the important developmental support given by the European Union. This procedure consummated the autonomy of schools and teachers because the laws and the NAT provided compulsory frameworks for the planning of teaching and learning only, however, it did not prescribe any teaching content or concrete outcomes apart from developmental tasks. Purposeful projects started which aimed at the development of pedagogical culture and the methodology of teaching and learning, and the reduction of the inequality of chances. An Instructional Program Package was issued to be used by teachers in all stages of the educational system. This Package served the development of the most important competencies (reading, mathematics, social skills etc.), and it has been one of the most successful "products" of educational development in Hungary for a long time. Horizontal networks were born for the dissemination of innovations. There was a country-wide program for the development of integration in the school system for 10 years from 2003, before the new educational administration abolished it in 2013. This program, in fact, worked for a wider purpose: Beyond integration it served, to a great extent, the reduction of the inequality of chances, too. This project was invented to decrease the segregation of Roma children in schools

(the proportion of Roma children in the younger populations is about 15% in Hungary). These developmental processes were not trouble free projects. They were too slow in the light of needs, there were some inconsequent decisions, and there were many signs showing that these processes were not free from corruption. Nevertheless, many teachers and other professionals took part in these programs, as they expressed in their project feedbacks, valued the direction of the developments as appropriate; while some of them would desire the consistency of decisions, the speeding-up the program development and the elimination of corruption. The bulk of the programs established between 2005 and 2010 did not reach their completion because the changes in the era of Fidesz-KDNP rule made it impossible.

The third important change in the Hungarian education system started in 2010 and is also running nowadays. The changes that came about made it entirely impossible for the educational system in Hungary to step to the way of modernization, and these changes have practically wiped out the results of the vague endeavours of the earlier era.

This text analyses the processes that occurred in the primary and secondary education only, there is not enough room to discuss higher education in this paper.

In the following, I will briefly analyse four questions concerning the direction of changes of educational policy and governance after the change of government in 2010:

- The liquidation of the autonomy of teachers and schools, and the forceful centralization of the education system in many fields.
- The generation of processes that have increased the role played by the school in the growing inequality of chances and, parallel to that, the effacement the integration, the inhibition of the development of inclusive pedagogy.
- Major withdrawal of financial resources from the education.
- The transformation of vocational education in a way that the sphere of education does not follow today the goal of training the labour force for being able to accommodate to changing environments, and does not educate young people for life-long learning.

### Extensive centralization

After 2010, education in Hungary was legislated by the Education Act enacted of December 2011. One of the most important changes it introduced was the centralization in numerous fields of education. Local governments could no longer be the owners and maintainers of schools, a central state bureau received the tasks of control (kindergartens remained in the control of local governments). Thus, the possibility to meet the local demands became largely restricted, which is exacerbated by the fact that schools and school principals were stripped of almost all of their decision rights. Even organizing the reparation of a broken window in a school, and the paying of the expense of it were possible only through the central state administration. After the introduction of this system (2013 September 1), an almost chaotic situation emerged, and the maintenance and control of the school system has still not been consolidated since.

The government accomplished a centralization process also in the field of curriculum control. In the era of the earlier framework between 2003 and 2013, there were compulsory curricula on two levels of the system. These were the country-wide and local-institutional levels. For the entire education system, the NAT (National Basic Curriculum as mentioned above) and, on the institutional level, the local curriculum fixed teaching and learning contents for teachers and pupils. The NAT did not prescribe any subject matter, the regulation made it the local curricula's business to define the exact and detailed contents of teaching and learning. Schools had the freedom to prescribe the detailed requirements for pupils, the NAT contained only the main developmental tasks of subjects.

The curriculum regulation law accepted in 2012 and introduced in practice from 1 September 2013 has three regulation levels. The content of

the top level of NAT has changed dramatically. This national basic curriculum, unlike the similar documents of most developed countries and unlike the earlier NAT, prescribes the subject matter and the requirements for schools in a broad sense. The educational administration newly produced an additional level in the curriculum regulation system between the levels of the NAT and the local curricula. This is the level of so-called framework curricula, which already existed at the time of the previous Fidesz government (between 1998 and 2002). These framework curricula fix the teaching and learning contents in a more detailed way than NAT does for lower primary schools (1-4 grades), upper primary schools (5-8 grades), secondary schools for general training (secondary grammar school, 9-12 or 9-13 grades), secondary schools with general and vocational programs (9-12 grades), vocational secondary schools (9-11 grades). There is a rule in the Education Act that the schools' curricula may contain no more than 10% of instruction time to be expended on their own local subject matters. In reality, NAT and frame curricula entirely fill up the school learning time with the contents provided. Moreover, for the majority of schools the prescribed content is more than these schools would be able to process in a meaningful way.

The new educational administration has carried out centralization in the realm of school textbooks, too. A large textbook market used to exist in Hungary before 2010: numerous publishers issued learning tools, not only textbooks, competing with each other. There was a procedure to validate textbooks to ensure the professional quality of them. This system changed dramatically immediately after the passing of the 2011 Education Act. Although the old textbooks remained on the market, and schools could still choose to use them, this academic year of 2017/2018 was the last one when this was still possible. The government established a staff for the development of new textbooks, bought up the two biggest companies that dealt with the edition of most textbooks before. Between 2013 and 2017, the new state textbook distribution company that had been created from the earlier two companies ran over the market with products with strongly reduced prices using state

subsidies. This way, the supply of schools with means of teaching and learning no longer bears resemblance to a free market. The government's openly declared aim is a situation when there is only one textbook, developed by the government's organization, for any school year and any subject that is used for teaching and learning. This means that the "one subject one textbook" system, which dominated the use of textbooks in Hungary before 1990, has returned, although which we believed to have left this behind at the moment of the change of regimes. With the nationalization of big book-seller companies not only development of textbooks but producing and distribution of them became practical monopolies of the state. The new textbooks published in this state system, as it turned out in the practical use, are substantially weaker in terms of their professional standards than textbooks developed and used earlier in the era of free market.

### Serious problems with the inequality of chances

One of the most important problems of the Hungarian education system is the inequality of chances. For many students, the chances to reach higher school qualification and to attain a higher social status as an adult are much smaller than of their luckier mates. Hungary is extremely underperforming amongst EU or OECD countries if we analyse the effect of the pupils' social background on their learning performances (see for example the data on Figure 4). The PISA 2015 study showed that concerning all three tests (reading, mathematics and science) Hungary had the largest rate of variance of performance, which can be explained by the differences in the socio-economic status of pupils, analysing the countries of OECD (OECD 2016). Our data were similarly bad earlier as well, but changes after 2010 only worsened the situation. The programs of the 2005-2010 era aimed to reduce the inequality of chances. After the 2010 turn, this aim disappeared from the educational system. The Educational Act lowered the school age from 18 to 16 years of age. This is one of the main reasons for the growing proportion of early school leavers mentioned above. A relatively large amount of students leave school without



any secondary school qualification because they reach the age of 16 and can leave the school without any consequences. They have minimal chances in the competition for better workplaces and for better a life as well.

In the Hungarian educational system, 60 percent of pupils continue their education in vocational schools after the accomplishment of primary (general) school years (1-8 grades). The educational administration radically reduced the proportion of time in general education in vocational schools. These arrangements have, on the one hand, made it more difficult to possess adaptive knowledge and to learn how to accommodate to the changes of the labour market, on the other hand, it has effectively made it more difficult for these pupils to access higher education. Since the pupils attending vocational schools are more from families with worse socio-economic status, these decisions of educational administration have increased the inequality of chances in the system.

Closely related to the inequality of chances the Hungarian education system, it has also been characterised by massive social selection processes for a long time. By the data of PISA studies, Hungary regularly produces some of the worst results in terms of how much of the test results can be explained by the differences between schools. The proportion of primary (general) schools, where the ratio of Roma children to all school pupils is above 50 percent (ghetto schools) is now 14-15 percent, an increase from 8-9% in 2008. If a town has more than one primary (general) schools, in most cases there are substantial differences amongst the social composition of schools' attendants. There are schools that are more attended by kids of rich families with higher social status, and also schools for lower social groups came into being. All governments after the change of regimes have tried to make arrangements against this spontaneous but in many cases even deliberately incentivised selection, and we find paragraphs of laws which intent to turn back this process, however, the policy and laws have proven powerless. So, in the case of Hungarian education, it does not seem to be possible to build up a comprehensive school system, a process that had tak-

en place in many developed countries in the 60's and the 70's. Educational integration, moreover inclusive education, when students with different social status learn together in the same groups, is not seen a value in the Hungarian school system. The visceral reaction of teachers and educational administrators to problems arising in the course of teaching kids with different levels and amount of knowledge is the separation of good and bad learners, gifted and non-gifted pupils into several groups. All selections like these become social selections; and finally the rich and poor, Roma and non-Roma are separated.

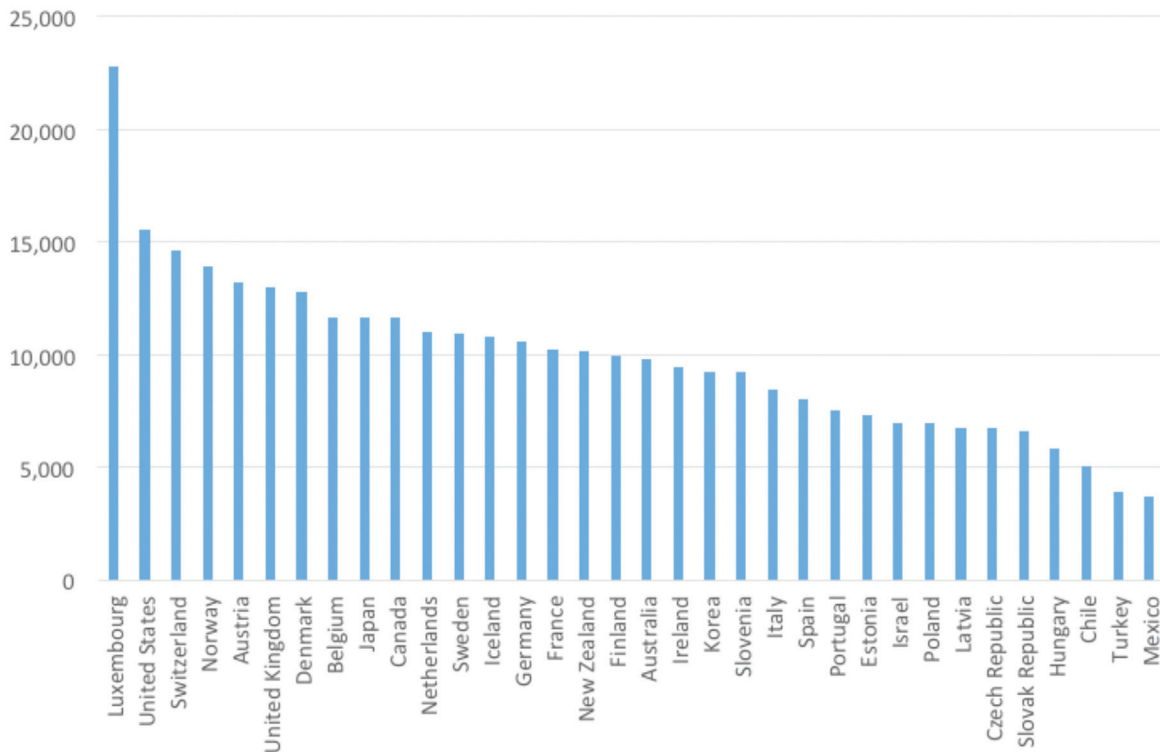
One of the most oppressive consequences of processes enhancing the inequality of chances and selection is that children in oppressed social groups possessing good abilities for becoming gifted youths are not able to emerge on account of their social situation. It is not only a personal tragedy, but also an enormous loss for society. On account of the deficits of the school system in the field of equality and selection, Hungary continually loses a substantial portion of its skills and talent potential, which constitutes a paramount damage for the future of country in the time of knowledge society and knowledge economy.

## Financing

The funding of Hungarian education is one of the lowest in the OECD countries (Figure 5). On the one hand, it means that Hungary spends little money on education in proportion to its economic power, but it is also true that the use of this little money is not efficient, there is serious waste in the system. It is true that the Hungarian economy is not amongst the OECD's strongest; however, it is this situation that necessitates the emphasised support of education, confessedly the most important driving force of the development of economy. Countries with economies worse than ours have been able to finance their education on a higher level than Hungary.



Figure 5: Annual educational expenditure in OECD and partner countries for all services in equivalent USD using PPP for GDP (2014).



Source: OECD 2017.

In the distribution of educational resources, it is easy to observe the favouritism of the Hungarian government. Good examples are the priority support of church schools and the greater financing of institutions that lean towards the government (for instance certain universities). The centralized, bureaucratic governing of education that doesn't meet the local demands is necessarily wasteful. Hungary receives outstanding amount of substantive support from European Union for the development of education, however after 2013, as it was mentioned above, it used this money for the centralization of the governance of education.

The wages of teachers are amongst the lowest in the OECD. The relative decline of wages that is the growth of distances between the mean wages of teachers and the mean wages of all graduate employees started in 2005 and touched bottom in 2013. By this time, realizing the tension among teachers, and in favour of gaining the advocacy

of them, the government was not able to hold the situation further, so it raised wages by an appreciable amount. It has been a five-year process, on the whole the government raised the wages by 50 percent against the basis of 2013. Meanwhile the developmental support coming from EU has increased, the transfer from many Hungarian people working abroad has increased substantially, so the budget and the economy came into good position to some extent, and the wages started to improve generally. Following this, a strange situation has evolved concerning the wages of educators. Although the wage raise of teachers by 50 percent actually happened, but it was not enough for teachers to reclaim their better earlier situation: the mean of wages of teachers came closer to mean of graduated employees' wages but not as close as it was before 2005. Correlating to an earlier state, the wage situation of teachers is relatively worse.

## Crisis in vocational education

In Hungary, vocational education wrestles with a serious crisis. The change of the system of vocational education would have been a serious task for a long time. There is evidence in the world that to train skill workers for concrete future tasks is impossible in almost all crafts today. In most crafts there is no stable system of professional knowledge, and the situation is the same with skills. Today, a great amount of knowledge used in work has to be acquired as an employee after ending school. Schools in vocational education have to accommodate to this situation. This accommodation means, first, the preparation for lifelong learning, bringing into focus durable elements of knowledge, highlighting the digital knowledge and languages, and it demands development of several entrepreneurial competencies and general professional skills. Elements of knowledge usable in workplaces immediately after finishing school education are overshadowed because they become obsolete very fast.

In the Hungarian vocational education, no accommodation to the changes posed by modernization and digitalization has occurred. New tendencies would suggest starting vocational training later in the course of school learning. In contrast to that, the system in which vocational education could start only on eleventh school grade at the age of 17 operated only about ten years (1998-2009) in Hungary. Since 2009, vocational training is organisable as early as grade nine (age 15). The changes require young people to take part in general training for a longer time. In opposite to that, the government decreased the number of grades in vocational schools from four years to three in 2012. The number of classes serving vocational preparation has not changed, so the number of hours for general education has dropped by half. The justification of decision and the facts contradict each other. The argument of the government was that direct vocational preparation has to be intensified, opposite to that only the proportion has changed, so that general education has come off badly.

It is hard to find any authentic and unambiguous answer in the discourses around Hungarian edu-

cation as to why these processes against world tendencies have evolved. Many suggest that low value-added work is preferred in the Fidesz-KDNP's economic strategy. They think that this is likely the way the Hungarian economy will be able to attract more foreign capital and become part of global economic networks. By the opinion of most Hungarian economist, this is a flawed strategy.

## How is it possible?

Although above I have demonstrated only some important changes in the Hungarian education system, it can be asserted that we can experience processes effecting negative results in many fields of the work of this system. There is an important question: Why does Hungarian society tolerate this?

The new government executed the formation of legislative and controlling bases of a new educational system on a crash course in 2010 and 2011. The Education Act was adopted in the end of 2011. Although some civil organizations in the education field criticized keenly the processes of change, the government had no problem with executing it due to its convenient parliamentary majority and, at least, quiet assistance of most teachers. Almost 150,000 educators work from kindergartens to the universities in Hungary, and by a generally accepted judgement of most of them, about 60-80 percent agreed with the policy of Fidesz-KDNP government, and the situation today is likely the same. This assertion can be confirmed by data from polls of teachers' opinions and attitudes (for example Kállai, Sági and Szemerszky 2016). These educators were not devotees of changes started between 2005 and 2010 either, they could not and cannot advocate the pedagogical ideas and practices prevalent in countries possessing developed and successful educational systems. It is very hard to say what the reasons of this situation are, there are no researches and analysts to give answer to this clearly. The inadequacy of in-service and pre-service teacher training is likely an important factor with the insufficient support of educational researches in background. For many decades, the educational policy and govern-

ing has not been able to understand the situation that the most important prerequisite for effective education is the reformation of the knowledge of persons in the system, especially teachers.

Thus the educational policy of Fidesz-KDNP government sees no substantial opposition in the circle of educators. The supporters of a narrow opposition are grouped in some civil organizations, which are targets of the government's counter-civil policy today. The general direction is to silence their initiatives, to terminate open debates, and to atrophy processes of social conciliation in line with important educational decisions. Today social consultation means that the ministry asks for opinions about the planned decision before the acceptance of a new law. The deadlines are too close; no extensive preparation, framing of alternatives or serious dispute of them are part of these vestigial conciliation processes, dredging any opposite opinions. It is not by accident that the most important demand in the Civil Platform for Education, a civil organization's publication "Kockás Könyv" ("Gridded Book" – CKP 2016) was the complete renovation of this consultation system. According to the opinion of this civil organization, there is a need for a consultation system, which ensures professional rationality, the involvement of stakeholders in the decisions, real debates and serious deliberation of opinions and recommendations emerging in the decision preparation process. The Platform has passed its proposals to the competent state offices on several occasions, has given free access of their analyses to the ministry; however, there is no sign of taking any of this work into account.

In Hungary the efficiency of education is declining, the system of the education is ill. It will not become unserviceable, will not collapse because educators, notwithstanding paralysing decisions, carry the system on their backs. Most of them, moreover, agree with this educational policy. Consequently, it will be very difficult to make necessary changes to catch up with well performing educational systems.

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