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Historical reflection as a source of inspiration for youth resistance in illiberal regimes – a qualitative study of the FreeSZFE movement in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Political socialization of youth is crucial both in the maintenance of an illiberal regime and in the resistance by civil society. The present qualitative study provides insight into the personal motivations of student leaders of a youth resistance movement organized for the protection of academic autonomy against the ‘illiberal democracy’ of Hungary. The study sought to explore how collective historical memory contributes to political socialization, whether historical reflection was a source of inspiration and whether history education triggered conscious citizenship resulting in the engagement of youth in resistance. Data collection involved interviewing 15 former students of the University of Theatre and Film (Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, SZFE) who played a key role in managing a 71 days long university blockade in 2020. Thematic analysis suggests that history education has the potential to trigger consciousness regarding citizens’ responsibility to confront power restricting individual freedoms and institutional autonomy. However, mainstream, alienating history education supported by the government in Hungary did not realize these potentials. Findings can be utilized in further research on the necessity of interactive, engaging history education methodologies to facilitate comparative reflection on history and current public affairs and to encourage conscious and active citizenship in illiberal regimes.

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Introduction

In countries experiencing democratic decline, youth play a crucial role in the long-term maintenance or either the gradual or radical change of the political system. A possible transition or return to genuine democratic ruling largely depends on the political awareness of young citizens, potential future decision-makers, and their consciousness regarding the citizen’s responsibility to seek balanced information, stand up for their rights, and

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to defend autonomous thinking and institutions. Meanwhile, the global problem of young people's apathy toward mainstream politics has been assessed from different perspectives. Exclusion from the political system and the failure to address issues essential to their lives have been discussed as reasons why political apathy has become a global problem (Briggs 2017, 4–5). It has been described as a symbol of democracy's decline (Oyeleye 2014, 59). Young citizens might not be broadly interested in the mainstream, electoral politics, but are interested in issues of global concern and those relevant to their existence (e.g. climate change or education). In these fields, they have been active in alternative forms of political participation, such as signing petitions and participating in demonstrations or boycotts (Briggs 2017, 66–69).

Youth can be a driving force in collective resistance against illiberal regimes, like the one maintained in Hungary. However, political apathy can be an obstacle. Recent sociological research found that only every fifth young Hungarian is interested in politics. Less than 20 percent of them talk about political issues regularly, more than 50 percent feel that their interests are not represented in national politics, and their contribution to alternative action of resistance is relatively low. According to the 2021 survey-based study, 26 percent of respondents had signed a petition, 13 percent had attended a demonstration, 23 percent had contributed to a boycott for political or environmental reasons (Bíró-Nagy and Szabó 2022, 52–56).

In the political system of Hungary, where for more than a decade an 'illiberal democracy' (electoral democracy undermined by populist illiberalism, Sajó 2021, 23–24) has been systematically constructed (with centralized power, ever-growing exclusionist policies, a decline in democratic practices, repression of autonomous thinking and institutions), political socialization of youth and driving forces behind youth resistance become crucial for the exploration of causes of the maintenance of the political system and the possible trends in resistance by civil society. An in-depth exploration of youth resistance requires the close consideration of specific conditions under which it occurs (Tuck and Yang 2014) that legitimizes case study-based research.

In political socialization, an individual's 'learning of social patterns corresponding to his societal positions as mediated through various agencies of society', which constructs their relationship to the political context they live in (Pfaff 2009, 169; Sapiro 2004, 3), education can play a significant role in addition to parental, individual characteristics and contextual factors, such as peer group influence (Kam and Palmer 2008, 612–617). In schools, both formal and extracurricular learning experiences have the potential to contribute to political socialization. Classes on society, history, or citizenship can directly impact the cognitive process of learning about possible individual attitudes in different political contexts. At the same time, extracurricular school activities (e.g. debating at school parliaments, attending poetry or movie clubs, school driven social services) can confer participation-enhancing benefits through the development of civic skills and orientations that foster political action (Davis and Evans 2002, 70–71; Myoung and Liou 2022, 1306; Reichert and Print 2018, 319; Weiss 2011, 595–599). They can enhance the effectiveness of young citizens when they get involved in politics by developing the skills of organizing events or constructively contributing to debates (Brady, Verba, and Scholzman 1995, 273). Education has the potential to bring a wide range of issues of public concern and divergent opinions to the attention of young people that might trigger consciousness, sensitivity, and critical thinking in public affairs and active engagement (Ahmed and

Gil-Lopez 2022, 4; Galston 2004, 264–265; Kahne and Sporte 2008, 740–743, 754–757; Keating and Janmaat 2016, 423–424; Lopes, Benton, and Cleaver 2009, 3–4, 13–14; Manning and Edwards 2014, 40–41; Pfaff 2009, 168). The precise way in which civics instructions, the structure of classes or the atmosphere in the classroom influence political socialization is unclear, but the potential to impact the awareness of public affairs is widely acknowledged (Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets 2016, 922–923). In this paper, the impact of history education on political socialization and more particularly, active engagement in resistance provides a major focus. My approach is based on the premise that the central purpose of social studies, including history, should be to enable the students to make their contribution to society by developing skills essential to the active citizen (Katz 1973, 295).

As MYOUNG and LIU put it, ‘although the concept of collective memory has not yet been well integrated into the study of political socialization, it should be’. Awareness about the benefits of positive historical events on the operation of politics and society, or the negative effects of national or regional traumatic stories is an essential element of political socialization (Myoung and Liou 2022, 10–11). In the Hungarian context, questions like how Hungarian authorities facilitated the deportation of Jews in the Holocaust, what political tactics were applied by the communist regime against individual freedoms and autonomy, how did underground civil resistance operate in past repressive regimes, or what opportunities were gained by citizens with the fall of the communism, bear important meaning in the current illiberal regime. The failure of political stakeholders to trigger an inclusive process of truth revelation and balanced historical dialogue about the Nazi and communist past has hindered the potential impact of collective historical reflection on conscious and active citizenship.

In such a context, it is an intriguing question how collective memory (or the lack of it) shapes individual and collective action of democratic resistance. It is especially interesting while we explore the motivation behind resistance by young citizens who have no personal experiences of the totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. This brings us to the research questions addressed by the present research.

Does collective historical memory appear in Hungarian history education in a way that potentially facilitates active citizenship and resistance to the current illiberal regime? (2) Does historical reflection play any role in the cognitive process of making an individual decision to actively engage in collective resistance?

The research questions were explored by studying the case of the FreeSZFE movement through qualitative, interview-based research. In 2020, a series of collective acts of resistance were run by the movement against the governmental measures annihilating the autonomy of the University of Theatre and Film (Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, SZFE, a small university with a 155-year long history and of high prestige). Although the identity of this *ad hoc* resisting community cannot be defined as such, for the sake of simplicity, I call it a movement.

Based on the first interviews, the following hypotheses were outlined: (1) frontal and alienating history education does not trigger acts of resistance against the illiberal regime, (2) reflection on the history of the twentieth century, with special regard to the Nazi and communist regimes, raises awareness regarding attacks on autonomy and

thereby contribute to the cognitive process of individual decision-making about participation in the resistance.

The broader context

The illiberal regime of Hungary is maintained by the Orbán government with a majoritarian and exclusionary approach. Since 2010, the Prime Minister and the governing parties believe that holding the two-thirds majority in the Parliament means that they legitimately make decisions for the people without transparent decision-making processes or any consultation with opposition political parties, independent experts, or institutions. The government has become intolerant of criticism related to its policy agenda. The centralization of power has been carried out through the 'occupation' of state authorities, weakening of checks and balances, mass manipulation by dominance in media, and attacks against civil society and academia (Bárd and Carrera 2020; Bárd and Pech 2019; Halmai 2018; Hann et al. 2020; Kirs 2020; Kopper et al. 2020; Mészáros 2020; Pirro and Stanley 2022; Polyák 2019). The process of democratic decline in Hungary has gone through different phases. Due to rapid constitutional and political changes, as a subject of academic classification, the Orbán regime has been a 'moving target' (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018, 1174) and it has been assessed from diverse perspectives (e.g. populism, constitutionalism). It has been classified as 'elected autocracy' (Ágh 2022, 9) 'externally constrained hybrid regime' (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018), 'illiberal informational autocracy' (Krekó 2022), 'autocratic legalism' (Scheppelle 2018), 'illiberal constitutionalism' (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała 2019), and in its radicalizing autocratic tendencies even 'on the edge of dictatorship' (Scheppelle 2020). Convincing analyses of KÖRÖSÉNYI and SAJÓ are based on the concept of plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD) by Max Weber to grab all fundamental characteristics of the Orbán regime. In PLD, the charisma of the leader plays a central role and charismatic rule is concealed by the form of democratic legitimacy. Representation is plebiscitary. There are formally free elections but diversity and reasonable dialogue in the parliament are missing, and the legitimacy of the opposition is denied by the illiberal ruler. Crisis situations are used by the leader to carry out revolutionary policies unbound by efficient checks and balances. Majoritarianism is underpinned by demagoguery (Köröseyi 2019, 284–295; Köröseyi, Gábor, and Gyulai 2020, 32–42; Sajó 2021, 28–55). These characteristics accurately describe the current Hungarian political system. At the same time, it remains a 'moving target' being in an ongoing process of constant political changes.

The maintenance of this plebiscitary leader democracy with growing illiberal policies without widespread civil resistance suggests that history repeats itself without conscious reflection of citizens on past experiences. Hungary's population lived under both the Nazi and communist regimes. One could assume that facing state, institutional, and individual responsibility for past atrocities facilitates awareness about the role of the individual in maintaining an illiberal political system. However, in this learning process and how repression appears in the collective memory, governmental policies related to the past play a crucial role. Hungary is not the only state in the Eastern European region where the myths of national innocence and bravery are promoted by legislation and state practices (Grabowski 2022), but it is the only state where the government, having a constitution-making power, was able to prioritize national pride and to keep silent about sensitive

issues (e.g. Hungary's responsibility for mass atrocities during the Holocaust) in the Fundamental Law, the country's constitution. After the fall of communism, in the first 20 years of the young democracy, an official truth revelation process about past totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes with the involvement of all political stakeholders was not undertaken. This provided an easy field for the Orbán government to shape the historical narrative. It shifted the blame to foreign occupying forces for the Holocaust while taking strict measures to confront communist crimes aimed at playing the role of the protector of national unity against any kind of leftist ideology (Kirs 2022). This approach might deprive youth of opportunities to gain a multi-perspectival understanding of the past. However, political memory built by other stakeholders, like social movements or civil society actors can contest the official narrative. As ANSARA put it, memory is a phenomenon always current keeping the bonds between the past and the present. While consciousness about individual responsibility in past repressive regimes can raise awareness about individual responsibility to confront current illiberal measures and injustices, the memory of fear from state repression can prevent people from getting involved in resistance. Even after a democratic turn, past repression can leave 'scars in society' manifested in collective fear from politically participating, while political participation can enable the reconstruction of political memory through critical response to the official narrative (Ansara 2015, 51–57). An intriguing question is whether history teaching can play any role in challenging the official narrative and abstract inherited fears hindering political participation, while the education system is also under the control of an illiberal government.

In the process of the development of the Orbán regime, its third electoral victory was interpreted as a turning point and as the start of a third phase of centralization of power (after capturing state authorities and the media) manifested in a culture war with the aim to gain full control over civil society, and to strengthen the legitimacy of charismatic rule and 'revolutionary' policies. The Prime Minister publicly announced a 'rebellion against political correctness, against the dictates of loopy liberal doctrine'. He declared that 'the rebellion against liberal intellectual oppression is not only widening, but also deepening. There is an increasing number of persuasive essays, thorough studies and indispensable monographs'. (Orbán 2020)

The 'rebellion' was focused on the 'occupation' of cultural and academic institutions carried out among other measures through depriving the Hungarian Academy of Science of its research institutes; the establishment of an own 'training' institution, the Mathias Corvinus College; an own 'Academy of the Arts'; or the model change pushing universities into a situation of direct political dependence (Ágh 2022, 12–14). Academic institutions have frequently been the center of political and intellectual criticism. Consequently, repressive, and autocratic regimes have tended to violate its autonomy. At the same time, universities can be used for the legitimization of illiberal regimes and indoctrination of students. In the populist vocabulary of the Orbán regime, liberalism and multiculturalism became curse words opposed to the officially approved Christian national identity and traditions. Academics nurturing ideas of liberalism are framed, as RYDER puts it, as part of 'an intellectually confused and self-interested elite' being in an 'undeserved privileged position as the arbiters of what is right or wrong' (Ryder 2022, 13, 113).

Universities' autonomy has become a major concern earlier in 2014 when the chancellor system was introduced. The chancellors, appointed by the minister responsible for

higher education, were given full control over budgetary issues and the administration of universities (Act CCIV of 2011: Art 13-13/A). In 2017, the Central European University (CEU) was targeted by a special law as a typical tactic of populist leaders to distract by speaking about external enemies and to create an image of themselves as the protectors of the people. Minister Zoltán Balog who submitted the draft law publicly stated that

it is in Hungary's interest to support the existence of a strong, autonomous and internationally acknowledged university, but it is not in her interest to support people serving foreign interests, who work against the democratically elected government, such as the Soros-organizations. (HVG 2017)

In 2020, the European Court of Justice held Hungary responsible among others for the violation of academic freedom (Commission v Hungary 2020), but the damage had been done, the CEU transferred its main location from Budapest to Vienna and launched its US-accredited degree programs there in 2019 (Enyedi 2018). Maintaining the rhetoric of protecting traditional Christian values, in 2018, the government withdrew the accreditation of the gender studies MA program. Consequently, no universities can issue a degree in gender studies. These governmental measures were gradual steps toward the overall reform of the entire higher education sector, the so-called 'model change'.

Between 2019 and 2021, almost all universities have been transformed from state-maintained institutions into private ones managed by public interest trusts. These universities are controlled by the board of trustees, including the selection of the rector, the appointment of other senior university leaders, management of the budget, the adoption of the organizational and operational rules, and rules on the employment of researchers and lecturers. Real estate used for the universities' operation was transferred from the state to them or the trusts. The status of employees as public servants was abolished.

The governmental rhetoric behind this action was that more flexibility is ensured for their operation, and they can allocate human resources more freely. They are still provided public funding based on performance contracts, but they became less dependent on the state. In fact, the reform was carried out without any consultation with those affected, excluding students and faculty from the decision-making process. The selection of trustees was not transparent, they were appointed by the government. The boards of trustees were filled with members of the government, and government-friendly political and economic stakeholders, which is subject to official criticism by European institutions due to rule of law-related concerns and the protection of the EU budget (Council of the European Union 2022, 42–43). The decision-making power of the senates of universities has been significantly restricted. As to the change in the status of university employees, public servant status ensured that their employment could only be terminated based on statutory grounds, and evidence of incompetence. Regular employment status terminated their immunity important in cases when they deal with politically sensitive issues (Drinóczi 2021; Kováts and Rónay 2021; Pap 2021; Ryder 2022).

The SZFE case

Governmental measures targeting the SZFE were embedded into the context of the model change in higher education, but also into governmental narratives about a culture war. In 2014, Imre Kerényi, a former cultural adviser to the Prime Minister, publicly

stated that most Hungarian drama literature is the product of Christian culture, and all major pieces are sacral. He emphasized that in the directors' and dramaturgs' education, power was maintained by a 'fag lobby', which paved the way to decadence and decay. Therefore, it is essential to change the SZFE or start a counter institution at the National University of Public Administration (Botos 2014). In 2018, the Prime Minister declared the need for a 'new intellectual and cultural approach' (Miniszterelnok.hu 2018). The SZFE was about to be transformed in the framework of the 'model change' and became a battlefield of a culture war.

In August 2020, the government established its board of trustees. Attila Vidnyánszky, the director of the Hungarian National Theatre, and an advocator for the promotion of national identity and Christian values in arts was appointed the head of the board. On 1 September 2020, all decision-making power of the SZFE senate was transferred to the board of trustees without consultation with the representatives of the university. Leaders and lecturers of the SZFE resigned in protest. A poll conducted by the SZFE Student Union found that all 210 respondents (out of the 353 full-time students) opposed the way the institutional reform had been carried out (Urfi 2020). Students organized a street farewell party for the resigning faculty, thousands of supporters joined them, the event grew into a demonstration and the occupation of the main SZFE building by students. The new management, including the government-appointed chancellor Gábor Szarka, could not enter the building, and Szarka suspended the semester of Fall 2020. The latter measure was later found unlawful and unconstitutional in a judicial proceeding and by the Commissioner for Educational Rights (Ryder 2022, 146–147). The blockade of the university's central building lasted for 71 days until 9 November 2020, when the government closed the university buildings due to the COVID pandemic, which decision the protesters complied with based on public health considerations (Frei 2020). The blockade was preceded by regular meetings among a narrow circle of students and professors to deliberate on the possible forms of protest, but collective actions during the blockade were attended by the majority of SZFE students and thousands of external supporters. The protesters created learning spaces within their 'Education Republic', decision-making forums with the participation of up to approx. 300 students at a time and their professional skills enabled them to apply innovative, theatrical tools, and street performances as new forms of protest in the Hungarian context. The FreeSZFE movement was born.

Unlike in the case of other Hungarian universities subjected to the model change, protest against model change at the SZFE was visible to the broader public and was appearing in a series of public demonstrative acts for multiple reasons. It is a small and single institution with a more than a century-old tradition of providing training in the field of theater arts. Both its history, wide acknowledgment, and its unique educational methodologies (e.g. the system of close mentorship) brought the institution to the heart of the professional and personal identity of professors and students affiliated with it. Most of the SZFE citizens were connected to each other in their educational program in this small community where for example, director, actor, and dramaturge students cooperated throughout their studies. The collective SZFE identity was subjected to critical and hostile governmental rhetoric well before the model change as described before. Then the small circle of SZFE citizens composed of individuals with strong skills in verbal communication and creativity, while facing governmental attacks aimed at

the core of their professional and personal existence, was more capable to build an integrated front of self-defense as opposed to more fragmented and much larger communities of other universities having no similar common identity.

Pro-governmental media personalities described the protest as a 'liberal (communist, anarchist, feminist, homosexual, etc.)' campaign (Szentesi 2020), and the former leaders and professors of the SZFE as a 'stinking old sect' hiding in a 'grungy nest' who turned into hysteria when the light was shed on them (Népszava 2021). Vidnyánszky, the head of the board of trustees, claimed that the protest was led by left-wing political parties and that students who occupied the university building were trained by well-known left-wing activists. In opposition, László Upor, the former rector who resigned in protest, stated that the demonstrations were never about any political agenda but about autonomy (Szurovecz 2020). Although the demands of the protesters were ignored by the government and the 'model change' was executed, the FreeSZFE movement became an impactful resistance story carved deep into the collective memory of the democratic opposition. The FreeSZFE protest community transformed into the FreeSZFE Association to provide an autonomous creative space worthy of the traditions of the former SZFE. The Emergency Exit program resulted in agreements with seven European universities to accept former SZFE classes and to provide them with degrees. However, not all members of the 2020 protest became a member of the Association, it became a new community different from the one that carried out the university blockade and collective public demonstrations of 2020 that are subject to the present research. When I mention the FreeSZFE movement or community, I mean the collective of individuals who actively contributed to the 2020 protest. External observers on both sides tended to see the FreeSZFE as a homogenous community. Pro-governmental voices spoke about a decadent, liberal company prone to moral decay, while supporters tended to see them as a coherent group of innocent and brave freedom fighters with the hope that they would shake the conscience of the Hungarian society and bring along a regime change. During the interviews with key student figures in the FreeSZFE movement, diversity within their group became evident. Diversity in age, professional interests, lifestyle, political, religious beliefs, and personal stories. At the same time, they all were committed to cooperative action of resistance involving conflict of opinion and perspectives, which in itself is central to a democratic community (Abowitz 2000, 885). The question is why did they one by one decide to confront power, risk personal career choices, and stand up for artistic freedom and academic autonomy? Were young members of the FreeSZFE collective forced into 'dignity-rooted' resistance by the 'unreasonable actions of those in power' (Ryder 2022, 48–49)? Why did they not keep silent to avoid further pressure, anxiety, and personal sacrifices? Was it a purely emotional or partly conscious decision-making process? I was turning over these questions in my mind while I was talking to the student leaders of the movement.

Data management and analysis

Qualitative interviews were carried out from February through April 2022. The 15 interviewees were former SZFE students from different BA and MA programs (e.g. movie or theatrical director, screenwriter, dramaturg, actor) and of different ages (15 interviewees from 22 to 29 years, and two interviewees of 32 and 35 years). They were selected by an

intermediary who played an active role in the movement and had an overall view on the key actors. Interviewees were selected based on their leading role, as forum moderators, demonstration designers, or Student Union representatives. The 1.5–2-hour-long semi-structured interviews covered a broader range of issues than the ones discussed in the current paper.

The interview guide was based on four subject matters:

- (1) Reflection on democratic decline and resistance, with particular attention to personal engagement in civil activism.
- (2) Identity of the movement.
- (3) Factors of personal motivation (family background, cognitive v emotional process, personal risks, and sacrifices).
- (4) Reflection on European and Hungarian history and education.

The method of qualitative interviews was applied due to the author's interest in the perspective and perception of the members of the movement. The interview guide was flexibly applied. The interviews were conducted in Hungarian, the mother tongue of all participants. It facilitated the nuanced conversation between the interviewees and the author. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim directly after the interviews in Hungarian by the author.

Written, informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. The aim of the research and its expectable outcomes were clearly explained to each interviewee. The interviews were conducted in private (in most cases at the home of the author) or in a few cases at quiet and not busy public places chosen by the interviewee, thereby, the confidentiality of the conversations was also physically ensured. These conditions were essential due to the frequently sensitive character of the exchanged thoughts, including issues of the impact of collective actions on the personal life of the interviewees, the reaction of family members to these actions, or personal beliefs as driving forces.

For the assessment of data, a thematic analysis was conducted that was driven by the research questions (i.e. the appearance of collective historical memory in history education as an impactful factor in conscious citizenship; and the role of historical reflection in the cognitive process of decision-making about active engagement in collective resistance). The method of thematic analysis was ideal since it enabled a rich understanding of the knowledge, personal motivation of leading members of the youth resistance movement and the identification of key themes (e.g. family stories and culture as sources of knowledge on history, the nature of power and the sufferings of victims as perceived by active members of resistance, distance from historical events, impactful education methodologies, political socialization, and individual responsibilities), which facilitated the interpretation of data across the transcripts and the revelation of information relevant to the research questions (Bryman 2016, 584–589). The two hypotheses (i.e. no significant impact of frontal and alienating history education on active citizenship; and the considerable relevance of historical reflection to the individual decision-making about engagement in resistance) were based on the first interviews and their validity was explored with a focus on the key themes structured along the research questions.

Findings

Findings are structured by the four main themes resulting from the thematic analysis: (1) family stories and culture as sources of knowledge on history, (2) the influence of impactful history education methodologies, (3) the nature of power and the sufferings of victims as perceived by active members of the resistance, (4) knowledge of history as a source of personal motivation.

(1) Family stories and culture as sources of knowledge on history

While I was trying to explore what main sources nourished the knowledge of interviewees about impactful resistance stories of the twentieth century's history, I found that the ones heard in the family or experienced through culture carved some specific stories deep in the memory of the interviewees.

Stories of the family and friends were shared, such as one of a grandmother who was hidden in a mill during the Second World War, and whose story impacted the personality of the empathic mother and indirectly the interviewee.

My mother has a very strong sense of solidarity and empathy, how she was raised impacted me the most. My grandmother was hidden in a mill all throughout the second World War. It may be that the attitude inherited by my mother is rooted in the experience of the Holocaust.

Other stories included a Jewish mother teaching about the horrors of the Holocaust, a Jewish ex-girlfriend sharing her family stories, or a grandmother who had to be locked down so that she would not join the revolutionaries of 1956. Family trips to commemorative locations were also mentioned as impactful experiences. A beautiful connection between the past and the present was discovered in a story of an interviewee's teacher friend, who actively resisted communism and whose stories and attitudes are perceived by the interviewee as directly influencing her acts in resistance.

My teacher from Szentes [a small town in South-East Hungary] largely impacted my personality, I am who I am today partially because of her. She was an important actress in the '70s in Szeged [a central town in the South-East region], a badass partisan. For example, she was mandated to organize a ceremony for the national holiday of 15 March ... [Instead of organizing an officially acceptable program,] she stepped on the stage all alone and recited a poem by Ady [a widely acknowledged Hungarian poet]. The State Protection Authority monitored and openly followed her ... and then she was expelled from Szeged ... She taught me how to behave. [...] We are still in contact. She knows very well what I went through during the resistance. I realized how much our situation worsened when she started to talk to me in plural tenses, like "our problems so and so ...".

Readings from literature and non-fiction were mentioned by multiple respondents as inspiring sources. A number of books and documents were specifically mentioned, such as the 'Orgy' by Gábor Zoltán about Arrow Cross atrocities under the Holocaust, Archives of State Security Services, or the 'Kazamaták' by János Térey about political detainees under communism.

Pop culture and movies were also recalled with specific remarks on Bertolucci's 'The dreamers', Zoltán Fábri's 'Ötödik pecsét' about Arrow Cross atrocities, or hip-hop music related to the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s.

Theater was among the major cultural sources of information. A theatrical project, which was specifically mentioned, is titled 'Personal history' presented by secondary school students based on interviews with Holocaust survivors. 'Sea Lavander', a Holocaust commemorative dance performance, was also brought up. They talked about obvious connections between their professional training and historical reflection.

In the class of dramaturgs, we had a scene-writing course and with half of the group we wrote a script about the samizdat, we were carrying out research through interviews with figures like Ferenc Kőszeg [a well-known liberal member of civil resistance under communism].

Family stories and relevant cultural experiences were discussed in specific terms by the interviewees, while similarly impactful educational experiences were brought up only upon follow-up questions pushing for specific responses.

(2) Influence of impactful history education methodologies

When asking interviewees about the main sources of their knowledge about history, the school was mentioned only by six respondents, and without any particular comment. No specific story from school or history education came up spontaneously. Only one interviewee said that secondary education had a significant impact on his way of thinking but added that he belonged to the privileged few who benefited from a strong history education in school.

Upon my question on why they do not recall specific impactful stories from school, multiple interviewees responded by sharing the opinion that the quality of history education in secondary school was poor, the education was frontal, lexical data was taught instead of inspiring stories triggering genuine reflection on the past. Commemorative events in schools were described as formal, boring, and alienating from historical events. Positive experiences were sporadic and connected to the individual skills of specific teachers or extracurricular education programs.

In school, I didn't have any experience that would hit me in the gut. History teaching at secondary school is not good, Hungary is infamously bad at this and also at facing the past. History is accurately taught when it comes to statistical data (for example, how many people died in a battle), but the general approach is not good for carving historical stories deep. Literature, like the 'Orgy', is capable to do that.

I don't recall any method that would have carved history or historical stories deep in my memory.

From history classes, I don't have any particular memories. We received traditional, frontal teaching.

I don't recall anyone from school who would have taught us what was interesting in the history of the twentieth century.

At the same time, positive attributes of history teachers were mentioned: being able to speak in an intimate, personal tone; connecting past events with current affairs; using movies to trigger open discussion; telling stories of victims and perpetrators; sharing own family stories; smartly emphasizing the important aspects of historical events.

When we talked about the Holocaust, he brought in a menorah, created a beautiful intimate atmosphere, and told us the story of his own father, how he was taken to Auschwitz, how he came back home and then passed away due to malnutrition.

We were watching a documentary related to the bombing of Hamburg. A man appeared in it who survived the attacks, but his skin had burnt from the hot air. These kinds of human details can carve these historical events deep into my memory.

Reading exercises based on documentarist reports about historical events were mentioned since they brought comprehensible details of human stories closer to the reader.

We learned a lot about the Holocaust and how people were hiding Jews in their homes to save them. This told me a lot about solidarity. These stories about people letting others in their homes and risking their own lives for them had a very strong influence on me. Yes, this is the power of community.

An interviewee was convinced that a fact-checking exercise concerning the Holocaust made students realize that seeking reliable information about public affairs is a task and responsibility of average citizens. Another interviewee emphasized that conducting and listening to interviews facilitated learning about moral choices and responsibilities. A respondent talked about a commemorative day (October 23 related to the 1956 revolution) when interviews conducted by students with their own grandparents were played on the speakers of the school during breaks.

Interactive exercises were extremely rare in their history classes, only one interviewee mentioned one that triggered the feeling of active resistance. On a commemorative day (March 15 related to the 1848 Hungarian revolution against the Habsburg dynasty), based on the idea of a scene-setter teacher, a small group of students were entering classes and pulling out other students to make them join 'the revolution'.

School? I don't know what to say. I cannot recall any experiential learning experience from history classes. I had an excellent literature teacher, but I don't remember anything else. Once on March 15, we played the revolution, which was good. My scene-setter teacher had the idea that we would pull other students out of classrooms to make them join the revolution. He was a good scene-setter teacher but not a good history teacher though.

School? History class? [She laughed out loud.] It was zero. The teacher did what she was obliged to do by teaching the compulsory materials, she did not influence at all sensitivity or the willingness to act if needed.

Without experiential learning in history classes and in the lack of other impactful sources, history can remain distant and irrelevant to the individual reflection on current injustices, as multiple interviewees pointed out. One respondent's remark is thought-provoking with regard to its impact on the existence of an illiberal regime. He was affiliated with a high-prestige public school with an exceptionally strong history education. He stated that the knowledge about historical events gained in school made him extremely sensitive to social inequalities and political injustices and that he knows that he is privileged with this positive school experience. He shared a dilemma: if everyone got such high-quality education as he did, would the current illiberal regime exist in Hungary?

My first hypothesis was confirmed by the interviews, namely, that typical formal Hungarian history education, in its current form, does not trigger acts of resistance against the illiberal regime. At the same time, the other hypothesis had to be explored more closely.

My goal was to reveal whether knowledge of the history of the twentieth century (gained from any sources of information) still played a role in individual decision-making to confront power.

(3) The nature of power and the sufferings of victims as perceived by active members of resistance

I requested all the interviewees to reflect on the stories they knew about the Nazi and communist regimes and to tell me whether they saw in them any moral lessons that should be kept in mind by average Hungarian citizens in the current political situation. The responses indicated that the limited impact of formal history education and more vivid information from other sources about history resulted in valuable individual considerations.

Some interviewees shared their reflections on the 'cycles' of repressive regimes, compared them, and explored their nature with regard to the recurring attitudes of citizens. The opinion was shared that Hungarian society is used to governmental powers restricting individual freedoms and that it has never grown up to democracy.

There are people and countries who repeatedly inherit these shitty regimes. The question is how can this cyclical system be terminated? Hungarian people are cynical because it seems that it is impossible to leave these regimes behind. Just think about Viktor Orbán 30 years ago with sparkling young eyes [at the change of regime from communism] and look at him today.

The automatism of having no word in political decision-making, striving for maintaining individual existence, and therefore playing the rules of power is seen as a root cause of political apathy. Citizens used to repressive regimes are prone to accept a paternalist government and to become alienated from public affairs based on the feeling that they would anyway not be able to influence them.

Society feels less responsible for its own fate, and this is rooted in communism. Public affairs are considered something the state will take care of, and society put itself into the status of a child. [...] Laws are created without a genuine reflection on reality and how society works. Laws are not created to facilitate the co-existence of different social groups, but the law itself is creating social concepts [...] to provide ideological guidance. This is familiar from history and society should be sensitive to it.

The lack of genuine democracy led to the situation of massive human rights violations. [...] All social communities see that those regimes and practices were not right. In opposition to this, sometimes I almost burst out in tears feeling that the Hungarian society and people have not learned anything. They do not realize that the mechanisms are the same, and we are heading in that direction.

The interviewees also emphasized the differences between past totalitarianism and the current illiberal regime. With regard to individual attitudes, the view took shape that the difference between the severity of reprisals upon resistance results in a higher degree of individual responsibility today.

As opposed to harsher repressive regimes, the soft repression of the current one is slowly killing people. It's a slow slaughter, you never know what consequences you have to face. They ruin your reputation or destroy you by the force of law.

[Past repressive regimes] tell me that the individual is stronger than thought, there is always a choice to resist.

[A key question is] where is the limit? What is it that is still bearable and when do you take risks by standing up? During our preparations for half a year [before the blockade of the university building], we said here is the red line, and here again, this is the red line, and once, just overnight, we started the blockade. Society should learn this, to recognize the limit, to admit that a situation is unbearable and you must stand up.

The significance of collective action was also acknowledged with a comparative discussion about the space and limits of autonomous action in the past and today.

The lesson is that it is not sure that your individual opinion reaches the decision-makers. If you are right without a doubt, even then, decisions can be made that do not comply with it. In our case, it was clear that taking away our university was unjust, but it was decided above our heads. It was like a story from communism. The average citizens should raise their voices more loudly. The community of resisters should reach a critical number so that it cannot be ignored anymore. [Compared to communism,] the situation changed, they might annihilate your employment, but you do not need to fear imprisonment.

The ability and willingness of resistance largely depend on information received about the management of public affairs. A cornerstone of an illiberal, populist regime is governmental propaganda through distorted mass information and media. The interviewees also reflected on the manipulation of people while exploring the similarities between the Nazi regime and the current illiberal one. Clashes between values and force, justice and power, and fear as a tool in the hand of power were discussed.

Each and everyone should individually stay alert not to be manipulated by politics, and not forget fundamental values due to the public mood. The Holocaust showed us how people cease to be human beings in the eyes of other people due to mass manipulation. The lesson is that power is just power. It does not represent talent or value it is simply force. This should not mislead the people. [...] Even though we knew that justice is on our side, we still had reflexes that made us scared of power. In this regard, we always had to reassure each other that the aggressor's attitude is unacceptable.

We are always more scared of power than we in fact should be, and this always serves power. In many more cases can one say no than one cannot even in systems much more brutal than the current one.

(4) Knowledge of history as a source of identity and personal motivation

Since resistance was manifested in their collective action, an interesting question is whether historical reflection was present in the process of deliberations while the participants of the movement were searching for a potential collective identity or adequate tools of resistance. Historical reflection was not seen by the interviewees as a primary source of collective identity. None of the interviewees remembered any discussion with a particular focus on history during the preliminary planning in the Summer or at the forums during the blockade in the Fall of 2020.

During the Summer forums, we didn't put ourselves into a historical context at all. We needed a bit of self-reflection to compare ourselves with other cases. This happened later on when we had already identified our situation and what we wanted to do.

Historical parallels were never grounds for the collective to identify itself. Furthermore, multiple interviewees strongly believed that they should not compare themselves to resistance movements in 'bloodier' eras, such as freedom fighters of the 1956 revolution, or resistance under the Holocaust. One of the interviewees talked about education by the family that would never let him compare the recent situation of individuals opposing the state with the sacrifices of people under the Nazi or communist regimes.

People suffered differently. I would only remain without a degree, but I would not be executed.

However, concerning the moral values, and the importance of protecting freedom from state repression, they all reflected on similarities between the current illiberal regime and the past totalitarian or post-totalitarian ones.

Historical perspectives also appeared in a pragmatic way while they were searching for efficient tools of resistance. This was a very narrow perspective primarily on (the recent) past blockades of universities with a slight reflection on resistance in general. Almost all interviewees mentioned the documentary (which they watched together during the blockade) titled 'Blokada' directed by Igor Bezinović about the 2009 university occupation in Zagreb, Croatia. Multiple respondents mentioned an Indian visiting student, who shared a past protest story from India, namely the occupation of a film school, that repeatedly became a point of reference. They almost all read 'Blueprint for Revolution' by Szrda Popović.

We all read the book of Popović, we passed it along. Everyone bought or borrowed it. But it happened afterward. First, the will of resistance was born, and then, as we were not experienced we were reading these books to search for tools, to see how it was done elsewhere.

An intriguing response concerning identity in the sense of professional integrity and credibility was a critical assessment of the SZFE professors' performance. The interviewee emphasized how certain members of the faculty as acknowledged artists used history in their work acting as heroes of moral values on the stage while remaining passive in reality when those very same moral values need to be protected. This criticism was the conceptual basis of a flash mob organized by the FreeSZFE during the blockade in front of the National Theatre. They were reading out pieces of the drama 'The citizens of Kassa' by Sándor Márai, while the drama was played in the National Theatre (Fidelio 2020). The play was directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, head of the SZFE's board of trustees, and is about citizens' actions in defending their rights against power in the fourteenth century.

When I posed the question of whether they think historical reflection influenced their individual decision to stand up against political injustices, no respondents reported a direct impact of historical reflection on their sensitivity related to injustices or their decision to actively contribute to the resistance movement. Out of the 15 interviewees, 6 assumed an indirect effect. None of them recalled a specific story from the past repressive regimes as one that was consciously reflected on while deciding about joining the movement.

Whether my knowledge of history inspired me to act? My first thought is no. Second, I would say that young people have always revolted against the oppressors, it's sexy and very courageous. I'm sure I was influenced by such stories that I had read or heard about, but I didn't think of specific stories when I decided to act.

Based on these accounts rooted in the self-reflection of the interviewees, I wondered what was the reason for such slight significance of historical reflection in deciding to participate in resistance. The respondents provided three explanations.

- (1) They feel distant from historical events, they seem not to be relevant in current affairs. The distance was meant in a subjective sense, an interviewee pointed out that historical events were discussed in a theoretical way, while current injustices awaken deep emotions. I don't feel that I'm directly related to historical events, history is not part of my reality. Moral conclusions based on stories from the Holocaust or communism occur to me in theory. Current affairs are the ones that awaken anger in my gut.
- (2) Multiple interviewees had had no particular interest in history before they gained personal experiences of confrontation with power. They started dealing with historical events related to repressive regimes after the governmental attacks against the SZFE. They became open to more conscious historical reflection because they themselves had to confront power. They received relevant literature from friends during the university blockade (e.g. Robert Merle's 'Derrière la vitre'), and they prepared demonstrative performances based on historical events (such as the 1956 revolution in Hungary against communism).
- (3) As a third reason for not reflecting on history before joining the resistance, an interviewee explained that there was no need for searching for parallel stories in history since the injustices in the SZFE case were obvious.

While none of the interviewees saw a direct link between historical reflection and their decision to contribute to the FreeSZFE movement, some of them emphasized that they would not have acted in the way they did without unconsciously reflecting on past repressive regimes.

In my opinion, historical stories deeply carved in memory do have a motivational force.

Historical experiences made me extremely sensitive to social inequalities and injustices.

Knowledge about historical events is significant. They are organically embedded in consciousness, it's difficult to explain the chain of effects, but they are built into my mind. I am convinced that if I didn't know about these stories, I would not act as I do.

Discussion

This research is the first in-depth exploration of the personal motivation of members of the Hungarian youth resistance movement FreeSZFE based on semi-structured interviews. I found that even if formal education and extracurricular school activities have the potential to impact conscious citizenship, critical thinking, and active participation in public affairs (Ahmed and Gil-Lopez 2022; Galston 2004; Kahne and Sporte 2008; Keating and Janmaat 2016; Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets 2016; Pfaff 2009), the Hungarian history education did not realize these potentials in the case of current members of youth resistance. However, the research findings highlight the relevance of historical reflection in the cognitive process of decision-making about actively engaging in collective resistance.

Findings demonstrate that sources outside school are more impactful than formal history education in the Hungarian context. This conclusion might not be surprising for readers familiar with the Hungarian context. History education methodologies applied in Hungarian secondary schools have been subjected to harsh critics for decades. As regards the relevant developments in the Orbán regime, milestones have been the introduction of the 2012 national education plan (NEP), the 2018 proposal for reform in history education, and the 2020 NEP.

The Association of Hungarian History Teachers (an independent organization established in 1989 advocating for history teachers' interests and the development of history teaching) and individual educators emphasized that the 2012 NEP maintained the old systemic problems. An unmanageable amount of factual information that teachers were obliged to transfer in classes does not leave any time or capacity for teachers to explore innovative methodologies. The NEP simplified history to stories of historical personalities, wars, and battles ignoring ever-changing historical discourse (Történelemtanárok Egylete 2017). Most of the teachers aimed to cover as many subjects as possible with the most possible factual details instead of interpreting historical events from a critical perspective. History teachers sharing critical observations were of the view that the goal to teach 'everything about all historical eras' undermines the real legitimate aim of history teaching, namely, to facilitate critical thinking on history, the understanding of the nature of historical research, and the ability to get oriented in current affairs based on historical knowledge. Innovation depends on the personal efforts of individual teachers due to the fundamentally failed approach of the NEP (Kojanitz 2018).

In 2018, a pedagogical research group published a reform proposal. It was primarily focused on skill development and defined the aims of history teaching as follows: experiential and inspiring knowledge transfer, the improvement of competencies and attitudes based on critical reflection on history. By decreasing the amount of factual information to be transferred, it provided space for applying innovative methodologies (Fekete and Török 2018). This proposal was not supported by the government and instead, it published a new NEP in 2020, which did not include any innovation. According to the Association of Hungarian History Teachers, knowledge of national defense received excessive attention. Critical reflection on sources of history is entirely missing from the priorities. The NEP puts primary emphasis on creating a 'positive national identity' without the possibility of critical observations (Történelemtanárok Egylete 2020). Compulsory history textbooks were criticized as resembling propaganda materials without facilitating the understanding of historical events (Kun 2022).

These professional concerns regarding formal history education were shared by my lay interviewees based on their own personal experiences. Most interviewees spontaneously recollected details of family stories or culture-related experiences that had carved moral lessons in their minds based on historical events. A grandmother hiding in a mill during the Second World War was mentioned as a source of inspiration for resilience, and many more relatives who shared their Holocaust- or communism-related experiences and thereby had transmitted sensitivity and awareness about the suffering of victims and the nature of power. Stories of the civil rights movement were brought up as information triggering consciousness about individual responsibility in resisting power. Literature, theater plays and movies about the Nazi and communist regimes were introduced by the interviewees in detail. None of them mentioned spontaneously any specific

experiences with formal history education that would have potentially influenced their personal choices in resisting the current government. In most of the interviews, specific questions had to be posed to encourage them to recollect relevant memories. Upon this slight pressure, did they mention sporadic positive experiences, occasions where the teachers had presented the history of repressive regimes in a way that it had seemed relevant to current public affairs, autonomy, and human rights. These occasions have remained in their recollection due to the personal tone of the speaker (dependent on the teacher's personality), the detailed presentation of local stories (interview or documentarist report-based activities), or the interactive nature of exercises (e.g. fact-checking exercises, playing a mock revolution). These factors either depended on the personal skills of the history teacher, or they were experienced in extracurricular activities or high-prestige secondary schools with a major social science focus. Impactful methodologies are not built into the system of mainstream history education.

Findings underscored the hypothesis that collective historical memory – crucial to political socialization (Myoung and Liou 2022) – does not appear in Hungarian history education in a way that would potentially facilitate active citizenship and resistance to the current illiberal regime. On the contrary, regular history classes and commemorative events in most secondary schools might alienate historical experiences thereby failing to realize their potential to trigger conscious and active citizenship or to prevent political apathy (Briggs 2017). It fits into the governmental policies to shape the historical narrative and to prevent a multi-perspectival presentation of historical events (Kirs 2022).

This brings us to the second research question whether historical reflection plays any role in the cognitive process of making an individual decision to actively engage in resistance. The findings suggest that such decision-making is rather an emotional and not so much a conscious process. However, based on the responses rooted in self-reflection and the subjective assessment of causal links between prior historical knowledge and the decision to resist, historical reflection seems to be a potentially impactful factor. Findings underpinned the second hypothesis about the considerable relevance of historical reflection to individual decision-making about participation in the resistance. Multiple interviewees shared a subjective feeling of distance from historical events, in comparison with current injustices of attacks against academic autonomy by the government, which awaken deep emotions. At the same time, when specifically asked about similarities and differences between past repressive regimes and the current illiberal one, and their consequences on the operation of the society, all interviewees' responses reflected nuanced views based on awareness about currently valid lessons of the past.

These accounts included a detailed discussion of the victims' sufferings under the Nazi and communist regime, the potentially fatal risk of individual resistance, and in comparison, the broader existential space for resistance today. All interviewees spoke about the significance of the protection of individual freedoms under both the past and the current regimes and in this process the importance of the citizens' courage and awareness about human values as opposed to the messages disseminated by governmental propaganda. A particularly interesting remark connected professional integrity with the individual responsibility to confront power in cases of injustice. In the country of the Oscar-winning movie 'Mephisto' from 1981, the discovery of such a connection is not a groundbreaking revelation. The main character Hendrik pursued a career in stage acting with Nazi support claiming that he is just an actor and has nothing to do with politics. An

interviewee pointed out how SZFE professors not resisting the governmental attacks against the University's autonomy used history in their work on the stage while failing to act upon the moral of past stories applicable to current public affairs.

Another interviewee sees totalitarian and post-totalitarian systems of the twentieth century and the current illiberal one as a cycle of authoritarian regimes that impact political socialization (Sapiro 2004). Hungarian people are seen by most of the interviewees as a society accustomed to governments restricting human rights, and individual and institutional autonomy. The society is patronized by the government and thereby its members do not feel responsible for the management of public affairs. Political apathy, as an element of democratic decay (Oyeleye 2014), and individual responsibility to resist power were discussed by the interviewees from the perspective of historical experiences. The consequences of the late and slow reaction of civil resistance were touched upon together with the painful reality of how most of the Hungarian society has not learned from past experiences and that 'we are heading in the same direction'. The sensitive discussion of the interviewees about the moral lessons of past repressive regimes underpins the assumption that historical reflection can be an important factor in personal motivations to resist an illiberal regime. In addition, their sporadic positive personal experiences with experiential history teaching suggest that interactive methodologies innovative in mainstream Hungarian history education have the potential to bridge the distance between reflection on historical events and current public affairs.

The limitations of the current research are apparent. While rich information was gained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, generalizations cannot be based on the findings. However, they can be transferred and utilized in research focusing on the roots of personal motivation that trigger youth resistance in repressive regimes. Future research should reveal how education methodologies can be developed to facilitate comparative reflection on history and current public affairs regarding resistance to democratic decline and the centralization of power. Research with members of other youth resistance movements within Hungary and in other countries of the Central and Eastern European region (having similar historical experiences) is needed to further explore the necessity of such developments and their potential to restore or strengthen democratic institutions. The current research is part of a wider project focused on youth resistance movements in illiberal regimes. The long-term goal is to explore how they become guardians of certain civil and political rights in illiberal democracies; and whether they identify themselves as such. Furthermore, I explore the attitude of illiberal governments towards the identity of youth protesters, and how smear campaigns aimed at denying the legitimacy of collective resistance erode civil and political rights.

Conclusion

The present paper provides insight into the personal motivations of young citizens regarding their decision to engage in collective resistance in an illiberal regime. The primary focus was on historical reflection as a potential source of inspiration for youth resistance in Hungary. Findings suggest that historical reflection indirectly impacts personal decisions to resist an illiberal regime, and history education has the potential to raise awareness about the nature of repressive regimes and to trigger consciousness regarding citizens' responsibility to confront power in such political systems. However,

these potentials were not realized by the mainstream, alienating history education in Hungary. It serves the interests of the illiberal government to control the historical narrative and to hinder the multi-perspectival understanding of the past. The goal of politicization of collective historical memory requires strict control over history teaching and the maintenance of frontal presentation of historical events from a nationalistic perspective. Information on past repressive regimes transferred through innovative educational methodologies increases the sensitivity of youth to social and political injustices. Therefore, interactive, engaging history teaching is significant in preventing political apathy, triggering conscious citizenship, and restoring democratic institutions.

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