



ANYU NE FELB,  
NEM LESZ  
SEMMI BABOM!

DON'T BE  
AFRAID, MOM!

STUDENT REPRESENTATION THEN AND NOW:  
THE REVIEW OF 30 YEARS

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KÖZÉP- ÉS KELET-EURÓPAI  
TÖRTÉNELEM ÉS TÁRSADALOM KUTATÁSÁÉRT  
KÖZALAPÍTVÁNY

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# STUDIES

Csaba Jancsák

## HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ROLE IN 1956 AND THE LEGACY OF 1956 SURVIVING IN STUDENT BODIES AFTER THE CHANGE OF REGIME

### Introduction

The widespread application of the principle of subsidiarity is one of the key social innovations facilitating the centuries-old development of European democracies. The idea that local problems can be best addressed through effective self-organisation by those directly involved in the matter has become a generally accepted practice in Western democracies. Subsidiarity, however, does not solely and primarily entail regional divisions but also a reasonable allocation of tasks. This is particularly true for higher education in which, since the second half of the 20th century, students have been involved in resolving issues affecting them, assuming a widening scope of authority in various institutional forms.

In the new millennium, people no longer doubt that self-government serves as the fundamental means for functioning democratic institutions. These particular organizational frameworks of social self-rule are suitable for articulating professional and political interests and social values as well. Apart from representing stakeholders', i.e. students' interests, identifying problems of higher education policy and youth policy, and proposing solutions are tasks that are best handled by student representatives who "live on Campus" and are at home in this world.

The generations of democracy (people in Western European countries or generations in Hungary born after 1990) may find it hard to imagine that it took the Hungarian society decades of fighting to secure the present rights for the youth and higher education students, and university student movements played a crucial role in this process. In some unique historical moments, the public and political actions of the youth may function as



a catalyst for major social changes and may even become the trigger for events of world-historical significance. Consider the movements of university students in France, Czechoslovakia and West Germany in the sixties, in Poland, Romania and Hungary in the eighties or in Serbia in the late nineties. The transition to democracy in Hungary in 1990 was rooted in the 1956 Revolution and War of Freedom. The 1956 Revolution was a historical event that proved to the whole world that the spark of freedom may light up even in grim periods of terror and suppression. However, the 1956 Revolution was not only the cradle of the change of regime taking place thirty-four years later, but also the cradle of self-governing student bodies in Hungary.

On 16 October, 1956 the students of the University of Szeged left the Union of Working Youth (DISZ), the youth organisation of the communist party and founded the Association of Hungarian University and College Students (MEFESZ). Four days after its foundation, the members compiled their academic and political claims at the association's general assembly, convened to establish their programme (Jancsák 2016). In the following two days, on 21 and 22 October 1956, MEFESZ organisations were formed one after the other and reinforced their claims. These political claims became the claims of the Revolution at the demonstration on 23 October. The Revolution ended with the attack of the Soviet army in November, however, the Hungarian society preserved its desire for the democratic rights of freedom. A new university movement was born in the mid-eighties, which was the legal predecessor of the present national student representation, the National Union of Students in Hungary (HÖÖK).

Comparing the student movements of 1956 and today, the present paper discusses the trans-historical social values manifesting over generations of students. The student union movement represents, preserves and transmits the particular values of the university and trans-historical values closely related to these, such as value orientations of freedom of thought, opinion and speech, solidarity, critical thinking, creativity, innovation



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and renewal, handing them down to young student generations (Jancsák 2016). These value-transmission processes are supported by the autonomy of self-governing student bodies, which – similarly to university autonomy (Enders – de Boer – Weyer 2013, 7) – entails the existence of decision-making competences and being free from any limitations on the actual application of said competences (Klemenčič 2014).

## **The Aims of MEFESZ**

The aim of the association is that the youths graduating from universities and colleges, dedicated to represent the mind of the nation, should not be an indifferent, passive crowd, being cowardly, supple and mean, but rather an army fighting bravely and soulfully for the nation, the country and for a better future. These people should not be in fear of talking about the truth, but they should serve the nation and the country with their skills, knowledge and ability (Section 5 of the Statutes of MEFESZ, 20 October 1956).

Formally, MEFESZ was founded at the general assembly held in the Auditorium Maximum at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Szeged on 20 October. The National Radio recorded the event (Jancsák 2017). Dezső Gönczöl, a student from the College of Teacher Education greeted the participants, András Lejtényi, a law student, read out the latest version of the Statutes, then Tamás Kiss, another law student, the programme of MEFESZ, namely, the list of academic and political claims. Kiss stressed that the programme and the claims belonged to the local MEFESZ body of Szeged, and that faculty claims would be formulated at faculty assemblies. In our view, this statement shows that the new organisation was based on the principle of subsidiarity, making a point of being a grassroots organisation.

We know our interests best, so it is our task to represent them and to defend them if necessary. An organisation standing outside of us, with leaders representing more than us, cannot represent our



interests as strongly as we can. We are not children who cannot distinguish between right and wrong. Our experience is that we can only achieve what we fight for (Section 2/c of the Statutes of MEFESZ, 20 October, 1956).

These recognitions led to the establishment of self-governing student bodies at the dawn of the change of regime (1956, 1988–1990).

In connection with student movements, the most important expectation was that students' interests were to be expressed and represented by students, as the world of students and their interests are particular in nature. This brought student movements into motion and continues to do so. At this point, we also have to mention that all three subsystems of higher education (administration, educational institutions and self-governing student bodies) share the common interest that the representation of student interests should be efficient.

### **The Academic Claims of MEFESZ**

The first part of MEFESZ's programme, accepted at the general assembly on 20 October 1956, consisted of student-social and interest representation claims that affected students (see the ten claims below). The association defined itself as an organisation of interest representation, yet they articulated national-level political claims already at their first assembly on 16 October (e.g. withdrawal of Soviet troops and restoring the country's independence). At the general assembly of 20 October, public/political claims were also formed. With this activity, they transcended the world of studenthood and the framework provided by the university. Their political claims reflected the problems of the entire country.

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## Academic Claims:

1. The political screening of university youth should be done in the spirit of the party declaration concerning intellectuals published in August.
2. The periodical Szegedi Egyetem should be the forum of university and college students, which must be reflected in its content and layout.
3. The members of the student welfare committee should be elected by the faculty assemblies.
4. We claim the right to organising free theoretical debates.
5. Overexertion must be ended:
  - a. martial education should be terminated in the case of female students and should be reduced to two lessons per week in the case of male students,
  - b. in the case of extracurricular subjects, grading should be "pass" or "no pass"; we demand to have more special elective courses and fewer mandatory courses.
6.
  - a. We establish a housing committee, which declares the maximum amount of rental fees.
  - b. The youth representative of a Youth Hostel can veto the appointment of the manager.
  - c. Youth hostels should be made out of free public buildings if it meets demands.
7.
  - a. Travels should be organised abroad, to the East and West as well.
  - b. We claim a 50% discount on domestic travels.
8. We claim a general ticket price discount for all cultural events.
9. We claim that the School of Music should be regarded as a college, and we demand proper university student rights for its students.



10. We claim that the health visitors' training school should be regarded as a college and we demand proper college student rights for its students.

(Quoted: Jancsák 2016, 104)

### **Political Claims of MEFESZ**

They also formulated nationwide political claims in addition to the intention of forming an organisation and demanding educational and social reforms on 16 October. Most of these claims were adopted as the programme of MEFESZ on 20 October. Three days later, many of them became the claims of the Revolution.

#### Political Claims:

1. We urge serving justice to those who are responsible for the crimes of the last era and the trials should be public!
2. We promote the freedom of information! The press should report on everything in full detail!
3. We urge the re-election of Imre Nagy and György Lukács into the Central Leading Board!
4. We claim a salary reform! The upper limit of incomes coming from the state should be announced and the improvement of low salaries should be accelerated!
5. We urge for the abolishment of the death penalty for political crimes!
6. We urge for the reestablishment of the free, democratic system of elections!
7. We claim that university youth should play a greater role in directing political and other matters of the country!
8. The mandatory delivery of peasants' surplus should be abolished!
9. The national celebration of 15 March should be restored!
10. Russian troops should be withdrawn from the country!

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11. Let there be university autonomy!
12. We claim that the 1848 Kossuth Coat of Arms should be restored.

(Quoted: Jancsák 2016, 105–106)

## **The Cradle of Hungarian Student Movements**

Following the analysis of the documents and interviews with the leaders and founders of MEFESZ, it is time to evaluate the role of the Association.

The idea of an independent university youth organisation originated from university students of Szeged (Tamás Kiss and András Lejtényi). It was not an initiative of power. The original purpose of the organisers (until 16 October) was to form a youth organisation, building from bottom up, as the means to solve educational and social problems of the youth. They thought student solidarity would establish its cohesion. Some of their objectives were truly monumental, going beyond educational and social claims, such as the right to free theoretical debates.

The members of MEFESZ have the right to rely on the solidarity of MEFESZ in a serious and correct case. One of the main duties of MEFESZ is to protect the interests of students as much as possible. The association consists of the sum of its given members, so a member should rely on its solidarity in all cases that concern the interests and the authority of the association. Without this, the members would not dare present proposals and claims which should be addressed to the leaders of the state or the party, for example, the recent question concerning the Russian language. Naturally, MEFESZ will not stand by anyone if the person in question breaks the moral standard, the law or any kind of regulation (Section 5 paragraph 2 of the rules and regulations of MEFESZ, 20 October 1956).



MEFESZ was established to defend the interests of university and college students. Every MEFESZ member has to strive to – on the basis of rationality – defend these interests, which are our own. Remember that we are all for one and one for all (Section 6 paragraph 2 of the Statutes of MEFESZ, 20 October 1956).

MEFESZ was based on direct democratic values. These secured for its members the freedom of thought, opinion and decision in the Statutes. One-person leadership and leadership cut off from the crowd were excluded in its constitution.

MEFESZ is an independent, free organisation. [...] The basic principle of MEFESZ is democracy, extended to the widest range of affairs. Consequently, and in order to avoid one-person leadership, decisions can only be made by the majority of the members. In order to avoid the devastating system of instructions coming from above, decisions can only be made by the members (Section 2/A paragraph 1 of the Statutes of MEFESZ, 20 October 1956).

MEFESZ is the organisation of university and college students. The right to debate must be secured and must be provided to all students and every member of MEFESZ through which the issue of direct democracy is maintained. The right of voting is also to be applied in the same way. It was truly problematic that the members did not dare to express their opinions. Therefore, it is expedient for us to have a public forum where everybody can express their point of view without any restriction, without facing reprisal or pushback (Section 3 paragraph 2 of the Statutes of MEFESZ, 20 October 1956).

If a theory fails during a debate, it is obviously unjust. What is right is the interest of all of us. The interest of all of us must be fought for. Our envoys should not be leaders (in the incorrect sense of the word), but rather the faithful and exact executors of the will of the



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youth. The system of commands coming from above is theoretically full of mistakes and practically unjust (Section 7 paragraph 2 of the Statutes of MEFESZ).

MEFESZ was a student initiative, but as an organisation, it could not live a life of its own due to the forthcoming revolution, invasion and retaliation. As a social movement, it serves as a mirror, since it came into existence as an answer to serious social, educational and youth problems. MEFESZ was based on movement-like principles and objectives and its most important features were that it declared values and it had a flexible organisational form (e.g. it was a conscious decision not to elect a Presidium or a President).

The character, task and aim of the association: MEFESZ is an organisation of the masses of university and college students which includes all of the youth involved in education (Section 1 paragraph 1 of the Statutes of MEFESZ, 20 October 1956).

The cohesion of the movement was based on two things. First, that they experienced certain social problems and, secondly that there was another group, the Union of Working Youth (DISZ), which they could oppose. Therefore, they started to revolt against the organisation which had kept them iced and treated them as infants, then they turned against the paternalistic state. MEFESZ planned to transform the situation of the youth, which had been kept under control by a totalitarian system, and to take part in the public matters of the university. This activity was considered to be subversive and revolutionary by the state and party alike.

After the assembly on 20 October, they sent envoys to all parts of the country. The envoys carried the message of MEFESZ. A number of MEFESZ units were established in various cities over the next few days (21-22 October 1956) in Eger, Budapest, Sopron, Veszprém, Gödöllő, Debrecen, Pécs, Miskolc and Mosonmagyaróvár. The most well-known assemblies may have been those at the University of Technology (Budapest)



and University of Debrecen (Debrecen) on 23 October, where a great number of students joined the new organisation. They formulated their own claims based on the programme of MEFESZ, which appeared at the demonstrations (in Budapest and in Debrecen) (Filep 2000, Kiss 2001, Lipták 2003, Szakolczai – Varga 2004, Szakolczai 2006, Frivaldszky 2006, Osváth – Zsidi 2007, Jancsák 2016).

It is common knowledge that a civil movement can only become the engine of change in rare historic moments, when the new political system undertakes and institutionalises the issues and suggestions of the given movement (Kozma 2004). This could not happen in the case of MEFESZ due to the paternalistic, totalitarian nature of the regime. The first student movement which tried to build itself from bottom up since World War II is not a case of institutionalisation, but rather one which served as catalyst of revolution as it raised important issues in the right historic moment.

The claims of MEFESZ suggested the need for a change of regime. Its claims for the restoration of national historical emblems and the independence of the state, along with free, democratic elections based on new foundations in a sovereign Hungary, were claims for a multi-party democracy. Their other claims also supported a programme aiming to abolish the dictatorship, with respect to political structure, economic regulations and national independence.

All in all, it is safe to say that the MEFESZ played a vital role in presenting higher educational matters to Hungarian society and drawing the public's attention to the problems of the youth. After the assembly on 20 October, MEFESZ had a considerable impact on national politics through its claims and envoys. It became the spark of revolution and the forerunner of today's student movement that began in September 1988. In our view, MEFESZ was the most important attempt to create a democratic student organisation in the 20th century.



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## **HÖOK as the Heir to the Legacy of the 1956 MEFESZ**

In the autumn of 1988, Hungarian universities were once again the scene of change. From the end of September, students held meetings where they collected and drafted their academic claims, then (as their petition sent to the ministry supervising higher education was rejected) they organised a nationwide student strike. The claims of the strike included university autonomy and academic freedom (free choice of courses and instructors) and the abolition of "ideological education". This strike led to the foundation of the predecessor of the HÖOK, the National Alliance for Higher Education (OFÉSZ). This civil organisation was one of the most important supporters of the change of regime (democracy and transition to a market economy) in Hungary. Its legal predecessor, the National Association of Students in Hungary (1993-1996) continued this democratic tradition. Since 1996, it has been the National Union of Students in Hungary (HÖOK) that maintains the legacy of 1956: focusing on the representation of students' interests but also making an impact beyond that.

When observing the roles and value orientations of national student representation over the last thirty years, it becomes clear that the umbrella organisation of student movements, the HÖOK, represents the social layer of university students in academic and educational issues in the field of higher education policy (as stated in the 1956 Statutes of MEFESZ). However, the views and actions of the HÖOK on youth and social policy go beyond the problems of the university life stage, and they also represent the interests of secondary school students and young adults. At the same time, they presented the critical thoughts of future generations (the future intelligentsia) on social policy not only by drafting documents on policies but also by organising demonstrations, thus contributing to the existence of democracy, social innovation and a society that is able to grow and develop.

Among the value orientations of the organisation, social values tied to



universities are highly preferred, such as the freedom of thought, opinion and speech, democracy, empathy, solidarity, critical thinking, innovation and renewal. All these value orientations reveal a subtle link between the “organisational personality” of the HÖÖK and MEFESZ. These findings corroborate our hypothesis that value transmission processes manifest over generations at universities.

Based on the memorial events and interviews conducted in recent years, it can be concluded that the actions of MEFESZ appear to be examples for the present Hungarian student movement, which has been operating for thirty years. This statement is reinforced by the fact that Tamás Kiss (the former leader of MEFESZ, who presented the programme of MEFESZ, its academic and political claims, at the general assembly on 20 October 1956) was elected as the honorary President of the HÖÖK in 2016. The preservation of the 1956 university students’ legacy and safeguarding their values prove to be an important element in the organisational conduct of the HÖÖK.

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