Transcript of ENHANCE Podcast Episode: Education, Rights, and Resistance: Voices from Hungary- Part 1
Recorded by: NHE

Introduction: I would like to welcome our listeners! This is the first part of our podcast series produced as part of the Enhance Project, which focuses on the exclusion of civil society organisations from Hungarian schools and its consequences. A few years ago Hungary enacted a child protection law and its implementing regulation, which significantly restricted the presence of civil society organisations in schools. The essence of the measure is that sensitivity training sessions, for example, on sex education or LGBTQ issues, can only be held by actors authorised exclusively by the state. The government justified this on the grounds of protecting parents' rights, but the decision has made the work of many civil society organisations impossible or significantly more difficult. In today's programme we discuss what children, schools and society are losing as a result, and how civil society organisations have been able to adapt to the changed circumstances. My guests are **András Nyirati**, president of the Emberség Erejével Alapítvány (Power of Humanity Foundation), and **Dávid Rimai**, a representative of Amnesty International in Pécs. Hello, everyone!

Nyirati, A. – Rimai, D.: Hello! We also welcome our listeners!

Q: **Would you like to briefly comment on my introductory speech, or shall we move on to a brief presentation of your organisations?**

András: In the beginning I think it's important to say that this is a bogus law. You have explained its claimed objectives, but as civilians, we had to get used to the fact that not only in education but in a lot of other areas too, there is a theatre where a very clever framework story is told about why this is good for people, but at the same time, the reason for the whole thing is totally different. It is clearly visible that the last 15 years have been about centralising everything into a concentration of power, because that's the sure thing, that's the safe thing, and then it will definitely happen the way the state wants it to, and if you look at any sector, from healthcare to education, anywhere, this is what is happening. Decisions are being made by as few people as possible, and then it's a sure thing, and obviously we, as a civil society organisation, and the civil sector can't go along with that.

Dávid: I would also like to welcome the listeners and thank you for the invitation. I would just like to add that this law is known to the public as the Child Protection Act, but it is quite common for infringing government measures to be given a grandiose, nicely packaged title. In reality, this law does not deal with child protection but rather serves political purposes. So we tend to rename these laws quite deliberately and do not refer to them by their misleading names. We call it a propaganda law. A very good example of this is what happened this spring, when the government tried to introduce a law under the name of transparency law, or rather, it has been trying to introduce a measure restricting civil society organisations and independent media ever since. We call this the "impossibility law" or the "shut up law", because we want to reflect the real purpose of the legislation with these names, rather than the sugar-coated, packaged version.

Q: **For those who don't know you, please tell us what you do and in what areas of society you are active?**

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András: Well, we rebel, as you can see, but to be serious, the Emberség Erejével Alapítvány (Power of Humanity Foundation) is now almost twenty years old, and the first ten years were spent specifically on human rights education. This means that we primarily visited schools and other youth communities and held interactive sessions on topics such as prejudice, human rights, dialogue, and normal democratic coexistence. I think this is important, and fortunately, at that time, quite a few civil society organisations were involved in this – it was a somewhat more prosperous period – because we were able to bring topics into schools that were not so prominent in the Hungarian education system, which is quite knowledge-based, like, that you can recount the Battle of Mohács and solve equations. But these are softer topics, which I think are even more important in terms of our social coexistence. So, we were able to bring this in, and the Emberség Erejével and other civil society organisations were also able to bring in a different approach, where having a conversation at school is not pressure but a different kind of atmosphere, and I think this is very, very much needed in the Hungarian education system. And then, just to stay on topic, the Emberség Erejével Alapítvány has been focusing much more on developing the civil sector and supporting other civil organisations over the last ten years. I can break our story down into two parts here. So it has moved to a slightly more macro level, but the basis of our identity is human rights education, so we are still developing board games and trying to go into schools. Incidentally, today my colleagues are holding a session for community organising students at the University of Pécs, using our KIO human rights card pack to mark the start of the academic year, but we are always talking about why it is only possible to hold sessions at universities.

Dávid: Amnesty International is an international organisation, as its name suggests, and we are present in more than 180 countries. Amnesty Hungary was established relatively soon after the change of regime, so we will be celebrating our 35th anniversary this year. We established our regional offices in Pécs a little later. Amnesty has been in Pécs since 2021, but we are also present in Debrecen and Szeged. We conduct research, publish results, and try to draw attention to social injustices and violations of rights.

We try to communicate these issues to people through various campaigns, actions and events, and to involve people in human rights issues, particularly gender equality, LGBTQ rights, freedom of assembly, the rule of law and international solidarity, which are the main themes of Amnesty Hungary.

Q: **You've already mentioned this in part, but what types of activities have you held in the past? Can you give us a couple of specific examples from primary schools, a series of activities that you remember?**

Dávid: I have been working for the organisation since 2022, but before that I had already worked for a civil organisation and had also been collaborating with the Emberség Erejével Alapítvány (Power of Humanity Foundation). We visited schools on a weekly basis to hold lessons on anti-racism and immigration. What I know for sure is that before the law was introduced in 2021, Amnesty reached around 4,000 students nationwide each year. Since this law was introduced, we have not been able to reach even a thousand students a year. As Amnesty, our education team gives lessons on the topics I listed earlier as our main topics.

András: It's great that you mention the numbers, because it helps us to understand that Emberség Erejével worked at the local level, or rather, let's say, at the county/regional level at most. We primarily worked with schools in Pécs and the surrounding area, and here too, it

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was possible for a smaller organisation like ours to reach 500-600 students in a year. Obviously there is also the question of organisational capacity, that we had enough volunteers and people to get this going, but there was also openness; for example, the schools were looking for us. I think it was very common to receive an email. The three of us worked together, as we mentioned before the conversation, in the House of Opportunities, where we regularly received such requests, like there is a DÖK (student government) day, or they experience in the classroom that there is a Roma student, and then the others treat him or her in a certain way, and that we should do something about it. So, it was a normal, accepted thing; you could find out in Pécs which organisations deal with such issues, and then a teacher would invite them. Returning to your question, from a methodological point of view, we have recently been using our own board games, so we came to the conclusion that we need to gamify, and that this is good because then it can be used not only in schools, but if you can make a good game on a given topic, then it can spread beyond that. Simply based on that, as far as I could see, the big difference is that Amnesty had a whole network of human rights educators. So, reaching 4000 students nationwide is a great number, but it requires enormous capacity, and we always started from the premise that we couldn't put together that kind of capacity. So what could we do to increase our reach? And then we thought about developing board games that others could also use, and we started working on leaving the board games in schools, hoping that they would be picked up. We showed them how to use it, so for us, this is how it actually works. Earlier it was perhaps more similar to Amnesty, in that we simply had lesson plans that we came up with to deal with a given topic, and then of course it could be adapted to the size of the group and where you went, so you could work differently and talk differently, for example, at an elite secondary school in the city centre and differently at a primary school in Hetvehely. But I think the core of it is the same, and that we always asked questions in a playful way, based on dialogue, and listened to the opinions of the children, who surprisingly love to express their opinions, and I am being deliberately ironic here when I say "surprisingly". The school doesn't socialise them like it is curious about their opinions, and I think these human rights education programmes were very good for this. It was possible for students to experience that someone would come and ask questions, and then they would look at us strangely at first, wondering why they had to say something here, but then it was so easy. I always noticed that teenagers can switch gears very easily, and then they just pour it out. Of course, it was also a factor that you can hear very provocative things from a teenager; they test us a lot or say something very extreme. Right at that time, we were working a lot on the topic of migration and refugees when the government started to focus on this, to give it a different perspective, and then a child in a primary school simply said that his father had been sent to the fence and that he didn't understand why he couldn't shoot the refugees because they were threatening his father. So, you could easily hear stories like this, and then you react to something, and you can talk about it further, but whether it was appropriate to go to such extremes, or I don't know, it wasn't that extreme anyway, so I think a lot of people thought that, but from that point of view it wasn't extreme; obviously, from the point of view of killing someone, from that point of view it was a very extreme situation, so things like that were perfectly acceptable, and that's how we worked.

Q: **When this change took place, it was very exclusive, so there were schools that agreed that from then on they didn't want you to go? Or was it a process like that? Are there still partners who are willing to let your programmes into their schools? Because I remember when I used to go to schools, or even when we worked together, what actually happened was that we approached a teacher or the headmaster and**

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said that we had this programme, we would like to come, and they would say, 'Yes, of course, this class has room for it, or it would be very welcome,' and that's how it worked. How much has that changed?

Dávid: I feel these doors have closed gradually. As András and I mentioned, there was already a network of customers, certain teachers who asked us for lessons, either as Emberség or as Amnesty, and then this ban came. But this ban included the fact that there is a list of organisations that are allowed to hold classes in schools. At the beginning of the conversation, it was mentioned that this is a bogus law, and a part of that is this list. Well, I haven't seen it; I don't know if anyone has seen it, but it doesn't really exist, and we don't really know who can select who to be put on this list, which makes this law seem a bit unenforceable. The invitations started to decrease, and it usually turned out that we couldn't go somewhere when there had already been an invitation, and then somehow the management, or the school district, or the school administrators decided not to let us in. This was usually communicated by the teachers, who said they were sorry, but that it was not possible now because, for example, the headmaster had said that Amnesty or Emberség could not come. However, we still do have invitations, and no one has ever reported us, nor have our invitations caused any problems. But it is very clear that the law works; it instils fear in teachers, and it instils fear in parents, and that is why they prefer not to invite civil society organisations. Not just us, but other civil society organisations have also been pushed out of public education, such as civil society organisations dealing with drug prevention or sex education. Even animal welfare organisations are finding it difficult to get in. We actually have a technical term for this as well, the „paralysing effect", that there is a law no one knows how to enforce, and no one knows what the consequences will be if something does happen. So it is best not to call in any civil society organisations, not to confront anyone; that's how the institutional leaders see it, and then it's possible that their contracts will be extended, because otherwise you never know, and from the fear for their existence they have that "more spacious outside" philosophy behind it.

András: I think it's very noticeable – I was just calculating it in my head while Dávid was talking – that in terms of Emberség Erejével, if we go back ten years, we had a project running in 2015, supported by the Norwegian Civil Fund. It essentially involved developing a series of 8-10 sessions in line with the current curriculum at that time, introducing human rights topics to schools. So we said that, for example, separated in the history curriculum, there were 8 or 9 hours of civics studies, so we developed a curriculum for 9 hours of civic education, signed a contract with the school, and then we went through 6-8-10 such processes at that time and summarised them in a methodological publication. So in 2015, it was possible to find schools in Pécs whose principals would sign the cooperation agreement, and then, since there is only one ethics class per week, it could happen that I held ethics classes for one class throughout the autumn, based on an engaging human rights theme, and I would say that it was absolutely in line with the curriculum. That's where we're coming from, and then, we can see that the replacement of headteachers began with the reorganisation of school districts, so basically, people who are part of the political system were put into decision-making positions, and then things started to go downhill. Obviously, the invitations were already pretty scarce, but it also started to become more difficult because, let's say, you had been to a school before, and it had a new headteacher, and then they didn't want it anymore. Then we ran into a problem when we announced a big programme for World Human Rights Day, where classes could register at an external location, and then the right-wing media picked up on this, saying – to put it mildly – we were

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„warming up" the children. That's when we first noticed that teachers who were enthusiastically signing up from schools to bring their classes started cancelling. Obviously, they claimed that something had come up, but you know, when three classes from one school cancel on you within half an hour after the article comes out, and then we were also confronted with the fact that the head of the school district drew attention to this in a public post, saying that in his opinion, students should not participate in such programmes, then we experienced what happens when it depends on the courage of a teacher. And then they still call, but preferably with the silent consent of the headmaster, or without the headmaster knowing, or something like that, and then we got to the law, which, in my experience, has actually reduced the number of requests to zero. First – and that was also an interesting game – we created a programme called Living Library, the essence of which is that students can meet people belonging to groups who are generally subject to social prejudice, such as Gipsies, Jews, gays, lesbians, and refugees, because we assume that most of these prejudices stem from fear of the unknown. This programme worked really well, and then we got requests saying that they loved it: Let's continue with the Living Library, but let's not bring in the gay and lesbian books. But that's not how it works; you cannot anyway, but especially as a human rights organisation, you don't discriminate between human rights. So, there was this period, and then slowly we realised that there were one or two last pioneers left who were doing this in complete secrecy, really, so that they sneak you in the hallway, and now obviously I'm not going to mention names or schools, but it's a nightmare that this situation remains. And what I'm experiencing is that in rural schools it is as if centralisation had not reached them, and they are incredibly enthusiastic. They have very few programmes like this anyway; they are happy when we go, and they proudly announce that they have partaken, so on one hand this is obviously great. I could even say that we are providing a service in places where we are not serving the middle class or sensitive young elites, so that's the exciting part of it, but obviously it requires completely different resources from an organisation to go to the county border and spend a whole day on a one-and-a-half-hour programme, rather than just hopping on a bus somewhere in Pécs, so that's how it is.

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