

--- 2nd week of January ---
Sixth Edition



EXPLOR2ING

CENTURY

Approaches of sustainable initiatives and degrowth in Hungary

POLITICS

Sziasztok,

We are Tom, Enora and Perrine, three students in Sciences Po Rennes and currently trainees at Cargonomia, a social cooperative in Budapest.

We are currently facing an ecological crisis raising, among others issues, political, social and economical questions. The current system is calling for indefinite growth whereas the planet has boundaries and limited resources. So, when we asked ourselves about sustainable solutions and alternatives, degrowth caught our attention. Then, we would like to learn from people who theorize about degrowth, put it into practice, but also from those who engage in ways that degrowth is likely to support.

This series of weekly papers are aimed to discover different fields of degrowth by interviewing people more or less related to it. Today, for the fifth edition of *EXPLOR2ING : Approaches of sustainable initiatives and degrowth in Hungary*, we are talking about policies, politics and polities with Rebeka SZABÓ, deputy mayor of the XIV district of Budapest, and co-founder and member of the green party Párbeszéd Magyarországért (Dialogue for Hungary).



REBEKA SZABÓ

How would you introduce yourself?

I've been working as a deputy mayor in Zuglo municipality* for seven years, starting in 2014. I have been working as a political professional since 2010 when I became a member of the Hungarian Parliament where I spent four years as a representative. I co-founded the first green party of Hungary in 2009, the LMP party *Lehet Más a Politika* (Politics can be Different)*, and then I founded *Párbeszéd Magyarorszáért* (Dialogue for Hungary)*. So I am a green politician. Before that I was a biologist and I'm an ecologist by profession.

Now I'm responsible for social and environmental issues in the municipality. I'm also responsible for nurseries and kindergartens on a political level (intermediate and high schools are not belonging to municipalities in Hungary anymore).

What were your motivations to begin politics?

I used to work on nature conservation issues. Science is really important but if you don't act on the political level to protect nature, there won't be any resources and ecosystems left. I was always interested in activism and that's how I became active in establishing the first green party of Hungary.

"Science is really important but if you don't act on the political level to protect nature, there won't be any resources and ecosystems left."

What is your perception of the current political events in Hungary?

As a member of the opposition, I would change the government for a lot of reasons, but mainly for green and social issues.

It would be a dilemma if you had a green government that protects nature but doesn't guarantee human rights and acts against LGBT people, all these terrible things.



Photo credit: Járdány Bence

But in Hungary, the government is horrible on both issues: on human rights they don't respect, on social injustice they are creating, and as well as on natural resources they are destroying. Basically, this government is building on every green area (for example investors supported by the government are destroying a lot of the shore on the Balaton lake). So I have serious reasons for wanting this government to leave. The primary election and how to make the opposition together is one political tool.

POLITICS IN HUNGARY

What is missing to the environmental crisis to be really addressed by the Hungarian government according to you?

Everything. I don't really see a lot of positive things they are doing for the environment on energy efficiency, carbon dioxide emissions or nature protection. At least they didn't forbid solar panels like they did with wind powerplants....(irony).

Do you have optimism in the future for having a real environmental agenda?

If there is a change of the government then yes of course. It won't be so easy because there are a lot of parties and many interests, but the present opposition knows that they have to be different from the Fidesz government. They know that they have to work seriously on environmental issues, and there are several true green politicians among them.

According to you, what is the place of science in the public and political debate in Hungary?

At the moment, science has a really small role, but I think it should have a much bigger one in the political debate. Politicians do not really use figures, facts and scientific results into political debates. This is a problem.

There should be a method on how scientific results could be put on the political process and into the decision making, I mean, an institutional one, not an occasional thing. In fact there were a lot of clever people working in the ministries, but when Fidesz reached the government, some left afterwards because they were real experts and they were fed up.

Politicians are supposed to guarantee basic needs to the population. But if they are not acting on these issues, are we supposed to wait for citizens to demand it?

On the one hand, it's easier for the politicians if there is a pressure from the public to do something, but on the other hand, it's the responsibility of the politicians to think beyond and imagine more steps. For example, if someone is working all day, caring about their children or studying but doesn't have a university degree let's say, he or she won't be so much aware of the long-term future. So this is the decision-makers' responsibility to have a longer view and perspective. But in general if you want politicians to do things, it's easier with public pressure. I will only care about the environmental issues if people want me to. Because I have the knowledge and I know that it's important for them, even if they don't know it yet.

"If someone is working all day, caring about their children or studying but doesn't have a university degree let's say, it's possible that they will not be the most concerned with the long term future."

Is there social or citizen pressure on environmental issues?

I think the global citizen pressure is getting bigger and bigger.

But you can see just recently in Glasgow, people were demonstrating on the street; still in the meantime politicians weren't taking the proper decisions.

I think in Hungary, there is a kind of citizen pressure but not big enough.

So how can we raise awareness in order to have people coming to you and claiming change? How can we institute social dialogue?

Well, this is very complex, there are a lot of tools. A lot of NGOs have good methods, they work with different types of people, they organize conferences. See what Cargonomia is doing for example.

At your scale, are you working within the municipality with some NGOs, or associations to raise awareness?

Yes, for example, we have this project called "Climate strategy" for 2030 launched by different experts. They put together steps we must take each year if we want to decrease carbon dioxide emissions by 40%. The strategy was approved by the municipality and then there was a big public awareness part. But the Covid pandemic killed a lot of activities we planned. Still we organized a climate contest for children. A lot of kindergarten and schools are involved and children have a lot of fun tasks to do. This is one of many projects we have, mostly with the children because it's easier.

At least there are some changes since I am deputy mayor, but it is not enough at all.

In the future, will these little steps be enough to create bigger changes and have bigger effects?

I think if everyone is doing these small steps, it might have a bigger effect. But I think it's not enough. I don't think that at a municipal level we can solve this crisis, here my role isn't so big. I can make a program for composting in the municipality, but it is just too small, it's a drop in the sea. I think it's on the State level and global level that we should act.

"I can make a program for composting in the municipality but it is just too small, it's a drop in the sea."

What do you think of citizen mobilization like the activist organizations Extinction Rebellion?

I think it's useful. All these citizen initiatives are very useful, even if some of them don't all see the picture, and are not perfect. But who is perfect anyway? Everything is useful that goes in that direction. And I think it's normal to have some overkill, and exaggeration somehow in this topic.

POLITICAL SYSTEMS

We met Alexandra Köves, she said at some point that "politicians think systematically, either stay in power or get into power, so we can't expect politicians to act on environmental issues". You are on the degrowth side, but you chose the representative democracy system, what is your opinion?

I think I'm not the right person to answer that, I'm not a political specialist, and I don't really know other systems than representative democracy. I'm a biologist originally, so I can't give you a lot of theoretical views of what kind of democracy we have to build.

I think representative democracy is something we should work for, even if I understand what Alexandra is saying. But if the people realized that these issues are really important for them and influence their lives, then politicians will be able to care about environmental issues. If they want power, they have to prove that they care about it. So it's possible within representative democracy to work on environmental issues.

Do you think democratic slowness is a problem regarding the climate emergency?

Yes, I think so. Sometimes it would be easier to do things in a less democratic way. But it's not the biggest problem. Politicians want to stay in power and they are afraid to not be popular enough. That's why they won't take unpopular decisions that could be beneficial for the environment. So it can be seen as democracy being a problem but I think it's more the problem of politicians who are too stupid.

If Viktor Orban wants to put immigration as a main issue, then he uses a lot of tools to make people think that this is something they have to be afraid of. So if he wanted to, he could shift a lot of interest to the climate crisis and then solve some problems, but he won't because he can't make a lot of money on it.

"So if [Viktor Orban] wanted to, he could shift a lot of interest to the climate crisis and then solve some problems, but he won't because he can't make a lot of money on it."

You worked at the State level at some point in your career. What did you decide to work at the municipality level?

On the one hand, in 2014 the opposition lost the elections really badly, so a lot of members of the Parliament were not reelected. I was one of them. On the other hand, being an opponent of this government is not so much fun. It is really annoying. The problem is even if you are a member of the Parliament you just cannot do anything! You can only communicate, you can only say "they are doing bad, and this is my opinion". But you don't have any real possibilities to change anything. So after a while I felt totally useless to sit there. I'm feeling much more useful at the municipality level.

What is your opinion about municipalism, or giving more power to municipalities?

Citizens participation is also a very important issue, but it requires a lot of education. I'm not meaning education in school only, but education of people. To enable them to make good decisions, you have to give them the proper information.

If they look only in their small interests, it might not be in harmony with the interest of the community. There is this "Not In My Back Yard" (NIMBY) thinking, which drives me crazy. For example, if you want to create an institution or a home for disable people, you have to choose a place, but whatever the one you choose, the local people will start to demonstrate if you don't provide them proper background information.

However, I know there are really good methods for involving local people in the process and make good decisions together. For example an NGO can go there before, show short movies, work in schools and make certain games...

So, asking people and having the decisions on a small scale is also about giving the proper frame and information. Then they can decide. A municipality can also have a lot of power, tools, or whatever, only if they are forced to always look at all sides of the issues.

There was an NGO which asked to renovate some empty apartments belonging to the municipality in order to allow homeless people to move in. It created a big scandal. The representative of the certain constituencies of Zuglo district were upset, saying that I didn't consult them and did not involve the people living in the buildings. But if I ask them they would have refused and those homeless people need to live somewhere! Come on, if they move in, nobody would have seen that they used to be homeless. They are homeless people who are going to work, who live decent lives, but they just don't have a home. This is not something that has to be decided on the level of the house, it has to be decided by us. And I failed. It was voted down. And the project was gone.

"Asking people and having the decisions on a small scale is also about giving the proper frame and information. Then they can decide."

What do you expect from the European Union?

I know that for every decision it can be a very long process and take a lot of time. Everything works that way. For example see what they are doing now with nuclear energy and coal in Glasgow. But at least some small things are done, like banning fur. Some countries in Europe don't produce fur anymore, and in Hungary, there is a movement about stopping its production. Or there is a movement about banning the use of wild animals in the circus. I guess it could be a decision of the opposition to phase these out in five years or something. Nothing works from one day to the other.

DEGROWTH IN POLITICS

Are you calling for degrowth as a politician? What do you think about degrowth?

Degrowth is a nice communication tool and it's a nice ideology, a good alternative. Voluntary simplicity is also important, but it's not really something that people are expecting from a politician to talk about. Usually, it's not so good if a politician directly tells people how to live their life. However, we can define some frames and we have indirect tools to convince people. For example, at a state level we can say "I'll give you half of the money if you renovate your house in an energy-efficient way". People won't think about degrowth but they will think about the money and do the renovation because you gave them money to do it.

The role of intellectuals and thinkers, like Alexandra Köves, is to talk about degrowth and do all the meetings behind. As politicians, we can show a good example: it would be very stupid to say "I'm a green politician and I go every day with a huge truck to work". You have to be sincere, and your life has to reflect the values you speak about.

In reality, if I had the power to change the public children's meals in schools and kindergarten, it would be so nice to make it more organic with less meat. But this is again something which needs a lot of work and money because it would be more expensive. So there are big systems which are not easy to change.

"The role of intellectuals and thinkers, like Alexandra Köves, is to talk about degrowth and do all the meetings behind. As politicians we can show good example."

You said that you feel more useful on this small scale but have you ever tried to talk publicly about degrowth?

Once there was a Degrowth Conference in Budapest in 2016. I had a talk and I was even going to the TV which was a great issue! Not because I was on TV (I used to do that quite often), but it was important for me that I could speak about degrowth on TV.

I wonder if it had a big effect but I think at least there were articles about degrowth, information about living and thinking your life in a different way and that growth is not everything.

Do you still have degrowth as a goal while working at the municipality level in your everyday life?

I think I still have my goals in my head but I would not say that I am working for a degrowth society. I am working for a greener and sustainable society and it meets in a lot of ways the degrowth ideas. In your everyday work it's important to keep in mind the big journey.

But when you're coming to your office and you have a lot of stupid cases to deal with you don't always think about the great ideas and changing the world. You just think about solving really small and concrete issues, like a garbage bin is needed on the corner of this street.

These are the "manageable pieces" I was talking about during the Degrowth Conference when I said "I have to take the concept of degrowth and reduce it into manageable pieces that can be enacted at a local level through the municipal policies". But I also have to care about a lot of things which aren't related to degrowth. For example, I used to work a lot on housing. But that's right, that, somehow, it's also related to degrowth...

I think we cannot solve the environmental problems without tackling social problems. If people don't have anything to eat or don't have a place to sleep, then it will be very difficult for them to understand that they have to care about the environment. You know, the first thing I solved here was giving food during school breaks to children whose families have low incomes. I organized that they can have food during Christmas and Easter breaks. But it was in plastic boxes. So I had this dilemma: "ok, I will use more plastic boxes which are not so good, but at least I have to give food for the children who really live in poverty". So what do I choose? Of course I choose to give food to the children. And I go crazy with these idiotic dilemmas !

"Take the concept of degrowth and reduce it into manageable pieces which can be enacted at a local level through the municipal policies."

So politics is about making compromises?

It's always about making compromises. For example, one of my colleagues used to be a member of the European Parliament, and he flew every week whereas he was a green politician. We spoke about it, and we thought he's making a bigger use of the work he was doing in Brussels. This world works in a way that you are always pushed into these contradictions, so you cannot really make the best choices.

That's why I'm saying that we have to change the system at the state level. We cannot expect people, for example, to read all the letters of products in the supermarket to know if there is palm oil. The system has to be changed in a way that we could ban palm oil at the State level and then we don't put in all the food.

"We cannot expect people for example to read all the letters of products in the supermarket to know if there is palm oil. The system has to be changed in a way that we could ban palm oil at the State level and then we don't put in all the food."

You talked about the "Climate strategy". Did you implement other environmental strategies, like a guaranteed minimum income?

Yes, but in fact it's a social stuff, it's not environmental one.

You cannot relate it to degrowth or environmental issues?

It's not totally like basic income. My party is for basic income but, again, you cannot do it at a municipal level, only at a state level.

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This guaranteed minimum income goal is to give money to someone who doesn't have 28 500 forints monthly, which is a very small amount of money.

So we are just adding money to reach this level. It was like a social transfer for really poor people and it required them to cooperate with the "Institute of Family care". People having needs were helped by social workers but it was an obligation for them to cooperate. So it was not like a basic income you get without any conditions.

But it was a very important social transfer and it's still working. I think people were happy with it. In fact there was a study about the monitoring of a lot of social systems, but it's very difficult to show it in such a short way that it really decreases poverty. I think it does, but you know just to make the proper studies, it costs a lot of money.

On a concrete approach, how do you manage with all your responsibilities? Do you listen to people's claims?

I have a terribly long to-do list and usually I'm doing the most urgent things. If people are coming with an idea, which was already in my mind but that I didn't have time to care about yet, then I'm really happy because we all want it to happen. It gives me motivation to work on it. But there are things very simple to solve and some which are more difficult and it can decrease my motivation. I already had some many unsuccessful projects. It's harder to start something when you know that it's almost impossible. At least, I have to try.

Are you still optimistic?

Well, it's also that I am already on the path, and it would take a big effort to step away or to change direction.

What would you want the world to look like in 50 years?

It shouldn't be worse than now, that would be already quite good. If we could stop right now losing more, it would already be a great deal, but I'm afraid it won't happen.

I'm thinking about overfishing, forest destruction, garbage everywhere and pollution etc. And I don't even talk about the carbon-dioxide emissions, which is a real problem. In fact, we are not speaking enough about the environmental and biodiversity crisis, which are other than the climate crisis. Of course, it's all connected, but we should give more importance to each one.

REVIEW OF INTERVIEW AND ANALYSIS

The exchange with Rebeka Szabó made possible to question the future of politics in Hungary at different scales, in theory and in practice. Here are some concluding remarks and analysis on this week's topic.

Expectations :

- We wanted to discover her political career and her view on the capacity for political action at different scales.
- As a member of the opposition, her views on the current government and the opposition primary election were relevant for us.
- We found interesting to question her on her motivations, hopes and disappointments in politics regarding the taking account of environmental issues in Hungary.
- We were curious about her global vision of degrowth and her concrete ecological decisions for the XIV district (Zuglo) of Budapest.

Remarks :

-Global learnings regarding politics and democracy-

- Governmental actions for the environment are missing. There are a lack of expert competences at State level and a deficit of citizen awareness that limit conditions for action.
- As deputy of the XIV district of Budapest, her action is extremely limited (whether in favour of ecology or more generally).
- In fact, it is difficult to act politically in the name of and for degrowth. Instead, this translates into the implementation of small measures in favour of the environment, in a policy of small steps for people to accept it.

- Rebeka Szabó's opinion and what we want to highlight -

- Mrs Szabó feels that she is not doing enough on account of the lack of power. Also, she is constrained by taking decisions one day at a time.
- The main ecological decisions should be taken at state and European levels, although municipalities could gain autonomy. Given the lack of decisions in that sense, she also encourages citizens initiatives that show a grasp of environmental issues and can put pressure on politicians to act.
- If Rebeka Szabó thinks that it's possible to work on environmental issues in a representative democracy, she expresses some criticisms (slowness of decision-making, lack of policy expertise and pragmatism, risk of asking people's opinion if they aren't aware and supporting ecological issues etc).
- According to Rebeka Szabó, the role of politicians is to give the tools to people and be an example. It is not to force people to live their life in a certain way. although the politician must accompany those who do not have the time or access to the "knowledge" that could benefit them.

New questions / challenges :

- If we want citizens to accept ecological political decisions we need a real change of mentality and behaviour.
- How can we put forwards political decisions to be compatible with degrowth but communicate in a way citizen would be aware of these issues?
- Could degrowth within representative democracy be a way to prioritize on well-being and care issues ?
- What will be the challenges and opportunities of the opposition regarding environmental issues if they won the future election ?

APPENDIX

LMP - Lehet Más a Politika Website (Politics Can Be Different) : <https://lmp.hu/>

Párbeszéd Magyarországért (Dialogue for Hungary) : Hungarian green political party formed in 2013 by former members of the Politics Can Be Different Party : <https://parbeszedmagyarorszagert.hu/>

Zugló XIV District of Budapest Website : <https://www.zuglo.hu/about-zuglo/>

"Exploring : Degrowth and Economics - Alexandra Köves", 22/11/2021, Cargonomia, <http://cargonomia.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Economics-Alexandra-K%C3%B6ves-2.pdf>

"The district climate strategy has been adopted" - Budapest 14th district of the capital - official website of the Municipality of ZUGLÓ (zuglo.hu) (Elfogadták a kerületi klímastratégiát), 01/07/2021: <https://www.zuglo.hu/elfogadtak-a-keruleti-klimastrategiat/>

Budapest portal | "Climate strategy and creation of a climate change platform in Budapest" - KEHOP-1.2.0-15-2016-00020 (Klímastratégia és éghajlat-változási platform létrehozása Budapesten) : <https://budapest.hu/Lapok/2017/klimastrategia-es-eghajlatvaltozasi-platform-letrehozasa-budapesten-kehop-120-15-2016-00020.aspx>

"Zuglo becomes first Hungarian settlement to introduce minimum income", Ádám Lestyánszky, 05/03/2015, *The Budapest Beacon* : <https://budapestbeacon.com/zuglo-becomes-first-hungarian-settlement-to-introduce-minimum-income/>

"The Zugló Assembly voted unanimously in favour of the minimum social income" (A ZUGLÓI KÉPVISELŐ-TESTÜLET EGYHANGÚLAG MEGSZAVAZTA A SZOCIÁLIS MINIMÁLJÖVEDELMEZT), 27/02/2015, | Dialogue for Hungary (parbeszedmagyarorszagert.hu): <https://parbeszedmagyarorszagert.hu/hir/zugloi-kepviselo-testulet-egyhangulag-megszavazta-szocialis-minimaljovedelmet>

Budapest Degrowth Conference 2016 Website : https://budapest.degrowth.org/?page_id=70

Budapest 5th Degrowth Conference 2016 Youtube "Degrowth in the Parliaments" : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awsaD06s718&t=4557s>

Municipalism : "a movement advocating direct democracy and subsidiarity power at the local level, often at the expense of -or in a confederated form as a substitute for, the state." *Exploring Degrowth*, Pluto Press, 2020