

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

FIGHTING FASCISM FROM HUNGARY TO NO KINGS: EZRA LEVIN & LÁSZLÓ UPOR ON TRUMP & ORBÁN

[Watch](#) | [Download Podcast](#) – [Uncut Interview](#) | [Download Podcast](#) – [Episode](#)

LAURA FLANDERS: If you care about the future, resisting autocracy and building democracy, we have a very special show for you today. As many of you know, much as Donald Trump rails against Europe, there is one small country there that he adores, Hungary. He and its strongman leader, Viktor Orbán, have praised each other for years. Anti-Democratic, demagogue, pro-Putin, pro-Netanyahu, anti-immigrant, anti-woman, anti-queer, Orbán and Trump came to power on parallel tracks with similar values. And if there is a model for the Trump administration, Orbán's is the one most explicitly being followed by them today. With our leaders in such a love fest, it stands to reason then that our two countries' resistance movements might have something to share. So, as we head into a critical winter for all of us, we have convened two experienced resisters. From the United States, we have Ezra Levin. He is the Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director of "[Indivisible](#)," the grassroots movement behind such historic protests as the "Hands Off" and "No Kings" rallies that saw millions of people hit the streets. They're also actively involved in voter-turnout efforts, including this fall's sweep of anti-Trump election victories. From Hungary, we are lucky to welcome László Upor, former Vice Rector and Acting Rector of the [University of Theater and Film Arts](#) in Budapest, Hungary. When the Orbán administration began taking control of Hungary's universities, just one fought back, his. And they did it in a world of inspiring ways, as you'll hear. They've been busy since building an international alternative. Clearly, both our guests have a lot of stories to tell. So, let's get at it, what is working, what is not, and where do we stand? Welcome, László, Ezra, to "Laura Flanders & Friends." I'm very glad to have you. Ezra, people may not realize you've gotten involved with Indivisible during Trump's second term, but you actually began in his first term when you and your wife, Leah Greenberg, were responding to his first election, so 2016.

EZRA LEVIN: We didn't think we were starting some sort of big national effort like this. We were former congressional staffers. We had both worked on Capitol Hill for members of Congress during the rise of the Tea Party. So, we had seen a Right-wing grassroots movement push back against a popular trifecta Democratic government. Obama had just won with big margins. He had the House, he had the Senate, he was pushing forward a bold policy agenda. And suddenly out of nowhere, this Tea Party force started rising up all over the country. My boss was targeted by it, Leah's boss in Congress was targeted by it. And they were organizing locally and pushing their elected officials. I disagreed with their racism, I disagreed with their violence, I disagreed with their ideology. But damn it, they knew how to organize locally and use the tools

available to constituents to push back. Flash forward to 2016, Trump wins. And it wasn't just his win that led us to try to start "Indivisible," it was two things. One, a future Trump appointee talking about the Japanese internment camps during World War II as a model for what to do with immigrants and refugees and Muslims. That was terrifying, that was horrifying. But then second, was an interview with incoming minority leader on the Democratic side of the Senate, Chuck Schumer, in which he said, well, we lost the election, that's what happens sometimes. We're just going to have to figure out ways to work with Trump. That was shocking to me, that was shocking to Leah. That was shocking to a lot of folks who viewed Trump as an existential threat to our democracy and somebody who needed to be resisted, not worked with, not somebody to figure out where the common ground is, but to stop his agenda before it can get off the tracks. So, we wrote a guide, basically drawing on our experiences working against the Tea Party. We saw what they did so effectively and said, look, you don't have to like what they were fighting for, but you can appreciate the power of local organizing in a Democratic republic, we can do this. And so, we put out a Google Doc called "[Indivisible, A Guide for Resisting the Trump Agenda](#)," and thought maybe this will be helpful to somebody out there who is looking for how to build and wield power in this moment. And shockingly, people read it. And then even more shockingly, they started forming "Indivisible" groups all over the country.

LAURA FLANDERS: László, I'm going to come to you for a backstory. I mean, you too found yourself in a moment, and I'm going to ask you to describe a particular moment where you looked around at what your skills were and what you could do, faced with a serious sort of existential threat to the institution that you were a part of. I'm thinking of August, the end of August, August 31st, 2020. Not the beginning of your story, by any means.

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: Let me first say that I really admire Indivisible and the name itself, it has a lot. Because "Indivisible" is very, very visible. And that's one of the major points, is I think that's part of our success, both "Indivisible" and our story. I, you know, I was a happy literature translator and dramaturge who became leader of the University of Theater and Film. And that was the point when the government decided to take over all the Hungarian universities. Of which only our university said, hey, that's not right, we won't take that. So, after several months of the staff and faculty resisting the government, eventually, the students started organizing. And from that point on, we were, you know, marching together as students and faculty and with a growing national and international support. As a background, we created a thing we called the Learning Republic, but that was preceded by the whole leadership resigning and the students occupying the main building of the university that they kept under blockade for 71 long days. And those days were filled with creative actions, very theatrical, very spectacular actions.

LAURA FLANDERS: After the Orbán Administration took over their university and rewrote its charter, László and his colleagues wrote their own charter of the university.

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: We decided to write something they cannot rewrite, and we called that "Charta Universitatum." We sent that document from the entrance of the university to the parliament. And the document, the actual physical document traveled via 15,000 hands of supporters. So, it was like a five-mile-long snake, human snake, through the whole city. And every one of them touched that document. They basically hand-signed the document, became accomplices in our crime against the illiberal state. It immediately involved and included people. So, people were not just audiences to our actions, but they actually were invited to join.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that's what I wanted to pull out. So, you're both communicators, you're both in the business of communicating, and very successful you are at it too. And one of my questions is, have you defined what the principles are guiding your efforts at communication or your communication tactics? Ezra.

EZRA LEVIN: That is a big...Wow. I've not been asked that question before.

LAURA FLANDERS: László just mentioned involvement. We want to involve people, not just tell people what to do.

EZRA LEVIN: Well, I think one of the things that we've, that has been foundational to the work we've done from the very beginning, I think it was helped because we didn't expect to start anything. We didn't think we were starting an organization, we didn't think we were starting a movement. We thought we were providing some useful information to folks. The number one response that we got when we put that guide down, which was all about how dangerous Trump was, how bad this regime was going to be, how much we needed to organize and fight back, was folks saying that they had hope after reading it. And we didn't write the guide to give people hope, we wrote the guide to tell people they had power. We're not the leaders of the movement, the leaders of the movement are the folks who are actually organizing on the ground. And it's really, really important to us that people aren't consuming "Indivisible" content for the purposes of being entertained or even being informed. They should be consuming content for the purpose of then using it in some way in their actual lives. So, this thing that László is pushing on, of participatory democracy is so, so important. Because what they want, what the regime wants, is to isolate us, make us feel alone, and put us in a position of scrolling through social media in this passive way, just accepting what the regime does. And so, our enemy in this is not Trump, it's not the Republicans, it's not the broader regime. Our enemy is this sense of cynicism or fatalism or nihilism. This sense that nothing we do matters, so why even try? So, Laura, you're asking me this now. I hadn't really thought about it in this way, but I do think a core principle in our communication philosophy is convincing people you have power, you just got to use it. The best way to use it is in concert with a lot of other people in your own community.

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: The key to our movement was A, we were indivisible. The unity and so solidarity, unbreakable solidarity between staff and the students, faculty and the students. And the other one is that it was a very multi-phased movement. So, it was not like a movement with a leader that you can hunt down, it was loads of, loads of faces, loads of faces that became familiar faces for the whole country, because the whole fight was going on for several months. People learned them, they got to know those people. And that was very important. We shared responsibility in everything. And the other thing is to share some kind of an example that you don't have to be afraid. There's no nothing to be scared of. And we definitely, none of us, neither the students nor the faculty behaved as victims. We didn't believe they were victims. So, I think they were the key things that the, you know, the multi phases, the unity, the "Indivisibility," and the fearlessness of the whole movement. And of course the spectacular, you know, it was in entertaining too. However tragic, still entertaining.

LAURA FLANDERS: Talk more about that, because I think entertaining has become an element of protest in the US more recently. I'm thinking about the "No Kings" protests of this year that have seen people come out in green frog suits and all sorts of suits to try to kind of ridicule the authoritarian tone and the [policing that's happening](#) in very frightening ways. That ridicule is important. And you did that too, László, right?

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: Yeah, absolutely. You have to laugh at them, not be afraid of them. They cannot face mirth. They don't understand mirth, they don't understand the derision. They think they are invincible, and when they just don't give in, they don't understand what's going on.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ezra, your "No Kings" slogan, people picked that up in so many ways and made it their own. And you see the signs for, you know, months after the demonstration in people's windows. László, I know that when the students took over the university, you kind of barricaded yourselves in with caution tape, which, in Hungary, is red and white, not yellow. And that tape ended up everywhere as a kind of visual connecting device. Was that carefully thought out in advance or it just happened?

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: It happened almost accidentally. The students first wanted to blockade the building with planks, like as a fortress. And the chancellor, who was very, very much in favor of the resistance, he was a good guy, he said, this is not safe, you cannot escape if there's anything wrong going on. Do something that you can go through. And they say, oh, okay, let's get some red-and-white tapes. And it became very spectacular. So, people started coming to the building and say, okay, this is a piece of art. We distributed thousands and thousands of pieces of that thing. And we told people, don't throw them away because that's garbage, that's pollution, take them home. So, they took them home. And thousands and thousands of people suddenly had that little tape. So, it became a fashion. And the same happened with the mask. The students had yellow masks, all of them. And yellow masks with the other symbol, the, you know, the raised

hands painted on it. And tens of thousands, I mean, literally, tens of thousands of people all around Hungary were ordering it by mail, they wanted to have that. So, you were traveling the country and you met at the petrol station, 300 miles from Budapest, you met another guy with the same mask and waving to each other. Oh, you too? Me too, yes.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ezra coming to you, I mean, the U.S. is not Hungary and theater occupies a different, I have to say, lesser place in our kind of pantheon of powerful institutions in this country. But we have our own. And I'm wondering, as you listen to László, what are the parallels or where do you see similarities, differences? And do you think that you've learned things about what inspires people, and involves people, and what doesn't? I'm assuming "Indivisible" has had some dud ideas along the way.

EZRA LEVIN: We've had plenty of dud ideas, one of the, there's a lot that resonated with what László has done. And we've taken an inspiration from what you all have done in Hungary. I just want to say that out loud. I think we are not, by training, resistance experts. I loved what you said, they don't understand mirth. Uh, that is so true. They want to be feared. They want to be accused of being an authoritarian, of being a strongman, they like that. What they can't afford is to be ridiculed, to be made fun of. They don't understand it, they can't engage with it. And also, it means that your people-powered protest is fun and popular and people want to be part of it. Our solution to this problem is getting historic numbers of people involved, pushing back against the regime. You can't do that if this is some kind of serious, sad, scary violent conflict with the regime, they will win. The regime as a monopoly on violent force in this country, they will win that. We do not want to engage in violence, we do not want this to be a sad thing that you have to do because it's always serious. We want this to be joyous resistance. And it's really difficult for an authoritarian regime to combat that. Because how do you push back against people having a good time, exercising their basic rights to show up in public with each other? They want to describe us as some kind of, I don't know, violent or subversive movement, but we show with our actual actions what we're doing. And they don't know how to push back against that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Plus, it is really hard to arrest people in those green suits. Just saying. While we're talking, you know, you have now filled me with joy and happiness, but it has to be said that we are still living in authoritarian times. And László, I mean, coming to Hungary, it's not as if you, quote, unquote, "won." The government did not change, it did not give you back your university. It did take over that institution, it did take over a lot of the theaters, and the arts, and media, and is in power. So, how do you assess as it were, quote unquote, you know, what works, or success, or victory?

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: It would be easy and funny to say that we lost everything, but we still didn't lose. Or we didn't win anything, but we won. But this is why I really think, that they couldn't break us, which is very important, and we gave an example that it is possible. And also, we

found a way out. Eventually, after many, many months of fights and when the blockade was done and all that stuff was over, about half of the students and half of the faculty left the university for good. And we formed a society we call [Free SzFE Society](#). The SzFE is acronym for the University of Theater and Film. And we joined forces with five European art universities, and they agreed on creating an umbrella to accept to adopt our students, the students who left the old university so those students could finish their studies seamlessly under the leadership of their old teachers.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming back to you, Ezra, for a second, I am interested in the kind of cracks in the edifice. And we saw some in the elections of this fall where just extraordinary, across-the-board victories by Democrats and anti-Trump candidates at every level. What do you think are the most widening cracks right now, or the things that perhaps are doing the most to turn people against the Trump administration?

EZRA LEVIN: There was a scary period earlier this year where it looked like Trump was going to succeed in consolidating power in this country. And I think the thing that has worked, is mass peaceful, organized people power. Starting very early on, in February and March, we were holding massive town halls where Republicans and Democrats alike were coming back home. And these libraries and community centers and public gatherings were just filled to the brim of people saying, why are you going along with, at that time, Elon Musk? Why are you allowing to run rough shot over the entire country? And Elon Musk got kicked out of the White House, he's no longer working there. That was followed by protests for "Hands Off," that was followed by the first No Kings Day on June 14th, that was followed by Labor Day, and by No Kings 2, and then by these incredible election results. What is shifting people? I think it's two things. One, Trump is overreaching. He is doing deeply unpopular things. A smart authoritarian in that position who was really disciplined, I think he might have had a shot to very quickly and decisively consolidate power by doing things that are popular with the general public. But he got a lot of votes from people who were worried about the prices of bread and eggs. He's not doing anything about the price of bread and eggs. So, a lot of non-MAGA voters who were willing to give him a shot are now feeling betrayed and disappointed. Because instead of seeing their lives improve, what they're seeing, is the east wing of the White House be demolished, and a long list of corporate sponsors handing out donations to Trump directly. So, I think a combination of large scale people protests that makes clear that this guy isn't inevitable, that this period we're in is temporary, and democracy will reassert itself. Combined with what everybody can see with their own eyes, that this is one of the most corrupt regimes in American history and that their lives aren't getting better.

LAURA FLANDERS: Are there cracks in the Hungarian edifice too, László? Does Viktor Orbán have an Achilles heel?

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: I think there is now, maybe the first time in 15 years. It looks that the opposition has some chance to win over Orbán. If, you know, if victory in the election is possible at all, we don't know. But even with the unfair elections, there is a chance that Orbán will lose. What happens after that, I don't know. But that's partly due to, I think, the people really being dissatisfied with what is happening. And strangely, a little sadly, the cracks appeared a little more than a year ago, a year and a half ago, related to a child-abuse case. And, I mean, strangely, because there have been so many other similar things over the past years and almost decades and nothing happened. But now, it seems that there is something really, really going on.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'd love you to each answer the question that we always ask our guests at the end of these episodes, which is, what do you think a story will be that the future tells of this moment? László, you're a storyteller. Thank you for one thing, for having your book translated from Hungarian. I can't wait to be able to read it.

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: Thank you, I can't.

LAURA FLANDERS: But what do you think is the story, or the play, that will be made about these times by the people of the future?

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: I think that this one big question future will ask, like, what do you mean illiberal democracy? They will just not understand. I hope they will not understand what this whole thing was about, the absurdity of these times. And I hope they'll laugh at us.

LAURA FLANDERS: Illiberal democracy being the best term people have come up with for describing what's happening in Hungary.

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: That's a contradiction in terms.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ezra, what about you? What story do you think the future will tell? I think I have a guess, but.

EZRA LEVIN: Well, I love the idea of, in the future, of them just laughing at the ridiculousness of this. Like, what on earth? Donald Trump, a reality star, came in and implemented a fascist regime? He started nationalizing the guard and invading other states and the Republicans did nothing, they just backed him up every step of the way? There was no fracture, how did that even happen? And with some years of distance and with the danger gone, it will all just be a ridiculous episode because democracy will reassert itself, DC will be a state, Puerto Rico will get self-determination, we'll get money out of politics, we'll make voting day a national holiday, we're guaranteed voting rights, and we'll actually have a democracy that reflects the will of the

people. And we'll take it for granted until the next threat is on our doorsteps and we'll have to organize again.

LAURA FLANDERS: Beautiful, great way to end. I thank you both, this conversation could clearly continue. It's been really a pleasure listening to you, and listening to you in conversation with each other. It's a joy, thank you.

EZRA LEVIN: Thank you. And László, thanks for being an inspiration to pro-democracy organizers all around the world.

LÁSZLÓ UPOR: Thank you. It is a great inspiration for us what you do, so.

LAURA FLANDERS: Mutual appreciation society, I love it.

The cracks in the Trump regime are showing, and one has to wonder which will offend the voters most. Will it be the cruelty, or the corruption, or the sex scandal, or the bullying, or the war crimes? We'll find out soon enough. The opposition, though, have weaknesses too. Most spectacularly at the level of their leadership. Maryland Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen was asked recently, who is leading the Democratic Party? To which he responded, grassroots groups around the country, groups like "No Kings." Which is sobering coming from the top. And it's no surprise then that that is exactly where Trump's DOJ is focusing. According to a leaked memo I referred to recently in a Substack, the DOJ is charging the IRS with going after the funders of nonprofit organizations. And that sounds scary. But I'm reminded of what our guests today emphasize, namely the importance of staying local and staying creative. After all the IRS can't actually audit your gifts of time, or attention, or creativity. So, that's where I'm focusing this month. If you want to hear my full uncut conversation with today's guest, including their questions of each other, which are great, you can get that through subscribing to our free podcast or that Substack that I mentioned. All the information is at our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura, thanks for joining us.

For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all at lauraflanders.org.