

From Surrogate Religion to Surrogate Democracy: Paganized Christianity and Right-wing Populism in Hungary

Zoltán Ádám & András Bozóki

The relation between right-wing politics and religious worldviews in Central and Eastern Europe in general and in Hungary in particular has been subject of recent academic research.¹ This inquiry fits into the long-standing research interest in religious interventions into politics and the role of the church in shaping policy decisions.² In this paper we argue that although in Hungary the relationship between right-wing populism and religion is of secondary importance only in setting the right-wing political agenda, large historical Christian churches take part in providing legitimacy for right-wing populism. The governing Fidesz and its extreme right opposition Jobbik that are both considered to be right-wing populist parties in this paper, in turn, make religious references to signal their traditional social values and identification with the societal mainstream. As Hungary in the post-World War II period has been fairly secularized, right-wing populist parties cannot afford to appear in front of the electorate as political representatives of churches or religious values. Yet, both Fidesz and Jobbik tend to refer to religious values and to seek church support as we will show. As a result, a link between right-wing populism and religion has been created in Hungarian politics in the past 25 years, following long-standing historical patterns originating from the interwar period. Meanwhile, liberal and left-wing parties

¹ Andrea L. P. Pirro (2015), *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge; Michael Minkenberg (2015), *Transforming the transformation? The East European radical right in the political process*. London: Routledge; András Máté-Tóth, Cosima Rughinis, eds. (2011), *Spaces and Borders. Current Research on Religion in Central and Eastern Europe*. Berlin - Boston: De Gruyter; Zsolt Enyedi (2000), "Clerical and religious polarization in Hungary" in: *Religion and Mass Electoral Behaviour*. Edited by David Broughton and Hans-Martin Ten Napel. London: Routledge, 157-176.; Zsolt Enyedi (2003), "The Contested Politics of Positive Neutrality in Hungary" *West European Politics*, Vol. 26. No. 1. 157-176.

² Karrie J. Koesel (2014), *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Anna Grzymala-Busse (2015), *Nations under God: How Churches Use Moral Authority to Influence Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

have rather promoted secular ideologies. The divide between leftist/liberal-centrist *versus* anti-communist parties thus has appeared following the classic secular vs confessional cleavage.³

In this paper, first we will present our understanding of political populism. Secondly, we will discuss the rise of right-wing populism in Hungary and its dominance since the end of the 2000s. Thirdly, we will look at the role of churches in right-wing politics and the relation between churches and right-wing parties. Fourthly, before the conclusions, we will discuss the phenomenon of right-wing nationalism as a surrogate religion.

1. Populism as politics of under-institutionalization

We consider populism as an anti-elitist political ideology, sentiment, and movement which contrasts the interests of the “pure people”, often presented as oppressed and innocent, with the oppressive, corrupt elite and its foreign allies. Populists favor “the people” over any other options.⁴ As Edward Shils famously observed:

“According to populism the will of the people enjoys top priority in the face of any other principle, right, and institutional standard. Populists identify the people with justice and morality.”⁵

When electorally successful, populist parties come to power and form government. As they initially represent an anti-elitist and – as we are going to argue – anti-institutional stance, their administrative performance may well run into difficulties, and they often under-deliver on promises. Yet, the Fidesz administration in Hungary since 2010 demonstrates that populist parties can be successful in power, and their administrative performance might well be sufficient

³ Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan eds. (1967), *Party Systems and Voters' Alignments*. New York: The Free Press

⁴ For more details cf. Margaret Canovan (1981), *Populism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; Cas Mudde (2007), *Populist Radical Parties in Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Hanspeter Kriesi, and Takis Pappas (2015), “Populism in Europe during Crisis: An Introduction” in *European Populism in the Shadow of Great Recession*. Edited by H. Kriesi and T. Pappas. Colchester: ECPR Press.

⁵ Edward Shils (1956), *The Torment of Secrecy*. London: W. Heinemann, 97-98.

to get reelected. Fidesz managed to combine anti-elitism, nationalism and an anti-EU stance with a pragmatist approach in most policy issues, presenting a charismatic leadership, allegedly defending the national interest and ordinary people.

As Laclau emphasized,⁶ populism as such has never had a particular ideological content but rather a particular anti-elitist approach to politics that has sought political mass-mobilization and a non-technocratic mass-participation in the political process. In this sense, populism is truly ‘democratic’ even if it fails to live up to (or openly rejects) the constitutional norms of liberal democracy. While engaging in mass-mobilization, populist parties tend to manipulate the public discourse by using mass media outlets and advocating their own (often ideologically defined) worldviews. These ideological contents might be nationalistic, xenophobic, anti-gay, anti-liberal, anti-western or, anti-Semite, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim or, for that matter, even radically liberal: the only criteria is that along the particular ideological content populist political entrepreneurs must be able to perform mass-mobilization. Once this requirement is attained, populism can serve various ideological purposes: It can be nationalist, socialist, semi-fascist or even neoliberal.⁷

Populism in power can be also understood as a way of governance in which power is personalized and its execution organized along personal relations. This has to do with permanent mass-mobilization as a means of popular legitimation: as formal political and administrative institutions need to be sufficiently fluid to allow for mass participation in politics, the organizing principle of power resorts to personal authority – just as it had been in pre-democratic history. In this sense, populism represents regression towards pre-democratic politics in an era of mass-democracy when political legitimation is conditioned on the open expression of mass political will. Yet, such popular legitimation process typically takes place under (semi-)authoritarian conditions that insure the continued power of the ruling populist party of government, while curtailing the opposition’s chances to raise an effective electoral challenge.

This (semi-)authoritarian rule is, however, not always easy to maintain. The open expression of political will requires a degree of formal institutionalization of the political process – a condition

⁶ Ernesto Laclau (2005), *On Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso

⁷ Cf. András Bozóki (2015b), „The Illusion of Inclusion Configurations of Populism in Hungary” in *Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe after 1989*. Edited by Michal Kopecek and Piotr Weislik . Budapest - New York: CEU Press

populist governments have difficulties to cope with once they start losing popularity. In fact, the loss of popularity in case of populist governments easily turns into loss of legitimacy: the loss of the popular belief that those in government justifiably exercise power even if their policies are harmful for some part of the electorate and hence do not enjoy unanimous approval. In consequence, populist governments typically try to maintain their popularity even at very high long term economic costs. Because of the type of legitimacy populist governments enjoy, such – on the long run self-defeating – economic policies⁸ can still make sense politically from the point of view of populist governments.

Governments in industrialized western societies typically rely on impersonalized, rational bureaucratic legitimacy.⁹ This is based on relatively mature political institutions that enjoy a degree of popular legitimacy irrespective of the popularity of particular politicians or parties in power. In contrast, power in pre-modern, non-democratic societies was typically based on traditional and/or charismatic legitimacy, often referring to religious worldviews that provided governments with a kind of sacred status, making them appear as being endorsed by non-worldly powers. Hence, kings and queens have been crowned by heads of churches, lending them traditional and/or charismatic legitimacy, whereas the detachment of church and state – i.e. the end of the practice of non-worldly legitimization – has always been a key condition of enlightened government.

Significantly, traditional and charismatic legitimacy in pre-modern societies do not require any formal act of mass-approval of power. Populism, in contrast, is based on formal approval of governance by people, and populist political regimes in this sense belong to the tradition of modernized, secular power. However, as a result of weak political institutions, rational bureaucratic legitimacy is typically not sufficient to preserve political stability in relatively less developed, pre- or semi-modern societies. As a result, charismatic (or charismatic/traditional)

⁸ For a discussion on economic populism, see Jeffrey Sachs (1989): "Social Conflict and Populist Policies in Latin America," National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge, MA) Working Paper No. 2897; and Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards (1989): „Macroeconomic Populism in Latin America”. National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge, MA) Working Paper No. 2986.

⁹ For a discussion on political legitimacy, see Max Weber (1978 [1922]), *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

legitimacy continues to play a dominant role, along with formal mass-approval of power.¹⁰ Hence, populism in a Weberian context can be labeled as *rational charismatic* rule, in which political leaders themselves become institutions and power tends to be personalized.

In other words, populism is a shortcut for establishing the missing element of rational, impersonal institutions in semi-modernized societies. In the absence of sufficiently strong civil societies and political institutions, populism makes up for the missing element of bureaucratic legitimacy.¹¹ However, a political regime based on a personalized way of governance, lacking rationally organized bureaucratic institutions remains predictably unstable.¹² This fits our conceptual framework: As personal authority in populism tends to substitute for institutional authority, the loss of popularity of leaders tends to create systemic crises, while the transfer of power from one leader to another is typically a great challenge for a populist government.

Finally, from an historical point of view, modern democratic populism in the post-WWII era can be seen as illiberal totalitarian politics in a period of mass democracies. Modern democratic populism originally appeared in South America where totalitarian politics was less discredited than in post-WWII Western Europe. Modern populists, such as Argentina's Juan Perón, managed to combine participation with the oppression of the political opposition. As Finchelstein put it:

“Populism emerged as a form of authoritarian democracy for the post-war world; one that could adapt the totalitarian version of politics to the post-war hegemony of democratic representation. While it curtailed political rights, populism expanded social rights; and at the same it put limits to the more radical emancipatory combinations of both.”¹³

¹⁰ To be sure, charismatic and traditional legitimacy play a crucial role in mature liberal democracies as well. Identification with particular politicians, their personal characteristics and capability to represent a set of 'sacred values' in a particular society remain to be decisive elements of democratic political life. See Dean Williams (2015), *Leadership for a Fractured World: How to Cross Boundaries, Build Bridges, and Lead Change*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler; Geert Hofstede (1997), *Cultures and Organizations – Software of the Mind*. USA: McGraw-Hill

¹¹ In line with this observation, the critique of technocratic, impersonalized power in modern societies emphasizes the positive role of populism in making society once again the dominant political actor instead of professionalized technocratic elites. Cf. Laclau op. cit.

¹² Joel Horowitz (1992), “Populism and its Legacies in Argentina”. In Michael L. Conniff (ed.), *Populism in Latin America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

¹³ Federico Finchelstein (2014), „Returning Populism to History”. *Constellations*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 467-482, p. 467.

Hence, populist governments are typically “democratic” in the sense of seeking mass-approval of power, but they build “illiberal democracies” in which governments are not constrained by checks and balances and the rule of law, and impose a majoritarian approach of governance, systematically exploiting political minorities, and ensuring their reelection by using public resources. In other words, they approximate Robert Dahl’s „inclusive hegemony” that allows for (limited) participation but curtails contestation for political power.¹⁴

Left-wing populists usually tend to use plebiscitarian mass support in order to transform established institutions into more “flexible” ones. They dismantle checks and balances, concentrate power in the hands of the president, limit debates, strike at opponents, and tend to use state resources and state apparatus for campaigning. They seek to deconstruct democratic accountability by eliminating safeguards against arbitrary rule. Right-wing (neoliberal) populists favor market economy, but they also weaken checks and balances, push for constitutional changes and embrace an increasingly personalistic leadership style and the practice of rule by “emergency” decrees. Leaders both in left and right populist camps tend to intimidate the opposition, attacking the privately owned media, co-opting civil society organizations and trying to build new “civic” organizations from the top down.¹⁵ They selectively disregard the norms and procedures of liberal democracy. In Europe, Viktor Orbán’s Hungary is a prime example of similar politics.¹⁶

2. The populist takeover of Hungary

¹⁴ Robert A. Dahl (1971), *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press

¹⁵ Cf. Sebastián L. Mazzuca (2013), „The Rise of Rentier Populism” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 24. No. 2. April, 108-122.; Kurt Weyland (2013), „The Threat from the Populist Left” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24. No. 3. July 2013. 18-32.; Miriam Kornblith (2013), „Chavismo after Chávez?” *Journal of Democracy*, op. cit. 47-61.

¹⁶ Bálint Magyar ed. (2015), *A magyar maffaállam anatómiája*. (An Anatomy of the Hungarian Mafia State). Budapest: Noran Libro

Strengthening of right wing populist and extreme nationalist movements across Europe has puzzled democratic theorists and worldwide observers alike as a trend that would seem to be incompatible in the purportedly liberal democracies in which they are taking root. In the nearly three decades since the collapse of communism in the former Soviet bloc, countries in East Central Europe have struggled to create a democratic legacy and propel their societies towards democratic futures. In Hungary—although the Roundtable Talks of 1989 led to a democratic arrangement and nonviolent transition from communism to a market economy and democracy¹⁷— many Hungarians have become disillusioned by their post-transition situation. There has arisen a sense that democracy was “stolen” from Hungarians and that a new transformation must be undertaken if Hungary is to be truly vindicated from centuries of indignity under various imperial powers and then of communism.

A 2009 Pew Research report measured public opinion of democracy and the current state of affairs in post-communist states. Tellingly, 77 per cent of Hungarian respondents indicated their frustration with the way Hungarian democracy had worked within the time period of 1991-2009, and 91 per cent of Hungarians thought that Hungary was not on the right track.¹⁸ Approval of democracy in Hungary immediately following the fall of communism was at 74 per cent, whereas by 2009 this figure had fallen eighteen percentage points to 56 per cent.¹⁹

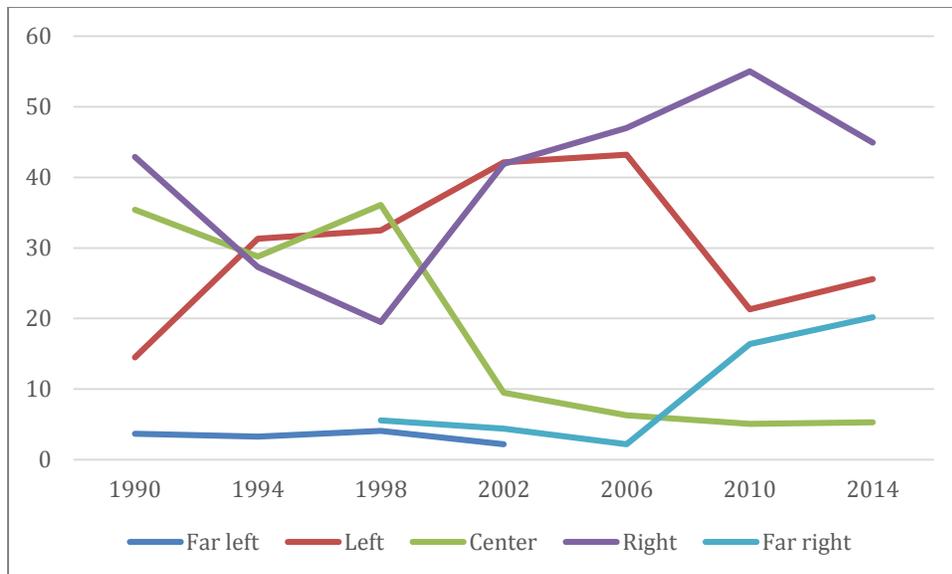
In 2010, shortly after these survey results were published, Orbán’s conservative-nationalist Fidesz party won the elections by absolute majority, which was translated, due to the disproportionate electoral rules, into a two-thirds parliamentary supermajority. Not insignificantly, Jobbik took 17 per cent of the vote in addition to Fidesz’s 53 per cent, representing a noteworthy increase in radical right wing representation in Hungarian elections.

Graph 1: Share of votes for Hungarian party lists (in percent of total votes) in 1990-2014

¹⁷ András Bozóki, ed. (2002), *The Roundtable Talks of 1989. The Genesis of Hungarian Democracy*. Budapest – New York: Central European University Press

¹⁸ “Two Decade's after the Wall's Fall: End of Communism Cheered but Now with More Reservations.” *The Pew Global Attitudes Project* (n.d.): n. pag. Pew Research Center, 2 Nov. 2009. Web.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*



Source: National Election Office

Notes: Far left: Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party / Worker's Party (1990-2002; 2014: 0,6%). Left: Hungarian Social Democratic Party (1990), Hungarian Socialist Party (1990-2014). Center: Agrarian Alliance (1990-1994), Center Party (2002), Fidesz (1990-1998), LMP (2010-2014), Alliance of Free Democrats (1990-2006), Entrepreneurs' Party (1990). Right: Fidesz (2002-2014), Independent Smallholder's Party (1990-2002), Christian Democratic People's Party (1990-1998), Hungarian Democratic Forum (1990-1998, 2006-2010). Far right: Hungarian Justice and Life Party (1998-2006), Jobbik (2010-2014).

Using its two-thirds parliamentary majority, Fidesz altered the entire constitutional system. They did not only introduce a new constitution, but changed electoral rules and fundamental laws, governing the relationship among government bodies and between the government and the citizenry.²⁰ The authoritarian turn was carried out by the two-thirds parliamentary majority itself, without any meaningful concession to the opposition and without a referendum or other institutionalized way of popular approval of the new Fundamental Law that replaced the Constitution of 1989. Precisely because of this, some observers have argued that the Fundamental Law suffers a critical lack of legitimacy, and hence will be relatively easy to

²⁰ Cf. András Bozóki (2011), "Occupy the State: The Orbán Regime in Hungary". *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* Vol. 19. No. 3. 649-663.; Umut Korkut (2014), "A Conservative putsch at EU's periphery: Crisis of Democracy in Hungary" A paper presented at the annual convention of Europeanists of the British Political Science Association, Göteborg, November 6.

modify by a future liberal democratic majority.²¹ However, perhaps the most shocking aspect of the Fidesz takeover from a liberal democratic viewpoint has been the fact that even this restricted legitimacy seems to represent a larger, more extensive popular political appeal than the pre-2010 liberal democratic regime did. Hence a key question to address is why liberal democracy as a political regime did fail to maintain popular support and political identification by the citizenry, more than anywhere else in the new Central and East European EU member states.

We argue that the difference that made Hungary particularly vulnerable to the populist political appeal was, paradoxically enough, its own transition success. Hungary created stable and efficient political institutions that allowed for a quick and efficient course of structural transformations in the corporate sector, and adopted an electoral system primarily based on single person individual constituencies with a run-off among leading candidates in a second round, resulting in a considerable electoral bias towards winning parties. The Hungarian political system has been highly centralized since 1990: it has been based on a unicameral parliamentary system in which there has been no rival political authority to that of the prime minister: there has been neither a popularly elected president of the republic nor powerful regional governments. In addition, the prime minister has been protected by a German-type constructive no-confidence vote implying that he or she could be dismissed by the legislature only if a new prime minister is elected by the same parliamentary vote. The result has been a highly centralized and personalized way of governance organized around the prime minister who has had comparatively little institutionalized political counterweight.²²

Exclusionary political institutions triggered exclusionary economic policies, most prominently a swift privatization process dominated by large multinational firms.²³ This resulted in the overwhelming weight of technologically advanced, capital intensive manufacturing companies

²¹ János Kis (2012), "From the 1989 Constitution to the 2011 Fundamental Law". In: Gábor Attila Tóth (ed.) *Constitution for a Disunited Nation. On Hungary's 2011 Fundamental Law*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press

²² Zoltán Ádám (2015), *Why Hungary? A political economic assessment of the Hungarian post-communist economic transition*. PhD dissertation, Faculty of Economics, Debrecen University (in Hungarian).

²³ Attila Károly Soós (2010), *Politics and Policies in Post-Communist Transition: Primary and Secondary Privatisation in Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. Budapest and New York: Central European Press; Zoltán Ádám (2004), "Autonomy and Capacity: A state-centred approach to post-communist transition in Central Europe". UCL/SSEES Working Paper series. No. 40, <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/17536/>

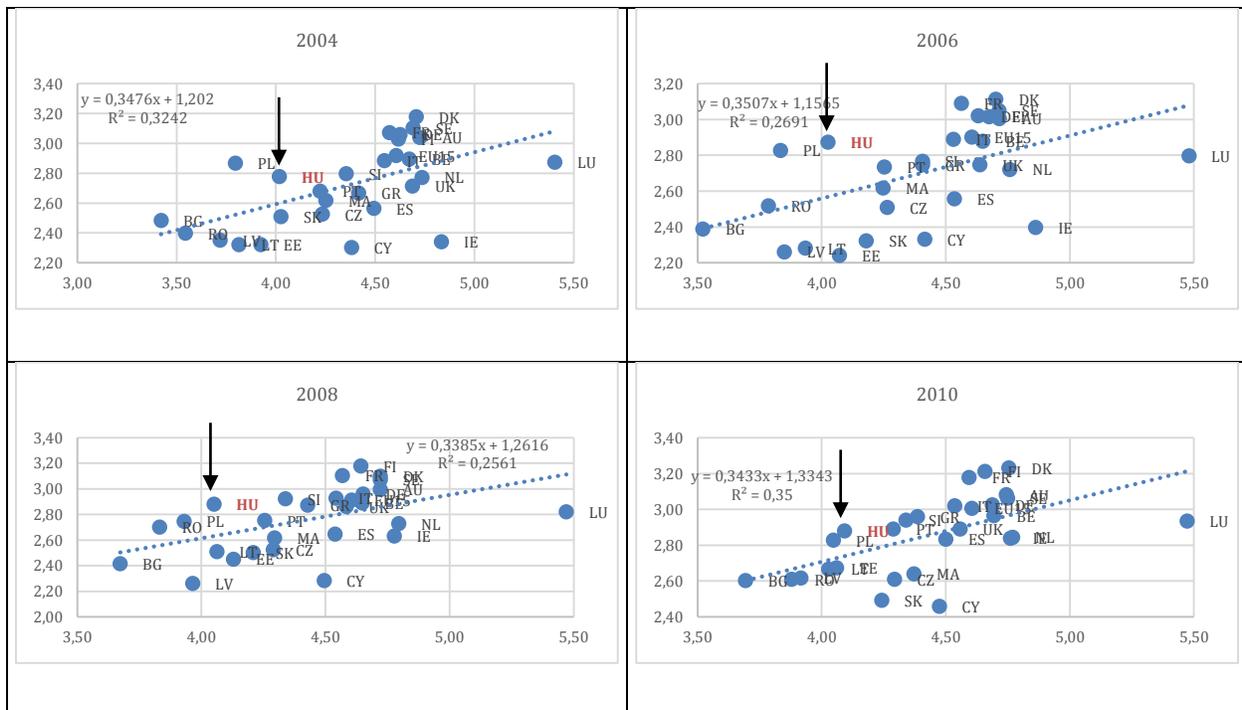
characterized by limited job creation and virtually no need for low-skilled labor.²⁴ In consequence, a large proportion of unemployed low-skilled industrial workers became economically inactive, relying on social benefits or early retirement. This way, paradoxically enough, fast and thoroughgoing privatization of the corporate sector reinforced the role of the government in providing income for a substantial part of the working-age population, increasing their dependence on the state.²⁵

Graph 2. The relationship between the level of economic development and welfare spending in the EU in 1995-2010. Horizontal axe: GDP per capita in PPS in percent of EU15. Vertical axe: ratio of budgetary expenditures on social protection to GDP.



²⁴ János Köllő, (2009), *A pálya szélén. Iskolázatlan munkanélküliek a poszt-szocialista gazdaságban*. [On the sidelines. Uneducated unemployed in the post-socialist economy]. Budapest: Osiris.

²⁵ István György Tóth (2009), „Bizalomhiány, normazavarok, igazságtalanságérzet és paternalizmus a magyar társadalom értékrendszerében” [Lack of Trust, Anomy, Perceived Injustice and Paternalism in the Value System of the Hungarian Society]. Summary Study of the Social and Cultural Conditions of Economic Growth Research Program. Budapest: Társi (http://www.tarki.hu/hu/research/gazdkult/gazdkult_elemzeszaro_toth.pdf).



Source: Ádám (2015)

Notes: Natural logarithm scales in both cases; Eurostat data.

As it can be seen on Graph 2, Hungarian budgetary spending on social protection remained substantially higher than the regional average in the entire transition period. (Hungary is constantly above the trend line, suggesting high welfare spending in comparison to its level of development.) Meanwhile electoral success became increasingly dependent on the vote of the economically inactive, and in election campaigns contending parties were bidding for the pensioner vote by offering ever-increasing pension hikes. Right-wing liberals at the same time were campaigning for tax cuts, complaining about internationally high budgetary redistribution.

In short, the swift and institutionally successful transition to a market economy was associated with fiscally lax, unsustainable economic policies. Periods of fast economic growth were

characterized by deteriorating fiscal and current account balances, undermining the sustainability of economic development.²⁶

Although the fiscal populism pursued by the left-liberal coalition²⁷ after 2002 was electorally successful, the price the political Left paid for it was enormous. The re-elected government was forced to introduce a severe austerity package right after the 2006 elections. A secret speech of Prime Minister Gyurcsány was leaked in September 2006, just days before the local government elections in which Gyurcsány confessed of lying to the electorate on the economic situation before the spring elections.²⁸ In response, street riots erupted in Budapest and far right mobilization reached a sizeable part of the electorate. The parties of the governing left-liberal coalition were defeated at the municipal elections. The 50th anniversary of the October 1956 revolution was held amidst high tensions with demonstrators and riot police clashing. The building of the parliament was fenced until March 2007.

Meanwhile, fiscal stabilization and painful structural reforms of public services went on, further eroding the popularity of the government. A referendum against structural reforms in healthcare and higher education was held in March 2008, in which the government suffered a landslide defeat. The governing coalition dissolved, and although the Gyurcsány-government remained in office for another year, it lacked an outright majority in parliament afterwards. Hence, when the global financial crisis hit Hungary in the autumn of 2008, the internal political situation was somewhat instable. Although the minority government swiftly negotiated a financing agreement with the IMF and the EU, Gyurcsány resigned in spring 2009 and a technocratic government, supported by constituent parties of the former center-left coalition, took over.

Increasing economic problems were widely associated with the failure of liberalism and the political Left. The fact that left-wing governments privatized national assets both in the 1990s and the 2000s – according to right-wing parties, allegedly benefiting former communist oligarchs

²⁶ Gábor Oblath (2013), „Hány év múlva? A konvergencia természetéről és időigényéről” [How Many Years More? On the Nature of Convergence and its Time Requirements]. *Statisztikai Szemle*, Vol. 91, No. 10. 21-39.

²⁷ The coalition was composed by the Hungarian Socialist Party (*Magyar Szocialista Párt*, MSZP), and the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége*, SZDSZ). It existed between 2002-8.

²⁸ Ferenc Gyurcsány's Speech in Balatonőszöd in May 2006. In English: (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferenc_Gyurcs%C3%A1ny%27s_speech_in_Balaton%C5%91sz%C3%B6d_in_May_2006).

– pushed the right-wing electorate to adopt simultaneously anti-communists and anti-capitalist attitudes. The visible rise in foreign direct investment reinforced their perception of liberal elitism and cronyism between a “comprador bourgeoisie”, made up by former communists and multi-national capital. In short, the economic crisis of the 2000s alongside the unsustainability of populist economic policies played a major role in the de-legitimization of liberal democracy and market capitalism.²⁹

At the June 2009 European parliamentary elections, center-right Fidesz gained 56 per cent of popular votes whereas extreme right Jobbik received 15 per cent. Next, in the spring 2010 elections, Fidesz received 53 per cent and Jobbik got 17. As it was already mentioned, due to the dominance of single mandate districts, Fidesz’ electoral victory was transformed into a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Left-wing and centrist parties together gained less than 20 per cent of parliamentary seats. The takeover of the populist Right was completed politically, ideologically and culturally³⁰ and a new, anti-liberal regime was established. Liberal democracy has been replaced by a hybrid regime.

3. Right-Wing Populism, Religion and Churches in Hungary

Historical Christian churches had been traditionally strongly affiliated to right-wing politics in interwar Hungary, providing popular legitimacy for the Horthy regime³¹ that relied on the so called ‘Christian national middle class,’ and considered itself anti-liberal, anti-Semitic and strongly nationalist. ‘Christian’ in this context first of all meant non-Jewish: reducing the economic, social and cultural influence of the generally highly assimilated Hungarian Jewish

²⁹ Cf. Umut Korkut (2012), *Liberalization Challenges in Hungary: Elitism, Progressivism, and Populism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 60.

³⁰ On Hungarian populism in more detail, see: Zsolt Enyedi (2015), „Plebeians, Citoyens and Aristocrats or Where Is the Bottom of the Bottom-up? The Case of Hungary.” in *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*. Ed. by Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis Pappas. Colchester: ECPR Press, 242-57.; András Bozóki (2015b), „Illusion of Inclusion” op. cit.

³¹ Miklós Horthy was Regent of Hungary in 1920-1944. For an historical assessment of the Horthy regime, see Krisztián Ungváry (2012), *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege* [An Evaluation of the Horthy Regime]. Pécs – Budapest: Jelenkor & OSZK

community was a primary ambition of the regime. Hence, Hungary introduced a cap on the number of Jewish university students as early as 1920, which is considered the first anti-Jewish Act of 20th century Europe.³² As Csaba Fazekas explained:

“In the Horthy era, Hungary can be described as being under an authoritarian political system, operated under a multi-party parliament and government. At the same time, the rule concerning the right to vote were far from democratic, with State institutions serving the governing conservative party. From 1922 to the end of the regime, the governing party, which changed its name several times, had an overwhelming majority in the parliament, something that made it practically impossible to transform the existing political system. (...) The regime also had its own official ideology, known as ‘Christian nationalism’. The latter blamed liberal legislation during the period prior to 1918 for weakening the ‘spiritual unity’ of the Hungarian nation, something it claimed could only be guaranteed by Christianity. Therefore, after 1920, Church and State were indissolubly linked to the whole of the regime and took on a ‘Christian character’, implying a complete sharing of interests between the historical Christian Churches (Roman and Greek Catholic, Protestant, Lutheran) and the Hungarian State.”³³

Fidesz and Jobbik are in many ways successors of interwar political parties. Fidesz is the current dominant right-wing social conservative party that, in line with Dahl and Finchelstein, allows for participation but severely limits contestation for power. As a governing party, it has staged ‘National Consultations’ along with mass advertisement campaigns, a ritual of masquerading its (often repressive) policies as the result of direct participation. Through its government-sponsored ‘civil society organization’, called the ‘Forum of Civil Alliance’, it has staged mass rallies called ‘Peace Walks’ as a means of mass mobilization to protect the national interest against ‘external enemies’ such as the IMF and the EU, and to express solidarity with the government. In a classic authoritarian fashion, Fidesz has hijacked the entire state and made

³² M. Mária Kovács (2012), *Törvénytől sújtva. A numerus clausus Magyarországon 1920-1945*. [Down by law. The numerus clausus in Hungary 1920-1944]. Budapest: Napvilág.

³³ Csaba Fazekas (2015), “The Roman Catholic Church and Exterme Right-Wing Ideologies in Hungary, 1920-1945” In: Jan Nelis, Anne Morelly, Danny Praet eds. *Catholicism and Fascism in Europe 1918-1945*. E-Book. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 368.

it its own political and economic asset, refusing the principles of limited government and the system of constitutional checks and balances, curtailing the prerogatives of the (otherwise already diluted) Constitutional Court and undermining the institutional autonomy of the judiciary system. Finally, the new voting system has given Fidesz an even larger electoral advantage than a dominant party had enjoyed in the 1990-2010 electoral system, resembling the structural political conditions of the interwar period at an increased level of participation.

Jobbik, in turn, represents the extreme right opposition of the ruling party, following the tradition of the Arrow Cross movement that ruled Hungary in 1944-1945 during the Nazi occupation. It rejects the social and political principles of the European Union, campaigns for a strategic alliance with Russia and other eastern powers, and mobilizes against the Jewish and Roma minorities. Fidesz and Jobbik have both attempted building a mass movement around themselves: whereas Fidesz created the network of ‘civic circles’, Jobbik built a paramilitary group in uniform.

Fidesz and Jobbik both operate outside the realm of liberal democracy. They both campaign for the extreme right vote, resulting in a strongly nationalist populism in both of their cases.³⁴ This required Fidesz to adopt increasingly illiberal policies so that maintaining its political dominance and a parliamentary supermajority since 2010. (Fidesz kept its two-third parliamentary majority at the 2014 general elections, labelled as free and unfair, but lost it a year later as a result of a local by-election.) Consequently, the political center shifted further to the right, polarizing left and right and making it more difficult for political moderates to appeal to a mass electorate.³⁵

³⁴ Cf. Sarah Cueva (2015), “Attack of the Radical Right: Incomplete Democratic Consolidation in Hungary and the Fidesz – Jobbik Convergence” manuscript; János Dobszay (2015), “Egyet jobbra, kettőt jobbra” [One Step to the Right, Two Steps to the Right] *HVG*, May 9. 6-9.; Cas Mudde (2015), “Is Hungary Run by the Radical Right” *Washington Post*, August 10.

³⁵ This is by no means a new phenomenon in Hungarian politics, though. Polarization had been a characteristic of Hungarian politics since about the mid-1990s. See András Körösenyi (2012), „A politikai polarizáció és következményei a demokratikus elszámoltatásra” [Political polarization and its consequences on democratic accountability]. Working Paper in Political Science 2012/1. MTA TK Politikatudományi Intézet; Gergely Karácsony (2006), „Árkok és légvárak. A választói viselkedés stabilizálódása Magyarországon” [Frontlines and illusions. The stabilization of voting behavior in Hungary]. In: G. Karácsony Gergely ed. *A 2006-os országgyűlési választások. Elemzések és adatok* [The 2006 elections. Analyses and data]. Budapest: Demokrácia Kutatások Magyar Központja Alapítvány – Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem Politikatudományi Intézet, 59-103.

One of the most intriguing questions from our point of view is whether the politicization of religion has played a significant role in this further right shift. Our answer is no: Hungarian right-wing populism, performed by Fidesz and Jobbik in an increasingly similar ideological fashion, has used limited religious references in the post-1989 era. The most important reason for this, we argue, is the limited role of churches and religion in the Hungarian society.

Graph 3. Ratio of believers/non-believers in international comparison

Percent of respondents who claim that "I don't believe in God"		Percent of respondents who claim that "I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it"	
Germany (East)	52.1	Japan	4.3
Czech Republic	39.9	Germany (East)	7.8
France	23.3	Sweden	10.2
The Netherlands	19.7	Czech Republic	11.1
Sweden	19.3	Denmark	13.0
Latvia	18.3	Norway	14.8
Great Britain	18.0	France	15.5
Denmark	17.9	Great Britain	16.8
Norway	17.4	The Netherlands	21.2
Australia	15.9	Austria	21.4
HUNGARY	15.2	Latvia	21.7
Slovenia	13.2	HUNGARY	23.5
New Zealand	12.6	Slovenia	23.6
Slovakia	11.7	Australia	24.9
Germany (West)	10.3	Switzerland	25.0
Spain	9.7	New Zealand	26.4
Switzerland	9.3	Germany (West)	26.7
Austria	9.2	Russia	30.5
Japan	8.7	Spain	38.4
Russia	6.8	Slovakia	39.2
Northern Ireland	6.6	Italy	41.0
Israel	6.0	Ireland	43.2
Italy	5.9	Northern Ireland	45.6
Portugal	5.1	Portugal	50.9
Ireland	5.0	Cyprus	59.0
Poland	3.3	United States	60.6
United States	3.0	Poland	62.0
Chile	1.9	Israel	65.5
Cyprus	1.9	Chile	79.4

Source: Tom W. Smith (2008), *Beliefs about God across time and countries*. Chicago: NORC - University of Chicago

Although Hungary is certainly not an extremely atheist society, a clear majority refuses to follow churches and to participate in institutionalized religious activities. This is a relatively recent development of the post-WWII period, in which Hungary went through a process of urbanization and industrialization while churches were severely oppressed by the communist regime. Whereas a revival of churchgoing had taken place after 1989, a large part of society still distance themselves from churches and religious references. Hence, appearing to be overly devoted towards religion and churches may alienate a substantial part of the electorate from any particular party.

Although József Torgyán's Independent Smallholder's Party (FKGP) in the 1990s renewed the historic party slogan of "God, Fatherland, Family", Christianity itself played a limited role even in their relatively old fashioned right-wing populism.³⁶ As representatives of current right-wing populism, neither Fidesz nor Jobbik defines itself through a religious identity, although in party manifestos both of them claim to be "Christian". Yet, Christianity in this context rather signifies a degree of social conservatism and traditional nationalism than expressing any substantive religious reference.

As for Fidesz, party leader Orbán regularly participates in the festive Catholic processions, known as *Szent Jobb Körmenet*, held on the anniversary of the foundation of the Hungarian state, August 20, every year. In the meantime, he openly identifies his own political camp with 'the Nation' and takes his opponents as the ones who serve 'foreign interests'. The turn from their original anti-clericalism in the late 1980s and the early 1990s to their openly positive stance towards religion never played a highly important role in the history of Fidesz. A recent book on

³⁶ József Torgyán, an old-school populist politician, served as Minister for Agriculture and the Development of Countryside at the first Orbán-cabinet between 1998-2001. Five years after his resignation he published a book on Christianity: Cf. József Torgyán (2006), *Kereszténység* (Christianity), Budapest: Etalon Film Kft.

the history of the party – published by a semi-official publishing house of Fidesz – does not even discuss the role of religion in the formation of party ideology.³⁷

The new Fundamental Law adopted in 2011 was the result of a unilateral governmental process, which did not reflect at all a national consensus. This Law, voted by Fidesz MPs, refers to Hungary as a country based on Christian values. The text increases the role of religion, traditions and ‘national values’. In contrast to the Constitution of 1989, the Fundamental Law of 2011 serves as expression of a secularized national religious belief system: a sort of paganized, particularistic understanding of the universalistic spirit of Christianity. The signing of the Fundamental Law by the President of the Republic took place on the first anniversary of the electoral victory of Fidesz that happened on Easter Monday, April 25, 2011, blasphemously claiming a bizarre parallel between the resurrection of Jesus and the adoption of the new Fidesz-constitution.³⁸

Fidesz uses religious symbols in an eclectic way in which references to Christianity are often mentioned together with the pre-Christian pagan traditions. This refers to the idea of “two Hungary’s”: the Western Christian, and the Eastern pagan, tribal one. When Orbán talks about the reunification of the Hungarian nation, he intends to re-balance power relations between the two camps. He aims to “Christianize” the pagan traditions – or rather, to paganize Christianity to accommodate it to the needs of the Hungarian nationalist right – when he brings together seemingly incompatible religious symbols. In his vocabulary, the Holy Crown of Saint Steven, the first Hungarian king, can easily go together with the Turul bird, a symbol of ancient Hungarians. The concept of political nation gave way to the ethnic idea of national consciousness. On inaugurating the monument of “National Togetherness”, Viktor Orbán voiced his conviction that the Turul bird is the ancient image into which the Hungarians are born:

³⁷ Edith Oltay (2012), *Fidesz and the Reinvention of the Hungarian Center-Right*. Budapest: Századvég

³⁸ Cf. András Bozóki (2015a), „Broken Democracy, Predatory State, and Nationalist Populism” in *The Hungarian Patient: Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy*. Edited by Péter Krasztev and Jon Van Til. Budapest – New York: CEU Press, 3-36.

“From the moment of our births, our seven tribes enter into an alliance, our Saint King Stephen establishes a state, our armies suffer a defeat at the Battle of Mohács, and the Turul bird is the symbol of national identity of the living, the deceased, and the yet-to-be-born Hungarians.”³⁹

He conjectures that, like a family, the nation also has a natural home — in this case, the Carpathian Basin — where the state-organized world of work produces order and security, and one’s status in the hierarchy defines authority. The legitimacy of the government and the Fundamental Law is not only based on democratic approval, but it is approved by God, and features the spirit of Hungarians represented by the Turul. All these concepts have replaced an earlier public discourse whose central categories were liberal democracy, market economy, pluralism, inalienable human rights, republic, elected political community, and cultural diversity.

As for Jobbik, research proves that its pro-Christian stance simply indicates that the party should be interpreted as “non-Jewish”.⁴⁰ By using this discourse, Jobbik creates an easily identifiable reference to its anti-Semitism. Founded in 2002 from a conservative university movement, Jobbik’s official ideological standpoint in their own terms is that of a

“principled, conservative and radically patriotic Christian party. Its fundamental purpose is protecting Hungarian values and interests. It stands up against the ever more blatant efforts to eradicate the nation as the foundation of human community. Its strategic program takes into consideration the possibility of the crumbling of globalization as we know it in a chain reaction due to its internal weaknesses and its disconnect from the real processes of the economy. The party considers the protection, replenishment and expansion of the national resources crucial. These include the physical and mental condition of the nation, patriotic togetherness and solidarity.”⁴¹

³⁹ Viktor Orbán (2012), “Minden magyar a turulba születik” [All Hungarians Are Born Into the Turul Bird], *Népszabadság*, September 29.

⁴⁰ Political Capital Institute: Research on religion and right-wing politics. Budapest, 2011.

⁴¹ Jobbik (2006), “About Jobbik” Movement for a Better Hungary, http://www.Jobbik.com/about_Jobbik.html

This ideology is that of a right-wing, radical party “whose core element is a myth of a homogeneous nation, a romantic and populist ultra-nationalism directed against the concept of liberal and pluralistic democracy and its underlying principles of individualism and universalism.”⁴² In addition to this nationalist rhetoric there is an underlying economic appeal that blames globalization for Hungary’s troubles.

Pirro identifies Jobbik by its clericalism, irredentism, social-nationalist economic program, and by its anti-Roma, anti-corruption, and anti-EU stance.⁴³ From the early documents, it is clear that the party believes that “national morality can only be based on the strengthening of the teachings of Christ”, and Jobbik promotes the spiritual recovery of Hungarians which has to be achieved by returning to the traditional communities (the family, the churches, and the nation).⁴⁴ True, Jobbik was particularly militant against the Roma and against the EU (burning an EU flag and throwing out another one from the window of the Hungarian parliament). It was also vehemently pro-Christian in installing large wooden crosses at several squares of Budapest. Nonetheless, as Akcali and Korkut explains

“scapegoating against the Jews and Roma is not what makes Jobbik exceptional in Europe today. (...) The solutions that Jobbik proposes to solve Hungary’s problems not only signal an anti-liberal, anti-Semitic, anti-Roma, anti-capitalist, anti-European, and anti-globalist stance (positions that may be shared by other European right-wing parties), but also appear to be historically and culturally (as well as geographically) hostile to the West.”⁴⁵

Although Jobbik enjoys the support of certain members of both the Catholic and the Calvinist Church – the two largest Hungarian religious congregations – neither church in general approves Jobbik and most church leaders tend to distance themselves from it. Despite its manifestly Christian self-identification, Jobbik is seen by many of them as representing an

⁴² Ibid.

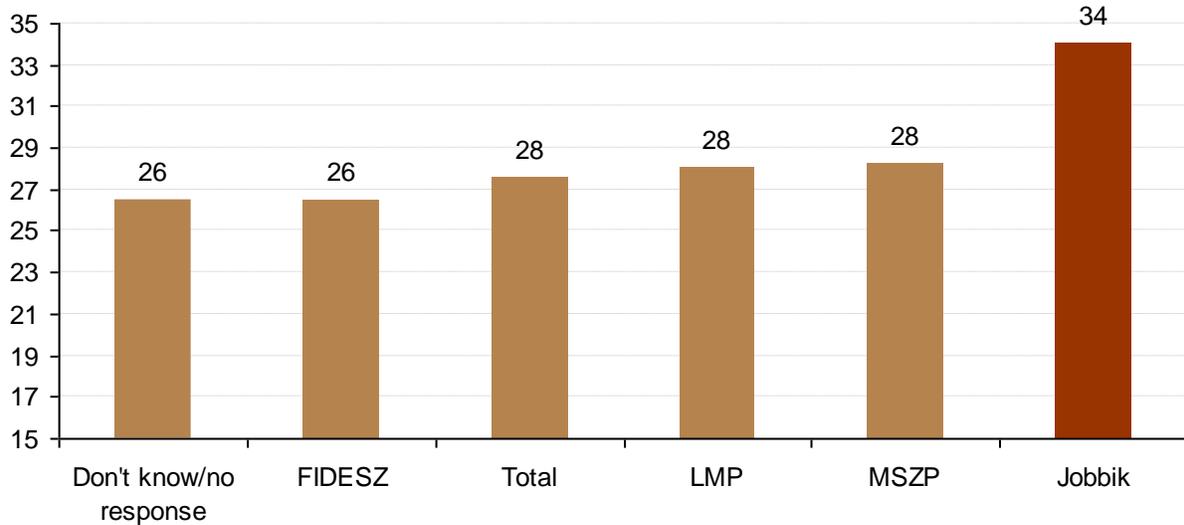
⁴³ Andrea L. P. Pirro (2015), *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge, 67-86.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 71.

⁴⁵ Emel Akcali and Umut Korkut (2012), „Geographical Metanarratives in East-Central Europe: Neo-Turanism in Hungary” *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 53. No. 5. 600.

essentially pagan, anti-Christian cultural tradition. This might not be accidental. In fact, despite Jobbik’s self-definition as Christian party, Jobbik voters are the *least* religious ones among all in Hungary.

Percentage of atheists in party voter camps
("I am not religious")



Source: Political Capital Institute research, Budapest, 2011.

Whereas the followers of churches seem to represent the highest share among Fidesz voters, their ratio is a mere 22%, followed by 15% among Socialist voters. Again, followers of churches represent a conspicuously low 6% among Jobbik voters. At the same time, explicitly non-religious people have the highest share among Jobbik voters (41%), and their share, interestingly enough, is lower among Socialist voters (21%) than among the Fidesz electorate (22%).

Answers to the question ‘How much religious are you?’ among voters of parliamentary parties (in percent of the particular party’s total electorates)

	I am religious, and I am following the	I am religious on my own way	I am not religious	I cannot tell whether I am	Refuse to answer	Total

	guidance of the church			religious or not		
Fidesz- KDNP	22	51	22	5	1	100
Jobbik	6	43	41	9	1	100
MSZP	15	57	21	7	1	100
LMP	4	51	35	9	1	100

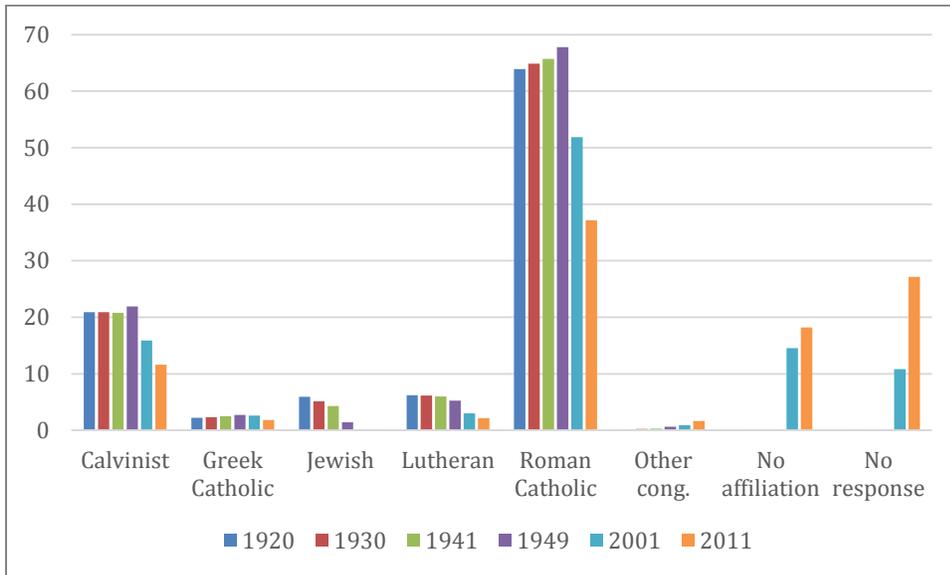
Source: Political Capital Institute research, Budapest, 2012.

While Fidesz has probably been the most preferred political party by Christian churches since at least the beginning of the 2000s, and Prime Minister Orbán has at numerous occasions identified himself as a Christian believer, Fidesz has established a strategic alliance with the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), a dominantly Catholic historic party, since 2002. As part of their agreement, KDNP has been provided a sufficient number of parliamentary seats to form its own parliamentary faction and is also allocated a generous number of government positions when they are in power. In exchange, KDNP has effectively given up its separate political identity and become a Fidesz-satellite, endorsing its 'Christianity' by its sheer name.

Although certainly not disliked by the Catholic Church, Fidesz probably has closer ties to the Calvinist Church, Hungary's second largest congregation. Orbán himself is Calvinist and one of its closest political confidants, Minister of Human Capacities, Zoltán Balog was a Calvinist pastor before joining professional politics. Orbán likes to attend religious ceremonies and to deliver semi-public speeches in churches. Correspondingly, Fidesz's relation to Churches is friendly but not strongly institutionalized. Yet, Christianity in general serves as a broad ideological reference, and at some politically prominent instances this reference becomes more concrete. For instance, in the new "Memorial of the German Occupation of 1944-45" on Szabadság tér, a central square in Budapest, Hungary is represented by Archangel Gabriel, being attacked by the German imperial eagle. This is a highly controversial new memorial that seeks to modify the public discourse on Hungary's role in WWII, depicting the country as a victim rather than a perpetrator. In this context, Hungary is represented by the Archangel, providing an obviously religious reference for national identity politics. Nevertheless, Fidesz typically refrains from directly advocating hardcore religious ideas that may alienate people. We explain this by the fact that Fidesz is a large umbrella organization, „the party of power”, and its voters typically

do not nurture strong religious identities. Therefore, while using religion to justify its populist policies, Fidesz must keep a delicate balance.

Graph 5. Share of religious congregations in Hungary (in percent of the total population)



Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, census data

Somewhat similarly, Jobbik does not appear to be a representative of religious interests either. In contrast to other rightwing populist parties of the region, for instance Law and Justice in Poland, it does not appear to be the protagonist of religious values. In contrast, it sometimes seem to nurture pagan affiliations, cultivating a longstanding relation of far right or Nazi political culture to pre-Christian paganism. However, just like Fidesz, Jobbik also has its own direct links to the Calvinist Church with one of the most prominent Budapest pastors being an explicit supporter while his wife, another Calvinist pastor by profession, being an elected Jobbik MP.

The particular congregation run by this couple happens to be located on Szabadság tér in Budapest, in about 50 meters from the German Occupation Memorial. On the staircase of the church, already on private property but facing the entire square, is a bust of Admiral Horthy, a present day extreme right political icon, who in fact fought the extreme right parties of the 1930s and '40s, and incarcerated the leader of the Arrow Cross movement, Ferenc Szálasi, who subsequently replaced him as head of state in October 1944 with the assistance of the Nazis. This

is the way religious ideas and (semi-) public religious spaces meet radical right politics in present day Hungary: typically they do not themselves create political identities, but both Fidesz and Jobbik use them as references to secure their positions and enhance their legitimacy as protagonists of the right-wing political cause.

4. Right-wing populism as surrogate religion

Whereas neither Fidesz nor Jobbik can be considered to be the political representatives of specific churches or particular religious values, right-wing populism itself can be understood as a kind of surrogate religion, as for many socially conservatives and/or nationalists it provides a sacred subject to worship. Hungarian right-wing populism uses Christianity as a reference, but its political content often appears to be in contrast to Christian values. Instead it advocates a highly nationalistic surrogate-religion in which the nation itself becomes a sacred entity and national identification carries religious attributes. Although from a seriously religious perspective this represents a kind of worldly paganism, and as such should be dismissed on actual religious grounds, this kind of surrogate religion is able to draw a sizeable crowd as followers in Hungary as well as in other countries. Such a surrogate Christianity has to do little with actual religious beliefs, though, even if it uses religion in general and Christianity in particular as a source of political endorsement. As Tamás Szilágyi argued:

“Though radical right-wing ideology places itself in the political field, it uses a syncretistic religious narrative to legitimate its program, the central elements of which are the sacralization of the Hungarian nation, the idea of chosen people, the designation of the national territory as a sacral space, and the inclusion of religious moral elements into political rhetoric. The Hungarian radical right-wing does not only designate religious doctrines as the source of ideals and values that underpin its political actions, but the orientation towards the transcendental also appears specifically in its ideological direction. The elements of Christianity and the ancient Hungarian pagan faith are mixed in the religious narratives of the radical right-wing ideology. However, it cannot be proven that either the Christian or the pagan elements mean a unified point of reference for everyone.

In the Hungarian radical right-wing, the groups using Christian rhetoric seem to enjoy the most popularity, but the currently marginal paganism-oriented group plays a more and more increasing role.”⁴⁶

The nation as a sacred collective entity is a crucial element of both Jobbik’s and Fidesz’s political ideology, and large historic Christian churches typically subscribe to this. The dominant attitude of the Roman Catholic and the Calvinist Churches – the two largest Christian congregations – approves it, and only smaller Christian churches, notably the traditionally more liberal Lutherans and some evangelical communities, tend to distance themselves from it. Christianity and the two largest Christian Churches, thus play a legitimizing role of right-wing politics, in line with the long-standing historical pattern in interwar Hungary.

The role of churches is important precisely because of the lack of rationally operating social and political institutions that integrate the nation as a political community. Instead, churches provide ideological resources to support right-wing populism, essentially playing a propaganda role for the regime. In exchange for this, a growing share of publicly financed services in education and healthcare are being administered by the historical Christian churches. This makes institutional relations between churches and secular authorities increasingly vital for both the churches and the state: church-run schools, hospitals and even universities are quite generously financed by the government but in exchange they need to fulfill certain administrative criteria in operation. Another way of the institutionalized participation of churches in everyday life is the incorporation of religious studies into the national curriculum of elementary schools that the Fidesz government introduced from 2013.⁴⁷

Religious conflicts, such as the opposition to Islam or other religions have not played a major role in political identity creation so far. Unlike their radical West European counterparts, the Hungarian populist Right has not displayed any strong anti-Islam stance, which was probably

⁴⁶ Tamás Szilágyi (2011), “Quasi-Religious Character of the Hungarian Right-Wing Radical Ideology. And International Comparison”. In: András Máté-Tóth, Cosima Rughinis (eds.), *Spaces and Borders. Current Research on Religion in Central and Eastern Europe*. Berlin - Boston: De Gruyter, 252.

⁴⁷ Non-religious students can elect ethics instead.

due to its traditional anti-Semitism. This might be subject to change in the future due to the increasing number of migrants to Hungary from the Middle East. In the summer of 2015, the Hungarian government built a wire netting fence on the border between Serbia and Hungary to prevent mass migration. It also conducted a hate campaign against immigrants, which was, however, rather based on ethnicity than religion.

To demonstrate the state of mind of the Hungarian Right on the migration issue, it is worth quoting Péter Boross, a former Prime Minister of Hungary and former advisor to Viktor Orbán, who is equally close to Fidesz and Jobbik. In an interview, Boross blamed the United States for the rise of the number of refugees in Europe and the crisis in the Middle East. In his comment he criticized the Americans for maintaining universalistic principles, like democracy and God, instead of accepting local democracies and local Gods. As he said:

“The thing is that the Americans enforce a ruthless approach by favoring the strong over the weak in everything. With them the strong are free to trample the weak. They named this system “absolute democracy”. After putting their hands on the world, they think that from an “Arab Spring” a functioning democracy will form. The multiplicity of their mistakes has contributed to the current situation. In reality, they are completely unsuitable intellectually to lead the world. Rome was wise back then. They left the conquered provinces in peace and officially adopted some of their gods in Rome. Washington does the opposite. It wants to impose its own God, Democracy, on the conquered countries.”⁴⁸

As influential father figure in shaping the ideas of the Hungarian right, Boross suggests that each nation has a right to create its own state, its own political regime (whether it is democracy or autocracy seems to be of secondary importance), and also to choose its own God. While he wants to defend Europe, he displays strong anti-EU sentiments. For him any supranational entity which bases itself on general principles beyond the nation-state (a universalistic approach to

⁴⁸ Péter Boross (2015), „Americans Are Intellectually Unsuitable to Lead the World” *Budapest Sentinel*, August 20. Boross wasted no time to mention the political role of Iran or Russia in the destabilization of the Middle East.

democracy, human rights, and Christianity) is wrong. Mass migration is interpreted by him as not a cultural but a biological and a genetical problem, which cannot be solved by the classic nationalist ways of assimilation. Boross' views embrace ethnic nationalism in its crudest form:

„Today nobody dares to say that immigration is not a problem of culture and civilization, but an ethnic problem. At the same time millions of people speaking different languages and with a different skin color are arriving to Europe. It is very important that it is not only their culture that is different, but their instincts, as well as their biological and genetic properties. (...) Culturally they should have assimilated a long time ago (...) But this failed. Cultural integration has not yielded anything good. Unfortunately, if this has not been a successful process in the case of the gypsies living with us, then there is not much chance that this is possible with the hordes of Muslims crossing the green border. (...) The European Union should not be thinking in terms of its own refugee quota system, but in forming its own armed forces.”⁴⁹

In this militaristic approach, “national Christianity” is contrasted to the mainstream, universal form of Christianity as a religion of love. In the meantime, it is also contrasted to the Gods of the refugees which are deemed unacceptable in Europe. Hence, ethno-nationalism, embraced by the populist Right, provides a sufficient basis of political identification as a type of surrogate-religion. While Fidesz interprets Christianity within the framework of nationalism, Jobbik frames it as part of its nationalism *and* anti-Semitism. God is not presented as a symbol of universal religious identity, as it is understood in the New Testament or explained in several speeches of Pope Francis, but as ‘the God of Hungarians’ (*‘a magyarok istene’*), in its particularistic, tribal, paganized, political understanding. In this sense, Hungarian right-wing populism does not have to rely on religious affiliations and neither places a particular emphasis on mobilizing them: they are simply parts of their fundamentally nationalist worldviews without any substantive religious references. Although religious identities are mobilized by the Right, they are merged with nationalistic worldviews and ideologies.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Finally, one should note that Fidesz in government has insisted to approve church statuses on political grounds. In a high-profile case, the Fidesz government in 2012 introduced a restrictive regime of registering churches, making it the prerogative of parliament to recognize a religious community as a church. Yet, both the Constitutional Court (in 2013) and the European Court of Human Rights (in 2014) judged the new provisions unacceptable, forcing the parliament to repeatedly revise it.⁵⁰ The new provisions obviously sought to extend government control and to differentiate between ‘accepted’ and ‘non-accepted’ churches. This way, the Fidesz government attempted to alter the relations between the state and churches and to strengthen its strategic alliance with the politically preferred large historical Christian churches.

Conclusions

Hungarian right-wing populism, represented by governing Fidesz and its (semi-)opposition Jobbik, has been dominating the Hungarian political scene since the end of the 2000s. The Hungarian populist Right has in many ways followed the historical patterns laid down in the interwar period by the then governing conservatives and their extreme right opposition.

Following Shils and Laclau, we considered populism as an anti-elitist, anti-institutional political behavior that identifies with ‘the people’, and enhances their “direct” participation in the political process as opposed to representative government. Populism has an ideological character but in itself does not have a particular ideological content. Rather, it is a pattern of discourse and behavior that can be filled by both left- and right-wing ideologies. We also argued, following Finchelstein, that in a post-totalitarian historical era, populism should be seen as the political manifestation of illiberalism, especially in (semi-)peripheries such as Latin America and Eastern Europe. Such an understanding of populism can be easily reconciled with the Dahlian concept of

⁵⁰ “The Constitutional Court in 2013 and the European Court of Human Rights in 2014 considered the deprivation from the status as a church and recognition by Parliament as a rights violation, while the existence of two kinds of statuses for religious groups was considered discriminatory.” In: Eötvös Károly Policy Institute, Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2014), “Disrespect for European Values in Hungary 2010-2014. Rule of Law – Democracy – Pluralism – Fundamental Rights.” Budapest, November 2014. <http://helsinki.hu/en/disrespect-for-european-values-in-hungary-2010-2014>

inclusive hegemony: a form of government based on popular participation without public contestation for power.

We argued that what made Hungary particularly exposed to the populist takeover of 2009-2010 was its rapid – and for a long time seemingly successful – institution-building process in post-communist transition: through strong political and economic institutions, post-1990 governments implemented exclusive social and economic policies, dramatically reducing the rate of employment and, unintentionally, making a large part of society dependent on state transfers. This approach to transition was one-sided, because it tended to identify democracy with institutions only. Hungarian democracy suffered by the over-emphasized need for stability which expressed itself in restrictive institutions. (Let us refer here to two examples: First, the existence of several laws that required two-third majority in the Parliament which reduced the political responsibility of the democratically elected government, and secondly, the obscure, mixed electoral system which tended to produce increasingly disproportionate electoral outcomes). This situation allowed little room for bottom-up democratic innovations, and it restricted the notion of democracy to (an increasingly corrupt) party system. Meanwhile, strong, highly centralized political institutions polarized the society and made it possible that a single, well-organized party with 53 percent of the popular vote transform the entire constitutional system after 2010.

Although neither Fidesz nor Jobbik appeared before the electorate as a deeply religious political party, both of them portrayed themselves as socially conservative, ‘Christian’ nationalists. This implied a form of institutionalized cooperation between them and large historical Christian churches. Whereas the political Right gain political support and legitimacy from churches, the latter are commissioned to run educational, health and social care institutions on government-provided budgets. In addition, politically well-received churches have been given official church status with all its benefits, whereas their less lucky (or politically less obedient) counterparts have been stripped off it.

However, in a substantially secularized country, such as Hungary, actual religious values play a limited role in policy-making. No rational political party would risk to represent a primarily religious agenda if it was to win elections. Christianity is an important political asset, but it is not

enough to carry elections and gain majority political support. Hence, right-wing populism also employs a quasi-religious ideological construction through which it attempts at mobilizing a wider social spectrum: ethno-nationalism. We call this a surrogate religion that offers a nationalist and paganized understanding of Christianity and elevates the concept of ethnically defined nation to a sacred status. It also provides legitimacy for the ‘rational charismatic rule’ of authoritarian leaders, who represent exceptional characteristics but are nevertheless popularly elected. This rule – modern populism – is illiberal and anti-democratic in the enlightened liberal sense, even though it relies on elections and other forms of politically conditioned popular participation. Viktor Orbán’s Hungary is probably the closest approximation of this type of governance in contemporary EU politics.

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