

Hungary under Viktor Orbán

“Illiberal Christian Democracy” and the Instrumentalisation of Religious Freedom

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Viktor Orbán's government has boasted of its commitment to religious freedom on many occasions. A closer look reveals that this commitment is very limited – namely to helping Christians in need abroad, and that, moreover, restrictions on religious freedom are increasing in Hungary itself. The government deliberately links the issue of religious freedom with its populist politics and rhetoric, thus creating a dangerous reinterpretation of religious freedom in the public perception.

The development of an “Illiberal Christian Democracy”

Since 2010, Hungarian democracy has undergone a fundamental transformation. Most critics of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of the Fidesz party were not surprised when Orbán outlined his vision of building an “illiberal democracy” in Hungary during a speech in Băile Tușnad (Hungarian: *Tusnádfürdő*), Romania, in July 2014.¹ Part of Orbán's plan for such a democracy is the formalistic reduction of democracy to elections, the centralisation of government power and the criticism of liberal concepts of freedom and rights. The aim is to protect the “cultural order” and thus reject issues such as immigration, feminism and gender in particular. Especially since 2018, Orbán has focused on a Christian concept of illiberal democracy, in which the narrative of Christian victimhood is central, as will be shown later.

1 Tóth, Csaba: “Full text of Viktor Orbán's speech at Băile Tușnad (Tusnádfürdő) of 26 July 2014” (29 Jul. 2014), <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-a-t-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>, accessed on: 5 Aug. 2023.

Orbán's concept of illiberal democracy is reflected in constitutional amendments and international initiatives and has a direct impact on civil liberties. The Fidesz-KDNP² coalition won the 2010 parliamentary election with a two-thirds majority, creating a constitutional political force. After the election victory, the new coalition used this supermajority to make numerous amendments to the constitution. Subsequently, on 18 April 2011, after a non-transparent preparatory phase, parliament adopted a new constitution called Fundamental Law (*Magyarország Alaptörvénye*).³ Since this Fundamental Law was signed by the President of the Republic, Pál Schmitt, on 25 April 2011, Easter Monday, it has been referred to as the Easter Constitution. The dating takes on a symbolic significance by linking the birth of Hungarian statehood with the resurrection of Jesus.

According to Hungarian political scientist András Bozóki,⁴ the preamble of the Fundamental Law in particular highlights "the political fusion between nationalism and Christianity."⁵ It states: "We recognise the role of Christianity in the preservation of the nation."⁶ The Basic Law of 2011 only treats individual rights of freedom as linked to the common good, whereby it does not consider them a value in themselves. The fundamental rights cannot be separated from the basic duties, with the latter being derived from a Christian worldview. The textual formulations place a much stronger emphasis on religion, traditions and "national values" than before. The Fundamental Law is based on the concept of a homogeneous nation. When it refers to equality before the law in Article XV (2), gender, ethnicity and religion are mentioned; however, legal protection has not been extended to sexual minorities.

2 KDNP is the Christian Democratic People's Party, the smaller governing party next to Fidesz in Hungary.

3 Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011: <https://www.parlament.hu/irom39/02627/02627.pdf>, accessed on: 14 Sep. 2023. For the English translation, see <https://www.parlament.hu/documents/125505/138409/Fundamental+law/73811993-c377-428d-9808-ee03d6fb8178>.

4 Unless otherwise noted, quotes that have not been published in English have been translated into English by the authors of the chapter.

5 Zoltán, Ádám/Bozóki, András: "Vallás és jobboldali populizmus Magyarországon," in: *Mozgó világ* 44 (3/2018), pp. 17–38, p. 26.

6 Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011.

In recent years, there have again been numerous amendments to this law,⁷ which the populist government pushed through according to its own power interests and without real consultation with the opposition.⁸ In many respects, there have been steps backwards in the protection of fundamental rights since 2010. In connection with freedom of religion and its instrumentalisation, some peculiarities of the Basic Law and other laws as well as some amendments should be mentioned.

The Hungarian Fundamental Law provides in Article R (4) that "[t]he protection of the constitutional identity and Christian culture of Hungary shall be an obligation of every organ of the state." This is reflected in particular in the constitutionalisation of the traditional concept of family and marriage. Article L (1) of the Fundamental Law defines marriage "as the union of one man and one woman established by voluntary decision, and the family as the basis of the survival of the nation. Family ties shall be based on marriage or the relationship between parents and children." This definition of family was already integrated into the constitutional text by the Fourth Amendment in 2013.⁹ The Ninth Amendment in 2020 added the provision that "[t]he mother shall be a woman, the father shall be a man."¹⁰ The constitutional enshrinement of this form of marriage explicitly excludes same-sex marriages. Unlike other forms of relationships, the classical family model is not only constitutionally protected but must be explicitly favoured by the state.

Furthermore, this amendment of 2020 constitutionally enshrined in Article XVI (1) discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation declaring that it is the duty of the state to "protect the right of children to a self-identity corresponding to their sex at birth, and shall ensure an upbringing for them that is in accordance with the values based on the constitutional identity and Christian culture of our country." Under the guise of protecting the best interests of the child, the constitutional amendment thus formulates a norm that is highly problematic. Completely ignoring current scientific knowledge on transsexuality, the constitution postulates that it wants to protect the self-identity of the

7 Szente, Zoltán: "Constitutional Changes in Populist Times," in: *Revue of Central and East European Law* 47 (2022), pp. 12–36, p. 15.

8 Zoltán: *Constitutional Changes*, p. 16.

9 Bill T/9929. Fourth Amendment of the Fundamental Law of Hungary (8 Feb. 2013).

10 Bill T/13647. Ninth Amendment of the Fundamental Law of Hungary (23 Dec. 2020). The current status of the legislation (12 Sep. 2023): <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100425.atv>.

child, which is considered unchangeably from birth.¹¹ The detailed explanatory memorandum to Article 3 of the amendment warns that “[t]he new, modern ideological processes in the Western world [...] are [...] threatening the well-being of children.”¹² It is considered part of human dignity that children have a right to a gender that corresponds to their sex at birth: “Sex at birth is an attribute that cannot be changed: people are born either male or female.” On the proposal of the Minister of Justice, Judit Varga, the parliament presented another amendment to the law, which excluded single persons as well as same-sex couples from the possibility of adopting children.¹³

In addition, in May 2020 the Hungarian National Assembly passed a new law that ended the legal recognition of gender reassignment in official documents. This is achieved by replacing the term “sex” in civil status registers with the term “sex at birth,” which is legally defined by “the primary sexual characteristics” or “biological sex determined by chromosomes.”¹⁴ This change in the law – which was passed by parliament in May 2020 despite a wave of fierce national and international protests – constitutes serious legal discrimination against transgender and intersex persons. Not least, the amendment to the law violated the European standards established by the Council of Europe, which guarantee transsexuals in all EU states the right to have their gender identity recognised in a quickly accessible and transparent procedure.¹⁵

For years, Hungary has been working on a global network on “traditional family values” and organising demographic summits with prominent international speakers, significantly including a Hungarian-Polish signature cam-

11 Szente: Constitutional Changes, pp. 31–32.

12 Bill T/13647, General justification, Art. 3, p. 9–10, <https://www.parlament.hu/irom41/13647/13647.pdf>, accessed on: 30 Sep. 2023.

13 Bill T/13648. Draft law amending certain laws on justice of 10 Nov. 2020, § 99, <https://www.parlament.hu/irom41/13648/13648.pdf>, accessed on: 14 Sep. 2023.

14 Bill T/9934. Changes of Certain Administrative Laws and Free Donation of Property (31 Mar. 2020), § 33 Art. 2 and 3, pp. 9–10, <https://www.parlament.hu/irom41/09934/09934.pdf>, accessed on: 14 Sep. 2023.

15 Council of Europe: Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, Art. IV. 21, <http://tinyurl.com/cp32kfa>, accessed on: 14 Sep. 2023; see also United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner: Hungary LGBT: New law proposal endangers rights of the trans and gender diverse persons, warns UN expert (29 Apr. 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/04/hungary-lgbt-new-law-proposal-endangers-rights-trans-and-gender-diverse>, accessed on: 18 Oct. 2023.

paing to prevent the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention on the Promotion of the Protection of Women's Rights and Gender Equality, which – according to the Hungarian government-affiliated conservative Centre for Fundamental Rights (*Alapjogokért Központ*) – is designed according to the “principles of gender ideology.”¹⁶

Strengthening “Christian values” and violations of religious freedom

All of these national and international initiatives and encroachments on fundamental rights are linked to the declared aim of strengthening the country's “Christian values” and “Christian identity.” However, shortly after 2010, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the country was increasingly restricted. Renáta Uitz describes this in particular regarding the changed registration procedures for religious communities through a new law of 2011,¹⁷ which was originally justified with the alleged need to reduce the number of registered churches¹⁸ and strengthen Hungarian traditions. However, “the Hungarian parliament regards the recognition of churches not as a question concerning freedom of religion but as a matter reserved for the discretion of the sovereign.”¹⁹

Thus, until 2011, Hungarian legislation guaranteed church status for religious organisations through a unified judicial registration procedure.²⁰ Based

16 On human rights issues of gender justice within religious communities, including within the Catholic Church, see Third Ecumenical Report on Religious Freedom: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz/Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (eds.): 3. Ökumenischer Bericht zur Religionsfreiheit weltweit. Eine christliche Perspektive auf ein universelles Menschenrecht (= Gemeinsame Texte Nr. 28), Bonn/Hannover 2023, pp. 38–49, pp. 44–45.

17 Act CCVI of 2011 on the right to freedom of conscience and religion and the legal status of churches, denominations and religious communities, <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100206.tv>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

18 The term church is used equally in the law for all religious communities, regardless of whether they call themselves a “church.”

19 Uitz, Renáta: “Hungary's New Constitution and Its New Law on Freedom of Religion and Churches: The Return of the Sovereign,” in: *BYU Law Review* (3/2012), pp. 931–965, p. 948.

20 Law IV/1990 on Freedom of Conscience and Religion and on Churches was the basic legislation of the relevant area of law from the period after the regime change (1989). This law addressed the fundamental issues of freedom of conscience and religion based on

on the new Church Act, the recognition of churches was clearly relegated to the competence of the parliament (decision by a two-thirds majority) and it was stipulated that the churches recognised by the parliament will be included in the Annex to the Act. Each of these established churches receives tax and other related benefits as well as budgetary support and is entitled to 1% of the personal income tax paid by individuals on a voluntary basis as well as their state supplement.

Through this new church law, the Fidesz-KDNP government has come to have strong influence over the churches. Since this law determines the church status of a religious organisation by the decision of parliament on a political basis, it can be used as an autocratic instrument of control and punishment. As a result, this law demands uncritical loyalty from church leaders, which thus becomes a survival strategy. Although the new law was qualified as unacceptable by the Hungarian Constitutional Court in 2013 and the European Court of Human Rights found in 2014 that the new church law violates the freedom of religion and the state's duty of neutrality,²¹ many religious communities have not yet regained their lost church status.

As long as this law is in force, it is quite certain that Hungarian churches will be completely dependent on and politically instrumentalised by the Hungarian government, which is trying to set a deterrent example for them by punishing the former church Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (*Magyarországi Evangéliumi Testvérközösség*, MET) under the leadership of Gábor Iványi since 2011. The church status of this Methodist church was already revoked in 2011, although this religious community had been active in Hungary since 1982 and continuously also carried out educational activities, social and charitable work. The reason for this punishment is that Iványi – formerly a confidant of Orbán – has long been an open critic of the government and the prime minister. He has since become an iconic symbol of the resistance to the government.

the 1989 Constitution by applying a very open model that introduced simple judicial registration of churches instead of licensing, <https://mkogy.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=99000004.TV>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

- 21 *Magyar Keresztény Mennonita Egyház and Others v. Hungary* (dec.), nos. 70945/11 and 8 others, 8 Sep. 2014, §102, [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-142196%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-142196%22]}), accessed on: 25 Oct. 2023.

The narrative of the Christian victim role and the threat to "Christian culture"

Viktor Orbán sees a competition of cultures emerging, in which Christianity is in danger of falling victim to the "Islamic threat." He sees himself as the saviour of the Christian West, in the tradition of the Calvinist concept of divine election.²² On the Hungarian Conservative portal, Orbán is praised for this attitude and portrayed as a protector of Christianity: "Those wishing to see a fully secularised European Union and who seek to ultimately undermine religion cannot help but tremble now that Hungarians overwhelmingly gave Viktor Orbán a mandate to safeguard and promote Christian democracy."²³ The fact that Orbán not only presents himself as the defender of Christianity but furthermore has a clearly patronage-based understanding of religious freedom becomes evident on numerous occasions. Some articles reporting on the years-long conflict between Viktor Orbán and Pastor Gábor Iványi referred to above quote a speech in which Orbán expresses that "the essence of illiberal democracy is Christian liberty and the protection of Christian liberty."²⁴

In his 2017 Christmas address, Orbán reduced Christianity to its cultural significance and described Christian culture as a prerequisite for the "correct" understanding of human rights:

"Our culture is the culture of life. Our starting-point – the alpha and omega of our philosophy of life – is the value of life, the dignity that every person has received from God. Without this we could not evaluate 'human rights' and similar modern conceptions. This is why we doubt whether we can export this into the life of civilisations built on other foundations."²⁵

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- 22 Prömpers, Klaus: "Viktor Orbán. Retter des christlichen Abendlandes?" (20 Jun. 2016), <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/viktor-orban-retter-des-christlichen-abendlandes-100.html>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
 - 23 Portella, Mario Alexis: "Orbán's Challenge to Uphold Christian Democracy" (10 May 2022), <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/politics/orbans-challenge-to-uphold-christian-democracy/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
 - 24 Silliman, Daniel: "Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship Raided amid Ongoing Conflict with Viktor Orbán" (25 Feb. 2022), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/february/hungarian-evangelical-fellowship-raid-conflict-orban-nation.html>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
 - 25 Here translated by a traditionalistic-conservative website: Orbán, Viktor: "'We Europeans Are Christians': Christmas Address" (29 Dec. 2017), <https://theimaginativecon>

At the same time, Orbán opposes the alleged renaming of Christmas markets and outlines a threat scenario:

“Today the attack is targeting the foundations of our life and our world. Europe’s immune system is being deliberately weakened. They do not want us to be who we are. They want us to become something which we do not want to be. They want us to mix together with peoples from another world and, so that the process will be smooth, they want us to change. By the light of Christmas candles we can clearly see that when they attack Christian culture they are also attempting to eliminate Europe.”

Anti-Muslim and anti-migrant positions

Part of Viktor Orbán’s populist rhetoric and his appropriation and reinterpretation of the issue of religious freedom is an anti-Muslim and anti-migrant political agenda. For example, in 2016, he postulated in an interview with the *Passauer Neue Presse*: “The civilisation that arose from Christianity and the civilisation that arose from Islam do not go together. They cannot mix, they can only coexist.”²⁶

In one of his Friday morning interviews on Kossuth Radio in March 2019, he underlined that his priorities are Christian culture and migration. “We won’t compromise on the issue of the protection of Christian culture and migration. Everything else is open for discussion.”²⁷ Here, again, the Hungarian prime minister reduces Christianity to a kind of Christian culture, thus revealing that he is more concerned with the alleged protection of a cultural identity than with matters of faith. Indeed, Ádám Zoltán and András Bozóki speak of a “strikingly nationalistically coloured substitute for religion,”²⁸ which is

servative.org/2017/12/europeans-christians-christmas-address-viktor-orban.html, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

- 26 Miniszterelnöki Kabinetiroda (Prime Minister’s Office): “Interview der deutschen Passauer Neuen Presse mit Viktor Orbán” (20 Oct. 2016), <https://miniszterelnok.hu/interview-der-deutschen-passauer-neuen-presse-mit-viktor-orban/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
- 27 Kovács, Zoltán: “PM Orbán: We won’t compromise on migration and the protection of Christian culture” (8 Mar. 2019), <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/pm-orban-we-won-t-compromise-on-migration-and-the-protection-of-christian-culture>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
- 28 Zoltán: *Vallás és jobboldali populizmus*, p. 33.

an ideological principle that gives the nation as a collective identity a quasi-religious status to which the individual subordinates himself.²⁹

Significantly, the Hungarian government was even criticised by the United States' administration under President Donald Trump for its rhetoric. In its International Religious Freedom Reports during the Trump presidency, the U.S. State Department noted that the Hungarian government regularly resorted to anti-Muslim and anti-migrant rhetoric and – in some cases – anti-Semitic patterns of communication. A report from 2021 states:

"Senior government officials, including Prime Minister (PM) Viktor Orbán, continued to make statements in defence of what they called a 'Christian Europe' and against Muslim immigration. In September, Orbán said present-day migrants were 'all Muslims' who changed the cultural identity of Europe. Other politicians made anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim statements."³⁰

In 2017, in the first session of parliament, Viktor Orbán warned against a *Soros Plan*,³¹ "an action plan that describes exactly how disobedient, non-immigrant Central European countries should be transformed into immigrant countries," which is why it is worth giving "more power and authority than ever to those who are prepared to defend the future of Christian Hungary," against which he sees a "new global offensive by one of the main religions, Islam."³²

Budapest Report on Christian Persecution

In 2016, as part of its self-declared development of a Christian democracy, the Hungarian government established the State Secretariat for Aid to Persecuted

29 Zoltán: Vallás és jobboldali populizmus, p. 39.

30 U.S. State Department: Hungary 2021 International Religious Freedom Report, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/HUNGARY-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

31 Schlagwein, Felix: "Wie George Soros zum Feindbild wurde" (27 May 2020), <https://www.dw.com/de/wie-george-soros-zum-feindbild-wurde/a-53572731>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023; see also Kalmar, Ivan: „Islamophobia and anti-antisemitism: the case of Hungary and the 'Soros plot',” in: Patterns of Prejudice 54 (1–2/2020), pp. 182–198.

32 Visegrád Post: "Viktor Orbán: Christianity and identity versus western liberalism" (20 Sep. 2017), <https://visegradpost.com/en/2017/09/20/viktor-orban-christianity-and-identity-versus-western-liberalism/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

Christians and, in 2017, it launched the Hungary Helps programme, a state-run, non-profit agency that aims to support Christians worldwide in their countries of origin and thus stands in opposition to Western and – from Hungary’s perspective – pro-migration policies.

Since then, the State Secretariat for Aid to Persecuted Christians and Hungary Helps have regularly commissioned the publication of religious freedom reports, the Budapest Reports on Christian Persecution. In all reports – including the fifth one of 2021 – the described appropriations and reinterpretations of the topic of religious freedom are particularly evident in the preface written by Viktor Orbán.³³ Orbán links and mixes the legitimate demand for a commitment to persecuted Christians worldwide with typically populist motives. The European and Western mainstream – which plays the role of the “elite” in Orbán’s narrative – is sharply attacked. By idly standing by, they are complicit in the fate of persecuted Christians. Orbán speaks of an anti-Christian attitude of new political movements whose “goal is to eradicate all of those characteristics that have emerged from Christian culture: the nation, the family based on the marriage of a man and a woman [...]”. At the same time, he speaks of “sexual propaganda” promoted by NGOs. In the preface to the fourth report of 2020, Orbán is even more explicit in some places.³⁴ He explains that talking about violence against Christians has even become a “taboo.” The liberal “anti-Christian forces” of the mainstream would push the “rainbow ideology” and specifically attack politicians and church people who reject this ideology. On the other hand, Hungary is presented as a saviour who “first had to break through the walls of hypocrisy and the hypocrisy that hides behind the guise of political correctness.” As it has done for centuries, Hungary exercises the role of the “shield of Christianity” in Europe. In doing so, Orbán outlines the threat scenarios of 1.5 billion refugees in Europe and an end to “Christian civilisation and values” in the event that the elites continue to “bury their heads in the sand.”³⁵

33 Ujházi, Lóránd/Boér Zoltán/Kaló, József/Petruska, Ferenc (eds.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2021, <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19SQCd5tqcrnAcpPAu-giNDceYfQvZEO5>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

34 Ujházi, Lóránd (ed.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020, <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1oEhnj4b46icv56G9iG7W2fsmkoXoY3ap>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

35 Hirschberger, Bernd/Voges, Katja: “Vereinnahmt und verzerrt. Wie der Rechtspopulismus die Religionsfreiheit instrumentalisiert,” in: *Forum Weltkirche* (6/2021), pp. 19–22.

International networking and strategies

Hungary embeds its policy of illiberal Christian democracy in a large-scale international networking strategy. The State Secretariat for Aid to Persecuted Christians is not a mere international aid programme but an instrument for political networking. Thus, numerous large-scale international conferences have already taken place. In 2019, the prime minister welcomed 650 religious leaders and experts from 40 countries.³⁶

Within the framework of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the Hungarian government establishes contacts not least with the evangelical right in the USA. This annual conference gathers international religious rights and has had a foreign policy networking function in recent years. In May 2022, this conference was held in Europe for the first time, in Budapest. Viktor Orbán gave the keynote speech and defended his populist nationalism. He referred to his opponents as "progressives, Marxists" and as "the international liberal left."³⁷ This rhetoric is common during meetings, with the main enemy images being liberal democracy, feminism, queer people and refugees, who are seen as a threat to Christian civilisation. Anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic conspiracy theories are commonplace. In 2023, the conference was held in Budapest for a second time.

The issue of outreach to Christians also provides a perfect networking opportunity between Hungary and Orthodoxy, including Russia. When Viktor Orbán opposed EU sanctions against Patriarch Cyril, he invoked religious freedom, which supposedly does not allow sanctioning church leaders.³⁸ Various church leaders, including Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and the Whole East, the head of the Syrian Orthodox Church, expressed gratitude

36 Rome Reports: "Hungary seeks allies against Christian persecution with political and religious leaders" (26 Nov. 2019), <https://www.romereports.com/en/2019/11/26/hungary-seeks-allies-against-christian-persecution-with-political-and-religious-leaders/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

37 Cullen, Ross: "Hungary a 'fortress of conservative and Christian values' says Orban" (20 May 2022), <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2022-05-20/Hungary-a-fortress-of-conservative-and-Christian-values-says-Orban-1abYjtDWG3u/index.html>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

38 Tidey, Alice: "Orban criticises EU plans to sanction head of Russian Orthodox Church" (5 Jun. 2022), <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/06/orban-criticises-eu-plans-to-sanction-head-of-russian-orthodox-church>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

for Orbán's commitment against the sanctions.³⁹ For his part, Patriarch Cyril praised Orbán several times for his fight for "Christian values."⁴⁰

It is also necessary to critically examine the political staging around the Hungary Helps programme. During presentations of the programme, the Hungarian State Secretary for Aid to Persecuted Christians, Christian Asbej, often demonstratively anticipates common criticisms of the programme – such as its one-sided focus on Christians – with an accusatory undertone. For example, he emphasises that the initiative is necessary because Christians are the most persecuted religious group worldwide, but also because Hungary is a "proud Christian nation" and wants to strengthen its Christian identity. In interviews, the question is often asked whether Hungary's commitment would make the country popular in other European countries. The state secretary's answer often mixes populist rhetoric with the topic of religion and religious freedom: "We have been told: It is against political correctness to support Christians [...] In fact it is against political correctness to be Christian."⁴¹ What also becomes evident on many occasions is the connection between the claimed central role in the defence of Christianity with the fight against LGBTIQ rights, whereby the political agenda is linked to the commitment to Christians. Critics of Hungary Helps claim that the commitment is pure politics and ask – for example – why the Hungarian government does not actively support religious freedom for Christians in Turkey, Russia and China as part of their program.⁴²

39 Daily News Hungary: "Orban meets Syriac Orthodox Patriarch" (12 May 2022), <https://dailynewshungary.com/orban-meets-syriac-orthodox-patriarch/>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

40 Hungary Today: "Russian Patriarch Kirill Congratulates PM Orbán" (17 May 2023), <https://hungarytoday.hu/patriarch-kirill-congratulates-orban/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

41 Wishon, Jennifer: "Hungary Defends Biblical Principles and Helps the Persecuted: 'Hungary is a Christian Nation'" (27 Sep. 2021), <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2021/august/hungary-defends-biblical-principles-and-helps-the-persecuted-hungary-is-a-christian-nation>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

42 Hungarian spectrum. Reflections on politics, economics, and culture: "International Conference on Christian persecution in Budapest" (29 Nov. 2019), <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2019/11/29/international-conference-on-christian-persecution-in-budapest/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

Final remarks

The examples given in this article show that, while the Orbán government seems to fully support the cause of religious freedom, the reality behind the strategically well-constructed scenes of political deception is different. The right-wing populist government politically instrumentalised the Christian churches and Christianity itself to such an extent that it did not promote religious freedom, but on the contrary restricted their freedom and turned Christianity into a political weapon. The tragic consequences of this became clear to the church leadership only recently when the data of the 2022 census came to light. In a country with a current population of 9.6 million, the Roman Catholic Church has lost 1.1 million believers within eleven years since 2011 and has thus halved in the last 20 years. According to the Central Statistical Office, in 2001 there were still 5.3 million believers in the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church, of whom only 3.7 million remained in 2011 and only 2.6 million in 2022.⁴³ Although all churches used a very intensive campaign to persuade their followers to make a clear statement in the census, 40% of the population refused to answer the question of which church they felt they belonged to. There are obviously complex reasons behind this, but one of them might be that many church leaders showed no resistance and allowed the government to deprive them of their sovereignty.

43 Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (Central Statistical Office): Népszámlálás 2022 (Population Census), <https://nepszamlalas2022.ksh.hu/eredmenyek/vegleges-adatok/kiadva ny/assets/nepszamlalas2022-vegleges-adatok.pdf>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

