

Christian Illiberalism in Hungary in a Historical Perspective
Nora Berend
and
How the Fidesz Government in Hungary is Co-opting the Churches -
Alexander Faludy

Discussion notes follow

(Summary of both presentations compiled by Philip Walters - 9 May 2019)

A recently-established government-controlled research institute in Hungary has the Orwellian title *Veritas*. Its remit is to rewrite the history of Hungary from a national perspective. Its director has stated that the deportation of Jews from Hungary to Nazi-occupied territory in 1941 was not motivated by antisemitism but was a police action to remove illegal immigrants. A new museum called *Sorsok Háza* (House of Fates) was built to show that Hungarians tried to save the Jews during the war; because of significant protests, its opening has been delayed. A crucial issue being debated in Hungary is the place of the Holocaust in Hungarian history. One main theme of the official narrative is that Jews were not persecuted until Hungary was occupied by the Nazis in 1944.

The government designated 2014 as the commemorative year of the Holocaust. Many events were criticised and boycotted by the main Jewish umbrella organisation *Mazsihisz*. Government spokesmen distinguished between 'Hungarian patriots' and 'Jewish co-citizens'. While claiming that the Holocaust was the work of the Nazis from Germany, the current Hungarian government is at the same time implicitly scapegoating the Jews as causing the problems: an official statement accused those boycotting the commemoration of undermining centuries of Jewish-Hungarian cooperation in the Carpathian basin. Another statement argued that Hungarians resisted communism because it was based on lies, and also that those now claiming that the present government was falsifying history were lying; thus the statement implicitly bolstered the persistent idea in Hungary that communism was created and implemented by the Jews.

Public posters covering the country criticise George Soros, claiming he wants to settle millions of 'illegal immigrants' in Europe. One poster shows Soros as a puppet-master pulling the strings of opposition politicians, both left-wing and right-wing; it is reminiscent of Nazi propaganda posters which portrayed a Jew in the role of the puppet-master. Another is inscribed: 'Let us not allow Soros to have the last laugh'. The posters directed against Soros never mention the fact that he is Jewish; but the message is clear. Someone has added to an anti-Soros poster in a bus shelter the graffito 'Stinking Jew' ('*büdös zsidó*'). This systematic semantic occupation of the public space is reminiscent of the hate campaign against Emmanuel Goldstein in George Orwell's 1984.

One poster shows Soros and opposition politicians in Hungary joining in using wire-cutters to remove the fence which the current Hungarian government claims it is putting up to prevent immigrants entering the country. In fact the quota set by the European Union for immigrants to be accepted by Hungary was 1294. The anti-immigrant propaganda is being directed at a fake problem in order to distract people's attention from real problems, such as the growing numbers of Hungarians living in extreme poverty of a kind unknown up to now outside Africa and South America, and the real cause of the woes of increasing numbers of the population: the economic policies and politics of the *Fidesz* government.

At the end of the First World War the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed and in the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 the victorious allies set the borders for a much-reduced Hungary. Since then there have been sizeable Hungarian minorities in all the surrounding countries. Admiral Miklós Horthy was Regent of Hungary from 1920 to 1944. The Horthy regime pursued an irredentist policy aimed at regaining the detached territories; this also led to an alliance with Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Antisemitism, however, was not foisted on Hungary by the Nazis. The Horthy regime claimed that Hungary was a Christian-national state, and that its mission was to protect Christian Hungary against its enemies, identified mainly as the Jews. The first legislation in twentieth-century Europe that had a negative impact on Jews was promulgated in Hungary in 1920, and 21 anti-Jewish laws were passed between 1938 and 1944. Moreover, Jews served in the Hungarian army in forced labour battalions, rather than as soldiers. Although mass deportation of Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz and other camps took place after the Nazi invasion of Hungary on 19 March 1944 (which, however, was not particularly resisted), Hungarian gendarmes and police, rather than Germans, gathered the Jews and forced them onto the trains, and it was Hungarians rather than Germans who pillaged the property of deported Jews. The *Fidesz* government is encouraging the cult of Horthy and is welcoming private initiatives to commemorate him, and Horthy statues are appearing in Hungary.

For further reading:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/hungary-passes-disputed-reform-bill-tighten-grip-scientists-190702180611858.html>

<http://rub-europadialog.eu/orban-and-the-hungarian-holocaust-historical-distortion-for-political-gain>

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/livid-protesters-block-hungarian-pm-orban-as-he-leaves-yad-vashem/>

https://index.hu/english/2019/06/20/1956_institute_veritas_merging_fidesz_hungary_academic_freedom_research_oral_history_archive/

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n22/nora-berend/not-just-a-phase>

How the Fidesz Government in Hungary is Co-opting the Churches

Alexander Faludy

Fidesz was founded in 1988 as a liberal youth party opposing the ruling communist government; it was also characterised by a degree of anticlericalism (though not hostility to faith communities *per se*). After its disappointing results in the elections in 1994, however, *Fidesz* began to move to the right, and its leader Viktor Orbán moved closer to the Hungarian Reformed Church, traditionally the most vocally nationalist church in Hungary. The Reformed Church and the Catholic Church, and to some extent the Lutheran Church (the third-largest church in Hungary), supported *Fidesz*, which in 1998 came to power in a coalition with the KDNP, the Catholic-based Christian Democratic People's Party (*Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*) and other small right-leaning parties. *Fidesz* subsequently absorbed the KDNP which now in reality exists only as a special interest group of hard-line Catholic MPs within the *Fidesz* family.

In tandem with making constitutional changes and changes to electoral legislation, which more or less ensure that it will continue indefinitely as the ruling party, *Fidesz* has been granting valuable real estate property to the churches both in Hungary and in the Hungarian communities in the neighbouring countries. These property transfers have complemented generous discretionary grants outside the normal framework of legally guaranteed support for church schools and diaconal institutions. There is a clearly discernible relationship between the level of grant made and the degree of political loyalty demonstrated by the denomination. The Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries have been enfranchised to vote in domestic Hungarian elections, and the local churches whose clergy are also community leaders play an important role in delivering their votes.

By contrast, financial support and even legal registration have been withdrawn from many smaller churches (most notably the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship led by Pastor Iványi ¹) and from Jewish and Muslim communities which are seen as likely to house opposition to the *Fidesz* government and its policies. Some known centres of opposition (like the Jewish *Auróra* community centre ²) have been subjected to police harassment. Another typical *Fidesz* strategy is not to directly undermine a given institution, but to set up a rival and much better-endowed institution which will attract clients from the other and gradually starve it of support. This is seen very clearly at present in the case of the (Neolog-Jewish) Budapest Jewish University which is being systematically undermined by the government's development of the (Chabad-aligned) Milton Freeman University.

Of the three main churches, the Lutheran Church is the one which sits least easily with the nationalist line of the *Fidesz* government, and its Presiding Bishop, Tamás Fabiny, has in the past been critical of government policies. There are also islands of resistance to government policies within the two largest churches, notably at the Catholic Arch-Abbey of Pannonhalma. However, paradoxically, church figures who were well-known

dissidents in communist times and stood up for freedom of conscience are now supporters of *Fidesz* and Orbán. Perhaps most striking is László Tőkés, a Bishop Emeritus in the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania. He opposed the Ceaușescu regime and was a significant figure in the Romanian Revolution, but until May 2019 served as a Fidesz Member of the European Parliament.

¹ On Pastor Ivanyi see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/europe/viktor-orban-hungary-ivanyi.html>

² On the Aurora Centre see: <https://english.atlatszo.hu/2019/05/05/hungary-by-atlatszo-the-police-were-the-surprise-guests-at-atlatszoz-fundraising-party-at-aurora-community-center/>

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Discussion, with consolidated responses from Nora Berend and Alexander Faludy

Q: Why do people vote for Viktor Orbán, given that it must be obvious that increasing numbers of people are living in increasing poverty?

A: People may see that the government's economic claims are false, but in provincial Hungary the population speaks only Hungarian and their only sources of information are the Hungarian media, which are almost all Fidesz-controlled. The myth that the government is keeping hordes of immigrants at bay leads people to believe that they are at least being saved from 'cultural annihilation' and further deterioration in their living conditions. Meanwhile the electoral law has been changed so that Fidesz can still win enough seats to stay in power even if its share of the domestic popular vote falls appreciably. There is also the fact that in rural areas the social structure is now basically feudal. Electoral secrecy is compromised in many rural areas. People rely on welfare and on patronage for such jobs (especially 'workfare' ones) as are available. They know that if they don't vote for the government's candidates the favours and funding on which they depend are likely to be withdrawn from their village community. Another factor is that the population of Hungary is falling, because of low birthrate and significant economic

emigration to Western Europe. A large proportion of those emigrating are the younger and better-educated.

Q: In view of the fact that the population of Hungary is falling, is the government encouraging the Hungarian populations in surrounding countries to return to Hungary?

A: The government has enfranchised the diaspora populations to vote in domestic Hungarian elections, and this is the main thing as far as the government is concerned. In fact, it doesn't want large-scale immigration back to Hungary by the diaspora populations because this would undermine the long-term Hungarian aim of reintegrating these territories within a Greater Hungary. And despite its propaganda claims that it is keeping hordes of non-Hungarian immigrants at bay, the government is in fact quietly encouraging foreign immigration from selected poorer non-EU countries via special industrial worker visa schemes. In some industries in Hungary the typical structure is: a management consisting of domestic Hungarians; middle-level administrators/supervisors who are bilingual ethnic Hungarians from Ukraine or Serbia; and workers who are non-Hungarian immigrants from those countries. There is also significant immigration from East Asia, especially China and Vietnam.

Q: Are you optimistic about the future for Hungary?

A: (Nora Berend): Yes, if you define an optimist as someone who thinks the future is uncertain.