Religion and Authoritarian Legitimacy

The Hungarian Pentecostal Faith Church

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Introduction: Faith Church and the Orbán regime

In recent years, Hungarian politics has gained international attention. Since 2010, when Viktor Orbán's national–conservative Fidesz party was elected to a parliamentary supermajority, the country has gone through a significant political transformation. The Orbán regime has gradually curtailed press and academic freedoms, eroded judicial independence, undermined a multiparty democratic system, and violated human rights. Researchers have described this process as *autocratization* (Boese et al. 2020; Maerz et al. 2020) and *democratic backsliding* (Enyedi 2018). This process has resulted in Hungary becoming "the EU's first ever authoritarian member state" (Maerz et al. 2020). At the same time, populists in Europe and beyond have applauded Orbán for these developments: Dutch and French populist leaders Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen have praised the Hungarian strongman for his "courage" in having "the strength to face the European Union" (Szakacs and Than 2018). Florida Republicans have admitted that Hungarian anti-LGBTIQA+ legislation inspired their own "Don't Say Gay" bill, banning sexual education involving LGBTIQA+ topics in public schools (Marantz 2022). Orbán enjoys the support of Donald Trump and was the opening speaker at the influential 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference in Texas (Smith 2022).

The Hungarian government has politically sold all these changes by employing a Christian–nationalistic narrative. It depicts the country as the last bastion of *Christian Europe* against *Western liberal cosmopolitanism*. Even though almost half of the Hungarian population identifies as non-religious, churches have played a key role in promoting this ideology and maintaining the Orbán regime. This article uses the fairly new Pentecostal Faith Church, which gained

prominence and much influence in the 2010s, as a case study. Investigating the role of Faith Church in the Orbán regime is key to understanding the new Christian–nationalist entanglements in Hungary and, in essence, the nature of the political system that Orbán has created.

Faith Church (in Hungarian, *Hit Gyülekezete*) is an Evangelical charismatic Pentecostal Christian denomination in Hungary. The community was established illegally in communist Hungary in 1979 and grew rapidly after the fall of communism. Today, based on the tax designation for churches, Faith Church is the fourth most supported church in the country. Before 2010, when Prime Minister Viktor Orbán rose to power, Faith Church was widely associated with liberal politicians in Hungary. This was not accidental, as liberals were considered the leading anti-communist force before the regime change of 1989. Faith Church aimed for recognition, and some of its prominent members were even part of the parliamentary faction of SZDSZ, the liberal party of the time. However, with Orbán's right-wing populist landslide victory in 2010, Faith Church shifted its loyalties to Orbán and his party, Fidesz.[1] In the following elections, senior pastor Sándor Németh openly endorsed Orbán. Furthermore, the church has reproduced Orbán's Islamophobic and anti-immigration rhetoric. Today, somewhat surprisingly but politically rationally, Faith Church has become one of the staunchest religious supporters of the Orbán regime.

There is a growing literature on the relationship between populism and the churches in the Orbán regime (Ádám and Bozóki 2016a; Gábor 2017). However, despite Faith Church's considerable influence in Hungary, there is hardly any academic work available on it. This chapter intends to fill this gap. Our study puts the activity of Faith Church into the context of the Orbán regime, and it analyzes the church's political role since Orbán's rise to power in 2010. It focuses on Islamophobia and other populist topics in Németh's communication and investigates the pastor's sermons and public statements on Orbán and his regime. Faith Church thus functions as an apt case study for the entanglement between the Christian Right and nationalist–populist movements in Europe, particularly in a context characterized by the financial and political subordination of large, historically established Christian churches to the government. First, to create a better understanding of Faith Church and its social and cultural context, we provide a summary of the political and religious landscape

1 The party's official name is Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance. Originally, Fidesz was an acronym of Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége (Federation of Young Democrats).

of Hungary, followed by a brief description of the political role and status of large Christian denominations in Orbán's Hungary. Second, we turn to Faith Church, presenting its history and rise in the past decade and analyzing its political role as an increasingly vocal supporter of the regime.

The religious and political landscape of Hungary

According to the 2011 census, most Hungarians were Christians. Most identified as Roman Catholic (39% of the total population), Calvinist (11.6%), or Lutheran (2.2%). However, 45.4% of the population did not declare a religious affiliation or declared themselves to be explicitly irreligious or atheist (Vékony 2021, 103). Historically, religion in Hungary has been dominated by Catholic Christianity since King Stephen I's ascension to the throne in 1000. In the 16th century, Protestant streams gained much influence, especially in the eastern parts of the state (Dreisziger 2016). During the decades of communist dictatorship, some religious organizations were banned. Those churches that were tolerated—such as the above-mentioned three *historical* Christian denominations—had to cooperate with the regime (Baer 2006; Dreisziger 2016).

With the fall of the communist system in 1989, Hungary became open for freedom of religious practice. Between 1990 and 2012, Article 60 of the new republic's constitution guaranteed free public and private exercise of religion. The same article confirmed the separation of religion and state. The constitution referred to religious establishments as *churches* (*egyház*), whether Christian or non-Christian. For instance, the largest Muslim community in the country bears the name Church of Hungarian Muslims (*Magyarországi Muszlimok Egyháza*). Registered churches had the right to offer optional religious instruction in public schools and establish denominational schools financed by the state. Hungarian legislation allows taxpayers to give 1% of their income tax to a registered church of their choice. A two-thirds majority in Parliament was required to make changes to this legal framework (Durham and Ferrari 2004, 153–162; Črnič 2007, 529–530; Rosta 2016; Schanda 2003).

In the 1990s and the 2000s, practicing religion in democratic Hungary was fully free by any liberal standards, as the state and the church were constitutionally separated, and the state declared neutrality toward churches and religions. However, after 20 years of liberal democracy, Hungarian politics took a different turn (Lendvai 2012; Kornai 2015). In 2010, Viktor Orbán's right-wing

populist Fidesz party won two-thirds of the seats in the Hungarian Parliament. Following this landslide victory, the populist regime passed a series of new legislation. It soon became clear that what had happened was not only a government change but also an autocratic turn. Previous democratization processes were reversed by policies of de-democratization (Lendvai 2018). These significant changes in the political landscape influenced state–church relations in a major way.

On January 1, 2012, the Fidesz-led government introduced Hungary's new constitution, the Fundamental Law of Hungary (*Magyarország Alaptörvénye*). While the new constitution continues to guarantee religious freedom, it is problematic on various levels: First, it makes use of discriminatory language. Its preamble implies that Hungarian nationality is exclusively Christian, even though Hungary has a substantial Jewish minority, one of the largest in Europe (Kovács and Barna 2017). Moreover, a high proportion of Hungarians are openly non-religious, with a national identity that is presumably not based on religion. The Fundamental Law's wording also reduces the agency of Hungarian officials in the final year of World War II when hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews were murdered (Kingsley 2018).

Apart from the discursive discrimination, the new constitution added provisions on the legal status of religious communities (Uitz 2012, 931). The Fundamental Law stripped hundreds of congregations of their legal status. It deprived them of state resources to which they had previously been entitled, including their income from the 1% offerings of taxpayers. This 1% tax is a major income for churches, especially smaller congregations. According to Orbán's government, this was a legitimate reform of an abused subsidy system. However, critics said that it punished religious organizations and leaders who criticized the Fidesz government. At the same time, it ensured the loyalty of the 32 religious organizations that were allowed to keep their legal status (Kingsley 2018).

The Venice Commission (officially the European Commission for Democracy through Law), an advisory body of the Council of Europe composed of independent experts in the field of constitutional law, expressed serious reservations about this legislation. The Commission stated that retroactive de-registration of religious bodies violated international human rights standards (Hendon and Hines 2012, 483–484). Legal scholar Renáta Uitz (2012) observed that "Hungary with its new Constitution and new cardinal law on freedom of religion and churches is on the track of straying far away from the European standard and building a unique, if unusual, regime of its own" (965).

However, the legislation took effect and, with certain modifications, remains in effect up to today.

The limited political appeal of the established historical churches

Nominally separated from the state and enjoying full religious freedoms since the fall of the communist regime, large religious denominations have remained dependent on government finances in the past decades. This has forced churches to cooperate with governments, and the large, historically established churches—most prominently, the Catholic and Calvinist Churches—have politically always leaned to the right, playing an active role in providing religious hinterlands and spiritual support for right-wing political groups (Enyedi 2000). For example, some parts of the Calvinist Church supported Jobbik in its far-right, antisemitic period during the early 2010s. In 2013, Pastor Lóránt Hegedűs, the religious leader of a downtown Budapest Calvinist denomination, erected a bust of Admiral Horthy, the governor of inter-war Hungary who imposed harsh anti-Jewish legislation and fought as an ally of Nazi Germany in World War II. Meanwhile, Pastor Hegedűs's wife was a Jobbik MP during 2010–2019 (Ádám and Bozóki 2016b, 112). In turn, both the Catholic and Calvinist Churches have supported the government's anti-refugee political campaigns since the 2015 European migrant and refugee crisis, in which hundreds of thousands of mostly Muslim refugees travelled through Hungary. At the peak of the crisis, Cardinal Péter Erdő, the leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church, infamously said that taking in refugees would be equal to human trafficking, while Bishop László Kiss-Rigó, the Catholic bishop of southeast Hungary, where most refugees entered the country, was one of the leading religious voices supporting the government's anti-refugee policies (Frayer 2015).

Viktor Orbán's governments themselves have included several Christian leaders, such as Calvinist pastor Zoltán Balogh, who served as Minister for Human Resources between 2012 and 2018 and became the president of Hungary's Reformed Church in 2021 (*Hungary Today* 2021). Former Family Minister Katalin Novák, who has been President of Hungary since 2022, has said that she has been driven by her Christian faith. Novák has propagated a conservative family worldview and promoted the abolishment of gender studies at universities (Brugge 2022; Lázár 2018). She is also involved with the work

of the World Congress of Families, a US-based Christian nationalist group (Casanova 2020, 43).

The rise of Fidesz as a dominating right-wing political force conquering and restructuring civil society through the Civic Circle Movement network in the 2000s was also partly based on religious affiliations, endorsements by large Christian denominations, and the mobilization of what was historically called the *Christian national middle class* (Greskovits 2020). When Fidesz came to power in 2010, the historically established Christian churches—besides the Catholics and Calvinists, also the much smaller Lutheran Church—saw their public standing rise. Their government-allocated budgetary transfers rose, and their role in running quasi-public schools, hospitals, and other institutions was extended. By implication, these churches have been cooperating ever more closely with the state under the Orbán regime (Gábor 2017).

Nevertheless, the large historically established churches were never powerful enough to exert decisive political influence in post-1990 Hungary. During the decades of the pre-1990 communist dictatorship, Hungary became one of the most atheist countries in the world, and large Christian churches lost their spiritual autonomy and credibility (Ádám and Bozóki 2016b). Although the democratic regime change ensured religious freedoms and liberated churches from direct state controls in post-1990 Hungary, due to their limited financial means and the relatively small size of their actual denominations, they always remained dependent on government support. While churches have seen their social and political status rise in the post-2010 Orbán era, during which they have become quasi-official religious entities, the historically established Christian churches, in general, have never regained an autonomous spiritual appeal, particularly in the eyes of younger generations and the better educated. By implication, when the Orbán regime decided to radicalize ideologically, taking increasingly radical policy measures framed as politics as usual (Sata and Karolewski 2020), it found the mobilizing capacity of the large Christian denominations limited.

Hence, the ideological radicalization of the Orbán regime was not carried out at the request of radical Christian groups. Unlike in Poland (Szelewa 2021), the large, historically established churches were not in a position to claim dominance for political Christianity. Instead of these churches exerting a decisive impact on right-wing politics in Hungary (as the conservative wing of the Polish Catholic Church has done in Poland), right-wing governments have financially controlled and politically used them, particularly in the post-2010 pe-

riod.[2] This is the context in which Faith Church, as a relatively new, charismatic religious movement, gained political prominence alongside the ideological radicalization and autocratization of the Orbán regime.

The history of Faith Church

The post-2010 restrictions on religious freedoms mostly affected the so-called new religious organizations, that is, religious movements established or popularized after the fall of communism. In the years following the establishment of the post-1990 democratic system, the number of new religious movements in Hungary increased significantly. Some of these new religious movements draw inspiration from Hungary's pre-Christian history and embrace a form of ancient Hungarian shamanism (Szilágyi 2015). Other popular new religious organizations include the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and various Buddhist groups. The new openness toward *the West* also brought US-style Protestant churches to the country, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and Pentecostals (Črnič 2007, 538–539). The most influential among these groups has been, without doubt, Faith Church. Significantly, this Pentecostal church was not affected by the 2012 legislative reform and could keep its privileged status (Folk 2017).

Faith Church's origins date back to the days of communism in Hungary. Its founder and senior pastor, Sándor Németh, was born into a practicing Catholic family. According to Németh's narrative, his coming to belief was connected to oppression in the communist system: At the age of 19, Németh tried to escape from Hungary, but the Yugoslav police caught him. After spending six days in jail, he became a diligent reader of the Bible and had a personal encounter with Jesus in 1976 (Balogh 2020b). He started Faith Church together with his wife, Judit, in 1979. The couple held the services initially in a private home in Budapest. They received theological support and ordination—according to some sources, anointing (Balogh 2020b)—through Good News Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. This church was led by Derek Prince, a leading figure of US Pentecostalism. For the first 10 years of the church, the couple and their

2 One indication of the radically different positions of Polish and Hungarian churches in their autonomous organizational capacity and political appeal is the fact that, unlike in Poland, restricting the right to abortion has never been on the agenda of mainstream Hungarian right-wing politics since 1990.

prayer circle conducted their activities underground. However, Faith Church soon became a major success, especially after the fall of communism and the liberalization of public religious practices (Balogh 2020b; Folk 2017).

The Németh s adapted the Pentecostals' *prosperity theology*, which was probably one of the main reasons why the church became so popular after the Hungarian economy's transition to the model of a liberal market economy (Folk 2017, 102). *Prosperity theology*, also known as the *gospel of prosperity*, teaches that congregants should actively engage in consumerism and aim at achieving financial affluence (Roberts and Yamane 2012, 227). Historian Holly Folk (2017, 102) suggested that this theology appealed especially to the economically up-and-coming middle and upper classes, following the establishment of the liberal market order in Hungary.

Within just four decades, Faith Church grew from a small underground congregation that met in private apartments to be the country's fourth-largest religious community (Folk 2017, 105). In the 1990s, Faith Church held regular worship services, including mass baptism ceremonies, in the Budapest Sports Hall, with an approximate attendance of 10,000 worshippers (Tenkely 2011, 247). Between 2002 and 2008, Faith Church increased its 1% tax offerings by more than 70% (Rosta 2016, 193). In 2016, the organization claimed to have 70,000 members and 300 branches in Hungary (Balogh 2020b). The church even established communities for Hungarian immigrant communities in Western Europe and the United States. Faith Church's Budapest meeting point continues to be the largest megachurch in Europe, with a weekly attendance of 8,000 (Folk 2017, 103).

Preaching Islamophobia

As mentioned before, in its earlier years, Faith Church was associated with SZDSZ (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége [Alliance of Free Democrats]), a liberal party that is now defunct (Enyedi 2003, 163). Members of Faith Church even appeared among SZDSZ's representatives (Körösényi 1999, 40). We assume that this closeness of Faith Church to this liberal party was mostly based on the two groups' shared commitment to economic liberalism and civil liberties, most prominently religious freedoms. After the 2012 constitutional reform and SZDSZ's dissolution in 2013, the church found its new ally in Orbán and his party Fidesz, a party that is *hyper-nationalist* and socially conservative in most ideological issues (Geva 2021).

Gradually, Németh became a staunch supporter of Orbán and his anti-immigration policies that limit Muslim migrants and protect the *native* people of Faith Church. Németh took as his mission the protection of "Christian Europe" and the preservation of "Hungarian values" (Jones-Gailani and Gőbl 2019, 399–400). In 2018, with just three weeks to go until Hungary's general election, Németh urged his followers from the pulpit to support Orbán and Fidesz. Németh warned them during Sunday services that a vote for Orbán's opposition was "a vote for allowing into Hungary 10,000 Muslims a year." The pastor stated that Muslims were "first terrorists and second human beings." Németh also reinforced his homophobic views and warned of the opposition wanting to introduce gay marriage (Adam 2018).

But Németh also reproduced Islamophobic conspiracy myths outside of his sermons. In an interview with the pro-government internet portal Mandiner.hu, Németh suggested that "no-go zones" existed in the UK, France, Belgium, Germany, and Sweden and that "Europe is being conquered" by Islam:

> In Western Europe, there are islands of the modern caliphate. Newspapers are referring to these as "no-go zones." They have succeeded in creating ethnic melting pots in which Moroccan, Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian immigrants who follow the teachings of Islam no longer consider their ethnic belonging to be important, instead it is their religious affiliation that will take precedence." (Cited in Novak 2016)

Németh linked this so-called Islamic takeover of Western European cities to globalization and a *left–liberal* plot to undermine national sovereignty. This is an argument that Orbán has also repeatedly made (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). Németh suggested that "there is a point at which globalization and the caliphate meet because globalization also calls for the elimination of national identity" (cited in Novak 2016). He even envisioned an alliance between left–liberals and Muslims and warned that such an alliance in Hungary would mean the end of democracy in the country (cited in Novak 2016). It should be noted that the Muslim population of Hungary is marginal and represents a few thousand people (about 0.3% of the total population). Before the 2015 so-called refugee crisis, Muslims and Islam were not a topic in Hungarian mainstream public discourse (Csiszár 2016, 303). Islamophobic agitation became dominant after 2015, strengthened by a series of targeted anti-Muslim

and anti-immigration government campaigns (Krekó, Hunyadi, and Szicherle 2019; Langer 2021, 174–175; Sereghy 2018).

Arguably, Németh has been one of the loudest proponents of anti-Islam sentiments in the country (Zolnay 2015). In his agitation against Muslim immigrants, Németh also builds on his subjective experiences with oppression in communist Hungary:

> We must defend Christianity because Marxism also caused great damage to Christianity, communism caused great damage to Christianity. Now, I'm referring to cultural Marxism, which is not the same as socialism. We lived under socialism, we know what damage it did to Christianity. I think that if they allow for the Islamization of Hungary, then Hungarian Christianity will never be able to stand up from that. (Cited in Novak 2018b)

As we can see, Németh has also made use of the term *Islamization*, which is a common slogan among the European far right (Vorländer, Herold, and Schäller 2018). Conspiracy myths such as *Islamization*, *great exchange*, and *fall of the West* postulate the existence of a secret plan to exchange white Europeans for Muslim and/or non-white immigrants. Often, behind such plans stand the *liberal elite* or *the Jews* (Önnerfors 2021). It is not only right-wing populists that spread these conspiracy myths but also far-right terrorists (Ware 2020, 5). In the case of Németh, the mysterious enemy pulling the strings of migration in Europe is Hungarian-born American Jewish philanthropist and businessman George Soros.

Preaching Zionism and Soros conspiracy myths

Like other Pentecostal movements, Faith Church is unconditionally pro-Israel and cooperates with like-minded US preachers and organizations. Sándor Németh made Christian Zionism a "central pillar of his ministry" (Hummel 2017). Christian Zionism is a belief among various neo-Protestant groups, postulating that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 were in accordance with Biblical prophecy. Some Christian Zionists believe that the gathering of the Jews in Israel is a prerequisite for the so-called Second Coming of Jesus. For this reason, various neo-Protestant churches, including Pentecostal ones, are among the most unconditional supporters of Israel around the world (Ariel 2006; Langer 2017).

Faith Church, too, is involved in Christian Zionist activities. The church is affiliated with the International Christian Embassy, a Christian Zionist organization based in Jerusalem that promotes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Németh has forged alliances with the Israeli Knesset's Christian Allies Caucus and the Israel Allies Foundation, an organization promoting Israeli interests in the United States Congress. Németh also coordinates with Pat Robertson, founder and chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network, who, like Németh, intertwines the domains of religion, politics, and media (Folk 2017, 103–104).

Historian Eva S. Balogh (2020a) suggested that Faith Church's strong pro-Israel stance may also have strengthened its relationship with Fidesz. When the Fidesz government began its anti-refugee and anti-immigration campaign in 2015, anti-Islam voices dominated the public discourse to an extent never before seen in Hungary. The government's antagonism toward refugees, most of whom were Muslims, forged an alliance with Israeli right-wing leader Benyamin Netanyahu. This new alliance between the Israeli and the Hungarian right-wing leadership may have pushed Németh and Faith Church closer to Orbán.

"Would you like for anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and hate of Christians to grow in Hungary?" asked Németh in a speech against Muslim immigration, suggesting that these sentiments would increase with an increase of the Muslim population (Novak 2018b). Depicting antisemitism as a new problem imported to Europe by Muslim immigrant communities has been a popular tool among European politicians across the political spectrum to promote Islamophobia and anti-immigration restrictions (Özyürek 2016). Fidesz politicians, too, act as if they would protect the local Jewish community by restricting Muslim immigration and emphasizing their close relationship with Netanyahu and his party, Likud (Langer 2021, 177–178).

However, having close ties to the Israeli right wing is no guarantee of not reproducing antisemitic canards. Despite Németh's alleged criticism of antisemitism, he and his church have repeatedly employed antisemitic code words, for instance, around the figure of George Soros. Such conspiracy myths allege that Soros manipulates political developments in Europe and around the world. These conspiracy myths have been amplified by the Hungarian government, which claims that Soros was behind the 2015 *refugee crisis*. In this narrative, Soros's plan was to de-Christianize Europe by bringing in Muslim immigrants. Following a series of countrywide government campaigns—on billboards and various media channels alike—the Fidesz government filed a pack-

age of bills called "Stop Soros." The legislation limits the scope for action by non-governmental organizations, making their employees and activists liable for jail terms for helping refugees (Langer 2021, 167; 2022, 160–161).

Németh, too, has taken an active part in demonizing Soros. After a visit to Faith Church in Budapest, US pastor Rodney Howard-Browne claimed that the Hungarian Pentecostals "single-handedly kicked George Soros out of Hungary." The pastor recalled that Németh asked for his prior help "because Soros is trying to work to shut my [Németh's] money down and is attacking tithing and everything" (Strang 2019). Németh also reproduced antisemitic canards about Soros and an alleged international elite in a letter to "international Evangelical–Charismatic leaders," in which Németh (2018) stated that "Soros and other influential individuals involved in clandestine activities are doing everything in their power to stop the strengthening of anti-globalist, anti-immigration, nationalist and Christian political forces in Europe."

It is, of course, not antisemitic per se to criticize Soros. However, the suggestion that Soros and a secretive international elite would try to undermine Christianity in Europe by promoting migration operates with traditional antisemitic codes (Berend 2022). This belief is based on the myth that Jews as a collective would be conspiring against Christians and manipulating political happenings in the world (Langer 2021; 2022, 162–165). This conspiracy theory fits well into fifth-column politics, which consists of accusing certain groups in society of conspiring with hostile outside actors to subvert the interests of the national in-group. It includes the conviction that there is a powerful foreign actor with hostile intentions toward the nation. It is based on the belief that this actor motivates domestic agents to execute their agenda of dividing and weakening the nation. Next, there is also a widespread belief that the details of the relationship and the agenda it serves are hidden from public view. Finally, the need to counter the threat of the foreign power requires unmasking, constraining, and possibly expelling these domestic agents from the body politic (Jenne, Bozóki, and Visnovitz 2022, 48–49). As Stephen J. Whitfield (2018) noted, if "one were looking to update the fantasy of a surreptitious Jewish stranglehold on the international economy, no candidate would fit better than the creator of the most adroit and prosperous hedge fund in the world, the canniest investor on the planet. More than anyone else, Soros can be held as inadvertently responsible for the sinister economic power of international Jewry" (417).

In light of the alleged international threat to Hungarian Christianity, Németh (2018) warned that "[i]t is our moral obligation to do everything in our power to hinder the establishment of a government in the European Union

that wishes to force its member states to the acceptance of homosexual marriages, pseudo-scientific gender-ideologies, the liberalization of abortion and drugs, obligatory migrant quotas and anything else in opposition to our Judeo-Christian worldview." The pastor's solution to all these "problems" is Orbán: "The prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban has taken a stand against such policies… Hopefully, he will continue on the hard and narrow road, which can lead Hungary into the coming new era" (Németh 2018). However, Németh's and his church's promotion of anti-immigration and pro-Orbán sentiments is not restricted to the walls of the churches. In the past years, Németh has built up a media empire and managed to reach masses of people beyond Faith Church.

Beyond Islamophobia, Faith Church generally disseminates the values of social conservatism, as a result of which it backs the Orbán government's cultural agenda. Not only does it preach family values and promote anti-abortion commitments, but it also appears to be a strong opponent of the concept of gender as social construction. The government and the churches firmly believe that humans are divided by their biological differences (i.e., the two sexes) from their birth. Those biological characteristics are supposed to define people's identity over their lifetime. The tenth amendment of the Fundamental Law stated that the father is man and the mother is woman. Accordingly, the government introduced further policies to discriminate against same-sex couples' adoption of and raising of children. These couples cannot have this right automatically; instead, they need to apply to the government to get permission. In the meantime, the government repeatedly claims that it treats gay and lesbian people equally, and pro-regime officials even add that their anti-Muslim migration policy is the best guarantee for gays and lesbians to avoid any harassment.

Since 2010, the Orbán government has initiated referendums on two occasions. In 2016, it organized a referendum against the European quota system for managing migration. Although the campaign was accompanied with intensive Islamophobic propaganda by connecting Islam with terrorism, the referendum turned out to be unsuccessful due to the low turnout. As a result, the government could not legally displace the quota system; nonetheless, the Orbán regime still refused the admission of refugees from the Middle East.

Five years later, the government initiated another referendum, this time against *gender ideology*. The goal of this referendum was to gain popular support for a previous piece of legislation by which Orbán consciously confounded homosexuality with pedophilia. To raise the level of participation, the referen-

dum was held on the day of the 2022 nationwide elections. The four referendum questions, a bit softer than the previous homophobic legislation, were as follows:

- Do you support the teaching of sexual orientation to minors in public education institutions without parental consent?
- Do you support the promotion of sex reassignment therapy for underage children?
- Do you support the unrestricted exposure of underage children to sexually explicit media content that may affect their development?
- Do you support the showing of sex-change media content to minors?

The referendum turned out to be unsuccessful because most voters could not interpret the questions within the framework of their everyday lives. The topic turned out to be too sophisticated for the pro-government voters. Fidesz won the general elections but lost the referendum on the same day.

In general, authoritarian regimes dislike ambiguity, fluidity, perplexity, and contextualization; therefore, they are against the liberal ideas of chosen identity and social constructivism. They prefer simplified binary oppositions and predefined, unquestionable, fixed identities. Authoritarian governments promise security over freedom to the people, so they believe that propagating fixed identities makes their ruling easier. In the final analysis, it is power politics that defines Orbán's policies on Muslim migrants and *gender ideology*. The regime tends to use the Pentecostal Faith Church to help reinforcing traditional social roles and identities.

Németh's role in the media landscape

Today, the media landscape in Hungary is characterized by the overwhelming dominance of government-controlled media. This results in anti-migrant and anti-Muslim narratives "largely incontestable in today's political and media environment" (Sereghy 2018, 269). As Zsuzsanna Vidra (2019, 134–135) has observed, almost all media in Hungary express some degree of Islamophobia. Their reports reduce Islam and Muslims to Islamist terrorism and anti-immigrant messages. This is true for state-owned and most private media alike. The depiction of Muslim refugees and migrants as part of the "invasion of Europe"

has been continual since 2015, the year of the "refugee crisis" (Jones-Gailani and Gőbl 2019, 399).

Some of the channels regularly promoting Islamophobic anti-immigrant messages are connected to Faith Church. Investigative reporters from the internet portal *Átlátszó* and the weekly *Magyar Hang* found that Németh took over majority ownership of the TV channel ATV, assisted by an offshore company registered in Liechtenstein (Bodoky 2020). ATV had been an important source of information for left–liberal voters for decades, even after the crushing defeat of SZDSZ. While Sándor Németh and Faith Church were pariahs during the first Orbán government (1998 to 2002), after 2010, he changed his position and started to come closer to the Orbán regime. No wonder Faith Church had achieved its anticipated legal and political status by 2012.

Once known as Hungary's last oppositional TV station, following Németh's pro-government maneuverings in the 2010s, ATV began promoting selectively pro-government messages while keeping a general oppositional profile. Since 2014, Faith Church has received significant subsidies, and ATV has received orders and advertisements from the government. Meanwhile, Németh started to propagate pro-government messages. He has stood with the government on important ideological issues, particularly Islamophobia, family values, and law and order. As Németh strengthened his pro-government political position, he was able to increase his share at ATV as well.

Staff working at ATV have complained about strong editorial bias at the television station and what they perceive to be a marked departure from the commercial television station's previous oppositional editorial approach (Balogh 2020a; Bódis 2021). Miklós Haraszti (2020, 219) hinted at the church's role in building out "Viktor Orbán's propaganda state." Even though Németh denied accusations of shifting ATV toward the interests of Fidesz, he admitted that the "state advertisements are very important to the finances of [ATV]" (Novak 2018a). While Orbán's government has made the work of independent media channels difficult—in some cases, impossible (Haraszti 2020)—it has never threatened the stations associated with Faith Church.

These developments make us question Holly Folk's thesis. Folk (2017) suggested that Faith Church is not a copy of US Pentecostal churches, as this community "advocates strongly for religious freedom and other civil rights, such as freedom of the press and of association, and it strongly opposes fascism" (108). While this was certainly true before 2010, since Orbán's authoritarian populist regime change, Faith Church has been playing an active part in compromising press freedoms and legitimizing the regime. While we do not con-

sider Orbán and Fidesz per se fascists, their rhetoric and political argumentation have been described as essentially fascistic by various observers, including philosopher Jason Stanley (2020) and author Rudolf Ungváry (2014). Faith Church, of course, opposes fascism per se. Yet, it is bothered by neither the aggressive nationalistic and systematically stigmatizing rhetoric nor the increasingly authoritarian policies that Orbán and Fidesz pursue. On the contrary, it contributes to the stigmatization of immigrants, Muslims, and pro-choice activists, just as it perpetuates antisemitic conspiracy myths. This is comparable to the far-right groups within the Republican Party, which also tend to stigmatize members of these groups (Langer 2022, 175–176; MacLean 2017).

Faith Church, and Sándor Németh himself, not only owns ATV, where his son, Szilárd Németh, works as CEO, but he also has considerable influence on the Spirit FM radio station, which is owned by his son's association. All Spirit FM broadcasters are registered at the ATV headquarters, and there is a huge overlap among the presenters of these two media outlets. Spirit FM regularly repeats certain ATV programs. In 2022, the media authority of the Orbán regime took away the frequency scale following its expiration from the liberal Klubrádió (Club Radio) and awarded it to Spirit FM. This was an example of an unlawful, direct governmental intervention to the frequency dissemination procedure, enabling Faith Church to receive the frequency for 10 years (Rényi 2022). This demonstrated the government's intention to control the remaining semi-autonomous institutions in order to broaden the space for maneuvering between direct propaganda and indirect manipulation.

Németh denied "being in cahoots with Fidesz" (Novak 2018a). Nonetheless, as this article has shown, the reverend has expressed his support for Orbán on various occasions. Németh's and his church's loyalty to Orbán seems to have paid off. Apart from not experiencing deregistration after the 2012 religious law reform, as all the other Pentecostal churches did, in 2018, the Fidesz-led government allocated HUF 758 million (USD 2.9 million) to Faith Church. HUF 394 million was to be used to build a conference center within Hit Park, the church's central space in Budapest. The other HUF 364 million was awarded to the Saint Paul Academy (Szent Pál Akadémia), a Pentecostal theological school founded by Németh (Német 2017).

In 2020, the Hungarian government signed an agreement with Faith Church. According to the Pentecostal community's press release, "[t]he government has recognized the activities of the largest Hungarian evangelical church as valuable for society. It is unique in Europe that a government not only grants full religious freedom to a charismatic Evangelical church but

grants the same legal and financial support for them as for the other mainstream denominations" (Faith Church 2020). It is to be assumed that the good relationship between Németh, his church, and Fidesz will continue in the coming years.

Conclusions

The history of Faith Church after the fall of communism is the story of a formerly repressed, anti-communist congregation, whose leader, Pastor Sándor Németh, did his best to make the Pentecostal Christian community an accepted church in Hungary. To achieve this, Németh sought to forge alliances with influential political forces, first with the most radical representative of the regime change, the liberal party SZDSZ. As Faith Church's membership grew dynamically in the 1990s and 2000s, political parties increasingly embraced its grassroots community to win the nearly 100,000 voters that it could reach. Although Faith Church was nowhere near as influential as the Hungarian Catholic Church or the Calvinist and Jewish communities, the committed and disciplined political activity of its members proved attractive to the parties.

We have shown that Németh's efforts were successful overall because after the change of power in 2010, Viktor Orbán, with a two-thirds majority in Parliament, elevated Faith Church to the status of an established church. At the same time, however, not only the social influence of Faith Church increased, but also the political system of the country fundamentally changed (Krasztev and Van Til 2015; Kovács and Trencsényi 2020). Liberal democracy was replaced first by an illiberal hybrid regime and then by a personalized authoritarian system. In this highly centralized political regime, Faith Church attained considerable political influence, largely through its growing media empire.

The rise of Faith Church can be understood as a political experiment by the authoritarian populist regime. Although nominally independent from the state, large established churches in Hungary remained dependent on government financing and were practically forced to cooperate with any incumbent government. As the political right, including Orbán's Fidesz, traditionally gains legitimacy from endorsements by large Christian denominations, state–church relations have been particularly tight during the tenure of right-wing governments. In consequence, controlling large established churches has carried strategic importance for the Orbán regime, creating a particularly close cooperation with the two largest denominations, the Catholics and the

Calvinists. Subordinating them politically, however, reduced their autonomy, as well as their spiritual independence and credibility.

As a Pentecostal charismatic church controlling a considerable media empire, Faith Church has offered additional spiritual resources and political mobilizing capacity for the radicalizing political agenda of the regime, which the larger, historically established churches have been unable—and, to be fair, in some parts also unwilling—to create. Hence, unlike in some democratic countries with a strong tradition of separation between church and state, it was not the case in Hungary that a charismatic Christian community had become politically influential on its own. On the contrary, the authoritarian state used a congregation struggling for established church status for its own political ends.

Paradoxically, however, the rise of Faith Church was accompanied by a loss of its political autonomy. Today, Faith Church is not only a religious community; it is also a business venture of the family of the pastor who leads the congregation. The charismatic congregation has been corrupted and co-opted by the government, making the formerly autonomous community one of the politically most devoted legitimizing institutions of the ethnopopulist Orbán regime. The developments around Faith Church illustrate the trajectory of Christian nationalism in Hungary, in which an ideologically radicalized version of Christianity is being instrumentally used by an increasingly authoritarian, yet popularly elected political regime.

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