

# **The Conservative (Catholic) Christian Right in Central Europe and the Illiberal Backlash**

## **The Czech Republic and Slovakia in Comparative Perspective**

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### **Introduction**

In 1989, Czechoslovakia liberated itself from communism. Political pluralism and religious freedom were reestablished, while the country was dissolved into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993. In this chapter, we introduce and compare the manifestations of the Christian (Catholic) Right broadening into the public sphere. This involves discussion of the agents who are more or less affiliated with the Catholic Church and its hierarchy. First, we briefly introduce the political systems of both countries. Second, attention is paid to the religious landscapes, depicting the relationships between the state and the church, as well as providing statistics related to the number of believers in the most relevant churches. Consequently, this chapter analyzes religious agents: insiders within the highest ranks of the Catholic clergy itself, *Christian* political parties, religious organizations and initiatives, and related media networks. When it comes to the internal structure, each subchapter is divided into two sections aimed at the Czech Republic and Slovakia, respectively.

### **1. The political and party system**

#### **Czech Republic**

The Czech Republic was established in 1993 as a parliamentary democracy (Brunclík and Kubát 2016) and a unitary state. The Czech Parliament is made

up of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, to which members are elected for four and six years, respectively. The Czech prime minister (PM), commonly the chairman of the major political party winning the most recent general election, is the head of government and represents executive power dependent on the majoritarian support of the lower chamber. The president, elected for a five-year term, is the head of state and commander-in-chief. He lacks many executive competencies *de iure*. Nevertheless, due to the interwar tradition of the strong center of power represented by the president, this has become a highly influential office, and its role has even strengthened following a 2012 constitutional amendment. Thanks to this, the president is elected no longer by both parliamentary chambers at their joint session but by the direct vote of the citizens (Brunclík and Kubát 2016, 12–13). This change and its consequences have encouraged scholarly discussion on whether the country is heading toward semi-presidentialism (e.g., Hloušek 2014).

The Czech party system could be described as stable during the period between 1992 and 2010 when coalition governments were usually formed by either the left-oriented Czech Social Democratic Party or the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (Balík and Hloušek 2016, 108). The era of limited pluralism ended when 10 parties entered the lower chamber in 2013 (Balík and Hloušek 2016, 107). This new period was marked by the advent and rise of the populist and originally center-right wing ANO 2011 party (*ano* means *yes* in Czech; initially, the meaning of ANO was Action of Dissatisfied Citizens), established and headed by billionaire Andrej Babiš (prime minister 2017–2021). However, ANO 2011 soon shifted to the center-left, attracting significantly higher electoral support from those who traditionally voted for the Social Democrats and the Communists. In recent months, the movement has been trying to appeal to conservative voters and has become skeptical towards the EU. Finally, in the 2021 general election, a wide range of right-wing and centrist parties banded together (including the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party, KDU–ČSL) in order to defeat ANO 2011. They succeeded in gaining a parliamentary majority and have formed a coalition government of five centrist and right-wing oriented parties headed by PM Petr Fiala.

## Slovakia

Like the Czech Republic, Slovakia is a unitary parliamentary republic with a directly elected head of state with a five-year term. The Parliament (National Council of the Slovak Republic, elected for a four-year term) is unicameral. Al-

though the Slovak political system is not usually considered semi-presidential (Spáč 2013), it is sometimes characterized in this way (Protsyk 2011). Considerations of this type intensified after the institutionalization of the direct election of the president in 1999 and even more so after 2011, when the constitution was significantly amended, giving the president the power to entrust the dismissed government with the temporary exercise of its powers (limited by the constitution) until a new government is appointed.

As in the case of the Czech Republic, the Slovak Prime Minister is appointed by the President. The PM-led government must gain support for its program statement in Parliament. The influence of two strong personalities in the position of PM, namely Vladimír Mečiar and Robert Fico (Kováčik and Klučiarovský 2015), was decisive for the formation of the Slovak political system. Usually, the PM is the chairman of the strongest governmental party, although there have been some exceptions.

As can be seen from this brief overview, Slovakia has a quite fragmented and unstable multiparty system without a dominant party. Quite typical is “the overall weak institutionalization of political parties,” as well as, “on the other hand, [the strong] personification of politics, [the] short life of existing” entities and the “frequent emergence of new entities, partially filling the vacancy after the existing ones or, in some other cases, responding to new situations” (Hynčica and Šárovec 2018, 11). A major challenge for the party system has recently been the rise of Euroscepticism (Ušiak and Jankovská 2021) and growing voter support for anti-establishment, especially far-right parties (Voda, Klučnovská, and Spáč 2021), represented by Kotleba—People’s Party Our Slovakia and The Republic (the latter emerging after splitting off from the former after the 2020 general election).

## 2. The religious landscape

### Czech Republic

After the fall of communism, freedom of belief and religion and the rights of all churches and religious orders began to be constitutionally guaranteed. They have also become a lived reality in public life, without any state interference. However, the question of the Catholic Church’s property restitution, following its previous seizure during the communist regime, became a contested and unpopular issue in the Czech Republic. The approval of the Church’s property

restitution in 2012 by one of the center-right governments was only narrowly approved by the legislature. In 2017, the center-leftist coalition government backed by the communist party controversially taxed these compensations, but this was subsequently cancelled by the Czech Constitutional Court (ČTK 2019).

At the diplomatic level, in 1990, right after the fall of the communist regime, the then Czechoslovakia reestablished its diplomatic relationships with the Holy See. In 2002, the international agreement between the Czech Republic and the Holy See was signed by the government. However, its ratification was later turned down by the Chamber of Deputies, as the communists, some Social Democrats, and even secular right-wing MPs from the Civic Democratic Party opposed ratifying the treaty, arguing the need to protect national sovereignty and the importance of the equality of all churches (Enyedi and O'Mahony 2006, 174–175). Thus, the Czech Republic became the only post-communist country not to have such an agreement with the Holy See (“Vatican and Czech relations” 2003).

The Czech Republic, sometimes referred to as an *atheist* or *non-believing* country (Hamplová and Nešpor 2009), recorded 43.9% of believers in the 1991 census. The majority of them (89%) declared their affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church, followed by the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (4.5%) and the Czechoslovakian Hussite Church (3.9%). The radical decline of believers and of those affiliated to registered churches has further continued in later censuses. In the 2021 census, a voluntary question on religious affiliation was answered by 69.9% of people (compared to 55.3% in 2011 and 91.2% in 2001), of whom 48.7% were self-declared non-believers, while 13.1% belonged to a church or religious society. Of these, 741,000 declared their affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church, which represented a decrease in those affiliated to this church of approximately two million people over 20 years (CZSO 2022).

Interestingly, when focusing on the 2021 census figures, the then archbishop of Prague, Cardinal Dominik Duka, denoted media reports pointing to the declining numbers of Roman Catholics in the country as *fake news*. Duka sharply rejected the methodology chosen by the Czech Statistical Office and argued that the COVID-19 circumstances, the non-obligatory question on religious affiliation in the questionnaire, and the strong sense of ecumenism among many Roman Catholics identifying themselves simply as *believers*, together with their fear of openly declaring their religious affiliation, artificially diminished the number of Roman Catholics in the official figures (Duka 2022).

## Slovakia

In terms of the relevance of Christianity, Slovakia is often contrasted with the Czech Republic as a country that still has a relatively high degree of religiosity. This is represented by a *traditional* type of believer/churchgoer, the significant representation of self-declared Christians in Parliament, and the relatively strong voice of the (Catholic) clergy in society. It should be noted that until the mid-1950s, Slovakia was a predominantly rural country with a strong Christian religiosity. As mentioned earlier, believers of almost all confessions underwent structural persecution during the communist regime of 1948–1989.

In sharp contrast to the Czech Republic, the Catholic Church's position in Slovakia is relatively strong due to historical reasons. This is also reflected in its relationship with the state. It should be remarked that in 2000, the Basic Agreement between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See was signed. In 2002, the treaty regarding the operation of the churches in the army, police, and prisons was concluded. Two years later, the treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See on Catholic education was also concluded. Regarding the issue of restitution, this was resolved in Slovakia sooner than in the Czech Republic. In March 2005, the Parliament passed a law on the return of the ownership of real estate to churches and religious societies, as well as the transfer of ownership of some real estate.

There was a significant religious revival connected with democratization processes after 1989. For the most dominant church, the Roman Catholic Church, this was associated with the building of new churches, the development of religious life, an increase in the number of priestly vocations, and the strengthening of the social position of the Church and its hierarchical representatives (Matlovič, Vlčková, and Matlovičová 2015). According to data from the latest census from 2021, Slovakia is still predominantly a Catholic country, with 55.76% of the population declaring themselves Roman Catholics (3,038,511; a 6% decrease compared to the 2011 census), 4% declaring themselves Greek Catholics (218,235), and 5.27% declaring themselves Augsburg Evangelicals (286,907). Those who declared that they were without any religious affiliation were 23.79% (1,296,142; ŠÚSR 2022). This slightly growing secularization trend and the changing dynamics of Slovak (Catholic) religiosity (Sekerák and Rončáková 2017; Moravčíková 2019) have led, quite paradoxically, to the desecularization of the state and public life, where various political agents verbally invoke Christianity and its values (Tížik 2017).

In their reactions to the results of the census, both leading representatives of the Catholic Church in Slovakia, the Archbishop of Bratislava and the then chairman of the Slovak Episcopal Conference, Msgr. Stanislav Zvolenský, and the then Greek Catholic Archbishop of Prešov, Msgr. Ján Babjak, thanked the believers for professing their faith. According to the latter, “I deem the results of the census very positively. It is proof that our Church is alive, even though it is struggling with various problems” (TK KBS 2022).

### 3. The religious protagonists

#### 3.1. The clergy

##### Czech Republic

Since 1989, the Catholic Church has become the most influential institutional actor in the Czech Republic, together with the representative standing body of the Czech Catholic bishops (the Czech Bishops' Conference) and the Archbishops of Prague: František Tomášek (1977–1991), Miloslav Vlk (1991–2010), Dominik Duka (2011–2022) and Jan Graubner since 2022. Moreover, there is the umbrella association entitled the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic.

František Tomášek, a symbol of resistance against communism, was succeeded as archbishop of Prague by Miroslav Vlk in 1991 (Cardinal from 1994). Msgr. Vlk systematically fought against xenophobia, racism, antisemitism (Allen 2009), and neo-Nazism during the 1990s and throughout the first decade of the new millennium. In face of the deeply rooted Germanophobia in Czech society, he aimed to improve the relations between Czechs and Germans. In 2006, Vlk strongly criticized the activities of the circles associated with the Society of St. Pius X, known as the Lefebvrists, accusing them of “sympathies for anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism,” while Lefebvrists replied that Vlk was socially ostracizing “Catholics who point to the negative consequences of liberalization processes in the church” (Allen 2009). The Lefebvrists are traditional Catholics who are constantly appealing for a return to pre-Vatican II Catholicism in liturgy and denounce the post-Council Catholic Church for becoming too open to modernism and liberalism. Cardinal Vlk further openly criticized the emerging Islamophobia and expressed his sympathy with angry Muslims during the Prophet Muhammad cartoon crisis (Vaughan 2006). He acted similarly during the recent *migration crisis*.

Cardinal Vlk wanted the Communist Party to be banned and had a series of clashes with Czech politicians, mainly over delays related to the return of Church properties from the state. However, his successor in the office, Archbishop (since 2012 a Cardinal) Dominik Duka, quickly became politically and ideologically closely tied to the “illiberal national–populist” (Hanley and Vachudová 2018, 280) President Miloš Zeman. They both shared “a populist approach and anti-immigrant rhetoric, islamophobia and disrespect for the Czech Prague intellectuals, political activists, NGOs, and human rights movements” (Šipka 2019, 95).

The approach of Cardinal Duka and the majority of the Catholic Church to the issue of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (still not ratified) serves as another example of the intolerant and illiberal approach of recent years. Conservative groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Czech Bishops’ Conference, and its head (Cardinal Duka), have strongly opposed its ratification, associating it with “gender ideology” and the “attack on traditional family” and arguing the need to preserve the “status quo” and the traditional role of men and women (Guasti 2021, 196–197). It should be noted that the document itself is primarily aimed “against violence against women and domestic violence” (Council of Europe 2021). In this regard, perhaps the most severe accusation, publicly supported by Cardinal Duka, was proclaimed by Msgr. Petr Pitha, one of Duka’s closest collaborators, during mass in 2018: “This is to be enacted under the Istanbul Convention in the name of a powerful pressure group of genderists and homosexuals. Your families will be torn and dispersed. They will take your children and keep you from where they went, where they sold them, where they are imprisoned” (cited in Guasti 2021, 197).

## Slovakia

Unsurprisingly, given the relatively high proportion of the Catholic population, the most important religious actor is the Slovak Episcopal Conference (SEC), the Slovak counterpart of the Czech Bishops’ Conference. When compared with the Czech Republic, the Slovak Catholic bishops represent a much larger part of the population. Moreover, in Slovakia, there is no primate (in contrast to the Archbishop of Prague in the Czech Roman Catholic Church), so there is no distinctive speaker who is first among equals among the hierarchs. The episcopate, together as a whole and also individually, regularly express their views on social and political issues. Let us briefly mention some of the most significant instances from recent years.

In 2009, shortly before the presidential elections, the Slovak media extensively reported on a homily broadcast on the radio, which was delivered by the then diocesan bishop of Banská Bystrica, Msgr. Rudolf Baláž, a former chairman of the SEC. In his homily, Baláž criticized the then presidential candidate Iveta Radičová (later PM) for her liberal attitude to the issue of abortion. She had publicly commented on the issue that what is moral or immoral in society is a matter of social agreement. “Does this sentence mean that if society agrees that murder is not a sin and a violation of the law, then we can kill? This is for fools,” Baláž remarked (bes 2009).

A decade later, in 2019, once again before the presidential elections, the Archbishop of Trnava, Msgr. Ján Orosch, commented on another female presidential candidate, Zuzana Čaputová. In his publicly broadcasted homily, Orosch declared that to cast a vote for her meant a “grave sin” for a Catholic, calling her an “ultraliberal candidate” (Gehrerová 2019). As in the Czech Republic, in the Slovak religious milieu of recent years, there can be traced the rejection of political liberalism and the rights of the LGBTIQ+ minority, as well as opposition to the Istanbul Convention.

A bigger public uproar was ignited by the Advent Pastoral Letter of the SEC a few years before. In addition to human sexuality, this dealt extensively with the topic of *gender ideology*, which is one of the main targets of the Christian Right not only in Slovakia (Đurinová 2015) but also across Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kováts 2018; Lavizzari and Prearo 2019). The letter reads as follows: “The adherents of the culture of death come with a new ‘gender ideology.’ Through the noble catchwords a breakdown of family life, which is to be sacred, is being promoted in society. This is a blasphemous riot of man against his Creator. This is what the actors of the culture of death and the proponents of gender ideology want to destroy in the name of noble catchwords” (KBS 2013). As is obvious, the letter’s authors worked with the term *culture of death* taken from St. John Paul II’s encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* of 1995.

There are plenty of other examples of how Christian ecclesial leaders struggle against this *ideology*, which plays the role of a straw man in their narratives. For instance, in its 2020 written opinion, the Dogmatic Committee of the Augsburg Evangelicals stated that “[t]o love the Lord means to be obedient to His Word and not to interpret it according to fashion trends and different ideologies. We reject the labelling as homophobes for those who do not share the same view of ideology related to same-sex attraction or transsexuality and gender identity” (Vieroučný výbor ECAV na Slovensku 2020).

### 3.2. Parties and their relation to Christianity and the Catholic Church

#### Czech Republic

Due to the long-lasting and strong secularization of Czech society, the right-wing parties, including the protest ones (Kim 2020), have pursued mainly (neo)liberal and eventually conservative discourses, but they have widely ignored pointing out the importance of Christian values (Hanley 2010, 116). However, after 9/11, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, and the London bombings of 2005, things have begun to change. Moreover, the advent of the *migration crisis* shaped the dynamics of the conservative backlash, with the Christian–Western narrative being employed not only by the KDU–ČSL. In this period, the issue of religion has become a common weapon in political rhetoric (Kratochvíl 2019).

After 1989, the KDU–ČSL established themselves as the most significant representatives of the Christian (and, more concretely, Catholic) electorate in the country. The party lobbied for the restitution of property once seized from the Catholic Church during the communist era. In particular, due to the prevailing liberal opinion in Czech society regarding reproductive rights (CVVM 2007), the party did not obviously promote its conservative programmatic issues (e.g., a ban on abortions and resistance to same-sex partnerships) in its electoral campaigns (Linek and Lyons 2011, 1158). However, several *abnormalities* from liberal democratic standards emerged during the period analyzed.

Due to the rising popularity of the *clash of civilizations* approach after 2001, during the 2009 electoral campaign, regional and predominantly Catholic political representatives of the KDU–ČSL strongly opposed the second mosque to be built in Brno (ČTK 2009), the largest city in and historical capital of Moravia (Moravia occupies the eastern part of the Czech Republic and is more Catholic than Bohemia). Shaped by other terrorist attacks in Europe and the emergence of the recent *migration crisis*, there has been a shift from nationalism to civilizationism, which, “driven by the notion of a civilizational threat from Islam” (Brubakers 2017, 1191), has given birth to an identitarian type of Christianity.

The rising resistance to Islam and Muslims, as well as the adherence to *Christian roots*, *Christian–Western culture*, and the *Judeo-Christian pillars of our civilization*, seems to be quite new in the rhetoric of the Christian Right in the Czech Republic. For example, high-ranked politicians of the KDU–ČSL expressed their support for the authoritarian populist and illiberal Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán (KDU–ČSL 2013). The then party chairman Pavel Bělobrádek congratulated Orbán on his victory in the 2018 general elections, saying that

“we have to defend values of European Christian civilization and national cultures” (Bělobrádek 2018). Prior to the 2017 general election, the KDU-ČSL formulated their basic programmatic directions for the 2017–2019 period, emphasizing the issue of Judeo-Christian civilization, “our culture,” while opposed to “multiculturalism” and “gender ideology” in education, as well as the trivialization of “our culture” (KDU-ČSL 2017, 4, 7–10). Finally, the KDU-ČSL have opposed the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by associating it with “gender ideology” and the “attack on traditional family,” further arguing for the need to preserve the “status quo” and the traditional role of men and women in society (Guasti 2021, 196–197), although that document was primarily aimed “against violence against women and domestic violence” (Council of Europe 2021).

After the 2017 general elections, Cardinal Duka congratulated in a letter the chairman of the openly xenophobic and Islamophobic Freedom and Direct Democracy, writing that “I’m convinced that we are united with care over the security of the people in this country and a series of other topics” (ČT24 2017). Duka ignored pressure from the more cosmopolitan and rather influential Catholic intelligentsia informally headed by prominent Catholic priest Tomáš Halík, who asked him to condemn the party for its xenophobia and had previously criticized him openly “for failing to make a distinction between Islam and Jihadist terrorism” (Dizdarevič 2017, 161). Duka defended his letter of congratulation by emphasizing that this (xenophobic) party supported the values of the *traditional family*, “which consists of men and women” (ČT24 2017). A Dominican friar, Filip Antonín Maria Stajner, even publicly recommended that Christians vote for Freedom and Direct Democracy rather than for the KDU-ČSL (PL 2017).

Finally, in 2021, Josef Nerušil, an employee of the Archbishop of Prague and an administrator of Duka’s Facebook page, publicly declared his decision to run for the 2021 general election as a leader of Freedom and Direct Democracy in a Prague constituency, saying that the party more corresponded to Christian values than the too moderate Christian Democrats. Neither Duka nor the archbishopric distanced themselves from Nerušil’s affiliation to the party (APHA 2021), which once again irritated the more pro-liberal urban Catholic intelligentsia.

## Slovakia

Until 2016, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH; Štefančík 2019) was considered the main Christian-oriented political party, with a close affinity

to the Catholic Church. Its roots can be traced in the environment of Slovak Catholic dissent. In the first years of its existence after 1989, the KDH's policy was embodied primarily within the personality of its founder, Ján Čarnogurský, an important representative of Catholic anti-communist dissent, who is today known for his admiration of Vladimir Putin. His political thought has long been characterized by a strong emphasis on conservative Christian and national values. Since its establishment, the KDH has promoted the idea of a return to Europe, namely, Slovakia's geopolitical reorientation to the West and Euro-Atlantic cooperation (Hynčica 2015). However, over the years, the party has gone through many internal tensions.

In the 2016 general election, the KDH did not enter Parliament for the first time in its history. In this period, there was significant party fragmentation in Slovakia. Several conservative-oriented political parties emerged, and some other parties strengthened the conservative elements in their programs. All of these tried to fill an ideological gap, seeking to appeal to Christian-oriented voters (Sekerák 2019). Despite the entry of Marian Kotleba's far-right party into Parliament, this should not be viewed as a mainstreaming of this type of politics. One of the parties that sought the favor of conservative voters was the Slovak National Party. Its chairman, Andrej Danko (who was already in the position of speaker of the Parliament), stated at his meeting with the SEC that he would do everything possible to ensure that LGBTIQ+ rights were not enforced in Slovakia (SITA 2016).

It is worth noting that a few years before, the chairman of the Social Democrats, Robert Fico (the then PM), had also sought balanced relations with the Catholic Church, stating, "I would be very happy that if the Church is a mother to the believer, let the state be the father of all citizens" (SITA 2008). Such claims are unsurprising because this nationalistic rhetoric, supplemented in later years by cultural conservatism, is typical of Fico (Burzova 2012). Fico also openly manifested his sympathy toward the now-deceased Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec, the former bishop of Nitra, who—as a heavily persecuted and secretly consecrated bishop during the communist regime—was a Slovak ecclesial legend and dissident icon. This can be explained as Fico's attempt to reach conservative voters. It is apparent that many other political parties have been interested in this type of electorate. We should mention that the KDH, which is ideologically similar to its Czech counterpart the christian-democratic KDU-ČSL, was unsuccessful once again in the 2020 general election.

In 2014, there was an interesting political cooperation between these two parties regarding the constitutional protection of *traditional marriage*. The then ruling Social Democrats, with the help of the votes of the opposition Christian Democrats, achieved a substantial constitutional amendment introducing a strict definition of marriage as a union of man and woman. A year later, some conservative NGOs (especially the Alliance for the Family, on which see below), in a close collaboration with the Catholic Church, collected signatures to hold a nationwide referendum on the protection of the *traditional family*. However, the referendum was characterized by a low turnout and led to a significant polarization of public opinion (Valkovičová 2017; Synek Rétiová 2021).

### 3.3. Christian-minded organizations and initiatives

#### Czech Republic

In the 1990s, there were some insignificant political groupings of the Christian Right bearing certain pro-fascist, corporatist, and clerofascist traits, such as the Movement of National Unification. This group appealed to the relevance of religion and Catholic morality and was persuaded of the importance of “traditional and natural religion in which our national tradition was established and our past formed” (Mareš 2000). In the new millennium, similar nationalistic, conservative, and pro-Christian initiatives emerged, which also manifested as strongly anti-EU and as defenders of Christian identity in Europe. In particular, in 2001, the conservative historian Petr Bahník founded a Society for Cultural Identity – Linden Cross, which organized conservative lectures, participated in anti-Marxist and anti-EU demonstrations, and closely collaborated with nationalistic and antisemitic initiatives. In 2007, Bahník became chairman of the tiny Rights and Justice Party, a “movement for nation and family,” which appealed against immigration, the EU, homosexual relationships, and euthanasia (onl-iHned 2007). In the previous year, the St. Wenceslas National Assembly, an umbrella movement of Czech nationalists (Mareš 2009), of which Bahník was a chairman, declared as dangerous the process of decomposition of traditional Christian values that had been caused by anti-Christian, multiculturalist, and supranational political elites. Finally, Bahník initiated the manifesto D.O.S.T. (*dost* means *enough* in Czech) in 2007, which gradually became active under the name Akce D.O.S.T. (Action D.O.S.T.). Akce D.O.S.T. has become popular due to the direct support it has enjoyed from Ladislav Jakl and Petr Hájek, the closest collaborators of Czech President Václav Klaus. The manifesto emphasized the relevance of the “Western, Antique-Christian roots of our

traditional culture,” families of men and women, and the “cultural and spiritual values of Western civilization.” It condemned a would-be political correctness and leveling aimed at creating a multicultural worldview (Akce D.O.S.T. 2007).

Moreover, a number of conservative and pro-Catholic groups focusing predominantly on regular conservative issues such as sexual education and abortion have emerged. In the mid-1990s, the Committee for the Defense of Parental Rights was founded in Brno as a reaction to the intention of the Ministry of Education to launch compulsory sexual education in primary schools. According to this initiative, only parents were morally responsible for the education of their children (Konzervativní strana 2010). As its successor, the Alliance for the Family was formed in 2017, which lobbies for *traditional families* and against same-sex marriages. In the late 1990s, the Pro-Life Movement initiative emerged. This is primarily a pro-life initiative, lobbying for legal restrictions on abortions by organizing the annual March for Life in Prague since 2001 (supported by Cardinal Duka) as well as exhibitions such as *Stop Genocide*, which portrayed bloody fetuses in city squares around the country. Although it has never turned to terrorist or violent attacks on clinics (Rees 2013), it can be viewed as implicitly nationalistic and anti-Islamic in its character.

As for the traditionalist-oriented currents within the conservative Catholics, several nationalistic-oriented initiatives on the Christian Right emerged in the early 1990s, such as the Society of Charles IV and the Club of Francis Ferdinand d’Este. The latter recruited its members and supporters from KDU-ČSL, radicals, and nationalist exponents of neo-Nazism and anti-semitism. In 1997, intellectuals under the leadership of Michal Semín, a well-known strongly conservative figure in the Czech Republic, founded the Una Voce initiative focusing on promoting church services in the Latin language for mystical and aesthetical reasons. Una Voce established itself as an anti-global and anti-EU initiative and directed criticism against Cardinal Vlk for his liberal views. Una Voce coordinated its activities with nationalist and far-right groupings and finally ended its activities shortly after the new Millennium (although they were renewed in 2012) due to being overshadowed by other traditionalist Catholic initiatives, such as the Lefebvrists and the St. Joseph Institute. The Lefebvrists, who appeared in the Czech Republic shortly after 1989, have become known for their religious and liturgical activities not only in larger Czech cities such as Brno and Prague but also in the town of Frýdek-Místek, reaching up to hundreds of supporters. Tomáš Strizsko, a prominent leader of the Czech Lefebvrists, claimed that Christians should not vote for

the current KDU-ČSL, alleging that they do not promote conservative values and are too close to Marxist and liberal political parties (FSSPX 2008). The St. Joseph Institute, a Catholic and conservative initiative founded by Michal Semín in 2005, has criticized the current liberal secular order and fought against secularization and “organized naturalism,” asserting the defense of “Catholic positions against syncretism, ecumenism and other pitfalls” (ISJ 2021).

Regarding the opposition to governmental anti-COVID measures and analogous anti-vaccination initiatives and activists, a well-organized and active alliance of initiatives with multifarious ideological affiliations has emerged in the Czech Republic. This includes individuals from non-political associations, media celebrities from the medical profession (including nationalists), far-right groups, and the Christian Right and Catholics represented by Action D.O.S.T. and the St. Joseph Institute. They organized sharp protests against the official implementation of COVID passes, calling it discriminatory and claiming that the strong assistance of sophisticated technologies in this process was introducing “permanent sanitationist apartheid,” thus making society drift toward the verge of a “new totalitarianism” (Akce D.O.S.T. 2021). Furthermore, pointing to the *abortion industry*, the lack of sufficient immunity after vaccination, and the negative side-effects of vaccination, activists from the Christian Right gathered around Michal Semín published an open letter to the Archbishop and president of the Czech Bishops’ Conference, Jan Graubner, in the ultra-Catholic online journal *Te Deum*, criticizing him for appealing to people to get vaccinated and for considering that act to be impeccable (Hodie 2021). Last but not least, Action D.O.S.T.co-organized (together with a vast number of initiatives and tiny non-parliamentary political parties, including nationalist and neo-Nazi groups) mass demonstrations against anti-COVID measures in Prague.

Finally, rather bizarre disinformation activities, which explain vaccination based on the *chipization* conspiracy theory and the interest of Bill Gates, the WTO, and the EU in creating controllable *biorobots* and severely reducing the world population, are being disseminated by the self-constituted Byzantine Catholic patriarchy of a few priests headed by the self-declared *archbishop* Eliáš Antonín Dohnal, who was earlier excommunicated from the Catholic Church and was recently residing in Ukraine. They have been declared anathema by the Catholic Church and other Eastern churches and have achieved some popularity in Ukraine, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (Štampach 2021). However, the Czech Bishops’ Conference and the overwhelming majority of Catholics

have supported or accepted vaccination and governmental measures, including closures and sanitary restrictions during services. Only a marginal initiative, known as the Třeboň Proclamation, has criticized how official restrictions were imposed on worship activities, funerals, and the rights of citizens to practice peaceable outdoor assemblies.

## Slovakia

In Slovakia too, various conservative NGOs can be found. Many of them are more or less close to the institutionalized Catholic Church. Unlike the Czech Republic, the influence of groups associated with the pre-conciliar form of the Roman liturgical rite has been rather marginal, although it has begun to increase in recent years.

Right-wing, religious-oriented groups gather mainly around the National March for Family, an annual mass event. The SEC is the main organizer of this march and supports it publicly through its pastoral letters. The partners of the march include, among other organizations, the NGO known as the Alliance for the Family. This was established in 2013 and has become the strongest opponent of LGBTIQ+ rights in Slovakia (Tektaş and Özgür Keysan 2021). The main public face of this organization is Anton Chromík, who has enjoyed significant media attention, especially in the period before the so-called referendum on the family in February 2015.

While Chromík has tried to be more consensual, often pointing to the alleged threats that the concept of the so-called traditional family has been facing, a much more confrontational type of communication with the public and the media was promoted by Jana Ray Tutková several years before the Alliance for the Family was established. Ray Tutková, who is Director of the Centre for Bioethical Reform, was one of the first pro-life activists in Slovakia (and was recently also known as an anti-vaxxer). Her fight against abortion has included drastic PR tools, such as the large-scale billboards that flooded Slovakia with their depictions of artificially aborted fetuses, similar to the aforementioned Czech Stop Genocide campaign (Beláňová 2020).

Another partner of the aforementioned march that is worthy of note is the traditionalist Institute of Leo XIII, which in its official *vision* states that “[w]e constantly watch as promoters of new values attack Christianity, as well as all pillars of a healthy society in an effort to replace them with enlightened social experiments. Utopian models that require the creation of a new, morally and socially ‘liberated man.’ Therefore, the Institute of Leo XIII aims to confront

these ideological efforts in order to build a broad, public Christian opposition that is aware of these threats" (Inštitút Leva XIII, 2010).

When it comes to the anti-vaxxer movement in Slovakia, this cannot be associated exclusively with the Christian Right. It is made up of several subcultures, not all of which are Christian-oriented. In addition to the aforementioned Ray Tutková, Peter Grečo, who often contributes to the conspiracy journal *Zem & Vek* (Earth & Age) and appears on the anti-system online ZVTV television channel, has close ties to this movement. He opposes vaccination and rejects the views of Pope Francis, while identifying himself with the conservative Christian Right. Nevertheless, the Catholic bishops' official stance regarding vaccination against COVID-19 is fully in line with the position of the Church and Pope Francis. In their appeal of November 2021, the bishops wrote the following: "We believe that vaccination is a great help allowing to stop the pandemic and save thousands of lives. By vaccination, we protect not only ourselves but also others. That one who doubts, let her decide precisely because the Christian vocation is to take care not only of herself but also of her neighbours and help them on the path of life. Let us be courageous and take this step out of love for others, for the weak, for the endangered" (TK KBS 2021).

### 3.4. Pro-Catholic media

#### Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, there is one non-commercial and apolitical TV channel focused on Christian audiences, *TV Noe* (established in 1996), whose director is the Salesian Leoš Ryška. Similarly, the Christian station *Radio Proglas* (established in 1995), directed by the Catholic priest Martin Holík, is also non-political and far from spreading radical or extremist attitudes. Finally, there is the traditional and soft Catholic-leaning journal *Katolický týdeník* (The Catholic Weekly).

In the 1990s, a series of periodicals emerged (e.g., *Týdeník Politika*, *Dnešek*, *Pochodeň Dneška*, and *Nový Dnešek*) aimed at promoting conservative or even ultra-conservative Catholic views commonly mixed with nationalist, anti-semitic, anti-Gypsy, anti-EU, and anti-NATO approaches (Mareš 2000). In some cases, these are even combined with elements of neo-fascism and neo-Nazism.

In the new millennium, a series of new journals emerged that spread conservative issues, either targeting traditionalist Catholic readers (e.g., the bi-monthly *Katolík revue* established in 2002) or affiliated to the Lefebvrists (*Te*

*Deum*). In 2004, the conservative bi-monthly *RC Monitor*, with the subtitle *The World through Catholic Eyes*, was issued for the first time. Recently, this has also shown itself to be anti-EU in its orientation, and one of its texts openly supported Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) before the parliamentary elections (Fuchs 2017), as well as supporting Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán (Cfam 2018). Currently, there are several other conservative online media, such as *Křesťan dnes* (Christian Today) and *Konzervativní noviny* (The Conservative Newspaper), the latter of which recently absorbed authors from the disappearing *Konzervativní listy* (The Conservative Papers; 2009–2019).

In regard to the disinformation scene, Petr Hájek, a former advisor and secretary of President Václav Klaus, surrounded by some personalities from the Christian Right, launched his conservative, anti-EU and pro-Kremlin online news server *Protiproud* (The Countercurrent) in 2013. This portrays its role as a defender of conservative and Christian values in a time of *migration crisis*. It openly declares its closeness to *Parlamentní listy* (The Parliament Papers), a leading disinformation (or eventually hybrid) online media server in the Czech Republic to which Cardinal Duka did not hesitate to give an interview (PL 2021). Finally, the expansion of the internet and social media has enabled initiatives (e.g., the Alliance for the Family [with its chairwoman Jana Jochová] and the Pro-Life Movement [with its speaker Zdeňka Rybová]) and individuals (e.g., Roman Joch and Matyáš Zrno) to disseminate the ideas, opinions, and thoughts of the Christian Right and lobby for its interests, including during the recent public campaign against same-sex marriages.

## Slovakia

As in the Czech Republic, there are various moderate Christian media in Slovakia directly connected with the Catholic Church, such as *Katolícke noviny* (The Catholic Newspapers, established in 1849), *Rádio Lumen* (established in 1993), and *TV Lux* (established in 2008). However, the conservative Christian Right in Slovakia prefers other information channels and media. In particular, the moderately conservative (and mostly Catholic) website *Postoj.sk* should be mentioned, as well as the recently established website *Christianitas.sk* and the slightly more radical online *Denník Štandard* (The Daily Standard) and *Hlavné Správy* (The Main News). All of these regularly publish articles critical of non-heterosexual minorities, progressivism, and liberalism. When it comes to *Christianitas.sk*, despite being independent of the official Catholic hierarchy, some Catholic hierarchs (including the aforementioned Msgr. Orosch) are among the interviewees and contributors. The website is closely connected

to the Slovakia Christiana Foundation, which, in its own words, “defends the teaching of the Church, natural understanding of marriage and family, freedom to profess the Christian faith and seeks to restore Christian civilization based on Catholic morality and Greek philosophy, based primarily on the Second Vatican Council decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*” (Komár 2021).

The Slovakia Christiana Foundation was established in 2016. According to the register, its founder was the Foundation of the Institute of Social and Religious Education of the Priest Piotr Skarga, which was registered in Krakow in 2001. Skarga (1536–1612) was a Polish Jesuit, preacher, hagiographer, and leading figure of the Counter-Reformation in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Slovakia Christiana Foundation has been inspired by the international *Traditio, Familia, Proprietas* (TFP) movement, which aims to protect the traditions of Christianity, family, and private property.

This foundation was one of the main organizers of the first Conservative Summit (Nadácia Slovakia Christiana 2021) held in Bratislava on September 20, 2021, where Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó spoke as the keynote speaker. Other high-profile speakers at the summit included Speaker of the Slovak Parliament Boris Kollár (chairman of the We Are the Family party), former Slovak MEP and current MP Anna Záborská, former Slovak PM Ján Čarnogurský, Slovak Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family Milan Krajniak, and KDH Czech senator (and former chairman of the KDH) Jiří Čunek (who is highly critical of non-heterosexual minorities). The summit was co-organized by the Polish conservative university Collegium Intermarium (established in 2021), which is closely linked to *Ordo Iuris*, a conservative Polish think-tank known for its protection of *traditional values*. Thus, the alliance between the Slovak and Polish (and partly Hungarian and Czech) Christian Right is quite obvious.

The aforementioned minister, Milan Krajniak, a former MP and current vice-chair of the We Are the Family party, can be considered one of the loudest critics of liberalism and liberal democracy. Before entering politics, he publicly referred to himself as the *last crusader*. His speeches in parliamentary debates are a good illustration of the contemporary Christian Right’s rhetoric in Slovakia: “We are not members of the Islamic, atheistic, liberal civilization, we do not have in Slovakia any mosques. But we have something here that every regime respected and that was churches; not under any regime did anyone let any church that had value and meaning fall down, and all those churches are Christian” (Krajniak 2016a); “Western civilization is built on three foundations:

Judeo-Christian ethics, Greek Athenian democracy, and Roman law. If liberal democracy seeks to castrate this civilizational identity of the West by removing the first pillar, the first foundation, then we will be a weak, emptied civilization without internal strength" (Krajniak 2016b).

It should be added that the criticism of the rights of sexual minorities is currently one of the main activities of the Christian Right in Central Europe (Kuźelewska 2019). Moreover, it can be stated that the fight against *gender ideology* is not only the topic of the far right (Đurinová and Malová 2017; Kazharski 2019), but it has also already become a standard part of Slovak politics and the rhetoric of conservative, right-wing media and NGOs (Valkovičová and Meier 2020).

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented a brief overview of the activities of the conservative Christian Right in two countries: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In both cases, while there are a number of differences, many common elements can be found. While in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium, the situation in the two countries was quite different due to their separate political developments and the position of the Catholic Church in society, various similar tendencies can be observed, at least for the most recent decade.

In Slovakia, in the 1990s, the Christian Right had a strong political influence in the form of conservative nationalism, which, at that time, was not part of the so-called culture wars. This was related to the emancipation efforts of Slovaks and the stage of state and national identity building (Findor and Kusá 1999). In the Czech Republic, this was a rather marginal political phenomenon. However, especially since the illiberal cultural/conservative backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019), the societal situations have converged. Paradoxically, this has happened despite the continuing social modernization and secularization. The Catholic Church and its affiliated organizations have become important public agents. In addition, many other non-religious actors (NGOs and political parties) have emerged, adopting identitarian, conservative rhetoric that refers to Christian values or roots as a defense against an external threat, whether Islam or political (supposedly *decadent Western*) liberalism. This rhetoric is associated with resistance against the rights of sexual minorities. Many (predominantly online) conservative media that have appeared in recent years (in the form of either alt-right or more moderate media) focus on these issues. These tenden-

cies in both countries reinforce the divide between liberals and conservatives (Rončáková 2015), with *Christian values* being used as an *empty signifier* in the public sphere, especially in connection with political Catholicism in its most radical forms.

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