

Religiosity in Viktor Orbán's political communication between 2010 and 2024
Desecularisation under Fidesz rule in Hungary

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Abstract

In February 2024, the President of Hungary resigned due to a political scandal, which involved the Hungarian Reformed Church and the Hungarian governing party, Fidesz. The case highlighted the interconnectedness of church and party politics in Hungary. While the country is supposed to be a secular state, the Fidesz party's ideological commitment to Christianity has led to a strong religious presence in Hungarian politics. The narrative deployed by the government often revolves around showcasing the right-wing party's commitment to Christian conservative values. The prime minister frequently uses religious phrases to underline the party's religious affiliation. This paper has found that the Fidesz party, and Viktor Orbán specifically uses a religious rhetoric for three main purposes: for conservative value communication and party brand building, for self-justification and the channelling of moral superiority and for the creation of a nation-threatening atmosphere against which the party can defend its citizens.

Introduction

In February 2024 a political crisis broke out, which led to the resignation of the president, Katalin Novák. The scandal revolved around an individual, who - after being prosecuted for helping out a paedophile director of a foster home - got a presidential pardon. As became apparent, the person who lobbied for the clemency was the head of the Protestant Church in Hungary, Zoltán Balogh. Besides his denominational duties, he was also a former minister of the Orbán government, and a close advisor and mentor of the president. The whole case was supposed to remain under grass, but a journalist from 444.hu (a government-critical newspaper outlet) published the story after a tip from a reader. The scandal erupted and it couldn't stop but destroy the political careers of two politicians and one denominational figure; the President, Katalin Novak the former Minister of Justice, ¹Judit Varga and the President of the Synad and head of the Reformed Church, Zoltán Balogh all resigned. The case points to the intertwined and multidimensional relationship between religion and the currently governing party of Hungary. Although Europe seems to be a primary advocate of modernism and secularism, the recently erupted scandal highlights that religion and churches are still important players in politics, especially on the right wing of the ideological spectrum.

Discussing secularisation, the separation between politics and religion has been a debated topic since the 20th century. Its main concept is that development and modernization lead to the decline of religiosity both on the collective and on the individual level.² Secularization theory conceived around the 1950s, with roots that can be traced back to the years of the Enlightenment.³ Since then, a lot of

¹ Judit Varga, former Minister of Justice was also involved in the incident. Introducing pardon requests and supporting the president's judgements are two of the justice minister's responsibilities in Hungary. Judit Varga was the justice minister during the controversial pardon; nevertheless, she resigned from her position last year, long before the controversy became public. Varga has officially announced her resignation from all political positions, although she was the leader of Fidesz's European Parliament ticket for the June election. The complete the story behind the pardon scandal may be found here: <https://visegradinsight.eu/hungarian-president-katalin-novak-resigns>.

² Berger, Peter L., ed. The desecularization of the world: Resurgent religion and world politics. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, (1999)

³ Berger, Peter L., ed. The desecularization of the world: Resurgent religion and world politics. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, (1999)

countries stepped on the trajectory of separating state and church relations. Secularization has been successful to some extent, most significantly in Western Europe; France serves as an outstanding manifesto of the secular Western state. However, it has been shown that while collectively some societies have been put on a secular course, influencing people's beliefs on the individual level is much harder. This means that total secularism and the end of religiosity in politics are far from becoming a global trend. Secularist theory has been proven wrong quite a few times in the modern world, as both old and new religions are spreading and resurging all over the world. Some notable examples have been in Islamic regions, in Northern America, Ireland, Cyprus or in the Balkans at the end of the 20th century, beginning and of the 21st century.⁴ Other than the natural spread of religiosity, the reappearance of religion in the political realm has been connected to rising populism and the strengthening of conservative, right-wing politics globally.

Hungary stepped on the path of secularisation in the 20th century. The country's history with Christianity started officially in 1000 CE, when King Saint Stephen founded the Hungarian, Christian state, giving up on the nation's pagan history. The influence of Christianity fluctuated throughout ages, but religion has never been that much of an integral building block of society in Hungary, compared to neighbouring Poland for example.⁵ After the Second World War, Hungary became a part of the Soviet Bloc, marking a new era in the relationship between religion and state in Hungary. Communism was strict on religion, the state wished to be the only regulatory force above its citizens. Therefore religion was like the forbidden fruit hanging above the citizen of the socialist state. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Hungarian state stepped on the path of secular liberalism as well. Today, the currently governing illiberal, right-wing Fidesz (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége, Alliance of Young Democrats) party heavily relies on religion when it comes to their political agenda. This has not always been the case, however.

⁴ Berger, Peter L., ed. *The desecularization of the world: Resurgent religion and world politics*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, (1999)

⁵ Kulska, Joanna. "The Sacralization of Politics? A Case Study of Hungary and Poland." *Religions* 14.4, (2023)

When founded in 1988, the Fidesz party used to be highly anti-clerical, anti-authoritarian and in favour of Europeanization and liberalism. During this time the primary audience of the party was the radical liberal youth, who wished to end the era of communist rule. Since then, the ideology of the currently governing Fidesz party has changed tremendously, as the party which was resting once on anti-clerical and liberal pillars, became a right-wing party with a strong religious agenda, which highly prioritizes Christian values. The reason for this is multifaceted; party brand building and social cleavages are all factors that contributed to the transformation of the party. ⁶After losing the election to the socialists in 2002, the founder and leader of the party, Viktor Orbán acknowledged that to meet voter expectations, they had to reshape the identity of the party. Sometimes, parties find themselves on the 'wrong' side of a cleavage, facing competitors. In such cases, parties can try to blur the divide, bring new aspects into political competition, or position themselves on the opposite side. Therefore, Fidesz began to transform their agenda into a mosaic of agrarian, religious and national-conservative values⁷. During the 1990s Viktor Orbán started to modify his party's ideological profile, slowly integrating Christian and conservative ideas into their political agenda. Fidesz's started the building of a new alliance along socio-cultural lines. Fidesz, for example, reorganized its party to reach this goal. One important factor here was the Civic Circles Movement.⁸ When losing the election in 2002, the Fidesz party decided to mobilise their voters by re-organizing and extending the network of the right-wing voters and politicians, so to reinvent political discourse. By founding this movement, they avoided radicalisation and apathy on the right-side which is often the case after losing an election. Through this movement, right-wing parties like Fidesz could continuously build and maintain support.⁹ This new civic factor changed the Hungarian political landscape tremendously, as more and

⁶ Enyedi, Zsolt. "The role of agency in cleavage formation." *European Journal of Political Research* 44.5 (2005): 697-720.

⁷ Enyedi, Zsolt. "The role of agency in cleavage formation." *European Journal of Political Research* 44.5 (2005): 697-720.

⁸ Greskovits, Bela *Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: the Civic Circles Movement*. *East European Politics*, 36(2), 247–266. (2020)

⁹ Greskovits, Bela *Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: the Civic Circles Movement*. *East European Politics*, 36(2), 247–266. (2020)

more rightist voters could join the movement of these civic circles.¹⁰ The goal of Orbán was to unite the right-wing voters and conquer the centre of the right-left ideological continuum. The role of religious denominations was rather important in this civic movement process. The reason for this is that churches can have a rather big role in democratization and political mobilization.¹¹ Some examples concerning the role of the church in anti-dictatorship and the democratizing process are in Spain or Brazil. Just like in Spain, in Hungary as well the church offered resources and manpower to the civic circle's movement.¹² The reason why churches participated in the Civic Movement was because they thought that to exert influence and protect their denominations, they must conquer a bigger part of the society. This relationship resulted in a rather good relationship between the Fidesz and churches. In 1994, Fidesz was the least authoritarian party with anti-clerical views in the Hungarian political system. By 2002, however, the electorate of Fidesz was much on the authoritarian end, with a growing religious discourse. Since 2002 the stance of the party has become even more polarized, becoming an almost far-right party, with heavy religious charge. In 2003, the party changed itself to a people's party, with a very strong civic movement background. Since their re-election in 2010, the party has been continuously associated with religious politics.

¹⁰ Gavra, Gabor A Fidesz átalakulása: Véget ért egy fejezet."Magyar Narancs, May 1. (2003)

¹¹ Casanova, José. Public religions in the modern world. Ch. 3 "Spain: From State Church to Disestablishment" (pp. 75-91) University of Chicago Press, (2011)

¹² Casanova, José. Public religions in the modern world. Ch. 3 "Spain: From State Church to Disestablishment" (pp. 75-91) University of Chicago Press, (2011)

Literature review

Although the number of people practicing Christianity in Hungary is declining¹³, the Central European country still counts as a rather religious state. This can be explained by its historical and regional connections to different denominations within the Christian culture. In 2023, 62 % of the Hungarians claimed to identify with any religion at all. Out of those who are religious, 58 % associates themselves with Christianity, while 4 % with other religions. 31 % of the society does not identify with any religion at all.¹⁴ The majority of Hungarians identify as Roman Catholic, while Protestant denominations such as Calvinism and Lutheranism also have a significant presence, particularly among ethnic minorities like the Hungarian-speaking communities in Transylvania. Apart from Christianity, small communities of Jews, Muslims, and various other religious groups also exist in Hungary. Concerning religious, between 2015 and 2016, only 9% of Hungarians claimed to pray weekly and 26% said to pray monthly or yearly. 64% of those asked claim they never attend religious services.¹⁵ Compared to 1991, there is a clear declining trend when it comes to the share of practising Catholics,¹⁶ however Hungary still counts as a rather religious country in Europe. This makes right-wing politics rather attractive among the population. Hungary's socio-political landscape is particularly attracted Christian, conservative ideas due to the nation's unique value structure, which combines elements of modernity and traditionalism. A key tool for understanding this mindset is the two-dimensional model developed by Ronald Inglehart, embodied by the World Values Survey. This model provides insight into how nations align on two critical axes: the traditional/secular-rational axis and the survival/self-expression axis. Hungary's placement on these axes reveals a country that, while secular and rational in many respects, exhibits low scores in self-expression and personal fulfilment, leading to a society characterized by closed thinking. This distinct duality situates Hungary

¹³ Peter, Urfi. Népszámlálás: húsz év alatt megfeleződött a magukat római katolikusnak vallók száma.444.hu. (2023)

¹⁴ Ipsos. Global Religion (2023)

¹⁵ Pew Research Center. Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe. (2017)

¹⁶ Haász, János. A KSH látványos térképpel mutatja meg, hogy a kevés magyar vallásos milyen soknak is feltűntethető. 444.hu (2024)

between Eastern and Western states on the value chart, The prevailing elements of this value structure - religion, paternalism, distrust, lack of tolerance, normative confusion, a sense of injustice, rational but closed thinking, and weak democratic commitment - create a fertile ground for right-wing ideologies to take root and flourish.¹⁷

Ideology can be understood as a recurring and interrelated pattern of ideas,¹⁸ along which parties categorise themselves in the political realm. Ideology is important in the political arena; we categorise parties, governments, politicians, and policies based on where they are located on the ideological spectrum. Ideology has relevance when alliances are formed or when elections are held. It can be claimed however, that ideology is becoming a remnant of the past, indicated by the diffusion of catch-all and populist parties.¹⁹ According to basic ideological categorisation, Orbán-led Hungary is located on the right wing of the political spectrum, representing nationalistic, conservative, and Christian values, while embracing a populist discourse. However, even when a party, like Fidesz, is visibly located on the political spectrum, ideological consistency is not necessarily present. When talking about political parties, one favoured classification is to differentiate between ideology-driven and ideology-applying regimes²⁰. The main difference is that those belonging to the first category are willing to pay a price for their actions when following an ideology, while those who fall into the latter category avoid any political risk and, therefore vary their ideological stances to satisfy their electorate. It has been argued before, that while there are many ideologies present in Orbán's way of governing, one should be cautious when classifying it as an ideological party. One part of academia likes to think that the leadership of Fidesz can be rather understood as opportunistic than working along ideological lines. It is claimed that conservatism, Christianity, and the protection of national sovereignty are all

¹⁷ Bíró, Nagy, András ed. "Regime change, democracy, and Hungarian society". Friedrich Ebert Stiftung/Policy Solutions. September. (2016)

¹⁸ Freedman, Michael. 2003. Ideology: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press. in Enyedi, Zsolt.. "Ideologies of Autocratization." AUTHLIB Working Papers 1.(2023)

¹⁹ Verma M. L. "Do political parties' matter to public policies? Evidence from select European Countries." Sociological bulletin, 49(2), (2000) 229-252.

²⁰ Enyedi, Zsolt. "Illiberal conservatism, civilisationalist ethnocentrism, and paternalist populism in Orbán's Hungary." Contemporary Politics (2024): 1-18.

terms that help to legitimize the Fidesz's rule and deflect attention from the authoritarian and illiberal tendencies. It can be debated, that what appears to be an ideological battle is rather just a simple and plain struggle for power. Is ideology only secondary when it comes to Fidesz?

Enyedi proposes the idea to be less rigid when it comes to ideological consistency, as actors can interpret political ideologies differently. Just because some "U-turns" are present, does not mean that a party is not aligning itself along ideological lines. Enyedi aims to highlight, that Fidesz does in fact, follow a continuous, consistent, and authentic ideological framework.²¹ In Hungary, the connection between party branding and ideology is significant. Party branding plays a crucial role in shaping voter perceptions and fostering partisan identities. Fidesz, for example, utilizes populist tactics and incorporates religion into its branding strategy to solidify its image. Usually is done by continuously emphasizing the core values of the party. The party's emphasis on religion serves to strengthen this attachment.²² Thus, Fidesz has focused on establishing a clear and unambiguous party brand, leveraging religion to bolster its support base and maintain its political power even in the face of challenges. Within a right-wing, conservative, and illiberal framework, religion and Christian narratives are of utmost importance for the Fidesz party. Throughout the years they have been successful by communicating these value sets continuously, and so justifying their political agenda.

Conservatism is an important and key building block of the regime. Conservatism reinforces certain moral principles, like respect for authority, adherence to social norms, and recognition of hierarchy. Conservatism also aims to maintaining a perspective on human nature, where "progress" may lead to decline, and "emancipation" may result in disorder.²³ Those associating with conservative values - both from cultural and religious aspects - praise traditional social structures, find religion of utmost

²¹ Enyedi, Zsolt. "Illiberal conservatism, civilisationalist ethnocentrism, and paternalist populism in Orbán's Hungary." *Contemporary Politics* (2024): 1-18.

²² Bíró, Nagy András ed. "Regime change, democracy, and Hungarian society". Friedrich Ebert Stiftung/Policy Solutions. September. (2016)

²³ Laruelle, Marlene. "Illiberalism: A conceptual introduction." *East European Politics* 38.2 (2022): 303-327.

importance and believe in the importance of national sovereignty. Following up on this, conservatism is more often prevalent in illiberal regimes. The reason for this is that both conservative and illiberal standing points share the same values, the rejection of liberal ideas. Liberals believe in progressive societies, globalization, multiculturalism and in the importance of civil rights. From a religious perspective liberals are most likely to be atheists.²⁴ Conservatives and illiberal are more commonly to be advocates for the need of authority, and are usually rather religious. Illiberalism and conservatism are not always intertwined, however. What makes illiberalism different from conservatism is their attitude to liberal democracy. Some conservatives in Western Europe (in Germany for example the Christian Democrats) do indeed advocate for the need of democratic principles. When it comes to the left-right spectrum, those on the left are usually considered to be more liberals, and those on the right more conservative. The differentiation between these two have not always been that evident. In the case of the Soviet Union for example, the members of the regime were considered as conservative leftist, while those who wanted the change regime changes (for example in the satellite states) were the liberal rightists. This was the case with the Fidesz party as well. As explored before, Orbán and the other founders of the current government party were considered the biggest advocates of a liberal regime change. This has changed however since 2002, as the Fidesz party became a conservative populist party, with Christian a foundation.

Populism usually goes hand in hand with right-wing ideas and is an often-mentioned characteristic of the Orbán government. The phrase has emerged as a prominent buzzword in recent years, often used as a descriptor for right-wing, illiberal, or authoritarian governments. The challenge of defining populism lies at the heart of contemporary political discourse, as it is rather difficult to decide whether it constitutes a movement or an ideology. Drawing on Mudde's definition, populism is characterized by its adaptability, particularly evident in its shifting perceptions of good and evil.²⁵ Unlike ideologies

²⁴ Collins, Randall. "Liberals and conservatives, religious and political: a conjuncture of modern history." *Sociology of Religion* 54.2 (1993): 127-146.

²⁵ Mudde, Cas. *An ideational approach*. Vol. 27. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2017)

such as socialism or nationalism, which rely on class or national identity, populism places morality at its core, leading to a fluid categorization of adversaries ranging from liberals to oligarchs, migrants, or LGBTQ individuals. Canovan's analysis adds depth to this by portraying populism as a structured response to power dynamics within a society, influenced by political, economic, and social factors²⁶. In Hungary, for instance, the Fidesz government exemplifies this narrative, framing itself as the defender of the people against a morally corrupt elite, which conveniently encompasses various targets from the European Union to domestic political rivals.

In Hungary, populism and illiberalism are interconnected as Viktor Orbán's government actively uses a populist narrative to justify illiberal policies. Orbán portrays himself as the defender of national interests against foreign powers, which legitimizes the actions his party takes to erode democratic institutions and empower the centralization of power. This approach undermines political pluralism and weakens checks and balances, leading to an illiberal state masked by populist appeal. In those cases, when checks and balances, individual rights, and pluralism are undermined by policies and institutions, we talk about illiberalism.²⁷ Illiberal parties maintain their electorate by capturing state institutions and resources²⁸ while also creating a common picture of the enemy. In Hungary, illiberalism also goes hand in hand with Euroscepticism²⁹ which underpins the idea about generating an enemy picture.

Orbán's government ties religiousness to its populist and illiberal agenda by promoting Hungary's Christian heritage as a cornerstone of national identity. This emphasis on religious values helps to consolidate power by aligning the government with the conservative, religious segment of the

²⁶ Canovan, Margaret. "Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy." *Political studies* 47.1 (1999): 2-16.

²⁷ Laruelle 2022; Sajó et al. 2021 in Enyedi, Zsolt.. "Ideologies of Autocratization." AUTHLIB Working Papers 1.(2023)

²⁸ Dimitrova 2018, 262; Innes(2014) in Greskovits, Bela. *Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: the Civic Circles Movement*. *East European Politics*, 36(2), (2020) 247–266.

²⁹ Laruelle 2022; Sajó et al. 2021 in Enyedi, Zsolt.. "Ideologies of Autocratization." AUTHLIB Working Papers 1.(2023)

population and marginalizing secular or liberal opposition. Máté-Tóth and Rakovics, in an analysis of Viktor Orbán's speeches, revealed a trend of increasingly intertwining religious rhetoric with the populist and illiberal agenda of Fidesz. By emphasizing Hungary's Christian heritage in his speeches, Orbán consolidates support from religious conservatives, framing his illiberal policies as necessary to protect the nation's spiritual, religious and cultural identity. Religion is being used to point to the "chosenness" of the Hungarian nation, as Christian keywords are mainly used to strengthen the "us" against "them" narrative.³⁰ This way, the party aims at creating a homogenous Hungarian nation that is protected by the party against the external enemies. Analysing Viktor Orbán's speeches a strategic use of religious language is revealed, which has intensified since 2002." ³¹

Brubaker contends that religion and nationalism aren't mutually exclusive but deeply interconnected, identifying four approaches to studying their relationship.³² He emphasizes their analogous nature, the role of religion in shaping nationalism's genesis, the intertwining of religious and national boundaries, and the concept of religious nationalism. In Hungary, as in other populist or right-wing states, the government leverages this connection to reinforce national identity, often emphasizing the nation's Christian heritage. The sacralization of politics, a concept discussed by Kulska, illustrates how political entities often cloak themselves in sacred narratives to legitimize their actions. Religion reinforces nationalist sentiments and policies with a paganized structure, aiming to establish an ethnically defined and religiously sanctified nation.³³ Religion is used in illiberal political environments to provide a kind of moral superiority and also to organise the electorate into a strong network. Bozóki and Nagy also explore religion as something that reinforces the nationalist approach, while also exploring the concept of ethnonationalism. Ethnonationalism refers to the notion that a nation is bound together by its ethnic homogeneity. This understanding is further strengthened

³⁰ Máté-Tóth, András, and Zsófia Rakovics. 2023. "The Discourse of Christianity in Viktor Orbán's Rhetoric" *Religions* 14, no. 8: 1035 (2023)

³¹ Máté-Tóth, András, and Zsófia Rakovics. 2023. "The Discourse of Christianity in Viktor Orbán's Rhetoric" *Religions* 14, no. 8: 1035. (2023)

³² Brubaker, Rogers. "Religion and nationalism: Four approaches." *Nations and Nationalism* 18.1 (2012): 2-20.

³³ Kulska, Joanna. "The Sacralization of Politics? A Case Study of Hungary and Poland." *Religions* 14.4 (2023): 525

by religion, which creates this idea of a Christian, ethnic, Hungarian society. They highlight that the purpose of this concept is to create an ethnically defined nation which can be elevated to a sacred status through religious legitimization.³⁴ In their understanding, religion is mainly used for two reasons in the Hungarian government's communication; for legitimization and to reach a bigger fracture of the electorate. According to them, a secular versus confessional cleavage has been created in the country, which is represented by the polarization between right-wing and left-wing politics. Leftist and liberal parties represent secular values while right-wing (anti-communist) parties, like Fidesz, appear more in favour of religious narratives.³⁵

The relationship between the Fidesz and religion can be also analysed from a clientelist aspect. In this case, not the broad religion, but the role of the Church must be inspected. Usually, when examining church-state relations neutrality is a key terminology, expected from both sides. Ideally, especially in the secular world order, states should be religiously neutral, while churches should be impartial when it comes to politics and parties.³⁶ The prime minister, Viktor Orbán also spoke out in 2008 regarding the importance of maintaining the separation of church and state. *"It is not appropriate for us, politicians, to praise or criticise the Church, because even if we praise or criticise it for some of its activities, there is always a suspicion lurking between the lines: 'they just want to tell the Church in such a polite way what politics expects of it' - although that is not the job of politics. Politics does not want to dictate to the church, even in a polite way, what it should and should not do."*³⁷ Although a lot has happened since 2008, the official stance on secularism by the Fidesz has not changed. In 2023 Zsolt Semjén, the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of National Policy, Church Policy and Church Diplomacy, and Chairman of the ruling party clarified that the church is an institution with the same rights as the state, not a subsystem. He stated that there can only be the tightest collaboration

³⁴ Ádám, Zoltán, and András Bozóki. "State and faith: Right-wing populism and nationalized religion in Hungary." *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 2.1 (2016).

³⁵ Lipset and Rokkan, 1967 in Ádám, Zoltán, and András Bozóki. "State and faith: Right-wing populism and nationalized religion in Hungary." *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 2.1 (2016).

³⁶ Enyedi, Zsolt. "Conclusion: Emerging issues in the study of church-state relations." *West European Politics* 26.1 (2003): 218-232.

³⁷ Az ország lelke és az egyház. https://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/beszed/az_oroszag_lelke_es_az_egyhaz

between the state and the church, not any subordination. The minister furthermore explained, that *“the balanced Hungarian church policy model lies between the two extremes - the state church model and the separation model - and can be described by the term "cooperative separation.”*³⁸

Nevertheless, these public statements, the relationship between state and church in Hungary can be mostly characterized by a clientelist relationship. Clientelism is a type of exchange between two actors, where the subject of the deal is to impact political behaviour for financial or social benefits. Clientelism is a phenomenon that is present in autocracies and democracies³⁹ in different forms; both the means and the ends can vary depending on the goal and the available instruments in each political landscape. A recent scandal in Hungary involving a religious official exercising state power contradicts the statements about separation. This reveals an intertwined relationship between the ruling Fidesz party and the Hungarian Reformed Church. Notably, Zoltán Balogh's transition from a former minister to a prominent religious leader exemplifies this intertwining. His appointments within the church, coupled with his political affiliations and advisory role to the president, underscore the blurred lines between political and religious influence. The church's overt and covert support for Fidesz, evidenced by public statements aligning with the party's agenda, illustrates the political ramifications of Balogh's dual roles. During his campaign for bishop, Balogh continuously emphasized cooperation with the government and promised of increased public funds for the church, further highlights the fusion of political and religious interests. In 2024 he was the one who lobbied for the presidential pardon involving a case of paedophilia. The clientelist relationship between the Reformed Church and the state, embodied by Balog, is further evidenced by increased state funding for church-affiliated organizations following his election. This nexus of power underscores the need to scrutinize the Hungarian government's commitment to secular governance amidst growing religious influence in politics. Obviously, the reason behind this clientelist relationship is to obtain

³⁸Semjén Zsolt: A magyar egyházpolitikai modell lényege az állam és az egyház együttműködésre való törekvése. (n.d.). Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt - kdnf.hu. <https://kdnf.hu/hirek/semjen-zsolt-magyar-egyhazpolitikai-modell-lenyege-az-allam-es-az-egyhaz-egyuttmukodesre-valo>

³⁹ Hicken, Allen. "Clientelism." Annual review of political science 14 (2011): 289-310.

and keep a stable voter's basis. In exchange for financial benefits and political power, the Church accepts to affiliate itself with the governing party, so to persuade voters among the religious cleavage. There is a lot of space for further analysis; the extent of growing state funds, the presence of religion in education and the personal party affiliations of religious individuals leave tons of space for further investigation.

Methodology/Empirical Strategy

The study used qualitative research methods, focusing on a detailed content analysis of primary source material, supplemented by manual coding of speeches. The goal was to contextualize the findings within broader political communication and secularism debates. This thesis was designed as a qualitative study, using content analysis to examine the presence and role of religion in political communication. The primary objective was to identify and categorize the ways in which religious narratives are employed by the Fidesz party, aiming to understand the purposes and context of religious phrases. By analysing speeches from the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, this study seeks to uncover the thematic elements and rhetorical strategies that highlight the intersection of religion and politics in Hungary. The aim was to identify three main categories which explains the presence of religious narratives.

The primary data consists of 13 annual speeches delivered by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán between 2010 and 2024. These speeches were selected because they are long, detailed, and usually indicate the main goals of the party for the upcoming year. These speeches are given by the Prime Minister each year in February to reflect and elaborate on the past year. The speeches were sourced from official government publications, ensuring their authenticity and reliability. To support the primary analysis, a wide range of secondary sources were consulted, including academic journals, articles, and books. These sources provide a theoretical framework for understanding the role of religion in political communication, particularly within the context of right-wing parties. The literature review focuses on the concepts of secularism theory, conservatism, illiberalism, populism, nationalism and the political mobilization of religious narratives, with a particular emphasis on Hungary.

The core of the methodological approach involves manual coding of the 13 selected speeches. (Only 13, because in 2021, due to Covid the annual speech did not happen). Coding is a qualitative research technique used to categorize and identify patterns within textual data. The coding process was conducted in several stages. Each speech was found on the official government website and then read

thoroughly. The aim was to gain a wide understanding of its content and context. Preliminary themes and religious phrases were highlighted and taken notes about. During this phase, the every religious phrase was assigned a code. Codes were being refined and adjusted as more speeches were analysed. The codes were then organized into broader categories based on their similarities. This step aimed to identify the main themes focusing on how religious narratives are constructed and utilized in political rhetoric. Finally, the most significant themes were selected to form the core categories of analysis. These categories represent the primary ways in which religious rhetoric is employed by the Fidesz party, offering insights into the strategic use of religion in political communication. This paper is built on the overall findings of this analysis. Due to the quantity of the finding, this paper only visualizes some important parts of the codes. The data that is later presented in the paper is only for visual purposes, to give the reader an idea.

The coding process led to the identification of three main categories that explain the purpose of religious narratives in Fidesz communication. The first category found relates to conservative value communication. This category includes references to Hungary's Christian heritage, historical continuity, and the portrayal of Christianity as a fundamental aspect of national identity. The rhetoric often emphasizes the preservation of cultural and religious traditionalism, highlighting the importance of family, peace, and Christianity. The second big group revolved around the moral self-justification of the party. This category highlights how religious language is used to establish moral authority and legitimacy. This includes invoking religious values to justify political decisions and presenting the government as a protector of ethical and moral standards, specifically against opponents. The third category shows that Orbán continuously uses religion to reinforce the party's nationalist agenda. Religious narratives are employed to foster political mobilization and unity among supporters, especially against immigration. In this category Islam was used in contrast to Christianity, reflecting on the effect cultural and religious differences have on national homogeneity.

Table 1 Identified code categories

Code	Conservative Values	Self-justification	National unity
Main code category	Reinforcing party brand by Christian conservative values	Justifying power by moral superiority	National unity against foreign threats
Sub-category	Family, peace, Christian past	Populism, Legitimacy	Anit-immigration, nationalism

To contextualize the findings through coding, the study examines the concept of secularism and its manifestations in Hungary. Secularism traditionally refers to the separation of church and state, but recent trends in Hungary suggest a shift towards desecularization, where religious influences become more prominent in political discourse. The analysis explores the historical and sociopolitical factors contributing to this shift, drawing on scholarly discussions and empirical evidence. The research also delves into the specific role of religion in Hungarian politics. This includes an analysis of church-state relations, the influence of religious institutions on policymaking, and the strategic use of religion by political actors. By situating the primary analysis within this broader context, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. To ensure that the findings are reliable several strategies were employed the use of multiple data sources (speeches, academic literature, media reports) allows for cross-validation of findings. Regarding ethical considerations, although the data consists of publicly available speeches, care is taken to anonymize any secondary data that may involve personal information or sensitive content.

This study acknowledges several limitations. The analysis is based on 14 speeches, which may not capture the full spectrum of religious rhetoric employed by the Fidesz party. Future research could expand the sample size to include more speeches and other forms of communication. Another limitation could be that qualitative analysis inherently involves a degree of subjectivity. While efforts were made to ensure objectivity, personal biases may still influence the interpretation of the data. The methodology outlined in this section provides a comprehensive framework for exploring the use of

religious rhetoric by the Fidesz party in Hungary. By combining qualitative content analysis with a review of relevant literature and coding, the study aims to uncover the employment of religious narratives in political communication. The identification of three main categories offers a good understanding of how and why religion is used in governmental communication. Through this research, the study contributes to the broader discourse on the role of religion in contemporary Hungarian politics.

Analysis

I aim to delve deeper into the phenomenon of religious communication by analysing annual speeches given by the prime minister from 2010 until 2024. I categorise religious phrases into three main contexts: (1) conservative value communication, (2) self-justification by moral superiority and (3) national unity against foreigners. In the case of value communication, religious rhetoric is employed to convey conservative and illiberal party brand messages such as family, peace, and Christianity. In the second category, self-justification involves framing the party's actions as politically justified, enhancing its perceived superiority over other political entities. Here the populist framework is important to understand, as self-justification is connected to the strengthening of the “us against them” framework. In the third category religious narratives are utilized to emphasise the perceived threat from migrants. In this category, Christianity is usually contrasted by Islam, perpetuating a xenophobic atmosphere. In this understanding the party positions itself as the sole protector of Hungarian identity. In this category the communication of ethnonationalism and civilisation differences is important.

Conservative values

The first category identified here elaborates on the interconnections between conservatism, religion, and the values represented by these. The findings indicate that religion constitutes a foundational element of conservative values, which the Fidesz party actively communicates to bolster its agenda. Conservatism, though a relatively broad concept encompassing a spectrum of values, is primarily linked to traditionalism, right-wing politics, and religious heritage. It supports a traditional way of life while rejecting progressivism and secularism. When the Fidesz party emphasizes conservative values - like as family, children, or peace- a religious narrative is usually present. This research points to the continuous presence of these conservative values, as integral parts to national identity. Conservatism is usually depicted as the opposite of liberalism; therefore, it is important to understand the differences between these two. Both conservatism and liberalism are deeply intertwined with cultural and religious frameworks. Liberalism emphasizes civil liberties and religious freedom, including the acceptance of atheism. Conversely, conservatism is often an advocate for a higher authority in politics, while communicating the importance of religious values.

In recent years, the Fidesz party has effectively leveraged a key Christian value - commitment to peace - to its advantage. The conflict in Ukraine provided a significant opportunity for the government to emphasize its pacifist agenda and its commitment to right-wing ideology. The party led by Viktor Orbán has proudly asserted that its stance aligns closely with that of the Vatican, thereby reinforcing the party's religious commitments. This ideological alignment with the Catholic Church's leadership has been an actively used communication strategy, reinforcing a conservative ideological stance. The government has even claimed that only the Vatican surpasses Hungary in advocating for peace, thus underscoring its moral position. Such communication strategies have demonstrated the government's success in upholding values deemed essential to traditional Christianity. However, some paradoxes have emerged. While traditionalism aims to strengthen religious ties within societies, it also seeks to

distance itself from religions that diverge from its core ideologies, such as Islam. This contradiction is noteworthy: while religion is thought of as a sacred value, other ancient religions like Islam are viewed with suspicion. As mentioned before, Hungarian society can be characterized by closed thinking, limited commitment to democracy, distrust, a lack of tolerance, and a preference for paternalism and statism.⁴⁰ This environment provides fertile ground for conservatism, which the government greatly uses to its advantage in its communication. In the table below some cases are showcased, which raise attention to the most significant examples when the government used the communication of peace to their benefit.

Table 2 Some examples between 2010 and 2014 when the importance of peace was mentioned by the prime minister. Although a religious context is not always present, the connection between the two is evident.

2015	Therefore, it is an iron law of Hungarian foreign policy that we Hungarians are interested in peace
2016	Peace, cooperation, trade, mutual investment, a regional balance that works for us, standing up for our interests - these are the basic principles of Hungarian national foreign policy.
2023	Can Hungary afford to remain on the side of peace in such circumstances, in direct opposition to our allies?
2023	Rather, they have migrated from the peace camp to the war camp. That left two of us: Hungary and the Vatican. We can't complain about the company, but there are serious consequences.
2024	We are just as alone in our peace position as we were in our anti-immigration position, and we will be just as right about the war.

Other than peace, another central message consistently communicated by the Fidesz party is its staunch support for the protection of families. Upholding and endorsing traditional social structures - like family - is a fundamental characteristic of conservative ideology. This perspective depicts family as the most fulfilling purposes of life; returning home to our family after a long day of work is the most noble goal one should crave. This idea is not inclusive with all types of families, however.

⁴⁰ Bíró, Nagy András ed. 2016. "Regime change, democracy, and Hungarian society". Friedrich Ebert Stiftung/Policy Solutions. September. (2016)

It posits that only heterosexual, monogamous relationships between a man and a woman, primarily for the purpose of social reproduction, are valid. The party has been coherent through the years by emphasizing the importance of the traditional family model, with the goal to solidify its ideological stance. The Fidesz party's support for families was reinforced through constant communication, but also by financial means; a number of family protection measures have been introduced like the family home nourishing discount loan, (CSOK), baby expecting allowance (baby loan), mortgage remittal for families with three children or more, and the car purchase support.⁴¹ The reason for this active prioritization of families in the policy agenda has a lot to do with the demographic decline of Hungary. Consequently, the government actively promotes its unwavering moral and financial support for families. The analysis presented in this thesis reveals that the emphasis on the importance of family has been consistent throughout the years since 2010. References to family are typically made in connection to the notions of home and children, painting a recurring picture of an idyllic family environment. According to this viewpoint, everything valued by the right-wing ideological spectrum is embodied in the traditional family structure.

⁴¹ Rostas, Katalin. "Analysis of the Family Protection Action Plan in Hungary." (2020)

Table 3 Some examples between 2010 and 2014 when the importance of family was mentioned by the prime minister. Although a religious context is not always present, the connection between the two is evident.

2010	Family is also a value that binds us together.
2012	Decent work, a secure livelihood, promotion on merit, a family and a home from which children can start their independent lives, and finally a dignified old age. That is what most of us want. It is what social scientists call independent middle-class life.
2013	(...) 90,300 babies were born in 2012: 2,251 more than a year earlier. You could also attribute this to the child and family protection measures abolished by the socialists and reinstated by us.
2016	In the trinity of God, country and family, and in the future country of faith, hope and love, none of us should want to belong to any one of these tendencies
2018	Ladies and Gentlemen! As for the future. You all know me well, you know that I believe in simple things: work, family, and country. To value work, to support families, to preserve national identity, to preserve independence - this is the future, and this future can be ours.
2019	We must once again stand up for our Hungarianness, for our Christianity, defend our families, our communities, and defend our freedom
2022	Family allowances will be maintained and even extended. We are not giving up on making childbearing a financial rather than a financial hardship. There will be children, there will be money, and we will protect families.

The importance of families is further strengthened by the government's goal to protect children. From a conservative viewpoint, having children is regarded as one of the most sacred duties a married couple can undertake. In the recent years children have been a main part of government propaganda; they have been depicted as the victims threatened by the "dangerous" ideologies of the liberals. The government often and actively uses the narrative which explains that children are threatened by the gender propaganda of the West. The government repeatedly visualizes the LGBTQ+ community as a threat to children, often even pointing to the connection between paedophilia and gay people. They Fidesz party has used paedophilia frequently as communication tool in their campaigns, echoing the party's zero tolerance for harming children. Interestingly, the latest scandal that led to the resignation of the president shook this agenda to its core. The political crisis that emerged from the presidential pardon questioned the moral and conservative ideological commitment of the government. Conservatism is frequently portrayed in opposition to cultural liberalism, which advocates for

feminism, gay rights, and multiculturalism. Liberalism emerged to empower those oppressed by established power structures, including ethnic minorities, the underprivileged, women, and LGBTQ communities. Its primary aim is to grant freedom and equality to these marginalized groups. In contrast, modern conservatism has reemerged as a counterforce to this liberal agenda, highlighting its capacity to fuel populist regimes. It promises to give the power back to those who feel marginalized by the liberal world order. The Hungarian government's commitment to is evident, as the governing party government consistently advocates for the maintenance of a traditional way of life. This narrative is often justified through Christian discourse. From the government's perspective, LGBTQ individuals are seen as contravening the "normal" way of life, thereby threatening the homogeneity of Hungary's ethnic and Christian society. Consequently, conservatism is particularly popular among white, rural, Christian, and heterosexual individuals who perceive their way of life as being undermined by a progressive world order. As a populist regime, the Hungarian government frequently identifies and targets opponents in its communication, framing them as adversaries against whom the nation must defend itself. These opponents include LGBTQ individuals, migrants, the political left, and the European Union.

Table 4 Some examples between 2010 and 2014 when the importance of child protection was mentioned by the prime minister. Although a religious context is not always present, the connection between the two is evident.

2022	On the 3rd of April, we will protect our children with a referendum, the father is a man, the mother is a woman, and our children will be left alone!
2022	We think differently about the precious tradition of Europe, (...) and now we think differently about the family, and we even think differently about the binary structure of society, based on women and men.

Self-justification and moral superiority

The second category examines the utilization of religious language and phrases by the Hungarian government for purposes of self-justification and the communication of moral superiority. Other than value communication - as explained in the previous chapter - the party also uses religious narratives to construct an image of moral superiority, that resonates with Fidesz supporters and legitimizes their governance in the eyes of the public. This strategy not only consolidates the party's power but also diminishes the moral standing of its opponents. The Hungarian government has been an expert at legitimizing its system; even during periods of economic recession or during political scandals, it has managed to sustain the perception that its system is just and fair. Supporters of the Fidesz party rarely ever hold the party responsible for anything, justifying even anti-democratic measures. This form of system justification is further reinforced by religious narratives. The underlying notion is that Hungary's social, political, and economic structures are particularly justifiable due to the party's connections to Christianity. This type of justification is rooted in the idea that voters are inclined to support a party affiliated with their own religious and/or social group. As Christianity is the most popular religion in the country the religious affiliation is rather effective. The electorate frequently validates the government's actions, which is one reason why the Fidesz party secured a two-thirds parliamentary majority for the fourth time in 2022. Other than self-justification, the party also emphasises its moral superiority. The sacred goal of the Fidesz's agenda positions its opponents - whether from the left, the European Union, or the Islamic world - as morally inferior. The use of religious phrases underscores a populist agenda, creating an "us against them" framework. The "us" refers to the protective, paternalistic, Christian government, whose primary and sacral goal is to defend the nation against foreign and domestic threats. By associating itself with Christian approval, the party finds ways to morally justify its policies. This justification of the party implies that the party's agenda is the only God-approved path, elevating it to a superior moral standing. The Fidesz party's connection with God not only establishes a framework of moral superiority but also suggests

paternalistic tendencies, wherein the leadership, representing Hungarian society, is perceived as the guardian of the nation's fate.

One of the biggest moral justifications the party comes from the fall of the socialist party. In 2006 a speech by the social democratic party was leaked, in which Ferenc Gyurcsány, the prime minister at the time, acknowledged lying several times about the state of Hungary's public finances and.⁴² This resulted in weeks of large-scale protests, resignation requests, and violent conflicts with the police. This event gave a way to right-wing parties to morally question leftist parties, which is a duality that is still relevant in the country. According to Orbán's party, there is the lying, secular left, and the moral and truth-telling right, that is in an alliance with God. The Fidesz continuously builds on this "God-approved" discourse to disapprove of the left and praise their agenda. Naturally, this type of moral justification also extends to the Western, liberal democracies. The prime minister recurrently mentions his disapproval of Western, secular societies. By positioning themselves with God, and thereby in contrast with the opponents, the party implies a moral triumph. In 2015, the prime minister said: *Here is an important piece of advice for all Christian Democrat politicians. I quote: "Do not worry about whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side."*

⁴² Gyurcsány, Ferenc. "A teljes balatonőszödi szöveg." The entire Balatonőszöd transcript. Népszabadság, September 18 (2006).

Table 5 Some examples between 2010 and 2014 when moral superiority in connection with Christianity was implied by the prime minister.

2014	The Lord takes the flock from those who feed themselves, not the flock. I urge everyone, although the Left is wrestling with its own problems, to be sensible and never forget that in a modern democracy, the people, the voters, have the final say on every system.
2016	Our Europe was built on Christian foundations, and we are proud to have achieved the fulfilment of freedom of spirit and freedom of man.
2018	We need to be clear that we are in solidarity with the people and leaders of Western Europe who want to save their homeland and their Christian culture, not with those who want to go beyond it. We will never be in solidarity with European leaders who want to move Europe into a post-Christian and post-national era.
2018	And I realised that from that point of view, we natives, who have our own country, our own culture, our own religion, which we also cling to tooth and nail, well, we are hopeless, untransformable individuals from the Soros point of view.
2019	This is how the European left has become the speculators, the world bourgeoisie, the world government and now, finally, the world migration, the gravedigger of nations, the family and the Christian way of life. (...) And we are preparing to stop the pro-immigration majority. We want a European Parliament that respects the decisions of countries and peoples about their own future and accepts that we Central Europeans want to go our own way.
2020	(...) they refuse to accept that in this part of the world we can derive our freedom from three simple Christian laws without liberal reasoning.
2022	The Left is now coming up with the bluff that those who join them will leave their lives behind like Christ's disciples leaving a fishing net. This is, please, the umpteenth leftist candidate for salvation. I remember that Ferenc Gyurcsány started like this.

The Orbán government often finds that associating itself with God, the most superior power, is easily justifiable within a paternalistic framework. Paternalism views the state as a guardian and educator, and places it in a sacral role.⁴³ In this understanding the government is responsible for the social, economic, and political flourishing of the country. As found in the analysis, the prime minister often uses religious words to underpin this understanding. The government takes responsibility for the renewal and maintenance of the country, which they do justify according to a right-wing, conservative, Christian direction. Despite generally low confidence in state institutions in Hungary, there remains an expectation for the state to enhance the lives of its citizens. The Hungarians, by and

⁴³ Enyedi, Zsolt. "Illiberal conservatism, civilisationalist ethnocentrism, and paternalist populism in Orbán's Hungary." *Contemporary Politics* (2024): 1-18.

large, do not necessarily believe in individual empowerment to improve living conditions. Instead, they prefer state intervention, especially concerning job creation and social benefits. This type of trust in a higher power points to the analogy between the Fidesz and Christianity, as religion is also a power to which people turn to for guidance. Consequently, a significant portion of the Hungarian population entrusts their fate to the state or in some cases to God. In this paternalistic framework the leader's divine connection to religiosity is also crucial. The Fidesz party has been actively emphasizing its close relationship with Christianity, particularly with the Hungarian Reformed Church in the recent years. By aligning its policies and values with Christianity the party suggests that its governance is morally superior and divinely sanctioned. This association is used to imply that the party's decisions and actions are justified by a higher moral order.

Table 6 Some examples between 2010 and 2014 when the prime minister implied the justification of government policies in connection with Christianity..

2014	After all, undertaking the renewal and complete reorganization of a country and a national community (...) primarily of moral responsibility. Is it right to live up to 100% of the authority given to us? Gospel story.
2015	Here is an important piece of advice for all Christian Democrat politicians. I quote: "Do not worry about whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side."
2016	(,,,) a civil Hungary, a civil establishment, a national-Christian era, a Hungarian country, is now being built, can now be built.
2018	We are firmly on our feet, with defences capable of holding back the biggest floods. In addition, Orthodox Christianity is fighting bravely (...).
2018	I believe that we Hungarians have a future if we remain Hungarian. We will cherish the Hungarian language, defend our Christian and Hungarian culture, preserve our independence and Hungarian freedom.
2020	After ten years, I can humbly say that we have figured it out and we have done it. We have taken a deep breath, we have scorned the foundations, and we finally have a Christian, national constitution.
2022	The child comes home from Mass. "What happened?" - they ask him. "Well, the usual. The priest talked." "What did he talk about?" "About sin." "And what did he say?" "He was against it." I'm like that with my story..".
2022	In a deadly pandemic, exploiting the fear of millions of families to overthrow the government is indefensible in any court of law. The time for both will come: one on 3 April, the other by God's order.
2023	God seems to love us.
2024	If God helps us, Hungary's room for manoeuvre will not be reduced, but will be expanded to the extent it has been for a long time.

National unity against foreign threats

The third category highlights the cases, when Orbán used a Christian narrative to emphasize the dangers that threaten the homogeneity of the nation. For this purpose, there is very strong anti-immigration narrative deployed by the government. In 2015, when an unprecedented wave of immigration flow hit Europe, the Hungarian government adopted a new narrative, which helped to strengthen their party brand. As a Christian, right-wing party they promised to defend the nation's unity against the dangers posed by the migrants coming from different cultures. The Fidesz party started a xenophobic, nationalistic, anti-immigration and anti-Islamic narrative, which is also represented by their political communication. The party also started to connect mass immigration with the loss of jobs, sexual assaults, and the disappearance of ethnic, Christian Hungarians. The protection against people coming from different cultures and religions has varying outcomes regarding government communication. By creating a fearful atmosphere, the party reinforces this idea about the protective Christian state, that is responsible for guarding Europe, the "last Christian-conservative bastion of the Western world."⁴⁴ Viktor Orbán, and his party members continuously depict the image of European society being replaced by the foreigners coming from the developing world as a utopistic fever dream. They like to use this image not only in a domestic, but also in a wider, European context. Since 2015, Orbán has become the main representative of anti-immigration ideologies both in Hungary and in the European Union. The Fidesz government's strict policy on mass immigration has become a main pillar of their ideological profile. The peak moment in this narrative was the building of a fence on the Serbian border, to protect the country and Europe from the mass of people, mainly from catastrophe hit regions. The government's reasoning for building the fence was that the Hungarians have the right to defend themselves against the danger of immigration which threatens the Christian culture of Europe.⁴⁵ The EU has highly criticized Hungary over the past

⁴⁴ Horváth Kárai, Andrea. Orbán: "Hungary has become the last Christian-conservative bastion of the Western world. Telex.hu, May, (2022.)

⁴⁵ Marton Dunai, "Hungary Builds New High-Tech Border Fence - with Few Migrants in Sight," U.S., March 2, (2017)

years for its behaviour towards migrants, and evaluated most of its actions as human rights and freedom of movement violation.⁴⁶ The government's answer for this assumption was that in today's political atmosphere *"it is forbidden to speak the truth."*⁴⁷ The truth that is being told by the Fidesz party depicts that *"our culture, our identity and our nations as we know them today will cease to exist"* because *"the decline of the Christian population, the Islamisation of the big cities is progressing day by day"*. The government therefore actively fights against immigration with an ethnonationalist narrative in their political communication. Campaigning against immigration by accentuating cultural and religious differences is a central element of the government's nationalistic party brand. Migrants are actively being demonized by highlighting their cultural and religious differences. Populism plays a significant role in this context; the governing party asserts that only it can protect the homogeneity of Hungarian society from the incoming Muslim majority. These xenophobic messages prevalent in government communication stem from a fear of the extinction of the white, Christian population.⁴⁸ The fear of the Hungarian nation becoming non-existent is a multidimensional issue with deep historical roots. One way to interpret this anti-immigration narrative is through the lens of ethnonationalism, an ideology in which a nation is defined by its ethnic homogeneity. Promoting Hungarianness and national pride has been a primary message of the government, which claims that only the current ruling party can defend these values. Protecting the nation, its culture, values, and religion has been a core aspect of the Fidesz party's brand. This ethnonationalist perspective is further reinforced by religion, which helps to solidify the image of a protected nation that is both Christian and ethnically Hungarian. Religion thus serves to support the nationalist approach, providing a sacral structure to policy direction. As previously explained, the purpose of this ethnonationalist approach is to create an ethnically defined nation, which can be

⁴⁶ Ildikó Barna and Bulcsú Hunyadi Report on Xenophobia, Discrimination, Religious Hatred and Aggressive Nationalism in Hungary in 2015. (2016)

⁴⁷ The Economist, "Why Is Hungary Turning to Nationalism?," The Economist (2018),

⁴⁸ Enyedi, Zsolt. "Illiberal conservatism, civilisationalist ethnocentrism, and paternalist populism in Orbán's Hungary." Contemporary Politics (2024): 1-18

elevated to a sacred status through religious legitimization.⁴⁹ In connection with this narrative, a xenophobic and hateful atmosphere has been created in the past couple of years. The success of these campaigns is rather convincing; according to a report that was published in 2016, 78% of the population would oppose migrants moving to their neighbourhood. The first data available from 1992, shows that during the 1990, only 15% of the Hungarian society described themselves as being afraid from foreigner.⁵⁰ These results highlight the success of the fearful and xenophobic propaganda that has been created by Fidesz party since 2015.

⁴⁹ Ádám, Zoltán, and András Bozóki. "State and faith: Right-wing populism and nationalized religion in Hungary." *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 2.1 (2016).

⁵⁰ Bíró, Nagy András ed. "Regime change, democracy, and Hungarian society". *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung/Policy Solutions*. (2016)

Table 7. Some examples between 2010 and 2014 when the prime minister connected the threat posed by immigration. Although a religious context is not always present, the connection between the two is evident.

2016	<p>The reality is that we cannot solve the demographic problems of an undeniably shrinking and ageing Europe with the Muslim world without losing our way of life, our security and ourselves.</p>
	<p>The reality is that if we don't get our act together urgently, the tension between an ageing Europe and the young Muslim world is rising. The tension between a secular, unbelieving Europe and an increasingly engaged Muslim world, between a Europe unable to employ its own educated young people and an under-educated Muslim world, will become unmanageable.</p>
	<p>We will not and do not want to import crime, terrorism, homophobia and anti-Semitism into Hungary. There will be no outlaw neighbourhoods, no riots, no immigration riots, no refugee camps set on fire, and no gangs hunting our wives and daughters in Hungary.</p>
2017	<p>And most of the immigrants will come from the Islamic world. If things continue like this, Europe's cities will have a clear Muslim majority, and London will be the first swallow, not the last. Our culture, our identity and our nations as we know them today will cease to exist if this continues. Our worst nightmares will come true. The West will fall, while Europe will not even realise it is being invaded.</p>
	<p>The transformation of the cultural foundations, the decline of the Christian population, the Islamisation of the big cities is progressing day by day (...)</p>
	<p>They (...) opened the way to the decline of Christian culture and the rise of Islam.</p>
2019	<p>Migration increases crime, especially against women, and brings the virus of terrorism. But we cannot get caught up in our fears.</p>
	<p>In the immigrant countries, a Christian-Muslim world is emerging, with a steadily shrinking Christian share.</p>
	<p>People my age will see the rapid transformation of once great Christian countries. Our hearts ache, but we can hardly help it.</p>
2022	<p>It seems, as I myself see it, that Latin Christianity in Europe can no longer stand on its own feet. Without Orthodoxy, without the alliance with Eastern Christians, we can hardly survive the next decades.</p>

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has pointed to the intricate relationship between religion, politics, and ideology within the Hungarian context, particularly focusing on the communication and rhetoric of the currently governing party, and its leader, Viktor Orbán. For the analysis, 13 speeches given by the prime minister were investigated. Regarding the methodology, the speeches were explored through a qualitative method of coding. Through the comprehensive, coding analysis, three distinct categories have been identified to showcase the utilization of religious phrases by the government party; the communication of values, the channelling of moral superiority and the xenophobic discourse are all underlying reasons for the Fidesz party's religious communication.

The first category highlighted the interplay between conservative values, religion, and right-wing politics. The findings revealed an active communication strategy by the Fidesz party deployed to exacerbate their religious commitment through value communication. Conservatism is associated with traditionalism, right-wing politics, and religiosity, advocating for a traditional way of life while rejecting progressivism and secularism. Conservative values are seen as integral to the national identity of the Fidesz party. This rhetoric deployed by them promotes the importance of family, peace, traditional gender roles, and Christianity. The Fidesz party's commitment to peace is one of the main aspects of their religious narrative identified in this research. The Fidesz party uses pacifism to underline their Christian background, particularly since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The government's pacifist stance aligns with the Vatican, reinforcing its religious commitments. This alignment is used as a communication strategy to bolster its conservative ideology. The party led by Orbán managed to successfully explain that Hungary is among the only European countries advocating for peace, highlighting the party's moral standing. Hungarian society is characterized by closed thinking, limited democracy, distrust, lack of tolerance, and a preference for paternalism and statism, creating a fertile ground for conservatism that the government exploits through their political

narrative. Besides peace, another important value for the Fidesz party - as identified by the annual speeches - is the promise of protecting Hungarian families. Supporting traditional social structures like family is a core aspect of their conservative, religious ideology. In their right-wing narrative family is the most sacral duty an individual can have for the country. This emphasis on the traditional family model is reflected in policies like the family home discount loan, baby loan, mortgage remittal for large families, and car purchase support. The prioritization of families is driven by Hungary's demographic decline. This also explains why the party focuses special attention to a child protection agenda. From a Christian-conservative perspective, having children is a sacred duty. While supporting and helping families who have children, the government also uses a populist agenda. The government portrays children as threatened by liberal ideologies, particularly LGBTQ+ rights, often associating the LGBTQ+ community with threats like paedophilia. This narrative has been a key part of Fidesz's communication strategy. Conservatism is often positioned against cultural liberalism, which advocates for feminism, gay rights, and multiculturalism. This value selection is evident in Fidesz's communication, as the Hungarian government consistently supports traditional gender roles and heterosexuality, often justified through Christian doctrine. The government views LGBTQ+ individuals as threats to the "normal" way of life, appealing to white, rural, Christian, heterosexual individuals who feel their lifestyle is undermined by progressivism. As a populist regime, the Hungarian government frequently targets opponents like LGBTQ individuals, migrants, the political left, and the European Union, framing them as adversaries.

The second category identified through the analysis shows how the Fidesz party uses religious language to justify its policies and communicate moral superiority. Fidesz intertwines its government narrative with religious discourse, creating an image of moral authority that resonates with its supporters and legitimizes its governance. This strategy not only consolidates the party's power but also undermines the moral standing of its opponents. This justification relies on the idea that all the social, political, and economic decisions made by the government are valid because of the party's

Christian affiliations. Given that Christianity is Hungary's most popular religion, this affiliation effectively ensures voter support. The electorate frequently endorses the government's actions, further legitimizing the Fidesz's power. The party's sacred agenda positions its opponents - whether from the left, the European Union, or the Islamic world - as morally inferior. One significant moral justification for the party stems from the fall of the socialist party. In 2006, a leaked speech by then-Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány revealed that he had lied about Hungary's public finances, leading to protests and a polarized political landscape. This event solidified the narrative of a lying, secular left versus a moral, truth-telling right allied with God. Fidesz continues to leverage this "God-approved" discourse to discredit the left and bolster its agenda, extending this critique to Western, liberal democracies. Religious phrases emphasize a populist agenda, creating an "us against them" framework, with the Christian government defending the nation against perceived threats. Fidesz's alignment with Christianity not only establishes moral superiority but also suggests paternalistic tendencies, positioning the leadership as the guardian of the nation's fate. By aligning itself with God, Fidesz implies a moral triumph over its opponents. This connection portrays the state as a guardian and educator, responsible for the country's social, economic, and political flourishing. Despite low confidence in state institutions, many Hungarians expect the state to improve their lives, preferring state intervention over individual empowerment. This trust in a higher political power draws a parallel with the reliance on religion for guidance. . Fidesz's strong relationship with Christianity, particularly the Hungarian Reformed Church, reinforces its image of moral superiority. By aligning its policies and values with Christianity, the party suggests its governance is divinely sanctioned, implying that its agenda is more sacral than others.. This association with religious authority helps Fidesz justify its policies and maintain support, portraying itself as the protector of national and moral integrity. This strategy not only solidifies the party's power but also perpetuates a narrative of moral and cultural superiority that resonates deeply with the voters.

The third category examines how Prime Minister Viktor Orbán employs a Christian narrative to highlight perceived threats to the nation's homogeneity, particularly through a strong anti-immigration stance. In 2015, during a significant wave of immigration to Europe, the Hungarian government adopted a strong anti-immigration narrative to bolster their party brand. As a Christian, right-wing party, Fidesz promised to defend national homogeneity against the dangers posed by migrants from different religion, specifically from Islam countries. This led to a xenophobic, nationalistic, and anti-immigration discourse in their political communication. Fidesz connected mass immigration with job loss, sexual assaults, and the disappearance of ethnic, Christian Hungarians. By creating a fearful atmosphere, the party reinforced the idea of a protective Christian state, positioning Hungary as the last Christian-conservative bastion of the Western world. Orbán and his party members frequently depicted European society as being replaced by foreigners from developing regions, a vision they used both domestically and in foreign policy. Since 2015, Orbán has been a leading figure in anti-immigration ideologies in Hungary and the European Union. The construction of a fence on the Serbian border symbolized this stance, justified as Hungary's right to defend itself and Europe from immigration threats. The EU has criticized Hungary's treatment of migrants, viewing it as a violation of human rights and freedom of movement. The government responded by claiming that "it is forbidden to speak the truth," suggesting that their stance was based on the need to protect Hungarian nationhood and the Christian culture. They argued that the Christian population's decline and the Islamization of societies in Europe pose a huge threat. This ethnonationalist narrative has affected their political communication, fostering a xenophobic atmosphere that has proved to be effective. A 2016 report showed that 78% of the population opposed migrants moving to their neighbourhoods, a stark increase from 15% in 1992. The campaign against immigration focuses on cultural and religious differences, a central element of the government's nationalistic brand. Migrants are demonized, highlighting their religious differences. Populism plays a significant role, with the government asserting that only it can protect Hungarian society's homogeneity from an incoming Muslim majority. The xenophobic messages in government communication reflect a fear of the

extinction of the white, Christian population. This fear is rooted in a historical context, interpreting the anti-immigration narrative through the lens of ethnonationalism, which is an ideology defining the nation by its ethnic homogeneity. Promoting Hungarian national pride has been a key government message, with claims that only the current ruling party can defend these values. Protecting the nation, its culture, values, and religion is a core aspect of Fidesz's brand. This ethnonationalist perspective is reinforced by religion, solidifying the image of a protected nation that is both Christian and ethnically Hungarian.

In summary this paper has showed that the prime minister actively uses religion in his communication techniques for three different reasons. These categories have been elaborated on and analysed to understand the purpose of the Fidesz party's religious narrative. The results have highlighted that desecularization is constantly present in the Hungarian government's rhetoric pointing tot he fact that the separation between politics and religion is not evident in the current right-wing party's agenda.

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