

# NATIONALISM AND POPULISM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE\*

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## **Preliminary Remarks**

We are ‘living in an age of populist democracies’<sup>374</sup> claims Márton Gulyás - Hungarian artist, political activist and co-founder of the Human Platform on the Austrian website *Der Standard* in July last year. The cause lies in the spectacular failure of the ‘Wende’ (the political events of 1989/1990), i.e. a failure of the transition processes from a socialist central administration and planned economy to a free democracy, or to a Western-style prosperity secured by a free market economy in Central-Eastern European societies. Populism is, according to Gulyás, a necessity, and only left-wing populism can lead to the revival of democracies in Hungary and the EU.

These and similar assertions are astonishing. Yet, quite a few scientific studies and analyses seriously ask the question: “Is populism a

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<sup>374</sup> Gulyás, Márton (2018), “Mit linkem Populismus gegen Orbán”, <https://derstandard.at/2000084426797/Mit-linkem-Populismus-gegen-Orban> (accessed on 15 November 2022)

force that endangers democracy or a force that revitalises it?”<sup>375</sup>, as does H. R. Reuter, for example. Likewise, in a study by sociologist Karin Priester, she considers whether populism could indeed fulfil a positive function as a “useful corrective”, as populists often “take up taboo, unpopular or neglected topics”<sup>376</sup>, criticise the extent, dysfunctionality, and opacity of political institutions<sup>377</sup> and point to (Reuter again) disappointed expectations of democratic participation and involvement. And this brings me to my first preliminary remark: populism does not arise from nowhere, but always in the wake of a social crisis. The resurgence of populism over the past decades signals a crisis of representative democracy that shows many facets.

My second preliminary remark concerns the concept of nationalism. On the occasion of his farewell lectures in Budapest five years ago, and regarding the history and present of Hungary in Europe, the American historian John Lukács – a Hungarian who recently died aged 95 in May 2019, said, “Neither communism nor socialism nor liberalism could cause such profound changes in the history of European societies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as nationalism. Nationalism triggered the most successful revolution and even today - especially in economic crisis situations - is readily claimed as a mobilising force; but a sober differentiation between nationalism and national-cultural identity would be appropriate.”

Question: To what extent does this problem, to which the two above preliminary remarks refer, apply to the societal developments in Hungary and Central Eastern Europe, to the diverse church life in these countries, to the cultivation of the heritage of a practised Christianity,

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<sup>375</sup> Reuter, Hans-Richard, “Die populistische Revolte - vier Anmerkungen”, in: *ZEE* 62 (3), 2018, 165.

<sup>376</sup> Priester, Karin, “Wesensmerkmale des Populismus”, in: *APuZ* 62 (5-6), 2012, 7.

<sup>377</sup> Hartleb, Florian, “Populismus als Totengräber oder mögliches Korrektiv der Demokratie?”, in: *APuZ* 62 (5-6), 2012, 26.

and to the creative potential of Protestant theology and Church? And if our Protestant churches want to take seriously the fears and concerns caused by these symptoms of crisis and/or by nationalist or right-wing populist political forces, then their mission - beyond preaching, education, *diaconia* and pastoral care - also includes a sober analysis of this reality. Moral indignation or moralising appeals cannot replace political-ethical judgement.

## **Characteristics of Populism**

The first characteristic is directly related to the literal meaning of ‘populism’. Populism is characterised by the allegedly legitimisation of the invocation of ‘the people’ as the ‘true and authentic sovereignty’,<sup>378</sup> and is accompanied by the claim that we are the authentic representatives of this democratic sovereignty. Here, not only is a rhetorical formula filled with pathos - ‘we are the people’ – repeatedly invoked; rather the exclusive representation of a common sense is also suggested by all means: common sense and the views of the people are superior to the reflective knowledge of the scholars, the academics and the intellectuals. These views - according to populist rhetoric - are based on concrete life experiences, are unadulterated, healthy and free from the scepticism of intellectualism. “Scholars, arrogant bureaucrats, cold-hearted technocrats, uncomprehending centralists, avant-garde thinkers, worshippers of big money” ignore the views of the people;<sup>379</sup> they believe that the people are stupid, and wisdom lies only with experts. Instead, “average workers” or “the man in the street” are instinctively superior to the functional elite. Populism thus feeds on an existing or

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<sup>378</sup> Polke, Christian, “Populismus als Herausforderung für die demokratische Zivilgesellschaft. Eine ethisch-theologische Perspektive”, in: *ZEE* 62 (3), 2018, 203.

<sup>379</sup> Referenced in Priester, *ibid.*, 4

fomented aversion to paternalism from outside or from above, and is directed against the so-called “false” and “treacherous” representatives of the people.

This is immediately followed by the second characteristic: *elite hostility*. The contempt is directed against the power of those who allegedly and wrongly held, or still wrongly hold, themselves as representatives of the people or who hold important positions in social, economic and cultural life. This aversion is occasionally also directed against the legislative and executive instances of the state, parliament and government, and can lead to criticism of the significance and existing forms of representative democracy.<sup>380</sup> (Here cf. with hostility against institutions). Populism, however, is by no means merely a reevaluation of the people, but a reversal of relations. Its hostility to the elite is anti-elitist only in an instrumental sense. Rather, it seeks the rise of a new elite that suits its own purposes.

This results in a certain anti-pluralism and claim to social homogeneity. This anti-pluralism is even programmatic, because pluralism is seen as the cause and decisive reason for the failure of social transition situations and longed-for prosperity in the long run. Since the (alleged) will of the majority is always seen as endangered by competing particular interests and special rights of influential groups, propagating and awakening a longing for homogeneity<sup>381</sup> is an obvious way to create images of the enemy. This was already the case in the era of real-life socialism before the fall of communism. For left-wing populism of the socialist kind, the enemies were always the others, the imperialists and capitalists out there who, with the help of their accomplices (internal enemies), endangered the majestic goals of a more just, egalitarian and classless socialist society. For the right-wing populism of our time, the defence of the identity of the indigenous

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<sup>380</sup> See Polke, *ibid.*, 204.

<sup>381</sup> See Reuter, *ibid.*, 164, Polke, *ibid.*, 204.

population against the threat from above and from outside is declared to be the highest goal; the fear of being overrun by (im)migrants and refugees becomes a mobilising force in various strata of society (not only in poorly educated circles, but even and often among academics). It is also significant that when populist forces acquire political mandates through democratic elections, or even form the government, the distinction between politics, state and society become erased (both in left and right populism). In this case, actors of populist forces will use state organs or intervention measures (e.g. subsidies) to act as identity builders and identity promoters. Although openly racist or anti-Semitic nationalist patterns of thought are excluded, it is not the case for the plea against an alleged constant danger from outside. Since no state of our time and geopolitical space can do without a certain plurality of ethno-cultural and spiritual character resulting from the cultural sphere,<sup>382</sup> a limited internal pluralism is acknowledged, but an attempt is made to preserve the common good of the “authentic nation”,<sup>383</sup> and the preservation of the identity of the people “in its ancestral place and without a blending of cultures through immigration”.<sup>384</sup>

A certain “backward-looking utopia” is closely interwoven with this claim to collective identity and “we-feeling” - as Karin Priester rightly points out on the basis of international comparisons.<sup>385</sup> What is meant by this is the commitment to a romanticised, unhistorical, ideal world, indeed to a “space of the people” that once guaranteed protection and comfort, to which one has a right and which should be maintained as a heritage, especially since one once made many sacrifices for it. Even if this supposed lifeworld cannot be expressed as a social category and

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<sup>382</sup> For example, the plea is not against democracy but against political liberalism, not against confessional diversity and the cultural imprint of Christianity but against Islam.

<sup>383</sup> Referenced in Polke, 204.

<sup>384</sup> Reuter, 165.

<sup>385</sup> Priester, 5-6.

does not function, populists regard this space as a “universe of self-evident things”<sup>386</sup> that must not be abandoned or fragmented. The insistence on continuity with this ideal state and the search for correspondences with this world leads to a backward-looking, defensive, reactive attitude, according to which any questioning of such self-evident facts or the claim to analyse current, socio-cultural or economic conditions is considered as treasonous or stigmatically regarded as fouling one’s own nest. In times of growing economic inequalities and rapid processes of change, the preservation of familiar ways of life gains plausibility, which populists like to instrumentalise.

These characteristics of populism are by no means complete and could be discussed further in detail. But I wanted to make my perspective transparent for my further presentation, so as to be able to describe and examine the development of East Central Europe, and especially Hungarian society, in more detail with the help of this interpretative framework.

### **The Specific Nature of the Development of Modernity in Central and Eastern Europe - Historical, Social and Economic Framework Condition**

After the political transition in 1989/1990, Hungary, just like most other states in Eastern Europe, was faced with a protracted process of change by which the country was to transform itself on an economic, social and political level from an authoritarian-totalitarian system to a liberal democracy. However, this was not a uniform process in all the countries of this region: experiences with democratic awakenings from their own history (for example, the 1956 popular uprising in Hungary, the Prague Spring in 1968, Solidarność from 1980 in Poland), the degree

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<sup>386</sup> Husserl, Edmund G., *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, Den Haag, 1954, 183. Referenced in Priester, 5.

of human rights violations and repression in the former regimes, cultural legacies of the socialist systems, reminiscence of the old and dissatisfaction with the newly acquired socio-political structures influenced the speed and depth of the transformation processes in the individual states.<sup>387</sup>

The transition from a totalitarian system to a liberal democracy can be characterised, both in Hungary and in other Central Eastern European societies, by several features.<sup>388</sup> I would like to highlight or briefly describe only two aspects, namely a component of a more economic nature and a political one:

- Economically, the transition can be characterised by the opening of a strong almost unfounded future perspective for citizens;
- Politically, society's path evolves from a consolidated democracy around the 'Wende' (i.e. the transition of 1989/1990) to today's hybrid system.

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<sup>387</sup> See Fazakas, Sándor, "Protestantische Identität und gesellschaftliche Gestaltungsaufgabe. Europäische Integration und ›soziales Europa‹ als Herausforderungen des ungarischen Protestantismus", in: Traugott Jähnichen / Torsten Meireis et al. (eds.), *Soziales Europa? Jahrbuch Sozialer Protestantismus*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014, 227–245. See also Pickel, Gert, „Nostalgie oder Problembewusstsein? Demokratisierungshindernisse aus der Bewältigung der Vergangenheit in Osteuropa“, in: Siegmart Schmidt / Gert Pickel / Susanne Pickel, *Amnesie, Amnestie oder Aufarbeitung? Zum Umgang mit autoritären Vergangenheiten und Menschenrechtsverletzungen*, Wiesbaden, 2009, 129–158.

<sup>388</sup> See Fazakas, op. cit., 230ff; See Pickel, Gert / Pollack, Detlef et al. (eds.), *Osteuropas Bevölkerung auf dem Weg in die Demokratie. Repräsentative Untersuchungen in Ostdeutschland und zehn osteuropäischen Transformationsstaaten*, Wiesbaden 2006.

### ***Introduction of Market Economy***

With the introduction of market economy, many citizens hoped to improve their own material situation to the level of Western-style prosperity. Within a few years, however, these expectations proved untenable. The side effects of economic upheavals (such as unemployment, cost explosion, inflation, corruption), the continuing economic disparity between the eastern and western parts of Europe, the newly created mass social misery and the more recent wave of emigration (due to freedom of movement within the EU) towards wealthier societies, have led to bitter disappointment and often to nostalgia and longing for the old social security of the socialist era. Apparently, the experiences in a post-1989 world are far behind the hoped for expectations.

The formation of a new social order for the country proved difficult. Social science studies and further analyses indicate that Hungary is currently experiencing its third attempt at modernisation.<sup>389</sup> The first attempt was made by the enlightened propertied aristocracy in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in order to avoid the misery of the European cities as a side effect of the capitalism of the time. The formation of the supporting class necessary for this project, the bourgeoisie, was just gaining momentum when the armies of the Austrian Emperor and the Russian Tsar and the subsequent wave of terror and retribution after the March Revolution of 1848 put an end to these reform efforts. The second attempt at modernisation began with the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, i.e. with the Compromise of 1867 and with realism in political thinking. The development was breath-taking - by the turn of the millennium, Budapest's infrastructure was on a par with Berlin. However, the defeat in the First World War and the years that followed

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<sup>389</sup> See more Nádás, Péter, "Der Stand der Dinge. Warum der Versuch einer dritten Modernisierung Ungarns nicht gelungen ist", in: *Lettre International* 95, 2011, 39–49.



led to a complete collapse. After the Second World War, the Soviets imposed their political, social and economic structure on Hungary (and on the surrounding societies in the region). During the decades of the Kádár regime, modest prosperity set in, but the price was catastrophic public debt and a flourishing shadow economy as a survival strategy for the population. The third attempt at modernisation, which began with the transition of 1989/1990, suffered and still suffers from the heavy legacy of earlier decades: survival strategies, the search for loopholes in the law, mutual distrust, secrets regarding the former cooperation with the communist state power, the separation of public and private spheres. As for the country's economic performance: a viable bourgeois middle-class has not yet been fully formed and the heavily indebted country, lacking a capital-strong entrepreneurial class, has not been able to hold its own in competition with Western large corporations and investors. Only very few succeeded in gaining a foothold in the new capitalist economic order - above all the former political elite, which had converted its ideological political power into economic power, a fact that has had an extremely irritating effect on the country up to now.

And another remark: the South-Central-Eastern European countries of today's Europe never had the opportunity to achieve the status of a welfare society and a nation state as a result of the development of modernity because of their geopolitical position and historical events. The countries of Western Europe were historically able - as historians and sociologists rightly note - to structure their social life through a relative balance of social security, the rule of law, economic interests and morality. In Central and Eastern Europe, this process was precisely the opposite: it is part of the difficult legacy of the brown and not least the red dictatorships. The memory of the time of humiliation and degradation, or the internal and external disruption left by these regimes, lingers on. And this negative development is now complemented by a resentment towards 'more Europe'. From the perspective of South-

Central-Eastern European societies, it is further deepened by the so-called centre-periphery syndrome (cf. Wallerstein theory<sup>390</sup>): that is, the strong states in the centre of Europe are characterised by an incredibly strong nation-state identity that is hardly perceptible on the surface, they act with a self-confident economic interest, while the countries on the periphery are allowed to continue to function as a cheap labour market and at the same time as an expensive sales market. This prosperity gap between centre and periphery is to be cemented because of the monopolising interests at the core - an explanation for the growing wave of migration in recent years from the new EU member states towards the West...

Developments almost three decades ago have shown that the initial enthusiastic conviction that an authoritarian political system like communism was finally a thing of the past has given way to sober pragmatism. Central-Eastern European societies are thus in a state between continuity and discontinuity. According to statistics, development in terms of poverty reduction is more effective than during the years immediately after the fall of communism. But social questions, economic philosophies, debates about the role of the state are carried out like 'religious wars' instead of sober, technical discussions.

### ***Political Development in Hungary***

The political development in Hungary since the fall of communism in 1989/1990 can be described in three phases according to the social scientist András Köröscényi:

#### *First period*

He calls the first period between 1989-1998 the *phase of transition*. This period is the time of bloodless transition that was to transform society from an authoritarian-totalitarian system into a liberal

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<sup>390</sup> See more Nádás, op. cit., 39-49.

democracy. The system of public law institutions and political institutions could be re-established and further developed. These institutions have been allowed to survive to the present day and continue to function - even though their political vulnerability is strongly criticised today. The period of transition was marked by:

- a pluralistic party landscape,
- public political debates,
- conflicts that have been fought out.

However, the initial “moment of liberal consensus” that came about in the wake of the fall of communism was soon replaced by left-liberal hegemony.<sup>391</sup> Like this very consensus, the results of the negotiated revolution were soon destroyed by the post-communist government majority, left-liberal rhetoric and by the massive mutual trust deficit of the former negotiating partners of 1989. Apparently, the elites saw the results of the initial transition negotiations as provisional only. Soon, the lack of trust led to a differentiation of political-ideological positions and the political actors questioned each other's legitimacy. Substantive issues (such as the questions of power, justice, reparations, the understanding of liberalism, etc.) could not be clarified and negotiated, even though an increase in civil society initiatives and interest in politics was clearly felt in the favourable liberal climate.

### *Second phase*

According to Körösekényi's assessment, the second phase between 1998-2006 is considered the phase of *consolidated democracy*. According to political science analyses, a democracy is then considered consolidated:

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<sup>391</sup> Körösekényi, András, *A magyar politikai rendszer – negyedszázad után* [*The Hungarian political system - after a quarter of a century*], Budapest, 2015, 403.

- when there are no separatist forces,
- when the majority of citizens think and act within this democratic framework even in the case of serious economic and social crises, and

In this respect, Hungary enjoyed a solid and consolidated democracy in the years between 1998-2006, accompanied by the stability of public law institutions. In parallel, however, another tendency slowly spread during this period: an initially pluralistic political landscape was replaced by a bipolar political camp with strong loyalty expectations and party preferences. This led to the credibility crisis of public institutions and interest groups. They lost political weight, while the influence of political parties increased vis-à-vis civil society organisations, interest groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In addition, another significant phenomenon emerged: a kind of ‘leader principle’ spread at the top of the respective political camps. This means that, within a political party and vis-à-vis its internal autonomy and leadership organisation, a leader who is considered charismatic gains power. This leader was not supposed to simply manage the party organisation professionally but to mobilise further followers, integrate internal but possibly diverging forces, as well as create visions. Such a tendency was already evident between 2004-2009 in both political blocs in the rivalry of two personalities (Gyurcsány and Orbán) and continues to this day. At present, it seems that a charismatic leader can assert himself on one side only, while the opposition remains fragmented and cannot find an integrating leader.

### *Crisis and regime change phase*

In the phase of *crisis and regime change* (since 2006), thanks to the confrontational style of the political leaders and as a result of the events during the autumn days of 2006, the polarisation of the bipolar political landscape continued (see protests and demonstrations over Prime Minister Gyurcsány's confession of lies, as well as the escalation of the

situation and brutal dispersal of the demonstrations).<sup>392</sup> The period of consolidated democracy came to an end, the crisis of the legitimacy of political forces spread. Citizens' trust in the government and parliament were shaken and it was not until the 2010 elections that an increased interest in politics returned, resulting in a two-thirds majority for the Fidesz party in parliament and the complete fragmentation of the opposition or left political camp. The radical right Jobbik party became the second strongest political force in the country. The former 'elite' arrangements were completely terminated, most political rules, behaviours and norms that characterised the first two phases were abandoned piece by piece. A "central political force field" took the place of a bipolar political power relationship with the dominance of the Fidesz party, which calls itself the Christian-Conservative People's Party. In Hungary, democracy as a form of society remained but the nature of politics was substantially changed. Although the government's rhetoric (based on a revolution by democratic means, or a "revolution from the voting booths") announced a new systemic change, authoritative political science and social science analyses assess what has been happening on the Hungarian political stage since 2010 differently: it is less of a systemic change (compared to 1989/1990) than a constitutional or governmental reform.<sup>393</sup> That is why experts refer to this upheaval with the term: 'regime change'. In a regime change, the institutions of public law remain intact, but significant changes take place:

- in the system of separation of powers,
- in the party system,

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<sup>392</sup> Schwabe, Alexander, "Notwendige Standpauke für Ungarn. Lügen-Bekenntnis und Demonstrationen", in: *Spiegel-online* 20.09.2006, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/luegen-bekenntnis-und-demonstrationen-notwendige-standpauke-fuer-ungarn-a-438209.html> (accessed 15 November 2022)

<sup>393</sup> Körösényi, *ibid.*, 409–410

- in the configuration of elites, and
- in the preferences and behaviour of voters.

With the regime change, political thinking changed radically: the political forces that came to power now understand and interpret their mandate differently than before, and their ideas about the ideal relationship between state and society take on new accents. A whole range of authoritarian methods have now become part of the style of government and the exercise of power. Populist tones are part of the rhetoric of everyday life, political visions with anti-communist and anti-pluralist elements are being drafted. These symptoms lead the harshest critics of the Orbán regime to speak of a “democrature”, a mixture of democracy and dictatorship.<sup>394</sup> Although such claims may seem exaggerated, comparative politics teaches us that there are so-called “hybrid systems” or “intermediate systems” in which parliamentary democratic forms of government and authoritarian tendencies in the exercise of power can get along or need not exclude each other.<sup>395</sup>

Körösi's periodisation stimulates further thinking in the sense that he does not link the fault lines and transitions between the respective phases to the changes of power or government among the political forces, nor does he make them dependent on parliamentary elections. Rather, he expresses that what is at stake here are tendencies that spread, grow or die over the course of years and parliamentary cycles beyond the rivalry of political forces. A process of change in which so-called

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<sup>394</sup> Bruck, András (2013), “Buslinie Sehnsucht: Die Demokratur in Ungarn”, in: *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, November 2013, <https://www.blaetter.de/archiv/jahrgaenge/2013/november/buslinie-sehnsucht-die-demokratur-in-ungarn> (accessed 15 November 2022)

<sup>395</sup> Levitsky, Steven / Way, Lucan Ahmad, “Elections Without Democracy. The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism”, in: *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2), 2002, 51–65. ; Diamond, Larry, “Elections Without Democracy. Thinking about hybrid regimes”, in: *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2), 2002, 21–35.

“obstacles to democratisation”<sup>396</sup> arise as unavoidable by-products of such a transformation due to cultural legacies of the former system, reminiscent of the old and dissatisfaction with the newly acquired socio-political structures, which are comparable to experiences of other Central-Eastern European societies or former socialist countries.

## **Susceptibility to Populism as a Challenge for Society and Church**

Historically, since the time of the Reformation, a popular piety or a pronounced people's awareness of God developed in Hungary, which, in the political upheavals, reckoned with trust in God's justice in history and, at the same time, with a certainty of faith in being hidden in God's hand. This attitude of faith was fed by the activities of Reformed preachers and teachers in the countryside and in the market towns, but also by education in church-run schools. In the culture of remembrance of the Reformed, for example, a past that “refers less to glorious historical events than to the miracle of survival, of continued existence despite historical tragedies” lives on to this day. Therefore, a consciousness of suffering is characteristic of the Reformed. With the thought figures of the Deuteronomistic interpretation of history, or with the biblical and historical parallels between the fate of the Old Testament people and the current historical situation of the country, the meaning of historical experiences was to be interpreted again and again. The events regarded as national catastrophes, such as the defeat by the Turks in 1526 and the subsequent and much suffered 150-year Ottoman rule, the collapse after the two world wars, the territorial losses due to the Paris Peace Talks, the Trianon trauma, the more than 40-year communist dictatorship, etc., were often interpreted in the scheme of sin-punishment-repentance or compared with the exile and desert

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<sup>396</sup> Pickel, *ibid.*

wandering of the chosen people in the Old Testament. As a result of this historical view and these analogies, a special interest in participating in public life arose in the Protestant churches. The overall view of society, nation and church and a very strong claim to sovereignty would have moved the Reformed to bear a special responsibility for the country.

But, recently, in the midst of the described symptoms of crisis in a transitional society, another challenge, a danger even, for the Protestant Christians and churches in Hungary has emerged: the claim to strengthen certain group identity(ies) in society, which mostly draws on cultural-ethnic elements and historical experiences. This is not surprising, because it is precisely in this geopolitical space that a collective sees itself as a historical community of experience, and it is precisely the Protestant churches - especially during the decades of oppression - that were considered the guardians of these fundamental rights. Today, when quite broad sections of the population or groups perceive the economic and socio-cultural upheavals as a threat, and perceive themselves again as powerless objects of global economic interests, many look back with longing to times when they enjoyed social security and social respect. This is mostly the interwar period, which was first interrupted by the war, then by the socialist social system and not restored after the fall of communism. Representatives of this era, which is considered the 'good old days', are revered or invoked as reference authorities or historical personalities for one's own identity. And since, in the eyes of these groups, the Church embodies continuity with this history, some such groups, which are not numerous, but considered radical right-wing, strive to articulate their identity in the Church or through the Church. If the official Church leadership tries to keep its distance from such claims on the grounds that the church is not a place for day-to-day politics or for the spirit of exclusion, it faces the accusation that, in the exercise of community and social services, it is



itself an ally of another political force that was democratically elected but now forms the government.

In order to preserve the Protestant identity and the Protestant task of shaping society, the churches are more than ever dependent on clear-sightedness and sobriety in today's crisis situation. To put it simply: theology and the Church are advised to respond critically/self-critically to certain questions and symptoms of crisis and to reflect on them theologically.

It is therefore necessary....

*...to avoid political appropriation!*

Even if politics wants to consider the historical churches as allies and treats them as partners in certain areas (e.g. in the social service sector, in the teaching of ethical competences, etc.), and remunerates their service in society, the question must not be ignored: how Christian are country and society? If a political party or the government calls itself Christian and sees itself in the historical role of 'defender of the Christian occident', defender of a Christian culture and society in Hungary and Europe, and if this collective self-assertion meets with acceptance in broad ranks of society, this observation must not obscure the fact that this is a matter of ideological resentment. Both in the imagination of the political elite claiming to be Christian and among their potential voters, the Christian worldview is still perceived as opposed to an allegedly liberal, secular, socialist-communist ideology. Even the churches tend to be sympathetic, but also rather uncritical of the Christian identity claimed by the respective rulers or political elite. They forget that there is more at stake here than a metaphysically-based ideology. They are quick to forget that faith in God is different and more than a commitment to a religious worldview, that God in Jesus Christ has a special, personal and unique history with each individual, that this history or God's turning to human beings does not merely establish a

moral world order but demands very personal devotion and responsibility from people.

*...to disclose ideological critique!*

Churches have a clear theological view on the origin and task of the state, on power and the exercise of power. Therefore, it is unacceptable to call on Christian (political) ethic when politicians try to redefine their mandate with constant references to the crisis by invoking the will of the people. A permanent crisis policy or alleged crisis management opens the door to authoritarian tendencies and does not tolerate pluralism, differences of opinion, or otherwise the danger inherent in the crisis - so the argument of the alleged crisis managers - would potentially be even higher. Unfortunately, however, the crisis has become an “instrument of power” in our time, and not only at the national level, but also in European politics (cf. Agamben, 2013, 44). The ongoing crisis of European institutions, which can be captured in many ways - e.g. as a euro crisis, as a debt crisis, more recently as a refugee crisis - gives the impression that the reference to the crisis and the promise of crisis management serves to compromise identity.

At the national level, the strengthening of the nation-state idea seems to be virulent again, and it is understood by many as a possible way out of the current crisis - no wonder, since the EU enlargement to the East could not solve this problem. After all, these countries (e.g. the Visegrad countries) were historically never able to freely develop their nation-statehood as a result of the development of modernity; after the fall of communism, they found themselves once again thrown back on their own capabilities in dealing with social and economic problems. However, caution is needed in evaluating this area, especially with regard to judging too quickly. After all, historical experience has shown that in crisis situations especially, it is not the utilitarian interests but the emotional elements that are important for the constitution of a community in the political sense. The shared history, culture, language,

religious conviction and its symbols and the shared destiny are supposed to ensure the cohesion of a collective. Therefore, churches are particularly needed in this context, both in Hungary and in the region as a whole. They should not only:

- carefully differentiate between real crises and crisis narratives and demystify the narratives, but
- present themselves as organisations that preserve the national heritage on the basis of their mission in history,
- carefully relativising it with an eschatological reservation,
- but at the same time remain on a transnational level.

Of course, this tension cannot simply be resolved according to the motto “reconciled diversities”, because the interlocking of national and confessional identity remains on the agenda from Poland to Spain, from Ireland to Orthodox Greece. The idea that socio-cultural differences can simply be levelled out over time and through modernisation is absurd. All that remains is the task of a reflected theological approach to the questions of people, nation and culture for the pan-European context.

*...to go beyond anti-communism.*

It has already been pointed out that the endeavour of politics is to enforce its own decisions and goals in a collectively binding way or - as Eilert Herms aptly puts it - to form “social ethos” so as to be able to maintain its legal order in the long run.<sup>397</sup> In Hungary, this is happening in the current crisis under the flag of anti-communism. Anti-communism has become a constant element in the desired formation of political identity - not only in the rhetoric of the currently strongest political force at the top, but everywhere where it is a matter of questioning the legitimacy of political opponents. In this discourse, the image of the enemy is always maintained, whereby the former communists can be

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<sup>397</sup> Herms, Eilert, “Das Konzept ‘Zivilreligion’ aus systematisch-theologischer Sicht”, in: Rolf Schieder (ed.), *Religionspolitik und Zivilreligion*, Baden-Baden, 2001, 93–94.

replaced in each case by the figure of the current opponent. Left-oriented entrepreneurs, multinationals, banks or international monetary funds, etc. - all those who act against the interests of the people - are supposed to find themselves in this enemy image as the descendants of the communists. From the point of view of the anti-communist argument, everything that may appear as evil and misery in the life of society is due to the political and economic influence of the post-communists and the left-liberals allied with them. Therefore, a sober analysis of forces controlling society does not come into view. Instead, elite hostility and disenchantment are stirred up and a new alliance between the alleged will of the people and national-conservative identity formation is announced. However, many believe that Hungary cannot become a prosperous country so long as the political elite does not move beyond anti-communist ideology (Mike, 2013). This is supported by two other arguments:

- On the one hand, there is no evidence that anti-communism is actually a consistent ideology or a guiding principle of social and economic policy (such as conservatism, social market economy or Christian democracy) with founders, programmes, goals or international networking.
- On the other hand, it should also not be concealed that there will be anti-communist hostilities and suspicions so long as there is no adequate legal and political coming to terms with the communist dictatorship and its legacy.

## **Conclusion**

- To all appearances, the rapid economic and socio-cultural upheavals and the pluralisation of lifestyles in the societies of Hungary and the Central Eastern European countries (but often also among their own church people) were perceived as a threat and a burden. The current refugee crisis and the defensive reactions to the proposed solution methods confirm, and even

deepen, fears that have grown over the course of history and continue to exist.

- Politics reacts to this with the endeavour of unifying identity contents in order to make the burdens resulting from the structural changes bearable for the collective and for the citizens, and to further their own existing or aspired power. It tries to offer an alternative solution against the real or even fomented feelings of threat, and to form collective identities from which it hopes to achieve high stability values.
- The Protestant churches, on the other hand, are faced with the task of assessing the processes based on the biblical and theological potential for reflection. Only a thorough and informed analysis of political-economic processes and a deep knowledge of biblical contents of faith would build up competence to critically examine time-bound patterns of identity and to offer alternative ways of shaping social coexistence.