

## *Transition and Churches in Hungary, with Special Regard to the Small Churches*

In this paper, first I will describe the characteristics of the church-political transition in Hungary in general.<sup>1</sup> In the second part of my article below, I will try to discuss how the so-called small churches were affected by the democratic transition.

A peculiarity of the regime change in Hungary was that it was not a revolutionary transformation, but a slow erosion of the communist system from the beginning of 1988 until the democratic elections in the spring of 1990. (This is why the Hungarian “transitological” literature tends to use the terms “long 1989” and “negotiated revolution”.)

In my view, the major (“historical”) churches did not participate in the regime change process, it passed them by, or even preceded them. Democratic church policy was not primarily the result of the churches’ struggle for religious freedom, but of the political struggle of the new democratic parties.

I would also like to call the attention two specialties of the regime change in Hungary:

1. The former ruling communist party and the last socialist government were active participants in the regime change in Hungary;
2. Most of the legislation of the democratic republic (including the law on religion) was passed before the free elections held in the spring of 1990.

In my opinion, from the point of view of church policy, we should treat the Hungarian state after the regime change as a separate period from April 1989 to April 1990, because formally the party state still existed, but in reality, the state no longer wanted to / could exercise power, but simply handed it over.

### **THE “MODEL CHANGE”, DECEMBER 1987 – APRIL 1989**

The change in church policy did not start as a regime change, but grew out of the reform program and the search for a new path in the last period of the communist party (Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party – MSzMP). In May 1988, the party conference replaced János Kádár as General Secretary and announced reforms. These initiatives ultimately contributed to the disintegration of the system rather than to its stabilization.

The process was closely linked to the so-called “alliance policy” of the last period of the Kádár regime. From the mid-1960s, the powerful president of the State Office for Church Affairs (Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal – ÁEH), Imre Miklós, the state secretary, advocated a “small steps church policy”, the essence of which was that the state counted on the churches as allies in order to achieve the social (and by the 1980s, political) goals of the system, in return for more and more freedom. The latter did not reach the minimum level of religious freedom in democratic states, and the state control and the influence over the churches remained an essential element of state church policy until the spring of 1989. However, the churches had by then accepted the role offered to them and sought to achieve their goals through dialogue within the system rather than by dismantling it.

The success of the “alliance policy” was marked by the decision taken in 1986 to review the legislation on church affairs. (This was essentially a continuation and deepening of the policy of “small steps” within the framework of the state socialist system.) The first and last time Imre Miklós, the State Secretary for Church Affairs, reported on his activities in Parliament was in December 1987.

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<sup>1</sup> About the church-political transition see detailed in Hungarian: Fazekas 2011; Erdődy 2015; Gergely 1992; Lugosi-Szabó 2017. From the relevant English studies: Valuch 2000: 337–341; Ungváry 2014; Szabó 2016.

The report was essentially a celebration of the Kádár-era church policy on the part of both the state and the churches accepted by the socialist state.

The preparatory work for the new law on religion was started by the State Office for Churches at the beginning of 1988, with the aim of providing a framework for a special “alliance” between the state and the churches. The first drafts essentially sought to incorporate the “old” content into a new framework and, most importantly, did not envisage the abolition of the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH), but at most a restructuring. Church leaders were also supportive, sharing the position of the party leadership and Imre Miklós, who saw the work on the Religious Affairs Law as a “democratization”. The churches accepted the model-changing concept of the socialist system. The “historical” churches distanced themselves from the political initiatives of the opposition until the beginning of 1990, and continued to envisage the remedying of their grievances (for example, the settlement of church education) within the existing framework.

## **THE “REGIME CHANGE”, APRIL 1989 – MAY 1990**

The last period of the state socialist system, which was supposed to implement the concept of model change, finally came to an end with the retirement of Imre Miklós and the decision to abolish the State Office for Church Affairs. In November 1988, a new government was formed under the leadership of Prime Minister Miklós Németh, which decided from the outset to take “major steps” in church policy.

Imre Miklós was dismissed from the presidency on 30 April 1989, and the State Office for Church Affairs ceased to exist on 30 June. The abolition of the ÁEH was strongly demanded by the opposition democratic parties, which were already operating legally at the time.

The dissolution of the ÁEH without succession was important for two reasons: firstly, it demonstrated that a state body controlling the churches and “managing” their affairs was not necessary in the democratic transition process. On the other hand, it also became a symbol of total state control and influence, which could not be influenced by the fact that in its last period it increasingly focused on dialogue with the churches and the preparation of the new Religious Affairs Law.

The government’s ideas, unveiled at the beginning of May, outlined a new approach and structure for church policy in all its aspects. The government, committed to a new church policy, was experimenting with new organizational structures and new staffing arrangements. Prime Minister Miklós Németh himself did his utmost to establish a model of a state-church that was democratic in all respects, while preparing and implementing the political regime change, and to do away with the remnants of the communist past.

Interestingly, the abolition of the ÁEH was met with the most moderate enthusiasm from the churches. The statements of the church leaders were characterized by uncertainty as to the nature of the sudden freedom and uncertainty about the future of church policy. I believe that a kind of “Stockholm syndrome” characterized the attitude of the large churches. The leaders of the so-called “historical churches” were more loyal to the regime that was disappearing than they were to political change.

(I think, this phenomenon was illustrated by words of a Roman Catholic bishop:

*“When I was already a bishop, but even before that, I already felt that what we are going to happen today will happen, that the Communist Party will give up its hegemony, because it has to give up. (...) Well, I dare say that I have always admired socialism, it has done many things, it is a great promise for humanity, I still say so today. But it cannot be realized in the way they wanted to realize it. (...) I never fought against it, in fact, I had the most loyal and most supportive relationship with the State Office for Religious Affairs. I never expected them to help – I wanted to help. They always helped. Whatever I asked for, I got.”<sup>2)</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Isten népének szolgálatában. [In the service of God’s people. Interview with József Cserhádi, Roman Catholic bishop of Pécs, Hungarian Radio, 19 April 1989] *Hungarian Monitoring* 20 April 1989, 1415–1423; 1422.

Typically, only small churches not recognized by the Kádár regime and renewal movements critical of it played this role.

The government speeded up the preparation of the law on religion and sought to involve churches and various social and political organizations in a wider range of activities. The aim was to generate a genuine democratic debate in order to create a broad social consensus for the transition legislation. The Németh government also wanted to underline its own democratic commitment through legislation.

The new institutional system was essentially based on three pillars. After the abolition of the ÁEH, a “Secretariat for Church Policy” (Egyházpolitikai Titkárság) was set up under the head of government, consisting of a few people, as a kind of advisory and coordinating institution. In practice, its most important task became diplomatic in nature, mainly to pave the way for contacts with the Holy See (this activity was crowned with success: in February 1990 diplomatic relations between Hungary and the Vatican were restored). The so-called Department of Churches (Egyházi Főosztály) was set up within the Ministry of Culture to coordinate the recognition of new religious communities and the operation of educational and other church institutions until the entry into force of the Law on Religious Affairs. The third, and perhaps the most specific, was the creation of the “National Council for Religious Affairs” (Országos Vallásügyi Tanács), with which the government sought to provide an institutional framework for dialogue with the churches. It held 3 meetings in total, focusing on the discussion of pending legislation.

The new democratic parties criticized the new institutional structure.<sup>3</sup> For them one of the most important things in the process of transition was to eliminate the state institutions in church affairs and ensure church-state separations. They declared: it is also an important interest of the “liberated” churches and religious communities. It was illustrated by a statement of a Conservative politician and the first president of the Constitutional Court, László Sólyom:

*“It is obvious that it is terribly ingrained in the church that it is restricted and has to ask for special permission for everything. And now it is unable to truly free itself from the state. (...) There is no need for any secretariat, no need for any religious council, because if there is one, it will certainly find something to do. It is also established by customary law to mediate, to control, to make itself indispensable. It would be a tremendous problem if the church were to engage in any of this. The aim is to achieve complete separation from the state. If the church has any »affair«, let the relevant ministry deal with it.”<sup>4</sup>*

From September 1989 to April 1990, the government did its utmost to introduce legislation to facilitate the operation of churches. The most important organizing element of this legislation was the declaration and practical implementation of the right to religious freedom. The most important of these laws is Act IV of 1990, adopted on 24 January 1990, but there were also a number of decrees which, before the free elections, served to establish the democratic state-church model. For example, they regulated the exercise of religion by prisoners and soldiers, the management of churches, the possibility of denominational schooling at all levels of education, etc.

## **AFTER THE FREE ELECTIONS, FROM MAY 1990 – “THE SECT QUESTION”**

The government led by József Antall, which took office in May 1990, was left with only one major area of church policy left to regulate: the enactment of a law on church property settlement, along with areas such as faith education, etc. The latter, however, became a source of heated political battles.

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<sup>3</sup> A particular feature of the transition in Hungary was the emergence of independent, democratic opposition parties from the beginning of 1988. In fact, it originated from two directions. In the process of regime change, completely new parties emerged, e.g. the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum – MDF) and the liberal Association of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége – SZDSZ) and Association of Young Democrats (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége – FIDESZ); and historical parties that had ceased to exist after 1945, such as the Independent Smallholders’ Party, the Christian Democratic People’s Party and the Social Democratic Party, were re-established. The democratic parties demanded religious freedom in general, the elimination of the remnants of communist persecution of religion. The “historical” churches were not very responsive to the new parties, preferring to negotiate with the transitional government.

<sup>4</sup> Kell-e egyházügyi törvény? [A law on religious affairs is it necessary?] Interview with László Sólyom.] *Magyar Nemzet. Emberkép* 29 August 1989, 3.

Of all the institutions of its predecessor, the Antall government retained only the Department of the Church, and abolished or restructured the others. The atmosphere of consensus that had prevailed in the second half of 1989 was replaced by ideologically motivated debates about the political activities of the churches. All this can be seen in parallel with the slow transformation of the role of the churches and the need to develop a new public strategy.<sup>5</sup>

Until 1989, under the communist regime, in addition to the officially accepted “historical” churches, the state classified the small churches into three groups:

1. There were some accepted small churches, which were integrated within the so-called “Council of Free Churches” (9 churches were included here, Baptists, Adventists, Methodists, etc.)
2. Tolerated small churches and religious movements (e.g. Nazarenes, Buddhists, Muslim communities after 1988)
3. Unauthorized, outlawed religious communities (mainly the Jehovah’s Witnesses and a Pentecostal charismatic group, the so-called Faith Church (Hit Gyülekezete). The latter were accepted by the state in June 1989 as the “swan song” of the ÁEH.)

As I mentioned, the churches accepted by the socialist regime as allies were not very active during the period of regime change, but rather tried to follow the events that affected them. Among the small churches and new religious movements, there were some that were explicitly apolitical, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the so-called Nazarenes, but there were also some that had developed close links with one of the democratic political parties, such as the Faith Church, the various “revival” and “renewal” movements, etc.

Law IV of 1990 was a liberal piece of legislation that broadly guaranteed the right to free practice of religion and basically only imposed formal requirements for the legal recognition of new religious communities as “official” churches (only 100 people had to submit a supporting signature to the relevant court).

Thanks to this law, several small churches that had been illegal under the communist regime were able to form legal religious denominations and new religious communities were organized. By 1993 there were more than 50 churches and religious denominations in Hungary. The emergence of new small churches in public life, and the in many respects unfamiliar elements of their faith life, were unusual in the newly liberalized public life (for example, street preaching, the appearance of churches in the media, or, in the case of Eastern religions, their special dress and rituals).

Rather, it was due to two interrelated factors. On the one hand, the established churches (in common Hungarian terms, the so-called “historical” – “historically established” – Christian churches: Roman Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran) were jealous of the new religious movements, which they treated with contempt as “sects”, and of their dynamic growth. Furthermore, the supporters of the conservative parties in power, however, saw in the new small churches not only a threat to “true” piety, but also propaganda against the Hungarian nation. They viewed the spread of new forms of religiosity with suspicion. (Traditional religiosity in Hungary was often associated with nationalism, as in many European countries.) The press of the governing parties published more and more biased reports about the dangerous nature of the “sects”. In 1992, we can already speak of a real anti-sect (anti-cult) campaign, as conservative public figures increasingly alarmed Hungarian society with the horrifying image of dangerous religious communities. Behind this phenomenon, the traditional mechanism of prejudice against “foreigners” could easily be detected. From the beginning, the process became a political issue and a manifestation of the opposition between the government and the opposition.

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<sup>5</sup> For the most important issues after the transition, in the 1990s, see in Hungarian e.g.: Balogh 1997; from the English language studies: Schanda 2003; Rosta 2017; the place of “sect question” in the church-political processes in the Hungarian society: Tomka 2010; Fazekas 2022; Máté-Tóth 2025.

In October 1991, three Protestant pastors founded the so-called “Helping Friend Team” (Segítő Barát Munkaközösség), a peculiar version of the Western anti-cult movements. The starting point was provided by parents whose child joined a new religious community and had therefore chosen a different set of values from the one they had inherited. The organization, which soon became the “one-man business” of a Reformed pastor Géza Németh (1933–1995), declared its mission to fight against “destructive cults”. Basically, all new religious communities were considered as such, from Christian Pentecostals to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists or the Hare Krishna movement. The most important feature of the anti-cult campaign was a special generalization. Sometimes specific religious groups were named, but the basic aim was to brand all religious communities outside the “historical” Christian churches as a generally uniform and dangerous movement. The recurrent accusations can be summarized as follows:

- The “cults” are anti-family in character, separating young people from their families and turning them against their parents.
- “Cults” are materialistic, extort money from members and commit financial crimes.
- Young people are brainwashed and “reprogrammed” to become anti-social and anti-national.
- The “sects” are in fact agents of hostile foreign organizations in Hungary.
- The “sects” are obscure movements that give the appearance of gentleness but are in reality aggressive and prone to violence.
- They abuse religious freedom guaranteed by new democratic laws.

In summary, the following factors can be highlighted as underlying the passionate debates about cults in Hungary:

- The extremely liberal law on religion set the limit for church establishment at a very low number of believers, so the rapid growth in the number of religious communities was indeed striking.
- The sectarian debate was exacerbated by the extremely tense and hostile relationship between the government and the opposition.
- During this period, there were also serious tensions within the largest governing party (which later led to the party’s split) between the far-right and Prime Minister József Antall, who was considered a moderate conservative.
- For Hungarian society, the expression of freedoms, such as freedom of religion and freedom of the press, was still a novelty 2–3 years after the transition from communist dictatorship into democracy.

In early 1993, the “Helping Friend Team” succeeded in getting a Conservative group in Parliament to support their activities. Two events in the Hungarian parliament were clearly linked to the activities of the anti-sect lobby. Firstly, in early March 1993, the two opposing positions clashed over the distribution of budgetary support for churches. The first alternative was that state financial support should be given to all legally registered churches, and that the state would not have the right to examine which religions were worthy of it and which were not. The second alternative is that the state should distinguish between denominations and should not tolerate “destructive sects” that are a threat to society. The Conservative majority in Parliament eventually voted in favor of the latter, and on this basis some churches were deprived of budget support on the grounds that they were indeed “destructive” communities. This was the first time that the Hungarian parliament declared that it could rank religions according to their “usefulness”.

The other, more controversial case erupted in March 1993. Conservative, pro-government MPs (one from the Hungarian Democratic Forum / Magyar Demokrata Fórum; one from the Independent Smallholders’ Party / Független Kisgazdapárt; one from the Christian Democratic People’s Party / Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt; and one independent) tabled a bill that would have radically restricted the right to establish new religious denominations: it would have changed the legal limit on the number of worshippers required to obtain legal church status from a minimum of 100 to

10 000, and would have required at least 100 years' presence and work in Hungary. The draft law, which would make it impossible for all minority churches except established churches to operate, was clearly backed by accusations of sects proposed by the "Helping Friend Team". In the end, more than half but less than two-thirds of the deputies supported the bill, so it did not become law. (The new law on the status of churches was only passed after 2010.)

In conclusion, the specialties of the church-policy transition of Hungary led to some new phenomenon:

1. Political alliance between the new Conservative political government parties and the traditional ("historical") churches, and
2. The liberal regulation of the religious freedom had also created new conflicts among the bigger and smaller (old and new) churches and the political parties as a special symptom of the heritage of the transition.

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