

**RED HOUSE OF CARDS: COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST  
HUNGARY AS POLITICAL RELIGIONS**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

CHRISTINE THERESA NEWBERG

Submitted to the Undergraduate Research Scholars program at  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by Research Advisor:

Dr. Stjepan G. Mestrovic

May 2019

Major: Psychology  
Sociology

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## ABSTRACT

Red House of Cards: Communist and Post-Communist Hungary As Political Religions

Christine Theresa Newberg  
Department of Sociology  
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Stjepan G. Mestrovic  
Department of Sociology  
Texas A&M University

This analysis investigated the effects and implications of Hungary's Communist legacy in the context of Hungarian socio-political landscapes during and after Communism. For this investigation, I relied upon Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and Eric Voegelin's *The Political Religions* to depict a collective mentality or collective consciousness derived from religion and politics and their impact on a societally shared understanding. The discussion further extended into an analysis of the manner in which Communist and post-Communist Hungarian governments utilise principles of political religions to serve as a structurally and culturally unifying force within society. Exploration of themes such as nationalism, ideology, and history have indeed revealed parallels between Communist and post-Communist governments which are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, especially considering the effects of a Communist legacy on a contemporary mode of governance. Throughout the analysis I have utilised secondary data in applying classical theorists like Durkheim and Voegelin to characterisations of each political religion for a qualitative analysis.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My endless love and gratitude go out to all those who have helped and stuck with me through this project. First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Stjepan Mestrovic for his wisdom, humanity and infinite patience for the Three Musketeers and I throughout the year and during our Sunday meetings. Without his guidance, motivation and his love for Durkheim, this paper would have been impossible. While on the subject of Sunday meetings, I would like to thank Chester for putting a smile on our face week by week. Furthermore, I have nothing but appreciation and awe for the better half of the Three Musketeers, Bryson Bassett and Madison Weber. Thank you for being some of the brightest minds in A&M's Sociology, for being exceptionally beautiful friends and hard workers. Special thanks go out to The Corner for the weekly respite and double wells. Additionally, this paper would have been impossible without the love and support of my family. Lastly, at 1112 I have found some of the most amazing, loyal friends who have made the writing process tolerable and the past four years unforgettable. To all other friends and everyone mentioned above, a big thank you is in order for the motivation, continuous love, good memes and an extraordinary few years.

## INTRODUCTION

Many years have passed since the fall of Communism in Hungary. The regime-change (*rendszerváltás*) in 1989 promised to bring political liberalisation, capitalism and the chance for people to have their voices heard. As part of the transition away from Communism, political and market controls were relaxed, elections became fully democratic, and the hope of a better life through social, cultural, political and economic reforms lurked on the horizon. However, many scholars have noted that the ‘Communist legacy’ is proving to be a glaringly apparent presence in formerly Communist countries, acting as a brake on democratisation (Bunce & Wolchik, 2006, p.8). This Communist legacy I take to mean the certain tendencies flourishing in Hungary’s socio-political life, which, characterised by political apathy, distrust of authority and other socio-political behaviours, have persisted into the contemporary era and leave their mark on the socio-political reality of the country.

Much of academic literature analysing Hungarian socio-political landscape since the regime change sees the nation as one in transition, on its way to mostly Western understandings of democracy, or as an established illiberal/populist democracy (Bunce & Wolchik, 2006; Innes, 2015; Pappas, 2013). However, Levitsky and Way offer a third kind, the competitive authoritarian or hybrid regime, which they don’t see as “partial” or “incomplete” democracies but rather as ones standing as distinct regimes with unique characteristics (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p.3). The regimes they call ‘hybrid’ are ones which uphold democratic institutions pro forma, but only for the sake of reproducing their power and maintaining international legitimacy. This analysis aims to understand the contemporary Hungarian socio-political environment as hybrid regimes which will be compared to Hungary’s Communist regime through the theoretical

framework of political religions.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim undertakes an investigation into exploring the “enduring elements that constitute what is eternal and human in religion” (Durkheim, 1995, p.4). His explanation of these enduring elements rests on the assumption of a functional nature of religion in society, containing certain collective notions that constitute the “skeleton of human thought” (Durkheim, 1995, p.8) from which collective representations in society emerge. Expanding on this he adds that such religious representations manifest as rites, whose purpose is to “evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states” (Durkheim, 1995, p.9) of a given group. When analysing the fabric of such groups, it is important to build on a discussion on how collective mental states underlie an affirmation and maintenance of group identity, values and ideology within a religion. If we take religious representations to “express collective realities” (Durkheim, 1995, p.9), we must also consider the collective consciousness, as the set of shared beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes that operate as a unifying force within society illustrate the “totality of social likeness” or “the total psychic life of a society” (Durkheim, 1964, p.80). In addition, Durkheim’s delineation of collective effervescence provides a useful way of understanding how individuals are bound to society’s ideals and values through interactions which occur based on shared concepts and symbols. This will be particularly useful in linking collective realities and religious representations to analyse manifestations of Communist and post-Communist political religions in Hungary.

The concept of political religion was extended upon by the Viennese thinker Eric Voegelin in his work by the same name, *The Political Religions*. Written in 1938, Voegelin’s essay is set against a historical backdrop full of totalitarian tension under Nazi terror. In it, he examines the “primal emotions” individuals seek to define “at the place where [his] soul is

linked to the cosmos” (Voegelin, 2000, p.30-31) as a way of experiencing their existence.

Utilising the concept of man’s pursuit of existence, we can thus also understand this tugging of emotions in the soul in a socio-political context, providing a framework for exploring man’s existence and its relation to society around him. Voegelin understands that sensing the “condition of creaturileness” (Voegelin, 2000, p.31) is perceived as a “spirit of the people” (Voegelin, 2000, p.6) and can therefore be thought of as existing within the “world of symbols, linguistic signs and concepts” which “arrange themselves around the sacred centre.” Such symbols, signs and concepts are shared and structured “according to the lines of political-religious splintering” (Voegelin, 2000, p.32). Following a Durkheimian split between what is sacred (treated with respect) and what is profane (treated as ordinary, everyday constructs), the political sphere is not merely profane, and is saturated with a religious dynamic and symbolism that the community must seek to protect (Maier, 2007, p.133).

The protection of what is considered sacred for society encompasses the “spirit of religious agitation and fanatically defended as the “right” order of being” (Voegelin, 2000, p.31) thereby synthesising politics and religion around a shared fundamental notion of a “sacred centre” from which an order of being or mental state arises. Voegelin assigns such elementary aspects common to politics and religion a “special language” (Voegelin, 2000, p.31), launching both into the realm of the “sacred” and separating it from the “profane” or ordinary things which are not treated with the same respect in society (Voegelin, 2000, p.70). However, an addition to Voegelin’s theory of political religion is necessary when analysing Hungary’s Communist and post-Communist socio-political landscape; while Communist regimes certainly attempted to create and enforce a political religion in Hungary, they ultimately failed to do so and can be labelled as incomplete. Thus, this analysis posits that Communism’s incomplete attempt at a

political-or civil-religion in Hungary ultimately left behind an unstable set of socio-political behaviours and characteristics which manifest themselves in a politically apathetic, unstable and fragmented society.

As part of the discussion on the socio-political characteristics of Communist and post-Communist Hungarian governments, we must inevitably utilise key elements of totalitarianism as understood by Hannah Arendt in her work on “The Origins of Totalitarianism.” Written only two years after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Arendt’s work reflects on themes used by Nazi and Communist governments to threaten the populace into subordination and compliance. The technique through which Communist and post-Communist Hungary achieve this domination of power can be understood in the context of Voegelin’s political religions in that political rhetoric, fear and threats to one’s existence constitute what is “sacred.” Arendt’s analysis extends into exploring how society, if it were to function as a political and cultural unit, must be approached with coherent and strong symbols through propaganda and political discourse (Arendt, 1973 p.341). Through borrowing many defining characteristics of Arendt’s totalitarianism, such framework of understanding can further be applied to investigating how the contemporary Hungarian government under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán aims to achieve a cultural and political unity in similar sense to that of previous governments under Communism.

Taking political religion as a means for the individual to derive moral power from and to have intimate relations with society, we can thus apply this theoretical framework to analyse its connection to political life and understand how nationalism and religion aim to “make the political unit, the state congruent with the cultural unit, the nation” (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.536). If we understand political unity as unified norms and ideologies within society, we can thereby explore how propaganda is used to establish ideological hegemony through relying on



stereotypes, double standards, outright lying, and many other techniques (Lázár & Horváth, 2013, p.222). Additionally, it is useful to consider other manifestations of communication such as the “socialist joke” (Lampland & Nadkarni, 2016, p.449), “symbolic and ritual nationalism” (Hytinen & Näre, 2017, p.236) and national, external symbols (Krasztev & Till, 2015, p.83) to understand how socio-political elements from Communist times also rear their heads under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s post-Communist, contemporary government.

Lastly, I include a discussion of Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon’s (1986) Terror Management Theory and some of its variations to offer a possible explanation of why Communism in Hungary failed to become a fully internalised, respected structure, and extend a similar line of logic for future implications of Hungary’s contemporary political religion.

Greenberg et al. proposed a unique mechanism through which individuals not only maintain their self-esteem in the face of challenge and existential threat, but also strengthen in-group ties with equal vehemence as the condemnation of the out-group (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Holbrook, Sousa, & Hahn-Holbrook, 2011; Solomon, Testoni, & Bianco, 2017). This framework of thought proves important in understanding why Communism failed to significantly alter many cultural propensities of Hungary. It also offers a possible explanation into why the contemporary political religion appeals to the nation’s existential insecurity through the same mechanisms to create lasting change.

# CHAPTER I

## COMMUNIST POLITICAL RELIGION

Communist movements seek to eliminate pre-existing political, cultural and social structures to replace them with new ones aligned with Communist ideology (Almond, 1983, p.128). To achieve this, “the first task of a ruling power is the creation of a politically unified nation by transforming the pre-existent, unorganised manifold into a body organised for action” (Voegelin, 2000, p.126). The history of Communism in Hungary serves as a potential example of how an incomplete and abrupt political religion fails to create meaningful cultural, behavioural and socio-political change. Firstly, I will define and explain how political religion as a concept fits into an analysis of Communist Hungary. By using key theoretically defining characteristics of political religions, we can thus begin to contrast and contextualise the intended efforts and aims of Hungary’s Communist regimes against the observed socio-political outcomes. Finally, establishing some of the regimes’ points of failure warrants theoretical explanations of the outcomes preventing genuine and thorough socio-political and cultural change.

After World War 2, Hungary’s official form of government came to be controlled by the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party to be included under Moscow’s Soviet influence (Leffler, 2012, p.175). After eliminating all opposition and winning full power in all corners of the Hungarian government, Communist efforts maintained their power from 1949 until four decades later, formally collapsing in 1989. It is important to note that Communism in Hungary had two flavours; an aggressive and terror-filled salami Communism which defined the years between 1949 and 1956 and a softer goulash Communism led by János Kádár until the final disintegration of the People’s Republic of Hungary in 1989.

Beginning in 1949, ‘salami’ tactics saw moderate politicians cut out of their positions one-by-one like salami slices under *de facto* leader Mátyás Rákosi (Nyyssönen, 2006) and through heavy pressure and influence from Moscow. After consolidating all power within the country and working under Soviet influence, Rákosi’s Stalinist movement resulted in Hungary becoming one of the harshest dictatorships in Europe (Johanna, 2004). However, Soviet influence met revolutionary resistance in 1956 when the Hungarian people demanded reform in all branches of the government, media, and economy. Eventually, what began as a students’ demonstration ended in bloodshed after Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest and after a period of disarray, power was returned to the Communists under Prime Minister János Kádár, who oversaw a gradually softening Communism until 1989. Thus began an era of relatively freer institutions and ‘goulash Communism,’ characterised by Kádár’s attitude of “whoever is not against us is with us,” leaving alone whomever did not actively revolt against state socialism (Békény et al., 1996, p.229).

Voegelin’s concept of political religion can be applied to understand Hungary’s Communist regime and its inadequacy in establishing a robust, lasting political religion. Extending Durkheim’s dichotomy of the sacred and profane realms within religions to the socio-political sphere, Voegelin illustrates how the “life of the people in political communities cannot be defined as a profane” one (Voegelin, 2000, p.70). Rebuilding a collective consciousness and unifying the nation into an organised cultural, political and social entity after the destruction caused by WW2 requires a firm establishment of legitimacy and power. Thus, an authentic Communist political religion would constitute a “world of symbols, linguistic signs and concepts” which “arrange themselves around the sacred centre; they firm up as systems, become filled with the spirit of religious agitation and fanatically defended as the right order of being”

(Voegelin, 2000, p.32). From taking over in 1949 to its fall 40 years later, Hungarian Communism emphasised various values such as social duty, loyalty to a socialist motherland, independence from capitalist interests and a “firm opposition to the enemies of Communist peace and freedom” (Almond, 1983, p.132).

In his exploration of political cultures Gabriel Almond states that Communist regimes stand as the ultimate test to the robustness of political culture theory and thus form political cultures themselves (Almond, 1983, p.128). Here, Voegelin’s understanding of political religions can be connected to Almond. Using some key tenets of Marxist and Leninist thought such as the reconstruction of a nation and celebration of labour (Figure 1, Figure 2), we can see how a dictatorship of the proletariat filled with class consciousness could stand as a complementary phrasing to collective consciousness, or a Communist political religion through symbols, linguistic signs and concepts (Voegelin, 2000, p.31; Almond, 1983, p.129). Voegelin’s ‘right’ order of being, or the future, for the everyday Hungarian was advertised to be defended by the Workers’ Party (Magyar Munkásmozgalmi Múzeum, 1970). Just as faith-based religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. contain sacred symbols like the cross, the Torah, saints and others, Communist political religions advance symbols like the hammer and sickle, coupled with linguistic concepts unique to Communism such as workers’ solidarity, rebuilding the nation and vilifying the right wing and the church.



**Figures 1 & 2.** Communist symbols. 1: “Produce more, build your country!” 2: “The Hungarian Communist Party fights for our future!” - Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Munkásmozgalmi Múzeum, 1970)

The Workers' Party aimed to unify the nation in a "fight for the nation's democracy and socialism." In one of Rákosi's many addresses to the nation, he stated that "good work and good politics step-by-step ousted the nation's enemies" which Rákosi defined as the "right wing whose workings inflicted serious harm on Hungarian democracy" (Rákosi, 1948). The regime's efforts to undermine the legitimacy of pre-existing capitalist structures and processes indicates an attempt at replacing an old political religion with a new one (Almond, 1983, p.128). However, the ideological scientificity of totalitarian propaganda manifests itself in references to dialecticism, a single universal version of a single truth, all derived from the context of an unstoppable revolutionary force. An example of this is Rákosi's attempt at justifying a Marxist-Leninist mode of governance: "The Marxist-Leninist idea of Communist Society is feasible, desirable, and inevitable," stating "the Hegelian dialectic of Marxism-Leninism is *the* universally valid and applicable doctrine expressing the interrelation of particulars" (László, 1964, p.21). Through guiding and confining political discourse to the realm of absurdity and abstraction, Communist regimes effectively aimed to exclude its citizens from political life in order to monopolise and centralise all forms of power (Arendt, 1973, p.346).

As much of his work on political religions derives from observing a Nazi totalitarian regime unfold around him, Voegelin saw grave danger in saturating an abruptly disrupted pre-existing political atmosphere with an almost religiously fanatical structure. Despite complete state control over most aspects of public and often private life, Communist ideology left shallow results (Valuch, 2015, p.32). Instead of creating a lasting and genuine cultural change that works towards values of secularisation, equality, unity and peace, the Hungarian Communist political religion established a dual reality for the people which ultimately prevented crucial attitude change. The absurd contradictions between mass purges with consistently failing 3-year plans

and the regime's incessant laud of Hungarian progress, sovereignty, and democracy ultimately "spelled terror rather than conviction" (Arendt, 1973, p.312). The mass atomisation achieved by repeated purges resulted in a loss of interest in politics, trust in authority, and even in peoples' own well-being (Arendt, 1973). The shallow mark that Communism left on civil society ultimately resulted in mass disillusionment, instability, distrust, apathy and indifference (Békény et al., 1996, p.184). For Durkheim and Voegelin, this would be understood as a failure to reproduce a system of political symbols, unified norms and national stability.

At this point, it is important to mention that much more investigation must be done on the many aspects of Hungarian Communism which could characterise it as an attempt at forming a political religion. However, the length of this paper and the lack of publicly available information limit the scope of both historical context and breadth of analysis. A thorough definition of successful political religions would serve as a useful comparison to the incomplete development of Hungary's Communist religion. In short, following Voegelin's and Durkheim's understanding of religions, I propose that a successful political religion would be blooming with high social consciousness, robust national identity and low political apathy. Indeed, a strong civil society would have many collective experiences that drive social cohesion and shapes thoughts and emotions based on shared concepts. In contrast, under Communism in Hungary, decades of institutionalised irrationality left behind but one result: an apathetic and indifferent nation characterised by alienation, fragmentation, and anomie, which I will next use as indicators of the detrimental legacy of the Communist political religion.

For a political religion to be successful, it must by definition be a social entity and it must be held together by collective consciousness. Without a set of shared beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes to operate as a unifying force within society, a distrustful behaviour pattern flourished

under Communism which had a serious impact on interpersonal and national cohesion. Even after the defining revolution of 1956, Hungarians were severely restricted in their social connection to the notion of a nation. As international socialism and socialist national thought were the prevailing narratives in Hungary under Communism, an independent sense of national belonging and cultural character was nigh impossible. Given the disjunction between propaganda and reality, the resulting indifference to political affairs could be taken to illustrate Communism's failure to provide viable alternative narratives to the pre-existing social discourse.

In 1945, the first general election to be held after the end of World War 2 saw a 57% win for the Independent Smallholder Party which ran on a conservative, nationalist platform under the slogan: God, Homeland, Family. Two years later, with overwhelming Soviet interference, the rightfully elected party was replaced by members of the Communist party through salami tactics, removing one individual after the other from elected office. Although the next 40 years saw a purge of religion and nationalism, such electoral support for conservative values is an introductory example of the pre-existing values held in importance by the public. As these very same values were vilified by Communism for four decades, there developed a general rejection of the state and state institutions, coupled with a high propensity for bending or outright ignoring Communist norms and state rules (Valuch, 2015, p.189). Such an atomised society results when a system relies on "extinguishing individual identity permanently" (Arendt, 1973, p.314), setting a nation up for the exploitation of totalitarian regimes and absolutist systems. As Péter Krasztev notes, other Eastern European nations also suffered from discontinuous efforts of modernisation such as is the case of Slovakia, Serbia, Belarus and others (Krasztev, 2015, p.171). This stop-and-start sequence resulted in a mass alienation from politics and society, and the fragmentation of civil society under severe oppression.

The process of such alienation from the socio-political sphere is demonstrated first by Yanqi Tong's (1995) work on post-socialist nations. Analysing post-socialist nations through the construct of mass alienation, Tong argues that such nations have "developed into a pattern of behaviour that is harder to transform than the political and economic institutions that originally created it" (Tong, 1995, p.216). As the fall of Communism left behind vast alienation, apathy and estrangement, "old norms have eroded but new ones were not yet in place" (Tong, 1995, p.234). Since society as a whole failed to develop mechanisms through which they could intimately interact with the political sphere, common symbols other than an anti-state or politically passive stance could not adequately form a sufficient collective consciousness (Penning & Kertzer, 1988). Thus, Tong delineates how this lack of symbolic attachment to Communist ideals resulted in mass apathy, alienation, and a brake on the construction of an effective democracy (Tong, 1995). If Communism were to have successfully formed a unifying political religion, the peoples' passion for shared symbols and values would have simultaneously strengthened and defined their identification with and allegiance to the Communist ideology. Instead, the collective effervescence binding individuals to ideals valued by Communism did not materialise and the only shared interaction occurring was a passive anti-state stance.

Lampland and Nadkarni's analysis of the "socialist joke" provides a unique extension of this anti-state narrative and a perspective into the Hungarian socio-political reality both during and after Communism. Understanding the socialist joke to be a means of condemning the regime and thus building political intimacy, the authors demonstrate how telling jokes reflects society's shared values and their relations with the unequal power relations between the state and its citizens (Lampland & Nadkarni, 2016, p.460). A key point to make here is that these jokes happened in the private sphere and enabled a withdrawal from political participation. The clear



framework of the “us” vs “them” in the socialist joke often mocked the “disjunction between ideology and reality” (Lampland & Nadkarni, 2016, p.459), preventing a coherent enactment and maintenance of a genuine political life. Thus, after the failure of the 1956 revolution, Hungarians were left with the socialist joke as “an act of everyday subversion,” acting as a form of political resistance and a commentary on the unequal power relations behind a fragmented society (Lampland & Nadkarni, 2016, p.451).

Not only could people not overtly express a collective reality, but a reliance on humour as a means of mocking the further system demonstrates individuals’ “disassociation from and rejection of the meanings, norms, and values” that define everyday Communist life (Tong, 1995, pg.216). Lampland’s, Nadkarni’s, and other scholars’ works demonstrates that the inadequacy of a Communist political religion in Hungary resulted in a thorough societal rejection of and disassociation from everyday political life. Such delegitimization of political institutions also has consequences for the stability of social interactions and overall wellbeing of society; a decimation of the nation’s political, cultural and religious foundations simultaneously resulted in adverse effects for the individual (Vingender, 2001).

Another example of the Hungarian individual withdrawing from society comes yet again from a unique analysis, this time by anthropologist Lisa Pope Fischer (Fischer, 2016). In her work ‘Symbolic Traces of Communist Legacy in Post-Socialist Hungary,’ Fischer uses the example of the current Hungarian healthcare system as a vessel for individuals’ alienation from both the system and from a post-Communist transitional society. The practice of gratuity money was present even under Communist times where a patient or the family of the patient would bring envelopes of money or even highly prized Western goods such as perfumes to the doctors attending the patient. Without this exchange, nurses and doctors would withhold information

from the patients or even fail to offer necessary treatments. When my own grandmother spent the last months of her life in a Budapest hospital, her doctor would barely even check in on her until my mother started bringing envelopes of money. Without that, we would not have even gotten a proper diagnosis or regular updates about my grandmother's health from nurses and her doctor.

Fischer understands this malfunction of the healthcare system to manifest in what she calls the "mystification of the body" occurring when individuals resort to alternative explanations and alternative medicine as a result of being alienated from a dysfunctional healthcare system. Fischer attributes the rise of alternative medicine to a metaphorical need to regain control not just over one's body, but also of a fragmented society (Fischer, 2016, p.104). The result of questionable practices and a woeful lack of equipment in Hungarian healthcare are apparent in the everyday mockery by doctors who also withhold information from patients if money isn't offered. Given decades of vehement Communist doctrine, it is almost ironic that Hungary's flawed healthcare system essentially assigns monetary value to one's health through 'gratuity money,' ultimately alienating an individual from society and contributing to a distrust of authority.

Not only was distrust of authority high as a result of disorganised Communist narratives but by the 80s the gaps in Hungarian social solidarity also became dismally clear. Tolerance, solidarity, respect for the other and acceptance of the 'other' decreased significantly. A survey conducted in 1982-83 showed that only a third of individuals listed tolerance as their top five most important values (Valuch, 2015, p.183). Accordingly, two thirds of the same individuals held high disdain for those who held values dissimilar to themselves. Valuch states that high intolerance persisted after Communism, likely resulting from a lack of civil society and a half-complete attempt at modernisation. Frequent incidences of discrimination and segregation still to

this day occur towards Roma and Jewish minorities in the country for example (Figure 3). Thus, a mentality of de-politisation and intolerance persisted into the years of transition as part of the Communist legacy, as even post-Communist jokes reflected the discord between a public political sphere and a private social one (Lampland & Nadkarni, 2016).

The demoralisation and apathy that characterised individuals' passive existence in the socio-political environment exacerbated societal disintegration. During Communist times, this can further be seen in the various measures that point towards extensive breakdown of norms and values in Communist Hungary. Two of the most shocking measures that unfortunately persist into contemporary times are suicide rates and widespread alcoholism. According to OECD measures, Hungary has consistently been ranked amongst the top 10 most severe nations for both indices. For three decades (1960-1993) the nation led the top 10 list for suicides in the entire world. All the way into contemporary times, Hungarian society persists with its self-destructive behaviour (OECD, 2019). With this in mind, such statistics would prove to be far more interesting and beneficial if credibility were to be established about the sources and data-handling of health measures from the post-war period.

In conclusion, while Communists like Rákosi and Kádár have made it abundantly clear what values they would like to see be imparted on the Hungarian socio-political landscape, the resulting loss in all sources of cultural, social and political identity do also indeed yield clear results. One result is how the individual has been effectively excluded and oppressed from political discussion, so civil commitment was unable to form, and another is that the Communist legacy left Hungary open to the exploitation of Viktor Orbán and FIDESZ, bringing the nation full circle back to being under totalitarian rule.

## CHAPTER II

### CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL RELIGION

*„Nincsen apám, se anyám, se istenem, se hazám...”*

*„I have no father, nor mother, no god, nor home”-Attila József, 1925*

This post-WW1 poem by the Hungarian poet Attila József (1925) resonates closely with the sense of meaninglessness and alienation present in society after the fall of Communism in 1989. The establishment of a representative parliamentary democracy in and of itself initially failed to address critical questions of national belonging, identity and purpose for Hungarians, and these very same questions are being used today to exploit nationalist sentiments for political purposes. The sense of atomisation and estrangement from society which has persisted for 40 years under Communism left an ideological and cultural void, and a new political religion after the fall of Communism proved necessary in an attempt to build cohesion and reorganise society.

Since the fall of Communism, many things have changed in Hungary. Universities and streets were renamed to erase Communist influence; monuments of Lenin, Marx and Engels were removed and relocated to the fringes of Budapest; Moscow Square became Széll Kálmán square. Newer memorials commemorating anti-Communist movements and uprisings have systematically replaced the symbols of Communism. Hungary's governing party for the majority of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has actively and aggressively put forth measures to distance the country from its Communist past and legacy. This analysis will, however, attempt to delineate that the nation merely transitioned from one totalitarian regime to another. For this section, Durkheim and Voegelin's works on religion and political religions prove yet again indispensable in exploring the collective consciousness and shared meaning created in Hungarian contemporary society.

Through historical and cultural symbols, Hungary's current governing party FIDESZ capitalise on the societal void left by Communism's failure to become an authentic political religion and attempt to systematically replace and recreate a collective reality around a sacred centre of a unique Hungarian identity, conservatism and religion. Using symbols like the crown, the flag and national days to re-enact and establish national, religious and cultural identities, FIDESZ essentially utilises symbols of cohesion to stir up fear of the 'other,' depicted as masses of migrants or scheming businessmen.

FIDESZ, translated as the Hungarian Civic Alliance, has been the ruling political party in alliance with the Christian Democratic People's Party since 2010. Now as a party centred around national and political conservatism, staunch anti-communism, and right-wing authoritarianism, FIDESZ was initially a liberal reaction to an era of Communism. While they had a chance at government in 1998, FIDESZ ultimately failed to win the 2002 elections which resulted in 8 years of government under a socialist-liberal coalition.

Since a re-election in 2010, FIDESZ have reoriented their anti-communist liberalism towards creating an "illiberal democracy," or what some scholars call a hybrid regime (Krasztev & Til, 2015, p.291). While democratic institutions like general elections and a constitutional court are upheld for the sake of international legitimacy, they serve only to reproduce power through eliminating economic resources for opponents, monopolising the press and to eventually reshape the election system to their advantage (Krasztev & Til, 2015, p.291). Since 2010, FIDESZ priorities have undergone a shift from promoting work and economic stability in 2010 to plastering public spaces with government sponsored billboards depicting harsh anti-immigration and anti-EU sentiments. Once a party promoting national unity and work, today's FIDESZ utilises Christian values and Hungarian identity to create tension and fear. Instilling this

fear of the ‘other’ in individuals, concentrating media ownership and stirring up radical nationalist sentiments has drawn considerable condemnation from other EU nations.

While Communism merely alienated individuals from enacting their religious, national, and cultural identities, FIDESZ capitalises upon these very same themes to incite fear and activate existential dread in people. Terror Management Theory offers extensive insight into how and in-group behaviour and the vehement maintenance of cultural worldviews are utilised to manage existential terror (Greenberg, Solomon, Veeder, et al., 1990; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, et al., 1989; Holbrook, de Sousa, Hahn-Holbrook, 2011). When individuals are reminded of their own mortality, be it symbolic like a looming end to ‘traditional Hungarian culture,’ or literal, they display an “increase in prejudice, stereotyping, negative evaluations, and aggressive behaviour toward other cultures and outgroup members” (Greenberg et al., 1990, p.384). Accordingly, there is systemic discrimination against many minorities such as Roma, Jewish, or LGBTQ+ individuals, all of whom can be perceived to be ‘threatening’ the ‘proper’ Christian way of life (BTI, 2018).

Under Communism, individuals faced a different threat from the state so they resorted to everyday political subversions or by receding into the private sphere of their own home. People either signed up to be members of the Communist Party or did not participate in politics at all. By extinguishing most avenues of enacting and maintaining political, cultural and individual identities, the Communist legacy left a void. This absence of collective action and effervescence is what FIDESZ capitalises upon. “Nationalism, then, became the precious cement for binding together a centralised state and an atomised society,” (Arendt, 1973, p.231) and Hungary emerged from the ashes of communism with merely a sense of national belonging as the most cohesive and prevalent identity to cling to (Sodaro, 2018).

The sacred concepts and linguistic signs present in today's political religion revolve around scare tactics and a covert and manufactured, yet perpetual sense of emergency. This sense of urgency and fear encompasses themes like the need for the immediate protection of Hungary's border (Figure 3), the family unit, and cultural identity and sovereignty. Such images ask the nation to 'defend a Christian culture for Hungary and Europe' in the current 'European culture wars,' or to 'support Hungarian families' over 'importing migrants.' Every single aspect of these activates important cultural and thus existential feelings for the average Hungarian whose tax compliance is even predicted by a degree to which they identify with the nation (Boda, Medgyesi, Özdemir, & Fondeville, 2018, p.8). When even tax compliance recalls nationalist sentiments, a manufactured existential threat made against one's Hungarian identity will certainly evoke increased prejudice, stereotyping and negative behaviour towards outgroup members.

For the establishment, fortification and maintenance of ideological hegemony and shared consciousness to be effective, certain legal, political and cultural rituals must occur. Perhaps the most obvious component of this complex process is propaganda. Incorporating Durkheim's notion of collective representation into public political discourse, we can see how the ritualised and sacred themes like national identity, religion and sovereignty are symbolic, repetitive, ambiguous, and are presented as unquestionable (Lázár & Horváth, 2013). Seen both in Communist times and in FIDESZ' fear tactics, totalitarian regimes aim to transcend the elements of reality and verifiable experience to remove all political and social issues from possible control by individual experience (Arendt, 1973, p.362). Playing on a moral ambiguity left behind by the Communist legacy, FIDESZ exploits an ideological vacuum and aims to replace it with their own sacred ideology through various channels.

## **Fundamental Law**

Enacted in 2011, the Fundamental Law of Hungary acts both as a legal and a cultural contract drawn between the state and the nation, replacing old symbolic values and propagating new, ‘sacred’ ones. Using Durkheim’s collective effervescence, we can see how FIDESZ uses a legal document to substitute a perceivable world for a moral one. With the same tactics, Marxist-Leninist ideology and promises of modernisation, freedom over war, independence over slavery, or missing the train of history (Arendt, 1973) left an extraordinarily shallow mark on Hungarian collective spirit (Valuch, 2015, p.32). FIDESZ was therefore able to fill this gap with the Fundamental Law in order to construct and reproduce, through providing a legal framework for collective representations, a symbolic and moral world with which citizens can interact in a socio-politically religious way.

Many defining themes of the Fundamental Law have a religious undertone, symbolically alluding to religious conflicts Hungary has faced reaching as far back as the Ottoman occupation of Hungary between 1521 and 1699. Depicting Hungary as a nation that has fought and “defended Europe in a series of struggles,” the law “recognises the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood” (Fundamental Law, 2011, p.2) thus establishing Hungary as the last standing Christian defender of Europe, a rhetoric revived in 2015 to be used against refugee-resettlement responsibilities.

The presence of a religion in a society’s code of law provides an ideological and existential framework that transcends culturally unique values or rituals, instead satisfying universal conditions of human existence. Furthermore, current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán regularly combines Christianity with a concept of the state, aiming to first “stabilise” a cultural-political foundation resting on national and Christian values and second to “make the political



unit, the state congruent with the cultural unit, the nation” (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.536). Therefore, the act of establishing Christianity as a ‘sacred’ value while simultaneously intertwining its significance with nationhood serves as a mechanism through which the government and nation affirms and maintains itself. Exemplified in Figure 3, the presence of a religion in society provides an ideological and existential framework that transcends culturally unique values or rituals, satisfying instead universal conditions of human existence.



**Figure 3.** Church and state. “The Holy Crown is the symbol of an outspread nation’s solidarity, symbol of our statehood, not only an object but a construct!” -János Áder, President of Hungary

Additionally, the Fundamental Law exemplifies FIDESZ’ attitude towards past Communist regimes. In the national avowal, it states that “we, the members of the Hungarian nation,” “do not recognise the Communist constitution of 1949” and “proclaim it as invalid” (Fundamental Law, 2011, p.3). Calling for a “spiritual and intellectual renewal” after decades that “led to a state of moral decay” (Fundamental Law, 2011, p.3) can be compared to Stalin’s “temporary tactical manoeuvre” and proficiency in rewriting the history of the Russian Revolution (Arendt, 1973, p.341-342). This does not lag far behind in insisting on a singular

version of history and thus transcends verifiable reality.

Furthermore, a divisive undertone lurks between lines of the Fundamental Law. To use Voegelin's words, the agitation of today's Hungarian political religion is "not calmed through unification with the whole. It needs the tension of the struggle" (Voegelin, 1931, p.68). While capitalism, kulaks, and the church became the rallying target behind Communist propaganda, today's Fundamental Law alludes to a series of struggles and victories to safeguard "heritage and [...] Hungarian culture" to avoid "torn apart" (Fundamental Law, 2011, p.2). By creating a wholly irrefutable and unverifiable dimension, FIDESZ manufactures and defends against attacks on Hungarian religious, cultural and existential identities in an attempt to mould a politically unified society by "transforming the pre-existent, unorganised manifold into a body organised for action" (Voegelin, 1931, p.126).

In similar vein, the document includes an entire article expanding on not only erasing but also criminalising Communist ideology both in the past and in the present. It labels the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party of the Communist times and its predecessors who work in the spirit of Communist ideology as "criminal organisations" (Fundamental Law, 2011, p.9) for betraying the nation, "systematically devastating the traditional values of European civilisation," depriving individuals of human rights and discriminating against individuals on the basis of "origin, world view or political belief" (Fundamental Law, 2011, p.10). Just as there was widespread discrimination under Communism against ethnic minorities and those on the opposite side of the political spectrum, Hungary's current government carries on the legacy of intolerance.

In sum, both Communist and post-Communist Hungarian systems aim to instil a moral order to foster social cohesion and transform the natural world into social and moral world. Main

themes of Christianity, family, and anti-Communist historical revisionism constitute much of what can be considered the sacred centre of contemporary Hungary's collective consciousness, all through which the nation affirms and maintains its identity and the relationship individuals have with it.

### Stop Soros, Stop Brussels



**Figure 4.** Government sponsored poster stating “Don’t let Soros have the last laugh!” with a graffiti addition of ‘Dirty Jew’ on George Soros’ forehead.

Durkheim’s and Voegelin’s timeless characterisations of political religion translate well to contemporary Hungarian society in that modern collective representations which include sacred Hungarian themes that can be seen all throughout society in the form of blue billboards, political rhetoric and re-enactment of Hungarian cultural identity. Voegelin’s sacred world of symbols and linguistic signs thrive today and it is through these that individuals “define primal emotions” and experience man’s existence (Voegelin, 1931, p.30). This of course parallels Durkheim’s portrayal of religion as the skeleton for thought and describes an existence in the political community which “cannot be defined as a profane realm” (Voegelin, p.70), thus establishing a dichotomy of ‘sacred’ versus ‘profane’ in political life as well. To feed the intense emotional needs arising from “religious agitation,” political life must be understood as sacred

with its unique “world of symbols, linguistic signs and concepts” all serving to feverishly uphold a “right order of being” (Voegelin, p.32). In addition to the discussion on Hungarian contemporary socio-political landscapes, the defence of an order of being offers a unique lens when exploring rhetoric, cultural symbols and their implications.

Government sponsored billboards like the ones in Figure 4 and Figure 5 have recently monopolised public space, turning Budapest blue with government ideology from hidden side streets to busy tram stops. Slogans such as “Let’s Stop Brussels!” and “Don’t Let Soros Have the Last Laugh!” have aided in creating an “us” vs. “them” realm for the everyday Hungarian, fulfilling a critical requirement for what Hannah Arendt terms “tribal nationalism” (Arendt, 19, p.227). This dichotomous thinking is further imposed on Hungarians by government narratives through appeals to national, cultural and religious identities.



**Figure 5.** Defending Europe. “Europe must be able to defend its external borders!” -Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade

For example, non-governmental organisations or private individuals such as the EU, philanthropist George Soros, or Hungarian opposition parties are viewed as valuing immigration and an influx of migrants as more important than children or national sovereignty (Figure 5).

Equating a general fight for human rights with a disregard for Hungarian children becomes a tool to decimate pluralism in public discourse and morph it from a perceivable everyday reality to an abstract battle of morals and cultural existence.

The tribal nationalism of the ‘us vs. them’ atmosphere that is created in Hungary ensures that on voting day, the choices are either the survival of a sacred Hungarian, Christian nation, or a path of ‘moral decay and crime.’ Thus, the government uses this technique to capitalise on people’s existential fears to maintain their power. Terror management theory explains this, as when one’s existence and moral world are threatened, the individual tends to resort to intensified in-group behaviour, further aggravating intolerance for the other. In other words, “Oceania had always been at war with Eurasia” (Orwell, 1961, p.64). A manufactured threat of middle eastern refugees and migrants appeals to the nation for defence of cultural, religious and national identity and sovereignty, which FIDESZ achieves through the monopolisation of political discourse.



**Figure 6.** Big Brother. “Don’t let Soros have the last laugh!”

Through extensive centralisation of governmental purview (Stuber, 2018, p.14), media narratives, and others, today’s FIDESZ aims to be the sole disseminator and builder of a new collective consciousness. Blue billboards with George Soros’ face such as the ones in Figure 6 are seen around virtually every corner of Budapest, instilling fear and hatred in people who have

never even heard of George Soros. With dishonest smear campaigns and placement of practical obstacles, FIDESZ legally and culturally eliminates political opposition while removing political and social discourse further and further from perceivable reality, in the same manner as Communism did. Despite a parliamentary system and regular elections through voting, the contemporary Hungarian government has been dubbed a hybrid regime for upholding democratic institutions *pro forma* only to monopolise and maintain power over all arenas of everyday life (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p.6; Krasztev & Till, 2015, p.3). In other words, the “playing field is heavily skewed” and “competition is thus real but unfair” (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p.5-6). This complex machine of a nation which has democratic foundations *on paper* but not in practice is indeed difficult to see at first. However, when compared to the never ending governmental reassurance that it was only Rákosi’s Communist party which could defend Hungary’s interests, it becomes increasingly easier to notice the parallels.

Despite regular elections, evidence of a Communist legacy would manifest itself in individuals’ relations with the state or lack thereof. A continuation of Communist tendencies would also point towards distrust of the government, de-politicisation of society, and mass indifference to civic affairs. However, the contemporary government has seemingly managed to foster a unifying sense of national identity, belonging and higher political involvement. Caution should be used when investigating the socio-political resilience and democratic foundations here, however. A high trust in government does not necessarily indicate a healthy relationship with the state if the base premises are founded on lies and the establishment of an abstract reality. Just as the credibility of many indicators and measures from Communist times should be questioned, the same should be done for the credibility contemporary governments’ indicators.

Although voter participation remains exceptionally high in Hungary even compared to

other EU nations, this should not necessarily be interpreted as a measure of integrity in democratic institutions or political freedom. Government propaganda and narrative no longer attempt to focus on stabilising the economy or gaining more rights for the everyday worker, but instead create an abstract reality full of fear for the ‘other.’ Through gathering all sources of media and information under government purview, Hungary’s skewed playing field manifests itself in the nation’s significant growth in trust of authority and decreased perceptions of corruption occurring since the election of FIDESZ in 2010.

Similar phenomena could be observed under Communist times where individuals were not truly able to express their collective wishes as the electoral system was corrupt and oppressive. Peoples’ relations to the state therefore boiled out in the form of the socialist joke and other cultural artefacts as discussed in Chapter 1. Under Communism, democracy was tangibly impossible. Under today’s totalitarian government, the same direct evidence is difficult to achieve, given the government’s hybrid form in upholding democracy and constitutional courts on paper. However, inspection still demonstrates that the state is the only source of information and political knowledge for people. While we can see the implications of a totalitarian state from the aftermath of Communism, which resulted in with apathy and mass alienation, we have yet to experience the outcomes of this modern form of totalitarianism.

In this context then, it is important to remember that precisely due to the lack of true ideological and democratic pluralism both under Communism and FIDESZ, it can be difficult to illustrate socio-political behavioural parallels on a historical timeline. While many patterns and indicators of political and social involvement stand as intact and healthy on paper, one must only consider the poignant examples which reveal the broken societal fabric behind government propaganda posters. Hungary is not the resilient, unified, Christian powerhouse of Europe that

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán advertises: the wide-spread discrimination, fragmentation and isolation in today's society reveals how the shortcomings of Hungary's Communist political religion left the country open for serious exploitation.



## CONCLUSION

Hungary as a nation has experienced numerous and volatile political systems during its complex history; after centuries of Ottoman occupation and Habsburg rule, Hungary eventually experienced a harsh Communist regime before circling back to totalitarianism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Each era left its mark on the nation's cultural, social and political composition, shaping the societal fabric for decades and centuries to come. Analysing contemporary socio-political environments in the context of the Communist legacy delineates the grim effects of mass alienation and fragmentation resulting from decades of terror and institutionalised irrationality. As individuals under Communism were prohibited from expressing national, cultural and religious belongings and identities, these needs were not met for society by the Communist regime's insistence on a prosperous, egalitarian and socialist industrial nation. Marxist-Leninist teachings of protecting the proletariat from the 'exploitative' and 'deadly' hands of the bourgeoisie fell on deaf ears after one too many families were taken to labour camps in the middle of the night or had their land taken to be nationalised. Elections were technically free, but unfair, and without an effective channel to elect, maintain and foster collective cohesion, individuals distanced themselves from active political involvement and cultural affairs. The result of such societal breakdown can be seen even today in what I call the Communist legacy through measures such as alcoholism, suicide, alienation and apathy.

After 40 years, this mass of indifferent people took the transition from state socialism to a parliamentary democracy in 1989 and welcomed governments who liberalised the markets and democratic participation. The further the nation distances itself from its Communist past through tearing down statues, renaming streets and airports and vilifying leftist opposition, the less parallels are drawn between the oppression of Communism and the oppression of FIDESZ,

today's governing party in Hungary. While indifference to politics and public affair have been effectively reversed through appeals to ardent nationalism, cultural and religious identities, the alienation within Hungarian society is still palpable. An intolerant, fearful social and political discourse is still very much present, standing as a tangible element of the Communist legacy. When an unfortunately high percentage of individuals do not even connect with their relatives or colleagues outside of work in their everyday life (Fábián, 2012), when discrimination and fear of the other runs rampant, how could the nation possibly be considered resilient and unified under a cohesive, shared set of values and beliefs?

This analysis has attempted to draw socio-political parallels in the societal fabric of Hungary between Communist and contemporary times. In understanding both regimes and people's relations to them in terms of religious fervour and activity, one can begin to understand the emotional connection and importance attributed to systems which attempt to create national and cultural meaning for people. Thus, through viewing political regimes as political religions, not merely as legal and political institutions, this analysis links individuals' emotional lives and identities to the socio-political sphere. This framework of understanding has been used to draw a parallel between two 'flavours' of totalitarianism, pointing out the mass alienation and fragmentation which could result without the establishment of a solid, nationally unifying basis for socio-political and cultural realms.

However, far more research is needed for a more comprehensive historical, cultural, social and political understanding of Hungary. In order to contextualise and illustrate possible implications of FIDESZ's political religion, it would be useful to analyse other post-Communist nations in a manner similar to Gabriel Almond's (1983) work on Communism and political culture theory. For example, Almond's analysis of the Communist Legacy in Czechoslovakia can

tie into understanding Hungary's socio-political realm to show how the decades of "organisational and media monopoly, repression and terror, and powerful incentives had failed to alter in any significant degree the civic propensities" of the population (Almond, 1983, p.132). Given the popular cultural 'brotherhood' and affinity between Poland and Hungary, Communist and post-Communist Poland could serve as a useful comparison to Hungarian political religions, especially considering similar historic, cultural and political elements. Furthermore, considering the questionable credibility of quantitative data from both Communist and post-Communist Hungary, yet again more research needs to be done to circumnavigate questionable or non-existent data. For example, while today's social surveys can include efficient and easily quantifiable reports and data for individual wellbeing within nations, research could contextualise mass alienation through an analysis of popular culture and jokes like Lampland & Nadkarni (2016) or Lisa Pope Fischer (2016).

Nevertheless, a legacy of mass alienation, societal fragmentation and self-destructive behaviour on a mass scale hold grave implications for a nation's future. Socio-political environments such as a Communist political regime left Hungary unstable and open for abuse by a populist FIDESZ. Hungarians speak of Communism in everyday life as a distinctly different, distant, and traumatic era but have welcomed a new form of totalitarianism for the sake of ridding the country of its Communist past. Through centralisation of the media, monopolisation of information, elimination of opponents and changing the socio-political playing field, totalitarianism and oppression rear their ugly heads yet again, and further research into explaining such regimes through the lens of political religions and politico-religious behaviours is much needed to understand individuals' emotional and social relations to the socio-political fabric of nations.

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