

**CENTRAL EUROPEAN  
CULTURE WARS:  
BEYOND  
POST-COMMUNISM  
AND POPULISM**

Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová,

Ondřej Slačálek

(eds.)

The anti-liberal turn in Central Europe aroused a lively scholarly discussion to which this book wishes to contribute by providing a novel perspective. The recent illiberal upsurge is often ascribed to weakly rooted liberalism in the context of an unfinished transition, or, conversely, to the completion of the transition process in which populists turn against their erstwhile mentors from the West. Without separating Central Europe from global trends, the authors of this book look at a change in the political dynamics of post-accession Central Europe through the prism of the *culture wars*. Conflicts over values, symbols and social norms have marked the 2010s in strikingly similar ways across Central Europe. To some extent they replace the older, socioeconomic right versus left cleavage, and, at the same time, they highlight topics like gender, identity, sovereignty and globalization. Every Central European country has undergone deeply polarizing episodes in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis, and some even before. In certain nations, these are linked to a strong national-conservative project, to religion or to traumas of the past, but there is no simple pattern. The book studies culturalized politics in a broadly conceived Central Europe – Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria and Croatia – and shows the various forms that culture wars have taken in the 2010s as well as their underlying logic.

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## KATALOGIZACE V KNIZE - NÁRODNÍ KNIHOVNA ČR

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# 1/ Introduction: How Post-communism Ends. Central European Culture Wars in the 2010s

*Pavel Barša, Žora Hesová, Ondřej Stačálek*

Whereas the year 1989 symbolizes the victory of globalization and universalistic values in Central Europe, 2015 may stand for the reaffirmation of national sovereignty and cultural particularism. During the refugee crisis of that year, humanitarianism was rejected in the name of national identity, abstract moral principles were replaced with concrete obligations to one's ascribed group and the memory of a particular past superseded an open future for humankind. Christian heritage was invoked not in order to strengthen pan-human solidarity but rather for the opposite purpose: as a badge of one's identity – national or European – that had to be defended against the threatening Muslim Other.

Reconfirmation of external borders, which reversed their softening in the wake of 1989, was complemented by the opening of a domestic front against those who insisted on human solidarity and multicultural coexistence. Simultaneously, the ultra-conservatives started attacking gender equality and LGBT rights. Against these and other liberal norms adopted in the process of Western integration, they claimed the right of Central European (CE) countries to decide upon their way of life in a sovereign manner – without interference from the West, depicted as decadent precisely for its embrace of cultural diversity and universalism. This anti-liberal offensive was specified in two ways that have been often combined despite their logical incompatibility. Its protagonists either stylized themselves as the saviours of the West, protecting it from its own

suicidal penchant, or they flirted with alternative civilizational legacies (e.g., Euroasianism) or other great powers (e.g., Russia, Turkey, China).

### **From ‘Populism’ to ‘National Conservatism’ and ‘Culture wars’**

Many of those who have analysed or commented on the anti-liberal turn of Central Europe in the final years of the 2010s conceived of it as a regional variant of the global ‘populist moment’ (R. Brubaker 2017), the protagonists of which were cited alongside Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Beppe Grillo, Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro (Müller 2016; Urbinati 2019, Pappas 2016). While this framework highlights some commonalities between anti-liberal movements and leaders across the world, it misses important differences among them. Moreover, recent analyses of technocratic and centrist varieties of populism have cast doubts on the automatic and necessary coincidence between neo-nationalist authoritarianism and populism (Bickerton, Accetti 2017, Groupe d’études géopolitiques 2019). A close look at the countries of our region over the last decade only strengthens these doubts.

Cas Mudde’s heavily commented upon and widely shared definition of ‘populism’ – as a ‘thin ideology’ focusing on conflict between a virtuous ‘people’ and a corrupt ‘elite’ – is both too broad and too narrow a concept (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). It is too broad because it can accommodate both liberal, civic, conservative and nationalist movements, and it leaves open the specification of the targeted elite. It is too narrow because it focuses on the political arena and leaves out movements which stem from and sometimes consciously limit themselves to the realm of civil society. The specification of an elite can be overcome by limiting the scope of populism to revolts against established *political* elites (rather than elites in general) and against political mediation as such (see Urbinati 2019). This condition, however, makes the concept even less useful as a general framework for our subject matter. The anti-liberal turn in the Central Europe of the 2010s was often conducted by a part of the established political elite (e.g., Fidesz in Hungary,

Law and Justice in Poland, the right wing of the Civic Democrats in the Czech Republic and of the Christian Democrats in Slovakia) in the name of a ‘thick’ national-conservative ideology on the one hand, and civil society initiatives raising various moral, cultural and memory issues on the other hand. ‘Populism’ captures only some aspects of this turn while ignoring others and, at the same time, it also includes some phenomena that are not part of this turn.

A few examples will suffice to substantiate the last point. The electoral successes of Andrej Babiš in the 2012 Czech parliamentary elections and of Miloš Zeman in the 2013 Czech presidential election, of Andrej Kiska and of Zuzana Čaputová in the Slovak 2014 and 2019 presidential elections respectively or of Igor Matovič in the 2019 Slovak parliamentary elections cannot be analysed without the help of the populism concept (defined along the above-suggested lines), but they had very little to do with the anti-liberal turn in our region. In the eyes of those who supported those actors, they represented ordinary people who suffered under the rule of an incompetent and corrupt political class – they promised to change the way their countries were being governed, not their direction. They did not claim to be on the right or on the left but, rather, with the people against the political elite. Following the terminology of a recent book, we can call them ‘centrist populists’ (Groupe d’études géopolitiques 2019).

The rise to power of Kaczyński’s Law and Justice (PiS) in 2005 and 2015, on the other hand, happened under the banner of a promise to replace the political regime established in the post-1989 era, namely the ‘Third Republic’, with a different regime, the ‘Fourth Republic’. Far from being ideologically thin, or ‘beyond left and right’, they were deeply rooted in the political traditions of the Polish Right. When PiS’s spokespeople targeted elites, they meant *liberal* elites, both political and otherwise, rather than a *political class* as such. If Ben Stanley is right that their politics took on populist features after their first coalition government in 2005–7 (through the imitation of their far-right partners), this statement only proves that populism is not a necessity but only a contingent characteristic; even if we drop it from our analysis, we can still capture

the distinctive features of PiS's politics (Stanley 2016). The opposite is true as concerns analysis of the abovementioned centrist populists. If we drop 'populism', we have nothing else whereby to capture their distinctiveness. This does not exclude the possibility that, at some point in their political careers, they may take on ideological ingredients that move them in an anti-liberal and nationalist direction as the evolution of both Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš in the second half of the last decade proved. Just as PiS added elements of populism to their national conservatism, Zeman and Babiš included elements of anti-liberal nationalism into their populism.

With the telling exception of the Czech case, our book looks at this last decade's anti-liberal turn in our region mainly through the prism of 'national conservatism' rather than 'populism'. While putting stress on ideology, we will attempt to show that the national-conservative turn is a phenomenon most salient at the intersection between politics, civil society and mainstream culture.

To capture this larger societal context of the anti-liberal turn, which is not reducible to politics in a conventional sense, we propose to approach it through the prism of 'culture war'. This perspective allows the linking of ideological changes in party politics to moral activism and memory entrepreneurship in civil society and the media. More comprehensively than the concept of national conservatism, it captures the shift in the public debates from conflicts over *policies* and their *objectives* to those over *identities* and *values*. Even if the protagonists of the anti-liberal turn argue for or against a particular policy, their main contention is not pragmatic but principled. Rather than in concrete pros and cons, they think in terms of values and identity that are allegedly expressed or denied by a given policy.

The shift of the public debate from political programmes to their cultural, moral or philosophical presuppositions changes the definition of the collective subject. Whereas *cosmopolitan liberals* typically invoke a society of citizens connected by rationally defined rights and duties, *national conservatives* prefer a community of co-ethnics and/or co-believers whose identity and obligations are rooted in

a particular past. The former camp assumes that citizenship pertains to a relatively superficial dimension of social coexistence, and it relegates the individual search for a deeper existential meaning to non-political communities. Against the distinction of civic and existential identities, the latter camp promotes reunification. Ethno-national and religious-civilizational identities endow thus the lives of community members with a strong *existential* meaning and, at the same time, provide the very content of their *political* identity. Its liberal adversaries do not merely oppose this or that political programme, they jeopardize the very foundations of the political community. The relationship to those adversaries, therefore, tends to be moved by an intense hostility that does not allow any compromise. Political *struggles* become cultural *wars*.

This book will look at the ways in which the anti-liberal politics of meaning entered Central Europe through the translation of political divisions into cultural terms along three interrelated axes of identity, past and morality. This re-description of the political cleavages has imposed itself in public confrontations over values, the carriers of which have been *both* political parties seeking power *and* civic initiatives mobilizing around symbolically charged issues. As usual in times of crisis, the border between those two spheres has become more permeable, with many ‘go-betweeners’. Some single-issue moral entrepreneurs have used their public notoriety, gained by mobilizing support for their cause on social media or as spokespersons of NGOs, to run successfully for political office.

## **Post-communist Framework**

In our analysis of the culture wars that have divided the Central European political landscape during the past decade, we move away from the post-communist framework. Coming from completely different, if not opposite ideological backgrounds, liberals and conservatives have in fact located the roots of the anti-liberal turn within the ideological tensions of the post-communist transformation.

Repenting liberals such as Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes saw the rise of nationalism, conservatism and euro-scepticism in Central

Europe as a reaction to or blowback from the post-nationalism, cosmopolitanism and Euro-optimism of the first two post-communist decades (Holmes and Krastev 2020). Underneath their analyses lurked an image of a pendulum moving back after it had been pushed unrealistically too far in one direction. Unrepenting liberals such as Grigorij Mesežnikov and Olga Gyárfášová, Timothy Snyder or Roman Krakowsky promoted the opposite diagnosis (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018, Snyder 2019, Krakowsky 2019). In their view, the problem was not that the liberal transformation had gone too far but rather that it had not gone far enough – otherwise, it could not be so easily reversed.

The two liberal analyses shared the framework not only with their national conservative enemies (Legutko 2016) but also with some Western leftists who looked critically at the post-1989 Westernization of the former communist countries (Mark 2019). All located the problem on a timeline between 1989 and 2015, that is, within the post-communist transition period, and conceived of the two camps which emerged during the last decade as external to each other – they defined their relation through mutual exclusion. In a retrospective illusion, the protagonists of these two camps pretended that they had been playing a zero-sum game against each other from the very beginning of the post-communist period in 1989.

In Poland and in Hungary, the myth of a zero-sum game between two ideologically homogenous alternatives became the master-narrative of both the conservative *and* the liberal camp in the 2010s. It was as if, in the 1990s, cosmopolitan liberals excluded the national conservatives from the political field and, in the 2010s, the latter took revenge. The holders of both positions claimed that they intended to bring the 1989 revolution to completion. The national conservatives complained that the revolution had been betrayed by Westernizing liberals who colluded with the communists. Cosmopolitan liberals complained that the ascent of the national conservatives prevented their countries from finishing the journey away from communist captivity to the promised land of Western democracy at the very moment of its arrival.

Similar to national conservative and leftist critics of Westernization, cosmopolitan liberals (repenting and unrepenting) placed too much weight on the inter-regional (or geopolitical) dynamic of the post-communist transition – as if what was at stake was one part of the East joining the West or, alternatively, failing to do so. Accordingly, they *either* neglected anti-liberal phenomena that emerged in the last decade simultaneously with the West (and thus pointed to more general causes of the crisis than those that can be inferred from the post-communist transition) *or* explained them as a counter-offensive by the East (T. Snyder) or its imitation by the West (I. Krastev, S. Holmes). This interpretation could only flatter East-Central European conservatives since it made them into the leading force of the European or even global anti-liberal turn and the avant-garde of the coming era. As Victor Orbán famously stated in 2017, ‘In 1989 we saw our future in Europe. Now we are the future of Europe.’

Orbán, Kaczyński and their ideologues depicted the post-communist transition as a sort of colonization (cultural and otherwise) by the liberal and therefore decadent West. They claimed that they came to power not only to reaffirm the identities of their nations and region but also to divert Europe from its suicidal liberalism and to bring it back to its Christian roots and patriarchal values. This sounded scary to West European liberals who supported wholeheartedly the Westernization of East-Central Europe in the 1990s. In view of the revolt of the post-communist political elites against ‘Brussels’ during the 2015–16 refugee crisis, Western liberals had second thoughts about a ‘too quick’ integration of those countries into the EU: Were not the post-communist countries a Trojan horse for the xenophobic and authoritarian East? No wonder Krastev and Holmes’s book became an instant bestseller in 2019. The spreading of anti-liberalism in the West, together with its simultaneous weakening vis-a-vis China and the geopolitical come back of Russia, seemed to signal a counter-offensive, as if the authoritarian and xenophobic East were lashing back at the West and the vector of imitation which prevailed in the first two post-Cold War decades had been reversed.

## The Post-1989 Consensus Unravelling

Yet the post-communist narratives of a clash between two monolithic and timeless identities – whether projected in space as West against East or in time as the liberal-cosmopolitan future against the communist or national-conservative past – neglected the complexity of recent history. To break the spell of those two dichotomies, we suggest shifting attention from a diachronic to a synchronic perspective. Our working hypothesis is as follows: What happened between 1989 and 2015 cannot be encapsulated in the story of a liberal and Westernizing revolution which then provoked a nationalist and conservative backlash. It is rather a story of a liberal-conservative consensus that was established in the 1990s and which unravelled in the 2010s – in some countries even during the 2000s (Rupnik 2018). Like any other hegemonic configuration (in the Gramscian sense), the consensus contained ideologically diverse elements which can be schematically subsumed under liberal and conservative, assimilationist and nationalist poles. The balance between self-colonization (entailed by joining the West) and self-determination; universalism and particularism; abstract principles and concrete identities; emancipation and protection; and enlightened reason and national (hi)story was tilted in favour of the former pole. The compromise was made palatable for the subordinated pole by a particularistic interpretation of the West: National conservatives wanted to belong to Western civilization not because it was – or should be – universal but because it was Western. Being part of the West was believed to be the ‘authentic’ core of the reconstructed identities of CE countries, not to mention the advantages that came with membership in the club of the rich and powerful.

The basis of the 1990s compromise was undermined in the 2000s. On the one hand, CE countries joined the West whereby they reached the goal of their post-communist trajectory and their political elites were looking for another project. Once the market economy and liberal democracy were established, the overlapping consensus of the cosmopolitan-liberal and national-conservative poles lost its *raison d'être*. On the other hand, reaching the promised

land – replacing a distant utopia of the West with its reality – led inevitably to disillusionment. The West that used to be the solution to the problems of its inferior semi-periphery suddenly appeared to be struggling with serious problems of its own.

The hitherto subordinated pole of the liberal-conservative consensus split off and began to define itself as an antagonistic alternative to its former ally: Nationalists and cosmopolitans, traditionalists and rationalists, reactionaries and enlighteners parted ways. Both the need to formulate another project (after the post-communist project was at least formally completed) and the perceived crisis of the West gave opportunity for nationally and conservatively minded members of post-communist elites to stop playing obedient pupils of the West and start posing as its teachers. They endowed their nations or even the whole of Central Europe with the mission of saving Europe from its suicidal liberalism.

The national-conservative side redescribed the post-communist era as a betrayal of the original promise of 1989, or as a failure. Westernizing liberals responded with their own version of an unfinished revolution in which the main culprits were national conservatives labelled as ‘populists’. The change in ideological direction is evident from the biographies of prominent representatives of the two camps who redefined themselves by adopting retrospective teleological narratives. Today’s national conservatives such as Viktor Orbán, Václav Klaus, Miloš Zeman, Ján Čarnogurský or Janez Janša (to take only the most glaring examples) were all proponents of the liberal-conservative consensus and diligently worked on the Westernization of their countries in the 1990s and 2000s. Some of the leading representatives of today’s cosmopolitan liberalism such as Karel Schwarzenberg, Donald Tusk or Mikoláš Dzurinda, on the other hand, had always also claimed the mantle of conservatism.

The narrative of the post-communist struggle of two camps with unchanged identities has an undeniable *practical* function for the actors and their constituencies, who need a meaningful story for their lives and for the collective destiny of their nations. It should, however, be abandoned on the *analytical* level. Instead of reproducing the illusion of an unchanged nature in political positions, academic research

should capture the ways in which actors redefine their enemies and friends as new situations force them to transform their positions and reformulate their programmes. As they do this, they draw on ideological elements and discursive tropes which form a relatively stable repertoire of their political cultures. The meanings of those elements and tropes, however, are not fixed but constructed by the varying usage of the actors in new situations and by new political configurations of which they become part. Elements of the given repertoire cannot speak and act for themselves, they need the actors to do it for them. By doing so, they modify their meanings in unpredictable ways.

Our framework deconstructs the retrospective narratives of unchanged identities through which actors give meaning to their struggle, bringing attention to the longevity of discursive and ideological elements that form the relatively stable material to be reworked and reassembled with every new crisis. Whereas the diachronic framework of actors absolutizes the discontinuities between the first fifteen post-communist years and the 2010s, our research framework brings attention to the continuities between those two periods and, similarly, between them and the last two decades of communism. The transition from one period to the other does not consist of a substitution of one homogenous set of ideological elements with a totally different one (as if national conservatism replaced cosmopolitan liberalism which had previously replaced authoritarian communism), but rather it involves the rearticulation of former elements into different relationships and hierarchies which aspire to form a new hegemonic formation.

If the emphasis of actors on the diachronic axis looks for endogenous factors in the anti-liberal turn and, thereby, isolates Central Europe from the transformation of the wider European and global world, our perspective puts the analysis of recent political changes in Central Europe against the backdrop of political changes in the wider regional and global context. The rise of neo-nationalism and ultra-conservatism in Central Europe was not a product of a purely endogenous dynamic in the post-communist societies but, rather, part and parcel of the pan-European, if not worldwide, anti-globalist moment of the 2010s.

## Six Post-Cold War Trajectories

In order to undermine the mental Iron Curtain which pushed many observers of the end of the last decade to explain the CE anti-liberal turn exclusively through the communist past and post-communist transition, we have decided to extend the analysis of the four Visegrád countries (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia), whose coordinated stance against migration in the European Union and ostentatious Islamophobia made them paradigmatic examples of illiberal post-communist politics, to include Austria and Croatia, which had a less clear-cut location vis-a-vis the Cold War bipolarity. Austria was not on the communist side of the Iron Curtain, although it did not belong fully to the West either: It was integrated into the EU only in 1995 and remains outside NATO. This borderline situation is precisely what makes the comparison with the post-communist countries of Central Europe – which were all part of the Astro-Hungarian Empire and thus share a substantial heritage – particularly meaningful. The country reflects, in its own way, several of the CE trends.

Croatia represents another EU member state that is defined by the Austro-Hungarian legacy. Although it was part of communist Yugoslavia, due to the feud between Stalin and Tito in 1948 it never belonged to the Soviet Bloc and was closer to the non-European nations of what used to be called ‘the Third World’. Its membership in the Non-Aligned Movement represented a parallel to Austria’s Cold War neutrality. In comparison with the post-communist countries of our sample, Croatia’s transition to democracy was delayed by the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, and its EU accession is more recent than that of the Visegrád Four. Its politics in the 2010s were nevertheless strongly affected by the same culture wars that erupted in other CE nations and, therefore, offer an interesting case for comparison. For the purposes of this book, we will refer to the four Visegrád countries and Austria and Croatia as ‘Central Europe’.

The post-Cold War configurations varied greatly in those six countries due to different trajectories in the twentieth century and the contingent circumstances. A substantial difference separated

societies in which the ‘national question’ was relatively settled upon the collapse of communism, such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria and, albeit more problematically, Hungary, from those that had to solve it during the transition, such as Slovakia and Croatia. The latter could establish their own synthesis of self-determination and Europeanization only after a period of ascendancy of the nationalist pole over the liberal one. Another difference pertains to the political cultures of our six countries. Until the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the gap between right-wing conservatives and left-wing liberals was not as deep and unbridgeable in the Czech Republic and Austria as it was in the other four countries.

### **Three Fronts of the Culture Wars**

Different profiles and dynamics cannot hide the substantial similarities among the six countries, which have been strengthened by the anti-liberal turn of the last decade. Between roughly 2010 and 2020, the divisions between the cosmopolitan-liberal and national-conservative camps (expressed in cultural, moral and philosophical terms) deepened and sidelined other – economic and political – specifications of the left-right cleavage. This old-new split was established in a series of confrontations which we call culture wars. The term is borrowed both from the nineteenth century *Kulturkampf* and from polarizing conflicts in the United States beginning in the 1980s. The sociologist J. D. Hunter (1992) reintroduced this concept to describe the backlash of the American conservative Right against the cultural and political liberalization of the 1960s. The ideological conflict opposing conservatives and liberals has since developed into the primary political cleavage and aligned with the opposition between the two main US political parties.

As one author of this volume argues elsewhere (Hesová 2021), despite their differences, the Western European culture wars that broke out during the 2010s have had a similar cultural and political logic to those of the US culture wars. Since the outbreak of morality conflicts about same-sex marriage in France in 2013, it is possible to speak of culture wars in an enlarged sense in Europe too. CE culture

wars reflect some of the Western European confrontations but have different centres of gravity. Conflicts over history and about collective identity (Rupnik, 2017) have preceded newer types of culture wars about moral norms. Since the mid-2010s though, those three types of cultural confrontations have aligned with and intensified each other even if each has retained their distinctiveness. Accordingly, we distinguish three main fronts of the culture wars throughout the book: (1) the politics of memory, (2) the politics of identity and (3) the politics of morality.

The *politics of memory* refers to conflicts over the meaning of crucial events of national history. A salient, albeit not exclusive, place is occupied by the twentieth century, especially World War II, the relationships to the Nazi and Soviet empires and the Holocaust. With the understandable exception of Austria, another prominent place is taken by the communist period. Closely linked to and buttressed by the narratives of the past is the *politics of identity*, both ethno-national and religious-civilizational. The former is constituted by the relationship to other nations, the latter by the relationship to other religiously defined civilizations and their representatives living in Europe. In the major confrontations of the 2010s, conflicts developed around multiculturalism and migration, whereby Islam was framed as threatening Western civilization and the demographic and cultural homogeneity of CE nations. The third type of culture war can be subsumed under the *politics of morality*. It pertains to recent repoliticization of the accessibility of abortion, women's rights, gay marriage or gender equality by ultra-conservative activists and politicians. Here, conservative norms have been used by various actors to attack liberal elites who had supervised the mainstreaming of liberal norms in the post-communist era.

Against the backdrop of the post-communist transition, the opening of those three cultural fronts has usually been conceived by actors on both sides of the divide as an attempt to reverse the process of assimilating Central Europeans into the historical narratives, identity and moral norms of Westerners.

(1) If, in the post-communist era, the twentieth century and World War II were seen through the prism of Western European

memory, with its central focus on Jewish suffering and the victory over fascism, in the last decade there has been a growing emphasis on the suffering of CE nations and the victory over communism. (2) Whereas in the previous era, CE countries were supposed to subordinate their particular identities to the universalistic identity of the European Union, defined by the Enlightenment and the rejection of ethnic nationalism, in the last decade some of their leading representatives reasserted particularism both at the level of their national identity (by stressing its ethno-cultural components) and at the European level (by defining it as an exclusively Christian civilization facing an Islamic threat). (3) Finally, the ideal of non-discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality – the acceptance of which was one of the conditions of accession for post-communist countries to the EU – was ridiculed by some mainstream politicians as an offshoot of ‘political correctness’ and demonized as an expression of the new kind of ‘liberal’ totalitarianism. Accordingly, the patriarchal family of ethnically pure, White and Christian nationals returned from the dustbin of history to which it had been supposedly relegated by liberals in the post-communist era.

## **Overview of Chapters**

By elaborating on continuities among the Cold War period, the post-communist transition and the 2010s, the following seven chapters undermine the narrative in which every period is presented as an ideologically monolithic bloc which came to replace the previous period as its opposite.

In chapter 2, historian of political thought Michal Kopeček traces the gap between the cosmopolitan (or post-national) and nationalist (or ethno-national) versions of democratic political identity back to the discussions of CE dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s, the formation of dissident self-narrations and their projection onto national historical identity narratives. His analysis implies that the anti-totalitarian paradigm in its binary and treacherously exclusionary version, which moved to the mainstream of the newly established public spheres of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia in

the early 1990s, put at an ideological disadvantage the liberal-progressive side of the post-communist consensus and, simultaneously, allowed the national-conservative wing of CE politics to reconstitute itself with the help of much of the post-dissident conceptual repertoire (imaginary of totalitarianism, memory politics, civil society) that dominated in the early post-communist era. Far from being a wholesale opposite of the anti-liberal offensive of the last decade, the ideological configuration of the 1990s prepared the ground for the reinvention of CE national conservatism as a confident challenger to the post-Cold War consensus (that was redescribed retrospectively as a purely liberal and Western imposition upon the genuine traditions of CE nations) in the 2010s. Kopeček's analysis shows that, far from negating the legacy of opposition to communist rule and of the first decade of transformation, the national conservative turn is among the possible reconfigurations and actualizations of democracy discourses already present in the previous era.

In chapter 3, the cultural sociologist Csaba Szaló reconstructs hermeneutically Viktor Orbán's national conservative discourse by showing how it reassembled and updated some elements of the Horthy era's 'Christian nationalism'. By contrasting the narrative of the replacement of 1990s liberalism with the reactionary conservatism of the 2010s, he shows that Orbán took a cue and incorporated elements from the liberal-conservative discourse (albeit in a moderated form) of the Hungarian democratic forum of József Antall, in power between 1990 and 1992, and from his own Fidesz government in power between 1998–2002. When Fidesz lost the 2002 parliamentary elections, Orbán abandoned the post-1989 liberal-conservative compromise and started moving towards its national conservative alternative. Even if Orbánism operates along all three axes of the culture wars, the role of the unifying framework is played by the politics of memory: The myth-history (C. Lefort) provides both the anchor for the identity of Hungarians and the reasons why they – as the victims of foreign powers (i.e., the Entente, Nazi Germany, Soviet Union) in the twentieth century – should focus primarily on their protection against today's enemies, such as Islam and Western Liberalism, and concern themselves with biological

reproduction by following conservative moral rules in personal life: restoring patriarchal family and extirpating ‘gender ideology’.

As Ondřej Slačálek shows in chapter 4, an even more palpable continuity of conservative elements can be established in the Polish non-communist political culture between the 1970s and the 2000s. It is epitomized by the figure of John Paul II, in whose vision the liberation from communism went hand in hand with the liberation from Western secularism and its ‘culture of death’ (*Evangelium Vitae* 1995). This continuity is visible above all in the topic of banning abortion. Both the deep interpenetration of conservative Catholicism and Polish nationalism and the prevalence of the anti-totalitarian paradigm (which diverted attention from the dark sides of the Polish Right such as antisemitism by focusing on the crimes of the Nazi and communist empires which successively occupied Poland) can explain the strength of the national conservative wing of Solidarity (*Solidarność*) in the 1980s. Despite its early demarcation from its liberal-conservative counterpart, its leadership (represented by the Kaczyński twins) tempered both its nationalism and its conservatism in the name of fighting the post-communist Left in the 1990s. Once this Left collapsed in the early 2000s, there was no need to compromise with the liberals who, on the contrary, replaced the post-communists as yet another cosmopolitan and uprooted group, completely alien to the concerns of true Poles. Hardcore nationalist and conservative views that had been pragmatically muted in the post-communist period could move to the foreground. A full-blown culture war opened on all three fronts of memory, identity and morality. Paradoxically, this situation can make the Roman Catholic Church’s position in Polish national identity weaker, and its conservative agenda, especially as regards gender topics, can lose its status of ‘compromise’ and become a much more questioned object of political struggle.

As Slačálek claims in the following chapter, due to the distinct political culture – the product of a different historical trajectory – the Czech case differs significantly from both the Hungarian and Polish ones. Since communism was more easily associated with nationalism and even conservatism than with liberalism in the 1990s,

the liberal-conservative consensus of the post-communist transition proved much more durable and resilient than elsewhere in Central Europe. In contrast to Hungary and Poland, national conservatives who asserted themselves on the right wing of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS; the main party to supervise the transition) were not able to become a force whose offensive would trigger a general restructuring of the political field. This role was played by two ideologically much thinner actors: former social democrat Miloš Zeman and businessman Andrej Babiš. The culture war between the former and the Czech political and media establishment did not originally have a centre of gravity in ideologically substantive or moral issues but rather in formal and aesthetic ones: Zeman took on the mantle of a cultural plebeian loathed by the snobbish Prague elite for his boorish manners (likened to those of the communist apparatchiks of the 1970s and 1980s). The anti-corruption and anti-political (i.e., technocratic) programme which lifted Babiš to power was similarly formal and ideologically empty. Czech political and media elites fought back with alarm: ‘Democracy’ was supposedly threatened by a two-headed ‘populism’ associated with Orbán and Kaczyński. The charge that the two Czech populists were close to the Polish and Hungarian national conservatives gained credibility with the 2015–16 refugee crisis as Zeman’s Islamophobia took on a central place in his discourse, paving the way for an alliance with the equally Islamophobic head of the Czech Catholic Church. Babiš, too, began to play a xenophobic and national-protectionist card, albeit still less vigorously than the right wing of ODS. Generally speaking, Babiš’s technocratic populism has tended to avoid culture wars and poses as a ‘rational centre’ between extremes. This position has contributed significantly to the success of his party.

As Jana Vargovčíková shows in chapter 6, due to the need to tackle the national question (whose solution gave rise to Vladimír Mečiar, the national-populist leader with autocratic inclinations), the definitive decision as to Slovakia’s post-communist direction and geopolitical orientation was postponed until 1998 when a coalition assembled around the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH). By the early 2010s, however, the liberal-conservative consensus, on

which both that party and its coalition were built in the late 1990s, was already unravelling and the ideological boundaries of the main political camps began to move according to a new structuring antinomy of rising cultural conservatism and defensive cultural liberalism. The catalyst for the ideological differentiation in the Christian camp and the Slovak political scene was an anti-gender war (carried out as a struggle for the traditional family against the Istanbul Convention and abortion) initiated and organized by the Catholic Church and various actors from civil society who began to supply new faces in the political game. Despite this catalysing effect of the politics of morality, the most general framework of this ultra-conservative offensive was provided by the politics of memory. Rather than rejecting the dissident and transitional discourses, new national conservatism reappropriated some of them, for example, making 'gender ideology' an inheritor of the 'totalitarian' social engineering of the communist period. The continuity with the anti-communist struggle was most pronounced among some former Catholic dissidents such as Ján Čarnogurský, who back in 1986 had fought in the name of human rights against the liberalization of the Czechoslovak abortion law.

Similar to Slovakia, Croatia's transition was postponed until the main political protagonist of national independence (Franjo Tuđman) was no longer in power. While in Slovakia the task of the transition was taken on by the liberal-conservative coalition, in Croatia it was fulfilled by the post-communist Social Democratic Party (SDP) and its liberal junior partners. As Zora Hesová shows in chapter 8, the Europeanization project was nevertheless also supported by the national conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which was ready to pay the price of self-moderation in order to let Croatia escape from the Balkans and join the club of rich Western Christian nations. Once Croatia's status as an EU member was secured, the truce between national conservatives and cultural liberals was called off. Similar to Slovakia, the culture war opened up first on the morality front, but the unifying framework was provided by the politics of memory, where an equivalence between the Ustashe and the communist regime aimed to shelve

the Western European interpretation of 1945 as the year of liberation and depict both anti-fascist and fascist Croats – whose suffering is symbolized respectively by the Jasenovac and Bleiburg sites of memory – as the sons and daughters of one nation from now on united and strengthened by a common Catholic faith and respect for traditional Christian values. Like their Hungarian and Polish equivalents, Croat national conservatives stopped short of the open revisionism vis-à-vis World War II that was typical of the Far Right but whose ideas – such as attributing the highest value to the ability of a particular nation and/or civilization to survive and thrive or hating its enemies – they nevertheless appropriated and exploited.

In Austria, to which chapter 7 is devoted, a similar strategy of both borrowing and differentiating from the Far Right was practiced by the young leader of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), Sebastian Kurz, vis-à-vis the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) in the second half of the last decade. The leader of FPÖ, Heinz-Christian Strache, replaced the latent antisemitism of his predecessor Jörg Haider with patent Islamophobia and philo-Zionism but retained the rough manners and aggressive rhetoric characteristic of the Far Right. Kurz has borrowed much of the framing of migration and Islam and the personalized political style from the Far Right but with polished manners, rhetorical euphemisms and a pro-European orientation. He has thus managed both to appropriate far-right issues, to contain the FPÖ (especially after the Ibiza affair) and to maintain a standing skeleton of the conservative-liberal consensus by allying himself with the liberal Greens in 2020. Yet his short alliance with the Far Right developed all the signs of national conservatism. As prime minister, he made Strache's party a junior partner in his government while brandishing its fight against antisemitism as a fig leaf to cover the anti-Muslim bias on which their alliance was built. Variations of this figure – replacing hatred of the Jews with ostentatious love (or, at a minimum, with the love of their state) and stigmatization of Muslims in their stead – can be found in other European countries, East and West (e.g., Victor Orbán, Miloš Zeman, Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen). This new redistribution of hatred and love allows the defenders of the rights of Palestinians in Israel/Palestine

or Muslims in Europe to be stigmatized as ‘antisemites’. FPÖ used this stratagem against the socialist mayor of Vienna, and other right-wing parties throughout Europe (including the Czech Republic) have used it against the transnational Boycott, Divest, Sanctions movement. Strache also tested another feature of the new European national conservatism. Like him, many of its protagonists are not Christians but nevertheless have put on their banner the promise to protect the Christian identity and revive Christian values in the face of the Islamic threat. They allied for this purpose with believers who dream about the re-Christianization of their nation and Europe. Here again, Zeman and Orbán could serve as prominent examples. It is no coincidence that those two leaders (like many other right-wing European politicians) expressed their support for Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump, whose political successes were based on the same alliance between xenophobic nationalism and religious (ultra)conservatism.

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## **From Narrating Dissidence to Post-Dissident Narratives of Democracy: Anti-totalitarianism, Politics of Memory and Culture Wars in East-Central Europe 1970s–2000s**

*Michal Kopeček*

For quite some time now, we have been telling ourselves that the troublemaker in the workings of the new liberal democracies of Central and Eastern Europe has been the ‘legacies of communism’. Two of the most formidable enemies of liberal democracy in the region, Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński, however, are neither former communists nor their heirs. Instead, they are former dissident oppositionists, albeit certainly not the central figures in the dissidence. Is it then not the ‘legacies of dissidence’ rather than those of communism which have turned out to be quite problematic? The past matters, but maybe it matters in a different way than we thought.<sup>1</sup>

If we want to understand the cultural forms and conceptual repertoire behind today’s culture war in East-Central Europe, we need to dig prior to 1989. In this chapter, I would like to go beyond the liberal versus populist scheme prevailing today and offer a more nuanced reading, showing that today’s cultural, political and symbolic cleavages are of early origins. Very often they have dissident genealogy, which gives them both mobilization potential and moral

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standing. For a long time, an idea abounded that the post-1989 liberal democracy ‘naturally’ ensued from the democratic opposition and its struggle against communist dictatorship. Yet the historical research as well as today’s political developments in the region show that liberal democracy was not the only potentiality and perhaps not the only possible outcome of the dissident struggle. An effort to understand today’s contest for democracy in this part of Europe leads us, among other possibilities, to reconsider our understanding of the history and meaning of anti-communist dissident opposition in the region.

The historical experience and moral mandate of democratic dissidence and later democratization movements in East-Central Europe was of great importance for the formation of post-communist democracy. The symbolic language and identity narratives of the post-1989 democracy were imprinted by the *legacies of dissidence*. In other words, the democratic opposition to communist dictatorship in 1980s’ East-Central Europe left considerable legacies in the form of certain *languages of the political* and *languages of the historical* which significantly contributed to the formation of the political cultures in the region after communism.

It is not just that the former dissidents played important public roles. The post-dissident narrative, what could be called the post-dissident Whig (liberal) interpretation of how democracy came into being, played a crucial role as the founding myth legitimizing the post-1989 democratic order.<sup>2</sup> It is a story about the birth of a new democratic opposition out of the post-1968 political, moral, existential, humanitarian and political surge powerfully boosted by the ‘Helsinki effect’ and the ensuing transnational human rights activism. It is a story about the innumerable odds and obstacles that the dissident groups and, later, the rising democratization movement had to overcome in order to arrive, finally, at the democratic

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2 Whig in reference to the famous, albeit contested essay of Herbert Butterfield from 1932, *The Whig Interpretation of History*. It is consciously Whig, not ‘whiggish’ as the latter is usually used to denote any progressivist storytelling. The Whig interpretation stands more concretely for historical narratives based on the teleological story of perennial struggle between the friends and enemies of progress or, in our case here, between the friends and enemies of human rights and (liberal) democracy.

revolutions of 1989. A journey ‘from a moral to a democratic revolution’ (as Vilém Prečan characterized in a nutshell the Charter 77 history in 1989), which opened a path towards political democracy, a market economy and the proverbial return to Europe and the Western community, where all these countries feel they have always culturally belonged. In this way the *narrative of dissidence* served from 1989 on as a powerful myth of democratic revival – a myth in the good sense, as a story of origins, as a foundational tale of community – underpinning the whole liberal democratic transition process in the region.

The post-dissident Whig narrative’s counterpart in the international arena took the form of a transnational Whig narrative about the rise of human rights to the pinnacle of international order and the lingua franca of the globalized and interconnected world. It is a story that similarly describes the struggle of human rights against all the odds and the obstacles of the Cold War, starting with its founding moment, the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948; through countless battles and contests over their interpretations and anchorage in international law between the West, the communist East and the Third World; to the path-breaking Helsinki Final Act and the ensuing Helsinki effect leading to the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 (Richardson-Little 2015). The Whig or liberal international human rights story served as the foundational myth for liberal internationalism, the new paradigm of the global order in the 1990s, the Pax Americana following the fall of the communist empire in Europe.

In the last decade and a half, this Whig interpretation of dissidence and of international human rights has been heavily contested from various angles. Although there have always been critical voices, especially in academia, it is only now, under the heavy artillery of political criticism and political struggle, that the contours of the discursive hegemony of this somewhat self-congratulatory liberal narrative, the triumphalist story of the victorious crusade of human rights, with dissidents and human rights activists as the main heroes leading the non-violent, democratic revolutions of 1989, are becoming more visible.

This chapter maps out the dissident and post-dissident identity and memory politics before and after 1989 from the perspective of the evolving narratives of democracy that formed the basis of the 'liberal' or, better, the 'liberal-conservative consensus' of the 1990s, which however also contained the seeds of its discontent and challenges. Regarding the questions of democracy and its narrativization, I lean mainly on the democracy theories of French political theorists and historians such as François Furet, Claude Lefort and Pierre Rosanvallon. First, they devised theories of democracy where the elaboration of the past and its representation has been understood as an inevitable part of 'really existing democracies'. In their reading, the genealogies or functioning *narratives of democracy* are not just an epiphenomenon of democratic life but an integral part of the practical workings of democracy in modern history. Second, in contrast to the mainstream anti-totalitarian liberalism, they understand the twentieth century experience of totalitarianism as an intrinsic part of the evolutionary history of democracy. This creates a useful distance from an expedient interpretation of democracy as born out of the life-and-death struggle with totalitarianism, which turned into a pivotal political moralism of the liberal transition era after 1989.

As the intention is to portray the development in broad strokes, I focus on a few symptomatic concepts in the dissident political thought and post-dissident narratives of democracy, namely the formation of dissident self-narrations and their projection onto national historical identity narratives at the turn of the 1970s/1980s. Further, I explore the concomitant rise of civil society related concepts, of the totalitarian imaginary and of the rise of 'memory politics' within the democratic opposition. The chapter outlines the way these crucial dissident concepts 'translated' into the nascent democratic political culture and, above all, the democratic political struggle at the beginning of the 1990s. Furthermore, it strives to follow their trajectories into the culture wars of the 2000s. The chapter hypothesizes that it was not some kind of deeply engrained, eternal propensity towards nationalist populism in the region nor deeply rooted animosities between the secular modernizing Left

and the traditionalist, anti-Western Right. Rather, it was concrete political and cultural configurations and power conflicts drawing, indeed, on a certain cultural repertoire that enabled and empowered the recent illiberal challenge to the ‘liberal-conservative consensus’ in the region. It is highly significant but often overlooked that the most successful of these challengers do not come out from outside, but from within the broad ‘liberal-conservative consensus’ of the early 1990s. They belong to the same ‘legacies of dissidence’ underpinning the post-1989 consensus – perhaps not representing its centre but not its volatile margins either.

### **Narrating Dissidence**

The Helsinki effect dramatically changed the language of international politics by lifting the status of human rights and international humanitarian law into a palpable subject of international politics and diplomacy in Europe and beyond (Thomas 2007, Eckel and Moyn 2014). Raising the issue of human rights above the ubiquitous but non-binding human rights discourse promoted by the United Nations, the Council of Europe and other organizations, the process changed the character of political opposition in Eastern Europe. Well known are the stories of Helsinki committees in the USSR, later that of the Workers’ Defense Committee (KOR; Komitet Obrony Robotników), Charter 77, the Movement for Defence of Human and Civic Rights (ROPCiO; Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela) and other so-called Helsinki groups that originated in the late 1970s, as is their emphasis on human and civic rights as their underlying fundamental political, philosophical principles and the basis for effective civic, nonviolent resistance. This canonized story became the backbone of the liberal or Whig narrative of dissidence, playing an important role in cultural-political legitimization after 1989. The Helsinki effect has over time been put in doubt for its unidirectional character (from West to East) and its simplified progressivist form. Current research into political and cultural dissent, but also the local historical memory always tended to picture Helsinki as a political opportunity more than

a point of birth or a matrix of dissidence – a political opportunity that presented itself at the right time to be strategically exploited by the nascent democratic opposition.

This is not to challenge the importance of the Helsinki effect altogether. Western support for human rights as well as the ‘Western gaze’ played a significant role as much as the ‘figure of dissident’, created mainly by Western journalists and Sovietologists, had a palpable ‘looping effect’ back in the communist countries (Szulecki 2019). Yet the watering down of the somewhat triumphalist story of the Helsinki effect, which allegedly brought Eastern European dissent into existence, is important conceptually. It shows that for ‘successful dissidence’ much more was needed than ‘merely’ international human rights law and human rights activism, both at home and abroad, albeit that too was *conditio sine qua non*. A part of the current research is thus rediscovering what was well known to the oppositionists themselves as well as to the local historians of democratic opposition: namely the rich pre-Helsinki maturing of the future dissidence, well before 1975, in various forms, from self-conscious political opposition to dispersed circles of social, civil and cultural resistance, which was an inevitable precondition for the post-1975 Helsinki frame to work. One such precondition was an existing patchwork of identity discourses in terms of both the forming of the anti-communist opposition and the national community, which represented dynamic cultural building blocks on which the ‘Helsinki message’ could be built and adapted to local cultural-political circumstances.

The influence of the human rights discourse was rather indirect and strained through multiple cultural sifters. Rather than the direct influence of human rights on oppositional identity, we can speak about a broader paradigm shift where human rights played an important but not exclusive role, nor was it even the most decisive. A case in point is Jonathan Bolton’s acclaimed book *Worlds of Dissent* focusing on the early years of the Charter 77 community up to 1980 and the crucial role of dissident storytelling to the sense of group identity and community (Bolton 2012). He observes that while the Chartist discourse was full of the language of truth, through its

storytelling opposition circles thrived on their own myths and legends. Enhanced by the significant role of underground culture, for which legend-building was a form of existential expression, it played perhaps a more palpable role in the formation of Czech dissent than in any other dissident community in Eastern Europe.

Bolton was not primarily interested in political programmes and dissident strategies, not even in political narratives and their long-term effects. But he shows illustratively how certain narratives acquired a canonical status as well as what it meant for streamlining the diversity of historical experience into a usable identity narrative. As he wrote in the book's conclusion, 'If we say that Charter 77 emerged from the trial of the Plastic People, we should realize that we are endorsing Havel's "metaphysical" version of the Charter's origin as an appeal to morality and conscience' (ibid.: 271).

Charter 77 was not only a human rights organization calling attention to abuses. For its members and sympathizers, it was also a community of shared values and shared stories – an interpretative community of sorts. Havel was, by all means, one of the most influential figures in Czech and Czechoslovak dissent. Through his generalizing narratives about the Charter, such as his famous essay 'The Power of the Powerless' as well as through his first-person writings – the prime dissident genre – such as his only slightly less famous *Letters to Olga* or his book-long interview with Karel Hvíždala *Disturbing the Peace* (which has a more apt but similarly ironic title, 'Long-distance interrogation', in Czech), Havel was constantly shaping and polishing the Chartist identity narrative. In a sense Havel's centrality was unique; he was the central organizational and unification figure within the Chartist community and thus the dissident culture in Czechoslovakia, a true leader of the country's democratic opposition. He was one of the major symbolic embodiments of dissidence for the Western media and politics next to Adam Michnik, György Konrád, Alexander Solzhenicyn and Andrei Sakharov. At the same time, though, Havel was one of the primary narrators of Czech and Czechoslovak dissidence too.

In June 1986 Havel wrote a contribution called 'On the Meaning of Charter 77' (O smyslu Charty 77; in Prečan 1990: 161–176)

for a planned collective volume recapitulating the ten years of its existence. Briefly and in simple, approachable language (by Havel's standard), he reiterated here the story of Charter that he had elaborated over the course of the past decade in his essays, interviews, petitions and declarations. Without any explicit reference to international covenants or Helsinki, Havel's story of the birth of Charter and democratic opposition was inscribed in the broader international human rights evolution only in hints and indirectly through Chartist on-the-ground activism. The broader interpretative frame of Havel's story was not formed by the invocation of human rights, but by the assumption that the post-1968 situation in Czechoslovakia was not only a political crisis but above all a deep moral crisis. As in most of his dissident writing, he juxtaposes the realm of politics and the realm of values and morality. This makes Charter not so much a political programme but a primarily moral and civic initiative, Havel wrote, with an obligatory reference to Jan Patočka as the source of this particular understanding. But the central category of the essay summarizing Havel's thoughts on Charter's identity and the meaning of its existence represented the contradiction between politics as a realm of *the temporary* and civic virtues (*občanství*), as a realm of *the infinite*. Politics is changing, political programmes arise, live and then disappear, but real politics can only exist on the grounds of a 'renewed sense of citizenship', which Charter was supposed to help to bring about (ibid.: 166–167).

The dissident republic of letters was a matrix out of which the sense of their own situation and activity was constantly being recreated. But it was also a competition of sorts between various proliferating narratives: which of them would eventually get the upper hand. In other cases, such as those in Hungary or Poland, we do not find an exact counterpart to Havel in terms of his centrality to dissident self-organization and the narration of his experience. But also in those countries, some of the 'interpretative communities' within the dissident circles were more influential than others, with some of them having a much more direct connection to their counterparts in other bloc states and, importantly, to Western media (Brier 2011; Szulecki 2019). The varying influence of different

discourses, cultural preconditions and ideological predilections has found its representation in the diversity of the general ideological leanings and thus also prevailing narratives of dissidence in the individual countries. Roughly speaking, whereas in the Czechoslovak case Charter 77 gave the dissident narratives a stronger rights-based character and moral philosophical underpinning, the Polish dissidents understood themselves more clearly and unequivocally as a political opposition; the Hungarian opposition for their part stood somewhere between the two (cf. Thaa 1996, Pollack-Wielgoch 2004). What was common to all of them, however, was the centrality of the *civic principle*, encouraged by the politics of human rights rising in importance within the dissident strategies of new evolutionism (A. Michnik), radical reformism (J. Kis, G. Bence) and anti-political politics (V. Havel, G. Konrád).

Yet, in general, we should not project the discursive hegemonies of the post-1989 era back on the historical reality. Despite the heavily one-sided Western narrative of dissidence focusing on the select few, such as Havel, Konrád and Michnik, and despite the *politics of consensus* fostered in the opposition – that is, a steady effort at broad consensus-building with the aim of unifying the oppositional forces around the ‘anti-political’ cause of social self-organization and human rights defence – the intra-oppositional plurality thrived. The effervescent literary culture, with its manifold storytelling, was growing independent of oppositional political exigencies supporting a fundamental plurality, which was itself not just surviving but thriving towards the end of the 1980s. Needless to say, different identity narratives had varying weight in the dissident community and thus very different followings.

## **Re-narrating the Nation**

If first-person dissident storytelling proliferated in *samizdat* and formed the basis for the identity-building of the opposition, as Bolton has shown, the historical essay, no less flourishing a samizdat genre, formed the basis of a wider-ranging identity-building project that translated or applied the paradigm shift happening in the opposition

to the whole national community or body politic. The numerous and sometimes fierce discussions about national history, its meaning and reinterpretations as well as national political traditions and their legacies concerning the dark-sides of national histories testify to the persistence of the political fissions within the anti-communist oppositions, involving a range of political identities, from former (reform)communists to all different kinds of socialists, Trotskyites, anarchists, cultural (proto-) and economic liberals, Catholics, Protestants, various kinds of conservatives and nationalists, and, on top of it, all possible combinations thereof. Political differences were temporarily overcome in the name of the struggle against tyranny but were never completely reconciled. These fissions and cleavages were later the matrix out of which a major portion of the post-1989 political spectrum in the region would be born and, along with it, the most influential post-dissident *narratives of democracy*.

The emancipatory power of human rights discourse could hardly be separated from national cultural and historical frameworks. Both the universalistic claim of human rights and their context-bound elaboration or ‘localization’ (Szulecki 2011) contributed to various critical reappraisals of traditional national patriotic projects in the democratic opposition, whether they were articulated in civic republican, liberal nationalist, communitarian or other fashions (Auer 2004, Ciżewska 2011). In their bid to extend the borders of the body politic and reach beyond the narrow dissident circles, some of them claimed that nationality, rather than citizenship, ensured solidarity among the population at large. The ideal of participatory democracy driven by active and self-reflective citizens was shared by many dissidents before 1989 as well as after it. However, drawing from various domestic political traditions, many dissident thinkers and strategists understood that it was politics rooted in a particular cultural tradition – *politics in the vernacular* (Kymlicka 2001) – that had a chance to push the political community forward toward the democratic ideal, and that this could be a source of active participation in democratization and, later, democratic politics.

National identity as an active discourse stood at the very centre of debates in samizdat and in exile journals during the last two decades

of socialist dictatorship (Feindt 2015, Trencsényi et al. 2018). Debates over the legacies of historical figures such as Bernard Bolzano, Tomáš G. Masaryk, Józef Piłsudski, Roman Dmowski, Oszkár Jászi and István Bibó created an intellectual space where different conceptions of nationhood and different principles of belonging competed for dominance within the community of oppositionists. Influential dissident writers such as Adam Michnik in Poland, Petr Pithart in Czechoslovakia and Miklós Szabó in Hungary adopted a critical stance towards traditional national historical master narratives and aspired to redefine national identity in order to pass over the illiberal legacies of ethno-nationalism and to accommodate the universal claims of human rights discourses and modern, pluralist democracy. This also meant reconsideration and critical evaluation of the traditional historical narratives about the pre-communist democracies such as the Polish noble democracy or the Second Republic, the Hungarian Reform Era and the failure of democracy after 1918, or the Czechoslovak interwar republic. These, in the passion of anti-regime struggle, sometimes tended to be treated uncritically as past golden ages of homegrown democracy.

Rather well-known today are the critical, civic patriotism projects standing as counter-concepts against the traditional ethno-national identity, which led to heated discussions among the dissident community. The two most renowned examples are, in the Czech case, Petr Pithart's 1979 essay 'Attempt of Homeland' and, in the Polish case, Jan Józef Lipski's 'Two Fatherlands, Two Patriotisms', written during the heyday of legal Solidarity in summer 1981. Both are prime examples showing illustratively the productive, but also uneasy coexistence of human rights discourses and the search for usable national political traditions or historically reflexive national identities (Kopeček 2012). They originated in a rather different context but had one basic common feature: historical self-criticism as a precondition for reconciliation, calls for a self-reflective and active citizenry, as well as for national democratic, civically-founded unity against the communist Leviathan. The idea of a possible historical compromise corresponded with the human rights based anti-political vision of consensual and compromise-ready politics.

Very similar ideas, strategic considerations and historical visions reconstructing the traditional national sense of belonging appeared also in the other national cultures in East-Central Europe, not least in Hungary and Slovakia. Due to somewhat different cultural contexts, regime structures and thus also the structure of the opposition, we do not find here an explicit formulation of dissident civic patriotism but a general ‘logic’ to the oppositional political thought, with a drive for a human rights based *anti-political consensus* and *historical compromise* that was very similar (Trencsényi et al. 2018). In Hungary, the issue of national consciousness and patriotism among dissidents connected directly to previous debates in Marxist historiography and were particularly influenced by Jenő Szűcs’s historicization of the concept of nation, arguing against any anachronistic projection of the modern post-Romantic national viewpoint onto the complex historical reality (Szűcs 1974). György Litván’s and Péter Hanák’s work on ‘Danubian patriotism’ and Oskár Jászi and the civic radicals’ development of a political identity which envisioned a multi-ethnic and democratic cultural-political community exemplify the search for an alternative discourse of collective identity to both communism and ethno-nationalism (Litván 1978, Hanák 1985). A similar role was played by some of the Slovak dissident intellectuals such as Miroslav Kusý, who in his 1980s essays castigated Slovak national Romantic self-delusions and permanent self-victimization and called for the abandonment of intoxicating ‘national optics’ in favour of a struggle for political and civic rights instead of supposed national oppression (Kusý 1991).

Intellectually interesting as these various civic and liberal patriotism projects were, they did not represent the oppositional majority. Standing for the internationally most visible left-liberal or radical democratic part of the human rights opposition, they were surely not insignificant. But it would be misleading if they were to be taken as representative of the ‘dissident view’ in general. After all, most, if not all of these concepts were reactions to a more or less palpable rise, especially in Poland and Hungary, of national sentiments and nationalist tendencies in the ranks of the opposition and the broader society.

Let us turn to the Polish context now. The dissident discussion of patriotism and nationalism reacted here, to a considerable extent, to national communist jingoism that caused a trauma to Poland's 1968 leftist opposition. The 'revolution of obscurantism', as Władysław Bieńkowski has called the government orchestrated antisemitic campaign of that year, prompted many of Poland's last remaining citizens of Jewish background to leave the country. Long afterward, people in the opposition reeled from the outburst of nationalist rhetoric in official media. In many ways, the episode predetermined the watchfulness with which left-wing and liberal dissidents reacted to anything they recognized as traditional Polish ethno-nationalism. A case in point is the first issue of the samizdat political quarterly *Krytyka*, close to the KOR circle, that was released in the summer of 1978 and was devoted in large part to the tenth anniversary of the Polish 1968. Kuroń, the leading figure of the KOR opposition, declared here explicitly – though without naming specific groups and milieus – that while communism as an ideology was dead, the 'national totalitarianism' rising in the country was becoming the main ideological danger and opponent of the democratic opposition (Kuroń 1978).

Such an evaluation was understood as an affront by the nationalist and independentist streams of opposition, many of whom were already organizing themselves around the rival opposition human rights organization, ROPCiO, that came into being in March 1977. Despite human rights figuring as a central point of reference in its name, the organization did not hide that its main goals were aimed well beyond the 'anti-political' agenda of human rights, that is, a goal of remaking the Poland of party dictatorship into an independent and democratic state. Human rights and their defence were surely not understood merely instrumentally or even opportunistically by the ROPCiO leaders and activists, yet they were also not a goal in and of themselves. Due to the rivalries within its leadership, ROPCiO did not last long, but its successor organizations formed, in fact, a large and influential part of the Polish democratic opposition, usually characterized as national conservative. Its narrative of the dissident experience and its relation to the redefinition

or rather recovery of the ‘nation’ was very different from the wishful civic patriotism of Lipski and others mentioned above.

One successor organization, the Young Poland Movement (RMP, Ruch Młodej Polski), is perhaps the best example of the entanglement of human rights issues with not just the goal of independence but with the recovery of national traditions and moral-political renewal of the national community. The core of RMP was formed by the student opposition in late-1970s Gdańsk around Aleksander Hall, Jacek Bartyzel and the editorial team of the bi-monthly *Bratniak*. They were inspired by the revival of conservative tradition in the writings of Marcin Król and his samizdat journal *Res Publica*, but also the national Catholic tradition through the émigré writer and activist Wojciech Wasutyński as well as the lawyer and informal tutor of the group Wiesław Chrzanowski. As activists of ROPCiO, they stressed the defence of human rights and human dignity as a unifying oppositional factor. Yet they also strove to put much more emphasis on the reconstitution of national community as a precondition of independence, leaning on the centre- and right-wing pre-war Polish political traditions of national and Christian democrats but also the Piłsudski camp.

The intellectual profile of RMP had been partly formed and subsequently symbolized by a polemic in 1978–9 about the ‘national democratic tradition’ (*endecja*) and the role of national identity in general between Aleksander Hall and leaders of the left-wing KOR opposition, Jacek Kuroń, Jan Józef Lipski and Adam Michnik (Feindt 2015: 65–83). Inspired by Dmowski and the ‘realistic trends’ within the national democratic movement during the period of independence struggles prior to 1918, as well as by the concepts of national self-organization and of ‘national interest’, Hall protested against what he understood as the liberals’ reductionist view, stressing mainly the nationalist and antisemitic excesses in the national democratic tradition (Hall 1978, Matyja 2015).

For the RMP milieu, the nation was historically the highest form of social organization, a moral, spiritual and cultural community of all generations. As they repeated a number of times, among other places in their programmatic Declaration from August 1979,

the universalism of human and civic rights needed concretization through individual nations and was to be realized through individual responsibility to the national community. From this point of view, independence, as one of the main goals of the democratic opposition, and the state must serve the nation and not the other way round. This meant that they stood not only against the communist ‘totalitarian organization of society’ in Poland and Eastern Europe but also against the ‘liberal-individualistic’ tendencies palpable both in the opposition and in the society, which contribute to a disregard of individual communal responsibility (Deklaracja 1979).

The bond of belonging, the concept of nation and the human rights doctrine became an implicit and, at times, explicit bone of contention among dissidents and oppositionists in most countries under communist rule. Implicitly, it stood as a cardinal question of the dissident strategy, one which became particularly relevant in Poland with the rise of the Solidarity movement in 1980. Who was the opposition to the communist dictatorship? Was it society as Kuroń would have it or the Polish nation as Hall and many others liked to claim? Kuroń and Hall reached a tentative compromise in the time before Solidarity appeared. The former wrote a longish and elaborate open letter to the editorial board of *Bratniak* where he repeated his suspicion and criticism of traditional Polish nationalism with its exclusivist nature as represented, in his view, by the journal. Yet, in a reconciling tone, he admitted that their position was legitimate, albeit criticizable, and they had the full right to defend it in a pluralist and democratic discussion (Kuroń 1979). The *politics of consensus* and of compromise ensuing from the common interest of struggle against the communist Leviathan took the lead over the dispute with what Kuroń and many around him understood, potentially, as the greatest danger for the not-yet-born Polish democracy.

In the 1990s’ liberal and anti-nationalist (although not a-national) reading of dissidence history in East-Central Europe, the nationalist and right-wing opposition and their human rights activism was, to a great extent, obliterated. Both the local post-dissident as well as the Western gaze of this allegedly ‘post-national era’ had a strong tendency to decouple the struggle for national independence and

sovereignty from that of respect for and compliance with human rights. Yet without the nationalist opposition as an important and powerful branch in Poland, similar to many other countries in the Soviet Bloc and the Soviet Union, the historical picture remains very inaccurate.

There were deep cleavages in the democratic opposition from the very beginning, and they were bridged only temporarily. If we wanted, we could trace some of today's political cleavages back to the formative years of the opposition. A case in point is Jarosław Kaczyński's samizdat article from January 1980, half a year before the founding of Solidarity. Kaczyński at that point was part of the KOR opposition and provided legal help to protesting workers as well as dissidents. Yet his article was a rather radical critique of the secular Left that arose out of the 1968 student generation and the former Marxist revisionists like Kuroń. They formed the majority in KOR and, above all, formed its ideological profile. This is perhaps the reason for Kaczyński's vitriolic criticism when addressing the former 'Trotskyists' and their concepts of so-called positive work within existing structures. Ominously, the author ended with an emphatic call for a clear distinction between those who are truly fighting against communism and for national independence and those who think they are in opposition to the communist regime while they are in fact helping to maintain it (Kaczyński 1980).

The disintegration of the opposition was a danger visible from beginning to end, not only between the various groups but also within leading organizations, such as KOR or Charter 77, with others such as ROPCiO in fact collapsing. It was foreshadowing what would happen to the post-opposition when the crust of the one-party police regime disappeared. This was also the reason behind the steady concern for the unity of the anti-communist opposition and behind the constant search for possibilities and conditions for a principled consensus. And yet, any essentialist retrospective reading of the democratic opposition as an eternal rift between what became much later, at the turn of the century, the liberal Left and the national conservative Right, would be misleading and ahistorical. Moreover, conservatism, in the opposition everywhere but in

Poland particularly, had not just national but, importantly, also religious roots and elements. This too was a matter of the dissident *politics of dialogue* exemplified famously by Michnik's seminal samizdat book *The Church and the Left* and Józef Tischner's rejoinder (Trencsényi 2018: 98–100). There is not, however, space here to pursue this line of oppositional alliance and later cleavage, which will also play an important role in the culture wars with regard to, among other things, biopolitics, women's rights and the (de)legalization of abortion. All in all, the opposition was much more plural, containing many and varied cleavages, contradictions, controversies and animosities so that a very different political differentiation could have been imagined, as we shall see below. There was no predetermination in the democratic opposition of the culture wars of the 2000s. At the same time, the existing clashes and cleavages were not insignificant either, since they contributed to the cumulated cultural and ideological sediments that would, indeed, play a prominent role in these wars.

### **Civil Society, Liberal Anti-totalitarianism and Dissident Politics of Memory**

The concept of 'civil society' has long been popular in dissidence research starting as early as the 1980s. With origins in early modern West European thought, the notion of civil society was reinvented in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1980s and found its way into the policy language of international development agencies during the 1990s. (Glasius, Lewis, Seckinelgin 2004). Similar to the notion of 'dissident', civil society was also first used by Western observers describing what was happening in the region, and only later was it adopted by the human rights and democratization activists themselves. Subsequently, however, it became a crucial part of the dissident self-narration and of the Whig post-dissident narrative.

The so-called Western ideas of civil society were naturally present in the philosophical, legal and sociological thought of the region and not only in its Hegelian form adapted and used in Marxism. The 'bourgeois' liberal notion of civil society was explicitly reflected

by Marxist revisionists and reformists in the 1960s in their designs to strengthen the autonomy and self-organization of the socialist society vis-à-vis the socialist state as an important part of the democratic socialism project (Schulze-Wessel 2018; Williams and Krapfl 2018). Yet for the attempts to conceptualize the nascent dissident activities in the 1970s, the traditional liberal or Marxist ideas had little bearing at first. Gordon Skilling observed, at the end of the 1980s, that a host of alternative terms close to the concept of civil society arose among the dissidents in an effort to give name to activities that varied in forms and differed in degrees of organization and of mutual support. These included, for instance ‘independent civic initiative’, ‘independent’ or ‘parallel polis’, ‘second economy’, ‘second culture’, ‘second public sphere’, ‘self-organization of society’, ‘anti-politics’ or ‘non-political politics’, the broadest being ‘a second’ or ‘civil society’ (Skilling 1989: 158). The notion of civil society was indeed also among them, though not prominently at the beginning. Later this rediscovery of civil society was seized and theorized within the broader context of Western political thought on civil society’s role in modern democracy (Falk 2003: 313–327).

From the point of view of the evolving narrative of dissidence, the conceptualization of the earlier dissident community as the only self-organizing element in society that resisted the totalitarian designs of dictatorial power was an expression of the desire to overcome, at least theoretically, the limits of the ‘dissident ghetto’, an anxiety that hounded the dissident communities from the very start. Subsequently, however, it also enabled them to think and devise society-wide strategies of civic resistance. Solidarity represented an early successful breakthrough of dissidence towards a truly societal realm when the Polish dissidents managed to join and enmesh themselves in the most powerful workers’ protest in twentieth-century history. As such, it has been viewed by dissident communities in other countries with awe and envy, but it also served them as a powerful example that, in a state socialist dictatorship, a breakthrough where the ‘society’ stands up against the ‘totalitarian regime’ was possible.

It was exactly this society-wide potentiality, if not promise of the ‘civil society’ concept that made it attractive for the opposition

strategists. A telling example is the famous tip of the iceberg metaphor used by Havel in his essay ‘The Power of the Powerless’ where he spoke about the activities of the ‘dissidents’ and their relationship to the broader society. He described them as ‘the proverbial one tenth of the iceberg visible above the water’, which made it possible for dissidents to think about themselves as part of the much larger ‘independent life of society’, the ‘most visible and, at first glance, the most political (and clearly articulated) expression of it’ (Havel 2018: 386) – dissidents as non-elected but committed representatives of society writ large.

Yet the dissident perspective that Aleksander Smolar in hindsight characterized as an ‘ideology of moral civil society’ soon came to dominate the discourse of civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe, leading to a situation where other civil society manifestations, which frequently did not call themselves civil society, were overlooked in research and in democratic narratives after 1989; these concerned, for instance, the religious communities beyond those directly participating in dissent but also the rather booming socialist civil society supported by the state or the rising socialist middle class (Buchowski 1996). Many of these civil societies would later, after 1989, be conceptualized as belonging rather to the ‘uncivil society’, prolonging post-communist syndromes or cradling traditionalist values at odds with the modernization and Europeanization of the transition era. (Kopecky and Mudde 2013). Moreover, it was also effectively challenging the opposition credentials of the nationally minded groups.

In speaking the language of civil society, they [left-liberal dissidents] were implicitly challenging the traditionally dominant ethnic conception of the nation with a nonethnic, political concept. By promoting civil society rather than ethnic community, they were not only proposing a wholly different way of defining ‘us’ and ‘them,’ but also suggesting a different way of looking at both the past and the future. (Smolar 1996: 25)

The binary nature of the dissident civil society notion which tended to counterpose society and state against each other found its counter-

part in the return of imagery concerning the theory of totalitarianism in dissident political and historical writings. As noted by the early analyst of this phenomenon Jacques Rupnik, the dissident reevaluation of the totalitarianism concept was surely not unreflected, a return to an old-fashioned instrumentarium abandoned at that time almost completely in Western Sovietology. It was a new attempt to redefine the concept in light of several abrupt reformist projects (1956, 1968, 1980–81) that showed the communist system was changing. Yet their ultimate failure was, at the same time, calling for the identification of the system's 'non-changing core' that, after all, potentially remained totalitarian (Rupnik 1988).

The new dissident attempts to grasp the totalitarian nature of the system were accompanied by a re-reading and re-evaluation of the older thinkers of totalitarianism such as Orwell, Koestler, Miłosz, Djilas and contemporaries such as Solzhenitsyn or Zinoviev. It is symptomatic that the major inspiration for the dissident writers was literary rather than that of political science related to the well-known Friedrich and Brzeziński model. One of the main assets of the classical theory of totalitarianism – that is, a comparison of Nazism and Stalinism – did not figure prominently in the dissident analyses as most of them were focused on communism. (Śpiewak 2003). Yet the implicit comparison was always there, and the literary inspiration that enabled the relatively wide usage and malleability of the term also helped to keep the question of the moral equivalence of Nazi (fascist) and communist totalitarianism relevant.

Totalitarianism became a common denominator of dissident writing, yet in various different modes. For the sake of clarity, I would distinguish between two opposite poles of the scale: totalitarianism as an analytical model and *usable totalitarianism* as a mobilization tool. In careful political analyses aware of the ideal-typical character of the concept the difference between the 'really existing socialism' of the 1970s and 1980s and the Stalinist years was acknowledged. For instance, Havel uses in 'The Power of the Powerless' and other essays the concept of 'totalitarianism' as an analytical tool, which in his writings underwent a rather significant transformation. As is well known, he does not speak about a totalitarian but a 'post-totalitarian

order’, which he characterizes as the result of the ‘historical encounter of dictatorship with consumer society’. Yet he stressed, ‘I do not wish to imply by the prefix “post-” that the system is no longer totalitarian; on the contrary, I mean that it is totalitarian in a way fundamentally different from classical dictatorships, different from totalitarianism as we usually understand it’ (Havel 2018: 358).

The concept did have enough analytical value for the writer to use it and build his analysis on it when comparing, for instance, the role of ideology, terror, violence, and so on, in a ‘classical totalitarian’ system – although he barely says what he means by that, it is without a doubt Stalinism – and a ‘post-totalitarian’ system. At the same time, Havel is quite explicit in several places within the famous essay that the ‘totalitarian power system’ is kept unchanged in the post-totalitarian order, which preserves as constant the fundamental identity of the political order. Moreover, Havel himself, when writing in a less sophisticated mode to ‘broader audiences’ at home or abroad, often referred to the current regimes in Czechoslovakia and other communist countries as totalitarian, not deviating from the generally accepted dissident-activist usage (e.g., Havel 1989: 99–135).

In the broader strata of oppositional activists in the 1980s, the intellectual finesse was however lost. Here the imagery of totalitarianism or the rhetoric of *usable totalitarianism* helped to phrase the political discourse in an understandably dichotomous scheme. It started to draw clear-cut borders between Us and Them, between the ‘democratic opposition’ and ‘totalitarian power’, ‘life in truth’ and ‘life in a lie’, between ‘democracy’ defined as the opposite of ‘totalitarianism’. Such anti-totalitarianism, having much more in common with the early Cold War usage rather than the sophisticated social analysis by some of the dissident intellectuals, was a tool of discursive war. It defended democracy against its major enemy, the existing, allegedly totalitarian power. Yet it did not and could not try to explain what democracy should look like. Democracy was a vision shared by the activists of the opposition as well as many people outside its realm. Understandably though, nobody in the opposition, not even the exiled political emigrants, paid much

attention to what kind of democracy it should be after the ‘totalitarian order’ crumbled.

This oppositional mobilization development had been accompanied by a similar tendency in the opposition’s *memory politics*. The ‘national history discourse’ proved to be a powerful tool in the hands of the opposition. The most obvious example in this respect was the ‘exploding historical memory’ (Baczko 1994) of Solidarity in 1980–1981. From that time on, and despite temporary political setbacks, the historical discourse of Solidarity became the most emblematic and influential counter-hegemonic culture in East-Central Europe. The ‘independent historical discourse’, as it was named, had already started to appear in samizdat publications during the 1970s. But the upsurge of national liberation rhetoric in Solidarity reinforced the strivings for historical research that from now on should *not only* be independent but, in fact, *counterposed* to the official communist historiography. The revisionist historical discourse became a fundamental part of Solidarity’s political and cultural production. In particular, the most recent historical periods underwent a vigorous reevaluation as it picked up on the most obvious historical taboos of the regime, such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Katyń massacre, the 1944 Warsaw Uprising and the notorious passivity of the Red Army, or the establishment of the Polish communist regime in 1944–48. Historical discourse, especially with regard to the twentieth-century Polish-Soviet relationship, turned into a moral-political battlefield against the regime.

Less successful and overwhelming than in Solidarity’s case, the efforts to employ the power of historical memory in the struggle against socialist dictatorship were also detectable in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. In Hungary this concerned particularly the Revolution of 1956 and in Slovakia the 1944 Slovak National Uprising. Symptomatic of the mobilization usage of historical discourse were the attempts of Czech dissidents to raise the ‘memory of the nation’ against the ideological machine of state socialist dictatorship. A well-known example is the Charter 77 document from 1984 ‘The Right to History’. The document, of very Orwellian diction, was issued, as usual, by the three Charter spokespersons, with Václav Benda at

the forefront. Questioning the official Czechoslovak historiography and the ‘politics of amnesia’ through which the communist power tried to manipulate and corrupt the historical memory of the population, the document called for a renewal of ‘authentic national historical memory’ that should also include the reevaluation of those elements of national history labelled traditionally by communist historians as ‘reactionary’, such as Catholicism, the concept of Central Europe or the Habsburg legacy.

The growing weight of the ‘national memory’ concept in the opposition’s political struggle did not mean that the critical discussion concerning national myths and auto-stereotypes disappeared. Sometimes they even caused an uproar, such as the Polish discussions about the memory of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising initiated by Jan Błoński in 1987 or the Czech debates around the demythologizing dissident historical narrative called Podiven scrutinizing modern Czech nationalism and its culmination in the expulsion of the Sudeten-German population after 1945. Yet these self-critical, anti-nationalist attempts were overwhelmed by politically exigent historical ideologies based on the traditional ethno-cultural notion of nation.

There were many differences and contradictions in the democratic opposition of the 1980s that threatened at every crossroad to split the fragile unity of the opposition; indeed, at times this happened, such as the splitting of the opposition in Hungary caused by the foundation of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF; Magyar Demokrata Fórum) in Lakitelek in September 1987. There were many conceptual contradictions in the political and cultural languages of the individual dissident groups, milieus and even individuals, such as, for instance, the contradictions between the doctrine of human and civic rights accompanied by a drive towards the *politics of dialogue and compromise* on the one hand, and the strengthening rhetoric of anti-totalitarianism that became an important tool of the opposition’s counter-propaganda and political mobilization on the other hand. This was mirrored, as it were, by a contradiction between the *critical patriotism* project – an intellectual and liberal pedagogical endeavour – and the defence and

utilization of the traditional ethno-cultural notion of nation and the invocation of *national memory* that again became an important part of the opposition's political mobilization against communist power. Yet, in general, the common powerful enemy kept these contradictions and often also deep-rooted animosities at bay for the time being.

The mutual interest in keeping the opposition unified in the struggle against communist power kept the various oppositional forces together, but the growing divergences were already preparing a way towards a swift political and cultural diversification of the opposition once the political field opened up. Instead of critical heart-searching and self-examination of national communities, the second half of the decade witnessed rather an opposite development, that of self-justification for the revived or newly established political and cultural identities of various groups and movements in their search for their 'authentic historical self'. It was not by chance that this was also accompanied by the relatable reading of the events in 1989 as a mythological rise of a nation in the name of democracy and self-determination against the totalitarian Leviathan.

### **Post-dissident Narratives, Liberal-Conservative Consensus and the Post-totalitarian Divide from Within**

The interpretations of the 1989 revolutions and their framing within broader narratives of European modernity and democracy became immediately a part of political identity-building and political contest both in Western democracies and in the region itself. In the latter case, the fast-appearing divergences in understandings of the nature of those events and of how to tackle the 'totalitarian' past became one of the fundamental cleavages forming the nascent political spectrum, particularly in the post-opposition camps, such as Solidarity in Poland or Civic Forum (OF; Občanské fórum) and Public Against Violence (VPN; Verejnost' proti násiliu) in Czechoslovakia. The immediate understanding of the events of 1989 as a *democratic revolution* was spread throughout the societies (Krapfl 2013); the understanding of the events as *liberal revolutions* (Ackermann 1992), not to mention

a liberal-democratic end of history (Fukuyma 1989), was either non-existent or completely marginal in the region. It was the search for specific political identity during the formative phase of the party-political system that led a part of the post-dissident camp to drift from anti-political ‘proto-liberalism’ (Szacki 1995) towards social or left-liberalism but also conservative/economic liberalism (Alliance of Free Democrats–Hungarian Liberal Party, SZDSZ in Hungary; Civic Movement, OH and the Civic Democratic Alliance, ODA in Czech Republic; and Freedom Union, UW in Poland). An important part of this process was the establishment of an ideological alliance with the liberal paradigm of 1989 forged by major Western liberal political thinkers such as Ralf Dahrendorf, Francis Fukuyama, Timothy Garton Ash, Jacques Rupnik and Bruce Ackermann.

Interestingly, in light of today’s criticism of neoliberal hegemony, the early left-liberal interpretations of 1989 originated from within the political contest of some Western countries, especially the Anglo-American context between left liberalism versus liberal conservatism/neoliberalism. In this respect most of the left-liberal interpretations such as that of Dahrendorf or Ackermann were highly critical of both the Hayekian ‘extreme constitutionalism’ (Dahrendorf 1990) as well as the neoliberal vision of laissez-faire capitalism à la Chicago school. International contexts mattered a great deal. So did, however, the domestic one and the existing cultural and symbolic repertoire coming out of the democratic opposition struggle of the last two decades.

Leaving the complicated and fragmented story of political diversification within the post-Solidarity or post-dissident political camp aside, what interests us here is the crucial role of former dissidents – many of whom left politics rather early – in creating some of the most decisive *languages of the political* and *languages of the historical* in post-socialism. The experience with ‘totalitarianism’ and the story of the democratic opposition struggle for the victory of human rights and democracy over communist totalitarianism, the Whig post-dissident narrative, played a crucial role in it.

It had two fundamental levels: the domestic, focusing on the ‘return of democracy’, and the transnational, standing for a return

to liberal internationalism as the main paradigm of international politics, with human rights being a natural hyphen between the two. Simultaneously, 1989 represented a major milestone in the evolving Western global doctrine of human rights. In their prevalently liberal interpretation, human rights became, after World War II, an inseparable part of Western political vocabulary and the core of political identities in all major mainstream political trends of the Western world. It was underpinned by an evolutionary story locating the birthplace of human rights in eighteenth century Western Europe – in particular France – and North America and the French and American revolutions. It stressed their positive evolution despite all odds and totalitarian challenges, and the major milestones of the post-war development were naturally the Universal Declaration in 1948, making human rights a principle of international relations, and, importantly, the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which stood for the decisive transfer of human rights from a declarative level onto the agenda of international law. The peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe were then perceived also as human rights revolutions, strengthening considerably the legitimacy of the Western human rights story and Western-style liberal democracy. The struggle for human rights in communist Eastern Europe waged by organizations such as Charter 77, KOR, or various Helsinki committees was an important part of this development and thus also an inevitable element in the formation of a democratic political identity in the new democracies of the region after 1989 and of its historical genealogy. The *narrative of dissent* became now effectively the backbone of the post-1989 liberal democratic *narrative of democracy*.

However, if internationally the 1989 democratic revolutions have been portrayed as the victory of human rights politics and civil society's struggle for democratization, on the ground they were often experienced and interpreted as the rise of the nation against an unpatriotic or foreign communist power. These pictures and emotions were building, among other things, on the national memory imagery that had been revived in the samizdat historical propaganda for more than a decade. Not just democracy but independence and national historical sovereignty too were the results of the democratization

struggle. National democratic and national emancipatory symbols such as national flags (without the communist heraldic additions), national anthems and popular national songs, references to great national traditions and freedom struggles, and the like played a primary mobilization role in the events in Budapest, Bratislava or Bucharest. The popular slogans and requests in the streets of these and other cities during the '1989 autumn of nations' did not, at first, seem to collide at all with those in the programmes of democratization movements, that of the 'return to Europe', the 'struggle for human rights' or the renewal of the 'democratic state and the rule of law'.

Yet there was a lot of caution vis-à-vis the masses in the street from the leaders of the non-violent revolution as well as a lot of fear of the surge of nationalist and ethnic passions. In most historical accounts of 1989 dealing with the relationship between the forming post-dissident political elite (the post-Solidarity camp, OF/VPN, the Hungarian Alliance of Free Democrats–Hungarian Liberal Party abbreviated as SZDSZ) and the mercurial and unpredictable masses on the streets, real or imagined, we read of a cautiousness, bordering on obsession, concerning the potential for excesses of democracy to destroy the non-violent, legalist and negotiated character of the regime change. As a result of the apparent demophobia of the nascent liberal elites, there are many examples from the early transition period of *anti-populist* and *anti-authoritarian* mobilization where the post-dissidents played a prominent role. These examples abound: for instance, Adam Michnik and the *Gazeta Wyborcza* in Wałęsa's case during the 1990 presidential election; the SZDSZ obsession with the populist and nationalist threat exemplified by the comeback of Horthy-like symbolism, which was vehemently criticized by prominent post-dissident liberals such Miklós Szabó, György Konrád or Gaspár Miklós Tamás; or the anti-Mečiar sentiments of both the Czech and Slovak post-dissident liberals.

In all these countries the danger of populism, of the unpredictable whims of the masses and the possible manipulation of them by dexterous and demagogic politicians became a major political concern of the emerging liberal elite, giving rise to a local variant of the language of *liberal anti-populism*, a handy instrument of

differentiation between ‘us liberal democrats’ and ‘them, populist anti-democrats’ (Marchart 2017). The question is what was there first? Populism and integral nationalism as a real danger to the newly born democracies or liberal anti-populism evoking the monster?

This liberal anti-populism in East-Central Europe was fed by the dissident and opposition conceptual repertoire, particularly that of *anti-totalitarianism* and *civil society* serving as a basic element for most narrativizations of post-communist democracy. In its emphatically binary structure, the anti-totalitarian discourse supported by the Popperian concept of open society and its enemies tended to portray the diverse reality in terms of totalitarian theory: totalitarian dictatorship versus democracy, lawless state (*Unrechtsstaat*) versus the rule of law and respect for human rights, open versus closed society.

No wonder, then, that the *totalitarian imaginary* very soon overshadowed the politics of historical compromise that characterized the 1989 negotiated and non-violent revolutions. Before the first all-around democratic elections in Czechoslovakia in June 1990, when suddenly the ex-dissident leaders of the Czech Civic Forum and the Slovak VPN realized that the still functioning and materially well-equipped Communist Party machine could actually fare quite well in the election (Suk 2000), the ‘national reconciliation’ rhetoric of the Velvet Revolution swiftly changed to an anti-communist crusade serving itself with the language of Cold-War *liberal anti-totalitarianism*. Its main concern was not a concrete vision of democracy but the fight against the enemies of democracy.

Such enemies might have been everywhere. All the more important then was the divide that the liberal *anti-totalitarianism* started to dig from within the liberal democratic camp. Following the dissident analyses of totalitarian or post-totalitarian order from the 1980s, it was clear to the new political elite that the formal constitutional regime was one thing, but another and more troublesome thing was the mentality of the population, the *homo sovieticus*, A. Zinoviev’s notion being used especially in the Polish liberal discourse (in the Czech context the concept of a ‘communist mentality’ was used more often). The main characteristics were declared

to be the collectivist mindset and a deficit of individualism and of the ability to make use of political and civic rights. These perceptions emerged very early on, not only in journalism but in the social sciences too, as one of the main heuristic tools explaining the civilizational and cultural lag, as potential transformation hurdles towards a 'standard' Western society. (Smolar 1993, Sztomka 1991, 1993, 1996).

This had clear links to the post-dissident notion of civil society, which became ubiquitous in the early post-communist context. Civil society as a foundational precondition of functioning democracy and thus of its building and cultivation became one of the main preoccupations of transitology scholars, who tended to use it in a very normative way, against which the empirical reality and thus, as a rule, the 'weakness' of civil society in post-communism was measured. It was widely used by the post-dissident actors such as Havel or Michnik, and in no less normative a way, but with much greater political impact. They were well aware that the 'dissident civil society' and the post-communist civil society were two different things. Yet, if in the dissident times they portrayed dissent as 'one tenth of the iceberg' of the supposedly flourishing independent life of society at large, now they lamented the post-communist social atomization, which made it very clear that civil society autonomous of the state – beyond the anti-communist protest movement that naturally disappeared along with its main target – did not really exist or did not develop fast enough. Not only did the myth of civil society as united, anti-political (or at least non-ideological) and supportive of radical reform dissipate very quickly, but the perils to political and economic reform that post-communist society unleashed, teeming supposedly with intolerance, xenophobia, undemocratic and authoritarian tendencies, excessive materialism and a lack of civic virtues, became the primary target of their criticism (Smolar 1996).

Additionally, in as early as 1990–91, the first 'wild lustrations' started to appear. It was a very painful process, especially for the so-called democratic camp, when secret police materials proving the collaboration of various newly-minted democratic politicians started to pop up, thus putting in doubt, to some extent, the anti-totalitarian legitimacy of the 'democrats'. In other words, it was

becoming clear that in more or less all parties and movements there were not only former communists but also former secret police collaborators.

The response of the emerging liberal democratic camp was to stress strong liberal constitutionalism – institutionalizing the *liberal distrust* (Rosanvallon 2008) towards untamed or immature democracy – and a turn toward liberal *politics of history*. This involved a broad variety of measures from rehabilitations, restitutions, the symbolic renaming of public spaces, new research institutions and so on, up to the *lustrations*, the most controversial and most symbolic element of the early liberal *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* politics in East-Central Europe. An emphasis on the politics of history based on notions of totalitarianism, clearly delineating good from evil in the recent past, has never been a matter of national conservative governments only, although they tend to claim so today. Civic education through history based on liberal anti-totalitarian idiom was present in the countries we are dealing with from the early 1990s on.

It is at this point that the really interesting part of liberal anti-totalitarianism's conceptual history started. Here, the notion of 'totalitarianism' or rather that of 'post-totalitarian residuum' went through a radical semantic reconfiguration within the post-oppositional camp (Wciślik 2015). It became clear that the most malicious totalitarian danger was not with the communists or post-communists: In their case it was clear that they were the heirs of the totalitarian party; the danger was visible and could be called by name. The treacherously dangerous totalitarian residuum started to be searched for within the post-opposition camp itself along with the sharpening of the political struggle – in Poland with the so-called 'war at the top' in 1990, in Czechoslovakia with the first general lustration draft-law coming to the parliament in spring 1991. The various groupings within the same camp started to recognize or at least label each other mutually as the potential totalitarian danger.

In Poland within the left-liberal part of the post-Solidarity camp, the main danger was not very surprisingly found to be ethno-nationalism, the *nemesis* of the KOR opposition since its very beginning. Adam Michnik was one of the most vocal proponents

of the notorious ‘refrigerator theory’ of communism. Communism froze but did not destroy the old right-wing totalitarian nationalism of *endecja* and the dogmatic political clericalism. Once the communist refrigerator collapsed, the danger of national, clerical or moralist fundamentalism reappeared and received a powerful impetus, becoming perhaps the most important threat to the nascent liberal democratic regime (Michnik 1998, Boueyeur 2007). In contrast, the camp around the Kaczyński brothers’ Centre Agreement (PC; Porozumienie Centrum) in the early 1990s countered with the theory of the red and pink conspiracy, especially after the abrupt fall of ‘their’ (Jan Olszewski’s) government. The Kaczyński brothers could not argue that the Round Table Talks themselves were a conspiracy as they took part in them as well; nevertheless, they could criticize their political and economic consequences. They were surfing on a radical anti-communist wave, renewing the old suspicion of ‘residual communism’ among the former revisionists and waving the black legend of Magdalenka, insinuating that the 1989 Round Table Agreement was in fact nothing else but a deal between the Communists, such as Kiszczak and Kwasniewski, and the residual communists such as Michnik, Kuroń and Geremek. So, from this point of view there was no doubt where the *residual totalitarianism* rested (Kurski-Semka 1992, Kurczewski 2009, Wciślik 2015). The speedily evolving animosity within the post-Solidarity and post-oppositional spectrum subsided somewhat, albeit only temporarily, after the 1993 elections, which were won by the post-communists.

In Hungary and later in independent Slovakia, the situation was slightly different due to the victory in the first democratic elections of the national populists of the MDF (a post-opposition party too, in fact) and, in 1992, of Mečiar’s Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS; Hnutí za demokratické Slovensko). Nevertheless, everywhere in East Central Europe the conceptual and semantic structures with dissident genealogy such as anti-politics, civil society, and liberal anti-totalitarianism and anti-populism served as the basis of the anti-populist political mobilization and, to a great extent, framed the struggle within public political discourse in the early 1990s. The Hungarian post-dissident liberals launched a thorough

criticism of MDF's populist nationalism and in particular its radical ethno-nationalist streams, that represented for them the danger of the 'comeback of the Horthy era' (Laczó 2015). In Slovakia after the rise of Mečiar to power in 1992–98, the liberal opposition, both post-dissident as well as post-communist, served itself with steady references to the Velvet Revolution, the need to return to its legacy and restrain Mečiarist national populism from diverting the country away from its path to a civilized Europe.

Political configuration mattered, which is especially illustrative in those cases where communist successor parties had returned to power, that is, in Poland in 1993 and in Hungary in 1994. The reaction here was the formation of new conservative political entities: Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS; Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność) in Poland (which however included many who would in the future fight on the 'liberal front' against the national Catholic conservatism of PiS) and Fidesz, with a new political face turning from liberal to national conservative after 1994. For part of the Polish Right, the post-communist electoral victory, reasserted even later by the election of the post-communist President Alexander Kwaśniewski, was a corroboration of the betrayed revolution thesis, whose most popular symbol became the Magdalenka talks in early 1989. As a reaction to the victories of the communist successor parties, the nascent conservative Right in both countries developed unifying programmes based on powerful critiques of the negotiated revolutions. Fidesz, which had quite a critical stance to it from the very beginning, started to question the character of the post-1989 transformation and called for a 'second revolution'. Like the post-communist Left, they too appealed to the 'losers of the transition', yet not to the impoverished working strata but to the middle classes. In their eyes, it was this true embodiment of the values of patriotism and self-reliance that continued to be victimized after 1989 thanks also to the neoliberal shock therapy unleashed by the so-called Bokros package in 1995. The restoration of the security and status of the Hungarian bourgeoisie became central to Fidesz's new political vision of 'civic-bourgeois (*polgári*) Hungary' (Bozóki 2005, Fowler 2004). In Poland, the AWS, after it took power in 1997, advanced

a new phase of politics of history aimed at finishing the unfinished revolution of 1989. That included the first attempt, albeit abortive, to introduce mass-scale lustrations, and the establishment in 1999 of the first Institute of National Memory in the region. After the disintegration of AWS while still in power and a further electoral victory for the post-communists in 2001, the *idée fixe* of unfinished revolution was taken over by the Kaczyńskis' PiS party, the rising power of national conservatism (Mark 2010, Mark et al 2015).

Significantly, in Czechia, the post-dissident differentiation followed a similar form and conceptual repertoire yet had a different content and thus also different outcomes. Václav Klaus and his conservative liberal camp, including ex-dissidents such as Václav Benda and dissident exiles such as Václav Bělohradský, argued that the post-Chartist anti-political politics of Havel, the 'third-way' programme of gradual economic transformation, the international idealism of Havel and ex-dissidents like Jiří Dienstbier in foreign policy, was all nothing but 'generic leftism', significant enough, as Charter 77 was, after all, full of ex-reform communists. Thus, in their eyes, the legacy of anti-politics threatened to divert the country from the liberal democratic transition back to the totalitarian abyss. In contrast, Havel, Dienstbier, and the Civic Movement (OH; *Občanské hnutí*) party representing the social liberal camp argued that it was the neoliberal market and privatization dogmatism implemented by Klaus and his party as well as the trust in authoritarian right-wing precepts à la General Pinochet that were threatening to destroy the young liberal democracy – it was supposedly nothing but 'Bolshevism inside out', as Dienstbier put it (Kopeček 2011).

The major cleavage in Czech post-dissident politics in the 1990s was between the two liberal camps. These shared similar liberal nationalist references centred around Masaryk, the First Republic (the golden age of Czechoslovak liberal democracy) and the Czech liberal tradition in a broad sense (Auer 2004). Klaus himself was rather reluctant to adhere closely to Czech liberal tradition, yet his cultural political references were unmistakably nationalist as, increasingly, were the politics of his party especially towards the end of the 1990s (Gjuričová 2008). Moreover, within the fairly ethnically

homogenous nation-state and with the ‘Slovak question’ being effectively solved with the dissolution of the federation, the ‘national question’, in contrast to the other three Visegrád neighbours, did not offer such promising reservoir for political mobilization.

Seemingly paradoxically, in both cases, Czech and Slovak, the political mobilization against the nascent party regimes, where the conservative liberals around Klaus and Mečiar’s national populists held political hegemony, was worded in the post-dissident language of ‘civil society’. If in Hungary and Poland it was the post-dissident anti-communist conservatives who were the early adherents of the ‘second revolution’ finishing the one started in 1989, in Czechoslovakia and the successor states it was largely the post-dissident liberals. In Slovakia, the liberal-conservative ‘civil society’, where the former dissidents played an important though far from exclusive role, referred to 1989 as unfinished business in its mobilization against Mečiar’s rule, which was built on an uncanny mixture of red (communist) and black (populist-*hudák*) nationalism (Đurašković 2016). In Czechia, it was Havel who was playing with the topic of the second revolution already at the beginning of the 1990s and later again at the turn of the century, dissatisfied as he was with the course the democratic transformation had taken. Starting with his confrontational Rudolfinum speech in 1997 lamenting the ‘post-communist morass’ in the country and blaming the Klausian neoliberal transformation, he grew increasingly critical towards the transition and state of democracy at home and in Central Europe, in general speaking often about mafia capitalism and invoking, not least in his 2006 memoirs, the need for a second revolution that would settle accounts not with communism, but post-communism (Znoj 2015).

The politics of civil society as against ossified party structures and business interests, so powerful in Czech *and* Slovak politics, was seen by critics such as Václav Bělohradský as detrimental anti-political impulses within democratic politics, because instead of mobilizing for a political cause, it mobilized against politics at large (Bělohradský 2000). What Milan Znoj calls the ‘moral populist style’ of Havel’s politics (Znoj 2015) indeed gave rise to a tradition of politics of moral outrage in Czech and partly perhaps in Slovak

politics as well. Both have seen repeated appearances of broad civil society protest movements formed at certain critical moments (following the so-called 1998 oppositional agreement in Czechia or after the 2018 murder of journalist Ján Kuciak in Slovakia) that expressed frustration with the current state of the political situation and the existing political representation. These have produced a strong tradition of *centrist populist* political formations in both countries (Věci Veřejné or ANO in Czechia, SMER in Slovakia) which, from time to time, come to power with outspoken criticism of the political class's corruption and a programme to cleanse the political system of it, but without casting doubt on liberal democratic principles as a whole. Significantly enough, the notion of totalitarianism and of the totalitarian residuum was mainly used by actors standing for the liberal transformation and defending it rather than by its challengers (Pehe, forthcoming).

To summarize, by the early 1990s alternative narratives of democratic and national-liberation revolution in 1989 had started to build up in the post-opposition camp as a result of the growing heat of political struggle. The topos of a revolution unfinished or stolen appeared in various forms, including the Round Table mechanism and the dirty deal between communist and liberal elites, the harsh economic liberal or neoliberal policies that betrayed the original ethos of the dissident 'moral civil society', and so on. Yet these differentiations had not yet split the political class into two mutually irreconcilable camps. What is more, many of those speaking about the need to 'finish' the job of the 1989 revolution, if not a second revolution, in fact belonged to the liberal and liberal conservative camp, with Havel being perhaps the most conspicuous example. Many others, who later became the symbols of 'national populism' – in Poland for instance the Kaczyński brothers, Antoni Macierewicz or Jarosław Gowin felt to be part of the broad, post-opposition camp and the liberal democracy-building process (Sawczuk 2018). A somewhat different situation existed in Hungary, where Fidesz had already in the mid-1990ies embarked on a fairly harsh criticism of the liberal transition. All in all, a big chunk of the contentious repertoire of the future culture war was present. Nevertheless, the various post-dissident

and post-opposition formations still shared their main goals, such as a market economy, democratic transformation and integration into NATO and the EC/EU – a powerful tool disciplining most of the political players. They also shared, in broad contours, the post-1989 narrative of democracy, portraying the current state as a result of the Helsinki effect and the struggle of the democratic opposition for human rights, freedom and democracy. It was the achievement of these major goals in 2004 that would act as a game changer.

### **National Conservative Backlash and the Culture Wars since the 2000s**

Around the turn of the century, politics in the countries of East-Central Europe underwent an important cultural reconfiguration. With the transition dynamics weakening, the chance of EU accession fairly high and the ascendancy of national conservative forces all over the region, a strong criticism of the ‘liberal consensus’ of the early post-communist era evolved. The criticism of the liberal transition era, however, was expressed not so much in social, but rather in cultural and symbolic terms. According to Ivan Krastev, the neoliberal transformation of the 1990s in connection with the EU accession process excluded, for a decisive time period, a great part of the social and economic conflict from the political struggle, thus opening a space for political mobilization based on symbolic and identity issues (Krastev 2007). This corroborated the distinctly anti-elitist and increasingly anti-liberal narrative of democracy and of the betrayal of the post-dissident liberal elites, which was there in basic forms since the beginning of the 1990s.

The different kinds of *narratives of democracy* from within the post-oppositional camp started to emulate the model of intra-democratic, agonistic struggle resulting from the ‘eternal’ attempts of modern democratic societies to achieve internal unity by eliminating or taming its formidable internal threat. The history of democracy in the modern age is a history of constant polarization. Building on Claude Lefort’s understanding of democracy as disembodied political forms divided in its symbolic self-representation and on François Furet’s ‘Lefortian’ history of the French Revolution, Pierre Rosanvallon

elaborated a binary model of two distinctive conceptions or visions of democracy: *voluntarist* (radical democratic, populist) and *rationalist* (liberal), two constitutive rival pathologies of modern democracy between which French history in modern times permanently oscillated (Rosanvallon 2006). As an ideal-typical model drawing on the ‘revolutionary democracy’ introduced by the French Revolution to most of continental Europe (in contrast with the English ‘evolutionary’ model), it can help us to understand better the bifurcation of democratic narratives in East-Central Europe during the culture wars period, with its central notion of popular sovereignty.

The French Revolution made the ‘sovereign people’ a life-giving principle of modern democracy. Yet its problem lies in the representation. It is an imperious principle because all power must flow from it. But it is also utterly vague, for ‘the people’ is always imagined as a whole, an anonymous collectivity. What results is a steady ‘tension between the order of the symbolic and that of the real’.

Voluntarism in Rosanvallon’s sense stands for the urge to heal the division between the real and the symbolic and to realize the promises of popular sovereignty. It is the resumption of the Jacobin drive for violent fusion and unity that the French Revolution sparked in the history of universal suffrage. Seen from this point of view, the institutionalization of a pluralistic and divided society is not seen primarily as a mechanism for managing social-political differences but as a plebiscitarian urge reviving the dream of popular fusion. Rationalism, in contrast, is a vision of scientific politics and rational design of governance available to the elite that strives to pre-empt violent social conflict, usually by transfer of authority to experts in management, substituting the sovereignty of the people for the sovereignty of reason, justice and law. It is a response to frequent voluntarist, violent excesses in history driven by the ‘dogma of popular sovereignty’ and its ruthless search for unity, a response no less utopian and dangerous. The virtue of avoiding terror comes linked to constitutive vices such as the empowerment of elites and the acceptance of hierarchy, and is always haunted by the spectre of depolitization.

The rationalist and voluntarist visions of democracy – the dream of rational government and the calls for popular sovereignty – and

their various historical stages and metamorphoses have found their current embodiment in the counter-positions of anti-totalitarian liberalism (victorious after 1989, taking anti-terrorist shape after 9/11) and its populist alternatives (post-Marxist or nationalist and nativist) (Moyn 2006). Both are the grandchildren of modern democracy and of impulses reaching back to its revolutionary beginnings at the end of the eighteenth century. In Central and Eastern Europe both are simultaneously the children of the 1989 democratic revolutions supposedly bringing these nations back from the 'totalitarian' aberration instigated in 1917 to the liberal democratic path.

Rosanvallón's ideal-typical model was developed mainly on the example of the struggle for democracy in modern French history. It gives us a vantage point from which to see the divergent post-dissident *democratic narratives* in East-Central Europe both in their sociological as well as representational forms. Metaphorically we can speak about rationalist and voluntarist periods in the post-1989 history of East Central Europe. The first stands for the time of liberal transformation after 1989 up to EU accession, an era in which the rationalist vision of democracy institutionalized liberal distrust to popular sovereignty. The later comes as a reaction to the first at the dawn of the new century in the form of radical democratic and populist (including national conservative) criticism in the name of the people and the unfulfilled promises of democratic self-determination.

The post-1989 liberal democratic transformation accompanied later by the process accession to the European Union was, indeed, largely elite-driven and an expert project (much less a democratic one) that involved very strong pedagogic, even paternalistic elements. After the breakdown of communism, which sometimes took the form of 'lawful' or 'constitutional revolutions' as in Hungary or Poland, a crucial role was ascribed to constitutionalism and the rule of law as a means of securing the transition to liberal democracy and a market economy. Moreover, a vision of the rule of law based on existing European and American constitutional developments along with human rights codifications had been widely understood not just as a vital part of the post-communist democratization but also

as an indispensable barrier against both a ‘Jacobin radicalization’ of the 1989 democratic revolutions and the authoritarian tendencies of charismatic transition politicians. Thus, independent and robust juridical institutions with the constitutional courts at the helm were established with the aim of immunizing – through a strict separation of powers and judicial review – the new democracies against any abuse of power.

Later on, during the EU accession process, there was a massive ‘outsourcing’ of much of the legislative work – which should have been the subject of political negotiation in the domestic parliaments – to the EU accession process. The implementation of the *acquis communautaire* was largely a bureaucratic and legislative, rather than a democratic procedure. In other words, the integration process entailed too many institutional and technical transfers and too little local democratic political deliberation. ‘EU membership was considered such a political priority in all candidate states that the laws were approximated without appropriate democratic deliberation and then justified as a historical necessity’ (Přibáň 2009: 350).

The national conservative backlash against the liberal constitutional pedagogy (Bucholc 2020) came very soon after 2004, the accession year. Yet ideologically it started to form much earlier, building upon the same anti-communist opposition and democratic activism credentials as that of the liberals representing the transition era. The best example in the region is Poland, where harsh criticism of the liberal 1990s had already been mounted by the turn of the century. A crucial role in the cultural-political formulation of the criticism was assigned to the reinterpretation of the 1989 Round Table Talks and their consequences, as we have already seen. In the eyes of the conservative politicians but also many less ambitious former local opposition activists, underground Solidarity members and so on, the historical compromise between the old communist and the new liberal elites led to historical amnesia, not only whitewashing the post-war history and playing down communist crimes in Poland but actually betraying the legacy of the anti-communist opposition and thus of the nation as a whole. As a consequence, calls to cleanse the new-born Polish democracy

of the sinister effects of the compromise resulted, after 2003, in a project to replace the ‘Third Polish Republic’ (established in 1989) with a new, ‘Fourth Republic’, a central part of the political programme of the Kaczyński’s brothers and PiS, which came to power in 2005–2007.

Symptomatic of the Polish but also other cases was that the conservative turns after 2000 were very often preceded by a semantic turn to the centre-right in public political discourse (Matyja 2015). This turn was framed by a new generation of right-wing critics of the 1990s *transition liberalism* and its numerous exclusions, which bred significant resentment in society. On the one hand, the new conservatives represented a challenge in the name of collective identity and traditions to the modernizing liberal hegemonic discourse about transition. However, they also opposed the inborn, popular anti-modernist traditionalism used by the early populist opponents of the liberal transformation in the previous decade. Their starting point for a thorough critique of the post-communist political order, the ‘democracy of periphery’, was the fact that it took the form of its Western liberal democratic model but did not manage to fill the façade with appropriate content intrinsic to the particular society (Krasnodębski 2003).

In Poland, a country with a significant and developed tradition of conservative political thought, the powerful conservative critique of *transition liberalism* contained three major elements that I want to mention here. First, its language was based on a strong attachment to a positively defined historical memory and national continuity, defining itself through contrast with the alleged *politics of the thick line* over the past that stood for the ‘original sin’ of Polish democracy after 1989 (Puttkamer 2014). Second, the newly established historical consciousness should have led to a restoration of historical subjectivity and thus state and national sovereignty overcoming the status of historical objects that characterized the small nations of East-Central Europe in the twentieth century. There was a positive institutional component stressing the need for a strong, functional state as against the liberal philosophy of a minimal state, which supposedly resulted in the practical weakness of state institutions and

corruption (e. g. the Rywin affair). And lastly, a pronounced reversion to the republican, communitarian understanding of society, in contrast to the liberal, individualist conceptions of the body politic, provided the conservative intellectuals' interpretation with powerful historical examples, not only from the early modern Polish nobility republic but also in the Solidarity movement, thus claiming the legacy of dissidence taken in the broad sense (Brier 2009, Trencsényi 2018: 279–282).

Hungarian conservative thought too, though much less robust and differentiated than Polish one, started to exert increasing influence in the form of a radical critique of the liberal transformation from the early 2000s on. With important breeding grounds at several Budapest universities such as Pázmány and Corvinus and think-tanks such as Századvég, their criticism has been, in contrast to Poland, less engaged with identity issues, religion and politics of morality, and more with reaffirmation of the importance of a strong state and political leadership capable of formulating and defending the 'national interest' as opposed to the liberal conception of minimal state and consensus politics with cosmopolitan implications. Their critique of liberal transitional institutionalism was tied to a rejection of the liberal stress on individual rights and freedoms, which was to be replaced by a system committing individuals through patriotic duties to the national community (Buzogány and Varga 2019).

The first Polish national conservative attempt to disrupt the liberal political and discursive hegemony failed in 2007, but it was followed by a new force in 2010, Viktor Orbán and his first election landslide, joined by PiS again in 2015. Since then, the rise of the powerful national conservative backlash against liberal democracy in the region has become one of the major sites of global struggle over the democratic imagination in the Western world. We are, however, interested here primarily in the parallel genealogy of the two ideal-typical *narratives of democracy* that have finally established themselves as two distinctive, competing cultural-political projects in East-Central Europe. First is the *liberal democratic* or Whig post-dissident one stressing the dissident origins of post-communist

democracy, its anti-totalitarian credentials, and its vision of the Europeanization/Westernization of the societies in question, emphasizing liberal individualism, human rights, active citizenry and civil society. Second is the *national conservative* narrative, similarly anti-totalitarian and claiming its origins in anti-communist opposition but putting markedly more stress on the historical agency of the *demos* as against the elites, on collective rights, national interests, autonomous local cultural and religious values, national solidarity and the resistance capacity of the national rather than civil society. The two ideal-typical narratives surely do not represent the whole post-communist discourse on recent history or the story of democracy's rebirth out of the struggle with communist/totalitarian dictatorship. But they do characterize the main political cleavage in terms of the diverging genealogies or narratives of democracy during the period of culture war.

Ideologically, and very often also personally, they are both rooted in the human and civic rights struggle of the democratic opposition of the 1970s and 1980s. Both share to some extent the framework of post-Cold War *liberal anti-totalitarianism*, especially its focus on the 'enemies' of democracy, be they communists, fascists, nationalists, religious fundamentalists, cosmopolitans, migrants or others. Over the course of the political and electoral struggle of the past two decades, however, they evolved into two very different visions of the past, the present and the future of democracy, giving concrete historical shape to what Rosanvallon identified as the inevitable, agonistic counter-position between rationalist (liberal) and voluntarist (populist) elements in the history of modern democracy.

Symptomatically, the national conservative illiberal turn around the turn of the century was first voiced in the cultural-historical idiom of post-communism: a qualitatively new *politics of memory* and, along with it, a new historically informed notion of patriotism. It strove to promote certain historical memories and to incorporate them into civic political education. With the establishment of Institutes of National Memory in Poland and Slovakia and a similar institution in the Czech Republic in 2007, the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, the concept of 'national memory'

or the ‘memory of the nation’ completed its long-term metamorphosis. From a dissident emancipation tool in the 1980s, it has become a state-supported civic education project that stressed the voices of the victims and of the resisters to communist rule, while dissidence alone has been usually reinterpreted as a form of resistance movement. The victims’ testimonies were ascribed the highest authenticity, in contrast to those supposedly ‘tainted’ by the former regime’s mentality. Typically, the founding of these institutions has been supported by a wide range of former dissidents who gave them moral authority and historical authenticity. Many of them, in the meantime, horrified by the illiberal turn of national conservatism became a clear voice of liberal democratic defence and thus anathema to the new national conservative establishment.

Although claiming novelty in contrast to the allegedly absent politics of history in the liberal transition period, in many ways the new conservative politics of memory has been a continuation of the 1990s’ post-dissident liberal or liberal-conservative politics of history, often even personal. In terms of its conceptual framework, the national conservative politics of history adapted and used most of the canonical paradigms of its liberal-conservative predecessor, such as anti-totalitarianism, the search for post-totalitarian residuum, a nation-centred historical imagination and a focus on the enemies of democracy. It embodied the desire to complete the ‘unfinished revolutions’ (Mark 2010), which was common to most post-communist countries in East-Central Europe, not just to Hungary and Poland and which had a very significant European dimension in the effort to raise, with the help of EU institutions, the memory of Gulag to the same level as the memory of the Holocaust (Dujisin 2021).

Beyond that, however, Fidesz and PiS’s rewriting of the written and unwritten rules of the ‘liberal consensus’ and liberal democracy, and thus also of the Whig liberal post-dissident democratic narrative, adopted a systematic character, reminiscent in many ways of such illiberal regimes as Erdoğan’s Turkey or Putin’s Russia rather than other countries in East-Central Europe. As the current national conservative ideological and social-political projects in the region

are analysed in the following chapters, here I restrict myself to a short reference to their adaptation of the dissident legacy and a few of its crucial concepts that we have followed in this chapter. Similar to many other elements in their political and social practice, which subvert but do not completely dismiss the basic features of liberal democracy, here too the national conservative challenge to the liberal take on dissidence is about re-signifying and re-appropriating the existing framework, not repudiating it.

This obviously concerns dissident anti-totalitarianism. If the post-dissident liberal Left after 1989 has seen the *totalitarian temptation* in the authoritarian tendencies of some transition politicians and, above all, in the populist voluntarist drive towards national unity, the national conservatives re-signify the concept, radically pointing out the affinity and thus totalitarian implications of both communism and liberalism. A prominent example is philosopher and politician Ryszard Legutko, one of the most influential, politically as well as ideologically, conservative thinkers behind PiS's second rise to power (Behr 2021). In his widely received book *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (2016), he summarized, in a way, the radical conservative criticism of the transition period which accumulated in the last two decades. The affinity between communism and liberalism, the two regimes stemming from the same root, from the same Promethean inclination of the modern human being, is indeed taken here as the general vantage point. Legutko's comparison is not an equivalence as he acknowledges that liberal democracy lacks the brutality of communism. However, it presents both regimes as expansive worldviews and utopian projects, proclaiming themselves the final boundaries of humanity's aspirations, ideological projects aiming to destroy traditional values in families, communities, religions and nations in order to build a new political social order.

In other cases, the post-dissident concepts are not just re-signified, but challenged frontally in its prevailing liberal interpretation to be reappropriated for different meaning. This relates, for instance, to the concept of human rights, the corner stone of the Whig post-dissident narrative of democracy. 'Human rightism' is portrayed as

synonymous with liberal elitism and, similar to the ‘gender ideology’, ‘juristocracy’ and other liberal tricks for allegedly circumventing democratic principles, criticised as fundamentally flawed and undemocratic. At the same time, the national conservatives claim, in a Christianist tone, that they also defend human rights, not those of allegedly cosmopolitan elites or insignificant yet culturally aggressive minorities but those of the majority population, the human rights of families, the religious rights of the majority population and, last but not least, the right of the national majority to national self-determination. The radical conservative reconfiguration of human rights discourse has a particular gendered and biopolitical aspect, conspicuously downgrading women’s rights, sexual minorities’ rights and gender equality in favour of the rights and normative patterns of traditional heterosexual families (Grzebalska – Peťo 2018). Yet it is important to bear in mind that these re-framings, as much as they are certainly inspired by transnational conservative activism, draw also on a considerable cultural and intellectual repertoire of national and religious human rights discourse present in the anti-communist opposition of the 1980s. Moreover, the gendered style of human rights discourse ‘vernacularization’ by the dissidents before 1989 (Brier 2017) and its reproduction in the liberal-conservative 1990s again indicates more continuities rather than discontinuities with the national conservative era.

A similar challenge and reconfiguration has been witnessed in the post-dissident notion of civil society. In the eyes of today’s conservative critics of transition liberalism, the civil society sphere, particularly those parts with strong international ties that previously served as an important breeding ground for liberal expert elites – academic, political or administrative – with cosmopolitan and pro-EU leanings, has created a double standard with regard to how the *political* is expressed by the elites. It was supposedly driven by a ‘post-political’ idiom, in which ‘the people’ were left devoid of their political voice due to the liberal expertization and judicialization of politics. That is why the political rhetoric of Orbán, Kaczyński and others of their stripe emphasizes – in an effort to regain the ‘political vernacular’ – issues of national sovereignty, national traditions and culture,

democratic self-determination and autonomy as against the diktat of the cosmopolitan elites both at home and in Brussels. They frontally attack the supposedly alien civil society organizations serving as agents of the transnational lobby. Yet, it does not mean a refutation of ‘civil society’ as a concept, but rather following a ‘dual strategy’ of negative pressure against those civil society actors perceived as hostile to the national conservative project and the positive promotion of those linked to the ruling party and its fundamental values (Bill 2020). Civil society, symbolically reconnecting – particularly strongly in the Polish case – to the ‘oppositional civil society’ under communist rule, is reclaimed from liberal elite capture and the ‘EU ideology’, as stated repeatedly by sociologist Piotr Gliński, later Minister of Culture in the PiS government from 2015 (2011). He was building on the premises elaborated previously by conservative think tanks such as Arcana (Ryszard Legutko, Andrzej Nowak) regarding the existence of an organically good civic energy that is stifled by the negligence, if not betrayal, of the liberal political class, which impeded popular social activity in an effort to keep its hegemonic control.

Moreover, the movement-like conceptualization of the party, particularly fitting for Fidesz, gave birth to the concept of the right-wing reconquista of civil society well before its rise to power. This is exactly what happened both in Hungary and Poland. After losing the parliamentary elections against the socialists in 2002, Orbán, who was trying to pre-empt intraparty criticism, turned to civil society to counter the election defeat, spurring a nationwide movement, the so-called Civic Circles. These brought together various groups from a mainly right-wing oriented, Christian, urban middle-class milieu desperate at the repeated return of ‘post-communists’ to power. While following the patterns of civil society activism and creating parallel structures in various areas of cultural and social life, their main aim was to challenge not only the political power of the left-liberal government coalition but, above all, its discursive hegemony on the transition era (Greskovits 2020). ‘The Civic Circles thus presented a fascinating instance of Orbán’s ability to recycle political ideas rooted in liberal democratic dissident culture in a completely

different context' (Kovács and Trencsényi 2020: 406). Similarly, it was the close collaboration between the Law and Justice party and civil society actors such as the *Gazeta Polska* clubs after 2007, highly instrumental, for instance, in the organisation of demonstrations and monthly commemorations of the Smoleńsk disaster after 2010, that paved the way for its return to power in 2015 (Ślarzyński 2018).

## Conclusion

The *legacies of dissidence* shaped conceptually and symbolically the post-communist political cultures in East-Central Europe, feeding them with both fundamental stories serving as foundational myths of the new democracies as well as a basic conceptual repertoire of how to think about democracy. Embodied in the perceived notion of *post-totalitarian residuum*, it also helped to create the fundamental cultural-political cleavage between the left-liberal and the national conservative post-oppositional political camps from the early 1990s on, which resulted eventually in the culture wars of the new century – a cleavage that proved to be quite fatal for the established constitutional order in some countries, such as Hungary and Poland, and everywhere sharpened political conflict to the edge of mortal combat.

In politics and culture, legacies matter. Yet they are not something instantly palpable. 'Legacies', in terms of ideas, concepts, imaginaries and practices, do not directly do something or cause something. Rather, legacies enable and contribute, making some decisions or ways of thinking more probable or convenient than others. They are 'building material' that needs to be developed in one way or another. The building material of the *narratives of democracy* and thus of the nascent democratic cultures in East-Central Europe after 1989 was, to a large extent, of dissident origin. Here we have tackled some of the most important building stones such as human rights and civil society, various reconfigurations of national identity, anti-totalitarianism and memory politics. There was nothing predetermined in how the legacies of dissidence would develop and influence the building of democracy after 1989. But there was nothing completely accidental either.

The truly successful populist, illiberal challengers to the ‘liberal consensus’ in the region are the ones that grew out of the 1990s liberal-conservative consensus. In other words, they are driven and sustained by resentment of liberal hegemony, real or perceived. But they build on the same liberal-conservative post-dissident matrix out of which the supposed liberal hegemony was raised; they adapt it to their new political programmes and cultural-political values. They are contenders from within the post-dissident family, not outside of it.

Legacies matter, but so do temporalities and coincidental political configurations – local, regional, European, global. Whereas there is much cultural and discursive ‘building material’ for illiberal counter-narratives of democracy in all of the region’s countries, only in Hungary and Poland has it ascended to completely challenge the liberal democratic mainstream. Elsewhere, in Czechia or Slovakia, but also in other countries in the region such as Romania or the Baltic republics, it did not. Why then has the situation in Czechia or Slovakia, so far, not followed the Hungarian and Polish examples despite the fact that both former countries are not short of formidable enough populist political forces? Why, despite the presence of not only heavy criticism of the liberal transformation but also calls for ‘second revolutions’ coming from important political actors, have we not so far encountered political projects similarly successful to PiS and Fidesz intent on the immediate replacement of liberal democracy and accompanied by a narrative of democracy countering the Whig post-dissident one? These are questions that will keep us busy in social and human sciences for some time to come. Some answers are attempted in the following chapters.

From the point of view of this study, we can preliminarily conclude that legacies are indeed important, for instance, the shared liberal nationalist background of most of the cultural-political streams in Czech dissent as well as major political actors after 1989. But accidental political constellations matter possibly even more. Neither of the two countries saw an early election victory among the communist successors, such as those in Poland and Hungary in 1993 and 1994 respectively, which – given the nature of the political system formation in the 1990s very different in each country – resulted in

an extremely dissimilar mode and logic to the political mobilization of the post-dissident conceptual repertoire. Whereas in Hungary and Poland the early calls for the 'second revolution' or for the finishing of the previous one came mainly from the conservative anti-communist corner, in Czechoslovakia and the successor states it was the post-dissident anti-communist liberals employing the post-dissident language of civil society mobilization. This gave birth to, among other things, an old-new tradition of centrist populism or civil society populism, which makes itself felt in the current political situation of both countries. In Czechia, it has resulted in the rise of concomitant centrist populist forces, the most powerful of which is Andrej Babiš's technocratic populist ANO movement, the country's political hegemon in recent years. But it has also led to a strange 'non-death' of mainstream liberal anti-communism and liberal discursive hegemony in the Czech media, feeding on the civil society mobilization against the 'former secret police agent' Babiš. Slovakia, after the long political hegemony of the socialist cum populist SMER party of Róbert Fico and the moral outrage caused by the political murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, has seen a comeback of powerful civil society mobilization against political corruption, with decisive results in both the presidential as well as parliamentary elections of 2019 and 2020.

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### 3/

## The Cultural Sociology of Hungarian National Conservatism

*Csaba Szaló*

The last decade was witness to the successive electoral breakthroughs of national conservative parties and the consolidation of Viktor Orbán's authoritarian democracy in Hungary. This text offers a cultural interpretation of Hungarian national conservative discourse, outlining how a set of interpretive communities was unified into a political community of Viktor Orbán's followers. My aim is more hermeneutical than explanatory; that is, it works toward the reconstruction of meanings that make Viktor Orbán's political authority comprehensible and acceptable for his allies as well as for his constituency.

The lasting support of the Orbán regime refers to more than expressions of social and individual interests; it is grounded in cultural structures of solidarity holding together his electorate and apparatus. Orbán's landslide victory in the 2010 election was prepared by the national conservative appropriation of civil society and the seizure of public culture after 2002. While in 2004 the referendum concerning double citizenship for minority Hungarians initiated by the national conservative opposition failed, it also manifested, besides the formation of a cultural cleavage, the continuing emergence of a new hegemony. In the years that have followed, the utopian narrative of liberation has been displaced by a national conservative narrative of protection.

Both electoral results and international media attention in the last decade demonstrate that the political image of Viktor Orbán has become well established in contemporary Hungarian and European public culture. In 2010, Orbán's party gained 68% of the parliamentary seats, and its right-wing alternative, the Jobbik movement (Movement for a Better Hungary), entered the National Assembly for the first time with 12%. By contrast, the first Orbán government

(1998–2002) was established with just 38% of the MPs representing Fidesz, forcing a coalition with the Independent Smallholder’s Party (FKgP; Független Kisgazdapárt) and the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF; Magyar Demokrata Fórum). While the overall proportion of MPs sharing national conservatism in 1998 was 59%, after the last elections, in 2018, their share was 79% (parlament.hu).

The current international public image of Viktor Orbán started to crystallize after his big electoral victory in 2010. Simultaneously, as the Hungarian prime minister took over the European Union’s rotating presidency in 2011, international media outrage erupted due to a new media law adopted by the Hungarian parliament that clawed back media freedoms. Contrary to Orbán’s previously cultivated public image as a pragmatic pro-European conservative from his first premiership (1998–2002), during the 2010s he became the ‘enfant terrible’ of the European Union. In the international media, he became identified with an anti-liberal project to reclaim national sovereignty and fundamentally change the nature of the European Union. His image was considerably shaped by praise for his political tactics, exemplified by border fences and transit zones, among right-wing political parties, movements and media throughout Europe and the United States. However, his recurring conflict with the European Parliament formed a public image around negative themes of dismantling checks and balances, extending state control over civil society and skewing the electoral process in his favour (Herman 2016, Cianetti et al. 2018). As far as Orbán framed his campaigns in populist terms, he was included into a broader global populist trend challenging liberal democracy (Müller 2017, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

This text conceives of Hungarian national conservatism as a manifestation of a historically specific discourse of political mobilization. Since normatively loaded cultural meanings, like ethical visions, can be explicitly stated and transmitted tacitly through nonreflective engagement in cultural practices, I will claim that this discourse of national solidarity performs a cultural transmission in which interpretive skills are just as important as frames of mind. Thus, instead of conceiving of Hungarian national conservatism as a gathering

of like-minded individuals, I intend to deal with the discourse as it is applied in particular social performances so as to achieve a fusion between speaker, audience and background culture (Alexander 2004). The specific role that the exposition of iconic verbal and visual images plays in the formation of interpretive communities will be emphasized via their performance examples.

To grasp the mobilizing potential of national conservatism in today's Hungary, I will need to consider its genealogy. This approach will also clarify what I mean by national conservatism in this text. The image of 'Christian Hungary' came into focus during the last phase of the First World War in 1918 as a core element of the political discourse that merged various secular political concerns with religious rhetoric advocating a national redemption (Hanebrink 2006: 59, Gyurgyák 2001: 301). At the core of national conservatism, one can find a moral vision of a Hungarian nation united against its external and internal enemies. This sense of war, entailing a threatening civil war, sets those believing in a 'Christian Hungary' against those who personify the 'other Hungary'. Through these means, the discourse of national conservatism can justify the exclusion of various kinds of others. When the Hungarian Kingdom was collapsing, the images and slogans of Christian Hungary primarily indicated a desire to expel Jews from the nation (Hanebrink 2018). Nowadays this inherent other Hungary is supposedly composed of liberals and supporters of 'alien beliefs'.

In what follows, my concern with understanding how the Orbán regime in Hungary achieved such strong legitimacy led me to focus on three phases in which the national conservative discourse was utilized and disseminated by political actors. In the first section, I examine approaches that national conservatives developed to re-politicize the subjective experience of existential situations. This exploration of moral politics illustrates that social policies promoting the conventional family, striving against 'gender ideology' and manifesting demographic anxieties receive coherent meaning through the nationalist narrative of historical struggle. The second part shows how the national conservative discourse articulates the relationship between personal experience, political stance and collective

action through a nationalist form of identity politics. The so-called refugee crisis provided the Orbán regime with a chance to perform a specific conservative meaning of state power. Hence, to switch from a post-communist narrative of an ‘unfinished revolution’ to a classic nationalist narrative of defending the nation against its external enemies. Finally, these efforts to establish a national conservative movement, state and society raise a series of questions about the Orbán regime’s claims of cultural legitimacy, which I address in the third part of this chapter. Altogether, interventions in the sphere of memory politics have been constitutive of Viktor Orbán’s broader strategy to reshape Hungarian public culture. By taking seriously how politically dramatized narratives of the past inform collective action, we can be well-positioned to decipher how activists’ concerns with self-understanding and recognition are related to shared cultural structures and the political economy.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Considerations**

The theoretical logic leading my interpretation of national conservatism is the following: The mask performers use during a ritual must be treated as the relevant object of inquiry regardless of whether these performers experience a role distance from these masks during or after these performances. What is more, we should not assume that the masks in which political actors perform their roles cannot influence the self-understanding of these actors in the long run.

My interpretive strategy is guided by cultural pragmatics in its accent on public events and performances for disclosing historically changing structures of meaning transmission. Consequently, my interpretation will be illustrated by Viktor Orbán’s speeches staged regularly in the specific setting of Bálványos Free Summer University and Student Camp. My reading of these public performances is explicatory, aiming to reveal various forms of preunderstanding assumed in the intended meaning effects of the cultural repertoire employed by the speaker. These implicit meanings will be treated as traces of various narratives and icons utilized to produce a coherent national conservative discourse to mobilize and unify political

collectivity. I claim that elements of discursive and visual meanings that are only referred to or hinted at in these speeches matter as much as those layers of meaning explicitly performed. Thus, the full engagement in particular interpretive communities, like those gathered in Tüsványos, presupposes a shared ability to decode implicit meanings located beyond the surface of Viktor Orbán's speeches.

For instance, as the government-financed campaign 'Against migrants and George Soros' in 2018 demonstrated, much of the performances of national-conservative cultural intermediaries took on a self-conscious dual addressivity, characteristic of subaltern counter-publics. These contrasting layers of (i) meanings generated for internal use and (ii) meanings oriented toward imagined onlookers can also be found in Orbán's speeches. The specificity of his performances at Tüsványos consists of their being addressed to interpretive communities of his followers. Thus, these performances offer a chance to access an atmosphere of cultural intimacy, an opportunity to retrieve those shared understandings and tensions of an off-stage discourse that are easily obscured by performances formatted for official circulation. However, this illumination of cultural intimacy does not disclose a hidden, essential national conservative coherence. Instead, Orbán's performances indicate a strategic fusion of various interpretive communities, a discursive strategy to gather together heterogeneous concerns.

The corpus analysed to provide illustrative examples contains all Viktor Orbán's speeches in the setting described above between 1993 and 2019. Specific, theoretically relevant themes are interpreted by reconstructing their various horizons of understanding (Schutz 1996, Reed 2011, Kögler 1999). Three horizons, conceived in a hermeneutical sense, are identified: The first is (a) the stage, that is, the performance itself, including the setting of its immediate performance. (b) The field designates those events and narratives which the interpretive community, including the speaker, the speech writers and the audience, are directly aware of. This horizon refers to the immediate understanding of the speech. In other words, this horizon refers to the cultural background of the shared lifeworld of those involved in understanding the speech. (c) The landscape

has to do with meanings that are not necessarily shared by those engaged in the interpretive community, either because they are not relevant to their immediate concerns or they disagree with the interpretation of another interpretive community. However, the most crucial aspect of this horizon is the requirement of achieving the appropriate distance to formulate critical interpretations.

The festival where Viktor Orbán's speeches have taken place each summer since 1990 is symptomatic in itself (*Prominoritate 2020*, *Oldtusvanyos 2015*, *Debreczeni 2019*, *Nagy-Vargha 2018*). Known as *Tusványos*, the festival takes place in the small town of Băile Tuşnad, located in Romania's Harghita county. Nevertheless, in terms of a Hungarian national conservative discourse, as a 'matter of truth', this event takes place in the Székely Land that lies in Transylvania. It was established by local Hungarian intellectuals from Transylvania and politicians from Fidesz interested in issues related to Hungarian minorities with close cooperation from the British Social Democratic Party (SDP). In the beginning, the festival avoided debates dealing with daily political issues and focused on a discussion of historical, economic and legal themes with scholars from Hungary, Romania and the United Kingdom; however, in the last decade, it became a prominent, ritualized meeting place for Hungarian national conservative interpretive communities.

For the last decade, Viktor Orbán has delivered his speech with the same arrangement. There are always the same persons on the stage. Viktor Orbán sits in the centre. On his right is Zsolt Németh, one of the founders of both Fidesz and the *Tusványos* festival. On the left side, one can find László Tőkés, a Calvinist priest and iconic Hungarian hero of the 1989 Romanian Revolution. It was Tőkés's open opposition to Ceauşescu's communist regime, resulting in the first demonstrations in Temesvár/Timişoara, which started the revolution. In 2019 Orbán began his speech by touching upon the last thirty years of Hungarian politics (Orbán 2019). One of his formulations ('We had to live in the last nine or ten years with a trowel in one hand, sword in the other. We had to build and fight at the same time') became viral for days within the oppositional cyberspace after someone discovered that the same formulation

had been used in a 1948 public speech by Mátyás Rákosi, then the general secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party. However, government officials claimed that the prime minister was referring to the Bible, to Nehemiah (4:17–18). For the interpretation of meaning effects, it is more important that in the following section of his speech, the fight, symbolized by holding the sword, is exemplified by the government's ability to defend Hungary from attacks. However, threats to Hungary's future no longer come from within the country; these dangers are approaching from outside, claims the speaker. Then he illustrates this successful fight by mentioning negotiations concerning the European Union's top institutional positions: instead of 'ideological guerrillas', the commission will be headed by 'a mother of seven children'.

### **Politics of Morality: The Promotion of the Family**

*Our struggle for Christian democracy.*  
– Orbán 2018, Tusványos

In the following section, I examine approaches the national conservatives have developed to repoliticize the subjective experience of existential situations. This exploration of moral politics illustrates that social policies promoting the conventional family, striving against 'gender ideology' and manifesting demographic anxieties receive coherent meaning through the nationalist narrative of historical struggle.

The politics of morality is a discursive mode of politicizing difficult existential situations (Agamben 2015). This politicization can generally be conceived through two discursive frames of depoliticization. In Western societies, hegemonic liberal discourse has recently strived to depoliticize value conflicts related to existential predicaments through juridification. In this sense, the struggle between conflicting moral visions can be excluded from the political sphere, leaving responsibility to the courts. However, this solution works only on the assumption that existential situations can be regulated by law that is grounded on a minimal normative

consensus expressed in a set of abstract, universal rights (Bellamy 2000). Secondly, another mode of justification and engagement in depoliticization can be observed in contemporary control societies (Deleuze 1992). The rise of the security state leads to the blurring of the private and public spheres. Moreover, each form of dissent and conflict is captured in the security spiral. The prevention of dangers through security measures dissolves the core of contentious politics: the public sphere.

National conservatism emphasizes the interests of families over the rights of individuals. The centre of Orbán's politics of morality is constituted by strengthening the family's role in social and political life. This promotion of the family generates tensions with policies, institutions and movements advancing women's rights. The unspectacular displacement of 'the woman question' with family concerns is visible in the replacement of institutions responsible for gender equality by ones dealing with demography (Pető and Grzebalska 2016).

In 2018, a publicity campaign organized in the form of a 'national consultation' set in motion the Orbán government's strategic effort to promote full-time motherhood and to encourage third births through tax and mortgage reductions, introducing loans and car payments for big families. The campaign revealed that this demographic strategy is explicitly framed in xenophobic terms contrasting the defence of the nation's internal resources with Hungary's repopulation by migrant Muslims (Vida 2019).

### **The Stage: The Defence of Endangered Forms of Life**

After securing a constitutional majority in the Hungarian parliament for the third consecutive time, Viktor Orbán delivered his speech at Tüskekert in a visionary, almost prophetic mode. He generally focused on the future, but his main target was the future of Europe. We can summarize his vision in two points: (1) Europe will be healthy again, but only with the help of stronger nation states, and (2) there will be a generational change in European elites. A new generation of politicians will definitively replace that of 1968:

In these elections [to the European Parliament in 2019] we must demonstrate that there is an alternative to liberal democracy: it is called Christian democracy. And we must show that the liberal elite can be replaced with a Christian democratic elite. [...] Christian democracy is not about defending religious articles of faith. [...] Christian democratic politics means that the ways of life springing from Christian culture must be protected. Our duty is not to defend the articles of faith, but the forms of being that have grown from them. These include human dignity, the family and the nation. [...] Having got to this point, there is just one trap – a single intellectual trap – which we must avoid. [...] The bait for this trap is hanging right in front of our noses: it is the claim that Christian democracy can also, in fact, be liberal. I suggest we stay calm and avoid being caught on that hook, because if we accept this argument, then the battle, the struggle we have fought so far will lose its meaning, and we will have toiled in vain. Let us confidently declare that Christian democracy is not liberal. (Orbán 2018)

Orbán envisaged in his speech the coming of a new age. In this sense, elections to the European Parliament were not conceived merely as one of the standard political events of transnational democracy. Instead, one can detect how these events are dramatized into the final episode of a historical struggle. This conflict is defined in terms of conflicting cultures, as a defence of endangered forms of life that originate from Christian values. Hence, ‘liberal elites’ are positioned in this narrative as invaders, as those who are responsible for the erosion of a historically established Christian form of life.

### **The Field: The Self-Defensive Struggle against Alien Forces**

Two events formed the immediate context of the 2018 speech dealing with Christian Europe’s future: General elections to the Hungarian parliament were taking place in the spring, and, after the Tüszvényos festival, autumn elections to the European parliament were waiting. Both election campaigns were characterized by intimidating and xenophobic rhetoric, which was boosted by government-financed billboards and posters warning of immigration dangers. The wide-ranging overlap between Fidesz’s campaign and a public information campaign funded by the government had an essential

temporal dimension as well. The so-called public information campaign started several months before the actual election campaign by employing agenda setting and stylistic motives that prepared a structure of relevance and atmosphere into which the ruling party's campaign could be ideally situated.

The core theme of all these political campaigns can be interpreted as a self-defensive struggle against alien forces. It is important to note that in parallel with these campaigns, the government's legislative initiatives also served to sustain this image of a struggle of self-defence. Besides laws that tightened eligibility requirements for asylum seekers, helping them also became categorized as a criminal offense. The latter regulation was aimed at non-governmental organizations assisting asylum seekers. These NGOs, like Central European University and George Soros, were portrayed as destructive forces. The image of Soros represented principles claimed to be destabilizing both to Hungarian society and Europe in general; specifically, all 'those liberals', including the European Commission, were said to be letting millions of Muslim and African migrants into Europe, in contradiction to the conviction that they would never integrate into Hungarian or any other European society.

Thus, this narrative of a self-defensive struggle against alien forces was built upon a deep concern about preserving a particular way of life which, in terms of a national conservatism discourse, expresses both the Christian and the Hungarian national heritage. Coupling asylum seekers and the liberal NGO sector together made it evident to the national conservative interpretive communities that the government of Viktor Orbán is involved in moral politics, in a struggle between the conflicting moral values of Christians on the one hand, and alien Muslim migrants and liberal NGO, 'comprador' elites 'serving foreign interests' on the other.

### **The Landscape: Demographic Anxieties**

Nationalism can be characterized by the commitment to unity of the nation. This commitment generates a perspective that obscures the internal divisions of the national society. Class, linguistic, ethnic, regional and gender divisions as they are experienced must be

reinterpreted by national unity – fantasies about the nation’s death form essential elements of the Hungarian national conservatism discourse. In recent decades, these dystopian visions received political legitimacy in the form of demographic anxiety (Bluhm and Varga, 2020). These themes were already established during the last years of the communist regime (Gal 1994). Perhaps, they were embedded in a long-established tradition of nationalizing population reproduction. This national conservative discourse conceives childbearing as a collectivized moral issue, leading to the essentialist representation of women as mothers.

The apparatus characterizes Hungary’s demographic situation by stressing that since 1981, the annual number of deaths has been higher than the annual number of births. While national conservative arguments emphasize the decisive role of interruptions, it is not considered necessary at all to note the role of health care, childcare, public education and Hungarian migration abroad. At the same time, it is interesting how these arguments work with the implicitly feminist claim that the ‘personal is political’ when trying to redefine the care of children as not a personal but a public issue: ‘Those who claim that it is a question of individual choice to have or not to have children are serving the culture of death’ (Kövér).

Various officials, activists and intellectuals claim in solidarity that the major obstacle to achieving their demographic policy goals can be identified in the liberal side’s gender-related perspective. The so-called gender ideology is characterized in the discourse of national conservatism in the following manner: (i) Gender ideology aims to manipulate the natural difference between men and women. (ii) It claims that homosexual orientation cannot be changed. (iii) It stresses the rivalry between men and women instead of focusing on their partnership. Finally, (iv) it is a perspective from which the family seems to be a violent site instead of a ‘nest of love’.

Opposition to gender ideology has formed a persistent part of the national conservative movement’s agenda and Orbán’s government campaigns for a long time. Various rhetorical tools have been mobilized to frame gender and sexuality-related rights, activists and scholarship as a threat to the Hungarian nation. In 2011,

the country adopted a conservative nationalist constitution which restricts marriage to heterosexual relationships and refuses the idea of discrimination based on sexual and gender identity. While the new Hungarian constitution explicitly protects ‘the human fetus’s life from conception’, a year later, the Hungarian parliament addressed its anti-abortion and conservative perspective in a new Family Protection Action Plan (Vida 2019). Besides preventing access to acceptable medical practice by banning the anti-abortion pill, the government also introduced a two-round compulsory session and a waiting period to persuade women against terminating their pregnancy. Parallel to these measures, in 2011 and 2013, anti-abortion campaigns were launched by the Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP; Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt), Fidesz’s formal coalition partner, in association with civic and religious organizations that depict women choosing abortion as murderers.

To remove gender ideology, the government modified the National Core Curriculum by stressing the distinction between learned and inherited determinants of sexual identity, focusing on healthy pregnancies and heterosexual family life. In 2018, degree programmes in gender studies were halted. In a fashion characteristic of the government’s moralist vision, the study programme at ELTE University in Budapest was replaced by a programme entitled ‘Economics of Family Policy and Public Policies for Human Development’ (Vida 2019).

At the core of the various Hungarian social policies supporting large families, one can find the institution of a child-rearing support scheme providing a basic income in the form of a monthly flat-rate amount for families with a stay-at-home mother and at least three children. This basic income support scheme for large families had been previously introduced in 1993 by the conservative government to fight economic uncertainties and growing poverty.

Viktor Orbán’s pronatalist strategy was already addressed during his first government (1998–2002). The primary measure introduced as part of the policy package was tax relief for a three-child family. Under the current income distribution, the tax relief benefits may encourage only parents with medium or higher incomes to have a third child (Spéder 2020). Hence, the effects of earnings-related

benefits, moving away from provisions based on means-testing that previous socialist governments introduced, were strongly differentiated, disregarding low-income families, especially those who are forced to work in the shadow economy. However, the flat-rate child-rearing support, together with the extended parental leave, still can motivate parents with lower incomes to have children as far as it supports stay-at-home motherhood. In contrast, the tax relief policy encourages middle-class mothers to return to their profession, deal with childcare and earn a higher family income.

By countering the liberal form of depoliticization, making particular moral dilemmas political again, the national conservative discourse was able to sustain the depoliticization of another kind of conflict, mainly related to the social question. The theme of migration made it possible to articulate a perspective that combines Orbán's activist image with justifications grounded both in security and in a moral vision of a good life. The idea of repoliticization can also be applied to the question of Hungarian minorities. By instituting dual citizenship for Hungarians living abroad, Orbán moved identity from the emotional and narrative sphere to the juridical and political fields (Kántor 2008).

### **Politics of Identity: The Strong State**

*We are building a new, illiberal state.*

– Orbán 2014, Tusványos

The national conservative movement, starting in 2002 but mainly from 2006 on, in its political communication overwhelmingly performed a moral critique of the post-communist left-liberal governments in terms of restoring and strengthening the nation. In this section, I consider Orbán's move from a narrative of unfinished revolution to the justification of a powerful state in defending and organizing the nation. In other words, national conservatives claim that a nation of families is in a deep social and moral crisis that can be overcome only by restoring and reasserting national traditions with a powerful state's powerful authority.

Identity politics can refer to practices of political mobilization related to culture and shared experience (Bernstein 2005). Although politics of identity is often located in activism engaged in by social movements, I focus the second part of this text on demonstrative performances of its agency by the Hungarian nation state. This nationalist politics of identity bears a resemblance to the activism of social movements. Viktor Orbán's efforts to incorporate radical nationalist movements into a centrally organized national conservative party started with civic activism after 2002. The Hungarian national conservative politics of identity emphasizes that the current predicaments of the Hungarian nation arise from an externally imposed condition, and these circumstances form the basis of the grievances all Hungarians hold. Hence, the relationship between personal experience, political stance and collective action was effectively established through nationalist narratives. The political and cultural goals of Orbán's identity politics are provided by a specific conservative notion of state power bearing responsibility for the national society.

At the Hungarian-Serbian border, Orbán's government erected in 2015 a kilometres-long steel-and-wire fence to keep refugee-seekers from entering the country. Between the years 2015 and 2018, the Orbán government systematically curtailed the capacity of foreigners to seek asylum in Hungary. The government created two transit zones at the Hungarian-Serbian border through which those seeking refugee status must proceed. These transit zones are locations meant to make asylum-seeking as undesirable as possible.

Directly following the *Charlie Hebdo* terrorist attacks in Paris at the beginning of 2015, Viktor Orbán made fighting migration his fundamental political stance. While the government refused the controversial EU quota scheme for the relocation of refugees and called for total control over the external borders of the European Union, several public campaigns were organized in the following months and years, reaching even the smallest towns and villages, which insisted that migrants would take away jobs and commit serious crimes.

The 'refugee crisis' had already come into view in spring 2015, but the decisive events, its dramatic phase generating historic events mainly in Hungary and Germany, were at the end of the summer.

Budapest's first trains with asylum seekers from the Middle East arrived in Germany at the end of August. In September, the German government decided not to close its border with Austria and allowed hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers to enter Germany. The previous phase of the crisis is represented by images from Budapest's Keleti station, where thousands of asylum seekers were camping. The station's underground passage was filled with people who had no idea how they could move onwards to the affluent West. One could assume it was also filled with camping mats, trash containers, mattresses, garbage, dirt and stench.

The refugee crisis's widely held narrative is that Germany decided in an unprecedented humanitarian act to put an end to the misery of asylum seekers in Budapest. However, this political decision was deeply influenced by the Hungarian government's unilateral decision to dispatch via buses thousands of refugees to the border, who started to march along the highway from Budapest to Austria. A hundred buses started a night transport to the border of those asylum seekers stacked at Keleti station. However, at this point it became clear that the desperate situation in Budapest was a result of the Orbán government's attempt to take the Dublin agreement seriously and refuse to let the asylum seekers continue their journey to Germany by train. Orbán would eventually adopt a police practice of driving on migrants, already made usual in Greece, Serbia and Macedonia over the previous weeks (Der Spiegel 2016).

Nevertheless, this event's political significance consists of proving the capability of Orbán's government to act. In synchronicity with this event, the Hungarian army was building a razor-wire fence along the border with Serbia, closing the Balkan migration route. The government's public communication represented and celebrated this border closing manoeuvre as evidence of the Hungarian state's power and sovereignty.

### **The Stage: A Community that Must Be Organized**

In 2014, Orbán's speech was carried out in a celebratory mood after his second big victory. The speech became famous due to the public controversy generated by his statements about illiberalism (Plattner

2019). In this speech, Orbán made clear that his government aimed to reorganize the Hungarian state so as not to follow liberal principles but national interests:

In other words, the Hungarian nation is not simply a group of individuals but a community that must be organised, reinforced and in fact constructed. And so in this sense the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organisation, but instead includes a different, special, national approach. (Orbán 2014)

Orbán rejects liberalism as a form of procedural legitimization of democracy in the name of a historically given national tradition. His speech reveals that democratic rule cannot be separated from how people comprehend the legitimacy claims of the state. The rejection of purely procedural legitimacy is part of the critique of post-communist liberalism that, according to Orbán, cannot consider national interest within its legalistic frames. He formulates substantial claims against procedural forms of legitimacy both in the name of the minority Hungarians living abroad and in the name of the interests of the ‘domestic majority of working people’. The phrase was frequently used in 2004 by the left-liberal government. It was also in the plebiscite campaign initiated by Fidesz. The plebiscite concerned dual citizenship intended to be granted to minority Hungarians. The reference to ‘the domestic majority of working people’ formed a part of the government’s threats that due to dual citizenship, the immigration of minority Hungarians would endanger the jobs of Hungarians. Hence, the nation in Orbán’s speech is conceived of as if only employees’ families formed it.

### **The Field: Incorporating Radical Nationalism**

Every nationalist is a person of knowledge and interpretive skills, enabling the understanding of events, speeches and texts. At the foundation of nationalism, one can find the image of the people. The nation is claimed to be naturally united, and no other division

is acceptable in this sense other than that between the people and its enemies (Lefort 1986). This image of the people without internal social divisions is shared both by nationalism and communism. Divisions constitutive of society are just denied. These social divisions are concealed by the affirmation of political division between our enemies and us. Thus, the constitution of national unity requires the invention of new enemies. The conversion of political opponents and adversaries into the figures of evil Others, usually linked with foreign centres, is coupled with campaigns against various enemies regarded as parasites to be excluded or eliminated. What is at stake can be easily understood as the body's health as far as the image of the people makes sense as an image of the social body.

What became definitively hegemonic with the political discourse after 2010 is the image of a society organized by the state. It is the image of society that is national in principle but includes those members of the Hungarian nation who live outside of the Hungarian state's territory. Thus, it is the image of a powerful state evoked as an actor governing this national society and protecting all those who belong to the Hungarian nation. The image of the artificially divided people closes the circle. While the unity of the Hungarian population living on the territories of six states can be actualized only on the fantastical level, this negative image of the 'people as one' shows that the Hungarian identity's political quest cannot be separated from the experience of division.

All three of these images make sense only when we understand their historical character. Thus, the Hungarian society cannot be democratically governed simply by applying international policy standards without a historical consciousness, which reveals the historical specificity of this society. In this sense, the Hungarian state cannot be grounded in economics and management given that its legitimacy is rooted in history. The Hungarian people cannot be adequately represented as a population currently living on Hungarian state territory. Without specific historical knowledge, one cannot see that the people simultaneously are a collective and a mystical body. Hence, behind these images, one can find a mythic history narrative about the Hungarian Kingdom as a unified entity that was both organic and mystical.

This kingdom's historical substance, which was previously symbolized by the king's body (Kantorowicz 1957) and, respectively, by the iconic Crown of Saint Stephen, is imagined through the collective corporeality of the people sharing a historical destiny. Previously imagined as the king's power and the aristocracy, which is incarnate to the kingdom's historical community, it is now invested in the people. This mythic history narrative grounds legitimacy and masks society's dissolution, counters the ungraspable and uncontrollable experience of social division and dissimulates the threat that those engaged in the state's apparatus will appear as individuals concerned merely with satisfying their desires and focused on the prosperity of their families.

Two radical nationalist parties had previously articulated the themes of migration and population decline. Earlier, the concern with demography was distinctive of the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIEP; Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja), followed by the Jobbik political movement, which focused its attention on migration (Vidra and Fox 2014). Jobbik was gathered as an interpretive community by turning public attention towards 'Roma criminality', breaking the taboo of racism in political mobilization. The Fidesz apparatus meanwhile has used elements of racist cultural repertoire in its recent migration campaigns. These racist elements were evident in posters which, while focusing on the Muslim danger, also mentioned those 'coming millions from the depths of Africa'.

In 2009, during the election campaign to the European Parliament, the Jobbik movement started to use the statement 'Hungary belongs to Hungarians!' as its main catchphrase. The Jobbik movement's political programme claimed that this slogan expresses an unambiguous and straightforward truth that can guide not only a political movement but the re-establishment of the country. The rhetoric of Jobbik can be generally characterized by this reverent, sermonizing and pathetic rhetoric. It operates with pseudo-religious phrases like 'Faith in Hungarian nationhood', 'Hope in the resurrection of the Hungarian nation' and 'The feeling of love for our brothers, for all Hungarians'. The document specified the ongoing international economic crisis that erupted in 2008 as a dark but transitional,

historical period which was bringing to the floor ‘a truncated nation deprived of its historical constitution’, a nation ‘with a crippled body and deformed soul’.

However, while in 2009 Fidesz focused on the post-communist narrative of an ‘unfinished revolution’, stressing the motive of anti-communism, the Jobbik movement, through its radical and generational appeal, turned the resentment permeating the contemporary crisis’s diagnosis into a coherent national conservative project of political transformation. The following proposals summarize their election campaign: (a) The undesirable effects of globalization must be countered by an active state; (b) the Stalinist constitution must be replaced by a constitution grounded in the Holy Crown’s doctrine of Saint Stephen; (c) instead of liberal democracy, Hungary needs a democracy built on values – that is, the universal and long-standing values of Christianity must displace the destructive principles of neoliberalism – and (d) the emptiness of consumer society must be confronted by a nationally organized network of environmentally friendly local communities. Nowadays, besides the last statement, all of the previous claims were already incorporated into Viktor Orbán’s political discourse.

In the 1980s, there were attempts by liberal and conservative activists to find predecessors (Dénes 2009). Enemy images and political idioms related to them played an important role in this process. All four types of political languages characterizing modern Hungarian political discourse – conservative realism, ethnic protectionism, Marxist socialism and communism – were built on strong enemy images (Dénes 2010). All these different collective self-projection schemes related to political modernity were manifested in visions of a fundamental enemy endangering the future of the national community. There is a strong continuity in this respect with this earlier period; the current national conservative discourse still cultivates an agonistic voice of identity politics that challenges the left-liberals’ perceived intellectual domination. Although national conservatives have ruled for a decade in the public culture, they still cultivate an oppositional voice, as if speaking from a minor, oppressed position of those who fight for their liberation.

## The Landscape: The Orbán Regime

Since its establishment in 2010, the national conservative government of Viktor Orbán has significantly changed Hungary's political institutions (Bozóki 2015, Kornai 2015). Due to the disproportionate character of the electoral system, which was even more gerrymandered for the 2014 elections, Orbán's government has been backed by a two-thirds majority of seats in parliament for three consecutive periods. The government is formed by a party alliance between Orbán's Fidesz party and its satellite KDNP. These two parties formed an electoral coalition in 2005. At the same time, KDNP's electoral support cannot be measured as its MPs form a separate parliamentary group. Both Fidesz and KDNP were members of the European People's Party.<sup>1</sup>

The governing alliance concentrates political power in the prime minister's hands; thus, it follows autocratic legalist regimes in their strategy to concentrate power in the executive (Scheppele 2018). By legal and procedural adjustments to the political field, the government systematically undermines political competition and removes oversight mechanisms on policymaking. These institutional change mechanisms that support 'illiberalization' include institutional reforms to media freedom, the constitution, the judiciary and local governance (Jakli and Stenberg 2020). After the 2019 local elections, when a unified opposition to Orbán's party took over local councils in Budapest and some other big cities, it became evident how the government uses systematic constraints on local, democratically elected institutions to protect itself against the emergence of local political resilience. Viktor Orbán's party approached governmental power campaigning against post-communism. Despite his dismissal of the preceding left-liberal form of governance, Orbán's economic policy maintains a version of 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (Fabry 2019). This strategy of replacing welfare by workfare, decreasing taxes, eroding the labour code and marginalizing trade unions is not treated as a core issue by the current political opposition to the Orbán regime (Hann 2018). Parliamentary political parties that were able to unify

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1 On March 3, 2021, Fidesz left the EPP Parliamentary Group. KDNP is still a member of it.

their forces for the next general elections in 2022 still articulate this coalition's legitimacy in the liberal-democratic discourse of post-communism. This discourse ignores the fact that Orbán's rise has its roots in the Hungarian society's deep moral crisis and disillusionment that characterized the pre-2010 era. It was during post-communism that clientelism, demagoguery and the adaptation to authoritarian practices became widespread (Vogt 2005). The widespread political opposition to Orbán builds its consensus on the refusal of clientelism, while it still will have to find symbolic means to address the phenomena of rural poverty and nationalist cultural hegemony.

Hence, in the last three election periods, one can observe the development of a unique political regime situated between liberal democracy and authoritarian dictatorship. This 'hybrid regime' points to the state's external embeddedness in the European Union and the internal institutional limitations of political competition simultaneously (Bozóki and Hegedüs 2018, Krekó and Enyedi 2018).

Viktor Orbán's government has established enduring political control in Hungary. First, it changed constitutional and electoral institutions to guarantee its continued success, hence emphasizing the legality of reforms that have been undermining liberal democratic political procedures. Second, while core liberal democratic norms and procedures remain formally part of a legal order, informal networks and procedural loopholes render these institutions ineffective (Grzymala-Busse 2010). The informal influence mechanisms that are unofficial hierarchical networks of loyalty to formal political institutions are visible in the unscrupulous control of political and economic competition and the mutual reinforcement of formal and informal structures (Böröcz 2000). Political actors conceive informal loyalty as a guarantee of obedience in a formal office.

The Orbán government's unprecedented power backed by a constitutional majority has, besides dismantling political mechanisms of institutional balance, also set new strategies in social policy and economic governance. New directions in social policy withdraw support from the 'undeserving' and 'unproductive' in favour of those who 'deserve' welfare benefits because they are productive demographically and economically, that is, those with big families but

also those who ‘work hard’ (Szombati 2018, Feischmidt and Szombati 2016). The new economic strategy turned the redistribution of wealth towards the national bourgeoisie; nevertheless, the continuous involvement of transnational capital in industrial exports has been maintained (Scheiring and Szombati 2020, Scheiring 2019).

What is behind this post-liberal, pseudo-democratic regime? Explanations are articulated either as agency-based narratives that focus on the elites’ role or as narratives uncovering structural constraints and conditions leading to the emergence of the Orbán regime. These structural conditions can be conceived in cultural terms, which stresses the nationalist political culture’s responsibility for the current erosion of democracy. However, to explain cultural phenomena on the grounds of measuring individual attitudes (Norris and Inglehart 2019) presupposes that symbolic processes can be reduced to attitudes accommodated in individual consciousness. Thus, the discontinuity between the support of the liberal democratic regime in the 1990s and early 2000s and its refusal after 2006 can be explained in the sense that some individuals changed their minds. At best, this can be conceived as reactions to individual lived experiences, which are influenced by changing structural, usually economic conditions.

How then should the significance of two phenomena that refer to widely shared experiences of both those who participated in and observed the regime change be considered? The first is the active role of elites in transforming the Hungarian public culture in the direction of hegemonic nationalist, xenophobic and racist discourses (Halmai 2011, Buzogány 2017, Buzogány and Varga 2018, Bocskor 2018). The second is the widespread grassroots demand for a break with the liberal-democratic, technocratic regime of the pre-2010 period (Greskovits 2020). In this sense, the erosion of everyday institutions was generated by the post-socialist economic restructuring. In other words, neoliberal disembedding processes led to a growing popular discontent that was transformed later by Fidesz into political demands (Bartha 2011, 2014, Hann 2018).

According to political-economic explanations, the widespread popular discontent emerging after 2006 was a result of inherent contradictions in the earlier, liberal-democratic, exclusively market

and transnational capital-oriented technocratic regime (Gagyí 2016, Fabry 2019, Scheiring 2019). Hence, the Orbán regime is an outcome of social struggles, not merely between those representing the interests of capital and labour but also between the different fractions of owners and managers. Thus, the Orbán regime represents a new compromise, a state apparatus emphasizing capital accumulation that privileges domestic capital and maintains favourable conditions for transnational capital in the sphere of industrial production (Scheiring 2019, Toplisek 2020).

To understand the Orbán regime's method of reproduction, we need to consider both the importance of external and domestic forms of support. The contribution of external, mainly transnational forces, like the European Union and the foreign investors maintaining the export-oriented manufacturing sector, besides their economic support and political constraining function, plays a vital role in providing legitimacy to the regime (Bozóki and Hegedüs 2018). The regime's use of prebendalism concerning domestic capitalists (Szelényi 2016, Rogers 2020a) is manifested in the establishment of a national bourgeoisie which functions as a politically loyal 'serving nobility' of the regime. The nationalization of segments of the economy and efforts to increase Hungarian ownership both followed this political strategy.

The Hungarian ruling class or dominant elite maintains its social position, besides the prebendal form of political economy, through cultural practices. The communication of ideologies that justify Orbán's policies and legitimizes the regime in general has been generating active popular consent for a decade. The continuous electoral success of Orbán's party is perhaps well-grounded in political power infiltrating public culture through a loyalist media apparatus. Nevertheless, a more profound understanding of this cultural mobilization of consent requires more in-depth inquiry into the symbolic content that the apparatus has disseminated (Rogers 2020b).

The largest mobilization against the government in Hungary since 1989 occurred in the autumn of 2014 and came into collective memory as an internet tax protest (Ferrari 2019). The social opposition to the Orbán regime has organized several mass demonstrations

in Budapest over the last decade, primarily protesting against media reforms, the restriction of academic freedoms and the labour code. However, while these mass performances were able to symbolically articulate their core demands, they have after ten years generated substantial change only on the oppositional side of the political field by stimulating six parliamentary parties to form a broad coalition for the 2022 elections. Integral to this cooperation were protests which lasted more than two months at the turn of 2018–19 against legislation that allows employers to obligate workers to work four hundred hours of overtime per year while the employers can hold up payments for up to three years. These protests played a crucial role in gathering unions, civic associations and oppositional political parties together. Besides mass demonstration, the social opposition to the Orbán regime has been articulated through various cultural movements and networks of youth. The most spectacular of these events was the occupation of the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest (SZFE) during autumn 2020, again lasting several months. However, neither the social nor political opposition to Orbán's regime successfully built robust organizational support in small cities and the countryside. Perhaps this is closely related to the absence of independent media and autonomous local civil society in the regions where most of the Hungarian population also lives and thus the disillusionment and ignorance that rural populations experienced during the post-communist period (Scheiring 2020, Sebök 2019).

### **Politics of Memory: The Discourse of Mythic History**

*We are entering the new epoch of nations.*

– Orbán 2011, Tusványos

In the last section, I will claim that while at the core of the national conservative politics of memory there is a victimhood narrative, it nevertheless rejects the politics of regret that emerged in the last decade as a new form of legitimization through the exposition of feelings of guilt. Viktor Orbán's cultural policy instead generally returns to the glorification of the national past.

Collective memory exposes the institutionalized agency that establishes and maintains memorable events. The shaping of collective memory by political actors and cultural movements belongs to the core strategies of national identity and nation-state building. Through its place-name changes and removal of monuments, the Orbán regime demonstrates continuity, with recurrent attempts to turn from debates about the past to direct political interventions, making radical changes in the atmosphere of the Hungarian public culture. In this sense, the politics of memory is symptomatic of a broader cultural strategy apparent in Orbán's media politics, the promotion of national conservative universities and the reshaping of academic research.

In June 2019, almost exactly thirty years after the reburial of Imre Nagy, who served as the prime minister during the revolution of 1956 and who was later executed by the communist regime and buried in a secret mass grave, the Hungarian government decided to reorganize the 1956 Institute, the historical research centre dedicated to the Hungarian uprising against communism and the Soviet occupation. The institute was established by independent and dissident historians just a day after the reburial of the revolution's executed heroes in June 1989, which came to be an emblematic public event marking the fall of Kádár's communist regime in Hungary. In 2012, the Orbán government changed the legal status of the institute and transformed it from an autonomous public foundation to a unit incorporated into the national library. While losing its legal status, the institute still preserved its intellectual autonomy. However, when 2019 it was folded into the Veritas Historical Research Institute and Archive, which is under the direct influence of the government, the institute's takeover resulted in its collapse in so far as all of the historians resigned their positions.

What appears from the government's point of view merely a minor administrative change to make research more efficient appears from the standpoint of the historians who quit to be a political step following the relocation of the statue of Imre Nagy that stood in a park next to the parliament building. The integration of the institute into a related research organization certainly conforms with part of a broader current of restraining public culture and creating

a hegemonic historical narrative that portrays the Hungarian nation as a victim of the Nazis and the Soviets, but which is now regaining its strength and independence. The Orbán government's establishment of the Veritas Historical Research Institute and Archive in 2013 to run parallel to university research bodies and those of the Academy of Science was justified by the need to revisit the false version of modern Hungarian history that was developed during the communist regime.

In 2010 when Orbán formed a new government, Fidesz was a broad coalition of different platforms united under a single hierarchy and Orbán's leadership. The party's organization was itself a model for reorganizing the state through a 'central sphere of power' that collects all political forces and social bases to adopt new changes in society. The monolithic hierarchical organization of Fidesz was developed following its second electoral defeat in 2006. After the political outrage in national conservative constituencies and riots in Budapest against the socialist PM Ferenc Gyurcsány shortly after the elections, Fidesz turned to a radical political mobilization developed earlier by the Civic Circles Movement. This movement, initiated by Orbán and national conservative intellectuals after losing the 2002 election, successfully rebuilt civil society into a massive social base for national conservative protest campaigns (Greskovits 2020). The Civic Circles Movement's membership was dominated by an urban educated middle-class; nevertheless, the militancy of this social base was already evident in a spring 2002 street protest and petition campaign following the parliamentary election loss to the socialists and liberals. The Civic Circles Movement created local places for initiative mainly through participation in nationalist memory practices and other cultural forms cultivating the ethos of conservative protest and resistance. The grassroots organization provided by the Civic Circles Movement significantly contributed to the mobilization and consolidation of Fidesz's core electorate. What is more, after 2006, Orbán was able to turn activists from this movement into active members of Fidesz, revitalizing its apparatus and turning its organization into a hierarchical network of loyalty.

Thus, the reorganization of the 1956 Institute, like another controversy over the suppression of academic freedoms, is in line with the vision declared by Viktor Orbán in his 2018 *Tusványos* speech: His party's victory in the elections, which brought Fidesz a third constitutional majority, had handed them the task of building a new cultural epoch in Hungary. In his words, 'We must embed the political system in a cultural epoch.' In tandem with the take-over of the 1956 Institute, the government increased its control over academic research by disassembling the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. It also forced the Central European University to relocate part of its activities abroad and cancelled the accreditation of the gender studies degree.

Perhaps, all these recent events manifest more profound changes taking place in the field of Hungarian public culture. At the end of 2018, the government-friendly owners of almost five hundred media outlets passed their proprietary rights on to a new non-profit media foundation presided over by a loyal friend of Viktor Orbán. This event did not mark the beginning of the Orbán government's effort to rebuild Hungarian public culture; instead, it revealed an already secured dominance in the field of mass media.

The thirtieth anniversary of Imre Nagy's reburial calls to mind the captivating performance of a young spokesman of a newly founded political movement, Fidesz, who demanded free elections and called on the Soviets to remove their troops from Hungary. Viktor Orbán, at that point, endorsed the communist prime minister of the revolution because Imre Nagy, by 'identifying himself with the Hungarian nation', had gained a strength of character in refusing taboos, putting an end to blind obedience and the dictatorship of a single party. Nowadays, like the relocation of the Imre Nagy sculpture from the Hungarian parliament's symbolic urban setting to a peripheral spot in the downtown, these formerly celebrated political virtues have also been displaced from the centre of Hungarian public culture.

It is symptomatic that, in place of Imre Nagy's statue, a pre-WWII monument to the victims of the 1919 Bolshevik terror is to be reinstalled. Perhaps this restorative act is in line with the urban memory politics implemented in Kossuth Square encompassing

the parliament building, where the Horthy regime's pre-war symbolic universe is visible again through its iconic sculptures (Kunt et al. 2013, Olah 2013). However, on the fringe of the parliament's symbolic urban setting, the government erected a new statue in 2014, preserving the memory of 'the victims of the German invasion of 1944'. Despite the proclamations that the memorial refers both to Jewish and non-Jewish victims, it was treated by the critics as evidence of an effort to play down the role of Horthy's regime in the Holocaust (Vajda et al. 2017). Inevitably, this monument manifests a memory politics developed first in the House of Terror museum to reinforce a sense of collective victimhood. At the core of this discourse is a new historical grand narrative portraying the Hungarian nation as an innocent victim of external forces.

### **The Stage: Rebellion against the World as It Is**

Orbán spoke after the first months of his newly achieved premiership during which the parliamentary supermajority introduced a law on dual citizenship for minority Hungarians living in neighbouring countries, decided to draft a new constitution, instigated an extra tax on the financial sector and put in motion several other 'unorthodox' policies. Orbán developed a narrative about the end of the post-communist world and stressed that Hungary was the first among European countries to step into the new era. Hungarians understood that the state would play a new role; the economy must be reorganized by the state into a work-based society. With an almost religious overtone, he proclaimed that, like the previous, post-communist era in Hungary, the whole old Western world, which is oriented towards unlimited growth and consumption, would pass away to make room for the new era in which previously strong states will turn to weak, and those countries who were thought to be weak would become powerful. However, Hungarians learned from their unique history that one could not build a prosperous state without establishing it as a strong nation:

Looking back over the last one hundred years, we have to admit that the Hungarian nation spent this hundred years in unnatural circumstances. Nothing happened in the way we would have liked for it to have happened. The world

was ordered in a way contrary to our understanding of what is natural. Until the end of the Second World War, we lived in an unnatural country; parts of it were plucked away, living in other unnatural countries; and we in Hungary were wrestling to keep alive this unnatural country surrounded by its enemies. There are several possible ways to conceive of this situation, but this cannot be accepted as the normal order of life. (Orbán 2011)

Instead of exposing the shameful events at the core of the politics of regret, Orbán's speech is embedded in a classical nationalist discourse of glory, heroism and victimhood. It is in Budapest's House of Terror museum that one can find the code for interpreting Orbán's rhetoric, which at the same time utilizes and challenges the cultural model of the politics of regret. The narrative of suffering under both Nazi and communist rule refers to the model of Holocaust remembrance, nevertheless reframing the responsibility of the state and Hungarians in general through an emphasis on the role of foreign powers in those decades of Hungarian history. Given that, at the beginning of the 2000s, the politics of regret had turned into an international normative expectation to refuse narratives of national glory, national conservatism successfully refused this mode of legitimization on the grounds that it is an externally imposed political narrative and one that follows a discriminatory logic against small nations.

### **The Field: Symbolic Restoration of the Hungarian Kingdom**

To understand the strategy advanced in the sphere of memory politics by the Orbán government, we need to expose the circumstances in which this strategy was constituted: First, the capillary, microcirculation structure that the counter-memory of the tragic fall of the Hungarian Kingdom had, during Kádár's communist regime, cultivated a specific mode of group solidarity also expressed as a commitment to tradition (Rainer 2014). Second, the spectacular rearrangement of the sphere of public memory in recent decades, which reinstalled the tragic narratives of national conservatism from the interwar period as hegemonic cultural frames of Hungarian identity, did not entirely displace all the memory frames developed

during the Kádárist era. Instead, it has utilized their pop-cultural and ethnic nationalist cultural repertoire to reinvent the apparatus of national conservatism.

At the end of the 1980s, when oppositional discourse emerged in the public sphere via printed publications (the magazine *Hitel*, etc.) and debates, one could observe a specific form of anti-communism closely related to the counter-memory of the failed 1956 revolution. In line with their narratives, ‘communists’ were to be refused and despised since they were historically traitors. Perhaps, this motive of blaming those who betrayed the Hungarian nation was strongly present in the counter-memories of Trianon, and its roots can be found in the hegemonic Christian nationalist memory culture of the pre-war Horthy era. Moreover, there is a clear continuity of these claims with the nineteenth-century discourse of political nationalism, which accused various minority collectivities, including Slovaks, Romanians and Jews, of deliberately damaging the re-establishment of the Hungarian Kingdom in the form of a modern nation state (Gyurgyák 2007).

Being a traitor arose within this anti-communist discourse as an inherent characteristic of these persons given by their ethnic origins. Narratives about the Jewish origin of the 1919 Bolshevik revolutionaries were also at the constitutive core of interwar antisemitism during the Horthy regime. They endured as significant components of the nationalist counter-memory’s minor narratives during the communist dictatorship too (Hanebrink 2018). Nevertheless, the ambivalent relationship between the racist and assimilationist thematic and stylistic forms of Hungarian identity was also manifested within lines of reasoning stressing the historical and ideological character of the ‘communist’ traitors’ moral failure. Instead of the alien blood of traitors, these narratives focused on their inability to apprehend national interest because of their alien modes of thinking.

This ambivalence between racist and assimilationist identity forms could already be grasped in the counter-memory’s basic features during the Kádár era, which combined hostility towards the ‘communists’ with religiosity (Catholicism and Protestantism) and nationalism. It was the antagonism against the ‘communist’,

which integrated different narratives offering an understanding of the essential characteristics of these ‘alien enemies’, either in terms of their beliefs or racial origin. Because of this counter-memory’s micro-circulatory structure, the conservative political alternative to the Kádárist regime was intelligible as a personal commitment to tradition. Nevertheless, because of the current political circumstances, this tradition could not be fully articulated, reflected or rationalized in public debates (Egedy 2013).

### **The Landscape: The Reappropriation of Christian Nationalism**

The position of power occupied by an apparatus is also based on possession of specific knowledge and skills. One of these skills is the interpretive ability to inscribe current events in a discourse of mythic history (Lefort 1986). This mythic history contains sacred episodes that constitute the narrative on which the present’s events acquire meaning. This discourse is fundamentally invulnerable; it imprints the signs of the real onto a foundational past. It is a discourse of the political community’s ideal body that traverses each of the party’s members. Engaged in this discourse, each individual sees himself caught up in a collectivity. While the individual is incorporated into this discourse, what is supposed to be real is assimilated into it.

If one wants to identify an iconic image that establishes a link between pre-war Christian-nationalism and the national conservatism of today, it will be the crown representing the kingdom of Saint Stephen. The repertoire symbolizing the continuity between the medieval Christian kingdom founded by Stephen I and the contemporary Hungarian state was invented and institutionalized during the establishment of the Horthy regime in the 1920s (Hanebrink 2006: 117, Kardos 1985, Gyurgyák 2007). Before the First World War, the public culture of Hungarian nationalism was thematically organized around the struggle for national independence against the Habsburg Monarchy. Protestantism occupied the principal position in this narrative of resistance against Catholic Habsburg rule. However, Christian nationalism’s central narrative emphasizing the long continuities in Hungarian history has displaced

the formation of Hungarian national identity further back from the reformation towards the mythic Middle Ages. While Christian nationalism was not designed to exclude traditions that emphasized Protestantism, it clearly brought the conservative Catholic hegemony to the public culture. The cult of the Holy Right, the hand of the sainted founder of the kingdom, is similar to other public rituals in the recent national conservative discourse built upon Catholic Counter-Reformation traditions.

While the Protestant tradition of fighting for freedom and cultural advancement of the nation was incorporated into Christian nationalism so as to hold a minor position, both modernizing liberalism and revolutionary Bolshevism were represented in this discourse as alien forces that were the main enemies not only of the Hungarian nation but also that of Christian Europe. This narrative about the destructive influence of ‘alien values’ on the Hungarian nation from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was fully articulated by the historian Gyula Szekfű (1920), who gave academic legitimacy to Hungary’s revised relationship to the Catholic Habsburg monarchy. Contrary to the previously hegemonic Protestant and liberal nationalist narratives in which the Habsburg dynasty and its absolutist state were the main enemies against whom the Hungarian nation fought for its independence, Szekfű claimed that the Catholic monarchy, and especially the cultural processes related to the Counter-Reformation, significantly contributed to the preservation of the Hungarian nation by securing the continuity of Stephen I’s state and the nation’s strong relationship with Christianity.

In August 1992, during days of renewed celebrations related to Saint Stephen, István Csurka, a nationalist dramatist and a significant member of the conservative movement Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF; Magyar Demokrata Forum) that formed a government after the democratic elections of 1990, published a lengthy pamphlet critical of new political elites, causing a great disturbance in the Hungarian public culture (Turbucz 2014). Within only a few months, after gaining 40% of the delegates’ votes for the MDF leadership, Csurka established his radical nationalist movement Circles

of the Hungarian Way (Magyar Út Körök) followed by the founding of the extreme rightist party MIEP. This pamphlet's disruptive effect contained the explicit expression of antisemitic themes and narratives, accusing liberals and communists of being servants of foreign interests articulated in Paris, Tel-Aviv and New York. His claim that the Hungarian population faces 'genetic degradation' was also widely debated; for instance, it was claimed to be an 'invitation to Nazism' by one of his fellow politicians from MDF (Debreczeni).

Csurka's pamphlet and the ensuing public debate disclosed that the discourse of national conservatism is inherently related to the tradition of antisemitism. Although communist censorship had denied the antisemitic repertoire access to the public for decades, those themes and narratives originating in the Horthy era's Christian nationalism were quickly and easily activated and actualized by national conservatives. After decades of public silence, an interpretive community concerned with liberals and communists of Jewish origin was coming to the fore again (Hanebrink 2018).

This revitalization of the antisemitic myth of Judeo-Bolshevism by Csurka's movement and the party was a kind of revolt against a conservative attempt led by Prime Minister József Antall to incorporate national-liberals within the discourse of Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism from its beginning in the 1920s faced a challenge from the previously hegemonic Protestant narrative structured around the conflicting duality of the *kuruc* and *labanc* forms of Hungarian identity. The *kuruc* perspective – personified by Ferencz Rákóczi, who led a revolt against the Habsburg monarchy – focused principally on independence and freedom. From the *labanc*, that is, loyalist and 'universalist', Catholic perspective, this unrealistic quest for independence was a characteristic of Protestant 'fanaticism' coming from Transylvania.

In the 1920s, the main challenge for the initiators of Christian nationalism was to rise above the *kuruc-labanc* conflicts by incorporating the radical and particularist Protestant form of nationalism into a conservative Catholic discourse that provided wider cultural ground for national unity. Despite the rising importance of the 'Jewish question' in the public culture during those years,

the unification of radical and conservative nationalism seemed to be attained through the purification of incorporated Protestant identities from ‘alien’ and ‘disturbing’ ideas of liberalism. This changed in the 1930s. While in the former decade, ‘Jews’ would be suspected of promoting liberalism, later ‘liberals’ would be dishonoured by ‘uncovering’ their Jewish origin.

Csurka and his MIEP started to use the cultural repertoire developed in 1930s Christian nationalist discourse. The close links of the movement to the Calvinist religious communities were expressed even in the dress code of their MPs. The style of cultural pessimism permeated their public performances, demonstrating their deep concern for the Hungarian nation’s vitality. However, the image that represented the dangers to the Hungarian nation was still the pre-war form of the ‘Judeo-Liberal’. Recently, this cultural pessimism was included in national conservatism, focusing on the European civilization’s declining vitality. Fears about the West’s decline are projected onto the Islamic Other and onto fantasies about the brutal and primitive vitality of prospective African immigrants. Thus, after 2015 the national-conservative apparatus related to Viktor Orbán gave local fears a European significance. This discourse provided a robust infrastructure for the circulation and repetition of this image.

The importance of the discourse, revitalized by Csurka’s movement and party, consists in the fact that the campaigns, centred as they were on the bestial threat of migration, did not wholly displace the pre-war image of ‘Judeo-Liberal’. The mobilization campaign against Georg Soros disclosed that the Europeanized, migration-centred cultural repertoire used to delegitimize political alternatives consists of antisemitic images and narratives already revived by radical nationalists in the 1990s.

Ambivalences and cultural contradictions inherent to various interpretive communities linked to national conservatism thus had already been manifested at the beginning of the 1990s via the institutionalization of radical nationalist media and movements. Despite the Hungarian Democratic Forum’s dissolution in 1993, the conservative and radical nationalist discourse layers have not been disconnected. In contrast to West European conservative discourse,

to be a conservative without a commitment to a nationalist interpretation of the past was unimaginable in Hungary. Institutionalized traditions of Christian religious life are still not sufficiently strong to ground a conservative discourse that could be autonomous from radical nationalism's memory politics.

## **Conclusion**

In his last speech in Tusványos, in 2019, Viktor Orbán several times addressed the audience as 'our generation' (Orbán 2019). One can find two interlinked modes of how this generational collectivity was demarcated in this speech, contrasting the 'generation of 1968' and those who believe in their 'historical role' today. Contrary to those mentioned later, that is, to communists and progressive liberals, who are, in his words, committed to helping history achieve its aim, Orbán's generation discovered that it is their generational existence, rather than history in general, that must be provided with meaning. Orbán, in his speech, then specified this meaning as a historic opportunity to make the Hungarian nation stronger.

As one can see, neither the concept of history nor a sense of commitment is called into question. In other words, communists and progressive liberals are rejected because of their universalism. Orbán's generational collectivity is portrayed as similar to previous generations in terms of history and commitment. However, his new generation is not marked anymore by universal humanitarianism but characterized by an attachment to a particular historical collectivity: the Hungarian nation.

The differentiation of Orbán's generation from the formerly mentioned 1968 collectivity is even more exciting because it was given by him a definite narrative form. His differentiating narrative is formulated as the drama of a failed generation, exemplified by the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ; Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége), as the opposite of the destiny of the successful 'Fidesz generation'. The dramatization effect is achieved through remarks related to destiny and predetermination. The generational failure of liberals is spelled out through the enumeration of situations in which

‘they were not allowed to govern and to take the initiative’ as far as the conservatives, the socialists, and then the Fidesz generation were given their own political moment.

One can notice a shift from an active to a passive mode of character construction in this narrative. Instead of stressing responsibility and the ability to achieve a political position, triumph appears to be a question of fate. In Orbán’s words, ‘It was a real drama. Let us thank God for not giving this fate to us.’ This construction’s intended meaning is most likely neither to generate empathy towards SZDSZ nor to free them from political responsibility for the deficiencies of the post-communist transformation. Instead, their ‘drama’ is used just to articulate trust in the future among the devotees of Orbán by giving proof of their positive predetermination, a piece of evidence that this political collectivity is more than powerful and successful. The cultural effect of this narrative is to strengthen group solidarity through recounting to them their exceptionality.

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# 4/ The Dynamics of the Polish Culture Wars<sup>1</sup>

*Ondřej Slačálek*

Poland is considered to be a hornet's nest when it comes to culture wars. There are many reasons for this. The most visible are the power of the Catholic Church and its influence on moral issues; the strength of the conservative, Catholic civil society; the turbulent development and temporal failure of the post-communist Left; and the replacement of the right-left conflict with a conflict between liberals (or liberal conservatives) and national conservatives as the most important political cleavage. But, above all, we see different temporalities. Both the successful promotion of the Catholic Church's moral agenda in the 1990s and the 2005–7 national conservative and far-right coalition government declaring the end of post-communism under the 'Fourth Republic' slogan could be considered a locally specific echo of the past. However, with the developments across the whole West in the 2010s and its variants in Poland, we can retrospectively understand the prevalence of those conflicts as avant-garde with respect to future developments in other countries, not as a regression to an unspecified past. Of course, the local specifics make the image appear much more extreme. But, as I will argue in this chapter, even those local specifics should not lead us to overlook both the many international contexts and, most importantly, the general tendency in the dynamics of the culture wars. It is this tendency that creates dynamics which can, as we will see in this chapter, change at least some of these specifics, considered for a long time as being essential to Polish identity.

Given the relatively long duration of Poland's various culture wars and their strong relevance in structuring the political field,

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1 I would like to thank Veronika Pehe and Hana Blažková for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

the country can provide us with an extended and thus unique perspective on culture wars and their dynamics. Understood as a case study, it can show us how various political and rhetorical strategies can have unintended impacts which are very different from the original intentions of their actors.

In this chapter, I will reconstruct various conflicts that fall within the definition of the politics of memory, identity and morality. In their short recapitulation, I will focus on how they can change and re-create political identities, how they can transform the definition of a situation – in short, on their dynamic aspect. This focus leads me to minimize the long-term historical context, which is almost omnipresent when discussing the Polish case. Instead, I will follow developments and transformations in the last forty years. In place of a temporal dimension, a spatial dimension will be emphasized based on the premise that it (and, above all, Poland's relationship to the West) played a decisive role in many culture wars.

To come to terms with an adequate temporality, I will start with two preludes, one focused on the 1980s and 1990s abortion debate and the other on changes in the political debate and political arena during the 2000s. Then, I will focus on the dynamics of the culture wars in the 2010s, especially in the decade's second half as it coincided with the rise of Law and Justice (PiS; Prawo i Sprawiedliwość). In conclusion, I will discuss what general lessons can be derived from the Polish case as it concerns the dynamics of the culture wars and whether we can hypothesize the next phases of their development.

### **Prelude I: The Catholic Church and the Ban on Abortions**

The years 1978–89 are remembered as a period of struggle for the self-emancipation of the Polish nation. It took place with the trade union Solidarity (Solidarność), an organization without parallel in numbers and influence in any other country of the Eastern Bloc, playing a central role and with the support of the Catholic Church and John Paul II as a unique Polish figure heading a worldly important religious body. John Paul II's visits to his patria meant

encouragement and empowerment for the liberation movement – symbols of liberty in the context of a decaying dictatorship.

The Church, represented by this figure, received huge moral capital especially in the post-communist countries (Ramet and Borowik 2017). It could represent a return to tradition in confrontation with the failure of the modernist and progressivist communist rule. It could, at the same time, represent some level of openness to the modern world after the Second Vatican Council.

Retrospectively, we can see some things differently. We can understand John Paul II not only as a continuation of the ‘spirit of the Second Vatican Council, but also silent moments U-turning away from some aspects of it, made visible by his close collaborator and successor Benedict XVI. We can also underline the fact that support for Solidarity was not the only agenda of the pope’s visits to his homeland. There was another mission which was successfully accomplished only a few years after the fall of the Polish People’s Republic (PLR; Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa). This mission was a ban on abortions, which had been legalized with qualifications in Poland since 1956 (and completely legalized by the Nazi occupation in WWII, later to become an important trope in the abortion debate).

Already, during his first visit in 1979, the pope was preaching against abortion as a ‘grave sin’ which not only damages the souls of its perpetrators but also ‘endanger[s] the future of the nation’ (Kościelniak 2018: 36). Some parts of the Solidarity movement adopted the anti-abortion agenda; for example, Solidarity in Katowice built the ‘unborn child’ memorial at the beginning of the 1980s (*ibid.*: 38). Already in the 1980s, the Church had begun promoting the anti-abortion agenda and had some partial successes; in 1984, for instance, the state banned abortion in a new hospital in Łódź (Ost 1991: 159).

The moment the regime ended, the Church started to become much more influential; according to some opinion polls, 95% of Poles trusted the Catholic Church. Of course, the role of the Church in moral issues was not as important as its role in opposition to the repressive regime and the potential to support an alternative. But this does not mean that the Church would be inactive in these questions.

Shortly before the first semi-free election in 1989, the Church proposed a law prohibiting abortions and punishing all participants in them with three years prison. The proposed law, called the Unborn Child Protection Bill, also used new terminology: a ‘conceived child’ instead of a foetus (Szelewa 2016). The proposal was not accepted in the parliament, dominated at the time by the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR; Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza), and even the leaders of Solidarity rejected it as ‘divisive’ (Ost 1991: 214); a representative of Solidarity’s liberal wing Adam Michnik warned repeatedly of the ‘Iranization’ of Poland in 1989 during round table negotiations (ibid.). But in the new Poland, these kind of activities of the Church met a new structure of opportunity.

Sociologist David Ost, upon visiting Solidarity’s congress in April 1990, was ‘startled to find the union spending far more time discussing its positions to abortion (fiercely against) than its position to market reforms (for, with moderate reservations)’ (Ost 2005: 62). The endorsement of the abortion ban by Solidarity shocked many (with the women’s section of Solidarity protesting against this endorsement). It led to a strong women’s campaign against the proposed abortion ban in 1991 (with slogans like ‘My uterus belongs to me’, ‘Fewer churches – More nurseries’ and ‘God save us from the Church’), to a petition for a referendum on the ban with 1.3 million signatures and to the formation of the Parliamentary Women’s Circle in Polish parliament, membered by both former communists and Solidarity members (Graff 2003: 109, Szelewa 2016: 749, Żuk and Żuk 2017: 693).

The heated public controversy led to the demand for a referendum. It was refused by Christian politicians and also by bishops in open letter: ‘God’s law cannot be voted for by humans in a referendum’ (Szelewa 2016: 750). President Lech Wałęsa and Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka rejected the referendum, dismissing the 1.3 million signatures despite fifty thousand being all that was needed by law (Żuk and Żuk 2017: 693). The ban was finally adopted in 1993, sometimes labelled as a ‘compromise’ because it made possible abortions in cases where pregnancy was a threat to the life or health of the mother, if it is the result of a criminal act (rape and

incest), or in cases where there was a high probability of severe damage to the foetus. The law adopted terminology already present in the 1989 Church proposal (Szelewa 2016).

An important controversy around the ban took place in autumn 1996, when the post-communist Party of the Democratic Left (SLD; Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej) was successful in adding a fourth amendment to the law, making abortions possible in cases where the mother experienced difficult living conditions – in fact, making the ban irrelevant. A huge wave of protest followed, making visible the strength of conservative civil society through demonstrations and public prayers, some of which were organized in front of hospitals where the abortions took place. The Church combined moralist and nationalist rhetoric, describing the law as ‘not only anti-Christian, but anti-Polish and inhumane as well’, evoking (in the words of the Radom bishop, Edward Henryk Frankowski) the Nazi liberalization of abortions as a ‘program of killing the Polish nation’ (Szelewa 2016: 751–752). The protests were also a great moment for Father Tadeusz Rydzyk. His Radio Maryja, founded in 1991, became extremely popular, and he became one of the faces of the protest, with declarations like: ‘There is still time, do not become executioners, murderers. Enough of Hitler and Stalin’s crimes, enough of murdering Poland’ (ibid.: 752). The controversy ended with the 1997 verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal interpreting Article 38 of the Polish constitution, which reads ‘The Republic of Poland shall ensure the legal protection of the life of every human being’, as a constitutional barrier to making abortion legal (Czerwinski 2004: 658).

There were various activities trying to revert the abortion ban. In the 2000s, this issue was increasingly Europeanized. Catholic conservatives were afraid that Europeanization would lead to a compromise, and their concerns were included in the concluding declarations of the Polish government in the EU accession treaty (2003):

39. Declaration by the Government of the Republic of Poland concerning public morality

The Government of the Republic of Poland understands that nothing in the provisions of the Treaty on European Union, of the Treaties establishing

the European Communities and the provisions of treaties amending or supplementing those treaties prevents the Polish State in regulating questions of moral significance, as well as those related to the protection of human life.<sup>2</sup>

This compromise was the result of fears on the Polish left regarding problems that might be caused by the Catholic Church during the EU accession referendum. According to Piotr Żuk and Paweł Żuk (2019), this preventive capitulation seriously damaged the reputation of the Polish Left. In 2002, a hundred Polish women (including the poet Wisława Szymborska and film director Agnieszka Holland) addressed the European Parliament in an open letter protesting against a ‘peculiar agreement [...] reached by the Catholic Church and the government concerning Poland’s admission into the European Union. Namely, the Church will support integration with Europe in return for the government’s closing [of] the debate on the revision of the anti-abortion law’ (quoted in Graff 2003: 110). During this time, while the abortion ban was probably agreed upon against the will of the majority of Poles, at the beginning of the 2000s support for free choice decreased from 65% in 1997 to 54% in 2002 (Szelewa 2016: 753).

## **Prelude II: The ‘Fourth Republic’, or Anti-communism as Present Perfect Continuous**

The volatility of Polish politics after 1989 and its openness to a radical-right challenger was demonstrated as early as during the presidential elections of 1990. Then, as a complete surprise, Polish-Canadian re-emigrant and right-wing libertarian Stanisław Tymiński succeeded in the first round, bypassing Tadeusz Mazowiecki to come in second after Lech Wałęsa. ‘Stan’ Tymiński’s campaign combined aggressive political marketing, an image of

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2 ‘Act concerning the conditions of accession of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Estonia, the Republic of Cyprus, the Republic of Latvia, the Republic of Lithuania, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Malta, the Republic of Poland, the Republic of Slovenia and the Slovak Republic and the adjustments to the Treaties on which the European Union is founded - Final act - III. Other Declarations - L. Declarations by the Republic of Poland - 39. Declaration by the Government of Poland concerning public morality’, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12003T/AFI/DCL/39;EN:HTML> (accessed June 26, 2021).

Western business success, anti-communism, conspiracy theories and the defence of ‘the people’ against economic hardship caused by elites. Twenty-six years later, Tymiński’s political style was sometimes compared to that of Donald Trump (Feffer 2017, Sowa 2018). While Tymiński was only an episodic figure, and another populist leader, Andrzej Lepper (Samoobrona), had marginal success in the 1990s, during the first half of the 2000s the situation changed. Not only did this era witness the rise of a self-conscious conservative nationalist Right but it also led to a change in the main cleavage of the Polish political system.

The preconditions were changes to the political system, both in terms of demand and offer. The demand was caused by a crisis of both economy and some actors (above all, the Left); the offer can be described on three levels: political forces (PiS, above all), conservative civil society and conservative intelligentsia.

The crisis in the political system followed a 1990s decade characterized by the severe impacts of harsh economic neoliberal ‘shock therapy’ brought about by Jeffrey Sachs, Leszek Balcerowicz and others and economic crises which had very unequal impacts, sometimes described as creating a ‘Poland A’ and a ‘Poland B’ (cf. Hann 2019). On the level of the political system, there was competition between the transformed post-communist party SLD and the various offspring of the Solidarity movement. Thus, the situation was typified both by the prevalence of the Left (in government 1993–7 and 2001–5 and 1995–2005 in the presidential office) and by the connection of both right-wing conservative liberals and the Left with neoliberal reforms and societal economic shocks. The discrediting of the Left due to corruption, manifested primarily by the Rywin affair in 2002–2003, opened space for another articulation of social solidarity. During the 2001 elections, four parties entered the parliament for the first time, including the liberal Civic Platform (PO; Platforma Obywatelska) and three conservative parties: PiS, The League of Polish Families (LPR; Liga Polskich Rodzin) and Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (SRP; Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej). Competition between PO and PiS has become the key conflict in Polish politics since 2005.

It was at this moment that we saw the rise of the conservative Right, the most important party of which was PiS. The party was founded by the Kaczyński brothers, veterans of both Solidarity in the 1980s and the post-Solidarity, critical conservative Right in the 1990s – they collaborated with Lech Wałęsa and split from him as early as 1990. During the 1990s, the Kaczyńskis were part of the small conservative party Agreement Centre (Porozumienie Centrum) and, in 2001, founded PiS. This party combined strong anti-communist and anti-corruption appeal with state interventions in the economy, championing national solidarity and the values of family, nation and social cohesion. Together with this, the party proposed a new beginning and moral revolution (cf. Szczerbiak 2007).

On the level of civil society there were, as we have seen, important movements around moral issues. The key role in Catholic conservative civil society was played by the Redemptorist priest and media mogul Tadeusz Rydzyk (Krzemiński 2017). A former emigrant who worked with Radio Free Europe in the 1980s, in 1991 he founded a radio station called Radio Maryja. During the 1990s the radio created a community of listeners connected by a conservative interpretation of moral values and Polish nationalism with anti-semitic tendencies. The radio's listeners formed a lively and vibrant community that could be mobilized for street protests on moral issues or in support of Rydzyk's media empire, which also consisted of *TV Trwam* and the daily show *Nasz Dziennik*. With this base, Rydzyk was able to defend his independence even from the Polish episcopate, in spite of the fact that some Polish bishops harshly criticised him and tried to control his excesses. Even Pope Benedict XVI had to intervene in Polish church affairs and demand that the Catholic media in the country respect 'the autonomy of the political sphere and the unity of the episcopate' (Krzemiński 2017: 93). Sometimes, Rydzyk is compared to Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority in the United States, which also played an important role in both elections and promoting a politics of morality (Żuk and Żuk 2019).

Together with political parties and civil society, there were also various streams of conservative intelligentsia emerging around cultural periodicals and debate clubs and developing concepts which

became (sometimes in a vulgarized version) important to the political rhetoric of Polish right-wing conservative politics (Matyja 2015, Dąbrowska 2018).

To some extent (and in parallel with some other streams of conservatives in other countries – the US and Russia above all) they reconstructed conservatism as anti-liberalism. Liberalism in the post-Solidarity Polish context is reconstructed as a betrayal of Solidarity's legacy and is connected with substantive values and truths, 'participatory democracy', national memory and the important role of religion (Krasnodębski 2003: 59–92). This suppression of Solidarity's memory is only a particular case of how liberalism works: It destructs a particular memory of a community, as well as objective truth (Krasnodębski 2003: 39–43; 229–247). Posed globally, we can consider liberalism as the totalitarian ideology of creating a 'new man' by destroying traditional social hierarchies and order (cf. Legutko 2016). As an alternative, the Polish conservative thinkers developed some critical concepts like 'subjectivity' (*podmiotowość*) or the pedagogy of shame, which describes a liberal approach that tries to impose shame for the past crimes of the nation (Dąbrowska 2019).

Of primary importance, this milieu developed the special notion of Poland's peripheral position in relation to the West. They thematized the imposition of Western liberal modernization as 'selective imitation' (Krasnodębski 2003: 211) or 'xeromodernisation' (Karłowicz 2016). They underlined that not only democracy but also modernity cannot be a product of imitation, it must be based on a strong domestic tradition (Krasnodębski 2003). Some Polish conservatives even adopted some concepts of post-colonial theory, following US-Polish literary scientist Ewa Thompson and her essay 'Said i sprawa polska' (Said and the Polish question, 2005). Thompson and her followers focused on the self-critical stances of liberal intelligentsia as demonstrating the internalized hegemony of the West. While the domestic society is stigmatized as having 'lower' standards (and is blamed for its poverty, explained as being a result of bad culture, for example, of corruption or backwardness), the West is automatically recognized as a bearer of higher moral,

rational and political standards. Against this self-blaming approach perpetuating a subordinate position, an alternative stance is needed based on a re-evaluation of domestic tradition, possibilities and sovereignty. Thus, Ewa Thompson combines nostalgia towards Sarmatian Polish tradition and the need to support Polish conservative nationalists in their struggle for sovereignty (Thompson 2007).

The slogan 'Fourth Republic', originally coined by the conservative intellectual Rafał Matyja in 1997 (Dąbrowska 2018), became the slogan of the Kaczyński brothers and their supporters in their 2005 campaigns and the name of their 2005–7 political project. The project implied harsh criticism of both the communist past and the present, liberal 'Third Republic', thereby proposing a radical break. Here, I call the anti-communism of PiS a 'present perfect continuous' tense: The main diagnosis is based on the idea that the present is continuously spoiled by the survival of the past and its interventions in the present. The image of some conspiracy during the roundtable debates and some dirty secret agreement during the power transition worked as explanation for the transformation's failure, of the continuity of elites, of the disillusionment of revolution; the image of a 'Fourth Republic' thus worked as promise of yet another revolution which would repair these grievances (cf. Szczerbiak 2005, Dąbrowska 2018).

Meanwhile, another slogan, 'Solidary Poland against Liberal Poland' manifested the position of the party in another way. Conservative nationalism was announced here as a successor of the Left, able to base its key value of solidarity on national grounds and position it against both locally and morally uprooted elites.

These basic promises found relatively strong appeal and led to the surprisingly successful election victories of the Kaczyński brothers in 2005. But they had their limit. Not only were they performed by the relatively eccentric political figures of the Kaczyński brothers, but, above all, the government of Jarosław Kaczyński depended on two even more extremist formations: the peasant populist SRP of Lepper and the ultra-Catholic LPR. Their dynamic coalition survived only two years and caused huge moral panics concerning populism and the Far Right in government, both on a domestic and EU level.

While PiS had ceased to be the governing party for eight years, during which PO occupied its position, the 2005–7 revolution had a lasting impact. As the marginalization of the Left continued, the main cleavage was no longer left vs right but the liberal conservative PO vs the conservative nationalists of PiS. Even occupying the relatively weaker position in this cleavage gave PiS great power. To a large extent, they could set and control the agenda. At the same time, while PO was a pro-European, liberal democratic and pro-market party, in many value conflicts it did not take up a position of polar opposition, but much milder versions of similar positions (on topics such as abortions or refugees). According to the psychological research of Piotr Radkiewicz (2017), ‘The typical mental profile of a Civic Platform follower is [...] accompanied by a political ideology that combines cultural leftism and economic rightism. [...] The typical profile of a Law and Justice follower can be described as [...] combining culturally right and economically left postulates.’ But this psychological profiling needs to be problematized. From other point of view, the conflict between PiS and PO is often a conflict between the centre Right and the conservative nationalist Right.

In its first period, the PiS combined its rhetoric of solidarity with neoliberalism; however, during its years in opposition, Kaczyński’s party left its neoliberal aspects (Ost 2018). But it was not enough. Solidarity was not only defended as a redistribution within the framework of the nation-state but also defended against any external power. The two axes described by Radkiewicz must be complemented by the third axis: globalization vs national sovereignty and identity. Anti-globalist, Eurosceptic and sovereigntist stances work well in compensating for the feeling of losing ground present in a huge part of PiS’s electorate. This position also gives the party strength in its conflict with domestic opponents. As Makarychev (2008) described Putin’s and Surkov’s concept of ‘sovereign democracy’ as an understanding of domestic politics in terms of international relations, we can understand the conservative nationalism of PiS as a (much milder) version of the same approach.

During the 2010s, we saw the rising importance of the culture wars. These culture wars radicalized PiS and created opportunities

for it to develop various aspects of its ideology into a party of ‘cultural counter-revolution’ (Kaczyński 2016, quoted in Tworzecki 2019: 102) aiming to reconstruct the conservative and hierarchical social order (ibid.). At the same time, these were an opportunity to exploit a critical/adversary role against Western liberalism.

The PO was unable, or in some cases unwilling, to face the rise of conservative nationalist attitudes, which led to a change in both the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections and the consolidation of PiS’s position in 2019.

### **Politics of Memory**

Just as the slogan about the ‘Fourth Republic’ reactualized the anti-communist motif, another actualization of a deep Polish trauma – the Katyń massacre – came about with the tragic end of Lech Kaczyński’s presidency on 10 April 2010 with the Smolensk plane crash. This trauma was reactualized by various actors and politically instrumentalized as a source of conspiracy theories. The complicity of a supposed Russian conspiracy was relatively easily moved to suspected Polish co-conspirators – the leading politicians of PO. Jarosław Kaczyński declared (after failure in the presidential election) in a Warsaw demonstration on 10 September that Donald Tusk, Bronisław Komorowski and Radosław Sikorski were guilty of the Smolensk tragedy and should ‘leave the political scene once and forever’ (Rzeczkowski 2020: 313). In October of the same year, the important conservative intellectual Zdzisław Krasnodębski (since 2014 MEP of PiS) warned that ‘PiS will be delegalized over the next year. There will be some other blatant murders [an allusion to the murder of Marek Rosiak] of journalists or intellectuals supporting PiS, some of them could also go to jail under arbitrary pretexts’ (Marchwiński, 2012: 192; Marchwiński’s insertion). Various layers of temporality (the Katyń tragedy and its suppression during the communist regime, the tragical plane crash) mixed together (in tragedy as well as in the image of a ‘national elite’ murdered and a ‘hidden truth’) to mobilize the idea of this hidden truth and enemies within.

Another important topic is the memory of the Holocaust and Jewish-Polish relationships. This topic is challenging for Poland – both because some critical historiographical interpretations thematize the history of Polish antisemitism and the role of bystanders or minor perpetrators in the Holocaust (Jan T. Gross controversy, followed by Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking controversy) and because it overshadows the Polish victims of World War II. Thus, the debate about the Holocaust’s memory constitutes a very sensitive sphere due to the potential for accusations of antisemitism and the competition for victimhood. This provokes an ambivalent relationship towards Jews and Israel. Sometimes, it has led to various conflicts on the international level, preventing PiS’s Poland from developing a similarly close relationship to Israel as has been developed by Orbán.

The relationship of the Polish nationalist Right towards Jews and Israel developed over time into a relationship of competitive imitation, which can be described through three examples: (1) The first is a law on ‘Polish concentration camps’ and other interventions into public memory as well as historical research of the Holocaust which are considered attacks on Polish dignity and honour at the international level. Mentions of ‘Polish concentration camps’ in international debate were considered offensive and actively challenged both by PO and PiS; in 2018 PiS promoted a law which criminalized public speech about the responsibility or co-responsibility of the Polish nation for the Holocaust which, according to its critics, could criminalize debate about Polish collaboration with Nazi extermination policies. (2) Another example is the 2013 founding of the Polish League Against Defamation connected with PiS, mirroring directly the US Jewish organization and trying to struggle for the ‘good name of the Polish nation’ by initiating court processes, for instance, with the Spanish daily *El País* (for quoting critical historians Jan T. Gross and Jan Grabowski); running shame campaigns (penning a letter signed by 134 Polish scientists against Jan Grabowski); recruiting participants for internet discussions defending the Polish point of view and attempting interventions into various works of popular culture. Finally, (3) there is an idea to describe

the suffering of Poles under Nazi occupation as a ‘Polocaust’ and to build the Muzeum Polocaustu, as was proposed by Kaczyński’s adviser, writer Marek Kochan (Napiórkowski, 2019: 165). Especially in the last image we see the drive for competitive victimhood, visible also in the implicit competition between the memory of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto vs the memory of the Warsaw uprising.

While the competition among victims constitutes an important part of the historical politics of PiS, at the same time, politicians of this party and intellectuals connected with it try to reconstruct the position of heroes and actors for the Polish nation. Those are very visible in the public commemorations of 1920, 1939, 1944 and of Polish anti-communist resistance after World War II. Especially in the first two cases, the narration of militancy is combined with the image of Poland as *avant-garde*, having faced first the threat that later proved to be fateful for the whole of Europe.

Both the image of the Polish victim and of the Polish hero develop and reactualize older tropes; they are a reappropriation of the twentieth century in frames developed earlier. What is much clearer now is the competitive nature of the narratives, both with Russians and sometimes also Germans (as nations of perpetrators), with Jews (as alternative victims) and also with the rest of the West, defended by the victims and heroism of Poles without adequate rewards.

### **Politics of Morality I: ‘Gender Ideology’**

During the first half of the 2010s, the ‘gender ideology’ war arrived in Poland as the important issue structuring the political debate. According to Graff and Korolczuk, who date the rise of the anti-gender movement to around 2012, these were exactly the conflicts that paved the way for national conservatism (Karlbergmet 2018, Korolczuk and Graff 2018). While the rhetoric found very fertile ground in Poland, it was mostly the result of a transnational dissemination of images concerning a feminist threat. This ideology drew inspiration from US parent groups struggling with sex education in school; Pope Francis, who called gender ideology ‘ideological colonisation’ during his 2015 visit to Manila; European Catholic ideologists like Gabriele

Kuby struggling against the ‘global sexual revolution’ (Korolczuk and Graff 2018) and the tacit network Agenda Europe<sup>3</sup> promoting traditionalist views on various social issues and having relatively unclear links to Putin’s Moscow (Suchanow 2020: 323–354).

Behind the organizational network, we can definitely speak about a discourse network. The anti-gender discourse is effectively globalized, with formulations, tropes and images spread across countries and cultural contexts. Moreover, as Graff and Korolczuk show very plastically, an important repertoire in the anti-gender discourse is its ‘anti-colonial’ framing. This includes criticism of international organizations and philanthropic billionaires (above all Soros and Gates) and of civil society sponsored from the West as imputing alien, colonizing concepts, uprooting society and destroying its traditional way of life and value order. ‘Genderism is seen as a global force, while resistance is always presented as local’ (2018: 809). In the context of Poland, this discourse is ‘eclectic’ and, paradoxically, ‘capitalizing on a rhetoric of both victimhood and cultural superiority’ (ibid.: 811).

But the combination of its global form and anti-colonial rhetoric is not the only paradox of the anti-gender movement. Sometimes it is openly anti-progressive and very conservative – Graff and Korolczuk quote Gabriele Kuby’s denunciation of ‘the 200-year cultural war to create autonomous, manipulable, controllable people’ (2018: 802). However, rather often, this movement articulates itself as a modern, human rights movement promoting ‘sound’ modernity over ‘crazy’ genderist extremes, with fully professionalized advocacy organizations skilful in advancing its agenda as an NGO, PR organization, lobby, lawyer team or think tank producing expertise.

A typical and important such organization in the Polish context is *Ordo Iuris*. Founded in 2013 with roots in Catholic fundamentalism, it works as a lawyers’ NGO and think tank producing expertise on various topics such as family, gender, LGBT policy and the ‘rule

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3 “‘Restoring the Natural Order’: The religious extremists’ vision to mobilize European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction’, *European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights*, April 20, 2018, [https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/rtno\\_epf\\_book\\_lores.pdf](https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/rtno_epf_book_lores.pdf) (accessed June 26, 2021).

of law' in Poland under PiS. *Ordo Iuris* frames its causes via 'human rights', 'legal culture' and 'natural law' and is able even to intervene on the EU level by lobbying and commenting on norms. *Ordo Iuris* combines a very professional form with very radical content and roots in Polish Latin American far-right emigration (Suchanow 2020: 446–502). One extremely important target for *Ordo Iuris* was the Istanbul Convention. *Ordo Iuris* fought against this document, which was ratified by Poland. It considered it a legal acceptance of 'gender ideology' and a challenge to any traditionalist position. In its place, the organization promoted the Convention on the Rights of the Family 'to protect the rights and autonomy of the family and to introduce effective, knowledge-based solutions to combat violence and assist its victims',<sup>4</sup> *Ordo Iuris* is of course *pars pro toto* for many more professionalized Catholic conservative NGOs like *Fundacja Mamy i Taty* (Graff and Korolczuk 2017). Another important part is also played by movements framed as grassroots initiatives, for example, parents' movements – *Stowarzyszenie i Fundacja Rzecznik Praw Rodziców* (The parents' rights ombudsman association and foundation), founded in 2009; *Inicjatywa Stop Seksualizacji Naszych Dzieci* (Initiative to stop sexualizing our children) founded in 2013; and the *Stop Gender Network* founded in 2014.

But the struggle against the Istanbul Convention was also a topic for the bishops. In December 2013, they published a pastoral letter against 'gender ideology', which according to them was 'the product of many decades of ideological and cultural changes that are deeply rooted in the Marxism and neo-Marxism endorsed by some feminist movements, and also the sexual revolution. [...] The danger of gender ideology lies in its very destructive character both for mankind, personal contact and social life as a whole' (*ibid.*: 181). Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek declared that 'gender ideology is worse than communism and Nazism put together' (*ibid.*: 176). According to some commentators, like the feminist Catholic theologian Zuzanna

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4 'Yes to the denunciation of the Istanbul Convention. The official collection of signatures has begun', *Ordo Iuris*, October 24, 2020, <https://en.ordoiuris.pl/family-and-marriage/yes-denunciation-istanbul-convention-official-collection-signatures-has-begun> (accessed June 26, 2021).

Radzik<sup>5</sup> or left-liberal Sławomir Sierakowski<sup>6</sup> (the founder of *Krytyka Polityczna*), for the Church, this struggle had a compensatory meaning as it had started to face paedophilia scandals.

Another topic is the struggle around LGBT rights. As in the case of other gender issues, in this context too we can observe the ‘globalization’ of the topic in the early 2010s. While we can identify strong homophobic tendencies during all three decades after the fall of communism, and these issues played some role even during the debate over the EU, it was in the early 2010s that anti-LGBT positions stabilized, becoming a key component of the image of the ‘decadent West’ (Żuk and Żuk 2020). In 2019, *Ordo Iuris* with the support of other Catholic civil society organizations started to promote two resolutions, one against ‘LGBT ideology’ and the other for the ‘rights of families’. These resolutions were calibrated for municipalities and local governments. The second resolution declared that no municipal funds would be accessible for any organization which does not accept the definition of family as based on the marriage of a man and a woman. Resolutions were accepted by more than one hundred local units, including four (in the first case) or five of the sixteen voivodeships. The idea of an ‘LGBT free-zone’ connected with these resolutions escalated the situation for the LGBT+ minority in Poland and encouraged some homophobic attacks. Europeanization of this topic brought about two dynamics: Polish conservative activists and politicians could both pose as defenders of ‘local’ tradition against ‘global’ usurpation as well as defenders of European tradition in the EU.

### **Politics of Identity: The Refugee Crisis**

The 2015 refugee crisis came in an electoral year. In spite of an image of ‘New Europe’ as completely anti-refugee, as late as May 2015, 72% of Poles were in favour of accepting refugees. It was later, at the end

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5 Radzik, Z., ‘Przepis na wroga’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, October 26, 2013, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/przepis-na-wroga-20971> (accessed June 26, 2021).

6 Sierakowski, S., ‘The Polish Church’s Gender Problem’, *New York Times*, January 27, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/opinion/sierakowski-the-polish-churchs-gender-problem.html> (accessed June 26, 2021).

of the same year, that the majority of the population refused this possibility (Jaskułowski 2019: 38). Jaskułowski explains this shift as due to the ‘pathological Europeanisation of the Polish public sphere’, the transfer of European debates, images and framings from Western EU countries eastward: The situation ceased to be framed by solidarity with refugees and started to be understood more in terms of the EU’s problems with Muslim populations and concerns over following this pattern (ibid.).

The Catholic Church was divided over accepting refugees. Officially, the Church followed the position of Pope Francis and declared the necessity for solidarity. But it also moved responsibility for it to secular authorities and did not initiate invitations of its own (Pędziwiatr 2018: 467). Some bishops also openly challenged the official Church position and embraced the Islamophobic definition of the situation. For example, Archbishop Henryk Hoser publicly spoke about the ‘suicide of Europe’ because of the new Muslim population’s high birth rate (Jaskułowski 2019: 43). However, some bishops sustained a pro-refugee approach. In 2017, the archbishop of Gniezno and primate of the Polish Catholic Church<sup>7</sup> declared that he would suspend any priest in his diocese that participated in an anti-refugee demonstration, causing a huge uproar and many negative reactions in the Church.<sup>8</sup>

Some moral entrepreneurs connected with the Church sometimes became important promoters of Islamophobic stances. For example, a young charismatic priest, Jacek Międlar, ‘gained notoriety for his active part in demonstrations against the “Islamization of Europe”, and for mixing elements of Catholic theology with ultra-nationalism, antisemitism and Islamophobia in his speeches’ (Pędziwiatr 2018: 469) – he was eventually suspended.<sup>9</sup>

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7 A mostly traditional and formal role connected with the traditional status of the archbishop in Gniezno, not with real power outside of the diocese.

8 Wencel, J., “Jaki z niego Polak? Jaki chrześcijanin?”. Atak katolików na Prymasa za krytykę antyuchodźczych demonstracji, *OKO.Press*, October 22, 2017, <https://oko.press/niego-polak-chrzescijanin-atak-katolikow-prymasa-krytyke-antyuchodzczych-demonstracji/> (accessed June 26, 2021).

9 Jók, ‘Były ksiądz Jacek Międlar bezkarny. Białostocka prokuratura: Nie nawoływał do nienawiści i nie znieważał’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, September 23, 2020, <https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,26329709,byly-ksiadz-jacek-miedlar-bezkarny-bialostocka-prokuratura.html> (accessed June 26, 2021).

The Civic Platform government of Ewa Kopacz had to manoeuvre in this context. At the beginning it was hesitant about accepting any refugees, and Civic Platform politicians, including its leader Grzegorz Schetyna, declared their unwillingness to accept any refugees.<sup>10</sup> PO refused to accept any refugee quota or permanent scheme for the redistribution of refugees in the European Union and, together with Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia, attacked the redistribution proposal. However, in the end, Ewa Kopacz's government promised to accept two thousand refugees for the next two years in July 2015; later on, she would promise to accept another five thousand refugees. She argued mostly for the necessity of solidarity with the rest of the EU and expectations the union would help with refugees from the Ukraine.

For the PiS, the refugee crisis became an opportunity to play the role of the hardliner. Jarosław Kaczyński securitized refugees in various ways – warning that they would bring about ‘all sorts of parasites and protozoa, which [...] while not dangerous in the organisms of these people, could be dangerous here’;<sup>11</sup> citing images of Sweden, with ‘45 zones there governed by Sharia law, there is no control of the state’, and Italy, where ‘Churches have been taken over and are often treated as toilets’ (Krzyżanowski 2018: 86); and claiming a threat of an ‘overall change of our culture’.<sup>12</sup> PiS combined this securitization of Muslim refugees with criticism of the ‘real hegemonic power of the EU’ (in the words of Antoni Macierewicz): Germany (ibid.: 88). PO thus could also be criticized for accepting a ‘German dictate’ (ibid.: 89) and betraying the resisting central European allies.<sup>13</sup> In defence of ‘Polish civilisation’ (Macierewicz,

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10 JK, ‘Schetyna dla TVP Info: PO nie jest za przyjęciem uchodźców’, *Newsweek*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/schetyna-mowi-tvp-info-po-nie-jest-za-przyjeciem-uchodzcow/8g3rpp5> (accessed June 26, 2021).

11 Cienski, J., ‘Migrants carry “parasites and protozoa”, warns Polish opposition leader’, *Politico*, October 24, 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/migrants-asylum-poland-kaczynski-election/> (accessed June 26, 2021).

12 Przemyski, J., ‘Kaczyński: Nie możemy w to wchodzić’, *Gazeta Polska*, <https://gpcodziennie.pl/64284-kaczynskiniemozemywtowchodzic.html> (accessed June 26, 2021).

13 Szczerbiak, A., ‘How is the European migration crisis affecting Polish politics?’, *Blog LSE*, July 6, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/07/06/european-migration-crisis-affecting-polish-politics> (accessed June 26, 2021).

quoted in *ibid.*: 88), PiS used, according to Krzyżanowski, a ‘wide range of arguments, starting from cultural/religious incompatibility and ending in radical and blatantly racist statements on biological inferiority that recontextualized elements of Polish historical anti-semitic arguments’ (*ibid.*: 92).

After its election success, PiS refused to accept any Muslim refugees. Moreover, the nationalist success also influenced the state of public discourse. Polish public television and public radio ‘started to undergo a deep transformation, opening the television and radio studios not only to a whole range of new right-wing journalists and commentators but also to far-right and openly Islamophobic individuals’ (Pędzwiatr 2017: 424). While some liberal media like *Gazeta Wyborcza* stressed openness to refugees (and connected it with respected Western leaders like Merkel or Pope Francis), the majority of the media accepted Islamophobic positions (Jaskułowski 2019: 43–44).

### **Beyond ‘Culture Wars’? ‘Liberal Democracy’ vs ‘National Solidarity’**

PiS was elected on a programme of ‘good change’, capitalizing on both the long period of governance under PO and the demand for social solidarity and redistribution. It was promised under the label ‘Family 500+’, which somehow merged the demands concerning supporting families and the reproduction of the nation as well as social justice and support for groups in need. However, soon after the election, the new government caused huge conflict around classic topics of liberal democracy, challenging ‘checks and balances’, the division of power and pluralism in public debate.

PiS attacked the media: the public media by replacing managers with loyalists and the private media via advertisement revenue pressure from both state and corporations working for the state (Ost 2018). These attacks on private media continued by challenging private media owned by foreign owners and proposing a special additional tax for these outlets.

Even more important and coming much sooner was the conflict around the Constitutional Tribunal. As in the case of replacing

public media managers, PiS could also use arguments that some of its acts only mirrored the analogical steps of PO, while its opponents could argue that these steps in this quantity and context were excessive and disruptive of the division of power. Criticism of PiS's steps concerning the Constitutional Tribunal by the European Union and the Venetian Commission also allowed the party to reactivate the 'anti-colonial' framing of the issue (cf. Bucholc 2020). Thus, while the massive street protest movement was framed with reference to an intellectual support group for Solidarity named the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD) and framed its protests as a defence of democracy against authoritarian usurpation, PiS defended its position as a defence of national sovereignty against foreign interference. Opinion polls were not in favour of PiS concerning the constitutional court; however, support for the party did not decrease in those same polls (Olechowski 2016: 66). And, in the end, it won the 2019 election. To some extent, we can consider this conflict a culture war of a special kind, as democracy was on both sides understood in an identitarian way, and the conflict, with its escalation dynamics, did not leave space for compromise.

While attacks on the division of power can be considered a success mostly in terms of power technology, the 500+ programme is ambivalently evaluated even by political opponents and provoked, for example, the Gramscian political economist Stuart Shields (2019: 13) to question why 'a government supposedly of the far right in Poland has offered the most progressive welfare intervention since the collapse of communism in the region'. Other evaluations are different and underline that reform is expensive and thus ineffective – and, to some extent, damages female employment – but even critics of the reform must accept that it lowered poverty for families and children in poverty (Karwacki and Szlendak 2020). Shields's answer to his question is directly connected with the nationalist worldview of PiS – which he frames as populist – and the relationship to the past and to the future: The idealized image of the national past is connected with the image of the heterosexual family with many children, but this familial image is also recognized as the best way to a proposed national future (Shields 2019: 13). Thus, PiS is able to

defend this project even against the large number of its own voters who criticise the welfare transfers as ‘irresponsible’ (Gdula 2018: 71).

This is one of the reasons why PiS, according to Gdula, is not a populist party, or this definition is not enough. Its societal authoritarianism operates by proposing different forms of its programme and different forms of moral satisfaction to various strata of society, but all are connected in stressing belonging in a national community, where the ‘neo-authoritarian’ elite reinstall the feeling of a meaningful order (cf. Gdula 2018). It corresponds with the fact that Kaczyński, since the 1990s, has built a self-image for his followers as an ‘alternative elite’, while he frames his opponents as a ‘mendacious elite’ (Stanley 2016: 258–259). The social ideal behind this image of solidarity is a differentiated national body, with the ‘real’ elite as its organic part.

## **Politics of Morality II: Struggles Over the Abortion Ban vs Church Scandals**

While KOD framed its criticism as defending the political basis of democracy and the rule of law in the state, the protest which could compete with it in attractivity could look like a particular fightback in one particular ‘culture war’. It was the struggle to revise the 1993 abortion law. In autumn 2016, the parliament did not accept the proposed initiative of *Ratujmy Kobiety* to relegalize abortions. At the same time, the parliament started to debate banning abortions due to foetal damage. While pro-life organizations framed this kind of interruption as ‘eugenic interruption’, feminists and many Polish women who were not politically active before this moment understood this ban as cruel, forcing the birth of dead children.

The situation caused huge protests. On 25 September 2016, actor Krystyna Janda shared via Facebook a post about a 1975 Icelandic women’s strike with a comment about the impossibility of such a protest in Poland because of the low level of solidarity among the country’s women. Her words inspired some women’s activists like Marta Lempart, and the protest against abortion ban received the name *Strajk kobiet* (Women’s strike; Suchanow 2020: 24). Tens

of thousands of Polish women protested in various places across the country, and, in the end, the proposal failed to find support in the parliament.

While the leadership of PiS probably calculated the pros and cons, the pro-life movement continued its activities in different ways. In 2017, a large petition for this ban was organized by the Church (Diduszko-Zyglewska 2019). In November 2019, a group of 119 MPs from PiS, the far-right Confederation (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość) and the Polish Coalition (Koalicja Polska – formerly the Polish People’s Party) sent the appeal to the Constitutional Tribunal. This tribunal (14 of its 15 judges were named by PiS) decided on 22 October 2020 to ban abortion for reasons of foetal damage. In spite of the COVID-19 epidemic, more than a hundred thousand Poles protested in the streets, some of them also attacking churches. During the four-year conflict, popular opinion has rapidly changed, and, today, a majority of Poles now support the legalization of abortion.<sup>14</sup> In February of 2021, even PO, a long-time defender of the ‘abortion compromise’ (the 1993 law) declared a change in its position and support for a cautious liberalization of the previous abortion compromise.

While the feminist movement has surprised in recent years with its mobilization capacity and militancy, the reputational losses suffered by the Catholic Church have started to escalate. Single cases of child sexual abuse were already appearing in the 1990s and 2000s, and between 2002 and 2012, 27 priests were sentenced for molesting children in Poland. However, those cases became a full-scale scandal in the 2010s within the context of the global sexual violence against children scandal and new information proving the impotence of the Church in coming to terms with these problems as well as the participation of important church representatives in covering the problem up or in its bagatelization (cf. Diduszko-Zyglewska 2019: 159–270). In 2018, the topic became the cause of serious

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14 Chrzczonowicz, M., ‘66 proc. Polaków za prawem do aborcji. Rekordowy wynik w sondażu Ipsos dla OKO. press’, *OKO.Press*, December 29, 2020, <https://oko.press/66-proc-za-prawem-do-aborcji/> (accessed June 26, 2021).

societal controversy and a crisis of legitimacy for the Polish Catholic Church. The foundation Nie Lękajcie Się published an interactive ‘Map of the Church’s paedophilia’, visualizing the cases of child molestation, giving it considerable resonance.<sup>15</sup> The movie of Wojciech Smarzowski, *Kler* (2018), and documentary films of Tomasz Sekielski, *Tell No One (Tylko nie mów nikomu; 2019)* and *Playing Hide and Seek (Żabawa w chowanego; 2020)*, resonated broadly; *Tell No One* became the most popular Polish movie on YouTube in 2019.

In this context, PiS openly intervened in supporting the Catholic Church. During its May 2019 party convention, Jarosław Kaczyński declared that due to the criticism of some priests, the movement had changed into an ‘attack on the Church, an attack on Catholics’, and that the ‘words of [...] Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, that whoever wants to attack and destroy the Polish nation will attack the Church first, are true, just as they were true when they were spoken’.<sup>16</sup> This even escalated during the Women’s Strike when some protests targeted churches. Jarosław Kaczyński reacted by a calling upon members and supporters of PiS to ‘defend Polish churches. We must defend them at any cost. [...] Let’s defend Poland!’,<sup>17</sup> which was broadly understood as a call for an escalation of the situation and political violence.

The criticism of the Catholic Church shifted to a re-evaluation of even the most important symbolical figure connecting Poland with Catholicism: John Paul II started to be recognized as a person co-responsible for the Church’s concealment of broad and probably systemic child molestation. This has led to a decline in his popularity within Polish society and especially the younger generation.<sup>18</sup> As 2020 came to a close, as a result of the Women’s

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15 Mapa Kościelnej Pedofilii, <https://mapakoscielnejpedofilii.pl> (accessed June 26, 2021).

16 ‘Jarosław Kaczyński: - To my zaczęliśmy walkę z pedofilią’, *Newsweek*, May 12, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/jaroslaw-kaczynski-to-my-zaczelysmy-walke-z-pedofilia/bjyh6ny> (accessed June 26, 2021).

17 Nycz, M., ‘Kaczyński wzywał do obrony kościołów “za każdą cenę”. Jest decyzja prokuratury’, *RMF24*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.rmf24.pl/raporty/raport-strajk-kobiet/news-kaczynski-wzywal-do-obrony-kosciolow-za-kazda-cene-jest-decy-nld,4895699> (accessed June 26, 2021).

18 Klauziński, S., ‘Jan Paweł II już nie taki święty. Młodzi winią go za tuszowanie pedofilii [SONDAŻ]’, *OKO. Press*, December 23, 2020, <https://oko.press/jan-pawel-ii-pedofilia-w-kosciele-mlodzi-sondaz> (accessed June 26, 2021).

Strike and the Church's child sexual abuse scandals, a movement to leave the Catholic Church started to gain popularity. This may represent the peak of the process described by Piotr Żuk and Paweł Żuk (2019) in terms of the rising conflict between a 'clerical state' and an 'increasingly secularized society'. According to the authors, the Church tries to solve its crisis by 'escaping into politics'. This may defend the privileged position of the Church, at least for some time, but at the same time it may make its problems even deeper, as the positions of the Church diverge further from the positions of the majority of the population.

## **Conclusion**

In Poland, we can find all three versions of the culture wars – politics of memory, politics of identity and politics of morality – in very important proportions. While in Austria and the Czech Republic (see respective chapters) the politics of identity are prevalent and other issues (connected with the politics of identity by actors who wanted to reclaim for them some relevance) are of minor importance, in Poland we can see the long-term relevance and intense presence of those conflicts in the public sphere. Not only do memory and morality issues have a similar relevance to identity issues but their content also somewhat occupies and constitutes the conservative concept of Polish identity.

All three arenas of the Polish culture wars have, to a great extent, made the conservative nationalists relevant and brought them to political power. It turned the conservatives into one actor in the main political cleavage. They also highlighted the political role of the Catholic Church and some moral issues promoted by it. At the same time, however, they brought about dynamics which can somehow damage exactly those actors who look like their contemporary champions or profiteers.

Through constant politicization, the Catholic element of Polish identity became strongly contested. Evoked as a weapon of one side of the conflict, it lost its unifying power. Not only was the image of a liberating Pope John Paul II partially replaced by images of

a Catholic Church covering up sexual abuses, but these scandals even led to a re-evaluation of John Paul II himself. The culture wars in most cases have had two impacts on the Catholic Church: As the Church was hauled into culture wars, it has become divided (as we have seen, namely concerning identity conflicts); its anti-xenophobic or liberal wing has become forced to declare itself against the conservative or nationalist wing. Consequently, the Church, as the object and subject of contestations, loses its unifying and identity-making power. While we cannot know if the apostate movement will change the numbers of Polish Catholics in a statistically important way, we can anticipate that the separation of national identity and political issues from the Catholic Church will grow, especially within the younger generation.

Likewise, it is doubtful that the dynamics of the culture wars have not been damaging for the political actor which has profited most from them in recent years: the Law and Justice Party. As we have seen in the 2016 and 2020 conflicts around abortion, it is easy for a large actor struggling to maintain a majority in the electorate to lose control over the dynamics of the culture wars, while the extreme positions (be they moral entrepreneurs, professional moral lobbyists or the Far Right) receive an important role and attractivity. PiS was unable to sustain Kaczyński's declared position: 'To the right of us, only the wall.' The rise in popularity of topics connected with nationalism has brought importance and strength to the nationalist populist party Kukiz'15 and the far right Confederation. What is more, the pervasiveness of the culture wars has created huge space for extra-parliamentary moral entrepreneurs.

War also makes enemies important. Despite the existence of a feminist voice in Poland throughout the three decades following the fall of state socialism, it was the conflict over abortion that made it critically relevant to many Poles. Thus, the main enemy of the conservatives is not only demonized and caricaturized but also provoked into relevance and into the form of a mass movement. Moreover, the Left has returned to the political scene in a form where it combines social solidarity with a liberatory (not necessarily liberal) position in the culture wars. Thus, it can become both

a real antipode of the conservative Right in culture wars and not just a liberal-conservative opponent. And, finally, this liberal conservative opponent can also be changed by the dynamics of the culture wars, as is seen in the changing position of PO as regards abortions and, to a certain extent, the refugee crisis.

The culture wars have very peculiar dynamics and have brought about developments which could hardly be considered predictable. It is exceedingly hard to hypothesize further developments in any way. As we have seen, the importance of the relationship towards the West on both sides of the culture wars will probably depend very much on how this relationship develops in the coming years, how this development is represented in the public imagination and how these representations are connected with questions of social solidarity. Up to now, the image of social solidarity worked together to represent an ambivalent power relationship with both the imagined and the real West in order to make powerful PiS's nationalist definition of the situation. Many things will depend on whether the oppositional political streams will be able to formulate an alternative relationship towards the West and connect it with alternative sources of social solidarity.

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## 5/

# Czech Republic: Populism without Culture Wars?

*Ondřej Slačálek*

In general, the Czech Republic of the last decade is a country that has experienced a very successful populist mobilization. Different from other countries in and outside the region, the successful Czech populists have not articulated a national conservative programme. The economic cleavage of right and left, previously the most important conflict, has been replaced by a choice between ‘populist challenge’ versus ‘defence of liberal democracy’, but this cleavage does not directly imply a choice between liberals and conservatives/nationalists. The reasons are both due to the appropriation of some liberal motifs by populists and because of the conservative elements of their opponents. Some aspects of rule of law are under serious attack, and the quality of democracy has deteriorated through the concentration of power and its misuse by the populist leader. However, there is no explicit programme of ‘illiberal democracy’ and, up to now, no important attack on the division of power has taken place.

Nevertheless, the fact that the triumphant form of populism cannot be characterized as national conservative does not indicate an absence of national conservative or xenophobic stances and agendas in the Czech public debate. The Czech Republic is very Eurosceptic – the most Eurosceptic country in the European Union – and, during the migration crisis, the country declared strong solidarity with other members of the Visegrád Group (V4) in its position against the remainder of the European Union as regards refugees. The Roman Catholic Church has entered the public sphere with a conservative agenda, which is a change from its weak, conformist and relatively liberal voice of previous decades; but, at the same time, the Catholic Church is of much smaller relevance than in Poland, Slovakia or Croatia. Neither same-sex marriage nor the Istanbul Convention

have been passed or ratified at the time of writing, and homophobia and attacks on ‘gender ideology’ are still accepted by the government and parliament. At the same time, there is a strong discourse of the Czech Republic as a ‘tolerant’ and ‘liberal’ country – often this ‘tolerance’ means lenience and an aggressive defence of sexism, but still.

This leads to two possible alternative depictions: (1) the Czech situation is subsumed by narratives of a ‘liberal democracy backlash’ and a national conservative revolution, which makes its specifics invisible and can therefore be understood through frameworks defined mostly by the Polish and Hungarian situations (cf. Brubaker 2017), or (2) it is depicted as a completely ‘special case’, where some important elements are missing (for example, a ‘conservative civil society’; Hanley and Vachudova 2018), and thus, it needs special analytical treatment (Pehe 2018).

To find a balanced way between both of these possibilities, the main research questions of this chapter are as follows: Can we consider the Czech case to be ‘populism without culture wars’, as a situation where the rise of populist political forces was driven mostly by an ‘apolitical’ technocratic ideology of competence, efficiency and performance, without conservative undertones? Moreover, does it mean the reaction against it also cannot be understood in terms of a liberal reaction to conservative values? Or, should we consider it a locally adapted version of the same phenomena, only with some aspects muted or varied? What is the role played by long-term patterns of national identity and medium-term development of post-communist democratic politics, and how are those resources used and transformed by contemporary actors? To answer these questions, I will outline the political conflicts of the third post-communist decade, with a focus on those in which the content is the relationship of the society towards (1) democracy, (2) the nation, (3) the West, (4) gender and (5) the Catholic Church. Schematically posed, I will argue that the relationship towards (1) democracy and (3) the West were key to structuring the debate. While the key political cleavage was created around questions connected with democracy (its meaning and quality), the change of relationship to

the West worked more on a level of the ‘definition of the situation’ rather than on a level of ‘political opinion’. The question of (2) nation was, to some degree, a ‘missing link’ in both debates; its vague and weak concept prevented the formulation of a stronger national conservative position, but, at the same time, it played some role in various moments to underscore some anxieties. In the case of (4) gender topics and (5) the position of the Catholic Church, these issues did not become central in political cleavages; however, their changes can inform us about correspondences with broader trends in Central Europe and the whole West.

This case study starts with the most important conflicts, which can be framed as culture wars, and with their contextualization. Where explanation was needed, I trace the roots of the medium-term post-communist development and the long-term trajectory of the Czech political culture to see which sources were actualized and how and what change occurred in the 2010s. Thus, the goal is to find a deeper historical context for the development of the Czech political culture and its various path-dependencies, but without essentialism or determinism – from a perspective which will see them open to historical development and reactualization in new political constellations and relationships. In addition, I also map how these five selected topics in the Czech culture wars overlap with the politics of identity, politics of memory and politics of morality so as to discuss it in conclusion.

### **Defence of Democracy without a Democratic Political Culture?**

At the beginning of the 2010s, the Czech Republic looked like the promised land of right-wing versus left-wing competition. This competition structured not only the conflict between the most important parties, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS; *Občanská demokratická strana*) and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD; *Česká strana sociálně demokratická*), but also the positions of the other parties. In 2010, the electoral triumph of right-wing neoliberal parties was followed by the creation of a government of austerity reforms, which then faced anti-austerity opposition from the left-wing parties, trade unions and civic initiatives. In 2013, two

elections took place: In the first direct election of the president, the candidate of the governing party, Karel Schwarzenberg, was defeated by the former chairman of ČSSD Miloš Zeman. Then, after the fall of the right-wing government (because of a corruption scandal), ČSSD won the parliamentary election, and its chairman, Bohuslav Sobotka, became prime minister. Both elections could be interpreted as a continuation and confirmation of the prevalence of the right-left cleavage. In fact, we can identify strong elements in these elections which make it possible to consider them not only as a turning point in the culturalization of politics but also as a problematization of our perception of the previous developments and the right-left cleavage in Czech politics. Why?

- The 2013 presidential election, the first by popular vote, could be considered a conflict between the Left and the Right, since Karel Schwarzenberg was the candidate of an austerity government and Miloš Zeman was a former chairman of the social democratic ČSSD and architect of its electoral victory in 1998 (he left the party in the 2000s). Karel Schwarzenberg had the image of a liberal candidate, with the support of the urban middle class, and played loosely both with his aristocratic background and the image of a free-minded Bohemian liberal (presented both as ‘punk’ and a ‘duke’ (*kníže*) by his supporters). Miloš Zeman, on the contrary, presented himself (as in the 1990s) as a ‘candidate for the ten million underprivileged’ citizens. Supporters of both candidates culturalized and moralized the conflict to a considerable extent. Schwarzenberg’s supporters worked with value, social, generational and aesthetic stigmatization of Zeman’s voters, depicting Zeman as a ‘country bumpkin’, representing the worst the Czech Republic had to offer. Schwarzenberg meanwhile was presented as the symbol of a better, middle-class and cosmopolitan Czech Republic and at the same time open-minded. While the Duke had a metropolitan and cosmopolitan image and was perceived as the candidate of Prague and the cities, Zeman was presented as the candidate of ‘the rest’ and the countryside.

- Zeman used plebeian stylization and populist rhetoric. Even before his candidacy, he had repeatedly presented strong Islamophobic views ('There is no such thing as a moderate Muslim, just as there is no such thing as a moderate Nazi'), and, during the electoral campaign, he spoke out against unemployed Roma and used anti-German nationalism. According to some analyses, this (above all the exploitation of Sudeten German expulsion topic) was the decisive strike which helped Zeman win. After his victory, both Zeman and his liberal, middle-class opponents – labelled and sometimes self-styled as the *Pražská kavárna* (Prague coffee house) – continued their polarizing strategies. President Zeman used a classical populist repertoire of various tools against elites, openly supported the Islamophobic movement during the refugee crisis, tried to use his competences beyond constitutional limits, supported some right-wing populists (including Austrian president candidate Norbert Hofer) and presented himself as the 'Czech Trump'. His opponents continued to describe him as the representative of a worse, 'boorish' Czechia, as morally and even aesthetically undeserving of being president of the republic.
- The parliamentary election in 2013 also looks like a continuation of the right-left competition, with ČSSD winning. But, in fact, ČSSD gained just 20.45%, while 18.65% was gained by ANO ('Yes' in Czech), a new political party beyond the left and right spectrum, based on anti-corruption and technocratic populism which was founded by the second richest businessman in the country, Andrej Babiš. While ČSSD presented themselves as a left-wing alternative to neoliberal austerity, ANO reacted against 'corruption' as a systemic problem in Czech politics as a whole; they presented themselves as a 'new' alternative to the 'old' political parties in their entirety. Together with ANO, this populist accent was also presented by Dawn of Direct Democracy (Úsvit přímé demokracie), the party of Czech-Japanese businessman Tomio Okamura that intended to return the Far Right to the Czech parliament, where it been absent since 1998; the party gained 6.88%.

- But the rise of Andrej Babiš's 'anti-political' populism was a much more important challenge. Due to his vast wealth, Babiš was able to skilfully connect economic, political and media power (by buying a huge media group including the most important serious daily newspaper) and produce political marketing. His campaign rhetoric was based on the binarity of a positive societal image as a whole and the corruption of politicians. 'We are not like politicians, we work hard', claimed Babiš in one slogan, adding the values of efficiency, technocratic solutions and operative decision-making. His political style implies a high level of disgust with the division of power. But this disgust was not articulated in ideological terms. He stressed that he is a 'liberal democrat' who deserves to be *salonfähig* as his private business is an important beneficiary of EU subsidies.
- Even after some of these subsidies were problematized both by domestic media, the opposition and police as well as by the European Union, and Babiš's relationship towards the union subsequently worsened, he still kept a relatively centrist position and never formulated a political vision which would mean an alternative to liberal democracy or contemporary forms of European integration.

Both Zeman and Babiš confirmed their viability – Babiš won the 2017 parliamentary election and became prime minister, and Zeman defended his position and won a second term in 2018. During both of these elections, the right-left cleavage was lost and replaced by another: that of 'populists' and 'defenders of liberal democracy'.

At first glance, there were no strong culture wars around this populist rise. Both Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš used, above all, the rhetoric of leadership, competences and economic improvement. They principally attacked the political parties and politicians (and, especially in the case of Miloš Zeman, journalists and humanist intellectuals), often with sweeping and moralist accusations, above all of corruption. Their majoritarian populism also included some attacks on ethnic or religious minorities and outsiders but no more

than was standard among other political forces (only Zeman's Islamophobia was much higher than this standard). Both brought about depoliticization based on a rhetoric of corruption in the political class, economic performance (Babiš's 'running the state like a company') and technocracy.

Much closer to culture wars were the conflicts around Zeman. He was repeatedly described as a liar, a drunkard, a boor and an agent of Russia and China. He provoked liberal intelligentsia through various attacks like attacking the twentieth-century liberal journalism icon Ferdinand Peroutka and openly attacking mainstream journalists, and providing support to communist or far-right tabloid journalists with exclusive interviews.

In the case of Babiš it was more complicated. In the beginning, this incredibly wealthy man – holding a fortune estimated to be worth \$1.4 billion in 2011 and thought to be \$5 billion as of this writing – articulated the widely shared discontent of many Czech citizens with corruption and political parties. With large corruption scandals touching almost all parties, even mainstream journalists and a large part of liberal civil society have described Czech politics as 'Palermo'. This selective view of corruption among politicians (and not among businessmen) led to the fact that the second richest Czech oligarch could become the leader of an influential anti-corruption movement. To anti-corruption was added the rhetoric of 'hard work' and 'pragmatic solutions' (technocratic centrism against traditional party politics), a mixture which was successful, especially because it presented *newness* in comparison with the discredited political class. As Babiš became more successful (in the end, he won the 2017 election decisively and marginalized the Left), the liberal, anti-corruption civil society, which had partially paved his way, criticized Babiš for his accumulation of economic, media and political power; his populist rhetoric; and his technocratic style (Závodský 2019).

During the refugee crisis, Zeman and Babiš had fairly different positions. While Zeman publicly supported the Islamophobic movement, Babiš waited for some time. His party included both anti-refugee politicians as well as a few human rights liberals – its minister of justice declared that the Czech Republic should accept

tens of thousands of refugees, much more than an EU refugee quota would imply. It took some time for Babiš to understand that the anti-refugee position was completely dominant in Czech society and to therefore adopt a radical anti-refugee stance – and even then, he signalled some openness to dealing with the rest of the European Union (possibly in return for agricultural subsidies). In the end he declared the defeat of refugee quotas to be his success.

A strong movement of social protest mobilized against both Zeman and Babiš. It culminated in large demonstrations organized by the initiative A Million Moments for Democracy, which repeatedly drew over a hundred thousand participants. The movement attempted to renew the ethos of the Velvet Revolution and in many aspects – a stress on anti-corruption and depoliticization but motivated more by moralism than by pragmatism – mirrored some traits of Babiš's movement.

One party opposing the government of Babiš and the Left also shared anti-corruption, centrism and a distance from the traditional right-left competition: ANO's main challenger, the Czech Pirate Party (Pirates; Česká pirátská strana) – the most successful pirate party in the European context and the first or second highest polling party between 2019 and 2021 – combined generational revolts and a focus on 'free internet' with an ideology of anti-corruption, transparency, centrist expertism and professionalism. Additionally, their minor political partner, the centre-right Mayors and Independents (STAN; Starostové a nezávislí), emphasize practical municipal experience against 'politics'. The second oppositional grouping, SPOLU (Together), is a mixture of right-wing conservatives, right-wing liberals and Christian democrats. The main party, ODS, is a post-Thatcherite neoliberal conservative party cooperating with the Polish Law and Justice (PiS; Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) party in the euro-critical club of MEPs. The other parties, TOP09 and the Christian Democratic Union (KDU; Křesťanská a demokratická unie), work together in the Christian democratic club of MEPs. Thus, the party, which is a key part of the 'democratic bloc' against ANO's populism, at the same time sides with the Polish national conservatives in European politics.

It was political dynamics that forced Babiš to convert from an opportunist ‘third party’ in the culture wars to a promoter of their conservative pole. Trouble with EU control over investigations into the misuse of subsidies from the union, as well as the Eurosceptic positions of a large contingent of the Czech electorate had already enticed him to take on the role of a strong defender of Czech national interests in the European elections. Electoral competition with the Pirates and the desire to downplay his spectacular failure during the COVID-19 crisis pushed Babiš to use culture war as one of the main frames of his 2021 electoral campaign. His book preceding this campaign, titled *Sdílejte, než to zakážou!* (Share it before they ban it!), is a rather paradoxical title for a book under the declared authorship of the prime minister, but it is emblematic of the book and campaign’s spirit. Babiš declared his will to ‘defend Czech interests’ against the EU elite and the ‘crazy neo-Marxists’. He has held a firm anti-immigrant position, stressed the need to raise natality and has a good relationship with his ‘friend Orbán’. While this tendency could become deeper and transform the identity of ANO (depending primarily on the election results), in the run up to the election it looks more like a tactical manoeuvre rather than an unchangeable expression of political identity.

### **Medium-Term Trajectories**

*Mobilization politics.* To understand how this right-left cleavage was replaced by a populism vs liberal democracy cleavage, we must understand the nature of the original division. Both sides were products of mobilization with strong populist elements. The most important right-wing party, ODS, was founded in 1991 by Václav Klaus and started by disseminating the idea that a neoliberal economic transformation is a chance for everybody, through anti-communism, nationalism (the ‘Czech way’ to privatization) and a critique of post-dissident liberal elites. Klaus’s political style in this aspect was described as ‘mobilization politics’ (Žák 1997) as it perpetually posed a basic question as to the nature of the new, post-communist order and connected it to his own political interest.

The opposite side of this cleavage was formed by Miloš Zeman in the mid-1990s by a large-scale political campaign where he articulated resentment and frustration with the transformation. He expressed deep disgust with the nouveau riche and right-wing political parties, and he was rather skilful in connecting it with a pro-Western social democratic, humanist, populist vision and programme for the ‘lower ten million’ – with an approximate population of ten million in the Czech Republic, this implied a presumed high level of inclusivity as well as exclusion of the rich in society (‘Upper ten thousand’). To some extent, the left-wing politics both in the Social Democratic Party and, a fortiori, in the Communist Party (KSČM; Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy) were connected with some level of conservative values, which were made even stronger by another strong personality, ČSSD chairman Jiří Paroubek.

*Majoritarianism vs moral populism.* Between 1992 and 2013, the main competitions in parliamentary elections were between right and left. But, at least for the duration of the 1990s, there was also another political polarization personified by post-dissident President Václav Havel and by Václav Klaus. Havel inspired moral criticism of Klaus’s politics. While he did not have alternative arguments to his economic policy (his criticism of the state and ‘structures’ was even somehow compatible with neoliberal concepts – cf. Eyal 2000), he did present a strong moral critique of its results: the ‘bad mood’ in Czech society. Two mobilizations in 1999–2001, to large extent inspired by him, tried to revive the ethos of the Velvet Revolution and defend the transformation reforms, but they demanded an end to the compromised representatives of both the right and left parties. These movements often considered themselves liberal movements against the excessive power of the political parties and for the defence of ‘civil society’ and the independence of public media. But, at the same time, they also had a strong element of ‘moral populism’ (Znoj 2017) and ‘mobilization against politics instead of political mobilization” (Bělohradský 2000).

What gave these mobilizations their strength was an agreement between the right-wing ODS and the left-wing ČSSD that the ODS would tolerate the Social Democrat minority government in 1998.

This agreement was described as a cynical corruptive calculus and a dangerous power cartel. While the citizens' mobilization was full of moralist contempt for the political class, Klaus and Zeman's rhetoric contained contempt for the ideology of civil society and posited the absoluteness of electoral legitimacy. In their imagination, democracy should be reduced to an electoral competition between strong individuals and their parties, similar to market competition in the economy. Their world was a world of winners and losers, where the majority delegates its power to a strong party which should not be limited in its power to govern. The moral populism of the movements met here the majoritarian arrogance of the democratic political parties' populist leaders.

*Anti-communism without nationalism and the revolt against post-communism.* Anti-communism was a strong element of the Czech political culture after 1989. To a large extent, it was a reaction above all against the previous two decades of decaying actually existing socialism connected with the Soviet military occupation and large-scale social cynicism. But anti-communism also homogenized the highly repressive 1950s and social euphoria of the 1960s in one image of 'criminal communism'. This anti-communism was mobilized by the Right not only against the Communist Party – in coalition with the left-wing bloc, it was the second largest party in 1992 and maintained its strength as a party with 10–14% of the electorate until 2017, when it fell to 7.76% – but also against the post-dissident liberals from Civic Movement (OH; Občanské hnutí) in 1992 and against ČSSD (Koubek et al. 2012). After 2002, anti-communism was mobilized once more, declaring it a moral scandal that the Communist Party still legally exists.

This anti-communism was the Czech version of the politics of memory, and it included a strong conservative dimension, including rhetoric of a struggle for the 'national memory'. However, its predisposition was more liberal than conservative, and it had problems with nationalism as Czech communism had been rather successful at integrating nationalism into its ideology; thus, anti-communism had to be very critical of many aspects concerning the dominant version of national identity. Some versions of anti-communist rhetoric

contained strong dissatisfaction with the post-communist reality, especially thanks to elements of continuity with the previous era, but also because there was a widespread tendency to defend post-communist liberal democracy and capitalism against any radical criticism. Anti-communism therefore did not become the basis for connecting conservatism and nationalism as it did in Poland or Hungary, where memory veins and political opportunities worked in a different way. Moreover, the role of both the conservative party in articulating frustration with the transformation and the position of the older generation and the lower strata of society was already, to some extent, taken by the Czech Communist Party.

### **Long-Term Trajectories**

One of the constitutive Czech political self-images is a story about the ‘long democratic tradition’ of the Czech nation. We can find some indirect predecessors of this image in Romantic nationalism and the essentialist idea of ‘Slavic democracy’, which was the undertone of mainstream historical conceptions in the nineteenth century (cf. Havelka 2001). A new version of this image was paradoxically created at this time by Tomáš G. Masaryk, who criticized both the pan-Slavic sentiments and historical falsifications which had helped to infuse the story of ancient Slavic democracy into the country’s historical knowledge. In his quasi-universalist, Western-centric conception, he considered democracy, together with other ‘values of humanity’, to be at the core of the Czech national programme (Masaryk 1927, Havelka 2001, Slačálek 2019). This reflected the interwar period and the Czechoslovak Republic’s standing as ‘the only one democratic state in Central Europe’, in contrast to Hungarian, Polish and, at the end of this period, the Austrian and German dictatorships. In 1945–8 and again in the 1960s, these moments in the ‘Czech democratic tradition’ worked as the argument for a ‘specific path to socialism’ and, in the 1980s and 1990s, as an argument for a Western democratic identity against violent inclusion in the Soviet Bloc. Reference to 1968’s Prague Spring worked as substitution for 1948, hiding an important component of the Czech democratic tradition: Unlike in other Central European countries,

Sovietization of the Czech part of Czechoslovakia had strong democratic legitimacy given that the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ; Komunistická strana Československa) was the winner of the 1946 election. This image of a 'unique democratic past' was complemented during the 1990s by images of the Czech Republic as a Central European 'star pupil' (*premiant*) in democratic transition and economic reforms.

Upon critical re-evaluation of some parts of the dissent, as well as part of Czech historiography in the 1990s, this myth of the democratic tradition has considerable ruptures, and some of them may contribute to explaining the contemporary situation. Petr Pithart et al. (Podiven 1991) underlined the fact that democratic politics was developed very quickly under a framework of ethnic nationalism, and the ethnic principle mostly prevailed over democratic values. In fact, interwar Czechoslovakia (the 'First Republic') could be described as a Czech ethnocracy based on privileged positions among the Western allies. The loss of this position in the context of Nazi expansion caused two corrections of 'democracy': an authoritarian, conservative, Catholic and racist short-lived 'Second Republic' (1938–9) and a pre-Stalinist 'Third Republic' (1945–8) based on anti-German national unity and a redefinition of democratic essentialism to socialist essentialism.

The Czech political culture was mostly a 'nation in opposition' to Habsburg empire, if we can summarize the main approaches characteristic of its formation. According to historian Jan Tesař (1989/2001), a strong element of gesture, theatrical pose, moralization and aestheticization of politics were also present in the political culture of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918–38. Formal democracy (corrupted by party oligarchies) was complemented by the extraordinary position of its leaders, Masaryk and then Beneš. They had to embody the 'values' of 'democracy', and their 'enlightened despotism' was to some extent legitimate and necessary; however, their 'personality cult' to a large extent prevented the development of a real democratic and civic culture. In Klimek's reconstruction (1996, 1998), formal party democracy was corrected and complemented by a shadow network of presidential influence called 'the Castle'.

These elements in the Czech democratic tradition were reinforced by forty years of state socialist dictatorship, which made it, for the most part, impossible to develop a democratic political culture in the public sphere. The perverted concepts of ‘unity’, ‘equality’, ‘the masses’ and ‘the people’ were mostly present in the public sphere instead (Fidelius 1998). Meanwhile, in dissent, various concepts of democratic political culture competed. Many of them (‘solidarity of the shaken’, ‘antipolitical politics’ or ‘parallel polis’) underlined not only the characteristic ‘nation in opposition’ but also a small, moral minority in opposition to the opportunist behaviour of the majority. This would prepare part of the ground in the society for competition between aggressive majoritarianism and moral populism (Žák 1997, Znoj 2015, Slačálek and Šitera in manuscript).

### **National Exclusivism without Nationalism?**

The refugee crisis represented a turning point. Yes, there was a culture war around it, but there was also a lot of consensus:

- There was no single party in the parliament which could be considered pro-refugee or even pro-EU refugee quotas. Relatively small Islamophobic mobilizations (from hundreds to thousands in the numbers of demonstrators) were strongly supported by media coverage, by politicians (like President Zeman, who supported Islamophobes, or others who distanced themselves from them but at the same time refused EU refugee quotas) and by opinion polls – in 2016, only 23% of respondents declared their country should help refugees, the smallest number in the EU (Standard Eurobarometer 86, 2016).
- The Islamophobic movement had two parts which shared the essentialization of the ‘Muslim Menace’ (Slačálek and Svobodová 2018, Čada and Frantová 2019). While the weaker portion of the movement was connected with the Far Right, a stronger segment stressed the incompatibility of Islam with the liberal values of Europe. This more important sector of the movement found some level of societal support

under the leadership of associate professor of biology Martin Konvička and commercial sociologist Petr Hampl. Where these factions of the Islamophobic movement did not differ was in their belief of the necessity for a brutal reaction against political Islam and its European allies. While far right leader Adam B. Bartoš publicly threatened to hang ‘traitors’ with nooses at a demonstration on 1 July 2015, Martin Konvička wrote in some social media debates about the necessity for Muslim ‘concentration camps’ in the near future and about grinding Muslims into ‘meat and bone meal’. Both factions of the movement also shared a criticism of the liberal, permissive and tolerant West and especially of human rights, anti-racist NGOs and feminism.

- President Zeman openly articulated his support for the goals of the movements. On the national holiday of 17 November 2015, Zeman organized an event where he spoke on a stage together with the most important individuals in the Islamophobic movement, including Konvička. Zeman here openly supported the Islamophobic movement against a ‘media massage’ concerning the migration crisis, and he identified his voice with the ‘voice of the nation’. Only after Konvička’s more unacceptable statements (about ‘concentration camps’ and ‘meat and bone meal’) were published did the president distance himself personally from Konvička, but not from support of the movement.
- Former president Václav Klaus was even more radical. While for a long time he never accepted the Islamophobes demonization of Islam, he completely shared their criticism of the European Union. He even published a short book with Petr Weigl, *Stěhování národů, s.r.o.* (2015; translated as ‘Migration period inc.’ but published in English as *Europe All Inclusive*, 2017) where they described mass migration as the weapon the EU elites use to destroy European nation states and the ethnic majorities inside them and to ‘create a new man’ in a transnational framework (Weigel and Klaus 2015: 51). Klaus also actively supported the German AfD and personally participated in the election campaign of the party.

- Some parts of liberal and left-wing milieus criticized harshly the racist and Islamophobic positions. Nevertheless, they mostly accepted some part of their definition of the situation. Much more present was solidarity with the rest of the European Union than the will to accept a substantial number of Muslim refugees. In the 2018 presidential election, Miloš Zeman defended his position by using his image as a defender of Czech ‘national interests’ against the EU and their refugee quotas. Even his main rival, the former head of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the liberal camp’s presidential candidate, did not support the acceptance of refugees. What is more, he even criticized Zeman for his role in accepting Muslim refugees during the Kosovo War in 1999.

During the refuge crisis, the movement was sometimes seen as a return to ethnic nationalism. The movement used the Czech flag and sometimes rhetorically employed the ‘defence of the nation’. The president, for his part, claimed, ‘This country is ours’, even using it as the name for a book of his interviews. We can also find some national moments in the context of the movement; for example, some of its participants also took part in the movement against Barnavernet in Norway. Together with the question of the rights of parents and conspiracy theories about ‘juvenile justice’, it was also connected with the idea of somebody wanting to steal and denationalize Czech children – sometimes with a strong reference to the memory of this practice’s use during the Nazi occupation.

Can we explain this all as a return of ethnic nationalism? One of the main arguments of this chapter is that ethnic nationalism is not the most important part of the explanation. On the contrary, it is only a partial and subordinate function; a much more important part is declinism, an ideology resting on the decline of the West as a whole which must be recognized and faced. It does not mean that nationalism is not present. But it does mean, much more so, that this ethnic nationalism is somehow void and contentless; Islamophobes used Czech flags and sometimes other symbols, they spoke about ‘our country’, but this did not indicate specific content beyond

the defence of sovereignty (Slačálek and Svobodová 2018). The discourse of the Czech Islamophobes can hardly be considered ‘local’ or ‘national’; it is adopted from Western sources. Even the harsh criticism of the Czech Islamophobes towards the European Union was in fact proof of their complete integration into the West and the EU; they considered the problems of these entities as their own problems.

### **Medium- and Long-Term Trajectories: An Absence of Resources for Czech Nationalism?**

The most important characteristic which can be attributed to Czech nationalism since 1945 is that it is saturated, and thus, it is only banal (in a Billigian sense – cf. Billig 1995),<sup>1</sup> especially in comparison with other Central European countries – no lost Kresy like Poland, no Trianon like Hungary, no humiliation under Czech tutelage like Slovakia. Ladislav Holý (1996) described Czech nationalism as having two typical modes: (1) as a nationalism based on *self-denial*, on the idea that, *unlike others* (for example, backward Slovaks or other Central European or Balkan nations), the Czechs are not nationalists, that they are modern, universalist (i.e., Western) citizens, who overcame nationalist backwardness, and (2), as a nationalism of *little men*, connected with distance from politics, an idea of apolitical truth and self-conception that, *unlike others* (especially Germans), Czechs do not have ideas of national greatness – it is connected much more with self-defence or with small apolitical values.

According to some critics (Kelly 1996), Holý’s description omits the ethnic and potentially aggressive aspects of Czech nationalism, with its long tradition leading up to the Young Czechs at the end of the nineteenth century. They are covered under the strata described by Holý, but they sometimes erupt. For Kelly, one such eruption was the popularity of violent racist skinheads in the 1990s.

This debate corresponds with two streams present since the fin de siècle: On the one hand, there is the ethnic particularism represented by the Young Czechs and connected with anti-German and sometimes antisemitic positions. On the other hand, there is

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1 I owe this characterization of Czech nationalism to Pavel Barša.

something that we can call ‘strategical quasi-universalism’ connected with Masaryk – the founding of the independent state in progressivist democratic ideology,<sup>2</sup> ‘Western universalism’ (and the power of the Allies). His attempted humanist reinterpretation of nationalism left many problems unsolved, including the dilemma between ethnic and political nationalism (Rádl 1928/1993). Thus, the First Czechoslovak Republic could be understood as a Czech ethnocracy that oppressed other nationalities – mainly Germans. The failure of this project in Munich 1938 led to a national trauma. The rise of nationalism coincided with the first year of Nazi occupation with a new form of nationalism both at home (Rataj 1997, Tesař 2006; Šustrová 2020) and in the foreign resistance. At the end of war, the result was a ‘Slavic’ reorientation – all but guaranteeing the 1945 ethnic cleansing – found in an alliance with the USSR. We can conditionally accept Holý’s description but with emphasis placed on the elements made visible by Kelly. Often here we see a self-denial of nationalism and its suppression through quasi-universalist positions. At the same time, these positions are connected with a strongly felt national interest: be it Masaryk’s embrace of Western universalism in connection with the establishment of the new state (and guarantees against Austro-Hungarian or German revisionism), be it Czech acceptance of communism pertaining to the approval of the expulsion of Sudeten Germans (and guarantees against German revisionism) or be it Havel’s new Westernism

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2 If we consider one of the key ‘culture wars’ at the end of the nineteenth century to have been the conflictual relationship of various national societies to the Jews and antisemitism, then the Czech equivalent of the Dreyfus affair is the trial of Leopold Hilsner (1899–1900). Tomáš Masaryk, later to become the Czechoslovak president, fought against the accusation of blood libel that was made against the Jews. His minority position later became a *lieu du mémoire* and, retrospectively, Masaryk won the struggle over national orientation in spite of the fact that during the actual struggle he had defended an unpopular position against a massive antisemitic wave. The argumentation he used is important: He attacked antisemitism as stupid, non-Western and unmodern (Strobach 2015). Antisemitism remained an undercurrent in Czech nationalism and was expressed in times of crisis – at the beginning of the republic (Frankl and Szabó 2015) or after its fall (Rataj 1997). But the later success of Hilsner’s defender, Masaryk, and his central position in the Czech national pantheon, as well as the post-Holocaust discreditation of antisemitism, contributed to the fact that the Communist Party, at the beginning of the 1950s and in the 1970s, was not very successful in its efforts to use antisemitic elements, nor were antisemitics after 1989 (e.g., Dolejší’s ‘Analýza 17. listopadu 1989’, *Týdeník Politika* or Adam B. Bartoš).

connected with Western integration (and guarantees against possible Russian revisionism).

As we have seen in the previous section, since the Czech nation can be considered a ‘nation in opposition’ after 1848 and especially 1867, there was also a strong concept of ‘oppositional unity’, especially against the Germans. After 1945, this will for unity was strongly present – politically in an almost consensual violent expulsion of Sudeten Germans – and it was instrumentalized especially by the Communists. Their intellectual mastermind, Zdeněk Nejedlý, connected a reinterpreted nationalist tradition, Stalinism and the neo-Romantic *Völkisch* concept of ‘the people’ into one of the key ideological bases of communist legitimacy (Nejedlý 1946, Kopeček 2019, Křestán 1996, 2012). Of course, the most important part of this ideology was unity against the German ‘revanchism’.

After the failure of a national socialist synthesis, hopes for national democratic socialism in 1968 lost their legitimacy. The regime’s nationalism became an ideology of what was in fact a national humiliation and imperial occupation.

After 1989, with many other societal shocks, a debate about Czech-German relations took place. Nationalist forces on both the far left (Communists) and the far right (Republicans) margins of Czech politics used this topic as one of the key agitation instruments. But, in the end, mainstream Czech politicians united in accepting some level of agreement with Germany while remaining resolute in defence of the Czech view of common history and in a refusal to dialogue with Sudeten Germans. This, together with the populist style of the Czech social democratic leader Miloš Zeman, contributed to the end of the far-right Republicans (SPR–RSČ; Sdružení pro republiku–Republikánská strana Československa) in the Czech parliament after the 1998 election.

The absence of a far-right parliamentary party between 1998 and 2013 (and the position of 1990s far-right leader Miroslav Sládek and the 2010s’ Tomio Okamura as both eccentric and clown) appears to confirm the saturated nature of Czech nationalism. But there are some facts which problematize this view: Collective anxieties connected with the Sudeten Germans, some of which were

almost consensual at the beginning of the 2000s; the popularity of some nationalist artists (Daniel Landa); or the widespread racism and anti-Gypsyism are all banal self-evidence of some ethnic ideas of a nation prevalent in Czech society. We can connect it, in conclusion, through what seems to be a strong demand for the defence of a not strongly declared national position. An implicit and unclearly defined nation demands sometimes clear defensive stances.

### **Westernism (and Declinism) without Europeanism?**

The 2015 refugee crisis was a decisive moment for the political imagination based on the image of Western civilizational decline. But the opportunity created by it and by the rewriting of political cleavages was filled by broader declinist imaginations. Various actors from different camps changed their political identity or offered new ideas. A few examples:

- The sociologist Jan Keller, a long-time organic intellectual of the environmental, alter-globalization, anti-war and anti-austerity movements and then a social democratic MEP, wrote prolifically during the migration crisis, warning against the acceptance of refugees and criticizing the supposed hypocrisy of EU elites. Jan Keller even published in right-wing publications, including the preface to a book by far-right sociologist and activist Petr Hampl about the civilizational treason of the left-wing and liberal intelligentsia accepting migration – Hampl actually prophesized civil war in Europe and urged the ‘natives’ to be more brutal than Muslims in that war (Hampl 2018).
- Security expert, former diplomat and human rights activist Tomáš Pojar – founder and former director of People in Need, an important humanitarian and liberal NGO during the 1990s – expressed his anti-refugee sentiment within the framework of European decline (and an inability to adopt Israeli security standards; he even welcomed the supposed extra-judicial murders of migrant route organizers by European security services). The former dissident and political prisoner

(and later intelligence officer) František Stárek, during his senate election campaign, devised the slogan (Let's start a) 'European Guantanamo'. But the declinist diagnosis was not limited to the refugee topic.

- The refugee crisis corresponded with the huge success of a group of Egyptologists (Miroslav Bárta), historians (Martin Kovář), a biologist (Stanislav Komárek) and a military officer (Otakar Foltýn) who focus on past 'collapses' of civilizations and prophesize a similar collapse in the case of contemporary Western civilization. They started to formulate their diagnosis in the context of the economic and eurozone crises. Some were open supporters of austerity government, and they shared an austerity explanation for the situation. However, soon after, other crises during the 2010s gave this team a lot of material to develop declinist prophecies.
- Alongside this, important media outlets, whether the far-right tabloid *Parlamentní listy* or the serious portal *Echo24* featuring top Czech right-wing journalists, started to promote a vision of the West as decadent, going beyond all proportion and having lost exactly those values that made it attractive during the Cold War and shortly after. Crazy left-wing ideas (or 'communism'), according to these right-wing Czech journalists, 'now are coming from the West'.

In many cases the feeling of declinism pre-dated the refugee crisis and had different sources. Keller was long a prophet of deep environmental crises and then of deep social conflict based on capitalism's inability to escape a destructive level of social inequality thanks to its destruction of the welfare state. But most of the declinist milieu has a much more conservative neoliberal background or ideological inclinations; for example, biologist Komárek considered the welfare state and even universal suffrage an 'evolutionary disadvantage' (2010).

After the refugee crisis, declinism became a firm and important part of the public imagination. A huge part of the media and persons from various intellectual and political milieu started to share a similar discourse.

Schematically posed, we can reconstruct these elements of declinist discourse:

- A decaying society with overly complex structures, including the welfare state and sometimes even democracy, which loses legitimacy and sees a decreasing economic performance, and thus, it needs to be radically simplified. According to Egyptologist Miroslav Bárta (2019), there are laws to the development of civilization, one of which he calls Herakleitian: What makes a civilization great also causes its collapse. In the case of the Western civilization, it is above all bureaucracy.
- This complexity sometimes also has a moral dimension: Norms are not clear but very complicated, which causes the loss of legitimacy and makes important the role of lawyers and/or moral specialists.
- Elites are disconnected from the people, and a reunion is needed to prevent societal collapse.
- New and unprecedented challenges demand new decisive political figures and maybe also extraordinary measures.
- The society loses its traditional sources of vitality, above all its traditional gender order of aggressive masculinity and submissive femininity. We have lost the repressive but stimulating *Vaterland* and now live in a caring *Mutterland*, depriving us of any responsibility (biologist Stanislav Komárek).

### **Medium-Term Trajectory: The Development of Czech Euroscepticism**

If we want to find the sources for declinism, we must focus on (1) the change in relation to the West and (2) the roots of Czech Euroscepticism.

First, we can see a broad fascination with the West throughout the 1990s and the will to ‘return to Europe’. Criticism was already present at this time, as it was present in the work of forerunners of this discourse like Kundera (1983). The Czechs sometimes presented themselves as a nation which proved loyalty to Western values under harsh conditions of dictatorship and Eastern occupation, and thus, they know them better (paradigmatically in Havel’s speech to

the US Congress in 1990). Sometimes, some elements of the West, such as feminism, were criticized as alienating people from the 'real West' or as simply being crazy. But these were only adjuncts to a general identification with the West or, sometimes, a form of compensation for the subordinated position.

After full integration into NATO and the European Union, the goal of 'return' had been achieved, but it came with the slow realization of two facts: (1) the country's semi-peripheral position within it and (2) the deep problems and weaker relative position of the West itself. The stereotypical positive image of the West as a role model was in some parts of the society replaced during that time by a stereotypical negative image of the West – migrant crimes in the streets, crazy Western universities, almost failed states within the EU. An acceleration of this process came with the refugee crisis: The Western part of the EU could be described then not only as the land of failing cities, with no-go zones full of street crime and political Islam, but also as an oppressor which, by enforcing refugee quotas, was forcing Czechs to repeat its mistake. It was also the exact moment that differences with the West – whether the absence of a colonial past, which exculpates Czechs from special obligations to poor countries in this context (as declared by ČSSD MP Lubomír Zaorálek – cf. Kalmar 2018, Sayyid 2018), or the country's relative ethnic homogeneity – were underlined and re-evaluated.

Second, strong Euroscepticism came relatively quickly, led by Klaus especially as regards the debate about the European Constitution (already in 2005) and then the Treaty of Lisbon (2007–9). As we have seen before, the Czechs are, according to some polls, the most Eurosceptic nation in the EU. While this position was not very strongly articulated because of fragmentation among Euro-sceptic political forces, it had its voice in President Klaus and some movements supporting him.

Long before the refugee crisis, it changed from a debate mostly about political power (nation state or EU) into a culture war of some form, with the European Union being criticized for articulating a mixture of 'human-rightism, ecologism, feminism,

multiculturalism', which was recognized as a new version of left-wing politics by Klaus. It was exactly this refusal of the EU and especially the Treaty of Lisbon which unified a relatively weak conservative Czech civil society (Akce Dost, Euportál) and led to the integration of some far-right figures such as Adam B. Bartoš. This alliance organized street demonstrations supporting Václav Klaus in his decision not to sign the treaty (until he changed his opinion and signed it). They also became the epicentre of one culture war when one important member of this initiative Ladislav Bátora became in 2011 an important official at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The media, Jewish organizations, anti-government initiatives but also liberal parts of the government coalition demanded his resignation because of his far-right connections. President Klaus then identified the situation as a 'dictatorship of political correctness' and publicly defended Bátora. He was unsuccessful; Bátora had to resign.

For a long time, Klaus's position framed the union and many liberal topics as a new 'left menace' and based his position on the negation of communism. Thus, he labeled the EU as 'socialist Brussels' and so on. But, at the end of the 2010s, he declared that communism also had some good aspects – its isolation from the West (which he had criticized very harshly before) defended Czechs against feminism and some other Western evils.<sup>3</sup>

### **Anti-gender Mobilization without Feminism?**

During the 2010s, some important public controversies connected with gender took place in the Czech Republic. While they never became central political issues, they attracted some attention and polarized views; thus, they can definitely be considered culture wars or perhaps 'low-intensity' culture wars. What follows is a brief summary of some of these:

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3 Polák, M., 'Komunismus nás paradoxně ochránil před genderismem a feminismem, prohlásil Klaus', *Aktuálně*, September 11, 2019, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/komunismus-nas-paradoxne-ochranil-pred-genderismem-a-feminis/r-550cc428d48811e982ef0cc47ab5f122/> (accessed June 26, 2021).

- First of all, there were a few controversies framed by one side as defending freedom of speech or artistic expression. The feminist opponents argued that this misunderstood this usage of freedom of speech and artistic expression, as it results in an incorrect definition of the role of educational institutions and spreads sexist culture. (1) The first of these conflicts revolved around the Miss Charles University pageant (2011–13), which faced criticism from feminist student activists for sexism and a commercial misuse of the university’s name. After strong criticism, the competition did not take place in 2014. (2) The other dispute involved an exhibition of nude photographs in the library of the Academy of Sciences, which provoked a protest by the professional Gender Expert Chamber and led to the exhibition’s premature end a few days later. Opponents of the exhibition argued it dishonoured female scientists and there was no connection to science; conversely, they were attacked for being puritans or a ‘feminist Taliban’ (Professor of Psychology Cyril Höschl). (3) Another conflict came when some feminists criticized a poem of Jiří Žáček in the textbooks 7- and 8-year-old children, called ‘What Are Girls in the World for?’ (‘K čemu jsou holky na světě?’).<sup>4</sup> While the poet and his supporters protested against the ‘censorship’ of ‘gender warriors’, his opponents discussed gender stereotypes in the education process.
- During the refugee crisis, one of the topics highlighted by the Islamophobic movement was gender. It was done in a twofold way: The movement stressed the rights of women in Islamic countries and, simultaneously, criticized the feminist agenda as an important element in Western civilizational ‘decadence’, a deviation from the ‘natural order’ and vitality. Thus, this movement, with the important component of women’s activism – one part of the movement called itself the ‘Angry Mothers’ – targeted feminism as an integral part of their declinist diagnosis (cf. Slačálek and Svobodová 2018, Svatoňová 2020, Vochocová 2021).

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4 The poem reads as follows: “What are girls in the world for? To become mothers and smile sweetly down on someone who is small.”

- The ratification of the Istanbul Convention continued from 2010 until 2015 almost without media concern, and it was not an important topic at the time. Only after 2018, when Prime Minister Babiš announced his intention to finalize the ratification process, did the treaty become a significant matter (Fellegi 2020). Activity against it was initiated by a letter from Czech representatives of various Christian churches and underlined by Petr Pířha's apocalyptic sermon (see the next section). But Catholic resistance found other followers, especially right-wing liberal but also left-wing conservative opponents of 'gender ideology'. As of this writing in early 2021, the treaty has still not been ratified in the Czech Republic.

While these controversies were present in the Czech public sphere, a much stronger reaction was attracted by the images of Western feminism. Special attention was caused by the Me Too campaign and the transgender movement, and not by their relatively weak and muted Czech forms but by their heated debate in the West. The conservative perception of both was connected with the image of a decadent West which had gone 'too far' and could lose its 'basic' and 'natural' institutions and intuitions (like 'men are men and women are women'). While Me Too was described as a de facto prohibition of almost any flirting, a '67 sexes' image became a meme present in the rhetoric of conservative politicians defending the 'normal world'. Thus, anti-feminist discourse was part of the declinist discourse about the decadence of the West.

However, together with this general characterization of the situation, there is also another aspect which can be understood better from a longer time comparison focused on the three post-communist decades.

### **Medium-Term Trajectory: Post-socialist Feminism**

Various authors have analysed the ambivalent legacy of the state socialist dictatorship. Some of them (Wagnerová 2017, Liřková 2018) underline the important role of dictatorship in promoting women's emancipation, especially in the 1950s and 1960s when some reforms arrived sooner and more radically than in the West – starting in

the 1960s, a return to conservative ‘normal life’ and ‘normal family’ became the new preference and peaked under normalization. Other authors highlight the low level of political participation among women, the destruction of an independent feminist movement and the subordination of women’s emancipation as regards the intentions of the regime (Nečasová 2011, Havelková and Oates-Indruchová 2014). We can conclude that there was an important level of emancipation but definitely not equality (considering both the division of roles and women’s participation in political power); however, we can also call it, in a paradoxical manner, *repressive emancipation* – conducted from above, in an authoritarian framework which absolved women from many forms of actorship, especially of possible feminist political actorship.

This paradoxical ambivalence was somehow mirrored by the mostly male-dominated dissident movement. According to some reflections of participating women, they did not develop a feminist critique of ‘their’ men so as not to undermine their position in the context of the repressive regime (Bělohradský 2007, cf. Linková and Straková 2017). But it was not only the difference between situations in the Eastern Bloc and the West; this difference translated into political opinions. As Havel partially analyses and partially performs in his *Anatomy of Reticence* (Havel 1986), dissidents felt a strong ambivalence towards Western feminist impulses, considering some of them to be absurdly pathetic and inadequate, or as they called it, *dada* (Havel 1986, cf. Ivancheva 2007).

This setting produced its results during the 1990s: The ‘open society’ and reconstructed pluralist public space were not very open to feminism. Many opportunities opened by the new regime were much better used by men – it was mostly they who became the top politicians and entrepreneurs as well as important and influential journalists.<sup>5</sup> Feminism as an approach was considered not only to be ‘dada’ but also ‘crazy’ (underlining and presenting some shocking aspects

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5 Šimůnková, T., ‘Muži znovu získali svá stará loviště, říká spisovatelka a publicistka Alena Wagnerová’, *Právo*, October 11, 2017, <https://www.novinky.cz/kultura/salon/clanek/muzi-znovu-ziskali-sva-stara-lovistve-rika-spisovatelka-a-publicistka-alena-wagnerova-40047806> (accessed June 26, 2021).

of feminist activism from selected Western contexts) or even ‘totalitarian’, a new ideology similar to Marxism positing one group of people against the other. Feminism was mocked in the media, with the strong influence of emigrant writers Josef Škvorecký and Ota Ulč, who testified to the declared absurdity of Western feminism (Čmejrková 1998, Hašková et al. 2006). Even many defenders of women’s rights distanced themselves from feminism in this context. Feminist ideas and milieu were very weak both in terms of activists and organizations and in terms of their position in the public sphere and politics. ‘Groups defending women’s rights did not have access to official institutions, and their agenda was not accepted as a part of established political discourse [...] neither institutional, nor discourse opportunities were open to them’ (Císař 2008: 99–100).

Starting in 1998, changes in the position of the feminist agenda were brought about by a new social democratic government and, above all, by processes of European integration. Gender conditionalities opened space for gender-related NGOs and their ‘transactional activism’ (Císař 2008); some gender-related topics were mainstreamed in the media, and some elements of the feminist agenda became important parts of the Europeanization package. While sometimes feminism was still described as *dada*, it was already too important to only be mocked.

Thus, we could consider the rise of the anti-feminist position and its importance in the public sphere as well as in some political discourses to be some form of backlash, a reaction to this alienating and Europeanized ideology which did not have roots in the domestic society. However, this would probably be misleading as it would lead us to forget about the most important aspect of the conflicts described above: These culture wars are ‘wars’ in so far as they have two real sides. After all, the feminists were the winners of all three cases described above as examples of the struggle for ‘freedom of speech’. Gender experts and feminist activists as well as female and sometimes male citizens identifying with their demands are present here. What changed after a decade of mockery and exclusion in the 1990s and another decade of Europeanization in the 2000s is the fact that, in the 2010s, we can speak about the successful embedding of at least

some feminist approaches in at least some part of society (especially the new generation), and its ability to use some institutional and discourse opportunities. While the anti-feminist imagination was fed, as in previous cases of anti-feminist discourses, prevalently through images of Western feminism, it was made more acute by the fact that this feminism had also found its Czech bearers. And vice versa, the presence of a strong anti-feminist discourse both in the form of aggressive ideological criticism of ‘gender ideology’ and in the form of unpolitical reactions revealing primitive sexist prejudices broadly present in Czech society, provoked into being and intensity both feminist activism and the mainstreaming of feminist positions.

### **Christianism without Christians?**

With 34.5% of the population declaring ‘no religion’ and another 44.7% declaring ‘no stated religion’, the Czech Republic is considered one of the most atheist countries, sometimes even the most atheist (competing with Latvia and the former German Democratic Republic). Sometimes there is debate as to whether the lack of religious belief in the country is ‘real’ atheism or ‘something-ism’ (Koci and Roubik 2015). While the Catholic Church is the largest church in the Czech Republic, the number of Catholics in censuses show a sharp decline: 82.0% in 1920, 78.5% in 1930, 76.3% in 1950, 39.0% in 1991, 26.8% in 2001 and 10.4% in 2011.

At the same time, the Catholic Church changed its position in the 2010s. Whereas in the first two decades of post-communism it was represented mainly by defensive and often even liberal voices, it is now very visible in cultural conflicts, summarized illustratively below through four examples:

- Since 1999, there has been a Czech public holiday commemorating St. Wenceslas, the tenth-century Czech duke considered the ‘patron saint’ of the Czech lands. Over the last decade, the holiday has been celebrated with a procession used by the Catholic Church to declare its ambition to play an important role in the nation. In 2017, for example, Archbishop Dominik

- Duka stated that he placed his hope in the ‘silent majority’ which would speak up during the election because it was now ‘governed and manipulated by the caprices of certain minorities’.
- In 2018, both Christians and the Far Right protested against a Brno production of Oliver Frlić’s drama *Our Violence and Your Violence* in which Jesus was depicted as raping a Muslim woman. Some far-right activists organized a demonstration against the production (and some of them even interrupted the performance). Archbishop Duka thanked the demonstrators, tried to use legal instruments against the production and declared in this context that ‘certain minorities are creating a totality’ which is ‘worse than Nazism and communism’.
  - In 2018, Archbishop Duka published (together with the representatives of six smaller churches) an open letter against the Istanbul Convention criticizing it for being based on an image of antagonism between men and women analogous to class struggle, for promoting ‘artificial categories’ and the ‘relativization of the shared values of European culture’.<sup>6</sup> On St. Wenceslas’ Day, the notable Czech Catholic intellectual doyen and former minister of education (in the first half of the 1990s) Petr Piřha gave a sermon in St. Vitus Cathedral. The text of the sermon was apocalyptic and warned against the LGBT movement and the Istanbul Convention, talking of ‘perfectly perverted laws [...] against the traditional family’. He warned that ‘your families will be divided [...]. For any expression of disagreement, you will be put into correctional labour camps of an exterminatory character [...]. Homosexuals will be declared the new superior ruling class.’ Piřha created a media scandal and was broadly criticized, but both the former conservative president Klaus and the current populist president Zeman defended him, as did Archbishop Duka. Piřha’s rhetoric was downplayed as being a ‘prophetic speech’ warning with exaggerations against real threats. When the liberal priest and Templeton

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<sup>6</sup> „Cirkve ke schvalování tzv. Istanbulské úmluvy v ČR”, June 25, 2016, [http://www.istanbulskaumluva.cz/assets/vyzva\\_cirkvi\\_politikum.pdf](http://www.istanbulskaumluva.cz/assets/vyzva_cirkvi_politikum.pdf) (accessed June 26, 2021).

Prize bearer Tomáš Halík criticized both Piňha and Duka, he was given an official written warning by the latter.

- Marches against abortions have been organized in Prague since 2001, but prior to the 2010s, they had counted participants in the hundreds or low thousands. In the 2010s, the marches were massively supported by the Archbishop of Prague, who personally participated in them alongside other members of the clergy, politicians and several thousand demonstrators. The marches were framed as ‘national pro-life marches’ or ‘national marches for life and for family’. In 2017, Duka declared, as a participant in the march, ‘Let us recognize how many lives are lost, the various ways in which we must look for workers because they are not born here.’ The question of Catholic morality was connected in this way with the subject of immigration, on which Duka has commented many times (cf. Beláňová 2020).
- As a candidate of the Catholic bishops, the young, neoliberal economist Hana Lipovská was elected to the Czech Television Council in 2020. Lipovská is publicly connected with Václav Klaus and the nationalist political leader Jana Bobošíková, who has a long history of attacks on the independence of public television. As Lipovská had herself publicly spoken about the uselessness of public television (as its services can be provided by private providers), her nomination was understood as a challenge and an attack on the independence of Czech Television. When Lipovská was elected to the council and started to organize a coalition against the management of Czech Television, even liberal Catholic politicians asked the bishops to call upon her to resign, but Dominik Duka refused.

Thus, we see that key Catholic priests, including the Prague archbishop and cardinal, Dominik Duka, have become vocal and important conservative voices in public discourse, and, to some extent, they play the role of allies of the conservative, populist and xenophobic milieu. Their agenda, at the same time, has become important for these allies. Even politicians who are atheist or agnostic (or formally Hussites) are becoming much more open to the Catholic Church,

and the defence of the special position of Christians is becoming important to the conservative/nationalist/populist politicians.

How can this alliance be explained? Can it be a productive strategy in re-establishing the Church's position in the Czech nation? What does it look like over the long-term historical trajectory of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Czech society?

I will try to answer these questions in three steps: First, I will present two possible explanations, one very localized and one very general – (1) the situation whereby the Church is held hostage as a result of receiving financial compensation for property expropriated by the Communists, as explained, and (2) Rogers Brubaker's (2017) conception of Christianity as a cultural condition of the contemporary identitarian crisis of the West and as a demand of the secularist populists. I then present the historical context and prospects of the Catholic Church in the role of culture warrior. According to Vaňáč (2017), the return of property, which was meant to bring freedom to the church, paradoxically made it a hostage to political power. It now needs to be on good terms with leading politicians to finish these unpopular property transfers. Brubaker (2017) coins the term Christianity as culturalized and political Christianity, an identitarian totem, not a religious belief; demand for it is provoked by Muslim migration, with the Christianist reference to Christianity answering the question of 'who we are'.

Together with these answers, we can see another level of analysis: Central Europe. Since 2015, the Bishop's Conference of Central and Eastern Europe has organized regular meetings annually, with topics like family, 'culture of life' and European identity.<sup>7</sup> While similar meetings took place before, after 2015 they became regular, annual and more focused on the politics of morality and identity. Archbishop Duka in some interviews explicitly mentioned the influence of other Central European churches and also shared some elements of their rhetorical repertoires ('worse than Nazism and communism'), arguments and topics.

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7 Tetiva, T., 'V Bratislavě se sešli biskupové střední a východní Evropy', *Cirkev.cz*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.cirkev.cz/cs/aktuality/180907v-bratislave-se-sešli-biskupove-stredni-a-vychodni-evropy> (accessed June 26, 2021).

## **Catholicism and National Identity:**

### **Losing Ground**

Unlike the Polish, Croat and, to some extent, Slovak context, the Catholic Church did not become a national church in the Czech Republic (cf. Rupnik 2018, Balík et al. 2015, Nešpor 2011, Pabian 2013). The dominant stream of Czech nationalism had strong anti-Catholic undertones, as the suppressed memory of Czech Protestantism (together with the Hussite tradition) was reconstructed by key national historians and ideologists (Palacký, Masaryk) and occupied a central position in their narratives regarding the ‘nature’ and the ‘meaning’ of Czech history. But there was a paradox since the successful re-Catholicization in the seventeenth century and the effective ideological monopoly of the Catholic Church (albeit partially muted in 1781 by the Patent of Toleration of Joseph II) meant that the great majority of the Czech nation was Catholic, and Catholics (including priests) were also an important part of the national revival movement.

The anti-Catholic accent grew stronger when the Czech nationalists became progressivist and anti-Habsburg, portraying the Catholic Church as loyalist and caught in the ‘alliance of the throne and altar’, as ‘medieval’ and ‘obscurantist’. As the Czech nation constructed itself to some extent as a ‘nation in opposition’ to empire, the majority of political parties included some form of opposition to the Catholic Church, which was on good terms with the empire (cf. Pabian 2013: 97).

Czech nationalist politics and culture in the nineteenth century was deeply influenced by its relationship with German nationalism, especially by the Protestant nationalism of northern Germany (with its *Kulturkampf* and *Los vor Rom!*). At the same time, it was strongly anti-German, which in practical terms meant defining itself in opposition to the Austrian German-speaking monarchy and its strong south German Catholicism.

Tension in the Czech national movement and its paradox – an at least implicitly anti-Catholic ideology in a mostly Catholic nation – was partially visible after 1918. Czechoslovakia’s first president, Tomáš G. Masaryk, founded the new state on ideas of the secularist

reinterpretation of Protestantism and the humanist interpretation of enlightenment and progressivism. Nominally, the great majority of Czechs were Catholic. But the progressive intelligentsia (both liberal and left-wing) was more influential in the new state. Also, to some extent, the Protestants were important, although Protestantism never became the ‘national religion’, of which the traditional Evangelical Czech Brethren – Lutherans and Calvinists united as one church in 1918 – and the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, created by the Czech Catholic priests who left the Catholic Church in 1920, dreamt. Many Catholics (maybe even the majority) became *matrikové katolíci* (registry office Catholics) who were not active churchgoers and did not even have a strong Catholic identity but were considered Catholics in the census because they did not leave the church. A large part of the clergy and Catholic intellectuals identified as a misrepresented minority with a strong resentment towards ‘liberalist’ and, sometimes, even a ‘freemasonic’ or ‘Jewish’ Czechoslovak Republic.

The situation was different from Slovakia. The Protestant minority became an important bearer of Czechoslovakism, but the Catholic Church was representative of the majority of Slovaks, and thus, it became the national church (see Chapter 6).

In the Czech case, the Catholic Church gained hegemony only for a short period of time between Munich (September 1938) and the occupation (March 1939). During that period, it articulated strong resentment towards the secularist First Republic, as well as displaying antisemitic and authoritarian tendencies (Rataj 1997). It thus discredited political and, to some extent, even cultural Catholicism for a long time.

### **Catholicism and Communist Rule: Effective De-Catholicization and Renewal of Legitimacy**

The Communists included the Hussite narrative and anticlerical progressivism in their reconstruction of the Czech national identity (Kopeček 2019, Randák 2015). They made heavy use of the struggle against ‘clero-fascism’ and ‘collaboration’, as well as against ‘clerical obscurantism’.

At the end of the 1940s and in the 1950s, the Catholic Church was subjected to harsh repression. Its property was expropriated, monasteries were violently closed, and many priests, intellectuals and politicians were imprisoned, some even murdered. At the same time, the Communists drastically and, to a degree, successfully modernized the countryside – the traditional base of the Church. This modernization was very often connected with effective de-Catholization.

During the 1970s and 1980s, some Catholics were part of the dissent, and some organized independent criticism and protests (Augustin Navrátil and his petitions for religious freedom). The underground church meanwhile brought together secret bishops, monks and priests (Fiala and Hanuš 1999).

At the same time, the Catholic Church was legal and tried to influence the nation. A ‘decade of spiritual renewal’ was declared by Cardinal Tomášek in 1987 but initiated by underground church activists Tomáš Halík and Petr Pířha. In the streets, the Catholics publicly protested – Cardinal Tomášek spoke on television and Czech and Slovak petitions were signed by thousands – against the full legalization of abortion (in 1986; abortions had been legal since the end of the 1950s but were, in effect, limited by humiliating abortion committees).

### **The Long Nineties: A Subordinate and Unsatisfied Part of Liberal Hegemony**

Catholics visibly participated in the Velvet Revolution and entered the new regime with moral capital brought by their opposition to the communist regime, the popularity of John Paul II and the image of tradition and stability in a time of change. However, the position of the Catholic Church was, in fact, highly ambivalent at this time.

The historical mood was based on ‘destroying myths’ of nationalism and communism (which sometimes implicitly led to Habsburg nostalgia), and the Catholic Church profited from it, especially from revision of the negative view held of the Baroque era. But the church went too far the canonization of Jan Sarkander in 1995 (a provocation of the Czech historical memory of the counter-reformation).

Much more important were non-local problems, especially the general mood of post-modern liberalism, liberation from traditional moral values and relativism. In this context the Catholic Church proposed outdated and problematic positions, especially in the case of family and sexual morality. These are in fact impracticable even for the majority of its members.

Thus, the Czech Catholic Church lost the majority of its legitimacy and moral capital – through its moralism, the conflict between liberals and conservatives in its ranks and, above all, through the struggle for restitution of church property.

The Catholic Church, much weaker than it had been forty years prior, pretended to become an important part of the public debate and to play, in fact, the role awaited by ‘Christianists’: a moral compass, a source of tradition and identity. During the 1990s, both political and intellectual elites (historian Dušan Třeštík, writer Gustav Mahler) reacted by and large negatively to this proposal. In reaction to the demand for a special role in society, the neoliberal prime minister Klaus declared that the churches should have the same role as the associations of gardeners.<sup>8</sup>

The church adapted to these conditions. When the Czech Catholic Church was led by Archbishop Miroslav Vlk (1992–2010), it took on a relatively defensive and defeatist approach and accepted the liberal hegemony. Its most prominent spokesperson was the liberal priest Tomáš Halík, close to President Václav Havel and the liberal camp in Czech society.

### **During the Crisis of Liberalism**

Between 2008 and 2013, three things changed: (1) Some former liberals such as Klaus and later even the left-wing Zeman started to use Christianist and value-laden conservative language; Klaus even publicly encouraged Catholics to be more vocal in defence of conservative values. (2) During Klaus’s period in office, Vlk was replaced as primate of the Czech Catholic Church by the more conservative and vocal Dominik Duka. (3) The question of property restitution was solved

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<sup>8</sup> Later, he said he was not talking about gardeners’ associations, but ramblers’ associations (Vaňáč 2017).

by the liberal right-wing government – together with some real estate, the Catholic Church received financial compensation equal to almost fifty billion Czech crowns to be paid over the next thirty years. This is also a condition for the final separation of the church from the state.

During the same period, the church started to cooperate with some conservative and populist politicians and began to wage culture wars against abortion, same-sex marriage, the Istanbul Convention and so on. Criticism from within the church existed but it was not very strong. When in 2018 a group of liberal and left-wing Catholics published a petition demanding Pope Francis relieve Duka of his archbishop office upon attaining the age of 75, both former President Klaus and President Zeman published statements supporting Duka. The supportive petition was followed by many more signatories (around 3,000) than the original petition (of around 700).

The restitution of church property and financial compensation also took place for Protestant churches and Jewish communities; they received even more than they lost under communist rule. It is probable that Duka wanted to employ this kind of ecumenism (with a leading role played by the Catholic Church) as he is now promoting a joint committee of historians which would deal with re-Catholicization as an extremely painful time in the Czech memory and overcome it.

### **Concluding Debate**

Both Vaňáč and Brubaker are right, there is both influence of local politicians and of general demand for Christianity. But maybe we can say more. Given the historical memory and the state of society, the Catholic Church cannot become a ‘national church’ in the Czech context. But with its resources, it (or an important faction led by key bishops) can work effectively as some form of *social movement organization* which can cooperate in alliance with conservative and populist politicians. It is hard for them, as the ‘silent majority’ evoked by Duka is also one which often hates Catholics and criticizes the restitution of church property.

It is also unrealistic to expect that it can revert the existing level of moral freedom in cases such as abortion rights or tolerance for LGBT+

peoples. But, in alliance with other conservative forces, it may be rather effective in blocking new liberalizing changes, such as the Istanbul Convention or same-sex marriage, and contribute to the articulation of a feeling that liberal freedom has gone ‘too far’. In this role as the *moral lobby*, its unrealistic demands also make complete sense: They move the goalposts of political debate and make the stakes higher.

We could go back to the end of the 1980s and the 1990s and show that the *supply* of Christianity existed on the side of the Catholic Church much *much* sooner than the *demand* for it within (at least one important faction of) secularized society. What failed in the Czech society at the beginning of the 1990s (when the Czech nation did not accept its consecration to the Virgin Mary) and in Europe most visibly in debates about the European constitution, which ended with the refusal to accept the centrality of the Christian legacy, returns in a much more politicized way: as an identitarian source for anti-immigration xenophobia and against new liberal rights from within liberal societies. This demand could even bring about some religious impacts (conversions), but not enough to change the key problem of the Czech Catholic Church. As there is antisemitism (almost) without Jews in some Central European countries and Islamophobia (almost) without Muslims in the Czech Republic, even if Christianity were to be successful in the Czech Republic, it would be Christianity *mostly without* Christians.

The Czech case shows us one paradox of Christianity: It tries to promote Christianity as the cultural basis for the *whole* society (or ‘civilization’), but by promoting this idea, it must lose its political independence and neutrality and *side* intensively *with one political camp* in that society. In the end, it casts the church’s demand to be the spiritual and cultural representative of the society much more in doubt.

### **Instead of a Conclusion: Conservative Anxieties without Conservatism?**

As we can see, the most important issues in the Czech culture wars are issues of identity. They have various versions, but mostly they are connected with the self-conception of the Czech Republic as

a Western country and with the question of migration. In this chapter, it is discussed under the label of Westernism. At the same time, while the debate about the quality of democracy does not have to be understood as an identity issue (since it does not have to be understood as a culture war at all), we will argue that, in this context, it is sometimes transformed into a culture war, as the special concept of liberal democracy becomes an attribute of (Western) identity.

The politics of memory had higher impact during the first and second post-communist decades. They were present both in the form of debate about the communist past and debates about the memory of World War II, especially in the context of the Sudeten Germans. In the third post-communist decade, these topics were present but mostly in new contexts and subordinated positions: Anti-communism is used against the oligarch Babiš for his Communist Party membership and collaboration with the secret police in the 1980s, as well as for his government's collaboration with the Communist Party after 2017. Sometimes, anti-communism is also used to frame Russia and China. However, in these contexts, the Western identity is a more important dimension of the conflict than memory. The presence of Sudeten Germans also becomes important in some episodes, but their importance is much less than in the 1990s and 2000s; meanwhile new, alien dangers – Muslims – were exchanged for them. But this menace to Western identity did not come from the national past but from the imagined future.

The politics of morality have become much stronger now, both in terms of public prominence, mobilization of actors (public visibility and the conservative stance of the Catholic Church) and results (same-sex marriage, the Istanbul Convention). To some extent, we can attribute this rise in the politics of morality to the changed social climate, the rise of various actors' conservative intuition and the transformation of the Catholic Church. It can also be understood as a reaction to liberal political actors as well as relatively successful or courageous feminists and LGBT+ activists and the Europeanization of part of their agenda. And yet, at the same time, we see that the politics of morality has become relatively strong at precisely the same moment where they can be connected

with the politics of identity (the criticism of feminism for destroying ‘the old, good West’ as we have known it and the framing of anti-abortion protests via criticism of migration by Archbishop Duka).

Until now, conservative declinism has not succeeded as a separate political force. Its political formations combined mostly neoliberal/right-wing libertarian Euroscepticism with conservative declinism and failed electorally (Svobodní, Realisté, Trikolóra)

But this indicator, of course, can work only partially. As we have seen, many political parties as well as public intellectuals have adopted the logic of culture wars. To some extent, the logic of declinism does not need to be promoted by a new political formation with a specific programme, as it has been brought into the mainstream by a plethora of actors.

The really open question is the shape of the opposite, ‘liberal’ camp. Various discourse coalitions were able to ridicule the Islamophobes and mobilize mass protests to defend ‘liberal democracy’ against ‘oligarchical usurpation’ or smaller protests against ‘fascists’ (members of conservative civil society) in media regulatory councils. But they are also not able to target the declinist diagnosis and face it at full scale, partly because they have their own variant of declinism: The story about the loss of Havel’s liberal paradise in the first two transformation decades.

Thus, can we speak about populism without culture wars, or at least culture war with very muted importance? There are some arguments for this thesis: Above all the character of Czech populism, in its main form, is technocratic not national conservative. Its leader Andrej Babiš is very skilful at manoeuvring between various sides of the culture wars, and he includes some elements of the declinist imagination in a very subordinate role to his general picture, which is optimistic, based on hard work and the prospects of a bright future.

His embrace of national conservatism in the culture wars currently seems like tactical opportunism, the same kind of opportunism which has previously cast him as a ‘third party’ nestled between the liberals and conservatives. But this view can be slightly changed if we take into serious consideration that conflicts about the quality

of democracy or the perception of the West and the European Union can be and often are perceived by its participants as a culture war. The struggle against ‘populists’ or ‘elites’ can work as a substitution for ethical and moral conflict – be the topic the ‘struggle against corruption’ or the ‘defence of democracy’, they share the absence of a possibility for compromise and an absence of space that is the nature of culture wars. When two anti-corruption movements clash with each other (the Pirates and ANO), culture war can become a good strategy to differentiate and mobilize around. But Czech politics do not provide only for this kind of struggle. Strong Euroscepticism (stronger even than in the case of Poland and Hungary) also works here, and it intervenes into actual debates about the decline of the West. Other elements like ethnic nationalism, sexism, homophobia and conservative Catholicism are very muted but present. They result in posing important limits on the sphere of possibility for many liberal/progressive forces, both domestic and/or of the EU, whether help for refugees, the Istanbul Convention or same-sex marriage.

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## 6/ Anti-gender Campaigns in Slovakia and the Dissolution of the Liberal-Conservative Alliance

*Jana Vargovčíková*

On a snowy evening in February 2018, ten thousand people gathered in the main street of Košice, the second largest city in Slovakia and situated in the south-east, near the border with Hungary. As in many other main squares around the country that evening, the city centre filled with crowds in what became the biggest demonstration since the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Participants came to express their indignation at the brutal assassination of the journalist Ján Kuciak, who had investigated a number of corruption schemes with links to government officials, and his fiancée on 21 February. At that very same moment, on the other end of Košice's main street, a smaller crowd gathered in front of the Constitutional Court and, at first sight, only seemed to have mistaken the gathering point of that day's event. Upon closer examination, however, the group of about forty people was centred around a priest and engaged in their weekly protest against the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and its supposed propagation of a 'gender ideology'. The juxtaposition of these two protests calls into question the place and salience of 'culture wars' in post-1989 Slovak history.

The parallel occurrence of the two mobilizations in the same space and time, literally as well as in terms of their political and social context, is revelatory. They represent two competing articulations of the priorities and threats in the country's future. On both sides of the street, participants claimed they had come for the well-being of their children, and, on both sides, their claims were framed as apolitical, driven by moral judgement and a sense of what is right. The competition between the two was not explicit, and their

audiences may even have overlapped in part. After all, the participants of the 2018 and 2019 protests under the main slogan ‘For a decent Slovakia’ were not all necessarily in favour of same-sex marriage or adoption rights.<sup>1</sup> In a country of five million, 75% declare themselves to be Christian<sup>2</sup> and more than 40% regularly attend religious services<sup>3</sup> – the Catholic Church, too, has been vocal in its opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage. However, it was the participants of the ‘anti-gender’ protest who devoted their time and energy to showing that morality politics should be the country’s top priority.

Why and how has the anti-liberal agenda gained such political salience in Slovakia over the past decade? To answer this question, this chapter analyses anti-gender campaigns within the context of Slovakia’s political evolution since the 1990s, in particular the dissolution of the liberal-conservative alliance following accession to the European Union. This approach complements the recent literature on new conservative politics and anti-gender mobilizations in Central Europe that focuses on slightly different questions, such as how opposition to gender equality has impacted actors in the women’s movement (Krizsán and Popa 2018) and how anti-gender mobilizations participate in the transformation of conservative politics in Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). It also contributes to the literature on opposition to gender equality in Slovakia by looking at developments posterior to the 2014 constitutional change defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman and the 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage, adoption and sexual education in schools analysed elsewhere (Valkovičová 2017, Libáková et al. 2019, Ďurinová 2015).

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1 According to the 2019 Eurobarometer survey on the rights of LGBTI people, only 31% of respondents in Slovakia thought gay people should have the same rights as heterosexual people, a decrease of support for same-sex couples’ rights compared to 36% in a comparable 2015 Eurobarometer survey (Eurobarometer 2015; 2019).

2 As opposed to only 13.4% declaring themselves to be atheist (2011 census). Cf. Czech Republic, where a much more secularized ‘anti-gender’ campaign took place, with, according to the 2011 Czech census, only 13.9% declaring themselves to be of any religious denomination (not only Christian), 34.2% declaring themselves to be atheist and 45% not answering the question. For more on the Czech case, see the chapter by Ondřej Slačálek in this book.

3 According to a 2014 representative survey based on 1,215 respondents, 40.6% said they attended a religious service at least once per month, and one in five respondents said they attended a religious service every week (Tížik and Zeman 2017: 119).

While paying attention to the transnational character of anti-gender campaigns, it stresses the meaning-making work of national actors and the importance of national structures of political opportunity, in line with the approach of David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). In sum, this chapter looks at the anti-gender campaign as a case of mobilization among conservative elites and places it in the context of a history of alliances and competitions between liberalism and conservatism in Slovakia. This sheds fresh light on the anti-gender campaign not as a part of a backlash following a period of liberal consensus (Dawson and Hanley 2016) but rather an expression of the crisis and competition among conservative elites following the dissolution of the 1990s and early 2000s liberal-conservative alliance.

By 'culture wars', a term that has also been adopted by the actors of the disputes themselves in order to label the novel translation of political conflict into cultural conflict, we mean a particular set of strategies for framing disputes and mobilizing popular support, dramatizing disputes as 'a more encompassing struggle for the past and the future of a given community, aiming at creating an ideological hegemony by stressing the fundamental incompatibility of visions' (Trencsényi 2014). It is not used in the strong sense of nineteenth century 'conflicts that embrace virtually every sphere of social life: schools, universities, the press, marriage and gender relations, burial sites, associational culture, the control of public space, folk memory, symbols of nationhood' (Clark and Kaiser 2003) and so forth. In the Slovak case, the situation is rather one of elites using a culturalist framing of their agendas to fit, among other things, the 'apolitical politics' tradition of legitimate opposition to government or of legitimate civic mobilization. In a sense, then, the Slovak culture wars are much closer to some of the contemporary analyses of US culture wars as elite strategies of political polarization amid the tempered and not fully consistent attitudes of the public (Thomson 2010).

Positions and opinions on issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage are thus understood as temporary products of the strategies of political elites engaged in a competition for maintaining or

improving their position in the Slovak political field. In a political sociology perspective formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, the political field is understood as a particular space of social activity with its own rules and its own hierarchy of resources, valid for gaining and maintaining a position in the field that is relative to the position of other actors (Bourdieu 2001). In a space thus structured by the positions of actors competing for political power, the main type of capital determining the position in the political field is political capital, linked to the capacity of an actor to gather and mobilize popular support. The added value of this approach to studying the anti-gender campaigns is its serious consideration of the effects of competition for power on the scale and intensity of the mobilizations around moral issues. The perspective of the political field helps to explain in particular why a transnational campaign has a much stronger impact in one country than in another that is otherwise comparable, here in terms of religiosity and the role of the Catholic Church in society, for instance. It requires us to pay attention to the policy and moral entrepreneurs (Kingdon 1995; Becker 1963) of the anti-gender campaign, to where they come from, to how they connect morality politics to identity and memory politics in mobilizing popular indignation and, finally, to how they reframe political conflicts as cultural ones.

The empirical material the chapter is based on comprises a database of profiles and careers of the leaders of organizations engaged in the anti-gender campaign protesting the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, as well as a corpus of texts produced by key actors during the campaign and, in particular, among Catholic elites, including publications on social media. The main focus is on a period of mass mobilization regarding ‘gender ideology’, stretching from 2016 and ending with the parliamentary elections of February 2020.

The chapter is organized as follows: The first part tries to explain the success of the anti-gender campaign in Slovakia by situating it in the country’s recent political history, stressing its link to the end of the liberal-conservative alliance that brought the country into the European Union in 2004. The second part then presents the campaign’s main entrepreneurs, their backgrounds and the way in which

the national campaign used resources available via the transnational opposition movement to the Istanbul Convention at that time. The third and last part then analyses the anti-gender campaign also as a new site for the revival of the country's traditional East/West political cleavage.

### **Cooking the Culture Wars: Morality Politics, Politics of Memory and Politics of Identity**

The term 'gender ideology' at the centre of mobilizations was imported by the Slovak Catholic Church and activists around 2012 and appeared in 2013 in a pastoral letter that mentioned it as connected to a term introduced by Pope John Paul II in the 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, 'the culture of death':

Followers of the culture of death are coming up with a new 'gender ideology'. In its name, they want to enforce so-called gender equality. A person hearing this term for the first time thinks that it is a matter of recognizing the same rights and the same dignity for men and women. But these groups [...] want to convince us that none of us exists by nature as a man or as a woman, so they want to deprive a man of the right to the identity of a man and a woman of the right to the identity of a woman and family the right to the identity of the family, so that a man no longer feels like a man, a woman as a woman and, regarding marriage, so that it is no longer the God-blessed exclusive communion of man and woman, but they want to promote the communion of two men or two women on the same level as marriage. Thus, a kind of Sodom mockery arises, opposing God's will and preparing God's punishment. [...] The culture of death really threatens the existence of a nation. [...] We should therefore reject the manifestations of the culture of death in its infancy. Only a candidate who rejects a culture of death can get our vote in any election. To do otherwise would be to despise those of our ancestors who laid down their lives for the good of their homeland.<sup>4</sup>

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4 The pastoral letter was read out in churches around the country on 1 December 2013. Available at <https://www.kbs.sk/obsah/sekcia/h/dokumenty-a-vyhlasenia/p/pastierske-listy-konferencie-biskupov-slovenska/c/pastiersky-list-na-prvu-adventnu-nedelu-2013> (accessed September 10, 2020).

In depicting gender ideology as an acute threat to individuals' lifestyles, their understandings of themselves and the social recognition they enjoy, the Catholic Church embarked on an active campaign of both mass mobilization and lobbying. At the policy level, opposition to gender equality policies first concentrated on fighting a human rights strategy drafted for the years 2014–19, without however reaching mass mobilization. After a shift of focus in 2016 to a transnational policy goal – the Istanbul Convention (IC) on violence against women – activists and conservative political parties started asking for the country not to ratify the convention and succeeded in mobilizing thousands of people to sign petitions and attend public marches.

While all three axes in the culture wars referred to in the introduction of this volume – identity, the past and morality – have been present in Slovakia, morality related issues have probably been most successful in mass mobilization and most influential in their impact on the political field. This success of the anti-gender mobilizations needs to be read in the context of the relation between religion and nation-building in Slovak history<sup>5</sup> and in the context of crisis within the traditional Christian democratic political party.

### **Historical Antecedents to the Twenty-First Century Culture Wars: Religion as an Undisputed Foundation of National Identity in the Quarrel between Liberals and Conservatives**

Whereas the identification of Polish national identity with Catholicism seems to have taken root in the nineteenth century, fuelled by discrimination and prosecution of Catholics by occupying empires (Prussia, Russia), no such clear-cut identification was established in the Slovak case. Throughout the nineteenth century, Catholicism was the religion of Vienna and Calvinism that of Budapest. If a predominantly 'Slovak' denomination were to be found, then it was that of evangelical Christians. Their national engagement was explicit, for instance, when they refused to form a 'Protestant union' with

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5 In line with Anna Grzymala-Busse's (2015) approach explaining the influence of the Catholic Church and religion on politics.

Hungarian Calvinists, mostly in order to not compromise Slovak claims for more linguistic and national autonomy.<sup>6</sup> However, even though most of the political elites of the autonomist movement were evangelists, many of them priests,<sup>7</sup> the majority of the Slovak population was Catholic<sup>8</sup> and commonly voted for Hungarian candidates to the kingdom's parliament in Budapest, disregarding local Slovak candidates. No symmetry comparable to that of the Polish case existed therefore between Catholicism and national identity. Culture, mostly as manifested in language and religious tradition, was nevertheless defined as the core of Slovak demands for autonomy in a situation where individual cultural and religious rights were the maximum that Hungarian authorities were ready to acknowledge. As Pieter M. Judson pointed out, the focus of political struggles on culture was not only a logical consequence for a population with no history of past political autonomy but also due to the structure of political opportunities that Hungarian political authorities as well as its courts provided for claims of collective rights (Judson 2016). The latter did not recognize the political rights of Slovaks and refused to acknowledge them as a separate 'nationality' within the Kingdom of Hungary but did however recognize the plurilingual character of the state and individual cultural and religious rights. The claims of the autonomist movements thus centred around culture and made the possibility of learning in Slovak and speaking in Slovak within the local administration the main focus of political struggles.

The quarrel between liberals and conservatives at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was in part about the relation of religion and science, with liberals criticizing their dissociation and calling for rational judgment to be allowed into conflicts

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6 The first Slovak political protests (e.g., opposition to the Protestant union project in the 1830s, *Prestolný prosbopis*, 1842) were strongly linked to attempts at Magyarization through religion. Strong overlaps between claims of national autonomy and religious autonomy can thus be observed starting in the early nineteenth century (Škvarna 2007).

7 E.g., Ján Kollár, Jozef Miloslav Hurban, Michal Miloslav Hodža, Ludovít Štúr and Samo Chalupka.

8 In 1890, Roman Catholics represented 47.8% of the population in the Slovak territory alongside 14.6% Calvinists, 13.6% Orthodox Christians, 11% Greek Catholics, 7.8% Lutherans and 4.7% Jews (Roman Holec in Ivantýšynová 2007: 65).

over religious issues. Perhaps even more importantly, the strife was about attitudes towards Western modernity and opposition to proponents of modernization of the Slovak society looking Westwards as well as pan-Slavists looking for a normative horizon and a path towards modernity through a community of Slavic peoples. Messianism, a particular political and literary style of romanticism ascribing to a nation a particular mission and usually dependent on the emergence of a messiah-like personality to lead the change, was characteristic of both. Michal Miloslav Hodža, a representative of the Slovak emancipation movement, argued, for instance, that the poverty experienced by the Slovak people was intended by God, that Slovaks suffered for other Slavic peoples and were thus taking part in a necessary ‘renaissance of Slavic peoples in a community of European nations assembled in a faith in Christ’ (Goszczyńska 2009), a Christian Austria being the chosen patria of Slavic peoples for Hodža, while others looked towards Russia.

In sum, whereas divisions over a westward or eastward orientation of national politics were already rife at the end of the nineteenth century<sup>9</sup>, opposition to a moral grounding in religious collective identity was never politically significant. According to the historian Ľubomír Lipták, a secular Slovak identity only emerged in the 1960s (Lipták 2019). In other words, liberals of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century were rarely secularists, and conservatives never went the full way in secularizing their political discourse and repertoires of action, unlike their Czech counterparts. After 1989 then, the relation between ‘culture’ and Christianity had not been politicized as a problem. Unlike in Poland, the society also did not become strongly divided on issues related to ‘morality politics’, and no political parties succeeded in elections with an outwardly anti-clerical programme<sup>10</sup>. This by no means suggests an uninterrupted

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9 Conflicts about the political conception of national emancipation already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century comprise, for instance, opposition between the ‘national poet’, Svetozár Hurban Vajanský (1847–1916), and his liberal critics or the young intellectual elite which gathered around the review *Hlas* (1898–1904) against the Slovak national party created in 1871 (see Klobucký 2006).

10 Except for short-lived political projects such as the explicitly secular ANO party (represented in the parliament and in the second Dzurinda government in 2002–2006); cf. Wiosna, Ruch Palikota in Poland.

continuity of cleavages, collective identities and mobilization strategies from the mid-nineteenth century to the contemporary anti-gender campaigns. However, for post-1989 political elites, they nevertheless constituted an important resource and constraint.

### **The post-1989 Liberal-Conservative Alliance**

In the aftermath of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia (1993), and especially after the 1994 parliamentary elections, the Slovak government fell into the hands of Vladimír Mečiar, a prime minister at the helm of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS; Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko) described as semi-autocratic. Unlike its neighbours, Slovakia experienced severe setbacks regarding democracy and the rule of law during this period and saw the prospect of accession to the European Union driven away. The main political divide of the 1990s was thus between the supporters of Mečiar and his opponents coming from both left and right, liberal and conservative camps.

The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH; Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie) acted as the strongest opposition party to Mečiar<sup>11</sup> while harbouring competing groups of both more pragmatic and liberal Christian democrats and ultra-conservatives. In the 1998 parliamentary elections, Mečiar was defeated by a broad alliance of five opposition parties where representatives of KDH played key roles. The Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK; Slovenská demokratická koalícia), as a Slovak version of a liberal-conservative alliance for transition, governed until 2006, accomplishing EU accession and introducing a series of neoliberal reforms. Even after their division into a younger and more liberal party in 2000 – the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ; Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia) around Mikuláš Dzurinda – and a more conservative party dominated by pre-1989 Catholic dissidents (the remains

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11 Created in February 1990 by personalities among the Catholic dissidents, it came second in the June 1990 elections, with 19.21% after the broad coalition, Public Against Violence (VPN; Verejnosť proti násiliu) – made up of Velvet Revolution personalities and which would later transform itself into Vladimír Mečiar's HZDS – and their 29.3 5% (Bobula 2001).

of KDH), Christian democrats led the coalition government, embodying the desire of the majority of the population to accomplish the political transformation and ‘catch up’ with the West.

In sum, anti-Mečiarism acted as a ‘glue’,<sup>12</sup> binding liberals and conservatives together and dimming the relevance of morality politics that would have weakened the governing coalition. With the progressive dissolution of the liberal-conservative alliance, not unrelated to the accomplishment of a ‘return to Europe’, conservative elites found themselves looking for a new programme and turned to morality politics as a rediscovered ‘glue’, justifying a claim to represent the ‘Christian voice’ in politics in continuity with the Catholic dissidents’ pre-1989 pro-life positions.<sup>13</sup> The party was in crisis, weakened by years spent in government implementing neoliberal reforms (1998–2006). Some of its key figures quit in 2008 (František Mikloško, Vladimír Palko), 2012 (Daniel Lipšic) and 2014 (Ján Čarnogurský), opening the ground for competitors from the fringes of politics to claims of better representing the Christian voice. The radicalization of views on morality issues was paradoxically also prompted by the fact that conservatism, as opposed to cultural liberalism, had been the common feature, a constant, in all governing formations since 1989 and not a distinctive feature of KDH – Mečiar himself did not espouse culturally liberal politics and enjoyed the relative support of some of the Catholic Church’s representatives (Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec, for instance)<sup>14</sup>

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12 A reference to the metaphorical characterization of gender ideology as a symbolic ‘glue’ that holds together a varied coalition of social and political actors in the anti-gender campaigns of Central Europe, as used by Andrea Pető in a report on anti-gender politics in France, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, edited by Eszter Kováts and Maari Pöim (Kováts and Pöim 2015: 126–31).

13 Indeed, in reaction to the Czechoslovak communist government’s 1986 bill on abortions that aimed to liberalize them (women would no longer have to undergo an examination of their demand in front of a committee), Catholic dissidents gathered more than six thousand signatures calling on the Slovak prime minister of the federal republic to stop the bill. As the historian Miloslav Szabó observes (Szabó 2020: 99–100), the petitioners used the discourse of human rights (of the unborn), mirroring use of the same discourse by the communist government (rights of women).

14 Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec supported Mečiar’s government, whereas the then president of the Conference of the Bishops of Slovakia, Bishop Rudolf Baláž, was critical of Mečiar and became the target of media attacks and propaganda.

even though, already at the time, ultra-conservative groups were not happy with Mečiar's strategic use of religious references.<sup>15</sup> In the 2016 elections, for the first time since 1990, KDH lost all of its seats in the parliament. This moment coincides with the beginning of an intense mobilization against the Istanbul Convention. The campaign, initiated by a coalition of conservative civic organizations called the Alliance for the Family (Aliancia za rodinu), linked morality politics with discourses on identity and the past in what became one of the most persistent and successful mass mobilizations of the post-1989 history.

### **Politics of Memory and Identity as Resources for Morality Politics**

Opposition to 'gender ideology' in the anti-IC campaign has been justified by references to the past (and future) of the polity, making memory veins (*gisements mémoriels*; Bonnard and Mink 2010) a resource for its entrepreneurs and opponents. Periods, events or places that are part of a collective memory are thus represented as related to contemporary issues in order to mobilize the public. As Mink and Neumayer (2013) summarize, 'Certain representations of historical facts, internalised through formal or informal socialisation (schooling, family), have the collective mobilisation potential to enable the group making strategic use of them to obtain the political influence it desires.' Similarly, representations of what differentiates insiders of a community from its Others are mobilized in anti-gender campaigns.

The mobilizing potential of memory veins such as the communist past, the 1989 Velvet Revolution or the creation of the First Slovak Republic in 1939, a fascist satellite state of Nazi Germany, thus depends on the meanings these periods are ascribed at present. In this sense, 'history is welcome in the present' (Mink 2008: 469). As in other countries, anti-gender campaigners have labelled

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15 In a letter to Mečiar from October 1996, Anton Čulen, an ultra-conservative activist, a collaborator with the Catholic dissident personality Anton Selecký and, later, founder of the Alliance for Sunday (a member organization of the anti-gender coalition since 2016), criticized Mečiar's attacks on KDH and the Church, calling him a 'neo-communist' (Letter from Anton Čulen to the Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, 24 October 1996, doc. No. 2212/96-Se, Slovak National Archive, archive of the Office of the Government (*Úrad vlády*), box 208).

organizations promoting gender equality as ‘totalitarian’, following in the footsteps of the social engineering policies of the communist regime. On the other hand, defenders of gender equality policies have labelled the charismatic priest leader of the anti-gender campaign, Marián Kuffa, as a ‘clerofascist’ in reference to the role of the clergy in the WWII Slovak state, presided over by a Catholic priest, Jozef Tiso.

However, parallels between Marián Kuffa and early twentieth-century priest-politicians also appear in a positive sense, reflecting the ongoing strife in Slovak society over the interpretation of the role of the Slovak Popular Party (SLS, *Slovenská ľudová strana*) in governing the WWII fascist state in Slovak history. For instance, one of the post-1989 leaders of KDĽ, former Catholic dissident and Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic (1991–92) Ján Čarnogurský, compared Marián Kuffa to the priest-politician Andrej Hlinka, the founder and leader of the Slovak Popular Party until his death in 1938. In a Facebook post, Čarnogurský wrote that Kuffa’s methods of mobilization strongly reminded him of what his father had told him about Hlinka’s methods – combining masses and public marches – then going on to suggestively remind that Hlinka had built the strongest Slovak political party to date.<sup>16</sup> As Hlinka was not alive for the acceptance of Hitler’s offer to Josef Tiso of 13 March 1939 to create a Slovak state carved out of interwar Czechoslovakia, this positive comparison bore less controversy than the negative comparisons of Kuffa to Tiso himself as president of the WWII Slovak state. Some of the anti-IC campaigning organizations have been less careful, however. The Alliance for Sunday (*Aliancia za nedelu*), advocating for the introduction of a work-free Sunday, celebrated the eightieth anniversary of the Slovak state’s creation in 2019 by reproducing mottos of the fascist state and portraits of both Hlinka and Tiso.

The 1989 revolution and its symbols also impregnate the political strategies of anti-gender campaigners and their opponents. The pro-life organization Forum for Life (*Fórum života*), for instance, used the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution (November 17) to

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<sup>16</sup> Facebook post, May 2, 2018.

present the fight against abortions as a necessary continuation of the 1989 struggles. By organizing a march on 2 November 2019 named 'A Candle for Unborn Children', it referred to the candle as a symbol of the pacific opposition to the communist regime in Slovakia, and especially to the thirtieth anniversary of the candle demonstration of March 1988 in Bratislava when Catholic dissidents organized a gathering for religious and civic freedoms, one of the most important public manifestations of opposition to the communist regime in Slovakia.

Identity politics has also been mobilized by parts of the political elite to justify opposition to the Istanbul Convention. One of the new ultra-conservative parties created in the wake of the anti-gender campaigns said they sought to 'protect Europe' simultaneously against 'the Islamization of Europe' thus preventing it from 'turning into Eurabia', and against 'fascist liberalism', the latter comprising 'abortions, euthanasia and then welcoming migrants [...], gender ideology and feminism, [...] pushing for the selfish interests of minorities [...] and a bureaucratic state apparatus controlling everyone and everything'.<sup>17</sup>

More secular political actors linked opposition to the IC and opposition to migration as well. The then Prime Minister Róbert Fico, for instance, famously justified his government's decision of February 2018 not to ratify the IC by stating that if Slovak women needed protection, it was first and foremost protection from migrants:

I understand one of the motives of the Istanbul Convention is to have a clear defence of women's rights. All the more so because Europeans are increasingly made up of migrants who often carry cultural and social patterns from their countries of origin. The woman is often seen as inferior in these, and the man is allowed to treat her as he pleases, playing both the role of a judge and of executioner in the family.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Dominik, T., 'Islamizácia Európy sa dá odvrátiť konkrétnymi rozhodnutiami', *Svetlo sveta*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.svetlosveta.sk/najnovsieblogy/islamizacia-europy-sa-da-odvratit-konkretnymi-rozhodnutiami/> (accessed 7 September 2020).

18 'Fico nedá súhlas na ratifikáciu Istanbulského dohovoru, prekáža mu definícia manželstva', *SME*, February 22, 2018, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20766569/fico-odmietol-ratifikovat-istanbulsky-dohovor-v-sucasnej-podobе.html#ixzz5X94mZavc> (accessed September 7, 2020).

Another secular politician using the IC controversy to communicate his attitude on the issue of migration was the leader of the neoliberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS; Sloboda a Solidarita) party who used the same argument but in support of ratification; Richard Sulík called on the government to ratify the IC by referring to its protection of Slovak society from ‘foreign cultural influences [stating forced marriage, child marriage and genital mutilation] that come to Europe through migration, and against which Europe must fight as one man’.<sup>19</sup>

The third type of political actor that founded their position towards the IC on an identity-centred discourse was the radical right party People’s Party – Our Slovakia (LSNS; Ludová strana – Naše Slovensko), led by Marián Kotleba, which stressed the need to protect Slovak society from Western liberalism and, even more particularly, from the ‘perversities’ coming from ‘the West’. With no mentions of God, the Church’s policies or the Pope’s declarations, the party’s MPs and MEPs joined the fight against the IC to protect ‘our civilisation’ against ‘neo-Marxist’ influences that go against common sense; ‘normal’, ‘traditional’ and ‘rational’ notions of two biological sexes; and ‘natural roles’, such as the that of a ‘strong, protective man providing for his family’ and of a ‘woman giving life to children and bringing them up’.<sup>20</sup> However, the party was a rather pragmatic latecomer to the fight against ‘gender ideology’<sup>21</sup> once it realized what mobilization potential it harboured.

### **Protecting ‘Traditional Family’: The Mobilization Strategy of Old and New Conservative Elites**

The first mass mobilization campaigns on morality issues started in 2013 around the definition of marriage. The Catholic Church asked for an amendment to the constitution so as to define marriage as

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19 ‘Sulík podporil Istanbulský dohovor a žiada Fica, aby ho nasledoval’, *SME*, September 13, 2017. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20648366/sulik-podporil-istanbulsky-dohovor-a-ziada-fica-aby-ho-nasledoval.html> (accessed September 7, 2020).

20 The speech of MP Milan Mazurek (LSNS) in the Slovak National Council, 43<sup>rd</sup> Session, March 29, 2019.

21 The party’s 2016 electoral programme, while anti-IC petition and marches were already well underway, still bore no mention of gender ideology.

a union of a man and a woman, thus barring the route to a potential legal recognition of same-sex marriage. At the time, the country had been governed since 2006 (with a brief interlude in 2010–12) by a secular social democratic party also described as populist, SMER-SD,<sup>22</sup> that was a proponent of a separation between church and state at the beginning of the 2000s but not once it came back to power in 2012. Even though the party's leader had explicitly presented himself as a 'fierce atheist' and remained neutral on a number of morality issues for a long time, at this point the party made a concession to the Church and partnered with KDH to adopt the proposed constitutional change in the parliament in 2014. In the years that followed, the organizers pushed the agenda further and asked for a clear exclusion of any possibility of same-sex marriage and adoptions. This time, however, the lead role was taken over by a coalition of Christian civic organizations established for the purpose in 2014 named Alliance for the Family.

At that point, KDH had already undergone a series of crises and lost most of its prominent figures (see above). The party had then been in opposition since 2012 and, prior to that, part of the right-wing coalition government led by Iveta Radičová, a short-lived (2010–2012) government that embodied the weakening of the liberal-conservative compromise. While the party was torn apart as regards its political positioning, a new type of leadership emerged around issues related to the defence of a 'traditional family', using existing the anti-gender policies of the Catholic Church and mobilization tools such as Marches for Life, mass petitions and social media campaigns. Unlike the divided leadership of the traditional party, the new leadership emerged from pro-life organizations, charismatic communities of worship, the peripheries of KDH and from local-level politics. Taking

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22 *Smer* is not an acronym but the Slovak word for 'direction'. SD stands for 'social democracy'. The party was founded in 1999 mostly by former members of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL Strana demokratickej ľavice), a party which had assembled reformist communists from the pre-1989 period. Its social democratic character mainly resides in its stress on the importance of the welfare state, which has however increasingly coincided with a nationalist discourse and a culturally conservative discourse that have inspired observers to call the party populist (see the introduction to this book for a well-founded criticism of such a confusion, however).

morality issues out of the realm of disputes on the future of the KDH party, this emerging leadership contributed to framing them as a matter of culture, identity and moral consciousness, thus to framing political conflicts as moral and cultural issues.

### **A New Christian Political Elite Rising from Organized Civil Society**

In 2014, Alliance for the Family launched a petition calling for a national referendum on ‘the protection of the traditional family’. Their campaign gathered more than four hundred thousand signatures, and even though the referendum was unsuccessful – invalid due to insufficiently high turnout (21.41%) – it was an empowering campaigning experience for a wide range of activists. Approximately a year after the failed referendum, the organizers shifted focus to a different target: the Istanbul Convention on the prevention of violence against women. Although ultra-conservative interest groups had already lobbied against the IC in 2013, winning a postponement of the ratification process from the government, a public campaign was only started in 2015 – the repertoire of action adopted for the marriage referendum campaign (petition, wide coalition of civic organizations), as well as the experience of the first Marches for Life in 2013 and 2015, was thus mobilized towards a new goal.

This time, the Alliance for the Family created an even wider coalition of campaigners called the Slovak Convention for the Family (SCFF; Slovenský dohovor za rodinu). A number of representatives of the SCFF have since become quasi-political or political figures. The alliance’s leader, Anton Chromík, a pro-life lawyer once close to KDH who also graduated in theology, emerged as one of the new representatives of the Christian voice in the public space. Cofounder and spokesperson of the alliance Anna Verešová, otherwise a pro-life civic activist and social worker, was elected MP in 2016 on the list of OLaNO, the ideologically loose, centrist, populist party of businessman MP Igor Matovič that had already brought to the parliament a number of conservative personalities from the organized civil society. In 2019, she left for KDH and has since been a regional deputy. Eva Grey, a doctor, university professor and pro-life activist

married to a former advisor of one of the leading KDH figures Ján Čarnogurský, was also an active leader in the alliance and a local KDH politician (2010–14) before being elected as vice-president of the party in 2016. Often, other leaders of the SCFF's member organizations were lawyers, university professors or doctors with multiple forms of engagement in the sphere of Christian associations, many having a spouse equally active in one of the associations. Overlaps with partisan politics were frequent, mainly with the two parties already mentioned, OĽaNO and KDH. Multiple membership and political engagement, implying a familiarity with campaigning as well as the political capital necessary for successful lobbying, were thus frequent in the population of those contributing to the anti-gender campaign.

As regards the difference from the earlier 2014–15 referendum campaign, in 2016, the Alliance for the Family joined forces with Marián Kuffa, a publicly known priest from Žakovce, a small village in eastern Slovakia. The charismatic priest was already famous thanks to stories published in the press, documentary films and TV reports about the social and charity work he had been carrying out for a community of the socially excluded. At the time he entered the campaign, he was widely acclaimed for the work that his centre, the Institute of Christ the High Priest, had accomplished with local Roma communities, former convicts and other marginalized groups. Upon entering cooperation with the SCFF, Marián Kuffa started preaching profusely about the dangers of 'gender ideology', organizing marches and distributing a petition. However, according to the priest's own account, one of the persons who motivated him to take up the issue was his brother, Štefan Kuffa, director of a hospice in a small eastern Slovakian town and, at the time, an elected MP on OĽaNO's party list (2012). When the campaign against the IC started, Štefan Kuffa was going through a serious crisis in his political career. He faced de facto exclusion from the OĽaNO party<sup>23</sup> and

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23 Formally, it was he who left the party after tensions with the party leader Igor Matovič and especially after the party presidency decided not to put him on the electoral list in the 2016 parliamentary elections. This followed an episode of public discrediting of Kuffa after he had used his legal parliamentary immunity in a private

subsequently failed in an attempt to get re-elected in March 2016 on KDH's list.

The third key actor in the mobilization against 'gender ideology' was the Catholic Church. The Conference of Bishops of Slovakia (Konferencia biskupov Slovenska) did not quite replicate the belligerent rhetoric of the SCFF, yet it provided financial and public support to the campaign. Large format banners functioning as invitations to demonstrations against the IC were placed at the entrances of churches, and the Church also used its specific modes of action to lobby the government and legitimize the campaigners, such as pastoral letters and official meetings with government representatives. Such use of pastoral letters was not new. In 2002, the Conference of Bishops had warned against EU policies on the rights of LGBT individuals (Valkovičová 2017). The Conference of Bishops was also one of the main organizers of the Marches for Life taking place in Košice (in 2013, with an estimated 80,000 participants) and Bratislava (in 2015 and 2019, each time with approx. 50,000 participants) and issued pastoral letters inviting Catholics to take part in the march. A week before the 2015 referendum, another pastoral letter called upon voters to oppose same-sex marriage, same-sex couples' adoption rights and sexual education in schools.

These positions then made the Church a natural ally of anti-gender campaigners. On 25 November 2016, the president of the Conference of Bishops published a declaration against the IC asking the government to stop its ratification. On 13 February 2018, the Catholic Church was supported by ten other Christian churches (unlike in the Czech Republic where Protestant churches principally stayed out of the campaign) in its official call on the prime minister to stop IC ratification.

In less than two years of campaigning, the organizers obtained a declaration from Prime Minister Róbert Fico that the IC would not be

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conflict - in a dispute with the neighbours of his son's illegally constructed house in a north-eastern Slovakian village, he was said to have physically attacked an elderly lady who then responded with a slap, following which Kuffa sued her for attacking a state official.

ratified since it was ‘contrary to the definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman’.<sup>24</sup> The prime minister announced his decision at a press conference on the day following the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, 22 February 2018. The campaign continued asking for a guarantee that the ratification process would be stopped. The NGO coalition also found allies in the parliament and obtained a resolution, massively approved by 101 of the 133 MPs present, against the ratification of the IC.<sup>25</sup> The parliamentary resolution did not have implications in legal terms but was an indisputable demonstration of the campaigners’ capacity to bargain with political parties.

After this success and in the wake of EU elections in May 2019 as well as in preparation for the country’s parliamentary elections in February 2020, some of the campaigning organizations shifted their focus to the pro-life agenda that had disappeared from sight since the launch of the anti-IC campaign in 2016. In continuity with their success from spring 2019, the organizations were effective in compelling two of the three governing parties, SMER and the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS; Slovenská národná strana), to propose a bill on restraining access to abortion.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, the anti-gender campaign gained such political salience in Slovakia due to the decline in the political capital of traditional political elites representing the ‘Christian voice’, which opened avenues for new actors to compete for their position in the political field, and thanks to the proximity of existing Christian organizations’ leaders to politics and, therefore, their access to the resources necessary to take their struggle to the national public sphere. The modes of action,

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24 ‘Fico nedá súhlas na ratifikáciu Istanbulského dohovoru, prekáža mu definícia manželstva’, *SME*, February 22, 2018, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20766569/fico-odmietol-ratifikovat-istanbulsky-dohovor-v-sucasnej-podobе.html#ixzz5X94mZavc> (accessed September 7, 2020).

25 The National Council of the Slovak Republic is a unicameral parliament composed of 150 MPs.

26 Abortion is legal in Slovakia until the twelfth week of pregnancy (as of April 2021). However, the conditions for access to abortion are already relatively restrictive compared to other European countries, with abortion not reimbursable under health insurance unless required for medical reasons (the cost can be around €250–350). Moreover, abortion is declined by some public hospitals with reference to a conscience clause, pushing women into private medical clinics.

the discourse and the justification for their demands cannot, however, be reduced to national dynamics, nor to the context-dependent blend of moral, identity and memory motives. The transnational circulation of the anti-gender agenda also contributed to the specific form of the anti-IC campaign in Slovakia.

### **Transnational Circulation of Discourse, Mobilization Strategies and Legitimacy**

The anti-gender campaign has its roots in the official policies of the Catholic Church, which has tried, since the middle of the 1990s, to counter policies on gender equality affecting some of its dogmas, such as the male/female complementarity as created by God. It became active on the issue particularly after the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo that called for actions on women's reproductive health and rights, including voluntary family planning, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The 2003 publication by the Pontifical Council of the Family, *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions*, then set the terms of the battle that Catholic organizations started with the support of the Church mostly in Latin America and Europe (Garbagnoli and Prearo 2017; Garbagnoli 2016) in what has been described as a transnational anti-gender countermovement (Corredor 2019).

Since the 2013 pastoral letter mentioning 'gender ideology' as a threat, many activities of the Slovak anti-gender campaign organizers have emulated foreign models and are not an exception to the general tendency of the circulation of visual material and mottos in Europe, as observed by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (2018: 8). The repertoire of action of the Slovak Convention for the Family builds on the preceding introduction of public marches as a mode of action in the Catholic activist repertoire. The first March for Life was organized in 2013 – in the United States, for example, the first was in 1974 – by the Church and a coalition of pro-life organizations, the Forum for Life, whose young leaders claimed they were inspired by marches organized abroad and wanted to try organizing them domestically.<sup>27</sup>

A transnational dimension of the campaign is also manifest in what Grossman and Saurugger call the internal methods of lobbying (Grossman and Saurugger 2006: 83–87), such as expertise and knowledge production. In the written documents of the Conference of Bishops asking the government to stop the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the arguments copy those of Vatican policy statements. ‘A return to a Christian anthropology’ is thus proposed as a response to ‘the pseudoscience of the gender ideology’ in the common declaration of Christian churches at a meeting with Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini in Badín on 4 March 2019. The Christian anthropology argument appears on several occasions in connection to a rebuttal of ‘gender ideology’, for example, at the international meeting of the commissions for Catholic education in Budapest on 14 January 2015, where Willem Jacobus Eijk, archbishop of Utrecht, delivered the lecture ‘Christian Anthropology and Gender Ideology’, translated into Slovak and published on the website of the Slovak Conference of Bishops. At a number of policy conferences of Christian organizations, speakers are invited from abroad with a legitimizing effect on both the goals of the campaign and the authority of its local organizers.<sup>28</sup> Literature on the question of family and gender also comes almost exclusively from foreign authors,<sup>29</sup> unlike in Poland, for instance, where local

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27 ‘Rozhovor s Tomášom Kováčikom, hovorcom Národného pochodu za život’, *Liga Pár páru*, <https://www.lpp.sk/informacie-o-cookies/2-nezaradene/518-rrozhovor-s-tomasom-kovacikom-hovorcom-narodneho-pochodu-za-zivot> (accessed September 3, 2020).

28 The April 26 2013 conference organized by the Conference of Bishops on gender ideology hosted, among others, Msgr. Mario Giordana, Msgr. Ignacio Carrasco de Paula, Msgr. Jean Laffitte, Prof. Francesco D’Agostino and Prof. Helen M. Alvaré. In October 2018, Prof. Raymond de Souza, an international mission delegate to the world’s largest pro-life organization Human Life International, presented a lecture on gender ideology in Catholic centres and churches in Bratislava and Košice.

29 The following works, among others, have been translated into Slovak: *Gender: A Controversial Issue*, a volume by Tony Anatrella, Monsignor and Vatican advisor as well as a psychoanalyst practicing ‘gay therapy’, published in 2013 by the Catholic publishing house Spolok sv. Vojtecha – VOJTECH; the document ‘Truth about the Love of Man: Fundamental Views on Marital Love, Gender Ideology and Family-Related Legislation’ by the Spanish Conference of Bishops, originally published in 2012; or *What is Marriage?* by Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson and Robert P. George, respectively a PhD student in philosophy, a US legal scholar and a fellow of the conservative think-tank the Heritage Foundation, published by the Collegium of Anton Neuwirth,

authors, often women, have published books on the issue and championed the anti-gender discourse.<sup>30</sup>

However, the marches of the SCFF have been different from Marches for Life both in Slovakia and in other European countries: The marches are combined with actions from an explicitly religious repertoire. They are usually preceded by a mass in a local church and headed by a priest carrying a cross. Participants hold an image of the Virgin Mary at the back and are asked to pray the rosary all along the route. The Slovak anti-IC marches thus contrast with the secularized form of pro-life and pro-family marches analysed by Kuhar and Patternote (2018: 10), an analysis based on a large study of European anti-gender campaigns that try to display ‘a colourful, youthful and festive outlook, far away from stereotypical images of conservative mobilizations and reminiscent of Pride Parades’.

Whereas the use of marches and legitimization by international links and expertise echoed strongly with the instruments of anti-gender campaigns in other countries, two other instruments seemed to appear less frequently elsewhere: electoral mobilization by the Catholic Church and the creation of new political parties. At the beginning of the campaign in the run-up to the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Catholic Church had published the ‘Decalogue for a Better Slovakia’: a set of ten demands addressed to political parties that were also supposed to work as indicators for voters. The list included withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention alongside other goals, such as the financing of religious education and stricter legislation on the prohibition of Sunday work.

The second particularity of Slovak anti-gender campaigns, the creation of new political parties, needs to be analysed in the context of the evolution of the Slovak political landscape.

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a programme created in 2009 aimed at the education and socialization of young Catholic elites. Only one short publication authored by a Slovak author has been published on this issue, Mária Raučínová’s *Gender alebo rodová ideológia* (Gender or gender ideology; Bratislava, Don Bosco, 2014).

30 Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk mention journalists Agnieszka Niewońska (*Raport o gender w Polsce*), Magdalena Żuraw (*Idiotyzmy feminizmu*), Marzena Nykiel (*Putapka Gender*) and the anti-gender celebrities Beata Kempa and Małgorzata Terlikowska (Graff and Korolczuk 2017: 183).

## **Reconfiguration of the National Political Field as a Result of the Anti-gender Campaign**

The campaign can be said to have prompted a number of political actors to adopt positions on gender equality and LGBT rights. Two effects can be observed in particular. First, a shift of the governing, secular social democratic party and almost all other parliamentary parties to conservative positions in an effort to maintain or amplify their political capital. Secondly, the creation of new Catholic political parties as competitors of the traditional KDH, which was losing popular support and thus losing its political capital. The anti-gender campaign lent budding new leaders a justification for the resulting fragmentation by arguing that a fight without compromises against gender ideology was necessary.

### **Left-Right Shift to Conservatism**

Unlike in Poland or Hungary, the Slovak government's strongest party at the time (SMER-SD) had a rather secular identity and had not used religious symbols for power legitimization. Gradually, however, the positions of SMER made concessions on morality policies<sup>31</sup> to the Catholic Church a part of the party's attempt not to lose the support of an important part of the electorate that the Church could influence at a time when the party's support was waning, as well as to trade in these concessions to the Church in exchange for the support of KDH on some of the government's bills. The February 2018 declaration of the prime minister on the non-ratification of the Istanbul Convention, as well as its previous support for the inscription of a man/woman definition of marriage into the constitution in 2014 represented such concessions. When confronted with further IC-related demands, as, for instance, it was at the international meeting of bishops in Bratislava in September 2018, the prime minister reminded the bishops of the 2014 and 2018 concessions as justification of why more would not be possible. When six months later, in the midst of the presidential campaign, the parliament

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<sup>31</sup> In the narrow sense of policies opening 'conflicts over first principle' – when life begins, when and how life ends, etc. For a review of approaches to defining morality policies, see Knill 2013.

adopted another anti-IC resolution, this was perceived as yet another victory of the campaigners and the Church. The latter in turn supported the SMER candidate in the presidential elections (EU Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič) instead of the pre-1989 Catholic dissident František Mikloško. This came as confirmation of the strategy of the Church to engage in bargaining with the government rather than support weak albeit Christian opposition parties.

The pragmatic shift of SMER to conservative positions did not equal it becoming Christian democratic, however. The justifications given by party representatives or election candidates for conservative policy decisions only argued in favour of a minimal version of Christianity – a need to respect the country’s Christian traditions. When the party’s 2019 presidential candidate, EU Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič, declared he was not in favour of IC ratification and not in favour of same-sex couple adoptions, he justified his decision by saying that it was a way of ‘doing away with unnecessary tensions in society [...] and confirming the value-orientation of Slovakia based on the respect of traditional values’.<sup>32</sup> This position gained him the support even of the ultra-conservative Kuffa brothers in the second round of the presidential elections against the openly liberal candidate Zuzana Čaputová, who won the elections.

Similarly, the anti-gender campaign saw all except two liberal parties<sup>33</sup> make a pragmatic shift to conservative positions. The government coalition party SNS, a nationalist conservative party, made the issue one of its priorities, and opposition parties Sme Rodina (We Are Family) and OĽaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) equally supported the February 2018 call of the Conference of Bishops to stop IC ratification, calling it a ‘Trojan horse polarizing the European Union as well as the society’.<sup>34</sup>

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32 ‘Kňaz Kuffa sa stretol so Šefčovičom a vyjadril mu podporu’, *Postoj*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.postoj.sk/41940/knaz-kuffa-sa-stretol-so-sefcovicom-a-vyjadril-mu-podporu> (accessed June 30, 2021).

33 Zuzana Čaputová’s centrist liberal party, Progressive Slovakia (PS; Progresívne Slovensko) – winner of the 2019 presidential elections – and Freedom and Solidarity, the right-wing neoliberal party.

34 ‘OĽaNO: Istanbulský dohovor je trójsky kôň, polarizuje Úniu aj verejnosť’, *SME*, November 25, 2016, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20393427/olano-istanbulsky-dohovor-je-trojsky-kon-polarizuje-uniu-aj-verejnost.html> (accessed June 30, 2021).

Overall, then, the co-occurrence of the anti-gender campaign with a series of elections tested the flexibility of political parties, both government and opposition, on ‘morality issues’ as well as their readiness to engage in trade-offs with the Catholic Church and Christian organizations. Confronted with the mobilization potential of Christian movements around morality issues, secular parties such as SMER or OĽaNO were prompted to adopt the anti-gender agenda in a secularized way, stressing the importance of respecting tradition and Slovak culture and thus continuing the history of culturalizing politics.

A brief remark on the relation between populism and national conservatism in the Slovak case is helpful here. As suggested in the introduction to this book, the rising importance of the two tendencies in the production of the political offer need not overlap. Populism, understood as a particular type of political rhetoric distrustful of traditional political parties and ‘established elites’ and proposing new and more direct ways of representation through actors who often appear as outsiders to the political field (Urbinati 2019), was visible beyond the national conservative groups. The OĽaNO party that won the parliamentary elections of February 2020 is led by entrepreneur and MP Igor Matovič who built his reputation on fighting corruption at a local level of government through methods typical of civic activism and implemented methods of online voting to determine the programme priorities of his party, for instance. Coinciding with major political scandals in the country, the anti-corruption rhetoric brought Matovič to government as a leader of a loose and ideologically non-defined political group – a ‘business firm party’ (Just and Charvát 2017) rather than a traditional party. Before him, anti-corruption rhetoric had already won the country’s presidential election for another entrepreneur presenting himself as an outsider surrounded by experts, stressing moral integrity, experience and contact with ‘regular people’ rather than a political programme: Andrej Kiska (president from 2014 to 2019 and founder of the party For the People; *Za ľudí*). Elements of what some scholars have called techno-populism, an anti-partisan and anti-ideology rhetoric combined with a ‘technocratic’ conception of politics aimed

at the resolution of ‘practical’ people’s problems (Bickerton and Invernizzi 2018), had thus found an incarnation in Slovak politics quite removed from the agenda and rhetoric of the national conservatives. Techno-populist politicians such as Matovič or Kiska have not been part of the key structural dynamic behind the rise of the anti-gender agenda – the competition for monopoly representation of conservative values in politics – although they were prompted, along with other parties, to adopt a position on the IC.

### **Competition over the ‘Christian Voice’ Monopoly in Politics: The Creation of New Parties**

‘Mass mobilization’ through the Church and religious organizations was also fuelled by ongoing struggles over the monopoly of the Christian voice in Slovak politics. In addition to the pragmatic shift of the government party to conservative positions, the second major effect of the anti-gender campaign was that it contributed to the fragmentation of the Christian democratic political space in at least three distinct directions, each forming alliances with a different segment of Slovak partisan politics: a conservative-liberal direction that entered pre-electoral cooperation with a centre-left liberal party; an ultra-conservative pro-European stream that formed an alliance with OLaNO, the centrist populist anti-corruption party; and an ultra-conservative nationalist direction that allied itself with the radical Right.

The conservative-liberal direction was taken by a renewed KDH: After its historic failure in the 2016 parliamentary elections, the party was to elect a new leader. The two main choices were the ultra-conservative pro-life MEP Richard Vašečka and the civic activist and entrepreneur Alojz Hlina. Both had entered politics through OLaNO, which attests to that party’s role in bringing new Christian elites into national-level politics. Yet Hlina represented a vision more centred around social policies than around morality policies, and thus more flexible on issues such as abortion or same-sex couples’ rights. The relation to liberalism was at the heart of the party’s 2016 internal debates. One of the ministers of the 1998–2004 liberal-conservative government embodying the anti-Mečiarist alliance (Ivan Šimko), for instance, disagreed with proposals for the party to wage

a war against liberalism. It was the more liberal candidate who won the vote for leadership and thus opened the doors for a repositioning of KDH while offering opportunities for the more conservative groups to assume the agenda marginalized by the new party leader and to create new parties.

The ultra-conservative traditionalist direction was taken by the first new party, the Christian Union (Kresťanská únia), founded by MEP and renowned pro-life advocate Anna Záborská, who left KDH after the party failed to offer her a position on the electoral list for the 2019 EU elections, and OLaNO MEP Richard Vaščka, the unsuccessful 2016 candidate for the KDH presidency. Záborská has mainly used her social and international capital to build her position as a new conservative leader. Born in 1948 and a doctor by training, Záborská had been a member of KDH since its creation in 1990 and an MP/MEP since 1998. Importantly, she always insisted on her political engagement being linked to the legacy of her father, Anton Neuwirth. Neuwirth, a former 1950s political prisoner, was a prominent figure of KDH, its honorary president (1994–2004) and MP (1992–94), then ambassador to the Vatican. At the EU level, Záborská had gained a strong reputation as an ultra-conservative activist, not least due to her mobilization during the opposition to the 2013 Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, known more popularly as the Estrela report and finally rejected by the European Parliament after a very close vote on 10 December 2013 – celebrated as an important ultra-conservative victory. Running for her new party in the 2019 EU elections, she received the public support of a number of personalities and celebrities who systematically mentioned her European capital and reputation. Among them was the German anti-gender celebrity Gabriele Kuby, author of a number of publications translated across Europe. Although the party did not win any seats in the 2019 EU elections, they enabled it to measure its electoral potential (3.9%). Ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections, the new party then concluded an electoral partnership with two populist centrist parties: OLaNO and Sme Rodina and entered the government.

Finally, the ultra-conservative nationalist direction of an alliance within the radical Right was taken up by another newly formed

party created by former OĽaNO MP Štefan Kuffa (the brother of Marián Kuffa, the priest) and an ultra-conservative former member of KDH, Peter Molda. It also included the well-known figures Marián Tkáč and Viliam Oberhauser from the patriotic organization *Matica slovenská*,<sup>35</sup> which used to support Vladimír Mečiar's government in the 1990s. The party, Christian Democracy – Life and Prosperity (KDŽP; *Kresťanská demokracia – život a prosperita*, later renamed ŽIVOT – NS), entered the competition for the Catholic voter by trying to convert the popular support of the anti-gender campaign into electoral politics. It first partnered with the nationalist party SNS (September 2019) and later with the radical right party led by Marián Kotleba (ĽSNS) that had grown out of the neo-Nazi party Slovak Brotherhood (*Slovenská pospolitosť*) after the latter was banned in 2006 by the Supreme Court. ĽSNS first obtained regional mandates in 2013, then entered the Parliament in 2016. The representatives of the new KDŽP party came mainly from either KDH, OĽaNO or HZDS backgrounds. KDŽP thus presented itself as bringing together 'national and Christian forces' and as 'doing in politics what the priest Kuffa is saying theologically'.<sup>36</sup> In the 2020 parliamentary elections, its candidates were elected on the list of the radical Right, and a number of activists close to the Kuffa brothers also ran on the lists of the radical Right in regional elections.<sup>37</sup>

However, through these partnerships, rather than converting campaign support to party support, KDŽP and the Kuffa brothers became estranged from other conservative milieux. Conservative media and personalities<sup>38</sup> as well as the Catholic Church progres-

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35 The Slovak variant of the patriotic organizations founded in the region in the nineteenth century (cf. *Matica moravská*, *Matica česká*, *Matica hrvatska*, *Matica srpska*). *Matica* can be translated as 'the centre of' or 'the parent body of a community in this context.

36 See <http://www.kdzp.sk> (accessed September 3, 2020).

37 E.g., Anton Čulen, author of a book about Kuffa the priest and founder of the Alliance for Sunday, had also previously successfully lobbied for the introduction of a conscience clause into law. See also note 16.

38 The conservative media *Postoj* and *.týždeň* also distanced themselves from Kuffa, see P. Stach and M. Bruneau, 'Známi slovenski katolíci reagujú na M. Kuffu: Nehovori za nás, o nás ani k nám', *Denník N*, March 21, 2018, <https://dennikn.sk/1070635/znami-slovenski-katolici-reaguju-na-m-kuffu-stojime-za-pochodmi/?pref-tit1> (accessed June 30, 2021). Among others, Vladimír Palko, a key figure in KDH until 2008 when he left and who first supported Marián Kuffa, distanced himself from him at the end of 2018, citing Kuffa's spread of conspiracy

sively withdrew their support for the Kuffa brothers. While close to Záborská's party on anti-abortion and anti-LGBTI policies, the party has also started advocating pro-Russian positions and spreading conspiracy theories about the European Union. The anti-gender campaign thus became a new site of expression for another important divide in the Slovak political landscape – that between the nationalist and sovereigntist pro-Russian camp and a pro-Western one comprising both liberals and conservatives.

### **Using the Anti-gender Agenda to Redefine the Country's Relation to the West**

Slovakia's integration with the European Union and its political transformation opened two fronts of political conflict that had been relatively stalled during the transformation period. The dissolution of the liberal-conservative alliance led to a more explicit dissociation of culturally liberal and culturally conservative groups, and the 'return to Europe' made it, paradoxically, legitimate to newly question the country's place and role in Europe and its (geo)political horizon. As a result, a diversification of political views on what 'Europe' referred to ensued.

Miles away from a simplistic division between pro-European liberals and Eurosceptic conservatives, the Slovak anti-gender campaign reveals that the dividing line in perceptions concerning the country's place in Europe and attitudes towards EU integration run across Christian conservative politics. In this regard, the Slovak case illustrates the assertion made in the introduction to this volume about the culture wars in Central Europe not being reducible to a disillusionment in society about the success or failure of a 'return to Europe', an assertion that warns against placing 'too much weight on the inter-regional (or geopolitical) dynamic of the post-communist

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theories. The criticism stayed rather mild however and the more categoric rebuttals of Kuffa's political activities came only from protestant authors, e.g., from Daniel Pastirčák, 'Keby priváľal ten jazdec', *Týždeň*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.tyzden.sk/stlpceky/47940/keby-privaval-ten-jazdec/>, accessed September 7, 2020) and Samuel Jezný, 'Známi katolíci sa dištancovali od Kuffu. Zjavne to nestačilo', *SME* April 13, 2018, <https://koomentare.sme.sk/c/20797570/znami-katolici-sa-distancovali-od-kuffu-zjavne-to-nestacilo.html#ixzz63xkNTGoo> (accessed September 7, 2020).

transition, as if what was at stake was one part of the East joining the West or, alternatively, failing to do so.’

The two new political parties that rose as competitors to KDĤ, the Christian Union (KÚ) and KDŹP, advocated for broadly the same policies on abortions but differed precisely in their discourse about the European Union and the West. Whereas MEP Anna Záborská (KÚ) held a pro-European discourse and insisted on the need for Slovakia to play a constructive role in the EU, KDŹP praised Slavic Brotherhood, published positive appreciation for Putin’s and Trump’s politics and spread stories from disinformation servers that sketch an apocalyptic vision of a morally decadent West. Reviving the messianic vein of the Slovak political tradition, as well as what historian Miloslav Szabó calls the Slovak priests’ ‘temptation of radical politics’ (Szabó 2019), the priest Marián Kuffa went to lengths to depict himself as a martyr whose life was in danger, implying ‘Brussels’ and ‘liberals’ were undoubtedly on a mission to murder him for daring to say the truth.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, in the discourse of the Kuffa brothers, a ‘gender conspiracy’ (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) appears as a novel articulation of an older element of Slovak politics – conspiracy theories about the West. Anti-Western propaganda has been linked to pan-Slavism since the nineteenth century and was spread by both the WWII Slovak state and the communist regime (Panczová 2017). Given that the Slovak population is a small and peripheral one, projects of political autonomy never really proposed a viable national community that would become a European power in itself and instead were associated with visions of belonging to a wider cultural space in which the Slovaks would play a role, the latter being more or less modestly formulated from that of the poor, who know what is right because they are not blinded by materialism (Kollár 1836/2009), to a role similar to that evoked by Polish conservatives, one of a resource of authentic faith that can bring Europe ‘back to its Christian roots’.

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39 See the numerous speeches of Marián Kuffa broadcast online (available on YouTube) and Valkovičová 2019 for a brief analysis.

However, the new variations on a discourse presenting the West as a source of dangerous inspiration also appear among perfectly secular, even anti-clerical political actors, such as the leader of the right-wing liberal party SaS:

As a term, liberalism is mistakenly used today in the West to speak about socialism and multiculturalism<sup>40</sup> [...] Political parties, including SaS, are funded by Slovak taxpayers. So, I will fight for the freedom of the Slovak and not for the freedom of Pedro of Portugal or Ahmed of Eritrea. I don't know who ever figured out that liberals now must agree to abolish borders, that everyone can go wherever they want – that is anarchy to me. And I consider Western-type liberalism to be a very harmful thing.<sup>41</sup>

Such a reinterpretation of liberalism as compatible with sovereigntist and nationalist politics reminds us of the not often underlined nuance in what 'the imaginary West' represented to the populations of Central Europeans. As Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová and Ondřej Slačálek write in the introduction to this volume, the framework of Western civilization was reappropriated not for being universal but for being Western – connoting living standards and consumerism for some and a region defined by its Christian identity and culture for others.

Apart from its civilizationist dimension, the recurrent criticism of liberalism in the anti-gender campaign also – simply – provided a new vocabulary to feelings of disenchantment with the 'last utopia of Central Europe', the 'imaginary West' (Barša 2017), both literally – the word 'gender' is now known in the most far away villages of Eastern Slovakia – and in a more general sense of a repertoire of themes available to express one's critical views on political issues. Whereas the entrepreneurs and supporters of the anti-gender campaign rarely use racism and xenophobia as resources for gathering

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40 'Multiculti' (*multikulti*) in the original Slovak version, used as a deprecatie and ridiculing shortening of 'multiculturalism', connoting its alleged naivety.

41 Interview with Richard Sulík 'Obvinenie Fica je smiešne. Liberalizmus západného typu je veľmi škodlivý, hovorí Sulík', *Denník Slovensko*, December 9, 2019, <https://dennikslovensko.sk/13809/exkluzivne-obvinenie-fica-je-smiesne-liberalizmus-zapadneho-typu-je-velmi-skodlivy-hovori-sulik/> (accessed September 10, 2020).

support,<sup>42</sup> they do use the fractured confidence that ‘catching up’ with Western European countries will solve the country’s problems. In 2013, at a conference on ‘the ideology of gender equality’, the president of the Conference of Bishops presented the country’s membership in the European Union as a constraint in the quest for its own normative model:

Two factors influence the spread of gender equality ideology in our country. The first is secularization, which in its radical form seeks to push religion to the margins of social life. In Europe, this process has made it difficult to find any great value that would not be questioned. This relativization is the result of an increasingly widespread agnosticism. We are ourselves surprised to see how many people in our country do not believe in the possibility of knowing the truth, only in freedom. *The second factor is our membership in the European Union.* (author’s emphasis)

Connecting the IC issue to a wider conservative agenda is also common among senior politicians and prominent conservative politicians. When sharing his comments on Marián Kuffa’s marches against gender ideology, Ján Čarnogurský, a cofounder of the Christian Democratic Movement reprobed the ‘liberal journalists’ criticizing Kuffa and discarded their relevance with an epochal argument: ‘What these journalists omit to write is that the hegemony of liberal ideology is over, and that their articles now belong to the past decade.’<sup>43</sup> In an article for the conservative daily *Postoj*, another prominent figure of KDH, Vladimír Palko, who has also written about a ‘marginalization and a persecution of Christians in the West’,<sup>44</sup> in turn presented popular support for the anti-gender campaign as a rejection of ‘Western liberalism’:

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42 Reference to threats brought about by migration were indeed rare in the campaign, and Kuffa, the priest, while spreading a number of hoaxes and conspiracy theories about ‘Western liberalism’, the kidnapping of children from Christian parents and such, even pledged he would take care of migrants in need and accommodate them in his parish (see ‘Charizmatický farár Marián Kuffa sa pripravuje na utečencov’, *TV Noviny*, September 11, 2015, [https://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1804805\\_charizmaticky-farar-marian-kuffa-sa-pripravuje-na-utecencov](https://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1804805_charizmaticky-farar-marian-kuffa-sa-pripravuje-na-utecencov), accessed September 7, 2020).

43 <https://www.facebook.com/jan.carnogursky/posts/1615853591860950>, Facebook post from May 2, 2018.

44 Palko, V., *Levy prichádzajú*, 2012, 2019.

There are simply two great desires at work here. One is people's desire for a more decent, more honest policy than Fico's. The second is the desire to reject the penetration of Western liberalism towards us. And both are correct. A complicating factor is that the world of Čaputová [the country's President] is completely insensitive to the other desire and the world of Fico and SNS [a coalition partner of SMER] to the first. However, this does not mean that there should not be a policy that is sensitive to both natural desires and tries to fulfil them.<sup>45</sup>

A secularized version of this discourse is represented by the governing party's leader Róbert Fico, who together with his party's conservative shift also adopted the narrative of a 'culture war' between tradition and liberalism. When commenting on the parliament's March 2019 adoption of a resolution against IC ratification, Fico famously stated it was a 'slap in the face of liberalism'.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

In sum, the translation of the transnational anti-gender toolbox into Slovak politics participates in the European contestation of the rights-based ideal of liberal democracy and offers three main elements for answering the initial question of why morality issues have gained such political salience since approximately 2013 in Slovakia and why they have had an important impact on the Slovak political field.

First, the emergence of culture war politics in Slovakia is to be interpreted not as a backlash following a preceding period where liberalism dominated but rather as a consequence of the implosion of a liberal-conservative alliance that accomplished the political and economic transformation and integrated countries into the European Union and NATO. The Slovak case illustrates the importance of the liberal-conservative alliance with particular strength. At

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45 Palko, V., 'Prezident a Istanbul', *Postoj*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.postoj.sk/42173/prezident-a-istanbul> (accessed June 30, 2021).

46 'Istanbulský dohovor: Liberalizmus dostal po papuli, povedal Fico', *Pravda*, March 29, 2019, <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/507209-istanbulsky-dohovor-liberalizmus-dostal-po-papuli-hovori-fico> (accessed June 30, 2021).

the beginning of the 2000s, as Poland and Hungary were entering their 'second conservative revolutions' (Bozóki 2008) due to the start of crises in the post-1989 liberal-conservative alliances, Slovakia was living a second 'end of history', back on the track to Europe after the period that is nowadays referred to as Mečiarism and that was defeated precisely by a wide liberal-conservative alliance that governed the country until 2006. Narratives on identity and memory were mobilized to give a concrete, context-specific mobilizing potential to the 'culture wars' chosen as the priority of new conservative politics.

Secondly, the campaign achieved a change in the positions of the government on the IC due to the intense engagement of moral and policy entrepreneurs with access to resources for mass mobilization and political elites. In retrospect, the Alliance for Family, which organized the Marches for Life and then took part in the anti-gender campaign, appears to have functioned as an alternative platform for activism in Christian politics at a time when the traditional Christian KDH party was losing political capital, opening avenues for new or rebranded contestants. In other words, the campaigns on morality issues became a training and professionalization ground and a career accelerator for a diverse group of activists from Christian communities and pro-life organizations. It enabled the accumulation of political capital and then converted this into positions on electoral lists of more (KDH) or less (OLaNO) established parties. As a result, a number of these new leaders entered national politics, but the traditional Christian democratic party was no longer seen as a compulsory transit zone or as the ultimate destination.

Thirdly, morality politics has revealed and fostered key changes in the national political landscape after the dissolution of the liberal-conservative pro-European alliance. The relation to Western Europe and the United States has long since had structuring effects on politics and partisan competition. With roots reaching to the nineteenth century, this relation was key in the 1990s and, arguably, more salient than the right-left divide of the political spectrum. A desire to 'catch up with the West', to 'return to Europe' or to look for a different 'national' way of transformation played a key role in the elections of 1992 that brought later semi-autocrat Vladimír Mečiar to power, as

well as those in 1998 that brought him down, to the benefit of a wide coalition of centre-right parties defending a neoliberal programme of economic transformation. The anti-gender campaign provided ground for novel articulations of this cleavage.

Finally, it needs to be said that this chapter only provides an introductory mapping of the conditions and effects of the anti-gender campaign in Slovakia. It raises a number of questions that would necessitate a separate inquiry: Mapping the evolution of divisions in the Christian activist sphere in recent decades in connection with the evolution of partisan politics, including a longitudinal prosopographic analysis of the leaders of Christian NGOs and associations, would help establish, with more precision, what change the anti-gay marriage and anti-gender campaigns represent for Christian politics from a longitudinal perspective. This chapter does not look either at what drives the signatories of petitions and participants of marches to actively support the anti-gender campaign. In addition, the impact of the anti-gender campaign on the attitudes and opinions of the population could not be explored in this chapter; existing opinion surveys nevertheless suggest a decrease in support for same-sex marriage.

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# 7/

## A New Austrian Kulturkampf?

*Zora Hesová*

In 2019, the Austrian ‘turquoise-blue’ government proposed a law banning the wearing of the headscarf in public secondary schools. After the radical-right Freedom Party of Austria’s (FPÖ; Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs – also referred to as the Freedomite Party) first controversial participation in the government (2000–2007), the second coalition (2017–19) between FPÖ and the centre-right Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP; Österreichische Volkspartei) proved no less controversial. Concerning the headscarf, the ban unsurprisingly prevailed against socialist and liberal opposition as well as widespread criticism, and the headscarf was prohibited in primary schools with a fine of €440. More surprisingly, in 2020, the ban was extended to girls up to fourteen years of age as part of the ‘turquoise-green’ government coalition agreement, which was to become the platform for the first Austrian government that, besides ÖVP, also included the liberal Greens (Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative). Hence, the highly divisive and borderline constitutional right-wing populist issue remained on the agenda after the most liberal government to date replaced the most right-wing government to date. The original law had in fact been initiated by the Freedomite Vizekanzler Heinz-Christian Strache from FPÖ. In 2020, the chancellor, Sebastian Kurz from ÖVP, played the same anti-Islam card, this time in a centre-liberal government with the Greens. The issue was even further intensified despite the FPÖ having lost in the 2019 snap elections following the ‘Ibiza scandal’.

Five years after the ‘migration crisis’, Islam still mattered in the colourful world of Austrian politics, yet in ways that were ostentatiously instrumental. Various issues such as the headscarf in classrooms, Muslims in secondary schools or ‘Salafi Kindergarten’ kept stirring up controversies. They usually had three things in common:

They were highly ideological, politicized in the self-referential context of Austrian party politics and they were symbolic, that is, devoid of policy gravity.

The headscarf case is a case in point. The veteran political commentator Norbert Mappes-Niediek remarked that there was indeed ‘a maximum consensus’ on the fact that young girls before puberty should not wear a scarf – among teachers, the public and Muslim theologians too, including the Austrian Islamic community – and hence no need for the ban. Moreover, very few girls actually wore a headscarf in primary schools. The aim of the law, according to Mappes-Niediek, was ‘to mobilize one’s political constituency against Islam, to make the opposition capitulate, and to polarize the liberal part of the public’.<sup>1</sup> The motivation was indeed at hand: Taking a public stance against Muslim visibility ingratiated right-wing politicians with the conservative, patriotic and latently Islamophobic part of public opinion, while it pushed their rivals, the liberals and the socialists into the uncomfortable position of defending Muslim female covering on principle.

Painting the liberals and the socialists as liberal defenders of a multicultural society has been the tactics of the radical Right since the mid-2000s. The unstoppable rise of radical-right populism and conflicts within the right-wing spectrum left the Austrian public divided over an agenda that did not stop at immigration and Islam, but extended to Christianity, national identity, local patriotic values, Euroscepticism and ‘gender’. In a similar pattern found in other Central European (CE) countries, symbolic issues of a cultural character have been at the forefront of public debates and have led to several substantial political changes. The populist radical Right rose in the mid-1990s and turned to neo-nationalism in the 2000s; there was a general turn to the right (*Rechtsruck*) at the political centre and a rekindling of ‘cultural wars’.

Unlike in other Central European countries, the term *Kulturkampf* (culture war) is not new in Austria’s contemporary politics. It has

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1 Mappes-Niediek, N., ‘Mein Europa: Kulturkampf im Klassenzimmer’, *Deutsche Welle*, May 17, 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3le3t> (accessed December 10, 2019).

been in frequent use since the 1980s<sup>2</sup> together with another concept, *Bürgerkrieg* (civil war). The terms reflect both the recent populist hostility towards Islam and an older legacy of political polarization that has accompanied Austria since its foundation. The Republic of Austria began as a fragile and divided rump state in 1918. The right-left polarization turned into a violent civil war in the 1930s and was put off only after the end of World War II and the Austrians' post-war choice of stability and consensual politics. Yet, since the 1980s, three new waves of political confrontation have marked Austrian politics: World War II revisionists and ecologists rocked the happy Austrian stability in the 1990s, right-wing populism dominated the early 2000s and, finally, neo-nationalists renewed populist right-wing politics between 2013 and 2020.

These new types of confrontation are different from the interwar conflict and have many similarities with other CE culture wars. Indeed, Austria is, in many aspects, a part of Central Europe. The Alpine republic shares not only the Habsburg legacy with other CE countries but also a Cold war experience. Austria spent the Soviet domination of CE in forced neutrality. Like its communist neighbours, Austria chose not to confront the WWII memory in the 1950s. It went through a substantial post-Cold War transition in the 1990s, ending its neutrality and becoming part of the European Union. Finally, after an early populist moment in the 2000s, Austria experienced deep polarization on cultural issues during the 2016 presidential elections in ways that foretold of the later Slovak and Polish divisive presidential elections. Yet unlike the rest of Central Europe, Austria has long experience with immigration and Islam. It has received tens of thousands of guest-workers since the 1970s and a substantial number of refugees in the 1990s – many from Southern Europe. The 2015 'refugee crisis' hit Austria much harder than its eastern neighbours. Finally, Austria also has the longest-serving populist far-right party in Europe,

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2 Apart from being part of the title of the books by Walter Hämmerle (2018) and S. Wiesinger (see part 2), the term *Kulturkampf* is frequently used in analyses of FPÖ's politics (Yagdi 2019, Meyer-Sauer 2017, Köchler, 2013, Fallend 2014, Murphy 2004, Chiantera-Stutte 2002).

which has aggressively campaigned against Islam and migration since the 1990s.

If the FPÖ is the most visible subject of Austrian Kulturkampf, it is hardly the only one. Austria's political scene has grown increasingly polarized over cultural issues since other parties began playing along, especially the centre right, in adopting the issues, framing and style of more radical cultural warriors. In a broader sense, Austria shares with its CE neighbours a degree of uncertainty regarding national identity. The question of Austrian identity was publicly reopened in the mid-1990s – a decade earlier than the other new EU member states of Central Europe. And so, despite differences in timing, degree and historical context, various elements of Central European cultural wars are present in Austria as well.

This chapter seeks to explore the peculiarities of the Austrian culture wars in three contexts: recent party politics, medium-term competition on the right and, finally, a long-term view of Austria's identity transformations. The first part will look at the recent polarization around migration and Islam, the second will analyse the effect of FPÖ's thirty-year existence on the right turn of the centre right, and the third part will place those confrontations into a broader perspective of Austrian political culture. The combination of these various contexts – political competition on the right, Austria's long history of civic confrontations and its experience with several party systems – should help to explain why identity and culture issues have been at the forefront of Austrian politics.

## **A Polarized Austria**

The end of the 2010s saw Austria more divided than ever: The 2015 migration crisis and the 2016 presidential election polarized the public into two camps opposed on values, concerns and principles. The presidential election was the first example of the public division, symbolized by two candidates – from the far right and the liberal left – in which a political centre had virtually disappeared for the duration of the symbolically charged election. Migration and Islam had certainly been aggressively politicized by the far-right

FPÖ throughout the 2010s. Yet in 2016, the FPÖ succeeded not only in capturing half the electorate, it also brought its framing and language into the mainstream. If Austria's cultural divisions were most palpable during the 2016 election year, they could be detected in shifting discourses on migration and Islam several years earlier.

### **The 2016 Presidential Election**

For most of 2016, the usually boring presidential election became a sort of national thriller. It demonstrated the depth of societal division when two candidates representing radical right-wing and liberal positions faced each other in a very tight race. In a country that, since 1945, has been led by two centrist mass parties (*Volksparteien*), neither the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ; Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs) nor the Austrian People's Party were able to push their candidates into the second round in 2016. Instead, the radical right-wing FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer actually won the ballot by a wide margin (35.1%) in the first round, with the Greens' candidate Alexander Van der Bellen (21.3%) coming in second; the mass parties' candidates ended in fourth and fifth positions with around 11% only. In a twenty-first century European first, there was a real possibility of a radical right-party candidate becoming head of state.

The April 2016 second round was tight and added to the divisiveness, which many experienced as nerve-wracking. Van der Bellen won by an unconvincing margin of only thirty thousand votes (50.35%), and the vote had to be repeated for formal reasons related to this close result. In the rerun half a year later, in December 2016, the liberal candidate won by a greater margin (53%). Anticipation and electoral participation were unusually high (68.5% in the first round, 72.7% in the second and 74.1% in the rerun).

The campaign itself was also exceptional. The candidates could not be more opposed: a neo-nationalist with a history of fascist sympathies (Scharsach 2013) running against a former long-term president of a liberal, left-leaning and radical ecologist green party. The election campaigns were also unusually dynamic and spectacular. Both candidates used modern marketing methods such as well-thought out digital storytelling via social media (Liebhart &

Bernhardt: 2017), image presentations of themselves staging authenticity and ordinariness, viral videos and direct communication with the media.<sup>3</sup> FPÖ had been perfecting its popular electronic messaging for a long time, but this time even the liberal camp succeeded in producing a viral video staging a warning from an 89-year-old Holocaust survivor.<sup>4</sup> The campaign messages were totally opposed: The FPÖ campaigned against immigration, against a ‘Muslim invasion’ and for an EU-exit referendum; the Greens campaigned for European solidarity, individual rights and a carbon-free future.

The elections were remarkable in the sense that in the second round, all other political parties opposed the FPÖ together, and the anti-FPÖ campaign involved a broad coalition of public figures and media. Yet, the full weight of ‘civic’ (*bürgerlich*) Austria only attracted slightly over 50% of the vote and almost failed. According to the Austrian linguist Ruth Wodak, the polarization was unprecedented: ‘Austria hasn’t seen such strong divisions in its electorate since the 1930s, when clashes between rightist and leftist parties and paramilitary groups triggered a civil war’ (Wodak 2016). What is more, the election brought more than just political polarization, it left the country divided along social lines: education, social status and gender. 76% of employees with secondary school and university diplomas voted for Van der Bellen, while 64% employees without a diploma supported Hofer; 62% of women preferred Van der Bellen, while Hofer earned 56% of the male vote (SORA 2016); with few exceptions, larger cities voted liberal and smaller cities and the countryside voted for the radical Right.<sup>5</sup> The class and gender divide were also overlaid by a differing stance on values, social norms and national identity. The whole campaign revolved around non-material issues: national identity, visions of the future and social norms. Hofer campaigned for ‘closed borders, more national

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3 ‘Aufregung um Norbert Hofer und ein altes Pizzafoto auf Facebook’, *Der Standard*, March 6, 2017, <http://derstandard.at/2000053651984/Aufregung-um-Norbert-Hofer-und-ein-altes-Pizzafoto-auf-Facebook> (accessed December 10, 2019)

4 ‘Holocaust survivor warns Austrians against far-right in viral video appeal’, *Deutsche Welle*, November 29, 2016, <https://p.dw.com/p/2TQFd> (accessed December 10, 2020).

5 Hameter, M., ‘Österreich gesamt, Detailergebnisse’, *Der Standard*, April 26, 2016

sovereignty, social conservatism and cultural homogeneity, while Van der Bellen committed to a liberal border regime, an integrated Europe, and similar policies. These positions reflect radically different visions of society' (Wolkenstein 2016). Directly and indirectly, the FPÖ promoted traditional gender roles, authority figures and a strong, controlling state, whereas Van der Bellen represented a progressive, liberal, European Austria (Gavenda, Umit 2016: 4).

The 2016 election in fact was not the first controversial Austrian presidential vote. In 1986, Kurt Waldheim, a former diplomat close to ÖVP was elected 'despite (or because) of his involvement with the German Wehrmacht on the Balkans in 1943–1944 – which he had attempted unsuccessfully to deny over several months' (Wodak 2016). Wodak refers to the controversial campaign in which exaggerated allegations about Kurt Waldheim's war past abounded and, despite that (or because of that), he was elected. At that time, Austria was still a stable centrist duopoly, where the national past was intentionally suppressed to safeguard national stability. Thirty years later, Austria's public life knows almost no taboos anymore. While subtle references to the Austrian Nazi past have not been absent from Norbert Hofer's public appearances (Wodak 2016), the social divisions no longer revolve around a silenced past. Rather, Austrian cultural confrontations developed around three much more contemporary issues: migration and Islam, religion and identity, and, partly, gender.

The issues of migration, Islam and opposition to EU policies now draw the dividing line between two camps represented by the two most radical or outspoken proponents. Migration and Islam have long been the only and special issue of the populist Right. Yet in 2016, those radical-right issues became central to the general Austrian political confrontation. The reason is partly circumstantial: Austrians voted amidst the effects of the so-called refugee crisis. But migration only exacerbated issues that had been previously politicized.

### **Effects of the 'Migration Crisis'**

In the year preceding the 2016 presidential election, the refugee crisis put migration, Islam and identity firmly at the centre of politics. After the 'Balkan route' had been established as a relatively

unobstructed channel for refugees stranded in Turkey to reach Western Europe in the summer of 2015, close to a million asylum seekers transited through Austrian railway stations in only half a year. The German government had agreed to process the asylum claims of those stranded in Hungary in early September, and so, with the approval of the Austrian government, it set thousands in motion towards the West. Around one in ten claimed asylum in Austria. After a year, some ninety thousand people had stayed in Austria, more than a third of them in Vienna itself.

The public response in Austria to the crisis was markedly open at first. A huge wave of solidarity appeared; charities, churches, municipalities and individual citizens organized to offer food, accommodation and asylum support. An active *Willkommenskultur*, a readiness to assist refugees, developed in Vienna and in several bigger cities, where most of the asylum seekers ended up finding accommodation. They were not dispatched according to a centralized federal ratio like in Germany, but rather they were adopted by willing municipalities, charities and social services. Not all were welcoming: Some cities, like the picturesque St. Georgen and even entire *Bundesländer* (provinces), rejected the pleas of the minister of the interior to build large tents (Siebenhaar 2017: 45). A backlash soon followed from both the radical Right and the centre right. The FPÖ was active in vehemently denouncing the ‘Muslim invasion’, the loss of border control and the costs related to dealing with the reception of the migrants. Continuing migration led the ÖVP/SPÖ coalition government to gradually change position; in autumn 2015, it adopted a markedly more cautious approach and security-centred rhetoric. Sebastian Kurz, the foreign minister since 2013, concentrated on working to close the Balkan route. In early 2016, he managed, together with Balkan governments and without the blessing of the European Union, to gradually close the Balkan borders and cut off the arrivals.

The refugee and border crises changed the atmosphere in all CE countries. Besides the practical and strategic problems of refugee reception, migration control and the coordination of a European migration policy, questions of principles, values and national identity came to be discussed. In Austria, two camps gradually emerged

with opposing views and appreciation of the crises. The different framings of the problem were prominent in the local Vienna elections of autumn 2015: The re-elected socialist mayor, Michael Häupl, defended the *Willkommenskultur* and humanist openness to refugees in need (Robin 2017: 221), while the FPÖ, hoping for a right-wing ‘October revolution’ in Vienna, expressed warnings against the ‘Islamization’ of Austrian culture: ‘We have a Christian culture; we want to preserve it for our children too.’<sup>6</sup>

In 2015, Austria was governed by a grand coalition (ÖVP-SPÖ) under a socialist chancellor, Werner Faymann, with conservative interior and foreign ministers. Both governing parties presided over a discursive shift in debating migration. Under pressure from FPÖ, the government’s positions were becoming increasingly preoccupied by security issues, but this was masked by striking euphemisms. Instead of debating policy and strategy, the SPÖ and ÖVP government engaged in ‘terminological conflicts’ (Rheidorf and Wodak 2018:16). Debates concerned the way securitizing policy elements would be named – whether the government would be building a *Grenzzaun* (border fence), a word associated with Orbán’s taboo-breaking policy, or a just a *technische Sicherung* and *Türl* (technical protection with a little door), whether the government would set a yearly *Obergrenze* (maximum limit) for asylum applications or whether the number would be just a *Richtwert* (guiding number). The evasive language in fact betrayed the difficulty of changing policies while simultaneously keeping a distance from the far-right language.

The government’s poorly masked euphemisms only pushed policy debates towards issues of value framing and thus exacerbated the polarization. Vienna’s liberal SPÖ chapter maintained that ‘there can be no limit on humaneness’, and the SPÖ’s president Heinz Fischer said that ‘one cannot limit a human right to a specific number and say, everyone above that number is out of luck’. Meanwhile, the mobilized Vienna public engaged in solidarity actions and campaigns aiming to showcase hospitality and give a voice to

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6 Langley, A., ‘Wiens Rechtspopulisten hoffen auf Sieg’, *Deutsche Welle*, October 10, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/de/wiens-rechtspopulisten-hoffen-auf-sieg/a-18774642> (accessed April 5, 2019).

refugees. The other discourse framed the crisis as ‘undirected mass migration’ that will ‘overstrain the country’ (Rheindorf and Wodak, 2018: 30–31). The populist Right instrumentalized fear, exaggerated negative scenarios of existential threats to the nation and made a constructive policy debate almost impossible. Eventually, as debates were taking on an ‘intensified rhetoric’, the euphemisms ceded to a policy of migration and border control as the ruling parties adopted a much stricter asylum law allowing the rejection of asylum seekers at the border under certain circumstances (Siebenhaar 2017: 51). Accordingly, the government discourse shifted from a language of individual rights and solidarity to one of control, security and economic costs, and eventually to collective protection and identity (Rheindorf and Wodak 2018). Throughout 2015–16, security and identity – issues reserved hitherto to radical-right populism – entered the mainstream, albeit in softened language.

### **ÖVP and Islam**

While migration and border control issues have subsided since 2016, Islam has become a permanent subject of party competition. Like in the case of migration, debating concrete policy issues has given ground to the use of Islam for political struggle, as several scandals have developed around Muslims and education. In 2015, a study on private Muslim kindergartens was commissioned by Sebastian Kurz. Extending public financing to private kindergartens had in fact been a project of the SPÖ-ÖVP government, when Kurz was state secretary for integration (2011–13). Like other rather innovative projects of his integration policy, its aim was to take measures towards the activation and acculturation of migrants.

The study, which examined the functioning of private Muslim kindergartens, had concluded that ‘intellectual Salafists and political Islamists are the dominant groups in the Islamic kindergarten scene in Vienna’.<sup>7</sup> The findings led to a widely commented-on controversy,

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7 Nimmervoll, L., Studienautor: ‘Salafisten und Islamisten dominieren Wiens islamische Kindergärten’, *Der Standard*, February 26, 2016, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000031845861/studienautor-salafisten-und-islamisten-dominieren-wiener-kindergartenszene> (accessed April 5, 2021).

all the more so because stereotypes and suspicions against Muslims were augmented by hostility to a purportedly permissive Vienna municipality: The traditionally socialist capital city has always been under suspicion of being too lenient towards migrants' transgressions and looking away from cultural threats. In fact, a government-commissioned study, widely-referred to as the Aslan report (*Evaluierung ausgewählter Islamischer Kindergärten und -gruppen in Wien – Tendenzen und Empfehlungen*), was promptly criticized by academics for methodological unsoundness (as it was based on only a few interviews) and by the Islamic community for bias. Moreover, the Kurz ministry was accused by the magazine *Falter* of doctoring the results so they would sound more alarming.<sup>8</sup> The political usage of the study's result was rather patent indeed. Sebastian Kurz had singlehandedly published the most alarming parts from a draft report in 2015.<sup>9</sup> The first intentional leak during the migration crisis and the report's final publication were followed by lengthy controversies. The (formerly Austrian) Islamic scholar Mouhannad Khorschide deplored the effects of the controversy: While there was no policy debate about actual quality and norms for private kindergarten, instead, the loyalties and allegiances of the author and the commissioners of the report were scrutinized.<sup>10</sup> The debates put into question the loyalty of Muslims to the republic, socialist Vienna's purported Muslim problem and ÖVP's honesty.

A similar controversy ensued in 2018 after Susanne Wiesinger, a schoolteacher and a former prominent SPÖ member, published an alarming book on the difficulties of Muslim youths in a Vienna working-class district's public school. Entitled *Kulturkampf im Klassenzimmer* (Culture war in a classroom), the teacher's book described the school as failing to deal with fundamentalism. The author spoke

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8 Klenk, F., 'Islam Kindergarten-Studie wurde von Sebastian Kurz' Beamten umgeschrieben', *Der Falter*, July 4, 2017, <https://www.falter.at/zeitung/20170704/islam-kindergarten-studie-kurz-leak> (last accessed April 5, 2020).

9 Topçu, C., 'Auf dem Prüfstand', July 12, 2017, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/umstrittene-studie-ueber-muslimische-kindergaerten-in-wien-auf-dem-pruefstand> (accessed March 11, 2021).

10 'Studie umgeschrieben? Islam-Theologe verteidigt Aslan', *Die Presse*, July 7, 2017, <https://www.diepresse.com/5246691/studie-umgeschrieben-islam-theologe-verteidigt-aslan> (accessed March 11, 2021).

of a so called parallel world being the ‘reality for some pupils’.<sup>11</sup> Like in the case of the Aslan report, anecdotal evidence of social issues was culturally framed as a ‘Muslim issue’: Wiesinger said openly that there were ‘too many’ Muslims in schools.<sup>12</sup> FPÖ and ÖVP used the occasion to criticize Vienna’s socialist mayor.<sup>13</sup> Tellingly for the political context, Wiesinger was named ombudswoman for values and culture conflicts (Ombudsfrau für Wertefragen und Kulturkonflikte) at the education ministry in the subsequent ÖVP-FPÖ government.<sup>14</sup> Hence not only the radical Right but also ÖVP openly instrumentalized public controversies around Muslims in schools to show its strict stance on Islam. This policy allowed ÖVP to appropriate Islam as a political issue for itself.

From the perspective of politics made of ‘culture conflicts’, it is not surprising that the 2017–19 and 2020 Kurz governments made an important symbol of Muslim headscarves in schools. The ban provided testament to the chancellor’s national, conservative position and gave him the leadership on cultural issues while forcing the liberals to defend Muslims. For his second governing coalition with the liberal Greens, Kurz imposed a promise to extend the headscarf ban to as early as fourteen years of age in schools. Out of the three-hundred pages in the coalition’s programme, this particular point gained the most media attention besides migration and energy policies. The extension of the headscarf ban was FPÖ’s promise in the former government,<sup>15</sup> and it was a particularly painful issue for the Greens in terms of personal rights and freedom of religion. Clearly, even after

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11 Nimmervoll, L., ‘Schule und Islam: Erdoğan-Begeisterung löst Radikalisierung ab’, *Der Standard*, September 10, 2018 <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000087058010/schule-und-islam-zwischen-parallelwelten-und-gelungener-integration>, (accessed April 5, 2020).

12 ‘Lehrerin pakt aus: Zu viele Muslime in Klassen’, *Die Krone*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.krone.at/1768127> (accessed March 11, 2021).

13 ‘Ein Buch als Zündstoff für eine Politik-Debatte’, *Die Wiener Zeitung*, September 10, 2018, <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/wien/988344-Ein-Buch-als-Zuendstoff-fuer-eine-Politik-Debatte.html> (accessed March 11, 2021).

14 Thies, J., ‘Susanne Wiesinger wird Ombudsfrau im Bildungsministerium’, *Addendum*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.addendum.org/schule/wiesinger-bildungsministerium/> (accessed March 11, 2021).

15 Mappes-Niediek, N., ‘Mein Europa: Kulturkampf im Klassenzimmer’, *Deutsche Welle*, May 17, 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3le3t> (accessed December 10, 2019).

the demise of the populist radical Right from the government coalition in 2019, symbolic politics continues to matter.

### **The FPÖ effect**

The process through which Austria's political competition was increasingly framed by conflicts over migration and Islam eventually led to a generalized conservative-liberal divide. If the immediate context was indeed the migration crisis and FPÖ's blunt politicization of Islam, its larger context was the prolonged party competition on the right. Since the rise of FPÖ in the 1990s, the radical populist challenger in the Austrian party system has had a strong impact on issues related to national identity and political style. Two skilled leaders, Jörg Haider and Heinz-Christian Strache, have pushed these issues in new directions.

The Freedomite Party has profoundly marked Austrian politics two times: during its participation in government under Haider's distant leadership from Kärnten (2000–2005) and during Strache's leadership after 2005. At first, the FPÖ represented a challenging competition within the political Right. During the second period, the competition doubled: Besides a struggle over the leadership of the radical Right itself, a struggle developed over domination of the wider political spectrum including the formerly socialist electorship. Since ÖVP's decisive victory in the 2019 elections, the winner is Sebastian Kurz, who had adopted some of FPÖ's issues, as well as populist communication and leadership strategies. During the long and intense rivalry on the right, migration, Islam and identity were pushed to the centre of Austria's politics. Such a culturalization of Austrian politics is in fact due to the transformations of FPÖ: Its first success was based on the appeal of far-right anti-migration rhetoric; the second success was made of the much wider appeal of neo-nationalist identitarian politics.

### **FPÖ Transformations**

FPÖ is a party of shifting ideological positions. It originated in the 1950s as a small party of *die Ehemaligen* (the 'formers'), that is, people linked to the Nazi regime in Austria, and as a party of

the *Deutschnationalen* (pan-German nationalists) – early FPÖ leaders professed an adherence to the German ethnic and cultural identity. In 1980, a pro-European liberal wing took over, and the party entered a government with SPÖ as a minority coalition partner. After Jörg Haider won the party's elections in 1986, he developed it into a successful Austrian nationalist party. In a modernizing move, Haider left German ethnic nationalism behind and adopted an anti-immigration strategy, highlighted by highly provocative rhetoric. His famous 'Austria First!' slogan was directed against foreigners. It claimed to defend a parochial, traditional, locally rooted 'good old Austria' against the globalized world (Hadj-Abdou 2016: 34). His borderline innuendos referring to the taboos of WWII made him a media star; his direct, personalized style made him popular in his home Carinthia region and beyond. Haider brought FPÖ from 9% of votes in 1986 to almost 27% in 1999, taking a record number of seats in the national parliament. In a move unprecedented since WWII, an openly right-wing nationalist party was made a coalition partner under the chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP) in 2000.

Schüssel was the first right-wing chancellor after a period of thirty years, during which the socialists Bruno Kreisky and Franz Vranitzky had been ruling alone and in coalitions with FPÖ or ÖVP respectively. The inclusion of FPÖ in the government was heavily criticized throughout Europe as a symbolic recognition of far-right politics. As expected, immigration was a major issue dealt with by FPÖ in its almost six years in government between 2000 and 2006. The ÖVP-FPÖ government focused on integration and the assimilation of foreigners. In 2002, a so-called *Integrationsvereinbarung* (integration agreement) was adopted. Its focus on language skills and access to the job market but also on the cultural adaptation of migrants to the Austrian context led to a culturalization of immigration politics. On the other hand, it also provided integration policies with much needed framework, funds and institutional focus. In general, the governing experience moderated FPÖ by forcing it to reframe its slogans into workable state policies. But coalition politics also led to serious internal conflicts that ended the coalition and forced new elections in 2002. FPÖ was considerably weakened

(down to 10%) and eventually split between a radical faction of FPÖ and Jörg Haider's side – who went on to start a new party, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ; Bündnis Zukunft Österreich). After Haider's 2008 death from a car accident, his new party virtually disappeared from the political scene.

Due to the split, two populist far-right parties competed against each other in national and local politics between 2005 and 2013. Under the new leader, Heinz-Christian Strache (b. 1969), FPÖ made a second major change. Strache took over FPÖ in a position of weakness and on the brink of disappearance in 2005 – after the bulk of cadres and property followed Haider to BZÖ. Under Strache's leadership, FPÖ radicalized its positions and reformulated its language 'by projecting polarizing messages and pushing identity politics in ways that had not been possible while they were serving in government' (Heinisch, Hauser, 2016). Instead of a general rejection of (Turkish and other) migrants, the new FPÖ focused on the Muslim Other (Hadj-Abdou 2016: 36) and began using provocative anti-Muslim rhetoric (Hafez, Rheinisch, Miklin 2019). The focus on Islam allowed Strache's FPÖ to take ownership of the anti-migration discourse in the competition with BZÖ and to profile itself as a leading force on the far right.

### **FPÖ's New Focus on Islam**

Besides Euroscepticism, Islamophobia became 'the central discursive and policy frame' of the reformed far right (Krzyżanowski 2013: 141). Its rhetorical devices shifted from a xenophobic repertoire to an identitarian one. In FPÖ's *Handbuchg Freiheitlicher Politik* (Handbook for freedomite politics),<sup>16</sup> apparently written mostly by the later presidential candidate Norbert Hofer<sup>17</sup>, Islam is framed as a *culturalized danger*. It is presented as a religion of war and aggression whose minarets are *Siegesstatuen* (columns of victory), as

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16 Its fourth edition appeared in 2013. Available at [http://www.fpoe-bildungsinstitut.at/documents/10180/13608/Handbuch.freiheitlicher.Politik+\(2\).pdf/3530ad0f-4bd0-47e2-9b8b-88a4b2a7a89d](http://www.fpoe-bildungsinstitut.at/documents/10180/13608/Handbuch.freiheitlicher.Politik+(2).pdf/3530ad0f-4bd0-47e2-9b8b-88a4b2a7a89d).

17 Bailer, B., 'Die FPÖ und ihr Handbuch für Extremismus', *Der Standard*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000047805924/die-fpoe-und-ihr-handbuch-fuer-extremismus> (accessed March 11, 2021).

a religion whose legal system is incompatible with ‘Western democracy’ and as a demographic danger, especially in certain places such as Vienna (Krzyżanowski 2013: 144).

FPÖ had made ample usage of the image of Islam as a cultural and demographic threat since the mid-2000s, and, as under Haider, the new FPÖ was able to attract attention by using catchy and provocative slogans fed through various channels of political advertising. As noted by Hafez, Heinisch and Miklin (2019), most visible were FPÖ’s poster slogans, such as ‘Vienna will not become Istanbul’ (Viennese elections in 2005), ‘No home for Islam’ (national parliamentary elections in 2006), ‘No home for radical Islam’ (Graz local elections in 2008); ‘The sound of church bells instead of muezzin song’ (Tyrol regional elections in 2008), ‘Away with mosques and minarets’ (2009), and ‘Home instead of Islam’ (2008). In the identitarian register, Islam is presented as a danger to the parochial, Christian Austrian identity. Migration is no longer just a problem for the welfare state and an object of a nationalist refusal to share national resources with foreigners, but a challenge to Austrian cultural and demographic homogeneity. The (increasing) presence of people perceived as culturally different is portrayed as a repetition of the historical onslaught of Muslim armies during the Ottoman occupations of Vienna. FPÖ has turned to warning against a process of Islamization by immigration – ‘the Islamic Trojan Horse’ (Turner-Graham 2008).

The culturalized danger of Islam found its reflection in the defence of the endangered Austrian identity, which is framed as Christian, Western and European. The salience of Christianity may be surprising. The original FPÖ was the party of libertarian, anti-clerical German nationalism (Heinisch 2004). Yet since the late 1990s, it has morphed into a party of socially conservative, clerical ‘Austrian patriotism’, defending the small Austrian man (Heinisch 2008). Already under Haider’s leadership, FPÖ’s 1997 party programme highlighted ‘Christianity as the foundation of Europe’ and the tradition of the *Abendland* (Hafez et al. 2019). Haider’s FPÖ allied with ‘the dogmatic wing of the Catholic hierarchy’ and called for Christianity to defend its values (Heinisch 2008: 49).

This ‘cultural patriotism’ (Heinisch 2008) of Haider’s FPÖ was given a broader, civilizationist dimension under Strache. For Strache, Islam was more than a religion; it was ‘a totalitarian legal and social system’ (Betz, Meret 2009: 320) that must be resisted at all costs. Underwriting Huntington’s slogan of a clash of civilizations, FPÖ called for the defence of the Occident (Betz and Meret 2009: 332). An EU elections poster stated, ‘Our course is clear: The Occident in Christian Hands’ (Abendland in Christenhand). After 2005, FPÖ stepped up the usage of religious symbols for political mobilization. Strache, for instance, made a political speech against the construction of an Islamic centre in 2009 with a cross in his hand or ‘celebrated’ his appeal to Christian tradition in front of the central Stephansdom in Vienna in 2012 (Köchler 2013: 13). FPÖ made use of the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683 to raise emotions against the *Türkengefahr* (the Turkish menace), forgetting that half of the Ottoman soldiers were in fact Christian.

For Strache, Christian symbols like church towers and crosses were markers of cultural (Christian) identity, whereas the actual confession of ethnicity was secondary: He has notoriously courted the large Serbian minority in Vienna, while making a stance of rejecting Islam and Islamism (Hadj-Abdou 2016). What his cultural Christianity did entail, however, is an explicit rejection of abortion, homosexual partnerships and adoption by homosexual couples – that is, the conservative issue of morality politics. Christianity is not present in the Freedomite ‘handbook’ except as a basis for identity; Leila Hadj-Abdou quotes the term ‘militant cultural Christianity’ to describe the instrumental nature of FPÖs ‘religious conversion’ (Hadj-Abdou 2016: 41).

The implications of the civilizationist outlook brought Strache’s FPÖ close to Netanjahu’s Israel. In 2010, he signed the so-called Jerusalem Declaration during a trip to the city that he undertook with representatives of the Swedish, Belgian and German far right. Its aim was to convey ‘their staunch support for Israel and its right to defend itself against “Islamic aggression”’ (Schroufi 2015). Abandoning the old, ethnic antisemitism, the European populist far right has framed popular uncertainties as fears of cultural erosion and

designated Islam the new enemy of ‘European culture’. Because the far right believed it shares this new ‘cultural racism’ – in other words, a hostility to Islam as a culture and civilization – with Israel, ‘defending Israel is now virtually of doctrinaire importance’ (Shroufi 2015). In his analysis of the curious consequences of the far-right anti-Islamic ideological turn, Omran Shroufi quoted Strache comparing himself to Theodor Herzl in an interview to the anti-Islam and pro-Israeli German online platform Politically Incorrect (PI News): ‘Theodor Herzl ... who was a ‘German-conscious’ [*Deutschbewusster*] ... er, citizen with Jewish roots [...] lived in Austria, was a member of a student fraternity [*Waffenstudent*] like me; we are, I mean, I am often vilified’ (Shroufi 2015).

Portraying the founder of Zionism as a fellow ‘cultural’ German brings the far right full circle from anti-clerical, racist nationalism to a cultural, civilizationist, ‘Christianist’ neo-nationalism. Even though the neo-nationalist mutation remains an exclusivist ideology, it has cleansed itself of overt racism. The culturalist (rather than racist) repertoire has a much higher chance of being normalized and adopted in some form by centrist politicians. Yet concerning its historical sympathies, FPÖ has walked on a tight rope between rejection of its fascist roots and attempts to make the far right acceptable and *salonfähig*. In 2018, when several FPÖ members were accused of keeping antisemitic songs in books from their fraternities, Strache announced he would set up a committee to examine the party’s ties to antisemitic groups and sacked the party members in question.

The ‘revamped’ FPÖ succeeded in casting its influence very wide indeed. It made ample use of new media and forged alliances with various sensationalist media and conspirationist internet channels. Strache also used to be very active on Facebook, where he was for a time the most followed politician in Austria (Kurz overtook him in 2020).<sup>18</sup> The innovative usage of social media included the production of cartoons like *Der Blaue Planet, HC’s Kampf für Freiheit gegen eine zentrale EU* (The Blue Planet. HC’s fight for freedom against a central EU); viral rap songs featuring Strache and mutual

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18 HC Strache had 500,000 fans in 2006; in 2020, Kurz has reached 958,000 fans.

repostings of content with allied anti-Islam websites such as unzensuriert.at (uncensored.at). Austria's most read daily, the tabloid *Krone Zeitung*, grew dependent on FPÖ content and functioned as its media amplifier. A powerful, self-feeding and 'self-confirming' information environment emerged in Austria<sup>19</sup> and allowed the 'revamped' FPÖ to obtain 17% of the vote in 2008, 20.5% in 2013 and 26% in 2017. In 2016, FPÖ's candidate scored 35% and first place in the first round of the presidential election, and in 2017 the FPÖ entered government in coalition with ÖVP. By the time the FPÖ had won its major successes, its polarizing culturalist, conservative and security-centred message had pushed the mainstream Right more towards its own positions.

### **The Conservative Turn to the Right**

If the FPÖ 'focused nearly exclusively on patriotism, defending Austrian culture and tradition, security, and welfare system' (Hafez, Heinisch, 2018: 660), it also included its Austrian internal liberal competition as an enemy within its culturalist matrix. The rejection of Islam went hand in hand with the rejection of the socialist party in Vienna during local elections. The FPÖ had accused Vienna's long-term mayor Michael Häupl (1994–2018) of Islamism and antisemitism, of imposing the headscarf and of promoting sharia – because of SPÖ's openness to freedom of religion for Muslims, the socialists would invite 'a cultural Islamisation' (Hafez 2019: 201). FPÖ viewed the Austrian political scene as divided between those who were against Islam and those who were for Muslims. This binary was expressed through the visual opposition of an election poster pitting Strache and Häupl under the title 'Duel Over Vienna. You Have the Choice', with a minaret next to Häupl and a church tower next to Strache (Forchtner, Krzyżanowski, Wodak, 2013: 142). Later, FPÖ accused the conservatives of also standing for Islam. In the 2017 campaign, the same visual binary opposed Sebastian Kurz and Strache. The former was accompanied by his quote from 2015,

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19 Maan, N. and Schmid, F., "Zur Info": Das Facebook-Universum des Heinz-Christian Strache', Feature Analysis, *Der Standard*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000044079645/zur-info-das-facebook-universum-des-hc-strache> (last accessed March 11, 2021).

‘Islam belongs to Austria’<sup>20</sup>, and the latter with the response: ‘Islamization must be stopped.’<sup>21</sup> Kurz’s later stand on the headscarf ban reflects his unwillingness to be publicly counted as within the ‘pro-Islam’ camp.

The context had indeed radically changed between the elections of 2013 and 2017. One month into the ‘refugee crisis’, in October 2015, Viennese state elections took place, in which the FPÖ challenged both the locally strong SPÖ and the governing ÖVP. The FPÖ put significant stress on the initial openness of the SPÖ chancellor, Werner Faymann, to provide humane treatment to refugees and to support Chancellor Merkel’s decision to disregard Dublin asylum procedures. Using striking anti-migration and anti-Muslim rhetoric, the FPÖ increased its share of votes by 5% to 30%, coming in second after a weakened SPÖ and far ahead of ÖVP (9%). The Austrian centre right chose to confront the old/new competitor on FPÖ’s own turf. The ÖVP ministers gradually intensified their focus on security and migration control. The young foreign minister Sebastian Kurz developed an Austrian response to the Balkan route. As a personal initiative, and in parallel with German-Turkish negotiations, he negotiated a gradual closing of the Macedonian, Serbian and Croatian borders to all but war refugees in January 2016, which was extended to all asylum seekers soon after. The decisive Austrian regional diplomacy made Kurz into a statesman. A year later, Kurz profiled himself even more decisively as a new type of a leader who would transform ÖVP. Ahead of the 2017 elections, he had himself elected party leader with the explicit condition of concentrating decision powers in the party leader’s office. He set up his own *Bundesliste* (election list) – ‘Sebastian Kurz List – The New People’s Party’ – re-branding the old party into a new ‘movement’. ÖVP’s new transformation was symbolized by a new colour. Instead of the traditional cassock-black, he chose turquoise – possibly to avoid recalling

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20 Metzger Kurz, I. ‘Der Islam gehört zu Österreich’, *Der Kurier*, January 23, 2015, <https://kurier.at/politik/in-land/kurz-diskutiert-mit-islam-religionslehrem-der-islam-gehört-zu-österreich/109.687.906> (accessed March 11, 2021).

21 Traill, K., ‘HC Strache Austrian election campaign poster’, October 13, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-13/strache-poster--islam-must-be-stopped/9048566?nw=0> (accessed March 11, 2021).

the black and blue coalition of the 2000s were ÖVP-FPÖ to build a government together in 2017.<sup>22</sup>

A general turn away from liberal conservatism towards a national-minded right was long in the making. FPÖ's rhetoric and demands had driven the immigration debate within the political establishment since the mid-2000s (Heinisch 2008). As the populist FPÖ was gaining on the centrist ÖVP in preference, ÖVP had gradually abandoned its earlier conservative-liberal positions and moved towards security-minded and identitarian positions – a process that culminated in the new ÖVP. Sebastian Kurz has not only steered a change in favour of personalized leadership and a symbolic restart, he has also pushed the conservatives to adopt positions and dominate issues that were hitherto reserved for the more radical fringe. One example of the ÖVP's reappropriation of far-right perspectives is the change in the Austrian state's relation to Islam. Unlike other European countries, Austria has long had a legal framework that recognizes the religion of Islam and its representative as a public corporation. Being the legal heir of Austria-Hungary, Austria has inherited a 1912 law on Islam through which the empire regulated the existence of a Muslim minority in Bosnia. This law was revived and amended in 1980 to create a self-regulating representative structure for Austrian Muslims, the Islamic Religious Community in Austria (IGGÖ) – a partner to the state that other EU countries are struggling to create. In a much commented-on revision, the ÖVP-SPÖ government had a new Islam Act adopted in 2015. According to Hafez and Heinisch (2018), this new law meant a historical break with Austrian consociationalism. In keeping with a pluralist legal tradition, Austria used to allow religious institutions to participate in the legislative process, granting them the status of negotiators, commentators and, to some degree, veto holders over the legal framework (Hafez and Heinisch, 2018: 654). The new law has, on the contrary, a directive and interventionist nature. It limits

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22 'Von Schwarz-Blau zu Türkis-Blau: Parteien und ihre Farben', *Der Kurier*, October 24, 2017, <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/koalition-von-schwarz-blau-zu-tuerkis-blau-parteien-und-ihre-farben/293.992.759> (accessed March 11, 2021).

the financial autonomy of Islamic institutions, stipulates the language of religion instruction and even includes a German translation of the Qur'an. Hafez and Heinisch have shown that the law was drafted by conservative legislators in direct response to populist demands. Since Islam has become a subject of political competition, the conservatives have used the new law to present themselves as a law-and-order party.

The shift away from earlier liberal positions is remarkable also because of ÖVP's earlier pragmatic and liberal framing of the Islam issue. In 2011, Kurz was appointed state secretary (and later minister) for integration and has shown a capacity for fresh approaches, namely, highlighting both the potential contribution of migrants to Austria and the need to reward integration efforts with public recognition which he used to readily grant to chosen Muslim Austrians. The 2015 turn 'blurred' the conservative position: It remained open on integration but restrictive when it comes to the autonomy of religious institutions. Finally, in 2017, ÖVP 'attempted to fully appropriate FPÖ's agenda during the election campaign' (Hafez, Heinisch 2018: 672).

Long before the adoption of the security-centred Islam Act, a more subtle change was in the making. Since the mid-2000s, talk of the 'cultural difference' of Islam and references to an 'Austrian way of life' emerged in debates about integration. According to a study on the political debates concerning the headscarf issue by Gresh et al., a substantial shift occurred in the framing of the issue. While the headscarf was considered a religious symbol throughout the 1990s, FPÖ campaigns for a general ban on Islam had politicized it and made it into an issue of cultural identity. Gradually, matters pertaining to Islam moved from being issues of religious freedom to questions of cultural values and traditions (Gresch et al., 2008: 414). Public debates about Salafi kindergarten and Muslim pupils reflect this shift: Religion has become framed as an expression of a 'culture', that is, a different and incompatible culture, and thus a basis for the politics of identity and, more specifically, Austrian politics of identity. If the ÖVP chose to take on far-right subjects and policies in order to better counter the rising populism, Sebastian Kurz and

ÖVP have only reinforced a tendency to culturalize political issues. In this context, issues concerning Muslims transformed into debates about Austrian identity, about the way Austrians see themselves.

### **Old-New ‘Civil War’?**

The polarization of Austria reached unprecedented levels during the 2016 elections and again during the so-called Ibiza scandal.<sup>23</sup> The events noticeably ended a long period in Austrian political history that was symbolized by cooperation between two strong centrist parties. For Walter Hämmerle, a veteran journalist and editor-in-chief of the *Wiener Zeitung*,<sup>24</sup> the 2010s symbolize a return of the conflict over Austrian identity – one that has accompanied Austria since its inception. From its foundation in the wreckage of the dual monarchy in 1918, Austria has been a country of entrenched opposing camps, the exception being the three decades between 1955 and the late 1980s. Those post-war years produced an image of a happy Austria, one that has now largely been abandoned to polarizing conflicts over migration, Islam, the European Union and liberal norms.

### **Austria’s Political ‘Camps’**

For half of its existence, modern Austria was an embattled republic with a fragile sense of self that became a successful Alpine republic – a country called ‘a better Germany’ by *Der Stern* in 2005 (Siebenhaar 2017: 20). In the past decade or two, the foundations of this construction have been questioned. In the beginning, Austria was a country that ‘nobody wanted’.<sup>25</sup> The newly formed republic was a rump state, insecure in its borders and waiting to be fixed by the 1920’s local plebiscites. It was constructed on the ruins of an

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23 The affair was triggered by a secretly shot video published in 2019, showing Strache and the deputy leader of FPÖ offering state contracts in exchange for election help from a woman he believed was the niece of a Russian oligarch in 2017.

24 One of four Austrian quality newspapers, alongside the right-liberal *Die Presse*, the left-liberal *Der Standard* and the Catholic *Salzburger Nachrichten*. It has been state owned since 1703.

25 The title of a 1962 book *Der Staat, den keiner wollte* by the journalist Hellmut Andics.

empire but without national unity, industrial base or fixed borders. After its foundation, several cleavages defined its political destiny: first, between the overwhelming majority of Austrians who desired to join Germany, a move precluded by the peace agreement, and those who wanted an Austrian state. Then there were those who wanted to build an authoritarian state and those standing in strong opposition to it. Politically, the landscape was divided into three major party camps: *die Christlichsozialen* (the Christian socialists) with their form of authoritarian political Catholicism (the Blacks); the socially liberal, reform socialists (the Reds); and *die Deutschnationalen* (the German nationalists; the Blues<sup>26</sup>). The 1920s and 1930s were a decade of gradual militarization of this cleavage, marked by instances of violent civic war, by the authoritarian regime led by the Christian socialists from 1933 on and, eventually, by the Anschluss in 1938.

After the war, Austria retained one of the cleavages: socialists versus conservatives, represented by SPÖ and ÖVP. Yet, post-war Austria emerged as the exact opposite of interwar Austria – both major political forces put stability and prosperity above political conflict. From militant organizations, they both evolved into ‘normal political parties [...] to Austria’s good fortune’ (Hämmerle 2018: 155). They cooperated, often ruled together and perfected their capacity for compromise. Under their combined leadership, Austria became a stable, prosperous country. Until 1966, the two parties ruled together, followed by a twelve-year-long SPÖ Kreisky government that modernized the country. For twenty-four of the subsequent thirty-six years, between 1983 and 2019, the two parties continued to govern together in a grand coalition.

The three stable post-war decades of *Konsensgesellschaft* (society of consensus; Seibenhaar 2017: 247) produced an image of a happy and stable Austria – thus, the saying ‘tu felix Austria’, formerly

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26 The blue cornflower was related to Romantic German nationalists after 1948, Germans who remained in Austria after 1866 and also sympathizers of the Nazi Party after it was banned in Austria before 1938, cf. J. Klätzer, ‘Im Dunstkreis der blauen Blüte’, *Der Kurier*, May 1, 2016, available at: <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/die-kornblume-geliebt-von-bismarck-symbol-der-alldeutschen-vereinigung-und-blumenschmuck-der-poe/198.127.906> (accessed March 11, 2021).

referring to the war-dodging, diplomatic skills of the Habsburgs, has been frequently, if ironically, used in reference to the Second Republic. Post-war Austria fared much better than the first interwar republic for several reasons. The national conflict fell away: German nationalism was thoroughly discredited by seven years of Nazi rule. Also, the new republic learned to tackle social conflict – through elaborate social partnership negotiations. Austria eventually acknowledged the liberal shift in the social values of the 1960s through modern civic reforms adopted by SPÖ.

The period of stability ended in 1990 when new parties emerged to rock the SPÖ/ÖVP duopoly: The Greens and the new FPÖ under Haider. Their issues were of a new, moral and ideological kind – ecology and peace, migration and identity. The Greens were the first to shake Austria via a series of mass demonstrations against nuclear energy. They mobilized for a referendum and forced the closure of an already built nuclear power plant in 1978. In 1986 they entered the parliament as a fourth parliament party and continued to pursue a new type of moral politics. FPÖ responded with its own type of moral politics centred around identity, although in changing ways. Jörg Haider had famously termed Austria a state without a nation, painting Austria as ‘an ideological miscarriage’ in 1988 (Frölich-Steffen 2004: 285), but it then made ‘a programmatic turn’, left German nationalism behind and adopted a stance against multiculturalism, the European Union and immigration (Frölich-Steffen 2004: 288). Out of the two challengers, only FPÖ managed to break the duopoly on the federal level in the 1980s: first, entering a government with the SPÖ (1986–90), and then with ÖVP (2000–2007). Only after the demise of the FPÖ in 2019 were the Greens resurrected, replacing it as a third party capable of entering government coalitions.

For Walter Hämmerle, Strache’s FPÖ has taken over the symbols and social networks of the German-national camp (Hämmerle 2018: 293). If the German-national issue has been officially abandoned, Haider has continued to walk the tight-rope and let out borderline hints at the German WWII experience and German nationalism, with xenophobic and antisemitic undertones. Despite or because these themes were largely suppressed, their airing secured him great

media attention. More importantly, after a flirtation with SPÖ and pro-European social liberalism, FPÖ chose Austrian identity as its main issue. If FPÖ could not offer a coherent identity concept or future vision of Austria, it has taken up positions that made sense within the political and discursive field of the construction and questioning of modern Austrian identity. The identity of Austria as a nation and as a state, in fact, has been the subject of much debate and creation in politics, academia and art. More specifically, the bases for post-war Austria and even more so for post-EU accession Austria have been questioned from both the Right and the Left.

### **Embattled Austrian Identity**

Of all the Central European countries, Austria stands out for its lack of a national anchoring in an ethnic identity. As the Austrian author Robert Menasse remarked, Austria is ‘the only nation-state that decided to become a nation’ for reasons of international relations (Menasse 2000: 17). And, he might have added, it worked out rather well – for a while. If Austria started its modern existence without any national anchoring, it has in fact recently developed a national identity. ‘Austrian national consciousness’ is a product of a rather quick process of identity building during the second half of the twentieth century (Frölich-Steffen 2004: 284; Menasse 1992). Under the elite leadership of the two main parties and their common plan, Austrian statehood and a certain Austrian self-image were gradually built up in the post-war years with an identity consciously rooted in economic prosperity and political stability. In the late 1970s, in the Kreisky years, Austria had finally become a success story. It rapidly modernized itself after the end of the Cold War, becoming a nation with a GDP per capita comparable to that of Germany.

Modern Austrian identity is based on several decisions which drew a thin line between its embattled past and the stable present and were long backed by an overwhelming consensus. The Second Republic dealt with the painful past by choosing distance from the ideological conflicts of the twentieth century. In 1945, the Austrian government adopted the victim thesis, a self-understanding of

being the ‘first victim’ of Nazism. Austria also identified itself with its legacy of Cold War neutrality and used its neutral stance to develop a centre of international diplomacy in Vienna, on par with Geneva. Finally, a new Austria, based on consultation and consensus, raised social stability to a primary goal. Gradually, more and more Austrians identified with the new state. The so-called *Deutschgläubigkeit* (belief in Germanness) slowly but steadily dissipated into a marginal phenomenon: In 1956, 49% of Austrians said in a poll that Austrians are a nation, and 49% said they are not; in the 1970s, 64% considered Austrians a nation and 10% did not, and in 2001, the gap widened further to 82% and 7% (Hawlik 2005). In public discourse and in arts, Germans were becoming construed as an ethnic Other, and Austrians have come to see themselves as *ein eigenes Volk* (a separate people<sup>27</sup>; Karner 2005: 417).

Eventually, a sense of *Austrianness* had developed. According to Hämmerle, it is based on a sort of parochial contentment with the landscape, reliability, prosperity and stability: The ‘pride and joy Austrians find in their nature is at the centre of the Austria-feeling’ (2018: 143). Landscape and cultural heritage – music, theatre, architecture – define the common ground for Austrian pride rather than a state history, ethnic identity, language and a national destiny. For some, it is identification with high culture (such as Mozart, music schools and architecture), for some it is popular culture (such as Mozartkugeln and Sissi), but regardless, Austrians now have a common reference for an ‘Austrian way of life’.

This identification, of course, could not be but fragile. It remains easy to question it from ethnic-national grounds, which is what FPÖ did. In the beginning, the Freedomites were set against the Austrian consensus on the victim thesis and against stability and neutrality as a basis for statehood. Yet not only the far right questioned Austrian self-contentment. Many on the liberal side did too. Once the ‘success-story Austria’ dispelled all doubts about the Republic’s viability (Menasse 1992: 10), critical Austrians set out to question its identity again in the 1990s. The arts – literature and theatre – were where

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27 Whereby the Austrian victory in football at the 1978 World Cup in Argentina made history.

the most stringent and unforgiving questioning and self-reflexion developed. A whole generation of Austrian writers and artists took issue with the Austrian consensus, from Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek to the transgressive actionism of Hermann Nitsch.

In his essay on Austrian identity, 'A Land Without Qualities', Robert Menasse takes the main tenets of Austria's self-identification apart. For Menasse, Austrian neutrality was a political-reality fiction for internal usage (Menasse 2000: 50). Neutrality was in fact imposed on Austria in the Staatsvertrag (the founding post-WWII document), but it was never guaranteed internationally, and it did not stop Austria from joining the UN in 1955. It was rather the expression of a wish never to get involved in a conflict between superpowers – at a time when Austria was a country literally torn between the East and the West. As the Soviet Bloc was crumbling, Austria applied for EU membership right away in 1989 and entered the union in 1995. Robert Menasse also picks apart the selective usage of history (Menasse 2000: 19) on account of the convenient self-acquittal of blame – an accusation that has been thematized with particular acerbity in recent Austrian literature. Finally, the basis of stability, the Austrian social partnership, may also be viewed in a contrasting light as an unofficial government, a private activity of party bureaucrats and a corporatist structure without a legal existence (Menasse 2000: 93).

There are clearly various 'narratives about Austria' that always provide ample space for an 'inner divide' (Hämmerle 2018: 11). As Menasse wrote in 1992, Austria may be a sovereign state and nation, and a quickly constructed nation at that, but not a *Heimat* (home-land). Austrian national identity or consciousness has remained rather unclear, eclectic, 'external and superficial, without implications and consequences' (Menasse 2000: 89). His sober view was vindicated by the post-1995 challenges. The post-1945 stability was indeed predicated on the possibility of remaining detached from the past and the rest of the world, which has increasingly proved impossible.

In view of the new, liberal economics, the stable, reliable Austrian political system was revealed as ambiguous. It was at the same time the fundament of a republican order and an obstacle to

political dynamism and good governance. The social partnership, what is sometimes called Austro-corporatism, was initially intended to prevent a return to the social and political strife that had characterized the country between the wars, but it has turned Austria into ‘a huge redistribution machine’ (Hämmerle 2018: 153) and caused a great deal of *Misswirtschaft* (misgovernment). The ‘extreme consociational nature of the Austrian polity’ (Heinisch 2008: 44) not only describes the tendency for grand coalitions but also the division of political power between the two parties and the politicization of levels of administrative posts and policy issues. For decades, democracy in Austria could not provide a *Machtwechsel*, that is, a change of government. Election results notwithstanding, similar policies have been implemented thanks to political consensus on governance and a lack of control of those in power (Hämmerle 2018: 156). The country has been ruled by the *Proporz* system, in which government and public sector positions are distributed among the strongest parties according to their electoral results. Party affiliation eased access to state employment, and it is not surprising that Austria is among the countries with the highest party membership rates in Europe (Hämmerle 163). Closeness between politics (Jörg Haider in this case) and business was also the context in which the largest Austrian banking scandal – misplaced investments, insider trading and deep-running corruption by Corinthian Hypo Alpe Adria Bank – ended up costing Austria some €8 billion (Siebenhaar 2017: 34).

Hence Austrian stability had a cost: an untransparent political system with a lack of control over the dominant parties. It is no surprise then that after thirty years, new facts came to rock the stability. The year 1986 marked the first departure from the quiet stability: Kurt Waldheim, an ÖVP candidate and former UN secretary-general, was elected Austria’s president amidst revelations about his role in the SS in the Balkans during WWII. In 1986, Jörg Haider took FPÖ on a resolutely new course, and the Greens entered the parliament for the first time under the leadership of the impressive Freda Meissner-Blau. The two parties would work towards steering the republic on a new course: the far-right and (post-material) left alternatives to the party-system. Shortly afterwards, in 1990, the whole

geopolitical context changed. The end of the Eastern Bloc, EU integration and globalization ended the long-serving neutrality and brought about questions that could not be handled through consensus any longer (Frölich-Steffen 2004: 285). Political stability and neutrality, the unquestioned bases of the old post-war consensus, had crumbled. Gradually, the black and red share of votes (that is, the potential grand coalition) began melting, from 84% in 1986 to the all-time low of 50.3% in 2017.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1990s, Austria lived through a transition that was in many ways similar that of its Eastern neighbours. Its neutrality had lost meaning with the end of the Cold War. After decades spent in a state of self-imposed semi-detachment from the West and from the prevailing liberal capitalist paradigm, Austria decided to join the West. ÖVP and SPÖ Europeanized themselves and eventually brought the country into the European Union. Yet, Europeanization and globalization brought new forms of division: Many no longer identified through their partisan sympathies as red, black or blue but rather on whether they stand on the losing or winning side of globalization. In relation to the globalized world, the Greens and FPÖ represent opposite options that gradually became part of the political landscape: an openness to transnational cooperation and to the transformations necessary to succeed in the new context and a rejection of the demands of the globalized era because of the dissolving effect they have on the abovementioned parochial Austrianness.

### **A New 'Bürgerkrieg'?**

The shared Austrian identity – the one developed through decades of the 'red-black' coalition – has proved 'brittle' (Hämmerle 2018: 283). Since the early 2000s, contentious events have multiplied in which it seems that a full half of the citizenry believes something radically different than the other half. It is no surprise that this division has hinged on the relation to immigration, Islam and even 'gender' – all have consequences for the image of shared 'Austrianness'. Immigrants are

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<sup>28</sup> There were five parties: 62 MPs went to ÖVP, 52 to SPÖ, 51 to FPÖ, 10 to the liberal NEOS, and 8 MPs to the Liste Pilz.

no longer suspected of crime and welfare opportunism but of also threatening the very fabric of Austrian society (Heinisch 2008). Since FPÖ has instrumentalized cultural Christianity to declare it the basis of Austrianness, despite the scepticism and increasing opposition of the Church (Hadj-Abdou 2016), the Muslim presence and respect for Islam were made into a symbol of a weakening Austrian identity. Finally, an ‘anti-gender’ discourse has been present among the Austrian public since 2012, the year in which pro-life Marches for Life began annually protesting against Vienna Pride.

*Extension to Politics of Morality.* Besides conservative Catholics, parents’ and men’s rights groups, the far right is the main channel of anti-gender discourse in Austria. In a programme declaration in 2013, FPÖ took a stance against abortion, homosexuality and gender equality by using the Catholic term ‘complementarity’ of the (essentialized and hierarchically organized) sexes (Meyer, Sauer 2018: 29). ‘Gender ideology’ and liberal policies are seen as leading to a ‘denaturalizing of sexual difference, of heterosexuality and of families’ (Meyer, Sauer 2018: 32). During FPÖ’s stint in government, a petition called #Fairändern was circulated that intended to introduce a compulsory waiting period between registration and the realization of abortion while banning late-term abortions. The petition was supported by ÖVP and FPÖ – especially Hofer, then the transport minister – but it had obtained only sixty thousand signatures by 2019.<sup>29</sup> It nevertheless caused concern among human rights activists and feminists, fearing that such ‘a back-door change’ would establish the first hurdle to the abortion right in a new political context. In 2017, the two government parties declared their support for the petition’s aims in their coalition programme.

Meyer and Sauer argue that the issue of gender plays a larger political role: It enables the creation of ‘an impenetrable antagonism that is not limited to specific problems or policy fields but pertains to society as a whole’. It has entailed criticism of liberalization reforms since

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29 Hausbichler, B., ‘Die Fristenregelung im Visier der Abtreibungsgegner’, *Der Standard*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000102620920/die-fristenregelung-im-visier-derabtreibungsgegner> (accessed March 11, 2021).

the 1970s, the articulation of ‘challenges to the survival of Austrian society’ and the creation of ‘a common framework’ to connect different actors (Meyer, Sauer 2018: 36). Indeed, besides migration and Islam, the conservative far right has found common ground in a conservative gender discourse that has been criticized by the liberal Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung as ‘rolling back gender-political achievements of the last decades’ (Götz 2020). Women’s rights have been firmly rooted in Austrian legislation since socialist, liberal reforms in the 1970s and also since EU accession in the 1990s. Anti-gender discourse, pro-life and men’s-rights issues have long been issues of marginal groups. Yet the far right’s alliance with the centrist ÖVP has shown that the politics of morality can indeed become a stake in wider cultural wars if a centrist party decides to take up conservative activism.

### **The Liberal Camp in the Culture War**

Walter Hämmerle describes the confrontation over cultural issues in blunt words. Based on different social and political identities, people oppose each other over language, over identity and over whose values are superior and whose positions are morally legitimate (Hämmerle 2018: 265). After the refugee crisis, this new culture war affected everybody, letting people confess their positions in a quasi-religious language (Hämmerle 2018: 252). Unlike in the 1930s, where resolute, militarized, hierarchically organized ideological camps faced each other with violence, ‘today’s civil war is between two lived worlds and different identity feelings’ (Hämmerle 2018: 261) with ‘irreconcilable concepts of the future’. One looks to the future, the other to the past (Hämmerle 2018: 12). For Ulrike Guérot (2017), a German political scientist, pro-European militant and politics professor in Krems, this Kulturkampf is a new, larger civil war between a reactionary and a universalist, progressive worldview, between the land and the cities, between the winners and losers of globalization, and between the identitarians and the cosmopolitans.

Both Hämmerle and Guérot seek to diagnose the ‘culture war’ in the Austrian and wider European context and call for finding a new way to establish political communities: Europe needs ‘a clear goal,

a clear direction and perspective, an emancipatory agenda, a concrete idea of itself' (Guérot 2017). Walter Hämmerle proposes a new Austrian narrative based on the Austrian tradition of rule of law since the enactment of a civil law code in 1812 and as expressed in Vienna's Heldenplatz by the words 'Iustitia regnorum fundamentum' (Justice is the foundation of the kingdom, Hämmerle 2018: 361).

For all their proposals for overcoming the cultural split, liberals such as Guérot and Hämmerle are conscious participants in the culture war, and their engagement is reflected in the strong language with which they describe it. For Walter Hämmerle, the sudden politicization around immigration has not just been a unilateral push coming from the far right, but a two-sided struggle from the beginning that involved almost constant provocations and answers, campaigning and counter-campaigning, and public debates. The agonistic character of the new politics was apparent at the beginning of the new political era. In 1992, for example, FPÖ initiated a signature campaign aiming to bring about an anti-immigration, 'Austria first' referendum. In reaction, a massive demonstration of 250,000 gathered in Vienna to form a 'sea of light' in January 1993. The petition failed but FPÖ grew, and gradually its anti-immigration attitudes would influence the political positioning of mainstream parties.

A liberal *Widerstand* (resistance) to far-right politics has accompanied FPÖ's rise. It has been very *bürgerlich* (civil, urban) in character. According to Ruth Wodak, civil society has gradually awakened due to a series of public scandals: the 1986 Waldheim affair in 1986, the black-blue coalition between 2000 and 2006 and, finally, during the 2015 refugee crisis.<sup>30</sup> The FPÖ's participation in government has especially energized the liberal part of public opinion. Pro-democracy advocacy groups, such as Demokratiezentrum, were founded in 2000;<sup>31</sup> liberal newspapers such as the daily *Der Standard* and

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30 Schmiederer, E., 'Fantasierte Bedrohungen', *Die Zeit*, September 24., 2015, <https://www.zeit.de/2015/39/angst-islamisierung-populisten-linguistin-ruth-wodak/komplettansicht> (accessed March 11, 2021).

31 Demokratiezentrum, Mission statement, cf. <http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/aktuell/ueber-uns/mision.html> (accessed March 11, 2021).

the weekly *Falter* dedicated themselves to scrutinizing and reporting the far right during the 2000s,<sup>32</sup> and multiple civic initiatives have countered xenophobia. Migrant-friendly acts and projects have become defining signs of Austria resisting the far right. In 2012, the social worker Uta Bock (1942–2019) was given the highest national honorary award for her citizen activism.<sup>33</sup> She had singlehandedly organized private accommodation for refugees since the 1990s. Her initiative eventually transformed into an organization in 2002 bearing her name.<sup>34</sup>

Since the beginning of the second ÖVP-FPÖ coalition, a new Widerstand organized itself again, this time in the form of initiatives such as protest groups ('Omas gegen rechts', 'Offensive gegen rechts', 'Jetzt zeichen setzen'), public events ('Thursday demonstrations', protests against FPÖ's ball in Vienna's imperial palace starting in 2012) or public declarations (e.g., by the Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek). Public activism, sometimes attracting thousands of people to demonstrations against the far right, has been intense since 2015, especially during the second black-blue coalition – resisting both the symbolic normalization of far-right politics on the Austrian political scene (the said ball on historical premises) and its political agenda.

Hence, the Greens, civil society organizations and left-liberal media are themselves part of the culture conflict concerning the vision of Austria. Not because they would form a militant party – the liberals see themselves as defenders of the rule of law and of the status quo. Their engagement is twofold: reactive and substantial. First, the liberals had long engaged in the attention-seeking game of the far right. Ruth Wodak speaks of the 'perpetuum mobile of the far-right'<sup>35</sup> – a strategic political instrumentalization

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32 According to a long-term journalist at *Der Standard*.

33 'Ute Bock ist gestorben', *Der Kurier*, January 19, 2018, <https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/ute-bock-ist-gestorben/307.354.256> (accessed March 11, 2021).

34 Cf. die Website about Ute Bock: <https://www.fraubock.at/de/ueber-uns/ute-bock> (accessed March 11, 2021).

35 Schmiederer, E., 'Fantasierte Bedrohungen', *Die Zeit*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.zeit.de/2015/39/angst-islamisierung-populisten-linguistin-ruth-wodak/komplettansicht> (accessed March 11, 2021).

of the media. Crude provocations would inevitably lead to public indignation by the leftist media and the liberal scene, to further escalation and to the eventual self-victimization of the far right. Symbolically aggressive behaviour allowed FPÖ to retain a perpetual presence in the public debate. The liberals saw through the game, but because values and principles were concerned, they could not help but fall into it again and again.

Secondly, liberal self-criticism has had a similar effect of undermining Austrian self-contentment, as did the far-right onslaught. A source of cultural ‘counter-hegemony’ since the 1990s, the liberal public has cultivated ‘critical narratives that challenge some of the premises, particularly those related to the Second World War and the Holocaust, underlying certain versions of the discourse of “Austrian-ness” summarised above; grassroots political opposition to the current government and (some) of its policies; and new imaginings of what we may tentatively term the “post-national self”’ (Karner 2005: 421). Hence, both the far-right onslaught and the liberal mobilization appear to self-intensify because they both seek to undermine the bases of accepted Austrianness from opposite directions.

### **Escalation or Moderation of the Culture Wars?**

The 2015–16 refugee crisis is a case in point: It has led to an unprecedented mobilization of liberal opinion and citizen initiatives working towards the accommodation of thousands of asylum seekers. Like in Germany, private groups, urban initiatives and Catholic charities mobilized in larger cities, and the liberal public was energized to an unprecedented level. For liberal Austria, the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2016 and 2017, respectively, had been all the more shocking: A far-right candidate almost prevailed against the combined force of the liberal mainstream, and, after winning the presidency, the Greens were unable to even make it into the parliament the following year. Instead, the election led to a replay of the black-blue coalition.

Contrary to that, Walter Hämmerle has interpreted both elections as temporary breaks in a general culture war. Namely, if Van der

Bellen won, it may have been because of his conciliatory rhetoric, that is, thanks to his attempts to avoid confrontation and to posit himself as a person of moderation. Further, the Greens did not lose to a conservative electorate; they lost because the party split just ahead of the elections. Peter Pilz, a veteran Green politician, ran his own party list on markedly cultural issues, including anti-Islam, and won more votes than the Greens. The Greens thus succumbed to an internal culture war themselves – therefore weakening the liberal camp altogether. Finally, having taken leadership on Islam, migration and security issues, Sebastian Kurz largely blunted the edge of the culture war.

For the duration of a (short) electoral cycle, a moderated version of a culturalized politics prevailed in the government. Polarization subsided when the stakes were lowered after the dissolution of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition. In 2019, Strache let himself get trapped – via secret recordings of extremely unpatriotic negotiations with a purported envoy of a Russian oligarch. The scandal led to the fall of the government and new elections in which FPÖ lost in the federal and Viennese elections in 2019 and 2020 respectively. After revelations about Strache's expensive lifestyle, the populist 'perpetuum mobile' ceased performing for a moment. Yet the polarization goes on. FPÖ in no way moderated its language and ran again on the Islamization ticket, albeit with weaker results. The Greens made a strong come-back into politics and became part of the federal government for the first time.

In the space of four years, Austria's political landscape was thoroughly rocked. The unprecedented rise of a modernized far right was compounded by the greatest humanitarian and security crisis in years. For a moment, it was possible to envisage an Austria governed by a far-right president and a far-right dominated government and entrenched to the degree that the culture war would leave no space for a political centre, such as in Poland or Hungary. In an unexpected turn which was largely due to the political talents of Sebastian Kurz and to the amateurism of the far right, the accumulated tension was defused and moderate governance restored after the 2019 snap elections. Still, Kurz's surprising insistence on extending the ban of the Islamic headscarf shows that culturalized confrontational logic continues in Austrian politics, nonetheless.

## Conclusion

Since the neo-nationalist turn of FPÖ in the mid-2000s, Austria's culture wars have deepened on account of attitudes to migration, Islam and, to a lesser degree, abortion and gender. They have reached several heights: diverging reactions to the refugee crisis in 2015, the deeply polarizing presidential election in 2016, and resistance to FPÖ's second participation in the government between 2017 and 2019. The context of Austrian polarization has been an increasing culturalization of politics since the 1990s. If the country's history of culture wars remains part of the historical consciousness and possibly also a fragilizing element of the national identity, the current 'culture wars' are new – they have developed against the backdrop of recent Austrian self-understanding.

As in the other countries of Central Europe, stability, prosperity and political success are of a rather recent nature and fragile character in Austria (in comparison with more settled Western European neighbours). Modern Austria started as a weak and divided heirress of the Danube monarchy. Only after 1945 did it leave the decades of its 'civic wars' behind to transform itself into a stable, prosperous and modern Alpine republic. The years 1945 to 1995 were an astonishing success. Austria's EU accession in 1995 marked the end of the post-war period of reconstruction and national reconciliation. But by in 1999, with the first ÖVP-FPÖ government, the atmosphere had changed.

The bases for the success of the Second Republic – social stability, wide-reaching coordination and conflict-avoidant politics based on a solid liberal-conservative compromise – have been weakened over the last two decades. Economic liberalization and globalization, political integration into the West and economic expansion into the East have all rocked the social and economic bases of consensual politics. The pragmatic and cooperative political style has been challenged by political forces that have introduced moral considerations into politics: post-material liberalism of the ecological, critical, human-rightist and internationalist kind on the one hand, and a neo-nationalist and identitarian type on the other.

Politically, FPÖ, the nationalist challenger, has attracted the most attention by breaking taboos and exacerbating political competition on the far right and, later, across the whole right-wing scene. A xenophobic turn towards 'Austria first' in the 1990s escalated into the neo-nationalist turn of the mid-2000s. FPÖ under Strache pursued an aggressive politics of identity based on cultural Christianity that was buttressed by a politics of conservative morality. On both accounts, FPÖ is no exception in Europe: FPÖ has partnered in its Christianist and conservative policies with the Italian and Scandinavian far right and Catholic fundamentalists respectively. The revamped FPÖ's steady rise was eventually countered by the centre right's adoption of far-right political themes, leadership style and even programme. By taking control of neo-nationalist issues, ÖVP has both moderated and entrenched the culturalization of Austrian politics.

Yet the focus on the far right obfuscates the fact that the liberal part of Austria has been engaged in an active and widespread 'resistance' to the revisionist and racist politics of FPÖ and thus in the larger culture war over values in politics. Liberal Austria has been successful in maintaining some taboos, especially those concerning the rehabilitation of Austria's Nazi past, (although FPÖ has succeeded in symbolically breaking several of them), and in preserving Austria's firm rooting in Europe: The issue of 'Öxit' was a short lived FPÖ idea during the presidential election. In comparison with the rest of CE, Austria has a strong urban liberal milieu and a history of liberal reforms that reach back to the 1970s. A sort of conservative-liberal or patriotic-European synthesis continues to live on within the still dominant ÖVP under Kurz's leadership. Hence, moderation of the culture wars has been an option in Austria even after deeply polarizing moments.

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# 8/ The Moment After: Culture Wars in a Polarized Croatia

*Zora Hesová*

In 2013, an open ‘culture war’ broke out at the very moment of Croatia’s EU accession. During the standoff between conservative Catholic organizations and the socialist government over a referendum on same-sex marriage, Prime Minister (now Croatia’s President) Zoran Milanović complained to the media that there was a culture war being aggressively waged in Croatia.<sup>1</sup> That year, conservative Catholics steered a school reform project through to the Constitutional Court because of their opposition to sexual education; they also gathered almost 750,000 signatures for a referendum on a same-sex marriage ban. Next to public conflicts over Catholic values, Croatia’s past has proven to have even greater polarization potential. 2013 was also when yearly public commemorations of the Second World War increasingly pitted a nationalist camp against an anti-fascist one.

Almost immediately after EU accession that year, a visible shift occurred in Croatian politics. In several successive public confrontations, the Croatian public was divided over questions of public morality and collective memory. Political consensus on immediate national aims was left broken. Non-party actors entered politics in symbolic confrontations over the national past and public morality, and an electoral swing to the right occurred in 2015. The two ensuing right-wing coalition governments were involved in further escalations over the national past. A generalized polarization has since developed between two large camps: a liberal centre-left camp, which has rejected conservative moralism and changes in

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1 Balira, S., ‘MILANOVIĆ “Agresivna grupa vodi kulturni rat”’, *Jutarnji List*, May 22, 2013, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/milanovic-agresivna-grupa-vodi-kulturni-rat-karamarko-silovali-ste-i-djecu-i-roditelje/1147217/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

commemoration policies, and a conservative, patriotic centre-right camp which promotes conservative public morality and engages ambiguously in war remembrance.

Unlike in the Visegrád countries, the context of the Croatian culture wars is not a populist turn. The political landscape has retained both its post-war duopolistic party structure and a relatively high degree of pluralism. The populist option is present but weak. The defining feature of the Croatian political landscape between 2013 and 2020 was rather this strong polarization between an urban, liberal camp and a conservative, Catholic one. Their political difference is based on opposing *cultural identities*, articulated around a series of contentious choices: a positive commemoration of the Partisan anti-fascist movement vs valorization of the WWII past; a secular, civic conception of Croatian identity vs a tendency to conflate ethnic Croat and religious Catholic identities; unquestioning acceptance of the primacy of the Croatian War of Independence (called the Homeland War in Croatia; 1991–95) and President Franjo Tuđman's role in modern Croatia vs a critical assessment of the same; and, finally, the acceptance vs rejection of religious, ethnic and sexual minorities (Raos 2016).

In order to understand why both the WWII legacy and social conservatism polarize the public, it is useful to see them as parts of larger 'culture wars'. The term refers to shifts in political struggles away from issues of economic and social policies towards conflicts over symbols and values, in which political cleavages are defined as cultural cleavages and, eventually, as opposing cultural identities – liberal vs conservative, anti-fascist vs nationalist. The notion of culture war does not, however, necessarily refer to entrenched historical cleavages or social divisions. Confrontation over symbolic matters is – as this study will attempt to show – part of the tactical repertoire of a populist type of political strategy (Brubaker 2018). Political and civil society actors have recently made ample use of historical traumas, discursive dissonances and popular resistance to official narratives in order to mobilize the public for political gain when a unifying vision for the future has vanished.

This contribution aims to study culturalized political conflicts within the context of shifting identities and narratives in contem-

porary Croatia, and especially the mutual dynamics of the two main theatres of its culture wars: the politics of morality and the politics of memory. If revisionism and Catholic activism stand out, they also stand in mutual relation and are both part of a larger quest to anchor modern Croatia within competing *frames* of identity. The argument is that it is the shifts between alternative identity frames (concerning national identity and national past) that presented themselves as opportunities for political struggle, especially since a broader political consensus symbolized by EU accession disintegrated and civil society actors (Church, revisionists, memory entrepreneurs) engaged in their versions of cultural politics.

The aim of this chapter is thus threefold: first, attempt a situational reconstruction of recent polarizations in Croatia and situate culture politics within the shifts in national narratives and remembrance practices. The second aim is to examine the changing definitions of national identity and the prominent role performed by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) which represent the larger context of cultural politics. The third is to focus on the main theatre of Croatia's culture wars, the contested remembrance practices, and relate them to changing memory regimes.

## **A Polarized Independence**

Croatia gained its sovereignty and state in a context of extreme crisis. Croats voted for independence in 1991 amid Serbian nationalist aggression and did not liberate all of the occupied territory until July 1995. Its national independence is emphatically celebrated as the real beginning of modern Croatia, and so the memory of the recent war is still alive. Moreover, the painful memory of the Second World War and of the Nazi protectorate, the Independent State of Croatia (NDH, 1941–45), has been recently reopened. Yet, as both wars recede into the past, their meaning has become intensely contested.

Twenty years after 1995, Croatia's political scene remains divided between a right-wing camp, led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ; Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica) – the party founded by the nationalist leader of Croatian defence, Franjo Tuđman,

in 1989 – and a liberal camp, led by the post-communist Social Democratic Party (SDP; Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske). A parallel division between ‘nationalists’ and ‘liberals’ has persisted on account of Tuđman’s WWII revisionism and the Serbian minority. Moreover, this division has recently extended to the role of the Catholic Church and public morality.

Despite or because of these divisions, Croatia has had a remarkably stable party system. After ten years in power (1991–2000), the nationalist HDZ was voted out of government and replaced by the reformed communists of SDP. The SDP led two governments, one between 2000–2003 under Ivica Račan, and another under Zoran Milanović, between 2011–15. The last SDP government brought Croatia into the European Union. Since then, HDZ has once again been the ruling party, this time in coalition with smaller right-wing and populist parties.

Both years of change, 2000 and 2015, meant more than a political alternation. They have also brought about shifts in the dominant ideological and cultural narratives that shape Croatian politics. The nationalist hegemony of Franjo Tuđman’s party, HDZ, was broken only in 2000 by the socialist and non-nationalist SDP. Liberal and socialist presidents, respectively Stjepan Mesić (2000–2010) and Ivo Josipović (2010–15), led efforts to reconcile Croatia with its Serbian minority (which represented some 4.5% after the war) and with the neighbouring countries; they also confronted unpleasant memories of the war. The departure from an authoritarian political style and liberalization efforts during the EU accession process were generally accepted as being part of Croatia’s national goals by both the SDP and the reformed HDZ. The ‘return to Europe’, solidified in Croatia’s course towards EU membership, became the basis of a national consensus. Yet, after this goal was attained in 2013, the consensus suddenly evaporated. Even as Croatia was successfully finalizing its accession, dissenting voices attacked the government on issues of the national past and Catholic morality.

Despite hopes that EU accession would fulfil the foremost post-independence national goal and that Croatia would also gain some breathing space for much-needed reforms, symbolic politics and

conflicts about the past have been ‘stronger than ever’ (Pavlaković 2015: 8). And while strife over issues of war memory and identity became overt directly after accession, Višeslas Raos traces the end of the consensus to the EU referendum in 2012. The goal of EU membership ‘served as a point of consensus of all relevant political parties and players. Once the country achieved membership, ghosts of the past began to haunt the country again, as crucial historic events and periods once again became items of contestation. In addition, new topics pertaining to bioethical and social issues emerged, leading to a series of culture wars’ (Raos 2016).

Increasingly, a tendency to divide the political scene into Us and Them became a fact of political life. Polarization has been observed and criticized but also taken as the underlying logic of Croatian politics. According to the Istrian pundit Mirko Štifanić, the two main political camps each see the other as ideologically driven: leftists tend to see their opponents as neo-Ustashe, and rightists dub their rivals neo-communists, but they cooperate in forming an oligarchical duopoly and in ‘stealing democracy’ (Štifanić 2017: 151). Dividing political actors into ‘blacks’ and ‘reds’ has become ubiquitous. Zdravko Tomac, a prominent Croatian politician, has warned that the greatest dangers facing Croatia are the demographic decline (the ‘dying out of the Croatian nation’), ideological ‘disintegration of the Croatian national corpus’ and ‘falsification of the contemporary national past’ in 2017 (Tomac 2017: 46–47). Tomac himself (1937–2020) exemplified the above logic of political dualism: Formerly a prominent communist politician, he led the pro-Tuđman nationalist camp in the post-communist SDP before leaving it and becoming ‘an active Catholic convert and missionary’ (Perica 2015: 29).

Since 2013, Croatia has lived through several periods of general polarization. The process of polarization can be separated into three main episodes: the referendum on marriage, the return of the WWII legacy to the public debate (both in 2013) and an increased politicization of remembrance politics at Jasenovac and Bleiburg in 2015. These episodes allow the gradual extension of symbolic contestation between increasingly solidified camps to be developed in politics of morality, identity and memory.

## 2013 Referendum Success

Public talk of culture wars started with a mass mobilization ahead of the 2013 referendum (Petković 2013). Half a year after joining the European Union, Croats voted en masse to rule out same-sex marriage and to constitutionally define marriage as a heterosexual union. The referendum – a first of its kind in Europe – was initiated by a conservative Catholic organization *U ime obitelji* (UIO; In the name of the family), led by the Catholic activist Željka Markić. With the open help of the Catholic Church, Markić was able to gather almost 750,000 signatures in an (only) three-week, legally defined collection period in May 2013 in support of a referendum. The referendum's question was: 'Do you support the introduction of a provision into the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia to the effect that marriage is a living union of a woman and a man?' Its legality was first put in doubt and forwarded to the Constitutional Court by the SDP government. After it was pronounced legal, the referendum was held in December 2013. 65% voted yes, with a participation of 38%. The proposed definition of marriage was later made part of the constitution.<sup>2</sup>

Remarkably, the conservative coalition prevailed against the will of the government, against the position of all major media outlets and against the whole of urban liberal civil society (Glaudić, Vuković 2016). The referendum was the first instance of an open political cleavage on cultural matters between centre-left and right-wing parties. Prime Minister Milanović and President Ivo Josipović (both of SDP), along with other left-wing parties, endorsed a 'no' vote, whereas the right-wing camp, led by HDZ and the Church, called upon people to vote 'yes'.<sup>3</sup>

The factors that played into the success of the 2013 referendum were at least three. First, the mobilizations were part of a larger conservative reaction to the Europeanization process that started with opposition to sexual education in school and escalated with same-sex marriage. The centre-left SDP government had implemented legal and

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2 The quorum was lowered ahead of the referendum on EU accession, see *infra*.

3 BIRN, 'Croatia Court Gives Nod to Marriage Referendum', *Balkan Insight*, November 15, 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/11/15/gay-marriage-referendum-not-unconstitutional-croatia-court/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

social reforms, including the introduction of so-called gender-mainstreaming. It also aimed to implement a health education curriculum in schools that would include sex education. The Catholic Church and conservative outlets and organizations actively voiced their opposition to any sexual education alluding to its alleged plans to ‘impose gender ideology’ (Padjen 2017: 133–134). They eventually obtained its removal from the school reform by appealing to the Constitutional Court.

The Catholic Church then warned that the socialist government may extend its liberal reforms to the rights of homosexuals. This expectation may have been due to direct foreign influence – the second factor. In 2012–13, a massive conservative mobilization called ‘La Manif pour tous’ (LMPT; Demonstration for all) protested in France against the Hollande presidency for allowing same-sex marriage. The UIO leader Željka Markić was directly inspired by LMTP (Hodžić and Bijelić 2014: 12) and moved to undertake a similar campaign in Croatia. Hence the mobilization had a conservative, anti-liberal character linked to a conservative Catholic movement that was just taking form in Western Europe (Kuhar and Patternotte, 2017).

Thirdly, the success of the referendum was, in the end, due to a more prosaic reason: It could force a constitutional change with a turnout lower than 40% because of a 2010 constitutional amendment that removed the requirement in Croatia for 50% turnout in referendums, adjusted to ensure the success of the EU accession referendum (Petričušić et al., 2017).

For the SDP prime minister, Milanović, demanding a referendum on same-sex marriage was a populist move on the opposition’s part: ‘This aggressive group of people – I’m thinking of their values – is guided by a cultural war, and, at this stage, the constitution is much more amenable to them, so it’s easier to impose their own political agenda and programme [through a referendum] than in the parliament.’<sup>4</sup> The referendum’s quick and massive campaign was openly supported by the RCC’s bishops, conservative Catholic

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4 ‘Milanović: Vrlo agresivna grupa ljudi provodi kulturni rat’, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, May 22, 2013, <https://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/novosti/hrvatska/clanak/202002/milanovic-vrlo-agresivna-grupa-ljudi-provodi-kulturni-rat-jovanovic-kurikulum-zdravstvenog-odgoja-nije-ukinut> (accessed June 30, 2021).

NGOs and right-wing political parties. UIO's capacity to quickly mobilize a fifth of all registered voters demonstrated the strength of the anti-liberal coalition. Former public initiatives seeking to obtain a referendum on more politically consequential questions such as (non-)cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in 2007 and on the border with Slovenia in 2009 were unsuccessful in gathering support.

In 2013 though, the mobilization did succeed in a purely symbolic matter of public morality: Croatia's legal system had already defined marriage as a heterosexual union in the Family Act (2009). The referendum's aim hence lacked any specific consequences apart from anchoring public rejection of homosexual marriage in a stronger legal text. The referendum notwithstanding, the Croatian Parliament adopted a law on the registered partnership of persons of the same sex in 2014. Although UIO tried to use the referendum results to block this new law, it passed with the support of a clear majority (89 for and 16 against, out of 150) in parliament.

The referendum had the effect of mobilizing conservative Croatian society, strengthening the RCC's role in social affairs and highlighting the liberal-Catholic cleavage in Croatia. After this large mobilization of the right-wing public, HDZ was, to no surprise, swept back into power in 2015.

After 2013, another 'culture war' erupted around the adoption of the so-called Istanbul Convention (IC) and over demands to restrict abortion. On both accounts, the conservative camp organized regular rallies and campaigns. This time, the IC proponents actively resisted. Taking their cue from the conservatives, the liberals also framed their campaign in cultural terms, warning against a 'conservative revolution' and 'conservative tsunami'. Lacking the support of a major political party, the conservative mobilization failed to repeat the success of 2013: The Istanbul convention was ratified by a later HDZ coalition government in 2018<sup>5</sup>, and the Constitutional

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5 Croatia ratifies the Istanbul Convention, Council of Europe, June 12, 2018, [https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/newsroom/-/asset\\_publisher/anInZ5mw6yX/content/croatia-ratifies-the-istanbul-convention](https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/newsroom/-/asset_publisher/anInZ5mw6yX/content/croatia-ratifies-the-istanbul-convention) (accessed June 30, 2021).

Court rejected a case against abortion, stalling the issue. Nevertheless, moral issues have become a mainstay in Croatian public debates.

### **Return of Nationalist Rhetoric in 2013**

In a parallel development to the conservative mobilizations, a palpable ‘right turn’ occurred amongst the public directly following the events of 2013. This was marked by an increasing number of public controversies, scandals and conflicts over the remembrance of the 1991–95 war. Nationalist rhetoric re-entered the public sphere via three salient incidents.

The first major event erupted in Vukovar in 2013. In a move towards a settlement in post-war Croat-Serbian relations, Croatia strengthened the legal protection of ethnic minorities. A census within the formerly binational city of Vukovar, which was destroyed by the nationalist Serb military in 1991, showed that the number of Serbs had passed a certain threshold. This gave them the right to use the Serbian language (i.e., Cyrillic) in public documents. Consequently, street names in Cyrillic were added to the Croatian (Latin) ones. The results were furious protests during which the Cyrillic signs were torn down. The Vukovar incident is considered a moment of change. In late 2013, incidents of hate speech became more numerous ‘after radical elements of HDZ sensed political capital to be gained by fanning anti-Serb sentiment’.<sup>6</sup>

Another change in public rhetoric occurred in 2015, on the twentieth anniversary of Operation Storm (Oluja) in Knin celebrating the four-day liberation of the Croatian territory from Serbian paramilitaries<sup>7</sup> in August 1995. At the unusually massive national celebration, all political parties were present, and a military parade was held. According to Dejan Jović, a political scientist in Zagreb, the unprecedented nationalistic tone of the event was linked to the upcoming Croatian parliamentary elections later that year as both the left-wing

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6 Opacic, T., ‘Selective Amnesia: Croatia’s Holocaust Deniers’, *Balkan Insight*, November 24, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/11/24/selective-amnesia-croatia-s-holocaust-deniers-11-16-2017/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

7 During which the formerly occupied territories were also cleansed of their Serbian inhabitants.

and right-wing blocs used the event to display their patriotism.<sup>8</sup> Like in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina at that time, nationalist language had recently returned to dominate the public discourse. During the entire election campaign, a turn to the right affected the whole mainstream political class and public debates in general. Intolerant and revisionist views were largely tolerated by the political class – and later criticized by human rights activists. According to Croatia’s ombudsman, ‘There are more and more media propagating and spreading prejudices and stereotypes, publishing texts that incite hatred against minorities, rehabilitating the Ustashe regime and diminishing or denying crimes committed in World War II.’<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the right-wing coalition government that took office in 2016 brought the most overt nationalist and revisionist rhetoric to the public space since the 1990s. The HDZ majority government, led by the independent Tihomir Orešković (January–October 2016) in coalition with the populist party Most, included Zlatko Hasanbegović as the minister of culture. Hasanbegović is a Croat Muslim historian with far-right views and a history of contacts with far-right revisionist groups.<sup>10</sup> Apart from breaking taboos by participating in controversial WWII commemoration events, he used his power to cut subsidies to a large segment of the urban cultural institutions and liberal media. His public support for nationalist and revisionist groups and aggressive moves against urban liberal culture was considered a kind of ‘culture war on behalf of the Croatian Right’, that is, an attempt to support the installation of conservative nationalist hegemony in state cultural policy.<sup>11</sup> He, too, has complained of a ‘cultural war’ being waged against himself

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8 Panic, K. et al., ‘Nationalist Commemorations Threaten Balkan Reconciliation’, *Balkan Insight*, August 7, 2015, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/08/07/nationalist-commemorations-threaten-balkan-reconciliation-08-07-2015/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

9 Opacic, T., ‘Selective Amnesia: Croatia’s Holocaust Deniers’, *Balkan Insight*, November 24, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/11/24/selective-amnesia-croatia-s-holocaust-deniers-11-16-2017/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

10 Hasanbegović, Z., ‘Hasanbegović: Ustaše su heroji, mučenici i šehidi’, *Portal Novosti*, February 13, 2016 <https://www.portalnovosti.com/hasanbegovic-ustase-su-heroji-mucenici-i-sehidi/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

11 ‘Hasanbegović vodi “kulturalni rat” za hrvatsku desnicu’, *Politika*, 6. 5. 2016

after he was denounced as an NDH-nostalgist by liberal media outlets based on a photograph from 1993 where he appears wearing an Ustashe cap.<sup>12</sup> A months-long confrontation ensued, pitting against each other the liberal, cultured urbanites and the revisionist minister. This extremely controversial government lasted less than a year and Hasanbegović was forced to leave, but the changes in political culture were to last. The nationalist rhetoric grew even stronger in the subsequent electoral campaign, this time also fuelled by the SDP leader, Zoran Milanović.<sup>13</sup> In 2016, ‘culture war’ became an accusation of HDZ and the SDP alike. Activists from both sides bore cultural identities denoted by slightly derogatory terms given to them by their adversaries: *kulturnjaci* (‘the culture people’ or liberal activists) against *obiteljashi* (‘the family people’ or conservative activists).

The media landscape also started changing in those years, and not only in Croatia. Besides an increasingly conservative editorial policy within the main outlets, a report by the Reuters Institute highlighted the growing popularity of right-wing radical websites and conservative portals linked to Catholic NGOs, HDZ and the RCC, as well as a lack of popular media on the left side of the spectrum.<sup>14</sup>

The conservative mobilization in politics through referenda continued into 2018. Two conservative citizens’ initiatives, ‘The People Decide’ and ‘Truth about the Istanbul Convention’, collected signatures for two different referendums. The former sought to make Croatian election law ‘fairer’ so that it would, in effect, limit the rights to minority representation of Serbs in parliament<sup>15</sup>, collecting 450,000

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12 Chastand, J.-B., ‘Accusé de révisionnisme, un ministre croate dénonce une « guerre culturelle »’, *Le Monde*, May 20, 2016, [https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2016/05/25/accuse-de-revisionnisme-un-ministre-croate-denonce-une-guerre-culturelle\\_4926352\\_3214.html?xtmc=hasanbegovic&xtcr=1](https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2016/05/25/accuse-de-revisionnisme-un-ministre-croate-denonce-une-guerre-culturelle_4926352_3214.html?xtmc=hasanbegovic&xtcr=1) (accessed June 30, 2021).

13 Milekic, S., ‘SDP Leader’s Tirades Leave Croats Bemused’, August 30, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/08/30/leftist-leader-tries-antagonizing-croatia-s-elections-campaign-08-29-2016/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

14 Peruško, Z., ‘Croatia’, *Digital News Report 2018*, Reuters Institute, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/croatia-2018/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

15 The first campaign concerns proposed changes to Croatian election law. It calls for the number of MPs to be cut from 150 to 120, for an increase in preferential voting on party slates from one to three votes, for a restriction in minority MP voting rights; and a reduction in the rights of the country’s ethnic Serbs, who make up about 5% of the population: Vladislavjevic, A., ‘Croatian Conservative Campaigners Claim Rapid Success’, *Balkan*

signatures to this effect.<sup>16</sup> The second petition collected some 60,000 signatures for a referendum on the convention. Only the first initiative passed with the required 370,000 signatures (10% of the total electorate); however, the referendum itself has since been stalled by the government. The relative success of the first initiative shows a certain convergence between the Catholic conservative camp and the nationalist one: The initiative had a clear majoritarian aim and was led by the notorious Željka Markić. Although she had helped to consolidate the conservative nationalists ahead of the HDZ victory in the 2015 elections, she has since been side-lined by the moderate conservative HDZ PM Andrej Plenković and turned to national issues.

In sum, the years 2013–16 led to a change from a pro-European consensus towards an incessantly confrontational political atmosphere. The peculiarity of the cultural split was its constant physical mobilization. Conservative activism was countered by a liberal mobilization of a sometimes sizeable character. Among other events, in June 2016, 40,000 people protested the ‘conservative turn’ – the effective forestalling of needed school reform and media censorship – with the slogan ‘Croatia Can Do Better’;<sup>17</sup> in 2017, feminists tried to block and symbolically protest a large pro-life demonstration in Zagreb;<sup>18</sup> and Zagreb Pride has also grown, with people protesting the right-wing turn.

### **Repolitization of the Past**

The most visible shift in political communication and the heaviest public confrontations developed on the political margins in relation to the remembrance of the 1991–95 Homeland War and the NDH period during WWII (1941–45). It is no understatement to say that

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*Insight*, May 17, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/17/croatian-referendum-initiatives-praise-their-success-in-signature-collection-05-17-2018/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

16 HINA, ‘Civil Initiative Claims It Has Enough Signatures for Referendum’, May 30, 2018, <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/28712-civil-initiative-claims-it-has-enough-signatures-for-referendum> (accessed June 30, 2021).

17 Mijić, K., ‘“Croatia can do better”’, *Political Critique*, June 4, 2016, <http://politicalcritique.org/in-pictures/2016/croatia-can-do-better/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

18 Brakus, A., ‘Resistance to The Conservative Revolution in Croatia’, *Kosovo two point zero*, May 22, 2017, <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/resistance-conservative-revolution-croatia/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

Croatia has lived under the shadow of wars for all of its short independent existence: First as a victim of aggression, later as a participant in war and, finally, as a country that had to come to terms with a series of war-related traumas. Croatia's responsibility for crimes committed in the Croatian territory has always been a political burden that Croatia seemed to have progressively come to address and resolve. All the more surprising then is the recent repoliticization of the past or, more specifically, the polarizing usage of public remembrance acts by the government, far-right groups and popular culture figures (respectively examined below).

Croatia's attitude towards crimes committed under its jurisdiction during the Homeland War has been a matter of both domestic and foreign policy. The start of EU accession negotiations hinged upon Croatia's extradition of General Ante Gotovina, who was accused at the ICTY of responsibility for crimes against humanity and against civilians during Operation Storm. For most Croats, he was a hero who made right an earlier foreign aggression. His surrender to the Hague as a prerequisite to EU accession was therefore considered a humiliation. He was eventually arrested in the Canary Islands in 2006. The HDZ government of Ivo Sanader, who had earlier criticized the cooperation with the ICTY, was forced to hand Gotovina over to the Hague. The general was first found guilty in 2011, but in 2012 he was acquitted of all charges. He was brought back in a government plane (Šabić 2019: 180) and was celebrated at the abovementioned commemoration of Operation Storm in 2015. Since his acquittal, the Homeland War was officially proclaimed a clean operation, and it became publicly accepted that the 150,000 Serbs who fled during the attack had just 'left'. After what was received as a symbolic whitewashing from the Hague – which was likely an unintended effect of transitional justice institutions – the Homeland War ceased to be the primary divisive subject. It was quickly replaced by World War II controversies.<sup>19</sup>

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19 In 2017, Croatia was found guilty of being an accomplice in crimes against humanity in the Bosnian War. The Croatian public is still somewhat divided over the officers found guilty at the ICTY. A recent controversy followed Slobodan Praljak's public suicide during a court reading of his sentence in the Hague in 2017. See Milekić, S.,

Besides Knin, the celebration site for the end of the Homeland War, Croatia has two other major memorial sites, plus a dozen minor ones. There is Jasenovac, the Ustashe concentration camp where around 80,000 Serbs and Ustashe opponents were killed between 1941 and 1945, and Bleiburg, a field on the Austrian side of the Slovenia-Austria border where the mass killing of the fleeing Ustashe army and civilians started at the hands of Tito's Partisan Army in 1945. All sites of memory are visited yearly, with attendance ranging from the dozens to tens of thousands. Every year has its 'memorial season' during which emotionally loaded speeches keep stirring political confrontations, especially in election years. The memorial season lasts for about five months: Starting in Jasenovac (22 April), passing through Bleiburg (May 15), the Anti-Fascist Struggle Day on 22 June (Jazovka and Brezovica), the Yugoslav Croat uprising on 27 July in Srb, and ending with Victory Day in Knin on 5 August. Vukovar closes the year on 18 November with the least controversial commemoration as there are no official speeches by politicians, just masses.

It is not surprising that mass gatherings are politicized. But their role as platforms for symbolic politics has only increased since the mid-2010s. During the 2015 campaign, and after HDZ took leadership of a coalition government, WWII memory politics became a field of increasing political confrontation. HDZ celebrated the end of WWII at a massive gathering in Bleiburg that attracted a crowd of 20,000 and later reduced its presence in Jasenovac to a silent wreath laying ceremony – ostensibly favouring the opposite major remembrance site to that of SDP.

But party politics is not the sole driver of the politics of memory. Since the return of HDZ to power, and most visibly since the second, more moderate HDZ government under Plenković, far-right groups have become an active factor in the memory politics. Apart from participating heavily in the Bleiburg and Knin commemorations, far right and nationalist groups attempted to prevent or

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'Croatia: WWII Controversies and a General's Suicide', *Balkan Insight*, December 26, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/12/26/croatia-wwii-controversies-and-a-general-s-suicide-12-22-2017/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

disrupt several anti-fascist commemorations in 2016.<sup>20</sup> Citizen historical societies have published revisionist accounts of the Jasenovac concentration camp by presenting Croats as victims. In 2017, a plaque with a semi-legal Ustashe wartime salute 'Za dom spremni!' (For the homeland, ready!), attached in a village near Jasenovac, led to protests and boycotts by the Serb minority, the Jewish community, human rights groups and liberals and to a serious government crisis.

Finally, the repoliticization of remembrance has extended to a broader sphere of sports and popular culture. With the divisions about memory out in the open, Croatia has developed an 'obsession with the past' (Pavlaković 2019: 121). Casual, hidden and overt Ustashe symbols, such as the letter 'U'; the abovementioned Ustashe salute; and patriotic songs with war references, have moved out from the narrow right-wing and football fan subculture and have entered the mainstream. A noted public controversy erupted in 2013 over the mainstreaming of the Ustashe salute, which had been forbidden during communist times. Its usage by the footballer Šimunić in a victorious qualification football match against Iceland caused an outcry. Šimunić was disqualified for the World Cup in Brazil, even after his lawyers attacked the testimony of Serbian historians and gathered 300,000 signatures in his support. He remained unrepentant, helping to radicalize the public debate by complaining about 'forbidden patriotism' (Brentin 2016: 870). Similar incidents are regularly prosecuted by FIFA,<sup>21</sup> but they seem to have become a mainstay in Croatia – in football, in handball and in popular music too.

Ustashe references have also become mainstream in pop music, where provocation brings popularity. The most notorious example is

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20 Milekić, S., 'Croatian Right-Wingers Removed from Anti-Fascist Monument', *Balkan Insight*, July 18, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/07/18/croatian-far-rightist-removed-from-anti-fascist-monument-07-18-2016/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

21 Milekić, S., 'FEATURE: Croatia's 'Banal' Fascism on Display at Israel Match', *Balkan Insight*, March 25, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/03/25/israel-match-scandal-shows-banalization-of-croatia-s-fascism-03-24-2016/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

Marko Perković Thompson,<sup>22</sup> a right-wing musician, who composed an unofficial Homeland War anthem that is often sung with an Ustashe salute by sport fans and right-wing groups (Brentin 2016: 864). For years, Thompson had organized an alternative, overtly nationalist celebration of Operation Storm in his village. Significantly, he was invited to the thirtieth anniversary of Operation Storm celebrations in 2015 and sang his famous song at the main celebration in Knin before an audience of 80,000.<sup>23</sup> The mainstreaming was complete after a court reinterpreted the slogan as ‘an old Croatian salute’, citing its frequent usage in popular culture (Brentin 2016: 864). Liberal activists and artists responded with vehement criticism or works accusing Croatian society of nostalgia and fascism (such as a provocative theatrical play by director Oliver Frlić), only to receive threats from the far right and scolding from President Grabar-Kitarović.<sup>24</sup>

To reiterate, between 2013 and 2016, once the goal of EU accession had been achieved, symbolic confrontations over public moral norms and the remembrance of the past took over Croatia, pitting two large camps against each other: those more urban, more socially liberal and of the anti-fascist tradition against those more religious, more conservative and with patriotic and sometimes revisionist references. On the liberal side, ombudswoman Lora Vidović is noted for her resistance to the relativization of Ustashe crimes; a number of academics and critical intellectuals have also adopted stances on minority protection; and civil society organizations conduct regular public campaigns for the protection of minorities and of the anti-fascist memory.

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22 Thompson is apparently nicknamed after a machine gun, see: Vladislavjevic, A., ‘Croatian Court Rules “Thompson” Song Did Not Break Law’, *Balkan Insight*, June 3, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/03/croatian-court-rules-thompson-song-did-not-break-law/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

23 Nikolic, I. and Milekic, S., ‘Thousands Join Croatian Victory Celebrations in Knin’, *Balkan Insight*, August 5, 2015, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/08/05/central-storm-ceremony-gathers-thousands-in-kinin-08-05-2015/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

24 Milekic, S., ‘Croatian President’s Year Sees High and Lows’, *Balkan Insight*, December 8, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/08/croatian-president-s-amuses-and-angers-the-public-12-07-2016/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

Paradoxically, the further Croatia moves from the remembered events, the livelier confrontations about its past are. References to the collective past and identity have proved to be a great reservoir for national symbols as they allow for various ways of framing collective identity and memory. In fact, Croatia's national self-understanding and official remembrance practices have changed several times within a brief period of time, and the roots of the culture wars may lay in this ongoing confrontation over the question of who frames identity and memory and how.

### **National Identity Questioned in New Contexts**

The sudden foundering of political consensus and the eruption of symbolic confrontations can be partially explained by the fulfilment of the major intermediate goal that Central European countries strove to achieve after the end of communism. Once Croatia became firmly rooted in Western Europe, little was left to define another potent common goal. Culture politics and symbolic wars appear to have quickly filled the void – not unlike elsewhere in Central Europe. But in Croatia, populism was not the driver. Croatia is an exception in Central Europe in having no significant presence of populist parties (Grbeša, Šalaj 2017). The short lived Most party left government in 2016, and Croatia's political landscape continues to be dominated by the two ideological opponents. When looking for alternative explanations for the sudden uptake of culturalized conflicts, we should question the assumption of a consensus. The earlier absence of open culture wars did not mean that Croatians had reached an agreement on identity and memory. It is possible to presume rather that this 'consensus' was a working agreement for the period of the state-building process. Once Croatia symbolically left the Balkans behind to join the European Union, questions of identity entered political competition, breaking the consensus, with various actors testing their relative influence. When looking specifically at official, government-sponsored interpretations of the national past and identity, there has never been a consensus. They have rather kept dramatically changing over the brief period of the last

three decades, as have dominant conceptions of national identity: Franjoism, liberal Euro-Atlanticism and a culturalized neo-nationalism. The decade of 2010 is marked by a shift to a landscape where the neo-conservative part of the earlier Euro-Atlanticist consensus has singled out as competition its ‘liberal’ counterpart.

### **Transformations of Dominant National Identity Definitions**

Croatia is a historical nation but a young state. According to Alex Bellamy, Croatian claims to statehood have not been in any way straightforward, and various competing conceptions of national identity have been formed and practiced until quite recently (Bellamy 2003). Croatia can rely neither on a unique ethnic identity nor dynastic or geographical continuity. Save for a Croatian medieval kingdom between the tenth and twelfth centuries, the continuity is only symbolized by the Croatian Parliament (the Sabor), regional rulers (bans) and reference to the medieval kingdom’s symbols, such as the coat of arms and the currency (kuna). Croats developed several versions of their national identity under Hungarian rule, partly under the Napoleonic regime and within the Austro-Hungarian state (Illyrian, pan-Slavic, South Slavic, ethno-nationalist). After 1918, a tight link to other South Slav nations was tested in the union of Serbia and Slovenia and, after 1945, within communist Yugoslavia. It failed, but its opposite, the ethnic exclusivist nationalism of the NDH episode during WWII, produced division and tragedy: in 1945, a third of Tito’s anti-fascist Partisans were Croats.

Competition among various notions of Croatian identity has, at times, been fierce, such as during NDH times, and it remains lively today. Open expression of that competition was nevertheless suppressed during the forty years of Yugoslavia. After the demise of Yugoslavia, the space for competition opened once again, but for a brief period only – a briefness some commentators regret (Dejan Jović 2018). Very quickly, the war escalated, and the imperatives of defence led to the dominance of the original narrative that Bellamy calls *Franjoism* (2018: 174).

Croatia’s wartime leader, Franjo Tuđman (1922–99), gained a hegemonic position as the head of the ‘state-building’ nationalist party,

HDZ; as the leader of the country's military defence; and, later, of its war in Bosnia. He has promoted his own national project of great unification, the *svehrvatska pomirba* (national reconciliation). Tudman's aim was to mobilize and unite Croats in fulfilling the 'thousand-year yearning' for an independent national state. Tudman's national goal was based on ethnic exclusivism – Croatia was to be a state of Croats only. They distinguished themselves through a distinct language, religious identity and a history of oppression and humiliation. Franjoism was fiercely anti-communist, anti-Yugoslav and clericalist. Yet Tudman also strived for healing of the historical and political divisions among the Croats and sought to unite the various ideological currents (Uzelac 1998).

Although earlier he was himself a communist and an officer under Tito, he allowed for a partial rehabilitation of the NDH period. Tudman framed the 1941–45 Ustashe state as a legitimate, if problematic, result of Croatia's historical yearning for statehood and an 'expression of the Croatian people's wish for independence and their own state' (Radonić 2013: 250, quoting Tudman). He did not fully embrace the NDH, but neither did he fully reject all Yugoslav features of Croatian identity (such as football fan clubs). Openness to inner plurality notwithstanding, there was little space for opposition or debate during the war and after, until Tudman's death in 1999. Franjoism was based on the self-evident goal of national sovereignty and on the assumption of HDZ's leading role (HDZ's slogan being 'HDZ – zna se', i.e., 'HDZ – of course'; Bellamy 2003: 66). Franjoism was hegemonic as long as Tudman wielded power, and it also created a diverse opposition. Liberals, Istrian regionalists, revisionists and anti-fascists all eventually rejected Franjoism's simplistic and authoritarian version of Croatian identity.

After Tudman's death, Croatia slowly entered its liberal moment. The liberal period was defined by three elements: the distance from Franjoism, political alternation (SDP-led coalitions were interchanged for HDZ-led coalitions) and the decade-long (2000–2012) EU accession process. Liberal critics of Franjoism offered different accounts of Croatian statehood (such as Ivo Banac's) and critical views on Tudman's reductionist, essentialist view of national identity

(such as those of Slavenka Drakulić or critical outlets like *Slobodna Dalmacija* and *Feral Tribune*). Yet, for all the need of change and reform, liberalism remained politically weak as a standalone political option. Several liberal parties have existed since 1990 but the liberal scene has kept changing and remains splintered. Liberal parties have participated in almost all post-Tudman coalition governments under the leadership of SDP (2000–2003, 2011–15) and HDZ (2003–11, 2015, 2016) – many moving from social to conservative liberalism. Moreover, political liberalism remained an accessory of the two dominant parties because the new Croatia could not find an easy fallback solution to establish its liberal tradition or democratic continuity from which to respond to Franjoism. When it came to references from the past, the few prominent pre-war liberals, such as Stjepan Radić (1871–1928), were neglected in favour of patriotic figures from the WWII period.

Without a strong reference to the national past, liberalism took all its content from the process of Europeanization. As such, the liberal political option was, from the start, associated with an outside guidance and even with the pressure of Euro-Atlanticism. Is it significant that Davor Ivo Stier, a prominent, younger HDZ politician, writes that what has replaced Tudman's spent state-building model is the 'Euro-Atlantic paradigm'. He maintains that Euro-Atlantic 'constellations of beliefs, values ... shared by members of a defined community' have become 'the main source of social and political legitimacy' (Stier 2015: 21). Even for HDZ, EU and NATO membership meant a historical 'return to Europe' and the realization of Croatia's foremost strategic goal, which means that Euro-Atlanticism built a unifying platform both for the liberals and conservatives. EU accession indeed became the basis for coalition among leading Croatian parties, which took form in the consensual Alliance for Europe (*Savez za Evropu*), lasting from 2005 to 2012. However, this period of consensus ended even before EU accession was realized, with popular support for EU membership starting to falter ahead of the 2012 referendum.

Several reasons have been evoked for the rapid demise of the liberal-conservative consensus around EU accession. The conditionality of European accession was one. It meant bending to conditions

of transitional justice and adopting a critical distance to the patriotic account of the Homeland War. For many, Europeanization was a pragmatic choice that came with a price, especially when it comes to matters of national symbolism. An example of such pragmatism was the less than wholehearted change in positions of HDZ Prime Minister Ivo Sanader – from a vocal criticism of the ICTY to General Gotovina’s extradition to the Hague in 2005. Even the SDP leader Zoran Milanović disagreed on some issues of transitional justice, and his government attempted to legally preclude any further extraditions like that of the Communist agent Perković.<sup>25</sup>

More generally, liberal reforms of the 2010s came to be associated with certain political options concerning national identity. The EU accession process was mostly carried out and completed by liberal politicians such as Vesna Pusić (of the Croatian People’s Party) and by the post-communist SDP under Milanović. SDP openly carries on the Yugoslav traditions of anti-fascism, feminism and social liberalism, and their political dominance during Croatia’s EU accession process led to a feeling of continuity with the former Yugoslav federalist elites. Davor Ivo Stier was among those who expressed resentment at the ‘socialist elites’ who would have entrenched themselves in inaccessible institutions (Stier 2015: 67). Finally, liberalism’s demise as a leading political orientation of Croatia’s Euro-Atlantic moment is also due to the liberals’ own weaknesses. Liberal governments relied on indications from Brussels to lead Croatia towards prosperity with a noted passivity and underestimated communication with the public (Šelo-Šabić 2019: 178).

After 2013, and even more so after the elections of 2015, a new kind of confrontational and symbolic nationalism entered the public sphere and filled the gap between the government and the public. Dragan Markovina, a prominent left-wing commentator based in Split, calls it the ‘new national paradigm’ – by which he means the politics of nationalist dogma, social conservatism and clericalism (Markovina

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25 Hedl, D., ‘Intelligence Chiefs’ Trial Promises Yugoslav Spy Revelations’, *Balkan Insight*, September 24, 2014, <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/09/24/intelligence-chiefs-trial-promises-yugoslav-spy-revelations/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

2017: 191). Markovina uses an expression of the abovementioned, revisionist minister of culture, Zlatko Hasanbegović, who called for ‘the consolidation and creation of a new national paradigm by which the new Croatia will finally unburden the spirits of the past and establish a new national model [*novi nacionalni obrazac*] that will integrate the entire nation and end ideological conflicts’.<sup>26</sup> While Hasanbegović possibly wished to leave the past behind, his aggressive policies as a minister of culture marked a clear shift from the liberal, ‘progressive’ Europeanization model towards national ‘integration’ by means of a new symbolic politics. Markovina criticized him for leading ‘a cultural revolution’ (Markovina 2017: 238).

After 2000, when HDZ moved partly towards the centre, several minor far-right parties emerged – the Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HCSP; Hrvatska čista stranka prava) and the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP; Hrvatska stranka prava) – as well as a series of far-rightist movements. The new revisionism of right-wing activists went much further than Franjo Tuđman’s measured recognition of NDH’s failed trajectory towards national independence. Since 2013, references and even celebrations of Ustashe heroes became more overt, self-confident and intentionally provocative. In the intellectual sphere, prominent liberals such as the late historian Ivo Banac and his wife Andrea Feldman have left their liberal convictions behind and have joined the national conservatives. Various cultural actors such as the Church, a plethora of national-conservative civil society organizations and thinktanks, veteran groups and historical societies have entered the field of culture politics with their agendas. Among those, the one alternative articulation of national identity that has successfully challenged the liberal-conservative consensus came from the transformation of the Catholic Church’s public role.

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26 HINA, ‘Potrebno je uspostaviti jedan novi nacionalni obrazac koji će integrirati cijelu naciju i prekinuti ideološke sukobe’, *Jutarnji List*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/hasanbegovic-potrebno-je-uspostaviti-jedan-novi-nacionalni-obrazac-koji-ce-integrirati-cijelu-naciju-i-prekinuti-ideoloske-sukobe/89890/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

## Croat-Catholic Identity

The Roman Catholic Church was central to Tudman's project of achieving national sovereignty, and it enjoys a prominent national role similar to that of the Polish Catholic Church – being Croatian is held synonymous with being Catholic. Yet, the Croatian self-perception as 'the most Catholic country in Europe' is, according to Vjekoslav Perica, rather recent (Perica 2006: 312). Indeed, the RCC became central to the Croatian national project only in the 1970s and gained the role of national institution later in the 1990s. Recently, the Church has worked towards maintaining this role via various means, including participation in the Croatian culture wars.

The national role of the RCC has changed throughout history. Even after the first articulations of Croat aspirations for autonomy, Church elites remained loyal to the Habsburg empire or were later open to a broad South Slav unification (such as Josip Strossmayer). Lower clergy developed a national identity before the Church hierarchy. After the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, the Catholic Church was regarded as Croatia's anchor within Latin Christianity and Western Europe, as opposed to the Balkans. In interwar Yugoslavia, the RCC was painfully aware of being a minority church and was unable to persuade the Orthodox-dominated kingdom to conclude a state treaty with the Vatican. The RCC then took chances on regimes that were giving it a larger, national role. During WWII, parts of the RCC accommodated the radical nationalist Ustashe regime under the leadership of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac (1898–1960). He was later condemned by a Yugoslav court for collaboration, but his stance towards fascism has remained controversial. Similarly contentious was the prominent role of some clergy during the Homeland War. In the 1990s, the relationship between the nationalist leadership and the Church was finally mutually beneficial, even if there was little sympathy between the formerly atheist Tudman and the higher clergy (Ramet 1996).

The RCC started to play an important national role on its own beginning in the 1970s. After the suppression of the *masovni pokret* (mass movement), that is, the Croatian Spring, demanding economic and cultural self-determination on an ethnic basis in 1971,

a prolonged period of *Hrvatska šutnja* (Croatian silence) ensued. Therein, the Church became the only politically tolerated repository of national identity and the main pillar of the national idea (Perica 2002: 57). The association between a Croatian and a Catholic identity was strengthened during the 1980s when the Church worked towards a religious awakening throughout Croatia. The ‘Great Novena’, a nine-years-long prayer campaign, was designed as much to celebrate the coming of Christianity to Croatia as to mobilize the restive public in a patriotic spirit on the Church’s grounds. Both membership of and the national legitimacy of the Croatian Church (*crkva u Hrvata*) grew significantly. The novena culminated in 1984 with a massive religious celebration in Zagreb and, indirectly, the famous Medjugorje apparition of the *Gospa*, Our Lady, in 1981. Because of a simultaneous religious and national awakening in the late 1980s, Perica argued that the Croat Catholic identity and the Croat nation were in fact born together (Perica 2006).

In 1990, the national role of the RCC transformed again. A full-blown ‘national-Catholic fusion’ (Busse 2015) developed due to the RCC’s important humanitarian role during the war and, above all, thanks to its overt alliance with the hegemonic HDZ. Franjo Tuđman considered Catholicism a distinct feature of the Croats and offered the RCC a close political partnership in exchange for support and legitimization. The alliance gave the RCC direct institutional access and important privileges. The RCC was recognized for its role in preserving the ethnic Croat identity during communism and was given the opportunity to act through state institutions to further catholicize the Croatian identity – mostly through youth education. A series of contracts concluded between Zagreb and the Vatican between 1997 and 1998 ‘established the Church as a national institution’ (Perica 2016: 13). The state introduced religious education in schools on par with other subjects so that virtually all school children nowadays take religion classes that are given by clerics nominated by the RCC and paid by the state. The RCC was restituted nationalized assets and receives substantial subsidies. It has also become one of the nation’s largest beneficiaries of privatization, having become a large entrepreneur and a wealthy institution (Perica 2016: 13).

The alliance with HDZ was tacitly accepted by Cardinal Kuharić, who was the head of the Croatian RCC until 1996. After his death, RCC leaders demonstrated more autonomy, for example by establishing relations with the Orthodox Church and by accepting greater inner pluralism. After Tudman's death and during the SDP governments, the Croatian RCC lost its privileged institutional access. Progressively, according to Busse (2015), it sought to recover its influence over social and political affairs through new channels, mostly through Catholic civil society.

The RCC found its new public role particularly in matters that pinned conservative social norms against liberal norms that were framed as foreign. A conservative nationalist tendency among the RCC hierarchy in Croatia stemmed in part from the RCC's role in Tudman's system of 'national Catholicism' (Perica 2016: 11). Yet even before the Homeland War, the RCC had been staunchly conservative. Until independence, the Church operated with limited contacts abroad and developed and maintained explicitly anti-Vatican II positions. Its main outlet is called *Glas Koncila*, the 'Voice of the [Vatican] Council', yet it regularly expresses ultra-conservative and revisionist views and attacks minorities and anti-fascists (Perica 2016: 14). After independence, the RCC drew back scores of lay people from the diaspora who have retained a conservative-nationalist outlook since the mass nationalist emigration of the 1940s. Several prominent returnees became particularly active on behalf of the national-Catholicism project, such as Stjepo Bartulica. They had contacts to conservative civil society abroad and made use of them during the 2013 referendum campaign.

### **Catholic Morality Wars**

In his 2015 book *Doba kontrarevolucije* (The age of counterrevolution), Dragan Markovina republished his regular columns from 2015 and 2016. Their main subject was what he calls the nationalist 'counter-revolution', a process in which the vestiges of liberal, progressive, civic and anti-fascist legacies have been attacked and dissolved in a new Croat political setting. His account of the abovementioned 'turn to the right' mostly relates to memory wars. Yet he recounts that even

before the liberal-conservative consensus gave way and memory wars broke out, a rightist ‘street’ movement started in 2013 with the same-sex marriage referendum. In his view, this successful referendum was the first event of many through which ‘the rightist front sought to shake the current government and to create an atmosphere of hate and of a latent civic fear in the society’ (Markovina 2017: 50).

The success of the referendum was indeed a watershed. The years 2010–13 were also a period in which a complex and professionalized conservative civil society established itself in Croatia, often in cooperation with American, German and Polish conservative circles. The most prominent of the conservative organizations is the above-mentioned UIO. It was founded in March 2013, just weeks before the petition campaign started. The focus on same-sex marriages was surprising: There was no immediate project to legalize same-sex marriage. But, as Glaudić and Vuković note, the simultaneity of anti-LGBT backlash and EU accession has been a common feature in Eastern Europe after European law forced new member states to treat LGBT rights as human rights (2016: 805).

The conservative politics of morality was supported by attempts by the RCC to become politically relevant again. The RCC intervened both as an actor during mobilizations but also as a source of conservative values and framings. Cardinal Božanić framed the marriage referendum as a ‘paramount civilizational question’ and a question of the ‘future of the Croatian nation’ and its ‘future generations’. Notably, he expressed his support for the marriage referendum in Vukovar, explicitly establishing a link between conservative values and the ‘defence’ of and ‘responsibility towards the homeland’ (quoted in Trošt and Sloomaeckers 2016: 163).

In turn, the national-Catholic frame facilitated the right turn in more than one aspect. The Europeanization process led to a certain resentment against foreign cultural influence and against the demographic pull of the European Union: Since 2013, as many as 230,000 mainly young people used their new EU passports to leave en masse to find work abroad (Draženić et al. 2018: 431). Catholic conservative discourse appears as both a moralist answer to the demographic malaise and as a traditionalist alternative to Euro-Atlanticist liberal

hegemony. By defending ‘traditional values’, the Church claimed to defend the national corpus from liberal ‘moral corruption’ and from depopulation, and it also highlighted its role as a national institution.

The Church has further embodied this role in the politics of memory. It is very present at all newer commemoration sites, especially at Bleiburg and Vukovar. Perak has calculated that RCC representatives hold the longest speeches; Cardinal Bozanić himself has been among the most frequent speakers at commemorations. Consequently, a mix of religious-nationalist language has dominated at the newer commemoration sites, framing the victims as a patriotic sacrifice on the ‘altar of the homeland’ (Perak 2019: 92).

Some prominent priests have indeed become an influential part of the right-wing, nationalist cultural front. Vlado Kisić, the media-active bishop of Sisak, adopted a nationalist, anti-Serb rhetoric; fuelled the anti-Cyrillic protests in Vukovar; gave space to the nationalist singer Thompson; criticized the SDP government and even indirectly intervened against a left-wing coalition project.<sup>27</sup> Such political activism has led to rifts within the Church. While most clerics may be nationalist or at least conformist in orientation, a small critical group has become very vocal. They include autonomous theologians, feminist nuns and liberal priests. The most prominent among them is a Croatian Argentine, Drago Pilsel. He grew up as a right-wing, nationalist militant in Argentina, volunteered to fight in the Homeland War in 1990 but grew disillusioned. He eventually turned his back on his nationalist past and adopted resolutely critical and liberal positions (Perica 2016: 24). In his autobiographical text called *Argentinski roman* (An Argentine Novel), he described his conversion from Ustashism to anti-fascism, criticized ‘the Bleiburg myth’ and took a critical stance against what he calls Croatia’s ‘clerical nationalism’ (Pilsel 2013).

Some resistance notwithstanding, the RCC’s activism in the morality wars has helped it to regain political relevance. Making use of its massive infrastructure, institutional privileges and large resources,

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27 Hedl, D., ‘Croatian Church Urges Right-Wing Election Win’, *Balkan Insight*, August 23, 2016 <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/08/23/croatian-church-urges-right-wing-election-win-08-22-2016/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

it recreated a political alliance with HDZ. The success of the conservative mobilization contributed to HDZ's return to power, and the new PM, Tihomir Orešković, wasted no time in symbolically recognizing HDZ's gratitude to the RCC. Right after the elections, he travelled to the Vatican to lobby for the canonization of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac (who was beatified by John Paul II in 1998).<sup>28</sup> The mission was not a success: Pope Francis stopped the process of canonization due to Serbian-Orthodox opposition. As the wartime Catholic Bishop of Zagreb, Stepinac failed to speak out against the Jasenovac killings. With Pope Francis, the Croats' privileged access to the Vatican has come to an end. He has also refrained from publicly supporting Medjugorje and has had the ongoing apparition of Mary in Medjugorje investigated.<sup>29</sup>

There are limits to the RCC's influence over HDZ. As noted above, in another major Catholic mobilization issue – the RCC's opposition to the Istanbul Agreement – the Church failed: HDZ did not vote down the ratification. Clearly, conservative mobilizations succeed only when the interests of the conservative activists ally with those of a major party. The alliance between HDZ and the RCC has hardly been a repetition of Tudman's national clericalism. Still, the RCC's return to the Croatian social scene has fuelled nativism, conservatism and nationalism.

## Two Cultures of Remembrance

While the politics of morality has mobilized the most people in a single event – 20% of eligible voters signed the petition for the marriage referendum – the politics of memory has proven to be the most permanently divisive aspect of Croatia's culture wars. Public commemorations of the past have been a mainstay in Croatia for the last two decades, yet they did not draw massive crowds until

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28 Milekić, S., 'Croatia PM to Push Pope to Canonise Stepinac', *Balkan Insight*, April 7, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/04/07/croatian-pm-won-t-change-pope-s-mind-on-controversial-canonisation-04-06-2016/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

29 Spaić, I., 'Vatican Sends Envoy to Medjugorje in Bosnia', *Balkan Insight*, March 27, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/03/27/vatican-special-envoy-to-medjugorje-arrives-in-bosnia-03-27-2017/> (accessed June 30, 2021).

recently. Since the 2013 and especially the 2015 memorial season, it has become evident that the Croatian public is, or has become, largely divided over its relation to the past, and it is over these struggles that the fiercest culture war is being waged.

Only some parts of the Croatian past are controversial. Many critical voices notwithstanding, the official account of the Homeland War (1991–95) as a heroic war of defence is practically uncontested in public, and the official 5 August commemorations in Knin became massive and inclusive in 2015 (Banjeglav 2018). The only change to the remembrance of the Homeland War concerns the growing space given to consideration of its civilian victims, for example, in school history textbooks (ESI 2015).

But there is little consensus around the remembrance of the Second World War. The division of Croatia into two ‘rival communities of remembrance’ has become visible at commemoration sites, especially in Jasenovac and Bleiburg, where two different publics gather, ‘each side focusing on their own victims and painting the “other” as exclusively perpetrators’ (Pavlaković 2019: 121). There are also two radically opposed ways of relating to the WWII past in Croatia. According to Pavlaković, elites and citizens are divided as to ‘which side, Ustaše or Partisans, fought for Croatia’s national interests’ (Pavlaković 2019: 121). One side relates to the anti-fascist tradition as the foundation of modern Croatia, while for the others, overcoming the historical victimization by hostile ideologies is key to the Croatian identity.

Even if those divisions are mostly staged around WWII rival remembrance sites, the issue at stake is not revisionism per se and not even the historical facts of WWII. Rather, the challenge to anti-fascism is above all a challenge to the communist Yugoslav legacy, through its specific framing of national memory and national identity. In fact, the official, government-sponsored account of WWII has changed several times over the past twenty years. By shifting the focus of remembrance, recent confrontations about the past have led to a rejection of a previous, hegemonic memory regime and have legitimized rival national identity projects.

## **Political Cleavage Over Yugoslav Remembrance**

Anti-fascism was the ideological basis of Tito's Yugoslavia. Communist Yugoslavia promoted a systematic culture of anti-fascist remembrance through state holidays, street names, public celebrations and dozens of bold monuments in an original brutalist style. Yugoslavia's republics all had their national memorial days celebrating local anti-fascist uprisings; they used to follow each other so that a commemoration calendar could be choreographed throughout the year. WWII was framed solely as a war of fascism against communism – only anti-Fascist battles and victims were celebrated. Even Jewish civilians and other victims of the Nazi genocide were somehow inscribed into an anti-fascist framework; ethnic and national perspectives on victimhood were decisively suppressed.

After 1990, other, suppressed memories were cultivated once again, especially the victims of Communist crimes. Most prominent among them is Bleiburg, which was made into a place of annual pilgrimage by the pro-Ustashe Croatian diaspora beginning in the 1950s. The site gradually developed into an unofficial site of remembrance, with memorial plaques and a chapel. In 1990, Franjo Tuđman incorporated Bleiburg into the new national remembrance culture and a Church-led Bleiburg commemoration practice developed.

When political confrontations over the past erupted after the 2000 transition, they were not introduced by WWII revisionists. Rather it was the liberal SDP politicians who made use of the annual end-of-WWII celebration at the Jasenovac camp to stress Croatia's anti-fascist past and identity. The first post-Tuđman SDP Prime Minister, Iвица Račan, used the WWII remembrance as a platform where Croatia could reject Tuđman's revisionist nationalism. Under Račan, and even more so under the liberal president Stjepan Mešić after 2003, prime ministers and presidents would hold official speeches at Jasenovac, making the anti-fascist commemoration a political event of national significance. Bleiburg commemorations on the other hand were marginalized after 2000. Iвица Račan did visit Bleiburg in 2002 in an effort to create balance, as did President Josipović in 2010, but in 2012 the parliament discontinued the official sponsorship of the Bleiburg commemoration. The SDP had hoped to depoliticize the issue of

NDH, yet the opposite happened. The turn to the right after 2013 deepened the politicization of all commemorative events. Political incidents started occurring in 2013 in Vukovar and elsewhere, and soon after memory became a political issue of the highest order. After PM Zoran Milanović's presence at Vukovar was disrupted in 2013, he made use of his speech at Jasenovac in 2014 to stage a vehement attack on the NDH and its legitimacy.

Under HDZ President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović in 2015, the HDZ government's memory policy made an almost complete U-turn away from remembering the victims of fascism towards commemorating Croatian victims of communist Yugoslavia. The president stopped holding speeches in Jasenovac and the HDZ-dominated parliament renewed sponsorship of the Bleiburg commemoration. The first Bleiburg commemoration after the HDZ victory fell on the eve of the election, and, above all, on the seventieth anniversary of the end of WWII. Bleiburg became a massive show of memory politics by HDZ and RCC leaders. Indeed, the Church boycotted the Jasenovac commemoration that year and chose to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1945 solely at Bleiburg (Perica 2016: 15).

After 2015, the division of memory politics acquired a palpable quality. Alongside Knin, Bleiburg became the most attended site of memory in Croatia and a platform for nationalist, conservative and revisionist actors. With the Jasenovac theatre of memory politics void of government presence, the opposition, SDP and national minorities turned it into their platform for denouncing fascism and revisionism. The cleavage became most visible in the official commemorations of 23 August, Black Ribbon Day, a day of remembrance for victims of all totalitarian regimes. Since 2016, the government has participated at the Jazovka site – a mass grave of victims of Tito's army from 1945 (Pauković 2019: 102) – and not in Brezovica, a service that commemorates a local uprising against NDH on the same day.

The confrontations over sites of memory have opened a gulf between the anti-fascist culture of remembrance, which is dedicated to all victims of fascism and thus transcends national identity, and the religious-patriotic culture of remembrance dedicated to

the Croatian victims of totalitarian ideologies. While the HDZ government has continued to acknowledge the NDH crimes in Jasenovac, it has shifted the focus of official remembrance to nationally defined victims. Croats killed in Bleiburg became symbols of the undeniable crimes perpetrated in Tito's Yugoslavia and proof of the criminal nature of the communist regime as such. Rather than the initial killings of Ustashe members by Tito's Partisans at Bleiburg, the deaths of civilians in so-called death marches from Bleiburg towards Yugoslavia are emphasized. These have been framed as 'innocent' victims, that is, people who have not been tried for war crimes and whose mass murder was covered up by the communist state. Bleiburg commemorations thus give space to an unfettered hostility towards Yugoslavia and towards Tito personally.

Critics like Dragan Markovina point out that Bleiburg commemorations remain singularly one-sided and decontextualized: The years 1941–45 and the character of revenge carried out by Tito's army are never mentioned (Markovina 2017: 194). Self-victimization, on the other hand, has been very explicit: Bleiburg speeches elevated the victims' suffering to a symbolic sacrifice for the nation, and the death marches were called the 'way of the cross'. Unlike Jasenovac, Bleiburg could be construed as a site of truly *national* remembrance, commemorations of those sacrificed for the sake of Croatia in a great national tragedy. The character of Bleiburg's long-covered crime and of the unhealed trauma lends itself to being annually reactualized in a sense of collective victimhood.

If Bleiburg clearly developed into a platform for national-conservative cultural politics, it is not primarily a revisionist commemoration practice. The government and history books recognize the crimes of NDH as well as Croatian participation in the anti-fascist struggle. Government officials continue to mark their presence at Jasenovac, albeit silently. At all commemorations between 2014 and 2017, only marginal numbers sported Ustashe symbols, as was observed during the realization of the 'Framing the Nation' research project dedicated to Croatian commemoration policies. One of its leaders, Davor Pauković, contends that Croatia seems paradoxically divided over the account of the communist period, that is, about

‘the character of the regime, the character and scope of its crimes’, rather than about WWII (Pauković 2019: 99).

Thus, the shift towards Bleiburg means in fact the rejection of anti-fascist memory politics. The anti-fascist memory regime was hegemonic until 1990, and it was reimposed in a modified way under SDP governments. Recent wars over memory mark steps towards something more subtle than revisionism: towards the nationalization of memory politics (Pauković 2019: 114).

### **Three Memory Regimes**

In the last thirty years, Croatia has passed through three major changes in its dominant ‘memory regime’ (Neumayer, Mink 2013). That is, a set of officially sponsored principles and interpretations of national history that started with the Yugoslav regime based on anti-fascism, changed to Franjo Tuđman’s focus on a national independent state and then again to a Europeanized anti-fascism. Eventually, after 2013, a dual regime developed where officially muted anti-fascism continuously meets the challenge of neo-nationalist remembrance.

Given the importance of memory politics in socialist Yugoslavia, in 1990, the first change in the memory regime was immediate – in content, but not in form. Independent Croatia quickly changed street names, school history books and state commemoration dates. One of the first official acts of Tuđman as president was to move Croatia’s anti-fascist day from August to 22 June (Radonić 2013: 237). For Tuđman, memory was a paramount political instrument. He was himself a military historian, had published on Croatian non-communist resistance to the NDH and cast doubt on the official accounts of Jasenovac victim numbers. He was sacked and later imprisoned for having contacts with nationalist-revisionist Croatian exiles.

Once in power, Tuđman sought symbolic reconciliation between opposing ideological currents – the nationalists, anti-fascists and Ustashe – and hence included the forgotten Croatian and NDH victims in the commemoration. NDH was also given symbolic recognition through the renaming of streets, with the name of an NDH

culture minister, Mile Budak, whereas thousands of anti-fascist monuments were destroyed or vandalized (Radonić 2013: 243).

Tudman's rehabilitation of the Ustashe state was only partial. He downplayed the crimes of NDH and kept paying 'lip service' to anti-fascism: The role of Croats on the anti-fascist front was recognized and anti-fascism was mentioned in the first Croatian constitution. In an effort at reconciliation, Jasenovac and Bleiburg were treated equally as sites of national tragedy. A political leader obsessed by history and by moulding national history to his image, Tudman even planned to rebury the remains of Croat victims from Bleiburg at Jasenovac inside a new memorial to all Croats killed in WWII (inspired by Franco's Valley of the Fallen near Madrid). This plan to physically and literally rewrite the past caused an immense uproar, and the 'mixing of bones' was never carried out. Nevertheless, it remains that in the Tudman era, the past was no longer articulated in terms of opposing ideologies (fascism, communism, nationalism), but through the prism of ethnic collectivities, their destiny and their mutual struggle over power.

After the political change in 2000, the Croatian memory regime changed for a second time. SDP politicians and a reformed HDZ under Ivo Sanader embarked upon the Europeanization process. EU accession also meant joining a common European politics of remembrance and a straightforward acceptance of the EU memory framework – 'the collection of policies, resolutions and decisions by the European Commission and the European Parliament (EP) that reflect and guide collective moral and political attitudes towards the past' (Milošević, Touquet 2018: 382). The European remembrance regime is built around a response to the Holocaust, upon the sacredness of human rights and the respect of minority rights. In the European framework, the year 1945 means a liberation and a restart. It also tends to place both communism and fascism within a shared category of totalitarian regimes. For Central European nations, though, celebrating 1945 as a liberation carried a strong dissonance as 1945 also meant subjection to another totalitarian regime. For some nations, communism had more lasting negative consequences than fascism.

During the 2000s, the old anti-fascist memory regime was incorporated into a modernized European memory framework. The combination seemed to work well: both had been given a privileged space in the condemnation of genocidal practices of fascism and used the supranational memory framework for reconciliation. The EU framework led to renewed interest in Holocaust studies. The Jasenovac legacy had the potential to symbolize Croatia's coming to terms with the past and embrace of the European future. Accordingly, in 2005, the parliament adopted the Declaration on Anti-fascism, making anti-fascism the new official framework for memory politics. It was a critical anti-fascism: It dissociated itself from communism and included a critical account of the 'red Holocaust of Bleiburg'. An alternative interpretation of WWII was developed that intended to counter both Croatian revisionism and Serbian nationalism in the accounts of the major sites of memory. Historical work was done, especially concerning the number of Jasenovac victims (currently placed at around eighty thousand); and the anti-fascist legacy was rehabilitated in the frame of a Croatian national narrative, as a means of national reconciliation with the Serb minority and with Croatia's neighbours. President Josipović made a tour of all major sites of memory in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, including monuments to Serbs killed in the Homeland War. During this time, official apologies were exchanged with Bosnians and accepted from the forthcoming Serbian president Tadić in Vukovar. (Pavlaković 2019: 124, Milošević and Touquet 2018: 389)

For post-Tudman governments, especially that of the SDP, the new politics of memory's aim was both to resolve and to shelve the past. Yet accession to the EU did not bring about a full acceptance of the dominant European memory culture. Increasingly, war commemorations were contested or even disrupted and/or used by political parties to make confrontational discourses. Around the time of accession itself, 'the elite consensus on antifascism seems to have withered away' (Pavlaković 2019: 120) as it seemed to have obfuscated the victimization of Croatian civilians and communist crimes.

Then, in 2016, a third turn in the politics of memory occurred. The dominant anti-fascist narrative was challenged by revisionist

actors of varying degrees of radicality. Right-wing governments undertook important symbolic shifts which in effect have ‘silenced’ the formerly dominant anti-fascist narrative (Pavlaković 2019: 121). While leftists and liberals continue to cultivate anti-fascist memories, revisionist theories abound in the sphere of popular culture and major institutions like the Catholic Church and conservative NGOs, all joined in commemorating Croatian victims. Hence, one can no longer speak of one official and dominant politics of memory.

This last, neo-nationalist memory regime is built around ethnic collectivity, self-victimization and relativization. As Banjeglav notes, victimization usually serves a logic of justification in relation to problematic actions or events (Banjeglav 2018: 872). The principal focus of the victimization frame is of course the government sponsored Bleiburg event. But in 2015, even at the celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary of the victory in Knin, President Grabar-Kitarović emphasized that the war was an unwanted external aggression. There, too, victimization has replaced a former frame of Europeanization, which used to be referred to previously.

The trope of self-victimization also extends to other periods of Croatian history. In late Yugoslavia, Croats were portrayed as victims of widespread discrimination, a sense that continues to subsist in the present (Djurasković 2018: 16). In 2011, a survey quoted by Pavlaković showed that 50% of respondents agreed that ‘Croats were the biggest victims in WWII and immediate post-war years’. In this new emphasis on national victimhood, the events in Bleiburg are fully decontextualized, stripped of the preceding four years of war and put into a logic of a national sacrifice due to the aggression of the archenemy. A continuity is established between this sacrifice and that of the Homeland War. For this symbolism to function, the sacrificial and otherworldly vocabulary of the Catholic Church is useful; since 2015, political speeches have taken place after mass so as to highlight the Church’s role (Pavlakovic, Paukovic, Brentin 2018: 15)

An element of the European frame has been retained in the new national paradigm: the relativization of the totalitarian past. Take, for example, Dragan Markovina’s quote of a 2016 speech by Speaker of the Croatian Parliament Božo Petrov: ‘All victims deserve respect

and piety [...]. Let us stop dividing over the dead. Let us build a modern Croatia over the Homeland War, and by always condemning crimes and all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.’ When mourning victims of all totalitarian regimes, the neo-nationalist memory frame equalizes the fascist Ustashe protectorate and communist Yugoslavia under the same concept of totalitarianism. It leads to looking at communism ‘exclusively from the vantage point of Bleiburg’ and thus avoiding a debate about NDH crimes (Markovina 2017: 218).

### **The Political Logic of Memory Wars**

Rather than proposing or opposing revisionism or fighting about the interpretation of the past per se – because there is a large consensus on the facts – memory politics appears to be a struggle about the political symbolism of memory regimes themselves. Pushing or resisting shifts in remembrance practices makes sense only in the political context of larger struggles between major political options: liberals and moderate conservatives resisting ‘Tudmanism’ and, lately, conservatives reacting to ‘Europeanization’ with their assorted memory regimes.

Memory wars in fact started with the defence of the anti-fascist legacy during first shift in memory regime: Tudman’s renaming of a central Zagreb square from the Square of the Victims of Fascism to the Croatian Nobles Square. Public protests against the renaming on 8 May became an annual event, with liberal and SDP politicians, including Mesić and Pušić, Croatia’s EU accession negotiator, attending. The square had its earlier name returned after the political alternation in 2000 (Radonić 2013: 242), hence the struggle had in fact as much to do with the legacy of Franjo Tudman as with anti-fascism. A similar argument has been made about the Yugoslav legacy at stake in conflicts around Jasenovac and Bleiburg. After the latest shift to neo-nationalist, ethnocentric memory framing, Cardinal Štepinac and Franjo Tudman were given public recognition without much debate (efforts towards the canonization of the cardinal, an airport and a huge statue in Zagreb of the first president). Yet below the confrontations of symbolic politics, there are notable exceptions

from memory wars, concerning school history textbooks, for instance. Younger historians have succeeded in having a critical and balanced view of both WWII and the Homeland War inscribed in officially approved books which about a third of schools now use, besides earlier and more apologetic schoolbooks (ESI 2015).

Both the 'liberal' and the 'conservative' engagement with the past should be seen as politics of memory. Pavlaković and Pauković distinguish between several types of memory entrepreneurs. They use Bernhard and Kubik's term *mnemotic warriors* for those who aggressively promote one exclusive historical vision and *mnemotic pluralists* for those who engage in debating various versions of the past and may use history for reconciliatory policies (Pavlaković 2019: 123). Croatia's politics of the past decade has been determined by mnemotic warriors from both parties of the Croatian duopoly.<sup>30</sup>

On the centre-left side, Stjepan Mesić, as a president (2000–2010), gradually profiled himself as a mnemotic warrior and 'the most prominent guardian of anti-fascism in Croatia' (Pauković 2019: 104). In the eyes of Dragan Markovina, he was the 'only high placed politician who attempted to deconstruct Tudmanism and the nationalist values that formed sovereign Croatia' (2017: 334); moreover, as a president he was also a militant anti-fascist whose positions were notable for their radicality. For Mesić, there were no innocent victims at Bleiburg as those killed died in their uniforms; and Bleiburg was not a Croatian tragedy: 'NDH was not an expression of the historical aspirations of the Croatian people, nor is today's Republic of Croatia in any way its continuation, nor its rebirth. The NDH was not independent, not Croatian, and it was not a state' (Mesić 2009, quoted in Pavlaković 2012: 13).

On the other, right-wing side, several younger HDZ politicians have profiled themselves as mnemotic warriors with explicit revisionist or anti-communist stances: Tomislav Karamarko, a historian of Partisan crimes, became the leader of HDZ (2012–16) and chose to attack the SDP government on account of history. The short-lived

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<sup>30</sup> While small, populist alternative projects often attempted to put emphasis on social issues and corruption, such as the parties of Most and Živi zid (Human shield).

minister of culture Zlatko Hasanbegović made culture war a government policy. Andrija Hebrang, the son of a victim of Tito's purges and a minister in several HDZ governments, has initiated the founding of the government Office for Locating, Marking and Maintaining the Graves of Victims of Communist Crimes after World War II and minimized the number of Jasenovac victims (Radonić 2013: 246). And Bruna Esih, a young female politician, Bleiburg activist and President Kitar-Grabarović's speaker at commemorations, became an 'icon of the Right'.<sup>31</sup> Yet in a recent change, the memory disputes have been taken over by civil society actors – for example, veterans of the Homeland War organized the Bleiburg Honorary Guard for which there is continuity between the victimhood of 1945 and the freedom fighting of 1991–95.

In summary, if we leave the mobilizing effects of revisionist provocations and liberal outrage aside, what is at stake in memory wars really is Croatia's relation to communism, the universalism of the anti-fascist memory regime and the place of ethnic and national symbols. Neither the crudeness of Franjoism nor the loftiness of Europeanization have resolved the dilemma, but both have created or channelled a lot of frustration and resentment.

## Conclusion

Following the mass mobilization around same-sex marriage in 2013, Croatia's cultural wars have continued to polarize the public over the Istanbul Convention and in the sphere of morality politics, a situation which has deepened with the shifting practice of commemoration during the five-month-long memorial season. Historical revisionism and social conservatism have proven highly mobilizing and divisive. Yet it would be wrong to see the very public resurgence of fascist NDH symbolism and of clerical conservatism as

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31 Karlović-Sabolić, M., 'Bruna Esih, zvijezda hrvatske politike i ikona desnice: hoće li rođena Splićanka osvojiti Zagreb i tako započeti karijeru iz snova?', *Slobodna Dalmacija*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/novosti/hrvatska/clanak/id/470275/bruna-esih-zvijezda-hrvatske-politike-i-ikona-desnice-hoce-li-roena-spljanka-osvojiti-zagreb-i-tako-zapoceti-karijeru-iz-snova> (accessed June 30, 2021).

a result of some formerly repressed nationalist tendency in Croatia. Rather, this chapter attempted to show that the culture wars inscribe themselves into the shifts in political contexts, which Croatia shares with its neighbours. In other words, Croatia's culture wars are both specific, because of its national history, and they reflect larger Central European developments – dynamics of right-left competition, the complex consequences of the EU accession process and larger ideological shifts. Croatia's polarization has reflected those developments in two theatres of the culture wars: the politics of memory and the politics of morality.

The vehemence of the memory wars stems partly from Croatia's very recent independence and from a series of war-related traumas that have not had much time to heal. Fragile or recent statehood or its changing status favour conflicts over memory. Yet not all memory traumas need to develop into polarizing conflicts; there has been much more progress on historical consensus-building concerning the Homeland War and schoolbooks than around public monuments and WWII. Polarization and culture wars need to be put into the context of party politics, European politics and larger, global events.

Mass public commemorations are a legacy of communist Yugoslavia that could not just be discontinued. Rather, they have been adopted by political parties on both sides: first by Franjo Tuđman; then by the post-communist SDP, which actively used a modernized version of Yugoslav anti-fascism to counter Tuđman's political and symbolic hegemony; and, later, by the right-wing HDZ to mobilize against SDP and their political symbols. This is not surprising. Mass emotive commemorations lend themselves extremely well to political mobilization. What is surprising is that most emotive struggles concern the older trauma, that of WWII, and not the more recent Homeland War. Here, the larger context of Europeanization may have had an indirect polarizing effect.

Cultural division has substantially increased since EU accession. After the realization of two major historical goals – independence and Europeanization – Croatia has lost an earlier political consensus over national direction, and the struggle over the past and over identity-related issues has become the primary field of political

confrontation. More importantly, the Europeanization process has also imposed its own memory frame, which was adopted and used by one of the two parties as a Europeanized anti-fascist framework.

The vehemence of confrontations about historical symbols does not necessarily come from a revisionist tendency on Croatia's right but rather from a larger resistance to a formerly hegemonic anti-fascist memory regime that is linked to both Yugoslav federalism and to the European integration process. The new memory politics of the HDZ-led governments have attempted to nationalize remembrance practices, centring them upon national victimhood. This memory policy allowed for the integration of a substantial part of the public – the Right, veterans of the Homeland War, the RCC and the conservative civic scene – as well as the rejection of memory frames seen as imposed from outside.

There is also a third level on which Croatia's politics stand in relation to a global development. Since 2013, new, conservative and nationalist civil society actors and the Catholic Church have entered the arena of national projects. Under the direct influence or inspiration of a conservative Catholic mobilization in France, Croatia's conservatives have mobilized the public and given the Catholic Church a new public role as defender of the nation against malicious liberalism. The RCC's role is not specific to Croatia – the Polish and, to a lesser extent, the Slovak Church play a similar part as national churches. The Croatian example shows that the Church has been highly active in both culture wars of memory and of morality. The Church, seeking to regain and maintain its role as the foremost 'national institution' (Perica 2015: 9), has reinforced and deepened both culture wars.

A third theatre in the culture wars, civilizationist identity conflicts, are notable for their absence. There is no shortage of civilizationist talk in Croatia, but this does not stem from a hostility to Islam. Here, the ethnic logic seems to hold primacy over the civilizationist logic: Bosnian and Croatian Muslims have historically been seen as ethnic Croats of Muslim faith, the revisionist minister Zlatko Hasanbegović being the prime example.<sup>32</sup> Rather than anti-Muslim

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32 Especially those of Bosnia that had been incorporated into wartime independent Croatia, the NDH.

civilizationism, the Catholic Church has developed a moralizing traditionalist discourse based on opposition to liberal modernity. It has been used in morality wars rather than in opposition to EU migration policies. Hence, even in a strongly Catholic nation, anti-Muslim civilizationism was not a necessary development but rather an effect of a contingent political development.

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# 9/ Afterword

*Pavel Barša, Žora Hesová*

The rise of nationalism and conservatism in Central Europe over the last decade was a regional manifestation of the crisis of the (neo)liberal globalization era. It was a revolt against the ideological presuppositions of this era. The collapse of the Soviet Bloc (and, later on, the Soviet Union itself) at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s confirmed the victory of (neo)liberal-conservative individualism and anti-statism, whose ideological and economic foundations were laid over the long 1970s as a response to the crisis of collectivist and statist projects – socialism or nationalism – that defined the twentieth century after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Simultaneously, with the victory of the (neo)liberal-conservative paradigm, the Cold War bipolarity was replaced by the global hegemony of the United States as leader of the West. Under its auspices, globalization was extended to all parts of the planet.

The 2008–9 financial and economic crisis, the consequences of which reverberated throughout the following decade, was not a temporary failure of the (neo)liberal-globalist order but signalled its deep structural – economic and social – flaws, to which the growing awareness of its ecological unsustainability was added during the latter part of the last decade. Simultaneously, the gain in the geopolitical weight of anti-liberal great powers such as Russia and China indicated the end of the unipolar moment of the 1990s.

The successes of nationalism and conservatism in the last decade should be conceived as both symptoms with this crisis and as attempts to replace the established ideological paradigm with an alternative. Various forms of xenophobic neo-nationalism, which were often allied with (religiously buttressed) moral ultra-conservatism, moved to the mainstream in Western Europe (Manif pour tous and Rassemblement national in France, the Brexit referendum

in Britain, M. Salvini in Italy, G. Wilders in the Netherlands, Vox in Spain), in the Americas (D. Trump, J. Bolsonaro) and in Asia (R. Duterte, N. Modi). In light of the findings of this volume it appears that our region took part in that historical conjuncture, and its ideological and political turmoil corresponds to what was happening in other parts of the world in the last decade.

### **Beyond 'Post-communism' and 'Populism'**

The anti-liberal wave, a sign of the crisis and of the demise of the post-Cold War order, manifested itself in different regions and countries of the world differently – according to their geopolitical place, history and political culture. The purpose of our book was to analyse the specific features which this global anti-liberal turn took on in Central Europe. In order to fulfil our task, we had to reject two perspectives that have prevailed so far: (1) the *regional-historical* or *post-communist* framework that has looked for causes of the anti-liberal turn in the transition from communist totalitarianism to liberal democracy or, more largely, in the transition from Eastern authoritarianism (and collectivism) to Western liberalism (and individualism), and (2) the *populist* framework that has focused on the attacks of the self-styled tribunes who pretend to *directly* and *immediately* express and represent the will of the people against the established elites whose power is linked to *indirect* and *inter-mediating* checks and balances and constitutional procedures.

The former framework explains the political turmoil of our region in the last decade through the backlash of societies which, due to forty years of communism – or deeper authoritarian traditions pre-dating it – were not ready to embrace the cosmopolitan liberalism that came with the Westernization of the 1990s and early 2000s. Even if signs of such blowback could certainly be detected at some level, our understanding of the anti-liberal wave of the last decade cannot embrace this hypothesis since the anti-liberal backlash is by no means limited to the post-communist and East European countries. We have found also wanting the latter framework, which tries to establish the universal reach of the anti-liberal wave through

the concept of populism. It does highlight the populist character of many successful anti-liberal projects of the last decade. Yet the concept of populism could also be applied to movements or leaders of that decade in our region who were not riding the anti-globalist, conservative or xenophobic wave, namely civic or technocratic populists like Zuzana Čaputová and Andrej Babiš. The populist framework is simply too formal (or ‘ideologically thin’) to capture specific features of the anti-liberal turn. Populist rhetoric can be filled with virtually any content. Depending on the specific context and goals, the antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ can take many forms – authoritarian or democratic, particularistic or universalist, racist or cosmopolitan, conservative or liberal. The emptiness of the populist discourse allows its protagonists even to switch from one ideological programme to its opposite.

We do not dispute the greater incidence of movements that framed their struggles as pitting ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ – outsiders of the political establishment against its insiders – in the last decade. What we do dispute is the automatic identification of populist actors with the challengers of moral, ideological and economic assumptions of the post–Cold War consensus. The rhetorical and organizational arsenal of populism has also been used by another type of populists – those who wanted to maintain or merely modify those assumptions without destroying the consensus itself. Their rise could also be analysed as a symptom and response to the crisis of the (neo)liberal-globalist order. Unlike the national conservatives, ‘liberal’ populists did not argue for its reversal or for a revolution but merely for mitigation or reform. An example of such ‘centrist populism’ is the French president, Emmanuel Macron.

Some countries of our region have become laboratories for this centrist populism as well: In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the anti-establishment card of the people’s tribunate, which stands above the disputes of traditional parties and their ideologies, was played by those who professed to believe in a ‘civic’ rather than ‘ethnic’ peoplehood and who promised efficient government rather than a protection against foreigners. Unlike the rest of the major parties, some populists (like the former Slovak president Andrej

Kiska), even preached hospitality towards refugees rather than their rejection during the 2015–16 refugee crisis. Because of its ideological vagueness, the populist framework is not appropriate for studying the turmoil of the 2010s. While it misses the ideological and cultural content of the anti-liberal turn in our region, the *post-communist* (or *regional-historical*) framework misses its global context.

To overcome both flaws, we have elaborated the framework of *culture wars*. It has a much more specific content than ‘populism’ and fits most movements and leaders who became agents in the global anti-liberal turn – both in our region and world-wide – in the 2010s. Namely, they waged a war against the liberal spirit of globalization with its universalistic values of equality, free individual choice, tolerance, open borders, cultural and racial mixing and sexual diversity. Against this individualistic universalism and its stress on the rights of *minorities* of all kinds, the anti-liberals of the last decade pitted collectivistic particularism, stressing the rights of national, racial and religious *majorities*. This general thrust was present wherever those movements and actors moved to the foreground in the last decade: in the United States and Brazil, in India and the Philippines, in Italy and France, in Poland and Austria. In each nation and region, however, the content was formed by specific narratives and discourses that corresponded to their unique histories and political cultures.

### **Post-1989 Liberal-Conservative Consensus**

In the countries we have dealt with in this book, the specific content was provided by national traditions and identities whose origins lay in those nationalities’ struggles within the Austro-Hungarian and, in part, Russian Empires. Those identities reached their maturity between the two World Wars, hardened under Nazi and communist rule and remained frozen in the Cold War period. In the eyes of the elites who were leading those countries in the 1990s, the lifting of the Iron Curtain amounted to their liberation. Central Europeans could fully restore their sovereignty and join West Europeans, from whom they were severed under communist rule or, in the case of Austria, by an imposed neutrality. Self-determination

was combined with an emancipation from the Cold War bipolarity. While it assigned every society its place and separated it from others, the post-Cold War unipolar moment allowed them to mix with others under the auspices of the only remaining global superpower or the European Union, which intensified its integration after the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and opened its gates to new members from East-Central Europe between 1995 (Austria), 2004 (V4) and 2013 (Croatia).

The new elites of the countries that lay on the Western fringe of the former Eastern Bloc eagerly embraced this prospect. For a brief euphoric moment, the restored sovereignty and the reclaimed Western heritage coincided with opening up to the larger world. Although this moment passed quickly and national conservative members of the new elites started articulating critical views on some aspects of Europeanization and globalization already in the 1990s, most of them recognized that, at least in the short term, there was no alternative to them. They were also highly motivated by geopolitical concerns: They looked to the West for the security guarantees of their independence from Russia. For the sake of joining the European Union and NATO, they were ready to compromise with the liberals. Even those who were deeply antagonistic to the universalistic values of globalization believed that they had to return to Europe *first* in order to shape it *later* to their own conservative or Christian vision.

On a more general level, the pro-European consensus in Central Europe was cross-ideological. It allowed each camp to project onto Europe its own version of it. The old Christian Europe of the conservatives sat side by side with the green Europe of environmentalists and progressive Europe of liberal multiculturalists and moderate leftists. Conservatives and nationalists increasingly grumbled at the liberal norms their states had to accept in the accession process, but they knew that they could not give up on the European Union if they wanted to remain in power and ensure the economic prosperity and geopolitical security of their countries. In other words, being part of the pro-European and pro-Western consensus forced them to mitigate their nationalist and conservative views, but they thought the price worth paying.

## **EU Accession and the Rise of National Conservatism and Centrist Populism**

The completion of the accession process logically entailed the possibility that the consensus would unravel and break up the alliances based on it since accession created a programmatic void which had to be filled. In other words, reaching the main goal of the transition forced political actors to look for other projects and alliances apart from than those which had been formulated and built up during the transition from the Cold War era. The aims as well as the friends and enemies had to be defined anew.

The exact moment and modus of this unravelling, however, was contingent on the specific political circumstances in each country. Gaining EU membership was a necessary but insufficient condition. Two extreme cases at opposite ends of the continuum are represented by Croatia and the Czech Republic. Croatia fell into an all-out culture war between the national-conservative Right and post-communist Left within a matter of months after it acceded to the European Union in 2013. In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, the first serious dent in the liberal-conservative consensus appeared only eleven years after accession during the 2015–16 refugee crisis, and the consensus, however frayed and fragile, is still holding in the spring of 2021 (the time of writing).

The case of Austria is *sui generis* since it did not experience forty years of communist rule and, therefore, could join the union in 1995. But even there this event undermined, if not the liberal-conservative consensus, then at least the dual hegemony of the right-wing ÖVP and the left-wing SPÖ (who used to rule in grand coalitions) and thereby opened the road to the populist ÖVP-FPÖ government in 1999. In Poland, EU accession coincided with the collapse of the post-communist Left which allowed national conservatives (PiS) to turn their erstwhile allies (i.e., the liberal conservatives of Civic Platform) into their biggest enemies and to ally with the far right against them. In Hungary, Orbán was already peppering his hostility towards the post-communist and post-dissident Left with national conservative elements in the 2002 parliamentary elections. EU accession in 2004 gave

him an additional opportunity to stigmatize the Hungarian liberals as alien to the Hungarian nation given their association with ‘Brussels’. In Slovakia, the membership provoked a crisis and internal differentiation within the Christian conservative camp, producing a falling-out of its liberal and national-conservative wings – the latter split further into a pro-Russian far right and pro-European centre right.

The opening of this unbridgeable gap between national conservatives and liberal conservatives in Poland and Slovakia or between the national conservatives and the post-communist and post-dissident Left in Hungary and Croatia, was, however, only one possible consequence of EU accession. The other materialized most patently in Slovakia and Czech Republic. It consisted in the rise of new actors and parties who, in the name of ordinary and virtuous citizens, attacked the post-Cold War political elite as corrupt and inefficient but left untouched the ideological consensus that had remained valid since accession. Although Western public opinion and, to some extent, even academic research has been attracted almost exclusively to the rise of anti-liberalism in our region, it was also a laboratory for this centrist populism.

While *national conservatives* undermined the post-Cold War status quo by creating and deepening ideological divisions, *centrist populists* undermined it by focussing on the evils produced by incompetent and corrupt politicians and/or rigidified system of institutional inter-mediation. The former based their attack on the status quo on the values which supposedly undergirded the antagonism between the Right and the Left; the latter based it on values which supposedly transcended it. National conservative populists promoted substantive or particularistic values – specific narratives of the national past and the uniqueness of the national identity vs the abstract rules of anonymous global space, a patriarchal view of gender and family vs LGBT rights and ‘gender ideology’. Centrist populists appeal instead to formal and universalistic values – a virtuous citizenry vs wicked politicians, efficient governance responsive to the wishes of the people vs a corrupt and inefficient elite alienated from the people, common sense combined with expertise vs the archaic left and right ideologies of the political class. Appealing to

both kinds of values polarized political debate by moralizing and personalizing it. Hence, the entrance of *both* national conservatives *and* centrist populists on the political stage transformed policy debates into clashes between seemingly fixed and unchangeable identities. This justifies Ondřej Slačálek's description of the struggle between Andrej Babiš and the Czech post–Cold War political class as a sort of culture war in which each side stresses their principal incompatibility supposedly based on antagonistic values. One could say the same about the struggle of the Slovak populist leaders such as Andrej Kiska, Zuzana Čaputová and Igor Matovič with Róbert Fico and his social-democratic party Smer in the last decade.

Most of the analyses of this book have focused on the culture war in the primary or proper sense, that is, those provoked by national conservatives and signalling (and feeding back into) the unravelling of the liberal-conservative consensus of the post–Cold War period which buttressed the accession of Central European (CE) countries to the European Union. Culture wars became the driving force behind the reconstruction of the political field in Hungary, Poland, Croatia and Austria in the 2010s. In Slovakia and Czech Republic, on the other hand, the restructuring role was mainly played out in conflicts between the centrist populists and the established parties, while culture wars proper played a complementary role in the former country and a marginal one in the latter.

## **Revolts against Europeanization**

The culture wars provoked by neo-nationalists and ultra-conservatives *and* those provoked by centrist populists were both symptoms of the crisis in the post–Cold War order and, at the same time, two distinct responses to it: one revolutionary, the other reformist. Except for chapter 4, devoted to the Czech Republic, we focused on culture wars that were initiated by national conservative parties and organizations. By their very nature, they undermined ideological assumptions behind the main justification for the (neo)liberal globalist order. As we have said, such a challenge was a worldwide phenomenon in the last decade, although it manifested itself in different

regions and countries in different ways – dependent on their histories, political traditions and actual circumstances. The specific contents and forms which it took in Central Europe were related to the fact that globalization in the post-1989 period was mediated and, to some extent, embodied and replaced by Europeanization.

The basic features of globalization – such as the weakening of national sovereignty and identity by the free movement of capital, goods, services, people and ideas, multilateral supranational institutions and regulations, the high valuation of transnational connections and exchanges based on individual choice and status equality (regardless of nationality, gender, race or sexual orientation) as opposed to the values of national or socioeconomic solidarity – were realized on a qualitatively higher level within the European Union. It endowed itself, due to the Maastricht Treaty, with a much more robust institutional infrastructure of supranational integration than that represented by the UN and its affiliated organizations, such as the IMF, World Bank, OECD or transnational NGOs representing ‘global civil society’. On a worldwide level, and more so within the EU, post-nationalism and trans-nationalism tended to supersede national identity and sovereignty. If the globalist conception of human rights saw in each individual, no matter to which nation, religion or culture s/he belonged, an exemplar of humankind, the Euro-federalist vision of an ‘ever closer union’ seeks to transform Britons, the French, Germans, Poles or Czechs into Europeans. Europeanization was globalization writ small.

Is it any wonder then that the anti-globalization revolt in Europe primarily took the form of a revolt against ‘Brussels’ (or ‘Strasbourg’) and against the norms and regulations by which the European Union (or European Council) appeared to limit the sovereign choices of European nations and their members? Those who wanted to challenge (neo)liberal globalization vented their anger at European institutions as the more immediate embodiment and enforcer of the liberal-globalist norms. In ways specific to Central Europe, various resistances to Europeanization reopened questions of the national past, of the nature of the family and control over women’s bodies (abortion vs free choice) and, finally, of the cultural boundaries of Europe and its nations. In other words, public memory,

individual morality and collective identity were repoliticized. It is in those three theatres that the Central European culture wars of the 2010s helped to unravel the liberal-conservative consensus on which the EU accession process rested.

### **Memory: Central vs Western European**

The European Union presented itself to its would-be members as built upon a symbolic and legal framework of the politics of history that all candidate states were supposed to accept. It could be summarized through three interrelated assumptions concerning the twentieth century: (a) the major moral challenge of that century's European history was the Holocaust; (b) although fascism and communism were equalised as two versions of totalitarianism, it was fascism which provided the paradigm of totalitarian evil; and (c) the year 1945 was – and should unambiguously be taken as – the year of liberation.

All three assumptions were accepted in the early 2000s by CE political elites together with other legal requirements (such as the EU *acquis*) and integrated into official memory policy in terms of memorial days, monuments and declarations. Already during the EU accession process, however, there were dissenting voices, such as expressed at the 'battle of the crosses' in Auschwitz or in the call for a remembrance of communist crimes (Stanley 2016), but they were toned down. The acceptance of the EU requirements was the price worth paying, a compromise done in the name of the greater good: accession to the European Union.

After that goal was reached, no compromise was necessary any longer. National conservatives could mount a wholesale attack on all three assumptions. (a) They cast doubt on the exemplary status of the Holocaust with reference to the suffering of their nations under Nazi and communist rule and blankly denied any possible collaboration of their nationals in it – if there were collaborators who resembled Poles, Hungarians and so forth, they were certainly not 'true' Poles, Hungarians, et cetera. (b) They claimed that communism was an evil equal to, if not greater than, fascism, particularly if one takes into account that it lasted much longer. (c) In their view,

finally, 1945 was not the year of liberation but rather the moment of a new occupation and subjection to the other totalitarianism.

More specifically, new ‘mnemonic warriors’ (Kubik, Bernard 2014) demanded that national victims be mourned publicly alongside or above the Jewish victims. In Hungary, Slovakia and Croatia they reclaimed periods of partial sovereignty during World War II as belonging to the national past and ‘whitewashed’ and celebrated interwar and war-time sovereigntist personalities. As Hesová writes in the chapter on Croatia, the virulence of the memory wars of the last decade is explainable by the fact that a symbolic reappropriation of a national past stood up against what was perceived as a double hegemony: that of the European remembrance framework and that of pro-European liberal elites. The national conservative repoliticization of the WWII memory caused divisions and scandals because their points could be and were framed as revisionist – in other words, rehabilitating fascist, far right and antisemitic wings of the national movements – by their liberal opponents. In fact, national conservative parties were usually able to shift the opprobrium of revisionism on groups or parties which emerged to their right and who, indeed, expressed overtly racist or antisemitic views, which they themselves avoided or expressed only covertly.

Moreover, the national conservatives deployed a two-pronged strategy vis-à-vis the European memory of the Holocaust. The abovementioned denial of the Holocaust’s exceptional status was complemented by their partial acceptance of the exemplary evilness of Nazi crimes. This was, in turn, used to whitewash CE nationalists: The focus on the horrors of the Holocaust made pale the more banal antisemitism of their predecessors, who excluded the Jews from membership in their ethno-religiously defined nations but usually would not go so far as their extermination. The anti-totalitarian paradigm, too, could be turned into an advantage of the national conservatives. Once West European lenience towards communism was overcome and the moral equivalence of communism with Nazism was reaffirmed, ex-communist former dissidents or post-communist social democrats could be demonized as much as former Nazis were and assigned the same status of ‘enemies of the nation’.

Additionally, their pro-European position could be explained by a purported affinity between the communist totalitarianism of twentieth century Moscow and a ‘liberal totalitarianism’ coming from Brussels in the twenty-first century. Both forms of totalitarianism supersede concrete and organically developed national identities through abstract and artificial rules formulated by uprooted elites (Legutko 2016). The frequent references to the Holocaust and to the anti-totalitarian paradigm are evidence that the European memory framework was not only resisted but also appropriated in a way which strengthened the national conservative agenda.

### **Morality: Conservative vs Liberal**

The acceptance of the EU *acquis communautaire* and increased interactions with EU states and ensuing EU lawsuits brought new norms to the CE legal systems, such as anti-discrimination law regarding gender and sexual orientation or the recognition of the adoption of children by same-sex couples done abroad. There were also newer issues, such as the concept of gender-based violence in the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention. In the times of transition, those norms were usually conceived as legal rules of civil and business law and jurisprudence. The Polish declaration which – as a part of Poland’s EU membership treaty – expresses the will to retain Polish ‘sovereignty’ in ‘moral matters’ (also stipulated by the accession referendum) nevertheless testifies to an early awareness of possible conflicts with regards to sexual morality and ‘family values’ between EU law and strongly Catholic countries such as Poland, Croatia or Slovakia at the time of accession (Urban-Hillman 2008: 160–161).

It is, therefore, rather surprising, that the revolt of the last decade against the EU values and legal norms did not have purely endogenous sources but was part of a transnational conservative Christian militancy. In the beginning of the 2010s, a rather coherent conservative discourse produced by global conservative activist networks framed liberal moral norms as ‘gender ideology’, at first in Mexico, then in France and Germany, before reaching Central Europe in 2013 – as shown especially in the chapters on Slovakia and Croatia. Transnationally funded professional advocacy groups carried out

legal and legislative initiatives to counter homosexual rights, access to abortion and gender-based social policies. They did so by using activist tools (petitions, court cases, advocacy, referenda) which had been developed by their liberal opponents in the last quarter of the twentieth century, as well as a rights-based discourse (foetus rights, parents' rights) and secularized language (invoking traditional values, 'natural law' and natural hierarchies) rather than biblical references.

The symbolic point of departure in Europe's morality wars was the French protest movement *La manif pour tous* in 2012–13 against the socialist government's plans to extend marriage to all. It was followed by the Croatian referendum and Polish and Slovak anti-gender protests in 2013. The transnational anti-gender activism directly inspired, supported and helped professionalize a hitherto muted Catholic civil society in Central Europe. Besides sexual education in schools – an old point of contention for the Catholics since the late 1990s throughout Central Europe – the global Christian fundamentalist network promoted pro-life activism and the rejection of homosexuality (articulated around same-sex marriage referenda), adoptions by same-sex couples and the gender perspective on relations between men and women. This 'anti-gender discourse' (of Vatican and French/German origin but readily adopted by bishop's conferences and media across Central Europe) helped integrate all the issues of morality politics under one contentious term. The conservative anti-gender front assembled not only Catholic fundamentalists but also secularized national conservatives who readily subscribed to a culturalized Christianity (Christianism, see Brubaker 2016) as a handy position from which to contest 'liberal elites'.

The morality wars overspilled via activist networks from the West, but the context of Central Europe offered propitious ground. If a more or less marginal fundamentalist reaction against liberal societal norms had been present since the 1990s, the freshly imported conservative discourse and activist repertoire gave it new energy after 2013. It allowed conservative Catholics, the national-conservative Right and anti-globalists to assemble under one roof. The concept of 'gender' was hijacked by the expression 'gender ideology' everywhere in our region. Morality wars concerned with the abortion ban

raged in Poland and Slovakia, and there were attempts to limit practical access to abortion in other CE countries. Reviving the debate about abortion, which was legalized in the 1950s, and hence linking cultural liberalism explicitly to communism, polarized politics in Poland and split the public in Slovakia.

### **Identity: Monocultural vs Multicultural**

Even though the European Union has no competence to impose migration and asylum policies on its member states, the German-led solution of the 2015 refugee crisis brought about a strong anti-Islam, anti-migration and also anti-EU reaction throughout Central Europe. This proved to be one of the watersheds of the last decade: Thereafter, migration and asylum issues have been framed in strongly identitarian terms which has produced unprecedented polarization between national conservative Eurosceptics and liberal, globalist pro-Europeans, even in countries which had not experienced it before, such as the Czech Republic.

The Visegrád countries were firm in their rejection of a potential EU assignation of even a single (Muslim) refugee to their countries – only the Polish government under Civic Platform vacillated a bit. Together with the rejection of European migration and asylum policy, the Visegrád Four rejected with vehemence the EU’s meddling in the sovereign matters of Central Europe. In the process, the whole Western multicultural societal model, with its openness to globalization and cultural and racial mixing, was put into question on the grounds that CE nations needed to defend the ethnically homogenous and ‘traditionally’ Christian character of their societies, however secularized and culturalized their Christianity may be. As always, it was Orbán who found the pithiest expression of the gap which had opened within the European Union: ‘There will be two civilisations in the EU. A mixed Muslim-Christian one in the west and a traditional European-Christian in central Europe.’<sup>1</sup> Suspicions

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1 McLaughlin, D., ‘Hungary’s Orbán eyes EU take over by anti-immigration parties’, *The Irish Times*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/hungary-s-orban-eyes-eu-takeover-by-anti-immigration-parties-1.3753892> (accessed June 30, 2021).

of the denationalizing effects of migration were such that even the social-democratic prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Slovakia began to use the nationalist and civilizationist rhetoric while speaking about migration.

As with the West European memory framework and anti-discrimination and gender equality norms, the acceptance of the universalistic and diversity-friendly version of European identity looked relatively unproblematic in the years before accession, and even for some time after it. As late as 2008, the values that were later decried – intercultural skills and multicultural understanding – could be promoted in public campaigns such as the ‘European Year of Intercultural Dialogue’ to general indifference. For a significant part of the CE public, especially in globalized capital cities, liberal norms of gender equality, individual autonomy and diversity continued to matter even after 2015. Yet campaigns similar to that of 2008 have now become utterly unthinkable. The European Union’s universalistic vision was reinterpreted as an attempt to engineer artificial ‘multicultural’ societies, stripped of their organically grown ethnic, moral and civilizational (i.e., Christian) character.

The identitarian opposition to the universalistic and multicultural aspects of the European project used a Christianist language that developed in reaction to the wars in the Middle East and jihadi terror in Europe and also drew on conflicts stemming from work migration both to and within Europe. Since Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and atheist EU residents and citizens mingled, the diverse EU regimes of secularity came into contact and tension. In the process, several important court cases (such as *Lautsi vs Italy*) tended to redefine religious symbols such as the crucifix in Italian and Bavarian state buildings as legitimately protected markers of historical cultural identity and thus no threat to state-neutrality towards religions (see Brubaker 2015, Roy 2017). If this ‘culturalization’ of Christianity was an unintended upshot of the EU integration process, both the terror and refugee crisis politicized the issue of cultural heritage and identity to an unprecedented degree.

In Central Europe, the Christianist language challenged the universalistic language to a point where it became almost impossible for

liberal minded individuals to maintain a political vision of openness to globalization and migration without appearing post-national elitists. Because globalization grievances were increasingly expressed in terms of civilizational identity and national sovereignty rather than in terms of socioeconomic justice, they strengthened the position of national conservatism in Central Europe.

## **Deeper Roots of the CE Culture Wars**

Prima facie it might seem that by depicting the anti-liberal turn in Central Europe of the last decade as a revolt against Europeanization we have slipped back into the post-communist or regional-historical framework we wanted to avoid. This is not the intention. Our culture wars and *global-historical framework* aims at a different contextualization of the subject matter. In its most widespread liberal or liberal-conservative version, the post-communist framework sees the political turmoil in CE countries over the last decade mainly as the manifestation of their failure to complete the journey from communist authoritarianism to liberal democracy, from the backwardness of the East to the modernity of the West, from the past to the future. This perspective reverses the national conservative and leftist criticism of that journey as cultural or economic colonization but retains its geopolitical framing as a West vs East game. We, on the contrary, view the CE anti-liberal turn as interconnected with and parallel to similar happenings in Western Europe, North and Latin America and Asia. To our mind, the CE anti-liberal turn is a regional variant of the pan-European and worldwide crisis of (neo)liberal globalization of the last forty years. Due to the particular location of CE countries on the Cold War map and their late accession to the European Union, their variant of anti-globalism was most idiosyncratic on the memory front, whereas the discourses deployed on the morality and identity fronts were paralleled and often even inspired by similar discourses in Western Europe or the United States.

Because of the absolutization of the image of a 'catch-up' modernization in which 'the West' and its modernity are fixed and unchanging, the post-communist framework is not able to

capture those interconnections, parallels and influences. It is blind to the fact that socioeconomic and cultural changes which Western societies have undergone in the last forty years have been no less far reaching and dramatic than the changes that took place in East-Central Europe in the last thirty years – liberals and liberal conservatives marginalize the importance of changes in the West because of their exclusive focus on the change in political regime. In fact, the image of a backlash can also be applied to the rise of national conservatism in the West. Our framework supposes that there are no essential or qualitative differences separating the reality of the CE post-communist countries from that of other European countries. Differences between them are a matter of degree, not of kind. In other words, Central and Western European members of the European Union can be located on one continuum, not in two separate spaces in which the mental Iron Curtain – inherent to the post-communist framework – relegates them.

Once we let the Iron Curtain in our heads fall down, we can recognize regional and historical sources of the national conservative revolution's robust character in our region without overestimating it and essentializing its source. To understand the greater intensity and the often brutal forms of an open Islamophobia and resurging antisemitism or the greater importance and bigger successes of the anti-abortion or anti-gender campaigns in some (even if not all) CE countries than in West European countries, we have to transcend the scope of this book and take into account their specific historical trajectories in the twentieth century. By redescribing the anti-liberal turn in Central Europe as an unravelling of the liberal-conservative consensus after the accession of CE countries, we have captured some of its proximate processes and causes. This short-term perspective has thrown light on 'how' the turn happened. If we want to find answers to the question of 'why' it was more quick, powerful and consequential than in Western European countries, we must move from the level of proximate causes to that of structural (or underlying) causes. In order to capture them, we must take into account not only the period of transition from communist rule but the communist period as well. At the same time, we must draw attention

from short term shifts in politics and ideology to long term shifts in societal culture. Hence, in the remainder of this afterword, we will abandon the empirical ground of the book's chapters and suggest some hypotheses which would have to be substantiated by future research.

### **Consequences of the Missed (Post-)1960s**

Our main hypothesis is that the difference in easiness, velocity and depth of penetration of (various aspects of) national conservatism in Central and Western Europe has to do with the different manner in which the cultural and sexual revolution of the 1960s and its consequences in the following decades unfolded and were experienced in the communist countries of Central Europe. This aspect matters to the extent that cultural liberalism, which went mainstream in the Western political culture of the 1980s and 1990s and which was vigorously attacked by the national conservatives in the 2010s, can be traced back to the cultural and sexual revolution of the 1960s and the 'long march' of the generation that was formed in that decade through the mainstream – cultural, political, administrative – institutions of West European societies. Against this backdrop, the national-conservative revolution of the 2010s can be seen as a reaction to the cultural revolution of the 1960s, that is, as a delayed counter-revolution.

The cultural revolution of the 1960s had a more muted, underdeveloped and shallower run in communist Central European countries. It happened during the political opening and 'thaw' and was cut short by authoritarian means at the end of the 1960s. It survived only on the margins of the official culture or in its dissident underground where its protagonists were pushed together and had to rally against the communist repression with its opponents. This historical difference then accounts for the relatively shallow foundations of cultural liberalism in post-communist countries that made them less immune to the inroads of nationalism and conservatism. Later, most of the Western achievements of cultural liberalism did not come to Central Europe 'from below', that is, through feminist, gay or anti-racist emancipatory struggles and their mainstreaming in the 1980s

and 1990s, but rather ‘from above’. They were part of the conditionality of the accession process whose fulfilment was the homework of high governmental officials. The bureaucratic and legalist nature of many liberal and progressive reforms and their lack of deeper roots in the civil society and mainstream culture made them easy targets for self-styled defenders of CE national traditions against supposedly alien norms coming from ‘Brussels’. Unlike their allies in the West, national conservatives did not encounter the defensive wall of mainstream cultural liberalism that would have been established in civil society, governmental institutions or political parties in the 1980s and 1990s.

The most glaring manifestation of this difference was the opposite reactions of the social democratic parties in the West and those in the East to the 2015 refugee crisis. Most Western left-wing parties usually played the role of a bulwark against the anti-refugee and Islamophobic wave upon which the Western far right surfed and which tempted the mainstream Right (with the notable exception of Merkel’s CDU). The social democratic prime ministers of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, on the contrary, opted immediately and without hesitation for an anti-refugee position. Those CE parties differed significantly from their allies in the socialist club of the European Parliament – the Austrian SPÖ included. The medium-term explanation of that difference seems to be obvious: While most of the Western socialists had replaced their erstwhile socialism with cultural liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s (when they were flooded by the ‘68ers), among the Eastern socialists, who established their parties only in the post-communist period, the cultural liberal wing was in the minority, if it existed at all.

### **The Perverse Effects of Communist Atheism**

Not only did the post-communist left-wing parties miss an important (post-)1960s part of West European history, the Christian democratic and centre-right parties in the post-communist countries had the same problem. The long-term consequences of the 1960s cultural revolution, which converged with the worldwide crisis of revolutionary statist projects, entailed the superseding of socialism (of

the Old Left) by cultural liberalism (as a by-product of the rise and fall of the New Left) in the European social democracy of the 1980s and 1990s. The long-term consequences for European Christian democracy were no less serious and consequential. The (post-)1960s culture undermined the post-WWII synthesis between democratic and Christian conservative values (McLeod 2007). The success of this synthesis was ensured by the survival of the patriarchal and authoritarian values of nineteenth-century Christianity within the nominally secularized public culture of the twentieth century. The mainstreaming of cultural and sexual emancipation in the last quarter of the twentieth century led eventually to a massive rejection of those patriarchal and authoritarian values in Western Europe (Roy 2019: 76–80).

As a result, those European Christians who took those values as an organic part of their faith lost their footholds in the mainstream culture and began to feel like outsiders. This sense of alienation did not emerge in Protestant countries due to the strong liberal wings of the Protestant churches, which followed and sometimes even led the post-1960s cultural shift. This shift, consequently, had a more dramatic effect on Catholic countries, in part due to the explicit rejection of sexual emancipation by the leaders of the Church since Paul VI's *Humanae vitae* in 1968. The Catholics who followed the Pope and his successors faithfully were gradually pushed to the cultural margins of their countries and Western Europe. Simultaneously, however, a liberal wing of Catholicism developed within national episcopates which entered into a long-term war of position with the conservatives.

In order to survive the epochal shift in the post-1960s culture, the European Christian democrats had to soften their cultural conservatism and loosen their confessional ties to the Catholic Church. In this process they opened themselves up to non-believers and even to non-Christians, transforming their parties into catch-all organizations. (Roy 2019: 99). Schematically speaking, they moved from the Christian conservatism of the post-war years towards the liberal conservatism of the 1990s. Those conservative Christians who did not accept this adjustment found themselves outside mainstream

politics. The cultural shift transformed them from members of the cultural majority to those of a religious minority that felt beleaguered by the growing paganization of the majority. (Roy 2019: 84)

As chapters 4, 6 and 7 – on Poland, Slovakia and Croatia – of this book made clear, such a loosening of the ties between the mainstream national culture and conservative Catholic believers did not happen in the less secularized European communist countries in which Catholic traditions were still strong. Forty years of official universalist and atheist rule and political closeness to revolutionary elites in the early 1990s allowed the Catholic churches in those countries to develop into the only bearer of truly national traditions and identity. Not only did the fulfilment of such a national role give those churches an enduring relevance and high standing in the eyes of the non- or anti-communist segments of society, but it also diverted them from universalist concerns with humanity (which prevailed among West European episcopates after WWII) to those concerned with the nations in which they operated. Intellectual backwardness was another consequence of the communist dictatorship. Censorship and state repression did not allow for the open debates to be led within the Church and among believers that had developed elsewhere in the wake of Vatican II. Communism shielded the CE Catholics from the challenges faced by Catholics in the West with regard to the cultural revolution of the 1960s and its consequences. The result was the absence or underdevelopment of a differentiation between conservative and liberal wings. Even where a liberal wing emerged (as in Poland and Croatia), it had to accept the conservative hegemony.

In summary, if atheism, which was officially imposed in the name of an internationalist ideology, actually helped to maintain or even strengthen the interdependence of national and religious identities, censorship and blockages of free intellectual exchanges further ensured that the conservative profile of the post-WWII Church, and its intellectuals survived with merely cosmetic changes until the 1980s when communism collapsed. This situation was most vividly embodied by John Paul II: He was determined to face the challenges of the end of the twentieth century with the help of the conservative version of Christian personalism, which he acquired as a young

cleric in the 1930s and 1940s. It is no wonder, then, that he rejected the post-1960s dominant culture as the ‘culture of death’ (*Evangelium Vitae* 1995) and called for a re-Christianization of Europe. Both phrases conspicuously figure in the recent culture wars in Central Europe as shown in the chapters on Croatia, Slovakia and Poland. When he intervened in the Polish debate in favour of EU accession, he did so in the context of previous debates within the Polish Catholic Church about the positive role that the more fervent and traditional Polish Catholicism could play in that project (Urban-Hillman 2008: 160). That understanding seemed to start materializing immediately after the accession when Poland became a vocal leader of those countries that promoted the inclusion of reference to religious roots and Christian heritage in the European Constitution (Michel 2008: 316–317, Massignon, Riva 2010: 266–268).

The conservative profile of and public reverence for the Polish pope – an icon of the anti-communist struggle – nicely epitomized the profile and high public standing of CE Catholicism in the 1990s when it drew heavily on the dividends of its victimization by the communist regimes. By pursuing the goal of religious marginalization, the communist regimes confirmed, if not strengthened, the Church’s importance while, at the same time, blocking and retarding its internal development. Hence, unlike in the West, CE national churches did not develop a robust liberal wing and did not even attempt to marginalize hardcore Christian conservatives. In the West, the rejectionists of the Vatican Council’s *aggiornamento* (1962–65) often flirted with far-right nationalists who were similarly stigmatized by mainstream culture (e.g., the followers of Marcel Lefebvre in France, some of whom joined the National Front in the 1980s; Roy 2016: 84–85)

In Poland, Slovakia or Croatia, the alliance of Christian conservatives with the defenders of nations was not a matter of choice: Communist regimes pushed them together whereby they helped to maintain – on a more general level – the interpenetration of Catholicism and national culture. The alliance of Christian conservatives with ethnic nationalists lasted into the 2010s when they together declared open war on Europeanization, which they likened to

the Sovietization of the twentieth century. The closeness of conservative believers who refused to adjust to both communist atheism and cultural liberalism, to ethnic nationalists who refused to adjust to both communist internationalism and liberal globalism/Europeanism, explains the strong overlap of morality and identity fronts of the culture war in Poland, Slovakia and Croatia which contrasts with their differentiation in Western Europe.

In the Czech Republic and Hungary, where the mainstream culture and national identity were de-Christianized during the communist rule in its last decades (if not before in the Czech case), nationalism's alliance with moral conservatism lacked the basis of the Christian faith. It was none other than Viktor Orbán who explained that that was not a problem: One can stand up for Christian values and defend the public role of the Church even if one does not believe in God. As in the case of Islamophobia, the enemy's identity helped to define one's own. If the fight against the Muslims made some atheists 'cultural Christians' (e.g., Oriana Fallaci, Anders Breivik), the fight against globalists who imposed liberal values upon their societies made some secular nationalists the defenders of Christian conservative values. Their endorsement of conservatism was helped by the idea of an affinity between liberalism and communism: Both supposedly try to *artificially* supersede norms which have *naturally* developed within *concrete* – historically and geographically situated – communities with *abstract* norms they present as valid for every rational human being, no matter where he/she happens to live. For those who, in the name of the particular values of their national community, oppose the abstract universalism of liberals and communists, conservatism is the other side of nationalism and vice versa.

While such a mutual implication of nationalism and conservatism seems obvious in the post-communist context, it may not be so obvious in Western Europe. Thus, Olivier Roy claims that populist defenders of national identity against the European Union and Islam do not tend to combine this programme with references to conservative values (Roy 2019: 107). People like Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders are, indeed, secularist figures. It is an open question

whether this generalization by Olivier Roy, which supposes that conservatism must be based on religious faith, really holds true for the whole of Western Europe. What our research has shown is that it does not hold for Central Europe – nationalism has combined easily with conservatism even in Hungary and the Czech Republic, where there is no religious basis for such a marriage. A strong conservative self-identification can be found, for instance, among Czech Eurosceptic neoliberals who fight simultaneously against economic overregulation and political correctness – the two evils that come from ‘Brussels’. Their conservatism usually has no religious basis and is not very radical. They would not go so far as criminalizing abortion or stigmatizing gay people, but they are, nevertheless, hostile to many achievements of anti-discrimination policies ensuring the equal status of individuals regardless of their ethnic origin, race, gender or sexual orientation. Their secularism does not prevent them from sympathizing with religious conservatives, and they even admire Trump’s America and Netanyahu’s Israel as countries in which nationalism and conservatism were able to prevail against globalism and political correctness. The mostly cordial relationship between Victor Orbán and Benjamin Netanyahu – who defended his crypto-antisemitic campaign against George Soros (Kalmar 2020) – and between Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Trump, who chose Poland as the only post-communist country to visit, must be seen in terms of a Central European overlap between a nationalist revolt against liberal globalism and a conservative revolt against cultural liberalism – the latter revolt can, but need not be backed up by, religious beliefs.

The difference between nationalism’s link to religious conservatism in Western and Central Europe can be summed up as follows: While hardcore conservative Christians belong to a different category than far-right nationalists and Islamophobes in the West, they often overlap and/or ally very easily in the East, which puts them closer to their counterparts in the United States and Israel than in Western Europe. The difference is explainable by the closeness of moral conservatism and nationalistic particularism that has been brought about and maintained by the common struggle against

enlightened universalists – communists and liberals – whose globalist projects have threatened both ethno-national identity and traditional morality.

The difference corresponds in fact to the variance between the Catholic Church in Western and Central European countries of the EU. While a softer and universalistic kind of conservatism (used to a long-term cohabitation with liberalism) characterizes national episcopates in the West, a harder and particularistic conservatism (not balanced by a robust liberal wing) characterizes national episcopates of the East. As has been said, this difference lies in the distinct manners in which the 1960s was inherited in the two parts of Europe and how their long-term consequences have played out there. This difference provides the key to the understanding of a different positioning of ecclesiastics in the two parts of Europe towards the anti-liberal turn of the last decade.

### **National Conservatism, Religion and Centre-Right Politics**

In line with our stress on the ideological substance of the anti-liberal turn (as opposed to its sometimes populist form), we have conceived of it as the rise of national conservatism. ‘National’ stands for the rejection of liberal globalism, which puts humanity (or Europe) above collective identity and its unique (hi)story. ‘Conservative’ stands for the rejection of liberal individualism, which puts the free choice of every human under conditions of status equality (i.e., regardless of his/her race, nationality, gender or sexual identity) above his/her obligations towards God (or natural law) and others within the (patriarchal) family and (national) community. The stake of the national pole is to control the territorial or cultural boundaries of a nation. The stake of the conservative pole is to control and limit the desire and free choice of an individual.

The global rise of national conservatism in the last two decades has been inherently linked to the anti-Islam agenda and the rejection of transnational elitism on its national pole and to the anti-gender, anti-abortion and anti-gay agenda together with anti-political correctness on the conservative pole. The reference to religion has been crucial to both poles. Parties, movements and

leaders in the national conservative family have differed, however, as far as the nature of their reference to religion has been concerned: Have they been able to combine believing/faith with belonging/identity (e.g., Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the Tea Party Movement in the US, Narendra Modi in India, Naftali Bennett in Israel and the League of Polish Families and PiS in Poland)? Or have they stressed the latter to the detriment of the former (e.g., Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel; Zeman, Orbán or Strache in Central Europe; most West European anti-immigration parties)? Accordingly, actors have differed in the extent and degree of their conservatism – minimizing it, if not deleting it (e.g., National Rally under Marine Le Pen); maximizing it (e.g., Poland’s PiS and America’s Tea Party movement) or steering a middle course (e.g., Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Viktor Orbán in Hungary).

In the European countries where the ties between national culture and religion were broken, appeals to religious identity have exclusively played the role of nationalistic mobilization against the principal enemies – Muslims and transnational elites. This is why most ecclesiastics (both Protestant and Catholics) in West European countries have kept their distance from such appeals, which they identified as attempts to hijack their religion for political purposes (having had nothing to do with Christian faith and values). The French, Italian, Austrian and Dutch Church representatives distanced themselves from the National Front (now National Rally) in France, Lega Nord in Italy, FPÖ in Austria and Geert Wilders’ party in the Netherlands respectively (Marzouki et al., 2016). Even if some of the Western ecclesiastics have repeatedly expressed worries about the numbers of Muslims in Europe, most of them rejected the instrumentalization of their religion by Islamophobic parties. Not so for the church representatives of Central Europe, some of whom allied with national-conservative leaders based on shared Islamophobia while here was a lack of shared faith (e.g., Archbishop Duka’s support for the Czech atheistic, but Islamophobic president Zeman). This difference between Central and Western European churches came out in the open during the European refugee crisis in 2015–16. Whereas CE churches split into xenophobic and humanitarian wings – the former being

usually more vocal than the latter – the humanitarian approach clearly prevailed among West European churches.

A similar difference in the attitude towards the rise of national-conservative xenophobia in the mid-2010s can be established among centre-right and Christian democratic parties on the two sides of the former Iron Curtain. Whereas some Western European right-wing parties came under attack for being too liberal to be right-wing (e.g., Merkel's CDU), some of their post-communist counterparts had made a national conservative turn already before the refugee crisis (PiS in Poland, Fidesz in Hungary, HDZ in Croatia). Elsewhere, a new national-conservative wing quickly emerged (e.g., ODS in the Czech Republic). Sometimes, the offensive of the new national conservative wing was so powerful that it marginalized the liberal conservatives (e.g., KDH in Slovakia, see chapter 6).

As we have suggested, the different degree of readiness to embrace national-conservative xenophobia and reactionary moralism in the post-communist East as opposed to that of Europe's West can be explained against the historical backdrop of forty years of communist rule and the post-communist transition. The perverse effect of communist atheism, which strengthened the Church morally and symbolically as well as the nationalist and conservative wing within it, became synergetic with the effects of the hegemonic anti-totalitarian paradigm of the early 1990s, helping the emerging Right in post-communist countries avoid a painful reckoning with its past sins such as antisemitism and exclusionary ethnicism. *Both* the long experience of imposed atheism and internationalism *and* the framework of anti-totalitarianism – whose focus on the big crimes of the Nazi and Soviet empires let pale the lesser crimes of the homegrown political Right – contributed to the reconstitution of Christian democrat or centre-right parties in the 1990s. They were explicitly much more conservative and nationalistic than their Western counterparts, although it was not *prima facie* visible because of their strategic endorsement of the post-1989 liberal-conservative consensus.

The CE national conservatism that arose from the ruins of that consensus in the last fifteen years or so has had two versions

according to whether the society was already significantly secularized (Hungary, Czech Republic) or whether, conversely, its general culture and national identity has kept close ties with the dominant religion (Poland, Slovakia, Croatia). The appeals of national conservatives to Christian culture in Hungary and in the Czech Republic had the purely symbolic and formal value of erecting a barrier between Us and Them, that is, Muslims and liberal elites who supposedly favoured them. The clerics of those countries who have publicly accepted that Christian/Catholic symbols may be reduced to a badge of collective identity have inadvertently confirmed the de-Christianization of their societies. In those countries, the morality wars have been to a large extent irrelevant or marginal, and most energy has been spent at the memory and identity fronts.

In the less secularized countries, where the mainstream culture and dominant religion are still woven together, the alliance of national conservatives with the Church has had a deeper basis in the interpenetration of national and confessional belonging. There, the culture war that waged on the morality front has been as important as those on the other two fronts. If it goes on, let us risk a prediction, those countries will likely replay the evolution that France, Italy or Spain underwent during the last sixty years, albeit at a quicker pace. The attempts by national conservatives to monopolize the link between national culture and Catholic faith will speed up the process of their decoupling. As the communist project of expelling religion from national culture ensured the survival of their symbiosis, the national conservative project of confirming their interpenetration will lead to their separation. The strong association of the national conservatives with the Church will lead the members of the opposite camp to extricate their sense of national identity from their faith and their faith from their loyalty to the Catholic Church, or, at least, to those of its representatives who embody the conservative programme. An overdue critical discussion on John Paul II's legacy, for instance, which began in Poland at the end of the last decade, has been only one of the many signs that point to that direction.

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# Resumé

The book reflects the transformation of politics in Central Europe during the last decade. As editors of the book, Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová and Ondřej Slačálek explain in chapter 1 that the text tries to go beyond two of the most common explanations: the *post-communist condition*, or weakly rooted liberalism, in the context of an unfinished transition, or, conversely, *populist strategies* employed by some leaders. Instead, the book focuses on culture wars that have become important (not only) in the region, and their replacement, to a considerable extent, of the right versus left socioeconomic cleavage. The book identifies three arenas of culture war – memory, morals, and identity – and presents an analysis of how various struggles around topics like gender, identity, sovereignty, and globalization transformed national politics inside a broadly conceived Central Europe of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria and Croatia.

In chapter 2, Michal Kopeček outlines a genealogy of contemporary debates on national identity from within the dissident and (post)dissident debates of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia. The chapter reconstructs the main disputes about various concepts of nation, civil society and totalitarianism framework. In the end, it shows that the national-conservative turn is among the possible actualizations of discourses on nation and democracy and was already present in the previous era.

In chapter 3, Csaba Szaló interprets Viktor Orbán's national-conservative discourse as presented in speeches during annual Bálványos summer meetings. It shows how Orbán powerfully enters into all three culture war arenas: in the politics of morality, through the reconstruction of family, presented as a solution guarding against a decadent West while also inciting demographic panic; in the politics of identity, by accenting a strong state and nation; and in the politics of memory, through emphasis on a Christianist reinterpretation of the national roots, including references to Horthy's interwar conservative nationalist regime.

In chapter 4, Ondřej Slačálek analyses the dynamics of value conflicts in Poland. The chapter traces the roots of Polish reservations

towards Western liberalism on moral issues in the 1980s and 1990s. While this distance transformed the most critical political cleavage in the 2000s and 2010s and temporarily marginalized the Left, a full-blown culture war on all three fronts of memory, identity and morality also had paradoxical effects. The Roman Catholic Church, openly siding with one side on some of these value conflicts, could, as a result, lose its important position within the Polish national identity.

Ondřej Slačálek tries, in chapter 5, to explain the much weaker impact of the culture wars, especially as connected with memory and morality, in the Czech Republic. Some aspects of the culture wars are present (nationalism, anti-feminism), and populist leaders (Zeman, Babiš) often use relatively xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric. However, much more important is the conflict about the nature of democracy and the relationship towards the West. To some extent, they become the subject of culture wars. Unlike Poland and Croatia, the Roman Catholic Church is relatively weak, and its role in the culture wars can marginalize its influence.

In chapter 6, Jana Vargovčíková maps the transformation of Christian politics in Slovakia. Anti-gender campaigns marked the break-up of the liberal-conservative consensus and differentiation of the Christian scene. At the same time, conservative positions on questions of morality and national identity have been adopted by politicians both from the Right and the Left.

Zora Hesová, in chapter 7, shows how culture wars broke out after Croatia's accession to the European Union. The strong role of the Catholic Church produces, as in Poland and Slovakia, significant conflicts around morality. The memory of the Ustashe regime, at the same time, makes memory conflicts extremely relevant, as has been seen, above all, in the conflict around the symbolic sites of Jasenovac and Bleiburg.

In chapter 7, Zora Hesová analyses how some dynamics attributed to 'post-communist' countries are also present in Austria – above all, the intense conflict around politics of identity and migration. While presidential elections in 2016 made the key political conflict a struggle between green and far-right politicians, both

the far right and the Christian democrats transformed their strategy substantively in subsequent years.

In the afterword, Pavel Barša and Zora Hesová identify the main conclusions. They describe both elements of the liberal-conservative consensus after 1989 and how these were abandoned following the integration of these countries into the EU. This provided national conservatives with political opportunities to vocally defend their positions in arenas of memory, morality and, above all, identity as revolts against Western Europe were depicted as ultra-liberal. The authors also discuss three deeper reasons for the power of national-conservative discourses: missed (post)1960s value transformation, the perverse effects of communist anti-religious politics, and the discourse resources and opportunities of the national-conservative Right.



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