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In this article, we briefly outline the process of establishment of the Catholic People's Party, in addition to focusing on the programme of the first Hungarian Christian party. The history of the creation of the party is not only an exciting topic that sheds light on the emergence of Hungarian Christian democracy but also carries theoretical, structural, and practical lessons for the politics of today.

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Introduction

All 19th-century Catholic parties that were significant in the emergence of European Christian democracy either disappeared or were transformed by the end of the Second World War. One of its reasons was that non-confessional parties replaced parties initially designed to defend the Catholic Church. So did the German *Zentrum* party, which was re-founded after the Second World War, but, due to the formation of the non-confessional Christian Democratic Union (CDU), it lost most of its electoral base. The first Hungarian Catholic party, in its original form, only survived until the end of the First World War; and its emergence had been an outcome of a longer process.

In our [last article](#), we tried to briefly present the distant roots of Hungarian Christian democracy. We concluded that the basis of the Christian democratic politics, such as Catholic associational life, unions and the press appeared slightly later in Hungary compared to the European developments, especially those in Germany and France.

However, the flow of events in Hungary significantly accelerated after that Pope Leo XIII's had published his encyclical entitled *Constanti Hungarorum* in 1893. Until the papal call, the Hungarian bishops – due to their specific situation – showed moderate interest in associational life and the organisation of a Catholic press. In addition to the papal letter, the organisation of a Catholic civil society was also urged by the escalation of the Hungarian *kulturkampf*.

Accepting the categorisation of Stathis N. Kalyvas, we concluded that the development of Hungarian Christian democracy, although somewhat delayed, followed a typical path. The Catholic Church in Hungary – like in other places - organised itself against the increasingly powerful liberal state. This meant the formation of associations and the launching of civil society initiatives, which, after a long journey, led to the formation of a Christian party. This party became the People's Party [Néppárt] in Hungary, often referred to as the Catholic People's Party [Katolikus Néppárt]. The party's first programme indeed declared that it intends to act not only to protect the interests of the Catholics but also to serve the whole of Christianity. However, the opinions diverge on how much this 'inclusivity' was successful.

In this article, we briefly outline the process of establishment of the Catholic People's Party, in addition to focusing on the programme of the first Hungarian Christian party. The history of the creation of the party is not only an exciting topic that sheds light on the emergence of Hungarian Christian democracy but also carries theoretical, structural, and practical lessons for the politics of today.

A long journey to found a party

The foundation of the Catholic People's Party was fundamentally influenced by the Hungarian *kulturkampf*, which erupted after the law on mixed marriages in 1868. Consequent liberal governments (Ágoston Trefort, Sándor Wekerle etc.) did not modify this policy, despite the papal protest and the resistance from the lower clergy. In the 1890s, countless liberal Church policy laws were announced: the law on marriage, the religion of children, state registers, the free practice of religions, and the reception of the Israelite religion.¹

For a long time, the Catholic aristocracy tried to voice their protest within the traditional political framework, the House of Magnates. Dániel Szabó points out that already in

1883, the so-called 'upper chamber opposition' began to be formulated in relation to the bill on the expansion of civil marriages.² This informal group consisted of bishops and secular high nobility from the House of Magnates. Among them, in terms of activity and number of speeches, Counts Nándor Zichy and Móric Esterházy stood out. The two high nobles played a significant role in forming the People's Party.

In the long run, upper chamber politics – due to its weak role in the political system – could not achieve significant success. Also, from 1891, the readership of the two most influential Catholic newspapers – the *Hungarian State* [*Magyar Állam*] and the *Hungarian People's Newspaper* [*Magyar Néplap*] – began to demand the establishment of a Catholic party, from which politically active high nobility and clergy refrained.³ In the process of the party's formation – in addition to the 'upper chamber opposition' – two initiatives must be highlighted. One is the so-called Catholic Circle [Katolikus Kör], and another is the introduction of Catholic assemblies. These two are not only closely related, but the two Counts mentioned above did important organisational work in both.

The first Catholic circle was founded by Imre Lévay on 27 May 1888 in Budapest; its president was Móric Esterházy. The circle – at first, by excluding politics – was meant to strengthen the unity of Catholics, and it also aimed to promote Catholics' material and cultural interests. After the establishment of the Budapest Circle, the Central Catholic Circle [Központi Katolikus Kör] was founded in the same year, which helped to create and foster the collaboration of the rural circles.⁴ These circles proved to be a sound basis for boosting Catholic public life, so it is not surprising that after the foundation of the People's Party, some of the Catholic circles transformed into People's Party circles.⁵

The organisation of the Catholic assemblies is also connected to these Catholic circles. From the study of Tibor Klestenitz, we know that the proposal for the organisation of the first Catholic assembly was made at the reading evening of the Budapest Catholic Circle on 3 May 1890 by parish priest Ferenc Komlóssy, a member of the parliament. Komlóssy suggested that the Circle, in order to discuss the recent questions of public life, should be entrusted to organise a national assembly.⁶ Then Prince-Primate János Simor asked for the event to be postponed.⁷ The first Catholic assembly had to wait to be held in Sopron until 1893. Right until 1894, assemblies were held only in rural towns, organised by the local circles under the chairmanship of Móric Esterházy.

From the point of view of our topic, the assembly of 1893 in Komárom should be highlighted. It was here that, for the first time, Ottokár Prohászka – at the time teacher of the seminary in Esztergom, later bishop of Székesfehérvár – formulated the demand of founding a Christian people's party:

“let us step into the field of sane politics that promotes our work, economy, industry, livelihood, and decent family life through expedient, practical associations. From these peasant associations, industrial and worker's cooperations based on Christian principles and Catholic circles will then be a large Christian people's party, which will not give speeches for months on such things that are so far-fetched that you dispute them after lunch while smoking pipe, and for which the 3000 Forint representative salary is a lot, but which understands the pressing needs of the people.”⁸

According to historian Tibor Klestenitz's argument, Prohászka's speech could only be given with Esterházy's consent, so we can conclude that, by this time, a part of the Catholic high nobility felt the foundation of an independent Catholic party necessary. This is supported by the fact that a year later, in July 1894, at the assembly of Bratislava, Nándor Zichy himself also formulated the proposal to establish an independent Catholic party.⁹ A few months later, at the assembly of Székesfehérvár in November, the situation around the issue of party formation was already tense. Following a preliminary call from the Catholic press, the participants of the assembly started loudly chanting *"Long live the People's Party"* upon the appearance of Nándor Zichy. According to Szabó, that's when Zichy uttered the words, that are considered to mark the party's announcement, and are constantly repeated as a slogan throughout the party's history: *"Well, yes, long live the people's party, I am also the people!"*¹⁰

However, the formal foundation occurred two months later, on 28 January 1885. The founding meeting was held in the Esterházy Palace; in addition to the two Counts and the Catholic high nobility, a part of the middle class was also represented. At the meeting, they decided on the name of the People's Party (without the label Catholic) and accepted the party's programme; Nándor Zichy became the party president.¹¹

The first Christian party programme?

The People's Party published a 14-point programme. In its introduction, it stated that not only the Catholic Church but the interests of Christianity are wished to be represented:

“The party has set itself the aim of protecting the Christian character of our society and healing the grievances inflicted upon the Catholic Church and Christianity in general; it embraces the economic and political interests of the nation and the people. On this universal basis, it accepts all Christian believers in order to protect mutual and mutually compatible interests.”¹²

It is another issue that the party membership was almost exclusively Catholic. Also, it was noted in the programme's introduction that in the divisive constitutional question of politics since 1867, the party was formed by accepting the 'compromise' between Hungary and Austria.

The first four points of the programme spoke out against the liberal church laws of the government. It protested against compulsory civil marriage, state register, and all other laws that are in contrast to the spirituality of Christianity. It also demanded Catholic autonomy and freedom of public education.

The additional programme points appear at other parties as well, and at the same time, it clearly carries the social teaching of the Church articulated by Leo XIII. For instance, in accordance with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the programme's 11th point states:

“11. We demand the regulation of the relationship between the employer and the worker, and especially, the protection of the family, moral and health interests of the worker, as well as the greater expansion of worker insurance, the tightening of the law on the Sunday holiday.”¹³

Among the programme points, we can find demands that prioritise the interests of small farmers and artisans, the demand for a more just and simpler tax system, and the improvement of the public administration. They also demanded the rectification of election frauds. Regarding another significant question of the era, the issue of nationalities, the programme writes diplomatically; according to it, the People's Party wished to treat the nationalities with complete courtesy, but it could only interpret

nationalities' demands in compatibility with the unity and the national character of the Hungarian state.

All this is in accordance with Pope Leo XIII's teaching who considers the following as the foundation of social welfare: the correct moral values, the proper order of family life, protection of religion and the rule of law, moderate imposition and fair distribution of public burdens, the flourishing of industry and trade, the development of agriculture, and in general all other institutions whose functioning improves in parallel with an increase in well-being and happiness of the citizens.¹⁴

Until its dissolution in 1918, the People's Party had 23 years to implement the points formulated in the first programme. If we wish to evaluate it in the context of Church policies, the party was unsuccessful since it did not manage to achieve any significant changes against the liberal laws. At the same time, during its existence, it was part of the government coalition on two occasions. Thus, the long journey that had begun in 1883 eventually brought the first Catholic party in Hungary to a position in the government.

Translated by Ádám Darabos

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- XIII. Leó pápa: *Rerum novarum*, 26 (1891), <https://regi.katolikus.hu/konyvtar.php?h=125>, 14.02.2022.

Endnotes

¹ Conf. SZABÓ Dániel: A Néppárt megalakulása. *Történelmi szemle*, Volume: 20, Issue: 2, 169-208 (1977)

² *ibid.*, 176.

³ *ibid.*, 184.

⁴ Katolikus Kör In. Katolikus Lexikon, <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/K/Katolikus%20K%C3%B6r.html>, 2022.02.14.

⁵ SZABÓ Dániel: A Néppárt megalakulása. *Történelmi szemle*, Volume: 20, Issue: 2, 197 (1977)

⁶ KLESTENITZ Tibor: Szalongyűlések vagy őszi hadgyakorlatok? A katolikus nagygyűlések meghonosítása Magyarországon. In: (Szerk.) Balogh Margit – Varga Szabolcs –Vértesi Lázár: Katolikus Zsinatok és nagygyűlések Magyarországon a 16-20. században. Budapest – Pécs, 2014.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ quotes: KLESTENITZ Tibor: Prohászka Ottokár a komáromi és a pozsonyi katolikus nagygyűlésen. In. (Szerk.) Mózes György, Prohászka tanulmányok, 2009-2012. Székesfehérvár: Székesfehérvári Püspöki és Székeskáptalani Levéltár, 2012, 87., http://www.ppek.hu/konyvek/Mozessy_Gergely_Prohaszka_tanulmanyok_2009_2012_1.pdf, 2022.02.4.

⁹ *ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Own translation, Hungarian Version: „No, hát igen, éljen a néppárt, én is a nép vagyok!”

¹¹ *ibid.*, 197-198.

¹² A Katolikus Néppárt programja. In. (Szerk.) Mérei Gyula – Pölöskei Ferenc: Magyarországi pártprogramok, 1867-1919, Budapest: ELTE, 2003, 164. Own translation, Hungarian Version: „A párt célul tűzte ki, hogy társadalmunknak keresztény jellegét megóvja, s a katolikus egyházon s valamint általában a kereszténységen ejtett sérelmeket orvosolja; Ezen egyetemes alapon tehát minden keresztény hívőt, a kölcsönös és egymással kiegyeztethető érdekek megvédése végett befogad.”

¹³ *ibid.*, 165. Own translation, Hungarian version: „11. Követeljük a munkaadó és munkás közti viszonyoknak szabályozását és különösen a munkás családi, erkölcsi és egészségi érdekeinek megóvását, továbbá a munkásbiztosítások nagyobb mérvű kiterjesztését, a vasárnapi munkaszünetre vonatkozó törvény szigorítását.”

¹⁴ XIII. Leó pápa: *Rerum novarum*, 26 (1891), <https://regi.katolikus.hu/konyvtar.php?h=125>, 14.02.2022.