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HISTORICAL ROOTS OF HUNGARIAN CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY V

THE (CHRISTIAN) DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S PARTY

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Formerly, we investigated the [early historical roots of Hungarian Christian democracy](#) and the appearance of the first Hungarian Christian party, the [Catholic People's Party](#). We also elaborated on the turbulences of the ["happy times of peace" and the collapse](#) and the status of [Christian democracy \(and Christian nationalism\) in the Horthy regime](#). The fifth article in the series provides an overview of the (Christian) Democratic People's Party from 1945 to 1949. This short period is highly significant since – within limits posed by the communists – the Hungarian Christian democratic movement led by the (Christian) Democratic People's Party became a vivid political force in Hungary.

Keywords: *Christian democracy, Christian socialism, Hungarian politics, Christian politics, (Christian) Democratic People's Party, István Barankovics*

Introduction

The second part of our previous article suggested that even though Christian democracy – partly due to the dominance of Christian nationalism – could not flourish, its seeds were already present in the Horthy regime. The new Christian concepts (e.g., solidarism, subsidiarity, Christian corporatism) were already formulated. Christian mass movements were also present in Hungarian social life, just like the Christian intellectuals and social thinkers who began to organise themselves and work on theoretical and practical political questions. This article focuses on the Hungarian Christian democratic movement from 1944 to 1949. It investigates the last days of the Second World War and the short period that lasted until the communist takeover in Hungary. First, the formation of the Christian Democratic People's Party will be presented, highlighting what constrained the party's success. In the second part, the history of the Democratic People's Party will be reviewed.

As a last note, it should be mentioned that this period of Hungarian Christian democracy is probably the most well-documented. Several detailed articles have been published (for instance, by Jenő Gergely and Éva Petrás), which means that without introducing unique novelties, this paper can only aim to summarise those works with a particular focus on the most vital issues.

Christian Democratic People's Party

As mentioned in our previous article, Reform Catholicism already occurred in the 1930s and was represented by Catholic intellectuals – such as Barankovics, Béla Kovrig and Vid Mihelics – around the literary journal *Vigília* (and *Korunk Szava*). They aimed to fuse their Hungarian origin with Europeanism, and Catholicism with social justice, representing a “third way,” which differed from the systemic critique of the left and right.¹ Furthermore, by the end of the 1930s, Christian democrats (Western Europeans and Hungarians), not independent from the papal pronouncements, began to support parliamentary democracy instead of corporatism in their conflict with Nazi and Communist ideologies.² In short, the

theoretical foundations were relatively stable, which is necessary for a political movement.

Steps were also taken at the organisational level to unite Christian associations. In 1938, three leading Catholic reform organisations (EMSZO, KALOT, MDOH) joined and established the Hungarian Aim Movement. Although some proposals were in line with the Christian democratic spirit (e.g., independent Hungary, which is founded on the Christian worldview, and defence of the family), several policies (e.g., extending numerus clausus with 5% to all jobs) resembled the ideals of the existing system.³

As Gergely explains, in 1943, the Archbishop of Esztergom, Jusztinián Serédi, issued a memorandum calling attention to the idea that if Christians wished to remain a robust political force in Hungary, they needed to break with Christian political actors involved in the previous regime and should proclaim an agenda that is based on a modern social program. Serédi supported this idea, which led to the first meeting between the leading Catholic public figures in August 1943, Győr, hosted by bishop Vilmos Apor. The participants – which also included the leader of the most influential Catholic mass movement (KALOT), Jenő Kerkai, and the two Christian democratic politicians József Pállfy and István Barankovics,⁴ who became the most defining figures of the movement from 1944 to 1949 – intended to create a new, modern, social and democratic Christian party. Due to the opposition from the faculty of bishops, the final solution was the foundation of the Christian Social People's Movement and the decision to make a political program based on Christian principles.⁵

Unfortunately, political opportunities were radically circumscribed, as several Christian democratic politicians were persecuted when Nazi Germany occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944. The new prime minister, Döme Sztójay, formerly ambassador to Berlin, was appointed a few days later by governor Miklós Horthy, in agreement with the Nazis. Christian democrats also participated in the resistance movement against the Nazi occupation, and many suffered persecution for helping their Jewish compatriots.

On October 11, 1944, Béla Kovrig asked for permission from Serédi to found the party, which he received and – although interpretations differ – the Christian Democratic People's Party (Keresztény Demokrata Néppárt, KDNP) was established two days later, on October 13, 1944, in Budapest. József Pállfy was appointed as the first president of the party. In the following days, several prominent Christian politicians and intellectuals were invited to join the party, including István Barankovics, who was also invited to the board of directors since – as Pállfy argued – he is considered a “genuine representative of progressive social Catholicism” and without him, it would be difficult to oppose the preconceptions of the anti-clerical left and to clear the party from suspicion of clericalism.⁶

A few days later, the Arrow Cross Party and its leader, Ferenc Szálasi, gained power, bringing a rule of terror. Also, from the autumn of 1944 to April 1945, the Soviet front was moving through the country; Hungary was under the military occupation of two powers. The KDNP's first program was released on January 21, 1945, Szeged and – in parallel to the Western European Christian democratic parties – the Christian belief in God was defined as a basis of its worldview, which expects the respect of human dignity. The respect for the person was based on natural law thinking, and it included the appreciation of the work, the workers, the protection of property, the sanctity of the family life, the love of the home and the service of the homeland. Social justice and the common good were also vital values in the program.⁷

On February 27, the party leaders decided to strengthen Pállfy in his position and appoint Barankovics as a secretary general. As Gergely concludes, “Barankovics's Christian democracy meant social democracy in domestic policy, social market economy in economic policy, and Finnish-style neutrality in foreign policy.”⁸ In short, it seemed that an ideologically stable Hungarian Christian democratic political party was founded, ready to become a political force. As Petrás highlights, the Christian democrats had a two-fold advantage after the Second World War: (1) as they were sanctioned during the War and had organised protest movements, they were clean from the sins of the previous system; (2) many right-wing parties were disbanded which led voters toward the politically

acceptable right, the Christian democrats.⁹ Nonetheless, inherent conflicts in Hungarian Christian politics and the Soviet occupation further hindered the party's progress.

The Democratic People's Party

The first serious friction in party unity became visible in the spring of 1945. As Petrás summarises, although the party was formed in the autumn of 1944 and received a temporary permit for operation from Béla Miklós Dálnoki (temporary prime minister), they were not present at the foundation of the Hungarian National Independence Front (Magyar Nemzeti Függetlenségi Front) on December 2, 1944, which gathered the democratic Hungarian parties (i.e., those parties which were meant to run on the upcoming elections). For a while, it seemed the party would not be allowed to run in the forthcoming elections. To show independence from the Catholic Church and facilitate recognition, on April 27, the party left the "Christian" term from its name, becoming the Democratic People's Party (Demokratikus Néppárt, DNP). Furthermore, on May 8, President Pállfy was dismissed, and Barankovics – remaining the secretary general – became the party leader. The party split. From the two DNPs, the Barankovics-led party was allowed to run in the 1945 elections.¹⁰ Finally, due to the closeness of the polls, Barankovics's party decided to stay away, and their leading politicians ran under the flag of the smallholders.

The elections were held on November 4, and surprisingly the Independent Smallholders Party achieved an overwhelming victory. They were a catch-all party and received 57,03% of the votes (many Christians voted for the smallholders since they could not vote on the DNP). Nonetheless, the smallholders were forced to make a grand coalition with the Social Democratic Party (17,41%), the Hungarian Communist Party (16,96%), and the National Peasant Party (6,87%). The smallholder Zoltán Tildy became prime minister until the proclamation of the republic on February 1, 1946, when Tildy became the president and Ferenc Nagy – also a smallholder – assumed the leadership of the government.

Nevertheless, the communists gained a strategic position by “occupying” the Ministry of Interior. The new parliament and the government remained weak; the key issues were decided at inter-party meetings (not to mention that Hungary was an occupied country led by the Soviet-led Allied Control Council). Furthermore, in the following years, especially from the beginning of 1947 when Stalin wished to accelerate the communist transition in Hungary, the communists did everything (e.g., enforcing political alliances, using communist informers in every party, organising strikes to immobilise the government, banning civil associations, using people's court to liquidate political opponents, expelling leading politicians for fictitious reasons) to gain political power. The smallholder party's room for political manoeuvring was slowly attenuated.¹¹

Christian democrats with a few MEPs (Sándor Bálint, Sándor Eckhardt) had no real influence on politics. The most vital question was whether the differences in the Christian camp could be reconciled. The critical actors in this regard were Barankovics and Cardinal József Mindszenty, appointed Archbishop of Esztergom in 1945. As Zoltán Balázs and Csaba Molnár summarise, Mindszenty was a confrontative anti-communist from the beginning and a monarchist (legitimist) who aimed to preserve Catholicism's political and cultural role. On the other hand, Barankovics – who wished to maintain the ground of Christian ethics – was against political Catholicism. He proposed a parliamentary and economic democracy, supported a republic, and intended to mitigate social inequalities by limiting private property (land distribution with compensation).¹²

Erdődy also adds that Mindszenty opposed the initial reforms of the new system: the land reform, the nationalisation/socialisation of the large industries, the signature of the peace treaty and the proclamation of the republic. At the same time, Barankovics perceived them as a necessary step towards democratisation. The politician thought that it was possible and – considering the political environment – inevitable to cooperate with the communists on strategic questions, as he also believed the force of democracy might halt their influence.¹³

In short, scholars of the period emphasise a slightly different aspect of the relationship between Mindszenty and Barankovics (which included strategic, ideological, and personal elements). Still, it is clear that the cardinal did not support the DNP and did not treat it as a proper representative of Christianity or Catholicism. The year 1946, in which the DNP could not produce any visible political achievements, did not bring any substantial change between the priest and the politician.

The real test of the DNP's policy was the elections in August 1947 (the first election held on the whole country's territory). At this time, the party had enough time and resources to organise itself and mobilise its votes. The opening speech of the campaign was in Győr, which symbolically – and also explicitly mentioned by Barankovics – referred to the forerunner of the movement: Sándor Giesswein and his evangelical socialism.¹⁴ Regardless of Mindszenty's rejection, most of the ecclesiastics supported the DNP.

Despite the salami tactics and the systematic fraud perpetrated by the communists, the DNP received the second most votes (16,5%) after the communists (22,3%). The smallholders' devastating result (15,3%) indicated that many Christian voters decided to vote for the DNP. The outcome surprised both the communists and Barankovics; from a young political movement, the results – especially considering the fraud – were convincing. In the following one and a half years, by offering a Christian alternative, DNP became the leading critic of the coalition government led by the communists.

The sorrowful end

In a democratic framework, the results would have meant a strong influence on parliamentary politics and, thus, the nation's destiny. Nonetheless, neither the DNP's policies nor Barankovics's famous and theoretically profound debate against the nationalisation of education – which, although often recalled by the researchers – could not change the political climate. The opposition's political persecution continued and even increased after the elections. The leader of the Hungarian Independence Party (who received 13,4% of the votes), Zoltán Pfeffer,

accused of fraud, was forced into exile after his party's mandates were taken away.

Christian democrats were not exceptions. Until the summer of 1948, Barankovics believed in the possibility of a meaningful political coexistence. He also decided to remain in Hungary for the very last moment (several fellows tried to convince him to leave Hungary). The latest drop in the glass was arresting Cardinal Mindszenty on Christmas 1948. In a personal conversation in January 1949, Rákosi clarified to Barankovics that the DNP would be dissolved. A day before the Mindszenty trial, on February 2, 1949, Barankovics fled to Austria and informed the media that the DNP had disbanded. Unlike in the rest of Europe, where Christian democracy became a dominant movement, Hungary remained without this intellectual trend for four decades. Yet, these five years are still the primary source of inspiration for those who wish to represent Christian democratic politics in Hungary.

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- ⁵ GERGELY Jenő: A kereszténydemokrácia Magyarországon, In Múltunk, 2007/3. 140.
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- ⁷ GERGELY Jenő: A kereszténydemokrácia Magyarországon, In Múltunk, 2007/3. 142-143. Petrás highlights that the programmes of the DNP in 1945 and 1947 faithfully reflect Barankovics's views, thus can serve as an examination of the ideology of Hungarian Christian democracy. See: PETRÁS Éva: A kereszténydemokrácia eszmetörténete Magyarországon a kezdetektől 1949-ig In Pascal Fontaine: Út Európa szívébe 1953-2009: A kereszténydemokrata

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