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Antisemitism in Hungary

Overview and historical context

In this short summary I am going to introduce the problem of antisemitism in Hungary from different perspectives. First, the political actors and public discourse related to antisemitism will be shortly presented that will be followed by the introduction of the specific antisemitic incidents. Finally, the attitudinal level of antisemitism will be discussed. Even though a thorough analysis would exceed the limits of this short paper, some links will be revealed between the three discussed ‘terrains’.

Antisemitism, which has different, distinguished manifestations in Central and Eastern Europe from those in Western European countries, is connected to the different historical, political and cultural contexts (Barna and Félix, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to start the analysis with some reference to historical background in order to contextualize the examined phenomenon. The Central and Eastern European region has a long history of coexistence between Jews and the majority society in different periods in history.

After the Middle Ages and its religion-based anti-Judaism, the Enlightenment brought a new type of antisemitism that was not focusing on religion anymore but rather on ‘racial’ categories (Berger, 1986). While the Jews got equal rights and representations in cultural and economic life of almost all the respected countries, the Jewish population also had to face antisemitic incidents, late versions of blood libels and with presence of some antisemitic political formations.

Even though they did not gain significant popularity, the Antisemitic Party was already founded in Hungary in 1875. The real surge of antisemitism, however, partly emerging as a consequence of the First World War. The first actual manifestation of post-war antisemitic legislation was the numerus clausus law in 1920. The law restricted the number of people in different groups who could attend university based on the ratio of the group in the society. Even

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though it was not written explicitly it was unquestionably targeted against the Jewish community and therefore can be understood as the first anti-Jewish law (Kovács M., 2012:44).

This early manifestation of antisemitic legislation also partly explains why the Holocaust could happen in Hungarian soil and why one could witness a willing cooperation by the Hungarian administration as these has early well-grounded intellectual-ideological antecedents since the 1920s. From 1938 new anti-Jewish legislations came into force that eventually concluded in the Shoah.

Almost directly after the Second World War a new dictatorship started to be established in the region that meant new rules to the Jewish population. Even though antisemitism was officially banned (Kovács, 2008), in reality the 'Jewish question' remained a significant element of the politics of the Communist Party in Hungary and with different intensity by countries and times, was part of the other communist regimes in the region too (Kovács, 2017). After the transition, the officially banned, but practically existing antisemitism came to the surface. It appeared again in the public discourse in a quite direct way, far-right and neo-Nazi parties and organizations had been established (Kovács, 2012).

Actors of the antisemitic discourse from the regime change until 2021

In Hungary as well as in the whole region the far-right actors are the most significant antisemites and mostly they are the ones who keep the topic 'alive' in the public discourse. It is partly related to the historical and sociological background discussed above, partly to the current set-up of the political spheres of these countries: neither the far-left side of antisemitism nor the extreme Islamist version of antisemitism exists in the region (Barna and Félix, 2017). Therefore anti-Israeli attitudes also come from the far right, almost exclusively.

The history of the Hungarian far-right can be divided into three big periods after the regime change (Félix, 2019) that also means different levels and types of antisemitism in the public discourse.

The first period was the 1990's when the most important far- right party was the Hungarian Justice and Life Party. Its then leader, István Csurka was famous of his strong antisemitic writings and speeches that were often focusing on the multibillionaire George Soros (e.g.

Monori, 2002). Not unrelated to the party, there was a heavy skinhead subculture during this period characterized by strong physical violence-related activities too. However, the target of these attacks were more the Roma community and the political opponents rather than the Jewish community.

The second big period of the far-right's history started in the beginning of the 2000's and was especially significant from 2006 on. This period can be labelled as the years of a 'national radical' counterpublic (Félix, 2019) centralized by a political party called Jobbik. This counterpublic offered a whole alternative universe for its members working as a patchwork with different, sometimes controversial (both ideological and organizational) elements (Félix, 2019). Nevertheless, antisemitism was part of its ideological background and with the growing support of Jobbik, antisemitism and other forms of exclusionist ideologies became more accepted and normalized in the public discourse (Félix and Vásárhelyi, 2018).

From around 2013 Jobbik started to soften its image to be seen as a less radical party and therefore tried to distance itself from the counterpublic. In April 2021 we are still witnessing the post-Jobbik period of the far-right.

There are some new organizations apart from the old ones who either try to find a new identity for the far-right like the Legio Hungaria movement or try to revitalize the 'old' counterpublic like the Our Homeland party (Félix, 2019) – both founded in 2018. Meanwhile however another phenomenon seems to appear on the Hungarian political palette: the current right-wing coalition of Fidesz and the Christian Democrats shifted more to the right especially since the refugee crisis in 2015 (Malomvölgyi, 2017). The strong anti-immigration politics had been a part of a securitization rhetoric that relates to the projection of other enemies like the LGBT community, 'the gender ideology', the civil society, while this discourse also includes 'traditional family' protection policies (Pető and Grzebalska, 2016). According to this securitized language, threats come from outside and many of them are connected to some visible and invisible 'powers' from which the government has to protect the nation.

One of the major 'background actors' is George Soros, who has allegedly the influence on spreading these enemy ideologies. George Soros has been a main character of the political communication of the current regime in the last few years. Even though the government rejects the accusations that this campaign was antisemitic, however, building a multi-year-long personalized campaign focusing on the background power of a multibillionaire who is of Jewish origin can have at least a side effect in growing (conspiratorial type of) antisemitism

especially if we consider the recent history of this kind of rhetoric discussed above in this chapter.

The other field of public discourse related to antisemitism is connected to the historical narratives around the Second World War, the Shoah and the responsibility of the Hungarian society in them. According to Mónika Kovács (Kovács, 2016) we can differentiate between two 'types' of politics of remembrance that are simultaneously present in the Hungarian public. While some elements of the global 'adopted' remembrance appear mostly in the Holocaust memorial days, speeches and in some exhibitions, there is a local culture of remembrance (or non-remembrance) that mostly rejects the responsibility of the Hungarian society in the Holocaust (Kovács, 2016:44). The relevant acts and events of the last few years related to this local remembrance will be discussed in the next chapter.

#### Antisemitic incidents

Both the relative ratio and the absolute number of antisemitic acts are much lower in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. It is partly related to the different context and toolkits of the antisemitic actors. In addition, the ratio of various types of incidents is also different: according to the data collected by the Hungarian Jewish Federation (Mazsihisz), the number of physical attacks is usually very low (it was zero in Hungary for 2020), incidents under the type of vandalism are also lower than in Western Europe and further decreased in the last year. Meanwhile the majority of the acts are under the categories of conspiracy theories, hate speech and antisemitism in the public discourse (Félix, forthcoming). In these three categories, the number of incidents showed further increase in the last year, which were most likely to be related to the Covid19 in at least two ways. First, due to the restrictions, verbal forms of antisemitism were seemed easier than physical atrocities and second, the frustrations caused by the pandemic easily led to the search for scapegoats. As far as the individuals who commit the antisemitic acts are concerned, it is hard to give any kind of characterology that could describe them as their socio-economic background varied greatly (Félix, forthcoming). At the organization-level, the most frequent actor of antisemitic incidents in the last two years were the Our Homeland party. In the category of antisemitism in the public discourse, people close to the government and pro-government media are also over-represented according to

Mazsihisz's database. These acts mostly relate to the so-called local remembrance (Kovács, 2016) of the Second World War and to the glorification of the previous Horthy regime discussed in the first chapter.

Maybe the best symbol of this local remembrance from the last few years was the Memorial to the Victims of the German Invasion that portrays Hungarians as victims of the Germans, thus relativising their responsibility in the Shoah. Heroization of those historical intellectuals who took part directly or indirectly in the Holocaust are also part of the local remembrance 'practice' that sometimes fall into the category of Holocaust distortion. In the last two years an important field of these acts was the education: it caused great public outcry at the beginning of 2020 when a number of war criminals became part of the national curriculum (Félix, 2021).

Another significant type of antisemitism in the public discourse is when some contemporary 'well-known' antisemitic intellectuals are honoured with awards or positions. These acts correspond to the normalization of antisemitism in the public discourse and therefore can have a negative effect on the attitudes held by society too.

#### Antisemitism at the attitudinal level

The first representative surveys on antisemitism also started after the regime change (Vásárhelyi, 2016: 94). Although it is quite difficult to make direct comparisons due to the methodological differences, it is safe to say that currently Jews are not the most hated group in the Central and Eastern European region (Barna, Félix et. al 2018). Also, if we compare it with the attitudes towards other groups, significant differences can be found. For instance, in comparison with the negative attitudes toward the Roma, antisemitism is less explicit and far less time manifest in direct discrimination (Sam Nariman et. al, 2020). Speaking exclusively of the level of antisemitism, Hungary is 'in the middle' within the four Visegrád countries together with Slovakia: the highest level is measured in Poland, the lowest is in the Czech Republic (Barna, Félix et. al 2018). However, we can certainly find some variation regarding the percentage of those who harbour antisemitic attitudes in the last more than thirty years of the Hungarian democracy. According to a research conducted on a representative sample in 1995, 17 percent of the population was antisemitic, 8 percent was extremely, 9 percent moderately antisemitic and further 32 percent accepted stereotypes about Jews without having

particular antisemitic feelings (Kovács, 2000:3). Being aware the strong latency problem in this regard, the real ratio of antisemites was probably higher: one quarter and one third of the population (Kovács, 2000:10). A decade after, in 2006, 25 percent of the population held antisemitic views (13 percent extremely, 12 percent moderately). The overall percentage further increased to 28 percent in 2011 with the growing percentage of extreme antisemites (to 17 percent) meanwhile the percentage of moderate antisemites slightly decreased (9 percent) (Kovács, 2012:449). It is also worth noting that far more people were willing to answer all the questions than in the previous surveys, which was explained with the more openly antisemitic political discourse caused by Jobbik and the surrounded far right subculture (Kovács, 2012: 450). As far as the content of antisemitism is concerned, this time the higher propensity of those who were willing to discriminate among those who were political antisemites also showed the ‘mobilization potential of antisemitism’ (Kovács, 2012: 451). However, as András Kovács (2012, 458) also pointed out, in the case of the supporters of Jobbik, antisemitism was rather a consequence than the cause of their political choice, which is in line with the results of my own research as discussed above (Félix, 2019). During the 2010’s the proportions of the different groups had not changed significantly (Hann and Róna, 2015, 2016). According to the last available representative survey conducted in 2019, 20 percent of the population was strongly and 16 percent was moderately antisemitic (Hann and Róna, forthcoming). In comparison with the previous survey conducted in 2018, the acceptance of some negative statements decreased, however the percentage of those who relativize or even deny the Holocaust is still relatively high (one of five and one of nine of the population).

Majority of the population is neutral or has even positive attitudes towards Israel (Barna and Félix, 2017) which is probably related to the lack of dominant anti-Israeli actors in the public discourse. Presumably, this result is also achieved due to the extraordinary good relationship of the Visegrád countries with the current Israeli leadership (Ibid). Similarly to those who are antisemites at the attitudinal level, it is hard to give a socio-demographic profile to those who commit antisemitic incidents (Kovács, 2012; Hann and Róna, 2015; forthcoming).

Party preferences, however, have some correlation with antisemitism similarly to the results of the previous years: in 2019, supporters of Jobbik were still more likely to harbour antisemitic attitudes, while supporters of left-wing parties were less likely to do that (Hann and Róna, forthcoming). It is also important that antisemitism usually correlates with other exclusionary attitudes: those who have negative attitudes towards the Jews usually have similarly negative attitudes towards other groups too (Kovács, 2012, 465; Hann and Róna, forthcoming). Broadly

speaking, people are not particularly interested in events related to the Jewish community, which translates into a neutral stance towards these issues rather than a rejection (Hann and Róna, 2015; 2016; forthcoming). From the last couple of years the inauguration of the Memorial to the Victims of the German Invasion monument was the only topic that a relatively significant percentage of people heard about (Hann and Róna, 2015). From 2017 the researchers asked the respondents about George Soros in various forms. Here again, the portion of those respondents who thought negatively slightly decreased from 2018 to 2019 but still 57 percent agreed that he was a “selfish, power-hungry billionaire, who is influential worldwide and cares only about his own financial and political interest”. The researchers found that Hungarian society is thinking more and more negatively about the billionaire that could at least partly be attributed to the strong anti-Soros campaign of the current government.

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