

Ep 57: Secularism around the world: Hungary

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Gáspár Békés (GB) The government basically bowed down to an extremist party with an extremist newspaper,

activist for youth rights, and secretary of the Hungarian Atheist Society. Earlier this year Gáspár

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was dismissed from his job as a civil servant at the Mayor's Office of the Budapest City Hall,

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and not even like a majority, not even like the catholic church,

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after a targeted campaign against him by far-right Christian groups supported by Orbán's government.

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but like just a minority thing, and this I think is terribly sad,

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They accused him of offending Christians, and even committing blasphemy. His crime: to have published

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and it's terribly boring for anybody who has ever expressed their opinions.

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an article three years earlier, in which he argued that child baptism went against fundamental human

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Emma Park (EP) You're listening to episode 57 of the National Secular Society podcast, produced by Emma Park.

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rights and should be made illegal. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of this view, the idea

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This episode is part of our series of podcasts on secularism around the world. Today I'm going

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that anyone might be dismissed from their job for having expressed it, in an unrelated context, seems

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to be discussing Hungary and the ways in which Viktor Orbán's illiberal Christian regime is

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threatening liberal secular democracy. My guest is Gáspár Békés, a journalist, secularist campaigner,

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clearly unfair. Gáspár will be talking to me about his experience of being targeted by religious

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extremists, about why the church and state are so closely intertwined in modern Hungary, and about

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how Orbán is using illiberal Christian values to clamp down on LGBT and reproductive rights. He will

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also be talking about his experience of Hungary's faith schools as a youth campaigner, and about the

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involvement of the Catholic church and child protection services, despite recent pedophilia

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scandals. We in the UK might be thankful for our somewhat greater measure of press and political

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freedom, at least at the moment. However, Gáspár's story should perhaps make us less complacent.

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In Britain earlier this year, a teacher was suspended after the harassment of conservative

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and extremist religious campaigners for daring

to show a blasphemous cartoon in the classroom,

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and no one in the political establishment, either on the right or left, did anything to defend him.

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We might wonder whether a politically repressive regime could take root in Britain too, if the

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rhetoric of offense continues to operate as such an effective weapon against those who try to speak

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freely, whether about religion or anything else. All the more reason for people and organizations

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around the world who value liberal secular democracy to make connections with one another

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Gáspár Békés, welcome to the podcast. (Gáspár Békés) Thank you for having me and a big welcome to the audience as well.

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(EP) So let's start with a general question about the situation in Hungary. Now, I understand

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that the Hungarian Atheist Society recently submitted a report on the way that Orbán's

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conservative Christian regime has eroded human rights, and in particular how recent

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amendments to the constitution have sort
of imposed a Christian cultural identity

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on Hungary. Could you talk us through some
of the details about how Orbán's government
is

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eroding human rights and how he's
using this christian approach to do that?

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(GB) Definitely. Well, Orbán's regime has
been
reigning over Hungary since 2010, and

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around 2015 or a bit later they've been
introducing this new idea of illiberal Christian

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democracy. This might raise some eyebrows,
for good reason, because why does a

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democracy have objectives such as illiberal
or Christian, and can a democracy be
Christian

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at all? So this is the one of the problems.
Calling such a system 'Christian' is already

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discriminatory. And they acted upon this in
several ways. They wrote in the constitution

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that Hungary has to protect its proud
Christian heritage and the holy crown,

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and also that the Hungarian institutions
have to protect Hungary's Christian heritage,

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and also that every child has the right to be
raised in a Christian cultural atmosphere.

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(EP) Are we talking about Catholicism
particularly
here, or other branches of Christianity as
well?

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(GB) Well in Hungary, Catholicism is the
most dominant type of Christianity, but there
are

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other protestant factions as well. But
definitely Catholicism is the the most
dominant.

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The last census was in 2011 and it was
little over 50%, the number of Christians.

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How you ask a question about religion is very
important regarding the result. So one of
the

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things we were fighting for is to have
questions
that are not biased towards towards
Christians. So

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there are other surveys, for example with the
youth,
and it's the latest survey I could cite, was a

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huge survey which said 94% of young people
between
the ages of 15 and, I think, 30 were non-
religious.

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So religion is losing its track very

very fast in Hungary. And the next census, which is,

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I think, next year, maybe it's shifted too because of Covid .I think it will show a

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huge drop in religiousness overall.

(EP) But despite this, Orbán is trying to make Hungary into

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a Christian country, very much a Christian country, according to his own idea of Christianity.

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(GB) Yeah. I don't think it's working to be honest. I think it's the idea that this is the goal, so the question

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is, of course, why is he making this? Is it because he's a devout Christian? Of course not. So in 1990s

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when he was leading the liberal party he said that prayers should be on their knees, and it was a

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fairly anti-clerical party. Now everybody is of course a devout Christian in the party, and

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they aligned themselves with the Christian Democratic Party, so it's a coalition government.

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But the Christian Democratic Party alone had 3 or 4% of votes when they were campaigning alone.

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(EP) Why did Orbán change his position so much, do you think, between the 90s and the last decade?

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(GB) Well, I think his moral position was being eroded.

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I think after 10 years of governance, which was riddled with corruption and terrible,

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terrible decisions from a policy perspective, I think they were losing their grip on power. So

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I think religion has been invented for the very reason of holding power and performing

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power. As we think of Christianity, it was used, well, the king was for example in a country

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the sovereign elected by God to rule, and this was the deal between the church and the state.

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So, to legitimize a certain ruler. So Orbán basically dusted off this very, very old

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concept of of using religion to secure his position, and of course religion equals morality

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in their eyes, and that's the message they're pushing: if you're non-religious you're immoral.

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And that's what they try to use to reinforce their position. The other thing is,

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which I think recently has been more effective, that nobody from the opposition really dares to

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criticize religion. So if any kind of illiberal policy is wrapped in a religious packaging

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there is a much less backlash.

(EP) Why is it that the opposition now is scared to criticize religion?

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(GB) Well, I think the opposition is really in a state of this war economy. In this context

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the Hungarian voting system has been severely changed by the Orbán regime, because

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they enjoy two-thirds majority, so they basically restructure the constitutional court,

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committees, the voting systems, so they put party functionaries in every possible

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position. So to win an election against the Orbán regime is very, very hard. So

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the only chance the opposition has is to band together. I think what they think is that

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you can only push messages which are not offensive to anyone.

(EP) How much influence does the Catholic

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church, or do other Christian groups have on the state, on government, and on society

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in practice would you say?

(GB) Well, I think a lot. It's not like in Poland, but there is absolutely

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a huge influence and the way they can exercise this is they are being

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handed an extreme amount of funds from the government. So just to put it into perspective,

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Hungary has the most church funding from the state per capita in the whole European Union,

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and they're very proud of that. It's a huge amount of money that's being spent on the church.

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Just to put it into this perspective, there's an orthodox church, an eastern orthodoxy, in

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Hungary. They have two churches and nine priests and like a thousand followers, and they just

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received a new church from the state, completely

funded by the state, and they received like

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three billion forints of support.

(EP) Well let's talk, Gáspár, a bit more about your situation.

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So in December 2020 a fundamentalist Christian newspaper claimed that you had previously insulted

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Christians, wanting to ban baptisms, and as a result, you were later dismissed from your job in their

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Climate and Environmental Affairs Department at Budapest City Hall. Can you tell us a bit more

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about how this happened and why you were dismissed?

(GB) Well yes, of course. So this

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article, the first article that was published, was on January 28th, which was my birthday, and

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it was published on a far right portal, called sunday.hu and it's

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a far-right Christian radical portal basically. The reason I'm saying it, for

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example, is there, on the day of Christian victims, they shared a picture of the Klu Klux Klan

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and the burning cross, and when of the editorial board are actually

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part of nazi organizations and revisionist organizations, promoting Hungarian nazism

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and stuff like that, like paramilitary organizations, and this newspaper is funded by the coalition

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partner of the Orbán government, the christian democratic party. It's funded by

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them. The first article was published by one of these former neo nazis saying I was unfair to the

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soldiers of the second world war because I claimed that the conscript soldiers of the second world

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war were not heroes, they were victims, but that was in the title. But they kind of twisted this

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into saying I desecrated the memory of these soldiers by saying they were not heroes, whereas

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I just iterated a pacifist perspective saying that if we fetishize violence by calling conscripts

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heroes then we could end up in the same situation.

So that was the first one. They

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were fishing actually for something on me, because

once they learned that I was working at City Hall

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they wanted to attack City Hall. It wasn't mostly about me. It was about the

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City Hall, because an opposition government's been elected in City Hall in the capital. So this is

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the biggest city in Hungary, two million people, so 20% of the population lives there, and it was

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a huge deal when the mayor was elected there. The government has been doing everything in its power

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to kind of smear the mayor and the municipality and finding any kind of leverage over them.

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Somebody found some information about me and that I was working there and that's when they tried to

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reach the municipal government through me. I was a civil servant, so I had no connection to

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the political branch and also I had no power in the office. I was in an entry-level position.

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But back to the articles themselves. The first article was basically about this war

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article, and the reason for that is that they just went through my Facebook account, and the latest

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post I shared publicly was this article of of the war, which I wrote years ago, but it was

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the anniversary so I shared it again. Then they started digging and then they found well this guy

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has written like 50 or 60 articles, and then they found my article on baptisms, so and that's when

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the circus really started. (EP) What had you argued in this article about baptisms?

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(GB) In the article I argued that, based on Hungarian law and human rights, so Hungarian rights and international

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rights and accords, baptisms should be illegal. The reason for this is that a baptism is an

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act by a parent where somebody is symbolically forced into a religion they have not chosen.

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Although this is symbolic, it signals to society that this kind of behavior is acceptable, and

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it leads to other kind of real effects, real indoctrination later on, of children into religion,

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and especially because when baptisms happen the church and the parents enter into a contract

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actually saying that the children will be raised in a Christian value

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environment, and they will be raised explicitly Christian, or Catholic if it's a Catholic baptism.

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I stated that, based on the Hungarian Constitution Article 7, it says every

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citizen has a right to freedom of thought and religion, and there isn't like a small letter apart

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saying that children are excluded. And also, more explicitly, the UN Convention on the Rights of the

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Child, which was ratified by Hungary, states that exclusively the children have the right to

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religious freedoms and freedom of thought. So I argued that obviously an act such as this and the

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following indoctrination is against fundamental law in Hungary. And although this is not

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enforced or practiced, but from a legal perspective this is absolutely clear. It's important to

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stress that this wasn't a satire, this was an article which just coldly stated the facts.

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It wasn't derogatory to Christians. It didn't demean anybody. It was just stating

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a legal argument. (EP) Making a case. So then you said it was when they discovered this

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article that the circus really started. So what happened? (GB) Well, this far-right

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newspaper started publishing articles, saying that I am a Christian hater, and that

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basically I was committing blasphemy and that I offended religious people, although

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what I was saying, I wasn't criticizing religious people, I was criticizing a religious duty or

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practice. But they of course made this connection which was untrue. Of course the

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government has a huge media apparatus in Hungary.

They bought most of the Hungarian media. Just to

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put it into perspective, there is no Hungarian radio station which is not under the control

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of the government or the government's different oligarchs. So, when they publish an article

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and if it's worthy of smearing somebody, what they do is they just literally verbatim copy paste

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the article into all of their newspapers. And that's what they did. They published that

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I'm working there, I am the advisor to the mayor, and that I am a Christian hater, and I dare to

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say that baptism should be banned and what not. Afterwards, this was on a Thursday,

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by Sunday the articles were published and the by Sunday the leader of the Hungarian Christian

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Democratic Party, the coalition partner of Orbán, and the Vice Prime Minister demanded my

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termination from the municipal government, the mayor's office. Then on Monday

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I was summoned by my superior, the head of the mayor's office, whom I'd never met, so who

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wasn't my boss directly, and they handed me a letter of reprimand,

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without any discussion or anything. The letter of reprimand said that I violated the policies of

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the municipal government by not making it clear that my articles, that were written three years ago,

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were not written in the name of the office. I repeat this because I know it's hard to believe.

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They literally said that I didn't make it clear that articles that I wrote

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three years ago on a completely different topic, in a completely different capacity,

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before I worked at the office, were not written by me as a civil servant. (EP) Sounds very Kafka-esque

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(GB) Yeah. It was. I was shocked. And of course they said that I

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also offended Christians. I was asking what was offensive about it, and actually

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no church statements were issued, so no actual religious groups were protesting what I said.

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It was just the party. This Christian Democratic Party and their newspaper and, of course,

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the government media, which is a connection. No actual churches or church people were

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criticizing this really. So how would they gauge the offensiveness of this and also why is

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offensiveness a basis for termination, because obviously anybody can be offended by anything.

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(EP) Is there a culture of offense, a rhetoric of offence, used against people who

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don't conform to the conservative Christian morality in Hungary at the moment?

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(GB) Yeah. Of course. Definitely. I think it's definitely present. Whatever Hungarian atheists

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or secular people say it's offensive. For example there was this new book published

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by a feminist theologian in Hungary about church abuse.

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It turned out that over 40 people were abused. They came forward and they were all abused

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by priests. A book was written on this.

Of course the church and a lot of government

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media said that this is blasphemy and this is just a money grab and it's offensive to Christians.

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This was literally about raping children, this book.

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It was a groundbreaking book which is a bestseller in Hungary now. And nobody

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went to jail from those people who molested kids because of the church cover-up. Instead of a

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sincere reaction from the government, what they did was say that this is just derogatory

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to Christians, offensive and whatnot. So there's definitely this culture of offensiveness and being

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offended by basically anything that's critical. That's why the church is in bed with

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the government because then the government can pretend they're offended in their

0:19:26.880,0:19:32.240
religious state. It's very much present. The office demanded

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that I apologize publicly for offending Christians and not upholding the values of the municipality.

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I said I have to think about it and ask my lawyer.

Then I was fired by the next morning.

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(EP) Since then, have you received further hate mail or persecution or attacks from either this far-right

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Christian newspaper or from other groups? (GB) Well I did. Sometimes when there's an article that's

0:19:57.040,0:20:02.320

connected to religion or secularism my name is mentioned among some other names, like a

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filler: also do you remember Gáspár Békés doing this and doing that? And I did receive a

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number of death threats, very explicit death threats, and of course a lot of, like hundreds, of

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defamatory statements and offensive things. But specific death threats, like a dozen death threats,

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I filed police reports in every instance and the police rejected it. They didn't care enough to even

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identify if it was a comment or it was a personal message, and they actually mixed

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it up. So I appealed but the the Prosecutor's Office also denied investigating the case. So

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the Hungarian authorities completely left me vulnerable to to attack, and they did nothing to

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prevent potentially very credible threats against my life. So actually when I was

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receiving the letter of reprimand, without my knowledge the municipal government issued

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a statement. The statement said that they are rejecting my views and they're distancing themselves

0:21:01.280,0:21:06.400

from me ,and that their views are not matching mine. So basically I was ostracized by my own

0:21:06.400,0:21:12.160

employer, despite the fact that I was getting death threats. I advised my employer

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that I'm getting threats and I think this made the situation a lot worse. Luckily there wasn't any

0:21:18.240,0:21:23.120

action, but there could have been. Hungarian law actually very specifically states that

0:21:23.120,0:21:30.800

members of public office are protected under law, so they enjoy enhanced protections.

0:21:30.800,0:21:39.191

I felt no enhanced protection, or protection whatsoever, from my own employer, or from the police.

0:21:39.191,0:21:43.520

(EP) What have you been doing since? Have you had another job?

(GB) I do have another

0:21:43.520,0:21:49.120

job, but I'm afraid to say it on air, which is I think a shame, because I said I'm not afraid, but

0:21:49.120,0:21:55.680

obviously I have to earn a living from something.

At this point I cannot publicly say where

0:21:55.680,0:22:01.440

I work, which I think is a terrible disgrace to Hungarian society and Hungarian politics

0:22:01.440,0:22:06.320

in general, that you cannot express where you work because you're afraid of retaliation and

0:22:06.320,0:22:13.840

another smear campaign. I think when we get to that point it's unacceptable.

0:22:13.840,0:22:19.200

The thing is the reaction of the political parties. There was no reaction whatsoever from any

0:22:19.200,0:22:23.398

political party based on this.

(EP) Even the opposition to Orbán?

0:22:23.398,0:22:29.440

(GB) Yeah. Basically there wasn't. We explicitly asked questions

from the parties: what did they think about this? They

0:22:29.440,0:22:36.254

didn't even respond, except one party which issued

a very political response with no content whatsoever.

0:22:36.254,0:22:41.760

They didn't dare to criticize. Other people, actually even

0:22:41.760,0:22:48.640

theologians and members of faith have criticized this decision. A lot of

0:22:48.640,0:22:53.520

independent political influencers have criticized this decision, and of course a number

0:22:53.520,0:22:58.952

of international organizations and domestic organizations have criticized this decision.

0:22:58.952,0:23:04.880

But there was no discussion whatsoever from the opposition parties, not

0:23:04.880,0:23:09.920

just the opposition parties but the media. The opposition media didn't even ask me

0:23:09.920,0:23:16.320

for an interview. I explicitly asked opposition newspapers and media to let me say my side

0:23:16.320,0:23:21.760

of the story and they refused. I did over 100 interviews in the last five years with these

0:23:21.760,0:23:30.400

media groups, and they were very happy to talk about my activism beforehand. But now that

0:23:30.400,0:23:36.560

this happened - and it's important also to note that the mayor is running for Prime Minister

0:23:36.560,0:23:42.320

this election - so what I gather is that they don't want to ruin his election chances and to diminish

0:23:42.320,0:23:46.720

his election chances because they might believe that he's the only one who can defeat Orbán.

0:23:46.720,0:23:53.840

But the problem is we cannot really defeat Orbán if we are getting accustomed to the same kind of

0:23:53.840,0:23:59.760

illiberal Christian state. That's the main problem: that we cannot fight fire with fire.

0:23:59.760,0:24:06.000

Or not just that, but if we become the Orbán regime, then we're not really changing anything, are we?

0:24:06.000,0:24:10.880

I think the secular values of a country are very important. It's not just about me, it's about

0:24:10.880,0:24:16.960

anybody who has been a journalist, anybody who has exercised their freedom of speech, anybody who is

0:24:16.960,0:24:22.480

an atheist, anybody who's just secular, and anybody who is taking a public office, because basically

0:24:22.480,0:24:28.080

what the opposition is saying now and the municipal government is saying is that if you ever

0:24:28.080,0:24:33.600

said anything that offends anyone, it doesn't fit into our political agenda you will be terminated

0:24:33.600,0:24:42.240

immediately and without hesitation. They didn't fold for a majority party, it was actual

0:24:42.240,0:24:50.000

Nazis. An actual Nazi portal with far-right Christian values was the one who started this

0:24:50.000,0:24:54.640

and the government basically bowed down to an extremist party with an extremist newspaper,

0:24:54.640,0:25:01.040

and not even a majority, not even the Catholic church, but just a minority thing.

0:25:01.040,0:25:05.520

I think it's terribly sad and it's terribly worrying for anybody who

0:25:05.520,0:25:10.880

has ever expressed their opinions. If this is what we're expecting for regime change, well it's

0:25:10.880,0:25:16.960

not going to happen.

(EP) Just on this issue of the illiberal Christian democracy, what about the

0:25:16.960,0:25:22.240

situation of LGBT+ people in Hungary?

The perceived discrimination against them by

0:25:22.240,0:25:27.040

Orbán's government has received quite a lot of coverage in the news over the last year or two.

0:25:27.040,0:25:32.734

What's the current situation? How much are LGBT+ people discriminated against in Hungary?

0:25:32.734,0:25:37.920

(GB) I would say increasingly.

The interesting thing about this that in my

0:25:37.920,0:25:43.760

opinion has come from a reaction to church criticism. As I said before, there was this

0:25:43.760,0:25:49.600

book published about clergy abuse in the catholic church, and it was very influential.

0:25:49.600,0:25:58.720

It was written by a very influential theologian, a woman, and it collected very very shocking

0:25:58.720,0:26:05.360

accounts of abuse. As I said this is the best seller now in Hungary. What the Orbán

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regime did first is they introduced a law following the publication of this book, or shortly beforehand.

0:26:11.920,0:26:15.680

That is an extension of the child protection law.

0:26:15.680,0:26:20.960

The first version was saying that we'll increase penalties for pedophiles

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and whatnot. The thing was that they added an extra cause to this anti-pedophilia law

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saying that you are not allowed to propagate or to advertise homosexuality to children, so

0:26:36.560,0:26:42.720

anybody under 18. You cannot advertise, not just advertise, you cannot even show homosexuality in

0:26:42.720,0:26:51.120

any context to people under 18. Also you cannot show homosexuality next to a church.

0:26:51.120,0:26:57.440

So basically 200 meters from a church you cannot present homosexuality in any way or any form and

0:26:57.440,0:27:05.440

if you do it incurs a penalty. This basically penalized the Hungarian LGBTQ community severely.

0:27:05.440,0:27:14.800

It set up a criminal prosecution against them and also it matched together pedophilia

0:27:14.800,0:27:19.840

and homosexuality, which is also extremely unacceptable. This was in recent months.

0:27:20.400,0:27:28.160

(EP) Has this approach had much public support?

Is there a general bias against LGBT

0:27:28.160,0:27:34.247

people in Hungary or is it just Orbán's government

specifically and the influence of religious groups?

0:27:34.247,0:27:39.440

(GB) There definitely is unfortunately a bias against homosexuals in Hungary. The

0:27:39.440,0:27:45.200

government's very good at influencing people and also kind of measuring what group to

0:27:45.200,0:27:53.120

hate at the moment. So, as I said, this whole law was basically made

0:27:53.120,0:27:57.840

to divert attention from the crisis of the church and the pedophilia. Because

0:27:57.840,0:28:03.680

in Hungary even the most devout Christians are repulsed by pedophilia in the church.

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This has been polled, this has been shown, and since the government allied itself on a moral

0:28:09.840,0:28:15.200

basis to the church, then if the moral basis of the church itself is eroded obviously that

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has an affect on the government's moral standing.

So they had to do something, and something big,

0:28:20.640,0:28:27.040

and something radical to divert attention, and of course divert it to another group you can hate.

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So obviously, Hungary, it's like in the Orwell novel 1984, basically that

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there's five minutes of hate, you have to just hate somebody, but in Hungary

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it's not minutes, it's basically constant. I mean Orwell is becoming the utopia, considering like

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it is just non-stop in Hungary, it's 24/7. There was a hate campaign against

0:28:52.240,0:28:59.200

George Soros, who is of course a Jew. There was a campaign against gypsies. There was a

0:28:59.200,0:29:06.101

campaign against homeless people. And now there are gays, and I'm sure atheists are somewhere down the line.

0:29:06.101,0:29:10.960

(EP) What about abortion and women's rights?

(GB) In the constitution there

0:29:10.960,0:29:16.160

is a clause saying that life starts at conception.

So definitely if they want they can just make a

0:29:16.160,0:29:22.080

law any time banning abortions, and definitely

there's rhetoric saying that life is sacred,

0:29:22.080,0:29:27.520

life starts at conception. But it's not illegal to do abortions in Hungary. You don't have to

0:29:27.520,0:29:32.880

have a specific reason to have an abortion, but this might change any time.

0:29:32.880,0:29:38.720

The coalition part of the Christian Democratic Party is completely against abortion

0:29:38.720,0:29:44.640

from a religious perspective. You never know what will happen. I'm definitely fearful for

0:29:44.640,0:29:50.480

a crackdown on reproduction rights. (EP) That's reproduction rights, but

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given that it's an illiberal Christian democracy, are women pigeonholed in any way

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in terms of their place in society? (GB) There is a lot of rhetoric from the government

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saying that the best thing a woman can do is to be a good mother, and that's their

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place and in the family. There is very very generous support for family planning, not

0:30:11.760,0:30:17.360

family planning in the contraception way, but family planning in general, saying that you

0:30:17.360,0:30:21.120

should have as many children as possible. They're very much desired, that's the best thing

0:30:21.120,0:30:27.280

a woman can do. The Minister for Families said that if a woman earns

0:30:27.280,0:30:32.800

less that's okay because why would a woman want to earn more? There's definitely rhetoric that's

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very conservative. One of the most worrying things

in Hungary is that the religious schools are

0:30:38.560,0:30:44.640

becoming increasingly dominant. The government is basically outsourcing education, and child

0:30:44.640,0:30:50.225

protection services as well, through Catholic church and other churches. For example now 60%

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of child protection services are in the hands of the Catholic church. They say this is

0:30:55.200,0:31:00.205

the best place they could be. (EP) Despite the recent report about pedophilia in the Catholic church?

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(GB) Yes. I mean this is mind boggling. It's hard to find the words, but really if there's any

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organization that absolutely has no place in child protection, it's the Catholic church. They neither

0:31:11.360,0:31:18.480

have the track record nor have the the means or the conviction to protect children

0:31:18.480,0:31:23.600

from anything, quite the opposite. We all

know how the Catholic church operates in basically

0:31:23.600,0:31:30.000

every country. Unless they're actually pressured into doing something, their

0:31:30.000,0:31:34.720

policies are allowing sexual abuse and cover-ups. Of course the biggest problem is

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the absolute power that the clergyman wield. Of course if there's absolute power there's also

0:31:40.640,0:31:47.360

absolute corruption. It makes people very vulnerable to abuse, especially if they're

0:31:47.360,0:31:53.280

already in a vulnerable state such as children in foster homes. So giving this to the Catholic

0:31:53.280,0:31:58.960

church is one of the biggest crimes against humanity in Hungary, I would say, without

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exaggeration. 60% is now in the hands of the Catholic church in the entirety

0:32:05.040,0:32:09.520

of Hungary. Not only that, in the last 10 years the number of religious schools have doubled

0:32:09.520,0:32:14.240

but the number of religious young people has actually halved. So it's not following a

0:32:14.240,0:32:19.818

trend. These religious schools receive four times as much government funding as public schools.

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Public schools are being defunded so the quality of education is decreasing

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extremely sharply in the last 10 years. This is a goal actually. The Hungarian government's

0:32:30.720,0:32:36.880

goal is to make people obedient servants and to lead people away from high schools and to put

0:32:36.880,0:32:42.560

them in vocational schools or put them into church schools. So either you cannot enter university and

0:32:42.560,0:32:50.400

then you're basically a subject of of industrial needs, or you are basically trained into a

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perhaps smarter but government supporting citizen.

Nobody should go to public schools

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or public high schools because then you might earn a degree. Hungary is the only

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country in the EU, except Luxembourg, which has a steadily decreasing number of university students.

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They're basically doing everything in their power to push people away from universities.

0:33:09.840,0:33:15.680

They decreased the mandatory education age to 16. So after 16 you can quit school,

0:33:16.720,0:33:21.520

which is terrible according to education policymakers and scientists. They're doing a

0:33:21.520,0:33:26.000

lot of these things, and the religious schools role is to indoctrinate children into

0:33:26.000,0:33:30.560

Christianity. The way they're doing this is there are very strict rules.

0:33:30.560,0:33:37.760

The Hungarian laws - the church is exempt from the emancipation laws, it's exempt from equal

0:33:37.760,0:33:46.400

rights laws, so they can do whatever they want, they can segregate people based on race, gender, religion...

0:33:46.400,0:33:51.200

(EP) Are they in fact doing that?

(GP) They are. Some schools don't accept for example atheists.

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If you don't present a letter of baptism then you are not accepted. As I said, baptism

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isn't just a symbolic thing, it's sometimes a way to enjoy quality education. There are over 100

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settlements in Hungary where there's no other school than a religious school.

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In these schools, although they are funded by the government, you

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have to be religious, you have to practice

religion. It's so strict that you

0:34:18.240,0:34:23.680

actually have a little booklet where they put a stamp on every mass you went to. If you

0:34:23.680,0:34:27.680

didn't go to mass you were actually reprimanded, and you can even be kicked out of the school.

0:34:27.680,0:34:33.680

Religious education is mandatory. You cannot choose ethics instead of religious

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class. On paper it's in line with its civil norms of society, but in

0:34:40.880,0:34:48.240

fact it's homophobic, it's ideophobic, it's anti-contraception. We have a lot of accounts

0:34:48.240,0:34:52.880

that these religious teachings, what they teach actually in the schools, it's

0:34:52.880,0:34:59.237

completely against the civilizational norms of Hungary and what we hold dear.

0:34:59.237,0:35:04.800

(EP) You've been directly involved in campaigning against these sorts of schools?
(GB) Yes. I've been campaigning against

0:35:04.800,0:35:10.160

this. The secular activism is part of my activism, not just because of youth rights

0:35:10.160,0:35:15.360

but predominantly because of youth rights, because

I feel the intersection of youth rights and

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the clergy's influence is making the diverse situations for children. Basically

0:35:22.400,0:35:27.600

young people have no agency and adults are not necessarily representing their best interests.

0:35:27.600,0:35:32.400

I think there's a concept that children are helpless, they're just subject to whatever their

0:35:32.400,0:35:37.040

parents or school systems are pushing to them.

But this is very wrong because

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if you think about children especially above the age of 14 they have to experience an environment

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where they are taken seriously, adjusted to their

0:35:49.280,0:35:55.360

capacities, but taken seriously nonetheless. Because otherwise at 18 you just switch the

0:35:55.360,0:36:01.120

switch of being responsible citizen and nothing happens. You cannot train responsible citizens

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by 18 years of neglect and rejection of basic and fundamental rights, because then

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as an adult you will not be interested in those rights, and practicing those rights, because you

0:36:10.640,0:36:14.720

never experienced them, you never knew them, you never practiced them, and if you tried to practice

0:36:14.720,0:36:22.960

them you were ostracized by your teachers, your classmates, your school system. These

0:36:22.960,0:36:27.920

church-run schools are indoctrinating children and they are pushing an agenda that's completely

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opposite to what society holds dear as norms. It's creating a parallel society, and this

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kind of parallel society is extremely dangerous to the sustainability of our democracy.

0:36:41.191,0:36:47.360

(EP) Gáspár, we could talk for hours about this and it sounds like it's a really interesting and difficult

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situation that Hungary's in at the moment. What do you think is the way forward for

0:36:51.440,0:36:56.560

Hungary in the medium term? Do you think there is hope that it may become more liberal and secular,

0:36:56.560,0:37:02.720

and if so, how is that going to be achieved?

(GB) Well if you're an activist you have to be optimistic. Right?

0:37:02.720,0:37:09.040

So I am going to say something optimistic.
How likely is it? I don't know. The oppression of

0:37:09.040,0:37:15.520
Hungary is by rhetoric and by law. The backlash against several secular communities,

0:37:15.520,0:37:21.600
the promotion of church, and the shameless promotion of church agenda by money, the rampant

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pedophilia is not being dealt with, is definitely, I think, awakening a lot of people's

0:37:27.840,0:37:33.520
inner secular values. So I think there are some values that we take for granted, and there

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are some identities that are dormant in people. For example, most atheists are not really

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living the atheist life, in a way that they're not necessarily knowledgeable about their atheism. They

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just simply don't believe. It's a topic that they just don't care about much.

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I think a lot of Hungarian atheists, which is a lot of people, especially young people.

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As I said, 94% are non-religious. So many of them are explicitly atheistic are definitely becoming

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frustrated. They will be unsupportive of this government because of this. I think

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this is what's happening in Hungary. Every time there is a statement against Hungarian atheists or

0:38:16.080,0:38:20.560
saying it is immoral, or we have to achieve final victory against them,

0:38:20.560,0:38:26.080
we see an influx of people into the organization's facebook group, for example, which has more than ten

0:38:26.080,0:38:30.960
thousand people now in Hungary. Every time this happens we see an uptick

0:38:30.960,0:38:37.840
in the membership of this group. So definitely I think there's a

0:38:37.840,0:38:42.240
backlash, and I think Orbán is underestimating Hungary's religious capacity.

0:38:42.240,0:38:46.560
I don't think this indoctrination is really working, especially because of freedom of information.

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Obviously people are not buying this kind of very radical Christian idea of of religion

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and society, because in the 21st century this is simply not compatible with what

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we believe and what we know about society, about the world, about nature.

0:39:04.720,0:39:11.600

People are questioning this and people will not be indoctrinated even with the harshest

0:39:11.600,0:39:18.080

means. I think this actually creates more backlash than support from society.

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This is my hope, that Orbán is actually creating a new front against himself, which he doesn't know

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about. He himself overestimates the Church's influence, which of course it contributes to,

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because all the money that they're pumping into the Church, of course visually it seems like

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they're everywhere and they have unlimited amount of funds. What I hope is that

0:39:39.840,0:39:46.640

secular values, and even atheist values, or atheists in general, will will rise up, band together and

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will be a significant opposition force against the Orbán regime, especially young people.

0:39:52.240,0:40:02.694

(EP) Well good luck with that Gáspár Békés, and thank you very much for coming on the podcast.

(GB) Thank you very much.

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