

Hungary's progressive Christian resistance

Viktor Orbán has tried to buy the loyalty of the churches, but not everyone is selling.

by [Marc Roscoe Loustau](#) in the [June 2023](#) issue



As Hungary's right-wing strongman Viktor Orbán begins his fourth term as prime minister, a younger generation of Christian leaders is taking up the mantle of resistance. They face long odds: their attempts to organize against authoritarianism are complicated both by infighting and by the government's dirty tricks.

Hungary is a Central European country of 10 million people; most of them reside in Budapest, the capital on the Danube River. According to the European Parliament, Hungary is no longer a democracy. Experts call it a mafia state and an electoral autocracy. With the help of his political party, Fidesz, Orbán has rewritten the country's constitution, taken over the judiciary, and turned over entire sectors of the economy to his oligarch friends. By the 2018 election, Fidesz was able to win a 67 percent parliamentary majority with just 49 percent of the vote. He hasn't gotten rid of elections altogether; he's rigged the rules so he'll never lose.

But “mafia state” and “electoral autocracy” don’t give the whole picture, because Orbán has extended his control far beyond elections and the economy. American Christians should be alarmed by Orbán’s manipulation of Hungary’s churches. While Orbán spews hateful rhetoric against refugees, ethnic Roma, and LGBTQ Hungarians, he claims to be making Hungary into a bastion of Christianity in Europe. His rhetoric has won him the allegiance of American right-wing culture warriors like Tucker Carlson. Carlson broadcast from Hungary last year and lauded Orbán’s system. In August, Orbán traveled to Dallas for a headline speaking engagement at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Meanwhile, Orbán has bought the loyalty of the country’s churches, including the large Reformed denomination and the Roman Catholic Church, by giving them huge sums to renovate church buildings and denominational schools. Most Hungarian church leaders have remained silent about Orbán’s hateful policies. Independent journalist Alex Faludy has an expression to explain their failure to speak out: “It’s very difficult to speak prophetic words of protest when you’ve got coins in your mouth.”

For the length of Orbán’s rule, Gábor Iványi, the leader of a tiny Hungarian Methodist denomination, has provided spiritual inspiration to the country’s anti-authoritarian resistance. Iványi started his career in the 1970s preaching the gospel on Budapest streets, challenging the empty consumerism of Hungary’s late socialist system. His shaggy beard is now white, but he still has the intense gaze of a wilderness prophet. With his charisma and a compelling biography, Iványi has attracted international news coverage, including a 2019 *New York Times* profile.

At 72 Iványi is part of an aging group of Hungarian church leaders who began as Communist-era dissidents. But an emerging generation of Hungarian pastors is also standing up to Orbán’s Christian nationalist regime—people like 37-year-old Márta Bolba, a minister in Hungary’s small Lutheran denomination. With war raging next door in Ukraine and no end in sight to Orbán’s regime, Bolba and other Christian activists are asking how they can best resist today’s authoritarian regimes.

Bolba serves Mandák House, a Lutheran congregation in Budapest’s Józsefváros neighborhood. Government-run media routinely stigmatize Józsefváros, calling it the city’s poorest and roughest neighborhood. When Bolba joined this congregation, her first act was to organize a weekly open dinner for her neighbors.

“This isn’t some kind of meal distribution,” she insisted when I met with her on Zoom to talk about her work. Bolba ate alongside unhoused people, the unemployed, Roma, and refugees as well as professors, students, retirees, and lower-middle-class workers—all of whom lived in the Józsefváros neighborhood. “We prepare and share the meal together,” she told me.

In newspaper opinion articles and interviews, Bolba denounces Orbán’s corrupt authoritarian system and the oligarchs who line their pockets from the public till. She also admonishes those who lead in Christ’s name when they are complicit. In 2018, Hungary’s Catholic cardinal Péter Erdő came to Józsefváros to bless a copy of sculptor Timothy Schmalz’s famous *Homeless Jesus*. But when Orbán’s lackeys carted the statue away just days after his visit, Erdő said nothing. “This hypocrisy is the true face of Fidesz’s false Christianity,” Bolba wrote in a column for the MÉRCE news portal.

Bolba first gained attention in 2013 when she faced down police on the steps of Budapest’s city hall. She joined housing advocacy group The City Is for All in a nonviolent action. Bolba, five months pregnant with her first child, blocked the doors to city hall to protest a government urban renewal plan.

Since then, she has helped lead multiple campaigns to defend the rights of Józsefváros’s residents against officials who talk about “cleaning up” the neighborhood’s poverty. Against the area’s Roma residents, Orbán’s lackeys have used racist dog whistles about “bleaching” the streets. Bolba calls this “fascist rhetoric” and decries this effort to manipulate the public’s fears.

You can see what Bolba’s activism has meant to this community if you hop on the no. 99 city bus that winds through Józsefváros. Just two stops away from Bolba’s church you’ll see a replica of the same bus painted on the side of a building.

The government had slated the building for demolition, but before the wrecking ball could arrive, someone turned its exposed brick wall into a canvas, which it remains today. No one will name the guerilla artists, but with a parent helping a child up the stairs and passengers smiling out the windows, the bus is clearly a symbol of community pride. And if you look closely you’ll see at the front of the bus a young woman in a robe, Geneva bands, and Bolba’s brown bob with her hands on the wheel.

“Iványi has left us a heritage of resistance,” Bolba told me. Still, Iványi’s style is more the go-it-alone prophet than organizer. Bolba believes that progressive Christians need to form a network, a leverage group to loosen Orbán’s grip on the Hungarian church.

In 2020, a young Catholic community organizer, Tibor Tarcsay, responded to this call by bringing young Christian progressives together to form a group they call Kovász Közösség (the Leaven Community). Together with Reformed and Lutheran Christians, Tarcsay set out an ambitious goal to reshape Hungarian churches’ sense of social responsibility. Amid Orbán’s xenophobic fearmongering, could the church be something other than either a bystander or a cheerleader?

Tarcsay and his colleagues have focused on organizing Hungarian Christians to care for the environment. Like other young Christians in the social media age, they have blogged about the theological underpinnings of their work and have posted updates on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Tarcsay studied medieval history in Hungary’s foremost Catholic higher educational institution, Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest. He grew up in a devout Catholic household, he said, but his progressive faith came from reading the early church fathers.

Focusing on environmental activism was both a theological and a politically strategic move, Tarcsay told me. Climate change is not as politicized as other issues in Hungary, he explained. Activists have reached out to Christians from across the political spectrum, even the Hungarian branch of the Boy Scouts. The Boy Scouts ignored Tarcsay’s invitations, but organizers have worked with a conservative Hungarian affiliate of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Taking whatever opportunities are open, the Leaven Community is trying to reintroduce Hungarians to progressive Christianity through interpersonal encounters amid climate change actions.

The Leaven Community is facing an existential crisis, however, which is endangering one of the best opportunities to unify Hungary’s progressive Christians. For the Leaven Community’s first two years, the Civil College Foundation, an independent civil society organization that mentors and funds grassroots citizen action groups, provided support to Tarcsay’s group. This fall, Leaven Community leaders decided that it was time to go independent.

Although they met in January to imagine their organization's future, Tarcsay told me that the conversation was not successful. "We are still figuring out our path forward," he said. "Unfortunately, we're making slow progress."

Bolba has heard about the group's struggles but has distanced herself. She praised the progressive Christianity that infuses the Leaven Community's mission but said, "I don't want to get involved in environmental organizing per se." Just as it seems ready to become young progressive Christians' primary organizing vehicle, the Leaven Community is in danger of breaking apart.

We could be tempted to write this off as a perennial problem; the left will always be fractious. But Hungarian progressives are imperiled even more by the authoritarian right wing's strategy to take down potential opposition leaders. Orbán does not have his police shoot to kill. Instead, Orbán's internet minions practice the dark arts of online character assassination.

Last summer, they targeted Hungary's Catholic influencer, a young priest named András Hodász. Hodász rocketed to fame in 2018 via his popular YouTube channel. He called it Papifrankó, mashing up the word for priest with a slang term meaning "to tell you what's up." The intro to his videos has a driving, hard rock beat. At one point, we see Hodász sling his cassock around his shoulders. The gesture captures the young priest's distinctive combination of panache and spiritual purpose.

Within a year of founding Papifrankó, Hodász had 30,000 subscribers, a huge number in a country of 10 million. Despite talking about familiar theological topics—"5 reasons NOT to become a priest" and "4+1 arguments that God exists"—Hodász attracted a passionately engaged audience of young viewers. In other videos, Hodász trades the cassock for a leather jacket as he preaches road safety astride his Ducati motorcycle. As always, he closes by reminding his viewers—with his trademark wink—"Don't forget to pray!"

Hodász's demise began in 2021 when he began questioning Orbán's homophobic and transphobic policies. Hodász approached the issue like a skilled influencer. He interacted directly with his audience, posting videos about the books his followers sent him. One was by James Martin, an American Jesuit who has won accolades—and Pope Francis's approval—by leading efforts at LGBTQ inclusion.

Hodász said, "It's useless to make children stay in their birth gender if they end up slitting their wrists or hanging themselves, or even if they simply grow up to be

unhappy adults.” Then he spoke urgently about the need to support young people’s growth and foster their desire for freedom.

Unfortunately, in Eastern Europe, Hungary is second only to Russia in sponsoring aggressive online trolls. Péter Krekó, writing for StopFake.org, has called Hungary a government-funded “post-truth laboratory.” As soon as Hodász questioned Orbán’s hatred, the trolls sprang into action.

First they began harassing Hodász online. Conservative commentators continued the campaign in the context of the official government-controlled media. Last spring, Hodász abruptly took down Papifrankó, removing three years’ worth of videos. Then the trolls mocked Hodász when rumors spread that he was suffering from mental illness.

In a March 2022 farewell message posted on Papifrankó, Hodász displayed the wounds caused by Orbán’s online abusers. He mentioned the attacks: the violent comments, newspaper articles, and response videos. He joked about stepping into a “line of fire.”

Then suddenly his voice broke with emotion. “The one thing I didn’t know is that I wouldn’t be able to take it.” Finally, in September, Hodász revealed in the press that he had asked Cardinal Erdő to release him from his duties as a priest.

“András Hodász’s sin was obvious,” Hungarian journalist János Reichert wrote in a commentary on the priest’s erstwhile online ministry. “His mistake was admitting that he doesn’t agree.” Reichert ends his reflections with a warning: “They aren’t using physical force, at least not yet.” Symbolic violence only whets the authoritarian appetite.

The incident also shows how Orbán brutalizes his opponents from a distance: anonymous trolls do the dirty work; the prime minister gets plausible deniability, and one less critic.

The activists I spoke with called what happened to Hodász a tragedy and said that it offers an important lesson—about holding their tongues. Progressives shouldn’t criticize each other, not when the government is paying trolls to do it. “It’s not worth saying anything negative, since there are so few of us,” Bolba told me when I asked her about the attacks on Hodász.

Tarcsay, the young Catholic activist, expressed his hope that Hodász would regroup and rejoin Hungarian public life. In early March, Hodász announced he was doing just that: the independent news and opinion portal Szemlélek, which builds bridges across the conservative and liberal divide in Hungarian Christian life, announced that Hodász will be joining the staff as a coeditor. “If you read me, you should see what you’re getting,” Hodász explained to Szemlélek’s readers. Hodász may have left the priesthood, but he’s still got work to do.

In the year since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine forced 8 million people to flee their country, progressive Hungarian Christians have been living out the gospel of compassion for the stranger. In Hungary, 34,000 Ukrainians have registered for the EU’s temporary protection status which guarantees refugees access to education and housing. In November, Mandák House, with the help of the United Nations and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, built a new refugee services center in Budapest called Dévai Fogadó (the Inn on Dévai Street). Located in a renovated shoe factory, the center offers arts education and basic schooling, accommodation, and other types of social assistance.

Even before Dévai Fogadó officially opened, social workers used the space to provide Ukrainian refugees with trauma and grief counseling. Speaking at the center’s opening event, Rita Minikh, who had fled Ukraine’s war-torn east, spoke about how she crossed the border with her children. She was afraid for their future, she said, “but Mandák House staff made us feel safe and provided a warm welcome.”

At the opening event, Bolba addressed the crowd of international aid professionals. “The Inn on Dévai Street is a place where people receive help,” she said, “but not just things. They can study together, practice crafts, and experience the arts.”

In contemporary Hungary, no new social initiative emerges without the government knowing about it and assessing whether it’s a threat to Orbán’s power. I asked Bolba to consider the possibility that, later on, Orbán might use the Dévai Fogadó as leverage to silence her.

Her response was adamant. She reminded me that the center receives no Hungarian government money. “I give regular interviews to the secular media,” she also said. Government-run outlets “often invite me to share the stage as a speaker.” According to Bolba, there is nothing she could say that the government does not

know already.

In fact, she continued, it is church leaders who are most afraid of her opinions. Because of her growing activism, she's been shut out of Hungary's ecclesiastical media coverage. "In church newspapers, it's almost like I don't exist," she said.

Recently, organizers of Hungary's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity blocked her from participating, even though Mandák House had hosted a gathering every year since 1998. Bolba is a threat because she puts the lie to the image that the organizers want to portray: that Hungary's churches either stand apart from politics or stand behind Orbán.

For the time being, Orbán's government tolerates Mandák House's expanded refugee ministry. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, right now it's in his interest to show that his country is helping. Before Russia invaded, Orbán embraced a geopolitical policy of playing Russia off against Europe. While he remains Russia's ally in the EU, the war has made it imperative to prove he also supports Europe's united front against Putin. By allowing the UN to fund Dévai Fogadó, Orbán has proof of this support amid his ongoing geopolitical gamesmanship.

However, Orbán has shown a willingness to lay back and wait. With no chance he'll lose an election, he plays a long game and dismantles Hungary's independent institutions when the time is right—that is, when the rest of the world is looking the other way. One can easily imagine that Orbán might see shutting down an institution like Dévai Fogadó—partly funded by an American denomination—as a way to prove his loyalty to Putin when that serves his purposes.

Geopolitical prognostications aside, Hungarian Christians' resistance raises both historical and theological-

ethical questions: When the political process has failed to defeat authoritarianism, what forms of Christian resistance have yet managed to weaken these regimes? What forms of Christian witness and practice are faithful and non-idolatrous, and therefore able to withstand the manipulations of principalities and powers?

In 20th-century Europe, Christians asked these questions when God called them to resist fascism or communism. Returning to the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn would be a valuable exercise for American Christians today. But before we debate these questions in the pages of magazines or around university seminar tables, we should take a seat at Bolba's Wednesday night dinners

and learn from the Christians who feel this calling today.