

## **Right wing extremist groups and religion in Central Europe**

*Bernhard Odehnal*

In the spring of 2009 the Austrian publishing house Residenzverlag asked the Budapest-based journalist Gregor Mayer and me to write a book about right-wing extremist groups in Central Europe. The proposal came on the occasion of the increasing public appearance of such groups especially in Hungary but at that time also in the Czech republic (as seen in Litvinov) and the violence they provoked.

We chose six countries that we covered already as journalists for a long time (Hungary, Czech republic, Slovak republic, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria). One of the topics we investigated was the relation of these groups to religion and the churches. The variety we found was astonishing. While in the Czech republic we could hardly find any connection of right-wing extremists to Christian churches there are surprisingly strong ties between these groups and the catholic, protestant or orthodox churches in the Slovak republic, in Serbia and especially in Hungary.

In the Slovak republic the connection between right-wing extremism and the catholic church goes back to the Second World War when the catholic priest Josef Tiso ruled the newly founded Slovak state in total economic and politic dependence to Hitler-Germany. Slovak nationalists regard this time until now as role model for the modern state and try to rehabilitate Tiso. They get sympathy and support from some priests but not from the catholic church in Slovakia as a whole. Nevertheless there is no attempt of the catholic church to review its role in the Second World War and the Holocaust.

In Hungary we can see a very active role of the Calvinist church in supporting the right wing extremist party Jobbik. This party has three MPs in the European parliament and 47 MPs in the Hungarian parliament. A follower of Jobbik is the Calvinist priest Lorant Hegedüs jr., who has his own church in the centre of Budapest. At the entrance of his church there's a picture of the former fascist leader Miklos Horthy. In 2007 the notorious denier of the Holocaust, David Irving, was special guest in the church. Hegedüs comes from a family with a strong anti-Semitic background, he was MP for the anti-Semitic party MIEP of Istvan Csurka from 1998 so 2002. The Hungarian Calvinist church never took position against Jobbik and other right wing extremist or paramilitary groups in public. But neither did the catholic church or the small Lutheran church.

Nevertheless we can see a new development in Hungary in the recent months: Since Christianity is part of the nationalistic ideology of the ruling party Fidesz under Viktor Orban, right wing extremist groups turn away from Christian churches and adopt pagan rites and symbols. For example: There's a strong movement to bring the old Hungarian runes (called: Rovasiras) back in to daily life. Some villages, governed by Jobbik-mayors, already put up street signs in runes. Another example is the adoration of the «Turul», a mythic bird from Hungarian sagas. Islamophobia as seen in the west is hardly an issue in Central Europe since there are no migrants from Islamic countries. On the contrary we can see an attempt of the Hungarian Jobbik to establish close ties to the Islamic republic of Iran.

Instead of Islamophobia right wing extremist groups in Central Europe operate with general xenophobia, attacks on multicultural societies, the European Union and especially with verbal and physical attacks on Roma. Antizigansim is the ideology that unites all groups in these countries.

*Bernhard Odehnal covers Central Europe as correspondent for the Swiss daily paper «Tagesanzeiger». Together with Gregor Mayer he wrote the book «Aufmarsch – die rechte Gefahr aus Osteuropa» (Residenzverlag 2010)*