

Education for a Christian nation: Religion and nationalism in the Hungarian education policy discourse

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journals.sagepub.com/home/eer**Eszter Neumann** 

Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

Abstract

In the past decade, right-wing populist parties have brought back nationalism and religion into European politics. While a growing literature explores the political strategies, style and success of these parties and the challenge they pose to the European project, less attention has been paid to how right-wing populist governing is done at specific policy areas. This paper explores the education policy discourse of the Hungarian right-wing populist government. Drawing on the Discourse-Historical Approach to critical discourse analysis, the analysis concentrates on political speeches performed between 2010 and 2020 to examine the discursive framings and strategies utilised in relation to three nodal points identified in the speeches: upbringing, teaching Christian values and the nation. While in the political rhetoric, a coherent religious nationalist, neoconservative narrative took form, over time this narrative shifted from a strategic project of crafting a new language to justify paradigmatic legislative and policy change to a language disconnected from policy work and predominantly displaying features of nationalist extremism. In the discussed period, as a combined result of the right-wing government's Christian indentitarian project and the ambition of the Christian churches to increase their power and legitimacy, religion has increasingly permeated the secular spaces of Hungarian education.

Keywords

Discourse, education policy, Hungary, nationalism, neoconservatism, right-wing populism

Introduction

On December 15th 2020, the Hungarian Parliament adopted the latest amendment to the Fundamental Law of Hungary.¹ The modification of Section XVI (1) proclaims that *'Every child has a right to such protection and care as is necessary for his or her physical, mental and moral*

Corresponding author:

Eszter Neumann, Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence, Tóth Kálmán u 4., Budapest 1097, Hungary.

Email: neumann.eszter@tk.hu

development. Hungary protects the right of the children to self-identity according to their sex at birth and provides an upbringing in accordance with the values based on Hungary's constitutional identity and Christian culture'.² The symbolic act of integrating the idea of upbringing and education based on Christian values (with a particular emphasis on the anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-gender dimension) in the country's constitution completed a decade-long governing work of reinventing education within a religious and nationalist framework.

This paper seeks to understand the discursive strategies by which education has been reclaimed as the domain of the national since 2010, the sweeping election victory of Viktor Orbán's right-wing populist government in Hungary. Drawing on the Discourse-Historical Approach developed by Wodak et al. (2009), the analysis explores the discursive framings and strategies mobilised in speeches performed at the so-called National school-year openings in relation to *upbringing, teaching Christian values* and the *nation*. The analysis aims to contribute to scholarly discussions on de-Europeanization, the strengthening role of the national in education policy-making and the ways in which transnational and European discourses on education are being challenged and Europe is being constructed differently (Seddon and Niemeyer, 2018) by neoconservative and right-wing populist actors. Furthermore, the case study dissects how the language of traditional values redefine religion and present Christianity as an identity marker and an exclusive and unifying force in schooling and education-policy. Hungary has been widely considered the hotbed of right-wing populist governing in the literature, therefore the study offers insights into a particular form of religious populist policy-making and the influence of populist imaginaries and communication style on education policy discourse.

Neoconservatism, populism, religion and nationalism

Since the decline of the Soviet Union, education policy research has paid increasing attention to the globalisation of policy-making and to how policies travel across scales of governance. This focus on globalisation processes perhaps obscured and delayed the recognition of the revitalisation of conservatism and right-wing policies (Williamson et al., 2011), and the trends of nostalgic re-centring on the national in education-policy making (Piattoeva, 2009; Silova et al., 2014). While the upsurge of right-wing populism and anti-Europeanism have become topical issues in political science and nationalism studies (Bevelander and Wodak, 2019; Brubaker, 2017; Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2017), education researchers have so far paid little attention to the ways in which these political developments have influenced education policy-making and the construction of policy discourses (Giudici, 2020), or whether, in any means, they indicate the breakdown of the global neoliberal consensus of education reform (Cohen, 2021).

Such re-centring onto the nation poses new challenges to the governance of the European education area. Since education has traditionally been considered a key area where national identity is constructed and sustained (Arnott and Ozga, 2010), the EU's involvement in national decision-making has largely concentrated on discursive convergence and interventions into national education matters have been considered highly sensitive issues (Nóvoa, 2000). Governments have historically understood schooling as 'a significant contributor to their capacity to govern, through its creation of a common space of meaning, around identification with the nation' (Arnott and Ozga, 2016: 255). Therefore, education policy discourses shed ample light on the ways in which states construct 'the nation' and its 'future citizens' (Popkewitz and Lindblad, 2004), and propagate a certain understanding of national identity through schooling. Furthermore, in an era of strengthening nationalist sentiments and when nationalism is heavily used as a resource for governing work, international and European influences are also being reframed alongside the reinvention of the national.

In framing my analysis, the literature on neoconservative education policy-making, religion, nationalism and nation-building in education, and right-wing populism are equally insightful in a complementary way. In the following, I will briefly discuss how these strands of scholarship informed my analysis which precisely concentrates on the ways in which these themes intersect. Research focussing on the characteristics of neoconservative education policy-making in the US (Buras and Apple, 2008; Cohen, 2021), England (Neumann et al., 2020; Ball and Exley, 2011; Jones, 2014; Revell and Bryan, 2018), Scotland (Arnott and Ozga, 2010, 2016) or in Poland (Cervinkova and Rudnicki, 2019) points to the internal tensions and ideological contradictions which characterise neoconservative governing. Neoconservative educational governments typically push forward conservative, cultural restorationist agendas in symbolic fields such as the curriculum (prescriptive and traditional academic content, patriotic education, value/moral/character education, see Revell and Bryan, 2018; Vincent, 2018) and express a preference towards central control and command on the one hand, while further promoting neoliberal modes of education governance and market-focussed solutions (strong accountability measures, privatisation, belief in a minimal state) on the other. One of the key questions here is whether populist and neoconservative governments disrupt the neoliberal hegemony and the long prevalence of the ‘neoliberal common sense’ (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010) in education policy or not (Cohen, 2021).

My analysis also draws on constructivist approaches to the nation which consider nationalism a cognitive phenomenon shaping how people see and structure their entire world. Being mostly naturalised in everyday practices, nations and nationalism become intellectually tangible as a discursive formation which needs to be performed (Özkirimli, 2010). Tröhler (2020) contends that while it has become a truism in nationalism studies and education research to view modern schooling as a key vehicle of constructing citizens, both tend to apply a narrow understanding of the relation between education and the nation/state. While the role of education – with the exception of Gellner (1983) – has mostly been underplayed in theories of nationalism, education and curriculum research tends to concentrate on highly visible and ‘aggressive’ ideologies, and to oversee the forces of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995), that is everyday, unobtrusive representations and practices of the nation that forge a common sense of national belonging among people. Tröhler (2020) suggests that education research should expand its scope beyond curricular content, and address how the modern school ensures the development of ‘nationally minded citizens’ and how they obtain ‘national literacy’, the skill of reading national symbols and interpreting them as an affirmation of their collective identity through education.

Delving into the historical connections between religion, state and the politics of education, historiographic research contends that religion has fundamentally shaped the projects of nation-building through schooling as well as the *languages of education* circulating globally (Buchardt, 2017; Popkewitz, 2013; Tröhler, 2011). These studies demonstrated that religion – especially the influence of Protestant salvation themes on republicanism and cosmopolitanism – had substantially influenced the development of European and North American schooling, as well as of education, psychology and psychometrics as academic disciplines and political expertise. Challenging research narratives on the secularisation of modern schooling, they highlight the impact of religious thought on modern pedagogy, and argue that Protestant ideas have played an influential role in public life through modern pedagogised forms of religion (Buchardt, 2017). Therefore, religious narratives have equally shaped transnational discourses and policies of education as well as narratives of nationhood. From the perspective of the present study, the questions to be explored concern the ways in which the right-wing populist strategy of sacralising education-policy brings about the reinvention of schooling as a site, and the teacher and the child as objects of Christian nationalism (Tröhler, 2011) on the one hand, and the discursive imprints of the choices made between different Christian traditions of thought on the other.

With a populist government in power since 2010, Hungary is often portrayed as a model country for contemporary right-wing populist governing. My understanding of populism draws on the literature that considers populism a complex and elusive category (Wodak, 2015; Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2017) which should primarily be viewed as a political style that relies heavily on discourse as a resource for forging an exclusionary form of identity-politics (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016). Although right-wing populist governments' attraction to law-and-order punitive measures, curtailing LGBTQ+ rights or perceiving gender equality as jeopardising traditional family roles derive from right-wing nationalist ideology and not from their populism (Enyedi, 2016), populism integrates form and content (Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2017), and as a political style and discursive framework it greatly shapes policy-making. While nationalist discourse centres on the nodal point of the 'nation', populist political rhetoric, using a distinctively moral tone, is structured around the antagonism of the morally pure 'ordinary people' and the morally inferior elites (de Cleen, 2017; Laclau, 2005). Through the constant staging of crises, populist politicians present themselves as saviours of the nation (Müller, 2016). In agreement with the observation that forces of nationalism and populism are partially conflated and inextricably intermingled in right-wing populism (de Cleen, 2017), the analysis considers how subtle and more direct formulations of nationalism and the populist style of governing leave their mark on the Hungarian education policy discourse.

Religion and nationalism in Hungarian right-wing populism

Right-wing populist politics have brought back religion to the political discourse across the Central-Eastern European region. This has mostly happened in largely secularised countries such as Hungary (Hesová, 2019).³ In the case of Fidesz, the governing party of Hungary, religion had become a central element of identification by 1998, as the party transitioned from a liberal to a conservative stance. Szűcs (2012) compellingly demonstrated that the neoconservative rhetoric has been a central tool for Fidesz's identity politics since 1998 and the key rhetorical elements in the government discourse – recently identified as populist – have been present ever since. Szűcs (2012: 137) mentions virtualization as a frequently applied discursive strategy, that is the discursive construction of an alternative action space through amplifying the religious, sacral dimension of the moral concepts inherent to the neoconservative ideology and using religious connotations for legitimating the party's claim for political power. Similarly, Ádám and Bozóki (2016) argue that Hungarian right-wing populist discourse has conceived the ethnically defined nation as a sacred entity, and has attached religious attributes to national identification. The government's political rhetoric and symbolic imagery of the nation have been greatly shaped by the electoral struggles between Fidesz and the extreme right Jobbik party before the 2010 elections, and the mainstreaming of far-right nativist discourses and policies by Fidesz after 2010 (Bozóki, 2016).

Since 2006, this discursive appropriation of religious meanings has been institutionalised by Fidesz's strategic electoral alliance with the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), a dominantly Catholic party with historically strong connections to the Catholic Church.⁴ Due to this political alliance, KDNP, which otherwise would have been far below the electoral threshold, has earned the necessary number of parliamentary seats to form its fraction and has received significant government positions since 2010. In turn, endorsing Fidesz politically and expanding the umbrella of 'Christianity' to the party alliance, KDNP has given up its own political identity. Since 2010, Christianity has become the dominant state ideology, for instance, the new Constitution adopted in 2011 makes references to God, Christianity, the fatherland, 'traditional values', and the 'Holy Crown of Hungary'. The coalition government has been heavily relying on the Roman Catholic and Calvinist churches to provide legitimacy for its policies and its governing narrative

(Ádám and Bozóki, 2016), thus ‘politicising religion’ and ‘sacralising politics’. However, following longstanding historical patterns from the inter-war period, the ‘Christian-national’ idea primarily functions as an element of identity politics which marks cultural belonging to social conservatism and traditional nationalism rather than a commitment to faith or religion (Ádám and Bozóki, 2016; Brubaker, 2017; Halmai, 2019; Hesová, 2019). Ádám and Bozóki (2016) go even further arguing that Christianity in the Hungarian case is entirely secular and political discourse and practice have habitually mixed Christian imageries with pre-Christian pagan mythology. Similar trends apply to the whole Central and Eastern European region where right-wing populist parties have redefined religion within the framework of indentitarian Christianity (Hesová, 2019).

Like right-wing populists across Europe, the government frequently invokes the country’s attachment to the ‘Christian identity of Europe’. While religion is discursively used to assert ‘the fantasy of unity without fissures’ (Arditi, 2007: 83), as a key marker of populist identity politics, it is also utilised in defining in- and outgroups. Since the 2015 refugee crisis, the rhetorical construct of distinguishing between the native people and its traditional culture from a threatening other has been upscaled from the national to the European level. The government has presented itself as the saviour of Europe’s ‘Christian civilisation’ (Bocskor, 2018; Bolonyai and Campolongo, 2017; Brubaker, 2017), envisioning that the continent would in time come around to the ‘Christian and national’ vision of politics (Müller, 2016). In the wake of these developments, Orbán declared that Hungary is governed as an ‘old-style Christian democracy’ in 2018.

Brubaker (2017) suggests that since the 2015 refugee crisis populist identity work has evolved in somewhat different directions in East Central Europe and North-West Europe. Both refer to a shared European, Christian identity which must be defended against an invasion of a foreign culture, but while in the latter case the growing civilisational preoccupation with the Islam shifted the definition of the political community from narrowly national terms to broadly civilisational terms (embracing liberalism as an identity marker of the Christian West), in Eastern Europe the political semantics of self and other have remained fundamentally nationalist (externalising liberalism as an anti-national project). The trope of the resistance to ‘centuries’ foreign rule’ renders liberalism (recently associated with dictates from ‘Brussels’ or George Soros) the latest of a long series of domination projects imposed by foreign powers (Brubaker, 2017). Constructing Eurosceptic political rhetoric, the Hungarian government has portrayed itself as a freedom fighter who defends ‘the Nation’s’ sovereignty from ‘Brussels’ as well as from his domestic political opponents whom he accuses of serving ‘foreign interests’.

Education policy-making in Hungary since 2010

The literature exploring the role of ideology in the policies of the Hungarian right-wing populist government has highlighted some tension between policy rhetoric and practice and disagree on the ways in which the strategic use of conservative rhetoric should be interpreted. According to Szikra (2019) one group of authors argue that policy-making has been entirely ‘pragmatic’: policy decisions have not exhibited any particular ideological orientation but are driven by the ultimate goal of gaining economic returns for those in power or loyal to the executive branch, maximising electoral support and strengthening the power of the ruling elite. In turn, authors using the ‘bricolage’ approach argue that ideas from different paradigms are innovatively blended in the policies of the government. Finally, based on the example of Russia and Hungary, Szelenyi and Csillag (2015) argue that these governments adopted a consistent ideology which they called ‘post-communist traditionalism/neo-conservatism’. This ideology embraces the usual essential values of conservative ideology such as patriotism, religion and traditional family values. Similarly to the agendas of the neoconservative revival in the US (Williamson et al., 2011), these governments identify themselves as social conservatives; they are ‘populists’ and

stage culture wars around socially conservative issues. They make a critical distinction between ‘workers’ and ‘people who do not work’, they are anti-immigrant and oppose racial/ethnic affirmative action and tend to be patriotic and religious. However, contrary to Western-European and US versions of right-wing populism, post-communist traditionalists are statist both in social issues and economic policy.

We discussed the symbolic struggles of the political elites since the regime change and the ways in which they impacted education policy-making after 2010 elsewhere in detail (Neumann and Mészáros, 2019). In brief, the socialist-liberal coalition in power between 2002 and 2010 represented a ‘Westernist’ modernisation political stance and constructed a political rhetoric which rejected the ‘backward’ characteristics of the country, including nationalism. In turn, the nationalist-populist political bloc led by Fidesz relied on the ‘Christian-national idea’ of the anti-communist interwar bourgeoisie, and forged a rhetoric of defending the nation against the internal and external enemies of national development. Fully adopting the EU proposed language of education, the education administration between 2002 and 2010 proposed a programme of ‘modernising’ education, Justifying the need for action with data from OECD’s PISA 2001 survey and endorsing the ‘neoliberal common sense’ mediated by European policy discourses, the Socialist-Liberal coalition initiated major reforms on the area of Roma integration and competence-based education.

In such a polarised political field, education has become a battlefield of a symbolic struggle for reinstating the nation since 2010 (Zakariás, 2014). In the following, I draw a quick sketch of the main compulsory education policies to provide my analysis with background. Education reform was neither foreseen in Fidesz’s election programme nor in its government programme in 2010, and education has not become a priority policy area for Fidesz ever since (Kopasz and Boda, 2018). KDNP however did publish a separate education policy programme in 2009 which announced that after the coalition’s election victory, ‘*we have to reverse detrimental processes without hesitation, and start to rebuild education on the foundations of consensual European humanistic values, the law of nature, and morality rooted in Christianity*’ (KDNP Educational Workgroup, 2009: 3). Between 2010 and 2014, the secretariat for education was led by a prominent KDNP politician with close ties to the network of Catholic educationalist. This period brought seismic changes in compulsory education predominantly driven by the political programme and ideological commitments of KDNP.

The governing of compulsory education since 2010 can be largely characterised by the neoconservative statist approach to policy-making. To symbolically mark the start of a new era in the governing of education, the 1993 LXXIX. Act on Education providing the overall legislative framework for compulsory education was dismantled and replaced by the CXC. Act on National Public Upbringing in 2011.⁵ The most notable neoconservative policies initiated in the first government cycle entailed the reinforcement of a traditional ‘chalk and talk’ knowledge-oriented curriculum with a nationalist agenda in the humanities (2012, 2020), the introduction of the compulsory choice between ethics and religious education in the school curriculum (2014). Appropriating the revisionist memory politics agenda of the far-right Jobbik party (Enyedi, 2016), the educational administration introduced the *Day of National Togetherness* commemorating the trauma of territory and population loss caused by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon/Versailles (2010) as well as a state-funded programme for schools to organise study trips to former, pre-1920 Hungarian territories. The neoconservative agenda went hand in hand with increasing central control and command and power concentration by centralising school maintenance and operation in 2013 (earlier, most schools were governed by local municipalities), nationalising the market of school textbooks (2014) and curtailing the professional autonomies of schools and teachers (2013). At the same time, the government’s policies have further strengthened educational inequalities, and significant

financial and professional resources were withdrawn from the area of social inclusion and school desegregation. The government has dismantled the frameworks of social dialogue and consultation and curtailed the rights of the unions (Bajomi and Csákó, 2017). Important legislative documents were often submitted by individual MPs in a fast track decision-making procedure.

The 2014–2018 government cycle has mostly brought a period of consolidation in compulsory education. Most recently, the process of reworking the national curriculum (2018–2020) showed an increasing preoccupation with ideological control over taught content. For instance, the works of Nazi sympathiser writers were integrated in the literature curriculum and, contrasting scientific evidence, a mythical reinterpretation of the origin of Hungarians and Hungarian language are promoted in the textbooks.

The Hungarian government's preoccupation with the traditional family ideal and the vision of a 'Christian-national' culture has been fostered by joint church-state projects since 2010. Such cooperation of state and church in forging Christian identitarian politics through education has strong historical origins in the interwar period (Nagy, 2000; Szabó, 2010). In turn for the ideological support of the historical 'Christian' churches, institutional cooperation between the state and the Christian churches was developed in a broad range of welfare services (Ádám and Bozóki, 2016). State officials have publicly and repeatedly confirmed the 'alliance' or 'strategic partnership' of church and state (Enyedi, 2016; Halmai, 2019), and contradicting the idea of state neutrality, historical, 'recognised' churches have been strongly and generously incentivised to take greater part in the provision of public services. Education was among the first sectors to be affected. Since 2011, a complex set of preferential regulations and incentives have invited 'recognised' churches to take over the operation of public schools (Radó, 2019). Consequently, between 2010 and 2021, the share of church-run schools rose from 8.6% to 16.6% in the primary sector, from 10% to 26.1% in the secondary sector, and from 5.6% to 10.5% in the kindergarten sector. Christian churches have also become important players in running after-school study programmes, higher education talent programmes, early childhood education programmes, and most recently they have become invested in the foster care system and child welfare provision. These school transfers have greatly contributed to the social polarisation of the local school systems and the ethnic segregation of state-run schools especially in small towns and villages at the more deprived peripheries of the country (Tomasz, 2017; Zolnay, 2016).

Methodological approach

My analysis was inspired by the strand of literature which understands policy as discourse, constructed and enacted in documents, speeches and other public forms discursively (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). More concretely, the paper draws on the discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis developed by Wodak et al. (2009). This interdisciplinary approach integrates four analytic layers: (1) the immediate language, its inconsistencies and dilemmas in discourse-internal structures, (2) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourse, (3) the extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames, and (4) the broader frame of historical and socio-political relations, processes and circumstances in which the analysed discursive events and practices are embedded. The adoption of the discourse-historical approach can thus encompass the specific Hungarian historical, political, social and institutional settings in education that could otherwise be overlooked. While it does not aim to contribute to historical studies, it has been historically sensitive and ideas rooted in conceptual history, such as 'the idea that discourses and concepts are reconceptualised across fields and genres' (Forchtner and Wodak, 2018: 146) have been influential to the approach.

My take on the subject was inspired by Wodak and colleagues' (2009) book on the discursive construction of Austrian national identity and particularly the chapter on political speeches (pp. 70–105), as well as by Wodak's (2015) more recent work on right-wing populist discourses. In the former research, the key assumptions were (1) that nations are primarily mental constructs, in the sense that they exist as discrete political communities in the imagination of their members; (2) that national identity includes a set of dispositions, attitudes and conventions that are largely internalised through socialisation and create a 'national habitus'; and (3) that nationhood as a form of social identity is *produced, transformed, maintained and dismantled* through discourse (Wodak et al., 2009). Research drawing on Wodak's work on the construction of Hungarian national identity (Bocskor, 2018; Bolonyai and Campolong, 2017; Glózer, 2014; Vidra et al., 2011) was also an important foundation of my study.

While Wodak and colleagues' systematic analysis focuses on three dimensions, content, strategies and realisations, my analysis mainly concentrates on the exploration of the content of political speeches. My research question concerns the ways in which education, national identity and Christianity were discursively constructed and connected in these speeches. Furthermore, I was interested in whether and how populist rhetoric elements infiltrate and structure the speeches and the ways in which Europe and European education policy discourses were addressed.

My sample consists of 18 speeches performed by the Ministers of Human Resources and the Secretaries of State for Education at the National school year openings between 2010 and 2020.⁶ The 'entry-level' analysis of the content of the speeches was conducted with the NVIVO data analysis software and the 'in-depth analysis' of coherence and cohesion was carried out in further iterations manually (see Wodak, 2015). Although school year openings with the attendance of ministers of education had been to some extent politicised by earlier governments, the educational administration coming into power in 2010 invested significantly greater governing work in constructing the beginning of the school year as symbolic, ritual, televised events where they explicitly addressed the imagined community of the schools of the nation. As a way of linguistically marking the 'national' identification of the new administration and their intention to reconceptualise schooling as a *national* issue, these occasions were labelled as *National school-year openings* and counted by sequence numbers to flag the start of a new era.

The locations were carefully selected with symbolic connotations in mind. Over eleven years, the host institutions were church-run schools on five occasions (a Cistercian Secondary School in 2012, Calvinist Schools in 2013, 2017 and 2019, and a Catholic congregational school in 2018). Alongside the speeches of the government representatives, local actors (representatives of the local municipality on seven occasions, school principals on four occasions, religious foremen on six occasions, and once the head of a teacher society and a university rector) were invited to speak. Student performances, choir recitals, poem recitations, dance and musical performances also took place. These performances were excluded from the analysis since my primary focus was on reconstructing the discursive strategies of the governmental actors.

Over the span of eleven years, altogether six politicians gave speeches on behalf of the government: Rózsa Hoffmann, a prominent politician of KDNP and the secretary of state for education between 2010 and 2013; Judit Bertalan Czunyi, a Fidesz MP and secretary of state for education in 2014–15, and László Palkovics, the secretary of state for education in 2016–17. Since 2018, the secretary of state for education has not spoken at the National school-year openings. The Ministers of Human Resources also took the stage every year: Miklós Réthelyi, a medical doctor associated with KDNP in 2010–2011, Zoltán Balog, a Fidesz MP and Calvinist priest between 2012 and 2017, and Miklós Kásler, a medical doctor and minister since 2018.

In the following, I turn to discussing the three nodal points or discourse topics identified in the speeches: *public upbringing, teaching Christian values* and the *nation*.

The discourse of public upbringing

In the first government cycle, the speakers were heavily invested in crafting a new policy language to contrast their policy vision with the education policy agenda of the previous administration. *'From now on, public upbringing will have a central role'* – the secretary of state for education introduced one of the key concepts of the new policy language in 2010. Arguing that the concept of public education was too restrictive, the new educational government proclaimed to build a *system of national public upbringing* (nemzeti köznevelés rendszer).

Let's start with the semantic analysis of the term *upbringing* which has replaced the word *education* in policy texts and public utterances. Using this term, the speakers contrasted the cognitive focus they associated with the term education and their vision of schooling which, they argued adopting one of the core concepts of the Catholic educational tradition, should encompass children's physical, cognitive and moral development and therefore provide means for raising 'whole humans' (RH-2012).

'... we will restore the standing of knowledge, studious work and honour, and we consider our schools institutions serving the physical, cognitive and moral enrichment of our children'. – argued the secretary of state for education in 2011.

The speeches frequently touched upon the importance of sports and physical training (in 2011, compulsory daily PE lessons were introduced) arguing that physical health and moral strength are closely interlinked (ZB-2013). The below excerpt provides a clear example of the use of the *nation as body* metaphor, the association constructed between healthy student bodies and the vitality of the nation:

'Let me quote a dictum from Iuvenalis: let us pray for a healthy soul in a healthy body. Recognizing the moral, physical and spiritual decline of the Romans, he feared the collapse of the empire. His words are warning signs for us today: it is unlikely that a healthy soul would be found in a weak and flabby body. And a sick soul is a great danger to the country, because it cannot fulfil its original mission, quality individual and community life'. (RH-2012)

The narrative of the education government reframed the relations between state and citizens and broke away from the 'neoliberal common sense' of education. The main line of argument in the speeches was that education should not be a *service* (szolgáltatás), but rather the common responsibility of the state and the parents. In this rhetoric, the term *service* was linked to the forces of consumer society in which, as argued, the education system is driven by consumer expectations (of parents, children, and multinational companies). Instead of the negatively portrayed *service-model*, the concept of *servicing* (szolgáltat) was proposed: upbringing should be a 'shared serving, the shared responsibility of the school and the family' (ZB-2013). Using similar logic, the so-called *school community servicing*, the compulsory participation of every Hungarian student in school-organised volunteering activities before graduation, was introduced in 2011. Likewise, the teaching profession was redefined as *servicing* rather than being a *public service* (ZB-2013). The wording here has notable connotations to Protestant conceptions of community work, calling and salvation, *servicing* refers to the Biblical concept of 'serving God by serving one another'.

The government's commitment to the strong state taking 'full responsibility for education' (ZB-2013) was supported by the concept of community responsibility:

'The community responsibility for operating the school system was divided, questioned and almost destroyed. We will strengthen the governing, financing and controlling function of the state so that it can bear this responsibility fully'. (RH-2011)

The speeches recurrently referred to society as a set of smaller and bigger communities spanning from the family to the globe. *Public upbringing* was argued to be capable of nurturing the whole personality and thus ‘serve the rise of the smaller and bigger community, the family and the nation’. (RH-2012) This trope reflects a similar vision of society as the one described by Rutherford (2008) as fraternity without equality in the rhetoric of Cameron’s *compassionate conservatism* in England.

‘A well-planned and organized education is always considered, and considers today, the interest of humanity as the greatest set, within that, the interest of the nation, the home country, then the smaller communities such as the church, the profession, the town or the village, then the even smaller communities, the family, and finally the interest of the individual. This is not an order of importance, this is the print of human existence. Upbringing should prepare the child in a way that, and teaching should transfer such knowledge that takes every piece of this print in its own place. This is how our conception of upbringing differs from other 20-21st century concepts’. (RH-2013)

Reiterating the emblematic neoconservative argument about the alleged dominance and failure of progressive education reform (Buras and Apple, 2008), in 2010, the secretary of state characterised the period of socialist-liberal coalition government as an ‘era of deceptive and false child-centeredness’. Citing a moral from the first Hungarian king in the 11th century, she argued that schools should not be too coddling with children, but be brave enough to push them and make demands. In a similar anti-liberal rhetoric, speakers promised to restore respect towards teachers and the balance between the rights and obligations of students, teachers and parents (RH-2010). Especially in the first cycle, with the use of the topos of correction and healing, it was often argued that the new legislation was aimed at ‘gradually correcting the failings of the previous government’ (RH-2011, ZB-2017). The socialist-liberal coalition in power between 2002 and 2010 was condemned for ‘*taking our earlier excelling thousand years old institutional system to aberration*’ (RH-2011), for neglecting the importance of values in education and for enforcing changes driven by foreign ideologies.

‘In the name of false ideologies, the previous educational administration and its followers questioned eternal values, which to rephrase the words of our poet, Dániel Berzsenyi, the mainstays and cornerstones of a strong and proud country’. (RH-2011)

Finally, applying an antagonising populist logic and anti-expert rhetoric, the speakers repeatedly argued that instead of listening to ‘fake experts’ (ZB-2012), the government is inviting teachers and professionals to have their voice heard, yet it exclusively collaborated with the National Teacher Chamber, a newly established representative body loyal to the government which replaced earlier, dismantled channels of social dialogue. The topos of the consensus-seeking government complemented with repeated calls to teachers to trust the government was especially dominant in 2015–17, when teachers and students organised and protested against the education reform.

The discourse of teaching Christian values

With reference to Christianity, the national policy discourse primarily centred on the topic of value-based teaching, with thematic contents directly borrowed from the institutional discourse of denominational schools. In the first two cycles, the topic of value-based teaching was closely associated with the concrete education policy of introducing religious education into the compulsory school curriculum: since 2013, parents have been requested to choose whether their children should learn religious education or ethics as part of the school curriculum. The introduction of religious education was frequently mentioned as a symbol of the broader turn towards teaching values, and also as a project expected to have wider repercussions on society as a whole. The

speakers often justified the policy through defending it from alleged criticisms, with implicit reference to the ‘Westernist’ political bloc which had taken a stance against the sacralisation of public schools.⁷

‘Ethics will be compulsory already in the first grade – I hear the alarming calls. But it was already compulsory! It has been compulsory, compulsory from birth for politicians, teachers, priests, parents and students. We will learn it together now. Together with the family home, the school can become a place where apart from 21st century knowledge, we can learn about the distinction between good and bad, the resolution of our conflicts, fears and anger. If we have one shared cause in the country, that’s the cause of upbringing’. (ZB-2012)

The secretary of state for education in the first cycle distinguished a particular ‘Christian pedagogic style’ preferred by the government. She argued that in Christian pedagogy, the divine commandment and ‘the most effective, irreplaceable pedagogic tool or weapon’ of ‘smart love’ has a central place.

‘The basic threads of such pedagogy are the study, awareness and practice of morals, the norms of social coexistence. Hence we start to teach ethics and faith from the new school year. This subject will and shall be the objectified form of smart love, so that in every growing child, eternal human good, beauty and true virtues should be the motivations or balances in their lives’. (RH-2013)

The discursive topic of teaching values was frequently exemplified by the topos of teaching the ability to differentiate ‘good from bad/evil’ (RH-2010, ZB-2012, 2015, 2016, MK-2018, 2019, 2020), ‘valuable from valueless’ (ZB-2015), ‘human from inhumane’ (MK-2020) as a central purpose of education and the ‘foundation of every life’ (ZB2016). It was also often argued that teaching values provides students with stability in a chaotic world. The ability to make value-based judgements was recurrently recalled when the challenges and dangers of digitalisation were addressed (JCB 2016). Since 2018, these arguments have shifted to a more general level with the topos of *defending the pure, virtuous and moral nation by teaching values* taking a central place.

‘Something is good when it is good for others as well: the family, the nation and the people. To make these judgements, we need ethics, right thinking, and a suitable human value-system. The concepts must be used accurately, not in a blurry or relativizing way. We must phrase things clearly. The acts worthy of man are humane, the acts not worthy of man are of indignity’. (MK-2019)

The expansion of the church-run sector within the education system received surprisingly little consideration in the speeches, even though, as mentioned earlier, several school year openings were held in church-run schools and religious foremen repeatedly appeared on stage. When speakers did address the relation between state and church-run schools, the strategy of justification was applied. For example, the minister argued in 2017 that since 200,000 students were attending school year openings in sacred spaces across the country, holding the national event in a church would not need further explanation. On another occasion, the minister called church-run schools to ‘take part in the struggle for the Hungarian school system’.

‘This is the first time that a national school year opening is held in a denominational school in Hungary in the last twenty-two years. This message is an acknowledgement for what denominational schools have accomplished over twenty years Hungary, and for the four hundred years, for that two thousand years since churches have been teaching. And having said that, we have a request towards denominational schools. They shouldn’t aim to be islands. Not even oases exclusively. They shouldn’t be a ghetto, a

bubble. They should take part in the struggle for the Hungarian school system. Let them be gardens – as they had called denominational schools in the old times – or orchards, with many gates, where one can come in and leave, and they should enrich Hungarian pedagogy, and you can benefit from the things that others perhaps know better’. (ZB-2012)

Naturalising the Catholic heritage and forging a Christian origin myth for the education system, the speeches repeatedly emphasised that the first school in Hungary was established by a Benedictian monastery in 996. Underlining continuity with the Christian past, the school years were counted dating back to 996. Emphasising the shared Christian past, present and future of Hungarian schooling, the speeches rendered the links of Christianity and the state education system as a natural, unquestionable truth, as a cultural and historical fact rather than a matter of religious beliefs. Thus they offered a narrative of the past which emphasised the Christian character of Hungarian schooling and side-lined alternative narratives of state-run or secular education. As the project of building an ‘old-style Christian democracy’ has become the main identification narrative of the Orbán government, specific references to the Catholic schooling tradition and Latin learning mottoes were replaced by an increasing focus on applying the Christian-national idea to education.

The discourse of nationalism

Within the broader framework of teaching Christian values, schooling was explicitly viewed as a key site of national identity-building and teaching patriotism. This project was promoted on the policy level by symbolic measures dedicated to the recognition of the ethnoregional community and expanding the scope of the nation to the pre-1920 territories. With speakers habitually addressing Hungarians living beyond the national borders in their speeches, this ethno-nationalist stance was discursively expressed by spatial references to the unity of the ethnic Hungarian community across the Carpathian-basin. For instance, in 2011, the president of the Transylvanian Hungarian Teacher Association was invited to give a speech and ‘symbolically represent Hungarian teachers in the diaspora’ (RH-2011).

While the role of schools in national identity-building was a dominant topic of the speeches spanning over the decade, a significant shift has taken place in the ways in which this role was conceptualised and national unity was discursively constructed. During the first government cycle, the conservative-nationalist policy agenda was primarily framed as an act of reclaiming schooling from the allegedly liberal and ‘foreign’ influence of the previous government. For example, talking about the introduction of the Day of National Togetherness, the secretary for education explained that the measure is dedicated to strengthen ‘*earlier stigmatized, consciously marginalized national identity – patriotism in a nice old term – in education*’ (RH-2010). This political programme was typically narrated as a project developed against and in spite of the criticism of the ‘Westernist’ opposition.

‘The program is being implemented. Of course there are and there will be some who try to cover the sky with clouds of sighs about how terrible all these constraints are, controllers are in the classrooms, and how impossible it is to teach Albert Wass⁸, and that we teach military education and patriotism, and anyway, where is the freedom?’ (RH-2012)

In line with the literature (Wodak et al., 2009), a typical ‘banal’ strategy of referencing the nation was by referring to the shared culture symbolised by quotes and anecdotes from and about poets, scientists, and sportsmen. The canon was discussed as an unquestionable moral resource in all the speeches, but while speakers in the first two cycles urged students to engage with the cultural

heritage, since 2018, students and teachers have been placed in even more passive recipient and mediating position respectively. Recently, students have been called to ‘admire Hungarian culture!’ (MK-2018, MK-2020) which has been described as a gemstone or a treasure:

‘Hungarian culture flourished from many roots, embraced many values, and by this, it became the peculiar treasure, irreplaceable gemstone of universal culture’. (MK-2018)

While the speeches of the first and second term primarily explicated what ‘national upbringing’ actually means through discussing the conservative educational programme, the discussion of policies has been replaced by nativist, extreme-right narratives of restoring the nation (Glózer, 2014) and nation-building through schooling since 2018. Recently, the topos of threatened national sovereignty with reference to wars, invaders, ‘foreign ideologies’, and a need to ‘reclaim our history, traditions, culture, identity’ and ‘economic and political sovereignty’ (MK-2019) have become central discursive topics. In this framing, the educational projects of patriotism and strengthening national identity were argued to ensure the survival of the nation. Recent speeches have emphasised the uniqueness of Hungarian culture and have portrayed the nation as the defender of what makes Europe European.⁹

‘It’s not enough to learn that Saint Stephen ruled from 997 and established a sovereign Christian state and Christian church. You shall know why, how and with what results. How did it pertain until now? You shall know that Christianity elevated our ancient culture into sacred heights, and our perspective on life, our sense of mission, legal order and lifestyle derive from this. We can still live as Hungarians, whilst states have emerged and declined around us’. (MK-2018)

Although the topos of students as the future of the nation has been employed through the whole period, before 2018, the speakers emphasised the key role of schooling and teachers in nurturing the future of society, while lately the emphasis has shifted to the role of families. Articulating the view of the traditional family and sometimes even a fertility agenda, families were portrayed as ‘sacred’ (MK-2018), safe havens, which express ‘self-sacrificing love’ and teach ‘character and human identity’ for future generations. Addressing parents, the minister proclaimed:

‘. . . the family is the most valuable alliance: the nation grows out of it, and it conceives and gives birth to the future’. (MK-2018)

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis so far examined how education, national identity and Christianity were discursively constructed in the Hungarian education policy rhetoric. I now turn to summarise my findings by looking at the shifts in the argumentation and the connections, coherence and cohesion between the three themes across the texts. While every speech was structured around these themes, I noticed significant shifts in emphasis and focus over time which also affected the applied discursive and rhetorical strategies.

In the first cycle, speakers introducing landmark legislative and policy changes were preoccupied with crafting a new policy language and rhetoric centring on the nodal points of upbringing and teaching Christian values. In this period, concentrating on redefining what education and the nation in education means, the speakers mainly employed transformative discursive strategies, often relying on the topoi of *building a new world*, *reinstating order and safety*, and *correction and healing*. This language was dominated by inward-looking, historical references. Policy-makers frequently

justified the new policy paradigm employing the strategy of dichotomisation (Cohen, 2021): they contrasted their programme with the legacy of the previous government and, applying the topos of the defence *from foreign and false ideologies*, employed dismantling discursive strategies to discredit political opponents and their allegedly anti-national ideologies.

In the second term, when the government faced teacher and student protests, the work of governing came to the forefront with speakers employing the topos of *seeking consensus* and *the promise of consolidation, stability and calculability following seismic changes*. While the policy language in the first term carefully avoided the use of European discourses, I noted the hybridisation of European discourses and the national policy discourse on teaching Christian values in this term especially in the speeches given by education secretaries coming in for shorter periods. References to European comparative data, benchmarks and discourses on economic competition, skills and competences appeared alongside the continued emphasis on teaching values. This period was characterised by a future-oriented policy discourse with a prevalence of constructive strategies presenting education as a *shared cause and responsibility*. Furthermore, applying perpetuative strategies, speakers emphasised *positive change, deliberative decision-making* and the importance of *tradition and values in a changing world*.

The political rhetoric since 2018 has been decisively different from that of the previous two terms. Perhaps to some extent due to the absence of the state secretary for education, the discussion of policy content and the work of governing have almost completely vanished from speeches. Arguably, these speeches reflect the ‘issueless politics’ (Reisigl, 2007: 1128 cited by Wodak, 2015) of the third term of government, a period when political communication and symbolic rituals have generally replaced education policy-making. Instead, a moralising, explicitly nativist rhetoric bearing striking similarity with the far-right discourses analysed by Wodak (2015) and Glózer (2014) took over the stage. With a tone of pathos, these speeches concentrated on the troubled but glorious past of the nation and its pure, noble, virtuous people (see Mudde, 2004), its threatened autonomy. They viewed schools and families first and foremost as a source of national identity-building where students learn how they should be true, virtuous Christians and Hungarians from history. Several paragraphs of the speeches between 2018 and 2020 were repeated word by word suggesting, if nothing else, that the speaker considered these proclamations as unquestionable, eternal, almost sacred truths.

While education has traditionally been a key area of national identity-building and forming nationally minded citizens, reinventing education as the domain of Christian and national identity politics has become a central and explicit agenda of the government since 2010. Using Billig’s (1995) metaphor, the unwaved flags (and crucifixes) were activated; not only in the political arena, but in the everyday lives of schools too. During the first term, education policy-makers were invested in constructing a neoconservative policy language describing a vision of schooling greatly influenced by the conservative Catholic politics of KDNP and a circle of Catholic educationalists. The key decision-makers proposed a vision of Christian education, and within this framework, concepts from the Catholic and Protestant educational heritage peacefully coexisted. The Catholic influence was tangible in the notion of educating the whole child and in crafting a history of Hungarian education starting with Benedictian monastery schools, and Calvinist thought – embodied by Zoltán Balog, the Minister of Human Affairs between 2012 and 2017 and Calvinist priest – was influential in framing teaching and education provision in general as a way of ‘serving’ God. This neoconservative ideological orientation was combined with a commitment to the strong state, therefore the findings support the hypothesis of post-communist/neoconservative traditionalism (Szelényi and Csillag, 2015). Combining religious conservative and nationalist discourse, state actors claimed legitimacy to carry out the centralisation of the education system in the name of national interests and Christian values. With the main actors stepping back, the policy discourse

became less coherent during the second term. Since 2018, the mainstreaming and institutionalisation of extreme-right nativist ideologies have taken place. This discourse colonised the domain of education, and education became just another symbolic domain for populism and indentitarian Christianity to draw resources from. It is the task of further research to explore how this ideological turn trickled down into the everyday life of schools, how it was resisted and reduced to banal nationalism at certain places, and how it created an opportunity for local school actors to push forward nationalist agendas and to reshape the contents of national literacies at others.

While education research mostly found the bricolage and overlaps of neoliberal and neoconservative education policies and ultimately the prevalence of the neoliberal commonsense elsewhere, in Hungary, the governance of compulsory education, substantiated on the antagonism of a school system driven by market logics and the ‘compassionate conservative’ vision (Rutherford, 2008) of schooling serving national interests, broke away from the neoliberal common sense. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, it worth noting that in the same period, the governing of less symbolic education policy areas not under the direct influence of the religious conservative political elite, such as vocational training or higher education, was characterised by ideological bricolage, and the influence of the neoliberal common sense.

The rest of the concluding discussion focuses on the boundary-making work by which national unity was constructed in the political rhetoric. The three nodal points, *upbringing*, *teaching Christian values* and *the nation* were closely associated in the education policy discourse, and together carved out the frames of an exclusionary form of identity politics in education. With the programme of teaching Christian values, the educational government decisively broke away from the political consensus on the secularity of public schools which dated back to the regime change. Moreover, applying a moralising way of legitimising state actions, the policy discourse on teaching Christian values enacted a new language of othering (see Revell and Bryan, 2018). The most apparent form of this is the naturalisation of Christian values in education, portraying the nation as a homogeneous, Christian community. By doing so, the policy discourse constructed a value hierarchy that suppressed and oversaw other worldviews and non-religious stances. Brubaker’s (2017) observations on European populisms seem to apply to the language of values education: while in Western Europe, responding to the civilisational threat from Islam, the policy discourse on values education tends to embrace liberalism (Revell and Bryan, 2018), in the Hungarian case, teaching Christian values was conceived as means of promoting nationalism and anti-liberalism. State actors formulated the discourse on Christian education and pedagogic style in opposition to what they labelled as ‘Westernist’ education. Pursuing the antagonising right-wing populist strategy, the global languages of education which themselves are deeply rooted in Protestant salvationist themes (Tröhler, 2011) were discarded and dismantled as representatives of anti-national forces. The analysis therefore highlighted how right-wing populists re-sacralise education-policy otherwise.

On a final note, while I agree with Ádám and Bozóki (2016) that on behalf of the government, the Christian-national idea has been used for an indentitarian political project that marks cultural belonging and redefines religion as a marker of Western civilisation which should be protected (Hesová, 2019), it is equally important to note that this effort has, met with the ambition of the Christian churches to increase their power and legitimacy and promote religious beliefs in a largely secular society.

The striking denial of complexity within society (Wodak, 2015) and the ‘absent presence’ (Apple, 1999) of race, ethnicity and social class in the policy rhetoric should also be noted. Even when the 2015 national school-year opening was held in a village school widely respected as good practice in the education of Roma students, none of the speeches given by government politicians touched upon the issue of ethnic or social diversity in education.

According to Wodak (2015), ‘right-wing populist nationalism inherently endorses an essentialized concept of nationalism expressed in ever more restrictive (nativist) body politics (Kulturturnation)’ (p. 95). While nationalism has always been a central organising force of the analysed speeches, over time we have seen a move towards more restrictive nativist discourses. The analysis provided several examples where neoconservative policies were narrated with typical populist discursive strategies. In the first two terms, the speakers dominantly utilised the discourse of distancing when they constructed the antagonism between the morally superior government representing ‘the people’ (and teachers in particular) and the distinctive others, in this case liberalism and the ‘liberal’ elite (‘fake advisors’, ‘liberal pedagogies’ and the policies of the previous educational government in general) were portrayed as morally inferior and ‘valueless’. Since 2018 however the discourse of proximity and the nativist ideal of national unity have become the most salient rhetorical features.

In the discursive construction of his own political identity, the Hungarian prime minister positioned the European Union as the representation of the ‘liberal other’, an antagonistic outgroup to the Hungarian people for whom he claimed to be the legitimate and authoritative voice (Bolonyai and Campolongo, 2017). Although this antagonism was not recreated and European education policy discourses were not challenged directly in the education policy rhetoric, at the subtextual level, the new policy language was aimed at dismantling and overwriting European policy discourses of social inclusion, skills and competences and thus represent a political attempt to dissociate the country from the European education policy space.

Political projects and discourses drawing heavily on nationalism as a resource, along with reinventing the national, also redefine the meanings attached to extra-national influences. While education research on the transnational flows of ideas, policies and people has carefully explored how policy-makers seek external legitimacy, the comeback of nationalism and the rise of right-wing populism raise the question of how inward-looking, exclusivist nation-building projects gain force from constructing the foreign as the dangerous other. Therefore, research on how such political movements shape education policies and construct Europe differently should stretch beyond the boundaries of the nation state, and observing the relational dynamics of ‘the people’ and the foreign ‘others’, explore how these political projects thrive on the rejection of the European other.

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ORCID iD

Eszter Neumann  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1915-4769>

Notes

1. After the 2010 elections, as a symbolic act of marking a new era, the Constitution of Hungary was replaced by the Fundamental Law of Hungary on April 25th 2011.
2. Translation credits: www.abouthungary.hu

3. A survey conducted across countries of the CEE region (Cooperman et al., 2017) found that 64% of the Hungarian population seldom or never attend religious services, which makes the country the second least active in the region. With 23% of the population identifying as non-believer Hungary ranked 11th on the World Atheism List in 2012 (Smith, 2012).
4. As of the 2011 census, 11.6% of the population claimed to be Calvinist and 39% Catholic. From the 17th century, the Hungarian Calvinist church had played a key role in the country's political leadership, Hungarian national identity-building and crafting the Hungarian nation through schooling. Nevertheless, until the interwar period's Christian-Conservative Horthy-era, none of the historical churches fully identified itself with the Hungarian nation and Catholicism had never been associated with Hungarian patriotism and nationalism. Unlike in Poland, under communism, the Catholic church was neither considered a symbol of national independence, nor an ally for the opposition. (Halmai, 2018). The most influential Fidesz politicians come from Calvinist families. The formation of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance hence aims to embrace the Catholic church and its voters into the halo of Orbán's government.
5. The direction of the vocational sector was assigned to the Ministry of National Economy in 2010 and followed a very different policy trajectory which will not be discussed in this paper.
6. I do not assume that the politician who delivers the speech is the person who actually wrote it. I agree with Wodak et al. (2009) in that this is not actually of great importance as the person who delivers the speech is the one who is solely responsible for its content.
7. After the regime change, fierce political debates centring on the principle of the so called 'world-view neutrality' unfolded on the regulation of teaching religious education in public schools. This debate perfectly exemplifies the typical positions in public debates relating to the secularisation in education (see: Burhardt, 2017). The politicians of the Hungarian Socialist Party, the Alliance of Free Democrats and Fidesz argued that public schools and the knowledge they convey should not be committed to any worldviews or religious convictions, and families should not be requested to expose their worldviews at the schools. Eventually, the 1993 Education Act ruled that in public schools, religious education should be organised as an optional after-school activity in a protected time zone when schools are not offering other programmes (Nagy, 1994).
8. The insertion of Albert Wass into the literature curriculum, a highly controversial 20th century writer expressing openly anti-Semitic views in his writings, has been a topical issue in the public debates on the canon promoted by the new literature curriculum.
9. Hesová (2019) noted similar civilisatory discourses across Central Eastern Europe.

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Author biography

Eszter Neumann is a sociologist of education, she obtained her PhD at King’s College London, UK in 2018. Her doctoral dissertation explored the ‘Soft and Hard Processes of Categorizing Students: Ability setting and managing behaviour in English and Hungarian schools’. Her research concerns education policy making in England and Hungary, interethnic relations in schools, the production of social inequalities and normalisation processes in schools. She is currently employed at the Institute for Minority Studies in the Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary. Her current research project examines the increasing participation of traditional churches in Hungarian education and education policy-making at the churches.