

The Post-socialist Integralism and Its Non-religious Origins

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2022.4.38> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV, v. v. i. © 2022, Juraj Buzalka. This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons

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Against the background of several biographies of non-religious persons in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this paper opens the discussion about the sources of reactionary conservatism in the non-religious sphere, parallel to the revival of religious fundamentalism after state-socialism. The argument is that the post-socialist conservative turn has to be analysed with regard to wider implications resulting from the transformations of social organization of politics under state-socialism and the post-socialist ideology that I define as post-peasant integralism.

Keywords: non-religion, post-socialism, post-peasant integralism, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia

How to cite: Buzalka, J. (2022). The Post-socialist Integralism and Its Non-religious Origins. *Slovenský národopis*, 70(4), 475–492. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2022.4.38>

This paper¹ opens the discussion about the sources of reactionary conservatism in the non-religious sphere, parallel to the revival of religious fundamentalism after state-socialism. The evident post-socialist conservative turn shall be analysed with regard to the wider implications resulting from the transformations of religion and politics under and after state-socialism, creating the people whom I call post-peasants: nominally urban employers of industrial economy who nevertheless value the country and its supposed conservative moral qualities. This post-socialist conservatism

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Tatiana Zachar Podolinská and two anonymous reviewers of *Slovenský národopis* for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

is expressed in the ideology that I define as post-peasant integralism. My perspective on integralism takes fundamentalist religion as an important component of the conservative-fundamentalist agenda. Integralism – as opposed to modern individualism, secularism, and scientific empiricism – nevertheless also emerges as a popular ideology of many non-religious people.

In what follows I first define post-peasant integralism. I then present some basic facts about religion and non-religion in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. The major empirical part offers several biographies of non-religious informants, and this is followed by the reconsideration of populist-conservative insurgency as a component of wider, not necessarily religious Counter-Enlightenment movement.

The post-peasant integralism

As Talal Asad (2003) argued, the secular is not a successor of religion or the sheer producer of the rational. Rather, religion and secularism developed alongside each other in modern times, transforming themselves via their mutual interference. The alternative secularization theories likewise argue for the decreased importance of institutional religion as well as individual traditional worshipping concentrated around a church in contemporary Western societies. Modern religiosity shows an increasingly developing mix of individualized religious and non-religious orientations (see, for example, Müller, Pollack, 2016; Davie, 1994; Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Luckmann, 1967). The authors researching the post-communist aspect of these religious transformations recognize similar diversity (see, for example, Nešpor, 2018; Podolinská, 2008; Hagoovská, Jerotijević, 2019). The sociological studies of religion notice the trend of de-secularisation and de-privatisation of religion in post-communist Europe in the first two decades after 1989. Thus, the analyses developed on the Western European material risk the inadequate reflection of the specifics of the post-communist modernity (Podolinská, Krivý, Bahna, 2013: 191). The authors also put forward the hypothesis about the importance of impact on this differentiation lies in the earlier, pre-communist past and on paths of development in particular national contexts that has been revived as tradition after communism's collapse (Podolinská, Krivý, Bahna, 2013: 192).

In my recent work (Buzalka, 2021), I suggested that people's livelihood practices and economic ideas developed under the communist modernisation should be examined more thoroughly to show how they have been transmitted and/or re-invented by contemporary populism. I have argued for post-peasant integralism, the post-socialist version of integralism developed originally by Douglas Holmes (2000) in Western Europe, that actually makes reactionary radicalization happen in the post-socialist European Union. I argue that the post-peasant integralism shows indivisible religious components, however, it has also often emerged as truly non-religious and even anti-religious politics.

Douglas Holmes (2000) considers integralism to be a movement emerging from the European tradition of Counter-Enlightenment, with its commitments to traditional

cultural forms. But it is a movement growing up in the apparently modern condition and having an appeal to people living apparently modern lives. As a framework of meaning, a practice of everyday life, an idiom of solidarity, and a consciousness of belonging linked to a specific cultural milieu, Holmes derives his integralism from Isaiah Berlin's (1973) interpretation of work by Johann Gottfried Herder. The ideas of romantic philosophers have in particular been feeding modern ethnic nationalism. Eastern Europe has been known as a particularly fertile region for the development of this romantic nationalism. It would nevertheless be inadequate to reduce the post-socialist conservative reaction as a kind of nationalist movement against secular cosmopolitan individualism. Like religion, so ethnic nationalism represents another element of post-peasant integralism.

Sonja Luehrmann (2011) in her work on Soviet atheist and post-socialist religious mobilizations in provincial Russia emphasizes their affinities and shared histories. Taking from this seemingly contradictory perspective – that activism of religious fundamentalists and communist zealots do not necessarily contradict each other from the functional point of view – it is not surprising that many fundamental religious activists today and those nostalgic for 'healthy' life under communism without gay activists, liberal sceptics, and multicultural relativists questioning the categories such as nation, jointly find the 'culture of life' – the concept connected with the Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) – worth promoting and following.

In my view, the post-peasant integralism originated in state-socialist modernisation and gains further strength after communism collapsed. It mobilises people who are not peasants but who nevertheless value the countryside as morally superior to a life in large cities. These post-peasants idealise their folkish descent, often fall into conspiracy schemas over the source of power in the global system, and they are open to whatever anti-progressive mobilization there is available in their local or virtual communities. Religious leaders often represent the strong agents supporting these reactionary ideologies but not all religious specialists are reactionary. Many non-religious people likewise do not represent the followers of secular-liberal individualism and cosmopolitanism. This interplay of religion and non-religion in the development of post-peasant integralism has to be investigated in the particular national settings.

The landscape of non-religion

Non-religion is understood here as phenomena that are in relationship to what is understood as religion in particular contexts (Quack, Schuh, Kind, 2020). The Roman Catholic Church won the legitimacy competition over the nation against the communist state in Poland and strongly influenced the establishment of a new political order. Almost 70% of young Poles regularly practised religion by early 1990s. This practising dropped to less than 25% by the early 2020s. Among the whole population, the proportion regularly practising religion has also fallen significantly

over that period and stands at 43% by 2021. While religious attendance has dropped significantly, religious belief remains high in Poland.² The polling, conducted in 2019 found 69% of Poles saying that God plays an important role in their life. That represents the second highest figure among the 13 EU countries surveyed.³

In contrast to highly religious Poland, in the Czech Republic the number of non-believers outweighs believers, while the public discourse is dominated by the significant anti-clericalism and expressions of atheism (Podolinská, Krivý, Bahna, 2013: 197). In the 2021 census 18,7% of those who filled in the question on religion declared they were believers and belonged to a religious association. More than two thirds of those who filled in the question declared being without religious belief (68,3%). As the question was voluntary, 30,1% people did not fill it in.⁴ The exceptionally low Czech religiosity is characterized by high levels of privatization and individualization, as well as strong distrust in traditional religious institutions, especially in the mainstream Christian churches. It would have been inadequate, however, to assume the interpretation of Czech exceptionalism as showing a high level of atheism (Václavík, Hamplová, Nešpor, 2018: 101).

Ten years ago, the authors Podolinská, Krivý and Bahna (2013: 247) confirmed the trend of weakening in church affiliation and the increasing individualisation and privatisation of religion in Slovakia. At the same time, they claimed, the traditional church religiosity still remains important. Slovakia in terms of religiosity tends to be closer to Poland than to the Czech lands, they argue (Ibid.: 212), while the high number of non-religious and those with low religiosity rather follows the Czech pattern (Ibid.: 242). The most discussed result of 2021 census in Slovakia has been the vanishing of three hundred thousand Catholics and thirty thousand Protestant Lutherans, two dominant confessions in the country, if compared to the census of 2011. The increasing number of non-believers (1,3 million of people, 23,8%) and those whose religion was unknown (6,5%) represents almost one third of the population (compared with the year 2011, the number of non-believers grew by four hundred thousand). The number of the dominant Roman Catholic confession fell by six percent over ten years, reaching 56% by 2021. The minority churches showed similar decline (Protestant Lutheran with 5,3% and 287 thousand believers and Greek Catholics with 4% and 218 thousand believers).⁵

In the following section I introduce biographies of non-religious persons in order to show these dominant patterns of religiosity and non-religiosity in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia in more detail. The interviews were gathered on various

2 <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/11/26/religious-practice-declines-significantly-in-poland-especially-among-young-finds-study/> (accessed December 7, 2022).

3 Behind only Greece (82%) was left. In Europe as a whole, only Turkey (89%) was higher. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/07/24/almost-70-of-poles-say-god-plays-important-role-in-their-life-the-second-highest-figure-in-eu/>

4 <https://www.czso.cz/csu/scitani2021/nabozenska-vira> (accessed December 9, 2022).

5 <https://www.scitanie.sk/k-rimskokatolicickemu-vyznaniu-sa-prihlasilo-56-obyvateľov> (accessed December 11, 2022).

occasions in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia since 2016. The selection of informants relied on the long-term familiarity with people and setting of research, ensured by the earlier long-term ethnographic fieldwork that had been carried out in South-East Poland (2003–2004) and Eastern Slovakia (2008–2009). The regular visits to the Czech Republic have been paid in a more recent period.

The selection of informants followed a clear criterion of what it meant being non-religious in the particular national as well as local contexts. The male bias in the research sample reflects upon the general pattern of lower male religiosity in East Central Europe. The middle-age and older generations of informants were chosen due to their greater awareness of post-socialist changes in the religious landscape. These relative imbalances of research samples shall not make a major difference in reading societal trends of religious and non-religious transformation.

The Polish religious liberals

In the following cases from Poland, I present the biographies of people who have a sincere religious background but do not follow a populist call. I consider them as “liberal” Catholics to represent the dominant pattern of what might be understood as non-religion in Poland. The liberal Catholics differ from the openly critical younger generation of anti-clericals ritually signing out of the church in recent years. The liberal Catholics represent the evidence to be emphasized throughout this paper that the actual followers of secular state and constitutional democracy can likewise be found among believers as well as non-believers.

The leadership of the Law and Justice party (PiS), the governing party in Poland since 2015, has exemplified the conservative turn of post-socialist countries, along with Hungary under the leadership of Viktor Orbán. I studied Polish Catholicism in 2003–2004, carrying out long-term fieldwork in the most pious South-East Poland (Buzalka, 2007). I defined the post-peasant populism that developed in the region as one inherited from pre-socialist agrarian times. I believed in the early 2000s that populism depended predominantly on Polish Catholicism as an alternative ideology to the dominant discourses of capitalist modernity and the secular individualist civil society of the time. I nevertheless also argued that although religion was a source of societal tension, it also promoted tolerance (Buzalka, 2006). And this influence of religion – represented by open-minded priests as well as believers committed to reconciliation of ethnic conflicts – often questioned intolerant reactionary populist politics. In the following two biographies I discuss the argument that in the Polish contexts, non-religion cannot avoid the legacy of Catholicism.

Wojtek (born in 1955) from Przemyśl, South-East Poland, remembers they were poor when he was little. His father passed away when he was ten years old. The family welfare improved slightly under the conjuncture managed by the general secretary of the Polish communist party Edward Gierek (1970–1980). Wojtek entered his studies in Kraków but he never completed. He got married in the church, as this was

the general pattern in 1979 and their only daughter was baptised. In the hardest economic times in Poland since the Second World War (by the early 1980s) the young family accepted an offer from Wojtek's retired mother and moved into her flat in Przemyśl. Low salaries of the clerk couple made them consider an option of private business that seemed available as the way out of the difficult economic situation. The couple nevertheless fell into debt. Wojtek's wife went to earn money to North America. As a consequence of all these complications, the couple got divorced and the daughter followed her mother into emigration.

As Wojtek says, he was raised in religion like everybody else in Poland. This included baptism, first communion, religious classes that took place in the church, instead of a school where they take place today. After entering the secondary education his religious commitments weakened. He nevertheless continued to accompany his mother to church from time to time. As he says, his mother was not particularly religious but followed the habit of church attendance. This was also the way of experiencing the resistance against the communist regime. After the victory of the Solidarity movement in 1989 his mother was worried that the church would receive too much power. As Wojtek says, more and more people began to speak about the need to separate the state and church, the opposite what they had been saying under communism.

In the time of his student years the church was perceived positively as the only opposition institution. The young people like Wojtek went to church in order to enjoy a little bit of freedom. "Nobody at that time believed that something would change with communism," he mentions. Today he knows some priests whom he keeps in high esteem, but he remains deeply sceptical about the episcopate. He thinks the worries of his mother about the Polish church gaining too much power came true under the populist conservative government.

Despite these attitudes, Wojtek is raising his second daughter according to the requirements of the church. Since he got married in the church with his first wife, his divorce was possible only in the secular way. His current partner – herself a religious person and divorced mother of two adults – shows dissatisfaction with this rigidity of the church that makes them cheat on rules. While living a proper family life with their daughter their relationship cannot be recognized by the church.

Wojtek considers himself to be a liberal. He nevertheless does not identify with any party today. In the 1990s he represented the conservative-liberal Freedom Union (*Unia Wolności*) in the city council. He has colleagues who have been openly supporting populist-conservative forces. He nevertheless also knows some radical secularists. One of them tried to convince her older daughter who paid a visit to her native city to de-register with the church. He found this proselytizing activity inappropriate. From his perspective he does not see the difference between how religiously he raised his older daughter in the 1990s and how his younger daughter has been raised twenty years later.

The situation nevertheless changed in the church, he thinks. An increasing drop of religious practising, a lack of clerics in seminaries, the drop of children completing

religious education in large cities all signal a change. Many younger individuals publicly de-register with the church. More and more couples make families without getting religious blessings or have civil marriages instead of the religious ones. The number of baptisms is falling dramatically. Only older generations keep supporting the church in their parish, located in historically the most religious region of Poland. It is expected that even the controversial anti-abortion law, against which the popular rallies took place in late 2010s, will be changed if the center-right and progressive opposition comes to power in 2023. As Wojtek sees the church these days, it is not worth fighting with it as it is falling apart by itself.

If someone follows religious practising it does not mean it is because of religion but because he or she thinks it is appropriate. These people would claim they are good Catholics. This is how they prefer avoiding accusations of being against religion in Poland, but it does not say much about their own religiosity.

A few years ago, there were campaigns against the sexual offences in the church. The church objected. These days Wojtek sees less objections by the church. Also, the social pressure is far less severe than it used to be in the time when he was young. Coming back to these times, Wojtek does not remember such as a generous support of families with more children as he sees today. “Today everybody wants there to be a lot of children, but there are no children.”

I stopped believing in the direct influence of God over people's lives. If God exists, he is a careful observer and a judge of the activities of people, but he does not intervene ... I always thought it is necessary to act appropriately vis-à-vis the people. Our relationship to religion and God is not important but our relationship to other people is. This is not a fear of punishment of God – the hell. The hell is the qualms of conscience, shame, and ignorance of wrongdoings that happened to other people or those who asked for help, but the help was not provided. As Władysław Bartoszewski [1922–2015, a Polish statesman, former minister of foreign affairs, and a supporter of liberal democracy, JB] used to say, if you do not know how to behave, do behave decently!

As this credo by Wojtek shows, there is a general inspiration by the ethics considered religious but there is a clear trend of leaving the authority of the church in favour of individual conscience. This reveals a twofold trend of weakening of traditional religious institutions on the one hand but not necessarily of growing anti-religious attitudes. These attitudes are presented in the case of Bartek, an atheist humanist who nevertheless does not deny his religious upbringing.

Bartek's father was a devout nobleman who was persecuted at the time Bartek was born in 1950. The family was not allowed to come close to their former possessions in the villages around Przemyśl, South-East Poland, and resided in Gliwice, Silesia. In the 1960s, they returned to the city center of Przemyśl, where they lived with

Bartek's aunts. Single, religiously devoted language teachers, they owned a large house that had been left in the ownership of the family. Bartek was a pariah in the local school. He became a student of literature in the relatively less restricted times (1970–1980). As Bartek spoke several languages, he benefited from travels to the West for work in the summer, to earn a better living.

After graduating in Polish philology in Rzeszów, Bartek accepted the proposal that he join the Polish United Workers' Party. Successful at his job, he became the head of the culture section in the county office, married a teacher of Russian, and in the 1980s he became the vice director of the county cultural centre in Przemyśl. The couple remained childless, did not go to church at all, and Bartek has begun claiming that despite his family's religious background he is an atheist. He enjoyed his job that offered an opportunity to meet the artists of the time, travelling abroad and across the country, and benefiting from privileges available to communist party members of the time.

At the first moments following the change of the communist regime Bartek was considered disloyal to the new system. He was unemployed for several months but thanks to his language abilities found a job of a cemetery cleaner in Switzerland. Soon afterwards, however, he returned to the position of vice director of the public library, thanks to his decision to join the post-communist Party of the Democratic Left (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* – SLD), the victor of elections. He was perceived as the right man doing the right job by the majority of his fellow citizens, including those who were strongly religious, and therefore remained in his position of cultural manager until his retirement in 2016.

Bartek remained a cosmopolitan, anti-clerical liberal and economic socialist in his ideological preferences. He showed a high level of criticism of the state-socialist bureaucracy as well as the religious populism that has become prominent in Poland since 1989. Bartek does not see the free market bringing adequate freedom to people as it endangers their economic security and understands the importance of religion in the sphere of social work and social teaching. Bartek wished to pay tribute to his father, a devout Roman Catholic, and donated most of his inherited family property on to charity. The most significant donation was the family manor house that was turned into a charity house. Staying to live with his wife in their three-room flat in the socialist block he continues enjoying his retirement by reading books, staying very critical about the growing influence of religious fundamentalism in Polish politics.

While Wojtek can be considered as representing the liberal Catholicism in Poland, religiosity critical of religious fundamentalism but identifying with the dominant religious tradition, Bartek's atheism is more anti-clerical. He nevertheless supports – financially as well as ideologically – Catholicism as a provider of social care, respecting also the Church's role in defining moral order and tradition of the Polish society. The open anti-clericalism in Poland has become visible in the last decade and especially young people are giving up their religious practising. The non-religious people in Poland nevertheless cannot deny the importance of religion in building democracy and tolerance. And their eventual criticism of the church does not

automatically bring a new quality of civility into predominantly rural regions such as South-East Poland. This is why the Czech religious indifference might offer a productive counterexample of post-socialist non-religion.

Non-religion is the Czech indifference

The deep tradition of industrialization made predominantly urban Bohemia likely to follow a strong secularization of the state and individualization of religious life. The construction of the Czech national story very much reflected these socio-cultural elements, building upon the ambivalent tradition of indifference vis-à-vis institutional religion and made Czechia one of the most secular European countries, comparable with East Germany or Estonia. The following two cases shall highlight the indifference towards religion as an important parameter of Czech non-religion.

Honza was born as one of “Husák’s children”, the baby-boom generation born in the 1970s and 1980s. He lives in Prague with his partner, an interpreter, and two school aged children. None of them has been baptised. He makes a living out of financial consultancy and entrepreneurial activities. He opted for this independent life when studying economics. Living in the prosperous capital and owning several properties in it, makes him belong to a modestly prosperous post-socialist middle class.

His upbringing did not have anything in common with any religion. Prague was the capital of normalization Czechoslovakia and pupils did not have a chance to meet with religion before 1989. He therefore learned nothing about the suppression of religious life by the communist system, despite listening to critical opinions about the regime’s crisis in the 1980s. Raised by a single mother, an interpreter, he saw his father, a diplomat, only occasionally. And the father was the only baptised (even though non-practising) member of the family. After 1989 his parents did not say a word of explanation about Cardinal František Tomášek’s (1899–1992) support of the Velvet Revolution. He took the presence of the religious leader in the revolution as neutral information.

His expectation was similar to the majority of his secular co-patriots: that the Church after 1989 would have taken the position of one among several interest groups in the democratic society. He immediately learned that Czech (Moravian) Catholicism had its own political party, Christian-Democratic Union – Czech Peoples’ Party (*Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová – KDÚ ČSL*) that, according to Honza, followed “those partners who offered more to them.” For the first time Honza questioned religious people and Christian politics that in his opinion preach principles but do not live according to these principles.

He perceives religion in the Czech context as having a glorious past but the one divided into Protestant and Catholic interpretation of this past. He follows the dominant national narrative about the great importance of Protestantism that made the Czechs different in his opinion. At the same time, however, he thinks the tradition of Husitism – and the ‘invented’ protestant Czech heritage, despite the actual

successful re-Catholisation of the country – was misused by the communists. His conclusion is that the lack of unity in religious belongings made the Czechs a little bit more tolerant towards other religions. And the importance of the Protestant tradition favoured the development of industry and the modern state. Considering this development, he was not surprised that there was no massive increase in Czech religious practising after the Velvet Revolution.

Honza considers himself to be “a rational person who does not seek spirituality” and who has no religious experiences. He is afraid that religious people are under the control of other, more powerful people. Because society has been built upon Christian tradition, this tradition has been incorporated into the legal system. He thinks that religious classes should be taught because of this historical tradition, but only on a voluntary basis. Ethical norms and rules should be guaranteed by the state, following the Czech ideologies of secularism according to Honza. The strict secularism has nevertheless been challenged by the so-called Church restitution laws from 2013. The returning of Church properties and financial restitution paid to churches according to this law were the subject of heated debates.

We are definitely more secular than Poles or Austrians, but unless there is settlement arranged with the church, the state will be paying back. You do not need the approval of an archbishop for installing the president. You do not swear on the bible but on the constitution. So, we shall be secular people in the secular state. But we are not quite. We are not separated financially, as the church depends on the state.

In the Czech case, there has always been a question of what and who is conservative and what the Czech conservatives' attitude has been towards religion. While Moravian Catholics follow the Christian Democratic pattern found elsewhere in East Central Europe, there have also been active openly anti-clerical conservatives in Czechia. Honza recalls the once popular Václav Klaus, former Prime Minister and President, who declared himself conservative. Honza used to identify himself with more ideologically nuanced Czech conservatives around the pro-business Civic Alliance (ODA) that has ceased to exist. The contemporary Czech society does not offer ground for thoroughly conservative politics, such as the one offered by ODA, as the society is too consumption oriented.

Honza nevertheless sees the possible conflict zone where conservatives and progressives can clash. Under communism, Honza says, the homosexuals were not open about their orientation. And the people under communism did not care about the sexual orientation of others. The policy “Do not ask, do not tell!” was applied. This indifference perhaps is the sign of Czech conservatism, thinks Honza. As he argues, “the homosexuals did not show their orientation, but punishment for being homosexual was abolished under communism.” Honza does not find the pride parades, currently popular across post-socialist cities, appropriate. He asks like a pure follower of traditional institutions, “if we allow them the registered partnership, they will immediately demand marriage?”

The Czech pattern of non-religion borders with anti-clericalism. As the example of Honza shows, religion shall be accepted only as a civilizational tradition, not the guide for life. Even the minuscule attempt to achieve historical justice via restitution law causes grievances for the thorough followers of Czech ideological secularism. The conservative reaction towards contemporary cultural preferences, considered progressive and modern, on the other hand cannot be limited to people who follow religion in their lives. The Czech indifference towards religion makes the dominant Czech conservatism – parallel to the Moravian minority of Christian Democracy – apparently non-religious. As the story of Jarmila shows, yet another source of contemporary non-religious conservatism comes from communist atheism.

Jarmila was born in 1929 in Wiener Neustadt, where her father worked in the steel mill. The family returned to their family home town called Zastávka u Brna while Jarmila was little. Jarmila was only ten years old when her father passed away. Jarmila's mother and one teenage brother relied on the job of their nineteen years old brother, a lathe operator, and on the mother's very modest pension. She was apprenticed as a seamstress. At the age of nineteen, Jarmila married a future People's Army officer and the son of a policeman. The couple got married in the small church in the centre of town in autumn 1948. Jarmila followed the wishes of her mother-in-law, who expected a church wedding, despite her non-practising record. Her own wedding was one of her rare encounters with religion.

The couple moved to Liberec where Jarmila's husband became an aircraft instructor at the military school. After six years the family moved to the city of Poprad in Slovakia, and soon resettled to the neighbouring Liptovský Mikuláš. With two daughters – one born in Zastávka u Brna in 1949, the other in Liptovský Mikuláš in 1951 – they then moved to Košice. The family spent almost every weekend at their cottage near Košice, gardening and fishing, enjoying the traditional family life of their generation.

Jarmila and her husband joined the communist party of Czechoslovakia at the very beginning of their life together. They remained faithful to the party's teachings even after the Warsaw Pact armed forces intervened in Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Although she was active in the senior club of former officers' wives and also paid fees to the orthodox communist party, Jarmila has never viewed her life in ideological terms. She obviously looks back to her life in state-socialist Czechoslovakia nostalgically. The reason, however, is the simple fact that they were young.

The family raised their daughters without any trace of religion. The children did well both under state socialism and after the communist regime collapsed. They raised their own children in the non-religious spirit as well. There has never been an anti-clerical atmosphere in the family, says Jarmila, and even the frequent visits to the church by one of her Slovak sons-in-law did not cause a major opinion problem around the family table. Unlike many of their Slovak co-inhabitants, Jarmila and her husband have never objected to atheist secularization of Slovakia. The belief in science and modern medicine – in the case of recent COVID vaccination, for

example – made Jarmila represent a sober minority in her surrounding, full of conspiracy theories and popular demonologies.

If there was a religious component in Jarmila's life, this would have had a form of communist party socialization at her husband's workplace and with peers at later stages of life. Especially the reading of communist press, participation in rituals after 1989, organized by the unreformed Communist Party of Slovakia, and the socialization in the club of military widows, shows certain religious patterns. Jarmila's Czech story, taking place partly in Slovakia, can be complemented by the case of Marian, the manager in the age of Jarmila's grandchildren. His memories of atheism differ due to the specificities of Slovak non-religion.

The progress of Slovak Christians

The first point Marian (born in 1980) made when I asked him about the topic of my research was that his grandfather was a political commissar in the Czechoslovak Peoples' Army. And that Marian did not know that religion existed before the collapse of the former regime. At that time the family used to live with grandparents in one of Bratislava's socialist suburbs. His father worked as an electrician and his mother was a clerk. Marian learned only after 1989 that his mother was raised as Lutheran. Currently Marian lives in his new house near Bratislava, makes a living as a successful manager, and raises two pre-school daughters with his wife, a pedagogy school graduate.

Not until he met his wife – an occasionally practising Roman Catholic – did Marian think about religious affiliations. When they were about to marry, he had a chance to meet a charismatic priest, ordained in secret under communism, who managed to address him. In Marian's opinion the most important was that the priest understood his family's background and the fact the priest was ordained after he was widowed. He knew what is like to have a family (as opposed to the celibate priests). After several meetings Marian accepted the church wedding. Their two daughters were baptised – by the priest who was a family friend – and the family visits church on exceptional occasions.

Despite his "getting closer" to religion there is an atmosphere of withdrawal from religion in the society. Religion in his view is practised as a sort of routine: "these people go to confession and that is it!" The major change comes with the increasing material consumption among people. Human relations are becoming more formal, life concentrates on social media, people do not meet so often. Marian thinks the generation of grandparents used to live in poverty but helped each other. Religion was likewise rooted in these archaic community values. Once religion helped to overcome crises. Nowadays many read motivation books and try to cope with insecurity by themselves. Once people used to know about each other's confession, who is Catholic, Lutheran, who was against religion. Religion is a private matter today. Marian also personalizes his spirituality as he sees it enacted when spending

time with his daughters. To have his close family around fulfils him spiritually, he says.

With regard to society, rules and norms have been guaranteed by law. These rules are inspired by traditional habits but need to change according to the context and needs. Since these rules and laws had been formed over centuries, it is obvious there had been a religious inspiration in establishing them. Marian observes a deep separation of ethics and practices in his job. Business in Marian's opinion is about money, while money is the opposite of religion, despite the church needing money for its activities. To earn money by business means to rather avoid religiously defined rules. The "ethical neutrality" of business today depends on the race for wealth, thinks Marian. And we learned in fairy tales already that the rich people were not always the best ones. The business ethic for Marian is that if they make money and nobody is hurt this is an ethical business. If the deal hurts somewhere, it poses an ethical question.

All modern development shows that secular society must be tolerant. Although conservatism has been often connected with religion, Marian thinks it can exist only in the secular society that tolerates this conservatism. So, for Marian, the intolerant Slovak conservatism survives especially in villages. But Marian also thinks that people like his father who lives in Pezinok, a part of Bratislava's metropolitan area, are conservative, despite not being religious at all. Despite his non-religious upbringing Marian can be considered as being a moderately conservative representative of a non-religious person with sympathies towards ethics and laws safeguarded by religion. In his opinion this attitude is possible only in the secular society that is aware of a particular disembedding of economy and religion and of the need for a special business ethic. While these ideas and practices can fairly fit to the dominant category of moderate progress, the non-religious conservatism can be represented by the fairly reactionary attitudes.

In early September 2022 I attended a funeral in Dudince, a small spa town of population around 1400, in South-Central Slovakia. The person who had passed away was seventy-two year old Miško. The central figure on the cemetery ritual was the town's mayor. Forty-eight year old former elementary school teacher, re-elected into office in October 2022, performed a decent, secular farewell. He pointed out several milestones in Miško's life. The most important was his fidelity to his wife and the rich family life they had been having together with their three daughters. The second most important topic was Miško's devotion to menial work, both before and after his retirement. Miško was a gardener and a wine maker, especially after he retired from the position of an electrician. He was a *gazda* – one's own master. Being *gazda* – producing some of one's own food and drinks – still matters in rural Central Slovakia.

After the mayor's speech, the civil servant from the mayor's office delivered the poem dedicated to passing of time in human life. The funeral car was waiting for the coffin with door open to be transported into the district town's crematorium while a love song by a Czech tramp band, apparently Miško's favourite, was transmitted via loudspeakers. Dozens of older male friends were expressing condolences to the family.

Miško had been openly non-religious. He used to be an atheist when he was a communist party member but became the supporter of reactionary conservative politics later in life. His non-religiosity was normal among the twenty percent of local non-believers who inhabited the town with the decisive half of Roman Catholics and the influential quarter of Lutherans.⁶ Miško used to be employed on the nearby booster pump of the Družba pipeline, the world's largest pipeline, which has been transporting crude oil to Europe from the former Soviet Union since the 1960s. Being the son of a landless gardener who migrated to the area from the Balkans in the inter-war period, he married the daughter of a rich peasant who was forced to collectivize during the socialist era. His opinions about politics very much mirrored the old communist propaganda with clear illiberal components and included the positive view of the Kremlin regime led by Vladimir Putin.

Miško's lifestyle reflected the benefits that have accrued to him in both the socialist and post-socialist periods: a large house, an old SUV, two vineyards, dozens of beehives and time for daily drinks with his friends in his cellar hut. Yet, despite the trappings of everything he had ever wished for, he claimed that life after communism was hard to bear for people like him. He was very critical of the post-1989 development, remaining nostalgic for communist years when he enjoyed privileges as an ordinary party member. Miško never went to church, perhaps except when he was little. His anti-clerical views went hand in hand with conservatism characterizing inhabitants of rural South-Central Slovakia.

The district of Krupina, the medieval and contemporary centre to which most of the historical county of the Hungarian Kingdom called Hont belongs, became the largest nation-wide stronghold of fascist Peoples' Party Our Slovakia (*Ludová strana Naše Slovensko*),⁷ which competed with Robert Fico's social democrats, the number one party there for the past fifteen years. The leader of the fascist party, Marián Kotleba, who has family ties in Krupina, made his breakthrough into politics in 2013 when he was elected the governor of Banská Bystrica County, one of eight self-governing regions in Slovakia. In the first round of presidential elections in 2019, Kotleba came second in the district-level vote in Krupina, closely following the lead of the liberal Zuzana Čaputová (28,5 to 22,8%). The reactionary and populist politics represented by Kotleba and Fico had been equally appealing to the religiously committed as well as atheist voters like Miško.

Laci, a member of the minority Hungarian community from the city of Lučenec, Southern Slovakia, has never attended church regularly. He used to be living a truly cosmopolitan life when he studied English philology in Bratislava and Budapest. He loved sarcastic jokes when graduating in 2000. His diploma work was on Monty Python,

6 From among 1380 inhabitants of Dudince, in 2021 there was 19,2% without religion, almost 49,35% Roman Catholic, and 24,42% Lutheran, making the town being overrepresented especially by the Lutheran significant minority, and the number of non-religious persons following the national average of almost 24 percent. <https://www.scitanie.sk/> (accessed November 2, 2022).

7 <https://dennikn.sk/1634639/lSNS-je-neonacisticka-strana-usvedcuju-ju-jej-spojenci-aj-vlastne-ciny/> (accessed November 6, 2019).

the famous British comedy group, among others targeting Christian bigotry bordering with blasphemy. The major amusement of Laci used to be marijuana and partying. After spending several years of work in Bratislava and Budapest, working for international translation companies, Laci returned to his native city in 2015. He complained about the poor quality of life he had in these big cities. His interpretation was that the pressure on employees was due to the global capitalist system. And the careless unscrupulous individualism of career-oriented colleagues that this system generated.

Having lost his father earlier than necessary, partly due to poor health care in Slovakia, at the age of 45 Laci came to live close to his mother. Also, and perhaps most importantly, he had not been successful in finding a life partner, even though he had approached many females, especially via the internet. He originally was thinking of returning to the village his grandparents came from but decided for the city in the end. He nevertheless considers country life as the future of communities in Europe and often expressed nostalgia for his native town that was in his opinion once a prosperous state-socialist district centre of an agrarian region. Contemporary man has stopped living in harmony with nature, says the frequent follower of conspiracy media, the occasional gardener, and ardent anti-vaccinator, who makes an irregular income from translations ordered by his international employers in Budapest or Bratislava.

In the current stage of European development Laci especially admires the achievements of the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán because of his civilizational change of Hungary. He especially appreciated Orbán's commitments in defending "European Christian values". He particularly disliked the passing of the Lisbon treaty, the foundational treaty of the European Union, by the Hungarian parliament. Everything in Europe is tied to financial oligarchy like a cancer, thinks Laci. As Laci says, Orbán made many mistakes, especially because he was not hard enough when dealing with the Bolsheviks (the socialist and liberal camp of Hungarian politics). These enemies of Christianity operated hand in hand with the servile and supposedly independent public media, thinks Laci. He sees the Hungarian prime minister speaks on behalf of those who are 'fed up with the liberal-Bolshevik plague' and intellectuals who have sold out Hungary to Western capital and subordinated Hungarian people to Brussels. Only radical solutions can help now, Laci think, unlike the liberals and EU bureaucrats who roll their eyes when the people like Laci speak the truth about the misbehaving Roma, Muslims, and LGBTI+ communities.

The case of Laci shows that one does not need to be religious to still follow the deep reactionary views. Not surprisingly, the highest number of non-believing supporters from among the Slovak political parties come from the fascist parties of Peoples' Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) and the party Republika (forty percent of voters of Republika never go to church), according to a recent poll.⁸ Many believers and non-believers in post-socialist European Union feel they are defending Christianity in and of Europe. They are defending Europe's purity against attack from the Muslim

8 <https://tvnoviny.sk/domace/clanok/348051-exkluzivny-prieskum-volby-by-vyhral-hlas-do-parlamentu-by-sa-dostala-aj-aliancia> (accessed November 14, 2022).

orient, represented especially by the refugees and migrants from Africa and the Middle East. They are also defending Europe's Christian character against the influence of godless liberals and socialist Bolsheviks, as they believe. These fundamentalist and often non-religious people, whose most radical segments I called village fascists (Buzalka, 2021), see atheism nowadays has taken the form of liberal multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, and white majorities are under threat from sexual and ethnic minorities.

This alternative depiction of society has roots in the European romantic tradition and in what Isaiah Berlin calls the Counter-Enlightenment. Berlin (1973: 22–24) writes about this deep anti-modernism whose ethno-national and religious components are strongest in the post-peasant integralism,

Not the luminous intellect, but dark instincts govern man and societies; only elites which understand this and keep the people from too much secular education that is bound to make them over-critical and discontented, can give to men as much happiness and justice and freedom as, in this valley of tears, men can expect to have. But at the back of everything must lurk the potentiality of force, of coercive power ... Only the church can organise a society in which the ablest are held back so that the whole society can progress and the weakest and least greedy also reach the goal.

Since the inception of modernity by the end of the nineteenth century the Counter-Enlightenment tradition has had similar appearances in the neighbouring national contexts of East Central Europe. The role of communism and its own integralist propaganda regarding gender relations and attitudes toward sexual minorities, as well as forced atheism likewise allowed to nurture integralist practices and ideas. The post-peasant integralism – its religious and non-religious components – is thus in part the autochthonous post-socialist phenomenon. However, it also represents the regional expression of the “populist moment” (Brubaker, 2017) that has been prominent globally in recent years.

Conclusion

In this paper, I offered several biographies of non-religious persons in Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia. The selection of biographies resulted from my twenty years familiarity with these nation-state settings and followed the goal of those who can be loosely lumped into the category of non-believer. The conscious atheists turned to be agnostic followers of religious tolerance, former believers who saw the Catholic Church as the moral fortress under the godless communism became the true followers of liberal constitutionalism and religious pluralism. There have also been cases of those who were cosmopolitan in their early lives but later turned to be fundamentalist reactionaries despite remaining non-believers. Both believers and

non-believers nevertheless respect the dominant religious tradition as the source of legitimacy and guardian of moral order.

The argument of the paper might then be summarized as the following: there has been no room for tolerant society in predominantly Catholic countries such as Poland or Slovakia without incorporating religion in some form into this tolerance. However, as the Catholic cases of Poland and Slovakia as well as the case of Czech indifference towards religion show, it is not religion that is the exclusive source of contemporary reactionary ideologies. Similarly frequent are Catholics respecting liberal constitutionalism and opposing reactionary populists who wish to impose reactionary laws over secular polities in the name of 'tradition' that they often interpret as being inspired by religion. There is no conflict of conservatives versus liberals as the followers of current populist insurgency argue but the major battle is fought between religious and non-religious followers of Counter-Enlightenment post-peasant integralism and religious and non-religious followers of secular democracy where the central value is on universal human rights and dignity, and the actual separation of the state and church. The final battle at this global 'populist moment' seems not to be over yet.

Acknowledgements:

The text benefited from the ideas developed within the European Commission Jean Monet Chair project 101048187 The post-socialist society and culture for the European Green Deal.

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