

**Understanding Hungary's support for persecuted Christians: Scrutinising religious motives
for giving aid**

Beáta Paragi

ORCID: 0000-0002-7432-7810

Institute of Global Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

Balázs Szent-Iványi

ORCID: 0000-0002-5883-4601

Aston Centre for Europe, Aston University, Birmingham, UK

Institute of Global Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

* corresponding author, email: b.szent-ivanyi@aston.ac.uk

Abstract

Religion is increasingly acknowledged as a driving force behind development processes; however, it has received little attention as a motivation for donors to give aid. The paper analyses the stated motivations and hidden agendas behind the Hungarian government's 'Hungary Helps' aid programme, aimed at supporting Christian communities in the Global South and reducing migration to Europe. The programme fits with the government's rhetoric on religion and migration, however, the paper reveals inconsistencies that suggest further motivations. While there is little evidence that there was domestic demand for such a programme, it has been used instrumentally to increase Hungary's influence among Christian interest groups and their political allies in the US.

Keywords: foreign aid, development aid, Hungary, Christian persecution, migration.

Introduction

Religion, and especially Christianity, has played a key role in shaping the international system of human rights (Moyn 2017) and the global development and humanitarian system. A significant amount of scholarship has scrutinized these religious origins, as well as the role faith-based organizations (FBOs) play in contemporary development and humanitarian work (Ferris 2011; Ager et

al. 2015). A growing number of studies have recognized religion as a 'dynamic and heterogeneous force within broader processes of development' (Bompani 2019, 3; see also Öhlmann et al. 2022). Despite this recognition, religion has generally been neglected in international development cooperation. Even if promoting religious freedom appears among the goals of donors and FBOs play an increasingly active part in implementing aid projects (Kraft and Wilkinson 2020), donor countries generally aim to avoid any semblance of favouring one religion over another. Furthermore, development has mostly been conceptualized from an economic perspective as a highly technical process, in which religion has little role to play (Ellis and ter Haar 2006).

While the way religion impacts development through its effects on norms and behaviour is being increasingly recognized, it is still unclear how considerations around faith impact donor policies and practices (Sundqvist 2016). One aspect of this question is how these considerations motivate donors to give aid, and how they impact the characteristics of aid programs. The purpose of the article is to examine the role of religion as a motivation for an eclectic, humanitarian and development aid programme launched by the Hungarian government in 2017, the Hungary Helps Programme (HHP). The programme explicitly supports Christian communities in the Global South, arguing that these communities are persecuted or systematically discriminated, and that this phenomenon is ignored by the West (reference removed). By supporting persecuted Christians in the Global South, the Hungarian government claims that it is also trying to reduce migration to Europe. However, by favouring these communities and thus potentially discriminating against other religious groups, the HHP goes against the established norms of the international humanitarian and development system.

Understanding the motivations driving the HHP are important. The programme represents a turn in Hungary's approach to foreign aid. As in other relatively new donors in Central and Eastern European (CEE), international development in Hungary has received practically no political attention and only very limited resources (see, e.g. Szent-Iványi and Kugiel 2020). Yet, the right-wing nationalist governments led by Viktor Orbán since 2010 seem to have 'discovered' foreign aid as a tool which can promote various desired policy objectives, as evidenced by massive increases in aid spending, through the HHP and other instruments. This may herald a shift in the broader CEE region regarding development policy. Furthermore, the HHP has received praise internationally, especially among Christian conservative groups in the United States, who may push for initiatives that emulate it.

The paper is based on the analysis of official government sources and data, which has been complemented by a small number of semi-structured interviews with development policy practitioners, chosen for their involvement with the HHP. Some of them were also given the possibility to comment the manuscript to ensure that there were no misunderstandings around the technical,

otherwise undocumented aspects of the HHP. All interviewees remain anonymous for reasons of confidentiality.

The main conclusion emerging from the analysis is that there were likely several motivations for launching and sustaining the HHP beyond the officially communicated goals. The motivations explicitly stated by the government, namely supporting persecuted Christian communities and reducing migration to Europe, cannot be ruled out as true drivers, even though there are some inconsistencies around them. Using insights from the literature on donor motivations, the paper discusses potential further, hidden agendas. Aid to persecuted Christians may resonate more with the sentiments of Hungarian society than 'mainstream' aid programs, because the former connect with Hungary's collective memory of victimhood. The paper also shows that the HHP was heavily 'marketed' internationally, especially in the United States, as part of a broader campaign to gain favour with the Trump administration. While this may not have been a motivation for creating the programme, it is likely to have played a role in ensuring its continued existence and expansion. This also suggests an appetite in some other countries at least amongst some constituencies for aid motivations and modalities that reject long-established international norms.

The argument unfolds in the following way. The next section offers a review of donor motivations for providing aid, and the role religion can play among these. This is followed by an overview of Hungary's development assistance activities and the HHP. The subsequent sections discuss the government's stated motivations and hidden agendas behind HHP respectively, while the final section concludes.

Conceptual framework: donor motivations for giving aid

Donors use official development assistance (ODA) to promote a variety of interests. Motivations for ODA are complex, and no single one can fully explain aid flows in any period (Bermeo 2017). Or, using van der Veen's (2011: 2) metaphor, 'aid programmes can handle whatever policy-makers put their minds to, making them the foreign policy version of a multitool Swiss army knife.' Motivations range from the altruistic and moral (Lumsdaine 1993) through more selfish economic and strategic (Dietrich and Wright 2015), to domestic political-demographic considerations (Blackman 2018). Addressing various security concerns, supporting allies or former colonies have all been identified as drivers, often outweighing the developmental needs of recipients (Hoeffler and Outram 2011).

Donor motivations have evolved over time. Economic and geostrategic considerations have been dominant during the Cold War (Alesina and Dollar 2000). The current foreign aid system is characterized by what Bermeo (2017) calls 'targeted development'. Donors are primarily interested in

insulating themselves from the spillover effects of under-development, and use aid in targeted ways to reduce the impacts of various transboundary problems, including climate change, irregular migration, diseases, or terrorism. Promoting development in order to reduce these spillovers is therefore very much a donor self-interest, and donors increasingly target the states from which these spillovers originate. This leaves little room for ‘moral vision’ among donor interests (Bermeo 2017). The general trend towards targeted development still allows for other motivations, and donors are highly heterogeneous in these (Lancaster 2006; Olivé and Pérez 2020). France has often been seen as driven by post-colonial interests, whereas the Nordic countries generally come closest to altruistic ideals. The CEE EU member states have chiefly been concerned with ensuring stability in their geographical proximity, while also seeking economic benefits (Opršal et al. 2021).

Domestic politics impact aid decisions. The literature unpacks how donor motivations are constructed by examining the preferences of governments, public opinion and also the priorities of various interest groups which seek to influence decisions around ODA spending.

Regarding the political orientation of donor governments, conservative governments generally have lower foreign aid budgets (Tingley 2010), while social democratic ones tend to spend more on aid (Thérien and Noël 2000). Given the purposes of this paper, the literature examining how right-wing populist parties (RPPs) view aid is especially pertinent. These parties generally employ a nativist rhetoric, focusing on the primacy of the ethno-nation versus outsiders. Immigration has emerged as their core issue (Lutz 2019), and it can thus be reasonable to expect that they will aim to use ODA to reduce it when in power. There is evidence that the rise of European RPPs has been associated with a ‘higher share of aid for migration-containment objectives’ (Hackenesch et al. 2022: 1391). Using aid to manage migration however goes beyond RPPs: it has been a major driver of the EU’s international development policy since at least the 2015 European refugee crisis as well (Castillejo 2016). Donors have increasingly been using aid to fund border control and deterrence measures, as well as address the ‘root causes’ through reducing poverty. In this latter sense, migration aid can be seen as an example of Bermeo’s (2017) targeted development. Whether aid can actually reduce migration is another question, and the historical record is at best mixed (Clemens and Postel 2018). Generally, aid is either ineffective in deterring migration (Clist and Restelli 2021), or even increases it from the poorest countries through various mechanisms (Berthélemy et al. 2009). Evidence for aid reducing migration comes mostly from a few select cases of well-planned and targeted interventions, such as those focusing on public services or rural development (Lanati and Thiele 2018; Gamso and Yuldashev 2018).

European RPPs also frequently reference Christian values as part of their broader civilizational rhetoric, emphasizing national cultural heritage against the homogenizing forces of globalization, and juxtaposing Western civilization with Islam (Ozzano 2019). RPPs interlink Christian values and nationalist tropes to create a sense of ethno-religious community among their supporters (Haynes 2020a). Playing on religious values stokes fears about the erosion of culture and political power, serving to reinforce an 'us versus them' rhetoric. The values of Islam are either portrayed as incompatible with Christianity, or in more secularized Western countries, RPPs challenge socially progressive 'post-Christian' ideas. (Haynes 2020a). While RPPs are generally not Christian parties, and only use references to Christian values instrumentally to strengthen their rhetoric (Roy 2016), they benefit from deploying ODA in ways which fits with this rhetoric. By focusing ODA allocation on Christian communities, RPPs can promote the message that Christian values are under threat globally.

Government decisions are shaped in part by lobbying from interest groups, including NGOs and religious lobby groups. Whilst NGOs have long been engaged in lobbying donors, religious lobbies in the Global North have become increasingly vocal on aid. For our purposes it is important to critically examine the motivations of both. Although NGOs are seen as the 'champions of the Global South' and advocate for aid to better target and empower the poorest, a significant literature argues that NGOs also care about their own access to resources, and that their advocacy work towards donors is geared towards policies which ensure this (Banks et al. 2015).

Religious lobbies have been especially influential in shaping the aid agendas of US governments. Evangelical Christians in the United States have been active on a variety of foreign policy issues since the 1990s, with an increasing passion to support persecuted Christians (McAlister 2019). These groups portray Christians as a globally victimized group, drawing parallels between their physical persecution in the Global South and their perceived marginalization in the US by the spread of progressive values. More broadly, there seems to be a strong public preference in the US for providing aid primarily to Christian countries (Blackman 2018), and these preferences are channelled by Evangelical groups towards the American government. Decisionmakers may face the political need to accommodate the opinions of these groups to help secure their hold on power, especially if they represent the preferences of significant parts of the electorate (Bar-Maoz 2018). Given the size of the Evangelical communities, they have a significant influence on US policies towards the less developed world, especially regarding foreign aid (Austin et al. 2022). They have also placed pressure on US administrations to act in case of various atrocities against Christians (McAlister 2019). While religious lobbies are less visible in Europe, the International Catholic Legislators Network (ICLN), founded in 2010, is increasingly influential. Its aim is 'to discuss the promotion of Christian principles in the political arena' (Esteves 2017), especially that of conservative views.

A number of theoretical expectations emerge from this review of donor motivations for understanding the drivers behind the HHP. First, as the literature shows that donors are driven by both stated motivations and hidden objectives, we expect there to be a combination of these behind the HHP as well. Second, we expect that the Hungarian government may have created the HHP as part of its wider efforts to support its anti-migration rhetoric and more broadly a narrative around global threats to Christian civilisation. Third, we expect that there may be domestic demand for a programme like the HHP, either from public opinion, or from groups which benefit from it, or support it from an ideological perspective. Before discussing these, we first provide a brief outline of Hungary's international development activities.

Hungary as a donor and the Hungary Helps Programme

Hungary, while having experience as a donor during the Cold War, re-emerged as a provider of aid in the run-up to its accession to the European Union. Throughout the 2000s, the country's ODA programme was small, with close to three quarters of resources being channelled through multilateral organizations. Bilateral aid was around \$30 million annually, and fragmented across a number of tiny projects, mainly in the Western Balkans and the former Soviet space. Funding for regions beyond these generally came from international obligations, such as participation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq between 2006 and 2013. There was little political attention to the policy area, and it was seen as something that 'needed to be done' to meet the EU's accession criteria. This was evidenced by the fact that after some initial growth, the amount spent on ODA hovered between 0.08 and 0.1 percent of GNI between 2005 and 2014.

Orbán's governments have viewed ODA more strategically than their predecessors. Hungary's first international development and humanitarian strategy was accepted in 2014, and the country increasingly began placing development assistance into a wider foreign policy context (Tarrósy and Vörös 2020). In 2011, the government announced a new foreign policy strategy entitled 'Global Opening', which aimed to strengthen the country's economic ties with emerging and developing countries. ODA clearly had a role to play in this strategy. Between 2010 and 2021, Hungary's annual ODA spending almost quadrupled from \$111 million to \$435 million. Bilateral aid grew even faster, from \$28.4 million to \$253.2 million, making Hungary the largest bilateral donor from the CEE EU member states.

The launch of the HHP in 2017 was consistent with this increased appreciation of ODA, and indeed the HHP was partly responsible for the significant rise in bilateral aid. Launched in parallel to Hungary's

existing ODA programmes, the HHP aimed to contribute to efforts to address the root causes of migration (Interview-1a) by providing direct local assistance to persecuted Christian communities in the Global South, and especially the Middle East (PMO 2020). The assistance was meant to be driven by humanitarian principles, while also taking into consideration development concerns (Azbej et al. 2018). Responsibility for the HHP was given to the State Secretariat for the Aid of Persecuted Christians and for the Hungary Helps Program (SSAPCHHP) in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), and not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), which had traditionally led on foreign aid. This evidenced high level political attention. The SSAPCHHP was moved to the MFAT in 2022, with the aim of ensuring better coordination with the ministry's 'secular' aid programmes (Interview-4). In 2019, the government also launched the Hungary Helps Agency, to manage the administrative aspects of implementation.

The HHP has become a relatively significant component of Hungary's ODA spending, in addition to funding channelled through the MFAT and other line ministries (OECD 2020). Between 2016 and 2022, 263 projects were financed under the HHP, with a total value of €76.1 million. The programme was originally positioned as humanitarian in government rhetoric, however, the data does not support this claim: only 86 projects were humanitarian in nature, while 157 were more of a longer-term developmental nature, focusing on social services (education, health) or reconstruction, as opposed to saving lives.ⁱ

The principles guiding the design and implementation of Hungary Helps projects are referred to as 'smart help' by officials: assistance (a) is transferred to *local* churches, Christian communities or other FBOs; (b) responds to *real* needs identified by these communities; (c) is preferably *direct*, without any intermediary organizations; and (d) takes the form of donations without administrative burdens and repayment obligations (Interview-1a). Hungary Helps projects do not support conversion but aim to strengthen already existing Christian communities. If measured by the number of projects, the Middle East was the most important target region (71.8% of all assistance), but Sub-Saharan African countries also received substantial aid (see Table 1). Local faith communities (LFCs) were the main beneficiaries in all regions (97 projects), followed by Hungarian FBOs (52 projects). The largest single beneficiary was the Antiochian Syriac Orthodox Church, which implemented projects in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

Table 1. Breakdown of Hungary Helps projects by year and region (in thousand euros)

	Pacific	Americas	Asia	EU	Other Europe	Middle East	North Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa	Total
2016*						383			383
2017						6,526		1,323	7,849
2018				114		10,568		1,061	11,739
2019		19	58	161	39	7,451		3,499	11,228
2020			157	162	357	14,020		1,699	16,396
2021	13	138	525	1,034	1,408	13,308	27	3,806	20,261
2022			178	137	4,354	2,426		1,188	8,278
Total	13	157	918	1,610	6,159	54,675	27	12,575	76,136
Projects	1	2	18	28	30	101	1	82	263

*: although the HHP was officially launched in 2017, a project in 2016 was branded as a pilot.

Source: authors, based on HHA (2023).

Assessing the stated motivations of the HHP

The Hungarian government emphasizes two motivations behind the HHP publicly: supporting persecuted Christians and reducing migration. Both of these link to potential aid motivations for RPPs.

Supporting persecuted Christians

Orbán’s Fidesz party, in power since 2010, shares many characteristics with RPPs: it espouses ethno-nationalism, is EU-sceptic, and strongly against immigration. There are also differences, however. Fidesz positions itself much more strongly as a Christian party than Western RPPs do (Fekete 2016), albeit reframing Christianity in a non-universalistic, nationalist way (Ádám and Bozóki 2016). As opposed to many RPPs, Fidesz is characterized by a belief in a strong role for the state (Enyedi 2016). Nonetheless, since Fidesz produces ‘a large number of statements, programmes and legislative initiatives in line with the [...] definitional criteria of populism, the term seems applicable to [it]’ (Enyedi 2016: 10). The Fidesz governments’ actions which have led to Hungary’s democratic backsliding have been well-documented (see e.g. Buzogány 2017) and are not reviewed here.

Christianity has been a nodal point for Orbán’s government (Lamour 2022). Orbán sees Hungary’s Christian identity as endangered by various transnational threats. These include: non-Christian (mainly Muslim) migration to Europe, often portrayed as a deliberate plot to dilute Europe’s Christian identity

(Fekete 2016); liberal and progressive values; and LGBTQ communities. The government's rhetoric around the HHP adds a further dimension to this, emphasizing that Christianity is not only under threat in Hungary, but Christians are the most persecuted community globally as well (HH-EEM 2017). As stated by Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó (MFAT 2017a),

[t]he dangerous trend of anti-Christianity is gaining increased strength, terrible atrocities are being committed against Christians throughout the world, and many of them are being forced to leave their homes. For some reason the world is behaving hypocritically with relation to this issue, as if anti-Christianity was an acceptable form of discrimination.

Religious intolerance, coupled with government restrictions on religion, has indeed been on the rise (PEW 2019). Christian communities have suffered tremendous losses since the early 1900s, especially in the Middle East, where 'the very survival of Christianity as a living religion is in doubt' (Hunt 2019), although this has been driven by demographic factors as well. Christian persecution is undoubtedly an issue that requires international attention, chiefly because of the human rights concerns it raises (Philpott and Shah 2019).

The Hungarian government's motivation to support persecuted Christian communities, and indeed to preserve them by preventing the (forced) migration of their members, may therefore originate from a sense of altruistic Christian solidarity and humanitarianism (Interview-4) or, as stated in official publications, 'the general principles of humanity, and our ensuing moral obligations' (Hungary Helps Agency 2020: 1). As argued by Bermeo (2017) however, altruism rarely plays significant role in donor decisions. Indeed, there are at least two inconsistencies around the government's rhetoric and actions that may question its commitment to helping marginalized Christians, and rather imply that the HHP's purpose is to strengthen nationalist-populist rhetoric domestically.

First, the Hungarian government interprets Christian persecution in a rather vague and inconsistent manner. Government-supported publications understand the phenomenon broadly, as ranging 'from social discrimination and exclusion through acts of violence to oppression and genocide', referring to reports by the Open Doors Foundation, an international FBO (Azbej 2020, 18-19). Indeed, intolerance of Christian religious beliefs is at times labelled as persecution by government officials. As stated by Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén in 2019, 'Christian persecution begins when a teacher in the West is vilified for wearing a small cross [...] [the government's] mission is to stand up against all forms of Christian persecution' (Hungarian Spectrum 2019). There is no evidence of any objective criteria, or a transparent mechanism used by the Hungarian government to determine what Christian persecution is and how it is measured. This vagueness allows the government to be selective in what it calls out as persecution.

In the fragile states of the Middle East, the government accepts as persecution anything reported as such by international FBOs, local church leaders, or others. However, it has tended to ignore or downplay the persecution of Christian communities in countries such as China or Russia.ⁱⁱ State likes Turkey, Egypt, Azerbaijan, or the former Soviet Central Asian states, all potential sources of migrants which persecute Christians, have not received any support from the HHP. While no donor can be active in all regions, this selectivity does imply that other diplomatic goals take precedence in these cases. While the government argues that they have never turned away requests for help because it ‘would have jeopardized diplomatic relations’ (Brown 2021), it is likely that the HHP is promoted only in some potential recipient countries and not others. Significantly, the countries listed above are all ones with which the Orbán government has been seeking closer relations with (Tarrósy and Vörös 2020).

Second, nothing would prevent the Hungarian government from offering protection to persecuted individuals under asylum and refugee law. Hungary is a signatory to the Geneva Convention, which obliges participatory states to tackle the problem of religious persecution within this context. However, the government has argued against this for two reasons. First, instead of the standard interpretation of persecution in contemporary refugee law, officials refer to the theological understanding of ancient persecution, and teachings on how Christians need to resist the temptation to flee or give up their faith (Interview-4). Second, the government claims that Christian values and heritage need to be preserved by strengthening Christian communities not only in Europe, but also in the Global South (Interview-1a; Interview-2a). Encouraging the migration of (Christian or other) individuals towards the North is not seen as the ‘right’ solution (Hungary Helps Agency 2020), which links to the government’s broader views on migration (see below). Migration is portrayed as a security risk, and as part of an existential struggle between Christianity and Islam opposed on cultural grounds (Lamour 2022). As it is primarily Muslim migrants who are singled out by these arguments, Christian migrants should not be a problem: their potential numbers are small, and they would not ‘dilute’ Hungary’s supposed Christian identity.

Indeed, Hungary has been quietly admitting limited numbers of (Christian) asylum seekers and other migrants, showing that it does not completely rule out their migration. The government has issued citizenship for hundreds of Coptic Christians from Egypt and Iraq since the Arab Spring (Panyi 2015), and in 2017 two Syrian Orthodox church leaders received Hungarian citizenship as well (Dull 2017). The government offered protection for Christian refugees with Hungarian roots from Venezuela (Lehoczki 2022). In 2022, Hungary gave temporary protection to 30,000 Ukrainians following Russia’s invasion.

However, officially, any support from the HHP's budget, for example, scholarships offered to Christian students, is conditional on returning to and staying in the country of origin in the longer term, that is, on voluntarily declining the right to seek asylum in Hungary. Preserving local Christian communities and religious value systems is seen by the Hungarian government as more desirable than the protection of individual human rights through asylum, which it calls a 'failed liberal approach' (Dull 2015).

Reducing migration

The second stated motivation behind the HHP is reducing migration to Europe by addressing its root causes. Reducing migration has been a cornerstone of the Orbán government's policies. The government enhanced law enforcement and border control, erected a fence along the country's Southern border in 2015, refused to take part in the EU's refugee redistribution scheme, and has vilified civil society groups advocating for better living conditions for refugees (Romaniuk 2021). Beyond these measures, the government also claims to make a contribution towards addressing the root causes of migration: officials argue that the HHP prevents migration by creating either better conditions in home countries, or by prompting local responses to challenges. A frequently repeated mantra is that 'help should be taken where the trouble is, as opposed to importing it to Europe and [...] Hungary' (Hungary Helps Agency 2020: 1). Yet, if no significant local Christian minority exists in a country, it is ignored by the HHP, even if it hosts migrants who aspire to travel to Europe, like Tunisia or Algeria (Interview-2b).

As discussed, between 2016 and 2022, HHP spending was worth over €76 million. Clearly, this amount is tiny in terms of addressing the root causes of migration or meaningfully ameliorating the situation of persecuted Christians. Other donors are also increasingly using ODA to tackle migration challenges. For example, the EU's Emergency Trust Fund for Africa has mobilized more than €5 billion (including a €9.45 million contribution from Hungary). However, even this was criticized for being too little compared to the scope of the challenge (Castillejo 2016). Hungary is a small donor, and the HHP represents a significant amount compared to what it had previously spent on bilateral assistance. Small amounts are not automatically ineffective, they can achieve marginal change or have spillover effects. Indeed, the Hungarian government claims that between 2017 and 2020, the HHP enabled 100 thousand people to stay in their homeland or its broader region (Hungary Helps Agency 2020: 1), although they do not offer any evidence to support this.

The credibility of this entire approach is also open to questions beyond the amounts spent. As discussed, the literature is highly sceptical on whether aid can actually reduce migration, and argues that it can only do so if aid is well-planned and targeted, especially towards providing public services. It therefore makes sense to examine the Hungarian government's approach to planning and targeting. The government has gone to great lengths to argue that despite relatively low amounts, the HHP is designed in a way that ensures impact. Most importantly, the projects are driven by the needs of the beneficiary communities and there is a strong degree of recipient ownership (Interview-1a; Interview-4). According to the SSAPCHHP (Brown 2021), recipients need to approach Hungary for support and set priorities. Officials, relying on formal and informal contacts (active and former diplomats, consultants with local knowledge), an in-house analytical team and external research institutes, 'carefully' analyse each request and engage in local visits ('humanitarian fact-finding missions') before making a decision (Interview-1a; Interview-4). Most support goes directly to the local churches, without the inclusion of any 'intermediary, big international organizations' (Brown 2021). There are no pre-conditions attached to the assistance, other than the recipient being an organization representing Christians.

This approach should give plenty of opportunities for local needs to prevail, and few opportunities for the interests of officials or contractors to distort priorities. Furthermore, in line with academic sources (Naguib and Okkenhaug 2008), the government also argues that Christian churches are major providers of care and social services for vulnerable populations in parts of the world where religion is a daily experience and where state welfare service provision is patchy. The HHP focuses on cooperation with local churches and Christian communities demonstrating local knowledge and social embeddedness (Interview-1a; Interview-4). If funding is channelled through Hungarian FBOs, they are selected for their local experiences and networks (Interview-1a; Interview-6). The importance of local embeddedness is in line with scholarly arguments emphasizing that familiarity with the context and setting priorities locally serve the interests of beneficiaries better (James 2011) and enable actors to respond to disasters quickly (Ager et al. 2015; Prodromou and Symeonides 2016; Kraft and Smith 2018). Churches and other FBOs can be considered truly local, which is increasingly viewed as crucial with the focus on 'localization' in humanitarian assistance (Prodromou and Symeonides 2016; Kraft and Smith 2018). Furthermore, Salek (2016: 346) claimed that religious approaches promoting partisan alliances and creating conflict is rather a myth than reality – a conviction apparently shared by the Hungarian government too. This in turn means, according to a number of officials interviewed, that local churches can be effective in providing services even to non-Christian beneficiaries (Interview-1a; Interview-4; Interview-6).

Although Hungary does not provide assistance to Muslim religious organizations, Muslim individuals are not excluded from being final beneficiaries of projects implemented by local Christian communities (Interview-1a; Interview-2a; Interview-4). According to the official argument, the stronger the local Christian communities are, the better positioned they are to offer services to the majority (Muslim) population, thus in turn, also preventing (Muslim) migration towards Europe. While Eastern Orthodox Churches are known for not excluding 'non-Orthodox Christians and non-Christians' (Prodromou and Symeonides 2016), other Christian communities also offer social services (education, healthcare) to anyone turning to them in most Muslim majority countries. Government-funded research (HH-EEM 2017; Ujházi et al. 2019) argues that HHP projects are meant to be inclusive, although this claim is yet to be independently confirmed (reference removed).

There are however some issues with this approach which question the credibility of the government's intentions. Most importantly, the government has made no visible attempt to show whether the approach described above actually works in practice. There is no publicly available research which measures the impacts of the HHP. Besides mentions in political speeches of aggregate (and unverifiable) numbers regarding outputs (how many people the programme has reached, how many churches were rebuilt, etc.), there is no transparent evaluation of actual impacts. Although there are different types of grant agreements entailing different reporting obligations for beneficiaries, reporting in general is lax and narrative-based. Beneficiaries are not required to use project management tools, or to meet measurable targets. In fact, as revealed by an interviewee, in some rare cases funding is handed over directly to church leaders in cash (Interview-2b). While other donors may have similar practices in humanitarian/conflict contexts, it nonetheless compromises the principles of accountability and transparency. Government officials argue that there is a high degree of trust between the government and the implementing partners/churches, not least due to the 'moral capital' possessed by the latter. These practices also reduce the need for bureaucracy (Interview-1a; Interview-4). However, this approach can also be indicative of a lack of interest in whether the assistance provided has any actual impacts on the beneficiaries and their propensity to migrate. The matter of opacity was noted by the OECD (2023: 27; 30) which highlighted that public information on and selection criteria for the HHP programme is lacking. The same challenge applies to the impact of HHP aid too, therefore further research would be needed to map LFCs' experiences with programme.

Hidden or non-stated agendas

The inconsistencies discussed above indicate that the HHP may be driven by political concerns beyond the declared motivations of supporting persecuted Christians and reducing migration. We do not dispute that these two factors played a role in the creation of the program, but as foreign aid usually serves a multitude of goals as part of a donor's foreign (and domestic) policy toolkit, further non-stated agendas may also exist.

Domestic demand for the HHP

As discussed, domestic constituencies may advocate for certain forms of development assistance. The question is therefore whether there is demand in Hungarian society for an aid programme like the HHP?

In general, there is no strong public support for religion and religiosity (Pew Research Centre 2018; IPSOS 2023), nor for aid-related matters in Hungary (Interview-4; OECD 2023, 27-28). Knowledge about Hungary's foreign aid policy is low among the population, and successive governments have avoided raising awareness on it due to fears of backlash. Foreign aid, at least its 'mainstream' (secular) manifestation, is not seen as a vote winner. There is a perception among politicians that spending taxpayer resources abroad is not popular, with voters focusing primarily on the domestic opportunity cost of any such spending. This is borne out by the limited survey evidence that is available: in 2019, 56% of Hungarians thought that the state should not increase foreign aid as the country cannot afford it (Mráz 2020: 40).

However, aid for specific purposes, such as for the HHP's stated goals, may have greater societal backing. Reducing migration has enjoyed overwhelming popular support (Barna and Koltai 2019) and Hungarian public opinion has become increasingly hostile towards immigrants (Thorleifsson 2017). Managing the 'root causes' of migration may have been popular with less hard-line government supporters, who while also against migration, were not unsympathetic to the suffering of migrants. The focus on persecuted Christian communities may have been seen favourably by churches and the religious right. However, critics usually point out that there is no broader societal demand for Orbán's 'Christian turn' (Hungarian Spectrum 2019). Hungarians are relatively secularized in their everyday lives: although around two-thirds identify as Christian (Mráz 2020), only 17% can be classified as 'highly religious', according to the Pew Research Centre (2018).

Even though Hungarians are not strongly religious, Christian persecution may nonetheless resonate with Hungarian society due to its own historical trauma and victimhood, as well as the (historically real or perceived) discrimination of ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries. The collective

memory of trauma caused by the Treaty of Trianon after the First World War is strongly alive, in which Hungary is portrayed as the victim of unjust geopolitics (Toomey 2018; Feischmidt 2020). This ‘traumatized social consciousness’ permeates Hungarian society, but is especially strong among those who are more religious, live in rural areas and are more prone to support authoritarian rule (Máté-Tóth and Balassa 2022: 72). These attributes also characterize the voters of Fidesz. The Treaty of Trianon created ethnic Hungarian communities in all of Hungary’s neighbours, many of whom have historically faced discrimination. Hungarian governments, driven by feelings of responsibility towards these communities, have provided significant amounts of aid to them since the early 1990s, with the goal of ensuring their survival in their ‘native land’ (*szülőföldön való boldogulás*). Since 2010, Fidesz has gone even further, with the ‘unification of the nation’ across borders emerging as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Under this principle, support to ethnic Hungarians has increased considerably, and those who want it have been granted Hungarian citizenship (although, officially, their migration to Hungary has never been encouraged). The Hungarian public sees Hungarian communities in neighbouring countries as discriminated by the majority populations, and solidarity with them receives high levels of public support (Trianon100.hu 2020). An official interviewed argued that the parallels with the plight of ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries make people more receptive and sympathetic to Christian persecution in the Middle East or elsewhere in the Global South (Interview-4).

One of the few public opinion surveys on the topic, carried out by a pro-government institute, found that in 2019 61.3% of Hungarians supported assistance for persecuted Christians, although this ratio had crashed to 25% by 2020, supposedly due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mráz 2020). Therefore, while there may be some receptiveness in Hungarian society towards supporting persecuted Christians, it is unlikely that this would have manifested as a strong and consistent societal demand.

Specific religious lobbies may have nonetheless still pushed for the creation of a programme like the HHP, even in the absence of strong societal backing. The government has institutionalized cooperation with (large historical) Hungarian Christian churches, whose roles in education, healthcare and social services provision have been significantly expanded since 2010 (Ádám and Bozóki 2016; Fekete 2016). The two largest Hungarian NGOs active in humanitarian and development assistance, Hungarian Interchurch Aid and the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, are both Christian FBOs. These two groups have welcomed the HHP and its focus on Christian communities and are strategic partners of the Hungary Helps Agency (Hungarian Interchurch Aid n.d.; Interview-6; OECD 2023: 35). This strategic partnership means that the Agency provides financing in advance through a framework contract, which the FBOs can use flexibly (Interview-1b; Interview-5).

There is however little evidence that they would have actively pushed for a programme like the HHP, nor do they benefit from it significantly in financial terms. Between 2016 and 2020 ODA funding for Hungarian civil society organizations has been allocated to three main groups: Prosperitati Foundation (Serbia) and the two large Hungarian FBOs mentioned above (OECD 2023: 29). The main beneficiaries of the HHP are LFCs in partner countries, and in the majority of cases they receive funds directly, without the mediation of Hungarian FBOs. Between 2017 and 2022, Hungarian FBOs were involved as implementers in 52, relatively small HHP projects (out of 263). These were worth €4.2 million in total, significantly less than the amounts received by LFCs in the Global South. For example, the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta received €134,000 from the HHP in 2020, which accounted for a mere 0.25% of its total income (Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta 2021). Furthermore, Hungarian FBOs need to spend these resources in the Global South. The HHP does not seem to have been designed with the intention of channelling funding to Hungarian churches and FBOs at a large scale.

Overall, there seems to have been little demand from society or specific interest groups for a programme like HHP. While its stated goals may have resonated with Hungarian society's views on migration and persecution, there is a general hostility towards channelling resources abroad. FBOs have welcomed the HHP and the government's diplomacy regarding Christian persecution, but the financial benefits accruing to them from it have not been large.

HHP as a tool to signal values and gain influence

The literature on donor motivations has paid almost no attention to how aid can be used to signal intentions to like-minded donor countries, with the view of deepening relations with them. There is however some evidence of this in case of the HHP. The program is closely intertwined with the Hungarian government's efforts to gain influence with international religious interest groups, and potentially use these as power multipliers in bilateral relationships. Indeed, the genesis of the HHP is linked to one of these groups as well. In 2016, Orbán took part in the annual conference of the ICLN. This group is secretive: participation in its annual conference is by invitation only and journalists are barred. Orbán's participation in the 2016 conference, organized outside of Rome, was at least partly driven by the fact that it provided him an opportunity to meet with Pope Francis. Christian leaders from the Middle East were also present at the conference, and apparently it was the accounts of their plight which moved Orbán to announce that Hungary would stand up against the persecution of Christians (Interview-4). Christian persecution has been an important concern for the ICLN (2021), and also for Pope Francis, whom Hungarian pro-government media had frequently criticized for his

compassion towards refugees (Vatican Radio 2016; Mráz 2020). Shortly after the conference, the topic of Christian persecution started to appear in the rhetoric of ministers (see MFAT 2017b), and the creation of the HHP duly followed.

Orbán became a regular participant at the ICLN conferences, attending one in 2019 in Portugal and one in 2021 in Rome. The 2019 conference brought together ‘several leaders of the extreme right’, including Mick Mulvaney, who at the time served as Donald Trump’s chief of staff (Faria 2019). Orbán used the 2021 conference in Rome to meet with Italian far-right leader Georgia Meloni (Hungarian Spectrum 2021). The ICLN has therefore provided Orbán with opportunities to meet like-minded leaders from Western RPPs. The creation of the HHP may have served to bolster Hungary’s reputation among them by signalling that it was concerned about the religious freedom of Christians.

Relations with the US and the Trump administration have clearly been important in this regard, if not as a motivation for creating the HHP, but as one for maintaining and expanding it. Showcasing alignment with the Trump administration was an important foreign policy goal for Hungary (Bayer 2019). Orbán was the only EU head of government who welcomed Trump’s election in 2016, seeing it as a vindication of his world views. Initially however, US policy towards Hungary did not change, and Orbán was snubbed by Trump. Securing a visit to the White House became a top priority for Hungarian diplomacy (Hegedüs 2020). Hungary intensified its lobbying in Washington significantly after 2016, with the New York Times calling it a ‘vast influence campaign’ (Vogel and Novak 2021). The HHP fitted well with these efforts and was used in an instrumental way to burnish Hungary’s credentials.

Evangelical groups have had a large influence on the Trump administration. Evangelical Christians formed a key part of the electoral coalition supporting the Trump (Margolis 2020). This, in turn, meant that the administration needed to ensure their continued support, which it did in a number of ways; most importantly, by reshaping America’s international religious freedom (IRF) policy (Haynes 2020b). The increasing influence of evangelical groups and the subsequent shift in US IRF policy gave Hungary an opportunity to signal that it has common interests and values with the Trump administration. Correspondingly, Hungary’s position on Christian persecution and the HHP were heavily promoted in the US.

Foreign Minister Szijjártó and the state secretary leading the SSAPCHHP, Tristan Azbej, visited the US on many occasions between 2017 and 2020, and spoke at events of various conservative organizations and evangelical groups. For example, in September 2018 Azbej held a series of meetings in Washington with officials and conservative Christian groups to showcase the HHP, as an approach to supporting persecuted Christians. His arguments were well received by the Trump administration, which was frustrated by USAID’s perceived inability to support Christian communities in Iraq (Igoe 2019).

According to Azbej, US officials acknowledged the HHP as a source of inspiration for USAID's Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response initiative, announced by vice-president Michael Pence in 2018 (Igoe 2019). In December 2018 Hungary signed a memorandum of understanding with USAID to increase cooperation in responding 'to the persecution of religious minorities in northern Iraq', with US officials deeming the HHP as an 'exemplary' initiative (PMO 2019). The HHP received significant coverage in the conservative US media (Green 2020), and Orbán was finally granted a visit to the White House in 2019. When meeting Trump in the Oval Office, he stated that he was 'proud to stand together with United States on fighting against illegal migration, on terrorism, and to protect and help Christian communities all around the world', to which Trump responded: 'you have been great with respect to Christian communities' (Borger and Walker 2019).

We find little evidence that gaining favour with American conservative groups was a conscious motivation when planning the HHP. However, the program's success in raising Hungary's profile among like-minded populist right-wing actors could explain why it was expanded following 2019 (Table 1). The election of Joe Biden however heralded an administration much less sympathetic to Orbán's ideals. Funding for the HHP in 2022 was scaled back, mostly likely because of the budgetary troubles faced by the Hungarian government rather than because of the change of US administration, but its promotion in the US all but stopped.

Conclusions

The paper aimed to examine how considerations around religion motivate donors, using the case study of the Hungary Helps Programme. The HHP is a relatively unique programme, mixing not only humanitarian and development logics, but also combining them with logics about religion and migration. It supports persecuted Christian communities in the Global South to preserve their existence and to reduce migration to Europe. These two stated objectives fit well with the Orbán government's radical right-wing rhetoric on religion and migration. However, there are some inconsistencies: Hungary could be more active in offering asylum to individual (persecuted) Christians and shows little interest in whether its funding for these objectives is well targeted or impactful. This suggests that other motivations may therefore be at play.

While there seems to be little societal or political demand for aid, supporting persecuted Christians may resonate better with Hungarian society (due to its own collective memory of victimhood) than aid programmes following the Northern mainstream. We find little evidence of churches and large FBOs having lobbied for a programme like the HHP, but they have welcomed it and FBOs especially have benefitted from it, although not to any significant degree. A motivation to expand the HHP may

have related to the Hungarian government's efforts to gain favour with the Trump administration. The HHP was marketed extensively in the US and played an important role in raising Hungary's profile with Evangelical groups and their conservative political allies.

The paper reveals three important insights. First, donors can use aid to signal various intentions or ideologies, often unrelated to development, to like-minded donors. Aid is a tool of foreign policy, and in this case at least it has been used to signal foreign policy alignment to a more powerful country. Similar motivations to use aid to signal ideology and alignment may be present with other donors as well, although potentially in different forms than in the case of Hungary. These may warrant further scrutiny. Second, our paper provides one of the first attempts to examine the role of religion as a policy motivation in case of an official Northern (OECD DAC member) donor. The analysis shows that in Hungary's case, the references to religion in development policy are closely linked to domestic political rhetoric, and thus, at least in part, instrumental. While references to religion in ODA policy appear to be primarily about addressing the plight of persecuted Christians elsewhere, they simultaneously reinforce broader political narratives that powerfully serve domestic interests. Third, the policy-making process of Hungary's development policy is extremely opaque, which made research on the HHP difficult. While not all donors are equally transparent, Hungary seems to be an outlying case, possibly a consequence of the backsliding of democracy in the country under Fidesz.

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Interviews

Interview-1a: two officials, Prime Minister's Office, SSAPCHHP, Budapest, 12/03/2020.

Interview-1b: follow-up with official from 1a, Prime Minister's Office, SSAPCHHP, phone, 26/11/2020.

Interview-2a: former MFAT diplomat, phone, 30/11/2020.

Interview-2b: former MFAT diplomat (same as 2a), Budapest, 11/04/2023.

Interview-3: official, MFAT, Department of International Development Cooperation, Budapest, 11/11/ 2020.

Interview-4: three officials, MFAT, Department for Coordinating the Hungary Helps Programme, Budapest, 29/03/2023.

Interview-5: official, Hungary Helps Agency, online, 04/05/2023.

Interview-6: Hungarian FBO representative, online, 18/05/2023.

ⁱ See the online appendix to the paper.

ⁱⁱ Non-Russian Orthodox Christians, members of Evangelical churches and those belonging to what are seen as 'Western' denominations face significant restrictions and harassment in Russia (RFI nd).