

## Article

# The Discourse of Christianity in Viktor Orbán's Rhetoric

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**Abstract:** This paper studies the views of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on religion and Christianity, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis is based on Viktor Orbán's speeches in Băile Tuşnad, at Bálványos Free Summer University and Student Camp (commonly known as Tusványos), which are suitable to sensitively trace the evolution of his thinking from 1990 to 2022. The analysis shows how the concept of Christianity has changed in meaning in the speeches, how it has been linked to political issues, and in what ways Orbán's thinking has been similar to and different from political Christianity and religious Christianity. Orbán's concept of Christianity can be understood within the theoretical framework of populism developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: in the discursive struggle for political hegemony, there is a continuous construction of 'the people', of society, in which 'empty markers' play a key role. Orbán's concept of Christianity can thus be adequately interpreted in terms of the discourse of the permanent creation of the 'nation'. The political emphasis on Christianity is related to the wounded collective identity of Hungarian society. The paper argues that because of the collective woundedness, society requires an overarching narrative symbolizing unity, of which Christianity is a key concept.

**Keywords:** Christianity; religion; populism; wounded collective identity; Viktor Orbán; natural language processing; biterm topic modeling; qualitative exploratory content analysis



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## 1. Introduction—Questionable Evidence

In international social science publications, it is common sense that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's policies are populist (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021; Antal 2019; Sükösd 2022) and he uses regular references to Christianity to make his policies successful (Lamour 2022). Born in 1963, he played a significant role in the 1990s regime change in Hungary. He was the youngest representative of a generation that had not been compromised by the communist regime, and not only because of his age. He first gained national prominence and recognition with his speech at Imre Nagy's funeral (16 June 1989). A symbolic figure of the 1956 revolution, Imre Nagy was secretly executed after the failed revolution, but his public funeral did not take place until the fall of communism. Viktor Orbán is a founding member of the Federation of Young Democrats (Fidesz) (30 March 1988) and has been its president since 1993. The party was elected to parliament in the first free elections of 1990, where it became part of the liberal opposition wing against the National Democratic government. In 1998, he became prime minister of a coalition government with the former right-wing parties until 2002. For 8 years afterward, he was the largest right-wing opposition group in parliament. Since 2010, he has been prime minister in a coalition government with the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), with a two-thirds majority in four consecutive parliamentary elections.

The vast majority of international publications analyzing Viktor Orbán's policies have been published in the past 10 years. The number of analyses has increased exponentially after 2015, linked to the European refugee crisis (Google Scholar search 2010–2015: 860, 2016–2021: 1970 publications mentioning Viktor Orbán, last access 30 May 2023; [Barcsa and Máté-Tóth 2022](#); [Kovács et al. 2022](#); [Kulska 2023](#); Szaló in [Barša et al. 2021](#)). Zsolt Enyedi (2020) summarizes the main characteristics of right-wing authoritarian politics, including the analysis of Viktor Orbán's policies and their Christian dimension. He lists the six main characteristics of this policy as follows:

‘[...] the combination of victimhood, self-confidence, and the resentment against the West; the transformation of neighbor-hating nationalisms into a civilizationist anti-immigrant platform; the delegitimization of civil society and the belief in a strong state; the resurrection of Christian political identity; the adaptation of conspiracy theories; and the transformation of populist discourse into a language and organizational strategy that is compatible with governmental roles’. ([Enyedi 2020](#), p. 365)

Enyedi calls this politics of Orbán's paternalistic populism, which he sees as typical of other Central and Eastern European countries as well. Whether this characterization is correct or not, it has the value of being representative of the general criticisms of Orbán's policies and of including all the key terms used in these descriptions. The question remains, however, what the relationship between the characteristics listed is. The focus of our study is to what extent Orbán's Christianity is a hallmark of the policy that is found in this compact formulation. According to Enyedi, there has been a change in Orbán's rhetoric and political emphases in the last few years, whereby the historical focus has been replaced by a focus on civilizational conflicts.

‘The historical skirmishes have been replaced by the civilizational conflict that is about the survival of Christian culture, nations, nation-states and traditional families. The fight against the threats of an imminent cultural catastrophe, and against foreign interference, require a common front’. ([Enyedi 2020](#), p. 367)

It seems essential to examine the relationship between the content and function of Christianity and historical traumas, on the one hand, and the Kulturkampf, on the other. Although Enyedi formulates his general insights with reference to several countries in the Central and Eastern European region, he does not rely on primary sources when writing about the political resurgence of Christianity. For our part, we do not consider it superfluous to test the picture that Enyedi exemplifies by drawing on primary sources. That is why we have chosen to analyze Orbán's speeches at Tusványos, because they span almost 30 years and seem to provide a suitable basis for a genealogy of the present situation. It is also an opportunity to explore further nuances in this conception of Christianity.

### *Research Questions*

The motivation of our research is to examine Viktor Orbán's Christianity and understand better the political communication strategy behind using the discourse of Christianity in his rhetoric.

We investigate to what extent the current prime minister's Christianity characterizes the politics that emerge in this compact formulation. We aim to analyze the concept of Christianity and its evolution over time in his speeches at Tusványos. We aim to show through analyzing the transcripts, how his concept of Christianity has changed in meaning, how it has been linked to political issues, and how Orbán's thinking has been similar to and different from political Christianity and religious Christianity.

## **2. Theoretical Approaches**

### *2.1. Canovan, Mudde, and Laclau*

Populism is usually seen as a lagging democracy, but Canovan argues that populism is a necessary component of democracy, capable of mobilizing the grassroots of democracy.

In developed democracies, populist political currents do not aim to fight the democratic rules of society and certainly do not want to impose tyrannical totalitarianism instead of democracy. Rather, they seek to exercise 'direct democracy', often successfully, especially through referendums and street political action. The central element of Canovan's thesis is that populism and pragmatism are not mutually exclusive dimensions of democracy. On the contrary, he argues that we must say goodbye to a conception of democracy that is merely pragmatic. Populism and pragmatism cannot be set against each other, if only because behind every pragmatic politics there is an ideology and a vision, which may confront or clash with other visions through certain democratic paths. On the other hand, for a theoretician of populism, it is also important not to equate populism with dictatorship, because, in his view, populist political actions and ideologies seek to achieve their ends by democratic means (Canovan 1999, pp. 2, 7).

"Democracy as we know it has two faces, one I call 'redemptive' and the other 'pragmatic', and populism lives from the tension between these two" (Canovan 1999, p. 8). Canovan goes on to say that in fact no democracy can exist without a certain belief in redemption. Any political theory that seeks to take this dimension out of democracy altogether is naive and has no direct connection with concrete democratic systems.

Among theorists of populism, there is a kind of 'minimal consensus' on the essence of populism, which Decker calls a stylistic and agitational tool (Decker 2004, p. 95ff.). According to him, the most important defining elements are conspiracy theories and thinking in terms of enemy images, provocation, the breaking of taboos, the use of biologicistic and violent metaphors, and sensitization, and fear mongering. This 'minimal consensus' includes the characteristics of populism cited in the political lexicon but is complemented by some other important features which, despite certain ambiguities, make it suitable for analyzing different political processes. Decker starts with the premise "that even if populism is a concept that is subject to disagreement, the core of the concept can be agreed upon in terms of ideological and orientational features. Secondly, the term is better suited to showing what is 'new' in right-wing parties than terms such as 'extremist' or 'radical'. And finally, and thirdly, in addition to the similarities in content, similarities could be found in the attempts to define populism" (Elliker 2013, p. 221). When common sense arguments as well as norms and moral concepts that have been tried and tested in the private sphere are invoked and transferred to the public sphere, what is right on a small scale cannot be wrong on a large scale. In contrast to 'classical' conservatism, populists focus on radical solutions: rather than proposing the incremental improvements typical of conservatives, they reject such half-hearted choices and regard the inability to compromise as a virtue (Elliker 2013, pp. 225–26). Radicalism and intolerance, on the one hand, and the pursuit of unity and harmony, on the other, characterize populist politics.

What these authors have in common in their theories and analyses is that they see populism as a descriptive or analytical category, and not as a vestige or crime against democracy. The analysts of populism in Central and Eastern Europe, and especially in Hungary and Poland, are interpreting conditions long after the political conditions experienced by Canovan or Elliker. Nevertheless, we think it worth considering to be more explicit in our own analysis about the separation between political analysis and political evaluation, all the more so because post-structuralist theorists of populism have developed a theoretical framework that seems more adequate for the conditions of the region; we think here of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau 2002; Mouffe 2018).

Laclau goes further in his interpretation of populism. In *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2002), which in many respects draws on his earlier work on Marxism, Laclau seeks to justify populism, so to speak, or in other words, to bring it back into thinking about contemporary politics. According to Laclau, populism should not be defined along the lines of particular political beliefs, nor can it be assigned to only one side of the political field, but populism is a political characteristic that unites different ideological positions or political fronts and contrasts this unity with the existing political power and authority. Populism should, therefore, be approached not by its content but by its form. In this way, populism can divide

the social field, with the people on one side and the political institutions that currently hold the hegemony on the other. Today, the people are not to be understood as an organized movement, but as a constitution of certain guiding expressions and equivalent chains that provide a general direction for thought and political reflexes. Laclau marks the essence of his whole train of thought in the very first sentence of the preface to his book: ‘The main issue addressed in this book is the nature and logics of the formation of collective identities’ (Laclau 2002, p. IX). Populism, in his conception, is the public process by which collective identities can be formed. In the struggle for hegemony, the various groups and social units (which Laclau calls demand) express themselves in the public sphere, find allies, and, as part of this process, the ‘people’ are constructed in opposition to the established system, the elite.

‘The emergence of the ‘people’ as a historical actor is thus always transgressive vis-a-vis the situation preceding it. This transgression is the emergence of a new order’. (Laclau 2002, p. 228)

Populism is the process, the procedure that creates this new order. In the case of Central and Eastern European societies, populism cannot be understood only as vestigial democracy, or as the destruction of democracy. It can also be understood as the emergence of this new order in the laclaulian sense. Populist political processes are designed to create a people from the ruins of the previous political order, following the totalitarian relations that disrupted the organic development of society, and concomitantly transfer the political power usurped by hegemonies to where it originally belongs, the people. The centuries-long lack of nation-state autonomy in these societies has led to a particularly strong desire for sovereignty. For this reason, political rhetoric emphasizing the stability of the nation state is popular. Successful politicians use populist rhetoric to appeal to such desires.

In relation to Laclau’s theory, further developed by his former colleague Chantal Mouffe (2018, 2022), Orbán’s political stance or style can be interpreted as a successful attempt to create a fundamentally new system of relations. And if viewed in this way, the functions of religion and Christianity can be interpreted not in terms of a democracy-building versus democracy-destruction model, but as part of the process by which ‘the people’ are created.

## 2.2. Threats and Securitization

Continuing the logic of the theories of populism outlined above, it is also necessary to try to answer the question of why Central and Eastern European societies are susceptible to populism in one sense or another. In their previous writings, Máté-Tóth and colleagues refer to the politics of memory of historical traumas and their perpetuation in the present, as well as to the high demand for collective security (Máté-Tóth 2019, 2020; Máté-Tóth and Balassa 2022; Máté-Tóth and Szilárdi 2023). The countries of the region, including Hungary, have historically been in a collision zone of Eastern and Western hegemonies. Their claims to nationalism and nation-state autonomy have remained unfulfilled for a long time, since the 19th century. Fear of nationhood and anxiety about the threat and loss of statehood played a major role in their collective identity. In their study, Dávid Kollár and Tamás László successfully demonstrated that threat and vulnerability play a very significant role in collective identity in Hungary (Kollár and László 2022). The Policy Solutions 2023 survey also shows that 40% of respondents in Hungary agree with the statement that “Hungary’s independence and sovereignty must be protected from the influence of great powers” (Bíró-Nagy 2023). And Bernadett Balassa and colleagues have demonstrated a close correlation between wounded collective identity and securitization based on empirical data (Balassa et al. 2022). These correlations have proven relevant for an adequate analysis of the Tusványos speeches and allowed us to examine Orbán’s perception of Christianity in the context of the country’s distinctively Central-Eastern European collective identity. Zsófia Rakovics and colleagues have applied methods of natural language processing to show that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán consciously relies on a variety of

political and rhetorical tools, the established techniques of populist discourse (see, for example, [Rakovics 2022](#); [Boda and Rakovics 2022](#)).

### 3. Materials and Methods

Our study adopts a mixed methodological approach, using quantitative and qualitative tools to analyze Viktor Orbán's speeches between 1990 and 2022. For the quantitative analysis, we use a selection of natural language processing methods. First, we apply bag-of-words methods to examine absolute and relative word frequencies, and biterm topic modeling for analyzing short texts. For the qualitative analysis, exploratory content analysis is carried out, allowing room for deeper interpretation.

#### 3.1. Data

The analysis is based on the transcripts of current Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán Viktor's speeches in Băile Tuşnad (Tusnádfürdő), at Bálványos Free Summer University and Student Camp, often referred to as the Tusványos speeches, available online. Viktor Orbán began his political career in opposition; after the first Orbán government (1998–2002), he was in opposition for 8 years; then, he continued as the leader of the governing party: in coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), he has won, uninterruptedly, four parliamentary elections since 2010.

In the quantitative approach, we are particularly concerned with providing a balanced representation of Viktor Orbán's speeches in Tusványos during his years in opposition and government, and therefore we are narrowing down the available speeches. In the quantitative analysis, we examine a total of 16 speeches (2002–2017): 8 years in opposition (2002–2009) and 8 years in government (2010–2017). By selecting this 16-year-long period, we study the years of extreme importance for Viktor Orbán's political career. He has been the prime minister of Hungary for 13 years (starting in 2010) without any interruption, and the effective milestones of his actual political communication strategy have been established between 2002 and 2017.

Our qualitative analysis does not perform any pruning, including of the texts of all speeches available online. We do this in order to study the full possible spectrum of his political communication, examining all years from which the transcripts of the Tusványos speeches are accessible. So for the qualitative investigation, we rely on all speeches between 1990 and 2022.

#### 3.2. Methods

Taking advantage of the mixed method approach ([Király et al. 2014](#)), we applied both quantitative and qualitative tools iteratively in several rounds. While we understand the challenges of using a mixed methods design (see [Dawadi et al. 2021](#)), for example that quantitative and qualitative techniques rely on different epistemological and philosophical frameworks, we believe that the combination could produce fruitful insights for this study.

In the qualitative analysis units of our research, we identified the most important keywords based on available literature and theoretical ideas and conducted an exploratory content analysis ([Mayring 2000](#)) to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of words as well as to provide an expert interpretation of empirically scanned patterns and temporal dynamics. The keywords chosen for religion and, more specifically, for Christianity are as follows: Christian, Christianity, Christian Democracy, Christian Democrat, de-Christianized, de-Christianization, Christian-centered, post-Christian, good God, faith-based, faith in God, creed, baptism, religion, religious, church, Church, by the Church, Islam, Muslim, Muslim-ized, orthodoxy, and Orthodox. For the qualitative study, MaxQDA software version 2020 Pro was used.

In preparation for our quantitative analysis based on natural language processing, we carried out data pre-processing, the steps of which are briefly described below. The raw texts are processed by removing special characters and punctuation in the texts, standardizing the keywords (e.g., lower case, standard character encoding), lemmatizing



them, and defining the units of analysis (tokens) relevant to the text analysis software. For the study, the texts were also broken down into sentences, so that the words and topics contained in each unit could be examined in greater depth.

The toolbox for text analytics is broad, and natural language processing offers a variety of approaches and methods for different types of analysis. One simple approach is the bag-of-words model, which looks at the frequency of words within a corpus, ignoring the order and position of words in the text. One of the reasons why we have chosen this method for the analysis of our study is that it is useful for a focused analysis of relevant keywords, to explore the occurrence of words and their dynamics. In this study, we focus on words related to religion and Christianity, which are of particular importance in terms of content. We also carried out a word frequency analysis for each period, opposition, and government years, and for the whole time period in general. To standardize and improve comparability, we analyze relative word frequencies, consider the whole transcripts (so-called documents) as a unit, and correct for the length of speeches, counting relative occurrences; in a similar way as [Boda and Rakovics \(2022\)](#) did in their study analyzing migration discourses. Data analysis is performed using R (Project for Statistical Computing) and the results are illustrated using bar charts.

Topic models ([Blei and Lafferty 2009](#)) can be used to map the dominant word groups in the text corpus, which can be interpreted to describe the characteristic themes in the data. These models represent dominant topics as a distribution over words and documents as a distribution over topics ([Blei and Lafferty 2009](#)). Several types of topic models are available, which should be chosen according to the characteristics of the available data and research questions. Since the available speech transcripts were of different lengths, they were broken down into sentences for topic modeling, avoiding possible bias due to the unequal length of the speeches. For our quantitative text analysis, we selected the biterm topic model (BTM, [Yan et al. 2013](#); [Cheng et al. 2014](#)) from the available options, which is suitable for analyzing short texts and identifying dominant topics. The biterm topic model was fitted in R using the BTM ([Wijffels et al. 2023](#)) package. Several models were run with different numbers of topics; the one chosen for the study was selected based on the computed topic coherence metrics and as a result of expert reasoning. We also fitted the biterm topic models to different subsets of the data, not only for the whole period (2002–2017) but also for the years in opposition and government, following the breakdown presented in the Data section. Both qualitatively (when interpreting the meaning of the words within each topic and the topics themselves) and quantitatively (when comparing topic coherence measures), the results of the 6-topic model proved to be the best. Therefore, we used the 6-topic model for the 2002–2017 period and applied 6-topic models for the subsets as well: speeches of 8 years in opposition (2002–2009) and 8 years in government (2010–2017), respectively. In the Results section, we present the outcomes of these biterm topic models in detail, as they are substantively well-related to the focus of our study and enrich the understanding of the content of the prime minister's speeches held in Băile Tușnad, at the Bálványos Free Summer University and Student Camp.

#### 4. Results

The analysis has been conducted according to the description of the Material and Methods section. The motivation for this section is two-fold.

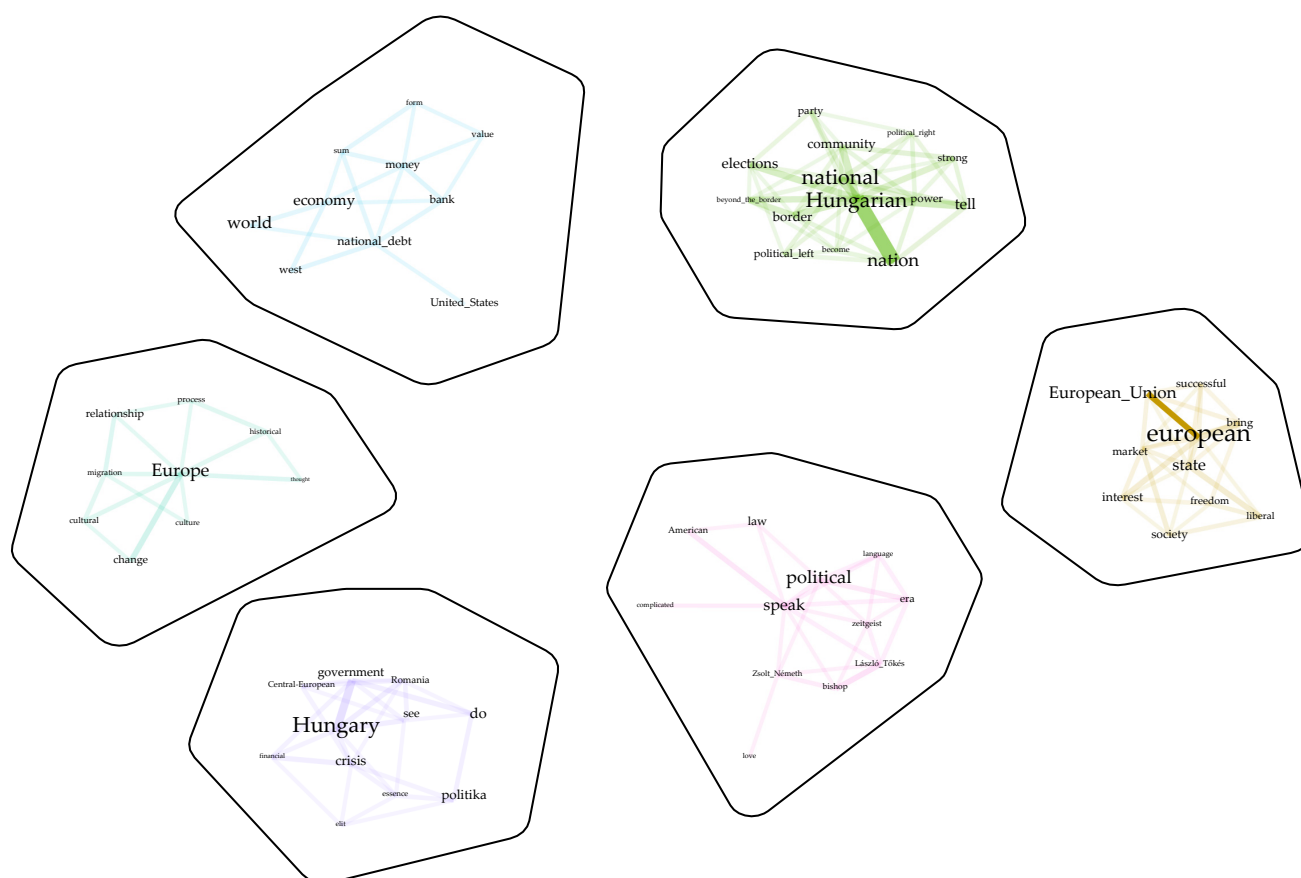
First, we aim to describe the main discourse areas of the Tusványos speeches for the different time periods explained in the previous section. With this, we provide a general overview of the substantive content of Viktor Orbán's speeches by examining the time period of 2002–2017, and also the years in opposition (2002–2009) and government (2010–2017), respectively. For this analysis—as outlined above—we use biterm topic modeling.

Second, in alignment with the main research questions, we concentrate on the topic of Christianity to gain detailed knowledge about its discourse in the prime minister's rhetoric. For this, we rely on bag-of-words models and compute relative word frequencies correcting to the length of the speeches.

#### 4.1. Discourse Areas of the Tusványos Speeches

In this subsection, we explore the relevant themes of the Tusványos speeches. We present the results of the biterm topic modeling for the narrowed time interval, in general for the period 2002–2017, and then for the opposition years (2002–2009) and years in government (2010–2017).

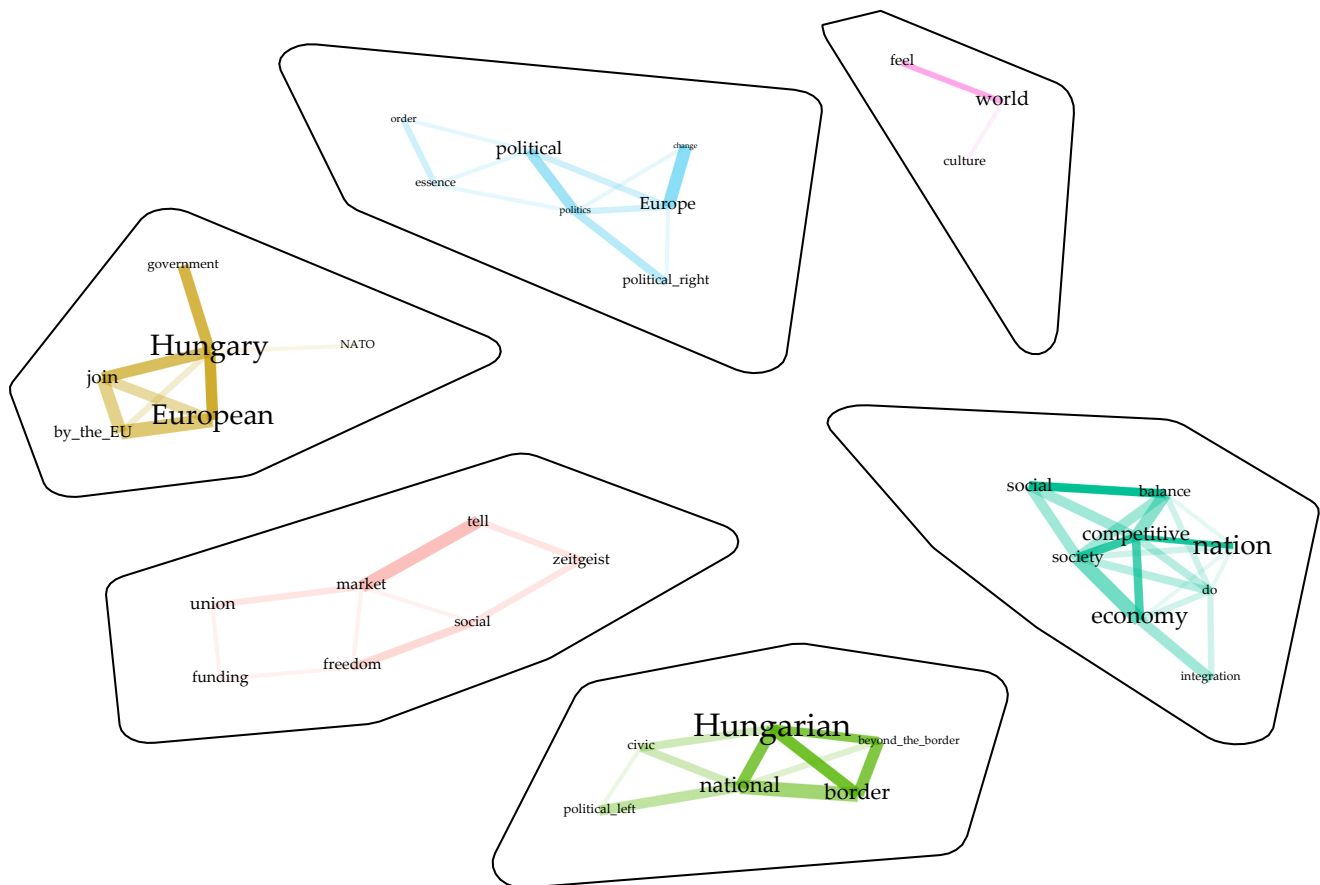
Six dominant thematic areas have been identified using the chosen topic model, which can be summarized and interpreted as follows. The order in which the topics are described does not indicate their importance and is read in a clockwise direction in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The results of the 6-topic model for the entire time period (2002–2017).

1. In the first topic, the central words are *Hungarian*, *nation*, and *national*. The terms in the word group refer to the Hungarian parliamentary elections, the sense of community with Hungarians living beyond Hungary's borders, the sense of belonging together, and the strong right wing, the representation of right-wing values.
2. The second topic contains the words *European* and *European Union*, highlighted. In addition to these, the words *interest*, *market*, *state*, *society*, *freedom*, and *successful* are also included.
3. The third topic contains typical words from politics, *political speech*, *language*, *laws*, different political eras, and *zeitgeist*.
4. The fourth topic focuses on *Hungary*, *Romania*, *Central Europe*, the *financial situation*, the *crisis*, among other things, referring to what and how the government and its policies see and do to solve issues.
5. *Europe* is the dominant term in the fifth topic, and other dominant terms include *history*, *culture*, *change*, *processes*, and *relationships* that can be observed in Europe. *Migration*, for example, is also a characteristic word within this theme.
6. One of the keywords in the sixth topic is *economy*, and the *world*, the *United States*, among other words such as *banks* and *government*.

Following the above methodological framework, we also use a 6-topic topic model for the time periods in opposition and in government for Viktor Orbán. The results are summarized in Figure 2 below for the period 2002–2009, when Viktor Orbán was in opposition.



**Figure 2.** The results of the 6-topic model for speeches before 2010, i.e., the time period in opposition (2002–2009) for Viktor Orbán.

Below, the six topics are presented in more detail, Figure 2, reading the results clockwise.

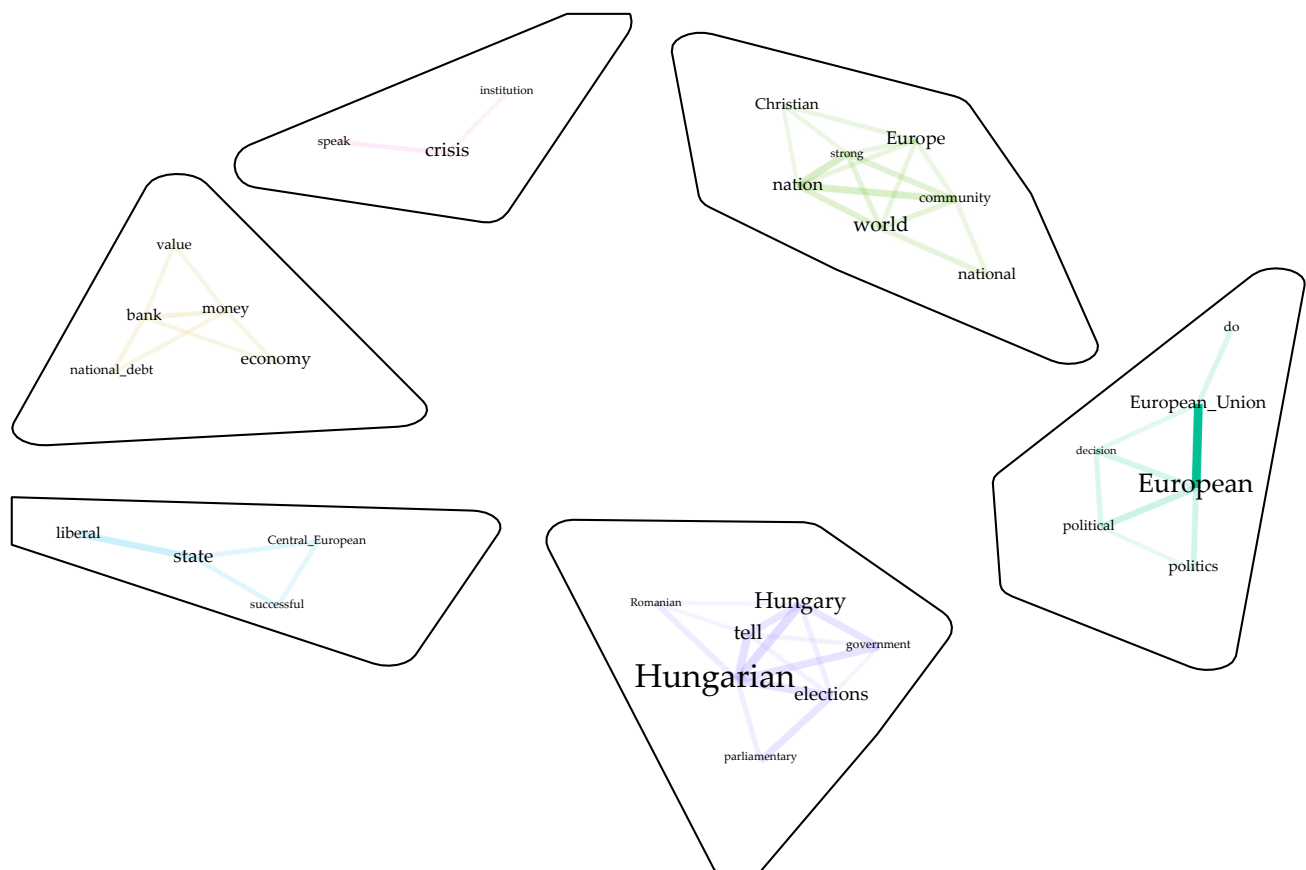
1. The central words of the first topic are *Hungarian*, *national*, *border* and *beyond the border* (referring to the territories that used to belong to Hungary). The terms in the word group also include hits for *civic* and *political left*. It is interesting to note how this translates into a sense of community, belonging, and a strong right-wing representation of right-wing values in the overall analysis over the whole period under study, especially compared to what was obtained in the opposition period, in the present model (*civic*, *left*).
2. The second topic contains the words *zeitgeist*, *social*, *market*, *funding*, and *union*. It is noticeable that, compared to the general picture, different foci dominate in the opposition period.
3. The most prominent words in the third topic are *Hungary*, *European*, *NATO*, *government*, and *accession*. This topic also looks at the issues of *joining the European Union* and *NATO*.
4. The fourth topic contains the words *Europe*, *politics*, *political*, *change*, *order*, *essence*, and *right-wing*. The theme discusses the role of the political right in Europe.
5. The word *world* is a typical one for the fifth topic, besides *culture* and expressions referring to emotions, such as the verb *feel*.



6. The dominant words in the sixth theme are *nation, economy, competitiveness, society, social, and integration*.

It can be observed from the words of the threads and their context that when Fidesz was in opposition, the terms *Hungarian, Hungary, country, and nation* did not include the term *Christianity* and were not prominent in the transcripts of the Tusványos speeches. This observation shows interesting results, especially in comparison to the communication of the years in government. We, therefore, turn to the period after 2010, when Viktor Orbán was already governing the country as prime minister.

Since 2010, the Fidesz-KDNP coalition government has played a leading role in the country's political life without interruption. A detailed analysis of Viktor Orbán's speeches in Tusnádfürdő during his years in government has been carried out, and the six relevant topics are presented in this section. Figure 3 shows the results of the 6-topic model for speeches in and after 2010, in other words, the time period in government (2010–2017) for Viktor Orbán.



**Figure 3.** The results of the 6-topic model for speeches in and after 2010, in other words, the time period in government (2010–2017) for Viktor Orbán.

The six themes are presented here in a clockwise direction as well, as shown in Figure 3.

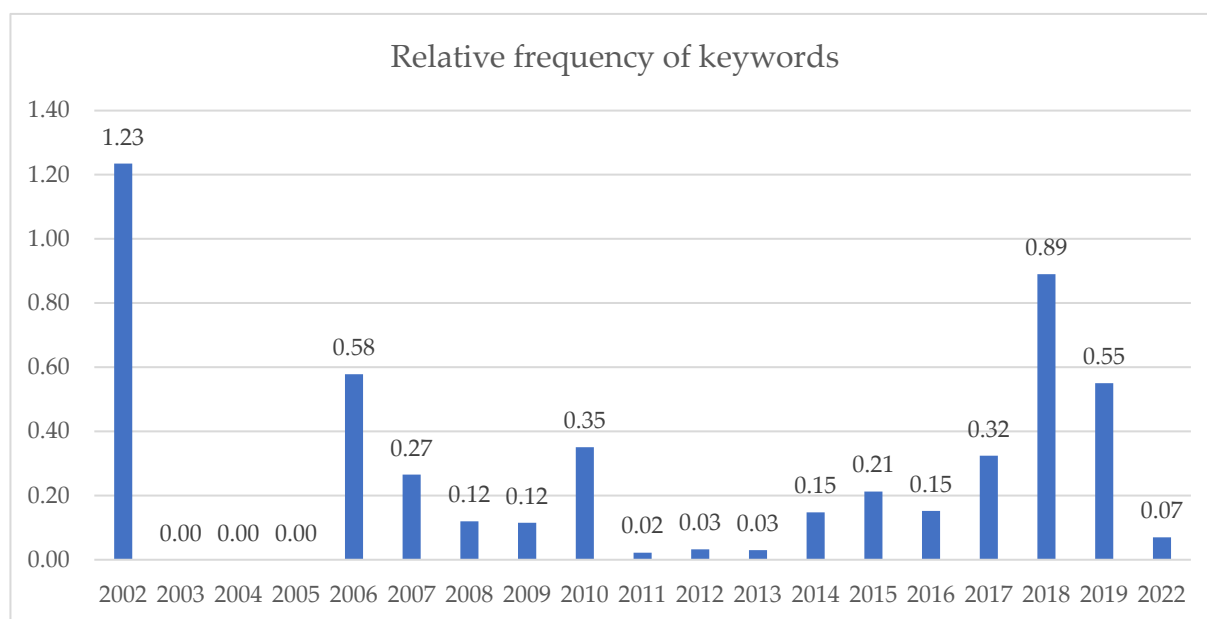
1. The prominent words of the first topic are *Hungarian, Hungary, election, parliament, government*, and the communication of what its representatives *say*. Similarities can be observed with the related topics of the general model.
2. The second topic contains the words *state, Central European, liberal, and successful*.
3. In the third one, the words of the economic dimension come to the fore as they have been presented in all the other topic models earlier. The dominant words are *economy, bank, money, national debt, and value*.

4. The fourth theme refers to the *crisis, institutions*, and discussions around the potential solutions, with the verb *speak*.
5. In the fifth topic, the words *Europe, nation, national, strong*, and *community* appear, along with the term *Christian*. This theme is of particular importance for our research, as will be discussed in more detail below.
6. The sixth topic contains the words *Europe, European Union, policy, political, decision*, and *action*.

The results show that when Viktor Orbán has been in government and in the position of Prime Minister, the word *Christian* has been more prominent in the Tusk speeches, and its connection with the words *nation, national, Europe*, and *community* has become more striking. The theoretical framework and empirical results presented in this section will be used to explore the topic of Christianity in more depth, and the following sections will explore the topic of Christianity further.

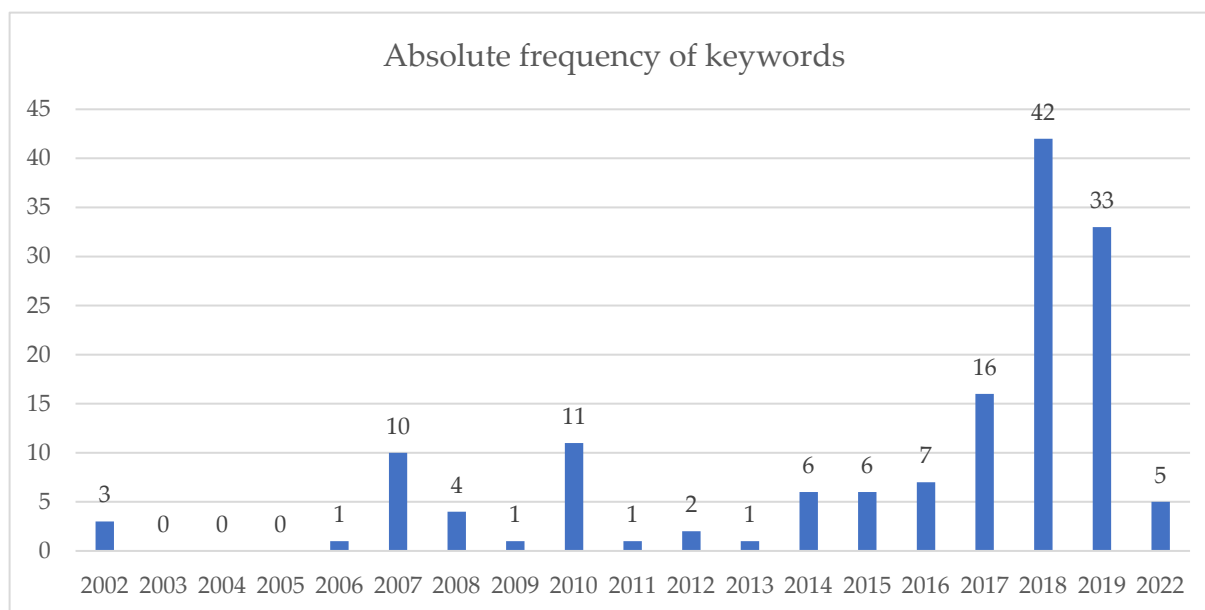
#### 4.2. The Discourse of Christianity

In what follows, we present the results obtained from the bag-of-words models in detail. The bar chart below, in Figure 4, shows a weighted measure computed as the sum of the relative frequencies (correcting to the length of the speeches) of all the religious terms chosen for study (for a detailed list, see the Methods section above). Overall, therefore, the results illustrate how prominent the theme of religion is in the speeches in different years. The higher the weighted measure is, the more important the religious keywords are within the speeches of each year.



**Figure 4.** The results of the bag-of-words model analysis; the relative occurrence of keywords between 2002 and 2022.

In Figure 5 below, the total absolute occurrences of the keywords are shown, with an average occurrence of 7.8. As the figure illustrates, the absolute occurrences of religious themes in the Tusk speeches show striking differences.



**Figure 5.** The results of bag-of-words model analysis; the absolute occurrence of keywords between 2002 and 2022.

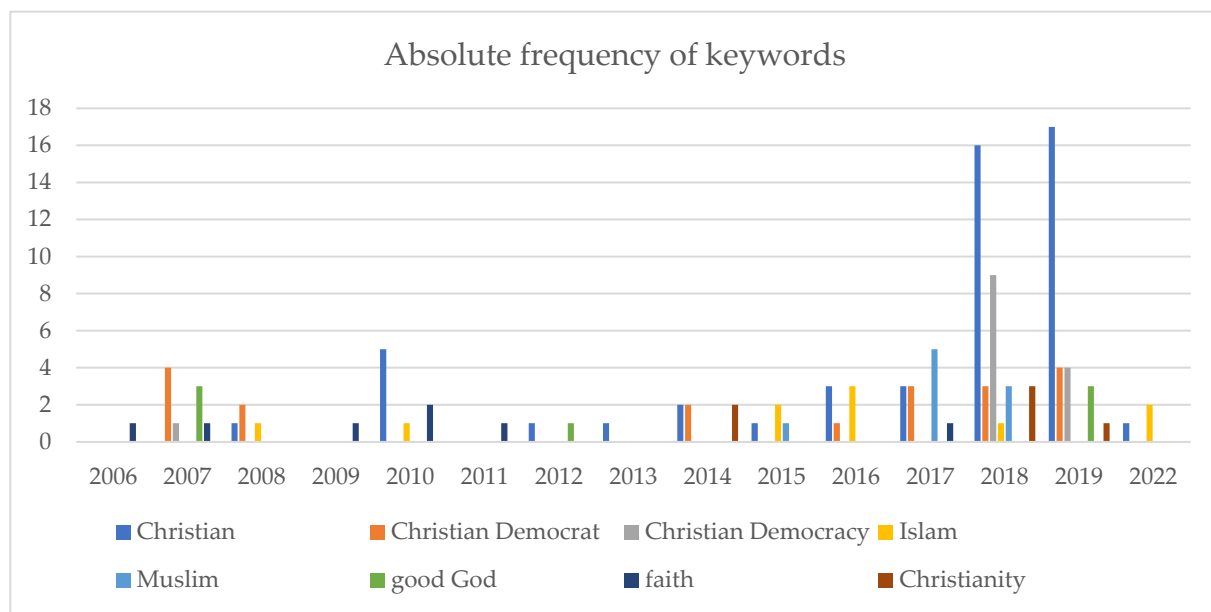
The chart shows that religious themes first appear above average in absolute terms in 2007 (10). From 2010 onwards, there are four years in which religious themes appear in speeches at least twice the average rate: 2010 (11), 2017 (16), 2018 (42), and 2019 (33). In fact, in the last few years, the incidence shows a sharp increase and then falls below average by 2022.

Based on these results, we need to answer the following question: How do the proportions of vocabulary within the religious theme evolve? Table 1 shows the keywords chosen for analysis and their absolute frequencies.

**Table 1.** The absolute frequency of selected keywords between 2002 and 2022.

| Keyword (More Frequent) | Absolute Frequency | Keyword (Less Frequent) | Absolute Frequency |
|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Christian               | 51                 | creed                   | 4                  |
| Christian Democrat      | 19                 | religion                | 3                  |
| Christian Democracy     | 14                 | religious               | 2                  |
| Islam                   | 10                 | church                  | 2                  |
| Muslim                  | 9                  | faith_in_God            | 2                  |
| good God                | 7                  | faith_based             | 2                  |
| faith                   | 7                  | Church                  | 2                  |
| Christianity            | 6                  | post-Christian          | 1                  |
|                         |                    | orthodoxy               | 1                  |
|                         |                    | Orthodox                | 1                  |
|                         |                    | Muslimized              | 1                  |
|                         |                    | de-Christianization     | 1                  |
|                         |                    | Christian-centered      | 1                  |
|                         |                    | baptism                 | 1                  |
|                         |                    | de-Christianized        | 1                  |
|                         |                    | by_the_Church           | 1                  |

And the following bar chart, in Figure 6, shows the absolute occurrences for each year of the keywords that appear at least six times in the Tusványos speeches, in order: *Christian*, *Christian Democrat*, *Christian Democracy*, *Islam*, *Muslim*, *good God*, *faith*, and *Christianity*. In Figure 6, the highlighted words are listed in alphabetical order.



**Figure 6.** The results of the bag-of-words model analysis; the absolute occurrence of dedicated keywords between 2002 and 2022.

The bar chart above shows that the term *Christian* is a prominent feature of the religious theme (note that the term *Christian* appears in only 2 speeches in total, together with the term *Christian Democracy*: in 2018 and 2019.)

Is there a difference between the religious themes of the 2007 speech and the 2010 speech, and if so, what is it? In the former year Fidesz was in opposition, while in the latter year it was in government with a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

The 2007 speech contains four religious terms: *Christian Democrat*, *Christian Democracy*, *God*, and *Faith*. In one case, the word *Jóisten* ‘lit. Good God’, is a greeting formula, somewhat like ‘God be with you’ in English or *Grüß Gott* in German. In one instance, it is God who sends Jonah to Nineveh. The other is that God alone can create, whereas a human needs a mate to create another human. This theological thesis is part of the context in which a kind of shift in outlook is beginning to take hold in Europe, in which family, tradition, and community are regaining in public thought the position they had lost or weakened as a result of the turn of 1968.

The term *Christian* is used in the phrase *Christian Democracy* throughout this speech. It fits into a line of thought which, although it incorporated the freedom of the 1968 turnaround into the Christian Democratic ideology and governments (e.g., Kohl’s government, in Germany), was not able to change the *zeitgeist*.

‘Because it is true that these Christian Democrat or Conservative governments have been formed, but they have never been able, perhaps they have never dared, to change the spirit of the times themselves, and this spirit of the times has prevailed, if not unhindered, then dominantly, until recently’. ([Tusványos speech 2007](#), p. 11)

The dominance of this *zeitgeist* seems to be breaking down, as the successes of (kind of) Christian Democratic parties in Europe show. Hungarian politics, based on the division in Europe, also think in terms of ‘Christian democratic equals right-wing’ and ‘social democratic equals left-wing’ options, which have reached a certain level but have not been willing or able to fight the *zeitgeist*. Therefore, “new types of parties are needed” ([Tusványos speech 2007](#)). The term *Christian Democracy* in this context is synonymous with right-wing, implying a link with right-wing European political trends, but also signaling a certain dissatisfaction with the loyalty to the *zeitgeist*.

The fate of faith in post-1968 Europe is also linked to the European zeitgeist. Faith became suspect, discredited, identified with clericalism. At the same time, faith is also a type of resource: ‘spiritual, moral, faith-based strength’ (Tusványos speech 2007, p. 29). These strengths are needed to enable the right in Hungarian political life to understand the new European zeitgeist and thus to ‘interweave’ and ‘harmonize’ the steps that follow from Hungarian social reality (Tusványos speech 2007).

The 2010 speech uses the term *Christian* primarily as an adjective of civilization: a civilization with Christian roots. This civilization is under threat from a global market and military point of view, at risk of sinking. For this reason, there is a need to concentrate efforts and—precisely because of Christianity—to open to Russia, which is also a large area with ‘Christian roots but not yet linked to Europe’ (Tusványos speech 2010). In 2010, Viktor Orbán, speaking again from his position as prime minister, stressed that ‘the fact that Russians are Christians’ would be of enormous importance in the next 20 years (Tusványos speech 2010, p. 16).

In terms of faith, this speech also contains the statement, familiar from the 2007 speech, that European societies have lost faith, but that the codes of conduct that were previously based on this faith are still present. ‘Instead of a faith in God, they have become a kind of code of conduct’ (Tusványos speech 2010), who no longer have the intellectual and spiritual background they once had. In addition to religious faith, faith as an assumption of some value or future is also mentioned in this speech. The last eight years have been characterized by a loss of faith in meaningful creation and the accumulation of value. The period referred to is when Fidesz was in opposition and Hungary had left-wing governments. The new government aims to restore to Hungarian society this shaken and lost faith, the ability to want to succeed.

In the 2010 speech, the term *Islam* appears. Incidentally, *Islam* first appears in the 2008 speech as one of the major sources from which the “first signs of a new migration of people” are emerging (Tusványos speech 2008, p. 21). Its occurrence here is meant to express the fact that Hungary’s history has been characterized by continuous inflows and outflows, which have brought with them a great deal of pain and misery, but also the advantage of having made the minds of Hungarians sharp and sophisticated.

‘I think Hungary is predestined by its history to play this role. The fact that Hungary has always been in turmoil, that every military route has passed through us, that we were influenced by Roman Christianity from the south-west, then by the Reformation from the north, then by Orthodoxy from the other direction, then by Islam from the third or fourth direction, and all of these somehow appeared, influenced and passed through Hungary, and from all of this a great deal of turmoil, misery and pain has resulted. But at the same time, it made our minds extremely sharp and sophisticated’. (Tusványos speech 2010, p. 24)

In this context, Western and Eastern Christianity as well as Islam are seen as external influences that have had a positive impact but have mainly caused confusion. It is interesting, even contradictory, that Christianity is clearly carries positive associations in the rest of the speech, whereas in this context it has a negative one. Christianity as an idea, a belief system, an ethical foundation, is positive, to be relied upon and restored to its original purpose. At the same time, Christianity as a historical and cultural power coming into the country from outside has had a rather negative influence on the country’s destiny.

This difference reflects the change in the reference system. Whereas before, Christianity was the reference point for the country’s ethos; in particular, pre-1968 Christianity is something that needs to be defended and reaffirmed. In this speech, however, the country becomes the primary point of reference, as opposed to what came from outside, the Christian hegemonies of the West and East. While in the 2007 speech, Christianity is a bridge of contact with Russia, in the 2010 speech it is more of a threat or a negative consequence of a threat.

What are the main religious themes of the three years, 2017–2019, what continuities and what differences of emphasis can be observed?



The term *Christian* is used in the 2017 speech in opposition to the terms *Islamic* and *Muslim*. The two religions are not compatible, Islam is stronger “in its devotion to life, its commitment, its subordination to individual interests and ideals” (Tusványos speech 2017, p. 30).

The 2018 speech was delivered in the year of his third two-thirds victory. As such, it is a sign that the past eight years have vindicated the new “Christian-based” constitutional order. And the next four years offer an opportunity to “build an era”, because the “stabilization of a political system based on Christian foundations” (Tusványos speech 2018) has been achieved.

In this speech, Christianity is opposed not to Islam, but to the West, which has denied its Christian foundations. Christianity is opposed to open society, multiculturalism, political correctness, and the undermining of the traditional family model.

‘In Christian Europe, work had honor, a person had dignity, men and women were equal, the family was the foundation of the nation, the nation was the foundation of Europe, and the states guaranteed security. In today’s open society Europe, there are no borders, European people are interchangeable with immigrants, the family has become a form of coexistence that can be varied at will, the nation, national consciousness, and national feeling are negative and transcendable, and the state no longer guarantees security in Europe’. (Tusványos speech 2018, p. 35)

The Christianity of Christian Europe has been shaken, according to the Prime Minister. Looking back over the last century, left-wing and liberal parties have moved away from the Christian community and social system and offered an alternative. And if this alternative continues to grow and triumph, it will no longer be possible to win elections on Christian grounds, because Christianity will be excluded from the social space. And this is a real danger, a threat to Europe.

The speech reiterates the diametrical opposition between the Christian (illiberal) and liberal conception quoted above.

‘Liberal democracy is in favor of multiculturalism, and Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture, which is an illiberal idea. Liberal democracy is pro-immigration, Christian democracy is anti-immigration, which is a real illiberal idea. And liberal democracy is pro-variable family models, and Christian democracy is based on the Christian family model, which is also an illiberal idea’. (Tusványos speech 2018, p. 43)

The 2019 speech will lead us further in the discussion of the relationship between liberalism and Christianity. At the time of the regime change in 1990, Europe seemed to be the future of Hungary and of the whole former communist area, now the tables are turned, and Hungary is the future of Europe because it insists on everything that is Christian, which means everything that is illiberal. Incidentally, the very liberal position that every adult has an equal vote is based on the Christian belief that God created all men equal. The need to move from the liberal to the illiberal is that liberalism has lost its original Christian roots and its content has been radically changed. What Viktor Orbán sees as non-liberal, or illiberal, in this sense, is nothing other than “[...] Christian liberty. Christian freedom and the defense of Christian liberty” (Tusványos speech 2019, p. 35).

There are two threats to this perception and the political agenda it drives. The first is from outside, from the West, which is interested in losing its Christian roots, and the second is from within, in the form of an unlimited flow of migration, the ultimate consequence of which is also the loss of Christianity and with it the loss of Europe’s identity. These two threats must be fought with equal determination.

## 5. Discussion

In this chapter, we will explore the key relations between the results discussed in the Results section and the qualitative content analysis of the Tusványos speeches.

An examination of the term *Christianity*, as well as other religiously relevant terms, allows us to situate the most important elements of reality that Orbán often mentions in his worldview and determine their relation to the religious dimension. The method of the procedure is to examine the correlations of the selected keywords, under the condition that the most frequently used religious keywords are included: *Christian*, *faith*, *Islam*, and *God*.

As the frequency of religiously relevant terms shows that religious themes are much more prominent in speeches after 2010, although not with equal frequency, it is worthwhile to conduct the analyses in chronological or other groupings (e.g., in opposition vs. in government). This will help show how the importance and characteristics of religion have changed between 1990 and 2022.

The term *Christianity* appears in the Tuskányos speeches for the first time in 2008, only once. The main theme of the speech is the unity of the nation, the struggle to unify the nation by Fidesz, while the speaker calls the then current government a nation-divider (the term *nation* is used 24 times in the speech). Orbán set out to talk about the future, about tasks that can be done for the future. He placed this in a historical–philosophical or metaphysical framework, in which “Christianity” is the primary characteristic of a great historical epoch. Orbán relates the problem of nation unification and his program to the question of whether it is perhaps ‘a question of a complete transformation of the conditions of existence of homo sapiens’ (Tuskányos speech 2008).

‘In other words, we do not yet know exactly whether we are at a moment of transition of a culture, as the ancient culture has given way to the later, subsequent Christian culture [...]’. (Tuskányos speech 2008, p. 20)

Humanity is living through a fundamental epoch which poses a great threat, also raising the question of national existence or non-existence.

‘The world is changing, and if the world is changing, it is a major challenge for all nations. Competitive nations will stay afloat and find the right answers, while uncompetitive nations will be plunged into a serious crisis that could threaten their very existence’. (Tuskányos speech 2008, p. 20)

In this discourse, Christianity does not yet represent either an ontological or metaphysical basis, or an ethical and moral norm to be observed. The mention of Christianity marks the end of an ancient epoch but does not imply a disassociation from a contemporary ideology, political program, or organization.

At one point in the speech, the term *Islam* is used. The speaker also describes this epochal transformation as ‘the first signs of a new migration of peoples, whether we look to the Islamic world or to China, to the Far East’ (Tuskányos speech 2008, p. 21). The term *Islam*, like *Christian*, is used in this speech to designate a world phenomenon, one item from a listing.

The 2010 speech changes the context of the term *Christian*. The speech is about Europe, about the threat to European civilization. The term *Christian* is a signifier of Europe, a safe place in this world for “a civilization with Christian roots” (Tuskányos speech 2010).

‘Europe must find a way to ensure that this descent is not drastic, that it is bearable, that it stops at a certain point, and that Europe, and our Christian civilization, takes a place on the world economic and military map that offers us security and prosperity, or at least the chance of it. This is what we must fight for today’. (Tuskányos speech 2010, p. 14)

In this context, Christianity is no longer a descriptive term but a value that is under threat and must be fought for.

In a later section of the same 2010 speech, the term *Christian* is used to describe the external powers that “appeared, influenced, and passed through Hungary”: Roman Christianity, Reformation, and Orthodoxy—the three most dominant branches of Christianity (Tuskányos speech 2010, p. 24). This list is also linked to the single occurrence of the term *Islam*, which is the fourth in the list of external powers.

In the (Tusványos speech 2012), the context of the term *Christian* is crisis: “there is a crisis in Christian civilization”. The other interchangeable term for Christian civilization is “the West”. *Christian* is also a descriptive term in this speech. In contrast, in the 2013 speech, the concept of *Christian* appears as a fighting slogan, written on the banner of the “bourgeois, right-wing, Christian, national camp”: “With God for the homeland and for freedom” (Tusványos speech 2013, p. 44). In the 2014 speech, Christianity is the banner of the right: “In Hungary, the governing civic, Christian and national force is Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People’s Party”, which won a two-thirds majority in parliament (Tusványos speech 2014, p. 5).

The theme of the 2015 speech is the refugee crisis. In this context, the term *Christian* is used in opposition to *Islam*, as the leader of the Islamic community in France offered to fill the deserted Christian churches (Tusványos speech 2015, p. 6). The 2016 speech signals a desire to sideline Hungary in the European political arena, in part because of a constitution that “reinforces Christian foundations” (Tusványos speech 2016, p. 4). The 2016 speech deepens the significance of the Muslim threat, which is growing in Europe at the expense of Christianity, and which appears to be stronger than Christianity. Referring to the 2018 parliamentary elections, the speech concludes that “if the next elections are not won by Hungarian civic, national, Christian forces, everything Hungary has worked for in recent years with sweat, pain, and suffering may be lost.” (Tusványos speech 2017, p. 41).

In the 2018 speech, the term *Christian* appears 16 times. The speech summarizes the Prime Minister’s analysis of what Hungary, which was built on Christian foundations and has successfully rested on them, must defend against: a West that abandons and rejects its Christian roots, censorship that is called Western political correctness, Western policies that threaten Christianity, the nation, and the family, and the possibility that Christian-based groups and movements will not be able to win elections in Europe. The speech clarifies the difference between Christian politics and Christian beliefs.

‘Christian democratic politics means defending the forms of existence that have grown out of Christian culture, not the principles of faith, but the forms of existence that have grown out of it. That is human dignity, that is the family, that is the nation’. (Tusványos speech 2018, p. 41)

The speech concludes by saying that the European generation of 1968 is being replaced by that of the 1990s, i.e., by “an anti-communist, Christian generation with nationalist sentiments” in Europe (Tusványos speech 2018). When countries liberated themselves from communism, they thought that Europe was the future, and now the bourgeois, Christian side can think that “we are the future of Europe” (Tusványos speech 2018, p. 47).

The 2019 speech also includes an above-average use of the term *Christian*. All occurrences serve to analyze the fact that liberalism is not Christian, and illiberalism is tame because it means Christian freedom. The speech continues the description of the threats of previous speeches, without adding any new element.

#### *The Securitisation Dimension*

To test the securitization dimension, we selected segments of the speeches where the Hungarian postpositions *szemben* ‘opposite [to]’ and *ellen* ‘against’ are used in the context of Christianity. From the summaries before, we can see that the term *Christianity* in the speeches is increasingly taking on the rhetorical role of the ruling party alliance’s own identity, separation from and opposition to others. Until finally, in the 2019 speech, it becomes a context for a threat.

In the 1995 speech, where the speaker compares Fidesz’s political platform with two others, the postposition ‘opposite’ implies a difference in style within the same political party, suggesting that the KDNP is more militant in maintaining its identity than Fidesz.

In the 2008 speech, the postposition ‘opposite’ also separates political tendencies and distinguishes between the period immediately after the regime change and the 17 years after it. The point of the change is that the classification of political left and right was relevant in the first era but is less so in the current era. Then, the left was opposed by

the right. At that time, the Hungarian political space was trying to imitate the European political space, where the Christian democratic right was opposed to the social democratic left. Orbán wants to do away with this distinction and says that new types of parties are needed. The word ‘opposing’ in this context is a pronoun expressing the opposition between right and left, but the context is another opposition: between old and new types of political parties.

The speech goes on to talk not about comparisons between parties but about the opponents of Fidesz. Here the opposition becomes ideological. National and Christian politics is what characterizes Fidesz and what its opponents are fighting against. This is the first time that the term *Christian* has been used to describe Fidesz’s policies, whose opponents are also, or perhaps primarily, opposed to Christian democracy. In the Hungarian party-political space, the term *Christian democracy* in the Orbán approach is exclusively owned by Fidesz and defended against attacks on the party or its speaker.

According to the 2010 speech, Europe is sinking, along with Christian civilization. This must be fought. The *we* in this context is the Fidesz–KDNP coalition and government, which has just been returned to government after eight years in opposition. The speaker gives the political mission of the new government a civilizational framework. He sees it as his duty to defend a civilization with Christian roots (‘we must fight’).

In the 2014 speech, two of the Fidesz–KDNP government’s policy adjectives are *Christian* and *national*. In the same paragraph in the speech, the postposition ‘against’ refers to the fact that in December 2004, the then government majority decided against granting Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries. Today, the Fidesz–KDNP’s two-thirds parliamentary majority was won precisely by the votes of those against whom the previous government voted. The rest of the speech makes it clear that the postposition ‘against’ expresses an opposition between two sets of values. On the one side is multiculturalism, on the other is heartfelt Christianity.

In the 2017 speech, the Prime Minister confronts Europe with refugees using the postposition ‘opposite’. Refugees in Europe—the French state is the specific example in the speech—are opposed to Christianity and would be willing to take over the Christian churches that stand empty.

The following paragraph of the 2019 speech, in which the postposition “opposite” occurs, is a summary and rhetorical culmination of the juxtapositions already made in previous speeches.

‘The final question is this: do Christian culture and Christian freedom need to be protected? My answer is that there are two attacks on Christian freedom today. The first comes from within, from the liberals: to abandon the Christian culture of Europe. And there is an attack from outside, which is embodied in migration, which has, if not the aim, the consequence of destroying the Europe we know as Europe’. (Tusványos speech 2019, p. 36)

This paragraph clearly demonstrates that the focus of the discourse on Christianity is the threat from within and without. Christian culture and freedom are under siege, and with it the whole of Europe.

Having analyzed the relationship between the postpositions ‘opposite’ and ‘against’ and Christianity, we need to clarify one further point. What further separations and threats does this postposition indicate? Our hypothesis is that the Orbán rhetoric over the years has identified different threats and offered the people and the country protection against them. To clarify this, we will examine the nouns associated with the postpositions ‘opposite’ and ‘against’.

The postposition ‘against’ occurs 31 times in 14 speeches.

In the 2007 speech, the postposition ‘against’ is used four times. The context of the first occurrence considers balance to be an ideal and specifically European quality.

‘A modern European individual cannot be a total and unreserved acceptor and admirer of their culture, their inherited culture, just as they cannot be a total

rejecter and a rebel against it, they experience both at the same time'. ([Tusványos speech 2007](#), p. 9)

This resolution refers to the fact that in Europe it is not possible to take an extreme position on 1968, which excludes all other explanations, nor to reject it completely. The obligation of balance applies to limiting the logic of the market. A policy is needed that 'protects society against the reorganization of all aspects of people's lives on the basis of the logic of the market, i.e., the logic of profit' ([Tusványos speech 2007](#), Item 19). Society must defend itself against 'a group of adventurers plotting against the constitutional order' who attack 'democracy' ([Tusványos speech 2007](#), p. 24).

In the 2016 speech, the most frequent word combination was *fight against* something, 5 times in total, and 4 of those times.

'Do not be afraid, fight! [...] For what is there to fight against? If we cannot define what to fight against, we cannot define what is a good form of fighting, what is expedient and what is counterproductive, we cannot choose the means. If we cannot say what we are fighting against, then we do not know which means are expedient and which are more likely to harm us. That is why it is important that we try—and I think this is the most important task for Europe in the coming year—to define together, at the European level, what we have to fight against'. ([Tusványos speech 2016](#), p. 7)

The passage quoted declares a struggle, a call to war against something. In this speech, delivered in a year of heated debate on refugees in Europe, it is the so-called "resettlement quota" that the speaker says must be fought. It is a quota that the EU wants to impose on those countries, including Hungary, that are opposed to such a quota. In the rest of the speech, immigration is linked to fears of terrorism and concerns about the loss of Europe's former face. The primary cause of the threat is identified, which the Prime Minister describes in this way:

'[...] to summarize what I have said so far, Europe has lost its global role, it has become a regional player, it cannot protect its own citizens, it cannot protect its own external borders, it cannot keep the community together, because the United Kingdom has just left. What more do we need to say that European political leadership has failed? It cannot achieve a single one of its objectives [...]'. ([Tusványos speech 2016](#), p. 30)

In the last speech we analyze, the speaker answers the question of why they are fighting against Central Europe. In response, he repeats what he said in detail in his 2019 speech. They "hate us" because Hungary opposes EU policies based on liberal political foundations, which are universal and exclusive. The speech recalls the migration crisis, the pointlessness of the sanctions policy against Russia and the 'gender' threat, all of which have been repeatedly exposed, and which are prominent topoi of Orbán's policy, which invokes threats to strengthen its camp of followers. In the ([Tusványos speech 2022](#)), the terms *post-Western* and *post-Christian* are used almost synonymously, leading us to the question of the relationship between Orbán's conception of Christianity and all that must be defended.

All of this justifies the claim that the Tusványos speeches can be interpreted based on the securitization approach, a rhetorical procedure that increasingly characterizes the speeches as time progresses. Furthermore, it can be argued that the mention of Christianity is primarily in the context of threat and defense.

## 6. Conclusions

As we interpret the results of our analysis along the lines of Canovan's and Mudde's approaches, we can say that all of Orbán's speeches are characterized by anti-elitism and speaking on behalf of the people, Hungarians. In this sense, Orbán's rhetoric can be called populist. In this populist way, almost all references to Christianity are made as a characteristic of the 'us' group, as opposed to the 'others.'



It is more appropriate and better aligned with the socio-historical context to interpret the discourse on Christianity in these speeches along the lines of Ernesto Laclau's theory of 'populist reason.' The Orbán speeches are delivered from a political position of nation- and country-founding and -defence. As numerous external dangers threaten Hungarian interests, he must constantly intervene for the survival of the Hungarian nation. In this struggle, Christianity is one of the cornerstones for the continual re-establishment and maintenance of the Hungarian identity and sovereign Hungarian state.

Based on the speeches delivered at Tusványos, it is reasonable to say that Orbán's policies and his Christianity are fundamentally nation-building. An analysis of his other speeches can further nuance this picture. Extended research may be needed on how Christian churches and self-identifying Christian intellectuals in Hungary react to the Prime Minister's discourse on Christianity.

To sum up, we can observe a significant shift in the content and emphasis of Christianity in the context of political entities. The descriptive character of the term *Christian* has changed into one of threat and self-defense. While Christianity used to be an attribute of Western politics, it has now become the basis and animating force of civic and nationalist politics.

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