

Illiberal modernity and non-state actor agency: the Hungarian Reformed Church's role in contemporary Hungary

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ABSTRACT: How has the Reformed Church in Hungary (RCH) participated in redefining “modernity” and democracy under Hungary’s illiberal regime led by Viktor Orbán? This study investigates the RCH as an active non-state actor supporting state projects in an illiberal democracy. Drawing on Péter Marton’s theory of non-state actors (NSAs), the analysis focuses on the Church’s agency. Empirically, the RCH exhibits strategic institutional unity and initiative in both national politics and specialized domains (education, social services, and the diaspora), functioning in mutually beneficial partnership with the state. As successive governments under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán have sought to recast liberal democracy into a “Christian” illiberal model, the RCH’s historical experiences and theological convictions have aligned to provide resources, legitimacy, and normative frames for this project. The findings show that the RCH, bolstered by Neo-Calvinist thought, has co-governed certain public functions and symbols with the state, thereby actively shaping an illiberal modernity. The article concludes that the RCH served neither as a mere proxy of the state nor as an entirely independent actor. Rather, it behaved as a strategic partner whose involvement illustrates how a church can bolster an illiberal regime’s redefinition of democracy while retaining a measure of distinct agency.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary Hungary, a self-described “illiberal democracy” from the 2010s, successive governments under PM Viktor Orbán have intertwined nationalist and religious narratives in a bid to reshape the country’s political order. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s political discourse explicitly opposed liberal-Enlightenment values of pluralism and secularism, instead promoting a vision of “*Christian democracy*” and traditional national identity. Within this milieu, the Reformed Church in Hungary – the country’s second-largest historical church – has emerged as a pivotal non-state actor, partnering with the state in what can be viewed as a project to redefine “modernity” and democracy along illiberal, Christian-national lines. The key question this article seeks to answer concerns how the RCH supported state projects aimed at redefining modernity and democracy in the framework of Hungary’s illiberal democracy.

To answer this, the article applies Péter Marton’s analytical framework of non-state actors (NSAs), which emphasizes that NSAs are organizations that represent “plausible sites of political agency and highly probable sites of domain-specific agency”. This approach moves beyond binary labels of control versus independence, instead examining how relationships evolve and reshape over time (Marton 2024).

Crucially, the RCH’s role must also be understood through its theological-political worldview, even though the Church itself is not monolithic, containing diverse streams: pietist, evangelical-charismatic, Barthian, confessional-Reformed, and liberal currents, among others. A strong influence is Neo-Calvinism, originating with thinkers such as Abraham Kuyper. It is explicitly critical of Enlightenment rationalism and secular modernity. Kuyper’s anti-modernist stance cast the French Revolution and its legacy as a direct assault on Christian foundations, arguing that Enlightenment ideas undermined divine authority and led to a corrosive uniformity in society (Kuyper 1898). In its Hungarian reception, Jenő Sebestyén can be read as one of the last major representatives of a doctrinally explicit Neo-Calvinist line; after 1950, this vocabulary became less visible in mainstream theological production. Yet key motifs persisted through identity narratives. Framed through the lens of a “wounded identity,” these motifs help explain why anti-modernist stances would remain socially and politically resonant in later periods.

Following this introduction, the article is structured in five parts. Section 2 chronicles the RCH's post-communist challenges, setting the historical context for its current public role. Section 3 examines the RCH's agency. Section 4 analyses the church-state relationship as an inter-organizational ecosystem, in Marton's terms (Marton 2024: 33-34). Section 5 addresses whether the RCH-state nexus has been adaptive or path-dependent, while Section 6 highlights the delicate balance between support for the state and the preservation of its independent mission. Finally, the conclusion offers a reflection on how the RCH has become an active co-creator of Hungary's illiberal modernity.

2. Challenges faced by the Reformed Church in Hungary in the post-communist era

Following the end of the Cold War, the Reformed Church in Hungary had to reposition itself amid profound post-socialist transformations. While the restoration of religious freedom after 1989 enabled the Church to reclaim its autonomy, this process was fraught with legitimacy crises rooted in the communist past. During the communist era, the RCH operated under close state supervision: the State Office for Church Affairs vetted senior clergymen, controlled finances, and managed the Church's external relations. Moreover, state-security organs cultivated informer networks and "peace priest" groups within the historic churches. Revelations of this created an "internal legitimacy deficit," meaning the RCH faced the task of moral renewal even as it was now free (Tomka 2006; Majsai 2006; Ramet 2014).

The 1990s saw the RCH regain properties and re-enter the domains of education and charity, facilitated by the state's "positive neutrality" through laws on restitution and church financing. In turn, this also re-embedded churches within the framework of public policies.

Beyond legal-institutional issues, the RCH had to contend with trends of religiosity that mirrored wider European patterns of secularization. An initial surge of religious interest in the early 1990s soon subsided into what is often described as "believing without belonging". While a majority of Hungarians still identify as Christian, regular religious practice is confined to a minority. Church surveys and sociological research have noted selective, episodic participation: many people attend worship only on major holidays (Christmas, Easter) and tend to privatize their faith in daily life. This is accompanied by an aging religious constituency – older members remain more active in church, while youth involvement is low. All these trends signaled to the RCH that it could not simply rely on traditional parish life; it would need to engage society through education, media, and social services (Pickel – Sammet 2012; Pew Research Center 2017).

A significant turn in the RCH's public role came after 2010, in tandem with the political consolidation of Orbán's Fidesz government. The Church dramatically expanded its role in public education and welfare, enabled by government policies encouraging churches to take over schools and social institutions. The RCH thus found itself both empowered and entangled in new governance challenges.

Meanwhile, the RCH's identity and mission extend beyond Hungary's borders. A unique feature is its transborder structure: the RCH views itself as part of a single community of Hungarian Reformed churches throughout the Carpathian Basin. In 2009, a Common Constitution was adopted, creating the "Hungarian Reformed Church" as an umbrella that united the Reformed churches of Hungary, Transylvania (in Romania), *Felvidék* (in Slovakia), Transcarpathia (in Ukraine), and Vojvodina (in Serbia). This transnational structure institutionalized what had long been a spiritual notion concerning Hungarian Reformed unity (Enyedi 2003). It also positioned the RCH as a quasi-political actor in Hungary's kin-state politics. The RCH became a channel for diaspora support, blurring pastoral mission with ethnonational advocacy.

All these post-communist developments set the stage for the RCH's robust engagement in the illiberal era: by 2010, the Church had rebuilt its infrastructure, regained a key societal role, forged transborder alliances, and honed a narrative that resonated with the incoming government's ideology, increasingly tied to the Orbán government's nation-rebuilding project through education, welfare, and diaspora initiatives. The subsequent sections analyze how, against this backdrop, the RCH has exercised agency and navigated its partnership with the state.

3. Agency in practice: political and domain-specific dimensions

For non-state actors, agency is the decisive quality that separates mere institutional presence from the capacity to act and shape outcomes. Situated within the broader NGO sector as an organization of institutionalized religion, the RCH exemplifies a dual structure of agency. On the one hand, it operates as a national moral-political actor, articulating positions on social and political issues in Hungary. On the other hand, it is a domain-specific agent that runs schools, social services, and transnational church networks in accordance with its professional and ethical norms. The following section treats these issues in two parts. Together, they demonstrate how the RCH functions simultaneously as a political interlocutor and an operational service provider within Hungary's contemporary governance.

3.1. Political agency

An NSA may be considered to possess political agency if it can make decisions and take stands that are politically salient beyond its narrow internal affairs. Per Marton's framework (2024), three preconditions are critical: strategic unity (the organization should be able to credibly commit its members to a chosen course), independent initiative (rather than merely responding to state direction), and the will to use this potential for agency in the public arena. The RCH largely meets these criteria.

Strategic organizational unity in the RCH was visibly achieved through its constitutional unification. On 22 May 2009, the Constituting Synod in Debrecen adopted the Common Constitution of the Hungarian Reformed Church, formally linking Hungary's Reformed Church with its sister churches across the border into a single community of churches. This was a conscious public act with political resonance. While ecclesiastically it represented unity of faith and structure, politically it was imbued with clear national significance: it was effectively a declaration of cross-border Hungarian cultural unity, done in the historic "Calvinist Rome" of Debrecen, with publicity and in the presence of state officials as observers (Református.hu 2015). The new constitution established transnational decision-making bodies and a shared identity under the name "Hungarian Reformed Church". This provided institutional mechanisms for issuing joint statements and representing Reformed communities collectively. This unity has been continuously reaffirmed each year on "Hungarian Reformed Unity Day," serving as a ritual renewal of the 2009 act and showcasing the RCH's ongoing will to act on behalf of the entirety of its collective, spanning borders.

Building on this unity, the RCH has shown independent initiative and the will to act in several domains of public life. Five arenas stand out in the period from 2011 to 2024, when the Church's interventions were recurrent, clearly attributable, and influential. In each of these arenas, the Church was itself a regular initiator of action rather than merely following state cues in this regard, underscoring its independent agency.

First, it made key normative interventions in public discourse. The RCH has at times exercised a moral voice in national politics. The 2015 migration crisis is a case in point in this respect. In September 2015, at the peak of the crisis, the General Convent Presidium issued a public "Statement on the European Migration Crisis" on behalf of the entire RCH community. This statement urged European leaders to balance "solidarity and active love" toward refugees with the need to protect citizens, thus embracing a humanitarian tone distinct from the Hungarian government's securitizing rhetoric (Presidium of the General Convent 2015). Similarly, the RCH Synod has spoken up on other issues, with diplomatic significance — for example, in 2015 it passed a declaration acknowledg-

ing the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide and urging the protection of persecuted Christians in the Middle East (Református.hu 2021). Such pronouncements, though infrequent, show the RCH's willingness to engage normatively as an independent moral actor.

The Church's role in symbolic politics further underscores its political agency. High-profile state leaders frequently appear at RCH events – for instance, both Prime Minister Orbán and Presidents János Áder and Katalin Novák have attended church inaugurations, anniversaries, or the annual Reformed Unity Day. When Viktor Orbán gave an address at the opening of a new Reformed school building (Rózsakerti School in Budapest in 2020), it was a mutually symbolic moment (Miniszterelnok.hu 2020). The Church's choice to invite and platform state leaders is itself a political act. By offering its pulpits and institutions as stages for state rhetoric, the RCH actively participated in the symbolic legitimation of the state – an illiberal state at the time.

Second, there has been programmatic expansion into public functions. Starting in 2011, the RCH consciously enlarged its role in public education at an unprecedented rate. This was a strategic choice by the Church to “occupy and perform a public function” as opportunities arose. By 2012, the RCH was running 206 educational institutions (including 76 primary schools and 47 kindergartens), up sharply from the previous year. The transfer/adoption of each of the institutions concerned required political agency, because the Church, in effect, was redrawing the church–state division of labor in education. The scale of the resulting involvement made the Church a policy actor in education in its own right. It has shaped the curriculum (within national guidelines), school culture, and community life. This strategy converted theological convictions into durable institutional routines whose effects reach far beyond synod resolutions.

Third, the RCH took an important role in cross-border representation and minority advocacy. The Common Constitution provided the RCH with durable instruments to act transnationally: the Common Synod and General Convent not only symbolize unity but also have a constitutional mandate to represent Hungarian Reformed communities abroad. This is precisely the kind of political agency that tests the boundaries of sovereignty while remaining non-state in form. The RCH has exercised this mandate in concrete ways. In the case of the Székely Mikó High School, the Reformed Church in Hungary and its Transylvanian counterpart jointly responded when Romanian authorities confiscated a previously restituted church school. They framed the issue internationally as a rule-of-law violation and an infringement of minority rights, issuing statements, organizing solidarity events, and leveraging ecumenical and political channels to put pressure on Romanian decision-makers. This was value-based advocacy by a religious NSA, casting a property dispute as a matter of justice and cultural survival (TRCD 2014).

The RCH also built coalitions to amplify its reach: in 2019, the Calvin Synod of the United Church of Christ (USA) – a body of Hungarian Reformed congregations in North America – formally joined the RCH’s Common Synod, extending the Church’s constituency transatlantically (Református 2019). International memberships (e.g., in the World Communion of Reformed Churches) provide additional platforms for the RCH to raise issues affecting its cross-border flock and to operationalize its commitments through events like Unity Day and concrete support through Hungarian Reformed Church Aid.

Through these steps, the RCH has shown a sustained will to act collectively across state boundaries, effectively becoming a voice of the nation in tandem with the Hungarian state’s kin-state policy (Pogonyi 2017). Notably, this amplifies Hungary’s diplomacy via non-state means – a church acting as advocate.

Fourth, the RCH has carved out an active role in humanitarian crises, often moving faster than – or framing issues differently than – the state. A prime example is the Church’s response to the European refugee crisis (2015–2016) and later Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022). The RCH established a Refugee Ministry under its charitable arm, the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid (RCHA), in 2006, which was reorganized and professionalized in 2017 through a partnership with the NGO Kalunba (a church-founded social service for integration).

In 2015, when thousands of Middle Eastern refugees crossed Hungary, the RCH acted on this will: congregations and church aid workers assisted refugees at border areas and transit zones, even as the government took a hostile stance. Later, when Russia openly invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Hungary faced a massive influx of refugees from neighboring Ukraine. The RCH’s preparedness paid off: immediately after the war broke out, RCHA set up a relief hub at the Záhony border, marshaled a network of congregations to provide housing and aid, and began issuing daily public updates on its efforts. In the first month of the war, RCHA coordinated over 3,500 volunteers, distributed ~250 tons of donations, and assisted more than 140,000 refugees across ten locations – all in cooperation with local governments and international agencies (RCH 2022a; RCH 2023; UNHCR 2023–2025). This was autonomous mobilization by the Church, initiated by its own organs following its moral commitments, not by government assignment. The normative framing (the Christian obligation to help strangers) and the structured execution highlight that the RCH can undertake public action on its own terms, thus contributing to governance while maintaining a distinct voice.

Finally, the RCH has shown political agency in how it handles its own leadership crises, which has implications for its legitimacy in the public eye. In March 2024, it came to light that Zoltán Balog – the Bishop of the Danubian Church District (Dunamellék) of the Reformed Church in Hungary and a former government minister – had signed a letter requesting that President Novák grant clemency to a politically connected individual convicted for coercion/witness

intimidation in connection with the cover-up of a child-sex-abuse case (pressuring a victim to retract testimony). The public backlash was swift, as this was seen as the Church lending support to impunity for the powerful. In response to the outcry, Balog resigned as Ministerial President of the Synod (Telex 2024a). From a political agency perspective, the case highlights the fact that the Church can make binding internal decisions in order to safeguard its broader capacity to act in society.

Taken together, the arenas of action discussed here map onto Marton's triad of preconditions for political agency. The fact that the RCH often cooperates closely with the state does not negate its capacity to choose and act independently. Rather, it suggests a nuanced reality: the Church's political agency is internally mediated: governments do not engage a theologically neutral church but preferentially interface with Neo-Calvinist leaders. Orbán's cabinets amplify Neo-Calvinist actors via podium access, appointments to public bodies, project financing, and heritage investments. The effect is asymmetric agenda-setting within the RCH: the Neo-Calvinist wing gains a louder voice and programmatic capacity, while other currents remain present and consequential but are comparatively less resourced and empowered. This pattern helps explain how the Church can issue unified-sounding signals on education, welfare, and nation-symbolic rituals despite the theological diversity.

3.2. Domain-specific agency of the RCH

Marton's framework posits that NSAs possess robust capacities to make an impact through their core activities that persist even if their overt political engagement fluctuates. For the RCH, these domains include education, diaconal services, chaplaincy and social care, and transnational ecclesial coordination. Domain-specific agency is typically less visible in national politics but can significantly influence society — and even state policies indirectly. This section explores how the RCH's domain-specific agency is constituted and exercised in its key fields of operation.

Education is arguably the flagship domain of the RCH agency. The Church has built a vertically integrated education system from kindergartens to universities, which it guides through a coherent pedagogical and organizational philosophy. The cornerstone of this is the concept of "Reformed educational formation" (*református nevelés*), a codified ethos that the RCH uses to align curriculum, governance, and staff training across all of its institutions. This ethos emphasizes Calvinist values, community responsibility, and holistic character development alongside academic content. At the tertiary level, the RCH controls two major institutions: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary

(KRE) and the Debrecen Reformed Theological University (DRHE) – the successor of the historic Debrecen Reformed College (founded 1538). They foster the Church's intellectual capital stock: pastors, religion teachers, theologians, as well as lay professionals versed in the Reformed ethos.

This higher-education apex feeds directly into the secondary and primary levels – for example, DRHE's teacher-training programs supply educators to Reformed high schools and elementary schools. At the secondary level, Reformed gymnasiums and vocational schools integrate faith and learning through school ethos. Many of these schools have historic identities (some were legendary Calvinist colleges before communism), which have been revived, giving them prestige and a strong sense of mission. At the primary and pre-school levels, the Church also promotes parental involvement and community around its schools, extending its social network.

What makes this domain-specific agency structural rather than episodic is that the RCH effectively governs an entire parallel system of education. This means the RCH can shape the values and competencies of tens of thousands of young citizens in line with its Neo-Calvinist outlook – effectively exercising influence over societal modernization (or counter-modernization) from below. By converting theological-ethical commitments into stable organizational routines and standards, the RCH's education system exemplifies domain-specific agency: it does not depend on political whim, it runs on its own organizational momentum and expertise. Even if the Church went quiet politically, its schools would continue to operate and produce social effects. Reformed educational formation is thus a high-probability case of effective NSA agency in shaping society.

In the field of diaconal services (faith-based social care), the RCH displays a similar institutionalized capacity. Hungarian Reformed Church Aid (RCHA) serves as the umbrella for the Church's charity work. Within RCHA, various departments address refugee integration, poverty relief, disaster response, elder care, and disability services. The key to RCH's agency here is that it has embedded its diaconal missions. There are clear lines of authority (RCHA's director reports to the Synod), predefined responsibilities, and trained staff or volunteers in place. This kind of ex-ante institutionalization means that when a crisis occurs, the Church does not have to invent a response from scratch; it can scale up an existing framework. The portfolio of services the RCH offers – legal counseling, housing assistance, language and job training for refugees, for example – has been carefully designed in partnership with secular experts (e.g., with the social services organization Kalunba). In its response to the 2022 Ukraine war, the RCH demonstrated that its humanitarian capacity is multi-hazard rather than event-specific. RCHA has been involved in flood relief (e.g., regarding a major Danube flood in 2013 and local floods in 2024), as well as international disaster aid (sending help after earthquakes in Croatia in 2021, Turkey in 2023,

and Morocco in 2023). This indicates the standing operational capability – permanent agency in disaster response – of the Church, independent of any single political cycle or media moment.

Throughout these operations, the RCH maintained close institutional relationships with state agencies (e.g., coordinating with Hungary’s disaster management authority or local mayors) and with global organizations (such as UNHCR). However, it has preserved ecclesial control over its aims and methods: the Church frames the aid as part of its mission, decides what ethical commitments to highlight, and often goes beyond what state programs do (for instance, providing spiritual care or integrating families into congregations). The significance here is that public interdependence – working in tandem with government – does not equate to loss of agency; rather, it enhances the governance relevance of the Church’s work without “collapsing it into state service provision”.

Another domain of RCH agency lies in chaplaincies and social inclusion ministries. The Church runs chaplaincy services in state institutions – notably in hospitals and prisons – under formal agreements with the government. These chaplaincies operate through the Reformed Mission Centre, which coordinates the placement and training of chaplains. The work is governed by service descriptions and protocols mutually accepted by church and state authorities.

Similarly, the RCH has dedicated Roma ministry programs aimed at the social inclusion of the Roma minority, a community facing deep exclusion in Hungary. The Church established a national Roma Mission office that runs initiatives such as after-school tutoring centers (*tanodák*), youth leadership training, and reconciliation events between Roma and non-Roma communities. The RCH forged a long-term partnership with the Swiss Protestant aid agency HEKS, which provided funding cycles from 2013 onward and helped with evaluation frameworks (HEKS 2024). This external partnership supports continuity (as opposed to one-off projects). The Roma Mission programs are integrated into the Church’s structure (with an ordained minister as national coordinator, etc.), ensuring they have institutional backing and oversight. These are hallmarks of institutionalized religion functioning as a domain-specific agent.

Finally, the RCH’s transnational ecclesial functions constitute a specialized domain of agency that extends beyond Hungary. This involves maintaining unity and cooperation among Reformed churches in different countries and engaging global Christian forums. The Common Constitution of 2009 (updated in 2023) is again fundamental – it legally and organizationally binds member churches in various countries to joint decision-making processes. The RCH is also an active participant in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), which plugs it into global networks of ecumenical and denominational exchange. These memberships are not merely symbolic; they influence how the RCH approaches issues like interfaith relations,

climate change, or social justice, aligning its domestic stances with broader Christian norms.

The payoff of this transnational embedding is that these inter-organizational ecosystems enable the RCH to project its domain-specific capacities (like charity, educational expertise, and community organization) beyond Hungary's borders in times of need. They also create channels by which the Church can, in subtle ways, constrain or enable states. The RCH's maintenance of such networks is thus a form of soft power agency anchored in its religious domain.

In conclusion, the RCH's domain-specific agency is broad and robust. Through specialized institutions and formalized protocols, the Church has built durable capacities that do not require constant political favor to persist. They are sustained by ecclesial legitimacy (members and believers support them as part of the Church's mission), by professional standards (they deliver credible services), and by transnational embeddedness (they are reinforced by global partnerships). This is exactly what domain-specific agency means: the RCH can significantly impact certain societal domains due to its internal strength and reputation, regardless of whether it is at that moment politically influential in a narrow sense.

4. The Church-state relationship as an inter-organizational ecosystem

Thus far, we have examined the RCH's capacities in isolation. We now shift focus to the relational dynamics between the RCH and the Hungarian state (as well as diaspora communities), treating their interactions as an inter-organizational ecosystem. Adopting Marton's ecological lens yields a twofold benefit: (1) it allows us to evaluate the RCH's agency not as a static attribute (the Church "has" or "lacks" agency); (2) it sets the stage for assessing whether the Church-state relationship evolves and rebalances over time or gets locked into certain patterns. In an "illiberal" context where the ruling power is strong, this perspective helps clarify if the Church is simply co-opted or if it maneuvers and learns within constraints.

To systematically analyze the RCH-state ecosystem, the article identifies distinct domains of interaction and classifies the prevailing interaction type (mutualism – both Church and state benefit from the relationship; commensalism – the Church benefits while the state is essentially unaffected; parasitism – one benefits at the expense of the other; competition/predation – both compete for resources or influence). These types can change over time or coexist in different aspects of the relationship, so the relationship itself can be treated as a unit of analysis that may be dynamically reshaped.

4.1. Education as an ecosystem tie

On the RCH's side, the benefit is clear: the Church now maintains a system-spanning educational network from preschool through secondary school. As of the 2023/24 academic year, official Reformed Church data recorded 204 educational institutions run by Reformed church maintainers, operating at 568 sites in 238 municipalities. Further, 109 kindergartens, 111 primary schools, 40 four-year secondary gymnasiums, 11 technical high schools, 16 vocational schools, 30 music/art extracurricular schools, 27 student dormitories, 3 special education institutions, plus pedagogical service centers for special needs and a network of itinerant special educators. In total, about 161,000 pupils are enrolled under ~6,000 teachers in Reformed-run schools. This scale – covering roughly 3-4% of all Hungarian schoolchildren – makes the Reformed school sector “system-relevant.” It also gains political capital: managing a large school network gives the RCH a seat at the table in educational policymaking and a concrete stake in national discussions on curricula, funding, etc. (Református Közlöny 2025).

On the state's side, the mutual benefit is that the Church's participation expands capacity and shares the burden of public education. The legal framework explicitly fosters educational co-production: Act CXC/2011 on Public Education allows “established” churches to assume the operation of schools relatively easily and guarantees them equal per capita funding. The state further supports church schools with investment grants (e.g., EU-funded infrastructure projects often include church schools among the beneficiaries).

The result is that coverage is extended (especially in small towns where municipal finances were inadequate and the Church stepped in to keep schools open) and pluralism in provision is increased, which the government ideologically frames as positive (parental choice, “freedom” of education). This clearly benefits the state by enhancing service delivery and buttressing its narrative of valuing Christian culture in public life.

Mutualism in education also manifests as reciprocal legitimation. This resonates with what Marton, citing Klein and Lee (2019), refers to as “mutual infiltration”: the state penetrates civil society (by influencing church-run education via funding and curriculum), while civil society (the Church) penetrates a state domain (public education) by taking on an official function.

However, none of this eliminates competition. There are still competitive aspects within the education sphere. For one, the RCH's 40 Reformed gymnasiums and other high schools put it in direct competition with state schools (and Catholic schools) for talented students, good teachers, and project grants.

Below the state level of analysis, the proliferation of Reformed kindergartens and primary schools has, in some towns, led to a “private-like” system where church schools are seen as higher-status than municipal ones. Families might

prefer the church school for its smaller class sizes or perceived better discipline, which can cause tension with the remaining state school that might then concentrate more disadvantaged pupils. This concern is not only hypothetical: church and policy discussions have acknowledged that school-transfer dynamics may intensify local segregation patterns, placing church-run education under increasing scrutiny for equality and non-discrimination in the Hungarian-EU regulatory environment. Thus, even within an overall mutualistic partnership, there can be zero-sum competition on specific margins (students, resources). At present, the modal characterization that best fits the education-related relationship is mutualism, with recognized facets of competition and dependence.

4.2. Diaconia and social services

In the domain of diaconal services, the RCH-state relationship is also predominantly mutualistic. The Church provides social services that complement the state's welfare system, and, in turn, the state offers funding and legal frameworks that enable the Church's work. This is, in many ways, a classic model of church-state partnership in welfare provision, as seen in many European contexts (termed *welfare dualism*).

The Reformed Church's diaconal footprint in Hungary is extensive. The RCH runs approximately 390 diaconal service units assisting around 23,000 clients nationwide. These units include elderly care homes, nursing homes, care centers for people with disabilities, rehabilitation facilities, temporary shelters for families or youth, and day-care services for children and the elderly. This scale has been relatively stable over recent years, indicating institutional continuity (Református Közlöny 2025). The Church, for its part, leverages its congregational embeddedness (volunteers, local knowledge, donations) and specialist know-how to provide care that the state might struggle to deliver alone.

From the state's perspective, partnering with RCH is beneficial. Hungary's public welfare resources are limited. The legal framework again is crucial. Act CCVI/2011 ("the religion law") not only sets out recognition tiers for churches but also explicitly permits and promotes cooperation in public-purpose domains such as social care, health, and education. The Act foresees "comprehensive agreements" with established churches for indefinite cooperation. This essentially underwrites the long-term contracting of welfare tasks to the Church. The Venice Commission's opinion on the 2011 law noted that this architecture basically cements church-state cooperation as a norm.

The mutualism in practice can be seen at multiple levels: (i) the state licenses Reformed diaconal institutions and inspects them, while the Church ensures they meet standards; (ii) municipal family services may refer clients to church

programs like addiction recovery groups; (iii) blended financing; and (iv) workforce complementarities.

Competition in the social domain exists but is usually limited: churches, secular NGOs, and municipalities might all vie for certain grants or contracts, as well as for trained social workers (a scarce workforce). Thus far, however, there has been a stable enough equilibrium, allowing these sectors to frequently cooperate. The modal character is thus one of mutualism: the RCH-state overlap in welfare provision is one of co-production and reciprocal reinforcement, with some of the more complex implications to be examined in Section 5.

4.3. Law and regulation

The legal-regulatory framework governing church-state relations in Hungary constitutes another important domain of interaction. Here, the pattern is largely mutualistic in that the laws enable stable cooperation and resources for the RCH, while providing the state with structured partnerships.

After several iterations prompted by constitutional and international scrutiny, Hungary's church law (Act CCVI of 2011, as amended by 2018) establishes a four-tier recognition system for religious communities: religious associations, listed churches, registered churches, and established churches. The latter refers to the top-tier, traditional churches. These are the ones eligible for open-ended comprehensive agreements with the state.

This legal architecture fundamentally enables mutualism: it provides the state and churches with a clear framework to cooperate "to promote the common good." For the state, the benefit is "reliable capacity" – by granting top churches secure legal status and funding channels, the state ensures these churches will continue to provide services and nation-symbolic functions (such as maintaining heritage sites, performing chaplaincy, etc.). For the RCH, the benefits are regulatory certainty and access to support: being an "established church" gives it a guarantee of stable funding and formal roles.

Because the law ties privileges to status, it inherently creates competition or inequality among religious groups. The RCH, as an established church, enjoys advantages that "newer" or smaller churches do not: more funding per capita (the state doubles taxpayers' donations of 1% of their personal income tax to established churches as a supplement), guaranteed inclusion in policy forums, property grants, and so forth. The Venice Commission in 2012 and the ECtHR in 2014 criticized exactly this aspect. The law was amended to address procedural issues, but it still "structures competition." One may see this as the state favoring certain NSAs, which, from the perspective of smaller groups, might look like parasitism. This could be akin to the principle of competitive exclusion: by

giving RCH a privileged niche, the state reduces space for rival religious NGOs in education or social work.

4.4. National-symbolic narratives

The arena of national-symbolic interactions covers ceremonies, public commemorations, and narrative co-production about national identity and history. In the RCH-state ecosystem, this domain is predominantly mutualistic. However, there are instances of commensalism, where the Church gains symbolic uplift at negligible cost to or effect on the state.

One enduring example of mutualistic symbolism is that of the Unity Day events. The adoption of the Common Constitution in Debrecen was itself a carefully orchestrated national event. It took place in the Great Church of Debrecen – a site loaded with historical significance as the venue of Hungary’s 1848 Protestant-centric national assembly – and involved political dignitaries along with church leaders. This inaugurated the annual “Hungarian Reformed Unity Day.” In subsequent years, Unity Day celebrations often received government support or were attended by representatives. These episodes yield reciprocal nation-building payoffs: the state’s narrative of unbroken national cultural continuity is reinforced by the image of Reformed communities united across the Trianon-imposed borders. At the same time, the RCH secures public visibility and status as a key pillar of national cohesion.

The Reformation 500 (2017) commemorations provide another example. The government set up a Reformation Memorial Committee (chaired by a cabinet minister) to coordinate the country’s celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. This included funding renovations of historic Reformed (and Lutheran) sites, organizing exhibitions, and high-profile ceremonies. In October 2017, a national thanksgiving service was held in Budapest with the Prime Minister speaking in Parliament about Protestant heritage as part of the national canon. In Debrecen, the Reformed College and Great Church received multi-billion Hungarian Forint (HUF) grants ahead of 2017, and Orbán personally announced funding for those projects in a public speech. Such episodes entwine nation-building and ecclesial heritage, clearly a mutualistic narrative.

Symbolic politics around traumatic history and national unity also see church-state mutualism. In 2020, the government declared the centenary of the Treaty of Trianon (1920) as the Year of National Unity. In these acts, the state’s narrative of resilience and cohesion is echoed by the Church’s theological narrative.

The RCH’s diaspora-related symbolic politics have expanded under the umbrella of government kin-state efforts. When the RCH incorporated Western European Hungarian Reformed communities in 2023, it did so at a Common

Synod session that also served as a public statement on caring for emigrants and scattered Hungarians. Similarly, the RCH's 2019 reunion with the U.S. Calvin Synod was timed with Unity Day's 10th anniversary, which the government media highlighted as a success of national policy (Református.hu 2020). These moves allow the state to claim that the "nation" (cultural nation) is being reunified, while the Church extends its ecclesial identity and influence. Again, mutual reinforcement is evident.

In summary, the nation-symbolic domain is largely mutualistic, punctuated by episodes where only the Church seems to benefit symbolically in a more one-sided way (commensalism). This provides a rich cultural backdrop for more concrete cooperation in other domains and sets a tone of synergy that likely facilitates trust in those other domains as well.

4.5. Diaspora & transborder linkages

The diaspora and transborder relations between the RCH and the Hungarian state represent another important domain of interaction. Given Hungary's explicit kin-state policy, there is a strong alignment of interests: both the state and the RCH seek to support Hungarian communities beyond Hungary's borders.

Since 2010, Hungary's government has ramped up spending and political attention to Hungarian minority communities abroad. The guiding document, *Policy for Hungarian Communities Abroad* (2013), and institutions such as the Bethlen Gábor Fund (BGA) supported this strategy. Churches explicitly became part of this policy, seen as keepers of identity. The Reformed Church has been a prime partner.

For the Hungarian state, the benefit is clear: churches like the RCH help achieve nation-policy (*nemzetpolitikai*) objectives. Financially, the BGA disburses massive grants to projects in Hungarian-populated regions of neighboring countries. In 2018, investigations estimated that around HUF 84 billion (over €250 million) went to cross-border organizations, and in some years, budgets were tripled at year-end to funnel more money toward them (BGA 2018). Even after a peak in 2020 (with extraordinary funding spurts), 2021 still saw nearly HUF 49 billion channeled to entities outside Hungary, which accounted for a major share of the BGA's outlay. These flows often supported church-linked infrastructure, e.g., the renovation of historic churches, the construction of new community centers run by churches, or even secular facilities owned by church-affiliated foundations (such as the Reformed high school in Aiud/Nagyenyed). This is mutualism: the kin-state secures nation-building and foreign-policy outputs (language use, community cohesion, favorable attitudes towards Hungary) while the Church strengthens its community.

During crises, this mutualism may operate in real time. Take the example of the war in Ukraine: the RCH's aid arm (RCHA) and the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia worked hand in hand to deliver relief on both sides of the border. The Hungarian state appreciated this because it both helped ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine and improved Hungary's international image. It demonstrated practical co-governance: church bodies, foreign donors, and Hungarian authorities coordinating to manage a humanitarian situation – none could have done so as effectively.

Similarly, on the diplomatic front, the RCH's involvement in global Reformed organizations (WCRC) gave it a platform to highlight minority issues and religious freedom concerns that align with Hungary's interests in protecting Hungarian minorities. Having the RCH raise issues in a multilateral church context diversifies partners beyond just Hungarian government lobbying (WCC 2025).

The main concern is financial dependence or distortion. The kin-state funding, while welcome, can be discretionary. For instance, BGA often topped up budgets in the month of December with extra grants, sometimes to a drastic extent. This unpredictability created major patronage dynamics: the Church or its institutions could tailor their requests or behavior to secure these funds, potentially compromising independence. The RCH is aware of this and tries to balance the dynamic by also engaging with Western partners. Nonetheless, certain subfields – e.g., the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia's educational projects – do rely almost exclusively on Hungarian state funding, meaning that if this were withdrawn, those projects might collapse. This is a vulnerability, as the relationship risked sliding into parasitism. As of 2025, the RCH-state diaspora partnership looked like a win-win for the parties, albeit retaining the potential for major imbalances.

4.6. Public voice and agenda-setting

Here, the RCH's "public voice" has been operating in a crowded arena – featuring secular NGOs, media, expert bodies, and other churches, and especially the larger Catholic Church – where many actors compete to frame issues, values, and policies. Government fora managed by the State Secretariat for Church, Civil Society and Nationality Affairs nominally invite input but also act as gatekeepers – agenda space is thus scarce. The RCH's relative advantages are its moral authority, nationwide organizational footprint, and direct lines to educators and social-service practitioners, yet it must still contend with powerful unions, expert councils, and rival ecclesial voices.

Competition is most visible in education, family policy, and social inclusion. After 2010, as the RCH's stake in education debates grew, secular groups perceived that their influence was diminishing. The RCH does not monopolize

the conversation; nonetheless, it often competes with the Teachers' Union and policy think tanks. It also competes indirectly with Catholic leadership to be recognized as "the Church's" principal interlocutor. In short, contestation – over framing, access, and policy levers – defines the baseline.

At intervals, however, this relationship shifts into coalitionary mutualism, in which churches act collectively and as partners with the state. Domestically, the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary (MEÖT), in which the RCH is a leading member, issues joint statements and serves as a common channel to the government. When MEÖT leadership meets officials, the state gains symbolic legitimacy by engaging a broad ecclesial coalition, and the churches gain amplified access and bargaining power. These episodes show how a fragmented voice can be aggregated into a platform that both secures attention and mitigates the disadvantages of denominational size.

Transnational networking produces similar effects. The RCH and its aid arm participate in Eurodiaconia, a European federation of church social ministries. When Budapest hosted Eurodiaconia's Roma Inclusion Network in 2024, the RCH/RCHA curated content and showcased projects, while government participation delivered visibility and policy linkage. The same logic extends to other consultative bodies – the National Roma Integration Council, demographic councils, and multi-stakeholder roundtables – where regularized interaction institutionalizes "mutualism by design," even if debate within them remains competitive.

Overall, the RCH leverages coalitions to compensate for size and to navigate gatekeeper-managed access. Competition determines whose frames gain traction. Mutualism emerges when the state seeks legitimacy, societal reach, or expertise and therefore engages church coalitions as co-producers. For the RCH, coalition platforms reduce isolation, broaden constituencies, and create windows to shape agendas that would be difficult to influence through confrontation alone.

Having dissected the main domains of RCH–state interaction, we can now conduct a broader assessment: has this ecosystem been adaptive or path-dependent under Hungary's illiberal turn? And what does this imply for the Church's autonomy and agency?

5. Adaptive or path-dependent? A relational assessment

Considering the 2010–2025 period, the RCH-state relationship shows an interesting mix of stability and adaptation. The broad arrangement – churches as partners in an illiberal state – has been quite path-dependent. Within that, both the Church and state have adapted to events and fine-tuned roles, nonetheless.

For example, in education and welfare, the initial mutualism only strengthened (path-dependent deepening), and both sides adapted to scale: the state created new funding schemes as the churches took more schools, and the RCH learned to manage a larger system (adaptive learning by both). In diaspora matters, when unexpected events like the full-scale invasion of Ukraine occurred, they quickly reshaped part of the relationship from long-term development to immediate crisis response (adaptive phase), but still within the mutual aid framework defined earlier.

Reshaping usually takes place during external shocks: for example, during the 2015 migration crisis, the Church momentarily asserted a more independent, humanitarian voice (displaying a bit more distance from the state narrative). By 2016, once the crisis had ebbed, the relationship reverted to its prior pattern. The 2024 internal scandal (the aforementioned letter requesting presidential clemency) tested the Church's independence; it responded by "self-cleansing" (adaptation to preserve credibility), and the state largely stayed silent.

Overall, one may say that the ecosystem has been adaptive at the tactical level but path-dependent at the strategic level. The fundamental roles (church as regime supporter and service provider; state as patron and culture-war ally) have not changed. Nonetheless, how they are implemented – e.g., which issues the Church speaks on, how funding is channeled, and which projects are prioritized – has involved flexibility. For the RCH's autonomy, adaptivity was associated with both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, the RCH has shown that it can adjust strategies (e.g., seek multiple funding sources, use coalitions to amplify its voice), which is beneficial to demonstrating its agency. On the other hand, the path-dependent reliance on an illiberal regime limited long-term agility (the longer it has persisted, the more the Church's identity has become intertwined with that of the regime, calling into question future adaptability).

For now, the Church–state ecosystem in Hungary's illiberal democracy can be summarized as institutionally entrenched but flexibly implemented – i.e., stable mutualisms in core domains, with selective adjustments to maintain balance and address challenges.

5.1. Measuring dependence and autonomy: funding and role modality

To complement the qualitative assessment, we now examine quantifiable indicators of the RCH's dependence on the state and its freedom of action. Mar-ton's framework suggests two useful measures: the Effective Number of Patrons (ENP) and role modality.

ENP (adapted from party system measurement, the Laakso-Taagepera index) gives a sense of how many significant funding sources an organization has. $ENP = 1/(\sum s_i^2)$, where s_i is the share of total funding from source i . An ENP near 1 indicates a single dominant funder; higher values indicate more diversified funding. A higher ENP generally correlates with more autonomy (since no single patron can completely dictate terms).

Role modality shows whether, in a project or function, the RCH is acting as a contractor/implementer for someone else's agenda (usually the state's), or as a fundraiser/initiator pursuing its own agenda that it then finds support for.

The RCH's overall budget comes from multiple streams: state budget subsidies (for salaries, maintenance, investments), donations of 1% of personal income tax from citizens, its own income (e.g., university tuition, rentals, donations), foreign or EU grants, and internal church contributions. If we aggregate at the national level, state-related funding clearly dominates. For instance, in 2025, the RCH's Synod budget plan totaled HUF 105.7 billion (roughly €290 million), of which the vast majority was direct state support or compensation (Református Közlöny 2024/4). The 1% tax offering added ~HUF 3.44 billion (just over 3% of the total) (NAV 2025). Own income and donations make up the rest, 10–15%. This indicates that despite the significant state funding, the presence of other streams lifts ENP above 1, to as high as 1.5 to 2.

Looking at the sub-sectors, in education, funding is almost entirely state-sourced (to which are added minimal tuition fees in higher education and some church top-ups). In diaconia, state normative financial support, along with some foreign aid and donations, yields an ENP of ~1.3–1.4. In contrast, for extraordinary humanitarian relief (like the Ukraine response), the Church actually raised considerable funding from international and public donations in addition to government support, with that specific effort having a broad patron base (UNHCR, ACT Alliance, RCHA fundraising, plus government) – thus the ENP value may amount to >3 in this case. The highest ENP is probably associated with areas like the Roma Mission, which gets funds from Swiss HEKS, as well as state and church sources – with no single dominant patron. For instance, one Roma program cycle (2016–2020) was approximately half Swiss-funded and half Hungarian state-funded. The lowest ENP is in the area of formal educational tasks, e.g., in the financing of teacher salaries.

Regarding the implications of these observations for autonomy, the RCH's core operations (education, clergy stipends, and admin) are heavily state-backed, implying limited financial autonomy. In terms of purely churchly activities, the RCH is independent (and funded by believers). In public service activities, it is mostly an agent supported by state funds.

5.2. Role modality analysis: The RCH plays multiple roles

For the operation of state-funded schools and social institutions, the RCH essentially acts as a contractor/implementer. It must follow national curricula, comply with welfare regulations, and be audited for the use of public funds. It has latitude in ethos and approach, but not in its core mandate. Similarly, diaconal institutions often fulfill state welfare obligations under contract. In these roles, the Church's autonomy is constrained by formal agreements and the need to maintain funding.

In certain projects, the RCH defines the vision and then seeks partners. For instance, the RCH decided to set up a Refugee Integration Center (the Kalunba NGO spin-off) when state integration support was minimal; they then received UNHCR and charity funds to support it. This is an example of acting as an initiator. Likewise, in the case of the RCH's plans to expand to the Western European diaspora, the Church itself initiated bringing the communities concerned under its wing, and subsequently received some government support, given that this matched nation-policy objectives.

In practice, many RCH activities blend modes and display mutability. A church school may be a contractor for academics but an initiator in its religious activities. A state-funded Roma college program might be originally the church's idea, but funded largely by the state when eventually operational, leading to a shift from initiator to joint implementer.

Crucially, Marton's point is that the more the RCH can act in initiator mode toward multiple funders, the more independent agency it may be said to have. On the whole, we see a trade-off: the RCH has accepted a high level of state funding to expand its societal role – this inevitably ties it to state priorities (contractor role). But it tries to preserve areas of independent action through diversifying fundraising and launching its own programs, seeking a delicate balance. In short, the RCH's dependence is thus significant but not absolute.

6. Limits and ambiguities of the RCH's agentic capability

Having mapped the RCH's active roles and its interdependence with the state, we finally reflect on the limits of its autonomy and the ambiguous situations where it is unclear whether the Church is acting independently or as an extension of state power. The RCH's capability to act is context-dependent and fluid, not an absolute quality.

The RCH's structure as a federated church means it must maintain internal consensus to act effectively. This can slow or dilute decisive action. For example, when issuing a statement on a political issue, the Synod Presidency likely con-

sults with district bishops, who consider how their clergy and faithful will react. The Church's agency is strongest when there is internal consensus and weakest when an issue is internally polarizing (e.g., the Balog case was initially met with hesitancy until the public outcry forced unity around the need for resignations).

The RCH exhibits a temporal pattern of stepping forward at certain moments and lying low at others. During crises, it has become highly visible, either in action or voice. In more routine times, it often returns to quiet, domain-specific work and symbolic support for the government. This indicates a limitation: the RCH does not try to assert its own agenda constantly but picks its battles. It is willing to exercise agency when conditions are permissive but otherwise remains a latent force.

Over a decade and a half of partnership with successive governments under PM Viktor Orbán, the RCH has increasingly entwined its identity with that of the political regime. Government and church leaders have frequently employed overlapping Christian-national vocabulary in public communication. This suggests ambiguity: is the RCH promoting a theological vision or a political ideology, or have the two become identical in this context? The RCH likely sees them as aligned, viewing illiberal Christian democracy as the practical realization of Neo-Calvinist ideals. But the risk is that if the regime does something that contradicts Christian ethics (corruption, abuses of power), the Church's close identification with it makes it hard to distance itself without indirectly indicting itself for its prior support. This may limit its future agency: if public opinion shifts and associates the Church with discredited policies, the RCH might lose the legitimacy to act effectively.

The RCH's transnational ties sometimes pull it in directions the Hungarian state is not keen on pursuing. For example, the World Council of Churches might emphasize refugee rights or critique nationalism. The RCH has to at least nominally acknowledge these broader Christian positions.

In conclusion, the RCH's agency is characterized neither by full independence nor mere puppetry – it is a continually negotiated space for maneuver. It maximizes influence where its goals and those of the state overlap, and it restrains itself where they might clash. Its autonomy is greatest in matters purely internal (theology, liturgy, spiritual care) and in cross-border ecclesial activities that the state endorses anyway.

7. Conclusions

This article has analyzed the active role of the Reformed Church in Hungary (RCH) in supporting and co-shaping the Hungarian state's project of redefining modernity and democracy according to its concept of an "illiberal democracy."

Grounding the discussion in Péter Marton's non-state actor theory, we have examined how the RCH exercises agency and how it navigates its relationships with the state in various domains. Several key conclusions emerge.

The RCH has proven to be an active partner in the Orbán government's drive to infuse Hungarian public life with Christian-national values. Through its rapidly expanding network of church-run schools and social institutions, the RCH has helped implement a "Christian" model of service provision parallel to (and intertwined with) the state system. This contributes to a redefined modernity in Hungary – one that departs from secular Enlightenment liberalism and emphasizes traditional, community-oriented norms. From education policy to nationhood narratives, the Church's involvement has buttressed the illiberal state's ideological legitimacy. At the same time, the state has relied on the Church to lend moral credibility to its agenda, in what can be seen as a symbiotic legitimation.

Further, Marton's concept of inter-organizational ecosystems was deployed to map how the RCH–state relationship varies by domain: mutualistic in education and welfare (with both parties benefiting from co-production), incorporating elements of competition (for influence and resources) and potential parasitism (if the Church becomes overly dependent on state funds in some areas). In most domains, the RCH–state tie is mutualistic, reflecting a convergence of interests. Our assessment, informed by ENP calculations and role analysis, is that the RCH retains a multi-patron footing domestically (ENP ~1.5–2+) and mixes roles (those of contractor and initiator). This means the Church is not a mere appendage of the state – it has its own resources and initiatives – but it certainly operates within state-defined frameworks and heavily relies on state partnership, revealing a situation of "adaptive mutualism."

The analysis also highlights the limits and ambiguities of the RCH's autonomy. The Church's capacity to act independently is contingent on context. Internally, the RCH must maintain unity among divergent factions, which often leads to cautious, consensual public positions rather than bold stances. Externally, the Church's heavy reliance on state funding in certain areas means it operates under significant financial and regulatory constraints.

In conclusion, the case of RCH demonstrates how a major Christian denomination can become a strategic non-state actor in an illiberal democracy, actively supporting the remodeling of the nation and society while also preserving its institutional interests. This partnership has been found to have come at the price of a certain ideological alignment with the ruling power. In sum, the Reformed Church in Hungary represents a case of an NSA that has "found its place" in an illiberal democracy – not by standing apart as a check on government overreach or as a challenger, but by stepping inside the system to co-direct the nation's course. Whether this will ultimately strengthen or diminish the Church's inde-

pendent voice in the future, beyond the sixteen-year period marked by the rule of successive governments under Viktor Orbán, remains to be seen.

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