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# Dynamics in state-religion relations in postcommunist Central Eastern Europe and Russia

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## ABSTRACT

The contribution aims to provide an exposition of the recent dynamics in state-religion relations in Central Eastern Europe (specifically in Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovakia) and Russia through the prism of the typology of modes of governance of religious diversity. Additionally, the present research complements this framework by taking into account the unique characteristics of Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. Though the countries of the region of Central Eastern Europe and Russia share much common history and recent experiences, the case studies analysed in this contribution reveal that state-religion relations and modes of governance of religious diversity nonetheless differ across countries. From a liberal secular perspective, adopted by the current authors, the dynamics of state-religion relations in this region look problematic. Of particular concern are state-Islam relations, which in some of the countries covered, namely Slovakia and Hungary, are already at a very low point, with Muslims (particularly of immigrant background) being increasingly securitised by the media, public, and the national political elites.

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## Introduction

The region of Central Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup> and Russia is known to have undergone profound transformations in state-religion relations in the past hundred years – from formerly amicable in the pre-World War era through exceptionally hostile during the communist intermezzo to somewhat ambivalent in the postcommunist era. The Central Eastern European states covered in this contribution, namely Lithuania, Slovakia, and Hungary, are all member states of the EU, and therefore have to abide – not least in their regimes of governance of religion – by EU values, principles, and standards. Russia, however, though before 16 March 2022 it too had been subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, has always had its own interpretation of the principles and norms enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and therefore has had strained relations with the Council of Europe. In the past two decades Russian domestic politics, not least those pertaining to state-religion relations, have been criticised by the EU and its individual member states, most notably by those located in Central Eastern Europe. Therefore, while the Baltic States and the Višegrad States may be seen as two sub-

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regions of Central Eastern Europe and comparable among themselves, Russia stands out as a very different region of its own.

All of the region's countries, though formally secular, have Christian heritage that forms part of their national identities. Even though religion plays an ever-decreasing role in people's everyday lives, the majority of the region's population nominally belongs to one of the main traditional Christian churches, namely Roman Catholic (in Lithuania, Hungary, and Slovakia) or Russian Orthodox (in Russia). Membership of other religions is marginal compared to the different denominations of Christianity, although, in Russia, inhabitants of Muslim cultural background constitute over 6.5%, and possibly up to 12%, of the population (Levada-Center 2013; Malashenko 2011).

State-religion relations in the region vary vastly. While some of the countries recognise a number of religious denominations as 'traditional' to the land, others limit themselves to a single denomination or do not confer such status on anyone. This formal (non)recognition, as is shown further below, often has far-reaching consequences, and not only for the individual faith communities but, and more importantly, in terms of preferences, hierarchies, and inequalities in the general constellation of state-religion relations.

On the social level, though the majority of the population in the region still identify with a (traditional) faith community – chiefly one of the Christian denominations – in practice, as the research findings reveal, a large proportion of this religious identification is intrinsically linked to nationalism (Pew Research Center 2017). However, in recent years decreases in traditional religious observance in some of these countries are being compensated by the appearance and increase of new religious communities (some of the 'New Religious Movements' type, others of historic religions less present in particular countries, including Islam).

Also, lately, Christian primordialist ideology that questions the idea of secular multiculturalism and cohabitation of religions and the very basis of current state-religion relations has also been on the rise. Moreover, in some cases, as is shown in this contribution, this issue has been taken up by political parties which incorporate it in their programmes. In some of the countries of the region, this has already resulted in an overhaul of legislation related to the governance of religion, taking it away from the hitherto burgeoning liberal secularism of the states. Thus, the meaning and parameters of secularism in the region of Central Eastern Europe and Russia in the postcommunist era may not be seen as carved in stone but rather as an object of renewed attention by multiple state and non-state actors and, consequently, subject to change.

This contribution aims at providing an exposition of the recent dynamics in state-religion relations in Central Eastern Europe (on the examples of Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovakia) and Russia (see Figure 1) through the prism of the typology of modes of governance of religious diversity (see the introductory contribution in this collection). Additionally, the present research complements this framework by taking into account the unique characteristics of Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. The authors of this contribution contend that to understand the specificities of the region, we need to look at religion-state relations from an angle that takes into consideration the different historical experiences of the countries of the former communist bloc.

The research for this contribution has been two-fold – it primarily includes qualitative content analysis of relevant national key legal documents and the qualitative analysis of practical policy measures by national governments. We focused on primary legal sources



**Figure 1.** Countries covered in this contribution: Hungary, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Russia.

for the former and secondary sources for the latter part of the research process. The primary sources for the qualitative content analysis were chosen using the purposive sampling method. Except for a short historic overview at the beginning of the contribution, the timeframe applied in the research covers the years from the fall of the Berlin wall until the present day, with special attention given to the years between 2000 and 2021.

We agree with Habermas (2006, 15) that we not only live in a time of postsecular societies, but that this requires an ‘epistemic adjustment’ in order to accommodate both supporters of secular values and those supporting religious ones in a liberal democratic environment. Provided both secular and religious citizens go through ‘complementary learning processes’ (Habermas 2006, 16), it is possible to reach an agreement on the limits of secularism. However, this idea of the postsecular only deals with the renegotiation of the limits of secularism in liberal democratic societies. When Habermas (2008, 17) claims that ‘(t)he controversial term “post-secular society” can only be applied to the affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where people’s religious ties have steadily or rather quite dramatically lapsed in the post-World War II period’, it is unclear whether postcommunist Central Eastern European countries may be considered part of this group.

We support the idea that countries in this region have also entered a postsecular era. Drawing on Eisenstadt’s (2000) idea of multiple modernities, we agree with Berger (2014, 78) that in countries with varying historic and political backgrounds, the boundaries between religious groups and the state are drawn differently in a postsecular framework.

This entails, however, that even if postsecular societies show characteristics that Habermas (2008, 20) touched upon, the liberal democratic background Habermas was presupposing may not necessarily be among them. As a result, we agree with Parmaksız (2018) that there is a lack of consensus over the meaning of postsecular.

Further drawing on Parmaksız (2018, 108), his term 'religionormativity' may help us better understand developments concerning the postsecular in Central Eastern European state-church relations: 'A religionormative system organises its social, cultural and/or political spheres around structures of understanding and thinking, as well as practical orientations, which make religiosity privileged' (Parmaksız 2018, 108). This idea is closely related to a negative and positive sense of secularisation (Parmaksız 2018, 108–109). According to the negative sense, secularisation is the weakening of the role of religion in different domains and institutions in society, thus it also entails the weakening of the religionormative political domain. This approach leaves little space for religion in the public sphere. However, according to Parmaksız (2018, 109), secularisation can also be approached in the positive sense,

as the establishment of a new normative order that cultivates its own sensibilities, practices, values, particular view on life and the human condition. This new secularnormative order creates its own exclusion and control mechanisms over what constitutes legitimate knowledge and thereby privileges certain cognitive structures, ideological and symbolic commitments, along with the practices, habits and reflexes that are attached to these commitments.

This positive postsecularity enables the state to step over the 'classic' normative frameworks of separation and supposed state neutrality and build up its own normative structures based on historical and cultural traditions. Based on distinct cultural and historical heritage, states may emphasise the duty to treat certain religions or religious communities preferentially. This, however, may also entitle the state to keep certain religious communities at arm's length or even to marginalise (and securitise) some of them. In this sense, it becomes justified for the state to grant different levels of recognition to various religious groups.

Churches with privileged status may receive extra government funding to perform certain public goods, such as education, caring for the elderly, or running hospitals. As Roy pointed out, these are the roles the secular states took over from the churches in Europe during the historical period of secularisation (Roy 2019, 16–18). In this sense, what we can observe currently in some Central Eastern European states, most notably Hungary, is a dynamic of de-secularisation initiated by the state, based on certain value sets. Governments may de-secularise certain domains that used to be secular, such as education, granting access to certain privileged churches, such as the traditional Christian churches in the region.

### **Historical overview of state-religion connections in the region: from established churches to state secularism**

Historically, most of the region of Central Eastern Europe and Russia was ruled by two regional empires – the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian. The first was demographically predominantly Catholic, hence, the hegemonic position of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in countries that used to be part of that empire. The latter was Russian Orthodox

with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as the supreme religious organisation closely intertwined with the state. The region hosted not only other Christian communities but also non-Christians, first of all Jewish but also Muslims. Russia also had many other religious minorities, most of which were incorporated and subjugated as a consequence of the imperial policy of the Russian Empire. Besides the diverse communities of Muslims and Jews, there were Catholics, Protestants, Old Believers, Buddhists, etc. In brief, the societies and their states in the region have a historic tradition of dealing with different religious communities.

However, the level of tolerance towards certain religions and their followers changed over the centuries. For a long time in the Habsburg Empire, the RCC enjoyed a privileged position and members of other religious minorities (like Protestants and Orthodox Christians) were treated as second-class, and – more importantly – as disloyal, citizens (Crews 2003). Under the Romanov monarchy that ruled from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, and during the rule of Ivan IV ('the Terrible', who reigned from 1547 to 1575), non-Orthodox Christians and others were pressured to convert to Orthodox Christianity, at times violently (Geraci and Khodarkovsky 2001, 6). The breakthrough in tolerance towards religious minorities came in the eighteenth century, when 'Edicts of Tolerance' were promulgated in both empires (Crews 2003). As a result, state-founded Islamic religious institutions were created in the Russian Empire by the end of the eighteenth century, and became an instrument in the governance of religion. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Jewish community received formal recognition in 1895 (Raj 1996), followed by formal recognition of Islam and its religious establishment in 1912 (Chudžíková 2011, 41).

The legitimisation of Islamic religious institutions was a particularly sensitive topic in both empires. In what is now Russia, Islam *de facto* became one of the country's major religions from the second half of the sixteenth century, when the Moscow Principality started expanding into the territories of the former Golden Horde. The conquests of Kazan and Astrakhan khanates significantly increased its Muslim population. Initially, the state was utterly antagonistic towards its Muslim subjects who, for two centuries, would constantly suffer from state-endorsed Christianisation at the hands of the ROC. With Christianisation policies bringing unsatisfactory results, and inspired by the Enlightenment, Empress Catherine the Great came up with the idea of creating muftiates – the spiritual administrations for governing the Muslim population in the late eighteenth century (Crews 2009, 34; Furman 1989).

In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, recognition of Islam was also problematic because of the proximity of the Muslim Ottoman Empire and the legacy of hostilities and occupations of Austro-Hungarian territories by the Ottomans. A full legal recognition of Islam came only after Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its significant number of Muslims, was occupied in 1878 and annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1908 (Sulok 2010). The end of the First World War opened up opportunities for new sovereign nation-states in Central Eastern Europe. Initially they all adopted democratic political systems that enshrined tolerance towards minority religious traditions, albeit where the dominant Christian churches (chiefly, the RCC) retained special status and relations to the state. Though the region of Central Eastern Europe had not experienced the secularising wave seen in Western Europe, in the interwar period secularist ideas finally found their way into the region's societies. Although policies for the governance of religion varied geographically and chronologically across the

Soviet Union, on the whole the Soviet authorities opted for an extreme form of state secularism and turned to suppression of all religious communities and their organisations (Furman 1989). In the early 1920s the authorities experimented with a degree of recognition and even support for some religious minorities (Coleman 2005, 154–197), coupled with repressive measures against the Russian Orthodox Church in particular. Pragmatic wartime and post-war leniency was followed by Nikita Khrushchev's campaign (1958–1964) to eradicate religion as an outdated relic (Konecny 1995; Smolkin 2018, 21–84).

The brief interwar period was followed by the communist era in the entire region, which was marked by the communist regimes' atheistic stance and an extreme form of state secularism (with the exclusively secularist statist mode of governance of religion). This had debilitating and detrimental consequences for all religious groups in the region (Ramet 1989, 2002; Dragadze 2003; Froese 2008; Dunn 2019). The central narrative tried to frame religious beliefs as an anachronism that would disappear with economic and social progress (Ramet 1989; Dunn 2019). All religious communities in the then socialist-communist bloc were closely controlled by the government and only the major denominations (such as traditional Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) managed to continue religious life. But even they, particularly Catholics and Jews, bore the brunt of the atheistic communist policies and actions, which included anti-Zionist, anti-Papal, and wider anti-ecumenical and anti-cosmopolitan campaigns. Christian churches adapted to the political reality and sometimes (particularly Orthodox churches) even went into tactical collaboration with the communist regimes (Ramet 2002; Dragadze 2003; Froese 2008). In some of the countries of the region, however, the Catholic Church took upon itself the role of the preserver and protector of the Catholic identity of the citizens, and some of the clergy, clandestine monks and nuns participated in peaceful resistance to the national communist regimes, for which they often paid with their freedom (Ramet 2002; Dragadze 2003; Froese 2008). Nonetheless, several decades of state secularism resulted in a dramatic decline in religiosity among local populations, and by the end of the communist era a tangible part of the local population had turned away from religion, effectively becoming post-religious (agnostic, if not atheist).

Looking back to these past centuries, the Habsburg and the Russian empires both had very clear religious identities. In each case, this strong religious identity led to the preferential treatment of certain religious groups over others. This also created an asymmetric relationship between the preferred church and the state, where the state became the 'guardian' of the Catholic and the Orthodox churches respectively. Thus, the secularisation process in these empires meant the decreasing control of the state over religious issues paired with an increasing pluralisation, but equal treatment was never on the table. This relationship became extremely asymmetric during the communist era. However, even during this period, state treatment of religions differed, ranging from total marginalisation (of minority religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, or Muslims in Hungary) to strict state control (of traditional churches).

### **Capturing the intra-regional differences in modes of governance of religious diversity**

Following the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989–91 the religious rights of the region's citizens were not only formally reconfirmed, particularly through newly adopted

constitutions and laws on religion, but also widely implemented. In Russia, however, the policy of conferring of religious rights and freedoms was limited chiefly to the historical religious collectivities, while the newcomer religious groups, though often formally entitled to them, in practice did not receive the expected religious rights and freedoms. In any case, state-recognised religious communities throughout the region were once again allowed to publicly engage in religious rituals and new religious communities started forming and seeking to register their organisations. The new national constitutions adopted under western liberal influence declared the states to be neutral towards religious organisations. This was a very short-lived liberal neutralism mode of governance of religious diversity, as the RCC and the ROC quickly made use of their, if not always formally conferred then certainly assumed by them, privileged status; the former through the Concordats with the Vatican, the latter through growth of its significance in the sociopolitical life of the country. In Central Europe, the signing of the Concordats created precedents for other traditional religious organisations to apply for similar treatment. The re-establishment of privileged status by the historically dominant churches may be judged as the first step away from liberal neutralism in these countries, towards moderate secularism and, eventually – in the case of Hungary and Slovakia – towards majoritarian nationalism.

Several other faith communities historically found on the territories of the Central Eastern European countries and Russia (like Jewish, Muslim, and some Protestant communities) were incorporated into the institutions that liaise between the state and religion, raising them above the others (non-traditional, registered, and unregistered) but still keeping them below the 'established' Christian denominations. The very distinction of what is officially or informally considered by the states as 'traditional' religious communities from others raises the question of equality between the former and the latter. In practice, the so-called 'traditional' religious communities and their representative organisations are treated preferentially by the state (in the form of financial assistance and wide-ranging social rights) (Račius 2020).

The initially liberal regimes of governance of religion paved the way to a proliferation of groups claiming to be, and registered as, faith communities. And, although in some countries there was concern about the appearance and establishment of ('dangerous') religious cults and sects, most of the groups wishing to register as religious did manage to institutionalise themselves. At the juncture of the millennia, the countries of Central Eastern Europe and Russia hosted a great variety of religious groups in otherwise highly secularised societies. In Hungary alone, for instance, there were more than 300 organisations registered as churches (the official name for registered religious organisations of any faith including those that do not have 'churches' in the Christian sense of the word) by 2010, a huge number compared to the small population of the country (Antalóczy 2013).

Lately, however, some of the countries in the region appear to be turning even further away from liberal secularism and the liberal neutralism mode of governance of religious diversity (Table 1) cherished in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain. Beginning in the first decade of the twenty-first century, many governments in the region gradually introduced tougher regulations on the registration and operation of religious organisations. One reason for this may have been the securitised environment around certain religious, chiefly Muslim, collectivities after 9/11 (in Russia's case even before) and the terror attacks in European cities in the first decade of the millennium.

**Table 1.** Modes and norms for the governance of religious diversity.

Majoritarian Nationalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strong state identification with one religion</li> <li>● May or may not include toleration for other religions</li> <li>● May or may not include personal religious laws</li> <li>● In radical cases the state takes over or controls the institutions and followers of one or more religions</li> </ul>
Secularist Statism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● State control of religion</li> <li>● The state excludes religion from the political and the civic, confining religious freedom largely to the private sphere</li> <li>● This mode of secularism may be self-defined as part of the national identity</li> <li>● May include some support of some religions, but religion mainly seen as belonging to the private sphere</li> </ul>
Liberal Neutralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Moral individualism – freedom of conscience</li> <li>● Anti-assimilation and equal civic standing of all religions</li> <li>● Religions are officially and socially tolerated</li> <li>● Active ‘de-othering’ but no ‘recognition’</li> </ul>
Moderate Secularism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Moral individualism – freedom of conscience</li> <li>● Religions may enjoy equal or unequal status but all are officially and socially tolerated</li> <li>● Religion seen as a public good in need of support</li> <li>● Religion might also be seen as in need of regulation</li> <li>● Mutual autonomy but restricted neutrality, including ‘weak’ establishment and unequal recognition</li> <li>● Religious and non-religious citizens give each other generally accessible/dialogical reasons in politics</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Modelling state-religion relations in Central Eastern Europe and Russia.

	Liberal neutralism	Moderate secularism	Secularist statism	Majoritarian nationalism
Russia			DON	QON
Hungary		DON		QON
Slovakia		DON		QON
Lithuania	DON	QON		

QON = Qualifying Operative Norms; DON = Dominant Operative Norms.

There are relevant examples of moderate secularism, which could be considered as a dominant operative norm (DON) in a number of countries under research (Table 2). This includes the preferential treatment of certain religions and religious organisations over others, and the unequal status and differential recognition of religions in these countries. In addition, we are of the opinion that majoritarian nationalism is a qualifying operative norm (QON) that is also relevant in the region. Here, we would like to mention the strong identification with Christianity in Russia and Hungary but also in Slovakia, which is also codified in these countries. The increasing role of Christian religious institutions in public life is also worth mentioning here. Finally, the fact that some religious organisations are not recognised or face outright persecution is also remarkable. Looking at the dynamics of state-church relations, in the gradual shift in state-church relations we see a movement away from moderate secularism towards majoritarian nationalism in a number of countries.

### **Hungary**

The current character of state-religion relations in Hungary was established after the coming to power of the current FIDESZ party-dominated government in 2010. Even

though religion plays a steadily decreasing role in people's lives, as far the modes and norms of governance are concerned, the current government's policy returns some aspects of religion and religious organisations from the private to the public sphere.

Hungary adopted a new constitution in 2011, which, besides mentioning the appreciation of various religious traditions of the country, emphasises the role of Christianity as a force to preserve the Hungarian nation in its Preamble (Hungarian Parliament 2011). This is a major change from the previous constitution (1989–2011), which did not mention the role of Christianity or God in the text at all (Alkotmany.hu 2011). In this sense, the new constitution could be considered a step away from the secular neutrality of the state, since there is a special, symbolic place for Christianity in the text. Hungary's revised law on religions drastically cut the number of recognised religious organisations – initially to just 14, later to be raised to 27 (Antalóczy 2013) and eventually to 32 (Hungarian Parliament 2011). Due to domestic and international criticism (U.S. Department of State 2017) for curtailing freedom of religion, the Hungarian law on religions has been amended a number of times. The removal of recognition from a number of churches indicated the government's willingness to grant the privileged 'church' status to only a handful of organisations. Among the initial 14 religious organisations recognised there were no Muslim organisations. However, after the amendment of the law, two Muslim organisations also gained recognition.

Although the new constitution still defines the Hungarian state as separate from religious communities (Article VI) (Hungarian Parliament 2011) and freedom of religion is also guaranteed in the text, it also allows the government to cooperate with religious organisations for certain public interests or goals. In practice, this means that the state may decide to sign so-called Comprehensive Cooperation Agreements with certain religious organisations. As a result, these organisations are allowed to take over certain responsibilities from the state in providing public goods (education, social care, etc.) and receive financial assistance in return. This set-up not only erodes the idea of secular neutrality, but essentially de-secularises certain religious communities and the providing of certain public goods. Churches with such Comprehensive Agreements may receive government funding for running schools, hospitals, and care homes. They assume control over the institutions and services they take over (or take back), which used to be traditionally secular bodies and roles funded and provided by the state. As this process takes place with the active cooperation of the government, we see here a state-sponsored outsourcing and de-secularisation of public goods (Szurovecz 2021). In the process, these churches also regain certain parts of the public domain that were taken away from them historically. In this sense, this is not only a process of de-secularisation of privileged religious communities, but also a reconstruction of long-lost traditional social structures.

The preamble of the Hungarian Constitution mentions Christianity's special role in the sustaining of the Hungarian nation throughout history. In line with the above-mentioned identification of the state as an entity with a clear Christian heritage, it is not surprising that the government decided to sign Comprehensive Agreements with the country's major Christian churches (Hungarian Parliament 2011). The fact that the biggest 'born-again' Christian community of the country, Hit Gyülekezete (Congregation of the Faith), also signed such an agreement is an indication that closer ties with the government are not reserved only for traditional churches, but also for those communities that have a tangible following and do not openly criticise the government (Hit Gyülekezete 2020).

However, the state can use the question of recognition and the signing of the Comprehensive Agreements as a political tool to exert influence over religious organisations. This creates an asymmetric interdependent relationship between the state as the financer of certain religious groups and the churches that perform certain public duties (education, social services) in return.

After a number of international controversies, the latest amendment to the Law on Churches in 2018 took back recognition of religious organisations from the legislature and gave it to the judicial branch. The new amended Law on Churches also allows people to form religious associations. These associations do not need to be registered as churches but they may function as faith communities nevertheless. For legal recognition as a church, the three-tier system remains in place. This three-tier recognition of churches effectively enables the state to differentiate between 'old' and 'young' (recently registered) churches, giving clear advantage to larger and historically established communities (Government of Hungary 2018). For these reasons, we consider Hungary to be moving away from formerly liberal neutralism through moderate secularism towards an increasingly identitarian form of majoritarian nationalism.

Besides, the exclusive right of the government to consider whether to enter into a Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement with a church or not gives the executive and the supporting legislative branches of power the ability to treat certain religious groups preferentially, while also enabling it to marginalise others (Government of Hungary 2018). The fact that no Muslim organisations have been able to sign such an agreement with the state thus far is likely to be seen by the Muslim community as evidence that the state prefers some communities over others. One can see an apparent preference towards Christian churches and towards those communities that remain neutral or support certain government policies. However, some of those Christian communities that dared criticise the Hungarian government have experienced persecution from state authorities. The case of the Hungarian Evangelical Brotherhood (*Magyarországi Evangéliumi Testvérközösség*) is a good example. The leader of this organisation has been a vocal critic of the current FIDESZ-led government. As a result, the organisation has been facing ongoing persecution from state authorities, including withholding state funding (Cseke 2022).

With the preferential treatment of certain 'old' churches over other organisations, as discussed above, norms linked to moderate secularism could be considered as dominant operative norms (DON). To further support this argument, the multi-tier recognition system and the government's right to decide with whom it signs a Comprehensive Agreement, and the de-secularisation of preferentially treated organisations providing certain public goods, also points in the direction of moderate secularism. Moreover, the increasing role of Christianity in the public sphere and the fact that Islamic religious organisations, although receiving the highest level of recognition, have not been able to sign a Comprehensive Agreement with the government, indicates qualifying operative norms linked to majoritarian nationalism (QON).

## **Slovakia**

The Slovakian case represents one of the most restrictive models of state-religion relations, if not in all of Europe, certainly in the EU. Admittedly, as may be expected of an EU member state, the Constitution of Slovakia (Article 24)<sup>2</sup> unequivocally guarantees

religious freedom and the Law on Religious Freedom and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Organisations (Article 1) re-confirms these constitutional provisions, establishing mutual autonomy between the state and religious collectivities and their organisations.

However, as the regime of governance of religion in Slovakia operates on a one-tier principle – all registered religious organisations are treated as equal before the law (that is, there is no formal distinction into ‘traditional’/‘historical’ religious communities and others) (Article 4.2), the state ‘recognises only those churches and religious societies that are registered’ (Article 4.4). The RCC has an exceptionally privileged status, as Slovakia signed a Concordat with the Holy See in 2000. Similar agreements were signed in 2002 between the state and a dozen registered Christian religious organisations (churches) representing the country’s Christian minorities.

Similarly to Hungary, Slovakia has also recently amended its legislation on religions making it next to impossible for smaller faith communities to get official registration (Slovak Parliament 2017). The previously liberal Law on Religious Freedom and the Legal Status of Churches was amended in 2007, requiring any religious community seeking to register their religious organisation to have a minimum of 20,000 members ‘who have a residential address in the territory of the Slovak Republic and who are Slovak citizens’ (Article 11) (Slovak Parliament 2007). In 2016, in the wake of the so-called ‘European refugee crisis’, the legislation on religions was amended once again, tilting Slovakia’s mode of governance of religious diversity clearly towards majoritarian nationalism, where the state identifies with and extends support to practically one religion – Christianity in its forms registered in the country – and includes toleration for only those faith communities that are registered. Though the president vetoed the Law, arguing that the amendments curtailed religious freedoms and rights, his veto was overturned and the amendments were passed by two-thirds in the Parliament in 2017 (The Slovak Spectator 2017). The most telling amendment to the Law was the one that raised the minimum number of members for the registration of a religious organisation from 20,000 to 50,000 members who have to be Slovak citizens permanently residing in Slovakia.

The amendments’ passage has been widely seen as putting a restraint on Muslims so that they do not form a religious organisation and institutionalise Islam in the country. Some observers even have labelled the process in the Law’s amendment as the ‘criminalisation of Islam in Slovakia’ (Werleman 2018). In fact, Slovakia is unique in the EU as it is the only member state that does not have a legally registered Muslim religious organisation. It is difficult to see one being registered any time soon given that the total population of Muslim background in Slovakia barely exceeds 5,000 (Lenc 2022).

The amendments have had devastating consequences for practically all minor faith communities that formed in the past several decades as they are forced to register according to the Law on Civic Associations of 1990 – which, incidentally, explicitly states that the Law does not cover religious collectivities (Section 1, Point 1c)<sup>3</sup> (Citizens Civil Law 1990) – and operate as NGOs. Being registered as NGOs and not as religious organisations, these faith communities are stripped of many of the rights that registered religious organisations have, including building and owning places of worship and other property, establishing institutions of religious education, providing pastoral care, and lobbying for rights relating to diet, religious feasts, clothing etc. As a result, as of the beginning of 2021,

there were just 18 registered religious organisations in Slovakia, of which only two were non-Christian (Office of International Religious Freedom 2021).

In conclusion, on the one hand norms of moderate secularism, such as moral individualism – freedom of conscience, religion being seen as a public good in need of support but also of regulation, as well as mutual autonomy but restricted neutrality, may be considered dominant operative norms (DON) in Slovakia. On the other hand, norms associated with majoritarian nationalism – strong state identification with one religion, selective toleration for other religions – should be seen as qualifying operative norms (QON).

## **Russia**

Even though state-religion affairs in Russia stand out in the region, they still have many similarities with the Hungarian and Slovakian cases: the postcommunist period in the Russian Federation also started with the state of liberal neutralism, which indicated a movement towards postsecularism in a Habermasian understanding (Habermas 2006, 16–17). This postsecularism and liberal neutralism were enacted by Russia's main law, the Constitution (adopted in 1993).<sup>4</sup> Article 14 affirms that Russia has no state religion and that people are free to follow their beliefs. This opening up of religious freedom facilitated a mushrooming of a great variety of religious collectivities who found the Russian Federation fertile soil for their activities. Such a situation was satisfactory neither for the state, which had increasing security concerns, nor for the ROC, which aimed to control and dominate the country's spiritual dimension (Anderson 2007; Koesel 2017; Marsh 2013).

The Federal law 'On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations' (N125-F3), which was promoted by the ROC and adopted in 1997, ended the phase of liberal neutralism and moved the state towards moderate secularism by establishing a two-tier system, which distinguished between religious organisations and religious groups.<sup>5</sup> The latter would need not just formal registration to operate, but were required to inform the local authorities about their existence and practice. A religious organisation had to meet much stricter criteria for registration. Initially, it was proof of 15 years of uninterrupted functioning within the borders of the Russian Federation. This requirement was later abolished, but organisation founders still had to present documents describing the basis of the religion, the way it is practised, its attitude towards family values etc. Due to the vague definition of extremism and terrorism, other Federal laws (e.g. N114-F3 'On Countering Extremist Activities' adopted in 2002 or N35-F3 'On Countering Terrorism' adopted in 2006)<sup>6</sup> became convenient legal tools for the state security apparatus to outlaw any religious group whenever it was deemed necessary or expedient (Shterin and Dubrovsky 2019). This judicial frame ensured the state's tight grip on religious groups and organisations and laid the groundwork for the Russian Federation to move further from moderate secularism to majoritarian nationalism. In other words, as in Hungary only even earlier, the state made a significant move towards de-secularisation.

This move towards de-secularisation required establishing a certain hierarchy among the institutionalised religions. Naturally, the top place was reserved for Orthodox Christianity, which authorities informally recognise as the state religion, even if according to strictly legal terms the state is still secular. The special position of the ROC is clear even from the content of the above-mentioned laws. For instance, the Preamble of the law

N125-F3 emphasises the role of Orthodox Christianity in constructing Russian collective identity, strengthening common values, and fostering culture. It also mentions 'other traditional religions' but does not name them, which places the Russian Orthodox Church at the top of the hierarchy of religious organisations (Koesel 2017), making it a 'de facto state church' (USCIRF 2018, 73). This position of the ROC (under the leadership of Moscow Patriarchate) is also clear from the role that it conducts in the public sphere. For instance, Orthodox teaching dominates religious education in schools, while other faiths are effectively marginalised in what was initially meant as an inclusive and comprehensive religious education curriculum (Iakimova and Menshikov 2019; Eremin and Osmachko 2017). Furthermore, Orthodox priests conventionally bless new Russian weapons and soldiers going on a mission (NYpost 2020). Even though other institutionalised religions also have this opportunity, their participation in the public sphere on the federal level is less prominent. Thus, for instance, though Muslim religious leaders are quite visible publicly in the Muslim-majority federal units, they are certainly less so on the federal level.

Since the very beginning of his tenure in office in the 2000s, Vladimir Putin realised the social and even political power of the ROC and did his best to put it into the service of the state. He increasingly utilised institutionalised religions, especially the ROC, in the state's domestic and foreign politics. By doing this, Putin sought to gain an additional legitimisation tool but, at the same time, this move enabled and strengthened the position of the ROC itself (Blitt 2011; Leustean 2018). The ROC, in turn, realised the advantage of the situation and used it to become the main player on Russia's religious ground, thus contributing to the de-secularisation of the state. This symbiosis between Russian political and religious elites is still, according to Anderson (2007), 'asymmetric' due to the dominance of the political elite, which is not surprising for an officially secular country.

Furthermore, the official separation of state and religion of the majority (Orthodox Christianity) in Russia became rather nominal following the ascendance of Vladimir Putin to power in 2000. The state leadership often accentuates its belonging to the Orthodox Church (Dunajeva and Koesel 2017). The president and members of the government have their 'private churches and priests', they regularly attend religious ceremonies and celebrations such as Easter and Christmas. The leaders of the Orthodox Church are also frequently invited to official meetings or ceremonies of the government (Yakhyaev and Kamyshova 2013). Moreover, Orthodox hierarchs are actively involved in the state's domestic and foreign affairs, supporting state politics and providing diplomatic communication channels (e.g. with Georgia after the 2008 war).

In conclusion, although officially Russia is a secular country, there is significant connection between the state, politics, and religion. The exceptional position of the ROC and its importance for state politics has encouraged the thriving of majoritarian nationalism in some regions of Russia. However, the state balances its support for the ROC by redirecting funds to other religious groups including Muslims, who constitute the second-largest religious group in the country (Yakhyaev and Kamyshova 2013). The federal and regional authorities, apparently for security concerns, promote the spread of institutionalised Islam at the expense of non-institutionalised. This is especially observable in some of the 'Muslim' republics of the North Caucasus. For instance, to promote institutionalised Islam in Chechnya, the republican government even established the positions of aides

to the Head of the Republic Ramzan Kadyrov, who also shapes and reshapes the religious life of the society according to his political needs.

Additionally, Russia's transition from a more liberal mode of governance of religion has been also very much tied to the state objective of preventing religious radicalisation. In the climate of the state's tightening grip on the social and political activities of religious organisations, politically active non-institutionalised groups (e.g. Salafis) and those labelled as sectarian (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses) have experienced regular pressure and persecution from the state (Ivanenko 2020; Laruelle 2020).

## **Lithuania**

Among the four countries under investigation in this article, Lithuania to this day continues to represent the most moderate, if not liberal, model of state-religion relations. Since the adoption of relevant legislation (the Constitution in 1992 and the Law on Religious Communities and Associations, passed in 1995), Lithuania has been and continues to represent the liberal neutralism mode of governance of religious diversity with moral individualism – freedom of conscience enshrined in them and practically all religions officially and socially tolerated.

Nonetheless, religions in Lithuania legally enjoy unequal status, as the foundational law of the country, the Constitution – besides guaranteeing religious freedom to the country's inhabitants in a number of its articles – makes an explicit distinction in Article 43 between what it refers to as a) 'traditional', b) 'state-recognised' 'churches'<sup>7</sup> and religious organisations, and c) those that are merely 'registered', though, admittedly, it remains silent on which ones fall under which category (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania 1992). Article 5 of the Law on Religious Communities and Associations states: 'The State shall recognise nine traditional religious communities and associations existing in Lithuania, which comprise a part of Lithuania's historical, spiritual and social heritage: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Jewish, Sunni Muslim and Karaites' (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania 1995). This distinction and inclusion of nine denominations reveals certain features of pluralistic nationalism (difference-sensitive identity recognition and institutional accommodation of religious diversity) but also compromises the principle of the state's secular neutrality.

Article 43 of the Constitution declares that there is no state religion in Lithuania; thus, all of the traditional religious communities named in the Law on Religious Communities and Associations are formally equal, both *vis-à-vis* the state and among themselves. Non-Christian religious communities such as Karaites, Jews, and Sunni Muslims, with their share in the country's population hovering around or less than 0.1%, formally have the same rights as the Roman Catholic community, which stood at over 77% at the time of the last population census in 2011 (Department of Statistics 2013, 5).

In practice, however, the numerically dominant RCC gets preferential treatment from the state and public institutions, hence certain features of majoritarian nationalism (state identification with, and support for, one religion) are discernible. For instance, the RCC has its representative on the Council of the national TV and radio broadcaster (LRT), and Roman Catholic priests serve in state institutions (Armed Forces, Border Police) as salaried chaplains and are otherwise routinely invited to bless state property (newly opening premises, police cars) and perform rituals at military events (by blessing unit flags).

Article 14 of the Law on Religious Communities and Associations clearly prioritises 'traditional' religious communities over 'non-traditional' ones by stipulating that 'Educational and training establishments of traditional religious communities and associations providing general education of the national standard shall be funded and maintained in accordance with the procedure established by the Government or an institution authorised by it, allocating the same amount of the budget funds as allocated to state or municipal educational establishments of the corresponding type (level)' (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania 1995). The inequality between religious communities has become evident in the practical application of the Law on Religious Communities and Associations in various other fields. As an example, for the past two decades the traditional religious communities have received, through their legal persons, annual payments from the state. The amount of these payments is divided proportionally, based on the number of believers recorded by the Department of Statistics.

The legally *de facto* unequal status of religious communities of different categories discernible in both the Lithuanian Constitution and the Law on Religious Communities and Associations, as well as a plethora of subsequent laws, was challenged at the turn of the century by a group of MPs who approached the Constitutional Court for an explanation. The Court, on two occasions in 2000 and 2007, endorsed the status quo promulgated in the Constitution (Constitutional Court 2000, 2007). There have also been attempts, thus far unsuccessful, to profoundly change the Law on Religious Communities and Associations – the draft law prepared by the Ministry of Justice has been shelved by Parliament.

Ultimately, on the one hand, certain norms of liberal neutralism, for instance moral individualism – freedom of conscience and official and social toleration of all religions, remain dominant operative norms (DON) in Lithuania. On the other hand, a number of norms of moderate secularism, such as unequal status of religions due to a multi-tiered recognition and benefits system, religion being seen as a public good in need of support, and preferred religions potentially becoming providers of certain public goods taking them over from the state, are qualifying operative norms (QON).

## Discussion

As is evident from the cases presented above, the region of Central Eastern Europe and Russia is somewhat diverse in terms not only of the confessional composition of the inhabitants of different countries of the region, but also state-religion relations. Therefore, one should be careful and not see the region of Central East Europe and Russia as having identical state-religion relations. Quite the opposite, one needs to appreciate the differences in the regimes of governance of religion in the countries of the region while being able to recognise certain similarities.

Based on the analysis of the dynamics in state-religion relations, one can, however, talk of a number of dominant operative norms (DON) and qualifying operative norms (QON) common to the countries under investigation. First, the state identifies with one denomination (Roman Catholic or Russian Orthodox) of one religion (Christianity), formally or informally recognised as 'traditional', but religion is mainly seen as belonging to the private sphere with occasional instrumentalisation of it by the state. Second, one may observe a rise of religious nationalism of identitarian nature in Slovakia, Hungary, and

Russia. Third, one may also discern that religion is often seen as a public good/danger in need of support and regulation. Thus, in most of the countries analysed, only the institutionalised forms of religion (registered religious organisations) are allowed to operate freely in a public sense. Consequently, individual freedom and institutional accommodation is offered only to believers of registered religions qualified by severe diversity-restricting toleration. In Lithuania, on the contrary, moral individualism and freedom of conscience remain paramount and practically all religions are officially and socially tolerated.

One of the most striking commonalities in regard to state-religion relations among some of the Višegrad countries, most notably Hungary and Slovakia, is a recent turn by their governments towards the instrumentalisation of religion. The majoritarian Christian identity that is also tangible in the Hungarian Constitution is a political cornerstone for the government that aims to instrumentalise religion. Preserving Hungary's Christian identity has been used by the government to shape public discourse on international migration. Besides, as in Slovakia, the negative narrative on migration was also linked to Muslims and Islam, which was put into a security framework (Buzan, Weaver, and de Wilde 1998). Even though the government emphasises that Muslims in Hungary are free to practise their religion and enjoy the protection of the law and the state, the Hungarian government, like the Slovak one, is also clear about not wanting any more Muslims to settle in the country (Portfolio 2015).

The instrumentalisation of religion betrays another common trend: a turning away from liberal secularism and the secular neutrality of the state. This may be a temporary detour but it may well turn out to be an indication of a somewhat illiberal 'postsecular condition' that may lead to novel forms of state-religion relations, which might purportedly be much more selective and discriminatory. As a result, the 'traditional' religious communities and their representative organisations could receive increasing support from the state, which can be considered a process of de-secularisation. However, the 'non-traditional' faith communities could be further marginalised, stigmatised, and securitised, with some of them being either pushed underground or to extinction in a process of forced secularisation. At the same time, the spiritual administrations of the favoured 'traditional' religious communities may opt for public support of government policies (in fact, this is already observable in some of the Višegrad countries) and also seek to promote their own 'de-secularisation' agenda.

One can observe in the political elites of Slovakia and Hungary a clear turn towards populist instrumental religious nationalism, when not only fringe marginal political parties but also mainstream ones and even those in power have started resorting to rhetoric full of religious symbolism and a sense of a clash of civilisations, the latter understood almost exclusively in religious terms. As a corollary to this, the political rhetoric of top politicians (certainly in Slovakia and Hungary) increasingly contains if not manifest then certainly latent Muslimophobia or Islamophobia, something that became a new norm in the wake of the so-called 'European migrant crisis' of 2015–2016. This, however, cannot be said about Russia, the government of which has to keep in mind the need not to antagonise its significant Muslim population, not least because of fears of radicalisation. However, the instrumentalisation of religion or the way religion is treated by governments in the region may change depending on which political party leads the government. Thus, unlike in Russia, one may see dynamic changes in Central Eastern

Europe, as there is no general consensus in society on the role religion should play in the public domain.

## Conclusions

Though the countries of the region of Central Eastern Europe and Russia share much common history and recent experiences, state-religion relations and modes of governance of religious diversity found in them, as shown through the cases of the countries analysed in this contribution, nonetheless differ. So, for instance, if Lithuania continues to represent the liberal neutralism mode grounded in a general freedom of religion and nine faith communities (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) recognised as 'traditional', with some features of majoritarian nationalism and pluralistic ('unity in diversity') nationalism, Slovakia has come to clearly represent the majoritarian nationalism mode grounded in a freedom of religion for only registered (state-recognised) faith communities, with some features of secularist statism. Hungary and Russia, meanwhile, represent two variants of moderate secularism. In the case of Hungary, the state plays an active role *vis-à-vis* the regulation and the utilisation of certain religious denominations and its mode features many elements of majoritarian nationalism and secularist statism. In the case of Russia, as in Slovakia, its mode is grounded in a general freedom of religion for registered (state-recognised) faith communities. It also includes many elements of secularist statism with official tolerance towards other religions and majoritarian nationalism that demonstrates favouritism towards Orthodox Christianity.

Overall, the dynamics of state-religion relations in the region of Central Eastern Europe and Russia in the foreseeable future does not look promising if viewed from the liberal secularism/secular neutrality/freedom of religion perspective. Of particular concern are state-Islam relations, which in some of the countries covered, namely Slovakia and Hungary, are already at a very low point, with Muslims (particularly of immigrant background) being increasingly securitised by the media, the public, and the national political elites.

## Notes

1. In this contribution, the region of Central Eastern Europe is understood as comprising three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and four Višegrad States (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary).
2. Constitution of Slovak Republic [01 October 1992]. Available online at <https://www.prezident.sk/upload-files/46422.pdf>. Accessed 06 September 2022.
3. Citizens Civil Law Associations Act No. 83/1990, 1990-03-27. Available online at <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/99932/119583/F-255803203/SVK99932%20Eng.pdf>. Accessed 04 November 2021.
4. Constitution of the Russian Federation [12 December 1993]. Available online at [www.constitution.ru](http://www.constitution.ru). Accessed 12 September 2021.
5. Lower Chamber of the Russian Parliament State Duma. 1997. Federal law 'On freedom of conscience and religious associations' (N125-F3) (*Federalnyi zakon 'O svobode sovesti i o religioznykh obed'ineniakh ot 26 sentiabria 1997'*). Available online at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/11523>. Accessed 12 September 2021.

6. Lower Chamber of the Russian Parliament State Duma. 2002. Federal law 'On countering extremist activities' (N114-F3) (*Federalnyi zakon ot 25.07.2002 'O protivodeistvii ekstremistskoi deiatel'nosti'*). Available online at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/18939>; Lower Chamber of the Russian Parliament State Duma. 2006. Federal law 'On countering terrorism' (N35-F3) (*Federalnyi zakon ot 06.03.2006 'O protivodeistvii terrorizmu'*). Available online at <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/23522>. Both accessed 12 September 2021.
7. The term 'church' used in the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania is to be understood as a generic term synonymous to 'formalised religious hierarchy'.

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