

## THE TURBULENT YEARS OF THE GREEK CATHOLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM AFTER 1989

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### Abstract

The present study focuses on the revival of denominational education in Hungary after the nationalisation of schools in 1948. It focuses on the decisive role played by Act IV of 1990, which created the legal and infrastructural conditions for the independent operation of denominational educational institutions. The law guaranteed freedom of religious belief and assembly, fostering the emergence of a pluralistic society that recognised the role of Churches in education. The analysis explores the relationship between social attitudes towards church schools and the political situation after the change of regime, and also examines the school takeovers in the Greek Catholic Metropolitan Church. Surveys show that the reopening of church schools has received considerable public support, reflecting a nostalgic longing for pre-nationalisation educational values amid dissatisfaction with state education. At the same time, social divisions emerged, with some fearing the re-emergence of religious influence in education and others arguing for a greater role for the churches. The case study on the re-engagement of the Greek Catholic Church in education highlights difficulties such as funding and the need for consensus on educational values among stakeholders. The research draws on interviews with key figures in the Greek Catholic community and relevant literature to illustrate the nuanced dynamics at play during the transition period. Ultimately, this study contributes to our understanding of how historical context, legal frameworks and social attitudes shape contemporary educational policy in Hungary.

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**Keywords:** Greek Catholic education system, denominational education,

**Discipline:** pedagogy

### **Absztrakt**

#### **A GÖRÖGKATOLIKUS OKTATÁSI RENDSZER VIHAROS ÉVEI 1989 UTÁN**

Jelen tanulmány középpontjában a felekezeti oktatás magyarországi újjáéledése áll az iskolák 1948-as államosítását követően. Fókuszba helyezi az 1990. évi IV. törvény meghatározó szerepét, amely jogi és infrastrukturális feltételeket teremtett a felekezeti oktatási intézmények önálló működéséhez. A törvény garantálta a vallási meggyőződés és a gyülekezés szabadságát, elősegítve egy olyan pluralista társadalom kialakulását, amely elismerte az egyházak oktatási szerepvállalását. Az elemzés egyrészt az egyházi iskolákhoz való társadalmi hozzáállás és a rendszerváltás utáni politikai helyzet kapcsolatát tárja fel, másrészt görcső alá helyezi a Görögkatolikus Metropólia iskolaátvételeit. A felmérések szerint az egyházi iskolák újraindítása jelentős támogatást kapott a közvéleményben, ami az államosítás előtti oktatási értékek iránti nosztalgikus vágyakozást tükrözi az állami oktatással való elégedetlenség közepette. Ugyanakkor társadalmi megosztottság alakult ki, egyesek a vallási befolyás újbóli megjelenésétől tartottak az oktatásban, míg mások az egyházak nagyobb szerepvállalása mellett érveltek. A görögkatolikus egyháznak az oktatásba való újbóli bekapcsolódásáról szóló esettanulmány rávilágít olyan nehézségekre, mint a finanszírozás, valamint az oktatási értékekkel kapcsolatos konszenzus szükségességére az érdekelt felek között. A kutatás a görögkatolikus közösség kulcsfiguráival készített interjúkra és a vonatkozó szakirodalomra támaszkodik, hogy bemutassa az átmeneti időszak során játszódnak árnyalt dinamikát. Végül soron ez a vizsgálat hozzájárul annak megértéséhez, hogy a történelmi kontextus, a jogi keretek és a társadalmi attitűdök hogyan alakítják a kortárs magyarországi oktatáspolitikát.

**Kulcsszavak:** Görögkatolikus oktatási rendszer, felekezeti oktatás

**Diszciplína:** neveléstudomány

According to Pusztai's (2004: 92) approach, two basic conditions had to be fulfilled in order for denominational education to be restarted in Hungary after the nationalisation of 1948. First, individual freedoms had to be extended, and second, the legal and infrastructural conditions necessary for the operation of schools had to be created. Act IV of 1990 guaranteed freedom of religious belief and conscience, freedom of religious assembly and association. It allowed the state and the church to operate separately in Hungary. Finally, it guaranteed the conditions for the free exercise of religious life without discrimination and counted on the moral education, cultural, educational and social activities of the churches (Fedor, 1995: 42). Several studies have

interpreted this law and its impact on the Hungarian education system for decades to come (Nagy, 1995; Halász, 1992; Korzenszky, 1997; Kozma, 2005; Szigeti, 1992; Tomka 1992).

Soon after the introduction of this law, it became clear that the transition from a party-state system, which strived for unity, to a pluralist society necessarily implied a redistribution of resources and the tensions this entailed between different social groups (Tomka, 1992: 14). In any case, we must see that the churches have had to face a completely new situation. In a very short period of time they had to prepare themselves for a completely new type of task.

Part of the contemporary literature interprets the resurgence of church schools as a new actor

entering the educational policy arena, and registers that the regime-changing government does not consider it unlikely that church schools will run 20% of Hungarian public education (Nagy, 1995: 302). The sociological approach to religion has emphasized social needs, and Szigeti, for example (1992b: 5), points out that after the regime change 18% of the population is strongly religious and another quarter or so is more weakly religious but attached to the church. Thus, he predicted that the number of schools returned in the first round would certainly not exceed the weight of churches in society. A balance had to be struck that was acceptable to all.

Overall, openness was reflected in this attitude of the Hungarian population, but Szigeti (1992b: 5) argues that two opposing positions existed in Hungarian society after the 1990 law on freedom of conscience and religion. One fears the introduction of a new Christian course, while the other emphasises the oppression of the religious. Between these two extreme positions, the churches had to find a middle ground.

Data from a survey conducted by the Hungarian Public Opinion Research in 1991 showed that 79.4% of the population believed that the reopening of church schools would benefit the Hungarian education system, and 63.7% of society believed that church institutions would benefit society as a whole (Tomka, 2005: 494). According to Tomka, these statistics presumably reflect the tangible values of the ten remaining denominational schools, a nostalgic recollection of the past, and a spirit of dissatisfaction with state education (Tomka, 1992: 494). All this took place in a social climate where about two thirds of people (67.5%) said they were religious, but only 19.1% were religious in the way the church taught, and 48.4% were religious in their own way. Halász (1992: 69) confirms that the vast majority of people accept that the educational role of the church is increasing, but only if this does not pose a threat to

freedom of ideology. Where there were several schools in a settlement, 80.5% accepted the return of the school to the church, but in single-school settlements this was unacceptable to most people. This issue is also important because it is vital in the pedagogical concept of church schools that there is consensus between parents and faculty on the core educational values. According to Szigeti (1992b: 6), the background to the debate on the return of church schools is the identity crisis that is emerging in society as a whole. The mindset of dictatorships was characterised by a constant search for enemies. In a part of Hungarian society, which had just experienced the regime change, this kind of interpretation was still very much alive, and the new school was seen as an 'anti-school'.

The restitution of church schools began under the then Minister of Culture, Ferenc Glatz, who declared after the opening of the Evangelical High School in Fasor in 1989 that the restitution of church property was in the national interest (Nagy, 1995: 293).

The Greek Catholic Church was also integrated alongside other denominational schools in the newly emerging pluralist education system, where the state's role was to ensure that larger school owners did not encroach on the living space of smaller ones (Tomka, 1992: 20). They were afraid of their own former position. Until 1948, the Greek Catholic Church maintained 143 schools in Hungary.

### **The circumstances of the first school takeover**

The next stage in the Greek Catholic Church's search for a new path was the situation that arose after the 1990 Act IV. Was it even worth taking up the role of school governor again, when there were no specially trained ecclesiastical and secular people available? A very important further question was: if the Greek Catholic Church were to take on the role of maintainer, how 'Greek Catholic' would

the institution taken over be if it were a public education funded by the state?

We will draw on the material of a personal interview with County Bishop Szilárd Keresztes, who was the County Bishop of the Diocese of Hajdúdorog between 1988 and 2007.

Several alternatives were considered for the location of the first Greek Catholic school founded after the regime change. Fathers belonging to the Order of St Basil the Great proposed the monastery garden in Máriapócs as the site for the new secondary school. In their opinion, it would have led to the further development of the shrine. Many of the priests argued in favour of Nyíregyháza because of its good accessibility. Dr. Miklós Kocsis, the then president of the City Council, proposed to the Bishop of Hajdúdorog on 1 March 1989, at the inauguration ceremony of Hajdúdorog, that the Greek Catholic school should be reopened, as there was no other way to have a secondary school in the city. Running a state school near Debrecen and Hajdúnánás would hardly have been successful. After the news got out, the Nyíradony administration offered a dormitory building if the new Greek Catholic secondary school would be located there. In the end, the decision was made in favour of Hajdúdorog for the following reasons: there was already a secondary school there, the town's history was closely linked to that of the Greek Catholic Church and, as a result, it had suffered many disadvantages in the decades before '89.

The Bishop also considered the educational conditions to be more favourable, the small town atmosphere provided greater security, and the possibility of a more personal atmosphere and cooperation between the students seemed to emerge. The Hajdúdorog City Council and the Hajdú-Bihar County Council supported the establishment of the gymnasium, but as the establishment of a secondary school would take

longer, they suggested that the primary school be taken over first.

The archbishop of Hajdúdorog approached the Minister of Culture, Ferenc Glatz, who approved this without legal authorisation. In a later meeting, he recalled that he was very proud of two things, the Budapest-Fasor Evangelical High School and the enabling of the Greek Catholic primary school in Hajdúdorog.

Thus, the school in Dorog became the first denominational primary school of the Greek Catholic Church after the change of regime. According to Szilárd Keresztes, after the school takeover, the teachers' concerns caused great difficulties, despite the promise from the Church that the entire teaching staff and the headmaster would remain in place and that there would be no special religious requirements for them, only acceptance of the fact that the school would operate in a Catholic spirit. School transfers from the point of view of the municipalities, diocesan administrators and education officers. We use interview material with the top leaders of the three Greek Catholic dioceses, the education referents and the leaders of the Archdiocese of Hajdúdorog.

Szigeti (1992b: 8) points out that the restitution of the schools was accompanied by considerable conflict. On the one hand, because the 1990 law provides for the possibility of returning the old schools, ignoring the geo-graphical mobility of the Greek Catholic population over 40 years, the mass migration to cities, although the ecclesiastical school issue cannot be considered without taking into account the religious-ecological and educational-ecological perspectives.

There was also a further conflict in relation to the fact that, although the law on restitution of property applied to schools that had once existed, the churches' aim was not to restore the old school network of 40 years ago, but to create a completely new network of educational institutions. In the

case of the Greek Catholic Church, returning to the situation before nationalisation would have meant taking back 143 schools. Some of them would have had to be reopened in villages that are now completely depopulated, with virtually no pupils or very few pupils.

Another difficulty was the issue of funding. The law on the possibility of pluralising school funding was passed without the issue of school funding being regulated. The development of state-level funding of Greek Catholic schools is not different from the financing of Catholic educational institutions, on which a number of studies have been published (Balogh, 1997; Dobszay, 2005; Fedor, 1995; Ravasz-Galik, 2002).

Finally, the fact that the schools were maintained by the municipalities, which had to be negotiated in the case of a school takeover, also posed a difficulty. The question of the continued operation of a school was often 'negotiated'. Similar experiences were also reported by Philip Kocsis in an interview with him, but he confirmed that the takeover of a school was always a free choice for the Greek Catholic Church. According to Györgyi (2011), the transformation of the education system was fraught with uncertainty, but there were local supporters who saw in the church presence the hope of a more stable operation after a difficult funding period (Györgyi, 2011: 21). The pluralist nature of education was also reinforced by the emergence of private schools, which, like church schools, appeared as an alternative to the municipally maintained schools.

Hermann and Varga (2016: 313) point out that between 2001 and 2009, the number of parochial and private schools increased almost equally (by 23 and 25%, respectively). However, between 2010 and 2014, the number of foundation schools decreased by 20%, while the number of students in parochial schools increased by 68%.

Each Church has a unique and specific history with the school network it maintains. In fact,

Pusztai (2014: 53), citing empirical evidence, points out that school enrolments show a specific pattern, mainly in terms of area. According to him, differences between regions are more significant than differences between denominations. We also consider the considerations related to the regional, municipal and intra-municipal environment of the school, i.e. the educational-ecological approach, as an important analytical aspect, since the Greek Catholic institutional network, even before nationalisation but even more so in the 21st century, is predominantly linked to the North-Eastern region of the country, whose student population is not comparable to that of other regions of the country.

After the reign of Szilárd Keresztes (1988-2007), the current Archbishop-Metropolitan Philip Kocsis, and from 2011, the current Bishop of Miskolc, Atanáz Orosz, and the Apostolic Governor Ábel Szocska, are responsible for the development of the current Greek Catholic school network. For all three of these leaders, the need to help disadvantaged students to catch up is a priority. The role of religiosity in promoting social inclusion and empowering those who emerge from a disadvantaged socio-economic status has also been highlighted by previous Hungarian research, including Pusztai and Torkos (2001: 587), Pusztai (2004: 27), Gereben and Lukács (2013), Kardos (2014: 57), Jenei and Kerülő (2016: 320). Statistical evidence shows that the Greek Catholic Church is particularly effective in reaching out to Roma communities (Bartl 2014: 360).

The present research used interviews to reconstruct the intentions of further maintainers regarding the establishment of the current school network. According to the Archbishop-Metropolitan's concept of network development, two aspects are cardinal when deciding on a school take-over: on the one hand, a school can be taken over if, based on preliminary assessments, there is a strong hope that the institution can be 'improved'

by the ecclesial presence, and on the other hand, if there is a significant Catholic presence in the locality.

Nyírácsád is an ideal example, with a large majority of Greek Catholics (70%), and 0.02% of those surveyed when the school was taken over were opposed to a change of provider. According to the Nyíregyháza education officer, school transfers are also a strategic decision: the diocesan leadership has always considered it important to have an educational and a social institution in each district for the Greek-Catholic faithful in the area. In his opinion, the most complicated and emotive school takeover was that of the Bányai Júlia Primary School in Debrecen.

In the Diocese of Miskolc, the most important criteria for the takeover of an educational institution, according to the education officer, are: the number of Greek Catholics living in the area of the school, the presence of an existing school, the existence and attractiveness of other church schools, the condition of the school and the predictability of its operation, and finally the vote of parents and teachers.

The education officer stresses that the diocese will not take over an educational establishment if the following criteria are met: lack of priests, the presence of several reputable church schools in the vicinity, the opposition of parents and teachers, or if the school is heavily subsidised. So the representatives of the maintainers consider it important to take over the maintenance of an institution only if there is no serious opposition from parents and teachers.

The Bishop of the Diocese of Miskolc emphasised in the interview that a school takeover requires the unanimous support of the diocesan Education and Training Committee, the Economic Council and the Consultative Board (Personal interview 2016c). He stresses that the significant increase in the number of disadvantaged students in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County determines the

diocese's educational strategy and school takeovers.

The education officer of the Archdiocese of Hajdúdorog mentioned serious difficulties in the case of the St Thomas the Greek Catholic Nursery and Primary School in Szolnok, referring to the head of the institution. The city of Szolnok approached the diocesan administration because the school had become a segregated institution.

The proportion of disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged pupils was extremely high compared to the proportion of schools in the city, and the number of Roma/Gypsy pupils was very high. In order not to close the school and not to disperse these children in the city schools, they approached the then Bishop Philip Kocsis.

According to the head of the institution: "*... there was a lot of uncertainty and fear among parents and children (e.g. will priests teach?), which the head of the institution at the time dispelled in the parents and children. There was almost 1 year of preparation, which was very flexible. In total, about 30 children were transferred to another institution. The parents expected that the previous discipline and behaviour problems would disappear, they expected that the unruly, very problematic children would be removed from the school. The city was not a partner in this, so there was no change in this area.*"

In the Diocese of Nyíregyháza, the education officer said that they are striving to have at least one Greek Catholic educational institution for their parishioners in every district of the diocese. At present, there is not yet a Greek Catholic school in every diocesan district.

In summary, school transfers in the three dioceses of the Greek Catholic Metropolitan Church are taking place independently of each other, yet their patterns, structures and motivations behind school transfers are very similar.

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