

Covid in Cartoons

(<https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons>)

Bringing together an interdisciplinary team of researchers at the University of Leicester and external partners Shout Out UK and Cartooning for Peace to collaborate on a UKRI COVID-19 rapid response grant (2021-2022).

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Posted by fl47 (https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons/author/fransiska_louwagie/) in Covid in Cartoons (<https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons>) on January 14, 2022 (Friday, January 14th, 2022, 9:09 pm)

On 27 April 2020, during the first wave of the coronavirus I drew a cartoon about Cecília Müller (illustration 1), the chief medical officer of Hungary and member of the Government's "Coronavirus Task Force". In this cartoon, she is looking at a crucifix saying:

Alapbetegsége Függőséget okozott – "His underlying condition caused addiction".

Illustration 1 – (c) Gabor Papai (Hungary) – Cartooning for Peace

In Hungarian the word "**függőség**" means addiction and comes from the word's root "**függ**" which means both hanging and depending.

The cartoon was a reference to a prior statement by Cecilia Müller's which minimised the impact of the virus by stating that deceased victims were "predisposed" to die due to pre-existing pathologies.

Cecilia Müller is not only a doctor but also a Catholic secular pastor. A few days after the publication, the smaller ruling Christian Democratic People's Party and the media of the government provoked a huge uproar, stigmatizing my caricature as anti-Christian. A "Christian defender" portal launched a petition against the cartoon and the "left-wing media". Several pro-government politicians promised to sue.

In Hungary the situation of the media is particular: its democratic institutions still remain, but the government has ousted the “unfaithful” people, and expropriated most of the media. So if they mark someone as an enemy, a complete storm descends upon them.

The televisions, radios, newspapers and portals all roared that I insulted every Christian. The wave of threats and abuses ran through social media, too. There was a radio who turned to its listeners with a call saying that if someone knew my address, they should send it in, because I am “wanted” by some people. There definitely was a paramilitary organisation offering to take on the mission but no physical violence took place.

In early June another cartoon of mine attracted attention, this time for being anti-Hungarian and hurting the feelings of nationalist Hungarians. I drew this cartoon for the centenary of the Trianon Treaty. This treaty is an aching memory for the nationalist Hungarians. It was signed between Hungary and the victorious First World War Allies on June 4, 1920. The terms of the Treaty shorn the country of at least two thirds of its territory and the population living in those lands. This Treaty was a trauma for a part of the Hungarian population, and sowed the seeds of resentment and ethnic warfare. Revisionist and nationalist policies won the country over, dragged it into a tragic war and poisoned peaceful relations with neighbouring countries for a hundred years.

Illustration 2 – (c) Gabor Papai (Hungary) – Cartooning for Peace

Upon the publication of the cartoon (illustration 2), a Christian Democrat politician threatened my newspaper, Népszava, by comparing it to the daily newspaper Népszabadság, which was shut down by the government in 2016. He said: “Népszabadság made a joke and was shut down, Népszava’s is going the same way. During the next few days I was targeted by a new coordinated media fire, however its effect was much smaller and it died out soon. It seems that in “anti-nationality” there is not as much mobilizing force as in “blasphemy”.

The story could have ended here, but in November the cartoonists of the biggest Hungarian journalist organisation (MÚOSZ) awarded my “anti-Christian” cartoon as the caricature of the year 2020. So in December a new attack ran through the government’s propaganda machinery. Similar in level to the one during the spring. The target this time was not only me, but the organisation of the journalists, too.

In January 2021 it turned out that another Christian Democrat leader Imre Veky, the chairman of the parliamentary committee on justice, managed to have the court discuss my “anti-Christian” cartoon. I got to know about it only after the trial, because Mr Veky’s losing his case started a new press campaign. This campaign also targeted the “liberal” courts: they were an easy target not only because of the support of the government’s media

but also because a judge is not to make statements about their own cases. However in this case the court itself made a press release correcting the disinformation made by Mr Veky about the verdict. But Mr Veky didn’t settle with it, he visited the leaders of the Hungarian churches and made them sign a statement condemning blasphemy. From historical and neoprotestant Christian churches, through Jewish organizations, till Muslim churches were amongst those who signed this statement. So Mr Veky with this joint statement in his hand could now declare to the press with self-confidence that my cartoon is not funny, as argued by the court, but that it is definitely insulting to all the churches. However, he remained silent about the fact that the statement for which he gathered signatures didn’t actually name the cartoon in question, so there were religious leaders not even knowing for what purpose their signatures were to be used.



In another case against my colleague Árpád Tóta W., a court ruled that insulting comments about “the Hungarians” were a violation of his pursuers’ rights. This ruling means that anyone in the community can now launch a lawsuit for not liking an opinion. Mr Tóta can be sued by “Hungarians”, as I can be by

“Christians”. With success. With already very few institutions remaining independent in Hungary, the government hence also liquidates the independence of the courts. The longer the lawsuit, the worse our chances. Time doesn’t work in our favour.

Népszava, my newspaper, is the only remaining oppositional daily newspaper, with the largest number of copies. Whilst its publisher is under the influence of the economic position of the government in the Hungarian media market the journal editorial is independent, but as depressing as the government’s media predominance is, independent speakers interfere with the propaganda of power. Only if none of us remain, then it can be said from Orwell’s 1984 novel²: “Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth.”

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