

Hungarian churches divided over new religion law

by [Jonathan Luxmoore](#)

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Warsaw, Poland, July 15 (ENInews)--Christian leaders in Hungary have given mixed reactions to a restrictive new law on religion, with larger denominations welcoming its curbs on church activities and smaller groups voicing fears for their future.

"We wanted a new law to make it more difficult to establish churches here - and we're happy the present government has now done something," said Zoltan Tarr, general secretary of the Hungarian Reformed Church, which claims around a fifth of the country's 9.9 million inhabitants as members.

"We're very much for freedom of worship and believe everyone should have the right to practice their religion. But this law represents a positive step, since it excludes quite a few communities here which don't legitimately qualify as churches.

The Calvinist pastor was speaking after the 12 July enactment of the "Law on the Right to Freedom of Conscience and Religion, and on Churches, Religions and Religious Communities," with backing from Hungary's governing centre-right Fidesz party.

In an ENInews interview, he said the country's existing 1990 Act on Churches had been "too liberal," adding that all religious communities had been given a chance to study the new law before its submission to Hungary's National Assembly.

However, this was denied by a leader of Hungary's smaller Church of God, who said the law's final text had been "very different" than the version shown to faith groups during a May consultation. "I don't think anyone will come and tell us we can't worship God," said Laszlo Debreceni, whose church

claims to have been in Hungary since 1907 but was stripped of recognition under the new law. "But it will raise serious issues that some churches are now on the approved list and others not."

Under the law, only 14 of 358 registered churches and religious associations will be granted legal recognition, while others will have to reapply for registration by a court after two-thirds approval in parliament.

Politics.hu, a website covering political issues in Hungary, said religious groups will have to meet seven criteria for recognition, including at least 1000 members and a 20-year presence in Hungary, adding that the Hungarian Methodist church and Islamic community were among those stripped of their previous legal status.

The law, introduced in June, was amended just before gaining final parliamentary approval by 254 votes to 43, and recognises Hungary's predominant Reformed, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Orthodox churches, as well as the Jewish community.

Bishop Imre Sibi, the Lutheran chairman of Hungary's Ecumenical Council of Churches, which groups 10 denominations and 18 associated associations, told ENInews that he accepts the new law.

However, the president of the Hungarian Unitarian Church, Botond Elekes, said he was disappointed his church had been denied recognition as a "historic religion."

"We were founded during the Reformation and we consider ourselves the only native Hungarian denomination, so we certainly have a historic background here," Elekes told ENInews.

The law was condemned as a "serious setback for religious freedom in Hungary" in a petition to parliament by Hungary's Civil Liberties Union and Helsinki Committee, co-signed by Human Rights Without Frontiers, the Southern Baptist Convention and other organizations.

Meanwhile, in a 12 July statement, the U.S.-based Institute on Religion and Public Policy said the law recalled "the Soviet past" and violated

"fundamental international human rights law," and should be viewed as "a danger to all Hungarian society and a terrible indication of the state of democracy in the country."

Debreceni said smaller churches would lose resources and be "handled very differently" at local government level, adding that he regretted that only the Hungarian Baptist Church had shown any "clear concern" for the fate of de-registered communities.

"Most Christian churches may eventually be accepted again - so this may not be an issue of religious freedom in the long term," the Church of God pastor told ENInews. "But it's a step back for human rights in the short term, since it means one political party, with its governing majority, will decide who can be a church and who can't." Premier Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party holds 227 places in the 386-seat Hungarian parliament.