

The Anti-Orbán Pride: An Election Prelude

Article by Kata Benedek

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The Hungarian government's decision to ban Budapest Pride sparked outrage and solidarity in Hungary and in the rest of Europe. After the city's Green mayor found a loophole in the law, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Budapest. The event's huge success was a setback for Viktor Orbán's illiberal government, whose party is trailing in the polls. However, the road to next year's general election is still long, and LGBTQ+ issues could once again be instrumentalised for political gain.

In his annual address in February, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said: "My advice to the Pride organisers is not to bother preparing for this year's parade. It's a waste of money and time! It won't be happening again." In March, his government banned the Budapest Pride. Yet on 28 June, the 30th Budapest Pride march took place, drawing an estimated 250,000-450,000 people into the streets.

These events could signal that something significant has changed in Hungary in terms of LGBTQ+ rights or visibility. In reality, however, the massive success of the Pride was the result of a strategic mistake on the part of Orbán's government. What happened in Budapest was the first act of the campaign for next year's elections.

The Pride ban

Less than a month after Orbán's speech, the Hungarian parliament passed a three-section amendment to the law on assembly, introducing a separate provision requiring compliance with the 2021 Child Protection Act – commonly known as the homophobe law.

The first section of the amendment states: "In Hungary, only assemblies that respect the right of children to proper physical, mental and moral development may be held, and therefore any assembly that violates the prohibition set out in the Child Protection Act is prohibited." The second adds that persons participating in such prohibited events commit an offence. The third empowers the police to use AI-driven facial recognition software to identify offenders.

The Child Protection Act allegedly aimed to protect minors from exposure to "LGBTQ+ propaganda" in the context of sexual education and broader representation in education, media, and advertising. However, the law never defined what constitutes "propaganda", neither in terms of content nor form. All attempts to fine cultural products deemed to "promote homosexuality" for underage audiences failed in court. Therefore, it was unclear from the beginning what aspects of Pride are affected by the law.

Avoiding even the appearance of analytical or legal argumentation in support of its actions, Fidesz (Orbán's political party) fuelled the discourse surrounding Pride with condescending mockery. In line with established communication strategies, government officials repeatedly claimed that Hungary upholds equality before the law. Bence Tuzson, the minister of justice, denied that Pride had been banned at all. He argued that it was simply not possible to guarantee the safety of children along a public route, and suggested that Pride be held at a closed venue. He proposed one of Budapest's horse

racing tracks, where the march could circle unbothered for as long as wanted.

The law, coupled with dehumanising rhetoric, sparked outrage both domestically and abroad. Critics accused Orbán of further dismantling democratic principles and fundamental rights by restricting freedom of assembly and expression, and denying human dignity to members of sexual minorities. AI-powered facial recognition also raised serious concerns: the practice conflicts with EU principles, and the European Commission is now examining whether the law complies with the EU AI Act and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Furthermore, Orbán's critics questioned the proportionality of deploying heavy surveillance technologies in response to minor offences. Given the vagueness of the law's wording, the government is now in a position to apply it against any movement it deems undesirable, intimidating civil society as a whole.

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A legal loophole

Based on the amendment to the assembly law, the police repeatedly refused to grant the Pride organisers permission to hold the annual march. The organisers did not appeal the final rejection, so the decision became legally binding. However, around the same time, Gergely Karácsony, the independent Green mayor of Budapest since 2019, announced that, in collaboration with the Pride organisers, the city would launch the event of *Budapesti Büszkeség* (which literally translates as “Budapest Pride”), reviving a long-lost tradition of celebrating the city's freedom after the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

The government and the police repeatedly warned the mayor that the event had not been granted permission. Four days before the march, Justice Minister Tuzson threatened Karácsony and his co-organisers with a prison sentence, and the participants with fines. The mayor, however, stood by another section of the law: municipal events do not need police permission.

While the capital eventually supported the Pride, it did not fund it. Pride events, including the march, were organised and executed by volunteers. The team relied on the support of just a handful of corporate sponsors, none of whom were visible during the March. The parade was accompanied by vehicles from four opposition parties (the satirical Two Tailed-Dog Party, the social-liberal Democratic Coalition, the centrist Momentum, and the Hungarian Socialist Party), two music bands, five civil associations, and the Gen Z media outlet Refresher.hu. The budget for the march, including everything from advertising to technical support, was approximately 25,000 euros.

In this context, the mayor's support alone does not explain the record turnout. In 2024, the same event attracted 35,000 people, while this year, even the more conservative estimates put the number of participants at over 200,000, with the more optimistic ones suggesting it could have been twice that.

A wedge issue

Fidesz's increased focus on LGBTQ+ issues starting from the late 2010s was not the result of an ideological leap, but the calculated choice of a wedge issue to split society. In the government's binary framing, the opposition is an aggressive troublemaker, foreign-serving, family-destroying, gay-loving,

deviant, treacherous minority, while Orbán's camp is cast as the peaceful, law-abiding, heterosexual, pro-family, national-conservative, normative (and normal) majority.

While Orbán, in different contexts, creatively argues that the majority is standing with him on LGBTQ+ matters, the issues related to LGBTQ+ rights are not among the main concerns of Hungarians, and many do not have an articulated opinion on them. The government's moral panic campaigns mimic American culture wars in a context where society has no lived experience with these issues or debates. Hungary has never discussed or implemented self-identification laws, gender clinics do not exist in the country, gender-affirming hormone therapy is not accessible to minors, and there is no controversy over pronouns, as the Hungarian language has no grammatical gender. There have been no reported cases of drag events in children's spaces or teachers deviating from sex education guidelines. While some might find vocal LGBTQ+ activism overbearing, in Hungary public advocacy is practically absent, as the government has appropriated the majority of the national media, monopolising and oversimplifying any theme it deemed politically useful.

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In this strategy, it does not matter whether the Child Protection Act is valid, logical, or even enforceable. What matters is the government's ability to raise and frame the issue it has artificially created – the scarecrow of LGBTQ+ propaganda – as and when the opportunity arises. This was most evident in the so-called "Child Protection Referendum" of 2022, which included leading questions such as, "Do you support the promotion of gender reassignment treatments to minors?" despite such practices not existing in Hungary. The referendum failed due to low turnout and a high number of invalid ballots submitted in protest against the vote, but it successfully mobilised and unified Fidesz's base on the topic.

Recent polling data seem to confirm the 2022 picture. A June 2025 poll by the independent Publicus Institute found that a narrow majority of Hungarians did not support Pride (48 per cent, against 45 per cent who do). However, an earlier poll from March suggested that 56 per cent opposed the ban on Pride, while only 33 per cent supported it. In both polls, the majority of Fidesz voters stood with Orbán: 88 per cent did not support Pride, while 75 per cent agreed with the ban. Among voters of all other opposition parties – except the far-right Mi Hazánk – over 80 per cent supported the rights of sexual minorities on both questions.

The March survey also found that 42 per cent thought banning Pride was a distraction strategy, and 26 per cent felt that Fidesz wanted to strengthen its camp by targeting a social group that is unpopular among its supporters. Only 20 per cent believed banning Pride was an effort to protect children, which suggests that a significant portion of pro-Orbán voters supported the government's decisions out of loyalty rather than conviction.

Orbán has successfully tied LGBTQ+ issues to party identification. However, public support for Pride has remained steady, attracting between 20,000 and 35,000 participants annually in recent years. The government likely expected that legal obstacles would drastically reduce turnout in 2025, allowing Fidesz to show its dominance. By focusing on the expected presence and support of opposition and foreign politicians for the parade, Orbán also aimed to reinforce his propaganda portraying the "LGBTQ+ lobby" as a radical, anti-sovereignist, and now law-breaking minority that disregards the will of the Hungarian

national majority and its democratically elected leaders.

Orbán's miscalculations

However, the government's strategy did not work out as planned. There is complete agreement in Hungarian public discourse that the real purpose of the ban was not to ensure adherence to Fidesz's ideology, but to dent the popularity of the Tisza Party – currently the most popular force among Hungarian voters – less than one year before the 2026 parliamentary elections. Led by former Fidesz member Péter Magyar, Tisza (a member of the centre-right European People's Party) has for months consistently polled above Fidesz by 10-15 percentage points. As Tisza's base is very diverse, ranging from left-liberals to centrists and conservatives who are dissatisfied with Fidesz and its corruption scandals, taking a stand on the Pride could have alienated part of it. Yet Tisza recognised the trap and refused to take a position, sticking to issues that concern voters, such as the country's economic struggles, infrastructural collapse, and governmental impotence.

This tactic proved effective: Tisza has continued to grow stronger in the polls. If anything, the obvious, hypocritical opportunism of the government's desperate attempt to corner Tisza further angered its critics. Most Hungarians agree that the dire state of education infrastructure and the health and social care crises have a far greater impact on children's wellbeing than Pride. It was also not long ago that the president of Fidesz and the minister of justice resigned over a pardon scandal involving a man convicted of covering up the sexual abuse of children. More recently, the story of a government-appointed and decorated director of a child protection service forcing young girls in his care into prostitution for years has caused public outrage. The list could go on.

In the end, the government's calculated strategy and months-long condescending campaign of aggressive, threatening, and dehumanising rhetoric backfired. The artificial dichotomy created by Fidesz on LGBTQ+ issues has effectively turned attacks on minorities into attacks on the broader opposition voter base.

When Budapest's mayor found a legal loophole allowing Pride to take place, it not only created a space for solidarity but, more importantly, an opportunity to demonstrate political power. The government's logic was flipped. While Fidesz sought to stigmatise the opposition by associating it with Pride, the critical mass reframed the narrative: those who came out to support Pride were, above all, showing their defiance of the government.

This year's Pride was not only about sexual minorities, but about all those who want Orbán gone. It was the largest anti-government demonstration in recent years.

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The aftermath of a losing battle

While the opposition celebrated in euphoria, the government's communication briefly fell into crisis in the aftermath of Pride. The strategy of aggressive, fear-mongering rhetoric designed to demonstrate strong leadership suddenly collapsed, and months of political investment went up in smoke. The presence of opposition politicians in the crowd – both foreign and domestic – was not at all prominent during the events, and Tisza's absence from the streets offered the government no occasion to accuse the party of

“LGBTQ+ propaganda”. The mass attendance also made it impossible for Fidesz to frame Pride participants as an unhinged, marginal minority.

The day after, Viktor Orbán addressed the events in a closed group with members of his “online army”, the *Fight Club*. “The order was issued in Brussels: there must be a Pride parade in Budapest. Their puppet politicians carried it out. This shows what life would be like if our country were not led by a national government that defends our sovereignty,” he wrote. A bizarre comment in a context where the sovereignist Fidesz party has been in power with absolute authority for 15 years.

After the initial disorientation, the party ranks quickly realigned within days. Fidesz politicians began to diminish the significance of the event – and thus their strategic and moral failure – and distanced themselves from the consequences. Government spokesperson Gergely Gulyás reiterated the message about equality in front of the law, and claimed that Pride was “more restrained” than in previous years, citing this as proof that the Child Protection Law is working. Both he and Orbán framed the possibility of legal consequences for Pride participants not as a political matter, but one of police jurisdiction – effectively shifting all responsibility onto law enforcement with a single sentence.

This swift political retreat is understandable given the unpredictable legal ramifications and their public consequences. The police did deploy surveillance technology capable of facial recognition, but even with this equipment it wouldn’t be able to identify every individual in a crowd of over 200,000 people. Based on current procedural protocols, processing that volume of footage would take an estimated 500 years. Moreover, the use of AI software for mass surveillance is not only potentially incompatible with EU law, but may also violate provisions of Hungarian law. If only a subset of attendees were to be fined, this could be considered discriminatory. There is also uncertainty as to whether anyone can be fined at all, given that the police did not disperse or instruct the crowd to disband – a legal point spokesperson Gulyás himself implied to agree with.

It was therefore unsurprising that on 7 July, the police announced that no action would be taken against the participants. They argued that, in the ambiguous informational context created by the mayor, the participants were not in a position to determine whether their attendance was illegal.

It is not clear yet what will happen to the main organisers, including the mayor himself. Should the police proceed with legal action, it would likely result in lengthy and complex proceedings. The authorities would need to prove that the event, which did not require an official permit, was illegal. This would entail demonstrating that the Pride violated the Child Protection Act – something no one has yet managed to prove in this or any other case.

Presumably, there will only be legal consequences for organising Pride if the government can find a formula to turn a losing battle into a political strategy for next year’s election campaign. What is certain is that, once again, such a strategy would have nothing to do with the welfare of children or the social position of sexual minorities.



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