



**RESIST**

Fostering Queer Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

# The RESIST project: Hungarian Case Study Findings



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## **Hungarian Case Study Findings**

### **Introduction**

The Hungarian government's anti-gender politics has attracted significant political and academic attention in recent years. Although the right-wing conservative Fidesz party has been in power since 2010, the intensification of anti-gender politics is frequently dated to the party and government's opposition to the Istanbul Convention, and the de-accreditation of Gender Studies MA programs, in 2017 (Kováts 2019). This intensification of anti-gender discourse was a conscious and strategic instrumentalization of the topic by Fidesz, aimed at strengthening its political position (Kováts/Pető 2017). Most recently, the Hungarian government passed several restrictive laws in the realm of gender equality. In December 2020, it banned the adoption of children by same-sex couples, and in March 2020 it sought to limit transgender rights by banning legal gender reassignment. In June 2021, the controversial Child Protection Law came into force, prohibiting the "exposure of minors" to LGBTIQ-related content. Government-organised and far-right media regularly publish content on anti-gender topics in an attempt to shape public perception of gender-related issues and manufacture moral panic. This data mapping report contributes to expanding the existing knowledge on anti-gender mobilisation in Hungary by mapping the current state of anti-gender discourses in Hungarian parliamentary, media and public discourses.

### **Hungarian Parliament Findings**

The first segment of the Hungarian case-study focused on the analysis of 25 debates obtained from the records of the Hungarian Parliamentary library (2017-2023). The debates were chosen based on the presence of diverse gender and sexuality related topics. Following are the key findings which emerged from this analysis.

- Given the established importance of anti-gender discourses in Hungarian politics over the last six to seven years, the presence and importance of anti-gender mobilisation in parliament is surprisingly limited. For example, despite the importance of anti-trans and homophobic messaging to the Orbán government (Patakfalvi, 2022) – which is also continuously reproduced in pro-government media - only one debate advanced the anti-trans debate, and a further two featured data relevant to the category 'debating trans lives'. This finding is even more striking in

light of the significant legislative changes which were enacted during this period, including the bill prohibiting the legal recognition of transgender people in Hungary, and the legislation preventing adoption by unmarried or non-heterosexual couples and single people. The prevailing balance of power in Hungarian politics offers an explanation to this finding. Since Fidesz-KDNP has a two-thirds majority in parliament, there is a lack of lengthy and engaged debates on the issues at stake, such that parliamentary debate with the opposition is merely formal. (Wilkin 2018, Szelényi 2023).

- The data reveals rhetorical strategies that combine established forms of anti-gender propaganda with novel, opportunist and sensationalist arguments advanced by anti-gender actors in the Hungarian parliament. Whereas their well-established arguments are based on conservative ideas about gender and family, and their relation to the nation (Fodor 2022), the novel or sensationalist arguments tend to capitalise on newly emerging anti-gender narratives circulating in transnational discourse. These include fear mongering about “transgender kids in the West”, sex education and the “perversion” of kids, or the threat of paedophilia. For example, the independent MP János Volner, previously of the far-right party Jobbik, stated, in the context of the debate on tougher action against paedophile offenders and amending certain laws to protect children, that: “In the United States, for example, a Democratic senator has proposed to the US Congress that paedophilia should be considered a disease and not a crime, because these are people who are attracted to children and their activities should not in fact be criminalised”.
- It is a consistent feature of anti-gender discourse in this corpus that those advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights are cast by the government as ‘a danger to society’ because they promote particular policies and discourses. They are regularly held to threaten children, heteronormative families and the values of the nation through indoctrination. This is particularly evident in considerations of the Child Protection Law, which came into force in 2022, thereby introducing measures aimed at protecting children from content that authorities deemed to be promoting homosexuality or gender reassignment. This law stirred up significant public debate both nationally and transnationally. Given the importance of civic activism in opposing the law, the data shows a significant effort to delegitimise civil society in parliamentary debates. János Volner, for instance, stated that: “Prime Minister! Do you not find it absurd that social organisations which help liberal politics to gain ground by any means possible receive more foreign support than all the parties in Hungary which receive the most state support?” (Debate title: Do organisations influence public life in Hungary, Prime Minister?, 2020)
- LGBTIQ+ and transgender individuals and activists are delegitimised through a purposeful conflation of issues and arguments. Hungarian conservative MPs frequently conflate LGBTIQ+ issues with the topic of paedophilia. This is both a

general conflation aimed at denigrating LGBTIQ+ people, and also a key way of attacking activism. This same conflation is reproduced by different political parties. For example, László Horváth of Fidesz stated the following in the context of the general debate on the draft on Hungary's 2024 central budget: "Here in the context of violence we continue to take a zero-tolerance position, violence of any kind, physical, psychological, emotional or whether it's paedophilia, whether it's transgenderism, whether it's gender or even LGBTQ propaganda." Similarly, the independent MP János Volner, previously of the far-right party Jobbik, argued that "If there is a political tendency that can protect paedophilia, it is undoubtedly on the left". The same MP also added: "I would like to remind you that the LGBTQ movement has been embroiled in similar scandals on more than one occasion, and that it has been the case that people have been allowed to speak and make demands in public who have not only made demands on behalf of homosexuals, transgender people and other minorities [...] but have also started to advocate lowering the so-called age of consent". Evident in such narratives is a tactic of seeking to manufacture 'moral panic', an approach that according to a recent report *Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights* is a particularly useful tool, because by presenting themselves as "adults, concerned with children's wellbeing and safety", politicians can appeal to people's moral duty to protect children (2021: 10).

- It is a regular feature of parliamentary discourse that MPs from Fidesz seek to present their arguments through the language of "rights and freedoms". The significance of this is that it presents the exclusion of civil society as a question of protecting rights and democracy. The exclusion of NGOs, including LGBTIQ+ groups, from collaborating with schools on educational programs, and the prohibition of sex education in schools, is framed as a parental right. This is held to mean the parents' right to educate their children on sexuality the way they want, and is related to a particular idea of children's rights, where the child has the right to his/her gender identity based on birth sex. For instance, Lőrinc Nacsa from KDNP argued: "it must be said that the mother is a woman and the father is a man, and that the child has the right to an upbringing that is in keeping with his or her gender identity and that is based on Hungary's constitutional identity and Christian culture." (2021 Fall term). In a similar vein, Róbert Répássy (state secretary) argued: "The Fundamental Rights Charter clearly states that the decision on how to bring up children is the parents' right. It is on this basis that we protect and defend the best interests of our children, and any sexual propaganda should only be carried out with the permission of the parent, in accordance with the parental consent in educational establishments." (2023 spring term)
- Fidesz MPs regularly stress their support for the right of individuals to live as they wish in Hungary provided that they leave children alone. This "guarantee" of liberal

freedom often presented itself in the corpus in statements responding to the criticism of the opposition or international criticism. Such rhetoric goes further than what Nash and Browne (2020) have described as heteroactivism – strategic attempts “to reassert the superiority and centrality of hetero- and gender-normative individuals” – by extending the protection argument to imagined, conspiratorial threats. This rhetoric of ‘live and let live’ was also instrumentalised in the spring 2020 debate on the Gender Recognition Ban. Government MPs argued that the change solely concerned gender identity on the official registry, allowing people otherwise to live as they wish and identify with the gender they want. Thus, the government attempted to deflect criticism of the law by diminishing the significance of the legal change.

- Attacking Gender Studies as a discipline no longer emerges as a central tactic in Hungarian politics. Given that the two Gender Studies departments that existed in Hungary were shut down in 2018 (Peto 2016, Helms, Krizsan 2017) discrediting Gender Studies departments is less relevant. The critique of theoretical work on gender remains, however, a viable tactic, where it is routinely discredited as ‘ideologically-based pseudo-science’ or as serving political agendas.
- Mentions of trans people in the sample of parliamentary debates occur only after 2020. This could be explained by the fact that prior to 2020 there was never an official ruling on gender recognition in Hungary. In 2020, the Hungarian Parliament passed a law that eliminated the possibility for transgender, non-binary and intersex individuals to undergo legal gender reassignment. The new law requires individuals to be identified according to the “sex assigned at birth”. After 2021, transgender people – aside from occasional solidarity expressed by the opposition – appear in parliamentary discourse in association with the dangers of “sex education” wanting to “corrupt Hungarian children”. The intensification of this narrative in 2021 coincided with the introduction of the Child Protection Law which prompted resistance from the EU and in Hungarian civil society.
- The threat from George Soros and foreign-funded NGOs is a common narrative, relating to a wider presentation of the EU and the West as “cultural colonisers” (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). There are multiple instances in the data where politicians express critical views of George Soros and his organisations, which are accused of meddling in Hungary's internal affairs and using financial resources to influence Hungarian politics. The government has criticised Soros for his support of civil society organisations and NGOs promoting democracy and human rights, including LGBTIQ+ rights. The EU/West is manifested in anti-gender parliamentary rhetoric as a threat, mostly in response to the EU’s criticism of Hungary’s approach to democratic values. So, Lőrinc Nacsa of KDNP appealed to the parliament: “Dear Parliament! A quite astonishing and concerted series of attacks has been launched against our country because of the law on the fight against paedophiles and child protection adopted in

the spring session. [...] Brussels is vainly trying to get us to allow LGBTQ activists into kindergartens and schools, but we are not willing to do that.” (2021 Fall term)

## Hungarian Media Findings

The Hungarian media sample consisted of three news outlets positioned differently on the political spectrum. Magyar Hírlap was chosen as a right-wing outlet, strongly attached to Fidesz. Válasz Online was selected as a reliably centrist media outlet, which publishes limited but lengthy feature articles, interviews and opinion pieces. Telex.hu was included as a liberal-progressive media source, being one of the most-read opposition-aligned outlets. The media corpus comprised 292 articles and revealed the following findings:

- There is a significant alignment between discourses in the parliament and the government media. That is to say, while the presence of anti-gender discourse in parliament is relatively limited given the political coordinates described, the same frameworks and discourses are reproduced in the media, and are in fact amplified and heightened. This is due to the fact that the media in Hungary is heavily politicised. Magyar Hírlap is a pro-government media channel and amplifies the views of the government (European Press Roundup, 2022), for example by allocating front pages to politicians campaigning on anti-gender issues, or denigrating oppositional politicians.
- Magyar Hírlap, regarded as the mouthpiece of the conservative ruling party Fidesz, is openly hostile on many gender and sexuality-related issues, including LGBTQ rights, gender quotas, sex education, feminist or LGBTIQ+ inclusive childrens’ books or film adaptations, and progressive (LGBTIQ+ inclusive) Christian congregations. Further, both the quality of discourse and quantity of coverage suggest that the outlet is campaigning on anti-gender issues. The newspaper deploys the term ‘gender ideology’ most often in the sample.
- The coverage of gender issues in the centrist media outlet Válasz Online aligns with the newspaper’s political positioning by presenting a non-aligned conservatism that also points out the hypocrisy of the government’s conservatism. In its coverage of gender and sexuality-related topics, the newspaper assumes the position of a “rational middle ground” in what they have termed “gender wars”. This is most clearly seen in treating LGBTIQ+ rights as subjects for balanced debate, such as in a debate on homosexuality and the church, with one side arguing that the inferiority of homosexuality can be justified by the Bible, the other arguing that stability and love is more important to a child than the sexual or gender identity of the parents, and that being a proud gay adoptive dad can be reconciled with being Christian: “Is a family a family? The Historical debate between András Hodász Catholic priest and the LGBT campaigner György Mészáros.” (Válasz Online, 2021)

- A similar middle-ground positioning on gender issues in Válasz Online is articulated in the discussion of the Istanbul Convention, which is frequently framed as a “platform for identity wars”, where neither left nor right is seen as clearly right or wrong.
- Telex.hu positions itself as a critical opponent of the government’s anti-gender rhetoric. The newspaper frequently publishes comprehensive critical analyses of Orbán’s anti-gender politics as well as lengthy investigative reports, for example on the expansion of the government-aligned Mathias Corvinus Collegium. They give voice to progressive NGOs like Budapest Pride or Political Capital. They frequently criticised Fidesz for vilifying LGBTIQ+ people and framing them as a target group similar to their approach to migrants, refugees and civil society organisations. They also criticise them for copying US right-wing republican arguments and tactics, such as hijacking the discussion of public education by stoking a confected moral panic about sex education.
- Although there are notable differences in the way gender- and sexuality-related issues are covered in Válasz Online and Telex.hu, when it comes to the coverage of trans issues, both outlets assume a closer positioning relative to each other. Válasz Online is cautious about recycling fake news, and there are occasional pieces debunking the misinformation and disinformation campaigns about transgender people, particularly transgender children. At the same time they provide positive coverage of actors that promote transphobic views, particularly some international figures. Telex.hu has a consistently critical position on conservative or right-wing interpretations of gender- and sexuality-related issues, while also displaying a hesitancy to openly criticise transphobic views.
- Magyar Hírlap, as a pro-government newspaper, is hostile towards transgender people, evident in their usage of transphobic language, the recycling of transphobic news, and the provision of platforms to trans-exclusionary campaigners. Occasionally, limited empathy is expressed concerning transgender people’s experiences of discrimination. In one article from 2021, titled "We must return to normality" Keresztesi Tamás writes: “according to those surveyed, 26% of transgender people in Hungary reported experiencing violence, and 96% of them were verbally harassed”. Despite the sympathy expressed in this sentence, the author asks “...is it worth it?”. A similar pattern can be observed in relation to homosexuality, where ‘the good homosexual’ trope emerges when homosexuality is experienced as a “silent or invisible” experience, confined within the privacy of one’s home (Magyar Hírlap, Benze, 12.10.2020).
- The use of demeaning language, such as “gender terror”, or the Istanbul Convention being referred to as a “legal freak”, is characteristic of Magyar Hírlap's coverage of gender issues. Explicit hate speech and personal insults also feature in some articles. The editor-in-chief, Pál Dippold, also a well-known novelist, has compared Soros to a “stinky polecat”, and female opposition MEPs to “stinky polecat furies”. A former MP László Tamás wrote in Magyar Hírlap that a lot of people would “give a huge slap” to

the participants of the Budapest Pride march, and the few liberal or left-wing politicians that join them (Magyar Hírlap Tamás, 13.11.2020).

- Magyar Hírlap contains the majority of definitions of the phrase ‘gender ideology’ (in the entire corpus ‘gender ideology’ was defined once time in Telex.hu, and 20 times in Magyar Hírlap). This finding challenges the initial assumption that right-wing media reproduces the term as a matter of fact, given its continued circulation in media discourse since 2010. The consistent use of definitions feature in attempts to remind readers about the dangers and threats associated with the term. Some of those definitions compare ‘gender ideology’ to immigration as one of the most serious threats to European unity, whilst others present it as an “extremist ideology”, or a tool of “globalist world power”. In all cases, ‘gender ideology’ is invoked as a threat to national values.
- Across all three newspapers the actors most frequently mentioned in relation to issues of gender and sexuality in news coverage are politicians, including Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Judit Varga, who served as Minister of Justice during the time of the sampling, Eszter Párkányi, an analyst at the Alapjogokért Központ (Center for Fundamental Rights), Balázs Orbán, the Political Director of the Prime Minister’s office and Katalin Novák, the President of Hungary. Magyar Hírlap coverage tends to reinforce the anti-gender views and positions voiced by these actors, whereas Válasz Online and Telex.hu critically review their speeches, interviews and statements. Transnationally known anti-gender actors are also frequently mobilised in these discussions, such as the German writer and sociologist Gabriele Kubly, British author J. K. Rowling, or the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin. Hungarian national political actors appear as the most influential figures in anti-gender politics, while at the same time transnational actors and ideas are featured and integrated.

## **Hungarian Controversy Mapping Findings**

Examining media coverage of the events related to the Child Protection Law in Hungary exposes a range of political and media anti-gender tactics and reveals how they are being mobilised, often reinforcing each other in specific instances.

- This controversy further exposes how anti-gender narratives in Hungary and other post-socialist countries adapt to nationalistic frames, represented as a struggle of values and ideas. This is particularly visible when Hungary is depicted as defending its “national values” against communists, Brussels, EU, Liberal West, Soros, and “the elites”. A vivid example of this that emerges in this controversy is the call by the Batthyány Circle of Professors published on their website: “The Batthyány Circle of Professors is deeply concerned to see that expectations and practices that are fundamentally at odds with the conservative-civic values that underpin our lives and

thinking are becoming widely accepted in European politics. We are concerned that neo-liberal and neo-Marxist principles are gaining a stronger voice in domestic citizen's political circles and in the pro-neo-liberal, independent and civilian media and organisations in our country. We do not agree that the nation is an obsolete historical construct that needs to be replaced by supranational organisation. We express our dismay at the movements that claim to valorise the role of social gender to devalue birth sex, or to oppose the two". (Pbk.info.hu)

- The strategies of media and political actors involved in the controversy can largely be characterised as heteroactivism (Browne and Nash 2017). This involves anti-gender actors seeking to strengthen heteronormative patriarchy and legitimise undermining sexual and gender freedoms by framing it as the protection of families and children. The children and the family framework allows both political and media actors to argue that the goal of the law is not to discriminate against LGBTIQ+ people, but to protect children from the harmful impact of (trans)gender-ideology (Rowlands 2023).
- A key example of this rhetoric is Viktor Orbán's speech in Brussels on 24.06.2021: "I am a fighter for their rights [in Orbán's words 'homosexual guys']. I was a freedom fighter in the communist regime. Homosexuality was punished and I fought for their freedom and their rights. So, I am defending the rights of homosexuals, but this law is not about that". [...] "It's not about homosexuals. The law is about letting parents decide what kind of sex education they want for their kids, [this] right should exclusively belong to the parents" (24.06.2021, reuters.com). By denying the discriminatory nature of their politics, these actors insist on other issues being at stake, such as children's wellbeing. The discursive strategies in both media and politics predominantly focus on creating moral panic and stigmatising and delegitimizing LGBTIQ+ activists, not least through conflating homosexuality and transgender identities with paedophilia.
- Discrediting those who support gender equality as "brainwashed by propaganda on the internet" and doing nothing more than virtue signalling emerges as a common tactic. As Jeszensky Zsolt argues "In Hungary, a law has been passed which seeks to protect normality from the ideology of conquest. The normality that twenty years ago would have been taken for granted even by those who now - in most cases out of good intentions, not malice, we must admit - are competing with each other to flaunt their virtues, display rainbow pictures and bid a final farewell to normality" (Jeszensky, 29.06.2021, pestisracok.hu).
- Drawing on the language of rights and social protection is a key element in anti-gender actors' attempts to strengthen the legitimacy of their arguments. For example, when LGBTQ-inclusive sex education and affirmative care of trans children

is described as “experimenting on children” (or even child abuse), the language of rights is mobilised to protect the children and emphasize the responsibility of adults in protecting the children. As a Magyar Nemzet article argues: “What is more important: the basic human right of a child in the development of their biologically-given natural human gender and their right to be cared for by their parents, or a completely false, "commercial" purpose, a propaganda activity that wants to distort the natural gender development of children by NGOs that produce gender ideology, by drag queens, by transvestites?” The author goes on to speculate about what would happen “... should pedophiles also issue publications citing rights, that pedophilia is not a serious crime, but - according to the new story - ‘love of children’?” (Tamás, 29.05.2023, Magyar Nemzet).

- ‘Amplifying specific voices’ emerged as the most frequent media tactic in the corpus of 53 articles/opinion pieces related to the controversy. Other frequent media tactics were ‘Positioning West as a threat’ and ‘Admiring Hungary as a bastion of conservative values’. A follow-up analysis of the tactics deployed by specific actors whose involvement in the controversy was mentioned in the media reveals ‘statements on the websites’ as a key tactic. It must be noted, however, that the controversy unfolded during the COVID-19 crisis, hence much activity took place online. Furthermore, anti-gender organisations, although many are publicly funded, do not need to make a significant effort to spread their views, as their press releases and online communications are regularly circulated through the vast system of government-aligned media, including full ownership of the regional daily newspaper sector, print and online news sources, and television channels, which regularly refer to government propaganda websites as authentic sources (Szelényi 2023).
- The Issue Network building - based on 41 seed URLs of anti-gender actors featured in the controversy - produced a dispersed network with the official website of the Hungarian Government as the large central node.
- Overall, the period of the controversy was characterised by significant, high-level tactical investment. The referendum on the Child Protection Law was organised around a list of misleading questions whereby legal actions were taken against the targets of anti-gender actors, such as the imposition of fines on bookstores or NGOs. There was a great deal of investment in publicity, such as the billboard and poster campaign by the far-right students’ group Egyetemi Ellenállás, calling to protect children.
- The only tactic that failed was the referendum itself. The campaign by Háttér society and LGBTIQ+ and human rights NGOs called on people to invalidate their votes by putting a double ‘X’ in response to the meaningless questions. Whereas the activists

opposing the Child Protection Law emphasised the discriminatory and hateful way in which the referendum questions were formulated, Orbán justified the need for the referendum as a necessary response to Brussels' "attack on Hungary".