

How to counter anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI mobilisation in Hungary and Poland?

Summary of the online closed-door roundtable of Political Capital¹

On the 26th of May, *Political Capital* in cooperation with *Projekt: Polska* Foundation and with the support of Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, hosted an online closed-door roundtable to present and discuss their comparative research on anti-LGBTQI mobilisation in Hungary and Poland. The panel's main goal was to share and discuss experiences and potential solutions to combat anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI mobilisation by a diverse group of actors who are somehow involved in the topic. The participants were members of LGBTQI communities, representatives of LGBTQI and human rights organisations, activists, lawyers, experts, and researchers from the two countries. All of them have been working to combat the ongoing threat to the rule of law and democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland.

The roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule: participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

The following summary presents the main topics discussed alongside key takeaway points.

REASONS BEHIND THE ANTI-GENDER AND ANTI-LGBTQI MOBILISATION

One of the central topics of the discussion was trying to find an answer to the question, why anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI mobilisation is happening in Poland and Hungary. Participants agreed that to come up with strategies to combat anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI mobilisation, it is necessary to understand its motives and drivers. Through the discussion the participants tried to find potential reasons by exploring answers to the following questions:

- Is the mobilisation part of a political strategy?

- The experience of human rights violations of asylum seekers and migrants in Hungary since 2015 was argued to be a 'laboratory experiment' for the government to test how far they can go in limiting the power of the judiciary and to what extent they can violate human rights. These lessons are telling, as those former and current practices can be applied to other social groups, such as the LGBTQI community.
- Participants from both countries agreed that their governments are more interested in keeping the topic on the political agenda than to eliminate it. As it is such an emotional and polarising topic it can reveal a route to get more voters. Hence, it is an effective tool for them for keeping their political power. Voting in a law as such and closing the topic would be a political disaster. Therefore, both governments are rather interested in "chasing the rabbit than catching it". In Poland, for instance, the governing majority often uses the tool of a so-

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called “parliamentary freezer”, in which such topics can be put aside and brought back to the agenda when necessary.

- One explanation for failed legislative acts in Poland was the occurrence of internal conflicts within the government. Hence, the lesson was that counter-mobilisation and advocacy are more likely to be successful if there is an internal conflict in the governing party or the government.

However, even if counter-mobilisation to combat anti-LGBTQI practices does not matter a lot to the government, it matters to the society, as it can mobilise anti-populist, liberal voters for elections.

- Is homophobia the main driver of the actors, especially politicians who fuel the mobilisation?

- Answer to this question was found to be rather difficult from both countries’ perspectives.
- With regards to Poland, some set out to find answers through the important role of religion in the country. However, in the opinion of some Polish participants, PiS leader, Deputy PM Kaczynski himself is not truly religious; he remains close to the church for tactical matters. This could have been a motivating factor to point at the LGBTQI community as an enemy of the predominantly Christian country and its conservative values.
- It was stressed that we cannot reveal politicians’ personal ideological motivations and beliefs; the only thing we can understand is their interests and goals. Furthermore, both governing parties in Hungary and Poland are huge and diverse communities that are most probably not driven by a strict set of common ideas but rather by common interests. Hence, for the sake of successful counter-mobilisation and advocacy, it is more important to understand the political logic and aim of anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI mobilisation than certain actors’ personal ideological motivations.
- Anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI mobilisation in both countries seem to follow party political interests and logic to increase political polarisation and mobilise the governing parties’ voter base.

- If we claim that many people in Hungary and Poland are not as homophobic as their politicians may think, why do they still make such efforts to mobilise against the LGBTQI community?

- Although it is a rather complex question, the participants agreed, that as these two regimes are becoming more and more undemocratic, they attack one minority group after another. These campaigns are embedded into the framework of democratic backsliding and are tools by which both regimes disguise and legitimise their actions to curb civil liberties and the rule of law.
- Furthermore, it is not new for such conservative regimes to control sexuality through the tools at their disposals, such as legal measures or political propaganda.
- The actions by the Hungarian and the Polish governments clearly reflect the fears of the destruction of patriarchy.

CHILD PROTECTION

A further dimension that adds depth to the issue is the Polish and Hungarian governments’ strategy of framing their anti-LGBTQI campaign as a child protection issue; fear-mongering makes it easier for them to mobilise voters. The speakers have agreed that this narrative is strong, as when children are pictured as a part of the equation, no risks can be taken.

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- Similar to Hungary, the main narrative of the Polish government is the need to protect children from the alleged threat of the LGBTQI 'ideology', however, legal practices do not reflect this to a large extent. While there were previous attempts to pass legislation, for example on controlling (sex) education, these were unsuccessful.
- The Polish government adopts this agenda as more of a rhetorical tool, and focuses on politicising schools, thus producing more of a chilling effect on school principals and teachers.
- Representatives of Hungarian LGBTQI and human rights organisations revealed that the passing of the so-called child protection law in Hungary which says that any expert or organisation that aims to hold sexual education classes in schools must pre-register, has not yet been followed by any implementing regulation. The system of registration has not yet been prepared, thus, for now, only school staff can educate on the topic. Furthermore, an unofficial 'whitelist' of organisations that should be allowed to educate has been circulating in schools, including organisations that are prone to be conservative, and lacking feminist or progressive approaches. Moreover, on a far-right media site, a 'blacklist' was published, listing Hungarian teachers who used rainbow/ally frames on their Facebook profile pictures.
- According to several sources, no human rights organisations have been invited to schools since the passing of the legislation in Hungary. For example, an organisation that previously received about 30-40 invitations per year, after the legislation did not receive any. Moreover, school directors have expressed their fears of such increasing state control that limits the freedom and autonomy of schools in this manner. However, private schools or those state schools with principals set in their ways are willing to go against the legislation.
- A recurring strategy that was supported by several participants was approaching the issue through education. The governments take advantage of people being afraid of something that they don't know. Thus, through education, it is important to familiarise people with the topic and the community.

ADVOCACY

The participants shared their opinion regarding the dilemma of whether and to what extent advocacy still makes sense in the two countries.

- Hungarian LGBTQI organisations reported that their work has been hindered since the increase in anti-LGBTQI mobilisation, in ways such as being rejected by venues to hold workshops in, mainly in the countryside, specifically in municipalities that are led by Fidesz. Therefore, it is more difficult to build a strong community; there are many supporters, but they are afraid to be open and vocal about their opinions.
- Speakers, based on experiences from Hungary, said that there is room left for advocacy, not all doors are closed. Still, the efforts have had to be realigned to focus more on EU institutions and opposition parties. Furthermore, the demand for evidence-based advocacy remains. Organisations, however, have to be more creative in their ways of gathering experiences from the ground.
- Polish participants expressed that in Poland advocacy is extremely essential and still possible. It is deemed crucial to work with opposition parties and politicians and encourage them to be very vocal about such issues, as it can bring them many supporters.

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- Experiences from both countries confirmed that the government-led anti-LGBTQI mobilisation does not fully reflect the opinions of the society. There are many (in)active allies to the community. Nevertheless, fear-mongering remains a valued political tool for these regimes. The participants agreed on the crucial need for consistency in advocacy.
- Besides advocacy, activist groups advised revealing ways in which people can become allies to the LGBTQI community and also go a step further with their actions, be explicit and vocal about their support.
- Examples of successful advocacy efforts can be found in both countries. In Poland, there was a strong mobilisation against the abortion ban, which resulted in a strong resistance in the society. Besides, the previously mentioned legislation on education did not pass, and in Poland this year 40 equality marches were organised country-wide. In Hungary, successful media campaigns can be seen as good examples, such as the „family is family” campaign and the recent campaign against the so-called ‘child protection’ referendum. As a result of the latter, the referendum was invalid.

CONCLUSIONS

Main takeaways from the panel:

- Third-party interventions are key, such as seeking help from the European Court of Human Rights.
- It is important to exchange good practices, dilemmas, and legal hurdles. Cross-country discussions are crucial.
- Many times, the legal challenges in Hungary are similar to those in Poland, thus solutions can and should also be coordinated.
- Although in Hungary, advocacy efforts are limited in their impact, it remains an important practice with EU institutions and opposition parties.
- More resource-rich organisations should reach out to smaller, grassroots groups and connect them to EU institutions.
- The invalid ‘anti-LGBTQI’ referendum in Hungary on 3rd April is a success story of the Hungarian civil sector, the strategy of which is directly applicable in the Polish context.