

Media discourses about Hungarian anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation in the summer of 2021

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Abstract

The article investigates how the relationship of religiousness and Christianity to LGBTQIA+ people was discursively constructed in Hungarian online media in relation to the so-called ‘child protection’ bill in 2021. The bill introduced stricter measures for offenders of pedophilia while also forbidding the ‘propagation’ of homosexuality to minors. Since governmental positions on LGBTQIA+ issues are conceptualized as part of the anti-gender discourse, where religion-based arguments have an important role, we focused on articles where LGBTQIA+ and Christianity-related keywords appeared simultaneously. We investigated two government-friendly (*Pesti Srácok*, *Magyar Nemzet*) and two government-independent (*Telex*, *Magyar Hang*) online media outlets. Our analysis identified seven major discursive structures: disengagement, separation of the church and the state, religious support, conditional tolerance, victimization, deviant and unnatural, and sin.

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Keywords

Christianity, discourse analysis, Hungary, LGBTQIA+, media discourse

Résumé

Le document examine comment la relation entre la religiosité et le christianisme avec les personnes LGBTQIA+ a été construite de manière discursive dans les médias en ligne hongrois en relation avec le projet de loi dite de la « protection de l'enfance » en 2021. Puisque les positions gouvernementales sur les questions LGBTQIA+ sont conceptualisées dans le cadre du discours anti-genre, dans lequel les arguments basés sur la religion ont un rôle important, nous nous sommes concentrés sur les articles dans lesquels des mots-clés liés à la LGBTQIA+ et au christianisme apparaissent simultanément. Nous avons enquêté sur deux médias en ligne pro-gouvernementaux (*Pesti Srácok*, *Magyar Nemzet*) et deux médias en ligne indépendants du gouvernement (*Telex*, *Magyar Hang*). Notre analyse a identifié sept structures discursives majeures: le désengagement, la séparation de l'Église et de l'État, le soutien religieux, la tolérance conditionnelle, la victimisation, la déviance et la contre-nature, et le péché.

Mots-clés

Analyse du discours, Christianisme, discours médiatique, Hongrie, LGBTQIA+

Introduction

Our research intends to explore how the relationship of religion, religiousness, and especially Christianity to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other sexual and gender minorities (henceforth LGBTQIA+)¹ was discursively constructed in the Hungarian online media in the period when the so-called ‘child protection’ bill was passed in the summer of 2021.

Although same-sex sexual activity between adults was decriminalized in Hungary in 1961 (Takács, 2015), due to policies punishing the public expressions of homosexuality and hostile social attitudes in the socialist era (Takács and P. Tóth, 2017), the Hungarian LGBTQIA+ movement began to develop in the 1980s, with further growth following the regime change in 1989/1990 (Hanzli and Nagy, 2024; Kurimay and Takács, 2016; Tóth, 2013). Subsequent expansion of gay rights includes the harmonization of the age of consent in heterosexual and homosexual relationships in 2002 (Takács, 2015) and the legal recognition of the registered partnership of same-sex couples in 2009.

However, since 2010, when Viktor Orbán and his *Fidesz* party returned to power, several measures limiting LGBTQIA+ rights have been adopted alongside intensifying anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses (Takács et al., 2022). The second Orbán government, thanks to its parliamentary supermajority, adopted a new constitution, the Fundamental Law of Hungary, in 2011, defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman, elevating the ban on same-sex marriage to a constitutional level. In subsequent years, besides the pro-government public media providing space for openly anti-LGBTQIA+ opinions and organizations (Tamássy, 2019), prominent *Fidesz* politicians also made

several anti-LGBTQIA+ remarks.² In 2020, the government passed multiple anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, including ending legal gender recognition and amending the definition of family in the Fundamental Law to explicitly exclude same-sex couples, while in 2021, it quasi-banned child adoption for LGBTQIA+ people.

In the summer of 2021, a new bill was proposed officially to introduce clear regulations on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse (Act LXXIX of 2021, henceforth Act 79). However, an amendment to the bill proposed to ban or limit access to content that ‘propagates or portrays divergence from self-identity corresponding to sex at birth, sex change or homosexuality’ for minors. The new Act with the anti-LGBTQIA+ amendment came into force on 8 July 2021. According to this so-called ‘child protection’ act, media content depicting LGBTQIA+ minorities shall be classified as unsuitable for minors and distributed accordingly. As such, it suggests that children need to be ‘protected’ from the ‘promotion of homosexuality’ and that LGBTQIA+ adults pose a threat to children’s mental and sexual health by merely existing in public spaces, including the media.

Act 79 attracted criticism from LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups also for making LGBTQIA+-inclusive sex education in public education institutions quasi-impossible (Háttér Society, 2021), thereby limiting the access of LGBTQIA+ students to comprehensive sexual health information and increasing their vulnerability to health risks. Moreover, due to the lack of a clear definition of the ‘propagation’ of homosexuality, the new law could also lead to excessive self-censorship among teachers and educators (Háttér Society, 2021).

Anti-LGBTQIA+ measures were also paramount in Hungary’s relations with the European Union. Since the 1980s, the EU and its institutions have consistently formulated directives and resolutions to strengthen and broaden LGBTQIA+ rights (Tóth, 2013). Therefore, the anti-LGBTQIA+ measures of the Hungarian government opened a new frontline between the EU and Hungary, resulting in explicit criticism from the EU. For instance, the Tavares report in 2013 criticized the heteronormative definition of marriage in the Fundamental Law. As a response, Viktor Orbán argued in the European Parliament that Hungary is ‘protecting a four-thousand-year-old tradition, (...) 2000 years in the Jewish culture and 2000 years in Christianity’ (Orbán, 2013, para. 7).

High-ranking politicians in several Western European countries and EU institutions also condemned Act 79, while the European Commission launched an infringement procedure against Hungary (EC, 2021). As Act 79 indicated a significant intensification of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation and discourse and provoked more severe reactions from the EU, our analysis focuses on the time period of the adoption and commencement of the act.

We conceptualize governmental positions on LGBTQIA+ issues as part of an international anti-gender movement and the related discourse. Since religion-based arguments play an important role in this discourse, our analysis examines whether this was reflected in the Hungarian media when reporting about the Hungarian anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation. As the discourse also encompasses the viewpoint that the protection of LGBTQIA+ rights is a form of external oppression imposed by, among others, the European Union, we also focus on how the EU is embedded in the Hungarian

media discourse, especially in relation to the Christian roots and future of Europe. Therefore, our research questions focus on how and to what extent the debate about LGBTQIA+ people and rights was discursively constructed in terms of religiousness and how the EU was embedded into this discourse.

In order to answer these questions, we conducted a discourse analysis of 38 articles from 4 online media outlets, published at the time of the adoption and commencement of the ‘child protection’ act, that is, between 1 June and 31 July 2021. We chose two government-friendly (*Pesti Srácok*, *Magyar Nemzet*) and two government-independent (*Telex*, *Magyar Hang*) news portals. We ground our analysis in the concept that through the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ people in online media and the political discourse disseminated in the media, the represented identities, social roles, and attitudes are defined and legitimized.

‘Gender ideology’

Many conceptualize the Hungarian government’s anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation and the associated homophobic and transphobic political discourse as the local manifestation of a transnational anti-gender political movement and its related discourse that sees itself as a resistance of the ‘oppressed majority’ (Félix, 2015; Kováts and Pető, 2017; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). Within the anti-gender discourse, the terms ‘gender’ and ‘gender ideology’ are used to refer to a broad spectrum of phenomena. These include the use of the analytical concept of gender, gender mainstreaming, the promotion of reproductive rights, recognizing gender-based violence, and the protection and advancement of LGBTQIA+ rights and interests (Balogh, 2014; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018), the latter of which have dominated the Hungarian anti-gender discourse since the late 2010s and early 2020s (Fodor, 2022). Those articulating the anti-gender discourse and opposing ‘gender ideology’ reject or question these aspirations. Consequently, homophobic and transphobic discourses, which often refer to the promotion of LGBTQIA+ rights and interests as well as the representation of sexual and gender minorities in public spaces as ‘LGBTQ propaganda’, are key components of the anti-gender discourse (Félix, 2015). In this discourse, ‘gender ideology’, and, thus, the promotion of LGBTQIA+ rights, is understood as a form of external oppression imposed by various international actors like the EU or ‘international lobbying groups’ in an attempt to interfere with domestic matters, threatening national sovereignty (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). In the Hungarian context, the anti-EU sentiment is particularly well pronounced, depicting any efforts to protect or enhance LGBTQIA+ rights as a foreign threat, with the Hungarian government positioned as the sole protector against it (Fodor, 2022). According to researchers in the field, religious institutions and members of the clergy have a vital role in articulating and disseminating the anti-gender discourse (Kováts and Pető, 2017; Paternotte, 2014; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). Similarly, religion-based arguments, articulated by politicians and other public figures, are also the backbone of the discourse (Balogh, 2014; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018), positing that there is an inherent conflict between religiosity and religious values and the protection and expansion of LGBTQIA+ rights.

Religion and the state in Hungary

Multiple approaches have been developed to describe the relationship between religion (or the church) and the state (e.g. Enyedi, 2003; Fox, 2019, 2023; Madeley, 2003; Robbins and Robertson, 1987). After the political transition in 1989, Hungary followed a liberal model called ‘positive neutrality’ (Enyedi, 2003), which supports a clear separation between the church and the state. This model was consolidated in the 1990s and still influences contemporary understandings of the state-church relationship. Since 2010, there has been a shift toward the ‘established church’ model (Enyedi, 2020), where the so-called ‘established churches’³ are constitutionally and legally positioned in an asymmetric, hierarchical manner. Established churches are partially financed by the state and play a significant and constantly growing part in education, social care, and health care. As the comprehensive study by Fox shows, growing state support for certain churches and religious traditions creates inequality and growing control over religion in several countries, including Hungary (Fox, 2023). Meanwhile, these established (historical) churches lost a large portion of their active membership as a result of the secularization and individualization of religion (Máté-Tóth and Szilárdi, 2023; Rosta, 2020). This process resulted in political dependency and asymmetrical power relations between the state and the churches, which also became visible in the mediated public sphere, where political actors have power and legitimacy acting in the name of religion – in our case, Christianity – without any additional comment by religious authorities (Vancsó, 2020a).

Describing the relationship between religion and the nation is also crucial, as the discourse on ‘gender ideology’ is embedded in the discourse on protecting the ‘Christian nation’. Several research studies have focused on the intersections of these concepts (Brubaker, 2012; Gorski, 2021; Spohn, 2016). Spohn (2016) asserts that in this region, ethnic and religious identities are not eliminated by political or civil concepts and thus remain constitutive of national identity. Christianity, as the primary religious tradition in Hungary, is used effectively in creating political identity. Since the transition, it has been presented in the discourses of radical right-wing parties, became part of government discourses after 2010, and gained a crucial role since the migration crisis in 2015 as the most substantial element of the discourse on protection (Vancsó, 2020b).

Beyond the formal relationship between religious institutions and the state (or religion and the nation), another aspect is the cultural and traditional influence of Christianity in everyday political communication. For instance, debates surrounding the inclusion of references to Christianity in the European constitution exemplified this (Harth, 2003; Schlesinger and Foret, 2006).

The relationship between religion (churches) and the state across three distinct dimensions – structural, discursive, and cultural – reveals a multifaceted phenomenon, showing signs of a constitutionally supported, politically systemized hegemony of the established churches and religion-centric morality (Halmai, 2020) in which ‘gender issues’ including those related to LGBTQIA+ are deeply embedded. The ‘gender issue’ can be critically addressed through diverse interpretations of religion due to the aforementioned relational dynamics without necessitating the involvement of religious professionals in the discourse.

Christianity and LGBTQIA+

Recent research (Bognár and Kmetty, 2020; Whitehead, 2018) shows that religiosity is one of the most dominant social determinants of having a negative attitude toward LGBTQIA+ people. In Hungary, religious and non-religious people share their views on most ethical principles, with the exception of homosexuality (Bognár and Kmetty, 2020). While secularized public discourse affects the value system of religious people (Davie, 2012), highlighting religious values in public discourse can have the same effect by strengthening anti-LGBTQIA+ attitudes. In addition, there is a clear pattern of referring to Christianity in its complex understanding (cultural, historical, moral, and theological) in the Hungarian public sphere (Vancsó, 2020a), dominantly in pro-government media. Today, Christianity is part of the government's everyday communication in the public sphere as tradition, culture, or the basis of moral principles. In the case of 'gender ideology' and 'LGBTQ issues', it serves as the opposite pole, representing 'morality' and 'normality'.

Moreover, according to contemporary Hungarian media and political discourse, the religiously neutral EU institutions seem to eliminate the role of Christianity, which served to ensure the aforementioned 'normality' and shared values in Europe. According to the government's political discourse, this 'lack of normality' gave space to the so-called 'gender ideology' and 'LGBTQ propaganda', which must be stopped on a national level.

Relying on these approaches and the above-presented socio-political context, our research aims to examine whether religiousness, Christianity, and LGBTQIA+ rights are constructed in relation to each other in the Hungarian media discourse regarding the so-called 'child protection' act of 2021, either in support of or in refutation of the anti-gender discourse. We also explore whether the discursive structures articulated in the Hungarian media ascribe any role to the EU regarding the protection and promotion of LGBTQIA+ rights. Therefore, our research questions are the following:

RQ1. How was the relationship between LGBTQIA+ people and Christianity discursively constructed in the Hungarian media discourse at the time of the adoption and commencement of Act LXXIX of 2021?

RQ2. How was the European Union embedded in Hungarian media discourse on the LGBTQIA+ minority and Christianity during the same period?

Methodology

To answer our research questions, we aimed for a corpus that covers a broad and diverse spectrum of Hungarian online media, that is, both government-friendly and independent, and left-leaning and right-wing mediums. For this, we chose four online media outlets: *Pesti Srácok* (pestisracok.hu), a relatively young, radical pro-government online newspaper; *Magyar Nemzet* (magyarnemzet.hu), a pro-government news site founded in the name of the oldest and historically one of the most read conservative daily newspapers; *Telex* (telex.hu), an independent liberal/left-wing online medium; and *Magyar Hang* (hang.hu), an independent center-right-wing critic of the governing parties (Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, 2021).

To analyze how the adoption on 15 June 2021, and the commencement on 8 July 2021, of Act 79 were immediately received and interpreted in the Hungarian media discourse, the data collection covered the period between 1 June and 31 July 2021. To find articles that discuss LGBTQIA+ rights and religiousness, we employed LGBTQIA+-related keywords, including *LMBTQ* ('LGBTQ'), *leszbikus* ('lesbian'), *meleg* ('gay'), *biszexuális* ('bisexual'), *transznemű* ('transgender'), *homofób* ('homophobic'), and *homoszexuális* ('homosexual'), and religiousness-related keywords as well: *keresztény*, *keresztén* ('Christian'), *vallás* ('religion'), and *egyház* ('church'). As the different news sites offer different search options, we relied on Google to find relevant articles to ensure consistent data collection. All articles published on these four Hungarian news sites containing at least one keyword from both groups were subjects of analysis. Finally, our corpus comprised 38 articles, of which 16 were published on *Magyar Nemzet*, 8 on *Pesti Srácok*, 10 on *Telex*, and 4 on *Magyar Hang*.

In our discourse analysis, we relied on Gee's (2010) approach, which defines language's seven building tasks. Of these, we focused on four that we believe are of decisive importance in the discursive construction of the relationship between LGBTQIA+ rights and religiosity: *significance*, *identities*, *politics (the distribution of social goods)*, and *connections*. Thus, we examined: (1) how the articles make the relationship between LGBTQIA+ rights, religiousness, and the EU in the protection of sexual and gender minorities' rights and specifically regarding the adoption of Act 79, seem significant or insignificant; (2) what identities are enacted in these articles and what identities are attributed to others with a specific focus on the linguistic enaction and ascription of LGBTQIA+, ally, and religious identities; (3) how are social goods distributed in the articles, that is, what is portrayed as 'normal' or 'good' and what as 'deviant' or 'bad'; and (4) how are LGBTQIA+ people and rights and Christianity as a broad concept – including religious but also secular elements – connected (Gee, 2010: 17–19).

We applied an inductive coding strategy and conducted a pilot coding first, where we coded selected articles separately to grasp the discursive strategies employed along the analytic aspects described above. A harmonized codebook was achieved by discussing codes, notes, and interpretations of found language use strategies. After coding every relevant article, we identified discursive structures through a joint discussion of the language use strategies of the four analyzed aspects. Our focus was on the nature of the articulated relationship, if any, between LGBTQIA+ people and rights and religiousness and Christianity and the aspects of religion and religiosity employed to interpret LGBTQIA+ rights.

Our research has some limitations. First, since we relied on Google to search for relevant articles, we cannot guarantee that we found every article mentioning at least one keyword from each keyword group. Second, our goal was to identify the dominant discursive structures in the Hungarian news media. Consequently, our research does not aim to fully capture niche viewpoints or the official perspectives of the Hungarian churches or LGBTQIA+ organizations. Third, we focused on the immediate media reception of Act 79; therefore, our findings primarily relate to this time period. Since anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses can evolve rapidly in the Hungarian context, there may be discursive structures we were unable to identify as they gained salience later.

Results

In the following sections, we present the most prevalent discursive structures employed in the analyzed articles to depict LGBTQIA+ individuals and their rights in relation to Christianity, as well as the EU's role in these.

Disengagement

The Hungarian independent news sites provided various counterpoints to anti-LGBTQIA+ government positions. These include the growing social acceptance and support for LGBTQIA+ people and rights, the right to sexual authenticity, fundamental human rights, children's rights, and free speech. Although crucial in the LGBTQIA+-related discourse, these arguments did not contain any religious argument. Therefore, by articulating the discourse of disengagement, the independent media was silent on this aspect of the topic, not linking Christianity to sexual and gender minorities or acceptance in a meaningful way. This discursive strategy almost never appeared in pro-government news sites.

The EU, its institutions, and member states, as well as 'the West' (on its own and as part of phrases like 'Western Europe'), were portrayed as positive counterpoles, almost as custodians of minority rights, aiming to protect not only Western gays but also Hungarian LGBTQIA+ people from the Hungarian government.

There are various possible reasons behind independent news sites' disengagement with the government's religious argument. In the case of *Telex*, it could be the secular approach of the liberal press to both the institutional church-state relationship and the separation between the religious and political spheres, even in communication. Namely, the liberal press rarely creates religious content and even less frequently references Christianity in a non-religious context or only by reflecting on the pro-government discourse with criticism (Vancsó, 2020b). In the case of the more conservative *Magyar Hang*, the news site sometimes strongly criticized the government's approach to Christianity for using every aspect of it (cultural, moral, historical) for merely political purposes.

Separation of church and state

This discourse, articulated in 4 of the 38 articles, problematized the strengthening of the relationship between religion and the state, focusing on political actors using religion as a basis for curtailing the lives of citizens, especially LGBTQIA+ individuals. Therefore, sexual and gender minorities were portrayed through the problematization of the religion-state relationship. As such, these articles did not mention the EU or other Western countries or institutions but constructed the separation of church and state as a Hungarian domestic political issue.

This discourse was (re)produced twice in *Magyar Hang* and once each in *Telex* and *Magyar Nemzet*. *Telex* and *Magyar Hang* reviewed the same interview with Miklós Beer, a Hungarian prelate of the Catholic Church and former Bishop of Vác, initially published on another independent online news site, *HVG*. Both articles quoted the following statement from Beer:

Politicians often insult other religious communities or people outside of faith in the name of Christianity. We cannot be happy about this. (...) It is unfortunate when politicians make decisions based on Christianity. (Bakró-Nagy, 2021; Magyar Hang, 2021)

In the quote, Beer suggested that even some members of the Catholic Church were not happy with the government's religious-rooted anti-LGBTQIA+ discourse and that the church and the state should keep their boundaries. In the previous years, mainly concerning the issue of migration, but also the so-called gender-related issues (see Kováts and Pető, 2017), a few church representatives were already mentioning the problematic issue of politicians referring to Christian traditions and values, combining it with the question of faith or explicitly referring to the teaching of the Bible in public matters (Vancsó, 2020b). Furthermore, they also criticized those priests who made political statements and supported actual politicians and parties (Vancsó, 2020a, 2020b). The particularly low appearance of this discourse is noteworthy, considering that the Hungarian government actively links Christianity in every sense to its political actions; therefore, providing counter-arguments could be a reasonable goal of the independent media.

Religious support

Even rarer was the discourse that portrayed religious people as supporting LGBTQIA+ people and their rights, as it appeared in only three articles published on *Telex* and *Magyar Hang*. The articles presented the support of specific religious civilians and one person from the church. Individualized advocacy in this discourse is of decisive importance as it suggests that religious supporters of LGBTQIA+ people and rights do not represent Christians or any religious organizations but only themselves. Therefore, supporting LGBTQIA+ people as a religious person is an individual choice based on personal belief.

The one article reporting that a person from the church shows unconditional support was published on *Telex*, stating that Gábor Iványi regularly attends the Budapest Pride March and sends his 'blessing' to the participants:

At the last stop of the Parade, Györgyi Lang introduced the speakers and expressed that Gábor Iványi, who could not attend this time, 'blesses everyone'. (Bozsó et al., 2021)

Iványi is a Methodist pastor of the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship, a Christian church of the Methodist denomination. No other person in the church was found to express such views unconditionally in the analyzed Hungarian media discourse. Interpreting this in the context of religious dogma and hierarchy, we argue that in the largest Hungarian church, the Roman Catholic Church, religious representatives cannot make statements on religious and Biblical matters that go against the sayings of the Pope. And even though the Pope has made some supportive statements regarding LGBTQIA+ people in the last few years, those only concern those who would like to join the Christian community – therefore, not unconditional. In addition, the Pope's remarks did not change the fact that the 'homosexual lifestyle' is still considered sinful by the teaching of the Bible. Therefore,

the most progressive and religiously accepted approach from the members of the Roman Catholic Church toward LGBTQIA+ people is to be tolerant and supportive, but not take their relationships as equal to the sacred relationship between a man and a woman.

In addition, neither the EU nor Western countries, institutions, or abstract phenomena (such as Western liberalism) were mentioned in the articles. Consequently, this discursive structure was also primarily concerned with domestic politics and domestic public discourse, not connecting LGBTQIA+ rights and their protection to Western institutions, such as the EU.

Conditional tolerance

In this discursive structure, LGBTQIA+ individuals and religiousness are portrayed as mutually exclusive social categories, the latter of which can ‘tolerate’ the former under specific conditions. This was the largest discursive intersection between the pro-government and independent news sites in the Hungarian media discourse analyzed.

The discourse of conditional tolerance operated with both latent and manifest homophobic rhetoric. For example, both the previously-quoted Miklós Beer, former Bishop of Vác, and Zoltán Lomnici Jr., a well-known Fidesz supporter and publicist, engaged in the argument that LGBTQIA+ people are free to live their lives and should be ‘tolerated’; however, they should not ‘promote their lifestyle’ and present it as something ‘ideal’ or ‘normal’. This discursive structure, therefore, initially masquerades as supportive, but later names a condition, admitting that the tolerance of LGBTQIA+ people is not unconditional; indeed, it is tied to their social invisibility and the perpetuation of heteronormativity.

In the following quote, the former Bishop of Vác employed the ‘tolerated, but never equal’ sub-discourse of this discursive structure, adding the important ‘child protection’ dimension, claiming that for same-sex couples becoming parents is ‘against the natural law’:

The former Bishop of Vác believes that the Church tries to remain compassionate, but they cannot accept that homosexual couples should be considered married, nor that they should be allowed to adopt children. (Magyar Hang, 2021)

The conditional tolerance discourse characterized the government’s communication about the so-called ‘child protection’ Act right after its adoption and in response to the EU’s first critiques. It was used to claim that the Hungarian government is not homophobic but is only ‘protecting’ the children, the parents’ rights regarding their children’s sexual education, and the institution of the ‘traditional family’. The following quote, published in *Magyar Nemzet* by Zoltán Lomnici, a government-friendly ‘legal expert’, exemplifies this discourse:

The most fashionable current accusation against the Hungarian government is that it is homophobic because (...) we do not allow LGBTQ propaganda to be imposed on under-18s. (...) In our country, gay rights are not being curtailed, as evidenced by the Fundamental Law and a number of other legal sources, including Act XXIX of 2009 on registered civil partnerships,

(...) which is the highest level of legislation providing same-sex couples with registered civil partnerships as a special, registered form of cohabitation. (Lomnici, 2021)

In the quote, Lomnici argues that the Hungarian government is not homophobic for prohibiting LGBTQIA+ content in schools and media content accessible to minors, as they have not (yet) curtailed LGBTQIA+ rights in other areas, such as registered civil partnerships. In doing so, he draws on the ‘behind closed doors’ principle (i.e. that LGBTQIA+ individuals can and should only express their non-cis-hetero identities privately, such as within their own homes), as he implies that LGBTQIA+ people are only banned from expressing themselves in public spaces but are allowed to live in legally recognized relationships in private. In such utterances, children, as subjects to the government’s protection, are rather a token, symbolizing innocence and the future of Hungary, the future of a Catholic, conservative, traditional Europe. LGBTQIA+ people, in this sense, are threatening ‘our’ future, ‘our’ families, and ‘our’ Europe by being visible, by existing in public spaces, and by having certain rights.

While the independent news sites typically did not place this discourse in a European or international framework, *Magyar Nemzet* evoked the EU, EU countries, and ‘the West’ as negative examples. Its articles suggested, on the one hand, that other EU countries went ‘too far’ in their liberalism, which ‘allows’ the ‘defamation’ of religious and national symbols. On the other hand, they claim that Western countries should not interfere in Hungarian minority policies as ‘migrants’ and the Muslim minority in these countries pose a threat to LGBTQIA+ rights, compared to which Hungarian policies actually provide freedom for LGBTQIA+ adults. The latter argument, by ignoring the existence of LGBTQIA+ minors and the effect Act 79 may have on them, ultimately admits that those who do not fit the government’s cis-heteronormative ideals are treated as second-class citizens (Takács, Fobear, and Schmitsek, 2022).

Victimization

This discourse, prevalent in the Hungarian pro-government media, not only portrayed sexual and gender minorities and Christianity as opposing phenomena but also explicitly constructed them as enemies. Those engaging in this discourse assert that Christianity, religiousness, and, by extension, the so-called traditional family values and children are the true victims, victimized by ‘LGBTQ propaganda’ and by every aspiration aimed at protecting sexual and gender minorities or promoting LGBTQIA+ rights. These efforts are frequently perceived as ‘attacks’ or even as a ‘war’ on Christianity, the so-called traditional family values, and children. A remarkable example of this can be found in an article on *Pesti Srácok*:

Liberal militants of the LGBTQ movement have unleashed an astonishing barrage of hate on the Reformed pastor of Hajmáskér-Sóly for daring to share a meme on Facebook, which has been circulating for at least a week, of a rainbow hand reaching out to children and being held down. As a father of several children, László Bikádi wrote alongside the picture, ‘Hands off my children!’ His post has since been blocked by reports galore, but before that, it was ‘rewarded’ with more than 400 comments in one day, and hundreds of people shared the posts of public

figures who incited against him. The Reformed pastor was called a homophobic Nazi by the great tolerants (...). (Füßy, 2021)

In the article, a Reformed pastor is portrayed as the victim of the ‘LGBTQ hate tsunami’ after posting a meme on his Facebook page that portrayed ‘LGBTQ propaganda’ trying to reach children menacingly but is held down by another hand. The picture was originally a Soviet war poster from 1941, which, as a visual representation, constructs and legitimizes the dehumanized portrayal of LGBTQIA+ people as the enemy of children, family, and religiousness. The language use of the article further strengthens the victim-perpetrator reversal often applied in the anti-gender discourse (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018) as it calls people who support LGBTQIA+ rights ‘militants’, an expression generally used to describe anyone connected to international organizations, liberal values, or being in political opposition and thus considered to be the ‘enemy’ of the concept of the nation and specifically of the ‘Hungarian people’.

This discourse portrays the EU in a more complex manner than the previous ones. That is, while the EU, ‘Brussels’, ‘the West’, and specific EU countries that criticized the new Act are portrayed as wanting to interfere with Hungarian domestic issues, imposing their ‘deviant’ beliefs on ‘us’; Europe, in general, is depicted as imprisoned by these institutions and needing to be freed and reinstated as a Christian region. As such, the discourse set in motion a populist political discourse that portrays political institutions and leaders as opponents of the ‘real’ European people.

The portrayal of every effort to promote LGBTQIA+ interests, as well as the mere existence of sexual and gender minorities as dangerous and monstrous, greatly contributed to a dehumanizing portrayal of LGBTQIA+ people. In addition, a frequently employed discursive move of this discursive structure was ‘calling out’ LGBTQIA+ people and their allies for their so-called intolerance toward homophobic, transphobic, and discriminatory actions and depicting Christianity and religious people as the ‘victims’ of this ‘intolerance’. Notably, those mediums called for tolerance toward themselves and those who think alike (conservative, Christian, etc.), who were themselves intolerant and inciting toward sexual and gender minorities. A striking example of this discourse is the last sentence of the previous quote from *Pesti Srácok*. There, the journalist called out those criticizing the Pastor for his hostile and homophobic post, calling them ironically the ‘great tolerants’, while the Reformed pastor, who suggested that the so-called ‘LGBTQ propaganda’ poses a threat to children, was not criticized, nor his statements commented on. This discursive move accused mainly but not exclusively individuals with hostility against religions and religious people, portraying them as ‘liberal militants’, ‘Soros militants’, ‘left liberals’, or ‘atheists’ advocating for ‘foreign’ and ‘liberal’ ideologies and wanting to eradicate Christianity from Western culture.

The victimization discourse, popular on pro-government news sites, strengthens the government’s campaign about the danger that the so-called ‘LGBTQ propaganda’ imposes on Hungarian society, and from which only Viktor Orbán and his government could protect the country if and only if they won the general elections in April 2022.

Deviant and unnatural

The existence of discourses presenting sexual and gender minorities as abnormal or even deviant and, thereby, dehumanizing LGBTQIA+ people is not new in discourse analyses dealing with LGBTQIA+ portrayal. In the relation of Christianity and LGBTQIA+ people, the discourse, as articulated in the Hungarian media, also integrates arguments regarding ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ modes of being due to the claim that the Christian way of living is based on and determined by ‘natural law’. According to this discourse, this ‘normality’ must be defended against ‘gender ideology’, which, as the following example from *Pesti Srácok* shows, is constructed as being evidently against Christianity or God and becoming quite normal in liberal Western European countries:

Gender ideology has no respect for Christianity or its representatives, nor even for normality, and even makes a mockery of the cross (...). They want to erase the presence of God from Europe, which they are clearly trying to replace with LGBTQ ideology. (Jurák, 2021)

Normality is thus related to Christianity, while abnormality and deviance are essentially part of non-religious ideologies such as liberalism or ‘gender ideology’; therefore, ‘gender ideology’ is *sui generis* secular, or even atheist, against God.

The discourse also adheres to the notion that there is a way of being that ‘God intended’ for people and that the so-called LGBTQIA+ lifestyle is against it. However, not all articles that engage in the deviant and unnatural discourse explicitly refer to Genesis nor claim that there would be a way God intended people to live their romantic/sexual lives. In such cases, the discourse is reinforced by calling into action other religious discourses within the same text that provide the article’s inner context and interpretational framework. The following quote from *Magyar Nemzet* is a manifest example of such discursive structures, in which the journal supportively quotes the leader of *Alapjogokért Központ*, a pro-government think tank.

The head of the center also stressed that they would not be frightened: ‘Our commitment to the good, to the order of creation, will not be affected by such Bolshevik speed’. (Magyar Nemzet, 2021)

As suggested above, this discourse includes a broad spectrum of actors ‘threatening’ Christianity and religious people, such as the EU, EU institutions, specific member countries, Western countries, and ideologies, as well as ‘liberal atheists’. The portrayal of Europe in the discourse was not nuanced. The EU and every institution, organization, ideology, or even those individuals who promote LGBTQIA+ equality and do not consider LGBTQIA+ people deviants appeared as quasi-synonyms for each other and were discursively constructed as ambassadors for abnormality.

Sin

The discourse of sin was fixated on the notion that, according to the Holy Bible, it is a sin to be homosexual or to engage in homosexual activities, hence also articulating a

discursive structure dehumanizing LGBTQIA+ individuals. It was the most explicitly Christianity- and Bible-focused discourse found in the Hungarian media discourse, as it regularly appeared in the context of interpreting the Holy texts literally and referring to that interpretation as eternal and unchangeable:

Christians must reject pedophilia and non-natural sexuality based on the Bible (...); protecting our loved ones from sin means distancing ourselves from sin, which is an innate human right. (Füssy, 2021, quoting a Reformed pastor)

Notably, the discourse on Biblical sin is not connected to any other sinful acts written in the Bible, but it is confronted with the 'proper', guilt-free way of living in a family consisting of a father, a mother, and children. It also shows how the use of Biblical references in order to discriminate against a group of people on a religious basis is based merely on cherry-picking and, thus, is actually not about living a 'Christian life' in Biblical terms.

This discourse employed both individualized and generalized portrayals of those 'threatening' Christianity and religious people. However, it typically did not mention the EU or its institutions explicitly but referred to 'the West' and used the adjective 'Western' in a negative context.

Conclusion

Our results showed a rather clear divide between the discursive construction of the relationship between religion and Christianity and LGBTQIA+ people in the independent and government-friendly Hungarian media at the time of the adoption and commencement of Act 79. That is, while the independent media seldom portrayed the two social groups and concepts as inherently mutually exclusive and articulated a rather inclusive portrayal of LGBTQIA+ individuals (see the discursive structures *disengagement*, *separation of church and state*, and *religious support*), government-friendly online news media depicted the two social groups as innate opponents of each other, articulating negative, dehumanizing, and even hostile discursive structures (see *victimization*, *deviant & unnatural*, *sin*). The discursive structures articulated in *Magyar Nemzet* and *Pesti Srácok* fit into the anti-gender discourse, also due to their view of the promotion of LGBTQIA+ rights as a form of external oppression imposed by the EU (Félix, 2015; Fodor, 2022; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018).

Our research has two major contributions. The first concerns the role of the members of the clergy in the reception of Act 79 in the Hungarian media. While independent news sites most frequently did not connect religiosity to the limitation of LGBTQIA+ rights at all, when they did so, they distanced themselves from forming an opinion and turned to members of the Church for religious statements and opinions on the issue. As such, they did not address nor contradict many of the religion-based arguments of the pro-government media. In contrast, government-friendly news sites articulated an opposing relationship between religiosity and LGBTQIA+ individuals and interests much more often; however, they usually did not turn to members of the clergy and took it upon themselves to define what is and is not part of the so-called 'religious values'. This

means that members of the church hardly ever expressed their views on LGBTQIA+ individuals and their religious and non-religious rights. This highlights that, in the Hungarian media, the anti-gender discourse, widely understood as articulated and disseminated by members of the clergy (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Kovács and Pető, 2017; Paternotte, 2014; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018), was rather echoed by pro-government journalists who usurped the right to define religious values and thereby implied the government's authority over religious matters.

In interpreting this result, we should note that Halmai (2020) argues that Hungary exhibits a constitutionally supported, politically defined, and systematically organized hierarchy of churches, which leads to increasing government control over major religious institutions (Fox, 2023). This asymmetric, often dependent relationship between religious and political entities results in the marginalization of religious professionals from public discourse on politically labeled issues. Furthermore, the incorporation of a Christian-centric morality and national identity into the constitution and political communication – framed as a cultural rather than a religious element accepted by the majority of the non-religious, too – renders religious actors sort of illegitimate in discussing these matters (Vancsó, 2020b). Ultimately, the liberal ideology advocating for the separation of church and state, or religion and politics, exerts significant influence on independent media and its audience by discouraging the intersection of religious and political matters. As a result, even in a less religious society, a politically emphasized and defined 'secular' or 'cultural' Christianity can be successfully used as an instrument, for example, for discrimination.

The second major finding concerns the greatly differing and complex portrayal of the EU. In some discursive structures, articulated almost exclusively in independent online media, that is, *separation of church and state* and *religious support*, the relationship between religion, Christianity, and LGBTQIA+ interests was constructed either as domestic social and political issues or as internal religious issues, without ascribing any role to other political actors. This was also true when these sites articulated the discursive structure of *conditional tolerance*. In the discursive structure called *disengagement*, the EU and other, sometimes abstract, political actors, such as 'the West', had a clear role as protectors and promoters of LGBTQIA+ rights and interests, portraying them in a positive context.

However, in the discursive structures articulated in government-friendly media (such as *conditional tolerance*, *victimization*, and *deviant & unnatural*), the EU, its politicians, and abstract political entities, such as 'Brussels' or 'the West', were generally constructed as foreign oppressors trying to impose their values on Hungary. Although these portrayals fit into the established anti-gender discourse (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018), they also reflect a unique complexity. While some articles portrayed the EU, Europe, and 'the West' as a single entity with a particular set of 'oppressive', 'liberal' values, others differentiated between European values and the EU. They depicted the EU as imposing LGBTQIA+ rights while claiming that Christianity and sovereignty – viewed here as the right to deny rights to minorities – represent true European values in need of restoration. This narrative challenges the portrayal of the EU as solely an oppressive force, suggesting a reconceptualization of Europeanness and essential EU values. Consequently, the government-friendly media's discursive structures create a

mixed image of the EU as both an external alien oppressor, a ‘bully’, and as ‘our’ own internally changeable political institution that has abandoned its original values, which are claimed to be safeguarded by Hungary.

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Notes

1. Throughout the article, we use the terms LGBTQIA+ people and sexual and gender minorities as synonyms.
2. For instance, László Kövér, Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly, compared child-rearing by same-sex parents to pedophilia, adding that ‘a normal homosexual (...) does not necessarily consider themselves equal’ (Dull, 2019) during an EP campaign event.
3. According to Act CXXXII of 2018, an established church is a registered church with which the state has entered into a comprehensive agreement to cooperate for community purposes.

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