

Written Statement of
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Chairman Keating, Members of the Sub-Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you about the gross violations of the human rights of LGBTQI people in Hungary. My testimony today is in my capacity as board member of Háttér Society, the oldest and largest LGBTQI organization in Hungary, and the Hungarian LGBT Alliance, the national umbrella organization.

Historically speaking, Hungary was a country with a relatively high level of acceptance and legal protections afforded to sexual and gender minorities. The country decriminalized homosexuality in 1961. The first gay civil society organization was set up in 1988, even before the end of socialism. Same-sex couples have been recognized by law since 1996. Transgender people had access to legal gender recognition since the early 2000s. Budapest, our lovely capital, hosted the first ever Pride March in Eastern and Central Europe more than two decades ago, in 1997.

In the past decade, and especially in the past two years, the legal, social, and political situation of LGBTQI people has severely deteriorated in the country. It started with the adoption of the new Fundamental Law, our constitution, in 2012. It contains a provision that defines ‘marriage’ as a union between a woman and a man, and ‘family’ only with reference to marriage and parent-child relationship. Since then, our families have lived in a legal vacuum.

Governmental homophobia and transphobia reached a new peak in 2019, when high ranking public officials, governing politicians and the overwhelmingly government-controlled public and private media started to speak in an unprecedentedly hostile way about our community. The Speaker of the Parliament likened same-sex couples raising children to pedophiles, Prime Minister Orbán said homosexuals should keep their hands off of children. A senior member of Parliament called for banning our Pride March and for boycotting Coca Cola as they featured a same-sex couple in an advertisement.

But the attacks did not stop at words: in May 2020 the Parliament banned legal gender recognition for trans and intersex people. Trans people now have to live with official documents that do not reflect their gender identity and / or their appearance. As a result, they are subjected to discrimination when looking for a job, when accessing health services or when applying for a bank card, just to name a few examples.

In December 2020, the Parliament restricted adoption by non-married persons: it will no longer be professionals, but rather a politician, our openly homophobic Minister of Family Affairs who will make decisions on who is a suitable parent. Most recently, just yesterday, an amendment was introduced in Parliament copying the infamous Russian propaganda law. The amendment would ban discussions on

homosexuality and trans persons in schools, ban advertisements portraying gay and lesbian couples, and sanction shops selling books or movies featuring LGBTQI people to minors. And we are not talking about the portrayal of sexual relations, but any portrayal of a gay or lesbian person, a same-sex couple or a transgender person.

Most of these legislative changes happened during the peak of the COVID crisis, when hundreds of people were dying every day. All these changes form part of a very conscious and diabolic political strategy to divert attention away from the inability of the government to tackle the health, social and economic crises COVID brought to our country. While these discussions were happening in Parliament, extreme right wing paramilitary groups felt encouraged to disrupt our work in illegal ways. Dozens of Nazis regularly come to our events, not just the Pride March, but movie screenings, workshops, discussions. They threaten the participants, physically abuse the organizers, steal or burn our rainbow flags. And the police offer no protection.

We are sad, angry and fearful. The rights we have fought for so hard for so many years can be taken away from us at a glimpse of a moment. We have become tools in a political game: the current Hungarian government uses us as scapegoats. We became enemy number one just because of the way we love or the way we identify. Don't be misled by the government's propaganda: the majority of Hungarians are not homophobes or transphobes. The majority agrees with legal equality for LGBTQI people, with legal gender recognition for trans people, with same-sex couples being a family.

We are not threatened by our society. We are threatened by a political leadership that creates and fights false enemies instead of governing the country. A political leadership that completely disregards not only its international obligations, but binding court decisions. If they don't agree with a court ruling, they change the law the next day. They abolished checks and balances, dismantled democratic institutions, filled up courts and public bodies with their friends. The problems we face do not only target us as LGBTQI persons, they target us human rights defenders, as independent civil society actors, as autonomous citizens.

But we do not give up. We will fight our legal battles, and we will protect our community from these attacks. We will make sure that every person understands how living in such a hostile political environment undermines our everyday existence, our mental and physical well-being. And we will make sure that our country finds its way back to the community of democracies built on the respect for human rights, equality and the rule of law.

But we need your help as well. You have to hold our government accountable to its international human rights commitments.