

Strategic Intolerance: The Rise of Anti-LGBTQ+ Rhetoric in Right-Wing Politics in Türkiye and Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of the late 20th century and the 21st century, the increasing anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has become a noticeable part of the contemporary political arena in backsliding democracies, notably Türkiye and Hungary. The twain, both ruled by nationalist and conservative political parties, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Fidesz respectively, have experienced a prominent rise in the representation of LGBTQ+ symbols and communities as emblems of moral misfit or menaces to nationalist values, religion, communal unity, or traditions. This shift in narrative is part of a deeper process of eviscerating democracy, national populist rule, and the entrapment of political power in the right-wing administration and values. Leaders such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Viktor Orbán are observed to be more frequently relying on domestic polarizing campaigns that target LGBTQ+ communities and employ anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. This political standing of autocratic leaders suggests an endeavor to become the protectors of culture against “imposed” Western liberalism and the LGBTQ+ movements. Alongside a dominant incentive to mobilize their conservative-leaning voter bases and cultivating an almost permanent set of supporters, these initiatives also signal a wider aim of imposing religious or traditional values on their respective constituents in the face of the rising trend of human rights movements for LGBTQ+ rights.

The gradually expanding prominence of such rhetoric invites critical inquiry into the political function it serves, the sociocultural conditions that allow it to resonate with portions of the electorate, and the implications it holds for human rights, minority protection, and democratic pluralism in both countries. In the scope of national and international policy, the rise in discriminatory rhetoric against LGBTQ+ individuals and communities is caused by various circumstances. This study questions why anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has become a strategic component of right-wing campaigns and policies in Türkiye and Hungary.

INTRODUCTION

The development of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in right-wing incumbent political parties has intensified, starting from the mid-1900s to the present years. Even though there has been an advancement in social liberalism in many countries all over the world, the rise of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric continues to prevail in the agendas of right-wing political parties. In fact, political initiatives like the bill proposal that prohibits the discussion of LGBTQ+ rights and discourages the advertisement of such “gender neutralization” agendas in Türkiye by the Free Cause Party (HÜDA PAR) are examples that show the immense amount of political backlash that both the LGBTQ+ community and human rights defenders are starting to face more prominently.

It is evident that the world has seen a rise in political movements that support contemporary human rights norms — not just LGBTQ+ rights but also phenomena like women’s rights and racial equality.

In recent years, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has gained renewed visibility in global politics, particularly within countries experiencing democratic backsliding and the rise of right-wing populism. Politicians across a range of regimes have increasingly targeted LGBTQ+ communities to appeal to conservative values, construct enemies for political gain, and reshape national identity. This trend not only endangers minority rights but also reflects broader authoritarian tendencies that concern scholars of democracy, populism, and human rights.

Türkiye and Hungary—two countries with different cultural histories but converging political trajectories—stand out as key cases in this global pattern. In both contexts, right-wing ruling parties have embraced anti-LGBTQ+ narratives with growing intensity, embedding them into national discourse and campaign strategy. This raises an urgent and complex question at the heart of this study: why have right-wing politicians in Türkiye and Hungary increasingly adopted anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in their political campaigns?

This paper argues that the recent surge in anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric by right-wing politicians in Türkiye and Hungary is best understood as a backlash against increasing societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. As public opinion has gradually shifted toward greater tolerance and support for LGBTQ+ rights, especially among younger and more urban populations, political leaders have responded by doubling down on homophobic rhetoric to reassert traditional values, rally conservative bases, and resist perceived threats to national identity. Although subtle in countries that experience human rights and democratic backsliding like Türkiye and Hungary, the increase is evident in the public media and basically in the societal interactions that people have. The LGBTQ+ community went from being taboo in some countries to a topic that can be discussed on certain platforms. Rather than reflecting static cultural conservatism, these policies and discourses function as strategic reactions to changing social attitudes.

The purpose of this paper is to establish a correlation between the rise of pro-LGBTQ+ movements and sentiment and the rise of anti-LGBTQ+ policies in the area of right-wing politics in Türkiye and Hungary. Although these two aspects have been examined by scholars, this paper aims to reveal how these affect

one another to instrumentalize LGBTQ+ individuals and their rights. The paper will tie the literature together, resulting in a conclusion on the reason, impact, and comparison of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric of right-wing parties.

Other studies have demonstrated the use of LGBTQ+ rhetoric by right-wing politicians to attract conservative voters and to alienate opposition parties. However, this paper will compare two countries from different political backgrounds and their political environments regarding the ethical views on LGBTQ+ communities.

THEORY

There has been a wide range of political activities across the globe that indicate a certain rise against LGBTQ+ movements. In 2021, the Hungarian parliament passed legislation that effectively bans the distribution of information about sexual orientation to minors. Philip Ayoub and Kristian Stoeckl argue this is an example of state-sponsored homophobia, connecting it to the recent strengthening of Russia's 2013 anti-gay law (Journal of Democracy, 2024). It is evident that these backsliding countries all experience a backlash against the LGBTQ+ community, particularly in their political landscape. Although more common in backsliding and illiberal countries, anti-LGBTQ+ policies are not exclusive to one part of the world.

In major Western countries, such as the United States of America (USA), that have an effect on the global trajectory of LGBTQ+ rights, there has been a major rise in LGBTQ+ support from the public. While very few surveys have asked about support for transgender people, from the two surveys that have, there is a 40% increase in support between 2005 and 2011 (Andrew R. Flores, 2014). Flores connects this to the rise in media representation and policy advancements in the country, like the Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) decision (U.S Supreme Court Center, 2015). The study "The instrumentalization of post-truth politics in Turkey: the case of the 2023 elections" by Oğuz Ufuk Haksever and Ahmet Sözen of Eastern Mediterranean University is vital in seeing how political parties use anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric as a campaign strategy. The paper discusses how the AKP has utilized post-truth political discourse in order to create an alternative truth about the opposition. This paper shows that right-wing parties use LGBTQ+ hate to repel voters from the opposition. Even though the paper portrays the rise in anti-LGBTQ+ policies to strategic compliance, it is also evident that the increase in anti-LGBTQ+ politics in a backsliding country like Türkiye also followed an increase in wider LGBTQ+ acceptance pre-2023 elections. Furthermore, the research, titled "Post-homophobic imaginaries amongst the far-right in Germany and Switzerland" by Stefanie Claudine Boulila, Antonia Marienfeld, and Fabienne Wellner, explores how far-right party actors in Germany and Switzerland actively use liberal discourses to advance reactionary gender and sexual politics beyond outright opposition. The paper also discusses the AfD and its anti-LGBTQ+ policies along with its homosexual leader, Alice Weidel. This paper aids in revealing the political environment regarding LGBTQ+ rights. The existing literature works to portray that LGBTQ+ identity and rights relating to gender identity have been and are actively being used as tools for political gain, and parties' approach towards the subject may shift according to these

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trajectories. Right-wing politicians across countries carry the incentive to eliminate the rise of social sympathy for LGBTQ+ communities, or at least to instrumentalize it for their conservative voter base. There are, it seems, a variety of circumstances that lead incumbent governments to take a hostile stance towards LGBTQ+ movements.

The literature demonstrates that LGBTQ+ rights and policies are significant in the interplay of morality, politics, and strategic implementation of policies both during campaigns and also during the terms of right-wing incumbent administrations.

METHODS AND DATA

This paper utilizes the method of comparative case study analysis to investigate the reasons behind right-wing politicians in Türkiye and Hungary adopting anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in their political campaigns. Comparative analysis is an effective method of uncovering patterns across different national contexts while acknowledging shared and divergent qualities of both countries. Comparing these two cases, the study uncovers the political, social and institutional conditions that contribute to the rising use of anti-LGBTQ+ policies by right-wing actors.

The case selection is done by accounting for both variation and similarity. Türkiye and Hungary are two nations with different historical trajectories and political environments; however, they share a variety of qualities that make them comparable. Türkiye and Hungary are both hybrid regimes with recent authoritarian shifts, governed by consolidated right-wing populist parties— the AKP in Türkiye and Fidesz in Hungary. Both countries have undergone major backsliding in the past decade and experienced the strategic politicization of the LGBTQ+ community in national politics. These qualities mention control the regime type and political ideology; the differences in cultural and historical aspects enable the study to test the broader applicability of the results.

It is important to note that Hungary and Türkiye do not directly reflect upon the historical and political qualities of all countries that are led by a right-wing regime. Nevertheless, the similarities in the emergence of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in these countries explain a broader spectrum of trends in the international political arena. This also increases the confidence in the robustness of the argument that this comparative case study aims to make.

In another scenario where two similar Western European democracies were chosen, for instance, the conclusions might have reflected the regional factors that determine the policy approach towards the LGBTQ+ people rather than a broader trend of political dynamics that the study aims to demonstrate.

Hungary and Türkiye are distinct in a variety of aspects. While the majority religion of Türkiye is Sunni Islam, it is Christianity, with Catholicism being the largest denomination. However, the similarities in government authoritarianism and public conservativeness are also evident. Consequently, if there is a common trend of policy backlash seen in the two countries, the argument of the paper has a higher

potential of being applicable to the rest of the globe because Hungary and Türkiye have different demographics but have produced the same result when it comes to LGBTQ+ policies.

The case study relies on several datasets to analyze a variety of factors in the matter of what drives the recent increase in anti-LGBTQ+ policies in these two countries. The first dataset used is the V-Dem Varieties of Party Identity and Organization Dataset (V-Party). The dataset provides information on the ideological orientation and issue positioning of political parties over time, including their stances on LGBTQ+ rights and policies. It allows for the visualization of changes over the years in the policies of major parties, Fidesz and AKP in this case, that affect the overall national policy and enforcement of the countries.

Another dataset used is the World Values Survey (WVS). It offers insight into the public attitude toward the LGBTQ+ people, helping assess whether the shifts in political rhetoric are a response to the change in opinion in public or a strategic way to ameliorate ballot performance.

These datasets are used to operationalize the dependent variable (anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric by political parties), the independent variables (party ideology, regime type, populist discourse), and alternative explanations like external political pressures. By using these resources, the study ensures both validity and comparability of the findings.

It is also important to note that there are a variety of factors that affect the political landscape of a country related to LGBTQ+ rights. Thus, this paper will consider some of these external and internal factors along with the data.

Below is a conceptual framework that demonstrates the factors that effectively determine the tolerance in the policies of an administration in a country.

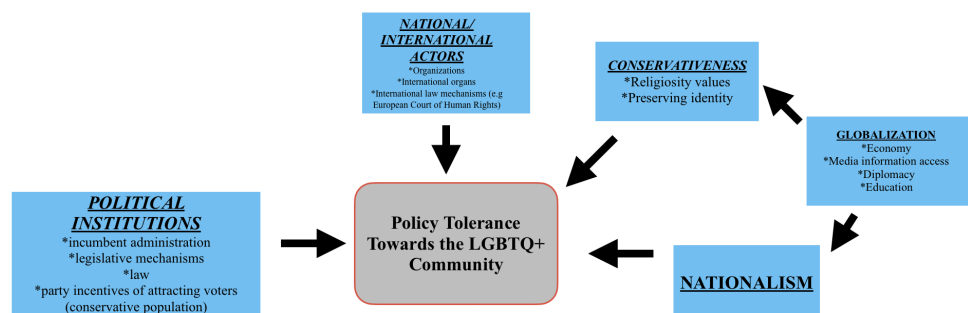


Figure 1: Conceptual framework illustrating the multifaceted determinants of policy tolerance towards the LGBTQ+ community.

The factors mentioned above are the reasons for the change in public opinion, thus changing the political strategy of right-wing parties. Globalization, led by international economic developments, international trade, the development of widespread media, and a more globalized education and diplomacy, changes two major factors in a country: Conservativeness and nationalism of the people. Inevitably, many countries, including Hungary and Türkiye, have become more globalized with the emergence and advancement of the aforementioned factors, making them more susceptible to changes in the political and human rights trends across the globe. This evolved public opinion in many multifaceted issues concerning morality, including the question of the legitimacy of the LGBTQ+ community.

A variety of international actors also contribute to the way countries shape their policies. Some organizations promote what they believe is best for family structures globally, which is anti-LGBTQ+ policies. One example is the World Congress of Families, organized by the International Organization for the Family (IOF). The organization has been organizing large international “pro-family” conventions that bring together the most fringe activists engaged in anti-LGBT extremism since 1997 and has been deemed a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Human Rights Campaign, 2014).

An organization that contributed to the development of pro-LGBTQ+ sentiment is the European Court of Human Rights. With Türkiye being one of its members, it creates a rhetoric that supports LGBTQ+ human rights movements, even though the Turkish government does not consistently comply with its rulings. With the increase in the number of Turkish citizens desiring to join the EU or to ameliorate their country’s stance as a modern, forthcoming nation that exemplifies Western democratic values, the positive sentiment for reforms in the understanding of morality has increased.

FINDINGS

In both Türkiye and Hungary, religiosity in the population has plummeted over the last decade. It is a result of globalization and exposure to outside influences. This recent decrease has resulted in a less conservative society, compared to the historical positions of the populations of both countries. Often, the traditional doctrinal interpretations of majority religious beliefs in both countries, Catholicism in Hungary and Sunni Islam in Türkiye, have opposing views on homosexuality and gender identity. For the Catholic Church, and specifically the Hungarian Catholic Bishops’ Conference, still directs that “avoid common blessing for couples who live together in a non-marital partnership or in a marriage that is not valid in the Church, or who live in a same-sex partnership” for Catholic priests. Convergently, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the official religious authority in Türkiye under the national government, explicitly states that Islam “curses homosexuality”. The reflection of these governmental stances are evident in public opinion. In public dilemmas such as morality issues, the influence of the majority religion is significant, making it an important factor to consider when analysing recent developments in morality issues and human rights, like the LGBTQ+ community. Below is a graph that demonstrates the change in the importance of religion in the Hungarian population. The data is taken from the World Values Survey and includes data from the years 1998, 2009, and between the years 2017 and 2022.

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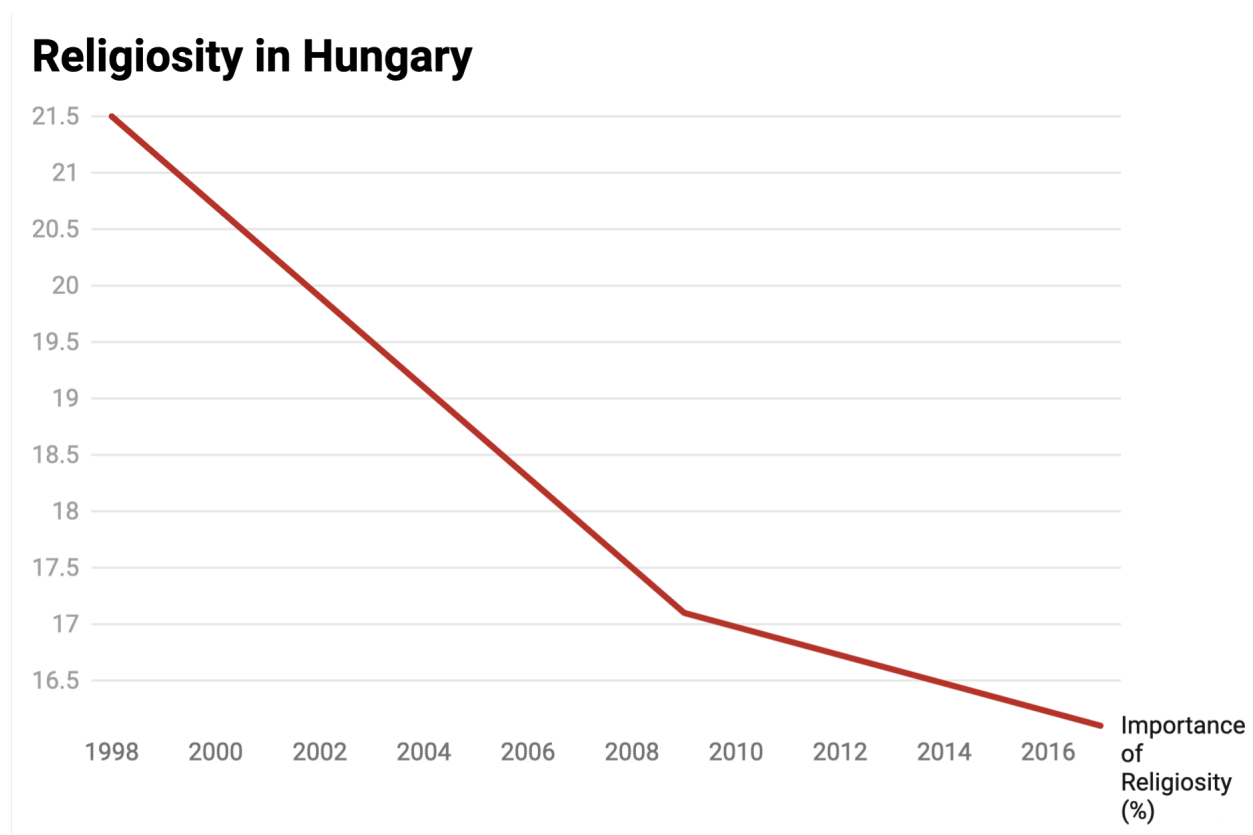


Figure 1: Percentage of respondents in Hungary who consider religion “very important”, based on World Values Survey data from Wave 3(1995-1998), Wave 5 (2005-2009), and Wave 7 (2017–2022). The figure illustrates the evolution of religiosity over time, reflecting cultural shifts that may influence political and social dynamics in Hungary.

Figure 1 explicitly demonstrates a decrease in the percentage of individuals who perceive religion as an important part of life according to the data from the WVS. In 1998, the percentage of survey respondents who said religion was “very important” was 21.5%. Over the years, this amount decreased, shifting to 17.1% in 2009 and then 16.1% between the years 2017 and 2022.

For Türkiye, although not consistent, the data demonstrates the same trend. Below is a graph that demonstrates the importance of religion in Türkiye over the years. The data is derived from the World Values Survey.

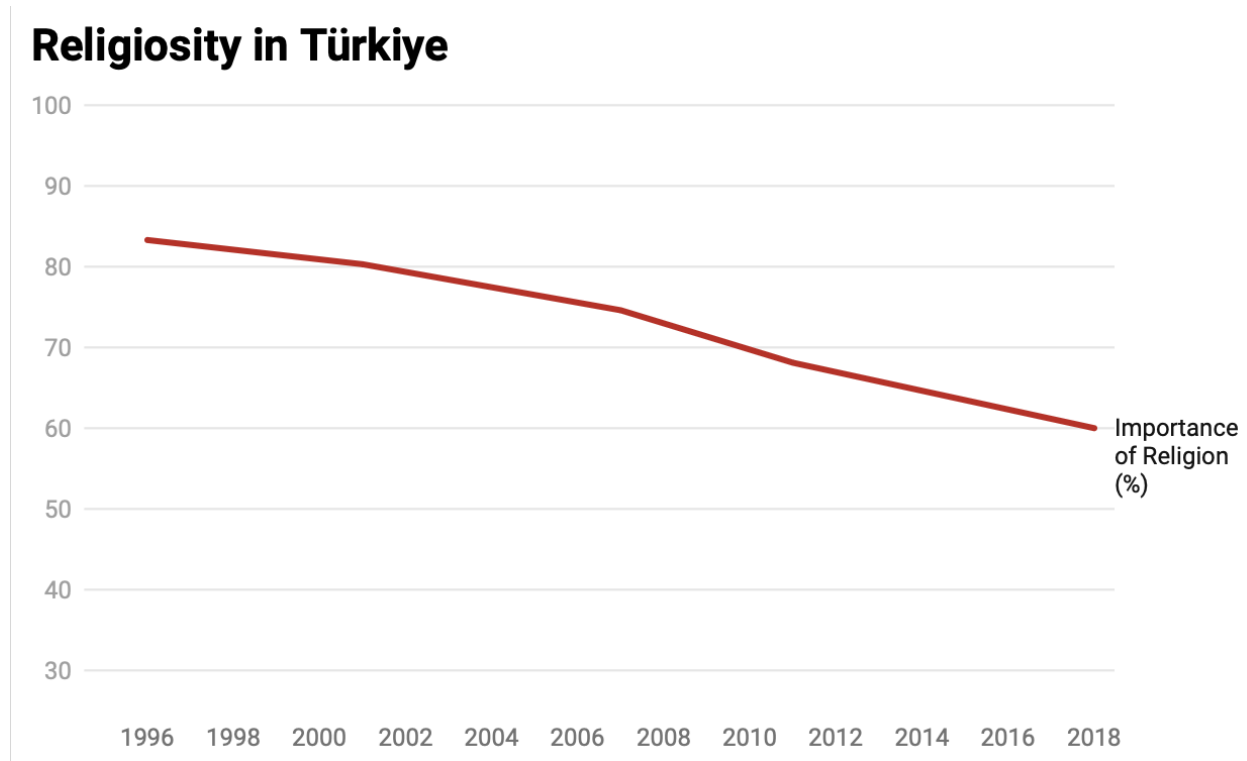


Figure 2: *Percentage of respondents in Türkiye who consider religion an important part of life, based on World Values Survey data from Wave 2 (1990–1994), Wave 3 (1995–1998), Wave 5 (2005–2009), Wave 6 (2010–2014), and Wave 7 (2017–2022). The figure illustrates changes in religiosity over time, highlighting cultural trends that may influence the country’s political landscape.*

According to Figure 2, in 1990, the percentage of survey respondents who perceived religion as a “very important” part of their life was 60.5%, which is also significantly higher than the corresponding percentage for Hungary. The following years demonstrated a different trend. In 1996, the percentage increased to 83.3%. After those years, the percentage fell consistently, arriving at 68% in 2011 and 60% in 2018.

Another independent variable to consider is the rate of homosexuality acceptance in both Hungary and Türkiye. Below is a graph that visualizes data from the World Values Survey and demonstrates the change in homosexuality acceptance in the population of Hungary. The graph demonstrates the percentage of respondents who state that homosexuality was never justifiable, with data from the World Values Survey.

Justifiability of Homosexuality in Hungary

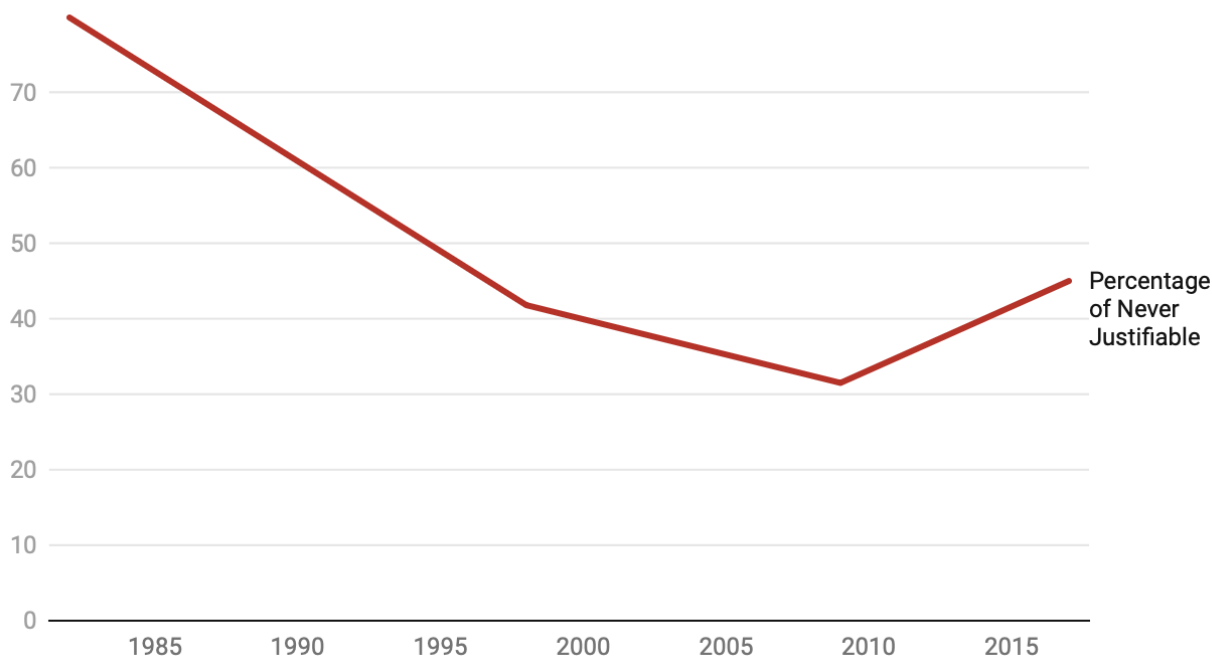


Figure 3 displays the percentage of respondents in Hungary who selected “never justifiable” in response to the question of homosexuality’s acceptability, based on World Values Survey data. In 1990, 79.9% of respondents reported that homosexuality is never justifiable. This figure dropped significantly to 41.8% by 1998 and further decreased to 31.5% in 2009. However, in the most recent wave (2017–2022), the percentage rose again to 45%, indicating a reversal in the previous downward trend.

Türkiye has consistently been a country that is relatively hostile towards LGBTQ+ communities, both politically and socially. However, the acceptability of homosexuality has changed over the years. The below graph presents the change in percentage of respondents who stated homosexuality was not “justifiable”.

Justifiability of Homosexuality in Türkiye

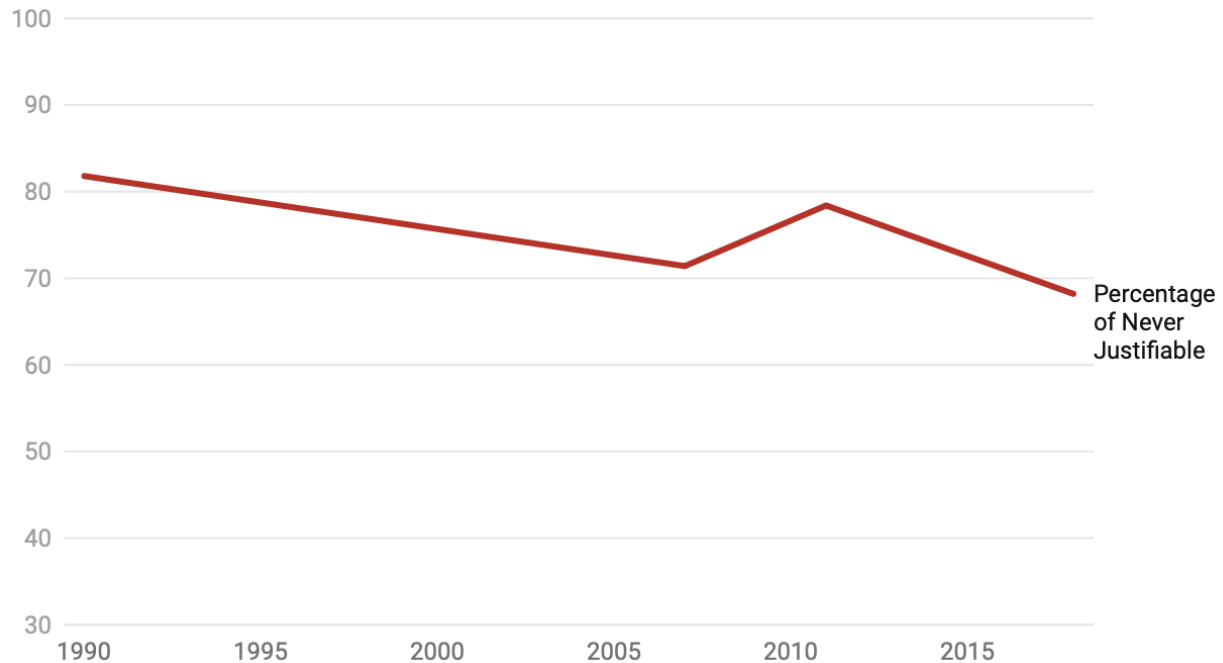


Figure 4 paints a picture that is relatively different from Hungary. In Türkiye, respondents who stated that homosexuality was “never justifiable” stayed high, despite the decrease. It is conspicuous that Türkiye has remained more hostile towards LGBTQ+ people compared to Hungary. The similarity between the two cases is that Türkiye has also witnessed a decrease in rejection of homosexuality. In 1990, 81.8% of respondents held this view. This percentage declined to 71.4% by 2007. However, in 2011, there was a notable increase to 78.4%, followed by another decline to 68.2% in the 2018 data. The graph demonstrates a fluctuating trend, with periods of both decline and resurgence in non-acceptance levels over time. Although an increase was seen in 2011, it is evident that homosexuality acceptance increased in Türkiye with the percentage of respondents who state its never justifiable going from 81.8% in 1990 to 68.2% in 2018. However, the data is solely an aiding factor in coming to this conclusion. Several political aspects of the country are also relevant in determining the increase in homosexuality acceptance in the population of Türkiye. For instance, there were no recognized LGBTQ+ organizations in Türkiye until the establishment of Kaos GL, the largest LGBTQ+ association in the country, in 1994. Since then, the number of the associations increased, with more support from the public.

In addition to the public opinion toward homosexuality, it is also consequential to analyze how the governments of Hungary and Türkiye changed their LGBTQ+ policies over time. This dependent variable is crucial in understanding the relationship between public opinion and political strategy.

Below is a graph that indicates the overall LGBTQ+ policy tolerance of Fidesz, the political party that had a significant authority over the country with Victor Orbán, its leader, becoming prime minister in 2010.

Fidesz - Hungarian Civil Alliance LGBTQ+ Tolerance

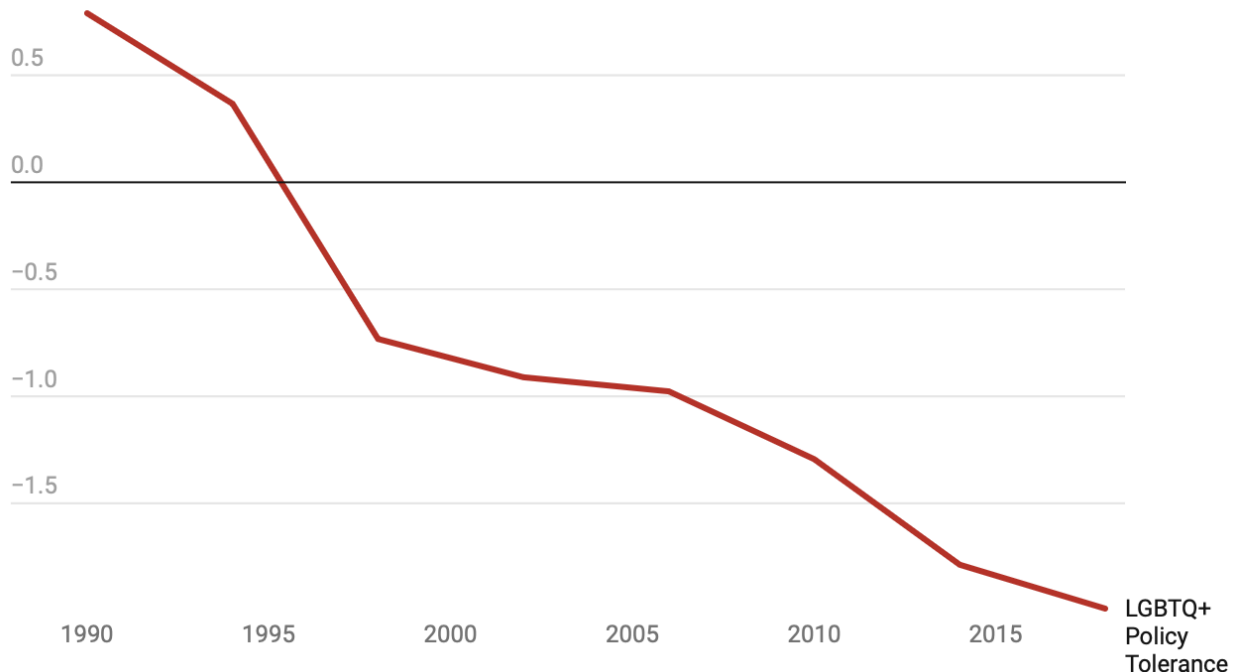


Figure 5: Level of LGBTQ+ policy tolerance of Fidesz in Hungary across time, based on V-Dem dataset indicators. The figure reflects the party's position on LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion through coding of policy preferences, rhetoric, and legislative behavior.

Figure 5 shows how the LGBTQ+ rating of the part decreased consistently since the year 1990, proving that in recent years there has been an increase in anti-LGBTQ+ policies in the administration of Hungary. The rating has fallen from 0.79 in 1990 to -1.992 in 2018.

Türkiye experienced a similar trend over the years. The below graphs shows the change in LGBTQ+ rating of the Justice and Development Party, more commonly known as AKP, which is the party that has

had a significant impact on the national policy of Türkiye since 2003, with party leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan becoming prime minister and later president.

Justice and Development Party (AKP) LGBTQ+ Tolerance

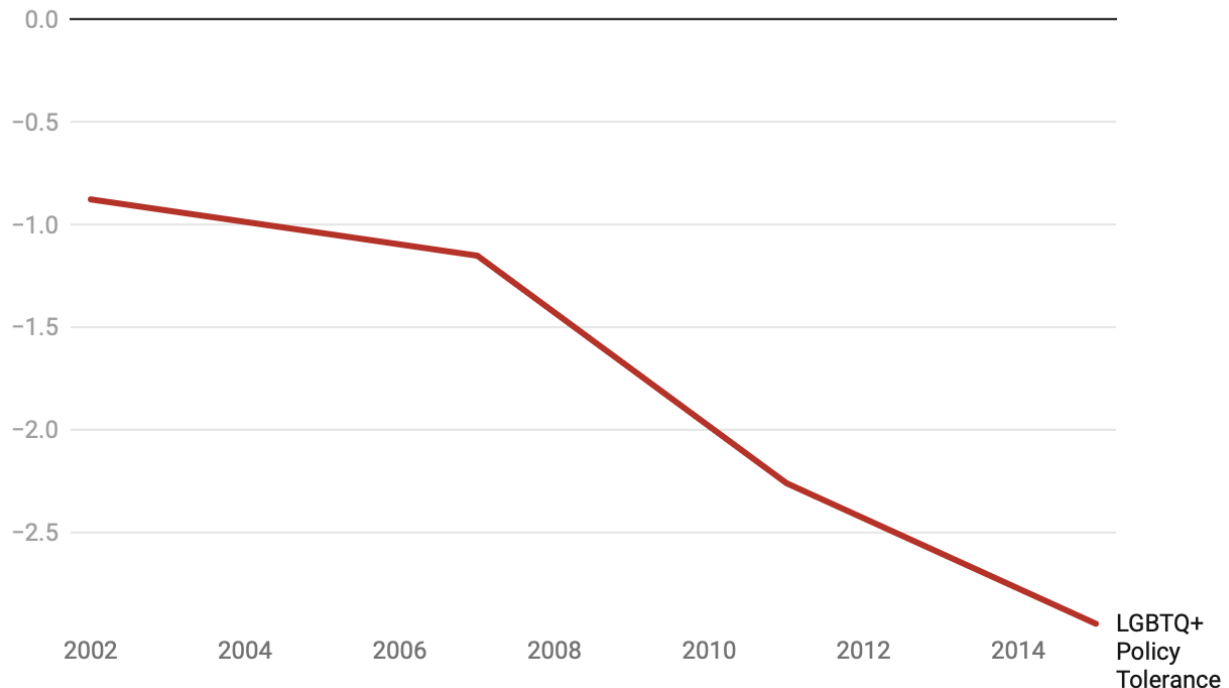


Figure 6: Level of LGBTQ+ policy tolerance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Türkiye across time, based on V-Dem dataset indicators. The figure illustrates the party's stance on LGBTQ+ rights as captured through policy positions, public rhetoric, and legislative actions.

Figure 6 shows the decrease in LGBTQ+ ratings of AKP from 2001 to 2015. In the year 2001, the rating was -0.878; since then it has fallen to -2.944 in 2015.

DISCUSSION

Although similar, the two countries have distinct values for both LGBTQ+ acceptance and policy tolerance ratings. The reason behind that is the geopolitical importance and location of the two nations. Hungary is a member of the European Union and Türkiye a candidate country. The EU has been known for cumulatively promoting LGBTQ+ rights and having pro-LGBTQ+ policies. The European Commission, for instance, has launched the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy for the years 2020-2025 (European Commission, 2024) and published a report on 25 September 2024. Hungary being more

tolerant towards LGBTQ+ communities, both with public opinion and political landscape, can be attributed to its relatively closer relations with the EU and its position as a European country in the global trajectory.

This does not mean that Türkiye did not experience a period where politicians were endeavoring to seem more tolerant to LGBTQ+ communities. In fact, in a televised interview, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated: "It is necessary for homosexuals to be legally protected within the framework of their own rights and freedoms. At times, we do not find the treatment they are subjected to on some television screens to be humane" (Kaos GL, 2002). It is important to consider that Erdoğan, at the time, was dedicated to expedite the membership process of Türkiye to the EU. However, this approach has been deemed insincere and strategic, considering the immense amount of anti-LGBTQ+ language used by Erdoğan and various AKP politicians. In 2023, Erdoğan stated he "would never be pro-LGBT" (PinkNews, 2023). Consequently, the policy of AKP has drastically changed towards the LGBTQ+ population.

The world has witnessed a wave of globalization that came inevitably along with the impactful rise of worldwide media. Additionally, with the increased soft power of western nations, who had a relatively positive approach to human rights matters and were comparably more open to LGBTQ+ communities, the world has seen a significant decrease in conservativeness. Although the difference was slight in some nations, with religiosity decreasing it was inevitable to see a wave of social liberalization of the world. In examining two distinct countries, Türkiye and Hungary, which have different demographics but similar political landscapes, the study shows that this increase in liberal thought and pro-LGBTQ+ movements is not exclusive to western states like the USA or United Kingdom (UK).

Religiosity has seen a decrease in both countries, allowing for movements deemed immoral by these religious institutions to thrive and amplify their impact. Along with the decrease of religiosity came an interconnected era where relatively conservative societies like Hungarians and Turks were exposed to liberal content, policies and human rights movements being born across the political landscape of the 21st century. This has given rise to a wider range of LGBTQ+ acceptance in both countries, as data shows. Both Figure 3 and 4 demonstrate that in recent years, Hungarians and Turks have become more accepting towards the LGBTQ+ community. Even though the data shows homosexuality acceptance, it can also be applied to how the general pro-LGBTQ+ movement is perceived since in these countries, the acceptance of the two tends to be directly proportional in the population. Although there could be differences in the acceptance rates of trans and gay citizens, for instance, the increase in acceptance of homosexuality proves a clear trend of improvement in the area.

While this is the case, the political environment in both countries seem to be advancing in the other direction, with both countries' incumbent administrations showing a trend of deterioration in their policies for LGBTQ+ communities. It seems contradicting that a country's populist right-wing party is working against the general trend in the population. This raises a critical question: why do ruling political parties intensify their anti-LGBTQ+ policy stances even as public attitudes appear to be shifting in a more accepting and inclusive direction?

The data across the years prove that there is a possibility that these two changes, decrease in homosexuality rejection and increase in anti-LGBTQ+ policies of major parties, can be interlinked. This portrays the escalation in anti-LGBTQ+ policies in both AKP and Fidesz administrations as a backlash or a reaction against the rising support for the LGBTQ+ movements and rights in their countries. Furthermore, this is fueled by the increasing levels of globalization that the international community experiences. It is arguable that due to the increasing amount of sympathy developed in populations right-wing populist parties endeavor to suppress these movements by implementing more anti-LGBTQ+ policies and placing anti-LGBTQ+ discourse in their speeches and party agendas.

LIMITATIONS

Due to Türkiye's sociopolitically adverse conditions for LGBTQ+ research, the data resources in this area are scarce. Hence, the data for homosexuality acceptance in Türkiye shows a fluctuating pattern, not as clearly demonstrating the change as the data associated with Hungary. However, the change is evident along with the observations in the developments in the human rights domain of Turkish politics.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complex dynamics of LGBTQ+ rights and the socio-political climate in Turkey, with a particular focus on the intersection of government policies and public opinion. Through the analysis of two cases, Hungary and Türkiye, the study reveals a growing polarization that both marginalizes the LGBTQ+ community and fosters political agendas centered on nationalism and conservatism. These findings prove that the rise of state-sponsored anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric derives from the right-wing administrations' intent to break the confidence, continuance and durability of emerging LGBTQ+ movements and supporters. The paper portrays this rise of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric as a response to growing support for the community across the globe.

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