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Authors: Sara Tóth Martínez
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Sara Tóth Martínez

saratoth@ucm.es

Journal of Science, Humanities and Arts, Freiburg, Germany

Abstract

This article analyzes the 2025 Budapest Pride through the lens of Guglielmo Ferrero's theory of power and legitimacy. Ferrero argued that illegitimate regimes rely on fear to maintain control, a concept used here to examine the Hungarian government's attempt to ban the Pride event. Despite legal threats and institutional repression, the parade was held peacefully, demonstrating a significant act of civil resistance. The article argues that the regime's intense response revealed its awareness of its own fragility and lack of legitimacy. Ultimately, the mass participation in the Pride demonstrated the power of citizens who recognize their own legitimacy over that of a coercive political system.

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to understand the Budapest Pride of 2025, which became one of the largest mass rallies of recent years in Hungary, despite being banned by the authorities. This political phenomenon will be analyzed through the theoretical framework of Guglielmo Ferrero, who specialized in the analysis of the role of fear in illegitimate political systems. This article first introduces the political theory of Ferrero. Secondly, the political events that led to the organization of the Pride in Budapest are going to be presented. Finally, a brief analysis is going to be made on the importance of the awareness of one's own legitimacy as a citizen in a democratic system.

Ferrero's Theory (1942)

In 1922, Ferrero, an Italian journalist and historian, was personally confronted by Mussolini after publishing a critical article about him in an American university journal. The fact that an omnipotent dictator was so irritated by a small article written by an academic in a little-known publication led Ferrero to reconsider the nature of power. He asked himself; Why would someone with so much power be so concerned about a single article published so far away? Ferrero's answer was that leaders who take power in an illegitimate way live in fear of the people from whom they seized power. Since they are frightened by the fact that their power, as easily as they acquired it, could be taken away, they redirect the fear into the people by ruling over them with violence, corruption, and deception.

The question of legitimacy is essential, as Ferrero argues that the most important inequality requiring rational justification is the inequality of power. This implies that all power structures must be perceived as legitimate in order to be accepted. It is crucial to understand that acceptance of the principles of legitimacy does not equate to affection for the political system in which one lives. One can accept the legitimacy of a democratic regime while still disapproving of the government in power. Ferrero concluded that, in illegitimate political structures, those in power are acutely aware of their own insecurity, which leads them to fear the people they govern. To resolve this tension, they redirect their fear onto the populace. Consequently, illegitimate leaders must constantly generate fear within the society they oppress in order to feel secure in their position of power. This means that the true win of a society over such a system is to achieve the ability to face the fear put in them by the rulers, because this way, they can redirect the fear in their direction, taking away from them one of their biggest weapons.



The Hungarian Political Context: A Quasi-Legitimate Regime

Applying Ferrero's theoretical framework to Hungary, I argue that Viktor Orbán's regime is a quasi-legitimate political system. This characterization stems from the fact that it originated with a democratic electoral victory in 2010, when Orbán secured a supermajority. However, once in power, he used this supermajority to alter electoral laws and other key elements of the democratic institutions established during the post-1989 transition, making it virtually impossible for the opposition to win future elections. Despite its democratic façade, the system has ensured the uninterrupted personal rule of Orbán, which is a clear violation of a fundamental democratic principle. The Orbán regime, therefore, retains some features that give it the appearance of legitimacy, but lacks the true legitimacy necessary for those in power to feel secure. As a result, the government must rely on mechanisms of fear, control, and coercion to maintain its position.

In recent years, the broader legitimacy of the system has been increasingly questioned due to economic stagnation, corruption scandals, and rising tensions with the EU over various political issues. These developments have contributed to the emergence of a new opposition party, *Tisza*, which appears to have created a viable alternative to the ruling regime.

Case of Study: Budapest Pride 2025

The situation of the LGBTQ+ community has become increasingly difficult under Viktor Orbán's dictatorial regime in Hungary. Sexual minorities have been targeted as a common enemy to support a populist political narrative aimed at preserving the existing power dynamics. The government has justified its actions against the queer community by claiming to protect children. However, actual child protection has not been a priority—evident in the dire conditions of orphanages, the concealment of child sexual abuse cases by government ministers (Solti 2024), and the deteriorating state of the education and healthcare systems.

Orbán made his first hints to ban Pride on February 22 of 2025 (Víg 2025). Later on, on the 18th of March, the assembly laws were modified in a way that they prohibited assemblies which violate the prohibitions of the law on the protection of children and guardianship administration; *The relevant paragraph of the guardianship law states that, in order to ensure the rights of the child, it is forbidden*



to make accessible to persons under the age of eighteen any pornographic content or content that depicts sexuality for its own sake, or that promotes or portrays deviation from self-identity corresponding to birth sex, gender reassignment, or homosexuality. The assembly authority shall prohibit the holding of an assembly if, based on the information available after consultation, it can be reasonably assumed that the notification is aimed at holding a prohibited assembly. If people still decide to gather, it would have legal consequences such as monetary fines and legal repercussions (Kormány.hu, 2025). This modification was clearly made to ban the Budapest Pride. After this, everybody was unsure if it was going to be organized and what legal consequences it would have. The government was very strong about the fact that they were not going to allow the event. Lázár János, Minister of Construction and Transport, affirmed that if the Pride happened after the prohibition, they would consider it a failure of the system and of the government (Cseke 2025).

One has to take into consideration that in the past years, the government had been passing antidemocratic laws and constitutional modifications without facing significant political consequences. Karácsony Gergely, the mayor of Budapest, affirmed that the Pride was going to be held and found a legal loophole to make it possible. If it was organized by the council, it didn't need to be approved by the authorities. The only legal problem left was that if Pride was interpreted as a reunion, it could be held, but the police office could ban it, while if it was understood as a musical dance parade, it didn't need the approval of the police (Mizsúr 2025).

Slowly, June arrived. The neo-Nazi group *64 Vármegye* made various communications affirming that they were not going to let the event take place. They were planning to occupy the same square where the Pride was going to happen and organized a car-marching protest and attacks in several points of the city. In the same way, the far-right political party *Mi Hazánk* planned the occupation of the bridge where the Pride parade was going to walk through. Moreover, another far-right organization, *Betyársereg*, affirmed that they were going to help all of these actions (Kolozsi 2025). The day before the Pride, the police office affirmed that the manifestation would not be approved (Barta 2025). The government also affirmed that the event was illegal and not allowed, and even though they were not going to actively perform violence, economic and judicial repercussions were going to take place (MR 2025). The Pride began in this atmosphere of ambiguity, where nobody could tell what was going to happen to the persons who decided to take part in the manifestation.



At this point, we can see a government that is doubting its own legitimacy in the eyes of the country. If the system had been legitimate, they wouldn't have needed to use force, but the law would have been accepted, and civilians wouldn't have been threatened. The fact that the government invested so much money and energy into the communication and prohibition of the event shows that they were afraid of what was going to happen. According to Ferrero's reading this would mean that they are conscious of their own illegitimacy, and they intend to put that fear back into the people.

The happenings of the Budapest Pride 2025 serve as a great example of how a situation like this should be faced by citizens who perceive their system as an illegitimate one. The rally became one of the largest political movements of the year, with an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 participants, which is roughly ten times more than in previous years (Mohos 2025). Despite facing a clearly hostile environment, the parade remained peaceful and non-provocative. This mass rally represents an interesting turn in relation to Ferrero's theoretical framework. Although the government responded to the Pride with threats and by creating an atmosphere of fear, following Ferrero's script, the protesters did not react by generating fear in return. Quite the opposite occurred: the participants of the Pride responded with a peaceful and inclusive rally, free of fear-inducing slogans or violent actions. This, according to Ferrero, would represent the failure of the quasi-illegitimate system, which did not manage to redirect the fear and vulnerability they felt into the people, even though they used all the institutional tools they had in their hands to stop it from happening.

Conclusion

The non-violent nature of the Pride rally further undermined the already weak legitimacy of the regime by refusing to engage in a dynamic of fear escalation. This means that the greatest power of the citizens in a system where the regime is frightened is to be sure of their own legitimacy.

Of course, the future remains uncertain, and Budapest has long stood as a distinct political counterpoint to the central government. Yet, through the lens of Ferrero's framework, we can observe how illegitimate political power operates: by instilling fear, making people feel watched and vulnerable, and by both direct and indirect expressions of violence. Despite this, citizens chose to confront power peacefully, refusing to let fear dictate their actions.



The façade concealing the political fragility of an illegitimate system was shattered and this is one of the most important lessons of the 2025 Hungarian Pride. Power lies where people believe it lies, and a quasi-legitimate regime begins to collapse the moment it becomes clear that the people recognize their own legitimacy as greater than that of the system.



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About the Author

Sara Tóth Martínez holds a B.A. in History from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, with a focus on Ancient History and the History of Gender Relations and Women. She has participated in several archaeological excavations held by both the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. During her undergraduate studies, she also served as the lead representative of the Literature and Philosophy Student Learning Circle at Colegio Mayor Universitario Chaminade. She is currently pursuing an M.A. in Altertumswissenschaften at the University of Freiburg, specializing in identity formation processes and the history of women in Ancient Greece. In addition to her academic work, she serves as an editorial assistant for the Journal of Science, Humanities and Arts.