Banning Pride is a fundamental threat to democracy: Why the EU cannot look away from Hungary

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> As Hungary becomes the first EU country to ban and criminalise a Pride march, the European Commission's failure to respond signals a deeper crisis for democracy and human rights across the Union, says ILGA-Europe's Advocacy Director, Katrin Hugendubel.

Imagine this: Brussels Pride has been banned by the Belgian government. Its organisers are under investigation. Facial recognition software scans the crowd for anyone daring to attend regardless, so they can be profiled and fined. Politicians remain largely silent. The European Commission expresses concern, but takes no action.

Now, replace Brussels with Budapest. This isn't a dystopian thought experiment – it is reality.

Hungary has become the first EU country to effectively ban a Pride march. Not due to any risk of violence or public safety concerns, but because the government has decided that LGBTI people marching peacefully through the streets of their capital is no longer acceptable.

This is about more than just LGBTI rights. It's about the future of democracy in Europe.

At ILGA-Europe, we've been warning about the instrumentalisation of LGBTI people by anti-democratic actors for the past five years or more, but in the past year, this has stepped up in ways we couldn't even have imagined. The Hungarian government didn't just ban Pride, it criminalised its organisers and police will use facial recognition technology to identify and fine peaceful participants.

Civic space under attack as authoritarian tactics spread

The closure of civic space in Hungary is accelerating at an alarming pace. The latest draft law, titled *On Transparency in the Public Sphere*, would make it virtually impossible for civil society organisations (CSOs) that are critical of the government or advocate for women's and LGBTI rights to receive any form of support from abroad, including dedicated EU funding through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.

The playbook is getting clearer: weaponise minorities, discredit and defund CSOs, dismantle democracy. LGBTI people are merely pawns in this game of destruction. First it's demonising trans people and rainbow flags, next it's press freedom, academic freedom, independent courts. Don't believe it? Just look at what's happening in the United States of America.

All across Europe, the far-right is testing the limits. In the UK, the Supreme Court stripped legal protections from trans people. In Georgia, once an aspiring EU state, a draconian legislative package straight out of Moscow was passed to silence LGBTI expression. In Bulgaria and Italy, debates rage over who gets to exist in public space and in schoolbooks.

The EU's silence is not neutrality, it is complicity

And the European Commission? It watches. It warns. But it does not act. There's been no infringement procedure launched over the Hungarian Pride ban. No political cost imposed for criminalising peaceful assembly. And while statements are made in Brussels about "European values," activists are left to fight disinformation, police intimidation, and public hostility alone.

Let's be clear: when the Commission turns a blind eye to the banning of Pride in the EU, it is not neutrality, it is complicity.

This failure to act doesn't just hurt LGBTI people. It erodes the very foundation the EU claims to be built on: the rule of law, fundamental rights, civil space. Civil society groups, especially those defending LGBTI rights, are being squeezed by legal loopholes, hostile narratives, and funding restrictions. In some places, they are branded as "foreign agents" or "enemies of the nation." And this anti-NGO strategy isn't unique to Hungary. We're seeing quiet, strategic echoes of it across the board. Even the European Commission is not immune, as centre and far-right actors target NGO funding in an effort to weaken organisations that defend human rights.

Democracy is being steadily eroded across Europe, not only with headline making mechanisms like Pride bans, but through a thousand quiet cuts.

Not too late to turn the tide

But it's not too late to turn the tide. It's time for the European Commission to stop issuing statements and start defending rights. It's time to launch infringement proceedings against Hungary for banning peaceful assembly in the EU. It's time to step up and support civil society groups targeted by smear campaigns, restrictive laws and funding threats. It's time for the Commission to stop separating "social issues" from "governance", because when governments chip away at LGBTI rights, they're also chipping away at constitutional guarantees, judicial independence, and the integrity of the state itself. It's all connected.

Above all, it is time to treat LGBTI human rights as what they are: a barometer for the health of democracy across the EU.

So, as rainbow flags wave this weekend in Brussels, where EU citizens are free to peacefully assemble at Pride without facial profiling and fines, without criminalisation, we urge EU leaders to look to Hungary and take action. You cannot have a Union built on equality and allow one of your own to criminalise Pride. Because if it starts with banning one march, where does it end?