

# Pride and freedom of assembly in Europe

## TRACING THE EROSION OF CIVIC SPACE BEHIND THE EU'S FIRST PRIDE BAN.

Over the past five years, Pride marches have become one of the clearest indicators of the health of democracy and fundamental rights in Europe and Central Asia. This trajectory became most visible in 2025, when Hungary adopted legislative amendments explicitly outlawing LGBTI-themed assemblies, marking the first formal Pride ban within a European Union member state. When states restrict Pride, they do not only target LGBTI visibility; they test how far they can go in restricting freedom of assembly, the rule of law, and dissent itself. The treatment of Pride increasingly reveals how governments approach public space, pluralism, and political opposition more broadly.

The contestation of Pride is not a neutral social fluctuation. While broader societal tensions form part of the context, the escalation documented in recent years reflects sustained political strategies by actors who have consistently framed LGBTI visibility as a threat to public order, morality, or children. These narratives have not emerged spontaneously; they have been cultivated over time and embedded into legislative proposals, administrative practice, and public discourse across multiple countries.

The five-year period under review in this chapter (2020–2025) captures a decisive phase in this escalation.

The [COVID-19](#) pandemic marked an important turning point. Across Europe and Central Asia, Pride marches and other public assemblies were cancelled or heavily restricted under emergency public health measures. While these cancellations were justified on public health grounds, the prolonged absence from public space risked eroding LGBTI visibility and normalising restrictions on assembly.

At the same time, beyond public health restrictions, state responses to assemblies during this period continued to involve repression. While many Pride events were cancelled under emergency measures, detentions of demonstrators were reported in Azerbaijan. In Belarus, a months-long crackdown followed protests, involving arrests, violence, and torture. Pride-related events were attacked or disrupted by extremist groups in Bulgaria and Ukraine. In several countries, assemblies were restricted through administrative means, including permit denials, while activists faced arrests and ongoing court proceedings linked to peaceful Pride participation, notably in Turkey and Russia.

Even at this stage, it was evident that restrictions were not purely temporary or health-related. Courts occasionally intervened, including rulings striking down Pride bans in Turkey.

At the European level, the European Court of Human Rights has for nearly two decades established clear standards on freedom of assembly in cases such as *Oya Ataman v. Turkey* and *Bączkowski and Others v. Poland*, affirming that states must not only refrain from unjustified bans but also ensure effective protection of peaceful assemblies, including LGBTI marches. Recent litigation, including pending cases such as *Tbilisi Pride v. Georgia*, reflects ongoing disputes not over the content of these standards, but over states' compliance with them. The issue is no longer the absence of legal clarity. Rather, it is the widening gap between established human rights jurisprudence and state practice, as bans, obstruction, and failures to protect Pride events continue despite binding legal obligations.

As COVID-related emergency measures eased, Pride [returned](#) to the streets with renewed scale and determination. [By 2022](#), every European country reported Pride marches, parades, or related initiatives. Pride expanded geographically, with first-ever events organised in new towns across multiple countries. Youth-led mobilisation was visible, including first-time local Prides organised by school-age activists and creative protest actions demanding stronger legal protections. This expansion demonstrated the continued strength and adaptability of the LGBTI movement.

However, this resurgence coincided with intensified political targeting and organised opposition. Pride increasingly became a focal point for counter-mobilisation, with parallel "family" marches and anti-LGBTI demonstrations held alongside Pride events, including during high-profile regional Prides. The rainbow flag became a politicised symbol to be attacked, removed, or publicly burned. What had previously appeared as episodic hostility consolidated into structured and repeated patterns of resistance to LGBTI visibility.

A model of systematic restriction became more visible. In Turkey, Pride bans were imposed year after year, with numerous events prohibited. Those who defied bans were met with police violence, mass detentions, and record numbers of arrests affecting both organisers and attendees. University Prides were disrupted, Pride Weeks were banned by governorates, and organisers faced indictments and ongoing prosecutions. Despite repeated interventions by domestic courts and the existence of clear European human rights standards, these practices continued.

The 2022 EuroPride in Belgrade became a landmark moment in this trajectory. EuroPride, a rotating pan-European LGBTI event that includes a Pride march and related human rights activities hosted by a different European city each year, faced a formal ban issued by Serbian authorities citing security concerns. Although the march eventually proceeded in a modified and heavily policed form following legal challenges and negotiations, the initial prohibition of a pan-European Pride event underscored that even high-profile, internationally monitored assemblies were not safe from executive bans.

Over time, bans became more and more widespread. They were imposed through a range of mechanisms, including executive decrees, decisions by municipal authorities refusing or revoking permits, police orders restricting routes or imposing disproportionate security requirements, and, in some contexts, legislative amendments targeting LGBTI-themed assemblies. These measures were justified through appeals to public order, morality, or the protection of children. Framed as neutral regulatory or security measures, these restrictions lowered the political cost of interference while limiting the freedom of assembly.

Across the region, we are seeing a number of distinct restriction models. In some contexts, executive or municipal authorities make use of repeated administrative bans or last-minute permit refusals. In others, police have imposed disproportionate security conditions, route limitations, or mass detentions that effectively curtail participation. A further model has centred on failure to protect, where authorities allow violent counter-mobilisation to proceed with insufficient intervention. Most recently, legislative codification has emerged, embedding restrictions and bans directly into national law. Alongside these institutional measures, Pride events have increasingly taken place amid rising hostility, including organised counter-demonstrations, incidents of violence, attacks on participants, and symbolic targeting such as the burning or removal of rainbow flags, both online and in public space. Together, these patterns illustrate not isolated incidents, but structurally distinct and mutually reinforcing approaches to constraining Pride and public assembly.

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By 2024, despite the escalation of restrictions and hate, new Prides were organised across a wide range of countries and local contexts, even as attacks, threats, and obstruction were reported in numerous states. Pride simultaneously grew and came under greater pressure, reflecting both movement resilience and shrinking civic space.

In 2025, this trajectory crossed a qualitative threshold within the European Union. In Hungary, legislative amendments explicitly outlawed LGBTI-themed assemblies, introduced fines for organisers and participants, and authorised the use of surveillance technologies, including facial recognition, to identify attendees. The measures were adopted at state level and applied on all occasions organisations tried to register a Pride or a LGBTI related event. What had previously been implemented elsewhere through administrative bans and policing was thus formalised in national law within an EU member state. The attempted enforcement of the ban in Budapest triggered significant domestic and international attention, and large-scale mobilisation, with hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets in response. Also in Pécs, a very successful and peaceful Pride went ahead despite the ban. The mayor of Budapest was investigated as a Pride organiser (leading to an indictment and a fine, without a trial in early 2026); while similar criminal charges targeted the organiser of Pécs Pride. The development marked a shift from discretionary obstruction to codified prohibition.

The escalation has unfolded through different institutional pathways across EU and non-EU contexts. In several non-EU countries, repeated bans and failures to protect Pride events have occurred alongside weakened judicial enforcement and limited avenues for effective remedy. Within the European Union, restrictions have more often operated through legislative reinterpretation, administrative regulation, or the reframing of limitations as security or child-protection measures, allowing governments to act while formally maintaining rights commitments. The adoption of a legislative Pride ban within an EU member state therefore represents not simply another instance of restriction, but a convergence of methods previously associated with more overt forms of repression and those embedded within formal democratic frameworks.

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This development does not stem from a single external precedent. Rather, it reflects a broader pattern: the gradual normalisation of increasingly invasive anti-LGBTI legislation and policy initiatives, combined with insufficient and inconsistent responses to earlier erosions of rights, including within EU member states themselves. Over time, the political and legal cost of restricting Pride diminished. Restrictions were no longer framed as temporary or exceptional; they became embedded, justified, and codified.

The implications extend far beyond Pride. When governments restrict Pride marches, they are not merely regulating a specific event; they are redefining the boundaries of lawful dissent and reshaping the practical meaning of freedom of assembly. The five-year trajectory documented here demonstrates how quickly restrictions can move from isolated administrative decisions to systemic practices and, ultimately, to formal legislative bans.

These developments also carry concrete consequences for organisers and communities. Repeated bans, legal uncertainty, and the threat of fines or criminal proceedings increase organisational risk and contribute to burnout among volunteer-led Pride committees. Heightened security requirements and related costs disproportionately affect smaller or newly established Prides, and in some contexts have prompted shifts to indoor, decentralised, or limited-access formats. Organisers have responded through strategic litigation, cross-border solidarity, and adaptive formats, but such measures require significant capacity and underscore the uneven conditions under which freedom of assembly is exercised across the region. Pride remains a visible site where these dynamics are concentrated. Its treatment continues to reveal how states understand democratic governance, pluralism, and the place of minority voices in public space.