



SoFRIED

SOCIAL WORK AND THE FAR RIGHT
IN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES

Social Work and the Far Right in European Democracies

Insights into a trinational research project

Europe Calling

May 12, 2026

Moderation:

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Social Work in Hungary – current challenges and perspectives for a democratic professionalisation

Part I

Political context, project aims and goals, methodology & research team

Júlia Wéber

1. Political context in Europe: shift to the far right in European democracies

Social developments

- Growing European and global trend towards far-right, authoritarian and anti-democratic thinking and action
- Political analyses and value studies confirm the shift in hegemonic beliefs in European societies towards authoritarian, ethnopluralist and nativist positions (e.g. Bottoni 2023; Flecker 2017; Greven/Grumke 2006; Keskinilic 2019; Langebach/Speit 2013; Lowles 2021; Szikra/Öktem 2022)

Implications for social work

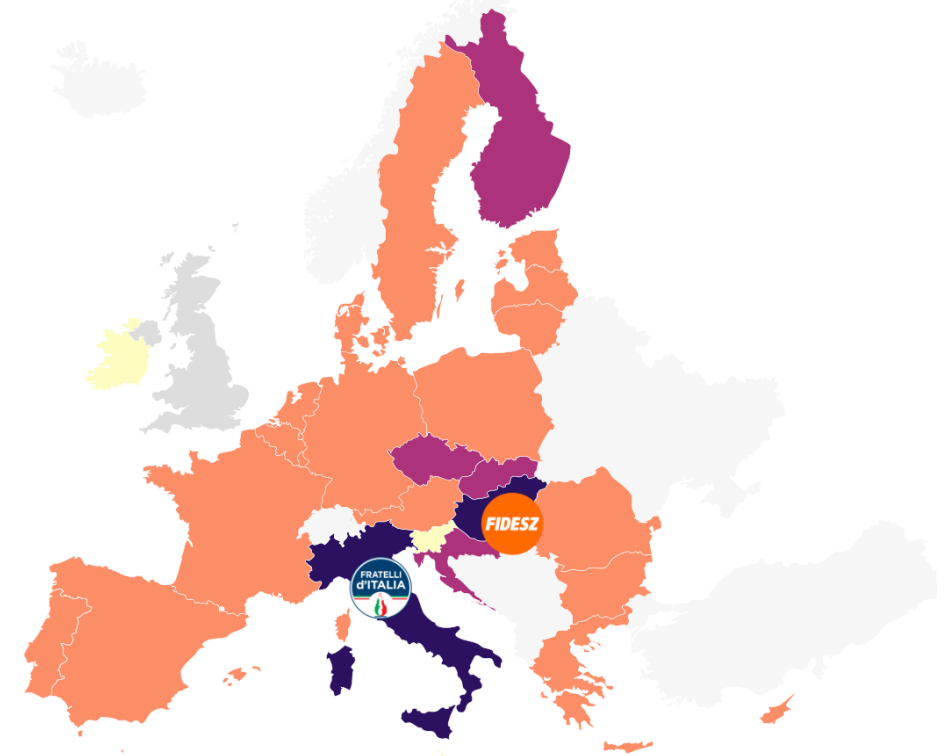
- Tendencies towards de-professionalization: promoted by changes in welfare state principles (Wéber 2022: 99f.; Vida/Háberman/Wéber tpb);
- Growing challenges for professional values and standards

State of research

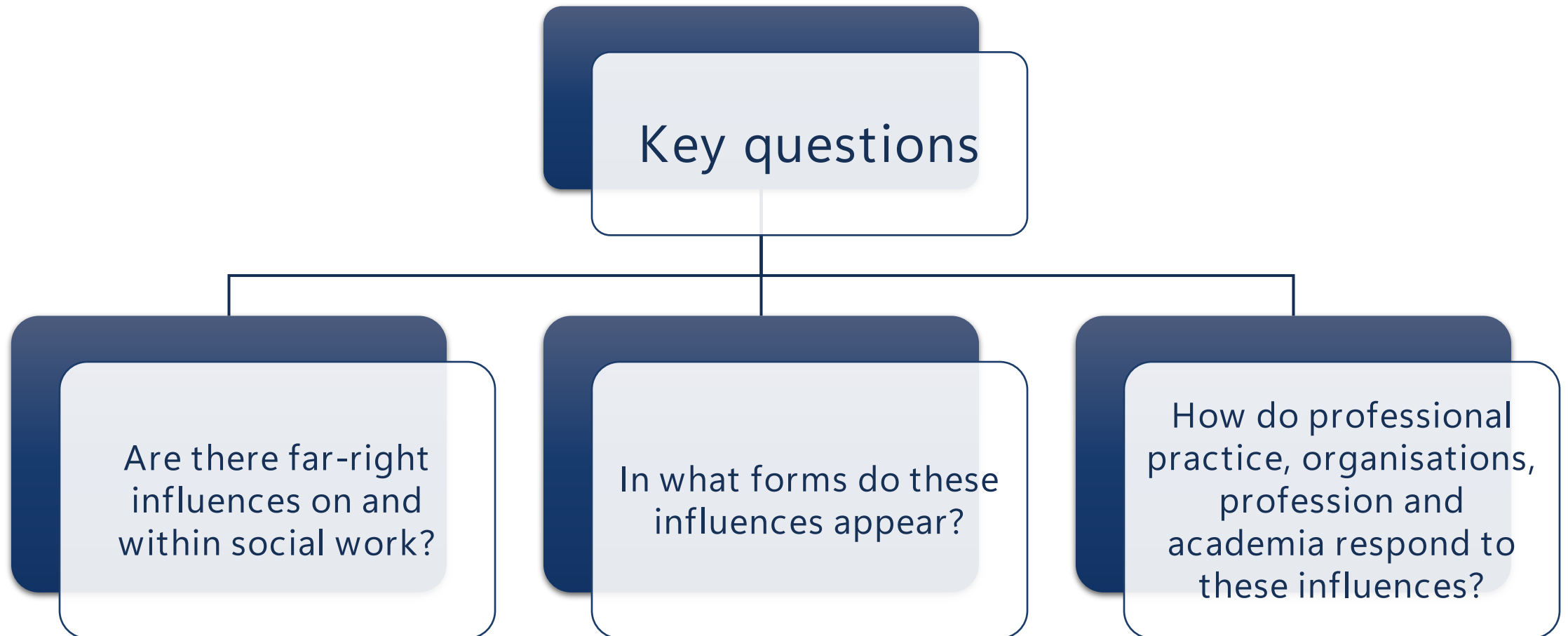
- Awareness of and research in social work on far-right influences varies across EU member states
- Social work profession has so far been relatively cautious in expressing its views on authoritarian tendencies on international level (Grigori/Krüger/Vida 2025 u. r.)

Far-right parties in EU governments – January 2026

not represented Opposition Coalition partner Governing party



2. Project aims and goals & research team



2. Project aims and goals & research team

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Hans **Böckler** Stiftung

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Ass. Prof. Dr. Zsombor Farkas, HU

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Research ethics approval:

German Ass. Social Work

(DGSA) Research Ethics

Commission

(Apr 21, 2025)

3. Conceptualisation of the „far right“ and „de-professionalisation“ of social work

Umbrella concept encompassing political actors, ideologies and attitudes associated with the radical and extreme right (Pirro, 2015 & 2023); transnational far right actors: international collaboration of authoritarian regimes (von Soest 2015).

Far-right as '*radically exclusionary*' (Pirro, 2023, p. 105) orientation based on nativism and authoritarianism, rejecting pluralism and equality.

Racialisation of social problems, promotion of exclusive solidarity (Gille, Krüger & Wéber, 2022, p. 77).

3. Conceptualisation of the „far right“ and „de-professionalisation“ of social work

De-professionalisation occurs where discretionary spaces are narrowed and occupational professionalism is replaced by organisational control, undermining the ethical and reflexive practice

Structural level: processes that systematically restrict or undermine characteristics of the social work profession (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008).

Normative and interactive level: processes that denote conditions that constrain the realisation of an ideal of professional practice (Becker-Lenz & Müller-Hermann, 2013; Trappenburg et al., 2020).

4. SoFRiED project methodology: mixed-methods-approach

Based on Jagusch/Gille (2019); Gille/Krüger/Wéber (2022)

Quantitative Online Survey

- Social work professionals in Germany from Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony, Hesse, and Thuringia; DE n = 1261
- Social work professionals in Austria from all federal states; AT n = 1360
- Social work professionals in Hungary from six (out of 7) regions; HU n = 287

Qualitative, problem-centered Interviews (Witzel 2000)

- Selected participants of the online survey (n ≥ 20 in each EU state, n (total) = 62)

Parliamentary Document Analysis

- Parliamentary activities of far-right/extreme right-wing parties (AfD; FPÖ, Mi Hazánk, FiDESZ)
- Complemented by media research

Data Analysis:

- Description of the quantitative data and qualitative content analysis of the qualitative data (Kuckartz/Rädiker 2023)
- international comparative perspective (Bereday 1964; Harkness et al. 2010; Walther 2018)

Part II

Quantitative and qualitative results on far-right influences in Germany, Austria and Hungary

Christine Krüger, Christoph Omann, Viktória Borda

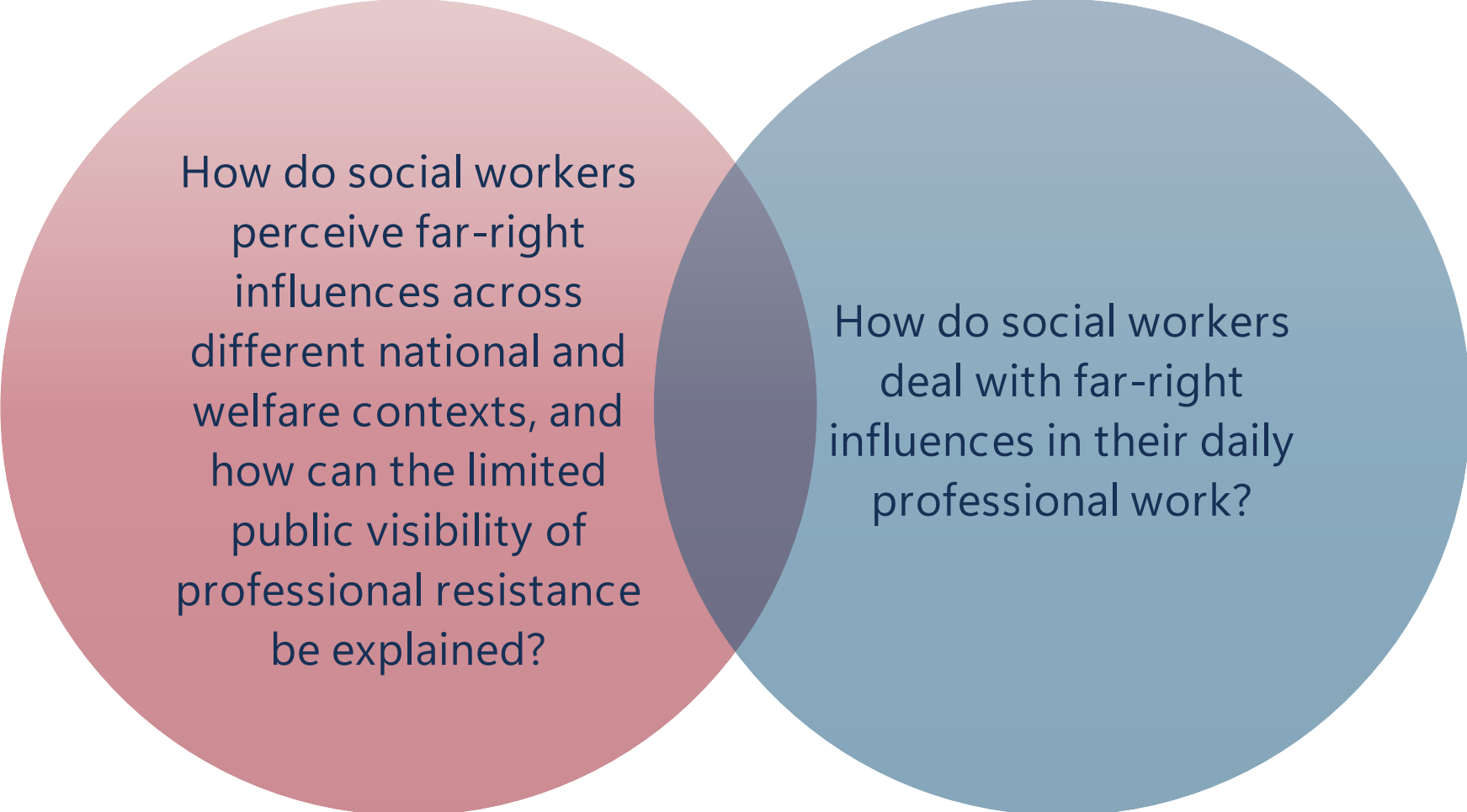
1. Context

From international (comparative) perspective: empirical research on social work and the far right remains unevenly developed.

- Germany: expansion of professional and academic debates (Krüger & Radvan, 2025)
- International: research and public discourse remain limited (Fazzi & Nothdurfter, 2021).

Empirical research suggests: social workers respond to far-right influences with *'tacit acceptance'* (Fazzi & Nothdurfter, 2021, p. 90).

2. Focus



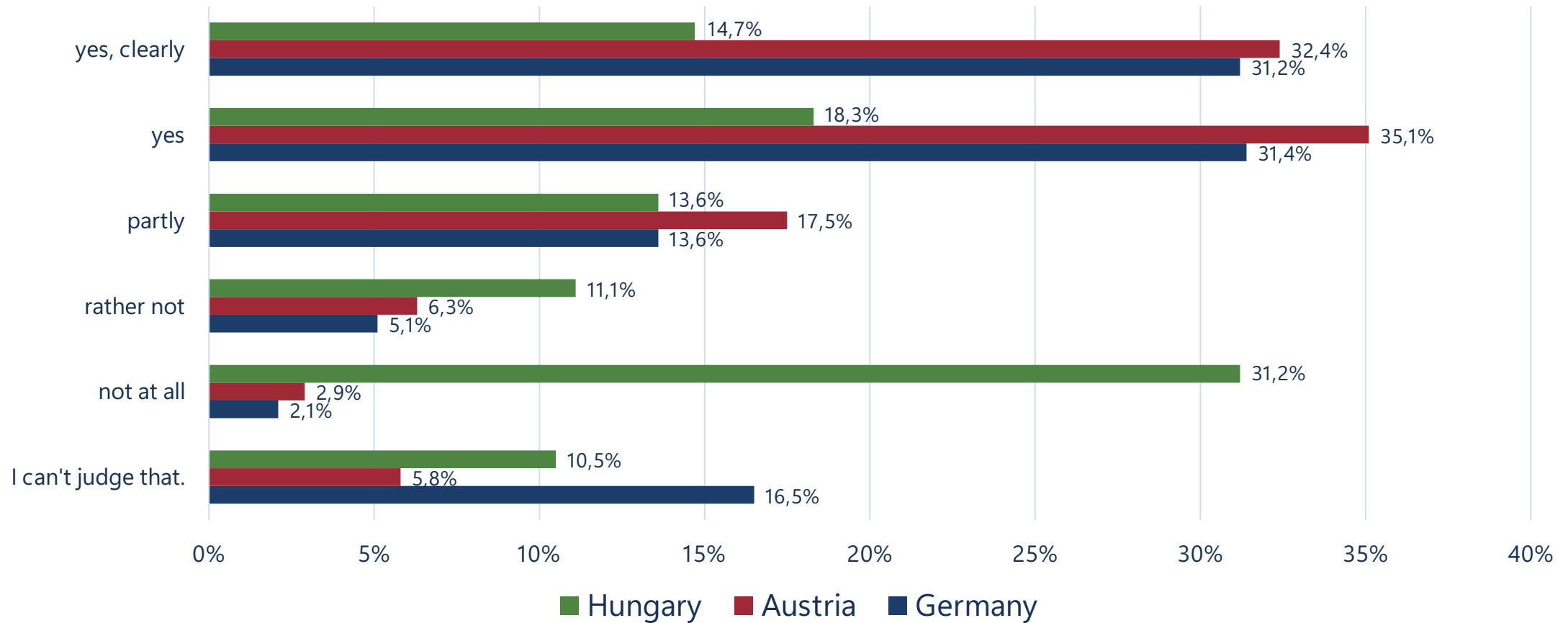
How do social workers perceive far-right influences across different national and welfare contexts, and how can the limited public visibility of professional resistance be explained?

How do social workers deal with far-right influences in their daily professional work?

3. Quantitative and qualitative data – first insights

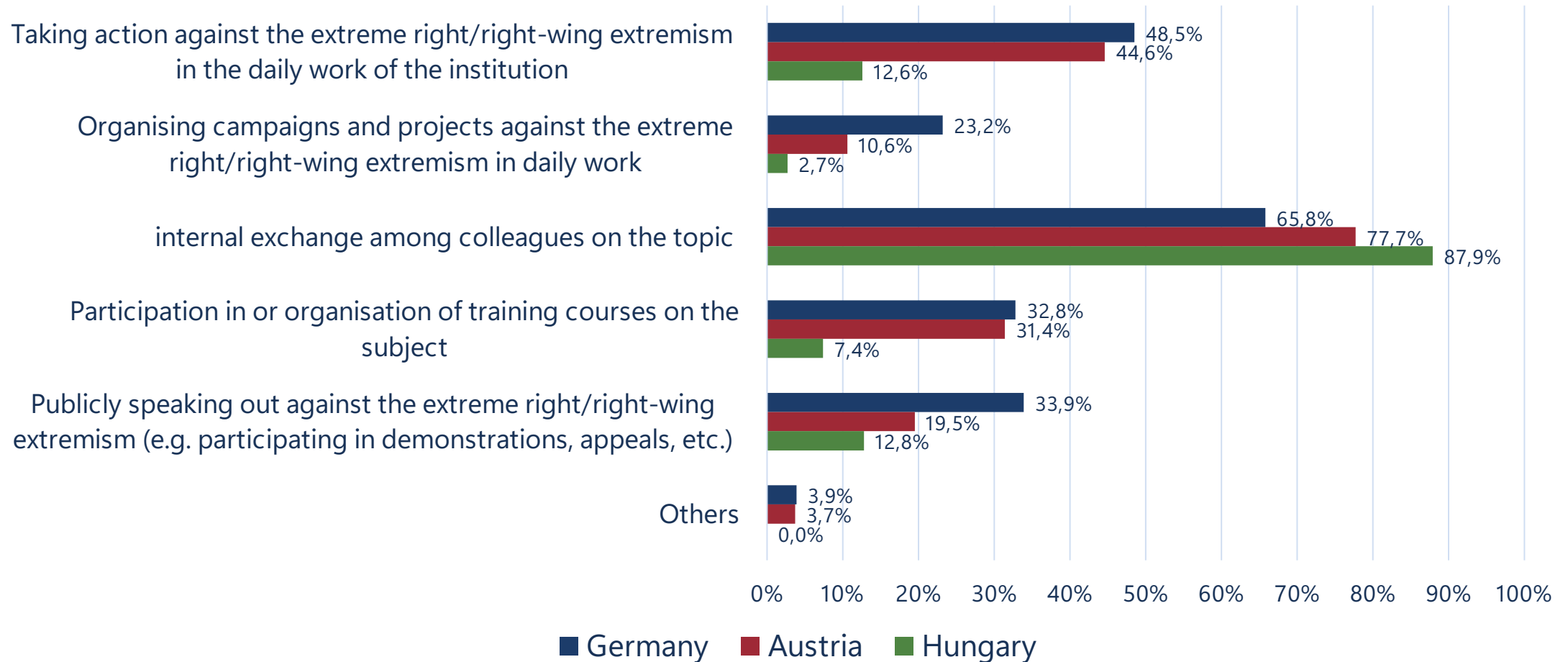
3. Quantitative insights

At the institution where I work, there is an awareness of the extreme right/right-wing extremism?



3. Quantitative insights

If you have noticed such awareness in your institution, how do you think it manifests itself?



3. Germany – a main qualitative result

„Intervention Paradox“ (Böhnisch 2023, 285)

“Occasionally, during my visits and consultations, remarks arise on the periphery that I would categorize within this spectrum. I usually do not engage with these remarks in depth, instead focusing on counselling within the context of the foster care arrangement.” (DE_03)

- Original: *„Es tauchen bei den Menschen, die ich besuche und berate manchmal am Rand Äußerungen auf, die ich diesem Spektrum zuordnen würde. Ich gehe gewöhnlich nicht tiefer darauf ein, sondern fokussiere mich auf die Beratung im Kontext der Pflegschaft.“ (DE_03)*

3. Austria – a main qualitative result

Practices of tacit resistance

"[...]this means that the word 'anti-feminism' has been deleted and the word 'gender' has not been used either. [...] But that was basically self censorship. A kind of anticipatory obedience. But the project application itself remained the same." (AU_04)

- Original: „[...] das heißt, das Wort Antifeminismus ist gestrichen, und das Wort Gender ist auch nicht verwendet worden. [...] Das war aber quasi eine Selbstzensur. So im vorausseilenden Gehorsam. Ähm, der Projektantrag selber ist aber gleich geblieben.“ (AU_04)

3 Results of the parliamentary documents analysis in Hungary

Based on Vida, Meleg & B. Erdős 2026

2010-2026 era of Orbán government, Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance and Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) party coalition

Patronal autocracy (Magyar & Madlovics 2022)

- the state is seen as the elite's corporate business
- the state and nation are seen as identical with the government party, and misuse of political power is common
- the Orbán regime elite did not follow but (mis)used ideologies, the main aims included money laundering, maintenance of centralised power, whitewashing, and brainwashing through propaganda

Post-Covid-19 crisis and the ongoing war in Ukraine

- the government introduced and conserved a "state of exemption" and institute **ruling by decree** (B. Erdős 2025)

2011 changes in the Constitution, now called Fundamental Law

- shift to „**illiberal democracy**” (Zakaria 1997)
- political Christianity
- new media law

Permanent modifications of law

- marginalisation of "social" in social policy; "welfare for the wealthy" (Szikra 2018)
- privileging of a "traditional" family model with heterosexual family ideal (Herke 2024)
- marginalisation & hate campaigns LGBTQIA+, rejecting of gender equality
- strategical reframing, p.e. "child protection": agitation against the LGBTQIA+ (Metz 2022)
 - > framing functions such a form of moral politics as part of a broader pattern in which social issues are politicised through threat narratives and moral panic

Parliamentary discourses and everyday professional practice: evident connection

Parliamentary patterns

(based on parliamentary analysis of Vida/Meleg/B. Erdős)

Dominant narratives

- workfare regime
- “deserving vs undeserving poor”
- family-centred and moralising welfare logic
- anti-gender / anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses
- individualisation of Roma poverty
- emphasis on loyalty and order

Political modes of operation

- centralisation
- strengthening of church actors
- delegitimisation of critical NGOs
- political reframing of professional language
- “penal populism” (Lévay, Kerezsi & Ivanics 2025)

How does this appear in practice?

(based on the preliminary results)

- political pressure within institutions
- self-censorship
- conflict avoidance
- depoliticised professional language
- “neutrality as a survival strategy”
- implicit stigmatisation of certain groups

Political logics do not merely influence/attack social work from outside but gradually become embedded within its substantive and institutional functioning.

The quantitative findings indicate structural patterns rather than isolated incidents

The quantitative findings indicate structural patterns rather than isolated incidents.

Deprofessionalisation

- shortage of skilled social workers
- lack of structural and institutional resources
- work overload
- low wages
- erosion of professional standards

Political pressure

- expectations of institutional loyalty
- culture of silence
- avoidance of politically "sensitive issues"

Selective solidarity

- "deserving" vs "undeserving" clients
- sensitivity around Roma and LGBTQIA+ topics
- moralising forms of support

Weak institutional protection

- limited professional protection
- weak advocacy structures
- low trust in institutions
- lack of social recognition

Many professionals perceive a gradual narrowing of professional autonomy.

Qualitative findings in HU: dual conduct and survival strategies

The qualitative interviews reveal: professionals simultaneously attempt to resist and adapt.

Resistance

- ethical reflection
- informal protection strategies
- emphasis on professional values
- critical thinking
- solidarity among colleagues
- public reaction – social engagement
- awareness raising

Adaptation

- passive resistance
- conflict avoidance
- depoliticised language
- neutrality as strategy
- self-censorship
- strategic silence

Hungarian specificity

One of the strongest characteristics of the Hungarian interviews is:

- learned helplessness,
- institutional insecurity,
- and the logic of “better not to talk about it”

At the same time:

- democratic professional identities remain present,
- ethical resistance persists,
- and informal solidarity still exists

Between resistance and adaptation – voices of social workers in HU

„The service system already has major gaps, and I see this worsening further. If this government remains, this trend will only deteriorate. And why is this happening? In my view, because they are withdrawing, not taking responsibility, and do not want to spend money on it or simply do not have the resources. So, it may be due to austerity, or perhaps due to shifting priorities - I am not sure.” (HU-18)

„... the way LGBTQIA+ people are being persecuted and excluded by our government is very significant.” (HU-16)

„In theory, Christianity is strongly emphasised, but I do not see its realisation in everyday practice. (HU-17)

„We don't stand up, we don't stick together, we just wait for someone else to do something” (HU_01)

„When I did not allow the local Fidesz to campaign in the institution, the local faction leader at the time made a very unpleasant phone call.” (HU-15)

„At the same time, there are issues related to birth control, alongside ongoing anti-Roma rhetoric. The stereotypical thinking that Roma people have many children and neglect them is also present here.” (HU-14)

„... about a quarter of the workforce is missing. In our case, this means that operations can only be maintained through overtime and staff reallocation.” (HU-19)

„I was one of the few with a university degree; I had a colleague who was completely burned out and had to be protected from a psychotic breakdown, and the site manager as well. The remaining sixty staff members had only secondary education or less. Care workers in the nursing home often had only primary education.” (HU-22)

„... the social sector is being completely neglected.” (HU-21)



„**49 social workers** have drafted the section of the TISZA Party’s platform dealing with social services. So far (as of 30 April 2026), we have not been photographed from the front even once. We have taken a few photos ourselves, but always from behind. It would have posed a risk to us, to our employer, our association, or even the party if it had come out that we were working for TISZA. The intranet systems were regularly hacked by pro-government actors.“
(Kozma 2026)


5. Discussion: deprofessionalisation from above and within

Shared paradox: Ethical concerns and critical reflections are widespread in informal settings, but rarely translate into collective, organisational or public forms of resistance.

The far right's influence on social work manifests less through overt ideological alignment than through indirect constraints on professional agency and discretion.

Deprofessionalisation is not only imposed 'from above' through political or organisational pressure but also reproduced 'from within' through practices of silence, avoidance, and adaptation.

6. Discussion summary

- 
- Across all three contexts: clear perception of far-right ideologies and policies as relevant to the professional field.
 - Engagement with far-right influence: fragmented, individualised, and confined to informal or internal settings.
 - Silence and avoidance thus emerge as dominant professional responses under very different political conditions
 - Organisational or public critique remains exceptional.
 - Silence reflects the interaction between far-right politics, welfare-state structures, and professional mandates, rather than ignorance or passivity.

Part III

Social Work in Hungary – current challenges and perspectives for a democratic professionalisation

István Sziklai

- Redefinition of “social”: from structural issue to individual status
- Moralisation and victim blaming replaces structural analysis
- Human-rights approaches (EU/UN) marginalised
- State withdrawal and church-based expansion in services
- Reduced public spending and redistributational effect and welfare pluralism

Key point: social policy becomes a tool of political control, not redistribution

- Deprofessionalisation and loss of autonomy
- Fragmentation (e.g. ethical tensions: church-based provision)
- Weakened partnerships (health, education, labour sectors)
- Growing dilemmas under anti-democratic pressures
- Increasing frustration, burnout, and limited empowerment work

- Outcome: more social needs, but worse conditions for ethical practice

Three strategic pillars

1. Professional autonomy
Enforced ethics, standards, evidence-based policy
Recognition of social work as a public professional body
2. Institutional resilience
Sustainable funding, fair salaries, quality education
Cross-sector partnerships and supportive organisations
3. Societal recognition
Public accountability for social problems
Community engagement and reframing social issues

Multi-level action needed: policy, community, organisational

- Illiberalism reshapes welfare priorities and narratives
- Language defines who is “deserving” – higher risk of exclusion
- Social work must reclaim ethics, solidarity, and voice(!)

Key strategies:

- Re-politicising social issues
- Strengthening professional alliances
- Maintaining everyday ethical practice under constraints

Quo vadis democracy in Hungary? – Democratic mobilisation through civil society and social work

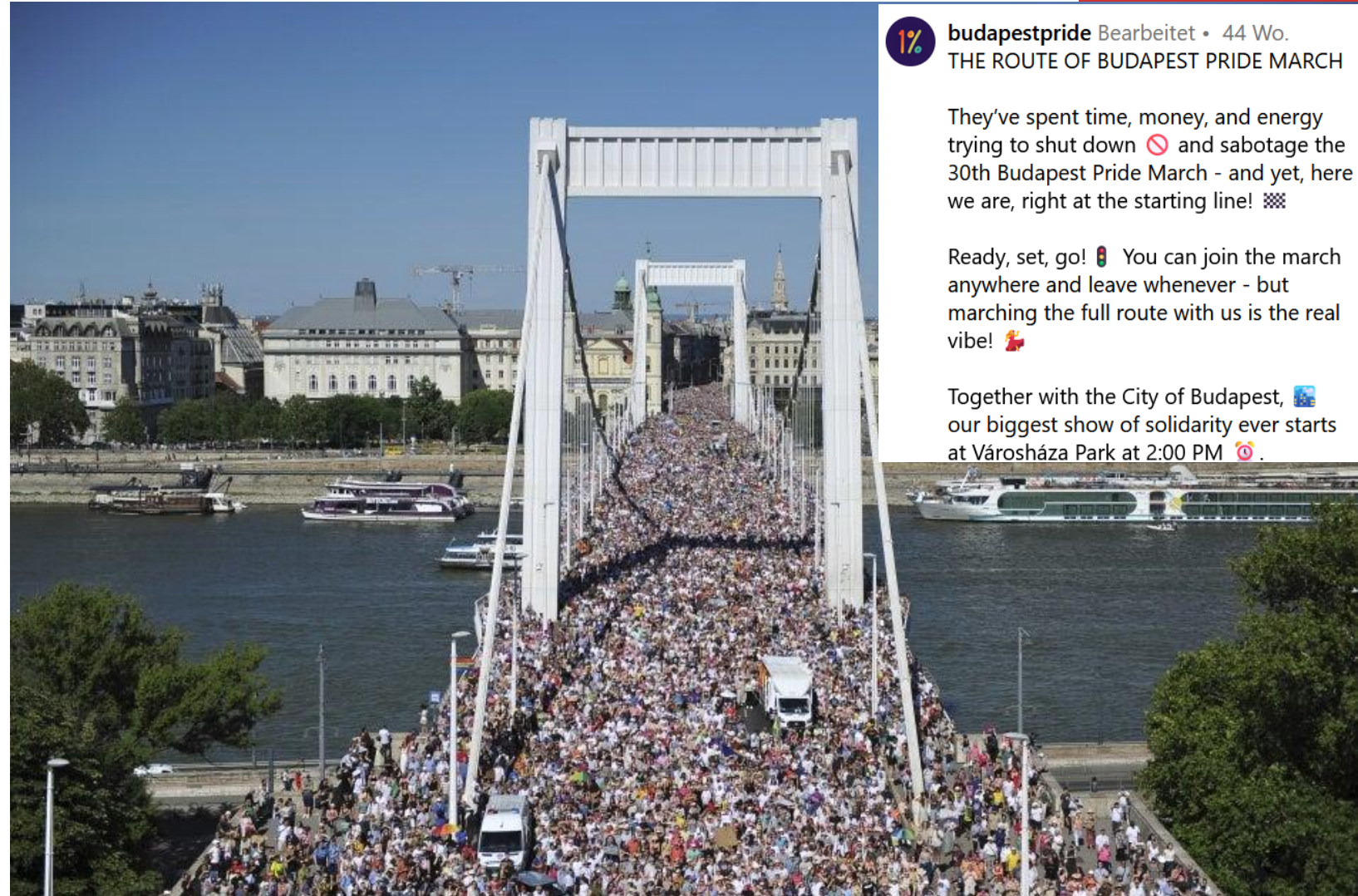
30. Pride Budapest 2025


Trotz des Verbots der Orbán-Regierung: die größte Demonstration seit 1989/90

Photo: „People gather for the Pride March in Budapest, Hungary, on June 28, 2025.
© 2025 Balint Szentgally/NurPhoto via AP Photo

Human Rights Watch 2025, source:
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/30/budapest-pride-2025-a-record-crowd-stands-up-for-democracy>; 06.05.2026

Instagram post of Budapest Pride 2025 source:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DLW0VyaoSks/>;
06.05.2026



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THE ROUTE OF BUDAPEST PRIDE MARCH

They've spent time, money, and energy trying to shut down 🚫 and sabotage the 30th Budapest Pride March - and yet, here we are, right at the starting line! 🏳️‍🌈

Ready, set, go! 🚦 You can join the march anywhere and leave whenever - but marching the full route with us is the real vibe! 🏳️‍🌈

Together with the City of Budapest, 🇪🇺 our biggest show of solidarity ever starts at Városháza Park at 2:00 PM 🕒.

Köszönjük! Thankyou! Vielen Dank!

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