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**To cite this article:** Dorottya Rédei (2024) Lesbian resistance through fairytales. The story of a children's book clashing with an authoritarian anti-gender regime in Hungary, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 28:3, 443-459, DOI: [10.1080/10894160.2023.2255044](https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2023.2255044)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2023.2255044>



Published online: 19 Sep 2023.



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# Lesbian resistance through fairytales. The story of a children's book clashing with an authoritarian anti-gender regime in Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

*A Fairytale for Everyone* (Meseország mindenkié), a collection of 17 fairy tales, featuring LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming characters and heroes from various disadvantaged racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds was published in 2020 by the Hungarian NGO Labrisz Lesbian Association. The stories address gender relations, disability, discrimination, social justice, poverty, domestic violence, child adoption, gender transition and same-sex love. After its release, the book became the target of anti-gender attacks. It was immediately labelled as “LGBT propaganda” and demonised as a tool for “spreading gender ideology” by the far right, leading to the implementation of legislation to restrict young LGBTQ+ people’s rights, in the name of “protecting children”. In turn, these political acts triggered unprecedented national and international support for the book and the Hungarian LGBTQ+ community. *Meseország* became a symbol of resistance against oppression, stigmatisation, discrimination and the increasingly autocratic regime. In this activist essay, the author tells the story of this book and reflects on lesbian resistance against anti-gender ideology, coalition-building and cultural production in present-day Hungary. She discusses the impacts of ideologically based intrusions of state control and the ongoing global media attention on Labrisz, and thinks about what ways of resistance can be imagined and effective against an authoritarian post-fascist regime.

## KEYWORDS

Anti-gender; lesbian; resistance; fairytale; childhood; Hungary

## Introduction

*A Fairytale for Everyone* (Nagy, ed., 2022) (original title: *Meseország mindenkié* (Nagy, ed., 2020); *Meseország* hereinafter) was published in 2020 by the Hungarian NGO Labrisz Lesbian Association. The book is a collection of fairy tales, mostly adaptations of well-known classics, mostly in contemporary settings, featuring LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming characters and heroes from various disadvantaged racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The stories address a range of social and human

rights issues, including gender relations, disability, discrimination, social justice, poverty, domestic violence, child adoption, gender transition and same-sex love. It is a beautifully illustrated anthology of 17 stories by 17 Hungarian authors, some of whom are prominent contemporary authors and others are emerging writers.

After its release, the book became the target of anti-gender attacks by governmental politicians and those who were in parliamentary opposition to but ideologically allied with the governing far-right coalition, Fidesz-KDNP. The book has an intersectional approach and a broad range of inequality issues to be addressed. Nevertheless, it was immediately labelled by far-right politicians and pro-government intellectuals as “LGBT propaganda” and demonised as a tool for “spreading gender ideology”. It triggered moral panic and legislative acts to restrict young LGBTQ+ people’s rights, in the name of “protecting children”. In turn, these political acts triggered public and political protest in support of the book. It became a bestseller, galvanised significant public support from parents, teachers, experts, celebrities and book retailers, and has been published in 11 European languages by May 2023.<sup>1</sup> It has become a symbol of resistance against oppression, stigmatisation, discrimination in an increasingly authoritarian regime.

This book has made Labrisz much more visible than before, contributed to the strengthening of the Hungarian LGBTQ+ movement in the face of increasing state-oppression, and the political actions it triggered have made a huge number of people realise that LGBTQ+ rights are a core issue of democracy. As a core member of Labrisz and the coordinator and public face of the *Meseország* project, I find it important to tell the story of the book from an activist-on-the-ground perspective, therefore I have chosen the genre of activist essay for this paper. I am also a scholar in gender, sexuality and education studies, and I analyse elsewhere the intersections of child protection discourses, LGBTQ+ rights, anti-gender politics and autocratization in Hungary (Ré dai, forthcoming). In this paper I reflect on lesbian resistance against anti-gender ideology, coalition-building and cultural production in these ‘dangerous’ times. I also discuss the impacts of the book and ongoing global media attention on our organisation, and I think about what ways of resistance can be imagined and effective against a regime which aims to destroy the democratic foundations that had been taken for granted in our organisational existence until now.

This essay is more of a personal activist reflection from the ground than a formal academic study. I have been working both as an academic and an activist ever since I started to engage with gender studies over 20 years ago. Balancing the two, producing meaningful knowledge and actions is a hard struggle in the era of excessively competitive production demands of neoliberal academia. Hearing the voice of fighters on the ground, diversifying forms of eligible knowledge and making knowledge

more widely accessible is crucial. Also, it is important to reflect on activism in writing, because there is little time for reflection on what we are doing, what impacts we are causing and why and how what we are doing affects us, activists, while being in action.

### ***Political, cultural and public responses to Meseország***

On its release in September 2020, *Meseország* plunged into already turbulent political waters. The Fidesz-KDNP government,<sup>2</sup> in rule since 2010, is the main actor in the Hungarian anti-gender movement, which means they have huge power to implement their political agenda. Fidesz transformed itself from a liberal to a conservative party around 2005, and since 2010 it has gradually shifted towards the far-right, imposing an increasingly authoritarian rule over the country. I consider Fidesz-KDNP to be a neo-fascist party coalition and the regime they have constructed in Hungary a neo-fascist—and consequently an authoritarian—one. The reason why I do not consider the regime an “illiberal democracy” (see Grzebalska & Petó 2018), is because it is not democratic, and the reasons why I consider it a neo-fascistic one are their eugenistic reproduction and family politics (i.e., supporting only white middle-class reproduction and families); their human resource politics in which the lives of people don’t matter;<sup>3</sup> their divisive politics centred around constructing disadvantaged social groups as enemies and running political campaigns to incite hatred against them; their manipulation, centralisation and damaging of culture, education and communication in order to project their propaganda through these channels and indoctrinate people to become uncritical followers of their destructive ideology. I use ‘far-right’, ‘neo-nazi’ and ‘neo-fascist’ as synonyms when I refer to the current Hungarian government and their politics. Anti-gender ideology is spread by the government in alliance with the US and Russian far right and other neo-fascist political forces globally.

The idea for *Meseország* grew out of the school program of Labrisz called “Getting to Know LGBT People”. The program, founded in 2000, was targeting secondary-school-aged young people, till it was banned in 2021. Around 2018 we started to think about how to reach out to younger children whom we could not reach with our school program. We were very much aware of the increasing social polarisation generated by the Fidesz-KDNP regime, the strengthening of neo-nazi groups, the shifting of Fidesz itself to the far-right, and the emergence and political legitimisation of discriminatory, exclusionary, homophobic, transphobic, racist, xenophobic, misogynistic public discourses. We were also aware that children were affected by such a social climate from an early age, so education for equality, inclusion, acceptance, diversity had to be started early. The brilliantly evident idea, a fairytale book, came from Györgyi Kövesi, one of

the leaders of the school program. The book was designed as the first step in developing a new strand of our education program for younger children, parents and teachers of younger children. We applied for funding, got it, and I undertook the coordination of the project. Back then, little did we know what we got ourselves into...

A week after the release of *Meseország*, MP Dóra Dúró, one of the leaders of the far-right party Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland), organised a public performance for the media, with the title “Fairylan doesn’t belong to aberrants!”<sup>4</sup> in which she tore the book apart and put the pages through a paper shredder, explaining that

Our Homeland doesn’t tolerate that children get exposed to homosexual propaganda by the abnormal lifestyle sneaked into fairytale books, which is a lie, as homosexual princes are not part of Hungarian culture. It’s no accident though that this aggressive lobby, homosexuality, is attacking the youngest, because education plays a huge role in this respect. According to Our Homeland, young people should be prepared for family life, they should be made aware that they will be prospective mothers and fathers (...). It disturbs their healthy and safe development if what is not normal and trivial is presented as if it was.<sup>5</sup>

Although we had expected some far-right protests, this performance, shocked us, the authors and the public, and it triggered a tsunami of political, media, pedagogical and cultural responses, both in support of and against the book.

On the opposing side, verbal attacks targeting the book and Labriz appeared in the governmental media. They were screaming “LGBT propaganda” or “homosexual propaganda”, without ever checking the content of the book. Dúró was so inspired by her own performance that soon after she shredded another recently published children’s book whose protagonist was a girl with two moms (Bán, 2019). Prime Minister Orbán did not condemn the book-damaging, an act reminiscent of Nazi and Communist book-burnings, a deplorable part of twentieth-century Hungarian history. Instead, he gave a radio speech, in which he said, “Hungarians are patient and tolerant with homosexuals (...) but there is a red line not to cross: leave our children alone!” (Hetek, 2020). I won’t go into discussing contrasting “Hungarians” and “homosexuals” as “us and them”, and into what “tolerant and patient” might mean for Orbán. What is more significant here is that this was not only tacit governmental approval to far-right groups’ actions, but a war cry, the kick-off of the ongoing governmental campaign against LGBTQ+ people, the launch of a gender panic, in which we and the LGBTQ+ activist community suddenly found ourselves and our activities deemed synonymous with paedophilia, threatening children’s ‘normal’ development, ‘corrupting’ children and young people, damaging families, undermining the nation’s unity and ability to

survive. Homo- and transphobic speech acts by government officials followed (and have never stopped since then), and the book was misused as a pretext for further legal attacks against LGBTQ+ people and rights.

A few days after Orbán's speech, an opinion piece appeared in the leading pro-government paper *Magyar Nemzet* (Németh, 2020). In the first part of the article the author, reviewed a controversial science paper about the origins of homosexuality (discussing whether it was a genetic or acquired trait). Then, out of the blue, he announced that “we have to judge the book *Meseország mindenkié* as similar to paedophilia, and Labrisz Lesbian Association as similar to a paedophile organisation”, as our activities are also “harming children”. We sued the newspaper and won the case in the Lower Court but lost it in the Higher Court, and then in the Appeals Court, because the residing council of judges in both upper courts decided that Labrisz, as a public actor, had to tolerate such opinions in the name of ‘freedom of speech’, and that such an opinion did not cause Labrisz any damage. The—obviously damaging—impact of this judgement is that now people refer back to it by simplifying the ruling as “the Court said that Labrisz was a paedophiliac organisation”.<sup>6</sup> We are taking the case further, the next step is the Constitutional Court.

State authorities also took action. The Consumer Protection Bureau (CPB) investigated an anonymous complaint claiming the book contained “non-traditional gender roles”. The complaint was found grounded, and CPB ruled that Labrisz conducted “unfair commercial practice” by not informing customers that the book contained characters with “non-traditional gender roles”. Labrisz was summoned “to do its best to properly inform customers” about this. The explanation was that the book looked like an average storybook, therefore customers could be deceived into buying it without being warned about its contents. This case shows the conceptual unclarity of the notions of gender and sexuality that anti-gender politics operates with, and how the threat of children becoming non-normatively sexual and the threat of them acquiring gender non-conforming or non-stereotypically gendered behaviours are used interchangeably in political rhetoric. This points at a central tenet of anti-gender ideology: the conflation of sex and gender, and the erasure or displacement of gender by biological sex which is assigned at birth and can never be changed.

Neo-fascist groups were encouraged and legitimised by the political attack against the book. Two demonstrations were held by groups connected to Our Homeland: there was a street demonstration in front of the office of Labrisz; and a disruption of a public reading event, originally planned for children. Other neo-fascist forms of protest included a petition to ban the book, launched by the international network CitizenGo, signed by over 80,000 people. Physical attacks also happened: bookshop assistants

were harassed verbally and physically (e.g. being slapped in the face and being spat on) for selling the book, and one neo-fascist group put up posters and stickers on the shopwindows of a children's bookstore chain saying "material corrupting children is sold here".

Prominent pro-government pedagogy and psychology experts also spoke out: one renowned conservative psychologist, Emőke Bagdy, announced in the governmental media that "early sensitisation towards sexual deviance" (by which she referred to awareness-raising education about LGBTQ+ people) was dangerous because at the age of 3–5 children identified with their same-sex parent and developed an 'appropriate' gender identity based on this identification. She claimed that children should be educated to "tolerate deviance" but not in kindergarten (Elek, 2020). Conservative education scientist Rita Pécsi published an open letter to parents, in which she argued that young children's neuro-system was not able to differentiate shades, so children needed black and white guidance to make sense of the world. She also argued that gender identity was not stable yet at an early age, and "sensitisation" confused it, as children easily identified with fairytale heroes with alternative sexual orientations or gender identities. She encouraged parents to exercise their right to withdraw children from sex education. Her ultimate argument was that "God created people to be women and men (Pécsi, 2020)".

Amidst the gender panic incited by far-right politicians and public figures, public discourse was fixated upon the need to protect children from harm. Everybody suddenly became a child development expert, and people vehemently argued that homosexuality had no place in children's lives and books; that children would be converted into gays if they read fairy tales about two princes falling in love; that rewritten fairy tales were plagiarism or that they confused children's sense of right and wrong; that the book was a Trojan horse using other minorities to promote a homosexual agenda, or it was a tool of the "international gender lobby" which wanted to eliminate gender differences between women and men.<sup>7</sup> What was really disturbing for us was that the existence of racial/ethnic minority and disadvantaged children (some of whom are characters in the tales) was completely ignored in the debate. As if such children didn't exist at all, as if all children were White, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-gendered and presently asexual but aspiring towards a heterosexual future.

However, on the supportive side, a fascinating wave of citizen activities emerged. People went to bookshops to personally express support for the harassed shop assistants, bringing them chocolates. Over 1200 psychologists signed an open letter in support of the book, denouncing the above-mentioned renowned psychologist's claims. Celebrities who had never communicated publicly about LGBTQ+ matters spoke out in support of the book and LGBTQ+ people. Popular actors organised a series of readings

of the tales, which are available on YouTube.<sup>8</sup> The book became a best-seller, with over 34,000 copies sold to date. Besides the intensive Hungarian media attention for the book, international media interest in the situation of LGBTQ+ people and far-right politics in Hungary also intensified, so the book and Hungarian LGBTQ+ activism was well covered in international news in 2020–2022. *Meseország* has received awards and nominations,<sup>9</sup> and due to the international attention, foreign publishers became interested.

### ***Legislative actions against LGBTQ+ people before and after Meseország was published***

*Meseország* didn't create the anti-gender ideology movement in Hungary, but rather catalysed a growing moral panic around children and the collapse of gender and sexual binaries. The book didn't arrive in a vacuum, it was not a trigger but a pretext for implementing a series of restrictive legislations against LGBTQ+ people. Ever since Fidesz-KDNP came into power in 2010, they have imposed a conservative legal agenda regarding gender equality and LGBTQ+ people's rights. In 2011 they redefined marriage as the union of a man and a woman in the amended Constitution. Also in 2011, a new Family Law was implemented with a heteronormative, exclusionary definition of family, which also got included in the Constitution in 2020. In 2013 the Civil Code was amended, so registered partners (i.e., same-sex couples) could not adopt each other's children. In 2015, Hungary vetoed the European Council bill on harmonising the financial relations of married couples and recognising registered partners of different nationalities. In 2016 Hungary was the only EU country to reject the European Council's Action Plan for supporting LGBTQI people. In 2018, gender recognition procedures for trans people got suspended with the excuse that the procedure was not compatible with GDPR<sup>10</sup> (Háttér, 2021). In the Spring of 2020, trans people's right to legal gender recognition was revoked. Also in the Spring of 2020, the Parliament rejected the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Pálfi, 2020).

The anti-gender agenda has also been embedded in education policies, including the bureaucratic centralisation of public education and the gradual diminishing of schools' and teachers' autonomy (see: Rédai, 2021; Rédai & Turai, 2021). The 2012–13 revision of school curricula meant mandatory religious or moral education in years 1–12; nationalism and patriotism as core values; the indoctrination of pupils about outdated traditional gender relations, simplified to a fixed and complementary set of 'male and female roles'; the lack of acknowledgement of gender as a social construction and its replacement by sex as a set of biologically



determined characteristics; essentialized gender differences and presentation of women and men as opposites complementing each other; no acknowledgement of gender diversity; no problematising of societal norms and power relations; a reproduction-centred view of heteronormative sexuality; and making LGBTQ+ people and issues and non-heteronormative families completely invisible (see: Rédei & Sáfrány, 2019; Rédei, 2021). In 2018 gender studies MA programs were banned.

Soon after *Meseország* was published, the implementation of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation continued. In Autumn 2020, the Child Adoption Law was amended, restricting the possibility of adoption to married couples only. Single heterosexual parents are now only able to adopt with special permission from the Ministry of Family Affairs, which is also problematic, but the declared target was LGBTQ+ people, who had been able to adopt children as single parents. Along with the heteronormative definition of family from the Family Law, the transphobic slogan of Fidesz's anti-LGBT+ campaign "the mother is a woman, the father is a man"<sup>11</sup> was also entered in the Constitution in 2020. In addition, in accordance with the new "child protection" agenda, it was declared that "Hungary protects children's right to self-identification according to their gender assigned at birth and ensures education based on Hungary's constitutional integrity and its Christian culture."<sup>12</sup> Note the cynicism of protecting the rights of those (cis-gendered children) whose right to self-identification does not need protection and at the same time denying the right to self-identification from those (trans people) whose rights need protection.

Finally, the law that gained international attention was the amended Child Protection Law implemented in July 2021. It is also publicly referred to as the "Paedophile Law" or "Propaganda Law", with a reference to the similar anti-LGBTQ+ "Propaganda Law" implemented in Russia in 2013. The law intentionally conflates paedophilia and homosexuality. There are no measures and resources included to prevent child sexual abuse or help victims, other than a very controversial, publicly accessible database of people who have been sentenced for child sexual abuse. Instead, the law prohibits "depicting" or "promoting" homosexuality and gender transition for minors (under 18) in the media, in advertisements and in schools. As there were numerous complaints about the unclarity of the law, a follow-up decree was introduced a month later, specifying that children's books "depicting" or "promoting" homosexuality and gender transition could be sold only in closed packaging, they could not be exhibited in shop windows, and could not be sold within 200 metres of churches and schools. It was clear that *Meseország* and Labrisz' school program were the specific targets of this legislation.

### ***How the LGBTQ+ activist community responded***

*Meseország* and the homo- and transphobic speech and political acts of the state and government gained a lot of public and media attention both in Hungary and internationally, therefore the visibility of Labrisz and LGBTQ+ issues significantly increased in the past 3 years. Suppressive legislation and incitement of hatred against LGBTQ+ people have misfired: they have, in fact, generated much more open public discourse about LGBTQ+ sexualities and child sexuality than was circulating before, and it also generated more concerted action by activist groups.

Before the intensification of the anti-LGBTQ+ politics of Fidesz-KDNP, collaboration among Hungarian LGBTQ+ organisations was occasional and project/funding-based. In the wake of *Meseország* and another hugely successful campaign in 2021 called “A Family is a Family”<sup>13</sup> by the Rainbow Family Foundation, collaboration between NGOs expanded. When the “Child Protection” Law was introduced, an informal but strong coalition of LGBTQ+ and human rights advocacy organisations, which we informally call ‘Rainbow Coalition’, was established, launching joint campaigns, sharing resources and tasks according to each organisation’s capacities. When the “Child Protection” Bill was proposed, the coalition managed to organise a demonstration in front of the parliament in less than a week, with over ten thousand people participating. In the following few weeks, over 130 thousand people signed a petition to protest the law. No LGBTQ+ issue had ever mobilised so many people before, and this was just the beginning. The government decided to hold a referendum about homo- and transphobic questions on the same day as the national elections in April 2022. The questions were manipulative, suggesting one possible answer, and asking about issues already regulated in the “Child Protection” Law.<sup>14</sup> The Rainbow Coalition launched a huge campaign to encourage voting invalidly at the referendum, so that it wouldn’t become binding. The campaign was incredibly successful, 1.7 million voters, about one third of the total of voters population, voted invalidly. Thus, even though Fidesz won a two thirds majority at the parliamentary elections, their referendum failed.

Public expressions of solidarity, rhetorical or financial support from individuals, independent or pro-opposition media, NGOs working in other areas, private companies and foreign funders for Labrisz and also for other LGBTQ+ organisations have grown immensely since Fidesz-KDNP launched their long anti-LGBTQ+ campaign. LGBTQ+ causes have been reinterpreted as causes of democracy; standing behind them has become a way to express protest against an increasingly authoritarian regime. The significance of LGBTQ+, human rights and other government-critical organisations has grown; it seems that we have become the remaining opposition to the government—since the parliamentary opposition has become

insignificant and incapacitated by Fidesz-KDNP. This puts these organisations, including Labrisz, into a more powerful but at the same time more vulnerable position. It is expected that the government will launch further crackdowns on these organisations. However, we have gained a lot of experiences in fighting back in the past 2–3 years, so we are better equipped to fight on.

One sore lack in coalition-building is women's organisations. Labrisz and Budapest Pride identify themselves as feminist organisations, support and participate in women's causes and activism, and we have repeatedly reached out to other, non-LGBTQ+ feminist organisations since Fidesz-KDNP accelerated its anti-gender propaganda. However, we did not receive even verbal expressions of solidarity or support from major women's organisations when the government attacked LGBTQ+ organisations and people's rights. At the core of this misalignment is a controversy about trans issues (especially regarding the rights of trans children) and a concern that LGBTQ+ organisations are distracting attention and funding from women's issues and undermine the women's movement—which, sadly, has never been strong in Hungary. Some of these women's groups even believe that it is the LGBTQ+ movement that is provoking the anti-gender backlash. They fail to recognise that their political positioning in this regime will not improve by not allying with trans and trans-inclusive organisations, because they are also treated as advocates of the “international gender-lobby” supposedly working to undermine Hungary's national integrity. The feminist and LGBTQ+ activist community is very small in Hungary, and such disagreements do not erupt in open conflicts (yet), as in some other countries. Still, the rupture is a sad sign of the success of anti-gender politics in dividing and antagonising groups fighting against patriarchy.

### ***Organisational changes in Labrisz***

Labrisz was established in 1999; it is one of the oldest and most stable lesbian organisations in Europe, and one of the strongest and most powerful groups in the Hungarian LGBTQ+ activist scene. Labrisz organises community events, festivals, regular cultural programs, runs a herstory archive and a school program, publishes books, and participates in political lobbying in coalition with other LGBTQ+ organisations. Labrisz is a small grassroots non-profit organisation with a flat structure, 10–15 active members, 3 board members, and a number of volunteers who help out occasionally with specific tasks. Some of the members have been in Labrisz since its foundation or since the early years, including me who joined in 2004. Most of the work by members is also done voluntarily, except when in the framework of an externally funded project. The ever-increasing

administrative work that is required for the operation of the organisation is mostly done by one or more of the board members, rather unenthusiastically, as it takes away time and energy from creative activism. At least, this is how Labrisz could be described until 2020.

A few Labrisz members attempted to initiate 'organisational growth' in the mid-2010s, but this was met by great resistance from the rest of the membership. We did not want more members, we did not want employed staff members, we did not want to work in projects just in order to generate the salaries of the employed staff members, we did not want to become a hierarchical organisation with paid and unpaid members, we did not want to produce income-generating products. Thus, 'organisational growth' failed back then, we kept the 'sisterhood' model where a dozen committed women would get together when they have the time and do things they enjoy and are good at doing. Even with this approach and intensity we could produce quite significant and good quality outputs, and we were content with that, although not very visible.

However, after *Meseország* was published, things started to change dramatically. Suddenly there was an enormous amount of work to do: dealing with the media, politics, far-right groups, book retailers, printing houses, foreign publishers, contracts, lawsuits, authors and their copies and royalties, disagreements between the authors and Labrisz as a publisher, constant public presence and producing immediate responses to anti-LGBTQ+ political actions. As I had been the coordinator of the book project from the beginning, I suddenly found myself working full-time voluntarily, trying to do other (paid) work at night, managing everything, talking to journalists, appearing in public constantly, to a degree that I had not felt comfortable with before. I became the 'Fairy Godmother' of the book. Labrisz members were helping with logistics, and we hired two part-time staff members for the first half year for coordination and administration tasks. As Covid was spreading in one wave after another, we stopped all our community and education activities; all the focus went to the book. And, similarly to Covid, political actions and the consequent media attention came in waves, with little time in between them to have a little rest or shift of work focus.

I experienced waves of hardly bearable frustration, exhaustion, burnout, depression, which were not visible publicly and were somewhat ameliorated by the increasing success and recognition the book and I received. We gained a huge amount of supporters, international media coverage and an unprecedented amount of income. I suddenly became an expert in anti-gender politics, started to receive invitations to conferences, roundtables, discussions, expert groups, research project proposals, and book launch events for the foreign editions. I received and am still receiving awards and nominations for my work with the book.

As most of my working time has been spent on *Meseország* since 2020, I have had to put aside academic work, which I had been able to do as a freelancer. I had never wanted to have a full-time academic job, I always tried to divide my working time between academic and activist work. However, the lack of time and energy to produce academic publications in the past years is visible now in my CV and makes it less competitive for academic jobs. On the other hand, due to anti-gender politics, it is more and more difficult to find work in the field of gender studies in Hungary. Researching gender and sexuality in schools, which has been my primary academic interest (see: Ré dai, 2019; Tsouroufli and Ré dai, 2021), has become impossible for me, due to the chilling effect of the “Child Protection” Law. Sex education programs are not allowed into schools now, and neither would I be allowed to enter, for doing research, I am well-known enough to be declared a *persona non grata* in schools. At the same time, I am more successful and impactful as an activist at the moment than I could be as an academic. Thus, for me, the political situation has triggered the dilemma of quitting academia or finding other ways to do meaningful research or becoming a full-time activist.

I was a Board member in Labrisz during these three years, and I ended up doing most of the administrative work, besides coordinating *Meseország*. This was unsustainable, and the time came for Labrisz to take that step and start ‘growing’. By that time, we had earned enough money from the book sales to be able to afford a few salaries for a while, so I took a part-time job in Labrisz in 2022, and we hired a managing staff member and a communications staff member. By early 2023 financial matters were beginning to grow beyond my competency, therefore we also hired a financial manager. It took about a year for the membership to understand and accept that the flat organisational structure was not sustainable anymore, there had to be a general director responsible for decision-making and organisational management. After some structural rearrangement and a group coaching process, I took that position in Summer 2023.

I have described these personal and organisational struggles in detail in order to make it visible what profound personal and organisation-level impacts the repressive politics of the current authoritarian regime can have, and also to show how successful resistance may change an organisation’s structure and functioning. What is happening to Labrisz, as a consequence of the explosion of our book project, is altogether positive. At the same time, it is a difficult and externally imposed growth process, as opposed to an internally motivated organic growth process at a comfortable pace. The increase of visibility for a lesbian organisation is wonderful but it also has consequences. We have more supporters, more followers, but that means we have to be constantly alert and available; it is expected that we communicate when something relevant happens in

politics; people are waiting for what we are going to produce next; we need to be available for the media and respond immediately, fluently and eloquently both in Hungarian and English. If we are not constantly communicating publicly, we will sink back to invisibility, which we cannot afford and do not want anymore. Also, we need to work on raising enough funds to be able to pay our employees, as the profits from the book will dwindle after a while. And we need to make sure we keep our employees as long as we can, because it is not easy to find people who are competent, motivated and would want to be officially employed by an LGBTQ+ organisation for a civic sphere level (i.e., relatively low) salary. Thus, 'organisational growth' in a neoliberal capitalist environment can be as much a threat to a small grassroots organisation as neo-fascism itself.

The issue of voluntary work is burning not only for Labrisz but all LGBTQ+ organisations. People are less and less able or willing to devote part of their working time or freetime to do voluntary work. Volunteering had never had much respect and popularity in Hungary, but currently it is more and more a question of making ends meet. Harder, more demanding, more competitive working conditions; precarity; feeling helpless and ineffective against such an authoritarian regime, are making voluntary work a less and less attractive option. Many older activists who have spent much of their lives volunteering are tired and burnt out or cannot afford volunteering anymore. Younger people often don't feel a call for volunteering, or if they do, they rather just 'help out' with specific tasks when there is an occasion but don't commit for a longer time. Fully paid activism (i.e., everyone is employed) is not sustainable for small grassroots groups. Besides, in Labrisz, everyone is a professional; we put our professional knowledge and skills and interests into our activism, but we all want to keep doing our professional (and income-generating) work outside Labrisz, as well. These material factors are weakening activism at least as much as fear, helplessness, hopelessness and passivity triggered by the repressive regime.

### ***Ways of resistance in an autocratic regime***

When thinking about forms of resistance to oppressive state power, usually democratic ways to resist come to mind, such as boycotting, demonstrations, verbal or physical protests, strikes, civil disobedience etc. However, these ways are rather ineffective in legally elected autocratic regimes. In such a regime, state power and governing politics will not be shaken by resistance, as long as those in power can claim legitimacy from popular support. Most of the population will not even be informed about acts of resistance because the party-state-owned media will ignore or falsify news of such acts. Still, resistance must continue, and as long as the party-state

is interested in keeping up the semblance of democracy, some legal structures will allow for resistance, despite imposing legislative restrictions and intimidating people away from protesting.

Taken-for-granted forms of protest, and the legislative framework enabling the operation of non-governmental organisations have been challenged by this regime, and we have had to accommodate our ways of resistance to a regime that does not tolerate critique or questioning its ways of operation. Publishing *Meseország* was an act of resistance, even though we hadn't expected the scale of further resistance it would trigger. It was resistance with a pedagogical tool against hatred, intolerance, discrimination, polarisation, social exclusion and oppression. I suspect that if this book had been published by a mainstream publishing house, it wouldn't have created much of a stir. Because it was published by a lesbian organisation, which had been monitored by the far-right for its educational (or, in their interpretation, 'child corruption') activities, and because it fitted well onto the map of 'liberal conspiracy' drawn by the neo-fascists, it made waves. Buying the book, supporting Labrisz and other LGBTQ+ groups, teachers using the tales in schools for human rights education, celebrities reading the tales on YouTube, are all acts of resistance. And on a larger scale, the invalidation of the homo- and transphobic referendum, was an unprecedentedly strong act of resistance against anti-LGBTQ+ politics. Which, in turn, has given hope and motivation to the LGBTQ+ activist community to continue resistance. And resistance is needed, because, after a temporary break following the national elections and referendum in 2022, the government picked up on their anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda again, and at the time of writing this paper, an even stricter "Child Protection" bill is being prepared (Serdült, 2023), along with imposing heavy fines on book retailers that sell books for youth with LGBTQ+ content without wrapping them up in plastic foil.

Besides single acts of resistance, there are more subtle and complex ways to resist. After the first shock of getting our school program banned, our trained volunteers and the program leaders decided that the program should continue. To resist the prohibition of going to schools, we are trying to redesign our school program and develop it into new directions. As a response to the government's insistence that sex education is parents' task exclusively, we are developing a program for parents, to give them guidance about how to talk about LGBTQ+ issues and sexuality with their children. We already have a teacher-training module in our program, which we want to expand and offer more trainings to teachers. Part of the teacher-training program is a training module on working with the fairy tales of the book. This is a resistant way to reach the target group the book was made for: children.

Resistance through cultural production and education initiatives can work more efficiently in this regime than open political protesting. Because political actors will not engage with us, lobbying is quite futile. Another

very important way for resistant activism is to form coalitions and solidarity networks with activists working for other minority/discriminated/oppressed groups. We should not remain in our silos but reach out to other groups and support causes that are not strictly within our own scope, whether they affect us directly or not. I am thinking of solidarity actions like ‘lesbians supporting teachers’. Or train drivers, or homeless people, or refugees, etc. This way it can become visible for the public that lesbians are everywhere and are not defined solely by their sexuality but they are also train drivers, teachers, homeless, refugees, etc. It can also send a strong message to the groups supported that they can count on us, and to decision-makers that discriminated groups are not alone and will stand together in the face of state oppression. When we support another group, it is more likely that the support will be reciprocated when we need it. In the Hungarian LGBTQ+ activist community we are at the beginning of forming these alliances, but the first step, recognising the need for solidarity networks and coalition-building, has been taken.

Like in fairy tales where objects come to life, *Meseország* has come to a life of its own, it has become more than just a book. Buying the book has been an act of taking a stand against hatred, intolerance, social exclusion; protest against the politics of the Orbán government. It has given a window of hope for people taking action to reinstate democracy. It has generated public debate on formerly taboo topics related to child-raising, child sexuality and education. The book was seen as one of the most important cultural products of 2020 in Hungary, novel and unique on the Hungarian children’s book market where children’s books with LGBTQ+—and other minority—characters had not existed before, and the genre of rewritten fairytales from a feminist perspective had not gained popularity. We hope that *Meseország* will help equip today’s children with the emotional and intellectual tools to resist oppression, discrimination, exclusion and embrace inclusion, diversity and the desire for freedom, and will help enable them to act for a fairer, just, equal, respectful and liveable future when they grow up.

## Notes

1. Dutch, Polish, Slovak, German, Swedish, Estonian, English, Finnish, Czech, French and Italian.
2. KDNP is the abbreviation for the Christian-Democrat People’s Party. It is a very small party which is an adjunct of Fidesz, i.e. they have run in coalition at the elections since 2010, otherwise KDNP would not receive enough votes to cross the 5% threshold for the Parliament. They are behind many of the anti-gender initiatives of the government, and their leader, Zsolt Semjén, is the Deputy Prime Minister to Orbán. I mention the two parties together where it is relevant.
3. A most tragic example has been the Covid-politics of Fidesz-KDNP, which resulted in Hungary having one of the highest Covid-related mortality rates in the world.



4. The Hungarian title of the book, “Meseország mindenkié”, literally translates as “Fairylanland belongs to everyone.”
5. Quoted in the online daily [www.hvg.hu](http://www.hvg.hu), [https://hvg.hu/elet/20201001\\_Meseország\\_mindenkie\\_mesekonyv\\_Labrisz\\_Duro\\_Dora](https://hvg.hu/elet/20201001_Meseország_mindenkie_mesekonyv_Labrisz_Duro_Dora). *My translation*. The video is not available, it was deleted by YouTube soon after. Some of the sentences in the original Hungarian quote are unclear or grammatically awkward, I have tried to translate the excerpt verbatim.
6. A comment on Labrisz’s Facebook page, 2023.
7. All these arguments could be found, for example, in comment threads of online bookshop sites. One example: <https://www.lira.hu/hu/konyv/szepirodalom/gyerekirodalom/mesek/meseország-mindenkie>
8. See the YouTube channel of Labrisz: [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=labrisz+channel](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=labrisz+channel).
9. Listed in the 2021 Catalogue of *The White Ravens*, Internationale Jugendbibliothek, Munich; *PEN Translates Award* for Anna Bentley, translator of the English edition, 2021; shortlisted for the Award *Fairytale Book of the Year* in the category of The Most Innovative Book by HUBBY (Hungarian section of IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People), 2020; The Most Innovative Children’s Book Award by the Student Jury of HUBBY, 2021.
10. GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) is the data protection and security law of the European Union, implemented in 2018. See: <https://gdpr.eu/>
11. Foundational Law of Hungary, Art. L/1.
12. Foundational Law of Hungary, Art. XVI.
13. <https://www.acsaladazcsalad.hu/>
14. See the questions and results of the referendum here: <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3871/>

## Disclosure statement

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Emma Goldman Snowball Award, Flax Foundation, 2020.

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