

14 Disinformation under the guise of democracy: lessons from Hungary

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Introduction

This chapter discusses how the Orbán governments in Hungary have developed an effective machinery for the production and dissemination of state-sponsored disinformation and other forms of government propaganda since 2010. The paper presents the Hungarian situation based on the "firehose of falsehood" propaganda model and its complement (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

This study argues that the success of propaganda can only be understood within a wider legal and social context, and therefore shows how legal and social control systems are being dismantled. The first part of the chapter presents a theoretical framework based on relevant literature on this kind of propaganda and adapts it to pseudo-democratic regimes such as the Orbán regime in Hungary. Subsequently, particular attention is paid to the legal, economic, and social environment that was built in parallel with the media system for the dissemination of state-sponsored disinformation. We are convinced that previous analyses have not paid enough attention to the broader context of the transformation of the Hungarian media system, without which the success of state disinformation and propaganda cannot be explained. The chapter is based on a review of legal and policy doctrines and related literature. Following this, and also based on our own primary research within the watchdog organisation Mertek Media Monitor, we summarise the main elements of the post-2010 transformation of the Hungarian media system, which the Orbán governments have undertaken to ensure that publicly funded political messages are disseminated unhindered, uncritically, and as widely as possible. The legal (Polyák, 2015 2019), economic (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020), and political (Bajomi-Lázár, 2021) aspects of the transformation of the Hungarian media system are well documented, interpreted, and placed in an international context (Mertek Media Monitor, 2021) in the literature and policy documents¹, so here we highlight only the aspects relevant to the spread of state-sponsored disinformation.

The last part of the chapter analyses one of the key instruments of state-sponsored disinformation in Hungary: the so-called national consultations, which were accompanied by major state campaigns and whose effects have already

been reported in the literature. In relation to the national consultations, we have analysed both the questions asked and the issues covered by the non-governmental media during the consultation period, in order to show what the national consultations have diverted the public debate from.

The nature of propaganda in pseudo-democracies

Since 2010, Hungary, as a member state of the European Union with improving economic performance until 2021, has developed a political system based on unilateral declarations of power and the elimination of checks and balances, instead of social dialogue and democratic competition. The resulting system has been described in the literature by a number of adjectives (Körösi et al., 2020), with Orbán himself calling it illiberal democracy (Puddington, 2017) and the European Parliament in 2022 calling it electoral autocracy². In this system, Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz four times won a two-thirds majority in the election in 2022. The pervasive, enemy-creating, and reality-bending, extremely loud political communication that we refer to here as propaganda is a strong pillar of the system's perpetuation.

We understand state-sponsored disinformation as a tool of propaganda (Martin 1982). Although there are broader definitions of propaganda (Ellul, 1973; Mareš & Mlejnková, 2021), in the context of this paper, propaganda is a form of political communication that seeks to persuade voters not through fact-based arguments but through a strong emotional, impulsive charge of communication. It usually relies on the creation of enemies, stereotyping, and the simplification of language, images, and content, and defines the election as a choice between different political systems (old vs. new, elite vs. power of the masses, good vs. evil), thus denying the legitimacy of political competition within a democratic framework. In the context of this study, propaganda is a tool of political influence that destroys the functioning of the democratic public sphere and ultimately deprives the electorate of the possibility of democratic decision-making.

Where propaganda serves the interests of the government or the political forces in power, and is produced and disseminated using public money and other state resources, it is state-sponsored.

The veracity of the messages is irrelevant to propaganda. Not all propaganda is disinformation, as propaganda can achieve its aims by amplifying some of the real facts or some opinions based on real facts and framing them in a way that appeals to emotions. While the aims of disinformation often coincide with those of political propaganda and are as destructive to the democratic public as propaganda, not all disinformation can be considered propaganda. For example, many of the non-political conspiracy theories and untrue health information do not meet the definition of propaganda used here. The common set of both types of manipulative communication is, however, ultimately very large.

The primary aim of propaganda is manipulation, often using untrue statements. These are excellent tools for achieving propaganda's aims: they can be used to provoke a strong emotional reaction, to strengthen the loyalties of one's own camp, to disqualify other points of view and their representatives, and to simplify complex problems. The aim of propaganda is not to communicate information but to convince on an emotional basis, and this type of communication is therefore, indifferent to the truth of the message.

“Firehose of falsehood”

The state-sponsored disinformation used by the Hungarian government fully meets the criteria that Paul and Matthews (2016) have defined as a “firehose of falsehood”, which was initially conceptualised in relation to Russian propaganda. This comprehensive propaganda model is so resource-intensive that it can only be carried out at the state level in practice, through the uncontrolled use of public money and the misuse of state power. Hence, the “firehose of falsehood” always takes the form of state-sponsored disinformation. The aim of this propaganda model is to eliminate the checks and balances and make democratic competition impossible in an environment in which the illusory, formal skeleton of democratic limits and competition still exists. This propaganda is therefore not simply aimed at convincing, enthusing, and mobilising, but at covering up government abuses and failures, disqualifying competitors, hiding or denigrating alternatives, and ultimately creating an illusory reality that is false in all its elements. It is therefore the most widespread and effective form of state-sponsored disinformation. By radically restructuring the ownership and financing of the media system, it builds up an effective infrastructure for the dissemination of disinformation at public expense and uses this infrastructure to mass-produce and disseminate disinformation messages at public expense.

In the following, we describe the four main characteristics of this propaganda model, according to the authors (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

1. High-volume and multichannel: propaganda messages are delivered to audiences across a wide range of platforms and genres, not only through all possible forms of media channels but through educational and cultural institutions as well. Messages are essentially the same across all platforms and formats. Many times they are repeated verbatim; other times they repeat centrally defined phrases and idioms.
2. Rapid, continuous, and repetitive: the propaganda machine can react very quickly to new situations, changing topics, picking up and releasing narratives in a matter of seconds. The rapid changes of topics also mean that this communication dominates public discourse at any given moment, continually diverting the audience's attention to newer and newer topics, leaving no room for refuting certain falsehoods or for any real debate. In doing so, it

constantly draws citizens' attention to the issues that the government wants to talk about and distracts attention from those that the government would rather remain silent about. The topics are not only repeated on different platforms but are also recurrently interlinked. Increasingly, the public perceives that it is being presented with a single narrative, even if its details sharply contradict each other. This is nothing less than conspiracy theorising by the government.

3. Lacks commitment to objective reality: propaganda messages use the truth according to their own intentions. They are not necessarily based on blunt lies, although they do not shy away from them. The messages are usually truthful, but the real elements are framed and taken out of context. The selective and manipulative use of reality makes propaganda messages even more difficult to refute. Propaganda also serves the function of discouraging those who seek to refute the messages. After all, any debate about the truth of propaganda is doomed to failure. The propagandist can easily twist arguments to refute manipulative messages, utter superficial half-truths, appeal to emotions and passions, and attack the speaker instead of presenting counter-arguments. Debate is particularly difficult in a media situation in which the debate leader is also biased towards propaganda.
4. Lacks commitment to consistency: just as conspiracy theories are generally inconsistent, and believers in them do not expect consistency, so are government narratives composed of partially contradictory elements. These narratives are most often held together by the identity of the propaganda enemy. More important than the actual content of the propaganda is its ability to reinforce the identity of the community, the simplest and most effective means of which is to contrast the community with the values and groups represented by the designated enemy. Just as individual and community identities are not consistent, propaganda does not have to be either. In fact, the more contradictory messages appear, the stronger the feeling in the public that anything can be true, or the opposite of anything can be true. As a result of the relativisation of facts, refuting lies with real facts becomes almost impossible during debates.

In terms of the Hungarian experience, the characteristics listed by Paul and Matthews (2016) are complemented by a further characteristic, which follows the previous ones, namely the extremely polarising messages. The purpose and effect of propaganda messages is to create a public sphere in which supporters and critics of the government are placed at an unbridgeable distance from each other. A polarised public sphere is dominated by emotionally overwrought rhetoric, primarily focused on maintaining group identity, and mainly presenting extremist views (Tufekci, 2018). This has the advantage for the ruling parties of creating a strong loyalty among their own voters, and emotional loyalty maintains the electoral majority needed for re-election.

The experience of recent years in countries operating within a fundamentally democratic and constitutional framework shows that the propaganda that appears in these countries is really successful in dividing and polarising the public and society. This gap-widening propaganda has been used in the Brexit campaign (Hobolt et al., 2021), in the political success of Donald Trump (Jacobson, 2016), by Narendra Modi in India (Taberez, 2020), Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Fernandes et al., 2020), and in some of the eastern member states of the European Union. Alongside Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland (Tworzecki, 2019), this political communication strategy has also been followed by Janez Janša of Slovenia (Krašovec & Deželan 2019).

Declining democracy in Hungary: eliminating the institutions of the rule of law

In 2010, after eight years of left-wing government, Viktor Orbán and his right-wing conservative party Fidesz won a significant electoral victory. They won two-thirds of the seats in parliament, which is enough to change the constitution under the Hungarian constitutional system, elements of which will be presented later in this paper. Orbán immediately used this mandate and radically changed the whole constitutional and legal system. As part of this process, he rewrote the electoral rules and has been shaping the electoral system to his own needs since the 2014 elections. This is an important factor in preserving the two-thirds majority.

The political, economic, and social system in Hungary after 2010 has been described in the literature by a number of adjectives (Körösényi et al., 2020) with Orbán himself calling it illiberal democracy (Puddington, 2017) and the European Parliament in 2022 calling it electoral autocracy³.

An essential instrument for dismantling the guarantees of the rule of law has been the Fundamental Law adopted in 2011, which was drafted without participation from neither opposition parties nor civil society. The new institutional framework created by the constitution also allowed the governing party to appoint its own confidants to head all the public institutions that are supposed to control power. An emblematic example of this is the Constitutional Court, whose powers were significantly reduced, and by increasing the number of judges and appointing new judges, the Constitutional Court already had a stable majority of judges in 2013 who unconditionally supported the Fidesz government (Eötvös Károly Institute, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union & Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2015). Even so, it cannot be said that the Constitutional Court has taken only restrictive decisions on freedom of expression and media freedom. For example, the decisions ensuring the free publication of police officers' images in the press are important reinforcements of freedom of expression.⁴ However, in cases concerning the media system, it has either not acted at all—notably the Media Council and the complaint about the independence

of the public media—or has ruled in line with the ruling party's demands. The most important example of the latter is the decision on the competition regulatory environment of the creation of the Fidesz-affiliated media conglomerate Central European Press and Media Foundation, which unreservedly approved the government's right to take over the authorisation of media acquisitions from the competition authority and the media authority.⁵

In Hungary, there are institutions in charge of guaranteeing press freedom and the rule of law, such as *ombudsmen*, an autonomous competition and data protection authority, as well as the State Audit Office, which is supposed to control the management of public media and advertising. Under the Fidesz government, these institutions have lost their autonomy, their powers have been reduced, and they are headed by leaders loyal to Fidesz. The judiciary has also gradually become traversed by political influences. Without the independence of the judiciary, cases uncovered by journalists have no legal consequences. Another impact of the erosion of institutions that guarantee the rule of law is that journalists working for critical media outlets are denied access to information of public interest from pro-government politicians, governmental departments and agencies, and public bodies such as hospitals and schools. On top of that, they are less and less likely to be able to use legal means to force a response. Furthermore, with the dismantling of autonomous institutions, possible attacks against journalists can also go unpunished. In Hungary, physical violence against journalists has not occurred, but Pegasus spyware has been used by the state against journalists and media owners, and in these cases no state body has provided legal protection to the victims (European Parliament, 2022).

Weakening the autonomy of social and economic actors

The Fidesz government has not only abolished legal-constitutional and political checks and balances, but has also directly and deeply interfered in economic and social processes. For instance, it has progressively discredited and denigrated autonomous actors, from businesses to universities (Láncos, 2021).

The politicisation of the economy involves directing a significant share of public procurement to a narrow economic group, which also ensures that European Union subsidies are used for political purposes. Publicly funded acquisitions in strategic sectors such as energy, construction, agriculture, banking, and telecommunications ensure that the new ownership loyal to Orbán remains in a key position in the event of a change of government. In 2016, Orbán also identified the media as a strategic sector in which Hungarian ownership should be secured (Stubnya, 2016); by 2016, this expectation had in fact been met.

The politicised economy creates chains of dependency that link local entrepreneurs to the Orbán regime as suppliers of politically supported large corporations, and the low-skilled rural population primarily through so-called public works, i.e., the maintenance of low-value and low-wage jobs financed by public

money. This strong economic vulnerability, which is typically associated with lower education and less diverse media consumption, increases, in our view, the susceptibility to propaganda. Indeed, resignation to one's own vulnerable, dependent situation is facilitated by the acceptance of a worldview that offers a stable order and protection from external enemies, often created by propaganda, in exchange for a dependent situation (Rieger et al., 2017).

Another important element in the overall transformation of society is the politicisation and political control of educational and cultural institutions. The full institutional centralisation of public education, the standardisation of textbooks, the ideological transformation of the centralised “national curriculum” and the acceleration of school segregation have already been implemented in the first half of the 2010s (Rado, 2020; Neumann, 2022; Ryder, 2022). At the time of closing the manuscript, the serious problems of public education (OECD, 2022) are taking some teachers, students, and parents to the streets, but the autonomy of educational institutions and teachers has been largely eliminated. This is the most important guarantee of the effectiveness of propaganda in the long term. Today, the Hungarian education system is characterised by the teaching of outdated fact-based knowledge instead of a critical approach, a complete lack of civic education, and at the same time, an overemphasis on sport, religion, and conservative authors (Neumann, 2022).

Building a media system for the dissemination of propaganda

Politically motivated media owners, extreme media concentration

Taking advantage of the economic, political, and social circumstances, Orbán has launched a far-reaching transformation of the media system. This transformation started immediately after the change of government in 2010 and continues to this day, with significant twists and turns. The media laws of 2010 created the institutional framework for media transformation, and the market takeovers and takeover attempts that started immediately after the change of government foreshadowed deeper structural changes. The aim of these transformations was and remains the creation of a media system in which publicly funded actors deliver publicly funded political campaigns and messages to the public without reservation. This captured media system (Dragomir, 2018; Griffen, 2020) is not intended to control and limit power but to stabilise illiberal governance as a beneficiary and committed supporter.

As a main result of the transformation of the Hungarian media market since 2010, a significant proportion of foreign investors withdrew from it, and their stakes were taken over by Hungarian investors. Typically, they were replaced as owners by businesspersons with strong ties to the governing party in Hungary (Mertek Media Monitor, 2016).

Until 2014, there was a highly centralised, essentially single-player media empire close to Fidesz, which was replaced between 2015 and 2018 by a

diversified system with smaller owners, but even more closely linked to the party and Orbán. This was followed by a new process of monopolisation. In 2018, the Central European Press and Media Foundation (Közép-Európai Sajtó és Média Alapítvány, KESMA) was created, which owns nearly 500 media outlets and is a major, but not the only, player in the pro-government media scenario.

Nowadays, media players can be assigned to one of three larger groups (Polyák et al., 2022). Pro-government media are defined as media companies or media outlets whose owners can be proven to have close links with the governing parties and state advertising accounts for at least one-third of their advertising revenues. Independent media are those for which none of these conditions are met. There is also a third, “grey zone” category of media in the Hungarian media market: those that do not exclusively or primarily convey the pro-government narrative in their content, give significant space to information and opinions critical of the government, but are exposed to direct government influence either by virtue of their ownership structure or by virtue of a share of state advertising of at least one third.

Public money at the service of party propaganda

The volume of propaganda is provided not only by the proliferating media channels, but also by the public money that keeps them alive (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). Public advertising serves both to disseminate government propaganda as widely as possible and to finance pro-government media. The pro-government media can thus count on stable funding regardless of the prevailing economic situation and its own performance, which is also a seriously market-distorting situation.

In 2022, the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister spent the most on advertising, followed by the state-owned gambling monopoly and the state tourism agency (Szalay, 2022). The vast majority of public money used as state advertisement, 86% in 2020, goes to media outlets and media companies close to the government (Mertek Media Monitor, 2021). Even if a non-government media outlet reaches the same or even a larger audience in a given market, advertising does not automatically follow. Public advertisers spent eight times more in the leading pro-government media outlet in the commercial television market and 45 times more in the news portal market than in the largest non-government competitor; the daily newspaper market, on the other hand, is entirely based on state advertising, with the only daily newspaper critical of the government receiving 78% of its advertising revenues from the state (Mertek Media Monitor, 2021).

Since 2020, public money has also been the fuel for disseminating propaganda on social media. In 2020, the Megafon Centre was founded by one of the leaders of a pro-government think tank organisation⁶ funded by the government and government parties, whose main activity is to promote the Facebook posts

of pro-government influencers (Bradford & Cullen, 2022). Facebook is the most popular platform in Hungary, but voters have also seen a lot of political advertising on YouTube (444.hu, 2022). The funding background of the Megafon Centre is not transparent. However, the court has ruled in a lawsuit that it is not illegal to claim that Megafon's operations are indirectly financed by public money through a foundation and a company (Bozzay, 2022). The Court's judgment therefore confirms that the Megafon Centre is also based on public money. Megafon spent €2.7 million on Facebook between April 2019 and April 2022, making it the largest political advertiser on Facebook in Hungary (444.hu, 2022). In second place is Fidesz, and in third place is the Hungarian government. Between April 2019 and April 2022, more than €11 million was spent on Facebook in favour of the ruling party Fidesz and €6.3 million in favour of the opposition parties. Social media became the main channel for Hungarian political communication in the 2022 election campaign (Bene & Farkas, 2022), making it clear to Hungarian voters that social media platforms are dominated by the player with more resources.

Emblematic tools of state-funding disinformation: national consultations

The national constitution as a political communication innovation

In the following, we present a propaganda innovation of the Fidesz government, the so-called national consultation (NC). National consultations are an effective tool for setting the political agenda, which, on the one hand, gives the appearance of voter participation and, on the other hand, sets the direction of public discourse for months with campaigns that flood all public channels. One of the most visible tools of Fidesz's reality-distorting propaganda instrument is the NC, which has been held 12 times since 2010.

Although consultation on decisions affecting citizens is an internationally known mechanism, the national consultation launched by Fidesz does not meet the most important methodological criteria of the procedure. The series of questions is a specific form of vertical production of mass support. They give the appearance of openness and participation but, in reality, they attempt to control citizens and the political and social agenda by creating a single, indisputable truth (Kövér, 2018; Barlai & Sik, 2017). The "questions" sent to each voter do not constitute a real consultation, since their phrasing and the answer options predetermine the intended direction of the outcome. In this context, they can serve no other function than to legitimise the government's future actions, backed in appearance by the "united will" of the voters. This operates as the government's attempt to control public discourse while pretending to be a proactive government that protects its voters (Sik & Domokos, 2019).

Every Hungarian voter, over 8 million, receives the questions by personalised letter by post, along with similarly distorting explanations, so even those who

otherwise do not consume political news cannot avoid the national consultation (Sik & Domonkos, 2019). The national consultation is not a referendum, nor is it subject to any regulation at all. Furthermore, the campaigns for the national consultation, the consequences of the results, and the guarantees of the credibility of the results (including the transparency and reliability of the minimal information such as the number of responses received, the proportion of postal and online responses) are not regulated. Therefore, there is no legally enforceable consequence to these political actions, yet the government refers to them in both domestic and foreign policy communications as if they were at least representative polls (Sik-Domonkos, 2019). Finally, the reliability of the results is undermined by the fact that the online submission platform has been proven to allow the same citizen to submit his/her answer any number of times.

National consultations use a variety of manipulation techniques to try to force the government's agenda on the voters. These include using "anonymous majorities"⁷ to justify their claims, embedding implicit answers in questions⁸, "false dilemmas"⁹, or using quite explicitly false claims¹⁰ (Diószegi-Horváth, 2022). The national consultations have had a proven impact on the perception of refugees and NGOs, for instance. In a 2018 survey conducted by Vicsek and his colleagues, 82% of the population, for example, had heard the claim that "George Soros is organising the transportation of migrants to Europe", and 44% of them considered it to be true (Vicsek, 2020, p. 95) (Table 14.1).

Table 14.1 Manipulation techniques of National consultation (Diószegi-Horváth, 2022)

<i>Manipulation techniques of National consultation (Diószegi-Horváth, 2022)</i>	
Using "anonymous majorities" to justify their claims	"There are some people who propose that the new Hungarian constitution should also protect common values such as family, order, home, work and health. Others say this is not necessary. What do you think?"—National consultation—Questions on the new constitution (2011)
Embedding implicit answers in questions	"Brussels is preparing a dangerous action. It wants to force us to abolish the cuts in rationing. What do you think Hungary should do? 1) Defend the overheads reduction. Insist that Hungarian energy prices are determined by Hungary. 2) Let's accept Brussels' plan and leave it to big companies to set the prices"—Stop Brussels national consultation (2017)
"False dilemmas"	"Do you agree that the Hungarian government should support Hungarian families and unborn children rather than immigration?"—National consultation on immigration and terrorism (2015)
Using quite explicitly false claims	"George Soros wants to persuade Brussels to allow at least a million immigrants from Africa and the Middle East to settle in the European Union, including Hungary, every year. Do you support this point of the Soros plan?"—National consultation on the Soros Plan (2017)

Furthermore, national consultations contribute to the information disorder by attempting to control political discourse. Due to a massive communication campaign, the success of voter manipulation is indicated by the results of recent opinion polls. To illustrate the parallel realities that exist alongside the national consultation, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the Hungarian opposition daily *Népszava*, the only legacy newspaper that existed throughout the whole period and did not change its political orientation, to illustrate how Fidesz tries to steer the political and social agenda. *Népszava* is a daily newspaper with consistently left-wing values, respecting the professional and ethical rules of journalism (Mertek Media Monitor, 2021).

The national consultations and the campaigns to promote them are perfect examples of the propaganda model on which this study is based. The wording of the questionnaires sent to all households is inherently highly propositional, pushing a single correct position. The associated media campaigns flood all communication platforms, from street posters to talk shows on pro-government television to Facebook. Each consultation focuses on the latest political enemy or political success, yet often repeats themes from previous consultations. The topics of the consultation, the questions, and the response options offered contain serious misrepresentations and untruths. In all cases, this reinforces or deepens the polarisation of society.

To demonstrate these two reality-distorting mechanisms, we have selected two of the 12 national consultations. The two selected consultations are not just isolated examples; the analysis of the other national consultations can be found on the Mérték Media Monitor website. We have chosen to focus on the two examples that directly target the European Union. However, an important feature of government communication is that the “European Union” is never mentioned, only “Brussels” as some demonised distant “power machine”.

For the “Stop Brussels” (2017) consultation, we examined national news in the print version of the newspaper in the week before and after the announcement of the national consultation and the publication of the questions, excluding publicist articles, as well as foreign, culture, and sports columns, along with other annexes of the journal. Thus, a total of 836 articles were subjected to content analysis, whereby the content of each article was analysed regardless of length. In the case of the 2022 consultation “seven questions on Brussels’ sanctions”, 499 articles of the *Népszava* newspaper’s online national column were subjected to content analysis using the same technique. In doing so, we specifically wanted to map out what other important public phenomena the government was trying to distract attention from with the NC, thereby contributing to an information disorder.

“Stop Brussels!”—2017

In the week before and after the “Stop Brussels!”¹¹ national consultation announcement, the referendum against the plans to organise one of the next

Table 14.2 Reality distorting by national consultation

<i>Reality distorting by national consultation</i>		
<i>National consultation</i>	<i>The government narrative by the consultation questions</i>	<i>The most frequent public events published in Népszava</i>
Stop Brussels (2017)	Brussels wants to take powers away from Member States in several areas, so Brussels must be stopped ¹⁶	NOLimpia referendum, OLAF investigation, and LexCeu
Seven questions on Brussels' sanctions 2022	Do Hungarian citizens agree with the sanctions against Russia (which had already been voted on by the Hungarian government at the time)?	Teachers protests and horrible conditions in education, Energy crisis

Olympic Games in Hungary¹², and the OLAF investigation¹³ on the Metro 4 dominated the public discourse and the front page of *Népszava*¹⁴.

The national consultation questionnaires were mailed on March 31, 2017, just a few days after the adoption of Lex CEU¹⁵, which caused a huge international outcry. During the period under consideration, almost all issues of the daily newspaper covered the Central European University (CEU) and the law that made it impossible for NGOs to operate in Hungary. The Hungarian government submitted an amendment to the National Higher Education Act to the Parliament. Although the draft was based on normative terms, the only target institution was clearly the CEU, forcing the prestigious university to move to Vienna.

A total of 25 articles on the referendum against the Budapest Olympic Games were published in the 26 newspapers at the time of the public announcement of the survey. In the 13 issues published at the time the national consultations were posted, 38 articles dealt with the CEU. This proves that the two topics were dominating public debate in the so-called “opposition”, although not all voters were aware of this due to the NC’s campaign (Table 14.2).

“National consultation: seven questions on Brussels’ sanctions”—2022

In 2022, the “seven questions on Brussels’ sanctions” national consultation, the Fidesz government asked Hungarian citizens about sanctions on Russia that it had already voted for¹⁷.

Of the 499 articles examined, 98 reported on protests¹⁸ by teachers and students against the curtailment of teachers’ right to strike¹⁹ and the disastrous conditions of the education system²⁰. This is a particularly high proportion considering

that the really intense wave of protests only started on the tenth day of the period under consideration. After the complete abolition of the teachers' right to strike, many of them began civil disobedience to draw attention to the inhuman conditions that had prevailed in education for years. In response, the government fired several teachers in a clear attempt to intimidate them. However, this triggered an unprecedented wave of resistance, with tens of thousands of students and teachers protesting for several months.

The second most frequently mentioned topic was the increasing energy crisis in the country and the financial problems of municipalities left alone by the state²¹, on which 33 articles were written by *Népszava* journalists.

What impact has this national consultation campaign had on public opinion? The European Union has traditionally been highly supported in Hungary, even among pro-government voters, and the Eurobarometer (2022) report shows that 60% of Hungarian respondents think that European Union membership is a good thing. Despite this, years of campaigning have not been in vain, with support for EU membership in Hungary falling by ten percentage points following the campaign against sanctions, according to the Medián survey (Hann, 2022).

In 2022, the effects of the National Consultation and the campaign on "Brussels sanctions" on public opinion were analysed (Vicsek, 2022). Again, the researchers formulated statements in line with the themes of the National Consultation and the government's frequently repeated messages. This time, they also looked at how responses from people with different party preferences varied. The claim that in Hungary "sanctions and war are the main causes of inflation" has already been heard by 81% of pro-government voters, and 78% of them also accept it, while 74% of opposition voters are familiar with the statement and 37% believe it to be true. The results show that there are clear differences in the perception of the statements' veracity on a partisan basis, but according to Vicsek, an important conclusion is that a considerably high proportion of opposition voters also accept the government's narrative (Vicsek, 2022, p. 4).

In the current war-related government communication, the hard-to-disprove, vague propaganda messages have been replaced by clear disinformation efforts. A survey conducted by Political Capital (2022) shows that as a result of government propaganda criticising the EU sanctions against Russia, 36% of the total population and 50% of government party voters (incorrectly) thought that Hungary did not vote in favour of the sanctions (p. 2). Government narratives that downplay Russia's responsibility for the war have even led governing party voters to put Russia only in third place on the imaginary ranking of parties possibly responsible; they consider that Ukraine and the USA are more to blame for the war (p. 5). These numbers suggest that recently the gap between government narratives and reality has become so wide that a massive part of the public is misinformed about even basic facts.

Conclusion

Since 2010, the Orbán regime has used huge amounts of public money to dominate public discourse. It uses public money to build, expand, and operate a media system that effectively communicates the government's messages rather than surveilling public power. On the other hand, it uses public money to run political campaigns that constantly set the agenda for political discourse.

This flood of state-sponsored communication builds a narrative that, while contradictory in some elements, provides a clear answer to how Orbán and Fidesz can continue to dominate public discourse and marginalise political alternatives. Constantly adapting to external circumstances, it uses the refugee crisis, the pandemic, or war to feed the propaganda. In each case, these campaigns create a fictitious or over-dimensioned enemy, divert public debate from real social problems or frame them in a favourable context for Fidesz, and portray Orbán and Fidesz as the only possible saviours of the nation. These narratives are pervasive conspiracy theories that deeply divide society, while at the same time providing Fidesz with a stable majority in the elections.

At the same time, this state-sponsored disinformation would not be sufficient to ensure Orbán's continued political success if it were not accompanied by the dismantling of society's legal, economic, and cultural immune systems. Weakening the rule of law, and economic and cultural institutions significantly increases exposure to propaganda.

The institution of the national consultation is a perfect illustration of state-sponsored disinformation in action in Hungary. In an unregulated procedure with no legal consequences and no methodological foundations, Fidesz strengthens its position by means of manipulative questions, all of which are amplified by a publicly funded campaign using the publicly funded media system.

The durability of the Orbán regime also shows that Hungary is a unique case. The conditions that have made it possible to dismantle autonomous constitutional, economic, and cultural institutions and to create a pro-government media system can hardly be met simultaneously elsewhere. It is therefore worth looking at the Hungarian example as an illiberal laboratory from which the risks of the erosion of democracy and the democratic public sphere can be well understood. Others can thus avoid or better manage these risks.

Notes

- 1 See the country reports of the annual Media Pluralism Monitor at <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/>.
- 2 Interim Report on the proposal for a Council decision determining, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded, 25.7.2022 - (C9-0000/2022 – 2018/0902R(NLE)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0217_EN.html.

- 3 Interim Report on the proposal for a Council decision determining, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded, 25.7.2022 - (C9-0000/2022 – 2018/0902R(NLE)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0217_EN.html.
- 4 Decisions of the Constitutional Court Nr 28/2014. (IX. 29.) AB and 3/2017. (II. 25.) AB.
- 5 Decision of the Constitutional Court Nr 16/2020. (VII. 8.) AB.
- 6 Alapjogokért Központ, Centre for Fundamental Rights; about its function, see Bárd, Koncsik & Körtvélyesi (2022).
- 7 National consultation—Questions on the new Constitution (2011): *“There are some people who propose that the new Hungarian constitution should also protect common values such as family, order, home, work and health. Others say this is not necessary. What do you think?”*
- 8 Stop Brussels national consultation (2017).
- 9 National consultation on immigration and terrorism (2015): *“Do you agree that the Hungarian government should support Hungarian families and unborn children rather than immigration?”*
- 10 “National consultation on the Soros Plan” (2017): *“George Soros wants to persuade Brussels to allow at least a million immigrants from Africa and the Middle East to settle in the European Union, including Hungary, every year. Do you support this point of the Soros plan?”*
- 11 https://commission.europa.eu/publications/stop-brussels-european-commission-responds-hungarian-national-consultation_en.
- 12 <https://www.euronews.com/2017/02/01/nolimpia-referendum-initiative-grows-in-budapest>.
- 13 <https://www.politico.eu/article/budapest-metro-scheme-tainted-by-fraud/>.
- 14 The European anti-fraud office, OLAF, has recommended that Hungary refund the European Union nearly €160 million after its investigation. In 2017, the opposition party Momentum successfully campaigned against the Olympic Games.
- 15 <https://verfassungsblog.de/legally-sophisticated-authoritarians-the-hungarian-lex-ceu/>.
- 16 https://index.hu/belfold/2017/03/31/igy_nez_ki_a_legujabb_nemzeti_konzultacio/.
- 17 <https://telex.hu/english/2022/09/29/orban-announces-national-consultation-on-energy-sanctions-but-what-is-this-exactly>.
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