



The Birth of an Illiberal Informational Autocracy in Europe: A Case Study on Hungary

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Abstract

While the institutional aspects of the illiberal shift in Hungary since 2010 have received notable scholarly attention, less analysis has dealt with the informational aspects of this de-democratization trend. In this article, I apply the concept of “informational autocracy” to Hungary to explain the way in which the Orbán government has been able to achieve the kind of hegemonic rule in that has also helped Orbán’s Fidesz party win their fourth straight election. The article briefly explains how the Hungarian media infrastructure (the “hardware”), was built up, and what are the dominant narratives—especially the conspiracy theories—that the regime is propagating (the “software”). The efficiency of Orbán’s informational autocracy in shaping public opinion is explained through specific cases in which the government could easily shore up its popularity by manipulating information, such as during the pandemic and after the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The article argues that Hungarian informational autocracy combines strategies and techniques that are imported from Western liberal democracies—with plenty of inspiration coming from the recent example of the United States, and with narratives and conspiracy theories that are imported from Eastern autocracies.

Keywords: Hungary, informational autocracy, conspiracy theory

Introduction¹

On April 3, 2022, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz-KDNP, the coalition that has been in power since 2010, won its biggest victory to date. Winning with 3 million out of more than 5.6 million votes cast (in a country of 8.2 million eligible voters overall), he took 52% of the share of the ballots cast on party lists in Hungary. This domestic result was topped off by the mail-in ballots of ethnic Hungarian voters from surrounding countries, which resulted in another constitutional majority (the fourth in a row), with a mandate of 68% of the seats in parliament.²

According to Politico's Poll of Polls database, which aggregates polling results and calculates an average for them,³ Fidesz's advantage over the opposition was one of 49% against 45% as of February 1, before the invasion of Ukraine—only a four-percentage-point difference. But two months later, the difference that manifested in the election results was dramatically higher, with Fidesz winning 52% of the votes on the party lists and the opposition mustering only 36%. The mail-in ballots then further boosted this initial 16-percentage-point advantage of Fidesz to 20.⁴

Looking at the events preceding the elections, the results were surprising to many observers. Orbán cultivated the strongest ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin of any leader from within the European Union, and Russia, against prevailing expectations, invaded Ukraine in the run-up to the campaign.

How was this landslide victory still possible? Besides the rally-'round-the-flag effect that manifested itself in many NATO countries⁵—as well as in Ukraine and Russia—in the months after the invasion, Fidesz's campaign during the war had a huge impact on voter preferences. After a period of confusion, Fidesz found its footing in terms of messaging, sending four main messages to voters through its centralized and politically-controlled media machinery. These were:

- 1) The opposition would pull Hungary into the war and even conscript Hungarian civilians to go and fight in Ukraine.
- 2) If the opposition is elected, the era of cheap gas will be over, since they would immediately raise the price of gas.
- 3) The Hungarian opposition secretly conspired with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his cabinet to interfere in the elections to help them.
- 4) If the opposition wins the election, children will be exposed to dangerous sex-change surgeries. There was a referendum held on the day of the election to push back these looming threats, including the question: "Do you support promoting sex-change surgeries for children?"

¹ I would like to express my thanks to Johns Hopkins University SAIS Bologna Institute for Policy Research for hosting me for a month in April 2022 as a research fellow so that I could work on the first draft of this paper. I am also personally indebted to Professor Evgeny Finkel for his inspiring discussion of the concept of "authoritarian inflation" during my guest lecture in his class. I am further grateful to the Institut Montaigne for organizing a session where I could present my initial findings and incorporate feedback into the text. Finally, I give thanks to Sergei Guriev for raising some important points during these discussions. All errors, logical mistakes, and omissions are my own.

² Hungarian National Electoral Committee, Accessed August 1, 2022, <https://ytr.valasztas.hu/ogy2022/orszagos-listak?tab=parties>

³ "Polls of Polls: Hungary" Politico, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/hungary/>.

⁴ Note that questions have been raised concerning the reliability of the polls conducted before the elections, since none of them had predicted such a huge difference in support.

⁵ "Ukraine: Rally around the NATO Flag," *Europe Elects*, April 13, 2022, <https://europeelects.eu/2022/04/13/ukraine-rally-around-the-nato-flag/>.

None of these points kept up with facts and reality. First, while the head of the opposition, Péter Márki-Zay, once said in an interview that if he were the prime minister, Hungary would follow NATO guidance on assistance to Ukraine, even in terms of military assistance,⁶ he and opposition leaders afterward have all repeatedly denied that they would send troops directly to Ukraine. Second, the opposition also expressed that it has no plans for the immediate abolition of the popular price cap on natural gas and on gasoline in Hungary—measures that were introduced by the Orbán government and which have kept energy prices low while they have been skyrocketing elsewhere.⁷ To top it off, the government itself announced in the middle of July that the price caps will be incrementally lifted—and that above-average consumption will not be subsidized.⁸ As it turned out after the elections, Hungary in fact pays more for Russian gas than it would pay for gas on the global market, which belies Orbán's claim that close ties to Moscow are an important means of guaranteeing access to cheap gas.⁹ Third, while there have been discussions between Hungarian opposition politicians and Ukrainian officials, such as the ambassador, during the campaign after the war broke out, such discussions are not extraordinary for at least three reasons.

First, officials of the governmental side from Hungary also communicated with their Ukrainian counterparts after the invasion. Second, many opposition leaders around the democratic world have communicated with Ukrainian officials to express their sympathy and to discuss ways of providing assistance. (For example, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell met personally with Volodymyr Zelenskyy on May 14, 2022.) Third, no proof of any conspiratorial discussions between the Hungarian opposition and Ukrainian authorities has been presented by Fidesz and the government so far—only the fact that the leader of the opposition planned to have a discussion with the Ukrainian president, which ultimately did not even take place.¹⁰ As for the sex-change surgeries for the underaged, this does not even constitute a theoretical threat in Hungary given that it is only legally permitted for people above the age of 18—and there are only extremely few cases where it even happened in Hungary.

Fidesz could thus win the election following an essentially post-truth campaign, painting the opposition candidate as a warmonger—and Ukraine, rather than Russia, as the main source of danger. Orbán even went as far as naming Zelenskyy as one of his opponents among the many whom he managed to defeat during the campaign.¹¹ This campaign clearly had an impact on public opinion: according to the latest poll by Eurobarometer, the Hungarian public expresses low sympathy with Ukrainians (the lowest after Bulgaria), and is the least supportive of Ukraine joining NATO.¹² According to another poll, by Ipsos, 67% of Hungarians agree with the statement that “the problems of Ukraine are none of our business, and we should not interfere.” In none of the nine other European countries in the sample did a majority of those polled agree with this statement. In only one country out of the 27 polled (Saudi Arabia) did

6 Csaba Tibor Tóth, “Márki-Zay partizános elszólása a NATO-ról eldöntött szinte mindent,” *Mérce*, April 10, 2022, <https://merce.hu/2022/04/10/marki-zay-partizanos-elszolasa-a-nato-rol-eldontott-szinte-mindent/>.

7 Raven Bettina, “Márki-Zay Péter: A rezsielőcsökkentés maradt,” *Index*, January 7, 2022, <https://index.hu/belfold/2022/01/07/marki-zay-peter-rezsielőcsokkentés-ellenzék/>.

8 Official website of the Hungarian government, “Megóvjuk Az Energiabiztonságot És Megvédjük A Rezsielőcsökkentést,” July 13, 2022, <https://kormany.hu/hirek/megovjuk-az-energiabiztonsagot-es-megvedjuk-a-rezsielőcsokkentest>.

9 Jandó Zoltán, “Brutálisan drágán jön az orosz gáz Magyarországra,” *G7.hu*, April 21, 2022, <https://g7.hu/vallalat/20220421/brutalisan-dragan-jon-az-orosz-gaz-magyarorszagra/>.

10 “Márki-Zay elismerte, hogy a stábján beszélgetést szervezett Zelenskij ukrán elnökkel,” *HVG*, April 11, 2022, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20220411_marki_zay_peter_ukran_egyeztetes_valasztas_kampany.

11 Aisha Rimi, “Viktor Orban Calls Zelenskyy an ‘Opponent’ after Hungary Election Win,” *Independent*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/orban-zelenskyy-hungary-ukraine-election-b2050328.html>.

12 European Union, Eurobarometer, “EU’s Response to the War in Ukraine,” April–May 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2772>.

a higher number of respondents agree with this statement (69%).¹³ Polls also indicate that Fidesz voters blamed Russia more at the beginning of the invasion,¹⁴ but they have increasingly put the blame on Ukraine instead as the conflict has progressed.¹⁵

This temporal pattern cannot be attributed to anything other than governmental, and pro-governmental, messaging, in which pundits have been pushing conspiracy theories from the Kremlin playbook in the Hungarian state-sponsored media—on the so-called genocide of ethnic Russians in Donbas, on supposed secret American-Ukrainian biolabs, or on the idea that Ukraine, which had given up its nuclear weapons following the collapse of the Soviet Union, was now somehow threatening Russia with developing nuclear weapons.¹⁶ The invasion could have been the most decisive topic that influenced the final outcome of the elections.¹⁷ Voters—especially on the Fidesz-KNDP side—were very supportive of conspiracy theories promoted by Russia as well.¹⁸ For example, 46% agreed that due to Ukrainian nationalists, the well-being of trans-Carpathian Hungarians is in constant danger, 37% of Hungarians agreed that Ukraine has committed genocide against Russian minorities, and 28% of the voters believed that the US operates secret biolabs in Ukraine where bioweapons are developed against the Russians.

But there have been other policy areas during Orbán's previous term of office as well in which Fidesz managed to take positions stridently at odds with the European mainstream without risking any loss of popularity at home in Hungary while others were suffering heavily. While some populists in government (such as former President Donald Trump in the United States or President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil) have suffered consequences from the political impact of high rates of coronavirus infections and mortality, Orbán has been able to survive the pandemic practically without any loss of popularity. He has managed to do this despite having the highest mortality rate in the EU and the third-highest in the world, according to statistics from Johns Hopkins University.¹⁹ In fact, the pandemic just helped Orbán extend his grip on power and strengthen the authoritarian characteristics of his regime.²⁰ The information environment clearly played a role in his success, as surveys indicate that two-thirds of Hungarians were vastly underestimating the death rate in Hungary, while the overwhelming majority parroted governmental messages on the country's quick and successful vaccination campaign as compared to the "slowness" of vaccine distribution elsewhere in Europe.²¹

13 "The World's Response to the War in Ukraine: A 27-Country Global Advisor Survey," Ipsos, April 2022, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2022-04/Global%20Advisor%20-%20War%20in%20Ukraine%20-%20April%202022%20-%20Graphic%20Report_o.pdf.

14 Endre Hann, "Medián: A Fidesz győzelme szinte biztosra vehető, csak a mértéke kétséges," HVG, March 30, 2022, https://hvg.hu/360/20220330_Median_valasztas_2022_Fidesz_ellenek_mandatumbecsles_kozvelemeny_kutatas.

15 Dániel Rényi, "Jobban kedvelik a fideszesek Putyint, mint a nyugati vezetőket," 444.hu, May 10, 2022, <https://444.hu/2022/05/10/jobban-kedvelik-a-fideszesek-putyint-mint-a-nyugati-vezeteket>.

16 Dávid Sajó, "Magyarországon is óriási erővel terjeszti a Kreml a háborús propagandát," Telex.hu, March 3, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/03/03/kormanykozeli-segitseggel-terjeszti-a-kreml-magyarorszagon-a-haborus-propagandat>.

17 Zsolt Enyedi and Andrea Szabó, "Nem osztották szimpatizánsaik az ellenzéki pártok Ukrajna-pártiságát," Telex.hu, May 25, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/05/25/enyedi-zsolt-szabo-andrea-valasztas-utani-kutatas-zavecz-elemzes-kulpolitika>.

18 Péter Krekó and Csaba Molnár, "Magyarországon is kéz a kézben jár a Covid-szkepticizmus és az oroszbarátság," Telex.hu, June 29, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/06/29/oroszbaratsag-oltasellenesség-kutatas-political-capital>.

19 Johns Hopkins University, Coronavirus Resource Center website, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality> accessed July 26, 2022. Archive: <http://web.archive.org/web/20220720102202/https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.

20 Agnes Batory, "More Power, Less Support: The Fidesz Government and the Coronavirus Pandemic in Hungary," *Government and Opposition* (2022): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.3>.

21 Endre Hann, "Medián: Fáradnak és megosztottak a járványkezelés megítélésében a magyarok," HVG, April 14, 2021, https://hvg.hu/360/20210414_Median. Note that Hungary has been the only country that certified the Russian Sputnik V and Chinese Sinopharm vaccines.

The democratic backsliding of Hungary has received notable attention in the last few years, with many brilliant articles explaining the illiberal character of the regime, and a special focus on how the legal system has changed and how the system of checks and balances has been demolished.²² Less scholarly attention has been dedicated to the aspect of the information policies of the Hungarian regime—even if it is intertwined with, and aided by, the institutional changes. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the nature and the modus operandi of the Hungarian regime using the concept of “informational autocracy.”

Hungary as an Informational Autocracy

Modern dictators tend to use information more than violence and direct repression to keep themselves in power. The concept of “informational autocracy,” (or “spin dictatorship”), as described by Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, is a fair characterization of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary.²³ As the inventors of the term put it:

The key to such regimes, we argue, is the manipulation of information. Rather than terrorizing or indoctrinating the population, rulers survive by leading citizens to believe—rationally but incorrectly—that they are competent and public-spirited. Having won popularity, dictators score points both at home and abroad by mimicking democracy. Violent repression, rather than helping, would be counterproductive because it would undercut the image of able governance that leaders seek to cultivate.²⁴

Guriev and Treisman cite Hungary as an example of such a regime. In their book they argue that the nature of these regimes seems democratic at first, before turning more into dictatorships of a different kind.²⁵ The authors discuss four main characteristics of these informational autocratic regimes.

The first is the low application of violence against political opponents (and concealing of violence if does happen). Some examples include political executions, imprisonments, torture, or violence against protesters. This obviously fits the Orbán regime: it has managed to replicate political success without the need for a recourse to violence. Hungarian voters, as I put it in a 2018 piece with Zsolt Enyedi, “enjoy the secret ballot, face no threat of violence, live in a country belonging to that club of democracies called the European Union, and get news from journalists who need fear no jail time. Yet these same Hungarians tolerate and indeed vote for an increasingly autocratic regime.”²⁶ While indexes measuring democracy such as those of the

22 András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs, “The Rise of Authoritarianism in the European Union: A Hybrid Regime in Hungary,” in *The Condition of Democracy, Vol. 2: Contesting Citizenship*, ed. Jürgen Mackert, Hannah Wolf, and Brian S. Turner (London: Routledge, 2021), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003158370-12/rise-authoritarianism-european-union-andr%C3%A1s-boz%C3%B3ki-d%C3%A1niel-heged%C3%BCs>; Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 39–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0043>; Kriszta Kovács and Kim Lane Scheppele, “The Fragility of an Independent Judiciary: Lessons from Hungary and Poland—and the European Union,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 3 (September 2018): 189–200, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.07.005>; R. Daniel Kelemen, “Europe’s Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe’s Democratic Union,” *Government and Opposition* 52, special issue no. 2, “Democracy without Solidarity: Political Dysfunction in Hard Times” (April 2017): 211–238, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.41>; Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).

23 Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, “A Theory of Informational Autocracy,” *Journal of Public Economics* 186, (June 2020): p. 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104158>.

24 Guriev and Treisman, “A Theory of Informational Autocracy,” 100–101.

25 Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

26 Krekó and Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe,” 41.

Economist Intelligence Unit²⁷ or Freedom House's Freedom in the World report²⁸ are clearly showing a gradual and steady decline in the quality of democracy in Hungary—especially when it comes to the quality of information and independence of the press. Meanwhile, the level of civil liberties is still rated higher, and despite the decline of the independence of the judiciary, there are no obvious cases of political imprisonment.

The second feature of these regimes, as Guriev and Treisman argue, is that they mimic democracy. This is obviously true for Hungary, which is part of international clubs for democracies—both NATO and the European Union—and institutionally keeps up a democratic façade. The government rejects any criticism of its democratic shortcomings and abuses of power, even if they come from officially recognized sources such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which organizes the most widely accepted election observation missions throughout the world. Government spokesman Zoltán Kovács' response to the criticism of the OSCE report on Hungary (after having officially invited its election observation mission) was: "Whatever credibility OSCE ODIHR [Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights] may have had left is now gone."²⁹ At the same time, the Hungarian government was busy legitimizing the elections with observers of questionable credibility, mainly from pro-Russian European far-right and extreme-right political forces (such as the Austrian Freedom Party) and NGOs (such as the ultranationalist Polish organization Ordo Iuris).³⁰ This trick of fake election observers has been imported from Putin's Russia. It reflects an obvious attempt to paint unfair elections as being democratic.

The third characteristic of information autocracies is that, unlike democracies that are more supported by the better-educated and better-off, they have much less public support among the elites and the highly-educated than among the lower classes and the less-educated. Empirical data provides clear support for the presence of this gap in Hungary. Researchers at 21 Research Center have created 14 categories based on the economic and social (including educational) status of the Hungarian population, and found that support for the governing party Fidesz incrementally increases as one goes further down the socio-economic ladder, and it is much lower among the most privileged category (33%) than among the most underclass group (48%). See the graph below.

27 "Democracy Index 2021: The China Challenge," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, February 10, 2022, https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/?utm_source=economist&utm_medium=daily_chart&utm_campaign=democracy-index-2021.

28 "Freedom in the World 2021: Hungary," Freedom House, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2021>.

29 "Orban's Ruling Party Had 'Undue Advantage' in Campaign—OSCE Report," *Reuters*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/orbans-ruling-party-had-undue-advantage-campaign-osce-report-2022-04-04/>.

30 "Government-Friendly Election Observers at the 2022 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections," European Platform for Democratic Elections, April 13, 2022, <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/Government-Friendly-Election-Observers-at-the-2022-Hungarian-Parliamentary-Elections.html>.

Table 1. The class distribution of the whole of society
According to educational background, income, wealth, occupational position, internet use, place of residence and ethnicity.
1= lowest class, 14= highest class.

Class by grades	Pro-government(%)	Pro-opposition(%)	No party choice(%)	Total (%)	Sample size
14 – Most privileged citizens	33	47	21	100	456
13	35	42	23	100	439
12	37	40	23	100	608
11	39	36	25	100	749
10	42	31	27	100	955
9	36	33	31	100	987
8	37	34	29	100	897
7	39	31	30	100	831
6	40	31	29	100	746
5	45	25	30	100	584
4	46	22	33	100	578
3	41	25	34	100	433
2– underclass	44	19	37	100	252
1– underclass, economically most deprived citizens	48	13	39	100	247
Full sample	40	32	29	100	8762

Source: Dániel Róna et al., *The Fidesz Party's Secret to Success: Investigating Economic Voting in Hungary* (Budapest: 21 Research Center, 2020), https://21kutatokozpont.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Main_Secret_Fidesz_Success_final-2.pdf.

In short: the economic losers of Orbán's regime are its most enthusiastic supporters.³¹ It also reveals the power of symbolic politics: these voters might be losers economically, but they are winners in terms of symbolic capital and identity politics. This success of symbolic politics is, of course, part of a broader zeitgeist and is not limited to spin dictators. Francis Fukuyama convincingly argues for example that “megalothymia” (striving for recognition) is the most important psychological and political driver of politics these days in the democratic world.³²

But this also brings up the fourth characteristic of information autocracies that might fit a bit less with Orbán's Hungary: these regimes, according to Guriev and Treisman, are less ideological than other forms of autocracies, and they like to emphasize competence and performance over violence. Orbán's illiberal populist rhetoric is, of course, less ideological than that of old-school Communist and fascist dictators in Hungary. At the same time, compared to that of more “technocratic” democratic politicians, his rhetoric is highly ideological in its support for ultraconservative values, use of strong enemy images, and conspiracy theories for mobilizing the electorate. In the 2018 election campaign, for example (during a period of steady growth and rising living standards), Fidesz used the most negative messaging in the history of post-transitional Hungarian political campaigns, mobilizing the electorate against the “pro-migration” and “Soros-puppet” opposition forces.³³

31 For a similar case in the United States, see: Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005) (Thanks for the editor for this suggestion.)

32 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

33 Fruzsina Nábelek, “Negatív kampány Magyarországon: A negatív kampány megjelenése az 1998 és 2018 közötti választási kampányokban” (PhD diss., Budapest Corvinus University, 2020), <http://doeplayer.hu/204021534-Negativ-kampany-magyarorszagon.html>.

At the same time, in line with the argument of Guriev and Treisman, Orbán obviously uses the rhetoric of competence and performance as well. Also, he is considered a highly competent leader by the general public, who usually mention him first as the politician they would be most happy to see in decision-making positions.³⁴ This image of competence clearly helps Orbán regularly win supermajorities (that is, with two-thirds or more of the seats in parliament). Taking this positive image as a competent leader into consideration, the performance-based legitimacy as this fourth feature of informational autocracies fits Hungary as well.

The fact that Hungary, to a certain extent, fulfills all four of the above-mentioned criteria, however, only proves that the regime is *informational* in nature, but not that this is an *autocracy*. Hungary can be fairly characterized (based on the literature cited above) as either a *hybrid* or a *competitive authoritarian* regime with an illiberal character. In the dichotomous typology of regimes along a spectrum between two polar opposites, in which the non-democratic systems all qualify as autocratic to at least some extent,³⁵ Hungary falls on the autocratic part on the spectrum—given that hybrid regimes are by definition not fully democratic. Of course, it falls closer to the democratic end than it does to full-scale dictatorships such as Turkey or Russia. The illiberal features of the regime are reflected in the strongly ideological elements of the government's public communications.³⁶

Orbán's Information Autocracy in Action

What is peculiar about Orbán's information autocracy, however, is that it operates within the framework of the European Union: a deeply institutionalized system of intergovernmental cooperation among many of the most democratic countries in the world. This also means that Orbán's policies are seemingly similar to other populists' policies. But there are actually more differences than similarities. As Guriev and Treisman put it: "While populists may attack or circumvent the state-controlled media, information autocrats almost always view it as an essential tool."³⁷ While Orbán's regime is clearly populist in its rhetoric and strategies of mass mobilization, its approach to information policy is centralized, controlled, and promoted by the state. Orbán's regime is a prime example of how informational autocracy overlaps with the new populism. At the same time, it goes well beyond populism (as will be shown later) as it seeks not only to adapt to public opinion, but to transform it.

The Hardware

As for its media infrastructure and institutional system, Hungary is clearly unique. The Hungarian media market has seen large-scale centralization since the second Orbán government took power in 2010. This gave rise to a government-organized media empire.

The government has used legislative and informal means to take control of the media market and overcome the alleged advantage of leftist-liberal outlets. The ruling Fidesz-KDNP government and parliamentary majority have used several tools to transform the Hungarian media landscape:

- The media law, passed in 2011, gave the Media Council (stacked with Fidesz loyalists) the power to selectively approve media acquisitions to the

34 "Népszerűség és elutasítottság. Hazai politikusok megítélése öt különböző szempont alapján," *Republikon Intézet*, 2016, http://republikon.hu/media/38236/republikon_politikusi-ne%CC%81pszeru%CC%8Bse%CC%81g_2016_augusztus.pdf.

35 János Kiss, "Demokráciából autokráciába: A rendszertipológia és az átmenet dinamikája," *Politikatudományi Szemle* 28, no. 1 (January 2019): 45–74, <https://doi.org/10.30718/POLTUD.HU.2019.1.45>.

36 Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (March 2022): 303–327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

37 Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, "Informational Autocrats," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (2019), 102, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.33.4.100>.

Media Council.

- This right was used extensively when pro-government oligarchs acquired private media to either shut them down, or to turn them into propaganda outlets, creating vast media empires.³⁸ At the same time, the media authority impeded attempts by independent media companies to merge, citing overt media centralization as a concern.³⁹ This selective approach strongly contributed to the “party colonization” of the Hungarian media.⁴⁰
- A large share of public-sector advertisements⁴¹ were allocated to media loyal to the government; furthermore, the government actively discouraged market players from advertising in non-government-affiliated news outlets.
- An advertising tax was imposed that made the financial situation of independent outlets more difficult.⁴²
- In 2018, in a grave attack against media pluralism in Hungary, more than 500 media outlets were put into a huge media foundation called KESMA⁴³ (Central European Press and Media Foundation), which means that the “owners” of these outlets were practically deprived of their media assets, including their ownership rights, without due compensation. Such maneuvers, to say the least, would be highly surprising in well-functioning, pluralistic media environments, and should leave no doubt that the “private” acquisitions preceding this move had been all politically controlled and orchestrated by pro-Fidesz pundits and media strategists.

As a result of these steps, Hungary clearly boasts the most centralized media system in the European Union. According to data from the Mérték Institute from 2019, 79% of the media was concentrated in pro-Fidesz hands.⁴⁴ This degree of media centralization after the transitions of 1989–1990 is unprecedented in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, and nowhere comparable with what can be seen in other current EU member states where populists have been in power in the last three decades, such as in Austria, Slovenia, or Poland.⁴⁵

38 For example, Heinrich Pecina, the owner of the company publishing the left-wing daily Népszabadság, shut this paper down just days before the company (Mediaworks) was sold to pro-government oligarch Lőrinc Mészáros.

39 “Nem engedélyezték az RTL Klub és a Central-csoport fúzióját,” *Napi.hu*, January 24, 2017, <https://www.napi.hu/magyar-vallalatok/nem-engedelyeztek-az-rtl-klub-es-a-central-csoport-fuziojat.628446.html>.

40 Péter Bajomi-Lázár, “The Party Colonisation of the media the Case of Hungary,” *East European Politics and Societies* 27, no.1 (2012): 69–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325412465085>.

41 For more information, please see: “Állami Hirdetések Magyarországon 2006-2017,” *Mérték* (blog), accessed July 5, 2018, <https://mertek.atlatszo.hu/allami-hirdetesek-magyarorszagon-2006-2017/>. The data tells us important information about how the advertising market works in Hungary. First, state spending on advertisements has grown considerably since 2010, especially since 2015. Second, while under previous governments the majority of advertising expenses went to multinational companies (whose products had the largest audience), successive Orbán governments have directed funds towards outlets loyal to the governing coalition.

42 Ella Csarnó, “A 7,5%-os reklámadó végleg ellehetleníti a magyar médiumokat,” *Index*, May 3, 2017, http://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/05/03/magyar_lapkiadok_egyesulete_magyarorszag_i_tartalomszolgaltatok_egyesulete_reklamado_adoemeles/.

43 “Report: Establishment of KESMA Exacerbates the Overall Risk to Media Pluralism in Hungary,” Central European University, CEU Democracy Institute, August 8, 2019, <https://cmds.ceu.edu/article/2019-08-08/report-establishment-kesma-exacerbates-overall-risk-media-pluralism-hungary>.

44 “Mindent beborít a Fidesz-közeli média,” *Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely*, April 25, 2019, <https://mertek.eu/2019/04/25/mindent-beborit-a-fidesz-kozeli-media/>.

45 Burçe Celik, Melek Küçüküzün, Mojca Pajnik, Marlene Radl, Marko Ribač, Birgit Sauer, Gerhard Schnyder Iztok Šori, Fanni Toth, Tjaša Turnšek, and Lana Zdravković, “The networks of media ownership,” Presentation at the PopBack Workshop, 30 November 2021.

The Hungarian “regime of posttruth [sic]”⁴⁶ is at a crossroads between past and present. It combines messages from East and West (or from autocratic and democratic countries alike), and the latest modern propaganda techniques with those of the past. The Russian-style media centralization based on “private” acquisitions mentioned above followed the model in Russia used after the *Kursk* submarine disaster of August 2000 when Putin, feeling that a critical media depicting him as incompetent and ignorant could be deadly to his image and popularity, took over media outlets and turned them into news sources that posed no direct threat to him. Orbán took similar steps in Hungary after 2010. Hence, the manipulation of the population through centrally-controlled disinformation, by directing the media through political orders, has become easier and more efficient than ever before.

The doomsday narratives concerning the state of the West—depicting it as a faltering region in the wake of mass migration, multiculturalism, and “ultraliberalism” (used in Hungary in a similar sense than “wokeism” in the US)—resemble some neo-Eurasianist⁴⁷ messages that appear in Russian state-controlled messaging. Moreover, fake news and conspiracy theories from Russian propaganda pieces find their way into the Hungarian public arena. Hungarian Pro-Fidesz media outlets often promote the Russian interpretation of the events on issues like migration, George Soros, Ukraine, NATO and the United States, or the Western liberal elite.

At the same time, the Hungarian media imports tools and messages from the Western post-truth world. As an example, Árpád Habony, the government’s unofficial spin doctor (or, as a BuzzFeed article labels him, the “phantom advisor”),⁴⁸ who was behind the successful political campaigns of Fidesz for more than a decade has many ties to the United States. He was in direct contact with two American-Israeli consultants: Arthur Finkelstein and George Birnbaum, who were the masterminds behind the anti-Soros political campaign that helped Orbán win the elections in 2018.⁴⁹ Árpád Habony also had personal professional meetings with Steve Bannon in Washington, DC before Orbán’s 2018 reelection.⁵⁰ Orbán, through his advisors, is carefully following political and campaign trends in the United States to cherry-pick some narratives that he hopes can work in Hungary as well. As a sign of ideological convergence between the US Christian right and Orbán’s Hungary, Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson has also been a guest in Hungary at the invitation of the government and he also had Orbán on his show.⁵¹ Furthermore, Hungary hosted the American hardline right-wing organization Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2022, and Orbán is scheduled to speak in Dallas in fall 2022 by invitation of the same organization.

46 Jayson Harsin, “Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 8, no. 2 (June 2015): 327–333, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccc.12097>.

47 A revival of the Eurasianist ideology after the fall of the Soviet Union (by authors such as Aleksandr Dugin), which is based on the assertion that Russia is closer to Asia in terms of its culture than to Europe. (neo) Eurasianism expresses a strong hostility towards the West, its culture, and its values. See, for example: Marlene Laruelle, *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015).

48 J. Lester Feder and Rebeka Kulcsar, “Meet the Mystery Man Who Is the Power Behind the Throne in Hungary,” *BuzzFeed News*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/hungarys-steve-bannon>.

49 Hannes Grassegger, “The Unbelievable Story of the Plot against George Soros,” *BuzzFeed News*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/hnsgrassegger/george-soros-conspiracy-finkelstein-birnbaum-orban-netanyahu>.

50 Patrick Kingsley, “Safe in Hungary, Viktor Orban Pushes His Message across Europe,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/europe/viktor-orban-media-slovenia.html>.

51 Charles Creitz, “Hungary’s Viktor Orban Tells Tucker Carlson: ‘Western Liberals Can’t Accept’ Right-Wing Dissent,” *Fox News*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/hungary-viktor-orban-tucker-carlson-western-liberals>.

Also, Orbán's government has used President Donald Trump's "American model" to discredit and stigmatize independent media by labeling them "fake news factories."⁵² This has worked remarkably well in keeping information contrary to the government narrative out of sight from Fidesz voters. Moreover, some media outlets controlled by the government are trying to copy far-right news and opinion website Breitbart, likely in an attempt to make conservatism seem catchy—an ambition articulated by government commissioner, ideologue, and Director of the State Historical Museum House of Terror Mária Schmidt, among others.⁵³ In line with this, a number of Hungarian websites have sought to copy the style and approach of the voices from the American populist right.

The Orbán government manipulates the population through centrally-controlled disinformation. The Hungarian government's rhetoric is made up of easy-to-understand, unified messages that are selected based on surveys conducted by pro-government think tanks. Their polling strategy (learned from US-based consultants) is that they only focus on the government's existing or potential voter base—tactically ignoring unpersuadable opposition voters entirely.

The Hungarian model applies the latest technological tools in its information policies, combining these with attempts to push one particular message in a highly centralized and concentrated manner. For example, its media empire spends hundreds of millions of dollars on targeted advertising around one particular message such as "Stop Soros," "Stop Brussels," or that Orbán's electoral opponent Péter Márki-Zay is a "warmonger." They blanket the public space through billboards, media, and social media advertisements.⁵⁴ The latter is more characteristic of the brainwashing campaigns of the 20th century, instead of 21st-century disinformation that is based more on confusion (through a plethora of messages) than persuasion (through one message).⁵⁵ In short: the Hungarian ruling party's disinformation campaign employs 21st-century methods to spread its simplified narratives akin to 20th-century-style propaganda.

Conspiracy Theories for Winners

In information autocracies, conspiracy theories have a different function than in democracies. In democracies, conspiracy theories typically target those in power. Authoritarian regimes can instrumentalize conspiracy theories from a position of strength to mobilize their bases and legitimize themselves and their centralization of power. This notion goes against the traditional democratic understanding of conspiracy theories as guerrilla narratives for "the losers"⁵⁶ (that is, for low-status groups who lack the financial and political resources to contest their high-status opponents, who wield greater political and economic power).⁵⁷

Conspiracy theories in informational autocracies can be deployed to help the government mobilize its own electorate during campaigns, but also to blame the

52 NYG, "Szűjjártó: Frusztráltak a nemzetközi álhírgyarak Orbán támogatottsága miatt," *Index*, May 10, 2019, https://index.hu/belfold/2019/05/10/szujjarto_kossuth_radio_pentek/.

53 Gergely Szilvay, "Ma már a konzervatív a szexi – Schmidt Mária a Mandinernek," *Mandiner*, May 22, 2018, http://mandiner.hu/cikk/20180522_schmidt_maria_interju.

54 Babett Orozsi, "Csaknem 100 milliárdot költhetett Rogán Antal tárcája kormánypropagandára," *HVG*, January 20, 2022, https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20200120_miniszterelnoki_kabinetiroda_zarszamadas_kormanyzati_kommunikacio.

55 Mariia Shuvalova, review of *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War against Reality*, by Peter Pomerantsev, *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 7 (2020): 263–265, <https://doi.org/10.18523/kmhj219687.2020-7.263-265>.

56 Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

57 Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder, "Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalised Political Attitude," *European Journal of Personality* 28, no. 1 (January–February 2014): 25–43, <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930>.

objects of those conspiracy theories for policy failures. In this respect, they play a similar role in Hungary as they do in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey⁵⁸ and Vladimir Putin's Russia.⁵⁹ The depreciation of the Hungarian forint in 2020, for example, was immediately blamed on "speculators" (and, of course, philanthropist George Soros) instead of on government economic policies or the Hungarian National Bank.⁶⁰ In 2022, blame for the decline of the national currency was put on Brussels.⁶¹ This is very similar to the strategy of the Turkish president, who blamed the plummeting of the Hungarian currency on "foreign powers."⁶²

Conspiracy theories in the Hungarian informational autocracy are used by the ruling party and its media empire to maintain the unity of their voter base and mobilize them when needed. Prime Minister Orbán's main political strategy revolves around dividing the Hungarian nation into two camps: a "patriotic" side represented solely by Fidesz, and an "unpatriotic" camp loyal to foreign interests. Consequently, Fidesz claims that only its views and policy solutions benefit Hungarians. This division is strengthened and maintained by the "war rhetoric" of Fidesz, whereby the "unpatriotic" group—being anyone who disagrees with the ruling party—is the puppet of the alleged enemy (such as the EU, the West, or liberals) following an "anti-Hungarian agenda." In this way, conspiracy theories help the government to morally discredit its opponents and turn public opinion against them.

The Success of the Electoral Autocracy in Shaping Public Opinion

As mentioned in the introduction, the government has been able to successfully shape public opinion on the Russian invasion and on the pandemic. There are several other examples of how strongly the government has been able to shape public opinion through its centralized media campaigns:

- In the case of migration and related attitudes, the overwhelming majority of Hungarians have been persuaded by Fidesz's policy stance. Consequently, xenophobia has been rising in Hungary ever since the start of the migration crisis in 2015, according to polls,⁶³ and manipulative government campaigns have certainly played a role in this.
- The ruling party's anti-EU, anti-Western, and pro-Russian rhetoric has clearly had an effect on the population's foreign-policy orientation.⁶⁴ Fidesz has been able to gradually shift the attitudes of its voters in a more pro-Russian, anti-Western direction. While back in 2014, a plurality of Fidesz voters preferred cooperation with the US over Russia (40% vs. 39%, respectively), by 2022 this has dramatically changed (24% vs. 55%).⁶⁵ And while, on the whole, public opinion favors the United States as a strategic partner over Russia, Washington's advantage in this regard is slowly

58 Mustafa Akynol, "The Tin-Foil Hats Are out in Turkey," *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/12/the-tin-foil-hats-are-out-in-turkey/>.

59 Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World* (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

60 Gergely Brückner, "Soros György és a magyar forint elleni támadás esete," *Index*, April 16, 2020, https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/16/soros_gyorgy_es_a_magyar_forint_elleni_tamadas/.

61 "Varga Mihály megtalálta a forintgyengülés felelősét: Brüsszel," *Heti Világgazdaság*, March 7, 2022, https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20220307_varga_mihaly_brusszel_szankciok.

62 "Turkey Blames 'Foreign Powers' for Fresh Currency Woes," *Deutsche Welle*, May 14, 2020, Business, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-blames-foreign-powers-for-fresh-currency-woes/a-53431231>.

63 Ildikó Barna and Júlia Koltai, "Attitude Changes towards Immigrants in the Turbulent Years of the 'Migrant Crisis' and Anti-Immigrant Campaign in Hungary," *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 5, no. 1, (May 2019), <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v5i1.501>.

64 Péter Krekó, "Russia in Hungarian Public Opinion," *Hungarian Social Report 2019* (Budapest: Tarki, 2019): 358–371.

65 Péter Magyar, "A magyarok többsége Amerikát választaná és nem Oroszországot," *444.hu*, January 7, 2015, <https://444.hu/2015/01/07/a-magyarok-tobbsege-amerikat-valasztana-es-nem-oroszorszagot>.

diminishing. Thus, Fidesz's anti-Western narrative seems to be making a considerable impact on Hungarian society, although the vast majority of Hungarians still support the country's EU and NATO membership. Support for EU membership is above 70%, while support for NATO membership is above 80%.⁶⁶ Some newer polls also indicate that the image of both Vladimir Putin and Russia has declined as a result of the invasion, but much less on the governmental than on the opposition side, and this asymmetry can be explained by governmental messaging.⁶⁷

- While George Soros was a rather unknown figure until the governmental campaign began against him in 2015 with attacks on his migration policy, and then because of the Central European University that he established in Budapest, he became a hated figure in the eyes of the Hungarian public as a consequence of strong governmental messaging, begun with political statements and then turned into a full-scale campaign through massive paid advertisements and billboards.⁶⁸ The vast majority of Fidesz voters support the ruling party's security narrative, mainly targeting civil society organizations allegedly funded by Soros—the government's public enemy number one. In light of this, it is unsurprising that of those who had heard about the 2017 NGO law aiming to stigmatize independent civil society organizations by labeling them as foreign-funded organizations, 54% of Hungarians (and 87% of Fidesz supporters) accepted the government's justification for it, according to a poll conducted by Medián.⁶⁹ (The law has since been abolished as a result of an EU decision.)
- The polarizing narratives of the Hungarian government have also had an impact: polarization has increased substantially between 2018 and 2022. According to polling data from the Political Capital Institute from March 2022,⁷⁰ Manichean thinking has increased significantly during this period. In 2018, 25% of Hungarian voters agreed that "Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil," but this figure rose to 39% just four years later. Similarly, the ratio of voters who agree with the statement that "The people I disagree with are misinformed" increased from 24% to 35%, and the ratio of voters who agree that "You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics" increased from 19% to 30%. We can see a vicious circle here: the increasing polarization, evidently, is creating even more fertile ground for conspiracy-theorizing and disinformation, which in turn facilitates further polarization in a feedback loop of negativity and ill will.

66 Daniel Milo, Katarína Klingová, and Dominika Hajdu, "GLOBSEC Trends 2018, Central Europe: One Region, Different Perspectives" (Bratislava: GLOBSEC Policy Institute, 2018), <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2018.pdf>.

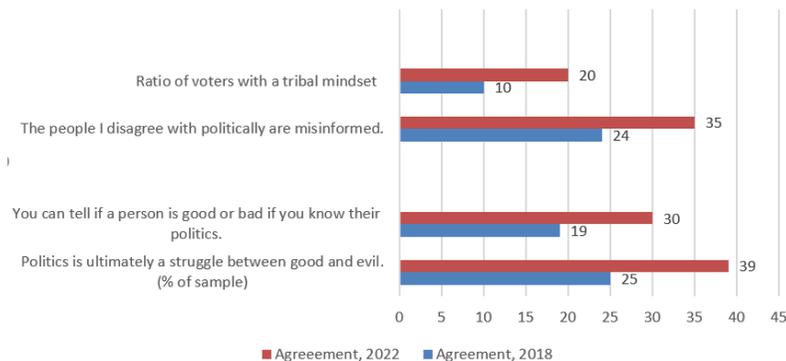
67 Flóra Dóra Csatóri, "Putyin népszerűsége idehaza is erősen csökken, egyedül a Mi Hazánk tábora szimpatizál vele egy kicsit," *Telex.hu*, June 8, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/06/08/oroszpartisag-nyugat-putyin-megitelese-kozvelemeny-kutatas-zavecz-research-kreko-peter>; Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová, and Michal Kortiš "GLOBSEC Trends 2022: Central and Eastern Europe amid the War in Ukraine" (Bratislava: GLOBSEC Policy Institute, 2022), <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2022-central-and-eastern-europe-amid-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

68 For a chronology, see: https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soros-ellenes_kamp%C3%A1ny_Magyarorsz%C3%A1gon.

69 Erdelyip, "A Magyarok 3 Százalékának Jut Eszébe Soros György, Ha Civil Szervezetekről van Szó", *444.hu*, August 6, 2017, <https://444.hu/2017/08/06/a-magyarok-3-szazalekanak-jut-eszebe-soros-gyorgy-ha-civil-szervezetekrol-van-szo>.

70 Political Capital Institute, "Tribalism in Hungary in 2022", forthcoming

Table 2. Manichean Worldview and Tribal Attitudes in Hungary, 2018 and 2022



Source: Political Capital Institute (forthcoming), representative poll from March 2022

“Disinformation Diplomacy”: Exporting Information Autocracy

As has already been mentioned, the Hungarian media ecosystem is strongly inspired by foreign models.

We can see at the same time that Hungary is not only a student of disinformation, but a teacher as well, especially in the broader Central and Eastern European region. The Polish government, under the leadership of the ultraconservative and illiberal Law and Justice party, has obviously learned some lessons from the transformation of the Hungarian political system, including the public media.⁷¹ In the infamous Ibiza scandal, the former head of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs: FPÖ), Heinz-Christian Strache, was recorded referring to Viktor Orbán’s media system as a model to emulate. “We want to build a media landscape like Orbán did,” he said on the leaked videotape.⁷²

The massive government-affiliated media conglomerate also serves the foreign policy ambitions of the Orbán government. And these ambitions are on display for all to see: on January 10, 2019, during a press briefing, Orbán openly declared that Hungary’s objective was to make sure that anti-immigration forces would become dominant in all EU institutions and that his government would provide all the help necessary to promote this. This would happen first in the European Parliament, followed by the Commission, and finally, following a series of national elections, in the European Council as well.⁷³ This speech clearly indicated that Orbán’s ambitions for information expansion are already European in scale.

Orbán’s regime has taken many determined steps to spread its successful information policy in the region through buying up media outlets and exporting consulting services, especially in the Western Balkans. The Orbán regime has acquired considerable media portfolios both in Slovenia and in North Macedonia, as well as in the countries where major ethnic Hungarian communities live such as Romania and Serbia. Hence, the government in Budapest tries to influence public

71 Wojciech Przybylski, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Can Poland’s Backsliding Be Stopped?,” *Journal of Democracy*, 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 59–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0044>.

72 “Austria’s Disgraced Strache Wanted ‘Orbán-Like’ Media Landscape,” *Budapest Business Journal*, May 21, 2019, <https://bbj.hu/politics/foreign-affairs/visits/austria-s-disgraced-strache-wanted-orban-like-media-landscape>.

73 “Orbán Viktor: Magyarország jobban teljesít,” *Origo*, January 10, 2018, <http://www.origo.hu/itthon/20190110-orban-magyarorszag-jobban-teljesit.html>.

opinion abroad. Obviously, its impact is not comparable to that in the domestic sphere. Both Nikola Gruevski, the former prime minister of North Macedonia and head of the VMRO-DPMNE party; and Janez Janša, the former prime minister of Slovenia (two nationalist illiberal politicians and willing recipients of Orbán's autocratic information aid), have lost their most recent elections. But Orbán's aid could have helped them stay in power for a while. Janša, for example, received considerable support from two Slovenian media outlets, namely from the gossip tabloid *Skandal24* and from the television channel NovaTV24, both of which had earlier been purchased by a Hungarian pro-Orbán businessman.⁷⁴ Following Janša's defeat in the recent Slovenian elections, there are signs that Hungarian investors are beginning to pull out of their Slovenian media holdings.⁷⁵

In North Macedonia, the former executives of Hungary's strongly government-controlled public broadcaster MTI have acquired a considerable media portfolio. These outlets, including Alfa TV, Republika Online, Kurir, and Lider, were used to actively support VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Gruevski.⁷⁶ The methods and content used by these media channels were strikingly similar to those seen in Hungary: spreading conspiracy theories, defaming political opponents, mobilizing against George Soros, and talking about migration. These tactics are, of course, not Hungary-specific, but the style, tone, and topics are practically copy-pasted from those of Hungarian political campaigns.

In addition to all this, since 2010 the consecutive Orbán governments have managed to create a large, mostly online media empire in Hungary's neighboring countries, aimed at dominating the public discourse on ethnic Hungarians living in these states. Setting up a complex media portfolio has been part of a major institutional build-up in ethnic Hungarian communities who were born and live abroad,⁷⁷ particularly in Slovakia, Romania, and Serbia. The media outlets controlled by either the Orbán government or by pro-Orbán oligarchs play a dual role in terms of supporting illiberalism. First, they are actively mobilizing ethnic Hungarians who also hold Hungarian citizenship to cast their votes in the Hungarian parliamentary elections (and, most recently, for the European Parliament as well). Second, these channels are also used to encourage local Hungarians to vote for the parties favored by the government in Budapest.⁷⁸ The massive influx of money from Hungary, including media acquisitions, into these ethnic Hungarian communities abroad has created networks of clientelism much more dependent on Budapest than on the capitals of their respective countries. This dependence is so strong that some experts already speak of the "infantilization" of ethnic Hungarian communities abroad, particularly in Romania.⁷⁹

But Viktor Orbán is exporting his message to the West as well— through different means. He is becoming a role model for some notable US conservatives such as Tucker Carlson, who paints Orbán and his regime as a real model to follow for the American right. In the interpretation of some American conservatives, Hungary is a country that is vehemently opposing immigration and woke culture, and where

74 Patrick Kingsley, "Safe in Hungary, Viktor Orbán Pushes His Message across Europe," *New York Times*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/europe/viktor-orban-media-slovenia.html>.

75 Novica Mihajlović, "What next for Hungarian-owned media in Slovenia? (Delo)," *International Press Institute*, June 2, 2022, <https://ipi.media/what-next-for-hungarian-owned-media-in-slovenia-delo/>.

76 Maja Jovanovska, Tamás Bodoky, Aubrey Belford, "Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans," *OCCRP*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/right-wing-hungarian-media-moves-into-the-balkans>.

77 Ádám Kolozsi, "Médiafelvásárlás, pénzzsórás, klientúraépítés: a Fidesz nagyon ráment a határon túl magyarokra," *Index*, December 13, 2018, https://index.hu/belfold/2018/12/13/mediafelvasarlas_penzszoras_klienturaepites_a_fidesz_nagyon_rament_a_hataron_tul_magyarokra/.

78 Kolozsi, "Médiafelvásárlás, pénzzsórás, klientúraépítés: a Fidesz nagyon ráment a határon túl magyarokra," *Index*.

79 "NERDély 2: Hogyan alakította át az erdélyi politikát a Fidesz?," *Átlátszó Erdély*, April 6, 2018, <https://atlatszo.ro/2018/04/06/nerdely-2-hogyan-alakitotta-at-az-erdelyi-politikat-a-fidesz/>.

traditional family values are respected.⁸⁰ Orbán is portrayed as a nationalist, anti-globalist, anti-immigration hero on American hyper-partisan and disinformation sites.

Conclusion: Theoretical and Policy Implications

According to Guriyev and Treisman, information autocracies can operate successfully within the circumstances of relatively modern societies, even where the level of education is relatively high and access to information is widespread.

The case of Hungary, one in which a well-established democracy has become an information autocracy in a little less than a decade, clearly illustrates that the manipulation of information may be far more efficient than direct oppression and application of violence, and it can be elegantly done within the institutional framework of a Western, nominally democratic state. Of course, the first steps towards building up an information autocracy are quite similar to those for the building up of a more classical authoritarian regime. Changing the legal-institutional system went hand in hand with building up an information autocracy in Hungary, as these different institutional changes were amplifying each other. For example, the Media Authority and the courts paved the way for the huge media acquisitions that helped to create an information environment where the government enjoys a hegemonic role but not a monopolistic one.

Consequently, large swaths of the Hungarian population are kept in an information bubble by their own government—although they do have access to alternative sources of information as well.

In Hungary, citizens can gain access to information critical of the government not just through newspapers and television channels, but especially online. Studies show that in Hungary we cannot talk about the totalitarian rule of information bubbles. In 2016, three-fourths of Hungarian voters said that they were interested in the political opinion of the other side as well.⁸¹ At the same time, as the media concentration develops, the information that reaches voters who are not actively seeking independent sources of information is increasingly pro-governmental. Pro-governmental forces spent eight times more on promotional billboards during the electoral campaign than the opposition.⁸² Using the logic of behavioral economics, the bigger the effort one has to make to obtain some alternative information against the “default,” the less likely it is that people will ultimately encounter this alternative information.

And, studies suggest, state-sponsored disinformation has a clear impact in Hungary—and not only on governmental voters. For example, according to research by the Dimenzió Media Foundation, before the elections of April 4, 2022, 86% of Hungarian voters had heard the “news” that the main opposition candidate would send troops to Ukraine, 67% that the left supports sex-change surgeries, and 85% that Hungary was successful in dealing with COVID. Those who hear these “stories” tend to accept them. For example, 60% of those surveyed who had heard the statements that Hungarian soldiers would be sent to Ukraine if the opposition were to win, accepted these statements as factual.⁸³ These figures clearly show the power of the increasingly Orwellian governmental disinformation campaigns.

80 Benjamin Novak and Michael N. Grymbaum, “Conservative Fellow Travelers: Tucker Carlson Drops In On Viktor Orbán,” *New York Times*, August 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/07/world/europe/tucker-carlson-hungary.html>.

81 “A politikai tájékozódás forrásai Magyarországon 2016,” *Mérték*, November 25, 2016, <https://mertek.eu/2016/11/25/politikai-tajekozodas-forrasai-magyarorszagon/>.

82 “RTL: Nyolceszor annyit költöttek plakátokra a kormánypartok, mint az ellenzék,” *HVG.hu*, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20220408_RTL_kampany_plakatok.

83 “What has been proven by the Hungarian election results?” Dimenzió Média Alapítvány, July 31, 2022, https://www.dimenziomedia.hu/hir/What_has_been_proven_by_the_Hungarian_election_results-144.

The Birth of an Illiberal Information Autocracy in Europe

Of course, informational autocracies are not omnipotent. Guriev and Treisman write that the legitimacy of information autocracies is mainly based on their ability to persuade voters on the basis of their political and economic performance. An important test of the regime, therefore, will be how much Orbán will be able to manipulate information during the turbulent times ahead, such that the lack of economic performance and the expected stagflation will not be blamed on him, but rather on bureaucrats in Brussels. Orbán's media already tries to push the message that in Western Europe inflation is much higher than in Hungary—even though this is factually incorrect⁸⁴—and that all the present economic problems are a result of the sanctions that the EU has placed on Russia.⁸⁵ More repressive regimes, like those in Turkey or Russia, also face hard times when they have to explain economic hardships to their citizens—so the term ahead, with much less abundance of EU funds and of wealth to distribute, might be decisive on the fate of the Orbán regime. In July 2022, protests against austerity measures have already begun in the streets of Budapest, demonstrating the limits of persuasion.⁸⁶

As the huge success of the Hungarian government has illustrated, a majority of the voters do not necessarily feel oppressed in an information autocracy—and no violence is used against its opponents. Elections in Hungary, even according to the OSCE, can be characterized as free, but unfair.⁸⁷ But their freeness means that the voters are willingly, and enthusiastically, re-electing their leadership on the basis of the available information. At the same time, lack of freeness of the elections (such as ballot stuffing, denial of voting rights to certain groups, intimidation on election days) is much more spectacular than lack of fairness in campaigning (such as uneven access to the media space, which is only visible in statistics). This makes the life of opponents of the regime very difficult as the illiberal, majoritarian arguments legitimize the regime as being the embodiment of the voice of the people (“we do what the voters want, as they support us”) is, technically, often valid. The road that leads to this point is paved with all kinds of attempts to silence opponents: state subsidies, closures of media outlets, media buy-ups that are made possible by discriminative legislation and law enforcement.

Viktor Orbán's regime is often characterized as “populist” and, as we can read in the literature, spin dictators can be populists as well. At the same time, overuse of this term would lead to misunderstanding the nature of this regime, as “populism” would also imply a chameleonic adaptation to the voters' needs. Orbán's informational autocracy, tries to change and transform voters' opinions instead of just parroting them. In this sense, his populist rhetoric is not coupled with a populist understanding of the public opinion—which is more transformative than adaptive. Orbán so far has shaped the opinion of Hungarians like play-dough.

⁸⁴ According to Eurostat data, inflation, year on year, in April 2022 stood at 9.5% in Hungary, and at 8.1% in the Eurozone. “Hungarian consumer confidence falls in May amid surging inflation,” *Reuters*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/hungary-economy/hungarian-consumer-confidence-falls-in-may-amid-surging-inflation-idUSKCN2N0074>; Eurostat, “Annual Inflation up to 8.1% in the Euro Area,” June 17, 2022 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/14644605/2-17062022-AP-EN.pdf/1491c8b5-35e4-cdec-b02a-101a14a912ad>.

⁸⁵ Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 31st Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp,” July 23, 2022, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-31st-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp/>.

⁸⁶ Agence France-Presse in Budapest, “Hungary Protests Continue for Fifth Day amid Growing Anger at Orbán Tax Changes,” *Guardian*, July 17, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/17/hungary-protests-continue-for-fifth-day-amid-growing-anger-at-orban-tax-changes>.

⁸⁷ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Hungary, Parliamentary Elections and Referendum, 3 April 2022: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions,” April 4, 2022, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/hungary/51511>.

So far, this shaping of opinion has been effective. As alluded to before, when Viktor Orbán delivered his speech on July 23 at Baile Tusnad in Transsylvania,⁸⁸ a Romanian nationalist from the crowd interrupted him. “Treat him kindly, as do policemen with drug addicts on the bridges” Orbán told the angry crowd sarcastically, referring to the protestors on the streets of Budapest who blocked bridges to protest against the austerity measures. This sentence could have been the motto of informational autocracies in general, and the Hungarian regime in particular, as it expresses the restraints of spin dictators against the use of violence. As political scientist Steven Levitsky argued in a comment to an article: “I’ve never seen an autocrat consolidate authoritarian rule without spilling a drop of blood or locking someone up,”⁸⁹ arguing that Orbán’s power is based on his ability to control societal institutions and the media. On the rocky road of upcoming implementation of austerity measures, time will tell if this strategy will be enough for Orbán to keep the power.

88 Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 31st Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp,” July 23, 2022, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-31st-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp/>.

89 Nicholas Riccardi, Justin Spike, “Embrace for Hungary’s Orbán deepens among US Conservatives,” *Washington Post*, July 24, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/us-conservatives-embracing-controversial-hungarian-leader/2022/07/25/23252f4a-obdo-11ed-88e8-c58dc3dbae2_story.html.