

Disinformation under the guise of democracy - Lessons from Hungary

Gábor Polyák - 0000-0001-9747-4373

Ágnes Urbán

Petra Szávai

Kata Horváth - 0000-0003-4829-8208

1. Aim and research method of the chapter

This chapter discusses how the Orbán regime in Hungary has developed an effective machinery for the production and dissemination of government propaganda using unlimited amounts of public resources since 2010. The paper presents the Hungarian situation based on the "firehose of falsehood" propaganda model and its complement. 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 the theoretical framework based on the relevant literature 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 media system, without which the success of state disinformation and propaganda cannot be explained. The chapter is based on a review of the legal and policy doctrines and related literature.

Following this, and also based on the literature and our own primary research within the watchdog organisation Mertek Media Monitor, we summarise the main elements of the media transformation.

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.

2. The nature of propaganda in pseudo-democracies

Since 2010, Hungary, as a Member State of the European Union, with an 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, Illés, Gyulai 2020) with Orbán himself calling it illiberal democracy (Puddington 2017) and the European Parliament in 2022 calling it electoral autocracy¹. In this system, Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz won a two-thirds majority in the election for the fourth time in 2022. The pervasive, enemy-creating

¹ 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

and reality-bending, extremely loud political communication that we refer here as propaganda is a strong pillar of the system's perpetuation.

The propaganda used by the Hungarian government fully meets the criteria that Paul and Matthews (2016) have defined as a "firehose of falsehood" in relation to Russian propaganda. This comprehensive propaganda is so resource-intensive that it can practically only be carried out at state level, through the uncontrolled use of public money and the misuse of public power. The aim of this propaganda is to eliminate the democratic limits of power and make democratic competition impossible. And this 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.

Characteristics of propaganda under the "firehose of falsehood" model.

High-volume and multichannel: propaganda messages are delivered to audiences across a wide range of platforms and genres, not only by all possible forms of media but by the schools and the cultural institutions, as well. The messages are essentially the same across all platforms and formats. Many times they are repeated verbatim, other times they repeat centrally defined phrases and linguistic idioms.

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. Rapid changes of subject also mean that this communication dominates public discourse at any given moment. 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 the different platforms, but are also recurrently interlinked. Increasingly, the public thus 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 government.

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 thus 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, 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.

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 identity are not consistent, propaganda does not have to be either. In fact, the more contradictory and mutually contradictory messages appear from the direction of propaganda, 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 relativization 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 are complemented by a further characteristic, which follows from 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 excludes the mainly argument-based debates focused on policy issues. Instead, emotionally overwrought 'bickering', focused solely on maintaining group identity and displaying extreme positions, dominates the public space. 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 possibility of a consensus-seeking public capable of performing democratic functions, at least in principle capable of self-reflection, is eliminated, and society loses the chance to decide on common issues in inclusive and constructive debates.

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 most successful in dividing and polarising the public and society. This gap-widening propaganda has been used in the Brexit campaign (Hobolt, Leeper, Tilley 2021), in the political success of Donald Trump (Jacobson 2016), by Narendra Modi in India (Taberez 2020), by Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Fernandes et al. 2020), and in some of the eastern member states of the European Union. Alongside Viktor Orban of Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland (Tworzecki 2019), this political communication strategy has also been followed by Janes Janša of Slovenia (Krašovec, Deželan 2019).

3. Declining democracy in Hungary after 2010

3.1. Eliminating the institutions of the rule of law

The political, economic and social system after 2010 has been described in the literature by a number of adjectives (Körösényi, Illés, Gyulai 2020) with Orban himself calling it illiberal democracy (Puddington 2017) and the European Parliament in 2022 calling it electoral autocracy².

An essential instrument for dismantling the guarantees of the rule of law was the Fundamental Law adopted in 2011, which neither opposition parties nor civil society were allowed to participate in shaping. At the same time, the new institutional framework created by the Fundamental Law adopted in 2011, which neither opposition parties nor civil society were allowed to participate in allowed the ruling party to take over all the public institutions that were supposed to control power by means of a complete change of personnel. Emblematic example of this is the Constitutional Court, which has either not acted at all in cases concerning the structure of the media system, such as the independence of the Media Council and the public media³, or has ruled in line with the ruling party's demands, for example in the case of creation of Fidesz-affiliated media conglomerate Central European Press and Media Foundation⁴.

Important guarantees of press freedom should be the rule of law institutions such as ombudsmen, an autonomous competition and data protection authority, or even the State Audit Office, which is supposed to control the management of public media and even public advertising. Under the Fidesz government, all 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 come under political

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 Decision of the Constitutional Court Nr 165/2011. (XII. 20.) AB.

⁴ Decision of the Constitutional Court Nr 16/2020. (VII. 8.) AB.

influence, although without its independence, cases uncovered by journalists have no legal consequences. Another consequence of the erosion of institutions of the rule of law is that journalists working for media that are not pro-government are denied access to information of public interest from pro-government politicians, government departments and agencies, and public bodies such as hospitals and schools, and are less and less likely to be able to use legal means to force a response. Furthermore, the dismantling of autonomous institutions of the rule of law that possible attacks against journalists will also go with impunity. In Hungary, physical violence against journalists has not occurred, but Pegasus spyware has been used by the state against journalists and a media owner, and in these cases no state body has provided legal protection to the victims (European Parliament 2022).

3.2. Weakening economic and social autonomy

However, 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. 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 EU 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, Frischlich, Bente 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). 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 virtually lost. This is the most important guarantee of the effectiveness of propaganda in the long term. An outdated factual knowledge, instead of a critical approach, a total lack of civic education, and at the same time an over-emphasis on sport, religion and conservative ideologies, all contribute to the emergence of a society that is not only unable to resist government disinformation, but does not even want to.

4. Building a media system for the dissemination of propaganda

4.1. 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 media system, or rather the growing pro-government media, is not intended to control and limit power, but to stabilise illiberal governance as a beneficiary and committed supporter.

The legal (Polyák 2015; Polyák 2019), economic (Bátorfy & Urbán 2020) and political (Bajomi-Lázár 2021) aspects of this transformation are well documented, interpreted and placed in international context (Mertek Media Monitor 2021) in the literature and policy documents⁵. This chapter uses the example of the so-called national consultations to illustrate the agenda-setting impact of state-sponsored disinformation.

As a main result of the transformation of the Hungarian media market since 2010, a significant proportion of the foreign investors withdrew from the 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).

The ownership of the media market has undergone several significant changes since 2010. 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 only player in the pro-government media.

At this time, the players in the media market can be assigned to one of three larger groups (Polyák, Urbán, Szávai 2022). The first category is made up of pro-government media enterprises, companies with obvious ties to the governing party. The second group includes independent companies, in terms of their revenues these have no affiliation with either political side. The third category comprises a distinctly Hungarian phenomenon, namely the pseudo-independent media outlets. Although these appear independent, in reality they have strong ties to the ruling party either through the person of their owner or through their source of funding.

4.2. Public money at the service of party propaganda

The volume of propaganda is provided not only by the proliferating 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 (CANnual Report 2022). The vast majority of public money spent in this way, 86 percent 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, public advertisers spent eight times more in the leading pro-government media outlet in the commercial television market and

⁵ See the country reports of the annual Media Pluralism Monitor at <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/>

forty-five 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.⁶

Since 2020, public money has also been the fuel for propaganda on social media. In 2020, the Megafon Centre was founded, whose main activity is to promote the Facebook posts of pro-government influencers. Facebook is the most popular platform in Hungary, but voters have also seen a lot of political advertising on YouTube.⁷ The funding background of the Megafon Centre is not transparent. However, the court has ruled in a correction 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). Megafon spent €2.7 million on Facebook between April 2019 and April 2022, making it the largest political advertiser on Facebook in Hungary.⁸ In second place is Fidesz, 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 government parties 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.

5. Emblematic tools of state-funding disinformation, the national consultations

In the following, we present the propaganda innovation of the Fidesz government, the so-called national consultation. The national consultation is 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 twelve 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 are a specific form of vertical production of mass support. They give the appearance of the openness and participation, but in reality, they 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 answers, so they can serve no other function than to legitimize the government's future actions by imitating the "united will" of the voters, and thus to control the public discourse, as well as pretending to be a government in action (Sik-Domokos 2019).

All the more than 8 million Hungarian voters receive the questions by personal postal letter, along the similarly distorting explanations, so even those who otherwise do not consume political news cannot avoid the national consultation. The national consultation is not a referendum, nor is it subject to any regulation at all. The campaign for the national consultation, the consequences of the results, the guarantees of the credibility of the results (including the transparency and reliability of the minimal information such as the number of the responses received, the proportion of postal and

⁶ Source of data: Mertek Media Monitor (2021).

⁷ Source of data: <https://444.hu/valasztas/orszaggyulesi-valasztas-2022/adatok-grafikonok#political-ads>

⁸ Source of data: <https://444.hu/valasztas/orszaggyulesi-valasztas-2022/adatok-grafikonok#political-ads>

online responses) are not regulated at all. 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 their answer any number of times.

National consultations use a variety of manipulation techniques to force the government's agenda on the voters. These include using the "anonymous majorities"⁹ to justify their claims, embedding implicit answers in questions¹⁰, "false dilemmas"¹¹, or using quite explicitly false claims¹² (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).

Furthermore, we argue that national consultations create an information disorder by controlling political discourse, which, due to a massive communication campaign, successfully manipulates the majority of voters. To illustrate the parallel realities that exist alongside the national consultation, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the Hungarian opposition daily Népszava as the only media that existed during the whole period and did not change its political orientation, in order 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.

To demonstrate these two reality-distorting mechanisms, we have selected 2 of the 12 national consultations for which the government-sponsored bias and the change in public opinion can be well understood in an international context. 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 "European Union" is never mentioned, only "Brussels" as some demonized 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, the 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 creating an information disorder.

⁹ 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?"*

¹⁰ Stop Brussels national consultation (2017): *„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."*

¹¹ National consultation on immigration and terrorism (2015): *"Do you agree that the Hungarian government should support Hungarian families and unborn children rather than immigration?"*

¹² "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?"*

5.1. "Stop Brussels! - 2017

In the week before and after the "Stop Brussels!"¹³ national consultation announcement, the referendum against the plans to organise one of the next Olympic Games in Hungary¹⁴, and the OLAF investigation¹⁵ on the Metro 4 dominated the public discourse and the front page of Népszava. In 2017, the opposition party Momentum successfully campaigned against the Olympic Games, that Fidesz supported enthusiastically. Which was a demeaning loss of prestige for the governing parties. Furthermore, the European Anti-Fraud Office has imposed a 59 billion forints (almost 160 million euro) fine on the construction of the M4 metro line in Budapest for corruption.

The national consultation questionnaires were mailed on 31 March 2017, just a few days after the adoption of Lex CEU¹⁶, which caused a huge international outcry. During the period under consideration, almost all the issues of the daily newspaper covered the Central European University (CEU) and the law that made NGOs impossible 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 newspaper issues 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.

5.2. "National consultation: seven questions on Brussels' sanctions"¹⁷ – 2022

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 10th 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.

¹³ https://commission.europa.eu/publications/stop-brussels-european-commission-responds-hungarian-national-consultation_en

¹⁴ <https://www.euronews.com/2017/02/01/nolimpia-referendum-initiative-grows-in-budapest>

¹⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/article/budapest-metro-scheme-tainted-by-fraud/>

¹⁶ <https://verfassungsblog.de/legally-sophisticated-authoritarians-the-hungarian-lex-ceu/>

¹⁷ <https://telex.hu/english/2022/09/29/orban-announces-national-consultation-on-energy-sanctions-but-what-is-this-exactly>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarians-renew-protests-demanding-higher-living-standards-teachers-2022-10-14/>

¹⁹ <https://telex.hu/english/2022/09/14/teachers-unions-turn-to-european-court-of-human-rights-about-their-right-to-strike>

²⁰ <https://telex.hu/english/2022/10/06/how-underpaid-are-hungarian-teachers-really-in-comparison-with-other-tertiary-graduates>

In the 31 days studied, a total of 98 articles were published on the education situation, by far the most on any other topic. 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? Although the European Union has traditionally been highly supported in Hungary, even among pro-government voters, and the Eurobarometer (2022) report also shows that 60% of Hungarian respondents think that EU membership is a good thing. Despite all this, the 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, 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 have 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 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 be blamed 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.

6. Summary

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 controlling 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 as to why Orbán and Fidesz are the only options for Hungarian voters. Constantly adapting to external circumstances, it uses the refugee crisis, the pandemic, or war. In each case, these campaigns create a fictitious or over-dimensional 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

²¹ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/10/30/hungary-closing-public-facilities-due-to-soaring-cost-of-energy>

conspiracy theories that irreversibly 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, 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 at the same time elsewhere. It is therefore worth looking at the Hungarian example as an illiberal laboratory from which the risks of the erosion of democracy and democratic public sphere can be well understood. Others can thus avoid or better manage these risks.

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