



The Unfreedom Monitor

A Methodology for Tracking Digital Authoritarianism Around the World

HUNGARY
COUNTRY REPORT

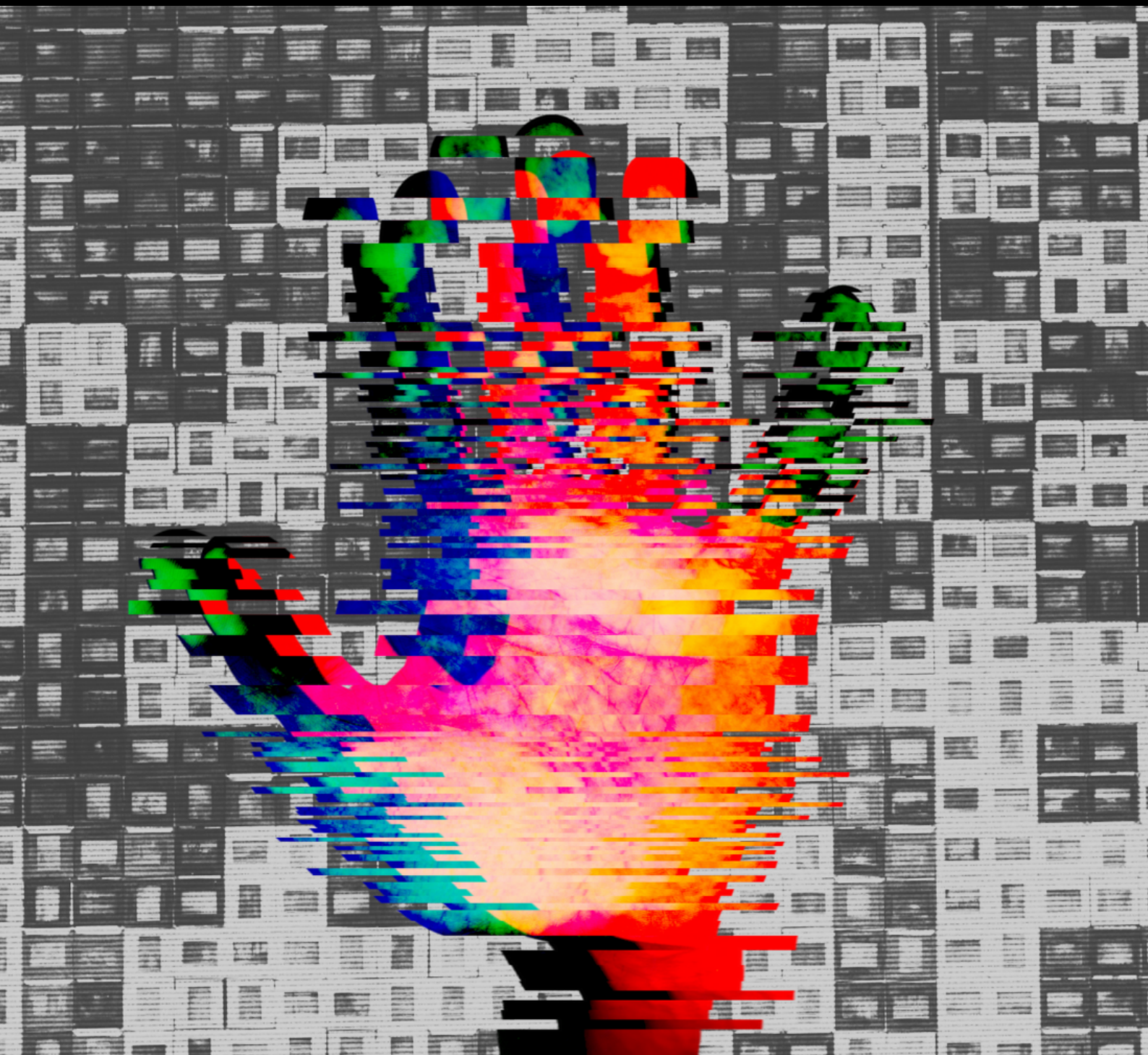


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital authoritarianism in Hungary is on the rise, motivated by the Hungarian government's attempts to silence and intimidate critical voices, including independent media workers, civil society organisations, and grassroots movements. Digital technologies are one set of tools used by the government to advance its political strategy: divide and polarise society, generate fear around economic and national security, and make voters believe that the ruling party Fidesz's narrative is the single source of truth. Their motivation is fueled by the Hungarian government's identity politics and nation-building tactics.

The report outlines how Hungarian society's main characteristics can be explained by the country's economic, social and political history and how the ruling party is able to exploit these characteristics for its own political goals. Since Fidesz came into power, civil society, opposition actors, independent press, and the European Union have regularly documented and raised awareness around how the government has been undermining democracy in the country. Its measures included attacks on civil society and the weakening of the independence of the judiciary. Yet, the Fidesz-led government managed to stay in power for more than a decade.

The use of digital technologies has not been the most dominant tool applied by the Fidesz-led government to advance authoritarian trends; the scale of it has increased in recent years. Incidents that illustrate how digital authoritarianism works in Hungary can be grouped into three categories: gaining control over critical digital infrastructure, silencing and intimidation of dissenting voices, and the use of law to undermine people's rights. The report demonstrates how these different methods manifest in real-life cases and harm individual and collective human rights.

The Hungarian government's main method of advancing digital authoritarianism has been through legislative procedures. The government has had a two-thirds parliamentary majority for more than a decade, allowing it to change the constitution and adopt laws without meaningful public oversight and consultation. It has adopted regulations to criminalise fake news spread through social media, its homophobic law has the potential to censor content online, and it also attempted to regulate Facebook because of its fear of being censored and banned during its election campaign like Donald Trump was.

The use of commercial surveillance spyware, like the Pegasus software, was a new addition to the country's digital authoritarianism practices. It was possible due to the lack of strong protections in the country's surveillance law and the lack of independence of the country's data protection authority. The secret services have unlimited data collection powers in Hungary, there are no strict conditions for surveillance, and there is no independent body overseeing surveillance. The Pegasus scandal revealed how this unlimited power is being used by the government.

BACKGROUND

Since 2014 civil society has been under attack in Hungary. The government used various tools, including police raids, stigmatisation, laws, and spyware, to undermine and attack critical civil society organisations and movements ([Uitz, Freedom House](#)). The secret services have essentially unlimited data collection powers in Hungary. There are no strict conditions for surveillance, and there are no independent bodies that could exercise strict control over the deployment of surveillance tools. The most recent Pegasus case has shown how this lack of oversight impacts the right to privacy and eventually the right to freedom of expression of Hungarian journalists, opposition politicians, and media business owners.

Pegasus is considered such a severe cyber weapon that the Israeli firm NSO can only sell it to other countries with the permission of the Israeli Ministry of Defence ([Panyi, 2021](#)). The deployment of the Pegasus software is the latest step in Hungary's history of digital authoritarianism but not the first one. In 2017 the government used illegal surveillance provided by the Israeli private security company Black Cube to back its false claims against independent civil society, namely that they are enemies of the nation ([L. Bayer, 2018](#)). Digital authoritarianism in Hungary might not be as visible and aggressive as it is in China or Russia, but the recent trends outlined in this report demonstrate that the direction the country's leadership is taking could easily lead to such a digital environment.

The Fidesz-led government has been in power since 2010 and used its power to enact laws that the government portrays as steps necessary to protect the interest of the Hungarian nation but at the same those laws are curbing fundamental freedoms of critical voices, vulnerable and minority groups, and, lately, average Hungarians as well.

Many remember the 2014 Hungarian internet tax protests which resulted in the complete withdrawal of the law ("[2014 Hungarian Internet Tax Protests](#)"). The massive public response to the potential tax imposed on internet users managed to force decision-makers to step back. Since then, however, there has been no similar public response in terms of scale and nature, despite the fact that the government has been increasingly using technology to advance its authoritarian power. Examples of digital authoritarianism include the use of commercial spyware, criminalisation of online fake news and detention of individuals as a result of posting critical content of the government, or censorship of LGBTQ+ content.

As the report outlines, these incidents are possible due to the government's political power, extensive control over the media environment, and the country's social and political history.

COUNTRY POLITICAL HISTORY

It is becoming more and more difficult to answer the question of whether Hungary is still a democracy. Reports, like Freedom House's Democracy Index, rate the country as partly free ([Freedom House](#), 2022); the European Parliament's MEPs said in September 2022 that "Hungary can no longer be considered a full democracy" ([European Parliament](#)), and Hungarian civil society has been ringing the alarm ([Amnesty International](#), 2022) for a decade now to call the world's attention to democratic backsliding in the country. At the same time, the country's leaders and Fidesz sympathisers argue that critique addressing the state of Hungarian democracy, rule of law, and free speech are unfounded, "fake news," and attempts by external actors, like the EU or George Soros, to discredit Hungary based on Western liberal values. It is not by accident that the answer is not a clear yes or no. The Fidesz-led government is very talented at using their two-third parliamentary majority to adopt laws that seemingly serve larger social and democratic needs, but, at a closer look, are designed to curb democratic freedoms. In such a political and social environment the space for opposition, civil society, and the media is shrinking. Fidesz's control is present in critical areas of life, and the party has become a state within the state. It uses its political power to exploit democratic processes with the help of its unlimited legislative power.

How it got here has a lot to do with the country's political and economic history. Hungary used to be part of the Soviet bloc; it was often referred to as the "Most Cheerful Barrack." Communism ended in the country in 1989. Communist rule came to an end through a peaceful transition to a democratic system. It was possible because the Soviet Union became weakened by the end of the 1980s, and the bloc started to disintegrate. While the system was not a communist state anymore, the minds and hearts of Hungarians did not change overnight. A study from 2018 showed that 30 years after the regime change many Hungarians still do not understand the concept of freedom of expression in a democracy. The study found that Hungarians value freedom of expression the most among all the fundamental values. And yet half of the respondents of the survey agreed with the statement that the "government must ensure that media reporting always reflects a positive image of Hungary." As the results show, free media does not preclude government control in the minds of many Hungarians ([Wessenauer](#)). In such a social environment, governments have a responsibility to educate society about these fundamental values but also to demonstrate what these values mean in practice. Fidesz has been doing the opposite: it took advantage of how little direct experience Hungarians have with democracy and fundamental freedoms due to its political history.

Before Fidesz came to power, Hungary had mainly socialist governments after the regime change. Those governments were not perfect, but the level of centralization and control in different fields, like media or judiciary, was much lower during their period. In 2002 the socialists managed to narrowly win the elections — they received 42 percent of the votes and Fidesz received 41 percent. While Fidesz has paid particular attention to the media since its foundation, its focus on it became even more significant after this election defeat. Orbán has been saying that the unfriendliness of the press was the

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cause of their political failures ([Előd](#)). What we see today is a result of decades-long hard work to gain control over the media environment in a way that is not immediately visible. Fidesz tried different strategies to create and strengthen its media empire, but in the end, it became possible for them to control a significant part of the traditional press. Access to the most critical information channels in the past twelve years has been key to the government's success and right-wing narrative.

Another critical factor is the disillusionment with the left in Hungary. Right-wing narratives, including far-right nationalist narratives, gained significant popularity in Hungary after the 2008 financial crisis ([Karácsony and Róna](#)). The rise in Fidesz's popularity was also a result of the previous socialist government's prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsany's infamous 2006 speech. The speech was given at his party's congress, and, while it was a confidential meeting, the address was leaked and broadcast by one of the biggest radio stations ([Népszabadság Online](#)). In his speech, Gyurcsany was very open and liberally used profane language to explain how his party misled its constituency. He said that the government had taken no meaningful actions during its office. The speech resulted in widespread protests, and the popularity of the socialist party, MSZP, drastically went down. This opened the floor up for Fidesz; the party won the 2010 parliamentary elections with a supermajority and has been in power since then ("[2010 Hungarian Parliamentary Election](#)").

Disillusionment with the left and little experience with democratic participation are all key contributors to the success of Fidesz, as are inequality and socio-economic deprivation ([Krekó and Enyedi](#)). These all create a fertile ground for the rise of right-wing conservative authoritarianism. Fidesz exploited these for their political purposes and has been applying more and more aggressively right-wing populist messages. Its primary tactic is to divide society with the help of nationalistic sentiment and not so much class issues issues ([Political Capital](#), 2018).

Fidesz has been in power since 2010 and was re-elected through seemingly democratic elections, but that does not necessarily mean they are leading a democratic government. Civil society repeatedly pointed out ([Ökotárs Alapítvány](#)) how the government undermined democracy, the rule of law, and press freedom, and so did the European Union. Nevertheless, the government has remained in power for more than ten years. As explained earlier, this is due to several historical characteristics, but it is also something that Fidesz itself contributed to a lot too by undermining democratic institutions and values.

By 2022 Fidesz had implemented measures on several critical areas of democracy; the most important ones relevant from a digital authoritarianism perspective are:

- Lack of judiciary independence: the government has adopted several measures since 2010 that have negatively impacted the independence of the Hungarian judicial system. This has been pointed out by civil society and EU institutions on several occasions, but most of those concerns have never been addressed ([Amnesty International](#), 2021).

“ Disillusionment with the left and little experience with democratic participation are all key contributors to the success of Fidesz, as are inequality and socio-economic deprivation

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- Shrinking the space of civil society: attacks on civil society started in 2012, mimicking the Russian approach. The first campaigns against NGOs were related to the distribution of foreign funding, which was considered an illegitimate tool to interfere with Hungarian politics (Nielsen). Later, in 2015, the government saw organisations that provided legal or any kind of support to refugees as one of the main threats to Hungary. The government adopted problematic laws and smear campaigns to discredit and intimidate these organisations from being critical and independent (Köves). The latest measure was a referendum held on the same day as the 2022 elections. After the election day, the National Election Commission (NEC) fined several civil society organisations. The reason: illegal interference with the referendum. The fined organisations implemented a campaign to encourage invalid voting to the referendum questions. The referendum was a homophobic step of the government masked as a child protection issue (Uitz).
- Media environment centralization: Viktor Orbán and his fellow politicians strongly believed that the press used to be against them and that journalists always helped Fidesz's opponents. Orbán stated in his 2019 government briefing speech that there are more journalists against him than for him, "but it seems that it is possible to win under these conditions." By 2022, the owners of most domestic TV, radio, print, and internet media are somehow related to government policy and politicians. The methods of gaining control vary, but the result is the same — Fidesz can control the information environment to the extent that can undermine the fairness of the elections (Csatári and Fábrián).

In April 2022, the right-wing Viktor Orbán took Fidesz to a fourth consecutive term in the parliamentary elections, winning two-thirds of the seats in the Hungarian parliament (Bayer). The campaign period leading up to the polls gave hope to many opposition voters. For the first time, the opposition parties united against Fidesz and self-organised with the help of civil society to hold a pre-election (Financial Times). As a result, citizens had only one candidate against Fidesz in most voting districts. Many considered this the last and only option to replace the government democratically, and optimistic calculations forecasted that the opposition would win the elections. However, when the first results came in, it became apparent that Fidesz would win again. The government gained a super majority again, giving them the power to change the constitution independently (Tait and Garamvolgyi).

The reasons for the opposition's failure are complex: the system of economic dependency maintained by the Fidesz regime, the extended favourable global economic environment, the electoral law tailored to the central power structure, the state of media freedom and pluralism, the totality of the Fidesz-led government's propaganda apparatus (especially in the interpretation of the Russia-Ukraine war), the abuse of votes of Hungarians living beyond the borders, and occasional electoral abuses all played an essential role in the outcome (Sík).

All these factors lead to a country where the governing party can control the public discourse around everything. Fidesz is willing to use its legislative powers to protect Hungarians, but in many cases, it is using them to curb democratic freedoms. These measures manifest in different areas and, lately, in the digital field.

COUNTRY'S INTERNET PATTERN AND PENETRATION

The proportion of Hungarians who use the internet has been rising rapidly in recent years. Over 86 percent of people will use the internet in 2020. The European Union's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) found that 88 percent of Hungarian households had access to the internet in 2020, ranking fifth among European Union (EU) countries ([European Commission](#)).

According to the government's National Info-communication Strategy, by the end of 2020, every home should have access to connections that are at least 30 Mbps. Although an independent study determined that the government was not on track to meet the objective as of March 2020, it is unclear if it did so by the conclusion of the covered period. The aim of the policy, which was to give at least 50 percent of households access to connections of at least 100 Mbps, was nevertheless achieved by the government (Hungary in the Digital Economy and Society Index).

Third-generation (3G) technology is almost universal. According to the DESI, 99 percent of homes will have access to fourth-generation (4G) technology by 2020; however, with 75 subscriptions for every 100 residents, Hungary has the second-lowest mobile broadband adoption rate in the EU. While more widespread 5G networks were still being developed as of March 2020, significant carriers were providing fifth-generation (5G) services in Budapest and a few other locations. In Budapest and other significant cities in Hungary, there are many public Wi-Fi hotspots. By the end of 2018, the government promised that every settlement would have public Wi-Fi available under its Digital Welfare Program, though it is unclear whether this promise has been kept (Hungary in the Digital Economy and Society Index).

Because of the state of media pluralism, the internet plays an essential role in accessing critical, unbiased information. According to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report, online remains the top news source for Hungarians, while print declined further in 2020. Many outlets are facing complex financial challenges. Smartphones are reported to be the most common devices for news consumption, with computers second. The report also found that Hungarians have a shallow trust in the news in general, particularly in public media. The takeover of Index, one of the most prominent online news outlets, by people with ties to the government is reflected in this decrease in trust ([Bognár](#)).

METHODOLOGY

The Unfreedom Monitor combines the methodology used in Global Voices' previous work on media observatories with an in-depth analysis of the contextual issues around digital authoritarianism. The Civic Media Observatory (CMO) approach is primarily qualitative and looks beyond socio-technical causes to consider power analysis, offer a way to discuss effects, and emphasise what works as well as what is negative. It is a framework that can be consistently applied across a range of settings, in order to identify and contextualise both positive and disruptive developments, to explain the forces and motives underlying them, as well as the narrative framing devices that often require local knowledge to interpret and weigh. This method is particularly helpful in the case of countries, like Hungary, where authoritarian trends are less direct and require contextual information.

This method allows us to compare, draw lessons, and consolidate learning about the trends, systems and rules that influence what we know, and how we know it. The observatory includes datasets of media items, structured analysis of context and subtext, and a civic impact score that rates media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse.

This study focused on Hungary has defined two main incidents related to digital authoritarianism that happened in the country in the last two years (2020–2022), and then a group of 20 media items related to each of the incidents were collected and analysed. The qualitative analysis of these 40 items in total was predefined for all the countries participating in this project, in this way a framework can be consistently applied across different national, political and technological contexts. The items included publications by local and international news media, reports by independent organisations, and social media posts, particularly from Twitter and Facebook.

In the case of the first incident, investigative journalists revealed that the Hungarian government has been using Pegasus spyware on critics. In 2018, the Hungarian government started deploying the Pegasus spyware; according to the investigative reporting done by Direkt36 ([Direkt36](#)), it targeted approximately 300 Hungarian citizens. Many of the targets are journalists, influential business actors with control over independent media, civil society actors, and critics of the government. The government did not admit that it bought and used the software at first, but a few months later it did confirm the allegation.

The second incident is about how and why Hungary criminalised COVID-19 “fake news.” In 2020, the Hungarian parliament passed new legislation in response to COVID-19. The law gave Orbán the power to rule by decree and to extend his power over the media environment. According to the new law, those who disseminate fake news in relation to COVID-19 can be fined and imprisoned for up to five years. The government claims that this measure is needed to make sure that no one is sharing false information that could undermine its efforts to fight the virus.

In the selection process the researcher looked for media items by Hungarian government officials, public media, journalists and civil society leaders. These items were analysed by the researcher in terms of sources, narrative frames, subtext, context, reactions, popularity, and a civic impact score that categorised the media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse and society at large. The coding process was done on a collaborative and relational database on the platform Airtable, and the coding was revised and discussed

with editors of the project, which ensured clarity and consistency among all the researchers participating on this project.

The crucial research questions were: how does digital authoritarianism in Hungary work and how are digital technologies being used by the government to advance its political interests while harming citizens' rights, like privacy or freedom of expression? To answer this question, four critical dimensions were considered: data governance, speech, access, and information. Another question was: what are the main contours of digital authoritarianism in Hungary and what are the pro- and anti-state media narratives? To evaluate this aspect, three important elements were included: motives, methods, and responses to digital authoritarianism.

The study was limited by a few factors. To begin with, while qualitative case studies have their value, it is not always straightforward to generalise from them to the populace at large. Time frame and capacity issues means that we did not manage to access all of the narrative frames available. Sometimes, civic discourse happens in closed spaces like Telegram channels and private groups, which are difficult to access.

This study constitutes a significant step for analysing the characteristics of digital authoritarianism in Hungary, where the Hungarian government seems to copy other mechanisms and methods used by authoritarian governments, like the Russian government. Even though this study has limitations, it provides a framework and key aspects for future research that can include some statistical analyses of social media narratives, the use of commercial surveillance, and the use of law to undermine freedom of expression. This dataset can also be used as the basis for policy recommendations, awareness campaigns and cross-border consultations.

MAPPING THE COUNTRY'S CHALLENGE WITH DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

The main events related to digital authoritarianism in Hungary can be grouped into three categories:

1. Gaining control over critical digital infrastructure
2. Silencing and intimidation of dissenting voices
3. The use of law to undermine people's rights

Below are the most prominent cases illustrating how digital authoritarian measures are being applied in Hungary.

GAINING CONTROL OVER CRITICAL DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

One of Fidesz's most important strategic goals is to gain control over critical infrastructure. Areas where the Fidesz-led government has acquired significant power include the energy sector, the financial sector, and the traditional media environment. One area it has not been able to dominate is the telecom industry, which changed in 2022 when Vodafone sold its Hungarian business for USD 1.8 billion to Hungarian state-backed groups.

The Vodafone Hungary acquisition

The government has been planning to build a public mobile operator for ten years. During this time, Viktor Orbán's ambitions have grown: he is now preparing to dominate the telecoms market through private companies financed by public money ([Rényi](#)). The Hungarian state and 4iG Nyrt would jointly pay HUF 715 billion for the British-owned Vodafone Hungary telecom group. However, the Hungarian state will only be a minority owner of 49 percent of the country's second-largest telecom company. The "national operator" is thus expected to be managed by Gellért Jászai, who heads 4iG ([Rényi](#)).

The prime minister's logic is that the more critical infrastructure he controls, the more secure he feels in power. This deal will help consolidate Orbán's influence in the sector. While it is unlikely that the government will start exercising direct control over the operator for political purposes, with this acquisition, the possibility of that happening does exist.

The same government buying a mobile operator also admitted to using the Pegasus spyware, and investigative reporting revealed that it targets journalists and opposition figures in many cases ([Walker](#)). With such a history of state surveillance and weak surveillance law, this acquisition raises concerns over privacy. It is yet to be seen if and how the government will access sensitive user communication once it has direct control over a mobile operator.

Fidesz's attempt to centralise Facebook

The shift from traditional media to social media

During the 2022 parliamentary elections in Hungary, Facebook played a critical role in reaching voters. One would be forgiven for thinking that the platform was essential for the opposition since the media environment favoured the ruling party ([ODIHR Election Observation Mission](#)), Fidesz. But the truth is that Fidesz relied heavily on Facebook during the campaign ([Hanula](#), Apr. 2022).

The Hungarian media environment is divided along political fault lines and operates in a market environment that is increasingly centralised ([ODIHR Election Observation Mission](#)). Fidesz has always paid particular attention to the media, and Orbán has argued that the party's past defeats were due to the unfriendliness of the press ([Csatári and Fábíán](#)). For this reason, over the last ten years, the party applied various methods to gain control over Hungary's media landscape and spread its messages without limits ([Csatári and Fábíán](#)).

By 2020, business interests close to the prime minister had control over large parts of the media ([Knight](#)). Fidesz allies also established new outlets (e.g. 888.hu, Ripost, Magyar Idok) to spread pro-government messages ([Előd](#)), and the party has been exercising political control over the public service media ([Rankin and Garamvolgyi](#)). In such a media environment, the opposition has a significant disadvantage when reaching potential voters. OSCE election observers found that the Hungarian media is sharply divided in an increasingly concentrated market. In the run-up to the 2022 parliamentary elections, biased and unbalanced news coverage characterised the public service media and many private media, mostly in favour of the ruling party. The ability of voters to make an informed choice was limited by this and the lack of debate between the main contenders ([ODIHR Election Observation Mission](#)).

Still, two years earlier, in the 2020 local elections, Fidesz was mildly defeated by the opposition. Fidesz still won in most districts, but the opposition also managed to win in several municipalities. The ruling party is said to have been caught by surprise by how well the opposition used social media during those elections ([Előd, Sarkadi Nagy](#)). Fidesz was so focused on building a traditional media empire that it lagged behind its opponents when it came to reaching its constituency through social media. Subsequently, Fidesz started implementing centralisation on social media similar to the way they had centralised traditional media ([Német et al.](#)).

One of the first attempts involved the establishment of a new platform, HunDub, since Facebook was labelled a "biased, liberal platform" that censors right-wing voices ([Hundub - Facebook](#)). HunDub emerged as a response to the US elections and the de-platformization of Trump ([Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere](#)). The party was worried that the same might happen to their politicians during the 2022 election campaign. However, the conservative "safe space" for Fidesz supporters ceased to exist after six months ([Spirk](#)). Hence, Fidesz's communication team had to devise a plan that worked on Facebook, the most popular social media platform in Hungary.

Disinformation spread through Facebook during the 2022 parliamentary elections campaign

The period leading up to the 2022 parliamentary elections was mainly dominated by the growing presence of Fidesz influencers on social media, as Political Capital, a leading Hungarian think tank, pointed out ([Political Capital](#), 2022). For instance, the loudest influencer, Philip Rakay, shared various disinformation narratives on Facebook a few days before the elections,² like “the Left is controlled and funded by a globalist international network aiming to displace Orbán.” Rakay’s video reached more than a million people thanks to the generous advertising placed on it by Megafon Center. Political analysts argued that the defeat of the opposition resulted from Fidesz’s success in making voters believe that the opposition was serving external interests and would bring Hungary to war ([Heil](#)).



Rákay Philip posted a video.

March 29 at 6:47 AM

DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S AT STAKE ON 3 APRIL? Whether our country remains! Or we voluntarily surrender it to the foreign-agent left, dragged along like a puppet by the networks...

If you think the April 3 elections are over, you are wrong! No one can sit idly by now! We are strong and we have a chance, but we cannot be complacent! The Peace March has once again shown the overwhelming power of the patriotic community, but if we don't go out and vote on 3 April, all may be lost! We must take the threat seriously, because Márki-Zay may be just a puppet, but there are serious forces gathering on the left. The networks are working for them and they want to wipe out Viktor Orbán and his government at any cost. Don't let them! On 3 April, vote for FIDESZ, vote for the homeland!



364.4K Post Views

374.5K Total Views

10,882 1,783 1,929

2. Philip Rákay's Facebook Page. Accessed 17 Nov. 2022.

Scaling back traditional media means scaling up Facebook presence

Fidesz spent a decade and a lot of money building up and sustaining its centralised media empire to remain in power. But recently, it has become clearer that maintaining this empire is not the most efficient way to spread its messages. Ninety percent of Hungarians use Facebook ([Statista](#)), and research shows that most of them get the news first from Facebook, and maybe in the evening from traditional TV news ([Előd](#)).

Several pro-government print newspapers are dying out in Hungary, one of the pro-government TV stations was shut down this summer, and more traditional media scaling back is about to happen ([Szalay](#)). For Fidesz, social media represents a more efficient way of reaching more people for less money than traditional media. Thus, rather than fighting and hating Facebook and Big Tech, Fidesz will likely concentrate most of its enormous communication resources there to aid its political goals.

SILENCING AND INTIMIDATION OF DISSENTING VOICES

In 2014 the government started to apply Russian-style tactics to discredit, intimidate, and attack independent civil society organisations. “We are not dealing with civil society members but paid political activists who are trying to help foreign interests here,” said Viktor Orbán when he introduced the concept of the illiberal state ([The Economist](#)). Attacks have primarily targeted the EEA/Norway Grants NGO Program coordinators, program funding recipients, and the Open Society Foundations’ Hungarian office. Crackdowns concentrated on four key issues: smear campaigns, intimidation, impeding organisations’ ability to execute their jobs, and targeting political watchdogs ([Krekó](#)). These measures became more severe towards civil society actors and are described in more detail in the motives section. The Fidesz era has been hostile towards dissenting voices in various ways by applying laws that target foreign-funded NGOs, police raids, and stigmatisation.

Such a political environment compels those working towards a more just and democratic society and are always critical of the government, regardless of who is in power, to be more conscious of their physical and digital routines and the different ways they communicate and store information. However, that is not always enough, as new spyware technologies can access private communication regardless of how secure one’s communication habits are. This became obvious after the international network of investigative journalists published the results of the Pegasus scandal ([Forbidden Stories](#)).

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The secret services have essentially unlimited data collection powers in Hungary. There are no strict conditions for surveillance, and there is no independent body that would control it. The most recent Pegasus case has shown that this is not a theoretical problem: the cell phones of Hungarian citizens were hacked without any obvious or publicly known national security reason ([Hungarian Civil Liberties Union](#)).

Years ago, the Hungarian government started using Pegasus, the spyware of the Israeli cyber company NSO, against Hungarian targets, to hack smartphones. The more than 300 Hungarian people targeted were investigative journalists, wealthy businessmen who own media companies, and their inner circle. Pegasus is considered such a severe cyber weapon that NSO can only sell it to other countries with the permission of the Israeli Ministry of Defence ([Panyi and Petó](#)).

The deployment of the Pegasus software is the latest step in Hungary's history of digital authoritarianism, but not the first one. In 2017 the government used illegal surveillance provided by the Israeli private security company Black Cube to back its false claims against independent civil society ([L. Bayer](#), 2018). Agents using fictitious identities secretly taped Hungarian NGOs and people associated with American-Hungarian businessman George Soros between December 2017 and March 2018. Three weeks before Hungary's election, the Jerusalem Post ([Harkov and Sharon](#)) and the government-run daily Magyar Idők started publishing the recordings ([Z. Bayer](#)). During the last days of the campaign, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used them to target independent civil society organisations. In the end, Orbán's right-wing Fidesz party won by a wide margin.

“ The secret services have essentially unlimited data collection powers in Hungary. There are no strict conditions for surveillance, and there is no independent body that would control it. ”

However, the use of the Pegasus software revealed an unprecedented scale of surveillance. In Hungary, many associate surveillance with the communist era and the left. The revelations resulted in disappointment and anger not just among the opponents of the government but among right-wing conservative intellectuals as well ([Borbás](#)). While the government first did not admit that it bought and used the software, a few months later, it did confirm the allegation. In November 2021, Lajos Kósa, a Fidesz politician, provided a statement regarding the government's use of the Pegasus software. He officially confirmed that the Ministry of Interior had purchased the Pegasus spy software but did not confirm that it was used to monitor civilians, journalists, lawyers, and opposition figures. The foreign minister has previously denied any knowledge of such data collection ([Bálint](#)). At the time of the statement, many journalists were confused about it. It was not entirely clear if Mr. Kósa knew what he had admitted.

Once they admitted the use of the spyware, the government had to respond somehow publicly. The Hungarian National Data Protection Authority (NAIH) investigated the Pegasus scandal, and it, however, did not find any problems regarding the use of the software. The president of Hungary appoints the president of the Data Protection Authority on a recommendation from the prime minister. The independence of this body has been widely questioned by civil society ([Hungarian Civil Liberties Union](#)).

Moreover, the very creation of the authority was problematic: the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that the predecessor of the Data Protection Commissioner, whose term of office had not yet expired, had been unlawfully removed from his post. Most tellingly, the NAIH examined the legality of the Pegasus surveillance and found everything in order because it did not determine whether the rules allowing surveillance at virtually any time met the criteria of fundamental rights ([Hungarian Civil Liberties Union](#)).

Since the state failed to provide comprehensive answers about why it applied the software to the targets, civil society took action. The Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU) filed a lawsuit in Strasbourg over the Pegasus scandal and asked the European Commission to investigate. The HCLU represents six of its clients in proceedings in Hungary, the European Commission, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, and Israel. They aim to expose the practice of unlawful information gathering, declare in international forums that Hungarian regulations on secret service surveillance violate fundamental rights, and prevent abuses for political purposes. At the time of writing this report, all cases were still pending ([Hungarian Civil Liberties Union](#)).

“ Panyi’s recent investigation shows how opaque the international commercial surveillance trade industry is.[.] Sanctions targeted at the industry and more robust human rights safeguards are urgently needed to finally end the decades-long human rights abuses.”

In September 2022, Szabolcs Panyi, a Hungarian investigative journalist with Direkt36, published a story on how the Pegasus software was brought to Hungary ([Panyi, 2022](#)). The report demonstrates how easily governments can exploit surveillance technologies without human rights safeguards in place. Panyi — also a target of the Pegasus software — explained the circumstances under which it was brought to Hungary, and the National Security Service’s (NSS) role in the transaction ([Panyi, 2022](#)).

According to the reporting by Direkt36, the National Security Service commissioned Communication Technologies Ltd. in 2017 to acquire the spy software developed by the Israeli company NSO Group. According to sources familiar with the circumstances of the transaction, the spyware was purchased for HUF 3 billion (approx. EUR 7.45 million). The investigation found that the whole transaction remained secret because, in October 2017, Parliament’s National Security Committee voted unanimously and without question to exempt the purchase of the spy software from public procurement.

Panyi’s recent investigation shows how opaque the international commercial surveillance trade industry is. This opacity makes it extremely hard to hold companies and states accountable for human rights harms. Sanctions targeted at the industry and more robust human rights safeguards are urgently needed to end the decades-long human rights abuses finally.

THE USE OF LAW TO UNDERMINE PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

Attempt to regulate Facebook

After Donald Trump was banned from Facebook and Twitter, the Hungarian government started discussing the possibility of regulating Facebook. In December 2020, Justice Minister Judit Varga angrily claimed that Facebook had changed its algorithm after one of her posts. The social media site responded by saying there was no such thing; they did nothing ([Cseke](#)). Then Varga hinted at the possibility of sanctioning social media because, according to her, Facebook and Twitter “shadowban,” i.e., “secretly, for political purposes, they limit the visibility and access to our user profiles in such a way that we do not know about it” ([Csatári](#)).

Varga posted in January 2021 that, since Facebook also restricts Christian, conservative, and right-wing opinions so that access to them is reduced, it is time for Hungary to consider the legislation of Facebook before EU legislation is introduced ([MTI](#)).

She announced on her Facebook page that the Ministry of Justice would submit a bill to parliament in the spring on the regulation of the domestic operations of large technology companies ([Csatári](#)). “We do not want to achieve anything other than the legal, transparent and controllable operation of big tech companies.” Varga wrote that they would continue to cooperate in preparing EU regulations in a similar direction, but “the events of the past period have shown that we have to act faster to protect people. After all, today anyone can be arbitrarily disconnected from the online space without any official, transparent, fair procedure or legal remedy.”

Varga also stated that “with the election of Joe Biden, the American tech gurus have also gone wild,” so she was preparing for social media sites to have a say in the next Hungarian election.

The idea of the government regulating Facebook has a long history, as the Digital Freedom Commission was established in the Ministry of Justice in the spring of 2020, which deals with the transparency of transnational technology companies ([Nyusztai](#)). However, in the end, the minister took no further steps. In April 2021, Varga said in a live Facebook conversation, after Thierry Breton visited Hungary, that, according to the EU Commissioner, the country had taken reasonable steps and should wait for the EU legislation to pass the planned legislative package and then create the appropriate national legal framework. According to Varga, the regulation will be ready by 2023 ([Deák](#)). No legislative steps have been taken at the time of writing this report.

While the law itself never came to life, the possibility of it signals the government’s willingness to crack down on social media. Minister Varga communicated that the need for the law was to protect the speech of Hungarians. It is more likely that the main trigger was the government’s fear of not being able to use Facebook during the 2022 election campaign period. Facebook is essential in the communication of the government. As described earlier in this report, the government realised that communicating through social media platforms is more efficient and powerful than through traditional media in the current information environment. The possibility of being banned could pose severe threats to their campaigning activities.

One example of how important the social media platform is for the government is how they used it during the pandemic. Despite having access to public television and most traditional media outlets, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used Facebook live videos to announce critical health, economic, and other pandemic-related measures and restrictions.

The Fidesz-led government relies on the social media giant on a vast scale for political and general public announcement purposes. This places them in a relationship of dependency. We shall see how they will attempt to become less dependent in the future.

Censorship of LGBTQ+ content through a homophobic law

In June 2021, Hungary passed a law banning LGBTQ+ content in schools or on kids' TV. The law has several paragraphs aiming at protecting children's interests, but, in reality, it is a homophobic law, prohibiting the portrayal and distribution of LGBTQ+ content ([Rankin](#)). The law mixes together LGBTQ+ people and paedophiles and considers both to be groups children need to be protected from. The law is the government's next move in creating enemies from which Hungarians need to be protected. It is also a tool to generate hate toward sexual minorities.

The law has not been enforced widely yet, but we have seen a few examples of enforcement in practice. In August, the country's National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) declared ([Garamvölgyi](#)) that it was looking into Netflix due to a scene in Jurassic World Camp Cretaceous. In this scene from a children's show, a girl kisses another girl after declaring her love. The Hungarian media watchdog claims that the incident may have violated the nation's child protection law. A contentious rule enacted last year prohibits LGBTQ+ people from appearing in school textbooks or children's television programs.

The law also restricts who can teach sex education classes in schools to those listed on an official register. Large organizations and businesses will be prohibited from conducting pro-gay advertisements if it is determined that they are directed at minors. For instance, a Coca-Cola advertisement from 2019 that featured happy homosexual couples and anti-discrimination messages led some senior Fidesz members to demand a boycott of the brand's goods ([Rankin](#)).

Criminalising spreading COVID-19-related fake news

During the pandemic, the Orbán administration, supported by the pro-government media, accused independent media of propagating "fake news" for questioning the government's readiness for and response to the public health emergency. This included instances where the media questioned whether doctors and nurses were wearing the appropriate protective gear ([International Press Institute](#)).

“ The Fidesz-led government relies on the social media giant on a vast scale for political and general public announcement purposes. This places them in a relationship of dependency. **”**

Later, the Hungarian parliament introduced several laws that were purportedly designed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic but strengthened the government's control. The new regulations gave the prime minister the power to continue the current state of emergency indefinitely, effectively granting him the ability to rule by decree. They also provide up to five years in prison for those who spread "false information" that is thought to hurt efforts to combat the virus. The law was tightened, making it possible to spread false information even by "distorting" a fact if doing so "may interfere with effective protection." The justification provided by the government was that the measure was meant to stop the spread of disinformation during a public health emergency ([Medvegy](#)).

People who support the government did not raise concerns regarding the law. For journalists, the law brought uncertainty, and some Hungarian journalists worried that covering the news might be even more challenging. They reported concern about the criminalisation of spreading COVID-19 related fake news as well, since many had believed that the main targets of the law were the independent, critical press.

After the law was passed, the police detained two Hungarian citizens on the basis of spreading fear-mongering content online. The legal basis of the interrogation was the COVID-19 fake news law. A retiree living in the country and an opposition activist in a tiny town were detained for posting their opinions on Facebook. In a post, one of them, the activist János Csóka-Szűcs claimed that 1,170 hospital beds in Gyula, where he lives, had been freed up for coronavirus sufferers. András Kusinszki was blamed for voicing his opposition to easing curfew restrictions just one day after the pandemic's anticipated peak ([Medvegy](#)).

Kusinszki and Csóka-Szűcs were charged with disseminating false information. After they were interrogated, neither was found guilty, but the whole incident led to fear of being imprisoned for being openly critical of the government. As of October 2022, no one has been fined or imprisoned under the scope of the law, but it is probably safe to assume that many remained silent instead of speaking up against the government's measures as a result of this incident.

THE MAIN CONTOURS OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN HUNGARY

MOTIVES

Fidesz's main tactic has been to divide the nation into "us and them": there are true Hungarians, and there are traitors and enemies of the country. Who the government considers the enemy of the Hungarian nation changes from time to time. Still, the basic idea is always the same: there are groups of people who pose a threat to the well-being of Hungarians, and thus the government needs to act to address those risks ([Balcer](#)). This is one of the basic premises of Fidesz's nation-building and identity politics.

Since Fidesz has been in power, it has considered refugees ([Human Rights Watch](#), 2018), independent civil society organisations and media outlets ([Freedom House](#), 2017), the European Union ([Office of the Prime Minister](#)), and members of the LGBTQ+ community ([BBC](#)) as groups Hungarians need to be protected from. During the refugee crisis, the government exploited the situation for their own political interests and incited hate and fear toward the refugees ([Juhász et al.](#)). Given that the government controls most of the Hungarian media, it was easy for them to make people believe they needed to be afraid of refugees. This enabled Fidesz to portray itself as the saviour of Hungarians who would ensure the Hungarians' jobs will not be taken away by "migrants."

Similarly, Fidesz has spent almost a decade discrediting, stigmatising, and attacking civil society actors who are critical of the government. The history of the shrinking space of civil society started in 2014 when police raided the offices of a few NGOs that were distributors of the EEA/Norway Grants ([EU-Russia Civil Society Forum](#)). Later it adopted a law that targets organisations whose funding sources are mainly foreign donor organisations. The law called for more transparency in the case of these organisations, and the justification was that these organisations could influence the domestic politics of Hungary; therefore, they need to be fully transparent. Civil society criticised the law for being problematic and used to stigmatise independent and critical voices ([Human Rights Watch](#), 2021). Interestingly the law was never really enforced, and sanctions were not implemented, even though some NGOs resisted it and did not register themselves as a form of expression of their fundamental disagreement with its premise ([Hungarian Helsinki Committee](#)).

During Fidesz's last term, new enemies emerged. The party has been successful in distorting reality, and, as part of that tactic, it started referring to the European Union as "Brussels." The EU was also the target of its communication campaigns during the refugee crisis as an actor that forced Hungary to let refugees in. Later, in 2019, the EU initiated infringement procedures against Hungary due to rule of law concerns ([European Commission](#), 2019). Since then, the EU has initiated other infringement procedures against Hungary, the latest one in July 2022 for its law banning LGBTQ+ content for minors ([Brzozowski and Makszimov](#)). In September 2022, as part of the infringement discussions, the corresponding committee stated in a report that "Hungary could no longer be considered a

“ Since Fidesz has been in power, it has considered refugees, independent civil society organisations and media outlets, the European Union, and members of the LGBTQ+ community as groups Hungarians need to be protected from. ”

full democracy” ([European Parliament](#)). All these events and procedures helped Fidesz build a narrative “at home” that the European Union is against the citizens of Hungary and that Fidesz needs to address the threats posed by the EU to Hungarian sovereignty.

In 2021, as Viktor Orbán’s ruling party stepped up its campaign for the 2022 elections, Fidesz introduced the law prohibiting gay persons from appearing in school textbooks or children’s televisions programmes.. ([Verseck](#)). Critics have compared the measures to Russia’s 2013 law banning “gay propaganda,” which they claim raised social hatred and encouraged vigilante attacks against LGBTQ+ individuals in the EU member state’s eastern neighbor. Sharing information with minors that the government deems to be endorsing homosexuality or gender change is now prohibited by Hungarian law ([Rankin](#)).

Lastly, journalists have been an evergreen target of the government’s authoritarian practices. The history of how Fidesz centralised the Hungarian media landscape is complex and very long ([Bodoky](#)). One of the most worrying outcomes of it has been that the party has successfully stigmatised independent journalists. A few critical outlets managed to stay alive primarily by switching to hybrid subscription-based business models. However, the journalists of these outlets are significantly limited in their work since government representatives hardly talk to them. If they do, they usually just say, “I do not talk to fake news media”.³ This is another way of creating an alternative reality for Fidesz supporters where the government narrative is the single source of truth; everything else is labelled as “fake news” or an attempt to attack Hungarians.

These motives are the primary sources of authoritarian practices, including digital authoritarianism. For instance, in the case of the Pegasus scandal, the government has strongly questioned the investigation’s credibility. State Secretary for Communications Zoltán Kovács said that “There has been no illegal surveillance in Hungary in the last ten years, a self-defending state needs new means of defence, and no evidence has been found that anyone in Hungary has been monitored with the spy software.” Moreover, questioning the credibility of articles on surveillance, he wrote that “one can read about leaked lists, but it seems that there are only unsubstantiated allegations” ([Kovács](#)).

According to the findings of the Unfreedom Monitor Airtable analysis on the Hungarian Pegasus incident, pro-government narratives under this incident claimed that state surveillance improves security and is needed since foreign interests threaten Hungarian national security. Foreign interest comes up in this narrative about foreign-funded NGOs and fake news media as actors who fabricated the Pegasus accusations to influence Hungarian politics.

3. [Judit Varga’s Facebook post](#). 22 Sept. 2021

METHODS

Key technologies and mechanisms

The Hungarian government's dominant way of advancing digital authoritarianism has been through legislative procedures. The government has had a two-thirds parliamentary majority for more than a decade, allowing them to change the constitution and adopt laws without meaningful public oversight and consultation. It adopted regulations to criminalise fake news spread through social media, its homophobic law has the potential to censor content online; it also attempted to regulate Facebook because of its fear of being censored and banned during its election campaign like Donald Trump was.

The use of surveillance spyware, like the Pegasus software, was a new addition to the country's digital authoritarianism practices. It was possible due to the lack of strong protections in the country's surveillance law and the lack of independence of the country's data protection authority. The secret services have unlimited data collection powers in Hungary; there are no strict conditions for surveillance, and there is no independent body overseeing surveillance. The Pegasus scandal revealed that this unlimited power is being used by the government in a worrying way. According to the investigative reporting of Direkt36, on October 11, 2017, the National Security Committee of the Hungarian Parliament voted on what appeared to be a routine issue: the ability of the Hungarian intelligence services that the committee oversees to acquire specific equipment without going through a formal public procurement process that would have included competition and publicity ([Nemzetbiztonsági bizottság](#)). One of the items it purchased through this process was a technology that can access all the data stored on mobile phones by hacking them. The description in the public documents did not specify or name the technology, but it was clear that it was very sophisticated spyware. It was the Pegasus software, manufactured by Israel's NSO Group. According to Direkt 36, the Special Service for National Security (SSNS) did not directly purchase Pegasus from the Israeli NSO Group but through a Luxembourg-registered company of NSO, and the buyer was a Hungarian intermediary, Communication Technologies Ltd ([Panyi, 2022](#)). Since there are no public procurement documents available on the purchase, the related costs are not officially known. However, Direkt36 managed to learn about the purchase through other sources. They found that the purchase of the software cost a net amount of around EUR 6 million. The SSNS argued that this was the cheapest offer when requesting an exemption from the public procurement procedure ([Panyi, 2022](#)).

Another relatively new but essential mechanism of digital authoritarianism for the government is acquiring critical infrastructure, like the Hungarian subsidiary of Vodafone. This practice is true for other critical infrastructure areas, like energy and media. What this means from a digital rights perspective is still yet to be seen, but Fidesz's practices have been very similar to those in the playbook of Putin and other authoritarian leaders.

RESPONSES

Hungarian citizens' response to the expansion of digital authoritarianism has not been very vocal and visible. For instance, when a person was arrested for criticising the government, many expressed outrage and anger on social media but nobody took to the streets. Similarly, the Pegasus scandal triggered disappointment among the government's supporters, but no mass protests occurred. Civil society raised its voices in all instances and took the available legal steps. Still, it usually takes months to see any results when it comes to pending cases in front of the European Court of Human Rights, and even if the rulings favour civil society claims, the government tends to disregard them. While journalists are still free to report on the issues outlined in this report, many argue that the surveillance of journalists and the arresting of critical voices increased the already heavy chilling effect on them.

In March 2022, Members of the European Parliament set up a committee to investigate the use of Pegasus and equivalent surveillance spyware. The committee's mandate is to gather information on how and why member states like Hungary and Poland, or third countries, are using intrusive surveillance in a way that violates the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union ([European Parliament](#)). As of October 2022, the work of the committee has not resulted in any significant steps in response to the unregulated trade and use of commercial surveillance technologies in the EU.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Authoritarianism has been growing in Hungary since 2010 and affects all areas of life. In the last few years, the government also started to use technology to advance its authoritarian practices. While the Hungarian government does not yet manipulate the internet to maintain power in the way China or Russia does, it shows signs of it by establishing a political influencer network to spread its messages across Facebook. Fidesz's main strategic priority is to gain access to critical infrastructure, and it has been able to do it in many areas. The internet and social media platforms are harder to gain control over as they are not something the government could easily acquire and attempts to launch alternative social media platforms have failed.

The two incidents that were subject to thematic and content analysis showed, however, that it is not only the government's narrative that is visible around these issues. In the case of the incident about the criminalization of COVID-19 "fake news," two dominant narratives emerged. According to the first narrative, governments have a right to limit freedoms during times of emergency. This narrative was predominantly supported by items that are pro-government. In items that belong to this group readers were provided with content that justifies censorship by COVID-19 and the state of emergency and considers the government's action reasonable and needed. Items under the second main narrative claimed that COVID-19 should not be used to adopt repressive laws. In the case of Hungary, narratives in this group mostly said that the government shouldn't decide what is true or false and that limits to free speech under an indefinite state of emergency are incompatible with European values.

The second incident in the research focused on the case when investigative journalists revealed that the Hungarian government has been using Pegasus spyware on critics. The incident demonstrates how the use of surveillance technologies without limits, proper oversight, and justification are a severe threat to citizens' right to privacy. According to the content analysis, two main groups of narratives emerged here too. According to the first one, the state — in this case, Hungary — should not be surveilling citizens without justifiable reasons. Those who condemn the Hungarian government's action argue that surveillance should not be used to monitor dissenting voices, and there should be strong legal limits when surveillance is possible. This narrative group was the most dominant, especially internationally.

Items in the second dominant narrative were questioning the Pegasus investigation's credibility. Items under this narrative claimed that state surveillance improves security and is needed since foreign interests threaten Hungarian national security. Foreign interest comes up in this narrative in relation to foreign-funded NGOs and fake news media as actors who fabricated the Pegasus accusations to influence Hungarian politics.

As the incidents above and in the report demonstrate, the Hungarian government is doing what it can as an EU member state to gain access to and influence over the online sphere. It tries to access private and sensitive communication by deploying highly sophisticated spyware. If it cannot control who speaks online, it tries to ensure that Fidesz's messages are the most heard. It is trying to centralise the online political discourse with the help of young Fidesz supporters: it builds up a network of influencers who get support from Fidesz to spread its messages.

It also uses its unlimited legislative powers to adopt laws suitable for censoring inappropriate content according to the government's narrative. During the pandemic, this resulted in the arrest of individuals who dared to criticise the government's COVID-19 measures.

Digital authoritarianism in Hungary is not yet as aggressive and systemic as in Russia or China, mainly because the country is still a member of the European Union. That, however, does not mean that it cannot become like that. In 2010, when Fidesz came into power, no one thought that the party would be inciting hate toward minority groups to stay in control. Authoritarianism is steadily growing in Hungary, and it is increasingly affecting the digital rights of Hungarians.

This report is an overview of digital authoritarianism in Hungary, but, by digging deeper into these two incidents using the Unfreedom Monitor content analysis methodology, we were able to show that the government tends to use the narratives in the media, like "the states' use of surveillance technology makes the country safer" or "the liberal media has exaggerated the Pegasus issue" as a response to accusations. The research also showed that civil society's response and the work of independent and critical journalists are extremely important when it comes to cases like the Pegasus scandal. We found that online media items by civil society actors and independent media amplified the findings of investigative journalists, explained the human rights implications of the scandal, and in many cases led to further legal action domestically and internationally. The study shows that digital authoritarianism in Hungary is present and, as civil society actors pointed out, urgent strategies are needed to address it. These include but are not limited to stronger surveillance laws, an independent data protection authority and judiciary, media pluralism, and an end to the intimidation of critical and dissenting voices.

“ Digital authoritarianism in Hungary is not yet as aggressive and systemic as in Russia or China, mainly because the country is still a member of the European Union. That, however, does not mean that it cannot become like that.

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