



# **A PERFECT PROPAGANDA MACHINE**

**A #ShePersisted Analysis of Gendered Disinformation and  
Online Abuse Against Women in Politics in Hungary**

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# INTRODUCTION

Since his party's overwhelming victory in the 2010 Hungarian general elections, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been strategically using nationalism and appeals to traditional and family values to strengthen his hold on power, at the expense of democracy, women's rights and minority rights.

Tying together antisemitic, nationalistic, anti-immigrant sentiments and fearmongering around the so-called "gender ideology," Orbán has aimed to establish himself as a strongman alternative to the liberal values represented by the European Union. Instead, he has increasingly positioned himself to be a global leader of the anti-gender movement, developing strong bonds with far-right actors globally, and aligning ideologically with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

To establish and solidify his power, Orbán has built and put into motion an impressive propaganda machine. He has used state-managed traditional media and, ever more prominently, social media—especially Facebook—to spread disinformation about his opponents and crack down on those criticizing the government.

In doing so, he was enabled by digital platforms' design, which prioritizes the most outrageous and divisive content, as well as their failures to implement their own terms of service with respect to disinformation and hate.

**As many of the strongest and most prominent opponents of Orbán's concentration of power are women, it comes as no surprise that they have been at the center of his online disinformation and hate campaigns, which in turn are becoming an ever more prominent aspect of Hungary's slide towards authoritarianism.**

Women politicians who oppose the government are often accused of being traitors, incompetent or liars. This case study analyzes the intersection of gender, technology and democracy in Hungary. It focuses on the dynamics, goals and modus operandi of gendered disinformation campaigns that target women in politics, and how they play into efforts to undermine democracy, women's rights and liberal values. In order to do so, it relies on a combination of desk research, some very basic targeted social media monitoring of posts including the names of women leaders on Twitter and Facebook, and interviews with local women's rights activists, women in politics and experts.<sup>1</sup> This study also highlights the timid response of social media platforms to government-led disinformation, propaganda and Russian influence, and the platforms' failure to protect the liberal values they espouse.

Given the admiration for Orbán among supporters of former United States president Donald Trump and conservatives in the U.S. and across Europe, what is happening in Hungary is ever more concerning and dangerous, well beyond national borders.<sup>2</sup> It serves as a cautionary tale for many countries of the power and reach of modern-day propaganda to undermine democratic values and institutions, and facilitate foreign influence.



## HUNGARY

### Facts at a Glance

14.1%

One of the lowest percentages  
in the European Union<sup>3</sup>

% of women in national  
government (as of August 2022)

90.1%<sup>4</sup>

Internet penetration rate  
(as of August 2022)

7.27M

OF 9.62 MILLION<sup>5</sup>

Number of social media users out of  
entire population (as of early 2022)

Most popular platforms: Facebook, YouTube and Instagram<sup>6</sup>



# **The Anti-Gender Crusade and Hungary's Slide into Autocracy**

# THE ANTI-GENDER CRUSADE AND HUNGARY'S SLIDE INTO AUTOCRACY

In April 2022, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing party Fidesz won a fourth consecutive term with 53% of the vote.

Many observers considered the electoral process “unfairly tilted in the governing party’s favor.”<sup>7</sup> Evidence of unethical behavior leading up to the election included the government platforms spreading misinformation about the opposition parties, and the use of public money to support the governing party’s campaign, resulting in an unfair advantage for the party.<sup>8</sup>

The 2022 election was just the latest example of Hungary’s long slide into authoritarianism.<sup>9</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic had already provided a vehicle for Orbán to consolidate power through the exploitation of “emergency powers,” which allowed him to rule by decree and silence opposition voices.<sup>10</sup>

**Orbán’s platform features the rejection of western liberalism; anti-migration, anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI+ stances; and opposition to the EU’s self-declared democratic values in favor of a nationalist, populist approach.<sup>11</sup>**

The repudiation of the EU has been a consistent feature of Orbán’s leadership.<sup>12</sup> As recently as July 2022, Fidesz proposed legislation that would weaken the power of the European Parliament by transferring authority to EU Member States and allowing national leaders—rather than voters—to choose lawmakers to serve in the body.<sup>13</sup> The start of Hungary’s tenuous relationship with the EU can be traced to Orbán’s election in 2010. His party espoused the ideas that “European integration had gone too far” and “the EU endangered Hungarian culture,” and Orbán has

since been repeatedly criticized for disregarding EU values and breaking the rules placed on countries with EU membership.<sup>14</sup> In September 2022, a wide majority of the European Parliament’s lawmakers passed a resolution raising concerns about Hungary’s political system, characterizing it as a “hybrid regime of electoral autocracy,” while the European Union Budget Commissioner recommended “suspending some 7.5 billion euros in funding for Hungary over corruption” under Orbán’s rule.<sup>15</sup>





**While Orbán has distanced himself from the EU, he has often publicly aligned with Russia in an ideological battle against liberal values and human rights. He has adopted a strongman persona and anti-democratic practices—similar to those used by Putin—to silence opposing voices, undermine women’s rights and centralize power.**

**In order to understand Hungary’s fall into authoritarianism, its repudiation of the EU and its alignment with Putin’s Russia, it is important to assess the role gender issues play in government propaganda.**

Campaigns against what is often referred to by its detractors as “gender ideology” have been skillfully used by Fidesz to argue for the repudiation of the EU, which, according to the Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly, László Kövér, would be responsible for “the spread of ‘gender madness’ in Europe.”<sup>16</sup>

The term “gender ideology” first appeared in 2008, framing gender-lens teachings as a threat to the traditional way of life and gender norms. But it was not fully mobilized until around 2017, when Orbán’s government targeted the gender studies program at Central European University (CEU), then headquartered in Budapest.<sup>17</sup> Ever since, gender has become a symbolic glue used by the ruling party to strengthen its power at the expense of democracy, women’s rights and minority rights, weaponizing conservative ideologies and Hungarians’ fears about globalization.<sup>18</sup>

According to **Sonja Lokar**—an international gender expert and former member of parliament in Slovenia—for postsocialist autocrats like Orbán, “this is the way of getting the support of the huge part of the electorate mostly overlooked by the democratic liberals and socialists and social democrats, namely uneducated men who are often more lost than women and feel defeated at home, especially when more flexible women are taking over the role of the family main providers.”<sup>19</sup>



**This approach, according to Ms. Lokar, appeals to some women too—especially those with little formal education and financially vulnerable and dependent on their partners, as it gives them a “sense of human dignity in their traditional role of ‘queens of the home’ with small but significant material incentives, and a political role as ‘mothers of the nation’ in this type of nationalistic ideology.”<sup>20</sup>**

**SONJA LOKAR**

Sexism in politics is evident at the highest levels in Hungary, and women have extremely low representation in Hungarian politics. When Orbán was asked in 2015 why his government had no female members, he answered that women “cannot stand the stress” that comes along with participating in Hungarian politics.<sup>21</sup> In this context, many have accused Fidesz of engaging in “genderwashing” by recruiting a few very visible women, in an effort to appeal to women voters and address criticisms of sexism within the party.<sup>22</sup> These women are profoundly aligned with the government’s anti-gender ideology, and support its vision of a “traditional” and heteronormative society, with set roles for men and women. Júlia Bakó, a Hungarian feminist activist, cites the example of Hungary’s

first female president, Katalin Novák.<sup>23</sup> Ms. Novák, who took office in March 2022, previously served as Fidesz’s minister for family affairs and “propagated views and introduced policies that hindered equality for women” while in this role.<sup>24</sup>

A report from the project *Hate Speech, Gender, Social Networks and Political Parties*, or GENHA, finds that since coming to power in 2010, Fidesz “has introduced a number of legislative changes that directly or indirectly diminish the rights of women and gender equality achievements and question the rights and dignity of non-binary gender identity, and all kinds of gender equality advocates who are not in support of the ideological underpinnings of the regime.”<sup>25</sup> In May 2020, the Hungarian parliament adopted a declaration refusing to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention. In 2021, Orbán called for the removal of the phrase “gender equality” from a declaration regarding social cohesion in the region, once again claiming gender is an “ideologically motivated expression.”<sup>26</sup>

Tragically, this battle against the so-called “gender ideology” has implications well beyond Hungary: it has also been used by governments in countries such as Poland and Brazil to “unite under one umbrella term various issues attributed to the liberal agenda, among them reproductive rights, rights of sexual minorities, gender studies and gender mainstreaming,” as well as sexual education in public schools.<sup>27</sup>

Orbán has increasingly become a global leader of the anti-gender movement, developing strong bonds with far-right movements around the world. He and institutions affiliated with his government have hosted, among others, former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, former U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions and newly powerful media agitators like Steve Bannon.<sup>28</sup>



# The Perfect Propaganda Machine: Fidesz's Domination of Traditional and Social Media

# THE PERFECT PROPAGANDA MACHINE: FIDESZ'S DOMINATION OF TRADITIONAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA



The restructuring of the media landscape implemented by Orbán since his coming to power to allegedly protect “conservative, patriotic and Christian views” has played an undeniable role in the erosion of democracy and women’s rights in Hungary.<sup>29</sup>

Since 2018, the government has consolidated 476 media outlets under the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), “a pro-government media conglomerate” controlled by a former Fidesz leader, making concerted efforts to undermine free media and disseminate pro-Fidesz narratives across the country.<sup>30</sup> A study conducted by Mertek Media Monitor found “the pro-Fidesz media portfolio... encompasses 77.8% of the entire news and public affairs segments in the Hungarian media.”<sup>31</sup> As a result, **Eva Bogнар**, a Senior Program Officer at CEU’s Democracy Institute, finds that there is

**“quite a significant chunk of the population that’s only exposed to government, pro-government narratives and propaganda.”<sup>32</sup>**

**EVA BOGNAR**

According to Marius Dragomir, a journalist and the Director of the Media and Journalism Research Center at CEU, this is “a classic example of media capture,” facilitated by four components: “control of regulation, control of public media, control of public funding in the sense that you use public funding, for example, in the form of state advertising to control the media,” and the “takeover of private media, which companies owned by oligarchs in Hungary have been doing for more than 10 years now.”<sup>33</sup> The few independent media that exist now are under-resourced and under threat.

Anti-immigrant nationalist discourse pushed by the Fidesz party—on both traditional media and digital platforms—has increasingly taken hold in the country. It has been instrumental in gathering support for government action and spreading conspiracy theories.

Among the most prominent conspiracy theories are those centered around the American Hungarian philanthropist George Soros.<sup>34</sup> They carry anti-western, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and anti-American undertones, and make accusations of his wanting to “Islamize” Europe and destabilize Hungary.<sup>35</sup>

Conspiracy theories, attacks and silencing efforts do not target Soros alone. They are also aimed at undermining a large part of civil society organizations active in Hungary’s democratization process over the last decade. In July 2014, Orbán accused Soros-funded organizations of being “paid political activists who are trying to help foreign interests.”<sup>36</sup> In June 2017, the government passed a series of measures to strike at any nongovernmental organization that received funding from abroad.<sup>37</sup> To silence opposition, the government has framed most civil society actors who advocate for progressive causes or maintain a focus on human rights as a threat to the Hungarian nation, regardless of their sources of funding.<sup>38</sup>

**Hungarian traditional media has also served and continues to spread pro-Putin propaganda, including anti-American conspiracy theories around Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>39</sup>**

**While Orbán publicly opposed the invasion and supported EU sanctions, the story being told on the ground in Hungary was entirely different. According to Ágnes Urbán at Mertik Media Monitor:**

**Hungary’s public media became the “number one broadcaster of the Kremlin propaganda in Europe,” and Kremlin talking points repeated on social media often resonated with supporters of Fidesz.<sup>40</sup>**

**ÁGNES URBÁN**

Ms. Bognar finds that “narratives that may have first appeared in the Russian disinformation sphere are being spread or used by pro-government media outlets” and Russia has also used political relationships with Fidesz to spread extremist narratives and influence Hungarian citizens, while “the Orbán government has made no attempts to

counter disinformation coming from Russia.”<sup>41</sup> As the Director of the Political Capital Institute, Péter Krekó, states, “the pro-Kremlin disinfo and government information ecosystem cannot really be separated.”<sup>42</sup>

**Initially praised as an important and popular tool for advocating and organizing civil action, digital**



platforms have increasingly become an extension of traditional media in Hungary, and are now an integral part of the pro-government propaganda machinery, pervaded by Russian influence.<sup>43</sup>

In a study published by CEU's Center for Media, Data, and Society as part of a project titled "Misinformation and Propaganda Through the Eyes of Hungarian Students," author Izabella Szentpéteri found that "since 2015 a domestic network of trolls, fake profiles, and Facebook sites has spread disinformation in Hungary, mostly coming from the Kremlin. This well-built system includes fake news, manipulated images and videos, and hateful speech to generate anger."<sup>44</sup>

Fidesz itself uses social media—and Facebook in particular—to cement its power with attacks aimed at the opposition through misinformative narratives and smear campaigns, political advertisements and articles circulated on government-owned websites.<sup>45</sup> Mr. Dragomir believes,



**"if you look at the whole media system, the disinformation is right there, right in your face and it is propagated by these state structures and oligarchic structures close to Fidesz."<sup>46</sup>**

**MARIUS DRAGOMIR**

In this context, "differing visions of the politico-economic system are articulated as conflicts between national and foreign interests, 'the people' and 'the traitors,'" with those who fall outside traditional heteronormative identities included among the traitors.<sup>47</sup>



**Social media has contributed to the worsening of a political landscape that Zita Gurmai, a Hungarian member of parliament, defines today as "extremely violent," where "ad hominem attacks are the norm, not the exception."<sup>48</sup>**

**ZITA GURMAI**

In this toxic environment, women are targeted most viciously. According to another report from the GENHA project, the most common online hate posts "target female opposition politicians, feminists, and women in public roles."<sup>49</sup> The report also concluded that "hate speech generating techniques are manifold, ranging from distorted interpretation of public statements of target actors, through presenting false evidence, up to visioning a vicious attack on conservative norms."<sup>50</sup>

The same study found that **"the most typical potentially sexist theme is the defamation of female politicians,"** and **"the most often used adjectives to dismiss their arguments are 'hysteric', 'stupid' and 'mean.'"** Hungary's right-wing political parties reproduce and encourage many of these attacks through their social media activity. For example, when analyzed, content posted by Fidesz on social media promoting the "traditional family" was found to have included "very harsh reactions to female politicians' criticism of governmental actions, policies, or rhetoric."<sup>51</sup> **Women politicians are "accused of spreading lies or fake news, thus betraying the country, or attacking 'Hungarian people' when they raise criticism on the government," and are depicted as "incompetent, corrupt, and devilish."<sup>52</sup>**



# **Gendered Disinformation and Online Abuse as Political Weapons in Hungary**

# GENDERED DISINFORMATION AND ONLINE ABUSE AS POLITICAL WEAPONS

**#ShePersisted works to address gendered disinformation in the form of the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information targeting highly visible women, such as political leaders, journalists, activists and other public figures.**

Available data analytics from political campaigns—both in Europe and the U.S.—show that women politicians are more likely to be targeted with higher volumes of online abuse and disinformation. These attacks are also more likely to be steeped in sexism, often focusing on a woman's character and sexuality, and they are “stickier,” or harder to recover from and fight with traditional tools like fact checking and media literacy.<sup>53</sup>

According to Kristina Wilfore, a global democracy activist and co-founder of #ShePersisted, “gendered disinformation campaigns build on, and are rooted in, deeply set misogynistic frameworks and gender biases that portray masculine characteristics as those fit for leadership while painting women leaders as inherently **untrustworthy** (insinuating a woman is dishonest or not trustable is a tried and true attack), **unqualified** (one of the biggest barriers women face when seeking office), **unintelligent** (tropes about women as dumb and unfit for the job are a prominent feature of gendered disinformation, made worse with objectifying sexualized content), and **unlikable** (which for women can be the death knell of their campaign).”<sup>54</sup>

Gendered disinformation is often coordinated and spread with malignant intentions. It aims to manipulate the public into developing falsely informed understandings of women politicians' track records, with the ultimate goal of portraying women in the public sphere as incapable of holding leadership positions, or otherwise discrediting them. As a result of these harmful narratives, women in politics often become the targets of avalanches of online hate, threats and abuse.

Gendered disinformation has become an ever more common tactic in Hungary to attack “strong,

empowered women,” reports Anna Fejős, a sociologist who has researched online hate speech in Hungary, including women in politics, as well as women's rights and LGBTQIA+ rights activists.<sup>55</sup>

As experienced by Emma Krasznahorkai, an activist for women's rights, it has become common to the point of being absolutely “normalized.”<sup>56</sup>

According to Ms. Bognar and media professional and researcher Aida Kaisy,

**“[Gendered disinformation] is also used to shut down certain debates, for example those around reproductive and LGBT rights. Its motives are political as even what might be viewed as social purpose debates, for example abortion rights, are linked to certain political narratives and institutions in the V4. The wider impact on democracy as women are not heard or represented is unequivocal.”<sup>57</sup>**

The most common disinformation narratives against women in politics in Hungary involve being untrustworthy (e.g., being a foreign agent—often somehow tied to George Soros—or having misappropriated public funds for personal gain) or unqualified (e.g., stupid, superficial or a weak puppet for powerful male leaders on the left). As a result, the women targeted “are simultaneously depicted as ‘ugly’ and ‘stupid,’ but also ‘dangerous,’ in the sense that they aim to destroy conservative norms.”<sup>58</sup>



**According to Ms. Fejős, these disinformation campaigns build on sexism in society and perpetuate gender stereotypes that promote “conservative roles for women,” and attack those who dare to deviate from the “norm.”<sup>59</sup>**

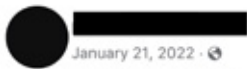
**ANNA FEJŐS**

**Targeted most viciously are women in opposition politics, particularly those who defy Orbán’s actions, support LGBTQ!+ rights and women’s rights, fight against racism or call out anti-Semitic behavior.**

Below are some illustrative examples from our analysis of how gendered disinformation has been viciously deployed against women leaders and political activists who challenge or oppose Fidesz. A necessary caveat is that while this analysis represents an important effort to map and begin to make sense of gendered disinformation in Hungary, wide

scale data analytics and a thorough monitoring of social media channels over an extended period of time would be needed to gather more evidence and achieve a more comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon and the malign actors behind it.

Future research should aim to map the weaponization of digital tools to facilitate malign behavior, including basic listening and trend monitoring, mapping and tracking malign actors, tracking monetization and the role of advertising, conducting terms of service compliance experiments and analyzing the activity of political actors.



January 21, 2022 · 🌐

Kunhalmi Ágnes az MSZP-s ostobája kipoztolta, hogy coviddal kórházba került. A tesztje pozitív lett és erős tüdőfájdalmi vannak. A halálos ágyáról befedezett melltartóban és a haját szépen befésülve, maszkban jelentkezett be. Az ágyról a fejét felemelve nézett szembe a kamerával. Bizonyára a tüdőfájdalmairól megfélekezett, ugyanis ha lettek volna, akkor az adott testhelyzetet biztosan nem kereste volna. Ágika testét csövekkel telepakolták ugyan, de nem tisztázott, hogy erre miért volt szükség. Ugyanis a mögötte lévő betegfigyelő monitoron jól látszik, hogy Ágika testhőmérséklete 36.2 C és a vére oxigénszintje 100 %. Szóval ez az Ágika tiszta hülyének néz mindenkit!!

See Translation



January 21, 2022 · 🌐

Ágnes Kunhalmi, the fool of MSZP, posted that she was hospitalized with covid. She has tested positive for severe lung pains. She checked in from her death bed in a tight bra and her hair neatly combed, wearing a mask. She raised her head from the bed and faced the camera. She must have forgotten about her lung pains, because if she had any, she would certainly not have looked for that body condition. Although Ágika's body was packed with tubes, it was not clear why this was necessary. On the patient monitor behind her, it is clear that Ágika's body temperature is 36.2 C and her blood oxygen level is 100%. So this Ágika looks like a pure fool to everyone!!




A Facebook post accusing Ms. Kunhalmi of lying about having been hospitalized for COVID-19, instead claiming that she was perfectly healthy.

**ÁGNES KUNHALMI** has been a Hungarian Socialist Party member of the National Assembly since 2014. As the leader of an opposition party, Ms. Kunhalmi is a vocal critic of Fidesz and Orbán's leadership. She participated in highly-publicized protests against the government in 2018 and was outspoken about her views on beating Orbán in the 2022 elections.<sup>60</sup> For years, Ms. Kunhalmi has been the target of disinformative stories. At a 2016 press conference, Ms. Kunhalmi fell into a fit of laughter and sources such as the pro-government online media outlet Ripost were quick to accuse her of being under the influence of drugs or alcohol.<sup>61</sup> In 2018, posters were disseminated depicting Ms. Kunhalmi in a doctored photo of her wearing a headscarf and promising Arabic lessons for children, as well as depicting her as naked in a cartoon.<sup>62</sup> That same year, an article published by Origo, a pro-government online media source, accused her of being more concerned with making jam, painting fences and sunbathing than taking political action.<sup>63</sup> She was also accused of being "backed by George Soros," a claim repeated elsewhere, and content posted on Facebook has accused her of lying about having been hospitalized for COVID-19.<sup>64</sup>



In this poster, Ms. Kunhalmi has been photoshopped to appear as though she is wearing a headscarf. The accompanying text negatively claims she is promising free Arabic language courses and efforts supporting immigrants. Originally posted and flagged for false content by @th\_ges on Twitter.



**EMMA KRASZNAHORKAI** is a feminist activist who first got involved in politics and activism surrounding women's rights at age 17 and has since participated and led demonstrations for LGBTI+ rights.<sup>65</sup> As a result of demonstrating against the government, Ms. Krasznahorkai was doxed in 2018 when 888.hu, a pro-government website with the tagline "we are Soros's opposition," published her name and photo. Her personal data was subsequently spread to the pro-government site origo.hu, and she was the subject of degrading memes, insults and posts claiming she was a "Soros violent activist." Ms. Krasznahorkai's face and name were aired on the national television channel TV2 and viewed by 700,000 people, and she received a barrage of online hate comments, including multiple threats on Facebook. She ultimately won a civil lawsuit against origo.hu, 888.hu and TV2 on the grounds of violating her personal rights. Ms. Krasznahorkai left Hungary in 2021.

**BLANKA NAGY**, a young activist who participated in multiple civil demonstrations against the government while in high school in 2018, quickly faced the ruling party's use of character assassination.<sup>66</sup> In an attempt to smear her, Fidesz-backed media, like the website Ripost, claimed she was failing in school.<sup>67</sup> Media outlets Lokál and Origo also repeated these claims—which Ms. Nagy denied—and labeled her an “untalented wannabe actress” and a prostitute.<sup>68</sup>



A [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED], ... a dk néven futó  
magyargyűlölő kamupárt az ... aljas  
magyar és nemzet ellenes céljaihoz  
használja, csak kihasználja, ... blanka a  
legújabb eldobható eszközük,... egy  
kapcarongy 😞😞😞

Translated from Hungarian by Google

The [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] ... the  
Hungarian-hating fake group called  
dk, uses it for its ... vile anti-  
Hungarian and anti-national goals, it  
just exploits it, ... blanka is their  
latest disposable tool,... a rag 😞😞😞




A tweet accusing Ms. Nagy of being a political pawn for “anti-Hungarians.” DK refers to the social-liberal Democratic Coalition.




**ESZTER GERAI-ÉDLER** first became involved in political activism in 2009. She has since participated in many demonstrations against the government, and in movements tackling social issues such as racism and anti-Semitism. In 2012, Ms. Gerai-Édler took part in protests calling for László Csatáry, a suspected Nazi war criminal, to be put on trial.<sup>69</sup> Shortly after her involvement in the demonstrations became public, Ms. Gerai-Édler's contact information and social media profiles were revealed by readers of kuruc.info, a Hungarian far-right website.<sup>70</sup> She received hundreds of threatening letters, phone calls, with vile and violent threats—including death threats—and an avalanche of online abuse, calling her a “Jewish whore,” a “filthy Zionist worm” and claiming that she had been lying about the Holocaust.<sup>71</sup> Much of the abuse frames her activism as anti-Hungarian, and depicts Jewish people as being separate from “real Hungarians.” Despite the gravity of these attacks, all of the investigations into the case have been either suspended or closed.<sup>72</sup>

BLANKA NAGY

**TÍMEA SZABÓ** was elected to the National Assembly in 2010. Following the 2014 elections, she became a member and co-president of the Green Party Dialogue for Hungary, leaving this role in July 2022. She has been vocal about her opposition to the regime since the beginning of Orbán's rule.<sup>73</sup> In 2015, László Kövér called Ms. Szabó an "internationally trained agent" because of her support of refugee rights.<sup>74</sup> Similar claims continue to be made, and origo.hu recently alleged that she "not only represents openly foreign interests, but is also interested in destabilization."<sup>75</sup> Ms. Szabó has also been accused of being a part of the "Soros network," or somehow tied to Soros, as well as being "involved in anti-Hungarian activities" and of receiving campaign financing from illegal sources in other countries.<sup>76</sup> Ms. Szabó stated that she has received threats because of the media and the government's role in furthering disinformation and hate. She denounced the allegations of working against Hungary as an "artificially created case" designed to distract attention from the government's failings.<sup>77</sup>

TÍMEA SZABÓ

  ...  
Replying to   
1/2 Tímea Szabó is watching airplanes instead of supporting the fight against the virus. She and her colleague; Bence Tordai has basically done everything to slow down the preventions against COVID19 in hope of higher death rates for the government. She also claimed that the...

  ...  
Replying to   
2/2 there hasn't died so many people in any other country from COVID19 as in Hungary 🇮🇪 she's a constantly having hysterical outbreaks in the parliament and their party is currently under 3% supporting rate. That's why she can't fligh 🇮🇪

12:56 PM · Mar 19, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

An example of an inflammatory social media post about Ms. Szabó related to the COVID-19 pandemic. To be noted is the use of the word "hysterical" to describe her behavior in parliament.

A black and white photograph of a large crowd of people, seen from behind, looking towards the left. Overlaid on the image are several large, semi-transparent orange circles, each containing a white social media icon: a Twitter bird, a YouTube play button, and a Facebook 'f'. The text is presented in a series of stacked orange rectangular boxes with black text.

# **Timid, Muddled and Inconsistent: Digital Platforms' Response to the Undermining of Democracy in Hungary**

# DIGITAL PLATFORMS' RESPONSIBILITY

In 2021, over 90 percent of Hungarians were internet users, and most users maintained social networking accounts.<sup>78</sup> In 2020, the number of Facebook users in Hungary rose to 5.4 million. Youtube followed Facebook as the second most utilized social media platform, boasting 5.1 million users.<sup>79</sup>

Digital platforms often claim they use the power provided to them by these large numbers to provide political activists with more equal, democratic conditions and freedom of expression. Yet, in recent years, the Hungarian government has increasingly used social media to track down, silence and even arrest those who criticize its actions online. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a member of an opposition party was detained for being critical of the government's handling of the pandemic on social media. Another man was detained for hours after criticizing the government's approach to lockdown policies on social media and using the words "tyrant" and "dictator" in his post.<sup>80</sup>

**In 2021, Orbán's government launched an investigation into Hungarian activists, journalists and lawyers perceived as threats. This was uncovered when over 300 phone numbers were found on a list of surveillance targets by clients of a security company in Israel, NSO Group.<sup>81</sup>**

Three of the devices connected to numbers on the list had been infected with Pegasus spyware, which allows access to all of the content on a device—including passwords, social media accounts, posts and even material within encrypted applications. Two of the infected accounts belonged to journalists at a non-profit media center.

As a result, many observers argue that social media platforms no longer foster freedom of expression for everyone, as instead they increasingly amplify the voices of "those who have financial means despite the value and the truthfulness of their messages."<sup>82</sup>

Facebook, in particular, has become an epicenter for the dissemination of quick-spreading disinformation. One of the most popular Hungarian groups on Facebook, ELÉG ("enough" in Hungarian), reached 147,242 followers in 2019, disseminating "aggressive anti-immigrant content with a strong language and promotion of religious and national values."<sup>83</sup> Official government and pro-government pages have been instrumental in influencing and manipulating the electorate during parliamentary election campaigns. An investigation by the independent online media outlet 444.hu found that the government employed online trolls to create, share and promote pro-Fidesz content on social media platforms.<sup>84</sup> As the popularity of Facebook has increased, so has its use to spread hate speech, attack public figures and perpetuate such disinformation.

**Kim Scheppele**, an American scholar who has studied the rise of autocracy in Hungary, finds:



**Facebook “dominates everything in the Hungarian social media space.”<sup>85</sup>**

**KIM SCHEPPELE**

**Ágnes Vadai**, a member of Hungary’s National Assembly and former Deputy Defense Minister, believes that fake news spreads more quickly when disseminated over social media, where people have fewer restraints about lying or defaming others:



**“people believe in Hungary, that if you write it on Facebook, it’s like nothing. So, you can write bad things about people.”<sup>86</sup>**

**ÁGNES VADAI**

Faced with this complex reality, platforms have often shirked responsibility for mitigating and tackling disinformation on their websites when they are used for spreading harmful, politically motivated content. For example, Facebook did not partner with an official fact-checker in Hungary until five years after the inception of the company’s Third-Party Fact-Checking Program, an initiative that was launched to tackle disinformation in Europe.<sup>87</sup>

**Social media platforms have also failed to implement their own terms of service with respect to disinformation, particularly when overpowered by immediate outrage from government officials, who cynically frame efforts to improve content moderation as attempts to curtail freedom of expression in favor of exaggerated “principles of political correctness.”<sup>88</sup>**

For example, in 2018, a senior Hungarian politician posted a video in which he blamed crime on immigrants. Facebook took down the video for violating the platform’s rules but restored it the following day.<sup>89</sup> “Exceptions are sometimes made if content is newsworthy or important to the public interest,” Facebook said in response to complaints.<sup>90</sup>

Twitter has acted in similarly timid ways. In September 2020, after the government’s official Twitter account was suspended, Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Relations Zoltán Kovács aired his grievances about “tech giants silencing those who hold different opinions.”<sup>91</sup> Immediately afterwards, Twitter stated that the suspension was an accident.

Given how Fidesz has used defamation online as a political tool, it’s not surprising that the Hungarian government has expressed concerns regarding the European Digital Services Act (DSA), which tackles disinformation and other aspects of online safety in the EU.<sup>92</sup> The DSA, widely viewed as a landmark effort, “sets clear obligations for digital service providers, such as social media or marketplaces, to tackle the spread of illegal content, online disinformation and other societal risks,” according to the European Parliament.<sup>93</sup> For governments like Orbán’s, which rely heavily on the spread of disinformation and hateful content against minority groups to cement power, the DSA could prove to be a challenge.

# CONCLUSION

Through a ruthless use of traditional and, increasingly, social media, Orbán and his party have been able to establish themselves as the defenders of “traditional values” and align themselves with Russia. To do so, they strategically use fearmongering against what they often refer to “gender ideology,” which represents a symbolic glue used by the ruling party to strengthen its power at the expense of democracy, women’s rights and minority rights.

**Gendered disinformation is a key tool within this strategy. It weaponizes misogyny to undermine women from opposition parties, those most critical of the government and those who speak in defense of women’s rights and minorities, who are often framed as stupid, traitors or mean.** These attacks have been normalized to the point where it’s now a commonly held belief that a politician “who criticizes the government for any reason has no place in Hungarian public life or Parliament,” undermining not only the individual women targeted, but also the agenda these women stand for and represent, first of all women’s rights and democracy.<sup>94</sup>

**In the meantime, digital platforms have also become an effective and easy channel for Russia to exercise its influence in Hungary and reach the broader EU, as Pro-Putin groups and webpages take advantage of an infrastructure that is particularly well-suited to spreading conspiracy theories, as hateful content is often disguised as defense of traditional values.**

In the face of this crisis of democracy, social media companies have failed to stay true to their promise to be a democratization tool. Far from being a place where everyone can freely express opinions and speak truth to power, digital platforms have become a critical weapon in the Fidesz party’s arsenal, and increasingly toxic and dangerous places for those who oppose the government.

The Hungarian case should serve as a wakeup call for many. The power and reach of digital media to shape values and beliefs keeps growing, and illiberal governments are becoming increasingly skilled at using the internet to undermine democracy and wage war against women’s rights not only in their countries, but around the world.

# NOTES

**1** Monitoring was conducted on Twitter and Facebook as the content hosted on these platforms was most accessible.

**2** In January 2022, a documentary titled *Hungary vs. Soros: Fight for Civilization* was released. In the documentary, conservative U.S. political commentator Tucker Carlson glorifies Orbán's regime, perpetuates anti-Migrant sentiments and casts Hungarian American philanthropist George Soros as an enemy to Hungary for his support of Hungarian civil society. The documentary has been labeled "classic 'national conservative' propaganda" by Cas Mudde, an expert on right-wing politics in Europe. See: Zack Beauchamp, "Why Tucker Carlson's Special on Hungary and Soros Matters," January 29, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/22904444/tucker-carlson-hungary-soros-fox-nation-documentary-special>.

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Disinformation in Hungary

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