— SPECIAL SECTION TWO —

# Introduction: Informational Autocracy and the Moral Panic Button – Using Migration Discourse as Manipulation at Master Level

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*The articles in the special section concentrate on a particular form of governance (informational autocracy) and on its core technology to acquire hegemony for the ruling power over political communication (the moral panic button). The example is Hungary; Poland serves as a point of reference, and the Russian war against Ukraine provides the conditions of a natural experiment. The case studies demonstrate that the primary topic of MPB is migration as the ultimate threat, and how those actors accused of creating, maintaining, and using the migration flow to destroy the sovereignty of the Hungarian state are used as scapegoats.*

*Keywords: informational autocracy, moral panic button, Hungary, Poland, NLP, manipulation*

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The 5 articles in the special section make for interesting reading for those who want to unders, tand in more depth how a government manipulates public discourse to maintain its power. The example is Hungary; Poland serves as point of reference, and the Russian war against Ukraine provides the conditions of a natural experiment. This type of governance is called information autocracy (IA, Guriev and Treisman, 2019). The technology which the Hungarian government applies as the backbone of maintaining this modern form of autocracy is the so-called moral panic button (MPB). The essence of this opportunistic tool is to send signals to broad sections of society through the conscious manipulation of information to which citizens unconsciously respond and fear. Fear- and crisis-mongering and the generation of an image of the enemy (more precisely a circle of enemies) help the authorities to rally the population to a strong-handed, competent leader, i.e. a type of charismatic father figure. The 5 case studies also demonstrate that the prime topic of MPB is migration as the ultimate threat and those persons and organisations that create, maintain and use the migration flow to destroy the sovereignty of the Hungarian state diminish the Hungarian nation. Various and flexible forms of ideological messages are also applied by the MPB, i.e. this model can be conceptualised as the original IA theory.

The 5 articles of the special section apply various empirical exercises to illustrate the technology of MBP as a key element of the IA toolkit. Most of the research focuses on media representations and applies different types of text analysis. The lesson is that the Orbán government is a master of manipulation. Though it has not produced completely new techniques (except perhaps the specially designed form of push poll – the so-called 'national consultation'). It is now a truism that the primary goal of the Orbán government is to hold on to power at all costs (see Kornai 2015, 2016). The adaptability of the information autocracy is a particularly fascinating issue: it reacts differently to the diverse migration situations (2015 and 2022), each in a way that reinforces the image it paints, which does not fully correspond to reality.

The way in which migration-related discourse is used by IA is as part of its post-truth ideological practice, which is lucidly shown by Rakovics and Boda's (2025) article in this section. This technique fits well with the general operational rules of the Hungarian version of IA. For example, while Orbán describes Hungary as a Christian conservative state[1] and one of its major themes is 'to defend the children' from the woke ideology (and recently forbade the annual Pride street demonstration to be held), in recent times, Christian churches in Hungary have been shaken by serious crises that have led to a major crisis of confidence.[2]

Although Fidesz is losing strength and a new opposition led by Péter Magyar, a former Fidesz party *cadre* is on the rise, Fidesz is still the strongest party and Hungarians still consider Viktor Orbán to be the most competent leader. In each case, the government propaganda machine has handled these crises professionally and minimised the damage, distancing Orbán from the Fidesz *cadres* who have committed the 'crimes'. Moreover, Trump's winning presidency and the growing visibility of the right-wing political parties in the EU parliament strengthen the image of Orbán as an influential international actor of radical conservative thought.

The MPB has been used very often and effectively by the Orbán administration in recent years, partly because the opposition was unable to reach out to the broader sections of society and explain clearly why the government's claims were false and untrue. For the first time in its history, the Hungarian government faced a new and powerful opposition actor in the 2024 municipal and European Parliament elections, with a voice that reached a much wider audience than the previous opposition. The exciting question is whether the MPB can be used effectively in this new political space. Public opinion polls in autumn 2024 and early 2025 show that the propaganda machine led by the headquarters of the MPB organisation within the Prime Minister's Office lost its initiative once it failed to dominate the communication space and was forced to react to topics not created by themselves. The most recent

national consultation on the new economic policy ('economic neutrality') has barely affected public discourse and the response rate has remained relatively low.[3]

The strength of the special section is that, in addition to the Hungarian example, it also analyses the former Polish government's communication on migration. While, in the minds of the public, the two countries wore the same hat – i.e. both can be described as information autocracies – the volume clearly shows that Polish society had a significantly different approach to migration and the government itself framed the migration crisis in a different way, so that the rejection of refugees and xenophobia were much less characteristic of them. The comparison between the Polish and the Hungarian examples is particularly relevant now that the Kaczynski government, previously characterised by genuinely autocratic tendencies, has been replaced by a government trying to bring back the basic institutions and *modus operandi* of liberal democracy.

The direction of research that the editors and authors of this volume set out will be fruitful in the long run, because it is an approach that is particularly useful in the field of political science and political economy. It is important to see that the selection of information, the way it is transmitted and the production of content measured in a pharmacy balance is crucial in the case of non-democratic and non-totalitarian regimes and, therefore, the phenomena studied in this special section may be of interest to a wide range of researchers focusing on de-democratisation.

In the course of de-democratisation, it is crucial for the leaders of IAs to fight to maintain their popularity since, if this declines, they cannot maintain their power and the political system either moves back to democracy or slides into the historically familiar dictatorial regimes. The articles highlight how Viktor Orbán has been able to maintain his popularity since 2010 with the help of the MPB. It can be seen that he has always used the tools of the MPB and enemy-building in a highly ingenious way. This is quite an achievement, as Orbán's idols, Putin and Erdogan, have been unable to maintain their system of information autocracy and have become old-style dictators in recent years. Russia and Turkey are now characterised by total censorship and the imprisonment or even murder of dissidents; just think how often dissidents are thrown out of their windows in Russia or how many judges and university professors in Turkey have been imprisoned for their political opinions in recent years.

In addition to the dropout, another process can also be observed, namely the expansion of information autocracies worldwide (Northern Macedonia, Georgia, Serbia). This is no coincidence since Viktor Orbán is devoting considerable resources to employing the tools he has perfected in Hungary to make information autocracies sustainable and the institutional framework of the political system an international model. Hungary is happy to share its experience in building the system with new types of autocratic leaders, not only by sharing knowledge but often by providing financial support for the implementation of individual steps (think of the support for former Slovenian Prime Minister Janša or the Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, who drew international attention for his use of brute force against young people protesting against him after his questionable election victory in October 2024). Hungary is also open to providing sanctuary to failed leaders in information autocracies who should be held accountable for their actions before the justice system; see Nikola Gruevski, former Prime Minister of North Macedonia or Polish Deputy Minister Marcin Romanowski. The Hungarian government has been extremely active in promoting MPB in the region. It supported its allies in Poland and Slovakia in introducing MPB but also intervened in other ways alongside its allies. For example, it provided a loan through an oligarch's bank for Le Pen's election campaign, interfered in Bosnia and Herzegovina's highly sensitive domestic political processes in support of its allied Serb leader and even sheltered the ousted Brazilian president at the Hungarian embassy for several days when needed.[4]

The research findings of this special section are not only important for our region – although their paramount importance here is unquestionable – but may also be of interest in Western Europe and even in the United States of America. The impact of messages that are entirely divorced from reality on voter behaviour has become a focus of social science around the world due to the populist turn, from the return of Trump as President of the US to the rise of Le Pen in France and to the continued rise of the AfD in Germany. The Hungarian Prime Minister and his colleagues are regular guests, even star guests, at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), while the Patriots for Europe group in the European Parliament has many radical right-wing parties from Western Europe among its ranks (with members from Austria, Denmark, Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, Spain and France). The German AfD is expected to join them soon. All this shows that the information autocracies are engaged in conscious and systematic international networking. These extremist parties are growing in strength and have already come close to political power in several Western European countries, so it is crucial to understand how the Orbán regime, which is the longest-standing ruling power in the European Union and one of the dominant organisations of the European far-right parties, maintains its power. Trump's recent efforts to abolish checks and balances in the US are also in line with de-democratisation processes.

Migration, to which the empirical research in this special section applies the theoretical framework, is part of the core CPAC discourse 'No migration! No war! No gender' (for the details see Sik and Krekó 2025, in this section). There is nothing new in treating migration as a threat (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) and the serious consequences of doing it in contemporary societies have been pointed out by many (Benczes and Ságvári 2022; Castles 2004) but the political benefits and ways in which information autocracies do so are particularly intriguing. The special section suggests that, although the Polish and Hungarian cases differ significantly (as the differing trends of their discourse as a reaction to the mass migration after the beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian war show, still the migration issue is and remains a core element of every ongoing political propaganda. Surányi and Bognár (2025, in this section) illustrate how the Hungarian government's migration discourse has changed as a reaction to the coming of Ukrainian war refugees – i.e. without changing explicitly their main anti-migration narrative but adding to it the aspect of deservingness. Varga, Rakovics and Sik (2025, in this section) show the changes of the pro- and non-government narratives focusing on the labelling techniques (i.e. 'migrant' versus 'refugee'). Finally, Surányi and Sik (2025, in this section) demonstrate the different trends of the level of xenophobia in Poland and Hungary in the aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian war, mostly due to the impact of the Hungarian anti-migrant propaganda.

**Notes**

1. Máté-Tóth and Rakovics (2023) show how the meaning of Christianity has changed in Orbán's speeches. They claim that Orbán's concept of Christianity is part of the permanent re-creation of the concept 'nation': 'The political emphasis on Christianity is related to the wounded collective identity of Hungarian society. The paper argues that, because of the collective woundedness, society requires an overarching narrative symbolising unity, of which Christianity is a key concept' (2023: 1).
2. For example, the case of the paedophile supporter who was pardoned by the former President of the Republic, Katalin Novák, for which Bishop Zoltán Balog, a former Orbán government minister, lobbied. Another example is the participation of a government-supported priest (Father Gergő Bese) in gay sex orgies or the case of József Szájer (a former EU representative of Hungary), who drafted a constitution embodying strongly conservative values, who left a gay sex orgy in Brussels during Covid with drugs in his backpack.

3. According to the research, 82 per cent of pro-government voters, 32 per cent of undecided voters and only 6 per cent of opposition supporters returned the questionnaire – overall, one-third of the respondents participated in previous consultations, 90 per cent of Fidesz-KDNP supporters, 47 per cent of undecided voters and 17 per cent of opposition voters answered the government's questions, resulting in an overall participation rate of 46 per cent. The higher-than-usual disinterest this time may have been due to the fact that, despite the government's propaganda campaign, only 45 per cent of respondents knew what the current national consultation was about, 15 per cent identified the wrong topic, while 40 per cent either did not know or did not answer. Nevertheless, as the survey showed, some people still filled out the questionnaire despite their lack of awareness (https://nepszava.hu/3179351_nemzeti-konzultacio-publicus-intezet-felmeres-orban-kormany).

4. Poland: https://444.hu/2023/08/14/terjed-a-magyar-innovacio-a-lengyel-kormany-is-kamuk erdesekrol-tartana-nepszavazast-a-valasztassal-egy-napon, Slovakia: https://444.hu/2023/12/ 08/szlovakiaban-is-futtatta-a-nyomaszto-videoit-a-magyar-kormany-a-valasztasi-kampanyban.

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