Hungary as an Ideological Informational Autocracy (IA) and the Moral Panic Button (MPB) as Its Basic Institution

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In this paper, we analyse the production, circulation and operation of narratives and the frames and themes of migration discourse through a case study in a bid to understand the role which the moral panic button (MPB) plays in creating simultaneous crisis- and fear-mongering campaigns against enemies (in our case, with the Soros phenomenon at the core) that are declared to be an existential threat to the 'Nation'. We argue that the creation and fine-tuning of the MPB is a crucial aspect of building the Hungarian version of informational autocracy (IA), i.e., a non-democratic regime in which the capture of the media and professional control of information are the central elements of the de-democratisation process and of maintaining in executive power.

Keywords: moral panic button, informational autocracy, Soros phenomenon, migration discourse, fearmongering

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Introduction

In this paper, we analyse the production and circulation of migration-related discourse, the operation of the moral panic button (MPB). This is the Hungarian government's institutionalised way of creating crisis- and fear-mongering campaigns against enemies that are declared to be an existential threat to the 'Nation', continuously. We argue that the creation and fine-tuning of the MPB is a crucial aspect of building the Hungarian version of informational autocracy (IA) – i.e. an autocratic regime in which the capture of the media and professional control of the information are the central elements of the de-democratisation process.

To explore how the MBP operates in practice, we employ both visual and discourse analysis following a traditional qualitative research approach. Specifically, we deconstructed the intended messages of the push-polls questionnaires and campaigns by systematically reading and viewing all of them between 2015 and 2024. Consequently, our analysis is not based on sampling but encompasses the entire corpus. This paper is organised as follows: in the first 2 sections we briefly introduce the concept of informational autocracy and the main characteristics of the moral panic button (MPB). In the next section we analyse the details of the operation of the MPB using the migration discourse, first to achieve its crisis-/fear-mongering goals and, second, to convince people that only the Fidesz-led government can save them from these dangers.

The informational autocracy

In previous years, Hungary has become a clear-cut example of de-democratisation. The most-often-emphasised elements of this process are political polarisation, the manipulation of the electoral system to the advantage of the ruling party and the domination of communication processes.

To illustrate how important the manipulation of information may be in the maintenance of power by contemporary rulers, we cite the authors of the concept of 'informational autocracy' or 'spin dictatorship':

(…) In the Peru of Alberto Fujimori, the Hungary of Viktor Orban, and the Russia of Vladimir Putin, illiberal leaders have managed to remove almost all constraints on their power while using relatively little repression and pretending to be democratic (…) their secret lies in the control of information. Instead of isolating their countries, imposing ideologies, or terrorizing citizens, such leaders achieve many of the same ends by manipulating public opinion. With the help of censored or co-opted media, they persuade citizens that they are competent and benevolent; their legitimacy rests on popularity rather than fear. (…) Instead of trying to reprogram people's thinking with a comprehensive ideology, they aim only to improve evaluations of their leadership (Guriev and Treisman 2020: 1).

This is how the authors characterise 'spin dictators'[1] who are not hard-core dictators who rule using open repression and violence:

(…) They wear expensive suits and send their kids to college in the West. They claim to be democratic and hold elections. They allow some opposition media, so long as its audience remains small. They monopolise power like the old dictators, eliminating any effective checks and balances but they do so with much less violence. They do it rather by manipulating information – co-opting the media and presenting a distorted version of reality. Instead of terrorizing people, they fool them (Treisman 2022).

According to the original concept (Guriev and Treisman 2020), there are 4 main characteristics of informational autocracies (or 'spin dictatorships'): (1) the low level of violence applied against political opponents, (2) mimicking democracy, (3) relying on public support among the lower classes and the less-educated and much less on the elites and (4) an emphasis on competence over ideology. Informational autocracies are lookalike democracies where a professionally and continuously manipulated public opinion is relevant to the fear- or crisis-mongering power game.

The first 3 abovementioned criteria of informational autocracies apply well to Hungary (for a detailed analysis, see Krekó 2022). At the same time, the analysis of the operation of the Hungarian version challenges the fourth feature of informational autocracies. The either/or approach of competence/professionalism versus ideology-based governance seems to oversimplify the picture. The Hungarian version of informational autocracy (IA), while emphasising the competence of the government, uses various ideological narratives extensively and intensively, both domestically and internationally (Enyedi 2023; Krekó and Enyedi 2018) to create and maintain moral panics, stir moral emotions, and sustain legitimacy. This political strategy must be based on strongly defined ideological positions: to fuel moral panics, you need a clearly defined set of moral values.

This extension of the original concept of IA is crucial for our approach since it emphasises the role of ideological propaganda as the key element of governance – i.e. the role of artificially created moral panics as the means of dominating the informational and moral spheres of autocratic rule. The Hungarian IA operates using an almost unlimited budget and organisational capacity. During political campaigns, public spending runs particularly high: only in March 2022 (in the month preceding the 2022 general elections), the government, the ruling party and its proxies spent more than 8 million EUR only on public billboards – 8 times as much as the opposition parties spent together.[2] The narratives that are produced and circulated are construed of a mix of standard frames and scapegoats which – if necessary – are updated and tailored to the changing political climate while using ideological elements as well (e.g. referenda and campaigns against gender propaganda and LGBTQ) as well as stressing both the competence of the government and the charismatic features of Orbán (Polyák 2019).

Enyedi (2023) argues that the Orbán regime has always used strong ideological positions to establish its power, mixing the following ideological elements[3]:

- illiberal conservatism, which 'promotes traditional family structures, social order and religious (Christian) legacies (…)' (p. 12);
- civilisationist ethnocentrism, which 'combines the anti-globalist idea of national sovereignty with loyalty to the circle of white Christian countries that are ready to defend themselves against migration and cosmopolitan discourse' (p. 13); and
- paternalist populism. The central principles of liberal democracy, like checks and balances, state that neutrality, individual rights and non-discrimination are of no value to this 'father-figure-led' form of populism (p. 13).

The fact that Fidesz, since the 2010 national election, has come to dominate Hungarian politics and has already repeated its landslide victory 4 times, proves that the MPB as well as the dismantling of the democratic checks and balances, works (Kis 2019; Orosz, Faragó, Paskuj and Krekó 2022). A key element of the success of the Fidesz government is that it has managed to convince a substantial part of the population (about one-third of potential voters, which – because of the carefully crafted election system – is enough to obtain a two-thirds majority in parliament) that they are the only competent and public-spirited political alternative which can bring security, stability and wealth to the 'People' as well as defend the country's sovereignty and morality.

The operation of the MPB

The concept of the MPB heavily draws on the theory of moral panic developed by Stanley Cohen (2011[1972]). A moral panic should focus on a seemingly life-or-death threat and may have serious and lasting negative effects on society. It has to involve a person or group of wrongdoer(s) who can be blamed. The moral panic often involves specific language. For example, asylum-seekers are often described using metaphors involving water (floods or waves) or depicted as an invading army. As to the origin of the moral panic, it can be bottom-up – when rumour and gossip initiate and widen the concerns of a local problem – or the result of an idea that trickles down from the elite through the media. Opinion leaders of all sorts (editors, politicians, 'moral entrepreneurs', so-called 'right-thinking people') use these channels to diagnose the problem and to offer the remedy.

The MPB, however, is not a simple top-down version of a moral panic but a unique propaganda machine by which the Hungarian government continuously creates crisis- and fear-mongering campaigns against artificially created scapegoats that are accused of committing various malevolent actions against the ''Nation'' The MPB has been successful in strengthening the worldview which the government prefers, enhancing polarisation and exploiting fears. Therefore, it is the core element of the toolkit of the Hungarian version of IA. Of course, the Hungarian informational autocracy does not operate in an international vacuum but combines persuasion techniques and ideological elements imported from Western, democratic and Eastern, autocratic political systems.

A crucial component of an informational autocracy is its hegemony over the media. When the regime felt strong enough to consolidate its power, immediately after its first win, it changed the legal environment. After the second landslide victory, the government started to close or convert critical non-government media outlets (Polyák 2019). Later, the Central and Eastern European Media Foundation was established on the basis of a pro-government entrepreneur's donation of their media assets to the foundation, which now owns hundreds of media outlets – over 470 (Bátorfy and Urbán, 2020) – and controls the whole system of county newspapers, providing centralised political content (Kovács, Polyák and Urbán 2021). The next step was the strategic redistribution of state advertising funds, which resulted in a flourishing pro-government and a struggling non-government segment. Around the early 2020s, 80 per cent of advertising revenue went to pro-government media outlets (Kovács *et al.* 2021). With the strategic distribution of state advertising, the pro-government media is flourishing, while the critical media is struggling to survive.[4] As the final step in controlling the media, Fidesz turned its attention towards social media. As a result, a network of influencers and political commentators was built who use their own social media accounts to mediate centrally composed messages on various social media platforms (mainly Facebook).[5]

However, the hegemony of the government in the media is necessary but insufficient to achieve the ultimate aim: control over the attitudes of the targeted part of the population. The chart of the 'history' of the MPB (Annexes 1 and 2) shows that, since 2015, there have been 14 'pressings' of the MPB (see the Roman numerals in the top segment of the chart), of which 5 were referenda and elections (Annex 1 – II, V, VII, XII and XIII) and the other 9 so-called 'national consultations'[6] – push-polls using manipulative questions filled out dominantly by the committed supporters of the regime to show that the 'majority' is behind the government.[7] Through these 14 pressings of the MPB, propaganda has created moral panics directly for the entire population – even those who never read or watch the media are reached by the letters sent to every household with a member who is eligible to vote and everyone is exposed to the billboards.

The above-mentioned pressings were embedded into various media campaigns (see the Arabic numerals in the lower segment of Annex 1 and the second picture in Annex 2) which precede and follow

the pushing of the MPB and reinforce their messages. The essence of this propaganda technology is nothing new: crisis-/fear-mongering – i.e., attempts to increase the number of sympathisers and to mobilise them as voters by generating a sense of threat through providing them with the enemy(ies) and theme(s). In short, it is to create a herd of tamed and disciplined Fidesz believers and devoted followers of Orbán, the charismatic leader.

The foundation of the MPB involves a mix of think-tanks and government departments led by a core group of experts and politicians at the Prime Minister's Office; its propaganda machinery flexibly mixes fake, doctored and manipulated news. It also professionally tailors the combinations of various narratives and scapegoats to reach all social strata while applying simple messages in a highly repetitive and monotonous manner.

The 'history' of the MPB in Hungary started in early January 2015 during the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo terror attack. On 11 January, the Prime Minister talked about the increasing threat which terrorism poses to Europeans' everyday lives and expressed his commitment to fighting this threat, stating that political correctness and the sclerotic EU are hindering the proper defence of Europe.

Soon, the spin doctors in the Prime Minister's Office discovered that the government's previously declining popularity had started to rise. The threat of migration combined with terrorism became the basis of further moral panics.[8] The 'history' of the MPB shows that migration was the core theme selected for crisis- and fear-mongering in 2015 (Annex 1: I, 1 and 2) and has remained a core theme throughout the entire period. There were, however, different phases when the pressings were refreshed and extended by adding new themes and scapegoats:
- In 2016/2017, the anti-migration campaign was reinforced by an anti-EU referendum (Annex 1: II, 3 and 4) by introducing Soros as a 'grey eminence' in the background and introducing a new propaganda technique – flash news embedded into coverage of major sports events (Annex 1: 5).
- In 2017 Soros was in focus but migration was not forgotten either (the relocation quota – i.e. migrants plus the EU – Annex 1: III and IV and 6).
- 2018/2019 – the first election phase was peppered with pro-family and anti-UN propaganda while making sure that all these messages contained anti-Soros narratives as well (including Soros, as an octopus and the anti-CEU activities – Annex 1: V, VI, VII, 7–11).
- 2020/2021 was the COVID phase (Annex 1: VIII, X, XI and 12).[9]
- 2022/2023 – the election campaign combined 2 seemingly unrelated issues (child protection and sovereignty) and used the 'classic' enemy images (Soros and the EU) (Annex 1: XII–XIV, 15).[10]

Annex 1 does not contain the national consultations in 2024 and 2025. The first one focused on sovereignty, with the EU as the main scapegoat.[11] Various topics were deployed to prove the so-called 'anti-Hungarian' sentiment of the EU, which is manifested through reducing the sovereignty of Hungary and blocking the fight of the Hungarian government (the spearhead of the international patriotic movement) against war, LGBTQ and migration. The second national consultation used the EU and multinational firms as scapegoats and combined the 'classic' topics (migration, family and war) with the concrete plans of the Hungarian government in the coming years to kick-off the campaign to win the next election in 2026.[12] Annex 2 shows that the MPB declared the main theme of the next parliamentary election in 2026, i.e. a new combination of scapegoats: Ukraine and the EU leaders, Zelensky and the leader of the main opposition party Péter Magyar).

resorting to spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation with the aim of influencing the public's perception of socio-political issues (Boese, Lundstedt, Morrison, Sato and Lindberg 2022).

The perceptions of threats to national sovereignty have also been exacerbated by the gradual inclusion of the region's states into supranational organisations, which may also have contributed to the population experiencing a sense of political impotence (Gerő, Płucienniczak, Kluknavska, Navratil and Kanellopoulos 2017). Thus, Soros was an appropriate figure onto which fears resulting from the integration into global political structures could be projected.

The Soros phenomenon (George Soros himself, his network, his foundations – especially the CEU – and, recently, his son, Alex) has been targeted by the MPB as the core scapegoat from the very beginning and is still an element of it.[17] This can be demonstrated lucidly by the visual presentation of George Soros himself. In Figure 1, we show the pictures that were used in the course of various MPB pressings between 2016 and 2024.

Figure 1. The visualisation of the Soros phenomenon*

* First row from left to right – 2017 (Annex 1: III and 6), 2018 (Annex 1: 8). Second row from left to right – 2019 (Annex 1: 9), 2021 (Annex 1: X), 2022), 2023 (Annex 1: 15).

Source: Compilation by the authors.

In 2017, the MPB found an article written by Soros that it used as the pretext for moral panic. Its essence was that Soros plans to import millions of migrants and, through this, 'endangers the culture of Christianity in Europe' (upper-left hand and Annex 1: III) and therefore has to be stopped. The traffic sign was invented (and in the same year used against the EU, Annex 1: IV) to send the message that the government is ready to fight. This pressing was embedded into an anti-Soros media campaign (upper-middle picture and Annex 1: 6). In this campaign, Soros was pictured as the Enemy laughing at the People.[18]

Since then, Soros has been portrayed as the mastermind hidden behind the scenes several times, for example:

- in the parliamentary election in 2018 (upper-right and Annex 1: 8), embracing the then-leaders of the Hungarian opposition parties (with cable-cutters in their hands and the message 'They want to demolish the border fence together' – i.e. let mass migration continue);

- in the lower-left picture, where we see 2 laughing men, Soros (again in the background) and Jean-Claude Juncker, former president of the European Commission, during the EU election in 2019 (Annex 1: 9). The message says: 'WHAT DOES BRUSSELS WANT TO DO? You have a right to know what Brussels is planning! They want to implement the mandatory settlement quota. They want to weaken member-states' rights to control their borders. They want to facilitate immigration with a migrant visa';
- the emoji (next to the lower-left picture) portrays Soros as an enraged bull, saying: 'Soros is again ready to attack us';[19]
- the picture (lower-second on the right) shows Soros hiding (and still laughing) behind the 'Brussels' sign, which shows the direction from where the opposition's candidate in the 2022 parliamentary elections gets his/her directives; and
- the last picture in the lower row repeats the previous message, i.e. Soros 'owns' the EU (Annex 1: 9) except, in this picture, the new generation of the Soros Empire stands behind the new leader of the EU (Annex 1: 15).[20]

These images signify that Soros is always hidden in the background (his smile expressing the satisfaction of a sure winner, his arms resembling the tentacles of an octopus), which image is further reinforced by the frames of the texts. As a result of this campaign, by the autumn of 2018, an absolute majority of the Hungarian population had become convinced that George Soros was bringing refugees to Europe in the framework of a grandiose, secret plan (see Note 5).

The production and circulation of migration-related narratives in an IA/MPB system

Since both the media and the parliament are under the hegemonic rule of the government, the default situation is that the MPB provides identical narratives for both – in other words, concerning important issues, narratives are produced top-down and centrally coordinated in the Prime Minister's Office. Investigative journalists (Szabó and Pogonyi 2022) have illustrated this mechanism using the reaction of the MPB headquarters to the Russian attack as an example:

(…) hours after the outbreak of the war, the Chief of Staff of the PM's Office convened a meeting for the leaders of government departments and think-tanks responsible for the communication strategy and summarised the communication strategy of the government (official position, main messages, etc.). The narratives were already ready (developed on the basis of non-public pro-government research): peace, avoiding participation in the war and shipment of weapons. (…) In late March (i.e., a fortnight before the election) the MPB headquarter[s] added Zelensky to the standard list of scapegoats (Soros, the EU and the opposition).

According to an interview, the Orbán government regularly tests the concerns/fears/expectations of its potential voters, then makes decisions without any deliberation in parliament – the results are communicated to and by the media and put into practice by policy-making. In other words, the media and parliament do not have much influence over the government's decisions; they only channel the government's narratives and legitimise the decisions which it has previously made. The success of these narratives is usually immediately visible in the public opinion polls. For instance, research revealed[21] that, before the 2022 elections, 86 per cent of voters in Hungary were exposed to claims stating that the opposition intended to deploy military forces to Ukraine, while 67 per cent encountered allegations that the leftist parties endorse sex reassignment surgeries. The public, too, manipulated for years by the MPB

propaganda machinery, often believes them to be true. Specifically, 60 per cent of respondents who were aware of the rumours about sending Hungarian troops to Ukraine in the case of an opposition victory regarded these claims as true. These statistics starkly illustrate the effectiveness of the government's disinformation campaigns, which are becoming increasingly reminiscent of Orwellian tactics.

The framing of the narratives is also determined by MPB experts at the top (operating within a network of think-tanks, spin doctors, journalists and politicians), therefore the priming and framing terminology is similar in the media and political spheres and mutually reinforcing.

There are no distinct policy narratives – i.e., either all policy actions are carried out without any policy discourse or, if there is any, they are identical to the simple 'translation' of the political decisions for the media and politics. More importantly, the government can tailor flexibly the production of migration narratives (and apply the potentially most effective frames) both to its short-term (even often *ad hoc*) economic and political interests and to its general ideology. Unsurprisingly, actual migration processes are less relevant than the political profit which IA can earn by applying such solely ideology-driven policies.

The main difference between the narratives of the migration process in 2015 and 2022 can be partly explained by the differences between the main characteristics of the migrants in the same period (Surányi and Sik 2025, in this section). Moreover, between 2015 and 2022, the strength of IA and the MPB as significant contributors to its power has increased enormously. First, IA had a much stronger impact on the media in 2022 than in 2015. The role of various MPB agencies has been tested several times and it now runs smoothly. The complex methodology of thematising and priming and the application of the tools (national consultations and special MPB language, etc.) has become almost automatic (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020). Consequently, the MPB in 2022 could immediately divide its operations, distinguishing between 'proper' and 'improper' migrants, to maximise the impact of 'refugee hypocrisy' (Pepinsky, Reiff and Szabó 2024) as part of its migration discourse. However, though the narratives were more diverse in 2015 than in 2022, the basic ideology upon which the narratives are built has not changed: the main purpose of the MPB narratives is to evoke fear and provide proper scapegoats. Conspiracy theories about George Soros, Brussels and their allies become the official, final, axiomatic explanations for all the problems which Hungary is facing, from high inflation to the low salaries of teachers. These campaigns are exploiting an inherent contradiction found in the empirical research on conspiracy theories. While these theories, as epistemic sense-making processes, can seemingly plausibly explain unexpected events to voters (van Prooijen and Douglas 2017), such as wars, viruses or mass migration, embracing these theories has been found to further induce the latter's fears and anxieties instead of reducing them (see, for example, Liekefett and Becker 2023). This explains why Soros-related conspiracies worked so well for the MPB in the migration discourse – for example, Soros imports millions of migrants, the Soros network recruits migrants and prepares them with mobile phones and information leaflets and Soros as a puppet-master influences EU leaders behind the scenes to pass pro-migration laws, etc.

A lucid example of how to combine the standard MPB themes and scapegoats (Soros, the EU, migration and gender propaganda) is provided in a speech by Orbán in July 2022:

There is less talk about migration now but, believe me, nothing has changed. Brussels, with its Soros army, simply wants to force immigrants on us. (…) we just want them to accept that, in our country, the father is a man, the mother is a woman and our children should be left alone and that they should make George Soros' army accept this.[22]

In May 2023, at the annual CPAC (*Conservative Political Action Conference*) meeting in Budapest, Orbán framed the war somewhat differently, proudly declaring the regime to be the spearhead of the conservative attack against arch-enemies such as the left and the liberals and their worldwide conspiracy under the disguise of globalisation who actually only want to destroy nations, freedom and the basic morals of conservativism. The narrative contains the same themes and scapegoats (Soros, Brussels, migration, leftist liberals, gender and woke ideologists, NGOs, etc.) and was 'updated' for the post-COVID and war era: it uses a virus analogy and claims that Hungary is an incubator for testing the serum against the cosmopolitan/globalist attack on 'normality':

> *(…) Uncle Georgie* [a derogatory nickname for George Soros] *announced his resettlement programme. He mobilised his NGO army and set about implementing his grand plan. They flooded the Balkans with illegal migrants and built a people-smuggling route leading into the heart of Europe. Then they came up against Hungary. We gave the command to halt, we took up the gauntlet and we defended ourselves: we built a fence and we defended our country. (…) Today we can see that this virus has not simply escaped: it has been bred, it is being propagated and spread all over the world. Migration, gender and woke: these are all just variants – variants of the same virus. (…) The good news for everyone is that we need look no further for a serum for the progressive virus: it is here, in Hungary. (…) All that is needed, before the election, is to write, in huge, prominent letters on your flag: 'No migration! No gender! No war!'*[23]

The official pro-governmental approach refers to the pro-refugee behaviour of the government in 2022 as proof that the government has never acted against migration in a racist way but only followed the principle that Hungary accepts refugees only when Hungary is the first safe country for them, which was not the case in 2015. However, the previously quoted excerpts of Orbán's recent speeches prove that the basic MPB anti-migration rhetoric still dominates the ideology, though it is embedded in other themes and uses fine-tuned frames.

As we wrote earlier, the 'Soros-network' was referred to by Hungarian propaganda as the core actor since the first push polls and campaigns, in 2015/2016 up to now, uninterruptedly using migration as a tool to destroy the sovereignty of Hungary. The only changes were that while, at the beginning, the pro-migration messages were associated with the devilish smile of George Soros, now it is Alex Soros and Zelensky and the EU leaders can be seen on TV, on the net and on every corner of Hungarian streets.

Conclusion: Is Hungary an outlier?

The case study presented above, in line with the position of some renowned political scientists (Enyedi 2023), seems to indicate that the theory on informational autocracies needs revision in one particular aspect that informational autocracies (unlike, for example, the communist or fascist regimes of the 20th century) are not necessarily non-ideological. Messages on competence and ideology – the latter using fake news and conspiracy theories (in the present case, the almost continuous use of the 'Soros-phenomenon') whenever needed – may be well-combined and synergistically used to convince people to accept the rule of the ruling party. The excerpts also show the ability of the MPB to contribute to (and not replace) the original IA theory with the importance of ideologies (Enyedi 2023), identified as an essential, *sine qua non*, element of the MPB propaganda that 'entertains' voters via fuelling moral panics constantly.

The operation of the MPB: The Soros phenomenon

To illustrate the operation of the MPB (i.e. how the pressings of the button – usually push-polls[13] – and the *à priori* and/or *ex-ante* media campaigns are combined), we briefly show how the Soros phenomenon (overlapping with the migration discourse) has been used in the propaganda.

Soros seems to be a 'perfect' candidate for a position at the centre of a global conspiracy theory.[14] The basis for his candidacy involves the following (intertwined and equally important) characteristics: he is a speculator, a multibillionaire, a cosmopolitan, committed to democracy and civil society and runs worldwide NGO networks. Moreover, under certain regimes and according to various political actors, further characteristics of Soros have been added to this image: Soros as an immigrant and/or a major donor to the Democratic Party in the US, a Jew in Hungary,[15] a US citizen in Russia and a supporter of Palestine in Israel.

There are, however, certain conditions beyond Soros' characteristics, which may further facilitate the spread of the 'Soros phenomenon'. McLaughlin and Trilupaityte (2013) argue that globalisation gave birth to the international diffusion of narratives and ideas, as well as created transnational linkages between NGOs that pose a threat to political actors oriented towards nationalism and protectionism. This was especially the case during and after the disintegration of the socialist regimes, when political elites looked to nationalism to fill the ideological vacuum left by Marxism–Leninism and used it to grab onto and retain power.

> *Soros makes for an interesting case study in the international circulation of political attacks. Soros' reputation evolved differently in varied regions of the world, as his unique career as a currency speculator, philanthropist and political actor changed over time. (...) Serbian dictator Milošević tried to evict Soros' foundation from his country by closing its offices in Belgrade (...), and Belarus's dictator Lukashenko threatened criminal investigations against staff involved in Open Society activities, forcing the closing of the institute. Soros was a metaphor for the unjustness of capitalism, elite manipulation and shady American intervention in local politics... starting from the middle of the 1980s, the KGB was actively trying to link Soros with the CIA in order to discredit him* (McLaughlin and Trilupaityte 2013: 432).

In societies with a weak economy and an unstable political situation and/or experiencing rapid and unexpected changes – such as the collapse of a regime, a revolution, a war or a pandemic – the image of Soros as a mastermind orchestrating major socio-political events may 'come in handy' as an antidote to citizens' failure to grasp the underlying processes that cause these events (Douglas, Uscinski, Sutton, Cichocka, Nefes, Ang and Deravi 2019). Since the second part of the 20th century, globalisation has significantly increased the various forms of flows of capital, knowledge, people, etc., traversing nation-state borders and resulting in novel governance structures with high complexity levels. Recently, with transformations in the flow of information (the World Wide Web) and communication (social media), the decreasing cost of travel and the emergence of the post-truth worldview, the receptivity of the public opinion towards the simple explanations offered by conspiracy theories (including those with Soros at the core) have become widespread (Tanguay 2021).[16]

Disillusionment with the dominant political institutions and established political parties since the 2008 recession has led to the ascent of radical and right-wing regimes across the globe which seek to quell popular unrest through a strong opposition to globalisation, pluralism and diversity (Bonanno 2020; Morlino and Quaranta 2016; Öniş and Kutlay 2020). These regimes have been increasingly

To put the Hungarian version of IA (and the role of the MPB in it) into a comparative perspective, we should emphasise that, while none of the techniques used in the construction and operation of the Hungarian IA were invented by Hungarian experts, a compact experiment, a 'laboratory of post-truth'[24] was developed and fine-tuned in Hungary. As Orbán has claimed, Hungary is 'the anti-virus laboratory of the conservative world'. At the same time, while this paper focuses only on experiences regarding the informational autocracy developed in Hungary, it is logical to assume that informational autocracies are typically ideological. Without a clear set of moral goals and principles, it would be impossible to fabricate (and then name, shame and blame) the enemies of these regimes and to exclude them from the political community – an approach which is typically and inevitably applied by such regimes to silence, intimidate and, often., chase away opponents, as the inventors of the IA theory (Guriyev and Treisman, 2022) have argued.

Notes

1. Estimated by the authors to be about 40 per cent of the non-democratic leaders in the 2000s.
2. K-Monitor: Governing Parties Spent 8 Times More on Billboard Campaigns Than Opposition https://hungarytoday.hu/government-fidesz-dominance-campaign-billboard-opposition-election/ (accessed 1 September 2025).
3. It is embedded into various socio-political and historic/cultural characteristics of contemporary Hungary such as anti-empire nationalism, ethnocentrism, chauvinism, irredentism, ressentiment towards the 'West', post-peasant (primordial) nationalism, etc. (Melegh 2016; Sik and Melegh 2017).
4. According to a report published around the early 2020s, 80 per cent of advertising revenue went to pro-government media outlets (Kovács *et al.* 2021). With the strategic distribution of state advertising, the pro-government media is flourishing, while the critical media is struggling to survive.
5. See, for example, an analysis of Political Capital Institute: https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3338 (accessed 1 September 2025).
6. The Hungarian version of a national consultation does not serve as a first step toward a consultation process since it does not allow room for any further discussion or debate. The only goal of the national consultation is to set the political agenda (i.e. its results are used to demonstrate that the entire Hungarian nation agrees with the government) and legitimise (*à priori* or *ex-ante*) the legal and political actions of the government. For example, in the first push poll (National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism in 2015 – Annex 1: I), the framing of the questions and the response items proves that the questionnaire is not intended to identify public opinion but to shape it – according to what the manipulator intends us to believe in (Bognár, Kerényi, Sik, Surányi and Szabolcsi 2023).
7. Which is a lie and abuses basic statistics since, while the MPB headquarters always informs the population that the overwhelming proportion of those who answered the questionnaires agreed with the questions (in the 2024 national consultation, 99 per cent), only a minority of potential voters (15–20 per cent) usually return the questionnaires.
8. There are various explanations as to why migration is a common source of moral panic, including socio-biological (invasion as a primal threat to human beings) and socio-psychological reasons (Stephan and Stephan 1996). The sociological model of methodological nationalism also

explains why migration is unavoidably a threat for an 'imagined community' such as the nation (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003).

9. The spring consultation in 2020 (Annex 1: IX) was cancelled due to the unexpected arrival of COVID.

10. We consider the campaign in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022 (Annex 1: 13–14) as an action which was not a pressing of the MPB since the crisis was not artificially generated by it.

11. https://444.hu/2023/11/17/brusszel-magyarorszagon-is-migransgettot-akar-letrehozni-itt-vannak-az-uj-nemzeti-konzultacio-kerdesei.

12. https://kormany.hu/hirek/hetfotol-indul-a-nemzeti-konzultacio-ime-a-kerdesek.

13. 'AAPOR defines a "push poll" as a form of negative campaigning that is disguised as a political poll. "Push polls" are actually political telemarketing – telephone calls, disguised as research, that aim to persuade large numbers of voters and affect election outcomes, rather than measure opinions (https://www-archive.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Resources/What-is-a-Push-Poll.aspx).

14. George Soros was perhaps first subject to conspiracy-like political attacks when he was labelled a CIA agent by Chinese party members in the mid-1980s (McLaughlin and Trilupaityte 2013).

15. Soros has been a well-known figure in Hungary since the late 1980s and there have been conspiracy theories about him from the very beginning. They emerged in the years following the collapse of socialism, when nationalist movements, capitalising on the resurfacing of ethnic tensions as well as a long history of antisemitism in the region (Astapova, Colacel, Pintilescu and Scheibner 2021; Bustikova 2015), painted a picture of Soros as the leader of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy aiming to undermine the nation's newly gained independence (Kalmar, Stevens and Worby 2018; Langer 2021).

16. Moreover, increasing social inequality also facilitates the spread of conspiracy theories (Casara, Suitner and Jetten 2022), i.e. the radical increase in inequalities between employers and employees, skilled and non-skilled labour, urban and rural areas, global and domestic producers, as well as between regions and sectors with differing levels of economic development triggered by globalisation may also explain the success of the Soros phenomenon (Rodrik 2018).

17. The first attempt by the Orbán government to arouse anti-Soros sentiment was an article in 2014 that claimed that the Open Society Foundation, although having officially ended its activity in Hungary in 2007, actively supported human rights organisations linked to the opposition – or indirectly supported activists and movements critical of the government. The campaign resulted in an anti-NGO act, essentially a copy of the one enacted in Russia not much earlier.

18. This picture subsequently led to a debate regarding the image's potential antisemitic connotations. The Ambassador of Israel in Hungary criticised this portrayal in a *communiqué* and asked the Hungarian government to stop hate-mongering. However, as the result of the smooth cooperation between Netanyahu and Orbán, the next day the Israeli Prime Minister got the *communiqué* annulled (https://24.hu/kozelet/2017/07/10/izraeli-hatraarc-soros-ugyben/).

19. Migration appears as an angry face emoji with the message 'Are you outraged because of illegal migration?' https://hvg.hu/itthon/20210707_emoji_reklam_kormany_nemzeti_konzultacio.

20. The original idea, however, was to put Zelensky instead of Alex Soros, https://www.lakmusz.hu/az-eredeti-terv-szerint-nem-alex-soros-hanem-zelenszkij-emelte-volna-fenyegetoen-a-kezet-a-nemzeti-konzultacios-plakatokon/.

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

22. https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-eloadasa-a-xxxi-balvanyosi-nyari-szabadegyetem-es-diaktaborban/.
23. https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-opening-of-the-cpac-hungary-conference/.
24. https://vsquare.org/hungary-is-a-post-truth-laboratory-peter-kreko/.

Funding

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Annex 1

Figure 1. The 'history' of the moral panic button, 2014–2023
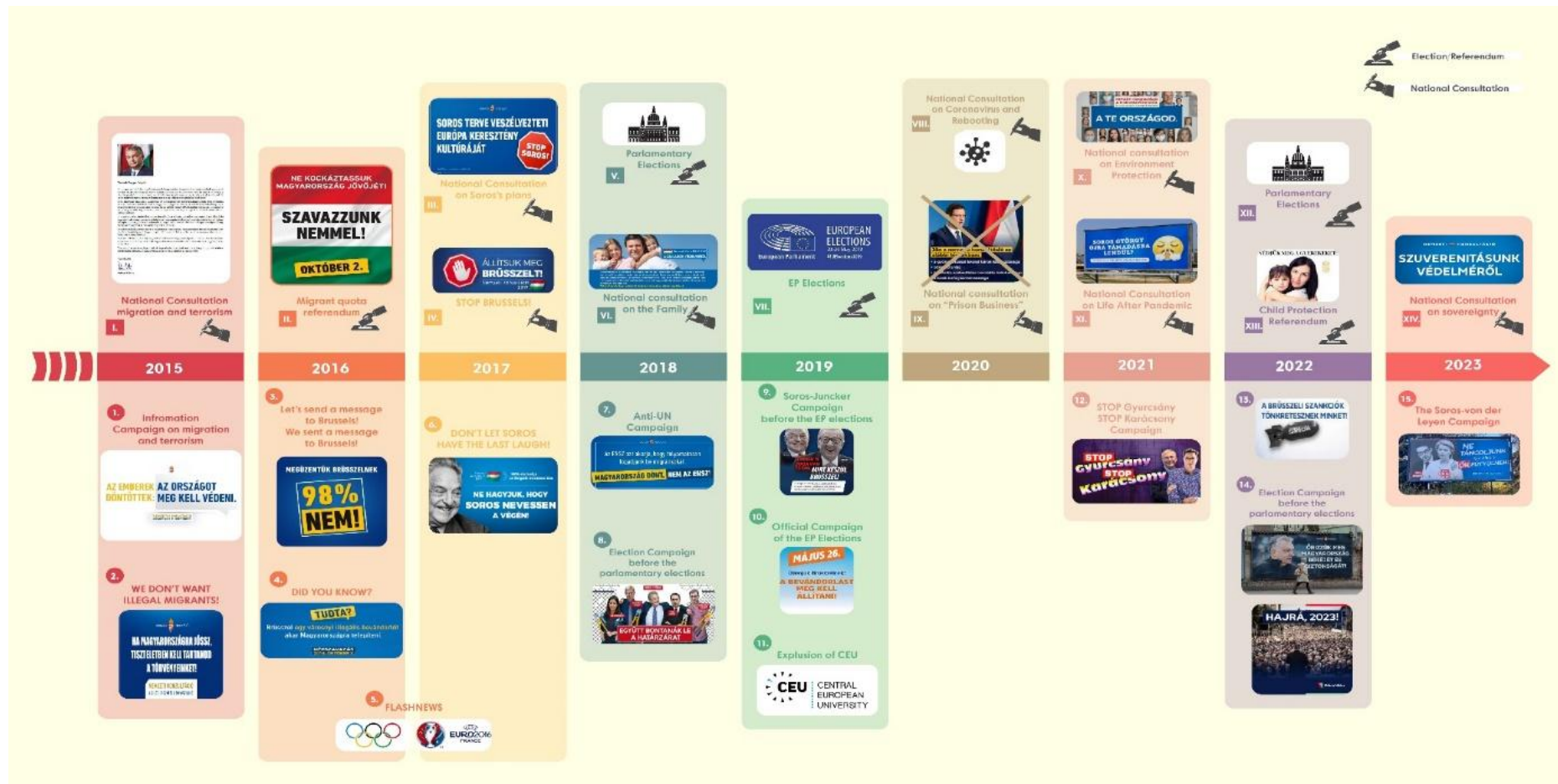
Annex 2. The 2 most recent (2025) pressings of the MPB

They would invite Ukraine to join the EU – but we would pay the price!

Like 2 eggs: Zelensky and the Hungarian Zelensky (Péter Magyar, the leader of the Tisza Party – at the moment more popular than Fidesz).