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Orbán's digital playbook

Behind Hungary's ballots lies a powerful machine of digital disinformation designed to keep the prime minister and his government in power

A recent study by the Hungarian Digital Media Observatory (HDMO) revealed that Hungary is the most vulnerable country in East-Central Europe to disinformation and conspiracy theories, with over two-thirds of the population questioning factual information. This has created an environment ripe for digital manipulation, where the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has effectively used disinformation to consolidate its power, undermine democratic values and influence elections.

Hungary serves as a prime example of the detrimental effects that digital disinformation can have on election integrity, allowing authoritarian regimes to mask their control as democratic. This distortion of public perception poses a significant threat to democratic principles worldwide, underscoring the need to scrutinise and mitigate the damaging influence of digital disinformation.

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Orbán's government conducts elections that appear democratic. Yet, they are skewed in favour of the ruling party, as highlighted by the OSCE's assessment of Hungary's elections as 'free but not fair'. This reveals a manipulated political environment where voting rights exist, but true democratic competition is undermined by pervasive digital disinformation.

While elections in authoritarian regimes often appear contradictory, they primarily function to legitimise oppressive governance rather than to foster true political rivalry. In Hungary, the Orbán administration has mastered this approach, employing tactics such as gerrymandering and media suppression to systematically weaken opposition parties.

Digital tools as instruments of authoritarian control

Digital technology plays a crucial role in Hungary's politics, with Orbán's government leveraging digital misinformation via state media and online platforms to maintain power and silence dissent. Pro-government media often negatively depict Ukraine and attribute economic challenges to EU sanctions, thereby shaping public opinion and stifling pluralism and freedom of information.

Hungary's digital authoritarianism also includes censorship and surveillance to suppress critical voices, labelling NGOs as threats. Despite these obstacles, citizen monitors and international initiatives strive to enhance transparency and defend democratic values against authoritarian encroachments.

While traditional media is pro-government, digital platforms offer even greater control. The Hungarian government utilises social media platforms to sway public sentiment, stifle opposition and undermine democratic discussions, posing a serious threat to the fairness of elections. Pro-government outlets often share distorted political accounts, discrediting critics, promoting government narratives and creating echo chambers where government content prevails. This skewed media landscape marginalises critical journalists and subjects opposition voices to harassment, further deepening existing biases. Consequently, many voters mainly encounter narratives that question opposition legitimacy and strengthen the ruling party's power.

Disinformation and the erosion of democratic trust

Disinformation is closely linked to the erosion of democratic trust in Hungary, driven by media manipulation and political strategies. Under Orbán, the government has exploited disinformation to consolidate power and undermine democratic institutions. This media control generates scepticism towards democratic processes and advances an illiberal agenda. Dominated by pro-government narratives, the Hungarian media significantly contributes to the spread of disinformation, particularly in its portrayal of international events. Consequently, citizens experience polarised trust in democratic institutions, oscillating between extreme confidence and profound doubt.

One strategy involves spreading false information through state-run and

social media, targeting political opponents and independent journalism by portraying them as national security threats. In doing so, the government seeks to weaken their credibility and diminish their influence among voters.

Digital disinformation also directly influences electoral results. In Hungary, false narratives have targeted opposition parties and civil society alike. The intent is to discredit rivals and sow distrust in democratic institutions. By inundating digital platforms with misleading information, genuine debate becomes nearly impossible. A notable example occurred in the 2019 municipal elections when opposition candidate Gergely Karácsony was falsely depicted as incompetent. Although the opposition eventually triumphed in Budapest, similar tactics persist nationally. This mix of disinformation and surveillance undermines democratic accountability as citizens struggle to trust information or fear retaliation for dissent.

Additionally, Hungary's government utilises an international network of far-right influencers and media to amplify its messaging. This aspect of digital authoritarianism demonstrates that electoral manipulation can transcend national boundaries, thereby complicating countermeasures. Media control plays a crucial role in shaping Hungary's narrative as a bastion of conservative values against liberal ideologies. Hungarian leaders frequently warn of liberal threats to Western civilisation while portraying their policies as ways to overcome these challenges. This portrayal, emphasising opposition to migration and the defence of traditional values, forms a cornerstone of this communication strategy.

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Digital disinformation reviving narratives about Hungary's Turkic heritage and non-European identity supports the rationale for illiberal policies and alignment with Eastern nations. This narrative aims to promote national pride and garner support for the government's foreign policy, which often conflicts with the EU. The absence of a robust legal framework against disinformation and a weakened independent media further exacerbate this issue.

Balancing free speech with monitoring hate groups on social media is a significant challenge today. Regulating tech platforms involves navigating democratic, cybersecurity and property concerns, especially as authoritarian regimes misuse them. In Hungary, Orbán's regime combines traditional authoritarianism with modern technology to

maintain power and erode democratic values. Hungary uses digital platforms to shape political narratives, masking its authoritarianism with a façade of electoral democracy.

By controlling public perception and the flow of information, the Hungarian government maintains power without outright bans or censorship. Consequently, elections serve to legitimise predetermined outcomes rather than reflect true democratic choice. Although voters think they have options, their choices are manipulated to favour the ruling party. The government's dominance over digital platforms silences opposition voices, creating a false sense of political competition.

Hungary's situation thus serves as a cautionary tale for democracies globally. Without strong protections against digital disinformation, democracies risk becoming superficial and compromised. Weak regulations on misinformation undermine accountability, turning elections into mere performances that lack real political choice. This distortion of democracy needs urgent attention. Policymakers must implement strict regulations to combat disinformation, hold tech companies accountable and foster media literacy to empower citizens. Without these measures, the foundation of democracy could be irreparably damaged.



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