

PÉTER KREKÓ

**(NO) BOUNDARIES FOR
BRAINWASHING? INFORMATIONAL
AUTOCRATIZATION AND ITS
CURES IN SERBIA AND HUNGARY**

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(No) Boundaries for Brainwashing? Informational Autocratization and Its Cures in Serbia and Hungary

Introduction: Why the Topic Is Important?

In the last few years, Viktor Orbán's "spin dictatorship" has exported its tactics of mass manipulation to multiple countries – as he has become the emblematic strongman with the know-how of how to remain in power for a long time. It gives a helping hand to like-minded "illiberals" in the Western Balkans (such as North Macedonia, Slovenia, Poland, Republika Srpska) with media, political consultancy, diplomatic support, and money, but also provided inspiration for the populist right in Italy, the United States, Brazil, France, Israel and elsewhere. Given the increasingly intimate relationship between Hungary and Serbia, Orbán's model can be increasingly attractive for Serbia as well on its ambivalent path towards Euro-Atlantic

integration. Despite the fact that Hungary, unlike Serbia, is a member of the EU and NATO, media concentration and massive state-sponsored disinformation and conspiracy theorizing are on a less developed stage in the Vučić-regime. **At the same time**, the Serbian president regards Orbán as a role model in many senses, and the support of a “Western” country, Austria towards both countries increases the impact of the Hungarian media model. Orbán’s role as a “teacher” of spin dictatorship can contribute to further deterioration of the quality and factuality of the information space in Serbia – if there are no efficient countermeasures from the EU and civil society actors.

The following essay tries to

- identify the patterns of systemic information manipulation from the state and its proxies in Serbia and Hungary using the theory and concepts of “informational autocracy” and “spin dictatorship”.
- highlight the similarities and differences between Hungary and Serbia through the lens of this concept.
- Recommend some cures against state-sponsored disinformation and informational autocratization.

Informational Autocratization: Think Globally, Deceive Locally

In the traditional psychological and political science approach of conspiracy theories,¹ these phenomena are usually understood as theories and guerilla narratives, or “populist counter-narratives” (Butter 2023) primarily serving the interests of “losers” (Uscinski, Parent 2014) – people without economic, political power, and lacking social capital. In this approach, conspiracy theories can even out groups who lack the financial and political

resources and contest their high-status opponents, who wield greater political and economic power (Imhoff, Bruder 2014). In Michel Foucault's terminology, conspiracy theories are tools and instruments to challenge the "Regimes of Truth" (Foucault 1977 [1976]: 13), that aim to monopolize knowledge production. But this romantic approach to conspiracy theories – and the systemic disinformation that is embedded in a conspiracy worldview – does not really reflect reality nowadays – neither in autocratic nor in democratic or semi-democratic societies. Today, the challenge is not that the "Regimes of Truth" and their gatekeepers and authorities (including academic institutions, mainstream media, opinion-leaders) are monopolizing the production, definition, and sharing of knowledge. The real challenge of today is that "Regimes of Post-Truth" (ROPT, Harsin 2015) are destroying the authority of these traditional sources of knowledge, leaving the citizens in dangerous epistemic uncertainty – which is the hotbed of mass manipulation and deception.

These Regimes of Post-Truth, or "informational autocracies", or "spin dictatorships" (Guriev, Treisman 2022) combine the power of the professionalized state bureaucracy and state resources with the most up-to-date and innovative communication technologies (including generative artificial intelligence), and often abuse social media platforms and search engines to maximize their control over the attitudes of the population – often with notable success. If the manipulation of information is

¹ The concepts of "disinformation", "fake news" and "conspiracy theories" are not identical but overlapping to a large extent in their practical manifestations. For conceptual, operational, and empirical differentiation, see for example Faragó, Laura, Anna Kende, Péter Krekó (2019), "We only believe in news that we doctored ourselves." *Social Psychology*.

highly efficient, there is finally simply no need to use direct oppression and violence. This way, autocracies are becoming more “elegant” and discreet in their toolkit and instruments. Trendy modern dictators tend to use information instead of violence and direct repression to keep themselves in power as long as possible. It makes them more democratic on the one hand (as direct violence looks bad on TV) and saves resources on the other. This is the key to success for “informational autocrats”, or “spin dictators”. As Russian economist (and ex-consultant of Dimitry Medvedev) Sergei Guriyev and American political scientist Daniel Treisman, the two inventors of the term, argue:

The key to such regimes, we argue, is the manipulation of information. Rather than terrorizing or indoctrinating the population, rulers survive by leading citizens to believe—rationally but incorrectly—that they are competent and public-spirited. Having won popularity, dictators score points both at home and abroad by mimicking democracy. Violent repression, rather than helping, would be counterproductive because it would undercut the image of able governance that leaders seek to cultivate. (Guriyev, Treisman 2020: 100–101)

Manipulation of information is running in parallel in the offline and the online world. According to the Oxford Computational Propaganda Project, by 2021 there were 80 countries in the world where state actors or proxies are manipulating social media information on an industrial scale (this is an 185% increase in the last 4 years, as there were only 28 such countries in 2017). Given that the largest countries on the Earth are in this category (including China, India, Pakistan, and Brazil), more than half of the citizens in

the World are currently living in countries where they are manipulated by their own – often elected – leaders.² Both Hungary and Serbia are indicated as countries where computational propaganda is an everyday practice by actors who own public power.

Conspiracy theories in informational autocracies can be deployed to help the government to mobilize its own electorate during campaigns, but also to blame the objects of those conspiracy theories for policy failures. In this respect, they play a similar role in Hungary as they do in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey (Akynol 2016) and Vladimir Putin's Russia (Yablokov 2018). The United States under the presidency of Donald Trump also made steps in that direction (and probably will make some more after the US presidential elections in September 2024), as well as Narendra Modi's India (Guriev, Treisman 2019). Viktor Orbán's Hungary is a textbook case for an informational autocracy, as Guriev and Treisman argue, and I also elaborated on this point in detail in another paper (Krekó 2022). In Hungary, manipulation of information through the centralisation of media, production of conspiracy theories, and disinformation on an industrial scale was the most important reason why Viktor Orbán could reproduce his legitimacy in three consecutive elections after winning elections in 2010 – making him the longest-serving Prime Minister ever in the history of the European Union.

² See The Oxford Internet Institute press release: [Anon.] "Social media manipulation by political actors now an industrial scale problem prevalent in over 80 countries – annual Oxford report" (2021), <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/news/social-media-manipulation-by-political-actors-now-an-industrial-scale-problem-prevalent-in-over-80-countries-annual-oxford-report/>.

While Serbia is not mentioned by Guriyev and Treisman as one of the “spin dictatorships”, and, as I will argue below, media centralization is in a less developed stage in many respects than in the neighboring EU and NATO member, Hungary, “discursive deception” is widespread in the state-owned media (Jovanović 2018), and conspiracy theorizing is omnipresent in political discussions today (Nefes, Milošević Đorđević, Vdović 2024; Petrović, Žeželj 2023). Also, it looks back to a rich history: using disinformation and conspiracy theories as political tools for mobilization and polarization has a long tradition in the Western Balkans, and played a very important role, for example, in justifying Serbian state policies and aggression before and during the Yugoslav wars (Byford, Billig 2001).

Serbia and Hungary: a Surprising Friendship

When Xi Jinping visited Europe in the Spring of 2024, he met with only two leaders of two Eastern European states: Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić. In both countries, the Chinese leader met a very warm welcome. Hungary, in a very small group of countries (with no other EU and NATO members sidelining Hungary), has rejected the resolution of the UN to call the Srebrenica massacre in the nineties a “genocide” – attracting widespread criticism from the country’s own allies. These two recent cases well illustrate that Hungary and Serbia got very close to each other in their foreign policy and geopolitical approach.

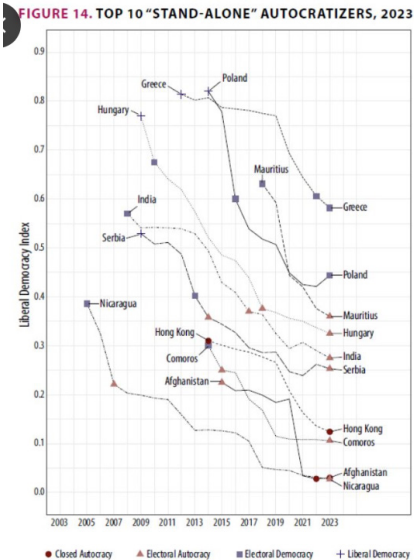
Hungary is one of Serbia’s most significant international partners today, despite their relationship having a rich history of tensions and hostilities. Frictions were very visible even during the Yugoslav Wars, where Hungary supported Croatia over Serbia diplomatically and with arms alike. This period also saw concerns about the Hungarian ethnic minority in Vojvodina, who faced ethnic tensions but also managed to gain political influence and advocate

for territorial autonomy. The transformation of relations between the two countries was marked by a significant improvement in recent years, and the current relationship is described as unprecedentedly cordial by some observers of foreign policy (Reményi, Pap, T., Pap, N. 2021). The substantial improvement in bilateral relations can be attributed to the leadership of Orbán and Vučić, leading to strengthened political and economic ties. Hungary's foreign policy priorities included European accession, NATO membership, and neighborhood policies focusing on Hungarian communities, which also fostered minority self-governments and cultural exchanges. Economic cooperation flourished, with significant Hungarian investments in Serbia and the Western Balkans. Hungary's support for Serbia's EU accession exemplifies the strategic partnership, further solidified by agreements on border security and migration control. This partnership reflects a comprehensive approach to mutual interests, including economic growth and regional stability (Vörös, Tarrósy 2022).

Of course, similarities in political leadership styles make this relationship even more intimate (see Tables 1 and 2 for the institutional and political similarities between the two countries).

Unquestionably, we find a lot of parallels between Hungary and Serbia at the same time - in terms of leadership, rhetorical style, media strategy, and spread of disinformation (Table 2.). The two leaders are employing similar tools in both institutional centralization and populist mobilization. Historically, both countries experienced conflicts and territorial grievances, often used by leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to rally nationalistic sentiments. Both countries are among the "stand-alone" autocratizers, according to the V-Dem group, belonging

to the same category of “Electoral Autocracies” (see the graph below). These are the two states that often define themselves against the Euro-Atlantic mainstream – despite their very different level of Euro-Atlantic integration (An EU and NATO member state and a non-EU, non-NATO Member state). They both have leaders who have served for more than a decade. And they both enjoy the support and patronage of a Western European country: Austria.



The electorate of the two countries also share some similarities in terms of their geopolitical attitudes (sympathy towards Russia and China), and obsession with conspiracy theories, according to comparative polls of Pew Research Center and Globsec, among others. The attitudes of Hungarians show a much higher shift in this respect, especially in the last decade, than the attitudes of Serbians, though. The media centralization in Hungary (discussed in detail below) helped the government to shift public opinion more in their direction. While about

15 years ago, the voters of Fidesz were the most vocal critics of Russia, and their attitudes towards the Russian Federation and President Putin were remarkably negative, Fidesz voters (along with the voters of the extremist Our Homeland Movement) have become the most pro-Russian voter group in Hungary, as a consequence of the increasingly consistent pro-Russian politics of Orbán (Tóth 2022).

Table 1: Comparison of Hungary and Serbia: Political and Media Freedoms

	Hungary	Serbia
Freedom of the Net (Freedom House, 2022)	Partly Free (69/100)	Free (71/100)
Freedom of the World Index (Freedom House, 2022)	Partly Free (66/100)	Partly Free 62/100
Freedom of Expression and Belief Subindex (FH, 2022)	10/16	12/16
Liberal Democracy Index (Vdem)	0,32 (Electoral Autocracy)	0,25 (Electoral Autocracy)

Furthermore, we can see similarities between how the Orbán and the Hungarian media and Vučić and the Serbian government-friendly media responded to opposition protests. Media outlets perform character assignments of certain opposition figures in order to attempt to delegitimize and discredit them, as well as how certain outlets compare the protestors to fascist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan (Mladenov Jovanović 2019).

We can also find parallel trends in informational

autocratization between the two countries – even if it is a bit less developed in Serbia than in Hungary. According to Guriyev and Treisman, the four main features of informational autocracies are that they tend to 1) mimic democracy while maintaining a democratic façade, 2) apply low levels of violence, 3) have more support among the lower-status groups in society, and 4) base their legitimacy more on performance than on ideology. Let's see how much these points apply to the Orbán and the Vučić regimes.

The first criterion obviously applies to both countries – electoral autocracies are per definitionem lookalike democracies, and both Orbán and Vučić often claim that Hungarian and Serbian democracies are more developed than their Western counterparts, where political correctness, wokeism, and gender ideology limit freedom of expression. The third criterion, again, fits for both countries. As Guriyev and Treisman argue, spin dictatorships have an inverse pattern of support than democracies: the lower the level of education, the higher the support for the regime, its institutions, and political players (Guriev, Treisman 2022). Informational autocracies, unlike democracies that are typically more supported by the better-educated and better-off, have much less public support among the elites and the highly educated than among the lower classes and the less-educated. Empirical data provides clear support for the presence of this gap in Hungary: support for the governing party Fidesz incrementally increases as we go down the socio-economic ladder, and it is much lower among the most privileged category (33%) than among the most underclass group (48%) (Róna et al. 2020). According to some research in Serbia, Vučić and SNS also have a rather “populist” voter base, with the overrepresentation of pensioners, lower-middle class, and undereducated voters (Bursać, Vučićević 2021).

Table 2: Similarities between Serbia and Hungary

	Serbia and Hungary
Democratic tendencies	"Autocratizers" (V–Dem)
Longevity of the regime	"Populist Establishments", with the leaders in power for 10/14 years
Image of the leader	Image of the alternativeness leader ³
Media System	Captured media ⁴
Media Strategy	Trumpian media strategy (attacks on independent media and journalists ⁵)

³ See Srđan M. Jovanović (2018), "You're Simply the Best": Communicating Power and Victimhood in Support of President Aleksandar Vučić in the Serbian Dailies *Alo!* and *Informer*", *Journal of Media Research-Revista de Studii Media* 11(31): 22–42.

⁴ See Ana Milojević, Jelena Kleut (2023), "Two Decades of Serbian Media Transformation: Media Capture instead of Media Autonomy", *Southeastern Europe* 47(1): 54–80.

⁵ See Milica Kulić (2020), "Populist Communication in the Post-Truth Age: A Comparative Analysis of Treatment of Journalists by Donald Trump and Aleksandar Vucic", *Journal of Regional Security* 15(1): 75–108. The article compares the communication strategies and styles of Trump and Vučić. The author finds similarities in their communication methods but notes that Vučić refrains from the personalized attacks that Trump frequently employs; Adam Klein (2023), "Capturing the Media: Similarities Between Viktor Orbán's and Donald Trump's Media Aspirations", *International Journal of Communication* 17(21): 6697–6717; Dejana Vukasović, Miša Stojadinović (2023), "On Pan-Slavism, Brotherhood, and Mythology: The Imagery of Contemporary Geopolitical Discourse in Serbia", in Mikhail Suslov, Marek Čejka, Vladimir Đorđević (eds.), *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: Origins, Manifestations and Functions*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 123–153.

Factuality of the information landscape	Saturated with disinformation ⁶
Identity-Building strategies	Exploiting Collective Victimhood ⁷ and Collective Narcissism
Surveillance Capitalism	Importing “best practices” of Digital Authoritarianism from China
Foreign Policy Discourses	Monopolizing discourses and interpretations on foreign policy
Ideological Mobilization in Foreign Policy	anti-Westernism ⁸ (with different undertones ⁹)
Geopolitical orientation	Pro-Russian, pro-Chinese stance (with a balancing game)
Voter base	Populist: overrepresentation of (as in the case of most informational autocracies).

⁶ See Samantha Bradshaw, Ulan Campbell-Smith, Amelie Henle et al. (2020), *Country Case Studies Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation*, https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2021/03/Case-Studies_FINAL.pdf; [Anon.] Research report Mapping disinformation in the Serbian media (2023), <https://cрта.rs/en/report-mapping-disinformation-in-the-serbian-media/>.

⁷ See Jessie Barton Hronešová, Daniel Kreiss (2024), “Strategically Hijacking Victimhood: A Political Communication Strategy in the Discourse of Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump”, *Perspectives on Politics*: 1-19; Dorottya Lantos, Joseph P. Forgas (2021), “The role of collective narcissism in populist attitudes and the collapse of democracy in Hungary”, *Journal of Theoretical Social Psychology* 5(2): 65-78.

⁸ See [Anon.] “Oroszbarát viszhang a szerb (és a magyarországi) médiában” (2021), <https://sajtoszabadsag.org/2022/11/13/oroszbarat-viszhang-a-szerb-mediaban/>.

⁹ See Helena Ivanov, Marlene Laruelle (2023), “Why still pro-Russia? Making sense of Hungary’s and Serbia’s Russia stance”, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/why-still-pro-russia-making-sense-of-hungarys-and-serbias-pro-russian-stance/>.

Party system	Dominant
Elections	Free, but unfair (OSCE-ODIHR)

At the same time, we find important differences as well, between the two countries – and some of them are also relevant in terms of their tendencies to move towards the model of informational autocracies. The fourth criterion of non-ideological regimes does not fit perfectly to either of the two countries – but the original theory can also be criticized for underestimating the role of ideologies (Krekó 2022). At the same time, Aleksandar Vučić is closer to the managerial-type non-ideological, pragmatic leader that Guriyev and Treisman describe in their works as the prototypical spin dictator.

Furthermore, while it is true that the second criterion of low levels of violence fits both countries, violence against journalists is frequent and systemic in Serbia (Čolović 2024), it is rather rare and sporadic in Hungary. In Serbia, verbal attacks against journalists are also more advanced than in Hungary. As Cerkov and Dordevic found, independent journalists in Serbia are exposed to coordinated assaults carried out by ruling party members, pro-government media, and troll networks. At the same time, they have sporadic outbursts of hate from highly partisan audiences, which can target any journalist regardless of their affiliation. These impacts lead to delayed psychological effects and even physical health issues (Markov, Đorđević 2024); see Table 3 for a comparison along the criteria discussed above.

Table 3. The four features of informational autocracies according to Guriyev and Treisman (2022) and their relevance to Serbia and Hungary:

	Hungary	Serbia
Mimicking democracy, while emptying democratic institutions	Yes	Yes
Less public support among the elites and the highly educated than among the masses and the less educated	Yes	Yes
Low levels of violence	Yes	Yes, BUT a higher level of violence against journalists
Legitimacy is based on competence instead of ideology	No	Yes

The Serbian Media System

Furthermore, we find some differences in the level of centralization of the informational system. While the two countries are mostly in the same categories according to ratings of quality of democracy (with Serbia having consistently lower figures in the same category of hybrid regimes), Serbia is usually rated a bit better (!) in terms of press freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of the internet by Freedom House (See Table 1).

With this being said, the Serbian media system also faces significant challenges related to media freedom and pluralism, marked by a decline in press freedom, and independent journalism being particularly vulnerable to political and economic pressures. The introduction of information and media laws (Stojanović, Jeremić 2023) has

raised concerns among media advocates and European institutions, warning of a serious regression in media freedom. These laws are perceived as not complying with international freedom of expression standards and could potentially entrench state control over the media landscape¹⁰. Furthermore, the media market in Serbia is characterized by a lack of fair competition, where pro-government media receive substantial financial support from public funds despite regularly violating journalistic standards. This funding strategy not only skews the media landscape in favor of the government but also undermines the financial viability and independence of professional media outlets – which face difficulties in sustaining themselves in a small media market. This scenario contributes to a broader climate of media manipulation, intended to create an illusion of pluralism while simultaneously discrediting independent journalism. As a result, the capacity of the media to act as a democratic check on power is significantly compromised, leading to widespread concerns about the erosion of media freedom and the safety of journalists (Švarn 2021). Also, mis- and disinformation is widespread in the Serbian media (Kleut, Ninković Slavnić, Ilić et al. 2022).

It is also important that the (slow and ambivalent) EU accession process made no positive impact on the media system in Serbia (Milutinović 2017; Dragojlov 2023). Serbia's transition towards EU standards of media has not effectuated actual democratic change in the media

¹⁰ See [Anon.] "Serbia: New draft media laws represent another step backward for media freedom" (2023), <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2023/10/04/serbia-new-draft-media-laws-represent-another-step-backward-for-media-freedom/> .

landscape. Instead, the EU's ambiguity has allowed Serbia to portray progress in this area on the surface, with actual progress remaining limited.

The Hungarian Media System

The Orbán government manipulates the population through centrally controlled disinformation that is flooding through television, radio, print media, and also social media sites such as Facebook.¹¹ Its rhetoric is made up of easy-to-understand, unified messages selected from the results of surveys conducted by pro-governmental think tanks. In short: the Hungarian ruling party's disinformation campaign employs 21st-century methods to spread simplified narratives akin to 20th-century-style propaganda.

As for its media infrastructure and institutional system, Hungary is clearly unique. The Hungarian media market has seen large-scale centralization since the second Orbán government took power in 2010. This gave rise to a government-organized media empire. The government has used legislative and informal means to take control of the media market and overcome the alleged advantage of leftist-liberal outlets. The ruling Fidesz-KDNP government and the parliamentary majority have used several tools to transform the Hungarian media landscape: The media law, passed in 2011, gave the Media Council (stacked with Fidesz loyalists) the power to selectively approve media

¹¹ See *Fidesz & Co. flooded social media with anti-Western hostile disinformation in Hungary's election campaign, reaching EU spending records (2024)*, https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/Uncovering_analyzing_debunking_and_researching_sponsored_disinfo_project_summary_2024.pdf.

acquisitions to the Media Council. This right was used extensively when pro-government oligarchs acquired private media to either shut them down, or to turn them into propaganda outlets, creating vast media empires. At the same time, the media authority impeded attempts by independent media companies to merge, citing overt media centralization as a concern. This selective approach strongly contributed to the “party colonization” of the Hungarian media. A large share of public-sector advertisements was allocated to media loyal to the government¹²; furthermore, the government actively discouraged market players from advertising in non-government-affiliated news outlets. An advertising tax was imposed, which made the financial situation of independent outlets more difficult. In 2018, in a grave attack against media pluralism in Hungary, more than 500 media outlets were put into a huge media foundation called KESMA (Central European Press and Media Foundation), which means that the “owners” of these outlets were practically deprived of their media assets, including their ownership rights, without due compensation. Such manoeuvres, to say the least, would be highly surprising in well-functioning, pluralistic media environments, and should leave no doubt that the “private” acquisitions preceding this move had been all politically controlled and orchestrated by pro-Fidesz pundits and media strategists. As a result of these steps, Hungary clearly boasts the most centralized media system in the European Union. According to data from the Mérték Institute from 2019, 79% of the media was concentrated in pro-Fidesz hands

¹² See [Anon.] “Állami hirdetések a kormányhű és a kormánykritikus médiában” (2023), <https://muosz.hu/2023/11/09/allami-hirdetesek-a-kormanyhu-es-a-kormanykritikus-mediaban/>.

(Máriás, Nagy, Polyák et al. 2019). This degree of media centralization after the transitions of 1989–1990 is unprecedented in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, and nowhere comparable with what can be seen in other current EU member states where populists have been in power in the last three decades, such as in Austria, Slovenia, or Poland.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In light of the increasingly intimate relationship between Hungary and Serbia, Serbia can follow Hungary further on the way of informal autocratization, showing the model of how to keep an illiberal ideological and political stance even inside the international institutions: EU and NATO. As Guriyev and Treisman (p 225) put it: “Abroad, spin dictators use propaganda to spread cynicism and division”. Viktor Orbán and his spin doctors have spread propaganda already quite efficiently in multiple countries in the Western Balkans, including Slovenia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (especially Republika Srpska), in an effort to extend his political influence in the region. Viktor Orbán also used the Enlargement portfolio in the Commission through Commissioner Oliver Várhelyi to strengthen patronage networks in the region, promising help in the way of integration, and using it as a bargaining (or blackmailing) chip. Serbia seems to be especially vulnerable to Hungary’s ideological export efforts.

How to limit Hungary’s malign political influence, and especially its role model as an informational autocracy in the broader region, and especially in the Western Balkans? Obviously, total isolation is not possible with an EU- and NATO- country. Guriyev and Treisman’s response is “adversarial engagement”: cooperation with a high level of cautiousness, drawing boundaries, consequential push-

back, and also consequential negative feedback when needed. If the “pupils” in the region see that Orbán can get along well after establishing an almost-Orwellian media landscape, they will follow the path.

Europe’s leaders should take note of the informational aspects of Orbán’s rule, and support free and independent media. Since centralization in Hungary has also been adopted by other countries in the region, its remedies might also be needed elsewhere, too. The European Media Act can be an important step in the right direction. But most importantly, Western countries should be aware of Orbán’s international impact. Projects such as the fact-checking site Lakmusz in Hungary (with an outreach of more than 2 million people so far in a country of 10 million), or CINS in Serbia are initiatives worth supporting. Investigative projects aimed at tracking the route of taxpayer money are important to raise awareness by showing the dark side and the price of informational autocratization. Of course, journalists, civil society members, and politicians should also be creative in finding ways of breaking the filter bubbles in informational autocracies.

EU institutions have to be well-equipped for the challenge of state-sponsored disinformation (which has rather been the elephant in the room) within the EU MS-s and among the countries that have ambitions to join the European Union – including Serbia. While state-sponsored disinformation is an increasingly important phenomenon in EU Member States, there is no effective European instrument to detect and combat it. The European Media Freedom Act regulates the distribution of state advertising but does not ensure that these rules are enforced. Furthermore, the European Union must take every opportunity to state that state-supported and therefore systemic disinformation is incompatible with European

values and excludes the democratic formation and expression of the will and, ultimately, the possibility of free and fair elections. It is proposed that state-sponsored disinformation should be a condition of the rule of law that also justifies the suspension of European funding, and it should be scrutinized closely during the accession process as the rule of law issue, as it poses a fundamental danger to the informed decision of citizens, killing the very essence of democracies.

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