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Evaluating the Information Landscape of the 2026 Hungary Parliamentary Elections

Implications for Information Security in the United States and European Union

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Executive Summary

While the landslide victory of Péter Magyar and the new center-right party Tisza in Hungary's 2026 parliamentary elections was a massive upset, it was also the direct result of the rapidly changing information landscape of the 2020s. Leading up to the election, incumbent Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz doubled down on their long-standing strategy, relying on strict control of traditional news outlets to shift public opinion in its favor. Magyar and Tisza, however, utilized social media and virality to spread its anti-establishment messaging. Despite comprehensive disinformation and propaganda campaigns disseminated by Fidesz and backed by Russia, Magyar's strategy claimed a decisive victory.

Using data from the European Social Survey Rounds 5-11, this study examines whether Orbán's disinformation strategy was successful, softening what would have been a landslide loss either way, or a failure, losing an election he could have won with a different approach. The data shows that anti-establishment sentiments were growing among Hungarians who use the internet, even before the emergence of Magyar and Tisza. It concludes that Orbán's neglect of social media platforms in favor of traditional news media made his propaganda efforts a complete failure. For policymakers, this election provides a case where the internet worked in favor of democracy rather than against it. Its final recommendation is that policymakers avoid seeking strict control of online spaces, but rather adequately prepare their citizens to navigate the modern information landscape and spot disinformation independently.

Problem Statement and Background

Disinformation and propaganda have become increasingly easier to disseminate during elections with the rise of the internet and social media. As such, the question of whether the internet is a net positive or net negative for democracy, as well as to what extent it should be regulated, is at the forefront of many policy discussions in the United States and the European Union. The 2026 Hungarian parliamentary elections provide a unique case study, where an incumbent authoritarian government launched a widespread disinformation campaign backed by foreign actors, but still lost decisively. Evaluating the information landscape of Hungary leading up to the elections, as well as determining whether said disinformation campaigns were successful, can provide lessons for policymakers in the US and EU to guide their decision-making around information security and the internet moving forward.

Fidesz, the Kremlin, and Tisza

April of 2026 marked a massive shift in Hungary's political environment, with sixteen-year incumbent Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his far-right political party Fidesz losing the prime ministry and 83 seats in Hungarian Parliament. Orbán and Fidesz first came into power in 2010, following a wave of discontent with the previous government in wake of the 2008 financial crisis.ⁱ The Orbán regime has since been characterized by strict control of media and purposeful misalignment with the values and mission of other EU member states.ⁱⁱ

Since 2022 and the start of the war in Ukraine, Orbán has made a noticeable turn towards Russia. This relationship has always existed under Orbán, due mostly to Hungary's overwhelming dependence on Russia for its energy sector. It has since developed into a deeper partnership between Fidesz and the Kremlin, with over 50 Russian diplomats posted in Budapest as of 2022.ⁱⁱⁱ Experts agree that Russia has also been a major player in Hungary's information

landscape. Since Vladimir Putin’s return to the Russian Presidency in 2012, the Kremlin has made a noticeable shift towards hybrid and information warfare in its sphere of influence.^{iv} Russian disinformation campaigns carry the primary goal of seeding distrust and division, both amongst a target population itself and more generally towards NATO and the EU.^v Given Orbán’s constant undermining of EU goals, including his consistent veto of aid packages to Ukraine, the Kremlin had vested interest in keeping what was essentially its EU Trojan horse in power leading up to April of 2026.^{vi}

Orbán’s opposition, and the now-Prime Minister of Hungary, Péter Magyar, and his party Tisza emerged very suddenly in 2024.^{vii} A former trusted minister of Fidesz and Orbán, Magyar defected after a scandal in which President Katalin Novák—a member of Fidesz—pardoned a man jailed for silencing sexual abuse claims against the director of a state-run children’s home.^{viii} The rapid rise of Magyar and Tisza culminated in their victory in the 2026 parliamentary elections, following a highly contentious campaign characterized by a tense media environment rife with disinformation and propaganda.

The Hungarian Information Landscape

In November 2018, eight separate Hungarian media companies donated a total of over 500 individual outlets to the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), which had been established only two months earlier. Each of the donors were Hungarian oligarchs and close allies of Orbán and Fidesz.^{ix} For the next eight years, Fidesz effectively controlled an estimated 80% of Hungarian media, with Reporters Without Borders designating Orbán as a “press freedom predator”, the first EU leader to earn the distinction.^x What few independent outlets remained were under constant threat of political retaliation, as evidenced by the 2020 firing of the lead editor and subsequent mass exodus of employees at Index, Hungary’s largest online news source.^{xi} While Orbán’s control of traditional media was strict and unrelenting, the online information landscape proved more difficult to control—though not for lack of trying. Ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, Fidesz spent an estimated \$4.8 million on political ads on Meta platforms, more than any other EU member state.^{xii} Later, in an attempt to comply with strict EU regulations, Meta banned all political advertisements in Europe on its platforms, a ban Fidesz made efforts to circumvent before the 2026 elections.^{xiii}

The usual Kremlin fingerprints were present in 2026, as well, with a group of Members of European Parliament writing a letter to European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen alleging Fidesz-Kremlin collusion and urging action in the weeks before April’s parliamentary election.^{xiv} Other independent news media argued said collusion was hardly covert, with Orbán’s rhetoric leading up to April leaning harder than usual towards anti-Ukraine, pro-Russian energy cooperation, and anti-European Union sentiments.^{xv} The general consensus among experts is that, despite the efforts of Fidesz to establish a greater presence online, the Kremlin felt its traditional covert bot farms were unnecessary when backing a leader with near-full control of the media. Disinformation was certainly still a factor, but experts predict that up to 90% of disinformation around the elections was produced domestically, with Fidesz generating most of that share independently and disseminating through its usual, state-controlled avenues.^{xvi}

Contrasting with this approach, Magyar and Tisza focused nearly all of their media and messaging efforts online. Magyar built his campaign around virality and a perception of authenticity, often leaning heavily into his status as a former member and defector of Fidesz. This proved to be highly effective, with Magyar averaging 2,325 shares per post on Meta

platforms leading up to the election and Orbán averaging only 1,000 shares per post.^{xvii} Additionally, experts agree that the campaigns' respective posting patterns worked overwhelmingly in Magyar's favor. Orbán's social media presence, which relied on frequent posts repeating the same messages, put him in an "algorithmic exile". Platform algorithms marked his content as stale and unengaging, therefore suggesting it less to users not already following him. Contrastingly, Magyar posted more videos than static photos, often altered his style and messaging, and directly encouraged his followers to share his posts, teaching the algorithm to mark his content as more engaging and worth pushing to new users.^{xviii}

The effectiveness of this approach was evident, with Tisza gaining 141 seats in Hungarian Parliament and increasing voter turnout by roughly nine percentage points relative to the 2022 elections.^{xix} However, it does not exist in a vacuum. Despite the concentrated efforts of Fidesz and the Kremlin, Orbán's traditional, disinformation and propaganda-focused approach to media control was not enough to overcome Tisza's online campaign. Understanding why this was the case carries significant policy implications for elections in the information age.

Analyzing European Social Survey Data

What Has Changed Since 2010?

The most important question surrounding these elections is to what extent Orbán and Fidesz's disinformation campaign was successful. Did it fail, directly spelling the end of Orbán's rule? Or did it succeed, softening what was going to be a massive loss regardless and galvanizing support among Fidesz's core voters in future elections? To adequately judge this question, this study utilized publicly available data to construct a counterfactual, understanding how attitudes of voting Hungarians have evolved over time, as well as how external factors motivate and change these attitudes. This study gathered data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Rounds 5-11, covering 2011-2023, which roughly corresponds with Orbán's second term as Prime Minister. Unfortunately, ESS Round 12, which was gathered in 2026, has yet to be published.

This study first analyzes mean trust and satisfaction in various aspects of Hungarian society from 2011-2023, measured by survey responses on a scale of 0-10. Mean trust stayed relatively consistent in this timeframe, with trust in police and the legal system generally scoring the highest, while trust in politicians consistently scoring the lowest. More notably, mean satisfaction in four of the five surveyed areas—democracy, economy, education, and government—rose from 2015 to 2021, before collectively falling roughly an entire point from 2021 to 2023. The fifth area surveyed, life, also fell, albeit much less drastically.¹

In pursuit of understanding the drop in mean satisfaction in 2023, this study considered various external factors. Initially, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed reasonably plausible. The data from ESS Round 10, however, was gathered in September of 2020, well after the start of the pandemic, and still showed increases in mean satisfaction in all five surveyed areas relative to the last round in 2019. It is unlikely that the effects of the pandemic on general satisfaction would be so delayed that they only manifest three years after the fact. A more notable change in Hungary from 2020 to 2023 is in internet availability and penetration. According to DataReportal's annual country reports, internet penetration in Hungary stood at 79% in January 2020, with 7.64 million internet users.^{xx} By January 2023, internet penetration had risen to

¹ See Appendix 1

89.7%, with 9.19 million internet users now in the country.^{xxi} As of 2026, Hungary's internet penetration rate sits at over 94%.^{xxii} This drastic increase was part of a state-led effort to bring high-speed internet access to rural communities and satisfy the European Union's Digital Agenda and the National Infocommunications Strategy.^{xxiii}

Understanding these massive increases in online activity, coupled with Orbán and Magyar's respective emphases on state-controlled press and the internet, this study used data from ESS Round 11 to measure four distinct relationships. These are as follows: engagement with political news media on trust, engagement with political news media on satisfaction, internet use on trust, and internet use on satisfaction. Within these relationships, it ran separate regressions for each of the aforementioned trust measures (European Parliament, Hungarian Parliament, legal system, politicians, police, and other Hungarians) and satisfaction measures (democracy, economy, education, government, and life). Additionally, each regression controlled for respondent age, understanding that internet users are likely to be younger.²

First examining how political news media affected attitudes, a few notable results emerge. Among all measures of trust and satisfaction, engagement with political news media only had statistically significant effects in four areas. A one percent increase in engagement with political news media was associated with an increase in trust in the police and the legal system, but a decrease in trust in other Hungarians and satisfaction with the economy. Overall, though, engagement with political news media seemed to carry no consistent effect in trust nor satisfaction, positive or negative. These results seem consistent with Orbán's strict control over political news media in Hungary and utilization of traditional outlets to maintain the status quo.

The relationship between internet use and trust appears remarkably similar to the relationship between political news media engagement and trust, with a one percent increase in internet use corresponding with a statistically significant increase in trust in the police and the legal system, but a decrease in trust in other Hungarians. The single most significant set of outcomes, however, came in examining internet use on general satisfaction. For democracy, economy, education, and government, a one percent increase in internet use was associated with a statistically significant decrease in satisfaction. Notably, these results predate the arrival of Magyar and Tisza in Hungarian politics in 2024. While Magyar certainly used the internet to his full advantage, the data suggests that internet use was already turning Hungarians against the Orbán regime before his arrival, or at the very least causing some unrest.

Implications and Limitations of the Data

The data clearly outlines three general trends. First, engagement with media seemed to sow distrust amongst Hungarians, whether on the internet or through traditional news avenues. In this sense, disinformation could be said to have worked, as distrust and discord were central tenets of the Kremlin and Fidesz strategy. Second, political news media kept attitudes decently consistent in Hungary. This was also by design, as the vast network of state-controlled media made extraordinary efforts to back Fidesz and the Orbán regime. Third, internet use had a significant negative effect on satisfaction, even before Magyar and Tisza utilized social media to push its outsider, anti-establishment rhetoric.

² See Appendix 2

While experts seem to agree that Orbán's reliance on traditional media avenues and Magyar's reliance on the internet won the latter the 2026 election, the consensus seems to view Magyar himself as the primary cause of the overwhelming shift against the Orbán regime. This data tells a different story, however, indicating that Magyar was simply able to capitalize on anti-establishment sentiments that had already been developing amongst Hungarian internet users. In this sense, Orbán and Fidesz's disinformation campaigns were a complete failure—not necessarily in their content or messaging, more so in the avenues they used for dissemination. Magyar was able to bring his messaging to a forum of diverse voters where resentment for his opposition was already growing, while Orbán's overreliance on traditional media created an insulated bubble of support that neglected swayable votes and only fueled the anti-establishment rhetoric of his opposition. In short, the freedom of expression the internet provides seems to have won out against Orbán's tightly controlled state media apparatus.

A few limitations are worth noting in this analysis—mainly that the ESS 11 data is merely a cross-section capturing a relatively short period of time. This cross-section is more valuable when viewed in conjunction with the overall trends in satisfaction, hence this study's assertion that it is indicative of a trend. This could also be more adequately studied after the publication of ESS 12. Additionally, the fact that internet use had no significant effect on trust in Hungarian Parliament is a weakness of its overall argument. Lastly, it is possible that the drop in satisfaction between 2021-2023 was due to the war in Ukraine and subsequent rising energy costs rather than internet use alone.

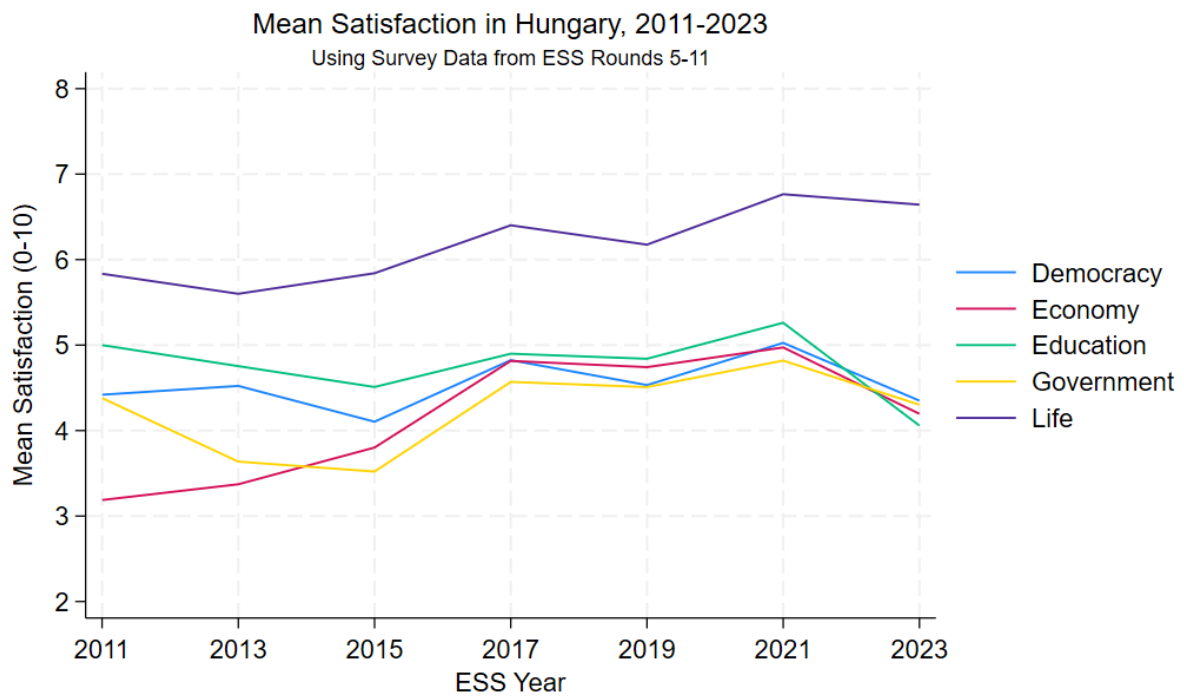
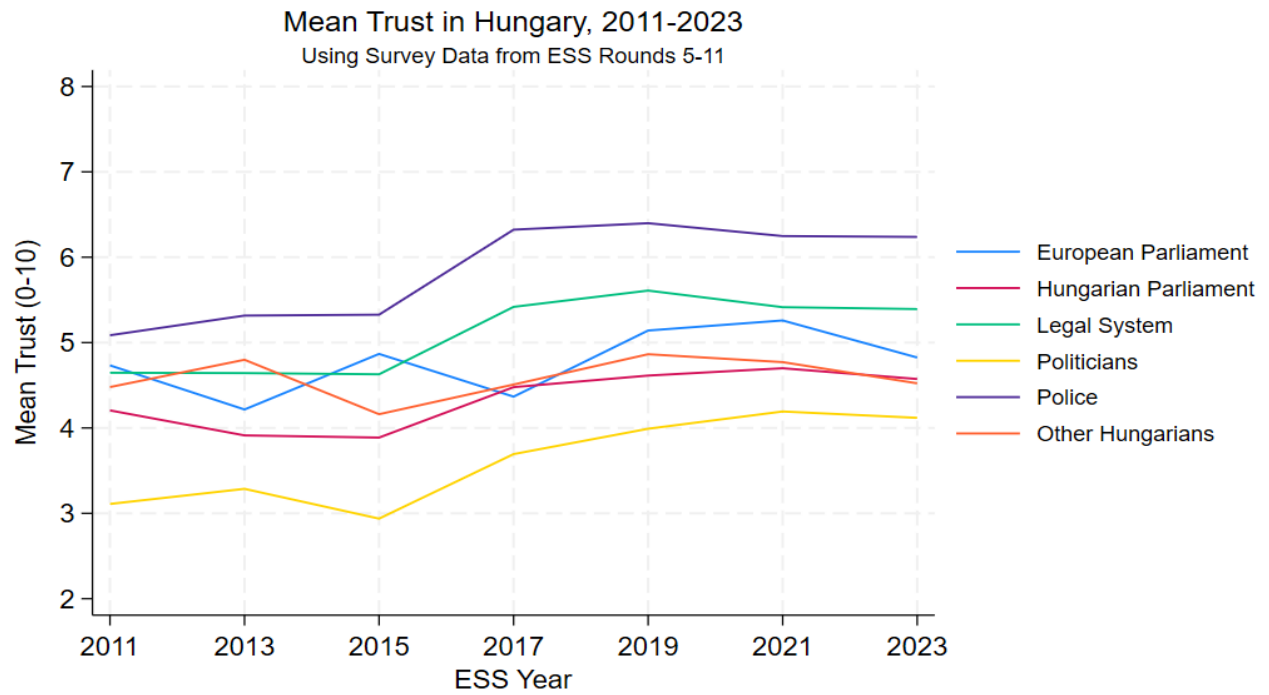
Implications for Policymakers

Hungary's 2026 parliamentary elections present a unique case study in which an authoritarian government had both a vast network of state-controlled media and foreign backing yet still failed in its disinformation and propaganda efforts. Worthwhile questions have been raised by policymakers on the societal benefits versus costs of the internet and social media. The natural inclination for some is to see rampant disinformation online as a threat to democracy, which is true in many cases. This case, however, provides a counterexample, where an opposition candidate was able to utilize the internet and social media to help expel an authoritarian regime peacefully and effectively.

In both the United States and the European Union, the debate around information warfare centers on whether states should concentrate on defense or resiliency. Is it more worthwhile to focus on stopping disinformation at its source, or to focus on preparing citizens to navigate the internet with no real way to effectively filter out disinformation? While hard cybersecurity infrastructure and platform regulation are certainly necessary to an extent, these elections illustrate why it is imperative that the internet remain free. Had Fidesz and Orbán focused more on controlling the digital space in the way that Russia or North Korea is able to, it is possible they would still be in power.

Expansion of internet access can have both positive and negative democratic effects. As such, this study recommends that policymakers in the US and EU shift their focus towards resiliency over defense. States should prepare their citizens to navigate the modern information landscape through comprehensive media literacy education, widely available fact-checked and unbiased information, and public-private efforts with social media corporations to monitor their platforms and curb purposeful disinformation as much as possible.

Appendix 1



Data: European Social Survey^{xxiv}

Appendix 2

Association Between Political News Engagement and Trust in Hungary - 2023

	(1) European Parliament	(2) Hungarian Parliament	(3) Legal System	(4) Politicians	(5) Police	(6) Other Hungarians
Political News Engagement in Minutes (Log)	-0.0642	-0.00126	-0.0759	0.122*	-0.0778	-0.146**
	(0.0500)	(0.0563)	(0.0542)	(0.0525)	(0.0490)	(0.0500)
<i>N</i>	1827	1853	1848	1856	1856	1872

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Association Between Political News Engagement and Satisfaction in Hungary - 2023

	(1) Democracy	(2) Economy	(3) Education	(4) Government	(5) Life
Political News Engagement in Minutes (Log)	-0.0147	-0.0990*	0.0470	-0.00393	0.0330
	(0.0544)	(0.0505)	(0.0511)	(0.0550)	(0.0425)
<i>N</i>	1833	1856	1735	1849	1865

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Association Between Internet Use and Trust in Hungary - 2023

	(1) European Parliament	(2) Hungarian Parliament	(3) Legal System	(4) Politicians	(5) Police	(6) Other Hungarians
Internet Use in Minutes (Log)	-0.0491	-0.0910	0.345**	0.161	0.220*	-0.287**
	(0.0989)	(0.114)	(0.107)	(0.106)	(0.0998)	(0.0999)
<i>N</i>	1377	1384	1382	1389	1394	1404

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Association Between Internet Use and Satisfaction in Hungary - 2023

	(1) Democracy	(2) Economy	(3) Education	(4) Government	(5) Life
Internet Use in Minutes (Log)	-0.228*	-0.221*	-0.351***	-0.260*	0.186*
	(0.108)	(0.102)	(0.103)	(0.110)	(0.0845)
<i>N</i>	1377	1389	1354	1377	1396

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

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