

# Moving Beyond Polarising Populist Propaganda

## The Case of Hungary



# SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

Provoking polarisation is a staple of populist strategies for seizing and consolidating power. It is used to control narratives, distract from your own incompetence, vilify opponents and keep supporters in a state of agitation, often through promoting a “culture war”.

Our research, however, shows that the strategy is vulnerable.

This research paper argues that despite their continued exposure to polarising narratives, Hungarian citizens themselves are considerably less divided than government rhetoric would have us believe. Through a combination of media monitoring, polling, audience segmentation, and focus groups, our research reveals important social trends hidden beneath the simplistic framing of Hungary as a divided nation. In particular, our results indicate that surface political polarisation disguises a broader consensus amongst the Hungarian people about values, priorities, and Hungary’s place in the world.

It is possible for independent media to appeal beyond the “liberal bubble”, notwithstanding the harassment they receive and the unfair economic advantages given to pro-government outlets.

# Media Monitoring

Our monitoring<sup>1</sup> of online news sites, TV, radio, and print media shows that although pro-government media dominates in terms of the sheer number of outlets, this dominance is not reflected in audience figures. Independent outlets are able to hold their own, often outperforming pro-government outlets that have long benefited both from state harassment of competitors and from covert and overt public subsidies.

To give the example of online media, the main pro-government site Origo had 750-780,000 unique users during the period of our monitoring, as compared to higher numbers for independent sites 24.hu (870-884,000 unique users) and Index (890,000-1.1 million unique users). Index was independent at the time of our monitoring, but it has since been taken over by government allies in order to collapse it, with most of its editorial staff resigning and forming a new media platform, Telex.

Our monitoring also found that the pro-government media tends to focus on divisive “culture war” issues, cultivating a narrative of the government as protector of “the people”. While the pro-government media is one-sided, however, the independent media often criticise both opposition and government figures.

# Quantitative Public Opinion Research

Our aim was to better understand the make-up and social attitudes of the Hungarian electorate, as well as how these attitudes interacted with socio-economic, geographic, and demographic characteristics. In order to do this, we designed and conducted nationally representative public opinion polling amongst Hungarian adults<sup>2</sup>. We then carried out a segmentation analysis to identify distinct groups of social preferences and political alignments amongst the Hungarian population.

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1 Media monitoring was carried out by Memo 98 and Mérték Media Monitor between 3 February and 15 March 2020. Our full report of media monitoring data is available on request.

2 The nationally representative survey was carried out by Median Market Research in February 2020. The sample size was 1200 persons aged 18 years or older.

Our quantitative public opinion research showed that the Fidesz Party's apparent advantage is exaggerated by divisions between the opposition parties. Overall, 39% of Hungarians say that they support Fidesz, and 33% support opposition parties – but this opposition vote is fragmented across many parties.

**Our survey also showed that:**

- Hungarians from all parts of the political spectrum hold economic views commonly associated with a “left-leaning” political perspective. They want to see income equality, and believe it is the government's responsibility to ensure popular well-being.
- Regardless of party affiliation, Hungarian voters seek security, and tend not to vote on “culture war” issues. Despite the government's focus on resisting the influx of refugees and migrants into Europe as a defining issue, the issue of emigration – particularly of the young and highly skilled – is seen as an equally concerning problem.
- The majority of Hungarians believe that EU membership is important for Hungary, yet they also think that Hungary is treated like a “second-class member” of the union.
- There is widespread concern about the erosion of democratic values: 44% of Hungarians believe that there is no free and independent media in the country, while only 30% think that there is. Equally, 58% would like to see less government involvement in the education system.
- Despite such concerns, however, barriers to democratic participation remain high: some 91% of Hungarians, for example, have no intention of taking part in civic protests.

## Survey Segmentation Analysis

Having analysed the survey results in full, we used segmentation analysis to break the electorate down into seven distinct segments; these were largely defined by political alignment and media consumption patterns.

- A “Hard Fidesz” group zealously follows pro-government media and believes its narratives. This group comprises about 22% of the population. Its members largely consume state broadcast media and support government “culture war” narratives around such issues as the role of George Soros, migration, and the need to prioritise “traditional” values. They do not prioritise these issues when voting, however, where bread and butter economic issues predominate.
- Two liberal/left segments largely follow independent media and do not buy into government narratives. An older segment we call “Traditional Socialists” accounts for about 11% of the population. They follow more traditional TV and print media and tend to vote for traditional left-wing parties such as MSZP and DK. Another 6% make up a younger, liberal group that spends more time online and tends to vote for DK and Momentum.
- Some 9% of Hungarians consume both government and independent media, and tend to vote for the government despite being worried about creeping authoritarianism. These centre-right voters trust independent media more than government media, and are sceptical of government propaganda narratives. We call this the “Sceptical Conservatives” group. They are educated and more likely to live in towns outside the capital. These Sceptical Conservatives make similar demands to those made by audiences more clearly aligned with the opposition. They say they want media that is less obviously partisan, will not indulge in personality-driven attacks, and is based on facts. They are concerned about government intrusion into independent institutions. They are tired of divisive, polarising politics, and they despair at the politicisation of public services, education, and business.
- There is a young, somewhat apolitical segment (16%) comprising many students. They are less likely to vote and treat most media with scepticism but are more likely to trust online independent media than any other. This large segment is not actively engaged by most political media and other commentators, but it could potentially become a new audience for independent media.
- Two other groups are made up of older, less educated voters who generally watch a mixed range of television and have very low rates of online media use. They are divided between government and opposition along roughly the same lines as the general population.



# Qualitative Public Opinion Research

In order to better understand the formation of public opinion in Hungary and the relative salience of various issues, we also conducted qualitative research through three rounds of online focus groups with participants from across Hungary. We specifically focused on the attitudes of Young Liberals and Sceptical Conservatives, because these are the groups most likely to engage with new and existing online media, which also makes them the clearest potential audience for new challenger outlets. In order to observe any shifts in attitudes that may become visible through social interactions, we conducted focus groups that isolated these individual segments – to understand their intrinsic nature – and then also brought them together. Key insights included:

- Both groups of participants reported that they yearned for unbiased, evidence-based media. They wanted to seek out content that reported on issues without engaging in the polarising narratives of either government or opposition. They were aware that outlets had particular stances and biases, and they knew that they needed to “curate” their news consumption from different sources.
- Both groups despaired at the polarisation of political debate in Hungary and said they wanted a return to coverage and discourse based on issues and evidence, rather than a hyperbolic rhetoric focused on personalities and the ongoing horse race between the government and opposition camps.
- Young Liberals’ news consumption was almost entirely online, included international outlets, and focused exclusively on independent media. Though they realised that “their own” sources could also be biased, they felt intellectually secure in their judgements and disappointed in the majority of their fellow citizens for not sharing their views. International media, such as The New York Times, enjoyed a particularly high degree of trust from this group.
- Sceptical Conservatives reported that they sifted through Hungarian sources offering a diversity of viewpoints. This process of information sifting was something that some took pride in, but others considered it a burden.

- Respondents agreed that the nation's press enjoys a degree of freedom, but they also felt that the government's direct and indirect actions constrain the practical realisation of this freedom. They distinguished between freedom of the press, diversity of opinion (where there exist several outlets influenced by different proprietors), and journalistic freedom (where even ownership does not imply influence).
- Corruption, even state capture, was a major concern, as was the politicisation of the state, at the cost of its effectiveness. There was consensus about the issues that needed addressing, including constitutional reform, investment in education, and healthcare.
- Participants broadly agreed that the issue of immigration was being blown out of proportion by the government. By contrast, the issue of emigration prompted enthusiastic contributions and was seen comparatively as a "much larger" issue. There was a clear sense that the depression of wages in Hungary is responsible for this, and that the government had actively chosen not to "fight for" the retention of young professionals.
- In relation to EU membership, participants felt that the government's corruption had created a vicious cycle whereby the nation could not succeed without the EU even though its benefits never truly reached most Hungarians.
- Even while despairing of Viktor Orbán's behaviour in government, participants admired his political skill. They felt that there was no effective alternative to Fidesz. This lay behind the decision of some Sceptical Conservatives to vote for Orbán despite being disappointed by his policies and behaviour.

# Conclusions

- Our research shows there are clear opportunities for Hungarian independent media, civil society, and other communicators to break new ground and play a crucial role in reinvigorating Hungary's social and political life. The opportunity exists to bring a critical mass of the country together to engage in a common debate grounded in democratic values.
- There is a wealth of approaches to explore how to reach new audiences. 'Constructive news', for example, can focus away from culture war issues and towards solutions to pressing economic and social issues. Online town halls and tools like Pol.is have been used successfully in, for example, Taiwan, to build consensus on issues, and to stimulate civic participation.

**Beyond Hungary, the social insights and the conceptual framework of the project has the potential to help those seeking to understand and overcome polarisation in other vulnerable societies. Examples include Hungary's neighbour Poland, other European countries such as Italy, as well as the United States.**



# ABOUT



# ARENA

Arena is an innovative programme dedicated to overcoming the challenges of disinformation and polarisation. Based within the Institute of Global Affairs (IGA) at the London School of Economics and Johns Hopkins University SNF Agora Institute, the Arena programme aims to use high-quality research, analysis, and evaluation to create effective best practices that can then be disseminated to journalists, public diplomacy teams, and civic groups. Arena seeks creative ways to counter the menace of unreality, stop the spread of hatred and division, and foster a fact-based discourse that enhances security, enables democracy, and builds trust. Its experimental research projects involve journalists, academics, and data scientists who seek both to understand disinformation campaigns and to reach audiences impacted by them.

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