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Oct 15, 2019 by [Vivian S. Walker](#)

Say It With Statues: Disinformation and Authoritarianism ^[1]

This is the second of a two-part article exploring the relationship between authoritarianism and disinformation in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Hungary. [Read part 1.](#)

Effective disinformation campaigns often exploit latent fears and prejudices using violent or terrifying imagery to influence audience perceptions. Hungary's House of Terror Museum is no exception. The power of the largely text-free exhibit rests almost entirely on its use of image and sound to evoke instinctual responses of fear and horror. Visitors are led down to an underground labyrinth of interrogation cells with implements of torture. They move through dimly lit audiovisual installations that bombard them with scenes of concentration camps, gulags, show trials and executions. Instead of being informed in a rational, straightforward way about Hungary's complicity in both regimes, visitors are left with a triumphant affirmation of the country's political evolution: "the fight against the two cruelest systems of the 20th century ended with the victory of the forces of freedom and independence."

These instances of brick-and-mortar historical revisionism are textbook examples of disinformation techniques. First, the employment of concealment and denial: The disappearance of the Nagy statue and the appearance of the memorial to the victims of German occupation both take place under cover of darkness so that the structure (or its absence) appears suddenly, irrefutably, and without authorship. Second, the use of distortion and reductive symbolism: The new figures tell an unambiguous story of unprovoked violence against innocent victims. Those deemed responsible for the victims' suffering are embodied explicitly as mythical monsters e.g. Nazis, portrayed implicitly as weak, unreliable actors, e.g. left-wing glorifiers of communism, or, as in the House of Terror museum, collapsed into an undifferentiated evil. Finally, the creation of uncertainty and distraction: These disinformation narratives obscure ruling party responsibility for national suffering or dishonor. Blame shifts instead to a marginalized, often discredited opposition or an alien and seemingly malign outside force.

In speeches and interviews, Orban has consistently justified the rise of illiberal, authoritarian rule, citing, for example, China, Russia and Turkey as "stars" of governance. The monument to the victims of the German invasion evokes Orban's harsh, often alarmist rhetoric about the risks to national sovereignty posed by outside "threats," such as immigrants, multiculturalism and the European Union. With the House of Terror Museum, Orban and his allies have orchestrated a thorough, public revision of the Hungarian government's role in two catastrophic events in order to establish the legitimacy—indeed the historic inevitability—of the current regime.

There are two important caveats to Orban's elaborate disinformation campaign. First, despite Orban's apparent ownership of his narrative, it is not unique to him. It originates with Putin's Russia. As a recent report suggests, Russia is currently projecting its power in Central Europe "with the overall aim of restoring its influence in the region and weakening the EU and NATO." This study indicates that among the so-called Visegrad Four countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia), Hungary has the "highest vulnerability to subversive Russian influence" thanks to its repudiation of liberal democratic values and "the attraction of Hungarian political elites towards the Russian geopolitical orbit." In other words, Orban is more willing acolyte than independent actor.

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Second, Orbán's disinformation narrative remains, for now, a relatively closed loop. His government's embrace of anti-Western sentiment is significantly at odds with Hungarian public opinion. According to a recent poll, Hungarians clearly still prefer a pro-Western geopolitical orientation and demonstrate relatively stable support for the European Union, NATO and the West. For example, 58 percent of respondents supported E.U. membership, and 75 percent would vote to stay in the European Union. Similarly, 54 percent of Hungarians agree that NATO membership is a good thing, and 76 percent would elect to remain in NATO. Finally, 57 percent of Hungarians in the 18–24 year old range, the generation that Orbán needs to co-opt in order to sustain his long-term political survival, believe that Hungary belongs fully in the West.

However, while these indicators are encouraging, they are not as strong as they were just one year ago. The historical revisionism at work in Hungary may already be eroding public commitment to the principles of freedom, tolerance, and justice upheld by Hungary's NATO and E.U. partners. And given that Orbán's allies have near-total control of Hungary's independent media outlets, there are few opportunities to contest this narrative.

Moreover, as the 2019 U.S. National Intelligence Strategy Report warns, Orbán's revisionism could well represent a growing risk to American national security. The report argues that "traditional adversaries" like the Russians and their cut-outs "will continue attempts to gain and assert influence" by taking advantage of "the weakening of the post-WWII international order and dominance of Western democratic ideals." This poses a serious threat to "U.S. goals and priorities in multiple regions." Should Putin, Orbán and those of their ilk start to win the narrative of unrepentant illiberalism, what happens to NATO solidarity and influence? This is not a hypothetical question. Recently, in response to calls for a tougher stance on Russian and Chinese influence in Europe, Orbán told U.S. diplomats that he wants his country to be "neutral, like Austria."

As statues come and go, and as Hungary's history devolves into anti-Western political allegory, the U.S. government should stand by the Hungarians who still believe in liberal democratic values and Euro-Atlantic integration. Support for independent investigative media outlets as well as local organizations devoted to fact-checking and debunking can help. So can targeted training sessions that sensitize ordinary citizens to the siren call of fake news. Ukraine and Moldova, for example, have made some progress in countering Russian disinformation thanks to such initiatives. Without help in pushing back against Orbán's disinformation efforts, the people of Hungary may not be able to sustain liberal democratic ideals when they matter most—for themselves and for their allies.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *Part 1 of this series examines the Orbán government's effort to reconstruct memorials to Hungary's recent history in the service of its increasingly authoritarian rule. This article was originally published in full by War on the Rocks.*

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