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Informational autocracy at work: Evidence from Hungarian anti-immigration campaigns

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Abstract

The paper examines the transformation of Hungarian popular attitudes on immigration throughout the 2010s, with particular reference to the 2015 European refugee crisis. Using a before-and-after study design combined with a potential outcome framework with Eurobarometer survey data, we analyze pre- and post-crisis shifts and compare Hungary to the broader EU. Our findings show that Hungarian attitudes toward immigrants from non-European backgrounds became significantly more negative during the crisis, diverging from trends observed in the EU as a whole. Conducting large scale anti-immigrant and anti-EU campaigns during and after the crisis, the Hungarian government leveraged the attitudinal change, demonstrated by settlement-level electoral data. Following Guriev and Treisman (2019, 2020), we regard this as 'informational autocracy' at work: a democratically elected autocratic government employs broad-based propaganda campaigns to secure popular support.

Keywords

informational autocracy, immigration, Hungary, Viktor Orbán, attitudinal change, refugee crisis

Introduction

Political consequences of international migration have been extensively researched (Fitzgerald et al., 2014; Mucha, 2024; Wondreys, 2021) and the politicization of inward migration by the Hungarian government has received particular attention in the context of an autocratizing political regime (Barna and Koltai, 2019; Bíró-Nagy, 2022; Merkovity and Stumpf, 2020; Segarra, 2023). Since 2010, Hungary has been governed by Viktor Orbán, whose administration is often characterized as authoritarian populist (Ádám, 2019, 2020), illiberal (Csaba, 2022; Toomey, 2018) or illiberal

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populist (Körösényi and Patkós, 2017; Mos and Piovezan, 2024). The European refugee crisis of 2015 had a substantial impact on Hungary. Located at the north-end of the so-called Balkan route, the country was one of the first receiving EU member states for hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Although their predominant majority left Hungary for Western Europe within weeks, the Orbán-government launched a large-scale anti-immigrant political campaign, stoking fears and politicizing the crisis for political benefits. Publicly funded billboards, along with TV and newspaper ads, emphasized the dangers of immigration. In addition, the government conducted a large-scale communication campaign, called a 'national consultation' (Bocskor, 2018). As a culmination of these efforts, a government-initiated referendum was held in October 2016 on the EU scheme on relocation quotas for asylum seekers.

This paper focuses on changes in Hungarian popular attitudes towards immigrants in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis and the ensuing anti-immigrant government campaigns. In particular, we ask how these campaigns altered Hungarians' views of immigration from non-EU countries, and what the political consequences of this change were. We hypothesize that, as a consequence of government campaigns, Hungarians' assessments of third country immigrants became significantly more negative than those of citizens in other EU member states. We argue that this attitudinal shift had long-lasting political effects, moving the median-voter towards the political (far-)right and increasing government support in subsequent elections.

We discuss this process within the framework of Guriev and Treisman's (2019, 2020) concept of informational autocracy (IA). We argue that, firstly, the Hungarian government, operating as an informational autocracy, employed propaganda to manipulate public attitudes. This manipulation, in turn, fostered increased pro-government sentiments, reinforcing the regime's support and longevity. We seek to connect the two components of IA by analyzing both the mechanisms through which the electorate is manipulated by propaganda means and the electoral outcomes the process generates. This approach to IA is illustrated in Figure 1.

As the first step of the empirical investigation, we apply a before and after study design with a special focus on Hungary, following the logic of the Potential Outcomes Framework (POF). For this, we use Eurobarometer data on public attitudes toward immigrants from 2014, 2016 and 2018. Logistic regressions are estimated to assess attitudinal changes in Hungary and across Europe during and after the crisis. In the second step, we employ OLS models to examine the electoral consequences of attitudinal shifts by linking them to settlement-level electoral results from the 2016 referendum and the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections.

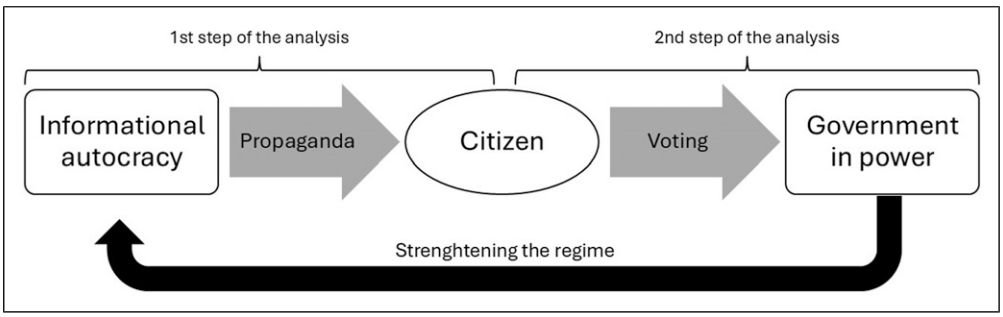

Figure 1. Informational autocracy at work: A two-step analysis.

In what follows, we provide theoretical context and motivation for the paper, then place our analysis in its historical context. We next present our data and empirical strategy, before turning to the results. The final section draws conclusions.

Theoretical context and motivation

As stated in the introduction, this paper focuses on attitude formation towards non-European immigrants in Hungary in the context of the 2015 European refugee crisis and its aftermath. It examines the Hungarian government's political mobilization against inward immigration, through which the governing Fidesz party reinforced its popular support (Bíró-Nagy, 2022), and presents this as a showcase example of informational autocracy (Guriev and Treisman, 2019, 2020). This chapter provides theoretical background for the analyses and justifies the case selection by demonstrating how and why post-2010 Hungary fits the theory.

Attitude formation toward immigrants has been extensively researched in social sciences, as reviewed by Berg (2015) and Ceobanu and Escandell (2010). A branch of this literature examines cases where these attitudes are actively shaped by political actors. Politically orchestrated anti-immigrant campaigns are often initiated by right-wing and/or authoritarian populist political actors, who use immigrants as a salient 'outgroup' to mobilize native 'ingroups' around nationalist or security-based narratives (Brubaker, 2017; Vachudova, 2020). The Hungarian government's anti-immigrant campaigns in the 2010s serve as clear examples of this strategy in practice, and the informational autocracy framework — which we detail below — provides adequate lens to asses them.

Populist governments' migration policies and the corresponding impact on popular attitudes have been discussed in the literature. The 'market competition hypothesis,' also known as the 'self-interest perspective,' suggests that anti-immigrant attitudes stem from fears that immigration threatens natives' employment or living standards (Espenshade, 1995). The Hungarian government's post-2015 campaign reinforces this logic, with billboards proclaiming that "If you come to Hungary, you cannot take the Hungarian people's job." As these messages were in Hungarian, their primary function was, of course, not to deter immigrants but to reinforce hostility among the native population.

Meanwhile, the social identity theory posits that anti-immigration attitudes are linked to individuals' social identity, which forms a basis for in-group and out-group distinctions (Stets and Burke, 2000), influencing one's stance on immigration policies (Fussel, 2014). Others have highlighted the role of values in shaping attitudes towards migration (Davidov and Bart, 2012). Latent political and cultural values are mediated through socialization and political symbols, and political messages can reactivate them in one's adulthood (Berg, 2015). Ideological messaging by political parties (Bohman, 2011), particularly by right-wing extremist groups (Semyonov et al., 2006) significantly impacts attitudes towards immigration. This mechanism operates through the mass media, which plays a crucial role in both authoritarian regimes, where government propaganda is prevalent (e.g., Adena et al., 2015; Lorentzen, 2014) and in democracies, where media capture can occur and propaganda-based 'semi-truths' can be distributed (Besley and Prat, 2006; Ursprung, 1994). Once again, the case of the Orbán regime is highly relevant in this context, too.

Several aspects of these issues regarding anti-immigrant propaganda have been examined by Messing and Ságvári (2021), which is the closest antecedent to our study. Their paper focuses on the effects of underlying societal values and political attitudes on attitude formation towards immigrants across Europe in the context of the 2015 European refugee crisis. By comparing attitudes towards immigration before and after 2015, they show that ethnically more homogenous, traditionally less

open and less democratic, formerly communist Central and East European countries exhibited more negative attitudes towards refugees than countries in Western Europe. Moreover, attitudes towards immigrants in CEE were less driven by basic human values than in older, more-established democracies with more diverse political discourses. Although their research is not primarily focused on Hungary, Messing and Sárvári show important aspects of how and why Hungary appears to be a highly idiosyncratic case in this respect. They argue (pp. 107-108) that "such openly hostile attitudes in Hungary may be attributed to several intersecting factors: the [traditionally] small number of immigrants and consequent lack of personal experience and knowledge about them, together with the generally low levels of trust and social cohesion that characterize Hungarian society […]." They also note that "[a] society in such a state proved to be extremely fertile terrain for the manipulative, anti-migrant propaganda that the Hungarian government put into action in early 2015 and has kept operating since then in a de-pluralized media environment unparalleled in the EU." Although they highlight the attitudinal and societal background of anti-immigrant sentiments, Messing and Sárvári do not address the impact of government campaigns, which is central to our analysis.

Thus, in contrast to the multi-country focus of Messing and Sárvári (2021), we concentrate on the Hungarian case, assessing it against a European benchmark, taking into consideration Hungary's unique geographical exposure to the 2015 refugee crisis, and employing a causal inference methodology. Unlike their broader explanatory framework, our analysis focuses specifically on the causal impact of government propaganda on the evolution of anti-immigrant attitudes. By situating this impact within the IA framework, which we discuss in the following paragraph, we also demonstrate why this propaganda proved politically advantageous for the governing Fidesz.

The last piece of the theoretical context in which we address these questions is the concept of 'informational autocracy' presented by Guriev and Treisman (2019, 2020). Informational autocracies are conceptualized as non-democratic regimes that do not function as overt dictatorships. Unlike traditional autocracies that openly exercise political repression, rulers in informational autocracies avoid visible suppression of dissent, as this would expose their incompetence and weaken their democratic legitimacy. Instead, they maintain a democratic facade while manipulating public perceptions through the control and distortion of information; a political strategy particularly efficient vis-a-vis an underinformed – and often also undereducated – electorate.

As Guriev and Treisman (2019, p. 101) emphasize, "a key element in [the] theory of informational autocracy is the gap in political knowledge between the 'informed elite' and the general public." Since the public, which could overthrow an incompetent leader, is "susceptible to the ruler's propaganda," this manipulation of information serves as the primary tool for informational autocrats to sustain their power and control without resorting to overt repression. As a result, such regimes can maintain a democratic façade, despite operating in an authoritarian manner.

Guriev and Treisman (2020) themselves mention Orbán's Hungary as an example of informational autocracy, but without discussing the Orbán regime in detail[1]: they do not elaborate on how the mechanisms of IAs manifest in Hungary's governance or how these processes ensure the Orbán government to maintain power. This work is presented by Krekó (2022), who provides a detailed account of the media machine, the propaganda mechanisms and the particular topics the regime employs to control public opinion in Hungary.

We go beyond this analysis by providing a direct test of how informational autocracy operates in practice in Hungary. In this paper, we claim that the 2015-2016 anti-immigrant campaign of the Hungarian government was a prime example of IA at work, as the campaign manipulated information with the goal of reinforcing Fidesz' rule and serving its reelection. Unlike previous studies, we focus specifically on the causal impact of government propaganda, situating our findings in a

comparative European context. We hypothesize that this extensive anti-immigration propaganda campaigns impacted on public attitudes, and helped Fidesz to be reelected at subsequent elections.

The Orbán regime meets the refugee crisis: Informational autocracy in action

Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán, won a two-thirds majority in the 2010 general elections, which marked the collapse of the center-left and liberal vote. With their constitutional majority, Fidesz implemented several significant measures, which were commonly labeled as signs of democratic backsliding (Halmai, 2020; Éltető and Ricz, 2024). In 2014, Orbán himself emphasized that their goal was to build an 'illiberal democracy', a term that has also been widely discussed in academic discourse, in which the Orbán regime is often described as authoritarian populist, illiberal or hybrid (Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018; Gera, 2023).

Thanks to the manipulation of the electoral system and the weakness of a fragmented opposition, Fidesz' two-third majority was reproduced at the 2014 elections. However, in early 2015, following two by-elections, Fidesz lost its constitutional super-majority, and far-right Jobbik emerged as an increasingly powerful political contender.[2] Against this domestic political background, the European refugee crisis of 2015 unfolded, with Hungary, as an entry point to the EU, facing enormous migration pressure. More than 177 thousand asylum applications were submitted in Hungary in 2015 which was unmatched by any other CEE country (Tétényi et al., 2018). In response to the crisis, the government adopted a number of restrictive policy measures against migrants and refugees, including a barbed border fence along the Hungarian-Serbian border. Meanwhile, a relatively extensive infrastructure of facilities taking care of refugees, originating from the 1990s, when Hungary took care of about 20 thousand ex-Yugoslavian refugees, was dismantled (Segarra, 2023). In addition, the government introduced a 'state of crisis due to mass migration' that is an emergency legal regime to deal with the crisis, still in place in 2025.

These practical policy measures were accompanied by a large-scale anti-immigration media campaign, unprecedented in the EU. When Europe was still dominated by an Angela Merkel-led Germany's 'Willkommenskultur', Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland adopted harsh anti-immigrant stances (Kabata and Jacobs, 2022; Kende and Krekó, 2020). Across Hungary, billboards and TV ads broadcasted the dangers of immigration, and a so-called 'national consultation on immigration and terrorism' was launched, in which respondents were manipulatively asked about the supposed link between immigration and terrorism. These series of propaganda efforts culminated in a referendum on the EU's scheme on relocation quotas for asylum seekers, which the government urged the public to reject. The referendum, preceded by yet another intensive media campaign with billboard, television and newspaper ads, was held in October 2016. Although it was technically invalid due to a lower than 50% turnout among eligible voters, an overwhelming 98% of those who showed up voted in line with the government, rejecting the EU scheme.

Through this, the government achieved two goals. First, it reinforced already existing anti-immigrant attitudes, making inward immigration the most pressing concern of Hungarians (Barna and Koltai, 2019). Secondly, and even more importantly for Fidesz, the governing party claimed ownership of the anti-refugee/anti-immigrant political stance, reinforcing its political dominance over its far-right competitor Jobbik, and paving the way for yet another two-thirds electoral victory for itself in 2018 (Bíró-Nagy, 2022). Since 2015, the anti-immigration narrative has become a central pillar of Fidesz's political strategy (Toomey, 2020), reinforcing voter alignment and serving as a key mobilization tool in subsequent elections. By continuously invoking the perceived threat of immigration, the government created comparatively extreme levels of anti-immigration attitudes

(Simonovits and Szeitl, 2019) and stabilized a 'moral panic' around it (Barna and Koltai, 2019) that it could utilize politically even in 2022.

In the next two sections, we empirically examine this process by estimating logistic regressions to track attitudinal shifts during and after the 2015 refugee crisis and applying OLS models to assess the role of politically enhanced anti-immigrant attitudes, manifest in the 2016 referendum, in securing Orbán's reelections in 2018 and 2022.

Data and empirical strategy

In order to examine attitudinal changes with respect to immigration from non-EU countries in the wake of the 2015 European refugee crisis, we use individual level data from three waves of Eurobarometer surveys. As these surveys cover the entire European Union, survey results for Hungary can be compared to other EU countries. Moreover, the wording of some questions, including those on immigration, did not change throughout the three surveys we use. Data for Eurobarometer 82.3 (European Commission, 2018) were collected in November 2014 — not only before the outbreak of the 2015 crisis, but also preceding the initial stages of Fidesz's anti-immigration campaign.[3] Data for Eurobarometer 86.2 (European Commission, 2020) were collected 2 years later, in November 2016, after the Hungarian migrant quota referendum. Data for Eurobarometer 90.3 (European Commission, 2019) were collected in November 2018, after the spring 2018 Hungarian general elections.[4] Importantly, Eurobarometer surveys are conducted in each EU Member States using a consistent methodology on representative samples, providing data on respondents' attitudes towards immigration and their socio-economic background. Since the three surveys include identical questions on immigration, they enable both cross-country comparisons and a before-and-after study design to analyze changes in attitudes over time.

As the dependent variable of our empirical model, we use data on respondents' attitudes towards immigration (*Immigration*). For that, question QA11/2,QB4/2 and QB1/2 were used from the 2014, 2016 and 2018 waves, respectively. The wording of these questions was as follows: "*Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you: Immigration of people from outside the EU – Very positive; Fairly positive; Fairly negative; Very negative; DK*". We focus on attitudes towards immigration from third countries because the 2015 refugee crisis primarily involved migrants from outside the EU, who were the direct target of Hungarian government propaganda.

Figure 2 shows how the proportion of anti- and pro-immigrant responses changed over the years in Hungary and the EU. It is evident that anti-immigrant sentiments intensified slightly across the EU from 2014 to 2016, as the proportion of respondents with very negative feelings towards third country immigrants increased by approximately 2.5 percentage points. However, in Hungary, this increase was dramatic, exceeding 20 percentage points. Furthermore, this attitudinal shift appears to be persistent, as the corresponding proportions remained largely unchanged in both the EU and in Hungary in 2018. This preliminary finding lends support to our assumption about the effectiveness of the Hungarian anti-immigrant government campaigns during and after the refugee crisis.

As we intend to estimate logistic regressions, the answers to the above question were recoded as follows: 1 = Very positive or Fairly Positive; 0 = Fairly negative or Very negative. Respondents with "DK" (don't know) answers were treated as missing values.

In the selection and use of explanatory variables, we applied a sequential model building approach. This means that our baseline estimations include demographic and socio-economic characteristics that may act as potential confounders, while the extended specifications incorporate variables that could function as potential mediators. This strategy allows us to both control for

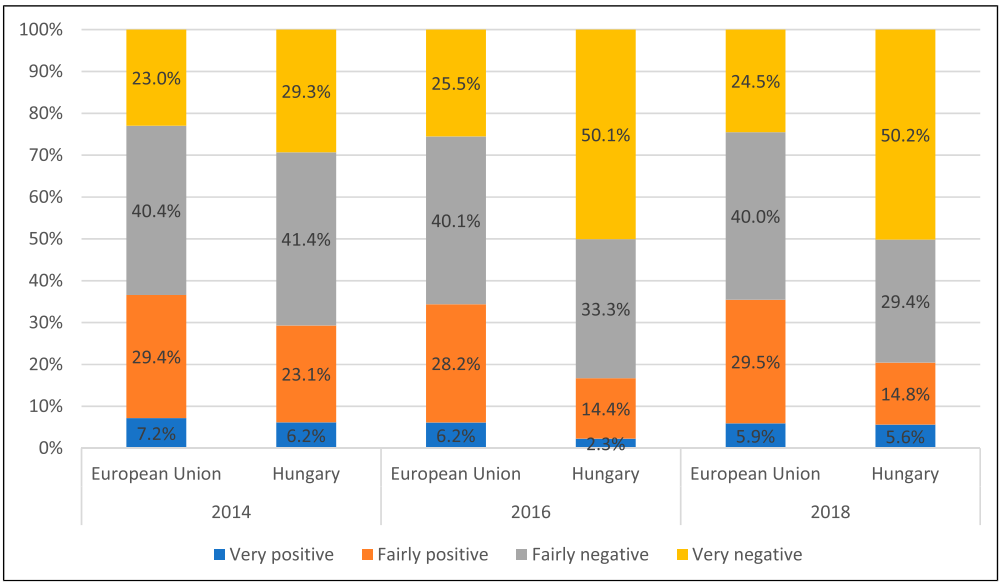

Figure 2. Feelings towards immigrants from outside of the EU in 2014, 2016, and 2018. Source: European Commission (2018, 2019, 2020).

the most relevant sources of confounding and to assess the robustness of our results when accounting for additional mechanisms that may transmit the effect.

The baseline demographic and socio-economic variables are similar to those of Mayda (2006) and Messing and Ságvári (2021), which ensures comparability, and they are also in line with the theoretical considerations of the literature earlier reviewed. As a first step, we control for individuals' *Age*, *Gender* (*Male* = 1) and years of *Schooling*.[5] We also add variables that capture ideological orientation. The Eurobarometer surveys ask respondents to place their views on a 1-to-10 scale, which we transform into dummies for *Left* (1–4) and *Right* (7–10), with centrist preferences (5-6) as the reference category. Next, we control for the respondents' subjectively perceived *Social class* (higher values represent higher social classes). *Rural* and *Small town* dummies describe respondents' place of residence (rural area or village, small or middle-sized town, respectively) with large towns as the reference category. As a further step, we add proxies for media exposure. As these Eurobarometer waves lack direct measures of media consumption habits, internet usage serves as the best available proxy. Our reasoning is that in the Hungarian context, government propaganda is predominantly disseminated through public broadcasting and print outlets, while online platforms present a more diverse range of political perspectives. As a result, individuals who use the internet more frequently are less likely to be exposed exclusively to government-influenced news. To capture this, dummy variables *Net_often* and *Net_never* represent those who occasionally or never use the internet, respectively, with everyday users as the reference category. Respondents' financial status is measured by *Situation_household*, which reflects how they judge their household's financial situation (higher values represent better conditions). Labor market status is controlled for by the following dummies: *Unemployed*, *Houseperson*, *Retired*, *Student*. The reference category is persons who work.

Since we use Guriev and Treisman's theory on informational autocracies as our conceptual framework, it is particularly relevant to consider forms of civic activism that may reflect levels of

social capital formation and government-critical political attitudes. At the same time, from a methodological perspective, in line with the general framework discussed in Cinelli et al. (2024), these variables can also be viewed as potential mediators that transmit the effect of government propaganda on anti-immigration attitudes. Thus, their inclusion in the extended specification is consistent with both the theoretical framework and the sequential model building approach outlined above.

Accordingly, we add the following independent variables. *Poldiscussion_occasion* and *Poldiscussion_never* are dummies measuring how frequently the respondents discuss national political matters with friends or relatives, frequent discussions serving as the reference category. *Situation_economy* captures respondents' judgement about the current situation of the national economy, where higher values indicate more positive evaluation. Trust in social and political institutions has been demonstrated to play important roles in attitude formation towards immigrants (Barna and Koltai, 2019). We therefore include the dummy variables *Trust_goverment* and *Trust_EU*, which indicate whether respondents tend to trust the government of their country of residence and the European Union, respectively(= 1, if respondent tend to trust them in each case). Additionally, perceptions of the European Union are measured by the dummy variables *EUimage_positive* and *EUimage_negative*, which capture very and fairly positive or negative images of the EU, with a neutral standpoint as the reference category. This is particularly relevant because the populist Hungarian government's propaganda has explicitly sought to stir up negative sentiment against the EU.

While all individual-level covariates discussed above serve as controls, our main variable of interest is the *HU* dummy, which identifies respondents living in Hungary. This variable captures the treatment effect of the Hungarian context in our before-and-after design, reflecting changes in public attitudes shaped by government communication after the outbreak of the 2015 migration crisis. To control for other country-specific effects, we include country dummies for the remaining member states as contextual controls, thereby absorbing unobserved cross-country heterogeneity. Moreover, since Hungarian attitudes may also have been influenced by the extraordinary refugee inflow of 2015 (Gessler et al., 2022), we control for this confounding factor by including *ln_Asylum*, the natural logarithm of the number of asylum applications from outside the EU in each country in 2015. This data was sourced from Eurostat.

By using the variables described above, our empirical investigation aims to assess how individual characteristics, including political preferences, influence attitudes towards immigration from outside the EU and whether government propaganda could manipulate these preferences, effectively hijacking the migration crisis in Hungary. To this end, we estimate logistic regression models separately for each Eurobarometer wave (2014, 2016 and 2018). Following the sequential model-building approach outlined earlier, we report a set of specifications for each wave: baseline models that control for demographic and socio-economic confounders, and extended models that additionally include potential mediators. To further investigate within-country dynamics, we also estimate the same specifications on the Hungarian subsample. Table 1 provides an overview of the variables used in the models.

In order to better substantiate the causal interpretation of the propaganda effect on Hungarian attitudes, our regression analyses are embedded in the Potential Outcomes Framework (POF). Within this framework, the *HU* dummy serves as the treatment variable, while the counterfactual outcome is defined by otherwise similar non-Hungarian respondents within the same survey wave. As a first step, we compute propensity scores based on the baseline covariates and inspect their distributions to assess common support. To address the limited common support across groups, we apply overlap weighting, which downweights observations with extreme propensity scores and

Table 1. Empirical specifications.

Specification	Sample	Baseline confounders (demographic and socio-economic variables)	Potential mediators (political variables)	Additional controls
(1)	EU	+		
(2)	Hungary	+		
(3)	EU	+		ln_Asylum, HU
(4)	EU	+	+	ln_Asylum
(5)	Hungary	+	+	
(6)	EU	+	+	ln_Asylum, country dummies

concentrates inference on the region of common support. The resulting weights are normalised, and weighted logistic regressions are estimated. From these, we derive marginal effects for the HU dummy. These correspond to the Average Treatment Effect on the Overlap Population (ATO), providing a causal estimate of how government propaganda shaped anti-immigration attitudes among comparable respondents.

To further assess the Hungarian treatment effect after 2015, we compare pre-treatment (2014) and post-treatment (2016) estimates. Following Gelman and Stern (2006), we do not rely on year-by-year significance alone; instead, we test equality of the HU coefficients across years, providing a direct test of whether the effect has changed.

For checking the robustness of our estimations, we take several steps. Firstly, the specifications described above are also estimated with ordered logit models for each wave, using the original four-point scale of our outcome variable. Secondly, to assess the robustness of our results to potential unobserved confounding, we apply an omitted variable bias sensitivity analysis (Cinelli and Hazlett, 2020). Thirdly, we estimate specification (4), excluding variable *ln _Asylum*, on several sub-samples of the 2016 data. These subsamples consistently comprise data from two countries: Hungary and another country that received a significant number of refugees in 2015, but where no corresponding government propaganda campaign was conducted on the refugee crisis. The countries considered are Sweden, Germany, Austria, Italy, and Greece. This allows us to investigate whether the observed attitudinal changes in Hungary can be primarily attributed to government propaganda rather than the presence of refugees or other unobserved factors. The results of these estimations are presented in the appendices.

In the second phase of our empirical analysis, we test the hypothesis that the Hungarian government's efforts in 2015-16 produced lasting shifts in voter attitudes, influencing the outcome of the 2018 general elections. Specifically, we focus on mobilization around the government-initiated referendum of 2016, which we argue altered attitudes in the electorate, potentially shifting the median voter to the right and consolidating support for Fidesz. This reasoning aligns with Guriev and Treisman's framework, according to which propaganda in informational autocracies is designed to manipulate public opinion and secure electoral advantage.

Since individual-level longitudinal data on political preferences are unavailable, we shift the analysis from individual attitudes to their aggregate electoral consequences, using settlement-level voting data. This allows us to capture the collective outcome of attitudinal shifts while maintaining coherence with the individual-level analyses presented in the first part of the analysis. We therefore use settlement-level data on voting patterns from the 2016 referendum and the 2014, 2018, and

2022 general elections, sourced from the Vox Populi database which compiles official electoral results from the Hungarian National Election Office.

For the empirical strategy, we regress the 2018 Fidesz vote on both the 2014 electoral results and the outcome of the 2016 referendum, following the approach proposed by Tóka (2019). The 2014 Fidesz vote captures baseline support across settlements, while the 2016 referendum result allows us to identify potential shifts in the electorate induced by the government's anti-refugee mobilization. In other words, this approach helps isolate the contribution of the referendum campaign in persuading new voters or mobilizing previously non-Fidesz supporters, over and above the pre-existing electoral preferences, while residual variation can naturally be attributed to other local circumstances or unobserved factors. To account for differences in settlement size, we employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions weighted by the number of eligible voters. In contrast to Tóka (2019), we estimate several specifications by using variables for both total votes and vote shares. Extending the analysis to the 2022 general elections allows us to assess the durability of the electoral support consolidated in 2016. to estimate the factors influencing the 2018 Fidesz vote. We expect that the 2018 Fidesz votes will correlate significantly with both the 2014 results and the number of "No" votes in the 2016 referendum (the option favoured by the government).[6]

Empirical results

The effects of propaganda on changes in attitudes toward immigration

Empirical results largely confirm our expectations regarding politically driven attitudinal change in context of the 2015 European refugee crisis in Hungary. Table 2 presents the marginal effects from logistic regressions estimated using the 2014 data, which serves as the "before" phase, while Table 3 displays those from the 2016 wave, representing the "after" phase of the study. Our dependent variable in both cases is the dummy variable *Immigration* that measures attitudes toward immigrants originated from non-EU countries. (Positive marginal effects suggest more approval of non-EU immigrants).

For 2014, the baseline estimations are in line with expectations. Specification (1) of Table 2 show that lower social and financial status, poorer internet access (*Schooling*; *Social class*; *Small Town*; *Rural*; *Net_often*; *Situation_household*), and older age are significantly associated with anti-immigrant attitudes in the EU. Labor market also matters, as unemployed individuals, housepersons, and students ceteris paribus holding more favorable views of non-EU immigrants than active workers. Political orientation proves highly influential: those with a left-wing political identity are generally more supportive of immigration, whereas those with a right-wing identity tend to oppose it. According to specification (3), the *HU* dummy was statistically insignificant, suggesting that prior to the crisis, Hungarians did not differ systematically from other EU citizens in their attitudes toward third-country immigrants.

In case of the Hungarian sample (Specification (2)), several variables lost significance or changed sign compared to Specifications (1) and (3). Males and unemployed individuals tend to exhibit anti-immigrant attitudes, while those living in small towns, never using the internet, or perceiving their household's financial situation as poor tend to have more positive feelings towards third-country immigrants. In summary, relatively pro-immigrant attitudes are primarily (though not exclusively) associated with a relatively more conservative, 'traditionalist' social profile prior to the refugee crisis in Hungary.

Building on the baseline estimations, the extended models incorporate additional proxies for political attitudes, providing further insight into the complexity of the phenomenon across the EU.

Table 2. Determinants of attitudes towards immigrants from outside of the EU (marginal effects of logit models, 2014).

	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)		(6)	
Variables	2014 EU		2014 HU		2014 EU		2014 EU		2014 HU		2014 EU	
Age	−0.00203***	(0.000286)	−0.000632	(0.00148)	−0.00204***	(0.000286)	−0.00199***	(0.000291)	−0.000811	(0.00149)	−0.00228***	(0.000303)
Male	−0.00481	(0.00639)	−0.0724**	(0.0306)	−0.00488	(0.00640)	−0.0131**	(0.00652)	−0.0773**	(0.0310)	−0.0271***	(0.00673)
Schooling	0.00745***	(0.000632)	−0.00898	(0.00621)	0.00743***	(0.000632)	0.00649***	(0.000640)	−0.00999	(0.00635)	0.00504***	(0.000686)
Left	0.103***	(0.00781)	0.0675	(0.0471)	0.103***	(0.00782)	0.101***	(0.00803)	0.0690	(0.0484)	0.0833***	(0.00835)
Right	−0.0550***	(0.00775)	−0.0101	(0.0334)	−0.0548***	(0.00776)	−0.0723***	(0.00775)	−0.0267	(0.0347)	−0.0821***	(0.00796)
Social class	0.0158***	(0.00346)	0.0152	(0.0194)	0.0157***	(0.00346)	0.00429	(0.00354)	0.0157	(0.0198)	0.0102***	(0.00381)
Small town	−0.0138*	(0.00764)	0.152***	(0.0380)	−0.0139*	(0.00764)	−0.00998	(0.00776)	0.133***	(0.0386)	−0.00975	(0.00819)
Rural	−0.0176**	(0.00829)	0.0113	(0.0421)	−0.0177**	(0.00829)	−0.0148*	(0.00842)	−0.0149	(0.0416)	−0.0241***	(0.00884)
Net_often	−0.0201**	(0.00926)	0.0355	(0.0437)	−0.0201**	(0.00926)	−0.0238**	(0.00936)	0.0328	(0.0440)	−0.0135	(0.00975)
Net_never	−0.0104	(0.00971)	0.152***	(0.0454)	−0.0104	(0.00971)	−0.0107	(0.00984)	0.128***	(0.0460)	0.00253	(0.0104)
Situation_household	0.0660***	(0.00448)	0.111***	(0.0212)	0.0659***	(0.00449)	0.0347***	(0.00482)	0.0511**	(0.0239)	0.0149***	(0.00510)
Unemployed	0.0216*	(0.0118)	−0.0921*	(0.0497)	0.0214*	(0.0118)	0.0320***	(0.0121)	−0.0776	(0.0515)	−0.00668	(0.0121)
Houseperson	0.0302*	(0.0156)	0.143	(0.127)	0.0299*	(0.0156)	0.0305*	(0.0159)	0.138	(0.127)	0.0169	(0.0163)
Retired	0.00392	(0.0102)	−0.0670	(0.0475)	0.00394	(0.0102)	0.00316	(0.0103)	−0.0499	(0.0486)	−0.00589	(0.0106)
Student	0.0763***	(0.0154)	0.0738	(0.101)	0.0760***	(0.0154)	0.0655***	(0.0156)	0.0867	(0.104)	0.0503***	(0.0161)
HU					−0.00903	(0.0167)					0.0323	(0.0246)
Poldiscussion_occasion							−0.0367***	(0.00784)	0.0768*	(0.0425)	−0.0354***	(0.00816)
Poldiscussion_never							−0.0354***	(0.00976)	0.0938	(0.0615)	−0.0599***	(0.00991)
Situation_economy							0.0338***	(0.00449)	0.0828***	(0.0250)	0.0535***	(0.00530)
Trust_government							0.0343***	(0.00777)	−0.00732	(0.0360)	0.0475***	(0.00818)
Trust_EU							0.0351***	(0.00775)	0.0189	(0.0362)	0.0423***	(0.00808)
EUimage_positive							0.114***	(0.00766)	0.116***	(0.0370)	0.103***	(0.00802)
EUimage_negative							−0.0756***	(0.00882)	−0.0794*	(0.0442)	−0.0833***	(0.00900)
Observations	24,732		966		24,732		24,690		966		24,690	
Pseudo R-squared	0.0387		0.0741		0.0387		0.0680		0.109		0.126	

Standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.
Specification (6) includes country dummies. Reference category is Germany West. The following dummies has a significant positive marginal effect: France, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Ireland, Great Britain, Northern Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, Austria, Poland, Slovenia, Romania, Croatia. The following ones has a significant negative marginal effect: Italy, Germany East, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia.

As shown in Specification (4), and in line with expectations, individuals who discuss national politics less frequently within their community (i.e., with a more 'introverted' political profile), tend to have more negative views of third country immigration. More positive perceptions of the national economy, higher trust in the national government or the EU, and a positive image of the EU are all associated with more favorable views towards immigrants, while a negative image of the EU is linked with more hostile attitudes towards them.

Although several variables lose significance, no systematic pattern emerges in Specification (5) where the regression is the estimated on the Hungarian sample with the same additional variables as in Specification (4). Yet, positive assessments of the domestic economy and the EU, in line with EU-wide results in Specification (3), remain associated with greater openness towards non-EU immigrants. On the other hand, the insignificance of trust and political discussion variables suggest that attitudes towards non-EU immigrants were not politicized in Hungary prior to 2015-2016.

Specification (6) also confirms the absence of a Hungary-specific effect in the EU-wide sample observed in Specification (3). This model incorporates country dummies for each EU member state, several of which are significant (see the note to Table 2), but Hungary is not. The reference category is Germany West, which represented a firmly pro-immigrant stance during the refugee crisis with its "Willkommenskultur".

Taken together, these results indicate that in 2014 – before the 2015 refugee crisis and the Orbán government's anti-immigrant campaigns – Hungary was not an outlier in attitudes toward third country immigrants within the EU. However, this is unsurprising, as Hungary had not experienced significant non-European immigration and the issue had not been politicized. Ordered logit estimations (see in Appendix 1) show the same patterns, confirming the robustness of these findings.

The situation had dramatically changed by 2016. Table 3 presents the corresponding estimation results using 2016 data both for the EU and Hungary. The timing of the 2016 Eurobarometer survey was ideal for our purposes, as it followed not only the 2015 refugee crisis, but also Hungary's October 2016 referendum on the EU asylum seeker quota scheme. This provides post-treatment data, to measure attitudes towards non-EU immigrants. The uniqueness of the Hungarian post-treatment situation results from the fact that Hungarians had been exposed to intense and systematic anti-immigrant propaganda in this period, whereas no other EU country experienced the same.

The marginal effects from Specification (1) reamin similar to 2014 with only slight differences. In contrast, Specification (2) on Hungarian data shows a clear shift: pro-immigrant attitudes are associated with a less conservative, more progressive profile (leftwing identification, higher social class and frequent internet use). Yet, our key result is highlighted in Specification (3): the *HU* dummy becomes highly significant with a negative sign, indicating that, *ceteris paribus,* Hungarians now hold much more negative views on third-country immigrants than EU citizens do overall. Controlling for country-level asylum applications (*In_Asylum*) shows that greater exposure is surprisingly associated with more positive attitudes towards non-EU immigrants. The strong negative Hungarian dummy suggests a likely effect of government propaganda, reinforced by Specification (4) and (6) with additional controls.

Furthermore, Specification (2) shows that in Hungary, right-wing identification, unlike in the EU-wide sample, is not associated with negative attitudes towards non-EU immigrants, suggesting that both right-wing and centrists voters are similarly unreceptive due to government propaganda. Interestingly, when additional political characteristics are included in Specification (5), the variable *Left* loses statistical significance, implying that attitudes towards the Hungarian government and the EU now capture the main drivers of views on immigration. This indirectly indicates that the anti-refugee and anti-EU campaigns of the Orbán government reshaped the Hungarian political landscape, at least partially overriding traditional left-right divisions.[7]

Table 3. Determinants of attitudes towards immigrants from outside of the EU (marginal effects of logit models, 2016).

	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)		(6)	
Variables	2016 EU		2016 HU		2016 EU		2016 EU		2016 HU		2016 EU	
Age	−0.000912***	(0.000286)	−0.00311**	(0.00128)	−0.00129***	(0.000288)	−0.00109***	(0.000294)	−0.00258**	(0.00124)	−0.00117***	(0.000305)
Male	−0.00143	(0.00627)	−0.0156	(0.0254)	−0.00837	(0.00630)	−0.0109*	(0.00642)	−0.0276	(0.0242)	−0.0259***	(0.00653)
Schooling	0.00377***	(0.000612)	−0.00706	(0.00501)	0.00327***	(0.000612)	0.00269***	(0.000627)	−0.00393	(0.00483)	0.00338***	(0.000663)
Left	0.139***	(0.00767)	0.0993**	(0.0430)	0.128***	(0.00771)	0.125***	(0.00793)	0.0599	(0.0394)	0.106***	(0.00818)
Right	−0.0583***	(0.00769)	0.0457	(0.0316)	−0.0587***	(0.00770)	−0.0748***	(0.00768)	0.0331	(0.0304)	−0.0596***	(0.00798)
Social class	0.0163***	(0.00343)	0.0454***	(0.0160)	0.0155***	(0.00344)	0.00590*	(0.00352)	0.0399***	(0.0154)	0.0130***	(0.00371)
Small town	−0.0271***	(0.00742)	0.0190	(0.0274)	−0.0283***	(0.00744)	−0.0205***	(0.00759)	0.0277	(0.0262)	−0.0267***	(0.00795)
Rural	−0.0257***	(0.00797)	−0.0623*	(0.0343)	−0.0260***	(0.00800)	−0.0139*	(0.00821)	−0.0494	(0.0337)	−0.0416***	(0.00837)
Net_often	−0.0207**	(0.00958)	0.150***	(0.0491)	−0.0186*	(0.00963)	−0.0181*	(0.00977)	0.158***	(0.0503)	−0.00758	(0.0101)
Net_never	−0.0331***	(0.00957)	0.0414	(0.0407)	−0.0158	(0.00981)	−0.0175*	(0.00993)	0.0496	(0.0399)	−1.54e-05	(0.0105)
Situation_household	0.0769***	(0.00456)	0.0448**	(0.0180)	0.0652***	(0.00459)	0.0285***	(0.00493)	0.00162	(0.0198)	0.0103**	(0.00513)
Unemployed	0.0452***	(0.0135)	0.0506	(0.0649)	0.0342**	(0.0134)	0.0555***	(0.0140)	0.0331	(0.0603)	0.0269*	(0.0139)
Houseperson	0.0116	(0.0156)			−0.00190	(0.0153)	0.0150	(0.0159)			−0.0321**	(0.0152)
Retired	−0.0223**	(0.00995)	0.0508	(0.0418)	−0.0244**	(0.00996)	−0.0294***	(0.0101)	0.0441	(0.0396)	−0.0250**	(0.0103)
Student	0.0939***	(0.0156)			0.0827***	(0.0156)	0.0729***	(0.0158)			0.0555***	(0.0161)
ln_Asylum					0.0194***	(0.00137)	0.0158***	(0.00137)			−0.0117***	(0.00289)
HU					−0.183***	(0.0125)					−0.182***	(0.0138)
Poldiscussion_occasion							−0.0665***	(0.00791)	−0.0379	(0.0372)	−0.0561***	(0.00810)
Poldiscussion_never							−0.0446***	(0.00968)	−0.0149	(0.0410)	−0.0624***	(0.00969)
Situation_economy							0.0537***	(0.00460)	0.0739***	(0.0230)	0.0717***	(0.00523)
Trust_government							0.0546***	(0.00749)	−0.0502*	(0.0266)	0.0491***	(0.00777)
Trust_EU							0.0509***	(0.00760)	0.0301	(0.0290)	0.0600***	(0.00782)
EUimage_positive							0.102***	(0.00767)	0.112***	(0.0340)	0.0914***	(0.00792)
EUimage_negative							−0.0666***	(0.00839)	−0.0333	(0.0349)	−0.0771***	(0.00839)
Observations	24,842		883		24,842		24,803		883		24,803	
Pseudo R-squared	0.0445		0.0594		0.0532		0.0865		0.111		0.144	

Standard errors in parentheses.

***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

Specification (6) includes country dummies. Reference category is Germany West. The following dummies have a significant positive marginal effect: Great Britain, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden. The following ones has a significant negative marginal effect: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Germany East, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia.

Overall, between 2014 and 2016, the Hungarian society shifted towards a markedly more anti-immigrant stance than the EU average. The equality tests of the HU coefficients across years further confirm that this effect changed over time. Rather than relying solely on the significance versus non-significance of the treatment variable in the logit models described above, these tests indicate that the change itself is highly significant, with $\chi^2(1) = 67.28$, $p < 0.001$ for Specification (3) and $\chi^2(1) = 63.15$, $p < 0.001$ for Specification (6).

Further checks confirm the robustness of these findings. Ordered logit estimations (presented in Appendix 2) show similar patterns while sub-sample analyses (presented in Appendix 3) also support the idea that it was not the presence of significant waves of immigrants, but rather government propaganda, that reshaped public attitudes toward immigration. The sensitivity analysis proposed by Cinelli and Hazlett (2020) shows that the negative effect of the HU treatment is robust to moderate unobserved confounding, with robustness values of 7.17% for Specification (3) and 5.12% for Specification (6). This analysis was conducted to assess whether the set of included covariates constitutes a sufficient set of controls, providing confidence that the estimated effect is not driven by omitted variables. While the effect remains statistically significant in both models, it is slightly more sensitive to omitted variables in the extended model, as adding many covariates reduces the treatment's share of residual variance and increases potential vulnerability to unobserved confounders.

Moreover, the influence of this treatment appears to be lasting. As indicated by the 2018 data (see Appendix 4 and 5), the same pattern persists 2 years later, with Hungary continuing to stand out as an outlier in terms of attitudes towards immigration.

Last but not least, the POF analysis underlines the causal nature of the propaganda effect on migration attitudes. Table 4 presents the estimations, which use propensity scores with overlap weighting and weighted logistic regression to calculate marginal effects, and these results are consistent with expectations and with the previously reported findings. Using the 2016 data, we find that the HU dummy – interpreted as the Average Treatment Effect on the Overlap Population – consistently has a negative sign and strong statistical significance, both when considering all non-Hungarian respondents as counterfactuals with Specifications (3) and (6), and when using the earlier introduced country pairs in Specification (4). These results indicate that the propaganda systematically shaped Hungarian citizens' migration attitudes, setting them apart from both the EU as a whole and from countries with high refugee inflows. The ATOs represent an average effect across the population, which may vary across different social subgroups; exploring this heterogeneity is left for future research.

Table 4. Average treatment effect on the overlap population (HU = 1 for Hungarian citizens, 2016).

	Treatment dummy HU					
	dy/dx	Std. Err	z	P > z	[95% conf. interval]	
Specification 3	−.2137941	.0193251	−11.06	0.000	−.2516707	−.1759175
Specification 6	−.2050152	.0225098	−9.11	0.000	−.2491335	−.1608968
Specification 4 (HU & SE)	−.2915815	.0247985	−11.76	0.000	−.3401856	−.2429774
Specification 4 (HU & DE-W)	−.1644929	.024778	−6.64	0.000	−.213057	−.1159288
Specification 4 (HU & AT)	−.1567056	.0208443	−7.52	0.000	−.1975596	−.1158515
Specification 4 (HU & IT)	−.1333026	.0206744	−6.45	0.000	−.1738237	−.0927815
Specification 4 (HU & GR)	−.1699155	.025222	−6.74	0.000	−.2193496	−.1204813

The effect of attitudinal changes on electoral outcomes

Having shown that the Hungarian government, operating a regime approximating Guriev and Treisman's informational autocracy, successfully shaped public attitudes towards immigration from non-EU countries, the next step is to assess how this mattered politically. Propaganda does not serve as an end in itself in IAs but as a means of securing regime stability. We therefore turn to the question of how the shift in attitudes on immigration translated into electoral gains for Fidesz, demonstrating the political utility of the government's strategy. The 2016 referendum represents a pivotal moment in this process, marked by a massive propaganda campaign that secured the support of over 3.3 million citizens for Fidesz – approximately one million more than the number of Fidesz voters in the 2014 election – on the issue of implementing an EU scheme on asylum-seeker quotas. As our findings suggest, this mobilization had a lasting impact on Hungarian politics, extending to the subsequent general elections in 2018 and 2022. Table 5 summarizes these dynamics, presenting OLS regression models that estimate the number of Fidesz votes (in Specifications (1) and (3)) and the Fidesz vote share (in Specifications (2) and (4)) in the 2018 and 2022 general elections, using vote counts and shares from the 2014 elections and at the 2016 referendum as predictors, all at the settlement level.

The results align with our expectations. A significant portion of the variance in both the number and share of 2018 and 2022 Fidesz votes can be tracked back to the outcomes of the 2016 referendum, controlling for the number and share of Fidesz votes in 2014. Specifically, the share and number of "No" votes cast in the 2016 referendum – in which the government encouraged a "No" response to reject the EU's asylum-seeker quota scheme – show a statistically significant influence on Fidesz's 2018 and 2022 electoral performance. These findings indicate that Fidesz managed to secure a substantially larger number of votes in settlements where opposition to the EU quota was more pronounced in 2016. It is likely that the Orbán government attracted support from both the

Table 5. Association between the 2016 referendum and the subsequent general elections in 2018 and 2022 in Hungary (coefficients of OLS models).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables	Fidesz votes, 2018 (no.)	Fidesz votes, 2018 (%)	Fidesz votes, 2022 (no.)	Fidesz votes, 2022 (%)
Fidesz votes, 2014 (no.)	0.433***		0.276***	
	(0.00621)		(0.00971)	
Referendum votes, 2016 (no.)	0.506***		0.638***	
	(0.00432)		(0.00676)	
Fidesz votes, 2014 (%)		0.465***		0.306***
		(0.0117)		(0.0172)
Referendum votes, 2016 (%)		0.525***		0.557***
		(0.00940)		(0.0138)
Constant	44.30***	−0.00721**	149.6***	0.0546***
	(12.43)	(0.00292)	(19.45)	(0.00427)
Observations	3175	3175	3175	3175
R-squared	0.998	0.814	0.996	0.624

Standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

center-left opposition and far-right Jobbik in 2016. The government's large-scale propaganda campaign against the EU quota scheme not only mainstreamed its own anti-refugee stance – effectively shifting the median-voter's position to the right – but also positioned itself as the leading radical-right, nationalist force. Both mechanisms likely played a role, making the anti-immigration campaign politically effective and, ultimately, supporting Orbán's informational autocracy.

Naturally, we do not claim that government propaganda was the sole factor behind Fidesz's electoral success in 2018 and 2022. Gerrymandering and other regulative changes, political mobilization strategies, economic conditions and social policies also played important roles (Mares and Young, 2018). Our aim here was not to account for all such influences, but to highlight the role of anti-immigration propaganda in shaping voter behavior, in line with the IA framework. By showing how the 2016 referendum contributed to subsequent electoral support for Fidesz, our analyses highlighted an important mechanism through which government propaganda reinforced regime stability.

Conclusions

In this paper, we investigated the operation of the post-2010 Orbán regime, conceptualized as an informational autocracy that has employed communication campaigns to create and maintain a loyal constituency. Through these campaigns, the governing Fidesz claimed ownership of the anti-immigrant political stance since the European refugee crisis started in 2015, effectively occupying a radical right political position while also maintaining its dominance in the center right segment of the political spectrum. This way, Fidesz reinforced its electoral dominance and reproduced two-third parliamentary majorities in both 2018 and 2022.

Since 2018, Fidesz has employed new themes of electoral mobilization in addition to anti-immigrant policies. These included an anti-LGBTQ stance since 2018 and a pro-Russia, anti-Ukraine stance in context of the Russian aggression on Ukraine since 2022. Mass communication campaigns, including 'national consultations' were pursued in both cases, reusing the political technology developed since 2015 with respect to anti-immigration policies. However, Fidesz' anti-immigration stance was modified towards refugees from Ukraine, who – at least in the beginning – were received with more hospitality than non-European refugees in 2015 and afterwards (Vidra and Messing, 2025).

Regarding the anti-LGBTQ stance, even a referendum was held along the 2022 general elections with a result similar to that of the 2016 referendum on the EU scheme on relocation of asylum seekers. Although the referendum remained technically invalid, it generated a homogenous pro-government vote of more than 3.6 million people – more than Fidesz as a political party has ever received, presumably also supporting the Fidesz vote at the general elections.

The main claims of this paper are in line with those of Krekó (2022): Hungary has witnessed the emergence of an informational autocracy over the past 15 years during which the regime has successfully manipulated political attitudes. By comparing patterns of attitudinal change in Hungary and Europe, we demonstrated how this political machine manipulated electoral preferences in the post-2015 period, and by analyzing the relation between the 2016 referendum and the 2018 and 2022 general elections in terms of electoral outcomes, we showed how those preferences contributed to the regime's electoral success.

It is an open question what happens to an informational autocracy once it loses political credibility because of deteriorating economic conditions and/or the dramatic weakening of its moral standing due to a (series of) damaging scandal(s). This may enable the rise of an electorally viable challenger as it seems to be the case in Hungary since 2024. One option, demonstrated by post-2022

Russia, is to become an overt dictatorship that employs mass repression and eliminates all its political alternatives. The other one, more likely to be the case in contemporary Hungary, is a difficult and often self-contradictory process of re-pluralization, showcased by post-2023 Poland and post-2023 Montenegro. What is going to be left of the informational autocracy Fidesz built and operated for 15 years once its political dominance will have vanished is yet to be seen, though.

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Data Availability Statement

The analysis presented in this study is based on publicly available data European Commission (2018), European Commission (2019), European Commission (2020); Populi (2024).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Guriev and Treisman (2020: 1) argues that "[i]n the Peru of Alberto Fujimori, the Hungary of Viktor Orban, and the Russia of Vladimir Putin, illiberal leaders have managed to remove almost all constraints on their power while using relatively little repression and pretending to be democratic".
2. In February 2015, Lajos Simicska, Orbán's old right-hand man in the creation of a business and media empire around Fidesz, changed loyalties and switched to support Jobbik. Jobbik also won the Tapolca byelection in April 2015, gaining the party's first parliamentary seat in an individual electoral district. (Earlier Jobbik won parliamentary seats only through votes for party lists).
3. The first large-scale billboard campaign was launched in June 2015, but earlier steps had already been taken — including Orbán's speech opposing economic immigration in the context of the Charlie Hebdo attack in January 2015, and the national consultation on the same topic in February 2015.
4. While other data sources, such as the European Social Survey, are widely used to measure social attitudes in social sciences (see, e.g., Messing and Ságvári, 2021), they are not suitable for this study. Given our before-and-after study design, it is problematic that the fieldwork for the 2014 ESS wave in Hungary took place between April and June 2015—during the height of the migration crisis—making it unsuitable as a 'pre-treatment' measurement. In this respect, Eurobarometer survey data, which is also a familiar data source in

research about attitudes towards immigration (Simonovits and Szeitl, 2019), is more appropriate for our purposes since it provides an EU-wide comparable data set for the exact time period that is studied in this paper.

5. Eurobarometer data provides information about the respondents' age when they stopped full-time education. The *Schooling* variable was generated by subtracting 6 years of these data.
6. Although it is undeniable that electoral outcomes are shaped by a wide range of factors operating at different levels (see, for example, Mares and Young, 2018), the aim of this analysis is not to account for all of these influences, but rather to explore the relationship between government propaganda and electoral outcomes. We do not, therefore, seek to disregard the importance of those factors. On the contrary, we argue that the effects of these factors are largely captured by the results of previous elections, which serve as one of the explanatory variables in our regressions. Naturally, some of these factors may have changed, and other influences may also have played a role, but such variations are reflected in the unexplained variance of our regression results. Nonetheless, the central empirical question we address is whether the referendum campaign had a significant effect on subsequent electoral performance.
7. On how populist messaging overwrites traditional ideological orientation, see for example Bakker et al. (2015).

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