

## Hungary: From Importer to Exporter of Political Technology

One of the aims of my book on 'Political Technology' is to explain its subtitle 'The Globalisation of Political Manipulation'. Certain types of political technology ferment in what I called 'hub states', like Hungary, which has imported various techniques from Russia, the USA (Arthur Finkelstein, George Birnbaum), and Israel (Black Cube), to create a unique local brew. The chapter on Hungary is called 'Everything in the Pot', and describes an amalgamation of worst practice from around the world.

Political technology has helped undermine Hungarian democracy. Now Hungary the hub state is exporting its political technology.<sup>1</sup> In three elections in neighbouring states in 2023 its operatives interfered with varying effect. Operations were led by Árpád Habony, the number one political technologist and propagandist for the governing party Fidesz. Money and resources were channelled through Századvég ('End of the Century') – not exactly a GONGO, more a pro-government think tank set up to create a closed circuit of policy advice and guaranteed state funding in fake tender competitions (most recently, for [€62.5 million](#)). Századvég is also a clearing house for political technology; for example it [partners](#) with the new 'Office of Sovereignty Protection'.

In [Poland](#), the Hungarians pushed the idea of holding a referendum on the same day as the election in October 2023, with four questions designed to raise turnout among supporters of the governing party PiS. Hungary under Fidesz has used so-called 'National Consultations', where ['the questions are worded to get the answers they want'](#) (twelve to date, with the latest in 2023 defending 'sovereignty' and attacking Brussels). The tactic failed in Poland. Opposition parties successfully urged a boycott: only 40.9% voted in the referendum, below the necessary threshold of 50%, rendering it invalid, compared to 74.4% in the parliamentary elections. Question number four in the referendum reflected Fidesz's other recommendation to constantly campaign on migration. The wording was a classic of leading phraseology: 'Do you support the admission of thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, in accordance with the forced relocation mechanism imposed by the European bureaucracy'. The third Fidesz tactic was ['to take any topic and repackage it as an ad hominem attack against \[former Prime Minister and President of the European Council Donald\] Tusk'](#); in particular depicting him as a German stooge. But with Poland's more divided electorate compared to Hungary, there was considerable blow-back in the mobilisation of opposition supporters.

In Slovakia the Hungarians were more successful. Habony et al first worked for HLAS-SD. Then switched to Robert Fico's SMER-SD as it rose in the polls, [helping](#) to downplay his pro-Russian stance.

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In Serbia, the Hungarians have worked with the VMSZ or Alliance of Hungarians in Vojvodina, which makes some sense, except that VMSZ is strong supporter of Serbian nationalist President Vučić.

But potentially the most important connection by far is Fidesz political technologists [working with](#) US Republicans. There has been traffic in both directions, with Habony and Gergely Losonci, Political Director of Századvég, [visiting the USA](#), and [Tucker Carlson](#) broadcasting from Budapest. Former Trump ambassador to Hungary David Cornstein is to some extent an intermediary. Conservative Political Action Conferences (CPACs) in both the USA and Hungary, and the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, Fidesz's ['ideas factory'](#), [serve as meeting places](#). (The Collegium has been promoted to take the place of the Central European University, forced out of Hungary in 2019). Partly this is about conservative values [ideology](#), minus some issues that play differently in different states, like abortion in Hungary. But it is also about political technology. Fidesz's expertise in gerrymandering constituencies may have partly come from the USA rather than the other way around. Weaponising migration as a political issue helped to secure Fidesz in power in the 2010s, again [adapted](#) from the Middle East to Mexico. Blaming [George Soros](#) is also common. But the most important area of joint interest would logically be media. Since winning power in 2010, Fidesz in Hungary has assiduously built up a state-controlled media empire, culminating in the formation of the giant Central-European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) in 2018. As with eclectic political technology in general, Fidesz media combines a variety of styles: tabloid, entertainment, spectacle and paranoia. In the USA 'MAGA media' is ['more loosely formed'](#) and currently reaches only the hard-core Republican audience - roughly the [two thirds](#) of Republican voters who persistently believe the 2020 election #StopTheSteal myth. But there are some structural similarities, particularly the [deep divide](#) between metropolitan and small-town areas; and in the USA, as I wrote in 'Political Technology', the disappearance of local media and its cloning by national chains purporting to be local. MAGA media may become more like Hungary's in time; though possibly also after first winning a (2024) election. 2024 may also look like Hungary 2010 in general. Just before that vote, Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán said notoriously that ["We only have to win once, but then properly"](#).

Hungary and the USA are also part of a triangle of disinformation about Ukraine, with Russian propaganda being reproduced in MAGA media for the election theme of Wall/Border 2.0. In 2016 Trump promised to build a wall on the border with Mexico, now he promises to concentrate on defending America's border, not Ukraine's (more on this in the next post).