

Investigative Journalism in the Era of a Crisis of Democracy: The Example of Hungary

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Abstract

The subject of the article is the functioning and role of investigative journalism in Hungary in the conditions of the tendency to move from liberal democracy towards autocracy, which has been observed for over two decades. This leads to the restriction of civil liberties in various areas of social life, including the sphere of activity of the independent media, which are obviously perceived by the rulers as an obstacle in appropriating the state and achieving goals contrary to the interests of citizens. Under the rule of Viktor Orbán, the leader of the Fidesz party, since 2010 a plan to monopolize the circulation of information and subordinate the media and advertising market to the ruling party has been consistently implemented. Internet sites of investigative journalism are the only enclaves of independent journalism, identified with the concept of the “fourth power.” Three such portals were analyzed, pointing to their economic basis, the methods of conducting and the subject of their investigations, and the effectiveness in publicizing irregularities in the conduct of the rulers and businessmen associated with power.

Keywords: Hungary, investigative journalism, online muckraking sites, crowdfunding

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“[illiberal regimes] have set out to transform democracy from a cooperative and pluralistic enterprise into a disguise for a game in which the winner sets all the rules”

Miklos Haraszti (former OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media)¹

“Non-profit journalism is fast becoming the only one available independent source of information in the country”

Tamas Bodoky (editor-in-chief of Atlatzo.hu)²

Freedom is not given once and for all and has to be won anew — this well-known saying illustrates well the current situation in several countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where societies, just over three decades after entering the path of democracy, have to fight again for basic human rights

1. See: “Resisting ill democracies in Europe. Understanding the playbook of illiberal governments to better resist them: A case-study of Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Serbia.” Report published by Centre for Peace Studies (Croatia), Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland), Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Yucom – Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights (Serbia), Human Rights House Zagreb, and Human Rights House Foundation. Human Rights House Foundation, Oslo (Norway) and Geneva (Switzerland) and Human Rights House Zagreb (Croatia), November 2017, available at <https://humanrightshouse.org/noop-media/documents/22908.pdf>.

2. Mong, A. 2014. “Hungary’s Independent Media Struggle against Economic Pressure, Intimidation.” Committee to Protect Journalists, last modified 2014-07-07, accessed 2023-09-05, <https://cpj.org/2014/07/hungarys-independent-media-struggle-against-econom/>.

and the rule of law. This is despite the fact that these countries belong to international communities that recognize as unquestionable foundations such values as the separation of powers, respect for the law, equality of citizens, free market, freedom of the media, freedom of assembly, and transparency of the activities of public authorities. The aforementioned standards of Western civilization, characteristic of civil society and a democratic state ruled by law, over time, became a ballast for the power elites in some countries of our region. In these countries, there is a slow but steady trend away from liberal democracy and towards autocracy. This leads to the restriction of civil liberties in various areas of social life. One such sphere is the activity of the independent media, which is obviously perceived by the rulers as an obstacle in appropriating the state and achieving goals contrary to the interests of citizens.

An example of such dismantling of democratic freedoms in the mass media market is Hungary under the rule of Viktor Orbán, the leader of the Fidesz party, who has been continuously and consistently implementing his plan to monopolize the circulation of information since 2010. This plan manifests itself in the domination of the television, radio, printed press, Internet, and advertising markets. The only enclaves of independent journalism, identified with the notion of the “fourth power,” are the few media, among which Internet portals specializing in muckraking, play an important role.

The purpose of these considerations will be to present the role played by the aforementioned media initiatives operating in the Internet environment in the defense of democracy in Hungary. According to the author, in the situation of the declining level of democracy in this country and the appropriation of most mass media by the authorities, independent investigative journalism websites become not only one of the few forms of government control but also act as an important source of information, counterbalancing the propaganda message from the media dependent on the government. The answer to several research questions will be crucial. First, what is the business formula for independent online media, and does it allow for financing journalistic investigations? Second, what are the subjects of investigations of investigative website reporters about, and how effective are they? Third, what other activities are undertaken by these portals to increase transparency and control the actions of the authorities and businesses in Hungary?

The research used the methods of critical analysis of sources, critical analysis of literature and the comparative method. The latter research procedure was used to determine the similarities and differences between the three most important Internet portals operating in the field of investigative journalism: Átlátszo.hu, Direkt36.hu, and 444.hu (Bienvenue 2019, 37). Numerous publications by Hungarian researchers and journalists were helpful in analyzing the problems concerning the Hungarian media market.

Investigative journalism appeared in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century (Bajomi-Lazar and Lampé 2013, 33). Kornél Tábori, following the example of the American muckraker Jacob Riis, documented the phenomenon of poverty in his publications, also among children, using photography in his work (Tomsics 2006). As in many real socialist countries, investigative journalism did not exist in Hungary after World War II. As rightly noted by Péter Bajomi-Lázár and Ágnes Lampé, journalists were then expected to be “soldiers of the party” rather than “guardians of democracy” (Bajomi-Lazar and Lampé 2013, 33). The restitution of Hungarian investigative journalism dates back to the late 1980s, although media experts’ assessments of the effectiveness of this form of informal control of power at that time are ambiguous (Bodoky 2011). The scandals among the rulers revealed by investigative reporters did not end with bringing the guilty to justice, and their social response was small (Bajomi-Lazar and Lampé 2013, 33). The perception of investigative journalism has changed in recent years, although the range of the media practicing this form of journalism is relatively small and, in fact, currently mostly limited to the Internet environment.

The problems with the control function of the Hungarian media stem from the three-decade-long transformation of the media market, which, according to researchers, is evolving towards an

authoritarian media system. In this context, Attila Batorfy recalls various categories of description of the existing state of affairs used by media researchers in Hungary: a post-socialist country with politicized media, media colonized by parties, media captivity, crony media, media operating in the patron/client system (Bátorfy 2019, 35–36).

The argument for the degradation of the position of independent media in Hungary is international press freedom rankings. In the Freedom of the Press list, Hungary has been included in the “partially free” category in recent years. “As a result, today’s Hungary can no longer be considered a democracy but belongs to a growing group of hybrid regimes, located in the “grey zone” between democracies and pure autocracies” (Bognar and Nemeth 2021, 12). In turn, the journalistic NGO Reporters Without Borders in 2018 classified Hungary as a “problematic” country, placing it in the 73rd place in the world—the ranking includes 180 countries (Krzysztosek 2023). In the same ranking from 2021, Hungary fell to the 92nd position (table 1). This situation negatively affects the credibility of media messages. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report for 2019, the level of trust in news in Hungary is 28%, which puts the country in the 34th place out of 38 countries surveyed (Crowley 2019). The weakening of independent media leads to the development of various pathologies of power institutions. In the 2022 Transparency International report on the level of corruption in the world, Hungary received the lowest rate among the European Union countries.³

Table 1. Hungary’s position in the Press Freedom Index in 2006–2021

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Position	10	17	23	25	23	40	56	64	65	67	71	73	87	89	92

Data source: RSF Reporters without Borders, data retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2021>, accessed 2023-02-04.

Hungary’s path to the current situation in the media market began after 1989. Right-wing parties demanded a balance of arguments among public opinion, which was then supposed to be dominated by media sympathizing with left-liberal views. This slogan has become one of the pillars of the policy pursued since 1998 by V. Orbán and the Fidesz party he leads. This goal was to be achieved by activities on the market of the daily press (“Magyar Nemzet”), weeklies (“Heti Válasz”), subordination of public media, and dominance in the outdoor advertising sector. In the latter area, the financial tycoon of Fidesz, Lajos Simicska, provided assistance. In the first decade of the 21st century, thanks to businessmen who sympathized with Fidesz, V. Orbán’s party entered another segment of the media—television, first by launching “Hír Television” and then its own cable channel “Echo Television” (Bátorfy 2015). After television came the time for the next segment of radio stations. The party’s portfolio includes two radio stations—“Lánchíd Rádió” and “Class FM.” In addition, after the victorious local government elections in 2006, many local newspapers in the Fidesz-controlled municipal governments were transformed into party propaganda mouthpieces (Bátorfy 2019, 37–38).

Thanks to friendly businessmen, such as Károly Fonyó or Lajos Simicska, Fidesz quickly “ideologically” dominated the media and outdoor advertising market. Over time, the traditional media controlled by Fidesz were also joined by Internet portals—MNO, Pesti Srácok, Tutiblog and OXOX (Bátorfy 2015). After 2015, several foreign companies withdrew from the Hungarian media market (including the German Pro7Sat1, Deutsche Telekom and the WAZ-Funke group), which made it easier for oligarchs sympathetic to Fidesz to take over their companies (Bátorfy 2019, 38). Another important direction of taking control over the media market in Hungary were changes in the field of law and regulatory institutions. After winning the 2010 elections, Fidesz quickly led the parliament to pass a media act and establish the National Media and Communications Authority (NMCA), whose task is to assign frequencies to broadcasters. Thanks to the procedure of appointing the head of the NMCA (by the Hungarian president at the request of the prime minister and after consultations with media organizations), the actual supervision in this area was taken over by V. Orbán

3. See: “Corruption Perceptions Index 2022.” Transparency International 2023, available at <https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/CPI2022-Report-Embargoed-until-6.01am-CET-31-JANUARY-2023.pdf>, page 11.

(Mucha 2020). The office also includes the Media Council appointed by the parliament, all members of which were appointed by Fidesz. The council, as a body loyal to the government, often arbitrarily interprets media law. The Media Mission and Property Fund (MMPF) was also established, whose task is to manage the achievements of public media. In November 2018, the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) was established, which includes nearly 500 titles (Bognar and Nemeth 2021).⁴ "The foundation is working at full capacity and (according to some sources) makes about 90% of publishers in Hungary dependent on the government. According to the analyses of the Central European Press and Media Foundation, in 2018 it was: 379 newspapers and magazines, 96 news websites, 20 TV channels, 11 radio stations and 3 billboard companies" (Mucha 2020).

The third pillar of Fidesz's dominance in the Hungarian media market is the method of financial support. 51.66% of all state advertising goes to commercial media owned by businessmen close to the government or to commercial media loyal to the government and public media. In terms of individual market segments, it looks as follows: radio—86.06%, daily press—68.23%, television—51.33%, weekly and monthly press—21.75%, outdoor advertising—74.12%, online—0.00% (Bátorfy 2015; Bátorfy and Urbán 2020). As a consequence, the media that are in opposition to the authorities participate in the profits from advertising from state institutions and companies to a small extent.

The Hungarian authorities have consistently weakened the opposition media or even led to their collapse. This was the case, for example, with the daily "Népszabadság" (Attila and Barcea 2016). "In 2016, the daily 'Népszabadság' published a series of articles about Antal Rogán, the minister responsible for government communications, popularly known in Hungary as the minister of propaganda, flying a helicopter belonging to one of the oligarchs during a wedding. These articles caused a terrible scandal. In one day, the oligarch associated with Orbán, Lőrinc Mészáros, bought 100% shares of the newspaper and immediately shut it down. It was a punishment for articles about Rogán" (Mucha 2020). Another way to take over editorial offices hostile to the government was to make personnel changes under the guise of reorganizing them. Examples of such actions are the dismissal of Szabolcs Dull from the position of editor-in-chief of Index.hu and similar proceedings against Origo.hu. In both cases, the editorial teams resigned as a sign of solidarity with the dismissed editors-in-chief. Portal Origo.hu. was later transformed by the authorities into a pro-government medium (Lees 2015; Mong 2014).⁵

Until the spring of 2010, Hungarian investigative journalism focused most often on controlling activities involving left-wing politicians and unmasking scandals related to them, which to a large extent helped the conservative party win by a landslide in the parliamentary and local elections (Bodoky 2011). The aforementioned relatively low effectiveness of investigative journalism in publicizing scandals stems from both the limited coverage of this type of media independent of the government and the way these projects are financed. Traditional media with a large reach—primarily television and radio stations—are not interested in publishing materials from the investigations of reporters working for Internet portals. The financial aspect is also important. Conducting journalistic investigations and the costs of legal services require large financial outlays. The withdrawal of support from state institutions forces investigative Internet portals to look for sources of financing, among others, in crowdfunding and donations from donors, which, however, is not a stable, long-term guarantee in this type of activity. In the situation of a small range of publications exposing the scandals of the rulers, the political elites do not see the need to react to allegations that the majority of voters have not heard of (Bajomi-Lazar and Lampé 2013).

There are currently three undertakings operating on the market of Internet portals, considered to be the most serious muckraker media remaining in opposition to the authorities.⁶ These are

4. See also: "Hungary" by Eva Bognar, published in Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019, available at https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf; "Hungary media shake-up fuels new press control fears," AFP, 2018-11-30, France24. Accessed 2023-02-09, <https://www.france24.com/en/20181130-hungary-media-shake-fuels-new-press-control-fears>.

5. See also: "A magyar hírmédia elmúlt tíz éve" [The past ten years of the Hungarian media]. Text and data visualization by Attila Bátorfy, in Hungarian and English. Accessed 2023-02-21, <https://atlo.team/media2020/>; "Hungary media shake-up fuels..." op. cit.

6. See: Spotlight on Media Startups from Eastern Europe, edited by Pauline Tillmann. Bosch Alumni Network,

Átlátszo.hu, Direkt36.hu and 444.hu. Átlátszo.hu, founded in July 2011 by a team of Hungarian journalists, lawyers, IT specialists, scientists, and independent experts, has been operating the longest on the media market (table 2). The origins of this portal can be traced back to 2009 when the Hungarian investigative journalist Tamás Bodoky investigated a feasibility study that convinced the Hungarian government to grant EUR 74.7 million in state aid and EUR 55 million in loans from the Hungarian Development Bank for Balatonring—a new motor racing track in Sárvoly. And although the reporter's request was initially rejected, the support given to him by bloggers, NGOs, and ordinary Internet users led to the disclosure of the content of the study by the authorities, and consequently to the withdrawal of the Hungarian Development Bank from financing this project. T. Bodoky, on the other hand, decided to leave the news portal Index.hu and set up the Átlátszo Center for Investigative Journalism and the related investigative journalism website *atlatszo.hu*, of which he is the editor-in-chief and a co-owner.⁷ In Hungarian, the word “atlatszo” means banners, which largely reflects the idea behind this project. The Átlátszo.hu portal is dedicated to

Table 2. Data on the *átlátszo.hu* website

Year of creation	2011
Founder	Tamás Bodoky and Ákos Maróy
Mode of action	Classic investigative journalism, creative commons license, data journalism, data visualization, camera drone
Staff / type of employment	Experienced investigative journalists, lawyers, IT specialists, scientists and experts in various fields
Annual budget/financing	HUF 85 million (approx. PLN 1 million) Crowdfunding (over 5,000 donators in 2020) Non-profit Donations from donors (exception: party and government sources)
Awards	Breaking Borders Award of Global Voices Online (2012) European Citizen Prize (2014) Transparency-Gőbölös Soma-Díj (2014) Freedom of Expression Award (2015) Hégető Honorka Video Award (2015) Theodor Heuss Medaille (2015) Hungarian Pulitzer Memorial Award (2016) Sozialmarie Award (2016) Transparency-Gőbölös Soma-Díj (2019)
Method of presentation of investigation results	Website <i>atlatszo.hu</i> reprints in friendly newspapers (e.g., “magyar hang”)
Publication language	Hungarian, English
Number of recipients (2020)	Home site (<i>atlatszo.hu</i>)—1.8 million readers blogs (subdomains) <i>atlatszo</i> —2.9 million audiences monthly activity on the portal's websites—600,000–1,400,000 unique views <i>atlatszo</i> Facebook page—112,000 followers
Quotation in hungarian media (2020)	2804 times
Partner organizations	The Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) Átlátszó Erdély vsquare.org Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)

available at <https://www.iac-berlin.org/assets/downloads/2106-Spotlight-Media-Startups-from-Eastern-Europe.pdf>.

7. See: “They shoot citizen journalists, don't they? Curating or outsourcing? Opportunities and threats in post-gatekeeper journalism” by Hanna Nikkanen. Accessed 2023-09-05, <https://www.ifla.org/publications/they-shoot-citizen-journalists-dont-they-curating-or-outsourcing-opportunities-and-threats-in-post-gatekeeper-journalism/>.

investigative journalism—it serves to expose government and business scandals and to promote transparency and freedom of information in Hungary (Bienvenue 2019).⁸

The 444.hu portal was launched as the second (table 3). The website was created on April 29, 2013, by Péter Uj, former editor-in-chief of Index.hu, and several former collaborators. In the initial period of operation, most of the members of the editorial staff of 444.hu were recruited from other well-known portals—Index.hu and Origo.hu.⁹

The last of the discussed investigative journalism projects is Direkt36.hu (table 4). Founded in 2014 by Hungarian editors and journalists: Gergő Sáling, András Pethő, and Balázs Weyer, who left Origo.hu. The name of the website—Direkt36—refers to the number 36, which is the country code for Hungary (Nguyen 2018).¹⁰

Crowdfunding and donations from donors are the basis for financing all discussed non-profit projects. For example, in the case of atlatszo.hu in 2020, micropayments accounted for nearly 60% of revenues, while the share in 1% of the tax transferred by citizens in the annual PIT settlement was over 25% of the total budget. Additional support is provided by grants from Western institutions and targeted funds supporting European investigative journalism (Bede 2019).¹¹ Importantly, the portal is a declared opponent of accepting support from the government and political parties. In turn, Direkt36.hu's budget is additionally funded by fees from partners publishing the portal's investigative materials. The funds obtained from the above sources make it possible to finance journalistic investigations, which are published not only on websites but also in friendly traditional media, which serves to increase the reach and influence on the authorities and businesses. Since November 2020, the conservative weekly *Magyar Hírlap* publishes the monthly *Atlatszo*. The initiative called Nyomtasz (‘‘PrintItYourself’’) is intended to be a way to reach the inhabitants of small towns more effectively in printed form. Another formula is the Orszagszerte (‘‘the whole country’’) project endorsed by Atlatszo. This is an idea from 2017 to present local stories to a wide audience from large cities and provinces. The pilot project was funded by an Open Society grant. This is a response to the actions of Fidesz, which took over most of the local media in 2006 (Bognar and Nemeth 2021, 15).

Social media also play an important role in expanding their reach. Atlatszo has launched over a dozen of its own blogs and provides its own blogging platform for valuable guest blogs. The most interesting are Így írunk mi (a constitutional law blog written by Atlatszo's lawyers) and the legal blog Strasbourgi Figyelő (‘‘Strasbourg Monitor’’). The latter summarizes and explains the most important judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in an understandable way to the average reader. Posts on Atlatszo's Facebook account have been viewed by 2.1 million users, and its Facebook page has 112,000 followers. In 2020, Atlatszo's articles were cited, referenced in publications, or mentioned 2,804 times in Hungarian print, electronic and online media.¹²

The subject matter of investigative publications is extensive. Many investigations concern the phenomenon of oligarchy, which is currently a serious problem in Hungary. Investigative journalists expose the oligarchs' actions leading to the expansion of their wealth and power, in which they use state and EU funds and manipulate democratic political institutions. An example is Atlatszo's publication on the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Peter Szijjarto, who used the private yacht of one of the businessmen who regularly won public tenders. This story was additionally publicized by all media independent of the government (Bognar and Nemeth 2021, 15). A similar case was publicized

8. See also: ‘‘Atlatszo—The first nonprofit center for investigative journalism in Hungary.’’ Annual report 2020, Atlatszo, available at <https://english.atlatszo.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/atlatszo-2020-annualreport.pdf>; ‘‘Dziennikarze śledczy uruchamiają międzynarodowy projekt Vsquare.’’ Last modified 2017-10-05, accessed 2023-09-05, <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/dziennikarze-sledczy-uruchamiaja-miedzynarodowy-projekt-vsquare>.

9. See: ‘‘Elindult Uj Péter portálja, a 444.hu’’ published at uj szo.com on April 29, 2013. Accessed 2023-02-04, <https://uj szo.com/kultura/elindult-uj-peter-portalja-a-444hu>.

10. See also: Direkt36, About Us. Accessed 2023-02-04, <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/kik-vagyunk/>.

11. See also: ‘‘Atlatszo—The first nonprofit center...’’ op. cit., page 16; ‘‘Non-profit Journalism for Hungary’’ by Tamás Bodoky, published in *Spotlight on Media Startups from Eastern Europe*, edited by Pauline Tillmann. Bosch Alumni Network, available at <https://www.iac-berlin.org/assets/downloads/2106-Spotlight-Media-Startups-from-Eastern-Europe.pdf>.

12. See also: ‘‘Atlatszo—The first nonprofit center...’’ op. cit., page 13.

Table 3. Data on the **444.hu** website

Year of creation	2013
Founder	Péter Uj
Mode of action	Classic investigative journalism
Staff / type of employment	Experienced investigative journalists
Annual budget/financing	Crowdfunding Non-profit Donations from donators
Awards	Transparency-Göbölös Soma-Díj (2017) Transparency-Göbölös Soma-Díj (2018) European Press Prize (2021) A Minőségi Újságírás Díjat (2022)
Method of presentation of investigation results	444.hu website
Publication language	Hungarian, English
Number of recipients (2020)	Home site (444.hu) — 1–5 million readers
Quotation in hungarian media (2020)	No data
Partner organizations	The Helsinki Committee Blinken Archives of the Open Society Direct36

Table 4. Data on the **direct36.hu** website

Year of creation	2015
Founder	Gergő Sáling, András Pethő, and Balázs Weyer
Mode of action	Classic investigative journalism, creative commons license, data journalism, data visualization, camera drone
Staff / type of employment	Experienced investigative journalists, lawyers, IT specialists, scientists and experts in various fields
Annual budget/financing	Crowdfunding non-profit donations from donators fees from media partners publishing direkt36 materials
Awards	European Press Prize (2016, Nomination) A Minőségi Újságírás Díjat (2021) Transparency-Göbölös Soma-Díj (2021) Transparency-Göbölös Soma-Díj (2022)
Method of presentation of investigation results	direkt36.hu website
Publication language	Hungarian, English
Number of recipients (2020)	Home site (direkt36.hu) — no data
Quotation in hungarian media (2020)	No data
Partner organizations	The Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)

by Atlatszo in 2018. The portal revealed links between the members of the Hungarian elite, including V. Orbán, and the businessman Istvan Garancsi. The latter invited V. Orban to fly to Bulgaria in a private jet. The case outraged public opinion, among other things, because the company Garancsi Market Zrt won government contracts worth millions of dollars. Because of this exposure, the journalists of the portal were attacked by pro-government media (Cooper 2018). Among the known investigations, there was, for example, the disclosure of breaking the secrecy of elections in one of the municipalities—a discussion of the most important Atlatszo investigations can be

found on the website.¹³ The issue of electoral irregularities was also present in the investigations of the 444.hu portal, which in 2014 received a grant of USD 49,500 (over HUF 10 million) from the György Soros Open Society Foundations for this purpose. Szabolcs Panyi from the Direkt36.hu portal revealed, among other things, the agreements between the Kremlin and the Hungarian government, wrote about Chinese influence in Hungary and the role of the German lobby in stopping international criticism of V. Orbán. Another Direkt36.hu journalist, András Szabó, published highly regarded investigations into the Fidesz party and the political decision-making processes of the Orbán administration. Interestingly, the activities of both reporters became the object of interest of the authorities, and their phones were hacked in 2019. This fact was confirmed by the findings of an international journalistic investigation called the Pegasus Project (Bleyer-Simon 2021). Google has also warned Hungarian investigative journalists that they are potential targets of a government-backed cyber-attack attempting to gain access to their accounts.¹⁴ Direkt36.hu's investigations uncovered how the Hungarian government hired a Russian state-owned company to build a nuclear power plant and revealed serious irregularities in EU-funded start-up projects. In the latter investigation, 20,000 pages of leaked documents had to be analyzed. The Direkt36.hu portal also participated in an international journalistic investigation called Panama Papers (Crowley 2019).

The abovementioned portals in various ways try to increase their range, stimulate the interest of citizens in the affairs of the state, and, as a result, increase their own influence on the course of public affairs. For example, *Atlatzso* has been inspired from the very beginning of its operation by the achievements of WikiLeaks and therefore it willingly uses whistleblowers (Valcke, Sükösd, and Picard 2016). For this purpose, the portal has provided various online tools, such as a platform called *MagyarLeaks* for anonymous and safe reporting of outrageous issues to citizens. Another very popular tool is *KiMitTud.org* ("WhoKnowsWhat"), which aims to popularize freedom of information and promote the submission of requests for access to data important from the point of view of the public interest.¹⁵ Other investigative tools include *Tooltarto* ("Toolmaker" — a collection of tools and databases that journalists or citizens can use to investigate) and *Alhírvadász* ("Fake News Hunter"), which enables Internet users to distinguish fake news from real information (Bognar and Nemeth 2021, 14).

Hungarian investigative journalists themselves admit that the effectiveness of their investigations, despite the growing public interest in their publications, is still low. And the punishment does not reach public figures whose activities are exposed by investigative journalists — instead, the sanctions fall on the whistleblowers. Under the rule of Fidesz, the independent Hungarian media face constant economic pressure and intimidation (Mong 2014). It is common practice for politicians and pro-government media to label critical journalists and media as providers of "fake news."¹⁶ Therefore, the work of Hungarian investigative journalists is particularly demanding. According to T. Bodoky, "Hungarian investigative journalism has no veterans. A talented reporter lasts only a few years in such a job, and then, driven to the brink of isolation and moral and financial annihilation, he sets off in search of 'new challenges', as the saying goes." But even with these difficulties, investigative journalism has taken root in Hungarian print and electronic media (Lees 2015).

At the same time, government-independent investigative journalism websites have become an informative counterbalance to pro-government propaganda media. Thanks to them, citizens confront messages which are published by the media favorable to the authorities and make well-considered

13. See: "Why is investigative journalism important? NGOs recall their most memorable stories from the past ten years of *Atlatzso*." (Translated by Zita Szopkó), *Atlatzso*, 2021-08-27. Accessed 2023-09-05, <https://english.atlatzso.hu/2021/08/27/why-is-investigative-journalism-important-ngos-recall-their-most-memorable-stories-from-the-past-ten-years-of-atlatzso/>.

14. See: "Google Warns Hungarian Journalists of Gov't-Backed Cyberattack," published at *Hungary Today* on October 8, 2021. Accessed 2023-09-05, <https://hungarytoday.hu/government-attack-journalists-google-gmail-warns-accounts/>.

15. See: "*Atlatzso* — The first nonprofit center...", op. cit.; "#IndexAwards2015: Digital activism nominee Tamás Bodoky and *Atlatzso*.hu" by Will Hydon. Published at *Index of Censorship* on March 9, 2015. Accessed 2023-02-06, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2015/03/indexawards2015-digital-activism-nominee-tamas-bodoky-atlatzso-hu/>.

16. See: "Hungary" by Eva Bognar, op. cit.

decisions based on facts. And although the portals described are constantly struggling with economic difficulties, according to T. Bodoky, “Non-profit journalism is quickly becoming the only available independent source of information in the country” (Mong 2014).

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