

5. (e-)Participation and propaganda: The mix of old and new technology in Hungarian national consultations

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1 INTRODUCTION

When the Hungarian government announced in February 2020 that a national consultation would soon be held on the country's justice system, citizens largely knew what to expect. Based on the pattern of the previous eight consultations held since Fidesz came to power in 2010, they would receive a printed letter from the prime minister, sent by regular postal service, together with a questionnaire, and there would be a massive propaganda-like campaign to promote the consultation all over state and private television, radio, the press, billboards and Internet channels. The stated goal of the exercise was to secure popular input, but the government would not hide another key purpose: to 'gather societal support so that the government could use this against domestic opposition or possible attacks from international actors, courts and EU institutions' (*Magyar Nemzet*, 2020).

Research has previously demonstrated that national consultations in Hungary were deeply flawed when it came to securing genuine popular input on policy making if evaluated based on content, process, effect, resource efficiency and communication (Batory and Svensson, 2019c). Unlike the fears and debates surrounding the use of information technology by authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China, the Hungarian consultations have been surprisingly old school, with physical mass mailing and posters playing prominent roles. However, there has also been the possibility to participate by filling in the questionnaire online, something which has received less attention. The intersection between populism and participatory governance demonstrates that participatory governance enthusiasts need 'to be more aware not just of the uses, but also the abuses of public input' (Batory and Svensson, 2019c). However, the addition of an online component has not been the subject of research and thus constitutes the focus of this study. The Hungarian case study is instructive as a reminder that e-participation practices are in themselves normatively neutral and can be used for partisan purposes that may serve to enhance democratic quality, but also the opposite.

2 ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Contemporary societies have been transformed by the use of information and communication technology (Dutton, 2004). While agriculture, manufacturing and classic services still consti-

tute important parts of human activity, they are gradually overshadowed by technology that enables the storage, exchange, control and sometimes manipulation of knowledge and data (Bannerman and Orasch, 2019). Social commentary has paid much attention to the effect of this development on the relationship between the state and citizens, with popular media focusing especially on the threat of ‘Big Brother societies’ as well as the potential positive effects on developed and democratic societies (Everett, 2009; Sætra, 2019). At the same time, social science research has been somewhat fragmented, with the impact of big data, surveillance and cyber security (e.g. Dinev et al., 2008; Ju et al., 2018; Weiss and Jankauskas, 2019; Percia David et al., 2020; Vishwanath et al., 2020) being studied separately from research on e-governance (Torres et al., 2006; Porwol et al., 2013; Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016). Where the former literature focuses on risks (e.g. Sundberg, 2019), the latter literature has often been normative, meaning ‘the more participation the better’ (Randma-Liiv and Vooglaid, 2019, p. 11), which may be due to the way e-participation has been promoted by international and regional organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the European Union (EU), or influenced by the literature on collaborative governance, which also often has a normative bias (Batory and Svensson, 2019b). At the same time, the importance of looking at the various ways technology can be used by governments for non-benign purposes is becoming paramount in the light of a global backlash for democracy (Lührmann et al., 2019; Csaky, 2020; Plattner, 2020; Scholte, 2020). While the negative effects on privacy and the increased possibilities for mass surveillance in non-democratic states, such as China, are well known (Wang and Hong, 2010), it is vital to broaden the focus beyond surveillance and extend the geographical scope to include Europe, where the quality of democracy seems to have deteriorated in several countries that are members of the EU, sometimes referred to as backsliding democracies (Sedelmeier, 2014; Sitter and Bakke, 2019). A key component of this is the strengthening of populist parties and their inclusion in or control of governments.

While populism has been an essentially contested concept in social science, current research appears to converge around a thin ideational approach to populism. At the core of this approach is a view of populism as defined by the populists that makes two claims. First, there is a gap between the people (or the ‘common man’) and the current elites (if the populists are not in power) or former elites (if the populists are in power). Second, a ‘common will’ exists that can be distilled (only) by the populist leader or the populist party (Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Hawkins and Littvay, 2019). This approach can also be aligned with the emphasis of populism as a ‘style of rhetoric’ that is grounded in these two components, whereas it ‘remains silent about ... what should be done, what policies should be followed, what decisions should be made’ (Norris and Inglehart, 2019, p. 4). In Europe, Hungary stands out as having being led by a party (Fidesz) that originated as a mainstream party, but transformed into a party embracing these characteristics and winning a supermajority in parliament in 2010 (Batory, 2016) as well as two consecutive parliamentary elections (Krekó and Enyedi, 2018). The national consultations which were initiated by Fidesz and which are investigated in this chapter serve both of these elements. Through replicating direct democracy tools without being constrained by constitutional regulations, the government can claim to have distilled the popular will, and the result can be shown to portray the inability of the left-liberal opposition with its (communist) elite past and, at the same time, portray Hungary as standing against the global liberal left manifested in those international bodies

that regularly criticize Hungary (e.g. the Council of Europe, certain bodies in the European Parliament, sometimes the European Commission) (Krekó and Enyedi, 2018).

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, it addresses whether the addition of an online element changed the way the government portrayed and used national consultations. Second, it seeks to investigate whether the added online element has had an effect on the participatory process in terms of procedural guarantees as well as citizen involvement through responses to questionnaires. This is accomplished by a case study on the two consultations that were the most recent at the time of writing. The selection made it possible to control for the relevance of issue and policy focus, since these differed significantly between the two consultations. The analysed material consists primarily of information in the public domain: speeches by members of the government, notably Prime Minister Viktor Orban, news reports, websites of Hungarian public administration units and analyses from Hungarian and international sources. The decision not to conduct interviews was based on a host of issues related to the political situation in Hungary – in particular legislation and a political campaign targeting Central European University. (On 6 October 2020, the Court of Justice of the EU pronounced the law in question incompatible with EU law (*Commission v Hungary* [Higher education] [C-66/18])). The university subsequently moved most of its operations to Austria. All authors of the chapter were affiliated with Central European University at the time of the research, which made access to decision-makers difficult. However, a written request to the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister in 2020 yielded some basic information, including separate quantitative data print and online submissions. This enabled further analysis, since very few data have been released to the public regarding the consultations beyond the crude numbers of responses to each question. The available sources allow for a preliminary analysis, but future research based on more extensive document archives and testimonies of key participating actors would be needed to solidify the findings and perform a more in-depth analysis.

3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Since the regime change in 1989–1990, Hungary has been considered a leading reformer in the region (see Greskovits, 1999) and this was characterized by relative political stability in the first two decades of Hungary’s political history. The political landscape changed dramatically in 2010, when, thanks largely to the fallout from the 2008 global economic crisis, Fidesz won a qualified majority in parliament. (Fidesz technically sits in a coalition with the Christian Democratic People’s Party, but, to all practical effect, Hungary has a single-party government.) Having changed the electoral law in its favour, Fidesz then won elections in 2014 and 2018 resulting in massive parliamentary majorities, following what many independent observers characterize as democratic backsliding in the country, involving the weakening or takeover of independent institutions, checks and balances in the country’s constitutional order and the rule of law (Sedelmeier, 2014; Bogaards, 2018). As a country with a combined Roman and Central and Eastern Europe public administration, heavily influenced by both Germanic traditions (through Habsburg rule) and legacies of communism and different transition trajectories, Hungary has long been characterized by centralized and hierarchical decision-making procedures (Meyer-Sahling and Yesilkagit, 2011; Kuhlmann and Wollman, 2014). Since Fidesz’s entry into power in 2010, these tendencies have been significantly amplified, including coordination of government units through further centralization (OECD, 2017) and the increased

selectivity with which the government interacts with external actors. In general, civil society has been polarized into one sector that is either openly government friendly and one that is, or is perceived as, oppositional (Greskovits and Wittenberg, 2016; Szalai and Svensson, 2019). The possibility to favour interaction with ‘friendly’ civil society was institutionalized through parts of Act CXXX of 2010 on the adoption of legislation and Act CXXXI of 2010 on Public Participation in Developing Legislation, which allows for long-term ‘strategic partnerships’ to be formed with select organizations, that therefore get privileged access to policy makers (Szalai and Svensson, 2019).

The opportunities provided by the rapid development of information technology have been utilized in an uneven manner in the intersection between policy makers, public administration and citizens. The focus has been on electronic public administration developments, which to a large extent have been co-financed by the EU, first through the Electronic Public Administration Operational Programme (2007–2013) and later the Public Services and Civil Service Development Operational Programme (2014–2020). For instance, early initiatives in the Fidesz-led government aimed to make public services more user friendly, e.g. through establishing so-called ‘government windows’ or one-stop shops for administrative services to citizens (Kovács and Hajnal, 2014), an important part of which was merged databases and new technological interfaces for communication. However, the capacity to absorb new technology at lower levels of government is limited by the lack of resources and training (Budai, 2018). e-Government therefore shows a dual picture. The ratio of citizens that use online channels to access public services is at the EU average (Dán, 2018) even though the ratio of households with Internet access at 83 per cent is still six percentage points below the EU average, with significant rural and poor parts of society excluded (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2019). However, technical development is not mainstreamed or used in innovative ways throughout the administration (Majzikné Bausz, 2008; Kovács and Hajnal, 2014). Hungary was ranked 45 in the United Nations e-government development report in 2018 (United Nations, 2018). In general, less attention has been paid to developing the possibility for citizens to provide input on policy making. There is no overarching legislation on how to include online solutions in policy design and implementation, although a government decree from 2010 implementing Act CXXXI of 2010 on Public Participation in Developing Legislation stipulates that draft legislation should be made accessible online and includes rules for how comments from the public should be collected and summarized (Batory and Svensson, 2019a). Therefore, it is not surprising that a separate e-government law enacted in 2015 only deals with administration–client contact within the framework of public services (Act on e-Government, CCXXII) (*EUGo*, 2015).

4 DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION AND ITS ONLINE COMPONENT

This case study focuses on the online component of the two most recent national consultations: the National Consultation on the Soros Plan, which was carried out in autumn 2017, and the National Consultation on the Protection of the Family, which took place a year later (at the time of writing, spring 2020, a new consultation had been announced but was postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak) (see Table 5.1). These were the last in a series of eight national consultations that had taken place since Fidesz came into power in 2010, which previous research

Table 5.1 Key characteristics of the two Hungarian consultations

	Soros Plan Consultation	Family Protection Consultation
Date	10 October 2017–15 December 2017	6 November 2018–21 December 2018
Opinions received	2,356,811	1,382,294
Of which submitted online	178,491	113,420
Letters submitted	7,939,899	7,886,290
Response rate	29.68%	17.53%
Percentage of online submissions	7.57%	8.21%
Accessibility	N/A	Access for the visually impaired provided

Source: Government of Hungary (2018a, 2019), response to Freedom of Information request 2020.

has demonstrated lacked legal control and transparency – there were no legal guarantees that the results would be taken into consideration during the legislative process and it was not clear whether they fell under the legal category of political survey, opinion poll or something else (Pál, 2016). However, even though the consultations did not meet the standards of tools of direct democracy (Erdős, 2018), the government greatly emphasized them in political communication.

National consultation questionnaires were printed and posted directly to all adult citizens (except the first in 2010, which targeted only pensioners) and generally comprised a letter from the prime minister and a return sheet containing questions with two or more answers. For the two consultations in focus in this chapter, citizens were also given the possibility to submit their answers through a National Consultation website.

The National Consultation on the Soros Plan consisted of seven questions with two answer options related to Hungarian-born American financier and philanthropist George Soros' alleged activities to promote migration. A press interview with one of Fidesz's American chief political consultants later revealed that George Soros was deliberately selected and built up as a target in the party's campaign to personally symbolize the abstract idea that foreign venture capital was attacking Hungary (Grassegger, 2019) and that migration was linked to this. An example of one of the questions demonstrates this tendency: 'The aim of the Soros Plan is for the languages and cultures of European countries to be pushed into the background in order to further the integration of illegal immigrants. Do you support this part of the Soros Plan? Yes/No.' George Soros himself denied that he had any plan to promote migration per se, stating that 'the national consultation contains distortions and outright lies that deliberately mislead Hungarians about my views on migrants and refugees' (Soros, 2017). Based on public statements made by high-level Fidesz party representatives (Kovacs, 2017; Orban 2017a, 2017b), the consultation was meant to serve four goals: to validate the government's policy; to provide the government with legitimacy; to strengthen Hungary's position internationally ('improve the Hungarian national position' in international forums); and to feed into decision-making ('preparation of a certain decision'). Results were presented in December 2017 and were followed up with a legislative package announced in spring 2018 and voted through parliament in June 2018 (see Table 5.2). Almost 2.2 million responses were returned in paper format, whereas less than 200,000 used the online version. While the consultation overwhelmingly

Table 5.2 Results of the National Consultation on the Soros Plan, 2017

Question	Online results		Paper results	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	6.49	93.51	0.31	99.69
2	6.41	93.59	0.31	99.69
3	6.56	93.44	0.33	99.67
4	6.33	93.67	0.28	99.72
5	6.23	93.77	0.31	99.69
6	6.37	93.63	0.29	99.71
7	6.46	93.54	0.38	99.62

Note: See the translation of the questionnaire at <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/national-consultation-on-the-soros-plan>.

Source: Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister.

supported one set of positions, a higher share of persons submitting online chose opposing answers.

The National Consultation on the Protection of the Family was the first national consultation to be undertaken after the government won a third term in the elections held in April 2018. The consultation was announced in early autumn 2018 and sent out to households in late October and November. The theme this time was family policy, even though the link to migration was maintained, as the first question was ‘Do you agree that the shrinking population should not be dealt with through immigration but through the stronger support of families? Yes/No’. The aim to strengthen the government’s anti-migration communication to international audiences was openly stated when the consultation was announced: ‘It is also a possibility to send a strong message – the renewal of Europe is impossible without strengthening families. If the families are strong, the pro-migration forces would have less space’ (State Secretary Csaba Dömötör, Government of Hungary, 2018b). The deadline for returning answers was set for 20 December 2018 and an online platform to vote was added a few weeks before the deadline. As with the previous consultations, this exercise was criticized for biased and misleading content (Kövé, 2018, 2019). The consultation was held at the end of the campaign ‘Year of Families’, and the majority of new family policy measures had been introduced or announced prior to the consultation itself, implying that the consultation was more about promoting government policy than an instrument for gauging public opinion. The overall number of responses was significantly lower than in the previous consultation, but the share of online responses was somewhat higher. The answers were more varied in general and between online and paper submissions, but the trend that online respondents were somewhat more critical of official government policy continued (see Table 5.3).

To the user, the online version of the consultations was straightforward and simple. Instead of sending the return sheet by post, respondents only needed to visit a website, provide their name and e-mail address and indicate their age. Respondents also had to state that they had read the data protection notice and that they were Hungarian citizens. According to the privacy policy published on the website, answers to the questionnaire were collected anonymously. This means that their personal data were only stored for a limited period of time and dealt with separately from the survey answers. Based on interviews and data requests, Rossi (2017)

Table 5.3 Results of the National Consultation on the Protection of the Family, 2018

Question	Online results		Paper results	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	97.17	2.83	99.36	0.64
2	93.62	6.38	97.87	2.13
3	96.03	3.97	98.35	1.65
4a	93.51	6.49	96.11	3.89
4b	89.80	10.20	93.69	6.31
5	90.60	9.40	94.00	6.00
6	95.73	4.27	97.97	2.03
7	97.10	2.90	98.94	1.06
8	97.63	2.37	99.53	0.47
9	96.38	3.62	99.00	1.00
10	95.32	4.68	97.70	2.30

Note: See the translation of the questionnaire at <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/heres-the-english-version-of-hungarys-national-consultation-on-the-protection-of-the-family>.

Source: Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister.

found that data were sufficiently anonymized. Control for participation, however, was latent: there were no barriers to participation, such as thorough and reliable identification procedures. The downside of this simplicity was that the system was not protected against accidental or deliberate misuse. As pointed out by Rossi (2017) and Pál (2016), there were no guarantees integrated in the online submission forms that only citizens submitted answers to the questions or that only one answer per citizen was submitted. When this process drew criticism, government spokespersons said they trusted ‘in the good faith of voters and that each voter would only fill out the questionnaire once’. Moreover, it was highlighted that not so many would use the opportunity to reply electronically (Government of Hungary, 2017b). The platform continued to allow multiple submissions by the same person during the National Consultation on the Protection of the Family in late 2018. What did develop between the two consultations was that the latter made software available to aid the visually impaired at the request of the Hungarian Federation for the Blind and Partially Sighted (Government of Hungary, 2018d). This may have been highlighted in communication as a way to demonstrate the government’s willingness to listen to what it considers credible parts of civil society. Despite this, the Hungarian Federation for the Blind and Partially Sighted found numerous faults with the accessibility of the online consultation, which led to a meeting with representatives in the Prime Minister’s Office in spring 2019 on how to improve subsequent consultations (Hungarian Federation for the Blind and Partially Sighted, 2019).

As for the outcome of the consultations, few data were released to the public. For instance, the same website that was used for the submission of answers subsequently contained only a link to a short summary of the results, limited to a basic description, such as the total number of answers and the percentages allocated to each response option. In connection with the National Consultation on the Soros Plan, members of parliament from opposition parties sought to verify the process of the consultation and the data communicated by the government, but only had the opportunity to visit three sites where the physical handling of questionnaires

happened. The visits were restrictive in time and extent, since the two parliamentarians only had 90 minutes for their inspection, including travel time between the venues (*Magyar Nemzet*, 2017). Instead of receiving verification of the integrity of the data collection process, the public learned from the government that those opposition politicians were acting in line with the Soros Plan and that they offended the people who submitted the answers (Government of Hungary, 2017a). Both the Soros Plan and the Protection of the Family consultations were communicated as a success, with predictable overwhelming support for the government's position and their planned actions (Government of Hungary, 2018c, 2019). According to the information provided by the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister on the Freedom of Information request by the authors of this chapter, there were practical differences between the handling and storage of the physical and online responses. While answers received by post needed to be digitalized (mainly by a human workforce), the online responses were processed fully without human contribution. Online responses are stored only digitally, while the storage of paper submissions is done both physically and electronically.

5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The consultations were designed, promoted and executed by the government. Within the government, the Prime Minister's Office was the most important unit for the national consultations and organizing and communicating the initiative. The Ministry of the Interior, which is responsible for the legal framework and the development of e-government services, or the National Council for Telecommunications and Informatics (NHIT), which is an advisory body to the government, seemed to play no significant role. The technical implementation of the online platform of the consultations was outsourced to private companies. Other than the name of the companies handling the physical copies of the consultations, very little was disclosed to the public about the companies' involvement. What can be reconstructed based on a subsequent report and ruling by the Data Protection Authority indicated that the Prime Minister's Office signed a framework contract with the companies New Land Media and Lounge Design in February 2017 (Hungarian National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information, 2017). These were technically separate companies specialized in media planning and marketing communication, respectively, but both were part of the same Lounge Group, which counted several ministries and other state agencies among its clients (Bruckner, 2018; Spirk, 2018; Lounge Group, 2019). The National Consultation website appeared to be formally owned by the Hungarian Prime Minister's Office, but jointly administered by the Office and the New Land Media and Lounge Design companies. The funding came directly from the central budget under the line 'tasks related to governmental communication and consultations', which was around 65 million euro, or 20 billion forint, in the years 2017 and 2018 (Central Budget: Act XC. 2016, Act C. 2017).

In a country known for excessive regulatory activity (OECD, 2017), it is striking that there was no dedicated legislation governing the consultations and the online platform and that the conduct of consultations lacked transparency (Pál, 2016). National consultations do not satisfy the principles set in Act CXXXI of 2010 on social inclusion in legislation. Remarkably, there was no central website containing data for all of the consultations that have been held. The online platform mentioned in the previous paragraph was only used for the actual (latest) consultation on family policy and even then only a short summary of the results was made

available to the public. This lack of public archiving casts serious doubt on the validity of the response rates and the breakdown of answers mentioned by government spokespeople, since no independent actor – public authority, media, civil bodies or opposition parties – can verify the accuracy of the statements concerning either the online or the traditional paper-based version of the consultations.

6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

Even though online options were available for both of the analysed consultations, it is notable that this option did not feature highly in government communication and not at all in any of the speeches that were held and recorded in Hungarian parliament and mentioned in the national consultations. It is questionable whether the general objectives of the online platform can be discerned from those that were stated for the overall consultation (validation of existing policies, provision of legitimacy for the government, strengthening the position of the country in a hostile international environment and input on decision-making). We can speculate about the motivation for an online option having been to increase the total response rate, appear technology friendly or provide work for information technology companies favoured by the government, but there is no evidence for any of these. It is clear, however, that a high overall response rate was important to secure those objectives and, for the government, the outcome of the consultation on the Soros Plan, at least, seems to have met expectations – with the caveat, as mentioned above, that no independent actor could actually verify the government’s claims on the outcome. The result was hailed as ‘the most successful consultation of all time’ as 2,356,811 opinions were received (2,178,320 by post and 178,491 online) (Government of Hungary, 2018a). The government did not comment on the ratio between online and post submissions, but merely communicated the fact. The latest consultation on family policy had fewer responses and there was no information available on the number of online submissions (Government of Hungary, 2019). The data included earlier in this chapter were received from a Freedom of Information request by the authors to the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister in 2020.

The low share of electronic responses may reflect the relatively low level of digital penetration in Hungary outside the capital city, the low level of familiarity with e-participation practices and/or the low level of trust towards the digital platform of the consultations themselves. In line with international trends, young people overwhelmingly use the Internet daily (93 per cent), but among the elderly (above 65), this drops to 22 per cent. Data from the Central Statistical Office also show that a significant proportion of those not using e-government services specified a lack of skills (11 per cent) or concerns about data protection (13 per cent) as reasons for relying on traditional methods for interacting with the authorities (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2019). Since there is no demographic or public opinion data on those that submitted online responses to the national consultation, we do not know how well these characteristics of e-government fit them and if that can explain the low uptake of the online version. Likewise, the somewhat higher ratio of respondents opposing the official government line in the online version cannot be explained without more demographic and geographic data.

Other reasons for the low use of the electronic platform for the consultation may include the absence of a concerted effort to involve diverse segments of society (e.g. people with disabilities or from minorities). This was partially changed during the consultation in 2018 as

accessibility for reading aides was developed. Another possible exception is the differential mobilization of the population: the governing party was generally more popular among rural voters (support for Fidesz tends to be higher in the countryside than in urban areas), and the national consultation may have followed this pattern in terms of a higher than average return rate from Fidesz's heartlands. Internet penetration is lower outside Budapest (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2016), which may have led to more respondents returning hard copies.

Unrelated to the technical means of submission (print and postal or online), the consultation was deeply flawed with respect to questionnaire methodology: the questions were framed to lead to the 'desired' answer and create or maintain misperceptions or incorrect information. The process was also deficient in procedural guarantees, for example, in the absence of external or independent actors to verify the results, and in the way the online version allowed for multiple submissions. The process before, during and after the online element was added to the consultation was opaque. There was little publicly available data. In terms of policy impact, the online and offline national consultation on the Soros Plan was followed by a Soros Legislation Package, which, among other things, introduced a tax on any externally funded organization that carries out activities in support of migration. The government argued that this came as a consequence of the national online consultation. However, given that the consultations confirmed Fidesz's positions on the policy issues at stake, it is plausible that these developments would have taken place even in the absence of a consultation.

The results from the consultation on the family policy were widely used in government communication as evidence that Fidesz's vision enjoyed wide support from the electorate. There is no evidence of any changes in collaboration practices with stakeholders as a result of the online national consultation, i.e. it had no demonstrable influence on the dynamics of external participatory practices (lobbying, petitioning, neo-corporatist practices, etc.). It should also be noted that the process of consultations did not seem to significantly stimulate the participation of marginalized social groups, although it has led to a discussion on and advocacy by citizens with impaired vision. To sum up, the addition of an online component did not significantly enhance or change the overall dynamics of national consultations. It actually decreased the transparency of rules and procedures for the submission of input as there was no guarantee that online respondents were citizens, which was an eligibility criterion for participation, and there were no efforts to prevent multiple submissions. Both the offline and online options lacked clarity on how and on what grounds citizen input would be considered.

7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The most decisive factors for the performance of the e-participation initiative were the national context combined with the individual characteristics of the country's highest political leadership. However, much research assumes that participatory instruments employed by governments genuinely seek to ensure public involvement in decision-making (Michels and De Graaf, 2010; Batory and Svensson, 2017), whereas in the case of the Hungarian national consultations, even the government's own communication confirmed that a main goal of the exercise was to validate and/or generate support for existing policy positions and, in this sense, served the partisan goals of the party in power.

In the context of collaborative and participatory governance initiatives, the Hungarian national consultations stand out in several respects. First, while the initiator – the government – argued that the consultations would inform policy making, it appears that the questions sent out in hard copy or offered online mainly served to demonstrate popular support for the (ideological) position held by the government. The consultations did not provide new information about popular preferences, or at least not in a way that independent observers would accept. The methodology of the consultations was flawed since the questions very clearly led the respondent to pick the ‘correct’ answer. The consultation was, for this reason, not effective, at least in the sense of a ‘neutral’ participatory exercise. It was however a very effective measure for Fidesz to get its partisan message across, using public resources while doing so.

The electronic platform of the consultations, in particular, does not stand up to closer scrutiny. The clear acknowledged yet dismissed potential for abuse by government spokesmen makes the results of the e-consultation highly questionable: there was a possibility for one respondent to submit the questionnaire several times, there were doubts regarding data protection issues and there was no possibility for verification of the results by an independent agency or external observers, be they opposition parties or civil society groups. With respect to democratic legitimacy and transparency, the national consultation in general and the online component in particular did not live up to international norms and standards. The effect on policy design and collaboration with civil society and private actors appears to be negligible, even though the consultations were followed by legislative packages. As discussed in this chapter, the exercise of national consultations served more as a dissemination tool for the government’s political agenda, and they were used to confirm previously formed political decisions. At the same time, the discernible difference between the online and print versions, both in terms of response rate and distribution of answers to specific questions, demonstrates the need for further research on this topic.

In conclusion:

[The] Hungarian case suggests that manipulated consultation processes can serve at least three political purposes: they lend (more) credibility and authority to governments’ claims of merely serving the popular will while following their essentially partisan agenda; they provide effective ammunition against criticism, particularly from the international arena; and they provide opportunity for shaping public opinion through propaganda and political marketing ‘dressed up’ as participatory governance. (Batory and Svensson, 2019c, p. 238)

The addition of an online component did not change this situation. We share the argument of Rossi (2017) on the role of trust in participative consultative processes: trust in the neutrality and anonymity of the consultative process must be established in order to consider it a real element of a participatory democracy. It could, however, be argued that online participation made the weakness of procedural guarantees even more glaring to those already critical of the government’s national consultation process.

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