

HOW TO TALK ABOUT ORBAN'S DECREE AGAINST CHARITABLE GIVING

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This is a short, reactive communications guide addressed to activists in Hungary targeted by the recently adopted [decree against charitable giving](#). Although it is unclear if the decree will remain in force in its current form, the communications advice in this guide remains relevant for attacks on NGOs in general. The suggested messages have not been tested but are based on the best available research and practice on analogous issues.

The pattern of authoritarian messaging

As Hungary is in the run-up to elections, it's likely that many of the laws and policies pursued by Fidesz between now and then are aimed at increasing their chances of remaining in power. One of the government's aims will be to keep criticism of its failures out of public debate, and instead shape public debate in a way that motivates its voter base, discourages opposition voters from turning out and splits the opposition party coalition.

The government will stoke public anxieties with messaging that is designed to make voters feel that their safety, health, culture, religion, economy, laws, and traditional social hierarchies are under threat. It will probably identify the source of the threat as either a marginalised group (such as people who migrate, feminists, LGBTQI persons, an ethnic minority, or people without homes) or people and institutions from among the majority population who are said to be protecting these marginalised groups (such as NGOs, philanthropists, the

EU, independent journalists, certain politicians or progressive voters) or both.

This kind of fear-based messaging stimulates support for authoritarian attitudes and policies among voters, such as policies that: discriminate against minorities, punish persons who migrate, limit civil liberties, concentrate power in a strongman-style leader, increase military spending, and create a strong law-and-order approach to crime. The recent [hate law](#) restricting the right of children to receive education and information concerning gender identity and sexual orientation is a recent example of this. To learn more about how authoritarians message, see Liberties' book '[Countering populist authoritarians: Where their support comes from and how to counter their success](#)'.

What's behind the decree against charitable giving?

Considering the [decision](#) of the Court of Justice on the first anti-NGO law, the Hungarian government is probably well aware that this decree is likely to conflict with a number of elements of EU law, such as the GDPR and rules on free movement of capital, alone and in conjunction with the freedoms of association and expression, protected by the Charter of Fundamental Rights. This suggests that the decree is intended as a shorter-term measure to disrupt the work of civil society organisations that might criticise the government for its failings. The decree does this in two ways.

First, and most obviously, by deterring supporters from making donations. With less money available to them, NGOs have fewer resources to do their job of scrutinising the government, keeping the public informed and helping citizens organise to voice their concerns, for example through protests, petitions, and other forms of campaigning.

The second way in which the decree could disrupt the work of civil society is its potential to direct the focus of public debate. On the one hand, by focusing public discussion away from issues that hurt the government's chances of re-election, on the other hand, by entrenching a narrative about NGOs that makes the public see them (and their criticisms) as untrustworthy. The government's narrative is that NGOs are meddling in Hungarian politics in a way that is against the nation's interests and that to guard against this, NGOs should be transparent about their funding. As of the time of writing, it does not seem that the government has yet dedicated much attention to promoting this narrative specifically around this decree. Even if government messaging on this decree remains low-key, it still poses a potential communications trap for NGOs, because they are likely to respond publicly to the decree.

How is the decree a communications trap?

The risk is that NGOs respond to this decree by communicating about it in a way that reaffirms Fidesz's framing. The government's framing of NGOs is that they are illegitimately meddling

in national politics, against national interests. Once this frame that NGOs are a 'problem' takes hold in public debate, then transparency becomes an obvious 'solution'. This means that it is not enough merely to argue over the proportionality or appropriateness of donor transparency. Rather, activists need to change the way NGOs are framed and replace the 'meddler' frame with a different frame.

Examples of arguments to avoid, that could reinforce the damaging 'meddler' frame include:

- People are entitled to donate to charitable causes anonymously, so this decree violates the privacy of donors.
- NGOs have a right to operate and have access to funding, including access to donations, and requiring donors to reveal themselves will make people reluctant to donate and make it harder for NGOs to function.
- Everyone should be transparent about their funding, we embrace transparency, here's how we're funded and here's an explanation about why so much of our funding comes from other governments, foundations and international organisations.

These arguments should not be the focus of NGOs' communications around the decree, because they're still essentially about transparency. Either that while transparency is a legitimate goal, requiring donors to reveal themselves is disproportionate. Or that transparency is simply not legitimate at all when it

comes to charitable donations. Or that transparency is great.

These arguments don't challenge the way that the problem is framed, which is that NGOs are meddling in politics and acting against the national interest. Instead, these arguments keep the conversation about the appropriateness of transparency as a solution. And this reinforces the government's framing that NGOs are trying to conceal wrongdoing. The third argument carries an additional problem. It invites hostile media outlets and the government to emphasise how much funding comes from entities outside the country. Public opinion [research](#) from Bulgaria suggests that the general public has little understanding of how civil society is normally funded and seem uncomfortable with funds from outside the country, with the exception of EU funding. If NGOs feed public debate on foreign sources of income, even with the best of intentions, it would likely help to reaffirm the government narrative that NGOs are not acting in the country's best interests.

Activists should also avoid directly contradicting the government narrative. An argument like: 'this is not about transparency, it's about stopping donations to NGOs because the government is afraid of us' is problematic, because it restates the 'transparency' frame, and it puts it at the front of your message. Research shows that negating a frame ends up reinforcing it. [Don't think of an elephant](#). What are you thinking of?

While it's good to point to the real reason behind the decree, campaigners need to go

a step further than saying that this is about defunding NGOs. Activists need to additionally explain why promoting the existence of NGOs connects to something their audience values. And they need to open their communications with this appeal to shared values. If the audience is not first made to appreciate how NGOs fulfil their values, then they're less likely to share activists' view that defunding NGOs is problematic.

What to say instead?

The government's 'meddler' frame is essentially a piece of misinformation. To challenge misinformation, experts suggest a three step '[truth sandwich](#)'.

First, say what you stand for, and what you're promoting.

This could focus on explaining what NGOs do in general, or on the thematic goals of particular NGOs. In explaining why NGOs matter or why they should be protected, activists need to avoid using technical language. No one outside their existing core of supporters will understand what 'freedom of association' or the 'European Convention on Human Rights' are, or how they connect to things the audience values.

The first example below explains anti-corruption in a non-technical way that connects to values around social justice, solidarity and equality. The second example explains the freedom of association in a non-technical way

that connect to values around our freedom to express ourselves and exert control over how we are governed. Activists could elaborate similar explanations for other issues they work on, such as the rule of law, media freedom or equality.

Some further examples of how to break down particular rights in a way that appeals to shared values are available in Liberties' guides on ['How to talk about human rights during COVID-19'](#) and ['How to talk about ethnic profiling: A guide for campaigners.'](#)

e.g. "Most of us want the same things - a fair paying job that allows us to put food on the table, a roof over our heads and free time to enjoy with our family and friends. As NGOs, we work to make sure politicians invest public money in things that benefit the public. Whether that's having roads that get our children to school or hospitals that help keep our loved ones healthy. We want a country where these opportunities are available to all of us."

e.g. "When we elect our representatives, we expect them to use the power we have given them to do what's best for all of us. But this means that they need to listen to citizens while they are in power. NGOs are like a bridge between citizens and our leaders. We help keep citizens informed of the decisions our representatives make and we help citizens get organised and speak to our leaders with one voice when they have concerns."

Second, allude to what the government is doing without repeating their message.

The first example puts the government's attacks against NGOs in a broader context and points to the underlying motivation of the ruling party as self-enrichment at the expense of the public. The second example also contextualises the attacks, but places more emphasis on how it's part of a plan to divide-and-rule.

e.g. "But instead of investing our taxes in things like health care, education and social security, certain politicians are giving lucrative contracts to their business friends while taking kickbacks. And as a result, our hospitals and welfare system are collapsing. The ruling party is desperate to be re-elected so it can keep making money. That's why it has to silence its critics. And so they try to point the finger for hard times at NGOs, independent journalists and anyone else who exposes their failings. The decree against charitable giving is just one example of that."

e.g. "But instead of listening to citizens' worries about our roads, schools and hospitals, some politicians are trying to spread hatred between us. Putting rural and urban Hungarians against each other, attacking newcomers, independent journalists and NGOs. Why? Because they are desperate to win the elections so they can take more power. And the only way they can do this is by distracting us from their failings and dividing us against each other. The decree against charitable giving is just one example of that."

Third, come back to your message.

Below are two examples of how activists could come back to their main message, sticking with the themes of corruption and government-spread hatred.

e.g. “Through our work we support Hungarians to come together to demand that our leaders invest in all of us, rather than in themselves and their friends. We will continue pointing out how our leaders can do better for everyone. And we will continue working to make Hungary a country where our leaders provide us and our children the chance of good health and a decent education.”

e.g. “We support Hungarians to come together across all walks of life to talk to our leaders about their concerns. When we join across our differences we can demand that our representatives listen to us and work for all of us, no matter who we pray, who we love, where we live or our colour. No leader who really cares about their people should be trying to stop that.”

Final remarks

To avoid reaffirming the government's frame of NGOs, it's important that activists lead with their own message about what they stand for. Activists should focus on what they do and how this brings our shared values to life, in non-technical language. This does not mean that activists should totally ignore the government's narrative. Rather, spokespersons should deal with this in second place, by alluding to it rather than repeating it, explaining why the government is peddling misinformation, and then coming back to your own message.