

Viktor Orbán accused of using Pegasus to spy on journalists and critics

By Shaun Walker

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Viktor Orbán's government has deployed a new weapon in its war on the media in Hungary, according to forensic analysis of several mobile devices, using some of the world's most invasive spyware against investigative journalists and the circle of one of the country's last remaining independent media owners.

The Pegasus project, a collaborative investigation run by the French nonprofit journalism organisation Forbidden Stories, has reviewed leaked records that suggest a wide range of people in [Hungary](#) were selected as potential targets before a possible hacking attempt with the sophisticated Pegasus spyware, sold by the Israeli company NSO Group. In a number of cases, forensic analysis confirmed devices had been infected with Pegasus.

The leaked data includes the phone numbers of people who appear to be targets of legitimate national security or criminal investigations.

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What is in the Pegasus project data?

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However, the records also include the numbers of at least 10 lawyers, an opposition politician and at least five journalists.

The phones of two journalists at the Hungarian Pegasus project partner, the investigative outlet Direkt36, were successfully infected with the spyware, including Szabolcs Panyi, a well-known reporter with a wide range of sources in diplomatic and national security circles.

Forensic analysis of his device by Amnesty International stated conclusively it had been repeatedly compromised by Pegasus during a seven-month period in 2019, with the infection often coming soon after comment requests made by Panyi to Hungarian government officials.



📷 Szabolcs Panyi, left, and colleague András Szabó. Photograph: Andras Petho/Direkt36

Pegasus enables the attacker to view all content on a phone, including messages from apps with end-to-end encryption, photographs and GPS location data. It can also turn the device into an audio or video recorder. NSO has claimed the spyware is only meant for use against serious criminals and terrorists.

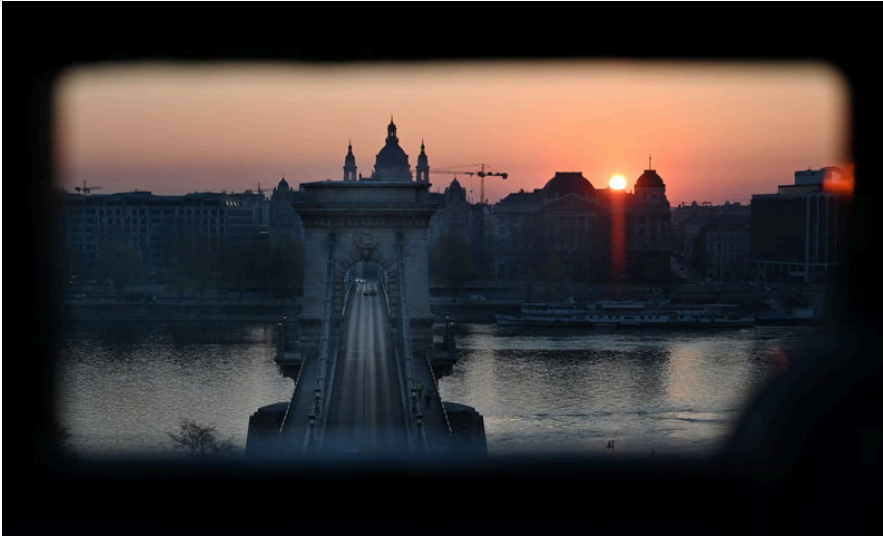
Panyi thinks some in the Orbán government believe independent journalists are part of a conspiracy against them. “I think there’s widespread paranoia and they see much more in our motives and our networks than there actually is,” he said.

“We are not aware of any alleged data collection claimed by the request,” said a Hungarian government spokesperson in response to detailed questions about the targeting of Panyi and others.

[NSO Group said](#) it “does not have access to the data of its customers’ targets”, cast doubt on the significance of the leaked data and said it would “continue to investigate all credible claims of misuse and take appropriate action”.

Previously, Orbán’s spokesperson Zoltán Kovács has [publicly attacked](#) Panyi, accusing him of “Orbánophobia and Hungarophobia” and describing him as “deep into political activism”.

Since Orbán became prime minister in 2010, Hungary has fallen from 23rd to 92nd in the World Press Freedom Index. Earlier this month, Reporters Without Borders put Orbán on its Enemies of Press Freedom list, the first time an EU leader has featured.



📷 Sunrise in Budapest. There are few remaining Hungarian media outlets that are not under some kind of government control. Photograph: Attila Kisbenedek/AFP via Getty Images

There have been almost no cases of physical violence against journalists in Hungary; instead, Orbán's war of attrition against the media has used different means. These have included harassment of independent journalists, pressure on media owners, withdrawing state advertising funds from critical titles and aggressive takeovers by government-friendly figures.

When his forensics report came through, Panyi sat down in Direkt36's Budapest newsroom, a modest suite of offices inside a grand building one block from the Danube, and sketched out a chart in blue pen.

On the left-hand side: dates on which he sent official requests for comment to the Hungarian government. On the right: dates on which forensic analysis shows his phone was compromised by Pegasus.

The correlation was hard to ignore. On 3 April 2019, for example, Panyi sent a request for comment to several government departments in relation to a story he was working on about a Russian bank that was relocating to Budapest despite concerns it could be a front for Russian intelligence. One day later, Panyi's phone was infected with Pegasus.

There were 11 occasions when a Pegasus infection was confirmed within a few days of a comment request from Panyi to the government, according to Amnesty's analysis.

More than half the comment requests he sent to various government offices during a seven-month period were followed up with an attack. The tactic, he assumes, was for the government to get ahead of the story, work out what he was planning to publish and attempt to identify his sources.

Analysis carried out on the phone of one of Panyi's colleagues at Direkt36, András Szabó, also returned positive results. Direkt36 is one of just a few remaining Hungarian outlets not under some kind of governmental control or influence.

Other Hungarians selected for potential targeting include a photographer who worked as a fixer for a visiting foreign journalist, and a well-known investigative journalist, who declined to have forensic analysis done or to be named, citing a fear of losing sources.

Another Hungarian journalist selected as a candidate for possible surveillance was Dávid Dercsényi, who edits a newspaper put out by the authority of Budapest's opposition-run eighth district and previously worked for five years for the website of the independent outlet HVG.

Three numbers linked to Dercsényi, including one belonging to his ex-wife that had been registered in his name, were found in the data.

He expressed puzzlement his name was in the data. "Mostly I was working on average, not-very-sensitive topics," he said. He suspects a request for comment sent to the government over a story about the trial of a former Islamic State operative could have drawn attention. He was no longer in possession of any of the three phones appearing in the data, so analysis was not possible.



📷 More than 70 editorial staff at index.hu walked out of the newsroom after submitting resignations following Szabolcs Dull's dismissal as editor in July 2020. Photograph: Bódey János/Index

The [decline of](#) the major online news site Index last year, under pressure from a government-linked businessman, left 24.hu, owned by the wealthy investor Zoltán Varga, as the biggest independent news site in the country.

Varga has long been in Orbán's crosshairs. In an interview on the terrace of his grand villa in the Buda Hills, he described receiving both enticements and threats from government-linked businesspeople to sell 24.hu and the rest of his sizeable media portfolio, which includes the country's bestselling women's magazine. On one occasion, he claims, he was told he would receive generous state advertising subsidies if he made editorial staffing changes.

📺 Pegasus: the spyware technology that threatens democracy – video

"They think everything is about money. But I already have money ... Slowly I turned into an enemy," he said.

He began to notice men in parked cars outside his home and unwanted eavesdroppers on his business meetings in restaurants. He said sometimes in the middle of a phone call, he would hear a recording of the call played back, from the beginning. On one occasion, a black helicopter hovered above his house and made three incursions into his garden – an intimidation tactic, he believes. Varga has round-the-clock security at his home and has long been wary of speaking on the phone.



📷 The Hungarian investor Zoltán Varga. Photograph: Central Media Group

He was right to be worried. A few weeks after Orbán won a third consecutive term as prime minister [in spring 2018](#), Varga invited six friends to dinner. Among them was Attila Chikán, a minister in Orbán’s first government in the late 1990s, who has since become a staunch critic of the prime minister. The others were wealthy and well-connected businessmen.

Over wine and finger food on Varga’s expansive terrace, the men discussed creating a new foundation that among other things would investigate and expose corruption among Hungary’s ruling elite. “It was a friendly conversation, it wasn’t a coup,” said Varga.

Two weeks later he met a government-linked acquaintance for coffee and she demonstratively referenced the dinner, suggesting such meetings could be “dangerous” for him. Varga suspected Orbán’s circle had somehow put the meeting under surveillance.

Indeed, the records show all seven people at the dinner were selected as potential candidates for surveillance. Forensic analysis carried out on the handset of one of those present showed clear evidence of a confirmed infection at the time of the dinner. The phone of another participant showed signs of Pegasus activity but not of compromise.

► Q&A

What is the Pegasus project?

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One of those present expressed surprise the meeting had attracted such attention. “It was a typical Hungarian discussion. We sat down, everybody said: ‘Fuck, the situation is really bad,’ but then it did not lead anywhere,” he said.

Along with Varga’s circle, the son and lawyer of the oligarch Lajos Simicska, Orbán’s [childhood friend turned enemy](#), also appear to have been candidates for surveillance around the time that Simicska was pressured into selling his critical media holdings to government-friendly figures in 2018.

Ajtony Csaba Nagy, Simicska’s lawyer, recalled noticing strange sounds or replayed conversations during phone calls in 2018. “It also happened that some information appeared in the press that we only discussed on the phone, nowhere else,” he told Direkt36.

Hungary, Israel and Pegasus

A former NSO employee confirmed Hungary was among the company’s clients. It apparently acquired Pegasus in the aftermath of a 2017 visit to the country by the then Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, a close Orbán ally. NSO has denied it takes any direction from the Israeli government when choosing its customers.



📷 Benjamin Netanyahu and Viktor Orbán shake hands at a joint press conference in Budapest in 2017. Photograph: AFP Contributor/AFP/Getty Images

In response to detailed allegations about Hungary’s acquisition and use of Pegasus, a Hungarian government spokesperson said: “Hungary is a democratic state governed by the rule of law, and as such, when it comes to any individual it has always acted and continues to act in accordance with the law in force. In Hungary, state bodies authorised to use covert instruments are regularly monitored by governmental and non-governmental institutions.”

Hungary has one of the loosest legislative frameworks in [Europe](#) for the authorisation of surveillance. There is no judicial oversight if the request is made for national security reasons; only the signature of the minister of justice is required.

Information released to the Hungarian outlet 168 Óra under a freedom of information request showed the justice minister, Judit Varga, approved 1,285 surveillance requests in 2020, which includes all forms of surveillance, not just Pegasus.

In an earlier interview with a Pegasus project partner, Varga said it was a “provocation” to ask whether she would authorise surveillance of a journalist, but said “there are so many dangers to the state everywhere” when asked why she had approved so many requests. The justice ministry did not respond to detailed allegations about Hungary’s use of Pegasus.

The government communications office, when presented with the same allegations, replied with questions of its own: “Have you asked the same questions of the governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany or France? In the case you have, how long did it take for them to reply and how did they respond? Was there any intelligence service to help you formulate the questions?”

Orbán has built his political platform on staunchly opposing migration and [claiming](#) Hungary is under attack from a network directed by the Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist George Soros.

The leaked data reveals at least one case in which Pegasus appears to have been used in the hope of uncovering – or inventing – a “Soros conspiracy”.

One of the numbers in the data belonged to Adrien Beauquin, a Belgian-Canadian PhD student.



 Adrien Beauquin. Photograph: Szabolcs Nagy/Index

On paper, he was the perfect “villain” for the Orbán government: a gender studies student at Central European University (CEU), an institution founded by Soros. At the time, the government was in the process both of [ending the teaching of gender studies](#) in Hungary and of [forcing CEU out of the country](#).

Beauduin was arrested at a protest in Budapest in December 2018 and charged with assaulting police officers, which carries a sentence of up to eight years in prison. He denies he was in any way violent towards police.

Beauduin's lawyer, Kata Nehéz-Posony, said there was "no real evidence" against him except for police testimony that was copied word for word from the case of another person arrested.

She said she suspected the arrest was "highly politically motivated". On 14 December, a few days after the arrest, the then communications chief of Orbán's Fidesz party publicly noted that "the pro-immigration Soros network is organising violent demonstrations in Budapest".

Analysis of Beauduin's phone showed Pegasus activity on the device shortly after this, though no sign of successful infection. Eventually, the most serious charges against him were dropped, suggesting nothing incriminating was found.

A former senior Hungarian counter-intelligence officer who left the service in the early part of the last decade admitted there was a flexible approach to concocting national security reasons for surveillance during his time. "[But] there were two professions we kept our distance from: lawyers and journalists," he said.

The leaked records, and the analysis of infected devices, suggest that in Orbán's Hungary today, this is no longer the case.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/jul/18/viktor-orban-using-nso-spyware-in-assault-on-media-data-suggests>