



**SOVEREIGNTY
PROTECTION OFFICE**

THE NETWORK ACTOR: SZABOLCS PANYI

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In its analyses and inquiries, the Sovereignty Protection Office has – on multiple occasions over the past two years – identified Szabolcs Panyi as a network actor financed and directed by principals with Democratic affiliations in the European Commission and the United States. The media outlets and organisations associated with him have been characterised as political instruments of the transatlantic pressure-exertion infrastructure. It is important to emphasise that the role of Szabolcs Panyi can only be interpreted within this specific, layered network structure, particularly in relation to operations conducted against Hungary with disinformation objectives and intelligence backgrounds. Outside this system of relations, he has no independent influence or impact: the awards he has received for his purported journalistic activity are “operational commendations,” rather than milestones of a genuine and valuable professional career. Panyi’s life trajectory and network of connections extend across the entirety of the active network operating in Hungary and Europe.

Establishing connections with the network

- Szabolcs Panyi’s network of connections has been significantly shaped by his fellowships in the United States – the Edward R. Murrow Program (2014) and the Fulbright–Humphrey Fellowship (2017–2018) – as well as by programmes launched by Transparency International.
- The Murrow Programme is funded by the Poynter Institute¹; in addition to Panyi, participants in the programme included Szabolcs Vörös (journalist and photojournalist at Válasz Online), Márton Gulyás (editor-in-chief of Partizán), and Ádám Ficsor (Minister without portfolio responsible for the civilian national security services in the government of Gordon Bajnai, later CEO of DatAdat).
- In 2018, Panyi conducted research at the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), operating under the auspices of the Washington, D.C.–based Atlantic Council. The DFRLab is part of the Open Information Partnership (OIP), which operates under the direction of the Zinc Network², an organisation responsible for distributing substantial USAID funding.³ Members of the OIP include Átlátszó, Political Capital, and Globsec. The parent organisation of the DFRLab, the Atlantic Council, maintains close ties with the U.S. government and NATO, and its leadership includes former senior intelligence (CIA) and military officials. Among its members are Dávid Korányi – founder of Action for Democracy, which played a key role in the prohibited foreign financing schemes uncovered in connection with the 2022 elections – as well as Gordon Bajnai.

1 The Poynter Institute established the International Fact-Checking Network, of which the Centre for Sustainable Media, founded by Péter Erdélyi, is also a member. The Centre for Sustainable Media has been supported by USAID, the Zinc Network, and the Media Development Investment Fund – an investment fund associated with George Soros, which previously held a partial ownership stake in 444. The Open Society Foundations also appear among the funders of the Poynter Institute.

2 Source: <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/hirek/kozel-10-millio-fontbol-vasarolt-politikai-influenszereket-a-brit-kormany>

3 Source: <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/hirek/a-szuverenitasvedelmi-hivatal-feltarta-a-usaid-botrany-korrupcios-szalait>



Szabolcs Panyi and Direkt36

- Szabolcs Panyi is primarily affiliated with two platforms, Direkt36 and VSquare. He serves as a regular journalist and editor for both outlets.
- The operation of Direkt36 was previously directly funded by Transparency International Hungary. Additional supporters of the outlet include the Sigrid Rausing Trust, the Civitates foundation, and the Foundation for Democracy and Pluralism. These organisations operate with funding from Brussels, the United States, and Soros-linked sources. The Foundation for Democracy and Pluralism also provides support to Partizán.
- In 2026, Direkt36 relocated to Germany. The 100 percent ownership stake previously held by András Pethő was transferred to Direkt36 UG, a company registered in Germany. One of its owners is Sebastian Esser, founder of Krautreporter, who has extensive experience in securing large-scale foundation and EU funding. Supporters of Krautreporter include the Open Society Foundations, the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the European Journalism Centre, and the Google News Initiative.
- The choice of location by Panyi and his associates is not incidental: Berlin serves as a strategic hub for disinformation and political operations conducted against Hungary. Within a radius of a few kilometres, it hosts the offices of approximately two dozen organisations that continuously seek to shape and influence Hungarian domestic politics.
- Erste Stiftung, the largest shareholder of Erste Bank, is the principal executor of the group's pressure-exertion activities.⁴ The Vienna-based foundation has for many years supported the dissemination of progressive ideologies and, in 2018, participated in the establishment of the Civitates fund, which has been playing an increasingly important role in the allocation of resources within the globalist network. Through Civitates and other projects, it supports key network actors operating in Hungary: organisations presenting themselves as civil rights groups, key intermediaries responsible for distributing foreign-sourced funds intended for influence-building, including Ökotárs and the Civil College Foundation, as well as network-aligned media outlets such as 444, Átlátszó, and Szabolcs Panyi's outlet, Direkt36.

⁴ Source: <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/hirek/erste-stiftung-a-globalista-nyomasgyakorlo-halozat-finanszirozaja>



VSquare and the regional network of OCCRP

- VSquare⁵ is an “investigative” outlet established and funded in 2017 by the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy (NED), with a focus on the Visegrád countries. From its headquarters in Warsaw, it coordinates the Central European partners of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). In Hungary, members of this network include Átlátszó and the Direkt36 portal, which is closely associated with Telex. The OCCRP is a global network of “investigative journalists” that officially conducts research and investigative activities related to organised crime and corruption, working with seventy-five outlets worldwide.⁶ Its most important network ally is Transparency International, which – according to the Sovereignty Protection Office – annually publishes a “corruption perception index” produced using a flawed methodology and on the basis of political commission.⁷ Until 2025, the OCCRP was primarily funded through USAID sources, and it is operated by the Journalism Development Network (JDN).

Drew Sullivan, the “American Friend”

- Drew Sullivan⁸, head of the OCCRP, has acknowledged that his organisation engages in “money laundering,” channelling funds originating from U.S. government or other “investors” sensitive to maintaining their anonymity to partner organisations. In exchange for funding, these partners cover topics important to the funders, while not scrutinising the “interventions” or “abuses” of the commissioning side. In another interview, Sullivan stated: “Our policy is that a country should not report on that country with its own money”. So whichever government they receive funding from, they do not write about that country. He added that he was not able to give an exact figure, but the United States is probably the largest supporter. “It’s the largest donor of OCCRP, yes, and has been for most of our history.”⁹ Leila Bičakčić, who served as the organisation’s financial director for five years, stated in January 2025: “If you are funded by the U.S. government, there are certain topics you would simply not go after” as U.S. interests take precedence over everything else.¹⁰ In its early period following its founding in 2006 by Sullivan, the organisation’s main donor was the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs of the U.S. Department of State.

5 The platform VSquare.org, in which Panyi has an interest, focuses – aligned with the geopolitical agenda of the European Commission and the U.S. Democratic Party – on topics such as Russian and Chinese influence, disinformation, espionage, corruption, and so-called “illiberal tendencies.” VSquare was established through the collaboration of the following “investigative” outlets: Frontstory (Poland), Investigace (Czech Republic), Átlátszó and Direkt36 (Hungary), and the Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak (Slovakia). Each of these outlets is a partner of, and receives support from, the OCCRP and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The circle of funders previously identified in connection with the OCCRP also appears behind VSquare, including the NED, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, USAID, Investigative Journalism for Europe (IJ4EU), and Journalismfund Europe. Similarly to the OCCRP, this organisation does not disclose information to the public regarding the scale or frequency of its funding.

6 Source: <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/hirek/az-atlatszo-tevekenysege-szuverenitasi-kockazatot-jelent-magyarorszag-szamara>

7 Source: <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/hirek/a-transparency-international-magyarorszag-karos-tevekenyseget-fejt-ki-es-dezinformaciot-terjeszt>

8 Source: <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/hirek/az-europai-bizottsag-uj-zsoldosai-drew-sullivan-es-az-occrp>

9 Source: <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/hirek/az-europai-bizottsag-uj-zsoldosai-drew-sullivan-es-az-occrp>

10 Source: <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/hirek/az-europai-bizottsag-uj-zsoldosai-drew-sullivan-es-az-occrp>



The Journalism Development Network (JDN), which operates the OCCRP, later received support – alongside U.S. government funding – from the Open Society Foundations, the Oak Foundation, the Sigrid Rausing Trust, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

- Drew Sullivan maintains a good relationship and close working connection with Szabolcs Panyi. Panyi has also worked within the central editorial office of the OCCRP.
- The U.S. Department of State exercised direct influence over the governance of the OCCRP through USAID and the NED. Funding arrangements included mechanisms through which veto rights could be exercised over leadership appointments and annual work plans of the organisation. Through this, influence extended across the entire network directed by the OCCRP, and presumably also affected the outlets and activities of Szabolcs Panyi.
- In early 2025, USAID programmes were halted by the new U.S. President, Donald Trump. At that point, the European Commission emerged as the primary financier and commissioning body of the OCCRP and Drew Sullivan – along clearly defined interests. This became evident from the European Commission’s written response to a parliamentary question submitted by German Member of the European Parliament Petr Bystron, in which it acknowledged that in November 2024, the OCCRP received EUR 604,269 in direct EU funding. Officially, the funds were allocated to support “investigative journalism”; however, in practice, they were used to produce politically motivated smear articles and black propaganda campaigns. According to the account, the Commission commissioned articles aimed at discrediting actors opposing the political and economic interests of the Brussels elite. As a result of the extensive campaign carried out by the OCCRP, the German police conducted a total of twenty-two searches in connection with the MEP who had submitted the question.
- The OCCRP and its network partners have also gained access to additional EU funding through another initiative, the FACT programme: they received EUR 1,294,233 to combat conspiracy theories and online trolls. The European Commission did not disclose this in its response to the German MEP. The funding was allocated for the development of an AI-driven fact-checking infrastructure. Plans include the establishment of a multilingual European hub capable of identifying “inappropriate” information across different countries. The project is coordinated by the Romanian Asociatia Jurnalistilor de Investigatii Context (commonly known as Context.ro), which is also a member of the OCCRP network. Its supporters include the European Commission, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Norway Grants. All participants in the project – media outlets and journalist organisations from Romania, Moldova, Latvia, Ukraine, and Italy – are partners of the OCCRP and are regularly supported by known actors and donors of the global political pressure network identified by the Sovereignty Protection Office.



- The OCCRP also appears as an advisory participant in the Datacros III project. Through this initiative – which brings together data analysis and processing organisations, national institutions of EU member states, competition authorities, anti-corruption bodies, and even the Belgian police – it seeks to expand its influence in Europe as an associated partner.

Szabolcs Panyi, within this system, is not an autonomous or self-standing actor, but rather an active participant and executor within an international political and media infrastructure that can be mobilised against Hungary. His significance does not derive from his individual person, but from the transatlantic network of donors, institutions, and platforms – operating under intelligence and political direction – that has elevated, legitimised, and continues to utilise him. Accordingly, the network of relationships surrounding him does not depict the career trajectory of an independent journalist but rather presents the illuminated profile of a network actor suited for political pressure operations.