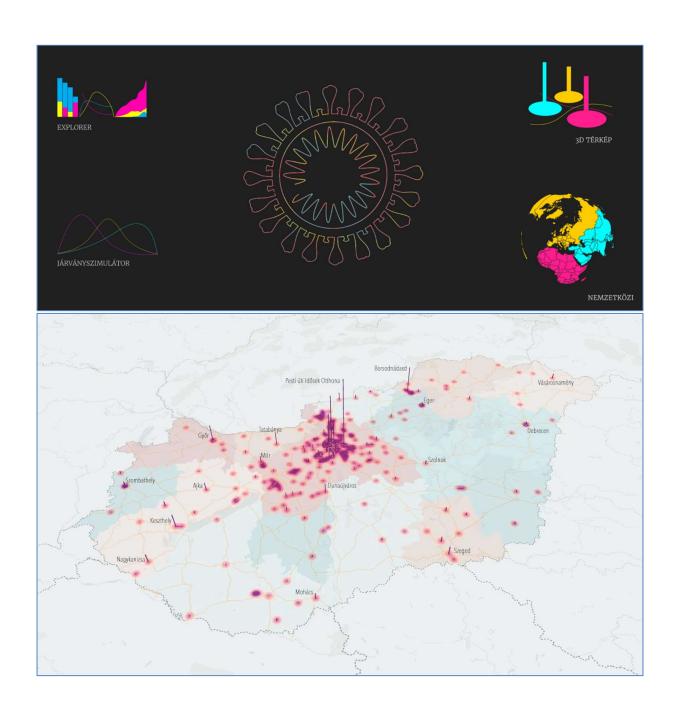


Atlatszo – The first nonprofit center for investigative journalism in Hungary



ANNUAL REPORT 2020

ATLATSZO

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1. The first nonprofit center for investigative journalism in Hungary

Atlatszo is a watchdog NGO and a center for investigative journalism endeavoring to promote transparency, accountability, and freedom of information in Hungary. Established in 2011, Atlatszo – 'atlatszo' means 'transparent' in Hungarian – produces investigative reports, accepts information from whistleblowers, files freedom of information requests and commences freedom of information lawsuits in cases where its requests are refused. Atlatszo operates a Tor-based anonymous whistleblowing platform, a freedom of information request generator for the general public, an independent blogging platform for other NGOs and independent journalists and experts, and other online services. Atlatszo staff are mostly journalists, supported by video journalists, legal and IT-experts.

Atlatszo is among the top ten most popular quality journalism sites of Hungary with growing readership and a significant impact on the Hungarian public sphere - our articles were referred to 2804 times in 2020 by other Hungarian media outlets. The site covers political corruption, campaign financing, financial abuse in public procurement procedures, infrastructure projects and EU funding, environmental abuse and human rights violations. It profiles individuals in public life, mainly politicians and businessmen. <u>English abstracts</u> of our most important stories are regularly published on our website.

The aim of Atlatszo is not only to shed light on scandalous misuse of political and economic power and influence; we want something to happen as a result of our work. Follow-up is at the core of our strategy. We make public participation very easy by linking to online social networks and creating tools to help the public express their views to the authorities and to politicians, as well as to hold public officials accountable. Some of our cases develop into official investigations and court cases. The typical reader is a middle class citizen who would like to see a higher standard of life and public discourse in Hungary.





2. Investigations and important topics covered in 2020

2.1 The Covid-19 pandemic

CORONAVIRUS

Opportunistic traders and slugghis authorities let fake and faulty masks flood Hungary



There can be serious faults with masks marketed as FFP2 in Hungarian webshops, that are accompanied by questionable certificate paperwork....

SARKADI NAGY MÁRTON — 2020. JÚL. 6.

2.2 State capture and corruption

FELCSÚT TRAVEL CLUB

László Szíjj is the beneficial owner of the Malta offshore company in posession of luxury yachts used by the Hungarian government elite



Over the last two years, we have written several times about the fact that the Austrian-registered luxury private jet with...

HORN GABRIELLA — 2020. JÚL. 10

2.3 Disinformation

DISINFORMATION

Leading pro-govt daily newspaper publishes "investigation" inspired by Azeri lobby efforts



History behind the documents underlying Magyar Nemzet's series of articles on 'Soros's conductor' lead back to Azerbaijan's attempt to influence...

SARKADI NAGY MÁRTON — 2020. NOV. 13.



2.4 Rural reporting

HUNGARY

Poor quality lignite distributed for those in need under the subsidized social firewood program



Municipalities are buying half a billion forints worth of lignite as part of the Hungarian government's social firewood program: the...

KATUS ESZTER — 2020. SZEPT. 11.

2.5 Environmental destruction

ENVIRONMENT

Mészáros Group acquires lucrative toxic waste processing site after the state renewed its permit



Environmental license of the Tatai Environmental Protection Ltd.'s hazardous waste processing plant at the Almásfüzitő red mud reservoirs was renewed in December 2019....

HORN GABRIELLA — 2020. MÁJ. 7.

2.6 Secret yachts and planes

FELCSÚT TRAVEL CLUB

Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó manages the crisis in Belarus on a luxury yacht in the Adriatic



The Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs is spending this summer seemingly feverish, just visit his Facebook page to make sure:...

ATLATSZO — 2020. AUG. 18



2.7 Propaganda machine

A COUNTRY BASED ON CHRISTIAN VALUES

Wealthy pro-Orbán pastor secretly took over ownership in opposition-leaning TV channel ATV



Despite the flourishing business empire developed by the legally accredited Pentecostal church in the past decades, the amount of funds...

ATLATSZO — 2020. JÚN. 1

2.8 National heritage

NATIONAL HERITAGE

130-year-old building loses protected status to give way to major construction project in Budapest



A construction company with good political connections (Heinrich Passage Ingatlanfejlesztő Zrt.) managed to achieve that a 130 year old building in...

HORN GABRIELLA — 2020. MÁJ. 15

2.9 EU Funds

EU FUNDS

Drone video: this is how the EU-funded "Disneyland" of Kisvárda looks like



Atlatszo visited the native city of Miklós Seszták, Hungary's former minister of national development (2014-2018), which has received more than...

ZSILÁK SZILVIA — 2020. MÁRC. 24.



3. Crossborder and domestic collaborations and partnerships

3.1 Átlátszó Erdély

<u>Átlátszó Erdély</u> is a Hungarian (minority) language investigative journalism nonprofit in Transylvania, Romania, inspired by, but independent of Atlatszo (Hungary). Atlatszo and Atlatszo Erdely are closely cooperating in multiple projects, including <u>tracking Hungarian state</u> <u>subsidies in the neighboring countries</u>, which in 2020 was supported by an IJ4EU grant for crossborder investigative journalism.

3.2 Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project

Just like in previous years, Sarajevo-based <u>Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project</u> (OCCRP) was a very important partner for Atlatszo in 2020. This year we cooperated with OCCRP investigating <u>Europe's Covid-19 spending spree</u>, and <u>medical supplies of dubious quality</u> purchased by the state in response to the pandemic. The <u>Investigative Dashboard managed</u> by OCCRP contributed research and flight tracking records to Atlatszo's investigation into <u>luxury yachts and private jets registered abroad</u>, and <u>secret flights of the Hungarian Air Force</u>.

3.3 Vsquare

Atlatszo is a founding member of <u>Vsquare.org</u>, an investigative journalism project, which brings together investigative outlets from Visegrad countries (Hungary, Slovakia, The Czech Republic, and Poland) and aims at improving the quality of investigative journalism in the region. Atlatszo contributed to investigations of <u>fraud and corruption involving EU funds</u>, a <u>secretive multinational ultra-conservative network</u> influencing societies in Central Europe, and various aspects of the <u>Covid-19 pandemic</u>.

3.4 Expanding Anonymous Tipping

Atlatszo is participating in a EU-funded project called <u>Expanding Anonymous Tipping</u> (EAT), which aims to promote a whistleblower culture and ultimately contribute to a lower level of corruption and empower civil society. EAT is offering an anonymous whistleblowing platform provided by <u>GlobaLeaks</u>, an open source, free software. The customized platform facilitates anonymous tipping and builds trust between citizens and public or private organizations.

3.5 Black Waters

<u>Black Waters</u> is a hybrid investigative-research and advocacy project led by the Center for Media, Data and Society of Central European University that responds to the need for engaging reporting on environmental damage, corruption and the consequences for social justice in Central and Eastern Europe. Atlatszo investigated the <u>hazardous waste deposit at the red sludge reservoirs in Almásfüzitő</u> in the framework of this project.



3.6 mySociety

mySociety is a not-for-profit social enterprise, based in the UK and working internationally. The organisation is building online technologies that give people the power to get things changed, and they share these technologies so that they can be used anywhere. mySociety is working with partner groups to help them build effective civic websites through the implementation of their tools and software. Kimittud, Atlatszo's public FOI request generator service is powered by mySociety's open-source platform, Alaveteli — also the software behind FOI sites in over 25 countries worldwide.

3.7 Open Information Partnership

The Open Information Partnership is a diverse network of established organisations and individuals across Europe working in open, independent, fact-based reporting and countering disinformation of foreign and domestic origin. In 2020 Atlatszo continued to work together with the network to research and expose false narratives invented and/or distributed in Hungary.

3.8 Magyar Hang

In 2020 Atlatszo started a collaboration with the conservative weekly paper <u>Magyar Hang</u> to publish a print supplement once a month, which contains a selection of the most important Atlatszo stories and infographics.





4. Innovation in visual storytelling

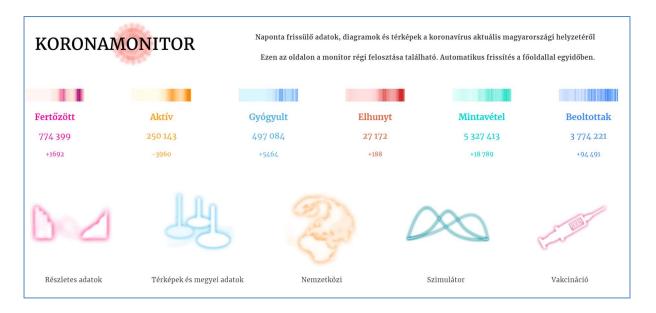
4.1 Data journalism and data visualisation

2020 was a busy and sometimes overwhelming year for Átlátszó's data journalism team. The enormous quantity of data generated by the Covid-19 pandemic gave lot of work and topics to be covered. Since the Government's data release on the coronavirus was insufficient and weak on many levels, in March 2020 we decided to launch Hungary's first visualized virus-tracker website called Koronamonitor, which became an instant nationwide success and an exemplar to be followed later by some other news outlets in Hungary.

The site contains the most complete and diverse statistics and the widest range of graphs, diagrams and maps on the corona outbreak in Hungary, and offers some additional features, like a data explorer, or a spread-simulator. The site was visited by 1,8 million unique users in 2020.

Apart from the unprecedented success of the Koronamonitor, our data journalism team made around 500 graphs, diagrams, maps and other information graphics during the year. Our visual journalism project Átló created thirteen standalone interactives, and worked for clients as the Municipality of Budapest, the Budapest City Archives, CEU CMDS, the Radio Free Europe, the Hungarian Academy of Science's Trianon100 Research Group or the Ecological Research Center.

In 2020 we started a collaboration with the weekly printed paper Magyar Hang, we create two-pager large scale infographics for them to reach new audiences. There was also a remarkable demand for Átlátszó's data journalism knowledge in 2020: we presented our work at six conferences, and we gave several workshops for journalists, NGOs and educators at venues like the Dataharvest or the European University Institute's Journalism Summer School. We also actively built on new talents interested in data journalism: in 2020 we worked together with eight students from the Media Department of the Eötvös Loránd Science University, and the University of Technology and Economics.





4.2 Camera drone project

Atlatszo is working with camera drones to offer a far broader, aerial view of key stories, such as wealth amassed by the governing elite, environmental degradation, which would have been left with a much more limited perspective relying only on what could be seen at ground level. In 2020 we continued to record and publish camera drone videos of the estates and houses of many politicians and well-connected businessmen enriched using public funds, thoroughly annoying those involved.

In 2020, one of them was Gyula Balásy, who owns companies benefiting from governmental propaganda campaigns. According to Balásy, his rights to personal data protection were violated, so he first turned to Átlátszó, but when we refused to delete the footage, he took action at the National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information (NAIH). According to NAIH's decision in the case, Balásy's course of action was unfounded, because domestic and international legislation allows for taking drone footage regarding public affairs as part of freedom of the press.

Later in 2020 a police investigation was launched into our recordings of combat vehicles stationed on an estate owned by a billionaire friend of the Prime Minister. In the course of the criminal investigation our journalist, Gabi Horn, was heard as witness, but it was closed down without finding any criminal act. According to a new law introduced after this case, from January 2021 taking drone videos of someone's private property without their permission becomes a criminal offence, and the publication of such a video will be considered as a qualified case. That is, journalists and publishers who make and publish such recordings could even be imprisoned. The regulation seems to target drone footages by the media, but we believe that there are firm legal grounds to challenge any further criminal procedures on the basis of the new rules as well.



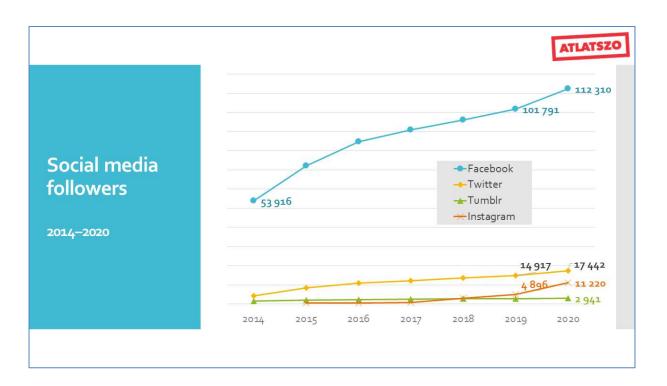


5. Legal strategy

Our legal strategy is based on the perception that public data is often withheld in Hungary by state institutions and by those using public funds, therefore freedom of information requests are not sufficient alone, court procedures must be initiated to obtain documents of sensitive nature. Our aim is to impact discrete cases, to force authorities to react and to actively form the court practice in cases involving previously undecided questions of interpretation. Atlatszo has won more than 60 percent of FOI lawsuits initiated so far.

Besides using courts, our primary choice for legal remedy used to be the National Freedom of Information and Data Protection Authority (NAIH), which is normally faster than courts and cheaper. However, since the Authority seems to be overloaded, the speed of its decision making slowed down significantly. In addition, its decisions are not binding upon the data holders, therefore should they not abide by the recommendation of the NAIH, at the end of the day we either file a lawsuit before the ordinary court or cannot get a legally binding decision. Therefore, in 2020 we decided to use this avenue less frequently.

The year 2020 brought a new phenomenon, one that is know as SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation), i.e., a series of lawsuits intended to censor, intimidate, and silence critics by burdening them with the cost of a legal defense until they abandon their criticism or opposition. After we have publicized, together with the Magyar Hang (an independent online and print outlet), one of our most-read article proving that Sándor Németh, founder-reverend of the Faith Church, took over majority ownership in opposition-leaning TV channel ATV secretly, assisted by an offshore company registered in Liechtenstein, they have initiated several legal procedures against us, in which five out of six judicial decisions ruled in favour of Magyar Hang and Atlatszo so far.





6. Online services

6.1 Independent blogging platform

Running a blogging platform allows us to boost our visitor numbers and provide a publishing space for other independent media, experts and NGOs. Until now, Atlatszo has started a dozen blogs of its own and attracted another dozen of quality guest blogs. In addition to Így írnánk mi, a constitutional law blog authored by Atlatszo lawyers, most recently a new legal blog was launched by Atlatszo, called Strasbourgi Figyelő ('Strasbourg Monitor') that is summarizing and explaining the most important decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Until December 31, 2020 not less than 120 cases were summarized in plain Hungarian language on this site, thus becoming a well—known source of the ECtHR caselaw among professionals. Ferenc Kőszeg, retired founding president of the Hungarian Helsinki Committe also started his new blog on our platform in 2020.

6.2 Secure leaking platform

In 2020, we received 4-5 submissions a week on average via <u>MagyarLeaks</u>, roughly every 10th disclosure being worthy of further journalistic scrutiny.

6.3 FOI request generator

<u>Kimittud</u> is an easy-to-handle online tool for citizens who wish to obtain information from government departments, agencies and state-owned companies. It's a simple concept: citizens use the website to request information and the replies are recorded on the website for all to see. Historical requests, along with any resulting correspondence, are archived publicly online. Since its launch in 2012, Kimittud has enabled more than 16,000 freedom of information requests with more and more citizens are discovering its power.

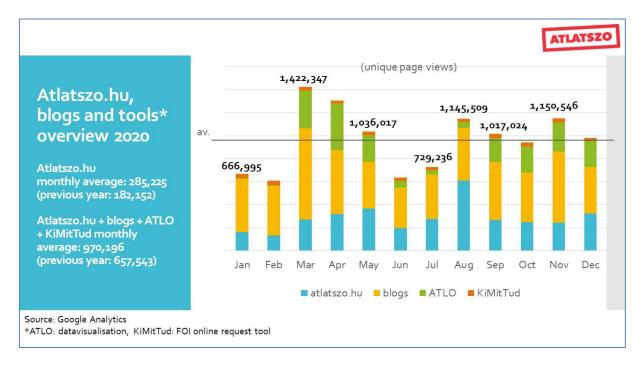


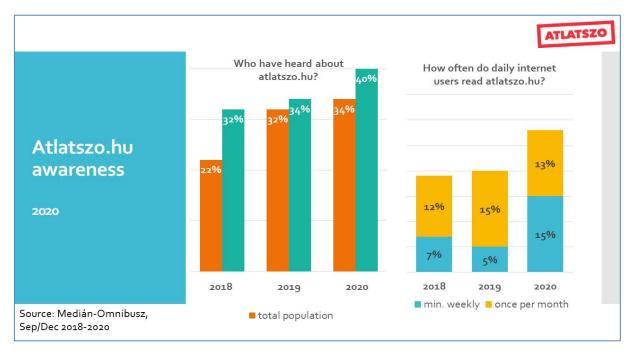


7. Audience and impact

7.1 Audience

In 2020, <u>atlatszo.hu</u> reached 1,8 million readers (+50% compared to 2019), while the blogs (subdomains) of Atlatszo had an audience of 2,9 million (+23%). The monthly regular activity on our websites is indicated by 600,000-1,400,000 unique page views via Google Analytics, or 15% of daily internet users of Hungary at least once a week (Medián Research). Our Facebook posts were seen by 2,1 million users and the <u>atlatszo Facebook page</u> reached 112,000 followers (+10%) by the end of the year, remaining an important source of traffic on the website.



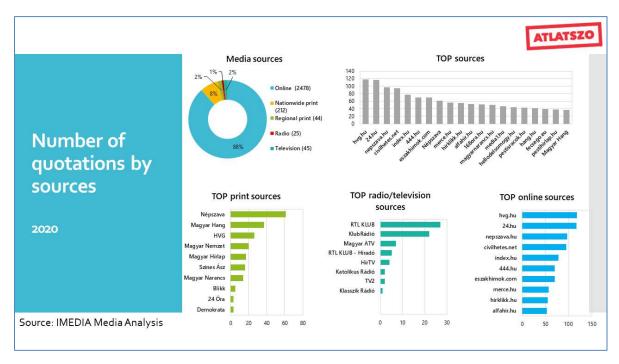


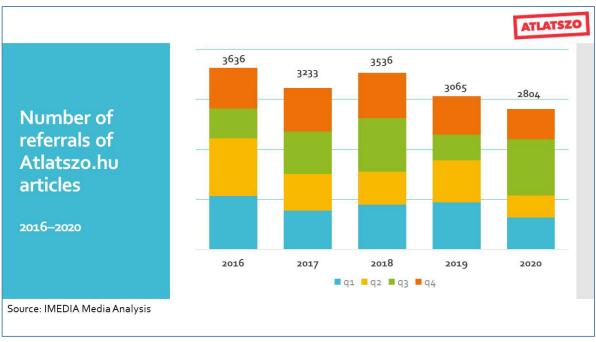


7.2 Impact

7.2.1 Domestic impact

Newsworthy stories published by Atlatszo get picked up by other media, print and online publications, as well as radio and television, including prime time news broadcasts. Atlatszo was quoted, referred to via its publications or was mentioned 2,804 times (-8% compared to 2019) in 2020 in Hungarian online, print and electronic news media, in connection with more than 500 news topics. In 2020, the pro-government media continued to offer little to no coverage to Atlatszo's investigations (IMEDIA Media Analysis).







7.2.2 International impact

Just like in the previous years, some of Atlatszo stories and features were noticed and quoted by international media outlets in 2020.

The editors of Datajournalism.com <u>selected</u> Atlatszo's Covid-19 tracking website Koronamonitor to the top 10 data journalism projects which made an impact in 2020. Our data activities regarding the coronavirus pandemic deserved a profile article by the <u>European Journalism Center</u>.

Atlatszo's investigation into the Foreign Minister of Hungary vacationing on a tycoon's yacht was reported by <u>Reuters</u> and <u>DW</u>. The police investigation into Atlatszo's camera drone recordings was reported by <u>AFP</u>, while <u>The Economist</u> mentioned us in a feature article about censorious governments abusing fake news laws. Our investigations of how oligarch Lőrinc Mészáros became the richest Hungarian was mentioned in <u>Süddeutshe Zeitung</u>. Our data gathered on propaganda spending by the Hungarian Government was quoted in <u>Politico</u> and <u>Haaretz</u>.

Atlatszo's <u>FOI lawsuit against the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade</u> resulted in official records proving that President Donald Trump's acting director of national intelligence, Richard Grenell, worked as a paid publicist for a foundation funded by Hungary's increasingly authoritarian government – the story was quoted by <u>Global Voices</u>, <u>Responsible Statecraft</u>, <u>ProPublica</u>, <u>DefenseOne</u>, and even the <u>Washington Post</u>.

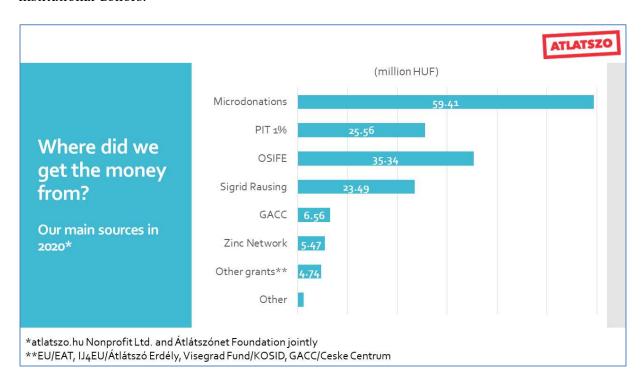
Atlatszo journalists were quoted multiple times in the foreign press, including in The Christian Science Monitor's podcast titled "From democracy to authoritarianism: Orbán's Hungary", in DW's articles "Viktor Orban's dangerous export of ideologies" and "Ungarn - Masken, Medien und Minderheiten", and BIRN's feature about freedom of information curbs in Hungary. We have been interviewed about crowdfunding media outlets by AFP, and the deteriorating situation of media freedom in Hungary by VOA.

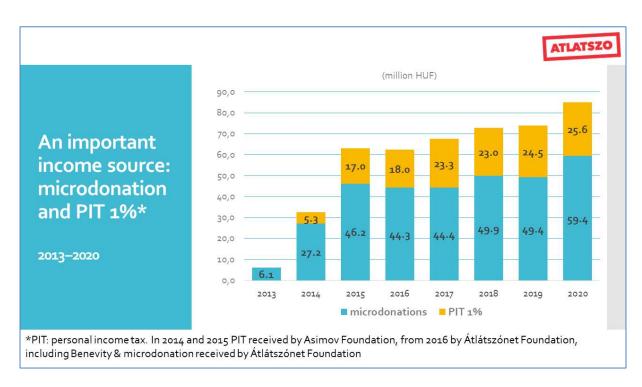




8. Funding

Atlatszo is financed by nonpartisan and non-governmental sources; we do not accept money from Hungarian state institutions, political parties and affiliates. Individual donors – more than 5,000 private citizens – are contributing significantly. Crowdfunding is very important to us; we regularly campaign our readership to donate. Microdonations and personal income tax 1 percent offered accounted more than 60% in the 2020 budget. The rest came from international institutional donors.







9. Prizes and Awards

Transparency-Soma Award for Investigative Journalism 2018

Atlatszo journalist Katalin Erdélyi, data journalist Attila Bátorfy, along with photojournalist Dániel Németh were awarded the <u>Transparency-Soma Prize</u> for their articles about the luxury vehicles, a yacht and a private jet registered abroad that prime minister Viktor Orban and the governing elite are using secretly. The Soma Prize is the most prestigious award for investigative journalism in Hungary and is awarded by Transparency International Hungary. Atlatszo journalists were also awarded the <u>Prize for Quality Journalism</u> for the same feature.



Hungarian Pulitzer Memorial Award 2016

Atlatszo as a media outlet was honored to receive the prestigious Pulitzer Memorial Award, the Hungarian prize for quality journalism named after Hungarian-born journalist Joseph Pulitzer. The Hungarian Pulitzer is the only such award outside the United States. Lajos Sipos, head of the foundation responsible for selecting award recipients, commented at the presentation ceremony that the main criterion for the award is to choose outlets and professionals which observe Pulitzer's guiding principle: that the truth is more important than political loyalties.

Earlier awards: SozialMarie Award – 2016; Hégető Honorka Video Award – 2015; Freedom of Expression Award – 2015, Index on Censorship; Breaking Borders Award – 2012, Global Voices and Google; European Citizen Prize – 2014, European Parliament; Theodor Heuss Medaille – 2015, Theodor-Heuss-Stiftung



10. Organisational structure

10.1 Board of supervisors



Andrea Pelle (*President of the Board*) is a lawyer and attorney. She graduated from the ELTE Law School in 1986 and has been active in human rights and civil liberties movements since 1988. In the 1990's, she provided legal support at the Independent Legal Support Service for psychiatric patients and defendants in court cases regarding drug abuse. During the same time, she also took part in the police, jail and prison

monitoring program of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee. In 1994, she was a founding member of the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU). For over two decades, the HCLU has monitored legislation, pursued strategic litigation, conducted public education and launched awareness-raising media campaigns. Pelle worked with the HCLU until 2013, when she left the Union and became a founding member of Szuverén Civil Society where she provides pro bono legal representation for defendants who are prosecuted for acts of civil disobedience.



Attila Mong is an investigative journalist and reporter currently based in Berlin, Germany. Until April of 2012, he was editor at Origo.hu, the biggest Hungarian news site. Before that, he worked for the Hungarian Public Radio as the host of the daily 3-hour morning show. Between 2000 and 2009, he was the host of a daily evening political talk show at private newsradio Inforadio. Previously, he was editor-in-chief of Manager Magazin, a Spiegel-owned business monthly (2005-2007) and also worked for various broadcast and print outlets in Hungary. He was

senior editor at Figyelo, a business weekly (1999-2004), co-founder of Figyelonet.hu, a business portal (2000-2001) and an editor-reporter at Hungarian Public Radio (1995-98) and Hungarian Public TV (1997-2000). Attila Mong is the author of a prize-winning book on one of Hungary's greatest banking scandals and has received various investigative journalism prizes (Pulitzer Memorial Prize 2004, Gőbölyös Soma prize 2003).



Gábor Polyák is associate professor at the University of Pécs, Faculty of Law, Department for ITC Law. He graduated in law and media sciences at the University of Pécs, Hungary. He completed an LL.M. degree at the University of Vienna on ITC law. His PhD was completed at the University of Pécs. He is the chief editor of the Hungarian professional journal 'Infokommunikáció és Jog' ('Infocommunications and Law'). He is author of numerous publications and expert papers in

media law, informatics law and telecommunications law. Polyák is the professional leader of the Mérték Media Monitor, a think tank and watchdog organisation focussed on the Hungarian media sector. Based on legal, journalistic, sociological and economic expertise, Mertek evaluates media policy measures and lays out its own policy proposals.



10.2 Management



Tamás Bodoky (Director, Editor) is an investigative journalist, editor and nonprofit manager based in Budapest, Hungary. Bodoky has been a journalist since 1996. Before founding Atlatszo, he worked at Magyar Narancs weekly newspaper for five years as a science and technology writer and Index.hu online news site for nine years in different journalistic and editorial positions. Bodoky won the Gőbölyös Soma Prize for his articles on Hungary's 2006 unrest and police brutality. Bodoky has won the Iustitia Regnorum Fundamentum and the Hungarian Pulitzer Memorial Prize for his investigative articles and FOI lawsuits on corruption cases. Bodoky holds an MSc degree in Agricultural Sciences (Gödöllő University, 1995) and a PhD degree in

Communication (University of Pécs, 2010). Bodoky is a member of the international investigative journalism networks Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.



Péter Gerner (Finances, IT, Administration and Project Management) graduated from the Eötvös Loránd University in geology and in informatics, and then obtained an MBA degree from the Budapest University of Technology. At the beginning of his career, he worked as a scientific researcher, then after a career change as a software developer, and then for 15 years as a manager at international IT companies. Since 2016, he has been dealing with

international clients in the field of IT consulting, operation and development, small businesses and non-governmental organizations in the field of implementing and developing an online presence. Péter joined Atlatszo full time in 2020 as Head of Operation.



Balázs Tóth (*Legal administration and compliance*) is a human rights lawyer and a practicing attorney. After graduating from the Faculty of Law of the University of Miskolc, he began his PhD studies, then worked for the Ministry of Education in 2004. Since November of 2004, he has been working for the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, one of the best-known human rights organizations in the country. At the Committee he has been responsible for projects dealing with law

enforcement, policing, detention, anti-discrimination and rule of law issues for more than a decade. Since 2016, he has been working for the Committee as an attorney. Between February 2008 and February 2013, he has also worked as assistant professor for the Department of Legal Theory and Sociology at University of Miskolc. He obtained his PhD degree in 2012. Since 2015, he has been working as a legal journalist for Atlatszo as well. He is the author of more than 30 academic articles and the co-author of the first comprehensive Hungarian book on ethnic profiling.



10.3 Staff and contributors

Investigative journalism team: Katalin Erdélyi (*editor*), Gabriella Horn, Márton Sarkadi Nagy, Szilvia Zsilák

Rural journalism team: Eszter Katus (*editor*), Csaba Segesvári, Zsuzsa Bodnár, Zsuzsa Zimre, Noémi Kocsis, Irén Kármán, Zoltán Kis

Data journalism team: Attila Bátorfy (editor), Zita Szopkó, Krisztián Szabó

Contributing journalists: Botond Bőtös, Barbara Vitrai, András B. Vágvölgyi, Lili Rutai, Zalán Zubor, Imre Huszka, László Pusztai, Eszter Galambosi, Ferenc Kőszeg, Antónia Rádi

Contributing video journalists and graphic artists: Gergely Áron Pápai, Zsófi Rick, Gabriella Dohi, Dániel Németh

Project management: Krisztina Zala (head of office), Hédi Dorogman

Lawyers, attorneys: Tibor Sepsi, Csaba Tordai, Gergely Gönczi

Legal entities: Atlatszo.hu Nonprofit Ltd. (HU): Atlatszo.hu Közhasznú Nonprofit Kft., Cg. 01-09-963846; Átlátszónet Foundation (HU): Átlátszónet Alapítvány, Fővárosi Törvényszék, 10715

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