

# DISINFORMATION AFTER THE FIRST WAVE OF THE CORONAVIRUS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Disinformation narratives and strategies related to the pandemic's first wave in Hungary and the CEE region

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## INTRODUCTION

Our research examines and reveals the strategic disinformation communication related to the COVID-19 epidemic between January and June 2020 in Hungary and in the CEE region.<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian nationalistic disinformation narratives are unique for at least three reasons: 1) China was depicted more as a friend than a foe, 2) anti-science narratives were not part of the mainstream, and 3) Covid-skepticism did not become widespread. Mainstream and fringe disinformation narratives about COVID-19 cast Hungary as a victim of Western aggression. Conspiracy theories about the virus being a weapon against China, or a product of the Western elite to rule the world are rather popular. Disinformation narratives also highlighted the difference between a failing West struggling to respond to the pandemic, and China, Russia and “Turkic” nations posing as humanitarian superpowers.

*To conduct the research, we monitored virus-related articles and Facebook posts published by Hungarian mainstream and pro-Kremlin fringe media with the aid of the SentiOne platform to examine disinformation trends both quantitatively and qualitatively. This project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Open Information Partnership,<sup>i</sup> and the inspiration and encouragements from Tom Southern and Seraphina Hintze throughout the whole research process.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only proved to be one of the greatest healthcare challenges of the world since the Spanish flu in 1918, it has accelerated a sea of political, economic, and geopolitical changes already in the making. Among such institutional changes is the fourth industrial revolution of ground-breaking technologies, like the Internet of Things (IoT), robotics, virtual reality (VR), artificial intelligence (AI), which is channeled right into the fight against the pandemic. However, the rapid changes of industries and technologies also highlighted the geopolitical problems with China in the fields of human rights issues, trade and technological wars tied into diplomacy,<sup>ii</sup> while the country plays a central role in the dissemination of these new technologies on a global scale. Besides the industrial revolution, two of the most important societal changes caused by the pandemic concern the governmental distribution of resources, and the rule of law and protection of personal data utilized by novel technologies to track and contain the virus-outbreak. As we have found in our research paper entitled *What the future holds for Europe after the pandemic*,<sup>iii</sup> the health of democratic institutions (rule of law, freedom of media etc.), along with welfare policies and income re-distribution will determine the post-pandemic shape of countries and the international order alike. New governmental powers acquired through state of emergency legislations can easily be turned into tools of political manipulation and control. Significant portions of the populations would also support the “heavy hand” approaches in fear of further economic or political turmoil or lacking the resources to resist them. The emergence or further strengthening of hybrid regimes through this crisis would inevitably contribute to the weakening of the Western international order, since these regimes are more willing to cooperate with Russia or China

A case in point is the Hungarian government, as shown below, which did not only use the pandemic as a cover to further weaken the rule of law,<sup>iv</sup> freedom of the media, etc., it also tried to bond with post-Soviet autocracies and China even more on the premise of “pandemic-related cooperation” as opposed to the “lack of solidarity” from the EU. Thus, it is unsurprising that Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó recently announced: ***“there is a new world order to be borne based on new power structures.”***<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Open Information Partnership Monitoring data used for the regional analysis covered Czechia, Hungary, Kosovo, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine in the Central Eastern Europe.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Conspiracy theories about the virus being a weapon against China, or a product of the Western elite to rule the world are widespread in the entire Central European region – mostly on fringe sites, but they are entering the mainstream as well. Euroscepticism related to the pandemic is also present in several countries, which makes Hungarian narratives about the EU's failure to reign in the pandemic much stronger.
- Hungarian disinformation narratives differ on at least three accounts: 1) China was depicted more as a friend than a foe, 2) anti-science narratives were not part of the mainstream, and 3) Covid-skepticism did not become widespread. Mainstream and fringe disinformation narratives about COVID-19 cast Hungary as a victim of Western aggression. Conspiracy theories about the virus being a weapon against China, or a product of the Western elite to rule the world are rather popular. Disinformation narratives also highlighted the difference between a failing West struggling to respond to the pandemic, and China, Russia and "Turkic" nations posing as humanitarian superpowers.
- As a result of the pandemic, the Hungarian government could further erode the rule of law and strengthen the regime's grip on independent NGOs and media, which provided the political rational and framework for epidemic-related narratives in Hungary.
- The governmental communication successfully sidelined and divided the opposition's response to the pandemic using false narratives that accused opposition actors of standing in the way of "national unity" in times of crisis, being part of the "George Soros network," or undermining Hungarian sovereignty, while the ruling parties stripped them of state funds and local tax revenues.
- Unlike other right-wing populist leaders in the world, Viktor Orbán's government praised scientists and embraced their solutions – at least rhetorically. The governmental communication on the pandemic was depicted as the only fact- and science-based response. The government monopolized data collection and communication on COVID cases, and embraced and used arguments from the scientific and expert discourse. "Let's not believe that we've become experts in virology. [...] Let's leave the field clear for the scientists, doctors and professors" – the prime minister said in an interview.<sup>2</sup> This is an illustration of the capability of Orbán's hybrid regime to adapt in times of crisis. In a country that was socialized in "scientific socialism" (an authoritarian regime built on some virtues of the enlightenment), this narrative proved to be powerful, as scientists are very well respected. Governmental disinformation legitimized by scientific or expert authority makes it even harder for citizens to distinguish information vital for their own survival and day-to-day activities from propaganda pieces.
- As an example, while the government referred to scientific and expert authorities, the most prevalent personnel in the regime's communication were from the military and the police. The head of the "Operative Staff", the emergency unit that held daily press conferences during the state of danger, is someone without scientific authority and expertise, and was used to push a disinformation narrative about illegal migrants being the biggest health threat to Hungarians.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio Programme "Good Morning Hungary"', Government, accessed 12 August 2020, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-20200508>.

- Our research results revealed that disinformation around the pandemic pushed Hungary further into China's arms and closer to the post-Soviet space. This was enhanced by mainstream governmental messages claiming the success of the "Eastern Opening" foreign policy after receiving medical personal protective equipment shipments from China and other Eastern autocracies such as Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, contrasting their actions with the lack of European or Western solidarity.
- Supported by the tale of humanitarian assistance, China's footprint has significantly grown in Hungary as the Hungarian government signed a classified loan deal with its Chinese counterparts for the construction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway worth HUF 700 billion (EUR 2 billion). Moreover, Hungary has imported twice as many ventilators from China as needed for HUF 300 billion (EUR 857 million).
- Fringe portals and homepages seized the opportunity provided by the uncertainty of the crisis to disseminate various conspiracy theories, including but not limited to COVID-19 as a tool to forge a global government with a global surveillance program, the involvement of Western elites in the creation or exploitation of the crisis, and spreading anti-vaccination and coronavirus-sceptic sentiment. Several countries in the Central and Eastern European region experienced similar trends, both in terms of conspiracies and increasingly geopolitics-focused information environments.
- Hostile state disinformation strategies were aimed at four core vulnerable audiences trying to navigate the crisis: everyday media consumers, pro-Russian or pro-Chinese political actors across Europe attacking the establishment during times of crisis, Western decision-makers fending off unfounded conspiracies, and finally the middle-class in the CEE region, desperate to hold onto its economic status.
- **Based on our research data, we outline future trends that could guide decision-makers in Hungary and in the West on how to formulate effective responses to the continuous stream of epidemic-related Russian or Chinese disinformation.** COVID-19 kickstarted political, economic, geopolitical, and communication changes could lead to three future trends: the establishment of a new international "status quo," an "autocratic expansion" of Chinese and Russian influence, or general economic and social destabilization of states as a result of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Hungarian economic recovery is already being discussed along clear geopolitical priorities by downplaying Western assistance and encouraging Russian or Chinese investments as part of a „pandemic cooperation" narrative.

## SHARED NARRATIVES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Based on the monitoring database of the Open Information Partnership,<sup>3</sup> we could identify four key crisis narratives that are present in multiple countries and in Hungary as well. Their presence and targets not only prove that pro-Kremlin or pro-Chinese disinformation is quite successfully disseminated on the European level, but they are the building blocks of common anti-West disinformation strategies readily available to both local anti-establishment actors, for example in Hungary, and to regional Russian disinformation networks.

### A HUMAN-MADE PANDEMIC

Ever since the gravity of the novel coronavirus situation was recognized by national governments, which reacted by imposing previously unprecedented measures, doubts over the origins of COVID-19 has been largely present within society. Conspiratorial pages on social media and blogs in Hungary were quick to react, promoting theories claiming that the novel coronavirus was the result of laboratory experiments. Recurring theories surrounding the artificial origin of COVID-19 include social media and blog posts about the virus being made in the Wuhan Virology Institute in China, while other fringe portals claimed that the virus was designed as a biological weapon in the United States. **Research data on CEE-wide disinformation suggests that this narrative has been ultimately present in several countries of the region, prominently appearing in Slovakia, Czechia, Georgia and Ukraine.** Fringe conspiracy portals in Slovakia pointed the finger at a potential [leak](#) from a laboratory leading to the global outbreak, with Czech contents appearing on social media [promoted](#) the same claim. This narrative was often associated with geopolitical aspects, targeting either China for its negligence over the virus or the United States and its alleged military secrets – or both. Pro-Kremlin [Georgian](#) disinformation elements repeatedly hinted at the country's US-funded Lugar Lab near Tbilisi as the potential source of the virus, while messages labelling the outbreak as a US interest were [prevalent](#) in Slovakia. Other pro-Kremlin conspiracy theory distributors in [Czechia](#) and [Ukraine](#) attempted to draw connections between COVID-19 and secret American biolabs operated in [Eastern Europe](#). Similarly to Hungary, anti-Chinese sentiment concerning the secrecy around the virus was also present, with Czech outlets [blasting](#) the WHO for „not stopping China“ as the virus was gaining ground.

### BILL GATES AS A PANDEMIC ARCHITECT/EXPLOITER

A significant share of disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe was targeted at the US tech billionaire, who – as a prominent global vaccine advocate through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – is accused of numerous wrongdoings, including being behind the whole COVID-19 outbreak, encouraging global surveillance programs in the shadow of the public health crisis, pushing for unverified vaccinations to be used at a global level and looking to gain wealth or global power through the pandemic. **Gates and his vaccination-related activities were a popular topic to exploit across the region, particularly by Slovak, Czech, Georgian and Romania disinformation-promoting outlets.** Besides Hungarian conspiratorial pages, which repeatedly featured theories surrounding Gates as part of their COVID-19 „coverage,“ Czech outlets – similarly to Hungarian ones – [pointed to](#) a partnership between the Rockefeller Foundation and the US billionaire to exploit the virus. The Slovak public on social media also experienced [theories](#) promoted in Hungary, alleging that the novel coronavirus will lead to humans being not just vaccinated, but microchipped by Gates's technology. Pro-Russian actors such as Sputnik Romania [suggested](#) that only Gates benefitted from the current health crisis, while [Czech](#) and [Georgian](#) news outlets promoted stories saying that he wants to control the world. This anti-elite and anti-Gates stance was repeatedly combined with an alleged global depopulation scheme COVID-19 is involved in, with [Slovak](#), [Czech](#) and [Georgian](#)

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<sup>3</sup> The Open Information Partnership Monitoring data used for the regional analysis covered Czechia, Hungary, Kosovo, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine in the Central Eastern Europe.

disinformation distributors rapidly echoing the same narrative. Northern Macedonia also [saw](#) the so-called Agenda 21 depopulation theory Hungarian social media users could repeatedly come across. In [Romania](#), another theory pointing to the UN's 2030 development agenda as a depopulation tool was promoted during the outbreak.

## COVID-19 IS NOT HARMFUL

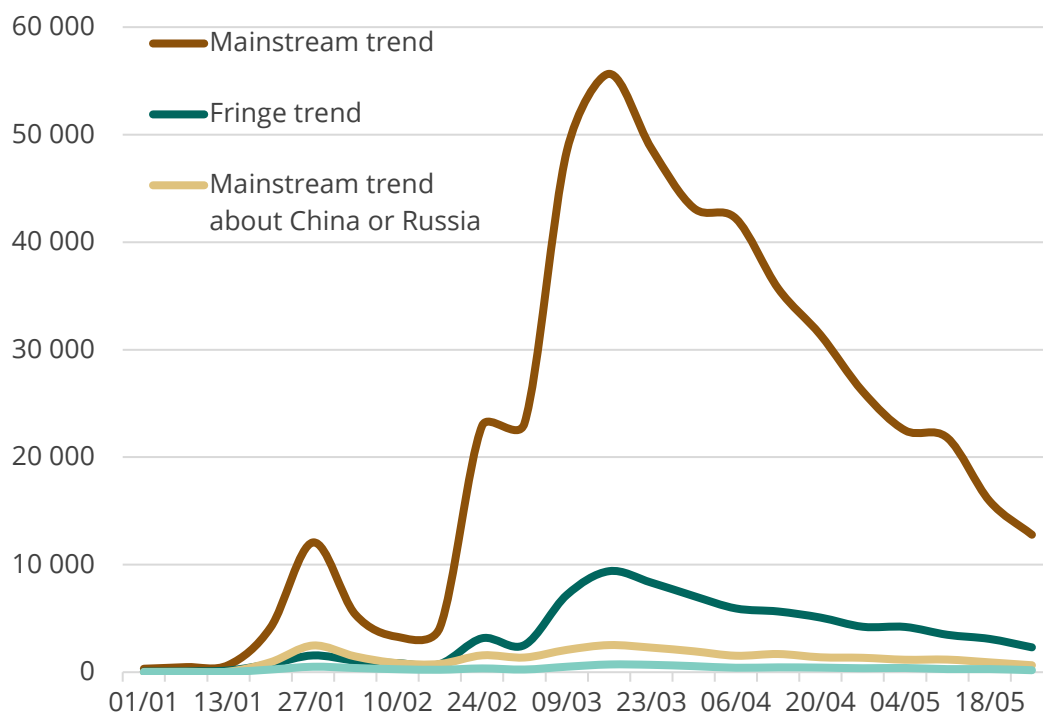
Due to scientific uncertainties surrounding the novel coronavirus, theories rushing to downgrade the real health threats – similarly to the origin of the virus – quickly spread. **Coronavirus-skepticism and denial gradually took shape not only in Hungary (mainly promoted by fringe homepages and controversial medical influencers), but prominently in Slovakia, Czechia, Romania and Georgia.** Most of the non-factual claims being promoted were associated with statements arguing that COVID-19 is essentially an ordinary flu (as seen in [Czechia](#) and [Slovakia](#)) and/or a fraud with a suspicious background motive (as seen in posts and news pieces promoted in [Czechia](#) and [Slovakia](#)) and/or a plan to reshape/destroy the economy (as seen in [Czechia](#)). Closely attached to this narrative was the spread of views denouncing compulsory protective masks, as well as anti-vaccination messages. Concerning protective masks, [Romanian](#), [Georgian](#) and [Slovak](#) portals pointed to their danger, with Slovak outlets [suggesting](#) that masks are just symbolic since there is no second wave of COVID-19 to come. Most notable anti-vaccination messages spread in the region were the ones about how a vaccine developed by Gates will have 50% effectivity (in [Czechia](#)), how vaccines could lead to autism (in [Slovakia](#)), how the new vaccine could kill 50 million people (in [Slovakia](#)) and how a Gates vaccine could kill people (in [Slovakia](#)).

## AN EU FAILURE TO FIGHT THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE PANDEMIC

**Exploiting the fact that national governments – given their authority – were the prominent first responders at the political level, fringe outlets in the region introduced and pushed for a strong anti-EU narrative that was concentrated on how the European bloc has failed to address the crisis and/or how the EU is looking to expand its power using the pandemic.** While the anti-European stance in Hungary was primarily present at the pro-government level, fringe pages and portals were also busy with „blaming Brussels.“ The aforementioned case was the most prominent in Czechia with messages saying that the EU [wants](#) to limit the sovereignty of its members, financial aid suggested by Brussels [is](#) essentially a trap, the European Commission has [failed](#) to act and that COVID-19 is the [failure](#) of globalism. Anti-EU messaging was also prevalent in Slovakia, pointing to [discussions](#) about migrants in the wake of the crisis and the [EU financial aid](#) that will limit sovereignty, while pro-Russian elements in [Romania](#) also feared sovereignty loss.

## MAINSTREAM NARRATIVES

Two separate lines of communication about the epidemic could be observed in mainstream Hungarian outlets. One informed the general public about the news on the global and local COVID-19 situation, its causes, vulnerable groups to the disease, possible treatments. In the early days of the news cycle, China was solely in the focus of attention because it was then the epicenter of the outbreak, and governmental or independent media tried to inform Hungarians about basic knowledge regarding the virus, possible containment measures, etc. Another line of narratives was produced by the government, the mainstream media under its thumbs to regain control of the political agenda, which swiftly turned the discussion about COVID-19 towards domestic issues, how the government or the opposition would and could deal with the pandemic, and the healthcare and economic crisis that ensued. The general discussion about the virus was driven by reports about Wuhan, China, the WHO, and the global spread of the pandemic in January,<sup>vi</sup> the first significant flare-ups of the epidemic in Europe and in Hungary in March,<sup>vii</sup> as seen on diagram 1 depicting the mainstream and fringe news trends.



**Diagram 1: The number of COVID-related messages in mainstream and fringe media, and trends of messages about the pandemic mentioning China or Russia between 1 January and 1 June 2020 in Hungary**

Fringe pages and self-appointed health experts already began the dissemination of mostly apolitical conspiracy theories, claims about false cures in February and March of 2020. Dr. Gábor Lenkei, a scientologist and owner of a vitamin business, declared COVID-19 less harmful than the seasonal flu based on "statistics,"<sup>viii</sup> while Tibi atya (Father Tibi), a Hungarian influencer site focusing on memes, alcoholic beverages and running a pub in Budapest, promoted the consumption of alcohol, half-jokingly, as immunization against the infection.<sup>ix</sup> The relatively low number of messages mentioning China or Russia (the yellow and bright blue trend lines) clearly highlights the internal focus of the discourse. Also, we can see that fringe media had only a minor impact shaping the Hungarian political agenda about COVID-19 during the first wave of the epidemic.



## NARRATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENT

Fidesz and PM Orbán regained control of the political discourse concerning the pandemic by adopting a state of emergency legislation (the Bill on the Protection against the Coronavirus) to rule by decree in March, which was not supported by the opposition without the inclusion of a sunset clause, and by the overall militarization of the governmental approach through the establishment of the Operative Staff made up mostly by police and military commanders.<sup>x</sup> Relying on health officials, experts on epidemiology, health or scientific data was at the core of the government's crisis communication strategy, while PM Orbán also established a quasi-monopoly of all the health data in the Hungarian media space by limiting public or journalistic access to health officials, health institutions' databases and by discouraging increased scrutiny through the amendment of the Penal Code on fearmongering.

The government quickly set up the official COVID-19 homepage, the koronavirus.gov.hu domain, where interactive graphs on the spread of the coronavirus in Hungarian counties, the number of infected, recovered, deceased persons, governmental measures, etc. served as the main source on epidemic-related information in Hungary.<sup>xi</sup> Four health officials became the "professional faces" of governmental communication: Miklós Kásler, director of the National Institute of Oncology and minister of human capacities, member of the Operative Staff; Cecília Györgyi Müller, a Hungarian physician and chief medical officer of Hungary, member of the Operative Staff; János Szlávik, chief infectologist of Budapest's St. László Hospital, member of the Operative Staff; finally, Professor Béla Merkely, director of Semmelweis University's Heart and Vascular Centre and the Rector of Semmelweis University – the latter organized for the first time ever in Hungary a representative testing effort to gauge infection levels in the country in May 2020.<sup>xii</sup> Based on the numbers of the SentiOne platform, messages containing one of the aforementioned names altogether amounted to more than ten thousand Facebook posts and over thirty thousand media articles in the Hungarian media space. Thus, the incorporation of medical experts into the government's task force and communication proved to be a success, and it achieved the four principal goals of the government. **With the help of mostly trusted and respected health experts, PM Orbán successfully stabilized the cabinet's previously quite chaotic and quickly changing official line of communication. Taking control of both the data and the experts who can interpret those to the public or Hungarian intellectuals meant the establishment of an information monopoly in COVID-related information.** The governmental communication and steps taken against the pandemic were on the surface more fact- and science-based, proving that even some hybrid regimes are capable to adaptation in times of crisis. However, experts' presence in the governmental discourse in general also indirectly legitimized the government's anti-opposition conspiracy theories, making it even harder for citizens to distinguish information vital for their own survival and day-to-day activities from propaganda pieces, deliberate acts of manipulation.

The Hungarian government accused the opposition of standing in the way of "national unity" in times of crisis,<sup>xiii</sup> cast them as anti-Hungarians,<sup>xiv</sup> part of the "George Soros network,"<sup>xv</sup> while stripping the opposition parties and opposition-led settlements of state funds and local tax revenues.<sup>xvi</sup> The government has also directly weaponized COVID-related disinformation to blame Budapest Lord Mayor Gergely Karácsony for the gross negligence of elders living in care homes operated by the metropolitan municipality after numerous residents became infected and died of COVID\_19.<sup>xvii</sup>

However, state-operated care facilities were also hit hard by the virus, and the government, state-run hospitals withheld vital health information about the spread of the disease in healthcare institutions, forcing health workers, doctors to sign NDIs. The amendment of the Penal Code, which increased the prison sentence for scaremongering up to five years, fit into the line of measures aimed at threatening the opposition and the free press under the pretext of fighting against disinformation. On the one hand Hungarian authorities did shut down online sites spreading conspiracies about the pandemic and many leftist clickbait sites also pushed disinformation about the government's incompetence. For example one

site claimed that PM Orbán decision-making involves literally “rolling the dice”.<sup>xxviii</sup> On the other hand, the police started over 100 investigations against alleged cases of spreading hoaxes related to the epidemic<sup>xxix</sup>, and some citizens were brought to the police for posting government-critical messages – that was aired prime time in the media. In the end, the governmental communication successfully sidelined and divided the opposition’s response to the pandemic, fully taking control of the crisis discourse.

## **GEOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA**

Geopolitical narratives in the Hungarian mainstream media mostly focused on the situation in China, Asian personal experiences about the infection, and the Chinese origins of COVID-19 in January and February of 2020. **Disinformation, conspiracy theories, pro-Chinese – mostly foreign-policy oriented – narratives started appearing in state and pro-government media only when the virus appeared in Hungary.** Disinformation was spread about the consequences of the crisis as well – e.g. the weakening of the Hungarian currency. member of the board of directors at the Russian “spy bank,” the International Investment Bank (IIB),<sup>xx</sup> Imre Boros – a former agricultural minister in the first Orbán government – hinted at “speculators” being behind the weakening of the Hungarian Forint, which, in fact, was affected by the grim economic outlook amidst the pandemic.<sup>xxi</sup> Governmental media picked up this narrative and pointed its fingers on George Soros.

**From mid-March, as authorities announced travel and lockdown restrictions, etc. to reign in the pandemic, the government started to build a narrative about the supportive actions of China, contrasting them with the lack of solidarity within the EU. Also, immigration and “immigrant countries” were to blame for the virus.** Following the anti-immigration rhetoric of his government, PM Orbán personally announced on his Facebook page on 4 March that the first two identified virus-carriers were Iranian students in an apparent attempt to prove that immigration contributes to the spread of the disease.<sup>xxii</sup> The Hungarian prime minister continued to stress the “obvious” link between legal and illegal immigration and the pandemic even during video conference of EU leaders on 10 March, forcing Hungary to close its borders.<sup>xxiii</sup> While pro-government media applauded China for the successful containment of the pandemic,<sup>xxiv</sup> and PM Orbán personally welcomed the first significant health equipment shipment from China on the Liszt Ferenc International Airport.<sup>xxv</sup> In April, FM Péter Szijjártó announced the establishment of an “airbridge” between Hungary and China, which would operate even during the Easter Holidays to acquire millions of personal protective equipment and more than a hundred ventilators.<sup>xxvi</sup> Pro-government news site Origo reported on a new vaccine developed by a laboratory in Wuhan and the Sinovac Biotech from Beijing.<sup>xxvii</sup> At the same time, independent and investigative portals reported that the Chinese imports were managed by Iván Kovácsics Jr., who is working for the Ministry for Innovation and Technology, and by the CECZ Közép-európai Kft./Ltd. headed by his father, the former deputy director of the Hungarian National Tax and Customs Administration (NAV). Iván Kovácsics was banned from entering the United States for corruption and VAT fraud back in 2014.<sup>xxviii</sup> **The pandemic clearly provided the government fresh ammunition to advocate for the success of the so called “Eastern Opening” foreign policy placing equal emphasis on Western and Eastern diplomatic and economic partnerships, first and foremost with Moscow and Beijing.** Although the Eastern Partnership proved to be an economic failure in terms of trade balance, China’s assistance was presented as a result of the long-term Hungarian policy. PM Viktor Orbán personally thanked President Xi Jinping for Chinese assistance during a telephone conversation in May,<sup>xxix</sup> while FM Péter Szijjártó expressed the same gratitude towards Chinese FM Wang Yi.<sup>xxx</sup>

**It is important to note that on the tailwind of the epidemic-induced cooperation with China, the Hungarian government continued to conduct and legitimize large-scale business deals with Beijing, and it also tried to include other hybrid regimes in its current foreign policy outreach, such as Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Kazakhstan.** Chinese personal protective equipment (PPE) deliveries

not only proved to be great photo opportunities for the government, it meant lucrative business for Wizz Air, landing a HUF 4.7 billion contract for shipments,<sup>xxxix</sup> and the government paid HUF 300 billion (EUR 857 million) for twice as many ventilators (16 thousand) PM Orbán said would be needed during a future peak of the epidemic in Hungarian hospitals.<sup>xxxix</sup> Under the veil of the virus outbreak, Hungary and China signed a classified loan deal for the construction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway at the end of April,<sup>xxxix</sup> the largest Chinese investment (worth more than HUF 700 billion or around EUR 2 billion) to date, which is also probably one of the biggest foreign corruption schemes besides Paks 2 built by Rosatom. The Chinese-backed project involves pro-Fidesz oligarch Lőrinc Mészáros as a member of the consortium responsible for the construction.<sup>xxxix</sup> PM Orbán attended the video conference of the Turkic Council, where Hungary holds an observer membership status, to thank the epidemic assistance, donations of masks received from Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Kazakhstan.<sup>xxxix</sup> Interestingly, Russia was mainly absent from the government's and the pro-government media's communication, reports mainly dealt with the epidemic situation in Russia, some of the actions Putin took to control the outbreak.<sup>xxxix</sup> There were only scant articles about Russia beating the pandemic in a few months,<sup>xxxix</sup> and Putin sending humanitarian help to Italy<sup>xxxix</sup> or the United States.<sup>xxxix</sup> **However, the governmental media began lately to quote directly the Interfax news agency and Russian experts about the success of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine,<sup>xl</sup> despite the lack of scientific data on the serum itself and a world-wide scientific backlash against the vaccine that was made available without proper trials conducted.**

**At the same time, the Hungarian government continued its strong Eurosceptic rhetoric to push its Eastern foreign policy agenda and defend itself against Western critiques concerning the state of emergency law.** Pro-government media and politicians stoked Eurosceptic attitudes from the beginning of the crisis. Fidesz MEP Tamás Deutsch scolded the European Union for "letting down millions of European citizens," while we "are attacked first for our Fundamental Law, then for our stance on migration, now for our steps taken against the pandemic."<sup>xli</sup> The pro-government Pesti Srácok made fun of Manfred Weber, the leader of the European People's Party in the European Parliament for his economic rescue plans proposing the development of a 5G network and a new airplane model as part of the European response to the pandemic.<sup>xlii</sup> An op-ed published in the main print daily governmental mouthpiece Magyar Nemzet simply declared the European Union a non-democratic institution. Allegedly, they did not only fail to manage the third large-scale crisis after the 2008 financial downturn and the "migrant invasion" of 2015, it – along with NATO – strips states of their national sovereignty to establish a "world government."<sup>xliii</sup> Despite the EU and the Commission establishing a recovery fund aimed at mitigating the effects of the crisis,<sup>xliii</sup> PM Orbán is downplaying Western solidarity to promote Eastern partnerships:

***"We are a member of the European Union, we want a strong union, but we also need to see its weaknesses, which are particularly striking during the coronavirus epidemic. We are negotiating with our neighbors and the Visegrad member states, but we must see that no help is coming from there (Brussels). We received assistance from China and the Turkish Council, of which Hungary is an observer member. Regardless, we are still members of the European Union. We are part of the Western alliance and we need to help each other, but we see that no help comes from within (the alliance)."***<sup>xliv</sup>

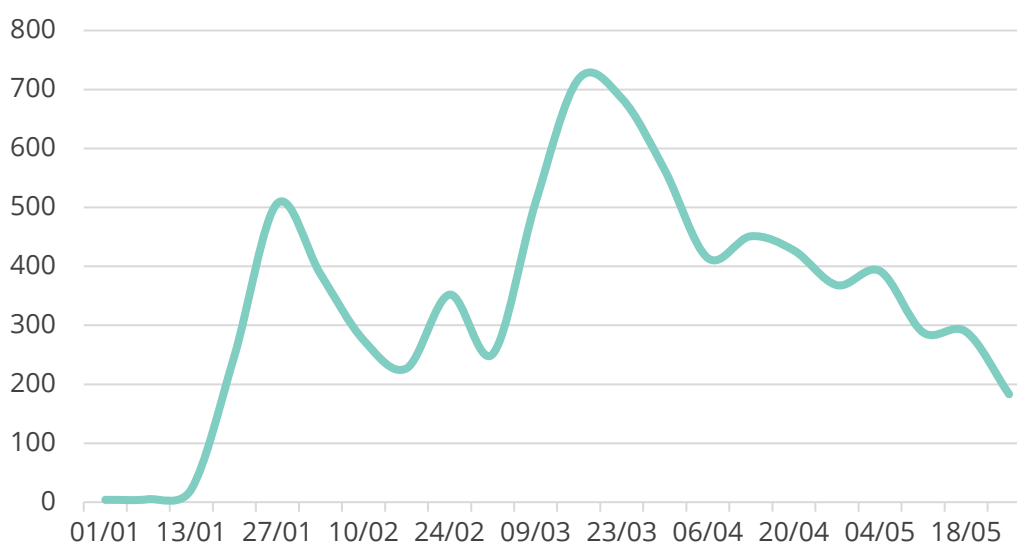
**Pro-government articles and social media posts paid particular attention to blaming the severity of the pandemic on ill-conceived "liberal ideologies" in Western societies.** Pro-government portal Origo stated that the French government's late response to the epidemic, adhering to the idea of open borders between European member states was caused by the "left-wing embrace of the empty spirit of 1968,"<sup>xlv</sup> while the print mouthpiece Magyar Nemzet criticized the Swedish state for the lack of integration of the Muslim diaspora, and for its epidemic strategy rooted in "an open society," all of which must have contributed to the spread of the virus in Swedish care facilities.<sup>xlv</sup> Moreover, the widespread George Floyd protests in the United States amidst the pandemic were discussed by government-controlled media as mostly violent riots,

diminishing or even negating the inherent human rights aspect of the Black Lives Matter movement, in line with the Hungarian government's rightist foreign policy agenda.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Based on the number of articles and posts, the mainstream discourse was clearly dominated by pro-government media, such as origo.hu, Magyar Nemzet or hirado.hu, and by Facebook. All this meant that pro-government messages and conspiracy theories could spread easily among Hungarians in general and the electoral base of the Fidesz-KDNP in particular.

## FRINGE/PRO-KREMLIN NARRATIVES

Fringe media portals and conspiracy theory pages have been particularly active in publishing coronavirus-related contents throughout the health crisis. **During the first half of 2020, there were three prevailing coronavirus narratives that were used by these disinformation actors. The first narrative exploits the sense of uncertainty, it was centered around how dangerous this virus turned out to be, how China fought to contain the outbreak (or struggled to do so) and where COVID-19 could „really” come from.** Accordingly, conspiracy theories pointing to the allegedly artificial nature of the coronavirus started to spread in late January and early February, as seen on diagram 2: fringe media actors such as the Világ Titkai (Secrets of the World) page suggested that the virus was human-made and created to destroy the Chinese economy,<sup>4</sup> while right-wing conspiracy theory promoter János Drábik attempted<sup>5</sup> to draw a connection between the virus' spread and 5G technology. **Drábik also claimed that the coronavirus was developed by the US Army Medical Command as part of a biological warfare strategy – also against China.**<sup>6</sup>



**Diagram 2: The number of messages mentioning China or Russia in the context of COVID-19 in fringe media between 1 January and 1 June 2020**

The uncertainties surrounding the narrative are also shown by the inconsistency of claims made by fringe portals in the January-February period: while some believed that COVID-19 was an anti-Chinese operation, other portals pointed fingers at Beijing over the outbreak.<sup>7</sup> This inconsistency is strongly in line with the general goal of pro-Kremlin disinformation in Europe, that is, to spread often competing and contradicting information to cause social divide or even unrest. Posting an estimated 700+ contents online, fringe actors were the most active in mid-March when the outbreak turned into a health crisis in Hungary as well. The period is also seen as a starting point when a significant share of fringe media actors started echoing pro-government communications on the virus.

<sup>4</sup> Sokak szerint a vírus mesterséges, így akarják elpusztítani Kína lakosságát és megroppantani gazdaságát, A világ titkai (fringe blog and Facebook homepage), 30 January 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/859181850817715/posts/2659317157470833>

<sup>5</sup> 5G és a Koronavírus: ÖSSZEFÜGG!! Leleplező videó, Facebook Page of János Drábik (fringe homepage), 1 February 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/197968936943164/posts/3561284710611553>

<sup>6</sup> Biológiai világháború – Dr. Drábik János, Jakab István (Youtube video), 18 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoCMndMRQ3o>

<sup>7</sup> Az American Enterprise Institute szerint a kínai kommunista rendszer nagyban felelős (...), VilagHelyzete (fringe blog), 1 February 2020, <http://www.facebook.com/856757694414520/posts/2726692540754350>

Gradually taking shape and becoming a regular line of communications from mid-April (the third highest peak of fringe activity on diagram 2), **the second narrative focused on the health crisis being subject to exploitation by either political and state or private and business actors.** The main corresponding subnarratives included claims against Bill Gates either as a pandemic architect or exploiter and worries over a potentially evolving global government and a mass surveillance scheme. The most notable combination of these two subnarratives occurred when the outbreak was labelled<sup>8</sup> as a plot by Gates to implant microchips into humans through vaccination. A generally examined trend among fringe homepages and conspiracy blogs during this period is that a significant majority of them has „weaponized” their COVID-19 coverage to promote previously pushed conspiracy theories in various recurring topics. Most notably, Gates was accused of a vaccine conspiracy.

**The relatively low number of cases and fatalities, which provided the greater public with a sense of security, gave room to the third most notable narrative, that is, coronavirus scepticism and even denial.** While the COVID-19 coverage of fringe homepages showed a mixed tendency – reporting on both the virus being and not being a serious threat, Dr. György Gődény, Dr. Gábor Lenkei, Dr. József Tamasi emerged as the top self-declared health experts with a high influencing capability. Lenkei and Gődény repeatedly rushed to downplay the effects of the virus, while Tamasi claimed that there was no pandemic at all. The latter narrative is expected to remain prevalent as the world fears a potential second wave.

As for fringe pages and portals, Russia received a significantly lower share of the coverage than China. The prevailing pro-Kremlin line of communications consisted of several elements on Russia’s handling of the outbreak, with two items standing out: the pro-government Facebook homepage Számok – A baloldali álhírek ellenszere (Numbers – the Cure for Leftist Fake News) claimed that EU sanctions made<sup>9</sup> Russia better equipped to tackle the crisis, while the pro-government page Patrióta Európa Mozgalom (Patriotic Europe Movement) – together with others – praised<sup>10</sup> Russia’s coronavirus aid for virus-hit Italy in mid-March.

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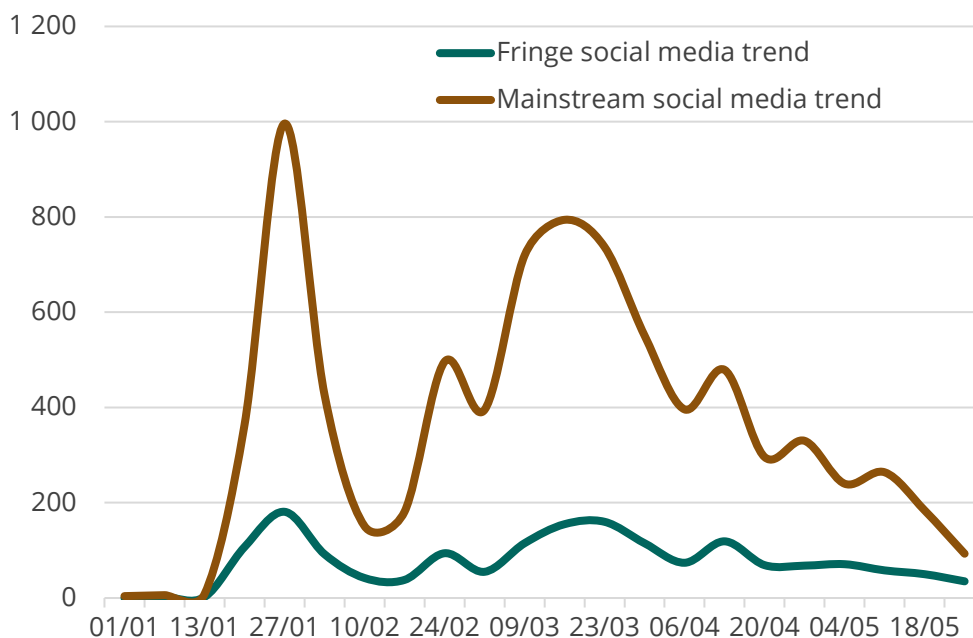
<sup>8</sup> Alex Jones is elővette a Microsoft 666 szabadalmát, Vilaghelyzete (fringe blog), 22 April 2020, [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=2933415790076185&id=142264392524686](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2933415790076185&id=142264392524686)

<sup>9</sup> A 6 éve tartó ruszofób szankciók miatt Oroszország ellenállób, mint valaha, Számok – A baloldali álhírek ellenszere (fringe homepage), 10 April 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/109117190565423/posts/156851039125371>

<sup>10</sup> Putyin megmutatta emberi nagyságát, Olaszország segítségére siet. Az EU rendszeresen ruszofób módon viselkedik, Patrióta Európa Mozgalom (fringe homepage), 23 March 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/178803562238471/posts/2806899529428848>

## SOCIAL MEDIA NARRATIVES

Since the majority of the pro-Russian and far-right media is available on Facebook in Hungary, we conducted a separate investigation regarding social media discourses. Both in the case of the mainstream media and fringe Facebook pages, there were three well-distinguishable peaks in COVID-19 related coverage, displayed on diagram 3, with both identical and differing narrative trends.



**Diagram 3: The number of Facebook posts in mainstream and fringe media mentioning China or Russia about COVID-19 between 1 January and 1 June 2020**

As seen on the diagram, the number of mainstream social media messages dominated the overall discourse, however, the shapes of the two trend lines are quite similar, which means that **fringe media and their messages followed the mainstream narratives and news production overall.**

The first peak – examined in late January and early February – coincided with the period when the Chinese outbreak was turning into a global health crisis and when the Chinese government ordered<sup>11</sup> to build a large hospital in Wuhan within 10 days. Domestic aspects corresponded with the request of Hungarian universities<sup>12</sup> asking its Chinese students who come from the Wuhan region not to travel back to their home country. **While mainstream outlets focused largely on China, fringe homepages emphasized precautionary measures taken by Russia<sup>13</sup> and questions surrounding the novel coronavirus.**

The middle of March saw the occurrence of the second peak with social media posts mainly focusing on Italy as the country hit the hardest by the coronavirus in Europe and domestic events as the Hungarian government introduced a national state of emergency and was in preparations for nationwide restrictions.

<sup>11</sup> Így épült meg 10 nap alatt a kínai szuperkórház, ATV, 2 February 2020, <http://www.facebook.com/114324688634857/posts/2923797484354216>

<sup>12</sup> Négy hallgatójuk származik Vuhan városából, ahol először mutatták ki az új vírust, 24.hu, 28 January 2020, <http://www.facebook.com/202099276507678/posts/2939155442802034>

<sup>13</sup> Koronavírus: a halálozási ráta nem magas, de ellenőrzés alatt kell tartani a helyzetet az oroszok szerint, Szeretlek Magyarország, 27 January 2020, <http://www.facebook.com/358670536193/posts/10157093479341194>

Mainstream social media narratives focused on geopolitical rivalry after the Chinese government accused US soldiers of bringing the virus into China. **Fringe portals depicted Russia as a humanitarian actor in Italy, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel was associated<sup>14</sup> with the outbreak because she had visited to Wuhan.**

As the outbreak was still evolving in Hungary, the third peak saw a continuing narrative about the geopolitical connotations of the crisis. Social media posts from mainstream outlets continued focusing on China due to Beijing's move<sup>15</sup> to implement surveillance measures, as well as on the increasingly friendly Chinese-Hungarian relations, with Prime Minister Orbán<sup>16</sup> and other members<sup>17</sup> of the Hungarian government thanking China for its COVID-19 assistance. Simultaneous coverage on Russia focused on Moscow struggling to contain the outbreak and easing restrictive measures nonetheless. At the same time, fringe messaging continued to depict an inconsistent picture of China: besides the „biological warfare theory” targeting the US, the Chinese government was accused<sup>18</sup> of knowing everything about the outbreak and failing to act.

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<sup>14</sup> Merkel 2019. szeptemberében Vuhanban járt, Kimondott Igazságok (fringe blog), 21 March 2020, <http://kimondottigazsagok.com/veletlenek-vegjateka-a-veletlenek-sora-egyre-hosszabb-merkel-az-usa-es-vuhan/>

<sup>15</sup> Pekingben minden eddigénél szorosabb megfigyelési technikát dolgoztak ki, HVG, 11 May 2020, <http://www.facebook.com/131283758531/posts/10159438837503532>

<sup>16</sup> Megköszönte a segítséget, amit Kína a járvány megfékezéséhez nyújtott Magyarországnak, Index, 15 May 2020, <http://www.facebook.com/560525343980775/posts/3461027597263854>

<sup>17</sup> Szijjártó Péter köszönetet mondott a kínai külügyminiszternek, Blikk, 14 May 2020, <http://www.facebook.com/136848826340367/posts/4152385644786645>

<sup>18</sup> Kína a napot is lehazudja az égről? Titkok szigete (fringe blog), 13 May 2020, <http://www.facebook.com/266679430927809/posts/561674068095009>



## MANIPULATION STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

When it comes to techniques of manipulation, we can identify five domestic and four international disinformation strategies and their corresponding manipulation techniques.

### DOMESTIC STRATEGIES

#### **The virus is a hoax or moral panic**

The most basic form of this narrative depends on the general population's ignorance concerning the pandemic. Some politicians, such as Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, or the aforementioned Hungarian experts tried to relativize the seriousness of the coronavirus infection to their ends. Techniques of manipulation involve: (1) false facts (the COVID-19 infection is similar to the seasonal flu); (2) opinions are mistaken for facts (the media tries to spin the issue to make opinions look like scientific facts).

#### **The pandemic is real and there is already a cure**

The cure narrative is mostly used by dubious experts, snake oil salesmen to get media attention, prove their expertise/holy leadership or sell some health services, self-invented cures. Techniques of manipulation involve: (1) false cause attribution (only special experts know how the virus works); (2) false effect attribution (some substances, over-the-counter drugs are proven to be effective against COVID-19); (3) false scientific facts; (4) false display of expertise.

#### **Hungary is a victim of domestic or international forces using the pandemic to subdue national sovereignty**

The strategy of victimhood plays on feelings of national pride, inferiority, and historical grievances dating back to the Cold War among Hungarians to stoke anti-West, pro-East attitudes. Primary techniques of this strategy involve: (1) the distortion of international relations (our allies are our enemies, our enemies our allies); (2) false or falsified facts (there is no solidarity within the EU); (3) the misidentification of business relations for humanitarian help (China is providing assistance by selling us PPEs); (4) hidden powers conspire against Hungary (to devalue the Hungarian Forint, create a world government, etc.). **This narrative is quite effective because Russian or Chinese conspiracy theories utilize the same argumentation, so Hungarian disinformation is readily available for foreign hostile actors to strengthen their anti-West, anti-NATO or anti-EU messages.**

#### **The Hungarian opposition is a tool of a hidden conspiracy against the Hungarian nation**

The Hungarian government's conspiracy theory against the opposition is often presented as a sub-type of the victimhood narrative, in which hidden forces' interests manifest themselves via domestic political players. Techniques of manipulation involve: (1) the attribution of false motives or interests (the support of international health standards, science is anti-Hungarian and serves foreign actors); (2) decontextualization of statements; (3) false alliances (if an opposition party, independent media are on the same page, they must be in a political alliance); (4) the government is the sole political representative of the Hungarian nation.

#### **Legitim critique is always about party politics**

The overt politization of independent media, human rights organizations and health providers is a strategy to delegitimize and silence critics, independent voices by claiming that they are part of party politics, thereby their stances reflect inherent bias. Techniques of manipulation involve: (1) fake news accusations (there is no independent media or all media have their clear political agenda); (2) there are no facts, only particular opinions; (3) every opinion is an opinion related to parties (there are no independent voices, sources, facts, etc.).

<b>Key Manipulation Techniques in Hungary</b>		
<i>Method</i>	<i>Case Summary</i>	<i>Creator/Distributor</i>
Distortion of facts	Multiple conspiratorial pages claimed that Bill Gates admitted responsibility for the COVID-19 outbreak. whereas he only admitted regret for not being able to do more against the crisis.	<a href="#">Titkok Szigete</a> , fringe and pro-Kremlin blog
Citing questionable sources	A Hungarian conspiratorial page cited Russia's flagship propaganda network RT to suggest that Bill Gates uses the pandemic to implant microchips into humans.	<a href="#">Vilaghelyzete</a> , fringe and pro-Kremlin blog
Citing questionable experts	COVID-19-sceptic communities repeatedly cited a group of foreign medical experts who promoted scientifically unproven claims to downplay the impact of the virus.	<a href="#">Association of Vaccine Critics and Life Protection, György Gődény</a>
Inventing new theories	Fringe actors claimed that the virus outbreak is part of an „eight-step plan“ towards a global dictatorship	<a href="#">Kimondott Igazságok</a> , fringe and pro-Kremlin blog
Importing foreign theories	Fringe outlets promoted Chinese state media claims, saying that US soldiers brought the virus into China.	<a href="#">Alternatív Hírek and Vilaghelyzete</a> , fringe and pro-Kremlin blogs

**Table 1: Key Manipulation Techniques in Hungary Source: Open Information Partnership monitoring data**

## **GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGIES**

Geopolitical strategies may employ all the narratives, strategies and techniques mentioned above. However, they are specifically designed to manipulate international audiences, attack Western alliances or publicize hostile foreign actors' interests and messages related to COVID-19.

### **The virus is part of political or economic ploy against the West or China**

The disinformation strategy relying on conspiracy theories tries to blame local or global elites for the pandemic, making it look as if a natural occurrence, disaster could have been designed purposefully by (powerful) actors to achieve geopolitical goals. These arguments can go both ways, either blaming China for creating the virus to achieve global dominance or blaming the United States/Bill Gates for the same reason. Techniques of manipulation involve: (1) false facts (the virus was created in a laboratory); (2) false geographical correlation (the virus appeared in Wuhan, where a laboratory is also located); (3) interests are causes (if Bill Gates were to profit off a new vaccine, he must have created the virus in the first place); (4) non-existent hidden actors (there must be a hidden elite directing the pandemic).

## **Western twilight**

Many anti-Western narratives showcase outbreaks in Italy or the United States, which are in stark contrast to the successful containment of the virus in China, as proof of the decline of Western liberal democracies and social order. These narratives are particularly dangerous, since Russia has been asserting its cultural superiority over the West based on the “holy trinity” of nation, family and Christianity for years.<sup>xlix</sup> Techniques of manipulation involve: (1) manipulation of statistical data; (2) overgeneralization (if the health system fails, the whole political system fails); (3) false cause attribution (the Western epidemic is caused by liberal values).

## **China and Russia are humanitarian superpowers**

China and Russia have used humanitarian aid delivery to hide their failure in reigning in the outbreak or make the impression that they are managing the epidemic so well that they can even help others, such as the United States or other Western countries, which are in crisis. Techniques of manipulation involve: (1) deliveries of PPEs; (2) propaganda campaigns; (3) omission of facts (for example, most of the Russian aid delivered to Italy turned out to be inadequate equipment).

## **The pandemic legitimizes China’s power projection**

The case of Hungary proves that Chinese assistance in the fight against COVID-19 is used to legitimize all kinds of other business deals, geopolitical aspirations without a direct and causal relation to the epidemic. Techniques of manipulation involve: (1) business interpreted as humanitarian aid; (2) any cooperation legitimizes every other forms of cooperation; (3) unfiltered adoption of Chinese propaganda.

## VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT

**Disinformation strategies and corresponding narratives have outlined four vulnerable audiences in Hungary and in Europe.** Domestic disinformation affects the general population, who do not have the necessary skills or knowledge to inform themselves about the geopolitical aspects and the scientific interpretations of the pandemic. Hence, local governments', "experts'" manipulative claims can easily mislead the local populace about the complex causes and effects of the pandemic, including the geopolitical implications of it. **On the international stage, the Russian or Hungarian "victimhood" narratives based on rhetoric centered around the defense of sovereignty reach out both to possible pro-Russian or pro-Chinese political actors across Europe or to European or Western mainstream decision-makers. Fringe actors can reformulate their messages with the help of the crisis to rally against the establishment,** blame the epidemic on a hidden plot of American or European elites against the people or sovereign states. At the same time, the same decision-makers need to spend scarce resources on fending off conspiracy theories instead of working on transnational solutions and economic relief packages. Finally, the economic carnage brought about by the virus would make the Hungarian, Central-Eastern European middle-class receptive of Russian or Chinese political influence if Russian energy policy, Chinese investments, technologies promised the restoration of their economic status in exchange for weaker, more corrupt democratic establishments.

## GEOPOLITICAL TRENDS AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Based on the experiences of the first wave of disinformation related to COVID-19, we can envision three trends for Hungary and the wider region in terms of changes in geopolitical relations and foreign hostile disinformation activities. We do not consider these trends mutually exclusive social or political tendencies, rather future predictions that can very well overlap or mutually contribute to future scenarios. **It can already be said that the Hungarian pandemic-related economic recovery is set out to follow clear geopolitical goals.** The Hungarian government enacted only a modest financial package to aid the Hungarian economy compared with other EU member states, worth around 4.5 % of the Hungarian GDP and consisting mostly of state-subsidized loans provided to enterprises.<sup>i</sup> **The size and structure of the Hungarian economic relief package represents an attempt by the government to avoid any future excessive deficit procedure of the European Union or any Western assistance,** such as IMF loans, which would limit Hungarian financial sovereignty. At the same time, the government continued to conduct and legitimize large-scale business deals with Beijing, not to mention the April statement of the Kremlin-controlled International Investment Bank, which would make up to EUR 250 million available for Hungarian projects in the commerce, agriculture, food, energy, and tourism sectors until 2022.<sup>ii</sup> **As a result, economic relief seems to pave the way for even more significant Russian and/or Chinese economic presence in Hungary, which is supported by pro-Chinese or pro-Russian narratives about the pandemic.**

### A NEW STATUS QUO

In the status quo trend of changes, the epidemic would significantly contribute to the further deterioration of Hungarian and Central-Eastern European media spaces and the consolidation of a hybrid logic. Conspiracy theories, disinformation about the epidemic would be rampant on social media and independent media, freedom of the media in general would be severely impacted by hostile foreign actors or local elites. **However, Chinese and Russian power projection enabled by the pandemic would not constitute a fundamental change of international or diplomatic relations in the long-term in the CEE region** beyond some new investments and occasional disinformation campaigns.

### AUTOCRATIC EXPANSION

The epidemic would allow China and Russia to dent the Euro-Atlantic alliance's unity on the economic, diplomatic and communication levels as well given the United States' isolationist tendencies, and the geopolitical weakness of the European Union to form a common foreign policy. **Russian and Chinese soft and sharp powers could successfully turn public attitudes in their favor in multiple countries in the regions, while investments would make parts of the local elite, media interested in supporting their geopolitical stance,** the emergence of a new, instable world order. Hybrid regimes, such as Hungary, would be the driving engine of these geopolitical reorganizations.

### ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DESTABILIZATION

**The pandemic and the economic downturn caused by it could destabilize the economic and social, political systems, and states themselves and question the international standing of Russia and China in the region.** Hostile foreign actors would be forced on the defensive, as grassroots movements would rail against their local allies demanding more media freedom, and call on civil society to ensure that the principles of equality and solidarity accompany the economic recovery after the pandemic. The Western international institutional system, the European Union would come out on top of the crisis due to the large economic relief funds, renewed solidarity among members of the Western alliances.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective countermeasures against COVID-19-related disinformation need to consider the multifaceted nature of the current crisis, the different future trends and vulnerable audiences outlined in the paper. Anti-disinformation activities, plans can be devised until the projected end of the pandemic in 2022.

1. **The “new status quo” trend would require the strengthening of already available anti-disinformation initiatives and capacities**, such as the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga or the Atlantic Council’s DFRLab, the European Union’s East StratCom Task Force, etc. by hiring experts well-versed in health science or epidemic-related policymaking.
  - a. Western institutions’ (WHO, IMF, NATO etc.) participation in the fight against the pandemic and against disinformation related to COVID-19 should be directly communicated to vulnerable audiences in member states.
  - b. Russian and Chinese statements about “humanitarian assistance” or “autocratic efficiency” should be called out and debunked.
  - c. Narratives about Russian or Chinese “effectiveness” in managing the pandemic could be supplemented by information about the increasing domestic oppression by the regimes, past or present aggressions in Ukraine or in Hong Kong.
  - d. Tech giants should be required to develop effective and public tools against hostile foreign communication and the spread of health-related conspiracy theories.
2. **An autocratic expansion of pro-Chinese or pro-Russian actors, political systems fuelled by the pandemic would require frequent, comparative research across EU or NATO member states** to understand what aspects of the pandemic, such as Euroscepticism or anti-establishment conspiracies, enable new geopolitical attitudinal changes among the populace and the elites.
  - a. Anti-disinformation communication campaigns should be able to reflect directly on issues, feelings central to attitudinal changes among the general population in Europe in general and the CEE region in particular.
  - b. Investigative journalism should be supported even more to highlight the corruption schemes that come with Chinese or Russian influence among the local elites.
  - c. Western tools of solidarity in the form of economic relief packages, new vaccines or therapeutics should be accompanied by communication campaigns executed by national governments receiving the aid.
  - d. New national security and data security problems with tracking devices, software developed in Russia and China should be publicized, as Europeans are generally wary of such anti-democratic technological tools.
3. **In the case of a general economic and social destabilization, local and Western institutions, governments, media should identify critical communication infrastructures and devise plans countering “active measures,” hostile media campaigns** weaponizing the divisive issue of culture wars, hate speech and extremist movements.
  - a. In polarised societies, different groups on both sides of the political divide should be regularly informed about foreign hostile manipulation attempts, campaigns directed at them and debates.
  - b. Independent domestic and international media should strengthen cooperation with civil society actors, local experts to defend the freedom of speech and local media spaces against foreign meddling attempts.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>viii</sup> szigete Titkok, 'Dr. Lenkei Gábor megnyugtató válasza: ezért nem fél a koronavírusról - videóban mondta el', *Titkok Szigete* (blog), accessed 6 July 2020, <http://titkokszigete.hu/dr-lenkei-gabor-menyugtato-valasza-ezert-nem-fel-a-koronavirustol-videoban-mondta-el/>.
- <sup>ix</sup> 'Igyunk Fröccsöt Ebben a Nagy Melegben!', accessed 6 July 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/185770441563258/posts/1854382801368672>.
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