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The threat that does not exist (for some): Russia and China



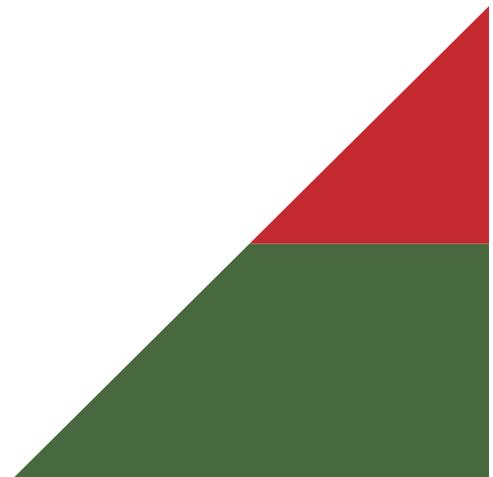
Narratives travelling the information space

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According to the [Globsec Trends](#) 2021 poll, more Hungarians see Russia (35%) or China (30%) as a strategic partner to their country than the United States (13%). The latter is the lowest proportion measured among the 10 countries surveyed. At the same time, China's relative popularity was the highest in Hungary, while that of Russia was the third highest after Slovakia and Bulgaria. Thus, it is interesting to see how these perceptions are formed via geopolitical narratives in the Hungarian information space.

Hungary has been ruled by the populist right-wing Fidesz-KDNP since 2010. One of the key foreign policy programs of the ruling parties is the so-called [Eastern Opening Policy](#), which officially aims to increase Hungarian exports to the East. This policy was accompanied by a parallel drift away from the country's allies in the West due to conflicts over Hungary's rule of law record, among others, and an increasingly cordial relationship with eastern authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and China. This change in foreign

policy orientation was mirrored in governmental statements and the coverage of the ever-expanding pro-government [media empire](#). Such was particularly visible during the coronavirus crisis, when the EU – for instance – was regularly [blamed](#) for its failure to manage the pandemic and vaccination program, while Russia and especially China were depicted as examples to follow and crucial partners.

Different worlds in the Hungarian media space

We can divide Hungarian media space into four core parts. The first is pro-government media, which can be considered the [largest](#) one, although their market share varies across sub-segments, such as printed press, online portals, radios, etc. Around 500 outlets are concentrated under the umbrella of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), which are often centrally [coordinated](#) to echo the government's views. While independent media still exists in Hungary, KESMA dominates entire market segments; for instance, it includes every single county-level newspaper in Hungary. The public broadcaster is also under the ruling party's [control](#), so freely available public TV could thus be the only source of information for some – typically poorer – citizens. The centrally governed, highly-coordinated and all-encompassing nature of the ruling party's messaging has the potential to reach a wide and diverse Hungarian audience layer. Therefore, by offering highly positive coverage on Russia and China while generally not reporting the threats these countries pose, these pro-government outlets could have contributed to Fidesz supporters' highly positive

evaluation of Russia. A similar [observation](#) was made by 'Voices of Central and Eastern Europe' research, which noted that Fidesz voters were considerably more likely to agree with narratives pushed by the ruling party than opposition backers.

The second part consists of independent media outlets that seek to maintain journalistic standards, such as Telex, 444 and 24.hu, which offer balanced coverage on geopolitical affairs and relatively frequently report on the threats posed by authoritarian regimes to Hungary. Independent media still [holds](#) a relatively large market share in the online market segment, but they have become relatively weak elsewhere. However, while many such outlets are rather popular, at least online, they may not be able to reach all layers of society. And since they all operate on a free-market basis, they do not run well-coordinated campaigns, unlike pro-government outlets. Thus, their impact on the Hungarian population's perceptions as a whole might be somewhat more limited.

The third part can be labelled as the 'grey zone' of websites that overtly or covertly support a certain political side, including

not only Facebook pages for media outlets, online portals, but pages run by influencers instead. As such they solely disseminate their own political party's geopolitics-related messages. Some of these are relatively popular with around [60,000](#) likes on Facebook, while others have a [considerably](#) smaller following.

The fourth and final part is that of fringe pro-Kremlin and conspiratorial websites. Pro-Kremlin, pro-China outlets constitute the smallest piece of the pie in Hungarian media space, but some conspiratorial sites that also spread pro-Kremlin content can be fairly popular on Facebook. These mainly focus on narratives that are generally not represented in pro-government outlets, such as Russia's "rightful" occupation of Crimea, the US's alleged role behind the Maidan coup, and anti-NATO claims. Although relatively unpopular, they could meet the demand for pro-Kremlin, pro-China, anti-West narratives if there is a significant transformation on the Hungarian media market; namely, the weakening of the pro-Fidesz media empire.

We will publish it, Mr. Lavrov

Just days before Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Hungary in August 2021, an interview was published with the head of Russian diplomacy in the pro-government daily Magyar Nemzet. In the interview, Lavrov praised Hungarian-Russian cooperation, its economic effects, and said he "understood" EU and NATO

membership conferred some obligations on Hungary even if it was against the country's interests. He also criticized Ukraine's treatment of national minorities, without a single remark about Crimea or eastern Ukraine. This was then shared by other government-friendly sites, such as [888](#) and [Pesti Srácok](#). Magyar Nemzet's article

was spread – according to Crowdtangle – by several pro-government Facebook groups, anti-EU groups, as well as multiple FB groups with Cyrillic names where Lavrov's main points were [translated](#). These Facebook groups included Закарпатська Правда (Transcarpathian Truth), ЗАКАРПАТТЯ-ІНФО (Се Закарпаття,

Детка ;)) (TRANSCARPATIA-INFO (This is Transcarpathia, Child;)), and Kárpátalja legyen újra magyar föld (Let Transcarpathia be Hungarian Land Again) that reach over 264,000 unique Facebook users. In so doing, Hungarian outlets and social media platforms serve as a tool to spread Kremlin narratives in Ukraine by utilizing the Hungarian minority, whereby the narratives could potentially drive future social dissent and civic uprisings in Ukraine.

Similarly, earlier this year China's ambassador to Hungary received a similar opportunity from the pro-government daily Magyar Hírlap. This op-ed was mainly shared by opposition actors and FB groups, mainly to criticize pro-government media for giving such an opportunity to the Chinese ambassador.

Days after the Lavrov interview, Hungarian FM Péter Szijjártó and his Russian counterpart held a joint press conference, where the main message focused on the two countries' close economic and energy sector cooperation, as well as in relation to vaccinations. This message was repeated on virtually all pro-government media channels without reference to the tensions between Russia and Hungary's allies, or Russia's aggressive foreign policy and its effects. The same outlets subsequently reported that Hungary and Russia struck an agreement on a long-term gas contract that would guarantee Hungarians can continue paying the EU's lowest gas prices.

Lavrov's visit was covered in essentially the same way by Orosz Hírek, with the only

additional piece of information mentioned being that the Russian foreign minister had accused the EU of Russophobia. Meanwhile, sites like Minden Szó and Vadhajtások only published very short articles about the meeting. However, Vadhajtások made up for it by reporting on a Lavrov speech at MIGMO a week later, where he "praised Hungary" for "not obeying the EU's joint norms and principles."

Independent media generally reported on the Lavrov meeting in a neutral tone, without criticizing the claims made by the two foreign ministers. While on the surface, this might seem similar coverage to that of pro-government portals, we need to look at the whole picture - independent media has been crucial in informing the public about Russia's aggressive foreign policy actions and its growing influence in Hungary. Thus, in the case of independent outlets, the coverage is not at all lopsided. Regarding the Lavrov visit, in separate articles independent outlets paid a lot of attention to the questions posed to Lavrov and Péter Szijjártó about Hungarian President János Áder's participation in the Crimea Platform. In terms of their Lavrov coverage, it was 444 that highlighted that the interview with Lavrov mentioned above was completely uncritical and emphasized that he could have been asked about Russia's actions in Ukraine.

In parallel, fringe outlets attacked any statements criticizing the Kremlin or its geopolitical goals, such as Hungarian Fidesz-affiliated President János Áder's

open support for Ukraine's sovereignty at the Crimea Platform. These sites have the friction of outreach mainstream pro-government media output: for instance, 888's coverage of the Lavrov interview generated close to 4,000 reactions on Facebook, while Orosz Hírek's attack on János Áder led to only 742 interactions. The Orosz Hírek article was also reshared by only a single FB group, the Movement for Independent Zakkarpattia. Others suggest that Ukraine is preparing for war in the East, which could lead to World War III. These narratives essentially compliment pro-government media coverage, which, whilst generally highly favorable to Russia, generally refrains from spreading openly pro-Kremlin propaganda.

The situation is rather similar regarding China. Magyar Nemzet, based on the Hungarian news wire agency MTI, reported on Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at the UN General Assembly by stating that China only expects discussion and mutual respect from partners. The article does not raise any concerns about the country, and such criticism is generally not featured on pro-government outlets.

These pro-East narratives are also counter-balanced with narratives claiming that the West "is committing mistake after mistake," the US is interfering with Hungary's internal affairs, and that the US has also fallen victim to circles wishing to build a "Transatlantic empire."

There is a balance

In contrast to pro-government outlets, mainstream independent media offer rather balanced coverage in general on geopolitical issues, presenting the population with both the ruling party's and the opposition's viewpoints.

Independent media also report on the views of opposition politicians on Hungary's relationship with authoritarian partners, such as MEP István Ujhelyi's declaration about Hungary not wanting to become a "Russian colony" and stay in the EU instead - although these articles generated few engagements, around 100.

Crucially, it was independent media,

particularly the Direkt36 investigative portal, which was responsible for launching the Fudan University campus scandal: the Hungarian government agreed that Fudan University could build its first European campus in Budapest, using mostly Chinese workers and financed by a Chinese credit line. Independent media continues to regularly report on Fudan, noting that despite the government - as a result of the scandal - promising a referendum on the issue, it instead created the Fudan Hungary Foundation that will have responsibility for managing the university. Independent outlets also reported that the government handed over the contract for the campus,

but blacked out all the crucially important parts. In the meantime, pro-government media continued to emphasize that the government "would bring the world's 31st strongest university to Hungary to improve the competitiveness of the country's higher education and provide modern education to youth." Such media outlets had previously accused the "Hungarian left" of hypocrisy for criticizing the decision, since it had been socialist Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy who had started Hungary's reproachment with China. Pro-government media completely disregarded all concerns raised by the opposition about Fudan University.

Magyarország Kormánya
February 18, 2019

A kormány tájékoztató akciót indít a bevándorlást ösztönző brüsszeli tervekről. Mindenkinek joga van tudni, melyek azok az aktuális javaslatok, amelyek alapján veszélyeztetik Magyarország biztonságát.

The government is launching an informative action on the Brussels plans that encourage immigration. Everyone has the right to know which are the current proposals, which are the basis of which threaten the security of Hungary.

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1.3K · 629 Comments · 1K Shares

TOP REFERRALS

Facebook · Twitter · Reddit · Instagram

TIMES POSTED: 177
TOTAL INTERACTIONS: 4,762
TOTAL FOLLOWERS: 657,595

SOURCE (FOLLOWERS)	DATE	INTERACTIONS	LINK
Magyarország Kormánya (167,895)	Feb 18, 2019	3,005	[Link]
Fidesz (278,031)	Feb 18, 2019	451	[Link]
Németh Szilárd (7,280)	Feb 19, 2019	220	[Link]
Fidesz Sopron és környéke (4,083)	Feb 18, 2019	73	[Link]
Pester Merkur - Pusztatranger	Feb 18, 2019	53	[Link]
Ég segí nei viő ESB	Feb 19, 2019	36	[Link]
Miskolci Fidesz (1,084)	Feb 18, 2019	34	[Link]
Viktor Orbán PL	Mar 10, 2019	32	[Link]

European Commission
February 19, 2019

Hungarians deserve facts not fiction. The Hungarian government campaign beggars belief. It is shocking that such a ludicrous conspiracy theory has reached the mainstream to the extent it has.

- There is no "they", only the European Union, with Hungary sitting at the table.
- The EU supports not undermines national border protection.
- There are zero plans for "humanitarian visas". Member States decide to what level they want to accept legal migration.



TOP REFERRALS

Facebook · Twitter · Reddit · Instagram

TIMES POSTED: 27
TOTAL INTERACTIONS: 5,988
TOTAL FOLLOWERS: 476,105

SOURCE (FOLLOWERS)	DATE	INTERACTIONS	LINK
Európai Bizottság Magyarország Képviselete (33,330)	Feb 19, 2019	4,287	[Link]
Jávor Benedek (100,370)	Feb 19, 2019	930	[Link]
Mesterházy Attila (249,639)	Feb 20, 2019	290	[Link]
Horváth Csaba (41,187)	Feb 19, 2019	138	[Link]
Nem a Fidesz és nem a Jobbik! (3,402)	Feb 20, 2019	121	[Link]
Demokratikus Koalíció Józsefváros (2,270)	Feb 20, 2019	34	[Link]
Ara-Kovacs Attila	Feb 20, 2019	28	[Link]

Source: Facebook

Source: CrowdTangle

Moreover, independent media has been critical in countering the anti-West, anti-US, and anti-EU claims by generally debunking these narratives. For instance, it was independent media with substantial online outreach that reported on the European Commission's "information material" that aimed to counter Fidesz's claims in its "You have the right to know what Brussels is

planning" campaign in 2019. Such reporting helped the material, originally published on the Commission's website, to reach a considerable part of Hungarian society.

The "You have the right to know what Brussels is planning" post by the Hungarian Government was reshared by numerous Fidesz regional Facebook pages/groups, reaching over 657,000 unique users.

The European Commission's response to the campaign, addressed predominantly by the Representation of the EU Commission in Hungary, was shared (according to the CrowdTangle Extension) by 27 Facebook pages or public groups, reaching only 476,000 unique users.

Top-down perception-building

Overall, Hungarians' positive views on Russia and China, as well as their distrust of the United States, could most likely originate from a top-down pro-Kremlin, pro-Beijing campaign that has been waged by the Hungarian ruling party. The positive statements on Russia and China, and the allegedly highly-beneficial effects of cooperating with them, stand in stark contrast with the anti-West narratives being circulated.

Yet at the same time, fringe pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing sites currently have very little outreach in Hungary - presenting both an opportunity and a threat. First, should Hungary's media market change significantly (specifically its pro-Fidesz segment), then the Kremlin and China would be compelled to build their capacities from ground up to penetrate the Hungarian media market. That would give a potential new government the opportunity to work out the details of stepping up against malign foreign information operations. But on the downside, a considerable number of readers may also migrate to these fringe sites in order to satisfy their demand for clearly pro-Kremlin, pro-China articles.

All in all, until pro-Kremlin and pro-Chinese narratives are distributed by the central administration via massive resources, it is unlikely that there will be a significant change in Hungarians' - and specifically Fidesz voters' - geopolitical preferences.

