

REPORT

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# HUNGARY'S SUBWAY TRAINS: A CASE STUDY OF RUSSIAN ACTIVE MEASURES AGAINST MUNICIPALITIES

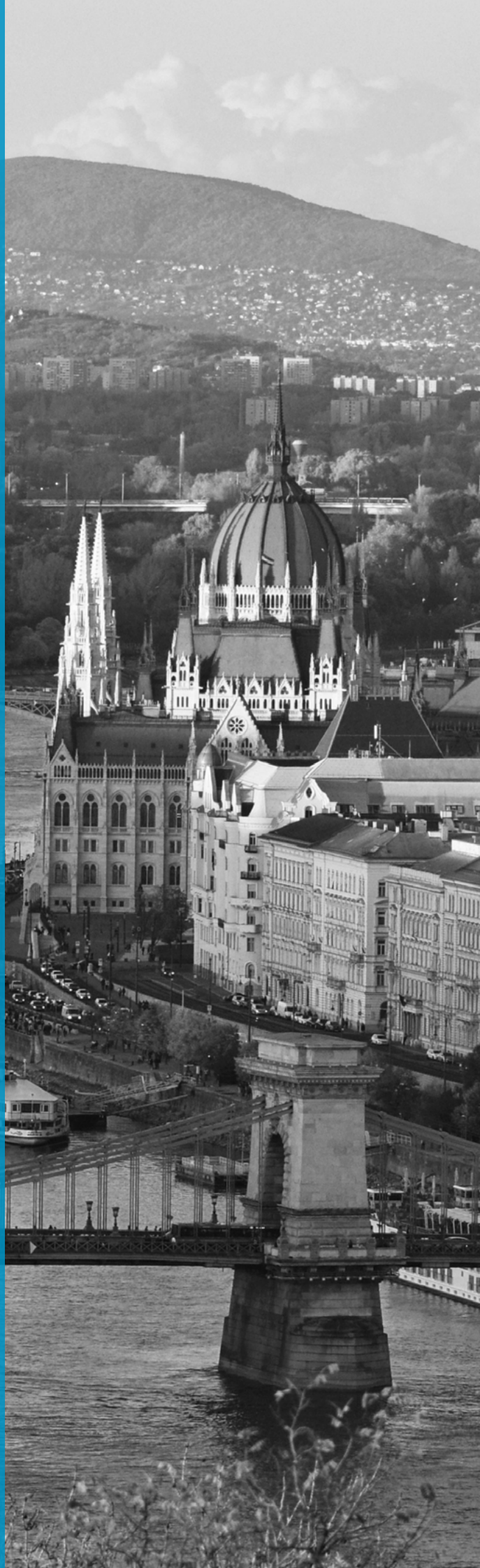


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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The Hungarian government seeks good relations with authoritarian regimes by pushing for their interests in the West,** mainly to have its hybrid regime legitimized or even financed by these actors. The Orbán cabinet seeks to ensure good relations with Russia, among other authoritarian states, by representing their interests at the European level; e.g. by arguing against anti-Russia sanctions, using common pro-Kremlin narratives. Moreover, they facilitate the advancement of Russian economic interests in Hungary as well, for instance by offering public contracts to Russian firms.
- **Russian firms are in a strong position in the transport sector in Hungary, possibly due to good bilateral relations between the two national governments.** Metrowagonmash won a HUF 69 billion (EUR 193 million) public contract for renovating the trains running on subway line 3 in Budapest after the firm with the better offer was barred from the process for questionable reasons. The Hungarian cabinet helped Transmashholding win a significant tender for delivering railway carriages to Egypt by refusing to back a consortium who would have got the contract originally, which was led by a Hungarian firm.
- **Active measures are not off the table for Russia to help its firms.** Russian and pro-Russian entities launched a campaign discrediting BKK head Dávid Vitézy in 2014, who has contacts on the highest levels of government, and thus, had considerable lobbying power at the time. The smear campaign helped depicting him as a threat to Russia-Hungary relations, possibly leading to Vitézy's removal, as he was pushing for buying new subway trains using EU subsidies.
- **Inexperience can help Russian interests.** The smear campaign launched by Russia was possible because no official notes were taken on a meeting between the leaderships of BKK and Rustrade. Therefore, Vitézy had no way to prove what actually took place during the discussions. The Hungarian government is not protecting Hungarian politicians or officials against such Russian actions, possibly due to fears about political retaliation from the Kremlin.
- **While Russian efforts to influence municipalities should receive more attention, national governments remain key.** More emphasis should be placed on investigating Russian firms' activities vis-à-vis local municipalities. However, it must be taken into account that a favorable national legal environment is also key for Russia to wield its influence economically.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Transparent lobbying rules are needed.** Democratic states must set up clear, serious lobbying rules, as these should help reveal who are trying to influence decision-making. Members of the government, ministries, MPs, and key local officials should all disclose their meetings with lobbyists. Lobbying should be restricted to those registered under transparent rules as lobbyists.
- **Public procurement procedures should be transparent as well.** Non-transparent practices in public procurement procedures not only increase corruption risks, but allow for authoritarian regimes to manipulate results. Therefore, ensuring that all possible public procurements are open to all and are governed by clear rules must be a priority for national security reasons, too.
- **National intelligence services must help local municipalities.** National intelligence services must focus more on protecting local municipalities as well. First, they should alert to authoritarian influencing attempts at local levels. Second, they need to constantly inform local-level officials of such attempts and offer them help in countering these practices.
- **Municipal officials must be trained to recognize influencing activities.** Municipal officials must

receive training to recognize patterns of authoritarian influencing activities and how to counter them, which could help avoid mistakes such as the one made by BKK leadership. This is especially crucial in municipal bodies who will play a role in distributing EU subsidies in the 2021-2027 budgeting period, as they can possibly decide over an unprecedented amount of funds.

- **Journalism must be strengthened and protected all across the West.** Journalism is facing tough challenges, as the income of media outlets has been slashed by the 2008 economic crisis and the 2020 coronavirus crisis, as well as changing consumption habits. Thus, member states, the EU and even NATO should invest in training journalists, especially investigative journalists, and maintaining the independent press, since they are crucial in revealing authoritarian influencing attempts. The local, municipal press is extremely important in this regard, too.

## INTRODUCTION

Hungary has had an improving relationship with Russia since the early 2000s under socialist premier Péter Medgyessy. Former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány aimed to improve relations with Russia further. The ex-PM supported the Russia-led South Stream natural gas pipeline over the EU-favored Nabucco pipeline. The premier reasoned in 2008 that Russia's pipeline would be finished faster than Nabucco.<sup>1</sup> At Vladimir Putin's 2006 visit to Budapest, the Russian president invited Budapest to become a part of its project transporting natural gas from Russia to Southern Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Prime Minister Gyurcsány said during his 2008 visit to Moscow that Russia is a key actor, as there is no alternative to cooperation with the Kremlin. "There are debates between the EU and Russia, but it is possible to have debates and cooperate at the same time," he noted, adding that the EU needs Moscow not only in the energy sector.<sup>3</sup> The flourishing Hungary-Russia relationship kept the Gyurcsány cabinet from reacting to the Georgian-Russian war for over three weeks. At the time, Viktor Orbán, then in opposition, as well as other high-ranking Fidesz politicians, were highly critical of the government's steps regarding the issue. Orbán proposed to accelerate the accession of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO, and suspend the strategic cooperation agreement between the EU and Russia.<sup>4</sup> Soon after the Russia-Georgia war ended, PM Gyurcsány called Vladimir Putin because of the aggravating global financial crisis, and advised the Hungarian premier that commercial ties and Russian investments are not threatened by it. Viktor Orbán said this was concerning, as nobody wants "Hungary to fall into Russian hands as a consequence of the financial crisis."

However, the views of Fidesz's chair on Russia transformed rather swiftly. He went to a United Russia party congress in St. Petersburg in 2009 to hold talks with Vladimir Putin. He then called for placing Hungarian-Russian relations on a "21<sup>st</sup> century basis," noting that Russia will help Hungary improve its energy independence, for instance, by helping build new nuclear blocks at the Paks Nuclear Power Plant.<sup>5</sup>

**Following his rise to power in 2010, Prime Minister Orbán launched a push to improve Hungarian relations with eastern authoritarian regimes in parallel with his increasing isolation from western allies.** This push was formalized officially with the launch of the cabinet's Eastern Opening Policy, which aimed at increasing the share of Hungarian exports to non-EU states and enticing investors from these countries

1 Origo (2008). „Önök gyorsabbak voltak” – mondta Gyurcsány Putyinnak. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20080228-gyurcsany-a-deli-aramlat-megelozte-a-nabuccot.html>

2 Political Capital (2006) Zdrasztvujtye Vlagyimir Putyin. Accessed: 2021. 01.26. See: [https://politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=1548](https://politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=1548)

3 Origo (2008). „Önök gyorsabbak voltak”

4 444 (2014). Orbán hat éve még orosz agresszióknak nevezte az orosz agressziót. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://444.hu/2014/09/04/ruszkik-haza>

5 HVG (2009) Orbán: az oroszok segíteni fognak az energiafüggetlenség elérésében. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20091125\\_orban\\_orosz\\_energiafuggetlenseg](https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20091125_orban_orosz_energiafuggetlenseg)

to come to Hungary. However, these efforts have not been overly successful, even despite Hungarian efforts to hinder or block EU-level decisions concerning Russia or China – among others.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Budapest frequently argues that anti-Russia sanctions cause extreme financial losses to Hungary, using exaggerated numbers, and have been unsuccessful in resolving the Ukraine-Russia conflict.<sup>7</sup> The Orbán cabinet has managed to agree on two substantial projects with Moscow and Beijing: the construction of the two new blocks of the Paks NPP by Rosatom, and the renovation of the Hungarian part of the Belgrade-Budapest railway line. **These projects, since they are not funded by the European Union, enjoy relatively little external oversight, making them a possible vehicle to funnel extra resources towards pro-government oligarchs.**<sup>8</sup> This is especially advantageous in light of the fact that control over EU subsidies is becoming increasingly tight, as highlighted by the rule of law mechanism's approval in December 2020.

The Orbán administration swiftly started building business ties with the Kremlin after 2010. Investigative portal Direkt 36 revealed that then-prominent pro-Fidesz oligarchs Lajos Simicska and Zsolt Nyerges travelled to Moscow in early 2010 to meet a high-ranking official in the FSB.<sup>9</sup> Sources told the portal that no substantial deals were struck at the time, and that it was simply an introductory visit, where the Russian side indicated that if the Hungarian visitors needed help with business-related issues, "they can be counted on."

## BUDAPEST-BELGRADE: THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

Although it is a Chinese-funded project, it is worth taking a look first at the Budapest-Belgrade railway renovation project. The main difference between it and the subway train renovation effort is that the former is directed at the national level and it did not require, based on evidence currently available, particular efforts by Beijing to be awarded the contract with Hungarian decision-makers. This will be one of the largest railway investments in Hungarian history.<sup>10</sup> The project is in line with China's One Belt One Road Initiative's goals; namely, extending its economic influence in Europe and Asia.

The project was originally estimated to cost HUF 400 billion (EUR 1.1 billion). Since then, estimated expenses have skyrocketed to HUF 750 billion (EUR 2.1 billion). 85% of this will be funded by a Chinese credit line.<sup>11</sup> One of the partners of the consortium that won the contract is RM International Ltd., which is tied to pro-government oligarch Lőrinc Mészáros.<sup>12</sup>

The cabinet officially says that Hungary would benefit from the project because the country could, thanks to the renovated railway, become the European customs center for Chinese goods. Multiple estimations are available on how long it would take for Hungary to profit from the project. The Hungarian business weekly Figyelő estimated the return window to be 2400 years if (1) Hungarian container import flows increased

- 6 Patrik Szicherle et al. (2019). Doors wide shut. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://politicalcapital.hu/pcadmin/source/documents/pc\\_authoritarian\\_influence\\_web\\_20191203.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pcadmin/source/documents/pc_authoritarian_influence_web_20191203.pdf)
- 7 Marianna Kovács-Angel (2017). Szíjjártó: 6.5 milliárd (!) dollárt buktunk az orosz szankciókon. 24.hu. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://24.hu/belfold/2017/01/24/szijjarto-65-milliard-dollart-buktunk-az-orosz-szankciokon-jois-trump-erkezese/>
- 8 Átlátszó (2017) A Közérdekvédelmi Központ közzétette a Paksi bővítés előkészítése során kötött szerződéseket. Accessed: 2021.02.21. See: <https://atlatszo.hu/2017/09/13/a-kozerdekvedelmi-kozpont-kozzetette-a-paksibovites-elokeszítése-során-kötött-szerződéseket/>
- 9 András Pethő & András Szabó (2018). Orbán játszómája – Feltárul a Putyinnal kiépített kapcsolat titkos története. 444.hu. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://444.hu/2018/03/11/orban-jatszomaja-feltarul-a-putyinnal-kiepitettkapcsolat-titkos-tortenete>
- 10 Gábor Tenczer (2019). Mészárosék nyerték el a méregdrága belgrádi vasútépítést. Index.hu. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://index.hu/gazdasag/2019/04/26/meszarosek-nyertek-el-a-belgradi-vasutepitest/>
- 11 Balázs Bozay (2020) Aláírták a Budapest-Belgrád vasútvonalról szóló hitelszerződést. Accessed: 2021.02.21. See: [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/24/vasut\\_hitel\\_budapest-belgrad-vasutvonal\\_kinai\\_hitel\\_alairtak/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/24/vasut_hitel_budapest-belgrad-vasutvonal_kinai_hitel_alairtak/)
- 12 István Váczi (2019) Kiderült, hogy sokkal drágább lesz, minden rekordot megdönt a Budapest-Belgrád vasút magyar szakasza. g7.24.hu. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://g7.hu/kozelet/20190612/kiderult-hogy-sokkal-dragabb-leszminden-rekordot-megdönt-a-budapest-belgrad-vasut-magyar-szakasza/>

by 75%, and (2) new railway lines allow for transporting the goods out of Hungary – even though surveys suggest that Hungarian import infrastructure is not as fast as the cabinet claims it to be.<sup>13</sup> Another issue is that the products would have to be moved to Hungary before they can go through customs. This would entail transporting the products from the port of Pireas to Budapest. However, while Minister of Finance Mihály Varga said that this journey would take a few hours, it currently takes two days to get from the Greek port to Belgrade. The Chinese Cosco firm's representatives told Index that it matters little to them whether their carriages go with 70 or 100 kilometers an hour between Belgrade and Budapest as long as the rest of the journey takes so long.<sup>14</sup>

Index made its own calculations. They estimated that Hungary could transport an extra 74,000 containers, which would earn EUR 18 million for the state a year, meaning that it would take over 130 years for the country to get back the money it invested into the renovation. Moreover, it must be noted that the Budapest-Belgrade railway line avoids most populous settlements in Hungary, so it can expect little income from personal transportation.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the project seems to have few incentives going for it. The renovation is the initiative of the Hungarian government, which serves the purpose of providing additional financial opportunities to pro-government oligarchs, as well as indicating to the European Union that Hungary can get financing opportunities from non-EU powers, too, a "card" up the Orbán cabinet's sleeve during EU-Hungary disputes. Since it serves interests that the incumbent cabinet deems important, the Chinese side did not have to pressure them in any way to conduct the renovation with their help – at least based on evidence available to us. Nevertheless, financing and building the railway line will be beneficial to Beijing not only because Hungary will have to pay back the loan it took to pay mostly Chinese firms, but also due to the fact that it can serve as a reference for Chinese companies seeking to engage in more projects in EU territory.

## THE EGYPTIAN RAILWAY PROCUREMENT TENDER: RUSSIAN INTERESTS OVER HUNGARIAN ONES?

The investigative portal Direkt36 found that in 2016, the Hungarian Ganz firm was the member and leader of a consortium winning an Egyptian public procurement tender for manufacturing 700 railway carriages, worth hundreds of billions of Forints.<sup>17</sup> Ganz took part in the tender with the backing of the Hungarian state-owned Eximbank, which is supposed to help Hungarian companies export products. However, the government then decided to use Eximbank to back a group led by a Russian firm instead. The deal was allegedly so important that it came up in discussions between PM Orbán and President Vladimir Putin as well.

Ganz, as the consortium leader, started discussions with Egypt in July 2014 with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Eximbank. They needed the loan to pre-finance the construction of carriages. The government even signed a strategic partnership agreement with Ganz Holding at the time. The railway cooperation agreement signed by Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi on his visit to Budapest in June 2015 strengthened Ganz's chances even further. However, in 2016, PM Orbán and President Putin discussed the

13 Index.hu (2017) 130 év alatt térülhet meg a méregdrága kínai vasút. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/12/01/budapest\\_belgrad\\_megterules\\_vam\\_kereskedelem\\_pireusz\\_kina\\_131\\_ev/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/12/01/budapest_belgrad_megterules_vam_kereskedelem_pireusz_kina_131_ev/)

14 Index.hu (2017) A kínaiaknak pont tökémindegy a Budapest-Belgrád vasút. Accessed: 2021.01.26. [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/12/08/budapest\\_belgrad\\_cosco\\_kina\\_vasut/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/12/08/budapest_belgrad_cosco_kina_vasut/)

15 István Váczi (2019) Aláírták az 500 milliárdos szerződést a projektről, amire nincs szükség. Accessed: 2021. 01.26. See: <https://g7.hu/kozelet/20190606/alairtak-az-500-milliardos-szerzodeset-a-projektrol-amire-nincs-szukseg/>

17 András Szabó (2018) Egy magyar cég majdnem elnyert egy nagy üzletet. Aztán az Orbán-kormány inkább beállt az orosz rivális mögé. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://www.direkt36.hu/egy-magyar-ceg-majdnem-elnyert-egy-nagy-uzletet-aztan-az-orban-kormany-inkabb-beallt-az-orosz-rivalis-moge/>



opportunity of running jointly for the Egyptian tender. Then, Russian Minister of Transport Denis Manturov visited Budapest, where he noted that “We are currently thinking about running jointly for tenders in the Middle East and Northern Africa, including Egypt.” RT said at the time that the Russian Transwagonmash and the Hungarian, half state-owned Dunakeszi Járműjavító would be members of the consortium.<sup>16</sup>

In 2016, Egypt announced that the Ganz-led consortium would be the winner of the tendering process, but no contract was signed in the end. In a report summarizing Ganz Holding’s 2016 activities, the firm highlighted that “After winning the tender, during the contracting process, the Hungarian government put the financing of the buyer behind the competing Russian firm, with whom Egyptian railways did not sign a contract.”

In 2018, Egypt decided to award a contract for 1300 railway carriages to Transmashholding, pre-financed by Roseximbank and the Hungarian Eximbank.<sup>17</sup>

## DUNAKESZI JÁRMŰJAVÍTÓ: A GENEROUS OFFER FOR RUSSIA

In May 2019, a governmental decree named Transmashholding as the buyer of Dunakeszi Járműjavító (DJJ) without any competition – and there could have been competition, as in November 2019, Stadler indicated that they would make an offer to purchase DJJ.<sup>18</sup> According to the media, former Hungarian Ambassador to London Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky, who had worked for the pro-government think tank Századvég as well and is friends with informal prime ministerial advisor Árpád Habony, has a stake in Magyar Vagon.<sup>19</sup> In May 2020, THM International AG and Magyar Vagon Ltd. announced they would purchase 90% of DJJ via THM Hungary Invest Ltd. (owned by Transmashholding) from the Hungarian state and Hungarian state railways. As a result, DJJ is supposed to be manufacturing half the carriages won on the Egyptian tender. However, as of July 2020, carriages were only being manufactured in Russia, and the DJJ manufactured nothing in the frames of this particular project.

It is currently difficult to determine why it was influenced the Hungarian government to remove its backing from Ganz and hand DJJ over to a Russian company. The role of Szalay-Bobrovniczky suggests that the cabinet wanted someone from its own circles to profit off the project. However, it is more than possible that the inclusion of a pro-government businessman came as the consequence of the switch, and was not the reason behind the decision to pull support from Ganz. It seems more likely that the multiple Russian-led projects (e.g., IIB, Paks) in Hungary have made the country a part of Russia’s economic power projection, and Budapest might not be able to confidently reject the Kremlin’s initiatives in light of previous “favors” or in fear of political-economic retaliation.

## THE SUBWAY TRAIN TENDER: ACTIVE MEASURE FOR ECONOMIC GAINS

Hungary’s metro line 3 (M3) has been in operation since 1976 with about half a million people using it almost every day (before the pandemic). The trains that operated on the line until recently were not much younger either. The technology of the trains, the tunnel, and air conditioning in the tunnel were eerily similar to that of

16 Szabó (2018) Egy magyar cég majdnem elnyert egy nagy üzletet. Aztán az Orbán-kormány inkább beállt az orosz rivális mögé. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://www.direkt36.hu/egy-magyar-ceg-majdnem-elnyert-egy-nagy-uzletet-aztan-az-orban-kormany-inkabb-beallt-az-orosz-rivalis-moge/>

17 Mfor (2018) Sinen van minden idők legnagyobb magyar vasúti fejlesztése – Egyiptomban. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://mfor.hu/cikkek/vallalatok/sinen-van-minden-idok-legnagyobb-magyar-vasuti-fejlesztese-egyiptomban.html>

18 HVG (2019) A Stadler megvenné a Dunakeszi Járműjavítót. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20191125\\_A\\_Stadler\\_megvenne\\_a\\_Dunakeszi\\_Jarmujavitot](https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20191125_A_Stadler_megvenne_a_Dunakeszi_Jarmujavitot)

19 Index.hu. (2020) Óriási orosz vonatbizniszhez ad pénzt az Eximbank. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/23/transmasholding\\_dunakeszi\\_jarmujavito\\_egyiptom/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/23/transmasholding_dunakeszi_jarmujavito_egyiptom/)



Baku, where in 1995 a train caught fire, killing 286 and injuring 270.<sup>20</sup> The Hungarian renovation of the trains and the tunnel became urgent after a series of mechanical problems affecting the M3 in 2011-2012.<sup>21</sup> In 2011, a train caught fire, although – thankfully – it carried no passengers.<sup>22</sup> In the same year, the maximum speed on the M3 line had to be cut from 80 kilometers an hour to 60.<sup>23</sup> Smoke came out of a train in 2012 as well.<sup>24</sup> In 2012, TÜV Rheinland sent an examination report to Hungarian public transport company BKK, noting that out of the 34 components they checked on the Soviet carriages, 11 was found to be in “catastrophic” and 15 in “critical” condition.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Budapest’s new leadership elected in autumn 2010, marking the ruling Fidesz party’s takeover of the capital, to replace the trains as swiftly as possible to prevent any loss of life. This likely pushed them to seek not the most cost effective, but the fastest solution. However, it would take half a decade until the trains were replaced.

Originally, both Lord Mayor István Tarlós, who was elected with the support of Fidesz, and then-Budapest Transportation Center (BKK) head Dávid Vitézy, who has close ties to the ruling party, agreed that the capital should purchase completely new trains for the lowest possible price with the help of EU subsidies. This was problematic for the Russian company Metrowagonmash, as their technology could not have competed with Western-made products. However, they were eyeing a contract for Budapest’s subway trains. Thus, after getting wind of Budapest’s leadership wanting to solve its subway train troubles as soon as possible, the Russian company’s lobbying efforts shifted into high gear; first to convince Budapest to opt for renovating the trains instead of acquiring new ones and then to choose Metrowagonmash for the contract. One of the lobbyists informally arguing for the Russian firm told the Hungarian news portal Index before the company’s tender victory was declared that he had merely been “mediating between the two sides” to be able to avoid a serious subway disaster. He noted that since the tunnel and the subway carriages were both built by the Russians, they are the most suitable for renovating them.<sup>26</sup> However, this argument is slightly problematic, as – for instance – the Skoda Transportation company successfully renovated the Prague subway’s original Soviet-built trains.<sup>27</sup>

BKK, which is responsible for managing public transportation in Budapest, turned to the Ministry of National Development (NFM) in April 2011 to finance the reconstruction of the M3 line with EU subsidies.

The NFM approved funding for the BKK for project preparations, including “the acquisition of new subway carriages.”<sup>28</sup> In 2012, plans included potentially acquiring Alstom carriages, which are currently running on Budapest’s M2 and M4 lines.<sup>29</sup> Over a year later, rumors started circulating that Budapest might replace the

20 Gergely Nyilas & Gábor Tenczer (2017) 22 éve történt a világ legsúlyosabb metrókatasztrófája. Index.hu. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://index.hu/kulfold/2017/10/27/azerbajdzsan\\_baku\\_metro\\_katasztrofa/](https://index.hu/kulfold/2017/10/27/azerbajdzsan_baku_metro_katasztrofa/)

21 Szabolcs Panyi (2017). Moszkva kavarása áll a budapesti metrókáosz mögött. Index.hu. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://index.hu/belfold/2017/10/28/vitezy\\_david\\_orszorszag\\_metrofelujitas/](https://index.hu/belfold/2017/10/28/vitezy_david_orszorszag_metrofelujitas/)

22 Origo (2011) Tűz volt egy metrószerelvényben az Árpád hídnál. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20110419-fust-a-3as-metroban-budapesten.html>

23 Index.hu (2014) Három éve egy helyben füstölög a hármass metró. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://index.hu/belfold/2014/06/14/harom\\_eve\\_egy\\_helyben\\_fustolog\\_a\\_harmas\\_metro/](https://index.hu/belfold/2014/06/14/harom_eve_egy_helyben_fustolog_a_harmas_metro/)

24 Pénzcentrum (2012) Tűz a budapesti metróban. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://www.penzcentrum.hu/utazas/tuz-a-budapesti-metroban.1031133.html>

25 Gábor Tenczer (2012) Katasztrófális állapotban a budapesti metrókocsik. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2012/10/08/katasztrofalis\\_az\\_orsz\\_metrokocsik\\_tobb\\_eleme/](https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2012/10/08/katasztrofalis_az_orsz_metrokocsik_tobb_eleme/)

26 Panyi (2017) Moszkva kavarása áll a budapesti metrókáosz mögött

27 Railway Gazette (2011) Praha metro car modernisation complete. Accessed: 2020.01.26. See: <https://www.railwaygazette.com/praha-metro-car-modernisation-complete/35856.article>

28 Index.hu (2014) Három éve egy helyben füstölög a hármass metró. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://index.hu/belfold/2014/06/14/harom\\_eve\\_egy\\_helyben\\_fustolog\\_a\\_harmas\\_metro/](https://index.hu/belfold/2014/06/14/harom_eve_egy_helyben_fustolog_a_harmas_metro/)

29 Origo (2012) A hármass metró vonalán is Alstom-kocsik futnának. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20120718-a-harmas-metro-vonalan-is-alstomkocsik-futnának.html>

subway trains with new Russian ones “under the guise of renovation.”<sup>30</sup> Tarlós, at the time, denied these rumors. A governmental decree (1468/2014) then concluded the new trains versus renovated trains debate, as it noted that it “examined the capital’s recommendations on the M3 line renovation, and decided to support the plans on renovating the trains.” Then, claims started circulating that the renovation was part of the Russian-Hungarian package deal made in 2014 including the Paks II Nuclear Power Plant project. In 2015, then-Minister for the Prime Minister’s Office, János Lázár, rejected these claims and said the government did not interfere with the capital’s choice. According to Origo, still an independent portal at the time, István Tarlós wrote to Lázár in January 2014, explaining that renovating the trains is a “technically feasible” alternative, but buying new ones is “recommended in terms of technical and longterm economic prospects.”<sup>31</sup> The NFM, then, made it clear that the government supports renovating the trains.<sup>32,33</sup>

Index identified numerous lobbyists with Russian connections around former Lord Mayor István Tarlós. One of them is István Kocsis, the former CEO of Budapest’s public transport company BKV, the state-owned electricity firm MVM, and the state-owned Paks Nuclear Power Plant. Kocsis was involved in several corruption scandals during the 2002-2010 socialist-liberal coalition governments. In March 2020, Kocsis was sentenced to five years in prison for embezzlement of funds and misappropriation of assets.<sup>35</sup> Another potential lobbyist for Russia could have been György Pető, a former socialist politician and a communist era intelligence official. Pető was deputy mayor at Óbuda during Tarlós’ tenure there as mayor, and Pető remained Tarlós’ confidant after the latter became Lord Mayor.<sup>34</sup> The third potential individual involved in lobbying on behalf of Metrowagonmash was András Tombor, PM Viktor Orbán’s former national security advisor. Tombor’s lawyer, Márton Géza Illés was Metrowagonmash’s legal representative when signing the contract for the renovation.<sup>35</sup> Tombor and Kocsis are considered to be lobbyists who have ties to a variety of Russian businessmen, while Pető is a potential agent of influence due to his work in department III/2 of the Ministry of Interior during the communist era, which often received instructions from Moscow. The department’s role included, among other things, “maintaining contacts and cooperating with the agencies of friendly socialist countries.”<sup>36</sup>

Another potential actor in the process was Béla Juhász, the head of the Russian company’s representation in Hungary. He was born in Transcarpathia as a Soviet citizen, who – according to a former intelligence official in Hungary talking to Index under the condition of anonymity – had long been working on advancing Russian interests. Juhász moved to Hungary in 1990 to found an import-export company, which had multiple Russian clients, among others.

As for István Tarlós, he told Index that nobody asked him for Metrovagonmash’s victory.<sup>37</sup> He claimed he asked Kocsis if rumors about his Russian lobbying activities were true, but the former BKV/MVM CEO said he has Russian connections but did not lobby on their behalf. Tarlós noted that he had believed that the best-suited candidate to refurbish something is the one who manufactured it originally, which seems contrary to

30 Index.hu (2013) Orosz metrókocsit vesz a BKV? Accessed: 2021.01.26. See:

[https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2013/11/08/orosz\\_metrokocsit\\_vesz\\_a\\_bkv/](https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2013/11/08/orosz_metrokocsit_vesz_a_bkv/)

31 Tibor Lengyel (2015) Lázár, Tarlós és a metróvita: a kormány döntött, nem a főváros. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20150829-metrovita-a-kormany-dontott-nem-a-fovaros-a-kormanyhatarozat-cafoljalazart.html>

32 Népszabadság (2014) Kocsicsere helyett felújítás. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See:

[http://nol.hu/belfold/20140131csere\\_helyett\\_felujitas-1441611](http://nol.hu/belfold/20140131csere_helyett_felujitas-1441611)

33 24.hu (2020) Tényleg a VIP-börtönbe vonult be a volt MVM- és BKV-.vezér. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See:

<https://24.hu/belfold/2020/03/14/kocsis-istvan-vip-borton/>

34 Péter Zsidai (2012) Fuccs a puccsnak. Magyar Narancs. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/fuccs-a-puccsnak-81814>

35 K-monitor (2017) Tombor András ügyvédje dolgozott a Metrowagonmashnak. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See:

<https://adatbazis.k-monitor.hu/hirek/magyar-hirek/tombor-andras-ugyvedje-dolgozott-a-metrovagonmasnak>

36 Belügyminisztérium (1972) A belügyminisztérium III/III csoportfőnökségének ügyrendje. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See:

[https://www.abtl.hu/sites/default/files/forrasok/ugyrend\\_3.pdf](https://www.abtl.hu/sites/default/files/forrasok/ugyrend_3.pdf)

37 Szabolcs Panyi (2017) Moszkva kavarása áll a budapesti metrókáosz mögött.

his original support for buying new trains. In 2013 Tarlós also sought an exemption from the tendering process for the train renovation because the modernization could not wait until the tendering process was concluded. However, in January 2014, the Lord Mayor said that there would be an open public procurement procedure.

Eventually, the subway renovation tender was published, receiving interest from seven companies. Five made it to the second round: Alstom, CAF, Skoda Transportation, Skinest Rail, and Metrowagonmash, but the first three withdrew quickly.<sup>38</sup> Before the final decision was made, the Estonian Skinest Rail was barred from the procedure for submitting an invalid offer, handing the victory to Metrowagonmash. The Estonian offer was HUF 9 billion (EUR 25 million) cheaper than the Russian one, offered more modern parts, and gave a five-year longer warranty.<sup>41</sup> According to the Metrőért Egyesület (ME, For the Subway Association), the Estonian offer included more modern induction motors instead of DC ones, and disk brakes instead of break blocks. The BKV, who made the decision to bar Skinest Rail, listed eight problems with its offer, including an “alternative recommendation for door operation,” “displaying the costs of audit services,” or “lacking a block draft on faults.” A mechanical expert told Index that the eight concerns listed by BKV “might stand their ground legally, but mechanically, they are not significant issues, which are easy to remedy or completely marginal.” The winning offer was HUF 69 billion (EUR 193 million) from Metrowagonmash.

Therefore, we can see that the decision to renovate the trains instead of buying new ones was crucial, as it ensured that the Russian firm remained competitive. At this point, Metrowagonmash’s lobbying efforts could have played a key role in convincing local decision-makers in the capital that the renovation was at least a viable alternative to buying new ones. Meanwhile, it is entirely possible that national decision-makers were also influenced to support renovation. However, as seen above, Metrowagonmash could not necessarily have won the tender even under these circumstances. It is unsure if the Russian company had calculated this possibility, but it is certain that well before the tendering process was concluded, Russian actors had set their sights on the municipality-owned firms that eventually could make a decision regarding the winner, BKV and BKK.

As noted above, Dávid Vitézy, the BKK’s head at the time, supported buying new trains after a competitive tendering process. Vitézy’s mother was, at the time, a Member of the European Parliament representing Fidesz, and his half-brother is PM Viktor Orbán’s cousin, so he is well-connected in the System of National Association (NER). It is in this context that the second Orbán government coined the political system born after Fidesz-KDNP’s election victory in 2010.<sup>39</sup> However, his political capital began to evaporate after a curious series of events detailed by journalist Szabolcs Panyi in his Russian influence in Hungary series.<sup>43</sup> In May 2013, the deputy head of Rustrade, Viktor Sorokin, asked BKK’s leadership for a meeting. They talked primarily about new trolleybuses for Budapest, but also mentioned the tenders for the M3 subway carriages. Sources told Panyi that Vitézy only shared general information on the procurement process, clarifying that the local self-government wants a transparent, competitive procurement tender, as that is the only way to secure EU funding. The BKK head also noted that Budapest favoured buying new trains. However, the BKK made a crucial mistake: no official notes were taken during the meeting. Weeks later, the BKK was surprised to learn informally that they were in a confrontation with representatives of the Russian Federation, as they were criticized from political levels for a conversation with the Russian ambassador, which they allegedly kept secret from the Lord Mayor. **Vitézy was essentially accused of starting a confrontation with Russia behind the Lord Mayor’s back; being unwilling to cooperate with the Russians; disrespecting ambassador Alexander Tolkach, and hindering the renovation project. Unfortunately, there were no records available to BKK to disprove**

38 Gábor Tenczer (2015) Elég furcsán nyerték az oroszok a metrőtendert. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2015/07/10/furcsasagok\\_a\\_bkv\\_metrotenderen/](https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2015/07/10/furcsasagok_a_bkv_metrotenderen/)

41 Gábor Tenczer (2015) Elég furcsán nyerték az oroszok a metrőtendert.

39 Országgyűlés (2010) „Legyen Béke, Szabadság és Egyetértés” See: [https://2010-2014.kormany.hu/download/d/56/00000/politikai\\_nyilatkozat.pdf](https://2010-2014.kormany.hu/download/d/56/00000/politikai_nyilatkozat.pdf)

43 Szabolcs Panyi (2017) Moszkva kavarása áll a budapesti metrókáosz mögött.

**this.** It seems clear that someone informally notified members of the Hungarian government about the alleged affair. The Vitézy-scandal reached PM Viktor Orbán and his closest circles, who then started seeing the BKK head as a risk in the context of Russian-Hungarian foreign policy and economic relations. Vitézy was fired in late 2014. Although István Tarlós admitted that their relationship was conflictual and he did not want Vitézy to lead BKK anymore, he told Index that it was not him who initiated the removal of the head of BKK. Only three months after the Vitézy-Sorokin meeting, Tarlós notified the NFM that he would like to avoid a public procurement tender to speed up the renovation process for safety-related reasons. The letter specified that the capital favors renovating the trains instead of getting new ones. His request was denied by the ministry, a decision likely taken by Minister for National Development, Lászlóné Németh, who had close ties with then-prominent pro-government oligarch Lajos Simicska, who had a hostile relationship with Tarlós.<sup>40</sup> The Lord Mayor actually told Panyi that he decided to support the refurbishment only after the above-mentioned governmental decree, but this letter – written half a year earlier – proves otherwise. In any case, the efforts to discredit Vitézy might have played a key role in alleviating the capital's resistance to renovating the carriages instead of buying new ones, and possibly helped remove any opposition to barring Skinest Rail from the tender, as Vitézy favored a competitive, fair process – although the latter was an unexpected consequence for the Russian company, since it happened well before Metrowagonmash's victory.

The first renovated subway carriages arrived in Budapest in early 2017. They faced considerable issues: their doors malfunctioned on multiple occasions, trapping hundreds inside a carriage temporarily. At one point, emergency breaks switched on automatically. The Transportation Authority decided to temporarily suspend the operating license of the renovated trains.<sup>41</sup> The BKV and Metrowagonmash have been debating the validity of the Hungarian side's claims for compensation for frequent errors. In the long-term, even more problems have been revealed: six trains had to be removed from operation due to rust until repairs are made,<sup>42</sup> and cracks showed up on some of the chairs in the carriages.<sup>43</sup>

However, the key question has become something else; namely, whether Metrowagonmash actually delivered almost completely new carriages instead of renovated ones. There has been widespread speculation ever since the arrival of the first trains that the Russian firm might have sold mostly new trains to Hungary, but these rumors were consistently denied by the government and István Tarlós. On 21 January 2020, the daily Népszava noted that on a special sitting of the BKV's board of governors, the firm's management practically admitted to having received almost brand-new trains from Metrowagonmash, noting that the doors leading from one carriage to another are from the old ones. They also listed the AVR train management system as old parts, but the main issue with this is that these units were taken down in Budapest and were never transported to Russia. When Népszava asked BKV about the proportion of new and old components in the carriages, they were told that "The exact data is known by the entrepreneur, it was in their competence to decide what parts they replace, this can even vary from carriage to carriage."<sup>44</sup> The main problem with receiving new trains instead of renovated ones is connected to the tendering process: if the tender was published for buying new trains, the technology offered by Metrowagonmash would not have stood a chance against western manufacturers, for example in terms of the electronic, software-managed control system of M3.

40 Szabolcs Panyi (2017) Moszkva kavarása áll a budapesti metrókáosz mögött.

41 Gábor Tenczer (2017) Döntött a hatóság: ki kell vonni az összes felújított metrókocsit. Index.hu. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2017/06/23/dontott\\_a\\_hatosag\\_kivonjak\\_az\\_osszes\\_felujitott\\_orsz\\_metroko\\_csit/](https://index.hu/belfold/budapest/2017/06/23/dontott_a_hatosag_kivonjak_az_osszes_felujitott_orsz_metroko_csit/)

42 Gábor Kovács (2020) Február végére javíthatják ki a legjobban szétrohadt metrókocsikat. HVG. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20200122\\_A\\_Metrovagonmas\\_februar\\_vegeig\\_garancialisan\\_rendbe\\_szedi\\_a\\_szetrohad\\_t\\_metrokocsikat](https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20200122_A_Metrovagonmas_februar_vegeig_garancialisan_rendbe_szedi_a_szetrohad_t_metrokocsikat)

43 Péter Zsidai (2018) Törnek, repednek a „felújított” metrókocsik ülései. Magyar Narancs. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: <https://magyarnarancs.hu/lokal/tornek-repednek-a-felujitott-metrokocsik-ulesei-112109>

44 Anna Szalai (2020) Megbukott a nagy budapesti metrócsalás. Népszava. Accessed: 2021.01.26. See: [https://nepszava.hu/3064242\\_megbukott-a-nagy-budapesti-metrocsalas](https://nepszava.hu/3064242_megbukott-a-nagy-budapesti-metrocsalas)



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## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, Russia has had considerable success in Hungary in the transportation sector. First, it managed to secure Hungarian support for a considerable Egyptian railway tender and purchase a large stake in a Hungarian company involved in the construction of railway carriages – all the expense of a consortium led by a Hungarian company. These endeavors were decided on the national level, using the Kremlin's close connections with high-ranking Hungarian officials, including at ministerial level. These decisions, similarly to the case of Paks II and the Budapest-Belgrade railway, were driven by the Hungarian ruling party's interests; e.g. securing funding for pro-government oligarchs outside of Brussels' control and showing western partners that Hungary has options outside of its own alliance system.

The subway renovation case, however, is somewhat different, as it generated only minor earnings for pro-government businessmen, as far as we know. It seemed primarily to be the result of (a) Russian lobbying efforts, (b) Russia's active measures aiming to discredit Dávid Vitézy, and (c) the Hungarian government's willingness to ease the way for Metrowagonmash to win the tender. Vitézy's removal could have been key because of his connections with high-ranking Fidesz officials, meaning that he had lobbying power on his own, potentially pushing for buying new trains. Thus, discrediting him by suggesting that he is a threat to Hungary-Russia relations was a way for Russia to ensure that he cannot tap into this potential. We can only speculate why the Kremlin paid so much attention to a relatively low-budget endeavor. There are multiple possibilities. The Kremlin might have wanted to show: (1) it can conduct business in the EU despite sanctions; (2) to finance Russian oligarchs and a key Russian corporation; or (3) simply test how much influence it can wield over Hungarian decision-making – or a combination of these.

Therefore, the case allows us to make some important conclusions. First, Russian influence can extend to fields other than the most commonly addressed ones, such as energy or the media. The Russian Federation still has relatively powerful firms in, for instance, the field of transportation, as the Hungarian examples show. These firms could have considerable lobbying influence in EU and NATO member states where they have connections from the communist era.

Second, local self-governments can be targets of Russian influence as they are less protected than most national governments due to less financial and human resources being available to them. Moreover, since foreign policy preferences play a much smaller role in municipal election campaigns and such concerns rarely come up during the appointment of municipal officials, it could be easier for pro-Russian candidates to get elected.

Third, Russian entities are willing to use active measures to help their companies profit. Such actions could involve a wide scale of actors from pro-Russian lobbyists through the local embassy to the higher levels of the Russian administration.

Overall, democratic states will have to focus their policy efforts on protecting their economies from unfair competition from authoritarian states, including at local government level, as such practices only serve to extend their influence over democracies.

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