



POLICY BRIEF WITHIN KREMLIN WATCHERS MOVEMENT PROJECT

TO QUOTE LIES IS LYING

– HOW HUNGARY'S
GOVERNMENT AMPLIFIES
RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION
ON UKRAINE



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REPORT

KREMLIN WATCHERS MOVEMENT

Kremlin Watchers Movement is a project which is running for almost 3 years now within the effort to fight Russian malign influence and disinformation in Europe. Gathered authors, junior analysts are producing content about Russian malign influence and disinformation on social media, informing not only expert society but also wide population about latest events in this field.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Hungary, traditional pro-Russian narratives are mixed with the Orbán government's official communication, which is itself full of manipulative falsehoods. It is currently an environment where the government not only spreads pro-Russian disinformation, but further employs Kremlin-approved narratives to its domestic policy agenda. Thus, many Hungarians are particularly vulnerable to Russian and related Fidesz government propaganda. As a consequence, Hungary's democratic institutions are evermore threatened and its open society diminished. Moreover, authoritarian-leaning leaders in the region increasingly model their political behaviour after Orbán.

Citizen awareness of Russian-Hungarian disinformation is crucial. Accordingly, this policy brief identifies and explores the false narratives Russia generates and Fidesz knowingly disseminates. This analysis points to the specifics of the disinformation campaigns in Hungary, as well as to the symbiosis between pro-Russian narratives and the communication strategy of Fidesz government officials. To effectively counter disinformation through public education, we recommend potential solutions adaptable to the Hungarian information space. This analysis therefore advocates media plurality and offers strategies to prevent the dissemination of disinformation while improving citizens' access to legitimate sources of news.

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief considers the latest pro-Russian disinformation campaigns underway in Hungary. The analysis offers an overview of false narratives exploited and disseminated by the Fidesz government in pursuit of its anti-Ukrainian posture. With their explanation, this briefing recommends potential solutions, while identifying key constituencies likely susceptible to targeted disinformation operations.

ANTI-UKRAINIAN MESSAGING PROMULGATED FROM BUDAPEST

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz government adopt and disseminate the Kremlin's false narratives about the current war in Ukraine. So doing, they mislead Hungarians about the Second Russo-Ukrainian War while simultaneously employing these lies to further their illiberal domestic agenda. These anti-democratic narratives complement each other in a disinformation ecosystem that serves both Viktor Orbán and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Following Russia's second invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Hungarian information space has become inundated with pro-Russian/anti-Ukrainian propaganda.

Media watchdog Vox Ukraine discovered 158 cases of Russian disinformation¹. These media groups were analysed as part of a study conducted in March 2023. Researchers identified 16 distinct pro-Russian narratives in Hungarian media fora. Many of these anti-Western messages are not new. Accordingly, the Fidesz government and private purveyors of Russian disinformation had to repackage tired themes to spur target audience interest. So modified, these messages were promptly incorporated into official Fidesz government communications. Representative of Viktor Orbán's eastward posture, these messages comply with disinformation narratives that suit the ruling party. Prevalent themes include:

- 1) Justification of the Second Russian Invasion while alleging that the West instigated the conflict.
- 2) Advocacy for Hungarian neutrality and inaction, arguing that this is the route to an "early peace."
- 3) The delegitimization of the Ukrainian state leaders, Kyiv's foreign allies, and critics of the Orbán and the Fidesz government.

The analysis will delve into messages that Fidesz generates in support of these common narratives as tailored for targeted audiences in Hungary as well as Hungarian minorities abroad.

Disinformation narrative 1: "The war is a conflict between two Slavic countries settling accounts; therefore, it does not concern Hungary."

This persistent assertion remains effectively popular. Arguments that Hungarian interests come first has mass appeal. They emphasize the Hungarian state's disinterest in what it characterizes as a war between two feuding nations whose regional disputes are not Budapest's business. The core theme is that the Hungarian approach should be one of strict 'neutrality', amounting to nothing more than calculated apathy. Supported by messages touting 'justice' through the reclamation of Russia's 'historical territories' or portrayals of a 'legitimate' invasion reacting to the alleged attacks on Russian minorities in Ukraine. The Hungarian government repeats – sometimes to the letter – this narrative in their official communication, thereby popularizing the Russian officialdom's portrayal of the war.

Disinformation narrative 2: "The West is already at war, escalating, and wants to drag Hungary into the conflict."

This narrative is currently gaining momentum, in part due to deteriorating relations between Budapest and Washington. Hungarian entities regurgitating this argument cite sources such as "Russian News". Widely read pro-governmental platforms such as Origo.hu try to convince Hungarians that Russia is fighting with the entire West due to the latter's alleged provocations. According to this narrative, the West is aiming to escalate the situation into a global war or to make Ukraine a nuclear weapons power.

¹ The study focused on 13 Hungarian news outlets, mostly known for their pro-government and often pro-Russian stance.

The assertion that Russia had no other choice but to invade (again) due to American expansionism is very common. Pro-Orbán groups contend that because of its behaviour, the U.S. and its Western allies are not simply assisting Kyiv; rather, they endeavour to prolong the war. Apart from other NATO member states, only Hungary is on the side of peace, calling for an immediate ceasefire and refusing to arm Ukraine's defenders. Disinformation sources contend that, despite Hungary's efforts to abstain from the conflict, the West is coercing Hungary to join the 'war party'.

The Fidesz government maintains that Hungary's political opposition, independent journalists and democratic civil society are all agents of the West, terming them as 'the Dollar Left'. Disinformation sources repeatedly claim that the domestic opposition has sold Hungary out and is acting on orders from the U.S. and the EU. That they are paid to overthrow the Orbán government and then follow orders from Brussels into war.

For example: The 'real reason' for sanctions against Hungarian nationals is that the West is castigating Budapest for its 'neutrality.' The Fidesz line is that that these sanctions, purportedly like other punitive measures in response to its policies, are solely means of interference in Hungary's internal affairs. Moreover, Hungary's cold neutrality is incorrectly depicted as a matter of national sovereignty, when in reality Orbán favours Russian interests. The narrative artificially stimulates the social cohesion Fidesz needs for popular support against foreign 'interventions'.

Disinformation narrative 3: Ukrainian elites are wilfully killing their countrymen and women.

Orbán government-sanctioned attacks on Kyiv's leadership are unrelenting. To discourage sympathy for and solidarity with Ukraine, defamatory tirades against the Ukrainian government and its military are frequent. In this propaganda, Ukrainian elites do not respect their own people; E.G. Kyiv is compelling minors to fight "as long as necessary." These allegations imply that that the war and its resultant suffering is the fault of Ukraine's leaders. They are often accompanied with tales Ukraine being a "non-existent" state (I.E. financially ruined and thus dependent on Western aid) or a "no man's land" likened to the blood-soaked battlefields of Afghanistan. Ukrainian elites are further accused of disseminating lies and untruths, describing Ukrainian propaganda a one of the most shockingly effective combinations of lies ever seen. These messages typically include ultra-nationalistic trappings with references to "Nazi Azov troops" or fabricated stories about the 'persecution' of ethnic Hungarians in the Transcarpathian.



THE SYMBIOTIC NATURE OF ANTI-UKRAINIAN NARRATIVES AND ORBÁN'S DOMESTIC AGENDA

The preceding narratives dovetail nicely into the Fidesz government's messaging in support or defence of its domestic policies. They serve to consolidate Fidesz rule by forcing controversial topics into public discourse. These narratives aid Russia by destabilizing the region, radicalizing the Hungarian society, and polarizing relations between Hungary and its increasingly erstwhile allies. Pro-government forces and extremist groups use social networks to deliver these messages independent of the Fidesz government. The below narrative is a prime example of the mutually complimentary nature of anti-Ukrainian themes and domestic Fidesz policy.

Disinformation narrative 4: The war and Brussels sanctions are to blame for inflation and economic underperformance.

Western sanctions are regularly employed as excuse designed to divert fault for the economic failures of Orbán's government. Disinforming actors argue that food and fuel shortages or skyrocketing inflation are the results of Brussels 'failed' sanctions. This narrative works as the government's insurance policy, providing scapegoats abroad. Fidesz further argues (curiously) that although sanctions failed to harm Russia, they are hurting Hungary. And only Fidesz party rescue measures can keep the country's economy afloat.

MEANS OF DISSEMINATION

There are various means of disseminating disinformation narratives in the Hungarian public space. The Orbán government and its backers primarily use social media, online portals, and direct email. These conduits' speed, anonymity and efficiency make them ideal vectors.

Thanks to the Fidesz government's endorsement, pro-Russian disinformation is widespread. The concentration of pro-Orbán media ownership (at least 75 percent) is supplemented by politically-motivated regulatory controls such as the centralized control of all media. It is the Hungarian state that exercises control over media outlets' registration, permission to broadcast, arbitrarily levying fines and penalties. Related regulations allow Fidesz to dominate in the information space, for example, by appointing loyal government supporters as heads of media control authorities. Thus, whenever the government adopts a Kremlin-friendly message, the majority of Hungarian media broadcast it as the official governmental line.

Pro-Putin actors in Hungary adopt Russian state propaganda into 'news' in a template-like manner, foregoing any shred of journalistic integrity. Accordingly, hundreds of ownership-centralized media groups systemically disseminate governmental disinformation through nationally established media outfits. A great example is the government-controlled Hungarian television, relaying Orbán's narratives "moderately" in hopes of broader support.

VULNERABLE AUDIENCES

Using voting polls and mass campaigns, Fidesz has a fairly broad audience, granting pro-governmental disinformation extensive reach. However, Hungary is a deeply polarized society with less-educated, rural voters typically backing Orbán, while university-educated urbanites favouring liberal policies. Because disinformation is spread by the present government, Fidesz supporters are easily influenced. Similarly divided abroad, residents of smaller Hungarian villages in Central-Eastern Europe look to Orbán as their protector and so heed his rhetoric. This directly contrasts Hungarian youth who travel to study or work in the West where independent foreign media affords a perspective on Hungarian affairs distinct from Orbán's.

Exacerbating these machinations, individuals in targeted groups often rely on a single or limited news sources. This problem is especially acute in rural areas, where the predominant source of knowledge for older generations is a printed regional newspaper – the ultimate local source of news – along with Hungary's state-sanctioned TV channels. Both formats remain under strict government control. Moreover, due to Hungarian society's polarization, Fidesz-approved Russian propaganda has easy inroads to the information fora on which those vulnerable rely. Those inclined to use fewer resources, such as senior citizens, are at even greater risk. However, not age, but the lack of education is decisive. For example: Public opinion surveys confirm teachers' concerns about their students' ability to identify and distinguish disinformation rendered ubiquitous by information communication technology.

The situation is similar in the areas inhabited by ethnic Hungarian minorities in states bordering Hungary. For some, it is more convenient to read the news in Hungarian. The danger is that those few newspapers intended for Hungarian readers abroad have long been financed by Fidesz backers.

COUNTERING PRO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN HUNGARY

The shape of the media scene in Hungary makes its society highly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns. This must change. The noted target groups need more effective means of combating disinformation to defend themselves. Their resultant experience will help international partners or human rights watchers by providing best practices.

It is the state's responsibility to educate the citizens about the presence and dangers of misinformation so that they don't fall prey to disinformation. Unfortunately, educational institutions in Hungary fall under the authority of the ruling party. To wit: When addressing the subject of disinformation, Fidesz-aligned teachers and educators teach through the prism of 'fake news', promoting governmental propaganda instead. Efforts to

point out media bias are often misused to attack the opposition-backed journalists and suppress plurality.

Hungarian society, opposition lawmakers, independent media owners, journalists and activists need to better impart the kind of **critical thinking** skills that would empower targeted individuals to distinguish fact from fiction.

This is quite a difficult task in Hungary, as the majority of the media are government controlled and manipulated. Independent platforms are difficult to access and get lost in the flood of aggressive propaganda. Hungarian media as a whole is torn between competing political actors. Biased for-and-against opinions are common. Consequently, assessing the purported facts behind a new report is challenging. Independent media platforms and democratic civil society labour to fill the gap; to do so successfully, they require more financial support from proactive citizenry. Independent unbiased media portals often survive only thanks to those donors who care about objective reporting. Political will to protect the media space is in demand, ensuring support for independent journalists, particularly in legal affairs. A good example to follow could be the ever-stronger laws to protect media freedom at the European level, although such legislation has a long way to go before being truly effective. Finally, employing prosocial techniques to identify disinformation would result in greater political awareness among Hungarians.

Refuting disinformation through verification

Finding objective sources that would refute disinformation in Hungary is extremely difficult, as disinformers work to monopolize the public space. Overall, high levels of polarization and unsubstantiated messaging from the government leaves Hungarians distrustful of the media. This, in turn allows disinformation campaigns to thrive.

Implementing more independent and credible platforms that fact check would help to scrub broadcasted information from the government's biased narratives. Projects in Hungary combatting disinformation need expand their reach and accessibility.

Support media plurality against the distortion of public space

Because the pro-government line is single-minded and biased, this appeal applies to independent media and investigative reporting. They do exist, but their reach is insufficient. This is not by chance. In Fidesz's Hungary, the system is built on appointing government loyalists to key positions that regulate the media, provide funding, and grant licenses.

In order to withstand constant pressure in the inhospitable environment of the Hungarian media scene, independent media and journalists require partnerships abroad for knowledge transfer of effective practices. Otherwise, Hungary may soon find itself bereft of democratic guardians in the press.

Prevent the export of disinformation

The government also controls a number of sources written in English. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that legitimate media abroad adopts a manipulative, pro-government message, giving the disinformation credibility among foreign audiences.

The corrupted media scene in Hungary needs to be reported abroad to ensure that Hungarian or Russian disinformation narratives will not gain traction. Governments which respect liberal European values must raise awareness about Fidesz purveyance of Russian disinformation. Democratic civil society abroad should raise the alarm as to the danger of pro-Russian narratives spreading from there. Elucidating which Hungarian sources are to be trusted and thus showing the true face of Orbán's Hungary should be the first step.

Prevent isolation

Controlling exclusive sources of information gives unlimited dominion over those who are unwilling or unable to seek elsewhere.

It is necessary to identify the circles where disinformation thrives due to its exclusivity. Certain layers of society in Hungary receive biased sources only. This would not necessarily be the case if they had an alternative. Fact-based news for Hungarian minorities, published in Hungarian, together with the establishment of independent local media would markedly limit the reach of Viktor Orbán lies and manipulations.





STRÁŽCI (CZ)

INFOSECURITY.SK (SK)

OBSERWATORZY KREMLA (PL)