



A BATTERING RAM AGAINST THE EU?

Hungary through the eyes of Russian propagandists

Dominik Istrate
Dorka Takácsy
Péter Krekó



POLITICAL CAPITAL
POLICY RESEARCH & CONSULTING INSTITUTE



December 2021

This project has been supported entirely or in part by the US State Department. The opinions and deductions presented are of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the US State Department.

Table of contents

Table of contents	3
Executive summary	4
Introduction	6
Methodology.....	8
The medium analyzed:	8
Hungary's through the eye of the Russian public and the news-consuming public.....	10
Main narratives	10
In the crossfire: Ukraine.....	15

Executive summary

- **A massive infrastructure is provided to serve the purpose of the Kremlin.** As the Russia-West relationship deteriorated, the Kremlin started investing more and more into building its own international image, ruining the image of their Western rivals, and circulating confusing information. This process got new impetus with the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014 with the aid of RT (formerly Russia Today), founded in 2005, or Sputnik International. By then, RT had already been broadcast in multiple languages. The State Duma approved a budget of more than USD 370 million for the operation of the channel in 2021, which Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simon described as a sort of “Defence Ministry.”
- **Help in breaking out of diplomatic quarantine.** While the Hungarian government often accuses the Western press of attacking Hungary, they need not fear such “attacks” from the mainstream Russian press, which generally presents a positive or neutral image of Hungary and the Orbán administration. Presenting the cordial relations between Hungary and Russia serves the Kremlin’s interests because they can balance concerns about Russia’s international isolation with the friendly attitude of an EU- and NATO member state.
- **The role of the ‘battering ram’.** Discussing Hungary in Russian media is especially important for the Kremlin because this can portray the former’s conflicts with the European Union and the Western world. EU criticism of Budapest provides an opportunity for the Russian press to damage the credibility of the block’s uncompromisingly liberal values and politics. On the one hand, the objective is to present the EU as the engine behind the destruction of traditional values that the Russian government aims to “protect” (i.e., traditional families) at home, and, therefore, illustrate how this cannot be an acceptable alternative for Russia. On the other hand, they seek to present the Union as fragmented and weak, and to imply that some members may be closer to the values of Russia than to the West. In this context, Hungary is often presented as an asset of Moscow: As one article published on Sputnik states: “Hungary may become Putin’s ‘battering ram’ for lifting sanctions.”¹ Here, however, the conflict is not the most important element, but rather the friendly relationship between Moscow and Budapest. Even though the relationship between Warsaw and Moscow is tense, accounts of Polish-EU disputes are widely published in mainstream Russian press. When reporting on Hungary, the Kremlin’s propaganda channels present Hungary as an asset for Russia rather than an equal partner.

¹ <https://sputniknews.com/20170205/russia-hungary-eu-relations-analysis-1050366103.html>

It is important to mention that this objective of Russia did not come to fruition, as the Hungarian government has always supported the sanctions against Russia in the European Council.

- **Hungary's useful in the information warfare against Ukraine.** The development of the Russian disinformation ecosystem, as well as the Kremlin's increasing activity in the field has led to a sort of "information warfare," in which Hungary — and within that, the Orbán government — has probably been playing the most important supporting role. The Kremlin can use the conflict-prone Hungarian-Ukrainian relationship to its advantage, as the Hungarian government keeps quiet on the role of Moscow in the events in Ukraine to maintain a good relationship with Russia. The Putin regime, through their own propaganda, can further exacerbate the relationship between Budapest and Kiev.
- **Hungarian pseudo-expert against Ukraine.** In 2018, a so-called Hungarian "expert," Miklós Keveházy, appeared on the show *60 Minutes* of the TV channel Russia1, in which he stated that the alleged advisors of Viktor Orbán encouraged him to "just give a try" to occupy Zakarpattia. These statements found their way into Ukrainian media as well, which could have run the risk of jeopardizing the relationship of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine towards the Ukrainian majority, as far as providing ammunition to the Ukrainian far right. Keveházy has become a part of the Kremlin's general propaganda. Lately, he stated to smaller Russian portals that George Soros is behind the Pegasus scandal or the Bulgarian government crisis. Russian media has invested significant energy in selling him as a "Hungarian political advisor," ensuring they can always play the "Keveházy card" to stir up trouble in Hungarian-Ukrainian relations. The Hungarian cabinet does not directly contradict the disinformation narratives introduced by the Kremlin regarding this supposed Hungarian threat, which – in fact – never existed.

Introduction

Since the Maidan revolution broke out in November 2013, and the Eastern-Ukrainian war at the beginning of 2014, the relationship of Putin's Russia and the West has drastically deteriorated. As of today, it has fallen to depths not witnessed since the Cold War. The European Union, the United States, and many countries of the Western Community have reacted to the 2014 Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the Eastern-Ukrainian intervention by Russia, and the Russian support of local separatists. They introduced economic sanctions in several waves, blacklisted Russian public figures who played a role in violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and openly condemned the Russian government for violating international law.

As a result of their international crimes against the sovereignty of Ukraine and an increasingly aggressive foreign policy, the reputation of Putin's Russia has significantly deteriorated among the political leadership and societies of Western countries.² The Russian Leadership has constructed a broad disinformation ecosystem³ consisting of Russian state-owned and pro-government media, as well as alternative portals. The aim of this network is to refine Russia's international image, but more importantly, to directly, or, rather indirectly influence decision-makers and opinion leaders by disseminating narratives in line with the Kremlin's own interests.⁴ Furthermore, Russian media endeavors to cause information disorder in Western societies, making local populations question factual information. As a part of this, the Kremlin has been influencing international public opinion with an officially independent television channel (RT; before: Russian Today) since 2005; however, in actuality, we find the editorial board declared to be in the interests of the Kremlin.⁵ RT in the past years has grown to be the most significant international participant of the pro-Kremlin media, and it seeks to compete with international press such as the BBC or CNN. Naturally, RT is only one piece of the puzzle—the official Russian national media, as well as the following media organizations, are also part of an information network connected by a thousand threads straight to the Kremlin: Sputnik International, News Front (a more extreme example, targeted towards a narrower audience), among others. Moscow not only tries to influence the English-speaking world, but also targets communities speaking German, Spanish, or even Serbian. Furthermore, News Front has a Hungarian Facebook page.

The development of the Russian disinformation ecosystem, and its activities becoming more active than ever before, have led to a sort of "information warfare," in which Hungary, and the government of Orbán, has probably been playing the most important supporting role. In parallel to the drastic deterioration of Russia-West relations, Viktor Orbán—going almost entirely against the European political mainstream—has conducted a particularly visible political change in turning towards the East. The Hungarian Prime Minister announced the largest energy investment in the history of Hungarian economics, simultaneously paralleling

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/russia-and-putin-receive-low-ratings-globally/>

³ https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

⁴ https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/dezinfo_guide_rovid_hun_20181123.pdf

⁵ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/chief-editor-rt-is-like-a-defence-ministry/>

the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis,⁶ as well as the Paks nuclear power plant expansion project—funded from a Russian loan. Also, since 2014 he has repeatedly expressed his opposition towards economic sanctions imposed as a European response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine.⁷ An increase can be observed in terms of diplomatic meetings between Hungary and Russia while increasing economic cooperation is presented as agreed. Hungary, for its part, has expressed their loyalty on multiple occasions, even on a diplomatic level. See for instance the case where László Trócsányi, former Hungarian Minister of Justice, handed over two Russian arms traffickers back to Russia, rather than to the United States.⁸

It goes without saying, that as a result of Hungary's pro-Moscow policy, as well as the damage to the Kremlin's international reputation, a significant proportion of the Russian government's state-controlled media regularly reports on various developments of the two countries' bilateral relations, especially if this pivots Putin's Russia into a better position in the European political space. Therefore, the Hungarian government receives special attention in Russian media, where a vast number of Viktor Orbán's positive news, opinions, and assessments are published in regards to Russia. The Hungarian government also plays a significant role in the Russian media through its conflicts with the European Union, serving as proof of the block's solidarity, its legal capacity, and continually it parades that the leaders of the EU only consider its liberal values as reprehensible. The current study presents the image of Hungary and its government as it can be perceived in Russian media, including narratives believed by Russian public, political messages conveyed by pro-Kremlin media, and the perception of Hungary by Russian-language disinformation portals.

⁶ https://index.hu/gazdasag/ado_es_koltsegvetes/2014/01/14/nem_veletlenül_ment_orban_moszkvaba/

⁷

https://index.hu/belfold/2017/02/02/putyin_latogatas_orban_viktor_sajtotajekoztato/?fbclid=IwAR0KvHG3FnJ7VA_zGVJ8Go4uKcW7yb-Hyszmp4tfEg-i73Mq0ki8rLuwIY

⁸ <https://444.hu/2019/09/06/szabadlapon-az-orosz-fegyverkereskedok-akiket-a-kormany-az-usa-helyett-moszkvanak-adott-ki>

Methodology

The study evaluates Hungary related, online articles, using qualitative methods, narrative analysis, and fact-checking, taking into account the following aspects:

- whether political messages propagated by the Kremlin, or disinformation narratives disseminated by the Russian government appear in them;
- whether they contain criteria of information warfare towards Hungary, the European Union, Ukraine or the United States.

The selection criteria for the given platforms:

1. shall include a Russian state supported medium supported and also an independently operating medium;
2. shall include medium that disseminates known disinformation narratives, regardless of its relationship with the Russian state;
3. shall include medium paying special attention to Hungary due to the nature of the Hungarian-Russian relations;
4. shall include medium paying special attention to Hungary due to the nature of the Ukrainian-Hungarian relations;

The medium analyzed:

- **RT:** Previously known as Russia Today. The news channel operates with Russian government support, and was founded in 2005 as a part of an earlier PR campaign of the Kremlin. The objective of the campaign was to improve Russia's image on the international stage, and to represent the Russian point of view regarding international affairs. Initially, the channel operated with a relatively small budget. However, in the scope of 16 years, the disinformation machinery sustained by the Kremlin has grown into one of the most important players, if not the most important. Apart from Russian, it is available in English, German, French, Spanish and Arabic. Several international studies⁹¹⁰ refer to it as one of the most important disinformation mediums, which tries to present the aggressive foreign policy of Russia in a more favorable light, primarily targeting European and American populations. Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan has signaled on several occasions that the channel's mission was to represent the Russian government's position. The State Duma has approved a budget of more than USD 370 million for the operation of the channel in 2021.
- RT mainly seeks to reach international audiences by competing against major international news channels, as well as being available in Russian as a news portal and video platform.
- **Sputnik International:** Next to RT, Sputnik International is functioning under the Rossiya Segodnya conglomerate and can be considered a Russian news source with

⁹ <https://academic.oup.com/joc/article/70/5/623/5912109>

¹⁰ Yablokov, I. 2015.) Conspiracy theories as a Russian public diplomacy tool: The case of Russia Today (RT). *Politics*, 35(3-4), 301-315.

the most manipulated content. The news agency broadcasts in more than 30 languages with its primary target audience being viewers in Western European countries. An important difference between Sputnik International and RT is the following: In case of RT, content praising the policies of the Hungarian Government regarding Russia and the EU can be often found, while Sputnik presents itself as a news agency in nature, therefore, it has the possibility of presenting dissenting opinions¹¹. At the same time, however, this page also has a positive view of the Hungarian measures on key issues, especially if they are of paramount importance to Russia.¹²

- **Ria Novosztyi:** Russia's largest Russian-language news agency, which operates under state surveillance, has been considered for a long time as one of the most factual among other Russian press, yet nowadays it broadcasts the official opinion of the Russian government in both national and international matters. Regarding Hungary, it reports in detail on bilateral political and economic relations. However, there are also opinions that are more unpleasant from the Hungarian government's point of view presented on their platform.
- **Kommersant:** This is one of Russia's most respected economic and business daily papers, which also regularly covers political topics. It is privately-owned but the Kremlin's influence can be felt nonetheless. Apart from RT, Kommersant also regularly provides a platform for the Hungarian Government's viewpoint, primarily through the representation of Foreign Minister, Péter Szijjártó.
- **News Front:** An alternative news portal linked to the Russian secret services.¹³ Its officially communicated mission is to provide information on the events of the war in Eastern Ukraine, while in practice, it presents an anti-Ukraine propaganda. Regarding Hungary, it primarily focuses on the conflicts and the critical stances between the Hungarian Government and Ukraine. The Hungarian branch of News Front informs their readers from several Russian or Eastern Ukrainian 'sources', such as donbasstoday.ru, newsua.ru or ya-turbo.ru. Thus, it plays a key role in "importing" Russian-language disinformation content into Hungary.
- **Meduza:** Meduza is an independent news portal publishing in Russian and English, and it currently operates from Latvia. The site started in 2014 in Russian, and has been publishing English content since 2016, as well. In 2021, the Russian Ministry of Justice marked the website as a 'foreign agent'. Hungary appears on the site mainly as a side branch of Russian scandals, for example when Andrej Nariskin, the son of Russian Foreign Intelligence Service's leader, bought a residence bond in Hungary.¹⁴ We examined this medium to provide a basis of comparison with Russian state narratives and pro-Kremlin portals.

¹¹ <https://sputniknews.com/20210623/eu-slams-hungarian-bill-banning-promotion-of-homosexuality-to-minors-a-shame-vows-legal-action-1083221692.html>

¹² <https://sputniknews.com/20210929/orban-hungary-decides-on-its-own-where-to-buy-gas-how-to-get-it-1089522799.html>

¹³ <https://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2017-02/bundestag-elections-fake-news-manipulation-russia-hacker-cyberwar>

¹⁴ <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2018/09/10/say-hello-to-the-director-of-russia-s-foreign-intelligence-service-his-son-s-family-apparently-tried-to-buy-hungarian-residency-for-360-000-euros>

Hungary's through the eye of the Russian public and the news-consuming public

Based on Google Trends search data,¹⁵ it appears that the number of searches related to Hungary in Russia peaked during the week of the European Football Championship this year. The first 10 terms containing the search term "Hungary" were all related to football.

Yandex Keyword Searcher presents a different view. The variance of Hungary-related searches related is more significant, and the top list includes¹⁶ the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Hungarian Visa Center. In terms of search numbers, similarly to the data of Google Trends, a significant increase can be observed during the time of the Football Championship. In June 2021, 1,447,371 searches contained the keyword "Hungary," compared to an average of 484,686 for the rest of the year.¹⁷

The study of Levada shows that the Russian public attitude and opinion is less interested in Hungary, and in addition, only 1-2% of Russians mention Hungary as a friendly country.¹⁸

Main narratives

The analyzed mediums all share in detail the political events in Hungary, as well as international political activity of the Hungarian government. It can be considered foreseeable as Hungary follows an unconventional Russia policy among the European Union countries. While the European mainstream intends to distance themselves from the Russian political leadership, Viktor Orbán has mentioned several times in the past three years the importance of political collaboration with the Kremlin. Furthermore, from the rest of the EU cabinets, the Hungarian government has almost seemingly been alone in arguing several times against the sanctions towards Russia.¹⁹ It is well known that several Russian laws restricting fundamental rights have served as a model for Hungary, such as the 2017 text of civil law closely paralleling its Russian counterpart²⁰ 'The Child Protection Act' and its regulation of the LGBTQ+ community is even stricter.²¹

The political and ideological proximity of the Orbán government provides a basis in and of itself for information regarding political and economic events in Hungary.

¹⁵ <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2020-10-29%202021-11-28&geo=RU&q=%D0%92%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F>

¹⁶ Yandex Keywords, 'Венгрия', <https://wordstat.yandex.com/#!/?words=%D0%92%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F>

¹⁷ Yandex Keywords, Impressions history for keyword "Венгрия", <https://wordstat.yandex.com/#!/history?words=%D0%92%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8E>

¹⁸ <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/09/30/attitudes-toward-countries-4/>

¹⁹ An exception is the Italian government of Five Stars Lega, which once vetoed the EU blacklisting new Russian names. However, this government proved to be quite short-lived. As an exception, the Slovakian Fico- and Pellegrini governments could be mentioned.

²⁰ <https://444.hu/2017/04/20/felfedezheto-az-orosz-minta-a-kulfoldrol-tamogatott-civil-szervezetek-regisztraciojat-eloir-toervenjavaslatban>

²¹ <https://444.hu/2021/06/16/a-homofobiat-pedofiliaival-osszemoso-magyar-torveny-meg-az-eredeti-orosz-mintanal-is-szigorubb>

The medium analyzed—mostly with the exception of Kommersant, with its economic and political focus, and the independent Meduza—broadcast the following narrative for their readers of Hungary and the Hungarian government:

- **Hungary, as an asset for Russia** Even though Hungarian-Russian relations can be considered friendly, there are important exceptions where Hungary is viewed by Russia more as an asset than an equal. In some symbolic cases, they are unafraid to blast the Hungarian party. In 2017, Sputnik International stated that Hungary could be the ‘battering ram against sanctions’ of the Kremlin against the European Union²². Moreover, after the inauguration of Donald Trump, the American president directly encouraged the Hungarian government to veto EU sanctions against Russia, for both economic and ideological reasons. This step also eased pressures on Russia from the American side. In 2016, during the 60th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Dmitry Kiselyov stated in a 10-minute segment on channel ‘Russia 1’ that the revolution was a type of neo-Nazi coups partially organized by the CIA.²³ Kiselyov did not fail to mention that this could have been the first “color revolution” ever in a Russia-friendly country.²⁴ The propaganda channels of the Kremlin highlighted the fact that the Hungarian Foreign Ministry did not refute the words of Kiselyov. Rather it can be considered an exchange of opinions on the issue with the Russian Ambassador. In the end, they agreed that it was a matter of “different historical interpretations.”²⁵ Also memorable, in 2014 the Kremlin accused Hungary with the intention of delivering T-72 tanks to Ukraine, based on the still-functioning Hídfő portal.²⁶ In reality, the military of Hungary had acted before the actual outbreak of the Ukrainian Conflict, and the tanks were acquired by a Czech military company.²⁷
- **Hungary, the protector of the traditional European values** On Russian state-supported channels, they openly represent Western criticism of Orbán’s policies, and provide supportive voices in the opinion section. The American political commentator Robert Bridge recently wrote on²⁸ RT online the following: ‘Hungary is a successful Christian nation, that’s why godless liberals slammed Tucker Carlson’s meeting with Viktor Orbán’. Ria Novosztyi, which essentially functions as a news agency, writes similarly regarding the anti-LGBTQ+ steps of the Hungarian government. The portal presented as news (not as an opinion opinion) claimed the following²⁹, “Gay propaganda for children is now officially a European value” and it continued defending the position of the Hungarian government in its support of the traditional family model. A similar political narrative can be observed in the alternative news portal with connections to the secret services—in the Russian edition of News Front—which has also been actively involved in presenting the anti-LGBTQ+ measures of the Hungarian

²² <https://sputniknews.com/20170205/russia-hungary-eu-relations-analysis-1050366103.html>

²³ <https://hungarytoday.hu/cia-ex-nazis-behind-1956-hungarian-revolution-russian-state-tv-claims-78806/>

²⁴ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/10/25/russian-tv-pundit-not-too-impressed-with-hungarys-complaint-about-his-1956-uprising-criticism-a55871>

²⁵ <https://sputniknews.com/20161026/hungary-uprising-kiselev-1046741619.html>

²⁶ https://index.hu/kulfold/2014/08/15/moszkva_fegyverszallitassal_vadolja_magyarorszagot/

²⁷ https://index.hu/belfold/2014/08/19/tavaly_nyar_ota_tudunk_az_elado_tankokrol/

²⁸ <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/531518-hungary-christian-nation-carlson-orban/>

²⁹ <https://ria.ru/20210703/tsennosti-1739684692.html>

government. News Front highlighted in one of their articles³⁰ that the "LGBTQ lobby overstepped a red line in Hungary", which is why, essentially, the Hungarian government was forced to take action in order to protect the traditional family model. A pro-Brexit, British Historian wrote, about the Budapest visit of Pope Francis in his piece published on RT³¹, "the Pope misunderstands Orbán, who is trying to preserve Hungary's Christian traditions." In recent months, the Hungarian government's policy of attacking sexual minorities has been substantial, including the law passed in June 2021, and the referendum initiated in connection with it. It is characteristic that some Russian Media, such as the Sputnik International published in detail³² the sex scandal in Brussels of ex-European Parliament Representative to Fidesz, József Szájer. RT did not suppress the scandal, and they put in focus the reaction of Viktor Orbán instead.³³

- **The follower and the followed – simultaneously** Overall, they present Hungary as a European example to follow, while at the same time, as a country following Russia's example. Perhaps surprisingly, Poland also appears in a similar position in Russian media, despite the notoriously unpleasant Warsaw-Moscow relations on account of Poland's conflicts with the EU. Then Poland's struggle for the rule of law will be praised without any issue³⁴ or either its green policy³⁵ if the Polish conflict with the EU is in focus. The EP debate on the country's rule of law performance with the participation of Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki was presented by the RT as "evidence" that Eastern states in the EU are second-class members.³⁶ The Kremlin propaganda uses both Hungary and Poland to criticize and discredit the EU, as well as to undermine its unity.
- **Successful Hungarian-Russian relations:** Beyond the ideological proximity of the Hungarian and Russian governments, one of the most propagated narrative is that an increasing political and economic cooperation between the two governments, and therefore, the two countries has been developing. The basis of this is Hungary's energy dependence from Russia, as well as the energy cooperation of the two countries. The Russian state media (both in English and in Russian) reported in sufficient detail regarding the extension of Paks, or on announcements and events related to the Hungarian-Russian gas trade. Most of these communications are not necessarily ideologically charged, however, their frequency suggests that the pro-Kremlin media considers it fundamentally important to present the relations with Hungary, an EU and NATO member state. Especially if it is also in line with Russian foreign policy interests. The latest example of the above was in September 2021, when they signed the 15-year, long term Russian-Hungarian gas contract, which was criticized on multiple occasions by the Ukrainian government due to its geopolitical dimension. Russia 1 the state owned news channel, presented a report on the 28th of

³⁰ <https://news-front.info/2020/10/07/lgbt-lobbi-pereshlo-krasnuyu-liniyu-v-vengrii/>

³¹ <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/534738-pope-visit-orban-christian-traditions/>

³² <https://sputniknews.com/20201202/conservative-hungarian-mep-resigns-after-police-raid-drug-fuelled-orgy-in-brussels-gay-bar-1081329758.html>

³³ <https://www.rt.com/news/508494-orban-hungary-mep-gay-orgy/>

³⁴ <https://www.rt.com/news/538733-poland-rejects-ecj-fine/>

³⁵ <https://www.rt.com/news/539145-brussels-blackmail-funds-poland-climate/>

³⁶ <https://www.rt.com/news/538733-poland-rejects-ecj-fine/>

September³⁷ with the title “Ukraine threw a tantrum over Russia and Hungary” in their online edition. The Russian pro-state media also shares and broadcasts it in similar details, when Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin, or Péter Szijjártó and Sergey Lavrov foreign ministers meet or they issue a common statement. In this context, the communication practice used in connection with Hungary's separate passenger policy is outstanding in the case of all media.³⁸ Among other issues, they reported on János Áder participating in the Crimea Platform Summit, which aims at redirecting the attention of the international community to the case of the peninsula illegally annexed by Russia from Ukraine. Meanwhile Péter Szijjártó assured Sergey Lavrov of the smooth progress of Hungarian-Russian relations. Russian success propaganda has manifested itself not only in political- but also in epidemiological cooperation: Péter Szijjártó, in March 2021 received the Russian Sputnik V vaccine against coronavirus. He talked about this in detail to his interview to RT³⁹. This was actively used by Russian media⁴⁰ as well as the Russian government⁴¹: a high ranking member of an EU state government chose the Russian vaccine. The symbolic gestures of the two governments in the autumn of 2021 also received a lot of media attention:⁴² Vladimir Putin awarded the Hungarian Foreign Minister with the Order of Merit⁴³ while Péter Szijjártó awarded the Russian Minister of Health Mikhail Murasko with the Middle Cross of the Order of Merit of Hungary.⁴⁴ However, the statements of Péter Szijjártó received more media attention during his visits to Russia, during his visits he sharply criticized the European Union for not acknowledging the Russian vaccine Sputnik V,⁴⁵ communicating it as a “political and ideological question”.⁴⁶ His critical statements flooded the Russian pro-government media as headlines. Kommersant also regularly broadcasts the viewpoint of Szijjártó, and therefore of the Hungarian Government, where the Hungarian Foreign Minister made several statements on economic and European political issues, where he highlighted several times⁴⁷, that Hungary “does not want a new Cold War.” The Foreign Minister of Hungary, unlike his colleagues from other EU- or NATO member countries, is regularly a guest for interviews at RT, which has the same value like the highest ranking member of the Hungarian diplomacy

³⁷ <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2619457>

³⁸

<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4957061?query=%D0%A1%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%8F%D1%80%D1%82%D0%BE>

³⁹ <https://www.rt.com/news/518721-hungary-sputnik-eu-vaccines/>

⁴⁰ <https://ria.ru/20210321/napadki-1602211501.html>

⁴¹ https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1373179843559448579

⁴² <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/929467-putin-orden-druzhby-vengriya>

⁴³ <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202111180046?index=12&rangeSize=1>

⁴⁴ <https://ria.ru/20211126/murashko-1760924027.html>

⁴⁵ <https://russian.rt.com/world/video/932831-vengriya-mid-sputnik-migranty>

⁴⁶ <https://ria.ru/20211128/sputnik-1761100151.html>

⁴⁷

<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2640485?query=%D0%9F%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%20%D0%A1%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%8F%D1%80%D1%82%D0%BE>.

is giving an interview to CNN⁴⁸ or to the BBC⁴⁹. Thus, the Hungarian government does not share (or rather does not problematize) the public opinion in Western Europe that the channel is supported by the Russian state, and it is a propaganda media. However, it has great significance that a representative of the Hungarian government in his interviews to RT is criticizing the allies of his own country. These criticisms quickly spread through the platforms of the pro-government Russian media, which uses these to suggest how "the West" is unfair and hypocritical. This suggestion is the same that the Kremlin has been vocal about. However, if this message heard is from a representative of the western system of alliance, this message is differently weighed. To give some examples from the comments that can be well used for the Russian state media: on the crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border in 2021, (*"The head of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry recalled criticism of the migration policy of Budapest"⁵⁰*), on the failure of the NATO mission in Afghanistan (*"Hungarian Foreign Minister called 20 years of NATO mission in Afghanistan a failure"⁵¹*), on the Russian relations of Western countries (*"Hungarian Foreign Minister accused the West of hypocrisy towards Russia"⁵²*), on the state of the Hungarian democracy (*"Hungarian Foreign Minister accuses US of spreading 'fake news'"⁵³*). The Hungarian Foreign Minister's remarks from the alliance and his statements, receive a lot of attention in the Russian state media beyond the weight and importance of the country. On the 28th of November within two Hours Ria Novosztyi publish 7 articles already⁵⁴ quoting the words of Szijjártó in their titles.

⁴⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/szijjarto.peter.official/videos/teljes-cnn-interj%C3%BA/652482005714515/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/szijjarto.peter.official/videos/bbc-hardtalk-ez-t%C3%A9nyleg-kem%C3%A9ny-volt/1190006904831858/>

⁵⁰ <https://ria.ru/20211128/siyarto-1761103765.html>

⁵¹ <https://ria.ru/20211128/afganistan-1761101486.html>

⁵² <https://ria.ru/20211128/litsemerie-1761100793.html>

⁵³ <https://ria.ru/20211128/feyki-1761101988.html>

⁵⁴ <https://ria.ru/search/?query=%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F>

In the crossfire: Ukraine

The most important reference point of the Kremlin-initiated information war is the still ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine. As a part of information warfare, pro-Kremlin propaganda aims to render Ukraine impossible and credible in the international media, to exempt Russia from their active role in the conflict, and to present the Kiev Government as the aggressor. The anti-Ukraine propaganda is a regularly returning element of the mainstream propaganda of the Russian Government⁵⁵. However, the most extreme political overtones are presented on the Russian platform of News Front, the portal that has ties to the secret services shared an article in March⁵⁶, how "Hungary and Russia would liberate Zakarpattia from Ukraine." In another article, published in August, News Front also dealt with the Crimea Platform Summit organized by Ukraine. While the Russian pro-government press rather highlighted that even though Hungary participated in the conference, the bilateral relations remain the same between Budapest and Moscow, News Front wrote that Hungary "used the Crimean platform for criticizing Ukraine", however, János Áder represented Hungary, and condemned Russia.

It is essential to highlight a few aspects of Hungary's role in Ukraine. Firstly, Hungary has legitimate demands to ensure the rights of local Hungarian minorities. Secondly, the Hungarian Government has been continuously vocal about supporting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, even in bilateral disputes, the country is indeed, to some extent, blocking Ukraine's integration into the Western community. Thirdly, as the current Hungarian government is trying to balance their obligation towards the West and their foreign policy aiming toward the East, they do not mention Russia's involvement in Ukraine. The latter point, as well as the strident tone of the Hungarian-Ukrainian dispute, both help the Kremlin in using the Budapest-Kiev disputes in their own anti-Ukraine propaganda, for instance, to exacerbate the relation between the Ukrainian majority and the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. The disinformation material prepared by the propaganda machinery of the Kremlin in Russian has involved the supposed Hungary "experts" who can quickly find their way to the Ukrainian media which can cause significant damage both within Ukraine, and in the Ukrainian-Hungarian relations as well.⁵⁷

It is undoubtedly of the interest of the pro-Kremlin media to display the relation between Hungary and Russian in a favorable color, the representation of the Hungarian government's international activities in Russia is far from uniform. Apart from overestimating the importance of each state of the bilateral relations, in more instances it is equally important for the pro-Kremlin Russian media, that the broadcast Hungarian stance should praise Russia, while attacking Ukraine at the same time. As we have mentioned it above, a key issue in the Russian government's foreign policy efforts is to incite conflict between Ukraine and its neighbors, mostly on ethnic grounds.⁵⁸ The Hungarian ethnic minority in Zakarpattia is no exception from the above. The relation between the Hungarian and Ukrainian Governments has drastically

⁵⁵ <https://24.hu/kulfold/2020/03/31/oroszok-ukranok-magyar-kisebbsseg-karpatalja-putyin-propagandamedia-alszakertok-pc/>

⁵⁶ Аналитик рассказал, как Венгрия с Россией спасут Закарпатье от Украины

Источник: <https://news-front.info/2021/03/06/analitik-rasskazal-kak-vengriya-s-rossiej-spasut-zakarpate-ot-ukrainy>

⁵⁷ <http://4liberty.eu/review-13-how-pro-kremlin-disinformation-exploits-minority-related-conflicts-between-ukraine-and-its-neighbors/>

⁵⁸ Ibid.

deteriorated since 2017, after the Kiev legislature restricted the use of minority languages in the country, in several waves. This has served as a great foundation for the Kremlin to ignite ethnic tensions between the two parties.

The presence of Miklós Keveházy in the Russian state media is one shining example of the presence of Hungarian 'experts' in the media. A Hungarian citizen who was previously completely unknown to both the Hungarian and Russian public, first appeared on the top ranking channel of the Russian state media, in the show of Russia 1, in its prime-time evening political talk show. Keveházy, who in the show appeared as a "Hungarian political advisor", has made several questionable statements, which are perfectly suited to undermine relations between Hungary and Ukraine. The Hungarian participant has made three strongly dubious statements, which later arrived to a wider, Ukrainian audience, causing a tension between Budapest and Kiev:

- According to Keveházy, the Hungarian Army, "At the helm of UN peacekeepers in blue helmets' could reach Lviv to clean local sources of drinking water.
- When the presenter asked whether the Hungarian Government considered occupying Zakarpattia, he responded that shadow coaches and advisors of Viktor Orbán distinctly encouraged him to "come on, just try it."
- In connection with gas disputes known as the perpetual boiling point of Ukrainian-Russian relations, he said that Hungary can essentially, at any time close the gas taps towards Ukraine.

The declarations of Keveházy quickly spread through the Ukrainian press. This not only could have been detrimental in the development of the Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, but it also secured political communications ammunition to the Ukrainian nationalists. This was enhanced by a political commentator, who has not previously performed, at least in public, any substantive expert activity.⁵⁹ After he has been to Russia 1, he has constantly appeared as a political expert in disinformation media presented in Russian for both mainland Russians and Russian-speaking residents from near abroad, such as News Front with ties to the Russian secret services. The main task of News Front is to disseminate anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian disinformation narratives regarding the East-Ukrainian war and the annexation of Crimea of 2014. Since 2018, Keveházy has appeared in 93 online material of NewsFront (interestingly, not in the Hungarian editions), he gave interviews to the portal several times and wrote articles for them as well. The materials he published were mainly criticizing the Russia policy of the European Union⁶⁰, the European Union sanctions, the liberal⁶¹ values and the world order led by the United States⁶² and specifically about criticizing Ukraine⁶³, the Hungarian government, on the other hand, was viewed positively because of its perceived positive combativeness against the EU, its conservatism, and its opposition to Ukraine. Regarding Ukraine, he disseminates general misinformation narratives, such as George Soros controlling the country from behind the scenes,⁶⁴ or he considers that the American businessman is

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ <https://news-front.info/2021/03/14/tusk-student-otlichnik-iz-kieva/>

⁶¹ <https://news-front.info/2021/07/28/vengerskoe-net-lgbt-lobbi/>

⁶² <https://news-front.info/2020/09/27/amerikanskaya-tragediya/>

⁶³ <https://news-front.info/2020/06/25/kak-soros-vzval-pod-svoj-kontrol-ukrainu/>

⁶⁴ <https://news-front.info/2020/06/25/kak-soros-vzval-pod-svoj-kontrol-ukrainu/>

behind the Pegasus-scandal⁶⁵ or the Bulgarian Government Crisis.⁶⁶ Lately has been presenting statements to the portal Polit Russia (35 occasions since 2019),⁶⁷ from which other world politics sites using the Kremlin's narrative are increasingly referring to it, such as a news.ru,⁶⁸ a politexpert.net,⁶⁹ a rueconomics.ru,⁷⁰ the riafan.ru⁷¹ or the actualnews.com.⁷²

Since 2021 Spring, the name of László Bogár also often appears next to Keveházy's, always together. They are referred to as Hungarian experts, it can be about blaming the West for "organizing the migration crisis" in the Belorussian-Polish border⁷³, questioning the official position of the United States up to 11 September 2001, as according to them, the tragic events "could have been organized by the strategists of a global power."⁷⁴ Keveházy's example fundamentally shows the importance of disinformation narratives in the Russian government media in relation to Hungary, at the same time, it highlights that the pro-Kremlin media needs to rely on marginal players in order to present opinions favorable to the Putin regime, but from the point of view of Europe, portray extreme opinions as mainstream for Russian media consumers. Positioning Keveházy as a 'Hungary expert' could serve as a basis of the conflict: He is surrounded by physical objects referencing to Hungary in his interview with the News Front, which could easily suggest that this represents an official Hungarian position, rather than an extremely biased opinion, often based on conspiracy theories.

⁶⁵ <https://politros.com/217158-v-vengrii-rasskazali-o-prichastnosti-sorosa-k-skandalu-s-izrailskim-pegasus>

⁶⁶ <https://politros.com/221225-miklosh-kevehazi-struktury-sorosa-vmeshivayutsya-v-vybory-prezidenta-bolgarii>

⁶⁷ <https://politros.com/tags/kevehazi>

⁶⁸ <https://news.ru/world/vengerskie-politologi-predrekli-evrosoyuzu-samounichtozhenie/>

⁶⁹ <https://politexpert.net/264181-vengerskii-politolog-kevehazi-ukazal-na-kreditnye-problemy-ukrainy-iz-zasvizheniya-tranzita-gaza>

⁷⁰ <https://rueconomics.ru/549782-analitik-kevehazi-zametil-diagnoz-zapadu-v-rechi-putina-na-valdae>

⁷¹ <https://riafan.ru/tags/kevehazi>

⁷² https://yandex.ru/turbo/s/actualnews.org/exclusive/402501-vengerskij-jekspert-kevehazi-prorochestvo-gorbacheva-o-raspade-es-mozhet-sbytsja-v-skorom-buduschem.html?utm_source=aab&platform=desktop

⁷³ <https://slovodel.com/626293-vengerskie-politologi-bogar-i-kevehazi-obvinili-zapad-v-organizacii-migracionnogo-krizisa>

⁷⁴ <https://riafan.ru/1519276-politolog-kevehazi-nazval-somnitelnoi-oficialnuyu-versiyu-ssha-o-terakte-11-sentyabrya>