POLITICAL CAPITAL
POLICY RESEARCH & CONSULTING INSTITUTE

Media hegemony and the export of disinformation across the border

The Orbán regime's influence on the Hungarian minority communities' public discourse in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine

November 2023

Content

Introduction

Our research focuses on the Orbán regime's influence based on propaganda and disinformation narratives in the minority Hungarian communities in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine in the context of local media spaces and political relations. We investigate how and to what extent Hungarian government propaganda and disinformation affect Hungarian diaspora communities and to what extent we can speak of the realization of influence over minority Hungarian publics.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has underscored the topic's importance, along with the Hungarian government's influence-building in Europe, the US, neighboring countries, and the Western Balkans. It is evident that the Kremlin, adhering to Soviet imperial logic and Cold War rhetoric, has reignited ethnic-based territorial claims and conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that were precursors to the two world wars. This has disrupted the European and (geo)political status quo established post-1945 and posed serious security risks in CEE. In a region where grievances about the position of minorities and state borders persist, revisionist sentiments are still alive in various sections of societies.

In the current situation of war, the Orbán regime's pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and policy clearly contribute to and increase the risks of renewed ethnic tensions and thus also pose a threat to the Hungarian minorities themselves. An excellent example of this is the Hungarian prime minister, who, in his 2023 State of the Nation speech, essentially blamed the West for the war:

"We could have done what we did in 2014 under Angela Merkel when Russia attacked Ukraine and annexed Crimea. We could have opted for war, like the one we are in now, but then we, the West, chose a different option: negotiation instead of war, peace instead of war. When Russia launched an attack, the West did not isolate the conflict but elevated it to a pan-European level. It could have deemed it a local, regional war or a military conflict between two Slavic states, as Hungary proposed."[1]

The risks are not to be underestimated either, as Hungary and Hungarian minorities have been prime targets of Russian hybrid war efforts and so-called "active measures" carried out by Russian intelligence services to influence the public and political elites - be it about the spying activity of the Jobbik MEP Béla Kovács, known as "KGBéla"[2] or the 2018 Russian action trying to burn down the Hungarian cultural center in Transcarpathia.[3]

We want to extend our gratitude to our local partners for their invaluable assistance in designing the research, collecting data, and conducting the analysis.

- Virág Gyurkovics, editor-in-chief and responsible editor of Átlátszó Vajdaság in Serbia
- Karin Kőváry Sólymos, journalist at the Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak in Slovakia
- Zoltán Sipos, editor-in-chief of Átlátszó Erdély in Romania
- András Soltész and Dmytro Tuzhanskyi from the online magazine Varosh in Transcarpathia, Ukraine

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[1] https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-evertekelo-beszede-2023/
[2] https://hvg.hu/itthon/20220927_KGBela_itelet_5ev_Kuria_kemkedes
[3] https://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200324_eliteltek-az-ungvari-magyar-kulturalis-kozpontot-felgyujto-oroszbarat-lengyeleket

Executive summary

- [Political Capital's earlier mapping](#) of the Orbán regime's efforts to gain influence argues that the Orbán regime's main foreign policy goal is to create a favorable foreign policy environment that will ensure the regime's long-term survival domestically and prevent and counter international criticism by building alliances with populist-right actors, promoting an "illiberal", "sovereignist" hegemonic shift in the EU, and enhancing the role of the Hungarian government internationally. The regime has also established hegemony over Hungarian minority communities in neighboring countries for two reasons: 1) to secure the votes of dual citizens in Hungary's parliamentary elections, and 2) to gain indirect influence on mainstream politics in these countries. Thus, instead of the legitimate and necessary support of the Hungarian minority communities and the representation of their interests, the Orbán regime has exploited these communities for its power-political interests.

- In our current research, we examined the presence of the Hungarian government's disinformation narratives in the online public sphere of the Hungarian minority communities in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine, disseminated through online news media and Facebook. The research focused on four main themes of the regime's hostility- and conflict-generating ideology and political agenda: anti-migration, anti-gender, anti-war and anti-sanctions narratives.

- The Orbán regime has established a significant power or hegemonic position in the minority media sectors in all four countries studied, relying on political, organizational and financial tools. This has three cornerstones: 1) the extent to which the Orbán regime controls the local media in neighboring countries; 2) how embedded the minority media space is in the majority media space; and 3) how diverse, competitive, and free the majority media space is. The combination of these factors strongly determines the extent to which state propaganda and disinformation, as well as the Hungarian and local actors who disseminate it, can influence the Hungarian minority public and flood the minority and potentially also the majority media space with disinformation.

- Our database, which included 1,245 relevant webpage articles and Facebook posts for the monitored period between 1 January and 15 July 2023, revealed the overall distribution of the four types of disinformation narratives under revision. The most widespread disinformation narrative concerned the Russo-Ukrainian war, accounting for 40% of our sample, followed by the anti-migration narrative (29%), the anti-gender narrative (19%), and the anti-sanctions narrative (12%). Overall, the anti-war and anti-sanctions "peace narrative" dominated the public discourses of the Hungarian minority communities in all four countries, accounting for 52% of all results. Their main message is that the West is responsible for the war by violating the Russian "sphere of interests", arming Ukraine, and causing a serious economic crisis by "rejecting peace" and imposing sanctions. In contrast, the Russians represent normality, defending so-called "traditional values", while the West is in an identity crisis, with a "population exchange" based on migration and a desire to "rainbowize" families.

- The anti-gender and anti-migration narratives were less prevalent overall (accounting for a total of 48% of our sample), but there was wide variation between countries. The anti-gender narrative was negligible in Serbia and Ukraine, as was the anti-migration narrative in Ukraine. However, the latter was the most prevalent narrative in Serbia and the second in Slovakia. The reasons for these differences lie mainly in the national political and social conditions.

- Regarding the presence of disinformation narratives on a country-by-country basis, Slovakia and Romania are the most exposed to the Orbán regime's narrative-based influence. However, while Slovakia has the second largest Hungarian diaspora with approximately 450-460 thousand

members, 57% of all disinformation items were generated there. By comparison, Romania, with the largest Hungarian minority community of 1.1 million members accounts for "only" 24% of all disinformation items. The share of disinformation items generated in Serbia (11%) and Ukraine (8%) in our sample roughly reflects the Hungarian diaspora's size and proportion and media space in these countries.

- We assessed the vulnerability of Hungarian minority communities to Hungary-originated disinformation based on six factors: 1) the level of press freedom; 2) the cooperation between the Orbán regime and local majority leaders; 3) the extent of the Hungarian government's control over the minority media space; 4) the relationship between local majority and minority media spaces; 5) trust in the media; and 6) the ratio of disinformation narratives for each country in our sample.

- In our assessment, the Hungarian diasporas in Serbia and Slovakia are the most vulnerable. The reasons for this include the fact that both the Serbian and the Slovak prime ministers (the latter only a candidate at the time of our research) have been allies of Viktor Orbán, have echoed key elements of PM Orbán's rhetoric, e.g. on migrants or Russia, and have relied heavily on disinformation narratives similar to Orbán's. Thus, although a higher proportion of Hungarians in Slovakia also consume majority-language media, there is an intense background noise of disinformation throughout the media space, similar to the situation in Hungary. Moreover, Serbia is an "illiberal" or "hybrid regime" similar to the Hungarian political system, with solid control over the press. In contrast, in Romania and Ukraine, Hungarian minorities have easier access to more unbiased and factual information, thanks to greater accessibility across minority and majority media spaces, a healthier media space, the absence of strong majority political actors allied with Orbán, and less background noise of disinformation.

- Although the disinformation narratives spread in the Hungarian minority communities serve the power-political interests of the Orbán regime, this tactic is detrimental to the interests of Hungary or the Hungarian minority communities.

  o Establishing control over the politics and public sphere of Hungarian minority communities, making them dependent on Budapest, and deliberately polarizing them along the patterns used in Hungary weakens their autonomy, cohesion, and ability to defend themselves against hostile political or informational influences.

  o The spread of centralized disinformation increases susceptibility to domestic misinformation, foreign hostile influence operations, and a general distrust of independent media among both majority and minority populations.

  o Pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian narratives, as well as those that increase social polarization over the war and the alleged role of minorities in territorial disputes, strengthen Eurosceptic and pro-Kremlin actors and undermine confidence in NATO and Euro-Atlantic structures.

  o Cross-border disinformation activities also pose a clear risk of regional destabilization, as the Hungarian diaspora could become a target of Russian "active measures" used to create diplomatic tensions between countries or to pit majority or minority societies against each other over minority issues or historical grievances.

- An independent, comprehensive, high-quality public media service in the minority language and a democratic, free and diverse media system can counter the effects of foreign disinformation influence targeting minorities, especially when there is a crossover between majority and minority media spaces.

Methodology

Our research aims to investigate the Hungarian government's narrative influence on Hungarian minority communities in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. While investigative journalists have extensively studied financial support as the primary tool of the Orbán regime's efforts to build hegemonic influence in these communities, the narrative influence has remained uncovered. For a thorough investigation grounded in the local context, in each country, we partnered with independent local Hungarian journalists, mainly investigative journalists, who deeply understand the political, social and media environment in their respective countries. Our partners were Virág Gyurkovics, editor-in-chief and responsible editor of the investigative portal Átlátszó Vajdaság in Serbia; Karin Kőváry Sólymos, journalist at the Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak in Slovakia; Zoltán Sipos, editor-in-chief of the investigative portal Átlátszó Erdély in Romania; and András Soltész and Dmytro Tuzhanskyi from the online magazine Varosh in Transcarpathia, Ukraine. Our partners were instrumental in uncovering the local contexts regarding the actors of influence, sources of disinformation and country-specific disinformation narratives.

Following the media research practices developed by Political Capital over previous years, our research examined the presence of disinformation and hostile narratives[4] in minority media spaces in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine between 1 January and 15 July 2023, employing qualitative content analysis and quantitative tools. A description of the political, economic, organizational and media contexts complemented the analysis of narratives. We also examined the relations between minority and majority media spaces and the "disinformation vulnerability" of Hungarian minority communities resulting from disinformation, or the lack of it, in majority media spaces.

Based on desktop research and the inputs of local partners, first, we selected the media and Facebook pages that most shape local diaspora publicity. News media sites, Facebook pages, influencers and local politicians were selected based on three criteria: (1) regular dissemination of governmental disinformation without providing context or fact-checking; (2) dissemination of governmental disinformation narratives baked into their articles or posts; and/or (3) being part of the media network funded and organized by the Hungarian government or its political affiliates. While media outlets had to meet one of the first two criteria mandatorily to be included in our final list monitored, the third one was only a supplementary criterion since we also sought to expand our inquiry into independent media.

After selecting the sources to be monitored, based on our previous research and our partners' input, we identified the four main narratives of strategic government communication. Using keyword combinations[5] in SentiOne and CrowdTangle online monitoring tools, we extracted online articles and Facebook posts containing messages or narratives relevant to us. In the resulting databases, we identified and labelled the four types of narratives and their respective sub-narratives. Then, we

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[4] To capture the complex phenomenon of disinformation and propaganda, and to reflect on the evolution of disinformation campaigns, we have applied Massimo Flore's definition of 'hostile narratives'. This refers to manipulative narratives that can be based on both true and false information, where the narrative of facts counts more than the facts themselves, and that rely on negatively charged emotions to target feelings and emotions. Flore, M., Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities (II): From Disinformation to Hostile Narratives, EUR 30029 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, ISBN 978-92-76-14308-6, doi:10.2760/271224, JRC118914, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118914

[5] The initial keyword combinations were the same for all four countries, but when searching on SentiOne, we tailored the keywords for each country to the specific thematic groups to ensure the most accurate results. For some countries, the number of hits was reduced, while for others, it was increased. The logical operators were modified accordingly.

analyzed the content of the narratives using qualitative content analysis and quantitative time-series statistical methodology. We also analyzed the network of actors involved in the dissemination of the messages, e.g., media, journalists, NGOs, to identify the sources, dissemination patterns and impact of disinformation and propaganda.

1. Disinformation in the Hungarian media space

1.1. Specificities of the Hungarian media space

Since 2010, the Orbán regime has sought to establish control over the Hungarian public and to consistently and systematically restrict freedom of speech and media. This is reflected in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index[6] , which assesses Hungarian press freedom through political, legal, economic, socio-cultural and security dimensions. The devastating changes in the media landscape between 2010 and 2023 have seen Hungary fall from 23rd to 72nd place in the ranking. Contrary to initial fears, the government achieved dominance over the media not primarily through legal means explicitly censoring or sanctioning independent media outlets – embodied in the new media law and the media authority dominated by Fidesz delegates – but primarily through power techniques that combine market tools with legal instruments. The authorities aimed to acquire independent media outlets, rendering them unviable in the market,[7] influencing advertising expenditures, transforming state-controlled media outlets into propaganda channels, and concentrating privately-held media outlets. The primary example of this is the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA),[8] which was established in 2018 with the inaction of the National Media and Communications Authority (NMHH) and the Hungarian Competition Authority (GVH), and which has "voluntarily" merged more than 500 local and national commercial media to serve the interests of the Orbán-regime. As the other leg of the government propaganda chain, the Media Service Support and Asset Management Fund (MTVA), which brings together the state media's radio and television channels, presides over a budget of HUF 127 billion (EUR 336 million) in 2023.[9] As a result, according to Reporters Without Borders' 2022 Press Freedom Index[10] , the regime has de facto control over 80% of the media in Hungary. For the 2022 election campaign, the government has extended its influence onto social media, including Facebook. One of its primary tools is Megafon, which features pro-government influencers on social media and spent HUF 2.7 billion (EUR 7.1 million) on government propaganda in 2022 alone.[11] Organizations employing pro-government influencers and campaigning for the ruling Fidesz party have spent HUF 8 billion (EUR 21 million) on communication in the last three years. Still, the source of the money is almost unknown.[12] In comparison, Megafon spent as much on advertising in the summer of 2023 as Spain's larger political parties during the Spanish general election campaign. Between June 24 and July 23, Megafon, along with its associate, the

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[6] https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2010

[7] In a blatant example, the market-leading portals Origo.hu and Index.hu were bought up by pro-government businessmen and turned into propaganda tools, while the left-wing print Népszabadság was closed down and the opposition-oriented Klubrádió was deprived of its frequency - the latter will only operate online in 2023.

[8] https://cepmf.hu/

[9] https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/10/24/mtva-kozmedia-koltsegvetes-2023-127-57-milliard-forint

[10] https://atlatszo.hu/adat/2022/05/09/romlott-a-magyar-helyzet-egy-sajtoszabadsag-index-szerint-de-masutt-meg-inkabb/

[11] https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20230531_megafon_beszamolo

[12] https://24.hu/belfold/2023/09/20/fidesz-propaganda-megafon-kampany-cof-adomany-tamogatas/

Kommentár Alapítvány (Tranzit), spent over HUF 70 million (approx. EUR 185,000) on ads, which would have ranked Megafon third in Spain's political party advertising spend.[13]

1.2 How the disinformation machine works

The resulting media monopoly, which controls 80% of the Hungarian media market, is directed by the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, Antal Rogán[14], on whose orders the government-controlled media empire "carpet-bombs" the public discourse through massive and permanent campaigns. One of the pillars of the hegemony over the public discourse is the funding and control of state media. At the same time, the Prime Minister's Office exerts control over and provides funding to not directly organized media through personal contacts and the advertising spending of state-owned companies and institutions. The Office's budget amounted to HUF 44 billion in 2022.[15]

The Hungarian information space is dominated by pro-Russian disinformation, especially about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian narratives are spread as if the Kremlin would be investing serious resources in influencing Hungarian public opinion, even though the direct Russian presence in the Hungarian information space is extremely low. This is because the domestic government-controlled media have been disseminating pro-Kremlin messages for years without the Russian leadership having to invest serious resources in Hungary. Fidesz's anti-war and "pro-peace" rhetoric, developed in the 2022 election campaign and rewarded with electoral success, is poised to dominate the Hungarian-language media space in 2023 – in Hungary and abroad. The Orbán regime continues to call for "peace" and an "immediate ceasefire" so that "pro-war" Western and Hungarian opposition politicians do not "escalate" the Russian-Ukrainian war into a third world war. Despite open Russian aggression, the pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian line of communication by the government and government-organized media has not changed over the past 18 months. They quote Russian disinformation and sources, question Ukraine's sovereignty, and constantly attack Ukraine on minority protection and other issues.

2. The Orbán regime's power-projection potential abroad

2.1. General foreign policy strategy after 2010

After 2010, the Orbán regime's foreign policy reflected a pragmatic turn, e.g. in terms of energy and economic partners, and served to build and sustain an illiberal-autocratic political system in the long term.[16] This has included the creation of a favorable international environment based on new allies to counter – primarily Western - criticisms of dismantling the rule of law and systemic corruption. This is why Orbán's foreign policy is characterized by taking action against mainstream Euro-Atlantic political actors and developing greater bilateral cooperation with autocratic, populist-radical countries, parties or leaders in the European Union, the Americas, the Balkans and the Middle and Far East. The primary means to achieve these goals are (1) the development and cultivation of ideological links focused on ultra-conservative or far-right issues such as gender, cultural homogeneity or anti-immigration views, (2) the building of foreign media influence, and (3) the acquisition of economic influence, interspersed with corruption, to serve Fidesz oligarchs or local political allies. At home, the Orbán regime's foreign policy is legitimized primarily by appealing to the "national interest" and emphasizing its alleged role

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[13] https://444.hu/2023/08/04/annyit-kolt-a-megafon-nyaron-hirdetesre-mint-az-otszor-akkora-spanyolorszag-partjai-kampanyidoszakban

[14] https://444.hu/tldr/2021/10/04/orbanek-nagy-kerdese-2022-elott-lehet-e-orokke-uralni-a-pillanatot

[15] https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/02/15/allami-propagandarekord-tavaly-44-000-000-000-forintot-koltott-rogan-miniszteriuma-a-kormanypropaganda-gyartasara-es-terjesztesere

[16] https://politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=3123

as a bridge between East and West. In reality, however, the Russian-Ukrainian war has put Hungary on an even more hopelessly forced course, with the loss of Western partners and the erosion of Hungary's ability to assert its interests. Therefore, the Hungarian prime minister has tried to influence decisions in the Euro-Atlantic institutional system primarily through troll politics and political blackmail (blocking, vetoing), which works less and less. As a spectacular sign of this, Hungary has been detested by its own alliance systems, its access to EU funds has been seriously limited, and the Visegrad Cooperation (between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), especially the Polish-Hungarian cooperation, has also been eroded. Despite the highly nationalist ideological charge and rhetoric, we cannot talk about the assertion of Hungarian 'national interests' since the economic benefits of cooperation with old/new autocratic partners in the East accrue primarily to the Fidesz elite. In contrast, the Hungarian state often explicitly loses out or becomes politically and economically dependent. For example, on the Kremlin providing Russian energy, on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan controlling the Turkish energy network, or on the Chinese government building battery factories in Hungary.

Moreover, Hungary's isolation within its own alliance system carries serious security risks, especially as the nature of the Orbán regime and the lack of options increasingly drive its cooperation with eastern autocracies, whether on economic or security matters.

2.2. Politics in cross-border communities

After the fall of communism, the Hungarian governments of the time considered the representation of the interests and some symbolic-cultural unification of the Hungarian people in the Carpathian Basin to be their priority.[17] They sought to promote the political or cultural self-determination of minorities suffering from ad hoc or systemic discrimination through targeted support provided to local civil and political organizations and religious and ecclesiastical institutions. Beyond the "inherited" responsibility, the national policy of the post-2010 Orbán regime was subordinated to power politics, or more precisely, it served to establish electoral hegemony, which would ensure the regime's political stability by contributing to a two-thirds parliamentary majority, and with it a majority in the media market.

We can identify three main trends in the Orbán regime's policy towards Hungarian minorities abroad: (1) the regime has intertwined the symbolic politicization championed by the Hungarian right with enhanced economic support for Hungarian minorities, (2) it has aimed to secure the votes of dual citizens, and (3) it has leveraged the cause of Hungarian minorities to serve its own power ambitions in the Carpathian Basin and across Central and Eastern Europe. The acquisition of economic and political control over Hungarian organizations and actors abroad serves as a means to this end, contributing to the influence over the voter base and elite beyond the borders. Thus, the government centralized and hierarchized support for Hungarian organizations in neighboring countries, similar to what it did domestically. The Hungarian Prime Minister and Chief of Cabinet, Antal Rogán, primarily make decisions, with the Bethlen Gábor Fund Management Ltd (BGA) as the central organization responsible for resource allocation. Between 2011 and 2021, EUR 687.9 million was allocated to Romania, EUR 144 million to Slovakia, EUR 143 million to Serbia, EUR 26.6 million to Croatia, and EUR 17.4 million to Slovenia, totaling over EUR 1 billion to these five countries.[18] When examining specific

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[17] At the time, the first democratic prime minister, József Antall's remark that he was "in spirit the prime minister of fifteen million Hungarians" was met with both admiration and astonishment.

[18] "The need for existence and the building of influence: Hungarian billions are flowing over the border", ujszo.com, 6 March 2021, https://ujszo.com/kozelet/letszukseglet-es-befolyasepites-omlenek-a-magyar-milliardok-a-hataron-tulra.

support areas, notable categories include real estate purchases, renovations and developments, sporting activities, infrastructure, and media investments.

3. Key Hungarian (dis)information actors in each country

3.1. The strategy of the Orbán regime

The Orbán regime has extended its relatively unrestricted power and the substantial financial resources mobilized for regime building to Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries. As mentioned earlier, the objective was establishing a centralized and hierarchical dependency system similar to Hungary's domestic political landscape. When the strategy of direct political control faced setbacks, the Hungarian government attempted to create a parallel system of institutions and financing. This process was most notably observed in Romania. As a result, by the early 2020s, the Orbán regime had effectively gained near-complete control over the Hungarian-language media spaces in neighboring countries.

3.2 Slovakia: almost everything at all levels

In Slovakia, the Hungarian minority media landscape is operated by a complex network of media and political actors. On the political front, the Hungarian governmental party collaborates with the Party of the Hungarian Community (Magyar Közösség Pártja), which was later absorbed into a new formation called 'Alliance' (Szövetség-Aliancia). This alliance provides opportunities for direct and indirect influence on local media through local politicians. As Slovak-Hungarian writer Péter Hunčík aptly put it:

"There is essentially a coup underway in the Hungarian (minority) media. Those who openly support the Party of the Hungarian Community (MKP) are occupying more and more space. They follow the same pattern as in Hungary, where they took over almost all the media and gained a lot from it."[19]

Three Hungarian minority media organizations financed by the Gábor Bethlen Foundation (BGA) play a defining role in Slovakia: the Alliance for Common Goals, the Association of Hungarian Television Professionals in Slovakia, and the Pro Media Foundation. In contrast, several independent minority media[20] reach a significant audience. The Alliance for Common Goals is the initiative that organizes Hungarian public life in Slovakia, which now has 27 public-political and youth member organizations, and runs the Felvidek.ma portal. The leader of the organization, László Gubík, has several links to political parties. He is the president of Via Nova, which started as a youth organization of the Party of the Hungarian Community, and the founding director of the Esterházy Academy. He has also been involved in the Rákóczi Association and Csemadok (Czechoslovak Hungarian Workers' Cultural Association). In 2014, Fidesz included him symbolically on its list for the European Parliament elections. The importance of the organization and Gubík is reflected in the fact that Tamás Menczer, Minister of State for the Development of Bilateral Relations at Hungary's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, gave a speech on national policy and the Russian-Ukrainian war at the Alliance for Common Goals' general assembly in June 2022.[21]

The Association of Hungarian Television Professionals in Slovakia created the first Hungarian television news portal, Hirek.sk, in 2011. The Pro Media Foundation, established in 2017 specifically to create a new media conglomerate funded by the BGA, dominates the Fidesz-controlled minority media space.

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[19] http://hungarianmoney.eu/icjk-survival-of-the-slovak-hungarian-media/
[20] https://ujszo.com/kozelet/felmeres-a-smer-fele-tereli-a-szlovakiai-magyarokat-a-magyar-kormanymedia
[21] http://szakc.sk/2022/06/08/jegyzokonyv-a-szakc-tanacsuleserol-2022/

Its Ma7 media family comprises the news portal ma7.sk, the weekly Magyar7 and the news portal Hírek.sk. Ma7 is dedicated to the uncritical promotion of Fidesz politicians and government messages. The Pro Media Foundation is integrated into Slovak minority politics mainly through the former MKP, and acts as a bridge between the Slovak and Hungarian political-cultural elites. Our own media analysis also confirms this. Among the contributors of prominent opinion pieces, we can find István Mácsadi, journalist of Ma7 and Alliance-Aliancia candidate,[22] Károly Kövesdi, senior editor of Magyar7 and Krisztián Pomichal, columnist of the Ma7 media family,[23] who is also Director of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium Dunaszerdahely Center.[24]

The numbers confirm the occupation of cultural space. Until 2020, the Bethlen Gábor Fund has spent huge sums on the Hungarian community in Slovakia, including local media. Minority organizations have received a total of EUR 144 million, or roughly HUF 54 billion, including EUR 1.5 million (HUF 541 million) for the Alliance for Common Goals, EUR 1 million (HUF 345 million) for the Association of Hungarian Television Professionals in Slovakia and EUR 4 million (HUF 1.5 billion) for the flagship Pro Media Foundation.[25] After 2021, the Hungarian economy, already weighed down by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and further strained by the Russo-Ukrainian war, faced additional challenges from surging energy prices and a high deficit. This economic slowdown compelled the Hungarian government to reduce its media spending abroad, closing numerous outlets.

3.3. Dual structure in Romania

The Hungarian minority community in Romania was the only one that Fidesz had not managed to control, at least for a few years. Consequently, the Hungarian government started to build and develop alternative political and media actors to compete with the influence of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ). When its failure became obvious (the Hungarian People's Party of Transylvania built against RMDSZ quickly fizzled out[26]), Fidesz came to an agreement with RMDSZ President Kelemen Hunor.[27] As a result, a kind of dichotomy emerged in the media structure, which can be divided into a huge media conglomerate directly controlled by the Hungarian government and a much smaller media conglomerate controlled by RMDSZ. On the one hand, RMDSZ, through the Progress Foundation and the Communitas Foundation, has provided at least EUR 400,000 (HUF 152 million) a year to support its affiliated media outlets (such as maszol.ro or the recently defunct Transindex),[28] and to a similar extent to the Jenő Janovics Foundation, which runs Transylvania TV and Transylvania FM radio.[29] In contrast, the Hungarian government provided EUR 4.5 million (HUF 1.45 billion) in 2017 through the BGA to the Transylvanian Media Association (EME), founded in 2013, which operates the Főtér.ro portal.[30] Although Szilárd Demeter, the director of Hungary's Petőfi Literary Museum (PIM), who has since become the Hungarian "pope of culture" and is linked to the EME, has

[22] https://szovetseg.sk/kepviselojeloltjeink

[23] https://www.klikkout.sk/2022/12/29/bemutatkoznek-dac-szurkolo-vagyok-pomichal-krisztian/

[24] https://mccfeszt.hu/eloado/pomichal-krisztian

[25] http://hungarianmoney.eu/icjk-survival-of-the-slovak-hungarian-media/

[26] https://atlatszo.ro/tamogatasok/nemzetstrategia/emnt-emnp-konfliktus/

[27] https://magyarnarancs.hu/kulpol/tudjak-maguktol-127375

[28] https://merce.hu/2021/11/09/a-transindex-bajba-jutasa-ramutat-hogyan-lehetetlenul-el-egyre-inkabb-a-erdelyi-szabad-magyar-sajto/

[29] https://atlatszo.ro/napi-politika/rmdsz/duskalni-lehet-az-rmdsz-gazdalkodasi-adataiban-a-lenyeg-tovabbra-is-rejtve/

[30] https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20180115_Kdierult_mire_kapott_masfel_milliardot_egy_erdelyi_mediaegyesulet_a_magyar_kormanytol

denied that the original political concept was designed to buy up the Transylvanian media market. Nevertheless, in practice, the EME has created the Transylvanian KESMA, the largest Hungarian media conglomerate in Transylvania, comprising 15 media.[31] According to Átlátszó Erdély's investigation, the new media empire received HUF 7.45 billion (about EUR 20 million) in Hungarian taxpayer funding between 2018 and 2021 through the BGA. The significance of this amount is revealed by the fact that the Romanian government spends roughly EUR 10 million (about HUF 3 billion) annually to support the Hungarian minority.[32] The Hungarian media market in Romania has also not been spared by the coronavirus epidemic and the subsequent economic crisis. Funding from the EME, which is managed by individuals linked to Szilárd Demeter, was significantly reduced. This reduction has led many to believe the entire communication strategy has collapsed. As a result, EME announced at the end of 2022 that it would close all its print media products and lay off two-thirds of its journalists.[33] The media empire is currently being reorganized by Antal Rogán, minister of the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office in charge of government communications, strengthening ties with KESMA.[34]

Despite the cutbacks, this media empire continues to serve the interests of Fidesz well, as the media outlets conveying Hungarian political opinions still outweigh independent media in terms of number and financing to this day. Their impact continues to significantly shape the perceptions of the Hungarian minority in Romania – based on the data presented below.[35] While there is no central propaganda, discrediting or overt censorship in the Transylvanian minority media, criticism of Fidesz or RMDSZ is unlikely to appear on these media platforms mainly due to self-censorship. The limited research, which is available on ethnic Hungarians' media consumption points to the Hungarian minority's extensive consumption of Hungarian-language media produced in Hungary or by local Hungarian media controlled by the Hungarian government. While the RMDSZ has taken a democratic and Western-oriented stance regarding the rule of law and the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Hungarians in Romania consuming Hungarian media, particularly those in Szeklerland (Székelyföld), tend to echo Fidesz's arguments in surveys, in contrast to the Romanian majority, primarily blaming Ukraine and NATO for the outbreak of the armed conflict.[36]

3.4. Only one man left standing in Serbia

In Serbia, the political influence of the Orbán regime is primarily exercised through the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ), in which the Hungarian minority and its institutions, weakened by the emigration during and after the Yugoslav Wars, play a significant role. As a result, the Vojvodina diaspora and the VMSZ are virtually directly dependent financially on the Hungarian government, which has provided EUR 251.7 million (HUF 95.6 billion) between 2016 and 2021 to implement the Vojvodina Hungarian community's territorial and economic development strategy and programs. Some funding was used to maintain an economic clientele loyal to the VMSZ. At the same time, the funding was also used to gain even more control over the minority media in Vojvodina. Most media in Vojvodina are controlled by the Hungarian National Council (MNT). It functions as the national minority

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[31] https://mediater.ro/termekeink.html

[32] https://transtelex.ro/kozelet/2023/03/16/rmdsz-koltsegvetes-penz-kisebbsegi-alap

[33] https://transtelex.ro/kozelet/2022/11/05/osszeroppant-a-fidesz-erdelyi-mediabirodalma-70-szazalekos-leepitesek-lesznek-a-mediater-lapjainal

[34] https://transtelex.ro/kozelet/2023/08/18/magyar-hang-demeter-erdelyi-mediabirodalom-radio-gaga

[35] https://itthon.transindex.ro/?cikk=29159&a_romaniai_magyar_sajto_fidesz_altali_befolyasoltsagarol_cikkezik_a_g4media

[36] https://transtelex.ro/kozelet/2023/02/24/toro-tibor-eloadas-erdelyi-magyarok-orban-putyin-nemzetegyesites

self-governing body of the Hungarian minority in the Vojvodina region, responsible for language use, education, information and culture issues. However, the organizations and institutions active in these areas are financially dependent on the BGA, including Magyar Szó, Hét Nap and Pannon RTV, which are founded or co-founded by the MNT. Pannon RTV's three media outlets (Pannon Rádió, Pannon Televízió és a Szabadkai Magyar Rádió) have received HUF 3.5 billion (roughly EUR 9 million) support between 2011 and 2021, while 95% of the total funding provided by the BGA to Hungarian-language media in Serbia, went to outlets under the auspices of MNT.[37]

In addition, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians already has disproportionate political weight today. In the last elections, there was no challenger to the list put forward by the VMSZ. Moreover, the BGA's support was also used to finance the building and technical infrastructure that houses the media mentioned above. Not only did this save Pannon RTV and its portfolio, including Pannon Radio, Hungarian Radio Subotica, Pannon TV and the news portal Pannon RTV, from bankruptcy, but the improvements also allowed Hungarian TV broadcasting to be included in the cable operators' offer and the Hungarian radio stations to acquire frequencies.[38] In addition to the Pannon RTV group, the VMSZ and the BGA brought the daily newspaper Magyar Szó and the weekly newspaper Hét Nap under the authority of the Hungarian government and local politics in 2011 and 2016, respectively. They also gained political influence over Vojvodina Ma, the oldest Hungarian news portal, by withdrawing and later re-instating BGA subsidies.[39] The Szabad Magyar Szó, Délhír and Vojvodina Television can be considered more independent and balanced. Not surprisingly, leading up to the 2022 Hungarian elections, not only did the VMSZ express support for the Hungarian government party, [40] but according to media monitoring by Átlátszó Vajdaság, around 70% of the content from influential and/or BGA-funded media outlets in Vojvodina promoted Fidesz, the Hungarian government, or government officials. Furthermore, 99% of this content was either positive or neutral in tone. [41] Our media monitoring also confirmed that a significant number of the experts or politicians quoted by the local minority media were affiliated with the ruling party or pro-government GONGOs, such as István Loránd Szakáli, Chief Economist at the Center for Fundamental Rights, General József Horváth, Security Policy Advisor at the Center for Fundamental Rights, or András Kosztur, historian and senior researcher at the 21st Century Institute.

3.5 Ukraine - the land of divergence

In addition to the general support for the Hungarian minority in Ukraine's Transcarpathia region, the Orbán governments have increasingly targeted efforts to promote the community's cultural rights, especially the right to education in their mother tongue, after the Ukrainian language law adopted in 2017 gradually restricted the use of minority languages in public education. The diplomatic tension between the two countries over language rights has not subsided with the outbreak of war. Viktor Orbán even named Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as one of his primary foreign policy opponents at a press conference after the 2022 parliamentary election. The confrontation has since calmed down somewhat, as the Hungarian government has provided substantial funding for refugees in Ukraine, the President of the Republic of Hungary has visited Kyiv in a show of solidarity, and Ukraine has indicated that it will reconsider restrictions on minority language use.[42] Nevertheless, the politically

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[37] http://hungarianmoney.eu/cins-orbans-purchase-of-influence/

[38] https://magyarnarancs.hu/kulpol/bevalt-receptek-126996

[39] https://magyarnarancs.hu/kulpol/bevalt-receptek-126996

[40] https://www.vmsz.org.rs/hirek/tortenesek/pasztor-istvan-vmsz-egyertelmuen-azert-szall-sikra-hogy-fidesz-kdnp-folytathassa

[41] https://atlatszo.rs/2023/02/13/hol-az-ingerkuszob/

[42] https://444.hu/2023/09/12/ukrajna-kesz-engedmenyeket-tenni-a-kisebbsegi-jogok-teren

sensitive, dual position of the Hungarian minority has not changed. On the one hand, the Hungarian minority's political loyalty to the Ukrainian state was repeatedly questioned during the war (and earlier due to their dual citizenship) despite ethnic Hungarian soldiers fighting on the Eastern front. On the other hand, support from the Hungarian government continues to be accompanied by strong anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian rhetoric, often legitimizing the war. Due to the sensitive conflict and the restrictions imposed on media usage by the laws of war, it is challenging to specifically identify disinformation actors in the Ukrainian minority media space, especially if we exclude Hungary-based media available through cable service providers. However, the influence of the Hungarian government is still present in this context. Consequently, the Hungarian minority media scene in Transcarpathia has four main actors. (1) The Ukrainian public media, the National Public Television and Radio Company of Ukraine (NTKU), have programs in Hungarian. (2) the Hungarian Democratic Federation in Ukraine (UMDSZ) and (3) the Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Sub-Carpathia (KMKSZ), which control the Hungarian-language media, either directly or indirectly through NGOs they founded. (4) The Hungarian state and the BGA are also present as background financiers. In addition, there is also a relatively large and independent network of minority or Hungarian-language media, such as Pulzus Radio[43] or Infopost Media[44].

The Karpatalja.ma news portal is run by the NGO Pro Cultura Subcarpathica, founded by Ildikó Orosz, President of the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College, László Brenzovics, President of the Carpathian Hungarian Cultural Association,[45] who is accused of separatism by the Ukrainian secret service and is currently in exile in Hungary, and the Association of Hungarian Journalists in Transcarpathia. The oldest publication of the Carpathian minority is the Kárpáti Igaz Szó, which operates both as a weekly newspaper and news portal, as its legal predecessor was founded in 1920.[46] Its current founder is the "Studio Tisza FM" or Tisza FM Studio Ltd., owned by the UMDSZ and by the NGO "For the Development of Kárpáti Igaz Szó". The latter was founded by the newspaper's journalists and it is involved in the delivery of war relief supplies to Transcarpathia.[47] Karpatinfo.net and karpatinfo.net.ua, which are linked to the weekly newspaper Karpat.info, are backed by Karpat Média Ltd., owned by local entrepreneur Istvan Szoboszlai. Both of these media have received funding from the BGA previously.[48] The owners of the news portal Karpat.in.ua, founded in 2020, include TV21, 50% owned by the KMKSZ, and the Carpathian weekly newspaper "Kárpátalja," also affiliated with the KMKSZ.[49] As the previously cited study titled "Hungarian Minority Political Landscape and Hungarian Minority Media in Transcarpathia" put it:

"Consequently, five regional news portals, two newspapers and one TV channel are owned (at least in part) by the KMKSZ or its leading members. The UMDSZ can count on only one newspaper and its news portal. Hungarian national radicals, former members of Jobbik (who left the party because of their extremist views) can influence the Transcarpathian Hungarian community through the KárpátHír news portal."[50]

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[43] http://pulzusfm.eu/hu

[44] https://infopost.media/hu/

[45] https://index.hu/belfold/2023/04/22/kmksz-elnok-valasztas-brenzovics-laszlo-karpatalja/

[46] https://kiszo.net/a-lap/

[47] https://kiszo.net/2023/09/17/ott-segitunk-ahol-csak-tudunk-%e2%97%8f-karpati-igaz-szo/

[48] https://www.karpatinfo.net/csaladbarat-kornyezet-fejlesztese-szoboszlai-istvan-egyeni-vallalkozonal

[49] https://www.iribeaconproject.org/index.php/our-work-analysis-and-insights/2021-09-10/hungarian-minority-political-landscape-and-hungarian

[50] https://www.iribeaconproject.org/our-work-analysis-and-insights/2021-09-10/hungarian-minority-political-landscape-and-hungarian

4. Analysis of narratives

We monitored the prevalence of the following four main disinformation and hostile narratives and their sub-narratives across Hungarian minority media spaces. For an extended explanation of the sub-narratives, please see the Annex.

1. Anti-war narrative

The main Hungarian anti-war narrative states that there is a need for an imminent peace and ceasefire, arguing that the Western delivery of weapons to Ukraine only prolongs the conflict. Although the Hungarian government respects Ukraine's territorial sovereignty officially, in practice, it expects Ukraine to make territorial concessions while rarely mentioning Russia's role in the conflict.

Sub-narratives:

- Peace needs to be restored
- This is not our war
- Western aid prolongs the war
- The warmongering West/local actors want to drag us into the war
- Pro-Ukraine actors are the puppets of foreign powers
- Ukraine is losing the war/ Russia is undefeatable
- Ukrainians commit war crimes
- Ukraine is led by an anti-Hungarian / anti-Christian / chauvinist regime
- The West/NATO provoked the conflict
- West/NATO is directly part of the conflict
- Aid to Ukraine is weakening the donor countries
- Euromaidan protests were a CIA coup
- Warmongering West is sustaining the conflict
- Ukraine was the aggressor
- Ukraine does not deserve support due to mistreatment of minorities
- The war is a chance for Hungarian revisionism
- Ukraine is forcibly drafting ethnic Hungarians
- Western geopolitical and economic interests are behind the war
- Ukraine is the West's puppet

2. Anti-sanctions narrative

The core of the anti-sanctions narrative emphasizes that sanctions against Russia are ineffective in stopping the war or significantly impacting the Kremlin. It posits that "the EU sanctions are responsible for the energy crisis and inflation," suggesting that they "affect the West more adversely than Russia" and "have failed to cease the conflict, merely resulting in economic hardship."

Sub-narratives:

- Sanctions not stopped war
- Sanctions elimination
- Sanctions hurt the West more
- Western planned sanctions
- Washington's energy interests sanctions

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- Sanctions blamed for global food problem
- (EU) Sanctions blamed for economic crisis
- EU divided over sanctions
- Sanctions hurt EU energy security
- Sanctions hurt EU households
- Sanctions hurt Hungarian energy security
- Sanctions hurt Hungarian households
- Sanctions destroy Hungary or the Hungarian economy

3. Anti-(im)migration narrative

The Hungarian government's predominant message on migration, often conflated with illegal immigration, portrays it as a dangerous and detrimental influx, mainly from Africa and the Middle East. This narrative suggests that such immigration undermines the West's and particularly Hungary's ethnic and cultural identity, threatens public safety, and could lead to economic or cultural integration challenges. It further argues that immigration is essentially "forced" upon Europe by the EU's bureaucratic leadership in Brussels, Western liberal elites, George Soros, and various NGO networks.

Sub-narratives:

- Threats of illegal migration
- Human trafficking
- Brussels' responsibility
- Migration causes the decline of Europe
- Migration causes economic crisis
- Migrant crimes
- Germany's "Willkommenskultur" failed

4. Anti-gender narrative

The anti-gender narrative portrays the gender movement and the LGBTQ community as lobby groups aggressively opposing and threatening traditional norms, alleging efforts to silence those with conventional values, re-educate children through schools, and endanger children by supporting pedophilia and gender change. It also accuses them of attempting to brainwash the public and advocating for the erasure of established gender differences through the promotion of gender reassignment.

Sub-narratives:

- Traditional (family) values threatened
- LGBTQ lobby wants to silence the majority
- LGBTQ lobby re-educates our children
- LGBTQ lobby supports pedophilia
- LGBTQ-brainwash via culture, sport
- LGBTQ lobby supports gender change
- Brussels as the tool of gender propaganda
- LGBTQ used as a stigmatization tactic

4.1. Regional distribution and patterns of narratives

Regarding the regional distribution of disinformation narratives, as shown in the chart below, most disinformation articles and Facebook posts were related to the war (502), accounting for 40% of our non-representative sample of 1245 items. This was followed by disinformation content related to migration (29%), gender (19%) and sanctions (12%).
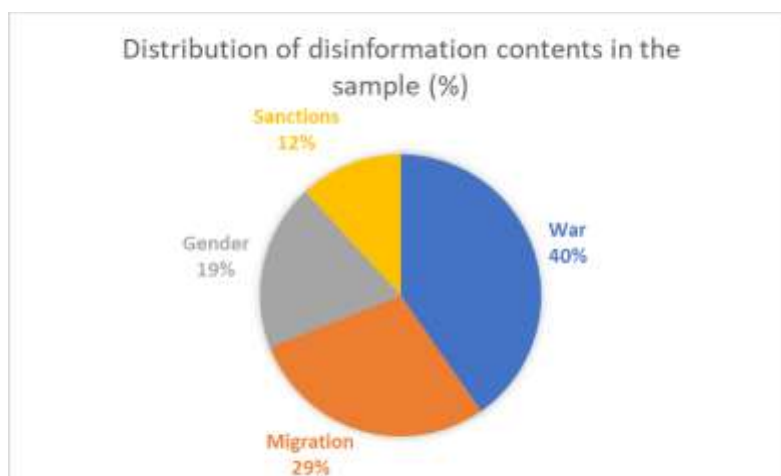
1. Figure Distribution of the four types of disinformation narratives in our sample

Concerning the distribution of disinformation narratives by country, most disinformation content was produced in the Hungarian minority media space in Slovakia (57%), followed by Romania (24%), Serbia (11%) and Ukraine (8%). In contrast, the Hungarian minority community in Slovakia is almost half the size of the Hungarian diaspora in Romania (about 450-460 thousand in Slovakia[51] vs. about 1.1 million in Romania[52]). The share of disinformation items generated in Serbia and Ukraine roughly reflects the size, proportion and media space of the Hungarian diaspora in these countries.
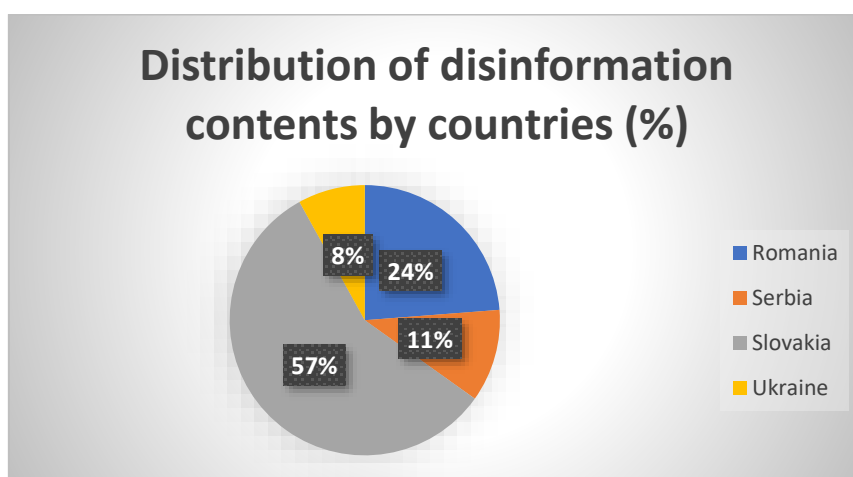
2. Figure Distribution of disinformation narratives by countries surveyed

The following aspects may explain this phenomenon. In Slovakia, local Hungarian actors are much more active in disseminating the Hungarian government's talking points. Moreover, before the early

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[51] https://hungarytoday.hu/slovakian-census-almost-half-a-million-people-declare-to-be-hungarians/
[52] https://hungarytoday.hu/census-in-romania-the-real-number-of-hungarians-may-be-1-1-million/

elections in Slovakia, Hungarian narratives became more closely intertwined with domestic Slovak political discourse. This is partly because disinformation narratives similar to those of the Hungarian government are also widespread in Slovakia, as Slovak majority actors also use them extensively. Another reason is Fidesz's support for Robert Fico's re-election. Such communication is less possible in the Ukrainian or Romanian domestic political discourse, which is much more hostile towards the Hungarian government.

In Serbia, on the other hand, there is little need to spread some of these narratives, as the Serbian media space and political life are already fueled by pro-Russian or Eurosceptic narratives and disinformation. Another important factor is that there is no close cooperation between the Hungarian government and the political elites in Romania and Ukraine. Furthermore, the legal framework and the more pluralistic media landscape limit the spread of Hungarian disinformation in the majority media spaces, which also affects the functioning of minority media.

We can see some significant differences in the distribution of the four main disinformation narratives across the four countries. While the anti-war narrative was the most widespread in the general sample, it was only second in Serbia, preceded by the anti-migration narrative. Moreover, the anti-gender narrative hardly played any role in Serbia and Ukraine, while it was the second most significant in Slovakia, even preceding the anti-migration narrative. In fact, Slovakia produced 85% of all anti-gender narratives, which means that, comparatively, this was the main narrative there. This is also the reason why the anti-gender narrative became third in the whole sample, while it was the least prominent narrative in all other countries.

Countries	Narratives				Number and ratio of occurrences
	War	Migration	Gender	Sanctions	
Romania	157	79	26	34	296 (24%)
Serbia	47	64	8	19	138 (11%)
Slovakia	230	198	202	81	711 (57%)
Ukraine	68	16	3	13	100 (8%)
Total	502 (40%)	357 (29%)	239 (19%)	147 (12%)	1245 (100%)

3. Figure Number and proportion of main narratives in the countries surveyed

The disinformation production of the minority media moves quite together in time, as shown in the figure below, with only the Romanian and Slovakian trends diverging in early June, mainly due to the upsurge of the Slovakian election campaign and the indirect intervention of the Hungarian government in it.[53] In fact, the propaganda in Hungary, reflected or adopted by the minority media, is extremely centralized in terms of content, distribution and timing.

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[53] The pro-Fidesz mainstream domestic media consistently supported Robert Fico's electoral bid, even during the elections silence period in Slovakia.
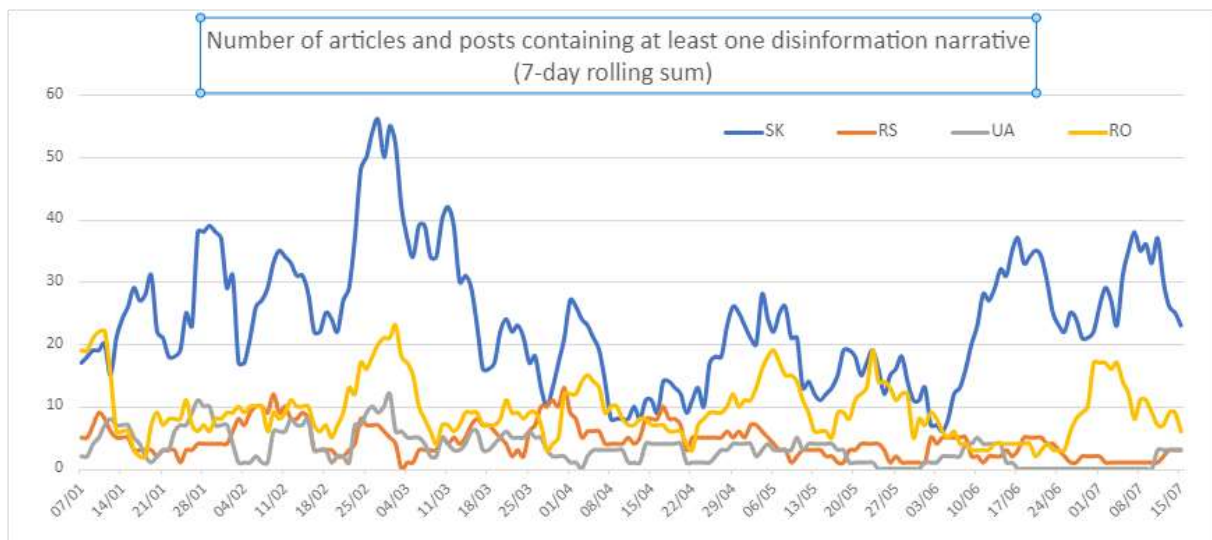
4. Figure *Temporal distribution of articles and Facebook posts containing at least one disinformation narrative in our sample of four countries surveyed between 1 January and 15 July*

The similarities in these countries, including the dominant narratives, result from the current politics and the financial or political dependence of the minority media on the Orbán regime, which is crucial for the widespread dissemination of messages, as found in all four countries studied. The differences are due to the democratic functioning of the majority media space, the integration of minority and majority media spaces to ensure access to multiple news sources, and the different interconnectedness of disinformation actors or news sources.

4.2. Country chapters

The following country chapters illustrate the presence, nature, and diffusion of disinformation narratives through the characteristics of minority media spaces and their interaction with majority media spaces. Qualitative and quantitative tools were used to examine the country-specific temporal distribution, drivers, actors, functioning, and impact of the four grand narratives.

4.2.1. Slovakia

According to the data, the Slovak minority media space was the most active in reproducing disinformation from Hungary. The communication activities of local actors played a role in this, as well as the interplay between Slovak and Hungarian political discourses in terms of both political relations and narratives, partly due to the Slovak elections.

Governments led by Viktor Orbán have had good relations with Slovakian governments since 2010, especially those led by Robert Fico between 2012 and 2018.[54] The good relations between the two countries are based primarily on the representation of mutual interests at the regional or EU level, which is made possible by cooperation within the Visegrad Group. The closer political alliance between the right-wing Fidesz and Fico's social-democratic Smer-SD, which transcends formal ideological differences, is explained not only by common foreign policy orientations but also by a leader-centered style of governance that combines governance with corruption and extreme politicization. Indeed,

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[54] This happened despite the fact that Fico's first cabinet - the Slovak National Party with and Mečiar's HZDS - was particularly fearful of Fidesz coming to power, which he considered "extremely nationalistic", and had previously been the head of government when it passed the Language Law, which punished the use of minority languages in public life, and the Citizenship Law, which punished dual citizenship by depriving Slovak citizens of their Slovak citizenship - both of which disproportionately affected members of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia.

Robert Fico and Viktor Orbán share similar condemnations of sanctions against Russia, the rule of law procedure against Hungary[55] and the EU's migrant relocation mechanism.[56] In light of this, it is not surprising that Viktor Orbán continued to support Fico after the latter was forced to resign following the corruption scandal that came to light after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018. At the same time, bilateral relations with the interim caretaker government led by the ethnic Hungarian Lajos Ódor, which was in power until the early Slovak elections in September 2023, have not been good.[57] [58] [59]

The victory of Smer-SD in the Slovak elections in September 2023 and the consequent coming to power of a new Fico government is crucial for the Hungarian prime minister, who has become highly isolated from EU partners, Polish leaders and V4 members. This is mainly due to his anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian (foreign) policy and rhetoric, as well as the defeat of his political allies (e.g. former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Slovenia's Janez Jansa).

No significant change in the situation of the Hungarian minority is expected after the Slovakian parliamentary elections, because the minority issue has not been a topic in the relations between the two countries for a long time, and the change of government will not change this significantly. More importantly, the Hungarian parties did not enter the parliament in the Slovak elections. György Gyimesi of the Alliance (Aliancia) party, which won 4.8% of the vote, has declared that "ethnic politics is over" in Slovakia.[60] The distribution of minority votes reinforces the impression that although the Orbán regime explicitly supported the goal of Hungarian minority representation in the Slovak parliament, it was no longer willing or able to influence minority party politics beyond a certain point.

Nevertheless, the Slovak minority media space proved to be the most effective arena for the Orbán regime's influence, as Slovakia generated the most articles and Facebook posts in our sample across all disinformation narrative types: 45% of war disinformation content, 55% of migration content, 85% of gender content, and 55% of sanctions content. The spread of Hungarian war-related disinformation in Slovakia was mainly driven by statements by Hungarian government officials[61], domestic political events in Slovakia[62] and war events. The trend chart below shows that the war-related news spikes (yellow curve) in January and February 2023 were mainly driven by statements by

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[55] Although Slovakia's small population means it would be of little support on policy issues decided in the Council, it could be important in the European Council of Heads of State and Government because of the unanimity requirement, especially if relations with the Polish government, which will meet after the October elections, deteriorate further. Slovakia could therefore be a long-sought ally of the Hungarian government in its stand-off with the EU.

[56] https://hang.hu/magyar-hang-plusz/ezert-hizelgi-korbe-a-magyar-kormany-robert-ficot-149672

[57] In July 2023, after Romania, the Slovakian government also expelled the Hungarian ambassador because of Viktor Orbán's "revisionist" statements in Tusványos, and Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó and Foreign Minister Tamás Menczer accused the Odor government of "hunting for a manhunt" after it temporarily detained former national police chief Tibor Gašpar, who was running for a seat in the Smer-SD party of Robert Fico in the early parliamentary elections.

[58] https://nepszava.hu/3205186_szlovakia-magyarorszag-diplomacia

[59] https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/07/nincs-megallas-szlovakia-is-berendelte-a-magyar-nagykovetet

[60] https://444.hu/2023/10/02/gyimesi-gyorgy-elmagyarazta-miert-irta-ki-szlovakul-hogy-vege-az-etnikai-politizalasnak

[61] https://korkep.sk/cikkek/kulugyek/2023/02/24/orban-viktor-nincs-messze-hogy-katonai-csapatokrol-szoljanak-az-europai-javaslatok/
https://ma7.sk/hethatar/orban-viktor-magyarorszag-nem-all-haboruban-senkivel
https://ma7.sk/hethatar/orban-viktor-nem-fogjuk-hagyni-hogy-belepreseljenek-minket-egy-haboruba

[62] https://korkep.sk/cikkek/mindennapjaink/2023/02/20/kacer-orbannak-es-a-bekepartiaknak-basszak-meg/

Hungarian government officials and Viktor Orbán, while the migration-related spikes (grey curve) in June and July 2023 were primarily driven by the intensifying Slovak election campaign.
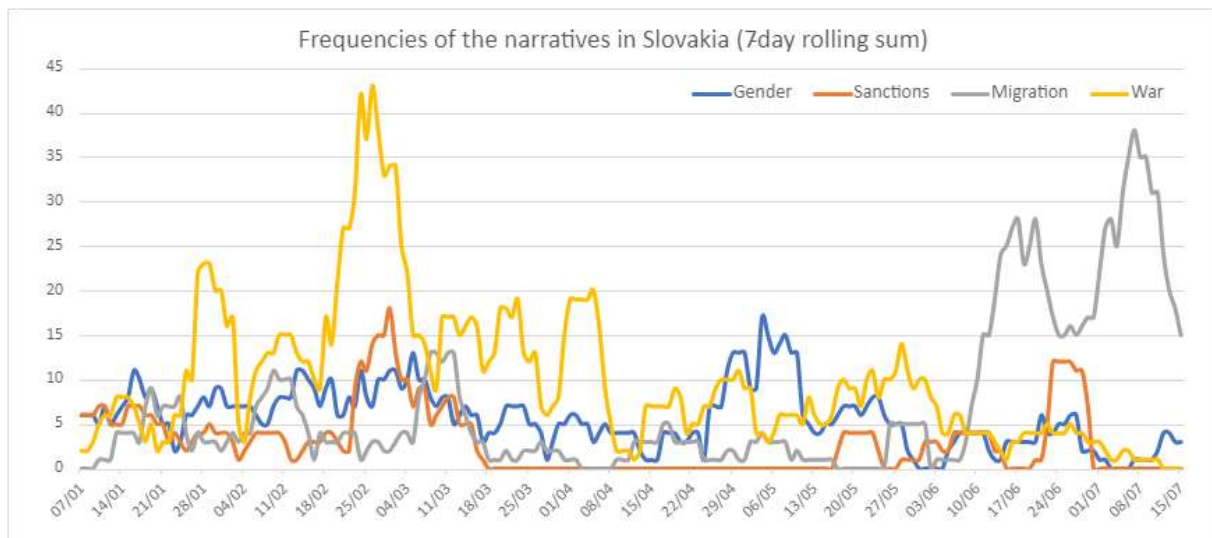
5. Figure The distribution of the number of disinformation narratives about war, sanctions, migration and gender in Slovakia between 1 January and 15 July 2023

As in the other countries studied, the most common narratives are that (1) an immediate ceasefire and peace are needed and (2) arms transfers only prolong and escalate the conflict with the war narratives accounting for 230 narrative items or 32% of the Slovak data subset. However, the third most popular narrative, identified in more than fifty articles, **introduced a message not common in other countries, that the West or local pro-Ukrainian political forces want to drag the country (Hungary or Slovakia) into the war.** The strong presence of the latter narrative can be explained by the fact that in the Slovak election campaign, the attitude towards the Russian-Ukrainian war was an important issue - for example, György Gyimesi, a candidate for the Slovak Parliament, put up posters[63] campaigning for peace, very similar to those of the Hungarian government. While Smer took a "pro-peace" stance similar to Fidesz,[64] opposing arms transfers, Progressive Slovakia, which came second in the election, supported a pro-Ukrainian foreign and security policy. The Slovak campaign also involved local Hungarian-language newspapers funded by the Orbán regime, with opinion pieces quoting and copying Hungarian government rhetoric and criticizing liberal, pro-Western and pro-Ukrainian Slovak parties.[65] There was also much criticism of transferring Slovak MIG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine.[66]

It is also noticeable that the migration narrative (198 items or 28% of the Slovak data subset) in Slovakia is strongly linked to the Hungarian government communication, which uses migration-related reporting to reinforce Euroscepticism.[67] The two dominant elements in the communication were "illegal migration" and "migrant smuggling", but the articles were mostly about border

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[63] https://napunk.dennikn.sk/hu/percrol-percre/3469582/

[64] https://ma7.sk/aktualis/fico-ha-kormanyra-kerulunk-leallitjuk-a-szlovak-fegyverszallitast-ukrajnaba

[65] https://piros7.es/hrubik-bela-szamlakivetettek#!

[66] https://ma7.sk/tollhegyen/ilyen-nincs-szlovakiaban-megis-van

[67] Such articles are sometimes opinion pieces by local authors, or are published without an author but with the name of the media outlet, usually criticizing the migration-related positions of the EU institutions and Western Member States, or praising Hungarian migration policy. See: https://piros7.es/orban-do-toho ; https://piros7.es/az-igazsag-ereje-pravda-vitazi

management issues - where, when and who crossed the border illegally.[68] Some politicians[69] even accused the Hungarian government of electoral interference, as the illegal immigrants caught in Slovakia came mainly from Hungary, and Robert Fico was trying to create as much panic as possible about migration.

Regarding sanctions, Slovakia stands out in that the third most significant narrative - even regionally - was not about Hungary's energy security but the West's planned use of sanctions as a geopolitical weapon against Russia (81 items or 11% of the Slovak data subset). The trend in Slovakia highlights that the discourse on sanctions is mainly driven by statements of leading politicians, such as Viktor Orbán's annual State of the Nation speech[70] and Robert Fico's anti-sanctions statements[71] in February.

Although the gender issue is by far the most present in the Hungarian public, accounting for 202 items or 28% of the Slovak data subset) sphere in Slovakia compared to other countries, it did not dominate the election campaign. The distribution of articles and posts containing the gender narrative was relatively evenly spread over the six-and-a-half months under review. The spike in early May is partly explained by the CPAC event in Budapest, where the press widely covered Orbán's speech. Slovak politicians, however, are much less engaged with the issue, according to the local Hungarian-language public discourse. [72][73]

In the Hungarian public sphere in Slovakia, it is clearly the platform called "Piros7es" ("Hearts 7"), whose tone and choice of topics are most reminiscent of that of the government-organized media in Hungary. Many of their writings are taken from government-organized outlet in Hungary such as Mandiner, Origo, and Pesti Srácok. Yet it does not only publish articles that fit the Hungarian government narrative, and sometimes it also publishes clarifying reports, even if only on more marginal topics.[74] There is also a tendency towards bias on Ma7.sk, while on Körkép.sk, the press ethics principles prevail more.

In addition to the statements of leading Hungarian politicians and local opinion-makers, the high amount of disinformation in Slovakia and the proliferation of pro-Russian narratives bordering on conspiracy theories is due to the inclusion of Hungarian opinion-makers in the discourse. An example is the opinion expressed by the former president of the green party LMP, András Schiffer, on the state television's main channel, M1[75] , that the EU decisions and sanctions are the work of big business and even the "profits of the US war industry". Another example is that Ma7.sk asked the notoriously pro-

[68]https://ma7.sk/aktualis/egyre-tobb-migrans-bukkan-fel-nyitra-megyeben-tobb-rendor-van-az-utcakon ;
https://www.hirek.sk/hethatar/csonakkal-szallitottak-migransokat-kulfoldi-embercsempeszek-zalaba ;
https://ma7.sk/kavezo/egy-csaladi-haz-kertje-allitotta-meg-a-migransokat-csempeszo-gruzt
[69] https://napunk.dennikn.sk/hu/3553030/kolikova-szerint-orban-a-smernek-akar-segiteni-a-menekultekkel-krajniak-ugy-veli-a-gender-ideologia-rakfene/
[70] https://ma7.sk/nagyvilag/orban-viktor-az-orosz-ukran-haborurol-ennek-nem-lehet-gyoztese
[71] https://ma7.sk/aktualis/fico-ha-kormanyra-kerulunk-leallitjuk-a-szlovak-fegyverszallitast-ukrajnaba
[72] Igor Matovič, for example, wrote several posts earlier this year distancing himself from so-called LGBTQ+ ideology, criticizing gender reassignment surgery and calling it sick that a minor could undergo such an operation. Yet, in the local Hungarian public, this was mostly framed as "Eduard Heger criticized Matovič for increasing social divisions through his statements."
[73] Today 7: *Eduard Heger criticizes Matovič for increasing social divisions,* 4 January 2023, https://ma7.sk/aktualis/eduard-heger-biralta-matovicot-amiert-megnyilvanulasaival-fokozza-a-tarsadalmi
[74] A good example is this: https://piros7.es/a-pink-flyod-es-a-hold-szivarvanyos-oldala
[75] https://felvidek.ma/2023/01/48-perc-a-szankciokat-nem-a-beketargyalasok-kikenyszeritesere-hasznaljak/

Russian journalist Gábor Stier, a regular guest at Valdaj Klub, about the outcome of the sanctions, i.e., a "sanctions-resistant" Russia.[76]

Duplication of content plays an essential role in amplifying messages. For example, when the article on Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation address[77] or the statements of Minister of Economic Development Márton Nagy or Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó, or the interview with Gábor Stier are all covered by Körkép.sk, Hirek.sk and Ma7.sk. **The statements in Hungary were also articulated by highly partisan local journalists reproducing the rhetoric of the Hungarian government and government-organized media**. For example, Lóránt Komjáthy in Körkép.sk[78] warned of the collapse of European industry as a result of sanctions, while Zsuzsa Németh in Felvidék.ma (monogrammed NZS) linked the rejection of the EU sanctions policy to the approval by the Commission of insect-based food products that declared war on traditional lifestyles.[79] In his article, Peter Aich called "the neo-liberal neo-communists who send tanks"[80] to account for the missing sanctions against Ukraine. At the same time, Béla Hrubík accused the Western countries and the "globalist banks" of "murder."[81]

According to our sample, specific organizations played a minimal role in disseminating these messages. These included the government-close Századvég institute in Hungary and the MKP Platform of the Alliance party, which formerly was an independent party of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, whose statement published on Facebook on the anniversary of the full-scale invasion against Ukraine denounced point by point the pro-Russian propaganda about the ineffectiveness of sanctions and Ukraine's anti-minority policy.

4.2.2. Romania

According to the data, the Hungarian minority media space in Romania was the second most active in disseminating disinformation related to the Hungarian government, with a 24% share in our database. This is a low performance considering that the largest Hungarian minority in the Carpathian Basin lives here, and there is continuous political attention and contact between the Orbán regime and the Transylvanian minority leaders. Hungarian political influence is also helped by public events such as the annual Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp in Băile Tușnad (Tusnádfürdő), which (also) serves to build contacts between political, cultural and religious elites, or the Pentecost Pilgrimage of Șumuleu Ciuc (Csíksomlyó), which attracts large crowds.

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[76] https://ma7.sk/nagyvilag/stier-gabor-jo-esellyel-a-masodik-evfordulon-tart-majd-a-haboru

[77] ttps://korkep.sk/articles/all-days/2023/02/18/orban-viktor-2023-will-be-a-more-dangerous-ev-a-war-on-organization/, https://ma7.sk/nagyvilag/orban-viktor-az-orosz-ukran-haborurol-ennek-nem-lehet-gyoztese, https://www.hirek.sk/nagyvilag/orban-viktor-az-orosz-ukran-haborurol-ennek-nem-lehet-gyoztese

[78] https://korkep.sk/cikkek/gazdasag/2023/01/17/itt-a-vege-a-made-in-europe-nak-a-sajat-vermebe-eso-unio-iparat-az-osszeomlas-fenyegeti/?fbclid=IwAR30GqiJFTKErUPCjtIsslyOtnIwAC2rOJNrYW52A0I5L8Yx4HJUh2n4HE0

[79] https://felvidek.ma/2023/01/tucskot-bogarat/?fbclid=IwAR1_4CYn93mDNRB1cw-1nUfMyGgU1SHqxrbDQ8qaKh93FU4oRgTNFZVP3Wk

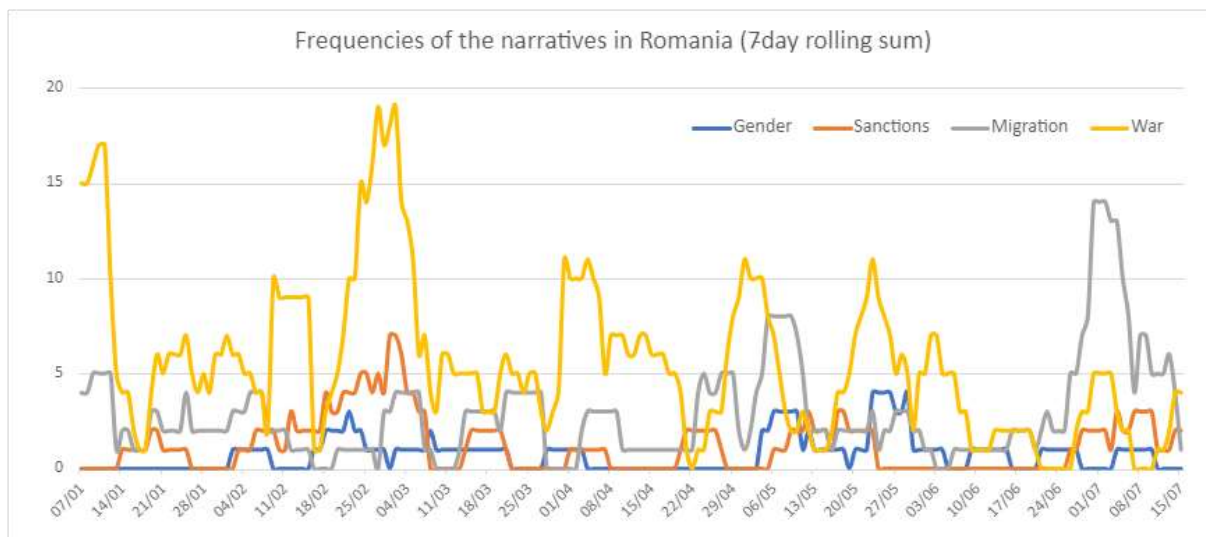[80] https://felvidek.ma/2023/01/meddig/?fbclid=IwAR0yYjZUPrnq_CzhShRY2O9WqzPfBa6_mk8jr7XMVwuSX9flAma4pF2KUWA

[81] https://piros7.es/ecce-homo

6. Figure Distribution of the number of disinformation narratives related to war, sanctions, migration and gender in Romania between 1 January and 15 July 2023

The dominance of war disinformation narratives (yellow curve) can be observed almost throughout the whole period under study, while the rise of the migration narratives (grey curve) was mainly due to the Hungarian government's communication opposing the new EU migration pact, including the new EU mechanism for the distribution of refugees.[82]

Most of the narratives dealing with the war, accounting for 157 narrative items or 53% of the Romanian data subset, emphasized that (1) an immediate ceasefire and peace were needed and that (2) arms transfers would only prolong and escalate the conflict. In addition, several other narratives appeared in the Hungarian media space in Romania, but to a significantly lesser extent. There were also narratives blaming the pro-war West for starting and sustaining the war[83], as well as anti-Ukrainian[84] and disinformation messages from the Kremlin.[85] The latter was particularly prevalent during the Orthodox holidays, with uncritical statements by Russian state leaders.[86] At the same time, messages of peace and cease-fire were mainly introduced into the information space through the "pro-peace" messages of the Hungarian government and Pope Francis.[87] A good example of this is when FM Péter Szijjártó's statement was quoted as saying that "*Hungary and the Vatican agree that the war and human suffering in* Ukraine *must end as soon as possible*".[88]

The second most common disinformation narrative in the Hungarian-language minority public sphere in Romania concerned sanctions (34 items or 12% of the Romanian data subset).[89] The

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[82] https://telex.hu/kulfold/2023/07/26/migransgetto-menekultugy-migracio-eu-kvota-hatareljaras-orban

[83] https://kronikaonline.ro/kulfold/putyin-szerint-a-nyugat-egyetlen-celja-oroszorszag-felszamolasa-es-errol-szerinte-papirja-van

[84] https://maszol.ro/kulfold/Feszul-a-hur-Ukrajna-magyarellenes-lepesei-miatt

[85] https://maszol.ro/kulfold/Putyin-az-egyhazat-meltatta-amiert-tamogatjak-a-haborut

[86] https://kronikaonline.ro/kulfold/elhallgathatnak-a-fegyverek-ukrajnaban-eletbe-lepett-a-putyin-altal-meghirdetett-tuzszunet
https://maszol.ro/kulfold/Londoni-orosz-nagykovet-Moszkva-beket-akar-de-feltetelei-vannak

[87] https://nethuszar.ro/riposzt/elo-ferenc-papa-szentmiseje-a-kossuth-teren/

[88] https://nethuszar.ro/flow/kozos-allasponton-vatikan-es-magyarorszag/

[89] Most of these can be divided into three types: 1) fact-based content; 2) republished government interviews and statements; 3) a few pro-government opinion pieces written by local journalists.

distribution of the most popular sub-narratives followed the regional pattern.[90] The Hungarian media in Romania conveyed to the local Hungarian population a variety of migration narratives (79 narrative items or 25% of the Romanian data subset) related to the Hungarian government.[91] Of the 19 sub-narratives analyzed, 14 were present in some form in the Romanian media space. The diversity of the media space is also indicated by the fact that both anti-Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian disinformation narratives were present, albeit the latter in very small numbers.[92] The distribution of sub-narratives is similar to that in Slovakia: in addition to "illegal migration" (43%) and "migrant smuggling" (35%), the third dominant sub-narrative is about "Brussels" (13%), which basically blames the European Union and the European Commission for illegal migration and all its negative cultural and economic effects.[93] Opinion pieces on migration were most frequent in the Romanian sample. The author of almost all of them was Béla Bíró. In addition to the three dominant sub-narratives, these articles often highlighted the sub-narratives about "Europe's decline" and the failure of the "Wilkommenskultur", which supports the reception and integration of refugees, through criticism of the policies of Western European countries, especially Germany. At the same time, in contrast to the Slovakian sample, there was less reflection on local political conditions. Hence, the migration narratives in the Romanian minority public space were probably less connected to the general Euroscepticism in the majority media space.

4.2.3. Serbia

The relationship between the Serbian and Hungarian governments, and between Aleksandar Vučić and Orbán, has been harmonious for years, as both are building an "illiberal" or hybrid regime based on reducing political rights and dismantling the rule of law. At the highest political levels, it has become commonplace in recent years to mention that economic and diplomatic relations between the two countries are at a "historic peak". This friendship began in 2010 when the heads of the two states agreed to set up a joint academic committee. The committee was tasked with investigating the events of 1942-1948, which claimed tens of thousands of victims on both the Serbian and Hungarian sides. In November 2013, Hungary's President János Áder addressed the Belgrade Parliament and apologized for the crimes committed by Hungarians against innocent Serb victims during the Second World War. Although a similar gesture from the other side was not forthcoming, this rapprochement was enough to pave the way for further strengthening of relations between the two countries.

The cultural and economic support (allocated through the BGA and Prosperitati, respectively) provided to Hungarians in Vojvodina is only one segment of the current strategic partnership between Serbia and Hungary. Hungary has also taken on the " ambassador" role for Serbia and the Bosnian Serb entity Republika Srpska in their EU integration process. They have planned joint infrastructure developments (e.g. the Budapest-Belgrade railway) and now also intend to join forces in the energy market with the recent creation of a joint gas export-import company.

The two countries also take a similar stance on foreign policy, especially on Russia, although the reasons differ. Indeed, Serbia has closer ties with Russia for historical, cultural and religious reasons, which have helped assert Serbia's interests in the international arena on issues such as the Kosovo crisis. However, Serbia is now in a rather controversial and sensitive situation. While it does not

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[90] The leading sub-narratives are: 1) sanctions are not able to stop the war; 2) (EU) sanctions are responsible for the economic crisis; 3) sanctions are harming Hungary's energy security.

[91] https://erdelyinaplo.ro/interju/baz-amerikaiak-az-utolso-ukranig-harcolnanakr-n-beszelgetes-john-helmer-moszkvaban-elo-geopolitikai-szakertovel

[92] https://nethuszar.ro/haboru/zelenszkij-szerint-nem-biztos-hogy-putyin-meg-el-es-nem-biztos-hogy-teved/

[93] In the case of Romania, this was specific in that there was international consultation and debate on the country's accession to the Schengen area during the period under review.

support international action and sanctions against Russia, thus maintaining a European trade and travel bridgehead for Russian citizens and elites, it cannot support the Russian annexation of eastern Ukraine on ethnic grounds either, as this was the reason for Kosovo's disputed independence as well.

As in the other countries studied, the most common narratives are that (1) an immediate ceasefire and peace are needed, (2) arms transfers only prolong and escalate the conflict, and (3) the pro-war Western policies are responsible for the war. Narratives about the war ultimately accounted for 34% of the Serbian data subset.[94] Compared to the other countries, a significantly lower proportion of statements by Hungarian government politicians and a higher proportion of opinion articles on the war and statements by Serbian politicians were found.
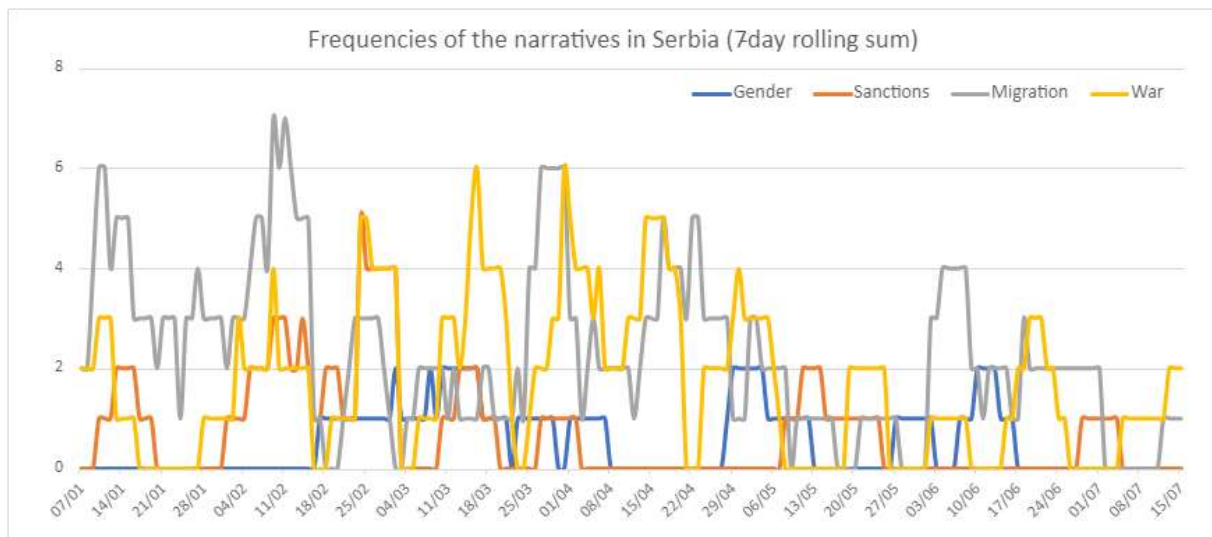
7. Figure The distribution of the number of disinformation narratives on war, sanctions, migration and gender in Serbia between 1 January and 15 July 2023

Only narratives related to migration and war were identified in significant numbers in Serbia. Migration items (64) accounted for 46% and war items (47) for 34% of the Serbian data subset, with their distribution fluctuating evenly. The former was dominated by the issues of the Balkan migration route, changes in the number of illegal migrants and "migrant crime", while the latter was dominated by the pro-Russian foreign policies of Serbia and Hungary and their similar positions on the war. The renewed crisis in Kosovo over the local elections was essential in reducing the prevalence of narratives in the summer.[95]

The articles display the Russian-Ukrainian war primarily as a conflict between the West and Russia[96]**. However, traditional pro-Russian messages are absent or less prominent than expected, and anti-Ukrainian narratives are almost entirely absent from minority media.** The latter may signify a foreign policy correction by the Serbian political leadership. Among other things, the opinion pieces claim *that 'the West is ready to fight to the last Ukrainian soldier*', suggesting that Ukraine is, in fact, the West's geopolitical tool against Russia. Interviews with pro-government "experts" from Hungary are also common.[97]

Among the migration sub-narratives, "illegal migration" was the most dominant (51%), while the second most common was "migrant crime" (30%), which is a difference compared to the other

[94] https://hetnap.rs/cikk/A-sejtheto-veg-42557.html

[95] https://infostart.hu/kulfold/2023/05/26/a-legmagasabb-harci-keszultsegbe-helyeztek-a-szerb-hadsereget

[96] https://hetnap.rs/cikk/Nem-targyalnak-42424.html

[97] https://hetnap.rs/cikk/A-sejtheto-veg-42557.html

countries studied. While in Romania and Slovakia, there were opinion pieces in this narrative, albeit a small number, these were not prevalent in Serbia. The content pieces were mainly of a reporting nature[98] on migrants in transit in Serbia, strongly emphasizing the "illegality" of refugees and often highlighting how certain groups facilitate their movement within the country (e.g., taxi drivers[99]) or through the border (human smugglers[100]). Where the overall picture in Serbia differed was in the proportionately greater presentation of the crimes committed by migrants while transiting through Serbia[101] or crossing the border[102] and regarding migrants already settled in Europe.[103] According to our data, the gender issue is hardly present in Serbia, with only three content pieces found. This might be related to what Virág Gyurkovics, editor-in-chief of Átlátszó Vajdaság, told us in a background interview:

"The Serbian press, by the way, took the LGBTQ issue off the agenda years ago. The background to this is that when EU accession negotiations started, it was strongly suggested that Serbia should open up to national and other minorities, including sexual minorities. It was after this that Ana Brnabić, who has lived in an openly gay relationship, became Serbia's prime minister. Gender reassignment, especially in childhood, is only rarely discussed in the media. However, the traditional family model is also a point of origin in the Hungarian press in Vojvodina. Still, the topic of promoting that in schools or gender reassignment is not common. Even if gender/LGBTQ issues appear in a derogatory way, they are rather portrayed in the local press as a liberal blight spilling over from the West, against which Vojvodina is protected simply because, as a non-EU member, it is isolated from certain influences."

4.2.4. Ukraine

The emergence and spread of Hungarian government-related disinformation narratives in Ukraine is fundamentally influenced by the long-standing diplomatic tension between the two countries. These escalated after the adoption of the law restricting the use of minority languages in public education in 2017[104] and continued after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Before the war, the Orbán government politically obstructed and rhetorically condemned Ukraine's rapprochement with the European Union and NATO because of the curtailment of the Hungarian minority's rights.[105] On the eve of another two-thirds victory in 2022, Viktor Orbán named President Volodymyr Zelensky as one of his primary foreign policy opponents after Zelensky had criticized the Hungarian government's foreign policy towards Ukraine.[106] Despite the Hungarian government's policy of supporting Ukrainian refugees, the conflict was further escalated by Hungary's refusal not only to provide armed assistance to Ukraine but also to threaten to veto sanctions and economic bailouts regularly. It has also launched a media campaign against Ukraine and sanctions, which the Russian propaganda machine loves to refer to, and has

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[98] https://pannonrtv.com/rovatok/tarsadalom/rendorsegi-akciot-kovetoen-sincs-nyugalom ;
https://pannonrtv.com/rovatok/tarsadalom/maganhazakban-es-az-erdokben-bujkalnak-migransok-zomborban
[99] https://pannonrtv.com/rovatok/tarsadalom/maganhazakban-es-az-erdokben-bujkalnak-migransok-zomborban
[100] https://pannonrtv.com/rovatok/tarsadalom/nemileg-csokkent-nyugat-bacskai-tersegre-nehezedo-migracios-nyomas
[101] https://www.magyarszo.rs/hu/5253/vajdasag_szabadka/287097/Terhes-n%C5%91t-t%C3%A1madott-meg-egy-migr%C3%A1ns-Szabadk%C3%A1n-Szabadka-illeg%C3%A1lis-migr%C3%A1ci%C3%B3.htm
[102] https://pannonrtv.com/tv/hirado/hirado-20230405-2000h
[103] https://delhir.info/2023/04/27/a-villamoson-konyhakessel-szurt-nyakon-egy-ferfit-a-szerbiabol-erkezo-migrans/
[104] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/5/high-treason-hungary-ukraine-in-dispute-over-language-laws
[105] https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/government-calls-on-ukraine-to-stop-curbing-rights-of-hungarian-minority
[106] https://nepszava.hu/3152498_orban-viktor-valasztas-2022-bbc-reuters-cnn

prevented the sanctioning of Patriarch Kirill and initiated the removal of other Russian individuals from the sanctions list.[107]

At the same time, the Hungarian-language minority media space in Transcarpathia is essentially characterized by a lack of disinformation, according to our data. The main reason for this is presumably the state of war in Ukraine and the intense action against Russian disinformation, which prevents or risks the spread of foreign disinformation narratives. This is the reason why the Ukrainian minority media space, along with Serbia, produced the lowest number of disinformation cases: only 100 publications of our sample of 1,245 items, i.e., 8% of disinformation cases, can be attributed to Hungarian minority media in Transcarpathia. Yet, the small size of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine also plays a role here.[108] The local Hungarian media published almost as little disinformation about the war as in Serbia: 68 in Ukraine and 47 in Serbia. At the same time, the discourse on the war was the most prominent in Ukraine, accounting for 68 narrative items or 68% of the Ukrainian data subset. As in other countries, the period under review was dominated by statements by Hungarian politicians, especially FM Péter Szijjártó and PM Viktor Orbán. This is reflected in the uneven prevalence of war-related narratives (yellow curve) in the figure below, as the war itself is a constant theme in both minority and majority media space in Ukraine. One reason for the gradual reduction may be the more conciliatory nature of Hungarian-Ukrainian diplomatic relations, one of the milestones of which may have been the visit of President Katalin Novák to Kyiv, which sent a very positive message of solidarity with Ukraine.
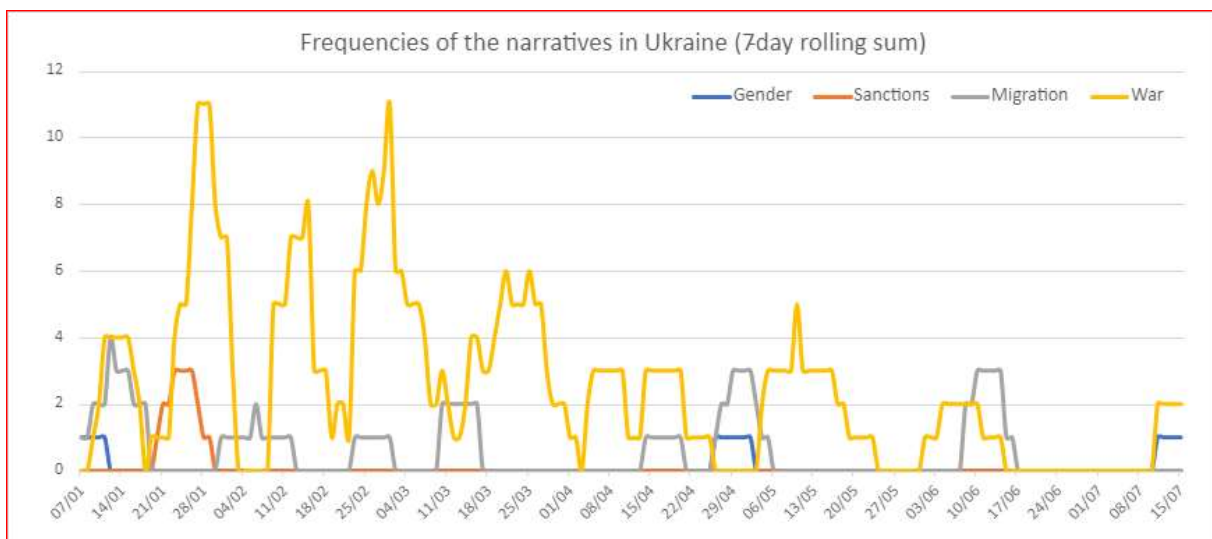
8. Figure The distribution of the number of disinformation narratives about war, sanctions, migration and gender in Ukraine between 1 January and 15 July 2023

The majority of the narratives identified in the 68 articles emphasized that (1) an immediate ceasefire and peace are needed, (2) arms transfers will only prolong and escalate the conflict, and (3) the Hungarian government will protect the Hungarians in Transcarpathia and Hungarian interests from the

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[107] https://hvg.hu/itthon/20220602_kirill_patriarka_oroszlorszag_szankciok

[108] Before the war, the estimated number fluctuated between 100,000 and 200,000, and the prolongation of the war may have a serious impact on this, as the Hungarians of Transcarpathia already have or can easily obtain Hungarian citizenship, which will help them emigrate.

Kyiv government[109]. Also worthy of mention are the messages about the pro-war West[110] and the call for staying out of the war[111].

Nearly half of the published narratives were "pro-peace" messages, with the other narratives appearing in significantly smaller proportions or not at all. The narratives entered the media space almost exclusively by quoting Hungarian government politicians.[112] In regional comparison, sub-narratives in Ukraine were the least diverse (11 were present out of 19 narratives examined), with almost half of the narratives (48%) being part of the "pro-peace" message. The sources often quoted FM Péter Szijjártó's statements that the Hungarian government tries to speak up for the rights of the Hungarian minority at all international organizations available, be it the UN, the Council of Europe, the OSCE or the European Union.[113] In addition, some articles sought to further exaggerate the government's – existing and substantial – humanitarian assistance with statements such as "*Hungary continues its largest humanitarian action ever to help the victims of the war in Ukraine.*"[114] The emphasis on Hungarian official assistance and international outreach might diminish trust in the Kyiv government and improve the perception of the Hungarian government by failing to mention or highlight the importance of Hungarian-Ukrainian cooperation and the actions of the Ukrainian government in protecting its citizens.[115]

Migration is presented in Ukraine mainly in the context of the "migrant crime"[116] and the "Brussels' responsibility"[117] sub-narratives. The content pieces on illegal migration and human smuggling were mostly short reports on border police measures based on publications on police.hu and by the Hungarian press agency MTI. The lack of narratives stigmatizing migration is obviously strongly linked to the war and the fact that millions of Ukrainians (and many Hungarians in Transcarpathia) have been forced to leave their homes temporarily or permanently.

5. Hungarian disinformation in the majority media spaces

5.1. How the majority media spaces work

Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index[118] assesses media freedom in political, legal, economic, socio-cultural and security dimensions. The 2023 figures show an overall improvement in the media situation in Slovakia (ranked 27 in 2022, 17 in 2023), Romania (56 in 2022, 53 in 2023),

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[109]https://karpatalja.ma/karpatalja/nezopont/menczer-tamas-a-kulhoni-magyarokert-kiallni-csak-egy-eros-orszag-tud/

[110]https://karpatalja.ma/karpatalja/nezopont/szijjarto-haborus-hangulat-uralkodik-az-europai-unioban/

[111]https://www.karpatinfo.net/2023/3/15/szijjarto-peter-magyar-nep-ma-szabadsag-nepe-200070517

[112] Nevertheless, gender or LGBTQ issues are present in the Ukrainian public discourse.

[113]https://www.karpatinfo.net/2023/3/14/szijjarto-kervenyeztuk-az-ukran-nemzeti-kisebbsegi-torveny-vegrehajtasanak-elhalasztasat-200070476

[114]https://www.karpatinfo.net/2023/3/20/szijjarto-peter-kormany-folytatja-az-ukrajnai-menekultek-es-az-uldozott-keresztenyek-tamogatasat-200070672

[115]https://politic.karpat.in.ua/?p=70125&lang=hu
https://www.karpatinfo.net/2023/3/14/szijjarto-kervenyeztuk-az-ukran-nemzeti-kisebbsegi-torveny-vegrehajtasanak-elhalasztasat-200070476

[116] https://www.karpatinfo.net/2023/6/8/meg-babakocsiban-ulo-kisgyerekre-kessel-rontott-szir-migrans-sokkban-franciaorszag-200072957?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=k%C3%A1rp%C3%A1tinfo+port%C3%A1l

[117] https://www.karpatinfo.net/2023/1/12/bakondi-iden-mar-3400-hatarsertot-fogtak-el-magyarorszagon-200068653

[118] https://rsf.org/en/index

Hungary (85 in 2022, 72 in 2023) and Ukraine (106 in 2022, 79 in 2023), and its deterioration in Serbia (79 in 2022, 91 in 2023).[119] In Romania, a stable media market and increasing media pluralism with the emergence of newer and newer media have contributed to the improvement of the media situation, while in Slovakia, inter alia, the new media law, which increased transparency of ownership of publishers, and media pluralism, which is relatively resistant to media capture[120].

Surveys mentioned below show that the majority media spaces in all five countries face similar challenges concerning changing media consumption habits, trust in the media and exposure to disinformation. In general, the trend towards digitalization of the media has continued in all the media markets studied, with online and social media gaining primacy over traditional print media, radio and television.

Attitudes towards media consumption have been severely affected by the competition for news consumers between online and social media and traditional media, the rise of social media platforms and messaging services, and the active disinformation activities of hybrid regimes. Trust in the press was already extremely low in all the countries surveyed and continued to decline, except in Ukraine, where confidence in TV and online news platforms increased after the outbreak of the war. [121][122] [123]

Another important aspect of the negative attitudes towards the media is the recent rise in "avoidance" of news consumption[124][125]. The main reasons for this are social crises such as the coronavirus pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the associated "infodemic" leading to information overload. This avoidance attitude is reinforced by the very high proportion of people in the countries studied who encounter disinformation content daily or weekly. According to the 2022 representative survey published by Statista, 45% of Romanian media consumers, 36% of Hungarians and Slovaks[126] , and 85% of Serbs encountered media messages containing misinformation the week before the survey was conducted.[127]

5.2. The relationship between minority and majority media spaces

The way to understand the cross-border prevalence of disinformation coming from Hungary is through analyzing minority media consumption patterns and the relationship between minority and majority media space. Since more recent and representative data on minorities are only available for Slovakia and Romania, we will focus on these countries while only raising some general findings for Ukraine and Serbia.

According to Zsuzsanna Lampl's 2021 research[128] , the media consumption of minority Hungarians in Slovakia follows similar trends as the pattern of the majority society. Yet, in terms of priorities, it

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[119] Each year, the WPFI indicator represents the index values for each country in a list of 180 countries.

[120] https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/media-capture-in-slovakia-final.pdf

[121] https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/549421.pdf

[122] Only 25% of consumers in Hungary trust the media in general and 45% trust the media they consume. In Slovakia, Romania and Serbia (27% and 37% vs 32% and 36% vs 29% and 57%). See:
https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

[123] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1029208/trust-in-national-mass-media-in-ukraine/

[124] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

[125] https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/549421.pdf

[126] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1076701/fake-news-frequency-europe/

[127] https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/549421.pdf

[128] https://forumszemle.eu/2022/11/22/sajto-televizio-radio-internet-reszletek-a-szlovakiai-magyarok-2021-es-mediafogyasztasarol/

retains the imprint of the previous era dominated by traditional media[129]. Accordingly, Hungarians give priority to television (94%), radio (84%) and print media (76%), followed by online news portals (71%). Hungarian newspapers dominate print media consumption, with Új Szó leading the way. The interconnection or interoperability of minority and majority media spaces is more evident in the television market, where the Slovak broadcaster Markíza (81.5%) is the most popular, followed by Hungary's RTL Klub (77.1%) and TV2 (76.1%), Slovakia's Joj (73.1%) and Hungary's Cool TV (69%). Looking at Hungarian stations only, the independent RTL Klub still holds the top position, but the top 5 most consumed stations also include the government-organized TV2, Hír TV and Duna World. Online news consumption has further strengthened the integration of minority and majority media spaces, as most Hungarians in Slovakia prefer to consume Slovak-language media, according to the survey.[130]

The media situation in Romania is somewhat similar, although the range of sources included in the study is smaller. According to the 2021 representative survey of the National Institute for Minority Research in Romania on news consumption related to the coronavirus pandemic, Hungarians in Transylvania are also characterized by a relatively high lack of trust in media consumption in general. Although Hungarians in Transylvania, especially those from Szeklerland, trust the Hungarian public media and Transylvanian Hungarian news portals more than Romanian sources, the confidence among the Hungarian minority in general is still only 47 and 35% respectively.[131][132]

However, an even more recent survey from 2022 found that Transylvanian and Szekler Hungarians are informed about the events in Ukraine almost as much by Romanian television channels (80% and 76%, respectively) as by the Hungarian state television channels of MTVA (85% and 82%). Hence, while Hungarian channels play a more significant role in ethnic Hungarians media consumption in Romania, Romanian television channels also play an important, but secondary role when it comes to news about the war.[133] Hence, in Romania, somewhat similar to Slovakia, the minority and majority media spaces may be more integrated than assumed. This may decisively impact and partially limit the influence of Hungarian disinformation actors, media and narratives.

The media space in Serbia faces similar challenges to that in Hungary, with circles close to the government seeking to gain political control and centralize the media market.[134] As a result, the Hungarian and Serbian governments and the government-organized media are exerting increased pressure on the minority public. This, in turn, encourages, first and foremost, the uncritical acceptance, legitimization and dissemination of their preferred themes, including the propaganda and disinformation narratives we have been investigating. Minority media space is primarily regulated by the Law of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (VAT)[135], which delegates the conditions and decision-making on the mass media in the mother tongue to the VAT, with the provision that it must

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[129] Unfortunately, the research did not deal specifically with social media, so we did not discuss this aspect due to lack of data.

[130] The most read news portals were aktualikty.sk and ujszo.sk, the former was clicked on by almost every second respondent (48.9%), the latter by more than 40% of respondents (43.9%), while the top 10 portals by reach were only 3 local (Új Szó (44%), Paraméter (31%), Felvidék Ma (31%)) and 1 Hungarian media (Blikk (30%)).

[131] Percentage of respondents who had a fair or high level of trust in the medium.

[132] Likewise, trust in RTL Klub, local and county daily or weekly newspapers, and Romanian-language television stations was low, with a trust rate of between 34% and 23% - meaning that the majority of the Hungarian minority in Romania does not even trust the Hungarian-language media.

[133] The less used sources included, in decreasing order of usage, RTL Klub, Hungarian portals in Transylvania, Hungarian government portals, Hungarian opposition portals, and English-language online media.

[134] https://crta.rs/en/media-ownership-maps-2020-2021/

[135] https://nmhh.hu/dokumentum/192082/hataron_tuli_magyar_nyelvu_mediumok_2016.pdf

involve minority national councils in the decision-making. In terms of minority media consumption, we can speak of a so-called "Vojvodina Hungarian syndrome"[136], characterized by a preference for minority Hungarian or Hungary-based media. However, due to increasing digitalization, online media, including Hungarian-language media, are coming to the fore among younger age groups. In this context, the consumption of Serbian-language media has slightly increased over a decade, affecting more than a third of minority media consumers[137]. However, the similarities between the Serbian and Hungarian government's policies and communication, as well as the political and economic dependence of minority actors on the Hungarian government, can counteract the potential positive effect of the integration of minority and majority media spaces. After all, all sources are similarly manipulated, and their political messages and content are somewhat similar in theme.

In Ukraine, even less data is available to outline the state and functioning of the minority media space. Based on previous research, minority Hungarian media are quite well embedded in both the Hungarian and Ukrainian media spaces. This is mainly due to the scarce resources and the shared use of Ukrainian and Hungarian (mainly MTI and MTVA) sources for news production. The scarcity of resources also results in journalists working for several media outlets simultaneously, including local minority media and Hungary-based media, such as correspondents. The integration of majority and minority media spaces is demonstrated by the fact that many media products use Ukrainian sources[138] . In contrast, minority Hungarians' media consumption here also tends to rely more on Hungarian-language and Hungary-based media, which opens the way for vulnerability to manipulation in the current situation. This is because the conflict between Ukraine and Hungary, mediated by Hungarian government narratives, may make media consumers in Transcarpathia distrust the mainstream Ukrainian media, which are already limited due to the war.

6. Disinformation vulnerability of Hungarian minority communities and its national security aspects

There are three cornerstones of the Orbán regime's influence over the Hungarian public in the neighboring countries: 1) the extent of the Orbán regime's control over the local media; 2) the extent of the given minority media space's embeddedness in the majority media space; 3) the extent of the majority media space's diversity, competitiveness and freedom. The combination of these factors determines to which extent government propaganda and disinformation, and their local and Hungary-based promoters, can influence the minority Hungarian public and flood the minority, and thus even the majority, media space with disinformation.

The informational vulnerability of Hungarian minorities can, therefore, be found in the structure of the local public sphere and at the level of the actors.

6.1. Structural vulnerability

Structurally, vulnerability is facilitated by the Hungarian government's control over Hungarian minority media in neighboring countries. Our data suggest that Hungarian government

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[136] "The results of our research during the period of the South Slavic civil war showed that the vast majority of Hungarians in Vojvodina turned away from the Serbian news media broadcasting Milosevic's war propaganda in a very short time, and relied predominantly on Hungarian and other foreign language sources", writes Ferenc Dobos in The Change in Media Use among Hungarians in Transylvania, Upland, Carpathian and Vojvodina 2001 - 2014. Ld.: https://mek.oszk.hu/16000/16066/16066.pdf

[137] https://www.mnt.org.rs/sites/default/files/attachments/vajdasagi_magyar_media_startegia.pdf

[138] https://nmhh.hu/dokumentum/192082/hataron_tuli_magyar_nyelvu_mediumok_2016.pdf

communication and government-organized media play a dominant role in all minority media spaces. The Hungarian government's rhetoric based on disinformation and hostile narratives uses a double "stranglehold", reaching media consumers either directly through the Hungary-based government-organized media or indirectly through the socio-economic-political control over a significant part of the local Hungarian-language media. **This can be used to interfere in the internal affairs of the respective countries and spread messages that may be contrary to the countries' national security interests, especially with regard to the Russian-Ukrainian war.**

An independent, comprehensive, high-quality public media service in the minority language and a democratic, free and diverse media system can counter the effects of foreign disinformation influence targeting minorities, especially when there is a crossover between majority and minority media spaces. The results suggest that the interoperability and integration of minority and majority media space provide some immunity against disinformation campaigns and propaganda from abroad, including Hungary. It gives protection structurally, as the majority Slovak, Ukrainian or Romanian media space, with all its problems, has a much more diverse media ownership structure than the Hungarian one, with more competition, and the information available is more diverse and balanced through media plurality and independent regulation. Minority media consumers can thus potentially form more independent and balanced opinions on the same topics, e.g., the Russian-Ukrainian war.

At the same time, this rhetoric may strengthen the national security risk actors (e.g. pro-Russian politicians) in the countries under study. It may even influence the majority society due to the high level of distrust in the media. Therefore, it is essential to see that while the Romanian far-right AUR party constantly attacks Fidesz with accusations of 'irredentism', it spreads pro-Kremlin narratives similar to those of the Hungarian government about Ukraine, such as the halting of Western arms supplies or Ukraine's failed minority policy.[139] In contrast, in Serbia's illiberal political and media system, which, like Hungary's, is partially centralized and dominated by right-wing parties, the mainstream and state-run media themselves have become the main source of propaganda and disinformation. This makes it difficult to access independent news sources and to form balanced opinions.

6.2. Vulnerability of actors

At the actor level, two forms of vulnerability can be distinguished, linked to the behavior of news consumers and to the dissemination actors who act as gatekeepers to the news flow.

The results suggest that local minority dissemination actors contribute to the prevalence of disinformation narratives in each country studied, except in Ukraine, due to economic and/or political dependence on the Orbán regime. In turn, majority dissemination actors may represent immunity or vulnerability depending on the country - immunity in Romania, vulnerability in Slovakia, where Robert Fico's statements may amplify susceptibility to Hungarian government propaganda through the majority media space.

The last element of vulnerability depends on the behavior of news consumers, i.e. their trust in the media and their "disengagement". Depending on how they use the media, these make both minority and majority members of society vulnerable to disinformation campaigns and messages. In the case of high levels of distrust, we can identify two main strategies that increase vulnerability to disinformation:

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[139] https://atlatszo.hu/vilagterkep/2023/09/13/a-titkos-fidesz-aur-testveriseg-igy-fonodnak-ossze-a-magyar-kormany-es-a-roman-szelsojobb-uzenetei/

1.) **Disengagement:** when someone does not trust news providers and withdraws from daily or regular news consumption, they receive biased news from secondary sources through personal channels.

2.) **Bubble effect:** if someone does not trust the media but does not opt out either, they are more likely to consume partisan (mainstream) news to suit their political tastes and/or turn to sensationalist, click-bait and conspiracy theory explanations from "alternative" or "grey zone"[140] media, or access information through their own community and social media "bubble". All of these result in highly manipulated and biased news consumption.[141]

The Hungarian government's control over minority media spaces reinforces both a vulnerability to disinformation and a distrust of the media, which runs counter to the strategic communication, be it local, regional or Euro-Atlantic, needed in the current crisis.

The vulnerability of Hungarian minority communities to the disinformation influence of the Orbán regime can be mapped along six dimensions. Vulnerability is influenced by (1) the health of the local media space; (2) the existence and communication of local, majority political actors allied with the Orbán regime; (3) the Orbán regime's overall influence (e.g., political, economic) over the Hungarian minority media space; (4) the integration of minority and majority media spaces; (5) trust in the media; and (6) the proportion of Hungarian government disinformation content.

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[140] The "grey zone" can be defined as a public space in which the ownership, financing, organisational and editorial background of the media is partially or entirely opaque for the manipulation of news consumers.
[141] The bubble effect can therefore contribute to information vulnerability even if balanced and relatively factual mainstream information is available in the media space, and even more balanced news is still available to those who do not completely withdraw from news consumption.

Country	Democratic nature of media space Rank in RSF's World Press Freedom Index[142]	Presence of majority political actors allied with the Orbán regime	Hungarian government control of minority media	Integration of minority and majority media spaces	Trust in the media[143]	Rate of disinformation content[144]
Romania	53	No - hostile [145]	Media spaces controlled by Fidesz and RMDSZ, separately	High: mainly in the television market	32%[146]	24%
Serbia	91	Yes - government[147]	Fidesz-controlled media space	Low: preference for Hungary-based or local Hungarian media	29%[148]	11%
Slovakia	17	Yes - government[149]	Fidesz-controlled and independent media space	High: mainly in the television market	27%[150]	57%
Ukraine	79	No - hostile[151]	Fidesz-controlled and independent media space	High: in traditional and social media markets	60%[152]	8%

9. Figure Key factors affecting the vulnerability of minority media spaces to disinformation by country

[142] To rank the democratic nature of the media space, we used the Reporters Without Borders 2023 World Press Freedom Index scores.

[143] Low trust in the media has been identified as a risk factor increasing vulnerability, which, as described above, traps consumers in a "bubble" or further alienates them from mainstream media.

[144] The proportion of disinformation narratives in each country in our sample.

[145] The strategic communication between the Romanian and Hungarian governments and leading Romanian and Hungarian politicians in important foreign and domestic policy areas is divergent, and there is no communication cooperation between the parties in terms of political narratives. Moreover, in 2023, the Romanian side sent a separate note to the Hungarian Prime Minister indicating the topics on which he could speak at the Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp.

[146] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

[147] The Vučić cabinet, in line with the Hungarian government, pursues a pro-Russian and pro-China foreign policy based on disinformation

[148] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

[149] The SMER-SD, which won the 2023 Slovak elections, and its leader Robert Fico, have been spreading disinformation narratives in line with the Hungarian government on key issues such as the Russian-Ukrainian war and illegal migration.

[150] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

[151] Because of the aforementioned minority issue, relations between the Ukrainian and Hungarian sides are extremely bad, despite the fact that the Hungarian government consistently uses extremely anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian rhetoric.

[152] Trust in online media.

Our table of the six dimensions shows that the most vulnerable minority media space is in Serbia, where minority media consumers, who already have low trust in the mainstream media, are the targets of disinformation narratives spread by the Vučić and Orbán regimes, separately or in cooperation, which cannot be balanced by either the Fidesz-controlled minority media space or the majority media space, which is increasingly restricting press freedom. Although press freedom in Ukraine is in a worse state than in Slovakia, the Slovak minority is still more vulnerable to manipulation by the Hungarian government due to the political alliance between Robert Fico and Viktor Orbán, extremely low trust in the media, and high disinformation activity in the Fidesz-controlled local media. In comparison, minority media in Romania and Ukraine appear less vulnerable, partly due to the high integration of majority and minority media spaces, which ensures media plurality and diversity of coverage, the lack of political and communication cooperation between political actors, and lower disinformation activity.

Annex 1 – Detailed data on disinformation narratives

1. War narratives

The Orbán regime is also spreading disinformation narratives about the war in Ukraine, of which 18 narratives about the Russian invasion were identified, ranging from "pro-peace" messages ("an immediate ceasefire and peace talks are needed") to "pro-peace" messages, anti-Western opinions ("arms deliveries are responsible for prolonging the war"), to anti-Ukrainian messages ("the Ukrainian state oppresses Hungarian and other ethnic minorities"). Since the beginning of the Russian invasion in February 2022, these messages have rarely deviated from the original and show a substantial overlap with Russian disinformation messages.
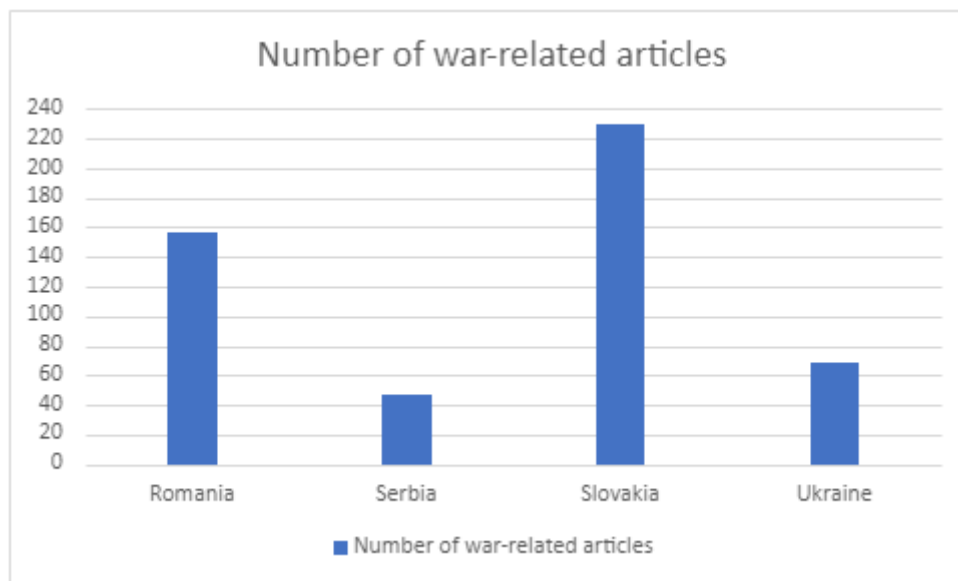
Our database, filtered using predefined keywords, contains 502 articles or posts containing at least one and up to three disinformation narratives about the war. Among the countries surveyed, this type of narrative was most prevalent in Slovakia (46% of cases), followed by Romania (31%), Ukraine (14%) and Serbia (9%). The uneven distribution may be related to the size of the Hungarian minority in each country, the extent of local Hungarian-language media, or other country-specific characteristics. The latter include that Slovakia is running an election campaign, Serbia has a centralized media space similar to that of Hungary, and Ukraine is in a state of war, resulting in a more controlled media space less tolerant of counter-interested disinformation operations.

War-related Subnarratives Percentage Distribution within the sample
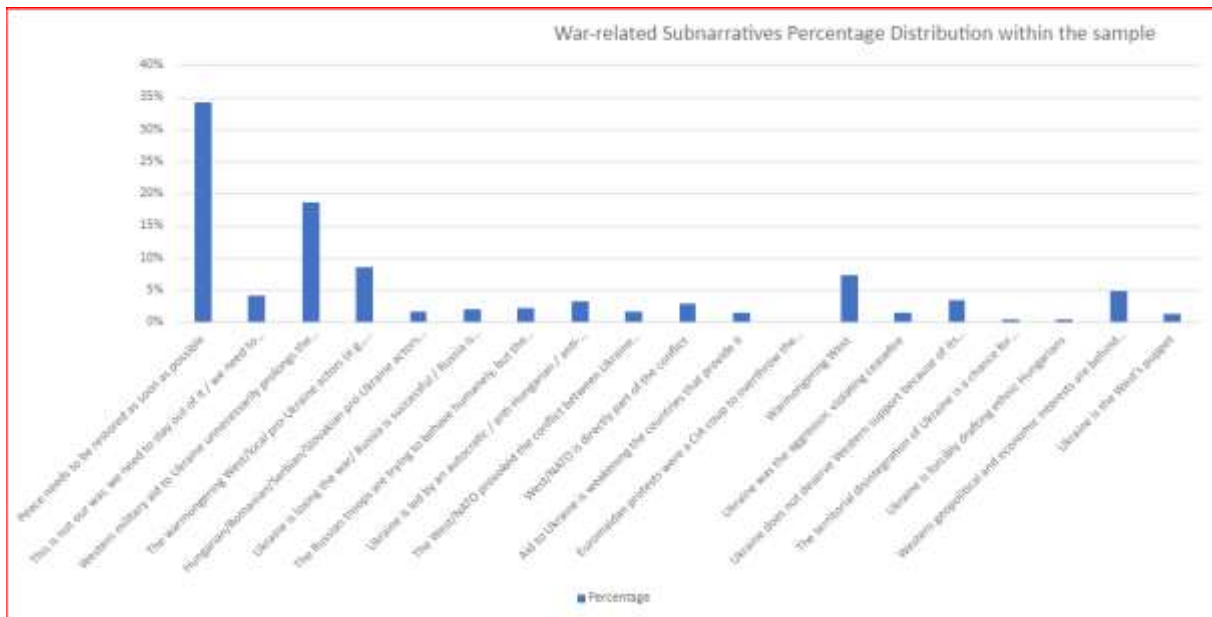
An examination of the leading narratives revealed that the top 3 narratives dominating the database in all countries, except Ukraine, focused on the same themes: (1) peace must be restored as quickly as possible (34% of sub-narratives); (2) Western arms supplies will only prolong and escalate the war (19%); and (3) pro-war Western and local actors want to drag the country into war (9%).

2. Migration narratives

For the Orbán regime, migration has been a major issue since the 2015 migration crisis and wave, serving as a tool for continuous enemy-building and providing a space for authoritarianism through emergency legislation. Therefore, the legal framework on refugee status has been designed after 2015 in such a way that it is virtually impossible for refugees from the African and Asian continents (mainly the Middle East) to obtain refugee status that would allow them to enter.[153] At the ideological level, the Hungarian government and the government-controlled media have made a distinction between refugees, partly stigmatizing refugees as "illegal migrants", and immigrants who arrive through the proper legal channels. The most important message of the Hungarian government on migration is that immigration from Africa and the Middle East is a fundamentally dangerous and harmful phenomenon, it disrupts the ethnic identity of the country, threatens public safety and can lead to economic problems. That is why, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Hungarian politicians were quick to clarify that Ukrainian refugees cannot be considered "migrants", but legitimate refugees enjoying Hungary's hospitality and support.

The database was compiled for Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, with 357 hits on migration narratives, of which 22% were identified in Romania, 18% in Serbia, 55% in Slovakia and 4% in Ukraine.

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[153] This essentially makes all refugees "illegal migrants", i.e. they are breaking the law simply by crossing the border.

Migrációs narratívával kapcsolatos találatok országonként
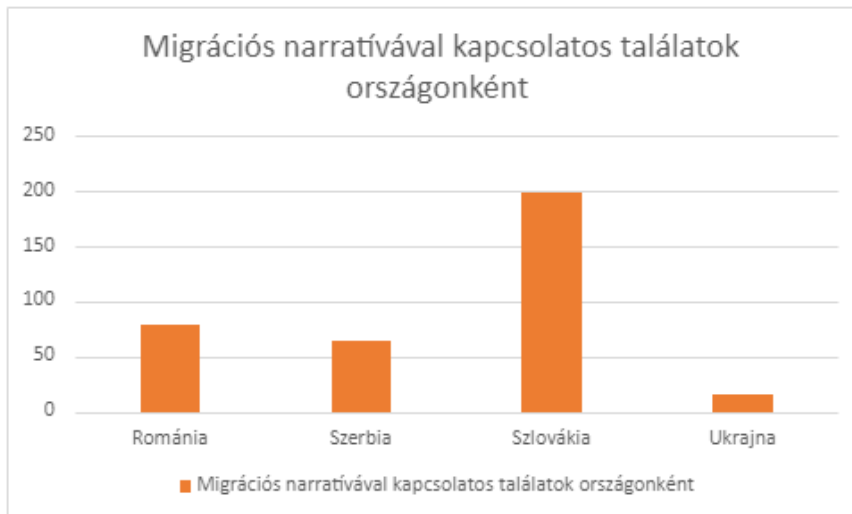
Regarding the distribution of hits by country, Slovakia had the highest aggregate score and the lowest for Hungarian-language media in Ukraine. The latter is relatively understandable, as Ukraine is not a migration transit country, and the population fleeing the war in Ukraine is presumably not particularly receptive to the Hungarian government's narratives on global migration. In Slovakia, on the other hand, the early elections, paradoxically refugees from Hungary, shape the discourse on this issue.[154]

Our research identified seven narratives on migration, of which the top 3 narratives in our sample and each country were "illegal migration" (46%), "people smuggling" (20%) and "Brussels' responsibility" (17%).
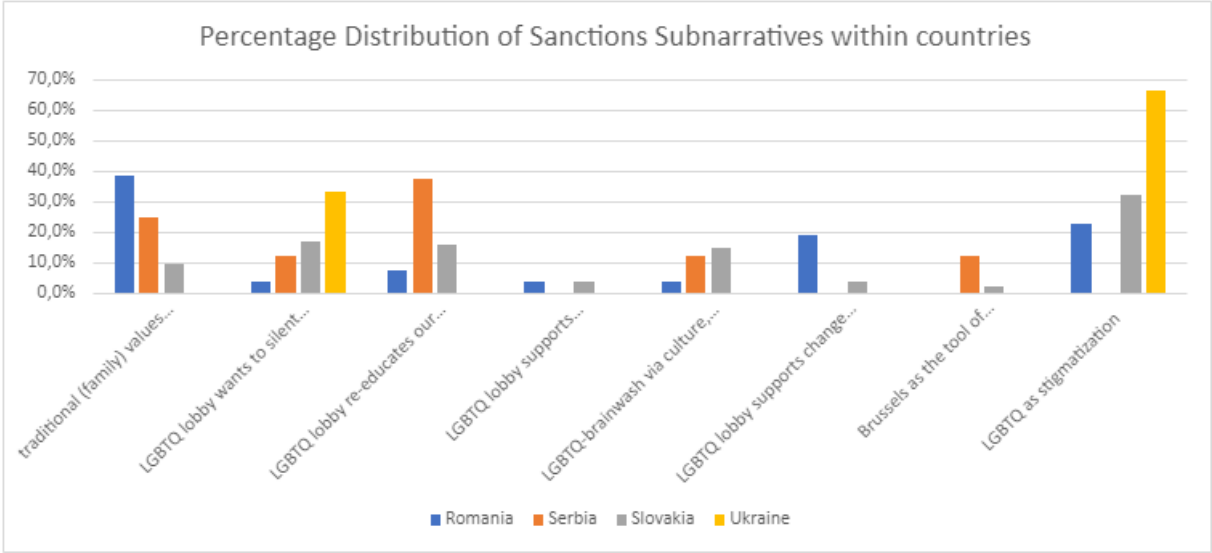

Alnarratívák eloszlása a teljes mintában

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[154] Contrary to its rhetoric, the Hungarian government has released traffickers from prisons and has not been effective enough in tackling internal trafficking, as Hungary is only a transit country in this respect.

The high number of narratives dealing with illegal migration and human smuggling is mainly because the media sampled regularly reported on border control operations carried out by border police and national defense agencies. [155]

3. Gender-related narratives

10-15 years ago, few people had heard of the concept of gender, apart from a small circle of intellectuals, and hardly anyone foresaw that it would soon become a political mobilizing force. Yet, in the (geo)political landscape that has been transformed in the 2010s, the so-called gender ideology has become a symbol, on the one hand, part of the struggle for women's equality on the progressive side and, more importantly, a tool for the right-wing populist political forces to explain the world in simplistic terms, as a driving force of the 'decadent West'. In Hungary, this is deliberately conflated with anti-LGBTQ voices. According to the main narrative, the West is in a complete identity crisis, where traditional community values are being shattered, families are being "rainbowed", and it is no longer clear who is male and who is female. This apocalyptic worldview is also well suited to the current war geopolitical context, where the Russians represent normality, defending traditional values, even if rarely stated so openly. In contrast, the West-backed Ukraine represents decadence and chaos. Keeping gender ideology on the agenda thus greatly helps right-wing populist forces to systematize and explain increasingly complex political events to the public.

The database, filtered by predefined keywords, contains 239 articles with at least one of the listed narratives. The figure below shows that in Ukraine (1% of disinformation messages)[156] and Serbia (3%) - at least in minority media - the gender narrative is mainly absent. In Romania (11%), it is barely present, while in Slovakia (84%), it is definitely on the agenda: in the period under review, 202 articles or posts identified at least one of the sub-narratives. The top 2 narratives in the Slovak and Romanian results were (1) "threats to traditional (family) values" and (2) the role or use of "LGBTQI/gender stigmatization".


Percentage Distribution of Sanctions Subnarratives within countries

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[155] https://felvidek.ma/2023/06/iden-94-embercsempesz-ellen-emeltek-vadat/ ;
https://www.hirek.sk/tajaink/egyre-tobb-migranst-raknak-ki-a-dunaszerdahelyi-jaras-hatarmenti-falvaiban ;
https://ma7.sk/aktualis/egyre-tobb-migrans-bukkan-fel-nyitra-megyeben-tobb-rendor-van-az-utcakon ;
https://erdelyinaplo.ro/aktualis/embercsempesz-halozatot-szamolt-fel-a-magyar-rendorseg-roman-allampolgarokat-is-orizetbe-vettek# ; https://kronikaonline.ro/erdelyi-hirek/kiterjedt-migranscsempesz-bandara-csaptak-le-a-hatosagok-a-bansagban#

[156] Although the LGBTQ\gender issue is often part of the public discourse in the Ukrainian media.

The prevalence of Hungarian government narratives is evident in Slovak public discourse, if only because many of the articles detected quote government politicians or take their cues from Hungarian media that are overtly or covertly government-controlled. Slovak politicians, on the other hand, are much less likely to touch on the subject.

4. Sanction narratives

After the outbreak of the war, the Orbán regime's anti-sanctions stance became a defining element of foreign policy, as it not only emphasized the government's "pro-peace" stance - embodied in social and economic stability - before the April elections but the economic arguments allowed it to continue to advocate its previous pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian policies. In the governing party's communication, we could, therefore, identify a large number of narratives on economic sanctions, ranging from conspiratorial claims ("the West is using sanctions to bring Russia to its knees by design") to Eurosceptic voices ("European sanctions are responsible for the economic crisis") to economic rationality ("sanctions threaten European or Hungarian energy security").) - especially given that important gas and oil pipelines pass through Hungary.
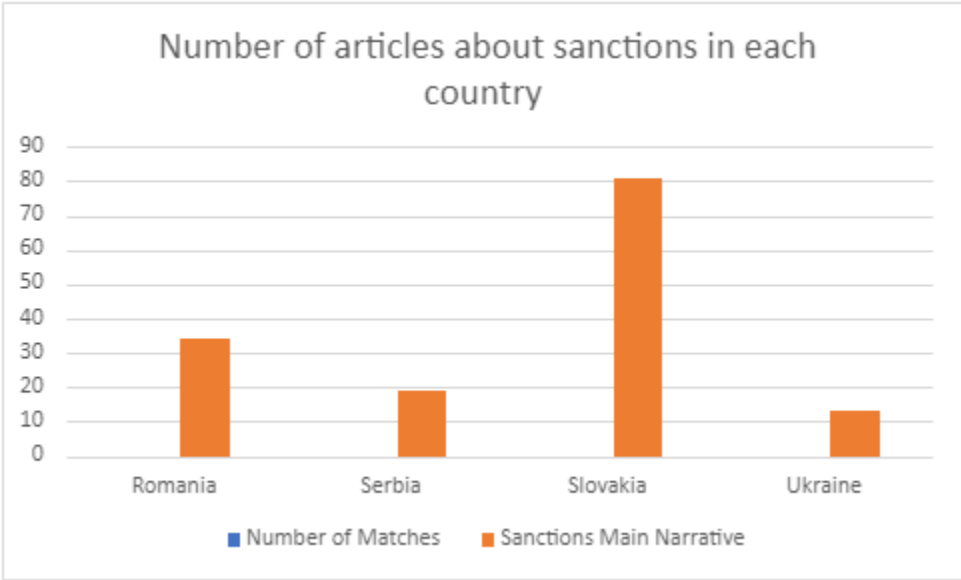
Our database, filtered by predefined keywords, contains 147 articles that mention one or at most two disinformation narratives. Of the countries surveyed, this type of narrative was most prevalent in Slovakia (55% of cases), as shown in the table above, followed by Romania (23%), Serbia (13%) and Ukraine (9%), presumably due to the energy security issue that was also a significant concern for Slovakia. In contrast, in Serbia, which is not affected by sanctions, this was much less of a focus, while in Romania, military and national security considerations were given priority due to its proximity to the conflict, not to mention Ukraine.

Sanctions Subnarratives Percentage Distribution within the sample
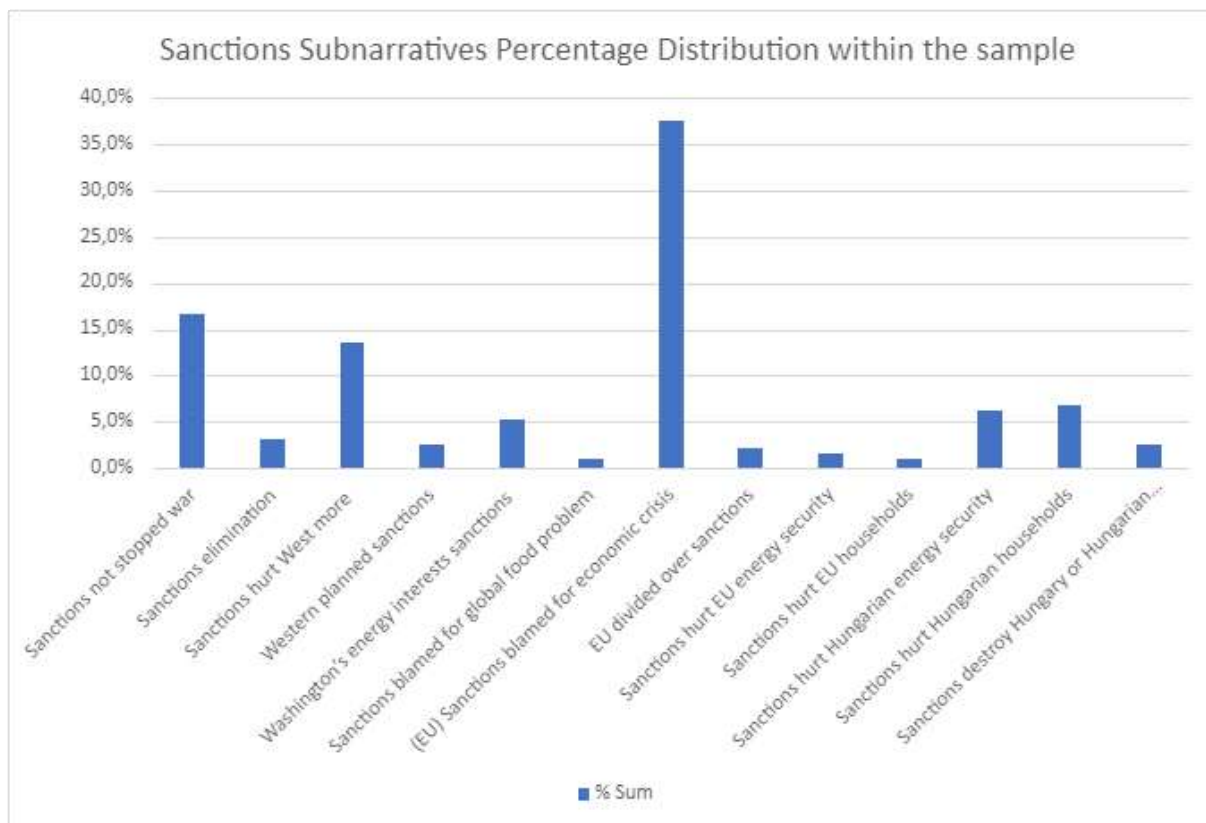
An examination of the leading narratives revealed that the top 3 dominant narratives in all countries except Ukraine focused on the same themes: (1) (EU) sanctions are responsible for the economic crisis (37% of sub-narratives); (2) sanctions have not stopped the war (17%); and (3) sanctions have not stopped the war (17%), (3) sanctions have harmed the West more than Russia (13%). In Ukraine, the third most prominent disinformation narrative dealt with the negative impact of sanctions on Hungarian energy security.[157] At the same time, in Ukraine - for understandable reasons - there is hardly any anti-sanctions rhetoric (13 articles), and it should be interpreted within this context that the majority of the rhetoric (7 articles) focuses mainly on the economic crisis, based on a few quotes from Péter Szijjártó[158] - while the Ukrainian discourse on sanctions is objective and fact-based, generally limited to the description of newer and newer rounds of sanctions.

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[157] However, the Ukrainian results are less relevant due to the very narrow scope of the data.
[158] https://karpatalja.ma/karpatalja/nezopont/szijjarto-peter-eleteket-menteni-csak-bekevel-es-tuzszunettel-lehet/

Annex 2 – Sub-narratives

1. War narratives

We identified 18 sub-narratives related to the Russian-Ukrainian war. **"Peace must be restored as soon as possible"** because the narrative is that war does not solve anything, it only leads to the death and suffering of thousands of people on both sides. The war must end as soon as possible (regardless of what this means for Ukraine). All this is based on the one hand on the assumption that "**Ukraine will inevitably lose because Russia is invincible**", selectively presenting events on the battlefield or directly quoting Russian officials. Russia's invincibility is often argued on the grounds that Russia is one of the largest and most powerful countries in the world and a nuclear power. The latter is also important because, according to the narrative, "**Western military aid to Ukraine unnecessarily prolongs the war while increasing the risk of escalation and a third world war".** Arms supplies, according to the narrative, also risk escalating the conflict beyond Ukraine, leading to direct war between NATO and Russia and a possible nuclear war. It, therefore, argues that immediate peace talks are needed to end the war. The danger of escalation and the pointlessness of Ukrainian resistance are not understood by the **"pro-war Western countries",** which "**use various local pro-Ukrainian actors (media, opposition politicians) as agents**" and "**want to drag the country into the war**".

This may be because, according to one sub-narrative, "**the war was provoked by the West/NATO"** and "**is motivated by Western geopolitical and economic interests, which are seeking to weaken Russia**". Indeed, some narratives even claim that "**Ukraine is a Western puppet**" and that "the **West is directly involved in the conflict**". At the same time, the actions of pro-war Western and pro-Ukrainian actors must be opposed by the country in question and "**stay out of the war, as it is not our war**". The Russian aggression against Ukraine is sometimes portrayed as an internal conflict between local post-Soviet countries and sometimes as a conflict between Russia and the US, which must be kept out at all costs. The apparent contradiction between the portrayal as a local and a global conflict is rarely resolved.

They are also not opposed to arms transfers because **the** narrative is that "**aid to Ukraine weakens the donor country"** by transferring its military capabilities and not redistributing people's money back to the taxpayers suffering from local economic woes. To reinforce this, they want to use a series of anti-Ukrainian narratives to prove that **Ukraine does not deserve Western aid".** This may be because "**Ukraine is run by an anti-Hungarian and anti-Christian regime**" which **"oppresses minorities"** and even **"forcibly conscripts Hungarians" to** send them to the front**.** Part of the anti-Ukrainian narrative is the old pro-Kremlin message that "**Ukraine is the real aggressor**" and that "**the Ukrainian army is committing war crimes while Russian troops are trying to be humane".** This sub-narrative seeks to undermine support for Ukraine by highlighting alleged or real war crimes committed by the Ukrainian armed forces while omitting well-documented, systematic cases of Russian war crimes.

2. Migration narratives

We have identified seven sub-narratives related to migration. The **"illegal migration"** sub-narrative is technically true. Still, it is distorted by failing to highlight that there is no meaningful opportunity for refugees to "legally migrate", as the Hungarian government considers Serbia, from where the vast majority of refugees come, as a "safe" country to which they can be deported back. Moreover, "**illegal migration**" is a catalyst for organized criminal groups, especially "people smuggling" circles. In the **'people smuggling'** sub-narrative, not only is the activity of genuine people smugglers presented and highlighted by the pro-government media but also, where appropriate, all activities that assist refugees (whether it is the taxi/transport service legally used in the country or humanitarian aid) are associated with people smuggling.

According to the **"Brussels"** sub-narrative, immigration is mainly "imposed" on Europe by the bureaucratic leadership of the EU/Brussels, the liberal elites of the West, George Soros and networks of NGOs. Linked to this is the **'decline of Europe'** sub-narrative. Migration is creating social tensions across Europe, putting 'Christian', 'European' values at risk, in the minority, and overburdening social welfare systems. All this is linked to the 'economic crisis' sub-narrative, according to which migration is aimed at importing cheap labor into Europe, which depresses the wage demands of the lower and middle classes and leads to economic problems, among other things, because integration is failing.

Government narratives associate "irregular migrants" with violence, crime and terrorism, either during or immediately before the border crossing or after their integration into European migration destination countries[159] . The sub-narrative of **'migrant crime'** seeks to both suggest this association and to magnify and highlight all crimes committed by migrants across Europe. Particularly in Germany, the biggest nation-state behind migration and the most dominant political leadership on the European scene is identified in German governments and politicians by the sub-narrative coded as **'Wilkommenskultur'**.

3. Gender-related narratives

Within the gender narrative, eight sub-narratives were identified. One of the main elements **of** the narratives related to the rights of sexual minorities and the protection of families is that **"traditional values and family models feel threatened".** Be it the so-called gender/LGBTQ lobby:

- **wants to silence the majority**, which is clinging to traditional values;
- **wants to re-educate children**, primarily through the schools;
- **support pedophilia** and thus put children at risk;
- **wants to brainwash people** by manipulating culture and sport;
- wants to erase gender differences **by promoting gender reassignment**;
- They want to **use Brussels and the European Union to** suppress national governments that resist.

According to the actors promoting the narrative, the gender/LGBTQ lobby refers to the "international liberal mainstream", media workers from independent newspapers, NGO representatives, human rights activists, liberal politicians, teachers, or anyone who supports equal rights for sexual minorities or gender equality, or who opposes the exclusionary rhetoric and actions of right-wing actors.

4. Sanctions narratives

Thirteen sub-narratives have been identified concerning sanctions against Russia. The main thrust of the narrative is that "the **EU sanctions are to blame for the energy crisis and inflation",** which "**hurt the West more than Russia"** and "have **not stopped the war and have only caused economic hardship**". The narrative blames the sanctions for "**global food insecurity"**, omitting that food is not subject to EU sanctions and that Ukraine cannot export at previous volumes because Russia has tried to blockade the country and prevent trade. The EU's punitive measures also "**threaten the energy security of the EU and its member states, including ultimately Hungary**". They also "**negatively affect the living standards and economic prospects of European and Hungarian households"**, ultimately "**destroying Hungary or the Hungarian economy".**

The narrative is that "the European Union is divided on energy-related sanctions" because of these negative effects. This is because, according to the narrative, "**behind the war and the sanctions are**

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[159] https://piros7.es/egy-goteborgi-rejtett-eroforras-tiz-eves-kislanyt-szurt-hasba

Western, mainly American, geopolitical and economic interests aimed at weakening Russia". This is particularly true in the case of the US, as "**Washington supports energy sanctions against Russia to promote its position as a global energy supplier, especially to the EU**". The narrative sees the weakening of the European Union as a US interest, as it forces European countries to buy American energy instead of Russian. In addition to the negative economic effects and divisions, the narrative argues that "**sanctions should also be lifted because the European and Russian economies are interdependent, so relations should be normalized again**".

Annex 3 – Detailed characteristics of media spaces

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, 85% of media consumers in Hungary[160] primarily access information online, compared to 74% in Slovakia[161] and 70% in Romania[162] - ahead of social media, TV or print media alone. The situation is also similar in Ukraine and Serbia. Serbian media consumers rely on social media for information to the greatest extent in Europe or globally, at 83%[163] , while in Ukraine, since the outbreak of the war, messaging services such as Messenger and social media platforms have been the main sources of news since the outbreak of the war, with 65% and 61% penetration respectively - well ahead of traditional media providers.[164] Nevertheless, television still plays a dominant, sometimes leading role in information regarding online presence or news consumption specifically. In this respect, RTL Klub and ATV, which are independent of the government, are among the top 5 most popular offline news sources in the very limited Hungarian public sphere, contributing to a considerable extent to media freedom. Likewise, the launch of PSB, TVR news channels and Euronews in 2022 has contributed greatly to the balance of the Romanian media market.

Only 25% of consumers in Hungary generally trust the media, and 45% trust the media they consume. Similar low trust levels in Slovakia, Romania and Serbia[165] (27% and 37% vs 32% and 36% vs 29% and 57%) indicate that, on average, slightly more than a third of media consumers in each country and region trust the mainstream media. The exception in this respect is Ukraine, where online and offline media still have high trust indices, with over 61% of Ukrainian media consumers trusting TV or community media news, compared to 30% trust in print media products[166]. It is probably due to the impact of the war that people's attitudes towards the media are somewhat different from regional patterns. However, disinformation and disinformation campaigns about the war, the restrictive media regulations introduced in response to them, and the government's drive for media centralization further erode public trust in media consumption.

Another important aspect of negative attitudes towards the media is the fact that social crises, like the coronavirus pandemic or the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the associated "infodemic" leading to information overload, have led to a significant increase in the so-called "avoidance" of news consumption. There are clear benefits to be gained from pausing or reducing news consumption, both in terms of reducing the psychological pressure on the individual and in terms of eliminating the public 'disorientation' associated with news dumping and low trust in the media - who and what can be believed and what can be reassuringly discussed. While in Ukraine, news about the war cannot be avoided. A Reuters Institute survey shows that globally, on average, 39% of consumers in the countries surveyed try to avoid the news, with the highest figure in Slovakia (50%), followed by Hungary (47%) and Romania (37%)[167] - a similar report by the OSCE shows that in Serbia this is true for 65% of users, by far the highest figure among the countries surveyed[168] .

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[160] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/hungary

[161] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/slovakia

[162] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/romania

[163] https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/549421.pdf

[164] https://gradus.app/en/open-reports/gradus-research-changes-in-media-consumption-ua/

[165] https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/549421.pdf

[166] https://www.oporaua.org/en/polit_ad/24796-mediaspozhivannia-ukrayintsiv-drugii-rik-povnomasshtabnoyi-viini-24796

[167] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

[168] https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/549421.pdf