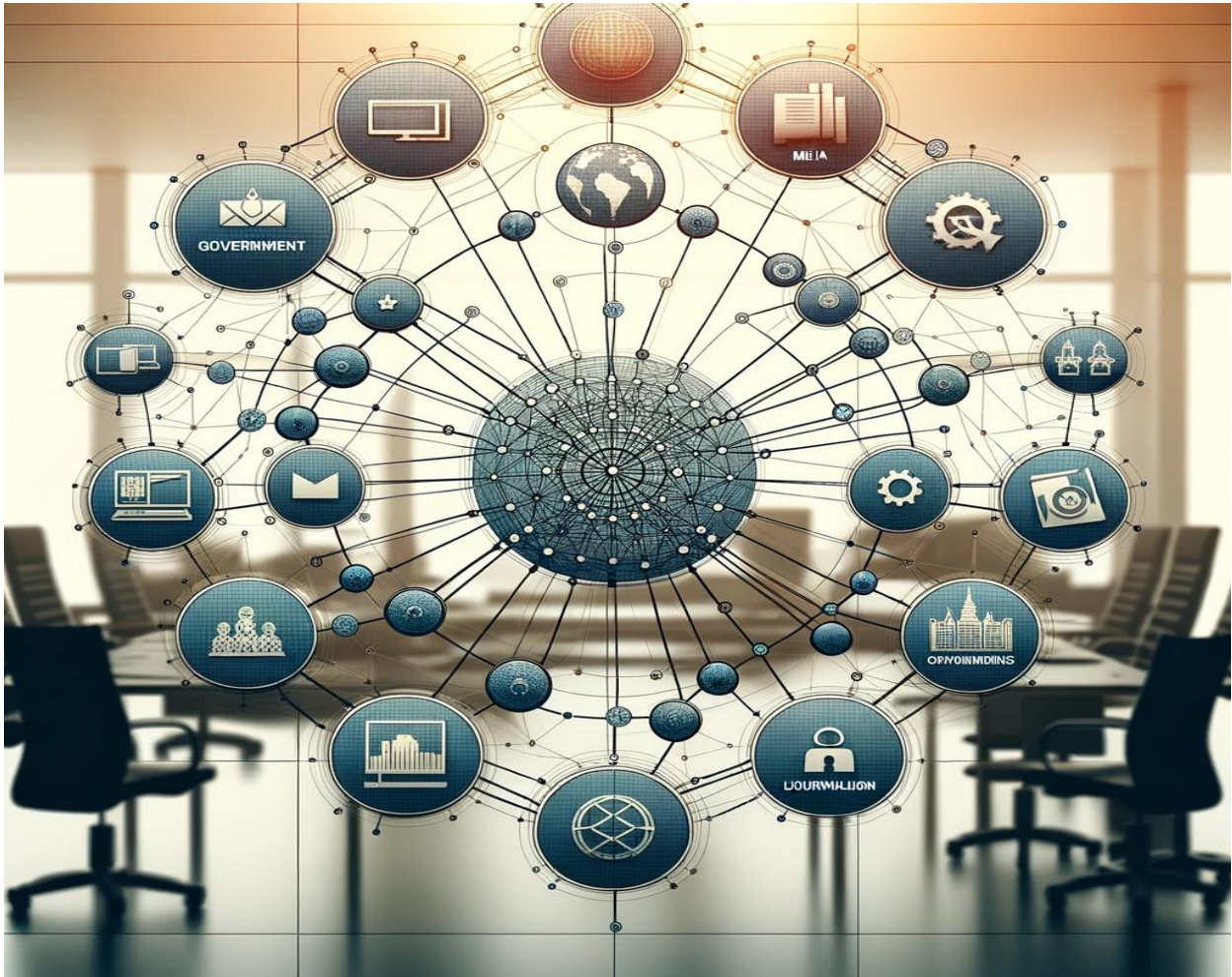


# Challenges of Strategic Communication in Hungary



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## Introduction

In an era defined by rapid globalization, evolving technologies, and shifting geopolitical dynamics, the realm of strategic communication has become crucial, intersecting the narratives, interests, and influence of states, political actors, and non-state actors. Within this context, the challenges posed by hybrid political regimes are increasingly attracting attention from scholars, policymakers, and practitioners.

Among these countries, Hungary emerges as a distinct case study. Since 2010, strategic communication functions within an increasingly autocratic and centralized political regime, marked by a concentration of power, weakening of independent media, and the development of a propaganda machine closely monitored by the regime. At the same time, Hungary has seen a significant shift in its foreign policy orientation, moving away from Western alliances and forming closer ties with Eastern autocratic or hybrid regimes, including Turkey, Russia, and China.

Thus, the nature and goals of the strategic communication of the Hungarian government are twofold. While Hungary's strategic communication aims to distance its citizens and voter base from Western liberal-democratic values, portraying them as a failed social model, it is also idealizing Eastern autocracies as sovereign entities and economic powerhouses standing up for their traditions. As a result, the Hungarian regime directly exposes itself to vulnerability related to foreign hostile strategic communication by not criticizing or even adopting Russian or Chinese communication panels. Furthermore, this communication indirectly subjects the Euro-Atlantic community to foreign hostile influence, as well as undermines the political unity and foreign policy of the NATO or the European Union.

This has particular significance in the Russian-Ukrainian war, where the Hungarian government tries to portray itself as a mediator and peace advocate, yet its communication consistently opposes Ukraine and supports Russia, adopting Russian war narratives and partially acknowledging Russian "spheres of interest" and geopolitical demands.

***Disclaimer: This report has been prepared with support from IRI's Beacon Project. The opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of IRI.***

## Executive summary

- Since 2010, strategic communication functions within an increasingly centralized political regime. Thus, the nature of Hungarian strategic communication significantly deviates from the conventional definition, marked by distinct symbolism, production mechanisms, and content attributes. This divergence is primarily rooted in the dominance of a government-controlled media conglomerate, exerting control over most of Hungary's media landscape with over 500 media outlets. A prominent illustration of this strategy is the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), orchestrated by pro-Fidesz oligarchs through the merger of numerous media entities, and the public Media Service Support and Asset Management Fund (MTVA), with a substantial budget of 127 billion Hungarian Forints (USD 367 million) in 2023. This extensive control has culminated in the Hungarian regime effectively overseeing approximately 80% of the media, as reported in the 2022 Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders.
- Consequently, the Orbán regime effectively utilizes the entire Hungarian media landscape as a strategic communication tool, encompassing both foreign and domestic policy areas. Domestically, its communication serves the dual purpose of sustaining its voter base and identifying political adversaries, which include opposition parties, George Soros, NGOs, and the

LGBTQI community. This communication strategy constructs a populist-nationalist image and identity that underpins the regime. In foreign policy, strategic communication endeavors to navigate two competing priorities: promoting the "Eastern opening" foreign policy narrative, which includes propagating the unfounded idea of the West's decline, while also meeting its commitments within the Western alliance system - as evident in its support for most EU and NATO decisions in alignment with Euro-Atlantic interests. Consequently, the Hungarian regime's strategic communication exhibits a dual nature, simultaneously fostering malign influence by supporting adversarial narratives and non-malign influence by aligning with key Euro-Atlantic issues.

- The Hungarian government's communication, characterized by a highly centralized and hierarchical structure, extends across governmental, party, budgetary organizations, state media, private media, and seemingly independent GONGOs. Communication operates on three distinct levels: at the apex is the Hungarian Prime Minister, who personally assumes responsibility for voter engagement, strategic communication, and message representation. On the pivotal middle tier, Minister Antal Rogán, heading the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, oversees government communication, coordinating both domestic and international messaging across government, party, and public media through selected state secretaries. At the lowest tier, the government and Rogán indirectly influence the media landscape by allocating advertising funds and directly through informal briefings.
- The Hungarian legal framework does not serve its purpose to mount a challenge to domestic-borne or foreign hostile influence in the information domain. For example, the National Security Strategy of Hungary (NSSH), does acknowledge some of the prevailing geopolitical tensions, risks and underscores the imperative for robust responses to communication, and ICT threats, or hybrid threats. However, it fails to identify the military and national security risks associated with Russian aggression or Chinese assertiveness. Instead, it stresses that Russia is a "dominant international actor with an essential role in global and regional security issues." As a more specialized administrative unit, the Media Council and the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) launched a campaign against fake news,<sup>1</sup> including informative videos and an infographic highlighting signs of fake news stories. However, the initiative of the NMHH primarily deals with domestic communication not with foreign ones.
- The Hungarian state's communication carries significant risks when it comes to foreign hostile influence. In the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war, pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives in Hungary are predominantly driven by Fidesz and the government, revolving around themes of peace, sanctions, and energy concerns. The Kremlin's strategic communication has observed and leveraged these Hungarian narratives. It exploits them to propagate claims that (1) there is a lack of Western solidarity against Russia, (2) Russian interests or spheres of interests should be recognized, and (3) Poland, Hungary, and Romania are covertly plotting to dismember Ukraine and annex territories populated by ethnic minorities.
- The foreign hostile influence is, therefore, "piggybacking" on the Hungarian government's strategic communication. This applies to the latest "sovereignty" legislative package aimed at safeguarding fair processes of next year's European and local elections against foreign influence, when, in fact, the legislation and the strategic communication that comes with it targets domestic opposition ahead of the elections.
- Even if not directly, the "sovereignty campaign" somewhat shapes views negatively on NATO, as foreign pressure in the Hungarian parliament regarding Finland and Sweden's admission to the alliance has always been presented by the Hungarian government as an issue of

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<sup>1</sup> [https://nmhh.hu/cikk/214271/Ne\\_hagyd\\_hogy\\_a\\_hireket\\_olvasva\\_becsapjanak\\_az\\_erzelmeid](https://nmhh.hu/cikk/214271/Ne_hagyd_hogy_a_hireket_olvasva_becsapjanak_az_erzelmeid)

sovereignty. Our social media analysis has revealed that the most viral posts on NATO are produced by both governmental and opposition politicians, while the discourse on NATO in the Hungarian media space is dominated by governmental sources.

- Other far-right or pro-Kremlin media contribute minimally to the debate on the role of NATO, with their effect mainly relegated to the extremist subculture. Still, they can amplify this negative view of the Alliance, leveraging the Kremlin's strategic communication. They focus on NATO's alleged aggressive stance, its purported role in the Russo-Ukrainian war, and the Western "escalation" of the conflict itself.
- The main challenge of strategic communication in Hungary stems from three aspects: 1) the absence of cooperation between state-led vertical and civic-headed horizontal stratcom actors; 2) the government's communication primarily targeting domestic opposition, not real hostile influence; and 3) the absence of any specialized stratcom state entity that is capable of countering foreign hostile influence coming from, for example, Russia or China.
- Non-hostile strategic communication elements on the horizontal level are present but lack the resources and structure to compete with government-dominated communication, let alone create an "alternative" strategic communication hub. Initiatives like the Civilizáció or Civilization Coalition established in 2017 by 34 NGOs<sup>2</sup> or HDMO, the Hungarian hub against disinformation,<sup>3</sup> could be the start of such a horizontal initiative. However, the first lacks the stratcom component as its core activity, while HDMO is a consortium of only six organizations (AFP, EPP, Political Capital, IDEA, Mérték, Lakmusz) with minimal resources at their disposal to put forward proper stratcom activities.

## Methodology

The research employed a desktop research approach, complemented by data collection on Facebook using CrowdTangle to comprehensively investigate the challenges and workings of strategic communication in Hungary. We analyzed the legal framework, official documents, the functioning and communication of media authorities, and other information sources to assess the structures and actors of strategic communication while collecting data on the reach of messaging for core StratCom units, other state communications, and hostile actors with regard to NATO on Facebook.

## The definition of strategic communication

The basic definition of strategic communication can be summarized as a course of communication action designed to achieve specific goals of communication by influencing target audiences on specific policy areas or objectives. As the Royal College of Defence Studies has put it:

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<sup>2</sup> The Civilizáció Coalition's mission is dedicated to enhancing the popularity and societal support for citizen self-organization and activism. It aims to increase the level of social solidarity, search for new forms of it, and stand up for the rights of citizen self-organizations and civil groups. For more please see: <https://civilizacio.net/hu/rolunk/misszink>

<sup>3</sup> LAKMUSZ-HDMO, or the Hungarian Digital Media Observatory, is the EDMO hub in Hungary, built as a national platform aimed at becoming the reference for all anti-disinformation stakeholders in the country by conducting fact-checking, disinformation analytical, and media literacy tasks to combat the presence and spread of disinformation propagated by domestic or foreign actors. For more please see: <https://www.hdmo.eu/section/about-us/who-we-are/>

*“A course of action that integrates ends, ways and means to meet policy objectives.”<sup>4</sup>*

If we look at it as an area of societal activities, Oxford Bibliographies points out that the definition cannot be reduced into one general definition referring to policymaking, since it is rather “an umbrella term to describe the activities of disciplines including public relations, management communication, and advertising” that “explores the capacity of all organizations—not only corporations, but also not-for-profit organizations, (...) and government.”<sup>5</sup> From a defense policy perspective, both NATO and the United States have provided their own definitions.<sup>6</sup> Their approach is a coherent and deliberate orchestration of communication activities and capabilities to endorse and advance the policies, operations, and strategic goals of an alliance or a nation. This unified approach encompasses Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations, and Psychological Operations, tailored to foster awareness, understanding, and support among key audiences. These efforts are carried out in tight coordination with allied nations or government entities, aiming to shape the informational environment in a way that is favorable to advancing collective or national interests. Strategic communication is characterized by a forward-looking, value-driven mindset that prioritizes long-term impact over immediate gains, employing a full spectrum of communicative tools to influence critical discourses and maintain strategic agility, all while adhering to core values and objectives.

### The short definition of strategic communication in Hungary

Without going into the intricate details of the Hungarian regime’s strategic communication aspects, a brief and working definition for Hungarian strategic communication can be established. As detailed below, Hungarian strategic communication fundamentally differs from the consensual definition of strategic communication in its symbolism, production mechanisms, and content characteristics. This divergence can be attributed to the vast government-controlled media conglomerate made up of public and private outlets monopolizing the Hungarian media landscape, whose central communication relies on a set of central mis- and disinformation conspiracy theories used regularly and methodically to manipulate media consumers, the Hungarian electorate, and sideline opposition parties or any foreign or domestic critic of the regime on a continuous basis. Consequently, the Hungarian strategic communication embodies both public and private media or communication entities and is capable of using the entirety of the Hungarian media space to influence not only specific target groups related to specific policy areas but the Hungarian society as a whole.

## Information threats: domestic and foreign actors and hostile communications

### The Hungarian media space

The government under Viktor Orbán has been actively working to gain influence over Hungary's public sphere. The approach has not been through direct government sanctions on independent media, but

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<sup>4</sup> <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/strategic-communication-mcom-function-guide/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0007.xml>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/jic\\_strategiccommunications.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162005-353#:~:text=Strategic%20communication%20is%20focused%20United,plans%2C%20themes%2C%20messages%2C%20and%20;https://stratcomcoe.org/about\\_us/about-strategic-communications/1](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/jic_strategiccommunications.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162005-353#:~:text=Strategic%20communication%20is%20focused%20United,plans%2C%20themes%2C%20messages%2C%20and%20;https://stratcomcoe.org/about_us/about-strategic-communications/1)

rather through a series of strategic moves. These included acquiring independent media organizations,<sup>7</sup> making them financially nonviable, manipulating advertising revenues spent by government institutions, transforming state-run media into vehicles for propaganda, and consolidating private media under control. A prime example is the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA),<sup>8</sup> which has orchestrated the merger of over 500 local and national commercial media entities formerly owned and later “donated” by pro-Fidesz oligarchs. Significant assistance has come from the National Media and Communications Authority (NMHH) and the Hungarian Competition Authority (GVH), which are staffed predominantly with bureaucrats loyal to the ruling Fidesz party, appointed for extended terms. Another key player in the government's media strategy is the Media Service Support and Asset Management Fund (MTVA), which consolidates state media's radio and television channels. In 2023 alone, MTVA controlled a significant budget of 127 billion Hungarian Forints (USD 367 million).<sup>9</sup> As a result, the Hungarian regime effectively controls approximately 80% of the media, according to the 2022 Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders.<sup>10</sup>

In this process, the Hungarian state, the Fidesz-KDNP coalition, and generally the government-aligned private press, GONGOs, and economic circles have conducted and merged strategic communication that can no longer be confined to the level of an organization or an economic or political subsystem. Instead, the official Hungarian strategic communication encompasses an entire goal and tool system and media market structure, ranging from government communication to regional newspapers, from traditional print and broadcast media to social media.

**Convergence of domestic and foreign hostile communication –the Russo-Ukrainian war**  
Consequently, the Orbán regime, capable of utilizing the entire Hungarian media landscape and its depths as a strategic communication tool, mobilizes strategic communication to target political enemies and partly to ideologically legitimize key policy moves, such as the nationalization of economic sectors and the construction of a populist-nationalist image and identity underpinning the regime. In foreign policy, strategic communication aims to balance two contradictory priorities: it tries to promote the foreign policy of “Eastern opening” favoring Eastern partners, while also fulfilling its obligations in the Western alliance system. In the case of war, this contradiction became quite evident. While the Hungarian government, in its “peace narrative,” blames Brussels, the West, or members of NATO for the war and its escalation, and criticizes Ukraine for not respecting minority rights, it has, albeit grudgingly and sometimes as part of a blackmail strategy, supported NATO decisions and voted for sanctions against Russia.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the societal landscape in Hungary has been deeply polarized over issues related to the war along party preferences,<sup>12</sup> a division that has been evident from the conflict's onset. Public opinion polls indicate that supporters of Fidesz and the far-right Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom) lean more towards a pro-Russian stance compared to voters of the opposition. This inclination is attributed partly to the ideological stances of these parties and partly to the dominance of pro-Russian narratives in the Hungarian public discourse.

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> <https://cepmf.hu/>

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

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

<sup>11</sup> Except for the accession procedure of Finland and Sweden.

<sup>12</sup> <https://infostart.hu/belfold/2022/05/09/hatalmas-a-szakadek-oroszorszag-es-ukrajna-hazai-megitelesben-partallastol-fuggoen>

The government's communication frames the pursuit of peace – as opposed to the “warmongering West” - as the primary national interest and a pivotal solution to the nation's socioeconomic challenges. PM Orbán thinks that peace negotiations should be Russian-American-led decision, suggesting that Western support for Ukraine only perpetuates the conflict. The government also strategically uses the sanctions discourse to shift blame for Hungary's domestic economic challenges, such as rising inflation, cost of living, and economic recession onto the EU, thus deflecting responsibility from itself. Narratives associated with Hungarian territorial revisionism related to the Russian aggression have been primarily propagated by far-right entities after the start of the war. Subsequently, platforms with pro-Russian leanings have been more active in this discourse, aiming to sow confusion and uncertainty.<sup>13</sup> While discussions around Ukrainization are prominent in Poland and Romania, the term is rarely used in Hungary, though its underlying concept is present in the form of the “defense of ethnic minority rights” in Transcarpathia. Hungarian discourse does include assertions seen in other countries about Ukraine being undeserving of assistance and that Hungary could reclaim Transcarpathia in the event of Ukraine's disintegration – tying back the discourse on Ukraine to themes of territorial revisionism.

The Kremlin's strategic communication has observed and leveraged these Hungarian narratives. It exploits them to propagate claims that (1) there is a lack of Western solidarity against Russia, (2) Russian interests, spheres of interests should be recognized, and (3) Poland, Hungary, and Romania are covertly plotting to dismember Ukraine and annex territories populated by ethnic minorities.<sup>14</sup>

Over time, the riskiness and uncertainty of Hungarian foreign policy grew together with how Hungary became increasingly isolated among Western allies, and the Hungarian foreign policy was forced onto a constrained path due to the deterioration of the Hungarian democracy and the regime's anti-Ukrainian stance after the start of the war. PM Viktor Orbán and the Hungarian MFA made a deliberate foreign policy push in 2023 to further court Russia, China,<sup>15</sup> or the Turkish countries,<sup>16</sup> even more, to increase its room for maneuver, ensure the country's energy supply, and business investments coming from the East, putting an even greater burden on the “multivectoral” strategic communication. **Thus, the Hungarian strategic communication can simultaneously be considered malign – supporting foes’ communication – and non-malign – aligning with Euro-Atlantic key issues – influence in nature.**

## Hungarian StratCom structures: legal and institutional frameworks

### Legal background

The legal framework of strategic communication and the disinformation activities that come with it are rooted in both the basic laws of the Hungarian legal system, such as the Fundamental Law (the Hungarian constitution), as well as the enforcement of other laws by the governing bodies under the administrative-political control of the ruling parties.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://pcblogger.atlatszo.hu/2022/10/27/nem-mondunk-le-a-teruleteinkrol-revizionista-narrativak-az-ukrajna-elleni-feszultsegekkel-szolgalataban/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://24.hu/kulfold/2022/11/17/orosz-ukran-haboru-lengyelorszag-magyarorszag-karpatalja-romania-putyin/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/putin-orban-russia-hungary-china-beijing-2265f08fca37e28f4b890d5ecce5d2e>

<sup>16</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/20/isolated-in-europe-orban-leans-on-turkic-allies-in-the-east/>



## The Fundamental Law of Hungary

Although points 1 and 2 of Article IX of the Fundamental Law acknowledge that 'Everyone has the right to freedom of expression' and 'Hungary recognizes and protects the freedom and diversity of the press, and ensures the conditions for free information necessary for the formation of democratic public opinion',<sup>17</sup> however, the application of the Fundamental Law or other laws does not necessarily uphold these principles either in theory or in practice.

In a notable decision from the autumn of 2019, Hungary's Supreme Court (the Kúria in Hungarian, not to be confused with the Constitutional Court of Hungary), concluded that neither the Fundamental Law nor the rules of the electoral procedural code mandate the neutrality of state bodies during election campaigns. This issue gained particular significance during the 2014 elections. According to a report by Transparency International, the ruling parties received material benefits equivalent to 560 million forints (USD 1.6 million) through government communications. This amount is substantial, considering that the legal maximum for campaign spending was 995 million forints (USD 2.9 million) per party.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, key policy documents, mentioned below, do not clearly state the need, goals, or means of how to counter foreign malign influence in the media sphere. Or if they do mention it, the Hungarian regime's behavior runs counter to it, as we have seen with regard to the Russo-Ukrainian war.

## The Hungarian National Infocommunication Strategy

The Hungarian National Infocommunication Strategy (NIS) for 2014-2020 – aimed to set the direction for info communication development aligned with the EU planning cycle for the same period – did not address any of the risks associated with the international environment or foreign hostile actors,<sup>19</sup> despite its core focus being on “key areas.”<sup>20</sup>

## The National Digitalization Strategy 2022 – 2030

The National Digitalization Strategy (NDS) of Hungary<sup>21</sup> for the period between 2022 and 2030 acknowledges various "risks."<sup>22</sup> However, these are primarily global issues, such as those related to climate change, or specific instances, like those concerning drones. The strategy specifically addresses "national security risks" in areas like the cybersecurity of power plants, protecting communication systems of state and local governments, and issues of capability development in the defense sector, considering Hungary's national defense and military security interests, as well as the need to develop operational capabilities in cyberspace in line with alliance obligations.

The NDS does tackle risks associated with critical infrastructure, highlighting the need to minimize the role of high-risk suppliers. However, it notably does not entertain China or Russia as specific risk factors,

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<sup>17</sup> <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100425.atv>

<sup>18</sup> <https://jog.tk.hu/mtalwp/az-allami-szervek-kommunikacios-semlegessege-a-kampanyban-egy-eltuno-alapelv?download=pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://2010->

[2014.kormany.hu/download/b/fd/21000/Nemzeti%20Infokommunik%C3%A1ci%C3%B3s%20Strat%C3%A9gia%202014-2020.pdf](https://2010-2014.kormany.hu/download/b/fd/21000/Nemzeti%20Infokommunik%C3%A1ci%C3%B3s%20Strat%C3%A9gia%202014-2020.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> These included the following: contribution to economic growth productivity; rise in employment; creation of consumer-added value; increase in business efficiency, and improvement of administrative, and public service processes in the framework of e-government.

<sup>21</sup> <https://cdn.kormany.hu/uploads/document/6/60/602/60242669c9f12756a2b104f8295b866a8bb8f684.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> This strategy is influenced by two significant factors: the closure of the National Infocommunications Service (NIS) in 2020 and the European Union's emphasis on digitalization in its 2021-2027 regional and cohesion policy. The NDS was developed in a context where digital transformation is a key focus area for Hungary and the EU, reflecting the evolving digital landscape and the need to address the challenges and opportunities it presents.

even in the context of the development of 5G networks, where the concerns mentioned are about the initial significant investments by service providers and public mistrust of new technology, such as fears regarding health risks.

#### National Security Strategy of Hungary

The Government Decision 1163/2020 (21.IV.) on the National Security Strategy of Hungary or the new National Security Strategy of Hungary (NSSH) does acknowledge some of the main geopolitical tensions by hashing out the main challenges, aims, tools of the strategy related to current changes and hybrid threats in a changing landscape of world affairs.<sup>23</sup> In a nutshell, it highlights the need for robust responses to communication and ICT threats, such as sophisticated influence operations and cyber vulnerabilities. Central to the strategy is a focus on regional stability, particularly in the Western Balkans, Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. National security and defense are prioritized, with goals set for developing a resilient defense posture by 2030 and protecting Hungarians abroad. The document also highlights the importance of international cooperation, seeking active partnerships with major organizations like NATO, the European Union, the United Nations, and the OSCE, as well as engaging in regional alliances. Addressing hybrid threats, the strategy underscores enhancing cyber and information security and ensuring coordinated defense and civil sector responses. It also sets out to tackle communication challenges by countering misinformation and managing digital vulnerabilities, acknowledging the complexities of modern security in an interconnected world. **However, the hybrid threats and “new challenges from the multipolar world order” do not specifically mention the Russo-Ukrainian war or point out military or national security risks associated the Russian aggression or Chinese assertiveness. On the contrary, it exonerates Russia against the war and blurs the responsibility for the aggression by saying:**

*“Russia is a dominant international actor with an essential role in global and regional security issues. Recent tensions have emerged between Russia and NATO, as well as the EU, leading to the suspension of practical civil and military cooperation by NATO. However, the political dialogue remains open, as NATO does not seek conflict and does not see Russia as a threat.”*

Similarly, the text mentions Hungary "watching China's military and security ambitions" without any negative connotation. Moreover, the Hungarian government emphasizes its interests in "pragmatically developing Hungarian-Russian relations and economic cooperation," and "pragmatically strengthening Hungarian-Chinese relations," including the Belt and Road Initiatives. The National Security Strategy of Hungary expresses an interest in a strong, democratic, and economically advancing Ukraine, and aims to bolster Hungary's role within Euro-Atlantic security frameworks, enhancing cooperation with NATO and EU allies. However, these aspirations may seem at least contradictory in light of the Hungarian government's hesitant stance towards financially supporting Ukraine's war effort and maintaining its financial stability, the accession procedure to the EU, not to mention the anti-Ukrainian narratives spread by the pro-government media. When it comes to the legal frameworks of dis- and misinformation, we need to take into account the Civil and Criminal Code and the National Media and Infocommunications Authority's (NMHH) legal practice, which further places the Hungarian media space under the rule of government-appointed officials under the thumb of government-appointed officials.

#### Civil Code and the Media Act

In Hungary, false factual statements are not constitutionally safeguarded if they are knowingly made or disregarded in violation of professional standards. Nevertheless, the legal recourse for addressing

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<sup>23</sup> <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A20H1163.KOR&txtreferer=00000001.txt>

untrue statements remains limited to specific circumstances:<sup>24</sup> (1) when such false communication infringes upon an individual's rights, where the Civil Code offers protection against reputation harm, the Criminal Code addresses defamation, and the Media Act allows for press rectification; (2) when the untrue statement carries legal consequences, such as false accusations or perjury; (3) when the false statement is intended to deceive consumers; (4) or when the false statement is made in a particularly high-risk context.

### Criminal Code

The latter scenario falls within the purview of the Criminal Code and carries penalties of up to three years of imprisonment (in specific cases, up to five years). There are two categories of such actions: the first is the threat of public endangerment,<sup>25</sup> and the second is scaremongering.<sup>26</sup> The latter was expanded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, introducing an additional specific case: during a special legal order, making false or distorted statements to the general public that may jeopardize or disrupt efforts to combat public hazards.

### Actors of strategic communication

#### The National Media and Infocommunications Authority

The relevant national authorities, including the Media Council and the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH), have been criticized for their lack of independence from the ruling party and their limited control over the content of media outlets under their purview. As a result, linear media services and public service media often disseminate partisan, biased content, or coordinated misinformation and distorted allegations that favor the ruling party, Fidesz. The appointment system for members of the Media Council, a five-member body responsible for monitoring and enforcing media laws within the NMHH, effectively grants the ruling party de facto control over this body.<sup>27</sup> Notably, all appointed members of the Media Council have been affiliated with Fidesz, underscoring the lack of diversity and independence. Given this context, the anti-disinformation measures implemented by national authorities under the ruling party's influence may be viewed as hypocritical. In 2020, the NMHH launched a campaign against fake news,<sup>28</sup> including informative videos and an infographic highlighting signs of fake news stories. However, even fact-checking articles published by public service media, ostensibly overseen by the NMHH, often fail to meet these criteria. Non-legislative measures include a hotline operated by the NMHH, allowing citizens to report suspected scaremongering, which is then forwarded to relevant authorities who do not engage with those in any meaningful way.

**In the absence of well-functioning and non-biased state-coordinated legal frameworks against foreign hostile strategic communication, it is up to civil society to take up the fight against disinformation, as presented below.**

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<sup>24</sup> <https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/1994-36-30-75>

<sup>25</sup> "Any person who states or disseminates any untrue fact intended to disturb the public peace, or gives the impression that there is imminent danger for the occurrence of an event that is likely to bring harm to the general public is guilty of a felony punishable by imprisonment not exceeding three years" (Criminal code, Act C, section 338)

<sup>26</sup> "Any conduct of uttering or publishing before the public at large a statement one knows to be false or with a reckless disregard for its truth or falsity at the scene of some emergency by which to violate public order or disturb the public peace at a place of public danger is guilty of a felony punishable by imprisonment not exceeding three years." (Criminal code, Section 337/1)

<sup>27</sup> [http://medialaws.ceu.hu/media\\_authority\\_independence\\_more.html](http://medialaws.ceu.hu/media_authority_independence_more.html)

<sup>28</sup> [https://nmhh.hu/cikk/214271/Ne\\_hagyd\\_hogy\\_a\\_hireket\\_olvasva\\_becsapjanak\\_az\\_erzelmeid](https://nmhh.hu/cikk/214271/Ne_hagyd_hogy_a_hireket_olvasva_becsapjanak_az_erzelmeid)

## Governmental political and civil service organizations

Given the highly centralized, hierarchical, and politically “hand-controlled” nature of the Hungarian political system, it does not make much sense to distinguish between political and civil service levels of decision-making in Hungary. They are the two sides of the same coin: many times, informal political decisions are enforced upon formally independent institutions, while selected institutions rule upon entire political subsystems, regardless of the normal divisions of power.

## The Prime Minister’s communication

The Hungarian government's communication can be characterized by a highly hierarchical, unified, centrally defined strategic communication that simultaneously extends to the communication of the governmental and ruling parties, governmental and budgetary organizations, state media, and the MTI (the Hungarian News Agency, Magyar Távirati Iroda in Hungarian). It also has purview over the communication of private media and GONGOs that are only semi-autonomous from the government, being either directed by officials loyal to the Fidesz-KDNP or receiving governmental funding in some form.

Communication occurs on three levels. At the top of the communication pyramid stands the Hungarian Prime Minister, who, as a leading politician and charismatic leader, is personally responsible for addressing the voter base, directing strategic communication, and representing it through personal messages. However, PM Viktor Orbán rarely gives interviews in Hungary, even to friendly media; instead, he prefers sharing his thoughts in his Friday interviews on Hungarian Radio,<sup>29</sup> while he details the challenges facing the Hungarian nation and the government's general domestic and foreign policy strategy in his annual speeches and in other public or private lectures.<sup>30</sup> Still, his social media presence and outreach is very powerful, has the most popular social media account among all the politicians with 1.2 million followers on Facebook,<sup>31</sup> 238 thousand followers on Twitter,<sup>32</sup> and 112 thousand followers on TikTok, including 186 thousand followers on Instagram.<sup>33 34</sup>

The centralization of the Hungarian political system, thus, means that Orbán’s role in shaping the strategic communication, which is intertwined the domestic or foreign policy of Hungary, especially on the war, is undisputable. Not only was he who called out President Zelenskyy on the night of the April 2022 elections, calling him one of the „enemies” he needed to defeat during the campaign,<sup>35</sup> but he also recently expressed his belief that:

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<sup>29</sup> <https://mediaklikk.hu/miniszterelnoki-interjuk/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2023/02/orban-viktor-2022-volt-a-legnehezebb-2023-lesz-a-legveszelyesebb-ev-a-rendszervaltas-ota>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/orbanviktor/>

<sup>32</sup> [https://twitter.com/PM\\_ViktorOrban?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/PM_ViktorOrban?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.tiktok.com/@viktor\\_a\\_tiktokon](https://www.tiktok.com/@viktor_a_tiktokon)

<sup>34</sup> An Academic paper considered the use of social media as part of a deliberate strategic communication on the part of the Hungarian PM to present himself as a unifying statesman based on masculinity. As political communication shifts increasingly online, Orbán's strategic use of social media, notably Instagram, demonstrates the mechanics of authoritarian populism after a decade in power. Analyzing 131 of Orbán's Instagram posts from 2019, it's evident he crafts an image of himself as both an "ordinary man" and a statesman. This image, forged through themes of nationalism and masculinity, aims to resonate with the public, setting itself apart from the government's usual "us versus them" rhetoric. For more, please see:

“Authentically” Maintaining Populism in Hungary – Visual Analysis of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Instagram, [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15205436.2022.2111265?fbclid=IwAR1OqtUQkTzItNdyjjsvRoAGGEly4Whlfxr9WNTQr7Xbd1GiP\\_T4RIPEQkw#:~:text=During%20the%20decade%20that%20he,g](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15205436.2022.2111265?fbclid=IwAR1OqtUQkTzItNdyjjsvRoAGGEly4Whlfxr9WNTQr7Xbd1GiP_T4RIPEQkw#:~:text=During%20the%20decade%20that%20he,g)

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60978909>

*"It is not an exaggeration to say that Hungarians in the Soviet Union were in a better position than during the era of Ukraine's statehood."<sup>36</sup>*

#### The Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister

On the most important middle level, the Prime Minister delegated government communication to Minister Antal Rogán, who heads the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister. The minister operates the Cabinet Office as a pinnacle communication body, coordinating the official domestic and international communication of the government, the party, and the public media through selected state secretaries and overseeing the operation of public media. The main organ under the Cabinet Office responsible for the coordination and content-production of strategic communication is the Government Information Centre (Kormányzati Tájékoztatási Központ - KTK).<sup>37</sup>

At the bottom level of the communication hierarchy, the government and Antal Rogán indirectly influence the media market through the distribution of advertising funds,<sup>38</sup> and directly through so-called informal briefings, according to independent media outlets.<sup>39</sup> Advertising decisions are coordinated by the National Communication Office overseeing communication procurement and sponsorship of budgetary organizations under the Government's control. In addition, government advertisements constitute the main source of revenue for pro-Fidesz private media, including the KÉSMA foundation.<sup>40</sup> Through media market spending, the government is also able to exert influence on independent media, some of which reciprocate with partial self-censorship on some issues.

#### The Hungarian Ministry of Defense

Until recently, the Hungarian Ministry of Defense was viewed as one of the last unequivocally pro-Western professional institutions, dedicated to fulfilling its Alliance obligations. However, after Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky became the new Minister signs of a possible ideological shift could be observed. For example, the new Chief of General Staff, Gábor Böröndi described the Second World War in an interview as a "local German-Polish war in 1939" claiming that the failure to appropriately manage escalation of the conflict through peace processes at the time led to the Second World War. The nature and implications of this interview were so severe that Sebastian Kęciek, the Polish Ambassador to Hungary, demanded accountability in an open letter, decrying this unacceptable distortion of history.<sup>41</sup> Szalay-Bobrovniczky also reiterated the government communication panels about the need for "peace" in Ukraine by blaming the West and members of NATO for the escalation of the conflict.<sup>42</sup> In summary, the communication of the Hungarian Department of Defense (DoD) has been increasingly aligning with the Hungarian government's strategic messaging under the new leadership. This shift in tone and content cannot be offset by the recent announcement of military development by Szalay-Bobrovniczky, which focuses on adopting Western, particularly German, military hardware.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20231117\\_orban\\_maert\\_ukrajna\\_karpatalja\\_szovjetunio](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20231117_orban_maert_ukrajna_karpatalja_szovjetunio)

<sup>37</sup> <https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/2022-4-B0-7G>

<sup>38</sup> <https://mertek.atlatszo.hu/guest-blog-advertisements-in-pro-government-and-independent-weeklies-in-2020/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://media1.hu/2023/10/31/exkluziv-kormanyinfot-tartottak-fideszes-mediakunkasoknak-orban-viktor-hivatalaban-a-karmelitaban-vagy-valami-nagyon-hasonlot-video/>, <https://444.hu/tldr/2021/10/04/orbanek-nagy-kerdes-2022-elott-lehet-e-orokke-uralni-a-pillanatot>

<sup>40</sup> <https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/03/15/orban-viktor-media-sajtoszabadsag-kesma-fidesz>, [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20181128\\_Meszáros\\_elajandékozza\\_a\\_teljes\\_mediabirodalmat\\_a\\_KözepEurópai\\_Sajtó\\_és\\_Media\\_Alapítványnak](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20181128_Meszáros_elajandékozza_a_teljes_mediabirodalmat_a_KözepEurópai_Sajtó_és_Media_Alapítványnak)

<sup>41</sup> [https://nepszava.hu/3194105\\_sebastian-keciek-ii-vilaghaboru-borondi-gabor-level](https://nepszava.hu/3194105_sebastian-keciek-ii-vilaghaboru-borondi-gabor-level)

<sup>42</sup> [https://nepszava.hu/3201210\\_szalay-bobrovniczky-kristof-orosz-ukran-haboru-haderofejlesztes](https://nepszava.hu/3201210_szalay-bobrovniczky-kristof-orosz-ukran-haboru-haderofejlesztes)

<sup>43</sup> The new minister was also implicated in a business venture involving Russian stakeholders that raised further questions about conflicts of interests, although, he got rid of his stakes in the company after taking office. For

## GONGOs and NGOs

Even before the second Orbán-government came into being in 2010, the Fidesz-KDNP in opposition has already put special emphasis on creating an alternative civic base made of party-related media, civic organizations and a large base of civic volunteers as an organic part of the party's, later, the government's strategic communication. Some of these have been converted into GONGOs after 2010 to serve three main functions: (1) generate positive reporting or analysis on the government's accomplishments; (2) legitimize the regime, and its actions, policy positions ideologically; and finally, mobilize online or offline support behind the government in times of elections or crises. The main think-tank of the Fidesz-KDNP is the Századvég Foundation which conducts regular opinion polling on behalf of the Hungarian government, providing insights into public perceptions of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, opposition leaders, governmental achievements, and current political events. Results help shape the government's communication strategies and policy decisions. Legitimacy is provided by several other institutions, such as the following:

- Alliance for a Civic Hungary Foundation (Szövetség a Polgári Magyarorszáért Alapítvány, SZPMA): Enhances Fidesz's presence and influence in Brussels and maintains connections with conservative foundations in Germany.
- Center for Fundamental Rights (Alapjogokért Központ, AK): Receives significant state funding and actively represents the Hungarian government's interests in national and international forums.
- Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC): Involved in extensive educational activities and plays a key role in foreign relations through organizing and participating in international events.
- Danube Institute: Serves as a bridge between Central Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world, organizing conferences and participating in initiatives like National Conservatism.
- Political Network for Values (Politikai Hálózat az Értékekért, PNfV): An umbrella organization focusing on anti-abortion and conservative family values, supported by the Hungarian government.

Offline and online mobilization efforts are mainly conducted by the Civic Cooperation Forum (Civil Összefogás Fórum, CÖF) and Megafon. CÖF has so far organized nine so-called "peace marches" to support important issues on the government's political agenda. The first march in 2012 centered on the "defense of sovereignty" against Brussels,<sup>44</sup> and the most recent in 2022 focusing on the Hungarian people's protest against sending arms or soldiers to the front, advocating for peace instead.<sup>45</sup>

To mobilize support on social media, namely Facebook, the Megafon Centre of pro-government influencers was established in 2020 to "counterbalance the predominant left-liberal voices on social media." The interconnectedness between these pro-Fidesz organizations is exemplified by Megafon whose founder and owner is István Kovács,<sup>46</sup> who also serves as the Strategic Director of the Center For Fundamental Rights (Alapjogokért Központ).<sup>47</sup> Megafon, which features pro-government influencers on social media, has received HUF 8 billion (about USD20 million) since its inception,

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more, please see: <https://wbj.pl/hungarian-defense-ministers-russian-ties-to-be-a-glaring-conflict-of-interest/post/134775>

<sup>44</sup> [https://index.hu/belfold/2012/10/18/meg\\_akartak\\_buktatni\\_orban\\_viktort\\_brusszelbol/](https://index.hu/belfold/2012/10/18/meg_akartak_buktatni_orban_viktort_brusszelbol/)

<sup>45</sup> <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2022/03/ismet-utjara-indul-a-bekemenet>

<sup>46</sup> [https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20200626\\_unom\\_mar\\_a\\_ballib\\_gozhengert\\_itt\\_az\\_ideje\\_hogy\\_megallitsuk\\_kovacs\\_istvan\\_a\\_megafon\\_kozpont\\_alapitoja\\_a\\_Mandinernek](https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20200626_unom_mar_a_ballib_gozhengert_itt_az_ideje_hogy_megallitsuk_kovacs_istvan_a_megafon_kozpont_alapitoja_a_Mandinernek)

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.corvinak.hu/eloado/kovacs-istvan-gergely>

surpassing the combined campaign expenditures of all opposition parties for social media.<sup>48</sup> It spent HUF 2.7 billion (USD 7.1 million) on government propaganda in 2022 alone.<sup>49</sup> The source of their budget is probably public money, however, Megafon insisted that they finance their activities from donations. Still, an investigative piece of Telex suggested that it was funded by the Cabinet Office through a civic foundation.<sup>50</sup>

#### *Alliance of Hungarian democratic NGOs*

Around two dozen NGOs and independent media outlets are striving to counter the domestic and the government's disinformation narratives on key issues such as the Russo-Ukrainian war, the risks of closer ties with China or Russia, immigration, and vulnerable groups like the LGBTQ community. These organizations face constant attacks from the government and its media filled with various and unfounded accusations of "treason," "serving foreign interests," or pushing a "liberal agenda" that allegedly threatens the Hungarian nation. In addition to publishing research and country reports on the state of Hungarian democracy, most of the prominent Hungarian NGOs have formed a common policy platform named "Civilization."<sup>51</sup> This coalition focuses on ensuring a free civil sphere, transparency in government funding, and promoting an open, solidary society. Their goals and actions not only aim to counter the government's hostile communications but also highlight necessary changes to restore the rule of law in Hungary. These include ensuring the transparency of state funding to civic organizations, guaranteeing meaningful participation in legislation, and providing adequate public access to information that is currently obscured under a veil of propaganda and the secrecy of government decrees.

#### *HDMO*

LAKMUSZ-HDMO serves as Hungary's EDMO hub, designed as a national platform with the aim of becoming the primary reference point for all stakeholders engaged in combating disinformation within the country. HDMO, which stands for the Hungarian Digital Media Observatory, is led by a consortium consisting of six partners. Its notable strength lies in its diverse team, encompassing social scientists, humanities experts, journalists, and fact-checking professionals. Given the multifaceted nature of countering disinformation, the project adopts a multidisciplinary approach, addressing the issue from various angles. The consortium's activities are structured around three core pillars: Lakmusz and AFP conduct fact-checking, Political Capital and Mérték Media Monitor engage in research and publications, while the Idea Foundation, with AFP's support, offers training to educators and journalists, as well as overseeing other media literacy initiatives. The initiative is co-funded by the European Commission in 2022, with Lakmusz.hu having already established itself as a reputable fact-checking platform.<sup>52</sup> Even though the initiative's focus is, at least partially, on strategic communication, the low number of organizations, and resources make their outreach and impact quite limited in the Hungarian public space.

#### *Opposition parties*

Following the unsuccessful 2022 elections, which did not yield electoral success for the joint list of opposition parties, there is currently neither the will nor the capability among opposition actors to collaborate on a unified political agenda and establish a common strategic communication framework for the upcoming local and European elections in June 2024.

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<sup>48</sup> <https://168.hu/itthon/megafon-milliardos-tamogatas-partfinanszirozas-propaganda-266760>

<sup>49</sup> [https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20230531\\_megafon\\_beszamolok](https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20230531_megafon_beszamolok)

<sup>50</sup> <https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/11/25/kozpenz-milliardok-a-kormany-szakertoire-alapjogokert-kozpont-batthyany-lajos-alapitvany>

<sup>51</sup> <https://civilizacio.net/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.hdmo.eu/section/about-us/who-we-are/>

## Assessment of the current state of strategic communications and its effectiveness

In Hungary, the primary sources of disinformation include government-controlled media (both traditional and social), alongside fringe, far-right, and pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets. These platforms are the foremost disseminators of disinformation narratives within the country. The dominant force behind the spread of these narratives is the ruling party, Fidesz, and its affiliated media outlets, such as Magyar Nemzet<sup>53</sup> and Origo.hu.<sup>54</sup> Although they have a smaller impact on the public, far-right sources like Kuruc.info<sup>55</sup> and Szent Korona Radio,<sup>56</sup> fringe social media channels like Számok a baloldali hírek ellenszere,<sup>57</sup> and pro-Kremlin sites such as Orosz Hírek,<sup>58</sup> Newsfront,<sup>59</sup> and Balrad,<sup>60</sup> also contribute to the spread of disinformation. Foreign hostile narratives emanating from Russia or China, as stated above, are piggybacking on the Hungarian government anti-West and pro-East strategic communication. A prime example of it is the current case of the „sovereignty campaign” and the Eurosceptic, anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian communication campaign behind it.

### The case of the „sovereignty campaign”

On 21 September 2023, Máté Kocsis, leader of the Fidesz parliamentary group, announced a new legislative package on the "defense of sovereignty" to be adopted by the Hungarian parliament. Kocsis explained that the package aims to safeguard next year's elections by making it more difficult for "those who sell our country abroad for dollars," (...) "left-wing journalists, pseudo-civilians and dollar politicians who think they can gain political power by pandering to the interests of American democratic billionaires or multinationals in Brussels and then pay the price for this support by abandoning the economic interests of the country."<sup>61</sup> The campaign, despite sticking to the overused term of "sovereignty," actually creates a new communicative and legislative framework for the Hungarian government's hostile narratives on immigration, human rights organizations, the war, and Ukraine, while launching a new round of attacks against the same political targets, like George Soros, the European Union ("Brussels"), independent NGOs, opposition parties, and Muslim immigrants.

The details of the legislative package have ultimately revealed the establishment of a "Sovereignty Protection Office" that would monitor any organization,<sup>62</sup> not just political parties, with an impact on the Hungarian electorate or public space during elections. By extending the application of election laws to any type of legal or non-legal entity, the new legislation bars organizations from receiving any foreign funding for election-related activities. The "election-related" aspect of the legislation seems to be intentionally dubious in its interpretation and application, while it threatens candidates or organizations accepting foreign financing with up to three years' imprisonment under a new clause in

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<sup>53</sup> <https://magyarnemzet.hu/>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.origo.hu/index.html>

<sup>55</sup> <https://kuruc.info/>

<sup>56</sup> <https://szentkoronaradio.com/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://twitter.com/szamokadatok>

<sup>58</sup> <https://oroszhirek.hu/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://hu.news-front.su/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://balrad.hu/>

<sup>61</sup> <https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/09/21/fidesz-kdnp-kocsis-mate-simicsko-istvan-kihelyezett-frakcioules-esztergom-sajtotajekoztato>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.parlament.hu/irom42/06222/06222.pdf>



the Criminal Code. Additionally, candidates who violate these provisions are required to pay double the amount of support received into a designated account determined by the State Audit Office.

## Analysis of discourses on NATO

Even if not directly, the "sovereignty campaign" somewhat shapes views on NATO, as foreign pressure in the Hungarian parliament regarding Finland and Sweden's admission to the alliance has always been presented by the Hungarian government as an issue of sovereignty. Adding the Hungarian military leadership's changing stance on Russia and the West to the mix, NATO's standing has been questioned in the eyes of the Hungarian public. Although Hungarians have consistently shown strong support for NATO, as multiple Globsec data have indicated,<sup>63</sup> it remains uncertain whether the Hungarian government's anti-Western stance and pro-Russian, pro-Chinese rhetoric embedded into a general anti-Western rhetoric could deteriorate positive perceptions of NATO, similar to the already deteriorating perceptions of the United States or the European Union.<sup>64</sup>

Based on a curated list of Hungarian "trustworthy information sources," and "questionable sources" on Facebook, we collected a database of Facebook posts containing the search term or keyword of "NATO" for one month using CrowdTangle for the period between 21 October and 21 November 2023. The database was then used to identify the main topics, disinformation narratives, disseminators of these narratives on "NATO" from a comparative perspective. As per the analysis and comparison of different sources, and their data, different trends could be identified in the Hungarian media space with regard to NATO.

In general, in terms of the number of posts, primarily mainstream government-aligned and, to a lesser extent, independent media dominate the public discourse on NATO in the Hungarian public. Among those, we can find Hirado.hu, the news media outlet of the main state channel or the independent 24.hu. However, the number of posts produced by leading media outlets is relatively low, only a few dozen in the examined month, probably due to Fidesz's effort to keep it out of the center of the political discourse and a low interest in the issue of the NATO accession procedure that is still underway.

In contrast, when comparing the most viral posts on NATO, those generating the most interactions are politicians and opinion leaders. Prominent figures play a significant role in this, including opposition and government party politicians, such as Tímea Szabó,<sup>65</sup> former co-leader of the opposition party Dialogue for Hungary, and Katalin Novák, the President of Hungary. The post generating the most interactions (2,314) was published by the opposition's former joint prime ministerial candidate, Péter Márki-Zay, who accused the Hungarian government of being hypocritical and serving "Russian interests" by sending troops to Chad while opposing military aid intended for Ukraine – when in fact, military hardware is transferred through Hungary to Ukraine.<sup>66</sup>

In comparison to far-right, vaccine-skeptical, pro-Russian, clickbait Facebook pages, it becomes clear that the Hungarian government's strategic communication is dominating the discourse about NATO on Facebook. The most interactions were generated by FM Péter Szijjártó, the Hungarian government's website, and Alexandra Szentkirályi, the government spokesperson. Besides them, only a politician from the far-right Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk), Előd Novák, and the far-right Elemi news page managed to generate significant traffic. It is also evident that the official communication of the

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<sup>63</sup>[https://hvg.hu/itthon/20231117\\_Ezzel\\_a\\_11\\_kerdessel\\_startol\\_a\\_nemzeti\\_konzultacio\\_Brusszel\\_Ukrajnamigransgetto\\_dollarbaloldal\\_es\\_gyermekvedelem\\_a\\_temak](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20231117_Ezzel_a_11_kerdessel_startol_a_nemzeti_konzultacio_Brusszel_Ukrajnamigransgetto_dollarbaloldal_es_gyermekvedelem_a_temak)

<sup>64</sup> [https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=3106](https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3106)

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100044157020101/posts/89500849198104>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100044294431020/posts/880603513426122>

government tries to keep the discourse on NATO as neutral in nature as possible. Most posts primarily discuss cooperation within the NATO framework and the Hungarian military's development under the new leadership, mostly steering clear of political tensions surrounding the NATO accession of Sweden – a decision that is halted by Turkey and Hungary. **Analysis of the data also highlighted that this type of governmental dominance operates quite inefficiently. While all NATO-related posts produced a total of 93,223 interactions, the government-controlled sphere only contributed with 3,989 to it. The disparity becomes even more pronounced when examining a one-month period of all governmental communication. Consequently, the most viral posts on NATO are produced by both governmental and opposition politicians, while the discourse on NATO in the Hungarian media space is dominated by governmental sources. Other far-right or pro-Kremlin media contribute minimally to the discourse, their effect mainly relegated to the extremist subculture.**

When examining the far-right discourse on NATO, it is clearly dominated by Mi Hazánk's politician, Novák Előd, and the far-right Elemei page. Their messages criticize the Hungarian government's declaration of a "war emergency" and the special legal order bypassing parliamentary decision-making, as well as the deployment of Hungarian troops to Chad, the latter with mild anti-Semitic undertones by characterizing the Chad regime as led by "a dictator supported by Israel, who bans elections and orders shooting at protesters."<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the Elemei page relays pure Russian propaganda, quoting Putin or Russian officials discussing the depletion of the Ukrainian army,<sup>68</sup> Moscow's official withdrawal from the European conventional armed forces treaty due to rising tensions with NATO,<sup>69</sup> or Putin's deliberations on NATO's alleged territorial aggression in Asia.<sup>70</sup>

**As a result, public discourses on NATO increasingly portray the organization negatively. This perspective stems from the Hungarian government framing the accession of Finland and Sweden as a matter of "sovereignty," whereas far-right actors amplify this negative view of the Alliance, leveraging the Kremlin's strategic communication. They focus on NATO's alleged aggressive stance, its purported role in the Russo-Ukrainian war, and the "escalation" of the conflict itself.**

## Challenges and potential of the strategic communications

In short, the main challenge of strategic communication in Hungary lies with the government, which uses its enormous propaganda machine to conduct both friendly and hostile strategic communication activities targeting the opposition, civic actors, independent media and members of NATO or the European Union, depending on the issue at hand. The hostile communication is preparing the ground for the foreign hostile narratives of Russia or China to penetrate the Hungarian media space with ease. As a result, the potential of Hungarian strategic communication can be divided into two segments: governmental and independent non-governmental. The latter includes civil organizations and independent investigative journalists, providing new, horizontal structures and quality content. However, this is not integrated with the government's vertical, multi-layered strategic communication. In contrast, non-governmental strategic communication, despite its good intentions, has limited reach

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100050195002108/posts/866722535010905>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100090939128106/posts/262335186807784>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100090939128106/posts/265412143166755>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100090939128106/posts/266360139738622>

and is less organized. It exists in a horizontal structure with minimal coordination among participants, as seen below in the table outlining the elements and challenges of the Hungarian strategic communication landscape.

Elements/levels of StratCom	Potential of strategic communication					Hostile influence		Coordination	
	Actors	Infrastructure	StratCom Center	Expertise	Quality content	Domestic direction of StratCom	Foreign hostile StratCom	On the same level	Vertical-horizontal integration
<b>Vertical</b>	State and state-controlled	500+	No or no formal one	No/PR-focused	No - PR-focused	Hostile	Friendly/supportive	Yes	No
<b>Horizontal</b>	NGOs, independent media	About two dozen	No	Yes	Yes - investigative	Friendly	Hostile/rejecting	No	No

**Hungarian StratCom elements on the state-led vertical and civic-controlled horizontal levels**

**Thus, the main challenge concerns transforming the Hungarian government’s media leverage into an effective tool for countering hostile strategic communication, which seems unrealistic at this point. Alternatively, transforming the stratcom elements on a horizontal level into a “civic strategic communication” initiative would require cooperation and resources that the current civic actors do not possess.**

## Conclusions and recommendations

### Conclusions

1. The current governmental communication apparatus is incapable or unwilling to conduct proper strategic communication that aligns with the Euro-Atlantic alliance and counter foreign hostile influences, primarily from Russia or China. The new "sovereignty legislative package" does not increase defense capabilities against foreign hostile influence either since it attacks the West and domestic targets primarily. Moreover, there is no specialized government-mandated institution to counter foreign hostile influences, while the Hungarian media authority’s "fake news" initiative is not geared towards countering foreign hostile influence.
2. The anti-West communication, therefore, reinforces both domestic and foreign hostile narratives, creating synergy between them in Hungary. In the case of NATO, Hungary's delay in the accession of Sweden is framed as a matter of 'sovereignty.' This approach enables pro-Russian actors, such as the far-right Our Homeland Movement, and pro-Russian or Kremlin-aligned media, to intensify their attacks on NATO. NATO becoming a target of such attacks has already started to diminish the previously unequivocal support for membership expressed by Hungarians. A November 2022 survey by Political Capital found that around 30% of Hungarians consider NATO responsible for the war, after Russia, the United States, and Ukraine but before the European Union.<sup>71</sup>
3. Non-hostile strategic communication elements on the horizontal level are present but lack the resources and structure to compete with government-dominated communication, let alone create an "alternative" strategic communication hub. Civic cooperations like Civilizáció or HDMO could be the start of such a communication initiative. However, the first lacks the stratcom component as its core activity, while HDMO is a consortium of only six organizations (AFP, EPP, Political Capital, IDEA, Mérték, Lakmusz) with minimal resources at their disposal to put forward proper stratcom activities.

<sup>71</sup> [https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=3106](https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3106)

## Recommendations

Our suggestions only focus on the horizontal elements of strategic communication or civic actors working in a hostile media environment to counter both domestic and foreign hostile influences, and possible donors assisting their work.

### Recommendation for civic actors

#### 1. **Focus on Community Engagement:**

- Invest in initiatives that empower local communities to participate in strategic communication efforts.
- Support grassroots movements and local NGOs in building resilience against hostile influences.

#### 2. **Engage in Counter-Narrative Campaigns and Organizational Strategies:**

- Develop and disseminate positive narratives that counteract hostile messaging.
- Highlight success stories and positive outcomes as a contrast to negative propaganda.
- Create a flexible strategic plan to adapt to changing hostile environments.
- Regularly reassess and update strategies based on the evolving nature of threats.

#### 3. **Train in Crisis Communication:**

- Equip disinformation experts, NGOs, independent media operating in Hungary or abroad with skills in crisis communication and rapid response to emerging threats.
- Conduct regular drills and simulations to prepare for real-world scenarios.

#### 4. **Promote Transparency and Trust:**

- Build trust with the public by being transparent about goals, funding, and activities.
- Clearly communicate the sources of information and back them with evidence.

#### 5. **Advocate for Policy Change in cooperation with democratic political actors:**

- Work with policymakers to advocate for regulations that combat misinformation.
- Participate in legislative processes to shape policies affecting information dissemination.

### Recommendations for donors

#### 1. **Provide Financial Support:**

- Offer grants and funding opportunities specifically for strategic communication initiatives in hostile environments.
- Ensure sustainable funding models that allow for long-term planning and implementation.

#### 2. **Advocate for Policy and Regulatory Support on local, regional or European levels.**

- Lobby for policies and regulations that protect freedom of expression and combat misinformation.
- Support legal frameworks that enable civic groups to operate effectively in hostile environments.

**3. Promote Network and Alliance Formation:**

- Encourage the formation of alliances and networks among NGOs, civic groups, and international organizations to strengthen collective response capabilities.
- Facilitate partnerships and collaborations across borders for a coordinated approach.
- Create platforms for sharing best practices, strategies, and insights between civic actors in different regions.
- Organize international conferences and seminars focusing on strategic communication in hostile environments.

**4. Offer Psychological Support and Burnout Prevention:**

- Provide mental health resources and support for individuals working in high-stress, hostile communication environments.
- Promote practices and programs that help prevent burnout and maintain the well-being of civic actors.

***Disclaimer***

*This report has been prepared with support from IRI's Beacon Project. The opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of IRI.*

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