

# INSIDE **RUSSIA'S** MANIPULATIVE EFFORTS IN HUNGARY

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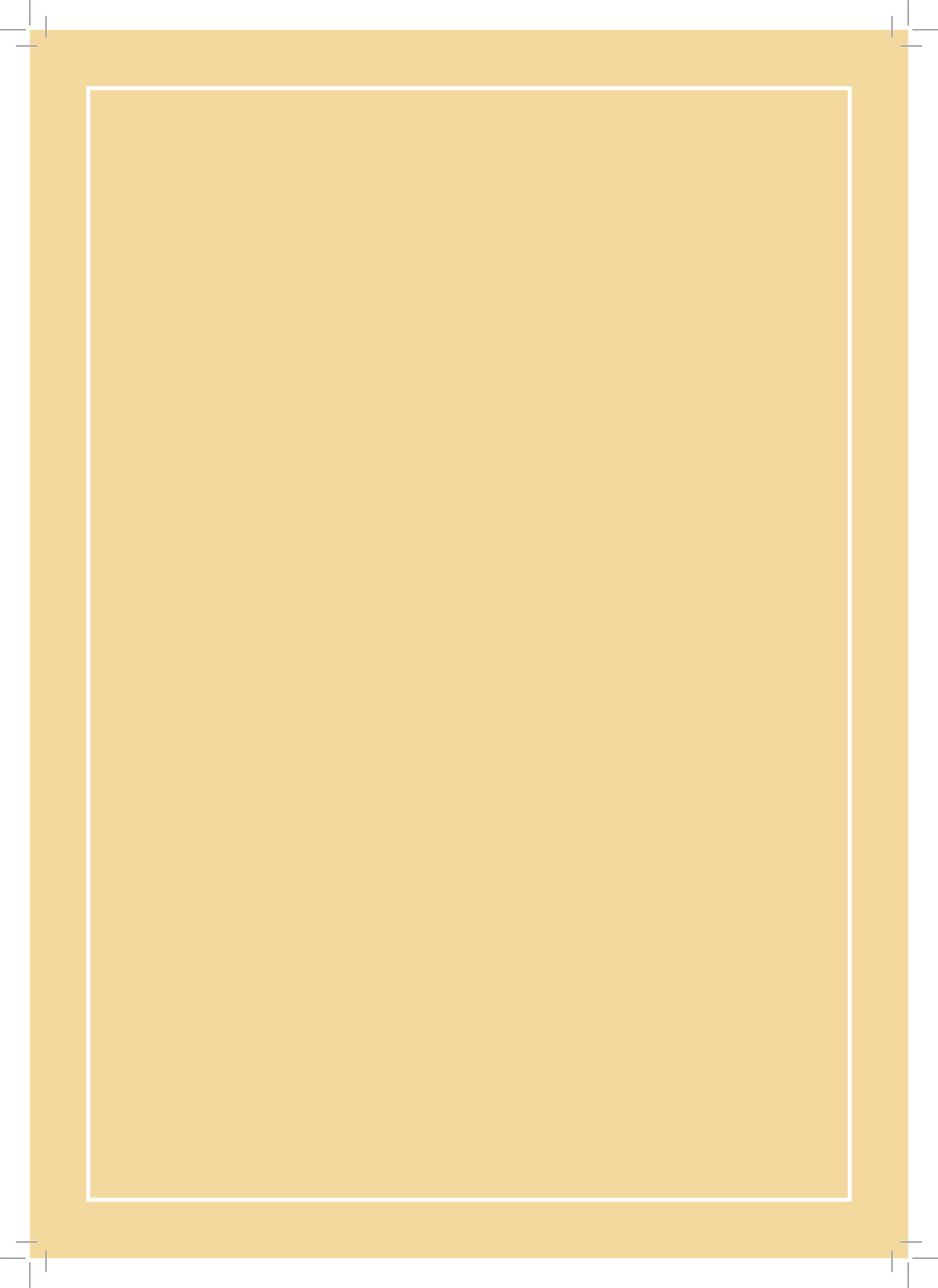
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## INTRODUCTION

Political Capital is an independent policy research, analysis and consulting institute founded in 2001 in Budapest. Our institute owes no allegiance to any government or political body. We have developed an extended network of professional partners, both domestically and internationally, all of whom have helped our institute become one of the most influential think tanks in Central and East Europe. We are committed to the guiding principles of parliamentary democracy, market economy, human rights and Euro-Atlanticism. Through the creation of analytical content, quantitative and qualitative policy research, and by organizing substantial debates, we want to (1) promote critical political thinking and increase understanding for politics, (2) raise awareness about political issues that have an impact on citizens' everyday life, even if indirectly, and (3) contribute to and develop critical public discourse and policy making based on knowledge and evidence.

Political Capital was supported by the US Department of State to examine various aspects of pro-Kremlin disinformation in Hungary. With the generous support of the Department of State, we could assess previously under-researched facets of pro-Kremlin disinformation in this country, such as how Hungary is depicted and used by Russian-language pro-Kremlin media, how NATO is perceived by Hungarians and the image of the United States in Hungary. This volume is the result of our six-month-long research project<sup>1</sup>.

Our first study, entitled '***A battering ram against the EU? - Hungary through the eyes of Russian propagandists***' reveals that the majority of the Russian press conveys a neutral or positive image of Hungary as a result of the Orbán cabinet's very friendly Russia policy. The Hungarian government's conflicts with the EU also receive extensive coverage in Russian media, where the country often appears as Moscow's instrument, or "anti-sanctions battering ram." We also reveal that deteriorating Hungary-Ukraine relations were frequently used by Russia to incite conflicts within Ukraine between the majority population and ethnic Hungarians.

Our second piece, '***The Kremlin's voice dominated social media discussions on Facebook in Hungary before the war***', shows that while NATO was not a key topic of discussion among the Hungarian political elite and even most media outlets before the war, Russia-friendly users, fake or real, were highly active in spreading the Kremlin's propaganda about the military alliance. These profiles were spreading the most popular anti-NATO conspiracies of the time, such as the one about the alliance's alleged desire to attack Russia or force Moscow to attack the West.

Our last text entitled '***The image of the US in Hungary***' takes a look at how the image of the United States is being forged by narratives disseminated by the Hungarian political and media elites, and social media discussions. We warn the public about the politicization of Hungary's solid relationship with the US, including that of firm economic and defense ties, never questioned by leading Hungarian decision-makers.

We hope that the conclusions of these three studies can lay the foundations for the continued improvement of US-Hungarian relations, which are crucial especially in the trying geopolitical environment of today.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2929](https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=2929)

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## A BATTERING RAM AGAINST THE EU? – HUNGARY THROUGH THE EYES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDISTS

*Dominik Istrate, Dorka Takácsy, Péter Krekó*

### THE GROWTH OF RUSSIA'S PROPAGANDA MACHINE

Since the Maidan revolution broke out in November 2013, and the Eastern-Ukrainian war at the beginning of 2014, the relationship between Putin's Russia and the West has drastically deteriorated. As of today, it has fallen to depths not witnessed since the Cold War. The EU, for instance, introduced sectoral economic sanctions against Russia and blacklisted several Russian figures. In reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the sanctions got significantly harsher, including a ban on products key to the Russian military industry and oil imports from the country.

As a result of their assault against the sovereignty of Ukraine, the war crimes committed by the Russian armed forces, and an increasingly aggressive foreign policy, the reputation of Putin's Russia has significantly deteriorated among the political leadership and societies of Western countries.<sup>1</sup> Russian leadership has constructed a broad disinformation ecosystem<sup>2</sup> consisting of Russian state-owned and pro-government media, as well as alternative portals. The aim of this network is to refine Russia's international image, but more importantly, to directly, or, rather, indirectly influence decision-makers and opinion leaders by disseminating narratives in line with the Kremlin's own interests.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Russian media endeavors to cause information disorder in Western societies, making local populations question factual information. The Kremlin-backed RT (formerly Russia Today) has grown to be the most significant international participant of the pro-Kremlin media, although it is only one piece of the puzzle: organizations such as Sputnik International or News Front are also a part of an information network connected to the Kremlin.

The development of the Russian disinformation ecosystem, as its activities are becoming more prevalent than ever before, has led to a sort of "information warfare," in which Hungary, and therein, the government of PM Orbán, has probably been playing the most important supporting role. In parallel to the drastic deterioration of Russia-West relations, Viktor Orbán – going almost entirely against the European political mainstream – has implemented a particularly visible political turnaround, shifting his attention towards the East. The Hungarian Prime Minister announced the largest energy investment in the history of Hungary parallelly to the outbreak of the Ukrainian war in 2014;<sup>4</sup> namely, the Paks nuclear power plant expansion project – founded from a Russian loan.

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

2 [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem\\_08-04-20.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf)

3 [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/dezinfo\\_guide\\_rovid\\_hun\\_20181123.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/dezinfo_guide_rovid_hun_20181123.pdf)

4 [https://index.hu/gazdasag/ado\\_es\\_koltsegvetes/2014/01/14/nem\\_veletlenul\\_ment\\_orban\\_moszkvaba/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/ado_es_koltsegvetes/2014/01/14/nem_veletlenul_ment_orban_moszkvaba/)



Moreover, since 2014 he has repeatedly expressed his opposition towards economic sanctions imposed as a European response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> Allegedly flourishing bilateral economic cooperation between Hungary and Russia have regularly been presented as a benefit. Hungary, for its part, has expressed its commitment to firm relations with Russia on multiple occasions, even on a diplomatic level. See for instance the case where László Trócsányi, former Hungarian Minister of Justice, handed two Russian arms traffickers back to Russia instead of the United States.<sup>6</sup>

It goes without saying, that as a result of Hungary's pro-Moscow policy, as well as the damage to the Kremlin's international reputation, a significant proportion of the Russian government's state-controlled media regularly reports on various developments of the two countries' bilateral relations, especially if this pivots Putin's Russia into a better position in the European political space.

## HUNGARY IN THE EYES OF THE RUSSIAN PUBLIC

Based on Google Trends search data,<sup>7</sup> it appears that the number of searches related to Hungary in Russia peaked during the week of the European Football Championship in 2021. The first 10 terms containing the search term "Hungary" were all related to football.

Yandex Keyword Searcher presents a different view. The variance of Hungary-related searches is more significant, and the top list includes<sup>8</sup> the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Hungarian Visa Center. In terms of search numbers, similarly to the data of Google Trends, a significant increase can be observed during the time of the Football Championship. In June 2021, 1,447,371 searches contained the keyword "Hungary," compared to an average of 484,686 for the rest of the year.<sup>9</sup>

A study by Levada shows that Russian public opinion is less interested in Hungary, and in addition, only 1-2% of Russians mention Hungary as a friendly country.<sup>10</sup>

## MAIN NARRATIVES ABOUT HUNGARY

While the European mainstream intends to distance itself from Russian political leadership, Viktor Orban has mentioned several times in the past three years the importance of political collaboration with the Kremlin. Furthermore, in contrast to most of the rest of the EU cabinets, the Hungarian government has seemingly been alone in arguing several times against the sanctions towards Russia

5 [https://index.hu/belfold/2017/02/02/putyin\\_latogatas\\_orban\\_viktor\\_sajtotajekoztato/?fbclid=IwARoKvHG3FnJ7VA\\_zGVJ8Go4uKcW7yb-Hyszmhp4tfEg-i73Mqokl8rLuwlY](https://index.hu/belfold/2017/02/02/putyin_latogatas_orban_viktor_sajtotajekoztato/?fbclid=IwARoKvHG3FnJ7VA_zGVJ8Go4uKcW7yb-Hyszmhp4tfEg-i73Mqokl8rLuwlY)

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

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

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

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

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



- at least most of the time.<sup>11</sup> It is well known that several Russian laws restricting fundamental rights have served as a model for Hungary, such as the 2017 “NGO law” closely paralleling its Russian counterpart;<sup>12</sup> while ‘The Child Protection Act’ and its regulation of the LGBTQ+ community is even stricter.<sup>13</sup>

The media analyzed<sup>14</sup> broadcast the following narrative to their readers about Hungary and the Hungarian government:

- **Hungary as an asset for Russia.** Even though Hungarian-Russian relations can be considered friendly, there are important exceptions where Hungary is viewed by Russia more as an asset than an equal. In some symbolic cases, they are unafraid to blast the Hungarian ruling party. In 2017, Sputnik International stated that Hungary could be the ‘battering ram against sanctions’ of the Kremlin against the European Union.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, after the inauguration of Donald Trump, the portal directly encouraged the Hungarian government to veto EU sanctions against Russia, for both economic and ideological reasons. In 2016, during the 60th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, Dmitry Kiselyov stated in a 10-minute segment on ‘Russia 1’ that the revolution was a type of neo-Nazi coup partially organized by the CIA.<sup>16</sup> Kiselyov did not fail to mention that this could have been the first “color revolution” ever in a Russia-friendly country.<sup>17</sup> The propaganda channels of the Kremlin highlighted the fact that the Hungarian Foreign Ministry did not refute the words of Kiselyov. Rather, the meeting of the Hungarian foreign minister and the Russian ambassador to Budapest can be considered an exchange of opinions on the issue – claimed the portal. In the end, they agreed that it was a matter of “different historical interpretations.”<sup>18</sup> In 2014, the Kremlin accused Hungary of delivering T-72 tanks to Ukraine, based on the still-functioning Hídfő portal.<sup>19</sup> In reality, the military of Hungary had decided to sell the tanks before the actual outbreak of the Ukrainian conflict, and the tanks were acquired by a Czech military company.<sup>20</sup>
- **Hungary, the protector of traditional European values.** On Russian state-supported channels, Western criticism of Orbán’s policies is regularly condemned, and supportive voices are prevalent in the opinion section. The American political commentator Robert Bridge wrote on<sup>21</sup> RT online that ‘Hungary is a successful Christian nation, that’s why godless liberals slammed Tucker Carlson’s meeting with Viktor Orbán.’ Ria Novosti, which essentially functions as a news agency, praised the anti-LGBTQ+ steps of the Hungarian government.

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

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

13 <https://444.hu/2021/06/16/a-homofobi-at-pedofiliaval-osszemoso-magyar-torveny-meg-az-eredeti-orosz-mintanal-is-szigorubb>

14 We analyzed the contents of the Kremlin-backed RT, Sputnik International, Ria Novosti, and News Front, the business daily Kommersant and the independent portal Meduza.

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

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

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

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

19 [https://index.hu/kulfold/2014/08/15/moszkva\\_fegyverszallitassal\\_vadolja\\_magyarorszagot/](https://index.hu/kulfold/2014/08/15/moszkva_fegyverszallitassal_vadolja_magyarorszagot/)

20 [https://index.hu/belfold/2014/08/19/tavaly\\_nyar\\_ota\\_tudunk\\_az\\_elado\\_tankokrol/](https://index.hu/belfold/2014/08/19/tavaly_nyar_ota_tudunk_az_elado_tankokrol/)

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

The portal claimed - presented as a news story and not an opinion-piece,<sup>22</sup> - that “gay propaganda for children is now officially a European value” and it continued defending the position of the Hungarian government in its support of the traditional family model. A similar political narrative can be observed in the alternative news portal with connections to Russian secret services – News Front –, which has also been actively involved in presenting the anti-LGBTQ+ measures of the Hungarian government. News Front highlighted in one of their articles<sup>23</sup> that the “LGBTQ lobby overstepped a red line in Hungary,” which is why, essentially, the Hungarian government was forced to take action in order to protect the traditional family model. A pro-Brexit British historian wrote about the Budapest visit of Pope Francis in his piece published on RT<sup>24</sup> that “the Pope misunderstands Orbán, who is trying to preserve Hungary’s Christian traditions.” The Hungarian government’s attack on sexual minorities was a substantial presence on Kremlin-backed pages, including the law passed in June 2021 and the referendum initiated in connection with it. It is characteristic that some Russian media, such as Sputnik International, published the details of the sex scandal of Fidesz ex-MEP József Szájer.<sup>25</sup> RT did not suppress the scandal, but they focused on the reaction of Viktor Orbán instead of the actions of Szájer.<sup>26</sup>

- **The follower and the followed – simultaneously.** Overall, Hungary was presented as a European example to follow in the research period, while, at the same time, as a country following Russia’s example. Perhaps surprisingly, Poland also appears in a similar position in Russian media, despite the notoriously unpleasant Warsaw-Moscow relations in the context of Poland’s conflicts with the EU. Thus, when it is needed to achieve Russia’s goals, Poland’s struggle against the rule of law will be praised without any issue,<sup>27</sup> as well as its energy policy.<sup>28</sup> The EP debate on the country’s rule of law performance with the participation of Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki was presented by the RT as “evidence” that Eastern states in the EU are second-class members.<sup>29</sup> Kremlin propaganda uses both Hungary and Poland to criticize and discredit the EU, as well as to undermine its unity.
- **Successful Hungarian-Russian relations.** Beyond the ideological proximity of the Hungarian and Russian governments, one of the most propagated narratives was that political and economic cooperation between the two governments were flourishing, and therefore, the two countries had been developing economically. The basis of this is Hungary’s energy dependence on Russia, as well as the energy cooperation between the two countries. Russian state media (both in English and in Russian) reported in sufficient detail regarding the Paks II project, or on announcements and events related to Hungarian-Russian gas trade.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most of these articles were not necessarily ideologically charged, however, their frequency suggests that pro-Kremlin media considers it to be fundamentally important to present the existence of cordial relations with Hungary, an EU and NATO member state, especially if it is also in line with Russian foreign policy interests. The latest example of the above was in September 2021, when they signed a 15-year long-term Russian-Hungarian gas contract, which was criticized on multiple occasions by the Ukrainian government due to its geopolitical dimension. Russia 1, the state-owned news channel, presented a report on 28 September<sup>30</sup> with the title “Ukraine threw a tantrum over Russia and Hungary” in their online edition. Russian pro-state media regularly shares detailed information on Orbán-Putin and Péter Szijjártó-Sergei Lavrov meetings. In this context, the communication practices used in connection with Hungary’s “outlier” policy is outstanding in the case of all media.<sup>31</sup> Among other issues, they reported on Hungarian President János Áder’s participation in the Crimea Platform Summit, which aims at redirecting the attention of the international community to the case of Crimea, illegally annexed by Russia from Ukraine. Meanwhile, Péter Szijjártó assured Sergey Lavrov of smooth progress in Hungarian-Russian relations. Russian success propaganda has manifested itself not only in political but also in epidemiological cooperation: Péter Szijjártó, in March 2021 received the Russian Sputnik V vaccine against coronavirus and he talked about this in detail in his interview to RT.<sup>32</sup> This was actively used by Russian media<sup>33</sup> as well as the Russian government:<sup>34</sup> a high-ranking member of an EU state government chose the Russian vaccine. The symbolic gestures of the two governments in the autumn of 2021 also received a lot of media attention.<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Putin awarded the Hungarian foreign minister with the Order of Merit<sup>36</sup> In turn, Péter Szijjártó awarded Russian Minister of Health Mikhail Murashko with the Middle Cross of the Order of Merit of Hungary.<sup>37</sup> However, the statements of Péter Szijjártó received more media attention during his visits to Russia when he sharply criticized the European Union for not approving Russian Sputnik V vaccine,<sup>38</sup> communicating it as a “political and ideological question.”<sup>39</sup> His critical statements flooded Russian pro-government media as headlines. Kommersant also regularly broadcasts the viewpoint of Szijjártó, and therefore of the Hungarian government, as the Hungarian Foreign Minister made several statements on economic and European political issues, where he highlighted several times<sup>40</sup> that Hungary “does not want a new Cold War.” The foreign minister of Hungary, unlike his colleagues from other EU- or NATO member countries, is regularly a guest for interviews at RT, which were presented domestically as if the highest-ranking

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

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

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

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

34 [https://twitter.com/mfa\\_russia/status/1373179843559448579](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1373179843559448579)

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

36 <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/000120211180046?index=12&rangeSize=1>

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

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

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

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

member of Hungarian diplomacy had given an interview to CNN<sup>41</sup> or to the BBC.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the Hungarian government does not seem to share Western concerns that the channel is supported by the Russian state and can be considered as a propaganda outlet. However, it has great significance that a representative of the Hungarian government in his interviews to RT is criticizing the allies of his own country. These criticisms quickly spread through the platforms of the pro-government Russian media, which uses these to suggest that “the West” is unfair and hypocritical. The Kremlin, of course, regularly made similar statements, but there is potentially more weight to this message when the West’s own representative tells them. The Hungarian foreign minister’s words were echoed during the crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border in 2021 (*“The head of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry recalled criticism of the migration policy of Budapest”*<sup>43</sup>), on the failure of the NATO mission in Afghanistan (*“Hungarian Foreign Minister called 20 years of NATO mission in Afghanistan a failure”*<sup>44</sup>), on the Russian relations of Western countries (*“Hungarian Foreign Minister accused the West of hypocrisy towards Russia”*<sup>45</sup>), on the state of the Hungarian democracy (*“Hungarian Foreign Minister accuses US of spreading ‘fake news’”*<sup>46</sup>). The Hungarian foreign minister’s remarks on the Western alliance and his statements, received a lot of attention in the Russian state media; well beyond the weight and importance of the country. On 28 November, Ria Novosti published 7 articles in two hours<sup>47</sup> quoting the words of Szijjártó in their titles.

## IN THE CROSSFIRE: UKRAINE

It is undoubtedly of the interest of pro-Kremlin media to depict the relationship between Hungary and Russia in a favorable color in the Ukrainian media space, even if they penetrate the latter through Hungary-related reporting in Russia. Apart from overestimating the importance of bilateral relations, in more instances, it is equally important for pro-Kremlin Russian media that Hungarian statements praise Russia, while attacking Ukraine at the same time. As we have mentioned it above, a key issue in the Russian government’s foreign policy efforts is to incite conflict between Ukraine and its neighbors, mostly on ethnic grounds.<sup>48</sup> The Hungarian ethnic minority in Zakarpattia is no exception from the above. Relations between the Hungarian and Ukrainian governments have drastically deteriorated since 2017, after Kyiv restricted the use of minority languages in the country in several waves. This has served as a great foundation for the Kremlin to ignite ethnic tensions between the two countries.

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

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

43 <https://ria.ru/20211128/szijjarto-1761103765.html>

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

45 <https://ria.ru/20211128/litsemie-1761100793.html>

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

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

48 Ibid.

The presence of Miklós Keveházy in the Russian state media is one shining example of the use of Hungarian ‘experts’ to mask the Kremlin’s messages. A Hungarian citizen who was previously completely unknown to both the Hungarian and Russian public, first appeared on the top-ranking channel of the Russian state media, in a show on Russia 1, on its prime-time evening political talk show. Keveházy, who in the show appeared as a “Hungarian political advisor”, has made several questionable statements, which are perfectly suited to undermine relations between Hungary and Ukraine. The Hungarian participant made three strongly dubious statements, which were later brought to the Ukrainian audience:

- According to Keveházy, the Hungarian Army, “At the helm of UN peacekeepers in blue helmets’ could reach Lviv to clean local sources of drinking water.
- When the presenter asked whether the Hungarian government considered occupying Zakarpattia, he responded that the advisors of Viktor Orbán had clearly encouraged him to “come on, just try it.”
- In connection with gas disputes that are the perpetual boiling point of Ukrainian-Russian relations, he said that Hungary can close the gas taps towards Ukraine at any time.

The declarations of Keveházy quickly spread through the Ukrainian press. This could not only have been detrimental to the development of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, but it also provided political ammunition to Ukrainian nationalists.<sup>49</sup> After he was on Russia 1, Keveházy regularly appeared as a political expert in pro-Kremlin Russian-language media aimed both at the domestic audience in Russia and Russian-speaking residents from the near abroad, such as News Front. The main task of News Front is to disseminate anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian disinformation narratives regarding the war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea of 2014. Since 2018, Keveházy appeared in 93 online materials of News Front (interestingly, not in the Hungarian editions), he gave interviews to the portal several times and wrote articles for them as well. The materials he published were mainly criticizing the Russia policy of the European Union,<sup>50</sup> EU sanctions, liberal<sup>51</sup> values, the world order led by the United States<sup>52</sup> and criticizing Ukraine,<sup>53</sup> while the Hungarian government was viewed positively because of its perceived combativeness against the EU, its conservatism, and its opposition to Ukraine. Regarding Ukraine, he disseminated general misinformation narratives, such as George Soros controlling the country from behind the scenes<sup>54</sup> and he considers the American businessman to be behind the Pegasus-scandal<sup>55</sup> or the Bulgarian government crisis.<sup>56</sup>

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49 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Keveházy also gave statements to Polit Russia (35 occasions since 2019),<sup>57</sup> from which his messages were quoted on other world politics sites disseminating the Kremlin's narrative, such as news.ru,<sup>58</sup> politexpert.net,<sup>59</sup> rueconomics.ru,<sup>60</sup> riafan.ru<sup>61</sup> or actualnews.com.<sup>62</sup>

Since 2021 Spring, the name of László Bogár has also often appeared next to Keveházy's. They have been spreading messages blaming the West for "organizing the migration crisis" in the Belorussian-Polish border<sup>63</sup> or questioning the official position of the United States about 9/11, as according to them, the tragic events "could have been organized by the strategists of a global power."<sup>64</sup> Keveházy's example fundamentally shows the importance of disinformation narratives in the Russian government-backed media in relation to Hungary; and, at the same time, it highlights that the pro-Kremlin media needs to rely on marginal players in order to present opinions favorable to the Putin regime. Positioning Keveházy as a 'Hungary expert' is very much in the focus of the efforts of pro-Kremlin media: He is surrounded by physical objects related to Hungary in his interviews with the News Front, which seeks to suggest that he represents an official Hungarian position rather than an extremely biased opinion, often based on conspiracy theories.

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

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

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

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

61 <https://riafan.ru/tags/kevehazi>

62 [https://yandex.ru/turbo/s/actualnews.org/exclusive/402501-vengerskij-jekspert-kevehazi-prorochestvo-gorbacheva-o-raspade-es-mozhet-sbytsja-v-skorom-buduschem.html?utm\\_source=aab&platform=desktop](https://yandex.ru/turbo/s/actualnews.org/exclusive/402501-vengerskij-jekspert-kevehazi-prorochestvo-gorbacheva-o-raspade-es-mozhet-sbytsja-v-skorom-buduschem.html?utm_source=aab&platform=desktop)

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

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

## THE KREMLIN'S VOICE DOMINATED SOCIAL MEDIA DISCUSSIONS ON FACEBOOK IN HUNGARY BEFORE THE WAR

*Patrik Szicherle, Csaba Molnár*

### WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR HUNGARY'S DEFENSE?

According to Hungary's National Security Strategy<sup>65</sup>, approved in 2020, NATO is one of the main pillars of Hungarian national security and the cabinet considers the alliance's strategic documents as the basis of defining the threats to the country. Hungary's National Military Strategy<sup>66</sup> of 2021 considers Article 5 (the mutual defense clause) of the North Atlantic Treaty as the main pillar of Hungary's security, adding that a strong National Defense Force is crucial for cooperating with allies.

In past years, Hungary has been fulfilling its NATO obligations or have done significant steps to meet these obligations, especially financial ones. According to a NATO report<sup>67</sup>, Hungary hiked its defense spending from less than 1% to 1.60% over seven years (2014-2021) and in 2021, the country spent more than the required 20% of this sum on equipment purchases. While some of these purchases are questionable, they helped<sup>68</sup> Hungary rebuild<sup>69</sup> long-lost capabilities.

Moreover, the incumbent Hungarian government has been using its veto power less frequently in NATO than it has been in the European Union in past years: in NATO, they most vetoed initiatives regarding<sup>70</sup> Ukraine before the war. In 2021, the Hungarian government approved the NATO statement listing Russia's aggressive behavior and China's ambitions as challenges to the international order<sup>71</sup>. However, in terms of domestic rhetoric, there have been some inconsistencies in Fidesz's messages about NATO: PM Orbán said multiple times before the war that Hungary cannot<sup>72</sup> rely only on NATO allies for self-defense, which necessitates a strong Hungarian Army. Naturally, there is a need for a strong Hungarian Defense Force, but the statements can be interpreted as if Hungary did not trust allies to fulfill their Article 5 obligations under the North Atlantic Treaty.

Moreover, the Hungarian cabinet has regularly said – even after the war – that there needs to be peace between the East and the West and rarely mentioned that Russia is an aggressor against Ukraine, although the PM, Hungarian officials and some of their advertisements have noted this.

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

66 <https://honvedelem.hu/hirek/nemzeti-katonai-strategia.html>

67 [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/210611-pr-2021-094-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/210611-pr-2021-094-en.pdf)

68 <https://24.hu/kozelet/2019/04/16/3500-milliardot-kap-a-honvedseg-tobb-a-kerdes-mint-a-valasz/>

69 [http://real.mtak.hu/105874/1/2019eA\\_Zr%C3%ADnyi\\_2026\\_program\\_Budav%C3%A1ri\\_Krisztina.pdf](http://real.mtak.hu/105874/1/2019eA_Zr%C3%ADnyi_2026_program_Budav%C3%A1ri_Krisztina.pdf)

70 <https://felvidek.ma/2022/01/szijjarto-elfogadhatatlan-a-magyar-kozosszeg-jogainak-folyamatos-csorbitasa-ukrajnaban/>

71 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm)

72 <https://kormany.hu/beszedekek-interjuk/miniszterelnok/orban-viktor-evertekelo-beszede-20220212>



The cabinet also did not protest loudly against President Putin's proposal<sup>73</sup> that NATO should retreat to behind 1997 borders, which would essentially terminate Hungary's membership and grossly infringe on the country's sovereignty. Clearly pro-Kremlin messages have also been disseminated by Fidesz lawmakers: Lajos Kósa claimed<sup>74</sup> after PM Orbán's 1 February Moscow visit that the "US and Russia are rattling swords," placing equal blame for the conflict in Ukraine on both sides. The Hungarian cabinet has also been a long-standing opponent<sup>75</sup> of EU sanctions on Russia, at least rhetorically, since no sanction can be approved without Hungary's vote. The public broadcaster also published statements in line with the Kremlin's propaganda both before<sup>76</sup> and after<sup>77</sup> the war started.

Regardless, members of the increasingly anti-West ruling party never directly question Hungary's spot in the alliance, but their persistent campaign against the country's key military allies could erode trust in NATO in the long-term. The parties of the united opposition,<sup>78</sup> meanwhile, are strongly pro-NATO. However, the new parliamentary force, the far-right Mi Hazánk has questioned<sup>79</sup> Hungary's NATO membership, claiming that it led to "giving up our sovereignty" and that it is serving foreign interests.

Overall, since the majority of Hungarian political forces agree with the country's NATO membership and even NATO policies, the organization has not become the subject of daily political debates, unlike the EU has. Nevertheless, political divisions between key actors on the assessment of Western allies, the EU and particularly the US could spell trouble for NATO in Hungary in the long-term.

## WE LIKE NATO AND CONSPIRACIES ABOUT IT, TOO

Hungary's membership in NATO enjoys overwhelming support among Hungarian voters and a majority of Hungarians agree that Hungary should defend an ally, if attacked. According to Globsec Trends<sup>80</sup> 2021, 80% of Hungarians would vote for the country to remain a NATO member state. A NATO poll<sup>81</sup> indicated in the same year that 57% of Hungarian respondents would agree to defending an ally who was attacked, with only 18% categorically refusing to help.

However, the overall picture concerning Hungarians' views on NATO is not this encouraging, as there is a significant layer in society who believe in NATO- or US-related conspiracy theories and a further third of the population might easily be influenced to believe in them. Political Capital found in 2018<sup>82</sup> that 27% of the local population placed the blame for the crisis (as it was then known) in Ukraine on the US and NATO, 23% agreed that Crimea was annexed to prevent NATO from building bases on the peninsula, 19% said that European NATO movements are preparing for a war on Russia, and

73 [https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2942](https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=2942)

74 <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2022/02/01/kosa-lajos-magyarorszag-es-a-v4-ek-kozso-erdeke-a-bekes-rendezes-ukrajnaban>

75 [https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20220307\\_varga\\_mihaly\\_brusszel\\_szankciok](https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20220307_varga_mihaly_brusszel_szankciok)

76 [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2954](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=2954)

77 [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2969](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=2969)

78 Political parties that competed in the 2022 general election as a coalition.

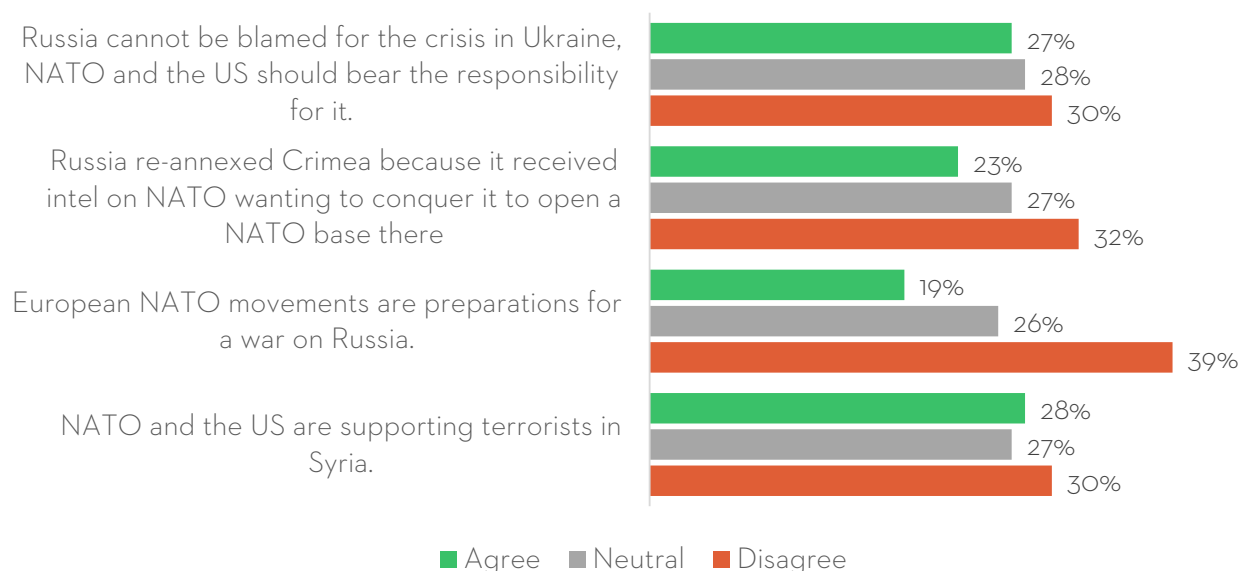
79 <https://mihazank.hu/vitaindito/>

80 [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021\\_final.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021_final.pdf)

81 [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/7/pdf/210707-pre-summit\\_polling\\_en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/7/pdf/210707-pre-summit_polling_en.pdf)

82 <https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc-boll-konteo-20181107.pdf>

28% believed NATO was supporting terrorists in Syria – and the proportion of respondents picking a neutral stance was around 25-28% in all cases.



The 2020 Globsec trends poll revealed<sup>83</sup> that 33% of Hungarian respondents believed NATO was provoking Russia by surrounding it with military bases. Focus group discussions conducted in preparation for the 2021 Vulnerability Index<sup>84</sup> indicated that Hungarians possess the least information on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in comparison to the EU or Russia, and the lack of information might be fertile ground for the disseminators of disinformation to exploit. As a result of the societal attitudes observed in Hungary, particularly in terms of locals' belief in NATO-related conspiracy theories, we assessed how NATO was depicted in social media discussions in Hungarian between 1 September 2022 and 14 January 2022.

## HUNGARIAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA IS NOT ANTI-NATO

### Methodology

We created a query in SentiOne to find results on online portals, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This created a database of online article and social media comments to assessed. The keywords were related to NATO and the United States. The research period was between 1 September 2021 and 14 January 2022. We analyzed Facebook comments (as the main social media platform in Hungary) in a separate chapter. We found 125,000 comments, so we restricted our database to those that specifically mentioned 'NATO'. In the case of comments, we did not only check whether the message was manipulative but also if there was a possibility that the user posting the comment is hiding behind a fake profile.

Looking at NATO-related media coverage in detail, the mainstream Hungarian press, including government-controlled media, generally reported neutrally or positively on NATO in the period under examination. However, the pro-government segment of mainstream media has often been

<sup>83</sup> [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020\\_read-version.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020_read-version.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> <http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/>

very positive<sup>85</sup> about the Kremlin or the Chinese regime and highly critical<sup>86</sup> of Ukraine – mirroring the rhetoric of the Hungarian cabinet. After the war, government-controlled media published factual articles about Russia’s attack on Ukraine, but they gave speaking opportunities to “experts” who represented the Kremlin’s line consistently.<sup>87</sup> Zoltán Lomniczi Jr., the legal expert of the government-organized Civil Association Forum (CÖF) said<sup>88</sup> on the day of the Russian attack that “if Russia’s claims about the genocide are true,” it would “complicate” the picture that we are witnessing “unprovoked military aggression.”

Some NATO-critical voices were present on independent portals as well, particularly in opinion pieces on the popular new left MÉRCE’s site, where one article declared<sup>89</sup> that NATO was an organization “encompassing western powers and their sphere of interest” and another criticized the German Greens for<sup>90</sup> “often nodding to Americans’ ideas about war.”

Meanwhile, independent Hungarian mainstream portals that adhere to journalistic standards generally wrote about Russia critically for launching an unprovoked attack against Ukraine. However, there was one practice employed by all<sup>91</sup> sides<sup>92</sup> of the mainstream that inadvertently helped the dissemination of pro-Kremlin narratives: they often quoted Russian officials based on the reports of the Hungarian news wire agency MTI at face value, without anything to balance their statements.

Grey zone media<sup>93</sup> took sides<sup>94</sup> more clearly: government-friendly outlets either communicated the cabinet’s messages or sided openly with the Kremlin after the latter launched its attack on Ukraine, while the pro-opposition ones are generally government-critical and pro-West. These outlets also mentioned NATO several times: some claimed, for instance, that NATO had been expanding eastwards illegally, hindering Russia’s basic security.

Since the mainstream media rarely spreads anti-NATO disinformation, at least directly, pro-Kremlin “alternative” sites remained relevant on this topic – and the popularity of the largest of these sites increased after the end of our research period with the start of the Kremlin’s war.

85 [link: https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2022/02/24/tisztelet-es-hala-putyinnak-nyilt-kreml-propaganda-fideszes-csatornakon/](https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2022/02/24/tisztelet-es-hala-putyinnak-nyilt-kreml-propaganda-fideszes-csatornakon/)

86 [link: https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2022/02/24/tisztelet-es-hala-putyinnak-nyilt-kreml-propaganda-fideszes-csatornakon/](https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2022/02/24/tisztelet-es-hala-putyinnak-nyilt-kreml-propaganda-fideszes-csatornakon/)

87 [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2969](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=2969)

88 <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20220224-orosz-ukran-haboru-ifj-lomnici-zoltan.html>

89 <https://merce.hu/2022/01/11/kozel-tizezer-ember-orizetbe-vetele-utan-rendezodni-latszik-a-helyzet-kazahsztanban/> vagy <https://merce.hu/2022/01/08/megkezdodott-a-magyarok-kimentese-letartoztattak-a-kazah-titkosszolgalat-fejet-tovabbra-is-forr-a-helyzet-kazahsztanban/>

90 <https://merce.hu/2021/10/22/a-szelsoseges-kozep-folytonossaga/>







91 <https://pestisracok.hu/moszkva-szerint-oroszorszag-biztonsagat-fenyegeti-a-nato-bovitese/>














92 <https://444.hu/2021/12/19/viszontfenyegeteseket-iger-oroszorszag-ha-az-usa-es-a-nato-elutasitja-a-biztonsagi-javaslatait>

93 These can have several characteristics: they predominantly write about domestic affairs, they clearly support a specific political party without official or semi-official connections to said party, their ownership structure and editorial are non-transparent, etc. They are essentially between the mainstream and “alternative” media.

94 [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PoliticalCapital\\_Grey\\_Zone\\_HU\\_20220523.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PoliticalCapital_Grey_Zone_HU_20220523.pdf)

As the two CrowdTangle figures below show, the outreach of even the most popular alternative pro-Kremlin site (Orosz Hírek<sup>95</sup>) based on the number of page followers is less than that of most grey zone sites (e.g., Vadhajtások, Gond-olkodó, Elég or Számok). However, the followers of alternative sites are the most active with interaction rates of well over 1% – and even reaching 3-5% in some cases.

Page Name	Total Interactions	Interaction Rate	Avg. Posts Per Day	Views on Owned Videos	Page Followers	Growth % and #
Average Total	118,226.67	0.615%	35.62	89,192.17	252,294.33	+0.26%
 24.hu	270,084	0.037%	112.43	346,090	924,522	+0.08% +766
 Vadhajtások.hu	204,010	0.965%	41.57	69,995	72,908	+0.75% +541
 Gond-olkodó	120,866	0.219%	33.43	—	235,279	+0.02% +55
 Mindenszo.hu	10,876	0.362%	11.14	—	38,405	+0.02% +8
 ELÉG	26,752	0.3%	8.29	13,274	153,807	-0.01% -17
 Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere	76,772	1.806%	6.86	105,794	88,845	+0.71% +630

Page Name	Total Interactions	Interaction Rate	Avg. Posts Per Day	Views on Owned Videos	Page Followers	Growth % and #
Average Total	29,130.15	0.842%	10.00	34,948.38	76,806.31	+0.45%
 24.hu	268,022	0.037%	112.57	346,090	924,526	+0.08% +770
 Orosz Hírek	106,504	2.775%	9.14	106,916	60,739	+2.64% +1,562
 Magyar Békekör	2,165	5.267%	2	—	2,942	+1.24% +36
 moszkvater.com	1,737	1.124%	5	1,323	4,397	+1.74% +75
 Kiállunk Oroszország mellett - Support Vladimir Putin from Hungary	264	1.748%	1.29	—	1,659	—
 Kiállunk Belarusz mellett - Support Lukashenko from Hungary	—	—	—	—	535	-0.19% -1
 Kiállunk Szíria mellett - Support Bashar al-Assad from Hungary	—	—	—	—	1,241	+0.08% +1
 Kiállunk Novorosszija mellett - Support Donbass from Hungary	—	—	—	—	391	+0.26% +1
 Kiállunk Venezuela mellett - Viva Chávez, Viva Maduro	—	—	—	—	526	—
 Kiállunk Örményország mellett - Support Armenia from Hungary	—	—	—	—	358	—
 Kiállunk Kazahsztán mellett - Respect Nursultan Nazarbayev from Hungary	—	—	—	—	314	—
 Kiállunk Palesztina mellett - Support Palestine from Hungary	—	—	—	—	608	—
 Kiállunk Magyarország Mellett We Stand with Hungary	—	—	—	—	246	—

<sup>95</sup> The site had 148 538 followers and 85,658 page fans as of 15 July 2022.

In our research period, Orosz Hírek published at least 84 articles on NATO, while the number was 76 for the mainstream pro-government Origo portal and 81 for the mainstream independent page Telex. The pro-Kremlin alternative site presents only Russia's viewpoint to readers on NATO and the US, claiming – among others – that Washington promised<sup>96</sup> Moscow in 1990 that NATO would not be expanding eastwards. The site also depicts<sup>97</sup> any aid to Ukraine as if it is granted for preparing an attack on Russia. Interestingly, News Front Hungary, the local branch of the News Front portal likely backed by Russian intelligence, went inactive in Hungary on 31 October 2021, likely because its miniscule outreach.

The narratives present on pro-Kremlin alternative sites rarely entered mainstream Hungarian media before the war (this changed to a certain extent<sup>98</sup> since then), but it did occur from time to time: some “reports” of the pro-Kremlin Békekör were quoted by MÉRCE<sup>99</sup> or even MTI<sup>100</sup>. Grey zone outlets, however, were much more likely to quote pro-Kremlin alternative sites.

## GROUPS FOR RUSSIA FANS

It is worth it to mention better-known Hungarian-language pro-Kremlin Facebook groups, such as “Kiállunk Oroszország Mellett - МЫ ПОДДЕРЖИВАЕМ РУССКИЙ НАРОД !”, “Oroszország mellett állunk ki” and “Oroszország mellett állunk ki” – the latter two are not typos, there are two of them with the same name. In these groups, users share clearly pro-Kremlin contents, such as RT articles with a Hungarian translation included (before the RT ban), so they aid the Kremlin's narratives in infiltrating the Hungarian public sphere, although the groups' effect is likely substantially less than that of the pro-Kremlin political elite in Hungary. Regardless, the phenomenon is not to be dismissed entirely, especially in the long-term.

## WAR IN THE FACEBOOK TRENCHES

Since directly anti-NATO disinformation narratives did not primarily reach the population through media outlets before the war, as we pointed out above, we took a closer look at Facebook comments that specifically mentioned NATO. We found 27 Facebook pages containing at least 10 relevant comments. As seen in the figure below, NATO-related discussions were not restricted to pro-Kremlin or grey zone portals, several mainstream sites (e.g., Portfolio, Telex, Euronews) hosted such discussions, too. The highest number of relevant comments was posted to a portal focusing on news in Transcarpathia and Ukraine, so ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring countries might also fall victim to anti-NATO narratives.

<sup>96</sup> <https://oroszhirek.hu/2022/01/08/usa-a-nato-soha-nem-igerte-hogy-nem-terjeszkedik-az-archiv-dokumentumok-cafolnak/>

<sup>97</sup> <https://oroszhirek.hu/2021/12/10/az-eu-beszallt-ukrajna-militarizalasaba-30-millio-euro-az-ukran-fegyveres-eroknek/>

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.lakmusz.hu/semlegesbol-oroszbarat-igy-torzult-az-origo-hangvetele-az-orosz-ukran-haboru-kitorese-ota/>

<sup>99</sup> <https://merce.hu/2022/01/04/egy-hettel-a-diplomaciai-targyalasok-megkezdese-elott-senki-sem-enged-az-orosz-ukran-konfliktusban/>

<sup>100</sup> [http://os.mti.hu/hirek/166092/a\\_magyar\\_bekekor\\_egyesulet\\_kozlemenye-2\\_resz](http://os.mti.hu/hirek/166092/a_magyar_bekekor_egyesulet_kozlemenye-2_resz)

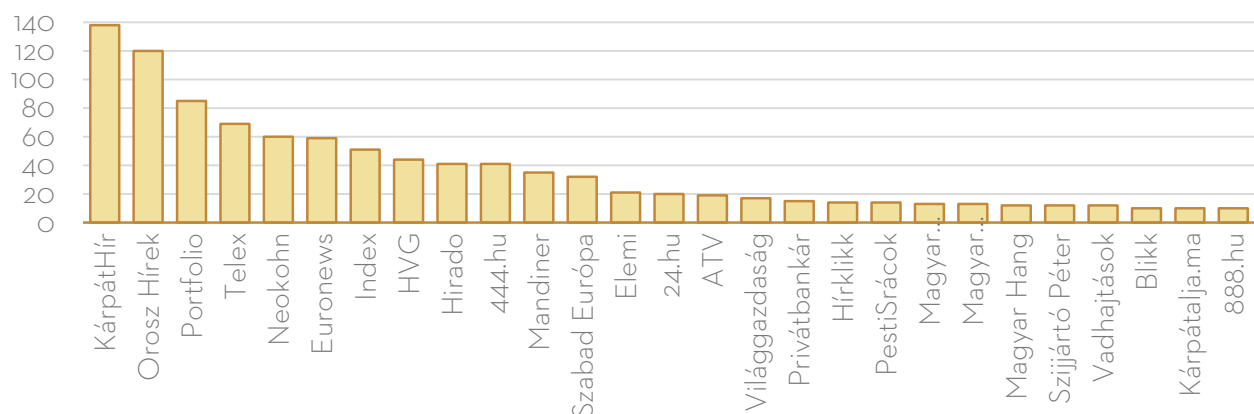
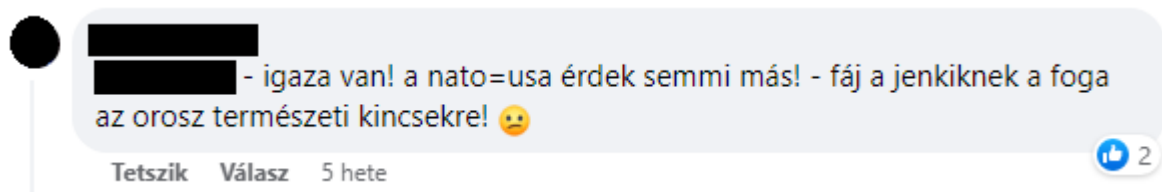


Figure 1 Number of relevant comments in specific Facebook pages (at least 10 relevant comments).

After evaluating all NATO-related comments, we found that 58% of them were critical of the military alliance and about a half of these also mentioned the US, indicating that the question of NATO and America – the largest contributor to NATO – often go hand in hand. Only 11% of the comments were positive about NATO and only a quarter of these wrote positively of the US. It must be noted, however, that the comments are not representative of the views of the entirety of Hungary's population.

The narratives we found in the comments are consistent with those being spread by international<sup>101</sup> and domestic<sup>102</sup> pro-Kremlin media:

- The most popular narrative in our database was that **NATO surrounded Russia with military bases**, which was the foundation of Russia's demands<sup>103</sup> against NATO presented in December 2021.
- Commenters often claimed that **NATO exists solely to represent US interests** and the **US wants to take over Ukraine through the organization**.



- Other said that **Russia has a technological advantage over NATO**, so it would win a war against the West.
- Commenters frequently claimed that **Russia's Ukraine policy is fair, as the latter belongs to the Russian world and the majority of Ukrainians would like to be a part of Russia, as it happened in Crimea**.
- Some commenters mentioned that **Hungary should leave NATO and the EU**.
- A very rare narrative was that **Romania might attack Hungary and the Romanians would win** – presenting the alliance as a threat to Hungary.

<sup>101</sup> [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=NATO&date=&per\\_page=](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=NATO&date=&per_page=)

<sup>102</sup> [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=1464](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=1464)

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/vlagyimir-putyin-azonnali-biztonsagi-garanciakat-kovetel-a-nyugattol/31622863.html>



The examination of commenters indicate that the narratives were not being spread solely by real Facebook users. In some cases, there are strong suspicions that **the users involved are managing fake profiles**. We could differentiate between three types of suspicious profiles overall:

- The “foreigners”: These profiles only shared NATO-critical comments. Their place of residence was usually given as the US, the UK or Germany and often selected a well-known university as their place of education. No other signs indicated that the profiles were fake.
- The “enthusiasts”: These profiles are real people who often discussed NATO in the research period and some of them were members of the above-mentioned pro-Kremlin groups. This indicates that some users are “exporting” the claims they read in the groups into mainstream discussions.
- The “professionals”: These are likely fake profiles. They usually use aggressive language, have potentially fake profile pictures or none at all, show very specific public activities on their profiles or display other suspicious signs. We also saw suspicious pro-NATO profiles and even discussions between these potentially fake profiles with the involvement of one anti-NATO and one pro-NATO user.





## OTHER FORA

On online portals, we found about 3,500 comments containing the word NATO. On these portals, we found some highly suspicious profiles, many of whom focused on one or two specific websites. One user only posted anti-NATO, anti-West and anti-EU comments to the articles of the independent website azonnali.hu, while another posted pro-NATO texts under the articles of the independent online portal HVG. The latter, according to the Discus platform, posted 5,184 comments between 6 November 2021 and 4 February 2022, which is an average of about 57 comments a day, so more than two every hour – if the commenter never sleeps or rests. Another profile roaming pro-government sites with anti-West comments has accumulated 105,000 comments, although we do not know how long the user had been active.

On YouTube, we only found about 700 relevant comments, but we also saw a very good indication of inauthentic activity: one user posted the exact same text 13 times in a time period of 27 minutes on 21 November 2021 concerning NATO's alleged responsibility for the migration crisis under the videos of various YT channels. Twitter, however, proved to be irrelevant in Hungary in terms of NATO-related messages.

## HARD TO DISREGARD THE PROBLEM

It seems clear that a pro-Kremlin “troll infrastructure” was built in Hungary before the war and this infrastructure was put to good use in the first days<sup>104</sup> of the war. Unfortunately, it is impossible to pinpoint who is behind this infrastructure.

It must be stressed that the relative success of manipulative narratives against NATO, which are clearly being spread in social media discussions in Hungary, is also a result of a lack of information. This is why it would be of the utmost importance that the Hungarian population has access to more information about NATO through well-constructed information campaigns. It is equally important to inform voters about what Hungary stands to gain from its partnership with the United States regardless of political considerations.

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<sup>104</sup> [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc\\_v4\\_social\\_media\\_war\\_ukraine\\_20220505.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_v4_social_media_war_ukraine_20220505.pdf)

## THE IMAGE OF THE UNITED STATES IN HUNGARY

*Patrik Szicherle*

### TELL ME WHO YOU VOTE FOR, I'LL TELL YOU WHAT YOU THINK OF AMERICA

The United States is one of Hungary's key allies in both economic and military terms. The Hungarian National Security Strategy<sup>105</sup> is very clear about this relationship: Hungary's fundamental interest is maintaining high-level military and economic cooperation with the US. This was confirmed multiple times by the incumbent Hungarian cabinet with the caveat that the political relations between the sides are dissatisfactory – except during the Trump-administration.

After Hungary's democratic transition, the first serious storms in US-Hungarian bilateral relations started gathering after the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although PM Viktor Orbán's former foreign policy advisor Réka Szemerkényi boasted<sup>106</sup> that the PM was the first NATO leader stating that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 fell under the scope of Article 5, debates about the war started domestically. The head of the far-right MIÉP party alleged<sup>107</sup> that US foreign policy is partly to blame for the 9/11 attack and a journalist at the pro-Fidesz Magyar Nemzet said there “really is a sort of arrogance, sense of superiority” across the Atlantic.

The war in Iraq generated much more debates, as Viktor Orbán, then in opposition, said<sup>108</sup> the US had no “authorization” to fight in Iraq – and he was backed by the majority of Hungarians on this issue, according to an IPSOS poll. Regardless of these debates and the F-16 fiasco<sup>109</sup>, until the latter half of the 2000s, Hungarian political parties generally strived to depict<sup>110</sup> their relations with the US in a positive light.

In the second half of the 2000s, WikiLeaks documents suggest that the American Embassy in Budapest was concerned<sup>111</sup> mostly by PM Ferenc Gyurcsány's pro-Kremlin attitude, while Ambassador April Foley had a much better opinion on PM Orbán, who – at the time – saw Russia as one of the key challenges to Hungary and he was satisfied with how Fidesz was improving<sup>112</sup> its relations with the Transatlantic community.

After PM Orbán's accession to power in 2010, political relations between the sides started deteriorating quickly, both due to the cabinet's steps degrading the rule of law in Hungary and partly

<sup>105</sup> <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A20H1163.KOR&txtreferer=00000001.txt>

<sup>106</sup> [https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/magyarorszag\\_az\\_afganisztani\\_haboruban\\_-nem\\_a\\_meret\\_a\\_lenyeg-68871](https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/magyarorszag_az_afganisztani_haboruban_-nem_a_meret_a_lenyeg-68871)

<sup>107</sup> [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/kereses.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=413](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/kereses.php?article_read=1&article_id=413)

<sup>108</sup> <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2021/09/13/tobb-mint-75-milliard-forintot-koltott-a-magyar-allam-az-afganisztani-szerepvallalásra/>

<sup>109</sup> <https://index.hu/belfold/grip608h/>

<sup>110</sup> [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=1439](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=1439)

<sup>111</sup> <https://transparency.hu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Szab%C3%B3-Andr%C3%A1s-Peth%C5%91-Andr%C3%A1s-Orosz-cikkek-1-6.pdf>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20110905-wikileaks-orban-viktor-kijelentesei-valasztasi-igereteirol-es-a-fidesz-elemzese.html>

because of its increasingly pro-Kremlin attitudes. On the surface, bilateral ties were substantially better during the Trump-administration, which tended to criticize the Orbán cabinet behind the scenes<sup>113</sup>, not publicly: during these years, Washington condemned Hungary for attacks against the CEU or delays in signing the Hungarian-American defense cooperation agreement. Publicly, US Ambassador to Hungary David Cornstein, a Trump appointee active between 2018 and 2020, publicly spoke cordially<sup>114</sup> about the Hungarian cabinet and even though he was critical of Fidesz in the case of the CEU, he rarely voiced his open opposition<sup>115</sup>.

The Hungarian ruling party – partly because the Republicans have recently been less vocal in criticizing it – is openly supportive of US Republicans and their policies. In contrast, the opposition has clearly sided with the incumbent Democrat administration and their policy preferences. As a result, contemporary Hungarian political discourse on the United States follows<sup>116</sup> party-political lines. And while economic and defense relations are generally not involved in these debates, there is a risk that even non-political US-related discourse is going to be affected by political bias.

## LIVING WITH YOU IS BAD, BUT WITHOUT YOU, IT WOULD BE A CATASTROPHE

Regardless, Hungarian society is not even close to being united behind a positive assessment of America. Medián's polls show that fewer and fewer Hungarians would pick Washington over Moscow (53%<sup>117</sup> said so in 2015, but only 45%<sup>118</sup> in 2022) even though Hungary chose to ally with the US on its own free will, while earlier, Russia had forced our country into an alliance as a conqueror.

When asked to rate Hungary's foreign policy partners on a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 is the most positive evaluation, Hungarians gave 65 points to the United States in 2015<sup>119</sup>, around 20 points more than to Russia or China. In 2018<sup>120</sup>, the US still stood at 54 points, but this fell to only 44 points in 2022<sup>121</sup>. While the US still beat Russia's 32-point score in 2022, China was already in front of the US with 47 points among Hungarian respondents.

But these numbers alone do not tell the whole story, as there is a massive gap between the views of different electoral camps: opposition voters are predominantly pro-US, while Fidesz followers are generally critical of Washington. The gap between these camps was already large in 2014: 72% of opposition voters would have elected to cooperate with Washington instead of Moscow, but only 48% of Jobbik and 40% of Fidesz voters would have done so. In 2018, these proportions were 70, 50 and 39%, respectively. By 2022, the level of polarization has become extreme: 82% of opposition voters (now also counting Jobbik in their ranks) and only 24% of Fidesz supporters backed Washington.

113 <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/turelmetlen-amerikaiakrol-es-lavirozo-orbanrol-arulkodik-egy-bizalmas-diplomaciai-irat/>

114 [https://hvg.hu/itthon/2021006\\_david\\_cornstein\\_orban\\_viktor\\_newsmax](https://hvg.hu/itthon/2021006_david_cornstein_orban_viktor_newsmax)

115 <https://www.ceu.edu/article/2019-03-22/cornstein-elmondta-mikor-johet-trump-budapestre>

116 [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2964](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=2964)

117 <https://444.hu/2015/01/07/a-magyarok-tobbsege-amerikat-valasztana-es-nem-oroszorszagot>

118 <https://444.hu/2022/05/09/ugyanolyan-rossz-velemennyel-vannak-a-magyarok-ukrajnarol-mint-oroszorszagrol>

119 <https://444.hu/2015/01/07/a-magyarok-tobbsege-amerikat-valasztana-es-nem-oroszorszagot>

120 <https://444.hu/2018/03/14/a-fideszesek-nagyon-megszerettek-putyint-es-oroszorszagot>

121 <https://444.hu/2022/05/09/ugyanolyan-rossz-velemennyel-vannak-a-magyarok-ukrajnarol-mint-oroszorszagrol>

Crucially, most independent voters always elected for the US, although in 2022, the relative majority of the group could not or did not want to answer this question, so there is a significant layer of society who can be influenced either way between the two sides.

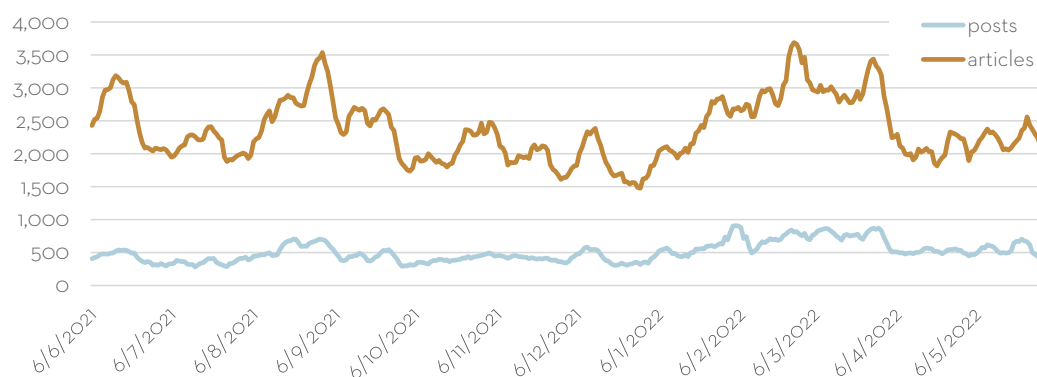
Divisions are also visible in Hungarians assessment of US leaders. According to a 2022 Medián poll<sup>122</sup>, Donald Trump received 56 points out of 100 from Fidesz voters but only 22 from supporters of the opposition, while Joe Biden met with very similar results, the only difference is that he given much more points by opposition backers (56-21).

The Globsec Trends 2022 poll<sup>123</sup> also revealed some concerning findings: only 13% of Hungarians believed the US was a strategic partner for the country, which is far behind Russia's 35%, although neither is nearly as popular as Germany, which was seen as a strategic partner by 58% of Hungarians. However, the poll also showed positive signs: 70% of Hungarians stated that the US is a "traditional partner" and "ally" within NATO.

## US IN THE MEDIA

We analyzed how Hungarian media (and not just those focusing on public affairs) depicted the United States between 31 May 2021 and 31 May 2022 using the SentiOne media monitoring software. We also monitored mentions of the US in social media, particularly Facebook discussions. Over our research period, SentiOne found around 150,000 articles. Close to 23,600 mentioned Donald Trump and nearly 53,100 included Joe Biden, which indicates that mainstream media discourse was mainly dominated by contemporary political issues, so these are partly responsible for influencing America's image in Hungary.

The US was mentioned the most during three peaks over the research period. First in June 2021, when it was revealed that Danish intelligence was helping the US with data to spy on allies and when the American withdrawal from Afghanistan was announced. Then, the media wrote more about the US regarding the actual exit from Afghanistan and its consequences. Finally, interest peaked during the lead up to and the launch of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.



*Number of articles, FB posts published about the US (seven-day moving average). Query: (America OR USA OR Biden OR Trump OR Washington) AND NOT "Latin".*

122 <https://444.hu/2022/05/09/ugyanolyan-rossz-velemennyel-vannak-a-magyarok-ukrajnarol-mint-oroszorszagrol>  
123 <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>

Overall, looking at the article's contents, it might seem like the US is primarily depicted in a negative light, but reality is slightly different from that, as a lot depends on who is the subject of a given text from the political spectrum of the United States. Government-controlled media, for instance, is generally critical of the Democrat administration, often in opinion pieces masked as factual articles. These articles often operate with words generating strong emotions, such as “inept”; for instance, the pro-government daily Magyar Nemzet once wrote<sup>124</sup> that “Even Osama bin Laden knew: Biden is too inept to be president.” The preferences of government-organized media are clearly visible in how they treat the same topic under different administrations: Magyar Nemzet harshly criticized<sup>125</sup> President Biden for leaving Afghanistan, but did not have such reservations about the statements of Donald Trump about<sup>126</sup> “leaving America’s wars”. Overall, actors (e.g. Tucker Carlson) supporting or not criticizing the policies of PM Orbán and Hungary are rather popular<sup>127</sup> on the ruling party’s side.

Pro-Kremlin “alternative” media and “grey zone” outlets<sup>129</sup> were the main proponents of anti-US disinformation and conspiracy theories before the war and they were often promoting pro-Kremlin contents as well, although the latter mattered less, as pro-government media already offered very favorable<sup>130</sup> coverage to Russia and China.

130 [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/kereses.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2477](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/kereses.php?article_read=1&article_id=2477)

## THE US AS THE WARMONGER

During PM Viktor Orbán's 1 February visit<sup>131</sup> to Moscow, the ruling party declared it to be a "peace mission". Afterwards, pro-government media started discussing "theories" that could explain the "conflict" between Russia and Ukraine (as it was known then). In Sajtóklub, Fidesz-loyalist opinion-makers stated<sup>132</sup> that "the US is rattling swords and they are forcing NATO member states and the EU to do so through pressure," adding that the US wanted to fight Russia, but PM Viktor Orbán "helped us" stop it. The peace narrative was present on pro-government, grey zone and alternative sites up to the day Russia launched its invasion, but was revived soon after, playing a key role in Fidesz's election victory<sup>133</sup>. The EUvsDisinfo website debunked<sup>134</sup> over 1400 claims about the US playing the role of the "warmonger" against Russia.

Regardless, anti-US claims in the context of the war continued spreading after Moscow launched its assault on Ukraine, alleging – among others – that Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had bought<sup>135</sup> 120 ships worth of shale gas from America before the war started, the use of which would only increase the economic gap<sup>136</sup> between Europe and the US, that the US<sup>137</sup> "has long worked on separating Ukraine from Russia" or that the two great powers (Russia and the US) could quickly<sup>138</sup> agree on neutrality for Ukraine and stop this, "but US strategists are rarely interested in this." Anti-US narratives like these, all taken from the website of the Hungarian public broadcaster, have become more prevalent on pro-government sites since the invasion began.

Meanwhile, government-friendly grey zone outlets, pro-Kremlin alternative media<sup>139</sup>, the Hungarian far right<sup>140</sup> and the far-left<sup>141</sup> are all spreading clear pro-Kremlin propaganda. Even the ruling political elite is guilty of this, as the PM's political director – then as a state secretary for the Ministry for the Prime Minister's Office – said<sup>142</sup> that we are witnessing a Russian-American war in Ukraine. The widespread efforts to blame the "West" and particularly the US for the war might be the reason why – according to Globsec Trends – Hungarians are the least likely to agree with the statement that Russia is to blame for the war and 63% say Ukraine should stay neutral. However, the same poll shows that only about a quarter of Hungarians believe Ukraine to be the West's puppet. Thus, it is clear that anti-US, pro-Kremlin disinformation does have an effect on societal attitudes, although this effect is not complete.

131 [https://politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2942](https://politicalcapital.hu/konyvtar.php?article_read=1&article_id=2942)

132 <https://444.hu/2022/02/24/oroszorszag-nem-fogja-megtamadni-ukrajnat-ezt-egy-hulye-is-tudja>

133 <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/06/03/enyedi-zsolt-szabo-andrea-postelection-kutatasi-elemzes-sorozat-harmadik-resz>

134 [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=us%20ukraine&date=&per\\_page=](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=us%20ukraine&date=&per_page=)

135 <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2022/02/25/nogradi-gyorgy-az-oroszok-alapveto-celja-hogy-ukrajna-ne-legyen-a-nato-tagja>

136 <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2022/02/24/nogradi-senki-nem-fogja-a-vilaghaborut-kockaztatni-ukrajna-miatt>

137 <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2022/02/24/ukran-valsag-szakerto-erdemes-komolyan-venni-amit-az-orosz-elno-mond/>

138 <https://hirado.hu/blog/cikk/2022/03/10/birodalmi-eszjarasok/>

139 <https://oroszshirek.hu/soros-penzelte-biden-felugyelte-az-amerikai-biofegyver-programot-ukrajnaban-az-orosz-vedelmi-tarca-szerint/>

140 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75y7V6cTpol>

141 [https://nepszava.hu/3155417\\_thurmer-gyula-ukrajna-munkaspart](https://nepszava.hu/3155417_thurmer-gyula-ukrajna-munkaspart)

142 <https://444.hu/2022/05/16/orban-balazs-szerint-amerikai-orosz-haboru-zajlik-ukrajna-teruleten>

As noted above, we also collected a database on US-related Facebook comments, although in this case, the start date was July 2020 to include the presidential election. During the election, President Trump was mentioned more by Hungarians, as well as in January 2021, while Joe Biden has been discussed more by Hungarian Facebook users only since February 2022.



29



We searched our sample of hundreds of thousands of comments for repetitive comments mentioning the United States, as the appearance of such statements can be a tell-tale sign of inauthentic online activity. We found multiple narratives being spread repetitively that we had already identified in previous research projects<sup>143</sup>. The first narrative claims that the US does not want to “notice” what Ukraine has been doing against minorities living there. The second alleges that NATO and Russia signed a “written agreement” pledging that NATO did not want to expand eastwards, but later, the CIA orchestrated a coup in Ukraine to expand NATO illegally. The third stated that Ukraine was being led by a theatre company and a bunch of Americans. The fourth claims both that Ukraine was committing genocide in the Donbass and that the US is operating biolabs in the country.

The new one we found is promoting a book by well-known Hungarian conspiracy theorist János Drábik, which states that Washington was aggressive towards Moscow and the former invested significant money into creating an “open society in Ukraine.” The comment added that the US, NATO and the EU did everything it can to “tear Ukraine from its natural bond with Russia.” All the pro-Kremlin narratives spread via Facebook comments – potentially reaching users who would otherwise have not seen such claims – have been debunked multiple times by EUvsDisinfo<sup>144</sup>.

## SOMETHING TO BUILD ON

Although the image of the US in Hungary can be called “mixed” at best, there are some pillars to build on, such as Hungarians wish to be protected by Washington in case Hungary was attacked or joint historical experiences concerning Hungarian freedom fighter and regent Lajos Kossuth<sup>145</sup> or Hungarian freedom fighters taking part in the US civil war<sup>146</sup> – predominantly with the North.

Hungarian politics also has a key task: they need to create an opportunity to discuss US-related issues outside of party political lines, which could start by jointly defining Hungary’s basic goals and priorities vis-à-vis the United States, even if this seems like an impossible task in the polarized Hungarian environment

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143 [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc\\_v4\\_social\\_media\\_war\\_ukraine\\_20220505.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_v4_social_media_war_ukraine_20220505.pdf)

144 [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo\\_keywords%5B%5D=keyword\\_77462&date=&per\\_page=&offset=20](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_keywords%5B%5D=keyword_77462&date=&per_page=&offset=20)

145 <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/1449>

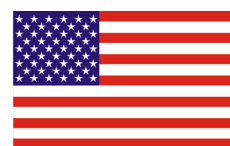
146 <https://pressbooks.ulib.csuohio.edu/hungarian-americans-and-their-communities-of-cleveland/chapter/the-civil-war-era-1851-1870/>

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