SHADOW
FORCES

HIDDEN MALIGN DOMESTIC
AND FOREIGN
"GREY ZONE" MEDIA INFLUENCE
IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• In Central-Eastern Europe, a so-called "grey zone" has emerged in the media, which tries to influence public opinion and pre-election political campaigns through hyper-partisan and sometimes even extremist – often anonymous or only seemingly "independent" – political communication, utilising conspiracy theories and ignoring the standards of ethical journalism.

• What differentiates the "grey zone" media from the mainstream in most cases is a specific media strategy that attempts to mask or remove the original partisan sources of messages and tries to hide authorship, editorial, or ownership background for a greater outreach.

• Our media research in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Serbia has, therefore, looked at political campaign communication before the Czech elections in October 2021, and the Serbian and Hungarian elections in April 2022 to map the "grey zone" media ecosystems, their regional role in the "dirty campaigns," and the war-related rhetoric after the Russian invasion.

• The qualitative and quantitative assessment of hyperlink networks connecting the media under investigation revealed that the grey zone is mostly made up of "old" anonymous conspiracy or clickbait sites established by extremist or nationalistic actors, and "new," radical, anti-vaccination or other anti-establishment movements represented by well-known influencers, all of which cooperate with each other in the dissemination of a total of 9750 messages per month in a network of 238 outlets.

• Due to their large media networks, mobilisation capacity and professional communication campaigns, the grey zone media is capable of re-branding or mobilising anti-establishment audiences, populist actors and hybrid regimes in Central-Eastern Europe and beyond. In Hungary, the pro-government *Megafon Centre* ran a social media campaign to reach the youth on a budget of over HUF 1 billion. As a result, 65% of younger Fidesz voters favour Moscow over Washington, according to a poll released by Median in May 2022.

• In Serbia and Hungary, the autocratic hybrid regimes play a pivotal part in the establishment, financing, and coordination of the grey zone, which is used to launch unsubstantiated smear campaigns against political enemies domestically and assist foreign autocratic influence of Russia or China. For example, the Hungarian pro-government website Bennfentes was used to charge the Mayor of Budapest with unsubstantiated claims of corruption based on surveillance materials of unknown origin.

• **Foreign autocratic influence is no longer a result of active intervention by foreign powers, but rather an autonomous, domestically-supported function of the grey zone media due to local actors and the financial and organisational opacity of media hiding special business or political interests.** In the Czech Republic, for example, Nela Lísková, the former member of ČSSD and SPD and a self-proclaimed "Consul of the Donetsk People's Republic," is a leading voice of pro-Russian and extremist positions.

• **The analysis of narratives and their dissemination over time reaffirmed that both the "old" extremist and the "new" anti-vax guard of the grey zone media are actively involved in the dissemination of Russia's tactical and strategic narratives to legitimise the military aggression against Ukraine.** For example, pro-Kremlin Serbian outlets *Novi Standard, Pečat, Pravda, Stanje stvari,* and *Webtribune* reiterated unsubstantiated accusations of slaughter, rape, and butchering committed by "Ukrainian Nazis" and tolerated by the "silent" West.

• **In fact,** based on the analysis of hyperlink-networks, **the grey zone serves as an intermediary between local extremist and/or pro-Russian, pro-Chinese forces and the European far-right and North-American alt-right movements.**

• **As a result, the grey zone media ecosystem has become a central, difficult-to-control and viral channel of regional or European pro-Russian rhetoric due to its use of modern technological platforms posing a serious threat to national security.** Despite the ban by the Czech authorities against conspiracy websites *Protiproud, Aeronet* and *CzechFreePress,* and the clickbait websites *Skrytá Pravda* and *První zprávy,* they have quickly reasserted themselves on Telegram and other platforms.

INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the new social media platforms in the early 2000s, which have simultaneously reinvented and marginalised traditional mass media, new media technologies have enabled the development of new techniques of political manipulation based on algorithm-enhanced individual targeting, artificial intelligence, bot or troll armies etc. More importantly, the new media platforms and technologies have disrupted local elites' traditional communications with their publics or electorates by allowing local or foreign political actors abroad to bypass entirely – with the help of social media platforms' cloud-based online infrastructures – traditional political or media organisations, as they seek to reach and manipulate target audiences. The latest iteration of malign domestic or foreign manipulation attempts may be observed in so-called "hybrid political regimes," such as those in Hungary and Serbia, or more clear-cut autocracies, such as Russia or China, which use a variety of semi-transparent, non-transparent, or anonymous forms of new and social media outlets and accounts to influence publics at home or abroad, in order to exert "soft" or "sharp power" in addition to their traditional media channels.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has clearly raised the stakes, as the "grey zone" media play a pivotal part in Central-Eastern Europe in the continuous legitimisation of the war, as we demonstrate below.

RESEARCH FOCI

Our novel research focused on the mapping and public exposure of the so called "grey zone" media outlets that have been established over the last several years by local parties, foreign powers, NGOs, lesser-known entities or unknown actors, and financed through obscure channels to influence public debate around key topics in Central-Eastern Europe. This new breed of the so-called "grey zone" media ecosystem has not (re)invented political propaganda as such: it has rather found new ways to disseminate it in a covert way in order to manipulate or deceive news consumers unable to discern who is communicating on specific issues, for what reason and to whom.

We have chosen to investigate the "grey zone" media ecosystem from a comparative perspective in the run-up to three general elections in two fundamentally different political systems in Central-Eastern Europe: the 2021 general elections of the Czech Republic, which is a liberal democracy with a high-functioning democratic public sphere; and the 2022 election campaigns of the "hybrid regimes" in Hungary and Serbia, where the political, economic and media systems are institutionally dominated and distorted in favour of the ruling parties to restrict basic political and human rights, including the freedom of speech or media. Therefore, the fundamental role and functioning of the "white" or "grey" media is markedly different in these countries. Whereas the "grey zone" media represent a rather small niche, as compared to the robust and mostly independent mainstream "white" media operated by fringe actors in the Czech Republic, the Serbian or Hungarian governments use "grey zone" media to further expand their already dominant positions in their

respective media spaces by targeting unaffiliated or even opposition-minded audiences. Likewise, opposition actors or parties in hybrid regimes or autocracies are also reliant on the use of "grey zone" media to compensate for the lack of a strong, independent "white" media.

DEFINITION OF THE "GREY ZONE" MEDIA

Our research distinguished between "white," "grey" and "black" propaganda and related communication infrastructures. While "white" propaganda would be open about their intent, sources etc., "black" propaganda would pretend to be a source other than themselves. Between the white and black propaganda is the "grey zone" media and propaganda which differs in four key aspects from independent mainstream media: (1) they primarily disseminate party or some sort of political propaganda; (2) their content-production relies extensively on the use of disinformation, not adhering to any journalistic ethical standards; (3) they do not establish traditional media organisations; finally, (4) they hide or somehow manipulate the transparency of authorship, or their editorial or financial backgrounds.

We consider websites or social media pages "grey zone" media if they either explicitly or implicitly seek to promote the governmental parties' or the opposition parties' political messages through the aggressive use of new or social media. A media outlet was classified as part of the "grey zone" if the nature and content of the site met the two predefined mandatory criteria (hyper-partisanship or news manipulation) and at least two of the five secondary criteria (time of establishment; reproduction of partisan content; hyper-partisan memes; editorial or financial opacity; intermediary funding) – for the full list and explanation of the selection criteria please see Annex 1. In this respect, we regarded official think tanks, GONGOs or other organisations financed by parties as part of the "grey zone" strategy of a party if they were engaged in the coordinated dissemination of party propaganda before the elections.[1] **As these media can also convey external, malign Russian or Chinese influence due to their editorial policy or ownership,[2] or general anti-West and Eurosceptic political platforms, we have examined their rhetoric about the war between 1 January and 1 March 2022 in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.**

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[1] We did not consider, however, governmental, organisational or individual webpages, blogs, YouTube channels etc. fringe media since these are communication or public relations channels of certain individuals or organisations without the need or expectation to report on any other matter than their individual activities or interests.

[2] We specifically included local pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing outlets that had been established to convey specific geopolitical positions in our initial list of media for each country under investigation.

METHODOLOGY

Our research employed both qualitative and quantitative methodology to monitor and collect historical media data present on Hungarian "grey zone" webpages and Facebook pages, Twitter or YouTube accounts. We have monitored the pre-election period between September 1 and October 31 in the Czech Republic, and the November 1 – December 31 period for Serbia and Hungary. **Given the unexpected invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, we also monitored narratives about the war between January 1 and March 1, 2022 in all three countries under investigation.** The quantitative dataset used in the analysis was generated using the SentiOne social media listening platform, which allowed us to access the data of websites, public Facebook pages and groups to conduct trend, sampling, statistical and network analysis of media content production. For more on methodology see please Annex 2.

Our main hypothesis asserted that the "grey zone" has been created either to directly manipulate the electorate or will be used indirectly by domestic or foreign actors to shape the electoral outcome and the public debate around essential issues on the political agenda during the elections.

To test our assumption and reveal the "grey zone" media, we have defined five research goals:
1. Mapping the size of the "grey zone" network in terms of numbers and their interconnectedness – based on the networks generated using the hyperlinks in elections-related messages.
2. Revealing the main political, economic or other reason behind the establishment and modus operandi of the sites under consideration.
3. Identifying influence operations orchestrated by certain actors or mostly uncoordinated media campaigns and narratives around central issues that have been carried out before, during or after the elections.
4. Establishing the possible links between the "grey zone" media and other domestic or foreign pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing media.
5. Raising awareness of the presence and manipulative nature of the "grey zone", the actors behind these media in all the three countries under consideration among journalists, local policymakers, the foreign and domestic general audiences.

To adequately measure media and their networks employing a "grey zone" media strategy, we have defined seven categories of media to be measured that meet our initial set of criteria and are engaged in a specific type of media production in each country: (1) anonymous hyper-partisan sources; (2) the top 10 conspiracy sources;[3] (3) the top 10 clickbait sites; (4) the top 10 GONGOs sources; (5) the top 10 pro-Kremlin local sources; (6) the top 10 pro-Beijing local sources; (7) other types of sources. For a detailed explanation of our media categories, please see Annex 1. **To understand the composition, functions, and impact of the grey zone ecosystems on a regional scale, we compared their communication networks or structures, their communication, organisational, financial mode of operation or modus operandi, and finally, their impact on society, politics, and media.**

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3   We defined a minimum number of sites, which could be extended by our research partners in each country.

STRUCTURE OF THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEMS

To determine the size, interactions, mobilisation capacity, and the central players of the grey zone media ecosystems in each country, we conducted a network analysis of campaign-related messages' hyperlinks.[4] We used hyperlinks to map the connections between members of our initial grey zone media lists in each country, and between grey zone media and third-party media, for two reasons: hyperlinks embedded into webpage articles or Facebook posts either (1) reference similar or hostile content on other sites to strengthen their messages' argumentation or (2) direct audiences to similar-minded pages. The network database allowed us to create a directed graph[5] using the software Gephi[6] to analyse which domains or groups of domains played a central role in the formulation of disinformation narratives, how the "grey zone" media ecosystem organised itself into clusters and reached out to other media, and how the pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing media tried to influence the campaign discourse in each of the countries under investigation. Using modularity class-ranking to group the nodes,[7] we were able to identify several subgroups or clusters of nodes which statistically occupy a similar network position in terms of their interconnectivity.[8]

Based on the analysis of hyperlink graphs, complemented with the examination of the main sources, and dissemination channels of narratives, we were able to determine the most central/active segments of the grey zone media in each country.

THE CZECH NETWORK

In the Czech Republic, the grey zone has two main segments. The first one is comprised of nationalist or extremist conspiracy or clickbait media, originally established as some form of private new media or blogs five to ten years ago, with non-transparent ownership, organisational or editorial structures, such as *Pravý prostor, New World Order Opposition,* and *CZ24 News* – some with over a million visitors per month (CZ24 News), according to Similarweb.[11] In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the emergence of a new Czech anti-vaccination movement in 2020 and 2021, a phenomena also seen in other Central-Eastern European countries. The Czech anti-vax movements created their own novel communication infrastructure of mostly transparent new media and social media

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4   We used hyperlinks found only in webpage articles or Facebook posts.

5   In mathematics, and more specifically in graph theory, a directed graph (or digraph) is a graph that is made up of a set of vertices connected by directed edges.

6   'Gephi - The Open Graph Viz Platform', accessed 12 October 2021, https://gephi.org/

7   Modularity (community detection) is a measure of network structure. It was designed to measure the strength of division of a network into modules. Networks with high modularity have dense connections between the nodes within modules but sparse connections between nodes in different modules.

8   Clusters or subgroups of nodes highlight how the graph is organised around specific nodes, what types of media serve as a "bridge" between different parts of the Hungarian network, how the Hungarian grey zone is situated in the Hungarian media in particular, and the European or global media in general.

accounts headed by public faces, such as *Otevřeme Česko – Chcípl PES, TV Šalingrad,* or *Srdcem pro vlast* – sites commanding an online audience of hundreds of thousands and an offline followership of thousands during street protests.[III]

Our network analysis of hyperlinks revealed the Czech graph of 805 nodes, as seen below on Figure 1, being organised by the "old generation" of conspiracy sources such as *Pravý prostor, Zvědavec, Tadesco, Aeronet,* and *New World Order Opposition* (NWOO), and – one of the main clickbait sites – *Parlamentní listy.*

Figure 1. The Czech clean grey zone media network diagram and its main clusters displayed in different colours (node size is proportional to the number of connections (edges); k-core=3, only nodes with at least 3 edges visible are shown)[9]

Source: Political Capital's and International Republican Institute's network analysis based on SentiOne data. Click here to download this image in high resolution.

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9   A k-core of a graph G is a maximal connected subgraph of G in which all vertices have degree at least k. For example, the 0-core of a graph is simply the entire graph since every vertex has at least zero edges; a vertex cannot have a negative number of edges. The 1-core of a graph contains the vertices that are connected to other vertices.

The main clusters or subgroups of the Czech clean graph are organised and mobilised by the same media. The biggest purple cluster centred around *Parlamentní listy* (Parliamentary Papers) and the hyper-partisan *České národní listy* (Czech National Letters) fosters a strong relationship with the conspiracy website *Zvědavec's* green cluster, as well as the blue group of nodes around another conspiracy outlet, *Pravý proctor.* The grey zone clusters' communication references both the mainstream media and the actors of the nationalist-extremist political side to formulate their messages. *Parlamentní listy* or *CZ24 News* in the blue cluster serve as "bridge" nodes between the mainstream media, such as *Seznam správy,*[IV] or *Lidové noviny* owned by the media group Mafra close to former PM Andrej Babiš, and the conspiracy sources of *Tadesco, Aeronet,* and *New World Order Opposition* (NWOO), which have affinity with the main actors of the nationalist opposition parties, namely Freedom and Direct Democracy, Tricolour or the Alliance of National Forces. For more on the Czech network results, please see the country-report on the website of Political Capital.

From a content-production perspective, the network analysis of hyperlinks between grey zone media and third-party sources revealed that the domestic and foreign malign disinformation campaigns had established a two-tier "integration" mechanism or system of the production of disinformation: a few Czech pro-Kremlin pages, such as Sputnik's Czech site, or conspiracy pages reference mainstream media to formulate their initial anti-Western messages. Then the same narratives are fed right into a variety of different conspiracy pages that disseminate them to a much wider far-right/Eurosceptic/anti-vaccination audience.

THE HUNGARIAN NETWORK

In Hungary, the grey zone media can be divided into two political and four thematic parts. When it comes to politics, the ecosystem follows the government vs. opposition logic. Newer, mostly anonymous hyper-partisan sites, such as *Gondolkodó* (Thinker) or *BalraMagyar* (Hungarians on the left), strengthen the leftist opposition's side, while the prominent anonymous *Számok – a baloldali álhírek ellenszere* (Numbers – the antidote to left-wing fake-news) or *Vadhajtások* (Wild shoots) echo the government's campaign rhetoric to an audience of several hundred thousand on Facebook.[V]

As in the Czech Republic, if we dissect the Hungarian grey zone media based on the establishment and activities of each media, we can distinguish between an "old guard" of mostly anonymous (1) conspiracy or (2) clickbait sources established years ago by actors close to the Hungarian extremist subculture, and a "new breed" of (3) hyper-partisan sites close to parties, as well as (4) new anti-vax Hungarian outlets founded in the last two to three years of the pandemic. The analysis of the complete Hungarian network of 613 nodes, as displayed below on Figure 2, revealed that the political campaign communication is organised by and around mainly rightist anonymous hyper-partisan pages, namely the purple cluster around the anonymous pro-government site *Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere,* and the green cluster of the anonymous pro-government site Vadhajtások and the anonymous extremist *Kuruc.info* close to the far-right and anti-Semitic Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Homeland Movement).

Figure 2. The complete Hungarian network diagram and its main clusters displayed in different colours (node size is proportional to the number of connections or edges)
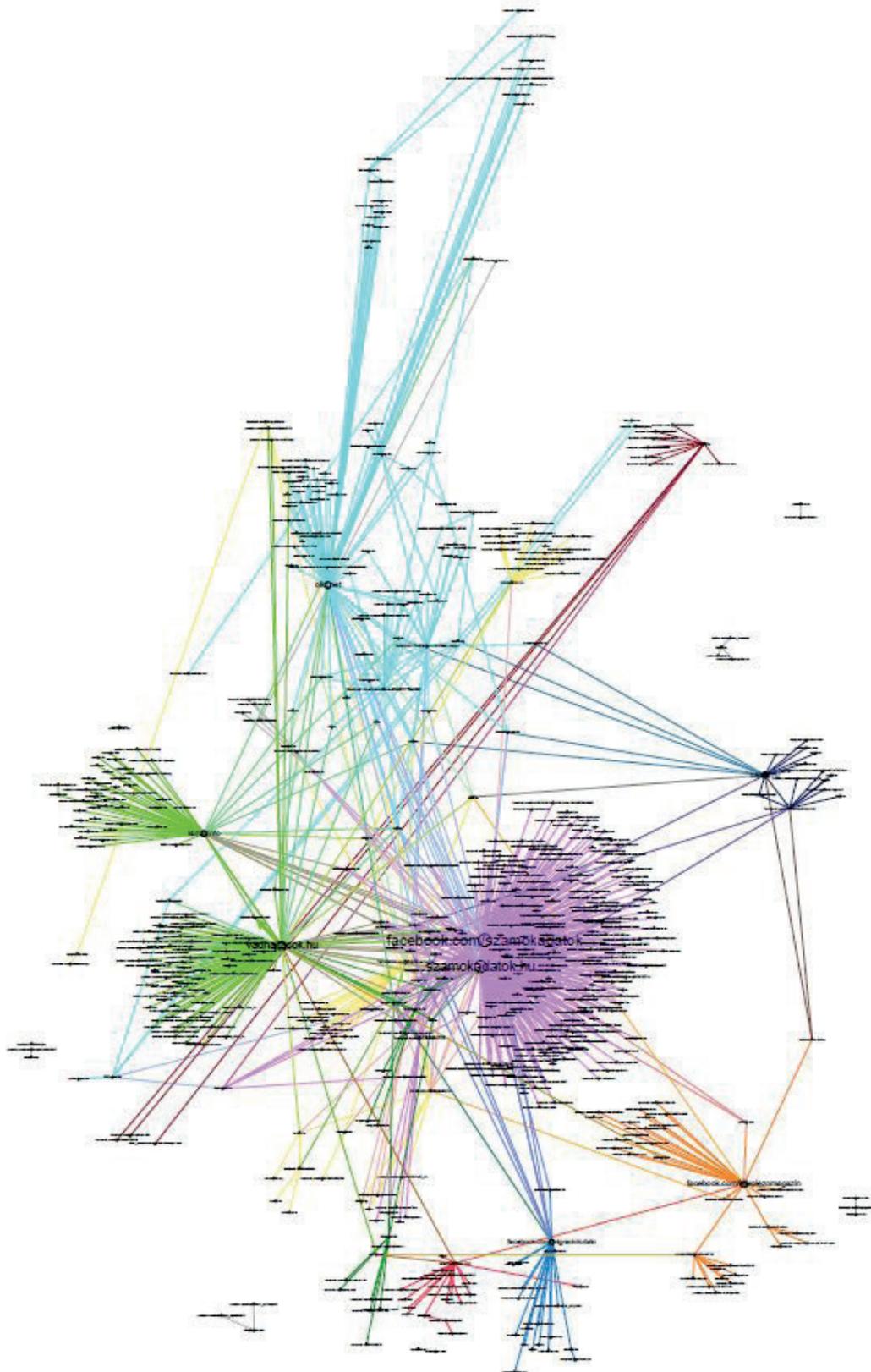
Source: Political Capital's and International Republican Institute's network analysis based on SentiOne data. Click here to download this image in high resolution.

Interestingly, the network is arranged around only one major hyper-partisan source on the left, the domain *OLKT.net,* close to the DK party, marked in turquoise blue, which is accompanied by two smaller anonymous leftist media: Gondolkodó (Thinker), linked to the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), and the Facebook page *Hírek a színfalak mögül* (News from behind the scenes), with some ties to the Democratic Coalition (DK) led by former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány. All the other conspiracy, clickbait or anti-vax sources have far less important roles in the network, which point to the significance of Hungarian parties, and their resources in the establishment and preservation of the grey zone in Hungary. For more on the Hungarian network results, please see the country-report on the website of Political Capital.

From a content-production perspective, the network analysis of hyperlinks revealed a "push or pull" mechanism. While Hungarian hyper-partisan or extremist sites pull a lot of domestic or foreign content to craft their messages, they are also used as a launching ground for new smear campaigns in which unsubstantiated claims are presented or pushed by some grey zone media to be picked up by mainstream outlets.

THE SERBIAN NETWORK

Serbia differs from Hungary and the Czech Republic in three main aspects: the Serbian grey zone is comprised of (1) almost exclusively nationalistic outlets that differ (2) along the opposition - governmental divide, unlike Czechia, and (3) the anti-government outlets basically form a substitute for the non-existent rightist or conservative independent media, unlike Hungary, since the right side of the Serbian mainstream media is completely ruled by the Vučić regime. The smallest network of the three is the Serbian graph comprised of only 168 nodes, with many of those forming a distinct "bubble," as seen on Figure 3 below. Among the grey zone media categories, the most relevant ones are anonymous hyper-partisan outlets dominated by the government, such as Beograd, and mostly anonymous conspiracy/clickbait sources with an anti-government position, such as *Webtribune* or *Srbija Danas.*

Figure 3. The complete Serbian network diagram and its main clusters displayed in different colours (node size is proportional to the number of connections or edges)
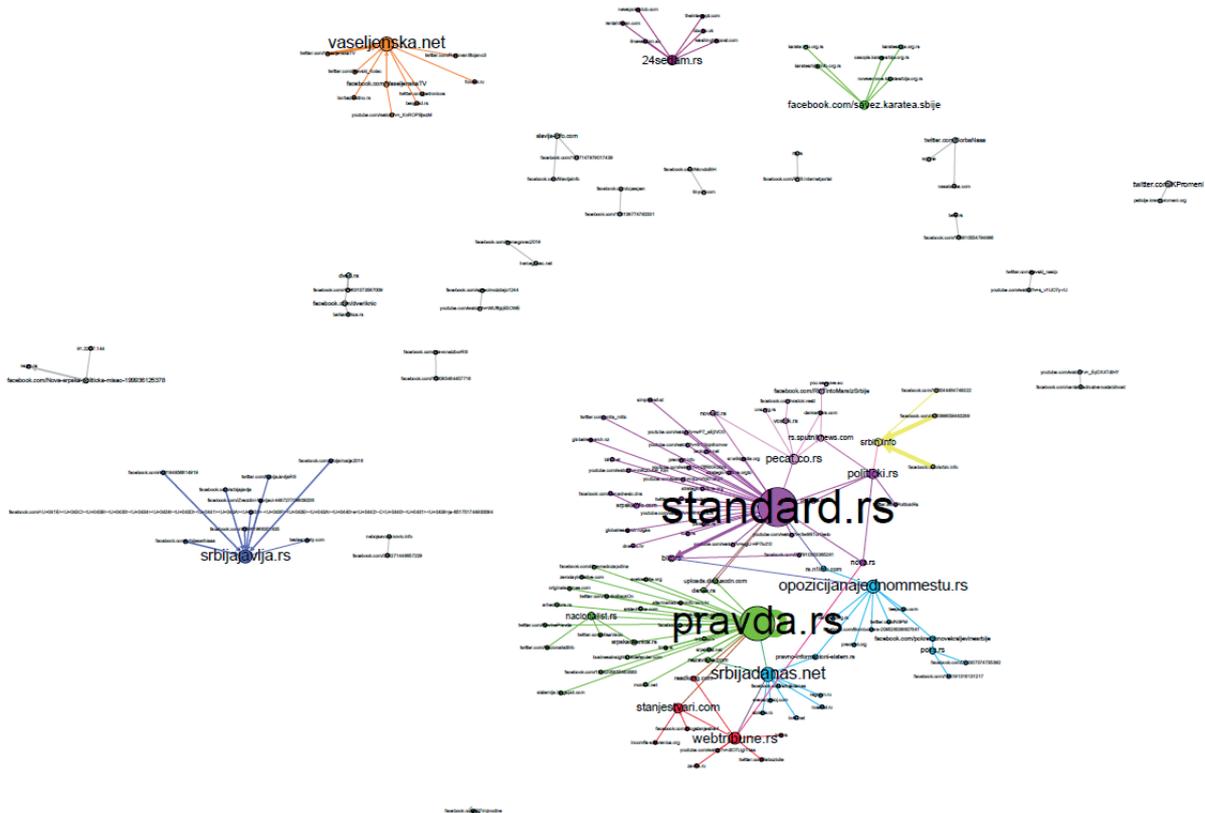
The presence of independent, smaller "bubbles" or clusters can be explained by political polarisation, as well as by the lack of platform data, since researchers mainly looked at hyperlinks found in website articles or Facebook posts, which missed connections between media formed through other platforms, such as Telegram. Nevertheless, the centre of the Serbian network highlighted two of the most significant media of the grey zone: the purple cluster of *Standard,* a pro-Kremlin opposition site, and the green cluster of the pro-Kremlin *Pravda,* similarly a pro-Kremlin and anti-government source. Besides the nationalist anti-government clickbait page *Srbija Danas* and the anonymous anti-government *Opozicija na jednom mestu* (Opposition in one place) in the third blue subgroup, the only significant pro-Kremlin outlet is to be found in its distinct bluish bubble on the left, *Srbija javlja,* a conspiracy source with a pro-Kremlin geopolitical orientation. For more on the Serbian network results, please see the country-report on the website of Political Capital.

From a content-production perspective, the network analysis of hyperlinks revealed the grey zone's "fragmentation" impact. The network has been fragmented along information bubbles created around the pro-government, anti-government, and independent sources that tend to attack each other in a harsh political competition, except for the presence of Russian malign influence supported by all or most of the grey zone actors.

MODUS OPERANDI

Based on the qualitative and quantitative network and content-analysis, including the results of the investigative research conducted in each country, we were able to identify four basic political, economic and media operational logic as part of the regional modus operandi of the grey zone media ecosystems. These societal mechanisms can be interpreted and explained separately, as we do below; however, they are, in reality, inter-related and integrated operational principles that contribute to the existence of the entire media ecosystems on multiple levels.

I. POLITICAL EXTREMISM

In all three countries, the oldest and most established "core media" of the grey zone was created by extremist political actors: a colourful group of conspiracy theorists, publishers of extremist literature, paramilitary organisations, and far-right parties. Given the ideological extremity and the conspiracy-mindset of extremist audiences, coupled with a usual lack of operational resources on the extremist end of the political spectrum, these actors could benefit significantly from the different new media/social media platforms that were able to provide them much-needed operational capabilities, anonymity to spread conspiracy theories and, at the same time, gain revenues from ad services based on a sizeable extremist audience. Thus, the oldest, and best-established conspiracy or clickbait websites or social media accounts could be linked to some of the extremist actors. For example, the Serbian far-right conspiracy YouTube channel *HelmCast,* or the Czech conspiracy website *Nová republika,* can be linked to extremist actors, while in Hungary the main far-right and anti-Semitic website *Kuruc.info* is allegedly operated by one of the politicians of the far-right Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Homeland Movement).

Another important consequence is that foreign hostile actors are able to influence or infiltrate the murky waters of extremism more easily. As explained below, the Czech or Hungarian nationalist-extremist scene has forged a close relationship with the Kremlin or pro-Kremlin actors, especially after the illegal annexation of Crime due to ideological proximity or a variety of active measures.

Therefore, the presence of the fairly strong extremist online and/or offline extremist subcultures and movements in Central-Eastern Europe has a profound impact on the existence and long-term sustainability and vulnerability to the foreign autocratic influence of the grey zone. **The inherently untransparent nature of extremist organisations and their media infrastructure makes it nearly impossible to track their ownership, membership structures, and editorial policies geared towards the spread of geopolitical mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories.**

II. HYBRID REGIMES AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

The second most important factor in the vitality of the grey zone media is the need of various parties to expand their strategic communication beyond their core audiences or limitations in a given media environment. In a normal and liberal-democratic media system, such as the Czech Republic, parties use the "services" of the grey zone to formulate and spread their anti-establishment messages targeting mainstream media or other centrist political actors. In the Czech Republic, the grey zone supported the rhetoric and political position of the nationalist-conservative opposition during the political campaign of 2021, such as the right wing – extreme right Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD) led by Tomio Okamura, the Eurosceptic Tricolour Citizens' Movement or the Free Bloc, including various anti-vaccination movements. Their rhetoric mainly centred on the allegedly "biased" mainstream media's coverage of nationalist actors and the betrayal of the Czech "national interests" by the winner SPOLU coalition (Civic Democrats, Christian Democrats, TOP 09) and the Pirates and Mayors.[VI] **The grey zone tried to present itself as the sole, fact-based source of the truth while advocating for the nationalist parties' hard Eurosceptic position or against the European sanctions regime against Russia citing Czech economic interests.**

In Serbia and Hungary, the political and media systems dominated by the so-called hybrid regimes contributed significantly to the establishment of the grey zone for two main reasons.[10] First, the Orbán or Vučić regimes have achieved such dominance over their public spheres, by controlling the majority of the media's ownership or editorial policies, that they have reached the actual limits of propaganda, creating an effective "media bubble" for their entire electorate. To reach apolitical, non-aligned or even opposition-minded voters and media consumers harbouring distrust or a distaste for the central propaganda machine, they need to cleverly manipulate the audience and "hide" the sources of propaganda. Second, the (democratic) opposition parties have a difficult time getting their messages out due to the lack or the weakness of independent or party-related media. For example, in Hungary, over 500 private or state-owned media serve the government's communication, and are counterbalanced only by a dozen or so independent media, mainly in the forms of online news portals.

Therefore, hybrid regimes make both the government and the opposition parties interested in the creation of the "grey zone" to enhance the reach of their strategic communications, that is relatively limited by being on the top and objectively limited by being on the bottom of the hybrid regime. For these reasons, the Serbian grey zone media is made up of mostly anonymous hyper-partisan sources and "independent" GONGOs, trying to spread governmental propaganda under different brands, such as *Pristojna Srbija* or *Srpska inicijativa* (formerly known *Srpska digitalna inicijativa*), with average social media audiences of 10,000 to 20,000 (Facebook),[VII] whereas the opposition relies mostly on anonymous conspiracy/clickbait outlets with a nationalist political orientation, such

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10   Hybrid regimes combine autocratic features with democratic ones and can simultaneously hold political repressions and regular elections. The term hybrid regime arises from a polymorphic view of political regimes that opposes the dichotomy of autocracy or democracy.

as the clickbait site *Srbija Danas* or *Webherald.* In Hungary, the grey zone is more divided along traditional ideological lines, with pro-government anonymous hyper-partisan, clickbait or GONGO sources expressing a nationalistic ideology or maintaining close relations with the Hungarian far-right subculture, and the most significant anonymous or semi-transparent outlets demonstrating a leftist ideology.

There is, however, a difference in the transparency of media somewhat integrated with the strategic communication of the pro-government or opposition parties. Despite the fact that the pro-government grey zone media is tightly woven into the official communication of Fidesz-KDNP or its politicians, based on their hyperlink-network, we were unable to reveal any ties between the governmental political actors and the leading anonymous pro-government outlets. One exception concerns the pro-government or government established GONGOs, since their public presence and media campaigns require their "independent" political experts', or influencers', faces to be easily identifiable in the public. So, the lack of transparency usually concerns these organisations' finances, hiding funding coming from pro-government or governmental actors. A prime example is the *Megafon Centre,* which has spent over HUF 1 billion on Facebook advertising during the 2022 campaign to push pro-government propaganda, while claiming to have received this huge amount of money in the form of independent donations.[VIII] **Regardless of the opaqueness of the Hungarian grey zone media, investigative research was able to reveal how pro-government outlets were used as a springboard to launch some of the most significant political scandals or smear campaigns against the opposition.** One such example includes the "anonymous scandal" charging the Mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, with alleged corruption charges, first published by the pro-government grey zone portal *Bennfentes,* then picked up by the mainstream pro-government media, spreading it like wildfire in an apparently pre-meditated dissemination strategy.[IX] In the case of the Hungarian opposition, our investigative research revealed numerous political or ownership links between some of the media and opposition parties. For example, the owner of *Nyugati Fény* (Western Light), Viktor Mandula, vehemently denies any links to the leftist Democratic Coalition led by former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány despite cultivating a high-level relationship with the party's leaders. The leftist *Pesti Bulvár* (Pest Tabloid) is co-owned by Gábor Veres,[X] who is a local representative of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) in the municipality of Budapest's 8th district, and also serves as vice-chair of the party's National Committee.[XI] **The difference in organisational transparency between the rightist and leftist outlets can be explained on the grounds of political legitimacy. While Fidesz-KDNP only needs new ways to disseminate governmental propaganda to independent or even opposition voters, the leftist grey zone media also contribute, to a certain degree, to the political standing or media influence of opposition parties against the overpowering Hungarian hybrid regime.** One of the owners of *Pesti Bulvár* highlighted their role in counterbalancing the government's dominance over media:

"There are many important things in Hungary that were not mentioned in pro-government media, and not even by MTI, the Hungarian national news agency" [that need to be addressed by Pesti Bulvár – Lorant Gyori].

Consequently, the grey zone media strategy of parties or even hybrid regimes tend to be quite untransparent in terms of organisational structures, ownership, or finances to be able to successfully move beyond these parties' core audiences. The integration of the grey zone into the strategic communication of parties also means that grey sources are primarily used to launch, prolong, or put a spin on unsubstantiated smear campaigns levelled against political opponents.

III. NEW ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

New anti-systemic social movements are another driving force behind the grey zone ecosystems in Central-Eastern Europe. Low on resources, outside of the parliamentary or mainstream party system, new anti-vaccination movements in Hungary and Czechia tend to turn to the grey zone for legitimacy and publicity for a variety of special interests. In the Czech Republic these interests concerned general discontent with the government's handling of the pandemic that prompted "grassroots" action. The new Czech anti-vax movement includes about 30 different groups protesting the government-mandated anti-pandemic measures or the new vaccines, which are, in their interpretation, the first steps towards the establishment of a new "COVID-19 totalitarian regime" by the Czech government. Among them, one of the most significant is the *Otevřeme Česko – Chcípl PES* (We Will Open Czechia- PES/DOG Croaked), founded by businessman Jakub Olbert, whose Prague-based restaurant was negatively impacted by COVID-19 restrictions.[XII] In contrast to other extremist or anonymous conspiracy sources of the Czech grey media landscape, the new anti-vax outlets are fairly open and transparent, run by well-known figures, who also rely on crowdsourcing in the forms of readers' donations or merchandise offered in webshops. Their popularity draws on both their informal communication style, including frequent livestreams broadcasted of anti-vaccination protests, and disinformation narratives, which tend to be personal testimonies and content imported from abroad, typically including conspiracy theories about 5G networks, the origins of COVID-19 or the sins of the pharmaceutical industry. **Investigative reporting has revealed business or ideological interests behind the Czech movement.** David Formánek, a well-known conspiracy theorist, who is behind the anti-vax outlets *Roušku dolů* (Facemasks Down), *Rizika vakcín* (Vaccine Risks), *Otevři svou mysl* (Open Your Mind) and *Kulový blesk* (Ball Lightning), uses his media to sell products and campaign against the mainstream media. In his view, all pandemic-related measures should be considered illegal:

 "...in times when the government behaves demonstrably illegally and issues only propagandistic declarations, uses illegal pressure and repression, fundamentally limits information, rights and freedoms guaranteed to citizens by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, Nuremberg Code, Constitution etc., it is our civil obligation to ensure access to such information in a way that allows everyone to make a free, qualified opinion."

Similarly, Patrik Pečénka, the owner of the anti-vax portal *Za pravdu* (For Truth) emphasised his role to inform people in a balanced way on the pandemic:

"My initiative is mainly informing citizens about information that the media conceal or distort and turn against those of us who do not agree with this situation" [with regard to the COVID-19 measures – Lorant Gyori].

Nevertheless, the public financing scheme of the Czech anti-vax movements and related outlets mean that hundreds of thousands of Czech crowns were donated by sympathiser to, for example, Otevřeme Česko – Chcípl PES,[XIII] KTV, or even millions in the case of Zdravé forum (Healthy Forum) since the start of the pandemic.[XIV]

In Hungary, the new anti-vax movement is also based on some special interests, and it is basically spearheaded by a small circle of former health professionals turned into conspiracy theorists.[11] The pandemic crisis profoundly impacted the Hungarian anti-vax community, which was transformed from a small circle of parents concerned about childhood-immunization into a hyperactive, network-building movement. Establishing itself through social media, the Hungarian anti-vax community is predominantly led by a new generation of self-proclaimed/alternate health experts such as **Dr. György Gődény who, as the prominent member of the leading branch of the antivax movement called the *Doctors for Clarity,* is leading a crusade against COVID-19 vaccines through a newly established network of clickbait websites, social media pages and groups as part of the grey zone.** Previous research of Political Capital has established a strong link between the Hungarian anti-vax community and the far-right and pro-Kremlin subculture:[XV] the Hungarian anti-Western far-right messages were adopted by the new antivax movement, such as the alleged "eugenics" plan executed by Bill Gates, Henry Kissinger, or George Soros; or that the novel coronavirus was released by the West to bring down China. In return, the "data" produced by anti-vax "experts" was picked up by the far-right Our Homeland Movement to argue, for example, against the vaccination of children against the COVID-19 infection. **The interaction between the far-right and antivax movements resulted in an anti-Western, more specifically, anti-US, turn of the Hungarian antivax communication, which significantly contributes to the Hungarian grey zone media's anti-Western position as a whole.** A prime example of this attitude was in plain view during the "COVID 9.11" protest organised by the leader of the antivax movement Dr. Gődény in September 2020. As explained below, the anti-vax movement has also expressed its sudden, unexpected and inexplicable support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

All told, the new social movements significantly contribute to the expansion and mobilisation of anti-establishment audiences, and voters, as well as the political legitimacy of anti-establishment and/or undemocratic actors in the countries observed. Although some of their activities are more in the open, as compared to the extremist subculture, they still tend to conceal some of the special business or political interests behind their activities.

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11   For more, please see Political Capital's study on the new Hungarian anti-vaccination movement entitled "COVID-9.11, The transformation and anti-West radicalization of the Hungarian antivax movement, https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/covid911_IRI_antivax_report_2021_11.pdf

IV. FOREIGN AUTOCRATIC INFLUENCE

The presence or impact of foreign autocratic influence, in the forms of disinformation campaigns or active measures, is not only a given in the Central-European grey zone media: it is, rather, an explicit function of it. Interestingly, the pro-Russian or pro-Chinese political and communication stance of the grey zone cannot be attributed primarily to foreign actors or interference anymore, it is a product of mostly domestic factors. **We can identify three mechanisms that enable foreign autocratic power projection into the Central-Eastern European countries: ideology, agents of influence infiltrating political subcultures or the lack of the general transparency of grey zone media.**

ANTI-WESTERN IDEOLOGY

One of the most important drivers of foreign autocratic influence is the anti-Western ideology of the grey zone media and the actors behind it. Since most or all the grey zone ecosystems in the Czech Republic, Serbia or Hungary exhibit nationalistic, or even far-right extremist political platforms, they fundamentally view the West, the United States, the European Union, or NATO as supranational structures trying to crush nation states or national sovereignty. So, nationalistic actors consider Russia or China as a much welcomed "counterbalance" to the West, making a new and ideal "multipolar world" view of the United States' dominance after the end of the Cold War possible again. Of course, the anti-Western stance has a slightly different pattern in each country under review. In Serbia, the fate of Kosovo, together with the shared Eastern Orthodox traditions, make Russia Serbia's key partner on the world stage in terms of diplomatic, economic or military cooperation. Euroscepticism is the main driving factor behind the Czech anti-Western attitudes, with a significant portion of the electorate exhibiting an anti-EU sentiment or even supporting Czexit: a whopping 27% of Czechs would support leaving the European Union, according to Globsec Trends 2021.[XVI] Hungary does not share a similar historical anti-Western sentiment: for example, Hungarians express the highest support and confidence among CEE countries in the EU or NATO, sometimes even topping confidence in Hungarian political institutions. Instead, the second Orbán government's deliberate anti-Western and pro-Eastern turn, dubbed the "Eastern Opening" foreign policy (Keleti Nyitás), which prioritised the special diplomatic relationship with Russia and China, has made its mark on specific aspects of Hungarians' geopolitical orientation. The anti-Western propaganda centred around the alleged "world conspiracy" of philanthropist George Soros, the pro-immigration stance of the EU or the corruption of the Biden administration etc. have successfully injected conspiracy theories into the mainstream political discourse in Hungary. As a result, a recent poll by Medián revealed that China is regarded more highly (47%) than the United States (44%), while the pro-government electorate viewed Russia more favourably (43) than the United States (33%) or Ukraine (24), with pro-Kremlin sympathies especially running high among young Fides voters.[XVII]

INFILTRATION

The presence of foreign autocratic influence in the grey zone is also assisted by the infiltration of its ranks by mostly domestic and, occasionally, foreign agents of influence. We were only able to prove a few cases of foreign infiltration, with a diminishing impact over time. For example, the now-defunct anonymous portal pro-Russian *Hídfő.ru* (Bridgehead) was founded by the disbanded neo-Nazi and paramilitary organisation Magyar Nemzeti Arcvonal (Hungarian National Front), who trained together with GRU agents and received some funding from them for their cooperation prior to 2016.[XVIII] At the same time, the former far-right Jobbik party was infiltrated by a Russian "businessman" named Béla Kovács, who is being prosecuted by the Hungarian authorities for Russian espionage against the EU in his capacity as Jobbik's MEP between 2010 and 2019.[XIX] The Hungarian extremist subculture's ties to the Kremlin came to the forefront again in 2021, when it was made public that two former Jobbik politicians took part in a Russia-funded "election observer mission," or active measure, led by the pro-Russian Polish politician Mateusz Piskorski in the Central African Republic to legitimise the re-election of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra favoured by the Kremlin.[XX] To a lesser extent, we could observe a similar phenomenon in the Czech Republic, where Nela Lísková, the former member of ČSSD and SPD and a self-proclaimed Consul of the Donetsk People's Republic in the Czech Republic, is a leading voice of pro-Russian and extremist stances, expressed on grey zone outlets, such as *Rukojmí*. The new anti-vax movements have also turned pro-Kremlin in Hungary and Czechia due to both their anti-Western ideological stance and maybe some possible infiltration. Without some hidden infiltration scheme, we cannot really explain the Hungarian anti-vax movement's sudden pro-Kremlin turn on the war in times when everybody was trying to put distance between themselves and the Kremlin, for obvious political reasons. The movement and the anti-vax Party for Normal Life (Normális Élet Pártja), led by conspiracist György Gődény, issued an unexpected press release in March 2022, declaring:[XXI]

"We are in favour of a military pacification of the region, even by the Russian side, as long as it is aimed at (…) minimising the suffering of the Ukrainian population and sparing the country's infrastructure. (…) We condemn the fact that the Atlantic bloc, with its expansion and the deployment of new and newer weapons systems, continues to provoke Russia."[12]

The more significant infiltration is domestic in nature, however. It concerns the strategic communication of the Hungarian and Serbian hybrid regimes that have not only established, financed, or coordinated significant parts of the grey zone ecosystems, but also enforced their pro-Eastern geopolitical orientation in their communication. In Hungary's case this meant making the grey zone outlets the "hard foreign policy fist" of the ruling parties. While mainstream pro-government media adopted a more measured, objective, and fact-based approach to the new war between Russia and Ukraine, anonymous grey zone outlets attacked the West and supported the invasion even more forcefully.

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12   'Gődény Györgyék Kiálltak Oroszország Mellett | Magyar Hang | A Túlélő Magazin', accessed 16 May 2022, https://hang.hu/belfold/godeny-gyorgyek-kialltak-oroszorszag-mellett-138126

GUNS FOR HIRE

The general lack of organisational, financial, or editorial transparency also makes it very likely that some of the grey zone media will follow a pro-Kremlin or pro-Chinese rhetoric for money or other benefits without ideological bias or a take-over by outside entities. The above-mentioned role of Hungarian extremist politicians or anti-vax activists could also be interpreted as a mutually beneficial backroom deal that benefitted the Kremlin without the deployment of significant actors from their side. The open financial mechanism of the Czech anti-vax outlets means that they can accept "donations" from anybody, while some of the Hungarian actors have proven to have established grey zone outlets for financial gains. The investigative portal *Átlátszó* revealed that one of the anonymous hyper-partisan outlets in support of the government, *Minden Szó* (Every Word), was founded, along with 11 other new media and social media accounts, by a software engineer named László Gerendás, living in the rural town of Esztergom.[XXII] According to the investigation, the owner of these sites has settled on the production of pro-government, including pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian, news to maximise their ad revenues on Google. **Thus, grey zone outlets geared towards click-based ad revenues can easily be enticed, directly or indirectly, to produce and disseminate pro-Kremlin or pro-Chinese disinformation for financial revenues.**

Altogether, the analysis of the grey zone systems and networks in the three countries has reaffirmed that their inherently anti-Western or pro-Eastern stance is reproduced on an autonomous and domestic basis. While small local networks of pro-Kremlin outlets do form a part of the grey zone ecosystems, they do not play a central or key role in the dissemination of disinformation narratives. Rather, the grey zone system as a whole produces anti-Western and pro-Eastern disinformation narratives directly quoting either local pro-Russian actors or parties, or original Russian sources, such as Sputnik, Russia Today, or the Kremlin. The autonomous re-production of foreign autocratic influence also means that the Kremlin's strategic and tactical narratives used to legitimise the invasion of Ukraine have been part of the grey zone well before the war started, as we explain it in the next chapter.

THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION

Although it is difficult to determine the impact of the grey zone media on the society and the political and media systems of the three countries under consideration, we will attempt to provide an assessment of their societal impact based on both some quantitative measurements, such as the average number of messages produced in a month, as well as a qualitative assessment of the disinformation narratives disseminated. Finally, we evaluate the geopolitical role of the grey zone media on the international level, including the bolstering of foreign autocratic communications influence by Russia or China in Central-Eastern Europe.

IMPACT IN NUMBERS

If we look at the raw data, as displayed below in Table 1, the grey zone demonstrates a significant capacity to mobilise people, producing a total of 9750 messages/month. Altogether, 238 outlets using a network of at least 1585 nodes, reach an average audience of 200,000 on Facebook. Given the new anti-vaccination movements' strong online and offline presence, and the deep societal roots of local extremist subcultures, the impact of the grey zone can be felt in all areas of life.

Table 1. The number of the grey zone media and their networks, average numbers of messages disseminated and estimated audiences of clickbait media in the Czech Republic, Serbia and Hungary

Country	Number of outlets[13]	Network size[14]	Average message/month[15]	Estimated audience/outlet[16]
Czechia	63	805	3624	80 728
Hungary	124	613	4417	472 080
Serbia	51	168	1709	74 632
Total	**238**	**1586**	9750	**209 146**[17]

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13   The initial list of grey zone sources was compiled by local researchers.

14   Based on hyperlinks found in the articles or Facebook posts of all the media on the initial list compiled.

15   Based on all the relevant articles or Facebook posts produced by the grey zone media in each country for the specific campaign periods under investigation. The number does not include comments of any kind.

16   Based on the average number of Facebook followers of the most significant clickbait media in each country, such as *Mindenegyben* blog in Hungary, *Parlamentní listy* in the Czech Republic, or *Srbija Danas* in Serbia.

17   The average number of audience/outlet/country.

NARRATIVES

The Russian invasion of Ukraine also proved to be a watershed moment for the grey zone media, which almost immediately changed its Russia-related communication, adopting mostly a pro-war rhetoric in accordance with their pro-Kremlin sentiment and geopolitical position before. Therefore, we present first the "normal" campaign narratives formulated before the war, and the so-called war rhetoric emerging after 24 February 2022. We conducted an analysis of the representative article and Facebook post samples, as well as a time-trend analysis of messages to identify the central messages, main types of narratives, and the peaks of message dissemination over time in each country. For more on the narrative methodology applied and for detailed research results, please see the country reports.

CAMPAIGN RHETORIC

Before the war, geopolitical issues, such as political views on the West, the EU or Russia, and foreign autocratic influence were not priority issues in Hungary or the Czech Republic. The grey zone media was primarily preoccupied with local election campaign scandals, political feuds or different communications strategies to support or attack the government or the opposition; foreign policy positions were usually only present in a fraction of narratives surveyed.

Based on a representative sample, Czech researchers identified five top narratives, amounting to 41.7% of all messages, dealing with: (1) the alleged "totalitarian regime" based on COVID-19 restrictions; (2) the critique of the democratic opposition coalition (the so-called "Demobloc"); (3) Euroscepticism; (4) attacks against the mainstream media based on their alleged "bias" against the nationalist parties supported by the grey zone media; and, finally, (5) support expressed for the national-conservative opposition. **The most-resonating Czech narrative was about presenting the government's COVID-19 restrictions and vaccinations as a means of fraud used to limit human rights and allegedly establish a "totalitarian political regime" by the Czech government**. At the same time, the media monitored downplayed the severity of the pandemic and the potential dangers of COVID-19.[18] The political relevance of the new Czech anti-vaccination movement in the organisation of the grey zone is undeniable, since they were the ones determining the main disinformation campaign during the peak grey zone news cycle before the elections (September 13 – 20 2021), which tried to frame the election process as a chance to fight for freedom and to overthrow the supposed "totalitarian regime."[19] They attempted to mobilise Czech citizens to oppose the measures and used their platforms to organise protests and petitions. This perception of the elections also led grey zone media across all our identified categories (conspiracy and clickbait sites, anti-vaccination, hyper-partisan media) to support national-conservative opposition candidates such as SPD, Tricolour, Free Bloc and more newly

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18   This is also an outcome of the research design, since we treated media opposing COVID-19 measures and vaccinations as a country-specific (and extensive) category of Czech grey zone media.

19   "Proč v ČR nevznikla proti koronavirová parlamentní strana? Mírná opozice v mezích zákona? Proč to na Slovensku, nebo v Rakousku jde? – Česká věc," accessed March 12, 2022, https://ceskavec.com/2021/09/proc-v-cr-nevznikla-proti-koronavirova-parlamentni-strana-mirna-opozice-v-mezich-zakona-proc-to-na-slovensku-nebo-v-rakousku-jde

established political movements such as *Otevřeme Česko - Chcípl PES* (We Will Open Czechia- PES/ DOG Croaked)[20] – one of multiple anti-vaccination movements which transformed themselves into political movements and ran in the elections. **Foreign autocratic influence, including pro-Kremlin narratives, were present through the Eurosceptic and nationalistic narratives that presented parties of the winning electoral coalition, SPOLU and Pirates and Mayors (PaS), as servants of external actors,** such as the European Union, betraying the Czech national interest.

In Hungary, we were able to identify altogether 27 relevant narratives that either reflected on more general political issues on the campaign agenda, such as political corruption; the state of Hungarian democracy; conspiracy theories, such as one about the European Union allegedly trying to create an "empire" against nation states; or narratives about specific scandals or political figures. The top five narratives amounting to 45.9% of our sample detailed: (1) the problem of mass-immigration into the EU, as presented by pro-government outlets; (2) the failures of government policies; (3) the opposition candidate for PM being unfit for holding premiership; (4) the political incompetence of the unified democratic opposition; (5) management of the COVID-19 epidemic. The analysis of the top narratives also confirmed the government's dominance over the Hungarian grey zone ecosystem, since three of the five narratives (1, 3, 4) conveyed the main lines of the government's campaign communications – highlighting how pro-government outlets outspent opposition-oriented ones, with only *Megafon Centre* spending over HUF 1 billion on Facebook ads during the campaign. The news cycle of the Hungarian grey zone peaked twice, during November 8 – 15, and December 6 – 12, reflecting mostly on the opposition primaries that saw the election of a surprise conservative candidate for PM on the part of the opposition, Péter Márki-Zay ("MZP"), the mayor of the town of Hódmezővásárhely. While the leftist grey zone media tried mostly to get out of the leftist parties' messages, or address the Pegasus spyware scandal used by the Hungarian government to monitor opposition politicians, independent journalists or civil society activists,[XXIII] the pro-government sources were involved in the fabrication of novel, mostly invented political scandals. We were able to identify two major influence campaigns during our timeframe of November 1 and December 31, 2021. The first one had to do with the success of the opposition primaries that prompted the ruling Fidesz-KDNP and all the pro-government media, including the grey zone, to present Péter Márki-Zay as an incompetent politician known for rhetorical gaffes,[XXIV] corruption,[XXV] ill-preparedness for the position or simply treasonous behaviour for calling on the European Union to investigate corruption cases in Hungary. **The second political communication campaign was launched by one of the leading pro-government news portals, Index, together with the grey zone media outlet *Bennfentes* (Insider).** The portals published a series of "leaked" documents and voice recordings disseminated by an "anonymous" source, which were in fact products of surveillance operations, about alleged plans by the leadership of the capital to sell most of the City Hall of Budapest and the land that surrounds it as part of a non-existent corruption scheme.[XXVI] **Foreign autocratic influence concerned mostly the Polish-Belarus border conflict, which was presented by the leading *Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere portal* (Numbers - the antidote to left-wing pseudo-news) not as a hybrid threat, but rather a Russophobic incident prompted by Poland or the European Union.**

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20   The name is a reference to the Czech Republic's PES anti-epidemic system.

According to the portal:

„It was a mistake to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries! (…) Both Brussels and Poland are responsible for the situation [on the border – Lorant Gyori]! (…) We are seeing the result of Poland's Russophobic, irresponsible policy! It is sad that we must write this, but our Polish friends are making a serious mistake by constantly trying to thwart Russia and Belarus! The EU, led by Poland, has not recognised the results of the Belarusian elections (…).“[XXVII]

Some Hungarian-speaking pro-Russian portals also tried to capitalise off the confrontation between Poland and Belarus. For example, the leading pro-Kremlin Facebook page *Orosz Hírek* (Russian News) accused the West of causing the immigration waves, and quoted President Putin's statement about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that caused people to flee, "which has nothing to do with Belarus," claimed the Russian president.[XXVIII]

Serbia proved to be the only country where anti-Western and pro-Eastern (pro-Russian or pro-Chinese) narratives belonged to the top five narratives pushed, and amounted to 45.5% of the representative sample. These were about (1) the Rio Tinto lithium mine-project; (2) various anti-Western topics; (3) governmental crime and corruption; (4) Serbian nationalism; and (5) the promotion of political candidates. As we can see, two of the leading narratives reflected badly on the government, starting with the Rito Tinto lithium mining project that sparked various protests in Serbia based on environmental concerns. The peak news cycle between December 6 – 13 2021 was also driven by the various environmental protests which ultimately forced the Serbian government to abandon the project after the April 2022 elections.[XXIX] The anti-Western line of grey zone communications actually represented a group of different narratives attacking the EU and NATO. Such narratives promoted the Russian (pre-war) position regarding Ukraine and the West, claiming, for example, that President Zelensky came under the influence of "Nazis,"[21] or that China's AI-based social classification system is the cornerstone of social stability, an example to be followed in Europe. The same outlets criticised the EU for its slow accession process and the COVID-19 measures, which threatened to turn the EU into a pandemic "tyranny." This is argumentation eerily similar to the Czech anti-vaccination actors' rhetoric.[22] **Ultimately, foreign autocratic influence proved to be an inherent part of the Serbian grey zone ecosystem, with all major outlets, regardless of political orientation, trying to please and present China or Russia as Serbia's key international ally. Besides opening up the Serbian media space to foreign autocratic influence, the grey zone outlets' anti-Western stances have significantly hurt the position of the pro-EU opposition, which enjoys around 20% support, as they turn the electorate away from EU integration and foreign policy alignment with the West.**

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21   "(УЖИВО ВИДЕО) Путин: Како Би Американци Реаговали Да На Границу Са Канадом Или Мексиком Поставимо Ракете? - Печат - Лист Слободне Србије," accessed April 13, 2022, https://www.pecat.co.rs/2021/12/putin-kako-bi-amerikanci-reagovali-da-na-granicu-sa-kanadom-ili-meksikom-postavimo-rakete/

22   Vladimir Tanacković, "Smrt evropske demokratije: Kako je borba EU protiv koronavirusa ušla u opasnu fazu," 24sedam, accessed April 13, 2022, https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/97606/smrt-evropske-demokratije-kako-je-borba-eu-protiv-koronavirusa-usla-u-opasnu-fazu/vest

WAR RHETORIC

After a moment of disorientation, most of the grey zone media in all three countries started legitimising or relativising the war, Russia's role, or war atrocities, as a result of both long-term pro-Kremlin ideological or personal positions and the presence of strategic or tactical Russian disinformation narratives about Ukraine. The number of war-related articles and Facebook posts quickly skyrocketed, as seen on the trend chart below.

The number of weekly relevant media content items (social media posts/website articles) dealing with the war in the Serbian, Hungarian, Czech grey zone media between 1/1-28/2, 2022 (7 day rolling sum)
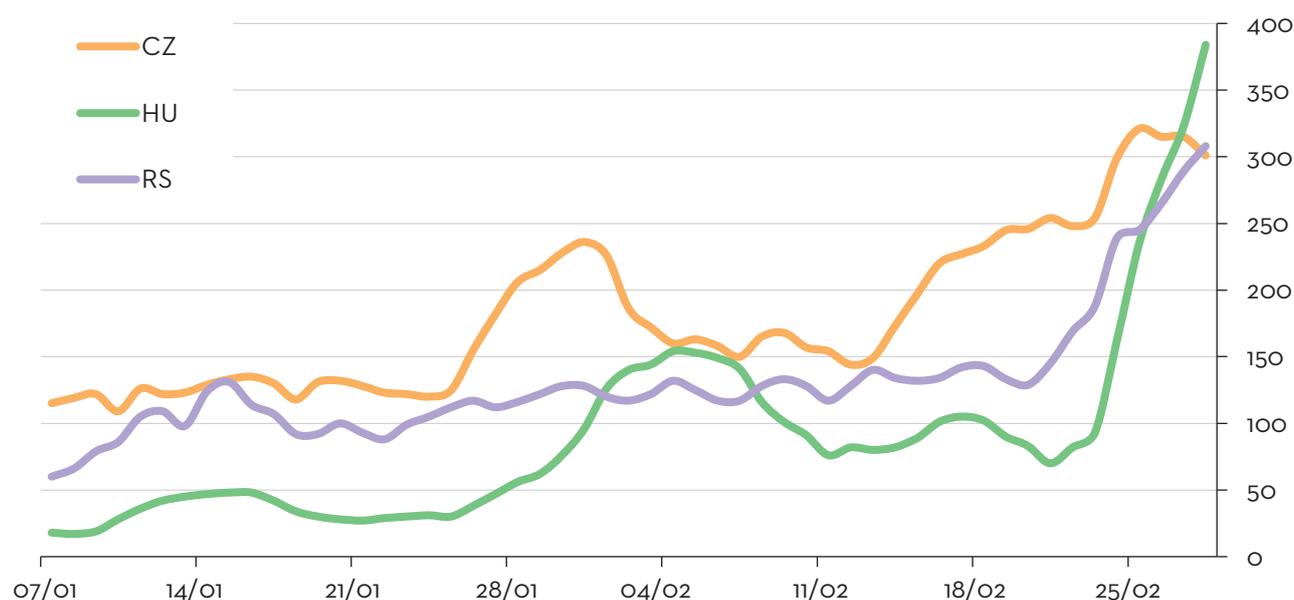
Most swiftly, the Serbian grey zone adapted to the new geopolitical reality by reiterating the main Russian argument about Ukrainians being fascists[23] killing Russian civilians in Donbass and that the Russian "special operation" is aimed at de-nazifying Ukraine without regard for the Ukrainian civilian casualties of the war. Among the top sources for this topic were pro-government 24sedam and several pro-Russian media outlets, such as *Novi Standard, Pečat, Pravda, Stanje stvari,* and *Webtribune,* which were the most active during the first week of the invasion between February 21 and 28 2022. Additionally, the Facebook page of Russian the state-owned *Sputnik Srbija* was especially central in the formulation and dissemination of the propaganda messages, which highlights the importance of pro-Kremlin grey zone media in times of profound crisis.

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23 "Огласио се Кадиров: ДОСТА СМО „МАЗИЛИ" НАЦИСТЕ, ВРЕМЕ ЈЕ ЗА ВЕЛИКУ ОПЕРАЦИЈУ! - СРБИЈА ЈАВЉА," February 28, 2022, https://www.srbijajavlja.rs/2022/02/oglasio-se-kadirov-dosta-smo-mazili-naciste-vreme-je-za-veliku-operaciju/

24sedam and *Pobednik* referred to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a "special operation"[24] or a "liberation operation."[25] 24sedam headlines described the West as "Fascist" launching an economic-political war against Russia to destroy Russian identity.[26] The grey zone media also reported extensively on the alleged Ukrainian war crimes and attacks on Russians and Russian-speakers in the years preceding the war, including unsubstantiated accusations of slaughter, rape and butchering executed by "Ukrainian Nazis" that the West was silent about.[27] Western media were also accused of employing an "empire of lies" by "staging" the death of Ukrainian civilians who "stand up" as soon as the cameras are off.[28] The story about Ukraine actually attacking Russia or planning to attack Donbass just before the Russian invasion was also present.[29] The other powerful moral justification of the war concerned the long-term conflict between the West and Russia and the West's alleged aggression against the Kremlin, forcing Russia to act to prevent its own destruction due to a "knife at its throat"[30] and "Washington's dagger" above its head.[31] **However, some of these anti-Ukrainian or anti-Western narratives were already present in the Serbian media space and in grey zone communications well before the invasion. Consequently, pro-Kremlin outlets or actors were easily able to change their already existing anti-Ukrainian argumentative frameworks, for example, about Ukraine being a Fascist state, or the Maidan Revolution being staged by the CIA in 2014, to legitimise the Russian aggression on short notice.**

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24   "EU i dalje preti, Rusija otkrila šta traži," Pobednik (blog), February 28, 2022, https://pobednik.rs/eu-i-dalje-preti-rusija-otkrila-sta-trazi/

25   24sedam, "Sutra pregovori na granici sa Belorusijom: Kijev je opkoljen, u Donjecku poginulo 15 civila (FOTO/VIDEO)," 24sedam, accessed March 14, 2022, https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/115105/sutra-pregovori-na-granici-sa-belorusijom-kijev-je-opkoljen-u-donjecku-poginulo-15-civila-fotovideo/vest

26   24sedam, "Pravo lice fašizma: Zapad započeo ekonomsko-politički rat sa ciljem potpunog uništenja ruskog identiteta," 24sedam, accessed March 14, 2022, https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/115719/pravo-lice-fasizma-zapad-zapoceo-ekonomsko-politicki-rat-sa-ciljem-potpunog-unistenja-ruskog-identiteta/vest

27   24sedam, "Ustaške metode ukrajinskih nacista: Klanje, silovanje, odsecanje delova tela i druga zlodela o kojima Zapad ćuti (FOTO/VIDEO)," 24sedam, accessed March 14, 2022, https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/115688/ustaske-metode-ukrajinskih-nacista-klanje-silovanje-odsecanje-delova-tela-i-druga-zlodela-o-kojima-zapad-cuti-fotovideo/vest

28   24Sedam, "Imperija laži: Evo kako Zapad izveštava o ukrajinskoj krizi - mrtvi se bude kada se kamere ugase, foto-montaža novo oružje (VIDEO)," 24sedam, accessed March 14, 2022, https://24sedam.rs/svet/vesti/115596/imperija-lazi-evo-kako-zapad-izvestava-o-ukrajinskoj-krizi-mrtvi-se-bude-kada-se-kamere-ugase-foto-montaza-novo-oruzje-video/vest

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In Czechia, the Russian invasion caused a certain kind of (geo)political turnabout in the political mainstream, since even Czech President Miloš Zeman, previously known for his good relationship with the Kremlin, condemned the Russian invasion as a "crime against peace" and supported the international sanctions against Russia.[XXX] **The unexpected turn of events also caused some short-lived confusion on the grey side, some in the anti-vaccination movement blamed both Russia and the West for the war, mixing conspiracy theories with facts on the ground. For example,** *Otevřeme Česko – Chcípl PES* **condemned the war and Russia's attack against Ukraine but assigned the blame to the EU and NATO for their** *"continual sanctions and incitement of instability,"* **and called the Czech Republic a useful idiot of other big powers.**[32] The movement's spokesperson, Jiří Janeček, even expressed an understanding of Putin's rationale for instigating the war to take action against the Ukrainian "genocide in the separatist republics."[33] **Two main narratives emerged by the end of February, when the news cycle of the grey zone peaked after the day of the invasion, as a winning formula to defend and legitimise Russian aggression against Ukraine: (1) the West or Ukraine is to blame for the war, or (2) the Czech national interest is best served by opposing the economic sanctions against Russia.** The first type of narrative was represented, for example, by the clickbait site *Rukojmí* or by the self-proclaimed Consul of the Donetsk People's Republic Nela Lísková, who claimed that Ukraine is the aggressor and the United States instigated the war to "seize" Ukraine under the pretext of defending democracy – an effort supported by the European Union as well.[34] The patriotic anonymous hyper-partisan outlet *České národní listy* spread conspiracies about the Revolution of Dignity being a NATO-supported coup[35], while accusing mainstream media of falsifying their reporting on war atrocities by presenting "actors painted in fake blood" instead of real victims of the war.[36] The economic narrative was pushed, for example, by the Czech site of Sputnik, arguing that Czech businesses will suffer significantly from the sanctions imposed on Russia, with little chance for any compensation.[37]

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32   "(10) Otevřeme Česko - Chcípl PES – Příspěvky | Facebook," accessed 15 March 2022, https://www.facebook.com/1016677211821396/posts/356470119674486/

33   Later the movement almost split over the assistance it provided to Ukrainian refugees. However, the movement's leader, Jakub Olbert, claimed that they are helping people affected by the war, just as they originally wanted to help businessmen affected by the anti-pandemic restrictions.

34   NWOO, 23 February 2022, http://www.nwoo.org/2022/02/23/rusvnext-prehled-zprav-22-2-2022/. Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

35   "(10) České Národní Listy – Příspěvky | Facebook," accessed 15 March 2022, https://www.facebook.com/107618950706191/posts/503533224448093/

36   "(10) České Národní Listy – Příspěvky | Facebook," accessed 15 March 2022, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=513214580146624&id=107618950706191

37   "Nahradí Brusel Čechům Ztrátu Trhu? Výrobce Dronů Primoco UAV Kvůli Sankcím Ukončil Činnost v Rusku - 21.02.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika," accessed 15 March 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220221123754/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220221/nahradi-brusel-cechum-ztratu-trhu-vyrobce-dronu-primoco-uav-kvuli-sankcim-ukoncil-cinnost-v-rusku-17724612.html

The grey zone's pro-Kremlin disinformation activity was so problematic that the Czech authorities took the unusual step of banning some of the media mentioned. The Czech Internet Association CZ.NIC, the operator of the domain with the national suffix '.cz', decided to block websites that spread disinformation about the invasion of Ukraine after consultation with the Czech intelligence services. First, the list of media included only the conspiracy websites *Protiproud, Aeronet* and *CzechFreePress,* and the clickbait websites *Skrytá Pravda* and *První zprávy.* As of the beginning of March, six more websites were blocked by the domestic mobile operators in reaction to the appeal from the government and the National Cyber Operations Centre. These included the conspiracy websites *New World Order Opposition* (NWOO), *Zvědavec* and *Svobodné noviny,* the clickbait website *CZ24 News.*[38] Nevertheless, these media are looking for other ways to spread their content. For example, *Sputnik CZ* now focuses its activities on Telegram. **Altogether, the Czech grey zone ecosystem, made up of old nationalistic-extremist conspiracy sources and new anti-vaccination media, did endure the "test" of the war. It remained a steadfast and strong supporter of the Kremlin's invasion mostly based on its anti-Western rhetoric, founded on the Czech Republic's economic dependence of Russia and the Kremlin being portrayed as a "natural and traditional ally" against the selfish and exploitative West.**

Unlike the cases of Serbia and the Czech Republic, the communication of the Hungarian grey zone became divided along the pro-government-opposition axis. Whereas the opposition or leftist outlets called out PM Orbán for his close relationship with the Kremlin, expressed support for Hungary's Euro-Atlantic membership or demanded tougher sanctions against Russia, the pro-government sources applied the harshest anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian rhetoric possible. The anonymous pro-government Facebook site *Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere* (Numbers - the antidote to left-wing pseudo-news),[XXXI] and the site *Patrióta Európa Mozgalom* (Patriotic European Movement) **basically run the same story word-by-word about the "real background" of the war, translating and publishing President Putin's speech** about "stopping the Ukrainian attack against Eastern Ukraine" and countering NATO's illegitimate expansion eastward which threatens the basic security needs of Russia.[XXXII] Interestingly, the Facebook page Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere started spreading posts about Ukraine's alleged aggression and attack against its own people two days prior to the Russian attack – highlighting the presence of a long-term Russian strategic approach to the war and the use of disinformation as a pretext.[XXXIII] In fact, the Hungarian pro-government grey zone media communication significantly contributed to the Hungarian pro-government mainstream media "double-speak," which tried – as part of the Hungarian foreign policy establishment's see-saw behaviour – to please the Kremlin and the Western allies at the same time by providing fact-based, minute-by-minute reporting in the news and a pro-war or pro-Kremlin viewpoint in the opinion sections.[XXXIV] Moreover, the anonymous Facebook pages **Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere**[XXXV] and *Elég* (Enough),[XXXVI] along with pro-government influencer Dávid Filep's media pages (the Facebook page A kopasz oszt, and *Aktuális,* supported by the *Megafon Centre*)[XXXVII]

38   "Jsou Zablokované Další Dezinformační Weby, Tentokrát Od Operátorů - Seznam Zprávy," accessed 14 March 2022, https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-zivot-v-cesku-jsou-zablokovane-dalsi-dezinformacni-weby-tentokrat-od-operatoru-191290

falsely stated that the opposition intends to start a direct war between Hungary and Russia, despite it clearly being in the Hungarian interest to stay out of the conflict. To make the "pro-peace" communication of the government even stronger, the governmental think-tank and GONGO *Századvég* published a representative poll showing that approx. 77% of Hungarians reject the idea of Hungary, as a NATO country, sending armaments and troops into Ukraine "were Russia to take hold of Ukraine," while 95% support the use "of all means necessary to preserve peace between Russia and Ukraine" – a rather misleading question, given Russia's unilateral, illegal and unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine.[XXXVIII] **The war also contributed to the more seamless integration of the "old" extremist and the "new" anti-vaccination parts of the grey zone ecosystem, after the anti-vax movement of György Gődény unexpectedly declared its support for the war Additionally, anti-Western and anti-NATO narratives were echoed in Hungary and Czechia by a small army of trolls on Facebook** – Political Capital's recent report titled "The Russia-Ukraine War in Social Media, Inauthentic online behaviour in the V4 concerning Russia's war against Ukraine" concluded.[XXXIX]

The analysis ultimately revealed three strategic communications and dissemination strategies employed by the grey zone media: (1) recycling; (2) going mainstream; and (3) data production. The grey zone used many old anti-Ukrainian narratives, such as one about the alleged "Nazi coup" ousting former Ukrainian President Yanukovich in 2014, that were rehashed to claim that all Ukrainians are Nazis. Grey zone media is also trying to bring to the mainstream pieces of pro-Kremlin disinformation. One prime example includes the anonymous pro-government portal *Vadhajtások,* which published President Putin's speech on Victory Day (celebrating victory over Nazi Germany) on May 9, 2022 with Hungarian subtitles provided by the main Hungarian-speaking grey zone Facebook page *Orosz Hírek* (Russian News).[XL] Lastly, grey zone GONGOs are actively producing some form of manipulated or manipulatively used "data" to support the pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric.[39]

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39   We are not claiming that the GONGOs in our research produced only fully false or manipulated data. Rather they manipulate the formulation of some of the questions in their questionnaires or produce valid surveys in coordination with political campaigns based on disinformation narratives.

THE GEOPOLITICAL ROLE OF THE GREY ZONE ECOSYSTEM IN THE CEE

By evaluating the geopolitical impact of the grey zone media on the international level, including the bolstering of the foreign autocratic communications influence of Russia or China in Central-Eastern Europe, we were able to identify five core functions that make these outlets and media a vulnerability and a threat to national security.

1. **Due to their large media networks, professional communications campaigns employed by hybrid regimes and/or new anti-vax players, the grey zone media is capable of re-branding or legitimising anti-democratic, populist actors in Central-Eastern Europe.** The provocative, politically incorrect and technologically advanced communications and media strategy has already made anti-Western or pro-Russian messages attractive for the youth. In Hungary, 65% of younger Fidesz voters between the ages 18 and 38 favour Moscow over Washington, according to a Median poll released in May 2022.[XLI]

2. **The grey zone serves as an interlocutor between local extremist and/or pro-Russian, pro-Chinese forces and the European far-right and North-American alt-right movements,** based on the analysis of hyperlink-networks. As a result, new anti-vax movements or more established pro-Russian actors can easily reach the global extremist-nationalist movements, integrating the Central-European and global levels of extremist communication. For example, the Hungarian neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic site Kuruc.info has its own connection to the leading neo-Nazi Daily Stormer, or other international accounts, such as the American alt-right disinformation site The Gateway Pundit or the Twitter account of Italian far-right politician Matteo Salvini.

3. **The new anti-vaccination social or political movements are more easily turned towards Russia or China,** adopting or following the anti-Western or pro-Eastern communication of the clickbait or conspiracy outlets of the far-right/nationalist subcultures. In return, the novel anti-vax movements provide the grey zone with access to new anti-establishment audiences that can be easily mobilised along a variety of geopolitical issues.

4. **The grey zone media ecosystem has become a central, difficult to control and viral channel of pro-Russian rhetoric** due to its diverse societal nature, sophisticated use of a variety of different technological platforms.

5. **The grey zone media plays a key role in the Russian hybrid war by disseminating tactical/ strategic narratives** by either integrating the pro-Kremlin communication of new and old extremist movements or bringing to the mainstream disinformation narratives about, for example, Ukrainian "war crimes," a CIA-led Nazi coup in Kyiv, etc.

ANNEX 1

DEFINITION OF THE "GREY ZONE" MEDIA

We considered websites or social media pages "grey zone" media if they either explicitly or implicitly seek to promote the governmental parties' or the opposition parties' political messages through the aggressive use of new or social media – even though they are not official platforms of parties, and cannot be considered mainstream media outlets. We regarded official think tanks, GONGOs or other organisations financed by parties as part of the "grey zone" strategy of a party if they are engaged in the dissemination of party propaganda or propaganda campaigns that met our selection criteria for media detailed below. We did not, however, consider governmental, organisational, or individual webpages, blogs, YouTube channels etc. media of interest, since these are communications or public relations channels of certain individuals or organisations without the need or expectation to report on any other matter than their individual activities or interests.

We have defined two compulsory and several additional criteria that are used to define and identify "grey zone" media. These media need to meet two of the compulsory and at least one of the additional/other criteria defined below.

Compulsory criteria

6. **Hyper-partisanship:** a site that has been created, either explicitly or implicitly, to support a political party or ideological side, and/or produces specific types of messages almost exclusively to reinforce the narrative of that side/party through the posts it shares.
7. **Manipulated content(s):** the media manipulates its contents through hyperboles, re-contextualisation, the use of dis- or misinformation etc. to reinforce a party line or campaign message either directly or indirectly. Manipulation in itself does not necessarily mean that the site is spreading disinformation, but it does prove that the messages or narratives are presented in a way to follow or reformulate party lines of communication.

Additional criteria

1. **Time of establishment:** media accounts and pages were set up in 2020 and 2021 to influence specific and current public debates during the election campaigns in the three countries.
2. **Reproduction of content:** sharing content that is similar to video or photo content shared on any party's official or social media pages.
3. **Hyper-partisan memes:** the use of innovative memes mocking or mimicking the political enemies of a party without a sarcastic intention.
4. **Editorial or financial opacity:** the site does not have a proper editorial board or financial information displayed; items are either not signed or signed under pseudonyms.

5. **(Partial) funding coming from parties/government/governmental figures:** media is financed by parties through intermediary channels, organisations, shell-companies etc. to produce manipulated content

6. **Ads targeting specific electoral or audience segments:** a media outlet which targets specific audiences or political target groups to promote a particular hyper-partisan narrative, using social media ad services based on audiences' geolocation, age, gender, profession etc.

The seven basic categories of "grey zone media"

To adequately measure fringe media and their networks that employ a "grey zone" media strategy, we have defined seven categories of media to be measured that meet our initial set of criteria and are engaged in a specific type of media production:

1. **Anonymous hyper-partisan sites** specifically set up to convey a specific agenda often in line with certain political parties and attempting to play a role and influence audiences during election campaigns in 2020 or 2021.

2. **The top 10 conspiracy sites**/country that also dealt with campaign issues or messages during the campaign. The ranking of these sites is based on a) ratio of conspiratorial content, c) Alexa page ranking, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.

3. **The top 10 clickbait sites**/country that also dealt with campaign issues or messages during the campaign. Clickbait media is any site that links with a headline that encourages people to click to see more, without telling them much information about what they will see or over-promising or otherwise misrepresenting — in a headline, on social media, in an image, or some combination — what they are going to find when they read a story on the web.[XLII]

4. **The top 10 GONGOs sites**/country that are established by the government, any party, oligarch, or public figures to push and/or finance hyper-partisan messages during the campaign and whose content or finances are not easily/directly retraceable to the original political/party actors. The ranking of these sites is based on a) the significance of the founder or financier, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.

5. **The top 10 pro-Kremlin sites**/country that have been established by foreign entities, such as governments, parties, media, NGOs, local pro-Kremlin political actors or unknown actors to represent and spread the Kremlin's geopolitical narratives or political stances in a one-sided, biased way. The ranking of these sites is based on a) the significance of the founder or financier, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.

6. **The top 10 pro-Beijing sites**/country that have been established by foreign entities, such as governments, parties, media, NGOs, local pro-China political actors or unknown actors to represent and spread China's geopolitical narratives or political stances in a one-sided, biased way. The ranking of these sites is based on a) the significance of the founder or financier, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.

7. **Other webpages or social media pages** that have met our initial set of criteria, however, they cannot be categorised as previously mentioned types of media.

ANNEX 2

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our research employed both qualitative and quantitative methodology to monitor and collect historical media data present on Hungarian "grey zone" webpages and Facebook pages, Twitter or YouTube accounts. We have monitored the pre-election period between September 1 and October 31 in the Czech Republic, and the November 1 – December 31 period for Serbia and Hungary. **Given the unexpected invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, we also monitored narratives about the war between January 1 and March 1, 2022, in all three countries under investigation.** The quantitative dataset used in the analysis was generated using the social media listening platform SentiOne, which allowed us to access the data of websites and public Facebook pages and groups to conduct trend, sampling, statistical and network analyses of media content production.

Steps of methodology

First, we collected data between September 1 and October 31 for the Czech Republic, and between November 1 and December 1, 2021 for Serbia and Hungary, to create the final list of "grey zone" media in each country that met our initial set of criteria. These media were coded as part of one of the 7 categories mentioned above in separate databases following the same structure (for example, name, webpage URL, social media accounts, organisation type, political content, political leaning etc.). The different periods had been selected to reflect on the Czech elections and the second round of the opposition primary in Hungary.

Second, we collected campaign-related media data for the same periods, namely webpage articles and Facebook posts produced by the media on our lists, to generate the final databases used for narrative sampling, campaign analysis and network analysis:

a. We filtered only political campaign-related messages (webpage articles or Facebook posts) based on a similar set of keywords in each country using the syntax of the SentiOne platform. The keyword-combination included in part the same words, such as "election," "campaign" and "candidate" for the sake of comparability or keywords for local political actors or scandals.

b. Filtered content was used to (a) generate representative message samples for each country for the identification and analysis of narratives in each sample; (b) analyse the main trend and sources' data for the messages disseminated in each country in each period under investigation; (c) generate network graphs based on the hyperlinks found in in the campaign-related messages for the periods under investigation. Network analysis was carried out using the Gephi software and Microsoft's data visualisation tool Power BI provided by the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project.[XLIII]

c. We conducted additional collection of data on war-related messages in our SentiOne project for each country for the period of January 1 – March 1, 2022. Data produced by the grey zone media on our list was then used for the analysis of trends and sources to identify the main narratives disseminated by the leading sources in the grey zone media ecosystems of each country.

Third, local partners in cooperation with local investigative journalists conducted online and offline investigative research into the organisational, financial or editorial background of the "grey zone" media. Researchers used desktop research and investigations of private or state registries, and conducted in-person interviews with the owners, editors or authors of the media to obtain a deeper understanding of the modus operandi of the grey zone media in each country.

ANNEX 3.

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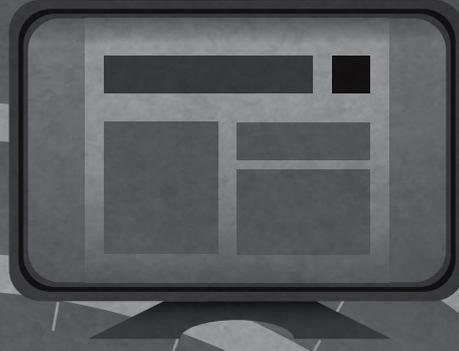
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