

# AGENTS OF INFLUENCE

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HIDDEN MALIGN DOMESTIC AND  
FOREIGN “GREY ZONE” MEDIA  
INFLUENCE IN HUNGARY

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is the summary of the results of a research project lasting over six months, covering domestic and foreign hidden malign influence activities pursued through the so-called “grey zone” media in three countries – the Czech Republic, Serbia and Hungary –, during a period of heightened international tensions related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Political Capital has assessed in numerous studies how the Kremlin or the Hungarian hybrid political regime has used their extensive media empire to conduct active measures or political smear-campaigns in service of political or geopolitical goals. In this study, we set out to understand the inner workings of clandestine disinformation campaigns carried out by mostly anonymous media actors to conduct or influence political campaigns, specifically in the run-up to the Czech, Serbian and Hungarian elections, and destabilise the region in general after the outbreak of the war. For more information on the project, please visit our website.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- 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 not to rely on traditional media organisations to manipulate or hide authorship, editorial, or ownership background.
- Our media research in Hungary has, therefore, looked at Hungarian political campaign communication between November 1 and December 31, 2021, as well as January 1 and March 31, 2022, to map and reveal the Hungarian “grey zone” media ecosystem, its role in the “dirty campaign,” and the war-related rhetoric before the general elections in April 2022.
- Although both governmental and opposition parties seem to rely on the grey zone for communication, our network analysis – based on hyperlinks found in campaign-related messages – proved that the Hungarian grey zone network is indeed ruled by anonymous pro-government media, such as Számok – a baloldali hírek ellenszere or Vadhajtások, and far-right anonymous media, such as Kuruc.info. Faced with the Hungarian hybrid regime’s media dominance and a fairly active grassroots extremist subculture, anonymous leftist grey zone media, such as OLKT.net or Gondolkodó, were able to mobilise and organise only a smaller part of the grey media ecosystem.
- Our investigative research has revealed that there is a significant difference in the editorial and financial modus operandi of rightist or leftist grey zone media. Whereas pro-government media heavily relies on well-known GONGOs or semi-transparent media, such as Megafon, we could not identify the editorial or financial structures behind the anonymous pro-government mouthpieces used to kick-start political smear campaigns or reach out to non-aligned or even opposition-minded audiences. In contrast, the leftist grey zone media tries to counterbalance the weakness of the independent mainstream media and the vast governmental media empire, so their personal or financial background is more transparent, in order to increase their general reach.
- There is also a fundamental difference in the workings of the “old” far-right extremist media, and the “new” anti-vaccination one. Extremist media tend to operate anonymous conspiracy or clickbait sites to hide their identity and maximise the size of their audience, whereas the new clickbait anti-vaccination media network is headed by well-known “health experts” advertising alternative medicine and health supplements.

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally changed the narratives spread by the Hungarian grey zone. Before the war, all sides were preoccupied with different political conspiracy theories; however, the grey zone communication became split according to party lines after February 24, 2022. The leftist opposition grey zone media narratives called out the Hungarian government's failed Eastern-oriented foreign policy, and named Russia as an aggressor in the current conflict. In contrast, the pro-government grey zone media either promoted the "neutral" foreign policy position of the government or directly legitimised the war, for example by publishing President Putin's war speech on the social media pages of Számok – a baloldali hírek ellenszere or Patrióta Európa Mozgalom.
- Network analysis has also confirmed that the Hungarian grey zone is a main channel of foreign malign influence, mainly in the form of Russian disinformation narratives. However, the small number of local pro-Russian sites have a rather marginal position in the network, which is a tool of Russian disinformation through the dominant position of pro-government sources referencing governmental foreign policy lines or Russian sources directly, such as Russia Today. Additionally, the rightist and extremist grey zone media clearly embed Hungarian political communication into other Western or American pro-Russian or extremist networks by establishing a connection, for example, with the alt-right site of The Gateway Pundit or Matteo Salvini's Twitter account.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of the new social media platforms in the early 2000s, which have simultaneously reinvented and marginalised classical mass media, new media technologies have enabled the development of new political manipulation techniques based on algorithm-enhanced individual targeting, artificial intelligence, bot- or troll armies etc. More importantly, the new media platforms and technologies have disrupted the local elites' traditional communication 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 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.

### RESEARCH FOCI

**Our novel research focused on the mapping and public exposure of the so called “grey zone” media that have been established in the last several years by parties, foreign powers, NGOs, lesser-known entities or unknown actors and financed through obscure channels to influence public debate around key topics in Hungary,** alongside other Central-Eastern European countries. These include the anti-LGBTQ law in Hungary,<sup>II</sup> patriotism in Serbia,<sup>III</sup> the corruption of politicians<sup>IV</sup> or the anti-vaccination movement in the Czech Republic.<sup>V</sup> The Czech and Serbian country case studies are to be found in separate studies on the project homepage of Political Capital.<sup>VI</sup>

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 and why is communicating on specific issues, 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.<sup>1</sup> **As these media can also convey external, malign Russian or Chinese influence due to their editorial policy or ownership,<sup>2</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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

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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;<sup>3</sup> (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.

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

## THE HUNGARIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM AND MEDIA SPACE

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The chapters on the political system, the media space and the political campaigns in each country serve as a context to understand how and why each “grey zone” functions, and how grey zone media communication is dependent (in a negative or positive way) on the communication of mainstream media, political parties and politicians.

The current shape of the Hungarian political system can be traced back to 2010 when the second Orbán cabinet took office. Supported by a two-thirds supermajority in the Hungarian National Assembly between 2010 and 2022,<sup>4</sup> the ruling Fidesz-KDNP used its extraordinary mandate to fundamentally transform the Hungarian political landscape dominated by one party, centred around the formal and informal personal power of the Prime Minister. To this end, the coalition has changed all the major elements of the institutional and legal system, starting with the enactment of a new Act on Media Services and Mass Media (the “Media Act”) in 2010, followed by the new constitution, called the “Fundamental Law of Hungary,” enacted in 2011. In a series of acts dubbed “cardinal laws” (*sarkalatos törvények* in Hungarian),<sup>5</sup> the ruling Fidesz-KDNP gradually “reformed” the regulations on all the major legal and/or political-institutional areas, from, for example, the Hungarian citizenship statute to the powers of the Constitutional Court or the functioning of the electoral system – all ensuring that the government concentrated and exercised power directly or indirectly through long-term political appointees heading the most important political institutions. PM Orbán called the resulting new political reality and asymmetric status quo of parties a “central political forcefield” in which the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition dominated the political system in terms of institutional and/or financial power against a fragmented opposition on the left and the right – providing the coalition with simple or supermajority wins in a highly disproportionate electoral system in the longer run. **The April 2022 elections have once again reinforced Fidesz’s domination of the Hungarian party structure, with Fidesz-KDNP winning 53% electoral support (on the national party list), followed by the centrist-leftist United for Hungary’s 34%, and the 5.8% result of the far-right Our Homeland movement.**<sup>VII</sup>

Alongside the transformation of the political structures, the Hungarian state, in cooperation with pro-government businessman and oligarchs, has “nationalised” several business or service sectors from banking to agricultural or energy production, redirecting economic resources to a pro-government economic ecosystem that further skewed the asymmetric balance of power between the governmental and oppositional parties in the Hungarian society. When it comes to foreign policy, the second Orbán government started a gradual shift to the East by prioritising a diplomatic and economic relationship with Russia and China based on a multilateral and an explicit “Hungarian interests-based” approach to international relations. As time went by and the new Hungarian hybrid regime was established, the Hungarian cabinet began to rely even more on the “Eastern

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4 Except for the period 2015 and 2018, when the ruling coalition lost its supermajority as a result of a by-election.

5 ‘Sarkalatos Törvények - Országgyűlés’, accessed 2 February 2022, <https://www.parlament.hu/sarkalatos-torvenyek>

partnerships” to politically legitimise the Hungarian “illiberal” political system and counterbalance Hungary’s increasing isolation among its democratic peers in the European Union or the Euro-Atlantic community. **The fifth Orbán cabinet, however, started to readjust, to a certain point, Hungary’s foreign policy orientation after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has made the continuation of high-level relations with the Kremlin impossible so far, especially under increasing pressure from the Hungarian government’s regional allies, such as Poland, for Hungary to change its pro-Eastern foreign policy course.**

Although it seemed at first that the Hungarian media market will be transformed through changes in the legal framework after 2010, the ruling coalition has, in fact, relied more on market tools and informational power to exert its dominance over independent media in Hungary. The National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) and the Economic Competition Office (GVH), both led by Fidesz appointees, have thus allowed the government and pro-government oligarchs to establish an unprecedented concentration of private electronic and print media, after a series of buyouts that closed down outlets or turned local and national independent media into government mouthpieces. As a result, over 500 media outlets have come under the direct or indirect control of political actors related to Fidesz-KDNP, amounting to around 50% control of the Hungarian media space,<sup>6</sup> with a clear dominance in the submarkets of regional newspapers, radio and television.<sup>7</sup> The crown jewel of the pro-government media empire is clearly the non-profit umbrella organisation Central European Press and Media Foundation<sup>8</sup> (KESMA),<sup>9</sup> established in 2018 with hundreds of media assets valued at over EUR 88 million, and the MTVA public broadcaster operating 7 radio and 5 television channels, 4 online portals, as well as MTI, the main Hungarian news agency, with a yearly public budget of HUF 130 billion (EUR 377 million).<sup>10</sup> The government has also established a commanding position in the advertising market, pressuring private companies and media agencies to limit their advertisements in the dozen or so independent outlets,<sup>11</sup> forcing some of them to put up a paywall for their financial viability.

The concentration in media markets has resulted in the creation of a pro-government “propaganda machine” on the content-production side that has mainstreamed the use of political conspiracy theories since 2010 about, for example, independent media or NGOs being “foreign agents” or the

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6 ‘A NER már a sajtó 50 százalékát kontrollálja – itt a nagy médiatérkép | Válasz Online’, accessed 3 February 2022, <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2021/01/04/a-ner-mar-a-sajto-50-szazalekat-kontrollalja-itt-a-nagy-mediaterkep/>

7 ‘Grafikonokon és diagramokon mutatjuk, hogyan alakult át a magyar média az elmúlt tíz évben | atlatszo.hu’, 7 August 2020, <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2020/08/07/grafikonokon-es-diagramokon-mutatjuk-hogyan-alakult-at-a-magyar-media-az-elmult-tiz-evben/>

8 ‘Közép Európai Sajtó És Média Alapítvány’, accessed 3 February 2022, <https://cepmf.hu/>

9 The government has designated KESMA as being of “national strategic importance.”

10 Zrt HVG Kiadó, ‘130 milliárd forintba nőhet a közmédia büdzséje’, hvg.hu, 19 October 2021, [https://hvg.hu/kkv/20211019\\_kozmedia\\_budzse\\_torvenyjavaslat](https://hvg.hu/kkv/20211019_kozmedia_budzse_torvenyjavaslat)

11 ‘Állami Reklámköltés 2006-2018’, Mérték (blog), accessed 3 February 2022, <https://mertek.atlatszo.hu/allami-reklamkoltes-2006-2018/>

European Union striving to establish a new supranational “empire.” All the public or private media under the thumb of the Fidesz-KDNP is informally or formally controlled by the Minister of the Prime Minister’s Cabinet Office, Antal Rogán, who orchestrates well-coordinated media campaigns across all outlets using copy-and-paste news items, outright censorship, blacklisting or attacking the “political enemies” of the government. The closure or takeover of independent media left only a handful of mainstream independent outlets standing, which ultimately resulted in Hungary ranking at 92 of 180 countries in the 2021 RSF World Press Freedom Index, down from 23rd place in 2010.<sup>VIII</sup>

The government’s central propaganda communication covers its pro-Eastern foreign policy orientation as well, which resulted in increasingly positive coverage of Russia or China – at least until the current war –, as well as a long-term Eurosceptic voice and negative views of the West or the United States. **In the first half of 2022, pro-government mainstream media adapted to the diplomatic U-turns by employing a double-layered approach: most of the leading pro-government outlets provided a generally fact-based, objective minute-by-minute report on the conflict itself, while pro-Russian narratives were “outsourced” to pro-government institutions and experts publishing opinion pieces or appearing on shows in pro-government media.**<sup>IX</sup> For example, the foreign policy editor of the main state-run M1 channel declared that “Putin has stepped up to defend the Russian-majority population of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.”<sup>X</sup>

## CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION BEFORE THE ELECTIONS

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The chapter outlines the state of the mainstream campaign and campaign communication, political strategies, main political scandals and issues or narratives that might be used by the “grey zone” media to push their messages, and either to reinforce or to weaken the mainstream campaign communication of political parties.

The collapse of the “central force field,” up until the April 2022 elections at least, that has re-established the two-faction or two-sided political system which was typical of the Hungarian election landscape until 2010, has fundamentally changed at least some of the rules of the political game in Hungary. Even though the ruling Fidesz-KDNP has maintained its dominance across the political, legal-institutional, economic and media systems, even more so after the 2022 elections, most of the opposition has created a common political platform that they wish to sustain in some shape or form in the next political cycle as well.

The relative success of the united opposition’s political strategy was proven during the unofficial opposition primaries, which mobilised some 850,000 opposition voters in September and October 2021, electing Péter Márki-Zay, the non-affiliated, conservative mayor of the mid-sized city of Hódmezővásárhely, as a surprise candidate for PM.<sup>XI</sup>

The very process of the opposition primaries enabled the opposition parties to dominate the Hungarian political discourse for months, while the unexpected victory of a PM candidate (defeating all party-affiliated nominees) who did not come from the establishment reinforced the opposition’s election program and the message that the opposition has set out to restore “Hungarian democracy”, the rule of law and the checks and balances of the Hungarian political system. The opposition’s campaign messages, therefore, centred mostly on symbolic issues, such as the change of the new constitutional system tailored to the needs of the ruling coalition, the restoration of the freedom of media, removal of the attorney general from his position and upending systemic corruption related to governmental oligarchs.

Although, Fidesz-KDNP once again did not release a concise campaign platform, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán made many campaign promises about the continuation of the government’s current programs, and handed out cash to major electoral groups. Among others, pensioners received an additional monthly allowance for the “13th month,” families with minor children were able to reclaim their personal income tax for 2021,<sup>XII</sup> while employed young persons under the age of 25 need not pay income tax from February 1, 2022.<sup>XIII</sup> Fidesz-KDNP has also mounted a strong symbolic campaign focusing on “family values” after the adoption of the Anti-Paedophilia Act in June 2021, which, in fact, targeted the LGBTQI+ community by limiting their activities and representation in media and in certain institutions, such as churches or schools.<sup>XIV</sup> The subsequent governmental propaganda used the act to label and persecute the LGBTQI+ community as paedophiles, while Fidesz-KDNP will hold a referendum on the day of the general election of April 3, 2022 on the ban of gender assignment surgeries of minors and unrestricted access provided to minors on sexually explicit media contents.

The united opposition has launched its own successful counter referendum on two key issues: the establishment of a campus in Budapest of the Chinese Fudan University and the extension of unemployment benefits – although the referendum may take place well after the general elections. The presence of the issue of the Fudan University on the domestic political agenda means that the campaign addressed, and continues to be addressed by, an outcome of the new war: Hungary's geopolitical stance and foreign policy decisions. **The democratic opposition is fundamentally challenging the Hungarian government's pro-Kremlin and pro-Beijing foreign policy and anti-Ukrainian positions, while stressing the importance of the country's strong and loyal standing within the EU and the Euro-Atlantic Community.**<sup>xv</sup>

Overall, the campaigns of the governmental forces and the opposition included plenty of traditional symbolic and “pocketbook” issues up until at least the invasion of Ukraine. Based on various public opinion polls, the political race between the two political sides had been perceived as quite balanced until the war.<sup>xvi</sup> **The tectonic shifts in regional, European and global (geo)politics caused by the war forced all major Hungarian parties to change their campaign messaging, which ultimately favoured the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition.** While the coalition communicated to their electorate and the Hungarian public that they are “on the side of peace,” despite supporting the European sanctions regime against Russia, or the EU's armament of Ukraine, the pro-government media conglomerate successfully painted the united opposition as “warmongers,” who would upend Hungarian economic activity by turning off natural gas or oil deliveries coming from Russia, and willingly send Hungarian soldiers – “kids” – to directly fight Russia on the side of Ukraine. Regardless of the clear falsehood of these war-related allegations, most Fidesz, and about one-third of opposition, voters believed the opposition parties' pro-war position, which translated into enormous support in favour of Fidesz-KDNP on top of their systemic and resource-advantages against their political competitors. **The pro-government “grey zone” media clearly served as a secondary amplifier of the ruling coalition's latest war-related campaign messages, which helped PM Orbán Viktor quickly regain control of the domestic political campaign agenda despite day-to-day changes in international politics and Hungary's position within these processes.** Moreover, the grey zone sources further enabled the geopolitical balancing act between the East and the West of the Hungarian government,<sup>xvii</sup> which tried not to condemn Russia too harshly and maintained some of its anti-Ukrainian diplomatic and communication lines despite voting for anti-Russian measures on the European level.

## THE HUNGARIAN “GREY ZONE” MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

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The summary of the “grey zone” media provides an overview and a basic understanding of the “grey zone” ecosystem in Hungary, its background, modus operandi in relation to mainstream politics or media, including the local pro-Russian or pro-Chinese media in each country. We used investigative methods, quantitative and qualitative analyses of narratives, time-trends of message dissemination and finally network analysis to understand the basic composition and content-production of all media under investigation.

In addition to dominating mainstream political communication and media, Fidesz-KDNP has devised an elaborate media strategy to reach out to non-affiliated voters or apolitical audiences, found mainly among the Hungarian youth. **Fidesz-KDNP resorted to new media tactics at least in part due to wavering support for the alliance among higher educated and younger city-dwellers, who are more likely to visit independent online news portals, while rejecting governmental propaganda. The 2022 election results have proven for Fidesz that it had made a good strategic decision to focus more on propaganda outreach on social media platforms both in the mainstream and the grey zone media, since the cabinet’s electoral support has increased across the board in almost all population segments.**

This new kind of media strategy is a special kind of mass-manipulation that may be characterised as a “grey zone” approach to content production and dissemination: media consumers are kept in the dark about who or what is the original source of the media content presented, thereby deliberately trying to hide or mask the connection between political actors and their messages in a “grey zone” of media production.

### THE FUNCTIONING AND MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TOP GREY ZONE OUTLETS

Given the unhealthy concentration of media in the Hungarian media market, some of the leftist opposition parties, mainly the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Democratic Coalition, founded by the former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány, have also resorted to using the same grey zone media and tactics in order to compensate for the weaknesses of independent media and the lack of party-affiliated media on the opposition side.

Among the seven categories of the grey zone media, the most important Hungarian category, without a doubt, is a group of “anonymous hyper-partisan” sources that is not only the most numerous category with 30 sources, but also represents the most well-defined grey zone content production and dissemination tactics. Anonymous hyper-partisan sources produce partisan content that is filled with hearsay, political conspiracy theories and vulgarity without displaying any affiliation with

parties or media organisations, hiding the identity of the editorial staff, founders or financiers.<sup>12</sup> We can find both pro-government and anti-government media sources in our first category; however, most of the sources and leading sources express a pro-government political bias. **As we will detail in the investigative chapter of our report, the opposition sources in this category seem more easily traceable to leftist politicians or parties, while the organisational or financial background of the pro-government side is more difficult to see.** As seen in Table 1, 2 of the top 3 anonymous hyper-partisan sources belong to the governmental side. Both Számok – a baloldali hírek ellenzere (Numbers - the antidote to left-wing pseudo-news) and Patrióta Európa Mozgalom (Patriotic Europe Movement) follow the governmental campaign communication line to a tee, while keeping financial, editorial or organisational structures completely hidden. Their presence, as demonstrated in the network analysis chapter, is not only significant in terms of the large size of their audience: they are also among the main centres or nodes organising and mobilising the grey zone media ecosystem. The only opposition media in our top list is Nyugati Fény (Western Light), an outlet that is fairly transparent when it comes to its ownership or editorial team.<sup>xviii</sup> However, its owner, Viktor Mandula, vehemently denies the site's links to the leftist Democratic Coalition, despite presenting the propaganda of DK and cultivating a high-level relationship with the party's leaders, detailed in the investigative section.

*Table 1 - Top 3 hyper-partisan sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Patrióta Európa Mozgalom	Unknown	Pro-government	208 695
Nyugati Fény	Private media	Opposition (DK)	18 538
Számok – a baloldali hírek ellenzere	Unknown	Pro-government	66 068

A comparison of leading right- and left-leaning sites reveals that anonymity is primarily a dissemination strategy for pro-government media, and that the sites that publish the most on geopolitical issues are not the ones with the largest reach – further increasing the advertising budget available for the media on the government's side. For example, the pro-government propaganda centre Megafon has spent nearly HUF 1 billion on advertisements on Facebook during the course of the campaign.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> We have also called sources anonymous if they display no affiliation or editorial staff on their websites or social media sites, even if the media's direct or indirect political affiliation can be identified after some desktop research, using investigative reports.

<sup>13</sup> Márk Herczeg, Bence Gáspár Tamás, 'Még mindig többet költ a kormányoldal a Facebookon, mint mindenki más együtt', 444, 23 March 2022, <https://444.hu/2022/03/23/meg-mindig-tobbet-kolt-a-kormanyoldal-a-facebookon-mint-mindenki-mas-egyutt>

In the second and third most important categories of Hungarian grey zone media we find mainly conspiracy and clickbait outlets that deal with campaign issues more rarely. Either because their content production strategy is geared towards reaching the widest possible audience with a variety of different news items, or because they were not founded, to begin with, for the sole task by unknown or identifiable political actors to push party lines. As seen in Table 2, the top 3 conspiracy sites with the most Facebook followers are Hihetetlen Magazin (Incredible Magazine) headed by Róbert Szűcs as the owner and Gábor Dombóvári as a former presenter of the state-owned M1 channel, the anonymous Rejtélyek Szigete (Island of Mysteries), and Titkok Szigete (Island of Secrets), which is part of a small network of clickbait sites, as explained in the investigative section later.

*Table 2 - Top 3 Conspiracy sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Hihetetlen Magazin	Private media	Extremist-conspiracy	114 584
Rejtélyek Szigete	Private media	Non-aligned	76 490
Titkok Szigete	Private media	Non-aligned	65 627

The top clickbait sources, as seen in Table 3, include mostly apolitical anonymous webpages and their social media accounts, such as the biggest Hungarian clickbait site Mindenegyben (Everything in one) with over 697 000 followers. To maximise their reach and revenues, they usually stay away from politics, and publish articles about lifestyle, miracle cures, “paranormal phenomena” or Nostradamus’ predictions. Their well-established position is reflected in their original media form, since they were all founded as blog platforms years ago, and have moved onto new social media platforms since.

*Table 3 - Top 3 Clickbait sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Mindenegyben blog	Blog	Non-aligned	697 227
Tudnod Kell	Blog	Non-aligned	364 991
Tudtad-e?	Blog	Non-aligned	354 023

Although the top conspiracy and clickbait sites are mostly apolitical, they may be considered an integral part of the Hungarian grey zone political communication for two main reasons: (1) they tend to disseminate all kinds of conspiracy theories, including political ones, to reach their conspiracy-minded audiences or earn more clicks; (2) these pages have a strong link to and an overlapping audience with the vibrant Hungarian far-right subculture, consuming and producing all kinds of political, anti-vax, social etc. conspiracy theories on an industrial scale.

We considered the prominent pro-government GONGOs also parts of the grey zone media to some extent, since even though their media campaigns, political experts, influencers or messages can be easily identified and connected to specific organisations, they usually claim not to represent the government or to be a part of the governmental media campaign, to make their messaging appear more independent and trustworthy in the eyes of the Hungarian public. Of course, they do represent another segment of the pro-government media empire and campaign machinery. For example, the organisation behind leading pro-government political expert Dániel Deák, as seen in Table 4 below, is Megafon Centre, which was created by István Kovács, the strategic director of the third most significant pro-government GONGO in our list, specifically to train social media influencers or “professional Facebook warriors” to win the 2022 elections.<sup>xix</sup> The influencers of the Megafon Centre proved to be integral parts of the ruling parties’ campaign machinery. Still, Megafon has vehemently denied having received any public funding, despite having presided over a campaign war chest of over HUF 1 billion in the run-up to the elections.<sup>xx</sup>

*Table 4 - Top 3 GONGO sources of governmental propaganda according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Deák Dániel (Megafon)	GONGO	Pro-government	72 000
Századvég	GONGO	Pro-government	49 272
Alapjogokért Központ	GONGO	Pro-government	42 099

Although the pro-government GONGOs have much fewer followers than conspiracy or clickbait sites, their role should not be underestimated in the grey zone ecosystem, since their opinions or data are widely used both by the mainstream and grey zone pro-government sites to formulate and support various disinformation narratives or conspiracy theories about the opposition, the European Union or the West. For example, Dániel Deák opined after the elections that the united opposition’s historical defeat meant that the leftist Democratic Coalition, led by former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány, will consume all other smaller opposition parties.<sup>xxi</sup> This is nonsense in political terms. The main governmental think tank Századvég Foundation, established in 1985, claimed at the same time that the EU’s rule of law procedure triggered against Hungary, in fact, pursues “political goals” by trying to cover up European institutions’ and politicians’ lack of transparency, and is unjustified when it comes to alleging corruption on the part of the Hungarian regime.<sup>xxii</sup>

While China has no relevant or impactful local media assets in Hungary, save for the Hungarian version of the China Radio International (Kínai Nemzetközi Rádió) with only 100 000 followers of Facebook,<sup>xxiii</sup> there still exists a small local network of pro-Kremlin pages which have been active in the dissemination of war-related disinformation narratives after Russia invaded Ukraine. Among the top 3 local pro-Kremlin sources, as seen in Table 5, we can list the anonymous Orosz Hírek (Russian News), the anonymous webpage Orientalista (Orientalist) with a focus on the Middle East,

and the Facebook page “Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin’s Official Hungary Website.” Besides being non-transparent, all these pages share the most recent war-related Russian disinformation narratives, for example, about Poland preparing to “reunite” Western-Ukrainian territories with its own.<sup>xxiv</sup>

*Table 5 - Top 3 Pro-Kremlin sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Orosz Hírek	Unknown	Pro-Russian/ pro-government	79 108
Orientalista	Unknown	Pro-Russian/ pro-government	16 658
Vlagyimir Vlagyimirovics Putyin Hivatalos Magyarországi Oldala	Unknown	Pro-Russian/ pro-government	6 900

Still, the relevance or impact of the local pro-Kremlin network is negligible compared to the pro-Russian communication present in the mainstream or grey zone pro-government media. Their function is more about disseminating the most horrendous hate speech or amplifying mainstream pro-Kremlin voices. Additionally, Russian News was one of the forums organising a pro-Russian rally in support of the war in Budapest at the end of April 2022.<sup>xxv</sup>

## INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH RESULTS

The investigative research component aimed to conduct a number of in-depth interviews with journalists, editors and financiers behind the grey zone media ecosystem or media experts, so as to move beyond an exclusive reliance on open-source information, and to acquire a deeper understanding of the background of certain actors and events. Expert opinions can, therefore, support or refine some qualitative or quantitative research results of our media research.

We were able to conduct three interviews to reveal the background of the grey zone media in Hungary.<sup>14</sup> We interviewed Viktor Marsai, research director of the pro-government NGO Migration Research Institute (Migrációkutató), one of the owners of the leftist outlet Pesti Bulvár and one of the editors of a pro-Kremlin Facebook page who requested anonymity.

<sup>14</sup> All three interviews used the same line of questions to acquire comparable research results.

## RIGHT-WING SOURCES

The right-wing, pro-government sites fall into different categories in terms of their transparency and discernible links to the Fidesz-KDNP alliance. There are several anonymous Facebook pages, such as Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere, or ELÉG Fidesz-KDNP 2021, that share meme-like pictures and short videos echoing the government's actual campaign narratives. An investigation led by the Hungarian Tax authority against the anonymous hyper-partisan ELÉG has found that the site was registered using the Fidesz Central Office's email address, [kapcsolat@fidesz.hu](mailto:kapcsolat@fidesz.hu),<sup>15</sup> just before the investigation was suspended.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, we were unable to find any concrete evidence of who the owners of the other pro-Fidesz anonymous domains and social media are.

Another type of semi-transparent pro-government websites, such as Bennfentes.net, owned by Károly Pósa, an artist and journalist of the pro-government mouthpiece Magyar Nemzet,<sup>17</sup> serves mostly to discredit opposition politicians.<sup>18</sup> Extreme right-wing Vadhajtások gained fame when its founder, Zsolt Bede, a well-known far-right activist, disrupted opposition events while live-streaming his performance.<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that the owners of Bennfentes and Vadhajtások are known, their articles are mostly authored by anonymous persons, and their finances are hidden. Another prime example of financial opacity is the newly established pro-government media centre called Megafon. The founder of Megafon is István Kovács<sup>20</sup>, who also serves as the Strategic Director of the Centre for Fundamental Rights (Alapjogokért Központ), a pro-government think-tank<sup>21</sup>. The aim of Megafon is, according to its credo, to 'counterbalance the predominantly left-liberal voices on social media.' Since its foundation in 2020, Megafon has spent nearly HUF 1 billion on advertisements on Facebook.<sup>22</sup> The source of their budget is probably public money;<sup>23</sup> however, Megafon declares that they finance their activities from donations.

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15 'Contact FIDESZ', accessed 28 March 2022, <https://fidesz.hu/contact-us>

16 [https://azonnali.hu/cikk/20210126\\_fideszes-e-mailcim-all-az-azonnali-videojat-ellopo-memoldal-mogott-allapitotta-meg-a-nav-majd-felfuggesztette-a-nyomozast](https://azonnali.hu/cikk/20210126_fideszes-e-mailcim-all-az-azonnali-videojat-ellopo-memoldal-mogott-allapitotta-meg-a-nav-majd-felfuggesztette-a-nyomozast)

17 <https://bennfentes.net/impresszum>

18 <https://bennfentes.net/2021/07/18/rejtelyes-leleplezest-iger-egy-video-ki-lehet-a-kettos-jatekot-uzo-politikus>  
<https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20210719-bennfentes-leleplezes-unios-tamogatas-4-5-milliard-forint.html>  
<https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20210729-cseh-katalin-momentum-cegek-palyazat-unios-penz.html>  
[https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20211209\\_hollik\\_istvan\\_cseh\\_katalin\\_botrany\\_korruptcio\\_belfold](https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20211209_hollik_istvan_cseh_katalin_botrany_korruptcio_belfold)

19 <https://www.vadhajtasok.hu/2021/08/04/rendkivuli-bede-zsolt-egyedul-szetverte-a-jakabek-forumat-budapesten>

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

21 <https://alapjogokert.hu/rolunk-2/>

22 Márk Herczeg, Bence Gáspár Tamás, 'Még mindig többet költ a kormányoldal a Facebookon, mint mindenki más együtt', 444, 23 March 2022, <https://444.hu/2022/03/23/meg-mindig-tobbet-kolt-a-kormanyoldal-a-facebookon-mint-mindenki-mas-egyutt>

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

There are also other GONGOs involved in Hungarian public life that openly support the government. Leaders of the Civil Unity Public Benefit Foundation (CÖF-CÖKA)<sup>24</sup> are frequent guests of pro-government media (just to name a few: László Csizmadia, Tamás Fricz and Zoltán Lomnici, Jr.).<sup>25</sup> After some investigative work and FOIA requests, it became public that the main founders of CÖF are major state-owned companies, such as Hungarian Electrical Works (MVM).<sup>26</sup>

Other GONGOs, like Századvég Foundation<sup>27</sup>, the Migration Research Institute (Migrációkutató Intézet)<sup>28</sup> or the Centre for Fundamental Rights,<sup>29</sup> publish opinion polls, analysis and other professional publications to support the government's political agenda with "hard data." Viktor Marsai, research director of the Migration Research Institute, explained in his interview that their main scope of activities is about publishing professional analyses and reports about migration. "Western migration studies generally use a pro-migration approach, even when it comes to economics or humanitarian questions," he said. In contrast, their approach to immigration is a "realist" one:

*"There has not been much discussion about the relationship between migration and security, for example, or about the possible links between migration and terrorism, or the fact that not all migration is fundamentally positive, even for economic processes. The Migration Research Institute wanted to fill this gap in 2015,"* said Viktor Marsai.

At the same time, the institute retains professional connections to independent NGOs assisting asylum seekers. The institute's communication aims to reach "everybody from university students to pensioners" through different channels, Marsai said. They still claim, as their scope is focused on the research of migration, that the institute "does not want to influence the electoral campaign."

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24 <https://civilosszefogas.hu/about-us/>

25 <https://civilosszefogas.hu/szovivok/>

26 <https://atlatszo.hu/kozadat/2021/12/21/titkolja-a-cof-nek-adott-40-millios-tamogatas-reszleteit-a-szerencsejatek-ceg/> , <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2018/09/10/a-felmilliardos-mvm-tamogatasbol-433-milliot-negy-nyulfarknyi-imazsvideora-koltott-el-a-cof/> , <https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2021/08/26/a-cof-nek-6-honap-alatt-kell-felhasznalnia-az-mfb-tol-kapott-25-millio-forintot/>

27 <https://szazadveg.hu/en>

28 Co-founded by Századvég and Matthias Corvinus Collegium <https://www.migraciokutato.hu/en/about-us/>

29 <https://444.hu/2017/04/13/az-alapjogokert-kozpont-civil-szervezet-igazgatoja-megmosolyogta-hogy-kormanykozelinek-nevezik-oket-majd-elarulta-honnan-van-penzuk>

## LEFT-WING OR OPPOSITION SOURCES

Unlike right-wing grey zone media, several of the leftist or opposition sources are openly linked to or support a party. Websites Nyugati Fény, Ellenszél, Ez A Lényeg and the Facebook page Európálya publish pieces that favour not only the opposition in general, but specifically the Democratic Coalition party (DK).<sup>30</sup> Viktor Mandula is founder, owner and editor-in-chief of Nyugati Fény<sup>31</sup>. In a 2016 interview, Viktor Szigetvári, then president of the Együtt Party, announced that he was attacked by Nyugati Fény, and these attacks only stopped when he complained to Ferenc Gyurcsány, president of DK.<sup>32</sup> Mandula declares himself to be independent, but we were able to link him directly to DK, based on his presence at the party's events alongside other party officials.

The owner of Ez a Lényeg (which operates 77 local versions) is Zoltán Páva, who<sup>33</sup> has a company that has a contract with the Democratic Coalition for social media consulting tasks in 2021/2022<sup>34</sup>. Anonymous Európálya is present only on Facebook and shares photos with quotes that are anti-government or pro-DK. According to news site 444.hu, Európálya has provided the address of the Hungarian Parliament as their mailing address to Facebook.<sup>35</sup> DK nonetheless denies having any connection to Európálya.

Several similar sites can be linked to the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) as well. Pesti Bulvár is co-owned by Gábor Veres<sup>36</sup>. Veres is a local representative in the municipality of Budapest's 8th district, is the chair of MSZP's organisation in Budapest's 8th district, and also serves as vice-chair of the party's National Committee<sup>37</sup>. Anonymous opposition sites HírHugó and Balramagyar also publish articles that favour MSZP,<sup>38</sup> while are also re-posting each-others' contents on their Facebook pages. According to 444.hu, these sites are "a project of the young socialists", while Hirhugó's domain was owned by an activist of the party:<sup>39</sup>

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30 <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/nyugati-feny-ezalenyeg-ellenszel-zsurpubi-bulvar/31497954.html>

31 <https://nyugatifeny.hu/impresszum>

32 [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20160719\\_politikai\\_vallasokbol\\_nem\\_epul\\_kormanyvaltas\\_interju\\_szigetvari\\_viktor\\_ellenzek\\_kormanyvaltas\\_botka](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20160719_politikai_vallasokbol_nem_epul_kormanyvaltas_interju_szigetvari_viktor_ellenzek_kormanyvaltas_botka)

33 <https://ezalenyeg.hu/impresszum>

34 <https://telex.hu/direkt36/2021/09/08/iden-is-bevetettek-meg-a-pegasust-tavasszal-megfigyeltek-egy-ellenzeki-mediatalajdonost>

35 <https://444.hu/2021/09/06/a-parlamentet-adta-meg-postacimekent-az-a-karacsonyt-tamado-fb-oldal-amiroi-a-dk-azt-allitja-hogy-nem-az-ovek>

36 <https://pestibulvar.hu/impresszum/>

37 <https://jozsefvaros.hu/onkormanyzat/kepviselok/107/veres-gabor>

38 <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/pesti-bulvar-hir-hugo-balra-magyar-hirklikk-jovotv-mszp-lmp-media/31503226.html>

39 <https://444.hu/2017/10/09/az-mszp-titkos-fegyvere-egy-weboldal-halalos-rohogtetessel-csinalja-ki-a-fideszt-es-az-olvasot-a-hir-hugo>

*“There was a young office manager in the MSZP office [in the 8th district], and he runs these two sites. I think he still has access to MSZP’s organisational website,” one source told us.*

Moreover, our investigation was able to prove that the same Google Analytics account is to be found behind Hírhubó, Balramagyar and the website of MSZP’s organisation in the 8th district of Budapest. We managed to secure an interview with one of the owners of Pesti Bulvár’s publisher, who said that they wanted to counterbalance the government-friendly media and give a voice to all the political scandals that frustrate people:

*“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),” he reasoned.*

According to the owner, Pesti Bulvár intentionally uses tabloid language to attract readers; he claimed, however, that “we never lie to our readers, nor do we give misleading titles to our pieces.” According to him, the majority of their readers are between 50 and 65 years old. Their staff works for free, as the site earns income only from Google ads:

*“Real advertisers are afraid to come to us,” he said.*

## CONSPIRACY AND CLICKBAIT SOURCES

**Most of the conspiracy outlets included on our Hungarian grey zone list have three main characteristics: they operate in a clickbait-manner to reach as many people as possible; these sites are a part of the Hungarian far-right subculture that is one of the main consumers of political or other types of conspiracy theories; and, finally, the leading sites can be linked to well-known conspiracy theorists, unlike most of the hyper-partisan pro-government outlets.**

One of the leading conspiracy theory sources is Hihetetlen Magazin (Incredible Magazine), which appears as a monthly print publication, runs a YouTube channel and is also active on social media.<sup>40</sup> Their online content usually promotes articles from their print magazine. The magazine’s owner and editor-in-chief is Róbert Szűcs, while its YouTube channel’s main anchor is Gábor Dombóvári, a well-known television and radio journalist, and a former veteran presenter of the main state-owned channels.

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.hihetetlenmagazin.hu> , <https://www.facebook.com/Hihetetlen.Magazin> , <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbVjF6nIrl2N7l6vWQ66Lnw> , <https://www.facebook.com/hihetetlenlv/>

Leleplező Magazin (Unveiling Magazine) is a very similar conspiracy outlet, with a print magazine and an online presence<sup>41</sup>. Its owner is Péter Tőke, while the main figure and deputy editor-in-chief is János Drábik<sup>42</sup>, a well-known conspiracy-theorist,<sup>43</sup> who runs his own Facebook-page.<sup>44</sup> Hír Aréna<sup>45</sup> is the website of F. Árpád Molnár, also a well-known conspiracy theorist.<sup>46</sup>

Conspiracy or clickbait sites often operate in a tight-knit network. Such a network can be identified around Titkok Szigete (Island of secrets), Titok terminal (Terminal of secrets) and Kimondott igazságok (Truth has been said)<sup>47</sup>. Their Facebook pages often share each other's articles and are operated by the same people<sup>48</sup>. Part of this network is a Facebook page and a YouTube channel under the name of Milán Zavatszki, whose real-world role or activities in organising the network could not be revealed even through further investigation.<sup>49</sup>

A similar network can be revealed around the site A Világ Titkai (The secrets of the world)<sup>50</sup>. We were able to link other websites to A Világ Titkai. These two other sites are Men's World and Női Magazin (Women magazine)<sup>51</sup>. As their name suggests, these are classic men's and women's magazines about cars, cosmetics or lifestyle choices, and they all use the same Google Ad user ID, and have the same layout and logo. While the conspiracy site is anonymous, the other two list<sup>52</sup> Likegroup Kft. as their owner, and their domain user is Euro Sport Média Kft. The owner of Likegroup and the head of Euro Sport Média is Attila Machalek, a football player and trainer recognised by the Hungarian Football Federation (Magyar Labdarúgó-szövetség), and both companies are in the process of liquidation. When it comes to the wider Hungarian political scene, Machalek is the director of ESM Security, owned by Szabolcs Botond, who has ties to the business world around the ruling Fidesz party.<sup>53</sup>

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41 <https://www.leleplezo.eu/> , <https://www.facebook.com/leleplezomagazin>

42 <https://www.leleplezo.eu/impresszum/>

43 <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2019/01/31/darbik-janos-trianon-ablonczy-balazs/>

44 <https://www.facebook.com/drabikjanos>

45 <http://hirarena.com/> , <http://hirarena.com/molnar-f--arpad> , <https://vk.com/molnararpad>

46 <https://www.facebook.com/molnarf.arpad.eli.1> , [https://index.hu/belfold/2011/02/25/lekapsoltak\\_a\\_hirhatteret/](https://index.hu/belfold/2011/02/25/lekapsoltak_a_hirhatteret/),

47 <http://titkokszigete.hu/> , <https://www.facebook.com/titkokszigete.hu/> , <https://www.facebook.com/titokterminal> , <http://kimondottigazsagok.com/> , <https://www.facebook.com/kimondottigazsagok/>

48 Ari Géza Kiss, Tamás Nagy, Kornél Csepeli, <http://kimondottigazsagok.com/kapcsolat/> , <http://titkokszigete.hu/kapcsolat/>

49 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLkPF8wNwRVtZ6SxWMEt4C> , <https://www.facebook.com/zavatszkimilanhivatalos/>

50 <https://avilagtitkai.com/> , <https://www.facebook.com/avilagtitkai/>

51 <https://mensworld.hu> , <https://www.facebook.com/MensWorldHungary/> , <https://noimagazin.hu> , <https://www.facebook.com/noimagazin.hu/>

52 <https://mensworld.hu/page/view?slug=impresszum> , <https://noimagazin.hu/page/view/impresszum>

53 Szabolcs Botond directs a company called Visual Europe, that is owned by New Land Media. New Land is the PR company responsible for Hungarian government's political campaigns.

Other anonymous clickbait sites that worth mentioning include: The network around Öt perc pihenő (Five minutes of rest)<sup>54</sup>, another network around Alternatív hírek (Alternative news)<sup>55</sup>, and some other, seemingly standalone sites<sup>56</sup>. These conspiracy or clickbait sites mostly base their revenues on online advertisements provided by big platforms, such as Google's AdSense, while the print magazines have income from subscriptions.

## PRO-KREMLIN SOURCES

In Hungary, pro-Kremlin propaganda sites are marginal and RT or any other Russian state-controlled media are not present in the country. However, there are some pro-Russian news sources in Hungarian. While most of the Hungarian pro-Russian sites are anonymous, some journalists, politicians and organisation can still be identified behind them.

Moszkvater (Moscow square)<sup>57</sup> is operated by journalists<sup>58</sup> who also work for the independent Hungarian weekly Magyar Hang<sup>59</sup>. Its editor-and-chief, Gábor Stier, was a Moscow correspondent of the pro-government Magyar Nemzet, and he is a board member of the Tolstoy Society for Hungarian-Russian Cooperation Association – an organisation funded by the Hungarian and Russian states<sup>60</sup>. One of the most important pro-Kremlin sites is “Russian News” (Orosz Hírek),<sup>61</sup> which operates not only a website, but is present on several social media platforms. The site is anonymous, and none of the articles have any authors indicated. In addition to the Hungarian version of News Front,<sup>62</sup> another pro-Russian site, this is the only pro-Kremlin site in our database that uses Yandex Metrica Plugin and has a Yandex.ru email address, which indicate some form of Russian operational background.

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54 Ötpercpihenő, <https://otpercpiheno.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/otpercpiheno/> + Rendkívüli Hírek, <https://erdekescikkek.otpercpiheno.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/Rendk%C3%ADv%C3%BCli-H%C3%ADrek-100576768203255/>, Köszölgát <https://www.facebook.com/kozszoigatoldal>

55 Alternatív Hírek <https://www.alternativhirek.com/>, Világ Helyzete <https://www.vilaghelyzete.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/AWAKENINGtheWORLD/>, Felfedés <https://felfedes.hu>, <https://www.facebook.com/felfedes.hu/>

56 Rejtélyek szigete <https://rejtelyekszigete.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/rejtelyekszigete> Mindenegyben <https://www.minden-egyben.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/Mindenegybenblog/>, Új világtudat <https://ujvilagtudat.blogspot.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/ujvilagtudat/>, Tudnod kell <https://tudnodkell.info>, <https://www.facebook.com/tudnodkell.info>

57 [www.moszkvater.com](http://www.moszkvater.com)

58 <https://moszkvater.com/impresszum/> Editor-in-chief Gábor Stier and journalist Roland Majláth work for both outlets

59 <https://hang.hu/informacio/impresszum-25069>

60 <https://moszkvater.com/szerzo/stier-gabor/>

61 [www.oroszhirek.hu](http://www.oroszhirek.hu), <https://www.facebook.com/oroszhirek.hu/>, <https://twitter.com/oroszhirek>, <https://www.instagram.com/oroszhirek/>, <https://vk.com/oroszhirek>, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKLQn\\_xAD6-hfHvc9nR4xLA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKLQn_xAD6-hfHvc9nR4xLA), <https://t.me/s/oroszhirek>

62 Although, the Hungarian version of News Front has been inactive for quite some time, it has been an important outlet for Russian revisionism and separatism in the last couple of years.

The page “We stand for Russia” (Kiállunk Oroszország Mellett)<sup>63</sup> indicates MIKSZ (Hungarian Youth Community Organisation, Magyar Ifjúság Közösségi Szervezete) as its owner. MIKSZ is an official association founded in 2011. MIKSZ defines itself as “a left-wing, anti-fascist political movement<sup>64</sup>, and their official goal is “to promote left-wing unity among young people”. According to official documents, MIKSZ held no assets and produced no income in the last years. Still, MIKSZ also operates other Facebook pages involved in the current war, such as “We stand for Novorossiya”<sup>65</sup> and “We stand for Belarus,”<sup>66</sup> which also list MIKSZ as their owner.

The website Orientalista is another pro-Kremlin outlet, and its editor-in-chief is Kassab Adonis<sup>67</sup>. Kassab formerly contributed to the far-right Vasárnap.hu<sup>68</sup>, a Catholic website with close ties to the Hungarian government’s junior coalition party<sup>69</sup>. Kassab himself is a former politician of far-right Jobbik, and a member of the military group Magyar Gárda, who has posted pro-terrorist and anti-Semitic content on his Facebook page<sup>70</sup>. Other contributors of Orientalista use pseudonyms.

One editor of the pro-Russian sites talked to us on condition of anonymity. He said his media is not a news site, and it does not even try to be objective: they publish their openly pro-Russian opinions. They started the site during the 2014 “Ukrainian crisis, when Russia was sanctioned. We wanted to express our support towards Russia”. According to our source, among the editors of pro-Kremlin content there are both right- and left-wing persons, but they have few resources, so they cannot run a proper editorial team.

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63 <https://www.facebook.com/kiallunkoroszorszagmellet/>

64 <https://mikszblog.wordpress.com/>

65 <https://www.facebook.com/support.novorossiya.hungary>

66 <https://www.facebook.com/support.lukashenko.hungary>

67 <http://orientalista.hu/rolunk/>

68 <https://vasarnap.hu/author/kassab-adonis/>

69 Publisher of vasarnap.hu is KDNP’s party foundation: <https://444.hu/2021/02/03/kozpenzbol-szallitja-nagyuzemben-a-meleg-es-az-abortuszellenesseget-a-keresztény-portal>

70 <https://neokohn.hu/2021/08/09/zsidokat-gyilkolo-ongyilkos-merenylor-e-mlekezett-a-vasarnap-hu-ujsgiroja/>

## PRO-BEIJING SOURCES

Unlike Russia, China has not increased its presence in mainstream or the grey zone media so far in Hungary.<sup>71</sup> The Chinese Embassy in Hungary is present on both Facebook<sup>72</sup> and Twitter<sup>73</sup>. State-owned China Radio International (CRI) is also present in Hungary with a website<sup>74</sup> and Facebook page; the latter has more than 83 thousand followers<sup>75</sup>. Igazi Kína (Real China) is an anonymous Facebook page that shares political pro-Beijing content, but has a very limited follower base.<sup>76</sup>

There are several pages promoting the various aspects of Chinese culture. The Facebook page of the China Cultural Center in Budapest<sup>77</sup> and Tusoló also promote Chinese culture<sup>78</sup>. Napi Kínai (Daily Chinese)<sup>79</sup> shares YouTube videos about Chinese culture. The website 'Contemporary Chinese Writers'<sup>80</sup> promotes contemporary literature. The Hungarian-Chinese Friendship Society is an NGO founded in 1959 by sinologists, its current members are China experts<sup>81</sup>. On their online platforms<sup>82</sup> they share articles and information about their offline events, mostly dealing with general knowledge about Asia and Chinese culture. There are also several China Studies institutions that have their online presence sharing information about their activities: one is the Confucius Institute of the University of Szeged<sup>83</sup>, and the Oriental Business and Innovation Center that specialises in business studies<sup>84</sup>.

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71 Tamas Matura: Hungary: no need for a Chinese soft-power strategy [https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep32152.14?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep32152.14?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

72 <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaEmbHungary>

73 <https://twitter.com/ChineseEmbinHU>

74 <http://hungarian.cri.cn>

75 <https://www.facebook.com/crihungarian/>

76 <https://www.facebook.com/RealChinaHUN/>

77 <https://www.facebook.com/CCCBudapest/>

78 <https://kulturzuhany.blogspot.com/> , <https://www.facebook.com/Kulturzuhany/>

79 <https://www.facebook.com/napikina/>

80 <https://kortars-kinai-irok.webnode.hu/> , <https://www.facebook.com/Kort%C3%A1rs-k%C3%ADnai-%C3%ADr%C3%B3k-Kort%C3%A1rs-k%C3%ADnai-irodalom-105628171741971/>

81 <https://www.mkbt.hu/rolunk/>

82 <https://www.mkbt.hu/> , <https://www.facebook.com/Magyar-K%C3%ADnai-Bar%C3%A1ti-T%C3%A1rsas%C3%A1g-MKBT-710080362438136/>

83 <http://konfuciuszintezet.u-szeged.hu/> , <https://www.facebook.com/szegedikonfuciuszintezet/>

84 <https://www.obic-bbs.hu> , <https://www.facebook.com/obicbbs/>

## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

With the help of the platform SentiOne, we generated a representative sample of 651 website articles and Facebook posts to reveal and categorise the main types of campaign narratives present in our dataset. The representative sample of all the messages' and sources' distribution within our timeframe between November 1 and December 31, 2021 allowed researchers to identify and categorise the main types of election- or campaign-related narratives in each country without the need to read through thousands of articles. Narrative analysis of samples revealed the differences between the "grey zone" and mainstream interpretation of the same topics, and the use of country-specific manipulation techniques employed by specific actors to influence the public discourse before the general elections.

The Hungarian sample contained mostly relevant messages, with only 6.5% of the sample being unrelated to the campaign communication under review, as seen in Table 6.

*Table 6 - The number and ratio of the top 5 Hungarian narratives in the representative sample between November 1 - December 31, 2021*

Narrative	Frequency	%
Migration	80	12,3
Government failures	64	9,8
Péter Márki-Zay is unfit to be Prime Minister	63	9,7
The opposition is incompetent or treasonous	52	8,0
Management of the COVID-19 epidemic	40	6,1

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 or the state of the Hungarian democracy, or conspiracy theories, such as about the European Union allegedly trying to create an "empire" against nation states, or narratives about specific scandals or political figures. Most of the "general" narratives contemplated the Hungarian government's or the united opposition's political performance, as seen in Table 7, about the top 5 main campaign narratives disseminated - amounting to 64% of all the messages in the sample. **Since we sampled messages in 2021, prior to the war, the leading narratives of 2022 could not yet be featured in this part of our analysis.** While pro-government media tried to tout the Orbán-cabinet's successes in keeping down the utility prices or keeping migrants out of the country and the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic, narratives of the opposition promised the restoration of the rule of law and Hungarian democracy by holding those in office accountable and cracking down on political corruption related to the pro-Fidesz oligarchs. Two of the most extreme narratives presented the two sides of the same coin by accusing the opposition parties of a "constitutional coup" in trying to change the constitutional political system created by the Fidesz-KDNP through the use of simple majority laws; the other side accused the government using unsubstantiated claims of future electoral fraud to stay in power. Conspiracy theories were

most pushed by pro-government mouthpieces about the European Union’s “empirical ambitions,” members of the opposition being foreign agents,<sup>xxvi</sup> and finally foreign powers, specifically the United States, preparing for illegal “intervention” in the Hungarian elections<sup>xxvii</sup> – a claim reiterated many times by Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó in mainstream media as well.<sup>xxviii</sup> There have been only four narratives addressing political leaders, most prominently praising PM Orbán’s personal political qualities or presenting former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány as the “puppet master” behind the scenes controlling the entire opposition. The attack levied against the former PM allowed the pro-government campaign to refer to the pre-2010 era of political and economic crises, such as the brutal police crackdown ordered by Gyurcsány against anti-government protesters in 2006 and the 2008 great economic recession that almost caused Hungary to default on its debt. Among the most current and leading political scandals, the criminal investigation against Pál Völner, a former MP and State Secretary for Justice from 9 October 2015 to 8 December 2021,<sup>xxix</sup> revealed the presence of corruption in the highest echelons of the Fidesz-led political elite, while the Pegasus surveillance scandal affirmed the illegal state-surveillance of independent journalists and members of the opposition. In contrast, the pro-government campaign tried to whip up semi-public plans to entertain the selling of the town hall of the city of Budapest as some kind of illegal corruption headed by the former opposition candidate for prime minister, the current Mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony. Ironically, the scandal of the Budapest City Hall was based partly on “leaked footage” acquired through illegal surveillance and published via an unknown pro-government source called “Anonymous,” which could not, so far, prove Karácsony’s active role in any of the “secret talks” which also turned out to have been staged by pro-government businessmen.<sup>xxx</sup>

If we look at the top 5 sources in our list, as displayed in Table 7 below, it is evident that the opposition and pro-government sources were pushing a very distinct political communication agenda when it comes to the top narratives disseminated.

*Table 7 – Main sources and their coverage of main narratives in the Hungarian representative sample between November 1 – December 31, 2021*

Source	Frequency	Migration	Government failures	MZP unfit for PM	Opposition incompetent treasonous	COVID-19 epidemic
OLKT.net	100	2	25	-	-	12,3
Vadhajtások	54	13	-	3	13	9,8
Elemi	53	11	-	5	6	9,7
Ez a lényeg	37	1	15	-	-	8,0
Hírextra.info						

While the anonymous hyper-partisan sources of the opposition (OLKT.net, Ez a lényeg) stressed the failures of governance and the mismanagement of the COVID-19 epidemic by the health authorities, anonymous pro-government outlets (Vadhajtások, Elemi, Hírextra.info) focused on immigration and the opposition's political scandals. For example, they accused the opposition, the Mayor of Budapest Gergely Karácsony and the opposition's prime ministerial candidate Péter Márki-Zay of political incompetence or outright treason in service of a "global network (...) trying to overturn the Orbán-government (...) to appoint an unstable puppet-government in its place, as Dániel Deák, a leading expert of the pro-government XXI Century Institute and Megafon put it.<sup>xxxI</sup> In response, leading opposition narratives faulted the government for a high level of corruption, highlighting the role of Pál Völner, inflation, societal inequalities or the erosion of the Hungarian democratic institutional system. Interestingly, only a few specific scandals, for example, the case of the Budapest City Hall or Pál Völner, made it into the top 10 narratives, while the government's favourite topics about the abolition of the utility price reduction by the opposition or former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány's role as a "puppet master" of the opposition got less traction. The same is true for main opposition narratives about the Pegasus surveillance case or claims of electoral fraud on the side of the government.

**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 not only mobilised around 850,000 people, but also succeeded in setting the agenda of the entire political discourse from October until November. As a result, the ruling Fidesz-KDNP and the pro-government media began to attack the surprise opposition candidate for PM Péter Márki-Zay ("MZP"), a mayor of the town of Hódmezővásárhely, after weeks of communications disarray. Their narrative tried to frame MZP as an incompetent politician known for rhetorical gaffes,<sup>xxxII</sup> corruption,<sup>xxxIII</sup> ill-preparedness for the position or simply treasonous behaviour for calling on the European Union to investigate corruption cases in Hungary. The second manipulation attempt was launched together by one of the leading pro-government news portals, index.hu, and quasi-grey zone media outlet bennfentes.net (Insider), founded by a journalist of Magyar Nemzet, accusing the Mayor of Budapest Gergely Karácsony of corruption. The portals published a series of "leaked" documents and voice recordings disseminated by an "anonymous" source, which were in fact some form of surveillance operations, about the capital officials' alleged plans to sell most of the City Hall of Budapest and the land that surrounds it for some form of a corrupt "commission fee."<sup>xxxIV</sup> The influence operation was clearly planned months prior to the opposition primary to attack then-candidate for PM Gergely Karácsony, if he had won the primary elections – subsequent investigations,<sup>85</sup> so far, could not prove the allegations of an active role in the business discussions of several businessmen close to the ruling coalition.<sup>xxxV</sup>

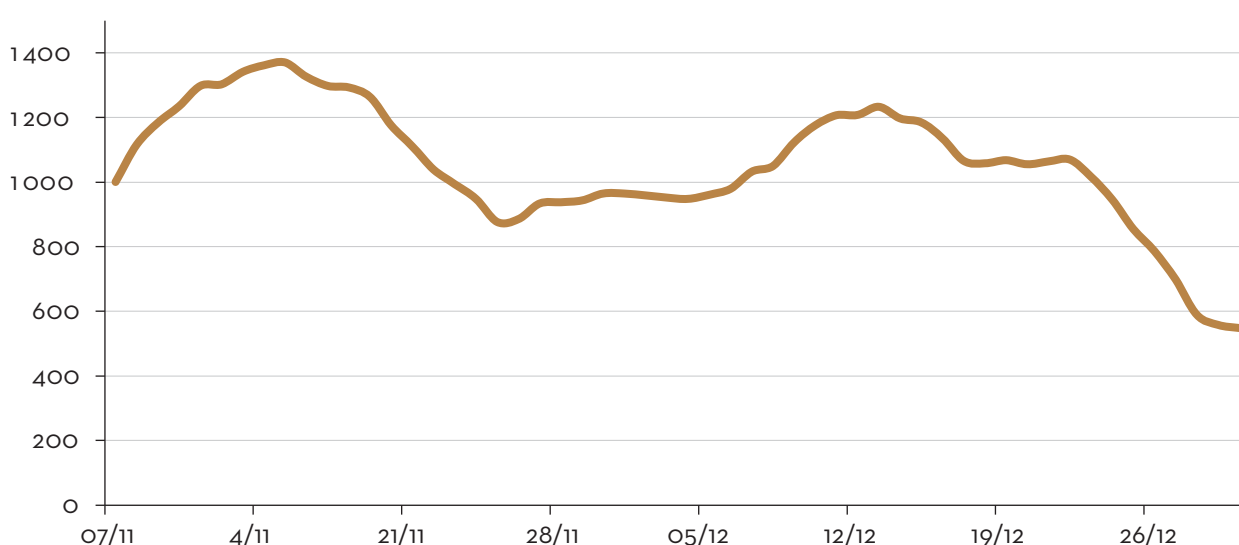
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85 Gergely Karácsony has admitted to having ordered a preparatory study in October 2020 on the monetisation options of the properties of the capital city, however, they have eventually ruled out the selling of any properties in November 2020. For more please see: <https://24.hu/belfold/2021/11/12/varoshaza-eladas-karacsony-hangfelvetel-hatter/>

## TREND ANALYSIS OF THE “GREY ZONE” MEDIA DISCOURSES

The trend analysis focused on general dissemination patterns of all the grey zone media and social media under review in terms of news peaks, top sources and drivers of discussions about the political campaign leading up to the elections. The examination of message distribution over time provided us, as seen in the Hungarian time-trend table below, with valuable insight into the grey zone media’s dissemination tactics that tried to reach out to hyper-partisan and/or conspiracy-minded audiences in each country based on the aforementioned main types of narratives.

*The weekly number of relevant media content (social media posts/website articles) dealing with the campaign in the Hungarian grey zone media between 1/11/2021 – 31/12/2021 (7 day rolling sum)*



The analysis of the general trend of Hungarian messages revealed two news peaks during the second weeks of November and December 2021. During the first peak, between November 8 and 15, 2021, the campaign discourse was mostly dominated by pro-government sources that were either pushing the new Budapest City Hall scandal or attacking the new opposition candidate for PM Péter Márki-Zay – trying to portray him as a “pawn” of former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány,<sup>xxxvi</sup> or as an anti-Hungarian politician who:

***“(…) went to Brussels and swore an oath of allegiance to everyone. He swore an oath to every political group, to every pro-immigration politician. The only thing he did not say was that he would be loyal to Hungary,”*** Deák Dániel from Megafon declared.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Among the main narratives, immigration was featured heavily as well during the first period. Hyper-partisan pro-government anonymous sites used the immigration crises on the Polish-Belarus border to either promote the government’s hard-line and successful anti-immigration policies or accuse the European Union’s alleged pro-immigration stance for the crisis to begin with. The anonymous Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere Facebook site (Numbers - the antidote to left-wing pseudo-news) went as far as to accuse Poland and the EU for their Russophobic foreign policy:

***“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 (...).”<sup>XXXVIII</sup>***

**Some Hungarian-speaking pro-Russian portals also tried to capitalise off the confrontation between Poland and Belarus.** For example, the 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.”<sup>XXXIX</sup> Consequently, opposition politicians and media strangely presented a more pro-Polish stance in the stand-off than the pro-government communication, oftentimes defending Lukashenka’s system and its hybrid war waged against the European Union.

At the same time, hyper-partisan opposition sites, such as Gondolkodó (Thinker) or Hírhubó (Newswire), bashed the government for large scale corruption scandals,<sup>XL</sup> illegal surveillance conducted using the Pegasus software,<sup>XLI</sup> or the utility cost-reduction financed, in fact, by the Hungarian taxpayers.<sup>XLII</sup> **Still, the analysis of the most viral opposition messages has also revealed that the opposition’s campaign could not really counter the allegations surrounding the Budapest City Hall case or point out the government’s problematic stance on the Polish-Belarus crisis.**

The second news peak produced a more balanced competition between the pro-government and anti-government sources, between December 6 and 12, 2021. The leftist media was successful in linking two of the most significant political scandals of the Fidesz-KDNP, the Pegasus surveillance scandal and the corruption case of Pál Völner, the former State Secretary for Justice from 9 October 2015 to 8 December 2021. What Nyugati Fény (Western Light), close to DK, alongside the anonymous Facebook sites Tízmillióan a 2022-es kormányváltásért (Ten million people for a change of government in 2022) and Gondolkodó (Thinker), stressed was that 1) Pál Völner is part of the Fidesz political elite, and that he was, for example, wining and dining together with PM Orbán a few weeks before his arrest,<sup>XLIII</sup> and that 2) he was also responsible for authorising the use of the Pegasus software against independent journalists and opposition figures.<sup>XLIV</sup>

Pro-government narratives tried to undermine the united opposition’s credibility and political legitimacy by claiming that they are agents of foreign powers,<sup>XLV</sup> such as MP Tímea Szabó, co-president of the Dialogue for Hungary, allegedly being an “agent” of the CIA due to her past work in Afghanistan with the UN,<sup>XLVI</sup> or they are preparing to repeal social measures of the Orbán-cabinet, such as the utility cost caps provided to Hungarian households for the reduction of the price of gas and electricity.<sup>XLVII</sup>

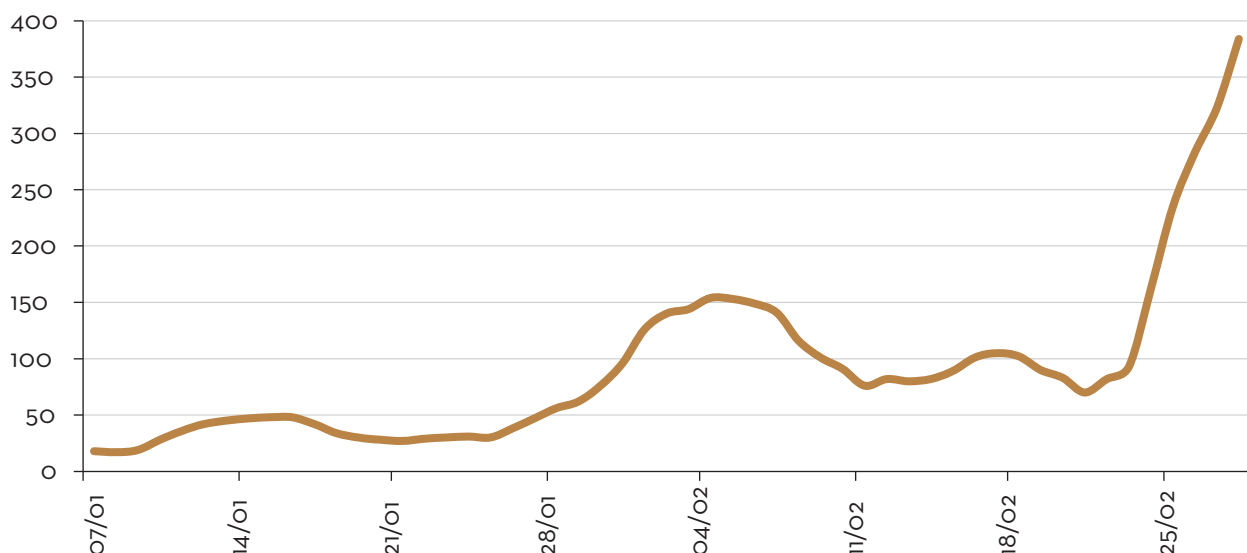
The top sources producing the most messages for the main Hungarian trend corresponded, for the most part, with the list of top sources in our representative sample. Thus, beyond Facebook's social media platform, the most active sources proved to be anonymous hyper-partisan sites, such as the pro-government vadhajtasok.hu, elemi.hu or mindenszo.hu, or on the opposition's side OKT.net. The only new source on the list proved to be the anonymous hyper-partisan site kuruc.info that is allegedly operated by a politician of the far-right Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland) Movement that is in agreement with the government on many issues, such as anti-immigration and xenophobic policies.

## HUNGARIAN NARRATIVES ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

We monitored campaign messages published in the grey zone media between January 1 and March 1, 2022 to detect the emergence and evolution of the Kremlin's war narratives based on a specific set of keywords.<sup>86</sup> Our research results revealed if and how pro-Kremlin narratives were picked up, as seen below in the time-trend table, reiterated, or localised by the diverse set of hyper-partisan, conspiracy, clickbait, pro-Kremlin and anti-COVID sources to formulate their geopolitical stance and formulate pretexts for the war.

If we look at the Hungarian trend of the "war rhetoric" displayed below and measured using the aforementioned keywords, it is evident that two news peaks dominated the period between January 1 and March 1, 2022.

*The number of weekly relevant media content items (social media posts/website articles) dealing with the war in the Serbian grey zone media between 1/1-28/2, 2022 (7 day rolling sum)*



<sup>86</sup> In order to collect all relevant narratives, we used a wide set of keywords to capture all messages containing any of the following keywords: Ukraine, Russia, Putin, Kremlin or Zelenskyy.

The first spike in the grey zone sources' news trend (01.31-02.07.2022) reflected the geopolitical tensions before the war, such as Russian demands to withdraw NATO forces from Eastern Europe or the warning of US intelligence services of an imminent attack against Ukraine,<sup>XLVIII</sup> and the bilateral meeting between PM Orbán and President Putin on February 1, 2022 in Moscow. Despite the Hungarian pro-government media, including the hyper-partisan sources on our list, exhibiting a strong pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian stance in general, Viktor Orbán's official visit prevented most of them from the dissemination of Russian narratives used to prepare the domestic and international audience for the war. They therefore tried to deny the threat posed by Russia to frame the meeting between the two leaders as some sort of a successful "peace mission" that achieved pragmatic and positive outcomes for the world, the Hungarian government and the Hungarian people. Both Dániel Deák, a geopolitical expert from the pro-government media centre Megafon,<sup>XLIX</sup> and the biggest pro-governmental policy think-tank or GONGO Századvég praised the Hungarian PM for conducting peace talks and successfully pursuing Hungarian interests in Moscow<sup>L</sup> in the form of long-term Russian-Hungarian energy deals that provide energy security for Hungary and the "utility cost reduction" for Hungarian households. Obviously, the pro-government rhetoric tried to avoid the impression that the ill-scheduled meeting somehow legitimised the aggressive Russian posture and presented the Hungarian PM as one of the last "allies" of President Putin within the Western Alliance. A small pro-Kremlin page called balrad.ru went so far as to ask Viktor Orbán to publicly acknowledge "Russia's right to secure borders and to conclude a separate agreement on mutual guarantees of security between the two countries."<sup>LI</sup> The same pro-government sources also attacked the opposition's candidate for PM, Péter Márki-Zay, of being unable to pursue a decisive and delicate foreign policy stance, especially when it comes to Russia under such volatile international conditions now and in the future.<sup>LII</sup> Only a handful of mostly pro-Kremlin sites repeated Russia's justifications for the war. The pro-Russian civic organisation Békekör (Peace Circle) accused the United States of warmongering in the service of "armament and incitement of hatred" against Russia,<sup>LIII</sup> while the anonymous far-right website Kuruc.info interpreted the geopolitical turmoil as a deliberate power-play on the part of the West to "halt the association between Russia and China as long as it is not too late for the (Western, the editors) globalist forces."<sup>LIV</sup> The anonymous hyper-partisan Flag Polgári Magazin quoted one of the best-known pro-government publicists and party members, Zsolt Bayer, about today's Ukraine being "a puppet state established and operated by the CIA" to regain American influence against the EU, Russia and China.<sup>LV</sup> Others accused Ukraine or the Western media of warmongering and wartime propaganda levied against a peaceful Russia.<sup>LVI</sup> Leftist sources resorted mainly to scolding PM Orbán for being a "puppet"<sup>LVII</sup> of President Putin and not doing enough to represent the security interests of Hungary or the EU in the face of an increasingly assertive Russia.<sup>LVIII</sup>

**In contrast, the all-out Russian assault against Ukraine activated a variety of the Kremlin's disinformation narratives in the pro-government grey zone during the second peak on the day of the invasion on February 24, 2022.** Most of the narratives disseminated primarily by anonymous hyper-partisan media made Ukraine responsible for the events. The anonymous pro-government Facebook site Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere ( Numbers - the antidote to left-wing pseudo-news),<sup>LIX</sup> and the site Patrióta Európa Mozgalom (Patriotic European Movement) basically run the **same story word-by-word** about the "real background" on the war, translating and publishing President Putin's speech

about “stopping the Ukrainian attack against Eastern Ukraine” and countering NATO’s illegitimate expansion Eastward that threatens the basic security needs of Russia.<sup>LX</sup> 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.<sup>LXI</sup> Other narratives accused Ukraine of serving Western interests, even during the Maidan Revolution,<sup>LXII</sup> or tried to legitimise Russia’s security concerns as part of big powers’ well-known historical rivalry.<sup>LXIII</sup> Most of the communication on the grey zone spectrum, however, mirrored the governmental efforts to position itself and Hungary as a “neutral” actor between the West and Russia, longing for peace and trying to stay out of the war for the sake of “Hungarian interests.” The Hungarian government’s pro-Russian “neutrality” is, in fact, to this day a double-faced communication effort to offer a gesture towards the Kremlin, despite supporting all Western sanctions on the international stage, whilst falsely accusing the united opposition of trying to lead Hungary into the war by offering Ukraine direct Hungarian military assistance. While the opposition’s candidate for PM Péter Márki-Zay did say that he would consider sending arms and men to Ukraine under the umbrella of NATO, the anonymous Facebook pages Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere and<sup>LXIV</sup> Elég (Enough),<sup>LXV</sup> along with pro-government influencer Dávid Filep’s media pages (A kopasz oszt Facebook page, Aktuális supported by the Megafon Centre)<sup>LXVI</sup> falsely stated that the opposition would like to start a direct war between Hungary and Russia against the clear case of the Hungarian interest being to stay out of the conflict. To make the “pro-peace” communication of the government even stronger, governmental think-tank and GONGO Századvég published a representative poll, showing that about 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.<sup>LXVII</sup>

Still, the government’s dominance over the Hungarian media space and its message about “peace” and “neutrality” did the trick, and apparently contributed to Fidesz-KDNP winning another supermajority during the April 2022 elections, since even about one-third of the opposition’s electorate believed the narrative about the opposition’s pro-war stance.<sup>LXVIII</sup>

## NETWORK ANALYSIS

Based on hyperlinks found in the texts of webpage articles or Facebook posts, we created a network database of interlinked domains to see how our “grey zone” sources linked to each-other or to third-party domains to produce campaign messages.<sup>87</sup> The network database allowed us to create a directed graph<sup>88</sup> using the software Gephi<sup>89</sup> 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,<sup>90</sup> we were able to identify several subgroups or clusters of nodes which occupy a statistically similar network position in terms of their interconnectivity. 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.

The complete Hungarian network of the “grey zone” media was made up of 613 nodes and 947 edges, as displayed below on the full graph on Figure 1. It revealed that the political campaign communication is organised by and around mainly rightist anonymous hyperpartisan pages. Among those we can find the website and Facebook page of pro-government Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere (Numbers – the antidote to left-wing fake-news) marked in purple, and another pro-government anonymous outlet Vadhajtások marked in bright green, both with alleged ties to the ruling Fidesz-KDNP.

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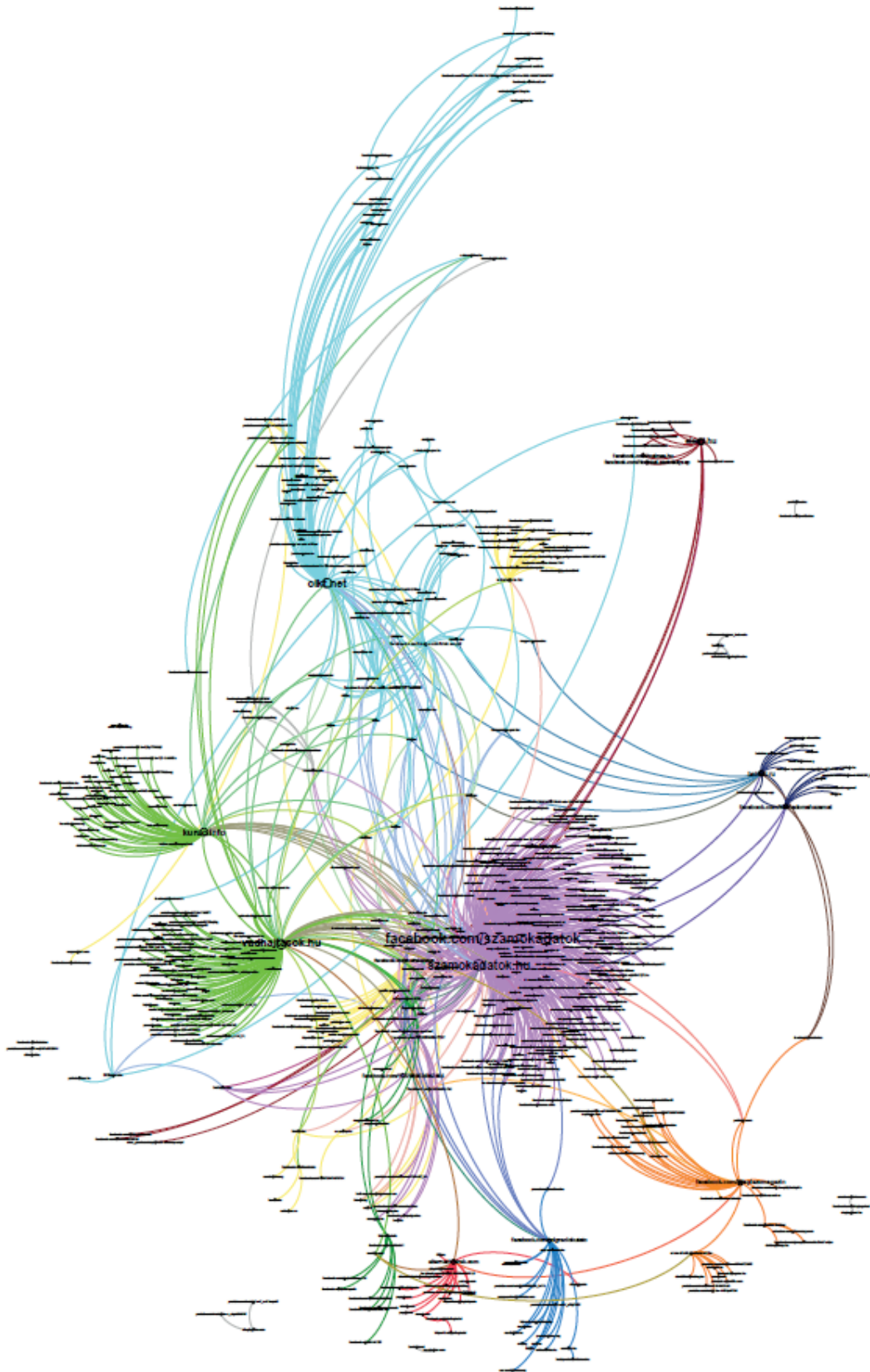
87 Since we have expanded our initial list of grey zone media, our final databases contained political campaign-related messages that were either produced by our initial or by the extended list of grey zone media as source domains, whereas the target domains contain both grey zone media and third-party media that were referenced by media contents produced by our final grey zone list.

88 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.

89 ‘Gephi - The Open Graph Viz Platform’, accessed 12 October 2021, <https://gephi.org/>.

90 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.

*Figure 1. 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.

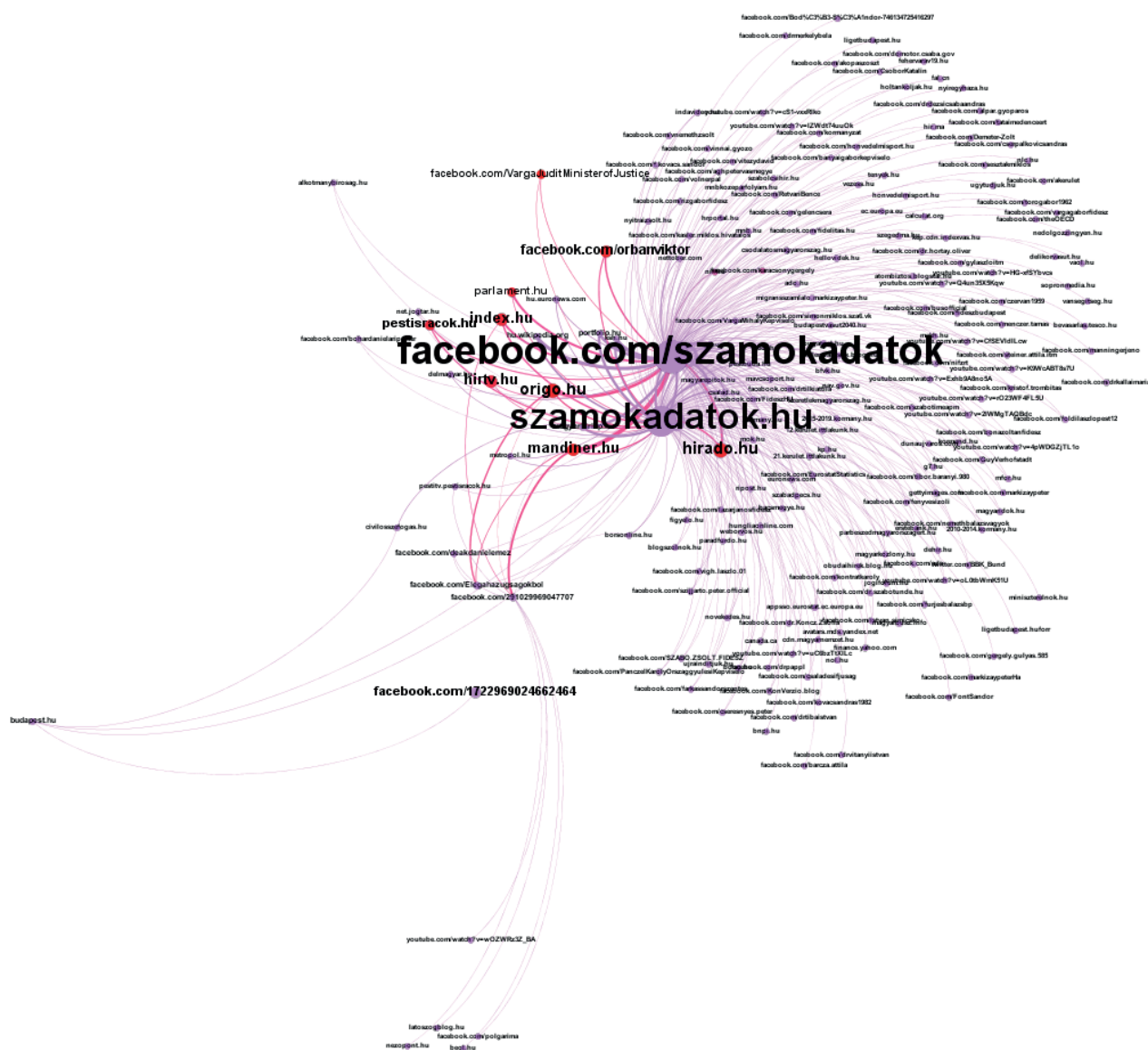
The third biggest rightist node belongs to the anonymous extremist website Kuruc.info, which allegedly has close ties to the far-right and anti-Semitic Our Homeland Movement Party (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom). Interestingly, the network is organised by only one major hyperpartisan source on the left, the domain OLKT.net, close to the DK party, which is accompanied by two smaller anonymous leftist media: Gondolkodó (Thinker), closer to the Hungarian Socialist Party's line (MSZP), and the Facebook site Hírek a színpad mögöl (News from behind the scenes), with some ties to DK. An overview of the Hungarian graph has reinforced our previous perception that the communication of the Hungarian grey zone media ecosystem is indeed dominated by the hyperpartisan sources with some proven or unproven affiliation to Hungarian parties, rendering the other types of sources, such as mainstream media or the clickbait, conspiracy, pro-Kremlin, pro-Chinese media, secondary in the execution of the "dirty campaign" pursued by Hungarian parties before the April 2022 elections.

## CLUSTERS AND CENTRAL NODES

The cluster analysis revealed many smaller subgroups, of which the top 10 are worth mentioning and the top 5 deserve a somewhat deeper analysis. The quick overview of the top 10 clusters, as seen on the full graph above, exposed even more openly the dominant position of pro-government and/or rightist sources in the graph, as the biggest purple cluster (34.58% of all nodes) is organised around Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere, the second most significant light green group (19.09%) is established by the pro-government anonymous Vadhajítások and the extremist anonymous Kuruc.info, while the fourth yellow cluster is another pro-government group of nodes around the pro-government anonymous hyperpartisan website Minden szó (Every word) and the anonymous Facebook page Balfakenews (8.31% of all nodes). The clusters from five to ten are also situated on the right side of the political spectrum: the orange group led by one of the most significant conspiracy pages, Leleplező Magazin (Revealing Magazin) (5.55%); the red cluster of almost exclusively conspiracy pages (3.1% of all nodes), such as Alternatív Hírek (Alternative News); the blue cluster of pro-government GONGOS (Migrációkutató, MCC) (3.1%); the small deep-blue group of some of the pro-Kremlin mouthpieces (2.45%), such as balrad.ru or Békekör (Peace Circle); another small cluster of mainstream pro-government outlets organised around the anonymous hyperpartisan pro-government Flag Polgári Magazin (Flag Citizen's Magazine) (2.44%); finally, a small cluster of eleven nodes connected through the anonymous pro-government campaign site of Elemi.hu (Elementary), amounting to just 1.79% of the total Hungarian graph. All these clusters are either directly or indirectly connected to the rightist politics due to their embeddedness in the pro-government media bubble or the extremist far-right or pro-Kremlin subculture formed around the Mi Hazánk Party.

If we look at the top 5 clusters more closely, we can see that the only leftist or opposition-leaning group is formed around the anonymous hyperpartisan OLKT.net marked in turquoise colour. The OLKT cluster is the third most significant one, encompassing a little over 15% of all the nodes. Within this group, we can find Gondolkodó (Thinker) and Hírek a színpad mögöl (News from behind the scenes), two other leftist anonymous sites that are connected to each-other through a series of independent outlets serving as "bridge nodes" between them, such as Szabad Európa Rádió

(Radio Free Europe), atv.hu, Klubrádió or Telex, founded by the former editorial staff of the leading pro-government outlet Index. Compared to the leftist cluster, the leading purple subgroup organised around Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere (Numbers - the antidote to left-wing fake-news) is much more centralised, mostly unilaterally referencing the Facebook or domain pages of the most important Fidesz politicians, as seen below on Figure 2.



It is noteworthy that the purple group relies in its communication on the Facebook page of PM Viktor Orbán or Minister of Justice Judit Varga, while also referencing mainstream pro-government outlets, such as Hír TV, Origo.hu, Hirado.hu, Mandiner – all marked in red on the graph above. The second most important cluster, marked in light green, seen on the full graph above, exemplifies how pro-government hyperpartisan sources are integrated into Hungarian or international extremist communications by referencing the main Hungarian neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic site Kuruc.info, which has its own connection to, for example, the leading neo-Nazi Daily Stormer, or other international accounts, such as the American disinformation site The Gateway Pundit or the Twitter account of Italian politician Matteo Salvini. The fourth and fifth clusters in the top 5 list reinforce the dominant positions of smaller pro-government anonymous sites in the graph, such as Minden szó or Balfakenews part of the fourth cluster, while the fifth orange cluster revealed that the leading conspiracy site Leleplező Magazin (Revealing Magazin) led by the most prolific conspiracy theorist Dr. János Drábik is channelling the new Hungarian antivax movement's central figures and platforms – namely, the movement's leader, the Facebook page of György Gődény and the page Orvosok a Tisztánlátásért (Doctors for Clarity) Association. Although, the new antivax movement's position is inherently anti-establishment and anti-government, the reason they could not have been integrated more with the hyperpartisan sources in our graph, is that they still fit the (geo)political platform of most of the pro-government sites by sharing a large amount of anti-West, more specifically anti-US conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 epidemic in Hungary.<sup>LXIX</sup>

## NETWORKED CONTENT PRODUCTION

Bridge-nodes connect different subgroups or clusters in order to produce content and/or direct audiences to similar media contents or outlets, reinforcing their messaging and political position.

If we look at some of the actual links within and between our clusters, it becomes evident that the main rightist nodes have been pushing the governmental campaign narratives or scandals already present in the mainstream media. The page Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere (Numbers - the antidote to left-wing fake-news), organising the purple rightist grey zone cluster, was pushing and praising the government's hard-line anti-immigration stance in its reflection on the 2021 Belarus-European Union border crisis. To defend the Hungarian government's anti-immigration measures, including the construction of a border fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border, Számok - a baloldali álhírek ellenszere referenced in its post a Euronews article about the fence built on the Greek-Turkish border, along with the main pro-government news outlet Origo.hu about another border fence built by the Danish government,<sup>LXX</sup> while reiterating Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó's previous message to Brussels why Hungary "will not become a country of immigration."<sup>LXXI</sup> When it comes to the other green rightist cluster organised by the anonymous hyperpartisan domain Vadhajítások, the portal referenced both the government's close political ally, the Twitter account of the Slovenian PM Janez Jansa, and the French ideological ally of the far-right, French presidential candidate Eric Zemmour, about the threat posed by the left-wing and anti-Fascist Antifa's "international terrorist organisation."<sup>LXXII</sup> Another Origo.hu article was used to prove the alleged corruption of the Mayor of Budapest Gergely Karácsony, who was accused by pro-government "anonymous sources" of trying to sell the City Hall of Budapest.<sup>LXXIII</sup>

## THE ROLE OF THE PRO-KREMLIN MEDIA

The same clusters also proved to be instrumental in disseminating pro-Kremlin narratives, one about Poland's and Brussels' responsibility for the "intervention" into Belarusian affairs that caused the immigration conflict on the border in the first place,<sup>LXXIV</sup> another on NATO's allegedly threatening Russia, forcing the Kremlin to station 120,000 troops alongside its border with Ukraine in December 2021 – a statement first published by the mainstream pro-government portal Mandiner.<sup>LXXV</sup> Still, genuine local pro-Kremlin outlets included in our initial grey zone media list either did not turn up on the Hungarian graph or they occupied a rather marginal position, such as the website Balrad.ru and its small deep blue cluster of pro-Kremlin sources, displayed below on Figure 3.

*Figure 3. The deep blue cluster of pro-Kremlin nodes of the Hungarian grey zone media graph (node size is proportional to the number of connections)*



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

All this proves that the grey zone's pro-Russian communication is produced entirely by pro-government sources, which formulate their messages based on either the mainstream governmental communication or the Kremlin's own Russian mouthpieces, Sputnik or Russia Today, not needing any assistance from the small number of Hungarian-speaking local pro-Kremlin outlets.

## 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*

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **Reproduction of content:** sharing content that is similar to video or photo content shared on any party’s official or social media pages.
4. **Hyper-partisan memes:** the use of innovative memes mocking or mimicking the political enemies of a party without a sarcastic intention.
5. **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.

6. **(Partial) funding coming from parties/government/governmental figures:** media is financed by parties through intermediary channels, organisations, shell-companies etc. to produce manipulated content
7. **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.<sup>LXXVI</sup>
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 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.<sup>LXXVII</sup>

- 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.

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