

Maintaining fair and open neighborly relations?

Mapping Hungarian influence in Slovakia and the Czech Republic

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INTRODUCTION

As the world today undergoes multiple parallel and simultaneous crises, whether in the realm of economy or security, it becomes increasingly important to focus analytical resources and energy on mapping out various forms of undue or even outright malign influence over strategic state assets and policies. Although multiple international bodies, institutions, and organizations help shape the international environment, rules, and norms, the state prevails as the primary framework within which laws, regulations, and policies are formulated and adopted, impacting individual and national prosperity, freedoms, rights, and security. How robust state institutions and facilities are, how well they function, how resilient they are against malign and undue influence, and how vulnerable they might be to such influence, especially in a crisis, is an ever more important area of study.

This report argues that it is indeed important to conduct solid research and then analyze the data to map out the aforementioned phenomena. More precisely, it aims to provide a mosaic of potential vulnerabilities or areas lacking resilience mechanisms in two selected states - Slovakia and the Czech Republic - and assess the targets, ways, means, and impact of information, economic and political interventions, as well as the more general power projection of the Hungarian government and affiliated actors in those two states.

The report offers descriptions of the used concepts, such as influence operations, and then presents findings related to Hungarian-Slovak and Hungarian-Czech relations. It is based on multiple in-depth expert interviews, OSINT investigations, media content analysis, and the results of a public opinion poll of the ethnic Hungarian minority's media consumption in Slovakia and their perception of the Russo-Ukrainian war and related sanctions. It includes an overview of these relations, a content analysis of official Hungarian representatives' public statements and government-affiliated media, and a dedicated section on mapping out potential vulnerabilities in one of the most critical strategic public sectors - energy, energy security, and defense. These all contribute to the overall vulnerability assessment for Slovakia and Czechia across the social, political, media, and cultural sectors.

HUNGARIAN INFLUENCE IN SLOVAKIA

Alexandra Fratrič and Matúš Jevčák

Adapt Institute

KEY FINDINGS

The examination of Hungary's influence operations in Slovakia reveals a multi-dimensional effort that involves diplomacy, public diplomacy, information operations, economic influence, and clandestine activities and military cooperation:

- **Diplomacy:** Hungary's diplomatic approach is characterized by both assertive gestures and strategic alliances. This includes the use of nationalist rhetoric and symbolic acts, such as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán referring to Slovakia by the historical name "Felvidék" and displaying maps of Greater Hungary. The Hungarian Citizenship Act, pivotal in granting citizenship to ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia, has influenced Slovakia's own legislation on dual citizenship, which has direct political and social ramifications for the Hungarian minority. These acts serve both to stir national sentiments and provoke diplomatic responses from Slovakia. Additionally, Hungary's engagement with Slovak politics is highlighted by its interactions with local parties, particularly the minority Hungarian parties and SMER-SD¹. Hungary's support for the Hungarian minority parties in Slovakia, like the Hungarian Alliance,² underscores its strategic use of these parties to influence Slovak internal politics and bolster the popularity of Orbán's regime among the diaspora. Simultaneously, Hungary's relationship with SMER-SD, characterized by mutual support and shared populist and pro-Russian stances, further illustrates Hungary's diplomatic efforts to forge regional alliances that can support its broader policy objectives within the region and the EU.

¹ SMER-Social Democracy (SMER- Sociálna Demokracia) is the largest political party in Slovakia, led by the incumbent prime minister Robert Fico

² The official name of the largest party for the ethnic Hungarian minority in Slovakia since 2023 is Magyar Szövetség - Madarská aliancia, sometimes also the abbreviation SZÖVETSÉG-ALIANCIA is used. Previously known as the Alliance (Szövetség-Aliancia), it was formed by merging the Hungarian minority parties SMK-MKP, Most-Híd, and MKÖ-MKS. However, Most-Híd left the united party in 2023.

- In summary, Hungary's diplomatic efforts have been marked by mixed success. Despite significant support, the minority Hungarian parties have struggled to cooperate effectively and achieve significant representation in the Slovak Parliament. This fragmentation limits Hungary's ability to directly influence Slovak national policies through these parties. The relationship with Fico and the SMER-SD party represents a more promising aspect of Hungary's diplomatic and political strategy in this context. This alliance has facilitated more substantial influence over Slovakia's stance on EU issues and regional politics, aligning more closely with Hungarian interests, especially in opposing certain EU directives and fostering a pro-Russian orientation.
- **Public Diplomacy:** Hungary extensively supports sports, cultural, and educational initiatives in Slovakia, using institutions like the Bethlen Gábor Fund to fund Hungarian media outlets and cultural institutions. These efforts are aimed at reinforcing a Hungarian national identity among the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, which also serves to promote political solidarity and alignment with Budapest's policies. The financing of education through projects like the branch of Mathias Corvinus Collegium extends Hungary's influence into cultural education, aligning with Hungarian governmental perspectives.
 - In the realm of public diplomacy, Hungary appears to be relatively successful. The funding of media and cultural institutions has helped to maintain a Hungarian national consciousness among the minority in Slovakia. Educational initiatives further embed Hungarian cultural and political values, ensuring a degree of loyalty and alignment with Hungary's governmental policies among the Hungarian diaspora.
- **Information Operations:** Hungary's control over Hungarian minority media narratives in Slovakia, particularly through funding specific media outlets, plays a critical role in shaping perceptions and influencing the political landscape. This media influence is primarily directed at supporting a positive view of Hungary's political agenda, ensuring the alignment of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia with Budapest's policies.
 - Hungary's influence through media operations in Slovakia has been effective in shaping the perceptions of the Hungarian minority. By financially supporting specific media outlets, Hungary ensures the

propagation of narratives that favor its geopolitical agenda. However, the broader impact on the Slovak public is limited, restricted primarily to Hungarian-speaking communities.

- **Economic Operations:** Hungary's economic influence in Slovakia is manifested through targeted financial support to entrepreneurs in regions with significant Hungarian populations. This not only bolsters economic ties but also builds a base of political support within these communities. In addition, Budapest cultivates great relations with several businessmen active in the Slovak energy industry.
 - Economically, Hungary has successfully embedded itself in southern Slovakia, providing targeted financial support that not only strengthens economic ties but also builds political support within the Hungarian minority. These operations, while locally successful, do not necessarily translate into broader political influence at the national level.
- **Clandestine Operations and Military Cooperation:** Covert activities, including espionage and intelligence gathering, signify deeper layers of Hungary's influence. The presence of Hungarian intelligence operations in Slovakia, coupled with military cooperation within the Visegrád Group, suggests Hungary's intent to solidify its strategic interests in the region. Meetings between Hungarian and Russian officials, facilitated by figures within Hungarian diplomacy, point to a complex geopolitical engagement that could challenge EU and NATO directives.
 - The success of Hungary's clandestine operations is harder to evaluate but suggests a strategic positioning within Slovakia that could be leveraged for more significant geopolitical gains, particularly in intelligence sharing and military cooperation within the Visegrád Group.
- This comprehensive approach highlights Hungary's strategic use of various dimensions of influence to achieve its geopolitical and national objectives in Slovakia, with significant implications for regional politics and European alignments. With Fico as Prime Minister and Pellegrini as President, Slovakia's alignment with the Orbán regime signifies a strengthening of bilateral ties that could influence the dynamics within the EU and the Visegrád Group. This partnership potentially shifts Slovakia closer to Hungary's political and ideological stance, characterized by a more nationalist and Euro-skeptic approach. For the EU, this could

mean increased challenges in achieving consensus on various policies, especially those related to migration, the rule of law, and democratic standards, where Hungary often opposes the majority view. Within the Visegrád Group, which includes Poland and the Czech Republic alongside Hungary and Slovakia, this closer alliance with Orbán could lead to a stronger collective bargaining position against EU central policies, potentially leading to a more fragmented EU where regional blocs wield significant influence.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a general overview of the influence operations conducted by Hungary in Slovakia, situated within the complex historical and geopolitical landscape of Central Europe. As nations with a deeply interwoven past, including centuries under a common monarchy and significant shifts in territorial boundaries, Hungary and Slovakia's shared history significantly influences their contemporary bilateral relations.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary has employed a sophisticated array of influence tactics aimed at maintaining and enhancing its sway over Slovakia, particularly targeting the significant Hungarian minority residing there. These operations utilize a blend of diplomatic, cultural, and economic tools meticulously designed to align with Hungary's broader national and regional objectives. This chapter explores how these diverse strategies are orchestrated to shape Slovak policies, influence political landscapes, and alter public perceptions across national borders.

The analysis will outline the scope and nature of Hungary's diplomatic engagements, highlighting how historical sentiments and shared cultural heritage are utilized to forge stronger cross-border ties. It will examine the pivotal role of cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy initiatives that Hungary employs to foster a sense of identity and solidarity among the Hungarian minority in Slovakia.

Economic interactions are equally critical, as Hungary leverages investments and economic incentives to create intricate ties with Slovak economic structures. These efforts are aimed at aligning Slovak interests with Hungarian policies and establishing economic dependencies. The chapter will delve into

how these economic operations extend beyond mere trade and investment, serving as key elements in Hungary's comprehensive strategy to exert influence.

Furthermore, this section of the study will assess the broader impacts of these influence operations on Slovakia's political and social fabric. It will consider the implications for regional stability, the challenges posed within the European Union framework, and the potential risks and rewards of such a deeply intertwined relationship.

Through detailed analysis and critical examination, this chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which Hungary asserts its influence in Slovakia. It highlights the complexities of influence operations as a fundamental aspect of modern statecraft and discusses the broader ramifications of these activities in the context of Central European politics and EU relations. By unpacking the strategic use of influence across various domains, this chapter contributes to a broader discourse on international relations, power dynamics, and the delicate balance between national interests and regional cooperation in the 21st century.

METHODOLOGY

Although the term 'influence operation' has been used for decades, notably in the context of military and intelligence operations, there is no widely accepted definition. For the purpose of this text, the authors use the definition as presented by RAND. "Influence operations are the coordinated, integrated, and synchronized application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and other capabilities in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict to foster attitudes, behaviors, or decisions by foreign target audiences [...]"³. To analyze the elements of the influence operations, the text uses the updated RAND model, as presented by Fratrič⁴ (2023). The model identifies five main elements of the influence operations:

³ Larson, E. V., Darilek, R. E., Gibran, D., Nichiporuk, B., Richardson, A., Schwartz, L. H., & Thurston, C. Q., "Foundations of effective influence operations: A framework for enhancing army capabilities," Rand, 2009, available online at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG654.html> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁴ Fratrič, A., "Influence operations of the Republic of Türkiye in the Western Balkans," Master's thesis, Banská Bystrica: Univerzita Mateja Bela, 2023, available online at: <https://opac.crzp.sk/?fn=detailBiblioForm&sid=D98A4A9B442AA1687855476ADD31> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

Diplomacy: activities conducted through various channels by diplomatic agents, other state officials, and private individuals. It aims to advance a specific state's objectives by influencing their foreign counterparts, state representatives, or foreign agencies.

Public diplomacy: activities carried out by state institutions, parastatal organizations, or NGOs. These activities are conducted with the goal of influencing foreign government actions or positions by engaging with the community and shaping public opinion.

Information operations: the dissemination of curated information, propaganda, or the fabrication of false narratives to either gain support for a specific cause or to alter perceptions and ideas, instill fear and/or uncertainty within the target audience (via numerous channels such as social media, TV, newspapers, etc.).

Economic operations: a wide variety of business and economy-related activities involving investments in the foreign country, loans, signing trade deals, gaining control over companies, or gaining influence over companies in any other ways in order to promote state interests in the foreign country.

Clandestine operations and military cooperation: Clandestine operations describe activities conducted by state bodies or agencies in a foreign country in a concealed way. Examples include covert influence, espionage, and assassinations. Military cooperation entails agreements between states to establish long-term institutional frameworks for routine bilateral defense relations, including joint exercises, policy coordination, research, and procurement⁵.

HUNGARIAN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN SLOVAKIA

Diplomacy

For many years, both the Slovak and Hungarian governments have perpetuated national disputes, such as those concerning the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dams, the Slovak Language Law, Hungarian minority rights in Slovakia, dual citizenship, the Hedviga Malina case, Slovak concerns about Hungarian irredentism and revisionism, and the Komárno case. These disputes have primarily served their respective political objectives. Although the level of

⁵ Ibid.

tension in Slovak-Hungarian relations has gradually decreased, isolated incidents have continued to occur in recent years. Notable examples include Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's remarks in July 2023, in which he referred to Slovakia as Felvidék and a breakaway territory, and the incident in November 2022, when he wore a scarf depicting a map of the so-called Greater Hungary, including the territory of Slovakia, which provoked a sharp reaction from the Slovak side⁶. Felvidék, translated as "Upper Land," refers to the historical name of the territory of present-day Slovakia within the Kingdom of Hungary. The use of this term is often associated with Hungarian irredentism, which is based on the idea of reclaiming territories of the historical Kingdom and creating a Greater Hungary.

In 2010, following the enactment of the Hungarian Citizenship Act in Budapest, Hungarian citizenship was extended not only to individuals born in Hungary or those who had resided there for a sufficient period but also to all persons with Hungarian ancestry. This included members of the Hungarian minority residing in Slovakia. According to the most recent official population census of 2021, 7.75 percent of the total population in Slovakia, equivalent to 422,065 individuals, identify as Hungarian⁷. In the 2011 census, this number was 458,467, representing 8.5 percent⁸. Over the last 20 years, the number of Hungarians in Slovakia has decreased by up to 110,000 individuals⁹. Consequently, the Hungarian minority remains the largest among national minorities, although its numbers are

⁶ Majerčínová, A.B., "Orbán znova prestrelil: Slovensko nazval odtrhnutým územím. Pobúril Sulíka, Šimečku aj Fica a Pellegriniho, Heger mu núka šiltovku", Pravda, July 25, 2023, available online at: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/675788-orban-znova-prestrelil-spochybnit-suverenitu-slovenska-nepripustne-zahrava-sa-s-ohnom-nacionalizmu/> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

⁷ Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, "Sčítanie obyvateľov, domov a bytov: Národnosť a materinský jazyk", Scitanie.sk, January 1, 2021, available online at: <https://www.scitanie.sk/vysledky-v-kombinacii> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

⁸ Aktuality.sk, "Počet príslušníkov maďarskej menšiny na Slovensku klesá", August 15, 2013, available online at: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/234605/pocet-prislusnikov-madarskej-mensiny-na-slovensku-klesa/> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

⁹ Sliz, M., "Predseda Aliancie Forró: Orbán nám pomáha viac ako naša vláda. Obávam sa, že Maďarov ubudne", Aktuality.sk, November 22, 2021, available online at: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/3qpzf7e/predseda-aliancie-forro-orban-nam-pomaha-viac-ako-nasa-vlada-obavam-sa-ze-madarov-ubudne/> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

declining. Hungarian is the mother tongue of 462,175 people or 8.48 percent of the population¹⁰.

The Slovak government responded to the passing of the Hungarian Citizenship Act by banning dual citizenship, which is still in force today¹¹. If Slovak Hungarians were to adopt Hungarian citizenship, they would lose their Slovak citizenship. Thus, unlike in other countries, hundreds of thousands of Hungarians living in Slovakia cannot officially vote in Hungarian elections, as Viktor Orbán wanted. Unofficially, many of them acquired Hungarian citizenship without informing Slovak authorities and are therefore eligible to vote. His Fidesz party has strong support among foreign Hungarians, winning more than 93% of their votes in the 2022 elections.

The amendment to the law on dual citizenship, which was pushed through the Slovak parliament in 2022 by the government of Igor Matovič, has not brought change either¹². It only eased the regulation and made it easier for those who have lost their Slovak citizenship to regain it. However, when acquiring citizenship in another country, the citizen will now not lose his Slovak citizenship if he has lived in the new country for more than five years. This does not apply to Hungarians living in Slovakia and their possibility of acquiring Hungarian citizenship.

In general, the Orbán regime's key foreign policy goal is to create a favorable environment that ensures its long-term survival domestically and counters international criticism by building alliances with populist-right actors, fostering an "illiberal," "sovereignist" shift in the EU, and elevating Hungary's role internationally. Consequently, Fidesz employs two main political approaches towards Slovakia. The first involves cooperating with and supporting Hungarian

¹⁰ Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, " *Sčítanie obyvateľov, domov a bytov: Národnosť a materinský jazyk*", Scitanie.sk, January 1, 2021, available online at: <https://www.scitanie.sk/vysledky-v-kombinacii> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

¹¹ Kőváry Sólymos, K., Finta, M., Cuprik, R., and Diko, L., "*Maďarské peniaze pre slovenský juh: Milióny v mene budúcich hlasov*", ICJK, February 26, 2021, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/103/Madarske-peniaze-pre-slovensky-juh-Miliony-v-mene-buducich-hlasov> [accessed on April 10, 2024].

¹² Szalay, Z., "*Dvojaké občianstvo už nebude zakázané: Podmienkou však bude aspoň päťročný legálny pobyt*", Denník N, February 16, 2022, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/2724185/dvojake-obcianstvo-uz-nejbude-zakazane-podmienkou-vsak-bude-aspon-patrocny-legalny-pobyt/> [accessed on April 10, 2024].

minority political parties in Slovakia to promote Hungarian and Slovak Hungarian interests at local and national levels. However, not all Hungarian ethnic minority parties in Slovakia are viewed positively by Viktor Orbán. For instance, in 2019, he referred to the Most-Híd party as a "splinter under his fingernail." Conversely, Fidesz's traditional partner in Slovakia is the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK-MKP)¹³, which merged with two other Hungarian minority parties in 2021 to form the Alliance party. One of these was the Hungarian Community Togetherness (MKÖ-MKS)¹⁴, founded in 2019, with ties to the Hungarian establishment, while Most-Híd, an inter-ethnic Hungarian-Slovak party, maintained a more reserved relationship with Orbán. Krisztián Forró, the then-chairman of the SMK-MKP, became the chairman of the Alliance¹⁵. The founding of the joint party was motivated primarily by the 2020 parliamentary election results in Slovakia, where, for the first time, a Hungarian party did not enter parliament. However, in 2023, a few months before the election, Most-Híd left the united party over a dispute about allowing former OLaNO MP György Gyimesi on the candidate list, leaving only the SMK-MKP and MKÖ-MKS factions. On December 9, 2023, at the Congress, the party's name was changed to Hungarian Alliance, platforms were abolished, and Gyimesi, who had joined the party a few days earlier, became deputy chairman.

Gyimesi is another figure sympathetic to Orbán. Elected as an MP from 2000-2003 for the OLaNO party, he became the right hand of then-Prime Minister Matovič for Slovak-Hungarian relations. Gyimesi sympathizes with the far-right Hungarian New Unity Movement¹⁶ that aims to unite all Hungarians in Slovakia. This movement maintains good relations with the far-right Hungarian Our Homeland Movement¹⁷, founded by radicalized Jobbik defectors. Gyimesi has repeatedly negotiated with the Hungarian side without Slovak diplomatic representation, such as Matovič's negotiations with Orbán in Budapest about the Sputnik V vaccine in April 2021 or in Komárno regarding the Slovak citizenship

¹³ In Slovak Strana maďarskej koalície (SMK) and in Hungarian: Magyar Koalíció Pártja (MKP).

¹⁴ In Hungarian: Magyar Közösségi Összefogás (MKÖ) and in Slovak: Maďarská komunitná spolupatričnosť (MKS).

¹⁵ Petrus, P., "Na Slovensku pribudla nová politická strana: Aliancia-Szövetség vznikla zlúčením viacerých subjektov", Noviny.sk, October 2, 2021, available online at: <https://www.noviny.sk/slovensko/634464-na-slovensku-pribudla-nova-politicka-strana-aliancia-sz-vetseg-vznikla-zlucenim-viacerych-subjektov> [accessed on April 11, 2024].

¹⁶ Új Egység Mozgalom in Hungarian.

¹⁷ Mi Hazánk Mozgalom in Hungarian.

law in March 2021. Together with Krisztián Forró, chairman of the Hungarian Alliance, Gyimesi often echoes Orbán's narratives, particularly about the war in Ukraine¹⁸.

From a political perspective, Orbán's efforts to support Hungarian political parties and entities have had limited success at the national level. Since the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Hungarian minority has had no political representation in the Slovak Parliament, with MKÖ-MKS receiving 3.9% and Most-Híd 2.05% of the votes. In the early 2023 parliamentary elections, the Alliance garnered only 4.39%, while Most-Híd (in alliance with Modrí) received 0.27%¹⁹. In the summer of 2023, even Viktor Orbán publicly criticized the Hungarian minority in Slovakia for failing to secure parliamentary representation despite constituting roughly ten percent of the population²⁰.

There are several reasons for this situation, ranging from the dwindling numbers of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia to their fragmentation, with some rejecting the policies of Fidesz and its allied parties. The political representation of Hungarians in Slovakia is also fragmented, with these parties often unable to agree on cooperation and a unified approach to elections. While parties like the SMK-MKP, the MKÖ-MKS, and currently the Hungarian Alliance sympathize with Fidesz, Most-Híd has a more reserved attitude toward Orbán.

This fragmentation, along with Hungary's growing international isolation within the EU in recent years, has led Budapest to cooperate politically with the SMER-SD party in Slovakia. The unifying elements are populism, a shared view of EU liberalism, and attitudes toward Russia. However, many experts believe that cooperation with SMER-SD might negatively affect the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. SMER-SD is currently in a coalition government with the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS). Despite the current SNS leader Andrej Danko's

¹⁸ Iboš, E., "Forró Krisztián és György Gyimesi elmondta Orbán szövegét az ukrán EU-csatlakozásról", Napunk, December 14, 2023, available online at: <https://napunk.dennikn.sk/hu/3730185/forro-krisztian-es-gyimesi-gyorgy-elmondta-orban-szoveget-az-ukran-eu-csatlakozasrol/> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

¹⁹ Aktuality.sk, "Výsledky parlamentných volieb 2023", September 30, 2023, available online at: <https://www.aktuality.sk/udalost/volby-2023/vysledky/> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

²⁰ TASR, "Milí Maďari z Felvidéku. Orbán vyslal z Rumunska odkaz krajanom na Slovensko", Aktuality.sk, July 22, 2023, available online at: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/3LmZrCH/mili-madari-z-felvideku-orban-vyslal-z-rumunska-odkaz-krajanom-na-slovensko/> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

sympathy for Orbán due to their similar views on the EU, leadership style, and Russia, in 2010, when SMER and SNS were also in a coalition government, Slovakia introduced a law prohibiting dual citizenship in response to Hungarian legislation granting citizenship to foreign Hungarians not living in Hungary^{21,22}. Additionally, there is growing concern that this government will actively undermine the rule of law and democracy in the country, which is also negative news for the Hungarian minority²³.

Although the Hungarian government officially supported the Alliance party in the 2023 election campaign in Slovakia, it equally backed Robert Fico, the leader of the SMER party, portraying him as aligned with Budapest's goals regarding the war in Ukraine and relations with Brussels. Similarly, in the 2024 Slovak presidential elections, Budapest favored Peter Pellegrini, leader of the HLAS party (a splinter from SMER), also supported by the SMER-led coalition.

Another connection between Robert Fico and Viktor Orbán is personal. Viera Tetáková, former Head of the Protocol Department (2010-2015), married Levente Magyar, who served in Orbán's cabinet as deputy chief of international staff and later as deputy state secretary for international affairs. He also worked as a secret informant for the Hungarian counter-intelligence agency, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which was confirmed by sources familiar with Magyar's links to Hungarian national security agencies²⁴.

Before the second round of the presidential elections in Slovakia in April 2024, Hungarian public television aired an interview with Peter Pellegrini, in which he explained why Hungarians in Slovakia should vote for him, how the government

²¹ Búry, J., “*Danko sa prirovnáva k Orbánovi: Netají sa obdivom k autokratickým politikom*”, HNonline.sk, July 30, 2023, available online at: <https://hnonline.sk/slovensko/96096648-danko-sa-prirovnava-k-orbanovi-netaji-sa-obdivom-k-autokratickym-politikom> [accessed on April 13, 2024].

²² Szalay, Z., “*Dvojaké občianstvo už nebude zakázané. Podmienkou však bude aspoň päťročný legálny pobyt*”, Denník N, February 16, 2022, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/2724185/dvojake-obcianstvo-uz-nebude-zakazane-podmienkou-vsak-bude-aspon-patrocny-legalny-pobyt/> [accessed on April 13, 2024].

²³ Johecová, K., and Camut, N., “*Slovakia, the EU's next rule of law headache*”, Politico, March 20, 2024, available online at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-eu-rule-of-law-prime-minister-robert-fico/> [accessed on April 13, 2024].

²⁴ Panyi, S., and Madleňák, T., “*Ficova šéfka protokolu chodila s informátorom maďarskej tajnej služby*”, ICJK, October 12, 2023, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/276/Ficova-sefka-protokolu-chodila-s-informatorom-madarskej-tajnej-sluzby-> [accessed on April 13, 2024].

is helping southern Slovakia, and how they are cooperating with Orbán's government. Pellegrini was eventually elected as the new Slovak president²⁵. Robert Fico had a similar interview in Hungary before the parliamentary elections. As Speaker of the Parliament, Pellegrini visited Hungary before the first round of the presidential elections and met directly with Orbán, Hungarian Speaker of the Parliament László Kövér, and President Tamás Sulyok²⁶.

However, this was not the first cooperation between Pellegrini and Orbán before the elections in Slovakia. Back in 2020, Slovakia's then-Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini asked Viktor Orbán to act as a middleman between him and the Kremlin. He aimed for an invitation to Moscow just before Slovakia's parliamentary election, hoping to appeal to the Slovak electorate. Pellegrini eventually got his visit to Russia but still lost the election²⁷.

The cooperation between Orbán and Fico in the international arena began shortly after SMER won the Slovak parliamentary elections in September 2023. In March 2024, a pro-Russia biker gang leader named Jozef Hambálek was removed from the EU's list of sanctioned individuals. He was accused of training fighters on the Russian side of the war in Ukraine, allegedly on his premises. According to Slovak media, the Fico government cooperated with Hungary to remove Hambálek from the sanctions list. In return, Viktor Orbán sought Slovakia's support in removing other names from the sanctions list, which were of particular interest to Hungary and Russia. This included attempts to delist Russian billionaire Alisher Usmanov, former Russian Formula One racer Nikita Mazepin, and billionaire Vyacheslav Kantor. Slovak diplomacy, alongside

²⁵ Renczes, Á., "Hogyan udvarolnak az elnökjelöltek a magyaroknak: Körçokot több ismert magyar is támogatja, Pellegrini nem szolt hozzájuk, amióta beállt mögé Forró", Napunk, April 3, 2024, available online at: <https://napunk.dennikn.sk/hu/3919706/hogyan-udvarolnak-az-elnokjeloltek-a-magyaroknak-korcokot-tobb-ismert-magyar-is-tamogatja-pellegrini-nem-szolt-hozzajuk-amiota-beallt-moge-forro/> [accessed on April 14, 2024].

²⁶ TASR, "Orbán po schôdzke s Pellegrinim: Maðarsko aj Slovensko presadzujú mier", Štandard, March 11, 2024, available online at: <https://standard.sk/593145/orban-po-schodzke-s-pellegrinim-madarsko-aj-slovensko-presadzuju-mier> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

²⁷ Panyi, Sz., and Diko, L., "Slovakia Elections: Peter Pellegrini's Balancing Act with Russia and Hungary", VSquare, March 19, 2024, available online at: <https://vsquare.org/slovakia-elections-peter-pellegrini-russia-hungary-orban-szijjarto/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Hungary, also advocated for the removal of these names from the EU sanctions list²⁸.

To sum up, Slovakia, led by Robert Fico, shares the same views as Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán, on the future of the EU, the war in Ukraine, migration, and the functioning of the V4. As Orbán himself declared at a joint meeting with the Slovak prime minister, the interests of Slovakia and Hungary align at least 99 percent²⁹.

In addition to Fidesz, Hungarian radical right-wing political parties such as Jobbik and Our Homeland Movement are active among the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Although these parties have been trying to gain influence, they lag behind local radical organizations. Local groups, with the help of the radical nationalist and revisionist political movement from Hungary, the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement³⁰, have managed to build a network operating for almost 20 years. Their activities focus on cultural events³¹.

Financial support for Hungarian minority politicians

Budapest also financially supports Hungarian politicians from SMK-MKP and MKÖ-MKS (both now under the Hungarian Alliance party) in Slovakia. However, Slovak law prohibits political parties from using foreign support. Before the 2016 Slovak elections, the Hungarian Government Office and the Bethlen Gábor Fund

²⁸ Berger, V., "The Bratislava-Budapest-Moscow Hotline: What Babiš Doesn't Say about Fico and Orbán", Visegrad Insight, March 27, 2024, available online at: <https://visegradinsight.eu/the-bratislava-budapest-moscow-hotline-what-babis-doesnt-say-about-fico-and-orban/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

²⁹ Valovičová, K., "Fico sa v Maďarsku stretol s Orbánom: Naše záujmy sú na 99 percent rovnaké, vyhlásil maďarský premiér", SITA.sk, January 16, 2024, available online at: <https://sita.sk/fico-sa-v-madarsku-stretol-s-orbanom-nase-zaujmy-su-na-99-percent-rovnake-vyhlasil-madarsky-premier-foto/> [accessed on May 15, 2024].

³⁰ Hatvannégy Vármegyei Ifjúsági Mozgalom in Hungarian.

³¹ Kőváry Sólymos, K., "Maďarská radikálna pravica na Slovensku", ICJK, April 30, 2022, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/186/Madarska-radikalna-pravica-na-Slovensku-> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

(BGA)³² sent over EUR 700,000 to the Főnix civic association³³. Employees of the SMK-MKP confirmed anonymously that Főnix funded the party's pre-election activities and some member salaries³⁴. Other organizations linked to SMK-MKP and the Unity Movement³⁵ politicians received grants from the BGA.

For example, Csemadok, led by SMK-MKP politician Gyula Bárdos, received substantial funding and was involved in political actions like the SMK-MKP campaign in 2016 and collecting signatures for the Unity movement in 2019. Between 2019 and 2020, Csemadok received more than EUR 1.2 million from the BGA, while the Association for Common Goals (SZAKC)³⁶, led by SMK-MKP politician László Gubík, received almost EUR 450,000. Gubík's other organizations, Marthos and VIA NOVA-ICS, received EUR 170,000 and EUR 90,000, respectively. Sine Metu, led by Örs Orosz from MKÖ-MKS, and the Pro Collegio Posoniens foundation, led by Szabolcs Mózes from MKÖ-MKS, received more than EUR 300,000 and EUR 80,000, respectively³⁷.

The link between politics and funding for Hungarian organizations in Slovakia is shown by the BGA's highest support for these entities during parliamentary election years in Slovakia or Hungary³⁸. Interestingly, before the Hungarian parliamentary elections in April 2022, the Hungarian government significantly cut subsidies to Hungarian minority subjects in Slovakia, likely due to Hungary's high budget deficit and increased domestic spending before the elections³⁹.

³² BGA (Bethlen Gábor Alap in Hungarian) was established by the Hungarian Government in 2011 with the aim of supporting and funding cultural, sports, educational, and economic activities of the local Hungarian communities abroad. The assets of the BGA are managed by the Bethlen Gábor Fund Management Ltd., a non-profit company established in the same year.

³³ Kóváry Sólomos, K., Finta, M., Cuprik, R., and Diko, L., “*Maďarské peniaze pre slovenský juh: Milióny v mene budúcich hlasov*”, ICJK, February 26, 2021, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/103/Madarske-peniaze-pre-slovensky-juh-Miliony-v-mene-buducich-hlasov> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Spolupatričnosť in Slovak, Összefogás in Hungarian. A political party that later transformed into MKÖ-MKS.

³⁶ Szövetség a Közös Célokért in Hungarian.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kóváry Sólomos, K., “*Maďarská vláda Viktora Orbána pred voľbami priškrtila dotácie na Slovensko*”, ICJK, March 29, 2022, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/178/Madarska-vlada-Viktora-Orbana-pred-voľbami-priškrtila-dotácie-na-Slovensko> [accessed on April 16, 2024].

Public diplomacy

Support for Hungarian minorities abroad is enshrined in Hungary's constitution, with the Orbán government claiming that financial support for them is a sign of solidarity, national belonging, and a governmental duty. Hungarians in southern Slovakia receive money from Orbán's government because the Slovak government often neglects them. For example, while Matica Slovenská, the oldest Slovak national, cultural, and scientific organization, is subsidized by the Slovak state budget, Csemadok, a cultural society of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia, does not receive financial subsidies⁴⁰. Similarly, southern Slovakia, where the Hungarian minority is concentrated, is economically underdeveloped. In this situation, the Hungarian government is trying to unite Hungarians living abroad via financial subsidies, giving them the feeling that someone cares about them and offers real solutions to their problems⁴¹. However, many projects go beyond the cultural and social dimensions and are linked to politics or political representation, as stated above.

BGA is one of the largest providers of state aid from Hungary to Slovakia, approving at least €144 million (almost 47.8 billion forints) worth of support to entities in Slovakia between 2011 and 2022⁴². More up-to-date data is not available. However, it is not the only entity that distributes Hungarian public money. Grants and subsidies go to many areas—culture, education, Hungarian minority media, football clubs, the church, and private companies. Many of these organizations are linked to Hungarian politicians from the MKÖ-MKS and SMK-MKP parties. It is unclear according to which criteria projects are evaluated, and there are often retrospective adjustments to the approved amount of financial support. The largest grants, worth billions of forints, are decided directly by the office of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Despite the allocations being mostly directed towards media, football, and ecclesiastical institutions, these disbursements ostensibly sought to bolster the

⁴⁰ Cuprik, R., "Na Slovensko tečú z Maďarska milióny eur. Ako si Orbán buduje vplyv", SME, February 26, 2021, available online at: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22604653/zaplatil-politikom-novinarom-aj-futbalistom-ako-si-orban-na-slovensku-buduje-vplyv> [accessed on April 16, 2024].

⁴¹ Kóváry Sólmos, K., Finta, M., Cuprik, R., and Diko, L., "Maďarské peniaze pre slovenský juh: Milióny v mene budúcich hlasov", ICJK, February 26, 2021, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/103/Madarske-peniaze-pre-slovensky-juh-Miliony-v-mene-buducich-hlasov> [accessed on April 17, 2024].

⁴² Ibid.

visibility and influence of Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party among diasporic Hungarian communities. The Slovak side has repeatedly expressed concerns about Hungarian activities on its territory and demanded that Budapest consult the Slovak government on its programs concerning Slovakia. Bratislava wants the conditions for these subsidies to be governed by the agreement between Budapest and Bratislava, established in 2004.

Financing Education

In October 2023, the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), often referred to in Hungary as an elite educational center of Fidesz, inaugurated its branch in Dunajská Streda, Slovakia. The event was attended by notable members of the Hungarian community in Slovakia, including Krisztián Forró, the president of the Alliance Party⁴³, and Szabolcs Mózes, the vice president. Additional attendees included Örs Orosz, president of the Unity movement; Péter Óry, former chairman of the SMK-MKP; László Gubík, head of the Esterházy Academy; Pál Csáky, former SMK-MKP party chairman, and Zoltán Hájos, the mayor of Dunajská Streda, who represents the SMK-MKP platform in the Alliance Party⁴⁴. MCC is committed to fostering talent and offering supplementary educational programs for students ranging from primary school to university levels. With 18 branches throughout Hungary and upcoming expansions into Romania, MCC maintains global connections through partnerships in Brussels, Vienna, Berlin, and the UK.

The Esterházy Academy, located in Martovce near Komárno, Slovakia, is another educational institution financed by Hungary. It is chaired by László Gubík, who also heads the Via Nova - ICS, the youth organization of SMK-MKP, and the SZAKC. This NGO manages the Felvidék.ma news portal and receives support from BGA⁴⁵. The academy primarily aims to offer educational programs to right-

⁴³ Currently renamed to the Hungarian Alliance.

⁴⁴ Finta, M., "Egy politikai közösség előkarácsonyi ajándéka: megnyitotta kapuit a Fidesz elitképzője Dunaszerdahelyen," Napunk, October 27, 2023, available online at: <https://napunk.dennikn.sk/hu/3647533/egy-politikai-kozossege-elokaracsonyi-ajandeka-megnyitotta-kapuit-a-fidesz-elitkepzoje-dunaszerdahelyen/> [accessed on May 17, 2024].

⁴⁵ Kőváry Sólomos, K., Finta, M., Cuprik, R., & Diko, L., "Prežitie slovensko-maďarských médií je v rukách Budapešti, a preto aj ich obsah," ICJK, February 26, 2021, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/105/Prezitie-slovenskomadarskych-medii-je-v-rukach-Budapesti-a-preto-aj-ich-obsah> [accessed on May 17, 2024].

leaning Hungarian youths under 31 who are university students interested in public life and media.

In 2023, the Rákóczi Association⁴⁶, with the financial support of the Hungarian government, donated a total of 20 school buses to Hungarian elementary schools in southern Slovakia⁴⁷.

Hungary also provides financial incentives and stipends to students studying in the Hungarian language in Slovakia. However, in 2022, the Slovak Foreign Minister requested that these school subsidies for Hungarians in Slovakia be channeled through institutions rather than given directly to individuals. Bratislava is advocating for these subsidies to be managed under the terms of the 2004 agreement between Budapest and Bratislava, which was established to support children attending Hungarian schools in Slovakia⁴⁸.

Additionally, the Hungarian government has expanded its subsidy program for Hungarian children in Slovakia to include colleges and kindergartens. This was announced by Hungarian State Secretary Árpád Potápi during the opening ceremony of the school year for Hungarian teachers in the village of Držkovce. Beyond scholarships, Budapest will also provide school bags to first-year students at Hungarian schools in Slovakia⁴⁹.

Between 2016-2022, a program aimed at constructing and renovating nurseries across the Carpathian Basin has been underway, marking one of the most significant Hungarian government initiatives for the development of southern Slovakia in recent years. In Slovakia, the program was coordinated by the

⁴⁶ Rákóczi Szövetség in Hungarian.

⁴⁷ Ibos, E., "*Egyre kevesebb a magyar iskola Szlovákiában: vajon az iskolabuszok számának növelése segíthet a helyzeten?*" Napunk, August 23, 2023, available online at: <https://napunk.dennikn.sk/hu/3534906/egyre-kevesebb-a-magyar-iskola-szlovakiaiban-vajon-az-iskolabuszok-szamanak-novelese-segithet-a-helyzeten/> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁴⁸ TASR, "*Dodržujte dohodu: Korčokovi nepáci, akým spôsobom Maďari podporujú naše školy,*" Trend, July 18, 2022, available online at: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/dodrzujte-dohodu-korcokovi-nepaci-akym-sposobom-madari-podporuju-nase-skoly> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁴⁹ Ibos, E., "*Országos tanévnyitó Dereskbén: nem tudják az iskolák, hogyan gazdálkodják ki a rezsit, de kaptak egy jó hírt is a kormánytól,*" Napunk, September 3, 2022, available online at: <https://napunk.dennikn.sk/hu/2995025/orszagos-tanevnyito-dereskbem-nem-tudjak-az-iskolak-hogyan-gazdalkodjak-ki-a-rezsit-de-kaptak-egy-jo-hirt-is-a-kormanytol/> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

Reformed Church and the SMK-MKP⁵⁰. According to the Hungarian government, the project involved the reconstruction of 175 kindergartens by 2021, with Budapest providing support totaling 12 billion forints (about 34 million euros). Additionally, funds from this program were used to build five completely new institutions. Concerns have been raised in Slovakia regarding the ideological elements in these kindergartens funded by the Hungarian state. Reports suggest that these institutions include a 'patriotic' corner where children are exposed to national propaganda from an early age⁵¹.

Restoration of Churches

In March 2021, the Hungarian government approved a resolution for a church restoration program, allocating approximately 73.7 million euros from the state budget. This initiative plans to restore 1,800 churches, with 1,400 located in Hungary and 400 in neighboring countries.

The Slovak portion of the program was officially launched in May in Komárno, announced by representatives of the Hungarian government, the SMK/MKP party, and the Roman Catholic Church. In Slovakia, the plan targets renovations for 101 churches across 96 villages. The breakdown includes 69 Roman Catholic churches, 25 Reformed churches, 6 Greek Catholic churches, and one synagogue. The focus has been primarily on exterior renovations, which commenced in the summer of 2021⁵².

Acquisition of Historical Heritage

Hungary has been actively participating in the Slovak real estate market since at least 2020. Through various government agencies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Budapest has begun purchasing historical buildings such as

⁵⁰ Szalay, Z., "Korčok stopol len časť Orbánových programov na Slovensku: Do historických budov a kostolov investuje Budapešť milióny eur," Denník N, October 14, 2021, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/2573848/korcok-stopol-len-cast-orbanovych-programov-na-slovensku-do-historickych-budov-a-kostolov-investuje-budapest-miliony-eur/> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁵¹ TA3, "Maďarsko podporuje 'svojich' školákov," September 12, 2022, available online at: <https://www.ta3.com/relacia/25574/madarsko-podporuje-svojich-skolakov> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁵² Szalay, Z., "Korčok zastavil len časť Orbánových programov na Slovensku. Do historických budov a kostolov investuje Budapešť milióny eur," Denník N, October 14, 2021, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/2573848/korcok-stopol-len-cast-orbanovych-programov-na-slovensku-do-historickych-budov-a-kostolov-investuje-budapest-miliony-eur/> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

townhouses, monasteries, and manor houses in Slovakia. Despite requirements under the Vienna Convention to notify Slovakia about real estate purchases for diplomatic purposes, Hungary failed to do so, leading to significant criticism from Slovak diplomats. Additionally, Hungary initially showed interest in purchasing arable land, but this plan was halted following Slovak diplomatic intervention.

In response, Slovakia mandated that cadastral authorities notify foreign states about real estate acquisitions, though this obligation only applies to state entities, not private buyers. Exploiting this loophole, Hungary began using the private company MANEVI SK, based in Dunajská Streda, primarily to purchase historic properties. This company now owns more than a dozen heritage buildings in prime locations of Slovak cities, collectively valued at nearly 13 million euros⁵³. MANEVI SK is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Hungarian company Manevi, with Comitatus-Energia as its sole shareholder. Both Manevi and Comitatus-Energia are part of the Hungarian Foundation for the Preservation of Immovable Heritage in Central Europe (Közép-európai Épített Örökség Megőrző Alapítvány), established in 2020. The Hungarian Parliament approved the law for its establishment, with Péter Szijjártó, the head of the Hungarian diplomatic ministry, personally overseeing its creation. This newly established foundation acquired assets worth approximately 44 million euros from two state-owned companies, Manevi and Comitatus-Energia, which were previously managed by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁵⁴. The foundation has since set up subsidiaries in neighboring countries, including Romania, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Slovakia, and has begun purchasing significant historical and heritage properties abroad. High-ranking officials of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade are among the final beneficiaries of MANEVI SK. These include Levente Magyar, the ministry's State Secretary; Péter Kiss-Parciu, Deputy State Secretary for Cross-Border

⁵³ Szórád, F., "*Orbán skupuje Slovensko: Tieto kultúrne pamiatky už skončili v maďarských rukách!*", Plus 7 dní, June 16, 2022, available online at: <https://plus7dni.pluska.sk/domov/orban-skupuje-slovensko-tieto-kulturne-pamiatky-skoncili-madarskych-rukach> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁵⁴ Kapitán, P., "*Maďarsko kupuje na Slovensku nehnuteľnosti aj cez nenápadnú firmu!*", ICJK, October 19, 2021, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/147/Madarsko-kupuje-na-Slovensku-nehnutelnosti-aj-cez-nenapadnu-firmu> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

Cooperation; and Orsolya Pacsáy-Tomassich, Director of the Diplomatic Academy and former deputy of Szijjártó⁵⁵.

Support for culture, art, and other activities

BGA regularly provides financial support to a wide array of foundations, associations, and other groups within Slovakia's Hungarian minority. These groups are involved in diverse activities ranging from culture and arts to hobbies such as belly dancing, fishing, tourism, and winemaking⁵⁶. Some of these organizations are significant either due to their impact or their connections to Hungarian minority politicians in Slovakia.

Gombasek Summer Camp stands out as the largest and most prominent annual cultural and music festival for Hungarians in Slovakia, organized by the SINE METU association. Örs Orosz from the Hungarian Alliance party chairs this association. The festival typically attracts politicians from Hungary, such as Árpád János Potápi, Hungarian State Secretary for National Policy, and Péter Szilágyi, Government Plenipotentiary for National Policy, along with members from Slovak Hungarian parties, predominantly SMK-MKP and the Hungarian Alliance⁵⁷.

Additionally, Hungary has financially supported the organization of a summer festival led by the conservative wing of the SMK-MKP under László Gubík, head of the Via Nova youth organization, and Csemadok, the largest cultural and advisory organization of Hungarians living in Slovakia⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ Mogilevskaia, A., "*Nadácia blízka Orbánovi skupuje slovenské národné pamiatky. Maďarsko do nej dolieva milióny na ďalšie nákupy*", Pravda, August 11, 2023, available online at: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/677605-nadacia-blizka-orbanovi-skupuje-slovenske-narodne-pamiatky-z-madarska-dostava-miliony-na-dalsie-nakupy/> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁵⁶ Nemzetpolitikai Informatikai Rendszer, "*Pályázatok*", NMHH, available online at: <https://adattar.bgazrt.hu/adattar/public/palyazatok.xhtml>. [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁵⁷ Kőváry Sólomos, K., Finta, M., Cuprik, R., and Diko, L., "*Maďarské peniaze pre slovenský juh: Milióny v mene budúcich hlasov*", ICJK, February 26, 2021, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/103/Madarske-peniaze-pre-slovensky-juh-Miliony-v-mene-buducich-hlasov> [accessed on May 15, 2024].

⁵⁸ Szalay, Z., Kacsinecz, K., "*Ide o to, aby sme sa nestali poskokmi Ameriky, povedal predseda maďarského parlamentu v tábore pri Komárne*", Denník N, July 7, 2022, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/2925052/ide-o-to-aby-sme-sa-nestali-poskokmi-ameriky-povedal-predseda-madarskeho-parlamentu-v-tabore-pri-komarne/> [accessed on May 15, 2024].

Another recipient of BGA funding is SZAKC, an organization that encompasses educational, youth, and cultural organizations in Slovakia. SZAKC also publishes the news portal Felvidék.ma, which benefits from BGA's support⁵⁹.

The civic association Pro Civis, led by another former politician from SMK-MKP, operates as a think tank focusing on local government policy⁶⁰.

Sports and football

Budapest actively supports sports in southern Slovakia, where there is a significant Hungarian minority population. Most of the money flows to support football, a sport passionately followed by Viktor Orbán. Significant funding from the Hungarian government has been directed towards the Komárno football club and especially FC DAC 1904 Dunajská Streda. The latter is particularly notable as it is often considered to be one of the biggest symbols of Hungarian nationalism in Slovakia and is 90% owned by prominent businessman Oszkár Világi, a long-time friend of Orbán and the head of Slovnaft, the only oil refinery in Slovakia. Additionally, the DAC football academy, managed by Világi's daughter, has also received substantial support⁶¹.

From 2019 to 2020, the Komárno club received over 1.5 million euros from the Bethlen Gábor Fund (BGA). Furthermore, Budapest financed the construction of the stadium with more than 6 million euros, also supporting the club's operating costs and development⁶². FC DAC, a symbol of Hungarian football in Slovakia, received millions of euros from the Hungarian government and the Hungarian petrochemical giant MOL for its stadium construction, which Orbán personally attended during its opening in 2016. The DAC academy has also benefited greatly, receiving over 10 million euros from the BGA for its operations, with additional

⁵⁹ Kőváry Sólymos, K., Finta, M., Cuprik, R., and Diko, L., "*Maďarské peniaze pre slovenský juh: Milióny v mene budúcich hlasov*", ICJK, February 26, 2021, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/103/Madarske-peniaze-pre-slovensky-juh-Miliony-v-mene-buducich-hlasov> [accessed on May 15, 2024].

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Kőváry Sólymos, K., Finta, M., Cuprik, R., Diko, L., "*DAC Dunajská Streda - Ferencváros: Milióny z Budapešti pre obľúbený šport Viktora Orbána - futbal*", ICJK, February 26, 2021, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/104/DAC-Dunajska-Streda-Ferencvaros-Felvideku-miliony-z-Budapesti-pre-oblubeny-sport-Viktora-Orbana-futbal> [accessed on May 15, 2024].

⁶² Ibid.

funding from the Hungarian Football Association. Orbán was present at the academy's inauguration in 2018⁶³.

Information operations

In Slovakia, particularly within minority media, there is a significant struggle with financial constraints and limited human resources. This situation provides an opportunity for the Hungarian government, through the Bethlen Gábor Fund (BGA), to contribute substantial financial support to Hungarian minority media outlets that would otherwise face sustainability challenges. The BGA has provided funding to a network of media outlets, including the operator of the Felvidek.ma portal (SZAKC), the Hírek.sk portal (Association of Hungarian Television Producers in Slovakia), the founder of the Ma7 media group (Pro Media Foundation), and the organization managing the Kőrkep.sk portal (Vox Juventae). While receiving subsidies from Hungary does not necessarily imply censorship or propaganda, there is a clear political influence, as these media often uncritically promote the rhetoric of the Hungarian government and favor the politicians of SMK-MKP, now part of the Hungarian Alliance party⁶⁴.

Furthermore, the public opinion among Hungarians in Slovakia, which was predominantly pro-European until 2004, has shifted towards a pro-Russian stance. This change is largely attributed to the influx of Russian propaganda facilitated by the propaganda efforts of the Hungarian government. Despite many Hungarians in Slovakia also accessing Slovak-language media, the impact has not been mitigated, as the entire media landscape in the country is currently overwhelmed by disinformation⁶⁵.

The narratives disseminated among the Hungarian minority mainly aim to bolster the popularity of Orbán's regime and its allies in Slovakia. The primary

⁶³ Bielik, P., "Orbánov futbalový projekt s Dunajskou Stredou funguje, lebo slovenské vlády zanedbali juh", Denník N, May 6, 2023, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/3345332/orbanov-futbalovy-projekt-s-dunajskou-stredou-funguje-lebo-slovenske-vlady-zanedbali-juh/> [accessed on May 15, 2024].

⁶⁴ Kandrik, M., "Maďarský informačno-mediálny vplyv na Slovensku", InfoSecurity.sk, September 7, 2023, available online at: <https://infosecurity.sk/spravodajstvo/madarsky-informacno-medialny-vplyv-na-slovensku/> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁶⁵ Szalay, Z., "Maďarsko posiela na Slovensko nezvyčajne veľa špiónov na príkaz Orbánovej vlády, mnohí z nich pracujú ako diplomati", Denník N, November 10, 2023, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/3670981/madarsko-posiela-na-slovensko-nezvycajne-vela-spionov-na-prikaz-orbanovej-vlady-mnohi-z-nich-pracuju-ako-diplomati/> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

objective is to secure votes and influence Slovak politics. However, this support often serves the regime's political interests more than it benefits the communities, undermining their autonomy and representation⁶⁶. The spread of disinformation within these communities aligns with Orbán's political agenda but damages the relationship between Hungary and its diaspora. By controlling these communities and polarizing them, their autonomy and cohesion are compromised, making them susceptible to manipulation. Such centralized disinformation campaigns increase vulnerability to misinformation and foreign influence and erode trust in independent media. Tactics promoting anti-Ukrainian sentiments and social polarization also bolster pro-Kremlin forces and weaken confidence in NATO and Euro-Atlantic structures. Moreover, cross-border disinformation campaigns risk regional destabilization as the Hungarian diaspora becomes a conduit for Russian influence operations aimed at creating diplomatic tensions or sowing discord⁶⁷.

In the lead-up to the 2023 early parliamentary elections in Slovakia, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's office launched a YouTube video campaign highlighting the dangers of illegal migration in seven EU countries, including Slovakia. These advertisements also targeted other countries where Orbán's allies were contesting elections, employing anti-immigration slogans. According to Google's data, these advertisements potentially reached about one-third of Slovakia's population⁶⁸. During Slovakia's electoral moratorium, Hungarian public media broadcast an interview with Robert Fico, the leader of SMER-SD and a key Orbán ally, thus indirectly influencing the pre-election phase in Slovakia. Fico's victory in the 2023 parliamentary elections was crucial for Orbán, anticipating his support to strengthen regional cooperation within the Visegrad Group and in Brussels. Similarly, before the second round of the Slovak

⁶⁶ Political Capital "*Hungarian Influence on Slovak Media and Information*", December 20, 2023, available online at: https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3311 [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Panyi, Sz., Kóváry Sólomos, K., Flis, D., "*Orbán zaplavil strednú Európu miliónmi online reklám. Mohli ovplyvniť aj výsledky parlamentných volieb na Slovensku*", ICJK, March 6, 2024, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/311/Orb%C3%A1n-zaplavil-stredn%C3%BA-Eur%C3%B3pu-mil%C3%B3nmi-online-rekl%C3%A1m.-Mohli-ovplyvni%C5%A5-aj-v%C3%BDsledky-parlamentn%C3%BDch-volieb-na-Slovensku> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

presidential elections, Hungarian public television aired an interview with Peter Pellegrini, the presidential candidate endorsed by Fico⁶⁹.

Economic operations

Financial support for entrepreneurs

In 2017, Budapest launched the Gábor Baros program, specifically designed to support small and medium-sized entrepreneurs in southern Slovakia. This initiative was based on proposals made by politicians from the extra-parliamentary SMK in 2014. Initially, 16 million euros was allocated for the program's first round. The second round, launched in 2019, supported approximately 2,300 entrepreneurs, with most receiving subsidies ranging from 3,000 to 14,000 euros. However, 37 entrepreneurs received larger subsidies, between 140,000 and 1.4 million euros. Since 2017, about 60 million euros have been distributed through this program⁷⁰.

In response, the Slovak side called for formal regulations on the support provided to entrepreneurs in southern Slovakia and proposed that the program should operate based on a formal agreement between Bratislava and Budapest. Following this proposal, there has been no new call for grant applications. This halt suggests an ongoing reevaluation or negotiation process regarding the terms and structure of the program.

Slovak businessmen with contacts in Budapest

The Fidesz-led Hungarian government also maintains close ties with influential businessmen operating in Slovakia. One of the most significant figures in this regard is Oskar Világi. Világi is widely regarded as one of the foremost influencers in the business sphere intersecting with Hungarian politics in Slovakia. He has maintained a longstanding friendship with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and the two meet regularly⁷¹. Világi's local ventures

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Szalay, Z., "Korčok zastavil len časť Orbánových programov na Slovensku. Do historických budov a kostolov investuje Budapešť milióny eur", Denník N, October 14, 2021, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/2573848/korcok-stopol-len-cast-orbanovych-programov-na-slovensku-do-historickych-budov-a-kostolov-investuje-budapest-miliony-eur/> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁷¹ Kőváry Sólymos, K., Finta, M., Cuprik, R., Diko, L., "DAC Dunajská Streda - Ferencváros: Milióny z Budapešti pre obľúbený šport Viktora Orbána - futbal", ICJK, February 26, 2021, available online

include ownership of the football club FC DAC Dunajská Streda, with his daughter overseeing the DAC Academy. Additionally, Világi was appointed by Orbán to the supervisory board of the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE) in Budapest. Beyond these roles, he serves as Chairman of the Board of Directors and CEO of Slovnaft, a company owned by the Hungarian MOL Group. Világi also has ties to MET Slovakia, the third-largest gas seller in the Slovak market. MET Slovakia is majority-owned (51.07%) by the Swiss company MET Holding AG, established years ago by the Hungarian oil giant MOL⁷². Interestingly, following the 2020 parliamentary elections in Slovakia, several MET Slovakia employees assumed managerial positions in key Slovak state-owned energy companies, including the gas supplier SPP⁷³.

Another notable Slovak businessman with ties to Hungary through his companies is Ján Sabol. Sabol, one of Slovakia's wealthiest individuals, primarily operates in the fields of biofuels and agriculture through his Envien Group, the largest biofuel producer in Central Europe. However, the ownership structure of the Envien Group is intertwined with prominent Hungarian businessmen, such as Goyrgy Nagy, who have connections in Budapest. Sabol, who shares a close relationship with Világi, is actively engaged in business dealings with MOL Group and Slovnaft through Envien⁷⁴.

Clandestine operations and military cooperation

Hungarian spies in Bratislava

According to information obtained by investigative journalist Szabolcs Panyi in the autumn of 2023, Slovak security authorities are perplexed by the unusually high number of Hungarian spies operating within the country. Many of them

at: <https://www.icjk.sk/104/DAC-Dunajska-Streda-Ferencvaros-Felvideku-miliony-z-Budapesti-pre-oblubeny-sport-Viktora-Orbana-futbal> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁷² MET Group, "About Our Company", available online at: <https://sk.met.com/en/about-us/about-our-company> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

⁷³ Turček, M., Diko, L., Madleňák, T., Kóváry Sólmos, K., and Džonlić, A., "Sulíkoví nominanti prichádzajú z firmy s väzbami na Világiho a Brhela", ICJK, May 11, 2023, available online at: <https://icjk.sk/183/Sulikovi-nominanti-prichadzaju-z-firmy-s-vazbami-na-Vilagiho-a-Brhela> [accessed on April 30, 2024].

⁷⁴ Kóváry Sólmos, K., "Impérium biopalivového kráľa Sabola vyrástlo vďaka Slovnaftu, maďarským oligarchom a utajeným akcionárom", ICJK, February 14, 2024, available online at: <https://icjk.sk/303/Imperium-biopalivoveho-krala-Sabola-vyrastlo-vdaka-Slovnaftu-madarskym-oligarchom-a-utajenym-akcionarom> [accessed on May 24, 2024].

hold high-ranking positions within the Hungarian Embassy or other Hungarian state institutions in Bratislava. Notably, the previous Hungarian ambassador, Tibor Pető, was publicly known to be an intelligence agent. He served as the administrative director of the Hungarian Information Office from 1995 to 1998 and as director-general from 1998 to 2002⁷⁵.

Slovak state authorities observed that during the 2023 election campaign in Slovakia, Hungarian Ambassador Csaba Balogh, who is also believed to have ties to Hungarian intelligence services, met with Russian Ambassador Igor Bratchikov. At the time, Bratchikov was largely isolated in Slovakia, with no other EU ambassador engaging with him. While the purpose of their meeting remains unclear, its context may be illuminated by Balogh's previous meeting with then-Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger in spring 2023. Reportedly, during that meeting, Balogh defended the Visegrád Group's (V4) pro-Russian stance. Balogh allegedly expressed Hungary's desire to rejuvenate the V4 after the Slovak and Polish elections, advocating for closer ties with Russia. Additionally, Balogh supposedly emphasized the importance of cooperation with Moscow during that encounter⁷⁶.

V4 Defense cooperation

Defense cooperation among V4 member states is widely regarded as a cornerstone of the regional grouping. One of the most prominent outcomes of this cooperation, which involves Slovakia and Hungary alongside Poland and Czechia, is the V4 EU Battlegroup. Additionally, Slovakia and Hungary collaborate on a multilateral basis in various other areas, such as the establishment of the V4 Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters (JLSG HQ), conducting common training and exercises, and implementing the Framework for Enhanced Visegrád Defense Planning Cooperation, adopted in 2014⁷⁷.

Air policing

⁷⁵ Szalay, Z., “*Maďarsko posielala na Slovensko nezvyčajne veľa špiónov na príkaz Orbánovej vlády, mnohí z nich pracujú ako diplomati*”, Denník N, November 10, 2024, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/3670981/madarsko-posielala-na-slovensko-nezvycajne-vela-spionov-na-prikaz-orbanovej-vlady-mnohi-z-nich-pracuju-ako-diplomati/> [accessed on April 30, 2024].

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Visegrad Group, “*Visegrad Group Defence Cooperation*”, Visegradgroup.eu, n.d., available online at: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/cooperation/visegrad-group-defence> [accessed on April 30, 2024].

In 2023, it was announced that Hungary would join the Czech Republic and Poland in patrolling Slovakia's skies after Bratislava transferred its Cold War-era fleet of Mig-29 fighter jets to Ukraine free of charge⁷⁸.

CONCLUSION

Hungary's influence operations in Slovakia, characterized by a multifaceted approach involving political maneuvering, cultural investments, and economic incentives, aim to consolidate Budapest's influence over the Hungarian minority and garner political support within Slovak politics. The strategic relationships Hungary fosters, notably with SMER and its leader Robert Fico, illustrate a deliberate alignment with like-minded political entities to enhance Hungary's strategic interests in the region, safeguard its diaspora's interests, and fortify its standing within the European Union.

The operations are deeply rooted in historical contexts and leverage nationalist sentiments, exemplified by events such as the controversy over the map of "Greater Hungary" and the diplomatic dialogues surrounding the dual citizenship issue. These instances not only resonate with the Hungarian minority in Slovakia but also stoke tensions and provoke backlash, influencing public perception and diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Hungary's tactical support of the Hungarian minority's political parties, particularly through the Fidesz-backed SMK-MKP and its coalition transformations, underpins its strategy to mold political landscapes in Slovakia and to increase the popularity of Orbán among the Hungarian minority. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is mitigated by internal divisions within the minority and the fluctuating success of these parties in securing parliamentary representation, as evidenced by the recent electoral performances where Hungarian representation was minimal.

Economically, Hungary exerts influence through substantial financial contributions directed towards fostering a pro-Hungarian narrative within Slovakia. This is executed through funding cultural institutions, supporting media outlets sympathetic to Hungary's policies, and financially backing

⁷⁸ Deme, D., "Hungarian Air Force to Patrol Slovakia's Skies", Hungary Today, May 15, 2023, available online at: <https://hungarytoday.hu/hungarian-air-force-to-patrol-slovakias-skies/> [accessed on April 30, 2024].

educational initiatives like the Mathias Corvinus Collegium. Such efforts are designed not only to preserve cultural identity but also to cultivate a generation aligned with Hungary's political ideologies.

The relationship with SMER and, particularly with Robert Fico, exemplifies Hungary's approach to establishing and maintaining influential political alliances. This cooperation is strategically beneficial, aligning with shared political and ideological goals, notably in fostering a conservative, nationalist base and opposing liberal EU policies. The direct and indirect support Orbán provided to Fico and his allies during recent electoral campaigns in Slovakia, as well as the alignment of Hungary and Slovakia's positions within the EU in 2024, highlights the pragmatic aspects of this relationship.

Additionally, Hungary's engagement with Slovakia has notable implications regarding Russia. The pro-Russian stances adopted by political figures within SMER and supported by Hungarian influence operations suggest a strategic alignment that extends beyond national and EU politics into broader geopolitical maneuvering. This alignment potentially serves to facilitate a pro-Russian narrative within Central Europe, challenging EU consensus on critical issues like sanctions and defense.

In summary, Hungary's influence operations in Slovakia are comprehensive, involving diplomatic gestures, direct political involvement, cultural engagements, and economic incentives. While these operations have had success in terms of maintaining influence among the Hungarian minority and certain political circles, they also face significant challenges. These include backlash from wider Slovak society, the potential for increasing polarization, and the inherent risks of overreliance on specific political alliances that may not always hold electoral or popular support. Thus, while effective in certain aspects, these operations also expose vulnerabilities that could affect both Slovakia's internal dynamics and its relations within the EU.

CASE STUDY: RAISING AWARENESS OF HUNGARIAN INFLUENCE IN THE SLOVAK ELECTIONS 2023

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Political Capital

KEY FINDINGS

- **The Hungarian government continues its disinformation campaign against Ukraine, the EU, immigrants, and sexual minorities.** During the examined period, between March 1 and September 30, 2023, the central messages of the Hungarian government are best described by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's words: "*No migration, no gender, no war!*". For every narrative we examined, the top sources were either government politicians, pro-government influencers, or pro-government fringe sites—the vast majority of messages repeated or built upon government narratives, with pro-Kremlin narratives being also popular.
- **Hungarian state support is critical in maintaining minority media, giving Budapest some influence over the information environment in Slovakia.** One of the main foreign policy goals of the Orbán regime is establishing hegemony among Hungarian communities living in neighboring countries to win their votes and to build a network of allied nations and committed politicians. Fidesz and the Hungarian government have helped create a media infrastructure for the Hungarian Community Party (SMK-MKP) to support its political efforts of unifying the political representation of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Although subsidies coming from Hungary do not automatically mean censorship or propaganda, the political influence is evident when examining the content produced by these media outlets.
- **The Orbán government's anti-Ukrainian and anti-West narratives are undeniably present in the Slovak media environment.** We identified 846 articles and Facebook posts containing one or more types of disinformation and government narratives. These were spread by minority media uncritically quoting Hungarian government officials or taking their cues from Hungarian media that are overtly or covertly government-controlled. In a minority of cases, government narratives could also be found in opinion pieces.

- **The Slovak elections do not seem to be at the top of the Hungarian government's agenda, but they are always seen in a favorable light.** The Hungarian government and its affiliated media did not pay close attention to the September snap elections in Slovakia. Reports were sporadic, and no efforts were made to campaign on the side of any party or to create a single narrative about the election. This, however, does not mean the reports and comments were not biased, especially towards Robert Fico's Smer party, which seems to be the government's favorite, after the coalition of Hungarian minority parties collapsed in May.

METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

The Orbán government had put serious efforts into building its influence among the Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries, such as Slovakia. The goal of our analysis was to uncover and analyze the influence-building efforts of the Hungarian government in the Slovak information space, particularly among the Hungarian minority. Understanding the ways and means of foreign influence during election time is particularly important. Our analysis identified the key narratives present in the government-organized media in Hungary between March 1 and September 30, 2023, to better understand the sources of disinformation we expected to transpire into the Hungarian minority information space in Slovakia. We included regular disinformation narratives spread by the government and how government-organized media covered the Slovak elections.

We examined the political discourse of the Hungarian minority media in Slovakia between March 1 and September 30, 2023, in four main thematic areas that dominate the Hungarian government's communication, including narratives related to *war*, *gender*, *migration*, and *sanctions*. For data collection and analysis, we filtered relevant articles and posts from websites and Facebook pages - using SentiOne - that played a key communicative role in the research topics based on predefined keywords. We then manually coded and aggregated the data to identify and quantify the disinformation content and the narratives associated with each thematic focus.

The websites and Facebook pages were selected based on expert advice based on the results of previous media consumption polls of Hungarians in Slovakia. A comprehensive 2021 survey found that 80% of Hungarians in Slovakia have an

internet connection, and out of them, 71% read online newspapers, 32% on a daily basis. Among them, Slovak news outlets are more popular. The most-read Slovak news portal is aktuality.sk (48.9%), and the most-read Hungarian news portal in Slovakia is ujszo.sk (43.9%), and the most-read Hungarian news portal is blikk.hu (30.3%).⁷⁹

Based on this data, we identified eight Hungary-based news portals under the Hungarian government's control (blikk.hu, hirado.hu, index.hu, magyarnemzet.hu, mandiner.hu, origo.hu, pestisracok.hu, ripost.hu) and eight Hungarian news portals in Slovakia to search for articles. Five of the latter have ties to the Hungarian government (ma7.sk, körkép.sk, hirek.sk, felvidek.ma, piros7.es), and three seem to be independent (ujszo.com, napunk.dennikn.sk, parameter.sk). We also included several high-profile local Hungarian politicians and party pages in the search.

ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES OF THE HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT

Hungary has a uniquely disinformation-ridden media space. Over the last decade, the ruling party and the far-right undeniably became dominant forces in spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories, and pro-Kremlin narratives. The ruling party's increasing dominance of the Hungarian media created an environment where government-controlled media outlets spread factually incorrect or otherwise misleading allegations and narratives about its political opponents, with virtually no external control. This created a situation where, for the majority of Hungarians, additional effort is required to find credible and professional media outlets for unbiased news. In Hungary, the most important channels of disinformation are the government-controlled media (traditional and social), fringe media, far-right media, and pro-Kremlin disinformation hubs, as these are the main distributors of disinformation narratives in the country.⁸⁰

The main challenge is that disinformation spread by government officials and government-controlled media can reach a significant part of society. Since 2010,

⁷⁹ Zsuzsanna Lampl: Press, Tv, Radio, Internet. Details On Media Consumption Of Hungarians In Slovakia In 2021, Társadalomtudományi Szemle, XXIV. évfolyam 2022/4

⁸⁰ GlobalFocus Center, Political Capital, European Western Balkans, Reporters' Foundation, "Propaganda Without Borders: A study of pro-Kremlin propaganda among far-right and radical voices in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Serbia", October 14, 2022, available online at: https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/Zinc_XFR%20Disinfo_Report_Final%20report_221010.pdf [accessed on April 15, 2024].

the Fidesz government has gained control over the vast majority of the media and the advertising sector in the country. The government-organized Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA)⁸¹ has approximately 500 media products (including national and local print, online, TV, and radio outlets) and constitutes the majority of the Hungarian media landscape.⁸² This centrally managed organization, in conjunction with public media and government advertising, is capable of communicating the ruling party's messages to all segments of the Hungarian society. Moreover, Fidesz has built a network of proxies, i.e., government-organized think tanks, NGOs, public influencers, experts, etc., that are funded mainly by the state and echo the government's narratives on every issue and discredit other actors with differing narratives. With their help, Fidesz has, in recent years, established a vast network of content providers to dominate the political discourse also on Facebook, funded most probably by public money. Thus, Fidesz has almost exclusive control over the public discourse in the country.

In contrast to the pro-government media network, independent media outlets still operate in Hungary; however, they are only significant in the online segment. The rural print newspaper market and local digital media have been almost entirely dominated by editorial outlets that do not adhere to journalistic standards. While the pro-government press serves as a campaign machine to convey a unified message, the remaining independent press is incapable of counteracting or defusing one-sided propaganda, either due to size or professional content production principles. As a result, Hungary has fallen 29th in the ranking of Reporters Without Borders since 2013, currently being the 85th country in terms of media freedom⁸³.

The whole population is targeted by disinformation, especially pro-government voters, as the government dominates the media space. As a result, only a small percentage of the population can avoid their messages. Thus, in general,

⁸¹ Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, *"HCLU turns to court to prevent unconstitutional founding of pro-government media empire"*, January 16, 2019, online available at <https://hclu.hu/en/articles/hclu-turns-to-court-to-prevent-unconstitutional-founding-of-pro-government-media-empire> & <https://tasz.hu/kesma> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁸² Mérték Media Monitor, *„Centralised Media System – Soft Censorship 2018 (Mertek Booklets 18)”*, December 13, 2019, online available at <https://mertek.eu/en/2019/12/13/centralised-media-system-soft-censorship-2018-mertek-booklets-18/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁸³ Reporters without borders, *"Hungary"*, n.d., online available at <https://rsf.org/en/country/hungary> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

everybody is vulnerable to disinformation, but those who consume most of their news from sources plagued with disinformation are more likely to fall victim. These groups include pro-government and far-right voters. Opposition voters or people critical of the government are generally less vulnerable to being impacted (but they are not protected either). This media dominance and systematic disinformation ecosystem also affects Hungarians living in neighboring countries such as Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, and Serbia since a portion of them follow Hungarian state media or Hungarian government-controlled media, as detailed in the Methodology section.

In our analysis, we found that between March 1 and September 30, 2023, the central messages of the Hungarian government can best be described by PM Orbán's own words: “*No migration, no gender, no war!*”.⁸⁴ Orbán’s words at CPAC Hungary in early May were echoed by Fidesz politicians and pro-government influencers, and these became the three main threads of government communication. For every narrative we examined, the top sources were either government politicians, pro-government influencers, or pro-government fringe sites. The vast majority of messages repeated or built upon government narratives, with pro-Kremlin narratives (especially citing Putin’s speeches) also being popular. The full list of narratives examined can be found in the Annex 1 of this case study.

1. **No war!** – Anti-war and pro-peace messaging still dominated the Hungarian media space, as the government continues to advocate for an immediate ceasefire in order to stop the “warmongering” Westerners and Hungarian opposition politicians from “escalating” the Russo-Ukrainian war into WWIII. The Hungarian government has been spreading disinformation narratives regarding the war in Ukraine since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022. Since then, the messaging has rarely differed from its origins.
2. **No migration!** – Narratives about migration made a surprise resurgence after a relatively quiet period from the start of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. For 15 months, as Ukrainian refugees arrived in the country, traditional anti-migrant sentiments and narratives essentially disappeared from the Hungarian media space. This changed in early June

⁸⁴ Origo.hu, “*Orbán Viktor: Nem a migrációra, nem a genderre, nem a háborúra!*”, May 4, 2023, online available at <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20230504-oran-viktor-cpac-beszed-2023-majus-4.html> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

2023, when the topic of illegal migration reappeared in the media following the EU Council decision on the reform of the asylum system. The decision was highly criticized by the Hungarian government, claiming that it would introduce “migrant quotas” to force Hungary to take in illegal immigrants and create “migrant ghettos.” PM Orbán posted on 9 June that *“Brussels is abusing its power. They want to forcibly transfer migrants to Hungary. This is unacceptable! They want to turn Hungary into an immigrant country by force.”*⁸⁵ His comments and the general anti-immigration and anti-EU narrative were spread by the ruling Fidesz party, the government, pro-government influencers, and the government-organized media.

3. **No gender!** – This narrative has been built for a long time, claiming that the government needs to protect the children from gender propaganda of NGOs, liberals, Soros, and Brussels.⁸⁶ This is done by demonizing the LGBTQ community and NGOs that want to conduct sexual education courses in schools or protect the rights of sexual minorities. Compared to others, this narrative was somewhat underutilized, with fewer posts and interactions, and often part of the triple-narrative message of “no to migration, no to war, and no to gender propaganda.”⁸⁷

The relative absence of economic topics between March and July is another intriguing trend. The narratives that blame the EU and sanctions against Russia for inflation still circulated; however, the share was significantly smaller. This is probably the result of worsening economic conditions, as the government has been facing a prolonged economic downturn for four consecutive quarters, double-digit inflation, and falling real wages, which have already resulted in the loss of over 400,000 potential voters.⁸⁸ At the time, the European Commission

⁸⁵ Orbán V., „*Brüsszel visszaél a hatalmával. Át akarják...*” | Facebook, June 9, 2023, online available at <https://www.facebook.com/357114925786112/posts/808658840631716> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁸⁶ Fidesz, „*Elsőprő többség mondta ki: a gyerekeket, iskolákat...*” | Facebook, April 27, 2023, online available at <https://www.facebook.com/540506630769223/posts/815936083226275> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁸⁷ Fidesz, „*Ettől tényleg leszakad a plafon*”, May 15, 2023, online available at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1706125229823073> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁸⁸ Even though the opposition could not profit from the changing political landscape, the ruling parties’ support is still going strong among voters with a party preference. For more, please see: Telex.hu, „*Medián: 400 ezer támogatót veszített idén a Fidesz, a magyarok több mint fele leváltaná Orbánt*”, October 4, 2023, online available at <https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/10/04/median-kozvelemen-y-kutatas-partpreferencia-kormanyvaltas> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

was still demanding additional safeguards regarding the Hungarian justice reform in order to release parts of the frozen EU funds. Additionally, there is public opposition to government plans to restart the Hungarian economic engine with Chinese electric battery factories, which are mostly staffed by short-term economic migrants “imported” from the Far East. Consequently, the government needed to and indeed came up with a new “masterplan” to defend Hungarian “sovereignty” against domestic and foreign “enemies” to divert attention from the above-mentioned problems.

By the end of the summer, the Hungarian government decided to start its new communication campaign centered around defending Hungarians and Hungary’s sovereignty in the run-up to the 2024 local and European elections to be held on June 4, 2024. On September 21, Máté Kocsis, the leader of the Fidesz parliamentary group, announced a new legislative package about the “protection of sovereignty” and the 2024 elections by making *“it harder for those who sell our country abroad for dollars”*.⁸⁹ Although the government keeps the Hungarian public in a permanent state of campaign, this new initiative was designed to discredit the opposition and halt the erosion of the ruling parties’ electoral support in the face of the economic downturn.⁹⁰

THE HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT’S INFLUENCE-BUILDING EFFORTS IN SLOVAKIA

Building international influence is a core national interest and can bring many economic and diplomatic benefits to a country. However, the strategic aim of the Orbán regime’s international influence-building is to ensure the regime’s long-term survival by trying to create an appropriate foreign policy environment for the government and to counter criticism and prosecutions for systemic corruption and dismantling the rule of law. Thus, although the Orbán regime

⁸⁹ HVG.hu, „Szuverenitási törvénycsomaggal számolna le a „hazát külföldön áruló” újságírókkal és civilekkel a kormány”, September 21, 2023, online available at https://hvg.hu/itthon/20230921_Szuverenitasi_torvenycsomag_kormany_frakcioules_Kocsis_Mate [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁹⁰ The proposed legislative package became a law on 12 December 2023. The new "Protection of Sovereignty Act" can be considered a new Russian-style „foreign agent” law aiming to threaten and harass the opposition, civil society organizations, media, and any other organization or individual the new Office for the Protection of Sovereignty suspects of serving foreign interests and jeopardizing Hungary’s sovereignty. See at Political Capital, „Hungarian government threatens its citizens’ courage with the so-called Protection of Sovereignty Act”, December 15, 2023, online available at <https://cz.boell.org/en/2023/12/15/hungarian-protection-sovereignty-act> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

justifies its international influence-building with national slogans, it does not yet seem to serve national interests beyond the regime itself. One of the main foreign policy goals of the Orbán regime is establishing hegemony among Hungarian communities living in neighboring countries to win their votes and to build a network of allied countries and committed politicians (preferably in government) in the Western Balkans and the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region.⁹¹

Among Hungarian communities in neighboring countries, the main tools of influence-building are:

- financial support for organizations,
- bringing Hungarian political actors into a position of dependency,
- media investments,
- sports investments,
- real estate purchases.

Since the early 2010s, vast sums of money have been transferred from Hungary to Hungarian communities living in the neighboring countries. These have primarily been used to support local Hungarian organizations, sports, and media, but a lot has also been spent on purchasing buildings and agricultural subsidies. The aims of the investments were:

- 1) to gain votes for Fidesz in Hungarian elections from citizens living in the neighboring countries with dual citizenship
- 2) to spread Fidesz's messages among out-of-country Hungarians
- 3) to influence the local situation by controlling and making the Hungarian organizations and local Hungarian parties dependent.

A significant part of the funding came from the Bethlen Gábor Fund Management Ltd (BGA Ltd): between 2011 and 2021, €687.9 million were transferred to Hungarian organizations in Romania, €144 million in Slovakia,

⁹¹ Political Capital, „*The building of Hungarian political influence - The Orbán regime's efforts to export illiberalism*”, December 2022, online available at https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC-Boll_HUNfluence_Study_ENG.pdf [accessed on April 15, 2024].

€143 million in Serbia, €26.6 million in Croatia and €17.4 million in Slovenia - a total of over €1 billion in the five countries.⁹²⁹³

Politics: The Hungarian government connections are generally focused around one of the four Hungarian parties in Slovakia, the Hungarian Community Party (SMK-MKP)⁹⁴, which is the strategic partner of Fidesz. In Slovakia, Fidesz has aimed to support a unified Hungarian minority party for years now. The objective was to channel the relatively numerous Hungarian communities under a single umbrella, creating a significant force in the Slovak National Assembly. In October 2021, a year and a half after all of the minority parties were voted out of parliament, this plan seemed to bear fruit, as a single coalition, named Szövetség - Alliance, united three Hungarian parties in Slovakia. The latest local elections in 2022 were a success for the Alliance as they gained 222 independent mayoral seats, second after Robert Fico's Smer.⁹⁵ However, in May 2023, the leadership of SMK-MKP, the largest faction in the Alliance, decided to include György Gyimesi on the Alliance list despite opposition from other member parties. This decision was controversial due to Gyimesi's highly contentious political agenda, which closely aligned with the Orbán government.⁹⁶ Aware that Gyimesi's inclusion might drive other parties away, several Hungarian government officials allegedly tried in vain to persuade Alliance leaders not to include Gyimesi on their list. Despite these efforts, the leaders did not comply with Budapest's request. As a result, several members have left the Alliance, putting their parliamentary seats at risk, prompting Viktor Orbán to criticize the minority Hungarian political community of Slovakia in his speech in Băile Tuşnad, Romania, in an unusually open and sharp tone. The result is a highly

⁹² Új Szó: „*Létszükséglet és befolyásépítés: ömlenek a magyar milliárdok a határon túlra*”, March 6, 2021, online available at <https://uj szo.com/kozelet/letszukseglet-es-befolyasepites-omlenek-a-magyar-milliardok-a-hataron-tulra> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁹³ The Zakarpattia region of Ukraine is another important target of Hungarian state subsidies. According to Schemes, a team of Ukrainian investigative journalists, between 2011 and 2020, Zakarpattia region received nearly €115 million, including grants from Bethlen Gábor Funds and other entities. Source: Iegoshyna V., “*How The Hungarian Government Invests Billions In Zakarpattia*”, July 9, 2021, online available at <https://vsquare.org/how-the-hungarian-government-invests-billions-in-zakarpattia/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁹⁴ Strana Maďarskej Koalície (SMK) in Slovak, Magyar Közösség Pártja (MKP) in Hungarian.

⁹⁵ Kósa A., “A Fidesz kampányát másoló politikusa miatt bukhatja parlamenti esélyeit a szlovákiai magyar párt, a Szövetség”, Szabad Európa, July 27, 2023, online available at <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2023/08/01/gyimesi-gyorgy-szlovakai-magyarsag-szovetseg-matovic-fico-politika-portre/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁹⁶ Ibid.

fragmented minority party landscape in Slovakia ahead of the September elections.⁹⁷

Media: Hungarian minority media in Slovakia is vulnerable to political influence due to previous funding constraints and a lack of human resources. This vulnerability has been exploited by the Hungarian government and local Hungarian politicians, making the outlets dependent on their financial resources and thus able to spread their content. A significant portion of the Hungarian media space in Slovakia is subsidized by the Hungarian government through the Bethlen Gábor Foundation (BGA) and is linked to the MKP party, which is the strategic political partner of Fidesz and the Hungarian government.⁹⁸ This network includes the operator of the *Felvidek.ma* portal (SZAKC)⁹⁹, the organization behind *Hírek.sk* (Association of Hungarian Television Producers in Slovakia), the founder of the *Ma7 media group* (Pro Media Foundation), and the organization operating *Körkép.sk* (Vox Juventae). Subsidies coming from Hungary do not automatically mean censorship or propaganda, but the political influence is evident, as these outlets uncritically repeat the Hungarian government's messaging and are favorable to SMK-MKP politicians.¹⁰⁰

Real estate purchases, sports investment, and education: Although not directly related to the main focus of our analysis, collecting data on the Hungarian government's other investments provides a more complete view of their influence-building efforts. The Hungarian government is directly purchasing real estate in neighboring countries, including Slovakia, through the *Foundation for the Preservation of Real Estate Heritage in Central Europe* (Közép-európai

⁹⁷ Molnár N., "Szeretettel Pozsonyból: Orbán Viktor beszólt a vesztükbe rohanó szlovákiai magyar politikusoknak", July 25, 2023, HVG.hu, online available at https://hvg.hu/360/20230725_Szeretettel_Pozsonybol_Szlovakia_valasztasok_Orban_Viktor_Szo_vetseg_Aliancia_MKP_Hid_Osszefogas_Gyimesi_Gyorgy [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁹⁸ IPI, "Hungarian Capital In Foreign Media. Three Strategic Models Of Influencing The Neighbourhood", February 2022, online available at <https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/hu.pdf> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

⁹⁹ Kőváry S.K., Finta M., Cuprik R., Diko L., "The Survival of the Slovak Hungarian Media is in the Hands of Budapest and thus their Content", Hungarian Money, February 2022, online available at <http://hungarianmoney.eu/icjk-survival-of-the-slovak-hungarian-media> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹⁰⁰ IPI, "Hungarian Capital In Foreign Media. Three Strategic Models Of Influencing The Neighbourhood", February 2022, online available at <https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/hu.pdf> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Épített Örökség Megőrző Alapítvány).¹⁰¹ The Foundation owns 14 buildings in Slovakia.¹⁰² The government also launched a public-funded program for church renovation, where 1.5 billion forints (about €4.3 million) will be sent, of which 101 churches in 96 Slovak municipalities will be restored.¹⁰³ The Hungarian government also launched a 34-million-euro program for supporting kindergartens and a scheme for entrepreneurs worth 60 million Euros, which started in 2016 and 2017, respectively.¹⁰⁴ There are also investments in sports, with an old friend of PM Orbán owning a Slovak football club, DAC Dunajská Streda.¹⁰⁵

ANALYSIS OF HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT NARRATIVES IN MINORITY MEDIA IN SLOVAKIA

The prevalence of Hungarian government narratives is evident in the Slovak public discourse, if only because a significant number of the articles detected quote Hungarian government politicians or take their cues from Hungarian media that are overtly or covertly government-organized. A significant part of the Hungarian minority media in Slovakia is thus highly politicized, with vulnerability to Hungarian government narratives being primarily provided by local actors. The main element of this is the interconnection between communication in Hungary and Slovak political life and domestic politics. On the one hand, quotes or interviews of Robert Fico about war or sanctions published by the Hungarian public media are regularly viewed by the minority media in

¹⁰¹ Vsquare, „*Hungary Is Buying Real Estate In Slovakia Through An Unassuming Company*”, October 22, 2021, online available at <https://vsquare.org/hungary-is-buying-real-estate-in-slovakia-through-an-unassuming-company/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹⁰² Erdélyi K., „*Újabb ingatlant vett Szlovákiában a Szijjártó embereivel kitömött alapítvány*”, Átlátszó.hu, August 9, 2023, online available at <https://atlatzo.hu/kozugy/2023/08/09/ujabb-ingatlant-vett-szlovakiaban-a-szijjarto-embereivel-kitomott-alapitvany/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹⁰³ Szalay Z., „*Kostoly na južnom Slovensku obnovia z peňazí z Maďarska. Je to užitočná podpora, hovorí slovenská katolícka cirkev*”, Dennik N, October 19, 2021, online available at <https://dennikn.sk/2579567/kostoly-na-juznom-slovensku-obnovia-z-penazi-z-madarska-je-to-uzitocna-podpora-hovori-slovenska-katoliccka-cirkev/?ref=list> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

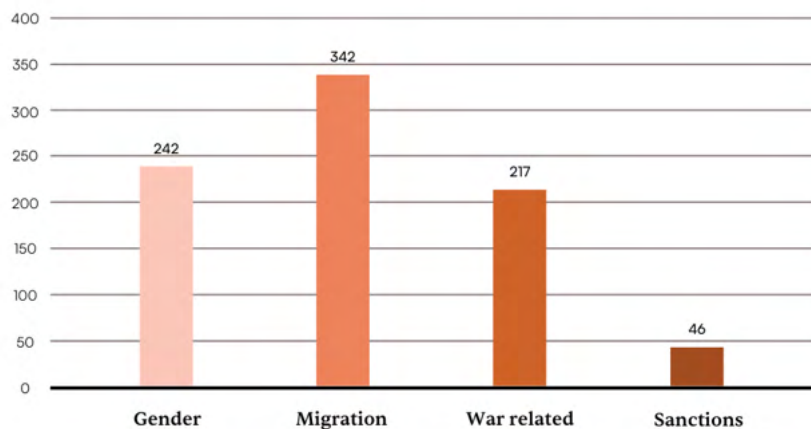
¹⁰⁴ Hrivnak T., „*Orban Builds Popularity, Influence In Slovakia Using Hungarian Taxpayer Money*”, Balkan Insight, November 29, 2021, online available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/29/orban-builds-popularity-influence-in-slovakia-using-hungarian-taxpayer-money/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹⁰⁵ Kóváry S.K., Finta M., Cuprik R., Diko L., „*Ferencváros of Felvidék Viktor Orbán's beloved football supported by millions from Budapest*”, Hungarian Money, February 26, 2021, online available at <http://hungarianmoney.eu/icjk-ferencvaros-of-felvidek/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Slovakia, and on the other hand, they attack the caretaker government with anti-sanctions rhetoric in the run-up to the snap elections.

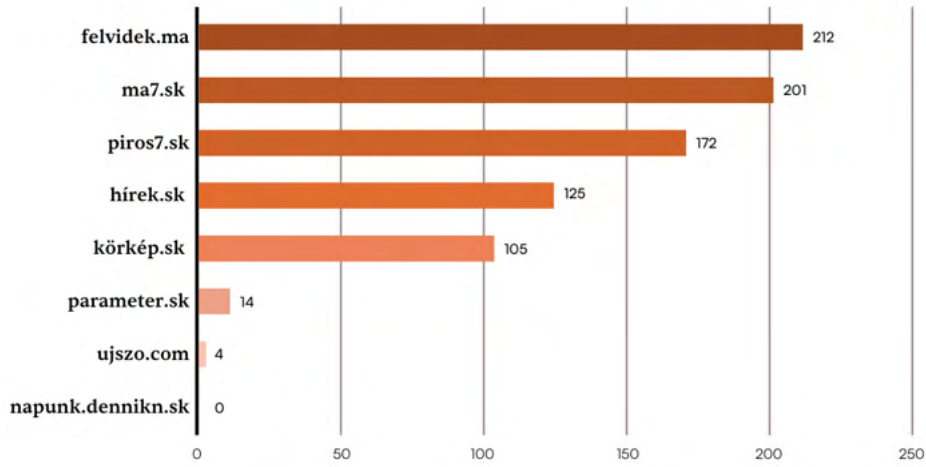
Due to this reason, the main types of prevalent disinformation narratives are similar to those detected in Hungarian media or even exactly the same. However, fringe or less-used disinformation narratives are thus less likely to appear in the Hungarian minority media. Between March 1 and September 30, we identified 217 pieces of content (articles or Facebook posts) containing disinformation narratives related to the Russo-Ukrainian war, 341 related to migration, 242 related to gender, and 46 related to sanctions. Several articles contain multiple types of disinformation narratives, as the Hungarian government regularly connects multiple topics into a single message. The most relevant example of this is the aforementioned Orbán quote: “*No migration, no gender, no war*”.

Number of articles in Hungarian minority media in Slovakia containing disinformation narratives between the 1st of March and the 30th of September 2023



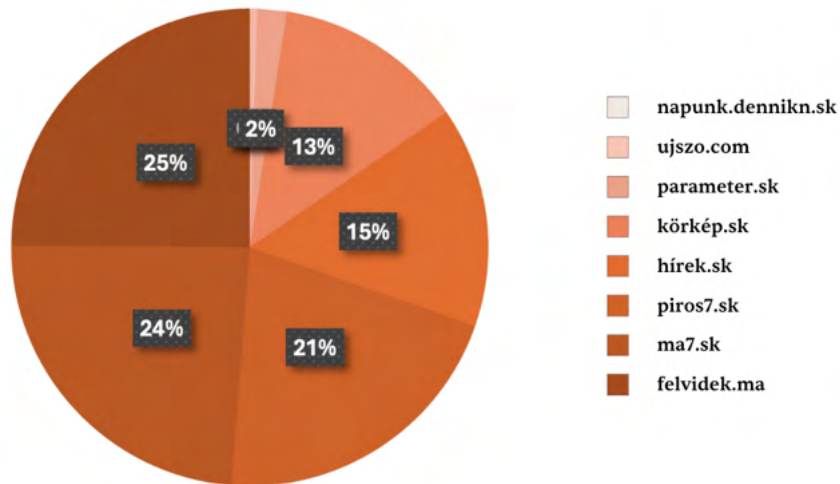
1. Figure Number of articles in Hungarian minority media in Slovakia containing disinformation narratives between 1 March and 30 September 2023

**Number of articles and posts containing disinformation narrative
between the 1st of March and the 30th of September 2023**



2. Figure: Number of articles in each examined Hungarian minority media outlet in Slovakia containing disinformation narratives between March 1 and September 30, 2023

**Share of articles and posts containing disinformation narrative
between the 1st of March and the 30th of September 2023**



3. Figure: Share of articles in Hungarian minority media outlets in Slovakia containing disinformation narratives between March 1 and September 30, 2023

War in Ukraine: In Slovakia, the dissemination of disinformation about the war is mainly linked to statements by Hungarian government officials¹⁰⁶, Slovak domestic political events,¹⁰⁷ and events related to the Russo-Ukrainian war. The most common narratives were that (1) *an immediate ceasefire and peace are needed*, (2) arms supplies will only prolong and further escalate the conflict, and (3) *the West or local pro-Ukrainian political forces want to drag the country (Hungary or Slovakia) into the war*. The strong presence of the latter narrative can be explained by the fact that in the Slovak election campaign, the attitude towards the Russian-Ukrainian war was an important campaign issue. While the winning party, Smer, led by former Prime Minister Robert Fico, has a “pro-peace” stance, which is admittedly similar to Fidesz’s¹⁰⁸, opposing arms transfers, Progressive Slovakia (PS)¹⁰⁹, which came second in the elections, and the party coalition that governed for part of the period under review, also envisioned a pro-Ukraine foreign and security policy similar to that of Western countries. Slovak newspapers funded by the Hungarian government also participated in this campaign, with opinion pieces quoting and copying the previous government's war rhetoric, criticizing liberal, pro-Western, and pro-Ukraine Slovak parties. For example, the debate on the transfer of Slovak MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine was much criticized, with Slovak pro-Russian politicians describing the transfer of the fighter jets as an attempt to drag the country into war.¹¹⁰

Migration: The anti-migration narrative in the Hungarian community in Slovakia is strongly linked to the Hungarian government's communication critical of the EU, using migration-related reporting to reinforce Euroscepticism. Thus, the Hungarian-language minority media space also contributes to the promotion of EU-critical political discourse in Slovakia, in some cases, for example, on

¹⁰⁶ Ma7.sk, “*Orbán Viktor: Nem fogjuk hagyni, hogy belepréseljének minket egy háborúba*”, April 14, 2023, online available at <https://ma7.sk/hethatar/orban-viktor-nem-fogjuk-hagyni-hogy-belepreseljenek-minket-egy-haboruba> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹⁰⁷ Körkép.sk, “*Nad szerint végül a kormány fog dönteni a MiG-ek átadásáról*”, March 14, 2023, online available at <https://korkep.sk/cikkek/belfold/2023/03/14/nad-szerint-vegul-a-kormany-fog-donteni-a-mig-ek-atadasarol/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹⁰⁸ Ma7.sk, “*Fico: Ha kormányra kerülünk, leállítjuk a szlovák fegyverszállítást Ukrajnába*”, February 5, 2023, online available at <https://ma7.sk/aktualis/fico-ha-kormanyra-kerulunk-leallitjuk-a-szlovak-fegyverszallitast-ukrajnaba> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹⁰⁹ Progresívne Slovensko in Slovak.

¹¹⁰ Ma7.sk, “*Ilyen nincs, Szlovákiában mégis van!*”, March 20, 2023, online available at <https://ma7.sk/tollhegyen/ilyen-nincs-szlovakiaban-megis-van> [accessed on 15 April 2024]

migration, but also on local domestic political conditions.¹¹¹ In terms of the distribution of sub-narratives, the two dominant elements in the case of Slovakia were "illegal migration" and "people smuggling", but a large number of articles were mostly about border police measures and official statements.¹¹²¹¹³¹¹⁴ As a rule, the source is information from law enforcement agencies, and these articles mostly report on the border crossing points, the number of illegal border crossings - either to Hungary or Slovakia - and whether there were any people smugglers who were prosecuted by law enforcement agencies. Alongside these, the aforementioned "Brussels responsibility" sub-narrative emerged as the central message of most opinion pieces, criticizing EU migration policy and sometimes repeating the messaging of the Hungarian government.¹¹⁵

Gender: In the seven months under review, the distribution of articles and posts containing the gender narrative is relatively even, with the spike in early May partly explained by the CPAC event in Budapest, where Prime Minister Orbán's speech was widely covered by the press. Around the same time, the Pope's visit to Budapest was also widely reported on, but the term "gender theory" was only thinly mentioned as something to be rejected. PM Orbán's statements are well-quoted by the Hungarian public in Slovakia anyway, so his anti-gender statements are also relatively frequently echoed. In addition to his speech at the CPAC, his annual "State of the Nation" address generated several media mentions during the period under review, but a good number of his regular Friday Kossuth Radio speeches also made it to the Hungarian media in Slovakia. On fewer occasions, Judit Varga or Balázs Orbán's anti-gender remarks were quoted.

¹¹¹ Piros7.es, "*Béla és Abdul, két jóbarát?*", June 13, 2023, online available at <https://piros7.es/bela-es-abdul-ket-jobarat> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹¹² Ma7.sk, "Egyre több migráns bukkan fel Nyitra megyében, több rendőr van az utcákon", June 8, 2023, online available at <https://ma7.sk/aktualis/egyre-tobb-migrans-bukkan-fel-nyitra-megyeben-tobb-rendor-van-az-utcakon> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹¹³ Ma7.sk, "*Csónakkal szállítottak migránsokat külföldi embercsempészek Zalába*", May 26, 2023, online available at <https://www.hirek.sk/hethatar/csonakkal-szallitottak-migransokat-kulfoldi-embercsempeszek-zalaba> [accessed on 15 April 2024].

¹¹⁴ Ma7.sk, "*Egy családi ház kertje állította meg a migránsokat csempésző grúzt*", February 2, 2023, online available at <https://ma7.sk/kavezo/egy-csaladi-haz-kertje-allitotta-meg-a-migransokat-csempeszo-gruzt> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹¹⁵ Piros7.es, "*Orbán, do toho!*", June 13, 2023, online available at <https://piros7.es/orban-do-toho> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Piros7.es, "*Az igazság ereje - Pravda vívazi*", July 1, 2023, online available at <https://piros7.es/az-igazsag-ereje-pravda-vitazi> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Slovak politicians, however, are much less active on this issue, at least according to the Hungarian media in Slovakia. Igor Matovič, for example, wrote several posts earlier this year distancing himself from so-called LGBTQ+ ideology, criticizing gender reassignment surgery and calling it sick that a minor should undergo such an operation. Yet, in the local Hungarian public, this was mostly framed as "Eduard Heger criticized Matovič for reinforcing social divisions with his statements."¹¹⁶ Surprisingly, even in Gyimesi György's statements, the gender issue only appeared rarely. In the Hungarian public sphere in Slovakia, it is clearly the platform called "Piros7es", whose tone and choice of topics are most reminiscent of that of the Hungarian government-organized media. Many of their writings are simply taken from Mandiner, Origo, and Pesti Srácok, key outlets of the government-organized media network echoing the government's narratives. Still, it cannot be said that only writings that fit the Hungarian government narrative are produced on this platform. In fact, sometimes it seems as if the blinders are taken off and clarifying writings are produced, even if only on more marginal topics. The writings on Ma7.sk are also tendentious, often blaming liberalism, woke ideology, and the West for various issues, with frequent mentions of gender and LGBTQ topics. On Körkép.sk, press ethics seem to be much more prevalent; the relatively many hits are rather reports on domestic political battles, in which politicians attacking gender ideology are quoted, but also their opponents.

Sanctions: Following the outbreak of the war, the Hungarian government's anti-sanctions stance became a dominant element of foreign policy, as it not only emphasized the government's "pro-peace" stance - embodied in social and economic stability - before the April 2022 elections, but the economic arguments allowed it to continue to advocate its previous pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian policies. In the governing party's communication, we could, therefore, identify a large number of narratives on economic sanctions, ranging from conspiratorial statements ("the West is using sanctions to bring Russia to its knees by pre-planned measures") to Eurosceptic voices ("European sanctions are responsible for the economic crisis") to economic rationality ("sanctions threaten European or Hungarian energy security"). In addition to these, narratives of Washington's interests in sanctions, the negative impact of sanctions on Hungarian energy

¹¹⁶ Ma7.sk, "Eduard Heger bírálta Matovičot, amiért megnyilvánulásaival fokozza a társadalmi megosztottságot", January 4, 2023, online available at <https://ma7.sk/aktualis/eduard-heger-biralta-matovicot-amiert-megnyilvanulasaival-fokozza-a-tarsadalmi> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

security and households' living standards, and the lifting of sanctions prevailed. In addition to the statements of leading Hungarian politicians, the high level of disinformation in Slovakia and the proliferation of pro-Russian narratives bordering on conspiracy theories were due to the inclusion of Hungarian opinion-makers in the discourse.

MONITORING THE SLOVAK ELECTIONS IN THE HUNGARIAN (GOVERNMENT-ORGANIZED) MEDIA

Main findings

The Slovak elections do not seem to be on the top of the Hungarian government's agenda. Searching for the names of Slovak parties and relevant political actors as keywords did not produce a large number of results (see the Methodology for the media outlets covered). *Mandiner* and *Index* are the two papers that cover the Slovak election campaign slightly more frequently, but even there, coverage of events beyond the issues indicated below is rare. We cannot claim that this is due to the Hungarian government's lack of interest in the Slovak election (they surely care a lot), which leads us to the following argument. However, as election day drew nearer, the subject became increasingly prominent.

The Hungarian government-organized media primarily seems to target Hungarians in Hungary. Readers in Hungary are provenly little or not at all concerned with foreign policy, which is one reason why little of this content is presented to them. They are still somewhat interested in the Hungarian parties beyond the border, but there is little success to report when it comes to the Slovak aspect. As far as the Hungarians in Slovakia are concerned, the party headquarters also know that they are only marginally informed by these Hungarian media, so they are not really the target group for these articles.

Fico is always seen in a favorable light. He is undoubtedly the Hungarian government's favorite. He is always described as "the leader of the largest party", "the guarantor of stability", "the defender of traditional values", while previous years' ambiguous issues of his are never mentioned. If Fico were not the candidate Orbán wanted to see win, we can be sure he would be labeled as "Hungarophobic" and criticized for "never apologizing for misinterpreting the

Hedvig Malina case.”¹¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the readers were never reminded of these issues within the time period covered. As election day approached, Fico was portrayed as a potential ally for Orbán in the European Union.

Orbán as a role model/nightmare. During the campaign, Orbán served as a reference point: some parties were scaring voters with him, while others referred to him as a role model. Obviously, the latter perspective was more loudly echoed in the Hungarian government-organized media, but not exclusively: quoting the criticism also showcased Orbán as a key figure in the campaign.

Main topics covered

Heated disputes between Hungary and Slovakia. In his speech in Băile Tușnad, Romania, Viktor Orbán expressed his dissatisfaction with the performance of Hungarian parties in Slovakia. This issue was covered in detail by both the Slovak and Hungarian press. Additionally, when Péter Szijjártó reframed the arrest of Tibor Gašpar, he received the same accusation from the Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS)¹¹⁸ that they typically direct at foreign criticism: “The attempt to influence the Slovak elections is obvious, and we consider it unacceptable”.¹¹⁹ Such and similar messages are covered by the researched Hungarian media.

Turning events among Hungarian parties in Slovakia. Hungarian parties’ activities are reported on in the covered Hungarian media, but only sporadically, when major events are disclosed (György Gyimesi joining the Alliance, Most-Híd leaving it). It is worth noting that Gyimesi does not dominate the news in Hungary concerning Slovak elections, even though his character is very Fidesz-like.

The ever-fragmenting center-right parties in Slovakia. The government-organized media are clearly amused by the fragmentation of the governing parties in Slovakia. Sometimes, the phenomenon is compared to the clumsiness of the opposition parties in Hungary.

¹¹⁷ In 2006, Hedvig Malina was beaten and robbed by two men for speaking Hungarian and then was prosecuted twice for perjury, causing significant bilateral tension due to the misconduct of Slovak authorities.

¹¹⁸ Sloboda a Solidarita in Slovak.

¹¹⁹ Index.hu, “*Ravasz Ábel: Orbán Viktor Szlovákia mentális gyarmatosítására készül*”, August 16, 2023, online available at <https://index.hu/kulfold/2023/08/16/szlovakia-szijarto-peter-menczer-tamas-nagykovet-kulugyminiszterium/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Fico labeling Čaputová or Ódor as Soros agents. Labeling somebody as a Soros agent will almost certainly appear in the Hungarian government-organized media. This is an important point that Fico and Orbán agree on.

ANNEX

List of disinformation narratives spread by the Hungarian government:

- **Peace needs to be restored as soon as possible** – The war does not solve anything; it just leads to the death and suffering of thousands of people on both sides. We need to end the war as soon as possible (regardless of what it means to Ukraine).¹²⁰¹²¹¹²²¹²³
- **This is not our war; we need to stay out of it– This is not Hungary’s/Europe’s war; this is the internal conflict of two post-Soviet countries/nations/of Russia and the US; we need to stay out of it, remain neutral.**¹²⁴
- **Western military aid to Ukraine unnecessarily prolongs the war while risking escalation and WWII** – This narrative aims to delegitimize military support for Ukraine by claiming that weapons shipments only prolong the war and the suffering of the civilian population. Weapons shipments also pose the risk of escalating the conflict beyond Ukraine,

¹²⁰ Hirado.hu, “*Szijjártó Péter: Álságos és önsorsrontó az ukrajnai békével kapcsolatos európai uniós érvelés*”, July 29, 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2023/07/29/szijjarto-peter-alsagos-es-onsorsronto-az-ukrajnai-bekevel-kapcsolatos-europai-unios-erveles> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹²¹ Hirado.hu, „*Tusványos – Fidesz: Orbán Viktor megerősítette Magyarország békére törekvő álláspontját*”, July 22, 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2023/07/22/tusvanyos-fidesz-orban-viktor-megerositette-magyarorszag-bekere-torekvo-allasponjtjat> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹²² Hirado.hu, „*Szijjártó: Itt az ideje végre felcsavarni a globális békepartí tőbbség hangerejét*”, 18 July 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/07/18/szijjarto-itt-az-ideje-vegre-felcsavarni-a-globalis-bekepartitobbseg-hangerejet> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹²³ MagyarNemzet.hu, „*Nacsa Lőrinc: Magyarország a béke pártján áll*”, March 5, 2023, online available at <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2023/03/nacsa-lorinc-magyarorszag-a-beke-partjan-all> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹²⁴ Hirado.hu, “*Rétvári Bence: Háborús időkben a háborúból ki kell maradni*”, June 4, 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2023/06/04/retvari-bence-haborus-idokben-a-haborubol-ki-kell-maradni> [accessed on April 15, 2024]. Hirado.hu, „*A háborúból ki kell maradni, a békepartí tőbbséggel kell tartani*”, 8 March 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2023/03/08/a-haborubol-ki-kell-maradni-a-bekepartitobbseggel-kell-tartani> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

leading to a direct war between NATO and Russia and a potential nuclear war.¹²⁵ Thus, it argues that immediate peace negotiations are needed to end the war.

- **The warmongering West/opposition wants to drag Hungary into the war** – This narrative is trying to paint Western elites and Hungarian opposition politicians as “warmongers” due to their support of Ukraine against the Russian invasion, particularly military aid.¹²⁶ The narrative argues that these actors are careless and want to drag Hungary into a war against Russia.¹²⁷
- **Hungarian opposition is the puppet of foreign powers** – This narrative claims that the Hungarian opposition parties and media are puppets of Western elites and George Soros is trying to force liberal values on

¹²⁵ Blikk.hu, “*Orbán Viktor keményen fogalmazott reggeli interjújában: Soha ilyen közel nem voltunk egy világháborúhoz*”, March 10, 2023, online available at <https://www.blikk.hu/politika/magyar-politika/orban-viktor-interju-kossuth-radio-haboru/ne4455m> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Hirado.hu, “*Orbán Viktor: Ha világháború lesz, akkor atomháború lesz*”, 14 April 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/04/14/orban-viktor-ha-vilaghaboru-lesz-akkor-atomhaboru-lesz> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

PestiSracok.hu, “*Szalay-Bobrovniczky Kristóf: Magyarország nem adja át lőszerkészletét Ukrajnának*”, March 20, 2023, online available at <https://pestisracok.hu/szalay-bobrovniczky-kristof-magyarorszag-nem-adja-at-loszerkeszletet-ukrajnanak/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Hirado.hu, “*Orbán Viktor: Sikerült elkerülni a harmadik világháborút*”, July 14, 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2023/07/14/orban-viktor-magyarorszagon-nem-lesznek-migransgettok> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Mandiner.hu, “*Soha nem volt ilyen magas a háború kiszélesedésének kockázata*”, June 8, 2023, online available at <https://mandiner.hu/velemeney/2023/06/kaszab-zoltan-velemeney-oroszorszag-ukrajna-haboru-kulfold> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹²⁶ MagyarNemzet.hu, “*Többször is igazolta háborúpártiságát a baloldal*”, July 19, 2023, online available at <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2023/07/tobbszor-is-igazolta-haborupartisagat-a-baloldal> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹²⁷ Hirado.hu, “*Szilágyi Péter: Ma a nyugati hatalmasságok szeretnék letörni a magyar szabadság vágyát*”, July 30, 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/cikk/2023/07/30/szilagyi-peter-ma-a-nyugati-hatalmassagok-szeretnek-letorni-a-magyar-szabadsag-vagyat> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Hirado.hu, “*Orbán Viktor: Jó a viszony az amerikaiakkal, de szokatlan a plakátokon való vélemény-képviselés*”, April 14, 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2023/04/14/orban-viktor-jo-a-viszony-az-amerikaiakkal-de-szokatlan-a-plakatokon-valo-velemeneykepviselet/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Ripost.hu, “*Karácsony belesodorna minket a háborúba*”, May 27, 2023, online available at <https://ripost.hu/politik/2023/05/karacsony-belesodorna-minket-a-haboruba> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Hungary, drag Hungary into war, and poison the minds of the children with LGBTQ propaganda.¹²⁸

- **The EU is to blame for inflation and the energy crisis** – This narrative argues that the EU has lied to Europeans, as the sanctions did not stop the war and only caused economic difficulties for Europeans. According to the narrative, European energy and sanction policies are inefficient and harmful; they increase inflation and create energy shortages across Europe. Unexpected effects of sanctions, such as the increase in food prices and the food shortage and famine in Africa, are caused by bad Western policies. The role of Russia is not discussed at all. The record inflation was first attributed to the war and later to EU sanctions against Russia, shifting the blame to outside factors from the government's economic policy.¹²⁹ There is only one solution to economic difficulties: peace.
- **Sanctions hurt the West more than Russia/Russia is unaffected by sanctions** – The narrative claims that Russia is not affected by sanctions, which in turn causes significant damage to Europe. While an energy shortage is rising in Europe, Russia is selling the sanctioned raw materials elsewhere, so neither the Russian economy nor its leadership are to suffer from sanctions. In consequence, sanctions were pointless and caused more harm to the West, while they did not stop the war.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ MagyarNemzet.hu, *“Simicskó István: Törvénytelen beleavatkozni hazánk belügyeibe”*, July 17, 2023, online available at <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2023/07/simicsko-istvan-torvenytelen-beleavatkozni-hazank-belugyeibe> [accessed on April 15, 2024]. MagyarNemzet.hu, *“Perelhetetlen slepp”*, July 15, 2023, online available at <https://magyarnemzet.hu/ahelyzet/2023/07/perelhetetlen-slepp> [accessed on April 15, 2024]. Mandiner.hu, *“A szabadságellenes hegemon mind felett”*, July 5, 2023, online available at <https://mandiner.hu/kozelet/2023/07/a-szabadsagellenes-hegemon-mind-felett> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹²⁹ Blikk.hu, *“A teljesítőképességünk határán vagyunk – Brüsszelből adott kemény interjút Orbán Viktor”*, June 30, 2023, online available at <https://www.blikk.hu/politika/magyar-politika/orban-viktor-interju-brusszel/y5n8vc8> [accessed on April 15, 2024]. Blikk.hu, *“Szijjártó Péter vészjósló bejelentése: hármass válság alakult ki, amit jelen helyzetben megoldani lehetetlen!”*, May 4, 2023, online available at <https://www.blikk.hu/politika/magyar-politika/szijjarto-peter-brusszel-valsag/fgwsx9t> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹³⁰ Origo.hu, *“Orbán Viktor: Tűzszünet kell és béketárgyalás”*, June 30, 2023, online available at <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20230630-orban-viktor-tuzszunet-kell-es-beketargyalas.html> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

- **Ukraine is losing the war/ Russia is undefeatable** - This narrative presents the situation on the battlefield as a hopeless one for Ukraine, claiming that Russian victory was inevitable. It often did so by ignoring events that have happened, such as the Kherson and Kharkiv counter-offensives, by selectively presenting information, or by quoting Russian officials directly and without critical context.¹³¹
- **The Russian troops are trying to behave humanely, but the Ukrainians are committing war crimes** - This narrative tries to undermine support for Ukraine by highlighting alleged or real war crimes committed by Ukrainian armed forces while omitting well-documented systematic cases of Russian war crimes.¹³²
- **Ukraine is led by an autocratic, anti-Hungarian, anti-Christian regime** - This narrative is being used to undermine support for Ukraine by highlighting its real or claimed human rights violations.¹³³ Particular emphasis is placed on Ukraine's treatment of its Hungarian minority and the crackdown on the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which was framed as religious persecution, painting Ukraine not only as an anti-Hungarian but an anti-Christian regime.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Index.hu, “*Orbán Viktor: Nekünk egy jól menő, sikeres Ukrajna lenne az érdekünk*”, May 5, 2023, online available at <https://index.hu/belfold/2023/05/05/orban-viktor-interju-kossuth-radio-haboru-ferenc-papa/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹³² Origo.hu, “*Mi lesz most, a veszélyes ukrán provokáció után?*”, May 7, 2023, online available at <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20230504-nogradi-gyorgy-az-ukranok-pofatlanul-kirovokaltak-ezt-a-haborut.html> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Mandiner.hu, “*Kemény üzenet a Kremltől: Moszkva meg fogja torolni az oroszok meggyilkolására való buzdítást*”, June 18, 2023, online available at <https://mandiner.hu/kulfold/2023/06/kulfold-ukrajna-oroszorszag-haboru-kreml-bosszu-gyilkosság> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹³³ Ripost.hu, “*Kényszerbetelepítéssel Oldaná Meg A „Magyar Problémát” Egy Ukrán Újságíró*”, June 27, 2023, online available at <https://ripost.hu/kulfold/2023/06/kenyszerbetelepitest-javasol-karpataljan-egy-ukran-ujsgairo> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹³⁴ PestiSracok.hu, “*Az Ukrán Ortodox Egyház ukrainai megkülönböztetéséről fogadott el nyilatkozatot az orosz parlament felsőháza*”, March 29, 2023, online available at <https://pestisracok.hu/az-ukran-ortodox-egyhazi-ukrainai-megkulonbozteteserol-fogadott-el-nyilatkozatot-az-orosz-parlament-felsohaza/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

- **The EU wants to force migrants on Hungary** – This narrative rejects the EU’s plan to reform the migration systems in Europe, claiming that the EU will force Hungary to either accept migrant quotas or pay hefty penalties.¹³⁵
- **The schools are the main battleground against LGBTQ activists who are supporting pedophilia in schools** – This narrative claims that Western-sponsored LGBTQI activists are actively advocating pedophilia in schools with the support of teachers, trying to poison the minds of the children.¹³⁶
- **Aid to Ukraine is weakening the countries that provide it** – This narrative falsely claims a trade-off between helping Ukraine and strengthening someone’s own country. This has an economic aspect, as financial aid is said to go to Ukraine instead of helping solve the societal and economic crisis, while the military aspect argues that by giving Ukraine military aid, the donor countries are weakening their own military capabilities.¹³⁷ A fairly common example is approvingly sharing footage of pro-Russian protests across Europe using this exact argument.¹³⁸
- **Ukraine does not deserve Western support because of its mistreatment of minorities** – This narrative undermines support for Ukraine, as it does not deserve support due to the alleged and real mistreatment of minorities.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Origo.hu, “*Orbán Viktor: A multik árspekulánsként emelik az árakat*”, July 28, 2023, online available at <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20230728-orban-viktor-radiointerju-osszefoglalo.html> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Origo.hu, „Brüsszel tartozik Magyarországnak, de Ukrajnának adja a magyarok pénzét”, July 31, 2023, online available at <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20230728-brusszeli-korrupcio-migracio-lomnici-zoltan-interju.html> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹³⁶ Hirado.hu, “*A Soros-egyetem a nyáron is folyik az LMBTQ-érzékenyítés*”, July 18, 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2023/07/18/a-soros-egyetem-a-nyaron-is-folyik-az-lmbtq-erzekenyites> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹³⁷ Hirado.hu, “*Orbán Viktor: Tűzszünet kell és béketárgyalás*”, June 30, 2023, online available at <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20230630-orban-viktor-tuzszunet-kell-es-beketargyalas.html> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹³⁸ Hirado.hu, “*Kormányellenes tüntetést tartottak Prágában*”, March 11, 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/03/11/kormanyellenes-tuntetest-tartottak-pragaban/> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

¹³⁹ Hirado.hu, “*Menczer Tamás: Magyarország nem támogatja Ukrajna integrációját, amíg a magyar kisebbség nem kapja vissza korábbi jogait*”, April 5, 2023, online available at <https://hirado.hu/belfold/belpolitika/cikk/2023/04/05/menczer-tamas-magyarorszag-nem-tamogatja-ukrajna-integraciojat-amig-a-magyar-kisebbség-nem-kapja-vissza-korábbi-jogait> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

CASE STUDY: TRACKING HUNGARIAN INFLUENCE IN THE SLOVAK ENERGY SECTOR

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KEY FINDINGS

- Although Slovakia and Hungary share some alignment and have close personal ties between individuals in business and politics, particularly in the energy sectors, **there is no hard evidence of any channels or tools of malign influence affecting Slovak strategic energy policies.**
- Certain areas highlight a lack of resilience mechanisms and can be considered potential vulnerabilities for the future. It is advised that these areas be tracked and monitored to maintain or increase Slovak resilience in strategic sectors such as energy policy.
- Two specific weak spots were identified: firstly, the continuous dependency of the Slovnaft refinery—owned by Hungarian MOL—on Russian crude. While diversification efforts are ongoing, there remains a **likelihood of close Slovak-Hungarian political alignment regarding the future of EU sanctions on Russian oil delivered by pipeline. Both countries are likely to work closely together to lobby for an extension of the exemption and possibly veto any further EU sanctions on Russian energy supplies.**
- Secondly, there is the ongoing exclusive dependency on Russia's Rosatom for nuclear fuel for Slovak and Hungarian nuclear power plants. **Although Slovak diversification efforts are ongoing, it is considered likely that these efforts could be prolonged and deprioritized, maintaining the dependency on Russia.**
- Various possible motivations to slow down diversification efforts were identified: technical, economic, security (particularly energy security), or political-ideological. A slowdown in diversification and partial decoupling from Russia is considered possible; however, Slovakia's complete reversal of these efforts, making it similar to Hungary, is considered unlikely. Geopolitical and broader security factors, such as the future of the war and

eventual settlement in Ukraine, will most likely impact decisions in this regard.

- Slovakia's resilience in the energy sector has increased in recent years, for instance, through adopting an amendment to the Act on critical infrastructure. Furthermore, ongoing diversification efforts across the energy sectors were mapped out and highlighted. Last but not least, Slovakia's established patterns of how its energy policies are formulated and adopted indicate a strong presence and influence of managers and experts, in contrast to Hungary, where political sway over these policies seems more prevalent.
- Regarding policy formulation and coordination between Slovakia and Hungary, although various informal and personal relations exist, primarily business and business-to-politics relations, no direct impact on strategic state policies could be found. Governments coordinating energy policies do so at official bilateral meetings or in Brussels (e.g., through their Permanent representations to the EU).

INTRODUCTION

This section will address and assess potential vulnerabilities for Slovakia in the energy sector and, more specifically, in energy security. The main aim is to contribute to the overall understanding of Slovakia's vulnerability to specific malign foreign influences, focusing on a sector that is arguably one of the vital strategic public sectors for economic, political, and security reasons. Additionally, the energy sector and energy security are often considered potential "soft power weapons" used by states like Russia to exert influence over other states' strategic policies. Could this be the case in Slovak-Hungarian relations? Could there also be a connection to Russian energy interests in Slovakia and the wider region?

The focus on energy policy and security has a clear strategic rationale. Assessing how vulnerable or resilient Slovakia's energy sector—and its related policies and security—are to malign foreign influence from Hungary is of paramount importance. Several assumptions led to this section's focus on the energy sector. Based on publicly known facts, overlaps in energy policy and interests between Slovakia and Hungary, particularly regarding oil, can be expected. Slovakia's only

refinery, Slovnaft¹⁴⁰, has been integrated into and fully owned by the Hungarian MOL Group since 2001.¹⁴¹

The complex realities of the Slovnaft refinery being dependent on Russian crude oil before 2022, as well as its ownership by the MOL Group, led to the formulation of common interests between the Slovak and Hungarian governments in Brussels in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Following the invasion, the EU began preparing a series of sanction policies called packages. Initially, oil was not targeted with sanctions, but after a series of negotiations between the representatives of the EU Member States¹⁴², oil transported from Russia via sea vessels was sanctioned, along with the introduction of a price cap. Crude imported through pipelines, however, was not sanctioned, and temporary exemptions were given to Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Hungary and Slovakia were closely aligned in advocating for this exemption, and this continues to this day.¹⁴³

Then, there are nuclear power plants in Slovakia and Hungary that operate the Soviet-type VVER-440/V213 reactors.¹⁴⁴ Russia's Rosatom state agency supplies fuel to all these reactors exclusively (through its subsidiary TVEL). Although diversification has been gaining traction in Slovakia, the question of when—and if—the dependency on TVEL will become a thing of the past remains

¹⁴⁰ Slovnaft is also one of the most complex refineries in Europe due to its high complexity, see “*Production sites*”, MOL Group, available online at: <https://molgroup.info/en/our-business/downstream/production-sites> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

¹⁴¹ See “*Vstup do nového milénia*”, Slovnaft, available online at: <https://slovnaft.sk/sk/o-nas/nasa-spolocnost/nasa-historia/vstup-do-noveho-milenia/> [accessed on April 4, 2024].

¹⁴² See Ostatník, V., “*The EU's foreign policy troika: who and what enabled unity and actorness in the 2022 sanctions policies on Russia?*”, 2023, Comenius University. Robert Fico's government seems to be invested not only in aligning with Hungary in terms of (prolonging) the exemptions from EU sanctions on Russian oil imports, but also in cooperating with Orbán's government in excluding some Slovak and Hungarian individuals from the EU sanctions list (see Šnidl, V., Renczes, Á., “*Fico pomáha Orbánovi vyslobodiť ďalších ľudí zo sankčného zoznamu*”, Denník N, March 19, 2024, available online at: https://dennikn.sk/3889391/fico-pomaha-orbanovi-vyslobodit-dalsich-ludi-zo-sankcneho-zoznamu/?ref=tit&fbclid=IwAR08OjWayj9ARZ37ujEdF0Hg_guUiG7NJKkbtztiuhHUWbPNAnHE5ivCMmg_aem_ASDUcmpS6IYuhZEhSmhD3cLD9JZ2WVbM_Dv6UMIW7MA61nSXcZsTcddhzPFqnrwuMdY [accessed on April 9, 2024]).

¹⁴³ Jack, V., “*Slovakia asks EU for extra year to kick Russian oil addiction*”, Politico, November 20, 2023, available online at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-asks-eu-for-extra-year-to-kick-russian-oil-addiction/> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

¹⁴⁴ Slovakia's Bohunice and Mochovce nuclear power plants operate five VVER-440/V213 reactors in total. Hungary's Paks nuclear power plant operates four VVER-440/V213 reactors, with two new ones under construction (these being of newer and more powerful type VVER-1200/517).

unanswered, leaving room for speculation on how this dependency could continue to be prolonged in both Slovakia and Hungary.

This brings us to political aspects as well. Slovakia's government of Robert Fico seems closely aligned with Viktor Orbán's government, as was already mapped out in the earlier sections of this report. After the two leaders met in Budapest in January 2024, Orbán proclaimed that 99% of interests are common or go "in the same direction."¹⁴⁵ This includes the future of nuclear energy as well.

Lastly, a case illustrating the strategic importance of energy policy and security in both Slovakia and Hungary, as well as the close ties between the two countries and Hungary's interest in increasing its influence in this sector, is the 2021 attempt by the state-owned Hungarian energy company MVM to enter the Slovak electricity market. MVM sought to acquire a 49% share of Stredoslovenská Energetika Holding, a.s. (SSE), which controls electricity and gas distribution in Central Slovakia. This private share of ownership includes managerial control over the entire company.¹⁴⁶ The transaction was not completed as the Slovak then-Minister of Economy, Richard Sulík, did not authorize the sale. The official reason was that MVM is a state company, and Sulík viewed the attempt as part of the Hungarian government's strategy to increase its influence in Slovakia.^{147 148} The governmental control over such decisions concerning private companies (through their need to secure the minister's authorization) was made possible by an Act on Critical Infrastructure Amendment in 2021. It stipulates that private

¹⁴⁵ Valovičová, K., "Fico sa v Maďarsku stretol s Orbánom. Naše záujmy sú na 99 percent rovnaké, vyhlásil maďarský premiér (video+foto)", SITA, January 1, 2024, available online at: <https://sita.sk/fico-sa-v-madarsku-stretol-s-orbanom-nase-zaujmy-su-na-99-percent-rovnake-vyhlasil-madarsky-premier-foto/> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

¹⁴⁶ Since 2013, 49% of the holding is owned by Czech company Energetický a průmyslový holding. The ownership includes managerial control over SSE.

¹⁴⁷ See Kováč, J., "Sulík zastavil predaj SSE Maďarom, nepáči sa mu, čo podnikajú", Denník N, November 10, 2021, available online at: <https://e.dennikn.sk/2605706/sulik-zastavil-predaj-sse-madarom-nepaci-sa-mu-co-podnikaju/> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

¹⁴⁸ On a different note, Hungarian MOL Group also had interest in buying the largest steel producer in Slovakia with a plant nearby Košice, currently owned by U.S. Steel. At the end, the American corporation decided to sell the whole subsidiary and to enter in negotiation with the Japanese Nippon Steel. Some analysts speculate whether Slovak officials tried to nudge the American owner into dismissing the Hungarian company's offers in order not to pass an important strategic asset into Hungarian ownership, but these speculations could not be verified. It is also noteworthy that there were more parties interested, including Chinese or Czech corporations (see Turza, R., "Aká budúcnosť čaká U.S. Steel Košice a čo vyriešili ministri Taraba a Saková v Tokiu? (otázky a odpovede)", Hospodárske noviny, February 13, 2024, available online at: <https://hnonline.sk/finweb/ekonomika/96131034-aka-buducnost-caka-u-s-steel-kosice-a-co-vyriesili-ministri-taraba-a-sakova-v-tokiu-otazky-a-odpovede> [accessed on April 10, 2024].)

ownership can change only with the government's authorization in selected strategic companies (operating in strategic sectors of the economy).¹⁴⁹ Interestingly, one of the opposition parties at that time, Hlas-SD, agreed with this move, with its chairman Peter Pellegrini highlighting the need to “show Viktor Orbán the limits of his economic expansionism” in the wider region.¹⁵⁰ Peter Pellegrini has been recently elected as the new President of the Slovak Republic, taking office in June 2024.

The abovementioned cases lead to the assumption that energy policy and security are critical strategic areas for Hungary and Slovakia. Secondly, there are cases of already existing close ties (e.g., Slovnaft or alignment on EU’s sanctions policies), but also cases of attempted deepening of those ties (e.g., in SSE), portrayed by some politicians as increasing strategic Hungarian (potentially malign) influence. And thirdly, one could expect ties deepening with Robert Fico’s government for the reasons mentioned above.

Therefore, one of the questions tackled in this section will be if the energy policies are now more closely aligned between Slovakia and Hungary, ultimately seeking to map out any potential (malign) channels and areas of influence in this area.

The assessment presented here is based primarily on both offline and online in-depth semi-structured interviews¹⁵¹ conducted by the author, mainly with experts in the energy sector.

METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

The main aim of this section is to analyze and assess whether, where, and through what channels Slovakia is vulnerable—meaning susceptible to potentially malign Hungarian influence in the energy sector. This requires working with defined concepts of strategic state vulnerability, malign state

¹⁴⁹ This can be viewed as a rare move by an economically liberal center-right party (SaS of Richard Sulík, then-Minister of Economy) to strengthen the role of the state in the strategic energy sector. It can also be viewed as a move to increase resilience and lower the vulnerability in case private owners owning shares of companies in strategic sectors decide to sell their share purely based on economic logic, without considering political and/or security aspects.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ 8 interviews were conducted for this section of the overall analysis. For questions addressed in an open-ended manner, please see the Annex of this section. In total, 15 experts were asked to contribute, all under anonymity; 7 declined to participate or did not respond to repeated requests. These were experts and representatives also from the public (political) sector and from the media.

influence, and strategic state resilience, which were introduced and addressed in the first section of this report.

Strategic state vulnerability, in this case in the energy sector, can be understood as an absence of resilience, especially towards malign foreign influence. In an undisruptive, stable, and predictable environment, strategic vulnerabilities might be challenging to spot and assess. Resilience, among other things, involves the “ability to anticipate and withstand a disruptive event, and to rapidly restore core functions and services in its wake, whether it be a pandemic, financial crisis, terrorist attack, or large-scale cyber incident,”¹⁵² or a significant international security crisis such as war or the aftermath of an invasion. There are then defined various types and forms of resilience, such as operational resilience, financial resilience, or data resilience, aiming essentially at maintaining and/or improving the given state’s ability to anticipate and respond to some disruptive (adversary) actions.¹⁵³

Critical infrastructure, including the energy infrastructure, is an area where resilience plays a crucial role in a state's ability to anticipate and respond to any kind of potential disruptive and adversary actions. A country’s energy policy and security have profound practical implications, ranging from the economy's stability (industry) to basic, individual human security.¹⁵⁴ In other words, a state's capacity to retain effective control over critical energy infrastructure, conduct effective energy asset management, and provide disaster resilience can be considered some of its core functions.¹⁵⁵ A state’s influence over these functions can thus be considered a potential risk.

¹⁵² See Borghard, E. D., “*A Grand Strategy Based on Resilience*”, War on the Rocks, January 4, 2021, available online at: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/a-grand-strategy-based-on-resilience/> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ Under critical infrastructure objects of particular importance, the Slovak law understands selected information and communication means, facilities for the production and supply of water, electricity, oil and natural gas and other parts of the property of the state and business legal entities and natural persons designated by the Government of the Slovak Republic or other competent authorities of the state administrations that are necessary to manage crisis situations, protect the population and property, to ensure the minimum functioning of the economy and the administration of the state, as well as its external and internal security, and which must be protected. These are facilities, services and systems considered vital to all citizens and the management of the state, the malfunctioning or destruction of which can threaten the important economic and security interests of the state. See Zákon č. 45/2011 Z. z. (Zákon o kritickej infraštruktúre).

¹⁵⁵ Compare “*10 Functions of the State*”, Institute for State Effectiveness, available online at: <https://effectivestates.org/ten-functions-of-the-state/> [accessed on April 9, 2024].

Slovakia and Hungary, both sovereign states and close allies, are members of the EU and NATO. This analysis did not aim to identify relationships and ties in the energy sector as inherent risks or channels of malign influence. Instead, it focused on determining whether such channels exist and operate and if they could be considered undue or potentially malign. If they do, could they pose a current or future risk? For instance, this could involve assessing the influence of private entities over Slovak state energy policy and decisions made at the national or EU level. Such influence could benefit private entities and potentially jeopardize energy security, especially through continued exclusive strategic dependencies, in the face of potential future crises or conflicts.

ALIGNING ENERGY POLICIES (OR NOT): NUCLEAR, OIL, AND GAS

Since the last parliamentary elections in Slovakia in September 2023 and the subsequent forming of the fourth government under Prime Minister Robert Fico, some analysts were expecting potential reversals of certain energy policies in Slovakia, namely the ongoing diversification and de facto decoupling from Russian energy resources. Such change, of course, would indeed be more in line with the current Hungarian energy policy.

All experts interviewed for this report, however, expect continuity from the current Slovak government in its energy policy, i.e., expect the diversification across all energy sectors to continue, albeit at a different pace. The primary reason for that is the need to accommodate the reality of the energy market as well as reflect on the political and security environment in Europe. In the words of one senior expert on the topic, formerly a close advisor to the Slovak government: “Reality will not let the Slovak government experiment.”

But there are other structural factors at play. In contrast to Hungary, ownership of the key facilities and infrastructure in the Slovak energy sector is less concentrated, and the government - any government, for that matter - does not have such political influence and control over the energy industry. In practice, officials rely primarily on the management of the companies and institutions, mainly in the nuclear and gas industries, but also - to some extent - in oil. Management in the energy industry, including partially state-owned entities, is generally pragmatic and business-oriented, reflecting on the market and prioritizing energy security. In Hungary, political sway over the energy policy

and the strategic decisions made in this realm seems to be more substantive. For instance, in the past decade, the Hungarian government has strategically increased its presence in the energy sector, increasing its influence and control – mainly in the MVM Group.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, these past years, energy as a policy was prepared and managed in several Hungarian ministries; only in December 2022 was a Ministry of Energy established. Experts interviewed agreed that ultimate control over the strategic energy policy, including international agreements in nuclear, oil, and gas, is in the hands of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This is not a standard institutional setup, and it is also compared to Slovakia, allowing for more political influence over the industry.¹⁵⁷ The subjective opinion of some experts interviewed also points out the nominations in the energy sector, which are not based on expertise but often on political grounds to exercise and maintain control over the industry. This again seems to be in contrast with the Slovak case, where much of the energy policy is also influenced by private companies, mainly Czech-based EPH, as well as various German or Italian investors such as E.ON or Enel¹⁵⁸. This is not to argue that Hungarian energy policy decisions do not make economic logic, only that they are more susceptible to political and ideological positions than in Slovakia.

¹⁵⁶ MVM Group is a dominant player in the Hungarian energy market and is fully state-owned. It embraces all segments connected to the energy sector: generation, storage, trade, distribution, provision of services, planning and design, construction, transmission, data transfer, incubation (see “*About the company group*”, MVM, available online at: <https://mvm.hu/en/Rolunk/AzMVMCsopotrol/ACegcsopotrol> [accessed on April 10, 2024]).

¹⁵⁷ In Hungary, the energy business and industry is said to be controlled in practice by people close to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, also since the energy sector is one of the strategic sectors identified by Orbán that should be controlled domestically as much as possible. Orbán’s governments have been prioritizing domestic capital and control in the industry over foreign ones for years as a deliberate strategy. In parallel, it is said that the Hungarian government has also set to increase its influence over domestic energy industries in its neighboring countries, including Slovakia, but without much success, as is also mentioned in this section.

¹⁵⁸ E.ON group owns 49% of shares in Západoslovenská energetika, a.s. (ZSE), which is the largest distributor of electricity and the largest supplier of electric energy and gas in Slovakia, with over a million daily customers. 51% of shares are owned by the Slovak Ministry of Economy. Enel owns 33% of shares of Slovenské Elektrárne, the largest producer of electricity in Slovakia, operating 31 hydropower plants, 2 nuclear power plants, 2 thermal power plants, and 2 photovoltaic power plants. Czech-based EPH, where Daniel Křetínský owns 51% of shares and retains managerial control, owns shares in many companies in the Slovak energy industry, such as Eustream, SPP Distribúcia, Nafta, Pozagas and SPP Storage (49% of shares through SPP Infrastructure, a.s., company, the rest is owned by SPP, i.e., is state-owned), but also owns 49% of shares of Stredoslovenská Energetika Holding, a.s., which EPH bought from the French (Electricité de France International (EDFI)) in 2013 and 33% of shares of Slovenské Elektrárne. This indeed makes EPH a critical player in the Slovak energy market.

This leads to the question of whether the energy policy in Hungary and Slovakia, respectively, is formulated and implemented through primarily pragmatic economic logic or is influenced by politics and ideology. In practice, answering this question might help explain certain policy decisions, namely in regard to diversification and decoupling from Russian energy resources. As mentioned, the research indicates that in both countries, it is a mixture, with Slovak energy policy being less influenced by politics and ideology.

It is worth exploring how the diversification efforts have been developing differently in Slovakia and Hungary in the last two years. A series of decisions of the Slovak government in 2022 and 2023 have set a course of diversification and gradual decoupling from Russian energy resources. Many of those post-2022 diversification efforts were enabled by long-term, gradual diversification in the energy sector following the 2009 gas crisis. Spat between Russia and Ukraine over the contract regulating the transit of natural gas had led to all Russian gas flows through Ukraine being halted for almost two weeks. In reaction to that, the EU and its Member States launched multiple programs and plans, including one to integrate Slovakia and Hungary closer in terms of energy infrastructure. These programs eventually strengthened energy security and lowered vulnerability in this sector over the following years, all the way until 2022. Experts agree that if those processes were not started in 2009, Slovakia, Hungary, and the whole of the EU would be more difficult in 2022 (i.e., more vulnerable and less resilient). In Slovakia, for instance, Slovenský plynárenský priemysel (SPP), a state-owned energy supplier, is required by law to keep reserves of at least 1 billion cubic meters of gas. In 2022 and in practice, this has led to a necessity to quickly buy enough gas from suppliers other than Russia.¹⁵⁹ The 2009 crisis has also resulted in a decision to enable the reverse flow of gas from Slovakia to Ukraine, strategically decreasing vulnerability. Alternative routes for gas and oil infrastructure were built (mainly in the north-south direction), connecting Slovakia with Hungary. The EU supported these projects (named Projects of Common Interest), often financing 50% of the construction costs precisely aiming to increase resilience, lower vulnerability, and increase energy security through diversification. It is important to note that the EU continues to be a critical actor, offering a framework for bilateral relations between individual EU

¹⁵⁹ These reserves do not have to be physically stored in Slovakia; making a contract with the supplier about the purchase of a certain amount of natural gas works in practice like an insurance, ensuring that that amount is available and ready to be supplied if needed.

Member States, including Slovakia and Hungary. Brussels also appears to be the main point of coordination of energy policies between Hungary and Slovakia.

Hungary's decision to continue cooperation with Russia in the energy sector after 2022, in contrast to multiple diversification efforts sped up in Slovakia, could, however, also be seen as an imperative - from the perspective of energy security. In other words, for Hungary, ideological and pragmatic policies might align with the current energy policy. Continuing the dependence on Russian energy resources can be considered a strategy prioritizing energy security, with parallel efforts to diversify gradually in the future. For both countries, the price of energy is, of course, important, but it seems to be *the* most important factor in Hungary. Natural gas is cheaper from Russia, also thanks to the existing infrastructure. For Hungary, this seems to be a critical factor since the majority of domestic consumption relies on gas, both for households and for industry. Some experts and commentators interviewed agreed that Viktor Orbán does not believe alternative energy sources will be available quickly, in sufficient volume, or at reasonable prices (compared to those from Russia) after February 2022. The following years have proven that there are alternative energy supplies and that diversifying is possible to lower the vulnerability and increase resilience and energy security. For Hungary, being landlocked and reliant on either existing physical infrastructure or new infrastructure being built, as well as on the conditions set by neighboring countries for supply (transit), maintaining Russian supply seemed imperative. With the new Paks 2 nuclear power plant not expected to become operational for at least the next ten years, this issue becomes even more pressing.¹⁶⁰ This contrasts with the energy security situation in Slovakia. While it is also a landlocked country reliant on neighboring countries for infrastructure, Slovakia is practically self-sustainable in electricity production. This self-sufficiency is a legacy of Czechoslovakia and its decisions

¹⁶⁰ Experts interviewed agreed that when an agreement about Paks 2 construction was signed between Hungary and Russia's Rosatom in January 2014, the geopolitical situation in Europe was vastly different. The agreement held on, and in 2022 or today, it would be a major risk to attempt to abandon it. There would be legal proceedings, and finding any alternative from the West would prolong the projects perhaps by decades. In this light, it can be viewed as a purely pragmatic decision by the Hungarian government to continue with Rosatom. The agreement also stipulates Rosatom's TVEL to supply the fuel exclusively.

in the 1950s and later¹⁶¹ when the communist regime decided to build nuclear power plants in Slovakia.

Nuclear: As of 2024, Slovakia's exclusive supplier of nuclear fuel is Rosatom's TVEL company. Slovenské elektrárne, the state-owned entity controlling the nuclear power plants, has a contract with TVEL until 2026, with an option to extend it to 2030. Experts interviewed agreed on TVEL's reliability in terms of supplies and the quality of its fuel. However, the consensus is that complete dependency on a single supplier from a country waging an aggressive war in neighboring Ukraine—and one that has previously used energy resources as a trade weapon to influence decisions (e.g., the 2009 gas crisis)—is not a desirable situation for Slovakia's future energy security and resilience.¹⁶²

Therefore, diversification efforts seem to be ongoing even under the government of Robert Fico (in office since October 2024). An expert and managerial consensus is supporting these efforts, particularly with the Canadian-American company Westinghouse (already producing fuel for VVER 440/213 reactors and already supplying nuclear fuel for the Ukrainian reactors (type VVER 1000/320) and is expected to supply the fuel to the Czechs in the course of 2024) but also with France's Framatome company, which is currently developing its VVER-compatible nuclear fuel and already signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Slovenské elektrárne in May 2023.¹⁶³ The remaining question is, primarily, the quality of such alternative fuel to the one supplied by TVEL and the “perfect” technical compatibility. Interviewed experts realize that Rosatom is not moving ahead in research, development, and innovation in the field of nuclear fuel as much as the West, but as of 2024, TVEL is still the safe choice. Given the reliance on TVEL's fuel by the Hungarians (with the contract

¹⁶¹ Construction of the nuclear power plant in Jaslovské Bohunice started in 1958 and it was the first nuclear power plant in Czechoslovakia.

¹⁶² Also see Inštitút pre stratégie a analýzy ÚV SR, “*Slovensko dokáže za niekoľko rokov zmeniť dodávateľa jadrového palíva*”, Denník N (blog), April 8, 2024, available online at: <https://dennikn.sk/blog/3929254/slovensko-dokaze-za-niekolko-rokov-zmenit-dodavateľa-jadroveho-paliva/> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

¹⁶³ The MoU concerns future strategic partnership in several areas such as operation and maintenance of the nuclear reactors, modernization and supporting services, research and development of nuclear fuel, but also cooperating on hydrogen electrolysis or on radioactive technologies in medicine; the Slovak government's strategy also seems to lie in short-term diversification with Westinghouse's existing fuel, and then more longer-term cooperation with the French (and other European nations) on what is dubbed the “European sovereign design” of both nuclear reactors and fuel, see *ibid.*

in place and no strategic plan to diversify¹⁶⁴), this creates space for a hypothetical scenario where the government of Robert Fico decides to continue diversification on paper. In reality, it prefers to prolong the contract with TVEL for as long as possible, perhaps aligning with Hungary. Consequently, these two countries will continue to rely on the Russian partner for critical energy supply, impacting energy security in both countries.¹⁶⁵

There is another line of potential (continued) dependence by Hungary and Slovakia on Russian Rosatom - in extending the permits for the running reactors, so-called lifetime extensions. This is a lengthy process, and in theory, national authorities in both countries can do it without Russian interference; however, given the wealth of experience Rosatom has with the VVER reactors, there might be an issue that requires their counsel or help in the future.

¹⁶⁴ Although some interviewees from Hungary mentioned their country reflecting the volatility of geopolitics and its impacts the energy sector, resulting in some contingency plans being developed by the Hungarian government: namely the increase of storage capacities for nuclear fuel in order to have more time to adapt to any abrupt geopolitical or geoeconomic changes. There is also an ongoing process of certification of alternative fuels such as from Framatome (also signing an MoU in December 2023), to have the necessary permits in place in case of such an abrupt change or to have them prepared after the contract with Rosatom is concluded in (initially, it was for an exclusive supply of fuel for Paks NPP by TVEL for 30 years, but the European Commission (formally through Euratom it governs and administers) pressured Hungary to amend the contract. It was then reduced to 10 years with the possibility of prolongation (see Haverkamp, J., “*Nuclear energy - the looming dependency on Rosatom in the EU*”, 2019, WISE International, and Gál, Zs, “*In Rosatom’s shadow: The uncertain role of nuclear in energy transition of Central and Eastern Europe*”, 2024, in: Mišík, M., Figulová, A., “*A decarbonised, secure, and united EU? EU energy and climate policy following Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine*”, Routledge, forthcoming).

¹⁶⁵ Reliance on TVEL has a technical aspect to it, as already mentioned, and some analysts interviewed point out significant risks connected to transiting to the new fuel and assume Robert Fico and his government could decide not to risk short-term energy security for long-term prospects. TVEL is seen as a reliable partner and the most “Westernized” part of Rosatom, meaning that in practice, there is good communication and cooperation, and besides geopolitical and security factors, there is practically no incentive to move away from the Russian fuel. One political scientist researching the connections between Hungary, Slovakia, and Russia in various sectors, including that of energy, pointed out the soft power and influence aspect of Rosatom supplying nuclear fuel to countries like Hungary or Slovakia. The argument goes that nuclear fuel and, generally, the nuclear industry are not generating any major income for the Russian (state-owned) companies, especially when compared to the oil and gas industries. According to him, some Russian officials themselves have been heard complaining about how the agreements they offered to, for instance, Hungary, but also to Turkey are far from financially optimal for them and, on the contrary, very appealing for the other side. This also hints at a strategic decision by Russian officials to use the exports in the nuclear industry as a tool of influence for the Russian state.

Oil: As of 2024, both Slovakia and Hungary are significantly dependent on Russian crude oil. Since 2022, the two countries have closely collaborated in opposing EU sanctions and later proposing and lobbying for an exemption for pipeline oil supplied to facilities such as Slovakia's Slovnaft refinery, owned by Hungary's MOL Group. In 2023, both the Hungarian and Slovak governments were lobbying in Brussels for an extension of this exemption.¹⁶⁶ Coordination of these efforts occurred mainly in bilateral meetings, such as between the Hungarian and Slovak foreign ministers in July 2023 and also in Brussels between both countries' permanent representatives to the EU.¹⁶⁷ Slovnaft's historically exclusive reliance on Russian crude meant that the entire business model of one of Europe's most advanced and complex refineries was based on Russian supplies. The Slovak government is keen on coordinating efforts with Hungary because of Slovnaft's strategic importance—it is a major employer in the country and a significant contributor to the state budget through taxes. Additionally, it supplies various products, from fuel to polymers, to the Slovak domestic market, supporting multiple important sectors of the economy, such as the automotive industry, and exports to other European countries, including Ukraine, where its fuel is used in the war effort against the Russian invaders.¹⁶⁸

Interviewees agreed that in the course of 2022 and 2023, there seemed to be no incentive for MOL Group to speed up diversification processes to lower its reliance on Russian oil supplies. A mixture of technical, economic, but also political reasons was mentioned, and continues to be used to frame the issue up to this day.¹⁶⁹ MOL maintains close ties to the government of Viktor Orbán.¹⁷⁰ In

¹⁶⁶ See Jack, V., “*Slovakia asks EU for extra year to kick Russian oil addiction*”, Politico, November 20, 2023, available online at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-asks-eu-for-extra-year-to-kick-russian-oil-addiction/> [accessed on April 12, 2024], and Reuters, “*Hungary wants to extend EU exemption for MOL to export Russian-origin oil products*”, July 3, 2023, available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-wants-extend-eu-exemption-mol-export-russian-origin-oil-products-2023-07-03/> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

¹⁶⁷ See *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ See Jack, V., “*Slovakia asks EU for extra year to kick Russian oil addiction*”, Politico, November 20, 2023, available online at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-asks-eu-for-extra-year-to-kick-russian-oil-addiction/> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

¹⁶⁹ See, for instance, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, Gulyas, V., “*Mol Deepens Orban Ties With \$305 Million Endowment Pledge*”, Bloomberg, April 1, 2021, available online at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-01/mol-deepens-ties-with-orban-via-305-million-endowment-pledge> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

sum, the economic, political, as well as personal¹⁷¹ connections result in a state where Slovakia is by some considered “a country whose critical energy infrastructure is owned practically by a foreign country, which doesn't have an interest quite visibly limiting this dependence.”¹⁷² However, Slovnaft had already started the diversification efforts in 2023. In March of that year, a “milestone” was reached in the crude diversification efforts when MOL Group transported Azeri light crude from its co-owned ACG field in Azerbaijan to the Slovnaft refinery in Bratislava.¹⁷³ In 2024, it is reported that Slovnaft is already experimenting with supplies not only from Azerbaijan but also from Oman, USA, or even Libya and other countries in the Caspian and Kurdistan regions.¹⁷⁴ MOL's chief executive, Zsolt Hernadi, made a statement in April 2023 that MOL (also making use of some EU funds) planned to invest more than \$500 million in diversification efforts in its Hungarian and Slovak refineries, and that whereas in 2022, only around 5% of Slovnaft's oil supplies were of non-Russian origin, the plan was to reach 30%-35% by the end of 2023.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ A case in point can be Oszkár Világi, mentioned also in the introductory section of this report. He is the current president of Slovnaft and a majority owner of the FC DAC 1904 Dunajská Streda football club. He maintains close ties both to many other influential businessmen and politicians in both Slovakia and Hungary - including Viktor Orbán (see Vašuta, T., “*Orbána volá Viktor, v Gorile je tridsaťkrát. Ako si šéf Slovnaftu vybudoval impérium*”, SME, November 24, 2022, available online at: <https://index.sme.sk/c/23020819/slovnaft-ale-kdeze-vilagi-si-vybudoval-ine-imperium.html> [accessed on April 17, 2024]). Világi, also with his long-term business partner Ján Sabol, controls a vast business empire closely connected to Hungarian businessmen (see Kóváry Sóllymos, K., “*Impérium biopalívového kráľa Sabola vyrástlo vďaka Slovnaftu, maďarským oligarchom a utajeným akcionárom*”, ICJK, February 14, 2024, available online at: <https://www.icjk.sk/303/Imp%C3%A9rium-biopalívov%C3%A9ho-kr%C3%A1%C4%B5a-Sabola-vyr%C3%A1stlo-v%C4%8Faka-Slovnaftu,-ma%C4%8Farsk%C3%BDm-oligarchom-a-utajen%C3%BDm-akcion%C3%A1rom> [accessed on April 17, 2024]). Világi's influence also reaches MET Slovakia, a second-largest gas supplier on the Slovak market.

¹⁷² See Jack, V., “*Slovakia asks EU for extra year to kick Russian oil addiction*”, Politico, November 20, 2023, available online at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-asks-eu-for-extra-year-to-kick-russian-oil-addiction/> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

¹⁷³ See MOL Group, “*MOL Group Q1 Results: Strong EBITDA Driven by Excellent Internal Performance*”, May 12, 2023, available online at: <https://molgroup.info/en/media-centre/press-releases/mol-group-q1-results-strong-ebitda-driven-by-excellent-internal-performance> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

¹⁷⁴ See Marko, M., “*Veľké zmeny v Slovnafte: rafinéria nahrádza Rusko šiestimi novými ropami, kupuje aj americkú*”, Hospodárske noviny, January 16, 2024, available online at: <https://hnonline.sk/finweb/ekonomika/96125824-velke-zmeny-v-slovnafte-rafineria-nahradza-rusko-siestimi-novymi-ropami-kupuje-aj-americku> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

¹⁷⁵ See Reuters, “*Hungary wants to extend EU exemption for MOL to export Russian-origin oil products*”, July 3, 2023, available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-wants-extend-eu-exemption-mol-export-russian-origin-oil-products-2023-07-03/> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

However, taking aggregate data for countries, Slovakia and the Czech Republic have sought to reduce dependency on Russian energy supplies since 2022, as already stated, while Hungary has continued to prolong its dependencies in practice - also in oil. It has signed new (preferential) agreements to boost supplies, and as of 2024, it is Russia's biggest energy customer in the EU, purchasing \$343 million worth of oil and gas in January of 2024 alone.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, it is also building a new pipeline connecting Serbia with Russian supplies.¹⁷⁷ It is evident that Hungary's oil supply policy has a direct impact on Slovakia.

Gas: According to the interviewees and the publicly available information, the Slovak efforts to diversify gas supplies from Russia have been in full swing since 2022.¹⁷⁸ Besides SPP, some 20 private companies operate in Slovakia's gas supply (storage and/or transit) business. One of the largest natural gas suppliers in the Slovak market is MET Slovakia, which is closely tied to Hungarian MOL. The owner of 51% of its shares is MET Holding AG, originally established by MOL and now led by Hungarian Benjamin Lakatos. Irish lawyer Conor Michael Delaney officially owns 49% of its shares. The unclear ownership structure and, more importantly, a de facto control over this company¹⁷⁹ can indicate a strategic vulnerability, especially given MET Slovakia's significant role in the Slovak gas market. It should also be noted that no malign influence regarding Világi or companies mentioned here over Slovak (energy) policy could be established or proven.

CONCLUSION

This section of the report focuses on assessing potentially vulnerable strategic points in Slovakia's energy sector that could be susceptible to malign influence

¹⁷⁶ See Ridgwell, H., "Hungary Appears to Be Strengthening Ties With Russia, China", Voice of America, February 23, 2024, available online at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/hungary-appears-to-be-strengthening-ties-with-russia-china/7499682.html> [accessed on April 12, 2024].

¹⁷⁷ Ibid

¹⁷⁸ See oPeniazoch.sk/TASR, "Čo ak sa zastaví dovoz ruského plynu cez Ukrajinu? Slovenskí plynári prezradili plán B!", March 10, 2024, available online at: <https://openiazoch.zoznam.sk/energetika/slovensky-plynarensky-priemysel-dokaze-nahradit-pripadny-vypadok-dodavok-plynu-z-ruska-inymi-zdrojmi/> [accessed on April 17, 2024].

¹⁷⁹ See, for instance, Turček, M., "Za miliónovou firmou sa vynárajú oligarchovia Világi a Brhel. Jej exfunkcionári sedia v štátnych podnikoch", Aktuality, April 28, 2022, available online at: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/4h7HRHM/za-milionovou-firmou-sa-vynaraju-oligarchovia-vilagi-a-brhel-jej-exfunkcionari-sedia-v-statnych-podnikoch/> [accessed on April 17, 2024].

from Hungary. It explores whether frameworks, tools, or channels exist that could compromise energy policy resilience and indicate an alignment of energy policies favoring Russian interests in Slovakia and the broader region. Analyzed data show that although there are certain points of alignment between Slovakia and Hungary as well as close personal ties between individuals in both business and politics (active and influential also in the energy sectors), there is no hard evidence of any existing channels or tools of malign influence over Slovak strategic energy policies. In other words, although there is no proof of malign influence exerted by Hungary over Slovak energy policy (and energy security as well as critical infrastructure), certain areas lack resilience mechanisms and can be considered potentially vulnerable spots for the future. It is advised that these should be tracked and monitored with an overall aim to maintain or increase Slovak resilience in strategic sectors such as energy policy.

Two specific weak spots were identified. Firstly, the continuous dependency of the Slovnaft refinery—owned by Hungarian MOL—on Russian crude oil. Although diversification efforts are ongoing and activities in this regard have been noted, there remains a likelihood of Slovak-Hungarian political alignment on the future of EU sanctions on Russian oil delivered by pipeline. Both countries have been working closely to lobby for an extension of the exemption and potentially to veto any further sanctions affecting the oil, nuclear, and gas energy sectors. Verifying whether this alignment is primarily driven by economic, technical, security, or political-ideological motives is practically impossible.

Secondly, there is the ongoing exclusive dependency on Russia's Rosatom—specifically, Rosatom's TVEL—for nuclear fuel for Slovak and Hungarian nuclear power plants. Although Slovak diversification efforts regarding nuclear fuel have been analyzed and duly noted in this report, experts interviewed consider it fairly likely that these efforts could be prolonged and deprioritized, maintaining the dependency on TVEL. This could be due to various reasons, including technical, economic, security (particularly energy security), or political and ideological factors. Consequently, Slovakia and Hungary might end up being among the last countries in the EU to continue their exclusive dependency on Russian nuclear fuel.

On the other hand, this report showed that Slovakia's resilience in the energy sector has increased in recent years, for instance, through the adoption of an amendment to the Act on the critical infrastructure. As of 2024, in any strategic

company operating in the energy sector where the state owns the majority (over 51%) of shares, the private owner needs to acquire approval from the government before selling its shares to another entity. Furthermore, diversification efforts across the energy sectors were also mapped out and highlighted.

Last but not least, Slovakia's established patterns of formulating and adopting energy policies indicate a strong presence and influence of managers and experts. This contrasts with Hungary, where political sway over these policies seems to prevail. Some interviewees listed this as another potential future risk: an increase in political influence over the energy industry (including both companies and regulatory institutions overseeing critical infrastructure) could undermine the more expert, pragmatic, business-oriented, and long-term stability-focused management of these companies. This could occur both formally and informally, resulting in both direct and indirect influence increases. Currently, the influence over this strategic sector in Slovakia is not perceived to be as politically driven as it is in Hungary.

However, there is a concern that politicians and ideologues might attempt to extend and expand their direct influence and control over Slovakia's energy industry in the future. Should relevant legislation be changed or amended, or if outright political appointments were made, the energy sector could become hostage to politicians who prioritize short-term economic or political gains over long-term energy security and resilience, potentially prolonging certain exclusive dependencies in this sector. While a slowdown in diversification and partial decoupling from Russia is considered possible by some experts, a complete reversal of these efforts by Slovakia, making its situation similar to Hungary, is deemed unlikely. It is important to note that geopolitical and broader security factors will likely impact decisions in this regard, particularly the future of the war and its eventual settlement in Ukraine.

In terms of policy formulation and coordination between Slovakia and Hungary, as already mentioned, although various informal and personal relations exist, primarily business and business-to-politics relations, no direct impact on strategic state policies could be found. Governments coordinating energy policies do so either at official bilateral meetings or in Brussels (e.g., through their Permanent representations to the EU). However, this was considered by the interviewees to be an interesting area of research since it appears no data on

energy policy coordination are shared with the public. The public relies only on what the governments decide to communicate officially.

In sum, certain personal connections and ties across a spectrum of companies, including in the energy sector, do raise questions about potential vulnerabilities, but so far, no malign influence has been established, detected, mapped out, or proven.

So, it appears that the key remaining questions relevant to the topic of this report are three. Will Robert Fico's government continue to work closely with the government of Viktor Orbán on prolonging the exemption from EU sanctions on oil (pipeline) and perhaps coordinate to veto further sanctions on Russia in the energy sector? Generally, this is considered likely. Secondly, will the reliance on Russian nuclear fuel also be prolonged? Similarly, this is considered a fairly likely scenario. And lastly, will the Slovak government try to establish more direct political influence over the energy sector in Slovakia? This remains an open question for the future. It also remains a spot to monitor for those interested in mapping out potential vulnerabilities in the Slovak energy sector.

ANNEX

Open-ended questions asked during the expert interviews included the following:

1. How would you define the key strategic interests in the field of energy: Slovakia and Hungary?
2. To what extent do these interests and priorities of the two countries overlap/align? Did this dynamic change after the last Slovak parliamentary elections/with the new Slovak government?
3. How are energy policies coordinated between the Slovak and Hungarian governments? Do the government, intergovernmental negotiations, agreements, or agreements at the EU level play the main role, or are private companies and actors involved, or are they third countries (outside the EU)?
4. Do Slovakia and Hungary have the same position regarding the exemption for oil imports from Russia? What future development do you foresee in this direction?

5. Do you anticipate EU negotiations on sanctioning Russian gas and nuclear fuel? In such a case, what would be the expected position of Slovakia and Hungary?
6. Specifically in the field of nuclear energy - Slovakia has started the path of diversification or the so-called decoupling from Russian nuclear fuel. Does this effort continue, or are there some reversals? How is Hungary doing in this respect?
7. Do you expect any changes in the nuclear policy of Slovakia or Hungary in the upcoming years (both in building new nuclear power plants and importing nuclear fuel)?
8. Could it be assessed that the current energy policy, specifically in the area of gas, but especially nuclear and nuclear fuel, in Slovakia and/or Hungary, aligns with Russian interests in this area and region?
9. To what extent/in what way do you think Western (EU and U.S.) sanctions against Russia in the field of energy have affected Slovak and Hungarian energy companies and government policies?
10. To what extent does Russia still (after February 2022) fulfill its obligations in the supply of energy raw materials/fuels?
11. Do you think that energy policy (in Slovakia and Hungary) has a political or security level in addition to the economic one? Could you please specify what you think is best based on your knowledge and experience?
12. Do you identify other significant/strategic areas in which there is a significant overlap of Slovak interests with Hungarian interests or where the Hungarian government is increasing its influence in Slovakia?

HUNGARIAN INFLUENCE IN CZECHIA

Pavλίna Janebová and Leona Kovar

Association for International Affairs

KEY FINDINGS

- Compared to Slovakia, **the influence operations of Hungary, as well as involvement in the Czech internal affairs, are minimal.**
- Although there are political, personal, and business ties between the actors in the Czech Republic and Hungary, **they do not in themselves point to an existing influence of the Hungarian government in Czechia**, but due to the strong position of the ANO movement and former Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš in the polls before the European Parliament elections, and before the 2025 general elections in Czechia, they show some **potential vulnerabilities on the Czech side.**
- **Czechia, especially in comparison to Slovakia, has so far not been a target of the economic operations of the government of Hungary.**
- **The three most important companies in Czechia owned by Hungarian subjects are AERO Vodochody (the largest aircraft manufacturer in the Czech Republic), Innogy Česká republika (a company providing natural gas, electricity, and heat), and MOL Česká republika (international oil and gas company).**
- From a strategic perspective, potentially **the most problematic** involvement of a subject affiliated with the government of Hungary in the Czech business is **AERO Vodochody (AV)'s majority ownership by Hungarian HSC Aerojet Zrt., given its prominence in the Czech aircraft industry sector, also with a hypothetical risk of Hungary sharing information and technologies with a third party, particularly Russia.** However, the **primary motivation for the acquisitions of companies that are key for the defense sector by Hungarian subjects seems to be the goal of increasing their own defense capabilities and conventional resilience rather than projecting Hungarian influence in particular countries.**
- In the fall of 2023, Czechia was one of seven countries in which two online advertisements ran, directly sponsored by the Hungarian state and focusing on the dangers of illegal immigration to Europe and the role of Hungary as a

defender of Europe before these dangers. The advertisements could have influenced political moods in the country and brought further support to political parties that also present migration as a security threat and often link it to the membership of Czechia in the European Union.

- Although Hungarian influence in Czechia is rather marginal at the moment, it cannot be excluded that with a change of political leadership, this can change. The alignment between Andrej Babiš and Viktor Orbán can mean easier access for Hungarian subjects to make acquisitions in Czechia, should there be an interest on their side. While a mechanism of foreign investment screening has been in place since 2021, it does not apply to investors from another EU country. Higher requirements for supply chain security are envisioned, e.g., in the draft law on the resilience of critical infrastructure entities or the draft cyber security law. Given Hungary's close relations with Russia and China, the possibility of them getting access to specific Czech businesses through cooperation with a Hungarian subject cannot be excluded.

INTRODUCTION

Hungarian bilateral relations with Czechia, as well as Hungary's involvement in Czech affairs and direct contact with Czech citizens, are not as intense as in the case of Slovakia or other directly neighboring countries. Unlike these countries, no significant communities of ethnic Hungarian citizens live on Czech territory.¹⁸⁰ There are no significant historical issues affecting the bilateral relations, apart from the Decrees of President Beneš,¹⁸¹ the effect of which on

¹⁸⁰ By the end of 2023, there were 11,117 Hungarian citizens with residence permits in the Czech Republic registered in Czechia. "T15 Cizinci podle státního občanství a kraje k 31. 12. 2023", Český statistický úřad, available online at <https://www.czso.cz/csu/cizinci/predbezne-udaje-zverejnovane-rs-cp> [accessed on May 6, 2024].

¹⁸¹ Decrees of Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš were adopted between 1940 and 1945 while the president was in exile. In 1945, the decree on the confiscation of agricultural property owned by Hungarians was adopted. In the same year, a decree on modification of Czechoslovak citizenship was adopted. According to the second decree, Hungarians who gained Hungarian citizenship during the occupation lost Czechoslovak citizenship the same day, and the rest of them lost their citizenship on the day of promulgation of the decree (2 August 1945). This didn't concern Hungarians who declared themselves Czechs or Slovaks or those who fought for liberation of or remained loyal to Czechoslovakia, etc. "28/2945 Sb. Dekret presidenta republiky ze dne 20. července 1945 o osídlení zemědělské půdy Němců, Maďarů a jiných nepřátel státu českými, slovenskými a jinými slovanskými zemědělci", Parlament České republiky: Poslanecká sněmovna, available online at <https://www.psp.cz/docs/laws/dek/281945.html> [accessed on May 6, 2024]; "33/1945 Sb. Ústavní dekret presidenta republiky ze dne 2. srpna 1945 o úpravě

mutual relations today remains largely hypothetical, and the officially unresolved issue of the participation of the Hungarian People's Republic's army in the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Neither of these subjects has had any significant potential to disrupt Czech-Hungarian relations. Following the split of the Czechoslovak federation in 1992, problematic issues from the communist times, like the Gabčíkovo - Nagymaros Project, remained with Slovakia.

Czech-Hungarian political relations are mainly developed within multilateral groups (EU, NATO, Visegrád Group - V4, Bucharest Nine - B9). The regional dimension is an important element therein. The 2015 Concept of Czech Foreign Policy speaks of Hungary as an "honorary neighbor".¹⁸² Bilateral relations since 1993 have not been affected by particularly controversial issues, but at the same time, no truly significant positive themes can be identified. Hungary shared with the Czech Republic (but also with other Central European states) efforts to integrate into the EU and NATO in the 1990s, and after joining both organizations, common themes were defined precisely by membership in these shared frameworks. In the case of the EU, these include positions on EU cohesion policy and, around 2015, the stance on dealing with the so-called migration crisis. Within the framework of European integration, we can also speak of a shared general rejection of the two countries' attitude towards its deepening, but again, this is not a topic that has the potential to initiate deeper cooperation, especially in view of the current divergent strategic positions in relation to Russia. An important topic of relations is mutual trade. Trade relations between the Czech Republic and Hungary are intense, and trade between the two countries has risen to around €14 billion a year after the decline caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸³

československého státního občanství osob národnosti německé a maďarské", Parlament České republiky: Poslanecká sněmovna, available online at <https://www.psp.cz/docs/laws/dek/331945.html> [accessed on May 6, 2024].

¹⁸² New foreign policy concept of Czechia's foreign policy is about to be published. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, "Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy", https://www.mzv.cz/file/1574645/Concept_of_the_Czech_Republic_s_Foreign_Policy.pdf [accessed on March 20, 2024].

¹⁸³ "Maďarsko", Businessinfo.cz, 13 July 2023, available online at <https://www.businessinfo.cz/navody/maďarsko-souhrnna-teritorialni-informace/2/#3> [accessed on March 20, 2024]; Ministerstvo průmyslu a obchodu, „Statistika pohybu zboží 12/2023 (metodika pohybu zboží přes hranice)", 7 February 2024, available online at [74](https://www.mpo.cz/cz/zahranicni-obchod/statistiky-zahranicniho-obchodu/statistika-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

The bilateral dimension of political relations has been strengthened in the past, especially in the context of the convergence of views between specific political leaders. Most notably, this has been the case between Viktor Orbán and Andrej Babiš, the Czech prime minister between 2017-2021 and the leader of the currently strongest opposition party in the country, ANO.

Given the political proximity of Viktor Orbán and Andrej Babiš (see below), relations began to cool after the formation of the Czech coalition government led by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) at the end of 2021 and especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The political alienation due to different attitudes towards the Russian war in Ukraine is confirmed by the results of a survey conducted by AMO among foreign policy elites in the V4 countries, according to which, in 2022, Hungarian foreign policy actors rated Hungarian-Czech relations as "neutral" (2.8 on a five-point scale), showing a significant decline since 2021, when these relations were rated as "good" (1.7) by Hungarian respondents.¹⁸⁴

The following text offers an overview of the influence that the current governmental regime in Hungary might exercise in Czechia, mainly in the diplomatic and economic domain, through ties between key political actors and business ownership.

HUNGARIAN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN CZECHIA

Diplomacy

Key political relations

Probably the most significant political alliance in the scope of Czech-Hungarian relations is the one between the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the former Czech Prime Minister and the founder of the ANO movement Andrej Babiš. Founded in 2012, ANO entered the coalition government together with the social democrats led by Bohuslav Sobotka in 2014. In this government, Babiš was the minister of finance. Based on the shared dislike towards Prime Minister Sobotka, a pragmatic alliance has begun to develop between Babiš and the then-president of the country, Miloš Zeman, who has been known for his pro-Russian

pohybu-zbozi-12-2023-metodika-pohybu-zbozi-pres-hranice--279672/ [accessed on March 20, 2024].

¹⁸⁴ Janebová P., "Trends of V4 states' policies in Eastern Europe", 2022, Praha: Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky (AMO), available online at https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/AMO_Trends_2022_web.pdf [accessed on April 3, 2024].

and pro-Chinese political stances.¹⁸⁵ In 2017, ANO won the parliamentary elections and proceeded to build a government with Babiš as the prime minister, first as a minority government, initially without the confidence of the parliament, and later with the social democrats as a junior coalition party. Babiš left the post of prime minister in 2021 after the current coalition government took office and has been the strongest opposition party in the lower house of the Czech parliament ever since, with polls predicting success for ANO in the upcoming European Parliament elections as well as the general elections in 2025.¹⁸⁶

Even though strengthening the V4's common stance on current migration issues had begun when Sobotka was still in the office, the Czech allegiance to the platform only deepened with Babiš in charge. Babiš himself is more pragmatic and, unlike Orbán, does not promote a specific or coherent political ideology, but he instead adjusts the programmatic orientation of the ANO movement rather according to poll results. Ensuring success for his businesses has been an important goal for him, even though he officially placed his assets into trust funds to avoid a conflict of interest as prime minister and later a member of parliament.¹⁸⁷ Foreign and European policy issues have mostly been instrumentalized by ANO and Babiš to be used in the domestic policy competition. The relationship (even friendship, as Babiš reminisces in his campaign book¹⁸⁸) between Babiš and Orbán started due to their shared opposition to the relocation measures as part of the EU asylum and migration policy. Even if himself without an ambition to rebuild the entire state administration to his liking, as has been the case with Viktor Orbán, Babiš was clearly impressed with Orbán's political skills and leadership, i.e., the ability to govern practically without any limitations and exercising personal control over the entire system. Mutual contacts included not only official bilateral visits during Babiš's time in the office of the prime minister but also, e.g., Orbán's

¹⁸⁵ Pokorná Z. "Zeman a Babiš. Popisujeme zlomové okamžiky klíčového spojení", 14 November 2022, *Deník N*, available online at <https://denikn.cz/996278/zeman-a-babis-jak-funguje-spojenectvi-z-rozumu/> [accessed on April 4, 2024].

¹⁸⁶ "Sněmovní volební model duben 2024 | SPD je třetí", *Median*, 2 May 2024, available online at https://www.median.eu/cs/?page_id=31 [accessed on May 5, 2024].

¹⁸⁷ Guryčová K., "Anatomie Babišových svěrenských fondů: premiér je jediný obmyšlený, může být správcem Agrofertu", *Irozhlas*, 15 July 2020, available online at https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/andrej-babis-sverenske-fondy-statut-stret-zajmu-agrofert_2007150530_kno [accessed on April 7, 2024].

¹⁸⁸ Sdílejte než to zakázou, available online at <https://www.sdilejteneztozakazou.cz/homepage/> [accessed on April 7, 2024].

participation in a public event officially organized by the Office of the government of Czechia in Ústí nad Labem shortly before the general elections in 2021 which in fact should have served as a campaign event for ANO and its leader.¹⁸⁹ Mutual meetings took place even after Babiš left the prime minister's office.¹⁹⁰ In 2023, Babiš took part in the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) organized by Orbán in Budapest and hosted conservative but also authoritarian right-wing politicians and personalities. Both politicians usually present their common positions on the desirable development of the EU integration and sustaining the key role of member states, opposition against migration, and the EU policies interfering with the member states sovereignty. Notably, Babiš has not yet fully joined Orbán and others, such as the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, in their pro-Russian rhetoric and criticism of Ukraine, even though ANO has been using some elements of anti-Ukraine rhetoric in the domestic political competition.

Two personalities around Babiš have been especially instrumental in building the ties between him and Orbán, or Czechia and Hungary in general in the time of Babiš's government. Tünde Bartha was the director of the Cabinet of Andrej Babiš at the Ministry of Finance. Later, she served as the Director of the Department of the Prime Minister's Cabinet, and in June 2018, she became Deputy Director of the Section of the Prime Minister's Cabinet after the second government of Andrej Babiš took office. On 28 June 2018, she was entrusted with the management of the Office of the Prime Minister. After Babiš's unsuccessful bid to become the president of Czechia at the beginning of 2023, Bartha left his team and the cooperation with ANO. She was born in the Hungarian-speaking part of Slovakia and studied at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. Fluent in Hungarian, she has been instrumental in facilitating relations between Prime Ministers Babiš and Orbán. According to rumors, in 2021, she was considered as a potential replacement for the then-ambassador of Czechia in Hungary – Tibor Bial – this, however, did not materialize.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Šídlová T., "Orbán v Ústí vzpomínal na Havla. Pak pro Babiše věstil další migrační vlnu", Seznam Zprávy, 29 September 2021, available online at <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/orban-v-usti-vzpominal-na-havla-pak-pro-babise-vestil-dalsi-migracni-vlnu-175887> [accessed on April 14, 2024].

¹⁹⁰ ČTK, "Babiš se opět setkal s Orbánem, na sociální síti mu říká Viktor", České noviny, 7 December 2023, available online at <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2450741> [accessed on April 14, 2024].

¹⁹¹ Šídlová T., "Kritik „trafik“ Babiš chce své superúřednici dohodit post velvyslankyně", Seznam Zprávy, 18 June 2021, available online at <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/kritik-trafik-babis-chce-sve-superurednici-dohodit-post-velvyslankyne-167462> [accessed on April 15, 2024].

Tibor Bial is another important person in this context. A former schoolmate of Bartha's, Tibor Bial was born in Košice and is also fluent in Hungarian. He was appointed a director of the Budapest office of CzechTrade, the Government trade promotion agency of the Czech Republic, in 2012. In 2019, he was appointed ambassador of the Czech Republic to Hungary as a result of the direct involvement of the Office of the government, despite the ambassador nomination being formally in the hands of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and put in connection with Babiš's business interests in Hungary.¹⁹²

Among other political figures in Czechia that Fidesz tries to build relations with is former president Miloš Zeman, whose political clout, however, is largely non-existent after he left office in 2023. Still, Orbán found time to visit Zeman during the Visegrád Group prime ministers summit in Prague at the beginning of 2024, likely trying to attract the attention of Zeman's supporters who align with the voters of ANO and, to a great extent, to other populist subjects in the country.¹⁹³ In the past, there also have been quite warm relations between Fidesz and the Czech far-right party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD).¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, during his last visit to Prague in March 2024, the Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó met with the leader of a populist pro-Russian subject "PRO" Jiří Reichl.¹⁹⁵

Andrej Babiš's business interests in Hungary

Andrej Babiš transferred most of his assets to trust funds in 2017 to avoid a conflict of interest as a finance minister and later prime minister. It mainly concerned the companies Agrofert and SynBiol, including hundreds of affiliated

¹⁹² Ehl M. and Prchal L., "Budoucím velvyslancem v Budapešti má být Tibor Bial. V minulosti byl členem pochybného maďarského řádu", *Hospodářské noviny*, 20 July 2018, available online at <https://archiv.hn.cz/cl-66197680-budouci-velvyslanec-v-budapesti-byl-clenem-pochybného-maďarskeho-radu> [accessed on April 16, 2024].

¹⁹³ Harzer F., Šula M. and Turek M., "Fico a Orbán v Praze: Objekt od Klause, úsměv od Zemana, těžké chvíle s Fialou", *Seznam Zprávy*, 27 February 2024, available online at <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/zahranicni-stredni-evropa-fotky-fica-a-orbana-objeti-od-klause-usmev-od-zemana-tezke-chvile-s-fialou-246698> [accessed on April 17, 2024].

¹⁹⁴ Okamura T., "Moc mě potěšil veřejný komentář maďarského ministra zahraničí Pétera Szijjártó...", Facebook, 20 June 2022, available online at <https://www.facebook.com/tomio.cz/photos/a.661866533824165/5716846101659491/?type=3> [accessed on April 17, 2024].

¹⁹⁵ Kačmár T., "Szijjártó se v Praze setkal s Rajchlem. Hledá spojení pro novou V4, míní politolog", *CNN Prima News*, 23 March 2024, available online at <https://cnn.iprima.cz/szijjarto-se-v-praze-setkal-s-rajchlem-hleda-spojence-pro-novou-v4-mini-politolog-432304> [accessed on April 18, 2024].

companies.¹⁹⁶ In spite of this, there have been suspicions about his persisting control over these assets.¹⁹⁷ Several of those are based in Hungary.¹⁹⁸ An independent Hungarian news portal, Telex.hu, pointed out five significant businesses of Andrej Babiš in Hungary: Agrofert's holding center in Budapest, IKR Agrár Kft., NT Élelmiszerfeldolgozó Kft., Agrotec Magyarország Kft. and Ceres Sütőipari Zrt. and the fact that they were repeatedly recipients of financial support from the Hungarian government. The NT Élelmiszertermelő és Kereskedelmi Kft. (NT Food Production and Trade Ltd.) acquired financial support from the Hungarian government in the amount of 1.7 billion HUF (4,7 million USD) in 2021. A similar amount of money was provided in 2019 and before.¹⁹⁹ Although good political and personal relations between the two prime ministers certainly were not harmful to the support of the particular business (and NT Kft. was visited by the Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó and presented as a good example of creating jobs which certainly can be observed as a prove of political support²⁰⁰), it also aligns with the Hungarian government's ambition to strengthen the domestic food industry, whereby Agrofert's direct competitors also got financial support.²⁰¹

The above-mentioned political, personal, and business ties do not point to an existing influence of the Hungarian government in Czechia. However, given the

¹⁹⁶ Bláha M., "Je Agrofert opravdu „bývalá firma“ Andreje Babiše?", Hlídací pes, 7 February 2018, available online at <https://hlidacipes.org/agrofert-opravdu-byvala-firma-andreje-babise/> [accessed on April 19, 2024].

¹⁹⁷ Guryčová K., "Anatomie Babišových svěrenských fondů: premiér je jediný obmyšlený, může být správcem Agrofertu", Irozhlas, 15 July 2020, available online at https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/andrej-babis-sverenske-fondy-statut-stret-zajmu-agrofert_2007150530_kno [accessed on April 7, 2024].

¹⁹⁸ "Naše společnosti", Agrofert, available online at <https://www.agrofert.cz/nase-spolecnosti?segment=All&country=HU&ajax=1> [accessed on April 19, 2024].

¹⁹⁹ B. M., "Babis arat a magyar agráriumban", Népszava, 27 October 2017, available online at https://nepszava.hu/1144078_babis-arat-a-magyar-agrariumban [accessed on April 19, 2024]; an overview of subsidies provided to Babiš's companies in Hungary between 2008 and 2013 is available on the website of the Investigace.cz project: https://imperiumab.investigace.cz/index.php/P%C5%99ehled_dotac%C3%AD/_Subsidies_overview#Hungary [accessed on April 7, 2024].

²⁰⁰ Zelenka, J., "Agrofert dostal od maďarské vlády stovky milionů korun, Babiš Orbánovi kryje záda v Bruselu," Deník N, 9 October 2021, available online at <https://denikn.cz/718651/agrofert-dostal-od-madarske-vlady-stovky-milionu-korun-babis-orbanovi-kryje-zada-v-bruselu/> [accessed on April 20, 2024].

²⁰¹ Gergely B., "Kormányfőtől kormányfőnek, with love: milliárdos támogatást kapott a magyar államtól a cseh miniszterelnök cége", Telex, 19 April 2021, available online at <https://telex.hu/gazdasag/2021/04/19/kormanyfotol-kormanyfonek-with-love-milliardos-tamogatast-kapott-andrej-babis-cege> [accessed on April 20, 2024].

strong position of the ANO movement in the polls before the European Parliament elections and, crucially, before the 2025 general elections in Czechia, they show some potential vulnerabilities on the Czech side. Should Andrej Babiš or some of his close co-workers come into the role of the prime minister, the factual continuing involvement of Babiš in the management of his companies and his business interests might interfere in his policy-making, even though they are probably rather unlikely to become the main drivers in this regard, given that Agrofert's assets in Hungary only make up a relatively small part of his overall portfolio.

INFORMATION OPERATIONS

In the fall of 2023, Czechia was one of seven countries in which two online advertisements ran, directly sponsored by the Hungarian state and focusing on the issues very important in the Fidesz program – the dangers of illegal immigration to Europe and the role of Hungary as a defender of Europe before these dangers.²⁰² The language of these ads was English, thus making it clear that they were aimed at foreign audiences. The view numbers also suggest significant financial resources invested into promoting these two videos.²⁰³ The potential impact of these advertisements on political developments was significant, particularly in Poland and Slovakia, where they coincided with general election campaigns. In some other countries, local elections were taking place at the same time. In Czechia, however, they did not coincide with any specific event. Nevertheless, the two advertisements together could have reached more than 2 million views, influencing political sentiments in the country. This likely provided additional support to political parties like ANO and SPD, which portray migration as one of the biggest security threats of our time and often link it to Czechia's membership in the European Union.

²⁰² “Hungary will protect its borders”, Magyarország Kormánya, YouTube, 21 September 2023, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juvAaNmZiEM> [accessed on April 21, 2024]; “Illegal migrants at Hungary's border”, Magyarország Kormánya, YouTube, 29 September 2023, available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czRzM_JjWOY [accessed on April 21, 2024]; Panyi S., “How Orbán flooded Central Europe with millions of online ads during election season”, Vsquare, 29 February 2024, available online at <https://vsquare.org/orban-central-europe-online-ads-election-season/> [accessed on April 21, 2024].

²⁰³ Zelenka J., “Maďari chtějí placenou kampaní ovlivnit názor Čechů na migraci. Straší záběry útoků”, E15, 5 October 2023, available online at <https://www.e15.cz/domaci/madari-chteji-placenou-kampani-ovlivnit-nazor-cechu-na-migraci-strasi-zabery-utoku-1410890> [accessed on April 22, 2024].

ECONOMIC OPERATIONS²⁰⁴

The high level of interconnectedness of certain business elites with the governmental / Fidesz circles in Hungary is quite significant and needs to be acknowledged when analyzing the potential involvement of the government and its interests in the business activities of Hungarian companies abroad. That being said, Czechia, especially in comparison to Slovakia, has so far not been a target of the economic operations of the Hungarian government.

When it comes to businesses in Czechia owned by Hungarian subjects, there are three main ones to be mentioned:

- **AERO Vodochody AEROSPACE a.s.**

AERO Vodochody is the largest aircraft manufacturer in the Czech Republic, acquired by HSC Aerojet Zrt. in 2021 (see case study below).

- **Innogy Česká republika, a.s.**

Innogy Česká republika, a company focused on supplying natural gas, electricity and heat, and its two subsidiary companies have been owned by MVM Energetika Zártkörűen Működő Részvénytársaság, i.e. part of the MVM Group (Magyar Villamos Művek Zrt., owned by the Hungarian State through MNV - Magyar Nemzeti Vagyonkezelő Zrt. – the Hungarian National Asset Management company, since 2020). Among other things, MVM is seen as an important instrument for the Hungarian government's outreach to the Balkans, mainly Serbia.²⁰⁵ The company also closely cooperates with Russia's Rosatom on the construction of the Paks II nuclear power plant.²⁰⁶ Former CEO of MVM György Kobor spoke about the acquisition as part of the broader

²⁰⁴ Seven anonymized semi-structured interviews were conducted for this section of the report. In total, 13 persons were approached, of which 6 declined to participate or did not react at all. Respondents include journalists, current or former civil servants working with the particular agenda and experts/ think-tankers.

²⁰⁵ Inotai E., Dragojo Saša and Stojanović M., "MVM charged with finding the power that Hungary needs", BIRN, 27 July 2023, available online at <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/27/mvm-charged-with-finding-the-power-that-hungary-needs/> [accessed on April 22, 2024].

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

strategy of the MVM to become the “leading energy player across the Central and Eastern European region.”²⁰⁷

While in Hungarian ownership, the company has kept a rather low profile without any clear signs of serving as an instrument for projecting the influence of the Hungarian state. According to the annual reports, the company focuses its CSR activities, e.g., on supporting Czech cinematography. Since 2022, it has financially supported organizations assisting Ukrainian refugees coming to Czechia as a result of the Russian aggression.

- **MOL Česká republika, s.r.o.**

In 2014, MOL Group, an integrated, international oil and gas company headquartered in Budapest, Hungary, bought the network of Agip gas stations from the Italian company ENI, thus becoming the second largest operator of a network of gas stations in the Czech market. The 25 % of MOL Group is owned by the Hungarian state. However, there are no signs that the company is serving to promote Hungarian interests in Czechia in any way.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

CASE STUDY: HUNGARIAN INFLUENCE IN THE CZECH DEFENSE INDUSTRY SECTOR - AERO VODOCHODY

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KEY FINDINGS

- AERO Vodochody holds significance in both military and civil aviation technology, making it strategically important for Czechia despite its limited international scale.
- Foreign investment in defense sectors can pose risks when commercial interests align with government policies, potentially leading to technology transfer concerns. The US, EU, and individual member states, including Czechia, have established screening mechanisms to address such risks.
- The acquisition of AERO Vodochody by Hungarian entities close to the Fidesz government raises concerns about transparency and potential influence on company management, impacting international partnerships and technological cooperation.
- The acquisition is part of a broader strategic plan by the Hungarian government to enhance defense capabilities, aligning with the Zrínyi 2026 plan for military modernization and establishing its interconnectedness in the region through business acquisitions.
- While current assessments suggest a focus on defense capabilities rather than political influence, future changes in political dynamics could alter this landscape.

METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

The following text describes the acquisition of AERO Vodochody (AV) by Hungarian businesses close to the Fidesz government and the potential risks stemming from their participation in the management of the company.

From a strategic perspective, the ownership of the majority of AERO Vodochody is probably the most potentially problematic involvement of a subject affiliated with the government of Hungary in the Czech business. The company, founded in 1919, is among the oldest aerospace companies in the world and focuses on the design and manufacture of military and civil aviation technology, employing about 1600 people. Among its products, the L-39NG subsonic jet aircraft, which

is primarily suitable for training, is the most prominent. The company also produces components for other foreign manufacturers. Even despite AV's limited significance in an international comparison, the importance of the company as an element of a strategically important industry is not to be underestimated.

In general, the risk brought about by foreign investment into strategic sectors like defense has been comprehensively described in the academic literature and operationalized by different kinds and levels of measures accepted at the level of nation-states. While in some cases, foreign investment in defense firms can be welcomed by national governments for economic reasons or as a means of deepening strategic partnerships,²⁰⁸ leading to modernization or preventing business closures and job losses, foreign control of a business in this sector can become problematic when *“the foreign company’s decisions become an extension of the government’s policy decisions rather than the company’s commercial interests”*.²⁰⁹ Russia’s and China’s clear ambition to change the rules of the international system while acknowledging the key role of technology in increasing one’s international position caused both the US and the EU – as well as individual EU member states – to establish foreign investment screening mechanisms. Czechia established its screening mechanism in 2021, targeting foreign investments coming from a country outside of the European Union, representing at least a 10% share in a particular company. The Ministry of Industry and Trade is the coordinator of the agenda, while several other institutions are involved in the process - the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of the Interior, the intelligence services, the police, and possibly other affected entities. Investment coming from Hungary as a fellow EU member state, however, does not warrant screening. Despite that, Hungary’s foreign policy and openly declared strategic views on relations with both Russia and China bring a new context to the issue. According to an interviewed expert, there is a possibility of subjecting a transaction to a screening once there is suspicion of a possible involvement of a third country,

²⁰⁸ Kleczka, M., Vandercruysse, L., Buts, C., and Du Bois, C., “The Spectrum of Strategic Autonomy in EU Defence Supply Chains”, *Defence and Peace Economics* (2023):1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2023.2180588>.

²⁰⁹ Larson A. and Marchick D., “Foreign Investment and National Security: Getting the Balance Right”, *Council on Foreign Relations* (2006): 1:33, available online at https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2006/07/CFIUSreport.pdf?_gl=1*u76cbq*_ga*ODg3OTIxNDA1LjE3MTQ5MDMzNjc.*_ga_24W5E70YKH*MTcxNTAwOTc4MS40LjEuMTcxNTAwOTgzOS4yLjAuMA [accessed on May 6, 2024].

but such cases are usually complicated to prove. Thus, the question is, to what extent does the involvement of subjects close to the Hungarian government in the ownership of one of the Czech companies operating in a strategic sector present a risk for Czechia?

This part of the report is mostly based on several anonymized interviews with former or current civil servants, journalists, and experts dealing with the agenda. It also uses relevant media coverage and data from publicly available databases.

AERO'S JOURNEY INTO HUNGARIAN HANDS

In 2006, AERO Vodochody was acquired by the Penta investment group in a privatization procedure. The main reason for selling AV was a financial deficit in the company management, caused i.a. by a significant investment into the development and certification of the L-39NG aircraft and threatening to shut the company down or be forced to sell it in parts. The Hungarian partners seem to have benefitted from the urgency of the transaction.

The original plan was for the company to be acquired by the Hungarian businessman András Tombor together with the Omnipol Group owned by a Czech businessman Richard Háva (participating in the development of the L-39NG), with Omnipol being in charge of the company management. András Tombor was known to be close to the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and had ties in the Hungarian business and political community, e.g., to Orbán's advisor Árpád Habony – as well as ties to Russia.

However, the transaction was never finalized since Tombor was not able to finance it. At this point, another Hungarian businessman appeared on the scene. According to the experts interviewed for this report, Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky was an even closer ally to Viktor Orbán and Árpád Habony than Tombor. With an aristocratic background and experience from the world of finance, he previously participated in Fidesz getting back to power in 2010 and, in 2016, was appointed the ambassador of Hungary to the United Kingdom, from where he returned early (2019) to take care of a casino business in Hungary.

In 2021, 100 % of shares of the company were sold by the Penta investment group to the HSC Aerojet Zrt., of which at the time of the sale, 80 % were in the hands of Hungarian company Aerojet Befektetési Vagyonkezelő Zrt. owned by Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky and 20% by Omnipol. According to the interviewees, it is also clear that Szalay-Bobrovniczky's, as well as previously Tombor's, plan to buy

AV is part of a broader strategic plan of the Hungarian government led by Fidesz to reach out to the wider Central Europe and acquire businesses potentially useful in fulfilling the government's plan on building Hungary's defense capabilities (see below). As such, the financial resources for actually carrying out the transaction were provided by the Hungarian Development Bank. Moreover, at that point, the pressure on finishing the transaction was big from the side of Penta, which contributed to the deal being especially advantageous for the Hungarians.

According to the interviewed experts, another instrumental person in the process of the sale of AV to the Hungarian hands, both to Tombor and Szalay-Bobrovniczky, was Oszkár Világi – an infamous personality, managing the Slovak energy company Slovnaft, a member of the leadership of MOL and a friend of Orbán's.

The sale supposedly raised some security concerns precisely because of the possible technology transfer to Russia, but not to the extent that would ultimately stop the deal. One of the interviewed experts mentioned the personal involvement of Orbán with Babiš to enable the transaction even despite objections from the security apparatus. Another interviewee pointed out a lack of interest of the current Czech government in this particular issue, as well as strategic businesses in the aviation sector. Nevertheless, according to the interviewees, the entire transaction was perceived as not being transparent. Even though Omnipol hoped to maintain a slight majority in the ownership, it was not able to do so because of the simultaneous acquisition of Aircraft Industries, another Czech aircraft manufacturer.

When Szalay-Bobrovniczky ultimately became the minister of defense of Hungary later in 2022, he sold his shares to the CEO of MOL Zsolt Hernádi, who then later sold it to the N7 Holding Zrt., the asset manager of the Ministry of Defense i.e., to the hands of the Hungarian state.²¹⁰

BUSINESS AS USUAL OR A STRATEGIC INSTRUMENT?

²¹⁰ Zubor Z. "Magyar állami háttérű, korábban Szalay-Bobrovniczky Kristóf által tulajdonolt cseh cég gyárthat harci repülőket Ukrajnának", *Atlatszo*, 26 May 2023, available online at <https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2023/05/26/magyar-allami-hatteru-korabban-szalay-bobrovniczky-kristof-altal-tulajdonolt-cseh-ceg-gyarthat-harci-repuloeket-ukrajnanak/> [accessed on May 7, 2024.]

The interviewed experts agree on the fact that Hungarian share in the ownership and a supposed lack of transparent management has been raising eyebrows with some of the Western partners of Czechia, effectively preventing the company from participating in certain important tenders in Western countries or developing, e.g., technological cooperation, which is perceived as detrimental for one of the Czech strategic businesses.

An interesting personal connection is that one of the two members of the board of the AV has, since the fall of 2023, been the above-mentioned former ambassador of Czechia to Hungary, Tibor Bial, closely connected to Andrej Babiš, whose party is likely to win the 2025 parliamentary elections. So far, however, as the interviewed experts agree, the Hungarian owners do not seem to aspire to “micromanage” the business.

That does not mean that the acquisition does not include a strategic component on the side of the Hungarian actors, i.e., essentially the government. The framework of the so-called Zrínyi 2026 plan focuses on military modernization and rearmament until 2026 or 2030, respectively, including strengthening know-how and military technology acquisition and also maximizing the security of supply. That includes investing in arms industries in other Central European states as well as attracting business to Hungary, e.g., through developing cooperation with the German Rheinmetall, building an ammunition factory in Várpalota,²¹¹ or the Czech Colt CZ Group SE, one of the world’s leading manufacturers of firearms, tactical accessories, and ammunition, with which the Hungarian state company N7 Holding Ltd. signed a joint venture agreement in 2022,²¹² following the cooperation under the transfer of technology framework agreement signed in 2018 between Colt CZ Group and the Hungarian state. Acquiring the technology and ability to construct an aircraft akin to the L-39NG fits well into the plan of expanding the capability of Hungary to strengthen its

²¹¹ “Capacity building for ammunition production - Foundation stone laid at new Rheinmetall ammunition factory in Várpalota, Hungary”, Rheinmetall, 17 January 2023 (press release), available online at https://www.rheinmetall.com/en/media/news-watch/news/2023/jan-mar/2023-01-17_capacity-building-for-ammunition-production-in-hungary [accessed on May 6, 2024].

²¹² “Colt CZ group podepsala smlouvu o společném podniku v Maďarsku”, Colt CZ Group, 22 December 2022, available online at <https://www.coltczgroup.com/media-tiskove-zpravy/colt-cz-group-podepsala-smlouvu-o-spolecnem-podniku-v-madarsku> [accessed on May 6, 2024].

own defense production. In fact, in 2022, the Hungarian government decided to purchase twelve L-39NG aircraft for the Hungarian military.²¹³

As several of the interviewees mentioned, expanding Hungary's political influence in the region does not seem to be the main driver behind these activities. At the same time, however, developing business ties in the realm of the defense industry with companies in other countries of the region and the entire EU also aims at guarding the country against severe consequences of non-compliance with the rules set by the EU, mainly regarding democracy and the rule of law., betting on the interconnectedness of domestic political and business elites in these countries. This approach has proved efficient already in the case of the presence of German automotive companies in Hungary and, indeed, has severe consequences for the EU.²¹⁴

Most of the experts interviewed about the case of Aero Vodochody doubt that there are technologies unique enough to be attractive to Russia or other third states. While there is an apparent alignment between Hungary and Russia on certain – important – issues, there does not seem to be cooperation on such a specific level.

CONCLUSION

This situation can, however, change with a change in the political representation of Czechia and the relations between Viktor Orbán and Andrej Babiš having a chance to materialize on the prime ministerial level. Still, when it comes to acquisitions of companies that are key for the defense sector by Hungarian subjects, the primary motivation seems to be the goal of increasing Hungary's defense capabilities and conventional resilience, as well as mitigating consequences of the democracy and rule of law deficits, rather than projecting Hungarian influence in the particular countries. In this context, it is essential to remember that Czechia is a very different case than Slovakia and other countries neighboring Hungary, where acquiring various types of assets is an element of a broader strategy of increasing one's influence.

²¹³ Nagy K., "Hungary to Procure 12 L-39NG Aircraft", European Security and Defence, 21 April 2022, available online at <https://euro-sd.com/2022/04/articles/exclusive/25993/l-39ng/> [accessed on May 6, 2024].

²¹⁴ Panyi S., "How Orbán played Germany, Europe's great power", Direkt 36, 18 September 2020, available online at <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/a-magyar-nemet-kapcsolatok-rejtett-tortenete/> [accessed on May 12, 2024]

CONCLUSIONS FOR SLOVAKIA AND CZECHIA

This report assessed the targets, means, and impact of information, economic and political interventions, and more general power projection of the Hungarian government and affiliated actors in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, respectively. It used concepts such as influence operations to analyze and conceptually explain the findings related to the Hungarian-Slovak and Hungarian-Czech relations. The analysis is based on in-depth expert interviews, OSINT investigations, media content analysis, and the results of a public opinion polling of the ethnic Hungarian minority's media consumption in Slovakia and their perception of the Russo-Ukrainian war and related sanctions. It included an overview of these relations, a content analysis of official Hungarian representatives' public statements and government-affiliated media (specifically in the context of the last Slovak parliamentary elections), and mapped out potential vulnerabilities in one of the most critical strategic public sectors - energy.

Each of the report's sections offered clear key findings and conclusions, as, overall, the mosaic of relations and layers of (potential) influence lying in front of the reader is indeed complex.

The comprehensive examination of Hungary's influence operations in Slovakia underscores a multifaceted strategy that intertwines diplomatic engagement, public diplomacy, information operations, economic influence, and clandestine activities. Diplomatically, Hungary employs assertive tactics and forges strategic alliances, marked by the use of nationalist rhetoric and symbolic gestures like referring to Slovakia as "Felvidék" and showcasing maps of Greater Hungary. The Hungarian Citizenship Act has been pivotal, granting citizenship to ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia and thereby influencing Slovak legislation on dual citizenship, stirring national sentiments and provoking Slovak diplomatic responses. Hungary's diplomatic ties are further exemplified through its support for minority Hungarian parties and strategic cooperation with SMER-SD, reinforcing shared populist and pro-Russian stances that align with Hungarian policy objectives.

On other fronts, Hungary's efforts in public diplomacy through initiatives like funding Hungarian media outlets and cultural institutions via the Bethlen Gábor Fund have been instrumental in fostering a Hungarian national identity among

the minority in Slovakia. These efforts extend to education through entities such as the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, ensuring cultural and political alignment with Hungary. Economically, Hungary has successfully cultivated influence in southern Slovakia by financially supporting local entrepreneurs and enhancing economic and political ties. However, the broader impact on the Slovak national policy remains limited. Covert activities, including espionage and intelligence operations within the Visegrád Group, and Hungary's interactions with Russian officials highlight deeper geopolitical engagements, suggesting Hungary's strategic positioning to leverage influence for more significant regional geopolitical gains. This complex array of activities signifies Hungary's intent to solidify and expand its strategic interests, potentially shaping regional politics and alignments within the EU and challenging consensus on critical EU policies.

Regarding the Orbán government's anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western disinformation narratives, these were shown to be undeniably present in Slovak public discourse during the election campaign between March and September 2023. The report identified 846 articles and Facebook posts containing one or more types of disinformation and government narratives, if only because they quoted Hungarian government politicians or took their cues from Hungarian media, which the government overtly or covertly organizes. This shows that a significant part of the Hungarian minority media in Slovakia is highly politicized, with the susceptibility to Hungarian government narratives provided primarily by local actors, which were used in 2023 to support the candidates favored by the Orbán government.

Regarding the expected vulnerabilities and lack of resilience in the Slovak energy sector - tied to Slovak energy security as such, although there were certain points of alignment between Slovakia and Hungary identified, as well as close personal ties between individuals in both business and politics (active and influential also in the energy sectors), there is no hard evidence of any existing channels or tools of malign influence impacting Slovak strategic energy policies. However, two specific vulnerable spots were identified: firstly, the continuous dependency of the Slovnaft refinery - owned by Hungarian MOL - on Russian crude. Substantial diversification efforts are ongoing, but there remains a likelihood of Slovak-Hungarian close (political) alignment on the future of the EU sanctions on Russian oil delivered by pipeline, with both countries working closely together to lobby for an extension of the exemption and, perhaps, also to veto any further

EU sanctions on Russian energy supplies. Second, there is the ongoing exclusive dependency on Russia's Rosatom regarding nuclear fuel for Slovak and Hungarian nuclear power plants. Although, again, the Slovak diversification efforts are continuing, a potential scenario where these efforts are prolonged and deprioritized, and there is, perhaps, closer alignment with Hungary in prolonging the dependency on Russia is considered relatively likely.

Compared to Slovakia, Hungary's influence operations in the Czech Republic are minimal, with limited involvement in Czech internal affairs. Despite political, personal, and business ties between Czech and Hungarian actors, there's no direct evidence of the influence of the Hungarian government on Czechia. However, due to the strong position of the ANO movement and former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš in election polls and his close political relation with the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his business interests in Hungary, there are potential vulnerabilities. Unlike Slovakia, Czechia hasn't so far been targeted economically by Hungary. Three key Hungarian-owned companies in Czechia include AERO Vodochody, Innogy Česká republika, and MOL Česká republika. The majority ownership of AERO Vodochody by Hungarian HSC Aerojet Zrt. raises strategic concerns, particularly given the limited credibility of the Hungarian management in the eyes of Western partners and the potential involvement of third parties, particularly Russia. However, the Hungarian acquisition of the company seems driven by enhancing defense capabilities and deepening business ties across the region rather than an ambition to exert direct influence. In 2023, Czechia was one of the countries where Hungarian-sponsored online ads focusing on immigration dangers and Hungary's role as a defender of Europe were run, potentially influencing political sentiment, particularly towards parties framing migration as a security threat linked to EU membership. This case reveals the vulnerability not only of Czechia but also to other countries when it comes to political advertising and foreign interference in elections.



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