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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN HUNGARY

EU DISINFO LAB



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
EMBLEMATIC CASES	4
NARRATIVES	5
COMMUNITY	6
POLICY	7

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INTRODUCTION

- Hungary is a special case in Europe, as one of the major sources of disinformation is the government itself (the disinformation researcher Péter Krekó refers to it as an “[Illiberal Information Autocracy](#)”). After the conservative Viktor Orbán was elected prime minister in 2010, his Fidesz party and allied economic interest groups started restructuring the public sphere. New media laws as well as the capture of public and private media service providers led to the creation of a media environment in which the majority of news media providers adjust their narratives to the governing party’s needs and interests. Besides self-censorship and favourable coverage of the government, these outlets often spread and even create disinformation to discredit the political opposition, dissidents, as well as foreign NGOs and Western governments. Besides the captured news media, the government also uses official channels, referenda, so-called “national consultations”, billboards and state advertisements to spread disinformation. Researchers of the think tank [Political Capital](#) argue that the government’s disinformation campaigns have a [visible impact](#) on public opinion on many issues (e.g. attitudes toward the government’s handling of the pandemic, migration, and responsibility for the Russian intervention in Ukraine). Apart from the government and the friendly media, some smaller actors use social media to spread conspiracy theories, political disinformation or promote alternative medicine. [Political Capital](#) estimates that purveyors of health disinformation generate the equivalent of EUR 10 million annually in advertising revenues.
- Since the mid-2000s the neo-Nazi website Kuruc.info is spreading far-right conspiracy theories, Holocaust denial, as well as anti-Roma and anti-LGBTQ content. After the Maidan protests in Ukraine and during the so-called refugee crisis in the mid-2010s, there was [a visible increase](#) in the number of websites posing as news media (the most prominent sites at the time were Meteon.org, Hidfo.ru, Napi Migráns - “Daily Migrant”) but in fact, publishing fabricated stories, mainly related to Russia, Ukraine, and refugees from the Middle East and Africa. At the time, a journalistic investigation found that some of these sites were set up by far-right politicians – while others are seen to fit in the disinformation activities of the Russian Federation, e.g. when the marginal Hungarian-language hidfo.ru site was quoted in the press release of the Foreign Ministry of Russia. Recently, in their assessment, researchers of [Political Capital](#) found evidence of a large number of inauthentic social media profiles engaging with Hungarian-language content and Hungarian users, spreading messages (often generated with online translation software) that resembled the official narrative of the Kremlin. [Disinformation networks](#) run by far-right activists amplify messages originating from Hungarian or Russian media.
- Often disinformation is paired with defamation in government-controlled media. The targets are politicians or other public figures.
- In the mid-2010s disinformation became part of the mainstream. Manipulated news segments in the PSM and government-controlled private media, as well as articles in print and online media, were aiming to show the alleged adverse effects of mass immigration on European societies.
- In the context of the war in Ukraine, the Hungarian media regulator announced that it is going to enforce the EU’s ban on Russian-origin disinformation channels, at the same time, similar pro-Kremlin content was shared on Hungarian blogs, news websites, television stations, and [even the PSM](#). During the election campaign, both the narrative of government members and news outlets included fabricated statements that the Hungarian opposition was aiming for involvement in the war in Ukraine.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

FABRICATED STORIES TO DISCREDIT THE GOVERNMENT'S OPPONENTS

The targets of fabricated stories aired in government-aligned private media and the public service media are often politicians or other public figures. One of the well-known cases is related to the millionaire, former bank- and media-owner Zoltán Spéder, who fell out of favour with the governing party's key politicians, and thus became a target of defamation. He was portrayed as having an affair with an unknown woman, the only proof being the accompanying video footage that showed him greeting his secretary. Other key stories focused on the alleged luxury lifestyle of the Socialist Party's former PM candidate Zsolt Botka and on accusations that the former president of the Jobbik party was a closeted homosexual and/or converted to Islam – in one case the proof presented was an “Allahu Akbar” sticker placed on the politician's car. An example of malinformation (true but misrepresented content) is the television news segment titled “[George Soros Would Have Killed His Mother](#)”: the news was based on a 1990s interview with the billionaire in which he mentioned his mother's suffering as one of the reasons for his support for the right to die in dignity – George Soros' foundations had been supporting civil society and media in the country. Soros also appeared alongside former European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker on governmental information posters [portrayed as the masterminds](#) of a plot against Hungary.

FORCED SETTLEMENT OF MIGRANTS

While news media were publishing made-up stories of the crimes committed by refugees and the adverse societal impact of immigration in Western Europe, the government organised a referendum in which it asked whether citizens agreed with the European Union's plan of the “mandatory resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of the National Assembly”. While the question in the referendum already misrepresented the EU's plans for a relocation quota, the government has started a country-wide poster campaign and sent out more than [4 million brochures](#) to households that detailed the rising criminality in Europe. Politicians often used the term “forced settlement” when talking to media about the reallocation of refugees. The referendum on 2 October 2016 ended up being [invalid](#) due to the low turnout.

THE ONLY EU MEMBER IN THE “PEACE CAMP”

Since the start of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, the Hungarian government and its allied media have taken a strong pro-Russian stance, often fabricating stories or quoting biased sources. The [government-aligned narrative](#) emphasises that both the Hungarian opposition and the governments of other EU countries are interested in the escalation of the war. A key issue is that of the sanctions: according to the mainstream argument, sanctions had almost no impact on the living standards in Russia, while Europeans are still suffering the consequences. The Hungarian government also argues that the country's [high inflation is due to the EU's sanctions against Russia](#) (“[sanctions inflation](#)”). Many misleading or made-up statements were included in the government's [national consultation on sanctions](#) – these [direct marketing letters](#) are sent to households, asking citizens' opinions on current political issues, but many of the problems presented are made-up or at least framed in misleading ways.

NARRATIVES

CRIMINAL IMMIGRANTS

The first set of disinformation narratives was related to refugees and emphasises stereotypes about the inability of Middle Eastern and African people to integrate into European societies. The destruction of Western European cultures and societies was elaborated in detail, while in the Hungarian context the number of possible immigrants was inflated, and the EU's and civil society's role was misinterpreted. Bits of the anti-immigrant narrative bear similarities to the great replacement theory, a conspiracy well-known in far-right circles across Europe, which claims that progressives and the Left are aiming at changing the ethnic composition of European countries.

SOROS-PLAN, EUROPEAN OR AMERICAN INTERESTS

Many disinformation stories deal with foreign interest groups that follow some great masterplan to reshape the world by sponsoring civil society groups, human rights defenders, and environmental activists, getting involved in wars, and meddling in elections. Often these groups are said to have already destroyed Western societies with their social experiments. According to disinformation pieces, these groups want to force Hungary to undergo the same destructive interventions (be it sexual education, gender bending, multiculturalism, or the consumption of insects) that led to the alleged demise of Western Europe. The "Great Replacement" theory appears in mainstream media and political statements, and is treated as a fact.

UKRAINE

Since the early 2010s, disinformation pieces emphasise the Russian government's attempts to safeguard racial purity, masculinity, etc., at the same time narratives about the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and Russia's invasion are almost exclusively built on the dominant Russian narratives. Ukraine and its government are described as a proxy of the United States that shares all the habits that led to the demise of the West: anti-Russian sentiments, the rejection of traditional values, strong LGBTQIA-influence, etc. A specific Hungarian component is the alleged mistreatment of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine (and the argument that members of this community are forced to fight a war that it not theirs). The West and the Hungarian opposition are described as actors that aim at fuelling the conflict; there were also claims that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy was trying to influence the Hungarian election in 2022 by criticising Viktor Orbán for his support for Russia. This narrative had a strong and visible impact on public opinion: 46% of the Hungarian population [believed](#) in April 2022 that the lives of Hungarians in Transcarpathia are constantly being threatened by Ukrainian nationalists.

COVID-19 AND VACCINATION

The same narratives as in many other EU countries were widespread about the allegedly exaggerated risks of COVID-19, the deadly side-effects of vaccination, and the inflated number of deaths. Especially during the first two waves of the pandemic, disinformation was spread with the aim of selling alternative medication or monetising content through online advertising services. Contrary to the previously mentioned narratives, pandemic-related disinformation was not spread by the government and the government-organised media. Still, pro-government sources emphasised the superiority of Hungarian crisis-management measures over other European approaches, even if that meant distorting the facts.

COMMUNITY

- [Lakmusz](#) is the only major standalone fact-checking project in Hungary. It is published by Magyar Jeti and was launched in January 2022 with the support of the French AFP news agency and the European Commission. While being relatively new, it already managed to become a household name in Hungary. Apart from widely shared pieces and narratives of disinformation, the project also fact-checked statements by both governing party and opposition candidates during the 2022 election campaign. It also publishes podcasts, research pieces and guides for internet users to better identify disinformation.
- [Telex](#) is an independent newsroom launched in 2020, after the governmental capture of Index.hu, by journalists that were left without a job. Telex regularly publishes [fact-checks](#) and it also runs the media literacy project Telex Akadémia.
- [Political Capital](#) is one of the leading independent thinktanks of Hungary, one of its key thematic areas is focusing on disinformation and conspiracy theories. Some recent pieces of research in this area focused on the monetisation strategies of conspiracy theorists on social media and the Kremlin-influences narratives in the government-aligned mainstream media. Apart from research, Political Capital also creates guidelines that help identify and counter manipulative narratives.
- [Televele Media Education Association](#) aims at improving the media literacy of young children and at promoting media education in Hungary in strong connection with the education of democratic values. Its DRON – critical media literacy and fake news (2017) project was focusing on socially underprivileged children and youths. In cooperation with the [Mertek Media Monitor](#), Televele also developed e-learning education materials for teachers which attempt to show how the media operates and the role it plays in a democratic society.
- [Idea Foundation](#) is another project focusing on improving media literacy skills of children and youth. It develops school curricula and provides teacher trainings.
- HDMO, the Hungarian hub of the European Digital Media Observatory is a research, media literacy and fact-checking projects which brings together several independent organisations: Political Capital, Magyar Jeti (the publisher of Lakmusz), Agence France-Presse (AFP); ePressPack; Idea Foundation; and Mertek Media Monitor.
- Government-linked activities related to disinformation and media literacy exist, but they are controversial. The Hungarian public service media (Hirado.hu) has launched its own fact-checking service, which is seen as providing politically motivated commentary. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government-aligned think tank Századvég published a lists of news items that it considered as “fake news or statements that are capable of scaremongering and misleading”, which included, among other things, a news articles by government-critical news media, a post on the website of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, social media posts of opposition politicians and an article by the Washington Post. The methodologies developed by the media regulator’s Magic Valley ([Bűvös völgy](#)) media literacy project are seen as high quality, however, their impact is disputed, given that disinformation is key to the government’s communication.

POLICY

- The [Criminal Code](#) deals with false statements, among others, when they mislead authorities or consumers, when they may cause harm to society in a state of public danger, or when they infringe on individual rights. The Civil Code provides protections to the person's reputation and the [Press Freedom Act](#) mentions the right of rectification when untrue statements were made about a specific person in the media. Personalities discredited by fabricated content on government-aligned media often use these remedies.
- In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Criminal Code was changed to react to the state of emergency. Section 10(2) of Act XII of 2020 on the containment of coronavirus stated that people who were seen as spreading "untrue fact or [...] misrepresented true fact" that could undermine the government's response to the pandemic may face prison terms of up to five years. The law was criticised for its vague wording (even legitimate critique of the government's misconduct could be understood as undermining governmental crisis responses) and its possible chilling effects on freedom of expression. The law was repealed after three months.
- In 2023, the Parliament passed a bill on the modification of the Criminal Code, reducing the punishment for defamation and libel. According to critics, this would add to the impunity of pro-government actors that produce smear campaigns.
- A regulatory framework for whistleblowers exists (Act CLXV of 2013 on Complaints and Notifications of Public Interest), the EU Whistleblower Directive was transposed into national law, with significant delay, in 2023. Still, civil society sees the protections for whistleblowers as unsatisfactory.
- There are no significant policy documents related to disinformation. A White Paper published by the Justice Ministry's rather inactive Digital Freedom Committee, which mentions "misinformation" and 'fake news' in the context of elections, and the vaguely phrased National Security Strategy – Government Resolution 1163/2020 – mentions disinformation as a threat, but doesn't specify where it comes from or how to act against it.

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