

Article

How Public Service Media Disinformation Shapes Hungarian Public Discourse

Ágnes Urbán^{1,3,*}, Gábor Polyák^{2,3}, and Kata Horváth^{2,3}

¹ Department of Infocommunication, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

² Department of Media and Communication, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

³ Mertek Media Monitor, Hungary

* Corresponding author (urban.agnes@mertek.eu)

Submitted: 3 May 2023 | Accepted: 24 July 2023 | Published: 19 October 2023

Abstract

The structure of the illiberal Hungarian media system is well documented. Fewer publications address the question of how disinformation is reshaping public discourse in Hungary. The most important feature of disinformation in Hungary is that it is often generated and disseminated by the pro-government media. This is certainly unusual, as in other EU countries it is typically the fringe media which are responsible for spreading disinformation. The Russian war against Ukraine illustrates how the disinformation ecosystem works in Hungary, and it also reveals its devastating impact on democratic public discourse. Public service media play a prominent role in spreading disinformation. We were able to identify several false narratives in the period of the first year since the start of the war. In the first few months of the war, a key element of disinformation that was being spread in Hungary suggested that Ukraine had provoked the armed conflict. Later, the prevailing message was that only Hungary wanted peace, while the Western powers were interested in a continuation of the war. During autumn, the focus of the disinformation campaign increasingly shifted to the EU, disseminating an anti-EU message that was more concerned with the sanctions than the war. The pro-government media constantly told news consumers that the economic difficulties and the rise in energy prices had not been caused by the war launched by Russia but by the sanctions that the EU had imposed in response to the aggression. Public opinion research clearly shows the impact of these narratives on the perceptions of the Hungarian public. The polls readily capture how the Hungarian public's opinion has changed over time. This study is primarily based on a content analysis of the relevant shows of the M1 public television channel, but we have also relied on some insights from public opinion polls to inform our analysis.

Keywords

disinformation; Hungary; propaganda; pro-Russian media; public service media; sanctions; war

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Media Discourses on European Integration: Information, Disinformation, and Polarization” edited by Ana Pérez-Escoda (Antonio de Nebrija University) and Tetyana Lokot (Dublin City University).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio Press (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

The spread of disinformation has long been a major focus of media research. However, this issue has become particularly important in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic and then the Russian invasion of Ukraine have highlighted the importance of credible information and the vulnerability of the democratic public to the spread of disinformation.

After the invasion of Ukraine, Russian state-owned media outlets in Europe were shut down to protect the European market from disinformation about the war. This was obviously the right step, but, unfortunately, there is an EU member state in which Russian propaganda continues to be broadcast without hindrance. This is Hungary, where Russian propaganda is still being intensely disseminated. Furthermore, what makes the situation particularly grievous is that this is the

responsibility not only of Russian but also of Hungarian-owned media companies.

In Hungary, the influence of pro-government investors in the media market is very significant and the narratives they present reach almost the entire Hungarian public (Polyák et al., 2022). The phenomenon of media capture provides an appropriate description of the media situation in Hungary. Its main elements, such as the acquisition of privately-owned media outlets by figures with political connections and the capture of public service media (PSM), are very manifest in Hungary. It is also well documented that media companies acquired by pro-government investors follow a very pronounced pro-government editorial line, and, as a result, large segments of the media are comprehensively unable to fulfil their watchdog functions (Dragomir, 2018, 2019; Griffen, 2020).

The Hungarian media system has been subject to international criticism for years now. However, since the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the role of state-funded propaganda has become even more evident. The pro-Russian narrative is especially pronounced in the government-controlled media. By contrast, in other European countries, pro-Russian propaganda is only disseminated by fringe media and social media (GlobalFocus Center et al., 2022). In Hungary, this narrative is extremely strong in the PSM. The goal of the article is to analyse the role of the PSM in an illiberal media system. In contrast to traditional models, the PSM can play a role not only in representing credibility and professionalism but also in influencing public thinking and bringing about profound social change through the widespread dissemination of disinformation.

In this article, we discuss the role of the PSM in the democratic public sphere, with a special focus on the crucial importance of reliable and credible public media in the fight against disinformation (Section 2). We describe the situation of the PSM in Hungary, highlighting that the presence of propaganda is well documented in content analyses conducted over the past decade (Section 3). Section 4 presents the results of our qualitative research. We analysed the content of the evening news shows broadcast by the public television channel M1 in October 2022 and February 2023, focusing on the energy crisis and the geopolitical situation. We also looked at how public opinion about these issues has changed.

2. The Role of Public Service Media in Combating Disinformation: A Literature Review

2.1. Public Service Media and Democratic Values

PSM are traditionally mandated to inform, educate, and entertain the audience. They have always been expected to provide high-quality content and embody the highest professional standards. Today, these media organisations are struggling to remain relevant in the changing technological environment (Van den Bulck et al., 2018).

Bardoel and Lowe (2007) describe the mission of PSM as embracing an audience-centred perspective. This does not imply abandoning devotion to serving the public as citizens. “On the contrary, it implies serving citizens in all the ways their public interest activities seek to fulfil their social, cultural, and democratic needs” (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007, p. 22). This approach shows that the responsibilities of PSM may be much more complex in the 21st century than in the past.

PSM can guarantee professionalism in the creation of media content, as well as the universal distribution of trustworthy content and services. They can also provide citizens with tools for understanding information disorders and increasing media awareness. Essentially, PSM are expected to regain trust in journalism and educate the public about disinformation (Horowitz & Lowe, 2020).

PSM operate not only in well-established democracies but also in countries where institutional autonomy is weak, and politics directly interferes with the work of PSM. Polyák (2019) clearly identified political pressure and the emergence of a pro-government narrative in the case of Hungary. In Poland, the public media are constantly subject to politicisation and party control. However, after the Law and Justice Party (PiS) came to power in 2015, political pressure became particularly pronounced (Mocek, 2019; Połowska, 2019). The political capture of PSM is also well known in the Western Balkans; Milosavljević and Poler (2018) explain this partly by the small size of the countries and insufficient funding.

2.2. The Challenge of Disinformation From the Public Service Media Point of View

One of the biggest challenges facing the democratic public today is the spread of disinformation. A growing trend of disinformation has been a long-standing phenomenon (Posetti & Matthews, 2018), but the Covid-19 epidemic (Grimes, 2021) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Erlich & Garner, 2023) have rendered the problem particularly visible. It is worth examining what role PSM, which are traditionally viewed as credible, can play in the fight against disinformation.

As Horowitz and Lowe (2020) explain that the historically respected notions of objectivity and truth are no longer broadly accepted, and there is a growing institutional distrust. At the same time, there is also increasing economic pressure since news providers are forced to compete with digital platforms for advertising revenue and attention. The authors use the term “information disorder” to analyse the role of PSM in helping “to distinguish between types of false information; to offer a guaranteed chain in creation, production, and distribution; and to supply content that addresses audiences as citizens instead of targeted audience micro-segments” (p. 179).

Humprecht et al. (2020) built a framework for boosting the resilience to online disinformation. The authors

identified seven political, economic, and media environment factors that weaken resilience. One of the factors is the weakness of the public services media. Boulianne et al. (2022) used the resilience model in their four-country study on misinformation and they examined the role of PSM. The results were controversial. In the UK, consumption of the BBC's media services did not significantly correlate with greater awareness of fake news stories or sharing misinformation. However, it did correlate with increased self-assessed exposure to misinformation. In France, watching France TV did not correlate with an awareness of, exposure to, or the sharing of misinformation. In Canada, consuming CBC News increased awareness of fake news stories and self-assessed exposure to misinformation, but it did not influence the likelihood of sharing misinformation. Overall, the authors could not prove that the consumption of PSM contributed to resilience.

Horowitz et al. (2022) created a three-dimensional framework to assess the role of PSM in countering disinformation. First, governments should ensure the independence of PSM to allow them to play a leading role in responsibly and credibly fighting disinformation. Second, PSM should be encouraged to collaborate with fact-checking groups and to become more involved in civil anti-disinformation efforts. PSM should be allocated the necessary resources for producing quality content, leading media literacy efforts, and innovating their online presence to increase the impact of these efforts.

The fight against disinformation is still not sufficiently prioritised in practice. Cañedo et al. (2022) identified 12 PSM public value components which often appear across the corpus of European national legislations and grey literature based on reports published on PSM websites. The components of PSM's public value were categorised according to their relevance, resulting in three levels of values: (a) essential value, (b) important value, and (c) interesting value. Surprisingly, media literacy was included in the third group of the least relevant components, even though experts point out that it is crucial in combatting disinformation.

3. Disinformation in the Hungarian Public Service Media

3.1. Propagandistic Editorial Line of the Public Service Media

In the last decade, several scandalous cases highlighted the fact that the Hungarian public media disseminates propaganda. Most of these cases led to intense public reactions (Kovács et al., 2021). Studies, including content analyses, have shown that the Hungarian PSM engage in highly biased and propagandistic broadcasting practices.

Already in 2014, at the time when Crimea was annexed by Russia, the presence of the Russian narrative was identifiable in the coverage of the state-owned MTI news agency, which had been integrated into the

PSM system in 2011. As Rácz (2016) found in his content analysis, MTI clearly favoured the Russian narrative. There was even a case of open manipulation when MTI reported news published in the Ukrainian media but distorted the wording in a politically sensitive way. To be fair, some other events in Ukraine, like the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, were reported in a fair way.

The so-called Spot Check (Szűrőpróba in Hungarian) series, published by the Hungarian media watchdog organisation Mertek Media Monitor, chose one public television news show per month and analysed if it complied with the requirements of the media law. Mertek analysed whether the news show was balanced, whether any biased or manipulated content had been published, and whether the editorial practices were biased, focusing only on amplifying the government's communication. The analyses examined manipulative practices in the selection of topics covered and in the way the news blocks were structured and also reviewed whether propagandistic elements appeared in the wording or the visual or audio elements accompanying the individual news items. The news analyses identified a strong bias in favour of the government, as the coverage was practically a verbatim repetition of the ruling party's narrative (Polyák, 2021).

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Parliamentary Elections report also analysed the news shows of the M1 public television channel and found strong bias during the election campaign:

In its editorial coverage, M1 showed bias in favour of the ruling coalition and the government, which received around 61 percent of the news coverage. On average, 96 percent of it was positive in tone, while 82 percent of the coverage devoted to the opposition was negative. This is at odds with OSCE commitments and international standards on fair access to the public broadcaster's programmes and undermined the public's corresponding right to receive media output. (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2018, p. 20)

The findings concerning the coverage of the 2022 election campaign were very similar. The public media news channel M1 displayed a clear bias in favour of the government and the governing party, Fidesz, by allocating 50% of political news coverage to the government and 5% to the ruling party Fidesz; the vast majority of these news were positive towards the government and Fidesz. There was no clear distinction between the coverage of the government and the ruling party. The opposition coalition received 43% of the total coverage, and this coverage was overwhelmingly negative. Reports were often laced with comments and unsubstantiated allegations attacking the opposition candidate (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2022).

Particularly strong evidence of bias towards the governing party was manifest in an audio recording of an

internal editorial meeting before the 2019 European Parliament elections. Balázs Bende, a senior PSM editor, instructed journalists about the editorial guidelines, and the audio recording was leaked to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Referring to the election campaign, Bende said “I’m sure no one here will be surprised to hear that this institution does not support the opposition list.” He was also very clear about the expectations from his colleagues: “Whoever is in charge must produce content according to the appropriate narrative, method, and direction, mostly about migrants and Brussels.” The censorship was readily apparent when he said that: “If anyone is not prepared to work under these conditions, he is free to file his resignation immediately” (Keller-Alánt, 2020).

The PSM in Hungary do not play the same role as their counterparts in well-established democracies. The main goal of the Hungarian PSM is not to seek the truth and present reality but to serve the government’s communication objectives.

3.2. Disinformation as a Topic in the Hungarian Public Service Media

Disinformation does appear as a topic in the Hungarian public media. However the Hungarian public media do not cooperate with independent fact-checking organisations at all, and their references to disinformation serve to build a political narrative rather than furthering actual fact-checking.

Analysing the *Hirado.hu* news portal of the Hungarian PSM, Bódi et al. (2022, p. 25), concluded that before 2020, fake news:

Was presented in the articles of *Hirado.hu* primarily as a problem specific to online communication, with its potential political and social implications, as well as the methods for countering it. In 2020, this changed, and the accusation of fake news emerged as a communication instrument against the domestic independent media, the opposition, and the international liberal elite.

In other words, in the Hungarian public media, the Covid-19 pandemic brought about a change in communication as a result of which the concept of “fake news” is used to stigmatise actors critical of the government.

A section called “Fake News Figyelő” (Fake News Observer) is still available on *Hirado.hu*. Ostensibly, this Fake News Observer is a fact-checking site, but it is rather one-sided in its selection of topics. The news items on the site were published between 1 March and 20 September 2022. Most articles were published during the campaign period leading up to the April 2022 parliamentary election, which suggests that the series was essentially used for political and campaign purposes. The vast majority of the news items sought to deny information about Ukrainian casualties, demonstrate the oppo-

sition’s alleged pro-war stance, and respond to claims in non-government media. Regardless of whether the fact checks published on the site are well-founded, it is clear that the purpose of the effort overall is not to combat disinformation but to reinforce the government narrative.

3.3. Editorial Line in the Days Following the Outbreak of the War

Just like the public opinion in other countries, the Hungarian public, too, was taken by surprise when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The media play a major role in such situations because everyone is trying to keep up with events and waiting for the news to be explained. This is a huge responsibility for journalists. During this period, quality media everywhere sought to shed light on the unfolding events by consulting geopolitical analysts and international experts. However, the dynamics in Hungary were fundamentally different, and the public service news is a case in point.

Already in the days following the start of the war, starting on February 24, 2022, the PSM featured a heavily pro-Russian narrative. This was all the more surprising since at the time, the government party politicians were still silent on the issue. They typically did not make any comments siding with Russia. Nevertheless, the M1 news channel started featuring pro-Russian “talking heads” who clearly advanced the Kremlin’s narrative.

A so-called national security expert, George Spöttle, a former German police officer, compared the Ukrainian people to the Volkssturm of Nazi Germany. György Nógrádi, the government’s other favourite national security expert, said that “since the creation of Ukraine in 1991, the Ukrainian leadership has been either pro-Russian or pro-Western, neither of which was very fortunate. I have never seen a truly pro-Ukrainian leadership” (Urbán, 2022). The third expert, Ágnes Bernek Daunerné, who was not previously known in mainstream media, simply blamed NATO for the situation in Ukraine (Urbán, 2022).

Another striking development was that the official Hungarian news agency, MTI, which operates as part of the PSM network, also followed the Kremlin’s narrative in avoiding the use of the term war in the first days of the invasion. Their use of the term “Russian military operation” clearly served to relativise the gravity of the situation and glossed over the fact that, in reality, Russia had launched a war against one of her neighbours (Szalay, 2022).

Although the reaction of the PSM was downright shocking, some optimistically believed that they were simply professionally not up to handling this situation and would correct their mistakes over time. In the case of MTI, this did happen to some extent—In response to the press scandal that followed in the wake of their use of the term “military operation,” they started calling the war a war. Still, on the whole, the PSM has continued to present the relevant geopolitical developments

in an extremely biased manner. The past year has shown that the daily news show of the M1 news channel hews closely to the government's communication, which—unlike its paralysis in the first days of the war—openly espouses a pro-Russian stance in the international arena as well (Kazharski, 2023). The PSM and the pro-government private media have significantly shaped Hungarian public opinion on this issue since the start of the war.

4. Empirical Research

4.1. Methodology

The research analysed the main news programme of the public service channel M1, which starts at 19:30 pm. The analysis covered two periods, 1–14 October 2022 and 1–14 February 2023. The content analysis focused on narratives dealing with the geopolitical situation, including the energy crisis and its economic consequences. We analysed how public service news programmes captured the complexity of the situation, how they presented different interpretations, and to what extent they helped their viewers understand the current processes. During the analysis, key messages were identified, with a particular focus on regularly repeated messages.

The choice of time periods was a conscious decision. In October 2022, energy prices were very high across Europe, and in Hungary, too, the question of what challenges the next winter would bring loomed large. In February 2023, it was already clear that the winter period had been basically well managed in the European countries, and no dramatic situation had developed. At the same time, it was also apparent at that point that Hungary experienced a very high inflation rate, and the domestic economy was doing considerably worse than in other EU member states.

We also looked at opinion poll data published between autumn 2022 and spring 2023, which show the changes in public opinion in Hungary. The polling data are from public sources.

4.2. The Presentation of the Geopolitical Situation in October 2022

The first 14 days of October 2022 marked an especially important period in the government's communication. For one, because of the high energy prices and the looming winter, a sense of uncertainty prevailed at the time. The economic prospects were hazy and the government needed to come up with a narrative framework for the difficulties that the Hungarian population was likely to be confronted with in the following months. Second, the prime minister had just announced at the end of September that a so-called national consultation would be launched on the sanctions against Russia. This was when the topics of the planned consultation and its exact

questions were publicly introduced (Cseke & Horváth Kávai, 2022).

Almost every evening news show during the period investigated featured a news block called "Energy Crisis," which generally lasted 10–15 minutes and reviewed the European energy situation. This block devoted a lot of airtime to high energy prices, emphasising that the public was in distress in many countries. On the one hand, it was of course true that prices were rising across Europe and beyond, and that there was a great deal of uncertainty as to what the winter would bring. Nevertheless, the public service news show substantially overstated how dramatic the situation was. They claimed, for example, that many people in Denmark sold their houses and "there were people who sought to make it through the winter using camping sites" (October 6); in Germany, "living standard deteriorated dramatically," and in fact "public lighting had been turned off in many major cities" (October 9), while every "Finnish household had to brace itself for potentially sustained electricity outages" (October 14).

The news programme presented people's everyday difficulties in an exaggerated form. This had no real news value, it merely tried to emphasise the difficulties faced by Western societies by highlighting banal situations. Thus, for example, the news programme claimed that "French public television recommended that people use their mobile phones less" due to the energy crisis (October 4); in Germany, the revenues of pawnshops were rising (e.g., on October 12, a woman was shown pawning her vacuum cleaner); and in Belgium "a growing number of people stopped showering at home and instead did so at work, at public swimming pools or gyms" (October 13). The public service news show frequently presented the difficulties faced by the public in other countries by airing locally produced reports that were obviously taken from foreign news coverage. Thus, during the period investigated, viewers of the Hungarian public service news shows learned about a Belgian bakery that was shut down; they saw a report on the Danish school where it was colder than usual, and about a French public swimming pool where the water was cold. The news show also repeatedly covered demonstrations in major foreign cities.

Not once during the period examined did anyone in the news say that Russia—or Putin specifically—bore responsibility for the high energy prices. In fact, the public service news show clearly blamed Brussels for the problems in the energy markets. It is important to stress that the government's communication had been talking about "Brussels" for a long time as part of an effort to steer public sentiments against the EU. They presumably do this because the EU has positive connotations for many, while Brussels had started out as a basically neutral term and is now increasingly perceived as negative. "Brussels sanctions" was a recurring term on the news show, as in "Brussels' sanctions don't work" (October 2), "the ill-conceived Brussels sanctions have

backfired” (October 3), “the sanctions hurt Europe a lot more than Russia” (October 5), and “Brussels sanctions have no regard whatsoever for European interests” (October 11).

Naturally, the public service news show did not only report on the difficulties but also on the presumed solutions, which were all without fail policies introduced by the government. Hence, the government’s firewood price-cap programme was repeatedly discussed, and it was pointed out that, in European comparison, the Hungarian population had fared best during the crisis: “Hungarian families are the safest in all of Europe” (October 8); “Hungarians still pay the lowest energy prices” (October 11); “while utility prices are increasing everywhere, in Hungary they are still cheaper” (October 12). Those news consumers who informed themselves only from PSM might well have perceived that the reality they lived in was an alternative one of sorts, namely one in which everything is all right in Hungary while the populations of other countries are suffering and many people are not even sure if they will make it through the winter season.

The public service news show was an early indicator that Hungary would chart its own distinct foreign policy course on the war, separate from the other members of the Western alliance system. The Hungarian prime minister said that to “achieve peace, Russia and the United States need to negotiate directly with one another” and that “Hungary is pro-peace, and as Hungarians, our interest is that peace prevails as quickly as possible” (October 11). The viewers were not necessarily aware of how much of an outlier the Hungarian government’s position was within the EU, as a report published on the next day said that “the support for the prime minister’s stance within the European Council seems to be rising steadily” (October 12). The Hungarian foreign minister, Péter Szijjártó, went even further when he asserted that “we are fully invested in preserving the energy cooperation between Russia and Hungary” (October 13). This was also the time when the government’s tone had become critical of the United States; this critical tone subsequently emerged as a dominant theme in Hungarian foreign policy in 2023. Viktor Orbán said that “something is amiss, and we need to ask our American friends what is going on here and who profits from this issue because we Europeans are definitely losing and it looks to us like you’re winning” (October 14).

The biased editorial practices of the public television channel manifested themselves in several ways. They repeatedly referred to the “left,” always in a negative context, such as “the dollar-left in Hungary [a reference to foreign funding that the opposition had received during the campaign for the 2022 election] has fully embraced the stupid decisions of the Brussels’ elite” (October 4). At the same time, not once did the PSM ask Hungarian left-wing politicians to speak about their own solutions to the issues raised. Only government party politicians were asked to comment on these issues, and the narra-

tive conveyed in the coverage also reflected their positions. The same was true of the experts invited to comment, as only well-known pro-government think tanks were given such opportunities.

Thus, the PSM news unequivocally and very visibly followed the government’s narrative in its coverage of the energy crisis. That is, they claimed that the sanctions imposed by Brussels are the root cause of the problems and that life across Europe had become extremely hard while the Hungarian government shielded the local population from the hardships—This was highlighted every day in the public service news show. Despite the lies in the narrative above, the constant reiteration of the message and the deliberate disregard for opinions that disagreed with it might well have convinced many viewers that this was the reality.

4.3. The Presentation of the Geopolitical Situation in February 2023

It emerges clearly from the February 2023 analysis that the Hungarian public television continues to cover the geopolitical situation based on three central narratives. For one, it claims even more openly than before that there is a clear link between inflation and the sanctions imposed by the EU. Furthermore, while it presents the government as pro-peace, it continues to portray the opposition as a supporter of the war. Finally, there is an increasing presence of anti-Ukrainian attitudes in its coverage. The latter manifests itself in citing Russian sources without adding commentary or context, and in highlighting inhumane actions allegedly committed by the Ukrainian armed forces and the presumably staggering losses suffered by the latter.

According to the M1 news programmes, Brussels bears the sole responsibility for the sanctions. The EU and the sanctions imposed by the latter are consequently also responsible for the overwhelming majority of negative repercussions stemming from the war. In this context, the public service news coverage has also continued the trend of exclusively inviting government party politicians or experts with ties to Fidesz to comment on war-related issues. In addition to the existing, continuously voiced references to “sanction-triggered inflation” (February 2, 6, 10) and the “energy crisis” (February 1, 2, 3, 14), a reference to the “energy catastrophe” (February 2) was introduced as a new element in the coverage of the war. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was often quoted on the issue. Thus, he informed the viewers of public service television that “it is futile to expect Brussels to step up and help, the only thing coming from [Brussels] are sanctions” (February 1) and that “this policy of sanctions constitutes a step towards war” (February 7). All government party politicians who were asked to comment proffered the same narrative. Thus, Fidesz MEP Tamás Deutsch said that “the EU’s sanctions policies hurt Europe more than Russia” (February 2). And Deputy Minister Csaba Dömötör noted

that “energy prices are high because of the sanctions, and the energy prices in turn cause record inflation levels” (February 4).

The other central message disseminated by public television—in addition to the core message that the record-high inflation is due specifically and exclusively to the sanctions introduced in response to the war—is the everyday struggle of other European countries with inflation. Slovakia “continuously confronts the increase in the price of basic foodstuffs. The numerous closings could lead to a shortage of basic foods” (February 1); “the government asks Germans to save continuously” (February 3); “the prices of district heating have skyrocketed in Slovenia” (February 4); “experts say that petrol prices increase and shortages could emerge in Austria” (February 5); and, in Ireland, “almost 40% of families reported skipping meals or reducing portions in order to be able to feed their children properly” (February 12).

Opposition politicians still hardly get any opportunities to comment, the editorial policy is very biased in this respect. They are only featured as “Brussels’ accomplices,” in the vein of “the dollar-left continues to support the sanctions that cause the energy crisis” (February 3–5, 10, 12–14). And if they do get the chance to speak on the inflation issue, it is accompanied by curious commentary: “The same dollar-left talking about inflation now is the one that takes money from foreign powers to mindlessly support every sanction Brussels imposes” (February 10). To understand the context, we need to add that, starting in autumn 2022, the government’s communication began to feature the term “dollar-left,” which creates the impression that opposition politicians, independent media, and NGOs work as foreign agents of sorts, funded from abroad.

Neither blaming Brussels nor casting opposition politicians in a negative light is a new phenomenon. We already reported on this in the previous part of this study. In reality, this has been a dominant theme in PSM television’s coverage for years now. However, a new element in our February 2023 analysis is that pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives are now directly featured in the coverage.

One of the dominant methods of conveying pro-Russian narratives is that comments by the Russian side and its representatives are broadcast in the news without any explanation or commentary. Examples include a statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claiming that “Russia strives to resolve the conflict peacefully” (February 2) or Putin’s speech, in which he said that “the most important thing is to protect the areas near the border against Ukrainian attacks; the residents have had to be relocated from several counties on account of the immediate threat to their lives” (February 2) and that “German tanks are threatening Russia once again” (February 2). Another indication of the overall trend is the use of vocabulary that the Russian side tends to use, such as telling viewers that cities in the Donetsk region are being “liberated” (February 1 and 13) and speaking

of American “terror attacks” in the context of the North Stream pipeline.

Even more striking is the negative presentation of the Ukrainian armed forces. A recurrently featured item—and a long one, too, as compared to other news segments—concerned alleged compulsory recruitment practices in Ukraine, “which some consider manhunts” (broadcast on February 3, 4, 5, 8, 11, and 12). Using recordings made with phones as illustrations, one news segment claimed that “many recounted the experience that [the recruiters] presented blank draft letters when they wanted to take someone;” that “uniformed men scour the streets in packs;” and that “there is a veritable manhunt for men between the ages of 18 and 64 in Ukraine.” The report further mentioned that they have to use footage from Telegram—a questionable source—because the freedom of the press is being violated in Ukraine. The latter is also allegedly the explanation for why Ukrainian television has referred to the videos in question as “part of the Russian propaganda efforts” (February 8).

In both periods under review, the M1 television channel presented a pro-Russian narrative, and in February 2023 it was already openly using elements of Kremlin propaganda.

4.4. The Impact of the Pro-Russian Communication

There is a strong correlation between the political narrative conveyed by the PSM and the evolution of public opinion polls on the issues touched upon here. However, in looking at the causal link, two factors need to be taken into account. For one, causality is not unidirectional. That is, it is not necessarily the PSM that influences the audience’s worldview. On the whole, we can assume that the viewers of the heavily pro-government public service television are more likely to be persons whose political views lean in this direction anyway, and their expectations influence the editorial line. At the same time, for many, the PSM were obviously not the only source of information about the government’s political narratives since a majority of privately-owned media corporations are also under the effective control of the ruling party (Polyák et al., 2022). It is hence impossible to capture the impact or quantify the influence of any single media outlet. What is nevertheless worth investigating is how the propagandistic editorial practices of the governing party media reshape the way people think and how this is reflected in the trends we see in the polls. We chose the M1 public television channel because it is accessible all across Hungary, the brand is well known domestically, and the institutional governance ensures the dissemination of the governing party’s communication messages.

The data published by the reputable pollster Medián in October 2022 showed that while in April 2022, 41% of respondents had said that they strongly disagreed with the sanctions imposed on Russia; by October, this ratio had surged to 52%. In light of the government’s

communication on the issue, it is hardly surprising that the public is heavily divided along partisan lines: The October 2022 poll showed that 81% of the government party (Fidesz) supporters rejected the sanctions, while only 26% of opposition voters said the same (Szurovecz, 2022).

In 2022, the think tank Political Capital published a survey in which it also looked at how informed respondents were. This was also of pre-eminent importance because the government's communication on the issues discussed here and its actual policies were diametrically opposed. Even though the Orbán government had voted for all the eight EU sanctions packages adopted up to that point, 36% of the total sample and 50% of Fidesz supporters in the sample thought that this had never happened (Political Capital, 2022). "The misguided Brussels" sanctions were a regularly recurring element of the public service news coverage, along with the claim that the sanctions caused the surge in European energy prices. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many were misled on the subject of the sanctions since it would have followed logically from the government's position for the Hungarian government to vote against the sanctions it deemed as harmful.

The Publicus Institute looked at the attitudes concerning the war in several studies, and the results were publicly disseminated as part of a conference presentation. According to these results, between April and October 2022, there was a significant shift in public opinion concerning the question "Do you think it is possible to nurture good relations with both the EU and Russia simultaneously?" In April, respondents were heavily divided on this issue, with 45% saying yes—that is they believed this was possible—and 47% saying no, "Hungary needs to decide where it wants to belong." By October, the public mood had changed, with only 30% believing that a balance was possible and 65% saying that Hungary needed to make a choice. This is not surprising in and of itself. However, crucially, the opinions of Fidesz voters did not change at all between April (52 vs 38%) and October (51 vs 39%). In both surveys, a few per cent of respondents could not or did not want to answer the question (András, 2022). It is striking that even as the Hungarian public's opinions shifted as events changed, the opinions of Fidesz voters were completely frozen. It appears that geopolitical developments have not had any impact whatsoever on the perceptions of Fidesz voters.

According to data published by the Publicus Institute, between December 2022 and February 2023, the share of the Hungarian public who believed that the sanctions imposed by Brussels had caused food prices to rise increased from 47% to 63%. During the same period, the share of those who believed that the government's economic policies were to blame dropped from 74% to 65%. The fact that in February 2023, 96% of government party supporters believed that Brussels sanctions were responsible for rising prices, while only 26% of opposition supporters shared this assessment, reveals a lot

about the state of political polarisation in Hungary today (Varga, 2023).

A poll conducted by Medián in February 2023 also confirmed that there are vast differences between citizens' opinions and these correlate heavily with partisan preferences. Thus, the voters who supported the parties that were part of the joint opposition list in the 2022 election believed overwhelmingly that corruption and the government's economic policy caused the economic crisis (92 and 91 points, respectively, on a 100-point scale). Fidesz voters, by contrast, clearly identified the sanctions (77 points) as the cause of the crisis, closely followed by the war (76 points). Furthermore, government party voters overwhelmingly thought that Fidesz's economic policy was least likely to blame for the economic situation; it received a score of only 29 points (hvg360, 2023).

5. Conclusion

The information provided by the Hungarian public media about the war and its consequences for Hungary constitutes deliberate disinformation. The PSM uncritically follow the narrative proffered by the Hungarian government, while the positions of the Western alliances or the Hungarian opposition, respectively, which contradict the government's positions, are either not presented at all or are disseminated in a distorted form.

The anti-EU narrative has emerged as the most dominant narrative in public communication about the war in Ukraine. This narrative is an extension of the "Brussels" antipathy, which has been a mainstay of government and PSM communication for years before the war broke out. This communication blames the presumably distant, invisible, elusive, imperial, and bureaucratic enemy for the new difficulties. At the same time, it is an important element in the efforts to absolve Russia and the Russian political leadership of responsibility for the current problems. Instead of Russia and Putin, "Brussels" is presented as the source of the problems that Hungary is facing as a result of the war and the government's policies.

The Hungarian public media has used the portrayal of the consequences of the war to build a narrative in which the citizens of Western Europe face dramatic difficulties in their daily lives while the Hungarian government successfully shields the Hungarian people from the negative repercussions. This simultaneously reinforces anti-Western sentiments and the national consciousness of a nation that is supposedly more successful than the West, while the Hungarian government and the Hungarian prime minister are presented as heroically defending the interests of the Hungarian people; in the pro-government media's presentation, this makes them deserving of unconditional respect. It is important to point out that even though it is true that the energy crisis has caused difficulties all over Europe, the Hungarian public media have failed to report on the cost-of-living crisis in Hungary, even as they grossly exaggerated the severity of the situation in Western Europe.

The Hungarian PSM's portrayal of the prevailing situation in Hungary and Europe contradicts the facts on the ground. The geopolitical reality is completely different from what is presented in the public media, while the Hungarian economy is performing abysmally, and Hungarian consumers struggle with the highest inflation rate in the EU.

The coverage of the war also features a constantly recurring narrative with a domestic political dimension: While the government is allegedly doing everything it can for peace, the opposition is portrayed as interested in prolonging and expanding the war, which is in line with Western interests. In other words, the opposition serves "Western" interests rather than the Hungarian national interests, putting the Hungarian people in danger.

All this has a clear impact on Hungarian society. As research has shown, although "the majority believe that Hungary's place is in the West, over the past two years the share of those who would prefer closer ties with Russia has doubled" (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023, p. 2). This is a dramatic development at a time when Russia has invaded a neighbouring country (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023).

In developed democracies, the PSM are an important part of the media system, they serve as guarantees of reliability and credibility. Their work is of particular importance in the fight against disinformation. The situation is completely different in Hungary, where public media are part of the problem rather than the solution. Public service news programmes constantly spread propaganda and disinformation that is obviously identifiable as serving Russian interests. Research has shown that this has had a spectacular impact on Hungarian public opinion. The Hungarian government's foreign policy is visibly pro-Russian, as is the editorial practice of the PSM.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Gábor Győri for his comments that helped us improve the study and the translation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- András, P. [Pulai]. (2022, December 10). *Hogyan (nem) tudsz harcolni az álhírek és a propaganda ellen!* [How (not) to fight against fake news and propaganda!] [Video]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1384588698946275>
- Bardoel, J., & Lowe, G. F. (2007). From public service broadcasting to public service media: The core challenge. In G. F. Lowe & J. Bardoel (Eds.), *From public service broadcasting to public service media* (pp. 9–26). Nordicom.
- Bíró-Nagy, A., Juhász, V., Szászi, Á., & Varga, A. (2023). *The world through Hungarian eyes: Foreign policy attitudes in Hungary in 2023*. Policy Solutions. https://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/Policy_Solutions_The_World_Through_Hungarian_Eyes_EN_summary.pdf
- Bódi, J., Polyák, G., & Urbán, Á. (2022). Az álhír fogalmának átalakulása a közszolgálati híradóban. A *Hirado.hu* álhírekkel kapcsolatos tartalmainak elemzése, 2010–2020 [The changing concept of fake news in public service news. An analysis of *Hirado.hu*'s content on fake news, 2010–2020] *Médiakutató*, 23(1), 7–26. https://www.mediakutato.hu/cikk/2022_01_tavasz/01_az_alhir_fogalmanak_atalakulasa.pdf
- Boulianne, S., Tenove, C., & Buffie, J. (2022). Complicating the resilience model: A four-country study about misinformation. *Media and Communication*, 10(3), 169–182. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i3.5346>
- Cañedo, A., Rodríguez-Castro, M., & López-Cepeda, A. M. (2022). Distilling the value of public service media: Towards a tenable conceptualisation in the European framework. *European Journal of Communication*, 37(6), 586–605. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026732312211090777>
- Cseke, B., & Horváth Kávai, A. (2022, September 29). Orbán announces "national consultation" on energy sanctions—But what is this exactly? *Telex*. <https://telex.hu/english/2022/09/29/orban-announces-national-consultation-on-energy-sanctions-but-what-is-this-exactly>
- Dragomir, M. (2018). Control the money, control the media: How government uses funding to keep media in line. *Journalism*, 19(8), 1131–1148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917724621>
- Dragomir, M. (2019). *Media capture in Europe*. Media Development Investment Fund. <https://www.mdif.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/MDIF-Report-Media-Capture-in-Europe.pdf>
- Erlich, A., & Garner, C. (2023). Is pro-Kremlin disinformation effective? Evidence from Ukraine. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(1), 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211045221>
- GlobalFocus Center, Political Capital, European Western Balkans, & Reporters' Foundation. (2022). *Propaganda without borders: A study of pro-Kremlin propaganda among far-right and radical voices in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Serbia*. https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/Zinc_XFR%20Disinfo_Report_Final%20report_221010.pdf
- Griffen, S. (2020). Hungary: A lesson in media control. *British Journalism Review*, 31(1), 57–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956474820910071>
- Grimes, D. R. (2021). Medical disinformation and the unviable nature of Covid-19 conspiracy theories. *PLoS ONE*, 16(3), Article e0245900. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245900>
- Horowitz, M., Cushion, S., Dragomir, M., Manjón, G. S., & Pantti, M. (2022). A framework for assessing the role

- of public service media organizations in countering disinformation. *Digital Journalism*, 10(5), 843–865. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1987948>
- Horowitz, M., & Lowe, G. F. (2020). Public service media in the era of information disorder: Collaboration as a solution for achieving universalism. In P. Savage, M. Medina, & G. F. Lowe (Eds.), *Universalism in public service media* (pp. 175–190). Nordicom.
- Humprecht, E., Esser, F., & Van Aelst, P. (2020). Resilience to online disinformation: A framework for cross-national comparative research. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 493–516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219900126>
- hvg360. (2023). *Medián: A Fidesz-szavazók is tudják, hogy válság van, de jó részük tagadja a súlyosságát* [Median: Fidesz voters, too, know that there is a crisis, but a significant portion of them denies its gravity]. https://m.hvg.hu/360/20230329_Median_kozvelemeny_kutatas_gazdasagpolitika_valsg_korrupcio_szankciok_haboru_Covid_idojaras
- Kazharski, A. (2023). Do ostriches live in Central Europe: Normalizing the Russian attack on Ukraine in the Visegrád Four. *Journal of Regional Security*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs18-43201>
- Keller-Alánt, Á. (2020, November 13). Twisting the truth? How editors manipulate news coverage at Hungary's state broadcaster. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/twisting-the-truth-how-editors-manipulate-news-coverage-at-hungary-s-state-broadcaster/30949003.html>
- Kovács, I., Polyák, G., & Urbán, Á. (2021). *Media landscape after a long storm: The Hungarian media politics since 2010*. Mertek Media Monitor. <https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/MertekFuzetek25.pdf>
- Milosavljević, M., & Poler, M. (2018). Balkanization and pauperization: Analysis of media capture of public service broadcasters in the Western Balkans. *Journalism*, 19(8), 1149–1164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917724629>
- Mocek, S. (2019). A map of political discourse regarding Polish public service media. In E. Połońska & C. Beckett (Eds.), *Public service broadcasting and media systems in troubled European democracies* (pp. 195–226). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. (2018). *Hungary: Parliamentary elections 8 April 2018*. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/385959.pdf>
- Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. (2022). *Hungary: Parliamentary elections and referendum 3 April 2022*. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/6/523568.pdf>
- Political Capital. (2022). *A Fidesz-szavazók fele szerint a kormány nem szavazta meg a szankciókat—Kutatás az orosz-ukrán háborúval kapcsolatos attitűdökről* [Half of Fidesz voters believe that the Hungarian government did not vote for the sanctions—A survey of public attitudes concerning the Russian-Ukrainian war]. https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=3107
- Połońska, E. (2019). Watchdog, lapdog, or attack dog? Public service media and the Law and Justice government in Poland. In E. Połońska & C. Beckett (Eds.), *Public service broadcasting and media systems in troubled European democracies* (pp. 227–255). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Polyák, G. (2019). Media in Hungary: Three pillars of an illiberal democracy. In E. Połońska & C. Beckett (Eds.), *Public service broadcasting and media systems in troubled European democracies* (pp. 279–303). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Polyák, G. (Ed.). (2021). *Four shades of censorship: State intervention in the Central Eastern European media markets*. Mertek Media Monitor. https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Mertek-fuzetek_19.pdf
- Polyák, G., Urbán, Á., & Szávai, P. (2022). Information patterns and news bubbles in Hungary. *Media and Communication*, 10(3), 133–145. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i3.5373>
- Posetti, J., & Matthews, A. (2018). *A short guide to the history of "fake news" and disinformation*. International Center for Journalists. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/A%20Short%20Guide%20to%20History%20of%20Fake%20News%20and%20Disinformation_ICFJ%20Final.pdf
- Rácz, A. (2016). Hungary: Where the government-controlled media was the main entry point for Russian metanarratives. In K. Pynnöniemi & A. Rácz (Eds.), *Fog of falsehood: Russian strategy of deception and the conflict in Ukraine* (pp. 211–243). Finnish Institute of International Affairs.
- Szalay, D. (2022). *Kulcsár László: Nagyon megfenyegethették az MTI-t a Karmelitából* [The Hungarian Press Agency seems to have received a massive threat from the PM's office]. Media1. <https://media1.hu/2022/02/26/kulcsar-laszlo-mti-orosz-hadmuvelet-haboru-kulonbseg-fenyegetes-karmelita>
- Szurovecz, I. (2022, October 25). *Medián: A lakosság többsége pár hónap alatt szembefordult a szankciókkal* [Median: Within a few months, the majority of the Hungarian population has turned against the sanctions]. 444. <https://444.hu/2022/10/25/median-a-lakossag-tobbsege-par-honap-alatt-szembefordult-a-szankciokkal>
- Urbán, Á. (2022). *The Hungarian government media disseminates Kremlin propaganda*. Mertek Media Monitor. <https://mertek.eu/en/2022/03/03/the-hungarian-government-media-disseminates-kremlin-propaganda>
- Van den Bulck, H., Donders, K., & Lowe, G. F. (2018). Public service media in the networked society. What society? What network? What role? In G.F. Lowe, H. Van den Bulck, & K. Donders (Eds.), *Public ser-*

vice media in the networked society (pp. 19–26). Nordicom.

Varga, D. (2023, March 20). Hat az agymosás, a magyarok egyre kevésbé az Orbán-kormány gazdaságpolitikáját, inkább az EU-t okolják a drágulásért [The

brainwashing is working, Hungarians are increasingly less likely to blame the Orbán government for inflation, attributing it to the EU instead]. *Népszava*. https://nepszava.hu/3188418_publicus-felmeres-brusszel-szankciok-inflacio-dragulas

About the Authors



Ágnes Urbán (PhD) is an associate professor and head of the Department of Infocommunications at Corvinus University Budapest. Urbán is also head of the think-tank MerteK Media Monitor, which aims to assess the impact of media laws and media policy decisions in Hungary. She received her PhD degree from Corvinus in 2006. Her areas of research include changing media markets, media consumption, and media policy. She is the author of over 70 publications in Hungarian and English.



Gábor Polyák (PhD) is a professor and the head of the Department of Media and Communication of the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. He also works for the Institute for Legal Studies of the Centre for Social Sciences as a senior research fellow. Furthermore, he is a researcher at MerteK Media Monitor, a Hungarian NGO focusing on media policy issues. His educational background includes law and media studies at the University of Pécs, a master of law degree in ICT law at the University of Vienna, and a PhD degree and habilitation at the University of Pécs. He teaches and conducts research in the fields of media law, IT law, and media policy. In 2020, he was awarded the Voltaire Prize for Tolerance, International Understanding and Respect for Differences by the University of Potsdam.



Kata Horváth is a PhD student at Eötvös Loránd University and a junior researcher at MerteK Media Monitor. Previously, she worked as a journalist for the online portals *Index*, *Átlátszó*, and *Mérce*. Her current research focuses on the phenomenon of disinformation and fact-checking in Hungary. She has worked as a research assistant on the projects HDMO—Hungarian Digital Media Observatory, the ELTE National Laboratory for Social Innovation (TINLAB), and with the research team of the Iscte—University Institute of Lisbon on the Portuguese part of the Newsreel—New Skills for the Next Generation of Journalists project. She is also a two-time award winner at the Hungarian National Student Science Conference and winner of the Hungarian junior scientific achievement award Pro Scientia Gold Medal.