

# **The Channels of the Russian Propaganda in European Democracies**

## **Comparative Analysis of Hungary and Italy**

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**2022.01.10.**

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## Introduction

Obtaining information has never been easier in the history of humanity, than today. Thanks to the internet, we can look up anything in our interest in just a few seconds, and we can share that information with another person on the other side of the planet. The hard part is that the amount of information we receive in that very short amount of time is so overwhelming that it is impossible to read all of it, and select what is relevant for us. What is even harder, is to find the truth about something. On the internet, in the television, or from our friends we receive information that contradict each other and all of this piles up above us, and overwhelms us, till the moment that in order to protect ourselves, we shut our brains and decide not to believe any of it, which ultimately leads to lose our trust in most of our sources.

This is exactly what sharp power takes advantage of. In this labyrinth of information and channels of communication that we are trying to orient ourselves, after a while even the most nonsense conspiracy theories can seem to be realistic. On one hand, nobody has the time and energy to read every different aspect of an event, and find the truth about every news. On the other hand, it is now a widely-known fact that the more times we hear or see something, the more we sympathize with it and believe it,<sup>1</sup> therefore, if someone has the resources, mostly money and channels of communication, they can get many people to believe what they want them to believe.

In liberal democracies, because of the freedom of the press, speech and expression of opinion, regulating information is extremely challenging. Autocratic regimes take advantage of this and are trying to gain influence by sharing their narratives in the society of their democratic counterparts. If they can create either sympathy, or fear towards them, they can make the citizens vote for parties that wants to ally with them. If that does not work, they can at least make the people lose trust in their government and create chaos in the society, or support extremist groups that undermine their own country. This third branch of projecting influence is called sharp power – instead of coercion or attraction, it uses disinformation and manipulation to get what it wants.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to get to know sharp power better through two case studies. Russia applies the methods of sharp power in many countries, but particularly efficiently in Italy and Hungary. In this research the spread of Russian propaganda will be examined by researching the channels and the narratives of the Kremlin arriving to the society of Italy and

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<sup>1</sup> Mackie-Smith, 2001. 433-478.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig-Walker, 2017.

Hungary. In the following paragraphs sharp power is defined in details. Afterwards, the paper summarizes the history and literature of sharp power. The second half of this research consists of a methodological chapter and the two case studies, and closes up with a conclusion of what was discovered about Russian sharp power.

### *Defining Russian Sharp Power*

In 2017 a new concept was born about exercising power – the term of *sharp power*. In the 2000s due to the technological and informational revolution many things have changed in the world that empowered states to get other entities to do, what they wanted them to do, even though the other entity originally did not want to do that – in other words, to exercise power over them. Hard power reaches this goal by using force; their military or economic strength. Meanwhile, with soft power, states and other entities get what they want by making themselves liked by others, for example, by sharing their culture. Sharp power is an entirely different tool. Autocratic countries usually use it by taking advantage of the openness of democracies, the freedom of speech, the press and expression. Principally, it is not about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centres on distraction and manipulation. Authoritarian regimes use it against democracies. Most influentially sharp power is used by China and Russia, but there are some minor differences between their tools.<sup>3</sup> This paper focuses on Russia's influence in Italy and Hungary, so the Chinese characteristics of sharp power are not discussed.

There are many different methods by which Russia exercises sharp power: spreading open propaganda, spreading hidden propaganda, verifying their narrative with pseudoscientific research, supporting anti-establishment political forces in the target country, espionage, cyber-attacks. In the following paragraphs these methods will be explained in detail with concrete examples.

*Spreading open propaganda:* In 2005 the media group Rossiya Segodnya launched a new, international news site, funded by the Russian government, called Russia Today. The aim of this news network was not hidden; the government wanted to spread the Russian narrative worldwide and use information as a weapon. The motto of Russia Today is “*Question more!*”; it encourages people to question the truthfulness of the western news networks and think about the Russian narrative. In 2014 the government started Sputnik as well, with the same goal. Both mediums have a vital role in sharing disinformation and conspiracy theories, and according to the secret services of the United States, their work influenced the election in 2016.<sup>4</sup> Shortly

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<sup>3</sup> Ludwig-Walker, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Krekó, 2021. 209-216. p.

after Russia invaded Ukraine, Margarita Simonyan, one of the leaders of Russia Today, was sanctioned, and the broadcasts of Russia Today and Sputnik were suspended in the European Union.<sup>5</sup>

*Spreading hidden propaganda – the “trolls” on social media:* In Russia, social media manipulation is a powerful tool for political influence. The state-sponsored government organization responsible for disinformation campaigns in Russia is the Internet Research Agency (also known as Glavset) owned by an oligarch. This agency is a “factory” that creates trolls for the different social media sites who share content and write comments on other people’s or organizations’ posts, spreading the Russian narrative. Russia mainly targets the United States, and European countries.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, propaganda exists in liberal democracies too, but there is a huge difference between their propaganda and an autocratic country’s propaganda, as in a liberal democracy there is freedom of expression that allows the press, the opposition and civil society to monitor the conduct of state actors, denounce their false steps and mobilize public opinion.<sup>7</sup>

*Support of anti-establishment forces:* The Russian government supports far-right and anti-establishment parties in the target countries. They have a friendly relationship in Italy with the eurosceptic Five-Star Movement, Matteo Salvini and his party, Lega,<sup>8</sup> and Putin and Silvio Berlusconi are also famous for their good relationship. In Hungary they support Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz, and they used to be close with Jobbik party too.<sup>9</sup> This support of political forces comes with financial assistance, as it was about to happen in June, 2022, when the Russian government wanted to finance Matteo Salvini’s trip to Moscow,<sup>10</sup> or by supporting these parties in the parliamentary elections with all the methods of sharp power. For example, in the United States’ 2016 election Russia spread conspiracy theories about Hillary Clinton, saying she was a member of an Illuminati-Zionist sect.<sup>11</sup> It is widely known that with Hungary’s Viktor Orbán Putin has a good relationship, they regularly meet, and the Hungarian PM has been working on tightening the two countries’ relationship.<sup>12</sup> According to the research of Political Capital, the supporters of Viktor Orbán’s party, Fidesz are more likely to believe the

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<sup>5</sup> European Council, 04.03.2022.

<sup>6</sup> Bradshaw-Howard, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Messa, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Liik, 2018, 32. p.

<sup>9</sup> Dezső, 2021. 286-306. p.

<sup>10</sup> Giuffrida, 2022

<sup>11</sup> Krekó, 216. p.

<sup>12</sup> Erdélyi, 2022.

Russian narrative about the reasons for the war with Ukraine, than the supporters of the opposition's parties.<sup>13</sup>

*Pseudo-scientific research:* A part of using sharp power is proving the propaganda in a way that even those who question things and require a scientific explanation, would believe it. Trying to prove their narratives, China establishes Confucius Institutes all around the world, implying similarity to the Goethe Institutes for example. The problem is that these and some other Chinese academic institutes cannot be accepted as scientific based on the Western values, as their academic freedom is limited and the topics of research and the publications of their results are in the best case manipulated by financial assistance.<sup>14</sup> Russia sometimes also tries to prove its narrative scientifically, for example by inviting a Hungarian "expert", Keveházy Miklós to their television programs. However, nobody really knows who Keveházy is, and where did he study or works, so he is unjustifiable as an academic scholar.<sup>15</sup>

*Cyber-attacks, espionage:* Improving cybersecurity is one of the most critical tasks of governments these days, as the malfunctioning of websites or social media sites can severely damage the economy and the society. Also, with cyber-attacks, one can access confidential information about the target country. Russia applies this method very effectively. For example, even though they were said to be a friendly country to Hungary, the secret services of Russia hacked the IT systems of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and they have access to confidential information. The Hungarian government is not able to block this attack and have the data hidden again.<sup>16</sup> Another type of Russian cyber-attacks is not connected with espionage, but only consists of blocking different websites, for example ministries', schools' or companies' websites to hinder their operations, as it happened in Italy by Killnet, in May 2022.<sup>17</sup>

*The power of energy:* According to Paolo Messa, energy is also a part of Russian sharp power, as the European Union is strongly dependent on it. By blackmailing European countries with the threat of turning off the tap, Russia can force these countries to behave in a certain way.<sup>18</sup> However, this type of influence is an economic weapon that the mainstream discourse about power would say belongs to hard power.

As one can see, sharp power is a combination of complex and variable methods of disinformation and manipulation. This paper focuses on the spreading of hidden and open

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<sup>13</sup> Krekó-Molnár, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Ludwig-Walker, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Krekó-Istrate-Takácsy, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Panyi, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Rainews, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Messa, 2019, 93-95. p.

propaganda in the target country's society, in connection with support of anti-establishment forces and pseudo-scientific research.

## Historical Overview

As every other concept, sharp power also existed before it was defined, although the time of its beginning is arguable. Some methods of it have been existent for centuries or even millennia, for example espionage, propaganda or the support of anti-establishment forces in another country. However, the creation of cyberspace, the need for developing new methods of projecting influence in the cold war, and the spread of liberal democracy created an atmosphere that by the middle of the 2000's, sharp power could evolve.

Soft power can also be traced back through history, to the ancient Persia that's culture was so attractive that Alexander the great chose it over his own Macedonian one, or to the seventeenth century's France where the monarch's culture was imitated by other European courts and the French language was attractive enough to become the language of diplomacy.<sup>19</sup>

Sharp power is strongly based on the available platforms of communication. Propaganda has been present already in the ancient Greece, but in parallel with the development of the platforms of information exchange, it became more and more efficient through history. The innovation of printing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the improvements in the size and speed of the mass media in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most recently digitalization in the 2000's were the most significant changes in communication, therefore, in the efficiency of propaganda.<sup>20</sup> These episodes of history always boosted the information warfare; while during the second world war propaganda was spread through leaflets, today the Internet Research Agency can do it through social media, for example on twitter, where in half a day a bot can post thousands of tweets.<sup>21</sup>

Just like propaganda, hybrid war also already existed before the 2000's, when it became a widely used concept. Some of the conflicts of the Cold War were defined with it; the United States' war in Vietnam, the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan and the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts were all fought with a wide-range of instruments, such as regular troops, guerrilla warfare or espionage.<sup>22</sup> Because of the MAD doctrine and the new international norms the two superpowers did not want to start a direct war using hard power, but they needed to develop new forms of projecting influence. Soft power was invented, so by sharing their culture and becoming attractive these blocks could gain new allies. Especially the United States was very successful in it. Both superpowers needed to spread their ideology too, liberal democracy and communism. The soviets established the Cominform, and in most of the third world's countries

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<sup>19</sup> Messa, 2019, 20. p.

<sup>20</sup> Jowett – O'Donnell, 1999, 47-96. p.

<sup>21</sup> Messa, 2019, 82. p.

<sup>22</sup> Messa, 2019, 109-116. p.

civil wars they supported the group that was closer to them; either the one that was about to create a liberal democracy or a communist state.<sup>23</sup> Regarding sharp power's methods, the KGB can definitely be named as one of the pioneers.<sup>24</sup> Also, during the cold war Russia has already called their warfare strategy and informational warfare or special operations and it consisted of disinformation campaigns and espionage. This warfare was completed with cyber operations as technology evolved.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of the Cold War soft power became more wide-spread and in the late 1980's it was defined by Joseph Nye. According to Nye, power is the ability to influence another's behaviour, so they will do what the influencer wants. The soft ways of it are by attraction, for example sharing culture.<sup>26</sup> China's establishing of Confucius Institutes at the beginning was viewed as a form of soft power, but through the years it became visible that these institutes practice rather pseudo-scientific activities and try to manipulate the public opinion with false information. The universities and research institutes that are in connection with Confucius Institutes are often asked to reject guests, who are problematic for China, for their events,<sup>27</sup> and sometimes publications of academically correct journals are asked to be hidden in China because they cannot pass the state's censorship. Also, the One Belt One Road Initiative is growing concerns among western states, as they are unsure to believe that the cultural and economic exchanges it boosts will not have a political effect too.<sup>28</sup>

The difference from soft power appeared, when China, Russia and Iran started to spend billions of dollars to manipulate information and public opinion abroad; not by sharing their culture and becoming more attractive, but in a way that they started to undermine the positive image of their enemies – liberal democracies – by highlighting their limits and contradictions.<sup>29</sup>

Walker and Ludwig in their article mark the first half of the 2000's as a beginning of sharp power – the time of establishing Confucius Institutes abroad, and the launching of Russia Today that's goal is to spread Russian narratives around the world.<sup>30</sup> The 2000's is a turning point in the history of sharp power in another aspect too; cyberspace was created then, conquered the world and soon became a space for a new type of war: cyberwar. Politicians and

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<sup>23</sup> Nester, 2020, 49. p.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew-Mitrohin, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Messa, 2019, 109. p.

<sup>26</sup> Nye, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Messa, 2019, 40. p.

<sup>28</sup> Messa, 2019, 55-56. p.

<sup>29</sup> Messa, 2019, 43. p.

<sup>30</sup> Walker-Ludwig, 2017.

military experts now recognize cyberspace as a new domain of warfare equal to land, air, sea and space and all of the developed countries has a unit for cyberwarfare.<sup>31</sup>

2013 was again a turning point as this year the Chief of Staff of the Russian armed forces Valery Gerasimov listed the new instruments for war that became known as the Gerasimov doctrine. This included simultaneous warfare in all physical environments and the information space, a new modern form of war that looks more like hacking an enemy's society than attacking it.<sup>32</sup> The implementation of the Gerasimov doctrine was realized by the west, and in 2015, after an investigation, the New York Times published an article about the Internet Research Agency, Russia's troll factory. It is located in Saint Petersburg, but there are thousands of employees all around the world – in this place people work to create fake news and spread it on the web through fake social network profiles or other websites.<sup>33</sup> In 2018 January the head of Security of the European Commission, Julian King alarmed the EU that they have found 3,500 cases of pro-Kremlin disinformation contradicting publicly-available facts in multiple languages and on multiple occasions.<sup>34</sup>

Several years after the pseudo-scientific activities and the informational warfare's beginning, cyber-attacks also started to be more regular by the end of the 2000's. It is obvious that Russia is a pioneer in cyberwarfare, and successfully extended its informational war to cyberspace. The first cyber-attacks happened in Estonia in 2007 and later in Georgia in 2008. Although none of them were proofed and admitted by the Russian government, both cases are pretty obviously connected to the Kremlin as they immediately took advantage of the damages caused. In Ukraine, after the Maidan square protests, the government was also under serious cyber-attacks, though never acknowledged by Russia. Some of the Ukrainian power plants were also attacked and left the population without energy for a few hours. These events demonstrated that such attacks cause serious harms to the economy and the population's mental wellbeing, and undermine the people's trust in their government. The attacks against Estonia, Georgia and Ukraine share that they were planned in detail and executed by groups of hackers equipped with resources, expertise and organization beyond the reach of a private citizen, and acted fully in line with the Russian political agenda. In 2016 at the Democratic National Committee the data of more than 500.000 voters were stolen to create problems for Hillary Clinton. The units that carried out the before mentioned events can directly or indirectly be traced back to the Kremlin

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<sup>31</sup> Messa, 2019, 101. p.

<sup>32</sup> Politico, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Messa, 2019, 83-84. p.

<sup>34</sup> Messa, 2019, 52. p.

or a Russian oligarch. The two groups involved in the attacks at the DNC, Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear, are also responsible for attacks against the Pentagon, the White House and many institutions of European countries.<sup>35</sup>

By 2022 sharp power's methods have evolved to be dangerously efficient. It is very hard for liberal democracies to stand up against these attacks, especially the ones that take advantage of the basic freedom rights. However, at the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian war the European Union took serious steps, for example prohibiting Russia Today<sup>36</sup> or expelling Russian diplomats.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, there are some channels of Russian propaganda that are not so easy to get rid of – journalists, politicians, experts that continuously share the country's narrative, and silencing them would lead to the questioning of some basic rights in a liberal democracy.

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<sup>35</sup> Messa, 2019, 109-116. p.

<sup>36</sup> European Council, 04.03.2022.

<sup>37</sup> BBC, 2022.03.29.

## Sharp power in Europe today

### *Cyber Security in the European Union*

The methods of sharp power have started to be developed during the Cold War or arguably even sooner, but digitalization and the informational revolution gave them a boost to be so dangerously effective. As sharp power is mostly targeted towards democracies, for the European Union it is a hard challenge to defend itself and its member states from these attacks. This was recognized by the institution during the past several years, and improving cyber security is now one of the most important goals of the European Union.

In 2020 December, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented a new strategy for the EU's cyber security, highlighting that it has to be reviewed and strengthened to protect Europe from cyber-attacks and state funded misinformation campaigns.<sup>38</sup> Russia's disinformation campaign as a tool of exercising power is also mentioned as a threat to be answered in the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, approved by the European Council in March, 2022.<sup>39</sup> According to Josep Borrell's foreword "...[the war in Ukraine] *has made it even clearer that we live in a world shaped by raw power politics, where everything is weaponised and where we face a fierce battle of narratives. All these trends were already happening before the Ukraine war; now they are accelerating.*"<sup>40</sup> Getting to know sharp power better and preparing the European countries and their society for these challenges can help defending the European democracies from these attacks. This paper is a humble contribution to the discourse about sharp power, an analysis of the spread of Russian propaganda, in hope of raising awareness of the informational warfare in our societies.

### *Russian Narratives in Italy and Hungary – A Macro Perspective*

There are many challenges that the European Union as an institution and the European peoples are facing today, for example immigration, the future of the EU, the Russian-Ukrainian war, or the coronavirus. As a part of exercising sharp power, the Kremlin uses all these problems to spread its own narrative about them, to create division and mistrust in the European democracies, and ultimately to increase its influence and power in their society.

In some countries the Kremlin's propaganda spreads more effectively, in some they are not that successful. Opinion polls suggest that the Russian presence is most wide-spread among

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<sup>38</sup> European Commission – High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> European Council, 24.03.2022.

<sup>40</sup> European Council, 24.03. 2022. 4. p.

the western European countries in Italy, and among the Eastern-European ones in Hungary, therefore, examining these two countries can give a thorough analysis about how the Russian propaganda works in Europe.

Since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022, the Russian narratives about Ukraine and the reasons of the war flooded the internet. In 2022 May, the European Council on Foreign Relations conducted a research about the European public's opinion about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. They polled approximately 8000 people, from different countries. Two traditionally Russia-sceptics (Poland, Romania), three large western countries that before the war were considered to understand Russia (Germany, Italy, and France), two southern Europeans that are generally not involved with Russia (Portugal, Spain), and two northern ones that are applying for NATO membership as a result of the war (Finland and Sweden). According to the survey, 73% of Europeans believe that Russia is responsible for the outbreak of the war, while 15% think that it is Ukraine's, the EU's, or the US's fault (2% said "none of these" and 10% "don't know"). Also, the findings of the survey suggest that European unity is stronger than it was in the past years that surprised Putin and Europe too, so the public in European democracies stand strongly against the invaders.<sup>41</sup>

Among these thirteen examined EU member states, Italy had the lowest percentage of blaming Russia (56%), and the highest for doing so of Ukraine, the European Union or the United States (27%).<sup>42</sup> In March, 2022 a similar research was conducted in Hungary by Századvég. The interviewers asked Hungarians who is responsible for the conflict; 47% said that Russia and Ukraine are equally responsible, 32% blamed Russia, and 13% answered it is rather Ukraine's responsibility.<sup>43</sup> In May, Századvég did the same research again, and the proportions have changed; 50% said that Russia and Ukraine equally responsible, 28% said rather Russia, 21% answered rather Ukraine. This research was conducted on a sample of one thousand people that has around +/-3% margin of error,<sup>44</sup> but the difference between the percentages of the answers is wider than this, and also a tendency is visible. So as one can see, since the outbreak of the war, more Hungarians turned to put the blame on Ukraine.<sup>45</sup> According to the Russian propaganda, this war is the West's and Ukraine's fault, so based on this data the Kremlin spreads this narrative in Hungary successfully. In both countries the Kremlin's bots spread narratives based on false information. One narrative that was found in both countries'

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<sup>41</sup> Krastev-Leonard, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Krastev-Leonard, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Századvég, 2022.03.03.

<sup>44</sup> Horváth, 2004, 107. p.

<sup>45</sup> Századvég, 2022.05.09.

social media is that Ukraine committed genocide against Russians. The source they cite is the OSCE, but the organization has never claimed any such thing. These bots are sometimes real users, sometimes fake profiles operated by algorithms.<sup>46</sup>

Russia also took advantage of the immigrant crisis in 2015 and since, to gain influence in Europe. The Kremlin is actively spreading news and making up stories that creates fear and hatred towards immigrants, therefore weakens centre right and centre left parties and helps far-right, nationalist parties to become more popular – parties that generally have a closer relationship with Russia than others, for example, AfD, Lega, or Fidesz. A perfect example of this phenomena is the so-called Lisa-case in Germany, where a Russian-German girl disappeared in Berlin for 30 hours, claimed that she was kidnapped and raped by three Arabs, then a few days later admitted that she was at her boyfriend's place. Even though it turned out to be fake, the Russian media continued to spread it, and organized demonstrations against the immigrants for far-right and Russian-German groups in Germany. Russian media intervened in German politics at the highest level with this case, their goal was to weaken Merkel's position before the election, who was strongly for sanctions against Russia and was a strong leader in European politics.<sup>47</sup> Russia did not start the immigrant crisis of 2015, but it took advantage of it. This case happened shortly after around 1000 women were sexually abused mostly by Muslim immigrants, so spreading this news in Germany helped to raise the popularity of AfD, (Alternative for Germany), a far-right party that has a good relationship with Russia.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly to this case, in 2018, when Italy held general elections, Russia interfered by backing xenophobic, and far-right anti-immigrants parties, who had a better relationship with them, than the west, by boosting xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments in the sphere of social media. The Kremlin has created a social media network that mostly shared articles and stories written by Sputnik (operating in Italian as well) that contained false information or were manipulative. Their message was that refugees are the ones to blame for inflation and unemployment, and this situation is just getting worse because of the pro-European politicians, and ultimately because of the European Union's pro-immigration policies. Immigration has become the central topic of the election campaign in 2018, and nuanced debate has been replaced by radical speech in the parties' communication. According to Alto Data Analytics, a global company that uses big data and artificial intelligence to analyse the public opinion in the media and social sites, Sputnik Italia has been very successful in influencing the radicalization

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<sup>46</sup> Political Capital, 2022, october.

<sup>47</sup> Meister, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Krekó, 2021, 201-2. p.

of the public debate over the immigration crisis. Of all foreign media operating in Italy, Sputnik Italia was the second-most influential, after the Italian version of The Huffington Post.<sup>49</sup> With this message, Russia managed to use immigrants not only to intervene in the upcoming elections, but also to deepen the disenchantment in the EU and create a wider division between pro-European and nationalist groups, blaming the EU for the problems of the Italian people.

In Hungary setting the immigrants and the EU up as enemies is not only Russian propaganda, but the government's position as well. Since 2010 Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz govern the country, and their leadership took a turn towards Russia, tightening the two countries' economic relationship and starting to share similar values.<sup>50</sup> For Russian propagandists, Hungary is seen as a "battering ram" in the European Union. The Kremlin doesn't really have to spread its narrative about the declining west and the extremely and harmfully liberal European values, because the government already shares these messages on its own platforms, and also there are many other far-right platforms that are not regulated. According to them the western world is declining because of leaving the traditional Christian values, and by supporting the LGBTQ+ community and letting the Muslim immigrants in, this process is getting faster.<sup>51</sup>

According to opinion polls conducted by Századvég in 2021, the support for membership of the European Union among Hungarians is very high (81%), even though they are critical towards the institution and would prefer some reforms and ultimately more independency for the member states.<sup>52</sup> In Italy a poll from 2019 suggests that the support for EU membership is not too high. 37% percent of the respondents said that it is a good thing for Italy, 42% said it is neither a good, nor a bad thing, and 17% said it is bad thing.<sup>53</sup>

The Russian propaganda and other forms of sharp power are present in many European countries, but in Italy and in Hungary they are more successful. In general, the Russian narratives go along with what the far-right represents, xenophobia, populism, nationalism etc., but there are some more radical ideologies as well, which will be discussed in the chapters of the case studies.

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<sup>49</sup> Alandete-Verdú, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Hegedűs, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Istrate, Takácsy, Krekó, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Századvég, 2021.07.09.

<sup>53</sup> Statista Research Department, 2019.

## Literature Review

Sharp power is a relatively young concept; therefore, its literature is mostly limited to short articles, essays. However, there are some books about it, or about some aspects of it, for example propaganda, disinformation or espionage. These methods of sharp power were used many times and by many powers through history, so literature about them is abundant. In this paragraph a collection of the academic articles and books is introduced that were used to gain a thorough knowledge about Russian sharp power.

The most important basis of this research is the article that created the concept of this new form of exercising power – Christopher Walker’s and Jessica Ludwig’s *The Meaning of Sharp Power – How Authoritarian States Project Influence?*<sup>54</sup> published in Foreign Affairs on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, 2017. In this article the two writers argue that China and Russia project influence abroad with methods so different from hard power and soft power that they deserve a separate concept at the same level. The methods of sharp power are so entirely different, efficient and widespread that they deserve to be called a third branch of exercising power. Having power over another country means that one can get the other to do, what they want them to do, even though the “attacked” country doesn’t want to. Hard power achieves this with coercion, while soft power does so by making one attractive. In contrast, sharp power is centred on distraction and manipulation. Authoritarian regimes that suppress political pluralism and free expression at home are applying the same principles abroad, interfering in democratic states’ open societies. According to Walker and Ludwig, both China and Russia started to use sharp power in the 2000’s, the former a bit sooner than the other. The authors mark China’s establishing of Confucius Institutes that lack academic freedom, and Russia’s launching of Russia Today with the admitted aim of sharing Russian narratives, as a starting point of sharp power.

A month after this article in Foreign Affairs, the National Endowment for Democracy published a collection of researches about sharp power. In this publication there are six papers, one introductory by Walker and Ludwig, three articles about sharp power in Latin-American countries and two in Central-European ones. This collection also underlines that China and Russia are the countries that use sharp power mostly, and that there are some differences between their methods.<sup>55</sup> After the creation of the concept and the publishing of the collection of researches about it by NED, Joseph Nye responded in two articles. He agreed that sharp

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<sup>54</sup> Walker-Ludwig, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> NED, 2017.

power is different from soft power, and went further. According to him: “*Sharp power, the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes, is a type of hard power*”.<sup>56</sup> Later in an interview Nye said: “*Sharp power is only a new term to indicate what we once called information warfare, that has existed for decades, and in particular since the 1930s and during the Cold War. Information warfare cannot replace the ability to attract other countries through soft power.*”<sup>57</sup> Information warfare is certainly not a new invention, and sharp power is definitely not working by making one attractive, but I disagree with Nye that it would be a part of hard power, as manipulation, disinformation, spreading propaganda and sharing one’s narrative with the use as pseudo-scientific research is not coercive. Even though the people of a country are manipulated, they are still able to make a decision and are not forced. Their way of thinking might be affected by sharp power; propaganda, fake news, or conspiracy theories, but these can be counterbalanced with truth, accessible scientific knowledge, and high-quality education. Also, the prevention of the attacks is complicated in a liberal democracy, but the war in Ukraine showed that Europeans are willing to limit the freedom of the press if it (even only indirectly) threatens the freedom and life of others.

Paolo Messa’s *The Age of Sharp Power*<sup>58</sup> discusses the concept in more details, referring to and concluding the most important articles and essays wrote about sharp power till 2018. The Italian journalist argues that sharp power operates in the same fields as soft power, for example culture, investments and diplomacy, but the methods are completely different.<sup>59</sup> Before the birth of this new concept, everything that could not be put in the category of hard power was called soft, but just as Ludwig and Walker stated, Messa also says that there is a huge difference between putting effort to making your country liked, or undermining another country’s reputation among its own people with disinformation and manipulation. There is a global trend of illiberal regimes delegitimizing democratic states and making their limits and contradictions emerge, channelled by the media, pseudo-scientific research and their citizens abroad. The Italian journalist also separates Russian and Chinese methods. As of this paper, only the chapters about Russia are relevant. Messa concludes the Russian strategy with the word “cyberwarfare”, emphasizing that the manipulative disinformation campaign that the Kremlin runs takes place in cyberspace. This paper also examines channels that communicate mostly in cyberspace, but I would add the importance of in-person conferences and talk-shows too. Messa

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<sup>56</sup> Nye, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Bechis, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Messa, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Messa, 2019. 38. p.

argues that Russia mainly targets the near abroad that is the post-soviet region. Writing this research in 2022 when the Kremlin's propaganda targets Ukraine the most, I have to agree with it, but only partially, as it will be discussed in this paper that for Russia it is very important to interfere in western democracies, not only the European Union, but also the United States. Also, sharp power works differently in democratic and autocratic countries, so it can be misleading to lump together the post-soviet and the western regions. Messa adds that one of the reasons of the success of sharp power, is the birth of cyberspace. While twenty years ago it was in an experimental phase, today it is definitely among the most important spheres of projecting influence, especially because there are no distances and borders in cyberspace, and cyberwarfare. Paolo Messa's book offers a great knowledge about sharp power in general, but for this research it was especially useful, as it has a separate chapter for Russian influence in Italy. The journalist argues that Italy is one of the most suitable countries to learn about sharp power.

Péter Krekó is a Hungarian social psychologist, the director of Political Capital Institute. The organization publishes articles about how the Kremlin's propaganda works in Hungary and Europe, and those researches are among the most important sources of Russian presence in Hungary. Krekó also wrote a book<sup>60</sup> about conspiracy theories, fake news and disinformation and the psychological basis of them. Krekó dedicated a chapter for Russian sharp power – though the concept is not used in it. He argues that disinformation and the spreading of conspiracy theories is a tool of the Kremlin's foreign policy. He writes about the infamous Lisa-case<sup>61</sup> (that was mentioned in Paolo Messa's book and other articles too) as a typical example of this. In addition to Paolo Messa, Krekó also adds that not only bots, or foreigner agents can be a channel of Russian propaganda, but by sharing their posts on social media, even a target country's own population becomes part of it.

Spreading propaganda is one of the most important tools of sharp power, therefore, the literature about it, which is very rich indeed, can also be useful for a research about sharp power. Many scholars wrote about propaganda, but one of the most thorough and widely-known ones

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<sup>60</sup> Krekó, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Lisa is a Russian originated German girl, who, as a teenager disappeared in Germany for 30 hours. Later she claimed that immigrants kidnapped and raped her. The Kremlin started to share this story, even Lavrov, the foreign minister talked about the horrifying deed of immigrants. However, soon the truth came to be that Lisa spent that day with a friend, but did not want to tell it to her parents. Even though the Kremlin heard about it, they continued to share the story of the kidnapper immigrants, and later a Russian backed pro-AfD, anti-immigration demonstration was organized because of this event. This happened in 2016, before the German provincial elections, and weakened Angela Merkel's and her party's position – a politician and a party that was a propagator of sanctions against Russia, and strengthened the AfD that has a good relationship with the Kremlin.

is Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell's *Propaganda and Persuasion*.<sup>62</sup> The writers define propaganda, put it into a historical and psychological context, and give instructions about how to analyse propaganda, adding four case studies. According to Jowett and O'Donnell, the word comes from the Latin language, and means to disseminate or promote particular ideas. Later negative connotations were attached to this word, and it was described with synonyms like distortion, deceit, manipulation, psychological warfare etc. The two writers define propaganda in their book as "*a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist*"<sup>63</sup>. This completely fits in the tools of sharp power. Jowett and O'Donnell states that the origins of propaganda can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, and through history, propagandists always quickly adopted each new form of communication, for example printing. By the end of the nineteenth century, mass media was so developed that it greatly increased the effectiveness of propaganda.

As Paolo Messa wrote, cyberspace, the internet and social media are again new platforms of mass communication and propaganda soon conquered them too. Digitalization boosted the already well-working methods of propaganda, and also other tools of sharp power that were developed during the cold war, according to many scholars who research Russia. For getting to know the origins of the Kremlin's methods, one has to study the KGB. The Mitrokhin Archive<sup>64</sup> is a collection of documents from the KGB's archive, smuggled to the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union by Vasili Mitrokhin. This book contains probably the most confidential data ever released, and discusses in details the KGB's system abroad – agents, spying, misinformation, presence in the communist parties etc.

After getting to know the methods of sharp power and the evolution of its Russian version, William Nester's book, *Putin's Virtual War – Russia's Subversion and Conversion of America, Europe and the World Beyond*<sup>65</sup> gives a thorough knowledge about Putin and the Kremlin today. The book is parted to three sections; Power and political culture in Russia, Vladimir Putin and his attitude to power and the Russian president's foreign policy in the United States, Europe and elsewhere. Nester argues that even though at the beginning Putin seemed to be a friendly leader of Russia to Europe, a few years after coming to power he showed his real face. In his view Russia's interests were the following: breaking up the European Union, changing liberal democracies to illiberal ones or autocratic regimes, making Europe dependent

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<sup>62</sup> Jowett-O'Donnell, 1999.

<sup>63</sup> Jowett-O'Donnell, 1999. 1-3 .p.

<sup>64</sup> Andrew-Mitrohin, 2000.

<sup>65</sup> Nester, 2020.

on Russian energy and ultimately to make Moscow Europe's economic and cultural capital. In order to reach these goals, the Kremlin will do whatever it takes. Nester's book does not mention the concept of sharp power, but still describes how Russia operates with it, and Putin's ideas about Europe will be discussed later in this paper, as a wide-spread Russian narrative.

Although not many scholars use the term of sharp power, they research and write about it a lot. It is important to state three things when one researches this concept; 1) there is a difference between using the tools of sharp power at home, or abroad, targeting another country, 2) the methods of sharp power were already used during the cold war, or arguably even before that, but digitalization and the birth of cyberspace changed these tools' efficiency radically, and the 2000's sharp power cannot be compared for example with the propaganda of the autocratic regimes of the interwar period in Europe, 3) there is a difference between the methods of sharp power if a target country is an autocratic regime, or a liberal democracy with an open society.

This paper is a research about Russian influence in two member states of the European Union; Hungary and Italy. It examines the methods of sharp power in the era of digitalization, when it already conquered cyberspace, projecting influence abroad, targeting two democracies, (though one of them is an illiberal democracy).

In this research I intentionally use the concept of sharp power, as this paper intends to be a contribution to getting to know this type of projecting influence, preparing democracies to be able to defend themselves against these disinformational and manipulative attacks, ultimately encouraging them to increase the level of their cyber security.

## **Methodology & Research Design**

This research is a comparative analysis of the Russian propaganda flooding the Italian and the Hungarian societies. Russia has its own narrative about the different global events and phenomenon, and is trying to spread them as efficiently as possible. They send different messages to each place, choosing the topics and shaping their narrative about them in a way that triggers the people in the target country the most. The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of how the Russian propaganda works, find the differences between the same narratives sent to the Italian and the Hungarian societies, and ultimately to contribute to the discourse and academic knowledge about sharp power.

Operationalising propaganda is essential to do research about it objectively. In this paper six different channels of the Kremlin were chosen. After mapping the network of the Russian propaganda, these channels were found to be among the most active ones, with a wide circle of followers. To get a profound knowledge about the narratives it is important to see that there are many different messengers who can be used. In this research a politician, a journalist, a jurist, a party and two online news sites are researched. These channels connect with each other, repeat what the others say or invite each other to their platforms.

Not only the channels, but the topics had to be sorted too, as checking all the narratives of Russia in all matters discussed nowadays would exceed the limit of this paper. There are three different crises and ongoing debates that are equally important and present in Italy and in Hungary as well. The future of the EU, the immigrant crisis and the war in Ukraine, and Russia takes advantage of all of them to gain power in Italy and Hungary. The Russian narrative about these issues will be discussed in details in the following chapters.

The messages that come through these six channels about these three topics were collected and analysed, and the goal of this paper is to find the differences of the same narrative in the two countries. In the following paragraphs the six channels and the methodology of building analysable research corpus will be presented.

### *Channels*

After reading and looking up many different channels of the Kremlin's messages, in both countries three different type of messengers were chosen to be researched in details. All of these channels are very active and effective. However, there are some differences between them, most importantly their target audience. Russia tries to reach as much people as possible, so they use many platforms, social media, politicians, the press, scholars etc. Some of these channels are obviously made up by the Kremlin, for example the bots on twitter, or a Hungarian

“scholar”, Miklós Keveházy, but some channels are already existent people, platforms, parties and so on, and because of ideological similarities or same interests in some issues, they are used by Russia. Sometimes they do this voluntarily, but sometimes they don’t even understand this. In some cases, it is hard to decide if a channel is made up by Russia or already existent and used by Russia, but in this paper this information is not relevant. What is important, is that they spread the narrative of the Kremlin.

In Italy the three messengers to be researched are Nadana Fridrikhson, the Il Fatto Quotidiano and Silvio Berlusconi.

Nadana Fridrikhson is a Russian journalist. She defines herself as someone who travels and sees the events for herself, who tells people the other point of view that western media wants to hide, nowadays mostly about the war in Ukraine. She is active in the Russian television, also invited to Italian talk-shows, and on social media she uses twitter<sup>66</sup>, Instagram<sup>67</sup>, telegram<sup>68</sup> Facebook<sup>69</sup> and YouTube<sup>70</sup> (there she has the most, 118.000 subscribers). In general, she posts and talks in Russian, although on Facebook and twitter some of her posts are in English, Italian or German.

The Il Fatto Quotidiano is an online newspaper. It publishes short articles about daily events in different topics, but mostly political ones. My impression is that the Russian propaganda is not spread intentionally and very regularly. This site rather goes for the click-bait topics and writes about both sides of the story, so sometimes the Russian narrative appears too. Its motto is „*Reading what others don't say is up to you*” and I think it describes them correctly.<sup>71</sup>

Silvio Berlusconi is an Italian politician and businessman, who entered politics after the Tangentopoli. Thanks to his populist method he was able to fill the vacuum of the rightist political sphere in the middle of the 1990’s. He was the prime minister of Italy from 1994-1995, 2001-2006 and 2008-2011 and is still active in politics as since October he is a member of the Senate of the Republic, and is the president of the party Forza Italia since its foundation. Berlusconi and his family are among the wealthiest people in Italy<sup>72</sup> and the most important source of his income is Mediaset company that is the biggest commercial broadcaster in the

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<sup>66</sup> Nadana Fridrikhson’s twitter profile

<sup>67</sup> Nadana Fridrikhson’s instagram profile

<sup>68</sup> Nadana Fridrikhson’s telegram channel

<sup>69</sup> Nadana Fridrikhson’s telegram channel

<sup>70</sup> Nadana Fridrikhson’s youtube channel

<sup>71</sup> The website of Il Fatto Quotidiano

<sup>72</sup> Forbes, 2022.

country.<sup>73</sup> Berlusconi is a good friend of Putin, and even though he distanced himself from the Russian leader at the outbreak of the war, recently they renewed their relationship.<sup>74</sup> Berlusconi often repeats the Russian narrative about the Ukrainian war and also in his media channels it is not rare to see Russia-related guests, for example Nadana Fridrikhson.<sup>75</sup>

In Hungary the three channels that were found to be active and effective enough to be researched are the Szent Korona Rádió, Eva Maria Barki and the Jobbik/Mi Hazánk party. They reach different audiences and work differently.

Szent Korona Rádió is a national radical 24/7 broadcasting internet radio and online newspaper, with the aim of popularizing the Hungarian culture. They often repost articles from Kuruc.info, quote Berlusconi, or Eva Maria Barki. Their articles are against abortion, the LGBTQ+ community, the West, the green movement, and are pro-Russian and far-right nationalist.<sup>76</sup> Szent Korona Rádió is part of the far-right media network that is connected to Jobbik. The party denies having any connection to Kuruc.info, but the timings and topics of their communication is very similar. Szent Korona Rádió cites Kuruc.info many times, and as they are also a radio channel, they reach those people too who do not use the internet.<sup>77</sup> In this paper only their articles will be researched and not the radio messages, as the latter only exist temporarily.

Eva Maria Barki is a Vienna based lawyer with Hungarian origins. She is also a scholar of international law, specialized in immigration law and the rights of ethnic minorities.<sup>78</sup> According to what she said about herself in an interview, the rights of the Hungarian minorities are very important to her and based on international law she considers the Trianon peace treaty invalid.<sup>79</sup> She is a supporter of prime minister Orbán, and believes that the United States wants to weaken and use the European Union as a cheap workforce.<sup>80</sup>

Jobbik Magyarorszáért Mozgalom (=The Movement for Better Hungary) is a Christian-conservative party that traces back its origins to the early 2000's.<sup>81</sup> Jobbik, some years after its foundation became a pro-Russian party thanks to the activities of Béla Kovács, who had some Russian ties, therefore, his nickname was KGBéla. He connected the president of

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<sup>73</sup> The website of Mediaset

<sup>74</sup> Horowitz, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Some of her appearances are available on the youtube channel of La7. An example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajZMxDoN6r4> Retrieved: 2022.10.30.

<sup>76</sup> The official website of Szent Korona Rádió.

<sup>77</sup> Róna, 2021. 132-134. p.

<sup>78</sup> Österreichischer Rechtsanwaltsverein, 2022.11.04.

<sup>79</sup> Frigyesy, 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Barki, 2015.

<sup>81</sup> Róna, 2021. 100-108. p.

Jobbik, Gábor Vona with Russian politicians, and played a key role in establishing the Alliance of European National Movements. Moscow supported this group and in general the far-right parties in Europe, the destabilize the continent by helping the anti-EU and anti-democratic movements. In 2014 Kovács was charged and some years later found guilty with spying for Russia about the European Union.<sup>82</sup> Jobbik used to be described as a far-right party, but in the 2010's some of their politicians, including the president, Gábor Vona started to be consolidated, while some of them, for example László Toroczkai wanted to keep their radically far-right program. Eventually in 2018 the party split up to an extremist and a more moderate one. The extremist wing established Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Home Movement).<sup>83</sup> After 2018 this paper analyses Mi Hazánk's communication, as they continued the extremism that Russia supports.

If one reads and listens to these channels a lot, the network of the Russian propaganda emerges, as these channels share and promote messages from each other. Nadana Fridrikhson talks in Berlusconi's media, and if the Italian politician says something about Russia, the Szent Korona Rádió will possibly cite him in an article<sup>84</sup>, or if Eva Maria Barki talks in a conference, it is not surprising to see a politician from Jobbik on the same stage an hour later.<sup>85</sup> These six channels are just a very small piece of the network, but exploring them, one can understand how sharp power works, and realize its dangerousness.

The discourse about these topics does not have the same intensity in time, so the timing of their analysis differs too. The messages about the refugees will be researched from the 18<sup>th</sup> of April, 2015, when, according to the UNHCR, the first turning point of the crisis occurred; more than 600 people died on a boat in the Mediterranean.<sup>86</sup>

The intensive discourse about Ukraine started months before the war. This paper marks the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, 2022 as a turning point, as on this day Putin published an article about "The Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" on the Kremlin's website. Here Putin explains why he believes the two countries historically belong together and that their separation and Ukraine's problems are because of the USA's and the EU's tireless effort to keep them away from each other.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Dezső, 2021. 286-306. p.

<sup>83</sup> Website of Mi Hazánk

<sup>84</sup> Szent Korona Rádió, 2022.11.03.

<sup>85</sup> Kuruc.info, 2013.

<sup>86</sup> Spindler, 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Putin, 2022.

The future of the European Union has always been up for discussion, but in times of crises it is always more intense. This was the case in 2015 due to the immigrant crisis, and a year later, in 2016, when the United Kingdom has decided to leave the institution. The coronavirus crisis, and now the Russian-Ukrainian war have the same effect. In these times it was always in discussion whether the members of the EU should try to solve the problems alone, or united, within the organization. Therefore, 2015 is marked here too as a beginning of the messages relevant today too.

In the following chapters every channel's every relevant message, communicated in the above-mentioned time limit about these topics, will be examined. Nadana Fridrikhson communicates to Europe via social media and TV. The posts she writes in Russian are not relevant to this research, as they are not intended for the Italian people. Her most important messages are her short monologues in the Italian TV shows. She talks there in Russian, but she is consecutively translated, and the things she says there are only for the Italian people, many of whom watch these talk shows.

The *Il Fatto Quotidiano* publishes articles every day, and about many different topics, and point of views. They spread Russian propaganda rarely and not directly. If in an article part of a Russian narrative is found, it will be added to the researched corpus.

Berlusconi communicates through social media, his party, Forza Italia, in interviews, and press conferences. There are many short interviews that he gave in television, or at political events that are available on YouTube, these will be researched and a party program of Forza Italia too.

Szent Korona Rádió is an easier channel, the articles they publish are most of the time in line with the Russian narratives. The content from the articles posted in the specified time frame and topics will be added to the research material.

Jobbik today is very different from itself before the split in 2018. On the party's website there aren't any available news or articles from before 2020. The party's communication in the given time frames will be collected from speeches or interviews still available on YouTube, or secondary sources, for example other researches, articles about the party. *Mi Hazánk's* point of views are easily accessible on their website, and their president, László Toroczkai's YouTube channel.

Eva Maria Barki mostly writes letters, gives speeches, or lectures in conferences. There are not that much of sources from her, but they are always long enough to gather content from them, especially the lectures that fully explain her point of views that are almost always the

same as the Russian narrative. The relevant messages from her will all be added to the research corpus.

After the relevant sources from each channel are collected, the similar contents will be gathered from them. This way we can see the Russian narrative that arrives to both countries as a whole. These channels are actively trying to reach their target audience, even more intensely in the given time frames, therefore, they make an abundant source for this research.

The societies in Hungary and Italy are different, and are sensitive to different things, so I suppose that even though the Kremlin has its own general narrative about the EU, the immigrants and Ukraine, the messages it sends to Italy and to Hungary are at least slightly different. After I built the corpus of the Russian narrative in each country, a comparison can be made and a better insight given to these societies and why the propaganda works in them so well.

## **Narratives in Hungary**

Based on the articles from Szent Korona Rádió, the speeches and letters of Eva Maria Barki and the statements and other press releases from Jobbik and later Mi Hazánk, the main messages of the Russian propaganda can be concluded as the following paragraphs say. The narratives in all three topics have a shared point: Europe's main enemy is the United States, they create the problems, like immigration or the war in Ukraine, and for Europe it would be more beneficial to ally with Russia and create a different world order, and to keep the independence of the nation states instead of becoming a federal European state.

### *Narratives about Europe and the European Union*

Every channel, Szent Korona Rádió, Barki and Jobbik/Mi Hazánk broadcasts the narrative that Eurasia should be an allied group of nation states, together with Russia and other northern Eurasian people, and not contain its transatlantic relations. The United States knows that Europe and Russia together would be too strong, so they do everything to prevent their alliance, and rather use Europe as a vassal who does everything according to their will. Sending immigrants is part of weakening Europe and the war in Ukraine is part of undermining the interstate relationships through Eurasia. The enemies are the United States and the federalist politicians of the EU, who work for the US.

Barki's explanation for this can be summarized as the following: There is a great war for Europe – after the fall of communism Europe thought it can be free, but a more dangerous dictatorship emerged; the unipolar world, led by the USA. They remained the only superpower, because Russia decided to stop the Cold War. American politicians now often say that they are the only superpowers and it should stay like that. This policy is based on the Wolfowitz doctrine (the US's exceptionalism, they have to prevent any other superpower's emergence) and Mackinder's Heartland-theory (if the Heartland, which is Eastern-Europe and Central-Eurasia, is in one power's hand, they can rule the world, as they possess great resources and a developed industrial area in the Ruhr, the alliance of Russia and Germany would make it happen). Putin, and also De Gaulle wanted this alliance but the US keeps preventing it. Sending immigrants is a part of the USA and the EU's federalist politicians' plan to weaken the European nation states. If Europe consisted of strong, independent nation states it would not be the loyal vassal of America. If the EU becomes a united state, it is easier for the US to use it as a loyal servant. The EU thinks that Hungary, Poland and Russia are a bigger threat to it, than the immigrants, but the US is the main enemy of Europe and Hungary is the only country in the EU that

understands it.<sup>88</sup> In another letter Barki shares the same ideas and argues that Hungary can set Europe free from the US's dictatorship.<sup>89</sup>

The Heartland theory and the real reason of the immigrant crisis was explained by a journalist in the news channel of RT. The video was translated and shared by Szent Korona Rádió as well.<sup>90</sup>

László Toroczkai, the president of Mi Hazánk party and former radical member and vice-president of Jobbik explains in a video that in the shadow of covid a new world order is being built by the World Economic Forum that contains mostly American companies. The forum's head is Bill Gates and the companies there discuss every matter about the world. Russian is not part of it, so they did not get a profit from Covid – their vaccine was not allowed in many countries. Also, every war is beneficial for the US, as the world's biggest arms factory, Lockheed Martin is American, and part of the World Economic Forum. Therefore, the war in Ukraine is also beneficial for the US, as the profit from the arms end up there. Europe's interest is the birth of a northern civilization, from Europe till Japan, Russians and Ukrainians would be part of it too. The European people would all have a better life quality if these countries were united, and their resources and technology used together, and if they allied with Eurasian countries and abandoned their transatlantic relations.<sup>91</sup>

All three explanations claim the United States to be the enemy of Europe, and encourages the people to cooperate with Russia instead.

Barki also says that the European Union is in a crisis, the people feel that it becomes a dictatorship. In 1989 Hungary got rid of a dictatorship from the East, now it is in danger from a dictatorship from the West, it is continuously attacked by the Western left-liberal mass media. In 1989 the West did not want Eastern Europe to be liberated, they fought for their own freedom.<sup>92</sup>

Barki corroborated her ideas in 2022 too as a reaction to the elections in Hungary. Her two letters can be summarized as the following: the West wants globalization and to build a unipolar world order, it continuously attacks Hungary for wanting to be independent – on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April Hungarians chose freedom, instead of the neoliberal totalitarianism that comes from the West. Hungary has to preserve the social model based on Christianity and family. Hungary resists the EU and the limiting of sovereignty so the EU continuously attacks Hungary with the

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<sup>88</sup> Barki, 2015.12.10.

<sup>89</sup> Barki, 2016.08.28.

<sup>90</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Bejelentkezés Párizsból... 2015.11.20.

<sup>91</sup> Toroczkai László, 2022.03.10.

<sup>92</sup> Civil Összefogás Fórum: 2022.02.10.

fake reason that in Hungary the rule of law and democracy are in danger. Hungary's democracy and rule of law are endangered by the EU that's becoming a dictatorship, not the government. Hungary's mission through history has been to protect freedom and justice against arbitrariness and dictatorship and independence from hegemons.<sup>93,94</sup>

### *Narratives about immigration to Europe*

The narrative that immigrants are sent by the US and other globalists, who support their unipolar world was present in all three researched channels. Barki and Szent Korona Rádió share the narrative that ISIS was created by the United States, and the war on terror is just pretended. The only great power that truly fights against ISIS and terrorism, is Russia. Parallely with this, all three channels continuously share stories about the horrible deeds of immigrants, as these stories encourage more and more people to vote for the far-right, pro-Russian parties.<sup>95</sup>

Szent Korona Rádió wrote a short article based on a video from RT News. In this video a reporter talks from Paris after a terrorist attack and says that the immigrants, terrorism and ISIS are all part of a globalist plan to weaken Europe and turn Africa, the Middle-East and Europe against each other. The pretended war on terror is a tool of the US and Israel to fight against every nation state that does not want to go along with the hegemony of the US. The terrorist attacks are conducted by terrorists, who were trained and funded by western intelligence agencies. ISIS is a creation of the United States, and Russia is the only country that is truly fighting against the ISIS. The soldiers of the ISIS now come to Europe to destabilize it. The media wants to stigmatize it as a conspiracy theory and fight against anyone who believes in it. The current refugee crisis is a consciously designed one, this is all part of a proxy war against Russia and Iran. The US and Türkiye use the immigrants as a weapon to weaken Central-Europe, Hungary and Germany. The reason of it is Mackinder's theory about the Heartland. Hungary is trying to prevent this immigration, so naturally, Viktor Orbán is being demonized by the EU. The French government is totally a subject of the US.<sup>96</sup>

Barki shares the same narrative; Immigrants come from all the places where the USA intervened, but they don't accept them, they send them to Europe to weaken it. 2015 is the beginning of the immigration crisis – it is a part of the USA and the EU's plan to ultimately weaken the European nation states. If Europe consisted of strong, independent nation states it

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<sup>93</sup> Barki, 2022.03.30.

<sup>94</sup> Barki, 2022.04.07.

<sup>95</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Idős nőt erőszakolt... 2016.03.02.

<sup>96</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Bejelentkezés Párizsból... 2015.11.20.

would not be the loyal vassal of America. If the EU becomes a united state, it is easier for the US to use it as a loyal servant. But it can't be a state because there is no European people. Therefore, they have to create them – that is why they are sending the immigrants, so that they will come together with the European peoples, they become a light-brown ethnic group that's IQ is below 90, and they will serve the US as a cheap workforce, without questioning them. If a politician goes against it, they are quickly eliminated. Immigration is used as a weapon today too. The ISIS wants to create a European Caliphate, the West finances the ISIS, which has a key role in immigration to Europe, because the people are running away from them. The EU thinks that Hungary, Poland and Russia are a bigger threat to it, than the immigrants, who rob, destroy and eliminate their culture. Hungary wants to preserve their culture, they are the only ones who are brave enough to say that immigration is a danger, but saying that is not politically correct, so other countries don't say it. The West is weakening Russia with sanctions because of the war in Crimea, while they are the only ones who fight against the ISIS and therefore could help to stop immigration.<sup>97</sup>

In 2016, Laszlo Toroczkai, then member of Jobbik party gave a lecture about immigration. He also said that these illegal immigrants are sent to Europe by the Bilderberg group (an informal forum to foster dialogue between Europe and North-America<sup>98</sup>). In his opinion this circle of influential American and European people wants to create a multicultural mass in Europe, because as nation states they would be too strong and it would be hard to control them.<sup>99</sup>

#### *Narratives about Ukraine and the Russian-Ukrainian war*

Barki talks about Ukraine again in connection with the Heartland theory. According to her without Ukraine Russia is not a superpower, only a regional power, because they do not possess the Heartland. That is why the US prevents Russia from taking its area.<sup>100</sup> The USA's geopolitical goal is the creation of a unipolar world order where there are no nation states, but every state is subject to the American hegemony. In Western Europe it happened already. The US wants to prevent the unity of Eurasia, that's why they are fighting against Russia. The war against Russia currently takes place in Ukraine with the support of the Western politicians and

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<sup>97</sup> Barki, 2015.12.10.

<sup>98</sup> The website of Bilderberg group.

<sup>99</sup> Lecture of Laszlo Toroczkai, 2016.04.30.

<sup>100</sup> Barki, 2015.12.10.

media. Russia protects its sovereignty and the 8 million Russian's right to self-determination in Ukraine.<sup>101</sup>

Mi Hazánk party's opinion about the Russian-Ukrainian war is also explained by Laszlo Toroczka on his YouTube channel. He argues that Ukraine was created only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by Russian, Polish, Romanian and Hungarian territories and its borders are unnatural. He does not take a side about the events on the Maidan square in 2014, but tells that some people believe it was a coup, organised from abroad, and an anti-Russian pogrom. In 2014 Russia occupied the Crimean-peninsula, and since then, there are fights in Donbass. Russia thinks that if they would not have attacked Ukraine, they would have done so to get Crimea back. Also, NATO was surrounding Russia, so they felt provoked. According to Toroczka it is unsure whether Ukraine would have attacked, or joined NATO, but it is a fact that this war was provoked and organized from abroad, by the globalists and the leaders of the world, who want to prevent peace between the Northern people, because if they were allied, they would be too strong.<sup>102</sup> Szent Korona Rádió also shares the narrative that Russia had to do something, because NATO was surrounding it, or Ukraine would have attacked.<sup>103, 104, 105</sup>

Another main narrative that Mi Hazánk shares is that Ukraine oppresses its minorities, their problem is naturally the oppression of Hungarians. The party in October declared Ukraine as an unfriendly country to Hungary, because in a city that belonged to Hungary before the first world war, they removed a Hungarian national symbol.<sup>106</sup>

On the far-right, nationalist Szent Korona Rádió's website many articles were published about the oppression of minorities in Ukraine, as Hungarian minorities are a victim of it too. They say that Ukraine is a chauvinist state, and deserved the war.<sup>107, 108, 109</sup>

On Szent Korona Rádió many articles claimed that Ukraine is led by the US, that Zelensky is a CIA-puppet, or that the CIA is training units in Ukraine.<sup>110, 111, 112</sup> One article said that the US gives war drugs to the Ukrainian soldiers, and that's the reason why they are so

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<sup>101</sup> Barki, 2022.03.30.

<sup>102</sup> Toroczka László, 2022.03.10.

<sup>103</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Az ukránok már... 2022.08.09.

<sup>104</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Interjú egy katonai... 2022.03.04.

<sup>105</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Néhány gondolat az... 2022.03.02.

<sup>106</sup> Website of Mi Hazánk, 2022.10.14.

<sup>107</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: A háború miatt... 2022.03.02.

<sup>108</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Ukrajna továbbra is... 2022.07.18.

<sup>109</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Néhány gondolat az... 2022.03.02.

<sup>110</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Több amerikai prominens... 2022.04.27.

<sup>111</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: A Pentagon irányít... 2022.04.14.

<sup>112</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Egyre nagyobb a káosz... 2022.03.05.

strong and persistent.<sup>113</sup> They write a lot about war crimes committed by Ukrainian soldiers, and criticize the western media for only talking about the ones committed by Russia.<sup>114,115,116</sup>

The amount of propaganda articles on Szent Korona Rádió about Ukraine make it impossible to cite every article and narrative here, these are only the most common ones. Szent Korona rádió also says that the weapons sent to Ukraine by NATO end up in the hands of smugglers, that the Russian army is not as weak as the western media shows or that the Ukrainian soldiers deliberately hide in schools, so Russia will bombard them, and so on. Their sources in general are blurred videos, documents that do not exist or the cited content is different, or what Russian officials have said.

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<sup>113</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Már harcidrogokkal is... 2022.05.05.

<sup>114</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Amiről hallgat... 2022.03.24.

<sup>115</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Kedvtelésből lövik lábon... 2022.03.27.

<sup>116</sup> Szent Korona Rádió: Fehér zászlós civil... 2022.05.11.

## Narratives in Italy

In Italy the Russian narratives among the Italian channels were not so easy to find, as they are more careful of how radically they speak. However, it is very common in Italy to invite Russian experts or journalist to their talk-shows, who are not afraid to tell openly the Kremlin's narrative. However, all the channels in most of the cases share one common thing; Europe should be more independent from the US and NATO, and the nation states stronger.

### *Narratives about Europe and the European Union*

According to Berlusconi the EU should be less bureaucratic, and the member states should cooperate more. The institution should have a common foreign and security policy, because now the US dominates the west's foreign policy, and always in each case some European countries follow their lead and some do not get involved. With a common foreign and security policy and a common European army the member states altogether could save around 50-80 billion euros/year. The EU could become a global military power and could have a word in every global issue, and not only follow the US's policies.<sup>117</sup>

The Fatto Quotidiano newspaper as it has already been mentioned shares many different writings and point of views, so it does not have a common view about Europe. However, there are some authors, who write articles that are probably more for the liking of Russia. Gianluca Ferrara's article that he wrote in 2016 after the referendum on Brexit is one of these. He argues that the EU is not equal with Europe and the European people. It is an economic institution that favours the elites and is based on the neoliberal economic policy. The people of Europe have been deceived and those who support the institution are victims of misinformation. For Europe it would be better to be independent from NATO, "*which, after 1989, no longer has any sense of existence other than the obvious one of perpetrating its hegemonic policies aimed at expanding its influence increasingly towards the east. A NATO that with its conflicts produces uncontrolled immigration and growing wars between the poor*". Ferrara also says that a new constitution should be written for Europe by the people, so the new union of the states would be truly at the service of the people and not the elites like the current one.<sup>118</sup>

### *Narratives about immigration to Europe*

According to Berlusconi illegal immigration is a danger for Italy's economy and security. The landing of illegal immigrants must be prevented, and those who manage to land

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<sup>117</sup> La7, 2017.12.31.

<sup>118</sup> Ferrara, 2016.07.06.

in Italy have to be distributed among the European states, in proportion to their population and economic strength. The best solution would if the EU's member states organized together the repatriation of the illegal immigrants.<sup>119</sup>

According to Berlusconi around 80% of the world's population lives in poverty, and 20% lives well. The problem is that now thanks to the internet, these people know that it is possible to have a better life, so they immigrate to countries with a higher quality of life. These people are not refugees who flee from war or persecution, they are economic immigrants. To prevent the influx of immigrants from Africa to Europe, the rich countries should come up with an African Marshall-plan; the US, the EU, China, Russia and Japan should invest economically in Africa, so their quality of life can be higher there and they will not have to leave their continent.<sup>120</sup>

#### *Narratives about Ukraine and the Russian-Ukrainian war*

Since the outbreak of the war Berlusconi has been inconsistent in his statements about Ukraine. My impression is that he has a very different opinion from what is accepted as politically correct in Italy, and what the current government that he is part of, represents. His most famous manifestation happened on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, 2022, in a party meeting, and was said to be intended strictly confidential. However, it was recorded, published, and created a huge scandal. In his monologue Berlusconi says that in 2014 in Minsk Ukraine and the two republics in Donbass signed a contract that they will not attack each other, but Ukraine breached the contract and a year later attacked. According to the former prime minister, around 5-7000 people died there. When Zelensky came, he tripled the intensity of the attacks. The people of these republics went to Moscow and asked for help from Putin, because they could not defend themselves. Putin did not want to attack, but he was pressured by the Russian people of Donbass, and in Russia and the press too, so he eventually decided to launch a special operation. His plan was to get to Kiev in a week, depose the government and replace it with a pro-Russian one, and then in another week go back to Russia, therefore, to finish the special operation in two weeks. But the Ukrainians were surprisingly strong and resistant, thanks to the western arms and money they were given, so Putin could not fulfil his plan. According to Berlusconi, if the west would not have given arms to Ukraine, and Zelensky would not have been so stubborn,

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<sup>119</sup> Berlusconi, 2022.08.24.

<sup>120</sup> Intervista a Silvio Berlusconi, 2017.12.31.

the war would have finished in two weeks, now because of Zelensky and his foreign supporters the war goes on a for a long time.<sup>121</sup>

This statement was intended for only to the people in his party (at least he claims so) but some of his public comments were similar. In Bruno Vespa's latest book (*La grande tempesta*, published in November, 2022) Berlusconi says that the war will end only if Zelensky understands that he will not get any more weapons from the West, and his supporters promise to financially support the reconstruction of his country. Then maybe the Ukrainian president would be willing to negotiate and stop the war. While Berlusconi goes in line with the Italian government and most of the time acknowledges that Italy has no other choice than supporting Ukraine, as a democracy's rights are in question, he also makes statements that are against the other politicians of the centre-right and Meloni. In an interview with Vespa he said that the Crimean-peninsula should remain in Russia, and there should be a referendum in Donbass. Overall, Berlusconi has controversial statements, but in general he thinks Putin to be a politician of peace and he is convinced that if the West stopped supporting Ukraine with financial aid and weapons, a peace treaty could be reached soon, with the fulfilments of at least some of Putin's demands.<sup>122</sup>

The online newspaper, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* most of the time shares the western narrative of the war, but sometimes they share articles from the other perspective too, or share a video about what a Russian official has said, without commenting it. In March, 2022 Angelo Cannatà posted an article on *Fatto Quotidiano* with the title "*Ukraine, Putin must be condemned but it seems to me crazy to attribute all the blame to him*". In this article the writer says that it is not correct to put all the blame on Putin, because that simplifies this conflict, which is unprofessional. Putin's concerns were legitimate, as NATO was coming too close to Russia, encircling it, so he had to step up against it in Ukraine. To negotiate between the two parties successfully, two facts should be acknowledged: 1) bombing Ukraine is a crime (here he adds, that bombing Iraq and Afghanistan was a crime too) 2) the West is to blame for its policies since 1989, and one has to be blind not to see the US's aims to gain power in Eastern-Europe. Cannatà quotes A. J. P. Taylor here; the British historian said that demonising Hitler and claiming him to be mad helped the West to hide their responsibilities, and according to Cannatà the same thing is happening today with Putin.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> *Corriere della Sera*, 2022.10.19.

<sup>122</sup> *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 2022.10.30.

<sup>123</sup> Cannata, 202203.09.

About the efficiency of the sanctions, Russia's opinion is present among the articles on *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. An article with an anonymous writer cites Dmitry Peskov, spokesperson of the Kremlin, who argues that the embargo of Russian oil will not affect the US that badly, but it will the European Union, as the member states of the institution depend on it very strongly. After the quote, the writer argues that the OPEC countries have already declared that they will not take any steps to compensate the shortcomings or reduce the global prices of oil. Therefore, the article, though carefully, suggests that an embargo on Russian oil would not be beneficial for Europe.<sup>124</sup>

About the Russian-Ukrainian war Nadana Fridrikhson was the most active channel of the Russian propaganda. She writes a lot, and posts on social media, mostly in Russian, but in the talk-shows that she has been invited to many times since February, 2022 she is consecutively translated. She said that Russia did not attack, or occupy the Donbass, but recognized the independence of the two republics, and stepped up to protect the Russians there from the atrocities of the Ukrainians. Fridrikhson insisted that the conflict there is not a war, but a special operation to protect people.<sup>125</sup> This goes along with what Berlusconi stated.

The Russian journalist frequently repeats that she has been to the zone of the conflict, talked to people in Mariupol, and many of them were happy for the Russians' arrival, and told her horrible stories about what the Ukrainians did there.<sup>126</sup> She insisted, that Russia's goal is not the occupation of these territories, but the protection of the people who live in the Donbas and in Crimea.<sup>127</sup>

Another message of Fridrikhson is that Ukraine is not a well-working democracy as the West says. It is corrupt and the opposition's politicians are silenced, or killed. She also said that Ukraine might terminate the Budapest memorandum and become a nuclear power, and also has biolaboratories, and these things are dangerous for the EU too. Also, Ukraine oppresses Polish and Hungarian people too, not only Russians.<sup>128</sup>

According to Fridrikhson Putin tried to resolve this conflict by negotiating, but Zelensky did not want that and got the EU and the US involved.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> F. Q., 2022.03.31.

<sup>125</sup> La7, 2022.04.15.

<sup>126</sup> La7, 2022.04.15.

<sup>127</sup> La7, 2022.04.29.

<sup>128</sup> La7, 2022.05.01.

<sup>129</sup> La7, 2022.05.07.

## Conclusion

After thoroughly researching the Russian narratives in Italy and Hungary I have found that even though there are some similarities, the narratives differ and are carefully planned to trigger the target audience the most. Also, the channels of the messages are chosen to reach the widest part of the population. The radicality of the messages stops exactly before the point where they would be banned. In both countries the channels were connected, the network of the Russian propaganda clearly emerged; sometimes it was hard to find the “original” messenger, because the channels quote each other regularly.

In Hungary all the three topics meet in the narrative that the US is a dangerous ally for Europe as they only want to use it as a vassal, and based on Mackinder’s Heartland theory, for Europe it would be more beneficial to cooperate with Eurasia. In Italy I have not found a unitary narrative like this, but more independence from America, or abandoning NATO was often suggested as a solution for Italy’s and Europe’s problems.

About the future of Europe different narratives were found in the two countries. In Hungary it was communicated by all three channels that the current world order is unipolar and led by the United States, either by their companies or politicians, and that this superpower only wants to exploit Europe, weaken it, and divide it from the other parts of Eurasia, because based on what Mackinder said, if Eurasia was united that would be the strongest superpower on the Earth. This narrative was communicated multiple times by all three channels with slight differences. In contrast to it, in Italy a more moderate anti-European narrative is present, one that does not demonise the United States, but urges full independency from it, by making Europe a military power on its own. This could be reached if Europe had a common army, and left NATO, which obviously would be very favourable for Russia. To conclude this topic, the radicalness of the narratives differs, but in both countries, there are voices that support more independency from the US and leaving NATO.

About the immigrants one narrative was present in both countries; they are dangerous and should be prevented from coming to the continent. Spreading this narrative strengthens the far-right political parties that weaken the governments. In Hungary, they are said to be sent to Europe by the American group that controls the world, to weaken Europe, by undermining security and after having been mixed with the population of the host country, making the people less intelligent.

About Ukraine I found similar narratives. In this topic in my opinion, it is equally important for Russia to undermine the support for Ukraine in every European society, as all

countries have an equal vote in the EU that stands up against Russia surprisingly united. However, in Hungary the Ukrainian-Russian war was connected with the Heartland-theory, or northern peoples' theory, as it is said to be a war of America against Russia, and a war that the US benefits from. Also, in Hungary the oppression of the minorities in Ukraine was repeated endlessly. In Italy the reasons of the war were discussed more intensely and whether all the blame is on Putin, or the West is faulty too, by generating this war with the presumptuous expansion of NATO.

In all three topics it was easier to find Russian propaganda and gather the most widespread narratives in Hungary, and also, they were more radical. As it is mentioned in the chapter of the macro perspectives, in Italy, Russian channels, and not the Italian ones are the most influential, for example the Sputnik Italia. In Italy the messages I researched were not that radical and the politicians and the newspapers were more careful with their communication, although, to their talk-shows they invite people who obviously are Russian propagandists. The other guests always argue with them, but their messages can still be heard. For example, if in Italy there is no politician or journalist who is willing to compromise themselves with sharing Russian propaganda, they send their own journalists, and it is not a problem for them to be continuously defeated in arguments, they already said what the Kremlin wants them to say. In Hungary probably it is cheaper to support some far-right radical groups and get them to spread the Russian narratives, as they already have a wide group of followers, who will not distance themselves from them because of hearing these radical messages. A difference between the two countries is that while in both of them there is a strong support for right and far-right parties, in Hungary there is a network and community of much more radical ideologies and conspiracy theories.

The aim of this paper was to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding about sharp power. So, what is discovered about spreading propaganda secretly and openly, these two aspects of sharp power, after the analysis of Russian propaganda in Hungary and Italy? Most importantly that it is more sophisticated, therefore, more dangerous than it is commonly thought to be, and discussed about. In both countries the channels are wisely chosen, in a way that it reaches the widest target audience, and the narratives are formulated in a way that it triggers the people the most. The messages get to the people and have an impact on public opinion that, in a democracy, can decide whom the country will ally.

Sharp power is efficient and it is extremely hard for democracies to fight against it. Researching it, and fostering discussion about it is crucial to the survival of European democracies. With high-quality education and the support of independent and reliable media

that tells the truth, the citizens of democracies are more capable to resist to believing in the fake news and conspiracy theories that the Kremlin spreads, and the effective and active spread of Russian narratives can be counterbalanced.

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