

Article

How public service media disinformation shapes the public discourse in Hungary

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Abstract

This is the abstract section of the manuscript. One paragraph only, giving a pertinent overview of the work, with a maximum of 250 words.

The structure of the illiberal Hungarian media system is well documented. Fewer publications address the question of how disinformation is reshaping public discourse in Hungary. The most important feature of disinformation in Hungary is that it is often generated and disseminated by the pro-government media. This is certainly unusual, as in other countries typically the fringe media is responsible for the spread of fake news.

The Russian war against Ukraine shows how the disinformation ecosystem works in Hungary and its devastating effect on the democratic public discourse. Public service media play a prominent role in spreading disinformation. In the nearly one year of the war, several false narratives can be identified. In the first few months of the war disinformation was spreading about how Ukraine provoked the war. Later, the prevailing message was that only Hungary was on the side of peace and the Western powers were interested in war. During the autumn, the message increasingly shifted to an anti-EU message, focusing less on war and more on sanctions. The pro-government media constantly conveyed the message to news consumers that the economic difficulties and the rise in energy prices were not caused by the war launched by Russia, but by the sanctions imposed by the European Union.

Public opinion research clearly shows the message these narratives have had on the Hungarian public. It is easy to see from the surveys how the Hungarian public's opinion has changed. The research is based on content analysis of M1 public television channel and on the results of public opinion polls.

Keywords

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

Issue

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41 1. Introduction

42 The spread of fake news and deliberate disinformation has long been a major focus of media research, but this issue has
43 become particularly important in recent years. First, the Covid-19 outbreak and then the Russian invasion of Ukraine have
44 highlighted the importance of credible information and the vulnerability of the democratic public to the spread of
45 disinformation.

46 After the invasion of Ukraine, Russian state-owned media outlets in Europe were shut down, protecting the European
47 market from disinformation about the war. The move was obviously the right one, but unfortunately there is a Member
48 State in the European Union where Russian propaganda continues to be broadcast unhindered. This is Hungary, where
49 Russian propaganda is intensively disseminated, and what makes the situation particularly serious is that this is the
50 responsibility not of Russian but of Hungarian-owned media companies.

51 In Hungary, the weight of pro-government investors in the media market is very significant and the narratives they
52 present are disseminated to almost everyone (Polyák et al, 2022). State advertising distorts the media market; while the
53 pro-government media are constantly exposed to state advertising and generate a lot of revenue, the independent media
54 can hardly gain any revenue from state institutions and are therefore at a competitive disadvantage (Bátorfy-Urbán,
55 2020).

56 The media capture phenomenon is a good description of the media situation in Hungary. Its main elements, such as the
57 acquisition of ownership by state-connected actors and the capture of public service media, are explicitly characteristic.
58 It is also well documented that media companies acquired by pro-government investors take a very strongly pro-
59 government editorial line, with the role of the media watchdog disappearing completely (Dragomir 2018; Dragomir 2019;
60 Griffen 2020).

61 For years, the Hungarian media system has been subject to international criticism, but since the launch of the invasion of
62 Ukraine, the presence of state-funded propaganda has become even more evident. The pro-Russian narrative is
63 prominent in the government-controlled media, which in other European countries is spread only in fringe media and
64 social media (GlobalFocus Center et al, 2022).

65 In this paper will discuss the role of public service media (PSM) in the democratic public sphere, with a special focus on
66 the crucial importance of reliable and credible public media in the fight against disinformation (Chapter 2). We describe
67 the situation of PSM in Hungary, highlighting that the presence of propaganda is well documented in content analyses
68 conducted over the past decade (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 presents the results of qualitative research. We analysed the
69 content of the evening news programme of the public television channel M1 in October 2022 and February 2023, focusing
70 on the energy crisis and the geopolitical situation. We also looked at how the public opinion has been changed on these
71 issues.

72 2. The role of PSM in combating disinformation - a literature review

73 2.1. PSM and democratic values

74 Public Service Media was traditionally mandated to inform, educate and entertain the audience. It was always expected
75 to provide high-quality content and to embody the highest professional standards, and today these organisations are
76 struggling to remain meaningful and relevant in the changing technological environment (Van den Bulck et al, 2018).

77 Bardoel and Lowe (2007) described the PSM mission as an audience-centered view. „This does not imply abandoning
78 devotion to serving the public as citizens. On the contrary, it implies serving citizens in all the ways their public interest
79 activities seek to fulfil their social, cultural, and democratic needs.” This approach shows that the task of the PSM can be
80 much more complex in the 21st century than it was in the past.

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

85 2.2. The challenge of disinformation from the PSM point of view

One of the biggest challenges facing the democratic public today is the spread of disinformation. Increasing disinformation pressure has been a long-standing phenomenon (Posetti & Matthews, 2018), but the Covid epidemic (Grimes, 2021) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Erlich & Garner, 2023) have made the problem particularly visible. It is worth examining the role that the traditionally trusted PSM can play in the fight against disinformation.

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

Humprecht et al (2020) built a framework for the resilience to online disinformation. The authors identified seven political, economic, and media environmental factors limiting resilience. One of the factors is the weak public services media. Boulianne et al (2022) used the resilience model in their four-country study on misinformation and they examined the role of public service media. The results were controversial. In the UK use of the BBC did not significantly correlate with awareness of fake news stories and sharing of misinformation but increased self-assessed exposure to misinformation. In France, watching France TV did not relate to awareness of, exposure to, or sharing of misinformation. In Canada, consuming CBC News increased awareness of fake news stories and self-assessed exposure to misinformation but did not influence the likelihood of sharing misinformation. Overall, the authors could not prove that the usage of PSM contributed to resilience.

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

The fight against disinformation is still not given enough importance in practice. Canedo et al (2022) identified 12 PSM public value components that are repeated in the corpus of European national legislations and grey literature based on reports published on public service media websites. The components of PSM’s public value were categorised according to their relevance and it resulted in three levels: (a) essential value, (b) important value, and (c) interesting value. Surprisingly media literacy was included in the third group of the least relevant components although experts point out that it is crucial in the fight against disinformation.

3. Disinformation in the Hungarian public service media

3.1. Propagandistic editorial line of the public service media

In the last decade several scandalous cases proved the existence of propaganda in the public media, most of these cases led to intense public reactions (Kovács et al., 2021). Some content analyses and studies have proven the highly biased, propagandistic broadcasting practices of the Hungarian PSM.

Already in 2014, at the time of the annexation of Crimea was invaded, the presence of the Russian narrative was identifiable at the MTI news agency, which was already part of the PSM. As Rácz (2016) found in his content analysis, MTI appeared to be clearly in favour of the Russian narrative. There was even a case of open manipulation, when MTI reported news published in the Ukrainian media, but distorted its wording in a politically sensitive way. To be fair, other events in Ukraine, like the shooting down of the Malaysian flight were reported in a fair way.

Hungarian media watchdog organization, Mertek Media Monitor's Spot Check (Szűrőpróba) series chose one public television news show per month and analysed if it complied with the requirements of the media law. Mertek analyzed if the news show was balanced; if any biased or manipulated news contents were published; and if the editorial practices were one-sided, and only focused on amplifying the government's communication. The analyses examined the manipulation techniques in the topic choice or in the way the news blocks were structured, and whether propagandistic elements appeared in the word choice or in the visual or audio elements of the individual news items. The news analyses identified strong bias towards the government, with virtually one-to-one coverage of the ruling party narrative (Polyák, 2021).

OSCE Parliamentary Elections report analyzed the news shows of the M1 public television channel and found strong bias during the election campaign. „In its editorial coverage, M1 showed bias in favour of the ruling coalition and the government, which received around 61 per cent of the news coverage. On average, 96 per cent of it was positive in tone, while 82 per cent of the coverage devoted to the opposition was negative. This is at odds with OSCE commitments and international standards on fair access to the public broadcaster’s programmes and undermined the public’s corresponding right to receive media output.” (OSCE, 2018).

Findings in the 2022 election campaign were rather similar. Public M1 displayed a clear bias in favor of the government and Fidesz by allocating 50 per cent of politically relevant news coverage to the government and 5 to the ruling party Fidesz, mainly positive in tone. There was no clear distinction between the coverage of the government and the ruling party. The opposition coalition received 43 per cent of mainly negative coverage. Coverages were often intertwined with comments and unsubstantiated allegations attacking the opposition candidate (OSCE, 2022).

Particularly strong evidence of bias towards the governing party can be seen in an audio recording of an internal editorial meeting before the 2019 European Parliament elections. Balazs Bende, a senior MTVA editor gave instructions to the journalists about the editorial guidelines and the audio recording was leaked to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Referring to the election campaign Bende said, „I’m sure no one will be surprised to hear that it is not the opposition’s list that enjoys the support of this institution”. He also gave clear instructions about the expectations „Whoever is in charge must produce content according to the appropriate narrative, method, and direction, mostly about migrants and Brussels.” The censorship was clearly reflected in his words when he said that „If anyone is not prepared to work under these conditions, he is free to file his resignation immediately” (Keller-Alánt, 2020)

PSM in Hungary does not play the role we know from well-established democracies. The main aim is not to seek the truth, to present reality, but rather to serve the government’s communication goals.

3.2 Disinformation as a topic in the Hungarian PSM

Disinformation as a topic does appear in the Hungarian public media, but it does not cooperate in any way with independent fact-checking organisations and serves to build a political narrative rather than a real fact-checking goal.

Bódi et al. (2022), analysing the Hirado.hu news portal of the Hungarian PSM concluded that fake news "before 2020 was presented in the writings of Hirado.hu's primarily as a specific problem of network communication on the internet, with its possible political and social consequences, and how to counter it. In 2020, this changed, and the accusation of fake news became a communication tool against the domestic independent media, the opposition and the international liberal elite". In other words, in the Hungarian public media, the Covid pandemic has brought about a communication turnaround in which "fake news" has become a term used to stigmatise actors critical of the government.

The section of Fake News Figyelő (Fake News Observer) is still available on Hirado.hu. This is ostensibly a fact-checking site, but it is rather one-sided in its selection of topics. News available on the site were published between 1 March and 20 September 2022. Most articles were published during the campaign period of the April 2022 Parliamentary election suggesting that the series was essentially for domestic political purposes. The vast majority of the news items refute information about Ukrainian casualties, prove the opposition's pro-war stance, and respond to claims in non-government media. Regardless of whether the fact-checks published are well-founded, it is clear that the purpose of public fact-checking is not to combat disinformation, but to reinforce the government narrative.

3.3 Editorial line in the days following the outbreak of the war

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

Already in the days following the start of the war, starting on February 24, 2022, the PSM featured a heavily pro-Russian narrative. This was all the more surprising since at the time the government party politicians were still silent on the issue.

180 They typically did not make any comments siding with Russia. Nevertheless, the M1 news channel started featuring pro-
181 Russian "talking heads" who clearly advanced the Kremlin's narrative.

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

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

191 Although the reaction of the PSM was downright shocking, some optimistically believed that they were simply
192 professionally not up to handling this situation and they would correct their mistakes over time. In the case of MTI, this
193 did happen to some extent – in response to the press scandal that followed in the wake of their use of the term "military
194 operation," they started calling the war a war. Still, on the whole, the PSM has continued to present the relevant
195 geopolitical developments in an extremely biased manner. The past year has shown that the daily news of the M1 news
196 channel hews closely to the government's communication, which – unlike its paralysis in the first days of the war – openly
197 espouses a pro-Russian stance in the international arena as well (Kazharski, 2023). The public service media and the pro-
198 government private media have significantly impacted how Hungarian public opinion on this issue has shaped up since
199 the start of the war.

200 **4. Empirical research**

201 *4.1 Methodology*

202 The research analysed the main news programme of the public service channel M1, starting at 19.30, over two periods,
203 1-14 October 2022, and 1-14 February 2023. The content analysis focused on narratives dealing with the geopolitical
204 situation, including the energy crisis and the economic consequences. We analysed how public service news programmes
205 present the complexity of the situation, how they present different interpretations and to what extent they help viewers
206 to understand the processes that are currently taking place.

207 The choice of time periods was a conscious decision. In October 2022, energy prices were very high across Europe, and
208 in Hungary, too, it was a question of what challenges the next winter would bring. In February 2023, it was already clear
209 that the winter period had been basically well managed in the European countries, and no dramatic situation had
210 developed. At the same time, it was already clear that Hungary had a very high inflation rate, and that the Hungarian
211 economy was in a much worse situation than other EU member states.

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

214 *4.2. The presentation of the geopolitical situation in October 2022*

215 The first 14 days of October 2022 were an especially important period in the government's communication. For one,
216 because of the high energy prices and the looming winter, no one knew what to expect in the coming months. The
217 prospects were uncertain and the government had to come up with a narrative framework for the difficulties that the
218 Hungarian population was likely to be confronted with in the following months. Second, the prime minister had just
219 announced at the end of September that a so-called national consultation would be launched on the sanctions against
220 Russia. This was when the topics of the planned consultation and its exact questions were publicly introduced (Cseke -
221 Horváth Kávai, 2022).

222 Almost every evening news show during the period investigated featured a news block called "Energy Crisis," which
223 generally lasted 10-15 minutes and reviewed the European energy situation. This block devoted a lot of airtime to high
224 energy prices, emphasising that the public was in distress in many countries. On the one hand, it was of course true that
225 prices were rising and that there was a great deal of uncertainty as to what the winter would bring. Nevertheless, the
226 public service news show substantially overstated how dramatic the situation was. They claimed, for example, that many

227 people in Denmark sold their houses and "there were people who sought to make it through the winter using camping
228 sites" (October 6); in Germany, "living standard deteriorated dramatically," and in fact "public lighting had been turned
229 off in many major cities" (October 9); while every "Finnish household had to brace itself for a potentially sustained
230 electricity outage" (October 14).

231 At times, the coverage veered into the realm of parody. Thus, for example, they claimed that "French public television
232 recommended that people use their mobile phones less" due to the energy crisis (October 4); that in Germany, the
233 revenues of pawnshops were rising (e.g., on October 12, a woman was shown pawning her vacuum cleaner); and that in
234 Belgium "a growing number of people stopped showering at home and instead did so at work, at public swimming pools
235 or gyms" (October 13). The public service news show frequently presented the difficulties faced by the public in other
236 countries by airing locally produced reports that were obviously taken from foreign news coverage. Thus, during the
237 period investigated, viewers of the Hungarian public service news shows learned about a Belgian bakery that was shut
238 down; they saw a report on the Danish school where it was colder than usual and about a French public swimming pool
239 where the water was cold. The news show also repeatedly covered demonstrations in major foreign cities. An interesting
240 fact was that the same protester in Berlin was presented in the Hungarian public service news shows on both October 9
241 and October 11.

242 Not once during the period examined did anyone in the news say that Russia – or Putin specifically – bore responsibility
243 for the high energy prices. In fact, the public service news show clearly blamed Brussels for the problems in the energy
244 markets. It is important to stress that the government communication has been talking about "Brussels" for a long time
245 as part of an effort to steer public sentiments against the European Union. They presumably do this because the European
246 Union has positive connotations for many, while Brussels started as a basically neutral term and is now increasingly
247 perceived as negative. "Brussels sanctions" was a recurring term on the news show, as in "Brussels' sanctions don't work"
248 (October 2); "the ill-conceived Brussels sanctions have backfired" (October 3); "the sanctions hurt Europe a lot more than
249 Russia" (October 5); and "Brussels sanctions have no regard whatsoever for European interests" (October 11).

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

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

270 The biased editorial practices of public television manifested themselves in several ways. They repeatedly referred to the
271 "left," always in a negative context, such as "the dollar-left in Hungary [a reference to foreign funding that the opposition
272 had received during the campaign for the 2022 election – the authors] has fully embraced the stupid decisions of the
273 Brussels' elite" (October 4). At the same time, not once did the public service media ask Hungarian left-wing politicians
274 to speak about their own solutions to the issues raised. Only government party politicians were asked to comment on
275 these issues, and the narrative conveyed in the coverage also reflected their positions. The same was true of the experts
276 invited to comment, as only well-known pro-government think tanks were given such opportunities.

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

4.3 The presentation of the geopolitical situation in February 2023

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

According to M1 news programs, Brussels bears the sole responsibility for the sanctions. The EU and the sanctions imposed by the latter are consequently also responsible for the overwhelming majority of negative repercussions stemming from the war. In this context, the public service news coverage has also continued the trend of exclusively inviting government party politicians or experts with ties to Fidesz to comment on war-related issues. In addition to the already continuously used references to “sanction-triggered inflation” (February 2, 6, 10) and the “energy crisis” (February 1, 2, 3, 14), a reference to “energy catastrophe” (February 2) was introduced as a new element in the coverage of the war. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was often quoted on the issue. Thus, he informed the viewers of public service television that “it is futile to expect Brussels to step up and help, the only thing coming from [Brussels] are sanctions” (February 1) and that “this policy of sanctions constitutes a step towards war” (February 7). All government party politicians who were asked to comment proffered the same narrative. Thus, Fidesz MEP Tamás Deutsch said that “the EU’s sanctions policies hurt Europe more than Russia” (February 2). And deputy minister Csaba Dömötör noted that “energy prices are high because of the sanctions, and the energy prices in turn cause record inflation levels” (February 4).

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

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

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

One of the dominant methods of conveying pro-Russian narratives is that comments by the Russian side and the comments of its representatives are broadcast in the news without any explanation or commentary. Examples include a statement by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov in which he said that “Russia strives to resolve the conflict peacefully” (February 2) or Putin’s speech in which he said that “the most important thing is to protect the areas near the border against Ukrainian attacks; the residents have had to be relocated from several counties on account of the

immediate threat to their lives" (February 2) and that "German tanks are threatening Russia once again" (February 2). Another indication of the overall trend is the use of vocabulary that the Russian side tends to use, such as telling viewers that cities in the Donetsk region are being "liberated" (February 1 and 13), and of American "terror attacks" in the context of the North Stream pipeline.

Even more striking is the negative presentation of the Ukrainian armed forces. A recurrently featured item – and a long one, too, as compared to other news segments – concerned alleged compulsory recruitment practices in Ukraine, "which some consider manhunts" (broadcast on February 3, 4, 5, 8, 11 and 12). Using recordings made with phones as illustrations, one news segment claimed that "many recounted the experience that [the recruiters] presented blank draft letters when they wanted to take someone;" that "uniformed men scour the streets in packs" and that "there is a veritable manhunt for men between the ages of 18 and 64 in Ukraine;" and that "there is no room for objections, they physically force Hungarian men of conscription age to go to war" and "they take them to the front to die." The report further mentions that they have to use footage from Telegram, a questionable source because freedom of the press is being violated in Ukraine, which is why Ukrainian television has referred to the videos in question as a "part of the Russian propaganda efforts" (February 8).

In both periods under review, the M1 channel presented a pro-Russian narrative, but in February 2023 it was already openly using elements of Kremlin propaganda. Thus, one year after the outbreak of the war, the editorial practices of the Hungarian PSM became similar to Russian state propaganda broadcasts.

4.4 The impact of the pro-Russian communication

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

The data published by the reputable pollster Medián in October 2022 showed that while in April 2022, 41% of respondents had said that they strongly disagreed with the sanctions imposed on Russia, by October, this ratio had surged to 52%. In light of the government's communication on the issue, it is hardly surprising that the public is heavily divided along partisan lines: the October 2022 poll showed that 81% of the government party (Fidesz) supporters rejected the sanctions, while only 26% of opposition voters said the same (Szurovecz, 2022).

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

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

public's opinions shifted as events changed, the opinions of Fidesz voters were completely frozen. It appears that geopolitical developments have not had any impact whatsoever on the perceptions of Fidesz voters.

According to data published by the Publicus Institute, between December 2022 and February 2023, the share of the Hungarian public who believe that the sanctions imposed by Brussels cause food prices to rise has increased from 47% to 63%. During the same period, the share of those who believe that the government's economic policy is to blame has dropped from 74% to 65%. The fact that in February 2023, 96% of government party supporters believed that Brussels sanctions were responsible for rising prices while only 26% of opposition supporters shared this assessment reveals a lot about the state of political polarisation in Hungary today (Varga, 2023).

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

5. Conclusion

The information provided by the Hungarian public media about the war and its consequences for Hungary is deliberate disinformation. The PSM uncritically follows the narrative of the Hungarian government, contradictory Western or opposition positions are not presented or are presented in a distorted form.

Anti-EU is the most important narrative in war-related information, even if the messages do not point to the European Union but to 'Brussels', which has been a well-established narrative, as the source of all problems. This narrative is an extension of the 'Brussels' antipathy that has been consistently communicated for years to the war situation, i.e. blaming the distant, invisible, elusive, imperial and bureaucratic enemy for the new difficulties. On the other hand, it is an important element in the absolution of Russia, the Russian political leadership. Instead of Russia and Putin, 'Brussels' is presented as the source of eventual Hungarian troubles.

The Hungarian public media used the portrayal of the consequences of the war to build a narrative in which the citizens of Western Europe face dramatic difficulties in their daily lives, but the Hungarian government successfully protects the Hungarian people from the negative consequences. This simultaneously reinforces anti-Western sentiments and the national consciousness of a nation more successful than the West, while the Hungarian government and the Hungarian prime minister are presented as heroically defending the interests of the Hungarian people, and therefore deserving of unconditional respect. It is important to point out that the energy crisis has caused difficulties everywhere in Europe, but the public media have been silent on the Hungarian livelihood crisis and have grossly over-dramatised the situation in Western Europe.

All this is factually contradictory to the real situation. The geopolitical reality is completely different from what is presented in the public media and the Hungarian economy is performing very badly, with the highest inflation rate in the European Union.

There is also a domestic political narrative to war reporting: while the government is doing everything it can for peace, the opposition is interested in prolonging and expanding the war, serving Western interests. In other words, the opposition serves "Western" interests instead of national interests, putting the Hungarian people in danger.

In developed democracies, the PSM is an important feature that guarantees reliability and credibility, and is also of particular importance in the fight against disinformation. The situation is completely different in Hungary, where public media is not the solution but part of the problem. News programmes are constantly spreading propaganda, and clearly recognisable pro-Russian disinformation, and research shows that this is transforming public opinion in a spectacular way. Just as the Hungarian government serves the interests of the Kremlin on the international stage, so does the Hungarian public media in the domestic public sphere.

Conflict of Interests

423 The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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