



MISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA VIEWED BY HUNGARIAN STUDENTS

Collection of students' projects

"Good quality news is like eating vegetables. Not all people are fond of it, but some do and everyone needs them to stay healthy." Daniel Funke, Fact-Checking Reporter at Poynter said this to the participants of the [Workshop on Misinformation and Propaganda for Hungarian Students](#), organized by the Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) at Central European University, Budapest, Hungary.

According to the Director of CMDS, Marius Dragomir, the goal of the three-day workshop was that *"misinformation is spreading like fire and it is extremely important for media literacy to catch up. Particularly in Hungary where propaganda is rife, any responsible institution should step up efforts to teach young people how to deal with lies. The workshop was our contribution to those efforts."*

Ten students participated at the workshop to discuss the topic of disinformation in the context of the state of the media with participation of Hungarian and international experts, to find out how and why misinformation is produced and ends up in their newsfeed and to learn about how recognize and fight misinformation.

The workshop had four trainers:

- Marius Dragomir, Director at Center for Media, Data and Society
- Daniel Funke, Fact-Checking Reporter at Poynter
- Oren Levine, Director of Innovation at International Center for Journalists
- Charles Salter, Chief Operating Officer at The News Literacy Project.

The workshop had a strong practical component: developing participants' skills to recognize and fight disinformation. As part of the project, participants have been asked to produce a post/podcast/visualization/film etc. on the topic of misinformation. Mentorship was provided to support the ideas.

Mentors:

- Krisztina Nagy, Budapest University of Technology and Economics
- Gábor Polyák, Mérték Media Monitor
- Éva Varga, University of Pécs

The final version of the projects was edited by CMDS Fellow Judit Szakács.

The following articles were written by the students of the program "Misinformation and Propaganda for Hungarian Students". The views expressed in the articles don't necessarily reflect the opinion of the Center for Media, Data and Society

We Need a Fact-Checking Website in Hungary and Here's Why

Author: Renáta Gajdos

Disinformation, misinformation, fake news – these words are now familiar to every person on the planet. Sometimes we don't even notice how we become trapped in a series of lies that we read, see or hear in the media.

In Hungary, disinformation has become a huge problem. People see propaganda in tabloids, on television screens, in newspapers, on the radio, on the internet, and social media. Most of Hungarians who rely on these sources for their news will get a distorted picture of the world. That's why we need an organization that can fight disinformation in Hungary.

Launching a fact-checking project requires a tremendous amount of energy, hard work, and courage. In Hungary, most of the media outlets are directly or indirectly financed by the government. For independent media sources, it is very difficult to remain free. The only way they can survive is by the support of the public via donations. This means that establishing a fact-checking organization can be extremely challenging.

They say a journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step. In my opinion, the first step is explaining to the community why we need a fact-checking website in Hungary. That's why I have compiled a list of things that can shed light on the issue and convince people to make a change. I have also created an infographic from the text, which helps to understand the essence and purpose of fact-checking in the information ecosystem to a broader audience in a simple, easy-to-understand form.

Pro-government media dominance

In Hungary, most of the pro-government media operations have joined forces and created a massive pro-government media conglomerate composed of almost 500 titles and outlets. It goes by the name of Central European Press and Media Foundation and headed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's supporter and media owner Gábor Liskay. Government advertising and sponsorships favor pro-government outlets. This has created a situation where independent and critical outlets are in a financially precarious position. Hence, the government has an even stronger and centralized voice than any other outlet. The pro-government media create a narrative that is more suitable for the government and try to promote the populist agenda of Mr. Orbán and his party, Fidesz. Today, most of what we see in the Hungarian media is considered to be pro-government propaganda. An essential element of the government media propaganda is the dissemination of false, misleading information, including the taxpayer-funded anti-Brussels and anti-Soros campaigns. To draw attention to this, a fact-checking organization is required.

Politicians and opinion-makers use traditional and social media to construct other narratives

Author and scholar Barbara Hardy says, “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.” People understand the world by relying on different narratives. In the political context, narratives can sway our thoughts and opinion. Fact-checkers can save time and energy for us by checking information spread by politicians and legislators.

If we don’t have an organization that monitors politicians’ statements, then it becomes easier for them to develop narratives of their own. People’s political identities and predispositions can often lead to a situation in which they believe everything that politicians say, even if it’s not credible. Politicians love to use the label “fake news.” When some controversial true story related to them becomes public, they often try to blame the media and journalists in false statements. We need an organization that can check the manufactured truth created by politicians.

Misinformation can have major consequences

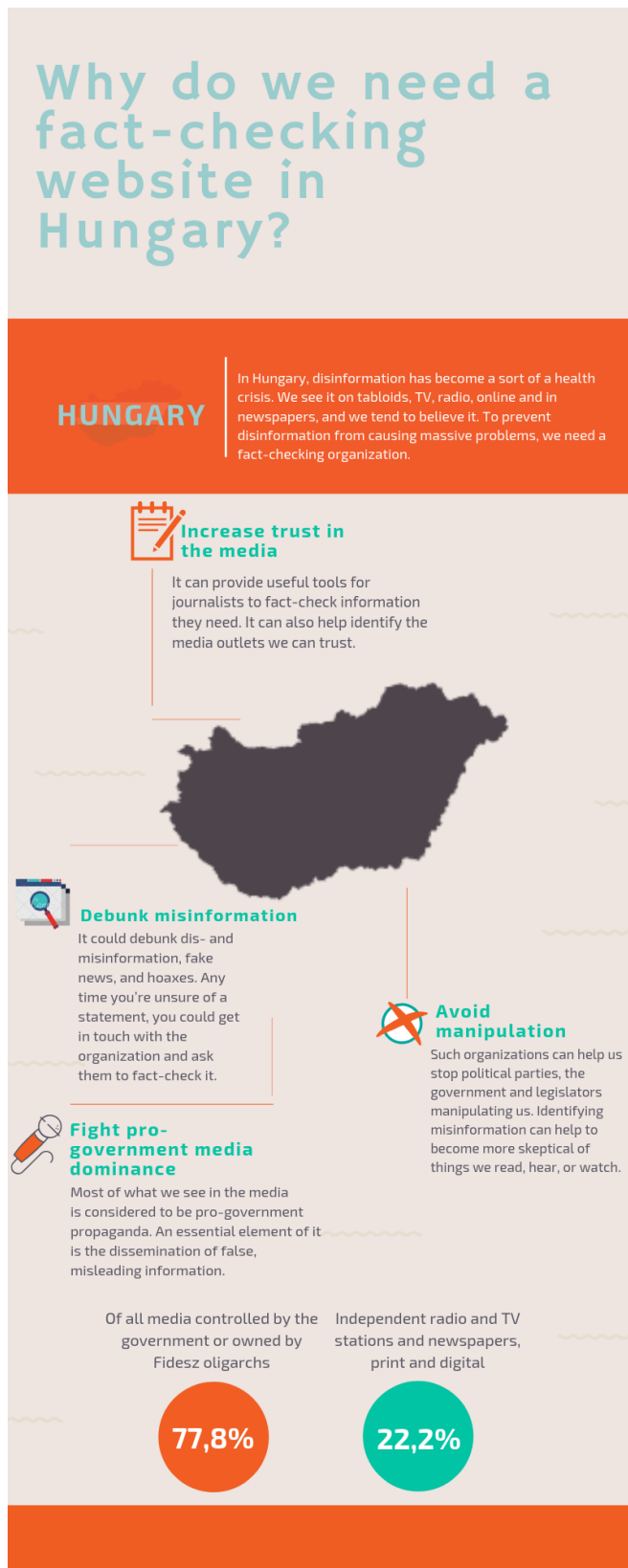
Misinformation has become a serious issue of our generation. The more you hear false statements, the more likely you are to believe it to be true. The public discourse about the migration crisis is a perfect example. Several media outlets, not just in Hungary, used photos of migrants out of context to incite hatred towards these minority groups.

Imagine that you are reading an article about the migration crisis, which claims that refugees have attacked the police, and it has the photos to prove it. You decide to share the story with your friends on Facebook or any other social media. Later, it turns to be a total fake, but the damage has been done. Hundreds of your friends and their friends have already seen it, and it caused hate, and increased chauvinism and racism toward migrants. You didn’t mean to cause harm; you just wanted to raise awareness about the issue. At the same time, you contributed to the demonization of refugees. We can prevent such situation from happening by creating a fact-checking website which can help us understand which facts are valid and which are not.

To increase trust in the media

As more fake news has spread across the media, we have started to think that all we read, watch or hear is a lie. That’s not true: noteworthy, non-partisan, and independent media outlets still exist. A fact-checking website can change the way we look at things. It can provide useful tools for journalists to fact-check information they need, and it can also help to identify which media outlets we can trust.

If we acknowledge that the fact-checking organization can become a sort of a watchdog of the media, then we will trust it more. Fact-checking isn’t an old-fashioned way of reporting. It’s the opposite, a creative type of journalism. It contains a large amount of data, but it can establish some strong and powerful statements creatively.



Exposing the truth to the public

The most important thing the organization would do is to debunk dis- and misinformation, fake news, and hoaxes. Anytime you are not sure about a claim, you could get in touch with the organization and ask it to fact-check it. You will see where propaganda and disinformation come from and how they spread. With time you would become more informed about the news you consume.

A fact-checking organization can make a change not just by debunking false news but also by raising awareness of this phenomenon and by investigating its mechanism and influence on the decision-making process in different countries. The credibility of such organizations is their independence.

Avoid being manipulated

Last but not least, with the help of such organizations, we don't let political parties, government, and legislators shape us. We can become more aware of the problem of fake news, thus become more skeptical about the things we read, watch, or hear.

Ultimately, fact-checking is putting power in your hands, in the hands of citizens. It gives you the ability to be a part of the process, to decide for yourself what is valid and what isn't. Together we can make a change. Together we can make a collective decision that will build our bridge to a decent future.

There are already many fact-checking organizations across the world that can be an example for us to fight against misinformation. Launching a fact-checking website doesn't require many resources: just two or three good journalists, a website, and funding. Most importantly, we need your support. It is only possible with your help. By recognizing that we need a fact-checking organization in our country, we are making a small step to start our journey of building a fact-checking community in Hungary.

Preparing Students for the Society of Misinformation

Author: Blanka Kovács

Fake news is not news in 2019. It is a potentially harmful phenomenon and though it's always been here, the rise of social media and the quickening pace of media reaction in general have increased its volume and impact. So much so that by now fake news is not even the right term to use. There are at least 7 types of mis- or disinformation to distinguish between; from satire to somewhat manipulated content to fabricated information. Despite fake news being a complex issue that we face daily, there is a general agreement about how to prevent its dangers from spreading: through media literacy education. In Western countries there are several well-funded initiatives to teach media literacy; however, in eastern European countries like Hungary this field is still in its infancy. For this article I interviewed Hungarian teachers about the current use, or lack thereof, of education regarding responsible news consumption.

The latest version of the National Core Curriculum in Hungary was published in 2012 by the government. Its main function is to create a single programme for public schools throughout the country. This curriculum aims to give teachers guidelines for what they should teach, but the expectations are often vague, and teachers are usually left with lots more work to do in order to create teaching plans.

The curriculum advises that media awareness be taught in Information Technology, History, Visual and Media Studies, and Hungarian Grammar classes. It is usually touched upon within the last of these. It is a relatively new topic to discuss with students, so my question was: how do teachers teach their pupils about the threat of misinformation?

According to József, a Hungarian Grammar and Literature teacher in a prestigious high school in the outskirts of Budapest, the topic is already covered in classes. "There is only one type of Grammar textbook series a teacher may use due to the administration's efforts to unify what we teach. In these books the topic of fake news comes up in every grade. However, the authors present it as if this phenomenon is the internet's fault only; they don't put it into the context of established press or journalism. This is why I feel like I need to spice up the exercises a bit. For example, when in literature class we talk about poets or writers who were also journalists, we talk a lot about popular publishing styles. The students like tasks when they have to compare an article of a dead poet and a piece from 444.hu, one of Hungary's main news outlets. In my opinion, the most important thing is to learn how to treat sources. It's not useful when you, as a teacher, tell them to stop reading specific websites or magazines. They wouldn't pay attention. So in the era of Google and hyperlinks, what I try to get across is how to be analytical when you read something."

Alma, a Hungarian Grammar and Literature teacher in a small secondary school in rural Hungary, mostly seconded József's views during our interview. "Yes, the curriculum contains journalism and advertising but beyond that it is not very strict regarding what you have to teach. When talking about it with the pupils, I focus on online communication and quality journalism. They have to search for articles and argue why it is false." So, as the examples show, the topic of fake news made it to the Hungarian school system, to a certain extent. But is that enough?

In the US there are many more resources offered to train young people to become informed news readers as well as to prepare teachers to teach about it. For example, in September 2018 California's Department of Education made teaching about fake news [a requirement](#), saying "news literacy is to help safeguard the future of democracy". With this decree California joined Washington, New Mexico and many other US states. After passing the law, a web-based system of materials has been created for teachers to report on how they plan to teach it in schools. Furthermore, a US-based NGO, the News Literacy Project has also created a software to teach children how to spot misinformation and how to recognize trustworthy articles. As their Chief Operating Officer Charles Salter told a workshop on misinformation in February 2019 at Central European University, the demand for such products is clear. In fact, the governing body of New York City has just provided every school in the city with [Checkology](#), a fake news education software.

According to the people I've interviewed, something like that would be great in Hungary, too. Unfortunately, the education system in Hungary is infamously lacking not only the necessary funds, but also the know-how of how to distribute them. There are much more fundamental problems that the sector needs to fix. The [starting monthly salary for teachers](#) with a BA is not higher than the Hungarian minimum wage for people with at least secondary education; for teachers with MA degrees, it is only HUF 8,000 (€24) higher. Under these circumstances the best that teachers can do is to "be creative". "I think it's a problem that while we are told to teach about quality journalism, the fake news phenomenon itself is not named in the core curriculum, at least not in the Hungarian Grammar subject guidelines. The curriculum does not outline what a grammar teacher should teach regarding the topic and so in a lot of cases I have to make an extra effort to reach out to colleagues teaching other subjects and cross-check what we are expected to teach." said Lili, a teacher from Budapest who works in an independent school primarily aimed at students who have learning difficulties or who have been expelled from other institutions.

In Hungary, teachers are required to attend workshops every year, but József said he has only found one media literacy workshop in the national database for these events. "I wish there was a fund for such things. Currently schools aren't even allowed to spend money on electronic gadgets. It's challenging to discuss the threats of social media without accessing them in the classroom. Ideally, we would receive an institutional grant, and the school committee could decide what we spend it on. Or we could apply for money to organise thematic projects for the kids about news consumption with teachers who must teach about it according to the curriculum. But this is surely a utopia - most likely nothing will change", he added.

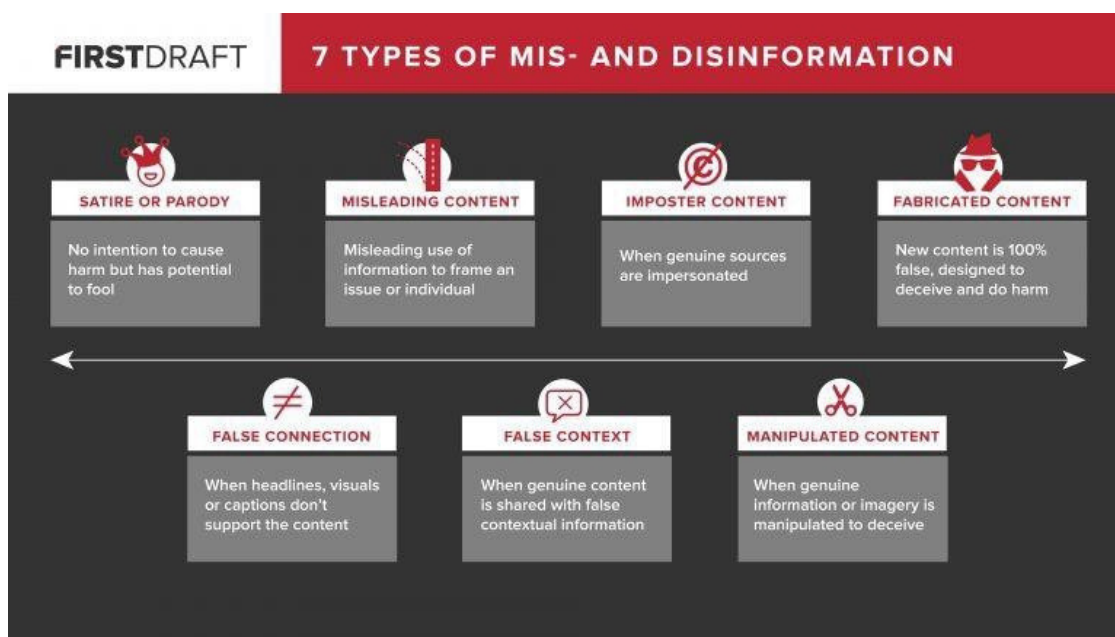
All in all, we can see that the problem is not that teaching young people about misinformation is not present in Hungarian schools. The problem is in the bigger picture: there is no budget to use innovative methods and to react to current issues speedily. Teachers are left alone with educating kids about the challenges of the fake news phenomenon. This basically means they are left alone without help in the mission of training them how to be responsible citizens in a democracy.

Disinformation and the Visegrád Group

Author: Pavel Nikolic

The current rapid technological advancement has given key importance to events and actions within the information space. Obviously, the power of information is not a new phenomenon and it has been weaponized for long. However, the means of modern technology has made the use of disinformation both easier and more dangerous. We have a considerably growing amount of data and pieces of information at our disposal, with greater availability and easier access to them. This also provides opportunities to infiltrate these communication channels by intentionally conveying misleading and false messages. The goals of these measures vary, including attempts to induce doubt, uncertainty, and chaos, manipulate opinions, alter, attack or discredit ideas and values for various political, economic, ideological or even military purposes. Indeed, false news and the spread of false information have the capabilities to influence matters on a worldwide scale.

Regarding disinformation techniques, common tools are the [so-called '4Ds'](#) that refer to '*dismiss*' (open disregard or denial of facts), '*distort*' (deliberately twisting the reality, falsifying the accounts of events), '*distract*' (by presenting numerous alternative stories and diverting the attention via other false narratives) and '*dismay*' (the use of threats and intimidation). There are many types of what could be considered a piece of misinformation or disinformation. The chart below is a handy tool when it comes to distinguishing the different kinds of contents.



7 Categories of Information Disorder (Credit: [Claire Wardle, First Draft](#))

To illustrate the dangers of false information, [MIT researchers analyzed Twitter content](#) from 2006 to 2017 and found that false stories spread significantly faster, farther and more broadly than the truth. False rumours and fake news simply reached more people than the true ones; they were 70% more likely to be tweeted than true stories. The researchers also discovered that it takes true stories about six times as long as false stories to reach 1,500 people. The reasons for these include that false content is often more interesting, feels more relevant, confirms previous biases and thereby it is more easily shareable.

In Central and Eastern Europe, four countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia form the so-called Visegrád group. Of course, these countries are different in many ways, but there are also similarities, sharing a common Communist past and a strong commitment after the end of the Soviet occupation of transforming their countries into Western democracies and becoming part of the Euro-Atlantic integration. Another commonality is that all four have been targets of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns in recent years. Channels that distribute misleading information have emerged in the “national” cyberspace of all the Visegrád states. The issue is considered mainly as “[results of actions of hostile or unfriendly third parties](#)”, especially in Poland and the Czech Republic. Slovakia and Hungary apparently take less active positions on the matter.



If we look at pro-Kremlin disinformation, a shared characteristic of these countries is that the main targets are the public opinion and the support for the European Union and NATO, the institutions and the democratic foundations of these countries. But moving on to the ‘demand’ side, to see how disinformation affects, influences and impacts the opinions and actions of the audience, first and foremost we have to look at and understand the audience. If we consider pro-Kremlin Russian disinformation, the European Union’s [East Stratcom Task Force already reported](#) in 2016 that pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign had been intensifying in Central

Europe with a more targeted focus on local audiences. Within these societies, the most susceptible groups to disinformation include youth and elderly people, as well as minorities and citizens with radical views.

The differences between the four countries, with regards to their political and economic orientation, the landscape and values of political parties, the situation and diversity of media actors, the overall public opinion on the country’s strategic orientation and the population’s receptiveness to the messages of [pro-Kremlin disinformation](#) are all important factors that define and distinguish the the characteristics and means of disinformation campaigns in the V4.

Overall, according to [a study by Slovak think tank GLOBSEC](#) on current dynamics in Central Europe, Hungary was found to be the most vulnerable to subversive foreign influences, Slovakia ranked second, the

Czech Republic third, while Poland was found the least vulnerable. The focus of the report is Russia, which is the biggest actor in the neighbourhood of the Euro- Atlantic integration with potentially disruptive political purposes.

Public attitudes towards the EU, NATO or Russia are diverging in the four countries, too, as seen from the GLOBSEC study. Pro-Russian sentiment in the society is the strongest in Slovakia, where the support for NATO is also the lowest. Meanwhile, it is the Czech Republic that could be labelled as the most Eurosceptic of the V4, where the EU is the least popular. The Hungarian population's pro-Western stance can be observed from the high support for both the EU and NATO. Finally, sharing a border with Russia in Kaliningrad and having historical mistrust towards it, Poland is the "most Euro-optimistic" and pro-NATO (and pro-US) country in the region. This shows the variety of audiences in the region, which explains why pro- Kremlin disinformation becomes country-specific regarding its tools and messages.

Finally, when it comes to countering disinformation, media literacy is key. One of the reasons why disinformation is so effective is the lack of media literacy of a population in a given country. According to Eurostat, [80% of people aged 16-29](#) use the internet and social networking sites on a daily basis in the EU. With plenty of unreliable and distorted information, it all depends on the judgement and awareness of the users to identify and reject false stories and disinformation. [Improving media literacy](#) helps with learning critical thinking, becoming a smart and conscious consumer of information, creating media responsibility, and becoming aware of, and resilient to, attempts of disinformation on a personal level.

China: A War with Disinformation

Author: Gábor Papp

"All warfare is based on deception."

SUN TZU: THE ART OF WAR

A Plan to Rule Them All

Every historical period has its own "source of power". Unlike that of the previous one it is now not just material, it is not land or factories but something far more complex. With the appearance of mass media, new media, social networks and many others, information (also big data) became the "first source of power", but at the same time it is also a threat. Information disorder has many faces but disinformation and political propaganda that can easily domesticate and/or divide entire nations have an enormous impact on our democracies. Radicals and populist politicians are using them – and because of their democratic legitimacy the very institutes that were supposed to stop them – to gain and keep their power.

We already have many examples, mostly from Europe (Central and Eastern Europe) and the US (especially the 2016 Presidential election) that proves us the efficiency of Russia's propaganda machine.

What if I say that I know something far more ferocious than the Big Old Bear of the North? And that is the Dragon of the East. Rather than splitting fire, it uses another tactic.

For a while we thought that China was happy to be in the shadow of the United States, and it is ready to accept the world as it is, ruled by the West. Then it had a great boom economically and after that it was clear that China wants more than we had thought.

One of the best examples of its divergence from the high expectations we had is when Xi Jinping was allowed to remain "president for life" as term limits were removed in 2018. So the West's 25 year bet on China has failed. Western leaders hoped that economic integration would encourage China to evolve into a market economy. The idea was that as they get wealthier, the Chinese would be keen on democratic freedoms, rights and the rule of law.

China has very serious ambitions now. It is also a very important player in this game, as its military rivals with Russia's and gets better and better. Not to mention its economy that is the second largest in the world if not the first.

China uses neo-imperialism by investing over a trillion dollars in more than sixty countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, Middle-East and the Pacific, mostly poor countries to spread its influence. They are about to rebuild the Silk Road – or in other words BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) or Globalisation 2.0 to become the star of the new world order.

The trade war with the US only escalates the march towards this goal and motivates China to push it even further. So to invest more in the military and find new ways to defeat those who act against its interests. This new kind of economic cold war is only the beginning of an era as the US' containment strategy is much more dangerous this time because of China's economic strength and military might.

We shouldn't forget that China got so powerful because of us in the first place. We used its enormous population, and cheap labour and now we are being used by them. Our most trusted pioneers of technology who speak so much about moral and human rights from the safe haven of the Silicon Valley forgot to use the same principles to use when they wanted to dominate China. Google was kicked out once, but it didn't give up that enormous potential that being there means. Now it is handing the future of the internet to China, by quietly collaborating with the government on a new, censored search engine code-named Dragonfly that will filter websites and search terms that are blacklisted by the Chinese government.

The First Line: An Army of Digits

As every government, the Chinese one also tried its new abilities of deception on its own civilians first. Those characteristic political propaganda posters that we have seen in history books are no more. On the one hand I mean the Great Firewall of China that created its own restricted Internet. On the other hand, I mean applications that were meant to spread the word of the government. Like Weibo, Baidu or WeChat where usernames have been linked to police database. “Xuexi Qiangguo” is the number one of China's hi-tech propaganda tools. The name means “study to make China strong”.

Its goal is simple: to spread the Communist Party's message and teach the youth the “correct” political thought. It was developed by Alibaba. Those who download it – which is often obligatory – are ranked based on their scores in the quizzes and even get prizes. What is that if not the encouragement of digital authoritarianism?

And how powerful are the Chinese tech giants? While in 2013 the world's 20 largest tech giants included 13 from the US and only 3 from China by 2018 this had changed. Now it is 12 from the US and 8 from China. They even went further by creating a society in which you are rated by the government on your trustworthiness. This is the “citizen score”. It might sound pretty Orwellian at first, but the truth is that it is not another dystopia in our mind. China is currently building a vast surveillance system that can make it all come true. And it is already happening in Xinjiang where millions of Uighurs and other Muslim ethnic groups are being monitored. Some described Kashgar as “the city that was turned into a prison”.

Taiwan might be a great example of this new kind of foreign influence that China is about to perfect. Some say that it is the frontline of the disinformation wars. In 2018 during a big flood there was a PTT (Professional Technology Temple - similar to Reddit) user – claiming to be a Taiwanese citizen – posted that he had been rescued by the Chinese government. Chinese language news like Apple Daily, Sanlih TV News, Xinhua news agency, Global Times quickly picked up that other Taiwanese were also rescued and “swore alliance to China”.

China was represented as the Big Brother who is always there when you are in need. But as it turned out it was the work of state-sponsored Chinese actors aiming to destabilize Taiwan.

According to the Sigur Center for Asian Studies the increasing role of social media in Taiwan's elections caught China's attention. Chinese universities began heavily researching Taiwan's social media usage and the government began to develop a strategy on how to utilize the technology to its advantage.

During the 2016 election cycle in Taiwan, Chinese internet users were suddenly granted access to Facebook, which had been previously banned. Mainland users—easily identified by their use of simplified characters, parroting of Chinese government slogans, and an “unwarranted degree of animosity”—spammed the Facebook pages of Tsai and Taiwan's major media outlets in January 2016 with anti-independence documents.

In a nutshell I chose this topic because I strongly believe that the West is not ready for the coming wave of Chinese misinformation. Beijing's social-media operations are larger and more effective than we thought.

While Russia is playing a short game, China is playing for a long one. China's goals are a larger role in and greater influence on the current international system. It wants to propagate the "Chinese Dream", and it aims to change the perception about China.

The method is also interesting: they are using coordinated messages that is positive and non-threatening.

Unlike the Russian troll farm that attempted to sway US voters and that employed at most 600 people. While estimates of the size of the Chinese operation vary, one study put the estimate at above half a million people.

Just imagine: if they could domesticate more than one billion people, what can they do to us?

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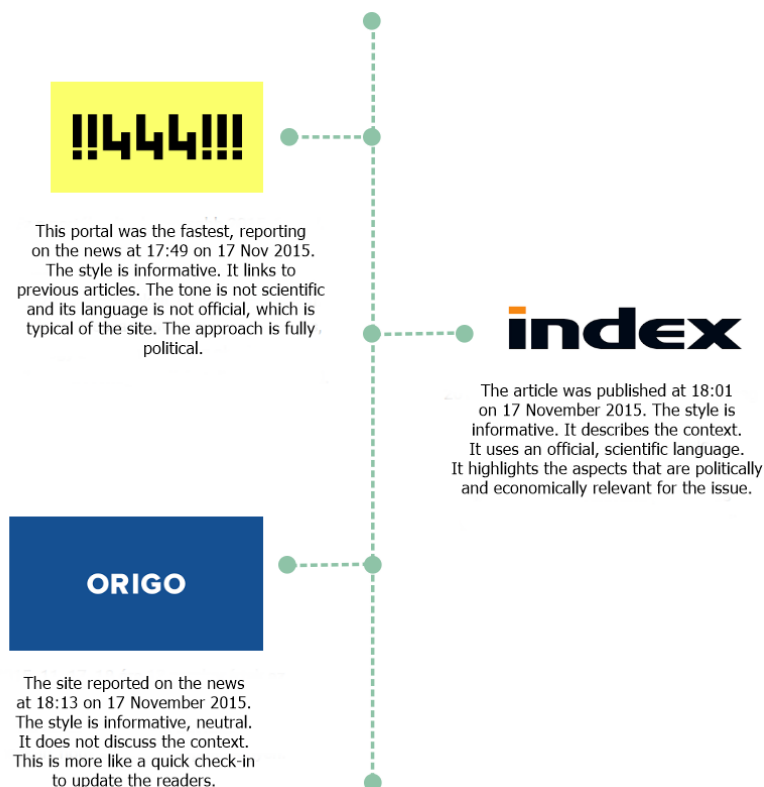
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How the Same News Is Reported On by Three Different Hungarian Portals

Author: Kamilla Strausz

Ever since the Hungarian-Russian intergovernmental contract was signed on 14 January 2014, followed by the Hungarian-Russian loan agreement, the Paks II project has been subject to fierce debates in Hungary. The agreements concern the construction of two new 1,200-megawatt reactors at the Paks nuclear power plant in southern Hungary. The plan has been facing obstacles from the beginning. One of these obstacles is the EU's investigation. This short analysis looks at how three Hungarian online media outlets reported on a possible EU infringement procedure against the project. The three media outlets studied here are 444, Index and Origo*. The first two of these are known to not be pro-government, while the last of them is.

The articles selected were published on 17 November 2015. They reported that Hungary may face EU infringement proceedings for the Paks II project. The goal here is not assessing the performance of a particular media outlet or journalist. Rather, the analysis aims to see whether media outlets distort reality in accordance with their world view.



* Find the articles here: [Index](#), [444](#), [Origo](#)

The analysis of writing styles presented in the Timeline above is supported by an examination of which section the news outlets published their report in. 444's article was published in the POLITICS section, Index put the story under ECONOMY, and Origo also published it in its ECONOMY section. This is closely connected to the tags used. The three media outlets added altogether 12 tags to the articles. These tags can be divided into nine groups. Their distribution is presented in the table below.

	PAKS	PAKS2	ENLARGEMENT	ROSATOM	ECONOMY	EUROPEAN COMMISSION	BRUSSELS	INFRINGEMENT PROCEDURE
444	X	X	X	X				
index	X		X		X	X	X	
ORIGO	X					X		X

When analyzing quality journalism, it is important to see what references are used by the authors and how. All three portals referred to the [news site BruxInfo](#), which first broke the news about the possible infringement procedure. These references are clickable in all three articles. In addition, 444 and Index referred to their earlier pieces (444 twice, Index once) to give context to the news. Index also linked to a PDF document version of the Hungarian bill T/13628 on the Paks contract. Another feature to look at under this category is whether the authors of the pieces are named in the by-line. 444 includes the author's name in its articles, while the name is missing from the Index and the Origo piece. This is important because the journalist's name may make the article more credible. It needs to be noted, though, that Index usually leaves out the author's name when the piece is taken over from another publication.

Journalists' tools and instruments can also be examined. The most important tools include the use of images, highlights, and quotations. 444 and Index included a picture each in their pieces. Index has a dramatic photo from Paks. In contrast, 444 uses a picture from a demonstration against Paks II. This clearly shows 444's position on the matter. Both media outlets give appropriate credits to sources. All three portals use highlights in their articles. 444 has one highlighted section, while Origo has two. The role of these highlights is to underline the most important parts of the articles. Quotation is only used by Index. It cites then Minister of the Prime Minister's Office János Lázár's words on the issue.

Let us also look at the titles. The authors of 444 and Index gave similar titles to their pieces. The titles given by 444 ("Brussels may suspend Paks enlargement") and Index ("Paks plans may be suspended by Brussels") are both informative and fairly neutral, other than the term Brussels, commonly used in government propaganda. The title given by Origo is a bit more negative: "Another warning is coming from Brussels." It also uses "Brussels" to mean the European Union.

Finally, let us look at a word cloud made of the titles of articles published in November 2015 covering the topic by 444, Index and Origo. This clearly shows that the most important words - "Brussels," "utility costs", and "Lázár" - completely reflect the main messages of Hungarian ruling party Fidesz' communication. This means that in addition to informing readers, the articles are dominated by political interests.



Defence Against the Dark Arts – Countering Disinformation in the European Union

Author: Ákos Szegőfi

Disrupting lies: where to start?

Whether to deploy or not to deploy counter-measures against disinformation – much like regulations on tobacco, drugs or firearms – is under the jurisdiction of individual EU member states. This made sense if we take into account that a few years ago, the Gerasimov-doctrine defined intentional disinformation as a weapon in the hybrid warfare. On the other hand, the Russian state used disinformation to disrupt European cooperation, making it a transnational issue. In light of Russia's recent election-meddling in several countries, including the Brexit-referendum, supranational EU organizations found themselves in dire need of addressing the challenge that Russian-disinformation campaigns pose for EU democracy.

Parallel to this “awakening”, member states began launching their own anti-disinformation campaigns in rapid fashion, to protect domestic elections. Disinformation can be conceptualized as a communicational process, and countries gave creative and quite different answers when it came to the question of disrupting the process.

Being successful in spreading bogus information means that citizens have a desire to consume it – this is the demand side of disinformation that is perhaps the hardest to handle. On the other hand, disinformation is business, meaning that message-amplifiers have an economic interest in circulating pro-Kremlin (or EU-sceptic) messages. With new regulations, these interests can be diminished. Communicational channels such as Facebook are more than capable of manipulating their users by writing algorithms that favor the creation of echo-chamber environments and serving amplifiers by providing them micro-targeting and other socio-econometric tools. Yet the platforms can be forced to regulate their activities.

Countries like Belgium and the Czech Republic positioned themselves for the long-run and opted to educate their citizens (the demand side). The ability to read (literacy) and the ability to surf the internet (digital literacy) does not necessarily mean that the person in question can critically evaluate the information received. Media literacy programs were launched in high schools, teaching children how to identify disinformation.

In the meantime, groups of social media pioneers at the Baltic countries established “troll- hunter” networks. Volunteers track down and identify accounts and people deliberately spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda. “Black lists” were written for social media users to check whether the news source that advertised its content on their news feed had any ties with the Russian government. Following these black lists, countries began lobbying for companies not to advertise on sites that were listed – a heavy blow to anyone who wanted to make a fortune out of spreading EU-sceptic bogus messages.

Fact-checkers – journalists who assess the veracity of public utterances – suddenly found themselves drowning in work. At first, the situation didn't seem very dangerous; most of the messages were written in

poor English or German – often with the use of the infamously bad Google Translate – and the pictures used to legitimize the claims of the lousy articles were easily traceable through reverse image search. In short, they were not very good lies. Soon enough, the situation turned worse. No matter the poor quality, high numbers of EU citizens started giving credibility to platforms posing as reliable news sites. It also might have swayed voting behavior. Fact-checkers looked like they were armed with a single flyswatter, desperately trying to fight off a horde of locusts. What Russian disinformation could not achieve with quality, it substituted with quantity.

The EU had to act, and among all the potential entrance points to the disinformation sequence, it decided to disrupt the process at the level of individual messages. In March 2015, the East Stratcom Task Force was established to combat Russian disinformation, and to communicate EU policies towards Eastern partners. The Taskforce ran notoriously low on staff and money (employing maybe a dozen, Russian and English-speaking journalists) until it was granted €1.1 million in 2018, and then another €3 million from January 2019. In addition, it launched a new website and a Facebook-account under the name EU vs Disinfo. The website has a comprehensive archive of debunked messages that appeared in EU countries with the intention to stir discontent in domestic politics, while the Facebook-account boasts infographics, short videos, investigative articles and weekly lists of the most outrageous popular disinformation that surfaces.

This article aims to assess the social media activity of EU vs Disinformation Facebook-page starting from the second budget-raise (January 2019), through the months until the European Parliamentary elections (the 26th of May). Critical recommendations about the activities of the EU vs Disinfo-initiative are included.

Humor, inoculation and repetition – the strategies utilized

One conspicuous feature of the EU vs Disinformation account is its colorfulness. The journalist staff uses custom-made illustrations, quality photos and occasionally cartoons, to stand out amidst the turmoil of the news feed. In this sense, the posts go directly against the type of disinformation it is aiming to debunk; the Taskforce wants the reader to observe the difference between quality journalism and cheap lies.

In this study, three types of Facebook-posts were distinguished and put under three categories.

1) EU vs Disinfo regularly publishes so-called disinfo-of-the-week or #TOPFAKES-lists, in which the fact-checker team shows off five or six headlines from pro-Kremlin media about EU member state policies or history. These were put on the list either because of popularity or because of their ludicrity. In five months, the page saw 28 of these posts. Most of the time, these posts are not hyperlinks but illustrations made for Facebook. Albeit the #Topfakes-lists are entertaining, it can also be counterproductive to echo disinformation on official platforms.



2) The second category includes individual case studies. As some particularly nefarious piece of information gets virulently popular, the Taskforce might pay an entire article to debunk falsehoods. Articles on the Skripal-poisoning for example counted as individual case studies since the EU vs Disinfo team had to deal with the mutations of the same disinformation. Often enough, certain pieces of disinformation return repeatedly, as they become of central importance for Russian foreign policy. Alternative reality production happens along the lines of these central narratives. All the 52 categorized articles were exclusively written by the Taskforce-staff.

3) Last but not least, longer investigative articles were distinguished that are not about disinformation per se, but about the bigger picture: the infrastructure behind the disinformation campaigns and the general methods of Russian propagandists to persuade readers. Some of the articles in this category are referenced works of other news outlets, and in two occasions, scientific articles. 53 posts belong to this category.

What can be said about the posts that the EU vs Disinformation uses to present its findings and messages? First of all, there are no huge differences between the number of likes that the posts receive, nor in the frequency in which they are being shared. Generally speaking, the reach is quite low, averaging between 127 likes for #TOPFAKES, 119 for case studies and (interestingly) 136 likes for investigative pieces. Sharing almost always lags behind likes, and the difference here is even smaller, around 48 shares on average for each category. It is safe to say that the social media penetration of the EU vs Disinfo is very far behind the platforms (like Russia Today or Sputnik) that it tries to combat. The most interesting observations of posts and methodology that the Taskforce uses are below:

- Not so surprisingly, videos always work better than articles, both in terms of shares and likes. The few spikes in the dataset that are observable are almost exclusively due to the 8 videos that were published in the given period.
- Investigative articles concerning the methods of Russian propaganda channels such as Russia Today are among the most popular reading materials. They provide insight into the inner workings of the propaganda machine, and it seemingly intrigues the readership. Not only are these posts popular, but they are also quite useful, since they have the potential to demolish the credibility of these news sources. The stories about Freudian slips and journalistic malpractices are handled with humor by Taskforce journalists, creating a slightly sarcastic atmosphere.
- In comparison with the insightful articles about the inner workings of the propaganda machine, articles on general methodological information about how propagandistic narratives work and other abstract know-hows fall behind in popularity (except in one case when it was sponsored). The human mind understands problems best through actual (social) settings and examples, and this certainly shows. Below is an example of a well written but poorly received (below average in likes and shares) post.



- Anything with the face of Putin on it sends the amount of likes and shares through the roof. There were 4 articles or pictures that displayed the Russian president, and all of them stood out in terms of reach.
- It is methodologically important that the Taskforce team did experiment with gamification. Links towards games such as "pro-Kremlin bingo" and "Crimean bingo" are not extraordinarily popular, but quite useful. An interactive game could work as psychological inoculation – a method in which test subjects are presented weak arguments and strong counterarguments in order to vaccinate them against future manipulation. Gamification is considered as the cornerstone of media literacy projects as well.
- The excessive use of humor by Taskforce journalists. EU vs Disinformation articles do not operate with the language of official reports. A usual problem with fact-checking is that it's hard to make myth busting as entertaining as the myth. As the tone of Russian state propaganda turns increasingly nationalistic, heroic, and aggressive, specifically in cases like the annexation of Crimea, it simultaneously becomes easy for journalists to ridicule. It is a slippery slope – too much humor that turns into sarcasm ultimately takes away from the communicational impact. The message behind the humor reads: "Don't be so dumb to fall for this. Have a laugh instead." In the right amount, humor is perfect to combat the fear-mongering that disinformation utilizes.

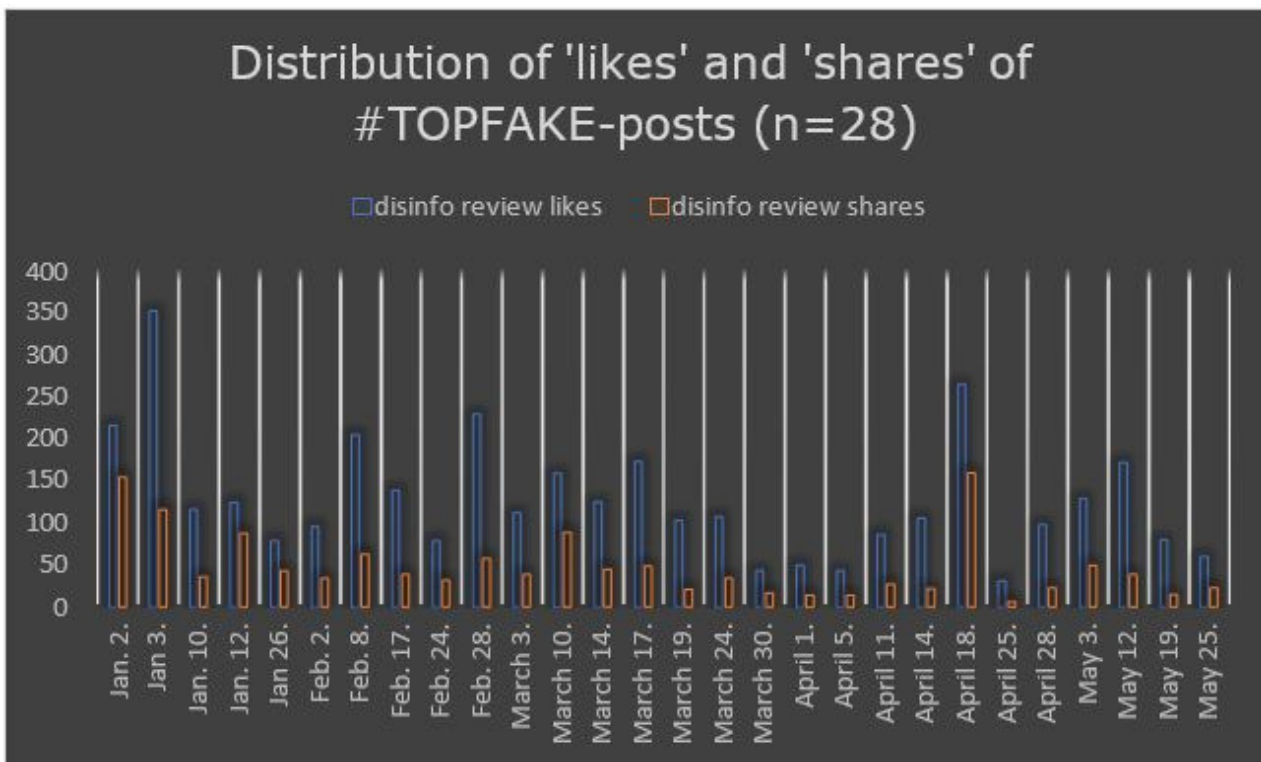


Figure 1. As it is shown, the number of likes tops the number of shares. The most popular post of this kind (in likes) was a selection of 1001 pro-Kremlin fake news from last year. The most popular in terms of shares was a post about Kremlin disinformation in connection with the Notre-Dame disaster.

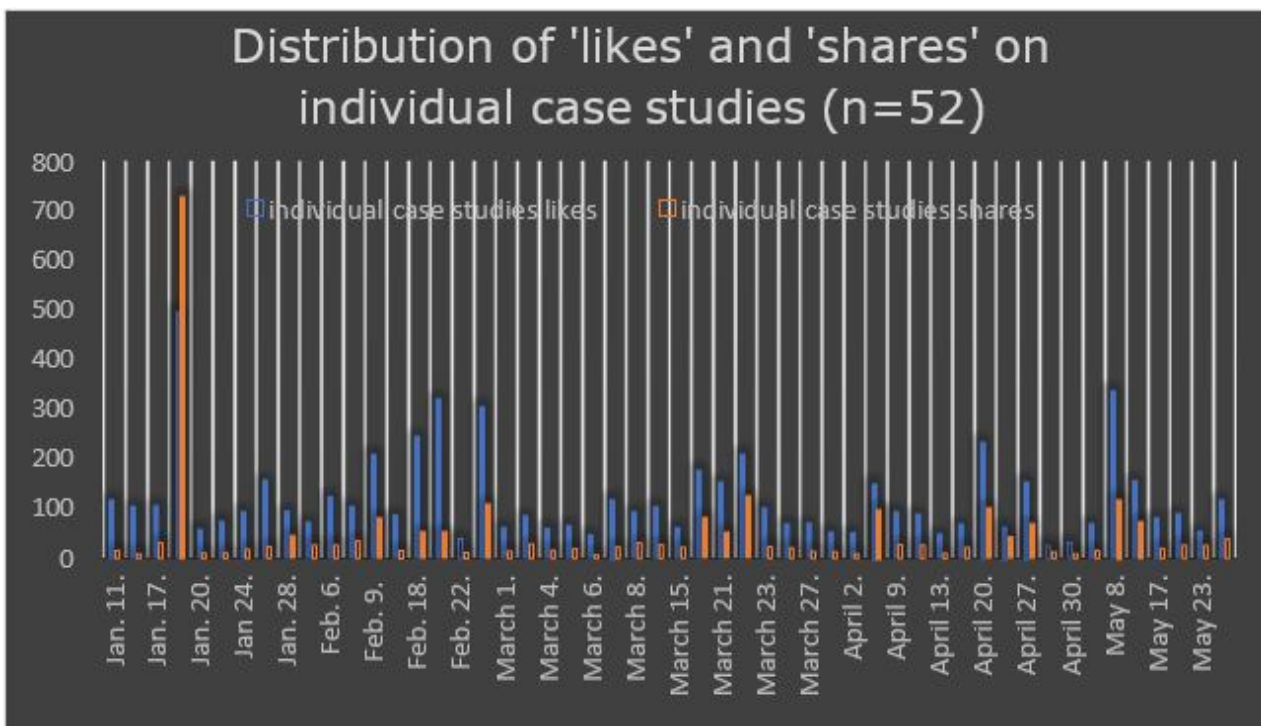


Figure 2. Interestingly, a short video footage on the case of the Kremlin's attempt to relativize Stalin's crimes came out on top with 730 shares and 497 likes (in this particular case, the number of shares exceeded the likes).

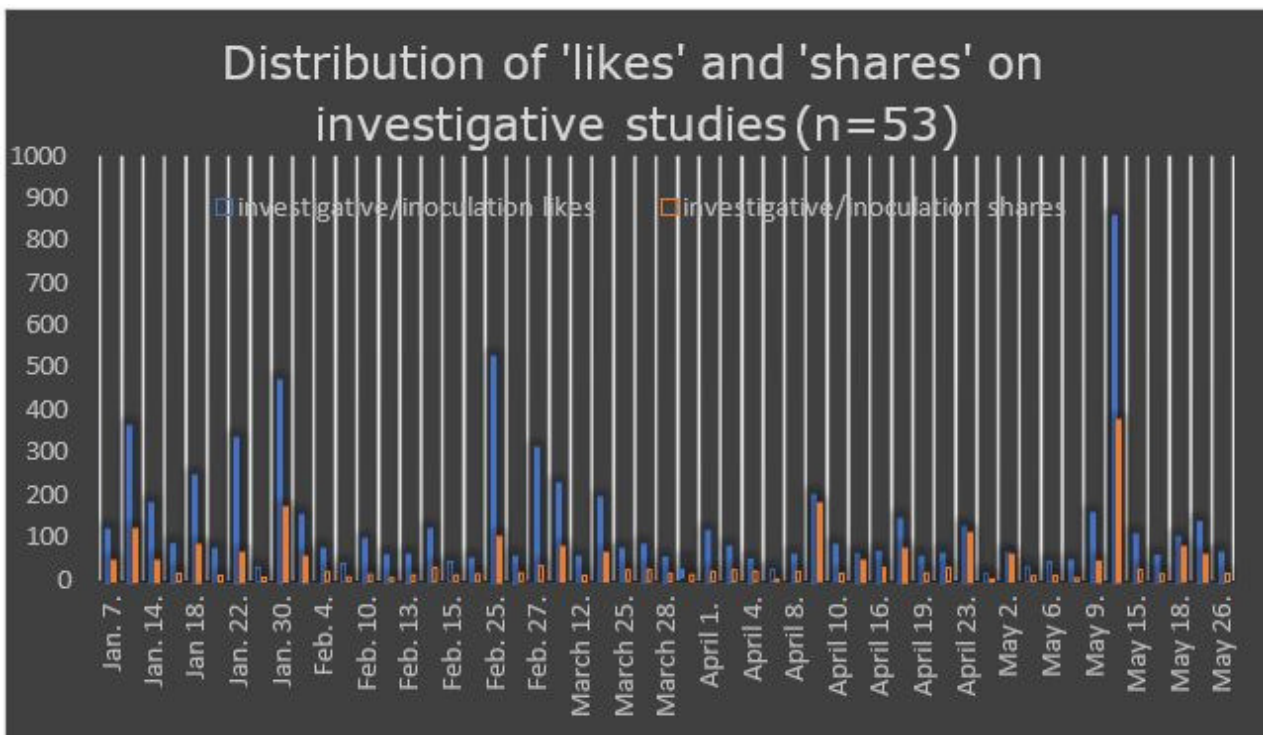


Figure 3. The most popular post of this kind was a sponsored infographic about the general strategies of disinformers, titled "Warning Signs".

EU Elections and fact-checking

This study looked at the nearly five-month period directly preceding the European Parliamentary elections. Interestingly, the first fact-checks and warnings about Russian intervention appeared not earlier than the 7th of April (the post itself, an article by Visegrad Insight was among the most poorly received posts in the sample). In the months before this particular post, Ukrainian elections and the one-year anniversary of the Skripal-poisoning were in the forefronts of interest.

It is worth noticing the lack of change in the data – the distribution of likes and shares are steady throughout the months, as it was “business as usual.” Posts relating to the EP elections sporadically appeared after the first post in April, but there was no big campaign launched, no sudden upsurge in popularity indicating sponsored content – or indicating any intention to fight off a theoretical Russian disinformational campaign with a counter campaign.

What can we learn from EU vs Disinfo?

Based on their activities, the Taskforce is more than a mere fact-checker team, and something less than a media literacy program – one could say that it is perhaps an early experiment of the EU in the field of disinformation. Fact-checking might be a useful tool for news outlets, but organizations such as the EU can do much more; they can push through legislative changes, they can (and did) pressurize platforms like Facebook into monitoring their content, and they could in theory launch actual media literacy programs. The biggest problem with EU vs Disinfo is, however, its perceived political partisanship. It is hard to see why people who are most susceptible to Russian disinformation would believe anything coming from an official EU agency. The EU vs Disinfo might not be in the position to differentiate truth from lies about the EU, precisely because it is an EU agency.

Brave New Hungary: The Anatomy of Fake News on Social Media

Author: Izabella Szentpéteri

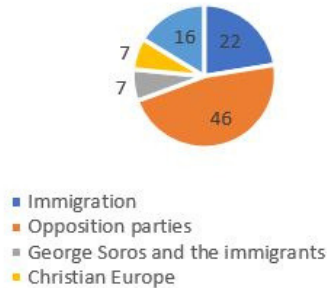
Over the past years, the Hungarian pro-Russian government gained control over both the mainstream and alternative media. Since 2015 a domestic network of trolls, fake profiles, and Facebook sites has spread disinformation in Hungary, mostly coming from the Kremlin. This well-built system includes fake news, manipulated images and videos, and hateful speech to generate anger. And of course, the focus is on refugees. These media want to show that immigrants are violent and brutal. In this paper, I will present some of the methods that have been used in Hungary to spread fake news widely.

During the European Parliamentary elections campaign in Europe, many political parties were focusing on immigration and refugees, depicting them in a very negative light for their electorate. The [latest research](#) of Hungarian policy research institute Political Capital shows that in three eastern-European countries, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, government-friendly media outlets spread Russian propaganda on social media. According to the research, the most disinformation during the elections campaign was spread in Hungary among EU member states. The reason for this is that the anti-immigrant government of Viktor Orbán controls most of the [mainstream](#) and [alternative](#) media in Hungary, and both both spread fake news.

In Hungary, pro-government Facebook sites attract a relatively large audience. One of the most popular pro-government propaganda sites on Facebook in Hungary is called ELÉG (“enough” in Hungarian), with 147,242 Facebook followers in May 2019. This is a huge number, considering the relatively small population (9.8 million) of Hungary. It is important to keep in mind that sites such as ELÉG often have a reach comparable to that of some traditional media.

The ELÉG site contains strong language, hateful texts and refers many times to non-existent events. One can easily categorize this troll-like media machine’s posts under five categories. It either posts manipulated pictures of refugees, targets opposition parties, makes some claim about George Soros and his network, emphasizes the Christian roots of Europe in a very aggressive manner, or shames some European politicians (for instance, it claims French President Macron is homosexual, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker is alcoholic). It is very important to note that this page is not an isolated example; the tactics used here are rather common. This is important because these sites may influence Hungarians’ voting behavior.

The Facebook posts of ELÉG between 25 April and 25 May, 2019



ELÉG was one of the Facebook pages in Hungary that amplified a lie originating from Russian RT on the oppression of Christianity in Europe in April 2019.



"Europe gives herself up: Crosses are veiled in an Italian cemetery to 'avoid offending' other religions"

During Lent this year, RT started to spread the "news" online that in Italy crosses and crucifixes were veiled in order not to offend other religions. This "bombshell" was used to spread hate against the Muslim communities in Europe. This "news" made it to the alternative as well as the mainstream media in many countries. People were furious, and many of them were concerned about the situation of Christianity in Europe. However, veiling the crosses during Lent is a Catholic Christian tradition, to focus on the penitential aspect of Lent. This example shows how the truth is distorted to spread hatred.



RT's report on the veiling of the crosses

While the post above by ELÉG does not refer to RT as the source of the news, these Facebook pages often do. For example, another alternative media outlet called *Világhelyzete.com* ("the situation of the world") often shares articles by *RT.com* on Facebook. In the post below, *Világhelyzete.com* shared RT's piece on the expected success of anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic parties in Europe at the European elections. (Though *Világhelyzete.com* has its own website, they can reach more people on social media, therefore I decided to focus on their Facebook platform.)



Worries about Europe “losing its Christian identity” often comes up on sites like ELÉG. For example, *Patrióta Európa Mozgalom* (“Patriotic Europe Movement), yet another pro-government propaganda site, shared the following post on 28 May, after the EP elections:



The image shows three very frightening men, holding the Koran with the following text: “Three-quarters of Danish immigrants say that Danish law should be based on the Koran... A fresh survey shows that 75 percent of the 150 thousand Muslims who live in Denmark say that the principles of the Koran should be integrated into the Danish constitution.” A five-minute fact-check can show us that this Danish survey doesn’t exist. This method is common on these sites: they often refer to non-existent surveys and made-up incidents that depict immigrants in a bad light; in fact, this is their goal. The screencap above also shows that the Facebook algorithm recommends Viktor Orbán’s official page, and a fan site called Millions for Viktor Orbán as similar pages to Patrióta Európa Mozgalom. The picture in this post was made by ELÉG, exemplifying how these “news” spread on social media. In fact, a [2018 media investigation](#) found that Fidesz’ centrally run network of trolls, members of which are called “Virtual Colleagues”, are often tasked with sharing on ELÉG posts. Furthermore, and also proving just how Fidesz aims to control social media, ELÉG’s [contact information](#) on Facebook is the official Fidesz email-address, kapcsolat@fidesz.hu.*

Beyond religious identity, these sites often express concern that Europe is being changed by the influx of immigrants, which “the left allows to happen.” The following post was shared by ELÉG:

* Yet this is not a definitive proof of connection because as news portal [Index.hu](#) recently found, the contact details on several Hungarian Facebook pages are either hacked or subject to a bug



"The Betrayal of Europe: Paris then, Paris now"

The picture in the bottom has a very mysterious journey on the internet. It was, indeed, taken in Paris, France, as the sign states, but back in July 2017. As I did my research for this picture, I found Italian and Spanish fake news sites using this image as late as in 2019. These media outlets want to show their readers the chaos caused by refugees in Paris, showing that refugees live on the streets. But the truth is that these people have been gathered because the city of Paris evicted a migrant camp. The picture was taken in 2017, but the post was made by ELÉG in February 2019, suggesting that it was a recent image of Paris. During the research, I found three different articles from the same Hungarian tabloid *Ripost* using this picture claiming the people shown are refugees. The first article says the picture was taken in Calais, the second says Italy, and only the third says correctly that these people were in Paris when the photo was taken. Yet not even this piece mentions the eviction.

The tabloid *Ripost* also exemplifies mainstream Hungarian media spreading fake news. An issue about which disinformation is widely spread by both mainstream and alternative propaganda sites is the so-called "migrant card." The government and its media claim that the EU and the United Nations give anonymous credit cards to migrants, and with this money, they can buy tools to attack the borders. According to the propaganda sites, they can also use this money to pay human traffickers. In reality, these prepaid debit cards are only given to refugees who have been screened, and only within the borders of Greece.

The amount given [ranges](#) between €90 and €550 a month, depending on family size and whether food is provided for them. The UN saves money with this scheme, and refugees can buy the food for themselves locally. This way, no aid gets wasted and local Greek businesses are supported. Despite that, the government and its media tell Hungarians that huge amounts are transferred to these cards. It was reported, for instance, that Hungarian-born US billionaire George Soros gave 500 million euros to be spent on the scheme. The propaganda media claim that the EU wants to destabilize Europe through means like this.



ITTHON

Hány terrorista kapott migránskártyát Brüsszeltől?

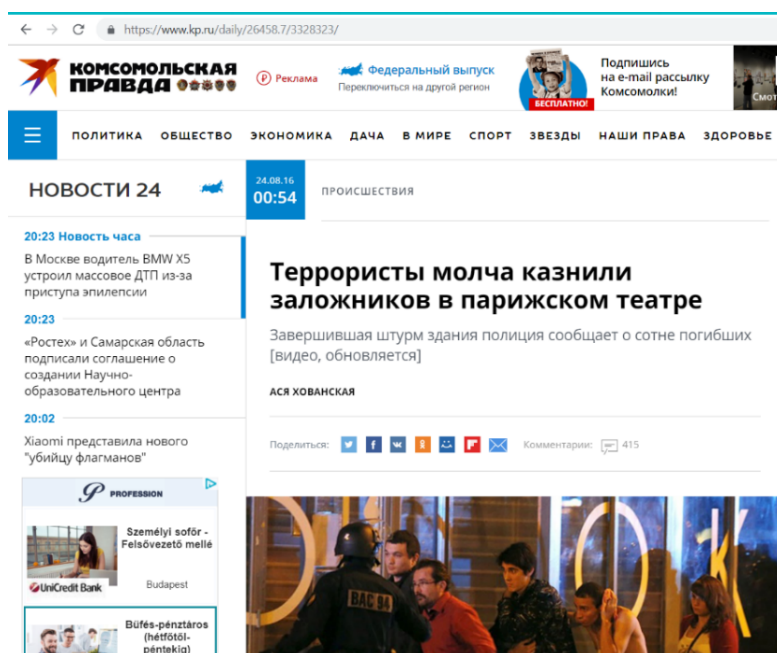
ORIGO | 2019.03.31. 13:37

Ajánlom 335

"How many terrorists got migrant cards from Brussels?", published by Origo, 31 March 2019

Origo is one of the most popular mainstream pro-government media outlets. It was established as an independent, high-quality online newspaper, but in 2017 a government-friendly oligarch bought it and turned it to a propaganda machine.

Propaganda about refugees is spread not only via reading materials but perhaps even more importantly by videos. YouTube is the perfect platform for manipulated videos on refugees. A Hungarian channel called *Világ Figyelő HírMagazin* ("World Observer NewsMagazine") has more than 6,000 subscribers and more than 4.3 million views. The uploaded videos are on alleged Muslim terror attacks and immigrants. The videos are mostly taken from the Hungarian public service television, in addition to a few "raw" footages shot with cell phones. When I analysed the videos, I often ended up on Russian websites. A sibling of this Hungarian YouTube channel called *Világ Figyelő Magyar Hírek* ("World Observer Hungarian News") even has its social media platform on Russian social media site VK. When attempting to verify the origin of a manipulated video on the YouTube channel, (the video turned out to be fake), I searched for the frames, which led me to a Russian fake news website, a screenshot of which is shown below. This website incites hatred against refugees, as clearly shown by the title which translates as, "Terrorists silently executed hostages in the Parisian theater. Police officers who stormed the building report a hundred dead [video, updated]).



Russian fake news website www.kp.ru

Another video on *Világ Figyelő*'s channel from 4 April 2019 is taken from the Hungarian public service television, claiming that migrants want to tear down the fence on the Greek border. The title states: "They (migrants) have already shaken the fence; they can start going to the border any time now." The television channel claims this is a well-coordinated operation. The report uses the word "caravan" multiple times, taken from US President Donald Trump. When trying to verify the video, it turned out to be manipulated.

In the past few years, there have been some examples of extreme disinformation coming from figures close to the Hungarian government. Two years ago, one of the most popular, controversial pro-government publicists, Zsolt Bayer posted a video on his own blog that showed three men beating a fourth man until he collapsed. Bayer claimed the people on the video were migrants in Europe. It turned out later that the video was shot in Latin-America in 2015. More recently, the troll network of the government spread a video of an immigrant man urinating into the subway of Paris. However, the upper right corner of the video had a map of the New York City subway. It turned out the video was shot for a campaign for a cleaner subway for the city administration of New York. Another outrageous example is *Origo* running a CCTV footage from the US, showing some young men beating an elderly woman. *Origo* added the sound of bombs exploding and people shouting "Allahu akbar" to the video. The goal was to convince viewers that this happened in Europe.

The examples discussed here are just the tip of the iceberg. The Hungarian social media landscape is dominated by pro-government propaganda sites. Hungarian ruling party Fidesz' landslide victory in the 2018 general elections is likely partly due to the irrational fear and hatred towards refugees, fueled by the media – even though the refugee crisis has been over since 2017.

The program *Misinformation and Propaganda for Hungarian Students* was organized by the Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS). The program was funded by the Public Diplomacy Small Grants Program of the U.S. Embassy Budapest Public Affairs Section of the Department of State to be organized by CMDS at the School of Public Policy of Central European University in Budapest, Hungary.



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