



The Information Warfare on the Internet

Exposing and Countering pro-Kremlin Disinformation in the CEEC –

Project Summary in Hungary

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This summary report is based on the four-months-long analysis of pro-Russian news on the Hungarian internet, conducted in the framework of the project entitled "Information warfare on the Internet. Exposing and countering pro-Kremlin disinformation in the CEEC" supported by the International Visegrad Fund.

Channels

Regarding the channels of pro-Russian disinformation, currently there are about 80-100 websites in Hungary spreading the narratives of the Kremlin. However, the decisive majority of them do not seem to have a serious impact, at least it cannot be verified from the number of shares and Like-s, and they remain on the blog sphere. Altogether there are 6-10 propaganda websites which are really influential, and articles posted on them can get easily hundreds of Like-s and shares.

Not all of the above mentioned sites are active in the social media sphere, at least not directly. Due to the lack of "Twitter culture" only Facebook has significant pro-Russian sites in Hungarian. Throughout the project we have found and followed only 10 Facebook sites, with 2000 or more supporters and a clear pro-Russian stand which share propaganda articles on a regular basis, mainly from hidfo.ru or from RT related sources.

Hungary is characterized by a specific phenomenon regarding the channels of Russian disinformation narrative, namely that Russian disinformation often appears in the mainstream media too, primarily in channels and newspapers that are either state-owned or influenced by the government. This is an important difference between Hungary and the other Visegrad countries.

Out of mainstream media channels, where Russian narrative is often spread, clearly the state news agency MTI is the most important, particularly because it provides news for free, thus is extremely influential all over Hungary. One needs to add though, that in terms of content, MTI does not publish fake or fabricated news. However, it indeed gives room to such Russian opinions, either of leading politicians or of influential newspapers, which serve as channels of disinformation on multiple levels. This ranges from labelling separatists in Eastern Ukraine as if they were a legitimate state to blaming the United States for the *en masse* death of civilians in Syria.

Besides, all major dailies contain articles that may qualify as parts of Russian disinformation. However, there are important differences even between the two right-wing dailies. One of them is a pro-governmental, almost far-right, therefore relatively marginal newspaper belongs to a controversial, pro-governmental oligarch. There are numerous authors in the staff of these dailies who regularly publish pieces of outright disinformation and anti-NATO, anti-EU propaganda. The background of the journalists is well-known, and many of them have close connections to Russia and Russian ideologies and the whole editorial staff share the same, clear political preferences. In the other conservative, independent daily, often critical towards the government, there are a few journalist, well known of their pro-Russian sentiments. Their leading foreign policy journalist can be characterised as *Russlandversteher* – and a really well-informed expert on Russia - for ages, well before Moscow has started its coordinated disinformation operations. His publications constitute the perfect example of how hard it is to distinguish between honest convictions and intentional disinformation operations. His publications contribute to the presence of the Russian narrative in the Hungarian mainstream press discourse.

There are few more examples of more or less established journalists who have been representing standpoints that coalesce today with the Russian narrative, but their stance is more rooted in historical Hungarian pro-Eastern sentiments than in contemporary Russian propaganda. (A significant part of Hungarian mythology has lots of Eastern connections.)

It should be noted that several chain mails among the elderly population – a significant tool, as three million retired people live in the country – are also spreading Russian propaganda. It is difficult to measure and to reach out to these channels, however their efficiency is much higher than any news portal: the sender knows the receiver and therefore trusts the information more, even if it is just a copy-paste version of a pro-Russian article.

Content and narratives

In terms of content, our research concluded that Russian disinformation against Hungary produced surprisingly few content, tailored specifically to the Hungarian audience. This is an important difference if compared to Poland. Russian disinformers missed the opportunity to play on the anti-Romanian, anti-Slovak, nationalist-revisionist attitudes present in certain layers of the Hungarian society.

The only exception was the active spreading of anti-migration content, in which pro-Russian disinformation channels actively participated, together with the Hungarian government-controlled media. However, in this particular case Russia's interests and

Hungarian government's interests overlapped, because both have been interested in weakening the EU by hampering the elaboration of a common EU-level solution. Due to the already ongoing anti-migration campaign of the Hungarian government, anti-migration „news” spread by pro-Russian disinformation channels resonated very well among the Hungarian population. However, even these pieces of „news” cannot be really considered as Hungary-specific content, since they were actively spread elsewhere too. The reason of this relative absence of Hungary-specific pieces is not known. One possible (though unlikely) explanation might be that they are simply unaware of these possibilities. The second variant is that strategic and operational planners of Russian disinformation consider the Hungarian population an already friendly, convinced one, therefore there is no need to conduct a serious information campaign. Another possible explanation might be the sheer shortage of resources: for running information operations against Hungary one needs to employ Hungarians (i.e. it's not that same as commenting and trolling in English, which can be done at a sufficient level by anyone, who speaks the language at a medium level), which limits the human resources pool – but again, the exact reasons are unknown.

Another reason for the low-level of targeted propaganda in Hungary might be the factor that most Hungarians – as Slovaks and Czechs – are in favour of a country between the West and the East, as indicated by the latest poll of the GLOBSEC Policy Institute. This means that the Russian objective to decrease trust in the allied partners and institutions has actually been achieved.

Instead, Russian disinformation efforts focused on spreading generalized, and not specifically Hungary-focused content. The main strategic aims of the spread narratives were:

- to erode trust in EU
- to foster anti-migration and anti-refugee sentiment
- to generate and strengthen anti-NATO sentiment
- to generate and strengthen anti-Americanism
- to discredit Ukraine, by picturing it as a fascist-ruled, aggressor, corrupt, failed state
- to discredit the report of the Joint Investigation Team about the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 flight
- to discredit liberal values, human rights approach and NGOs dealing with the promotion of these values.

The methods of spreading these contents showed a great variety, ranging from publishing outright fakes to doctored photos, from picturing Eastern-Ukrainian separatist as if they were legitimate, elected actors, to accuse the U.S. of committing war crimes in Syria. Probably the most common way they used was to misinterpret and distort existing, confirmed facts.

A particular feature observed was that Russian disinformation likes to circulate and recycle „news” produced by Russian disinformation sites in other countries in order to gain extra credibility and multiply the effect of a single piece. A spectacular example was an article produced originally by the globalresearch.ca website about a U.S. Marines F/A-18 bomber painted to Russian colors, thus accusing the U.S. of preparing false flag bombings in Syria in order to discredit Russia. In fact, the photographed F/A-18 was member of a so-called aggressor squadron used to train U.S. pilots to fight foreign forces, thus the picture itself was real. However, the story about a possible U.S. false flag operation was a complete fake. Nevertheless, it was widely circulated in Hungarian, by referring to „foreign reporters”, thus gaining extra credibility.

When it comes to social media channels, we can clearly state that the strongest pro-Russian pages were hiding their ideological standpoint, and rather offered alternative news. Only content analyses proved that the vast majority of these sites were sharing foreign policy news with solely pro-Russian stand. Since foreign policy news in Hungary are among the least popular ones, any news channel mainly specializing on foreign news and having no advertisement whatsoever - like hidfo.ru - would not follow a real demand or a business-driven approach. Only the second-line of Facebook pages - with approximately 20.000 followers - offered open support for Russia, while Hidfo, the semi-official Kremlin controlled Hungarian news portal is only the 5th most popular among pro-Russian Facebook pages.

Overall conclusion

The golden rule of Russian propaganda proved to be true in Hungary as well. Russia is not creating a real alternative narratives, but rather strengthens existing national ones already supporting the Kremlin’s agenda. As the Hungarian government supported strong anti-EU sentiments, an anti-migration and anti-refugee approach, it was extremely hard, or rather impossible to separate pro-governmental voices from pro-Russian voices. Meanwhile, certain topics found no or limited support in the Hungarian mainstream media or government, such as anti-NATO approach, discrediting Ukraine or discrediting the report of the Joint Investigation Team of the MH-17 incident. News portals providing extensive space for these particular topics can be categorized as Russian propaganda sites, while others - voicing an anti-EU or anti-migration approach - are rather *Russlandverstehers*, anti-Western, far-right rooted or simply pro-governmental sites.

However, using Russian propaganda materials on purpose, even after recognizing their nature and goal, in order to support one's (or the government's) own political agenda, contributes to the general misinformation of the public.

As a result, we can draw the conclusion that Hungarian media is highly infected by Russian propaganda, however, the most popular online news channels have so far remained healthy. There is reason to worry about the traditional news outlets, as the online version of print dailies were among the most infected ones, throughout the research period.

Finally, one should note that the influence of the mainstream online media should not be overestimated, as it predominantly has an intelligentsia-based readership. The general public, living in the countryside and in smaller cities, is watching cable news and public channels. Those watching mainly public TV channels are more exposed to the influence of *Russlandversteh*.

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