

THE REPRESENTATION OF DISINFORMATION, HYBRID WAR AND THE COVID EPIDEMIC IN THE HUNGARIAN MEDIA – A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS¹

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ABSTRACT: *The discursive construction of the populist divide between us – the ingroup of “normal,” “patriotic” people – and them – the outgroup of “suspicious others,” the current enemy – is closely linked to the dissemination of disinformation. The spontaneous spread and interest-motivated dissemination of disinformation is occurring with unprecedented speed and efficiency as a result of info-communication technology. This undermines public trust in public institutions, including the media itself, and threatens democratic values and the political processes. This paper identifies and examines the EU-related populist media discourses of disinformation, hybrid warfare, and the COVID-19 epidemic in Hungary between July 2021 and February 2022. It will be shown to what extent the discourses accompanying the above events and phenomena were used by the individual media sources and the actors presented in them to challenge European institutions and their legitimacy, as well as the European integration project as a whole.*

KEYWORDS: *COVID-19; disinformation; hybrid war; media discourses; EU; political polarization.*

INTRODUCTION

There is a significant overlap in the media representation of disinformation, the COVID epidemic, and the hybrid war issue in relation to the EU. It is well

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known that the harmful effects of disinformation include threats to democratic political processes and democratic values in general, undermining trust in institutions and in digital and traditional media. Disinformation also harms democracies by hindering informed decision-making by citizens. Being uncostly and highly efficient, disinformation has been deployed by state and non-state actors as a key tool for exerting influence (European Commission 2018b). Disinformation on the one hand intervenes with the democratic order by dominating and distorting public discourses and corrupting the process of democratic decision-making concerning central issues of public interest. On the other hand, when a political force wins the elections, it might deconstruct the constitutional order of the state (Bayer et al. 2019). Disinformation also increases polarization in society and decreases trust in mainstream media and institutions (Vérter, Bjola, and Koops 2020). The other indirect effect of disinformation is the temptation of governments to infringe upon civil liberties. As Vilmer et al. (2018) argue, this could be the true end goal of the foreign powers behind disinformation campaigns – that is, to lead governments to take measures that are contrary to their democratic and liberal values. The narratives promoted by disinformation campaigns exploit preexisting tensions in society associated with contentious issues such as migration, crime, the rights of sexual minorities, and reproductive rights. What is important is that the messages are designed to distract the audience from certain issues (Bayer et al. 2019). Government-owned or government-sponsored media outlets may also constitute an important vehicle for the dissemination of disinformation (Vilmer et al., 2018). As for ideological and partisan media outlets, they also promote misperceptions aligned with their ideology. A study by Garrett, Weeks, and Neo (2016) suggests that partisan media promotes misconceptions about reality in at least two different ways. First, by questioning the credibility of experts whose conclusions challenge their ideology. Second, on some occasions, they promote misunderstandings of evidence. Likewise, mainstream media outlets can unwittingly propagate disinformation: “[a] conspiracy theory could now go from fringe speculation to the headlines of network news within weeks. And even if the mainstream news was reporting on it in shock or disgust, it still led millions of viewers and readers to be exposed to these ideas” (Marwick and Lewis (2017: 22).

In the EU, Russian-origin disinformation is a major threat, especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The EU has already taken steps to mitigate the damage by raising awareness (EUvsDisinfo 2015), and since the start of the Russian war against Ukraine, overtly propagandistic Russian state media (Russia Today and Sputnik News) have been banned from the EU with limited success (Euronews 2022). Newly mediatized important events provide an opportunity

for foreign disinformation sources to weaken the EU. This happened with the COVID-19 epidemic and the war in Ukraine.

Disinformation has a serious impact on public opinion, partly due to the uncontrolled social media activity of many “useful idiots” and partly due to state-run so-called “public service” media, which itself spreads disinformation.

The issue of hybrid warfare began to gain prominence in parallel with the war in Ukraine. Presumably, the practice of hybrid warfare (involving a significant amount of disinformation) has become more common than the talk about it.

The aim of the study described here was to analyze the media discourses that were published in selected media – M1, RTL, HÍRTV, ATV, ORIGO, HVG.HU, Népszava.hu, Magyar Nemzet.hu – between July 2021 and March 2022.

The three themes, disinformation, hybrid warfare, and the COVID epidemic, were included in the study partly because of the division of labor between the members of the research team and partly because disinformation is a tool of hybrid warfare and has been frequently used in anti-EU discourse on the COVID epidemic.

In the following, we present the results of an exploratory analysis of media discourses dealing with the EU and Europe that also touched on one of our three main themes (disinformation, hybrid war, and the COVID-19 epidemic). Accordingly, we identified and analyzed the following contents: a) EU or European Union, or Brussels or Europe, and disinformation, lie, fake news or fake news (61 items found) b) EU or European Union, or Brussels or Europe, and hybrid war, (63 items) c) EU or European Union, or Brussels or Europe, and COVID, COVID epidemic, Coronavirus, Coronavirus epidemic or pandemic (459 items).

As expected, the epidemic was an event and a topic of extreme importance, and the number of media discourses about it, therefore, exceeded the number of discourses about the other two topics many times over. The COVID outbreak dominated the media and the political space and provided an opportunity for individuals and media sources to shape the discourse and present themselves and their rivals according to their interests. Each media source covered these issues according to its original affiliation. The pro-government media echoed pro-government views and anti-EU sentiment on COVID-19, while the independent media tried to present an accurate picture of reality.

Media discourses on the COVID epidemic may be diverse depending on the mentioned aspect of the epidemic (economic, health, crisis management), the actors (opposition, government, EU, health professionals, or the public), and the behavior of the public. As the epidemic in Hungary was covered very intensively in a very polarized media space, this is the most important of the three topics and will be presented in more detail and at greater length.

The following three chapters present the media discourses related to the EU. In the first chapter, we present the discourse on the EU and disinformation; in the second chapter, the EU and hybrid war; and in the third chapter, discourses identified as addressing the intersection of the EU and the COVID epidemic.

DISINFORMATION

Disinformation is defined as “false, inaccurate or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (European Commission, 2018a: 10).

In the EU, according to the consensual agreement on use, “disinformation” is the preferred term for fake news (European Parliament, 2015). “The term fake news fails to capture the complex problem of disinformation, which includes content that is not entirely ‘fake,’ such as fabricated information mixed with facts, as well as practices broader than the concept of ‘news,’ such as the creation of automated accounts used for astroturfing³, fake follower networks, fabricated videos, organized trolling, and visual memes. In addition, the term ‘fake news’ is used by some politicians and their supporters as a tool to dismiss reports that they find objectionable” (European Commission, 2018a).

In addition to disinformation and fake news, the term “misinformation” should also be mentioned. In contrast to disinformation, misinformation is distorted or falsified information that is not intentionally manipulated (for some purpose or profit). The disseminator of misinformation believes that he or she is disseminating correct, factual information. The EU’s specialized linguistic database (IATE) also stresses that the terms disinformation and misinformation should not be confused. According to IATE, misinformation is “information that is incorrect or misleading but not intentionally so.”

Since time-series data on exposure to disinformation and trust in the media are not available, we can rely on some surveys from recent years to characterize Hungarian media consumers.

In 2016 (Eurobarometer 452), the majority of EU citizens (53%) trusted the national media, compared to 44% in Hungary.

In 2019 (Table 1), data on disinformation awareness (not directly on the actual spread of disinformation) showed that the latter was around or slightly above the

3 “Astroturfing” is the deceptive practice of masking the supporters of an organized message to make it appear as if the latter is a spontaneous, grassroots message.

EU average in Hungary. A larger proportion of Hungarians than the EU average found it easy to identify disinformation.

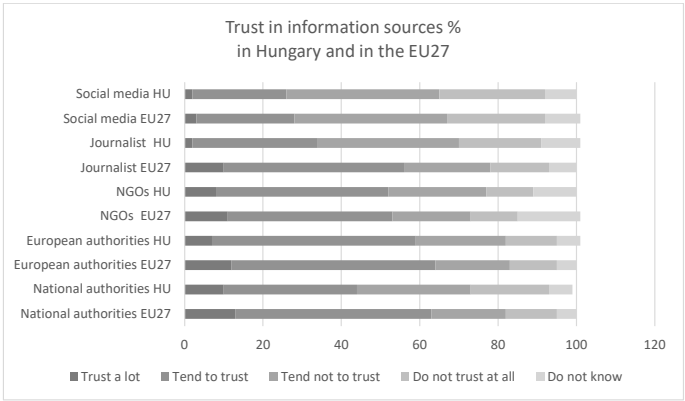
Table 1 Attitudes and experiences with disinformation

% who agree with the following statements	In the EU	In Hungary
The existence of misleading or even false information is a problem for democracy in general.	79	78
The existence of misleading or even false news and information is a problem in Hungary.	74	76
You often come across news or information that you believe to be misleading or even false.	69	75
You can easily identify news or information that you think misrepresents the truth or may be false.	58	63

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 92 – 2019 https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2255eb92_fact_hu_en.pdf

When respondents were asked *in 2022* about the extent to which they trust different sources of information about the war in Ukraine (Flash Eurobarometer 2022), the data showed that Hungarians trust EU authorities more than national authorities and trust journalists less than the EU average.

Figure 1 Trust in information sources (In general, how much do you trust the following sources of information about the war in Ukraine?)

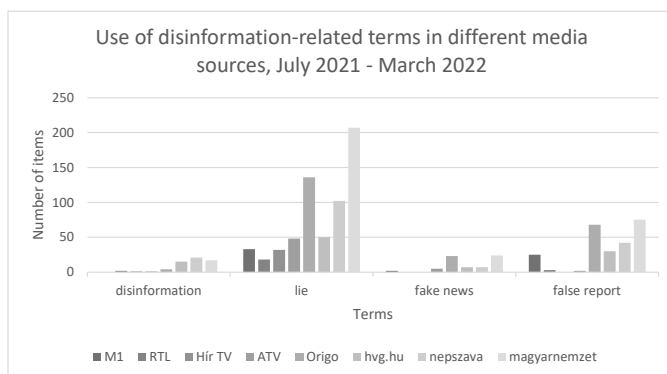


Source: Eurobarometer (2022) EU response to the war in Ukraine, edited by the author <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2772>

Another survey from 2022 (Ipsos, 2022, p. 67) found that people in Hungary had the least trust in the media of the 29 countries surveyed, with 9% of people believing the media to be reliable and 64% considering it unreliable, compared to a global average of 19% and 43% respectively.

According to a Eurobarometer survey from 2023, nearly half of respondents in the EU (48%) said that public TV and radio (including their online editions) were the most trusted source of news, followed by print media and their online editions, with 38% of respondents trusting them more, compared to 29% for private TV and radio. The credibility of public media in Hungary is by far one of the lowest in the EU-27, with only 25 percent of respondents citing it as their most trusted source of news. In terms of trust, social media (28%) and online platforms (28%) are also ahead of public media.

Figure 2. *Use of disinformation-related terms in different media sources, July 2021 – March 2022*



Source: author's data collection

The overall picture shows that over the last decade, trust in the media, and in Hungary, in particular in public media, has gradually declined, and it is now half the EU average. Trust in journalists in general is also low (there is no separate data about what respondents think about journalists associated with independent media and public or pro-government media). Trust in EU institutions is higher than trust in domestic institutions, and trust in social media is higher than trust in public media. Awareness of disinformation is similar to the EU average, and Hungarians are even more confident about their ability to stop disinformation than the EU average.

As there is a difference between everyday and official language, we used keywords that better reflect today's Hungarian media vocabulary. To identify news at the intersection of EU and disinformation, we used the following keywords: disinformation, lie, fake news, false report, and propaganda.

Propaganda, a specific form of distorted reality, was also used as a keyword, but surprisingly, there was not a single EU-related article in the selected media outlets that contained this term during the period under review. However, in the few independent media outlets (which are not part of our current sample), discourses related to propaganda did appear – particularly in relation to the war in Ukraine and EU sanctions against Russia.

The chart shows that the terms “lying,” “fake news,” and “false reports” are more frequently used than “disinformation,” and the media that most frequently use these terms are the so-called “public service media,” which in current Hungary serves as a mouthpiece for the state. One explanation for this may be the emotional charge of the words; “disinformation” is neutral and descriptive, with less emotion, while “lying” or “fake news” is better suited to attracting attention and provoking a quick emotional reaction – which seems important in a very polarized society during general election time. In general, the news items that were studied contain discourses that are not related to the issue of disinformation (or its more common equivalent, such as fake news or lies) but only use these terms to disqualify political opponents or ideological rivals or the content of the communication.

In the period under study (July 2021 to March 2022), 61 news items were found in the selected media that related to the intersection of EU and disinformation. In these texts, the following discourses could be identified.

The fight against disinformation and measures taken against it are just other tools for the enemy to censor content it does not like, violate Hungary's sovereignty, and strengthen the rule of Brussels.

These discourses were presented exclusively in pro-government media (Magyar Nemzet and Origo.hu). It is in this context that *Lakmus*,⁴ the first Hungarian fact-checking announcement in the “public service media” was presented. In these discourses, Hungary is being persecuted by George Soros,⁵

4 <https://www.lakmusz.hu/rolunk/>

5 George Soros is a Hungarian-born American businessman and philanthropist. In Hungary, he is considered one of the main enemies of the Orbán government.

Brussels, liberals, the West, etc., and the fight against disinformation, such as fact-checking, is just another liberal ploy to silence opinions they do not like. Facebook moderators are also accused in these discourses of being hypocrites for betraying fundamental liberal values such as freedom of speech and expression. Nowadays, identifying disinformation without any context or attribution can simply involve referring to “Brussels” – a mere item on the list of enemies:

“...And no one can take that away from them, despite globalist pressure, Brussels blackmail, disinformation about the rule of law and the mantra of fake news.” (Topolánszky 2021)

In order to mitigate the epidemic-related situation, cooperation at the EU level is needed in a number of areas, particularly to address the issue of disinformation about the causes and treatment of the disease.

In the independent media (hvg.hu, RTL, and Népszava.hu), when worsening trends emerged during the COVID outbreak, this discourse was usually followed. According to this, raising awareness and tackling disinformation must always be on the EU’s to-do list.

China and Russia are spreading disinformation to weaken the EU, and Hungary is helping them.

This discourse was presented in the independent media (hvg.hu and népszava.hu). A specific case occurred in January 2022, when the Hungarian government was condemned for the illegal use of Pegasus spy software and the decision to establish a campus in Budapest for China’s Fudan University. A draft European Parliament report on foreign interference in the EU’s democratic processes and misinformation (European Parliament 2022) expressed concern that Hungary (and Serbia) are helping China and Russia to achieve their geopolitical goals and contributing to the spread of disinformation in the region. It also condemned the close links between Fidesz and Jobbik (a Hungarian government party and another right-wing party) and the Kremlin. The report accuses “malign and authoritarian foreign states and non-state actors such as Russia and China” of interventionist tactics aimed at subverting democracy.

Quasi-disinformation

This information about the disinformation practice of the government is presented in the independent media (hvg.hu).

These discourses critically depict so-called “peacock-dance communication,”⁶ – where there is a huge gap between the regime’s official international position and the narratives being disseminated domestically, leading to different content for different audiences, e.g., in Brussels and Hungary, or different content for the same audience at different times, avoiding communication with independent media, and contacting only the partisan media where only pseudo-questions are asked. This in itself is not necessarily disinformation, but in terms of effect – creating confusion and maintaining voter engagement and loyalty – it is almost the same thing.

In February 2022, the EU-Africa summit in Brussels concluded with the adoption of an eight-point joint declaration. The document advocates the creation of legal migration routes, which Viktor Orbán agreed with. Even at the end of the summit, it was not clear why Viktor Orbán posted on his social networking site before leaving for Brussels that “We stand as David against the Goliaths of Brussels.”

Disinformation is the stuff that political rivals spread, and it is a major danger – especially when they spread unpleasant things about us.

This type of discourse is mainly prevalent in the so-called “public media” (M1) and pro-government media (Magyar Nemzet and Origo.hu) and is often used as a tool to dismiss the opinions of political rivals. The whole independent media is classified as a “fake news factory” by the Prime Minister (Szili -Fábián 2018) and by many members of the governing party.

HYBRID WAR

Hybrid war refers to a military strategy that uses political warfare and mixes conventional warfare, irregular warfare, and cyber warfare with other methods

6 The current Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, once called this good practice when he was negotiating in Brussels.

of influence, such as disinformation campaigns, fake news (*kompromatka*, ‘hahaganda’), diplomacy, law enforcement, and foreign electoral interference.

Much of the discourse on hybrid warfare has been intertwined with the discourse on migration, giving the speaker the opportunity to denounce EU migration policy. On the Polish-Belarusian border, the migrant crisis triggered by Lukashenko created an opportunity to update the Hungarian populists’ enemy list: Brussels attacking Hungarians, the EU’s ineptitude at managing migration, and the migrant threat are discussed alongside the success of Hungarians and Viktor Orbán in managing migration. More than 40 percent of the 63 items were published within one month during the period under review (November 2021), 60 percent of them in the government media (m1, origo.hu, magyarnemzet.hu).

The hybrid war between normal people and the liberal lobby is not what it seems.

In populist conservative, pro-government media (M1, Magyar Nemzet, and Origo.hu), journalistic ideologues often redefine and reinterpret concepts such as hybrid war. Normal people, the majority, are described as oppressed by a perverse, aggressive minority in a hopeless world.

“This is not a conflict of nations, nor are the advocates of globalism trying to subjugate the ‘localists.’ The real conflict is between the mass of normality and a rather narrow minority. The battlefield advantage does not necessarily lie in numbers. Those of us who want to maintain normality are in the majority, but the more effective weapons are concentrated in the hands of a few. And the era of hybrid warfare was introduced by the few to ensure that the existing imbalance would not only develop but become almost irreversible – an irreversible process – in the interests and favor of the minority.” (Földi 2021)

“Hybrid warfare” between quotation marks – so-called hybrid wars

These discourses question the use of the term itself. The use of quotation marks is meant to suggest that either there is no hybrid war at all or what is happening on the Polish-Belarusian border is not a hybrid war.

“The authorities have recently witnessed a significant increase in migratory pressure across the Polish-Belarusian border and from the Middle East via Belarus towards the eastern border of the European Union. The increase in immigration is an ‘organized action’ which, according to the Poles, is a ‘hybrid war’ waged by Belarus. Since the beginning of August alone, more than two thousand people have tried to cross the Polish-Belarusian border illegally.” (Origo 2021)

Fragmented, incomplete discourses

These discourses, presented in pro-governmental media, are characterized by omission. In these, one can only learn what is happening, typically at a concrete, illustrative level (e.g., thousands of migrants are freezing on the Polish-Belarusian border), but the level of abstraction does not rise any further; one cannot know why it is happening, what is happening, who the actors are, what they are doing, or what motivates them. In general, the parts of the discourse related to Lukashenko and the Kremlin are amputated by the speakers and often linked to the discourse that “the EU is incompetent on migration” and “Hungary is wise, farsighted, and consistent about migration issues.”

The tactic of silencing is a feature of propagandistic communication. During the campaign leading up to the Hungarian parliamentary elections in April 2022, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán never named the opposition’s candidate for prime minister. Further, when Ukraine was attacked by Russia, Hungarian government politicians carefully avoided naming the aggressor. The same tactics are used to avoid naming the perpetrators of the ‘migrant crisis’ and to avoid calling what is happening on the Polish-Belarusian border a hybrid war.

“According to him [Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó], all those politicians in Brussels who have taken a pro-migration stance over the past six years, who have kept the mandatory resettlement quota on the agenda and refused to give money to countries protecting their borders, should now go to the Polish-Belarusian border, and ‘shame on them.’ So Szijjártó made a statement about the situation on the Belarusian-Polish border without mentioning Belarus’ role in it. This was done earlier by Justice Minister Judit Varga.” (hvg.hu 2021)

Brussels, background power, secret political powers – the hybrid war is fueled by the EU – pure ‘conteo’

These discourses appear in the so-called “public media” and pro-government media (M1, Magyar Nemzet, Origo) – the “experts” from these newspapers envisage a chaotic world in which only two things are certain: inevitable danger and a main enemy in the form of a “background” power. The basic structure of the discourse is simple and involves moving in a few steps from a specific question to the basic problem challenging the world, which is the ultimate explanation for everything. In this approach, the EU is evil, not of its own volition, but because it is in the grip of a “background power.” Sometimes the role of this background power in these narratives is played by George Soros.

While medical disinformation discourses about the COVID outbreak failed to penetrate the Hungarian mainstream media, remaining in social media and the fringe media, conspiracy theories about the power politics of hybrid war have been given free rein – at least in the pro-government “public service” media.

“ – What makes defense impossible for Europe today is that a large part of the European political elite, led by Brussels, is simply in the grip of a backroom power which is not seeking to defend Europe but to achieve the aims of this particular war, whether overtly or covertly. This issue is difficult to resolve because the political forces in decision-making positions are working with the enemy. For this reason, systems that would otherwise be capable of defending themselves, such as armies, NATO soldiers, and border protection organizations, are not given the right orders to defend themselves but instead create an unacceptable living situation for them. The problem is not that there is no protection but that the policy does not allow it.

- There is already talk of hybrid warfare in the EU. Do you think the current migration crisis could be a turning point?

- From the mouth of the Brussels bureaucracy, hybrid warfare implies that Russia is fomenting this tension between Belarus and Poland; in other words, Lukashenka and his team are attacking the EU on behalf of Russia. This is not the case. That is precisely the logic of hybrid warfare [–] that I am diverting attention to someone else, making someone else the scapegoat, while I am the guilty party.

- Because starting migration with unnecessary wars, not stopping the invasion at Europe's borders, and creating tensions between European governments is not an attack by Russia, but [is due to] the cooperation of Brussels bureaucrats. (Földi 2021, Magyar Nemzet)

- There is a hybrid war on the EU's eastern border, we are in solidarity with Poland, but let's ask quietly: 'what has been going on at Hungary's southern border since 2015?' asked Kövér. He stressed: 'the West is waging a hybrid war against the Hungarian and Polish governments.'" (Kövért 2021 Magyar Nemzet)

Lukashenko's migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border is part of a hybrid war.

These pieces in the independent media (hvg.hu, Népszava) rely mainly on Polish and EU sources and quote politicians. They claim that Lukashenko, the Belarusian president who lost the recent elections and, with Russian help, suppressed his political opponents, has retained power, leading the EU to impose sanctions against him and a number of Belarusian officials. The artificially created migrant crisis at the border is partly Lukashenko's revenge on the EU and partly the implementation of Russian orders. The method avoids the use of arms but weakens EU unity by creating chaos and making it impossible to apply the EU's core values consistently because of the self-contradictory nature of the situation.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

To examine the discourses related to COVID-19, we followed the usual procedure: a) we identified all the news published by selected media related to the EU, the European Union, and Brussels, and b) we filtered these articles to those that mentioned the pandemic (coronavirus, epidemic, COVID).

As a result of this process, 459 items remained which contained some kind of relevant discourse.

Table 2 shows the course of the epidemic in Hungary. The most severe wave in Hungary started after the start of vaccination. Modern vaccines were used, but traditional Chinese and Russian vaccines were also widely used in Hungary,

especially at the start of vaccination. The data for Hungary are quite negative, both in terms of mortality and vaccination rates.

Table 2 *The COVID-19 epidemic in Hungary*

Waves of the pandemic so far	5
The most severe wave	the third (peak 17 April 2021)
Deaths per 100,000 inhabitants	504.76 (3rd worst in the world after Peru and Bulgaria)
First vaccination start date	23 December 2020
Vaccination with at least one dose (%)	64.8
Vaccination with the full vaccine series (%)	62.7
Vaccination with supplementary dose (%)	38.3
Willingness to vaccinate against COVID-19	12% of the Hungarian adult population is determined not to be vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2, and among Hungarians aged 30-39 years old, the proportion of non-vaccinators reaches 23%
Vaccines used	Pfizer – Biontech, Moderna, Sputnik V, Astra Zeneca, Sinopharm, Jansen

Sources: WHO 2022; Johns Hopkins University 2024; IDEA 2021; author’s compilation.

The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by an unprecedented wave of false and misleading information, the so-called “infodemic” (WHO Infodemic). COVID-19 was also exploited by disinformation campaigns by foreign states, mainly China and Russia, to discredit the EU and democratic governance in general. The disinformation campaigns created misleading narratives, such as identifying the EU’s alleged lack of assistance to partners and third countries, instead highlighting the goodwill of China and Russia (Bayer et al. 2021). This led the European Commission to publicly identify China and Russia as the main perpetrators of online disinformation. The EU recognized that the pandemic had opened the door to disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining the credibility of European democracies and the EU and national or regional authorities. It also accused Russia and China of “seeking to undermine democratic debate, exacerbate social polarization and improve their own image in the context of COVID-19” (European Commission 2020: 3).

EUvsDisinfo is a flagship project of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force. The project was established in 2015 with the aim of better anticipating and responding to the Russian Federation’s ongoing disinformation campaigns that are affecting the European Union, its Member States and the countries of the Common Neighborhood. EUvsDisinfo uses data

analysis and media monitoring services in 15 languages to identify, collate, and expose disinformation cases from pro-Kremlin media in the EU and Eastern Partnership countries.

At the intersection of the EU and the COVID pandemic in Hungary, the four pro-EU narratives defined by EUvsDisinfo (2020) are clearly discernible in the majority of the media discourses that were analyzed:

1. The EU is not able to handle the pandemic, and it is on the verge of collapse. This narrative has been disseminated by pro-Kremlin sources and a number of domestic networks/sources in and outside the EU.
2. The EU is selfish and betrays its own values. This narrative has also been spread by pro-Kremlin sources and numerous domestic networks/sources inside and outside the EU.
3. Russia and China are responsible powers. The pro-Kremlin media focused on Russian aid to Italy, proclaiming that “Russia helps Italy and the EU does not.” Pro-Kremlin sources portrayed the Chinese “global project” as superior to the EU. The Chinese state-controlled media and social media outlets heavily promoted the idea that the Chinese model was superior in the fight against COVID-19 while highlighting global expressions of gratitude for Chinese aid deliveries, including in Italy.
4. Finally, the EU is using the crisis to advance its own interests.

Results of the analysis of the discourse on COVID

During the period under study (July 2021 to March 2022), there were, on average, 100 items per month related to the research question. We focused on those in which the keywords were not just mentioned but were part of a discourse. Since this was the pre-election period in Hungary, discourses creating or blaming enemies often combined a whole range of enemies; Brussels, liberals, the declining West, and the political opposition were often combined into one item, but the discourse was not about Brussels, but about the opposition. In ironic descriptions of anti-EU propaganda, Brussels is used not only as a noun but also as a verb, such as “to Brusselize” (meaning to condemn, blame or blame Brussels, i.e., the EU).

Using the items (news items from selected media), the following discourses were identified and will be elaborated later: the EU’s failure to tackle the pandemic; the existence of a diabolical or evil plan to destroy Europe; Hungary is doing better than the EU; the EU is selfish and betrays its values; China and Russia are doing better; the EU is exploiting the crisis to advance its own interests.

In Hungary, the public service media is under pro-government influence and, according to critics, a mouthpiece for government propaganda. In independent media, anti-EU propaganda discourses are also quoted or ironically presented. The pro-government *origo.hu*, *magyarnemzet.hu*, and M1 TV presented the same discourses using the same wording and repeated them exhaustively. After it was semi-officially revealed that Sinopharm is ineffective in a quarter of people over sixty, and the Prime Minister offered people a third booster vaccine, the “China is good” discourse disappeared.

After the final climax of the pandemic, discussions about the EU began to focus on the allocation of the recovery fund to Hungary rather than on how to deal with the pandemic. In the protracted negotiations, the EU Commission called for anti-corruption measures and greater transparency from the Hungarian government, while the government’s discourse accused the EU of making political rather than professional decisions about the so-called Child Protection Act (which conflates protecting children from pedophiles with homophobia).

From 24 February 2022 onward, the pandemic issue disappeared completely, giving way to the war-related crisis in Ukraine. The upcoming elections on 3 April filled the media space with the communication turbulence of the Hungarian government (the previous pro-Putin stance had to be explained under the circumstances).

Despite the failure of the “opening to the East” strategy (a major element of government rhetoric in recent years) and the exposure of the government’s overheated pro-Russian policies, the dominant narrative has portrayed the opposition as the enemy of the state and the nation.

Discourse on the failure of the EU

This discourse appeared in the pro-government media M1, *Origo.hu*, and *Magyar Nemzet* (which overlap with the public media in contemporary Hungary) and are often intertwined with the discourses “Hungary is doing better against it” and “Russia and China are good.” In these cases, the EU is portrayed as a slow, disorganized, underperforming entity accused of not providing enough vaccines, masks, or respirators. The EU is to blame in this context not only for the delayed initial response at the start of the pandemic but also for the failure to recover quickly and the lack of Community resources for recovery.

The reports of a rebellious and brave Hungary deciding to buy vaccines from elsewhere (China and Russia) are intended to reinforce the image of an efficient, well-organized, and generous China and Russia and to point out that the EU is descending into chaos.

The real situation and chances of Chinese and Russian citizens were never discussed. There were reports of aggressive demonstrations in European cities against the epidemic-related measures, highlighting police brutality. For the same reason, the Hungarian “national consultation” became part of the discourse on COVID-19. It was used to show that Hungary is doing better because instead of suppressing people and their opinions (as in other countries), the Hungarian government is asking for people’s opinions and acting accordingly. The post-epidemic national consultation was about post-crisis recovery. The media, the national poster campaign, and the questions in the consultation questionnaire⁷ show that pandemic-related issues were a good way (at least for the government) to keep alive the old discourses on migration: the old enemies – Brussels and Soros – and highlight the “savior”: the (better performing) Hungarian government that is protecting Europe’s borders.

In the summer of 2021, Budapest hosted some mass events: the World Hunting Exhibition, the European Football Championship, and the Eucharistic Congress. In the “EU is a failure, Hungary is doing better” discourse, it was often said that this summer would have been a summer of restrictions for Hungarians, with events canceled due to the slow pace of vaccine procurement in Brussels, but with the help of China and Russia, Hungary was able to organize these events, while other EU countries were unable to lift restrictions. Critics who argued that the government should not have taken a health risk with these events were accused of being anti-Christian or of depriving “normal people” of their pleasures (football and hunting).

The “diabolical plan and danger” narratives

In these discourses, the future of the EU is apocalyptic – involving the failure of the EU in the future tense – and the consequence of an evil plan (as presented in M1, Origo.hu and Magyar Nemzet). This is sometimes only superficially linked to the pandemic. The pandemic serves only as a gloomy background to a long

⁷ For example, questions 12 and 13:

12. The European Court of Justice has ruled that the detention of immigrants at the Hungarian border in transit zones is illegal. The ruling states that migrants must be allowed to enter Hungary during the epidemic. This decision coincides with George Soros’ old migration plan to let in a million migrants a year at any cost. Do you agree that the government should continue to stand up against immigration and maintain a tight protection of Hungary’s borders? Yes No
13. Brussels is preparing an offensive against the immigration-related provisions of the Hungarian Constitution. They want to force us to amend the articles of the Fundamental Law that prevent migration. Do you agree that the Hungarian government should stick to its anti-immigration rules, even at the cost of open conflict with Brussels? Yes No

jeremiad about the future of Europe and the world. The discourse often begins by claiming that the European Union is facing dangerous times: pandemics and migration flows will determine the most important developments in world politics and economics. In this way, pandemics and migration are linked, and this provides a solid basis for the other ingredients to be strung together.

“The EU’s role in the global economy, in industrial and technological innovation, is diminishing. The continent has been hit by a financial crisis, a migration crisis and then a coronavirus epidemic, while the foundations of the eurozone are cracking, the budgetary and public finance situation in the southern member states is deplorable, not to mention the demographic decline that is a major cause of all the problems. Firstly, the validity of creation, of the Christian parable, has been called into question, on the basis of rationality and the assumption that what the human mind cannot understand, measure or experience does not exist. Doubts about ancient truths have become the source of modern knowledge. Following the trend of doubting God, scepticism about the importance of nations, about the ‘love of place,’ has spread: that our natural environment, our ancestors, their customs, our linguistic-cultural tradition derived from them, is a recent construction, a romantic fantasy, [that it is] now time to leave behind in the face of the global goals of an increasingly unified Humanity. And now – for several decades – we are witnessing ... the questioning of the female-male creation and the consequent denial of the child’s right to adequate physical, mental and moral protection.” (Szánthó 2021, Magyar Nemzet)

Sometimes, the EU itself poses a threat, for example, when the number of incoming migrants increases and, according to the discourse, the need for mandatory resettlement quotas is repeatedly raised by NGOs and the Brussels bureaucracy. But even in these difficult times, the Hungarian government is resisting and continues to disagree with the plan for mandatory distribution.

Childless Western couples who have given up on having children of their own are also part of the general danger because their world is no longer biologically self-sustaining, so they are forced to import people from outside – and this brings us to the issue of dangerous migration, rephrased as the problem of “replacement.”

And in the extended discourse, migrants are a health risk because they spread the coronavirus. In these discourses, political forces, Brussels bureaucrats, left-wing liberal groups, NGO networks, and the media are also fomenting ideological conflicts that threaten to bring down the EU.

“Hungary is doing better”

In these flattering discourses (presented in M1, Origo.hu and Magyar Nemzet), Hungary is months ahead of Europe in terms of vaccination or reopening. The success of the vaccination program is also largely due to the government's timely realization, before the failed vaccine purchase in Brussels, that it should not rely only on the European Union but also open up to the East. The Hungarian economy is projected to recover to above its pre-plague level by autumn 2021, while most EU countries have not yet managed to do this. Selected statistics were cited on how happy Hungarians are compared to their less happy EU counterparts.

Whenever possible, this economic success was mentioned. In such reports, the relevant indicators were carefully chosen: the number of deaths from COVID and the excess deaths per 100,000 people were mentioned only in periods when the EU average, the Central European average, or the Visegrad average was worse.

The “wise decision” of the Hungarian government to place hospitals under military administration was praised, and the “*calm governance*” of the government was praised, which contributed significantly to the smooth implementation of the restrictions and the restart of the economy in Hungary. The Hungarian state “*went to war*” and saved the country; thanks to this, we did not see images like those in Bergamo, Portugal, or Romania – the discourses claim.

Finance Minister Mihály Varga, often quoted by government media, said that before the epidemic, the Hungarian economy was the second fastest-growing economy in Europe and that after the global crisis, Hungary was still one of the fastest-recovering economies in Europe. The recovery would not have been so rapid, he said, if the pandemic had not hit a strong, fast-growing and resilient Hungary.

One factor behind Hungary's supposed success is a strong leader who is the saviour of the country. The prime minister has been preoccupied with the leader topos for more than a decade. He has argued that in difficult situations in the EU a strong leader is the salutary solution. “*...when we are in trouble institutions are not able to help. So, you need personal leadership. And personal leadership is not respected at all in the European Union...*” (Orbán 2015)

“The EU is selfish and betrays its own values” discourse

In Hungarian public service media (M1) and pro-government media (Origo.hu, Magyar Nemzet), coverage of the protests against the EU's pandemic measures often concluded that despite the alleged brutal dispersal of protests,

there were no international repercussions, which is an example of the application of double standards and thus a betrayal of fundamental liberal values. The case of the Recovery and Resilience Plan not being adopted by Hungary is the most striking example of the alleged betrayal of fundamental EU values linked to the pandemic.

Hungary submitted its recovery plan on 12 May 2021 (European Commission 2021). As a general rule, if there had been no obstacles, Hungary would have received the related funds by now. However, due to the outstanding issues with the plan, which was intended to strengthen the anti-corruption framework, including improving prosecutorial efforts and access to public information, negotiations have been delayed and have not been concluded to date. The Commission says EU funds for Hungary are being withheld because of the need to strengthen the anti-corruption framework. At the same time, the Hungarian government and Fidesz, the governing party, claim that the EU Commission is acting according to its political biases. They accuse the Commission of making political judgments because, after the Hungarian parliament passed an amendment to the child protection law in June 2021 that EU institutions say discriminates against LGBTQ people, negotiations on Hungary's economic recovery plan stalled.

The two events (the condemnation of the so-called Child Protection Act in the European Parliament because of its homophobic nature and because it conflates homosexuality with pedophilia, and the rejection of the Recovery Plan) have been linked in the discourse of Hungarian government political actors according to their interests. Since June 2021, the EU-critical discourse, although still starting from the COVID crisis (as the recovery fund is meant to mitigate the damage the latter caused), has grown into a discourse in its own right, with EU criticism at its core.

According to this discourse, the EU is biased (it has already given the funds to other countries), persecuting and punishing Hungary (for not participating in the LGBTQ canon), interfering in its internal affairs, and violating Hungary's sovereignty. This discourse allows the public and the media to silence the fundamental objection raised by the lack of guarantees against corruption in the Hungarian Recovery Plan.

“Russia and China do better; they are the good ones” discourse

This discourse is very often intertwined with the “Hungary is doing better” discourse (presented in M1. Origo.hu and Magyar Nemzet). Without the Eastern vaccines and timely government decisions, Hungary could not have performed

better and saved people. Thanks to the Russian and Chinese vaccines imported into the country, Hungarians were among the first to have access to life-saving vaccines.

China was described as a world of the East, with new state and digital giants rising and economic and military centers gradually shifting eastwards. This image was contrasted with a so-called neo-Marxist, bloated liberalism waging a (self-)murderous war against its own country: Western civilization.

As mentioned in the introduction, there were problems with the effectiveness of the Chinese vaccine among the elderly. Since then, these discourses have faded.

Discourse of “the EU exploiting the crisis to promote its own interests”

This form of discourse was very rare (presented in *Magyar Nemzet*) and involved references to business considerations embedded in a wider power context whereby centralization of the procurement of protective and other equipment, which is otherwise rational, strengthens the former's mandate. As a result, the narrative suggests that Member States are devalued, and some have been badly served in the distribution of vaccines. Brussels thus seeks to increase its power through disease management under the guise of a Health Union. However, the issue of disease management, along with other health issues in the EU, has been left to the Member States.

CONCLUSIONS

The European integration project is at the heart of political polarization in Hungary. Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary has been characterized by defiance and criticism of the EU, its institutions, and values (Bayer 2020). The confrontation with the EU is often built around identity-based arguments, which tend to question the values of the EU. The questioning of liberal democratic governance promoted by the EU is exemplified in an article published by Viktor Orbán himself in the conservative pro-government Hungarian newspaper *Magyar Nemzet*, where he wrote that

“The doctrine that ‘democracy can only be liberal’ – this golden calf, this monumental fetish – has been debunked.” (Orbán, 2022).

This controversy culminated in Viktor Orbán's public campaigns against the EU institutions. These included the 2018 "Let's Protect Hungary" campaign against a European Parliament resolution that raised concerns about systemic problems with the rule of law in Hungary (Bayer-de La Baume, 2018) and a 2019 poster campaign funded by Hungarian taxpayers that accused Jean-Claude Juncker, then president of the European Commission, and Hungarian-American businessman George Soros, of advocating migration plans that threatened Hungary's national security (Bayer 2020).

While political polarization over the EU is present in other EU countries, it is exceptionally visible in the Hungarian media. This can be explained by the government's control of the media. The Hungarian government-controlled media are themselves directly involved in the dissemination and production of disinformation against the EU. There is no need for organized Russian disinformation campaigns since the pro-government media, especially the public service media, perform this task. Such media spread pro-Kremlin narratives. According to the Oxford Internet Institute, "pro-government disinformation is the equivalent of Kremlin narratives without direct influence from Russia" (Bradshaw – Howard 2018). This is not limited to pro-Russian messages but also includes attempts to portray the EU as weak and unviable, thus undermining trust in EU institutions in general (Chatterjee – Krékó 2020). It is not surprising, therefore, that the narratives revealed by EUvDisinfo have been embraced by the pro-government Hungarian media. It should be stressed that domestic disinformation can be much more effective as local governments have more information about the preferences and needs of their own populations (Szicherle – Krékó 2021).

After Fidesz came to power in Hungary with a two-thirds majority in 2010, Viktor Orbán's explicit goal was to establish an illiberal regime, and he announced a policy of opening up to the East. Central to this ideology was the fight against threatening external forces, multinational companies, migrants, and the EU. The party changed the constitution, the electoral law, and the media law, obtaining significant media dominance. Brussels became a target of blame, and this was strongly reflected in the discourse on COVID-19. In it, the Hungarian prime minister criticized not so much selfishness as EU inertia, embedded in a narrative of a declining West, contrasting this with Russian and Chinese performance and effectiveness.

However, the vast majority of the Hungarian population is pro-EU, so there are clearly limits to the domestic elite's criticism of the EU. This was especially true before the elections, so the strong EU criticism of the Hungarian government turned into a pragmatic sovereigntist stance in the second half of the period under review.

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