

# EUROPEAN UNION, GEOPOLITICS, AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE: AN ANALYSIS OF GEOPOLITICAL DISCOURSES IN HUNGARIAN MEDIA IN 2021-2022

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper analyzes Hungarian media discourse related to the geopolitics of the European Union between July 2021 and March 2022. The qualitative analysis draws on a sample (n=100) of the geopolitics-related media corpus of the MEDEU project. Before the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the questions of migration and border control, the enlargement of the European Union in the Western Balkans, discourses about the future of Europe, and the assumed divide between the “Eastern” and “Western” Member States dominated the geopolitics-related media content. Following the Russian attack, the Russo-Ukrainian war became the most salient topic, while older themes were also reframed in light of this event. Governmental narratives and terminology dominated the analyzed media contents, which were reinforced through (so-called) experts presented in pro-governmental media. At the same time, the political opposition and government-critical media were rarely able to present and/or disseminate their own narratives.*

**KEYWORDS:** *EU enlargement, geopolitics, media analysis, migration, Russo-Ukrainian war*

## INTRODUCTION

The paper presents Hungarian media discourses related to the geopolitics of the European Union between July 1, 2021, and March 31, 2022. The analysis draws

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on the media contents of the Hungarian media corpus of the “*MEDIATIZED EU – Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization and Their Representations in Public Perceptions*” Horizon 2020 project. Although the term “geopolitics” is widely known and used by politicians, journalists, security experts, and members of several scholarly fields, its definitions and applications are far from consistent (Dodds, 2019). In most cases, it is understood as the division of the world into geographical units (including metaphors such as the “Iron Curtain”), the “geographical understanding” of the world based on these divisions, and the foreign and security policies deriving from this understanding (Dodds, 2019). An important part of the scholarly study of geopolitics is critical reflection on these practices: how these divisions and “geographical understandings” are constructed, how they function, and what goals these geopolitical constructs (geographical units and metaphors) serve, as well as the related interpretations and identities (Dodds, 2019).

In line with these considerations, the paper investigates how the geopolitical challenges of the European Union (such as its enlargement in the Western Balkans, the Russo-Ukrainian war, and irregular migration from outside of Europe) are represented in Hungarian media, what discursive frames are used for their interpretation, and what the outlined potential/desired actions are in these media contents. This also includes the media framing of the geopolitical perspectives of the Hungarian Government and (when it is present) the perspective of the political opposition. Additionally, we cover regional geopolitical constructs such as the “Visegrad Four” (V4), which has become a salient collaborative unit within the European Union.

## CONTEXT

The European Union faced several important geopolitical challenges at the beginning of the 2020s, including migration crises, the difficulties of the Western Balkans and “Eastern” enlargements, and the relationship with the major global geopolitical actors such as the United States, China, and Russia. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, starting on February 24, 2022, created several further salient challenges, including the issue of energy security and the ability of European states to defend themselves against external aggression. The war came with serious sacrifice: at the time of writing (2024 November), the number of injured and casualties, according to secret service intelligence, may have surpassed a million people (The Wall Street Journal, 2024), while the GDP of Ukraine shrank by 30 percent in 2022 (European Parliament, 2024a).

Currently, 20 percent of the internationally recognized territory of Ukraine is under Russian occupation, but the near-daily air strikes (which regularly result in civilian casualties) involve the majority of the territory of the country, causing serious infrastructural damage. Another consequence of the war is that several million Ukrainians have had to leave their place of residence, many of whom applied for asylum in EU Member States. According to UNHCR, by November 2024, 6,225,700 Ukrainians had applied for asylum in a European state and 560,200 outside of Europe (UNHCR, n.d.). The war caused the largest European wave of migration since the end of the Second World War (Dodds et al., 2023).

The war also put the question of EU enlargement into a new perspective. Following the “big bang” enlargements of 2004 and 2007 and the accession of Croatia in 2012, the enlargement process practically became stranded: accession talks with countries of the Western Balkans progressed slowly (Serbia, Montenegro) or had not even begun before the start of the war (North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina). At the same time, none of the countries of the “Eastern partnership” (Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia) had even reached candidate status prior to the war. Although the EU has used the issue of accession as a geopolitical strategy since the Balkan Wars of the 1990s (Anghel & Džankić, 2023), several experts have pointed out that, unlike in the case of post-Soviet Eastern Europe, in the case of the Western Balkans and the “Eastern partnership” there was no real intention for enlargement (e.g., Petrovic & Tzifakis, 2021; Verdun & Chira, 2011). According to this interpretation, keeping the issue of enlargement on the political agenda and promising potential future accession have been used by the Union primarily to ensure the stability and security of the area and to limit Chinese and Russian influence in the region (Anghel & Džankić, 2023). The Russian invasion created a new situation in the enlargement process: following the start of the war, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova applied to join the European Union (in June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova officially became candidate countries). Simultaneously, accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia finally started (Albania officially became a candidate country in 2014 and North Macedonia in 2005).

The Hungarian government took a geopolitical position different from the EU majority on multiple issues, including the question of migration, the enlargement of the EU, and the relationship with China and Russia. Governmental positions were shaped by both domestic and international (primarily EU-related) considerations. Following the landslide victory in 2010, the Fidesz-KDNP coalition returned to power with a two-thirds parliamentary supermajority, and the second Orbán government was formed. The new government quickly began dismantling constitutional checks and balances and building a new, more centralized regime with extensive control over the political system and

the media, which exhibited several autocratic traits (the characteristics of this new regime have been extensively discussed in the literature, see, e.g., Körösenyi et al., 2020; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Lengyel & Ilonszki, 2012). These changes quickly attracted criticism from EU institutions (e.g., European Parliament, 2013, 2022, 2024b) in response to which the Hungarian government launched an intensive anti-EU campaign, which has been going on (with minor interruptions) up to the present day. Some typical examples involve the so-called “peace march” (a mass demonstration organized by a pro-governmental NGO/GONGO) on January 21, 2012, which featured the slogan “We will not be a colony [of the EU],” the governmental communication related to the 2015 European migration crisis (see, e.g., Bocskor, 2018; Bognár et al., 2022), the 2016 “quota” referendum campaign against the refugee resettlement scheme proposed by the European Commission (see European Commission, 2016; about the referendum campaign see e.g., Demeter, 2018; Gessler, 2017), the anti-EU campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic (see e.g., Szabó & Szabó, 2022), and currently the governmental communication related to the Russo-Ukrainian war (in particular, the opposition to the EU sanctions against Russia). One goal of these campaigns was to strengthen support among the electorate and shape issue-related public opinions, which was particularly successful in the case of the governmental anti-immigration position (see, e.g., Bíró-Nagy, 2022). Another goal was to delegitimize, in the eyes of the Hungarian electorate, criticism coming from the EU, as well as to delegitimize EU institutions and, in a broader sense, “Western liberal” values. As an alternative, the prime minister and the governmental communication presented a traditionalist, nativist-nationalist, Christian-conservative value system (see e.g., hvg.hu, 2018; Orbán, 2014).

In order to expand the economic and political room for maneuvering internationally, the Hungarian government initiated the so-called “Eastern opening” policy. This policy strived for closer and more visible cooperation with countries including China, Russia, and several other autocratic systems. Simultaneously, the government intended to strengthen its position within the EU by promoting closer cooperation between the V4 countries (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic) in order to advocate regional interests more effectively as well as to counterbalance “Western liberal values” (Balogh et al., 2022; Scott, 2022). Regarding the enlargement of the EU, the government positioned itself as a strong supporter of the accession of the Western Balkans countries. This support was partly motivated by the desire to increase the number of potential allies within the EU, as most of these countries share some regional interests, show similar autocratic tendencies, and are socially more conservative than the (so-called) Western Member States. It was also motivated by a general desire to strengthen illiberal actors internationally. Following the

Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the Hungarian government also positioned itself as a strong supporter of Ukraine's EU membership (Lamour, 2024). However, this changed after a controversial Ukrainian language law was passed, which limited the usage of the native language for minorities in several areas (such as education, health care, and social services), including the language use of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine (see, e.g., Venice Commission, 2019a, 2019b).

Due to the strengthening economic and political relations with Russia and the deteriorating relations with Ukraine and the EU leadership, the Hungarian government found itself in a precarious situation following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russo-Hungarian and Ukrainian-Hungarian relations that had primarily involved bilateral issues before, such as economic cooperation or disagreement about minority rights, now gained international salience and became increasingly seen as a political choice between the "Western" and "anti-Western" alliances. While Hungary joined the EU declarations condemning the war and supported the sanctions against Russia (e.g., Council of the EU, 2022a, 2022b), the government strongly criticized the same sanctions, which it labeled "the sanctions of Brussels," distancing itself from them. Governmental communication emphasized that the economic interests of Hungary should be prioritized, including interests related to energy security (cf., Lamour, 2024). At the same time, governmental communication avoided publicly condemning the Russian aggression (with the exception of signing the EU declarations) or even naming the aggressor, consistently referring to the war as a "Slavic internal war" (*belháború*) and demanding its prompt ending even at the price of Ukraine giving up parts of its territory. Relatedly, governmental communication strongly criticized Western weapon supplies to Ukraine, arguing that it would extend the war (i.e., by providing the opportunity for Ukraine to defend itself). The perceived pro-Russian position of Hungary also put a strain on the relations between the V4 countries, with the other three countries openly expressing support for Ukraine and condemning Russia.

## METHOD

For the analysis, I used the geopolitics-related media contents of the Hungarian media corpus of the MEDEU project. I created this geopolitical sub-corpus by using the following 19 keywords: security council (*biztonsági tanács*), security policy (*biztonságpolitika*), embargo (*embargó*), energy security (*energiabiztonság*), UN Security Council (*ENSZ Biztonsági Tanács*),

geopolitics (*geopolitika*), NATO, national security (*nemzetbiztonság*), Russo-Ukrainian war (*orosz-ukrán háború*), Russo-Ukrainian conflict (*orosz-ukrán konfliktus*), Paks2, sanction (*szankció*), Ukraine (*Ukrajna*), the war in Ukraine (*ukrajnai háború*), Ukrainian conflict (*ukrán konfliktus*), Ukrainian-Russian war (*ukrán-orosz háború*), Ukrainian-Russian conflict (*ukrán-orosz konfliktus*), and V4, Visegrad countries (*visegrádi országok*). These searches resulted in a total of 4149 media items (online articles and transcripts of television programs) in my sub-corpus. Since analyzing such a large corpus with qualitative methods is not feasible, I took a random sample of 100 pieces of media content. Content that turned out to be irrelevant from a geopolitical perspective was again replaced by random sampling.

The MEDEU media corpus contains the contents of four pro-governmental (origo.hu, magyarnemzet.hu, M1, HírTv) and four government-critical/neutral (nepszava.hu, hvg.hu, ATV, RTL Klub) news media. Fifty-eight percent of the geopolitical sub-corpus comes from the pro-governmental media and 42 percent from the government-critical/neutral media. The 100 pieces of media content of my sample that I analyzed broadly adhered to these proportions (66 and 34 percent); the difference is primarily caused by filtering out non-relevant content and replacing it with random sampling (i.e., sampling not only from the contents of the news medium that was omitted). However, since the analysis is qualitative in nature and the analyzed sample is relatively large, it seems less likely that important geopolitical themes of the observed period were overlooked. This is supported by the fact that the sample covers all parts of the observed time period, somewhat over-representing the period following the start of the Russian invasion (59 percent of the sample comes from this time period, while its proportion is 42 percent in the geopolitical sub-corpus). Relevant parts of the 100 media items were first identified by thematic coding. During thematic coding, 36 codes and sub-codes were developed. I have used these identified parts in the subsequent analysis.

## ANALYSIS

The investigated time period was divided into two parts according to the start of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine (February 24, 2022). In the first, longer period (July 1, 2021 – February 23, 2022), geopolitics-related media content was dominated by the issue of migration, the enlargement of the European Union, and the (assumed) divide between the “Eastern” and “Western” Member States. The second, shorter period (February 24 – March 31, 2022) was naturally

dominated by topics related to the Russian invasion, while topics of the previous period were also framed (or reframed) in light of this event. Simultaneously, the salience of geopolitics-related issues also increased: 42 percent of the media contents of the corpus come from this shorter period. Discourses were largely influenced in both (but in particular in the second) period by the election campaign preceding the April 3, 2022, general election in Hungary.

### ***Main discourses before the start of the Russian invasion***

From July 2021 until the start of the Russian invasion, the observed media content contained a wide range of geopolitics-related topics, including the enlargement of the EU (in particular in the Western Balkans), Europe's energy security, the question of migration and border security, the future of Europe (politically, geopolitically, culturally), cooperation among the V4 countries, the EU's Eastern Partnership, Hungary's "Eastern opening" policy, and the (assumed) division between the "Eastern" and "Western" EU Member States over the rule of law procedure and cultural differences. Most of the observed media contents were dominated by the Hungarian government's frames and narratives.

With regard to *migration and border security*, the dominant themes were the debate between Hungary and the European Union concerning refugee and migration policies and the Belarus-European Union border crisis. Since discourses related to migration have been widely discussed in the literature, we will only highlight a few points related to geopolitics here. The most important point is probably that governmental narratives framed migration from outside of Europe (in particular from the Middle East and North Africa) as a physical threat to Europe against which it had to defend itself.

*The minister [Péter Szijjártó, the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs] argued that in order to keep Europe safe, we must stop the waves of migration. He warned that the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan posed a security challenge, which could make the country the source of new waves of mass migration. (...) He emphasized that in order to avoid new migration pressure, all open issues had to be solved with Turkey in relation to migration. The EU's "lines of defense" need to be strengthened – he added.<sup>2</sup> (origo.hu 2021.07.12)*

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2 The quotations presented in the paper were translated into English by the author.

These security concerns, together with the well-known older topoi of terrorism and cultural threat, became re-contextualized after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan had actually taken place:

*Replying to a question, Viktor Orbán talked about the problem of migration. He emphasized that Europe should not risk its own culture because of migration and that terrorism interlinked with migration was a real threat, which he had been talking about for years. This is the situation with Afghanistan as well – he added. There should not be a situation when migration undermines the European project. About the relationship between demography and migration, he argued that the large masses of migrants put Europe's cultural identity in danger. (origo.hu 2021.09.01)*

In addition to these themes, the events in Afghanistan led to the re-emergence/intensification of the anti-Brussels narratives, which framed Brussels as incompetent, extremist, and dangerous to the future of Europe.

*The [border] fence does not need to be strengthened, the fence is good and strong. It is possible that we will need more men, but we will ask for them then, and we will send them here. The weak point is Brussels. They say there that those who want to leave Afghanistan should be allowed to enter Europe. This is betrayal. Look, there are thousands of men working here [at the border]. There are thousands of men working here so that there, in the center of Europe, everyone can live in security, welfare, and comfort. And when these men here work so that migrants cannot come in, then to say from Brussels that they will bring in people from Afghanistan is a betrayal. (...) Those who want to bypass this fence to take in migrants to Europe betray the European men. Brussels is planning to do this, and we need to stop it. (M1, 2021.09.22, V4 news)*

This excerpt demonstrates well that the limited number of alternative discourses (e.g., from the European Union or the domestic opposition) are mainly presented as part of the dominant governmental narrative and are framed accordingly.

With regard to the Belarus-European Union border crisis, the governmental position and the position of prominent EU politicians seem to be more in line (at least regarding the geopolitical aspect). The central argument here is that Europe is under a hybrid threat as, in addition to the migration pressure, the Belarusian government is strategically using irregular migrant flows against Europe.



*Margaritis Schinas [the Greek EU Commissioner for Promoting the European Way of Life] told the Brussels portal [Politico] that “a new type of threat emerged at the borders of the European Union. This is a hybrid threat. Human suffering is used as a weapon against the European Union. We have to make the attackers understand that we will defend our borders. This has been successful so far. We have the resources and we can finance the efforts of member states to protect the borders, but this does not mean that we will finance the cement and stones which would be built into such a wall”- said the EU commissioner. (hvg.hu 2021.10.29)*

Another key geopolitical theme in the observed time period was *the enlargement of the European Union*. The Hungarian Government presented itself as a strong supporter of the accession of the Western Balkans countries. The central argument was that the integration of the region was necessary to guarantee the security of Europe, while the lack of prompt action to integrate on the EU's part would lead to other geopolitical actors integrating the region. The government even argued for the immediate accession of Montenegro and Serbia. According to the governmental narrative, those Member States that do not support the region's accession (by trying to slow down the accession process) are making a serious strategic mistake. The government also envisioned the Western Balkans region as the next potential driver of economic growth in the EU. I did not find any alternative discourse or challenge to the governmental position regarding the Western Balkans in the media corpus.

*According to Viktor Orbán, the Balkans should not be made a buffer zone but should be integrated into the EU. (...) “Until they [the prime ministers and presidents of the member states] decide that we need to integrate the Balkans, we will be part of a continuously postponed process that gets lost in the details, focuses on regulation issues instead of strategic questions, and are called negotiations but in fact are delaying tactics” – he warned (...) “If the peoples of the Balkans get a chance, they will catch up in a few years, just like the Visegrád countries did, they will strengthen their economies and the real great economic growth will arrive from the Balkans to the European Union.” (hvg.hu 2021.09.24)*

In addition to the Western Balkans, the accession of Ukraine also occasionally came up in the observed corpus. The Hungarian government expressed support for the process but argued that the Western Balkans needed to be prioritized and

that Ukraine needed to respect the rights of national minorities (in particular, the rights of the ethnic Hungarian minority).

Another key geopolitical issue in the observed period was *the cooperation between the V4 countries*. The V4 group was present in the observed contents in at least four different ways: 1- as a form of economic and political cooperation; 2- as the “engine” of the EU economy; 3- in relation to the (assumed) differences from the Western Member States in terms of cultural identity, norms, and values; 4- in relation to differing approaches to energy policies (in particular, the opposition to the European “Green Deal” and against green policies in general). The last two points will be revisited as part of the other themes below.

*The politician [Viktor Orbán] held a speech in Katowice, where he met his three Central-European colleagues as Hungary holds the presidency of the V4. He emphasized that low taxes help boost investment and the development of infrastructure, and this is one of the main goals of the Hungarian government for the next half a year as the head of the group. However, he still does not want to hear about the compulsory settlement of migrants. In his view, immigration is a security issue. He added that he expected respect and not public lecturing from the other member states as the four [the Visegrád group] represented significant economic power. He also argued that no one could tell Hungarians how they should raise their children. (nepszava.hu 2021.07.01)*

The issues of *energy security* and *energy policy* were also present in the corpus, particularly related to Russian natural gas exports, renewable energy sources, and nuclear energy. The governmental narrative disseminated by pro-governmental media personnel (journalists and so-called experts) argued that Brussels and some Member States followed irrational anti-Russian positions, while Russia was, in fact, a respectable and reliable partner and energy provider and Russian gas combined with nuclear energy provided the key to the energy security of Hungary. The government contended that renewable energy sources did not provide (yet) a viable alternative, and the EU’s green policies were framed as irresponsible and as contributing to both energy insecurity and the drastic increase in prices. Related to the issue of renewables versus nuclear energy, there also seemed to be unity among members of the Visegrad group, while the attitude toward Russian natural gas was more divided, although this division was carefully avoided in the pro-governmental media.

*Brussels still denies that it has responsibility for the surge in energy prices. (...) In the meanwhile, Brussels wants to introduce a so-called climate protection tax. The Vice-President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, would impose it on motorists, apartments, and family houses. This would cost 32,000 HUF [approx. 90 EUR] a month for the Hungarian people [per capita]. The Director of Communications of Fidesz argues that this is not only unacceptable but also hypocritical. Because the climate protection goal is just a charade. István Hollik said that the left supports Brussels' plan in vain as the government will not let it happen. "We will protect utility cost reductions and together with the V4 countries we will veto the plan of an EU-wide climate tax. Because we believe that the price of climate protection should not be paid by the European and the Hungarian people, but the large multinational companies destroying the climate."* (M1 news 2021.10.17)

Commerce with Russia and, in particular, the procurement of Russian natural gas and the contract with *Rosatom* to build a second nuclear plant ("Paks2") have been challenged both by the domestic opposition and some international actors, arguing that this makes Hungary dependent on Russia.

The discourses related to the *future of Europe* involve a wide range of topics, including: 1- the struggle between competing visions of a federal Europe and a "union of nations" (i.e., primarily economic cooperation); 2- the struggle between competing cultural values ("traditional" versus "progressive" values); 3- relationships with other regions of the world, and 4- ultimately, the survival of the EU and "Europe." This last topic is mostly framed in cultural and racial/ethnic terms and in relation to migration.

*Charles Michels talked about the creation of a geopolitical union. In his opinion, this was not a dream anymore but could become a reality soon since competition with the rest of the world could only be kept up this way, and this way, we could give effective answers to the challenges facing us. (...) Viktor Orbán, in reaction to this [another comment about the collapse of the Roman Empire], argued that historical parallels are important in general, but migrants are coming now, and currently, it is less relevant what happened to the Roman Empire, not to mention that the migrants are Muslims and they change the cultural character of Europe. Europe primarily needs economic success and not so much common policies – added the Hungarian prime minister. (origo.hu 2021.09.01)*

## *Main discourses during the Russian invasion*

From the start of the Russian invasion on February 24 until the end of the observed time period (March 31), the war dominated the geopolitics-related media discourses. The main topics related to European geopolitics were the (physical) security of Europe and the Eastern Member States; the energy and food security of Europe; the belongingness of Ukraine (and the Western Balkans) to Europe; questions concerning EU and NATO enlargement; and sanctions against Russia and their impact on Europe. Importantly, Hungary held a general election on April 3. Thus, the observed time period also overlapped with the most intensive part of the election campaign. The war itself soon became a central theme of the campaign.

The central message of the governmental communication was that Hungary needed to be kept out of the war to ensure the security of the Hungarian people and the energy security of the country. On the domestic level, they argued that the “left” (i.e., the united opposition) was acting irresponsibly by being “on the side of the war” (e.g., by wanting to send weapons or, assumedly, even troops to Ukraine). They also argued that such hasty politics would endanger the energy security (price levels and sufficient supply) of Hungarian households. The long-established tropes of the opposition being incompetent, dangerous, and serving the interest of Western leftist-liberal interest groups re-emerged and became reframed in the context of the war. Simultaneously, the long-established tropes of the dangerousness and incompetence of Brussels were also built upon.

In spite of intensively criticizing Brussels and the idea of Western sanctions against Russia, in the first days of the war (and even one or two days before it), Hungarian governmental politicians emphasized European unity and argued that Hungary would join with its allies (EU, NATO) in all decisions. For instance, Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó argued that:

*The position of Hungary is clear: We support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, as we have always done, and we will not break up European unity related to the response, just as we have never done so. (hvg.hu 2022.02.23)*

An interesting aspect of the pro-governmental media is that, in the first days of the war, they also presented pro-Russian positions and narratives, while later, they tried to balance Western narratives with more pragmatic techniques. For instance, in line with governmental communication, they referred to the events with the general and more neutral term “war in the neighborhood” without mentioning the Russian president or the fact that Russia had attacked Ukraine.

At the same time, they put significant emphasis on the assumed incompetence of Brussels and the Western powers in general (failure of Eastern policies, lack of power in preventing the war) and on the ineffective and dangerous nature of the sanctions. Pragmatism, criticism of the West, and even cynicism were characteristic of pro-governmental publicists and so-called media experts. For instance, the publicist of the pro-governmental *Magyar Nemzet* extensively mocked the German Green Party for agreeing to remove the full “blockade” of the Russian energy sector from the list of sanctions, a significant turn in the party’s energy policies.

*They could decrease their cursed Putin- and Russophobia when it came to the question of how to heat or how to supply energy to their factories. Practice triumphed here over obscure ideologies which were built on the following: we are the good democrats who tell you how you should lead the country we cannot even position on a map. No doubt the United States has the best record at this so far, but the Germans believe in this as well. (magyarnemzet.hu 2022.03.22)*

However, within a few weeks, Hungarian leaders clarified their position related to the sanctions and argued that no sanctions should involve a ban on the import of Russian fossil fuels. They emphasized that Hungary would not support any decision that endangered the energy security of the country.

*She [Judit Varga, the Hungarian Minister of Justice] said that there was a war in the neighborhood of Hungary, and the position of the Hungarian government was clear, firm, and consistent: “We will not let anyone embroil Hungary into this armed conflict.” Judit Varga also mentioned that, according to the position of the government, sanctions against Russia cannot be extended to the area of energy policy “since we would endanger not only the energy security of Hungarian households but also the energy security and supply of the households of several other European countries.” Hungary will always be part of the united international action so long as it is about making peace. (origo.hu 2022.03.22)*

The governmental narratives and discursive frames were widely disseminated by the pro-governmental media, publicists, and think tanks, while so-called experts in these media reinforced them by applying the exact same arguments and terminology as governmental communication. For example, in the excerpt below, the director of analysis of the pro-governmental think tank

Nézőpont Institute repeated the narrative and terminology of the governmental communication, while in the last sentence, it even seems as if he were talking in the name of the government.

*It is obvious that those who ask for the extension of the sanctions are, in fact, suggesting that the price of the war in the neighborhood should be paid by the Hungarian people and Hungary. The left and Péter Márki-Zay [PM candidate of the united opposition in 2022] are even demanding sanctions that are weakening the Hungarian currency – said the director of analysis of Nézőpont Institute on M1. Those oppositional formations and Péter Márki-Zay and the united opposition, those who demand the introduction of different sanctions and, for instance, their extension to the energy sector, they create insecurity, just as do their ideas about weapon supply. Making the sanctions more brutal and extending them creates such an insecure climate that can obviously weaken the forint. The government, just as they have made it clear multiple times on Monday, will not support any measures that would endanger the energy supply of Hungary. (M1 news 2022.03.07)*

The domestic political opposition could not create and/or successfully disseminate an alternative narrative with regard to security and energy policies, except for repeating multiple times that they would not send soldiers to Ukraine or otherwise get Hungary involved in the war (which was one of the most widely disseminated accusations in the election campaign). They also emphasized that they would not endanger the country's energy security, although they did not provide many details on how they would replace Russian energy sources. However, they did manage to construct an alternative narrative related to geopolitical relations and the place of Hungary within them. They framed the war and the related questions as a choice between the “East” and the “West” and emphasized that Hungary needed to belong to the latter. They argued that the events showed the failure of Orbán's “double game” and that Hungary needed to act together with its Western allies (EU, NATO), support every sanction, and even send weapons to Ukraine if needed. They also strongly criticized the “Eastern opening” policy of the Hungarian government. For instance, Anna Donáth, who was chair of the oppositional party Momentum at the time, said:

*I believe that Europe took it seriously that we had to prepare for this [event], even if the Hungarian government was not always a partner in this. Even now we don't see anything else from the Hungarian government but that they are playing this double game. They would*

*like to remain good partners with Putin, and, of course, they have to be partners with Europe as well. (...) I can imagine that they blocked the process as long as they could. (...) I will only believe it if I see that Hungary supports the common European sanctions or calls Russia to account just as the Germans or the others do. Let's see when the Russian spy bank will be expelled, which was allowed in the country by the government itself, and when sanctions will be implemented against oligarchs and businessmen. (ATV 2022.02.22, Egyenes Beszéd [a daily political talk show])*

Similarly, Ágnes Kunhalmi, who was co-chair of the Hungarian Socialist Party at the time, argued the following way:

*According to her, the hypocrisy of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is demonstrated well by the fact that in the first days of the war by Russia against Ukraine, the pro-Fidesz media, including MTVA [the official state media conglomerate] predicted "great Russian success," and now, when it turned out that even Orbán cannot make himself independent of NATO [positions], they are explaining his complete turnaround. (...) She emphasized that the state media, instead of fairly presenting opposition politicians, propagates lies. She recalled that they claimed about Péter Márki-Zay that he would send soldiers and weapons to Ukraine, which was a blatant lie. (nepszava.hu 2022.03.02)*

Although the war dominated the media discourses during this time period, some other important themes were also present, mostly linked to the events of the war. First, a split among the V4 countries over Hungary's Russia policies was occasionally mentioned in the non-governmental media (although this discourse became more prevalent *after* the observed time period). Second, the discourses related to EU enlargement were extended with the issues of Ukraine and Georgia's EU membership, simultaneously with the possible enlargement of NATO with Ukraine, Finland, Sweden, and Georgia (Finland and Sweden since joined NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively). These discourses were attached to the changed security situation of these countries as well as to the issues of the security of the Eastern EU Member States.

Finally, an election-related theme also came up occasionally: the assumption of governmental politicians and pro-governmental publicists that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) would intervene in the Hungarian elections in favor of the united opposition and would present a politically motivated assessment of the elections. The following excerpt from an

essay written by the pro-governmental think tank *Századvég* is a good example of this.

*The [current OSCE] report relies on the argumentative scheme of the Hungarian left and involves false claims regarding our election system. Consequently, we can assume that the final report of OSCE following the election will be biased and politically motivated and will be manifested in a preconceived judgment, which we are not willing to accept. The biased conclusions and unjustified accusations thus will not serve [the goal of] observation, which would be the official goal of the mission, but [will serve the goal of] interference in the democratic elections. (origo.hu 2022.03.29)*

## CONCLUSION

The paper has analyzed the geopolitics-related media content of the Hungarian media between July 2021 and March 2022 in the media corpus of the MEDEU project. We have shown that the observed time period may be divided into two parts: the longer period preceding the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and a shorter period following this. In the first, nearly eight-month-long period, a wide range of geopolitical topics were observed, including EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, the questions of migration and border security, discourses related to the future of Europe, the cooperation between the V4 countries, the “Eastern opening” policy of Hungary, and the (assumed) divide between the “Eastern” and “Western” EU Member States due to the rule of law procedure and cultural differences. The second time period, lasting just a bit more than one month, was naturally dominated by the Russo-Ukrainian war, and older topics were reframed and reinterpreted in light of this event. Geopolitical perspectives also became more salient; nearly half of the contents of the geopolitical corpus were associated with this shorter period.

The analyzed media contents were dominated by the topoi, terminology, and frames of governmental communication: the pro-governmental media widely cited and reinforced them, including in opinion columns and via carefully selected (so-called) experts who used the exact same arguments and terminology as the government. The political opposition and the government-critical media could rarely create and/or disseminate their own narratives; they predominantly positioned themselves in relation to the governmental narratives (mostly opposing them) without being able to provide their own framing. One



notable exception was the reframing of the “Eastern opening” policy and the Russo-Ukrainian war as a choice between the “East” and the “West.” According to this framing, the government had chosen the “East,” while the opposition emphasized Hungary’s belongingness to the “West” and the importance of making political decisions accordingly.

Several governmental positions remained consistent over the observed time period and beyond, including the governmental perspective on migration and the Western Balkans enlargement of the EU. At the same time, cooperation between the V4 countries and the political and economic relations with Russia were severely impacted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Governmental communication and the pro-government media tried to downplay the rift within the V4 by mostly remaining silent about it, while the ambivalent relationship with Russia was evaded by redirecting the focus toward the assumed inability of the European Union to deal with the consequences of the war and emphasizing the negative impacts of the sanctions. This criticism largely drew on the terminology and discursive frames of the permanent anti-EU campaign that has been going on since 2010 and which is expected to be a defining feature of future Hungarian-EU relations in the short term. On the other hand, if relations with other V4 countries remain strained, governmental communication will need to reflect on this and present new alliances to remain consistent with its own image of showing initiative in representing Hungarian and regional interests within the EU.

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