



COVID-19 AS A TOOL TO TARGET DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND VALUES: THE CASE OF HUNGARY

Lilla TÓTH, György LENGYEL and Borbála GÖNCZ¹

The Covid-19 epidemic in Hungary contributed to the decline of democracy in two ways. The direct effect was the declaration of a state of emergency by the government and the shift to decree government (from spring 2020 until now, first with reference to the epidemic, then later with reference to the war in Ukraine). The indirect effect has been spreading disinformation about the EU and the domestic political opposition in the context of the epidemic. Disinformation erodes the public trust in institutions, including the media itself, and poses a threat to democratic values and political processes. Based on data from international empirical research the paper shows the process of the breakdown of democracy and the accompanying legitimating media discourses.

Key words: Covid-19; disinformation; media; EU; polarization; populism.

1 INTRODUCTION

The government's democracy-destroying actions on the grounds of the Covid epidemic in Hungary are only a part of a long process which last period began with the second Fidesz government in 2010. From 2010 until now, Fidesz governments have used a variety of means to consolidate their autocratic power (Eötvös Károly Policy Institute 2018; Drinoczi 2020; Gado, Kerekes and Magyar 2024).

According to Ágh (2022, 77) “in the euphoric days of the accession of ECE (East Central European) countries the convergence was the basic term, but later the divergence between the East and West has become deeper and wider and its

¹ **Lilla TÓTH**, PhD, is a senior research fellow, at the Centre for Empirical Social Research, CIAS, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary. Contact: lilla.toth@uni-corvinus.hu **György LENGYEL**, PhD, is professor emeritus at Corvinus University of Budapest, where he is the head of the Centre for Empirical Social Research and founding editor of Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy. Contact: gyorgy.lengyel@uni-corvinus.hu **Borbála GÖNCZ** is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Empirical Social Research, CIAS, Corvinus University of Budapest and co-editor of the Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy. Contact: borbala.goncz@uni-corvinus.hu

recognition in the EU has been hopelessly delayed." He states also that after the periods of De-Democratization and Autocratization from the 2020s onwards we are in the De-Europeanization stage which is "offensive" and "conflict-seeking" representing the interests of this newly emerged autocratic system against the EU.

In the 2010 elections, Fidesz won a constitutional two-thirds majority in parliament, and this meant a monopoly of political power. In Hungary's case, this means that "a political force can change the constitution, pass any law - even one requiring a two-thirds majority - on its own, without the need for consultation and consensus with other political forces, and fill the institutions of checks and balances with its own loyalists." (Gado, Kerekes and Magyar 2024, 11).

Three factors made the autocratic breakthrough in 2010 possible. The disproportionate electoral system, with 53% of the vote in 2010 and 44% in 2014, was enough for a two-thirds majority in parliament. Concentration of executive power: the lack of independence of the President of the Republic from the government and the fact that a two-thirds majority in parliament is sufficient to amend the constitution or even adopt a new constitution. All this has allowed the constitution to be constantly adapted to the power and political needs of the moment, and the introduction of a system of government by decree from 2020. The new Fundamental Law was voted by Parliament on 18 April 2011 and has been amended 12 times in the 12 years since then. These amendments have affected more than half of the current 166 sections of the Constitution.

Institutional changes have tended towards the establishment of an electoral autocracy, in order to ensure the irremovability of the incumbent elite. The Constitutional Court, the functioning of the Parliament, the institution of president of the Republic, the court, judiciary, the central state control bodies and the local governments were all affected. Meanwhile many fundamental freedoms were violated (freedom of expression, freedom of information, right of assembly, right of association and property rights) (Gado, Kerekes and Magyar 2024). The latest development regarding the state of rule of law is that in December 2022, European Union institutions suspended and tied to conditions Hungary's access to EU funds under various procedures due to severe breaches of the rule of law and human rights (Amnesty International Hungary et al. 2023). For the period of the Covid epidemic (from March 2020 to February 2022), we will examine how two interlocking tools have reinforced autocratization processes: governing by decree (Soltész and Palotai 2020) and government participation in the dissemination of disinformation.

2 DECREE GOVERNMENT

In most countries, the constitution contains provisions for special cases where, in the interests of efficiency and or speed, the normal legislative process is suspended, and the government legislates and governs without the time-consuming democratic decision-making process. These cases are usually defined in the constitution, also in Hungary (Ministry of Justice 2019), together with the details of the rule by decree. Today, Hungary has had four years of decree government and is likely to continue. It seems that in Hungary's illiberal democracy, the aim of government is to govern by decree, and any pretext is used to do so.

2.1 The legislative history of government by decree

According to Szentes and Vörös (2024) since 2010, the restructuring of the government and the strong position of the Prime Minister have also provided an opportunity to re-politicise professional decisions and the senior levels of public administration. Unlike in the past, the government programme did not have to be voted on, making political accountability of the government impossible. Another instrument facilitating political irresponsibility is the secrecy of government meetings. One of the measures restricting freedom of information was the encryption of government meetings. After 1989, post-transition governments have repeatedly attempted to abolish the documentation of the content of government meetings. As of summer 2018, government meetings are no longer legally audio-recorded, since 2010, this has been done despite a legal requirement not to do so (Eötvös Károly Policy Institution 2018).

Apart from that, the documentation of government meetings is incomplete, the situation is not much better as regards the decisions taken. Only some of the decisions are published in the Hungarian Gazette in a way that is accessible to everyone. Others are either classified or simply not made public. In the first half of 2024, a total of 152 decisions were taken that cannot be disclosed. These include the so-called three thousand decisions, which are officially considered secret. Under the law, they become national classified data - depending on their content, for 10, 20 years, or 30 years with the stamp "Top Secret". The latter classification can be extended twice, so that their content can be kept secret for up to 90 years (Lengyel 2024).

Following this development, the government was granted full powers under the special legal order. The legislative basis for the three states of emergency created by the special legal order was the threat of mass immigration, a state of pandemic health emergency and a state of war emergency (Szentes and Vörös 2024).

From September 2015, the threat of mass immigration gave rise to the proclamation of a state of emergency, which, despite the lack of both constitutional basis and factual conditions, has been renewed every six months by Parliament (by a simple majority) on the proposal of the Government. Last time the Government extended the "state of crisis caused by mass immigration" until 7 September 2024 by Government Decree 47/2024 (4 March 2024), and it is planned to be maintained until next March.

After the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, the reference basis for the exceptional legal regime was doubled with the declaration of an epidemic alert on 11 March 2020. The law on the control of the coronavirus (First Enabling Act), adopted on 30 March 2020, authorises the Government to declare the end of the state of emergency by decree. Parliament may only decide to repeal the law, not directly to end the emergency which is a condition for its repeal. On a combined reading of the two provisions, the Hungarian Parliament has delegated to the Government the power to determine the date of repeal of the Enabling Act. In doing so, the Government has been given a mandate which is essentially open-ended.

On 16 June 2020, the Parliament repealed the law providing the framework for the legislation of regulations, but the following day the Government - based on a law passed the previous day, without any constitutional basis - proclaimed the health crisis, which was not included in the Fundamental Law as a case of

exceptional legal order, and which lasted until 18 June 2021. On 3 November 2021, the Government again declared an epidemic emergency, and on 10 November the Parliament adopted the Second Enabling Act, which, however, also provided for its own expiry after 90 days. On 8 February 2021, the emergency was redeclared and the National Assembly adopted the Third Enabling Act. On 1 January 2022, the Third Enabling Act was extended until 1 June 2022.

The third basis for the special legal order was the state of war, which was introduced on the grounds of the war in Ukraine, and which will be extended by Parliament every six months from 25 May 2022 (most recently until 19 November 2024). In parallel with the migration crisis, the war in Ukraine is now the basis for the special legal order.

Drinóczi (2020, 1) in the early stage of the Covid pandemic claimed that the Hungarian government abused the constitutional emergency regimes: "Hungary could exemplify how to be constitutionally well equipped to deal with emergencies and still able to abuse them ... the abuse and misuse of constitutional emergency regimes, in Hungary, have two layers: the actual abuse of emergency powers, be those extra-constitutional (the "crisis situation caused by mass migration" since 2015) or (partially) non-constitutional (COVID-19 crisis 2020), and the abusive regulation of emergencies and powers (2015, 2016, 2020) by bypassing constitutional procedures and resorting to secrecy, including the non-transparency of decisions and vague drafting."

2.2 How the Hungarian government abused the special legal order during the Covid - pandemic

In the period from 11 March 2020 to 8 February 2021, 651 government decrees referring to emergency situations were published, only some of which were related to the slowing of the epidemic and reducing its socio-economic impact (Soltész and Palotai 2020). Unjustified extension of time and scope was a common feature of decrees of that period, there were decrees which have gone beyond the principle of the temporary nature of the exceptional legal regime and have entered long-term legal relationships. At the other extreme are government decrees which, although they may be related to the emergency, contain provisions which unduly restrict the beneficiaries of the legislation, or which disproportionately restrict fundamental rights. According to experts the already existing regulations would have been enough. Even the part of the measures aimed at epidemic management could have been taken within the framework of the Disaster Prevention Act or the Health Act, without the exceptional authorisation of the Government (Soltész and Palotai 2020). As for the economic impact of the pandemic from the view of corruption researchers (Martin 2021) under the conditions of state capture, during the pandemic, the government has used the extraordinary circumstances to further concentrate its power and extend cronyism. Discrimination against opposition-led local governments has been conspicuous; first the municipalities were deprived of a significant portion of their own revenues (proceeds from the vehicle tax were redirected to the state budget, and the local business tax was halved), after which some were compensated – if they were governed by Fidesz (Petó 2020).

The government has also used the pandemic to unilaterally modify the electoral law and change the constitution (Fundamental Law) for the ninth time since it was passed in 2011. Several government decrees have been adopted to create a legal basis for measures that cannot be linked to the emergency. The most blatant

of the former were the decrees allowing private companies to be placed under state supervision. The so called *Kartonpack* (Domány 2020) decree was an example under which the company's management was immediately dismissed by the government commissioner who took over ownership.

The intensification of cronyism is reflected in the fact that the government has spent more extra funds on sports and churches than on healthcare since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 (Székely 2020). Social transfers to those in need, particularly individuals who lost their jobs due to the crisis, have been very limited. The Covid-19 crisis management by the Hungarian government has favoured companies over workers, and social dialogue has become even more limited (Czifrusz 2021). In 2020 a managing authority, the Hungarian Tourism Agency distributed 230 million euros in support to the sector without any transparency or equal and normative access to resources. The beneficiaries from this scheme have known links to the ruling administration. Further example for rewarding members of the adopted political family is the emergency-related, but unduly narrowed scope, which was the provision of leverage support for sectors important to businesses close to the government, such as wine products or tourism. State support for port business in Balaton and for rural hotel development (170 billion HUF) or for the World Hunting Exhibition (1.67 billion HUF). The reference to the epidemic emergency provided an opportunity to override public procurement rules in favour of companies close to the government. As a consequence of that the government acquired for HUF 300 billion respirators that have been largely unused - and stored or donated abroad for HUF 15 million a month - and have been donated for free, 722 billion for vaccines (there is no data on the purchase of Chinese and Russian vaccines), tests, masks, and built and maintained epidemic hospitals etc., which later became empty.

The economic consequences are severe, despite the stability of the Hungarian economy over the decade leading up to March 2020, cronyism, corruption and serious distortions of the institutional system have prevented Hungary from pursuing inclusive growth (Martin 2021). The state of emergency offered also an excellent opportunity for the government for symbolic and propaganda activities. The government demonstrated alertness and power by ordering of the involvement of the armed forces and the right to use weapons in the context of an epidemic emergency. Reducing transparency and maintaining and increasing secrecy was also characteristic feature of this period. The fight against the EU happened in every possible forms. For a long time, the Government opposed the common European vaccine procurement, which is a sensible step in a health crisis, because of the lack of extra profit that can be outsourced.

Strengthening earlier propaganda against migrants, LGBTQ people and feminists did not cease even during the epidemic. The case of the Iranian students shows that the government has seized every opportunity to continue its anti-migration propaganda and to link migration with the spread of the coronavirus (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2020b). The amendment of the Act on Civil Registration Procedure, based on which gender cannot legally be changed anymore in Hungary. During the pandemic, the government felt it was time to amend Act I of 2010 on Civil Registration, with which they made gender at the time of birth unchangeable in the civil registers. The amendment represents an open attack against the rights of transgender and intersex people, it violates fundamental constitutional rights, and it clearly violates the right to human dignity and the respect for private and family life (Soltész and Palotai 2020). Rejection of the

ratification of the Istanbul Convention, on 5 May 2020, the Parliament also voted for the rejection of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. The related political statement, no. 2/2020. (V.5.) of the Parliament is a symbolic manifestation of the hate campaign that the Hungarian government has been conducting since 2015 against refugees, civil organizations, the EU, the UN and everyone else who criticized their policies (Soltész and Palotai 2020). The legislative solution of punishing the expression of opinion happened by the modification of the scaremongering provisions of the Criminal Code. The bill expanded the definition of scaremongering (Article 337 of the Criminal Code) with a new basic case (Soltész and Palotai 2020).

2.3 Decree government without reason - make the exceptional become the norm

Despite the lack of mass immigration and war in Hungary, the Hungarian government has maintained emergency conditions since 2015, and the decree governance started in 2020 in the wake of the epidemic emergency. Based on the uninterrupted governmental practice of the past years and the lack of political-social protest, it can be concluded that the state of emergency has become the norm. Its legitimacy is unquestioned by nearly half of the electorate, and it has become commonplace as a justification for invoking law-limiting decrees and for sidelining Parliament - the democratic political will. The 'anti-sovereignty' package of laws adopted in December 2023 is the culmination of this process and the beginning of a new era: severe restrictions on fundamental rights, in this case surveillance, or criminal proceedings based on the vague grounds of sovereignty protection, are now possible regardless of any threat. In all these cases, the Fundamental Law is not a limit, but a supporting and referable legal framework.

3 DISINFORMATION - STATE OF AFFAIRS

COVID-19 disinformation campaigns by foreign states, mainly China and Russia, exploited the pandemic to discredit the EU and democratic governance in general. European states such as France and Italy were targeted by disinformation campaigns launched by autocratic regimes to suggest that the latter were more effective and successful in managing the crisis compared to European democracies (Parola 2020). Additionally, disinformation campaigns created misleading narratives such as the EU's alleged lack of assistance to partners and to third countries, highlighting instead the benevolence of China and Russia (Bayer et al. 2021). This prompted the European Commission to publicly identify China and Russia as the main perpetrators of online disinformation. The EU has recognized the pandemic opened the door for disinformation campaigns seeking to undermine European democracies and the credibility of the EU and of national or regional authorities. It also accused Russia and China of "seeking to undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarization and improve their own image in the COVID-19 context" (European Commission 2020). EUvDisinfo (2020b) identified four narratives targeting the EU include:

1. The EU is failing to deal with the pandemic and that the EU is on the verge of collapse. This narrative was disseminated by pro-Kremlin sources and several domestic networks/sources in EU and beyond.
2. The EU is selfish and betrays its own values. This narrative was also disseminated by pro-Kremlin sources and several domestic networks/sources in EU and beyond.

3. Russia and China are responsible powers. Pro-Kremlin media focused on Russian aid delivered to Italy, proclaiming that “Russia is helping Italy and the EU is not”. Pro-Kremlin sources also depicted the Chinese “global project” as superior to the EU. Chinese state-controlled media and social media channels strongly promoted the idea that the Chinese model is superior in tackling COVID-19, while highlighting global expressions of gratitude for Chinese aid delivery, including in Italy.
4. Lastly, the EU is exploiting the crisis to advance its own interest.

In that part of the article, we wanted to explore to what extent these narratives or variants of them could be detected in the media coverage of the COVID-19 in Hungary.

3.1 Disinformation, polarization and media narratives

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). The term fake news however fails to capture the complex problem of disinformation, which involves content that is not completely “fake”, but fabricated information blended with facts, and practices broader than the notion of “news”, such as creating automated accounts used for astroturfing, networks of fake followers, fabricated videos, organized trolling, and visual memes. Additionally, the term fake news has been used by some politicians and their supporters as a tool to dismiss coverage that they find disagreeable (European Commission 2018a). The harms of disinformation include threats to democratic political processes and values, and can specifically target myriad sectors, such as health, science, education, finance and more. The harm of disinformation was also recognized by subsequent instruments of the EU, highlighting that disinformation “erodes trust in institutions and in digital and traditional media, and harms our democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to take informed decisions. Disinformation also often supports radical and extremist ideas and activities. It impairs freedom of expression” (ibid., 1).

Being uncouthly and highly efficient, disinformation has been deployed by state and non-state actors as a key tool for exerting influence (European Commission 2018b). Disinformation intervenes with the democratic order in two ways. First, disinformation dominates and distorts public discourses and corrupts the process of democratic decision-making on central issues of public interest. Second, when disinformation campaigns lead to political success, the political force that won the elections through manipulation might deconstruct the constitutional order of the state (Bayer et al. 2019). Disinformation also increases polarization in society and contributes to lowering trust in mainstream media and institutions (Vériter, Bjola and Koops 2020). One of the indirect effects of disinformation is the tempting of heads 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.

Very often, the narratives promoted by disinformation campaigns exploit pre-existing tensions in society on contentious issues such as migration, crime, the rights of sexual minorities and reproductive rights. Messages could also be inflammatory and provoke fear, disgust, and surprise, or conversely might appear benign, since they are designed to distract the audience from certain issues (Bayer et al. 2019).

Government-owned or government-sponsored media outlets may 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 at least in two different ways. First, partisan media outlets often question 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. As Marwick and Lewis (2017, 22) argue “[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”.

3.2 Populism and disinformation

There are variants of populist ideology, not all of which represent extremism on the political palette, but they can be said to be characterized by anti-establishment rhetoric, undifferentiated reference to the people, pragmatism, and a confrontational and mobilizing approach (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2011; Kriesi 2014; Rooduijn et al. 2019; TAP 2024). Populism may appear both on the left, and on the right. Populist narratives may thus be different according to ideological contexts and more importantly, they may differ depending on whether the party is in opposition or in government. A common feature of populism in opposition is that it thematizes the social problems perceived by many, appearing in such a colour that they are the ones who dare to tell the truth. While anti-establishment rhetoric is strong, the policy vision is narrowed, the thematization is one-sided. The focus of the proposed solutions is mostly on some combination of denial, restitution and discrimination.

Populists in power tend to build upon the supposed charismatic features of the leader, to force political polarization, to strengthen clientelism and weaken independent institutions, often by creating a new constitutional order (Pappas 2019). A study on the effectiveness of epidemic management measures found that populist policies are less consistent, less supportive to minorities and are more open toward radical change than liberal ones (Bartha, Kopasz and Takacs 2020). They tend to circumvent institutional and professional constraints, as well as political and civic participation. They rely more on discursive governance toolkits and tabloid communication panels, more frequently apply divisive narratives.

One of the paradox features of populism is that the main source of its popularity, the credit for anti-establishment political rhetoric may erode when getting into a government position - like Fidesz in Hungary (Körösenyi and Patkós 2017; Ilonszki and Lengyel 2019) - they themselves become part of the establishment. Then they must create or amplify a new image of the enemy, which could mean that the external threat, the EU, the multinational companies and global organizations are cross-targeted, or from the other end: immigrants, foreigners, and disadvantaged minorities. Another strategy is to allude to the existence of a ‘deep state’ of elites controlling the media and finance. Beyond disinformation the old methods of liquidation of freedom of expression and of the press also support the establishment of an authoritarian state. The link between disinformation and populism may appear in at least two ways. The more general

link is that anti-establishment rhetoric of populism tends to undermine epistemic trust (Campbell et al. 2021), that is to question the credibility of science and the media. The other, more specific link has to do with populists in government. Populist national leaders - while creating the image of the enemy - may question the viability and credibility of supranational co-ordination, making supranational institutions target of a blame game.

Before the COVID-19 epidemic, epistemic trust in Hungary was below the EU-average. It was especially true in the case of the trustworthiness of the national media. While majority (53 %) of EU-citizens – and within that more than three-quarters of Scandinavians – trusted the national media, the proportion of this opinion was only 44 % in Hungary (European Commission 2016).

3.3 The frame – the short story of the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary

In this section first we briefly summarize the information about Covid-19, then we describe in more detail the frames of events and conditions of the epidemic in Hungary. As Table 1. shows, the epidemic hit Hungary in March 2020 and vaccination started in December 2020. The most severe wave fell after the start of vaccination. Newly developed Western vaccines have been applied but Chinese and Russian vaccines were also widely used, especially at the beginning of vaccination. Traditional vaccines (Sinopharm, Sputnik V) typically require growing large amounts of infectious viruses and then inactivating them — a process that can take weeks or months. However, modern mRNA vaccines can be quickly designed, tested, and mass produced. The Hungarian data both in terms of mortality and vaccination are one of the worst.

TABLE 1: THE COVID -19 PANDEMIC IN HUNGARY

	HUNGARY
Waves of the pandemic so far	5
The most severe wave	the third (climax 17 April 2021)
Death per 100,000 population	504.76 (the 3 rd worst in the world after Peru and Bulgaria)
First vaccination start day	23 December 2020
Uptake with at least one dose (%)	64.8
Uptake with a complete vaccine series (%)	62.7
Uptake with additional dose (%)	38.3
The vaccines used	Pfizer- Biontech, Moderna, Sputnik V, Astra Zeneca, Sinopharm, Jansen

Source: WHO 2022; John Hopkins University 2024; own compilation.

The first patient to be diagnosed with the Coronavirus in Hungary was on the 4th of March 2020. On 11 March 2020, the government declared a state of emergency (Governmental Decree no. 40/2020). Civil society organisations (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2020a; Eötvös Károly Policy Institute 2020) criticised the government for declaring a state of emergency. They believe the measures necessary to fight the Coronavirus outbreak did not call for this exceptional legal order and that the state of emergency entitles the government to disrespect almost any fundamental right of the citizen.

In March 2020 new form of the prohibition of panic-mongering or spreading of fake news was also introduced and strengthened during the so-called state of emergency during the Covid 19 pandemic in Hungary. The Bill on Protection against the Coronavirus (Bill T/9790) has two pillars of provisions. First, it seeks a parliamentary mandate for the government to rule by decree without a sunset clause or any other provision that would guarantee that Parliament can exercise its role of effective oversight. Second, the law defines two new crimes. Anyone who publicizes false or distorted facts that interfere with the “successful protection” of the public – or that alarm or agitate that public – could be punished

by up to five years in prison. Anyone who interferes with the operation of a quarantine or isolation order could also face a prison sentence of up to five years. Under the circumstances, that media pluralism has been in decline for years in Hungary, and the relationship between the government and the government-critical press became severely hostile in recent days (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2020b) these regulations could be regarded as further potential threat against the freedom of expression and press.

In Hungary the purchase of vaccines, ventilators, masks and other medical equipment lacked the necessary transparency and - in the case of ventilation equipment - later proved to be overpriced, low quality, too close to crony business circles, and not justified quantity (Rádi 2020; Sarkadi Nagy 2021). The topic of vaccines bought from Russia and China was embedded deeply in the renewed disinformation propaganda from Russian and Chinese sources.

Reports in March 2021 stated that Hungary was the first country in the EU to "begin using China's Sinopharm and Russia's Sputnik V vaccines, even as polling showed that public trust in non-EU approved vaccines was low"(Spike 2021). With the original orders depleted, Hungary did not offer Sputnik vaccines anymore as of August 2021, however, Sinopharm vaccines were still available for the country's pioneer third dose vaccination programme. The purchase price for the five million doses of coronavirus vaccines made by Chinese company Sinopharm, was 36 USD for a dose, several times that of Pfizer-BioNtech or AstraZeneca vaccines (Sarkadi Nagy 2021). Nearly a third of the elderly who received vaccine were given Sinopharm, even though the manufacturer itself does not recommend its use for people over 60.

Meanwhile a growing problem among people vaccinated with the Chinese coronavirus vaccine appeared. Many people, especially above 60, did not show adequate immunity in post-vaccination serology testing. In July 2021 the results of two SARS-CoV-2 antibody (often referred to as serology) testing from the Municipality of Budapest and Semmelweis University were published, with Sinopharm being the worst performer in both. At the same time, PM Viktor Orbán announced that a third dose will be available from August. Nonetheless, some people have already managed to get an mRNA vaccine after the seemingly ineffective Chinese one (Szopkó and Szabó 2021).

The government never admitted the low performance of Sinopharm, however, to avoid any further problem it offered the third jab, the booster according to the persons' fancy (About Hungary 2021a). In the polarized public sphere, the issue of vaccination proved to be also dividing. The political opposition was labelled as antivaxxer by the governing party because they repeatedly spoke out against the idea of vaccines not authorised by the EU being used in this country. In the public service media, dominated by government propaganda, the original message of the opposition that they suggest vaccination with any vaccines - except those (Sinopharm and Sputnik V) which are not authorised by the EMA, the EU European Medicines Agency - has not been given a voice. The Hungarian government has given more than 4 million doses to other countries (About Hungary 2022). The type of the donated vaccines either are unknown or Sinopharm (ibid.) and Astra Zeneca which cannot be rolled out in Hungary anymore because of the resistance of the people and their expiry date is not known but supposedly close. At the same time, most of the ventilators that have been purchased for 300 billion HUF were in storage without being used, but the government is also giving them away for free: so far, it has gifted 11.7 billion

forints worth of machines abroad. In the context of the health crisis, the anti-EU disinformation efforts took a new turn, in which the EU was systematically portrayed as overwhelmed by the situation and unable to respond to the needs and calls of its eastern neighbours. When we use “Brussels will not help” search keyword (in Hungarian) on Google, we get 313,000 results. On 27th March 2020 Viktor Orbán prime minister of Hungary in one of his weekly radio-programme (Kossuth Rádió 2020) claimed:

“But you have to see that help is not really coming from here [from the EU]. We got help from the Chinese, and I appealed to the members of the Turkic Council, of which Hungary is a member, for help, and we got it. That is the situation at the moment ... But it is good to know, it is good to see, and we are also aware of the weaknesses in the whole structure of the European Union.”

Besides, in January 2021, Hungary became the first member of the European Union to approve the Sinopharm vaccine, signing a deal for 5 million doses (National Post 2021), PM Viktor Orbán was vaccinated, as a loyalty gesture, with the Sinopharm vaccine on 28 February (Euronews 2021). Then 5.2 million doses were delivered to Hungary by May, fulfilling the contract (Budapest Business Journal 2021). On 21 January 2021, Hungary became the first European Union country to register also the Sputnik shot for emergency use. Even though for this time vaccines from the joint EU procurement were on their way (the first Pfizer jab was delivered on 23 December 2020), it seemed to be crucially important for Orbán to show that he is the saviour type leader. The leader who is bringing the vaccines to Hungary, the one saving the country, and at the same time he could point out that salvation comes from the East, not from Brussels. The discourses such as: “without the Chinese and Russian vaccines we would be in great trouble now” or “Brussels will not help, only China and Russia help” are in complete accord with pro-Kremlin propaganda (EUvsDisinfo 2020a) hammering that the EU bodies look pathetic and helpless (EUvsDisinfo 2019).

The so called „national consultation” is one element of the governmental propaganda tool. Since the consultations are not organised in the form of a public opinion poll or civic discussion, but in the form of a simple political questionnaire, neither the questions nor the way they are evaluated are based on professional aspects of public opinion polling (About Hungary 2024). The methodology of the evaluation of the questionnaires is not known. Experts protested several times (Kettős 2015) against the national consultation; the academics and researchers believe that the national consultation is manipulative, undermines the credibility of public opinion polls and creates a false impression among citizens. Nevertheless, in 2017 the “Let’s stop Brussels!” (European Commission 2017) and in 2021 the 11th national consultation (About Hungary 2021b) also used a billboard campaign as part of the political marketing. The government’s political advertisement campaign applied emojis to call on people to fill out the newest ‘National Consultation’ survey. Following a short question, an emoji hints at what perhaps the government wants to see in reaction. Most billboards deal with George Soros, Brussels and the EU, migration, and “sexual propaganda”.

As it has already been mentioned the Brussels “topic” started earlier, the Orbán government wanted to “stop Brussels” already in 2017. In present Hungary, in the public debate Brussels is used as an eponym of the European Union; the empire, the oppressor, the “we know who”, our enemy, which is the main threat to our sovereignty. Based on that observation we decided to analyse those

articles and news items which includes the following keywords at the same time: EU or European Union, pandemic, and Brussels. Disinformation as part of the manifested Euroscepticism in the mainstream media in Hungary occurred very often compared with the scientific disinformation. The findings of a research (Gyóri, Krekó and Istrate 2020) show that the Hungarian nationalistic disinformation narratives are unique for at least three reasons: 1) China was depicted more as a friend than a foe, 2) anti-science narratives were not part of the mainstream, and 3) Covid-scepticism did not become widespread.

3.4 Methods and sample

The methodological approach in this study was qualitative with a double step method, content analysis, firstly, and critical discourse analysis secondly, that allowed to explore the main issue: to what extent the four narratives detected by EUvsDisinfo or some of them could be perceived in the media coverage of the COVID-19 in Hungary. EUvsDisinfo is the flagship project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force. It was established in 2015 to better forecast, address, and respond to the Russian Federation's ongoing disinformation campaigns affecting the European Union, its Member States, and countries in the shared neighbourhood.

- How does media coverage reflect the EU is failing to deal with the pandemic and that the EU is on the verge of collapse
- How does media coverage reflect the EU is selfish and betrays its own values
- How does media coverage reflect Russia and China as responsible powers supporting European countries.
- How does media coverage reflect the EU is exploiting the crisis to advance its own interest.

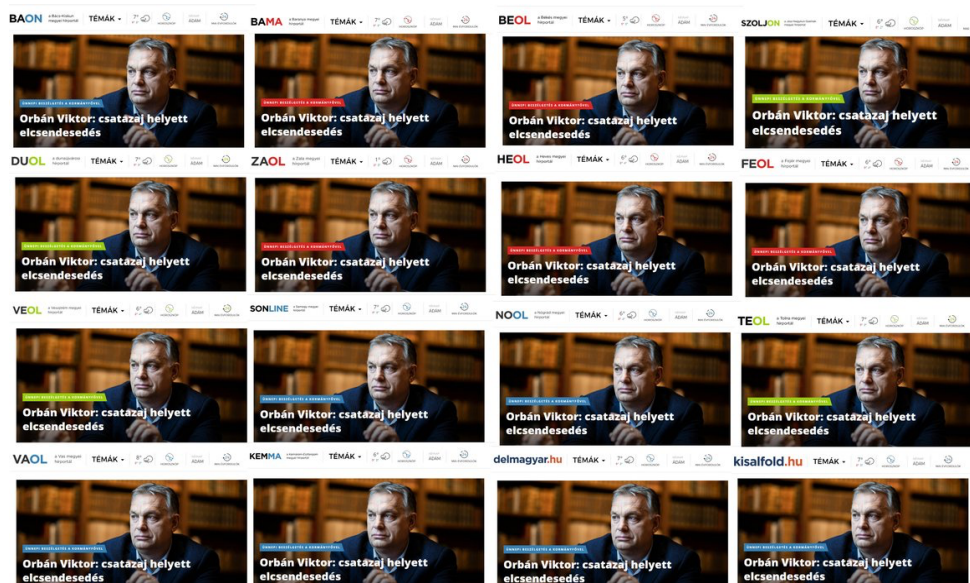
Regarding sample selection it included the following steps: 1) chronological period of study: from July 2021 to February 2022; and 2) media selection: a total of six Hungarian media outlets were selected, four press media and two TVs (origo.hu, magyarnemzet.hu, nepszava.hu, hvg.hu, RTL and MTV1). News sample selection from media outlets during the examined period (between July 2021 and February 2022) were selected in a two-step-process: 1) Capturing all news published by media outlets related to EU, European Union and Brussels; 2) Filtering by keywords (coronavirus, pandemic, covid) all pieces related were included in the sample of study. As a result of this process there were 459 pieces to analyse.

3.5 Results of the media analysis

During the examined period (between July 2021 and February 2022) there were an average 100 related items per month. We focused on those where the keywords were not just mentioned but acted as part of a discourse. Because in Hungary this time was the pre-election period, and the enemy creation or blaming discourses often united the whole range of enemies; Brussels, liberals, the declining west, and the political opposition often fell in the same item, but the discourse dealt with the opposition not Brussels. When ironically describing anti-EU propaganda, Brussels is used not only as a noun but also as a verb as to Brussels (meaning condemns, accuses or blames Brussels, i.e. the EU). Using the items (news from the selected media outlets), we identified the following discourses which would be elaborated later: Discourses on the EU failure to manage the pandemic; the existence of diabolic or an evil plan ruin Europe; Contrary to the EU, Hungary is doing better; the EU is selfish and betrays its

values; China and Russia are doing better; and The EU is exploiting the crisis to advance its own interest. In Hungary the public service media is under governing party influence, and it is considered as the mouthpiece of the government propaganda. In the independent media outlets, the anti-EU propaganda discourses also occur as quotation or in ironic form. The pro-government origo.hu, the magyarnemzet.hu, the MTV1 introduce the same discourses with the very same wording and repeat it exhaustively. As you can see in the picture below, the government's media content is centrally defined and identical across the board.

PICTURE 1: THE PHOTO OF THE P.M. IN DIFFERENT COUNTY NEWSPAPERS



Source: Szabad Pécs.

These are supposed to be independent county papers. Their political content is all produced in the Mediaworks central editorial office. After it turned out semi-officially that the Sinopharm is not effective for a quarter of people over sixty, the “China is good” discourses vanished. After the last peak of the pandemic, EU-related discourses, instead of pandemic management, started to focus on disputes over the allocation of the part of the recovery fund to Hungary. The EU Commission during the prolonged negotiation requested anticorruption measures and more transparency from the Hungarian government, while in the discourses of the government the EU was blamed for making political instead of policy decisions related to the so-called child protection law (in which the protection of children from paedophiles is mixed with homophobia). From the 24th of February 2022 the topic of the pandemic disappeared entirely and handed over its place to the Ukraine war crisis. The approaching election day on 3rd of April, with the communication turbulence in the Hungarian government (the earlier Putin-friendly behaviour under the circumstances needed some explanation) filled the media spaces.

3.5.1 The EU failure discourses

These discourses, appeared in the pro-government media (which overlap with the public service media in present Hungary), and are often intertwined with the “In contrast, Hungary performs better” and “Russia and China are good” discourses. In these cases, the EU is depicted as slow, unorganized, underperforming entity, blamed for not providing enough vaccine, masks, or ventilator. The EU in this context is guilty not only for the belated initial reactions

at the beginning of the pandemic but for the lack of the quick recovery, or the lack of community funds for recovery. The reports on rebel and brave Hungary who decided to buy vaccines from elsewhere (from China and Russia) are suitable to strengthen both the image of effective, well-organized and generous China and Russia and point out that the EU is starting to fall into chaos. The actual situation and chance of Chinese and Russian citizens has never been discussed. From European cities there were news about aggressive demonstrations against epidemiological measures which emphasised the brutality of police. For the same reason the Hungarian “national consultation” became part of the Covid-related discourses. Using this topic, it was possible to show that Hungary performs better, because instead of oppressing the people (as other countries do) Hungarian government asks for the people’s opinion and will act accordingly. The very last national consultation was about the recovery after Covid pandemic. The media, the national billboard campaign and the questions from the consultation questionnaire (About Hungary 2021b) show that the topic of the pandemic was suitable (at least for the government) to keep in focus the old discourses on migration: the old enemies – Brussels, Soros and the Saviour: Hungarian government (performing better) protecting the borders of Europe.

In the summer of 2021, Budapest hosted a few mass events: the World Hunting Exhibition, the European Football Championship and the Eucharistic Congress. In “the EU is failure and Hungary performs better” discourses it had been often mentioned that it would have been a summer of restrictions for Hungarians and events would have been cancelled due to the slow pace of vaccine procurement in Brussels, but because of the help of China and Russia Hungary was able to organize these events while other EU countries could not remove the restrictions. Critics of these events, who thought that the government should not have taken the health risk with these events, were blamed with anti-Christianity or being against the joys of “normal people” (football and hunting).

3.5.2 *The diabolic plan – danger discourses*

In these discourses the future of the EU is apocalyptic – this is the EU failure in future tense – and it is a consequence of an evil plan. Sometimes, it is only superficially related to the topic of the pandemic. Pandemic only serves as a gloomy background to start a lengthy jeremiad about the future of Europe and the world. It often starts with claiming that the European Union is facing dangerous times: pandemics and migration flows will determine the most important global political and economic developments. In that way the topic of pandemic and migration are interlinked, and it is a solid ground to start to string up the rest:

“The EU's role in the world economy, in industrial and technological innovation, is shrinking. The continent has been hit by a financial crisis, a migration crisis and then the coronavirus epidemic, while the Eurozone's foundations are cracking and the fiscal and public finance situation in the southern Member States is deplorable, not to mention demographic decline, one of the main causes of all the problems. First, the validity of Creation, the Christian parable, was questioned on the grounds of rationality and the fact that what the human mind cannot understand, measure or experience does not exist. Doubt about ancient truths has become the source of modern knowledge. After the trend to doubt God, came the spread of scepticism about the importance of nations, of the 'love of place': that our natural environment, our ancestors, their customs, our linguistic-cultural

tradition that derives from them, is a recent construction, a romantic fantasy that is now time to be left behind in the face of the global goals of an increasingly unified Humanity.” – (Szánthó 2021)

Sometime the danger is the EU itself when for example, the number of migrants arriving increases, and - according to the discourse - mandatory resettlement quotas are repeatedly brought up by NGOs and the Brussels bureaucracy. But even in these hard time, the Hungarian government resists and still does not agree with the plan for mandatory distribution. The childless western couples, which have given up having children of their own are also the part of the general danger, because their world is no longer biologically self-sustaining, so they must bring in people from outside – and with that, we are at the topic of dangerous migration. And in the extended discourses migrants mean health hazard because they spread the coronavirus. In these discourses there are also political forces, Brussels bureaucrats, left-wing liberal groups, NGO networks and media that are stirring up ideological conflicts that threaten to bring down the EU.

3.5.3 “In contrast, Hungary performs better”

In these flattering discourses Hungary is months ahead of Europe in terms of vaccination or re-opening. The success of the vaccination programme can also be largely attributed to the government's timely recognition, before the misguided purchase of the vaccine from Brussels, that it should not rely only on the European Union, but also open to the East. From the Autumn 2021 the Hungarian economy has been regarded as already outperforming its pre-pandemic level, while most EU countries have yet to do so. Selected statistics were quoted to show how Hungarian people were satisfied compared with less happy EU counterparts. In the success reports the suitable indicators were chosen carefully: the number of Covid death or the excess number of deaths per 100,000 were mentioned only in the periods when it was better than the EU average, or the Central-European average, or the Visegrad countries' average.

There were discourses praising the “wise decision” on the part of the Hungarian government to place the hospitals under military administration, reporting with appreciation on “calm governance” contributed significantly to the smooth implementation of restrictions and the subsequent restart of the economy in Hungary. The Hungarian state “went to war” and saved the country: thanks to this that we have not seen images such as those from Bergamo, Portugal or Romania – claims these discourses.

3.5.4 “The EU is selfish and betrays its own values” discourses

Reports on demonstrations against pandemic measures in the EU often concluded that despite the reportedly brutal dispersal of the demonstration there were no international repercussions, which regarded as an example of applying double standard and this way betrayal of basic values. The major example of the alleged betrayal of the basic EU values which related to the pandemic is the case of the non- accepted Recovery and Resilience Plan of Hungary (European Commission 2021). Hungary submitted its recovery plan on 12th May 2021. According to the general rule if had not been any obstacles Hungary would have got the fund by now. But because of the unsolved problems in the plan, which were: strengthening the anti-corruption framework, including by improving prosecutorial efforts and access to public information, the negotiations were prolonged and has not been finalized until now. The Commission says that EU funds to Hungary are withheld due to need to strengthen anti-corruption framework. At the same time Hungarian government

and Fidesz, the governing party claim that the EU Commission is acting according to its political biases. They accuse the Commission of judging on political bases because after the Hungarian parliament passed amendments to its child protection law in June 2021, which European Union institutions said was discriminatory against LGBTQ people, the negotiations on Hungarian Recovery Plan was prolonged. The two events (the condemnation of the so-called Child Protection Act in the EU Parliament - because of its homophobic nature and because it conflates homosexuality with paedophilia - and the rejection of the recovery plan) were linked in the discourses of political actors, according to their interests. As of June 2021, the EU-critical discourse, while still starting from the Covid crisis, as the recovery fund is intended to mitigate the damage caused by it, has grown into an independent discourse, with EU critique at its core. According to this discourse, the EU is biased (it has already granted the fund to other countries), persecuting, and punishing Hungary (for not participating in the LGBTQ canon) and thus interfering in its internal affairs and violating Hungary's sovereignty. This discourse allows the silencing in public spaces and in the media of the fundamental objection that has been raised about the lack of guarantees against corruption in the Hungarian recovery plan.

3.5.5 "Russia and China perform better – they are good" discourses

These are the discourses very often intertwined with "Hungary performs better". Without the Eastern vaccines and timely government decisions Hungary would not have been able to perform better and save the people. The Russian and Chinese vaccines which were imported into the country made Hungarians among the first to have access to the life-saving vaccine. Concerning China there were descriptions on the Eastern world where new state and digital giants are rising, economic and military centres are gradually shifting eastwards. This picture was contrasted with the neo-Marxist-inflated liberalism which is waging a (self-)murderous war against its own home, Western civilisation. As it already has been mentioned in the introduction section there were problems with the effectiveness of the Chinese vaccine among elderly people. From the time it turned out, these discourses faded.

3.5.6 "The EU is exploiting the crisis to advance its own interest" discourses

These discourses were very rare, reference to business consideration were embedded in a wider power context where the – otherwise rational - centralisation of the procurement of protective equipment and other equipment will increase the value of the commission. Because of that the Member States become devalued, and some Member States have been badly off in the distribution of vaccines. In that way Brussels wants to use epidemic management to increase its power under the guise of the Health Union. Nevertheless, the issue of pandemic management together with other health issues belonged to member state level in the EU.

3.6 Discussion

Hungary can be categorized by highly polarized political and media landscapes. This is clearly reflected in the analysis of media discourses on the EU management of Covid-19 crisis. Our analysis suggests that the Hungarian pro-government media outlets embraced all the disinformation narratives propagated by Russia and China and the four narratives detected by EUvsDisinfo. The European integration project is at the heart of the political polarization in Hungary. Orbán's rule of Hungary has been marked with defiance and criticism of the EU, its institutions, and its values (Bayer 2020). The clash with the EU is

often structured around identity-based arguments, which tend to challenge the values of the EU. Challenging the liberal democratic governance fostered by the EU is exemplified in an article published by Orbán himself in Hungary's conservative newspaper *Magyar Nemzet*, where he wrote that "The doctrine that 'democracy can only be liberal' — that golden calf, that monumental fetish — has been toppled" (Orbán 2021). This antagonism culminated with Orbán launching public campaigns against EU institutions, such as the 'Defend Hungary' campaign launched in 2018 against a European Parliament resolution that raised concerns about systemic rule of law problems in Hungary (Bayer and La Baume 2018). Or a 2019 a billboard campaign funded by Hungarian taxpayers, accusing the then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and the Hungarian-American businessman George Soros, of pushing migration plans that pose a threat to Hungary's national security (Bayer 2020).

While political polarization over the EU is present in other EU countries, it remains exceptionally visible in the Hungarian media. This could be explained by the governmental control of the media. The election of Orbán had a detrimental impact on the media landscape in Hungary. The second Orbán government approved a series of amendments to the country's media laws to control the media landscape in the country. These amendments included a law to set up the National Media and Info-communications Authority (NMHH) and the Media Council, responsible for regulating the Hungarian media market, including media acquisitions. The Media Council, controlled by members loyal to the ruling Fidesz party, allowed the expansion of pro-government oligarchs in the Hungarian media sector, who use their media outlets into government mouthpieces. Likewise, the public media was also taken over by Fidesz loyalists. Today, the Hungarian ruling party has a massive number of media outlets under its direct or indirect control, and a propaganda machine.

The Hungarian government-controlled media itself become 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 public service media perform this function. Such media outlets spread pro-Kremlin narratives. According to the Oxford internet Institute "Pro-government disinformation matches Kremlin narratives without any direct influence from Russia" (Bradshaw and Howard 2018, 29). This is not limited to Russian-friendly messages, but it also includes attempts to portray the EU as weak and unviable, hence undermining trust in the EU institutions in general (Chatterjee and Krekó 2020). It is not surprising, then, that the narratives detected by EUvDisinfo we embraced in the pro-government Hungarian media. It should be emphasized that home-grown disinformation can be much more effective since local governments have more information on their own population's preferences and needs (Szicherle and Krekó 2021). However, it is important to highlight that our study did not focus on social media. In social media, disinformation narratives do not need a local interlocutor to reach local audiences.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper we intended to investigate the variants of Covid-related anti-EU disinformation in Hungary and how these have reinforced institutional changes towards autocratization. To this purpose we conducted discourse analysis of six online sources (TVs and newspapers) on the period between July 2021 and

February 2022 and linked them to the institutional context of the country. Populism is present in Hungary in opposition and in government as well. The anti-establishment rhetoric of populism in opposition is a breeding ground of epistemic distrust. Although it appears in politics –in the Hungarian *Mi Hazánk*– it leaves little trace in mainstream media as its main field is social media. Once in power populists need to modify anti-establishment rhetoric. After Fidesz came to power in Hungary with two-third majority in 2010, PM Orbán's explicit aim was to establish an illiberal regime and proclaimed the policy of opening toward the East. Central to this ideology was to fight against threatening external forces, multinationals, migrants, and the EU. They changed the constitution, the election law and media law, gaining significant media dominance. Brussels became the target of a blame game, and this has been strongly reflected in Covid-related discourses. In this the PM criticised not so much the selfishness, but the inertia of the EU, embedded in the declining West narrative, contrasted with Russian and Chinese accomplishments and efficiency.

The state of institutions and elites of Hungary can explain the situation. The media is polarized in many countries, but in the Hungarian case this polarization is dangerously asymmetric in terms of resources, and democratic institutions are severely weakened. Political elites are in ideologically based fierce competition, and they do not seem to agree on the rules either. The EU is a negative, dividing point between federalist and sovereigntist positions in the Hungarian scene, where the governing elite's hard sovereigntist discourse prevails. Most of the population in Hungary is committed pro-EU, so there are obvious limitations of EU-criticism on behalf of domestic elites. This was especially true before the 2022 elections, so the strong EU-criticism on behalf of the Hungarian government turned into a pragmatic sovereigntist position in the second half of the period under review. The relative strength of propaganda and disinformation is also shown by the results on the degree of institutional trust. Between 2019 and 2021, trust in Hungarian institutions (parliament, government, politicians) decreased in Hungary (by 6-8%), while the initially higher (62%) trust in the European Commission remained unchanged in the years of the Covid epidemic (Kukovič 2022). When the topic of the epidemic was suppressed by the war that the Russian president started against Ukraine, the combat-rhetoric of the Hungarian PM was immediately ceased. Governance by decree and the use of Russian disinformation sources are now part of the peace rhetoric that offers protection against the threat of war.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has received funding from the European Union's H2020 Research and Innovation programme under grant agreement no 101004534 – Mediatized EU – H2020 – SC6 – Transformations - 2020.

REFERENCES

- Ágh, Attila. 2022. "The third wave of autocratization in East-Central Europe." *Journal of Comparative Politics* 15 (2): 72–87.
- About Hungary. 2021a. "CMO: Hungary's medicines authority grants licences for two more vaccines." 23 March 2021. Available at <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/cmo-hungary-s-medicines-authority-grants-licences-for-two-more-vaccines>.

- About Hungary. 2021b. "Here's the latest national consultation questionnaire" 1 July 2021. Available at <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/here-s-the-latest-national-consultation-questionnaire>.
- About Hungary. 2022. "COVID vaccine". Available at <https://abouthungary.hu/tags/covid-vaccine>.
- About Hungary. 2024. "National Consultation." Available at <https://abouthungary.hu/tags/national-consultation>.
- Amnesty International Hungary et al. 2023. "Assessment of compliance by Hungary with conditions to access European Union funds." Available at <https://www.ekint.org/bejegyzes/2023-04-27/az-unios-jogallamisagi-feltetelek-tobb-mint-felet-nem-teljesitette-a-kormany-sajtokozelemeny>.
- Bartha, Attila, Marianna Kopasz and Judit Takács. 2020. A populisták jobban csinálják? A koronavírus-járvány közpolitikai tanulságai: járványkezelés az európai liberális és populista demokráciákban. In *Vírusba öltött politika: Világjárvány és politikatudomány*, eds. Körösenyi, András, Andrea Szabó and Balázs Böcskei, 89–108. Budapest: Napvilág.
- Bayer, Judit, Natalija Bitiukova, Petra Bard, Judit Szakacs, Alberto Alemanno and Erik Uszkiewicz. 2019. *Disinformation and propaganda – impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States*. Brussels: European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies.
- Bayer, Judit, Bernd Holznagel, Katarzyna Lubiniec, Adela Pintea, Josephine B. Schmitt, Judit Szakács and Erik Uszkiewicz. 2021. *Disinformation and propaganda: impact on the functioning of the rule of law and democratic processes in the EU and its Member States - 2021 update*. Brussels: European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies.
- Bayer, Lili. 2020. "How Orbán broke the EU — and got away with it." *Politico*, 24 September 2020. Available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-viktor-orban-broke-the-eu-and-got-away-with-it-hungary-rule-of-law>.
- Bayer, Lili and de Maia La Baume. 2018. "'Defend Hungary' campaign launched after European vote." *Politico*, 19 September 2018. Available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/defend-hungary-campaign-launched-after-european-vote-viktor-orban>.
- Bradshaw, Samantha and Howard, N. Philippe. 2018. Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation. *Online Supplement to Working Paper 2018.1*, Oxford Internet Institute. Available at http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/07/ct_appendix.pdf.
- Budapest Business Journal. 2021. "Hungary takes last delivery of Sinopharm vaccine." 21 May 2021. Available at <https://bbj.hu/business/industry/pharma/hungary-takes-last-delivery-of-sinopharm-vaccine>.
- Campbell, Chloe, Michal Tanzer, Rob Saunders, Thomas Booker, Elizabeth Allison, Elizabeth Li, Patrick Luyten and Peter Fonagy. 2021. "Development and validation of a self-report measure of epistemic trust." *PLOS ONE* 16 (4): e0250264.
- Chatterjee, Sohini and Péter Krekó. "State-sponsored disinformation in Western democracies is the elephant in the room." *Euronews*, 6 July 2020.
- Czirfusz, Márton. 2021. *Covid-19 crisis management and the changing situation of workers in Hungarian manufacturing. Labour and social justice*. Budapest: Fridrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Domány, András. 2020. "Azonnali hatállyal állami felügyelet alá vonták a Kartonpackot." *hvg.hu*, 17 April 2020. Available at https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20200417_Azonnali_hatallyal_allami_felugyelet_ala_vontak_a_Kartonpackot.
- Drinoczi, Tímea. 2020. "Hungarian Abuse of Constitutional Emergency Regimes -Also in the Light of the COVID-19 Crisis." *MTA Law Working Papers 13*. Available at <https://log.tk.mta.hu/Mtalwp/Hungarian-Abuse-of-Constitutional-Emergency-Regimes-Also-in-the-Light-of-the-Covid-19-Crisis>.
- Eötvös Károly Policy Institute. 2018. "Kormányulések nyomok nélkül – immár a tartalom is eltűnik a titkosítás mögül (elemzés)." 4 July 2018. Available at <https://www.ekint.org/az-allam-atlathatosaga-informacioszabadsag/2018-07-04/kormanyulesek-nyomok-nelkul-immar-a-tartalom-is-eltunik-a-titkositas-mogul-elemzes>.

- Eötvös Károly Policy Institute. 2020. "Coronavirus: Risks associated to the introduction of the state of emergency." *Facebook*, 11 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/eotvoskarolyintezet/>.
- Euronews. 2021. "Hungary's PM Viktor Orbán vaccinated against COVID with Chinese Sinopharm vaccine." *Euronews*, 28 February 2021. Available at <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/02/28/hungary-s-pm-viktor-orban-vaccinated-against-covid-with-chinese-sinopharm-vaccine>.
- European Commission. 2016. *Eurobarometer 452. Media pluralism and democracy*. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/image/document/2016-47/sp452-summary_en_19666.pdf.
- European Commission. 2017. "Stop Brussels": European Commission responds to Hungarian national consultation. 27 April 2017. Available at https://commission.europa.eu/publications/stop-brussels-european-commission-responds-hungarian-national-consultation_en.
- European Commission. 2018a. "Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: report of the independent high level Group on fake news and online disinformation." *EC Publications Office*. Available at <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/0156>.
- European Commission. 2018b. "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic, and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. Tackling online disinformation: A European Approach." *COM 236 final*. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0236>.
- European Commission. 2020. "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic, and Social Committee of the Regions. Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right." *JOIN 8 final*. Available at [https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j4nvke1fm2yd1u0_i9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vl9erm2pi7zz/v=s7z/f=/join\(2020\)8_en.pdf](https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j4nvke1fm2yd1u0_i9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vl9erm2pi7zz/v=s7z/f=/join(2020)8_en.pdf).
- European Commission 2021. "Hungary's recovery and resilience plan." Available at https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility/country-pages/hungarys-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en.
- EUvsDisinfo. 2019. "5 Common Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Narratives." 2 April 2019. Available at <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/5-common-pro-kremlin-disinformation-narratives/>.
- EUvsDisinfo. 2020a. "DISINFO: The coronavirus puts EU's existence into question." 13 March 2020. Available at <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-coronavirus-puts-eus-existence-into-question/>.
- EUvsDisinfo. 2020b. "EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19 Pandemic." 1 April 2020. Available at <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic>.
- Gado, Gabor, Zsuzsa Kerekes and Bálint Magyar. 2024. "A joguralomtól az uralom jogáig. A jogállam felszámolása Magyarországon 2010–2024." Budapest: CEU Demokrácia Intézet.
- Garrett, R. Kelly, Brian E. Weeks and Rachel L. Neo. 2016. "Driving a wedge between evidence and beliefs: How online ideological news exposure promotes political misperceptions." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21 (5): 331–348.
- Győri, Lóránt, Péter Krekó and Dominik Istrate. 2020. *Disinformation narratives and strategies related to the pandemic's first wave in Hungary and the CEE region*. Budapest: Political Capital and Consulting Institute.
- Hungarian Helsinki Committee. 2020a. "Unlimited power is not the panacea." 23 March 2020. Available at <https://helsinki.hu/en/unlimited-power-is-not-the-panacea/>.
- Hungarian Helsinki Committee. 2020b. "Why was an Iranian student deported from Hungary?" 4 April 2020. Available at <https://helsinki.hu/en/why-was-an-iranian-student-deported-from-hungary-video/>.
- Ilonszki, Gabriella and György Lengyel. 2019. Irresponsible Elites in Opposition and Government: The Hungarian Case. In *The Contested Status of Political Elites. At the*

- Crossroads*, eds. Vogel, Lars, Axel Salheiser and Ronald Gebauer, 184–202. New York: Routledge.
- Johns Hopkins University of Medicine. 2024. *Data on Coronavirus*. Available at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.
- Körösi, András and Veronika Patkós. 2017. "Liberal and Illiberal Populism. The Leadership of Berlusconi and Orbán." *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 8 (3): 315–337.
- Kettős, Mércse. 2015. "Közvélemény-kutatók, társadalomtudósok tiltakoznak a nemzeti konzultáció ellen." 30 April 2015. Available at https://kettosmerce.blog.hu/2015/04/30/kozvelemeny-kutatok_tarsadalomtudosok_tiltakoznak_a_nemzeti_konzultacio_ellen.
- Kossuth Rádió. 2020. "Jó reggelt." 27 March 2020. Available at <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-a-kossuth-radio-jo-reggelt-magyarorszag-cimu-musoraban-13/>.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter. 2014. "The Populist Challenge." *West European Politics* 37 (2): 361–378.
- Kukovič, Simona. 2022. "How novel coronavirus has shaken public trust in decision making institutions: Comparative analysis of selective union members." *Journal of Comparative Politics* 15 (1): 9–19.
- Lengyel, Tibor. 2024. "Orbánék majdnem minden kormányülésen hoztak olyan döntést, amelyet akár 2114-ig is titokban tarthatnak." *HVG360*, 27 August 2024. Available at https://hvg.hu/360/20240827_Orban-kormany-titkos-dontes-titkositas-haromezres-kormanyules-kormanyhatarozat.
- Martin, József Péter. 2021. "Amid the Pandemic, It's Now Corruption That 'Performs Better' in Hungary." *BIRN Balkan Insight*, 24 February 2021. Available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/02/24/amid-the-pandemic-its-now-corruption-that-performs-better-in-hungary/>.
- Marwick, Alice and Rebecca Lewis. 2017. "Media manipulation and disinformation online." *Data & Society Research Institute*. Available at https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline-1.pdf.
- Ministry of Justice. 2019. Fundamental Law, Article 53, State of emergency. 13 December 2019.
- Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2011. *Voices of the Peoples: Populism in Europe and Latin America Compared*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame.
- National Post. 2021. "Hungary signs deal for Chinese Sinopharm's COVID-19 vaccine, first in EU." 29 January 2021. Available at <https://nationalpost.com/pmnh/health-pmn/hungary-signs-deal-for-chinese-sinopharms-covid-19-vaccine-first-in-eu>.
- Orbán, Viktor. 2021. "Együtt újra sikerülni fog." *Magyar Nemzet*, 21 September 2021. Available at <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2020/09/egyutt-ujra-sikerulni-fog>.
- Pappas, S. Takis. 2019. "Populists in power." *Journal of Democracy* 30 (2):70–84.
- Parola, Fabio. 2020. "Europe's infowar: China, Russia and COVID-19 disinformation." Available at https://www.treccani.it/magazine/agenda/articoli/scenari-internazionali/Parola_Infowar.
- Pető, Péter. 2020. "Miután csökkentette az iparűzési adót a kormány, milliárdos támogatást adott a fideszes városoknak karácsonyra." *24.hu*, 24 December 2020. Available at <https://24.hu/belfold/2020/12/24/helyi-iparuzesi-ado-fidesz-orban-ellenzek/>.
- Rádi, Antónia. 2020. "Hungarian businessman connected to the Azerbaijani Laundromat makes a fortune in the ventilator business." *ATLATZSO*, 5 November 2020. Available at <https://english.atlatzso.hu/2020/11/05/hungarian-businessman-connected-to-the-azerbaijani-laundromat-makes-a-fortune-in-the-ventilator-business>.
- Rooduijn, Matthijs, Andrea L.P. Pirro, Daphne Halikiopoulou, Caterina Froio, Stijn van Kessel, Sarah L. de Lange, Cas Mudde and Paul Taggart. 2023. "The PopuList 3.0: An Overview of Populist, Far-left and Far-right Parties in Europe." Available at www.popu-list.org.
- Sarkadi Nagy, Márton. 2021. "Smoke and mirrors obscure broker in Hungary's overpriced purchase of Chinese vaccines" *ATLATZSO*, 23 March 2021. Available at <https://english.atlatzso.hu/2021/03/23/smoke-and-mirrors-obscure-broker-in-hungarys-overpriced-purchase-of-chinese-vaccines>.

- Soltész, Anikó and János Palotai. 2020. *Concentration of Power Salvaged - Coronavirus Stocktaking - Assessing the Crisis Management of the Hungarian Government from the Perspective of Constitutional Law*. Budapest: Eötvös Károly Policy Institution.
- Spike, Justin. 2021. "Hungary emerges as an EU vaccination star amid surging cases." *Associated Press*, 12 March 2021. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/europe-budapest-coronavirus-pandemic-china-coronavirus-vaccine-59d7eaf2dfbb47fea28c004b9da13727>.
- Szánthó Miklós. 2021. "Genderkufárkodás. A gyermekvédelem „új”, magyar ügye „csak” egyhangos, de annál élesebb felkiáltás: eddig és ne tovább!" *Magyar Nemzet*, 2 July 2021. Available at <https://magyarnemzet.hu/velemenyt/2021/07/genderkufarkodas>.
- Székely, Sarolta. 2020. "Állami pénzpumpa a válság idején: 140 milliárd forint ment sportra." *Privátbankár.hu*, 7 December 2020. Available at <https://mfor.hu/cikkek/makro/allami-penzpumpa-a-valsag-idejen-140-milliard-forint-ment-sportra.html>.
- Szentes, Ágota and Imre Vörös. 2024. Kormány, rendeleti kormányzás. In *A jogállam felszámolása Magyarországon 2010–2024*, eds. Gado, Gábor, Zsuzsa Kerekes and Bálint Magyar, 16–22. Budapest: CEU Demokrácia Intézet.
- Szicherle, Péter and Péter Krekó. 2021. *Disinformation in Hungary: From fabricated news to discriminatory legislation*. Brussels: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.
- Szopkó, Zita and Krisztián Szabó. 2021. "Sinopharm vaccinees speak out about getting their third shot under the counter." *ATLATZSO*, 19 July 2021. Available at <https://english.atlatszo.hu/2021/07/19/this-vaccine-would-have-gone-in-the-trash-sinopharm-vaccinees-speak-out-about-getting-their-third-shot>.
- TAP. 2024. Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index. Available at <https://populismindex.com/report/>.
- Vériter, L. Sophie, Corneliu Bjola and Joachim A. Koops. 2020. "Tackling COVID-19 disinformation: internal and external challenges for the European Union." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 15 (4): 569–582.
- Vilmer, Jean-Baptista Jeangene, Alexandre Escorcía, Marine Guillaume and Janaina Herrera. 2018. "Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies." Report by the Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) of the Ministry for the Armed Forces. Available at https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/information_manipulation_rvb_cle838736.pdf.
- WHO. 2022. Covid-19 Dashboard. Available at <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/cases?n=c>.



COVID-19 KOT ORODJE ZA DEMOKRATIČNE INSTITUCIJE IN VREDNOTE: PRIMER MADŽARSKE

Epidemija Covida19 na Madžarskem je prispevala k zatonu demokracije na dva načina. Neposredni učinek je bila razglasitev izrednih razmer s strani vlade in prehod na vladanje z dekreti (od pomladi 2020 do zdaj, najprej v zvezi z epidemijo, nato kasneje v povezavi z vojno v Ukrajini). Posredni učinek je bil širjenje dezinformacij o EU in domači politični opoziciji v kontekstu epidemije. Dezinformacije spodkopavajo zaupanje javnosti v institucije, vključno s samimi mediji, in predstavljajo grožnjo demokratičnim vrednotam in političnim procesom. Članek na podlagi podatkov iz mednarodnih empiričnih raziskav prikazuje proces zloma demokracije in spremljajočih legitimacijskih medijskih diskurzov.

Ključne besede: Covid-19; dezinformacije; mediji; EU; polarizacija; populizem.