

CASIMIR PULASKI FOUNDATION



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# MITIGATING THE UKRAINE-RELATED DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS' IMPACT ON HUNGARIAN SOCIETY

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PULASKI POLICY PAPER



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## Mitigating the Ukraine-Related Disinformation Campaigns' Impact on Hungarian Society

### Executive Summary

Hungarian society's predominantly negative view of Ukraine is largely a result of disinformation campaigns orchestrated by Russia and the Hungarian government. These campaigns exploit public anxieties about economic hardship, erode empathy, and capitalize on a lack of understanding of Ukraine. To counter these harmful narratives, a multifaceted strategy is needed that includes education, fact-based dissemination, and fostering dialogue. By addressing these issues, we can create a more informed and compassionate public opinion that supports the safety of Ukrainians and paves the way for future Hungarian government support of Ukraine's integration into the European Union.

***Hungarian society's negative view of Ukraine stems from top-down disinformation by Russia and Hungary's government, exacerbating fear and eroding empathy. Countering these narratives is essential for future Hungarian support of Ukraine's EU integration.***

A recent study<sup>1</sup> pinpoints that the pervasive negative sentiment towards Ukraine in Hungary isn't rooted either in personal experience, or in historic grievances. Research suggests that the hate-mongering is primarily top-down, driven by the government's agenda. The government leverages its control over a centralized media landscape to disseminate and amplify anti-Ukrainian messaging. They employ tactics like "national consultations," which are essentially government-sponsored direct marketing campaigns disguised as public opinion polls, to further their agenda. These campaigns are accompanied by massive advertising blitzes, often using misleading information to reinforce the desired narrative.

The ultimate objective is twofold:

- **To protect the physical safety of Ukrainians living in Hungary:** The current climate of hostility creates a real risk of violence against Ukrainians.

- **To create space for a Hungarian government in the future to support Ukraine:** The current, negative public opinion could constrain a future government's ability to provide meaningful assistance to Ukraine, both in terms of war efforts and potential EU/NATO accession, even in case there was political will to do so.

To counter these negative perceptions, a multi-faceted approach is needed which can be applied even in an unsupportive political environment:

- **Filling the knowledge gap through education:** While reforming the national curriculum is desired, long-term goal, "guerilla methods" can provide immediate impact. For example, replicating the success of a bilingual magazine on Slovak-Hungarian shared heritage<sup>2</sup> could be adapted to foster understanding of Ukrainian history and culture.
- **Reaching beyond the Budapest bubble with factual information:** Countering the prevalent scapegoating requires disseminating accurate information about the economic situation and the war in Ukraine. This can be achieved through accessible public forums featuring experts who can debunk myths and engage with citizens across the country.

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## Introduction

Hungarian society currently exhibits an execrable opinion in regards to Ukraine. This is largely the result of politically motivated disinformation campaigns. Recent research conducted by the think tank, the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID), has shown that unlike the other three Visegrad countries, Hungarian society holds an overwhelmingly negative opinion about Ukraine, Ukrainian people, and the country's future. The study analyzed Ukraine-related coverage on four media outlets (a radio channel, the public broadcaster's TV channel, an online news portal and a printed newspaper), each with the largest reach of their kind, for 17 months. The key narratives were identified, and then in-depth focus group discussions (each lasting 1,5 hours) were conducted to understand the popular opinion about these narratives and the main topics: Ukraine's future and EU-accession. The results were telling. While the governmental propaganda's impacts on Hungarian society were already contemplated by many, the research has proven that the key propaganda narratives worked in this case too, and the focus group members unanimously found Ukraine to be undeserving of any support, and none of them saw a future for Kyiv in the EU.<sup>3</sup> Our study was not the only one pinpointing the Hungarians' growing anger and fear of Ukrainians. Policy Solutions' recent, representative public opinion poll found that Hungarians assess Ukraine as more of a threat than Russia.<sup>4</sup> The Ukraine-related disinformation targeting Hungarian audiences stems from (at least) two state-backed sources. It is not only in Russia but also in Hungary, where from the Prime Minister and government members to the entire centralized media empire (consisting of over 480 outlets), the same messages and rhetoric are used in coordinated ways, often including disinformation elements. Moscow and Budapest's propaganda machines cooperate, and this cooperation is primarily made possible by the shared enemy depictions of the Orbán-regime and the Kremlin:<sup>5 6</sup> Ukraine is portrayed as one of them.

## Thesis

Hungarians' negative opinions of Ukrainians, Ukraine, and the country's EU accession predominantly result from aggressive disinformation and propaganda campaigns and a lack of knowledge of Ukraine, and Ukrainians, not from personal experience.<sup>7</sup> I argue that it is necessary to counter these harmful effects to 1) physically protect Ukrainians in Hungary from possible spillover effects on the 40.000 Ukrainians living in Hungary and 2)

to give the (either current or future) Hungarian government space to maneuver policy, unrestricted by the widely shared, strong anti-Ukrainian public sentiments. These public opinions have already made it more difficult for Budapest to work with EU and NATO allies to help Ukraine in the long term as the government has locked itself and the public into anti-Ukrainian perspectives. Mitigating disinformation will give Hungarian political leadership more room for maneuver to support Ukraine (shall it be through war efforts, EU-accession, or NATO-accession), being less constrained by a public opinion which has been shaped by years of consistent disinformation campaigns.

Unfavorable political opinion influences political decision-making, even if with limitations in the current Hungarian political situation, where hatred towards various (fictitious or real) enemies or groups is soaked from above. Sharing disinformation about Ukraine is not unique to the current Fidesz government and its media empire. For instance, even the Orbán-regime's main challenger Péter Magyar (whose entirely novice party gained 30% at the EP elections in 2024) repeated many disinformation claims,<sup>8</sup> later reasoning that before the elections he could not have criticized Russia, in order to not lose "all the support he has".<sup>9</sup>

### **Methodology and Sources**

This policy paper builds on the existing research results, collected and showcased in the Hungarian information environment, and analyzes these propaganda campaigns' and their impact on Hungarians. The study gathers best practices from the region, and elaborates the policy recommendations for various stakeholders.

To present the Hungarian disinformation ecosystem, media centralization and media landscape, a brief literature review follows, showcasing the most recent studies, papers and policy recommendations available. To assess the Ukraine-related disinformation in Hungary in-depth, relevant studies of think tanks and academics are gathered. To evaluate the government's political communication over the last 10 years' of campaigns, (billboards, 'national consultations', etc.) relevant political speeches of Orbán, key talking heads, and their social media platforms are analyzed. To understand the popular sentiment and the disinformation's impact, the paper examines available polls (Policy Solutions 2024<sup>10</sup>, GLOBSEC Trends 2024<sup>11</sup>).

Collecting all these I mapped the problems and key areas where disinformation caused damage and look at best practices in the broader region for successful recipes. My assumption was that best practices and know-how is to be found among NGO-s working on inclusion, conduct awareness raising campaigns, and work with Ukrainians in Hungary. While initially I planned to look at their materials and contact the most promising one to exchange information, this road did not live up to expectations. This was mostly because the organizations I contacted work predominantly on day-to-day helping Ukrainian refugees, but do not carry out campaigns to inform the general public or fight against disinformation about them. Hence, I broadened the pool of possible good solutions and contacted experts involved in projects countering disinformation. Based on the discussions, I elaborated the policy recommendations.

### **The Hungarian media Environment**

The hyper-centralized Hungarian media environment is a hotbed for disinformation. Its highly centralized nature in itself poses a risk to information manipulation.<sup>12</sup> There are about 480 media outlets that belong to the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA). In 2018, this media conglomerate was created as a result of owners “voluntarily” offering their possessions to it overnight.<sup>13</sup> This unusual fusion was exempted from competition law by a decree from Prime Minister Orbán, making it immune to Hungarian Competition Authority’s acquisition inquiries.<sup>14</sup> According to the decree’s text, this merger was qualified of both strategic and public interest. This reasoning (and hence, the exemption from competition law) was approved by the Constitutional Court.<sup>15</sup> Public broadcasters and radios were also taken over by the government and began repeating governmental narratives. Institutional checks and balances fail to work. The Hungarian Telegraph Office (MTI), the Hungarian national news agency, the source for the majority of the outlets, does not only censor news but receives direct orders from the Prime Minister’s Office.<sup>16</sup> Two other steps paved the way for MTI’s ideologically loaded news to reach large audiences via even the smaller radio channel’s programme. MTI’s services were made free, while access to the materials of other news agencies remained rather costly, hence, for financial reasons, MTI’s coverages cannot be disregarded even by the independent editorials. Along with this, radio stations were obliged to incorporate news blocks in their programme. Lacking the financial and human resources-related capacity to create their own news coverage, most radio stations used MTI’s freely accessible news. Moreover, Hungary’s Media Authority, created in 2010, by the Fidesz-government, to

exert control over the media, works in a politically biased way.<sup>17</sup> Ownership is crucial and impacts the content of these outlets to a great extent. In 2019, Zoltán Kovács, Secretary of State for International Communication and Relations stated that with the help of KESMA, they managed to get “nearly 50 percent of the Hungarian press to convey the government’s position.”<sup>18</sup>

This media empire operates by using identical messages and narratives and acts in a coordinated way. In its messaging, is tremendously difficult to dissect Russian and Hungarian domestic propaganda, as the messages transmitted are largely overlapping. This centralized environment, which was operating with pro-Russian propaganda even before the invasion, but after it, pushed the pedal to the metal.<sup>19</sup> Numerous studies showcase plastically that for instance, the most read pro-government news sites such as Origo parrot widely debunked claims of the Russian propaganda machine.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to this environment, there are independent, foreign-owned (such as RTL), and domestically-owned media outlets (belonging to the Central Media Group). Independent outlets generally struggle financially and are increasingly targeted by smear campaigns for being foreign-funded. The advertising market is also distorted by the government via state advertising, which is exclusively placed in pro-government outlets.<sup>21</sup> The fact that the Hungarian Prime Minister’s Office is the biggest spender on Hungary’s ad market is also telling.<sup>22</sup> Following suit and voicing the government’s notoriously anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and political steps, pro-government media outlets have generally used negative narratives. Solely independent media journalists went on field trips to Ukraine to showcase the realities of the front, doing the journalistic work to decipher Ukrainian realities. While their job was vital to inform the Hungarian public discourse (reaching at least one part of Hungarian society), the volume of pro-Russian propaganda in traditional and social media plus beyond media outlets was impossible to counterbalance.

To further discredit independent media’s coverage which diverts from governmental propaganda, the government weaponized “sovereignty”. For this reason, an authority and a background institute for it were created, which under the pretext of “sovereignty protection”, target investigative journalists and civil society organizations.<sup>23</sup> These are the Sovereignty Protection Office, and its research body, the Sovereignty Protection Research Institute, headed by a former Communist state agent.<sup>24</sup> The head of the Office, long-time Orbán-loyalist Tamás Láncki declared not to prioritize Russian or Chinese influence-

seeking.<sup>25</sup> As anticipated by experts, it rather focuses on amplifying governmental propaganda. The recently established Office already issued a report to discredit the coverage of independent experts and journalists on Ukraine, labeling them "pro-war".<sup>26</sup>

### **Governmental Political Communications: Anti-Ukrainian Messaging Beyond Media Outlets**

It is far not only the centralized (traditional and online) media environment that ensures the overwhelming dominance of the governmental messages in the Hungarian information space.

A "national consultation" is a government-sponsored direct marketing campaign in which letters are sent to every home in Hungary. These letters, on whatever subject the government pleases, are largely rhetorical and include propagandistic, fear-mongering, and scapegoating justifications. The Fidesz-KDNP government launched the technique known as "national consultation" in 2015. Since this is the eighth consecutive one, the government is constantly running its campaign without regard to elections or electoral campaign legislation.

They claim to be asking people what they think, but the results are never disclosed. A massive advertising campaign that uses everything from billboards and public broadcasters to pro-government influencers accompanies these consultations. Their main function is to set the agenda and promote the governing party by maintaining unity within the Fidesz camp and giving the impression that their opinions count. This allows PM Orbán to use the group's achievements overseas to argue that he is speaking for the interests and concerns of the people he has consulted. It goes without saying that state funds are used to pay for them all; the billboard campaign and consultation alone have cost over 7.8 billion forints (~19 million euros).<sup>27</sup>

In the fall of 2022, there has been another "national consultation" held, thematizing the war in Ukraine, blaming the war and "the failed Brussels' sanctions" for Hungary's problems. Seven misleading questions<sup>28</sup> in the letters that were placed in the mailboxes imply that Hungary's economic problems are directly related to the sanctions that were imposed "by Brussels" and that these problems would only get worse if they were to be extended longer. It seems insignificant that the restrictions on oil were not even in effect



until December 1st and that gas transited through pipelines—as it is received by Hungary—is not subject to the sanctions at all.

The consultation document in the mailbox can be easily disregarded, but it's much harder to ignore the consequences of the strong advertising campaign that goes along with it. Robust billboard campaigns conveyed this narrative in a condensed way, with the slogan "The sanctions of Brussels are destroying us", depicting the sanctions as actual bombs.<sup>29</sup> The ad failed to note that while the Hungarian government continuously wage a verbal battle against "Brussels" and "Brussels bureaucrats," it voted in favor of all eight punishment packages. To increase the absurdity of the situation, Viktor Orbán himself was agitating against the sanctions by demonstrating that he already filled out the consultation survey saying "no" to the sanctions while he had previously accepted and signed all of them in real life.

While the general population's reaction to the campaign (with the bombs) popularizing the national consultation" was not positive, it did the job. According to an opinion poll conducted by Publicus by the time the campaign was running<sup>30</sup>, 65 per cent of all respondents found it pointless, and only 36 per cent found it useful. Not surprisingly, party preferences show clearly, as 4/5 of Fidesz voters find the consultation helpful while 96 per cent of opposition voters and 67 per cent of uncertain voters find it useless. People liked the billboards with bombs even less. The above-mentioned poll was conducted at the beginning of the campaign and showed that only 2 per cent liked it and a further 2 per cent "rather liked" it as opposed to the 5 per cent who "rather disliked" it and the 48 per cent who did not like it at all. At the moment of polling, 32 had not seen such a billboard. As mentioned, however, the campaign did its job. Political Capital's study based on the opinion poll conducted by Medián<sup>31</sup> in by the time, 36 per cent of the total population and 50 per cent of Fidesz voters believed the Hungarian government did not vote in favour of the sanctions. 53 per cent of all respondents think that the gas prices increased on the market due to the sanctions although the increase started already in September 2021 but went largely unnoticed by the population due to government interventions in the market. The overarching narrative of the "sanctions of Brussels" being failed prove to be catchy: according to 59 per cent of the population, the sanctions did more harm to Europe than to Russia.

The “national consultation” is only one of the examples of the governing party bypassing campaign regulations to advertise its messages involving more abundant resources than as a party if would be entitled to. Generously financed proxies and GONGOs such as Civil Cooperation Forum (CÖF) often launches billboard and Youtube ad campaigns, parroting the governmental slogans, to amplify its messages. Logically, before the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, given that the Fidesz made the war in Ukraine the central topic of the campaign, CÖF campaigned for immediate peace.<sup>32</sup> Megafon, the pro-government influencer incubator, for instance received more money in the single year of 2022 than all the opposition parties from the state budget for campaigning combined.<sup>33</sup> The financial imbalance is striking in the online sphere too. In the first 5 months of 2024 Fidesz, CÖF and Megafon combined spent about EUR 4 305 000 on Facebook and Google ads, while the entire landscape of opposition parties and outlets linked to them spent about 834 000 Euros.<sup>34</sup>

Disinformation is a significant part of the propaganda's messages especially regarding Ukraine-related topics. For instance, according to one popular disinformation narrative, Ukraine mobilises disproportionately on an ethnic basis in Transcarpathia, carrying out “forceful conscription” (“kényszersorozás” in Hungarian). The narrative of ethnic Hungarian's disproportionate suffering for Ukraine was frequently applied by PM Viktor Orbán as well. He repeatedly stated,<sup>35</sup> for example, that hundreds of Hungarians had fallen on the battlefield, to present himself as an advocate of immediate peace who strives to save the lives of Hungarians in Ukraine.

There is no data to back up this claim. According to Transcarpathian organizations and experts, at the time of the statement made the number of fallen Hungarian soldiers was not more than about ten per cent of what PM Orbán claimed, and also, ethnic Hungarians were underrepresented in the Ukrainian army.<sup>36</sup> Still the expression “forceful conscription” and the connected disinformation myth conquered the Hungarian pro-government media space in May 2022. This myth served to hysterize Hungarian popular opinion and was built on elements taken out of context. Media coverage of such “forceful conscriptions” usually depicted a nice, everyday scene, such as peaceful citizens unsuspectingly going to the market or to work. Suddenly, a group of soldiers appear and surround a handful of men, taking them away by force. The narration tends to add that it is all because of their Hungarian origins and the underlying assumption that Ukrainians hate Hungarians and exploit their power over this minority group. The narrative was so successful, that given

the overlapping enemy pictures of Hungarian and Russian governmental propaganda (Ukraine, 'Brussels' and the West), that such a fabricated story was even picked up by the Russian domestic propaganda machine.

In January 2023, Pesti Srácok – a fringe, radical pro-government website – covered the story of “forceful conscription” the usual, exaggerated way. In their story, Ukrainian authorities were encircling markets and nearly kidnapping several ethnic Hungarians as part of a “brutal forceful conscription campaign.”<sup>37</sup> This fabricated story was then picked up by the leading Russian news agency TASS.<sup>38</sup> From TASS, this news was republished by many Russian news portals, including the largest ones. Hence, Ukraine was presented to Russian readers as an aggressor and emphasized that ethnic Hungarians, not just ethnic Russians, are victims of their repression (as popular Russian disinformation narratives claim).

### **Anti-Ukrainian Messaging and Its Impact**

The Mérték Media Monitor's study (2023) analyzed the country newspapers' coverage (all of them belong to the mentioned KESMA holding). The newspapers have a smaller section for local news, the rest is country- and world news, for which the coverage is verbatim the same, and use the same disinformation narratives. These are political messages and interpretations of the world, which are very often recurring in Fidesz's communication, and which are based on deliberately misleading or false information, specifically in order to influence politics, strengthen social divisions or distort public opinion. All speakers or sources supported these claims. The individual narratives were often presented together, stacking up images of the enemy or condensing the most important manipulative elements of Fidesz's political message into one well-worded sentence. They analyzed the most prevalent narratives regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war, and found that „the evil Zelensky, evil Ukrainians” was the most commonly used one. The repetition of the “sins” of Zelensky and Ukrainians served to legitimize the Hungarian government's anti-Ukrainian stance and rhetoric, and to justify why Hungary should not help Ukraine. Other narratives identified were the „pro-war Brussels”, „pro-peace Fidesz”, “Ukraine gets the subsidies Hungary deserves” and “war inflation”.<sup>39</sup>

Our study, conducted by the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID), analyzed different government-related outlets during a largely overlapping period of time, found that the same narratives prevailed.<sup>40</sup>

As mentioned, the key narratives identified were the same throughout the outlets. Criticisms of Zelensky and Ukraine, and smearing them predominantly for their corruption. These narratives often cite Russian politicians without context or criticism.<sup>41</sup> The study conducted focus group interviews to decipher how the governmental narratives were amplified by the centralized media environment and the amount of money spent on advertisements. During the focus group discussions,<sup>42</sup> the respondents voiced unanimous rejection to the idea of Ukraine ever joining the EU and were critical about providing any help or support to Ukraine in the war. The intensity of hatred and disdain towards Ukrainians and Zelensky was unexpected. Meanwhile, the government propaganda's expressions were used by the speakers such as *'the West will fight until the last Ukrainian'*, *'it shouldn't be the Hungarian people to pay the price of this war'* and *'it is the war of two Slavic nations'*, hence *'we should stay out of it'*. The general consensus was that Ukraine does not deserve any help, and they undeservingly receive "Hungarians' money". This latter claim gained traction from July 2023, when the Hungarian government connected the two entirely separate messages: the EU froze certain funds to Hungary and continued to provide financial aid to Ukraine. The government's narrative was that Ukraine undeservingly received the Hungarian's money, and it proved to be catchy among the respondents. The interviews brought two other unexpected results. Except for 2 of the 15, the respondents admitted to never having met a Ukrainian, hence, their negative emotions had no personal roots. Also, the problems of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, Ukraine were not mentioned. The key conclusions from the study were that the anti-Ukrainian propaganda had a strong impact on Hungarian society, fueling strongly negative emotions towards them. However, the hate-mongering seems to be top-down, and the negative emotions do not seem to stem either from historic grievances or personal bad experiences.

The study's findings above align with public opinion polls. As the poll of Policy Solutions (2024), with 1000 respondents found, Hungarians are 5 percent more likely to view Ukraine as a threat than Russia (51% vs 46%). Additionally, Policy Solutions detected a significant deterioration in the Hungarian population's attitude towards Ukrainian refugees in the last two years. In the spring of 2024, a mere 17% of respondents said it would be okay if Ukrainian refugees moved in next door, while 49% of respondents said they would feel uneasy about that. The deterioration is palpable compared to 2023 when 45% were unfavorable, and in 2022 when only 30% displayed these unfavorable views—a 19

percent increase in unfavorability between 2022 and 2024.<sup>43</sup> The latest Globsec Trends (2024) have also shown that Hungarians have strong reservations about Ukraine's EU and NATO membership prospects. While 55% of Hungarians see Russia as the main culprit for the war, only 36% see Ukraine as a future member of the EU, NATO or both. Moreover, over 50% said that the West is provoking Russia by delivering military aid to Ukraine.<sup>44</sup>

### **Key problems- what made the propaganda work so well?**

There are numerous factors which allowed the anti-Ukrainian propaganda to work resulting in strong anti-ukrainian sentiments across the Hungarian society proven by numerous studies listed previously.

#### **1) Scapegoating for the worsening of financial situation of Hungarians**

The last two years brought about significant financial hardships for most of the Hungarian society. The government's monetary policy consequently weakened the country's currency, and with its wast redistribution before the 2022 elections actively contributed to the roaring inflation.<sup>45</sup>

The Hungarian forint (HUF) has weakened significantly over the years: when Hungary joined the EU in 2004, one euro cost about 250 HUF, compared to 410 in 2022 and about 398 in 2024. Moreover, inflation in November 2022 hit 22.5 per cent. If it was not bad enough in itself, this inflation is predominantly caused by the increase in food prices (40 per cent), the biggest increase in food costs in the whole European Union. The roaring prices of food hit the masses as, for example, bread in August 2022 cost 66 per cent more than the year before while the EU average hovered around 18 per cent. The governmental propaganda empire was quick to find those responsible for the hardships on a rhetorical level: during the electoral campaign in spring, "war inflation" and "sanctions' inflation".

This scapegoating was further exacerbated when the governmental rhetorics in July 2023 connected the two messages of a) EU freezing funds for Hungary and b) the EU provides further financial aid to Ukraine. From the two, entirely independent facts the narrative of "undeserving Ukrainians receive the money hungarians deserve" was born, and it had a strong impact on the popular opinion. As we found in our study with CEID, this was the main association and evoked the strongest negative emotions from the respondents (leaving virtually no room for historic grievances or personal negative experiences).

## 2) Desensitization of Hungarian society

The Hungarian society has been actively conditioned to not practice solidarity since decades. The Orbán regime conditioned people to look for individual solutions instead of organizing themselves and even less to stand in solidarity with other groups.<sup>46</sup> In 2010 the regime announced a new concept that claimed to be the "work based" or "work centered" society, with with it barely concealed its renunciation of the uplift of the underprivileged layers of society. At most, it has tried to maintain the appearance of action through a political debate on changing the number of poor people, but its concept of a "work based society" was more about exclusion and political dependency than about empowerment. It meant the drastic cut of social aids and benefits (such as the job-seeker benefit which was cut to the shortest in the EU, 90 days). According to governmental rhetoric, masses of (predominantly Roma) people had made a living off aid, because they did not want to work. This, in the new, "work-centered" society had to change, and the "public works" scheme was introduced, which took away the granted nature of unemployment benefit for the most vulnerable groups and made it subject to the whims of local political forces. The scheme, deemed utterly ineffective by the European Commission, seems to have served the electoral clientelism, and social control, and most importantly the cementing of the narrative of "the undeserving poor".<sup>47</sup>

"Undeserving" is a key theme here. Different ethnic and social groups came from Ukraine to Hungary. The well-situated middle class had a relatively easy task to settle despite the relatively little help and lack of transparent and effective help from the state. Destitute, ethnic Hungarian Roma people from Transcarpathia, however, were in an even more difficult situation. Some of them having double citizenship, the question of who is entitled to what is complicated in itself, not easy to navigate.<sup>48</sup> The question of undeserving came to play in the case of the Roma people from Transcarpathia too. When the government canceled with a short deadline the state-funded accommodation for refugees from parts of Ukraine Budapest says are not directly affected by military action, the reasoning was eerily similar.<sup>49</sup> Governmental spokesperson Gergely Gulyás referred to the people affected that "a practice has developed, where around 4,000 people have been living on Hungarian state money without taking a job. In Hungary today, anyone who wants to, can work."<sup>50</sup>

State-promoted cynicism and individualism are prevalent. The governmental propaganda has long time put to pedestal interests instead of values. The government cherishes its "interest-based" foreign policy, and disdains the Western "value-based" one, labeling it hypocritical.<sup>51</sup> It popularizes fact-relativism and mocks independent media, by claiming them "fake news" and inventing the term "függetlenobjektív" ("independent-objective") suggesting that there is no such a thing as objective journalism but exclusively overt or covert propaganda<sup>52</sup>. This cynical approach is reflected in the governmental rhetoric and pro-government propaganda towards Ukraine as well. As described earlier, it shifts the focus of Hungarians from the heroism of Ukrainians who defend their freedom to the material wellbeing of individual Hungarians (as the slogan "It shouldn't be the Hungarian people to pay the price of war!" says<sup>53</sup>).

### 3) Lack of knowledge and lack of understanding

The third factor which enabled the propaganda to have a detrimental impact on Hungarian popular opinion is the lack of knowledge, understanding and connections with Ukraine and Ukrainians. It means that this void could then easily be filled with biased or false information, disinformation and propaganda. Hungarian being a non-slavic language shares no mutual intelligibility with Ukrainian (unlike some of the neighboring countries, where the integration of Ukrainian refugees was significantly easier). Also, Ukraine has never been a touristic destination on the mental map of Hungarians, and except for the population close to the Ukrainian border, people met very few Ukrainians if at all. Ukrainian guest workers before the full-scale invasion mostly worked on constructions and lived rather isolated. Hence, the peer-to-peer networks which worked for instance among Ukrainians living and working since longer time in Poland which helped to facilitate the arrival and settlement of Ukrainians there were largely missing in Hungary. The school curricula which is centered around historic grievances does not help the Hungarian students to profoundly understand the neighboring countries, nations and cultures either.

### Policy Recommendations to positively influence the Hungarian popular opinion about Ukrainians

- 1) **Filling the knowledge gap starting from schools: Guerilla methods.** One of the reasons for the Hungarian society's receptiveness to anti-Ukrainian propaganda and disinformation is the lack of knowledge on Ukraine and its peoples. Even that part of history school curricula that would concern Ukraine focuses on Hungarians'

historic grievances. School curricula is lengthy and complicated to change even in case of political will which is clearly absent in Hungary, but there are good examples for guerilla methods which could be copied. For instance the Association of History Teachers from Hungary teamed up with the Slovak news portal Dennik N published a bilingual magazine on the shared cultural heritage of the two countries and provided them free of charge to interested schools both in Slovakia and Hungary (655 and 51 institutions respectively). The publication, funded by the EU tackles myths and puts to the front personal stories of historic figures to bring the long, shared history of Slovaks and Hungarians closer to the students.<sup>54</sup> This could be replicated and adapted to Ukraine as well, highlighting the historic ties, cultural similarities and common features with Hungary. Open-minded history teachers could use these in teaching, in addition to the school curricula, as the Slovak-Hungarian example shows. If deemed successful, similar publications could be tailored for elder age groups too, to be displayed and disposable in libraries, public buildings and other often visited facilities.

- 2) **Reaching out of the bubble: Fireside chats.** It is vital to combat scapegoating with factual information, and reach out of the bubble. Given that Hungarians' negative opinion towards Ukrainians largely stems from worries of financial nature (fueled by the buzz words and narrative frames detailed earlier such as "war inflation", "sanctions' inflation", "the undeserving Ukrainians receive the money which should be sent to Hungary", "4000 people in Hungary did not want to work" and undeservingly live off aid, etc.), the scapegoating must be tackled. This could be done providing factual information to Hungarians that Ukraine and the war in Ukraine is not the (most decisive) reason for the economic hardships Hungarians face. While scapegoating seems to have worked rather effectively regardless of the level of education,<sup>55</sup> lesser educated groups are less exposed to correct information. Although people already interested in world politics can assess endless amount of valuable, factual podcasts, lectures and articles, less politically conscious groups who do not particularly seek out for this sort of information only face the flood of anti-Ukrainian propaganda. To reach these groups, events could be organized country-wide, in smaller towns (to bring out the knowledge from the Budapest-bubble) in community places to myth-bust, involving knowledgeable public figures and experts. In 2022 for instance, a leading Russia expert went on such a tour, to tackle fake news and spread factual information about the war.<sup>56</sup> In his assessment, many interested laics from various age groups came to attend these fireside talk-like, evening events and the discussions were fruitful. Shall there be satisfactory funding (to cover the travel costs and accommodation for one



night, as such programs are best held in the evening, after work), there most likely are enough of experts willing and able to participate in such programs.

**Author: Dorka Takácsy, Finalist of the Empowering Young Women Experts in Regional Security and Foreign Policy Fellowship**

Dorka Takácsy is a researcher based in Budapest, focusing on disinformation and propaganda in Central-Eastern Europe and Russia. She is a visiting fellow of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and a research fellow at the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy. She is also pursuing a PhD at the Corvinus University of Budapest, researching Russian domestic disinformation about the West.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration (CEID), 2024. The study was financed by the International Visegrad Fund, and focused on how Ukraine's future and its EU accession-perspectives are portrayed in the media and how the public opinion sees these questions. The research's outcome, which is the comparative study of the Visegrad countries is to be published end of October this year. An op-ed summarized the appalling Hungarian results beforehand: <https://444.hu/2024/07/10/mar-az-is-elhiszi-hogy-a-korrupt-ukrajna-nem-erdemel-segitseget-akinek-nem-jon-be-a-kormany-kampanya>

<sup>2</sup> György Bugyinszki, Ingyen juthatnak hozzá a Napunk és a Denník N kétnyelvű magazinjához több mint 700 magyar és szlovák iskola diákjai (More than 700 Hungarian and Slovak students have free access to the bilingual magazine of Napunk and Denník N). Média 1. 14/06/2024 <https://media1.hu/2024/06/14/napunk-dennik-n-ingyenes-magazin/>

<sup>3</sup> The study was financed by the International Visegrad Fund, and focused on how Ukraine's future and its EU accession-perspectives are portrayed in the media and how the public opinion sees these questions.

I partook in it, as the Hungarian partner was the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID) from Hungary. The research's outcome, which is the comparative study of the Visegrad countries is to be published end of October this year. I published an op-ed about the appalling Hungarian results beforehand: <https://444.hu/2024/07/10/mar-az-is-elhiszi-hogy-a-korrupt-ukrajna-nem-erdemel-segitseget-akinek-nem-jon-be-a-kormany-kampanya>

<sup>4</sup> Policy Solutions, The World Through Hungarian Eyes- Foreign Policy Attitudes in Hungary in 2024. 05/07/2024 [https://www.policysolutions.hu/en/news/649/world\\_through\\_hungarian\\_eyes\\_2024](https://www.policysolutions.hu/en/news/649/world_through_hungarian_eyes_2024)

<sup>5</sup> Dorka Takacsy, Hungarian disinformation on Russia. Visegrad Insight, 03/05/2023 <https://visegradinsight.eu/hungarian-disinformation-in-russia/>

<sup>6</sup> Dorka Takacsy, Illiberal Disinformation is No One-Way Street: Russian and Hungarian Domestic Propaganda at Each Other's Service, AUTHLib, 04/05/2023 <https://www.authlib.eu/illiberal-disinformation-russian-hungarian-domestic-propaganda/>

<sup>7</sup> See 1st footnote, the study is going to be published this September.

<sup>8</sup> Gergely Nyilas, Magyar Péter a kormánypropagandából ismerős valótlanosságokat állított az ukrajnai háborúról (Péter Magyar claimed untruths about the war in Ukraine, familiar from government propaganda). Telex.hu, 04/14/2024 <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/04/14/magyar-peter-ukrajna-oroszorszag-raketatelepites-egyesult-allamok-befolyasi-ovezet-klub-radio>

<sup>9</sup> Jędrzej Bielecki, UE marginalizuje Viktora Orbána. Fidesz obawia się o wynik wyborczy.(EU marginalizes Viktor Orbán. Fidesz is worried about the election outcome.) Rzeczpospolita, 03/06/2024 <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art40531141-ue-marginalizuje-viktora-orbana-fidesz-obawia-sie-o-wynik-wyborczy>

<sup>10</sup> Policy Solutions, 2024

<sup>11</sup> GLOBSEC Trends, 2024 <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2024-cee-brave-new-region>

<sup>12</sup> Anton Shirikov (2023). Fake News for All: How Citizens Discern Disinformation in Autocracies. *Political Communication*, 41(1), 45–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2257618>

<sup>13</sup> Attila Batorfy, "Data Visualization: This Is How the pro-Government Media Empire Owning 476 Outlets Was Formed," *atlatszo.hu*, November 30, 2018, <https://english.atlatszo.hu/2018/11/30/data-visualization-this-is-how-the-pro-government-media-empire-owning-476-outlets-was-formed/>.

<sup>14</sup> Miklos Jenei and Zoltan Kovacs, "Orbán Exempts New Propaganda Conglomerate from Competition Law," *Index.hu*, December 5, 2018, [https://index.hu/english/2018/12/05/propaganda\\_hungary\\_media\\_national\\_interest\\_competition\\_authority\\_exempt\\_viktor\\_orban/](https://index.hu/english/2018/12/05/propaganda_hungary_media_national_interest_competition_authority_exempt_viktor_orban/).

<sup>15</sup> "Nem alaptörvény-ellenes a Közép-Európai Sajtó és Média Alapítvány bővítési szándékát nemzetstratégiai jelentőségűnek minősítő kormányrendelet" (Government decree declaring the expansion of the Central European Press and Media Foundation to be of national strategic importance is not contrary to the Fundamental Law). *Alkotmánybirosag.hu*, June 25, 2020, Assessed: September 23, 2024. <https://www.alkotmanybirosag.hu/kozlemeny/nem-alaptorveny-ellenes-a-kozep-europai-sajto-es-media-alapitvany-bovitesi-szandekat-nemzetstrategiai-jelentosegunek-minosito-kormanyrendelet/>

<sup>16</sup> Akos Keller-Alant, "How Hungary's State News Agency Whitewashes The News: An RFE/RL Investigation," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18:22:01Z, sec. Hungary, <https://www.rferl.org/a/how-hungary-state-news-agency-whitewashes-news-rferl-investigation/30984420.html>; Zsuzsanna Wirth, "Leaked Documents Show How Orbán's Circle Dictates the News at Hungary's State News Agency - Direkt36," *Direkt36 - Direkt36 Is a Non-Profit Investigative Journalism Center with the Mission to Hold Powerful People and Institutions Accountable*. (blog), March 4, 2022, <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/kiszivargott-iratok-mutatjak-hogyan-diktalnak-orbanek-a-nemzeti-hirugynoksegnek/>.

<sup>17</sup> Tamas Fabian, "Orbán's influence on the media is without rival in Hungary," *telex*, March 23, 2021, <https://telex.hu/english/2021/03/23/orbans-influence-on-the-media-is-without-rival-in-hungary>.

<sup>18</sup> Attila Batorfy and Agnes Urban, "State Advertising as an Instrument of Transformation of the Media Market in Hungary," *East European Politics* 36:1, 44–65 (July 9, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1662398>; IPI-author, "Hungary: Investigative Media Átlátszó Targeted in Latest Smear Campaign," *International Press Institute* (blog), January 24, 2023, <https://ipi.media/hungary-investigative-media-atlatszo-targeted-in-latest-smear-campaign/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Eva Bogнар on Russian Propaganda in Hungary". CEU Democracy Institute. Accessed on 28/09/2024 <https://democracyinstitute.ceu.edu/articles/eva-bognar-russian-propaganda-hungary>

<sup>20</sup> Political Capital, "Disinformation wonderland in the Hungarian government-controlled online media: Origo's articles on Putin and Zelensky". 21/04/2023 [https://politicalcapital.hu/library.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=3192](https://politicalcapital.hu/library.php?article_read=1&article_id=3192)

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel Szalay, „A Miniszterelnöki Hivatal maradt a legnagyobb hirdető a magyar reklámpiacon” (The Prime Minister's Office remains the largest advertiser in the Hungarian advertising market). *Media1*, 07/12/2022

<https://media1.hu/2022/12/07/a-miniszterelnoki-hivatal-maradt-a-legnagyobb-hirdeto-a-magyar-reklampiacon/>

<sup>23</sup> Zoltán Molnár, A Transparency International és az Átlátszó lettek a Szuverenitásvédelmi Hivatal első célpontjai (Transparency International and Átlátszó became the first targets of the Sovereignty Protection Office). Telex.hu, 25/06/2024. <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/06/25/szuverenitasvedelmi-hivatal-transparency-international-vizsgalat-indul>

<sup>24</sup> András Dezső, Viccnek is durva: a volt III/III-as titkosszolga útja a szuverenitás védelméig (Rough even for a joke: the former III/III agent's way to the protection of sovereignty). Telex.hu, 23/09/2024 <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/09/23/horvath-jozsef-szuverenitasvedelmi-kutatointezet-kamu-james-bond>

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<sup>27</sup> Zoltán Siposhegyi, Nyolcmilliárdból sugallja azt a kormány, hogy nem Moszkva, hanem Brüsszel tehet a válságról (With eight billion euros, the government suggests that Brussels, not Moscow, is to blame for the crisis). Euronews.hu, 20/10/2022 <https://hu.euronews.com/2022/10/20/nyolcmilliardbol-sugallja-azt-a-kormany-hogy-nem-moszkva-hanem-brusszel-tehet-a-valsagrol>

<sup>28</sup> Zoltán Kovács, Here are the questions from Hungary's next consultation on Brussels' failed sanctions, About Hungary, 14/10/2022 <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/here-are-the-questions-from-hungarys-next-consultation-on-brussels-failed-sanctions>

<sup>29</sup> Ukraine war: Hungary comparing EU sanctions on Russia to bombs is 'inappropriate'. Euronews. 21/10/2022.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cmaff8uyw00>

<sup>30</sup> Gábor Czene, Itt a felmérés, még a fideszes szimpatizánsoknak se nagyon tetszenek a "nemzeti konzultációt" népszerűsítő hirdetések (Here's the poll, even Fidesz supporters don't like the ads promoting the "national consultation"). Népszava.hu, 07/11/2022. [https://nepszava.hu/3174757\\_nemzeti-konzultacio-plakatok-bomba-brusszel-publicus-fidesz](https://nepszava.hu/3174757_nemzeti-konzultacio-plakatok-bomba-brusszel-publicus-fidesz)

<sup>31</sup> Political Capital. A Fidesz-szavazók fele szerint a kormány nem szavazta meg a szankciókat – kutatás az orosz-ukrán háborúval kapcsolatos attitűdökről (Half of Fidesz voters say the government did not vote for sanctions - research on attitudes towards the Russia-Ukraine war). 16/11/2022 [https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=3107](https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=3107)

<sup>32</sup> Hanga Zsófia Aradi, Plakátokkal és megafonnal felszerelt teherautókkal indul békét hirdetni a CÖF (CÖF launches peace campaign with posters and megaphone trucks). Telex. 28/05/2024 <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/05/28/cof-coka-mobilplakat-kampany-beke-haboru>

<sup>33</sup> Gergely Miklós Nagy, Titokzatos milliárdok fűtik a NER-propaganda nehéztüzérségét (Mysterious billions fuel the heavy artillery of NER propaganda). 24.hu 20/09/2023 <https://24.hu/belfold/2023/09/20/fidesz-propaganda-megafon-kampany-cof-adomany-tamogatas/#>

<sup>34</sup> Political Capital. Tövig nyomta a pedált a Fidesz a költsékekben és a háborús riogatásban, de ez még nem a vége (Fidesz has pushed the pedal to the metal on spending and war mongering, but this is not the end yet). 07/06/2024 [https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=3384](https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3384)

<sup>35</sup> MTI, Orbán Viktor: a rendszerváltás óta ez volt a legnehezebb év (Viktor Orbán: this was the most difficult year since the regime change). Maszol. 21/12/2022 <https://maszol.ro/kulfold/Orban-Viktor-a-rendszervaltas-ota-ez-volt-a-legnehezebb-ev>

<sup>36</sup> Brigitta Varga, Magyarország segítséget nyújtott a harcokban elesett Vértés István családjának (Hungary has provided aid to the family of István Vértés, who died in the fighting). Kárpáti Igaz Szó, 12/01/2023 <https://kiszo.net/2023/01/12/magyarorszag-segitseget-nyujtott-a-harcokban-elesett-vertes-istvan-csaladjanak/>

<sup>37</sup> Angéla Füssy, "Ha ez így megy tovább, tényleg nem marad magyar Kárpátalján" – Füssy Angéla helyszíni riportja a brutális kényszerosorozásokról és elnyomásról ("If this goes on, there will really be no Hungarians left in Transcarpathia" - Angéla Füssy's on-the-spot report on the brutal forced oppression and repression), Pesti Scrákok. 22/01/2023 <https://pestisracok.hu/ha-ez-egy-megy-tovabb-tenyleg-nem-marad-magyar-karpataljan-fussy-angela-helyszini-riportja-a-brutalis-kenyszerosorozasokrol-es-elnyomasrol/>

<sup>38</sup> TASS. СМИ: в Закарпатье идет массовая мобилизация этнических венгров в украинскую армию (News outlets: Mass mobilization of ethnic Hungarians in Transcarpathia to the Ukrainian army is underway). 24/01/2023 <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16867563>

<sup>39</sup> Mertek Media Monitor, „A kormányüzenetek mindent beterítenek” (Governmental messages flood everything), 2023 [https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Mertek\\_fuzetek\\_35.pdf](https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Mertek_fuzetek_35.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> CEID, 2024. (see 1st footnote). For the analysis we chose four media outlets (each with the biggest reach of its kind). In radio, we chose Info Rádió— a channel that is considered to be a widely listened-to, credible news radio with analytical commentaries presented all day. While belonging to KESMA, this outlet tries to remain a moderate news channel, and seeks to sound objective. We chose to examine the online outlet Index.hu. This news portal once was considered the main bastion of independent media until 2019, when its editorial board and ownership was changed entirely, causing the vast majority of its staff to leave and found another site, telex.hu. Index.hu's coverage subtly started to convert to assist governmental rhetoric. As for newspapers, we chose Magyar Nemzet, the most-read printed daily. This is the flagship outlet of Fidesz, and has an especially close connection with the ruling party. „#The most vocal pro-government talking heads and publicists publish here, and materials from this site are routinely quoted by the pro-government media sites, hence, they have a large reach and an impact on setting the agenda. The study examined the TV-channel= M1's online archive.# Its evening news coverage is widely watched, as this channel is one of the few available without a cable service as part of the base TV channel package. Hence, two “popular” outlets in our assortment are hirado.hu and Magyar Nemzet, and the two “serious” i.e. factual are index.hu and Info Rádió.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, in this article, Magyar Nemzet quotes an active Russian politician from the Russian State Duma, Andrey Klishas (his interview to Sputnik) saying that Ukraine is deeply corrupt:

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Magyar Nemzet, "Kliskas : Ukrajna korrupt rezsim, ebben Európában sem kételkednek," (Kliskas : Ukraine is a corrupt regime, Europe is in no doubt about that,) November 11, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/11/kliskas-ukrajna-korrupt-rezsim-ebben-europaban-sem-ketelkednek> .

<sup>42</sup> The discussions were conducted on a small (N=15), but representative sample regarding age, sex, location, and level of education.

<sup>43</sup> Policy Solutions, 2024

<sup>44</sup> Globsec Trends, 2024

<sup>45</sup> Luca Pete, Krisztian Szabo, Is high inflation in Hungary really caused by the war in Ukraine? Atlatzso.hu, 06/10/2023 <https://english.atlatzso.hu/2023/10/06/is-high-inflation-in-hungary-really-caused-by-the-war-in-ukraine/>

<sup>46</sup> Attila Juhász, Csaba Molnár, Szolidaritás és jóléti sovinizmus a magyar társadalomban (Solidarity and welfare chauvinism in Hungarian society). Political Capital 2018. [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/fes\\_pc\\_szocialpolitika\\_tanulmany\\_181004.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/fes_pc_szocialpolitika_tanulmany_181004.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Bernard Rorke, Road to nowhere for Hungary's Roma: public works scheme is futile and insidious. ERRC. 14/06/2019 <https://www.errc.org/news/road-to-nowhere-for-hungarys-roma-public-works-scheme-is-futile-and-insidious>

<sup>48</sup> Utcából Lakásba! Egyesület, Milyen otthonra találtak az ukrainai menekültek Magyarországon? (What kind of home have Ukrainian refugees found in Hungary? ) 03/07/2024, MÉRCE.hu <https://merce.hu/2024/07/03/milyen-otthonra-talaltak-az-ukrainai-menekultek-magyarorszagon/>

<sup>49</sup> Robert Hogson, EU executive to contact Budapest over eviction of Ukrainian refugees. 22/08/2024 <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/08/22/eu-executive-to-contact-budapest-over-eviction-of-ukrainian-refugees>

<sup>50</sup> Lázár Benjámin Fazekas, A háború elől menekülők már csak a civilekre számíthatnak, akik nincsenek felkészülve sok ezer ember támogatására (Those fleeing war can only rely on civilians, who are not prepared to support thousands of people). 26/08/2024

<https://merce.hu/2024/08/26/a-menekultek-utcara-rakasaval-az-ellenuk-iranyulo-hangulatot-es-razsorulok-kozotti-feszultseget-szitja-a-kormany/>

<sup>51</sup> Speech by Prime Minister Orbán at an event celebrating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.2023. Accessed on 28/09/2024 at Miniszterelnök.hu <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-an-event-celebrating-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-founding-of-the-hungarian-institute-of-international-affairs/>

<sup>52</sup> example: Áron Ternovác, "Függetlenobjektív" újságírók a baloldal szolgálatában ("Independentobjective" journalists at the service of left-wing. Magyar Nemzet, 07/01/2022 <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2022/01/fuggetlenobjektiv-ujsgirok-a-baloldal-szolgالاتaban>

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<sup>53</sup> Ne a magyar emberek fizessék meg a háború árát! (It shouldn't be the Hungarian people to pay the price of war!), Magyarország Kormánya. 06/10/2022 <https://kormany.hu/hirek/ne-a-magyar-emberek-fizessek-meg-a-haboru-arat>

<sup>54</sup> György Bugyinszki, Ingyen juthatnak hozzá a Napunk és a Denník N kétnyelvű magazinjához több mint 700 magyar és szlovák iskola diákjai (More than 700 Hungarian and Slovak students have free access to the bilingual magazine of Napunk and Denník N). Média 1. 14/06/2024 <https://media1.hu/2024/06/14/napunk-dennik-n-ingyenes-magazin/>

<sup>55</sup> CEID, 2024

<sup>56</sup> One of such events took place in Budapest's agglomeration, in Pilisborosjenő: <https://pilisborosjeno.hu/hirek/oktober-25-en-elinditjuk-science-cafe-sorozatunkat-melyet-a-nappali-kavezoval-kozosen-szervezunk/>

# CASIMIR PULASKI FOUNDATION



WARSAW  
28.10.2024

DORKA TAKÁCSY