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Disinformation, Digital Nationalism and the Hungarian Minority in Ukraine

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ECMI Minorities Blog. Disinformation, Digital Nationalism and the Hungarian Minority in Ukraine

Krisztina Lajosi

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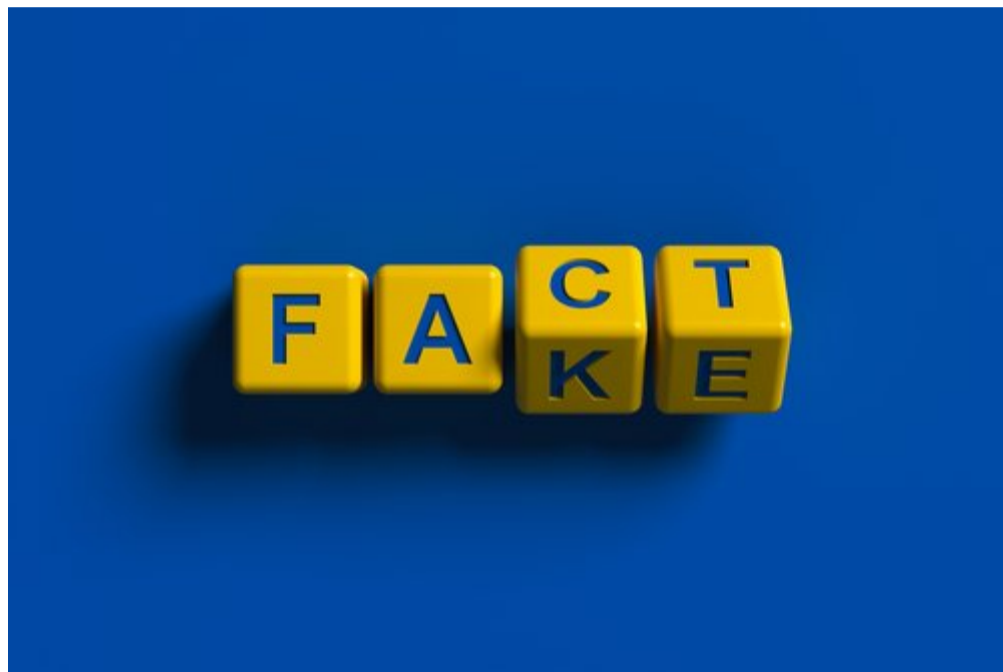


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*** This entry is part of the special section of the ECMI Minorities Blog on [National Minorities and the War in Ukraine](#). ***

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The Hungarian minority in Ukraine has not been under the direct siege of Russian troops yet. However, in the last decade it has been targeted indirectly by the Russians, whose aim has been to destabilize Ukraine and the EU. Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, it has become clear that President Putin's main objective is to start a large-scale disinformation campaign with the help of modern communication technologies to undermine the trust in democracies, discredit liberal ideals, and set up online and offline hubs outside Russia to strengthen far-right, anti-western ideologies in Europe. [Hungary has become such a hub](#) and the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán a useful ally in the [information war](#).

The Hungarian minority has become entangled in an intricate web of Hungarian, Russian, and Ukrainian nationalist politics, and it will be difficult for them to free themselves from this trap. Their best choice would be to support Ukraine in its heroic fight against the Russian occupation and convince Orbán to support a fast-track EU membership for Ukraine. However, given the intense Russian disinformation war to which this community is exposed via Russian and Hungarian media, it will be a daunting task to change political attitudes. It would help if the Hungarian government and mainstream media were more critical of the Kremlin and would support the Ukrainian cause more vocally. There has been some change in this direction following the recent Hungarian parliamentary elections held on 3 April 2022.



There have been a few air-raid alerts in Transcarpathia, but in this region the devastating violence and large-scale destruction of Luhansk and Donetsk, or the attacks around Kyiv, Lviv, and Ivano-Frankivsk are known only from news reports and from the stories of refugees coming to stay or passing through towards Western Europe. The reality of the war is felt “only” through the news about [deceased soldiers](#), whose names and pictures are printed in local papers and posted on social media, and through the overwhelming fear that many more young men will be taken away to fight and will not come back alive.

However, in addition to the war on the ground, which for the moment is waged far away from Transcarpathia, another war is being fought online, where the Hungarian minority is implicated directly and indirectly through the propaganda machine of the Russian state. The war on social media platforms is continuous, close, and intimate, and there are no warning alarms when the audience is targeted. Instead, the operation takes various forms, and is often so subtle that only users with a high degree of media literacy can recognize the fake news.

The ethnic Hungarians, about 150,000 people, make up [0,3% of the population](#), and live mainly in the Zakarpattia Oblast region – Kárpátalja in Hungarian, also known as Transcarpathia or Subcarpathia – in the southwestern part of the country bordering Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland. This region is multiethnic and has had a remarkably turbulent history. In the 20th century alone Transcarpathia has been part of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, the Soviet Union, and Ukraine. Without ever leaving the country, a person could have been a citizen of five different states. Until the Treaty of Trianon (1918) it was part of the Kingdom of Hungary, with the exception of a period in the 17th century when it belonged to the Transylvanian Principality under the rule of Gabriel Bethlen (1580-1629) and George I Rákóczy (1593-1648). The region occupies an important place in the Hungarian national imaginary: Árpád, the leader of the Hungarian tribes, allegedly crossed the Carpathian mountains at Veretsky Pass before settling in Pannonia. A statue commissioned by the Hungarian government from the Ukrainian sculptor of Hungarian ethnic origin Peter Matl was erected there in 2008. The Palanok Castle, also known as Munkács Castle in Mukachevo, became a symbol of anti-Habsburg resistance because in 1685, two years after the defeat of the Ottomans at the battle of Vienna, Ilona Zrínyi (1643-1703) did not surrender the castle but defended it successfully against the imperial army with a handful of Hungarian, Ruthenian, Slovakian, and German soldiers. These events have been memorialized numerous times by Hungarian artists and writers, especially during the 19th-century nation-building movement, and the Transcarpathian region has occupied a central place in Hungarian national narratives. Nationalist movements with imperial fantasies have recycled these historical imaginaries to appeal to their far-right electoral base; for example, [the radical right party Jobbik has argued for Hungarian autonomy in Zakarpattia](#) on numerous occasions.

The Hungarians in Ukraine have not started separatist movements, nor have they advocated reunification with Hungary. Their political goal has been autonomy within Ukraine. The Hungarian Cultural Association of Zakarpattia (Kárpátaljai Magyar Kulturális Szövetség - KMKSZ) issued [a declaration](#) according to which they condemn the Russian aggression and fully support the territorial integrity of Ukraine. László Brenzovics, the head of the KMKSZ, has appeared several times in Hungarian mainstream media praising the humanitarian aid provided by Hungary. The day after the elections on Sunday 3 April, the KMKSZ issued a [statement](#) congratulating Viktor Orbán on his victory and reassuring the Hungarian minority in Ukraine about the protection of the Hungarian government, albeit slightly rewriting history when asserting that Hungary has been supportive of Ukraine’s EU membership. [In fact, Hungary had been blocking it until recently.](#)

The radical voices from Hungary, which intersect with Russia’s interest in destabilizing Ukraine, have an impact on the image of Hungary and Hungarians among Ukrainians and can lead to ethnic tensions. According to [one study](#), 42% of Ukrainians considered Hungary a friendly country in 2015, which decreased to 12% by 2020. Only Russia preceded Hungary on the list of countries with the worst image in Ukraine. Numerous incidents have been reported of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine being harassed by Ukrainian nationalists. In 2020 several Hungarian organizations in Transcarpathia received [threatening letters signed Ukrainianwolf](#) telling them “Hungarian dogs, go home!” Putin’s claim about a “Nazi Ukraine” is a blatant lie, but [the violence of far-right Ukrainian extremists](#) has historically damaged relations with the Hungarian minority.

The Hungarian-language newspapers and online news platforms in Ukraine report on the war in a factual manner and neutral tone, focusing mainly on the movements of the Russian and Ukrainian troops and on the humanitarian aid provided by Hungary. But if one reads the commenting threads of these newspapers on Facebook, the picture of the political attitudes of the Hungarian public becomes more controversial, reflecting a far more complex and polarized reality than the usually balanced reporting of the newspapers would suggest. These comments under the articles matter, because it has been scientifically proven that [commenting threads influence](#) the public significantly with respect even to such neutral topics as nanotechnology. When it comes to political issues that are naturally divisive, the effect of the commenting



threads can have far-reaching consequences. Internet trolls, bots, but also human users with extreme views can cause cascading waves of violence online and offline. Moderation in time of war is a difficult task, and strict rules can even be loosened; in order to punish the invaders, [Facebook](#) decided to temporarily allow calls for violence against Russian soldiers, the Russian and Belarusian presidents, and praise for the [far-right Azov battalion](#). Russian state media outlets like RT and Sputnik were banned by mainstream social media platforms in the West. However, inflammatory speech can take more subtle forms. Polarizing narratives are harder to moderate than straightforward calls to kill.

For the past month I have been observing the postings of Facebook users on a number of Hungarian-language newspapers and online news platforms with a Facebook profile. There are many posts in these groups that are either pro-Russian or in line with the Russian official narrative of the war, according to which NATO and the US provoked President Putin into launching the invasion. Another narrative that gains ground is about the violence of Ukrainian soldiers against their own people, thus minimizing Russian violence in the war and shifting blame to the Ukrainians for the scale of destruction and human suffering. Among the most common tropes mentioned in comments are “Ukrainian corruption,” “self-inflicted tragedy,” “western manipulation,” “serving US interests,” and “incompetent Ukrainian government.” Remarkably, little or no anger is expressed against the Russians, and there are no negative or harsh remarks about President Putin. On the contrary, President Zelensky is often referred to as a “clown,” as “incompetent,” or as being “the puppet of President Biden.” Typically, the articles published by these Hungarian news outlets in Ukraine on social media have a handful – hardly ever more than fifty – “likes” and comments. The most viciously anti-Ukrainian comments in the threads come from male users who according to their Facebook profiles live in Hungary. The language used is often vulgar and hostile towards Ukrainians. It is ironic that the motto of the newspaper *Kárpáti Igaz Szó* (True Word of the Carpathians) on Facebook is “The paper of fastidious readers,” which is in stark contrast with the reality on Facebook.

The comments echo the same attitudes and opinions as the Hungarian far-right and pro-government social media and online platforms. The master narrative is that the war in Ukraine is a collision between two world powers, Russia and the US. Russia saw an opportunity to enforce its interests in Ukraine. The war could have been prevented, had the Ukrainian government not succumbed to pressure from the US and NATO to provoke Russia by insisting on NATO and EU membership. The mantra of the Hungarian government is that the war in Ukraine is “not our war,” therefore Hungary will not send weapons to Ukraine and wants to be neutral and urge Russia and Ukraine to begin peace negotiations. During the recent parliamentary elections won with a sweeping victory by Orbán’s party, Fidesz, the last stage of the campaign focused on the war, and Orbán was portrayed as the guarantor of peace in Hungary and the protector of the Hungarians in Zakarpattia. The coalition of the opposition parties lined up against Orbán were repeatedly depicted as warmongers who would send arms and troops to Ukraine, and would thus endanger the lives of Hungarians. The campaign was effective, and Fidesz won the election by a two-thirds majority.

[The reunification of Transcarpathia with Hungary is a conspiracy theory](#) that has been circulating among the Hungarian far-right fringes, and through social media has also reached a Transcarpathian Hungarian audience, but it has not mobilized people to take any concrete political action. Neither the Hungarian government nor Hungarian organizations in Transcarpathia have ever mentioned or even implicitly alluded to this option. Nonetheless, the Kremlin-friendly stance of the Hungarian government helps such conspiracy theories to become mainstream, as [the general public is confused about the war and tends to blame NATO and the US instead of firmly condemning Russia](#).

In 2014, following the Russian occupation of Crimea, [Orbán advocated for the autonomy of the Hungarians in Zakarpattia](#), which was firmly rejected by Ukrainian politicians who argued that such a proposal serves Putin’s plans to further destabilize Ukraine. Though Orbán has never referred to irredentism directly, his claim and support for autonomy was a tactic to secure the votes of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine, to whom he has issued passports and given the right to vote in Hungarian elections.

The spreading of conspiracy theories can start a chain reaction, stirring up further [nationalist fervor in countries like Slovakia](#), where some conservative politicians have expressed their fears that Orbán, with the help of Putin, aims to reclaim the Slovakian territories with a large Hungarian minority that were given to Slovakia after the Treaty of Trianon. After the recent elections, however, both the Hungarian government and the Fidesz party started expressing opinions that are closer to the EU. For example, Hungary would now support Ukraine’s EU membership, though for the past few years it has been blocking it because of the [language law in Ukraine](#) that does not protect minority languages and would restrict the use of Hungarian in public life. Such a language law was meant [to enhance national identity](#) by boosting the status of Ukrainian as a tool for nation-building in times when Russia has used the same argument to justify invasion, referring to Russian-speaking communities and the protection of a Russian culture that is endangered by Ukrainian nationalist policies.



A violent incident from 2018 shows how such ethnic manipulation can have international dimensions: three Polish citizens, members of the far-right Falanga party, who were fighting in the Donbas region on the side of the separatist republics, [threw Molotov cocktails into the building of the Society of Hungarian Culture in Uzhhorod](#) (Ungvár in Hungarian) in an attempt to provoke further tensions between Ukrainians and Hungarians in Zakarpattia. The three Poles were hired to commit the crime by a German journalist with suspected links to the Russian Federal Security Service. This case demonstrates that Moscow is interested in creating tension and further destabilizing Ukraine.

The Rusyn or Ruthenian community in Zakarpattia has also been targeted by Russian propaganda. In 2008, Dimitry Sidor, a priest and the leader of the Soym of the Rusyns (the General Assembly of the Ruthenians in Transcarpathia), was placed under investigation and accused of endangering the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state by [advocating the independence of Ruthenians in Ukraine](#). He denied the accusations and argued that his goal was autonomy within Ukraine and not state separatism. Sidor has been suspected of operating under Russian influence.

[In 2015 the Russian TASS press agency](#) concocted fake news about a congress held by Ruthenians who demanded autonomy. This surprised the Ruthenians in Mukachevo, who saw the news all over the Ukrainian press. Petro Getsko, who is referred to as “the Ruthenian Prime Minister” by TASS, has not been seen by the locals for years. Ethnic [Romanians in Bukovyna were also allegedly seeking independence according to Russian fake news](#). This fake report about the Romanian secessionist movement in Ukraine was later seamlessly taken over by international media. Since 2014 Russia has been staging online and real-life fake separatist protests in Lviv, [Odesa](#), and Transcarpathia. In 2016 the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, an information portal, warned about the [Russian fabrication or encouragement of fringe separatist movements in Ukraine](#), and warned the world about Russia’s plans to stir further havoc and to create causes to justify invading Ukraine.

Indeed, since 2014 Hungarian political life has been dominated by massive nationalist online and real-life propaganda. Populist ethno-nationalism was becoming more ubiquitous both at the bottom, in obscure chatgroups on the internet, and at the top, in the form of well-organized governmental anti-immigration campaigns. The government used the image of George Soros for scaremongering about “foreign invasion” on every conceivable advertising surface, from billboards along the highways to posters along the escalators in metro stations. The message of these governmental campaigns resonated with a public that was also confronted with transnational conspiracy theories online about “the Great Replacement,” according to which there exists a master plan to replace the white population in Europe with Muslims and black people. In an article from 2018, the Hungarian far-right online media platform *888.hu* described Ukraine as [“the greatest puppet state of the American CIA”](#), and suggested that Germany had tried to influence the outcome of the Russian elections. The message that such “analysis” conveys is that the West is interfering in foreign elections, so when Russia uses the “same tactics” it is merely responding to the provocations of the West. This narrative has become dominant and mainstreamed in right-wing Hungarian media. Such reporting explains how the right-wing public in Hungary, and the Hungarian minorities abroad following these media outlets, have been conditioned to view Russia not as a bully but as a victim of bullying by the West.

[The whole far-right media ecosystem is under Russian influence in Hungary](#), according to a study using big data analysis published in 2018 by the Corruption Research Centre in Budapest. In terms of semantic signals, Moscow is much closer to Budapest than Brussels. The research concluded that numerous texts were not written in Hungarian but were direct translations from Russian or English, resulting in unnatural grammatical structures and unidiomatic phrases. Fringe Russian news portals like *hidfo.ru* were mainstreamed in media outlets close to the Hungarian government. When the CRC research compared the Hungarian online news websites in terms of their geographical distance from Moscow, they found that most right-wing websites were “closer” to Moscow and were effectively “in Russia,” while [only two \(the Index.hu and mno.hu\) were in Hungary](#) according to this calculation.

This toxic online environment can have serious real-life consequences and endanger the coexistence of the Ukrainians and the Hungarians in Ukraine. It can lead to hate crimes and extreme actions as it undermines trust between the two ethnic communities. The conflict that evolved into [verbal skirmishes](#) between President Zelensky and the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán influences public perception of the war. In the [speech](#) given after his massive reelection, Viktor Orbán confronted President Zelensky and referred to him as “an opponent” along with the EU and the liberal opposition in Hungary. Orbán and his government have reassured the Hungarian minority in Ukraine several times that Hungary would support and defend them in case of emergency. The best way to protect the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia would be to support Ukraine in the war and stop the political double-speak, which partly satisfies the Kremlin while partly agreeing with the EU and NATO. The Hungarian government keeps repeating that it condemns the war, is in



full agreement with NATO and the EU, and has voted in support of sanctions against Russia, but at the same time the state-controlled media pays little attention to the horrific massacre in Bucha, and voices critical of President Putin are almost non-existent.

To conclude, minorities are vulnerable to the effects of (social) media manipulation, especially when fringe extremism is being mainstreamed by politicians or legacy media. A greater awareness of online disinformation and fake news could impede their destructive influence on the co-existence of ethnic communities. Hungarian internet users need to be more alert to (foreign) manipulation and should realize that hate speech online can be followed by hate crimes in real life. Media literacy campaigns and moral clarity in legacy media regarding the Russian aggression would be helpful. The future of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine depends not only on their representation in Kyiv, but also on developing cordial relations between Ukraine and Hungary. A change of tone of the Orbán government towards President Zelensky would be a right step in this direction.

[Back to overview](#)

