Political Capital: Coronavirus and disinformation
in association with Euronews Hungary

Executive summary

- A wide range of actors are spreading disinformation and manipulative statements about the coronavirus epidemic: sensationalist fake news sites, populist politicians, internal political actors, authoritarian regimes (Russia and China), but even "celebrities" pursuing popularity. In our study, we mapped Hungary's disinformation universe, comparing its characteristics to international trends.

- **The Covid-19 epidemic is a new opportunity for Russia and China to deteriorate trust in the Western institutional order.** Russian disinformation campaigns are attacking the European Union especially vehemently. Besides sowing informational disorder, the Kremlin primarily aims at deteriorating Western populations' trust in their own governments, and political-economic and institutional systems. The main tools of the Kremlin to disseminate its messages are its allies in the West, mostly populist politicians. Beijing's primary efforts are focusing on avoiding the association of the Covid-19 epidemic with China, defecting the blame to the US. **Both Russian and Chinese disinformation and "mask diplomacy" are striving to depict Putin's "sovereign democracy" and the Chinese communist regime as an alternative to Western liberal democracies.** In countries severely affected by the virus (e.g., Russia), there is a high level of susceptibility to such messages.

- **In March, a considerable anti-EU campaign developed on the international level, as well as in Hungarian government-controlled and pro-Russian media, contrasting the EU's lack of action, failure with the success of nation states and the lack of solidarity from Brussels with the humanitarian aid of the Russian regime.** Populist parties have placed the coronavirus outbreak in the context of migration, which has thematized European public affairs since 2015. This anti-EU campaign might deteriorate the European population's views on the European Union and strengthen support for Eastern regimes.

- **Demand for manipulative articles and disinformation concerning the coronavirus is extremely high.** On the 15 Hungarian sites examined in this study, we found several hundred articles that were deceptive in some way, which generated numerous interactions, reaching hundreds of thousands of Hungarians. A large number of disinformation narratives are spreading internationally as well. The phrase "infodemic" used by the WHO is not at all an exaggeration.

- **Narratives representing Moscow's interests are present in the Hungarian media space without any efforts made by the Kremlin.** The key narratives revealed by the European External Action Service (EEAS) closely resemble the contents of the Hungarian articles under examination (e.g., "only Russia and China help, the EU does not").

- The majority of popular Hungarian influencers called on their followers to act responsibly (stay at home), but there were some important exceptions as well. **Influencers can even reach audiences that would not see manipulative information otherwise.** One of the largest opinion-former groups working under the fictive character Tibi Atya, which has one of the largest audiences in Hungary, used its communication channels to deteriorate trust in traditional media, suggesting

that the situation is not as severe as they claim it to be. Others tried to exploit the situation by promoting food supplements. Another rather popular celebrity, singer Barbi Opicz advocated for drinking water with a 3% hydrogen-peroxide content as a remedy for the virus.

- **It is important to note that several Hungarian portals, blogs, etc. have become notably more cautious in spreading disinformation – presumably, in part, due to the actions taken by authorities.** In March 2020, even some of the best-known Hungarian conspiratorial portals focused on reporting official data from authorities. This does not mean that coronavirus-related disinformation disappeared, rather that the manipulative narratives that had already been spread earlier were supplemented by reports on official data for "safety reasons". The strong actions taken by Hungarian authorities against portals spreading fake news concerning the coronavirus (e.g., arrests, sites shut down) might have made the editors of some sites more cautious. For disinformation portals seeking to earn an income from advertising, it might be better worth it to stay out of the "coronavirus business" and avoid scrutiny by authorities, so they can freely continue their activities on other topics.

Policy recommendations

- The pandemic brought few novelties to the disinformation market, it rather updated, repackaged already available fake news and conspiracy theories. Several countries could have been more prepared for the disinformation epidemic with the introduction of media awareness education and a stricter regulation on large tech companies. **While in Hungary there is currently no political will to act, and it is unlikely to be there in the near future considering that the incumbent government is among the main sources of manipulative narratives, Western states will have to think about taking tangible action to restrict the spread of disinformation.**
- We believe that the following ten steps could help the fight against disinformation:
    - **More EU funding and stronger resilience:** The European Union, as one of the main targets of authoritarian and populist disinformation, must strengthen its efforts against fake news; for instance, by increasing funding for already existing resources (e.g., EEAS Disinfo team).
    - **Protecting media freedom.** Improving the training of journalists and the protection of the freedom of speech and the media is important not only in the EU but also in states seeking to join the Union. Media plurality does not offer complete protection against disinformation, but it weakens the effects of state-sponsored fake news.
    - **Implementing media awareness training in school curricula.** Member states should consider implementing into their school curricula basic knowledge about the functioning of democracies and democratic societies, the rule of law, the operation of international institutions and civil society. Although education is a competency of member states, more coordination is needed on the EU level.
    - **Better communication – for instance by EU representations.** The Union should communicate its results in managing the crisis to a broader audience and more frequently. Pro-EU governments, parties, politicians should show even more willingness to cooperate on managing the crisis, as populist forces and great powers interested in
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weakening the EU will also depict member states' failure to reach agreements as a failure of the Union. This could significantly deteriorate Europeans' views on the EU.

o **Strengthening cyber security.** All European, national and local legislators should receive cyber security training to avoid having their accounts hacked. Thus, instances could be avoided when documents stolen from legislators' accounts find their way to the public with manipulated contents. These are subsequently used in campaigns against EU institutions, pro-EU actors – as it happened multiple times in past years.

o **Social media should make more efforts against fake news, including in the case of smaller languages.** Large social media companies should in general make stronger efforts against disinformation. They must ensure that their algorithms do not help the creation of information bubbles and that they bury manipulative content as much as possible. Extraordinarily extremist contents must be removed from their sites swiftly. Fact-checking cannot be restricted to large languages (English, French, German) – as, for instance, Facebook currently has no verified Hungarian-language fact-checkers.

o **The population must be aided in accessing credible information.** Euronews should be available in all EU member states in the local language in the cheapest cable TV package. Moreover, independent media should pay more attention to EU-related issues, reporting on them in a simple, easy-to-understand manner.

o **Large companies should not advertise on fake news sites.** It is the responsibility of large companies to avoid advertising on sites with manipulative contents because (1) it stains their reputation and (2) improves the acceptance of such sites. Moreover, the successes of the Eurosceptic, populist forces these portals usually support could be detrimental to firms' financial success if they managed to implement their agenda on the national or European level.