

# **Foreign Policy Discourse: Misinformation and Disinformation in the Legacy Media and on Social Media Produced by Journalists, Diplomats, Experts and Fact-checking/Debunking Initiatives in the Visegrad Four Countries Compared with Policies Tackling Disinformation: An Exploratory Study**

or

## **When Alternative Reality in Foreign Affairs is the King and Freedom of Speech on Platforms is the Queen**

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This article is comparative exploratory analysis of significant and symptomatic occurrences of misinformation and disinformation (with a focus on the Caucasus region and Russia) in the legacy media and on social media produced by journalists/media, diplomats, experts and fact-checking/debunking initiatives within EU in general, and in the Visegrad four countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) specifically. The examples found (in particular, coverage, commentaries and analyses of Georgian-Russian 2008 war and the Smolensk crash accident in 2010) are then compared with the most recent legislative initiatives aimed at targeting “fake news” or freedom of speech on social media in these countries. It is found that on the one hand there are peculiar but not always really fully rationally explainable conditions when and why some foreign policy issues have been misinterpreted. This misintepretation is being kept unchanged and continues unchanged to be further disseminated within specific discourses among specific groups of stakeholders. On the other hand there have been identified certain interesting correlations between these foreign policy misinformation and disinformation tendencies and approaches towards tackling misinformation and disinformation at more general country levels. These findings thus uniquely bridge events and policies in more than a decade span, and moreover, they do it with focus at both domestic and foreign policies. There are rather significant theoretical (academic) and political (foreign policy) implications originating from this study. For the former category, there are implications for media/journalists, as well as foreign policy analysts. For the latter category, there are implications for politicians and diplomats. In conclusion, the study offers an array of identified but not yet really fully explored follow up research topics.

### **I. Introduction**

One has to agree with Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach that „Fake news is one of the most overused and badly defined terms in the modern political and media vocabulary.“<sup>1</sup> There have been measures taken by state authorities, including legislative and other regulatory initiatives, and policies designed, in particular by the European Union (EU), that should stop or prevent malign foreign influence seen as “information warfare”, being part of hybrid operations by countries. For example, following Russian invasion to Ukraine, there was rather quickly introduced EU-wide ban on five Russian media operating within the EU.<sup>2</sup> The

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1 [Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach](https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/fake-news-in-visegrad-overused-and-underestimated/), *Fake News in Visegrad: Overused and Underestimated*, Green European Journal, (2018), <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/fake-news-in-visegrad-overused-and-underestimated/>

2 First RT English, RT UK, RT Germany, RT France, and RT Spanish, and then later on Rossiya RTR/RTR Planeta, Rossiya 24/Russia 24, TV Centre International, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>.

explanation offered was that: „Russia uses all these state-owned outlets to intentionally spread propaganda and conduct disinformation campaigns, including about its military aggression against Ukraine.“<sup>3</sup> Clearly, within communication area of foreign policy making and execution, the major attention is focused on impact of malign foreign actors on domestic and foreign policy of EU Member States<sup>4</sup> (M.S.) or Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> Only occasionally international or nation-wide media from liberal-democratic countries are randomly mentioned as producers or disseminators of fake news.<sup>6</sup> There is very little academic focus (in contrast to watch-dog organisations' work) at domestic production of fake news in foreign policy arena by relevant internal political players (in contrast to local media and social media platforms seen as facilitators here) as well there is little focus how fact-checking and debunking initiatives perform in this specific area. As put by Sadouskaya-Komlach, many local intellectual (in particular, academic) elites (in contrast to journalists and independent fact-checkers and debunkers) are by and large „turning a blind eye to the peddling of misinformation by their own ruling elites.“<sup>7</sup> This is in part related to larger issue of local politics (e.g. there is pressure on opposition or critical voices in general), issue of academic research standards and interests (e.g. it is difficult if not impossible to build great theories on such case studies), but it is also related to terminology used (e.g. fake news are attributed to those with whom we tend politically disagree) and constitutional rights (fake news producers tend to abuse their constitutional right to freedom of speech regardless of potential consequences of their communication efforts while some governments tend to abuse constitutional rights if they feel threatened by fake news producers). In short, there are legal-constitutional issues, as well as empirical-practical problems in foreign policy thinking and policy execution associated (not only) with controversial definitions and labeling of quite many news, speeches, statements or calls as being (partly or fully based on) fake news or disinformation/misinformation (or at least, identifying them as containing some important elements of incorrect data). There are many academic and (depending on a country) policy debates and studies on proper approaches to regulating either social media (as a major source or the main disseminator of disinformation and misinformation), or regulating „fake news“ in general.<sup>8</sup>

However, as a result, there is usually ignored - but there certainly exists - a paradoxical problem that deserves more systematic academic attention, related to occasional or more

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<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/#individual>

3 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/#individual>

4 For example, Ireneusz Ciosek, AGGRAVATING UNCERTAINTY, RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE WEST 57-72, *Toruńskie Studia Międzynarodowe* 1, (2020);

5 Elīna Lange-Ionatamišvili, Jānis Bērziņš, Aivar Jaeski, Mark Laity, Nerijus Maliukevičius, Aurimas Navys, Gerry Osborne, Robert Pszczel, Stephen Tatham, *ANALYSIS OF RUSSIA'S INFORMATION CAMPAIGN AGAINST UKRAINE* (2015).

6 For example, Adrian-Viorel Dragomir, Robert HELLVIG, Constantin Adrian Blănaru, AN ANALYSIS OF THE EVENTS THAT LED TO THE EXACERBATION OF THE BLACK SEA CRISIS IN THE LAST DECADE AND THE ROLE OF DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION, *Internal Auditing & Risk Management*, 28-53 (66/2022 ), Monthly brief no. 16 – EDMO fact-checking network argued that “A new anti-Russia disinformation narrative emerged in September, with many false news exaggerating (e.g.) or caricaturing (e.g.) the phenomenon of Russian young males fleeing the country to escape the mobilization.”

7 [Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach](https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/fake-news-in-visegrad-overused-and-underestimated/), *Fake News in Visegrad: Overused and Underestimated*, *Green European Journal*, 2018, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/fake-news-in-visegrad-overused-and-underestimated/>

8 Amy Kristin Sanders, Rachael L. Jones, and Xiran Liu, STEMMING THE TIDE OF FAKE NEWS: A GLOBAL CASE STUDY OF DECISIONS TO REGULATE, *J. INT'L MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT LAW* 8(2), (2019), 203-228, ANDREI RICHTER, Fake News and Freedom of the Media, *J. INT'L MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT LAW* 8(1) (2018-2019), 1-33, Andrej Školokay, An Exploratory Study of Global and Local Discourses on Social Media Regulation, *Global Media Journal – German edition*, 10(1), 2020,

regular disinformation/misinformation or, indeed, mal-information, produced by local (national) or EU authorities, experts, journalists/media and – ironically – fact-checking initiatives themselves - among liberal-democratic states within foreign policy field. It is true that there are some local fact-checking initiatives (e.g. demagog.cz, demagog.sk, demagog.pl, lakmusz.hu and atlasvlivu.cz) that focus on this specific area – primarily checking statements of local or foreign politicians in political current affairs debates. However, there is somehow sidelined an issue of producing or/and disseminating sometimes rather fundamental misinformation, disinformation and mal-information in foreign policy thinking, making and analysis and debunking by governmental authorities, experts, media and fact-checking initiatives. Obviously, domestic issues are more attractive, easier to comprehend and it is easier to double-check them for local media and audiences at large. However, foreign policy is in no way unimportant issue for smaller or medium sized states, as Russian invasion to Ukraine clearly demonstrates. Moreover, some foreign policy issues such as those in the Caucasus region, or focused on Russia, are either blurred for local audiences (e.g. Georgia-Russia War of 2008) and/or they are politically interpreted and thus instrumentalised (e.g. the Smolensk air crash in 2010). Most often, audiences get familiar with these foreign policy issues through media reporting, or, increasingly, through discussions on social media.

This issue is perhaps even more pronounced in democracies that slide towards autocracies, and/or within ideologically conservative regimes such as Hungary and Poland. For example, public service media (PSM) in Poland are often seen as disseminating fake news, or, in old terms, pro-governmental propaganda.<sup>9</sup> This can be seen in a rather bizarre criminal defamation court case (2019-2022) in which PSM TVP ("Polish Television"; one of the key TV stations in Poland) unsuccessfully sued a law professor who criticised some Polish media as "Goebbels media".<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in Hungary, the government and its affiliated entities (including pro-governmental PSM) are seen by some observers as an occasional source of fake news or even producers of disinformation campaigns.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in case of Hungary, "the channels used to distribute pro-government propaganda ... are not automated Twitter bots or untraceable Facebook accounts, but media outlets supported with government money, including widely read newspapers dependent on state advertising, online news sites teeming with government-funded banners, and morning talk shows on the public television channel."<sup>12</sup> In that sense, "the Hungarian model is unique in the EU in that it is government-managed and government-funded. Finally, "... the fact that the Orbán government has .....gradually silencing independent media makes this model especially terrifying and effective."<sup>13</sup>

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9 Andrzej Krajewski, *Monitoring of the 2019 European Parliament election campaign in the main news programme of Polish public TV*, [https://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Masz%20Glos/RaportTDEnglFin\\_June%2010N.pdf](https://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Masz%20Glos/RaportTDEnglFin_June%2010N.pdf) (June 10, 2019); Krzysztof Bobiński and Andrzej Krajewski, *Polish public television: propaganda instead of news* (March 28, 2022), <http://towarzystwodziennikarskie.pl/en/2022/03/28/polish-public-television-propaganda-instead-of-news/>

10 [Daniel Tilles](#), *Polish state TV loses case against law professor who described it as "Goebbels media"*. Notes from Poland, (DEC 7, 2022), <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/12/07/polish-state-tv-loses-case-against-law-professor-who-described-it-as-goebbels-media/>

11 [Patrik Szicherle](#) and Péter Krekó, *Disinformation in Hungary: From fabricated news to discriminatory legislation*, (7 June 2021), <https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/06/07/disinformation-hungary-fabricated-news-discriminatory-legislation>

12 Márton Bede, *Analysis: Hungarian taxpayers fund unique 'fake news' industry* (26.1.2021), <https://ipi.media/analysis-hungarian-taxpayers-fund-unique-fake-news-industry/>

13 Márton Bede, *Analysis: Hungarian taxpayers fund unique 'fake news' industry* (26.1.2021), <https://ipi.media/analysis-hungarian-taxpayers-fund-unique-fake-news-industry/>

Clearly, it is precisely this paradoxical international and regional political and media context that makes this comparative exploratory study of fake news/hoaxes and /disinformation/misinformation/mal-information in foreign policy discourses of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia both needed and challenging. How come that Hungary and Poland, countries that had been seen as political forerunners in political and economic reforms in the 1990s, currently seem to be relatively so much (considering either frequency, intensity and/or impact, as well as intentionality) involved in producing and/or disseminating foreign policy fake news and hoaxes at governmental and pro-governmental (media sector) levels? But do Czech Republic and Slovakia really fare much better here, or maybe one can identify some fake news and hoaxes or /disinformation/misinformation at governmental and in the media sectors with focus or impact on foreign policy in these countries, too? And if the latter is case, what does it tell us about this issue? At a very theoretical level (not discussed in detail here), can one perhaps argue that with respect to foreign malign influence, paradoxically, „...perceived democracy destruction can in effect be democracy promotion“<sup>14</sup>? Is it possible that, in some countries at least, and perhaps ironically, “Government propaganda, media concentration, self-censorship and the failure of the democratic left are more of a threat than the global “fake news” „, as put by Aleksandra Eriksson already in 2018?<sup>15</sup>

As will be shown, and as it could have been perhaps expected, there are actually quite many challenges with respect to interpretation of events and policies that concern foreign policy towards Russia or of Russia towards its neighbours. This was (until Russian invasion to Ukraine in 2022) perhaps the most pronounced in the Caucasus region, and, from perspective of the EU M.S., in Poland and Hungary.

The article further discusses these issues in the following parts. First, it further clarifies the research questions, methodology used and the cases selection procedure. Then, it reviews previous research on the topic(s). This review could be done in a limited way only. There is no specific research that would cover selected researched issues here in a systematic comparative way, or indeed, in all covered research fields. Moreover, this review could be done from many different perspectives, as we explain later on. Then there follows explanation on how fake news, hoaxes, disinformation and misinformation are understood and defined (either legally, or in public-media discourses) in V4 countries. This allows us to understand why there have been different approaches chosen to allegedly the same malign threats, as we discuss next. Connected to this, we discuss also local initiatives against fake news / misinformation / disinformation in V4 as well as we discuss identified (officially or unofficially, or explicitly versus tacitly) major sources that have been labeled as originators of fake news, misinformation / disinformation in V4 countries. We shall see that there is certain political logic behind these divergent results. In particular, this overview allow us to understand why individual governments have enacted (or did not enact) certain regulatory measures and legislative initiatives against fake news, misinformation / disinformation. Then follows a major part of this contribution – selected examples of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information produced and/or disseminated by journalists, diplomats, experts and fact-checking/debunking initiatives. We conclude with analytical interpretation

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14 Hans Klein, “INFORMATION WARFARE AND INFORMATION OPERATIONS: RUSSIAN AND U.S. PERSPECTIVES.” *Journal of International Affairs* 71,(1.5), (2018): 135–42.

15 Aleksandra Eriksson, *The Pitfalls of Censoring Fake News*, Visegrad Insight (22 March 2018), <https://visegradinsight.eu/the-pitfalls-of-censoring-fake-news/>

of these complex findings and with suggestion of research questions and topics for follow up research.

## II. Research Questions, Methodology and Case Selection Procedure

This comparative research is based on case study methodology and exploratory approach.<sup>16</sup> For the case studies, relatively homogenous sample was selected – four democracies in Central-East Europe that are part of loosely defined regional foreign policy lobby group – the Visegrad Group. These are the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The Visegrad Group (also known as the "Visegrad Four" or "V4") self-defines its purpose as „to work together in a number of fields of common interest within the all-European integration“.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the selection of this foreign policy lobby group is relevant from the point of methodology since it allegedly represents rather homogeneous sample. This can be seen in further self-description of V4 countries that „have always been part of a single civilization sharing cultural and intellectual values and common roots in diverse religious traditions, which they wish to preserve and further strengthen.“<sup>18</sup> However, as will be documented furthermore, and as it was already documented at the level of national regulatory authorities,<sup>19</sup> and as it has already been suggested, in spite of these allegedly shared cultural values, there are quite heterogeneous approaches to tackling fake news/misinformation/disinformation in these four countries. Moreover, there is radically different - less radical and/or the least anti-Russian foreign policy of the Hungarian government within the EU, and the most anti-Russian foreign policy of Poland, certainly within V4 and possibly within EU, too (maybe with exceptions of the Baltic states). This actually puts this case selection into category of „the most diverse cases.“

As it is typical for exploratory approach, the goal of this contribution is to identify problems, clarify concepts, and suggest hypotheses.<sup>20</sup> By 'problems' it is understood a) whether and why there is an issue with fake news/disinformation/misinformation in foreign affairs within V4 bloc?, b) How serious is this issue – are there extreme cases of /disinformation/misinformation found in foreign policy in V4 countries?, c) Can the main sources of important fake news/disinformation/misinformation in this area be e.g. governments, diplomats, media, etc?, d) If so, how is it possible that fake news/disinformation/misinformation are produced not only by „foes“, but also by those players (e.g. governments or ministries of foreign affairs) where one would not expect that to be the case in a liberal democracy? e) What can be possible consequences of analysed situation for foreign policy?

By 'clarifying concepts' we mean a) What is definition of fake news/disinformation/misinformation used? b) Who defines terminology for fake news/disinformation/misinformation and their producers and on what criteria within our

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<sup>16</sup> Exploratory research is defined as a research used to investigate a problem which is not clearly defined. It is conducted to have a better understanding of the existing problem, but will not provide conclusive results. For such a research, a researcher starts with a general idea and uses this research as a medium to identify issues, that can be the focus for future research. An important aspect here is that the researcher should be willing to change his/her direction subject to the revelation of new data or insight, <https://www.questionpro.com/blog/exploratory-research/>

<sup>17</sup> [About the Visegrad Group](https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about), <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about>

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> Andrej Školkay, Social Media Regulation from the Perspectives of National Media Regulatory Authorities in V4, *Mediální studia*, 14(2), 188-215 (2020)

<sup>20</sup> [Pertti Alasuutari](#), [Leonard Bickman](#), [Julia Brannen](#), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Research Methods (Sage Handbooks) 1st Edition, 2 (2009)*.

selection of countries? c) What do we mean by „vulnerability“ to foreign (specifically, Russian) influence?

By 'suggesting hypotheses' we aim tentatively to answer at least some of the above mentioned questions. As it is typical for exploratory research, we end up with more questions than answers – thus providing a fertile research ground for more qualitative or quantitative follow up research.

As mentioned, the issues of fake news and hoaxes/disinformation/misinformation has become politically and scientifically relevant not only regionally, but also at a EU level. However, as mentioned, there is relative lack of interest and related paucity of academic analyses of local production of misinformation and disinformation at high political level, save for some exceptions. In any case, these issues are usually single case studies, moreover, discussed from perspectives of psychology, or history, and tend to be rather descriptive. This in turn justifies the use of exploratory and comparative approach. It is the task of science, as well as strength of democracy, to have a critical look at its own failures. Finally, the Russian invasion to Ukraine highlights importance of foreign policy based on factually correct information and analyses. It is different to claim academically or politically that some event happen in one way or another, while this interpretation ultimately becomes a matter of life and death if this leads or contributes to waging or prolonging a major war. It should be mentioned that we are going to use terms fake news, hoaxes and disinformation or misinformation and mal-information as, by and large, synonyma throughout the text (with conceptual differences specified if needed and possible). This is so because sometimes it is difficult to argue whether one item should be called misinformation or disinformation or mal-information, or hoax. For example, it can be rationally assumed that some Polish politicians honestly believe that, for example, the Smolensk tragedy was caused by the Russian state. Therefore, it is difficult to call their stance as disinformation (using cited definition of disinformation here). Moreover, it will be shown that there exist nation-specific definitions of fake news/disinformation or hoaxes. Therefore, although we use more or less academically generally accepted definitions of these terms<sup>21</sup>, we also discuss local definitions of these terms later on.

### **III. Previous Research on The Topic: Challenging “Vulnerability” Concept**

There are many possible ways how to approach this overview, considering complexity and scope of this exploratory analysis. On the one hand, there was not identified any comparative research with this specific focus (topics, geography, actors, time-span, etc). On the other hand, some of discussed topics (e.g. Georgia-Russia War, The Smolensk Tragedy) have been extensively researched and discussed. Therefore, also due to space limitations, just one specific issue that seems to be relevant for a comparative focus and that broadens our knowledge (if reviewed critically) has been included in this review part. This is so called „Vulnerability Index“ that defines and identifies vulnerability towards foreign malign influence. Such data -if correct - may be found very useful for this type of analytical comparative studies. The Vulnerability Index (2021) analyzed “the vulnerabilities” of

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<sup>21</sup> Misinformation is false or inaccurate information. It is shared by accident without the intent to cause harm. Examples include rumors, insults and pranks. Disinformation is false information shared deliberately to mislead and cause harm and includes malicious content such as hoaxes, spear phishing and propaganda. A hoax is a widely publicized falsehood so fashioned as to invite reflexive, unthinking acceptance by the greatest number of people. Fake news is false or misleading information presented as news. Unlike misinformation, which is inaccurate because a reporter has confused facts, fake news is created with the intent to manipulate someone or something. C. Wardle, H. Derakhshan, “Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making” Council of Europe policy report DGI(2017)09, Council of Europe, (2017), <https://firstdraftnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/PREMS-162317-GBR-2018-Report-de%CC%81sinformation-1.pdf?x29719>.

selected countries towards foreign malign influence in five dimensions: public attitudes, political landscape, public administration, information landscape and civic and academic space.<sup>22</sup> Although we deal in this article primarily with domestic production, dissemination and interpretation of selected foreign policy narratives, this index (as well as other further cited similar indices) is still useful as an anchoring tool. However, anchoring we interpret here differently than the authors of this Index. It should be perhaps corrected that this Index is not so much about „vulnerability“<sup>23</sup> but, in our interpretation, it is specifically in the Hungarian case rather about the increased level of tolerance or even symbiosis (congruence) between the discourses and policies in two (or more) countries (in this case, Hungary and Russia, and to lesser degree China). In that sense, it could be perhaps better called „Congruence Index“. This important difference in terminological specification (in contrast to original authors' perception) reflects indicators used (as cited above, with the important impact of the political landscape and public administration) as well as it reflects in general rather sceptical long-term research results on the possible direct impact of propaganda of any type. For example, on the one hand, there is missing important variable in this index – general quality and quantity of foreign news as perceived by experts or publics, or, ideally, as presented in qualitative and quantitative studies. On the other hand, there are some indicators whose analytical usefulness may be seen as questionable – e.g. cyber security capacity.<sup>24</sup> There are other indicators that would benefit from revisions, too. For example, within cumulative indicator „Perception of Russia“ there are sub-indicators: „Russian military is better“, „Russia provokes conflicts“, „Russia is aggressive“, „Russia is a threat“. First, it is strange that for China there is only one sub-indicator – „China is a threat“. Second, on what bases can an average analyst or non-expert assess Russia's military abilities/qualities? Related, what is difference between the last three sub-indicators (provokes conflicts, aggressive, and a threat)? Be that as it may, how can one correctly assess whether Russia is aggressive when, as we shall see further, there are indeed wide misperceptions of some key recent relevant and related historical events? Third, it would be interesting to have included sub-indicator such as „Russia is a political model to follow“ – that would be possibly better indicator of how vulnerable are countries to Russia's (or China's) influence. There are many other variables and indices that would deserve critical discussion. Following this a very brief criticism with a few suggested modifications, we can explain further why we see that this index is more about congruence than about vulnerability in the Hungarian case. At best, it can be seen as „self-induced“ vulnerability. On a scale of 1-100 (0 is the most resilient and 100 the most vulnerable) the Vulnerability Index revealed the vulnerabilities towards the Russia's and Chinese's influence in Czechia (at 29 points), Slovakia (at 32) and Hungary (at 44) (data for Poland were unavailable) in 2021.<sup>25</sup> An earlier Vulnerability Index (2017) identified Hungary (at 57 points) as the most vulnerable country, closely followed by Slovakia (51), then followed with distance by both Czechia (38) and Poland (30).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, based on a different methodology, the Kremlin Influence Index (2017) identified Hungary (61) (compared with Czechia - 48, Georgia - 54, and Ukraine - 49) as the most

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22 <http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/>

23 Underrstood as „the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.“

24 [http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/downloads.html/Globsec\\_VI\\_Methodology.pdf](http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/downloads.html/Globsec_VI_Methodology.pdf)

25 <http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/>

26 Daniel Milo, Katarína Klingová, Vulnerability Index. SUBVERSIVE RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL EUROPE (2017), <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2017-08/globsec-vulnerability-index.pdf>

vulnerable country to the capacity of Russia to influence (initiate, change) the processes in the information space (production, exchange and consuming of information).<sup>27</sup>

As mentioned, we consider all these indices to be more likely indicators of discourses and policies congruence rather than indicators of vulnerability or as a source of influence in the process of information elaboration.

Based on this brief critical overview, and conceptual/terminological clarifications, one can assume that Hungary is not that much susceptible to foreign malign influence. Rather, we can assume that foreign policy issues may be most often and/or most successfully *internally* instrumentalised in Hungary for misinformation and disinformation purposes (aiming primarily at internal audiences) by local actors. But why is there a relatively and comparatively high congruence with Russian foreign policy in Hungary, as seen (to be discussed) in domestic instrumentalisation? The answers to this fundamental question differ. For example William Natrass argues that Hungary's 'pro-Russia' stance is the result of historical and recent political factors, many of which have been shaped by Orbán himself.<sup>28</sup> Others include here energy dependency and political model of Russia's illiberal state as the reason for Orbán's positive (or at least no so much critical) attitude towards Russia.<sup>29</sup> Péter Krekó found four main factors here: energy ties, business deals and corrosive capital, intelligence penetration, and information influence.<sup>30</sup> Others see this as just the distinct foreign policy path that was announced by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012 to pursue a multivector diplomatic and economic foreign approach based mainly on the economic interests of Hungary – so-called "Eastern Opening". Within this context, some authors rightly point to the increased vulnerability (but) *as a result of chosen policies*: „What the Hungarian government could really offer in return for the Chinese and Russian diplomatic support and some of these business deals favouring governmental oligarchs was increased vulnerability, starting with the Hungarian public sphere and ending with national security issues.“<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Balázs Orbán, political director to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has written in his book that Germany, Russia, USA and China, together with Turkey are the most significant powers for Hungary. Moreover, among the key ideas he expressed that „states pursue their own interests“ and „the most important actors in foreign policy are states“.<sup>32</sup>

Within this context, it may be true that the most disinformation during the elections campaign before 2019 European Parliament elections among EU member states was disseminated in Hungary.<sup>33</sup> This trend seemed to continue in Hungary, where news spread by Russian media were often picked up without any kind of criticism by the media in Hungary.<sup>34</sup> Some even argued that Russia disinformation (together with local structural

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27 Tamar Kintsurashvili, Dali Kurdadze, Sopho Gelava, Jakub Janda, Veronika Víchová, Győri Lóránt, Patrik Szicherle, oman Shutov, Diana Dutsyk, *Kremlin Influence Index, 2017* (12 June 2017), [http://www.cso.ge/view.php?type=research\\_reports&slug=kremlis-gavlenis-indeqsi-2017&lang=en](http://www.cso.ge/view.php?type=research_reports&slug=kremlis-gavlenis-indeqsi-2017&lang=en)

28 William Natrass, Hungary's 'pro-Russia' stance was inevitable, Politico, (SEPTEMBER 15, 2022 ), <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-pro-russia-stance-inevitable/>

29 Amanda Coakley, Putin's Trojan Horse Inside the European Union, Foreign Policy, (3 AUGUST 2022), [HTTPS://FOREIGNPOLICY.COM/2022/08/03/HUNGARY-ORBAN-RUSSIA-CONSERVATIVE-POLITICS/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/03/hungary-orban-russia-conservative-politics/)

30 Péter Krekó, Russian influence in Hungary, ING2 Committee Hearing on Russian interference in the EU: the distinct cases of Hungary and Spain. 27 October 2022, Brussels

31 Lóránt Győri, [HUNGARY GIVES UP ITS FIERCE PRO-KREMLIN STANCE AT LAST](https://vsquare.org/hungary-gives-up-its-fierce-pro-kremlin-stance-at-last/), VSQUARE, (03.03.2022), <https://vsquare.org/hungary-gives-up-its-fierce-pro-kremlin-stance-at-last/>

32 B. Orbán, *The Hungarian Way of Strategy*, Budapest, MCC Press, 2021, 180-182

33 Political Capital, *Putyin propagandája szolt a hazai kormánymediából az EP-kampányban*, (2019, May 24), <https://pcblog.atlatszo.hu/2019/05/24/putyin-propagandaja-szolt-a-hazai-kormanymediabol-az-ep-kampanyban/>

34 [Kafkadesk budapest](https://kafkadesk.org/), MEET LAKMUSZ, THE FACT-CHECKING SQUAD DEBUNKING FAKE NEWS IN HUNGARY (2022, FEBRUARY 3), [HTTPS://KAFKADESK.ORG/2022/02/03/MEET-LAKMUSZ-THE-](https://kafkadesk.org/2022/02/03/meet-lakmusz-the-)



conditions) facilitated Victor Orbán's consolidation of power.<sup>35</sup> This last claim is certainly exaggeration. It also should be explained that the Russian media do not play a significant role in any dissemination of Russia's preferred narratives among foreign audiences. Rather, they are a source of narratives for the local pro-Russian media, in particular fringe media.<sup>36</sup> It is useful to cite an expert opinion that, although not focused specifically on Hungarian situation, it is quite helpful here:

„The media, described as a tool of "Russian propaganda", do not offer much more as an alternative than support for some of the Kremlin's power moves abroad, for example in Syria or Ukraine. They do not present the existing model of political and socio-economic organization in the Russian Federation as a positive alternative. On the other hand, they concentrate various frustrations of a large part of the public, either from socio-economic development or from the wars led by the US and other Western states in various parts of the world, the legitimacy of which is at least questionable.“<sup>37</sup>

The argument here is that Hungarian authorities tolerate „alternative“ fringe news outlets, including those produced by foreign actors (e.g. Russia), precisely for identified reasons. This is simply due to the fact that the Hungarian authorities, and Hungarian pro-governmental media, instrumentalise occasionally these sources, and, moreover, themselves are involved in production of misinformation and disinformation. Perhaps most importantly, the government enforces foreign affairs policies and communications that are more in line with (or that are less critical to) policies of certain foreign actors than in the other three V4 countries (or the EU as such). As a result, Hungary's FIDESZ party's „anti-EU, anti-Western, and pro-Russian rhetoric has clearly had a long-term effect on the population's foreign-policy orientation.“<sup>38</sup> Indeed, there are many studies, some already cited (including Vulnerability Index that uses here data from V-Democracy Index) that point at misinformation and disinformation produced by authorities and pro-governmental outlets in Hungary and Poland in general.<sup>39</sup> There has also been for over a decade, Polish a PiS party “promoting a heterodox explanation model for the Smolensk tragedy—in other words, a conspiracy theory.”<sup>40</sup> We come to this issue, that plays in foreign policy opposite direction, back later on. What matters, it is that for this phenomenon, indeed, congruence or self-induced vulnerability (to irrational thinking lead by emotions in the Polish case) is better word than vulnerability. It is not just a matter of words used – it is a totally different analytical concept and perspective. We can indirectly support this novel finding (and suggested terminological corrections as well as resulting different analytical interpretations) with results from a comparative survey and three country specific national surveys.

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FACT-CHECKING-SQUAD-DEBUNKING-FAKE-NEWS-IN-HUNGARY/

35 Jonathan REISHER, The effect of disinformation on democracy: the impact of Hungary's democratic decline, CES Working Papers – Volume XIV, Issue 1, [https://ceswp.uaic.ro/articles/CESWP2022\\_XIV1\\_REI.pdf](https://ceswp.uaic.ro/articles/CESWP2022_XIV1_REI.pdf)

36 Kremlin Influence Index 2017: Joint Research Report. – Kyiv, Detector Media, (2017). p.8

37 Juraj Marušiak, Nielen o ruskej propagande, Pravda (3.01.2017),

<https://nazory.pravda.sk/analyzy-a-postrehy/clanok/415537-nielen-o-ruskej-propagande/>

38 Péter Krekó, Russian influence in Hungary, ING2 Committee Hearing on Russian interference in the EU: the distinct cases of Hungary and Spain. 27 October 2022, Brussels

39 E.g. Patrik Szicherle and Péter Krekó, *Disinformation in Hungary: From fabricated news to discriminatory legislation*, (7 June 2021), <https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/06/07/disinformation-hungary-fabricated-news-discriminatory-legislation>

40 Alois Streicher, Truth under Attack, or the Construction of Conspiratorial Discourses after the Smolensk Plane Crash, p.297 In: »Truth« and Fiction: Conspiracy Theories in Eastern European Culture and Literature, edited by Peter Deutschmann, Jens Herth and Alois Woldan, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020, pp. 279-300. (277-299),

The first survey shows attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees. Only Polish respondents showed more generous approach towards them (only 15% would allow „none or only a few“ of them). These „negative“ data for Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia were actually identical (and as different from Poland): approximately 40 %.<sup>41</sup> More ambiguous question („satisfaction with government actions towards Ukrainian refugees) showed more diverse results: Slovakia (3.7 out of 10), Czechia (4.1), Hungary (5.2) and Poland (5.5). We do not know whether governments were doing enough or should do more or less here. Finally, there was question about moral duty to (help) Ukraine/Ukrainian refugees. Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of Hungarians (59%) felt they have somewhat or extreme duty towards Ukraine, in contrast to about a third Czechs and Slovaks each. Poles were somewhere in between, reaching about 45%. Clearly, attitudes of Hungarians towards Ukrainians do not show any impact or susceptibility to Russian propaganda, rather on contrary.<sup>42</sup>

The second survey (July 2022) showed that more than half of Slovaks would welcome a military victory of Russia over Ukraine in autumn 2022.<sup>43</sup> The third survey from September 2022 (based on different methodology) showed that 47 % of Slovak respondents would prefer victory of Ukraine while victory of Russia would prefer only 19 % of respondents.<sup>44</sup> We do not know what would be the results for Hungary, but these national data (although a bit inconsistent), as well as already available comparative data question hypothesis about higher vulnerability of Hungarians (or Hungary, for that matter) towards foreign misinformation. This can be confirmed in another surveys, too.<sup>45</sup> For example, April-May 2022 survey found that Ukraine and Russia were both quite negatively perceived and judged by Hungarians, with Ukraine perceived a bit better ranking.<sup>46</sup>

The lesson from this overview is that, apparently, there is an analytical confusion or unacknowledged conceptual merger between “vulnerability” and “congruence”. Congruence suggests more active approach and in effect, a policy choice. It also suggests limited impact of propaganda (or fake news and disinformation). In contrast, vulnerability paints rather passive actors, possibly huge impact of propaganda and limited foreign policy choices. In general, and related, there appear to be used rather questionable variables for various indices. Many of these variables expect in-depth knowledge in many different areas – which is unrealistic goal. Moreover, sometimes contradictory, or at least little consistent results from public opinion surveys do not contribute to analytical clarity either. This all leads to rather controversial analytical conclusions as well as, possibly, it does not promote the best follow up foreign policy options for those actors who follow the original interpretation of this index. In contrast, alternative and correct terminology (and change in analytical

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41 [Lenka Dražanová and Andrew Geddes](#), Attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees and governmental responses in 8 European countries, Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute. (6 September 2022), <https://www.asileproject.eu/attitudes-towards-ukrainian-refugees-and-governmental-responses-in-8-european-countries/>

42 Surveyed a combined total of 8525 respondents in the eight countries between 25th May and June 6th 2022 with nationally representative samples of approximately 1000 respondents.

**43** Michal Hudec, Most Slovaks want Russia to win Ukraine war, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/most-slovaks-want-russia-to-win-ukraine-war/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/most-slovaks-want-russia-to-win-ukraine-war/) (15. 9. 2022)

44 [Lukáš Kovalčík](#), Vojna na Ukrajine: Takmer štvrtine Slovákov je jedno, kto zvíťazí. Alarmujúci je aj počet ľudí, ktorí fandí Rusku, (4 October 2022), <https://www.starhitup.sk/vojna-na-ukrajine-takmer-stvrtine-slovakov-je-jedno-kto-zvitazi-almujuci-je-aj-pocet-ktory-fandi-rusku/>

45 <https://hungarytoday.hu/ipsos-poll-survey-opinion-hungarians-war-ukraine-russia-sanction/>

46 [Andrea Szabó and Zsolt Enyedi](#), Opposition voters do not share their parties' pro-Ukraine stance, (27.5.2022), <https://telex.hu/english/2022/05/27/opposition-voters-do-not-share-their-parties-pro-ukraine-stance>

perspective) allows us to frame and explain divergent Hungarian findings in a proper analytical and comparative context.

#### IV. Understanding Fake News, Hoaxes and Disinformation/Misinformation in V4

As mentioned, although V4 countries are seen as culturally homogeneous, there have been used „drastically different approaches to understanding and tackling fake news“<sup>47</sup> in the past years. There was no consensus about the best regulatory approaches to social media either.<sup>48</sup>

In Poland, the concept of "disinformation", has been defined in the draft Act on the Protection of Freedom of Speech in Online Social Networks, drafted by the Ministry of Justice. Disinformation should be understood as "false or misleading information produced, presented and disseminated for profit or violation of a significant public interest or causing personal injury or property damage". The draft clearly states that disinformation is unlawful (Article 3(6)). Unlike the EU Code on disinformation, the Polish drafter covered not only public damage, but also damage caused to specific persons.<sup>49</sup> In addition, when it comes to public damage caused by disinformation, there is only regulation combating the dissemination of false information in connection with the election campaign as defined in the Electoral Code.

In Czechia, the Czech Ministry of Interior refers to "the "ABC approach" when identifying disinformation. There are three criteria : the accuracy of factual statements, balance in reporting and the credibility of the sources chosen.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, Manipulatori NGO defined disinformation as "lying, deceptive, false information that aims to influence the judgment and opinion of an individual, several persons or the entire society."<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Manipulatori NGO defined fake news as "false, distorted news. It involves the deliberate dissemination of misinformation through traditional or online media."<sup>52</sup> Similarly, hoax is defined as "a deliberately created deception masquerading as the truth. In a broader sense, it can also mean false news, mystification, alarm news, but also a joke."<sup>53</sup>

In Slovakia, the Police defined disinformation indirectly, as having „Main goal of primary disinformation creators ...to cause chaos in society and undermine trust in the state, which was directly related to spread of hatred and mistrust of state institutions. Disinformation has become a hybrid tool in a form of attack on the Slovak Republic interests as well as the security of its citizens.“<sup>54</sup>

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47 [Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach](https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/fake-news-in-visegrad-overused-and-underestimated/), *Fake News in Visegrad: Overused and Underestimated*, Green European Journal, 2018, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/fake-news-in-visegrad-overused-and-underestimated/>

48 Andrej Školkay, *Social Media Regulation from the Perspectives of National Media Regulatory Authorities in V4*, *Mediální studia* (2), (2020).

49 [Xawery Konarski](https://www.traple.pl/dezinformacja-online-jak-ja-rozumiec-i-jakie-sa-srodki-prawne-jej-zwalczania-w-polsce-i-ue/), *Dezinformacja online – jak ją rozumieć i jakie są środki prawne jej zwalczania w Polsce i UE*, 2022, <https://www.traple.pl/dezinformacja-online-jak-ja-rozumiec-i-jakie-sa-srodki-prawne-jej-zwalczania-w-polsce-i-ue/>

50 <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/clanek/dezinformacni-kampane-dokumenty-a-odkazy-dokumenty-a-odkazy.aspx>, Ben Nimmo, *Identifying disinformation: an ABC. IES Policy Brief Issue 2016/01 - February 2016*. [Policy Paper] (2016)

51 <https://manipulatori.cz/lexikon/dezinformace/>

52 <https://manipulatori.cz/lexikon/fake-news/>

53 <https://manipulatori.cz/lexikon/hoax/>

54 COMMUNICATION AND PREVENTION DEPARTMENT OF THE PRESIDUM OF THE POLICE FORCE, *POLICE FORCE REPORT ON DISINFORMATION OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC IN 2021*, 5, (2022), [https://www.minv.sk/swift\\_data/source/images/slovak-republic-report-dezinfo-2021.pdf](https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/images/slovak-republic-report-dezinfo-2021.pdf)

The Act on Cybersecurity (2022) included definition of “harmful content“ as “an activity, data or program resource that has or may result in damage or threat to security, foreign policy or economic interests of the Slovak Republic and is a form of hybrid threat.“  
 In Hungary, interestingly, following COVID19 pandemic since 2020, the local independent media, the opposition and international liberals became accused of producing fake news by PSM radio. The authors called this type of discourse about fake news as right-wing and populist.<sup>55</sup> On the official website koronavirus.gov.hu there is a list of governmental definitions of which we put two (untrue, panic-inducing information, type of fake news or prank mostly received by e-mail) into table. In addition, National Media and Communication Authority defined five hallmarks of fake news that we present in the following Table 1.

**Table 1: Definitions of Fake News / Hoaxes /Disinformation in V4**

Country	Disinformation	Fake News	Hoax	Other
<b>Czechia</b>	<p>The “ABC approach”: the accuracy of factual statements, balance in reporting and the credibility of the sources chosen.</p> <p>Lying, deceptive, false information that aims to influence the judgment and opinion of an individual, several persons or the entire society.</p>	<p>False, distorted news. It involves the deliberate dissemination of misinformation through traditional or online media.</p>	<p>A hoax is a deliberately created deception masquerading as the truth. In a broader sense, it can also mean false news, mystification, alarm news, but also a joke.</p>	
<b>Hungary</b>		<p>„ the news and opinions produced by local independent media, the opposition and international liberals“ (academic analysis)</p> <p>untrue, panic-inducing information (The Government)</p> <p>- starts from a well-known person or event (Bill Gates, Iraq war) - is of public interest - generates strong emotions (desire for money, fear of spiders.) - speaks in a style</p>	<p>type of fake news or prank mostly received by e-mail</p>	

55 Jenő Bódi, Gábor Polyák and Ágnes Urbán, Az álhír fogalmának átalakulása a közszolgálati híradóban. A Hirado.hu álhírekkel kapcsolatos tartalmainak elemzése 2010–2020 (The changing concept of fake news in public service news. An analysis of Hirado.hu’s content on fake news, 2010–2020) , MEDIAKUTATO, XXIII (1), 7-26, (2022).

		disguised as technical language, - ostensibly citing scientific authorities (NMHH)		
<b>Poland</b>	false or misleading information produced, presented and disseminated for profit or violation of a significant public interest or causing personal injury or property damage"	„untrue, false news, usually spread by tabloids to sensationalise or defame someone (usually a politician)“ (PWN Vocabulary)		
<b>Slovakia</b>	It can cause chaos in society and undermine trust in the state, and is directly related to spread of hatred and mistrust of state institutions.			<b>Harmful content</b> means an activity, data or program resource that has or may result in damage or threat to security, foreign policy or economic interests of Slovakia and is a form of hybrid threat

Clearly, there is no consensus on key definitions within V4 countries. At governmental level, there is also different approach whether one should use a key label „disinformation“ (Poland) or „fake news“ (Hungary) or „harmful content“ (Slovakia). In the next section, we check how this different understanding of key terms resulted in different fact-checking and debunking efforts within V4 countries.

### **Initiatives Against Fake News/Disinformation/Misinformation in V4**

Regarding fact-checking and debunking, it should be noted that “science supporting its efficacy is, at best, mixed.”<sup>56</sup> Some argue that the consequences of disinformation can be mitigated, but disinformation is not a solvable problem.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, some results are „inconsistent with a simple hypothesis that fake news crowds out hard news consumption.“<sup>58</sup> In other words, fake news consumption seems to be heavily concentrated among a small group of news consumers.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, it seems logical that in heavily polarised political and media systems (such as Hungary and Poland) pro-government

56 David Lazer, Matthew Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam Berinsky, Kelly Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam Metzger, Brendan Nyhan, Gordon Pennycook, David Rothschild, Michael Schudson, Steven Sloman, Cass Sunstein, Emily Thorson, Duncan Watts, Jonathan Zittrain, *The science of fake news*, *SCIENCE*, 359(6380), 3, (2018)

57 B. Valeriano, B. Jensen, and Maness, R., *Cyber Strategy: The Evolving Character of Power and Coercion*, London: Oxford Press (2018).

58 Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, *Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign*, (2018), <http://www.ask-force.org/web/Fundamentalists/Guess-Selective-Exposure-to-Misinformation-Evidence-Presidential-Campaign-2018.pdf>

59 Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, *Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign*, (2018), <http://www.ask-force.org/web/Fundamentalists/Guess-Selective-Exposure-to-Misinformation-Evidence-Presidential-Campaign-2018.pdf>

supporters are not necessarily interested in critical opinions that would challenge their deeply rooted ideas.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, there is quite extensive network of governmental, private and non-governmental initiatives in this area and in this region. The following summary is incomplete, but still rather extensive. There is Central European Digital Media Observatory that includes eight partners from Czechia, Poland and Slovakia.<sup>61</sup> There are some attempts to employ AI in the process of debunking.<sup>62</sup>

In Czechia, there are about 10 fact checking initiatives: [manipulatori.cz](http://manipulatori.cz), [demagog.cz](http://demagog.cz), [hoax.cz](http://hoax.cz), [kremlinwatch.eu](http://kremlinwatch.eu), [HlídacíPes.org](http://hlidaciPes.org) and [Neovlivni.cz](http://neovlivni.cz).<sup>63</sup> There is also a single fact checker from AFP.<sup>64</sup> Among these, [kremlinwatch.eu](http://kremlinwatch.eu), followed by [HlídacíPes.org](http://hlidaciPes.org) and [StopFake.cz](http://stopfake.cz) tackle Russian disinformation. There is also governmental plenipotentiary for disinformation as well as Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats affiliated to the Ministry of Interior.

In Slovakia, *Hoaxes and Scams* – Facebook page of the Police claims to be the most followed page in Slovakia focused on misinformation with over 122,000 followers in 2021. It was run by Communication and Prevention Department of the Police. It debunked, with help of more than 9,000 private messages received from citizens, a total of 189 hoaxes on its specialized site, 151 of which were solely related to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most common disinformation narratives related to foreign affairs was that the pandemic is a secret plan by the powerful to rule/destroy humanity. Similarly, some fake news and hoaxes mentioned foreign actors, or were relevant to foreign stakeholders, e.g. a hospital in Slovenia or the Red Cross in Austria. Significantly, the 2021 Report raised the issue of foreign actors involvement: „It is possible that their actions were trying to support the foreign policy interests of state powers abroad. Foreign state powers tried to spread their narratives through their own or befriended media, or fictitious independent activists, often communicating in different way within their own state...“<sup>65</sup>

In private sector, there is just a single fact checker from AFP.<sup>66</sup> Most of these fact-checking sites focus on Russian disinformation.

In Hungary, there is fact-checking website Lakmusz since January 2022.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, there was almost immediately attack about „The Soros networks and methods behind this project“.<sup>68</sup> Earlier initiatives included investigative journalism nonprofit and a watchdog

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60 Luca Bertuzzi and Vlad Makszimov, [EU funds fact-checking website in Hungary ahead of crucial elections](https://www.euractiv.com/section/media/news/eu-funds-fact-checking-website-in-hungary-ahead-of-crucial-elections/), (17. 1. 2022) <https://www.euractiv.com/section/media/news/eu-funds-fact-checking-website-in-hungary-ahead-of-crucial-elections/>

61 <https://kinit.sk/project/cedmo-central-european-digital-media-observatory/>

62 [www.oznacuj-dezinfo.kinit.sk](http://www.oznacuj-dezinfo.kinit.sk).

63 Katarzyna Gierło-Klimaszewska, Political fact-checking in the Czech Republic on the example of [demagog.cz](http://demagog.cz) and [manipulatori.cz](http://manipulatori.cz) portals. *Mediatization Studies*, 3(1), 115–135. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/ms.2019.3.115-135> (2019).

64 <https://www.omeiach.com/hoaxy/17165-facebook-ma-novinku-na-slovensku-a-v-cr-spusta-fact-checking-video>

65 COMMUNICATION AND PREVENTION DEPARTMENT OF THE PRESIDIU OF THE POLICE FORCE, POLICE FORCE REPORT ON DISINFORMATION OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC IN 2021, 5, (2022), [https://www.minv.sk/swift\\_data/source/images/slovak-republic-report-dezinfo-2021.pdf](https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/images/slovak-republic-report-dezinfo-2021.pdf)

66 Martin Hodás, Overuje správy pre Facebook: Hoax vymyslíte za 10 minút. Vyvraciam ho celé dni (9.5.2020), <https://zive.aktuality.sk/clanok/146760/overuje-spravy-pre-facebook-hoax-vymyslite-za-10-minut-vyvraciam-ho-cele-dni/>, <https://www.omeiach.com/hoaxy/17165-facebook-ma-novinku-na-slovensku-a-v-cr-spusta-fact-checking-video>

67 [Kafkadesk budapest](https://kafkadesk.com), MEET LAKMUSZ, THE FACT-CHECKING SQUAD DEBUNKING FAKE NEWS IN HUNGARY (2022, FEBRUARY 3), [HTTPS://KAFKADESK.ORG/2022/02/03/MEET-LAKMUSZ-THE-FACT-CHECKING-SQUAD-DEBUNKING-FAKE-NEWS-IN-HUNGARY/](https://kafkadesk.org/2022/02/03/meet-lakmusz-the-fact-checking-squad-debunking-fake-news-in-hungary/)

68 <https://visegradpost.com/en/2022/02/22/a-hungarian-fact-checker-in-partnership-with-the-european-commission-and-afp-soros-shadow/> (FEBRUARY 22, 2022).

NGO [atlatszo.hu](https://english.atlatszo.hu/about-us/).<sup>69</sup> The National Media and Communications Authority (NMHH) regards increasing consumer (ie not citizens) awareness against misinformation as its primary goal. There also is a pro-Russian, pro-government Facebook page that is called Numbers - the antidote to left-wing fake news, which claims to debunk the liberal propaganda/fake news.<sup>70</sup> There is [urbanlegends.hu](https://www.urbanlegends.hu/), campaigns such as by [buvosvolgy.hu](https://www.buvosvolgy.hu/) and [kekvonal.hu](https://www.kekvonal.hu/) (teaching plan, campaign „recognizing fake news for 17-18 y. olds“), [oszd okosan](https://www.oszdokosan.hu/) („share wisely“, people can check whether it is worth sharing a link), Tudatos Net (Conscious Net), Idea Foundation (teaching material), [Álhírvadász](https://www.alhivadasz.hu/) (fake news hunter). In Poland, there were eight fact checking initiatives in 2019 (Demagog, Konkret24, Demaskator24, Trudat, “Keyboard Warriors”, OKO.press, Sprawdzam AFP and Antyfake).<sup>71</sup> Among these, majority tackle Russian disinformation. In addition, there was governmental the Polish Platform for Homeland Security (PPHS).

**Table 2: Selected Institutional Initiatives Against Fake News in V4**

Country	Governmental	NGO - Fact-checking/ Debunking	Private/ Business	Other
<b>Czechia</b>	Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (Ministry of Interior)  Governmental Plenipotentiary for Fighting Disinformation	<a href="https://www.manipulatori.cz/">manipulatori.cz</a> <a href="https://www.demagog.cz/">demagog.cz/</a>  hoax.cz  European Values (Information Defense Hub + Kremlinwatch.eu)	HlídacíPes.org  Neovlivni.cz  AFP (FB)	Zvolši.info  EDMO network
<b>Hungary</b>	The National Media and Communications Authority (NMHH) - but focused on consumers!	Lakmusz (AFP, 444.hu and the Media Universalis Foundation)	AFP  Atlátszó	Numbers, Conscious Net, Idea Foundation Álhírvadász <a href="https://www.urbanlegends.hu/">urbanlegends.hu</a>
<b>Poland</b>	Polska Platforma Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego (PPBW) - The Polish Platform for Homeland Security (PPHS)	OKO.press,  Demagog	Antyfake, Demaskator Konkret24 Sprawdzam AFP Trudat	“Keyboard Warriors”  EDMO network
<b>Slovakia</b>	Communication and Prevention Department of the Police - Hoaxes and Scams – Facebook pages of the Police (since 2017/18)	Demagog.sk  Infosecurity.sk (Disinfo report)	AFP (with FB)	„Virtual Elfs“ community on FB (Katedra komunikácie)  EDMO network

69 <https://english.atlatszo.hu/about-us/>

70 <https://www.urbanlegends.hu/2022/03/forraselemzes-szamokadatok-hu/>

71 Michał Kuś and Paulina Barczyszyn-Madziarz, Fact-checking initiatives as promoters of media and information literacy: The case of Poland, CEJC, 2, 249-265 (2020).

It appears that the Hungarian case represents the least governmental effort to tackle disinformation. Czechia and Slovakia are the most active in this area, while Poland seems to be located somewhere in between Hungary and Slovakia and Czechia. A major leveraging role seems to play the European Commission with its indirect recent funding of new fact checking and debunking initiatives. This finding supports our argument that we are dealing here with congruence rather than vulnerability in the case of Hungary. This finding is supported with data from the next Table X. It indirectly but strongly suggests that actually the Czech Republic and Slovakia feel that they are the most vulnerable to foreign disinformation campaigns.

There is specific and identical situation in both Hungary and Poland. Although there are no „alternative“ disinformation/fake news specific sources banned or targeted legally, the government and pro-governmental media believe and argue that oppositional politicians and critical media, and liberals in general produce fake news and disinformation.

**Table 3: Major Sources of Disinformation Identified by Authorities in V4 (in 2022)**

<b>Country</b>	
<b>Czechia</b>	Aeronet, Protiproud, Ceskobezcenzury, Voxpopuliblog, Prvnizpravy, Czechfreepress, Exanpro and Skrytapravda, sputniknews.com, Cz24.news, Nwoo.org, Slovanskenebe.com, Svobodnenoviny.eu ,Zvedavec.org
<b>Hungary</b>	Not known specific sources banned or targeted legally by authorities or indirectly through NGOs or private actors. In general, these fake news sources are seen oppositional politicians and critical media, and liberals in general by pro-governmental media and politicians in power. However, analysts argue that the government actually runs some disinformation campaigns.
<b>Poland</b>	Not known specific sources banned or targeted legally by authorities or indirectly through NGOs or private actors. In general, these are seen oppositional politicians and critical media, and liberals in general by pro-governmental media and politicians in power. Reports underline usually certain narratives which are disinformative and they rather mention groups of sources (eg. Fake Twitter accounts).
<b>Slovakia</b>	Hlavné správy, Armádny magazín, Hlavný denník and online only radio broadcast Infovojna.

## **LEGISLATION TARGETING FAKE NEWS AND HOAXES in V4**

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in addition to the EU-central ban on certain Russian outlets,<sup>72</sup> two Visegrad countries (Czech Republic and Slovakia) banned some local news and current affairs websites that were seen as – in general and often openly not acknowledged terms - a threat to national security. In local conditions, these websites are listed among 262 „controversial“ outlets, according to the local vigilant initiative.<sup>73</sup> However, as it is clear from the list, those banned websites were not selected

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>

<sup>73</sup> <https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok>



based solely on their ranking in this list of controversial websites. It seems that a combination of „intensity“ and „popularity“ was used when considering their blocking. In fact, the official reasons used for the temporary ban were not much transparent and supported by evidence, and certainly widely seen as controversial from a legal–constitutional point of view. In short, there were arguments concerning the legality of these acts when considering the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. Moreover, it was not certain whether there has not been re-introduced (preventive) censorship in both cases, especially in the Czech case. The Czech Constitution allows limits on freedom of expression and freedom to disseminate information only under specific conditions and as laid by the law. This clearly did not happen, The ban was introduced by a non-state body without any support in legislation.

In the Slovak case, the hastily passed law was used, but arguments used for banning certain websites were seen as insufficient and publicly available evidence justifying such an approach was entirely missing. Interestingly, new legislation approved by the Slovak Cabinet (not yet the Parliament) in November 2022, brings more transparency and legality into the process, but it can still be seen as legally constitutionally and problematic. In contrast, Hungary and Poland showed some intentions to find balance in regulating social media (seen as a key tool for disseminating fake news and hoaxes) about two years ago. That time, though, especially Poland was aiming more at protecting free speech on social media (following the banning of President Trump on Facebook and Twitter). Interestingly, there was no mention of fake news and hoaxes in the Hungarian draft proposal save for the electoral campaign. However, since then, while Hungary remained rather passive in this legal initiative, Poland moved further and presented a less radical proposal than it was an initial draft. It allows quicker decision-making than in the Slovak case, as well as more protection for individual users against platform interventions. Hungary used fake news arguments during Covid19 pandemic for enacting some regulations. All in all, the issue of fighting fake news and hoaxes seems to be rather relevant. At the same time, it shows rather heterogeneous approaches within Visegrad countries. Moreover, these approaches are seen as controversial from regulatory and constitutional perspectives.

## **POLAND**

There was no specific legislation yet as of late 2022. However, in late 2020, the Ministry of Justice drafted provisions that allegedly effectively implement the constitutional right of freedom of expression and help protect against fake news.<sup>74</sup> Among interesting aspects of this draft legislation was “John Doe lawsuit” approach. If someone’s personal rights were infringed upon by an unknown individual, he should be able to file a lawsuit to have these rights protected without naming the defendant. To file the lawsuit effectively, it would be enough to cite an URL with offensive content, as well as the dates and times of publication and the user’s profile name or login.

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74 <https://www.gov.pl/web/justice/a-breakthrough-law-on-freedom-of-expression-on-the-internet>

However, the 2022 version draft act is less radical. It envisages the appointment of the so-called Freedom of Speech Board, which would safeguard the constitutional freedom of expression on social networking sites. The Board would comprise law and new media experts and it would be appointed by the lower chamber of the Polish Parliament for a six-year term of office, by a 3/5 majority. The draft act also provides that if a website blocks an account or deletes a certain item, even though its content does not violate/infringe upon the law, the user will be able to lodge a complaint with the service provider. The provider must confirm that the complaint has been received and it must be considered within 48 hours. If the provider dismisses the complaint, the user has the right to appeal to the Freedom of Speech Board, which will have to make final decision within seven days.

## **SLOVAKIA**

There are two related regulations: Act on Media Services (2022) and Cybersecurity Act Update (2022 Draft version, approved by the Government but not yet by the Parliament). In the first case, the Media Services Board can only take action if potentially illegal content is being spread online. These include, for example, child pornography, extremist materials, posts inciting terrorism or national, racial and ethnic hatred, posts denying or approving the Holocaust and crimes against humanity, or posts defaming a nation, race or belief. Before people turn to the regulatory authority, they must notify the operators of the page on which the illegal content is being spread about the illegal post. Potentially illegal content will be decided by the board's three-member senates. If the Board comes to the conclusion that the content in question is illegal and at the same time its dissemination threatens the public interest or represents a significant interference with individual rights citizens, will issue a decision to prevent its spread. If the platform operators do not remove the illegal content and prevent it from spreading further, they can be fined between 2,500 and 100,000 euros by the Board.

In the second case, National Security Authority (NSA) should block content that may threaten the security, foreign policy or economic interests of Slovakia and which is a form of hybrid threat. It will be possible to block not only websites, but also accounts on social networks or communication platforms. The NSA will be able to act only on the basis of a "reasoned proposal" from the state's security services, for example the police, State intelligence or military intelligence. Blocking will require the consent of the Supreme Administrative Court, which will have to make a decision within 15 days. Blocking can last for a maximum of nine months. The new rules do not even give site operators a chance to defend themselves, for example by removing problematic content themselves and refraining from further similar actions. The court must make a decision within 15 days. It is problematic to see how the websites could have opportunity to present their arguments before the verdict is handed down. This regulation raises a number of legal questions, including those of constitutional nature - whether it re-establishes post-censorship practice in the country.

It should be explained that this initiative followed the controversial ban on selected „alternative” outlets in March 2022, immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in

February 2022 until the end of June 2022. These included Hlavné správy, Armádny magazín, Hlavný denník and online only radio broadcast Infovojna. This blocking was widely seen as controversial from a legal point of view, specifically, as too vaguely justified and in breach of ECtHR case law - OOO Flavus and others against Russia.<sup>75</sup>

It was done by the NSA and justified vaguely as “blocking of harmful activity”. More specifically, it was stated that the NSA “has identified harmful activity that can cause serious disinformation.” No further specific evidence or arguments were mentioned or made available. These were classified as “sensitive” (dôverné) and “secret”. The law did not define „serious disinformation“. The director of the NSA further justified blocking and its scope arguing that „blocking should be effective, with purpose and adequate to possible risks associated with [blocking](#).”<sup>76</sup>

It should be mentioned that the Ministry of Justice drafted a crime offence “spreading false information” in its 2021 update to the Penal Code. The penalty would be between one and five years of sentence. However, this particular idea was dismissed in public discussion before it entered the Parliament. For example, prosecutor general called this draft “absurd, ambiguous and empirically impossibility to prove”, therefore, professionally inadequate proposal as well as inadequate to the current situation in a society.<sup>77</sup>

## CZECHIA

There was no specific legislation. However, the Czech social media users already have the right – as defined in the law on Certain Services of the Information Society - to defend themselves with a lawsuit against the operator of the social network against the unauthorized blocking or deletion of a post, or on the contrary for an undeleted post that he feels has been harmed. Yet it is relatively complicated legal process. The responsibility lies with the operator. The responsibility of the operator is not excluded in the event that the content of the server contains the statement of a third party. However, the condition for the emergence of liability is at least slight negligence in relation to the illegality of the published information. In the case of digital media, the knowledge of the acquirer that illegal information is stored on its infrastructure plays a key role. The operator must therefore usually be notified of the illegality. After that, he must delete the information, otherwise he bears responsibility for its content. However, there are types of information whose illegality is obvious. In such a case, the responsibility of the operator arises even without notification by a third party. An example can be the promotion of fascism or a gross insult.

In 2019, there was a draft amendment to the Penal Code. According to it, operators or administrators of internet platforms with more than 100,000 users would face up to three

<sup>75</sup><http://www.pravnelisty.sk/clanky/a1062-blokovanie-webovych-stranok-a-jeho-mozny-rozpor-s-judikaturou-europskeho-sudu-pre-ludske-prava>  
<https://dennikn.sk/2818631/sucasne-blokovanie-dezinformacnych-stranok-je-ustavne-problematicke-co-s-tym/>

<sup>76</sup>[https://standard.sk/181496/riaditel-nbu-vypnutie-hlavnych-sprav-bolo-opodstatnene-a-primerane-nekoname-na-zaklade-jedneho-clanku/?cookie\\_status=accept](https://standard.sk/181496/riaditel-nbu-vypnutie-hlavnych-sprav-bolo-opodstatnene-a-primerane-nekoname-na-zaklade-jedneho-clanku/?cookie_status=accept)

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/m-zilinka-novy-trestny-cin-sirenie-nepravdivej-informacie-je-nenalezity>

years in prison for deleting user contributions. This draft law, based on an initiative of an obscure MP, did not pass through the Parliament.

It should be mentioned that on February 25, 2022, the Association CZ.NIC (Združenie CZ.NIC), national manager of Czech domains, after the call from Czech national security authorities (in particular, National Center of Cybernet Operations - Národní centrum kybernetických operací (NCKO), and following generally formulated Decision of the Government), blocked websites Aeronet, Protiproud, Ceskobezcenzury, Voxpopuliblog, Prvnizpravy, Czechfreepress, Exanpro and Skrytapravda. In early March 2022, sputniknews.com, Cz24.news, Nwoo.org, Slovanskenebe.com, Svobodnenoviny.eu and Zvedavec.org were added to blocked websites. In total, initially, more than 20 controversial websites were targeted upon request by state authorities.

Both decisions were based on the internal rules of the association. Blocking was extended twice for a month and finally ended after three months. The association asked national authorities to provide a relevant court order or decision of the Police or other relevant state body. No such order or decision was made available. The association explicitly stated this was an extraordinary and unprecedented measure, subject to regular revision on monthly basis. The ending of blocking was explained as „there is no immediate threat to national or international computer security associated with these domains“.<sup>78</sup>

Interestingly, two local NGOs (Otevřená společnost and Institute H21) sued the Ministry of Defence in administrative court cases as a result of this blocking. They argue that the approach by the state was illegal. In their view, blocking was not an independent decision of private subjects.

There is still the possibility the Czech government and Parliament will discuss criminalisation of disinformation. Such legal recommendation exists among measures suggested by Michal Klíma, governmental plenipotentiary for disinformation.

## HUNGARY

There was no specific legislation save for, similar (but more extensively considered) to Slovak „Press Act“ and Polish Press Act, ie there is a reference to false factual statements published in any media content. Moreover, following COVID outbreak, there was a new update to law on Crime of Scaremongering. that criminalizes the spreading of misinformation deemed to undermine the authorities' fight against the COVID-19 virus with fines and up to five years in prison.

The Ministry of Justice started drafting a new bill that aims to make big platforms comply with the law and operate transparently in 2021. The Ministry of Justice has also set up the Digital Freedom Committee, which aims to make transparent the operation of transnational technological companies. The Committee produced „White Paper“ in 2020 which, however, does not tackle fake news and hoaxes only in connection with election campaign. The last session of the Committee was in January 2021. There was a public promise that a concept (a draft) on regulating social media will be prepared by the Ministry of Justice and sent to the members of the Committee for review, including consultations with the platforms. However, apparently, nothing happened since that time (for almost two years). The Minister of Justice

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<sup>78</sup> [https://www.irozhlaz.cz/zpravy-domov/dezinformace-weby-legislativa-zruseni-blokovani-propaganda-rusko-cesko-domena\\_2203061532\\_pik](https://www.irozhlaz.cz/zpravy-domov/dezinformace-weby-legislativa-zruseni-blokovani-propaganda-rusko-cesko-domena_2203061532_pik)

had a meeting with the EC and when they informed her about the possible DSA/DMA regulation, Hungary withdraw its plans to regulate alone.

The overview of legislative efforts is presented in Table X in a more transparent way. This overview also related regulations. For example, it includes the Act on Publications (2022) in Slovakia that allows to demand corrections in case of “untruthful statements”. In Hungary, the Press Act (2011) allows to demand corrections to false factual statements published in any media content. Similarly, in Poland, the Press Act allows factual correction of inaccurate or untrue press material. As mentioned, in Poland there is law to combat the disinformation in connection with the election campaign. According to Art. 111 §1 of the Electoral Code, the candidate has the right, among other things, to apply to the District Court for a ban on the dissemination of such information. Such a request shall be examined within 24 hours in a non-administrative procedure. The time limit for lodging an appeal against such a decision with the Court of Appeal is equally short, and the publication of a correction, reply or apology must take place within 48 hours at the expense of the obligated party (Art. 11 (3) and (4)).

**Table 4: Legal Efforts in Tackling Fake News and Hoaxes in V4**  
(as of December 2022)

<b>Country</b>	<b>Specific Legislation Adopted</b>	<b>2022 Year Draft(s) Available Targeting Specifically Fake News /Hoaxes and/or Social Media</b>	<b>Past Efforts (Drafts) Targeting Specifically Fake News / Hoaxes and/or Social Media</b>
<b>Czechia</b>	Partially, (concerning an individual and civic law with reference to information society services )	No	Yes (2019)
<b>Hungary</b>	Partially (theoretically completely), (concerning COVID19 and fake news), as well as any false factual statements published in any media content.	No	Yes (2020)
<b>Poland</b>	Partially, (concerning election campaign and fake news, as well as the press)	Yes	Yes (2020)
<b>Slovakia</b>	Partially, (concerning specific content on social media and the press, including online media)	Yes	Yes (2021)

After this broader context reflecting governments' lead or supported efforts in tackling misinformation, disinformation and mal-information, it may be enlightening to see whether and when, and why there was misinformation, disinformation and mal-information produced and/or disseminated in or by the legacy media and on social media by journalists, diplomats, experts and fact-checking/debunking Initiatives in the V4 countries. This is not meant to put on the same footing long-term propaganda campaigns in captured media in authoritarian countries such as China or Russia. Yet, clearly, such reflection may be useful, although maybe a painful for some involved actors. In any case, it is an interesting exploration from academic research point of view.

### **Examples of Misinformation/Disinformation/Mal-information Produced or Disseminated by Journalists, Diplomats, Experts and Fact-checking/Debunking Initiatives**

Essentially, in this part, the focus is on some incorrect (false) descriptive and causal ideas (thoughts about how the world works and why) in foreign policy. These beliefs can be assessed according to logical consistency and factual accuracy. This idea was inspired by thought that: "Some bad ideas masquerade as neutral fact, only to be exposed later on. Others worm their way into strategic doctrines, guiding a wide range of policies that long outlast the original thought. Good ideas, meanwhile, can have bad effects—and bad ideas can be used for good."<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, this part reflects upon the idea that "the concept of mistakes is necessarily linked to agents or their choices playing a substantial role in negative outcomes,..“ and, furthermore, "On the individual level of analysis, a particularly rich history of scholarship has put mistakes in IR down to cognitive biases and limitations of decision-makers"<sup>80</sup>. In other words, we assume that misinformation, disinformation or mal-information produced and/or disseminated by some journalists or media, experts and diplomats, as well as fact-checking and debunking authorities is first of all result of mistakes (thus, it can be correctly labeled as misinformation). However, this assumption is challenged in some cases by persistent adherence to some of these mistakes even when confronted with facts, as it happened in some further discussed cases. Thus, some actors continue to adhere to wrong ideas in spite of fact that the opposite evidence is available to them and they know about this evidence. Then, one can assume, they produce disinformation or even mal-information. The latter case can be seen at an example of domestic campaign that actually hurts image of external actor. Many of these examples can be illustrated at the Georgia-Russia War of 2008

### **The Georgia-Russia War of 2008**

The Georgia-Russia 2008 War is commonly perceived as turning point when Russia returned to its imperial expansionist imperial foreign policies.<sup>81</sup> Be that true or not is

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<sup>79</sup> Charli Carpenter, *When U.S. Foreign Policy Went Wrong*, FP, (January 15, 2021)

<sup>80</sup> Andreas Kruck, Kai Oppermann, and Alexander Spencer, Introduction: Mistakes and Failures in International Relations IN: Andreas Kruck, Alexander Spencer, Kai Oppermann (eds), *Political Mistakes and Policy Failures in International Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature, 1-30, 3 (2018).

<sup>81</sup> Eichler, Jan, *Válka mezi Gruzíí a Ruskou federací jako významný předěl* (The War Between Georgia and the Russian Federation as an Important Milestone), *vojenskerozhledy*, (2019), <https://www.vojenskerozhledy.cz/kategorie-clanku/ozbrojene-konflikty/valka-gruzie-ruska-federace>, Lukáš Dyčka, Pavel Faus, *Vyzbrojování Gruzie v kontextu snah o členství v NATO* (Arming Georgia in the Context of its Efforts to Join NATO), *Vojenské rozhledy*, 4/, 74-85 (2016), Bayulgen, Oksan, and Ekim Arbatli. "Cold War Redux in US–Russia Relations? The Effects of US Media Framing and Public Opinion of the 2008 Russia–Georgia War." *Communist and Post-*

irrelevant here for a moment – we come to this issue later on. What matters it is that this has been seen as such turning point among many foreign policy analysts, media and diplomats. Only exceptionally some analysts did not consider this war as a turning point in Russia’s foreign policies.<sup>82</sup> Other agreed that the conflict „may have been a turning point, but in a very different direction. It indicates the end of the 'unipolar moment' and the beginning of a new era in the international system, in which the imperative for recognition and respect of newly emerging on resurgent powers has come into its own.“<sup>83</sup>

Still, this military conflict deserves full and in depth analytical attention. If we select Georgia-Russia 2008 war as a case study, we see among foreign policy experts following divergent opinions on who was the aggressor:

**Table 5: Analysts and Russia - Georgia War 2008 – Whom To Blame Most/First?**

Source	Russia	Georgia	Both Georgia and Russia (Georgia was first, but in a sense it reacted, or Georgian troops were sent to restore order, etc)	Not clearly stated
<b>EUISS (2009)</b>		x		
Balaban (2008)				x
Veebel (2016)				x
<b>IIFMCG (2009)</b>		X		
Eichler (2019)		X (de facto)		x
Miháliková (2010)		X		
Raubo (2011)		x		
Dyčka and Faus (2016)			x	
Darchiashvili (2018)		X (de facto)	?	
Nițu (2010)		X		
Godzimirski (2012)		X (de facto)	x	
Manutscharjan (2008)		x		
Fričová, Thim, Veselý (2008)		x		

*Communist Studies* 46(4), (2013): 513–27, Khan, Simbal. "RUSSIA-GEORGIA WAR AND NATO: IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY." *Strategic Studies* 28/29 (2008): 1–14.

82 Jacek Raubo. "WPŁYW DOŚWIADCZEŃ Z KONFLIKTU GRUZIŃSKO-ROSYJSKIEGO Z 2008 ROKU NA WIZJĘ WSPÓŁCZESNEGO BEZPIECZEŃSTWA MIĘDZYNARODOWEGO. WYBRANE PŁASZCZYZNY" (THE INFLUENCE OF THE 2008 CONFLICT IN GEORGIA ON A MODERN VISION OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY. SELECTED ASPECTS), *Przegląd Strategiczny* 2:115-131 (2011).

83 Jorge Heine. "The Conflict in the Caucasus: Causing a New Cold War?" *India Quarterly* 65(1), (2009): 55–66.

King (2008)			x	
Cory (2010)		x		
Carbone (2008)		x		

The above overview suggests some surprising findings.<sup>84</sup> There is no unanimous consensus on a very basic and at the same time fundamental issue – who shot first? It should not be a problem to answer this question, if one uses statements of witnesses, global satellite technologies and other intelligence tools and sources. Yet one should know the answer to this fundamental question if he is involved into analytical work. In fact, some analysts used rather appological or ambiguous language. e.g. „Georgian troops were ordered to restore order in the breakaway region of South Ossetia and launched an assault on the city of Tskhinvali, where Russia had a contingent of peacekeepers....“<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, inspite of this lack of unanimous consensus, most of the analysts more or less clearly and/or indirectly and reluctantly acknowledged that it was Georgia who started this war.<sup>86</sup> Most importantly, two official EU reports (EUISS 2009, IIFMCG 2009) confirmed Georgia’s military initiative here. Within this context, it legally and normatively does not matter whether Georgia was possibly „provoked“ into this intervention.<sup>87</sup> In fact, a long-term rearmament of Georgian military up to 2008 suggests opposite – Georgia was actively working on possible swift re-integration of break-away provinces by force.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, between 2003 to 2008 Georgia’s military expenditures reached it’s top. However, Georgia’s military acquisitions did not reflect country’s inclination towards west and NATO (as one would assume).<sup>89</sup> Similarly, it is irrelevant whether one could consider this military intervention as a legitimate and legal action from the point that there was formally still recognized control of that territory as part of Georgia proper. At that time, there were South Ossetian, Russian and Georgian peacekeeping units present in South Ossetia. It is also normatively and logically questionable whether either initial (immediate) and/or follow up military actions by Russian military that included further invasion into Georgian territory can be without hesitation called (within this context) as „agression“ against Georgia, as it is quite often interpreted.<sup>90</sup> In fact, a detailed study acknowledged a long-term (lasting for decades) ethnic tensions in

84 The sources: EUISS, Georgia – Conflict with Russia, EU security and defence, Core documents 2008, (2009), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep06971.68>,

Aschot Manutscharjan, „ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA – RUSSIA’S INTERVENTION IN GEORGIA (AUGUST 2008).“ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2008), Constantin-Gheorghe Balaban. "CAUCASUS WAR – THE END OF THE COLD WAR OR A NEW COLD WAR?". *Strategic Impact* 29:11-1 (2008), Viljar Veebel. "Escaping the Imperial Grip of Russia: Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, and Georgia". *Cross Border Journal for International Studies* 1:107-126 (2016), David Darchiashvili. "RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR OF AUGUST 2008: CLASH OF IDEOLOGIES AND NATIONAL PROJECTS IN THE ERA OF HYBRID WARFARE". *Sõjateadlane* 7:12-38 (2018),

Ionel Nițu. "Provocări la adresa analizei strategice. Studiu de caz: Implicațiile războiului ruso-georgian asupra echilibrului de putere în Eurasia"(Challenges of the Strategic Analysis. Case 5 study: Implications of the Russo-Georgian War over the Balance of Power in Eurasia), *Romanian Intelligence Studies Review* 03:5-31 (2010).

85 Jakub M. Godzimirski, What makes dialogue work or not? The Russia–Georgia Case, *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs* (NUPI) (2012)

86 For example, Carbone (2008) wrote bluntly:“In August 2008, Georgia lauched a large-scale attack to retake control of South Ossetia,....“ Carbone, Maurizio. "Russia's Trojan Horse in Europe? Italy and the War in Georgia." *Italian Politics* 24 (2008): 135–51.

87 e.g. King, Charles. "The Five-Day War: Managing Moscow After the Georgia Crisis." *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 6 (2008): 2–11.

88 JU, Gruzie: Jak se připravovala válka, *Britské listy*, (2008), <https://legacy.blisty.cz/art/42034.html>

89Lukáš Dyčka, Pavel Faus, Vyzbrojování Gruzie v kontextu snah o členství v NATO (Arming Georgia in the Context of its Efforts to Join NATO), *Vojenské rozhledy*, 4/, 74-85 (2016).

90 e.g. Magdalena Fričová, Michal Thim, Luboš Veselý, Ruská válka v Gruzii: Jak dál? Russian war in Georgia: where do we go from here?, *Policy Paper*, 4/2008 AMO (2008).



those regions of Georgia and concluded that „although it is obvious that Russia played a strategic-political game especially in the later phase of the conflict with Georgia and significantly contributed to the victory of the separatists, but to the resulting conflict situation it responded *ad hoc* rather than creating it directly.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Cory Welt suggested to consider “how a mix of limited offensive intentions, insecurity, uncertainty, and cognitive shortcuts and misperceptions had the capacity to lead to inadvertent war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia.”<sup>92</sup>

Within this context it is instructive and probably not so much surprising to see how differently V4 countries interpreted this war in 2008.

In search of a cause of the Georgian-Russian conflict Slovakia sided with the conflict rather on the side of Russia, while Poland presented clearly pro-Georgian position. The Czech representation was divided on this issue - while Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek accepted more the arguments of Georgia, President Václav Klaus rather supported the Russian side. The ruling Hungarian socialist the party was relatively cautious in its assessment of the situation – although it later came around rather on the side of Georgia, as an unequivocal supporter of Georgia and a critic Russia can be characterized above all by the Hungarian opposition, headed by the strongest by the Fidesz party.<sup>93</sup>

In fact, „Although initially Western discourse and media coverage took at face value Georgia's version of the unfolding of the war, subsequent evidence has disproved the latter. Russia only reacted to an unprovoked attack on South Ossetia in the middle of the night.”<sup>94</sup>

### Journalists/Media

It is instructive to analyse fake news produced or just disseminated by journalists and media on an example of Georgia-Russia war of 2008. The media can be powerful in constructing a certain narrative of an international conflict, which can then affect public and expert perceptions of the same country or of other countries, as it was shown, within this context, on a US example.<sup>95</sup> Another study suggested that selected Russian, Georgian, and Western print media displayed distinct patterns of either balanced reporting or partisan attitudes towards coverage of this war, which also varied over time.<sup>96</sup> How it was in V4 media coverage?

There is a study focused on Polish media.<sup>97</sup> It showed that two of the Polish newspapers (Dziennik, Rzeczpospolita) more likely supported Georgia in the conflict with Russia, while

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91 Emil Souleimanov and Tomáš Baranec, DISKUSIA: RUSKO A OBČIANSKA VOJNA V GRUZÍNSKU LIMITY GRUZÍNSKEJ NEZÁVISLOSTI NA ZAČIATKU 90-TYCH ROKOV, 59-75, 74, [https://fmv.euba.sk/www\\_write/files/dokumenty/veda-vyskum/medzinarodne-vztahy/archiv/2012/1/2012-1\\_souleimanov\\_baranec.pdf](https://fmv.euba.sk/www_write/files/dokumenty/veda-vyskum/medzinarodne-vztahy/archiv/2012/1/2012-1_souleimanov_baranec.pdf)

92 Cory Welt, “The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 1 (2010): 63–97.

93 PETER BREZÁNI, ed, ROČENKA ZAHRANIČNEJ POLITIKY SLOVENSKEJ REPUBLIKY 2008, VÝSKUMNÉ CENTRUM SLOVENSKEJ SPOLOČNOSTI PRE ZAHRANIČNÚ POLITIKU, N.O. BRATISLAVA (2009).

94 Jorge Heine. “The Conflict in the Caucasus: Causing a New Cold War?” *India Quarterly* 65(1), (2009): 55–66.

95 Bayulgen, Oksan, and Ekim Arbatli. “Cold War Redux in US–Russia Relations? The Effects of US Media Framing and Public Opinion of the 2008 Russia–Georgia War.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46(4), (2013): 513–27

96 Hans-Georg Heinrich and Kirill Tanaev. “Georgia & Russia: contradictory media coverage of the August war.” *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, 3(3) (summer 2009), pp. 244+.

two others (Gazeta Wyborcza, Fakt) showed a more balanced or neutral approach, but nonetheless there was tendency to favour Georgia.<sup>98</sup> In general, the study claims that the Polish journalists (and political elites) responded to the conflict in line with the past negative experience of the relations between Poland and Russia. However, the study did not answer the question to whom these four newspapers attributed primary responsibility for the war. Indirectly, considering overall attitude in their coverage, it can be assumed that Russia was primary blamed for this war. In fact, the very biased nature of Polish media coverage of this conflict is in itself a serious problem for reputation of the national press.

For other countries within our regional focus, we do not have media coverage analysis for that period. However, even less systematic analysis is symptomatic and revealing about the quality and argumentative consistency of coverage. For example, Slovak conservative online newspaper Postoj once clearly attributed responsibility for 2008 war to Georgia.<sup>99</sup> However, in another article it mentioned „Russian invasion to Georgia in 2008“.<sup>100</sup> Liberal newspaper Denník N published an article by Georgian ambassador in which he claimed that there was „full scale military aggression of Russia against Georgia“ in 2008.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, liberal newspaper Sme usually attributed aggression to Russia in commentaries, while in news reporting it was more objective.<sup>102</sup> The Czech newspaper Lidové noviny seemed to blame mostly Georgia, but it did publish foreign opinion that blamed Russia.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, the Czech liberal newspaper MF Dnes also seemed to blame for the conflict mostly Georgia, but it did publish foreign opinions that blamed for the conflict Russia.<sup>104</sup>

### Table 6: Media: Russia – Georgia War 2008 – Whom To Blame Most/First?

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97 AGNIESZKA STÊPIŃSKA, OBRAZ KONFLIKTU ROSYJSKO-GRUZIŃSKIEGO W 2008 ROKU W POLSKIEJ PRASIE DRUKOWANEJ (THE POLISH NEWSPAPERS COVERAGE OF THE RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN CONFLICT IN 2008), *Zeszyty PRASOZNAWCZE*, LIV (1-2), (2011), 59-75.

98 This was not only an Editors/journalists' attitude – it was also about a position taken by those who are covered or quoted in the news items, interviews, or comments. Altogether, these are all opinions presented in a particular newspaper.

99 Jaroslav [Daniška](#), Kto prehral gruzínsko-ruskú vojnu, *Dennik Postoj*, <https://www.postoj.sk/v-skratke/2073/kto-prehral-gruzinsko-rusku-voju> (7 August 2018 )

**100** [Christian Heitmann](#), Diplomacia ako párová terapia. Ako sa môže skončiť vojna na Ukrajine, *Dennik Postoj*, <https://www.postoj.sk/117721/ako-sa-moze-skoncit-vojna-na-ukrajine> (02. november 2022).

101 Revaz Beshidze, Máme ďalší rok po vojne z augusta 2008. Ruská okupácia gruzínskych území pokračuje, <https://dennikn.sk/2495284/mame-dalsi-rok-po-vojne-z-augusta-2008-ruska-okupacia-gruzinskych-uzemi-pokracuje/> (6 August 2021)

102 Mykolka Riabčuk, Stále zostávam Čechom a Slovákom, *Sme*, <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/20898717/stale-zostavam-cechom-a-slovakom.html#ixzz5PCRhmK43> (25.8.2018), see also Oskar Bardiovský, Skresľovanie dejín (11.8.2018), <https://blog.sme.sk/bardiovsky/politika/skreslovanie-dejin>

103 František Šulc, Miška v ruské pasti, 23.8.2008, *Lidové Noviny*, Petra Procházková, Saakašviliho „triumf“ – přežil. [7.08.2009](#), *Lidové Noviny*, Project Syndicate, Rusko překračuje Rubikon, 16.8.2008,

104 e.g. Z Gruzie poprvé od války v srpnu 2008 odlétlo letadlo do Ruska, [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/z-gruzie-poprve-od-valky-v-srpnu-2008-odletlo-letadlo-do-ruska.A100108\\_130204\\_zahranicni\\_ash](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/z-gruzie-poprve-od-valky-v-srpnu-2008-odletlo-letadlo-do-ruska.A100108_130204_zahranicni_ash), Gruzie a Rusko po roce vzpomínají na krvavý konflikt, napětí trvá, [www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/gruzie-a-rusko-po-roce-vzpominaji-na-krvavy-konflikt-napeti-trva.A090807\\_101621\\_zahranicni\\_avy](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/gruzie-a-rusko-po-roce-vzpominaji-na-krvavy-konflikt-napeti-trva.A090807_101621_zahranicni_avy), Rusové a Gruzinci otevřeli po třech letech společnou pozemní hranici, [www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/rusove-a-gruzinci-otevřeli-po-trech-letech-spolecnou-pozemni-hranici.A100301\\_071551\\_zahranicni\\_ipl](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/rusove-a-gruzinci-otevřeli-po-trech-letech-spolecnou-pozemni-hranici.A100301_071551_zahranicni_ipl)

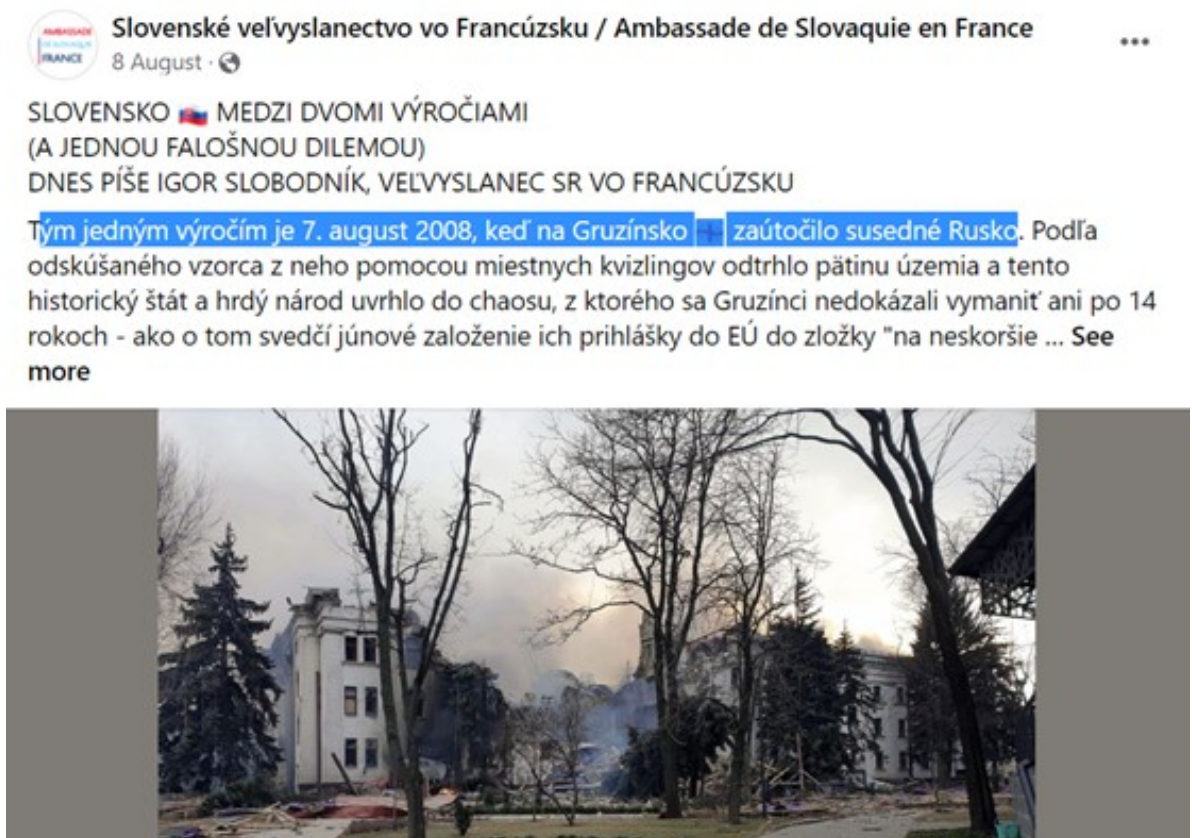
(Tentative results of Prevailing Tendency in Coverage, articles selected with key words between 2008-2022, exploratory approach + review of available studies)

<b>Country</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>Georgia</b>	<b>Both Georgia and Russia</b>	<b>Not clearly stated</b>
SK	Denník N	liberal	x			
SK	Sme	liberal	X (in news)	X (in commentaries)		
SK	Postoj	Conservative	x	x		
PL	Dziennik	centrist	x			
PL	Rzeczpospolita	right	x			
PL	Gazeta Wyborcza	Centre-left	Mostly neutral, then Russia			
PL	Fakt	tabloid	Mostly neutral, then Russia			
CZ	Lidové noviny	right	X	X		X
CZ	MF Dnes	liberal	x	x		x

## Diplomats/Foreign Service

It should be noted that the European Parliament in its Statement in 2018 mentioned „military aggression of Russia against Georgia in 2008.<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, we argue that this is an imprecise statement. It is too strong to claim that somebody who was attacked should be seen as an aggressor if he continues for a few days with military operations on the territory of opponent (if this was an intent or motivation). Yet, this public statement may explain why we identified following examples of questionable content produced by foreign services in this area. First, it was the Slovak Embassy in France that claimed in August 2022 that it was Russia that had attacked Georgia in 2008 (Scan No. 1).


Scan No. 1: Slovak Embassy in France – Statement on Facebook



**Slovenské veľvyslanectvo vo Francúzsku / Ambassade de Slovaquie en France** 8 August · 🌐

SLOVENSKO 🇸🇰 MEDZI DVOMI VÝROČIAMÍ  
(A JEDNOU FALOŠNOU DILEMOU)  
DNES PÍŠE IGOR SLOBODNÍK, VEĽVYSLANEC SR VO FRANCÚZSKU

Tým jedným výročím je 7. august 2008, keď na Gruzínsko 🇷🇺 zaútočilo susedné Rusko. Podľa odskúšaného vzorca z neho pomocou miestnych kvizlingov odtrhlo päťtinu územia a tento historický štát a hrdý národ uvrhlo do chaosu, z ktorého sa Gruzínci nedokázali vymaniť ani po 14 rokoch - ako o tom svedčí júnové založenie ich prihlášky do EÚ do zložky "na neskoršie ... See more



Following the same reasoning, the Slovak Ambassador in the UK claimed that it was Russia that attacked Georgia in 2008 (Scan No X: ).

Scan No 2: Slovak Ambassador in the UK - Facebook Statement

<sup>105</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/sk/press-room/20180607IPR05245/parlament-vyzyva-rusko-na-ukoncenie-okupacie-gruzinskych-uzemi>



#MapaTýždňa: OTVORENÁ AGRESIA RUSKA PROTI SUSEDOM SA  
ZAČALA UŽ V ROKU 2008, ÚTOKOM NA GRUZÍNSKO

Agresia Ruska voči Ukrajine v roku 2014 - a ďalšia fáza ruského útoku od februára 2022 - nebola prvou ozbrojenou agresiou proti susedom.

8. augusta uplynulo 14 rokov od krátkej, ale intenzívnej vojny na Južnom Kaukaze. Začiatkom augusta 2008 sme boli svedkami regulárnej, medzištátnej vojny medzi Gruzínskom a Ruskom. Odvtedy Rusko vojensky okupuje, politicky a ekonomicky kontrolu... [See more](#)



In fact, although the official position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Slovakia is identical<sup>106</sup>, an Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia found out that it was Georgia that initiated that conflict.<sup>107</sup> There are more studies that - sometimes reluctantly – accept that this time Russia was not an aggressor, or at least not the first who shoot.<sup>108</sup>

Selected examples of alternative explanation of causes of Georgia-Russian 2008 War are thus a typical evidence of situation when “bad ideas can hold fast once embedded in institutions and national narratives.”<sup>109</sup>

106 E-mail communication with Michal Slivovic, Director of Department of States of Eastern Europe, Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, MFAEI, Michal.Slivovic@mzv.sk> Tuesday, November 8, 2022 3:17 PM

107 Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, *Report*, (September 2009), [https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC\\_38263\\_08\\_Annexes\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf)

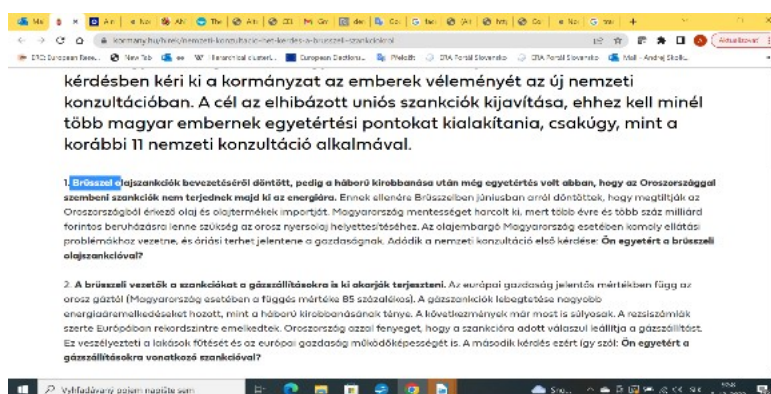
108 Eichler, J. Válka mezi Gruzii a Ruskou federací jako významný předěl (The War Between Georgia and the Russian Federation as an Important Milestone), *vojenskerozhledy*, (2019), <https://www.vojenskerozhledy.cz/kategorie-clanku/ozbrojene-konflikty/valka-gruzie-ruska-federace>, Miháliková, E. Conflict analysis of Georgia, *Slovenská politologická revue*, X(1), (2010), 59-83.

109 [Charli Carpenter](#), *When U.S. Foreign Policy Went Wrong*, FP, (January 15, 2021)

## Governments

We could detect an instructive example of intentionally high level deceiving interpretation of collective (EU level) foreign policy decisions by a national government. Specifically, the Hungarian government launched its 12<sup>th</sup> “national consultation” on October 14, 2022.<sup>110</sup> It is claimed in this call for popular mobilisation that the goal is to correct the flawed EU sanctions against Russia. Specifically, it was claimed that “Brussels decided to introduce oil sanctions,....Brussels leaders want to extend the sanctions to gas deliveries as well.”<sup>111</sup> However, this decision was enacted not by “Brussels” or “Brussels leaders”, but by the European Council or by the Council of Ministers.<sup>112</sup> The European Council consists of the heads of state or government of the EU's member states, together with its President and the European Commission President. It defines the EU's general political direction and priorities.<sup>113</sup> The Council of Ministers consists of ministers from EU M.S. who share the same portfolio – in this case energy or economy. In that sense, it is clearly and grossly misleading to call it a “Brussels” or “Brussels leaders” decision.<sup>114</sup>

### Scan 3: Hungarian Government's 2022 Deceptive Call for “National Consultation” on EU Sanctions



This Brussels’blaming narrative became part of official speeches of Hungarian authorities in the following period.<sup>115</sup> What are these national consultations about? As put by Gabriella Szabó, political scientist from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences:

National Consultations are one of the direct marketing tools of Fidesz. It is often labeled (by Fidesz) as a survey although technically and purposely national consultations are one of the political communication techniques. It started in 2005. Since Fidesz came into power in 2010, eleven rounds of National Consultations have been initiated and completed.

110 <https://kormany.hu/hirek/nemzeti-konzultacio-het-kerdes-a-brusszeli-szankciokrol>

111 <https://kormany.hu/hirek/nemzeti-konzultacio-het-kerdes-a-brusszeli-szankciokrol>

112 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/24/european-council-conclusions-23-24-june-2022/>

113 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/>

114 In order to clarify here, we contacted the Embassy of Hungary in Slovakia, Fri 12/9/2022 9:59 AM mission.pzs@mfa.gov.hu

115 <https://kormany.hu/hirek/a-nehez-gazdasagi-helyzet-a-szankcios-politika-kovetkezmenye>,

<https://kormany.hu/hirek/a-kormany-nak-az-energiarak-mellett-az-ellatasbiztonsagert-is-harcolnia-kell>

In the Fidesz/Government's rhetoric, "Brussels" is the collective name of the enemy, an empty signifier. Sometimes it refers to the European Commission, usually to the European Parliament, and occasionally to those foreign figures and institutions who are critical of the Hungarian government. It is not surprising that the National Consultation is not using the correct term and is biased because National Consultation is a political action that aims to mobilize public support. As a political marketing tool, National Consultation is not objective, not neutral, but subjective, emotionally arousing (incl. negative tonality), and open for collective interpretation.<sup>116</sup>

In essence identical opinion expressed Zsolt Gál, political scientist from Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, who added: „This probably should be seen as a symbolic identification of a new power center of the EU ("Brussels is a new Moscow"), as well as probably there is an effort to create impression that Hungarian politicians do not participate at adopted decisions.<sup>117</sup>

Thus, one can safely argue that the government – and uncritical PSM media – disseminate here disinformation or, indeed, mal-information related to foreign affairs, under pretext that they want to hear the opinion of the people.<sup>118</sup> In effect, National Consultation that initially started as a deliberative process was transformed into a political tool employed to achieve political gains.<sup>119</sup> It is a part of an earlier academic debate whether and how much could National Consultations be seen from the viewpoint of deliberation or rather as a direct marketing instrument that one can find in the literature on relationship marketing.<sup>120</sup> To conclude, less than 1.4 million of Hungary's 8.2 million registered voters took part in the consultation process. The European Commission dismissed the results of Hungary's government consultation on EU sanctions against Russia.<sup>121</sup>

### The Smolensk Tragedy

The Smolensk tragedy seems to be dual compelling reference point for questions of self-definition and cultural identity of many Poles.<sup>122</sup> It seems rather significant event for Polish-Russian relations as well as for national politics. For the former, some authors initially claimed that a joint commemoration rite in Katyn in 2010 symbolically created a change in the bilateral relationship between Russia and Poland.<sup>123</sup> However, this is probably too strong

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116 Personal communication, [Szabo.Gabriella@tk.hu](mailto:Szabo.Gabriella@tk.hu), December 9, 2022 10:39 AM

117 Personal communication, [zsolt.gal@uniba.sk](mailto:zsolt.gal@uniba.sk), December 9, 2022 10:40 AM

118 See also [Dorka Takacsy](#), Hungary's Propaganda Campaign, *Visegrad Insight*, (15 December 2022), <https://visegradinsight.eu/hungarys-propaganda-campaign/>, Péter Hunčík, Pávi tanec zlého chlapca Viktora Orbána, *Denník N*, (20 December 2022), <https://dennikn.sk/3159742/pavi-tanec-zleho-chlapca-viktora-orbana/>

119 Daniel Oross & Paul Tap, Using deliberation for partisan purposes: evidence from the Hungarian National Consultation, *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 34:5, 803-820,(2021),DOI: [10.1080/13511610.2021.1995335](https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2021.1995335)

120 Bene Márton, Farkas Xénia, Kiss Balázs, Szabó Gabriella, A CENTRALIZÁCIÓ ÉVEI, POLITIKAI KOMMUNIKÁCIÓ MAGYARORSZÁGON, 2006 – 2015, MTA TK PTI, Budapest (2019), *Studies in Political Science*, <https://politikatudomany.tk.hu/uploads/files/Centralizacioevei.pdf>

121 [Alexandra Brzozowski](#), EU brushes off results of Hungary's national consultation on Russia sanctions, [EURACTIV.com](https://www.euractiv.com), 17. 1. 2023

122 [Maria Kobielska](#), Endless aftershock. The Katyń Massacre in Contemporary Polish Culture. In: Leese, P., Crouthamel, J. (eds) *Traumatic Memories of the Second World War and After*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. (2016). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33470-7\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33470-7_9)

123 [Michel André Horelt](#), The Power of Ritual Ceremonies in State Apologies: An Empirical Analysis of the Bilateral Polish-Russian Commemoration Ceremony in Katyn in 2010. In: Mihai, M., Thaler, M. (eds) *On the Uses and Abuses of Political Apologies*. Rhetoric, Politics and Society Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London. (2014).[https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137343727\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137343727_5)



claim – in particular, if one considers long term foreign policy of Poland.<sup>124</sup> In fact, the opposite seems to be true. It also had strong impact on domestic party politics. Since the Smolensk tragedy, the PiS is experimenting with its a long term ideological project of an alternative vision of history. The objective is to impose „alternative“ truth..<sup>125</sup> In short, it is nourishing conspiracy theories about Russian involvement in disaster that killed Polish president and many other officials. The tragedy „... intensified division between liberal and enlightened establishment and unenlightened clerical mass.“<sup>126</sup> This extreme alternative approach to reality culminated in December 2022, when the Polish Sejm (Lower Chamber, 231 deputies voted for the resolution, while 226 parliamentarians did not participate in the vote) passed a resolution declaring Russia a “state sponsor of terrorism.” In addition, it explicitly and directly blamed Russia for the 2010 crash of a Polish Air Force flight in Smolensk.<sup>127</sup> This was not first time that the Polish Sejm passed resolution with respect to interpretation of history.<sup>128</sup> Clearly, conspiratory vision of events seems to correlate with the political vision in which there is no relevant political/ideological alternative.<sup>129</sup>

Obviously, also the media or communication tools have been impacted by „ideologisation“ of this tragedy. For example, the Polish press has published relatively little ”transparent” journalistic photography with focus on crash in Smolensk. Moreover, these photographs were often read contrary to the intentions of the photographs, because the texts gave another meaning to the pictures.<sup>130</sup> There was difference noticed in how the conservative media (“Gazeta Polska”, Radio Maryja, TV Trwam) and the left-wing and liberal media (“Gazeta Wyborcza”, TVN) interpreted the tragedy and surrounding events.<sup>131</sup>

### Fact-checking/Debunking Initiatives

Although fact-checking/debunking initiatives are precisely established for double-checking others’ relevant statements, sometimes they themselves produce incorrect interpretation of others’ statements. For example, following report (Scan X) claimed that Russia acknowledged its policy of “energy blackmail” towards the EU, although the argument used by Russian spokesperson was rather different. Russian President’s spokesperson talked about technical impact of sanction, not about political circumstances or political intentions of Russia.<sup>132</sup>

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124 Patryk Tomaszewski. "A Comparative Discursive Analysis of the Polish Foreign Ministers’ Speeches Regarding Poland’s Security Policy and Its Cooperation with Ukraine, the Republic of Belarus, and the Russian Federation in the Period 2011-2019". *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review* 1:79-100. (2021),

125 Francois Bafoil The Law and Justice Party in Poland: Family Romances, National Romances. In: *The Politics of Destruction. The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. (2021). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81942-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81942-2_3)

126 Szymon Wróbel S, *Mourning Populism. The Case of Poland*, “Polish Sociological Review”, 4 (176), (2011)

127 **Głosowanie nr 44 na 68. posiedzeniu Sejmu dnia 14-12-2022 r. o godz. 21:15:01**, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/agent.xsp?symbol=glosowania&NrKadencji=9&NrPosiedzenia=68&NrGlosowania=44>

128 See Resolution of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland against the manipulation and falsifying of history by high ranking Russian politicians. <https://www.gov.pl/web/qatar/resolution-of-the-sejm-of-the-republic-of-poland-against-the-manipulation-and-falsifying-of-history-by-high-ranking-russian-politicians>

129 Juraj Marušiak, *Konmšpirácie ako sprievodný jav krízy*, Pravda, p.25 (21 January 2021),

130 Magdalena Mateja, *Informacja, interpretacja czy ideologizacja? Katastrofa pod Smoleńskiem na fotografiach dziennikarskich*, *Studia de Cultura*, (2011), 38-48

131 [Przemysław Żukiewicz](#), *The Smolensk Tragedy and Its Importance for Political Communication in Poland after 10 th April, 2010 (Focusing on the Political Incidents in Front of the Presidential Palace)*, SP, 1(15),

## Scan 4: EU vs DiSiNFO Incorrect Interpretation

Listen to this article  
0:00 / 7:06 1X

This week, the Kremlin finally showed its cards when spokesperson Dmitry Peskov **admitted** the obvious. Namely, that Russia's gas supplies to the EU have been and will stay on hold not because of **supposed maintenance** of the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, but because gas is a tool of **political blackmail** in the Kremlin's toolbox of influence.

Now, if you are getting confused about Russia's stance on EU sanctions – don't worry, it's not you, it's them. While one part of their disinformation ecosystem **keeps hammering** day in and day out that EU sanctions have no effect whatsoever on Russia and hurt the EU instead, other parts of the Kremlin **keep doing their utmost** to make the EU drop its sanctions.

Ironically, a month later Russian President Putin still talked about Russia's interest in supplying oil and gas to the EU.<sup>133</sup> There was no interest on the side of fact-checking organisation to correct its previous statement regardless of the fact that this information became familiar to them in communication with the author of this article.

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132 [Disinformation Review](#), PRO-KREMLIN PROPAGANDA RUNNING OUT OF GAS, (2022, SEPTEMBER 8), <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pro-kremlin-propaganda-running-out-of-gas/?highlight=%22political%20blackmail%22>

Vladimir Soldatkin and Oksana Kobzeva, *Putin moots gas hub in Turkey with Nord Stream supplies*, (October 12, 2022, 26 PM GMT+2 Last Updated 20 hours ago), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-moots-major-gas-hub-turkey-with-nord-stream-supplies-2022-10-12/>

## Conclusions

The main focus of this study was on detecting controversial reporting, commenting, commemorating and in general questionable interpretations of selected but relevant foreign policy issues (with a focus on the Caucasus region and Russia) within the EU in general, but with a more specific focus on selected countries of East Central Europe, in political and media discourses, using an exploratory approach. The findings were then put into comparison with local efforts to tackle misinformation/disinformation and mal-information. The sample comprising Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia was supposed to represent culturally and geographically close countries joined in *ad hoc* foreign policy regional lobby group. However, in spite of this selection based on the "most similar cases" approach, the results suggest rather diverse results. It was possible to identify some recent (Hungary, fact-checking portal EUvsDisinfo) or long-term (Poland, Slovakia) examples of mis/disinformation produced by authorities, diplomats or the media (pro-governmental in Hungary and Poland or independent media in Slovakia), or by EU-funded fact-checking organisation. Interestingly, in all these examples in one way or another Russia can be identified as a central actor.

It was found that there are two different approaches with respect to local efforts tackling misinformation/disinformation and mal-information within this regional foreign lobby state group.

The first approach can be called **„repression of the alternative media in an emergency situation“** and **„occasional misinformation produced by alternative media or other bodies is tolerated or tackled primarily by fact-checking and debunking NGOs and only in extreme cases by state authorities“**. We identified such an approach in Slovakia and Czechia. However, it should be noted that **Slovakia is moving towards more restrictive regime that will include not only monitoring, but also expected irregular bans of certain websites and social media accounts**. At the same time, in Slovakia, the government (ministry of foreign affairs) and the independent (especially mainstream) media (including PSM) rarely produce what we can call misinformation (no intention to produce disinformation but nonetheless, they occasionally produce such outputs). As we could see in the example of interpretation and coverage of the Georgian-Russian war of 2008 and its anniversaries in particular in the Slovak case, mainstream media and authorities (diplomats) have no problem in producing and sticking to misinformation that is, in fact, disinformation. However, much more misinformation and disinformation are produced by alternative media whose outputs remind more of gossiping. However, these alternative versions of local and especially foreign events produced (or, perhaps more precisely, using „copy, translate and paste“ method) by alternative media occasionally broaden perspectives offered by mainstream media.

The Slovak government as well as the Czech government reacted quickly (and most likely unconstitutionally) towards selected alternative media – effectively silencing them for a few months - during what was seen as an emergency situation and part of hybrid war (immediately after the Russian invasion to Ukraine).

The Czech government also considered strict regulation of fake news/hoaxes in late 2022 – early 2023. However, this was found as problematic approach in a more liberal Czech society.

The second approach can be called (metaphorically speaking) „**alternative reality is the King**“ and „**freedom of the speech on platforms is the Queen**“. This situation was identified in Hungary and in Poland. However, **Poland seems to be moving towards some restrictions to freedom of speech on the platforms, too.** The Polish and Hungarian governments and government-friendly media have no problem with the occasional production and further dissemination of disinformation (from their perspective, it is true and correct opinion or fact). The most known and long-term notorious example in Poland is the Smolensk Tragedy. This accident is commonly interpreted by the PiS Party and authorities, and friendly or captured media, not as an accident, but as a pre-planned and secretly executed (by Russians) mass murder of Polish elite. This conspiratory vision of the world events culminated in late 2022 when the slight majority of the Polish Lower Chamber of the Parliament passed a resolution which it vindicated Russia from this accident in an official and malicious way. Thus, one can define this act as a sort of mal-information. In addition, Georgian-Russian War was commonly perceived as Russian aggression by Polish elites and a major part of the media.

In Hungary, the government initiates „national consultations“ that sometimes include clearly biased formulations. The 2022 initiative included an effort to undermine common foreign policy goals of the EU towards Russia in the eyes of the local public. For that purpose, rather incorrect terminology was used – in fact, this is rather a norm than an exception to use such ultimately negative nicknames: „Brussels “ and „Brussels leaders“. Although it is technically true that the decision was geographically-wise made in Brussels, it was done at the meeting thereby by ministers or prime ministers and presidents of EU M.S.

Within this context, we suggest to correct or replace some variables used as well as to replace the name and analytical meaning of the Vulnerability Index. This Index seems to be relevant in particular for Hungary (either in original meaning or in a newly suggested re-labeling and re-interpretation), with a more suitable name Congruence Index.<sup>134</sup> As it has been discussed, Hungary is not vulnerable to foreign influence – rather, there is congruence of certain (especially business and sanctions) policies to a certain degree with some countries (in particular with Russia) that are seen as highly problematic by other EU M.S. (or, indeed, rated as a top enemy by Poland).

Interestingly, both Hungary and Poland, countries that a few years ago (around D. Trump era that ended with his ban on Facebook and Twitter) tended to fight any regulation of social media platforms, allegedly with a focus on defending the freedom of speech on social media. Poland drafted earlier such regulation but the 2022 draft can be seen as a more moderate one. Hungary remained rather passive in that regard, allegedly waiting for a pan-European solution (Digital Services Act and Digital Market Act). There was a common perception among governments in both countries that social media platforms tend to limit

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<sup>134</sup> The authors of the original index have been contacted, but there was no response either to these criticism or suggestions: [dominika.hajdu@globsec.org](mailto:dominika.hajdu@globsec.org), [katarina.klingova@globsec.org](mailto:katarina.klingova@globsec.org), December 16, 2022 3:18 PM

freedom of speech. It was not found somehow inconsistent approach that both governments actually attempted to limit oppositional or critical voices in PSM and other critical legacy media.

The tentative overview of media coverage of the Russian-Georgian 2008 War showed even more heterogeneous results. The least problematic media coverage was found in Czechia, while arguably the most biased coverage one could find in Poland. Slovak and Hungarian media coverage could be, tentatively, located between these poles. It should be specified, that, for example, Slovak media tend to inform correctly in news, but have no problem in allowing misinterpretation in commentaries.

However, we should remind the reader that even respected international media from time to time fail in their foreign coverage.<sup>135</sup>

In conclusion, it has been proven that some incorrect reporting and/or interpretations of important foreign events can penetrate deeply into foreign policy thinking and discourses of segments of the political spectrum, and diplomacy, including minor part of foreign policy experts, and part of the media in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia and less so, in Czechia. This occurrence is probably related to cognitive biases and mistakes (Slovakia). It probably reflects ideological biases (mainly among some Czech, Polish and Slovak foreign policy experts), but also it is based on deeply rooted political persuasions and (negative) historical legacy/memory (Poland) and/or more recent utilitarian political instrumentalisation (Hungary). In that sense, we could observe that alternative reality nourished by Polish political conservative spectrum and some media probed into (in part) absurd political declaration by a chamber of the Polish Parliament in 2022.

An alternative partial focus on the Georgia-Russian war in 2008 by some Slovak diplomats, supported by an official but incorrect interpretation of that event, resulted in the dissemination of misinformation by Slovak diplomats on Facebook. It could be perhaps justified by an identically misleading understanding of the Georgia-Russian war by the European Parliament on the 10th anniversary of this war.

Hungary is a different case in point. There, the government knowingly produces foreign policy (as well as, and sometimes at the same time, domestic policy) misinterpretations in orchestrated campaigns covered as „national consultations“ or in other way in captured media, for local audiences.

Paradoxically, in Hungary in particular, and less so, but still, in Poland, misinformation (The Smolensk Tragedy) and disinformation as well as mal-information (2022 „national consultation“) and captured media (especially in Hungary) seem to be more threatening to a healthy media eco-system and foreign policy efforts than the Russian or Chinese misinformation and disinformation efforts.

This can also be seen in the attention that is paid to fact-checking and debunking initiatives. In Hungary in particular, except for some minor local fact-checking initiatives produced by

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135 See *From the editors: The Times and Iraq*, (May 26,

2004), <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/26/world/from-the-editors-the-times-and-iraq.html>

journalists and their organisations, a major push for debunking came directly or indirectly (via pressure on social media platforms) from the EU. In contrast, Slovakia and Czechia more actively and more widely support debunking and fact-checking initiatives. Poland seems to be located here somewhere in between these two poles.

There are other secondary but important tentative findings that should be explored furthermore. How come that relatively so many foreign policy analysts or politicians or diplomats are unable or unwilling to stick to the facts with respect to some important events in foreign policy? Tentatively, we see that at least some of them must rely either on biased media coverage, or they show some deeply-rooted biases and prejudices (especially in the Polish case). How is it possible that the editors in foreign policy or security studies accept for publishing some articles based on clearly wrong premises? Consequently, how can Russian or other foreign diplomats understand in part absurd interpretations (narratives) of some foreign policy events? How can one understand and interpret the incongruency of Slovak diplomacy with official conclusions of fact-finding mission of the EU as well as other internal analytical materials in the case of the Georgia-Russia war? How is it possible that Members of the European Parliament ignored the same findings from the EU-funded report and other internal analytical materials? Or can one see an extension of military intervention into territory of aggressor as „aggression“ by those initially attacked? How is it possible that the Polish Parliament (Lower Chamber) passed a political statement that is in contradiction with facts (The Smolensk Tragedy)? How can this „alternative interpretation of reality“ that blames other State for something it did not do, be understood by the Russian foreign service?

How come the Hungarian government has no problem in launching a deceiving nationwide campaign that misinterprets foreign policy reality and, moreover, hurts the image of the EU? What can be done, if anything, with respect to clearly biased conservative and „PSM“ media in Hungary and Poland, and a section of partially biased liberal private and PSM media in Czechia and Slovakia in their reporting on some foreign events?<sup>136</sup>

Is it possible to design analytically more relevant congruence index? Can we avoid to include there too many very specific questions that can be naturally answered only on basis of biased media reporting or political interpretation/utilisation of certain events?

How is it possible that the EU-wide fact-checking and debunking initiative is unwilling to correct its wrong interpretation that concerns the Russian foreign policy goal that, if correct, has fundamental consequences for the EU foreign policy?

These are all research questions that deserve further exploration.

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136 There are some monitoring efforts focused on the contribution of leading news media to mature democracies all over the world. see Josef Trappel, & Talas Tomaz, Democratic performance of news media: Dimensions and indicators for comparative studies. In J. Trappel, & T. Tomaz (Eds.), *The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021: How leading news media survive digital transformation* (Vol. 1) (pp. 11–58). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855404-1> (2021)