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How Public Service Media Disinformation Shapes Hungarian Public Discourse

Media and Communication

Abstract:

The structure of the illiberal Hungarian media system is well documented. Fewer publications address the question of how disinformation is reshaping public discourse in Hungary. The most important feature of disinformation in Hungary is that it is often generated and disseminated by the progovernment media. This is certainly unusual, as in other EU countries it is typically the fringe media which are responsible for spreading disinformation. The Russian war against Ukraine illustrates how the disinformation ecosystem works in Hungary, and it also reveals its devastating impact on democratic public discourse. Public service media play a prominent role in spreading disinformation. We were able to identify several false narratives in the period of the first year since the start of the war. In the first few months of the war, a key element of disinformation that was being spread in Hungary suggested that Ukraine had provoked the armed conflict. Later, the prevailing message was that only Hungary wanted peace, while the Western powers were interested in a continuation of the war. During autumn, the focus of the disinformation campaign increasingly shifted to the EU, disseminating an anti-EU message that was more concerned with the sanctions than the war. The pro-government media constantly told news consumers that the economic difficulties and the rise in energy prices had not been caused by the war launched by Russia but by the sanctions that the EU had imposed in response to the aggression. Public opinion research clearly shows the impact of these narratives on the perceptions of the Hungarian public. The polls readily capture how the Hungarian public's opinion has changed over time. This study is primarily based on a content analysis of the relevant shows of the M1 public television channel, but we have also relied on some insights from public opinion polls to inform our analysis.

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