

# Analysing Media Polarisation in Georgia and V4 States: Domestic and External Factors - Main Findings for Hungary

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## 1. Domestic factors of polarization:

**Media polarisation in Hungary is not a side-effect or collateral damage: strengthening dividing lines is the main objective of the current regime in accordance with its broader strategy to widen political polarisation in order to create a stable majority within the Hungarian electorate.** Following the election victory of his party with a supermajority in 2010, Prime Minister Orbán's government introduced new measures in the media sphere as part of his mission to establish a new type of hybrid, illiberal political system. The public media and the pro-governmental TV-s, radios, online journals as well as the daily press have been transformed into a propaganda machinery. Fidesz, the right-wing populist ruling party has used regulatory and business instruments to control most parts of the media landscape in spite of the ongoing conflicts with the European institutions and global voices of criticism. The small free and independent segment of the media keeps on following traditional journalistic ethos in a hostile environment. As for the audiences, supporters of Orbán's government and those citizens who want a radical change live in separate worlds: they follow mostly their own media hubs and have created their alternative virtual realities. All the characteristics of the media system put Hungary into the category of having just a partly free media in international comparison.

## 2. External factors of polarisation:

**Following the dramatic change in Orbán's political line towards Russia around 2014, the pro-Fidesz part of the media has adjusted to the new course called Eastern Opening that gives both instrumental and ideological basis to a special friendly relationship between the Hungarian government and Putin's regime.** The mouthpieces of the government have moved from a former critical position to open admiration towards the Russian strongman during the last decade. The pro-Russian argumentation and the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, which can be easily observed in the "official" media coverage of the war have successfully transformed the attitudes of the Fidesz camp that is members of a captive audience. When Russia attacked its sovereign neighbour in February

2022, after a short period of embarrassment, the media empire of Fidesz started to echo the propaganda of the ruling party claiming Hungary stands on the side of peace in the war of two foreign nations. Russia has been often portrayed as the real victim in the conflict as being provoked by Western powers. Echoing fake news and simplistic manipulation rooted in Russian information sources plus neglecting the reports on the brutality of the military actions by Putin's regime have become characteristic in the non-free part of the media. On the other side of the spectrum, the free and independent Hungarian media follows and frames news from a democratic, pro-Western standpoint. Here, Russian forces are called invaders and occupation is called occupation. Further dividing and polarising factors used by the governments and its media include regular smear campaigns targeting foreign out-groups like migrants, "Brussels" and the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros.

3. Key stimulating factors of media polarization based on the survey results:

**The monopoly of the government in the media sphere has a devastating impact on the political culture and the general trust in the institutions in Hungary.** According to the journalists participating in our survey, the most important domestic factors of polarisation are the following: the rhetoric of the ruling party, disinformation and corruption. The least relevant aspects were the activities of civil society representatives, religious issues and environmental challenges. Regarding the external factors of polarisation, the Russian aggression/the war in Ukraine and the relations with Ukraine and Russia were considered the most relevant, followed by EU policy. The influx of Russian citizens and, somewhat surprisingly, the Ukrainian refugees in Hungary have been the least significant external factors. Journalists believe that it is the state-capture of the media and its political instrumentalization which influence mostly the current situation. We can detect from the comments of the Hungarian respondents how much they are discontent with the current state of affairs. Pro-governmental media not only dominates the field, but it functions as a propaganda machine: with a clear strategy in their mind, pro-governmental media workers amplify positive messages and often invent false news. These propagandists often receive instructions from the authorities, especially from the "propaganda ministry" led by Antal Rogán how to write on political issues. Moreover, they frame the news in accordance with the line of the government positions even without concrete demands from the top. Government officials are banned to talk to journalists who are not invited to press conferences and the discrimination of the autonomous media organs is evident. Most of the national, regional and local media are pro-governmental and especially in rural areas people are not able to reach alternative sources for balanced information. The isolation of the independent press from the

majority of the society blocks dialogue between dissent interpretations of political issues depriving people of the opportunity to make informed choices and decisions whilst turning them against each other as a chilling effect. Dialogue and deliberation are non-existing political notions in an illiberal state. Loyal and centrally directed businesspeople serve the interests of the ruling party as its clients as media owners whilst government's advertising goes exclusively to pro-governmental media.

4. Media polarisation mitigating mechanisms and ways to ensure informed decision-making:

**There is little hope for a quick change that would include the mitigation of political and media polarisation.** A gradual adjustment to global reality in Orbán's political course seems to be unlikely just like the defeat of his party at forthcoming elections which are not fair. Nevertheless, as the government has manoeuvred itself into an isolated status and Hungary has currently moved to a non-influential, decision-taker role at European level, critical voices, including moral arguments, have become louder on the oppositional side of the political spectrum and in the free parts of the media. Reality and propaganda can gradually collide since there is no economic miracle in Hungary at all – just the contrary. Even Fidesz voters tend to follow stories about the Hungarian health system and education system on independent sites as they are aware that there are huge problems with these spheres and government-supported outlets will not report on those issues. Non-governmental outlets mostly want and try to be independent also from the opposition following a traditional model and mission of sovereignty. Even under pressure, it is the independent media's responsibility to find paths to those audiences who do not usually read about politics - especially to young people using alternative methods to distribute news in a funny and witty way. As our respondent stakeholders have pointed out, independent journalists often feel threatened and excluded, but they can write what they want since there are no criminal proceedings against them, at least. There is an urgent need for media education as well as fighting against disinformation and fake news. This development, however, cannot be separated from the fundamental renewal of the political (partisan) supply side. In general, Hungarian like-minded media and political stakeholders believing in liberal-democratic norms and values are advised to co-operate with European and global actors to curb illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in Hungary.

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