

István Hegedűs

War and Peace: Populist and Radical Political Communication Spread by Fidesz
and Its Loyal Media in Hungary

Presentation at 27th annual conference of the Central European Political Science Association (CEPSA) entitled “War and Democracy: Central European Democracies Under Pressure” at the University of Dubrovnik, 29 September 2023

1. Background – War and Peace and Elections
2. Political Communication Methods and Techniques - Reporting on the war in the Fidesz media
3. Political Communication as a miracle weapon?

Hungary as the Champion of Peace

First, I intend to recall some aspects of the state of affairs in Hungary before the war broke out, hence, when Russia attacked its sovereign neighbour on 24 February 2022.

1. Prime Minister Orbán created a special relationship to President Putin since 2014. (Actually, this *Sonderweg* has not changed during the last one and a half years in spite of the hopes/prophecies of many analysts that the Hungarian government would gradually adjust to the joint EU positions. Even the militant foreign minister has remained the same.)
2. Central smear campaigns against perceived external enemies have become common place based on fear and anxiety since Fidesz won an overwhelming majority in 2010. Harsh anti-Brussels rhetoric was even accompanied by so-called peace marches against the “colonisation” in the name of a freedom fight at the beginning of last decade. Anti-Western sentiments have been widely spread in the pro-governmental media as well as increasing number of political conflicts with the US administration – except during the period of the Trump presidency.
3. The legacy of the “soft” Hungarian dictatorship under János Kádár has strongly contributed to a dominant attitude of many people who have developed

a sort of island mentality and have escaped to provincialism from the noise of the outside world.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine created a new political momentum in Hungary just a few weeks before the general elections. After a short hesitation, the right-wing authoritarian populist ruling party under the leadership of Viktor Orbán opted for a communication strategy that emphasised his desire for “peace”. Just like during previous successfully polarising smear campaigns, this time Fidesz labelled opposition politicians as the supporters of “war” that Hungarians have nothing to do with and we should keep it outside of our borders, a conflict that was portrayed as a “fight between two foreign countries”. The opposition Prime Minister candidate, according to the charge that was spread all over the country during the election campaign, would “send our boys abroad to die”.

Top government politicians could easily rely on the dominant and loyal segments of the state captured media that have reiterated the centralised propaganda messages since its complete uniformization after 2010, the year of political takeover and the beginning of the illiberal U-turn and democratic backsliding in Hungary. Since then, mobilising significant parts of the electorate for supporting the ruling party Fidesz has been based on fear, anxiety, resentment as well as traditional provincialism mixed with new-fashioned radical right wing cultural identity politics.

Political communication methods invented by the government

Here you have some characteristic citations from Origo, an online journal that used to be an independent source, but after a takeover and change of personal it became a propaganda mouthpiece of the government. Quotations from other similar outlets would show identical type of information spread by the strictly controlled Fidesz media empire.

“The counterattack is a complete failure: the Ukrainians are running away from the front in panic”, an article under this title published in Origo on 18 September 2023, (www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20230918-orosz-ukran-haboru-ellentamadas-visszavonulas.html)

“Ukrainians kill ordinary civilians with American weapons”. This was the title of the video report published in Origo, a Hungarian pro-governmental online news outlet on 3 September 2023 (www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20230903-egyre-tobb-szor-tamad-civileket-ukrajna.html).

“Another amazing twist: Ukraine may declare war on Poland”, a title after the conflict with some neighbouring EU countries on the import ban on Ukrainian wheat on 21 September 2023 in Origo. “It has been shown countless times that the Kiev regime does not show even the smallest form of gratitude. As soon as they get what they want, they continue their distasteful demands and insult their most important allies one after the other.” The title of the report: “Zelensky went crazy: after the Poles, he also attacked his other big ally”. (Origo, 21 September 2023)

In general, we can detect the following methods invented/used by the pro-governmental media:

1. Attacking old and new, internal and external “enemy”/“enemy of the people” through character-killing charges and conspiracy theories. The standard technique is to sustain and widen the cleavage between “us and them”, hence, the defenders of the nation that has been allegedly “under attack” from “Brussels”, “Soros” and their domestic “mercenaries” in an “era of multiple – external - dangers”.

When unmasking the opposition parties, the independent segment of the media landscape as well as autonomous non-governmental organisations, these pro-governmental mouth-pieces repeat again and again the charge that critical voices are all financed from abroad. “Dollar left-wing”, “dollar civilians”: these expressions were created by actually they sound strange even in Hungarian, but you can get used to it quite soon as synonyms to foreign agents. According to this description of the global state of affairs, there is a hostile environment all around our country: not only the United States of America – and its ambassador, David Pressman – belong to those who want to control and direct Hungary, but Sweden as well. If Sweden wants to join NATO, first, its government should respect Hungary and apologise for a negative report that was broadcast in a TV channel... This is the demand of the Fidesz parliamentary faction after watching this documentary collectively...

2. Framing events in accordance with an artificially constructed alternative reality where the government has desperately fought for its own country and countrymen whilst neglecting any facts and information that would challenge this simplistic concept. Doing so, the loyal media propagandists – it is hard to call those media-workers journalists who have a job inside the Fidesz media empire – simply follow the political line laid down in Orbán’s speeches. Not only his ideological worldview narrative has been echoed, but the frames and the wording invented by Fidesz major spin doctors, as well.

Liberal, democratic Western politicians are portrayed hawks who are interested in a long-lasting conflict with Russia. Disinformation monitoring research led by Political Capital Institute detected in April 2023 that “The most popular narratives included those claiming that Russia is achieving victories on the battlefield, that aid to Ukraine prolongs or escalates the war, and that the West is using Ukraine as a pawn against Russia” (bad excuse). Moreover, “some voices already claiming that Ukraine will be unable to do anything and that Russia's final victory is inevitable” (https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3191).

Former studies have already stated that there has been no real need for direct Russian media influence in Hungary: domestic media outlets know it better how to spread anti-Western narratives and how to discredit Ukraine. That might be the reason why some extreme elements of Putin's claims are not echoed servilely like the accusations of a Nazi rule in Ukraine. However, when Medvedev called Polish people stinky rats who need to be exterminated and accused the Ukrainian government of being paranoid and delirious drug-addicted Nazis, no critical comments were published in the Fidesz controlled part of the media.

Certainly, the Hungarian government's position is widely spread especially on the “failed and harmful sanction policy introduced by Brussels”, which only prolong further suffering according to this narrative. Instead, an immediate cease-fire is needed and, as foreign minister Peter Szijjártó proclaimed, more and more foreign governments agree with the peace efforts of the Hungarian government. Whenever there is new - false or correct - information about increasing war fatigue in the public opinion inside some NATO countries, the pro-governmental media celebrates this shift as a victory of the Hungarian government's political line.

The pro-Ukrainian statements by Katalin Novák, the otherwise loyal President of the Republic seem to serve just as a sort of counter-balance to the ears of foreign audiences and to mitigate the impacts of the government's anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. (Still, you never know in politics, how and in which direction partly artificial, but maybe partly existing internal differences can develop in the future...)

3. Supplying ultra-conservative and alt-right ideological themes, perceptions and arguments to the audience as a guideline how to fight (back) against the assumed oppression by globalist liberal-minded elites and their domestic representatives. All these claims are strongly connected to the image of the alleged decline of the West. Even using some seeds of truth regarding the multiple crises the democratic world faces today, the simplified and hostile composition of political

and policy issues and urging problems give the impression of a sinking civilisation compared to the emergence of the East. Hungary's allies and the international institutions led and dominated by liberal elites are under fire in the pro-governmental media. Alt-right illiberal identity politics include attacks against so-called gender ideology as well as the exclusion of out-groups, especially migrants and refugees, or, recently an attempt to unmask Sweden's liberal democratic order. David Pressman, the US ambassador to Hungary should be sent home because of his critical remarks on the state of the Hungarian democracy and has been caricatured as a woman.

4. Spreading Russian-friendly narratives in order to support Orbán's geopolitical balancing "dance" between the Western democratic political community and emerging authoritarian systems in the world.

The relevance of the Hungarian government's Sonderweg within the European Union and in the global political arena, including its communication tools and practices, cannot be underestimated - especially since Putin's attack against a sovereign nation and, as a consequence, "Zeitenwende", a new epoch in international politics. Orbán has been mostly isolated at European level, but he can play the victim card domestically. The central message of the forthcoming election campaigns in 2024 – European plus local elections in Hungary – will be a choice between Fidesz candidates, who want to defend Hungarian sovereignty and those on the other side, who wish to undermine it.

It's the political communication, stupid?

Since the end of the era of "rational voter behaviour" – and the questioning of the simplifications of the rational choice model in general – the (funny) claim that it's the economy (stupid), hence, the economic performance and delivery of the government would be decisive regarding the outcome of elections has lost its convincing strength. Today – especially since the beginning of era of identity politics – good political communication seems to be the winning trump card in the hands of politicians. In public discourse we often talk more about the successes and failures of their messages, statements and style than the program of the parties they represent.

Of course, this approach is one-sided. At a workshop of invited Hungarian experts in April 2023 organised by the Hungarian Europe Society entitled the participants agreed that there is a "need for a strategic renewal of the mindset, behaviour, methods and techniques of political actors opposed to radical right-

wing populism and the hybrid system created by Orbán”. Negative campaigning, continuous Orbán-bashing do not work well: perhaps, populists use weapons like creating enemies more convincingly than democrats in their communication.

Even otherwise logical advice might not be enough: “given the scarcity of communication space, it is important to communicate very consistently about the issues, to communicate a lot about a few things, to be proactive and not to follow Fidesz's thematic directions”. Although it might be useful to rename high inflation rate “Orbán inflation”, similar inventions would not be sufficient to change the public mood and stabilised party preferences in a polarised electorate. It would be also fundamental to realise the method of “opposition management” as a tricky manipulation by the ruling party that means a constant linking of the opposition’s positions to the views of a minority in the society: the opposition is likely to do well if it can present its ideas to the majority of the people.

The limits of political communication campaigns: A striking example of the success of centralised government propaganda is the way in which the earlier anti-Russian nature of Fidesz voters has gradually been replaced by a stance that is 'understanding' of Putin and even blames Ukraine. But the big majority of the people has not bought the anti-Brussels rhetoric. Perhaps, a winning anti-Orbán alternative can be based on strong and courageous pro-European political identity and vision. Without a mobilising and convincing political offer even the best communication methodology cannot prove to be in itself a *Wunderwaffe*.

Thank you.