

Hungarian Elections and the Hungarian Diaspora in Serbia

An examination of the main topics surrounding the 2022
Hungarian parliamentary elections in the Hungarian
Diaspora in Serbia

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Executive Summary

Coverage of the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections in Hungarian- language media in Serbia



Research into coverage of the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election by Hungarian-language media in Serbia has shown the dominance of three sources: *Magyar Szó*, *Vajma.info* and *Szabad Magyar Szó*. The first two lean toward the dominant Hungarian minority party – the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ) – in their coverage, while the latter represents an independent outlet that often includes criticism towards both the party and the Hungarian government.

Three distinct topics relevant to the research were detected: a negative portrayal of the Hungarian opposition, attempts by the Hungarian government to mobilize voters abroad, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences. The coverage of Hungarian-language media in Serbia only fleetingly covered the LGBTQ+ referendum that was organized on the same day as the election, 3 April 2022, as well as other aspects of Hungary's relationship with the West, EU and NATO.

Context

Hungarian Diaspora

253,988

Ethnic Hungarians in Serbia

68,116

*Hungarian citizens in Serbia
registered for 2022 election*

Serbia is an important country for Hungarian national elections due to a significant number of Hungarian citizens living in Serbia and the strong links between Fidesz and the dominant Hungarian national minority party in Serbia (VMSZ), as well as the dominant national party in Serbia, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

While only about a third of the total Hungarian population in Serbia has registered to vote in the upcoming Hungarian election, indicators suggest that these voters are disciplined supporters of both Fidesz and VMSZ and that their opinions are shaped by media sources biased in favor of Fidesz and its messages.

According to the 2011 population census in Serbia, there were 253,899 citizens identifying as ethnic Hungarians, making up 3,53% of the overall population and the largest ethnic minority in Serbia.

Ethnic Hungarians living outside the country had a facilitated path to Hungarian citizenship following the introduction of the 2010 Act on Hungarian Citizenship. Since they only needed to demonstrate the ability to speak Hungarian and provide evidence of Hungarian ancestry many non-Hungarians in Serbia managed to acquire citizenship as well by managing to prove that one of their ancestors lived within pre-Trianon Hungarian borders. As of 9 March 2022, 68,116 Hungarian citizens living in Serbia registered to vote in the Hungarian parliamentary election.

As of February 2022, there were five political parties representing the Hungarian national minority in Serbia in the Register of political parties managed by the Ministry for State Administration and Local Self-Government. This political pluralism is somewhat illusory given the dominance that the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (Vajdasági Magyar Szövetség – VMSZ). The dominant position of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians is comparable to the position of Fidesz in Hungary and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in Serbia. The VMSZ maintains close ties and cooperation with both. It is considered a sister party of Fidesz, with whom it shared membership in the European People's Party (EPP) until its expulsion in 2021.

Primary information sources in the Hungarian language in Serbia are publicly owned. Radio-Television of Vojvodina (RTV) is a public broadcaster with minority language programs. On the other hand, there are daily newspapers *Magyar Szó*, weekly *Hét Nap*, and Pannonia Foundation, which is the publisher of *Pannon TV*, *Pannon radio*, and media portal. The founder of these media companies is the National Council of the Hungarian National Minority.

METHODOLOGY

To monitor the 2022 Hungarian election campaign in Serbia we mainly used the Pulsar ICT to observe the activity of media, Facebook pages and public profiles of politicians. The sources were chosen based on their traffic, number of followers, and reach in order to maximize the relevance of our findings. We have worked mainly with a selected [list of sources](#).

The narratives and tagging were decided with colleagues from partner organizations in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Ukraine with the purpose of drawing similarities and differences at the end of each research.

In the second phase of the analysis, we reviewed each tag and double-checked the filters. We took into account only manually tagged content for the analysis of narratives due to a consistent number of irrelevant posts. Each narrative got a narrative tag and a status tag: neutral, supporting, or conflicting, to determine the tone and purpose of the post in the matrix of our narratives. These tags along with the narratives were decided according to best practices in social media analysis.

Limitations - We have manually tagged posts after filtering the narrative by keywords. In the context of huge volumes of data, we followed our selection of keywords and sources. Other relevant data might be missing from our monitoring, but the major actors and sources have been included in this research.

Chapter 1. Main narratives about the opposition leader Péter Márki-Zay

Mentions By Volume

Feb 10, 2022 13:00 — May 26, 2022 13:59



Among the analyzed articles by Hungarian-language media in Serbia, there were 109 articles on the Hungarian opposition and its candidate for Prime Minister Péter Márki-Zay from 10 February until 29 April 2022, covering the duration of the election campaign and its aftermath. The highest number of articles was published on election day itself, 3 April, as well as 15 March, which featured both a pro-Fidesz and a pro-opposition rally.

The outlet with the largest number of articles was *Vajma.info* (49) followed by *Magyar Szó* (32). Both outlets have been supported by the Bethlen Gábor Foundation established by the Hungarian government. The media outlet with the third-highest number of articles on the Hungarian opposition, *Szabad Magyar Szó* (25) is an independent portal more critical of the ruling Hungarian party in Serbia (VMSZ) and the Hungarian government itself.

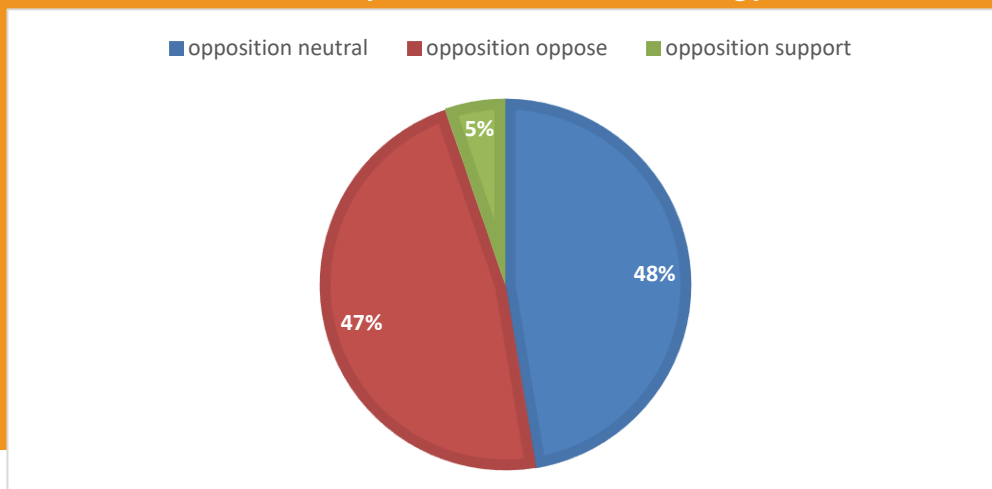
According to the election results, the Fidesz-KDNP list received 94% of the total diaspora votes, which also indicates that the majority of the 80.257 registered Hungarian voters in Serbia supported the ruling party (no data per country are available). This has been a trend established since 2010 and makes the issue of the representation of the opposition in the Hungarian-language media in Serbia a relevant research topic (while also taking into account that this is not the only factor influencing the voting preferences of Serbia-based Hungarians).

Tag Analysis



Most popular Tag

Among the analyzed articles, there was an almost equal number of those with the tags “opposition-oppose” (53) and “opposition-neutral” (54). Articles with an “opposition- support” tag were almost completely absent. Vajma and Magyar Szó, as well as Hét Nap weekly, were the main sources of the opposition-negative articles, while Szabad Magyar Szó only published articles that were neutral towards the opposition. Vajma also published a number of articles that were opposition-neutral, while only a handful of Magyar Szó articles were in this



Narrative Analysis

Among the most frequent negative narratives towards the opposition were 1) The unfavorable comparison between the economic records of pre- and post-2010 governments; 2) Claims that the opposition was beholden to foreign interests; 3) The image of the opposition as being too ideologically diverse and only interested in coming to power 4) claims that the opposition would lead Hungary into war in Ukraine if it won.

The tag “warmongering opposition” was the most frequent one that appeared on the same articles as “opposition-oppose” (17 times) and was mostly present in the second half of March. The majority of articles containing this narrative used the quotes of the ruling party members, which framed the election as a choice between war and peace. Another tag relevant to this chapter, “PMZ_communication mistake” appeared less frequently (only in five cases). However, comments made by Péter Márki-Zay inspired several dominant narratives of the ruling party, including that the opposition is made up of an alliance ranging from “the fascists to communists”.

The narrative on the unfavorable comparison between pre-2010 and post-2010 governments was also mostly based on the statements of Fidesz officials. For example, on 12 February, *Magyar Szó* reported on an interview with Viktor Orbán, in which he said that this election is about (former Prime Ministers) Gyurcsány and Bajnai wanting to return. “And if they return”, Orbán said, “it will bring us back to the same situation as before 2010”, a period which he described as economically backward, with rising taxes and prices and decreasing subsidies.

Similarly, *Magyar Szó* also reported the statement of the Fidesz parliamentary group leader Máté Kocsis, who on 31 March said that the election was a choice between the “failed past (of the 2002-2010 governments) and a successful future”. He also named some of the examples that Orbán also gave in his interview, such as the abolishment of the 13th pension.

The narrative that the opposition is beholden to foreign interests was also present, though not to the same extent. In February, *Vajma* reported on a lecture given by *Magyar Nemzet* editor László Zöldi Szentesi in the Hungarian-populated town of Temerin Serbia. According to Szentesi, the “leash” of the opposition was held by someone from abroad, where they receive support in the form of money, media promotion, ideas, and training. In March, *Magyar Szó* published an op-ed by one of its editors, who assessed that the opposition has a completely different idea of Hungarian interests, “which they interpret as unconditional subordination to Western interests... and the political mission demoted to the role of delegates”.

Meanwhile, the narrative that the opposition was too ideologically diverse was primarily based Péter Márki-Zay's [misreported statement](#) that both the fascists and the communists have representation in the opposition coalition, which was first reported in Serbia by *Vajma* on 17 February. Even though Márki-Zay later rephrased his comment, the original version was picked up and used against the opposition, including in statements carried by Serbian (language) media. At the beginning of March, *Magyar Szó* reported on the statement of the leader of the Christian Democratic People's Party Zsolt Semjén, who said that the opposition "according to their own confession, a conglomerate ranging from communists to fascists, led by Péter Márki-Zay, but actually run by Ferenc Gyurcsány". The same phrase was also used at the time by *Magyar Nemzet* editor László Zöldi Szentesi.

By the end of March, in the final weeks of the election campaign, the main narrative directed against the opposition was that it would directly involve Hungary in the war in Ukraine, while Fidesz stood for peace. *Vajma* was the main source of this narrative in Serbia, reporting on Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó's 25 March Facebook post, who said that "the left would drag Hungary into the war". A week later, an article on Viktor Orbán's speech was published, with the title "Orbán: If the left wins, the arms shipments will start the next day".

When it comes to the articles with the "opposition-neutral" tag, it was harder to detect specific narratives. *Vajma* was actively reporting on the opinion polling in the final three weeks of the campaign, with the articles emphasizing a growing gap between the ruling and the opposition parties and the findings that Viktor Orbán was much more popular than Péter Márki-Zay. *Szabad Magyar Szó* was the only outlet to mention the unfair electoral conditions the opposition was campaigning in, writing that the opposition was given only five minutes in the public media to present its election program and that opposition politicians do not receive much publicity from the government media, including those funded by taxpayers. This media outlet also pointed out that the pro-Fidesz rally on 15 March was facilitated by public money, which was unavailable to the opposition. Reporting on the opposition's election defeat, this outlet still noted that Márki-Zay's "speeches were often unacceptable, his statements sometimes confusing", highlighting the problems with his communication.

**Opposition would lead
Hungary into war in
Ukraine if it wins**

**Opposition too
ideologically diverse and
only interested in coming
to power**

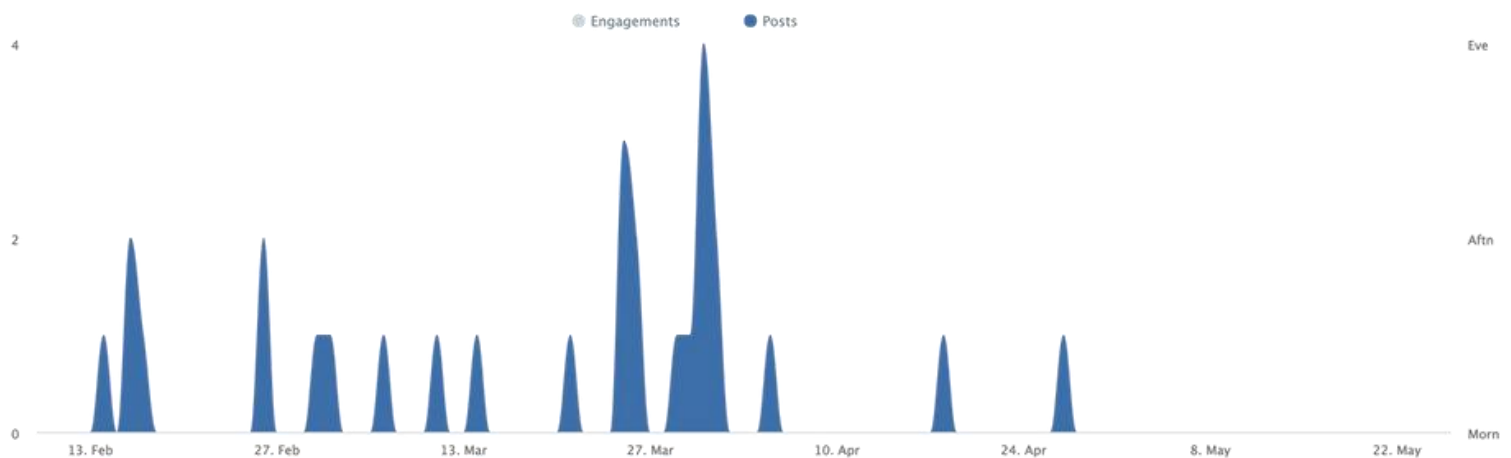
**Unfavorable
comparison between the
economic records of
pre- and post-2010
governments**

**Opposition was
beholden to foreign
interests**

Case Study

Mentions By Volume

Feb 10, 2022 13:00 — May 26, 2022 13:59



Vajma was the media outlet with the most articles tagged “opposition-oppose” (as well as “opposition-neutral”) in the observed period. As the graph above shows, the tag was most popular at the end of March, several days before the election date.

The reporting on the opposition in this period started with the opinion polling results showing declining popularity of Péter Márki-Zay as a candidate for prime minister in February; it also covered one of his communication mistakes, in which he called the Hungarian voters from Slovakia “mail-voting zombies”, which caused a negative reaction from the Hungarian Youth Association in Slovakia, which was also reported.

Vajdaságma MAGDOLNA, MANDA NAPJA KERESÉS A VAJMÁN NÁRAY ÉVA

2022. JÚLIUS 22., PÉNTEK AZ EURÓ KÖZÉPÁRFOLYAMA 117.43 RSD | 398.57 HUF

GAZDASÁG KULTÚRA MÉDIA MAGAZIN TUDOMÁNY KÖZLEMÉNYEK SPORT

VÁLASZTÁSOK 2022 / MAGYARORSZÁG

Századvég: Orbán Viktor csaknem kétszer népszerűbb Márki-Zay Péternél

VÁLASZTÁSOK 2022 / MAGYARORSZÁG 2022. MÁRCIUS 15. | 12:56 |

Betűméret: + -

Orbán Viktor és Márki-Zay Péter közül Ön kit látna szívesebben a miniszterelnöki pozícióban? (%)

Candidate	Percentage
Orbán Viktor	62%
Márki-Zay Péter	32%
Nem tudok / Nem válaszolt	6%

A Századvég márciusi közvélemény-kutatása szerint a politikailag aktívak közül csaknem kétszer annyian látnák szívesebben Orbán Viktort kormányfői pozícióban, mint Márki-Zay Pétert.

Az intézet hétfői, az MTI-hez eljuttatott közleményében kifejezte, a megkérdezettek 62 százaléka a regnáló miniszterelnököt, Orbán Viktort látná szívesebben az ország élén a következő kormányzati ciklusban is, ezzel szemben Márki-Zay Péternek, "a balliberális pártok kormányfőjelöltjének"

Vajma article on the opinion polling

During March, *Vajma* reported on the heterogeneity of the opposition coalition, which gathers “fascists and communists” (see above), and then proceeded to report on the statements of Fidesz politicians comparing the state of the country in 2010 and in the years that followed. An example of a headline from this point in time is: “László Kövér: The stake of the election is to preserve the results” (11 March). By the end of March, *Vajma* was reporting on the war in Ukraine and the interpretations of the Fidesz politicians, notably Szijjártó and Orbán, that the stake at the elections is war and peace.

TÜKÖR



2022. július 22.

A nándorfehérvári dladal napja

2022. július 21.

„Ha nem kapunk gázt, felkelések lesznek” –
kell az orosz gáz Berlinnek

2022. július 20.

Nepáliak, üzbégek, indiaiak és kazahok
dolgoznak a vajdasági mezőkön

LEVELEK A RÓZSA UTCÁBÓL

VÁLASZTÁSOK 2022 /
MAGYARORSZÁGKövér László: A választás tétje az eredmények
megőrzése

VÁLASZTÁSOK 2022 / MAGYARORSZÁG 2022. MÁRCIUS 12. [7:56]

Betűméret: + ↺ -



A választás egyik tétje, hogy mindazt, amit az ország elért az elmúlt tizenkét évben, egy rossz választással el lehet veszíteni - mondta az Országgyűlés elnöke pénteken Szentendrén, választási fórumon.

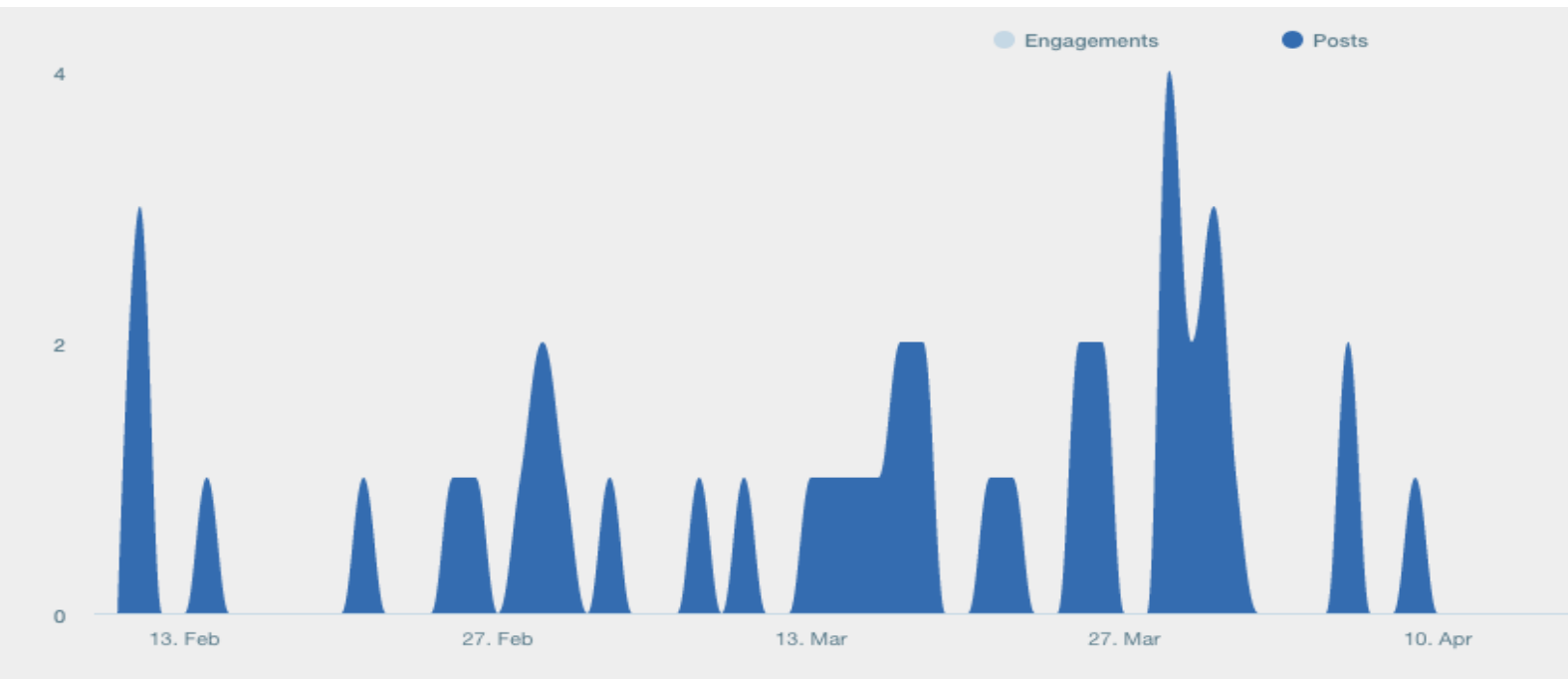
Kövér László kijelentette: azt a kérdést kell feltennie mindenkinek, hogy kezébe lehet-e adni az ország irányítását egy ilyen ellenzéknek. A fideszes politikus

Vajma article on the statement of László Kövér

Conclusions

Hungarian-language media in Serbia published more than 100 articles on the Hungarian opposition over the course of the election campaign. There was an equal number of negative and neutral articles on this topic, while positive narratives on the opposition were not present. The analysis of the negative narratives shows that the opposition was presented as wanting to return the country to the economically unsuccessful pre-2010 period and that it wanted to get involved in the war in Ukraine, with the headlines of a choice between “war and peace” present in the final weeks of March. The communication of Prime Ministerial candidate Péter Márki-Zay was a topic of several articles, but it was not a dominant story.

Chapter 2. Media attempts to mobilize the Hungarian diaspora to vote in favor of Fidesz



More than 80,000 Hungarian citizens from Serbia voted in the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election. According to the statement by the dominant Hungarian minority party in Serbia, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ), this represents more than 70% of the registered voters. Meanwhile, according to the official data, around 94% of votes cast by Hungarian citizens abroad went to the Fidesz-KDNP list; it is assumed that its share among the voters from Serbia was similarly high even though no country-specific data were available.

The overview of the Hungarian-language media in Serbia shows that narratives urging citizens to vote for Fidesz dominated. Most of these articles were quoting the statements of the members of Fidesz and the local VMSZ party. There was only one article reporting on opposition leader Péter Márki-Zay making his case for voting in favor of the opposition during his visit to Subotica. As expected, only the independent *Szabad Magyar Szó* reported on this visit, while *Magyar Szó*, *Hét Nap*, and *Vajma.info*, which are close to the VMSZ (the first two outlets are owned by the VMSZ-dominated National Council of the Hungarian National Minority), either did not cover it or did it superficially. In total, there were 41 articles focusing on this issue from 10 February to 9 April, with *Magyar Szó* daily publishing the largest number of articles. This outlet reported exclusively on the campaign to vote for Fidesz. The results of the research are not surprising, given the long-term trends and voting intentions of the Hungarian population in Serbia.

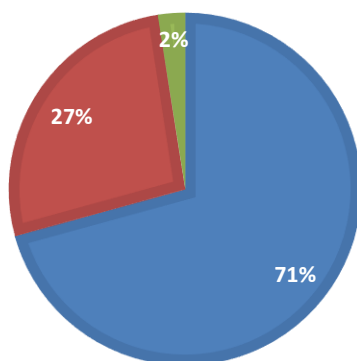
Tag Analysis



Most popular Tag

More than half of the reviewed articles had a “mobilization-support” tag, marking the narrative of support for the Fidesz-KDNP list. Most contained statements of Fidesz and VMSZ members on the importance of supporting the Hungarian ruling party on 3 April. The coverage was unbalanced, as there were no critical evaluations of these statements and almost no reporting on the possibility of voting for the opposition.

■ mobilisation support ■ mobilisation neutral ■ mobilisation oppose



Narrative Analysis

Among the main mobilizing narratives were: 1) The need to support the Hungarian national unity and independence by voting for Fidesz, the only party that cares about the Hungarians across the border; 2) The need for the trusted partners of Vojvodina Hungarians to remain in power in Budapest as well as in Belgrade (presidential and parliamentary elections were taking place in Serbia at the same time); 3) The victory of Fidesz would be beneficial for the overall relations between Hungary and Serbia.

On 1 March, the President of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians party (VMSZ) István Pásztor urged voters to support the ruling parties in the upcoming Hungarian election, saying that “one of the fundamental tasks of ... Hungarian politics across the border is to create community unity”. His statements were reported by *Magyar Szó*. On the same day, the same outlet quoted János Árpád Potápi, Secretary of State for National Policy of the Hungarian Prime Minister's Office, who, together with Pásztor, participated at an event at Lake Palić in northern Serbia. Potápi also invited the attendees to support Fidesz “because this is the only way that the nation-building work that we started 12 years ago can continue”.

On 6 March, *Magyar Szó* reported the statement of Zsolt Semjén, Deputy Prime Minister, made at an event in Subotica. Semjén stressed the importance of the adoption of the law that enabled Hungarians across the border to become fully-fledged citizens in 2011. “We felt it was our moral duty. The granting of citizenship enabled the unification of the nation under public law”, Semjén said. He added that “in order for this national policy and economic development to continue, it is necessary that, for example, here in Vojvodina, we can take advantage of the lucky-star position that the Orbán-Vučić-Pásztor cooperation means. This is the interest of Hungary, this is the interest of Serbia, and especially this is the interest of the Vojvodina Hungarians.” Three days later, *Vajma.info* published another article on VMSZ calling on Hungarians in Vojvodina to support Fidesz. According to the article, István Pásztor emphasized that “the past three election cycles had proven that there is no one else besides Fidesz who has a relevant opinion on the Hungarian communities across the border”. He mentioned the opposition LMP party as the only other party that had approached VMSZ, but that relationship apparently did not progress too much.

On 15 March, Hungarians in Vojvodina marked the Hungarian national holiday along with the anniversary of the 1848 revolution. VMSZ member Árpád Fremond stressed the need for national unity ahead of the elections. *Magyar Szó* quoted him as saying: “We have to stick together, we have to unite, regardless of the fact that we have different opinions, but we have to go in the same direction... I am confident that on 3 April, everyone will do everything possible to ensure that the Hungarian community can decide independently in the upcoming period during the elections, both in Budapest and Belgrade.”

On the same day, VMSZ held its central ceremony in Subotica. The guest of honor at the event was Judit Varga, Minister of Justice of Hungary, who emphasized that on 3 April, “we must continue the country-building that we started”. This was the only article published by *Szabad Magyar Szó* with a “mobilization-support” tag.

Another outlet that reported on the mobilization of Vojvodina Hungarians was *Hét Nap* weekly, which, on 23 March, published an interview with VMSZ politician Bálint Pásztor. “It has never happened before that parliamentary election in Serbia and Hungary are taking place on the same day, but even if this were not the case, it would still be very important for Hungary to have a government that sees Hungarians abroad as partners. That is why it is important that Viktor Orbán remains the prime minister in Hungary, and that the national policy marked by the Fidesz-KDNP alliance is the strategic direction of the Hungarian government”, Pásztor said.

Meanwhile, István Pásztor, said on 30 March that, regarding the campaign, all three choices (parliamentary elections in Hungary, presidential and parliamentary elections in Serbia) are equally important and that the VMSZ can only be satisfied if (the options they support) perform well in all three cases. “For our part, we did everything in order to contribute to the success of the Hungarian election and the victory of Fidesz”, Pásztor said. The articles tagged “mobilization-neutral” informed readers about the dates and the procedures of voting by mail in the Hungarian parliamentary election, as well as the election results, according to which votes from abroad secured an additional seat to Fidesz.

Szabad Magyar Szó was the source of several articles tagged “mobilization-oppose”. The first one covered the visit of the opposition Prime Ministerial candidate Péter Márki-Zay to Subotica, while the second focused on a potential scandal in which the members of the VMSZ party, and not the official Serbian Post Office, were reported to have personally delivered ballots to citizens.

On 13 March, Márki-Zay spoke in Subotica, saying that the opposition “want to take care of you in the same way, even better, than the current Hungarian government”. He also said that Hungarians living in Serbia will receive not less, but more financial support, should his option win.

Between 17 and 19 March, *Szabad Magyar Szó* also published several articles on the fact that the activists of the VMSZ party were participating in the delivery of the ballots, creating a possibility of influencing the election results on behalf of Fidesz. István Pásztor called the situation “misinformation” in a statement for *Magyar Szó*. The story was subsequently picked up by Radio Free Europe, which reported on several allegations of this practice. There has been no formal investigation into the matter.

Support Hungarian national unity and independence by voting for Fidesz

Trusted partners of Vojvodina Hungarians should remain in power in Budapest and Belgrade

Fidesz victory would be beneficial for overall relations between Hungary and Serbia

Case Study



Trusted partners of Vojvodina Hungarians should remain in power in Budapest and Belgrade

The website of Magyar Szó, the oldest Hungarian-language daily, had the highest number of articles tagged “mobilization-support” in the research period on its website.

The coverage started on 26 February and ended on 30 March. This media outlet covered several events during which the representatives of VMSZ – István Pásztor, Árpád Fremond and others, as well as the representatives of the ruling coalition in Hungary – including Zsolt Semjén and Judit Varga – urged Hungarians residing in Serbia to support Fidesz. The outlet also covered Viktor Orbán’s visit to Serbia on 19 March, during which he participated in the ceremonial opening of the high-speed train route between Belgrade and Novi Sad, which will be a part of the Belgrade-Budapest route. Orbán, however, did not openly campaign for his parliamentary list during the visit.



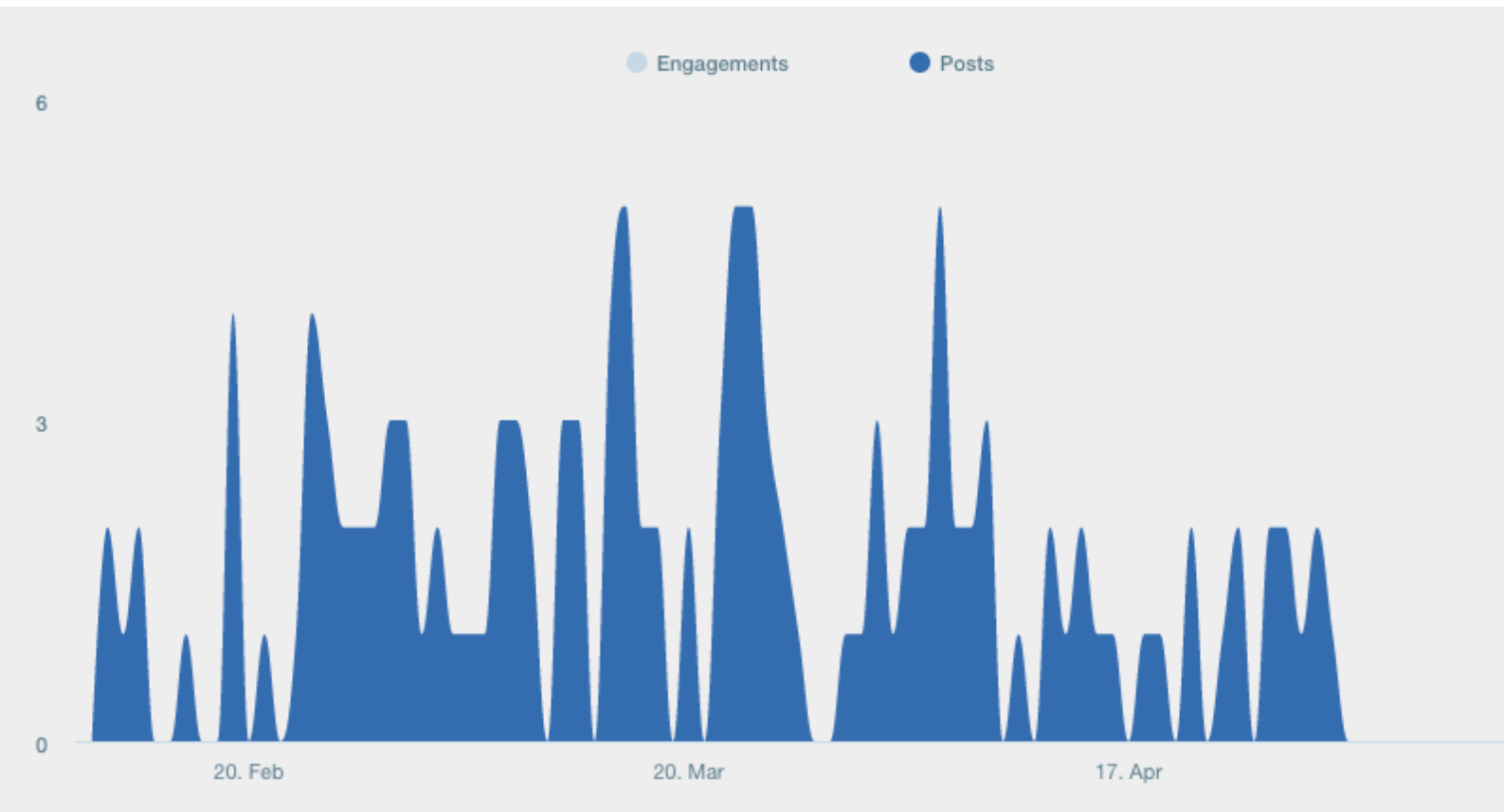
15 March celebrated in Topola, Serbia

The outlet did not cover any activities of other Hungarian political organizations in Serbia, which were a part of opposition coalitions, nor the activities of Hungarian opposition. It released only a short news article on Péter Márki-Zay's visit to Subotica.

Conclusions

Most of the articles in Hungarian-language Serbian media that covered the voting in the Hungarian parliamentary elections pushed the narrative that Hungarians in Serbia should vote for Fidesz, mostly by reporting on the statements of Fidesz and VMSZ politicians. Articles with a neutral stance or critical of this position were scarce. The fact that voters in Vojvodina strongly supported the ruling party, at least according to unofficial indications, was not surprising.

Chapter 3. The invasion of Ukraine as a topic in the Hungarian elections



Relative to other topics covered by this research, the war in Ukraine and the positioning of world powers towards it have been extensively covered by the Hungarian-language media in Serbia. From 10 April to 26 May 2022, 130 media articles were published on the subject. The most intensive coverage took place at the very beginning of the war, in late February and early March, and then in late March, during the meeting of NATO and EU leaders.

As the previous chapters have shown, the war in Ukraine significantly influenced the election campaign period. The opposition was accused by the ruling Fidesz of wanting to significantly involve the country in the war. There is little evidence that the war influenced the vote of Vojvodina Hungarians, given their previous voting trends, but it certainly shaped the discussion around the election.

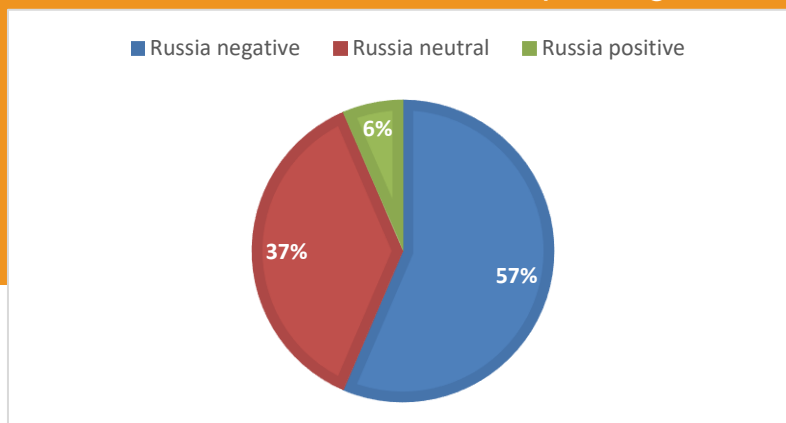
The war in Ukraine completely overshadowed other aspects of Hungary's relationship with the Transatlantic community. Therefore, all articles tagged with "west-support", "west-oppose" and "west-neutral" were also related to the war in Ukraine.

Tag Analysis



Most popular Tag

The most popular tag in this chapter was “Russia-negative”, with 35 out of 130 articles containing condemnations of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, mostly by quoting EU and NATO officials, but also highlighting potential war crimes committed by Russia. Independent Szabad Magyar Szó was the media outlet that published most of these articles (17), followed by Vajma.net (11). Russia was generally the most present topic – additional 23 articles were marked with a “Russia-neutral” tag, as well as four “Russia-positive” ones, which reported the statements of the Foreign Minister of Russia Sergei Lavrov. The number of neutral articles on NATO, United States and the EU, put together, was the same as the



Narrative Analysis

Most of the content in the Hungarian-language Serbian media on the war in Ukraine consisted of news articles on specific events, while the bigger picture was rarely a topic. Only seldom was the Hungarian or Serbian perspective included. In those cases in which they were mentioned a specific position of both countries (less inclined to sanction Russia and support Ukraine) was mentioned. However, unlike many Serbian-language media, Hungarian-language ones never openly took the Russian side or justified its action by promoting disinformation. The main narratives can be summarized as 1) The negative reactions toward Russian aggression; 2) The coordinated Western response and, 3) The specific positions of Hungary and Serbia.

In late February, following the start of the war, *Szabad Magyar Szó* reported on the military steps taken by Russia and the condemnation by the West, most prominently the United States. This outlet also made an overview of Western media on 26 February, noting that Serbia was described as a Russian ally by *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

“Many may think that Belarus is the only country in Europe that openly supports Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But the Kremlin has other allies on the continent. One of the most important is the EU candidate Serbia. Many media outlets in the Balkan state report Russia's aggression against Ukraine in a way that is no different from Kremlin propaganda. Sometimes, for the sake of simplicity, Russian coverage is taken in its entirety in Serbian translation”, *Szabad Magyar Szó* reported.

On 28 February, *Vajma.info* published an anti-war opinion column from a regular contributor. “There are only losers in war, as our generation has already learned from the experiences of past generations”, the piece reads. Meanwhile, on 21 March, the same outlet published a *Le Monde Diplomatique* [article](#), which justified some of the Russian concerns, namely the proximity of NATO forces. “It is morally unacceptable and counterproductive for the vulnerable Ukrainian people to pay the price for the dangerous plans of the American superpower”, the article read. This was one of the rare instances in which the Russian position was partially justified.

The same outlet reported on 8 March that the Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán had “clearly stated that weapons cannot be shipped to Ukraine via Hungary, but the Hungarian government agreed to allow these shipments to pass through Hungarian territory or airspace while destined for another allied country”.

This article followed several others published by *Vajma* which, in general terms, reported on the sanctions imposed on Russia. In mid-March, both *Szabad Magyar Szó* and *Magyar Szó* reported the statement of Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary- General, on the possibility of Russia using chemical weapons. *Szabad Magyar Szó* also reported on the casualties and war damage caused by Russian forces to Mariupol. “The invaders cynically and deliberately attack residential buildings and densely populated areas and destroy children's hospitals and urban infrastructures”, the outlet reported.

Only after the elections on 3 April did the media outlets turn their attention once again to the Hungarian position, which was re-emphasized by the country's officials. On 6 April, weekly *Hét Nap* wrote about the Facebook post by Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó. "From the very beginning, we speak clearly about the war taking place next door: we condemn the military aggression, we stand up for the sovereignty of Ukraine, we let in hundreds of thousands of refugees... At the same time, the safety of Hungary and the Hungarian people is of course more important to us. This is not our war, so we want to get out of it and will stay out of it", Szijjártó wrote.

On the same day, *Vajma* reported on Viktor Orbán's press conference where he said "this is a war started by the Russians, they attacked Ukraine, this is aggression", adding that Hungary supported the common position of the European Union. He also called for an "independent and impartial investigation into the (war) atrocities".

Meanwhile, also on 6 April, *Szabad Magyar Szó* published another overview of world media, quoting an article from the Washington Post: "Pro-Putin Hungarian Prime Minister declares victory in the national elections".

On 24 March, *Magyar Szó* reported that Ukraine was defending Mariupol "extremely tenaciously" against "Russian aggressors".

In late March, the United States once again repeated its resolve to defend Ukraine should the chemical weapons be used, which was reported by *Magyar Szó* and *Szabad Magyar Szó*. On 26 March, *Szabad Magyar Szó* quoted Hungarian *Népszava*, which assessed that the Russian operation had stalled. On 4 April, *Magyar Szó* quoted the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky, who warned that "even more terrible things than the crimes that took place in Bucha may come to light, given that other regions of Ukraine.

**Negative reactions
toward Russian
aggression**

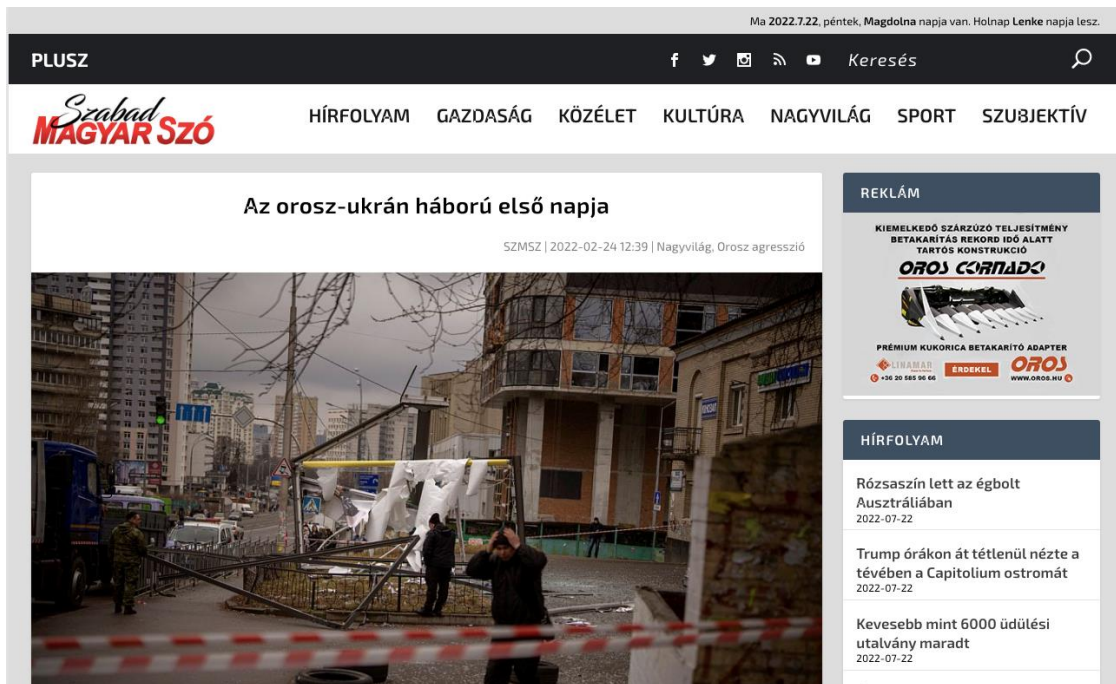
**Coordinated
Western response**

**Specific positions
of Hungary and
Serbia**

Case Study

Szabad Magyar Szó (SZMSZ), an independent portal founded in 2016 by former journalists of *Magyar Szó*, was the source of the majority of articles on Russia, as well as the majority of “Russia-negative” tags.

At the beginning of the war, SZMSZ had daily coverage of military developments. It also published several overviews of Western media, one of which marked Serbia as a Russian ally in Europe.



The coverage of the first day of the war

In March and April, this outlet wrote about Russian war crimes in Ukraine, primarily in Mariupol and Bucha, as well as the Russian struggle with the war effort, with mounting casualties and defections of some members of the Russian elite. “The Russian invasion is a nightmare” reads one of the headlines quoted by SZMSZ in the context of its media overviews. The outlet seldom covered the war from a Hungarian perspective. Only after the elections on 3 April, it published another overview of the world media and their reactions to the result, which highlighted, in a highly negative way, the position of the Hungarian government.

Több mint 2100 mariupoli lakos vesztette életét az orosz agresszió kezdete óta

SZMSZ | 2022-03-13 21:14 | Nagyvilág, Orosz agresszió



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HÍRFOLYAM

Rózsaszín lett az égbolt Ausztráliában
2022-07-22

Trump órákon át tétlenül nézte a tévében a Capitolium ostromát
2022-07-22

Kevesebb mint 6000 üdülési utalvány maradt
2022-07-22

“More 2100 residents of Mariupol lost their lives since the start of the war”

Conclusions

Even though the war in Ukraine received the same, if not more intensive, coverage than the election campaign in Hungary in the media outlets included in this research, the events were mostly covered from a global, neutral perspective. Russian aggression was portrayed negatively, although there were several instances that attempted to offer some justification for its action, but not nearly to the extent present in the Serbian-language media. The Hungarian perspective was more present after the elections on 3 April.

Report conclusions

This research on the reporting on the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election by Hungarian language-media in Serbia has shown that the three online Hungarian-language media outlets were especially active: Magyar Szó, Vajma. Info and Szabad Magyar Szó. The first two are leaning toward the dominant Hungarian minority party – the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ) – in their coverage, while the latter represents an independent outlet which often includes criticism towards the party, as well as the governments of both Hungary and Serbia.

Three distinct topics relevant to the research were detected: a negative portrayal of Hungarian opposition attempts of the Hungarian government to mobilize voters abroad and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and its consequences. The coverage of the Serbia-based media did not include, except fleetingly, the LGBTQ+ referendum that was organized on the same day as the election, as well as other aspects of Hungary's relationship with the West (EU, NATO and the United States).

There was an equal number of negative and neutral articles on Hungarian opposition and its Prime Ministerial candidate Péter Márki-Zay, while the positive narratives were not present. Most of the time, the image of the opposition was formed through reporting of the statements of Fidesz politicians, which were quoted uncritically and without an attempt to create a balance. Opposition was presented as wanting to return the country to the economically unsuccessful pre-2010 period and wanting to get more directly involved in the war in Ukraine, with the headlines of a choice between “war and peace” present in the final weeks of March. The communication of Prime Ministerial candidate Péter Márki-Zay was a topic of several articles, but it was not a dominant story.

The majority of the articles on voting from abroad pushed the narrative that the Hungarians in Serbia should vote for Fidesz, again, mostly through reporting on the statements of Fidesz and VMSZ politicians. Articles with a neutral stance or critical of this position were scarce. The fact that voters in Vojvodina strongly supported the ruling party, at least according to the unofficial indications, was therefore not surprising.

Finally, the events related to the war in Ukraine were mostly covered from a global, neutral perspective. Russian aggression was portrayed negatively, although there were several instances that attempted to offer some justification for its action, but not nearly to the extent present in the Serbian-language media. The Hungarian perspective was more present after the elections on 3 April, when Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister defended their unwillingness to join some of the harsher sanctions on Russia and stressed that the citizens of Hungary supported this approach. There were no indications that the war in Ukraine significantly influenced the vote of the Hungarian citizens living in Serbia, which was expected to be strongly in favor of Fidesz even before the war began.



European Western Balkans (EWB) is a regional media portal specialized in European integration process of the Western Balkan countries, founded in Belgrade in 2014. The Serbian language version of the portal was launched in 2017.

EWB was established by the Centre for Contemporary Politics (CSP), Belgrade-based think tank focused on democracy, EU integration and foreign affairs, founded in 2012.

For more information about our activities please visit europeanwesternbalkans.com and centarsavremenepolitike.rs

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