

How Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Exploits Minority- Related Conflicts Between Ukraine and Its Neighbors



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Russian active measures, particularly the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, generally focus on exploiting existing faultlines within and between societies. Throughout history, countries, regions, and settlements in Central and Eastern Europe went through several changes in allegiance or borders, especially in the 19th century. Thus, several nations ended up with a considerable number of ethnic minorities from neighboring countries. The administrations of the "home" nations of these minorities, naturally, seek to protect them from real or perceived

threats and secure the legal protection of their rights. These efforts are often interpreted by host nations as foreign interference in their affairs.

Moreover, in host nations, local minorities are often the targets of legal initiatives seeking to prove the nationalist credentials of political forces, often resulting in restricting minority rights. One example of such an attempt is Romanian President Klaus Iohannis's claim that the opposition would "give Transylvania to Hungarians"¹. These factors often led to open conflict between the host and home countries, offering Moscow an opportunity to advance its own agenda by focusing on sowing discord in the international community.

Ever since tensions started to escalate between Moscow and Kyiv over the Maidan Revolution in early 2014, Russia's leadership has been actively courting far-right organizations and extremist figures in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), prompting them to pay more attention to geopolitical issues, such as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Such far-right groups often express revisionist views, seeking to revert post-World War I territorial developments. Extremist groups from Ukraine and its neighbors, pro-Kremlin NGOs and intense disinformation campaigns have been used by Moscow to provoke ethnic conflicts between the Ukrainian majority and minorities living in the country. Russia is courting organizations whose goals are in line with the Kremlin's strategy of the destabilization of the CEE region via direct influence (e.g. political and business ties) and indirect action (e.g. spreading misleading narratives via official Russian media).

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¹ Barberá, M.G. (2020) *Romanian Opposition 'Giving' Transylvania to Hungarians*, *President Claims*. Available [online]: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/29/romanian-opposition-giving-transylvania-to-hungarians-president-claims/>

The NGOs, extremist groups, individuals approached by Russia, in turn help amplify the Kremlin's messages and attempts to stir up intra-state and interstate conflicts². Additionally, Russia has also been working on exploiting tensions between the government of Ukraine and those of neighboring nations, especially Hungary and Poland, which Kyiv itself fueled by approving a highly controversial education bill in 2017 and the corresponding language bill in 2019 that can potentially restrict minority language rights. One of the main instruments in these efforts of sowing discord, is using disinformation to turn Ukrainian public opinion against minorities living in the country.

VLADIMIR PUTIN AND MINORITY CARDS

The expansionist foreign policy of Russian President Vladimir Putin began to take shape in 2008 when the Russian army invaded South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with the two Georgian breakaway territories being controlled by Moscow ever since. Modern-day Russian aggression became even more visible to Europeans after covert Russian forces annexed the Crimean Peninsula in February 2014 and Russia started providing military support to pro-Russian rebels in the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Although Russian efforts to weaken Ukraine and prevent its Euro-Atlantic integration can be considered hard power tools, the Kremlin is using its entire arsenal of hybrid warfare to achieve its aims, including economic pressure, cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns. The main channels of such efforts are official pro-Kremlin media, which spread narratives controlled completely by the Putin administration. These messages then frequently make their way into pro-Kremlin portals run by devout, voluntary followers of Moscow

or click bait sites, as well as extremist blogs, forums, and so on. Pro-Kremlin actors in Russia, Ukraine and other countries of the CEE region have also mounted significant disinformation campaigns against the Ukrainian leadership³.

Experiences of the past six years suggest that a considerable proportion of these campaigns were aimed at minority-related issues. Already in 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin justified the annexation of Crimea, among other reasons, by the potential infringements on the minority rights of ethnic Russians that the new, "banderist" regime of Ukraine might implement⁴. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Moscow and its media empire never forgets to report on alleged and real anti-minority activities in Ukraine. Consequently, several of these efforts were aimed at igniting tensions between Ukraine and its neighbors by exploiting existing political conflicts between Ukrainians and ethnic communities living in the country; exaggerating lower-scale political issues or creating the appearance of such conflicts.

In particular, two pieces of Ukrainian legislation and their consequences gave room for minority-related disinformation targeting Ukraine:

- On September 5, 2017, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's parliament) approved an education bill, abolishing the right of national minorities to receive education in their mother tongue from the 5th grade of public education onward

³ Gigitashvili, G. and R. Osadchuk (2020) *Backlash Against the Controversial Peace Deal Spun On Ukrainian and Russian Media*. Available [online]: <https://neweast-europe.eu/2020/01/13/backlash-against-the-controversial-peace-deal-spun-on-ukrainian-and-russian-media/>

⁴ President of Russia (2014) Address by President of the Russian Federation. Available [online]: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

² Ibid.



IT IS UNSURPRISING THAT MOSCOW AND ITS MEDIA EMPIRE NEVER FORGETS TO REPORT ON ALLEGED AND REAL ANTI-MINORITY ACTIVITIES IN UKRAINE

to secondary school studies and higher education⁵. An amendment to the aforementioned legislation approved in January 2020 requires that the transfer from education in minority languages to the Ukrainian language should gradually⁶ take place for minorities speaking EU languages⁷;

⁵ Information Department of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Secretariat (2017) *Ukraine's Law 'On Education' out Now*. Available [online]: <https://www.rada.gov.ua/en/news/News/149413.html>

⁶ According to the law, minorities speaking official EU languages will be educated in their mother tongue until grade 4. From grade 5, they would learn 20% of their subjects in Ukrainian and this proportion will reach 40% by grade 9. Then, in grades 10–12, it will reach 60%. See: <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/02/05/ukrajna-oktatasi-torveny-nyelvtorveny-karpatalja-szabalyozas/> [in Hungarian]

⁷ Unian (2020) *Ukraine's Parliament Passes Bill on Secondary Education*. Available [online]: <https://www.unian.info/politics/10833062-ukraine-s-parliament-passes-bill-on-secondary-education.html>

- On April 25, 2019, Ukrainian MPs voted to approve a new countrywide law on the use of the Ukrainian language, granting Ukrainian language a new special status while essentially restricting the use of minority languages everywhere except during private conversations and religious ceremonies⁸. Former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who was among the key supporters of the bill, signed it into law only five days before his predecessor, incumbent President Volodymyr Zelensky, was inaugurated as head of state;
- both the education and language laws were aimed at strengthening Ukraine's national identity in the wake of Russia's actions in the Donbas, and to counter pro-Kremlin propaganda. An estimated 17% of Ukraine's population are Russians; however, the use of the Russian language – due to the country's Soviet roots – is much more significant;
- besides being constantly criticized by Russia, the new laws also came under scrutiny from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Poland, as ethnic minorities speaking their languages live throughout Ukraine in considerable numbers⁹.

HUNGARIANS BECOME THE MAIN TARGET

Almost immediately after the controversial education law was approved by the Ukrainian parliament, the Hungarian government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán became

⁸ Grigoryan, A. (2019) *Ukraine: Legislature Adopts Language Law*. Available [online]: www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/ukraine-legislature-adopts-language-law/

⁹ UK Home Office (2019) *Country Policy and Information Note Ukraine: Minority Groups*. Available [online]: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812080/Ukraine_-_Minority_Groups_-_CPIN_-_v2.0_-_June_2019_.pdf

the harshest critic of the Ukrainian legislation. Hungary later announced that it would block Ukraine's path towards NATO membership¹⁰ and initiated a review of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement¹¹. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov used the Hungarian government's response as evidence that the education law is "ill-conceived and does not meet European standards"¹². Hungary's decision was also praised by Russian propaganda channels to discredit the Poroshenko administration for failing to deliver on its main foreign policy priority¹³, that is, joining the Western alliance system¹⁴.

Disinformation is also being used to increase bilateral tensions between the two countries along the minority row, as well as between the Hungarian and Ukrainian ethnic groups within Ukraine. For instance, Hungarian pro-Kremlin¹⁵ and government-controlled¹⁶ me-

dia, as the government¹⁷ itself, were heavily pushing the narrative that Ukraine's decision to redeploy troops to Transcarpathia constituted a threat to the local minority population¹⁸, even though the official Ukrainian justification for it was to protect the locals from increasingly frequent provocations. It was, in fact, earlier provocations by actors close to Russia that posed a security threat to Hungarians in the region.

The headquarters of the Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Subcarpathia (KMKSZ), the primary organization advocating for ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine, was attacked in Uzhhorod twice in early 2018¹⁹. According to the Polish and Ukrainian authorities, the two attacks were committed by pro-Russian members of the Polish extremist Falanga group and perpetrators arriving from Russian-occupied Transnistria, respectively²⁰. The first attack was allegedly financed by Manuel Ochsenreiter, a German far-right, pro-Russian journalist and the former consultant for an AfD MP²¹. Regardless of this evidence, Hungarian Foreign Minister

¹⁰ Krekó, P. and P. Szicherle (2018) *Why Is Hungary Blocking Ukraine's Western Integration?* Available [online]: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-is-hungary-blocking-ukraine-s-western-integration/>

¹¹ *Daily News Hungary* (2017) "Hungary to Initiate Review of EU-Ukraine Association Agreement." Available [online]: <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungary-initiate-review-eu-ukraine-association-agreement/>

¹² TASS (2019) *Hungary's Response to Ukraine's Education Law Indicates It Is Ill-Considered — Kremlin*. Available [online]: <https://tass.com/politics/969875>

¹³ *Sputnik International* (2018) "Not on My Watch: Hungary Vetoes NATO-Ukraine Summit - Sputnik International" Available [online]: <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710291058630471-hungary-vetoes-nato-ukraine-summit/>

¹⁴ RT (2019) *Budapest Vetoes Ukraine-NATO Summit, Says Kiev's New Law a 'Stab in the Back'*. Available [online]: <https://www.rt.com/news/408080-hungary-ukraine-nato-bid/>

¹⁵ *News Front Hungary* (2018) "Kljátaja Uhorscsina! – Az istenverte Magyaroszági". Available [online]: <https://hu.news-front.info/2018/08/12/Kljataja-uhorscsina-az-istenverte-magyaroszag/> [in Hungarian]

¹⁶ Pallagi, M. (2020) *Aggódnak a magyarok, amiért ukrán katonákat telepítenének Kárpátaljára*. Available [online]: <https://magyarnemzet.hu/archivum/hataron-tul/aggodnak-a-magyarok-amiert-ukran-katonakat-telepitenenek-karpatalajara-3852937/> [in Hungarian]

¹⁷ *Unian* (2019) "Ukrainian MFA: Deployment of Troops to Zakarpattia Is Ukraine's Sovereign Matter". Available [online]: <https://www.unian.info/politics/10050179-ukrainian-mfa-deployment-of-troops-to-zakarpattia-is-ukraine-s-sovereign-matter.html>

¹⁸ *Orosz Hírek* (2018) "Elhagyta a Donbasszt és Kárpátalja felé indult az ukrán hadsereg legnagyobb egysége." Available [online]: <https://oroszhirek.hu/2018/01/23/elhagyta-donbasszt-es-karpatalja-fele-indult-az-ukran-hadsereg-legnagyobb-egysege/> [in Hungarian]

¹⁹ *Political Capital* (2019) *How Was the Diplomatic Feud Between Ukraine and Hungary Portrayed in and Fuelled by the Russian Disinformation Networks?* Available [online]: https://politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_cee/publications.php?article_id=2388

²⁰ *UAWire* (2020) *Kyiv: Russia Behind the Attacks on the Office of the Union of Hungarians in Uzhhorod* Available [online]: <https://uawire.org/russian-involvement-seen-in-the-attacks-on-the-office-of-the-union-of-hungarians-in-uzhhorod>

²¹ *RFERL* (2020) *Far-Right German Journalist Implicated In Firebombing Of Hungarian Center In Ukraine*. Available [online]: <https://www.rferl.org/a/far-right-german-journalist-implicated-in-firebombing-of-hungarian-center-in-ukraine/29708843.html>

Péter Szijjártó did no more than summon the Ukrainian ambassador to Hungary over the attacks²².

These reactions indicate that the official Hungarian narrative is focusing on only one side of the story – existing problems in Ukraine, such as the rise of nationalism – but completely disregards the other side of it, namely Russia's role in encouraging and exploiting these issues via disinformation and intelligence methods, presumably to avoid damaging the flourishing bilateral ties between Budapest and Moscow.

THE CASE OF MIKLÓS KEVEHÁZY

The statements and decisions of the Hungarian government regarding Ukraine and bilateral tensions between Budapest and Kyiv are immensely useful for Russian disinformation efforts. The Kremlin cares little about the safety of the Hungarian community in Ukraine and uses their situation to put it in parallel with the allegedly grave predicament of ethnic Russians, which is strongly interconnected with Russia's aim for advancing its foreign policy priorities.

Relations between Hungary and Ukraine were again corrupted in September 2018, shortly after a video in which ethnic Hungarians in northwestern Ukraine took a naturalization oath and received their second, Hungarian citizenship, went viral. Responding to the event, then Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin decided to expel a Hungarian consul based in Berehove, giving way to a reciprocal response from Budapest and months of bilateral diplomatic spats.



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²² *Daily News Hungary* (2018) "Hungary Summons Ukrainian Ambassador over Attack against Hungarian Cultural Association's Office". Available [online]: <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungary-summons-ukrainian-ambassador-attack-hungarian-cultural-associations-office/>

When tensions between Hungary and Ukraine reached a new low, Miklós Kevéházy, a never-before-seen "Hungarian



THE STATEMENTS AND DECISIONS OF THE HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT REGARDING UKRAINE AND BILATERAL TENSIONS BETWEEN BUDAPEST AND KYIV ARE IMMENSELY USEFUL FOR RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION EFFORTS

political consultant” appeared on Russian state media to further complicate an already troublesome situation. Despite being entirely unknown to both television viewers and the political scientist community, Keveházy made an eventful entrance on *60 Minutes*, a prime-time political talk show on Rossiya 1, the main Russian public media news channel²³. While on screen, he had a highly impactful performance and made a number of statements that later became widely cited in Ukrainian media. Interesting enough, Keveházy:

- stated that the Hungarian army – if instructed by the country’s leadership and if Ukraine is fine with it – could reach the city of Lviv, and clean the water there as a part of a UN peacekeeping operation. It is hard to understand why Keveházy would focus on the claim that Hungary would lead a peacekeeping core to Lviv to clean the water; one possibility is that the Hungarian Foreign Ministry frequently advocates for Hungarian expertise on water technology and using it in third world countries²⁴. “Hungary announced two months ago that it wants to put things in order in Transcarpathia. Not on their own, but by inviting blue helmets there,” he told the audience;
- when asked whether Hungary was planning to annex Transcarpathia, the northwest Ukrainian region heavily populated by ethnic Hungarians, he responded that he is almost sure about the fact that unknown advisers are telling PM Orbán to “try, [to]go ahead”;
- reminding the audience that Kyiv stopped purchasing Russian gas directly and the country is now supplied from Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, he effectively threatened Ukraine that if the bilateral situation escalated, Hungary might just close the gas tap [to Ukraine], and then people would just freeze²⁵.

²⁴ Hungarian Foreign Ministry (2019) *Vízügyi minisztereket fogadott Szijjártó Péter*. Available [online]: <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/kulgaszdasagi-es-kulugyminiszterium/hirek/vizugyi-minisztereket-fogadott-szijjarto-peter> [in Hungarian]

²⁵ <https://rueconomics.ru/353264-prosto-perekro-em-gaz-a-u-vas-uzhe-kholodno-ekspert-iz-vengrii-prigrozil-ukraine-zamerzaniem-i-pokhodom-do-lvo-va-pod-flagom-nato> [in Russian]

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXgaAcmksqk> [in Russian]

With such claims, the prime-time show did not go unnoticed. The already worrisome statements were altered and distorted in Ukrainian and Russian media, prompting Ukrainian nationalist forces to use them to reinforce their narrative that Hungary is dangerous and threatens Ukraine.

For instance, Keveházy's claims concerning unknown advisers telling PM Orbán to try annexing Transcarpathia went viral in Russian media, but were misquoted as "the Hungarian leader Orbán received the 'go-ahead' from Washington and Brussels: Try it if you can, to "bite off" part of Ukraine"²⁶. Only the first part of Keveházy's allegation that "The Hungarian army could reach Lviv (...)" made it to the headlines in Ukraine. Subsequently, claims began circulating in some Ukrainian media outlets describing Hungary as a potential threat²⁷.

Moreover, articles with titles such as "Just cut off the gas – and it's already cold for you: an expert from Hungary threatened Ukraine with freezing and marching to Lviv under the NATO flag" were also published²⁸. Ukrainian media outlets published these quotes without checking their credibility and completely failed to check the background of the so-called "Hungarian expert"²⁹, which would have made it clear to them that Keveházy's opinion is completely marginal and should neither be trust-, nor newsworthy.

²⁶ <http://rusonline.org/opinions/raskryty-plany-vengrii-po-ukraine-perekroem-gaz-i-vvedem-v-zakarpate-golubye-kaski-oon> [in Russian]

²⁷ <https://www.obozrevatel.com/abroad/dojdem-do-lvova-propagandist-vengrii-prigrozil-ukraine-na-rostov.htm> [in Russian]

²⁸ <https://rueconomics.ru/353264-prosto-perekroem-gaz-a-u-vas-uzhe-kholodno-ekspert-iz-vengrii-prigrozil-ukraine-zamerzaniem-i-pokhodom-do-lvova-pod-flagom-nato> [in Russian]

²⁹ <https://politua.org/novosti/51004-armiya-vengrii-mozhet-dojti-do-lvova/> [in Russian]

Given all these claims, one is right to ask: who is this Miklós Keveházy? What our efforts to uncover his background suggest is that not much information is available about him. There is little evidence about his activities in Hungary or how he ended up commenting on Ukrainian and Hungarian affairs in pro-Kremlin media. There is no record of him being active in politics or political consultancy in Hungary, but there are signs to suggest his potential right-wing affiliation. Two pictures show him sitting next to Gábor Vona, the former chairman of Jobbik, a far-right-turned-conservative Hungarian party that was highly supportive of Russia until a major inner-party political change.

At the time, Vona met the leadership of Rodina, a strongly right-wing political party in Russia in July³⁰ and November³¹ 2014. Although Keveházy was present, his role in these meetings is unknown. There is also a record of Keveházy working as a paid audience-member and a guest in various Russian talk shows before his sudden emergence as a "political expert" in the media. He has only been active as a "political consultant" since October 2017, which is incidentally the date when debates between Budapest and Kyiv about the Ukrainian education law started to heat up. Keveházy first appeared in an article published by the close-to-Kremlin NTV channel, bearing the title "Russians do not belong here: Ukraine continues to break ties with Russia, rewriting laws"³². In the article, he was quoted on how hard the Ukrainian education law is hit-

³⁰ <https://rodina.ru/novosti/ZHuravlyov-Amerika-vtyagivaet-ne-tolko-Rossiyu-no-i-vsyu-Evropu-v-bolshuyu-voynu?fbclid=IwAR3RQ4nBnutL1CRMMsMIE8unQmtO70jzbeGlcip8CHA-usjFRy3d4Ghffn0> [in Russian]

³¹ <http://www.stalingradclub.ru/component/content/article?id=583%3Apatrioty-evrazii-ob-edinyayutsya&fbclid=IwAR3BVzZu7druXZmNrwFqRBstvAUhVap71NiKp2sdd1JR8gGiWRGz1Z0kgk> [in Russian]

³² <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1941303/?fb> [in Russian]

ting Hungarian schools in Transcarpathia. He then appeared on Russian prime-time television.

From the moment of his appearance on Rossiya 1, Keveházy has frequently been featured by *News Front*, a Russian site established in November 2014 as a mouthpiece for the self-proclaimed "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, allegedly supported by Russian intelligence services and operated from Crimea. Keveházy is a "prominent" commentator on Ukraine-related issues, sometimes going live on *News Front* TV as an expert. According to stopfake.org, a Ukrainian investigative platform, *News Front* was visited by almost 5 million people in March 2019. Half their audience is in Russia, while 22% of them are in Ukraine.

Interestingly enough, Keveházy's appearances are exclusively available on the Russian version of the *News Front*'s website, on the Hungarian site there are no results for his name in the search bar. In his interviews and statements on the site, in addition to recounting the hardships experienced by Transcarpathian Hungarians, he uses the well-known pro-Kremlin messages, primarily bashing the US, Ukraine and its leadership in all possible aspects, while praising Russia. He gave these interviews in front of Hungary-themed visual elements to highlight that he is Hungarian, potentially not only to proudly emphasize his nationality, but also to give the impression that he represents mainstream Hungarian way of thinking about Ukraine.

- Since he was discovered, Keveházy has written articles for other pro-Kremlin Russian sites too³³, criticizing, threatening, and ridiculing Ukraine. His activity as a political commentator is

largely periodical, but his materials are still being quoted³⁴ and he has continued pushing for a pro-Kremlin narrative. Among others, Keveházy claimed in July 2019, that "there is a consensus" among European countries that Ukraine cannot join the European bloc due to its poor minority policy³⁵. While Hungary and Romania indeed criticized the Poroshenko-endorsed education law, several European countries criticized Hungary – in particular – for standing in the way of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The most notable example happened in February 2020, when – besides the United States and Canada – several ambassadors of NATO-allied European countries negotiated with Hungarian foreign ministry officials to protest Budapest's blocking of Ukraine's aspirations to come closer to the alliance³⁶;

- commenting on a visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin made in Budapest in October 2019, Keveházy said that many Hungarians recently started to realize that their country "chose the wrong path of development"³⁷ when they decided to support further integration with Europe. Following a seven-month pause, he returned to speak on *News Front* and blasted the United States, adding, "we are calmly

³⁴ <https://matveychev-oleg.livejournal.com/9734040.html> [in Russian]

³⁵ <https://news-front.info/2019/07/31/politika-po-roshenko-prodolzhitsya-pri-zelenskom-kak-kiev-protivotoit-vengerskomu-zakarpatyu/> [in Russian]

³⁶ Panyi, Sz. (2020) *Bement Egy Tucát Diplomata a Magyar Külügybe. Feszült Vita Lett Belőle Ukrajna Miatt*. Available [online]: <https://444.hu/2020/02/13/bement-egy-tucát-diplomata-a-magyar-kulugybe-feszult-vita-lett-belole-ukrajna-miatt> [in Hungarian]

³⁷ <https://news-front.info/2019/11/08/vengriya-ponyala-cto-ne-stoilo-idi-evropejskim-putem-miklosh-kevezazi/> [in Russian]

³³ <https://regnum.ru/news/2494065.html> [in Russian]

awaiting the death of a fantastically evil empire³⁸.

His fear-mongering, US- and Ukraine-bashing contents are apparently only being served to the Russian-speaking audience, with his comments prominently appearing on Russian news engine and news portal *Yandex*, among others.

None of Keveházy's comments reached the Hungarian mainstream media and they did not really storm Ukrainian state media, either. After his prime-time debut on Rossiya 1, only a handful of Ukraine-language outlets reported on his statements

³⁸ <https://news-front.info/2020/06/08/my-spokojno-ozhidaem-gibel-fantasticheski-zloj-imperii-miklosh-kevehazi-o-situaczii-v-ssha/> [in Russian]

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SINCE HE WAS DISCOVERED, KEVEHÁZY HAS WRITTEN ARTICLES FOR OTHER PRO-KREMLIN RUSSIAN SITES TOO, CRITICIZING, THREATENING, AND RIDICULING UKRAINE

as those coming from a “Hungarian propagandist.” Keveházy’s comments appeared on two better-known Ukrainian national news outlets – ZIK TV and Obozrevatel. At the same time, the example of Keveházy’s Rossiya 1 appearance serves as proof that his statements could have a major impact on bilateral ties and has the ability to penetrate the Ukrainian information space because of the low language barrier between the two.

Resulting from all these appearances, Keveházy has become an *established expert* on Ukraine, Hungary, and minority policies in the Russian media, and one can assume that next time when the Kremlin needs to play the minority card in Ukraine, they will know who to call. The strong emphasis placed on Keveházy’s Hungarian origins, and his narratives on the Hungarian minority’s purported plans of autonomy, and Hungary’s alleged schemes to annex Transcarpathia, constitute a potential threat to the Hungarian minority itself, and these have the potential to turn Ukrainian public opinion against local Hungarians and provoke Ukrainian extremist groups into committing physical violence against minorities. The ultimate aim of the narrative, however, is to push the Ukrainian public against not just ethnic Hungarians in the country, but also the Euro-Atlantic community as a whole.

NONEXISTENT TERRITORIAL DISPUTES WITH UKRAINE

While most Russian efforts to increase tensions between ethnic groups and Ukrainian authorities have been focused on the alleged aspirations of ethnic Hungarians for breaking away from Kyiv, the situation of other minorities was also used by pro-Kremlin actors. The latest example of this push involved ethnic Bulgarians, whose number is estimated at above 200,000 within the Ukrainian population.

USING BULGARIAN EXTREMISTS FOR SPREADING SEPARATIST IDEAS

In May 2020, the incumbent Ukrainian government moved to carry on with an administrative reform plan, according to which the country's Bogdan region (where the majority of ethnic Bulgarians live) would be divided into five separate administrative units. The move was immediately criticized by the ethnic Bulgarian community, which feared that they would be weakened and unable to send their (traditionally pro-Russian) MP, Anton Kisse, to the Verkhovna Rada.

Initiated by its pro-Moscow and/or nationalist lawmakers, the Bulgarian parliament approved a resolution condemning Ukraine's actions. Kyiv hit back, saying that the measure is part of a countrywide administrative reform and dismissing the Bulgarian protest as foreign interference. The scene looked ready for a conflict between Bulgaria and Ukraine, which local Kremlin loyalists and Moscow were ready to exploit.

As the Hungarian case suggests, pro-Kremlin disinformation actors aimed for portraying the dispute as something bigger than what it really was, namely, not an ethnic row, but a territorial conflict. A notable example came from the Russian news site *Politobzor*, which claimed that Bulgaria "put forward territorial claims to Ukraine" in the region in question, whereas no official request came from Bulgarian officials³⁹. Only the Bulgarian pro-Russian and far-right ATAKA party came up with such claims, the importance of which were over exaggerated by pro-Russian media outlets⁴⁰.

³⁹ <https://politobzor.net/216074-bolgariya-vydvynula-ukraine-territorialnye-pretenzii-iz-za-odesskoy-oblasti.html> [in Russian]

⁴⁰ StopFake (2016) *Pro-Kremlin Far-Right Bulgarian Party Used in Latest Ukrainian "Separatism Fake"*. Available [online]: <https://www.stopfake.org/en/pro-kremlin-far-right-bulgarian-party-used-in-latest-ukrainian-separatism-fake/>

This pro-Russian effort to spark a conflict between Kyiv and Sofia, which was most certainly intended to prevent the Bulgarian government from supporting Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, was not the first one. In 2016, several Ukrainian news sites reported on a fake letter allegedly sent by the Bulgarian government to endorse the request of Ukrainian Bulgarians for greater autonomy within Ukraine⁴¹.

ATTACKS ON POLISH CEMETERIES

Besides also being involved in dubious or nonexistent claims about economic autonomy for ethnic Poles in Ukraine, Poland was

⁴¹ Ibid.



IN 2016, SEVERAL UKRAINIAN NEWS SITES REPORTED ON A FAKE LETTER ALLEGEDLY SENT BY THE BULGARIAN GOVERNMENT TO ENDORSE THE REQUEST OF UKRAINIAN BULGARIANS FOR GREATER AUTONOMY WITHIN UKRAINE

also targeted by pro-Kremlin media actors, however, in slightly other ways. In Ukrainian regions bordering Poland⁴², cemeteries and monuments important for the local Polish minority have been frequently vandalized. RT⁴³ and other Kremlin-controlled or pro-Kremlin⁴⁴ media then covered these attacks extensively.

Another example of Russia stirring up tensions between Ukrainians and Poles is the feud between pro-Putin Polish “history buff” Mirosław Majkowski and Russian-born Ukrainian nationalist leader Artyom Lutsak. Majkowski and Lutsak had their fair share in provoking tensions between Warsaw and Kyiv – while the former staged anti-Ukrainian rallies in the border city of Przemysł, counter-rallies followed (or collided with the Polish ones) that were organized by the Lutsak-led nationalist movement, the Right Sector.

Despite both being pro-Russia, this rivalry, which almost ignited violence in the Polish-Ukrainian border region, was potentially staged by the Kremlin – Majkowski is seen as the loudest pro-Putin surrogate in Poland, while Lutsak has strong ties to Moscow and did not even acquire Ukrainian citizenship until 2012⁴⁵. Although the PiS-led Polish government itself had quarreled with Kyiv over the interpretation of history

and the actions of historical figures and traditionally important historical monuments, Russian efforts involving Warsaw have remained largely unsuccessful, with Poland continuing to be one of the strongest advocates for Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration.

ALLEGED TERRITORIAL REQUESTS FROM ROMANIA, TOO

The ethnic Romanian community also came under Moscow’s radar. Numerous close-to-Kremlin Russian news outlets, including Sputnik News and Russia Today, stated that local Ukrainian Romanians – led by a certain Dorina Kirtoake – allegedly proposed to gain autonomy in the historical region of North Bukovina, most of which is now a part of Ukraine, whereas no such local assembly or request ever materialized and the aforementioned figure turned out to be a fictitious person⁴⁶. This pro-Kremlin narrative was brought to life by the concept of “Greater Romania”, the country’s interwar territory, which at the time included most of modern-day Moldova, as well as parts of western Ukraine and northern Bulgaria. Corresponding disinformation has so far ranged from groundless rumors (such as Ukraine is prepared to cede a part of the country to Bucharest) to baseless claims – uttered on Russian state TV channel Pervij Kanal – about Romania’s territorial requests to Kyiv⁴⁷.

In all cases, regardless of which minority was brought into the spotlight, the strategy behind these aforementioned disinformation efforts was to portray Ukraine

⁴² Górczyński, O. (2018) *Russia’s Covert Campaign to Inflame East Europe*. Available [online]: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russias-covert-campaign-inflaming-east-europe>

⁴³ RT (2019) *Monument to Polish WWII Massacre Victims Desecrated with Fascist Symbols in Ukraine* Available [online]: <https://www.rt.com/news/373233-polish-monument-wwii-vandalized-ukraine/>

⁴⁴ <https://888.hu/ketharmad/felavattak-az-ukran-ron-galas-utan-ujjaepitett-vereckei-emlekmuvet-4127785/> [in Hungarian]

⁴⁵ *Observer* (2018) “This Is How Vladimir Putin Manufactures Conflict Between Nations”. Available [online]: <https://observer.com/2018/07/putin-conflict-poland-ukraine-nato/>

⁴⁶ StopFake (2020) *Fake: Bukovinian Romanians Demand Autonomy*. Available [online]: <https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-bukovinian-romanians-demand-autonomy/>

⁴⁷ EU vs Disinformation (2020) *Romania and Hungary Have Territorial Claims to Ukraine*. Available [online]: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/romania-and-hungary-have-territorial-claims-to-ukraine/>

as a country that should not even exist in its current form (or at all) or it should at least return to the Russian geopolitical orbit. Questioning Ukrainian identity and sovereignty is a recurring element of pro-Kremlin propaganda, which exists both in country-specific ways, as shown above, and in a greater context. The latter is also shown by pro-Kremlin claims, saying that it was the United States that green lighted the partition of Ukraine between Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Romania, and echoing that Ukraine is a “completely artificial country”⁴⁸.

To sum up, pro-Russian outlets did not necessarily make completely unfounded claims – some organizations, political parties in states neighboring Ukraine did disseminate messages in line with the Kremlin’s interests. However, disinformation portals regularly over-exaggerated the importance of these messages, making the statements of marginal organizations and individuals look like official policies. Moreover, they also used the claims of dubious experts and analysts to strengthen the narrative that the minorities living in Ukraine pose a threat to the territorial integrity of the country via their home nations. These efforts by pro-Kremlin propaganda could, this way, generate animosity between the majority and minorities within Ukraine. In turn, any conflicts between ethnic groups in the country could be used by pro-Kremlin media to prove the rightfulness of Russia’s official reason for intervention in Crimea, and the protection of the Russian minority from the alleged “Nazi” regime in Kyiv.

ALL SIDES MUST ACT TO AVOID FURTHER RUSSIAN PROVOCATION

While no major threat is expected to permanently block Ukraine’s path to Western integration from Bulgaria, Poland, or Romania, the conflict between Budapest and

Kyiv has opened the door for Russia to use Transcarpathian Hungarians as an instrument in achieving its foreign policy goals. Its disinformation network is committed to exploiting the bilateral tensions between Hungary and Ukraine to depict the Hungarian minority in the region as a “fifth column” for Hungary. Consequently, Hungarian – and, importantly, Ukrainian – decisions that deepen the divisions between the two countries are nothing but new opportunities for Russia to continue encouraging ethnic conflicts.

For the Kremlin, it matters little if these conflicts are started by paid Russian agents or Ukrainian nationalist groups, Russian leadership will use every single attack to justify the annexation of Crimea and, at least rhetorically, support rebels in Eastern Ukraine. As always, any atrocities will serve as “proof” that Russian fears about minority rights were well-founded, and that Ukraine does not belong to the Western community. To avoid giving such a potent information weapon to Moscow, both Kyiv and Budapest will have to change course. In line with this, all other sides involved in the issue due to the presence of their minorities in Ukraine, should also refrain from publicly escalating tensions with the Ukrainian administration, which also has considerable responsibility to avoid giving any chance to Moscow to use its decisions and false narratives as information weapons.

Kyiv must swiftly implement the changes recommended by the Venice Commission (e.g., get rid of ambiguities, ensure a sufficient level of teaching in EU languages, improve the quality of the teaching of the state language, enter new dialogue with national minorities, etc.) to its education law, and it should do the same concerning the Ukrainian language law (e.g., delay its implementation; repeal provisions differentiating between languages of indigenous

⁴⁸ Ibid.



BESIDES ALSO
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people, the EU, others, etc.). Alternatively, Kyiv could extend the rights granted to indigenous minorities (e.g., the right to study in their mother tongue throughout elementary and high school), primarily the Crimean Tatars, to communities using an official EU language as their native tongue.

Moreover, Ukrainian decision-makers should disseminate positive rhetoric on minorities that considers them partners in building Ukraine, and not adversaries. Importantly, neighboring states should also communicate clearly and regularly with Ukrainian citizens, highlighting what their aims are in terms of protecting their local minorities, emphasizing that they have no territorial ambitions, and noting how they

are helping Ukraine in its path to Western integration.

Ukrainian media must be more careful when taking over stories and quotes from Russian media and pro-Kremlin media outlets in the CEE region. As for Hungary, Budapest should de-escalate tensions by lifting its veto on progress in Ukraine's integration process, as the country would, years from now, have the final say on approving Kyiv's EU and NATO membership. Over those years, Hungary would have ample opportunities to monitor the implementation of the two controversial laws, and one of the chapters in EU accession negotiations would concern the judiciary and fundamental rights, ensuring that Ukrainian laws are in full compliance with EU standards.

In this regard, Volodymyr Zelensky's victory in the 2019 presidential elections was a promising sign. Although the disputes surrounding the controversial education and language laws continue to have a profound impact on bilateral tensions, both Budapest and Kyiv have been actively engaged in sorting out the issues, and a summit between the Ukrainian president and the Hungarian prime minister is rumored to be in the making. This "reset" presents a challenge to the Kremlin, as chances for exploiting minority-related conflicts could become drastically lower if an agreement is reached. A smaller, but meaningful gesture in this regard came in Ukraine's aforementioned administrative reform: although Ukrainian officials denied it, the restructuring of the borders of a region in the Transcarpathian region seems to be favorable for ethnic Hungarians (which, of course, was immediately attacked by Ukrainian nationalists)⁴⁹. However, the two disputed

⁴⁹ <http://politic.karpat.in.ua/?p=8461&lang=hu> [in Hungarian]

laws remain the elephant in a room and will eventually decide Ukraine's future in NATO according to the perspective of the Hungarian government's perspective.

One other potential obstacle comes from the lack of willingness for compromise from both sides. The policies of the Ukrainian government are heavily dependent on domestic party politics, in which Zelensky's Servant of the People party is continuously contested by its nationalist opposition. Led by former President Poroshenko, the European Solidarity party is able to mount large-scale opposition when it comes to linguistic, religious, and other cultural issues important to conservative or right-wing Ukrainian communities. While the political threat posed by Poroshenko remains far from becoming a contender against the ruling party, political risks could easily evolve if Zelensky crosses red lines drawn by the post-Maidan Ukrainian society.

From the Hungarian viewpoint, the often-nationalistic rhetoric of the Orbán government is one of its core policies and the ruling Fidesz party invested heavily in making itself the sole representative of Hungarian national interest. Since almost all major Hungarian opposition parties (except, to some extent, the liberal Momentum party and the Democratic Coalition of former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány) support the government's Ukraine policy, it is important for Budapest to be able to show tangible results in any potential agreement with Kyiv to avoid giving the initiative on the Ukraine issue to opposition forces. The Kremlin could exploit such domestic political considerations, the internal political struggles of Hungary, and those of Ukraine's other neighbors to advance its own foreign policy goals.

Since Hungary is already an EU and NATO member and it can block Ukraine's integra-

tion at any point, Budapest has the upper hand in the negotiation process. In any case, finding a solution to bilateral issues would ultimately benefit both sides, primarily Ukrainian citizens and ethnic Hungarians living in Transcarpathia.



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