

5. Hungary: No need to preach to the choir

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Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Stakes vis-à-vis China and Russia

Hungary enjoys close economic and political relations with Russia. A major area of cooperation is the energy sector. The Orbán administration has an agreement with Moscow on the construction of two new units at the Paks nuclear power station.¹⁷² Eighty per cent of the costs of the project are to be financed from a 30-year loan from Russia, amounting to EUR 10 billion.¹⁷³ Following Russia's invasion of Crimea, while Hungary joined other EU member states in sanctioning Moscow, its government maintains that the EU is 'shooting itself in the foot' with its policy.¹⁷⁴ Most recently, Hungary supported Russia by refusing to sign a joint EU statement condemning Moscow's violent suppression of domestic protests in January 2021.¹⁷⁵

The Orbán administration is committed to China as well. Hungary was the first European country in 2015 to sign China's 'Belt and Road' initiative.¹⁷⁶ More recently, it entered into a strategic cooperation agreement with Fudan University to establish a campus in Budapest.¹⁷⁷ The administration has shown its support for China by going against the EU consensus in numerous controversial affairs.¹⁷⁸ In April 2021, Hungary blocked an EU statement that would have criticised China for its new national security law applicable to Hong Kong.¹⁷⁹ The EU adopted sanctions against China in March 2021, though Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó called them 'meaningless and harmful virtue-signalling'.¹⁸⁰

Hungary has welcomed Chinese companies, including those the West is watching with growing suspicion. The administration signed a strategic partnership with Huawei in 2013.¹⁸¹ The Chinese company launched the first private 5G network in January 2021 at its Europe Supply Center in

172 Hungarian Parliament (2014) T/13628. számú törvényjavaslat a Magyarország Kormánya és az Oroszországi Föderáció Kormánya közötti nukleáris energia békés célú felhasználása terén folytatandó együttműködésről szóló Egyezmény kihirdetéséről. Magyarország Kormánya, January.

173 Hungarian Parliament (2014) T/140. számú törvényjavaslat az Oroszországi Föderáció Kormánya és Magyarország Kormánya között a Magyarország Kormányának a magyarországi atomerőmű építésének finanszírozásához nyújtandó állami hitel folyósításáról szóló megállapodás kihirdetéséről. Magyarország Kormánya, May.

174 "Hungary PM Orban Condemns EU Sanctions on Russia", *BBC News*, 15 August 2014; Baczynska, Gabriela and John Chalmers (2020) "Hungary's Orban Says EU Should Reverse Russia Sanctions, Not Push Cyprus on Belarus", *Reuters*, 25 September.

175 "Joint Statement on Recent Widespread Protests in the Russian Federation", Norway and the OSCE, 28 January 2021.

176 "Hungary First European Country to Sign up for China Silk Road Plan", *Reuters*, 7 June 2015.

177 Strategic Cooperation Agreement Between the Government of Hungary and Fudan University.

178 Prasad, Ravi (2018) "EU Ambassadors Condemn China's Belt and Road Initiative", *The Diplomat*, 23 April.

179 Emmott, Robin and John Chalmers (2021) "Hungary Blocks EU Statement Criticising China over Hong Kong, Diplomats Say", *Reuters*, 16 April.

180 "Szijjártó ellenzi azokat a Kína elleni szankciókat, amiket jóváhagyott", *Euronews*, 22 March 2021.

181 Peragovics, Tamás (2019) "Brothers in Arms? Recent Developments in Hungary-Huawei Relations in the Context of Global Huawei Phobia", *A Világ gazdasági Intézet blogja*, 27 February.

Páty.¹⁸² Hungary is anticipating economic benefits in exchange for its political and diplomatic support, but the record shows a mixed picture. Chinese FDI in Hungary amounts to 2.4% of the total FDI stock, and, though modest, the figure indicates a Chinese investment presence more robust than in the rest of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region.¹⁸³ A key deliverable of the relationship is the Budapest–Belgrade railway project, to be realised within the framework of the BRI. Its construction is expected to cost Hungary approximately EUR 2.1 billion, 85% of which is to be financed from Chinese loans.¹⁸⁴

Hungary’s official documents scarcely refer to China and Russia. The National Security Strategy emphasises close cooperation with Russia in political and economic matters.¹⁸⁵ Regarding China, the strategy mentions vulnerability connected to Chinese investment in critical infrastructure, a warning disconnected from the reality of Hungary’s strategic partnership with Huawei. Though adopted in April 2020, the document does not speak of any security challenges related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Information warfare appears in the Cyber Security Strategy as a general security challenge.¹⁸⁶ Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Orbán administration has not taken any new security measures to protect against malicious foreign propaganda. The Hungarian discourse is largely in sync with the interests of the narratives of China and Russia. This overlap implies that influence operations from these countries are mostly unnecessary.¹⁸⁷

Government Narrative, Response Measures, and Data Handling During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Government Narrative

The Hungarian government established an operational body in early 2020 with the objective of centralising epidemic response management and informing the public of new measures through daily press conferences. These briefings have been held online since September 2020, and representatives of the body are not pressed to respond to queries submitted by the press beforehand. This setting allows the government to put forward claims that enter public discourse unscrutinised in the absence of independent media outlets. The press conferences were discontinued on 11 June 2021, after the pandemic’s third wave had been pronounced over in Hungary.¹⁸⁸ They have not been resumed despite the ongoing fourth wave of the pandemic in November 2021.

182 “Felavatta Magyarország első ipari 5G magánhálózatát a Huawei”, *Telex.hu*, 14 January 2021.

183 “Hungary – an Assessment of Chinese-Hungarian Economic Relations”, Comparative Analysis of the Approach Towards China: V4+ and One Belt One Road.

184 “Aláírták a Budapest-Belgrád vasútvonalról szóló hitelszerződést”, *Kormányzat*, 24 April 2020.

185 1163/2020. (IV. 21.) Korm. határozat Magyarország Nemzeti Biztonsági Stratégiájáról. English version [available here](#).

186 1139/2013. (III. 21.) Korm. határozat Magyarország Nemzeti Kiberbiztonsági Stratégiájáról. English version [available here](#).

187 An interesting example is that RT, the Russian, state-controlled television network, shut down its website after a study was published on how it influences pro-governmental media. Furthermore, RT planned to open an office in Hungary, but later dropped the idea due to the friendly tone of pro-governmental media. See the research: “The impact of Russia’s state-run propaganda apparatus on online media in Hungary – 2010-2017”, Corruption Research Center Hungary; Szicherle, Patrik and Péter Krekó (2021) “Disinformation in Hungary: From fabricated news to discriminatory legislation”, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 7 June.

188 “Operatív törzs: megszűnik az operatív törzs sajtótájékoztatója”, 11 June 2021.

A webpage, koronavirus.gov.hu, was launched to inform citizens and to encourage them to register for vaccination. The data published is, however, often misleading and ill-suited for longitudinal analysis,¹⁸⁹ leading independent media outlets to collect, analyse, and disseminate accurate information.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, the National Public Health Centre publishes guidance on responsible behaviour during a pandemic on its website,¹⁹¹ but it does not mention social media or online pandemic discourse.

The government's narrative first focused on linking the viral threat to migration. In March 2020, Orbán claimed that 'the historical challenge remains migration,' later adding that 'the epidemic was brought to Hungary by foreigners.'¹⁹² When news broke out of an African strain of the virus (Beta), Orbán stressed the importance of not letting 'people go to Africa lest they bring home the new mutation.'¹⁹³ Later, however, he used no such language to issue warnings about the Alpha (then called British) variant.

The domestic discourse changes according to announcements via Orbán's Facebook page or during his regular public radio interviews. On 4 September 2020, Orbán announced that 'Hungary measures the success (of the defence) in human lives.'¹⁹⁴ This performance metric disappeared from communication after the number of deaths skyrocketed during the second and the third waves. The government-friendly media has also kept silent about it.¹⁹⁵ These media outlets praise the authorities' measures and are found to be reporting data selectively to make the government's performance look better than it is.

The Chinese view of the pandemic makes frequent appearances in Hungarian domestic discourse. Chinese Ambassador to Hungary Duan Jielong published a number of articles in *Magyar Nemzet*, an influential right-wing daily newspaper. In February 2020, the Chinese ambassador wrote of his conviction that 'China will be able to defeat the virus,' lauding his country's initial response to the outbreak and thanking Hungary for its assistance already at the early stage of the outbreak.¹⁹⁶ He published another piece titled 'The lies of the American ambassador'¹⁹⁷ in July 2020, criticising Washington's management of the pandemic and its 'relentless provocations against the Chinese people.' That *Magyar Nemzet* allows the ambassador to voice his concerns is indicative of the Orbán regime's tacit endorsement of the Chinese narrative.

189 Haszán, Zoltán (2020) "A kormány a járványról szinte semmit nem árul el, de legalább megtanítja a matematika használatára a magyarokat", 444, 13 October; Danó, Anna (2020) "Koronavírus: sűrűsödik az adatkód", *Népszava*, 1 December. (There is no English version of koronavirus.gov.hu, it simply links to the government's 'blog' published by the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister: <https://abouthungary.hu/>.)

190 24.hu and telex.hu have their own sections regarding Covid-29, and 444.hu established its own special page particularly for Covid-19 data: <https://444.hu/koronavirus-covid-19-jarvany-data>.

191 [Tanácsok, tájékoztatók](#).

192 Biró, Marianna (2020) "Orbán: A járványt Magyarországra a külföldiek hozták be", *Index*, 13 March.

193 Czinkóczi, Sándor (2021) "Orbán: Ha most kiengedjük az embereket afrikába, és hazahozzák az új mutánsokat, akkor kész vagyunk", 444, 2 March.

194 "Orbán: állig felfegyverkezve várjuk a vírus második hullámát", [Koronavirus.gov.hu](https://koronavirus.gov.hu), 4 September 2020; "Coronavirus – Orbán: Hungary 'in Full Armour' before 2nd Wave", *Hungary Today*, 14 September 2020.

195 On how the Hungarian government controls most of the media in Hungary, see the following short articles: Fábrián, Tamás (2021) "Orbán's influence on the media is without rival in Hungary", *Telex.hu*, 23 March; Kállai, Péter (2019) "Media situation in Hungary", *V4 Human Rights Review*, 1 (2), pp. 20-22.

196 Duan, Jielong (2020) "Kína képes leküzdeni a járványt", *Magyar Nemzet*, 14 February.

197 Duan, Jielong (2020) "Az amerikai nagykövet hazugságai", *Magyar Nemzet*, 30 July.

Response Measures Taken

To allow rule by decree, Parliament adopted the so-called ‘Enabling Acts’ in March and in June 2020. Such a legislative solution raised the question of constitutionality, not least because it allows the government to inaugurate a state of emergency practically at will.¹⁹⁸ Opposition parties rejected the ‘Enabling Acts’, drawing criticism from the government for obstructing its epidemic management efforts. In actuality, the Acts seemed somewhat unnecessary. Parliament had been in session all along despite the pandemic situation, and the ruling Fidesz party enjoys a constitutional majority, which makes its legislative power close to limitless.

Harsh penalties were introduced for scaremongering. The spreading of false information to ‘undermine the effort to protect the country in a state of emergency’ is a criminal act punishable with up to five years of imprisonment. No charges are filed in most such cases, but arrests and investigations alone are enough to induce a ‘chilling effect’ on public discourse.¹⁹⁹ Another problem is that the distinction between actual disinformation and legitimate criticism is essentially meaningless in the Orbán administration’s perspective. The label ‘fake news’ is systematically deployed against anyone, primarily opposition politicians, who challenges the official handling of the epidemic.

Nonetheless, there are positive examples of state action aimed to curtail genuinely malicious disinformation related to the pandemic.²⁰⁰ Protests organised by virus-denier György Gődény were broken up. After having been detained in December 2020, Gődény was formally charged with scaremongering in June 2021.²⁰¹ In September, he was handed a 1-year prison sentence suspended for two years as a first instance judgement.²⁰² Paradoxically, Gődény’s personal Facebook and webpage, full of content openly sceptical about the virus and the government’s protection measures, is still regularly updated and remains publicly accessible.²⁰³ However, his anti-virus and anti-vax Facebook group and YouTube page have been deleted.

In February 2021, the government posted a one-minute video on Facebook to dispel conspiracy theories. The video features infectologist János Szlávik rejecting claims that the vaccines are harmful, contain microchips, or cause infertility in women, as baseless.²⁰⁴ Beyond this minor intervention, however, there is no indication that the government is concerned about fake news spread by foreign actors online. Minister of Justice Judit Varga announced in January 2021 that the government is working on a bill to regulate social media. Its intended purpose is not to fight disinformation, but to deal with what the government alleges to be suppression of conservative

198 See: Halmi, Gábor, Gábor Mészáros and Scheppele Kim Lane (2020) “From Emergency to Disaster”, *Verfassungsblog*, 30 May.

199 For details with proper examples see the Freedom on the Net 2020 report of Freedom House on Hungary.

200 See for example: A man stated online that people died after being vaccinated – “Operatív törzs: rémhírtérjesztéssel gyanúsítanak egy, a vakcinákról valótlanosságot posztoló férfit”, [koronavirus.gov.hu](https://www.koronavirus.gov.hu), 13 May 2021.

201 “Vádat emeltek Gődény György ellen”, [hvg.hu](https://www.hvg.hu), 21 June 2021.

202 “György Gődény received a suspended prison sentence”, *Newsweek.com*, 21 September 2021.

203 Website of Doktor Gődény.

204 “VAKCINAINFO – Van-e chip a vakcinákban?”, *Magyarország Kormánya*, 12 February 2021.

opinions by large tech companies.²⁰⁵ This is a key matter, as the Orbán administration prefers to communicate with its supporters via Facebook. The bill is on hold as the government awaits EU regulation on this question.²⁰⁶

Governmental Data Handling and Manipulation

Access to COVID-19-related public information is actively obstructed by the authorities. Ruling by decree has allowed the government to extend the deadlines it has to meet when responding to public interest data requests. Ministries and government agencies answer to requests in 90 days instead of the 15-day deadline under normal circumstances. The justification for such an extension is that the release of COVID-19-related information would set back defensive measures against the pandemic,²⁰⁷ though the real reason seems to be the Orbán administration's preference for obscurity over transparency. Furthermore, independent media organisations are not allowed to report from hospitals, nor are health care workers free to make public statements.

The authorities demonstrably manipulated information on vaccine effectiveness. A chart was published on koronavirus.gov.hu in April 2021, which depicts the Chinese Sinopharm and the Russian Sputnik-V as more effective than Pfizer and Moderna. Critics including Hungarian biochemist Katalin Karikó pointed out that the chart directly compared the number of deaths that occurred per 100 thousand people for each vaccine used in Hungary, even though such a comparison is meaningless without control groups or consideration of the number of deaths occurring in the non-vaccinated population.²⁰⁸ Not only was the chart deceptive, its message that Eastern vaccines are better than Western ones is contradicted by the government's preference for the Pfizer vaccine, which is set aside for chronic patients, the elderly, pregnant women and children under 18.²⁰⁹

Vaccine Procurement, Vaccination Strategy and Discourse

Hungary was the first country in the EU to approve the Sputnik-V vaccine on 21 January,²¹⁰ and Sinopharm on 24 February.²¹¹ Notwithstanding the absence of evidence on the safety and efficacy of these vaccines, the government decided to rely on them, and thereby on its Eastern partners, for its domestic vaccination program. The primary objective behind this move was to build popular support in the run-up to the 2022 parliamentary elections by showcasing competence through the government's ability to vaccinate the Hungarian people at a much faster rate than those EU countries employing only Western vaccines. The share of the Hungarian population fully vaccinated stands at 60%, which is below the EU average.²¹²

205 See: "[Making Fidesz hip, no matter the cost](#)", *Telex.hu*, 10 November 2020.

206 "[Gov't Decides to Wait for Joint EU Regulation on Social Media Giants](#)", *Hungary Today*, 15 April 2021.

207 According to the Decision of the Constitutional Court in case IV/100/2021, justifications for extending the deadline to 90 days should be detailed.

208 See [Katalin Karikó's Facebook post](#) on the issue.

209 "[Opposition Slams Gov't for 'Trying to Undermine Trust' in Western Vaccines](#)", *Hungary Today*, 28 April 2021.

210 Thorpe, Nick (2021) "[Coronavirus: Hungary First in EU to Approve Russian Vaccine](#)", *BBC News*, 21 January.

211 "[Hungary First EU Nation to Use China's Sinopharm Vaccine against COVID](#)", *euronews*, 26 February 2021.

212 "[Central Europe struggles with new Covid-19 wave](#)", *EUobserver*, 18 November 2021.

The approval of Sinopharm is telling of the extent to which political considerations tend to overwhelm other concerns. The Chinese vaccine was greenlit after a legal amendment made it possible to sideline the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition (OGYÉI), which is the Hungarian national regulator tasked with vaccine approval. The amendment allows for a vaccine to be used in Hungary if at least one million people had already received it in an EU member state or a candidate member state.²¹³ Serbia, an EU candidate country and a close friend of China, received its first batch of Sinopharm in mid-January, and inoculated more than one million of its citizens by the time of the amendment. The legal modification in Hungary served to clear the path for Sinopharm and to bypass OGYÉI in the process.²¹⁴

The Orbán administration is heavily critical towards the EU, particularly vis-à-vis the sluggishness of Brussels' vaccine acquisition program. In March 2021, Orbán said that the EU 'messed up' the vaccine purchase,²¹⁵ despite the fact that Hungary received more vaccines from the West than from the East.²¹⁶ Furthermore, the EU itself does not procure vaccines. It entered into advanced purchase agreements with manufacturers only to guarantee that EU member states of varying bargaining power and financial resources be able to obtain vaccines.²¹⁷ In November 2021, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó announced Hungary has no intention to procure more Sinopharm and Sputnik vaccines, and that 80% of the 10 million doses currently in stock in Hungary are Western vaccines.²¹⁸

In another instance, government-friendly media accused EU Commissioner Stella Kyriakides in May 2021 of refusing the authorisation of Eastern vaccines because of a 4-million-euro bribe.²¹⁹ In actuality, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) did not authorise Eastern vaccines because the pharmaceutical companies did not apply for the authorisation at the agency. Currently, two Eastern vaccines, the Sputnik and the Sinovac, are under a rolling review by EMA.²²⁰

Orbán also criticised Western manufacturers in February 2021 for the delay in vaccine delivery. The accusation was politically motivated, again, as he never mentioned that Russia only supplied 25% of the 600 thousand vaccines it was contracted to provide during its first phase of transfer. In March, Fidesz MP János Lázár went further by claiming that the Eastern vaccines helped save the lives of 600 thousand Hungarians, while the slow rollout of Western vaccines led to the death of 20 thousand Hungarians.²²¹ Another Fidesz politician claimed that the Eastern vaccines allowed for COVID-19 restrictions to be lifted in April, made possible the re-launch of the economy,

213 A Kormány 19/2021. (I. 28.) Korm. rendelete a biztonságos veszélyhelyzeti gyógyszerellátáshoz szükséges egyes intézkedésekről szóló 488/2020. (XI. 11.) Korm. rendelet módosításáról. *Magyar Közlöny*, 2021/13. p. 301.

214 "Itt a kormányrendelet, amellyel az OGYÉI-t megkerülve engedélyezhetik az egyik kínai vakcinát Magyarországon", *Portfolio.hu*, 28 January 2021.

215 "Orbán Viktor: Brüsszel elszúrta a vakcinabeszerezéseket", *Koronavírus.gov.hu*, 14 March 2021; "Gov't Slams EU Again for 'Scandalously Slow' Rollout of Covid Vaccines, Turns to China", *Hungary Today*, 17 January 2021; "Foreign Ministry Blames Brussels for Slow Vaccine Rollout", *Hungary Today*, 8 January 2021.

216 "Magyarországra érkezett vakcinák típusa és mennyisége", *Koronavírus*, 20 April 2021.

217 European Commission (2021) "EU Vaccines Strategy", 11 May.

218 "Szijjártó Péter: Magyarország nem vesz több keleti vakcinát", *Portfolio.hu*, 22 November 2021.

219 "Visszautasítja Az Európai Bizottság a Ciprusi Biztosról a Magyar Kormány médiában Keringő Álhíreket", *newsbeezer.com*, 7 May 2021.

220 European Medicines Agency (n.d.) "COVID-19 vaccines: under evaluation".

221 Mázsar, Tamás (2021) "Lázár: A keleti vakcinák 600 ezer magyart mentettek meg, a nyugati vakcinák hiánya miatt 20 ezer magyar vesztette életét", *24.hu*, 30 March.

and helped to avert a further economic loss of HUF 500 billion.²²² Besides supporting Chinese and Russian vaccine diplomacy, these politically skewed statements exonerate the government from its failure to protect the lives of more than 33,700 Hungarians. This is a tragically high figure that puts Hungary fifth in global COVID-19 casualties per million inhabitants.²²³

The Orbán administration is adamant that its reliance on Eastern vaccines was an epidemiologically sound decision, despite mounting evidence to the contrary.²²⁴ It did not publicly address the Chinese vaccine's poor performance. Pro-government media called out Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony, who initiated an antibody testing campaign in the capital in July 2021, 'for spreading disinformation.'²²⁵ The accusation demonstrated, yet again, the weaponisation of fake news to delegitimise concerns raised by the opposition. On 23 July, it was announced that a third dose of the vaccine would be available from 1 August for those who had already received the requisite two doses. The authorities made this option available in response to the fourth wave of the pandemic spreading in Western Europe,²²⁶ but the real concern is the vulnerable segment of the population that is unprotected despite being vaccinated. Sinopharm was administered to 500 thousand elderly citizens in Hungary, despite the fact that its efficacy in those aged 60 and above was known to be questionable in the absence of sufficient testing.²²⁷ Emphasising the uniqueness in Europe of a third dose, the Orbán administration claims to have triumphed over the EU once more. In reality, it is merely trying to fix a domestic problem of its own making.

Viktor Orbán ruled out the possibility of making vaccination against COVID-19 mandatory in Hungary. In October 2021, the government has given employers the right to make it compulsory for employees to be vaccinated. The measure was justified by the fact that the number of deaths started rising again, showing that Hungary is entering a fourth wave despite predictions to the contrary.²²⁸ The government announced a one-week vaccination campaign in November. It is meant primarily to incentivize the unvaccinated to pick up their first doses without prior registration, but the campaign seems more successful among those looking to get their booster shots.

222 "Menczer: a keleti vakcinák nélkül 500 milliárd forintot vesztett volna Magyarország", koronavirus.gov.hu, 20 May 2021.

223 On 26 November 2021, Hungary ranked fifth globally, with 3,449 deaths per one million people.

224 Results of a COVID-19 antibody examination published on 13 July 2021 showed the underwhelming performance of Sinopharm compared with other vaccines used in Hungary (AstraZeneca, Janssen, Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech, Sputnik-V). 1760 Hungarian citizens above the age of 60 participated in the study, and 23.9% of those who received the Chinese vaccine lacked adequate levels of anti-body protection: "A Fővárosi Önkormányzat által szervezett antitestvizsgálat első eredményei", [Budapest.hu](https://budapest.hu), 13 July 2021. An article written by two Hungarian researchers later confirmed these findings: a sufficient antibody response was missing in around 25% of subjects aged 60, which increased to a staggering 50% for those that were 80 years old. See Ferenci, Tamás and Balázs Sarkadi (2021) "Virus neutralizing antibody responses after two doses of BBIBP-CorV (Sinopharm, Beijing CNBG) vaccine", *Medrxiv*, 29 July.

225 "Újrakezdte a kínai vakcina elleni kampányát az oltásellenes ellenzék", hirado.hu, 15 July 2021.

226 "Orbán Viktor: Európában elsőként Magyarországon érhető el a harmadik oltás", *Origo*, 23 July 2021.

227 "Új magyar kutatás érkezett a Sinopharmról: gyengén védi az időseket a kínai oltás", *Portfolio.hu*, 20 July 2021.

228 "Where vaccination is as high as in Hungary, there will be no fourth wave," Béla Merkely, rector of Semmelweis University, member of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's epidemiological team of experts: "Practically all unvaccinated people will get infected by coronavirus", *Portfolio.hu*, 7 October 2021.

Authorities issue so-called immunity certificates for people who have recovered from the virus or have been vaccinated. During the third wave, the holders of such a card were allowed to participate in various services and social events within Hungary. Later on, the government began stressing that the vaccine is the only effective measure, and it makes other measures unnecessary. The worsening of the fourth wave contradicted this belief, and the government reinstated the mandatory mask wearing in closed places and the use of immunity certificates for certain activities. These certificates are not as useful for moving across EU countries though, as travel is authorised only for individuals having received a vaccine approved by EMA. Following the introduction of the EU Digital COVID Certificate, Péter Szijjártó rushed to negotiate bilateral agreements allowing travel for Hungarians regardless of vaccine type. Until the end of November 2021, only 24 countries recognised the Hungarian vaccine passport, six of them EU member states.²²⁹

The Orbán administration not only prohibited free choice between vaccines, it failed to disclose that a probable consequence of inoculating Hungarian citizens with vaccines unapproved by EMA is that they are practically barred from traveling in the EU. The Orbán administration erroneously expected that economic and other considerations would speed up EMA approval processes. Gergely Gulyás, Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, spoke of the need to abolish the EU's discriminatory practice. He reasoned that if a Chinese tourist is welcome in the EU, then citizens of the bloc inoculated with an Eastern vaccine should likewise be free to travel.²³⁰ It seems the third dose may offer a way out of this conundrum. Data shows that only 2% of the booster jabs in Hungary are from Eastern vaccines. With most people receiving a Western vaccine on top of the first two doses, the expectation is that this may allow them to travel more freely in the EU.

Pandemic-Related Investments, Vaccine Diplomacy, and Ventilator Diplomacy

A key investment made in connection to the pandemic is the National Vaccine Plant under construction in Debrecen and expected to start producing a Hungarian vaccine by the end of 2022.²³¹ The idea of a vaccine factory has been in the pipeline for years, but the pandemic provided added impetus to accelerate the process. Another investment concerns the purchase of a mask-sewing machine from China at a nominal capacity of 2.8 million masks per month.²³² The face masks are made by prisoners in the Sátoraljaújhely prison, and in August 2020 the prison reported an output of a meagre 900 thousand masks over two months.²³³ In response, opposition politicians allege that the government overpaid ten-fold for the machine that cost taxpayers EUR 600 thousand.²³⁴ The police is investigating whether the procurement reflects a case of misappropriation of funds.²³⁵

229 "Utazás a védettségi igazolvánnyal", Konzuli Tájékoztatás, 23 July 2021.

230 "Ezért utazhatunk majd keleti vakcinákkal, így okoskodik a kormány", *Forbes*, 4 May 2021.

231 "Construction of Vaccine Plant to Begin in 100 Days in Debrecen", *MTI-Hungary Today*, 17 May 2021.

232 "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán viewed production of face masks in Sátoraljaújhely prison", Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister/MTI, 5 April 2020.

233 "Az ígért maszkok töredékét gyártotta le a Magyarországra hozott kínai masina", *24.hu*, 2 August 2020.

234 "Opposition Politicians Claim Mask Sewing Machine Purchased by Gov't Four Times Overpriced", *Hungary Today*, 5 October 2021.

235 "Töredékéért vásárolhattuk volna meg a kínai maszkgyártó gépet", *168 óra*, 13 May 2021.

The Orbán administration purchased more than 16,000 ventilator machines from China for a total of HUF 300 billion,²³⁶ however, barely 1,000 of the 16,000 were installed in Hungarian hospitals²³⁷ due to a shortage in trained personnel capable of operating the machines. The rest are being sold or given away for free to countries in need.²³⁸ Taking advantage of its large stock of vaccines, Hungary also donated and lent to countries in need.²³⁹

Conclusion

There is no evidence that China and Russia are employing influence campaigns to manipulate Hungarian discourse in accordance with their respective interests. As the Chinese and Russian perspectives are integral to the Orbán administration's ongoing narrative, which emphasises Eastern excellence in vaccination and pandemic management, these efforts are unnecessary. Whatever distortions appear in Hungarian discourse are authored by the government itself. These manipulations are informed by a self-serving logic that seeks to legitimise the reliance on Eastern vaccines by attacking the EU for its alleged slowness and incompetence. As the 2022 elections draw closer, the Orbán administration is likely to further politicise the pandemic and continue its abusive rhetoric towards the West.

236 Haszán, Zoltán (2020) "Kezd kirajzolódni, hogyan rendelte jelentősen túl magát lélegeztetőgépekből Magyarország", *444.hu*, 26 August.

237 "Ezer lélegeztetőgép sem került ki a kórházakba a beszerzett 17 ezerből", *hvg.hu*, 30 November 2020.

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