

Foreign Policy Conflicts in the Hungarian Media

Policy Solutions' analysis about the presentation of international events in the Hungarian press

During the past decades, foreign policy debates rarely emerged as the focal points of the Hungarian political agenda to a degree that would have rendered them interesting to large segments of the domestic public. Since autumn 2014, there has been a substantial change in this regard. With the eruption of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the scandal surrounding the American decision to impose a visa ban on certain high-level Hungarian officials, and visits by Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Hungarian foreign policy has gone through a phase of unprecedented intensity, and so did by extension the foreign policy press and society at large.

While those who closely monitor public affairs tend to be aware of the political orientation of Hungarian media outlets, studies concerning the foreign policy outlook of these media are thus far rare. That is why Policy Solutions and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation have jointly decided to examine the presentation in selected major media of various foreign policy conflicts that have surfaced since autumn 2014, along with the domestic policy divisions they engender. What we specifically sought to ascertain was whether a pro-Russian or pro-Western line predominated in reporting about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict; whether the Hungarian or the American positions tends to prevail in stories about the conflict between the American Embassy in Budapest and the Hungarian tax authority/government; and finally how the press presented diplomatic relations between Germany and Hungary during this period.

For our study, we investigated the news shows of three television channels (RTL Klub, TV2, MTV1), the news articles of two daily newspapers (Blikk and Metropol) and of an online newspaper (Index). Our analysis looked at two time intervals: November 2014 and February 2015. Our analysis focused on evaluating how much space/time the individual media outlets accorded to presenting conflicting positions and to what extent only one of the parties involved was present in their reporting.

US-related coverage in leading Hungarian media

It emerges from the research performed by Policy Solutions that in a comparison of the three foreign policy areas investigated here (US, Germany, Russia), in November 2014 and February 2015 only RTL Klub's news show featured news concerning the United States in pre-eminent spots. Of all the news items involving either the US, Russia or Germany, almost every second (47%) dealt with the US. On TV2, it was every third (33%), in the news of MTVI and the pages of Metropol every fourth item (27% and 25%, respectively) in this category featured US-related news, while in the tabloid Blikk and the online news site Index only every fifth item dealt with the US (21% and 20%, respectively). MTVI's news show not only dealt more often with Russia, but in fact with Germany as well. The relations between Hungary and the US were of interest to the media mainly in November, and in February interest in American-related issues had waned to such an extent that some media even failed to report the fact that the US chargé d'affaires at the time, André Goodfriend, left his position in Budapest.

In evaluating the news items related to the US, it is readily apparent that the American position was most intensely represented in the news of RTL Klub, while MTVI's and Blikk's reporting focused more on the Hungarian government's side of the contentious visa ban issue .

RTL Klub's presentation of the issue heavily favoured the American view, and there was not a single RTL Klub news show in this period that cast a favourable light on the Orbán government's position. By contrast, none of the news show on TV2 in the period under investigation focused exclusively on the US position, and there was only one show which appeared to lean slightly towards the American view of the scandal. In seven cases, TV2 reported neutrally, and in the same number of instances the overall picture favoured the Hungarian government.

In other words TV2's news show, *Tények* (Facts), clearly gave the government side more opportunities to comment on the issue than those who were in agreement with the American stance, but it "compensated" for this slant with numerous neutral and balanced instances of reporting. This was not by any means a case of anti-American bias.

Representatives of the US were extremely rarely offered the opportunity to comment in MTVI's news show, *Híradó* (News), and even in these exceptional

instances the American perspective was presented in an indirect form, for example through a statement or a Twitter message by the chargé d'affaires at the time, André Goodfriend. The public media palpably hewed towards the government's position in the context of what become known as the "entry ban scandal", and, unlike other media examined here, it also constructed its own distinct narrative of the issue. Nevertheless, the anti-American stance that was apparent in these news items was not discernible in the few other reports involving the US, mainly in business-related news, which featured the US as a partner.

Index's reporting was characterised by a very critical stance towards the government, which often resulted in a more positive presentation of the American view. This did not imply, however, that Index's staff was uncritical vis-à-vis the American perspective. Still, on the whole articles presenting the American arguments were less critical than those investigating the government's position.

Blikk's reporting on the scandal predominantly featured the positions of the Hungarian government and the tax authority, often quoting statements and comments by representatives of the government or tax authority officials. Yet even as it granted more space to presenting the government's side of the story, there were no anti-American reports. Metropol, too, devoted significant space to disseminating the government's position on the issue, but the decisive factor influencing its line of reporting was support of the Orbán government's positions rather than a distinct anti-American stance.

News related to Germany in the leading Hungarian media

Among the three issues we looked at in this study, the most influential Hungarian media devoted the least airtime/space to news involving Germany. Of all the news items reviewed in the period under investigation, a mere 15% dealt with the country led by Angela Merkel.

The evening news of the public television channel devoted most broadcasting time to Germany (32% of all news items we reviewed), more than it spent on the US in this timeframe. It is obvious that MTV1 accorded greater weight to the government's diplomatic offensive than other media did during this time. RTL Klub gave Germany-related news (11% of all items) far less time than it devoted to the American visa ban or to Russian-Hungarian relations and the

Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Nor did Germany occupy an outstanding position in the reports of TV2's Tények (10%). Moreover, news related to Germany featured a vast ratio of brief 30 second items.

Index also covered Germany rather infrequently during the period under investigation (6% of all items). There were hardly any articles that dealt with German politics or German events (rather than Germany in the context of German-Hungarian relations). There were eight articles featuring issues involving German-Hungarian relations in Blikk, and thus Germany received the smallest share among the three topics we reviewed (17%). Nevertheless, as compared to the other media outlets, Blikk still gave relatively greater weight to items in involving German-Hungarian relations. As Metropol did, on the whole. Though the newspaper hardly reported about Germany outside Chancellor Merkel's visit, its detailed reporting about the latter in six articles made Germany a key issue in its coverage, at least during the visit and its immediate aftermath.

Our evaluation of items featuring Germany shows that all the media reviewed here reported about the country from a friendly perspective, apart from an article or two there was no critical coverage. MTVI's Híradó always presented Germany favourably, and it devoted significant airtime to highlighting Angela Merkel's role in mediating between the parties in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, pointing out Germany's efforts to advance peace, which in the same items the public channel also identified as the policy of the Hungarian government. On the whole, public television accorded Fidesz more opportunities to present its positions than the German party had in Híradó's coverage, but the reports were still leaning towards a balanced perspective.

In the case of RTL Klub, the situation with regard to coverage of Germany was similar to the channel's reporting on the US in the sense that there was not a single show when the Hungarian government's perspective was allotted more time than the German position. With regard to the presentation of German-Hungarian relations in TV2 Tények, the attitude of the channel may be said to lean towards the German side, as all relevant coverage featured the arguments of the western country: In three reports the German position was prevalent, while in another two both parties' positions were in balance.

As for Index, our general observation is that unlike in its coverage of the US (where reporting on issues involving the visa ban was heavily critical of the government), or its articles involving Russia (which often featured a perspective that was staunchly critical of the Putin government), there was

not much of a clearly discernible position. Articles surrounding the Merkel visit were leaning towards a balanced representation of both German and Hungarian views, allotting space to depicting Viktor Orbán's positions as well.

A review of the articles Blikk devoted to German-Hungarian relations suggests that the issue rarely appeared in the newspaper, and its coverage was mostly centred around a specific date, namely the German chancellor's visit in early February. Nevertheless, Blikk's reporting – and this was a contrast to the other two foreign policy areas reviewed here – tended to be longer than average in terms of length, and they were marked by a pronounced pro-German attitude. In the context of reports about the Merkel visit, this was most emphatically manifest in the space Blikk allotted to German criticisms of the Hungarian government. Reporting in Metropol tended to be either neutral towards Germany or accorded more space to the German view than to potential counter opinions. At the same time, Metropol was comparatively brief in its coverage of the Merkel visit, even while the issue was huge in all other media.

News items related to Russia in leading Hungarian media

With the exception of RTL Klub, which featured a pre-eminently high share of US-related news, all other media investigated devoted the highest share of their respective news to Russia, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and Putin's visit. Index was especially detailed in its reporting of Russia-related news, and a vast three-quarters of its total reporting on the three foreign policy areas discussed here dealt with the Eurasian state. The intensity of its interest is also manifest in the fact that it sent correspondents to Ukraine, who reported about the conflict zone in several articles and video reports.

Blikk's coverage also dealt most often with Hungarian-Russian relations and, closely connected to the latter, with news items involving the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Still, while its coverage of Germany was characterised by few but long items, the reverse was true in the context of its coverage involving Russia – it published a high number of articles that tended to be shorter on average. Among the three issues analysed here, the Ukrainian conflict, Russia and the Putin visit clearly received the greatest emphasis in Metropol's foreign policy section, too. Most of its November editions and all but one of the February editions featured articles on the subject, and in fact on several days it printed more than one such item.

TV2 also covered Russian-related news most intensely of the three areas. It featured the issue on 27 occasions, in other words on average there was a report every second day. Specifically, the channel was most intense in its coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which was the subject of half of its reports; but there were a lot of news items (nine, to be specific) in Tények about Orbán's meeting with Putin as well. Items involving Russia were not only the most widespread in terms of their frequency, but were also most extensive in terms of their length.

A striking observation is that MTVI devoted relatively little attention to Russia and the Ukrainian conflict. As compared to the other news shows and newspapers we reviewed, MTVI was highly unusual in that the total number of items involving Germany in the period investigated was similar to the channel's reporting on Russia/the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, even though the latter were at the centre of international public attention. In February, before the Putin visit, however, there was a significant quantitative change, both in terms of how frequently items were broadcast and their duration. MTVI featured items involving Russia or the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on 18 news shows, well over every second day of the 28-day month. In many cases, these items were among the most important news on the given day, and in some cases they were the lead items.

In terms of the overall evaluation of reporting on Russia, the most important conclusion is that the majority of media presented Russia differently when it came to news involving Hungarian-Russian relations than in items covering the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. While in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict coverage was almost always pro-Western or at least balanced, when it came to Russian-Hungarian relations, or at least the Putin visit, several media outlets tended to report in a Russian-friendly way or with a greater emphasis on depicting the Russian position.

Metropol's approach was most illustrative of this trend, as in half of its longer articles on Russian-related news published in November 2014, the pro-Russian position was either predominant or exclusive. In February, half the published articles were mostly or fully pro-Russian, or they represented the Russian position (or in some cases the Russian separatist position in Ukraine) more prominently, while six articles placed a greater emphasis on the Ukrainian or western views. Those articles that cast a favourable light on the Russian side were mostly published at the time of Putin's visit in mid-February. Where the coverage pertained to Hungary's foreign policy relations with Russia, the tone regarding the latter was almost exclusively positive. In the context of the

Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the picture was mixed, op-eds critical of Russia were published as well as pro-Russian reports.

MTVI's news betrayed a decidedly mixed approach when it came to reporting about the Ukrainian-Russian conflict in this period, both in terms of the intensity of reporting and its orientation. The balance tipped heavily in favour of a friendly take on Russia during the time of President Putin's visit to Hungary. In the period 16-18 February, virtually all of the many news items in the Híradó were pro-Russian. Nevertheless, it did not use this positive/one-sided approach to highlight the positions of the Russian leadership, but the Hungarian policy towards Russia, with Putin reaping the corollary benefits of this policy. In the news following Putin's visit, the Ukrainian and/or western standpoint on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict became much more pronounced in reporting on the same than the Russian/separatist perspective.

RTL Klub was the polar opposite of the latter two media outlets, in that it took an unequivocally western view in its presentation of news involving Russia. With three exceptions, the western position – that is the American, the EU or the Ukrainian perspective – was fully or moderately dominant in its reporting. There was no report in which opinions in support of Hungary's eastern opening or a pro-Russian view was dominant. It is true for both RTL and TV2 that in their reporting on the course of the war, coverage typically tended to be neutral and reflect both positions, while in terms of the international diplomatic efforts directed at managing the conflict, pro-Western reporting tended to prevail.

TV2's Tények presents news on Russia with a slant that leans towards a pro-Western attitude. In roughly half the pertinent coverage the western position – that is the American, the EU or the Ukrainian perspective – tends to be predominant or even exclusive; in seven instances only the western position was presented, while a further eight items presented the western views slightly more than the Russian position, and seven were balanced. The depiction of Putin's visit was less unequivocal on TV2. In a third of the relevant reports – two in advance of the visit and one in its aftermath – the Russian position was more pronounced,

When Index wrote articles on Russian related news, it often did so at significant length and in a tone that was unmistakably critical of Putin. Roughly a third of Index articles qualify as neutral, but the slightly and decidedly anti-Russian articles have a vast preponderance in Index's coverage. In the online newspaper's otherwise extensive reporting, pieces that predominantly or

exclusively featured the Russian position without critical commentary or remarks by the authors were far and between. Nevertheless, the articles and videos produced by Index's war correspondents had a very different tone than the articles written in the newsroom in Budapest. Though the former mostly refrained from presenting official views, the authors obviously strove clearly to present the opinions of everyday folk in the war-torn areas without bias and with empathy, even if those views happened to be unequivocally pro-Russian.

Finally, Blikk's reports tend to be mixed. When it came to its coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian fighting, then the newspaper's reporting did not tilt in any direction. Yet of its two articles about the Orbán-Putin press conference, one only reported pro-government/pro-Russian viewpoints with the pro-western take lacking, while the other report emphasised criticisms formulated by western players.