

**Hungarian elections 2022 in
Ukrainian Zakarpattia: no
campaign and less than 6,000
votes – but with Russian
disinformation**

Examination of the main topics surrounding
the parliamentary election from Hungary in
the Hungarian Diaspora from Ukraine

DECEMBER 2021 - MARCH 2022



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This report has been prepared with support from IRI's Beacon Project. The opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of IRI



Executive Summary

The main and official part of the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election campaign coincided with the preparations and launch of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Despite the fact that Ukraine and the Russian invasion became a key topic of the parliamentary campaign in Hungary in 2022,¹ public attention to the Hungarian elections in Ukraine was extremely low, primarily and naturally due to Russian military build-up leading to the full-scale invasion on 24 February.

Unlike previous election campaigns, 2018 in particular, when the participation of Transcarpathian Hungarians in Hungarian elections became one of the topics of political debate and journalistic investigations both in Ukraine and Hungary, this year's election campaign drew no public attention.

According to the monitoring results there was almost no campaigning and mobilization as such among Hungarians in Ukraine – both offline, for example, rallies or door-to-door activities, and online, in the form of publications, political advertisement in the local Hungarian-language media. However, mobilization was organized and conducted through the media and social networks outside of Ukraine, from Hungary. Hungarian media have a high level of penetration among the Hungarian community of Ukraine, which lives along the Ukrainian-Hungarian border within the Transcarpathian region.

Officially, 5,840 people with Hungarian passports (as second citizenship) voted at the Hungarian consulates in Uzhhorod and Berehove. This number is only about 0.06 (or about 6%) of the votes needed to win one seat in the Hungarian parliament.

Simultaneously with the election campaign in Hungary, as well as preparation and launching of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia organized and conducted a series of hostile disinformation operations on Ukrainian-Hungarian relations. They were implemented from October 2021 to April 2022. Key narratives of these campaigns are "Hungarians in Ukraine are constantly oppressed by the state and nationalists", "Transcarpathian Hungarians want to separate from Ukraine and join Hungary", "Orban is ready to deploy special forces in Transcarpathia to protect local Hungarians", "Ukraine is preparing for military defense of Transcarpathia from Hungary", etc.

The Hungarian community in Ukraine before and after the invasion

For deep diving into the context we invite you to first read our previous extensive report on this topic "[Hungarian 2022 elections and the Hungarian national minority in Ukraine](#)".

Additionally, it should be noted that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the imposition of martial law (state of war) and general mobilization in Ukraine led to an extra mass exodus of representatives of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia. Hungarian passports, strong family and professional ties in Hungary were additional motivation. Among those who left Ukraine were also local leaders of the Hungarian community, journalists, education and culture servants, who played an important role in mobilizing during the elections, both Ukrainian and Hungarian.

There are different public numbers of Hungarians who have left Ukraine after the invasion. In particular, the editor of *Kárpáti Igaz Szó*, the oldest Hungarian-language newspaper in Transcarpathia, György Dunda mentions the number of 20,000 Hungarians². According to the UMDSZ³ leader László Zubánics, who refers to preliminary estimates of the Hungarian education community in Transcarpathia, the new school year in Hungarian-speaking classes in Ukraine may begin not 15-17k children, as it was in 2021, but about 12-13k, i.e. 30% less⁴. László Zubánics

¹ <https://www.iribeaconproject.org/our-work-analysis-and-insights/2022-04-01/hungary-2022-campaign-finale-war-mongers-vs-peace-lovers>

² <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2022/06/szolidaritasi-elofizetest-hirdet-a-karpati-igaz-szo-karpataljai-magyar-lap>

³ Ukrajnai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség, Hungarian Democratic Union of Ukraine

⁴ This data was provided exclusively to the author of this research during the interview

speaks of an approximate number of 30,000⁵ Hungarians who left Ukraine after the invasion.

Thus, if we take into account that as of 2017 there were about 131 thousand Hungarians living in Transcarpathia, their number may now be less than 100 thousand.

Hungarian election campaign 2022 in Hungarian-language media in Ukraine

As part of this study, the most popular Hungarian-language media and social media pages in Ukraine were monitored in the period from December 2021 to April 2022 inclusive. In total, there are more than 20 sources of information.

This monitoring was carried out both through the SentiOne online monitoring tool and manually directly by the author of this study.

The monitoring results are as follows:

- The Hungarian parliamentary campaign 2022 was very weakly covered in the Hungarian-language media and social media of Ukraine, mostly with the series of mostly neutral publications, some rare accusations against the Hungarian opposition and little coverage of accusations of Ukrainian officials for interfering in the Hungarian elections by Viktor Orbán's team.

For example, a statement by the KMKSZ⁶ (Kárpátaljai Magyar Kulturális Szövetség, Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association), issued on 1 March, read: "The Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association finds it outrageous and deeply condemns the war campaign carried out by the opposition parties. We find it unfortunate that some opposition parties, despite our request, are using the already difficult Transcarpathian Hungarians as a campaign theme, and they want to collect votes in the upcoming parliamentary elections by stirring up the differences between Hungarians in the mainland and abroad."

- Between mid-February and the end of April 2022, less than 100 media publications (both websites and social media) related to the 2022 Hungarian elections and Hungarian diaspora in Ukraine were identified in the most popular Hungarian-language outlets and social media pages in Ukraine. Another 100 publications were related to Russian aggression in Ukraine and West-Russia relations. In each of these dimensions, about the one-third of the publications dated after election day - 3 April;
- Most are reprints from Hungary's leading media, first of all the Hungarian state news agency MTI (*Magyar Távirati Iroda*, Hungarian Telegraphic Office). And in case there was a certain context about opposition or government in these messages, it was also reprinted without any editing.

For example: the MTI press release with a statement by Hungarian government spokesman Tamás Menczer, which was reprinted by such outlets as Kárpátalja⁷, Kárpátalja.ma⁸ and Kárpáti igaz szó.⁹ This press release contains one of the key election narratives of Viktor Orbán's team: accusations against the "left" opposition and its leader Péter Márki-Zay, who wanted to "drag Hungary into the war in Ukraine" and was "ready to send Hungarian soldiers there".

There were identified just a few (less than 10) publications with such accusations within the whole period from December 2021 till April 2022.

- Mobilization of Transcarpathian Hungarians to participate in the elections was practically absent, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24. Exceptions are only informational reports on the voting procedure at the Hungarian consulates in Uzhhorod and Berehove. The wide coverage in the local Hungarian-language media of Hungary's humanitarian aid to Ukraine can be considered a sort of indirect agitation. The ruling team, led by Viktor Orbán, also used this "peace

⁵ <https://infopost.media/naslidky-vijny-na-zakarpatti-zalyshylosya-menshe-100-tysyach-ugorcziv-laslo-zubanych/>

⁶ <https://kmsz.com.ua/2022/03/01/a-karpataljai-magyar-kulturalis-szovetseg-elnoksegenek-nyilatkozata/>

⁷ <https://karpataljalap.net/2022/03/21/menczer-jovoben-kuld-magyarorszag-segelyszallitmanyokat>

⁸ <https://karpatalja.ma/karpatalja/nezopont/menczer-a-jovoben-is-kuld-magyarorszag-segelyszallitmanyokat>

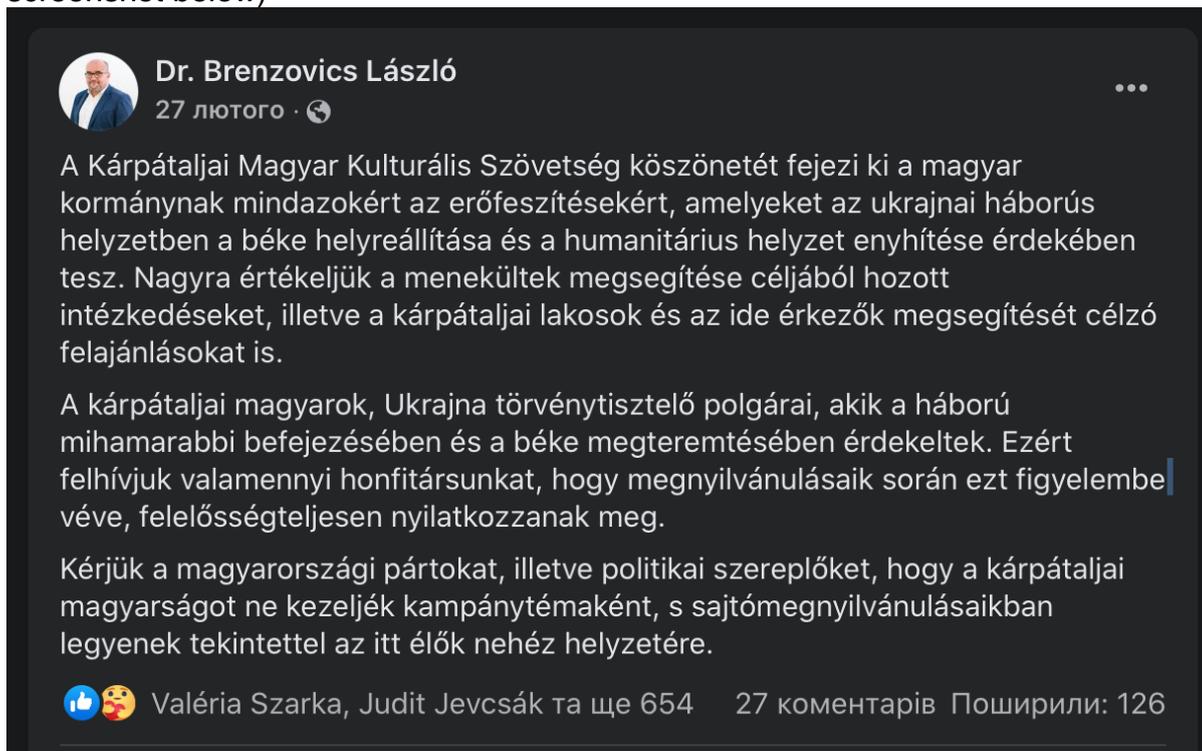
⁹ <https://kiszo.net/2022/03/21/menczer-a-jovoben-is-kuld-magyarorszag-segelyszallitmanyokat>

topic” as part of the election campaign.

- The LGBTQI+ referendum and its topics were completely ignored and absent in Ukraine’s Hungarian-language media space;
- Most reports of the Russian invasion of Ukraine were mostly informative with reference to the Hungarian and Ukrainian media outlets (reprints);

There are few key factors that led to the actual absence of the election campaign and mobilization among the Hungarian diaspora directly on the territory of Ukraine:

1. Semi-legality of the procedure of participation of Ukrainian citizens of Hungarian origin with Hungarian passports (as dual citizenship) in the elections in Hungary on the territory of Ukraine, because it is a matter of recognizing the existence of Hungarian citizenship as the second, which is prohibited by Ukrainian law.
2. The Russian invasion, and as a result the martial law and general “public tension” in Ukraine;
3. After the Russian invasion, the leaders of the Hungarian community in Ukraine publicly called not to use Transcarpathian Hungarians as an election topic. In his statement of February 27, 2022, the leader of the KMKSZ László Brenzovics stated: “We ask the Hungarian parties and political actors not to use the Transcarpathian Hungarians as a campaign topic, and to take into account the difficult situation of the people living here in their press releases”¹⁰ (last paragraph of the screenshot below)



4. The Ukrainian-Hungarian diplomatic conflict, which started in 2017, only intensified since the Russian invasion because of Hungary's position regarding aggression and military support of Ukraine. Hungary's reluctance to supply Ukraine with weapons and ban of the weapon transportation across the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, as well as the ambiguous rhetoric of Viktor Orbán's team on anti-Russian sanctions and atrocities of the Russian army in Ukraine have not been helpful.
5. A series of attempts to provoke the Ukrainian-Hungarian conflict were mainly in the form of disinformation smear campaigns, both before and immediately after the full-scale Russian invasion, which coincided with the Hungarian election campaign. *This topic will be discovered in a separate chapter of this report below.*

¹⁰ <https://bit.ly/3ub30yq>

6. The experience of the recent diplomatic scandals between Kyiv and Budapest due to the interference of one or another side into the elections in the neighboring state. Thus, official Kyiv accused the Hungarian authorities of interfering in the Ukrainian parliamentary elections 2019, as well as the local elections of 2020. As a result, since autumn 2020 a few Hungarian officials, in particular the state secretary for national policy Árpád János Potápi, as well as the special envoy of the Hungarian government István Grezsa are persona *non grata* in Ukraine.
7. The small number of votes generated by Hungarians from Ukraine do little in terms of directly influencing the final results and the distribution of seats in parliament. *This topic as well will be discovered in a separate chapter of this report below.*

However, it is important to keep in mind that Transcarpathian Hungarians were involved in election campaigning from outside Ukraine, by media outlets and social media from Hungary. According to a poll conducted in September 2020 by The Institute for Central European Strategy¹¹, the Hungarian media have a high level of penetration in the Transcarpathia, where the Hungarian community lives compactly along the border: 57.4% of representatives of national minorities in the Transcarpathian region, the largest of which is Hungarian, said they draw information from foreign non-Russian TV and radio channels, and 28.8% - also from foreign non-Russian online publications.

Mechanics of voting, procedures and scandals

Ukrainian Hungarians, who have Hungarian citizenship in addition to Ukrainian but are not officially registered in Hungary, can vote in Hungarian elections only for the party lists, and cannot vote for candidates in single-member constituencies. In 2022, such Hungarians could also vote in a referendum on 4 issues related to LGBTQ.

However, this does not mean that all “Hungarians abroad” (külföldi magyarok / a határon túli magyarok), who have, in addition to citizenship of the country of living also Hungarian citizenship, automatically become voters.

To participate in the elections in Hungary as a Hungarian abroad, you need:

- 1) register in the National Electoral Office (NVI, Nemzeti Választási Iroda) database as a foreign voter without a place of registration in Hungary. In election 2022, this had to be done by March 9, 2022, 25 days before election day.

In total, in this election database, 206,456,129 Hungarians without a registration in Hungary registered to vote.

- 2) to receive the specific package for voting Hungarians without a registration in Hungary, this year it was from March 19 to April 3 inclusive. In Ukraine, in the 2022 Hungarian elections, this voting package was available in person at the Hungarian consulates in Uzhhorod and Berehove. Voter packages in Ukraine were not transmitted either by mail or through local Hungarian organizations such as the KMKSZ or the UMDSZ which were cases in Serbia or Romania.

- 3) to return the ballot paper in an envelope to the election body, during the 2022 elections this had to be done between 19 March to 3 April at the consulates in Uzhhorod or Berehove.

These and other procedural moments were explained openly through the local Hungarian-language media. For example, the Consul General of Hungary in Uzhhorod, József Bacskai, gave a specific interview on this topic to the local Hungarian-language media in the Zakarpattia region¹².

¹¹ The poll was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation together with the Center for Political Sociology for the Institute for Central European Strategy from August 24 to September 6, 2020. A total of 1,000 respondents were interviewed - 500 respondents from a representative sample in the Zakarpattia region (in 6 cities and 15 villages of the region) and 500 respondents from national minorities (including 300 Hungarians and 200 representatives of the Roma, Romanian and Slovak communities) in compact settlements. The error does not exceed 4.4%.

¹² <https://karpataljalap.net/2022/03/24/tudnivalok-kulkepviseleti-szavazasrol>

Tudnivalók a külképviseleti szavazásról

A konzulátusokon már fel lehet venni a levélsomagokat

2022. március 24., 20:00, 1100. szám

Megosztás 96



According to a credible source, about 26,000 Hungarians in the Zakarpattia region were able to vote: 15,000 voting packages were sent to the consulate in Berehove and 11,000 to the consulate in Uzhhorod.

According to official data released by the State Secretary for National Policies in the Hungarian Government, Árpád János Potápi, during a series of conferences on national policy (nemzetpolitika), 5,840 Hungarian citizens voted in total in the Hungarian consulates in Uzhhorod and Berehove. Taking into account that about 90-95,000 votes¹³ are needed to win one mandate, the mentioned number of votes of Transcarpathian Hungarians is only about 0.06 (or about 6%) of votes required for one mandate.



Photo: facebook.com/potapiarpad

In comparison, in two Hungarian consulates in Romania (in Miercurea Ciuc / Csíkszereda and Cluj-Napoca / Kolozsvár) voted 205,767 Romanian Hungarians in total. At the consulate in Subotica (Szabadka, Serbia) – 60,913 voters. It is interesting to note that in the data presented by

¹³ https://www.politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=2968

the State Security Policies in the Hungarian Government there is no Slovak Republic, where apparently the voting was not organized either on the basis of diplomatic missions or by mail.

In total, 94% of Hungarians abroad, whose ballots were declared valid, voted for the ruling Fidesz-KDNP bloc, which means 251,468 votes.

Unlike in previous years,¹⁴ bussing voters (voter tourism) through the Ukrainian-Hungarian border was not identified by observers during the elections 2022.

However, on election day another scandal broke out online, but was not covered by the Hungarian-language media: the member of the Berehove City Council Karolina Darcsi, who is also the head of the KMKSZ faction, posted on her Facebook page a photo, in which she threw an envelope into the ballot box, and accompanied this photo with an invitation to take part in the voting. This photo disappeared from Karolina Darcsi's profile on 3 April, but the screenshot of the post was taken by the journalists.¹⁵ The Hungarian politician did not comment on the incident, according to the report the photo was taken at the Hungarian consulate in Berehove.



In February 2019, Karolina Darcsi got into a public scandal due to violations of Ukrainian customs legislation, stopping at the Luzhanka checkpoint in a car with foreign registration and presenting Ukrainian and Hungarian passports to border guards. Then the Berehove District Court fined her 3400 UAH (at that time it was approx. 150 USD/ 130 EUR, now it is less than 100 USD/ EUR) for illegal border crossing (Article 204 Part 1 of the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offenses). However, in May 2019, the Zakarpattia Regional Court of Appeal overturned the decision due to a gap in the law.

Disinformation campaigns and Russian hostile operations

Meanwhile, Russia organized and conducted a series of hostile disinformation operations on Ukrainian-Hungarian relations.

The first phase was implemented during October-December 2021, when Russia had already started to build-up troops on the Ukrainian border, and Hungary was holding opposition primaries

¹⁴ <https://infopost.media/vyborchij-turyzm-u-modi-v-odnomu-z-prykordonnyh-sil-ugorshhyny-naselennya-mizh-vyboramy-zmenshylosya-vidvichi/>

¹⁵ <https://infopost.media/zakarpatska-deputatka-progolosuvala-na-vyborah-v-ugorshhyni-po-ugorskomu-pasportu/>

and an unofficial early election campaign.

The second phase of Russia's disinformation operations was implemented immediately after the invasion of Ukraine during late February and March 2022.

The key narratives of these Russian hostile operations were: "Hungarians in Ukraine are constantly oppressed by the state and nationalists", "Transcarpathian Hungarians want to separate from Ukraine and join Hungary", "Orban is ready to deploy special forces in Transcarpathia to protect local Hungarians", "Ukraine is preparing for military defense of Transcarpathia from Hungary", etc.

In October 2021, exploiting another aggravation in Ukrainian-Hungarian relations due to Hungary's signing of a new gas contract with Gazprom, as well as manipulating a number of real facts and events, including military exercises in Hungary, disinformation was spread in the information space of Ukraine, Russia and Hungary with narratives:

- Ukraine will try to take revenge on Hungary for a new gas deal with Gazprom by oppressing the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia;¹⁶
- In response, Hungary decided to redeploy its troops from west to east of the country, to the border with Ukraine, and Orban is preparing special forces to deploy them to Transcarpathia, Ukraine, to protect local Hungarians.¹⁷

It is important to note that meanwhile these manipulations and disinformation were spread, on October 6, the Security Service of Ukraine informed about the detention of a Russian intelligence agent who was planning a series of terrorist attacks in Transcarpathia¹⁸.

In December 2021, the narrative of a possible military conflict / clash between Ukraine and Hungary was re-disseminated through the Russian media on the basis of a similar manipulation of real events and facts¹⁹.

Анексия Закарпаття: ВСУ срочно перебрасывают боевые подразделения из Донбасса к границе с Венгрией

Вчера, 12:09 14



По данным опроса, проведенного Фондом «Демократические инициативы» имени Илька Кучерива совместно с Киевским международным институтом социологии (КМИС), более 40 процентов украинского населения уверены в намерениях Венгрии аннексировать Закарпатскую область Украины.

The main feature of these campaigns was that they were based on the manipulation of real facts and the imposition of misinformation on them to create the desired overall picture - alternative theoretically possible reality, based on the narrative: "there is an ethnic confrontation between Ukraine and Hungary, which leads to the military conflict, and it will happen soon or later". In both examples, Russian operations were implemented through the so-called "fringe" or "gray-zone"

¹⁶ Debunking is available in Ukrainian <https://infopost.media/rosijska-propaganda-lyakaye-fejkamy-pro-ugorski-vijska-pid-kordonom-z-ukrayinoyu/>

¹⁷ Debunking is available in Ukrainian <https://infopost.media/rosijskyj-fejk-pro-vijskovu-napругu-mizh-budapeshtom-i-kyevom-vkynuly-i-v-ugorskyj-informprostir/>

¹⁸ <https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/sbu-zapobihla-serii-teraktiv-na-zakarpatti-pered-sudom-postane-ahent-spetssluzhb-f>

¹⁹ Debunking is available in Ukrainian <https://infopost.media/yak-rosiya-znovu-vygaduye-zagrozu-vijskovogo-zitkennya-mizh-ukrayinoyu-ta-ugorshhynoyu/>

media, including anonymous telegram channels, sites such as News-front, Antifashist, Orosz Hírek, Topcor ru²⁰, as well as conditionally mainstream Russian media such as Gazeta Ru, RIA Новости, Izvestia, Lenta ru, Komsomolskaya pravda and others.

Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, its hostile operations on Ukrainian-Hungarian topics became less sophisticated and more straightforward.

On the day of the Russian invasion the information that some Hungarian-speaking communities / municipalities in the Berehove district of the Zakarpattia region are planning to hold a referendum on joining Hungary was widely and virally spread online, initially via mainly anonymous Telegram channels and on social media (Facebook). This information was refuted by UMSZ leader László Zubánics²¹. Moreover, on February 25, the International Spokesperson of the Hungarian Government Zoltán Kovács refuted this information,²² calling it a provocation. There was and still is no factual evidence that there have been any attempts to hold such a referendum, and representatives of the Hungarian community in Ukraine and Transcarpathia, as well as the region's leadership, insist that nothing like this has happened in the region.

In mid-March, the same narrative about the alleged desire of Transcarpathian Hungarians to join Hungary was circulated again, this time through Russian and pro-Russian media, including an article on Regnum signed by former Hungarian MEP Béla Kovács²³, who is suspected of spying for Russia and who moved to Moscow a few years ago²⁴. The article is dated on Regnum on 14 March.

Another provocation on the same topic happened 21-22 March: many residents of Hungarian-speaking districts of the Transcarpathian region, in particular the city of Berehove, received SMS with the following content: "Ukraine is for Ukrainians. Glory to the nation! Death to the enemies! Magyars²⁵ to the knives"²⁶.

12:34

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²⁰ <https://topcor.ru/23149-annexsija-zakarpatja-vsu-srochno-perebrasyvajut-boevye-podrazdelenija-iz-donbassa-k-granice-s-vengrijej.html>

²¹ <https://bit.ly/3I5IjJZ>

²² <https://bit.ly/3OyyPJE>

²³ <https://perma.cc/SR2B-KWRR>

²⁴ https://nepszava.hu/3143770_kbgbelakemkedes-moszkva

²⁵ Magyars means Hungarians

²⁶ <https://bit.ly/3I0OBdQ>

A few days later, on 24 March, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) informed of the detention of a group of people in Odesa who were behind sending the anti-Hungarian text messages in Transcarpathia. According to the SBU, this group of people acted "at the request of a foreign anti-Ukrainian center of the Russian Federation".²⁷

The Polish fact-checkers' team of the Agence France-Presse (AFP) monitored that the same Russian narratives about Ukraine, Hungary and Transcarpathia were spread in the Polish information space during the same period of time²⁸.

It is worth noting that all these provocations and disinformation special operations took place in the final phase of the election campaign in Hungary and on the eve of election day.

Conclusions

1. Ukraine and the Hungarian community in Ukraine (Transcarpathia) have become not so much a "participant" in the election campaign in Hungary as an object and tool used by various players for their own purposes.
2. The share of votes of Hungarians from Ukraine in the elections in Hungary is negligible and does not affect the distribution of seats in parliament.
3. The Hungarian-language media in Ukraine, as well as the Hungarian community are under total control and censorship of the Hungarian state and governmental political alliance Fidesz-KDNP.
4. It is not necessary for the ruling Fidesz-KDNP team to use loyal local Hungarian-language media in Ukraine, which in recent years have been developed into a powerful network of online outlets, tv channels, newspapers, in order to agitate Hungarians in Ukraine. This can be done directly from Hungary, i.e. from outside Ukraine, because of the high level of penetration of Hungarian media in the Ukrainian frontier where ethnic Hungarians live.
5. Ukrainian-Hungarian relations remain very problematic, and are the constant target of Russian disinformation, which seeks to exploit both the traumas and fears of both Ukraine and Hungary.

During and as a result of the election campaign in Hungary and the active use of the topic of Ukraine and the Russian invasion, another political and diplomatic aggravation in bilateral relations between Ukraine and Hungary was provoked. It also laid the groundwork for future conflicts between Ukraine and Hungary, at different levels: the personal level between the leaders of the two countries²⁹, the politics and policy level towards Russia, its aggression of Ukraine and how to stop it.



²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/ssu.odesa/posts/311658751063210>

²⁸ <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.32899U7>

²⁹ Orban blamed Ukraine on interference into Hungarian elections and named president Zelenskyi among his opponents <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/04/viktor-orban-adds-zelenskiy-to-his-list-of-overpowered-opponents>