

Mitigation, Whitewashing, Obfuscation and Manipulation

Content Analysis of Articles on the Russian Aggression in Ukraine During the First 15 days of the War, Based on Publications of Four Hungarian News Portals and the BBC

English Summary

December 2022

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Summary

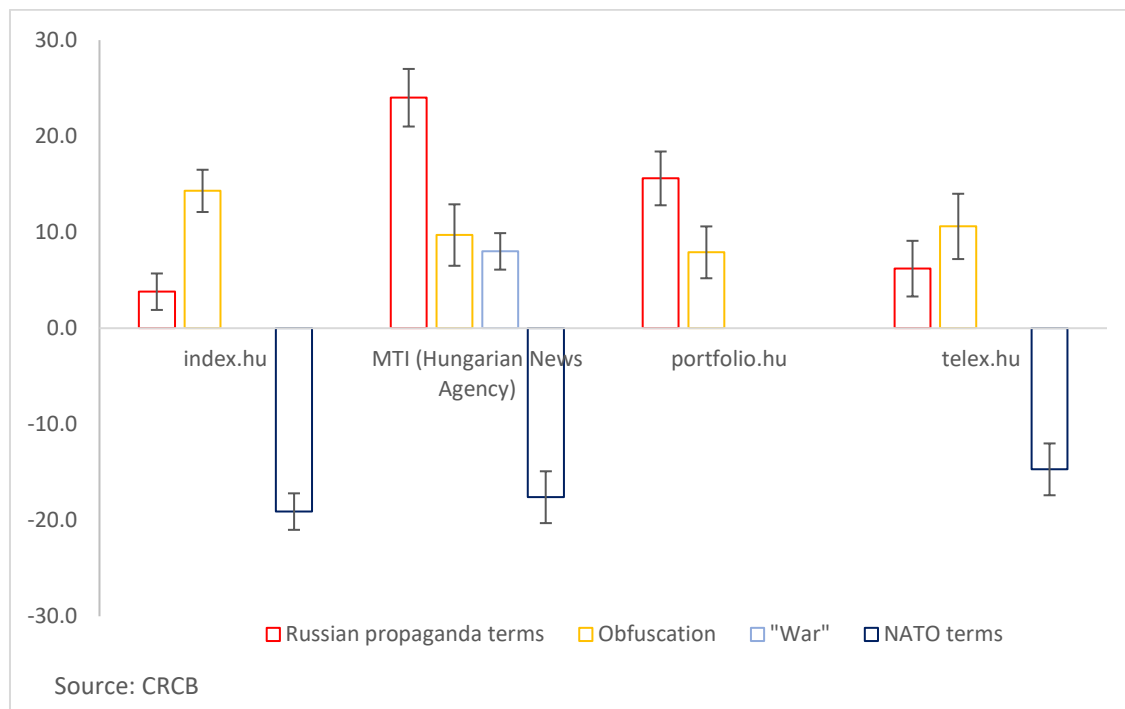
- 1) In this study we investigate whether Russian propaganda appears in the reports of three independent Hungarian news portals (Index, Portfolio and Telex), BBC, MTI (the Hungarian Press Agency), as well as in news published on the website of the Hungarian Ministry of Defence. The focus of the analysis is articles and news published during the first 15 days of the Russia-Ukraine war. Our analysis also addresses the issue of whether the Hungarian news portals reported on the events of the war in an unbiased way or not. Qualitative and quantitative content analysis methods were used in the study. We present the results of three case studies and two statistical analyses.
- 2) Among the highly diverse range of propaganda methods, only two techniques were examined. Both are related to the vocabulary used, in the wording or phrasing. The first technique is known as 'name-calling' or 'labelling' and means the use of words that describe persons, groups or events in such a way as to create prejudice against them. The second propaganda technique seeks to influence the reader's opinion by arousing fear, uncertainty and doubt, thus, its name: FUD. In this study, the focus is on the desire to create uncertainty and doubt; fear-mongering is not examined.
- 3) The case studies analyse an article published on telex.hu on 21 March and an interview published on 22 March, as well as news and related videos published on the website of the Hungarian Ministry of Defence between 24 February and 10 March.
- 4) With the help of quantitative analysis, we examine the degree to which the two propaganda techniques mentioned above are prevalent, the first part of the analysis examining name-calling and labelling, and the second part analysing the techniques of FUD.
- 5) The first case study demonstrates how the Hungarian presentation of a foreign language article may actually convey a meaning exactly contrary to the original article's content to Hungarian readers, and thereby, at least in part, fall in with the vocabulary of Russian war propaganda. Although the first published Hungarian version of the article was later corrected, the vast majority of readers had by then already read the first version.
- 6) The second case study uses an interview with the Hungarian Minister of Defence to analyse the journalist's and the Minister's use of words and statements. The results show that the Defence Minister used terms close to NATO terminology to describe Russian aggression, whereas the interviewer rather did not. Indeed, in several cases, the Minister's statements suggest that there might be conflicts in the background regarding Hungary's NATO membership.
- 7) The third case study examines what terms and names were used to describe the war on the Hungarian Ministry of Defence website. The results of the statistical analysis suggest the presence of a double use of language. In reporting events when soldiers or diplomats from NATO countries were present, the ministry's website prefers to use the same terms to describe Russian aggression as those used by NATO. In other cases, however, they use names

that blur Russian responsibility and equate the two parties. The wording in this latter case is closer to that used in Russian state propaganda than it is to the concepts used by NATO.

8) The first part of the quantitative analysis examines whether the articles published by the different portals (Index, Telex, Portfolio, the BBC and MTI) during the first 15 days of the Russian-Ukrainian war differed in terms of the words, expressions and formulations used to name the Russian-Ukrainian war. Probability models were used to analyse whether there is an effect on the probability of using different wordings of the war on different portals if we control for the effect of the news source to which the article refers and some other observable characteristics of the articles (e.g. length of articles, time of publication). The analysis covered all articles dealing with the war published during this period (6,272 articles).

9) The results show that, compared to the BBC, all Hungarian news portals studied were more likely to use Russian propaganda terms than BBC articles. MTI news used this type of wording with a 24 percent greater probability than BBC news. Portfolio and Telex articles were about 6 and 16 percent more likely, and Index articles were 4 percent more likely to use such phrasing than the BBC news, even if the effect of the referred source of the news and some other observable characteristics (length, time of publication) of the articles is taken into account. These differences proved to be statistically significant. (See Fig. A.)

Fig. A.: Differences in the probability of use of terms which describe the Russian aggression on Hungarian news portals compared to the BBC, significant marginal effects with robust standard errors, percent



10) All Hungarian news portals were about 8-14 percent more likely to use such terms for the Russian aggression in their articles that could be used to blunt or obfuscate what was happening (e.g. "Ukrainian situation", "Ukrainian events") than BBC news. These differences were found to be significant in the multivariate probability estimates (See Fig. A).

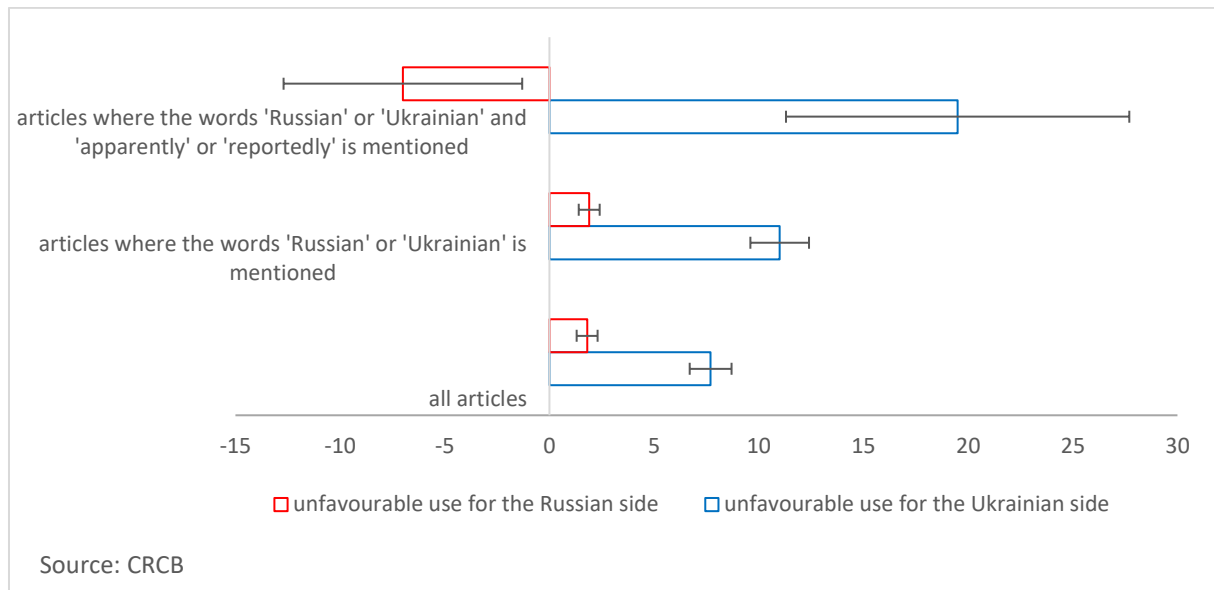
11) Articles on all Hungarian news portals, but the Portfolio were much less likely to use NATO terms for the Russian aggression than the BBC articles with the exception of Portfolio (See Fig. A.).

12) Based on the quantitative analysis we also investigated the use of two words which are suitable for discouraging or confusing the reader, for generating uncertainty and doubt: *“látszólag”* (apparently, seemingly, outwardly, superficially) és *“állítólag”* (allegedly, purportedly, supposedly). For the analysis, we used the same sample of articles as in the first quantitative analysis. All 6,272 articles about the war published by the BBC, MTI, Index, Portfolio and Telex during the first 15 days of the war were used. Nevertheless, using these two words can be justified during wartime, since most news cannot be immediately confirmed from reliable sources, and it is reasonable to treat all unconfirmed reports as uncertain. The question is whether the words expressing uncertainty are used in a balanced and undistorted way in statements about both parties. If not, and these words were used with a significantly greater frequency in relation to one or other of the belligerents, it may be that the words are being used to cast doubt on the credibility of one party or to create uncertainty among readers about the credibility of one or other of the parties' news reports.

13) We analysed the probability of the words *“látszólag”* (apparently, seemingly, outwardly, superficially) and *“állítólag”* (allegedly, purportedly, supposedly) being mentioned in the articles, also the probability of these words being mentioned in a way that was unfavourable to the Ukrainian side, and the probability of their being mentioned in a way unfavourable to the Russian side.

14) The results show that the words *“állítólag”* and *“látszólag”* were used by Portfolio's 'Global' section ten times more often than in any other news portals in the study, and, the statistical analysis has found that, unlike in all the other news portals examined, Portfolio did not use the words in an unbiased way, but in a way that was with greater probability unfavourable to the Ukrainian side and could have created an opportunity to discredit the Ukrainian side. This difference was found to be significant using multivariate probability estimations (see Fig. B.).

Fig. B.: The difference in the probability of mentioning the words "allegedly" or "apparently" in favour of Ukraine or Russia on portfolio.hu compared to the other news portals studied, marginal effects with robust standard errors, percent



15) The Hungarian word “*látszólag*” has two opposite meanings. In everyday language, it is most often used to say that something seems to be uncertain and that rather the opposite of what we see is true. The other, older meaning of the word is to be obvious, or visible. In the latter sense, it is relatively rarely used in everyday speech. Nevertheless, Portfolio, unlike the other news portals examined, often did not make clear in its articles which of the contradictory meanings of “*látszólag*” was being used in each mention. This may have added to readers' uncertainty.

16) Words have power. The vocabulary and phrasing used to describe someone or something, events or actions do have an impact. This analysis gives an example of how the choice of words can create important differences in meaning and how phrasing may influence the way readers think about Russian aggression. The presence of terms favoured by Russian state propaganda in the vocabulary, and in the wording of the independent press counts because it can influence the thinking of readers. The results of our analysis showed that this effect can be observed in the presence of texts and concepts deriving from Russian propaganda which are also found in the articles of certain Hungarian news portals.

17) The use of Russian state propaganda concepts and the biases revealed by the statistical analysis may not be the result of intentional decisions by journalists or editorial staff – they may be unconscious, or only semi-conscious. Our study may help to reveal these unconscious decisions in the future. The empirical results presented here may help the editors and journalists of the Hungarian online portals in the study to see more clearly where their writings fit into the discourse of Russian aggression. They may also help readers to recognise earlier if the articles they read may contain traces of Russian state propaganda.