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Media Mirrors and Propaganda Magic: Reflecting on Gergely
Karácsony's Portrayal in Hungary's 2024 Local Elections

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Introduction

Scholarly research constantly highlights the importance of an independent media in promoting a country's democratic health (see Gehlback & Sonin, 2014; Larcinese et al., 2011; Mundy, 2023; Petrova, 2011). A strong, free press combats corruption and promotes good governance, which are crucial for the viability of a well-functioning democracy (Petrova, 2011). However, media independence varies according to the broader democratic context of a country (Boshnakova & Dankova, 2023). Hallin and Mancini (2004) found that state policies have a major impact on shaping media landscapes at various levels of involvement. Globally, state involvement has shifted in the digital era, with a greater emphasis on funding and regulation than outright ownership (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). Yet, in certain countries, increasing government engagement is multifaceted, including public broadcasting, press subsidies, and ownership restrictions (Brüggemann et al., 2014).

Visible in emerging illiberal democracies like Hungary, democratically declining press freedom and media instrumentalization trends are also observed in several former communist countries in the Central Eastern European region (Boshnakova & Dankova, 2023). Since Viktor Orbán's return to power in 2010, Hungary has seen a substantial ideological divide, in which liberal values are abandoned in favour of national and populist objectives. This transition has been accompanied by significant changes to the country's political, economic, as well as media systems, diminishing democratic checks and balances while increasing state media domination (Bajomi-Lázár & Stępińska, 2019; Enyedi, 2016). Hungary has fallen to 67th place in 2024 from 23rd in 2010,

according to the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index¹, indicating a significant decline in press freedom and media independence, ranking it currently as the third worst country in the EU in terms of press freedom.²

Despite extensive research on state media involvement and its implications for democracy (see Buzogány, 2020; Luo & Przeworski, 2023; Ropponen, 2023; Sajó, 2021), gaps remain in understanding the dynamics and consequences of such interventions under illiberal governance systems. This research seeks to address these gaps by focusing on the representation of domestic opposition politicians, particularly Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony, in the realm of government-controlled media in Hungary. While some researchers have focused on the visual representations of Hungarian opposition figures (see Farkas, 2022) and the communication techniques of the Mayor and other opposition members (see Krizbai, 2021; Musil, 2024; Szabó & Szilágyi, 2022), other studies have examined the challenges faced by leaders of opposition cities (see Deets, 2023; Flick & Gömbicz, 2021). However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding an in-depth analysis of Mayor Karácsony's depiction in the media, both within national and international contexts. This gap underscores the need for more focused research on this topic.

Therefore, this paper will explore how government-controlled media portray domestic political opponents like Karácsony, who frequently receives critical coverage from pro-government media organs. This analysis is crucial because it sheds light on how illiberal regimes manipulate media narratives to alter public perception of domestic

¹<https://rsf.org/en/country/hungary>

²<https://telex.hu/english/2024/05/03/reporters-without-borders-press-freedom-in-hungary-3rd-worst-in-the-eu>

opponents, thereby influencing Hungary's broader political discourse and democratic integrity (Polyák, 2019). Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending the strategies employed by illiberal regimes to maintain power and control public opinion, contributing to the broader discussion on media freedom, political manipulation, and the health of democracy in illiberal systems.

Kovács et al. (2023) highlighted the significant role that regional newspapers, both in print and online, play in shaping social discourse, particularly in provincial Hungary. Accordingly, this research will examine the impact of online news media in Hajdú-Bihar County, Hungary's third most populous county, which includes Debrecen, the second most populous Hungarian city and a long-time stronghold of the ruling Fidesz government.³⁴ The primary objective is to analyse the portrayal of Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony by both pro-government and independent press outlets during the 2024 EU election campaign, which coincides with Hungary's municipal elections. The paper will look at how media outlets, which frequently serve as spokespersons for the Orbán administration, may impact Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's election success, particularly in provincial areas dominated by government-friendly media. The focus of the analysis will be on evaluating the prevalence and language used in the portrayal of Mayor Gergely Karácsony, with special emphasis on labelling and tonality in the media coverage. The aim is to elucidate the impact of media on public opinion and election outcomes within this politically significant context.

³ https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/fo/fo/fo0014.html

⁴ <https://atlatszo.hu/orszagszerte/2024/05/30/fellegvar-vagy-legvar-debrecen-es-nyiregyhaza-valasztas-elott>

Theoretical Framework

Political Parallelism

Scholarly research has increasingly highlighted the agenda-setting role of media in relation to parliament (Rosset & Kurella, 2021; Soroka, 2002; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). This body of work reveals that the interplay between media and politics is shaped by various factors, including the nature of the issues, media characteristics, and political party dynamics (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Despite the breadth of these studies, the concept of political parallelism, which describes the connections between media outlets and political entities (Hardy, 2008; Seymour-Ure, 1974), has often been overlooked as a critical moderating factor. This oversight is particularly notable given that Hallin and Mancini (2004) have highlighted political parallelism as a key element defining a country's media system (Van der Pas et al., 2017).

The concept of parallelism, initially termed press-party parallelism, was introduced by Seymour-Ure in 1974 to describe the relationship between media and political parties. For instance, a newspaper can be regarded parallel to a party if it is closely related by organisation, devotion to party aims, and reader partisanship (Seymour-Ure, 1974). Hallin and Mancini (2004) reformulated this idea as political parallelism, indicating a move away from media linkages to individual parties and towards larger political orientations. They observed that, while media-political links continued, they had evolved in response to the demise of political parties in Western Europe and the commercialization of media. Organisational ties, such as ownership, became less

common, with parallelism being affected more by market segmentation and the political participation of media owners and journalists (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Hallin and Mancini (2014) identified political parallelism as a major property of media systems and classified them into three categories; the North Atlantic or Liberal model, the Northern European or Democratic Corporatist model, and the Mediterranean or Polarised Pluralist model. The Liberal model, which includes Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and Ireland, is distinguished by a broad press market, low political parallelism, highly professionalised media, and a limited involvement of the state (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The Democratic Corporatist model, which includes Nordic countries, German-speaking countries, Belgium, and the Netherlands, is distinguished by a large press market, relatively high political parallelism, strong professionalisation, and significant state intervention, particularly through public service broadcasters and press subsidies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The Polarised Pluralist model, found in France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, is distinguished by a limited reach of the daily press, high political parallelism, weak professionalisation, and strong state intervention, which is frequently influenced by particularistic interests and clientelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, the classification of some nations, such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, and Germany, under these models has been contested due to their distinct media and political features (Brüggemann et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, Hallin and Mancini's (2004) three media system models remain the most extensively used framework for comparative studies of journalism and political communication (Benson et al., 2012). Although their models are heuristic and take into account differences in real-world media systems, they have proven a valuable reference point (Brüggemann et al., 2014). This thesis also draws heavily on research using the

Hallin and Mancini model as the foundation for its theoretical framework.

When it comes to categorising Eastern European countries, media systems are generally characterised by a tension between the sector's limited professionalisation, which is attributed to the rapid commercialization of assets and the weakness of civil society, and the high level of politicisation and state control, which are prominent legacies of the former communist regime (Boshnakova & Dankova, 2023). Hallin and Mancini (2013) examined the consistency of a common post-socialist pattern in media systems, focusing on the quick shift of regimes in Eastern Europe. They claim that, while all media systems evolve, the rate of change in this region has been far quicker. This rapid transformation distinguishes the region from other media systems, which evolve more gradually (Hallin & Mancini, 2013, p. 22). They encourage further application of their original model, and scholars have used it to closely investigate media systems in Eastern European. Ongoing research continues to refine and expand the understanding of media-political dynamics in diverse contexts.

Castro Herrero et al. (2017) examined the media systems of Eastern European nations, with an emphasis on European Union (EU) members, in order to validate, and expand on Hallin and Mancini's 2004 original model. They found three clusters based on partially geographical traits: The eastern cluster (Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania) has high political parallelism, low public service broadcasting investments, poor press freedom, and high foreign ownership, with Hungary standing out for its strong political control over media and low press freedom. The centre cluster (Croatia, Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovenia) exhibits moderate political parallelism, a strong public service broadcasting, low foreign ownership, and high ownership concentration and regulation. The northern cluster (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia) has little political

parallelism, high press freedom, high foreign ownership, and the highest levels of journalistic professionalism and online news consumption (Castro Herrero et al., 2017).

Peruško et al. (2015) partially applying the Hallin and Mancini model, analysed 23 European nations, taking into account economic, political, and social inclusion, media market status, creative production, and globalisation as defining factors. They identified Eastern European countries, along with Greece and Portugal, as a distinct cluster with the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) and democracy scores in Europe, lower globalisation (except for the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Portugal), and less developed media markets. For example, Romania has the lowest newspaper circulation (42 per 1,000 adults), while Bulgaria has the lowest smartphone penetration (9%). These nations also have a higher television concentration, with top stations in Bulgaria, Croatia, and the Czech Republic accounting for more than 60% of the viewership, and more than 70% in Portugal. This cluster contradicts the conventional view that Eastern European media are simply post-socialist institutions, displaying more complex institutional traits.

According to more recent insight, Dobek-Ostrowska (2019) found that the media systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) can be broadly divided into two models: the Hybrid Liberal model and the Politicised Media model. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia are examples of nations that follow the Hybrid Liberal model, which has less political parallelism and less political party dominance. These nations have a mix of liberal principles and economic prosperity, although certain media businesses still face governmental control (Milosavljević & Kersevan Smokvina, 2017). On the other hand, the Politicised Media model, characterised by greater political parallelism and significant party colonisation of the

media, includes countries such as Poland, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia, as also confirmed by the findings of Castro Herrero et al. (2017) and Bajomi-Lázár (2014). In Hungary, in particular, Orbán's rule has resulted in greater media polarisation and party control, resulting in a media system that is frequently described as being in "party captivity" and subject to significant censorship. This distinction reflects the varied degrees of media independence and political influence across Central and Eastern Europe, with smaller nations favouring a hybrid approach and bigger or more politically turbulent governments favouring politicisation (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019).

The examination of political parallelism within CEE media systems reveals a complex interplay between media and politics, especially in what are often referred to as illiberal democracies. Plattner (2019) defines "illiberal democracy" as a system that holds free and fair elections but does not build the liberal institutions needed to preserve individual rights, enforce the rule of law, and maintain constitutional checks on power. This leads to a society in which democratic procedures exist but fundamental freedoms and legal safeguards are degraded or absent. Moreover, in such democracies, the media is frequently dominated or substantially influenced by the government, resulting in censorship, diminished press freedom, and a lack of independent reporting, undermining the media's ability to hold authorities responsible (Surowiec & Štětka, 2020). The structural weaknesses of CEE media landscapes, as previously discussed, caused by factors such as rapid commercialization, poor civil society, and historical legacies of state control, have also become the breeding ground for government manipulation of the media. The growth of populist political actors has intensified this tendency, with media systems developing to reflect new or recreated affordances that advance illiberal agendas (Krekó, 2022; Zielonka, 2015).

The first notable appearance of illiberal democracy in the CEE region, as well as in Europe as a whole, is frequently attributed to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who, in a 2014 speech, explicitly advocated for a form of governance that maintains democratic elections while rejecting core liberal values such as judicial independence and media freedom (Plattner, 2019). Hungary, alongside with Poland have since been labelled "pioneers" of this political model in Europe, each illustrating distinct patterns of media manipulation and political control. For instance, Hungary has exhibited its illiberal tendencies by establishing a government-appointed media council to ensure "objectivity," resulting in biased reporting that is more closely aligned with state objectives than journalistic neutrality (Rubnik, 2023). Poland, following a similar route, has also assaulted media freedom, as seen by formerly governing PiS's political takeover of public television, which resulted in the dismissal of over 200 journalists and converted the media into a propaganda instrument for the government (Surowiec et al., 2020).⁵ These actions are accompanied by a broader erosion of judicial independence, as evidenced by Hungary's constitutional amendments allowing the parliamentary majority to overturn court rulings and Poland's legislative reforms that jeopardise judicial independence (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). Hungary's path towards media capture however, will be examined in greater depth later in this paper, demonstrating how the Orbán government gradually degraded press freedom through legislative acts and state-controlled institutions.

The aforementioned causes and events highlight the pivotal role of the media in spreading illiberalism, challenging standard political studies that frequently ignore this dynamic. Połńska and Beckett (2019) propose that the reconfiguration of public media

⁵ The opposition's victory in late 2023 has sparked optimism for increased media freedom in Poland, as evidenced by the country's rise to 47th place on the Reporters Without Borders' index, an improvement of ten spots within a year. Source: [RSF](#)

services in illiberal democracies mirrors wider European trends in media-politics interaction. The distinct history of CEE media systems, characterised by a mix of historical legacies and modern political pressures, emphasises the significance of strong media policy in protecting democratic principles.

Media Capture Theory

Related to the concept of political parallelism, which highlights the alignment between media outlets and political entities, the concept of media capture shifts focus to the power dynamics influencing media production and dissemination, illustrating how political affiliations can lead to control and manipulation of media content (Napoli, 2021). The Centre for International Media Assistance (2021) describes media capture as a type of governance failure in which news media enhance the financial or political goals of powerful parties who control the media sector rather than holding them responsible and serving the public interest. This arises as a result of a corrupt connection between political leaders and media proprietors in which positive news coverage is exchanged for preferential treatment. Mungiu-Pippidi (2008) similarly defines media capture as the inability of media organisations to achieve autonomy while serving the interests of third parties. This arises from a corrupt connection between political leaders and media proprietors, where positive news coverage is exchanged for preferential treatment.

Napoli (2021) further investigated the concept of media capture in today's digital era, focusing on the new dynamics offered by digital platforms. The growth of digital media has created new dynamics in the media environment. With their wide reach and power, digital platforms may aggravate as well as ameliorate media capture. On the one hand, they provide new channels for information transmission and democratic participation;

on the other, they may be used by strong interests to strengthen media control and manipulation. Social media algorithms, for example, might prioritise material that is politically relevant, affecting public discourse and sustaining media capture (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Furthermore, economic pressures on digital news sites might lead to reliance on advertising income, undermining editorial independence and contributing to media capture (Tambini, 2020). Closely related, Corneo (2006) also emphasises the importance of wealth concentration in media capture, claiming that in democracies, wealth concentration facilitates media capture by allowing affluent individuals and corporations to have disproportionate influence over media content. This concentration of media ownership has the potential to influence public discourse and policy results in favour of the affluent, exacerbating inequality and weakening democratic processes.

Over the last decade, media capture has grown more common in post-communist countries, with political and corporate elites exerting informal power over the media landscape, prioritising ideological dissemination over public information (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013). This has resulted in substantial distortions to media freedom and independence, since captured outlets are less likely to investigate or report on government malfeasance, reducing transparency and impeding democratic accountability (Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014; Besley & Prat, 2006). Media capture affects the critical role of journalism in democratic nations by limiting the media's capacity to act as a watchdog, as well as channelling information to serve certain political and economic objectives. This process contributes to a biased, government-aligned media environment, limits independent journalism, and erodes public trust in the press (Surowiec & Štětka, 2017).

The widespread control of the media by political and economic elites in several CEE countries, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, underscores the urgent need for robust measures to protect media freedom. Despite initial commitments to

adhere to European regulatory standards after the collapse of the Soviet Union and their subsequent accession to the EU, media capture continues to be a persistent challenge in many of these countries (Góra & Zielińska, 2013). This ongoing issue highlights the failure to fully implement the necessary protections for independent media, raising concerns about the erosion of democratic values in the region. The EU has expressed growing dissatisfaction with widespread political interference in the media, recognising that it undermines not only journalistic integrity, but also the fundamental pillars of democratic governance and public accountability (Horsley, 2021; Dragomir, 2019).

While this research primarily focuses on Hungary and the CEE region, the impact of media control extends far beyond these borders, indicating a broader and more concerning trend with significant global implications. Brüggemann et al. (2014) revised the Hallin and Mancini typology of media systems, conducting a detailed investigation of how shifting degrees of political power and media freedom may affect media functions in a variety of democratic settings. Their findings show that media capture is a global problem that has major implications for democracy and public debate. In such situations, news organisations employ strategic framing to influence public perceptions of political actors by emphasising certain characteristics and acts that are consistent with political objectives (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013). This global trend of media capture emphasises the importance of protecting media independence in order to sustain democratic accountability and public conversation.

Understanding media capture's impact on political parallelism and the broader media environment paves the way for investigating how media information is framed. While media capture focuses on who controls the media and why, framing theory investigates how the media shapes public perception through selective presentation and emphasis (Entman, 1993). As previously stated by Bajomi-Lázár (2013), news outlets employ strategic framing to affect public perceptions of political actors by emphasising particular characteristics and acts that are consistent with political aims. By examining both media capture and framing, one can gain a thorough understanding of the power

dynamics at work in media creation and distribution, as well as their effects on public discourse and democracy.

Framing Theory

Framing theory posits that an issue can be interpreted from multiple perspectives, each emphasising different values or considerations. It explores how individuals form specific understandings of an issue or adjust their perspectives based on the way information is presented (Chong & Druckman, 2007). According to Entman (1993), framing is the act of selecting and emphasising certain aspects of perceived reality within a message. This selection process has a substantial influence on understanding issues by highlighting particular problems definitions, causal interpretations, moral judgements, and policy solutions. Not only do frames reflect reality; they actively alter it, affecting how challenges are seen and addressed. This framing is constantly contested and changes throughout time (Matthes, 2011).

In media studies, framing is typically defined as a communication process influenced by psychological and institutional circumstances that form certain social realities. Media frames are composed of narrative and symbolic aspects that correspond to individual cognitive schemas as well as larger historical and cultural contexts (Van Gorp, 2007; de Vreese, 2005). These frames build power from this resonance, influencing how people understand events and information. In the realm of political communication, framing theory is especially known for investigating how political players and events are depicted in the media. Politicians and political problems are framed to produce narratives that either support or oppose certain political goals and ideologies (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Political media framing, which draws on interpretations and knowledge of both media and political communication frameworks, has a considerable impact on public views of political individuals and events by emphasising certain elements while downplaying others. This selective focus can influence how the public views political reality, and it frequently serves larger ideological or strategic purposes (Chong & Druckman, 2007). For example, political figures can be framed as reformers, populists, or even villains, depending on how the media emphasises their actions, policies, or associations (Svensson Glaser, 2018). Strategic framing in the media may either support or undermine political narratives, influencing not just public opinion but also election outcomes and policy discussions (de Vreese, 2005). Research on political media framing has shown that repetition, visual imagery, and the linkage of political leaders with broadly accepted social norms may all influence public opinion (Van Gorp, 2007). Institutional pressures, ideological biases, and audience expectations frequently shape how media frames are produced, resulting in a so-called “feedback cycle” in which public opinion and media representation reinforce one another (Matthes, 2011).

Frame-setting refers to how media frames influence people's understanding and perception of political problems by interacting with their prior information and predispositions. Media frames shape how people perceive and assess political events, influencing both individual attitudes and bigger societal processes including political socialisation, decision-making, and collective action (de Vreese, 2014). At the individual level, framing may influence attitudes on specific topics by emphasising some while downplaying others, so altering how these concerns are interpreted and prioritised (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2005)

Therefore, the combination between media frames and individual cognition is critical for determining the level of media influence. In polarised societies, like Hungary, elite cues can have an even greater influence when reinforced by media frameworks, altering popular opinion and policy choices (Levendusky, 2013). This demonstrates that media framing does not just reflect public sentiment, but actively influences it by emphasising certain parts of political reality while ignoring others (Entman, 1993). Furthermore, framing influences agenda-setting by modifying which topics receive public and political attention (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). As a result, understanding frame-setting is critical for analysing how the media impacts public opinion and mobilises collective action, particularly in politically heated settings (de Vreese, 2005).

The theoretical frameworks emphasize the interrelationship of media framing, political parallelism, and media capture, providing a perspective on Hungary's media landscape. Media frames influence public impressions of political personalities by highlighting certain narratives, whereas political parallelism emphasizes the linkages between media sources and political institutions, thereby influencing how political actors are represented. These factors influence both public sentiment and the accuracy of media reportage. Furthermore, the study demonstrates how political party media domination strengthens popular opinions and corresponds to larger trends of illiberal administration in Hungary.

Literature Review

Party Colonisation of Hungarian Media

Since the democratic transition in 1989, Hungary has sought to establish constitutional liberalism and a pluralistic public sphere that reflect broader trends in the CEE region, albeit with distinct national characteristics (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Polyák, 2019). In

accordance with the Hallin and Mancini (2004) framework, Hungary's media system witnessed rapid development, with substantial efforts aimed at establishing a diversified and autonomous media landscape consistent with democratic norms. This process included significant state intervention, foreign media ownership, and a dominant, but weak, political party presence, paralleling broader political and economic liberalisation, privatisation, and deregulation trends, often referred to as "shock therapy" in research literature (Kleinstauber, 2010).

However, recent media policies in Hungary have radically altered the media environment, decreasing media freedom safeguards and restricting independent media (Polyák, 2019). Polyák and Urbán (2016) identify three major pillars of this transformation: eroding media regulatory independence, manipulating market access, and controlling public information. Pro-government media have free access to resources, allowing the ruling party to control public discourse through legal means, economic manipulation, and strategic appointments. As a result, government-sponsored information spreads extensively, while dissident voices are strongly suppressed.

In order to understand the present status of party colonisation in Hungarian media, it is necessary to look at recent events, notably after Viktor Orbán's administration reclaimed power in 2010. During this time, the government has drastically changed the media environment by establishing the aforementioned three pillars. According to Krekó (2022), the so-called "*Hungarian media model*" which is characterised by heavy state control, generates a "*media bubble*" through strategic technological utilisation and centralised messaging. This strategy includes huge advertising efforts centred on single themes such as "*Stop Soros*" or "*Stop Brussels*," which are reminiscent of twentieth-century propaganda yet use modern technologies. By flooding public areas

and media outlets with similar messages, the governing party's misinformation campaign prioritises persuasion through a coherent narrative (Soroka, 2022). More on the enemy creation narratives of the government's propaganda machine will be further observed at a later stage.

Media Ownership Concerns in Hungary

The so-called "*de-consolidation*" phase, which began in mid-2010, resulted in a major reduction in media freedom in Hungary. Viktor Orbán's administration, known for its Christian, national, and conservative principles, used its supermajority to undertake broad media changes. These included the passage of a Media Constitution and a Multimedia Act, which centralised authority over all media outlets under the ruling party, essentially reducing media pluralism (Altena, 2017; Bajomi-Lázár, 2013).

In 2010, Viktor Orbán formed the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH), which merged four separate regulatory entities, giving the government unparalleled influence over media regulation. This consolidation, which was criticised for converting independent institutions into weapons of state censorship, allowed the Fidesz party to put loyalists in important regulatory positions, considerably increasing its control over Hungary's media landscape (Czaky, 2017). Lőrinc Mészáros, Orbán's childhood friend and essential actor in this transition, began acquiring Hungarian media properties after Fidesz's initial electoral triumph. His company, Mediaworks, has evolved into Hungary's most influential media agency, controlling a vast array of media products, including over 84 news sites and all regional daily newspapers (Kovács, 2018).

The 2015 rupture between oligarch Lajos Simicska, who played a key role in building the financial and media infrastructure of the Fidesz party⁶, and Orbán exposed the extent of political control over Hungary's media. After Simicska defected following the 2014 election, he briefly led an anti-Orbán media campaign ahead of the 2018 election. Threatened with assassination, Simicska handed over his companies to Orbán loyalists and fled the country (Nagy, 2023). During this time, the government withdrew advertising from Simicska's outlets and expanded its media influence, with Mediaworks acquiring 11 publishers (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). In 2018, Orbán solidified his control by creating the Central European Press and Media Foundation (*KESMA*), to which loyal oligarchs "*donated*" over 500 outlets (Polyák, 2019; Róka, 2017).

In 2018, numerous pro-government media owners combined their holdings under *KESMA*, citing "*national strategic importance*" to avoid regulatory scrutiny, resulting in a strongly biased media climate that favours government narratives. This concentration has significantly reduced media plurality, ensuring that the government's message dominates public debate. During the 2018 election campaign, all county newspapers ran identical Fidesz-promoting pieces, demonstrating the level of media manipulation (Czinkóczy, 2018).

The Hungarian Public Media Service (PMS) has also had a significant impact on public opinion, notably during crises like the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In a recent research conducted by Urbán et al. (2023), PMS has depicted Hungary as a defender against the effects of conflict, aligning its editorial position with the government's pro-Russian attitudes, so influencing societal views and public opinion.

⁶ <https://merce.hu/2018/01/03/ellensegem-ellensege-kicsoda-simicska-lajos/>

By dominating both regional and national media, the government guarantees that its narrative is continuously transmitted, matching local news with the overarching political goals of the governing party. The government's plan for changing the media environment consists of six key tools: law, regulation, governmental communication, state advertising, governmental initiatives, and state bank loans. According to Bátorfy (2017), Mediaworks and Lőrinc Mészáros have played crucial roles in creating a media environment that is heavily biased towards the government.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has been concerned about Hungary's media environment for more than a decade, pointing out that by now KESMA controls around 500 national and local media outlets that predominantly serve government objectives. The organisation has raised concerns about the decline of journalistic freedom, as seen by Hungary's score of 67 on the RSF press freedom index, which places it behind Chile, Uruguay, and Ghana (RSF Journalistic Freedom Index, 2024).⁷ Furthermore, RSF has criticised the government for shifting broadcasting frequencies from independent media, such as Klubrádió, to pro-government stations under dubious conditions (Szelényi, 2022).

Urbán et al. (2023) also emphasised the critical role that regional newspapers, both in print and online media, play in shaping social discourse, notably in the lives of rural Hungarians, functioning primarily as the Orbán government's mouthpiece. Thus, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's electoral victory is sometimes linked to his popularity in rural regions, where government-friendly media outlets are widespread. This hypothesis proposes that media consumption has a significant influence on political decisions and varies by location, particularly in smaller rural communities with fewer media options.

⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/country/hungary>

In terms of political and public affairs reporting, regional newspapers continue to surpass daily newspapers (Boshnakova & Dankova, 2023).

Understanding this background requires observing how propaganda occurs among regional, rural newspapers, particularly those controlled by Mediaworks. Given the substantial media holdings of Mediaworks, these publications are hypothesised to play an important role in depicting opposition individuals and structuring political discourse in a way that benefits the government. Such an assessment can provide more information about the processes of media manipulation and their influence on public opinion in Hungary's politically heated media environment.

Orbán's enemies

To understand how the Orbán-esque propaganda media operates, it is important to observe its distinctive characteristics, one of the most conspicuous being the creation of enemies. Identities develop via separation from "*others*" since establishing identity without contrast is impossible (Stavrakakis et al., 2018). The process of discursive othering defines the definitions of "*us*" and "*them*" determining who is, and is not a member of the group. This othering entails defining "*us*" vs "*them*" through language, employing multiple categories and symbolic limits to include and exclude (Sata, 2023). According to Abdelal et al. (2001), multiple conceptualizations of identity compete for dominance within and among communities. As a result, identity is impacted by both intrinsic content and relational dynamics, with identification inside a group encouraging rivalry with out-groups. As a result, membership in a national community might be viewed as belonging to an "*imagined*" community, which is valued more than other group connections (Anderson, 2006).

The technique of discursive othering is crucial in defining "*us*" and "*them*" which determines group membership and is especially common in Orbán-esque media narratives. In Viktor Orbán's political rhetoric, enemy creation is a key component, purposefully used to rally support and legitimise his governance (Sükösd, 2022). Orbán's speeches typically create dichotomies between a virtuous "*us*" and a menacing "*them*" addressing a variety of groups and individuals including Hungarian-American businessman and investor George Soros, the EU, Roma people, LGBTQ+ community members, and the political opposition from both the domestic and international scenes. This rhetorical tactic not only fosters a sense of national vulnerability but also spreads fear and anxiety among the public, resulting in an urgent demand for draconian policies (Meeusen & Jacobs, 2017). In Orbán's populist paradigm, discursive othering successfully presents these enemies as existential threats to the entirety of the national community, justifying his authoritarian measures (Jensen, 2011). Such narratives are consistent with populist ideology, which portrays society as divided between "*pure people*" and corrupt elites or dangerous others, emphasising a romanticised concept of national purity and sovereignty (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Sata, 2023). Orbán's Euroscepticism and ultra-nationalism reinforce this narrative, portraying Hungary as a defender of traditional European values against alleged EU encroachments (Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019). This created contrast between a glorified past and a corrupt present seeks to legitimise Orbán's political authority and strengthen his control by portraying Hungary as a stronghold of real European civilization (Dessewffy, 2022).

Between 2010 and 2018, Viktor Orbán's political approach emphasised the formation of external enemies to support his populist agenda, while domestic political opponents were mostly marginalised. From 2010 to 2015, the discourse revolved on an "*economic*

freedom fight" against neoliberal capitalism and speculative elites, with these foreign entities seen as dangers to Hungary's national economic policy (Hegedüs, 2019). During this era, Orbán delegitimised domestic opposition by presenting them as puppets of foreign forces, depriving them of political agency and reducing their importance to simple extensions of his true rivals (Sükösd, 2022). The second era, from 2015 to 2018, was dominated by the refugee crisis, with Orbán emphasising the importance of protecting Hungary's ethnic and cultural unity from the perceived threats of mass migration (Sata, 2023). This move enabled Orbán to continue his externalisation campaign, portraying the EU and other foreign organisations as existential threats to the country's sovereignty and cultural identity (Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019). Throughout both periods, Orbán's rhetoric consistently downplayed the significance of internal political conflict, instead positioning himself as the sole defender of Hungarian and broader European values in the face of crises, thereby consolidating his political power and legitimacy (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

According to Sata (2023), Viktor Orbán's rhetoric has increasingly portrayed internal opposition, notably from the Hungarian left-liberal spectrum, as a severe danger. He has utilised populist tactics to depict his opponents as pawns of foreign interests, eroding their credibility and political power. By attributing numerous problems to the failings of liberal administrations, Orbán portrays his illiberal democracy as critical to save Hungary from further collapse, portraying his regime as the ultimate protector against his opponents of the domestic political scene.

Gergely Karácsony: A Principal opponent of Orbán

Gergely Karácsony, Budapest's opposition mayor, is one of Prime Minister Orbán's most vocal domestic political opponents. Karácsony, a green and left-wing politician,

co-chaired the Párbeszéd (*Dialogue*) party until 2022. He was elected Mayor of Budapest in 2019 as part of a five-party opposition alliance. Karácsony previously served as Mayor of Budapest's 14th District from 2014 to 2019. His political experience includes sitting as a Member of Parliament for the LMP - “Lehet Más a Politika” party (*Politics Can Be Different*) from 2010 to 2013 then as an independent MP from 2013 to 2014.⁸

Gergely Karácsony has emerged as a significant figure in Hungarian politics, challenging Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his ruling Fidesz party. Unlike Orbán, who uses populist tactics and harsh language to gain power, Karácsony promotes a more moderate and conciliatory approach to politics. He believes in building a democratic climate through “*mild-mannered and soft-spoken politics*,” in stark contrast to Orbán's combative attitude (Adam, 2018).

Karácsony views Orbán's regime as both dictatorial and corrupt. He often points to the grievances of Fidesz loyalists who secretly wish for a change in government to curb what they see as the regime's boundless arrogance (Adam, 2018). This impression is not without merit; during Orbán's leadership, Hungary has seen considerable levels of corruption, with political favouritism and nepotism being commonplace. Such concerns have been central to Karácsony's criticisms of the administration, which emphasise the need for openness and democratic changes (Rényi, 2022). Karácsony and Orbán have a mutually antagonistic relationship. Orbán and Fidesz have used state-controlled media and propaganda to discredit Karácsony and other opposition politicians. Pro-government media routinely criticise Karácsony's work as mayor and portray the opposition coalition as a plot orchestrated by former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány (Bayer, 2021; Panyi et al., 2022). The government's media apparatus attempts to

⁸ <https://karacsonygergely.hu/ki-vagyok>

undermine the opposition by portraying them as simple pawns of foreign interests and corrupt entities, undermining their credibility among voters (Bayer, 2021).

To understand the dynamics of the 2024 Budapest mayoral election, consider who is competing with the incumbent, Gergely Karácsony. Alexandra Szentkirályi, backed by Fidesz, and Dávid Vitézy, running independently, offer two opposing views on the city's future governance. Szentkirályi, a former government spokesman with close ties to the ruling party, has focused her campaign on forging cooperation with the national government to benefit Budapest citizens, while criticizing the opposition for political inefficiencies. Vitézy, on the other hand, focuses on technical competence and urban policy innovation, promising to address crucial challenges like public transportation, affordable housing, and infrastructure imbalances between core and peripheral districts (Tóth, 2024).

Research Questions

Despite Gergely Karácsony's prominent role in Hungarian politics as Mayor of Budapest and a crucial opposition figure, his media representation has received little scholarly study. Given his importance in Hungary and the CEE region, where illiberal governance systems are common (Rupnik, 2023), knowing how state-controlled and independent media outlets portray him is critical for interpreting the broader political scene. Examining these portrayals can reveal important information about the processes of media framing, political power, and public opinion in Hungary's highly polarized media environment.

To this end, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: What frames and discourses were applied in the portrayal of Mayor Gergely Karácsony by Hungarian media outlets during the 2024 EU elections?

RQ2: In what ways did Hungarian state-controlled and independent media depict Mayor Gergely Karácsony throughout the 2024 EU election period?

Methodology

Research Sample

The data for this study was gathered over a one-month period, from May 9 to June 9, 2024, during the 2024 EU and municipal election campaigns in Hungary. Articles about Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony were carefully gathered from selected news websites, including a pro-government news outlet operated by Mediaworks and two independent regional news outlets that sit in Hajdú-Bihar County. To ensure consistency and minimize oversight, articles were collected at the same time every day. The research applied keywords such as "Karácsony Gergely" and "Főpolgármester" (Mayor of the Capital City) to find all pertinent references to Karácsony. This methodology was developed to investigate how the Mayor was portrayed in non-Budapest-based media.

The final sample includes 62 articles from *HAON - Hajdú-Bihar Vármegyei Hírportál*, a regional news agency in Hajdú-Bihar County owned by Mediaworks. The company is known for its pro-government position and financial ties to the Fidesz party (Bátorfy, 2017). This is much greater than the 4 articles published by *Cívishír*, owned by the independent BDR MÉDIA Kft.⁹, and the 1 article published by *Debreciner*, owned by *Együtt Debrecenért Egyesület* (Together for the City of Debrecen Association). The

⁹ <https://civishir.hu/impresszum>

latter association, established in 1998, seeks to promote active engagement in local civic affairs and cultural life.¹⁰¹¹ Cívishír and Debreciner are both independent local news outlets that mostly cover Debrecen and its surroundings.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Initially, all articles mentioning Gergely Karácsony, regardless of context, were included in the research to obtain a comprehensive picture of how the Mayor of Budapest is portrayed in non-Budapest-based regional media. Articles were picked if they made direct or indirect reference to Karácsony, whether the mention was critical or incidental to the article's main theme. Following the first assessment, publications that merely briefly mentioned Karácsony without providing important background or analysis were eliminated, leaving only those that analyzed his political activity, policy opinions, or personal character in greater detail.

This inclusion/exclusion approach was introduced to find a balance between breadth and depth, ensuring that Karácsony's representation was thoroughly reviewed. According to Krippendorff (2018), carefully defined inclusion and exclusion criteria are critical in content analysis to ensure methodological consistency and focus on relevant data. Such criteria not only help to systematically filter unnecessary material, but they also ensure that the analysis is closely aligned with the research objectives, which improves the study's validity and replicability.

Qualitative Content Analysis

To efficiently investigate the data in this paper, a qualitative approach, namely a qualitative content analysis was applied. This approach is effective for detecting

¹⁰ <https://www.eginformacio.hu/cr9310202115>

¹¹ <http://www.egyuttdebrecenert.hu/index2.php>

connections, patterns, and frequencies in media information (Schreier, 2012), revealing how Gergely Karácsony is portrayed in various media organs. Content analysis provides a methodical technique to studying media narratives and can reveal themes that may inform wider generalisations about other political actors or circumstances. According to Hansen and Machin (2018), this strategy is particularly effective for managing even bigger datasets, allowing researchers to thoroughly evaluate content in a relatively short amount of time.

The following research will use content analysis to investigate the framing, focusing on labelling and tonality, as well as recurring themes in the media representation of Karácsony. Although the paper is mostly qualitative, the approach allows for the incorporation of quantitative elements such as the frequency of certain terms or frames. This dual method will give a deep knowledge of how media coverage reflects political objectives, as well as findings that may be applicable outside the boundaries of this research.

Labeling is a crucial element in the paper. In this sense, labeling refers to the act of allocating something to a specific category or grouping and associating it with other entities or traits, so rendering them identical. This technique allows media outlets to identify Karácsony as "competent," "incompetent," or "neutral" based on the media's generated narrative. This might be stated openly or implied via synonyms or descriptive phrases (Oxford Languages, 2022). For example, the usage of adjectives like "inexperienced" or "unfit" may function as labels that shape public perception of Karácsony.

Similarly, tonality is an important component of how media articles portray political figures such as Karácsony. Tonality is defined in this paper as the entire arrangement

and presentation of a text's features that shape its emotional and evaluative tone (Merriam-Webster, 2021). The tonality of an article will be classified as positive, negative, or neutral based on how the material is written and the sentiment conveyed. For example, an article detailing Karácsony's accomplishments in a positive perspective would be classified as having a positive tone, but one concentrating on his mistakes or weaknesses would have a negative tone. Neutral articles, on the other hand, may give a balanced or factual narrative without demonstrating a strong bias toward any particular viewpoint.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is an important method in qualitative content analysis because it provides a systematic approach to investigating how language, tone, and narrative influence media portrayals of persons and events. This research employs textual analysis to look at how Hungarian regional media presents Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony, with a focus on how language, tone, and narrative choices show subtle ideological influences. Textual analysis goes beyond surface-level reporting to reveal both what is stated and what is omitted (Brennen, 2021). As theorists like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams argue, language is not simply a channel for information but a dynamic, socially shared process that creates meaning and reflects societal values (Williams, 1977; Hall, 1980). In this study, analysing word choices, thematic patterns, and framing techniques helps uncover how articles might convey political leanings during an election period.

Examining the choice of terms and recurring themes helps reveal how Mediaworks-owned outlets, like the pro-government Haon, portray Budapest Mayor Karácsony, in contrast to independent sources such as Cívishír and Debreciner. In this

case, language choices are not just descriptive but work as active tools shaping public perception. The analysis further draws on Cormack's (1995) criteria for ideological critique to dig into the subtleties of these portrayals, noting, for example, how some publications selectively avoid positive representations of Karácsony while others emphasise his criticism. This approach is especially valuable in news analysis, where omissions and narrative focus subtly push readers toward certain viewpoints without overtly partisan language. Finally, Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980) reminds us that readers interpret media through their own perspectives, shaped by their political leanings and backgrounds. By connecting the media's portrayals to this broader decoding process, the analysis not only sheds light on political bias within the media but also on the larger social impact of these narratives on public opinion. In doing so, this study underscores the significance of textual analysis in understanding how media, even when it appears neutral, can actively influence democratic engagement by shaping political identities and opinions.

Ethical Considerations in Textual Analysis

Although textual analysis is a popular and efficient tool for qualitative research, it has its own limitations and ethical considerations. Given its subjective nature, researchers must be aware of their interpretive role and the possibility of bias. Textual analysis necessitates that interpretations be based on the facts presented in the texts, rather than imposing prior conceptions or ideological biases (McKee, 2003). The social, historical, and political contexts should be thoroughly explored to achieve a nuanced understanding (Hall, 1980). In this paper, the political affiliations and ownership of media sources are critical to an ethical interpretation of how Gergely Karácsony is portrayed. Brennen (2021) also adds that researchers must acknowledge the potential

impact of their findings on public opinion and democratic processes, presenting results responsibly and avoiding oversimplification.

Results

Pro-Government News Site - Topics

Gergely Karácsony's representation in pro-government media reveals a deliberate and consistent effort to undermine him as a political leader, focusing on specific narratives and presenting recurring personalities to highlight his perceived flaws. The alleged mismanagement of Budapest's infrastructure projects is one of the most prominent issues discussed in the media. Pro-government media outlets frequently portray the current reconstruction of Metro Line 3 as a failure representative of Karácsony's larger administrative incompetence. Reports frequently highlight delays, cost overruns, and inconvenience to commuters, citing Karácsony's leadership as the root problem. This framing is consistent with a larger narrative that portrays opposition-led regimes as incapable of addressing complicated governance concerns. Another recurring issue is traffic congestion, with publications linking deteriorating urban mobility to Karácsony's policies, particularly his perceived priority of bicycle lanes and public transportation over car traffic, which has been criticized for alienating regular commuters. The narrative frequently portrays these policies as evidence of a "war on cars," enhancing his image as detached from ordinary concerns of Budapest citizens.

Another key topic is financial mismanagement, with pro-government media constantly claiming that Karácsony's administration abused public funds. These articles emphasize measures such as cuts to public services, especially waste disposal, as examples of fiscal irresponsibility and bad planning. By focusing on these concerns, the news

creates a narrative of fiscal incompetence, depicting Karácsony as incapable of efficiently managing the city's resources. These attacks are frequently accompanied by allegations of corruption, with publications claiming that foreign donors and NGOs have excessive influence over his policies, portraying him as a person corrupted by external interests. The invocation of George Soros and the European Union as significant actors in Karácsony's government is a recurring theme, linking his leadership to a larger conspiracy narrative that paints opposition politicians as agents of foreign meddling. This method is consistent with Viktor Orbán's long-standing rhetoric of defending Hungary from external dangers, pitting Karácsony against national sovereignty and traditional values.

The inclusion of recurring personalities who serve to contrast Karácsony's perceived shortcomings with the competence and alignment of Fidesz-supported persons is integral to this media strategy. Alexandra Szentkirályi, a former Orbán government spokesman and the ruling Fidesz party's mayor-nominee, regularly appears as a counterpoint to Karácsony, representing the administration's professed devotion to effective governance and public service. In articles about urban and national policies, Szentkirályi is frequently portrayed as a problem-solving leader who provides clarity and direction, whereas Karácsony is portrayed as indecisive and ineffective.

Pro-Government News Site - Framing

The framing of Karácsony's leadership includes his perceived ideological standing. Pro-government media emphasizes his support for progressive and ecological policies, portraying them as radical and incompatible with the demands of Hungarian society. His environmental initiatives, such as the promotion of bicycle infrastructure and limits on older, polluting vehicles, are depicted as disruptive and elitist policies, rather than

vital urban renewal efforts. These measures are condemned for neglecting the reality of daily living for Budapest citizens, further isolating Karácsony from the population, according to the Haon article narrative. This critique frequently coincides with the perception of his administration as unduly influenced by Western liberal ideas, increasing the divide between national and foreign goals.

The tone of these portrayals is predominantly negative, with emotionally charged language used to elicit distrust and discontent among readers. Descriptive adjectives like "chaos," "failure," and "corruption" appear frequently, providing a grim image of Karácsony's reign. Articles rarely take a neutral tone, and when they do, they tend to emphasize facts that are consistent with the larger critical narrative. For example, even discussions of infrastructure projects that could benefit his government are presented to emphasize delays or disagreements, ensuring that any potential accomplishments are swamped by perceived flaws.

The persistent use of framing, naming, and emotionally charged intonation demonstrates how pro-government media shapes public opinion against opposition people. By emphasizing Karácsony's purported shortcomings and juxtaposing them with the stated triumphs of Fidesz-aligned people such as Szentkirályi and Vitézy, the coverage promotes a contradiction that validates the Orbán government's narrative of competent governance. This picture is consistent with broader tendencies found in illiberal democracies, where media capture allows ruling parties to dominate public debate while marginalizing opposing views. Such approaches not only influence electoral outcomes, but also create political culture, creating an environment in which dissent is delegitimized and alternative governance models are rejected as fundamentally defective.

Independent News Sites - Topics

The independent online journal articles focus on a number of interconnected political and social issues involving Gergely Karácsony and other Hungarian public figures, such as the debated relocation of the Transport Museum from Budapest to Debrecen, where Karácsony questions the rationale for doing so, as well as shifting political alliances in the city. While the museum controversy reflects broader policy debates about cultural heritage, economic interests, and urban planning, Alexandra Szentkirályi's resignation and endorsement of Dávid Vitézy highlight changing electoral strategies and the complexities of coalition building in Budapest's leadership race.

Electoral campaigns and their associated rhetoric become an important topic as well. In Polgár, Klára Dobrev's¹² address emphasizes mobilization, vigilance, and resilience in the face of what she describes as efforts to "grind down" opposition personalities, notably Karácsony. Her statements highlight how political leaders try to galvanize followers by encouraging them to participate actively in the voting process. The use of "family buttered bread" and the request for daily sacrifices to ensure effective campaigning emphasize the grassroots element of these political initiatives, as well as the sense of urgency surrounding forthcoming elections.

Throughout the articles, the coverage includes a variety of substantive discussions, strategic political repositioning, and symbolic actions. Infrastructure initiatives, museum relocations, campaign endorsements, historical references, and appeals for citizen engagement all combine to paint a complex image of Karácsony's political landscape. While the content addresses some Budapest-specific difficulties, it does not

¹² Klára Dobrev (b. February 2, 1972, Sofia) is a Hungarian politician, founding member of the Democratic Coalition, Member of the European Parliament since 2019, former Vice-President of the European Parliament, and founder of Hungary's first Shadow Government in 2022. Sources: [Demokratikus Koalíció](#), [European Parliament](#).

delve deeply into metropolitan-level complications. Instead, it focuses on regional news of Hajdú-Bihar County or Transtisza¹³ territories and the larger political currents that shape local governance. Economic interests, urban growth, cultural identity, and social justice are all part of a larger storyline in which many individuals, such as Karácsony, Szentkirályi, Vitézy, and Dobrev, exert influence or respond to unfolding events.

Independent News Sites - Framing

The framing applied by both Civishír and Debreciner articles emphasizes information, context, and several perspectives. Rather than depending on a single, overarching narrative, articles typically combine direct quotes, official statements, historical references, and stakeholder perspectives to provide a well-rounded depiction of events. For example, the Transport Museum debate is framed not only as a policy disagreement, but also as a broader reflection on investment decisions, cultural positioning, and the importance of reasoned arguments, which is an approach that places Karácsony's position within a larger framework of urban governance and national interest.

When reporting on resignations, endorsements, and campaign rhetoric, the framing implies a fluid political environment marked by strategic calculations, shifting alliances, and publicly announced agendas. Szentkirályi's resignation is presented with obvious factual aspects, such as her withdrawal from candidacy and support for Vitézy, while also communicating the electoral impact of her actions. This framing enables readers to see political developments as part of a continuing struggle for public confidence, support, or legitimacy.

¹³ Tiszántúl or Transtisza is eastern Hungary and part of the Great Hungarian Plain extending into Romania. Debrecen is its main cultural and economic center. Source: [Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár](#)

Karácsony's personal background and moral arguments are framed by references to historical events, religious heritage, and rural beginnings, emphasizing the symbolic importance of his talks. Such framing portrays Karácsony as a personality who combines personal history and political goals, urging readers to relate policy proposals and electoral ambitions to underlying ideals and long-term dreams for the country. Similarly, Dobrev's campaign theme in Polgár emphasizes community engagement, the emotional tone of the political conflict, and the importance she sees in overcoming uncertainty and inaction among supporters.

The language utilized in these articles has a measured, neutral tone. They include direct quotations and factual explanations, offering enough background for readers to comprehend the consequences of each development while not promoting a specific perspective. References to historical events, social issues, and practical concerns, such as commuter inconvenience or the economic allocation of cultural institutions, are woven into a narrative that portrays political figures as navigating complex environments rather than engaging in personal conflict.

Discussion

Frames and Discourses Applied in Portrayal of Mayor Karácsony

Pro-government media sources, particularly those owned by Mediaworks and represented by HAON, portrayed Mayor Karácsony in largely bad light. The three most significant frames found included administrative incompetence, with pro-government media frequently highlighting alleged failings in managing Budapest's infrastructure projects, most notably the Metro Line 3 renovation. Delays, cost overruns, and commuter irritation were highlighted to portray Karácsony as an inept mayor. Financial mismanagement was another recurring theme, with media outlets accusing Karácsony's

administration of misusing public funds and making poor budget decisions. This is consistent with media capture theory, which holds that state-controlled media seeks to undermine opposition personalities by challenging their competence and integrity (Buzogány, 2020). Lastly, the alleged ideological radicalism was defined by portraying Karácsony's support for progressive and environmental measures as extreme and incompatible with Hungarian society's traditional values. Initiatives like bicycle infrastructure and restrictions on older vehicles were depicted as “elitist”, “counterproductive” and disruptive, feeding tales of ideological extremism (Sükösd, 2022).

Independent new sites such as Cívishír and Debreciner presented more balanced and nuanced perspectives. They emphasized policy-focused reporting, covering real policy disputes such as the Transport Museum's relocation and election strategy while giving different perspectives and contextual assessments. This way of reporting is, in terms of classification, closer to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) democratic corporatist media model, which emphasizes informed public discourse (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Independent media also offered constructive criticism of Karácsony's policies, emphasizing both merits and weaknesses rather than simple condemnation. This balanced approach encourages a better informed electorate and strengthens the media's watchdog role, and thus the overall democratic functioning of media (Petrova, 2011).

Depiction of Mayor Karácsony by State-Controlled and Independent Media

The depiction of Mayor Karácsony by pro-government media was characterized by negative labeling, emotional tonality, and strategic narratives. Pro-government media routinely labelled Karácsony as "ineffective," "corrupt," and "radical," generating a

skewed narrative that harmed his reputation and public image (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The tone of pro-government media was primarily negative, with emotionally charged language like "chaos," "failure," and "corruption" supporting a poor impression of Karácsony's leadership (Soroka, 2002). In addition, pro-government media used strategic narratives to portray Karácsony as a threat to national sovereignty and traditional values, connecting him with foreign interests like George Soros and the EU. This aligns perfectly with Orbán's strategy of discursive othering to create "enemies" and consolidate political power (Sata, 2023; Sükösd, 2022).

Independent media, on the other hand, portrayed Mayor Karácsony in a more balanced and objective light, retaining a neutral to positive tone and emphasizing factual reporting and constructive criticism above outright negativity. This technique promotes a more objective portrayal and allows readers to draw their own conclusions (de Vreese, 2005; Van der Pas et al., 2017). Independent media employed a broader range of labels, including both positive and negative adjectives, to provide a more complete picture of Karácsony's policies and deeds. This balanced labeling promotes informed public discourse and democratic responsibility (Petrova, 2011).

Integration of Pro-Government and Independent Media Findings

The findings demonstrate a dramatic discrepancy in how pro-government and independent media perceive Mayor Karácsony. Pro-government media used negative frames, strategic labeling, and emotionally charged tones to undermine Karácsony and strengthen the ruling party's narrative of competent governance. This manipulation is a great example of media capture, in which media organizations prioritize the interests of powerful political actors over journalistic integrity and public service (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Buzogány, 2020). Independent media, on the other hand, remained committed to

fair reporting, using a variety of labels and a neutral to positive tone to present a more impartial depiction (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Petrova, 2011).

Implications for Media Capture and Political Parallelism

The findings highlight the widespread influence of media capture and political parallelism in Hungary's illiberal democracy. Pro-government media's negative framing and strategic storylines diminish opposition personalities like Karácsony, reinforcing the ruling party's political authority (Bajomi-Lázár & Stępińska, 2019). This is consistent with the concept of political parallelism, in which media outlets collaborate with political bodies to advance specific agendas, compromising media independence and pluralism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Independent media, although trying for balanced and objective coverage, face considerable limits in a climate controlled by media capture. Their efforts to retain journalistic integrity demonstrate the durability of independent journalism while also emphasizing the difficulties in sustaining media independence in a politicized setting (Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014).

The strategic control of government interests over media ownership, as demonstrated by the extensive holdings of Mediaworks, facilitates media capture and reinforces political parallelism, limiting media pluralism and allowing the ruling party to dominate public discourse (Czaky, 2017; Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). This concentration of media ownership is a major contributor to the deterioration of media freedom and democratic accountability (Rubnik, 2023).

Contribution to Literature and Future Research

This study adds to the current literature by conducting a thorough analysis of media representation techniques, specifically in terms of framing, labeling, and tonality. It

broadens the understanding of media capture and political parallelism by demonstrating their practical applications in altering electoral outcomes and public opinion (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019). By focusing on a specific opposition figure, Mayor Karácsony, the study provides case-specific insights that supplement broader comparative studies on CEE media systems (Castro Herrero et al., 2017; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019). This micro-level research offers a comprehensive view of how media capture works in practice, emphasizing the interaction of media ownership, political goals, and public perception.

Moreover, Urbán et al. (2023), as noted in the literature review, stressed the critical role of regional newspapers, both in print and online, in molding social discourse among rural Hungarians, where they predominantly serve as mouthpieces for the Orbán government. This focus emphasizes how media consumption, particularly in places with little options, influences political decisions and adds to Orbán's support in rural areas (Urbán et al. 2023). This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of the current study, which contributes to the topic by illustrating how localized media environments and regional variations in media access may influence public opinion and electoral outcomes in illiberal democracies.

Future research should include a larger media sample, such as more independent media at the county or region level, to provide a more complete picture of Hungary's media dynamics. This would increase the generalizability of the findings and include a broader spectrum of media depictions. Integrating quantitative tools could supplement qualitative findings by providing more quantifiable information on the prevalence and influence of various frames and labels (Andreotta et al., 2019). For example, comparing the frequency of negative and positive frames across a broader dataset could help to

quantify the amount of media bias. Also, studying audience reception and the effectiveness of various media portrayals on voter behavior would improve understanding of media influence in electoral circumstances.

Surveys or focus groups could be used to investigate how various media narratives influence public perception and voting intentions. Exploring the role of digital media platforms in mediating these depictions is equally critical, especially given the growing prominence of social media and online news consumption. Researchers could look into how digital algorithms and online discourse influence public opinion and political engagement (Rita et al. 2023).

Limitations

The paper's concentration on a small number of regional media sources may not adequately represent the diversity of media representations in Hungary. The prevalence of pro-government media in the sample, particularly HAON, makes it difficult to generalize findings to all media types in the country. Furthermore, while qualitative analyses provide depth, they may include subjective interpretations despite efforts to maintain objectivity (Krippendorff, 2018).

Another hindering factor of the research is the data collection period was only one month during the elections. This snapshot approach may fail to capture longer-term media patterns or narrative shifts that occur outside of the current electoral context. Future research should use longitudinal designs to investigate how media portrayals change over time and in reaction to various political events.

Conclusions

The portrayal of Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony in Hungarian rural media during the 2024 EU and local elections shows the complex interaction of media capture, political parallelism, and framing in an illiberal democratic context. Pro-government media outlets used negative frames, labeling, and emotionally charged tones to delegitimize opposition individuals. This strategy not only undermines his leadership, but also strengthens the ruling party's narrative of effective governance, cementing political power. By emphasizing concerns such as administrative inefficiency, financial mismanagement, and ideological radicalism, pro-government media effectively mold public opinion to support the ruling party's objectives.

In stark contrast, independent media outlets attempted to offer fair and objective coverage of Mayor Karácsony. These venues prioritized policy-focused reporting, constructive criticism, and the inclusion of different stakeholder voices. Such actions highlight the importance of media plurality in maintaining democratic accountability and cultivating an informed electorate. The commitment of independent media to nuanced reporting serves as a contrast to popular pro-government narratives, supporting the watchdog function required for a healthy democracy.

This paper emphasizes the critical role of media freedom in ensuring a vibrant democratic discourse and an informed voter in Hungary, and thus other CEE contexts. By demonstrating the scope of media manipulation and its deep impact on public perception, the study helps to a better understanding of how illiberal governments use media systems to maintain power and suppress resistance. The findings demonstrate the methods by which media capture and political parallelism operate, demonstrating their efficacy in weakening media pluralism and democratic accountability.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of sustaining media independence and variety as a practical requirement for the maintenance of democratic principles. In contexts where media is dominated by pro-government forces, the degradation of media independence poses serious dangers to openness, accountability, and the overall health of democracy. The concentration of media ownership, as evidenced by Mediaworks' enormous holdings, plays an important role in this erosion, allowing for the manipulation of public discourse and limiting the scope for dissenting voices.

The concluding thoughts of this research go beyond Hungary, providing significant insights for other countries dealing with similar difficulties in their media environments. It advocates for systematic measures to protect media independence through strong legal frameworks, support for independent journalism, and increased media literacy among the public. This research not only sheds light on the specific case of Mayor Gergely Karácsony's media portrayal, but it also adds to the larger discussion of media systems in illiberal democracies. It emphasizes the need of independent media in countering state-controlled narratives and creating an environment conducive to democratic principles. As Hungary and other CEE nations grapple with the challenges of sustaining democratic integrity in the face of emerging authoritarian tendencies, media freedom protection and promotion remain critical pillars in assuring their democracies' resilience and vibrancy.

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Appendix “A” (Codebook)

Thematic Codes

1. Infrastructure and Urban Policy

- **Definition:** References to Karácsony’s management of urban infrastructure projects.
- **Examples:** Mentions of Metro Lines/Public Transport, traffic congestion, bicycles etc.

2. Financial Management

- **Definition:** Narratives about Karácsony's financial policy and/or alleged mismanagement.
- **Examples:** Claims of reducing waste management services, allegations of corruption.

3. Environmental and Progressive Policies

- **Definition:** Focus on policies that promote sustainability and progressive changes.
- **Examples:** Criticisms of restrictions, car bans, etc.

4. Foreign Influence

- **Definition:** Narratives connecting Karácsony to external actors or suggesting external control.
- **Examples:** Claims of foreign funding, links to George Soros, “Global Left” or EU.

Framing Codes

1. Positive Framing

- **Definition:** Instances where Karácsony’s actions or policies are presented in a favorable light.
- **Examples:** References to successful projects or achievements.

2. **Negative Framing**

- **Definition:** Instances where Karácsony's actions or policies are depicted as failures or threats.
- **Examples:** References to alleged incompetence, or harm caused by policies.

3. **Dichotomy Framing**

- **Definition:** Comparisons between Karácsony and Fidesz-supported figures to highlight opposition inefficacy.
- **Examples:** Juxtaposition/Comparison of Karácsony's presidency with e.g. Szentkirályi's or Vitézy's policies.

Labeling Codes

1. **Labels of Competence**

- **Definition:** Terms used to assess Karácsony's administrative capabilities.
- **Examples:** 'Incompetent,' 'ineffective leader,' 'unfit to govern.'

2. **Labels of Allegiance**

- **Definition:** Terms highlighting Karácsony's alignment with external entities or ideologies.
- **Examples:** 'Foreign puppet,' 'Soros ally,' 'EU-controlled.'

Tonality Codes

1. **Positive Tones**

- **Definition:** Articles with a favorable (or neutral) evaluation of Karácsony's policies or character.
- **Examples:** Balanced presentation of facts

2. **Negative Tones**

- **Definition:** Articles with a critical evaluation of Karácsony's policies or character.
- **Examples:** Terms like "failure", "chaos" etc.

3. **Neutral Tones**

- **Definition:** Articles presenting facts without *overtly* positive or negative bias.
- **Examples:** Balanced reporting with factual focus.

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Abstract

This study investigates the portrayal of Gergely Karácsony, the Mayor of Budapest and a prominent opposition figure, within Hungarian media during the 2024 European Union (EU) and municipal election campaigns. Utilizing a theoretical framework that integrates political parallelism, media capture theory, and framing theory, the research aims to investigate how state-controlled and independent media sources influence public perception and electoral outcomes in Hungary's increasingly illiberal democracy. The study placed special emphasis on regional newspapers, especially those in the countryside, with a particular focus on Hungary's third most populous county, Hajdú-Bihar. A qualitative content analysis was chosen to analyse a sample of 67 articles collected from one pro-government, Mediaworks-close news outlet, HAON, and two independent regional news sites, Cívishír and Debreciner, over a one-month period. The findings reveal a stark contrast in media portrayals: pro-government media consistently employed negative frames, labeling Karácsony as "ineffective," "corrupt," and "radical," while emphasizing his alleged administrative incompetence and financial mismanagement. These outlets strategically linked Karácsony to foreign influences, aligning with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's rhetoric of national sovereignty and populist agendas. On the other hand, independent media provided more balanced and nuanced coverage, focusing on policy discussions and constructive criticism without resorting to overt negativity. This dichotomy underscores the pervasive influence of media capture and political parallelism, which undermine media pluralism and democratic accountability by promoting government-aligned narratives and marginalizing opposition voices. The study contributes to the existing literature by offering a detailed case study of media manipulation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), highlighting the challenges faced by independent journalism in politically

charged environments. The findings emphasize the critical need for safeguarding media independence to ensure democratic integrity and informed public discourse in illiberal regimes.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Forschung untersucht die Darstellung von Gergely Karácsony, dem Bürgermeister von Budapest und einer prominenten Oppositionsfigur, in der ungarischen Medien-Szene während des Wahlkampfs zur Europäischen Union (EU) und den Kommunalwahlen 2024. Unter Verwendung eines theoretischen Rahmens, der politischen Parallelismus, die Theorie der Medienerfassung und die Framing-Theorie integriert, soll untersucht werden, wie staatlich kontrollierte und unabhängige Medienquellen die öffentliche Wahrnehmung und die Wahlergebnisse in Ungarns zunehmend illiberaler Demokratie beeinflussen. Ein besonderer Schwerpunkt der Forschung lag auf regionalen Zeitungen, vor allem auf denen auf dem Lande, mit besonderem Augenmerk auf dem drittbevölkerungsreichsten Komitat Ungarns, Hajdú-Bihar. Eine qualitative Inhaltsanalyse wurde gewählt, um eine Stichprobe von 67 Artikeln zu analysieren, die über einen Zeitraum von einem Monat von einem regierungsnahen, Mediaworks nahestehenden Nachrichtenblatt, HAON, und zwei unabhängigen regionalen Nachrichtenseiten, Cívishír und Debreciner, gesammelt wurden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen einen starken Kontrast in der Darstellung in den Medien: Die regierungsnahen Medien verwendeten durchweg negative Frames und bezeichneten Karácsony als „ineffektiv“, „korrupt“ und „radikal“, während sie seine angebliche administrative Inkompetenz und finanzielle Misswirtschaft hervorhoben. Diese Medien brachten Karácsony strategisch mit ausländischen Einflüssen in Verbindung und stimmten mit der Rhetorik von Ministerpräsident Viktor Orbán überein, der sich für nationale Souveränität und populistische Ziele einsetzt. Auf der anderen Seite lieferten unabhängige Medien eine ausgewogenere und nuanciertere Berichterstattung, die sich auf politische Diskussionen und konstruktive Kritik

konzentrierte, ohne zu offener Negativität zu greifen. Diese Dichotomie unterstreicht den allgegenwärtigen Einfluss von Medienkontrolle und politischer Paralleltät, die den Medienpluralismus und die demokratische Rechenschaftspflicht untergraben, indem sie regierungsnahe Narrative fördern und oppositionelle Stimmen marginalisieren. Die Studie trägt zur bestehenden Literatur bei, indem sie eine detaillierte Fallstudie über Medienmanipulation in Mittel- und Osteuropa vorlegt und die Herausforderungen aufzeigt, denen sich der unabhängige Journalismus in einem politisch aufgeladenen Umfeld gegenüber sieht. Die Ergebnisse unterstreichen die Notwendigkeit, die Unabhängigkeit der Medien zu schützen, um demokratische Integrität und einen informierten öffentlichen Diskurs in illiberalen Regimen zu gewährleisten.