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Polish Misinformation Using a Hungarian Recipe: The Curious Case of Visegrád 24

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The popular Visegrád 24 Twitter account pretends to be a news agency, but just repackages material with a conservative spin

The Visegrád 24 Twitter account has rapidly grown in popularity, but their motivation and funding are far from transparent. While capitalising on Western support for Ukraine, the owners are building a brand to “Make Europe Great Again”, exporting a more successful Polish model initially tested by Viktor Orbán.

The Hungarian attempts failed, but the plan stayed alive in Poland: in just two years, Visegrád 24 has grown into one of the largest Central Eastern European information operations in English - despite its total anonymity, opaque funding structure, having no website, lack of original content and with dubious links to the Polish government.

Visegrád 24 Gains Notoriety

From a Hungarian perspective, it is no longer surprising to find a news site has ties to the government, let alone one that spreads illiberal narratives with taxpayers’ money, like in the case of state media. However, this practice has not been widely adopted by Viktor Orbán’s international allies - and this is exactly why, from a democratic standpoint, the Polish attempts to do so at an international level seem daunting at a time when there is an ongoing war in the region.

On 31 October 2022, the Polish chancellery allocated 1.4 million PLN (roughly 300 thousand EUR) from the budget reserve for a leisure and health NGO called Action-Life Foundation to implement a public task titled Visegrád 24, a decision signed off by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki without further explanation.

The name might ring a bell, as for the past two years, social media profiles under the same name have gathered hundreds of thousands of followers by aggregating news from the Central Eastern European region, nowadays focused mostly on the war in Ukraine.

However, a sports NGO receiving state funds for a news site is only one of the many dubious chapters in Visegrád 24’s story.

The page claims to aggregate and curate news, politics, current affairs, history and culture from Central and Eastern Europe. It first appeared on Twitter in January 2020, gaining 324,000 followers to date, as well as an audience of 153,000 on TikTok and 7,000 on both Facebook and Instagram. However, unlike other regional sites like Visegrad Insight, which produces original, English-language analytical content, Visegrád 24 creates virtually no original material; it relies solely on re-sharing and re-posting information, and its website, [Visegrád24.org](#) serves only as a donation page for the unnamed authors.

Origin of Misinformation

It is especially interesting to see how they have earned a name for themselves. Posting fake news at the beginning of the war, such as Leonardo DiCaprio donating 10 million USD to Ukraine or PornHub blocking access to its page from Russia, but Visegrád 24 was reportedly the first international social media feed to publish a video of Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin dancing with her friends at a house party in August 2022.

With her country waiting for its accession to NATO, releasing such footage was logically thought to be in the interest of someone whose agenda would benefit from a scandal around Marin herself – thus the efforts to find the people behind Visegrád 24, which has been set up from Poland using a Polish phone number, rejuvenated.

The first query about Visegrád 24's operators came only a few months after its foundation in 2020, when, answering the question of Slovenian political scientist Mario Plešej, the page's runners described themselves as a group of friends interested in the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative, with many of them working in the news industry, universally representing a conservative worldview.

It took until the autumn of 2022 for Polish news sites TrueStory and OKO Press to track down the people running Visegrád 24. One of them is believed to be Polish journalist Adam Starzyński, who used to work at an English-language website run by the Polish right-wing TV channel, TV Republika, and who was also known for editing the ultra-conservative Twitter page @BasedPoland, which had a following of 150,000 before being banned from social media.

Starzyński is a key figure in what OKO Press refers to as the MEGA (Make Europe Great Again) movement, an informal group akin to the Donald Trump-led Make America Great Again campaign, seeking to influence audiences with xenophobic and anti-establishment narratives. Accordingly, BasedPoland was known for its anti-refugee content, as well as sharing praise for right-wing political leaders ranging from the Polish government to Jair Bolsonaro, Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán. Nowadays, Starzyński posts on social media under the name Adam Starski, sharing not only similar content as before but also materials produced by Visegrád 24, which seem to support two things: Ukraine and the European far-right.

Following Visegrád 24's posting the video of Sanna Marin, another man behind the page revealed himself. His name is Stefan Tompson: a British PR specialist, who has been working in Poland since 2014 and running a YouTube channel about Polish history in English since 2020. Despite also being linked to MEGA, Tompson's work was supported financially by the Polish National Film Fund – and some of his videos were posted by Visegrád 24 itself too.

In an interview with Rzeczpospolita in September 2022, Tompson admitted that he personally created Videgrad24's pages, which he runs with friends who also work in the social media industry. He denied the allegation that the aforementioned video of Sanna Marin first appeared on Visegrád 24; however, he added that he believes many support Finland's accession to NATO purely because "Sanna Marin is a beautiful woman," and he labelled her partying amidst geopolitical tension as "questionable".

Tompson also claimed that liberal views overshadow conservative perspectives on social media. Despite denouncing Viktor Orbán's pro-Russian stance on the war, he did emphasise – reminiscent of Orbán's beliefs – that the West has an identity crisis, and that spreading this point of view by no means coincides with Russian interests.

He ultimately said that Visegrád 24 has been operating with no funding whatsoever, but they will soon begin looking for investors so they can function as a full-fledged news organisation.

The plan may have succeeded; however, at the moment it might not be fair to call the Polish state's 1.4 million PLN worth of support for a project titled "Visegrád 24" an investment. Yet, the links seem to be there.

Exploiting Connections

The Action-Life Foundation, the organisation set to announce the funds allocated to Visegrád 24, was set up by a 33-year-old environmental engineer, Jakub Nowak in 2016. Since then, the NGO has won numerous state tenders for sports events as well as historical and patriotic activities, worth 1.9 million PLN (400,000 EUR) altogether.

The Polish news outlet Wirtualna Polska (WP) approached both the chancellery and the NGO regarding the allocation of funds for Visegrád 24. While the former did not provide the details of the agreement, nor the names of those who signed it as it has not been concluded, they did admit that the foundation's task would be to set up an English-language portal dedicated to culture, history and politics in the CEE and 3SI region, as well as fighting Russian disinformation — exactly what the Visegrád 24 social media accounts claim to do.

On the other hand, an unknown representative of Action-Life told WP that the NGO has been informed by the chancellery in November that the financial support plans have been withdrawn and refused to explain whether these funds would have been used for turning Visegrád24.org, which now only operates from donations, into Visegrád 24's own news site. And despite reading their message, Stefan Tompson did not reply to WP's request to clarify whether the government has become a donor to his project.

But ties between Visegrád 24 and the Polish government do not end here, albeit allocating public money for a leisure NGO to set up a news site would raise enough questions in the first place. Not only are Visegrád 24's TikTok and Instagram channels littered with quotes by Polish government figures in a positive context, but as OKO Press discovered, the page was cherished by right-wing politicians before it rose to prominence.

For example, MEP Patryk Jaki from Solidarna Polska (a conservative right-wing party which split from PiS in 2012) was one of the first to complain when Visegrád 24's operations were first blocked on Facebook, but Deputy Foreign Minister Szymon Szykowski vel Sęk also praised Visegrád 24's values. When asked about this, Stefan Tompson said he did start telling his circles in Warsaw about the page he was running and admitted sharing divisive remarks by politicians as well as tagging them in posts to gain more reach. Apparently, it worked.

The Greater Concern

While Visegrád 24's story alone could threaten the freedom of the press in Poland, the fact that it is an international outlet with a shady background in times of war makes it far more problematic.

Factual posts about the situation in Ukraine might mislead foreign audiences into believing that Visegrád 24 is a reliable source of information, whereas the overwhelming amount of posts on the war currently just overshadow its clear and admitted ideological nature.

In this sense, what we are seeing here is the soft manipulation of global opinion - similar to how Russian and other eastern propaganda operate in the West.

The Hungarian recipe

Still, it would be wrong to compare Visegrád 24 to the Hungarian propaganda machine operating within its borders. What is less known, however, is that Viktor Orbán's government has also made efforts to set up operations like Visegrád 24 - and failed in a spectacular fashion.

With a similar name, an English-language news agency called V4NA (Visegrad 4 News Agency) was set up by one of Orbán's well-known advisors, Árpád Habony in 2019. The company was registered in London, and the paperwork was completed by Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky, who now serves as the Defense Minister of Hungary.

In the beginning, V4NA provided newsroom materials for Hungarian pro-government outlets, which were almost exclusively centred around xenophobic themes targeting refugees. While both the Czech and the Slovakian governments protested the use of Visegrad in its name, the service continued to operate, charging 400 to 2000 euros per month for content distribution. Nowadays, its bilingual materials are free to access and no longer even resemble a news agency - it is clear-cut anti-refugee, anti-LGBTIQ+ and anti-West propaganda. And following an investigation by Átlátszó, it turns out they no longer operate from London but from the headquarters of the largest pro-government media conglomerate in Hungary.

Another example of the Hungarian government's ventures into the foreign news market came in 2014. It was an exclusively English-language news site about Hungarian affairs that was launched by a foundation called Friends of Hungary and chaired by a well-acclaimed scientist with close ties to the government, Szilveszter Vizi. The foundation, whose events are even attended by Viktor Orbán himself, claims its aim is "to provide value-based, yet non-partisan, information to the community of Hungary's friends and the general public on events and successes concerning Hungary and Hungarians living around the world."

While V4NA has a clear agenda, Hungary Today is harder to see for the naked eye. The site does not lie or induce hate directly but echoes the government's self-proclaimed victories (i.e., family-orientedness, welfare, stability, etc.). It only publishes non-conservative views in its Opinion section, does not report on the Hungarian opposition and civil society and refuses to contextualise news which, from a truly balanced standpoint, might be harmful to the government. For instance, at the end of last year, they wrote about Hungarian economic growth without mentioning that Hungary has the highest inflation rate in the European Union, and it praised the success of the Hungarian film industry in 2022, forgetting to mention that productions with a political agenda received enormous sums of money yet flopped miserably at all foreign awards.

And it is just the cherry on top that the only other English-language "news site" from Hungary is the one called About Hungary: a blog which follows every step the government takes, but the user must scroll to the very bottom and open the Impressum to find that what appears to be a news source is actually run by the Cabinet Office of, you guessed it, Viktor Orbán.

The Hungarian example demonstrates a more simplistic approach to capturing the media. Visegrád 24 tries to operate in a grey area and softly co-opt readers amongst the plethora of otherwise mostly credible information; in comparison, the pro-Orbán outlets aim for direct influence with little regard to reality.

While the Hungarian government's ventures into the foreign mediasphere have not gone well, the top-down capture of the press has been the cornerstone of Viktor Orbán's hybrid electoral autocracy.

Nevertheless, all evidence points towards the Polish model being more successful on an international level.

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P.S.

Visegrad

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