



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

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## Hungary - The Ukrainian Crisis in the Hungarian Media

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on Hungary.

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## Hungary - The Ukrainian Crisis in the Hungarian Media

In Hungary, the crisis in Ukraine, the protest movement on the Maidan in Kiev, the violent clashes between demonstrators and the police, and the collapse of President Yanukovich's government made the headlines as they did almost everywhere else in Europe and North America. Besides the regular reports in daily newspapers and on television, public media often produced more sophisticated analyses of the events by consulting experts. In this kind of analysis, in the form of either television debates or published essays, two types of commentator typically spoke.

### "Westernizers" and "Russophiles"

The first group consisted of experts on global and international security politics. Péter Tálas, the director of the Strategic Defence Research Centre at the National University of Public Services, was the most frequent guest on talk shows, followed by foreign affairs expert András Rácz, associate professor at the Institute of International and Political Studies at Péter Pázmány University, and László Póti, senior research fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. The second group of expert voices mainly comprised scholars, especially Russian and Eastern European specialists such as Zoltán Sz. Bíró, the most frequently interviewed expert on Russia, or Beáta Varga from the University of Szeged.

As in other European countries, the media discussion of the Russian military intervention in the Crimea can be divided into two phases: the months of the government crisis and demonstrations in the centre of Kiev and the subsequent international calamity prompted by Russian actions on the Crimean peninsula.

In Hungary, the first phase was generally conceived as a domestic crisis of governance resulting from the internal divisions in Ukrainian society and politics, particularly the divide between "Westernizers" and "Russophiles" or between "Ukrainian-speakers" and "ethnic Russians". Hungarian media tended to interpret the events in the context of the previous "orange revolution" and saw them as the next phase in a conflict between the oligarchic ruling elite and a popular opposition. The Maidan protest movement was thus viewed as an example of unstructured non-political violence, which was triggered by the brutal intervention of the police and then escalated by violent popular reactions. The participants in the movement were usually referred to using neutral terms such as "demonstrators". In general, mainstream Hungarian commentaries were reluctant to take sides and refused to talk about either a "revolution" or a "putsch".<sup>[1]</sup>

Following Russia's military intervention, the discussions became noticeably "globalized". Since then, the Ukrainian crisis has mainly been discussed in terms of geopolitics, territories and populations. In trying to make sense of the events in Ukraine, the media focus has turned to security politics and the question of what states and regions may be affected by the new situation and in what way. The Hungarian media shows a keen interest in diplomacy and often considers the main agents of international politics who are expected to be opposed to the Russian intervention, e.g. the USA, the European Union and China. These states and international alliance systems are conceived as having conflicting power interests when it comes to Russia: the United States' wish to maintain the global power equilibrium; the EU's interest in political and economic stability on its eastern edges; and China's shared frontier with Russia in Asia.<sup>[2]</sup>

Economics is another important issue addressed in the Hungarian discussion of Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> It is often stressed that Ukraine plays an important role in the trading of fossil fuels such as gas, particularly from

Russia, and that the Russian intervention may endanger the secure supply of such energy sources. Commentators have asked how international systems may be affected by the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>[4]</sup> Journalists and experts have also raised concerns with regard to how NATO and individual NATO member states may react to the Russian military intervention. Here, particular attention has been paid to Poland and the Baltic States, which share frontiers with Russia and, as it is usually highlighted, are wary of Russia due to their experience of occupations in their recent history.

Frequently, Ukraine is conceived as being subject to international constellations and global networking. Experts in Hungary often ask what the European Union or Russia can offer to Ukraine in terms of political integration and economic aid.<sup>[5]</sup> It is normally stressed that while Russia can provide Ukraine with relative political and economic security, its offer is no match for the EU's promise of economic modernisation. Against this background, the status of Ukraine is seen as the outcome of an East-West competition. Occasionally, even the status of Ukrainian statehood is interpreted as a matter of geopolitics. Several commentators are quick to point out that Ukraine emerged as a post-Soviet state with little or no legacy of an historical statehood. Some, like Péter Tálás in an interview on 3 March 2014 in the leading leftist daily *Népszabadság*<sup>[6]</sup>, even see Ukrainian statehood as a legitimate subject of international security considerations and argues that the "need" for a Ukrainian state may be debatable.

The issues of global security and Ukrainian ties with Russia situate the media discussions in the context of empire.<sup>[7]</sup> Concerns about Russian territorial expansion and possible spheres of influence and the role that various populations might play in these developments are the categories usually used to understand the rise and fall of empires. These categories clearly mobilize old-fashioned stereotypes of a "Russian Empire" that has, in essence, not changed. President Putin is portrayed as the direct heir to tsarist Russia whose legacy has been preserved by the quasi-Soviet empire. However, this perspective on international affairs also makes it easier to make sense of the role the European Union and the USA are playing in the crisis: both appear to be pursuing their familiar power politics in the European borderlands. (Notably, Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* was a major bestseller in Hungary around the year 1989.)

## Ukraine the foreign Land

Although it was (and still is) a major media story, the Ukrainian crisis seems to have very few direct links to Hungary. While the Maidan events were covered in great detail, most reports and analyses view "Ukraine" - the country and the society - as a remarkably abstract concept. Understood as part of a global security issue or explained in the context of cultural otherness (Russian and East European studies), Ukraine appears as a distant, alien, almost exotic land. It is often claimed that Ukraine is a country with an amorphous identity composed of strange people, including Russian-speaking Ukrainian nationalists, Russian-speaking Russians, and a Ukrainian-speaking "Western" population. Experts emphasize that Ukraine is basically a post-Soviet construction, an emergent nation.<sup>[8]</sup> Some commentators suggest that, given the fact that its political, ethnic and linguistic borders have shifted so often in its recent history, historical uncertainty is part and parcel of the Ukrainian nation. They seem to argue that without a stable historical statehood and borders, linguistic and ethnic continuities, and a coherent national identity, the state's legitimacy is weak. They speak as if, despite the existence of the Ukrainian state, the country and the nation are somehow not fully valid. Ukraine is thus included in a somewhat vague concept of Eastern Europe, which is not very difficult to identify with "Russia" as the empire of the East. In this way, Ukrainians are identified with the "global Russians".

The majority of Hungarians traditionally consider Eastern Europe as a geo-historical area that is fundamentally different to their own country, as a region that might be interesting to study, but is basically irrelevant to Hungary's international and domestic circumstances. Most Hungarian intellectuals, political elites and ordinary citizens see their country as part of a "Western" historical and political region, either in the form of a "modified Western Europe" called Central Europe or as part of mainstream European civilization. The impact of Eastern Europe and neighbouring national cultures is generally thought to be limited to political dependence or economic planning, whereas the study of entanglements, transfers and shared historical legacies remains the domain of scholarship.

It comes as no surprise that very few direct links have been drawn between Hungary's experience and the crisis in Ukraine. Unlike in Poland, Romania or the Baltic countries, Russia's military intervention has, for the most part, raised only economic concerns in Hungary.<sup>[9]</sup> Experts stress the need to reconsider Hungarian involvement in Russian investments and to review Russia's role as a reliable partner. (Interestingly enough, although most commentators understand the anxieties of Poland and the Baltic states in the face of Russian military might given their experience of Russian occupation in their recent past, nobody has recalled that Hungary herself might have had a similar experience in 1945 or 1956.)

The other direct link between Hungary and the Ukrainian crisis to which the Hungarian media points is the issue of minorities. Foreign Minister János Martonyi is anxious to protect the Hungarian minority in Western Ukraine.<sup>[10]</sup> Security experts warn that the way Russia uses and abuses the ethnic Russian population in Ukraine may have an impact, either positive or negative, on how the cultural and regional autonomy movements of Hungarian minority groups in Romania, Slovakia and Serbia will develop in the future.

Although radicals who see the Russian acquisition of the Crimea as a blueprint for Hungary in Western Ukraine are a minority voice in the public media,<sup>[11]</sup> their views are often expressed on various online forums and commenting sites.<sup>[12]</sup> (Right-wing extremist Jobbik party delegate Dávid Kovács, who was personally invited by Russian politicians to supervise the referendum in the Crimea, stated that the process completely conformed to international and democratic norms. Kovács himself graduated from the Institute of International Relations in Moscow in 1986. His views were similar to those of Mateusz Piskorski, a member of the Polish populist party Samoobrona.) Radical voices echo the then still underground right-wing extremists who in 1993 accused Prime Minister József Antall of failing to seize the opportunity to "re-acquisition" Slovakia after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.<sup>[13]</sup>

Even though political elites and mainstream public media, in line with the 28 March official communiqué of the Hungarian government, reject such a radical line as irresponsible and dangerous,<sup>[14]</sup> they reinforce the impression that the most important - perhaps the only direct - connection of Hungarians to the Ukrainian crisis is the Hungarian minority. After the escalation of violence in Kiev in late February, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán visited the Hungarian-Ukrainian border, while State Secretary Zsolt Németh talked about the special responsibility of Hungary towards Ukraine due to the Hungarian minority in the country. Hungarian media regularly publishes reports about the situation of Hungarian minority groups and also interviews minority leaders, which is a typical way of discussing neighbouring countries in Hungary. The protection of minority rights and cultural identities among ethnic Hungarians is truly an important issue, which no government in Hungary can avoid addressing. However, while the media focuses on the minority issues that link Hungary to Ukraine, it discusses the political troubles and atrocities there as distant events beyond the scope of ordinary Hungarians, showing little awareness of the existence of a major European country in Hungary's backyard. In general, the complexities of Ukrainian history and society are underexplored and the relevance for Hungary of broader developments in a huge

neighbouring country with a population of 48 million people is rarely clarified.

## Footnotes

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