



The image of China in the Hungarian Media

Dr. Tamás Matura, Ph.D.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The frequency of media coverage of certain China-related topics strongly correlates with their domestic political significance.
- The issues of the efficacy of Chinese vaccines, Fudan University, and Chinese credit and investment were the three most important China-related topics in 2021.
- All analysed topics were covered both by media outlets close to government and by independent and opposition sources.
- The image of China is largely determined by the logic of domestic political camps. The main reason for articles with a positive tone is the friendly China-policy of the Hungarian government, not the sympathy of the press itself.
- China does not have a strong and systemic influence on the Hungarian media.
- It is likely that the general perception of China among Hungarian public opinion has further polarised in 2021. Among pro-government voters, the positive media narrative may have boiled down to a more favourable image of China over the past year, while readers of independent and opposition media may see Beijing's role in a darker light.
- It is important to point out that based on the articles published in the relevant media, there was no trace of direct and systematic Chinese disinformation campaigns in 2021.

Introduction

The rapid economic, political and military development of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is one of the most divisive developments of recent decades that may alter the existing global order. It is now commonplace that the PRC is rising from a poor and underdeveloped country to one of the strongest economic powers in the world in a very short time. At the same time, although lagging behind its economic strength, China's media presence in the world is increasing, partly as a result of its conscious efforts and partly as a result of growing interest from the Western media. Although it is true that Budapest has a very cordial relationship with the East Asian country led by the Chinese Communist Party, as a member of the Western alliance system, it is important to monitor the image of China in the mainstream Hungarian media that has the power to influence public opinion. It is also worth looking at which topics related to China are more often presented by the media and which ones are neglected. Based on all this, the position and attitude towards China of the main Hungarian media outlets can be drawn. The significance of this is well illustrated by the fact that while the importance of Hungarian-Chinese relations used to enjoy the support of the whole political spectrum in the past decade, bilateral ties became a major campaign theme in the year before the general election in 2022 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the debates over the Fudan University.

Methodology

In the course of the research, the analytical team employed the online search engine of mainstream Hungarian media sources (index.hu, origo.hu, hvg.hu, 444.hu, 24.hu, telex.hu, Népszava, Magyar Nemzet, hirado.hu, Kisalföld), and reviewed all the news items published during 2021 that were in some way related to the most important topics concerning China in the analysed period. The following topics and keywords were first included in the research:

- The way China handled the pandemic
- The origin of the virus and the city of Wuhan
- The efficacy of Chinese vaccines
- Vaccine diplomacy (both Chinese and Hungarian)
- Mask diplomacy

- The case of Chinese ventilators
- Chinese loans and investments (including the Belgrade-Budapest railway)
- Fudan University
- 5G and Huawei

Out of the thousands of articles combed through by the research team, 1,030 items proved to be relevant because either one or more of the above-mentioned topics were covered in depth. However, articles in which a topic under study appeared, but only at the level of mention or enumeration, were omitted. The articles included in the final database were coded by the research team according to whether the tone of the article conveyed very negative, negative, neutral, positive, or very positive messages about China. It is important to note that during the coding, we did not examine the truthfulness of the article and the message conveyed, only what value judgment the particular news story may have influenced the reader in relation to China. Subsequently, we used statistical analysis to examine the direction in which a medium conveyed a message as a whole or on average, and which topics it dealt with more often and which topics were mentioned less frequently. Based on the preliminary results, two topics (mask diplomacy and the case of Chinese ventilators) were finally excluded from the analysis because they were addressed in only a negligible proportion of all articles (0.8 and 1.8%, respectively) during the study period.

Mr. Balázs Kiss has provided valuable help to the coding process of the research project.

Limitations

Like all scientific research, this project has its own methodological limitations. On the one hand, due to limited resources, it focuses only on mainstream and national media, i.e. it does not cover smaller publications, tabloids and social media, and only partially covers local media. At the same time, it can be reasonably assumed that the media involved in the research directly and indirectly determine the Hungarian public discourse, as the relevant outlets publish the very same news not only in their original appearance (either in print or online) but also on their social media platforms. The inclusion of *Kisalföld* daily in the examined media is intended to make up for the lack of detailed research in the local media, as it publishes almost

the same news as other members of the pro-government KESMA¹ group in every corner of the country.

Furthermore, the research does not cover television news because it is extremely difficult or even impossible to survey, as the texts of thousands of news items broadcast during the year are not available online.

Another inherent methodological problem in coding the tone of the articles was the individual hermeneutical buffer of the research team members, i.e. their interpretive framework arising from their own situation, which may have inadvertently influenced whether the message of a particular text was interpreted as a negative, neutral or positive. This uncertainty is something all similar research projects have to face. Although efforts have been made to automatise and neutralise the coding process using artificial intelligence and algorithms, previous experience has made it difficult to address the challenges posed by non-English texts and thus these methods were not applicable in our case. However, the concerns above have been largely allayed by the results of the research, as the attitudes of some media towards China do not contradict the scientific literature published previously.

Review of literature

Over the past four years, several studies examining the image of China in the Central European media have been carried out in the framework of international cooperation. The first major research, covering the period of 2010-2017, was conducted by Czech, Polish, Hungarian and Slovak researchers under the auspices of AMO in Prague.² Regarding the Hungarian situation, the final study found that the media discourse on China was influenced by the political attitude of the given media outlet, that is, news sources considered to be close to the government conveyed a more positive picture of the People's Republic of China while independent or anti-government sources painted a more negative image of China. One of the reasons for this may be that after the 2nd Orbán government came to power in 2010, it aimed to strengthen

¹ The Central European Press and Media Foundation was founded in 2018, to serve as a non-profit organization under which pro-Orbán government private media in Hungary was consolidated, as pro-government entrepreneurs handed over 476 media outlets to the Foundation.

² Karásková, I., Matura, T., Turcsányi, R. & Šimalčík, M. (2018). Central Europe for Sale: The Politics of China's Influence. AMO Policy Paper 2018 (3).

business relations with the PRC, but a few years later the political dimension started to dominate the agenda in parallel with the deterioration of relations between the EU and Budapest. The Hungarian government has made a number of political gestures towards Beijing, often in opposition to the EU, suggesting that the Prime Minister would forge political capital out of his close ties to Beijing vis-à-vis the EU. While in the pre-2010 period, Fidesz members presented the most anti-Chinese sentiments in their parliamentary speeches, after their election victory, their critical remarks essentially disappeared.³ All of this was naturally echoed in the tone of media close to the government (MTVA the Hungarian National Broadcasting company and the KESMA group), while independent and opposition affiliated media mostly opposed the government's position on China between 2010 and 2017.

Three years after the first study of the MapInfluenCE project described above, the research team once again asked key questions about how economic issues (Chinese investment) and security (China's involvement in building 5G networks) developed in the Visegrad countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) by the end of 2020. The results revealed that the press close to the government continued to report more positively about China than the opposition and independent media. However, the pro-government press rarely praised China itself. They emphasised the success of Hungarian foreign policy in establishing closer relations with China, and emphasised the importance of bilateral economic and political relations, i.e. the Hungarian policy towards China was portrayed in a positive light rather than the PRC itself.⁴ However, all this did not prevent the voters of each party from forming a strong opinion not only about the Hungarian government's policy towards China, but also about the PRC. According to opinion polls conducted in the second half of 2020 by the Sinophone project launched by the Czech Palacky University, China's perception in Hungary also runs along domestic political division lines, and dislike or sympathy for Beijing depends primarily on which party one votes for. While it might seem logical that left-wing voters have less resentment against the seemingly communist China, in fact China is favoured by Fidesz voters the most, with a strong overrepresentation in the group of those with a positive view of Beijing. The link between the positive narrative in government communication and in the pro-

³ Karásková, Ivana, Alžbeta Bajerová, and Tamás Matura. "Images of China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments". AMO Policy Paper2 (2019).

⁴ Karásková, Ivana, Alžbeta Bajerová, Tamás Matura and Matej Šimalčík. "Careful or careless? Debating Chinese investment and 5G technology in Central Europe". AMO Policy Paper (2021)

government media and the positive shift in the views of formerly strongly anti-communist pro-government voters on China seems clear.⁵

Another important and interesting aspect of the present research is that in previous years there was no sign of Chinese (dis)information or other systematic activity aimed at influencing public opinion in Hungary. Although in other EU member states China's so-called wolf warrior diplomacy created some rudimentary attempts to influence or even confuse local discourse⁶, it did not occur in Hungary. One of the probable reasons for this is that in the last decade the Hungarian government has become so friendly with Beijing that it has made it unnecessary for China to engage in any information campaigns in the country.

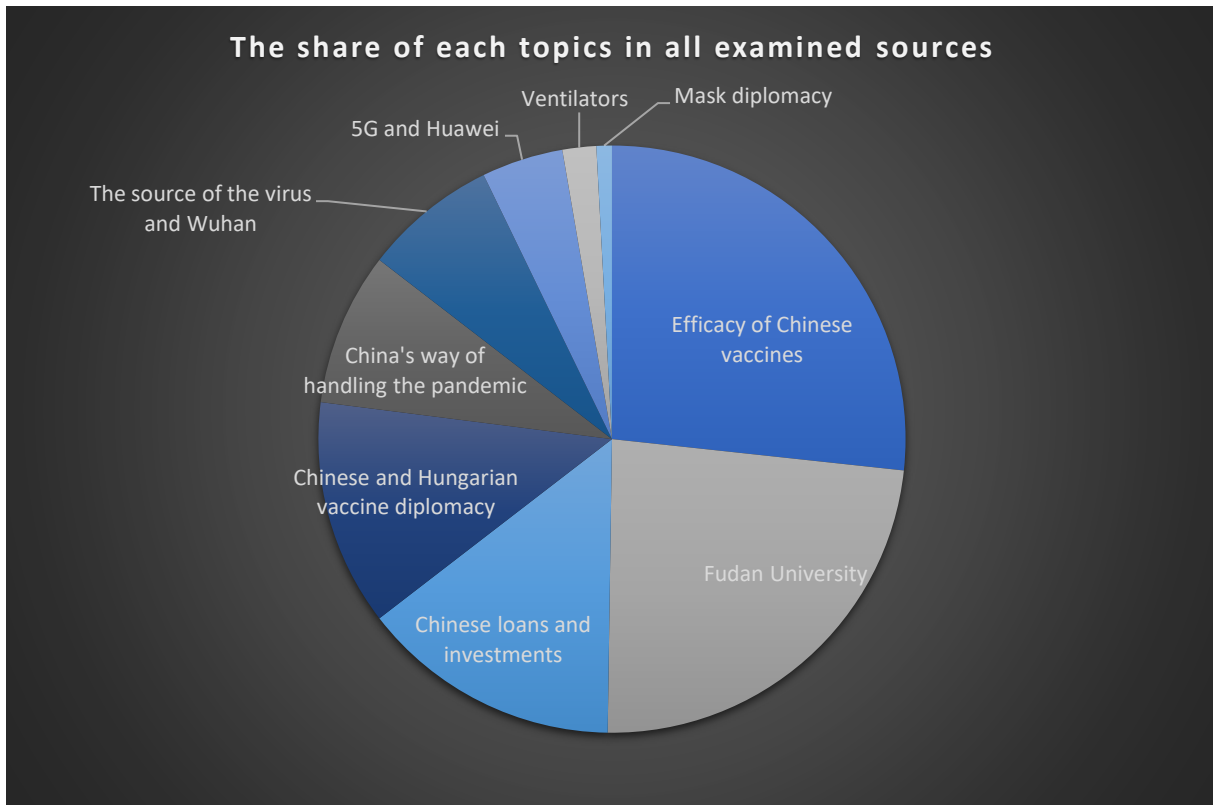
Main findings

It came as no surprise that the frequency of media coverage of certain China-related topics was strongly related to their domestic political significance. Thus, as shown in Figure 1, the highest proportions of Chinese vaccine efficacy (26.7%), Fudan University case (23.53%), and Chinese credit and investment (14.32%), appeared in the news in 2021. These three issues were the subject of the biggest domestic policy debate in the period under review, as doubts about the reliability of Chinese vaccines sparked a big storm in public opinion, as did the issue surrounding Fudan University in Budapest or Chinese credit and investment. These are followed by those topics where Hungarian domestic policy relevance is limited or negligible. While in the case of vaccine diplomacy (12.46%) a Hungarian thread can still be found, as the importation of Chinese vaccines into Hungary and their occasional further donation are included, the quality of Chinese pandemic management (8.44%) and the origin of the virus (7.35 %), the cases of 5G mobile technology and Huawei (4.49%) already had little domestic policy relevance, so lagged behind the above-mentioned topics in the field of news. (The topics of mask diplomacy and ventilators had almost completely lost their relevance by 2021, while in 2020 they were still serious issues).

⁵ Tamás Matura. „Ki szereti Kínát?”. Mэрce. 20 January 2021. and

⁶ Karásková, Ivana, Alicja Bachulska, Tamás Matura, Filip Šebok, Matej Šimalčík. “China's propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Central Europe”. AMO Briefing Paper (2020).

Figure 1.

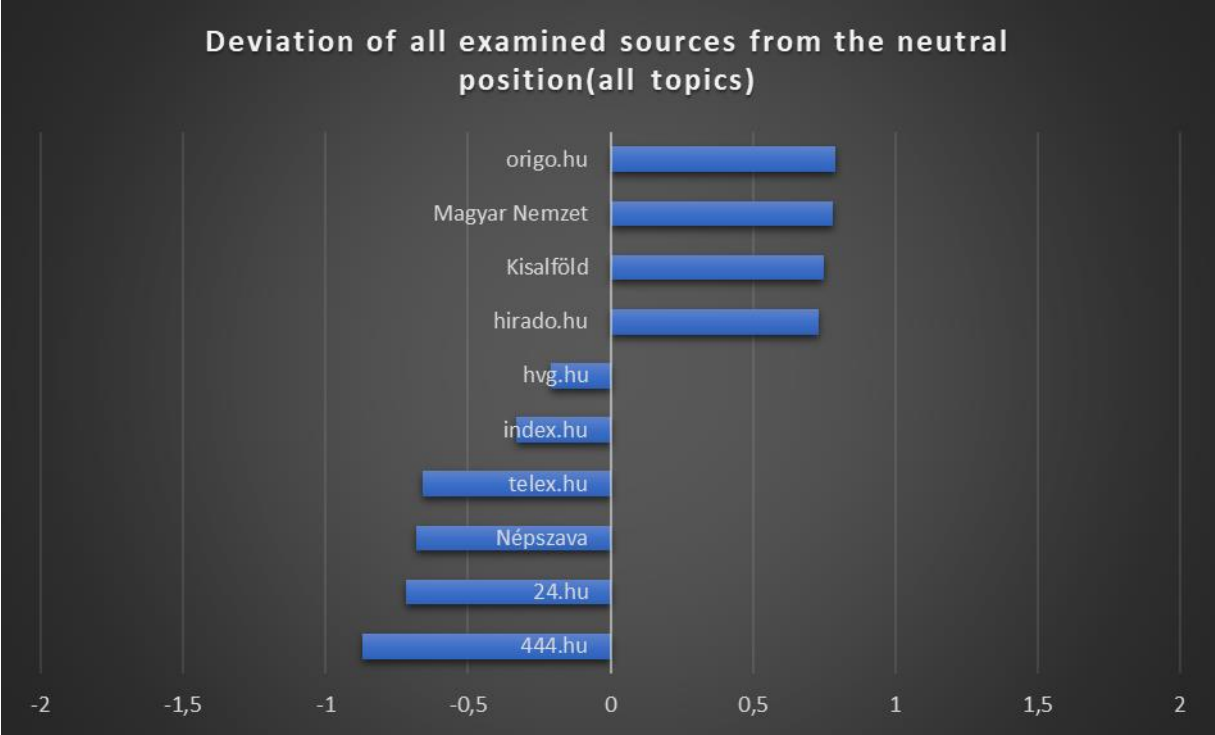


It is noteworthy that no pattern can be discovered in the field of topics that are more or less neglected by some media, that is, it cannot be said that media outlets closer to government or the independent and opposition press preferred certain topics or, on the contrary, ignored them. However, there are marked differences in the fact that a given news source has presented a topic in a more positive or rather negative form through its articles.

As can be seen in Figure 2, an average of all the examined topics in origo.hu, Magyar Nemzet, Kisalföld and hirado.hu (i.e. essentially the national broadcasting company) on the scale from -2 to + 2 presented significantly more positive messages than the neutral position. At the same time, hvg.hu, index.hu, telex.hu, Népszava, 24.hu and 444.hu mainly reported more negatively in matters related to China than the neutral position. The picture thus formed corresponds almost perfectly to the public opinion regarding the political affiliation of the examined media, i.e. the sources considered close to the government deviated to a positive direction, while the editorial offices known as independent or opposition deviated to the negative side of the spectrum. Only index.hu, which was already considered to be largely pro-government in 2021, stands out somewhat, but this is probably due to the fact that the declared goal after the

takeover of the editorial board of index.hu was to maintain its acceptance by opposition readers as well.

Figure 2.

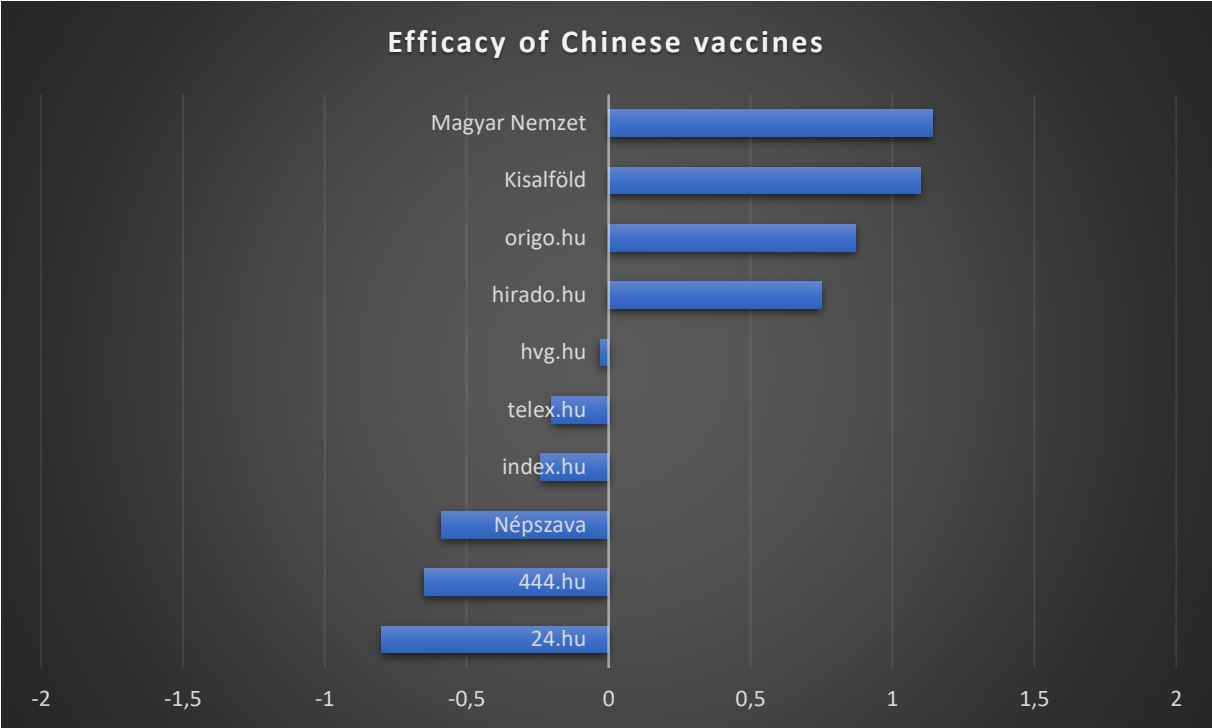


However, the same picture does not always emerge for each topic. Although the media outlets considered close to the ruling party have deviated positively from the neutral position in most cases, news about the origin of the virus and the city of Wuhan or the 5G/Huawei mostly painted a negative image of China in most media outlets. This can be explained by the fact that these two topics had minimal domestic political significance during 2021, had little relevance to Hungary, and for this reason the editorial offices mainly relied on the predominantly negative news of the international (Western) media.

The most frequently raised topic was the issue of the effectiveness of Chinese vaccines, which on the one hand literally appeared as a life-and-death issue in the media and on the other hand became the most politicised theme of the public discourse in Hungary. While the press, which is considered close to the government, focused on the reliability, proven technology, international prevalence of Chinese vaccines or presented the vaccination of Hungarian

celebrities, independent and opposition reports highlighted poor test results, incomplete documentation and negative international experiences. Overall, 32-37 per cent of all articles published in connection with the examined topics dealt with the effectiveness of vaccines in the case of origo.hu, Népszava, Magyar Nemzet and hirado.hu (with different tone, of course), while in the case of the other examined media outlets the proportion was slightly lower, but of course all the outlets dealt with the issue extensively.

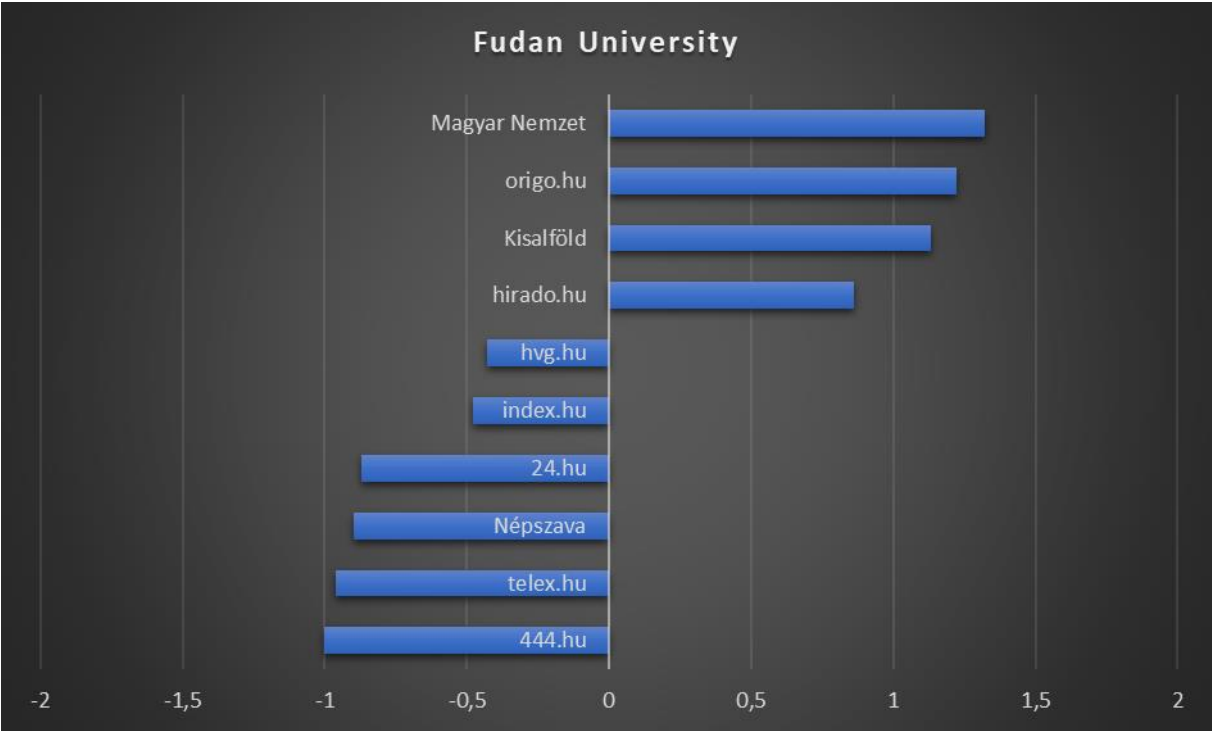
Figure 3.



The issue of the planned Budapest campus of Fudan University aroused almost as much media interest. According to the news, the Chinese university would be built by Chinese workers, financed by a Chinese loan, and would cost Hungarian taxpayers HUF 4-500 billion (USD 1,5 billion). According to critics, all this would mean that the Hungarian state would spend more on the Chinese university than on the annual support of the entire Hungarian higher education system, and in their view, this would give Beijing an opportunity to boost its ideological influence or even to increase its intelligence activities in Hungary. However, according to the supportive comments, it is one of the best universities in the world. Occasionally propagandistic articles have emphasised that “fears of the opposition” were baseless, as Fudan has partnered with a plethora of Western universities, and Barack Obama, Christine

Lagarde and even George Soros have spoken there. Telex.hu dealt with this topic extensively, devoting half of its articles relevant to this research to the case of Fudan, but we can also see a 37% share in the case of Népszava, while other media sources covered the topic in about 20 per cent of their articles. The amount of news about Fudan was greatly boosted by the fact that it was covered in the months leading up to the election, and for the first time, opposition politicians saw an opportunity to increase their support by criticising the Hungarian government’s China policy (or even China itself). Thus, in connection with Fudan, it can be said that for the first time the issue of China-Hungary relations became a serious domestic political topic.

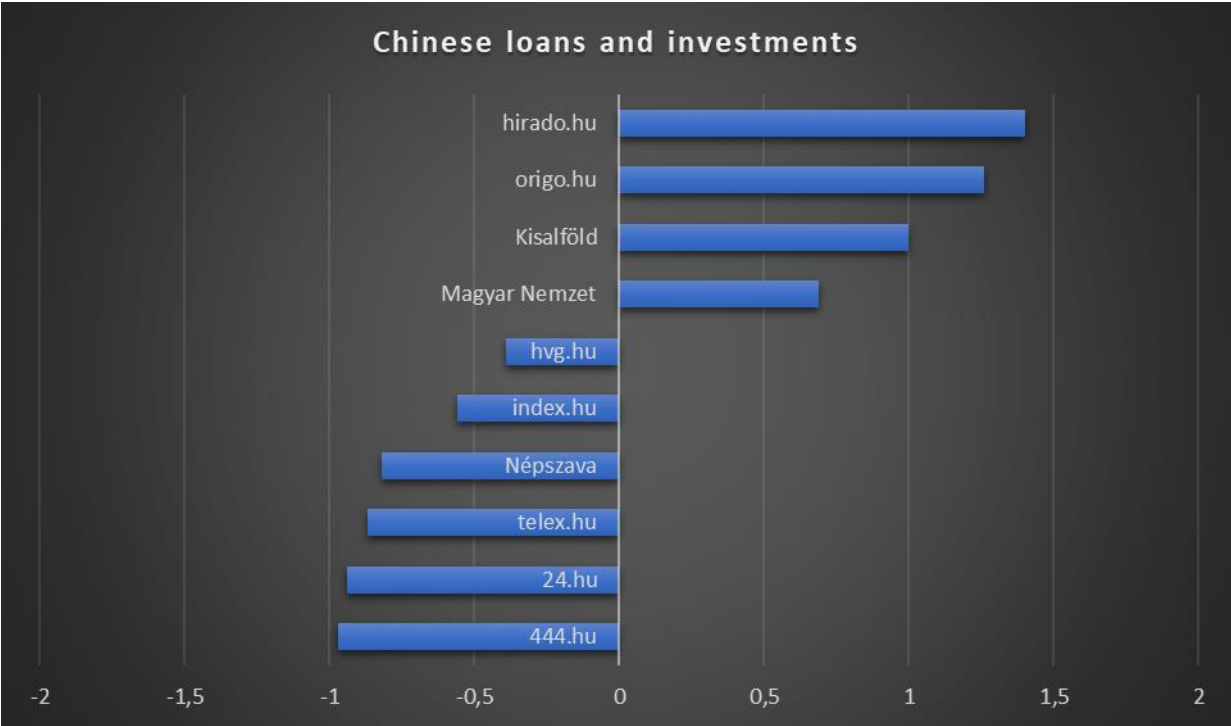
Figure 4.



Compared to the previously presented topics, the issue of Chinese loans and investments (including the Belgrade-Budapest railway line), received slightly less attention. Although the domestic political significance of this issue is clear, it was somewhat relegated to the background during the pandemic, as spectacular Chinese investments, including railway construction, slowed down in 2021. The image of the topic was determined by domestic politics, well-illustrated by the fact that it is not so much China itself that was the focus of

critical comments, but rather the legal and financial conditions of investments. In other words, the renovation of the Belgrade-Budapest railway, for example, was less criticised for the involvement from the Chinese side, but rather for the costs of the project, the lack of transparency and the secrecy of the Hungarian state, and for the high probability of corruption. All this, of course, indirectly casts a shadow on China itself in the eyes of the readers of the critical media outlets. On the other hand, according to the positive narrative, the modernised railway connection would make Hungary a logistics centre, strengthen its relations with Serbia, make Hungary an important station on the Silk Road, and constitutes a strategic move towards rising (Eur)Asia.

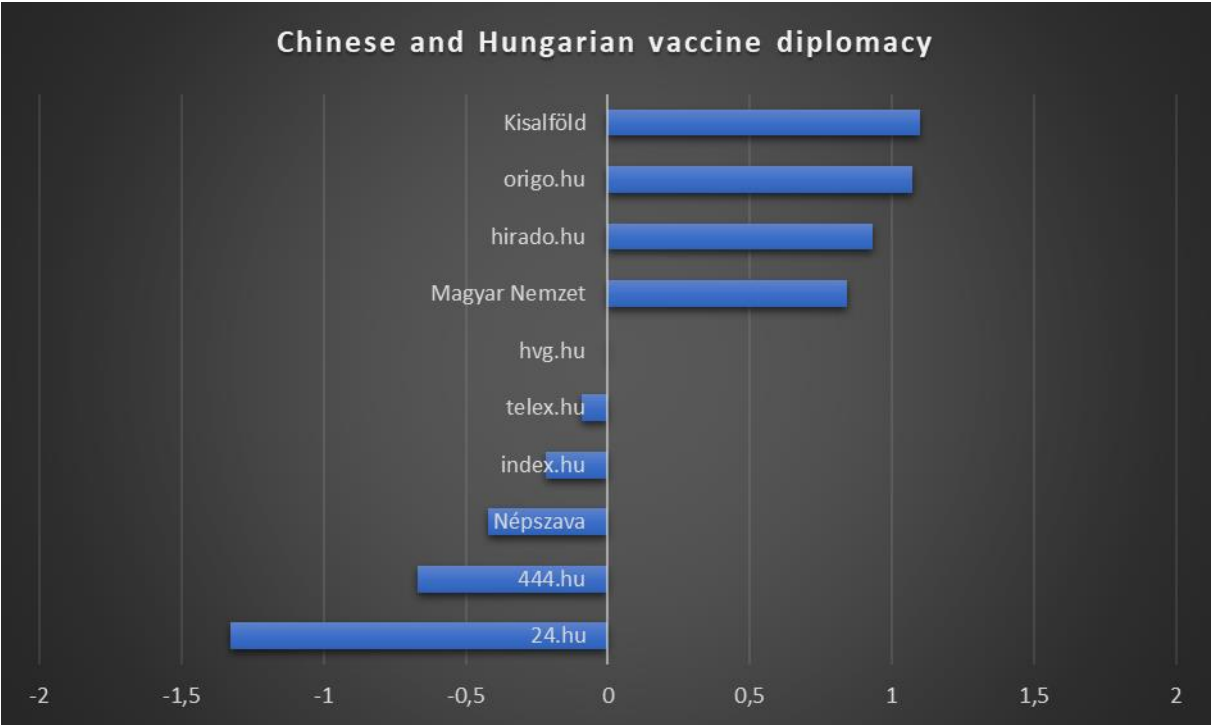
Figure 5.



Compared to the topic of the efficacy of Chinese vaccines, the vaccine diplomacy of China and Hungary received less attention, as only 12 per cent of all articles examined reflected upon the issue. The media sympathetic to the government mostly preferred news of vaccine shipments from China to Hungary, which emphasised the success of Hungarian foreign policy in this area and, of course, provided a number of photo opportunities for politicians receiving vaccines at the airport or announcing the departure and arrival of shipments. The critical media approached this topic from two directions. On the one hand, it reported on the importation of Chinese vaccines, but did not fail to mention the negative international

experiences with their effectiveness, and especially dealt with the special conditions of the Hungarian procurement, suppliers and the dramatically high price of Chinese vaccines. In addition, the role of Chinese vaccine diplomacy in the world emerged in a number of critical articles that often viewed Chinese vaccine diplomacy in other parts of the world, as an effort to gain influence or strengthen the business interests of Beijing.

Figure 6.

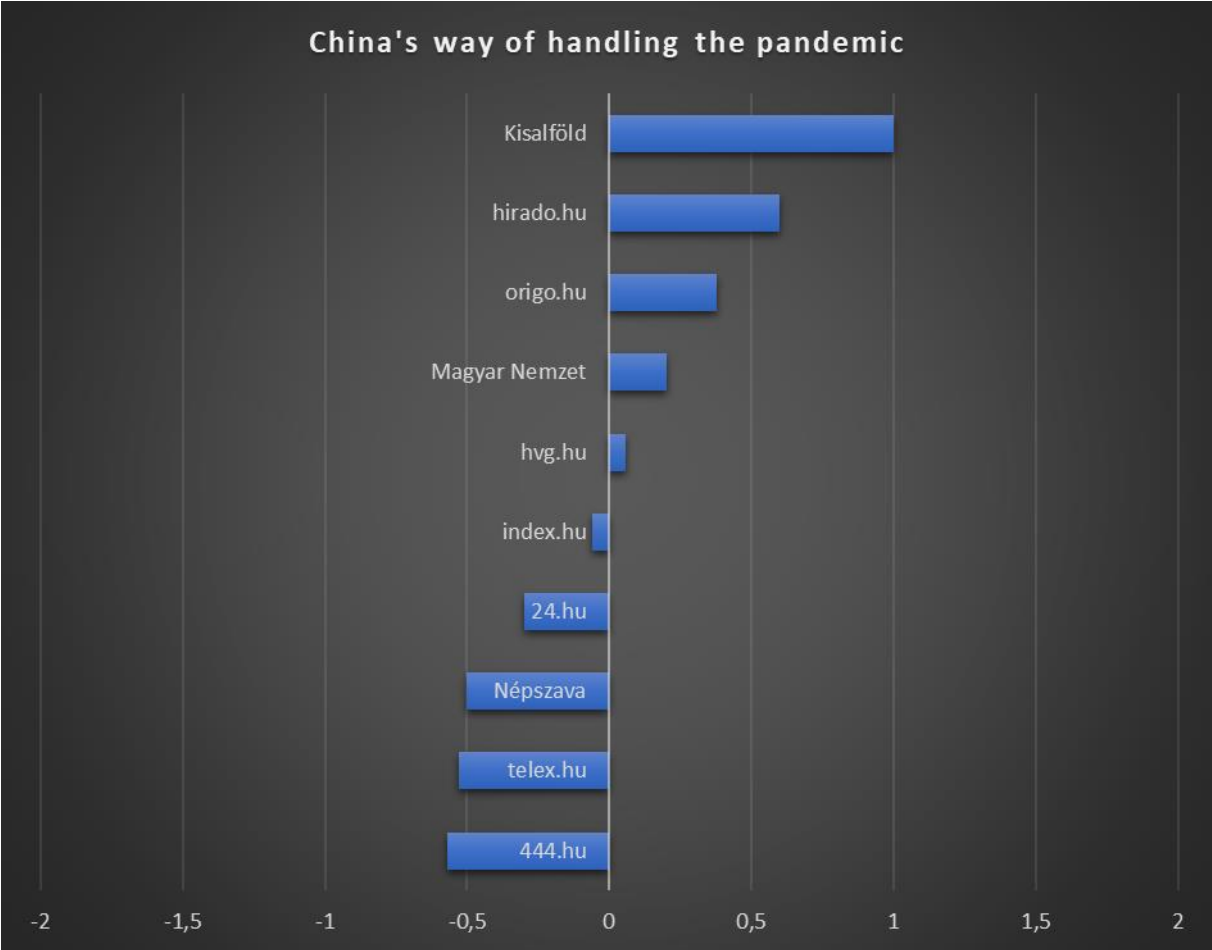


In the case of other topics, the Hungarian domestic political factor clearly decreases, so the usual pattern of pro- and anti-China news sources fades away, and the polarity between the tones of media outlets decreases.

As the quality and nature of Chinese pandemic management had little direct effect on Hungary, the strength of negative and positive fluctuations visibly decreased in the case of most media sources. Of course, the number of articles with a neutral position was also increased by the fact that China was able to present successes at this stage of the pandemic. A negligible number of infected people were found compared to the country’s population, and zero-covid policy seemed to work. All this, of course, was offset by the often-authoritarian nature of the instruments used by the Chinese state, and by the strictness of total lockdowns.

The news coverage often did not go into detail, nor did it highlight the positive or negative aspects of Chinese pandemic management, it was mostly limited to mere facts and figures, making them ill-suited to influencing readers' perceptions of China.

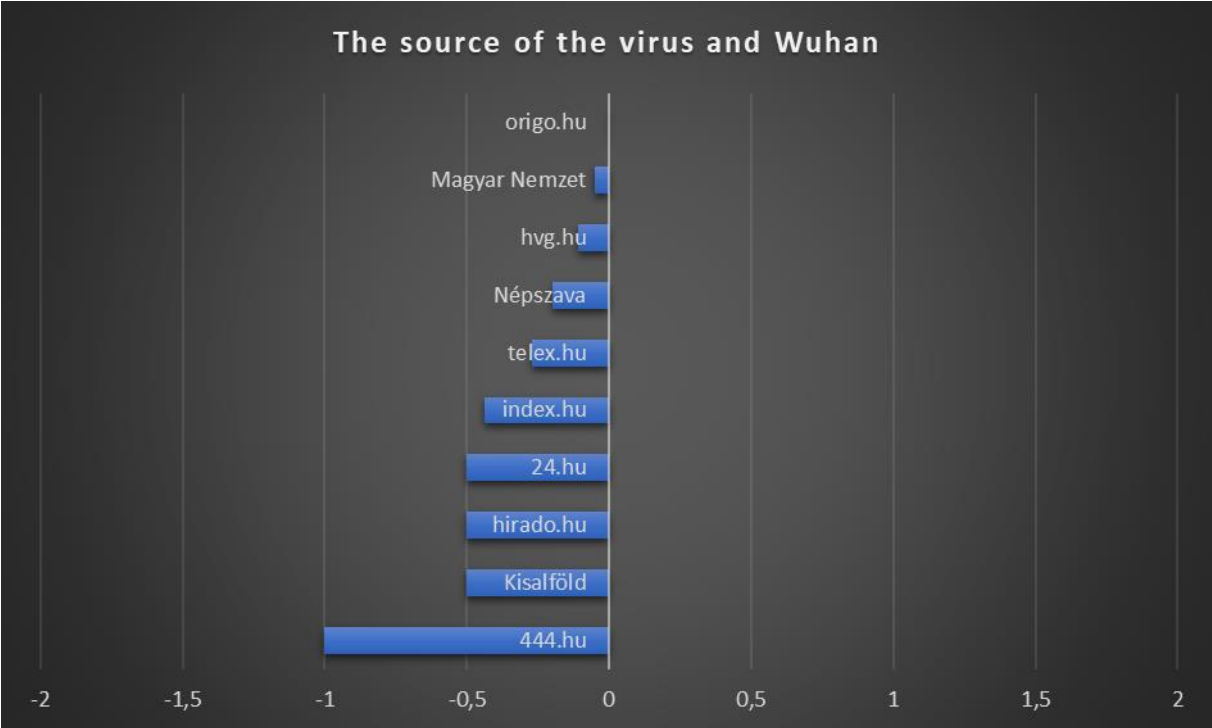
Figure 7.



Of all the topics examined, the origin of the virus and the case of the city of Wuhan stand out the most, as all the media examined here painted at most a neutral but rather a negative picture of China. The lack of positive news can be explained by the fact that the questions surrounding the origin of the virus obviously had no domestic political implications to Hungary. Actually, the presentation of the Chinese origin of the virus may have served the interests of the Hungarian government. The dominance of the negative press coverage may also have been boosted by the fact that the domestic press could only rely on foreign sources on this topic, and the Western media was mostly negative about China concerning the origin of COVID-19. Beijing's meddling into the WHO's investigation in Wuhan received particularly

unfavourable coverage, just like allegations (sometimes conspiracy theories) that the virus had escaped from a Chinese laboratory and that the PRC was trying to obstruct international investigations into its source. As far as we know, the COVID-19 pathogen did originate in Wuhan and the Chinese authorities were not really at the height of the situation in the first weeks of the outbreak of the pandemic, thus it would not have been easy to present positive articles on this topic.

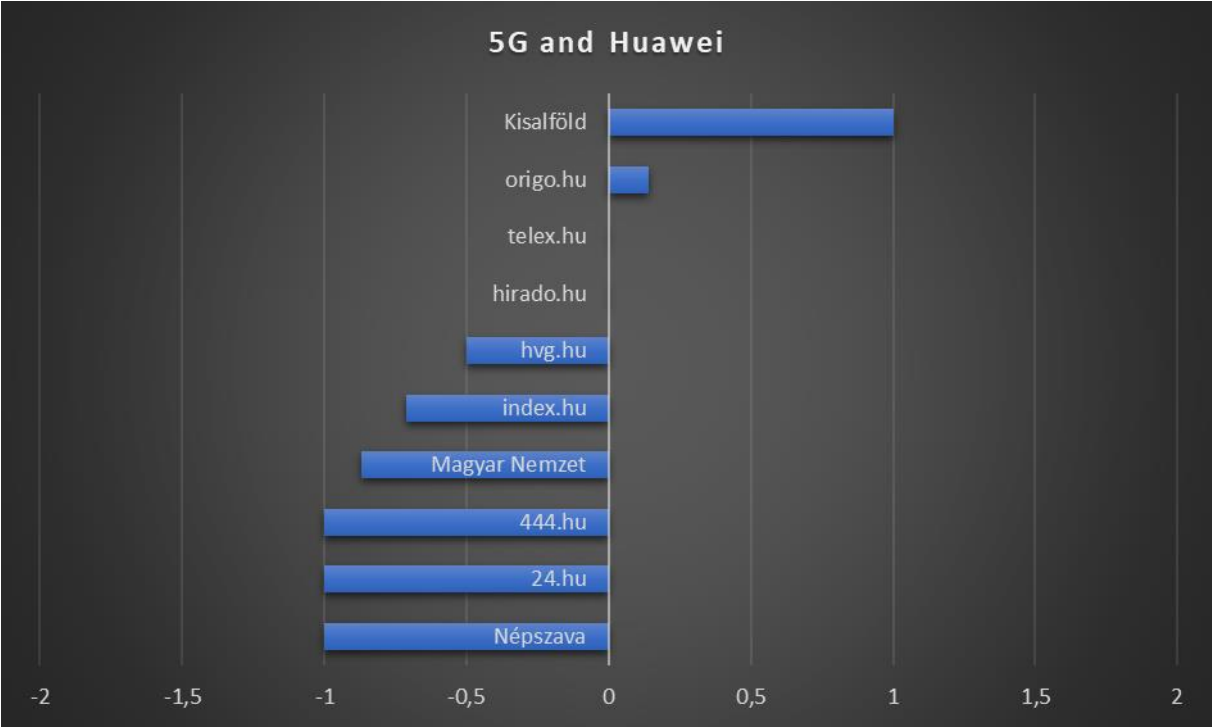
Figure 8.



Although the involvement of Chinese companies in the deployment of 5G telecommunications networks used to be an important topic in previous years, by 2021 the pandemic and the results of U.S. actions against Huawei sharply reduced press interest in the topic. Barely 4.5 per cent of all articles examined concerned this issue. Although there were articles that conveyed extremely positive messages by the Hungarian government about the importance of 5G networks or about Huawei's excellence, those articles did not dominate coverage even in the pro-government press. Articles with a negative tone mostly voiced concerns expressed by the United States that 5G is a critical infrastructure and Chinese companies and the Chinese state should not be allowed to participate in the development of such networks. Other critical

articles targeted Huawei's alleged wiretapping cases or the reservations by other countries against the Chinese company. However, it is important to stress that so few articles were published on this topic during the period under review that the results could not be considered authoritative in the long run.

Figure 9.



Conclusions

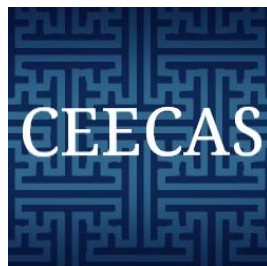
Conclusions from previous years' research remain largely valid. The position of the Hungarian media regarding China largely depends on how the given media outlet relates to the Hungarian government. That is, the image of China is largely determined by the logic of domestic political camps.

The People's Republic of China or its political and economic system is rarely praised even in the pro-government press, while opposition and independent sources are most critical of the Hungarian leadership's China policy, but often China itself gets into the crosshair. Based on all this, it can be stated that China does not have a strong and systemic influence on the

Hungarian media, the main reason for the articles with a positive tone is the friendly foreign policy of the Hungarian government, not the sympathy of the press itself. Consequently, in the case of a (although unlikely) change in the China policy of Hungary, the positive narrative about China may disappear altogether.

It is likely that China's general perception among Hungarian public opinion has further polarised. Among pro-government voters, the positive media narrative may have boiled down to a more favourable image of China over the past year, while readers of independent and opposition media may see Beijing's role in a darker light.

It is important to point out that based on the articles published in the relevant media, there is no trace of direct and systematic Chinese disinformation campaigns. Pro-government news outlets convey messages that are positive about the policies of the Hungarian government, while Chinese communications panels do not appear directly in such articles. However, even these articles may have a positive indirect effect on China's perception in Hungary.



The research was supported by the grant of the US Embassy in Budapest as part of a larger project titled 'Risky Business? Assessing Political Economic and Technological Risk Perceptions of Relations between the People's Republic of China and Hungary'. The project examines the relations between Hungary and China in four main areas. In addition to the media relations described in the present research report, the research team also examined the image of China in the Hungarian public, the image of China among the Hungarian political and economic elite, and China's involvement in Hungarian critical infrastructure.