„Nothing is true, everything is possible?"

How do fake news about migration spread, and that can be do against them? – These were the questions that the conference organised by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Political Capital explored in Kossuth Klub on 24 May 2017.

The conference was opened by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The keynote lecture was held by **Attila Juhász, director of Political Capital**, who introduced their main findings of their study that analyses the political impact of fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories related to migration. He pointed out that the surge in the popularity of fake news and fake sites about migration is attributable to three fundamental reasons: the actual strengthening of migratory processes; the strengthening of the public discourses around this topic; and a changed media landscape. (This latter primarily means that an increasing proportion of news consumers obtain information primarily and exclusively from social media, which operate under the rule that contents that the readers like rank higher.)

Political strategies were based on xenophobia, fake news and disinformation narratives in the past as well: these have gained more ground again in the Brexit referendum, the election campaign of President Trump in the US, or in the anti-refugee billboard campaign of the Hungarian government. The change in the discourse can be adequately measured by how the migration issue has been profiled mainly as a security policy issue and identity political matter, while the humanitarian and solidarity aspect, which was present initially, was pushed to the background. Policies could also not escape the changes in public perception: migration policies obviously shifted towards increased strictness. Attila Juhász also warned about the impact of Russian propaganda, which encroaches on existing European problems, amplifies them and thus tries to sharpen political conflicts.

Juhász quoted social research findings that confirmed the success of disinformation migration propaganda: while only 3 percent of Hungarians considered migration the most important problem in 2014, this rate was 34 percent in November 2015, and it was still at 30 percent one year after that when the migratory pressure on the Balkan route eased as a consequence of the EU-Turkey treaty. The director of PC also referenced a relevant research by Tárki when he mentioned that 53 percent of respondents had not wanted to let anyone enter the country early 2016, and the number of those who described themselves as friendly towards aliens had tended towards zero.

Researchers by Ipsos and Buzzfeed support the affinity of media consumers towards fake news and explanations: these say that fake news deceive minimum 75% of readers. (This rate stands even higher at 83% in case of people for whom social media are the primary news sources.) PC's own research shows that 45% of Hungarian readers tend to believe that reality is different from what the media show, and that the events in the world are in fact steered by hidden players in non-transparent ways (including 18% who are positively convinced that conspiracy theories are true).

Juhász also categorised the nature of fake news. Often, real data are displayed in a false context (e.g. the number of rape cases in Sweden did not increase as a consequence of a mass appearance of migrants but because every single incident is counted as a separate one also in case of continuous perpetration). Another typical case is when misleading data are communicated deliberately by mixing true or partially true information (confounding migrants with refugees). And purely invented contents are also common (e.g. Lisa case in Germany).

Dániel Fazekas, founder and managing director of Bakamo Social, a social media based market research start-up, also spoke at the conference. Bakamo Social has developed an award-winning software that can map and link similar patterns of social media discourses on the level of human meaning making. This means that it can deeper analyse and describe the public opinion and discourses related to a topic (or a brand, as the case may be) as they appear in social media. One of the latest projects of Bakamo Social included the monitoring of opinions that appeared on Facebook with regard to the elections in France, however, Fazekas' presentation also mentioned the reception of the 2015 refugee crisis on Facebook in Hungary.

Fazekas asserted that fake news represented only a small proportion of social media discourses. The problem, in his view, is that there are very many discourses that argue from a false narrative, and insert fake news into their interpretative frames as a justification of alternative realities. Fazekas thinks that this is in fact sincerely dangerous: frames based on conspiracy theories and alternative interpretations of reality, which permeate only 20-30% of conversations, but their impact is much wider. These cause societal insecurity, generate frustration, fears and anger – which is the ultimate purpose of fake news. Fazekas told that their method of screening the commenting and linking behaviour of users not only allowed them to monitor virulent topics but also the birth, patterns and spread of reactions.

Fazekas' presentation was followed by a panel discussion about the possible tools in acting against migration related fake news and false narratives. Participants, in addition to Fazekas, included **Gabriella Cseh, public policy director of Facebook for East-Central-Europe; Dániel Hegedűs, political scientist and guest lecturer of Freie Universität Berlin and research director of Freedom House**. The discussion was moderated by **Veszna Wessenauer, analyst at Political Capital**.

Gabriella Cseh pointed out that Facebook was aware of its responsibility, and they have considered the issue of fake news a lot over the past few years. They have launched several projects to manage the problem, which have been evolving dynamically according to feedback so far.

Cseh reported how it was essential for Facebook to have real ("authentic") users in real interactions on their site, and that users can feel safe both has regards the safety of their data, and in terms of being protected from attacks on the platform because of their opinions. Cseh also mentioned that Facebook did not consider itself a media, so that they don't analyse the factual truth of contents, but rather that there should be communication generated by real people with reactions to them from real people.

Cseh confirmed that they also had perceived how some people tried to influence the elections in France through social media: thirty thousand fake profiles have been removed from the site in this context. One of the methods is that they monitor materials that are well read but not shared extensively: many people click on fake news that are shared with eye-catching titles, but only few of them share these on because they recognise that the information is untrue. Facebook's algorithm ranks these news items lower. The same happens with fake news that users flag to them.

Facebook has compiled a guidance document with 10 points that allow users to recognise fake news more easily. They also have another development that offers related news items when a reader clicks on an article, so that there is the possibility to obtain information from several unrelated sources and different perspectives.

Berlin resident Dániel Hegedűs brought up a draft bill proposed in Germany about the regulation of social media as an example: according to the proposed bill submitted by the federal government early April, fake news could be removed immediately from social media that have more than two million users. Although Hegedűs sees meagre chances for the passing of the bill, and he considers it to be more of a campaign manoeuvre before the elections, we also know from a survey that Facebook was the slowest in Germany when it

came to removing posts that contain hate speech: only 35% of fake news were removed within a day, while the largest video sharing sites removed 90%.

Gabriella Cseh acknowledged that filtering the contents of 28 million users in German is no easy feat, and that it had been relatively difficult to find a partner in Germany (after the fact finding portal Correctiv they have a contract with Focus online). However, results in the newer round are much better in her view. She also pointed to the method used in The Netherlands: NGOs involved in checking the contents, on the basis of flags from the users, will confirm if the sharing of a post needs to be limited.

Dániel Fazekas, director and co-founder of Bakamo Social asserted that Facebook was in fact counter-interested in limiting contents: the user will click on what they like and agree with. If articles are offered that are in conflict with their opinion, or if the sharing and reading of certain contents are limited, then that will alienate them from the platform. Referring to the Guardian leak that had happened a few days before the conference, he told that there was clearly a massive chaos in the application of the Facebook's principles of moderation, and he mainly does not understand why it is a secret how Facebook filters contents, and why the entire process is not transparent.

Cseh said in defence that Facebook had always made it public among the conditions of use what contents were unacceptable, and the leak of the several hundred pages long moderation principles, that were meant for internal use, only show to everyone how serious Facebook is about this responsibility.

Dániel Hegedűs mentioned that there was an expansive but not very well read network of fake news, which are fed with news by Russian propaganda channels (Russia Today, Sputnik); however, Hegedűs thinks that excessive fears about the political impact of fake news are exaggerated in Europe. Disinformation warfare might have had importance during the Brexit referendum or the elections in the US, when the fight was really tough. However, Hegedűs thought that the work of fake news factories was rather counterproductive in the French elections. And if they swing into action in the elections in Germany, then Russians can expect substantial political backlash (for example a protracted review process of economic sanctions against them) in exchange for zero profit (AfD has been losing significant ground since last year). Although Hegedűs believes that feeding fake news sites is a relatively low cost tool for Russia (1000 – 1500 people can feed the whole world with fake news). He believes that they could exert any larger influence in Europe only if they acquired opinion leading publications through middlemen.

Dániel Fazekas agreed that classic fake news generate minimal share of the comment traffic, but he also thinks that the main source of danger is those 20-30 percent of the discourse that goes on in an alternative reality and feeds an unreal narrative – and which, in his view, appears as a serious societal problem. Even though Cseh thinks that politically motivated contents are more difficult to filter that click farms that propel the sales of a product with manipulative techniques, Fazekas believes that Facebook sees clearly from IP addresses which political contents come from where, and they would also be able to curtail this. Fazekas assumes that Facebook and similar social media channels should be regulated by sector level codes similar to what applies to telecommunication and electronic media companies.

Hegedűs thinks that the problem of fake news cannot be handled with state and political tools, and he also thinks that consumers adapt to changes on the media market. Normally, fake news can be amplified by marginal groups only – it is a much more serious challenge if the government media fabricates fake news.

After a short break, the event continued with a political panel that explored the responsibility of politics in the spread of fake news. Although the organisers also invited a representative of Fidesz to the discussion, however, the government party finally didn't delegate anyone to the debate. **Edit Zgut (Political Capital)** held a discussion with **Zsolt Molnár, MSZP, chair of the National Security Committee of the Parliament**, **Zsuzsanna Szelényi, Együtt, Member of Parliament**, and **Bernadett Szél, LMP, member of the National Security Committee of the Parliament**.

No bigger debate happened this time; the participants were in great agreement in blaming the government party in Hungary for failing to even put onto the agenda of the responsible parliamentary committees their proposals about researching and averting Russian influence in disinformation. They all mentioned the extent of passivity of the Orbán government in this issue; and Bernadett Szél pointed out how Viktor Orbán was playing a duplicitous game also in this field: he approved the political declaration about condemning the disinformation and propaganda campaigns of Russia at the congress of the European People's Party in Malta at the end of March, and called for joint action against the Kremlin's makings. However, Fidesz-KDNP voted against LMP's draft resolution, which was the exact copy of the declaration, already in the parliamentary committee in May.

Szelényi also mentioned that Hungary should join the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats established in Finland, which may foster effective international action against the exact national security threats applied by Russia (cyber-warfare, hacker attacks, setting up propaganda sites that spread fake news). However, the Orbán government refused this initiative, too.

Zsolt Molnár pointed out that while Russia can use the tools of information warfare without any civilian control, protection against the same is limited – quite correctly – by laws on the safety of personal data in Western democracies. Molnár thinks that it would be easy to protect ourselves, but the tools would stretch beyond the frames of the rule of law, which clearly cannot be our objective.

It was also Zsolt Molnár who highlighted the fact (and the others agree, too) that one of the most serious consequences of disinformation in society is that people become immune to real information as well. Thus, they no longer believe facts either. It is also for this reason alone that not only intelligence services but everybody shares the responsibility in acting against fake news and information warfare.