



The Swedish Society from A Hungarian Perspective – A Media Analysis



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Short Communication

In our study, we examined the media representation of Sweden in the most widely read Hungarian-language online press over the past 5 years through content analysis of articles. Our primary goal was not to analyze individual news items but rather to investigate which larger narratives of Hungarian online media stories about Sweden fit into different periods, that is, how the storytelling about individual news items fits into larger narratives.

The media analysis examines what image of Swedes emerges in the media in Hungary, and what picture of Sweden has been portrayed in the Hungarian-language written online press in recent years – and based on these, what can we learn about Sweden? The tool used for our media analysis is qualitative content analysis [1,2], where the analysis dimensions emerge during the analysis process following a grounded theory approach [3,4]. Coding is not done according to predetermined categories, but these categories develop during the analysis process, aided by Goffman's [5] framework theory, which has become increasingly prevalent in media analysis today [1].

The exact interval of the analyzed period is 01.09.2019-31.01.2024. The search was conducted only in Hungarian language, at the national level, and in online written press (thus excluding images, moving images, videos, audio recordings, and podcasts). A total of 54 websites were included in the analysis, which were examined in detail. The search terms were Swedes, Sweden, and Swedish society. During the analysis, we distinguished between independent and non-independent media platforms. We consider as independent any media entity free from state/governmental/corporate/organizational backgrounds (influence of interests). If there was no clear information about a given site, we examined through the imprint what ownership background it had.

The analysis aims to systematically uncover what image has emerged in Hungary about Swedes in the media, and what picture

has been painted of Sweden in the Hungarian-language written online press in recent times. The narratives identified here are significant for the overall perspective of our research, as we intend to examine later how these narratives are reflected in the thinking of Hungarians in Hungary and abroad.

In this writing, we do not have the opportunity to present the analysis in detail and its entirety. Summarizing the results, it can be said that in the Hungarian press in the past 5 years, the majority of articles related to Sweden deal with the following thematic categories: migration and its consequences; LGBTQ/gender issues; the state of democracy; the Russian-Ukrainian war and the question of Swedish NATO accession; the Covid situation and its handling; economic crisis: energy crisis, inflation.

Of course, these topics often cannot be sharply distinguished from each other, and in many articles, several of them appear simultaneously. In general, it can be observed that the content of the individual news sites overlaps, with the same topics appearing in the same periods; therefore, cross-referencing occurs multiple times, meaning one topic is discussed by all media from different perspectives. Regardless of the specific media platforms, the topics are the same, but their approaches are clearly different, leading to distinct narratives.

Based on the results, one of the most important lessons is that our systematic media analysis shows what can be fundamentally perceived even from "everyday" media consumption: it seems as if there are two Swedens: one showing apocalyptic conditions, practically an uninhabitable country, while the other is a much more pleasant place that can serve as an example for Hungary in many respects. The interpretation of this duality must clearly be sought along political fault lines; the narratives fundamentally differ between government and government-affiliated media versus press outlets associated with opposition parties or categorized as independent media. However, this duality does

not create a balanced situation, as the emergence of topics in the press is clearly generated by the current political intentions and guidelines of the government, and the other side(s) then try to somehow react to the thematization, produce counter-narratives, or perform “fact-checking”.

The most prominent topics since the beginning of the period we examined were migration and expressions related to LGBTQ communities. The “popularity” of these topics was only temporarily overshadowed by some current problem or issue (e.g., C-19, war in Ukraine). The powerful presence of the migration topic in the Hungarian press clearly follows the condemning narrative of migration in government policy; it serves as a counterpoint to the idyllic vision of the homogeneous nation-state, evaluating it against the decades-long processes in Sweden that run counter to this aspiration. Accordingly, the state/governmental or government-affiliated media intensively tries to link the topic of migration with increasing crime rates, heightened terror threats, or even Christian persecution or democracy crisis.

In addition to migration, a nearly constant topic in government or government-affiliated media is the attitude of Swedish society and politicians toward LGBTQ communities. Criticisms expressed from the Hungarian side suggest that in Sweden, there is a “gender madness” and the activities of the “LGBTQ lobby” are intertwined with pedophilia and the promotion of gender reassignment surgeries in this narrative.

In the aforementioned topics (migration, LGBTQ, democracy), there is no clear counter-narrative in the non-governmental media. Oppositional organs mostly just comment sarcastically on the strongest statements of government-party politicians or publicists on these topics.

In the independent press, on the other hand, much of the writing tends to aim for more objective information, being less passionate than media expressions associated with the government or opposition forces. Among the topics covered, this type of journalism striving for objectivity is most noticeable in articles related to the deteriorating crime situation associated with migration.

As mentioned earlier, tangible topics that shape everyday life for everyone also appear in the media representation of life in Sweden, such as COVID-19, energy crisis, and inflation. During Covid-19, the opposition press was fond of presenting Sweden’s pandemic management as an example compared to Hungary’s. In the independent media, however, even conflicting evaluations of the success of Sweden’s pandemic management have appeared.

Regarding the economy, it is evident that in certain periods, the media affiliated with the government has reported on the situation in Sweden in quite dramatic terms. This is particularly evident in how the Swedish government’s misguided economic policies have practically endangered the livelihoods of the population due to runaway inflation and energy prices.

Conclusion

In summary, based on the above, we can conclude that in the interpretation associated with the government, Sweden has become a fragmented, decadent, and uninhabitable society, for which migrants are partly responsible, while the native population is burdened with ideologies that are incapable of self-defense and are unlivable and suicidal. The opposition and independent press try to refute this picture in their expressions, mostly by just reacting to topics initiated by the government. However, an independent thematization or narrative building regarding Sweden cannot be demonstrated from their side.

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