

# Factual relativism and distrust of news sources among the Hungarian public

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The study was carried out in the framework of the [HDMO \(Hungarian Digital Media Observatory\) project](#). In the framework of the 30-month project, researchers from Political Capital and Mertek Media Monitor are investigating the spread of disinformation and the effectiveness of measures taken to combat it, journalists from the international news agency AFP and Lakmusz are fact-checking, Idea Foundation is providing training on media literacy, and the digital infrastructure of HDMO is provided by Epresspack. [As in the first phase](#), the project is co-funded by the European Commission. The HDMO consortium was selected by the European Commission [through an open call for tenders and is fully independent in all its activities](#).

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### Executive summary

**The nature of modern disinformation is that it seeks not to persuade but to confuse.** One of the most important parts of disinformation is the reinforcement of doubt about objective facts and reality. It is precisely this kind of doubt that is the hotbed for belief in fake news and conspiracy theories; and strongly present in domestic online and offline public discourse, as well as in public opinion. This phenomenon we will refer to as “factual relativism”. In this paper, we focus on how this phenomenon manifests in the Hungarian public opinion.

**In Hungarian society, factual relativism and distrust of news sources are relatively widespread.** Two-thirds (67%) of Hungarian respondents fully or partly agreed with the statement that “*Many things that are quoted in the press as facts are really just opinions*” and 76 per cent agreed with the statement that “*We cannot be sure about what is reported as fact is true*”. Strikingly, 59 per cent of the respondents also agreed with the statement “*Objective reality does not really exist, there are only different opinions*”.

Based on the aggregated answers to the five questions, respondents were divided into four groups. 36 per cent of the respondents were found to be strongly fact-relativist, and 38 per cent are moderately fact-relativist – which means that the overwhelming majority of Hungarians are strongly skeptical about the factuality of the information environment that surrounds them. Only 18 per cent firmly believe that facts can be known, and 8 per cent of the respondents could not be classified because they did not answer at least one item.

**Factual relativism is a hotbed of belief in conspiracy theories and fake news.** According to our data, factual relativism is higher among believers of conspiracy theories and geopolitical (e.g. Kremlin disinformation statements) and medical hoaxes (including conspiracy theories about vaccines). At the same time unrelated to age, education, and gender. Type of settlement makes some difference: people living in Budapest were less likely than those living elsewhere in the country to agree with relativist views of facts.

**Factual relativism is party-independent and strong across all voter bases.** Partisanship is typically a strong predictor of most opinions in Hungary, where tribal political cleavages are becoming deeper, and polarization is growing<sup>1</sup>. Critical views on facts and reality do not differ substantially among supporters of one party or another and thus do not reflect the political polarization that pervades domestic public opinion on most issues. Factual relativism is thus a phenomenon that cuts across socio-political fault lines, is widespread in Hungarian society and offers ample scope for manipulation.

**The current information environment explicitly reinforces doubt about the facts.** This phenomenon is clearly related to both the growing political divisions and propagandistic media environment dominated by government campaign narratives and to the nature of these crises – the COVID-19 pandemic, then Russia's invasion of Ukraine<sup>2</sup> – which have allowed the public to experience the confusion that conflicting news and opinions can cause.

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<sup>1</sup> Krekó, P. (2021). Populism in power: the tribal challenge. In Joseph Forgas (Ed.). *The psychology of populism* (pp. 240-257). Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> The survey was conducted before the attack of Hamas on Israel on 7 October 2023.

## Introduction: Factual relativism, information apocalypse and learned helplessness

Due to the growingly confusing media environment and the decline of the trust in the press and other knowledge-producing institutions we can observe a growing uncertainty about the existence of objective and verifiable facts.<sup>3</sup> This uncertainty is also linked to the idea that there may be logically mutually exclusive 'alternative facts' that can be equally valid on the same subject at the same time. Our study focuses on the growing doubt about the existence and knowability of facts (what others, including Asa Wikforss, call “factual relativism”), which we have been the first to investigate in the domestic public opinion. Although the study was carried out in the framework of the HDMO project, co-funded by the European Commission, the database was processed based on data from a public opinion survey that was conducted with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

The rise of factual relativism is linked to the overwhelming feeling that it is difficult to choose the most relevant or factually correct information in the face of the increasing and often contradictory information available. Recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and (following our poll) the Israel-Hamas war have only reinforced this feeling in public opinion. More and more data are amplifying the information noise and the information uncertainty and manipulability that comes with it. While classical propaganda aims to reduce the amount of information and narrow its sources, modern disinformation aims to confuse minds by overwhelming them with information.<sup>4</sup>

A typical reaction to this information overdose is to turn away from the news. According to research by the Reuters Institute in early 2023, 47 per cent of Hungarian respondents said they had avoided news about the war in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> Although this is not unique in Europe, it shows that the phenomenon of “information learned helplessness” (also known as “information apocalypse” or “reality apathy”<sup>6</sup>) is already having a real impact on news consumption.

Moreover, as trust in the traditional media weakens, there is a growing demand for the kind of news that reveals this hidden, covert truth – which is often more exciting, more compelling, and seemingly more coherent than reality. Fake news and conspiracy theories, promise to bring order to the chaos and reveal the “real” among the competing narratives “they” seek to hide from us. In terms of distrust in the media, Hungary is at the bottom of the league: only 25 per cent trust the media, the second lowest in a global sample of 46 countries surveyed by the Reuters Institute.<sup>7</sup> And research by the Mertek Media Monitor<sup>8</sup> shows that Hungarians are less and less likely to consider the Hungarian media objective, with almost half of pro-government voters even considering it biased in favor of the government side.

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<sup>3</sup> Pomerantsev, P. (2019). *This is not propaganda: Adventures in the war against reality*. PublicAffairs.

<sup>4</sup> Pomerantsev, P., & Weiss, M. (2014). *The menace of unreality: How the Kremlin weaponizes information, culture and money*. Interpreter

<sup>5</sup> [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2023.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Gregor, M., & Mlejnková, P. (Eds.). (2021). *Challenging online propaganda and disinformation in the 21st century*. Springer Nature.

<sup>7</sup> [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2023.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mertek-fuzetek\\_30.pdf](https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mertek-fuzetek_30.pdf)

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Although pro-government voters prefer to read the pro-government press and opposition voters prefer to read the independent press, there is also significant “cross-consumption”: 41 per cent of news consumers also read from or watch sources they do not consider credible<sup>9</sup> – which may also contribute to information uncertainty.

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<sup>9</sup> Mertek, 2023, p.19.

## Research methodology and research questions

In this paper, we seek to answer the question of how the phenomenon of factual relativism is represented in Hungarian public opinion. Our research questions are:

- How widespread are the views in the domestic public opinion that facts do not exist at all or cannot be known in the current situation?
- Who are more prone to this doubt?
- How does factual relativism, skepticism about the existence and accessibility of news and facts, relate to belief in conspiracy theories and fake news?

To better understand Hungarian society, a representative public opinion survey was conducted by Inspira Research between 24 March and 11 April 2023, with a sample of 1,000 people, representative of gender, age, education and type of settlement, interviewed face-to-face. The questionnaire was divided into four blocks:

- media consumption habits on public and political issues;
- susceptibility to disinformation narratives about Russian aggression against Ukraine;
- susceptibility to other disinformation narratives not related to the war;
- views on objective reality and factual relativism.

In this paper, we analyze the data from the last block and draw on some of the questions from other blocks.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The responses to the first three blocks are analyzed [in this study](#).

## Public opinion on the reliability of facts

### *The salience of factual relativism*

Five themes have been put together to capture the uncertainty about the existence and knowability of facts. As there was no published research in the literature from which we could draw on tested questions, the authors of this paper created additional questions beyond the one used by Peter Pomerantsev in an earlier poll<sup>11</sup>:

The exact wording of the introduction and questions:

I am going to read out statements that some people agree with, and others do not. Using the five-point scale, tell me to what extent you agree with each statement. 1 means you strongly disagree and 5 means you strongly agree. Of course, you can also use the intermediate grades.

1. The 'truth' is really the position one chooses for oneself.
2. Objective reality does not really exist, there are only different opinions.
3. Anyone who claims to know what the facts are is actually lying.
4. Many things that are quoted in the press as facts are really just opinions.
5. We cannot be sure about what is reported as fact is true.

A typical trend of our time, as mentioned in the introduction, is that the role of objective journalism is increasingly being replaced by the production of opinion pieces, from which news is less and less distinct. This tendency is also strongly reflected in domestic public opinion, with 67 per cent of the respondents (37% fully, 30% partly) agreeing with the statement that "*Many things that are quoted in the press as fact are really just opinions*". The percentage of those who disagreed was only 8 per cent.

Doubts about claims treated as fact in the public domain are very strong in Hungarian society. This is reflected in the fact that more than three-quarters of the respondents said, "*We cannot be sure about what is reported as fact is true*". Fifty-two per cent of the respondents very strongly agreed with this statement, while a further 24 per cent somewhat agreed. This also indicates a critically low level of trust in information sources, as shown by several previous studies, including research by the Mertek Media Monitor.

The "opinionated" interpretation of truth is shown by the fact that 60 per cent of respondents said that "*The 'truth' is really the position one chooses for oneself*" (34% strongly agreed, another 27% rather agreed).

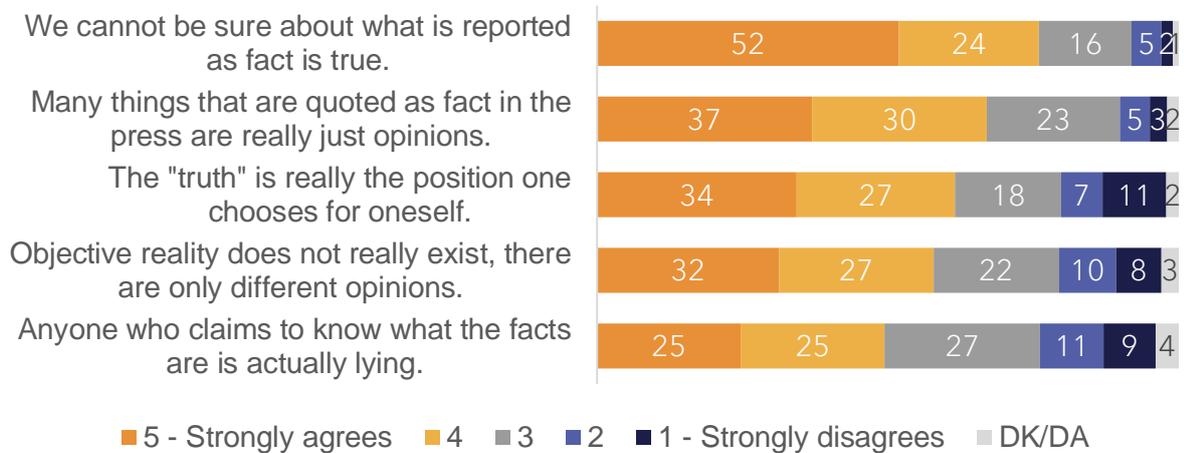
The following statement, which expresses stronger skepticism ("*Anyone who claims to know what the facts are is actually lying*"), was agreed by half of the respondents (25% strongly, another 25% somewhat).

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<sup>11</sup> „'Truth' is what somebody chooses to believe.”

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However, an even higher level of agreement was found for the most radical fact-relativist statement, “Objective reality does not really exist, there are only different opinions”. 59 per cent of the respondents agreed with this (32% strongly, 27% rather).<sup>12</sup>



1. Figure: Agreement with factual relativist statements in Hungary (% of total sample)

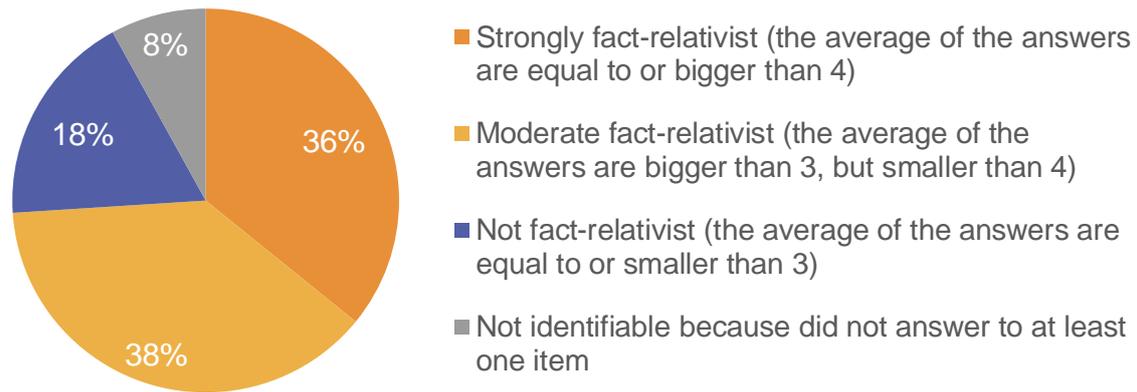
For further analysis, we created a scale by calculating the average of the responses to the five items.<sup>13</sup>

Based on the averages, we created four categories within the sample: (1) strongly fact-relativistic (average of responses greater than or equal to 4), (2) moderately fact-relativistic (average of responses greater than 3 but less than 4), (3) not fact-relativistic (average of responses less than or equal to 3), and (4) respondents who cannot be classified.

<sup>12</sup> This latter statement is in many ways consistent with the more strident claims of postmodern philosophical approaches to the relative nature of facts, which will be discussed in more detail in the next paper.

<sup>13</sup> The categorization was based on the average of the responses to the questions, ranging from 1 to 5, which also ranges from 1 to 5. A higher value means that the respondent identifies more strongly with skeptical views that relativize the facts. The percentage of missing answers was low, with 92% of respondents giving a valid answer to all questions. On the other hand, the internal consistency of the items reached an acceptable level (Cronbach's alpha of 0.704). The five items were, if not robustly, clustered into a single factor, explaining 47.2% of the variance. This also shows that the responses to the different questions are correlated (strongest pairwise correlation coefficient +0.521, weakest +0.145), thus justifying the combined treatment of factual relativism, perception of post-truth opinion-based public discourse and these different aspects of epistemic uncertainty.

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2. Figure: The ratio of groups according to their responses of the factual relativism scale

**Based on this data, 36 per cent of the respondents are strongly, and 38 per cent are moderately fact-relativist – more than three-quarters of Hungarian society are highly skeptical about their ability to acquire factual knowledge in today's information environment.** Of course, this widespread doubt may be based on a variety of experiences and opinions (general uncertainty about the facts, critical perceptions of the media situation, or experiences with contradictory information), which can be broken down in further analysis.

There are significantly fewer people (18%) who believe or trust in the existence of facts and reality over opinions. Only 8 per cent of respondents could not be categorized due to not answering one or more items.

### *Who are the most sceptical about the facts?*

In our research, susceptibility to factual relativism was found to be independent of most demographic variables (gender, age, education). Only by type of settlement we could find significant differences: **people living in Budapest were less likely than those living elsewhere in the country to agree with relativist views of facts.**

The same can be said for party preference. **Critical views about facts and reality do not differ substantially among supporters of the government vs. the opposition parties,** and there is therefore no political polarisation in this question – which is highly atypical, as polarisation is otherwise practically omnipresent in the Hungarian public opinion<sup>14</sup>.

However, stronger factual relativism does predict higher levels general belief in conspiracy theories. The more one is critical of facts, of objective reality, the more one believes it to be true that events that seem to be independent of each other are often the result of coordinated clandestine activities, or that there are secret organisations that have a major influence on political decisions. There was a significant positive correlation between factual relativism and Conspiracy Mentality.

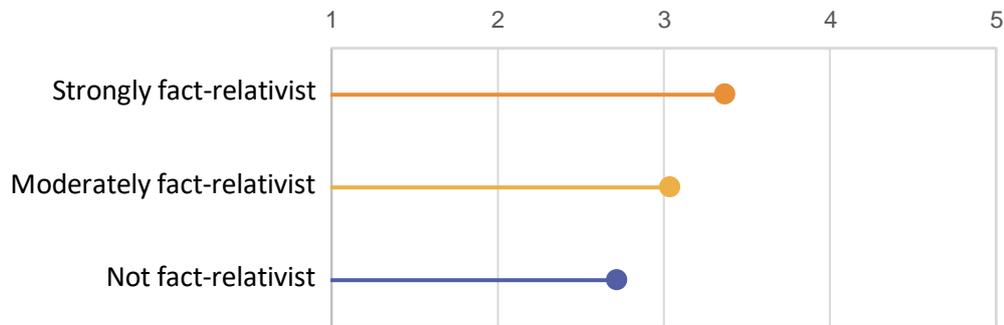
<sup>14</sup> Vegetti, F. (2019). The political nature of ideological polarization: The case of Hungary. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 78-96.

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3. Figure: Susceptibility to Conspiracy Mentality in different groups (averages on a scale from 1: immune to 5: highly susceptible<sup>15</sup>)

Fact relativism was also found to make us more susceptible to disinformation about the war. Those with a high degree of factual relativism are more likely to believe allegations that have already been refuted by fact-checkers<sup>16</sup>, such as that Ukraine had previously committed genocide against the Russian minority living on its territory, or that a significant part of Ukraine's territory was owned by the US.



4. Figure: Susceptibility to Kremlin-related disinformation statements in the fact-relativism groups (averages on a scale from 1: immune to 5: very susceptible<sup>17</sup>)

**Factual relativism is associated not only with a susceptibility to disinformation about the war but also with a distrust of news and information about Russian aggression against**

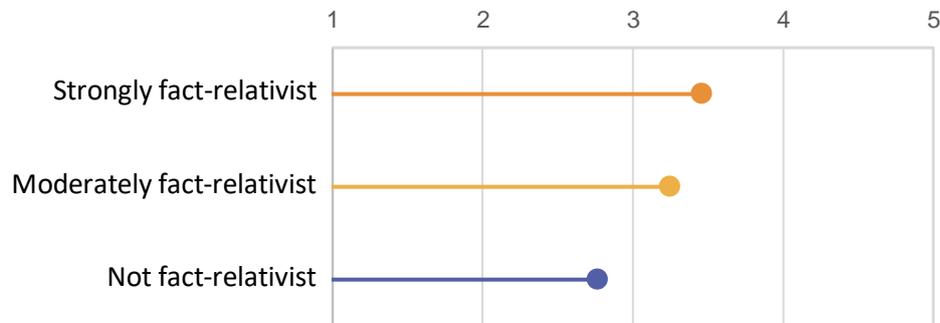
<sup>15</sup> Susceptibility to conspiracy theories was measured by two items. The formulation of the questions was: 'I am going to read out statements that some people think are true and some people think are not. Please use the five-point scale to tell me how true you think each statement is. 1 means that it is definitely not true and 5 means that it is definitely true. You can, of course, use the intermediate grades. (1) "Events that appear to be unrelated are often the result of covert activities." (2) "There are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions." Susceptibility was assessed using a scale constructed from the two questions using simple averaging. The Pearson-correlation between the Fact Relativism Scale and the Conspiracy Mentality Scale is +0.429.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.lakmusz.hu/putyin-5-eros-allitasa-ukrajnarol/>

<sup>17</sup> Susceptibility to disinformation about the war was measured by four items. The question was asked. Please use the five-point scale to tell me how true you think each statement is. A 1 means it is definitely not true and a 5 means it is definitely true. Of course, you can also use the intermediate grades. (1) "Ukraine has previously committed genocide against the Russian minority living on its territory." (2) "Ukraine's leadership is made up of Nazis and espouses Nazi ideology." (3) "Because of Ukrainian nationalists, the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia is in constant danger of losing its life." (4) "A significant part of Ukraine's territory is American-owned." Susceptibility was assessed using a simple averaging scale of the four questions. The correlation between the factual relativism scale and the war disinformation scale is +0.284.

**Ukraine.** Those who believe that everyone in the war is lying and spreading fake news identify strongly with the relativist view of the facts.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, fact relativism makes them susceptible not only to geopolitical disinformation but also to less politicised health disinformation.<sup>19</sup> The more strongly fact-relativist persons tend to believe the claim – refuted<sup>20</sup> in Lakmusz’s fact-checking – that Pfizer’s internal documents also prove that many people died from their coronavirus vaccine. The spread of this disinformation was discussed in our previous study.<sup>21</sup>



5. Figure: The susceptibility to disinformation about the Pfizer vaccine within the fact-relativism-scale groups (based on the on perception of truth of statement of the statement: "Pfizer internal documents also show that many people have died from their coronavirus vaccine."; averages on a scale of 1: definitely not true to 5: definitely true)

In sum, it is clear that the acceptance of fact relativising views increases susceptibility to both conspiracies and Russian disinformation, as well as health fake news.

<sup>18</sup> The Pearson-correlation between the factual relativism scale and the war-related item is +0.392.

<sup>19</sup> The Pearson-correlation between the fact-relativism scale and the vaccination item is +0.243.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.lakmusz.hu/reg-megcafalt-hamis-informaciokat-terjeszt-a-pfizer-vakcinarol-a-cof-szovivoje/>

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.hdmo.eu/download?id=2073&pn=hdmo\\_pc-study\\_1\\_eng\\_20230619-pdf](https://www.hdmo.eu/download?id=2073&pn=hdmo_pc-study_1_eng_20230619-pdf)

## Appendix

Distribution of responses to the factual relativism scale items in the total sample (%)<sup>22</sup>.

	5 – Strongly agrees	4	3	2	1 – Strongly disagrees	DK/DA	Average (1-5)
We cannot be sure about what is reported as fact is true.	52	24	16	5	2	1	4,22
Many things that are quoted as fact in the press are really just opinions.	37	30	23	5	3	2	3,97
The "truth" is really the position one chooses for oneself.	34	27	18	7	11	2	3,67
Objective reality does not really exist, there are only different opinions.	32	27	22	10	8	3	3,67
Anyone who claims to know what the facts are is actually lying.	25	25	27	11	9	4	3,47

Correlation between the fact-relativism scale and the scales and items examined in the study.

	Pearson correlation coefficient
<b>Conspiracy Mentality Scale</b> (Average of 2 items, range of values 1-5)	+0,429
<b>War-related disinformation scale</b> (Average of 4 items, range of values 1-5)	+0,284
<b>In this war everyone lies and spreads disinformation</b> (1 item, range of values 1-5)	+0,392
<b>Internal Pfizer documents also show that many people have died because of their coronavirus vaccine</b> (1 item, range of values 1-5)	+0,243

<sup>22</sup> Due to rounding, the sum of the values does not necessarily equal 100 percent.