

The Houdini Ads

How political advertisements slip through Google's and Meta's filtering systems

***POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF – EARLY EXPERIENCES FROM
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GOOGLE'S AND META'S "ZERO
POLITICAL AD" POLICY***

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Table of contents

Table of contents	2
Introduction.....	3
Key findings and lessons	3
Key lessons.....	5
1. Context: TTPA vs. Google's and Meta's decision to ban political advertising	6
2. A clear result of the political advertising ban: most ads are gone	6
3. Political ads still appear on both platforms.....	6
3.1 Political messaging in government ads	6
3.2 Ads by government-organized proxy organizations	8
Case study: the surge of NEM's political video ads in the post-TTPA era	9
3.3 Recruiting members to online groups.....	10
4. Google has reclassified previous political ads into different categories	11
Annex: Definition of political advertising according to the TTPA.....	14

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Authors: Bulcsú Hunyadi, Péter Krekó, Róbert László, Csaba Molnár

Introduction

Even before the EU's Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising regulation (TTPA) came into effect, both Google and Meta had suspended political advertising¹ on their platforms – at least officially. In practice, however, the transition has been far from smooth. Political ads, including seemingly harmless cartoons and hardcore deepfakes placed by Hungarian advertisers, are still running on both tech giants' platforms. Often, they are simply (re)classified in other categories such as Business, Finance, Autos or Internet.

Hungary will hold its most consequential parliamentary elections in sixteen years in the spring of 2026. Reaching unaffiliated voters is crucial for all political forces, but compensating for the loss of political advertising poses a particular challenge for the ruling party that has [championed political advertising in Hungary and the EU](#) - for example, Fidesz spent more on social media advertising both on Google and Meta in the 2024 EP-elections than any other political party within the EU. In the first nine months of this year, before the ban took effect, government-affiliated actors — including government agencies, Fidesz politicians, government-organized media, and proxy organizations — paid for 87% of the HUF 4.1 billion (around EUR 10.6 million) spent on Google and Meta ads in Hungary. Opposition parties spent only a small amount in comparison. Even though this year was an election year in Czechia, spending on political advertisements in Hungary was eight times as much than in the [Czech Republic](#). As we discovered in an earlier [research project](#), the large volume of political advertisements [flooded](#) social media with sponsored disinformation and hostile narratives.

Below, we summarize the main lessons on how Hungarian political advertisers reacted to the ban and the anomalies that the platforms' policy enforcement processes created following the ban.

Key findings and lessons

- **A clear effect of the ban on political advertising: Most ads have disappeared,** and most major political advertisers either no longer have active ads or their ads are far less political.
- **Yet, there are serious leaks in Google's and Meta's filtering systems that allow political ads to slip through** and reach a significant number of users.
- **In Hungary, pro-government actors remain the primary source of ads with political content, some of which appear to deliberately test Google's and Meta's filtering systems.** These actors seem to design ads to evade the platforms' filters with notable success.

¹ For the definition of political advertising, see the Annex or page 13 of the Guidelines to support the implementation of Regulation (EU) 2024/900 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising. https://commission.europa.eu/document/0e5bb552-72f5-434e-8778-ed95e2955f25_en

- **Evasion tactic example 1:** The Hungarian government has run nearly identical ads against its political opponents on Google, Meta and street billboards with one key difference: the Meta ad omits the face of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to avoid depicting any political figure.
- **Evasion tactic example 2:** The most notable “tester” is the National Resistance Movement (NEM), a government-organized proxy organization that has primarily used AI-generated video ads, including an animated video resembling a children's cartoon and deepfakes discrediting the main opposition leader.
- Some NEM videos with political content appeared to millions of Facebook users in a country with fewer than 10 million citizens. However, a video that was not advertised made it only to 28,000 views, demonstrating the decisive role of promotion in generating massive viewership.
- **Google’s and Meta’s filtering system**, which should identify political content and prevent it from being advertised, **has serious shortcomings and significant loopholes**. The main issues include the following.
 - **Misclassification:** Both platforms often fail to recognize political content. While Meta simply allows these to be advertised, Google categorizes ads with political content under a broad range of non-political topical labels such as Arts and Entertainment, Autos and Vehicles, Beauty and Personal Care, Business and Industrial, Computer and Consumer Electronics, Finance, and Internet and Telecom.
 - **Inconsistent categorization:** Not only does Google miscategorize political ads, but it also often categorizes identical ads with political content under different labels.
 - **Reclassification:** Google has reclassified some ads that were originally categorized as “Political” under different, non-political labels before the self-imposed ban on ads. However, the reasons and criteria for the reclassification remain unclear. The result is similar to cases of misclassification and inconsistent categorization: ads that were originally labeled as “Political” often end up under non-political labels, while similar or identical ads are labeled differently.
 - **Inconsistent review process:** While Meta reviews active ads, it often leaves similar or identical versions of the same ads intact while removing others as “Political”. This leads to a cacophony where some versions of the same video ad that were flagged as political are removed within an hour, while others are running remain for several more days.

- **AI-generated videos pose a serious challenge to Meta's filtering mechanism.** In its current state, Meta's filters seem unable to reliably handle video content, especially AI-generated material.
- **These anomalies raise serious concerns about the reliability of the filtering systems.** This applies not only to pre-TTPA ads but also currently active ones.
- There are several possible explanations for the anomalies and permeability of Google's and Meta's ad filters. These issues may be caused by a **combination of algorithmic imperfections, a lack of willingness to address "creative forms" of paid political advertisements, and limited investment in technical development and human oversight**, particularly in small markets with unique languages, such as Hungary.
- Unless tech platforms take their self-imposed ban policy more seriously and invest more in their technical and human oversight and enforcement capabilities, **there is a real risk that the Hungarian election campaign and other upcoming campaigns will be influenced by a significant number of illicit political ads – including deepfakes – with a huge reach.**

KEY LESSONS

In general, the Hungarian experiences offer three key lessons.

- They reveal the complexity and challenges of regulating political ads and enforcing compliance.
- They provide useful benchmarks for disinformation actors in other EU countries on how to evade the political ad ban of major platforms.
- Along with previous studies, they suggest that **with sufficient resources and an extensive, strategic and diversified presence on social media, political actors can adapt to the "post-advertisement" era with a fourfold strategy**: 1) circumventing ad bans and "slipping through" with advertisements; 2) [Stimulating organic engagement](#) via supporters and activists, as well as pseudo-organic engagement via [inauthentic online behaviors](#), such as astroturfing, and bot and troll armies; 3) Using even more divisive language and hyperbolic messaging; 4) [Using \(and buying\) loyal influencers](#) to convey the message.

However, the extent to which the broader political and social context matters for **profiting from evading ad bans on platforms has yet to be analyzed**. Such tricks may remain below the radar and pay off politically in an [informational autocracy](#) like Hungary, where the ruling party dominates the traditional information sphere. However, they could backfire in a functioning democracy with a diverse and balanced information sphere by triggering public resistance and aversion.

1. Context: TTPA vs. Google's and Meta's decision to ban political advertising

On 10 October 2025, the EU [regulation](#) on political advertising – the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising (Regulation (EU) 2024/900, TTPA) – entered into force. This legislation sets out detailed transparency and targeting requirements for service providers. Rather than introducing these complex regulations, both Meta and Google voluntarily banned all political advertising from their platforms across the EU².

Nevertheless, to comply with their decision and, indirectly, with the TTPA (to remain exempt from it), they must categorize advertisements to determine which ones are political and which ones are not. Political advertisements are banned, while non-political ones are allowed to run on their platforms.

2. A clear result of the political advertising ban: most ads are gone

The ban on political advertising has had one clear effect: most major political advertisers currently have no active ads – or, if they do, the ads are far less political.

A significant number of former high-spending advertisers, including political parties, politicians, and proxy actors, have disappeared from the advertising landscape altogether. Clearly, the bans imposed by Meta and Google have reduced the overall volume of ads on these platforms - albeit not to zero.

3. Political ads still appear on both platforms

Although most political ads and former major political advertisers have disappeared, ads with overtly political content and objectives continue to appear on these platforms. They have slipped through the filtering systems of Google and Meta. Below, we show some examples.

3.1 POLITICAL MESSAGING IN GOVERNMENT ADS

The [Prime Minister's Cabinet Office](#) and the [Government of Hungary](#) launched several political ads on Google and Meta, respectively. These ads go well beyond merely informing citizens, yet the platforms did not block them. The ads urge users to participate in the so-called National Consultation by filling out a propaganda-laden questionnaire sent by the government to every household. For the past fifteen years, the government has used these pseudo-public opinion surveys, or push polls, to refer to the false consent they reflect and update its voter databases. This September, the prime minister himself admitted it when [referred](#) to the National Consultation as a mobilization tool for Fidesz.

² Google [announced](#) in November 2024 that it would phase out political advertising in the EU before the TTPA took effect. This process was completed on 22 September 2025. Meta made the same [decision](#) on 25 July 2025, and disabled political ad services on 6 October. TikTok [banned](#) political advertising in 2019.

As the examples below show, these ads portray the Hungarian government's political opponents as puppets of the West and Brussels, accusing them of planning to raise taxes if they come to power. **The Meta ads appear to have been tactically designed to evade the platforms' filtering systems by omitting Ursula von der Leyen's face, which is featured on the street billboards.**



Both ads date from October 2025. Left image: An ad by the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office that Google approved and classified as non-political, despite its political content. The text reads: "The West's puppets want to raise taxes." Right image: An ad by the Government of Hungary that Meta approved and classified as non-political, despite its similarly political content. The text reads: "They want to impose tax increases on us from abroad."



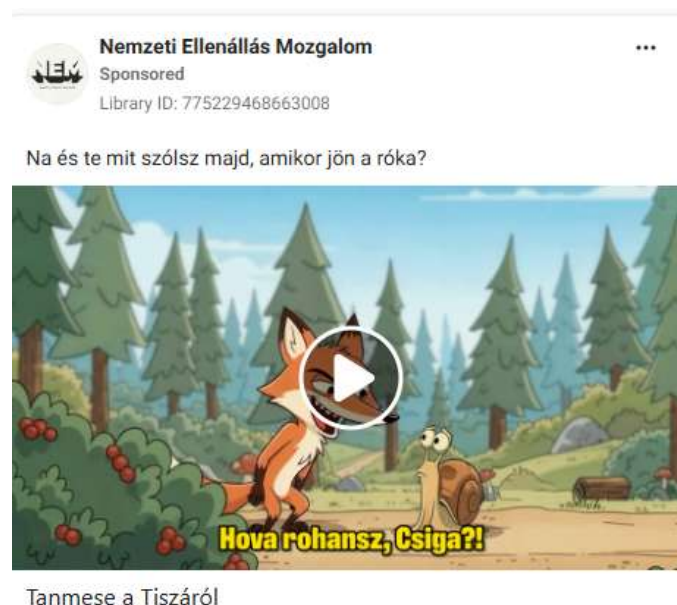
For comparison: A billboard promoting the National Consultation, photographed in October, on a residential building. The text reads: "Brussels' puppets want to raise taxes. Protest the tax increase!"
Source: HVG, @ Túry Gergely

3.2 ADS BY GOVERNMENT-ORGANIZED PROXY ORGANIZATIONS

Government-organized proxy organizations are actively testing Meta's and Google's filtering systems – with notable success. Quite a few of their ads are slipping through.

The most notable “tester” is the National Resistance Movement (NEM). Founded in November 2024, it quickly became one of the largest advertisers in Hungary. Its success has continued even after the political ad ban: several of its ads with clear political messages have passed Meta's filters.

A remarkable example of circumventing the no-ad policy is an animation styled like a children's cartoon that is probably AI-generated. It is clearly designed to test the platforms' filtering mechanisms. On the surface, it appears to be a harmless fairy tale, but anyone living in Hungary would immediately recognize the characters' real-life political counterparts and the underlying, very obvious political message³. This cartoon-style advertisement conveys a political message, albeit implicitly, and proved to be a successful tool to deceive Meta's filtering system. The ad highlights the difficulty of regulating political advertisement and enforcing compliance. Therefore, **it could serve as an example for other actors in the EU to circumvent the ad ban.**



A political ad disguised as a cartoon by the National Resistance Movement (NEM), a government-organized proxy organization. In the cartoon, a fox warns a group of animals living on the banks of the Tisza River about an alleged upcoming property tax that will supposedly be imposed by the opposition TISZA party and explains how much it will cost them.

³ Under the guise of a "property inspection," a fox warns several animals about an alleged upcoming property tax and how much it will cost them. Ultimately, the animals conclude that "it wasn't a good idea to move to the banks of the Tisza". For context: the Tisza is Hungary's second-biggest river and the name of the main opposition party. The property inspection is a clear reference to the government's [baseless and denied claim](#) that the TISZA party would raise taxes if elected in the 2026 general election.

But cartoons are not the only tools to circumvent ad regulations. **Deepfakes are also flooding the social media space in the “post-advertisement” era.** Some of these synthetic videos with crystal-clear political content and no pretense of being non-political are spreading through advertisements as well. A notable example is a professional, vivid, AI-generated video portraying Péter Magyar, the leader of the opposition TISZA Party, in a straitjacket, speaking incoherently like a madman. The video, which was advertised in six versions, suggests that Magyar has a psychopathic personality. These videos are once again advertised by the National Resistance Movement, a Fidesz proxy.



An AI-generated political ad by the government-organized proxy organization National Resistance Movement, aimed at discrediting opposition leader Péter Magyar

CASE STUDY: THE SURGE OF NEM'S POLITICAL VIDEO ADS IN THE POST-TTPA ERA

We reviewed and analyzed each of National Resistance Movement's ads to determine their success in bypassing Meta's political filter, their reach, and the amount of money spent on them. We selected NEM because its AI-generated videos exemplify the potential of AI to create misleading and hostile political messages. Preliminary research also showed that NEM's ads had significant reach, reaching millions of Hungarian Facebook users.

Since 10 October 2025, NEM has [launched](#) 76 ads promoting 8 AI-generated videos on Facebook. By 4 December 2025, Meta had reviewed and removed 47 of the ads (62%). NEM spent at least HUF 24.7 million (EUR 64,300) promoting these 47 ads.⁴ For comparison, the

⁴ Meta only discloses spending data for ads it categorized as political. However, instead of exact figures, Meta only provides spending ranges. The lowest range includes spending under HUF 100 (EUR 0.25), while the highest starts at HUF one million (EUR 2,600) and is open-ended. Of the 47 ads reviewed, 21 fell into the highest spending category, meaning at least HUF one million (EUR 2,600) was spent on each.

largest opposition party, TISZA, spent only about twice this amount on political advertising on Meta's platforms during the first nine months of 2025.

However, the removal came too late – the 47 ads had already achieved significant reach by then. Of the eight videos, the most popular was viewed 28 million times; two had 10 million views; and the others had 9.1 million, 7.4 million, 6.8 million, 1.6 million, and 121,000 views, respectively. One of NEM's AI-generated videos, which was not advertised, received only 28,000 views. This demonstrates that ads that slip through the filter play a decisive role in generating massive viewership.

Meta's political content filter shows clear weaknesses. **For example, of the 47 ads taken down, ten had been active for less than an hour, while eighteen had been running for at least a week.** The inconsistency of the review process is further illustrated by one video that was advertised in 30 versions, differing only in their target audience. Twenty-one of them were later categorized as political, while nine were not, for reasons that remain unclear. The timing of the takedowns was also uneven - some versions were removed within an hour, while others stayed up for several days.

On 28 November, NEM published its latest AI-generated smear campaign video, depicting Péter Magyar and Ursula von der Leyen sitting in a car. NEM created six ad versions for this video. However, Meta did not remove any of the ads, all of which ran for the full week-long campaign period. This demonstrates once again that Meta's filtering mechanism cannot reliably handle video content, especially AI-generated material, in its current state.

3.3 RECRUITING MEMBERS TO ONLINE GROUPS

In May 2025, Fidesz established a movement called "Fight Club", whose members are tasked with boosting the organic reach of pro-government social media content through reactions, comments, and shares. The creation of this now nearly 50,000-strong community was partly intended to offset the loss in visibility caused by the October ban on political advertising. However, experience so far suggests that these efforts have only partially compensated for the drop in reach that paid ads could provide.

However, the name of "Fight Club", which mainly consists of the most enthusiastic Fidesz activists, may sound divisive to a broader audience. Therefore, PM Orbán initiated another digital movement called "Digital Civic Circles." These groups are generally more inclusive and diverse. They use a more moderate tone and are intended for internal organization and mobilization, as well as to demonstrate that Fidesz has support from opinion, leaders, celebrities and even athletes.

After TTPA came into force, numerous ads started to encourage users to join the Digital Civic Circle Facebook groups or the Fight Club's Messenger channel.

Strangely enough, neither tech giant classified these recruitment ads as political content. Google categorized them under various headings, including [Autos and Vehicles](#), [Business and Industrial](#), [Finance](#), [Computer and Consumer Electronics](#), and [Internet and](#)

[Telecom](#). Meanwhile, on Meta's platforms, which do not categorize ads under topical headings, more than 250 ads encouraging users to join the Digital Civic Circles were running.



Ads encouraging users to join various groups and channels, October–November 2025. The text of the ads reads: On the left: “Chat with us!”; In the middle: “Join the Digital Civic Circle! Both on the street and online, we are the majority!”; On the right: “Join the Budapest Digital Circle! Let’s write the story of the nation’s heart together!”

4. Google has reclassified previous political ads into different categories

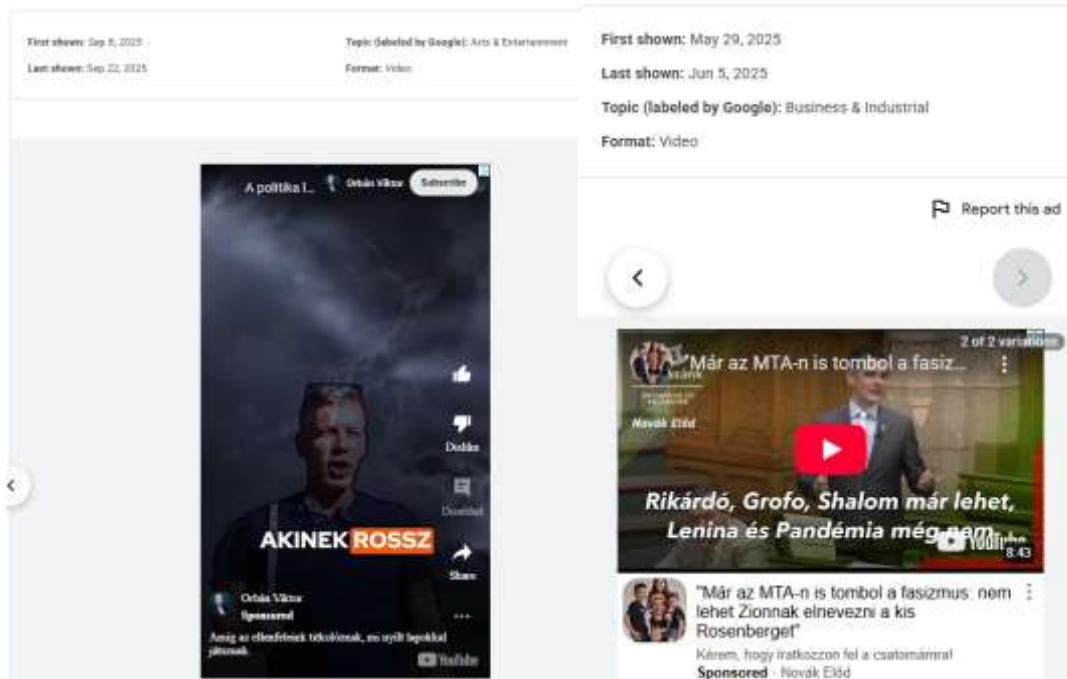
Currently, Google’s ad library only contains non-political ads. However, numerous ads from the past year also appear in the former political ad database. **This suggests that Google initially classified them as political but later reclassified them under different, non-political labels.** Those old political ads that were not reclassified are now invisible and inaccessible because of the “erasure of the past”- political ads, even from the period when they were allowed and running, are not displayed. This highlights another issue with Google’s filtering and categorization system. The reasons for this anomaly are unclear, and the process is opaque. One possible reason, however, is that Google reclassified certain ads as non-political around the time political ads were phased out.

These reclassified ads demonstrate that Google’s filtering system frequently misclassifies obvious political content. Furthermore, the new categorization is often inconsistent. Ads with identical or nearly identical content are placed under different topic labels (as demonstrated by the Fight Club and Digital Civic Circles ads above). These anomalies raise serious concerns about the reliability of the filtering system, a problem exacerbated by the fact that this phenomenon is not limited to pre-TTPA ads but also affects currently active ones.

There are several possible explanations for these anomalies. One possibility is that it is the result of Google's deliberate policy and tactics to narrow the category of political ads. Another possible explanation is the inaccuracy of the categorizing AI software, and Google's limited investment in technical development and human oversight, particularly in a small market with a unique language like Hungary.



Ads by the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office on Google. The ad on the left, labeled by Google as "Arts & Entertainment", reads: "Brussels would finance the war through your taxes. Protest the tax increase! National Consultation". It was [shown](#) between 25-30 November 2025. The ad on the right, labeled by Google as "Business and industrial", reads: "More reasons to protest against tax increases. Click and watch the video! Prepared on behalf of the Government of Hungary". It was [shown](#) between 6-10 November 2025.



Ads originally categorized as “political” and later reclassified under different topic labels by Google. The ad on the left, run by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and depicting opposition leader Péter Magyar, was reclassified as “Arts & Entertainment”. The ad on the right, run by far-right MP Előd Novák and featuring footage of his speech in parliament, was reclassified as “Business & Industrial”.



Ads classified by Google as non-political and placed in different categories despite essentially identical content, October–November 2025. The first ad on the left, classified as “Law and Government,” reads: “It’s worth watching this video if you want to know where our tax forints can go!”. The second ad on the left, classified as “Business and Industrial”, has the same text. The second ad on the right, classified as “Beauty and Personal Care”, reads: “The West’s puppets want to raise taxes.”. The first ad on the right, classified as “Arts and Entertainment”, has the same text.

Annex: Definition of political advertising according to the TTPA

Article 3(2) of the TTPA defines both what constitutes ‘political advertising’ and what does not.⁵

‘Political advertising’ means the preparation, placement, promotion, publication, delivery or dissemination, by any means, of a message, normally provided for remuneration or through in-house activities or as part of a political advertising campaign:

- (a) by, for or on behalf of a political actor, unless it is of a purely private or a purely commercial nature; or
- (b) which is liable and designed to influence the outcome of an election or referendum, voting behavior or a legislative or regulatory process, at Union, national, regional or local level.

Political advertising does not include:

- messages from official sources of Member States or the Union that are strictly limited to the organization and modalities for participating in elections or referendums, including the announcement of candidacies or the question put to the referendum, or for promoting participation in elections or referendums;
- public communication that aims to provide official information to the public by, for or on behalf of any public authority of a Member State or by, for or on behalf of the Union, including by, for or on behalf of members of the government of a Member State, provided that they are not liable and designed to influence the outcome of an election or referendum, voting behavior or a legislative or regulatory process;
- presenting candidates in specified public spaces or in the media which is explicitly provided for by law and allocated free of charge, while ensuring equal treatment of candidates.

⁵ See p13. of the Guidelines to support the implementation of Regulation (EU) 2024/900 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising. https://commission.europa.eu/document/0e5bb552-72f5-434e-8778-ed95e2955f25_en