# Disinformation blitz in the 2024 European election campaign

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# Content

## Executive summary

- **False narratives and conspiracies about migration, the war in Ukraine, energy security, and the EU institutions** [plagued](#) **the European elections**. Many of these disinformation narratives are far from new; they are [re-framed](#) around old prejudices and misconceptions to fit the current circumstances.

- **Disinformation narratives targeting the EU with "warmongering" and domestic challengers for cooperating with them were particularly prevalent during the European election campaign in Hungary**. The most prominent hostile narrative was the alleged danger of "pro-war" European politicians and their Hungarian counterparts wanting to pull Europe into World War III. Fidesz sought to discredit those European "left-wing" (including Ursula von der Leyen, Manfred Weber, Donald Tusk, and Emmanuel Macron) and Hungarian politicians who contradicted the government's "peace" narrative. This narrative gradually gained prominence during the course of the campaign and eventually overshadowed all other narratives.

- **After the "clemency scandal" shook the Hungarian domestic political scene, a new challenger, Péter Magyar, stepped into the limelight and launched a new anti-regime movement while engaging in an anti-corruption discourse**. Fidesz and its proxies promoted hostile narratives aimed at discrediting Magyar with varying intensity. These narratives portrayed Magyar as "power-hungry," "violent," "pro-war," "dollar leftist," and a "leftist messiah" serving the interests of George Soros.

- **The government's perspective was prominently featured in state media and traditional pro-government media outlets, which presented current events and individuals from the government's perspective**. The pro-government camp spent a significantly higher amount on political advertising than all opposition parties combined. The level of spending on social media was notably high, even by European standards.

- **Once again, the pervasive dissemination of voters with false and misleading information among voters constituted a significant challenge in the European election campaigns.** Notwithstanding the number of commitments by Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) to combat disinformation in line with the EU's Digital Services Act and Code of Practice on Disinformation, Fidesz was able to disseminate pro-government, anti-EU, and pro-Kremlin narratives through sponsored campaigns with practically no constraints. The government amplified its campaign messages to an extent where that eclipsed all other voices.

- **The flood of the Kremlin-inspired, Euroskeptic "pro-peace narratives" is anything but an isolated case.** The two recently established radical right European groups, Patriots for Europe and Sovereign Nations of Europe, are expected to be the superspreaders of some of the aforementioned disinformation narratives during the forthcoming European parliamentary term. These groups – especially Patriots for Europe. The third largest group in the European Union – may contribute to the mainstreaming of pro-Kremlin narratives within the broader European discourse.

## Introduction

While deceptive narratives about local and national issues are widespread and continue to divide European societies, some disinformation content is prevalent across the 27 Member States. These European-level disinformation narratives are aimed at the armed conflicts, climate change, EU institutions, electoral processes, and migration. The pervasive nature of disinformation campaigns intended to undermine the electoral process and the democratic debate ahead of the 2024 European elections, as well as to shift the votes towards particular candidates, is a significant concern.

The European and municipal election campaigns in Hungary were notably saturated with disinformation aimed at national and European issues. As there is no legal limit on campaign spending for local and European elections, Fidesz, with the involvement of third parties, dominated the media, social media, and political advertising with hostile disinformation about political opponents and the war in Ukraine. By framing the election as a choice between "peace or war" or even "life or death," Fidesz created a highly polarized political environment and discourse. The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive picture of the most prominent disinformation narratives detected in the run-up to the double elections on 9 June 2024 in Hungary and to situate them in an international context.

Fidesz party employed state resources for the advancement of its political agenda and narratives, thereby obscuring the distinction between the party, the government, and the state, as well as between information and campaigning. These techniques were identified and highlighted in the ODIHR report on the 2022 elections. The incumbent party utilized state-run communication platforms to disseminate its political messages. The Government Information Centre facilitated pro-government messaging to e-mail addresses provided by citizens when registering for Covid-19 vaccination. In this report, 20k, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Mérték Media Monitor, Political Capital, and Unhack Democracy have identified irregularities. Additionally, Fidesz also disseminates its narratives through its government-organized nongovernmental organization ([GO]NGO), such as posters and advertisements, commissioned by Megafon Center and the Civil Union Forum (CÖF) but financed by public funds.

Consequently, Fidesz is able to disseminate messages and disinformation narratives that align with its political interests both during and outside of the campaign period. Despite maintaining a dominant presence in traditional media, Fidesz is increasingly focusing its efforts on social media. From the beginning of the year until June 15, Fidesz and its GONGOs, Megafon and CÖF, collectively spent a total of €5.4 million on advertisements on Facebook and Google. This figure is approximately four times that spent by all opposition parties and their partisan media, which amounted to €1.4 million. When considering only political parties, Fidesz and KNDP spent a total of €2.8 million, which is twice the amount spent by all opposition politicians combined (€1.3 million). Fidesz and its GONGOs were responsible for 98% of the total €2.5 million spent on promoting hostile narratives, while the opposition parties and their associated media accounted for the remaining 2%.

While Fidesz's control over traditional and social media has contributed to the lack of a level playing field in the European election, this power is not without limitations. The 44.82% result achieved by Fidesz cannot be considered a significant failure, as it is the third-highest percent However, it is not very reassuring when viewed in the context of the high standards set by Viktor Orbán and the party's hegemonic position and agenda-setting power. Despite Fidesz's spending

on political advertisements targeting Péter Magyar with the goal of discrediting him, his Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA) was the real winner of the election, having scored 29.6%.

*1. Figure: Hungary – European election results*
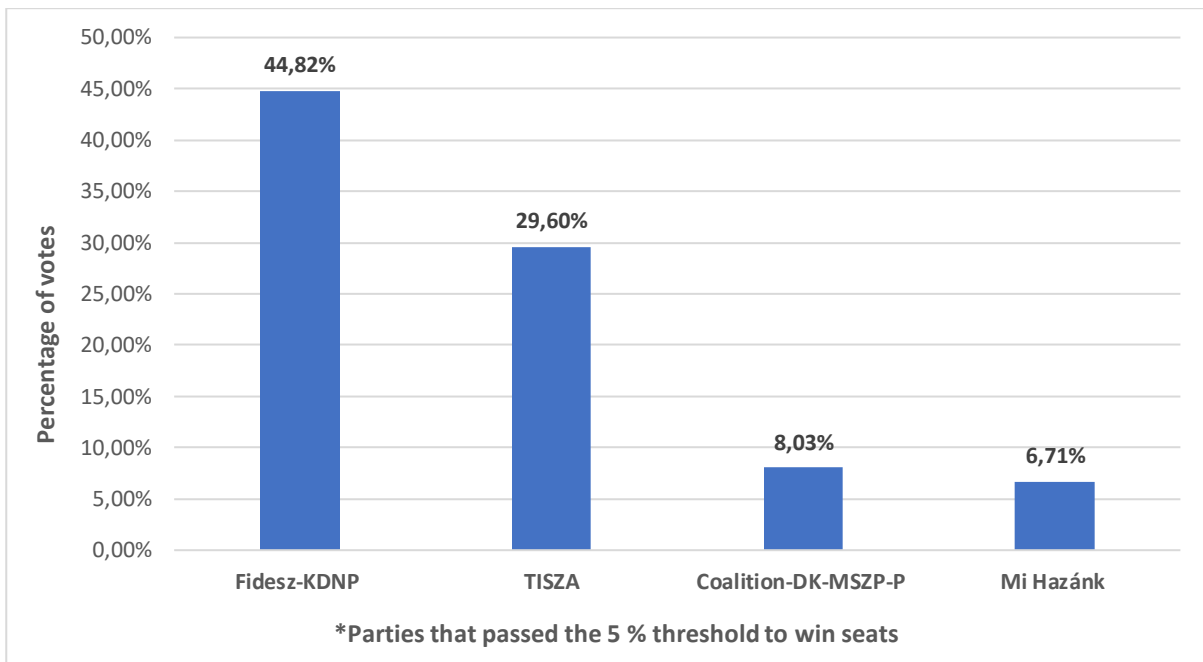


In comparison to Hungary, the European arena experienced a more diverse landscape of disinformation narratives. These narratives targeted Euroscepticism by discrediting EU representatives, the war in Ukraine, migration, LGBTQ+, climate change, and the Israel-Hamas war – to mention the main topics (see Figure 1). While the Hungarian narratives were dominated by the war/peace dichotomy and the anti-Brussels theme, which was accompanied by criticism of the "left", in other EU countries, **climate change, LGBTQ+, and the Israel-Hamas war** were also in focus. Regarding climate change, each country selected a different theme, but the common thread was the fear that the EU will exert control over various aspects of life, such as the mileage in Romania, the water and shower in Spain, the use of old cars in Croatia and the fruit and vegetable production in Germany and Portugal. Another old narrative that resurfaced was the assertion that windmills cause drought and destroy the lives of marine mammals. **Discrediting EU representatives and the war in Ukraine** were undoubtedly recurring themes. For example, Ursula von der Leyen was falsely accused of being linked to Nazism (due to her grandmother shaking hands with Hitler or her great-grandfather being Nazi himself), which brings us back to the connection between Ukrainians and Neo-Nazism, which initiated the invasion in Ukraine by Russia. Another common point was the usage of pro-Kremlin sources, which indicated the insignificance of the elections. The two recently established radical right European groups, Patriots for Europe and Sovereign Nations of Europe, are expected to disseminate some of the aforementioned disinformation narratives during the forthcoming European parliamentary term. Despite its status as the third largest group in the European Parliament, Patriots for Europe is likely to exert minimal influence due to its almost complete exclusion from key positions by the prevailing "cordon sanitaire" of pro-European parties. However, the groups may contribute to the mainstreaming of pro-Kremlin narratives within the broader European discourse.

*2. Figure: % of related disinformation on total detected disinformation, by topic (June 2021 - June 2024)*
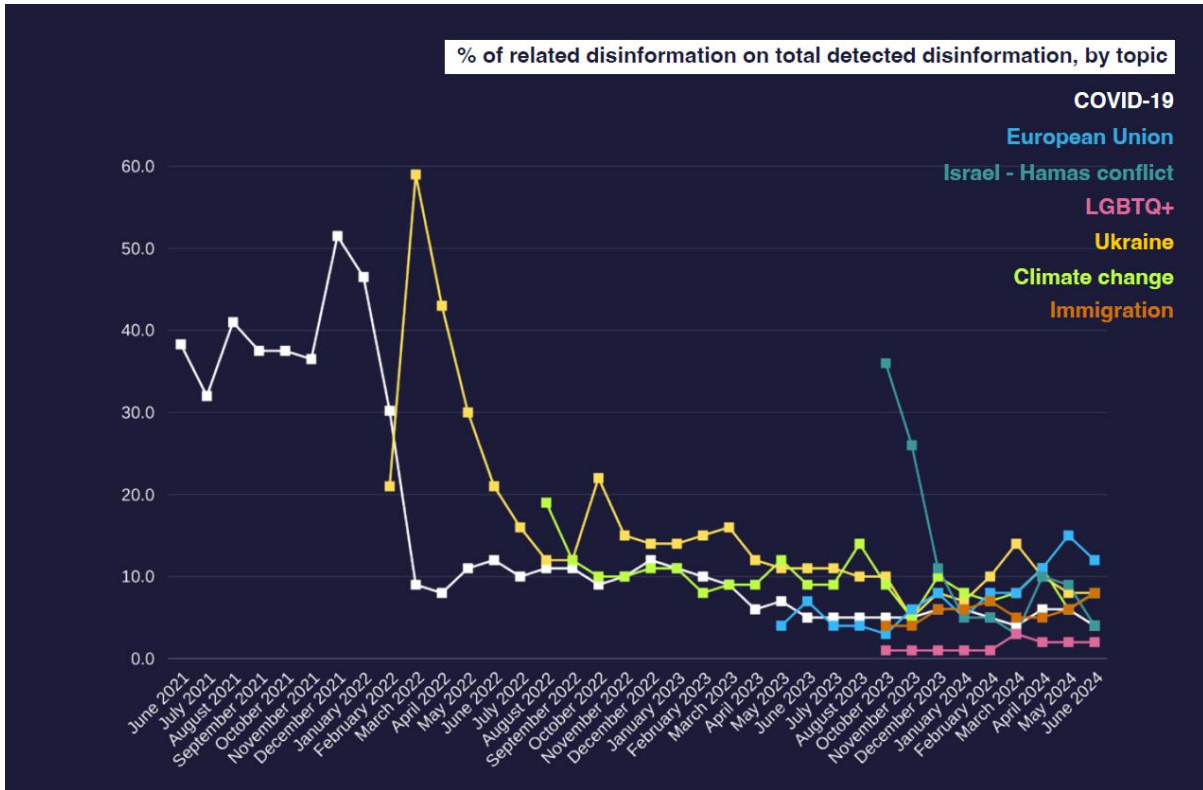


Source: EDMO Monthly reports https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/EDMO-37-Horizontal.pdf

## Key Disinformation Narratives in Hungary

Although the official campaign period was supposed to start on 20 April 2024, the clemency scandal precipitated a shift in the political landscape, prompting the election campaign to commence in February 2024. Prior to the scandal, Hungary experienced a relatively tranquil pre-election period during which the ruling party utilized its power to identify suitable candidates and campaign messages while the established opposition parties attempted to negotiate on the extent and forms of cooperation. President Novák Katalin's controversial pardon of a convicted pedophile accomplice led to widespread outrage and questioned a fundamental aspect of the Orbán regime's identity. President Novák resigned, and Judit Varga, Fidesz's top candidate for the European Parliament elections and former Justice Minister, stepped back from politics. As the public outcry over the scandal appeared to subside, Péter Magyar, former Fidesz bureaucrat and ex-husband of Judit Varga, burst into the political arena by launching a new anti-regime movement while engaging in an anti-corruption discourse.

Initially, Fidesz and its proxies refrained from directly reacting to the clemency scandal. Instead, its GONGO, Megafon Center, shaped the pro-government discourse about the alleged dangers of the "dollar left" and the "dollar media." They advertised edited videos that allegedly proved that George Soros donated funds to Action for Democracy through, which the united Hungarian opposition received funds for their campaign. Over the past two years, Fidesz and its proxies have constructed the "dollar left" label as a synonym for foreign agents, with the intention of stigmatizing any Fidesz-critical or independent organization or individual. Ultimately, this hostile narrative accused opposition politicians and independent media organizations of serving the interests of George Soros and the "international, globalist war, migration and gender lobby" in Hungary. This strategy bears resemblance to the Kremlin model.

Following the President's resignation, Fidesz politicians and pro-government media sought to reframe the narrative surrounding the clemency scandal by complementing the "dollar left" narrative with accusations of "irresponsibility" and "violence" directed at opposition politicians. They commended Katalin Novák and Judit Varga, who assumed responsibility by resigning and acknowledging "failure," thereby exemplifying the tenets of right-wing conservatism. In contrast, the opposition politicians (uniformly labeled as "left-wing") have consistently evaded accountability for their actions and have been disingenuous about the importance of child protection. For instance, Megafon influencers created several videos pertaining to the police case of Momentum MP András Fekete-Győr and the scandals of former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány. These videos portrayed the aforementioned individuals as "violent," "power-hungry," and "unaccountable." Nevertheless, there are numerous instances of left-wing politicians resigning in the wake of scandals. Additionally, PM Orbán and pro-government media criticized the opposition politicians for not supporting the Child Protection Act. However, these actors neglected to mention that the opposition politicians had refrained from supporting the bill because it conflated pedophilia and homosexuality.

The opposition, primarily the Democratic Coalition (DK), also tried to build a hostile narrative over the clemency scandal, calling prominent government officials, including President Novák and PM Viktor Orbán, "pedophile saviors" for their role in the decision.

### *Background: What is Megafon Center?*

Megafon Center is a pro-government GONGO that focuses on spreading political narratives and messages supporting the ruling party, Fidesz, on social media platforms such as Facebook and

YouTube. Megafon Center provides training and manages a group of influencers who produce and promote pro-government narratives while discrediting and criticizing the opposition. These influencers create a large number of short videos, posts, and memes, which are disseminated through paid advertising on media platforms such as Facebook.

## Peace or War

Fidesz and its proxies sought to shift the political discourse away from the clemency scandal and back to the war in Ukraine. The pro-government media and Megafon influencers launched a hostile narrative suggesting that the "pro-war left", which they consistently identified as serving the "globalist elite" – often referencing George Soros and his son - wanted to start World War III. The "pro-war" and "globalist elite" labels appear to have been constructed based on the premise of deep state conspiracies. As the double election approached, this narrative gained traction and eventually overshadowed all other narratives in the final weeks. Overall, pro-government actors spent €1.1 million on this hostile narrative.

Pro-government actors portrayed any European or Hungarian politician who disagreed with Fidesz's narrative on peace as "leftist" and "pro-war," irrespective of their political values and party affiliations. They employed a manipulative video editing technique to portray politicians as "warmongers" who were serving the interests of a "globalist war lobby." Fidesz sought to reduce the election campaign to a false binary dichotomy between peace and war, a strategy similar to that employed in the 2022 general election campaign. In this narrative, the "pro-war left" politicians are depicted as wanting to drag Europe into the Russian-Ukrainian war by providing military aid and troops to help Ukraine. In contrast, the ruling party espouses a "pro-peace" stance, advocating for a ceasefire and the initiation of peace negotiations. The majority of the targeted politicians labeled as "leftists" do not belong to left-wing parties, such as Emmanual Macron, Donald Tusk, Ursula von der Leyen, and Manfred Weber. Pro-government media accused French President Emmanuel Macron, NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, and Polish President Andrzej Duda of escalating the war in Ukraine. A Megafon influencer falsely advertised that the left-wing German government was preparing for war. He used out-of-context statements by German officials with images of World War II to underscore the threat of escalation. Megafon also falsely claimed that Manfred Weber wanted to introduce compulsory military service in all EU Member States when he was only talking about German conscription. With regard to Hungarian opposition politicians, pro-government actors primarily targeted Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony and Ferenc Gyurcsány as "pro-war" based on out-of-context excerpts of speeches. However, this portrayal of a "pro-war" stance is misleading, as opposition politicians have consistently demonstrated support for peace while expressing solidarity with Ukraine.

> *The narrative developed by Fidesz and its government-controlled outlets is based on pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns, which were expected to emerge throughout Europe.*

The narrative disseminates conspiracy theories about Ukraine and the West's role in the conflict and mirrors Russian strategic narratives. Pro-government media frequently reflect the following pro-Kremlin perspectives without critical analysis or context:

- **Discrediting Volodymyr Zelensky**: First, the pro-government camp portrayed him as a clown, and an irresponsible leader. Over time, however, they gradually shifted their narrative to portray him as a puppet of the USA and a dictator who provoked the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

- **Ukraine cannot be an EU and NATO member**: Initially, Hungarian government accused Ukraine's government infringing upon the rights of ethnic Hungarians residing in Ukraine. Afterward, Fidesz linked the frozen EU funds to Hungary and

the EU aid to Ukraine. Fidesz falsely spread the claim that Ukraine received the EU funds that were earmarked for Hungary.

- **Corruption and the rule of law**: Despite Ukraine's ongoing endeavors to address corruption and rule of law deficiencies, pro-government actors have magnified these issues and disseminated pro-Kremlin disinformation as factual information. Such outlets have depicted anti-corruption measures and cabinet reshuffles as a form of political cleansing by Zelensky. Pro-government outlets frequently cite Russian politicians without contextualization when publishing articles that are critical of Ukraine.

- **The West's responsibility in the conflict**: The pro-government media outlets frequently leveled criticism at NATO and Western politicians, holding them responsible for the potential escalation of the war in Ukraine. They harshly criticized over the provision of Western weapons to Ukraine. Additionally, they also contended that Sweden's accession to the NATO demonstrated the country's "collapse as neutral and sovereign state".

- **Ukrainian threat to Hungary**: Pro-government media portrayed extremist comments of a former volunteer solider regarding Ukraine's plan to invade Hungary as a serious threat.

In order to reinforce the perceived threat of World War III, the ruling party erected billboards bearing the slogan "Stop War." The billboards were displayed throughout the country, in some instances, in a manner that precluded the presence of other billboards in the immediate vicinity. The Fidesz party advanced this narrative to an unprecedented degree, presenting it as an absolute dichotomy. The Fidesz party presented a stark choice: either Fidesz or war. The visual design of the billboards was intentionally misleading, with the word "Stop" in the "Stop War" slogan being smaller and less prominent than the word "War." Additionally, Gergely Karácsony, Péter Magyar, George Soros, and Ferenc Gyurcsány are depicted behind the word "war." In the final weeks, Fidesz erected new billboards with the word "Peace," featuring Viktor Orbán. Ultimately, the Prime Minister and pro-government actors reinforced the message that Fidesz is the only guarantor of peace while portraying everyone else as an existential threat.

*3. Figure: „Stop War" – „Peace" – „Stop War"*



Source: https://telex.hu/zacc/2024/05/26/orban-viktor-plakat-beke-haboru

Further platforms where the government pushed their "peace or war" agenda included Viktor Orbán's letter to households, was distributed directly by Fidesz-activists, and the speeches delivered by government officials. "The color of peace is orange [referring to the party's color] on June 9th and the name of peace is Fidesz", said Péter Szijjártó.
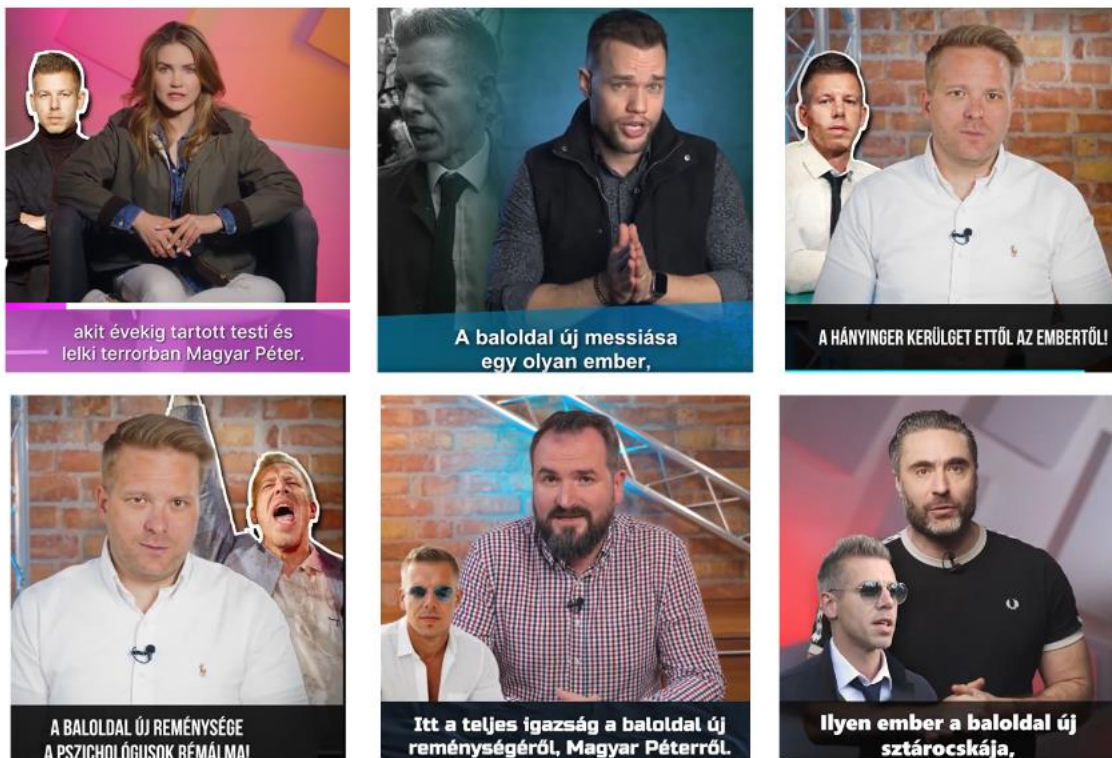
## The smear campaign against Péter Magyar

After the clemency scandal and the resignation of both President Katalin Novák and former Justice Minister Judit Varga, the ex-husband of the latter, Péter Magyar, stepped into the political scene. His accusations against the government, the prime minister, and several ministers are powerful mainly because he was a member of the regime's inner circle and held senior positions in state-owned companies. As he gained prominence, he began to organize large demonstrations, attracting tens of thousands of supporters on multiple occasions. This led him to establish the Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA), which sought to challenge both the incumbent Fidesz party and all opposition parties.

Fidesz and its proxies promoted hostile narratives aimed at discrediting Magyar with varying intensity. This [strategy](#) had previously been employed and tested in the 2022 electoral campaign against the opposition PM candidate, Péter Márki-Zay. Looking at the whole spectrum (including videos and posts alike), hostile narratives aimed at discrediting him alone [accounted](#) for €1.0 million. However, as the elections drew near, the emphasis on hostile narratives against Péter Magyar began to wane, coalescing with narratives surrounding the threat of World War III. While Fidesz's proxies spent the majority of these funds, a small portion was also spent by opposition-partisan media outlets aligned with the opposition party, the Democratic Coalition.

The discrediting campaign by pro-government actors, especially government-organized media and Megafon' influencers', promoted various narratives about Péter Magyar. They accused him of being "power-hungry," dubbing him the "new leftist messiah" serving the interests of the "American left owned by the empire of George Soros." After his ex-wife disclosed details of their failed marriage, which included allegations of abuse by Magyar, the intensity of the smear campaign increased. Magyar was frequently portrayed as a "personality-disordered," "violent," and "pro-war" individual inciting riots (see examples of hostile terms in Figure 3). This intense Russian-style smear campaign against Magyar was designed to safeguard Fidesz's core voter base and mitigate the political risk posed by Magyar's rise by discrediting him both personally and politically.

*4. Figure: „he kept her in terror", „the new Messiah of the left", „this person makes me sick", „the hope of the left is the nightmare of the psychologists", „here is the whole truth about the hope of the left" and „this person is the new star of the left"*



Source: https://mertek.eu/2024/05/13/a-baloldal-uj-messiasa-magyar-peter-kampany-visszakapcsolva/

By examining only the most widely advertised Megafon videos (as identified through the comprehensive analysis conducted by Mérték Media Monitor), the following shifts in content and tone occurred over time. At his first appearance in February, influencers attempted to portray Magyar as "abusive" and "violent." Subsequently, in March and April, the character assassination intensified, with videos trying to label him as a "dollar leftist." In May, the most widely promoted videos focused on incidents from Magyar's cross-country campaign tour to discredit him, further reinforcing the narrative that the Tisza Party leader is "aggressive" and "violent. "

*5. Figure: Changes in the topics of the analyzed Megafon videos*
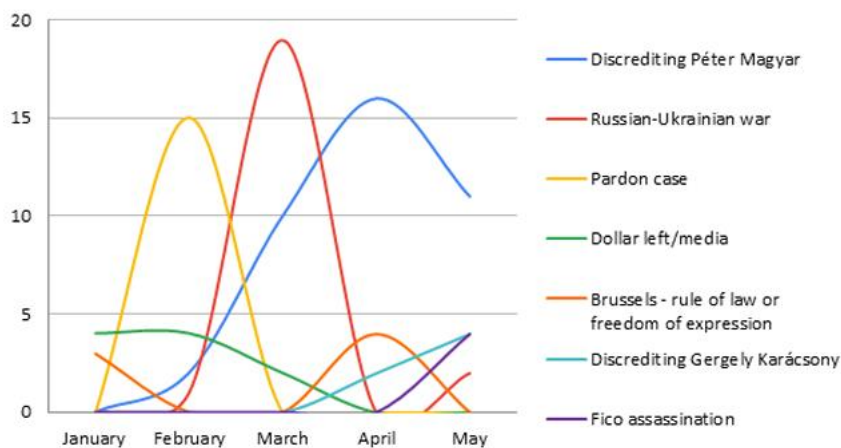
Source: Mérték Media Monitor

Péter Magyar was not the sole target of the government: the largest opposition party, the Democratic Coalition, also expended a considerable amount on discrediting him. The party was concerned about the potential loss of its relatively dominant position on the opposition side and thus attempted to discredit Péter Magyar. Their campaign manager deployed 125 advertisements, 114 of which were focused on Magyar for a 30-day period (between mid-April and mid-May).

In the offline domain, the same narratives could be observed on the billboards erected by the government. Figure 4 illustrates how all the messages can be combined into one picture. The image depicts the PM Orbán's often-cited slogan, "No migration, no gender and no war", in the hands of the "leftist" opposition leaders who are perceived to serve the interests of Brussels, featuring Ursula von der Leyen in the background.

*6. Figure: „Bru$sels' humble servants"*



Source: https://rtl.hu/belfold/2024/05/16/fidesz-oriasplakat-haboru

## Global and digital dictatorship / Our Homeland

On a comparatively smaller scale, the radical extremist and Euroskeptic right-wing party Our Homeland also played a role in the dissemination of disinformation based on conspiracy theories related to anti-liberalism, anti-Westernism, and especially anti-Americanism.

The primary false and disinformation narrative put forth by the party was the assertion that a global and digital dictatorship was threatening Hungary's sovereignty by interfering in the lives of Hungarian citizens. The party's billboards promoted the slogan "Hungarian future instead of globalist dictatorship." They engaged in a series of hostile narratives against the World Health Organization (WHO) and its Director-General. The Director General was depicted as a communist with a terrorist past who was interfering in Hungary's internal affairs and pursuing globalist interests through the so-called "pandemic contract." In 2023, the party initiated a petition against the "pandemic contract," which it claimed enables the WHO to make dictatorial decisions, impose compulsory vaccination, and set up a mass surveillance system.

Another pervasive narrative was that of the digital dictatorship. Our Homeland was propagating against the use of bankcards, claiming that the citizens would be subject to "total digital surveillance and the withdrawal of public money at the touch of a button." Another theme was artificial intelligence (AI). Dóra Dúró warned that governments and corporations could potentially exert control over people's lives through the use of AI. The latter narrative sought to exploit the – often legitimate – concerns about new technological advances by exaggerating the current risks of using AI.

## Impact

In the 2024 Hungarian European election campaign, the Fidesz party and its satellite organizations dominated the media, social media, and political advertising with hostile disinformation narratives. Fidesz exploited its dominant position in the media to target smear campaigns at political opponents. Fidesz's campaign message of "war or peace, " a manipulative tactic to create fear and anxiety, has further polarized the Hungarian political environment, putting even more pressure on the remaining independent press and civil society.

The disinformation narratives presented in our study had a profound impact on the public perception of the war in Ukraine, with social media playing a pivotal role in the process. A study revealed that Hungarians held more negative opinions of Ukrainians and the country's potential accession to the EU than Poles, Slovaks, and Czechs. Hungarian voters tend to adopt similar language propagated in the pro-government media, even those who are critical of Fidesz. A comprehensive public opinion survey found that Hungarians are more likely to view Ukraine as a threat than Russia. Fidesz, the party that most flooded the disinformation scene in Hungary, could gain 45 percent of the votes- that is the third highest result of any paty lists witrhin the European Union even if not very high percentage by Fidesz's standards.

Once again, the systematic flooding of voters with false and misleading information constituted a significant challenge in the context of the European elections. Despite the fact that Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) have made a number of commitments to combat disinformation in accordance with the EU's Digital Services Act and Code of Practice on Disinformation, a Spanish fact-checking portal has uncovered that a significant proportion of flagged content infringing these companies' disinformation policies, including Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, went unaddressed. X and YouTube were the worst performers, taking no visible actions in around 75 % of the cases.

# Policy recommendations

In the context of disinformation, the various laws - the Digital Services Act, the Code of Conduct on Disinformation, and the Transparency of Political Advertising – have had limited effect in Hungary. Fidesz spread pro-government, anti-EU, and pro-Kremlin narratives through sponsored campaigns. Given the enormous amount of resources Fidesz spent to amplify its campaign messages, the party effectively overshadowed all other voices on social media platforms. Consequently, VLOPs not only failed to combat the disinformation Fidesz was disseminating, but they also benefited from it. In the light of these observations, we propose the following policy recommendations:

1. **Invest in fact-checking and moderation**: The VLOPs should deepen their cooperation with fact-checkers, invest in such services, and incorporate fact-checking information into their platforms and algorithms. They should also improve their capacity to moderate content and implement a transparent, verifiable, and appealable content moderation procedure.

2. **Enhancing transparency**: Despite the VLOPs' endeavors to enhance transparency in political advertising and promotion, it is imperative that the platforms disclose the precise amount spent on such advertising. Platforms should also seek to obtain and publish data on the actual funding of political advertising. The financial background of political advertising can be obscured by companies that have no other activities other than funding advertising on the platform.

3. **Compliance with EU legislations and policy enforcement:** Despite committing to demonetize and combat disinformation, the VLOPs have not only failed to stop the spread of false and misleading information but have profited from its dissemination. Meta's Ad Standards prohibit ads containing content that third-party fack-checkers have debunked. However, politicians' posts and ads are exempt from Meta's Ad Standards to protect free speech. This loophole allows politicians (and their proxies) to spread and amplify misinformation on Meta. As a result, political content that is proven to contain disinformation should be banned from advertising. Additionally, political advertising should be subject to a spending limit that aggregates the spending of different advertisers when they are promoting the same messages.

4. **Mitigating psychological harm:** The Fidesz campaign slogan, "war or peace," contributed to an exacerbation of the state of war psychosis, precipitating feelings of fear and anxiety among the general public, particularly the minors. More intensive public discourse and targeted education are needed to address the negative psychological impact of the endless state of emergency on communities and individuals.