



**POLITICAL CAPITAL**  
POLICY RESEARCH & CONSULTING INSTITUTE

# Political campaigning on social media in the “post-reality” and post-advertisement era

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*Lessons from Hungary’s 2026 election campaign*

April 2026

## Executive summary

The 2026 Hungarian parliamentary election may have been the [first post-reality campaign](#). The Orbán regime has transformed Hungary into an [informational autocracy](#), dominating the information space and developing methods, manipulations, and a communication style that consolidated its power and served as a [blueprint](#) for illiberal leaders seeking to manipulate elections. Consequently, the regime became a trend-setter in using innovative legal tricks and political techniques in campaigns to secure parliamentary victories. The 2026 elections served once again as a laboratory for information manipulation, setting new precedents and revealing techniques that could reappear in other countries.

**Hungary's experience illustrates how political actors can adapt to social media ad bans by relying on manipulative and rule-breaking methods.** These methods include **organic amplification** through coordinated supporter networks; **synthetic amplification** through inauthentic account networks; **circumvention of the ad ban**; the **mass production of content**, especially short videos; the **creation of proxy actors** to multiply the number of messengers; and the **strategic use of emotionally charged generative AI visuals**.

**These developments should serve as a warning to democratic actors in other countries.** The Hungarian case can help policymakers, state institutions, researchers, and civil society organisations to anticipate similar tactics elsewhere, particularly in situations where political actors seek to maintain informational dominance despite the existence of formal restrictions on political advertising.

**Hungary's experience also demonstrates that current platform regulation and enforcement remain imperfect.** Although most ads disappeared after the ban, **serious weaknesses in platform filtering systems** still allowed political ads to pass through and reach substantial audiences.

**This points to a clear need to strengthen social media regulation and amend it where necessary.** The Hungarian case highlights persistent problems of **misclassification**, **inconsistent review**, weak detection of **AI-generated political content**, and the continued use of coordinated and inauthentic amplification techniques.

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## Introduction

Hungary's 2026 parliamentary elections were a watershed event, both domestically and internationally. After coming to power with a constitutional majority in 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán completely reconstructed the political system to serve his own interests, building a hybrid regime often described as an [informational autocracy](#). In such a non-democratic regime, control over the information sphere and capture of the media are central to maintaining executive power, for example through the use of state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation, as well as the creation of enemy images and projection of threats.

The ruling party of the Orbán regime, **Fidesz, created an information sphere that functioned as a laboratory and blueprint for other illiberal political actors**. Among other things, the regime transformed state media into a propaganda outlet for the party, established private propaganda outlets, attempted to eradicate independent media, created proxy actors to parrot its messages and established, trained and financed a group of political 'influencers' to disseminate propaganda on social media. This system was indirectly financed through public funds. However, this well-established system sprung a leak in October 2025, only six months before the elections, when the two major social media platforms in Hungary, Google and Meta, stopped political advertising in the European Union. Consequently, **Fidesz was forced to renew its social media strategy and explore new tools and tactics to maintain its dominance**.

**The campaign was pioneering not only in terms of the techniques applied, but also in terms of the topics and narratives employed**. Having failed to gain traction with other campaign issues, **Viktor Orbán took cognitive warfare to a new level**, among other things by deploying large amounts of AI-generated content, including images, videos, and forged documents. **Fidesz campaigned almost exclusively on disinformation narratives** regarding Ukraine, the EU and the opposition TISZA party, all of which were completely divorced from reality. The aim was to **perpetuate the overarching narrative of an imminent threat of war**, making the dangers posed by Ukraine and a potential TISZA government seem real. Fidesz sought to persuade voters to fear election interference, sabotage or even an attack from Ukraine, while accusing the opposition leader, Péter Magyar, of colluding with the Brussels elite and Ukraine to draw Hungary into war. **The result was potentially the world's [first post-reality campaign](#)**.

Thus, **Hungary's elections served as a laboratory for information manipulation**, demonstrating to illiberal leaders how to run a post-truth campaign based on manipulative techniques and disinformation narratives about non-existent enemies. Although the TISZA party won the election with a historic result, **Fidesz's substantial electoral support of 36% suggests that their campaign had a significant impact**.

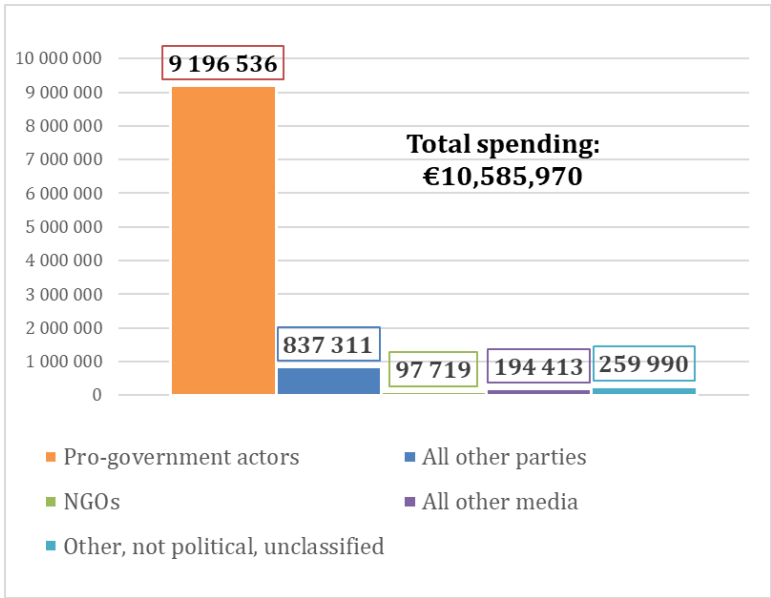
## 1. Role of political advertising before the ad ban

Even before the EU's **Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising Regulation (TTPA)** took effect on 10 October 2025, the two main social media platforms in Hungary, **Google** and **Meta**, had already **suspended political advertising** after September 2025.

This created a significant challenge for Hungary’s ruling **Fidesz** party, which had previously been at the forefront of political advertising in both Hungary and the EU. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, Fidesz spent more on social media advertising on Google and Meta than any other political party in the EU.

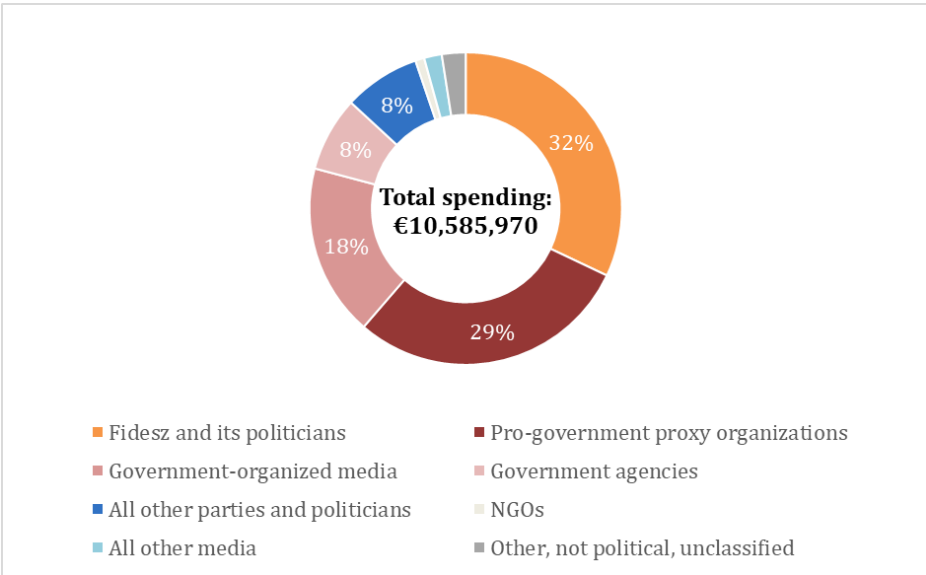
In the first nine months of 2025, **Fidesz-affiliated actors** — including government agencies, Fidesz politicians, government-organized media, and proxy organizations — **spent EUR 9.2 million** on political ads. This equated to **87%** of the total political advertising spending on Google and Meta in Hungary by all advertisers.

Figure 1: Political advertising spending on Meta and Google platforms in Hungary between 29 December 2024 and 27 September 2025, categorized by type of actor (in euros)



Affiliated and proxy organizations have long played an important role in Fidesz’s electoral campaigns. The ruling party has regularly outsourced parts of its campaign activity to such entities, which are financed from undisclosed sources.

Figure 2: Political advertising spending on Meta and Google platforms in Hungary between 29 December 2024 and 27 September 2025, categorized by type of actor and broken down by Fidesz-affiliated actors (in euros)



## 2. Changes in social media campaigning after the ban

Although most ads disappeared from both Google and Meta after the ban on political advertising, **serious leaks in the platforms' filtering systems** still **allowed** political ads to get through and reach large numbers of users. **Pro-government actors remained the main source of such political content.** Some of these ads appear to have been deliberately designed to test and evade Google's and Meta's filtering systems.

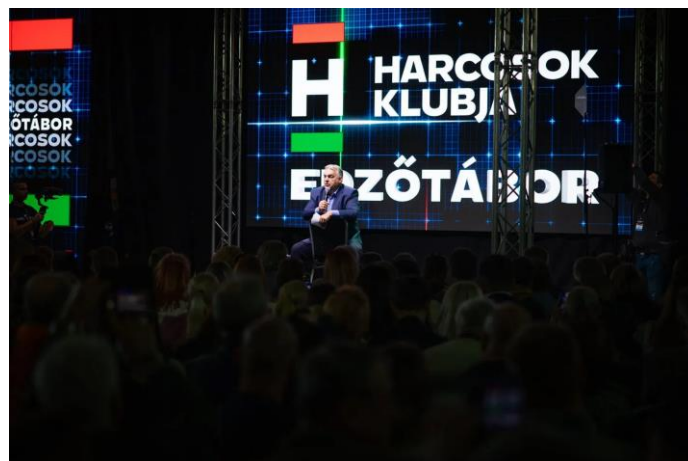
Political actors, particularly those linked to Fidesz, have turned to **alternative tools and tactics** to spread their message widely and maintain **informational dominance** in the absence of **social media ads.**

### 2.1 Organic amplification via coordinated supporter networks

**Organic amplification via coordinated supporter networks** enables political actors to **extend the reach of their content by mobilizing real supporters** to react, comment, and share in a coordinated way. In Hungary, Fidesz used this approach in preparation for the post-advertising era by establishing two organizational structures to reinforce its political messaging on Facebook.

- **Fight Club** is an online activist network conceived and launched by Viktor Orbán. Membership is coordinated through a private Facebook group with around **sixty thousand members.** Fidesz politicians and aligned influencers instructed and deployed members to support designated content through coordinated online engagement and interaction.
- **Digital Civic Circles (DPKs)** are a network of closed Facebook groups. There are **two main types of DPKs: territorially organized groups,** typically aligned with individual electoral districts and administered by local Fidesz politicians and candidates; and **thematically organized groups,** led by national-level party figures and public personalities. The former type coordinated online and offline activities for local supporters, while the latter focused predominantly on spreading political messages.

*Figure 3: Prime Minister Orbán provided guidance to participants at the second Fight Club boot camp, which took place at the Erzsébet Camp in Zánka on 19 October 2025 (Source: Viktor Orbán's Facebook page)*



Despite Fidesz's high expectations, analysis of social media activity suggests that both **Fight Club** and **Digital Civic Circles** could **increase the reach of online content only to a limited**

extent. Their overall effect remained **modest**. By comparison, **paid political advertising** provided significantly broader reach across multiple Facebook pages at the same time.

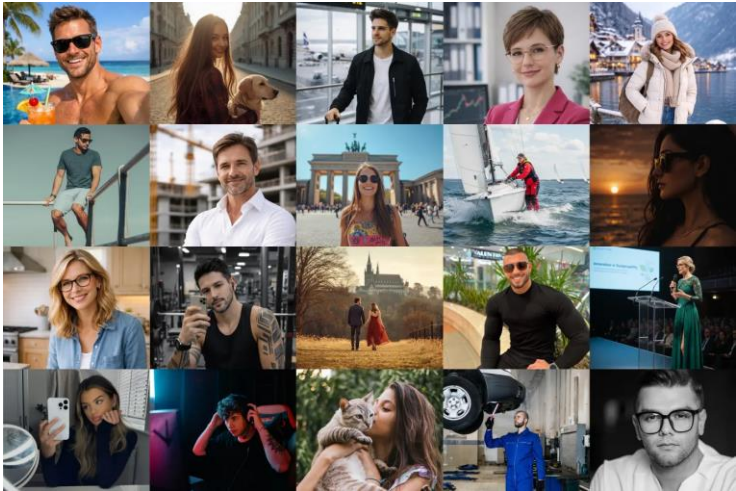
### 2.2 Synthetic amplification via inauthentic account networks

**Synthetic amplification via inauthentic account networks** enables **political actors to increase visibility** through centrally managed networks of fake profiles and pages. In Hungary, this tactic appeared in networks that **amplified content connected to Fidesz** and its broader political ecosystem.

These networks **tend to be more effective than grassroots activists** because they can quickly generate significant interaction, such as comments and likes, while mimicking human activity. Furthermore, one person can manage multiple inauthentic accounts simultaneously, amplifying the effect. Moreover, networks of inauthentic accounts, such as bots, can operate on a scale beyond that of human users by automating interactions across multiple profiles.

**Inauthentic networks are also often better able to avoid detection**, especially when they operate alongside the visible activities of groups such as the Fight Club and Digital Civic Circles. Investigative reporting has exposed such practices. Journalists from [Telex](#) uncovered a network of around **2,000 fake Facebook pages and profiles** used to promote the posts of Fidesz politicians through coordinated ‘likes’.

Figure 4: AI-generated Facebook fake profiles identified by Telex (Source: [Telex](#))



### 2.3 Content flooding

Following the platforms' ban on political ads, **Fidesz and its proxies flooded social media with content to maintain their dominance** of the information space **and preserve the reach** they had achieved through advertising.

- They aimed to **capitalize on the benefits** of the mass publication of short videos on Facebook, known as **Reels**, because the **algorithms effectively promote this format**. Reels have become an important tool for generating reach and engagement figures as an **alternative to political ads**. In [October 2025](#), Fidesz's social media expert, Magor Dukász, urged the party's "online fighters" to create many short videos.

- Fidesz **created several proxy** actors to multiply the number of messengers and increase the volume of content published by a wide range of sources, all of which **conveyed the same message**. They typically used more **divisive language** and **hyperbolic messaging**.
- Fidesz politicians **posted more frequently** on social media to compensate for **lower engagement levels**. Despite having fewer followers, TISZA candidates' posts received higher engagement and twice as many reactions as Fidesz, meaning they reached a broader audience organically. In response, Fidesz politicians flooded their social media with posts in an attempt to bridge the gap.

## 2.4 Circumventing restrictions on political advertising

Although political advertising had been suspended, **political actors could still manage to circumvent restrictions**. In Hungary, this tactic became visible after **Meta** and **Google** suspended political advertising in the European Union in autumn 2025, while **enforcement remained imperfect**, and their systems for identifying and filtering **political content remained only partially effective**.

**Advertisers, primarily pro-Fidesz actors**, including politicians and affiliated proxy organisations, **used a range of tactics to bypass platform restrictions**.

- **Continuously relaunching ads that have been removed:** Some advertisers continued to run advertisements that were essentially **unchanged from the period before the ban**. Even when ads were removed, **advertisers relaunched them immediately**. Sometimes, these ads remained active for several hours before being taken down again. This cycle could be repeated multiple times. Even **short periods of renewed exposure** can still provide a **benefit to advertisers**. Meta has yet to address this serious loophole.
- **Using AI-generated content for adverts:** AI-generated content, including that with political content, appears to slip through the platform's filters more easily (see *Figure 5*).
- **Hiding the political nature of the content:** Advertisers **altered content so that the political message remained intact while avoiding detectable political markers**. This involved omitting recognizable political figures, presenting messages in a stylized, allegorical, or fictional visual form, or wrapping messages in seemingly nonpolitical narratives or settings (see *Figure 6*).
- **Establishing new Facebook pages with no other content to launch ads:** Advertisers also set up **new Facebook pages solely for advertising purposes**, without publishing any organic content. In the absence of an **advertising history**, such pages may be subject to less scrutiny from platform monitoring systems (see *Figure 7*).
- **False-flag pages and ads:** A more sophisticated variant involved **false flag operations**. Pages mimicking the visual identities of opposition parties were used to run advertisements that pit the candidates of those parties against the TISZA candidate.

Figure 5: The National Resistance Movement, a Fidesz proxy organization, ran 15 ad versions of an AI-generated video, depicting a fictional phone call between Péter Magyar and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. While Meta removed the ad, it has reached hundreds of thousands of users

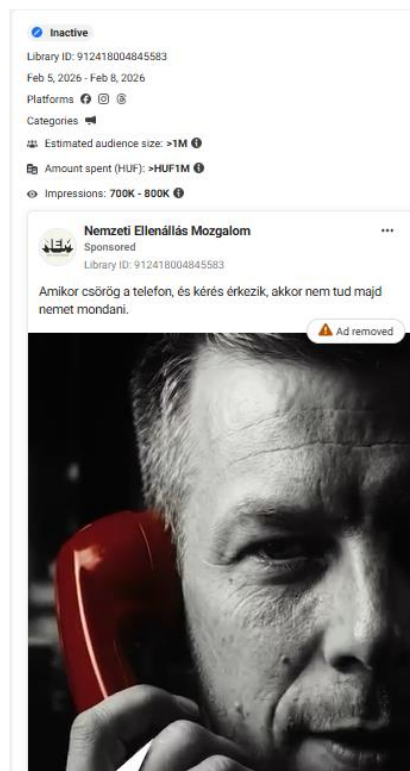


Figure 6: A political ad disguised as a cartoon by the National Resistance Movement (NEM), a government organized proxy organization. In the cartoon, a fox warns a group of animals living on the banks of the Tisza River about an alleged upcoming property tax that will supposedly be imposed by the opposition TISZA party and explains how much it will cost them.



Figure 7: The "Not Our War" Facebook page was created on 20 December last year, and its content consists exclusively of AI-generated videos designed to incite fear of war. This propaganda platform, which describes itself as a news and media site, has only a few hundred followers, but with running 380 ads, some of its videos have garnered hundreds of thousands of views.



## 2.5 Strategic use of emotionally charged generative AI visual content

The strategic use of emotionally charged generative AI visual content enables political actors to convert political messages into highly flexible and emotionally powerful visual narratives. In Hungary, **AI-generated images and videos** became a [prominent feature](#) of the election campaign, and pro-government actors used this form of content most intensively, often through affiliated, proxy, or covert pages.

**Generative AI** enables political actors to turn almost any **political message into a visual form**. As a result, AI-generated videos have become **highly flexible tools, ranging from realistic depictions to stylized or allegorical representations**. A key feature of such visual content, particularly hyper-realistic pieces, is their ability to **evoke powerful emotions** while offering simplified, easily digestible narratives. They often achieve wider reach than traditional political content, especially when supported by paid promotion.

*Figure 7: During the 2026 election campaign, Fidesz utilized AI-generated videos to disseminate and amplify their narratives. The [first](#) AI-generated video sought to instil fear and anxiety regarding the horrors of war. The [second](#) and [third](#) videos depicted Péter Magyar as a stooge of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The [fourth](#) video smeared the TISZA Party regarding alleged austerity measures.*



### 3. Key lessons

Hungary's experience highlights how difficult it is to regulate political advertising on social media and ensure compliance. These developments also illustrate how similar tactics could be replicated by **disinformation actors in other EU countries**.

#### 3.1 Lessons for malevolent actors on how to adapt to the post-ad era

With sufficient resources and an extensive, strategic and diversified social media presence, political actors can adapt to the post-advertisement era by relying on a multifaceted strategy.

- Continuing to **bypass ad bans** and exploit weaknesses in platform enforcement.
- Mobilizing **supporters, activists and inauthentic networks** to generate both organic and pseudo-organic engagement, including through **astroturfing** and **bot or troll activity**.
- Relying on more **polarizing language** and more **exaggerated messaging**.
- Using **proxy actors** to expand the number of coordinated voices carrying the same message.
- Producing **large volumes of content**, particularly **Facebook Reels** and other short-form videos that benefit from algorithmic amplification.
- Deploying **AI-generated content**, especially videos, to bypass filtering systems and provoke strong emotional reactions in order to shape perceptions more effectively.

#### 3.2 Lessons on the shortcomings of platforms

Although Google's and Meta's filtering systems have improved since the ad ban was introduced, several **problems and loopholes remain**:

- **Misidentification and misclassification**: Platforms do not always recognise political content correctly. While Meta simply allows such ads to run, Google categorises ads with political content under a broad range of non-political topical labels, including Arts and Entertainment, Autos and Vehicles, Beauty and Personal Care, Business and Industrial, Computer and Consumer Electronics, Finance, Hobbies, Games and Leisure, and Internet and Telecom.
- **AI-generated videos**: Video content, especially AI-generated material, appears to pass through filters more easily.
- **Inconsistent and selective review**: Ads are not always assessed consistently during platform review. While Meta reviews ads when they are launched, it does not always recognise their political nature appropriately. A second review of running ads appears to be more thorough, but also selective, often removing some versions of the same ad as political while leaving similar or identical versions online for longer.
- **Lack of data**: Google does not provide sufficient transparency on political ads that were launched and later removed.

**Unless tech platforms take their self-imposed ban policy more seriously and invest more in both technical and human oversight and enforcement, there is a real risk that the Hungarian election campaign and other upcoming campaigns will be shaped by a significant volume of illicit political ads – including deepfakes – with very large reach.**