

Fidesz & Co. flooded social media with anti-Western hostile disinformation in Hungary's election campaign, reaching EU spending records

Summary report of the project “The marketplace of (false) ideas: Uncovering, analyzing, debunking and researching sponsored disinfo” funded by the European Media and Information Fund

June, 2024



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About the project

Since October 2023, the research institute Political Capital, the fact-checking site Lakmusz, and the media watchdog Mertek Media Monitor have been collaborating to detect, analyze, and debunk sponsored disinformation during the 2024 election campaign in Hungary. The project *“The marketplace of (false) ideas: Uncovering, analyzing, debunking and researching sponsored disinfo”* was funded by the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF).

In this report we present the findings of our project, which specifically focused on advertised disinformation during the European Parliament and (local) election campaigns in Hungary. The report consists of three parts: The first part presents the results of Political Capital’s monitoring of political ad spending and the promotion of hostile narratives. The second part presents the fact-checks and investigations conducted by Lakmusz’ journalists and the third part presents the in-depth analyses of campaign videos and the focus group and survey research conducted by Mertek Media Monitor.

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Background on Hungary's political landscape

Hungary's last general election, in 2022, resulted in a decisive victory for Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party, securing a fourth consecutive term. This outcome was facilitated by the government's tight grip on the media and its control over the election narrative, particularly the widely used theme of "war or peace" propagated by Fidesz in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Fidesz portrayed itself as the guardian of Hungary's stability, in contrast to an opposition that was seen as potentially dragging the country into conflict.

On 9 June 2024, Hungary held both European and local elections amidst ongoing tensions between Fidesz and the EU (marked by Fidesz's departure from the European People's Party in 2021, and the withholding of EU funds over concerns about rule of law and democratic backsliding since December 2022). Economic challenges, including high inflation rates, persisted. Despite these issues, public sentiment continued to favor Fidesz, contrasting with a fragmented opposition and a growing cohort of undecided voters.

The political landscape was further shaken by the pardon scandal in early 2024, when President Katalin Novák's controversial pardon of a convicted pedophile accomplice led to widespread outrage and the resignation of Novák and former Justice Minister Judit Varga, who was also directly involved in the case by granting the pardon. During this turbulent period, a new political figure, Péter Magyar (Varga's ex-husband and a vocal critic of Fidesz "from within"), quickly emerged as a reformist alternative challenging both Fidesz and the traditional opposition.

I. Analysis of ad spending, spenders and narratives (by Political Capital)

Political Capital monitored the political ad spending on Meta and Google on the one hand and the promotion of ‘hostile narratives’ on the other. The concept of ‘hostile narratives’ goes beyond disinformation and is based on [academic literature](#). In our methodology hostile narratives are characterized as 1) the deliberate distortion of facts via narration and manipulative storytelling; 2) the exaggeration of existing fears and perceived threats; 3) the portrayal of socio-political actors and opponents as enemies. For more information see the [“Methodological Toolkit”](#).

Below, we first present the main findings on political advertising on social media, detailing the spending by different actors. We then present the findings on the promotion of hostile narratives, their promoters, the most widely circulated narratives and the terms used to depict the enemy.

The series of the 9 analyses, published on a bi-weekly basis between 29 February and 21 June, covered the period between 31 December 2023 and 15 June 2024.

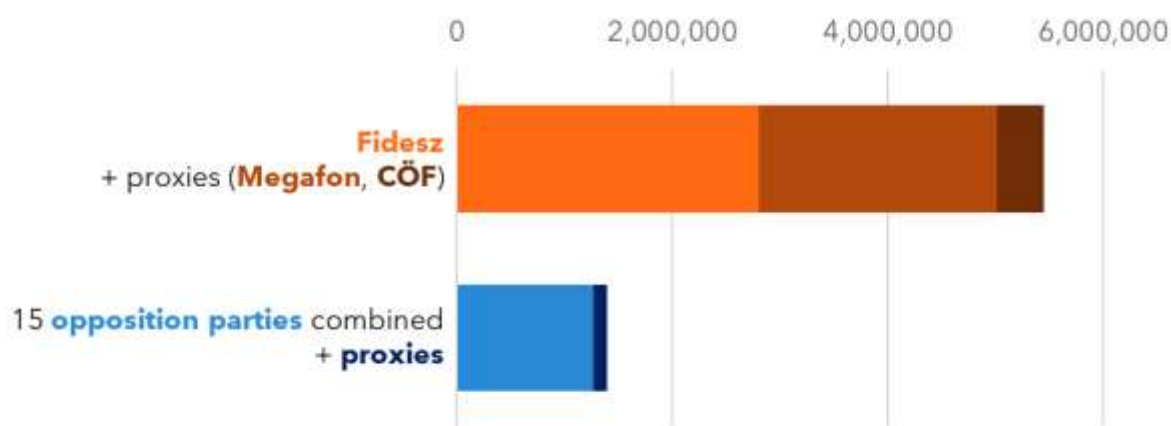
I.1. Political advertising on social media in Hungary’s election campaign

I.1.1. Fidesz and its proxies vs. the opposition and its proxies

The 2024 election campaign has once again revealed a huge asymmetry in political ad spending by political camps in Hungary. While the pro-Fidesz camp spent €5.4 million on Meta and Google ads from the beginning of the year until 15 June, all 15 opposition parties and their associated media spent a quarter of that, €1.4 million (see Figure 1).

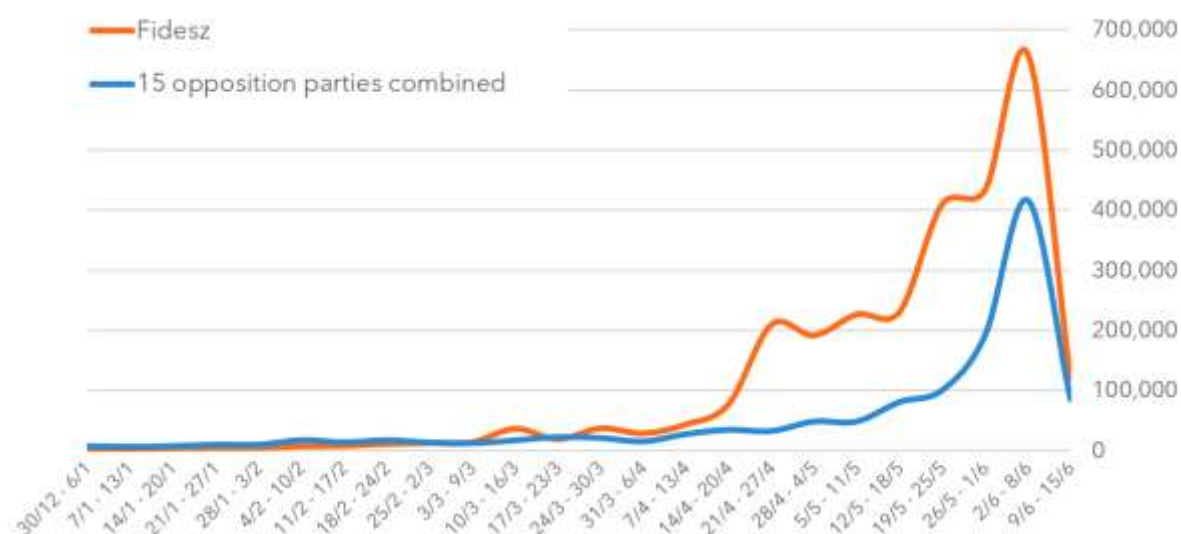
Fidesz and its politicians alone spent €2.8 million, twice as much as all 15 opposition parties combined, which totaled €1.3 million. However, Fidesz’s campaign was heavily supported by its proxy organizations, referred to as ‘third parties’ in the 2022 [report](#) of the OSCE-ODIHR Election Observation Mission, which seemingly independently promoted the ruling party’s messages. **Two government-organized actors played a major role in the campaign. Megafon**, an organization that trains, coordinates, finances, and promotes pro-government social media ‘influencers’, **spent almost €2.2 million**, and **the Civil Union Forum (CÖF)**, a government-organized NGO (GONGO) to which Fidesz usually outsources its negative campaigning, **spent another €0.4 million. The two proxies together spent 2 times more than all opposition parties combined.** In contrast, opposition proxies spent a total of €121 thousand.

1. Figure: **Political ad spending on Facebook and Google** (in euros, between 31 December 2023 and 15 June 2024. Source: weekly reports from Meta Ad Library and Google Ads Transparency Center, for HUF-EUR conversion we used the official rate on 6/6/2024)



Spending on political advertising began to soar in early April, widening the gap between Fidesz and the opposition parties (see Figure 2 below). Thus, even without proxies, the difference in available resources between the ruling party and the opposition is spectacular. This gives Fidesz a significant advantage in reaching potential voters – in line with the [assessment](#) of the OSCE-ODIHR Election Observation Mission in 2022, which found a huge asymmetry in the access to the public arena between the government side and its opponents.

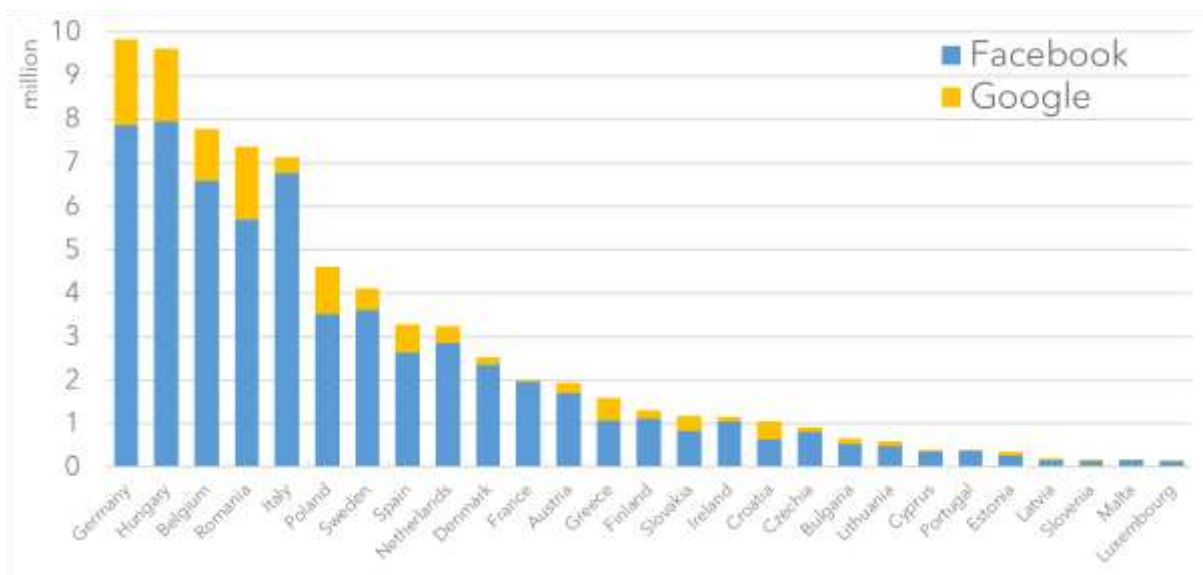
2. Figure: **Weekly ad spending of Fidesz and the 15 opposition parties combined on Facebook and Google** (in euros, aggregated data based on party affiliation of politicians, candidates and affiliates running ads. Source: weekly reports from Meta Ad Library and Google Ads Transparency Center, for HUF-EUR conversion we used the official rate on 6/6/2024)



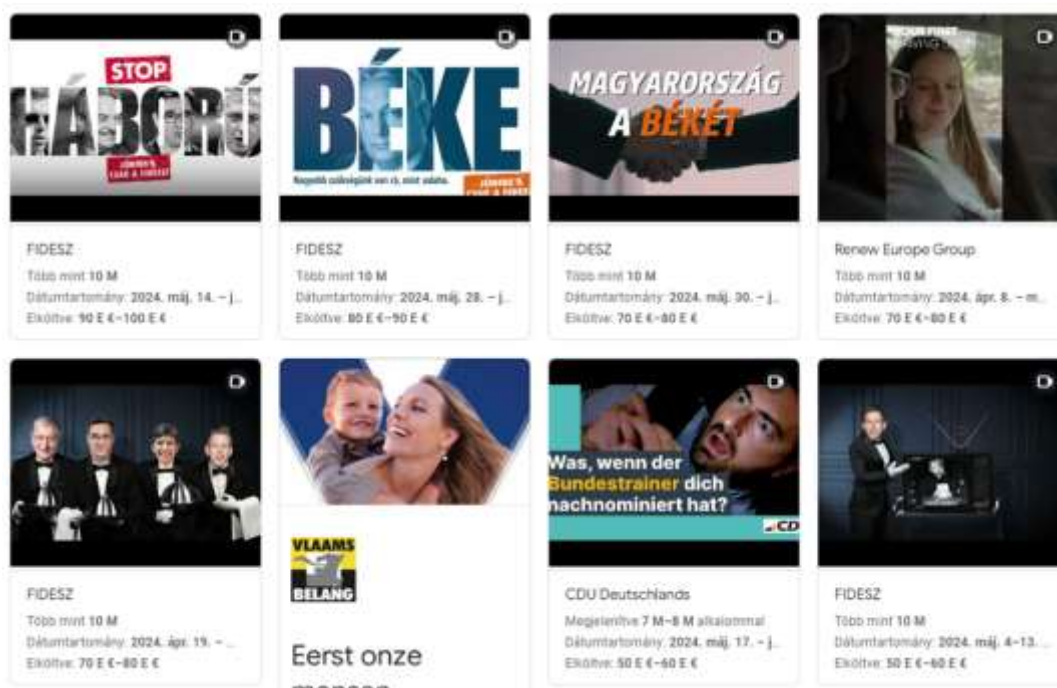
The level of online political advertising spending in Hungary is outstanding not only in the national context, but also by European standards. **Fidesz was the biggest advertiser on Google in the EU during the observed 5 months, paying for five of the eight most**

promoted videos. All three rungs of the imaginary podium are occupied by Fidesz – the ruling party of a country of 10 million people, at a time of election campaigns in all 27 EU countries.

3. Figure: **Political ad spending on Facebook and Google** in 27 EU Member States (in euros, in the last 90 days before Election Day. Source: weekly reports from Meta Ad Library and Google Ads Transparency Center, for countries outside the Euro area, spending is converted into Euro using the average of the ECB daily exchange rates for the 90 days under review)



4. Figure: **The eight most advertised videos on Google** between 1 January and 9 June 2024 (below the images are the advertiser, the number of views, the active period of the ad and the amount spent)



1.1.2. Pro-government media vs. independent media

The ruling Fidesz party's campaign was supported not only by GONGOs, but also by the highly centralized and controlled pro-government [media empire](#), which spent €2.5 million in the first five months of the year to advertise its content, although not exclusively on political issues. Nevertheless, government-organized media are often involved in spreading Fidesz's messages. In contrast, independent media outlets spent only €55 thousand and did not promote any party's message.

1.2. The main promoters of hostile narratives

For every Euro spent on political advertising in Hungary, 47 cents was spent on spreading a hostile narrative. Fidesz and its satellite organizations are the main – and almost sole – purveyors of hostile disinformation narratives, responsible for 98% of the total €2.5 million spent on promoting such narratives, while all opposition parties and their partisan media were responsible for only the remaining 2% (see Figure 5).

As shown above, Fidesz uses proxies such as GONGOs and government-organized media to amplify its messages. However, the role of these organizations becomes particularly clear when looking at the promotion of hostile messages. The data show that **Fidesz largely outsources its negative campaigning to third parties: while Fidesz's proxies spent €1.9 million promoting narratives hostile to Fidesz's political opponents, Fidesz spent only 0.5 million directly.**

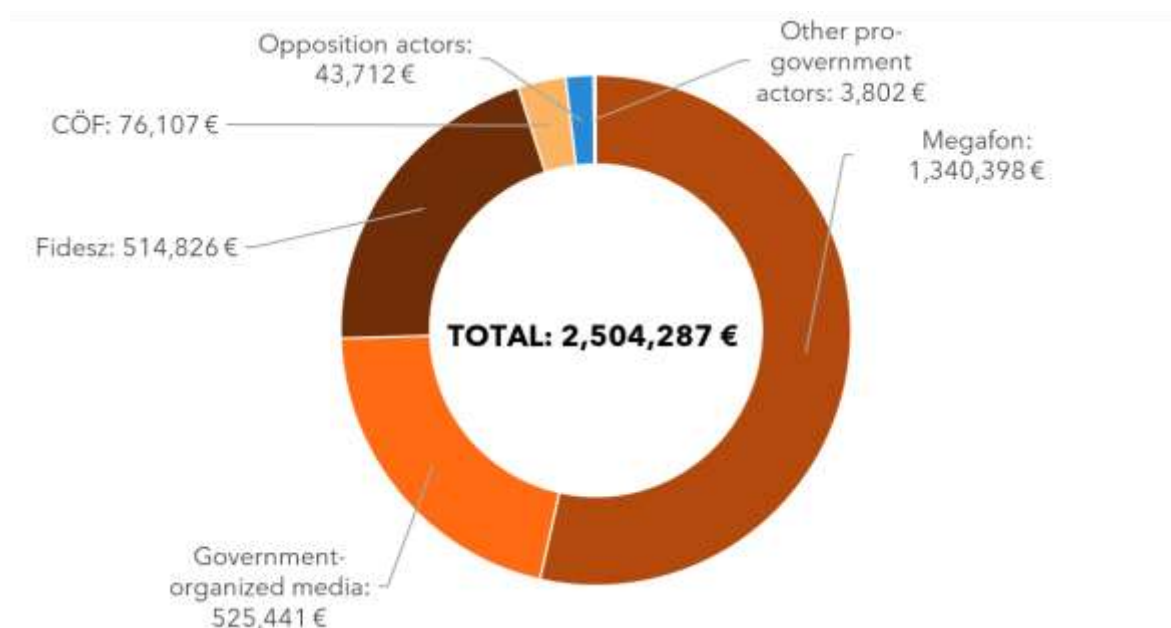
Fidesz's covert communication efforts were led by Megafon's pro-government 'influencers', who spent €1.3 million on videos spreading hostile narratives targeting all real and imagined opponents of the government. This accounted for over half (54%) of all spending.

Government-organized media spent a total of at least €0.5 million on hostile narratives, making them the second largest promoter of such content.

While CÖF's contribution to the campaign with its short videos targeting opposition politicians was crucial at certain times, overall, it has only played a limited role, spending only at least €76 thousand to promote hostile narratives.

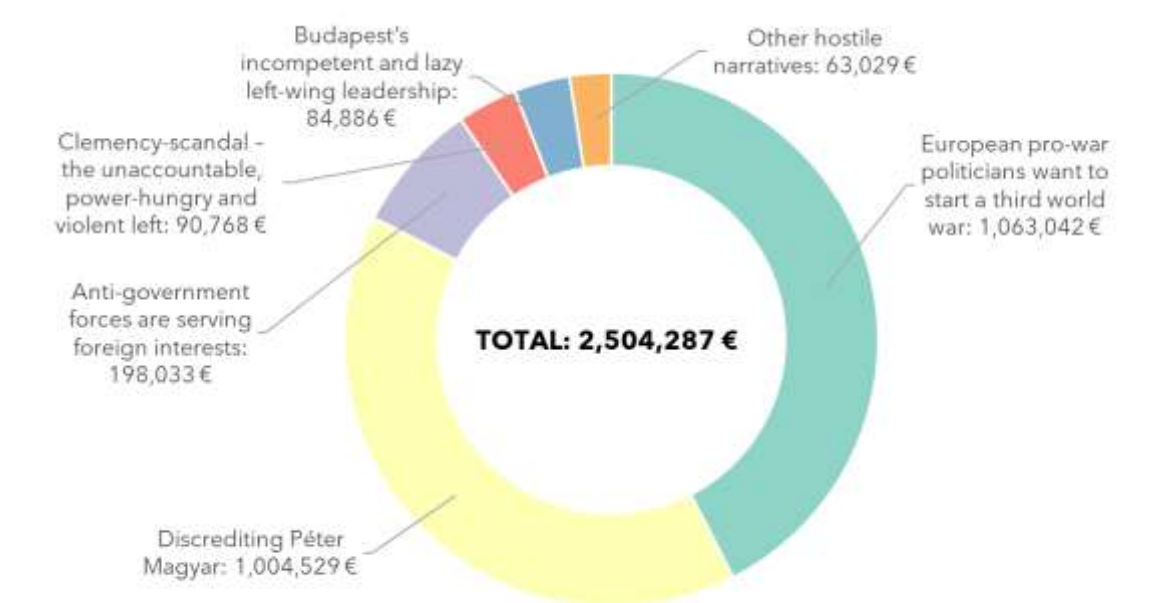
Anti-government hostile narratives are also present but remain almost below the surface. All opposition parties, mainly former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's Democratic Coalition (DK) and its proxies, spent a total of €44 thousand on advertising content with hostile narratives.

5. Figure: **Ad spending on hostile narratives on Facebook, by advertiser** (in euros, based on individual ads active between 4 February and 15 June 2024, downloaded via Meta Ad Library API and categorized by Political Capital, for HUF-EUR conversion we used the official rate on 6/6/2024)



I.3. The most promoted hostile narratives and terms

6. Figure: **Ad spend on hostile narratives on Facebook, by narrative** (in euros, based on individual ads active between 4 February and 15 June 2024, downloaded via Meta Ad Library API and categorized by Political Capital, for HUF-EUR conversion we used the official rate on 6/6/2024)



I.3.1. “European pro-war politicians and their Hungarian servants want to start World War III”

The most promoted hostile narrative overall in the whole period from 4 February to 15 June was that “European pro-war politicians and their Hungarian servants want to start World War III”. Pro-government actors spent €1.1 million, or around 42% of the total, on attacking the so-called “European pro-war politicians” and their Hungarian ‘servants’ who are contrasted with the government’s peace narrative. This narrative gradually grew in importance as the elections approached, overtaking all other narratives in the final weeks.

Pro-government actors from the prime minister to political talking heads have manipulatively edited excerpts of speeches by European politicians, accusing them of being “warmongers”, in the service of the “globalist war lobby” who want to “recruit men and women from all over Europe to send them to die in Ukraine”. The World War III narrative reinforces the false message that the election was a choice between war and peace. The argument is that the ‘pro-war left’ and most Western countries want to drag Europe into the Russian-Ukrainian war by sending weapons and troops to help Ukraine. On the other hand, the ‘right’, led by Fidesz, is ‘pro-peace’, and it alone wants to end the military conflict by advocating for a ceasefire and peace talks. The European politicians targeted by these narratives include Ursula von der Leyen, Emmanuel Macron, Donald Tusk, Olaf Scholz, Manfred Weber, Jens Stoltenberg, and several ministers of the German and Polish governments. Most of them are simply labeled as “leftist”, even though many of them belong to right-wing parties.

This narrative is built upon years of [pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign](#) of Fidesz and the government-organized media in Hungary, spreading conspiracy theories about Ukraine, and the West’s role in the conflict, often directly borrowing from Russian strategic narratives.

Examples of hostile terms used in the narrative: Brussels bullshit train; Brussels imperial army; Brussel war council/center; European politicians drunk on war psychosis; fantasies of nuclear war; global beepers; globalist left-wing war hawks; generals of the Soros-plan in Brussels; Polish leader burning with battle fever; pro-war Brussels leaders; pro-war governments; pro-war censorship; Soros-bitches; Soros-shuffle mix; Sorosist Polish minister; the left has been completely taken over by the psychosis of war; the Polish government that aggressively took power; the war train has no brakes; war profiteers; war-hungry globalists; wartime insanity; Zelensky's hysterical demands.

1.3.2. Discrediting Péter Magyar

The second most promoted hostile narrative targeted the newly emerged opposition hopeful Péter Magyar, who entered the political arena after the clemency scandal erupted in early February 2024. **Hostile narratives aimed at discrediting him alone were promoted of €1.0 million, or 40% of the total spending. However, as the elections approached, hostile narratives against Péter Magyar faded somewhat and were partially subsumed into hostile narratives about the war.** While the vast majority of the above amount was spent by Fidesz's proxies, a small portion was spent by hyper-partisan media outlets close to the opposition party DK.

The discrediting campaign by pro-government actors, particularly the government-organized media and Megafon 'influencers', has promoted multiple narratives about Péter Magyar, accusing him of being a "power-hungry" person, who had become the "new leftist messiah", to serve the interests of the "American left owned by the empire of George Soros". After his ex-wife revealed details of their failed marriage, claiming that Magyar had abused her, the smear campaign kicked into high gear, and Magyar was regularly branded as a personality-disordered, violent, pro-war man who was inciting people to riot (see hostile terms below).

The intense Russian-style smear campaign against Magyar has been aimed at protecting Fidesz's core voter base and neutralizing the political risk of Magyar's rise, by trying to discredit him both personally and politically.

Examples of hostile terms used in the narrative: *Clown Peter; the left's new messiah; leftist lie masquerade; left-wing star-makers and messiah-carvers; liberal-commies; life-threatening mental disorder; lumbic messiah; metropolitan liberal messiah; narcissistic footballer's wife; new globalist investment; petty blackmailer; Psycho Péter; power-hungry abuser; project of the American left; the left's endless cesspool; the nightmare of psychologists; wife terrorizing, wiretapping, family humiliating, leftist little bully; libtard; Soros-infected politician.*

Background: Who is 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 grabbed the attention of the public, rallying tens of thousands of people on multiple occasions, he decided to start a party challenging both the governing Fidesz and all opposition parties. Finally, his TISZA party won 29.6 percent of the vote (1.35 million), making him the leader of the largest opposition party in Hungary. Together with 6 other TISZA MEPs, Péter Magyar joined the European People's Party.

1.3.3. “Anti-government forces serve foreign interests”

Third on the list of spending on hostile narratives is the narrative that “anti-government forces serve foreign interests”, which was promoted for €198 thousand, or 8% of the total.

According to this narrative, the opposition parties and independent media are foreign agents funded by George Soros and the so-called “international globalist war, migration, and gender lobby” to serve their interests in Hungary. They are accused of “being in the pockets of the globalists” to “drag Hungary into the Russo-Ukrainian war, allow illegal immigrants into the country, and spread gender propaganda to poison children’s minds”. The labels “dollar left”, “dollar media” and “dollar celebrity”, built up over [the last two years](#), are used by Fidesz, its proxies and media as synonyms for foreign agents to stigmatize any anti-government or independent organization or individual – following the Russian model.

Examples of hostile terms used in the narrative: *betrayed the entire nation; dollar army; dollar celebrities; dollar left; dollar media; dollar pimps; dollar workers; Dollar Daddy of the US Embassy; fooling the Hungarians for a few bucks; globalist masters of the left; Hungarian-poisoning Soros-dollars; LGBTQ brainwashing; leftist scheming Brussels; humble servants of Brussels; pro-war left-wing politician bought with dollars; sold out the country for dollars; Soros empire; traitors; treasonous politician; violent woke propaganda; war-gender-migration propaganda.*

1.3.4. Clemency scandal: the pro-government narrative about the “unaccountable, power-hungry and violent left”

The pro-government messages to reframe the clemency scandal are the fourth most promoted hostile narrative with spending of €91 thousand, or less than 4% of the total spending. This narrative attacks opposition politicians and the independent media that exposed the scandal as allegedly “irresponsible”, “power-hungry” and “violent”.

The narrative is that then president Katalin Novák and former justice minister Judit Varga took political responsibility by resigning and admitting “failure”, authentically representing the values of the right-wing community, while in contrast, opposition politicians (uniformly labelled as left-wing) never take responsibility for their actions and sins. The government-organized media has also accused opposition politicians of using the issue of child protection for their political gain, and that they are a group of “unaccountable”, “power-hungry” and “violent” individuals, who will use any means to gain power.

Examples of hostile terms used in the narrative: *bearded women; crazy woke-people; crimes against the nation; hypocritical and two-faced left; Sorosists comrades; the jackals of our public life; the left’s gender-fever-induced insanity; the left-without-consequences; trans-lobby; violent antifas; violent gender-propaganda.*

1.3.5. Budapest's incompetent and lazy left-wing leadership

Parallel to the European Parliament elections, local elections were held across the country on 9 June 2024. Hungary's capital, Budapest, was a key battleground for the opposition and Fidesz, resulting in an intensified campaign against the incumbent mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony. Alexandra Szentkirályi, Fidesz's candidate for mayor of Budapest, who withdrew from the race two days before the election on 7 June, and Megafone's 'influencers' spent €85 thousand to accuse Gergely Karácsony of being pro-war, corrupt and incompetent, who has been busy "robbing the City Hall" instead of solving the city's problems as a "puppet" of Ferenc Gyurcsány, leader of the DK party and Fidesz's decades-long arch-enemy. In this campaign, a cartoon video of Karácsony appearing as the baby of the Gyurcsány family was a qualitative leap in the negative and hostile portrayal of the mayor.

Examples of hostile terms used in the narrative: *Baby Gyurcsány; Bankruptcy Mayor; Budapest is the prisoner of the dollar left; Ference Gyurcsány is a disease that infects Budapest; puppet in the mayor's chair; pro-war dollar left Gyurcsány puppet; Mr. Wimp.*

1.3.6. Other hostile narratives

Other hostile narratives on various topics accounted for €63 thousand spent by several different actors.

We identified dozens of other ads that more or less fit the concept of hostile narratives but reached far fewer people because they were advertised for far less money. A prime example was the opposition's narrative attacking the Orbán government over the clemency scandal, labelling prominent government politicians, including former President Novák, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán "pedophile saviors" for their role in the decision. Another branch included pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian narratives related to the Russo-Ukrainian war and Sweden's NATO accession, spread by government-organized media and the far-right Mi Hazánk party. A prominent example was the alleged plan of the Ukrainian government to occupy Hungary if it lost the war against Russia. This story was quickly debunked by our fact-checking partner Lakmusz. Mi Hazánk has also promoted several conspiracy theories about total digital surveillance by companies and the state, exaggerating the risks of artificial intelligence and online payment solutions.

The opposition DK party has also attacked the new Fidesz-nominated president of the republic, Tamás Sulyok, with his father's "full Nazi" past and that he was part of a "land mafia" that sold Hungarian farmland to foreign buyers in the 1990s, reflecting to two recent scandals involving the new president. Klára Dobrev, the leader of DK's European Parliament list, has also described the Chinese president's visit to Hungary in early May as the "arrival of Chinese colonial ships". In a similar vein, another opposition party, the LMP-Greens, has spread a hostile narrative about battery manufacturing plants "colonizing" Hungary.

The 9 analyses in Hungarian can be found [on this page](#).

An analysis in English published on 25 April can be found [here](#) and another published on 8 June [here](#).

II. Fact-checking, monitoring monetized disinformation, and investigating advertisers (by Lakmusz)

II.1. False or misleading claims

Throughout the project, Lakmusz's journalists wrote weekly fact-checks of claims advertised for money on Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs), exposing the seeds of disinformation used in political ads: claims that are wholly or partially false, taken out of context, or otherwise misleading. These claims are reused in multiple ads, and many of the ads contain multiple false claims that support misleading and/or hostile narratives.


For example, the most advertised hostile narrative was connected to the war, suggesting that

“European pro-war politicians and their Hungarian allies want to drag our country to World War III”



Illustration: Réka Szulágyi, Bence Kiss

This narrative was supported, among others, by the following claims:

 <p>8 ads, €14,674</p>	<p>ADVERTISED CLAIM:</p> <p>“Germany’s minister of education says we must start preparing even children for war.”</p> <p>FACT-CHECK: MISLEADING</p> <p>According to the original statement, we need to teach children what to do when they face any kind of crisis in their lives - be it war, environmental catastrophe, or pandemic.</p>
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38 ads, €38,639

ADVERTISED CLAIM:

"Manfred Weber wants to introduce compulsory military service in all EU member states."

FACT-CHECK:
FALSE

Weber talked only about Germany's military service, not about an EU-wide compulsory military service. The European People's Party said in a statement that Weber never supported this idea and therefore never talked about it.



42 ads, €78,685

ADVERTISED CLAIM:

"Emmanuel Macron is ready to send troops to Ukraine and to use nuclear weapons."

FACT-CHECK:
MISSING CONTEXT

Macron said there's no consensus on troops in Ukraine, but nothing can be ruled out. He also said that France has nuclear capabilities, but it is their responsibility to avoid escalation.




42 ads, €71,598

ADVERTISED CLAIM:

"Donald Tusk, Manfred Weber and Ursula von der Leyen are left-wing, pro-war politicians who serve the interests of George Soros."

FACT-CHECK:
FALSE

While claiming that certain politicians are pro-war or serve someone's interests may be considered a political opinion and is beyond the scope of fact-checkers, it can factually be pointed out that the aforementioned politicians do not belong to left-wing political parties.

	ADVERTISED CLAIM:
	<p>Former Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány is a pro-war politician. This claim is supported by a video clip of Gyurcsány saying that "in war you have to have weapons in your hands".</p>
	FACT-CHECK: FALSE CONTEXT
173 ads, €168,163	<p>Gyurcsány was not talking about the war in Ukraine, but about the Hungarian opposition's political war against Viktor Orbán.</p>

Other false/misleading claims were related to the following topics:

1. **Undermining trust in the European Union** (e.g. €27,700 spent on the misleading and out-of-context claim that Ursula von der Leyen "admitted" that the EU withheld funds from Hungary not because of rule of law issues but because of the child protection act; €3,000 spent on advertising that EU funds were used to support Hamas);
 - ✗ **Criticizing other European countries** (e.g. 23,000 euros spent on claims that the German economy is struggling because the country is spending its resources on supporting Ukraine and migrants);
 - ✗ **Discrediting opposition politicians** (e.g. €35,000 spent on false claim that Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony planned to ban cars older than 10 years from the capital).

In total, Lakmusz debunked 46 election-related claims advertised on Google's and Meta's platforms between October 2023 and June 2024 (articles with English translations are available here: <https://www.lakmusz.hu/elections-2024/>).

II.2. Monetized disinformation

By collecting all ads containing at least one claim debunked by Lakmusz, we were able to show for the first time in Hungary how much money the platforms made from amplifying disinformation during the campaign.

We identified 511 individual advertisements containing at least one false/misleading claim. These were advertised for a total of at least 188 million forints (475 thousand euros).

Number of claims checked:	46
Number of ads containing false claims:	511
Money spent on false ads:	€475,000

II.3. Investigations

In addition to writing fact-checks, Lakmusz journalists also conducted in-depth investigations into the most prominent purveyors of disinformation. The focus was on the so-called Megafon Centre, an organization that aims to amplify right-wing voices online. It provides various resources, including training, mentoring, and advertising, to influencers who spread the government's narratives on various social media platforms, mostly in the form of short videos.



Megafon's logo: "Your voice - amplified"

The source of Megafon's funding remains unclear (the company claims to have received 12 million euros from anonymous donors, but reports show that public funds also enter Megafon's accounts in an opaque manner through various foundations).

During the 2024 campaign, Megafon Center became one of the biggest spenders on social media, spending 2.2 million euros to amplify the content of its influencers.

In a series of investigations, we analyzed the group photos published about Megafon's training sessions, and we used OSINT techniques to identify 450 individuals across Hungary connected to the government-affiliated influencer network.

Part1: [Nearly 70 Fidesz candidates attended Megafon's trainings before the local elections](#)

The article revealed that nearly 70 people who had attended Megafon's training sessions were running in the 2024 elections, either as Fidesz candidates or as "independent" politicians.



Illustration: Réka Szulágyi, Bence Kiss

Part2: [They appear as ordinary Facebook users, but they were actually trained by Megafon](#)

The second article identified more than 30 individuals who present themselves as authentic online opinion leaders, but whose ties to Megafon have remained largely hidden from the public. These individuals manage anonymous or semi-anonymous platforms that employ astroturfing tactics to disguise political campaigns as grassroots activities.



Illustration: Bence Kiss

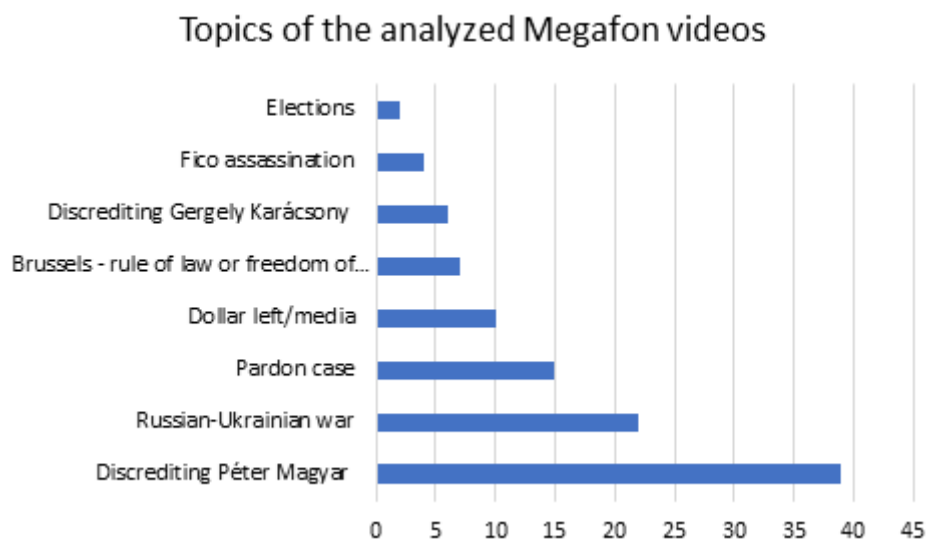
III. Video analysis, focus group and survey research (by Mertek Media Monitor)

III.1. Megafon video analysis

Mertek Media Monitor also used the concept of the hostile narrative to analyze Megafon's videos. Mertek conducted an in-depth analysis of Megafon's 105 most advertised videos to better understand this phenomenon and how these narratives are constructed in the videos. Of these 105 videos, Megafon spent a minimum of €518 thousand on advertising. The videos published by the influencers closely follow political and public events, framing current events in a way that is closely aligned with the government's narratives.

The videos analyzed were published on 8 different topics, the most frequent of which focused on the discrediting of Péter Magyar (39 videos), the Russian-Ukrainian war (22 videos), and the Hungarian clemency scandal (15 videos). Videos on a given topic were posted by all influencers within 1-2 days. These videos have the same logical structure, the same argumentation, and often even the same editing techniques. The current topics and the hostile narratives we studied were largely determined by the large-scale smear campaign against the new opposition leader, Péter Magyar. His central role is also indicated by the amount of money spent. Of the €518 thousand spent on advertising the 105 most expensive videos, more than 43% was spent on discrediting Magyar, totaling nearly €225 thousand. The second most advertised topic, the Russian-Ukrainian war, accounted for "only" 17.9 percent of the videos analyzed, or €92.6 thousand.

7. Figure: The eight topics of the 105 Megafon videos by frequency



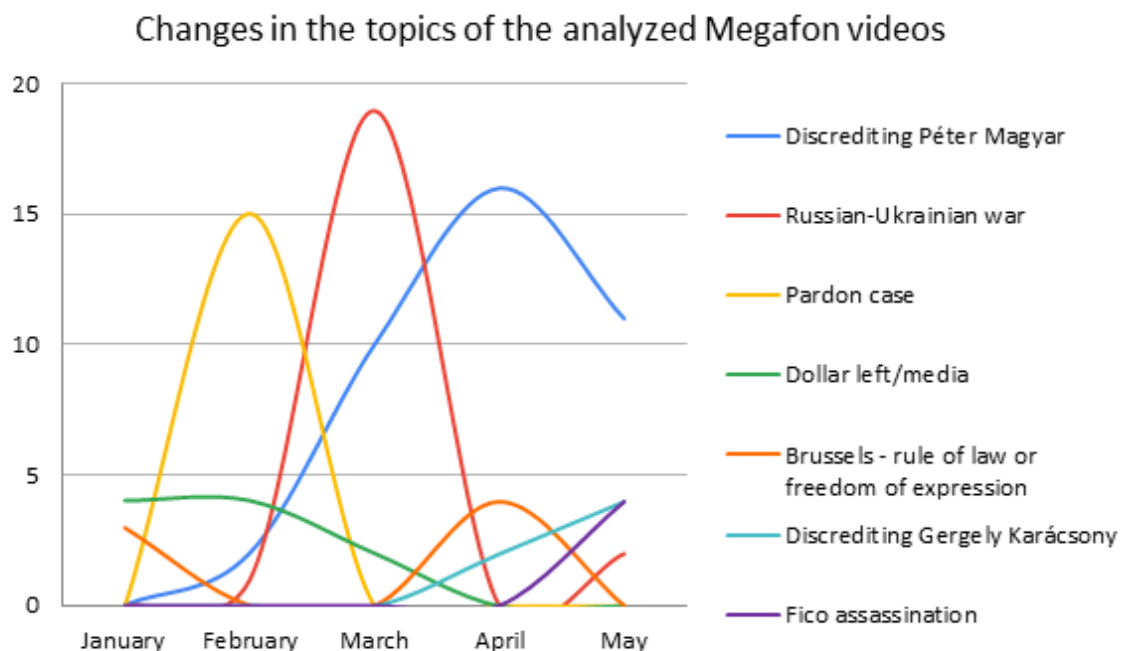
In most Megafon videos, a classic conspiracy theory is unfolded with all its typical tools. Conspiracy theories are moral tales based on archetypal narratives of right and wrong, good and evil. They create a black-and-white worldview, increase hostility toward the "other," and reinforce divisions between in-group and out-group members by delegitimizing claims that differ from one's own and interpreting them as part of a

conspiracy. Megafon influencers follow the government's rhetoric to identify the arch-enemies, who in most cases appear at the level of the secret power involved in the conspiracy. The most common enemy images - "globalist elites", "international left" and George Soros - are presented as a frightening "pro-war", "leftist" background power that wants to put pressure on Hungary in pursuit of its evil interests. And this pressure is mostly based on the fear of "war, gender, migration", as Viktor Orbán himself often mentions.

The Hungarian opposition was portrayed by the Megafon influencers as "pro-war and pro-migrant," driven by foreign interests. According to the narratives used to create the image of the enemy, the "dollar left" and the "dollar media" that the Megafon influencers claim to be working with are funded by the "globalist elite," the "international left," the "globalist war lobby," or even George Soros, and therefore share these views that harm Hungary's interests. In the context of the pardon scandal, this has been complemented by the hostile narrative of the "never taking responsibility" and "consequence-free" left.

Péter Magyar also changed the dynamics of the enemy concept. When he appeared in February, influencers tried to spread the message that Magyar was an abusive, violent man. Then, in March and April, the character assassination against him took a new turn, with videos attempting to paint him as a "dollar leftist. In May, the most promoted videos explicitly used incidents from Magyar's cross-country campaign tour to discredit the politician, further reinforcing the narrative that the Tisza Party leader is an aggressive, violent man.

8. Figure: Topics of Megafon videos: temporal distribution



Further evidence of the hostile intent of the videos examined is the lack of "good guys/allies" against the threats outlined. Pro-war and pro-foreign interests are countered

by "peace" or "common sense", but this is very rarely associated with a person or party by the influencers. For example, Viktor Orbán's picture appears in less than 10 videos, and his name is mentioned even less often by Megafon influencers.

Elections also play a surprisingly small role in the Megafon videos examined. Almost half of the videos do not even mention the elections. When they do mention the elections, it is more to counter the images of the enemy, with influencers telling viewers who to vote against and advising them to "think soberly". A few days before the elections, several influencers posted videos explicitly urging people to vote, and some even said they would vote for Fidesz. Only two of these videos were included in the sample based on ad spend.

The detailed analyses can be found on the following links (in Hungarian):

[The story of the clemency scandal through Megafon videos](#)

[Hostility production for millions – the pro-war left](#)

["The new messiah of the left" - Péter Magyar campaign back online](#)

III.2. Tribal views of media, Megafon and press freedom - focus group discussions

The aim of the focus group research was to find out what the research participants think about the Hungarian media system and how they relate to propaganda. Megafon was strongly emphasized in the interview, we were curious to know how Megafon videos are perceived, how aware the participants are of what they are actually seeing when such content appears on social media.

The research clearly demonstrated the polarization of the Hungarian public and thus of Hungarian society. Surprisingly, **even the terms used by pro- and opposition voters differ**. Opposition respondents refer to it as pro-government or opposition/independent media, while pro-government (Fidesz) voters prefer to think of it as a right-left split in the media.

The two types of media differ in three important ways:

- What problems they are dealing with - both sides feel that their side of the media is dealing with the real problems and that the problem statements of the two sides are very far apart.
- Who it criticizes - the opposition criticizes its own side, the pro-government press criticizes only the opposition or its opponents.
- Overall, what is the tone – the pro-government press is positive and optimistic about Hungary and the government, while the opposition press is negative and pessimistic.

The difference in the **basic role of the media** is that while the opposition would expect the media to be critical of the government, the pro-government media do not report the idea that the media are there to check power. Rather, they see the media as an enabler of power, or in the case of opposition media, as a skill for power.

This polarization is clearly visible in the fact that both government and opposition respondents see the media on both sides as presenting news and events in very different and often contradictory ways. But both sides believe that their media is the more reliable.

There is a fundamental difference in the way research participants understand **trustworthiness**. Opposition respondents interpret trustworthiness primarily in terms of how close a media outlet is to reality, to the facts, and clearly perceive independent media outlets critical of the government as more trustworthy and objective. On the other hand, pro-government respondents tend to derive trust from the relationship to the truth. They believe that they have the truth on their side, which is reflected primarily in their media.

Many people also look at the **other side's news** - but they do so on the basis that their own media is clearly the more credible and reliable. So these situations are less likely to lead to a corrected, middle ground. Rather, the differences that are discovered serve as confirmation that the other side does not see the world, the government's actions, and events correctly. This is reflected in the frequent use of labels: media critical of the government are called "libbish" and "bad faith" by Fidesz, while government media are called "brainwashed" and "incitement" by the opposition. Those who sympathize with the government also tend to criticize opposition journalists.

The majority of respondents explicitly like online public discussion programs. One of the main attractions of this genre is that it provides information in a more entertaining way, while at the same time offering a deeper insight into a topic. Opposition respondents have also turned to online public affairs programs because they feel that the rise of Fidesz has made it increasingly difficult for them to find the public affairs content that appeals to them in the print press and on television.

Megafon is a better known name among opposition respondents than among government respondents. They are more likely to know only a few influencers who are not necessarily aware that they belong to Megafon.

Respondents from **the ruling and opposition parties had very different attitudes toward the content and credibility of the Megafon videos**. The pro-government respondents could identify with the content of the videos, believed in their truth, and had only stylistic concerns. But more important than their own tastes, they believe that there are certainly target audiences that these videos can reach and thus ultimately be useful to the right, to Fidesz.

According to the opposition interviewees, the videos are manipulative, they are seen as government propaganda. They find them discredited and therefore reject the way they communicate. In addition to the propaganda nature of the videos, many on the opposition side are aware of their public funding. They are also very negative about it. Megafon has become for them a symbol of bad, useless spending of public money.

Opposition and government respondents also have different **attitudes toward propaganda** itself. Opposition respondents perceive government-affiliated propaganda media as a major problem and would prefer free, independent media.

The voters of the ruling party do not see any serious problems with the way government propaganda works. They dismiss criticism that questions the use of these tools by relativizing and trivializing them. They do not believe in the independence of the media, in the freedom of the press, which they believe exists only in an ideal world. They believe that in reality, especially in Hungary's small media market, every media outlet needs big donors to operate, which inevitably leads to dependence on political or economic circles.

The detailed analyses can be found on the following link (in Hungarian): [A magyarországi média és propaganda - Kvalitatív vizsgálat kormánypárti és ellenzéki szavazók körében](#)

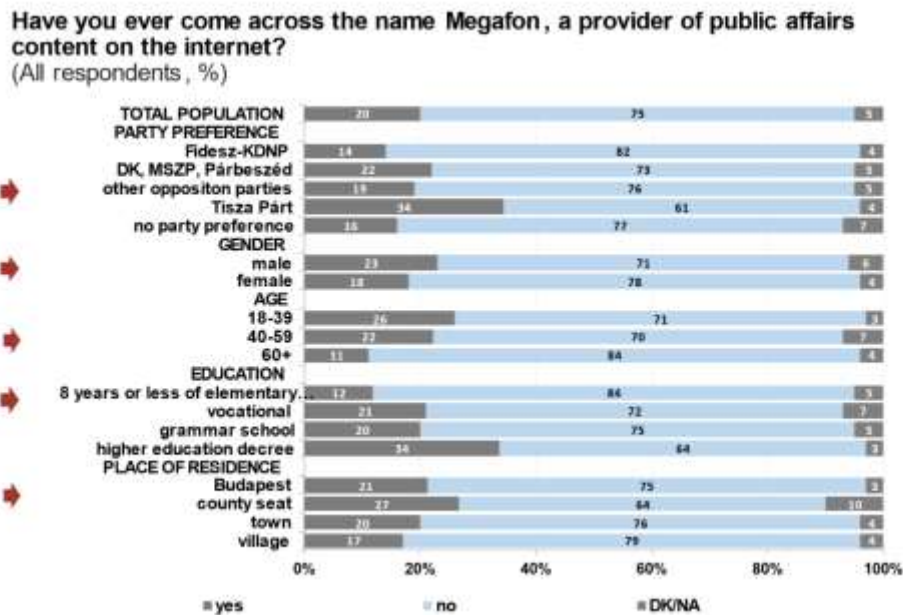
III.3. Awareness and perception of Megafon: survey results

The survey confirmed some of our previous information, for example that online sources play an important role in news consumption. Notably, many people now follow YouTube channels and podcasts.

Not surprisingly, social networking sites and algorithmic content are also part of users' daily lives. Less than half of respondents are aware of the source of their information, and many of them click on sites they do not trust.

The most novel element of the research is the analysis of perception of Megafon content and awareness of political influencers. Only a small proportion of respondents are aware of political influencers, and awareness of Megafon as an advertiser is not very high. It is noticeable that the voters of the new opposition party, Tisza, are the most familiar with Megafon, probably due to the fact that party leader Péter Magyar often mentions Megafon at demonstrations as the main propaganda tool of the ruling party. Awareness of Megafon is also above average among young people, university graduates and residents of county seats.

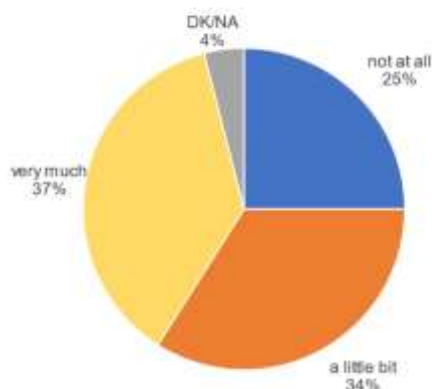
9. Figure: Prominence of Megafon



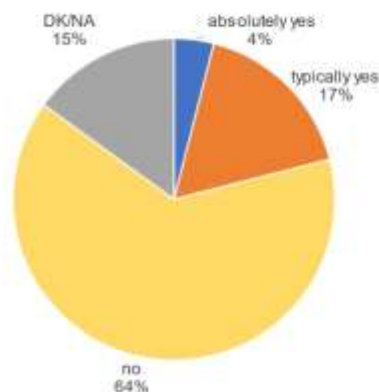
Megafon videos are something that everyone who uses Facebook encounters, even if they may not be able to identify what the content is. Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents are disturbed by these videos and find them unreliable.

10. Figure: Perception of Megafon

How much do Megafon videos bother you?
(Among those who are used to seeing it on social media, %; N=275)



Do you consider Megafon's content to be reliable?
(Among those who know its name, %; N=204)

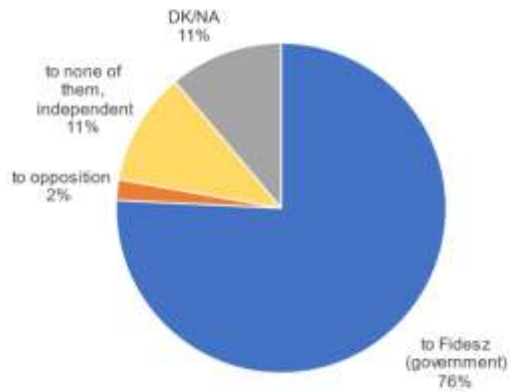


Awareness of Megafon is strongly influenced by the fact that the brand name does not appear next to the content, but only as the sponsor of the advertising. This is probably the reason why only 30% of the respondents know that it is paid content, but still it seems that articles about Megafon have reached a part of the society. The fact that Megafon is close to the ruling parties is known by a very large number of respondents, three quarters of them.

11. Figure: Perception of Megafon

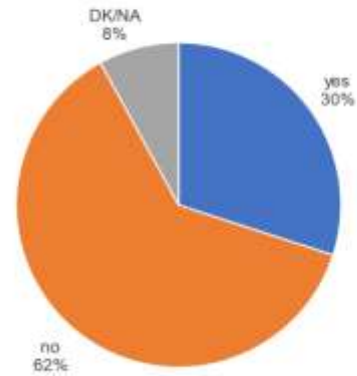
Which political side do you think Megafon is close to?

(Among those who have encountered the name Megafon, %; N=204)



Do you know that this content is constantly being advertised?

(Among those who are used to seeing it on social media, %; N=275)



The detailed analyses can be found on the following link (in Hungarian): [Online tartalomfogyasztás és a Megafon - Kvantitatív kutatás eredményeinek összefoglalója](#)

IV. Policy recommendations for fair election campaigns on social media

Researchers from Political Capital and Mérték Media Monitor and journalists from Lakmusz have regularly published research and fact-checking articles on electoral disinformation during the 2024 campaign period. We have tracked, analysed and verified paid content promoted during the campaign and identified who is funding it. We also attempted to show, for the first time in Hungary, how much money each social media platform is making by promoting false and misleading information.

The project on electoral misinformation was carried out by a consortium led by Political Capital, involving Lakmusz and Mérték Media Monitor, which won a €143,000 grant from the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF) in an open call for proposals. Any content supported by the EMIF is the sole responsibility of the author(s) and does not necessarily reflect the views of the EMIF or the Fund's partners, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the European University Institute.

Based on the analytical work experience, the following policy recommendations are made.

Recommendations for platforms

1. Platforms have already taken effective steps to ensure transparency in political advertising and promotion. However, we recommend that they disclose the exact amount of such spending.
2. Experience has clearly shown that the practice of classifying individual advertisements as political advertising is not uniform even within a given platform and that different platforms use different criteria. The Code of Practice also provides for cooperation between platforms in order to develop a uniform and transparent definition of political advertising (Commitment 3). Although a uniform definition had to be adopted in the first year of application of the Code of Practice, it seems that there is a chance to develop a uniform definition once the Regulation on transparency and targeting of political advertising enters into force. It is proposed that platforms should develop an interpretative recommendation for the definition of political advertisement in the Regulation (Article 2(2)) before the entry into force of the Regulation, which will help to categorise advertisements with examples.
3. Platforms are crucial for electoral campaigns, and it is, therefore, essential to establish transparent, consistent, and predictable practices for political communication, particularly for electoral campaigns. Currently, decisions on political content, particularly sponsored political content, do not meet these conditions.

4. We recommend that platforms seek to obtain and publish data on the actual funders of political advertising. Currently, the funding background of political advertising can be obscured by the reporting of entities that have no real activity other than funding advertising on the platforms. The publication of real business data alone would significantly increase transparency.
5. We recommend that giant platforms and very popular search engines set up independent monitoring bodies, at least during election campaigns, composed of experts with knowledge of the language, social context and electoral rules of the country concerned to support platforms in assessing political messages.
6. It is recommended that platforms take the initiative to work more closely with national fact-checking organisations that follow international standards and consider the results of their fact-checking activities in the fight against political disinformation.

Recommendations for domestic stakeholders

1. Although very little experience has yet been gained with the Digital Service Coordinator, it will be an important player in the assessment of systemic risks in the operation of the platform in the Member States, based on European legislation. It is recommended that the Digital Service Coordinator develops a strategy for election campaigns to monitor and assess the impact of systemic risks related to the operation of platforms on election campaigns, involving the widest possible range of stakeholders.

Recommendations for national legislators

1. Campaign financing in European Parliament and local elections is essentially unregulated, creating a serious imbalance between competing candidate organisations. It is recommended that legislators also set a ceiling and transparency for campaign spending in these elections.
2. We recommend that a regulation be established requiring campaign expenses to include the expenditures of all organisations that publish advertisements or paid content on behalf of a candidate organisation.
3. We recommend that political advertisers should be able to demand that the actual sponsors of political advertising be identified and publicly available, regardless of the advertising platform.

Recommendations to the European Union institutions

1. All the proposals concerning platforms are also proposals for the Commission, as platforms can essentially be persuaded to increase transparency through regulatory instruments.

2. Despite several provisions on complaint handling, justification and disclosure of decisions and transparency in the Digital Services Act and the self-regulatory code on disinformation, the functioning of platforms remains completely opaque. To monitor the fairness of election campaigns, it would also be of the utmost importance that platforms publish the various transparency reports (Code of Practice Commitment 36-36; DSA Articles 15, 24 and 42) and decisions on infringing or illegal conduct (DSA Dashboard) in a clear and uniform structure and with uniform content. We propose that the Commission adopt a Recommendation setting out a common structure and minimum content for reports and data.
3. We suggest that the Commission clarifies in an interpretative Recommendation that the justification of decisions taken by platforms (Article 17 DSA) should also be made public in an anonymised manner.
4. As the Digital Service Coordinator can be an effective facilitator of the debate on the assessment of systemic risks to the functioning of platforms in the Member States, we propose to strengthen and detail the European requirements for the independence of the Digital Service Coordinator (Article 50 DSA). If the Member State designates the media regulator or its decision-maker as the digital service coordinator, the Commission should necessarily take into account the findings on the independence of the media regulator in the annual rule of law report when assessing independence.
5. While state-sponsored disinformation is not currently a common phenomenon in EU Member States, there is no effective European instrument to detect and combat it. The European Media Freedom Act regulates the distribution of state advertising, but does not ensure that these rules are enforced. Furthermore, the European Union must take every opportunity to state that state-supported and therefore systemic disinformation is incompatible with European values and excludes the democratic formation and expression of will and, ultimately, the possibility of free and fair elections. It is proposed that state-sponsored disinformation should be a condition of the rule of law that also justifies the suspension of European funding.