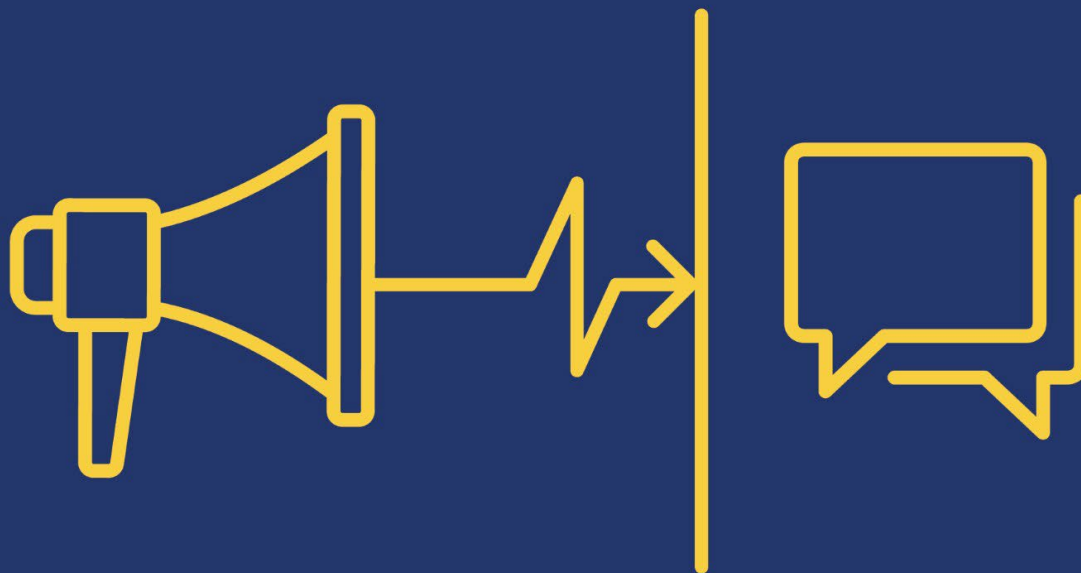




WHY STATE-SPONSORED DISINFORMATION CAN FAIL?

Lessons from the Collapse of Orbán's Informational Autocracy

July 20, 2026

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The research was carried out in the framework of the HDMO (Hungarian Digital Media Observatory) project, funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Health and Digital Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Executive summary

This study explains why the informational autocracy built under Viktor Orbán lost its persuasive authority in the 12 April 2026 parliamentary election. It focuses on how Fidesz lost agenda-setting power, why its disinformation strategy ceased to persuade beyond its core electorate, and how TISZA established itself as a credible governing alternative.

- TISZA won 55.8% of the domestic list vote and 141 seats, ending sixteen years of Fidesz rule. The central lesson is that **the persuasive authority of an informational autocracy can collapse faster than its institutional infrastructure** when communication can no longer override voters' everyday experience.
- **A credible challenger with a competing governing alternative: The collapse of Fidesz began when Tisza undermined their claim to political inevitability.** TISZA's rise from 2024 undermined Orbán's image as the only plausible prime minister and ended Fidesz's self-reinforcing advantage based on expected victory, governing competence and the absence of a viable alternative.
 - By June 2025, Péter Magyar was seen as a more competent potential prime minister than Viktor Orbán (53% to 44%), and more respondents expected a TISZA victory than a Fidesz victory (42% to 38%).
- **The battle of narratives: Fidesz progressively abandoned positive performance-based campaigning and concentrated on an existential “war or peace” message.** Fidesz narrowed its campaign to fear of war, Ukraine and Brussels, but these messages remained largely confined to loyal voters and met strong skepticism among the wider public and undecided voters. TISZA offered a hopeful, domestically focused alternative centered on declining living standards, corruption, failing public services and “regime change.” It succeeded in turning the election into a referendum on the Orbán system.
 - The “war or peace” narrative failed to dominate the election: the share perceiving an immediate threat of war fell from 46% in 2025 to 29% in 2026, while 62% rejected the claim that Ukraine and Western actors sought to draw Hungary into the war.
- **Losing the Digital Freedom Fight: Fidesz's digital advantages no longer translated into attention.** Fidesz retained centralized message discipline and published two to three times more content on some platforms, but its staged, repetitive communication generated less engagement than TISZA's livestreams, longer videos, comment interaction and broader presentation of candidates.
 - Péter Magyar's 50 most popular Facebook posts generated 4.8 million interactions, compared with 2.8 million for Viktor Orbán; in the final campaign week, Magyar received about 50% more Facebook interactions despite posting less.

- **AI-driven fearmongering: It reached saturation rather than expanding support.** Fidesz-aligned actors used synthetic media asymmetrically to fabricate war, security and opposition-related scenarios, including highly realistic violent content. The campaign achieved extensive reach but mainly reinforced existing partisan attitudes and may also have increased skepticism among Fidesz voters.
 - Although 73% of social-media users encountered manipulative AI content, 90% considered its political use unacceptable.
- **Campaigning after the advertising ban: The suspension of political advertising on Meta and Google substantially reduced Fidesz's advantage in terms of paid amplification and visibility.** Pro-government actors exploited weak filtering through proxy pages, stylized or fictional formats, and AI-generated content. However, loophole-based evasion did not compensate for the loss; the online environment became substantially more competitive and less asymmetrical.
 - Before the ban, Fidesz-affiliated actors had spent EUR 9.2 million – 87% of all political advertising expenditure – on the two platforms in Hungary.
- **Successful preemptive communication: Preemptive exposure of smear campaigns and Russian influence operations further weakened propaganda.** Péter Magyar, investigative journalists and experts anticipated and publicly exposed likely smear narratives and foreign influence activities. This “informational immunization” lowered the credibility and emotional impact of later attacks and reduced the stealth of hybrid operations.
- **The pro-Russian narrative turned against Fidesz: Its long-standing pro-Russian and anti-Ukraine messaging turned from an electoral asset into a strategic liability.** Anti-Ukrainian messaging still mobilized the Fidesz base but failed as persuasion. Warnings about Russian interference, reports on Orbán–Putin and Szijjártó–Lavrov contacts, and TISZA's counter-frame recast Fidesz's Russia policy as dependence and a threat to Hungarian sovereignty.
- **Propaganda turned inward: Fidesz was deceived by its own disinformation.** Fidesz increasingly internalized its own claims of inevitable victory and opposition weakness. Government-aligned polls provided reassurance instead of diagnosis, limiting the leadership's capacity to recognize danger, assess TISZA realistically and adapt its strategy.

Introduction

Hungary's parliamentary election of 12 April 2026 produced a political transformation few observers had expected to occur with such speed or on such a scale. Péter Magyar's TISZA Party received 55.8% of the domestic national party-list vote and won 141 of the 199 seats in the National Assembly, comfortably exceeding the 133 mandates required for a constitutional majority. The governing Fidesz–KDNP alliance received 36.3% of the domestic party-list vote and secured 52 seats, while the radical-right Mi Hazánk Movement entered parliament with 5.9% of the domestic party-list vote and won six mandates. No other party crossed the parliamentary threshold. The final result ended sixteen consecutive years of – an increasingly hybrid – Fidesz government and gave a party that had emerged as a serious political force only two years earlier the largest parliamentary majority won in Hungary since the democratic transition in 1989/1990.

This study seeks to explain one crucial dimension of that failure: the breakdown of [Orbán's informational autocracy](#) and its inability to persuade voters. The concept of informational autocracy describes regimes that rely less on open violence and mass repression than on persuasion, media control, agenda-setting, the simulation of popular legitimacy and the continuous projection of governmental competence. Their stability depends on convincing citizens that the incumbent is capable, protective, widely supported and, above all, politically irreplaceable.

For a long time, the system was extraordinarily successful. It did not merely persuade voters to support specific policies. Orbán's four consecutive two-thirds victories after 2010 were facilitated by institutional engineering and opposition weakness, but also by Fidesz's ability to maintain the perception that no realistic alternative to the government existed. Even many voters who were dissatisfied with Fidesz came to regard another Orbán victory as inevitable. This expectation of inevitability became a political resource in itself.

This point also defines the scope of the present study. Our primary focus is on (dis)information, persuasion and political communication. We examine how Fidesz lost its previous dominance over the political agenda; how TISZA built the image of a credible governing alternative; how Péter Magyar used direct and pre-emptive communication to weaken government smear campaigns; how the prohibition of political advertising on major online platforms reduced Fidesz's digital advantages; how increasingly extreme fearmongering and AI-generated content reached a point of saturation; and how the government's pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives were ultimately turned against its own sovereigntist identity.

This focus does not imply that economic conditions, corruption, governance failures or deteriorating public services were secondary. On the contrary, communication became ineffective partly because it could no longer override voters' everyday experiences.

Nevertheless, the informational dimension remains indispensable. Economic hardship does not mechanically remove governments from office, especially in a system where the incumbent enjoys overwhelming control over public communication. For years, the Orbán government successfully reframed domestic failures as consequences of hostile external actors: Brussels, migrants, George Soros, the international left, Ukraine or the war. The central question is therefore not simply why Hungarian voters became dissatisfied, but why the government lost its capacity to define the meaning of that dissatisfaction. One of the election's most important lessons is therefore that the persuasive authority of an informational autocracy can collapse much faster than its institutional infrastructure.

This analysis remains timely for several reasons. First, the election result did not automatically dismantle the informational structures created under Orbán. Media ownership patterns, institutional cultures, communication networks, political influencers and deeply embedded interpretative frames do not disappear with a change of government. Second, Hungary is currently facing the difficult task of transforming institutions that served partisan political communication while preserving democratic pluralism and legal continuity. Changes to public media, constitutional institutions and Orbán-era structures are already at the center of the post-election transition. A precise diagnosis of the former system is necessary to prevent democratic reconstruction from being reduced to the replacement of one party's control with another's. Third, the Hungarian case has broader international relevance. Orbán's system was not only a domestic regime but an influential political model for illiberal and radical-right actors abroad. Its combination of elections, media manipulation, culture-war mobilization, conspiracy narratives and the performance of overwhelming popular support appeared to demonstrate that democratic institutions could be hollowed out without eliminating them completely. The 2026 election reveals the limitations of this model. The Hungarian election therefore offers insights not only into how informational autocracies manufacture consent, but also into how consent can unravel—and how a political system built on the systematic distortion of reality can ultimately become incapable of recognizing reality itself.

1. A credible challenger with a competing governing alternative

Informational autocracies can remain stable as long as they are able to maintain a dominant perception in the public sphere that they are the only viable and competent governing force. This perception of inevitability - the belief that there is no realistic alternative to the incumbent - is a key pillar of their communicative and electoral stability.

In the Hungarian case, this mechanism began to weaken from 2024 onwards, when the TISZA Party emerged as a credible political challenger. Since then, Fidesz has increasingly struggled to maintain its previous dominance over the political agenda and to sustain its core narrative of exclusive governing competence. Most importantly, it has become more difficult to uphold the image of Viktor Orbán as the only plausible and capable prime ministerial candidate – especially after the 2024 European elections, when TISZA, a party formed only 3 months before, could win 30% of the votes.

Empirical polling data reflects this shift in perceived competence. According to Medián Institute surveys, by June 2025 - approximately ten months before the election - Péter Magyar was [already perceived](#) as a more competent potential prime minister (53%) than incumbent Viktor Orbán (44%). In parallel, expectations regarding electoral victory also shifted: the proportion of respondents expecting a TISZA Party victory (42%) exceeded those expecting a Fidesz victory (38%).

This represents a significant break from previous electoral cycles since 2010, when Fidesz consistently benefited from a self-reinforcing perception of inevitability. In earlier elections, a majority of voters tended to expect a Fidesz victory, and Viktor Orbán was widely regarded as the most competent political leader. This expectation itself functioned as a reinforcing – and self-fulfilling – mechanism of dominance, shaping voter confidence, strategic voting behavior, and agenda control.

The emergence of a credible challenger has therefore disrupted the “inevitability narrative” that previously stabilized Fidesz’s political dominance, and it introduced uncertainty into voter expectations, weakening the psychological advantage of the incumbent. As a result, governmental narratives have become less self-evident, less uncontested, and more exposed to comparison, critique, and counter-framing than in previous electoral cycles.

2. The battle of narratives between Fidesz and the TISZA Party

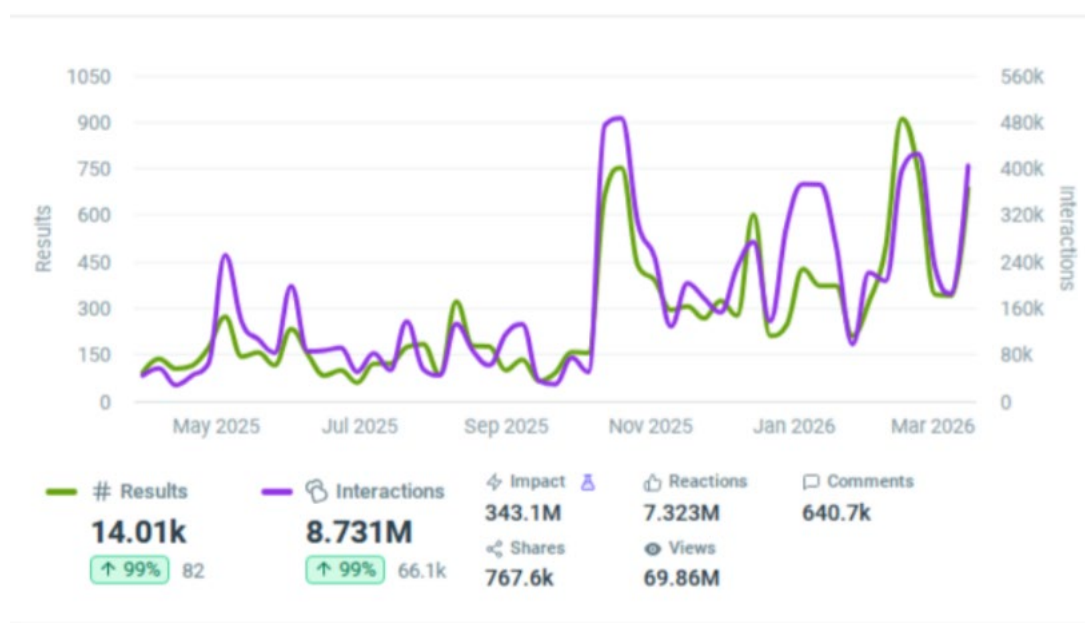
Fidesz and the TISZA Party employed different campaign strategies and tactics, which explain the nature and impact of their respective best-selling narratives. The TISZA campaign was more complex and diffuse than the Fidesz campaign because it addressed a wide range of issues to emphasize domestic problems while supporting its central message of 'regime change'. The challenger party campaigned on various domestic issues to appeal to a heterogeneous electorate. In contrast, Fidesz progressively narrowed its campaign messages to an overarching fear-inducing narrative of an imminent threat of war. Fidesz sought to persuade and mobilize its voters with emotionally powerful messages about geopolitical threats.

2.1 FIDESZ: FEARMONGERING UNTIL IT BACKFIRED

While Fidesz initially campaigned on both domestic and foreign policy, the former—which focused on the Orbán regime's achievements over the past 16 years and the distribution of pre-election handouts—gradually receded from the campaign. These positive messages about the Orbán government's performance lost their prominence because they failed to alter public perception of domestic policy shortcomings.

Fidesz, therefore, increasingly relied on its “war or peace” narrative, framing the election as an existential choice between “life or death” (Figure 1). This central narrative was reinforced by a broader network of supporting disinformation messages designed to render the alleged threats and interference posed by Ukraine and the European Union, and the dangers of a potential TISZA government, more real and credible. Péter Magyar was portrayed as colluding with the Brussels elite and Ukraine to drag Hungary into the war. The strategy sought to exploit the widespread [negative image of Ukraine](#) and war-related fears.

1. Figure Number of occurrences of the search term “war or peace”, and the interactions it generated across websites, Facebook pages, Instagram, and TikTok channels between 1 April 2025 and 22 March 2026.



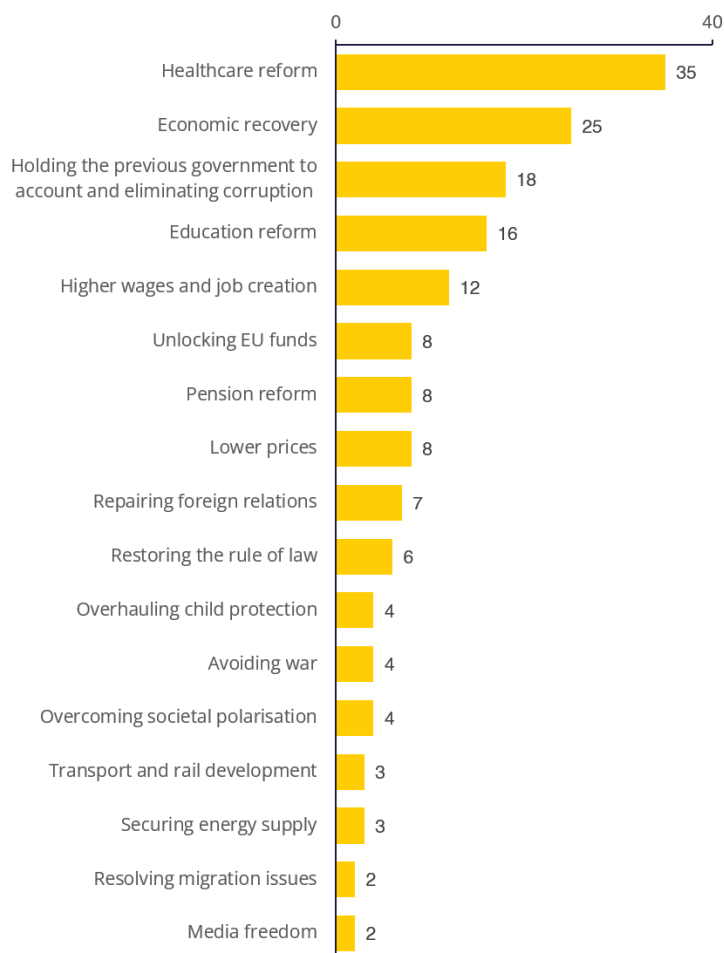
Fidesz's central message failed to resonate with voters, and the “war or peace” frame did not become the election's dominant policy issue. Despite Fidesz's efforts to make the risk of Hungary being drawn into the war seem imminent and realistic, public concern decreased significantly ahead of the election. A survey by Policy Solutions [found](#) that, while 46% of Hungarians perceived an immediate threat of war in 2025, this figure dropped to 29% in 2026. In fact, these narratives struggled to expand beyond Fidesz's core electorate. Political Capital's [survey](#) found that, while 78% of government supporters accepted the claim that Ukraine and Western actors were trying to draw Hungary into the war, 62% of the broader population rejected it. Similar patterns emerged regarding claims that Brussels intended to force Hungary to raise taxes and cut subsidies in order to finance support for Ukraine. Among undecided voters, rejection substantially outweighed acceptance. This dynamic was also visible in reactions to the explosive device found near the Serbian section of the TurkStream pipeline just one week before the Hungarian election. A [poll](#) conducted by Medián on 7-8 April found that the narrative generated mixed reactions even among Fidesz voters. While 59% considered the incident to be a serious threat, 18% viewed it as a politically motivated provocation. Among undecided voters, skepticism was significantly stronger, with the majority dismissing the incident as staged.

2.2 TISZA: UNITY AND HOPE THROUGH COMPLEXITY

In contrast to the dark, dystopian tone that characterized Fidesz's campaign, the TISZA Party ran a hopeful, optimistic campaign centered on voters' everyday concerns, corruption, and the promise of “regime change.”

The TISZA Party offered an alternative vision for Hungary, pledging a ‘regime change’ to tackle the dysfunction, mismanagement, and corruption that had plagued the Hungarian state. Péter Magyar promised to pursue legal and political accountability for political and business leaders implicated in alleged corruption cases. He proactively addressed the domestic policy issues that concerned voters the most, including declining living standards and the mismanagement of education, transport, and public healthcare (Figure 2). TISZA sought to shape the public discourse by highlighting these shortcomings and advancing policy alternatives. In the final weeks of the campaign, TISZA began to incorporate more explicitly pro-EU messages, following a series of leaks that revealed the close relationship between the Hungarian and Russian leadership.

2. Figure “What are the two most important issues that you expect the new government to address?” Opinion poll conducted by Medián between 15 and 20 April.¹ Spontaneous responses as a percentage of the voting-age population.



Ultimately, TISZA succeeded in framing the election as a referendum on the Orbán regime, mobilizing voters around a broad demand for political change and securing electoral victory.

¹ HVG: Már a Fidesz-szavazók ötöde is alkalmas kormányfőnek gondolja Magyar Pétert

3. Losing the Digital Freedom Fight, Losing the Elections

For years, Fidesz's dominance on social media rested on centralized messaging, strictly coordinated party and pro-government communication ecosystem. Despite the structural advantages, the campaign preceding the 2026 parliamentary elections demonstrated the limits of this model of informational autocracy. While Fidesz maintained centralized control over its communication, Péter Magyar and the TISZA Party proved more successful in adapting to the logic of social media platforms and attract interest.

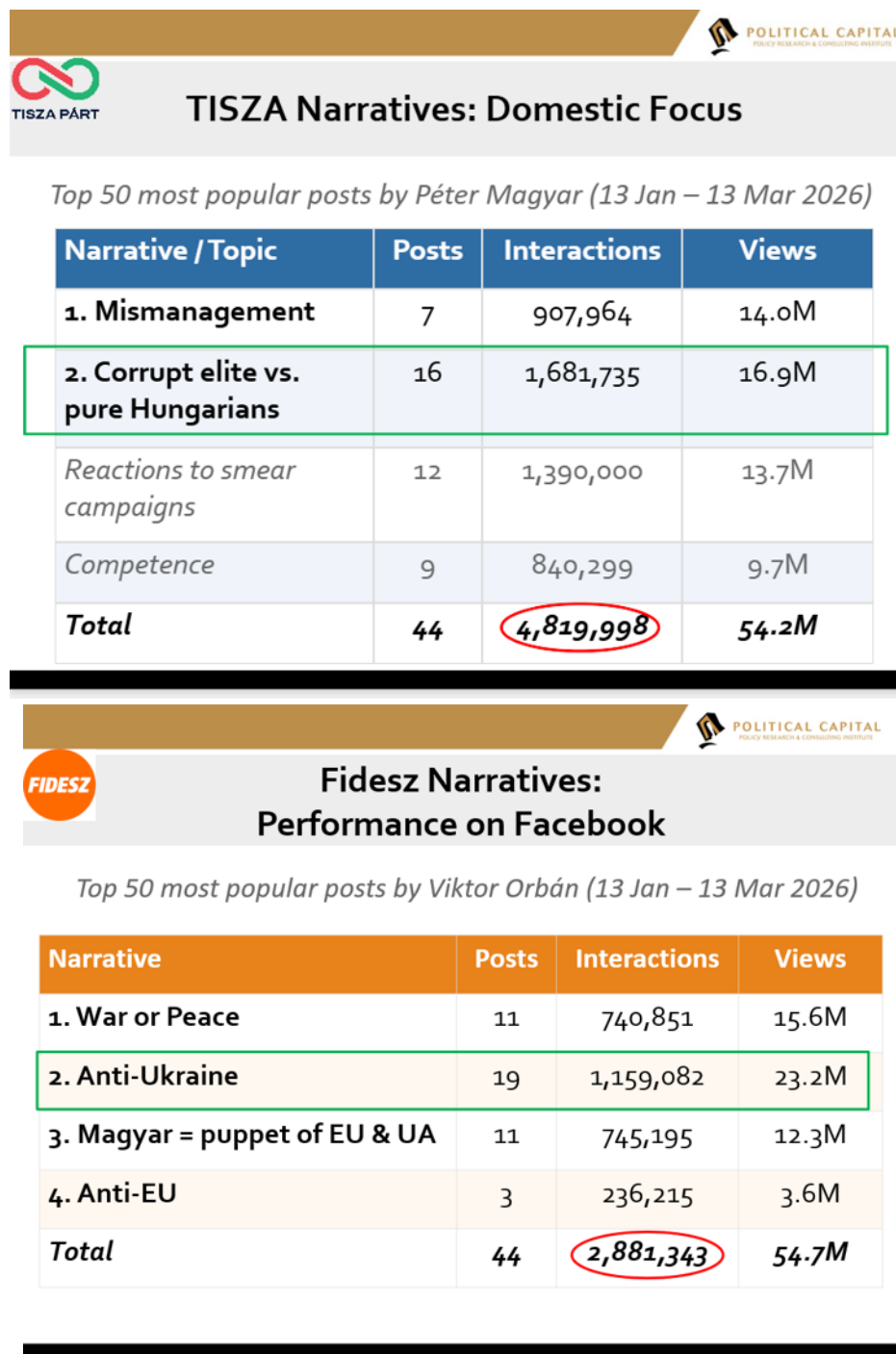
One of the defining characteristics of the Fidesz campaign was the dominance of centrally controlled messaging built around the prime minister. Government communication followed a vertical structure in which narratives originated from the top and were repeated throughout the party and the government-aligned communication network. As the campaign progressed, Viktor Orbán's social media presence increasingly shifted toward short-form "reel" videos. Initially, these videos primarily served to present the prime minister in seemingly spontaneous, "behind the scenes" situations.² Over time, however, this format became the central channel of Orbán's campaign communications. Despite their informal appearance, the highly staged content that merely echoed the Fidesz campaign narratives seemed less effective at generating engagement. The analysis of Viktor Orbán's 50 most popular Facebook posts³ showed that even the most successful content largely revolved around four recurring narratives promoted throughout the government-aligned communication ecosystem. Despite the scale and coordination, it appeared less effective at mobilizing user engagement than Péter Magyar's communication. In the last month before the election, nearly all of the ten most popular political posts originated from Péter Magyar's social media pages. During the final week of the campaign, Magyar dominated interaction metrics across all major platforms.⁴ The top 50 Facebook posts of Péter Magyar, for example, had 4.8 million interactions overall, while Viktor Orbán's top 50 posts attracted only 2.8 million interactions.

² [Telex: Bulvárba vitte a Fideszt, most már Orbán Viktor kampányának egyik éceszgébere](#)

³ Political Capital ranked the posts published by Viktor Orbán's official page and the official Fidesz page, as well as Péter Magyar's page and the official TISZA Party page between 13 January and 13 March according to the level of user engagement they generated, in terms of reactions, comments and shares. We then conducted a qualitative review of the top 50 posts with the highest engagement. In the narrative analysis, we excluded high-engagement posts that did not contain a direct political message, framing or narrative. These posts were usually related to party events or topics that generate engagement regardless of political content, such as International Women's Day or gastronomy.

⁴ [Lakmusz: Heti kampányfigyelő: a TISZA a hajrában is tönkrevverte a Fideszt a közösségi médiában](#)

3. Figure Comparative performance of key narratives in the top 50 most popular Facebook posts by Péter Magyar (TISZA) and Viktor Orbán (Fidesz) between 13 January and 13 March



Magyar's communication strategy relied on direct interaction with followers through Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, including regular livestreams, longer video messages, and frequent engagement in comment sections. Depending on the platform, Fidesz published roughly two to three times more content than the TISZA Party, yet the opposition consistently generated substantially higher engagement rates.⁵ Over time, the TISZA campaign also gradually moved beyond its initial

⁵ [Heti kampányfigyelő: Magyar Péter maga mögé utasította Orbánt TikTokon](#)

“one-man show” character. Newly introduced TISZA politicians such as István Kapitány, Anita Orbán, and László Gajdos received increasing visibility both in the campaign and on social media platforms. In contrast, the Fidesz campaign became more concentrated on Viktor Orbán, Péter Szijjártó, and János Lázár. Meanwhile, other government politicians were less visible and mostly repeated campaign slogans.⁶ In the final week before the election, Fidesz-affiliated politicians posted approximately two and a half times more content than TISZA-affiliated actors, yet their posts received around 3.5 million fewer reactions overall. Péter Magyar also outperformed Viktor Orbán at the individual level. On Facebook, his posts generated around 50% more interactions than Orbán’s during the final week of the campaign (2–9 April), despite a lower posting volume (61 versus 81).⁷

⁶ [Telex: Árad a TISZA a Lájbajnokságban](#)

⁷ [Lakmusz: Heti kampányfigyelő: a Tisza a hajrában is tönkreverte a Fideszt a közösségi médiában](#)

4. Crying wolf in the digital age: how AI-driven fearmongering reached a breaking point

Fearmongering and the construction of perceived enemies have long been central elements of Fidesz's political communication strategy. Over time, however, maintaining the effectiveness of these narratives required constant escalation: threats had to appear increasingly immediate, existential, and emotionally charged. The 2026 campaign represented the culmination of this dynamic.

AI-generated content [became](#) a defining feature of the campaign in the year preceding the election. Its use was structurally asymmetric, with synthetic media deployed overwhelmingly by Fidesz-aligned actors, including affiliated media outlets and proxy organizations. Rather than merely amplifying existing narratives, these tools were frequently used to construct fabricated political scenarios and visually reinforce disinformation narratives attacking opposition actors.

The spread of AI-generated political content was further amplified through paid social media distribution, as AI-generated videos proved capable of circumventing Meta's political advertising filters. According to Political Capital's [survey data](#), 73% of social media users encountered manipulative AI-generated political content during the campaign, with exposure reaching 88% among TISZA supporters. While the realistic nature of these deepfakes misled over one-third of those who encountered them – leaving another 52% uncertain of their authenticity – the strategy appears to have approached the limits of public tolerance, with 90% of respondents considering the use of AI-generated political manipulation unacceptable.

War-related messaging became the clearest example of this escalation. AI-generated videos depicted scenes of armed conflict and destruction in order to reinforce the claim that a TISZA-led government would draw Hungary into the war in Ukraine. The example that caused the greatest outrage was a fully realistic [video](#) showing a young girl waiting for her father to return from war, only for him to be captured and executed. The video was published on Facebook by both Fidesz's Budapest branch and the party's central page. Both had significant reach: the former had 714k views, the latter 842k. The campaign also portrayed Ukraine as a direct threat to Hungarian security, including fabricated scenarios involving attacks on energy infrastructure and foreign interference in Hungarian elections.

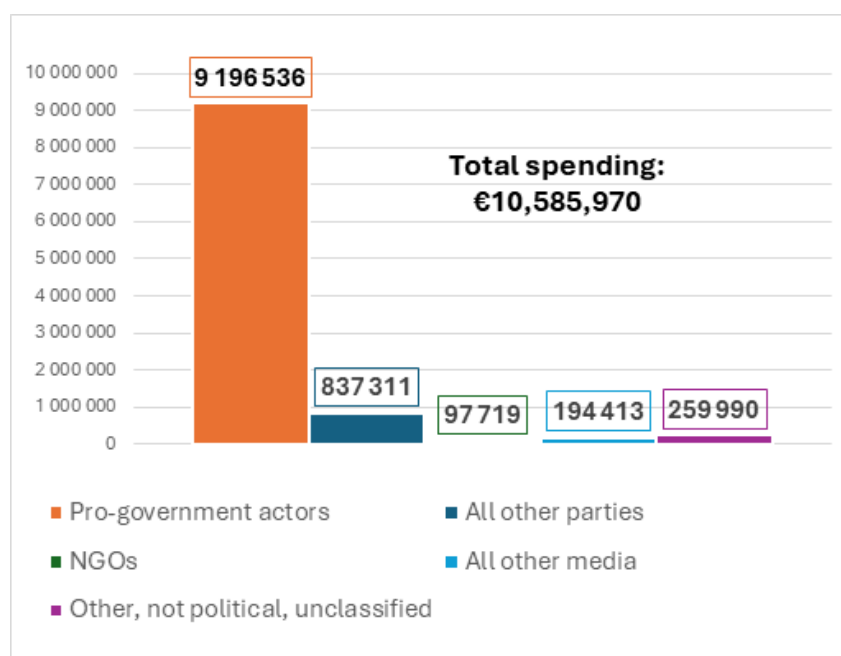
Despite this intensive messaging, survey evidence suggests the videos were unlikely to achieve their intended effect. According to a [survey](#) conducted by Political Capital a few weeks before the elections, the use of AI-generated or manipulated videos in political contexts was overwhelmingly rejected by the Hungarian public: 90% of respondents considered the use of such tools in politics entirely unacceptable, while only a negligible share (3%) found them even somewhat acceptable. This suggests that although deepfakes were increasingly becoming part of the everyday online experience, their social acceptance remained extremely low.

These findings suggest that Fidesz's campaign did not fail because of insufficient reach, but because its core narratives had reached a point of saturation. The extensive use of AI-generated fearmongering appears to have reinforced existing partisan attitudes without significantly expanding support beyond the government's established voter base. In fact, it may even have sparked skepticism among Fidesz voters.

5. Political campaign after the ban on political advertisement

The Hungarian election campaign arrived at a turning point when Meta and Google suspended political advertising across their platforms within the European Union after September 2025, even before the EU's Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising regulation (TTPA) came into effect. This posed a significant challenge for Hungary's ruling Fidesz party, which had previously spearheaded political advertising in Hungary and the EU. Until the last moment when ads were still permitted, 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 advertising spending on Google and Meta in Hungary by all advertisers.

4. Figure 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)



Following the ban, the previously dominant position of Fidesz-affiliated actors was significantly weakened.⁸ This shift did not eliminate asymmetries in communication capacity – a key feature of informational autocracies – but it altered the playing field. Most paid political ads disappeared following the ban, and political actors, particularly those linked to Fidesz, tried to adapt rapidly by shifting toward alternative tools and tactics to maintain informational dominance.⁹

Leaks in platform filtering systems allowed pro-government actors to partially circumvent the restrictions. These actors remained the primary source of ads with political content, some of which appeared to deliberately test Google's and Meta's filtering systems and designed their ads to evade the filters. Tactics included proxy organizations creating new Facebook pages used exclusively for advertising purposes and repeatedly relaunched previously removed ads, sometimes almost immediately after takedown. In some cases, pages imitating the visual identity of other opposition parties were used to spread misleading political content targeting TISZA candidates. Hiding the

⁸ [Political Capital: The Houdini Ads - How political advertisements slip through Google's and Meta's filtering systems](#)

⁹ [Political Capital: Political campaigning on social media in the "post-reality" and post-advertisement era](#)

political nature of content through fictional, allegorical, or stylized formats and omitting recognizable political figures, as well as the growing use of AI-generated content, appeared to help political material evade platform filters more easily.¹⁰

Despite these successful evasion tactics and the persistent weaknesses of platform filtering systems, the ban on political advertising had a substantial impact on the campaign environment. Most paid political advertisements disappeared, and many of the previously dominant advertisers either ceased advertising altogether or shifted to less overtly political content. While pro-government actors remained capable of exploiting loopholes, these efforts did not fully compensate for the loss of paid advertising. As a result, Fidesz-affiliated actors were no longer able to dominate social media visibility to the same extent as before the ban, creating a more competitive and less asymmetrical online information environment during the election campaign.

¹⁰ [Political Capital: The Houdini Ads - How political advertisements slip through Google's and Meta's filtering systems](#)

6. Successful preemptive communication

Another important reason for Fidesz's defeat lies in the opposition's increasing use of preemptive communication strategies, which can be understood through social psychological research on "prebunking" or psychological inoculation.

A substantial body of research¹¹ has demonstrated that warning individuals in advance about potential persuasive attempts, and pre-exposing them to weakened versions of adversarial narratives can significantly reduce the persuasive power of those messages. The findings suggest that preemptive exposure to manipulation techniques (rather than just factual corrections after exposure) increases cognitive resistance to disinformation and reduces the effectiveness of later propaganda attempts.

In the Hungarian political context, Péter Magyar and the TISZA Party have notably adopted elements of this strategy with great effectiveness. Using insider information, leaks, and access to the inner workings of the Fidesz communications apparatus, the opposition was able to anticipate and publicly signal expected smear campaigns and narrative attacks before they materialized. This reduced the effectiveness of traditional negative campaigning. By publicly warning that specific types of smear narratives or character attacks were likely to emerge, the opposition was able to "inoculate" segments of the electorate. This lowered the credibility and emotional impact of subsequent attacks. In some cases, such as the alleged sex video involving two prominent TISZA figures, this dynamic may have also created a strategic disincentive for certain narratives to be fully deployed by parts of the pro-government communication ecosystem, as their anticipated effects were partially neutralized in advance.

Second, this preemptive communication made foreign interference and hybrid information operations much more difficult. Hungarian investigative journalists and experts, including Direct36, Szabolcs Panyi, and András Rácz, as well as think tanks such as the Political Capital Institute and international outlets such as VSquare, Bloomberg, the Financial Times, and the Washington Post, reported on attempted influence activities attributed to Russian state-linked or state-aligned actors, including the GRU, the SVR, and the so-called Social Design Agency. These reports described coordinated efforts involving narrative amplification, digital propaganda, and covert influence operations targeting European political environments, including Hungary.

Many of these investigations were based on leaked or intelligence-sourced materials that were often anonymized and attributed to European intelligence services. These disclosures raised public awareness of potential hybrid interference strategies, reducing their stealth and effectiveness. Consequently, the informational environment became more "transparent," which limited the ability of external actors to shape perceptions unnoticed.

¹¹ 1) McGuire, W. J. (1961). *The effectiveness of supportive and refutational defenses in immunizing and restoring beliefs against persuasion*. Available at: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1962-01716-001>. 2) van der Linden, S. (2022). *Misinformation: susceptibility, spread, and interventions*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-020821-114338>; 3) Roozenbeek, J., van der Linden, S. (2019). *Fake news game confers psychological resistance*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0279-9>; 4) Roozenbeek, J., van der Linden, S., Nygren, T. (2020). *Prebunking interventions across cultures*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-008>; 5) Roozenbeek et al. (2022). *Psychological inoculation improves resilience against misinformation*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abo6254>; 6) Lewandowsky, S., van der Linden, S., et al. (various works on inoculation / prebunking synthesis). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00027162221087936>

Additionally, media reports and investigative leaks revealed details about high-level political communications between Russian and Hungarian officials, including interactions involving Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov, Viktor Orbán, and Péter Szijjártó. These communications were particularly related to strategic energy dependence and geopolitical alignment.

Taken together, these developments created a communicative environment in which domestic smear campaigns and foreign influence attempts were subject to greater preemptive exposure, reduced ambiguity, and diminished persuasive effectiveness. In this sense, the Hungarian opposition's use of anticipatory communication strategies served as a type of "informational immunization," which weakened both domestic negative campaigning and elements of hybrid informational pressure.

7. How the pro-Russian narrative has turned against Fidesz

One of the most important communication factors behind Fidesz's defeat was that the government's long-standing pro-Russian and anti-Ukraine messaging turned from an electoral asset into a strategic liability. Since 2014, Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz media ecosystem had increasingly and systematically tried to shift Hungarian public opinion away from the West and Western institutions, while normalizing a more sympathetic view of Russia. This effort had visible effects. By the late 2010s, [Russia had become more acceptable to parts of Hungarian public opinion](#), and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the government's communication further deteriorated the image of Ukraine. Hungary became one of the EU societies [least sympathetic](#) towards Ukraine, partly as a result of years of state-driven narratives portraying Kyiv, Brussels and Washington as actors threatening Hungarian security and sovereignty.

This communication strategy had previously helped Fidesz electorally. In 2022, Viktor Orbán won on a “pro-peace” platform, claiming that only his government could keep Hungary out of the war and resist alleged pressure from Brussels and Ukraine to drag the country into a direct military conflict. The message was simple, emotionally powerful and well suited to the government-controlled media environment: Fidesz meant peace, the opposition meant war. It allowed the government to transform its Russia-friendly foreign policy into a protective, nationally framed position.

In 2026, however, the same narrative worked very differently. The government again tried to demonize Ukraine and portray the opposition as serving foreign interests. But this time, the broader political context had changed. The Orbán government's pro-Russian orientation was no longer perceived only as a geopolitical preference or as a “peace policy.” It increasingly appeared as a vulnerability - a sign that the Hungarian state had become exposed to Russian influence. This undermined Fidesz's core “sovereigntist” message. A government claiming to defend national sovereignty became vulnerable to the charge that it had compromised Hungary's sovereignty in favor of Moscow.

Political Capital's [pre-election survey](#) showed this shift clearly. Almost half of the respondents thought it was likely that Russia would interfere in the election, whereas far fewer believed that Ukraine or the EU would do so. On the question of Hungarian-Ukrainian tensions, more respondents blamed the Hungarian government than blamed Ukraine. Even more importantly, the central disinformation narrative of the Fidesz campaign - that Ukraine, with the help of the EU and NATO, was trying to draw Hungary into the war - was rejected by a clear majority of the population. The narrative remained powerful among Fidesz voters, but it failed to expand much beyond the government's core camp. Among undecided voters, too, skepticism towards the claim was stronger than belief in it. This suggests that Fidesz's anti-Ukraine campaign still mobilized loyalists, but it was much less effective as a tool for persuasion.

The reasons for this shift were threefold.

First, investigative journalism and advanced public warnings helped to “pre-bunk” possible Russian influence operations, as mentioned above. Reports before the election described alleged coordinated efforts involving narrative amplification, digital propaganda, covert influence activities, and Kremlin-linked actors, including the Social Design Agency and Russian intelligence-linked networks. These revelations meant that Russian influence was no longer an abstract accusation made by Fidesz's opponents. It became a concrete campaign issue. The exposure weakened the

persuasive power of the operation: voters were primed to see certain messages not as organic political arguments, but as part of a wider influence effort.

Second, the revelations brought new and politically damaging information into the public sphere. The most important examples were the reports about contacts and leaked conversations between the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Péter Szijjártó, and his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, as well as between Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin. Investigative outlets reported that Szijjártó had discussed EU sanctions with Lavrov and allegedly promised to help remove a person connected to a Russian businessman from the EU sanctions list. Other reports claimed that Szijjártó regularly briefed Lavrov on sensitive EU discussions, which created alarm in Brussels and reinforced the perception that Hungary was not simply “communicating with all sides,” but actively weakening EU unity from within. VSquare also reported that Szijjártó asked Lavrov whether Putin would receive Orbán before a NATO summit, with Orbán described as flexible about the location of the meeting. Orbán called Hungary a “lion”, while Hungary a mouse. Even if the government denied wrongdoing and framed the leaks as a wiretapping scandal, the political damage was substantial. The story gave a concrete face to a broader suspicion: that the Orbán government’s “peace policy” was in practice a privileged channel of coordination with Moscow, and subservience to its goals.

Third, Péter Magyar and TISZA successfully transformed these investigations into a powerful counter-frame. They did not merely accuse Fidesz of being wrong on foreign policy. They attacked the central identity claim of the Orbán regime: sovereignty. Fidesz had long presented itself as the only force capable of defending Hungary from Brussels, Washington, Kyiv, and “foreign interests.” TISZA turned this narrative against them. The question became not whether Hungary should be sovereign, but who had actually endangered Hungary’s sovereignty. In this reframing, the government’s closeness to Moscow became dependency instead of pragmatism and peace diplomacy. The “sovereignist” government appeared to be the one most vulnerable to foreign influence. This was a serious communication failure for Fidesz because it touched the symbolic core of its political brand. The revelations suggested weakness instead of strength, exposure instead of control, dependency instead of independence, and geopolitical risk instead of protection. Fidesz could still reach its core voters through the familiar anti-Ukraine and anti-Brussels frames, but it struggled to persuade those outside the loyalist camp it would have badly needed.

In sum, Fidesz was not defeated because Hungarians suddenly became uniformly pro-Ukrainian or anti-Russian. The change was more specific and politically more damaging: the government’s pro-Russian orientation became associated with vulnerability, hypocrisy, and loss of sovereignty. The same communication strategy that had helped Orbán win in 2022 – presenting himself as the guarantor of peace against Ukraine and Brussels - became less credible in 2026, when Russian influence itself became a central concern. That reversal was one of the decisive communication factors behind Fidesz’s defeat.

8. When propaganda turns inward: Fidesz's campaign of self-disinformation

A further explanation for the defeat of the informational autocracy of Viktor Orbán lies in the success – and ultimately the self-destructive effect – of its own persuasion machinery. Over more than a decade, Fidesz constructed an extraordinarily powerful communication system based on a vast network of communication channels and platforms (messengers), unlimited resources, message discipline, state-sponsored disinformation, conspiracy theories, and the continuous repetition of narratives about Viktor Orbán's competence and the opposition's inherent and eternal weakness. This system was designed not only to persuade voters but also to sustain the perception that Fidesz's political dominance was inevitable and that no credible governing alternative existed.

By 2026, however, these narratives appear to have been totally internalized by the party itself. Fidesz did not merely communicate that its victory was certain and that the opposition was strategically incompetent; much of the governing camp seems to have genuinely believed these claims. They became convinced that its organizational resources, media dominance, financial advantages, and electoral machinery would once again guarantee victory. Even when the rise of TISZA became impossible to ignore, the prevailing assumption was that Péter Magyar himself or his party would either collapse before the election or, at a minimum, remain unable to secure the constitutional majority required to fundamentally transform the political system.

Wishful thinking thus became systemic. "We deceived ourselves", as a Fidesz politician [admitted](#) after the election. Only a minority within the broader Fidesz camp seems to have recognized that an electoral defeat was becoming likely. Government-aligned polling played a particularly important role in this process. Surveys produced by institutions such as the Nézőpont Institute and the Center for Fundamental Rights, which continued to measure substantial Fidesz advantages before the election, functioned as political "opium" for the governing camp. Their findings provided reassurance, emotional comfort, and apparent empirical confirmation that the established strategy remained effective. Instead of serving as instruments for assessing political reality, these polls increasingly became tools of shielding party elites, activists, and supporters from mounting evidence that the electoral environment had fundamentally changed.

Fidesz's self-deception, therefore, became an important contributing factor to its defeat. The party's communication machinery remained capable of mobilizing core supporters, but it simultaneously weakened the leadership's ability to recognize danger, evaluate the opposition realistically, and adjust its campaign strategy. Fidesz had become so successful at manufacturing confidence in its inevitable victory that it lost the capacity to distinguish its own propaganda from political reality. When political communication is organized primarily around reinforcing loyalty and projecting strength, the distinction between external persuasion and internal analysis can gradually disappear. Orbán's informational autocracy not only misled citizens; ultimately, it also misled itself.