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Outsourced Political Campaign: Role of Pro-Government Political Influencers in Spreading Hostile Narratives in Hungary

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Abstract

During the 2024 European Parliament and municipal election campaigns, the ruling Hungarian party, Fidesz, significantly increased its use of populist rhetoric and disinformation techniques through a pro-government political influencer network known as the Megafon Központ (Megafon Center). This study explores the role of this organization in disseminating hostile and manipulative narratives on social media, with a particular focus on how these narratives influence voter decisions and reinforce social polarization in the context of the European Parliament elections. The research employed qualitative content analysis to examine the 105 Megafon videos with the highest advertising costs during the campaign period, identifying the target audience, key messages, as well as the linguistic and visual tools employed. The results show that most videos rely on demonization and fearmongering, often presenting distorted information. Conducted focus group studies revealed that perceptions of Megafon content are highly polarized along political lines. Based on representative public opinion polls, Megafon influencers and the brand itself are not widely recognized by the general public, but they do have visibility among certain social groups. Meanwhile, nearly all Facebook users encounter their content. Additionally, most voters are unaware that this content is paid political advertising. Although respondents often question the credibility of Megafon videos, their persistent presence contributes to social polarization and influences political discourse. The Megafon model is easily adaptable and poses a significant risk to democratic public discourse, as it effectively distorts the information environment for voters on social media.

Keywords

European Parliament elections; hostile narratives; Hungary; polarization; political influencers; social media

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1. Introduction

In 2010, Hungary deviated from the path towards the establishment of a democratic and diverse media system. Several independent yet closely interrelated processes played a role in this shift.

Firstly, it is impossible to ignore the historical background that, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1990, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe did indeed embark on a path towards a market economy and democratic institutions, but the media systems that emerged did not resemble the Western European models. The level of political parallelism remained high, the main media owners were often linked to political power, the financing of private media was partly dependent on state resources, and public service media were unable to become truly autonomous. By the early 2000s, it had become clear that Central and Eastern Europe was following a different path of development than Western European countries (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019).

Secondly, the 2008 economic crisis proved to be an important turning point in the region's media development, resulting in a significant decline in advertising revenues and making it necessary to rethink media business models. The situation was made even more serious by the spectacular rise of digital platforms during the same period, which led to a drain on advertising revenues. Media companies were therefore faced with a sustained decline in advertising revenues and, even after the crisis, it was not possible to return to the previous business model. All this permanently reduced the profitability of media companies and Western investors began to leave Hungary, as in the rest of the region (Dragomir, 2019; Stetka, 2012).

Thirdly, and this is a uniquely Hungarian development, with the Orbán regime coming to power in 2010, the Hungarian Parliament adopted new media regulations and began to establish an illiberal media system. Noteworthy features include the concentration of media ownership, the financing of media loyal to the government through state advertising spending, the operation of public service media as a propaganda machine, the political control of the media authority, and the capture of the entire media ecosystem (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017; Griffen, 2020; Polyák, 2019; Urbán, 2024).

Nowadays, a severely distorted media system has developed, based on strong political influence, a polarized audience, and the presence of state-sponsored disinformation (Urbán et al., 2023). In recent years, Hungarian media policy has shifted from focusing solely on controlling legacy media to dominating digital platforms with political communication from the ruling parties, primarily through advertised content (Political Capital et al., 2024). This was the government's response to consumer habits that were steadily shifting to digital media, and within that, social media (Hann et al., 2023).

2. Political Influencers and Hostile Narratives: A Literature Review

This article examines the specific Hungarian manifestations of organized disinformation distribution networks whose communication set includes hostile narratives as a dominant element. This state-driven, centrally coordinated approach to disinformation, combined with an influencer network that uses a lot of government resources, such as Megafon, represents a unique case within the European Union. The Megafon phenomenon is dangerous because it is easy to replicate and there is a significant risk that the model will spread to other countries. The literature review looks at the literature on such organized networks and hostile narratives. The specific Hungarian situation is discussed in the next section.

2.1. Weaponizing Influence: The Rise of Political Influencers in Democratic Warfare

Digital technology, in particular the internet and social media, has fundamentally transformed the possibilities for political communication and participation worldwide over the past two decades (Howard & Hussain, 2013; van Dijck & Poell, 2015; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). At the same time, technological developments have also created new challenges: Authoritarian regimes have quickly adapted and started to use digital tools to consolidate their power, manipulate the information space, and monitor citizens (Kuznetsova, 2023; Vanderhill, 2020). Our work, therefore, focuses on how authoritarian regimes use information and communication technologies to manipulate and spread disinformation through digital platforms, further strengthening political control and weakening democratic participation.

Disinformation may affect elections (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Altay et al., 2023; Bader, 2018) and manipulate public opinion during crises (Bachmann et al., 2019; Yablokov, 2022). Social media is increasingly used to manipulate opinion with professionalized disinformation campaigns by states and political actors targeting elections, democracy, and human rights (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Populist politicians exploit social media's influence to shape public opinion (Pérez-Curiel, 2020).

Social media platforms offer effective new channels for the dissemination of automated, anonymous disinformation, or computational propaganda, abroad and domestically (Gibson, 2023). Martin et al. (2023) define influence effort in autocracies as a coordinated campaign by the state or ruling party to influence one or more specific aspects of politics at the domestic level or in another state. The authors identify more than 100 such foreign or domestic influence efforts, with a growing trend. The research shows that 65% of foreign influence efforts are linked to Russia.

There are many examples of influence effects around the world, ranging from disinformation spread by public service media (Urbán et al., 2023), social media manipulation with paid influencers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), and troll networks working with public money (DiResta et al., 2021; Linvill & Warren, 2020).

Several researchers have tried to categorize the operation of such coordinated networks which are emerging in many countries. Private digital marketing companies, civic troll networks, and PR firms that engage in disinformation campaigns have been labelled digital mercenaries (DiResta et al., 2021; Forest, 2022). Cyber troops (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Wijayanto et al., 2024) have been defined as secretly funded, highly coordinated, mostly anonymous accounts, paid by government or political party actors to manipulate public opinion online. Particularly well-known networks include the Russian Internet Research Agency (DiResta et al., 2021; Freelon & Lokot, 2020) and the Chinese propaganda machine known as the "50 cent army" (King et al., 2017).

While international literature provides numerous examples of organized forms of political influence and disinformation, this study focuses on the unique functioning of political influencers linked to the government. Currently, there is little empirical research analyzing how a professional influencer network organized and financed by the government of a European Union member state uses hostile narratives in social media and how effective it is. Although populist movements in Europe are quick to learn from each other, there is a risk that the model will spread to other countries.

2.2. Hostile Narratives in the Disinformation Discourse

A new concept, "hostile narratives," has emerged in the academic discourse on disinformation in recent years. The idea of the hostile narratives themselves is not new; it has been used in a historical context (e.g., Jencks, 1969); however, in the 2020s, it has recently become a means of broadening and reframing the discourse on disinformation.

In the literature, hostile narratives encompass all negative, offensive manifestations of political communication. It is not a theory in its own right but a concept that can be used to describe the typical elements of political communication. It covers terms such as character assassination against individuals (Viertmann, 2018) and hate speech against groups (Baider & Kopytowska, 2018).

Hostile narratives are necessarily based on the use of untrue or distorted facts. As Flore (2020, p. 13) writes, "The narration of facts counts more than the facts themselves." This narration constructs a story that exaggerates, distorts, or reframes specific characteristics of the person or group designated as the enemy. In all cases, the story as a whole gives a false picture of the person or group concerned. Hostile narratives are systematically designed communication strategies that use selective truths as weapons to legitimize aggression against target persons or groups (Vihmand-Veebel, 2022). The Hungarian examples analyzed in the article are excellent illustrations of this interpretation.

Flore (2020) describes hostile narratives as a more sophisticated version of disinformation campaigns that appeal to emotions and exploit social vulnerabilities. Hostile narratives use negative emotions for strategic communication. Fear, anger, existential threat, vulnerability, insecurity: By amplifying these emotions, the hostile narrative creates the need for intra-group cohesion and defense. Negative emotions lead to a psychological state in which the brain responds more positively to bigoted statements and divisive rhetoric. Hostile narratives also amplify identity-based divisions, making them important drivers of social polarization. This also gives the narrative's proponent a strong mandate to act against the designated enemy. The report also highlights the role of public figures and the media in spreading false and unsubstantiated information noting a dramatic increase in the number and type of partisan news stories.

Anning et al. (2021) build on Galtung's theory of cultural violence to define and analyze hostile narratives. Galtung (1990) distinguishes cultural violence from direct violence, which refers to physical harm, and from structural violence, which covers social injustice. Cultural violence can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. Anning et al. (2021) draw on Galtung's concept of the "Self-Other gradient" to detect hostile narratives. This gradient refers to the processes of legitimizing violence by elevating the "Self" while devaluing or demeaning the "Other." The hypothesis is that the steeper the gradient between the "Self" and the "Other," the more legitimate violence becomes.

Empirical studies show that hostile narratives exploit neurocognitive vulnerabilities (McLaughlin, 2020). The spread of hostile narratives correlates with a measurable decline in social cohesion and institutional legitimacy. These effects are manifested in accelerated polarization, institutional delegitimization, and behavioral radicalization.

Accelerated polarization transforms latent social divisions into active political fault lines. Experimental studies have shown that persistent exposure to divisive narratives reduces intergroup empathy by 39%, as participants increasingly perceive out-groups as existential threats (Iyengar et al., 2019). This affective polarization undermines the consensus-seeking mechanisms essential for democratic governance. Moreover, in the US, surveys show that 19% of Republicans and 10% of Democrats endorsed political violence as justifiable in 2021, a doubling since 2017 (Kleinfeld, 2022).

This article presents examples from Hungarian political communication that clearly support the theoretical framework of hostile narratives. The close connection between hostile narratives and character assassination is particularly clear from the examples.

3. Hungarian Innovation in Boosting Political Influencers: The Megafon Centre

Megafon is a collective of political influencers. Their first appearance in Hungarian public discourse as a collective dates back to 2020. They disseminate short video clips, typically 1–2 minutes long, on various social media platforms, primarily Facebook. Their clips are always government-friendly and/or critical of the opposition, and the videos are published on the respective influencers' Facebook pages, with the name Megafon only featured as the source of funding for the ads. Hence, Megafon is not widely recognized as a distinct brand even though it plays a substantial role in shaping Hungarian public discourse. Some of the Megafon influencers were already known (as political analysts or television hosts) before joining the collective, while others had not appeared publicly prior to their engagement with the group.

There are many open questions concerning the funding of Megafon. The Megafon Digital Incubator Centre Nonprofit Ltd (hereinafter referred to as the Megafon Centre) operates as a private company which means they have no legal obligation to respond to freedom of information requests. Analyzing the data disclosed by pro-government organizations, the independent news portal Telex concluded that the Megafon Centre is financed with taxpayer money. The company filed a lawsuit against Telex in response to this report; however, the court held that the factual claims in the article were well-founded (Bozzay, 2022). According to an award-winning investigative reporter, Megafon alone received twice as much money as the total amount of public financing for the opposition during the entire 2022 election campaign (Bozzay, 2022). A query by a journalist asking where the money had come from was not answered (Nagy, 2023). Megafon is therefore the ruling party's outsourced campaign team: it operates with opaque funding and is not required to account for its resources under official election campaign regulations.

Multi-channel networks, which help influencers work together, are well-established tools in the world of social media. However, the operation of the Megafon Centre is still, in many ways, a unique phenomenon (Német, 2024a). First of all, despite claiming to be a non-profit enterprise, it spends an outsized amount, even on an international scale, on the visibility of its influencers. At the beginning of 2024, Megafon influencers spent more on Facebook ads than all political advertisers in Slovakia or Croatia combined (Teczár, 2024). Furthermore, the Megafon Centre provides everything that the influencers may need, including mentoring, production costs, and other forms of support. The influencers are selected based on political values rather than professional merit (Német, 2024b).

Beyond the unequivocally pro-government slant of the videos, there are several other indications of the close relationship between the ruling party and Megafon. For one, it has become customary for Megafon influencers to appear at events and rallies held by the governing party including the prime minister's annual State of Hungary address. Furthermore, prominent Megafon influencers were in attendance at several campaign events hosted by the ruling party in 2024. Thirdly, Megafon also hosts training events where they teach campaign techniques, political communication, and video editing. An investigative reporter identified 68 Fidesz politicians among the governing party's municipal candidates in 2024 who had participated in such a training (Német, 2024a). We can thus unequivocally assert that Megafon is a government-affiliated organization and that its posts published on social media serve the interests of government communication.

Megafon is thus a well-structured organization that operates with public funds. And even though the use of a broad variety of characters may give rise to an illusion of diversity, in reality, its messaging is centralized. As Metz and Kövesdi (2024) point out, the influencers who are trained or financially and/or technologically supported by Megafon all emphasize the same narratives differing from one another only in terms of style.

Juhász (2025) looked at the Megafon videos with a focus on the common reasoning fallacies in them and found that the videos use these to simplify politics for their viewers. A particularly typical example of these is the strawman argument and ad hominem attack, which focus on the political opponent's person and characteristics, distracting the audience from the relevant underlying policy issue.

Based on an analysis of Meta and Google databases, the Political Capital Institute has calculated that, in the first half of 2024 (up to June 15), Megafon had spent €2.2 million on social media ads. The analysis also found that 54% of all political advertising featured hostile narratives. The ruling party and its satellite organization were responsible for 98% of the total €2.5 million spent on promoting such narratives (Political Capital et al., 2024). The platforms provided by Meta and Google are popular in Hungary and users continuously encounter advertised content produced with support from Megafon. It would hence not be an exaggeration to say that Megafon has had a substantial impact on political discourse in the run-up to the concurrently held European Parliament (EP) and Hungarian local elections on 9 June 2024.

4. Methodology

The methodological framework of the research is based on systematic data collection and analysis processes that enable a comprehensive examination of the short videos and their impact. This research was conducted as part of the Hungarian Digital Media Observatory project. The present study undertook a qualitative analysis of the 105 videos that Megafon had spent the most on advertising between the 1st of February and 9th of June 2024. We selected the videos based on the Facebook Ad Library; the database revealed that Megafon had spent at least 204.8 million forints (ca. €500,000) on advertising the videos in question. However, we cannot determine the exact amount spent on advertising each video as the Meta Ads Library only publishes an approximate figure. As a result, we always calculated the estimated advertising spending based on the minimum threshold value. For instance, Meta has not even disclosed the maximum amount above HUF 1 million (approximately €2,450); thus, all we know about these ads is that they cost more than that. In reality, the amounts that were spent on advertising could be much higher. The objective of our study was to compile the most comprehensive picture possible of the advertised videos to reveal fake and misleading information as well as to help readers understand what instruments Megafon,

a unique propaganda tool even in international comparison, uses in its efforts to shape public discourse in Hungary.

To supplement the content analysis, we organized focus group discussions to explore the impact of influencers from the perspective of the audience and conducted a representative public opinion poll to support our findings with quantitative data.

We used online focus groups to capture the assessment of Megafon videos. There were 26 participants in total, 14 of whom were pro-government and 12 opposition voters, which roughly reflected the political landscape. The research included an equal number of men and women, and the sample was diverse in terms of educational attainment, occupation, and place of residence. The participants were recruited by the Medián Public Opinion and Market Research Institute. The four discussions took place in early May 2024 during the election campaign. Two groups were made up of government party supporters while another two consisted of opposition voters. The survey featured several topics, including the overall assessment of the Hungarian media situation, the public's trust in the media, and their news consumption patterns. We also focused specifically on Megafon's activities. We aired three Megafon videos during the sessions which were used to engender further discussions.

We also captured the public's online content consumption and familiarity with Megafon videos, as well as their relevant knowledge, using a public opinion poll of 1,000 respondents who were representative of the Hungarian public. The statistical margin of error for the poll was ±3.2 percentage points. The poll was based on a representative sample of the Hungarian adult population in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, and the type of municipality in which they reside. The polling data was collected between 13 and 24 May 2024, during the campaign for the concurrent EP and local elections held in June.

5. Results

5.1. Louder Than Truth: Analyzing Megafon's Fear Factory

The examination of the content and stylistic characteristics of Megafon videos is essential for understanding how this content shapes public discourse. This section explores the structure of these videos, the narratives they convey, and the tools they use to influence audience emotions.

The videos published by the Megafon influencers track current political and public affairs events in Hungary. They react quickly to new events and hew closely to the government's narratives. The rising and increasingly popular opposition politician Péter Magyar was especially often the subject of such videos (39 out of the total 105), but other national policy issues and figures were also frequently featured.

It is very typical of Megafon that when they react to an issue, all influencers post their videos within a day or two. The logical structure and reasoning, in fact, even the images used, are the same. They designate the enemy, which includes international actors and Hungarian opposition politicians, using dramatic images and music to convey the danger and show that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is bravely standing up to evil. Even in terms of plot, they follow a standardized content; formally speaking, the videos also feature unique aspects: they were produced by nine distinct influencers each featuring a distinct language, style of clothing, studio

background, and music. The variety of styles used included, among others, a detached expert perspective, humorous approaches, and a mocking tone. Thus, even as they disseminate the same narratives, each of the influencers strives to appear unique.

Although domestic policy issues dominated Megafon's agenda during the period examined, in large part because of the concurrent EP and municipal elections held in the spring of 2024, the way the organization structures its narratives was also manifest in its videos on two foreign policy issues. One was the war in Ukraine (22 of the 105 examined videos). These often envision a third world war, manipulatively using statements made by politicians who are labelled as "pro-war." These were predominantly Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen, and Manfred Weber, along with other European and domestic opposition politicians whose statements were used out of context. The videos featured talk of "pro-government globalist elites," a topos that was also a recurrent element in the official government communication.

Megafon videos regularly used the technique of taking sentences from politicians' press conferences and interviews and having influencers explain them in their own words, greatly exaggerating and often changing the original meaning. They exploited the fact that the manipulated presentation of statements made in an extremely complex geopolitical situation could be used to instill fear in users. One example was Emmanuel Macron's speech on February 27, 2024, in which he said, "There is no consensus to officially back any ground troops. That said, nothing should be excluded. We will do everything that we can to make sure that Russia does not prevail" (Wintour, 2024). This appeared in several videos in the original French with Hungarian subtitles, which in itself may have reduced the reach of the original message, but influencers then interpreted the remarks in Hungarian, saying that "the French president would plunge the whole world into war in a matter of moments" (Bohár Dániel – Riporter, 2024a) and that "the French president is playing with our lives" (Bohár Dániel – Riporter, 2024b).

The other regularly recurring issue with an international dimension was that of the so-called "dollar left/dollar media" (10 of the 105 videos). These videos claimed that "dollars rolling in" were used to control the opposition and the independent media. The videos sought to discredit several independent media outlets regarding their alleged connection to George Soros, also using a narrative claiming that the "Soros empire interferes with the election."

The most prominently featured public enemies—the "globalist elite," the "international left," and George Soros—were presented in the videos as the representatives of a shadowy power that rules from behind and seeks to pressure Hungary. This pressure is centered around the topics often mentioned by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, namely "war, gender, and migration." A key feature of these videos is that they cannot be analyzed using political science terminology: Even when viewing the videos, it is often difficult to ascertain exactly what the globalist or left-wing elite entails, or who exactly is a part of these elites. Nor are the influencers, by any measure, consistent in their word choice or targets. As is typical of conspiracy theories, the depictions of enemies tend to be inconsistent even within the same video clips. The "globalist elite" and the "international left" are often represented by the same European or Democratic Party politicians and often by George Soros.

The majority of the narratives they disseminate about the alleged globalist and/or left-wing elite also appear in the context of the Russo–Ukrainian war. The underlying logic of these videos is that the "globalist elite" is funding the "pro-war international left" to keep support for the war going, since they profit from it.

One of the pre-eminent features of the videos analyzed is how they construct bogeymen. Regardless of whether the underlying issue is one of domestic or international politics, the various enemies are depicted as instruments of the power behind the scenes. It is especially striking that the forces of "good" and their "allies" barely appear during the presentation of the threats presumably looming over Hungary. Megafon influencers focus on the alleged enemies while the positive aspects of their own underlying beliefs appeared only in a few of the videos we saw.

The other key feature is fearmongering. For one, this emanates from the messages themselves (war, the interventions of the shadowy powers) but the impact is massively reinforced by the images used. Explosions, war scenes, and dramatic music are often used to reinforce viewers' visceral fears. For instance, in his video posted on June 6, Dániel Bohár, the most widely advertised influencer on Megafon, who was supposedly commenting on the Hungarian elections, depicted the president of the European Commission, the president of the European People's Party, and the president of France marching in military uniform in front of a battle tank. Similarly, several videos showed a simulation of what would happen if the Hungarian capital were to be hit by a nuclear attack.

On the whole, therefore, Megafon is a group of political influencers who disseminate unequivocally pro-government narratives, but unlike the official governmental narratives they are much more likely to appeal to emotions. They tend to focus on perceived enemies and fostering an "us vs. them" feeling, which is clearly used to polarize public opinion. This is further reinforced by fearmongering, which suggests that the enemy is trying to push Hungary into the war and that their ultimate goal is our destruction. In light of the fact that these messages are continuously present on the most popular social media platforms, and that Megafon spent vast amounts on advertising in the first half of 2024 (the period we analyzed), the impact of these messages on the Hungarian public cannot be underestimated.

5.2. Perceptions From the Polarized Public: Qualitative Research on the Perception of Megafon Videos

In addition to content analysis, it is also important to consider how the audience evaluates and perceives these videos. In this section, the results of focus group research are presented, highlighting the differing perceptions of various political camps and the social impact of Megafon videos.

The focus group survey showed that opposition voters knew more about Megafon than pro-government participants. Several of the pro-government sympathizers only realized during the discussions, upon seeing the videos, that they had seen Megafon clips before and knew the influencers involved. The name Megafon was not recognized by all.

Among opposition viewers, Megafon videos are viewed decidedly negatively; they assess them as propaganda. As one of the participants put it, "It is readily apparent that they shamelessly lie to the public." Opposition viewers also unequivocally assessed that Megafon was pro-government: "They no longer even bother to pretend to be independent." Unsurprisingly, the issue of funding for the ads also came up with people saying that Megafon "uses our taxpayer money." An interesting aspect of the interviews was that the participants clearly recognized that the content had been centrally produced and their assessment, additionally, was that the influencers had not fully succeeded in their efforts to imbue the clips with their own individual style: As one of the participants put it, "There is just no personality behind it, they just needed a face they could use to sell [the videos]."

Among pro-government voters, the assessment of Megafon is very different. These participants were likely to consider these Megafon clips as credible. As one of them noted, "I doubt they would lie or disseminate fake news." The majority of pro-government focus group participants did not see anything objectionable about the fact that the influencers disseminate very similar content and messages. They believe that this is an effective channel of public communication and they think "it's a smart idea to involve influencers, they are close to youths." They are similarly pragmatic when it comes to their assessment that the content disseminated in Megafon videos does not suffer from a lack of credibility. The discussions revealed that pro-government voters feel that Megafon addresses real problems and, even if the videos' style fails to live up to their taste, they nevertheless accept that, from a communications standpoint, they are still effective. A government party voter summarized their opinion as follows: "This is what the average rural voters want, this is what the average voter understands." Albeit indirectly, this statement constitutes a rather clear criticism of the quality of the videos and of the voters too.

The differences in opinion discussed above persisted even after the presentation of the aforementioned three videos. Pro-government voters agreed with the claims in the videos; they did not question the veracity of the latter. Those who sympathise with the opposition, by contrast, raised two new considerations. For one, they argued, the other side "always needs someone to hate and despise; they need enemies." Second, they said that the videos deflect from the real problems, especially economic hardships and the freezing of EU funds.

On the whole, it emerged that the participants of the focus group research were aware of Megafon. Still, several of them only recalled what it was once they had watched the videos. It was not surprising to see that the participants' opinions were fundamentally shaped by their partisan preferences. Opposition voters were likely to see these videos as propaganda and assessed them negatively. Government party voters, by contrast, identified with the main message and, even if they had reservations in terms of taste, these were overridden by their perception that, in the context of the political competition, Megafon is viewed as an effective instrument that shapes public perceptions to be more attuned to the government party's views.

5.3. Hidden in Plain Sight: Quantitative Analysis for Measuring Megafon's Reach and Reception

In addition to qualitative results, we also use quantitative data to support the awareness and social impact of Megafon videos. In the following, based on representative public opinion polls, we show how well-known Megafon is, who encounters its content most frequently, and how different social groups relate to it.

The political influencers that make up the Megafon group are not widely known to the public. Still, in some cases, their name recognition was striking, given that they only appear in advertised content and do nothing else of public note. Forty-three percent of respondents knew at least one of the influencers we asked them about, while the name recognition of the most prominent influencer stood at 30%. The share of respondents who recognized the name Megafon was lower at 20%, which may be explained by the fact that Megafon does not appear as a media provider or brand name attached to the content produced under its aegis; it only plays a role as a source of funding for videos.

A third of the respondents (34%) who had heard of one of the influencers or the name Megafon came across videos associated with the group at least once a week. This is not a high share considering that during the campaign period the ads were continuously visible on Facebook. It seems likely that many see these videos

without knowing that Megafon is behind them. The lack of awareness is also underlined by the fact that sorting the respondents' answers by education showed that those with higher educational attainment were most likely to be aware of having come across Megafon content, while those with the lowest level of education were the least likely to have encountered it. It is also worth noting that when we look at the distribution of responses by political preference, opposition voters were more likely to encounter Megafon content than pro-government voters or voters without a party preference.

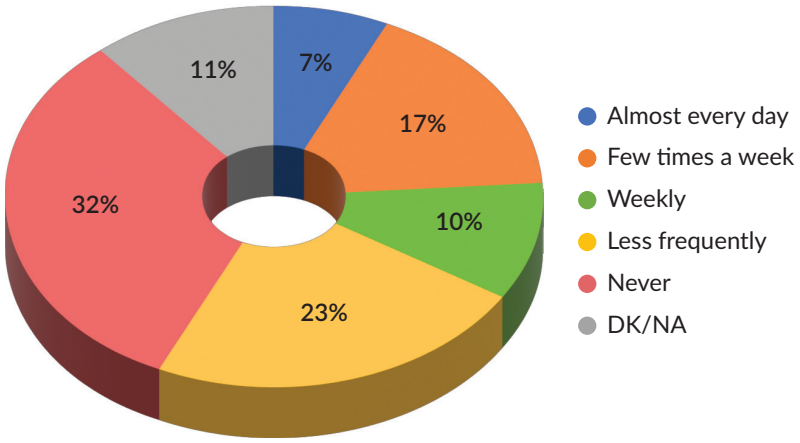


Figure 1. When you're on social media, how often do you come across Megafon video clips or the clips of the previously mentioned persons? Note: A share of respondents who knew at least one of the Megafon influencers or Megafon itself (n = 480).

Similar to the previously reviewed qualitative surveys, the poll also revealed that Hungarian society is divided when it comes to the assessment of Megafon content, as it can be observed in Figure 2. Among the respondents who said that they had already seen Megafon videos, only 39% said unequivocally that they never finished watching them.

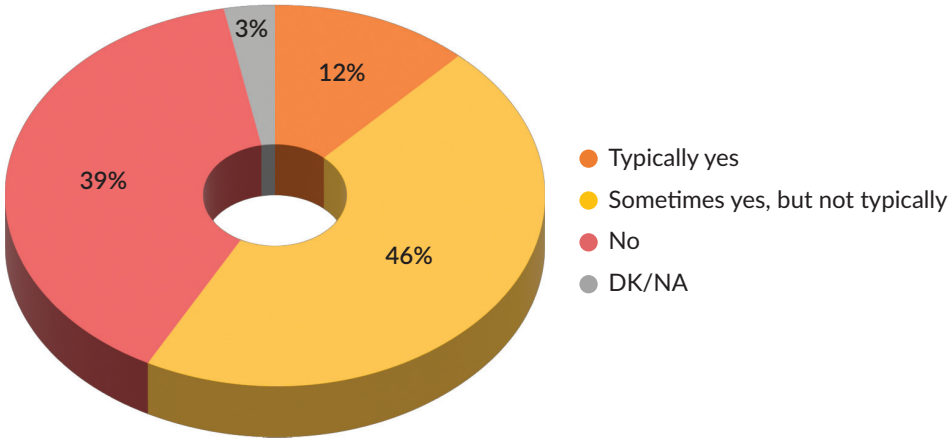


Figure 2. Do you tend to watch video clips published by the previously mentioned persons all the way to the end? Note: A share of respondents who had seen at least one of the influencers in question (n = 129).

Among those who tend to encounter Megafon videos and are aware that these have been produced by the latter, only 37% claimed that these contents irritate them a lot, while a further 34% say it irks them slightly.

A mere quarter of respondents said that Megafon videos do not bother them at all. Obviously, the latter were the respondents whose political views hewed close to the ideas raised by the influencers in the Megafon videos. The data also support the proposition that the attitudes concerning the video clips are predominantly determined by partisan preferences.

The fact that Megafon has close ties to the government side is relatively widely known (76%) among those who recognised its name. Although this is a high ratio, considering that the question referred to what may be the most emblematic player in terms of the ruling party's control over public discourse, a higher result would not have been surprising either. Only a negligible proportion of respondents, a mere 2%, said that Megafon has closer ties to the opposition. However, 11% of respondents assessed that it was independent of both major political camps.

The lack of awareness about Megafon was most conspicuous in the fact that only 30% of respondents indicated that they knew that Megafon publishes paid content. This also highlights one of the major risks associated with this type of communication innovation: Many regard these clips as news of sorts, as content released by newsrooms, and they are thus much more likely to believe it than they would if they were aware that it constitutes advertising.

Despite the money spent on advertising, or maybe in part because of it, Megafon failed to attain widespread credibility: Close to two-thirds of respondents said "no" in response to the question concerning Megafon's credibility. Juxtaposed with earlier data, this also reveals that many watch these videos even though they do not regard them as credible sources of information, which raises further questions about the impact mechanism of political ads, as can be observed in Figure 3.

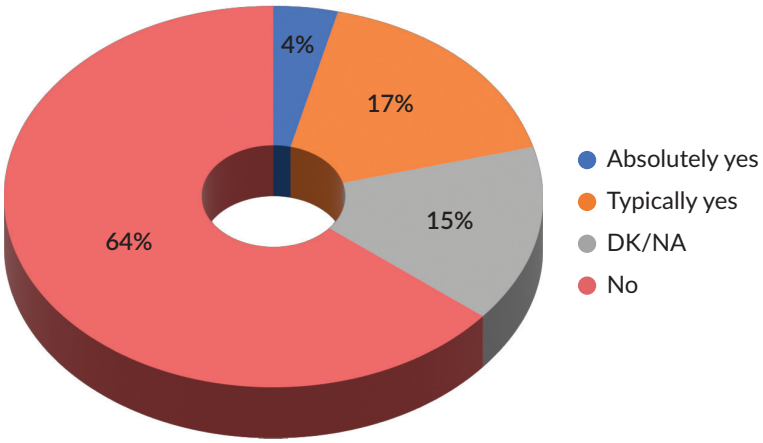


Figure 3. Do you think the content disseminated by Megafon is credible? Note: A share of respondents who knew the name Megafon (n = 204).

In response to the poll questions, few respondents claimed to know Megafon, even though the general experience is that Hungarian Facebook users can hardly avoid encountering their ubiquitous videos; this was especially true during the 2024 election campaign. The risk stemming from political advertising published on social media is precisely that, as compared to legacy media, when it comes to this form of communication, users will find it much harder to distinguish between newsroom-produced content and advertising. This is especially true when it comes to Megafon influencers since several of them are known from television news

shows and, as a result, many users tend to think of them as reporters or even experts. Our poll was only able to capture the perceptions of those respondents who knew Megafon; in other words, those we might refer to as aware users. This method does not allow us to study those who did not know what Megafon was and were also unable to name any of its influencers. The latter is the most vulnerable group and it seems very likely that political ads on Facebook are most effective in influencing this segment of the public.

6. Conclusion

The spread of disinformation, the coarsening of public discourse, and social polarization can be observed in many countries and, while this is not solely due to social media, there is consensus that it has contributed to these processes (Gibson, 2023; Pérez-Curiel, 2020). While these platforms have facilitated the emergence of grassroots initiatives and amplified the voices of local communities and civil society organizations, it has become clear that actors with greater resources are able to achieve greater impact on these sites. It is not surprising that politicians and parties have recognized this and are trying to dominate the public sphere through a strong social media presence to gain or maintain power.

Political influence on social media often manifests itself in the form of increased foreign interference which in Europe primarily means Russian influence. However, there are now several examples of domestic influence with autocratic leaders using state resources to become dominant players on social media sites (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Linvill & Warren, 2020; Martin et al., 2023). From the perspective of political leaders and platform owners this is a win-win situation as it helps those in power to maintain their position by restricting public access, while the platforms generate significant revenue from constant political advertising.

Hungary is an important example of this model. The ruling party dominates the public sphere (Griffen, 2020; Polyák, 2019; Urbán, 2024) and one element of this is the constant advertising content appearing on social media. The ads are not only financed by politicians or parties but also by a company specializing in this field called Megafon, which advertises content by political influencers and also provides training for other influencers and politicians. The influencers are often well-known figures, political analysts, or former television presenters, but it is mainly advertising spending that ensures their constant visibility.

The perception of the Megafon videos was measured using qualitative and quantitative methods, which revealed that many people are unaware of how Megafon works. In the focus group discussion, many only recognized Megafon after watching the videos but, by then, everyone was familiar with the influencers, which shows their wide reach. The questionnaire survey revealed that even among those who are familiar with Megafon, only 30% are aware that the videos are advertisements. This low awareness suggests that many people probably view these social media posts as news content (Hann et al., 2023; Szakács, 2025).

This study adds to the growing research on digital mercenaries and cyber troops by offering empirical evidence of how state-affiliated political influencer networks operate in practice. Our analysis of Megafon's hostile narratives during the 2024 EP elections supports recent theoretical ideas that view these as advanced disinformation tools that take advantage of media consumption habits in the social media-driven media landscape. These narratives also amplify identity-based divisions and systematically create fears by constructing enemy figures and using fearmongering tactics. The research fills an important gap in understanding how domestic influence campaigns work within European contexts, especially through the

new mechanism of government-funded influencer groups that blur the line between advertising and news content.

Building and operating a group of political influencers is relatively easy, especially if one has access to government funds. The Megafon phenomenon is dangerous because it is not specific to Hungary, it is easy to copy, and there is a real risk that the model will spread to other countries.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used Deepl for the text, which has now expanded its capabilities by integrating a next-generation LLM.

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