

Negative Campaigning and Mobilization Through Disinformation: Astroturf Political Influencers' Visual Disinformation Strategies on Facebook

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Abstract

This study investigates the strategic use of visual and verbal disinformation by astroturf political influencers for negative campaigning and political mobilization. Focusing on the case of the 2022 national election campaign in Hungary, the research examines how seemingly grassroots influencers, who conceal affiliations with political actors, engage in astroturfing, a deceptive communication tactic involving the dissemination of fabricated or misleading information. Specifically, the analysis centers on the content produced by Megafon, a prominent astroturf influencer network on Facebook, the dominant platform for political communication in Hungary. To address the research questions, a total of 2,655 Facebook posts were analyzed using manual quantitative content analysis. The dataset comprises both visual and verbal content, with a particular focus on negative campaigning and political mobilization. The findings indicate that disinformation is deeply embedded in both the textual and visual dimensions of astroturf content, with visual disinformation being more prevalent than purely textual. A recurring tactic identified is decontextualization, where genuine visuals are paired with misleading commentary, thereby distorting meaning and intent. Visuals are frequently used to misrepresent opponents' actions and mobilize supporters under false pretenses. These strategies are deployed without transparent disclosure of influencers' political connections, blurring the boundaries between organic activity and coordinated political communication. By analyzing these manipulative practices, the study emphasizes the urgent need to recognize astroturf visual disinformation as a potent instrument for undermining democratic discourse and highlights the critical role of social media as a battleground for political manipulation in contemporary electoral contexts.

Keywords

astroturfing; democratic discourse; disinformation; mobilization; negative campaigning; visual communication

1. Introduction

Political influencers have emerged as new actors in political communication, using their visibility and popularity to promote political actors or issues on social media (Riedl et al., 2023). They can thereby “mobilize voters that [official] campaigns cannot reach” (Goodwin et al., 2023, p. 1627). Operating in a gray area with no strict campaigning regulations, their activities can be seen as grassroots political activism or astroturfing (Goodwin et al., 2023). Online astroturfing refers to centrally coordinated political campaigns that imitate genuine grassroots activity, creating the illusion of spontaneous participation while being directed top-down by political actors (Arce-García et al., 2022; Keller et al., 2020). Although such campaigns may involve the intentional spread of fabricated or misleading information, their defining characteristic lies in the deceptive presentation of coordinated communication as authentic engagement (Keller et al., 2020). Digital astroturfing can aim to gain support for or oppose a policy or political actor (Kovic et al., 2018). This article argues that such aims can translate into mobilization and negative campaigning strategies.

While mobilization (i.e., calls to action encouraging citizens to participate in the democratic process) and negative campaigning (i.e., attacks on political opponents) are well-established themes in political communication research (Haselmayer, 2019; Haßler et al., 2024), their intersection with astroturfing has received comparatively less systematic attention. Recent studies have explored political astroturfing and its effects on online engagement (e.g., Arce-García et al., 2022; Keller et al., 2020), yet little is known about how such practices integrate disinformation narratives for mobilization and negative campaigning in influencer-driven environments. Accordingly, this article aims to understand the extent of disinformation narratives used for (RQ1) negative campaigning and (RQ2) mobilization in astroturf political influencers’ campaigns.

Additionally, disinformation and digital astroturfing research has predominantly focused on textual content, leaving the role of visuals underexplored. Given that visual information is processed faster and perceived as more credible (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Messaris & Abraham, 2001), visual disinformation may have stronger persuasive effects (Dan et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). Accordingly, the study investigates (RQ3) the use of visual disinformation and (RQ4) the content of disinformation narratives employed by pro-government astroturf influencers on Facebook during the 2022 Hungarian national elections. The Hungarian case, where the Megafon network strategically trained influencers to promote government-aligned messages (Bene & Juhász, 2025), offers a revealing example of how coordinated visual disinformation supports electoral mobilization. While Hungary is the focal case study, the findings are situated within broader scholarly debates on influencer-mediated disinformation in democratic contexts.

To address the research questions, both visual and verbal Facebook posts ($N = 2,655$) were analyzed using manual quantitative content analysis, focusing on negative campaigning, mobilization, and visual disinformation. Findings suggest that both verbal and visual disinformation are prominent in the posts of Megafon astroturf influencers and are largely employed for negative campaigning and mobilization. These strategies frequently rely on decontextualization—pairing genuine visuals with misleading texts (Hameleers et al., 2020). Consequently, astroturf visual disinformation can be a powerful tool in negative campaigning and mobilization, often used to undermine opposition without clear disclosure of the real political motives. By outlining astroturf verbal and visual disinformation tendencies, this research contributes to the field of information disorder studies.

2. Disinformation, Astroturf Political Influencers, Negative Campaigning, and Mobilization

Disinformation, astroturfing, negative campaigning, and mobilization can be understood as interconnected strategies within the digital campaign environment: Astroturfing provides the organizational infrastructure, disinformation narratives supply manipulative content, negative campaigning defines strategic attacks, and mobilization represents their behavioral outcome.

Recent scholarship on the “age of disinformation” (Carmi et al., 2020) emphasizes the strategic manipulation of information in digital environments. The concept of information disorder (Wardle, 2018) captures this spectrum, encompassing misinformation (the unintentional spread of false information), disinformation (the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading content), and malinformation (genuine information shared to cause harm). Among these, disinformation poses a particular threat to democratic integrity by undermining informed citizenship, weakening institutional trust, and delegitimizing political opponents (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

With the onset of the fourth age of political communication (Blumler, 2016), social media platforms have transformed political discourse by introducing new actors and organizational logics (Thorson & Wells, 2016). One of these new actors is social media influencers, who mediate political content through affective, personalized, and interactive communication styles (Riedl et al., 2023; von Sikorski et al., 2025). They can promote political actors and issues with genuine posts, but may also simulate grassroots coordination or conceal their real motives and political connections (Goodwin et al., 2023). In the latter case, the literature labels them astroturf political influencers: They are seemingly independent social media personalities who, while appearing as grassroots voices, are in fact strategically aligned with political actors to disseminate partisan narratives, mobilize support, and discredit opponents through coordinated, often deceptive communication (von Sikorski et al., 2025).

Following Keller et al. (2020), astroturfing refers to campaigns that mimic spontaneous, bottom-up political expression while being orchestrated top-down by partisan organizations. In these campaigns, paid or incentivized participants simulate genuine civic engagement, promoting partisan agendas, distracting from unfavorable issues, or attacking opponents. While astroturfing often overlaps with disinformation, it is conceptually broader: Not all astroturfed content is factually false, but all such activity is deceptive in its presentation of coordination and authenticity. As Keller et al. (2020, p. 259) argue, astroturfing “deceives the audience about the identity of its participants,” thereby constituting a form of information manipulation that may or may not rely on falsehoods.

Digital astroturfing can aim to influence and manipulate public opinion and shape political narratives by sharing content that undermines or supports political issues and candidates (Kovic et al., 2018). Based on this idea, this article argues that disinformation shared on social media by astroturf influencers can be used for negative campaigning and political mobilization.

Negative campaigning can be defined in several ways (see Haselmayer, 2019). From the simplest and most straightforward approach, it means attacking the opponents with any kind of criticism (Geer, 2006). With digital media, negative campaigning has become more personalized and emotionally charged (Nai & Walter,

2015). On social media, negative campaigning thrives on affective polarization and algorithmic visibility, where emotionally provocative content spreads faster than neutral information (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Within this environment, disinformation serves as a catalyst for attack politics. False or misleading content allows actors to delegitimize opponents and shape perceptions without accountability. It serves both as content (by spreading fabricated accusations) and a mechanism (by exploiting emotional dynamics) to reinforce hostility (Tucker et al., 2018). Disinformation-based attacks often rely on moral outrage and fear, sustaining polarization and reinforcing group identity.

Astroturf political influencers might play a crucial role in this process. They lend authenticity to centrally coordinated campaigns by translating elite attack messages into relatable narratives. Thereby, astroturfing provides an organizational structure through which disinformation-driven negative campaigning can spread covertly and effectively.

Mobilization—the activation and encouragement of the public to participate in the democratic and political process (see Norris, 2001; Verba et al., 2002)—can be considered a core aim of political communication. However, as Haßler et al. (2024, p. 386) describe, mobilization “has changed significantly in recent decades,” shaped by new political actors, content, channels, audiences, and regulations. These developments have reshaped campaign and communication strategies, especially with disinformation.

Disinformation might operate as a mobilizing instrument, often used for mobilizing supporters against opponents and the press (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). By solving coordination problems with focusing on collective attention and creating shared perceptions of threat or injustice (Petersen, 2020), it can stimulate emotional arousal and in-group solidarity, and leverage anger, fear, and resentment to strengthen partisan cohesion and prompt participation (Thorson & Wells, 2020). Critically, this process is not simply manipulation but a complex coordination mechanism (Petersen, 2020).

Astroturf influencers might be particularly effective here, using relatable personas and visual formats to transform partisan emotions into calls for action, whether voting, sharing content, or attacking opponents online. Through this blend of authenticity and coordination, they link disinformation to tangible political behavior. While both strategies are shaped by the new channels, trends, and actors, little research exists on the possible connections between disinformation, negative campaigning, and mobilization. Hence, this study investigates (RQ1) the extent to which disinformation narratives are employed for negative campaigning and (RQ2) for mobilization in the Facebook communication of astroturf influencers.

3. Visual Disinformation on Social Media

The increasingly visual nature of social media has transformed how political actors communicate. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok prioritize attention-grabbing images and videos, prompting political actors to make visual content central to their strategies (Lilleker, 2019). In this environment, visuals are not merely illustrative but strategic tools used to signal authenticity, evoke emotion, and frame political realities in ways that resonate with audiences and circumvent traditional journalistic gatekeeping (Russmann et al., 2019). Because they are processed and remembered more easily than text, images exert stronger emotional and cognitive influence in political communication (Lilleker, 2019; Miles, 2023).

Because visuals are highly persuasive and easily shared on social media, visual disinformation has become a particularly potent phenomenon with the deliberate use of images and videos to mislead, deceive, or manipulate public opinion for political purposes (Dan et al., 2021). Hence, the strategic role of visuals becomes particularly salient in disinformation and astroturfing campaigns. Visuals can be employed to construct persuasive and emotionally charged narratives that appear credible and organic but are in fact centrally coordinated. Political actors, including state-aligned influencers, might exploit the high shareability and immediacy of images and videos to amplify disinformation, blur accountability, and legitimize partisan frames. For example, decontextualized war footage or pandemic-related imagery has been used strategically to reinforce specific narratives, justify political actions, and undermine trust in opponents and media institutions (Brennen et al., 2021; Uluşan & Özejder, 2024).

Visuals play multiple communicative functions within these strategies: They can serve as “evidence” for false claims, simplify complex realities into emotionally charged symbols, and mobilize collective sentiments around polarizing issues. Their power lies not only in emotional appeal but in their ability to anchor deceptive narratives within apparently authentic imagery, thereby lending credibility to misleading messages (Krafft & Donovan, 2020). For political actors seeking to dominate online discourse, visuals might thus function as tools of framing and amplification.

Additionally, with widely available AI tools, and deepfakes with multimodal synthetic media, all kinds of communication actors are capable of fabricating convincing audio-visual content that can manipulate public perception and erode trust (Battista, 2024). While such technologies enhance campaign sophistication, their use in spreading disinformation poses profound risks to transparency, accountability, and the integrity of democratic processes.

Despite their growing prominence, the strategic deployment of visuals in political disinformation remains underexamined. While prior research has extensively analyzed textual misinformation, only a small proportion of studies systematically investigate how visual content is produced, combined, and circulated as part of disinformation campaigns (Dan et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023; Yang et al., 2023). This gap is especially significant given the increasing role of influencer-based and astroturf communication, where visuals might serve as key instruments of persuasion.

To address this gap, the present study focuses on the use of visuals in the Facebook communication of astroturf political influencers during the 2022 Hungarian national elections. Specifically, it investigates (RQ3) which visual disinformation strategies can be identified and (RQ4) which narratives appear in the Facebook communication of astroturf influencers.

4. Astroturfing Political Influencers in the 2022 Hungarian Election Campaign

The 2022 Hungarian national elections provide a unique opportunity to study astroturf political influencers, who spread government-friendly information on Facebook during the campaign (Bene & Juhász, 2025). To understand the role of these actors, it is necessary to explain the country-specific characteristics. The context of the study is crucial from the perspective of disinformation types, which might vary depending on the environment of a country (see Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019).

Hungary can be described as an “illiberal democracy” (Bíró-Nagy, 2017; Polyák, 2019). As Bennett and Livingston (2020) describe, in illiberal democracies, “disinformation supports a transition to more authoritarian regimes with overt press censorship and the suspension of basic rights and legal processes” (p. 4). To better understand how this system works, it is necessary to review some major political events leading up to this condition.

Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz–KDNP coalition has held a parliamentary supermajority for 15 years, as of 2025. The 2022 parliamentary elections were held on 3 April, preceded by a seven-week-long official campaign period between 12 February and 3 April. It must be highlighted that on 24 February, six weeks before the elections, Russia invaded Ukraine—an event which highly impacted the ongoing Hungarian campaign context and its topics (see Farkas et al., 2024). Additionally, this election was unique from another perspective, too: Because of the “free but not fair” nature of the elections and the “unbalanced” playing field (see Batory, 2014), a six-party opposition coalition (United for Hungary) was formed to defeat Fidesz, led by a non-partisan, independent candidate, Péter Márki-Zay. Despite this alliance, Fidesz secured a fourth consecutive two-thirds majority.

Taking a step back, since the beginning of their first two-thirds majority in 2010, the ruling parties have increasingly reshaped the Hungarian media landscape (Bajomi-Lázár & Stępińska, 2019). They passed a new Media Act in 2010 and steadily expanded government influence, which “does not use violence or overt censorship to control media. The main instrument of control is the re-distribution of media resources” (Bajomi-Lázár & Stępińska, 2019, p. 261). As Bátorfy and Urbán (2020) summarized, the governing Fidesz–KDNP party alliance channels state resources to traditional media outlets aligned with the government. Although the internet is still a relatively freer place, government-friendly businessmen have already purchased the most popular online news sites, e.g., Origo.hu and Index.hu. In Hungary, 85% consume their news online, and 61% specifically on social media—specifically on Facebook—which is higher than news consumption on TV (51%) or in print (7%; Newman et al., 2023). Not surprisingly, the government turned to social media influencers to expand the channels and the opportunities to influence voters.

However, the Hungarian government did not need regular influencers who created their own content but actors who seemingly genuinely shared attacking messages about the opponents (Bene & Juhász, 2025), and used more confrontational and vulgar language than the official politicians (Mikola, 2023). Consequently, they needed astroturf political influencers, who artificially manipulated public opinion while presenting themselves as spontaneous and uncoordinated. This task was outsourced to Megafon (Mikola, 2023).

Officially, Megafon is a nonprofit communication agency that claims to receive no public funds. Accordingly, their political advertising activities on social media do not fall within the scope of the Hungarian campaign regulations and are not regulated and controlled by the State Audit Office. Although the funding background of Megafon is not transparent, in a lawsuit, the court has decided that it is legitimate to claim that the agency is indirectly financed by public money through a foundation and a company (Bozzay, 2022; Polyák et al., 2024; Tóth-Bíró & Bálint, 2021). Although their self-claimed mission is to support and amplify the voice of the right-wing, conservative community through training and sponsoring influencers, all the supported influencers are connected to the government, and their social media posts are basically repeating the government’s rhetoric (Mikola, 2023). Furthermore, Megafon actors constantly refer to themselves as independent influencers and non-electoral actors, but in fact, they are astroturfing political influencers.

As Bene and Juhász's (2025) comparative analysis of Megafon Facebook activity, engagement, and advertising data shows, these astroturf influencers engage in character assassination of opposition politicians. The authors also describe how Megafon's activities are closely coordinated with Fidesz, evidenced by shared personnel, party appearances at events, and leaked emails linking Megafon to Fidesz's digital team. Following Keller et al.'s (2020) definition, astroturfing refers to centrally organized campaigns that mimic grassroots activism to appear spontaneous. Megafon fits this description precisely—its influencers simulate independent voices while executing coordinated, pro-government communication designed to manipulate perceptions of authentic public support.

5. Methods

Prior research indicates that visual disinformation thrives on social media (Yang et al., 2023). Within the Hungarian context, Facebook represents the most widely used platform by both political actors and citizens (Newman et al., 2023), and it therefore serves as the empirical focus of this study. In 2022, the Megafon website listed 10 affiliated influencers (A kopasz oszt, Zsolt Bayer, Dániel Bohár, Dániel Deák, Stefi Déri, KonVerzio, Tamás Kötter, Tamás Korondy, Philip Rákay, and Kristóf Trombitás). Table A1 (see Supplementary File) summarizes key descriptive data on context for their online activity and reach during the election period. Using CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, we collected all posts published by these actors during the official 2022 Hungarian national election campaign period (12 February–3 April), resulting in an initial dataset of $N = 3,657$ posts. At the time of coding, however, the posts of one influencer (Dániel Deák) and several additional items were no longer available, most likely due to deletion. Consequently, the final dataset consisted of 2,655 posts produced by nine Megafon influencers.

The units of analysis were the individual posts on the influencers' Facebook accounts. Posts included status updates, links, photos, videos, and live videos, which could include text. In the case of multiple photos, only the first one was coded, while in the case of videos, only the first minute was coded. Text overlaid on visuals was coded as part of the visual content.

As a first step of the analysis, a Hungarian fact-checking site (Lakmusz, 2022) and a Political Capital (2022) report were used to collect and overview the main disinformation narratives of the 2022 Hungarian election campaign (see Table 3). As a next step, a manual quantitative content analysis (Parry, 2020), with an inductive, qualitative codebook generation process based on Hameleers et al. (2020) was applied to 100 random posts to refine the codebook. The inductive analysis aimed to formulate categories that describe both the visual and verbal characteristics of disinformation and their relations to mobilization and negative campaigning. After formulating a detailed codebook that focuses on the disinformation activities of astroturf political influencers, the manual quantitative content analysis was applied.

The presence of disinformation narratives was coded with a dichotomous variable (1 if present, 0 if not), and if present, the coder had to decide which disinformation narrative was present in the posts from the previously collected list of narratives. If more narratives were present in the same post, the most pronounced one had to be coded. In each post, the coder assessed whether the disinformation appeared verbally, visually, or both. If visual disinformation was present, the type of visual disinformation was coded according to Hameleers et al.'s (2020) work, which differentiates between four categories: (a) pairing authentic visuals with misleading texts (decontextualization); (b) cropping or decontextualizing visuals to

make certain aspects of issues more salient in a goal-directed way (reframing); (c) manipulating visuals to present a different reality (visual doctoring); and (d) fabricating content by pairing manipulated images with manipulated text (multimodal doctoring). To understand the “big picture”—the visual disinformation narratives—Hameleers’ (2025) logic is applied to consider both the visual and verbal elements of Facebook posts, which are in interaction when creating deceptive storylines and statements.

Negative campaigning was identified as critiques, accusations, and attacks on opponents (Geer, 2006), coded as a dichotomous variable (1 if present, 0 if not). Mobilization was defined as calls to action, such as encouraging or discouraging voting for a party or actor; sharing, reading, or watching election-related information; invitations to online or offline campaign events; or other election-related encouragement directed at political actors or citizens—inspired by the ideas of the Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide (2026) codebook, which allows international comparisons of election campaign strategies in digital communication channels. Coding of this variable differentiated between mobilization, interaction, information, and no calls to action.

Additionally, general visual features, such as the type of visuals and valence of the visual disinformation posts, were also coded. The former variable distinguished between video, screenshot, photo, meme, flyer, statistics, and cartoons, while valence (positive, negative, mixed, neutral, or humorous) was judged based on overall visual and verbal tone.

The final codebook (see Table 1) was applied to the whole sample ($N = 2,655$). Coding was carried out by the author of the article. To ensure reliability and validity, an intercoder reliability test was also applied on a random sample ($N = 100$) by a political science student, who participated in two coder training sessions. The intercoder reliability test resulted in Krippendorff’s alpha values of at least 0.93 for all variables.

Finally, computational statistical analyses were carried out to explore the relationships between disinformation narratives, negative campaigning, and mobilization to systematically examine how these elements interact in astroturf influencers’ communication.

6. Results

Table 1 summarizes the main descriptive findings of the content analysis. As can be seen, disinformation narratives were present in 22% of the whole sample, and from these posts, 22% contained only verbal disinformation, while 78% appeared with visual elements. Accordingly, it can be said that disinformation was present in a fifth of the posts of the astroturf political influencers’ Facebook campaign, and visual disinformation was more common than purely verbal disinformation.

Almost half of all posts (47%) called for some kind of action. The main aim was mobilization (82%), which was either a positive call to participate in the elections, or a negative call not to let the opposition win, and in some cases, a “go for it” cheer for the ruling party’s candidates. To a lesser degree, Megafon influencers shared information on other political matters and encouraged their followers to read or watch election-related content (17%). Calls for interactions were uncommon (1%). This means that the astroturf political influencers of Megafon are almost exclusively using their visibility to mobilize voters, and by doing so, they contribute to the government’s campaign.

Table 1. Summary of descriptive findings of the content analysis.

Categories	Krippendorff's alpha	Variables	Freq. (% within the whole sample)	Freq. (% within the category)
Presence of disinformation	0.97		22%	–
		Visual	17%	78%
		Verbal	5%	22%
Presence of calls to action	0.96		47%	–
		Mobilization	38%	82%
		Interaction	1%	1%
		Information	8%	17%
Presence of negative campaigning	0.96		49%	–
Main topic of disinformation*	0.95			
Type of visual disinformation	0.98			Freq. (% within all visual disinfo. posts)
		Decontextualization	13%	75%
		Reframing	3%	17%
		Visual doctoring	1%	8%
		Multimodal doctoring	0%	0%
Type of visuals	0.96			
		Video	6%	34%
		Screenshot	4%	25%
		Photo	4%	21%
		Meme	2%	10%
		Flyer	1%	6%
		Statistics	1%	3%
		Cartoon	0%	1%
Valence of the visual disinformation posts	0.93			
		Positive	1%	4%
		Negative	11%	62%
		Mixed	4%	25%
		Neutral	0%	1%
		Humorous	1%	8%

Note: * Identified main topics of disinformation are described in Table 3.

As for negative campaigning, almost half of the posts (49%) showed negative statements or visual representations of opposition actors. These posts contained accusations, character attacks, criticism, or negative exaggerations. Accordingly, it can be said that by organizing an astroturf political influencer campaign, the government can capitalize not only on strengthened mobilization but also reap the rewards of negative campaigning strategies.

Further, to answer RQ1 and RQ2, Table 2 summarizes that 89% of all disinformation posts were used for negative campaigning. As for mobilization, 66% of all disinformation posts were intended as calls for action. Altogether, more than half of the disinformation (57%) spread by astroturf political influencers was aimed at both mobilizing their followers and running a negative campaign. In sum, then, results suggest that both negative campaigning and mobilization were important strategies of the astroturf political influencers when spreading disinformation.

Turning to RQ3 and the types of visual disinformation, 75% of the disinformation posts used visual decontextualization, with authentic visuals being paired with misleading texts, either in the post text or in text superimposed on the visuals. Reframing, when visuals are cropped to make certain aspects of issues more salient in a goal-directed way, was present in 17% of all disinformation posts. Visual doctoring—the manipulation of visuals to present a different reality—occurred in 8% of disinformation posts. Multimodal doctoring, with the manipulation of both visual and verbal elements, was not present.

As for the visual characteristics of disinformation, the types and the valence of the images and videos were coded. For visual disinformation purposes, videos (34%), screenshots (25%), photos (21%), and memes (10%) were the most commonly used, while flyers (6%), statistics (3%), and cartoons (1%) were rarely used. The high ratio of videos, screenshots, and photos suggests that these are the most suitable tools for decontextualization, as authentic visuals can best support the verbal elements of disinformation spread by astroturf influencers.

Considering the valence of the posts, the majority of visual disinformation was negative (62%), and humorous posts (8%) outnumbered positive ones (4%). The high amount of negativity can be easily understood considering the frequent application of negative campaigning. Further, these results suggest that visual disinformation is predominantly negative in nature. Twenty-five percent of visual disinformation posts were mixed, and these typically depicted the opposition from a negative perspective and Viktor Orbán from a positive one.

Table 2. Negative campaigning and calls to action within disinformation.

Variables	Freq. (% within disinformation)*
Negative campaigning	89%
Calls to action	66%
Both Negative campaigning & Calls to action	57%

Note: * The variables are not mutually exclusive within disinformation.

Turning to RQ4, Table 3 describes the frequency and content of the identified disinformation narratives, and the frequency with which they were used for calls to action and negative campaigning. The most frequent statements were formed about the supposed intention of the opposition parties and candidates to drag Hungary into the Russian-Ukrainian war (50%). This was often summarized in a form that the stake of the election was war or peace, where the government represented peace, while the opposition stood for war. The narrative was formulated with other words, too: Sometimes the whole opposition, sometimes specifically Péter Márki-Zay, was accused of wanting to drag Hungary into the war by sending weapons and Hungarian soldiers to Ukraine. These posts were quite often used for both mobilization (75%) and negative campaigning (85%).

The second most common disinformation narrative was about the former prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, and his supposed leading role in the opposition (28%). This narrative also appeared as him being in control of the actual opposition coalition's leader, Péter Márki-Zay, or stated that Márki-Zay is only a puppet of Gyurcsány. These narratives mobilized followers in 67% of cases, and 91% of posts related to the former prime minister were used for negative campaigning.

Another common disinformation narrative states that the opposition works with foreign/CIA agents, and they are all controlled and financed by a globalist international network whose aim is to replace Viktor Orbán (8%). A little more than half of these posts (53%) were aimed at mobilizing followers, and not surprisingly, all of them (100%) contained criticisms or accusations.

In 6% of the disinformation posts, a narrative about the opposition's supposed intention to abolish the utility cost-reduction program of the government appeared, while 4% of disinformation was about the idea that the opposition candidates' campaigns are financed by the cocaine trade. While both narratives were used for negative campaigning (100% each), the former one was more often used for mobilization (48%) than the latter one (20%).

Finally, there are less frequent but still recurring narratives (1% each), such as the opposition's supposed intention to support children's gender affirmation surgery without parental consent, their intention to

Table 3. Frequency and content of the most common disinformation narratives.

	Frequency	Calls to action*	Negative campaigning*
The opposition wants Hungary to join the war	50%	75%	85%
Ferenc Gyurcsány is the real leader of the opposition coalition	28%	67%	91%
The opposition works with foreign and CIA agents for globalist powers	8%	53%	100%
The opposition seeks to abolish the utility cost-reduction program	6%	48%	100%
Opposition candidates' campaigns are financed by the cocaine trade	4%	20%	100%
In the West, children have gender affirmation surgeries without parental consent, and the opposition would support this in Hungary	1%	71%	29%
The opposition seeks to privatize healthcare	1%	0%	100%
The opposition would open Hungary's borders to illegal migrants	1%	60%	100%
Ukraine, as a state, does not exist or is an artificial entity	1%	100%	100%
The US and/or the "deep state" is responsible for the war; it serves their interests	1%	67%	1%
Other	1%	50%	100%

Note: * Percentages are calculated for the frequency within the given disinformation narrative.

privatize the health care system, and to open Hungary’s borders to illegal migrants. Still, in 1% each, there were narratives about the ideas that Ukraine as a state does not exist or is an artificial entity, and that the US and/or the “deep state” is responsible for the war, which serves their interests. Lastly, the final 1% of disinformation; these posts were rare and therefore merged into a single “other” category. These were related to the opposition’s intention to raise taxes, and to the Ukrainian neo-nazi deputy police chief of Kyiv. These narratives quite frequently contained criticism or accusations, and to a lesser degree, mobilization was also aimed at by these posts.

Regarding temporal dynamics, Figure 1 illustrates a clear temporal pattern in posting activity, with a sharp escalation as the campaign unfolds: rising from an average of 7.3 posts per day in the early phase to 20.4 in the final weeks. The mid-March surge aligns with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February and its ensuing political fallout, suggesting that external crises served as key triggers for intensified communication and agenda-setting. Posting activity reaches its peak in the final days before the 3 April election, reflecting a deliberate strategy to maximize visibility and engagement during the most competitive stage of the campaign.

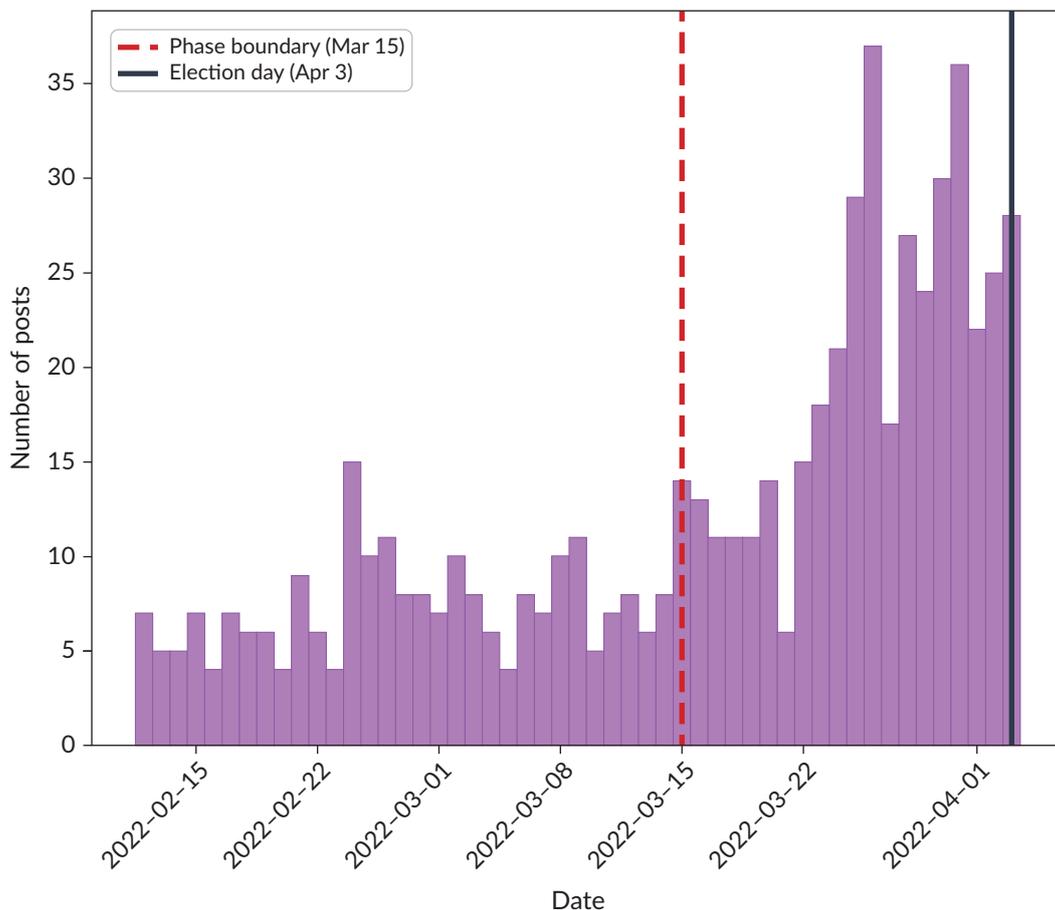


Figure 1. Temporal patterns in posting activity.

As Table 4 shows, mobilization posts nearly doubled from the early campaign (40%) to the final phase (71%). This highly significant increase indicates a strategic shift toward activating supporters as election day approached. Negative campaigning, by contrast, remained consistently dominant throughout the period (87–94%), underscoring its central role in the influencers’ communication. Overall, the campaign evolved

from a primarily attack-oriented phase to one increasingly focused on mobilization, suggesting a calculated transition from persuasion to turnout efforts in the final stretch.

Table 4. Temporal patterns of mobilization and negative campaigning.

	Mobilization (%)	Negative campaigning (%)
Early (12 Feb–14 Mar)	36.9	93.8
Late (15 Mar–3 Apr)	71.4	86.6

Note: Chi-square test (mobilisation × phase): $\chi^2 = 60.0$, $p < 0.0001$.

Next, Figure 2 shows that across pages, activity clusters are consistently in high-negative territory (above 82%), yet levels of mobilization vary substantially (26% to 75%). Dániel Bohár stands out for combining the lowest mobilization rate (26%) with persistently high negativity, reflecting an attack-oriented communication style focused more on delegitimizing opponents than rallying supporters. In contrast, Stefi Déri presents a somewhat different profile, with lower negativity (72%) and moderate mobilization, suggesting a more mixed strategy that blends critique with selective calls to action.

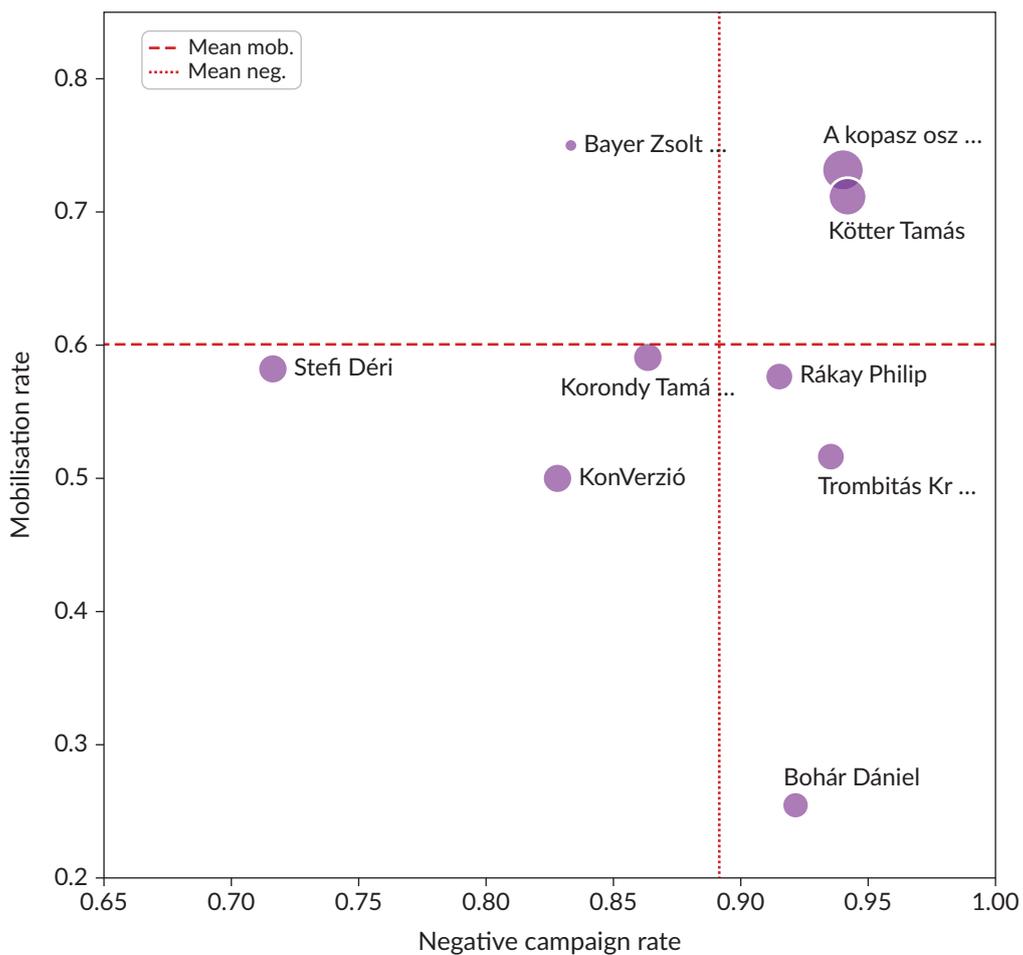


Figure 2. Influencers' mobilization and negative campaigning activity. Varying sizes of the purple circles indicate the total number of posts published during the campaign.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the relationships between disinformation narratives, negative campaigning, and mobilization strategies in astroturf political influencers' Facebook posts during the 2022 Hungarian national election campaign. To enhance our understanding of contemporary online disinformation, the analysis was further extended to examine visual content and its role in shaping information disorder.

The findings reveal that disinformation appeared in approximately one-fifth of the sample, underscoring the threat posed by astroturf influencers disseminating dubious political content. These actors relied predominantly on visual disinformation, employing images and videos for decontextualization, i.e., to support false claims with authentic images. This observation aligns with prior research (Hameleers et al., 2020) and suggests that decontextualization remains the most accessible and effective form of visual disinformation, as it requires neither advanced technical expertise nor specialized tools. However, as AI-driven image manipulation technologies evolve, this balance may shift. By 2026, AI-modified visuals had already begun to appear in Hungarian Facebook-based political communication, particularly in attack-oriented content targeting opponents.

Regarding the strategies of astroturf political influencers, both mobilization and negative campaigning emerged as common objectives of their posts, frequently intertwined with disinformation. The findings on negative campaigning are consistent with previous research, as Bene and Juhász (2025) likewise identified a high proportion of posts targeting the personal integrity of political opponents. Notably, calls to action appeared in more than half of the disinformation posts, while negative campaigning with accusations and criticism towards the opposition was present in nearly all such content. Moreover, over half of the disinformation posts simultaneously served both mobilization and negative campaigning purposes. These results lend support to Goodwin et al.'s (2023) argument concerning the mobilizing potential of these emerging actors and offer a previously underexplored illustration of substantial shifts in mobilization strategies (Haßler et al., 2024).

Based on the results, it seems like, besides spreading disinformation, astroturf political influencers aim to mobilize voters, frequently relying on negative campaigning techniques. This mobilizing function suggests that astroturf influencers are not just transmitters of partisan messages but also actively shape political participation, demonstrating a shift in campaigning where traditional party communication is augmented by influencers. These practices illustrate how political communication is being transformed by new digital intermediaries, who leverage personalized styles and platform-specific affordances to amplify partisan narratives and attack opponents. Accordingly, our findings lend support to Riedl et al.'s (2023, p. 2) argument that political influencers constitute an "ideal case for studying the changing political media ecology," as they exemplify both the innovative and disruptive forces reshaping democratic campaigning in the digital age.

The most frequent disinformation narratives were connected to the opposition's supposed intention to lead Hungary into war, and to the alleged leading role of the former prime minister. There were other common narratives, which were mainly false accusations of the opposition parties and candidates. Although to a lesser degree, the astroturf actors spread disinformation about the role of the US in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Consequently, Megafon astroturf political influencers used various disinformation narratives to support the government.

Overall, the findings reveal a campaign communication pattern dominated by negativity and strategic mobilization. While negative campaigning remained consistently high across phases, mobilization intensified sharply toward the election, reflecting a tactical shift from attack-driven to participation-focused messaging. Pages clustered around high negativity but diverged in mobilization intensity, with some emphasizing attacks and others engagement.

The present article underlines Facebook's central role in the Hungarian political communication, which aligns with broader media consumption patterns in Hungary, where political news consumption on social media is high (Newman et al., 2023). Further, results align with general social media consumption patterns as well: Facebook's visual affordances with images, videos, memes, and screenshots facilitate rapid dissemination of emotionally charged, misleading content that promotes ruling party interests while discrediting opponents. Additionally, this study reveals how astroturfing blurs the line between authentic political expression and state-coordinated disinformation, creating a false sense of grassroots engagement.

The article's case-specific insights open important theoretical discussions regarding whether findings can be generalized and extended to other democracies. On one hand, the use of Facebook's algorithmic amplification of visual and emotional content is not country-specific; these posts trigger more engagement— and thus, more visibility all around the globe (see Gerbaudo et al., 2023; Metz et al., 2020). Also, visual disinformation techniques, such as decontextualization and reframing, are common methods of persuasion in international disinformation campaigns (see Hameleers, 2023). Furthermore, astroturfing as a strategy is present worldwide (Schoch et al., 2022), and the concept of political influencers masquerading as grassroots actors is seen in other countries, such as the US, with coordinated influencer campaigns (Goodwin et al., 2023), and Russia, with state-sponsored troll farms (Zannettou et al., 2020), as well. Additionally, the illiberal democracy model of Hungary has been copied in many countries such as Turkey, Poland, and Serbia (Krekó, 2022; Shattuck, 2018), where similar media–state convergence occurs (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). Finally, considering the content and context, tactics like character attacks and emotional visual framing are portable tools used across multiple electoral systems and media ecologies (see Grabe & Bucy, 2014; Nai et al., 2022; Petkevic & Nai, 2022).

On the other hand, Hungary's illiberal democracy and the extensive government control over traditional media create an unusually supportive ecosystem for astroturfing to thrive, unlike in pluralistic systems. Still, Hungary can function as a model for other regimes, showing how astroturfing can be institutionalized in a semi-democratic framework. This exportability makes Hungary an influential case in global debates on disinformation and democracy. Nevertheless, the scarcity of counter-messaging outlets or fact-checking infrastructure in Hungary may have amplified Megafon's effects, which is an important asymmetry that does not hold universally.

Associated with this, the study has limitations. First, the identification of disinformation narratives relied on a list of previously verified cases, which may have constrained our ability to detect newly emerging narratives circulating during the campaign. The limited availability of Hungarian-language fact-checking databases further restricts the scope of identified narratives, potentially leading to an underestimation of disinformation prevalence. Second, while manual content analysis enables the nuanced interpretation of visual and contextual elements that automated tools cannot capture, it limits the number of posts that can be feasibly analyzed. Finally, future work might focus on different social media platforms to compare and widen our knowledge of astroturf political influencers.

Still, the findings of the present article highlight that astroturf political influencers should be considered as a new kind of political communication actors with serious potential to mislead and mobilize voters by false accusations about political opponents. Since “an astroturfing campaign tries to appear like such an organic expression of public opinion but is actually centrally coordinated and organized” (Keller et al., 2020), citizens might be deceived about the credibility and intentions of these political influencers, the real political actors behind the shared information, and the validity of their content. Additionally, since these astroturf political influencers aim to mobilize their voters, the threats to democratic processes and informed citizenry are increased. Considering the high ratio of visual disinformation used by these actors, the potential threats might be even more significant. Visuals can be highly effective tools both in negative campaigning and political mobilization, and when it comes to disinformation, images and videos can provide fake evidence, with a high potential to emotionally influence public opinion, often by discrediting opponents or evoking fear, uncertainty, and anger.

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Conflict of Interests

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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