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## Political Propaganda Indicator Pilot Project

The creation of the Political Propaganda Indicator (PPI) is an attempt to create an indicator for measuring abuses of the power of information, following the model of the so-called Democracy Index created by Freedom House<sup>1</sup> and the Corruption Perceptions Index tracked by Transparency International.<sup>2</sup> Any system of national information should also be accompanied by a method for measuring and tracking how corrupted the information disseminated to the public is.

### Antecedents

In Hungary, the battle for the conquest of the media space began in 1993.<sup>3</sup> And it continues to this very day. The most recent development in this ongoing game transpired just days before this article was completed, with the election of the new members of the Media Council. The Hungarian opposition will appeal this election in the Constitutional Court and in international forums, arguing that the fact that the most important media and communications oversight body in Hungary comprises only members delegated by the governing party is incompatible with both the Hungarian Constitution, the Fundamental Law, and with EU norms.<sup>4</sup> Three successive elections (2010, 2014 and 2018) have yielded a constitutional two-thirds supermajority in Parliament for the governing parties, and have thus given the government the power of attaining exclusive oversight over the institutions that produce political news and information and control and influence the flow of such information. The governing parties have fully availed themselves of this power.<sup>5</sup> Pro-government media outlets receive nearly 80% of the funds allocated to media from the central budget. Independent media, by contrast, receive only 22% of these funds.<sup>6</sup>

In the meanwhile, all around the world and in Hungary, too, social networks have opened the floodgates that have led to a whole new era in political propaganda. As social networks proliferated, the editorial control over the news stream, which was previously performed by newsrooms, disappeared.<sup>7</sup> Anyone can act as a news source on these networks and they can access everyone else directly, without intermediaries.<sup>8</sup> The editorial responsibilities designed to ensure that articles disseminated are true are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019>

<sup>2</sup> <https://transparency.hu/tag/korruptcio-erzekelesi-index/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.emasa.hu/cikk.php?id=11917>

<sup>4</sup> <https://media1.hu/2019/12/03/kiakadt-a-medianacs-ujboli-elfideszesitesen-az-ellenzek/>

<sup>5</sup> The pro-Fidesz media is all-pervasive <https://mertek.eu/2019/04/25/mindent-beborit-a-fidesz-kozeli-media/>  
<https://mertek.eu/en/2019/05/02/fidesz-friendly-media-dominate-everywhere/>

<sup>6</sup> Advertising spending <https://mertek.eu/2019/04/16/allami-reklamkoltes-2006-2018/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.walkersands.com/how-social-media-is-changing-communication/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.walkersands.com/how-social-media-is-changing-communication/>

thus easily circumvented. This is especially dangerous since fake news spread six times faster on social media networks than fact-based news items.<sup>9</sup> Even if newsrooms did not know this quite as precisely as research has since established, they nevertheless suspected it to be the case, which is why media organizations dedicated a whole lot of energy and money to establish their credibility, which proved to be their most treasured asset. An organic corollary of information disseminated through networks is the latitude it extends to individuality and personal action, and, as a consequence thereof, to the freedom of individual irresponsibility. This has gone hand in hand with the decline in the relevance of forcing corrections by way of judicial intervention. Furthermore, recent research showed that in the social networks, the fake news streams behave like distinct eco-systems. The fake news that are shared “come to life,” in a manner of speaking – they hide to avoid being exposed and then resurface unexpectedly in new guises.<sup>10</sup>

Fake information has become an easily and universally deployable instrument for dominating public opinion. In the run-up to Trump’s election and the Brexit referendum, for example, the Russian government operated tens of thousands of bots that churned out fake news by using fake social network profiles.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the process whereby a false perception of the world becomes a pervasive mass phenomenon is far more complex. Even the torrents of fake news generated and disseminated across multiple fronts of communication in parallel will not lead to success in and of themselves; for these to work as intended, the activities across various fronts need to be coordinated. In an article published in the November edition of the monthly *Mozgó Világ*, the researchers Domonkos Lázár and Endre Sik exposed a vast, centrally-coordinated effort to manipulate Hungarian public opinion through a series of such actions.<sup>12</sup> They write that between the summer of 2015 and 2019 the Orbán government had pushed the “Moral Panic Button” on 17 readily identifiable and distinct occasions. On these occasions, it launched into communication activities that were deliberately designed to evoke a sense of panic across the entire society, suggesting that our core societal values were under attack. Logically, these types of communicative actions tend to mutually reinforce one another.<sup>13</sup> Another strategy in this vein is to induce informational chaos. Informational chaos, that is the mass dissemination of contradictory information of uncertain provenance, is artificially generated by political players, while the audience is increasingly exposed to and dependent on this information. Efforts to suppress real information also amount to disinformation. A media system that selects its preferred items from among the information it disseminates serves to boost the informational dependence of the public.

The PPI looks at the combined and aggregated impact of the various effects discussed above. It captures the quality of information provided by the given media system, along with the impact of deliberate political manipulation on the information of the public. The PPI shows what percentage of the people accept as true news items that are spread by political propaganda even though they are otherwise often difficult to verify as factually true; it shows what share of the public have accepted a false perception of reality because of propaganda and manipulated news services; what percentage of the people fall prey to false news streams and, consequently, how many of them decide in free elections on the basis of misleading, deliberately false information or concealed information as compared to a situation when there is a level informational playing field.

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<sup>9</sup> Fake news spread faster than facts

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/technology/twitter-fake-news-research.html>

<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>

<sup>10</sup> A fake news spread as if were an eco-system: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-019-1494-7>

<https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/>

<sup>11</sup> Russian fake news robots deployed to influence elections in the West <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2017/11/17/russian-bots-rogue-planets-and-robot-beheadings-fake-news-stories-duped>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/40971554/A\\_mor%C3%A1lispanik-gomb\\_2.0](https://www.academia.edu/40971554/A_mor%C3%A1lispanik-gomb_2.0)

<sup>13</sup> <https://24.hu/belfold/2018/12/19/migrans-moralispanik-kutatas/>

Internet-based applications have resulted in the unfettered freedom to disseminate information. The new instruments have also opened up the gates to gangsters in political and business life.<sup>14</sup> It is not the masses who are responsible for their wrong choices; the responsibility is borne by those who deceive them. The sources of information have become subject to the dangers of toxification because the relevant control mechanisms have been eliminated all around the world. This kind of concern has been expressed in various forums. In the Guardian, Timothy Garton Ash has sought to alert the public to this danger in several columns. In his most pointed warning thus far, he argued that the part of Europe that had once been caught behind the Iron Curtain is now subject to an organized and concerted attack on democracy.<sup>15</sup> For the time being, Germany appears to be the country that is taking this problem most seriously. The dissemination of fake news is one of the most important national security challenges – said German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and the German government set up a foundation to consistently monitor channels of information and to move immediately when it experiences misleading information, lies, disinformation and provocations.<sup>16</sup>

Essentially, they look at fake news as recurrently committed scam, fraud and misinformation for base motives, for profit, deliberately and as part of a conspiracy, with exceptional cruelty and by abusing the power of information.

The simplest way to gauge how successful the effort to generate a false consciousness at the societal level has been to measure what percentage of the electorate believe false claims, to what extent they are likely to identify with the views concocted by political propaganda, with the fake news, the abuses and character assassinations churned out by extremists groups, or with cunning conspiracy theories. Research on the benefits and risks of fake news mechanisms has emerged as a scientific discipline in its own right.<sup>17</sup> The authors of studies on the media tend to look at the mechanisms of fake news in the context of political propaganda, and they view it as a virus of sorts that infects the news stream and upsets the information available to the public. This pathogen attacks the immune system of public information. Up until the most recent decade, the defense system arrayed against fake news had operated relatively well. There was a strong correlation previously between credibility and thoroughness on the one hand and the reach of information on the other.<sup>18</sup> (A lie has no legs, as the proverb says.)

In the new media world the artificially generated noise is so intense, however, and the thousands of bots deployed to spread fake news make such a deafening rumble – in other words there is such a massive feedback mechanism in the system – that information often ends up being misinformation. The producers of fake news – some of whom are businesspersons on the lookout for easily deceived customers, while others are politicians in search of easily deceived supporters – artificially insert themselves into the chain of information. They seize the process of news production from journalists, news agencies, media organizations – the profession dedicated to this end – who are employed and authorized by the audiences for this job, and take control of it themselves. Private corporations, quacks, profiteers, organizations, parties, campaign and PR teams produce news that are often effectively nothing but false claims, lies, distortions, unverifiable promises, slanders, propaganda texts, frauds and misleading information. The masses are incapable of performing the work that had been previously

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<sup>14</sup> Final legal decision: Ernő Korponyai and the Fidelitas (the Fidesz youth organization) in Szeged were lying in their leaflets <http://nyugatifeny.hu/2019/10/25/70-ezer-helyreigazito-szorolapot-kell-kiosztania-a-hazudozo-fidelitasnak-szegeden>

The story of Imre László is similar

<https://dkp.hu/hirek/4435/a-birosag-nyomozast-rendelt-el-a-tv2-es-az-origo-ellen-a-laszlo-imret-ert-ragalmazasuk-miatt>

<sup>15</sup> A coordinated attack on democracy in post-Iron Curtain Europe

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/30/democracy-europe-1989-berlin-wall-velvet-revolutions-populists>

<sup>16</sup> German Chancellor Angela Merkel on February 9, 2020, at a speech inaugurating the new headquarters of the German Federal Intelligence Agency (BND): <https://444.hu/2019/02/08/angela-merkel-szerint-az-alhirterjesztes-az-egyik-legnagyobb-nemzetbiztonsagi-kihivas>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.sciencenewsforstudents.org/article/studies-test-ways-slow-spread-fake-news>

<sup>18</sup> <http://mek.oszk.hu/13400/13432/13432.pdf>

discharged by high-quality newsrooms, that is to evaluate the news and to filter out falsehoods; they are incapable of performing the functions that used to be performed by specialized business journalists, political analysts, foreign policy experts and international correspondents. The result is that the average reader will not be informed but will instead end up being misinformed by the news.

## Natural and artificial chaos

Political propaganda features both natural and artificial chaos. By their very essence, fake news and hate speech are not straight talk; they want to manipulate, after all. They mislead, distort, warp, curse and denigrate. They misrepresent groups, communities and events, they distort reality in order to incite passions and sentiments. In other words, in contrast to the classic logic governing knowledge, the things presented are not portrayed in an increasingly focused and accurate manner, but instead in a divergent, confused and chaotic form. There are good measurement tools for capturing such cloud formations, see for example the research conducted by Endre Sík. Spreading chaos in the information mechanisms is not an end in itself. One evident goal is to reduce, maybe even inhibit, the impact of efforts at revealing falsehoods. There are media operating independently of the government and of propaganda centers that report about developments that are potentially embarrassing for those in power, but these reports reach only a limited range of readers and audiences. How limited is their reach? That, too, can be measured. The leading online newspaper Index reported in a headline that *Hungary leads the EU statistics concerning frauds*.<sup>19</sup> Pro-government news sites, newspapers, television channels, as well as the state media, mostly failed to report this piece of news.

This phenomenon is not limited to Hungary, nor is it limited to some reckless journalists who have trodden down the wrong path. One of the most prestigious scientific magazines, *Nature*, publishes pieces on the damage wrought by fake news and on their modus operandi almost every week.<sup>20</sup>

And when several speakers affiliated with the parliamentary opposition in Hungary spoke out in favor of press freedom in October 2019, the prime minister responded by telling them how that concept had changed recently. During a PMQ at the beginning of the Parliament's autumn session (October 21, 2019), Prime Minister Viktor Orbán responded to charges that his government was violating the principle of press freedom by arguing that the traditional understanding of press freedom was no longer relevant since the rise of social media had resulted in a situation when anyone can say whatever they want and that information can be disseminated to everyone. Consequently, thus Orbán, the problem before us now is to find out how we can coexist with this challenge. "That is why it is ridiculous and outdated to try to hold this government accountable on the basis of the traditional criteria of press freedom" – he added. (*The passage in question can be found between the 1:38 and 2:40 mark in the video.*)

The prime minister argued that the technological means for full freedom were given, and in the process he naturally neglected to discuss how this situation can be abused.<sup>21</sup>

Theoretically, there should not be too much of a difference between various pieces of political propaganda. That is why the PPI will not make an effort to examine the political motives behind the propaganda, their level of veracity. That is the responsibility of other organizations and institutions. All the PPI sets out to do is to ascertain how effective the mechanisms of political propaganda are. In their

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<sup>19</sup> [https://index.hu/kulfold/eurologus/2019/09/03/olaf\\_jelentes\\_vezet\\_az\\_unios\\_csalasi\\_statistikakban\\_magyarorszag/](https://index.hu/kulfold/eurologus/2019/09/03/olaf_jelentes_vezet_az_unios_csalasi_statistikakban_magyarorszag/)

<sup>20</sup> [Influence of fake news in Twitter during the 2016 US ... - Nature www.nature.com › ... › articles › article Fake news game confers psychological resistance ... - Nature https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0279-9.pdf?origin=ppub; Fake news game confers psychological resistance ... - Nature; https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0279-9.pdf; Social media platforms on the nature of fake news - By https://hackernoon.com › social-media-platforms-on-the-n... Fake News on the Internet - Nature, Dangers and ... https://www.homodigitalis.gr › posts](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0279-9.pdf?origin=ppub)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UBqJTU4bzc>

article entitled ***The Moral Panic Button***, Endre Sik and Domonkos Lázár also focused only on trying to show how the various politically-motivated media operations are building on one another with the goal of increasing political support. They write that the Orbán government has pushed the Moral Panic Button on 17 distinct occasions; this was the number of times between the summer of 2015 and 2019 when the government deliberately sowed panic in society with the use of communicative actions, effectively deceiving the public by suggesting that their basic values were under attack. The Moral Panic Button is a type of moral panic invented and developed by government propaganda. For its effective use, it is also essential for the underlying issue to be suitable for engendering and increasing the fears of the public (on account of its sociological characteristics, migration lends itself excellently to such ends). Furthermore, there also need to be some scapegoats (it is even better when the brains behind the Moral Panic Button work with several mutually compatible scapegoats) who can be used to embody the underlying threat. The process requires a type of language and manner of speech (the framing of the issue) which render the fear palpable by manipulating people's primordial instincts. To achieve all this, it is necessary for the state to wield a hegemony in the media, to ensure that manipulative contents are disseminated continuously through every available channel. Furthermore, the Moral Panic Button also deploys propaganda methods which serve to ensure that even those segments of the population that do not consume media will not escape, since the propaganda will be delivered right to their doorstep. This includes push poll-type national consultations or the use of democratic institutions (elections, referenda). Retrospectively, we can look at government communication in the aftermath of the terror attack against the Charlie Hebdo offices (on January 7, 2015) as the beta testing of the Moral Panic Button. After all, speaking in Paris on January 11, 2015, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán told the Hungarian public that "Europe needs new fortifications and stabilizing factors to provide for its protection against the tremors and rumblings that threaten its security." From that point on, the government consistently kept immigration on the public agenda, along with the issue of terrorism, which it tried to link to migration. As Endre Sik wrote previously [on 24.hu](https://24.hu), *"the Moral Panic Button is an instrument of manipulation that directly reaches all the residents of a country. It goes beyond mere manipulation by the media – even if that media is largely government controlled. That is because consumers may decide whether they read, listen to or watch media – and consequently some won't –, such an operation will reach every resident; and when that process is further being facilitated by all the instruments at the media's disposal, then it is legitimate to speak of an institutionalized moral panic generated by the state. To visualize this, one might imagine a literal button, which is pushed over and over again to produce vast waves of manipulative contents that sweep over the entire country. Since I assume that such a pervasive, expensive, complex and long-term centralized manipulation is probably without a precedent in the world, I propose that we register it as a Hungarikum."*<sup>22</sup> <sup>23/24</sup>

And the desired impact was achieved

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<sup>22</sup> A Hungarikum is defined as "a collective term indicating a value worthy of distinction and highlighting within a unified system of qualification, classification, and registry and which represents the high performance of Hungarian people thanks to its typically Hungarian attribute, uniqueness, specialty and quality."

<sup>23</sup> <https://24.hu/belfold/2018/12/19/migrants-moralispanik-kutatas/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://24.hu/belfold/2019/05/31/sik-endre-moralis-panik-propaganda/>



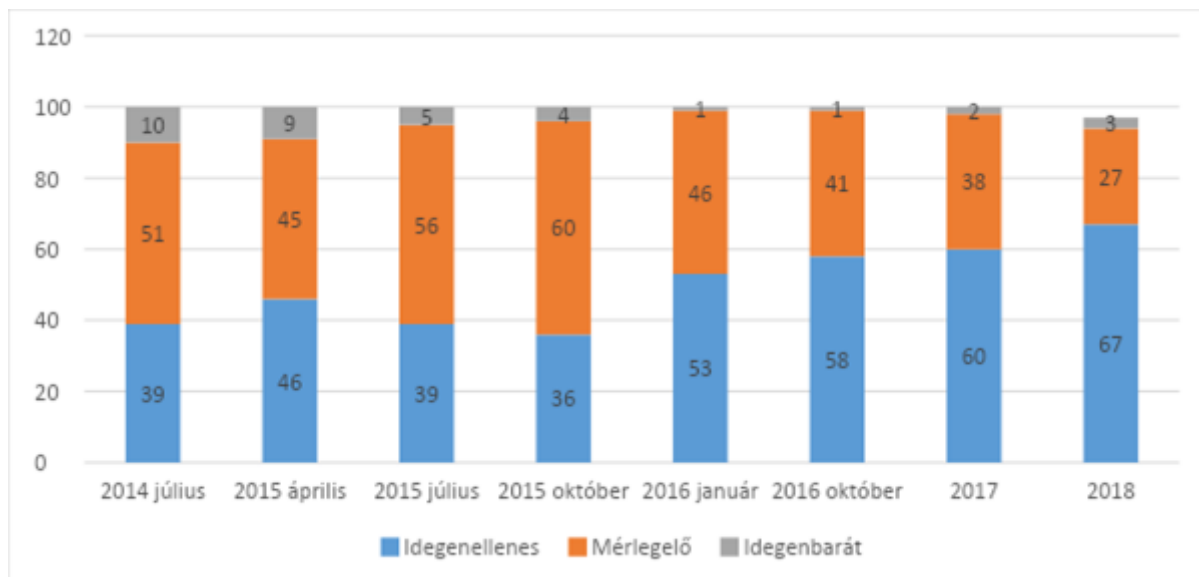


Figure 3: The respective shares of respondents who are xenophobic, xenophilic or in-between, from July 2014 through 2018

Source: Társi 2014-2018

Endre Sík and his colleague show how public perceptions changed in response to the centrally-controlled propaganda. In other words, Hungarians were not xenophobic from the start, although within the European Union they were potentially the most liable to be receptive to manipulations aimed at inciting xenophobic sentiments. In any case, in the period from July 2014 through 2018, Hungarians experienced the most dynamic growth in the prevalence of xenophobia in society; the share of respondents who expressed xenophobic sentiments surged from 39% of the total population to 67% during this period. But had the Hungarian media system not lost its ability for self-correction, then the propaganda would not have been this effective.

## The PPI pilot project

In designing the survey methodology, the research team (consisting of Klára Megyeri, Gábor Polyák, Ferenc Vicssek and Tibor Závecz) used an iterative approach. It emerged relatively early on that the funds would not be sufficient for a comprehensive data collection that extends to all the details that we wanted to learn about. For starters, we had over 100 questions ready right at the outset. Disaggregated into smaller batches, these would have surveyed in detail the kind of images that emanate from the political propaganda – and contrast these images with the reality as it can be reproduced based on credible sources – with respect to migration, the European Union, corruption, healthcare, poverty, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Central European University, constitutionality, inflation, the economy, family support, sports subsidies and the major political players. With a bigger budget, we would have had enough resources to perform a more detailed mapping of regional and inter-generational patterns, as well as the impact of socio-economic differences. The Foundation that was involved in the program only agreed to the implementation of a pilot project, however, under the assumption that the first results would lay the foundations for a more expansive fundraising effort. In compiling the questions, we also had to take care to ensure that we would be able to distinguish clearly between politics and political propaganda, and we also assumed a position of impartiality as part of our fundamental research obligation. The budgetary allocations for governmental propaganda exceed the funds that independent media have at their disposal by a factor of five. If the number of claims selected from the respective political sides had been proportional to the amount of money they operate with, then the ratio would

have been five government messages versus one from the opposition. That is why in the analysis we had to adjust the ratio somewhat, to prevent a situation in which it seems that it is only the government's propaganda activities that are being investigated. The pilot project also aimed to find out what type of topics were most likely to motivate survey respondents to make at least an effort to evaluate the credibility of individual news items. We also had to keep in mind that the sample size – that is the number of persons interviewed – does not match a standard sample size because our budgetary limitations would have covered too few questions if we had proceeded with a larger sample. The professional consensus that emerged was that we should interview 500 persons in the framework of our pilot project. In designing our survey, we also had to keep the workload of the polling companies in mind. We could not reach too far back into the past with our questions because memories regarding issues that have already vanished from the political agenda might well have faded. At the same time, however, when it came to very recent issues, we had to allow some time for social perceptions to be widely shaped by the information disseminated through propaganda measures. The survey was performed in April 2018 using telephone interviews, and our questions concerned the typical political propaganda messages of that time. Due to budgetary limitations, we had to forgo the possibility of international comparisons. The comparison of data from several countries would have made clear to what extent the opinions of the citizens of individual countries differ when it comes to their assessment of international processes, and this would have allowed for an investigation of the effectiveness of political propaganda in an international comparison.

The proposed objective in introducing the Political Propaganda Indicator is to come up with a unified methodology, a model of measuring and evaluating propaganda, which would allow us to compare the impact of political propaganda on public opinion over time and across space, either by individual campaigns or in the aggregate. We wish to create a database that will allow us to gauge how thoroughly the messages of political propaganda have permeated a given society, how the given community's worldview has been shaped by the news and fake news, respectively, and to what extent public opinion and the popular will and the decisions taken by the populace are shaped by deliberately disseminated false information, willful efforts at misleading the public, and how dangerous the lack of information or level of disinformation in society has become.

It seems that thus far no one has looked at the disinformation mechanisms from **the perspective of their outcome, their effectiveness in influencing the electoral will**. If an indicator system were to emerge that is subject to a widespread consensus, then this would make it possible to trigger the democratic defense mechanisms against deliberate efforts aimed at disinformation. It could be used to warn in a timely manner the organizations responsible for safeguarding democratic values when democratic norms are being violated. The PPI is an indicator which shows how balanced the competition is in the community under investigation between political propaganda and independent information. The **PPI** is the index measuring the effectiveness of political communication. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the proliferation of new media systems, public information has gone topsy-turvy. Reality and perception are diverging massively. The new methods and their mass proliferation open up new possibilities and whole new perspectives for manipulation. The introduction of the Political Propaganda Indicator allows at least for a partial correction of our (clarity) of vision about the impact of this phenomenon.

The European Commission and other international organizations do not have indicators that would allow them to survey and assess the state of public information and how well-informed the public is in a given community. Just as corruption indices do not measure the actual incidences of corruption but rather the perception of corruption, in other words the sense of corruption in society, the PPI would also result in a ranking based on the perception of propaganda. Because of the new media consumption patterns, there is a natural demand these days to shield oneself against fake news and dubious individually customized

commercial offers. Facts, independent opinions and expert assessments are almost impossible to make out amidst the massive media noise, the artificially generated cacophony, the political marketing campaigns and the torrent of fake news. Media systems hardly cover professional discourses, critiques, opposition criticisms. With the help of a PPI, the community could at least develop a sense of the level of brainwashing concerning a given issue of importance. The PPI is the marker of the pervasiveness of false consciousness in society.

## Results

Using a representative telephone-based survey administered by Závecz Research to a sample of 500 respondents, we sought to find out how broadly Hungarian society had come to accept certain news items disseminated by political propaganda as true despite the fact that they had been previously debunked by credible sources, in other words despite the fact that they were verifiably contrary to facts and were used for propaganda purposes in a propaganda campaign. We examined how likely our respondents were to have encountered specific claims made by individual propaganda campaigns, and how likely they were to consider these claims to be true. We did not examine the veracity of the questions. We strove to ensure that claims from all across the political spectrum were included among the issues we raised in our survey. We were cognizant of the limitations of the pilot project, to wit the fact that with the funds available to us we were limited to investigating the public perception of 15 claims. We also investigated to what extent voters who receive their news from the peculiar Hungarian media system have failed to learn about verified news items reported by several important and credible news sources, and to what extent they were likely to accept as true those claims that had been concealed from them, the ones that they had previously no chance to encounter despite the fact that their newsworthiness would have readily merited their coverage by the media they consume.

PPI distinguished between three main groups, therefore. In the **Alpha** version of the Political Propaganda Indicator, we looked at the social reception of issues concerning which it seemed obvious that the goal of the campaign was to engender a public perception that significantly diverged from the factual reality of the underlying issues. (Thus, for example, certain issues were magnified to an extent that they gave rise to far greater concerns in Hungarian society than we had observed in other countries – including countries where the underlying phenomenon had a distinctly larger real impact on society. Since there were already several international studies highlighting this contrast, we did not have to empirically investigate this ourselves).

We investigated the claims in question in two dimensions. For one, we wanted to know if our respondents had encountered the given claim, and we also asked them if they thought them credible. When we can perform a more detailed survey with a more extensive budget, we will need to ask at least 100 questions, which will give us plenty of space and opportunity to also explore claims and questions that are subject to a firm consensus no matter the ideological viewpoint (even within the extremely polarized Hungarian political spectrum), such as for example the notion that the earth is not flat; using these as baseline will help us evaluate the answers overall. If the survey includes trivial questions, these can serve to justify the normality of the sample selection. The research performed in the framework of the larger project – the one that would follow on the heels of the pilot project – will offer us better opportunities for a detailed sociological analysis of the underlying issues with a larger sample size. For the time being, the pilot project did not allow us to also look at the regional distribution of answers or the financial and socio-economic circumstances of the respondents. At the same time, it would be enormously important to find out how the various responses and views break down by region of residence; age group; party preferences; and financial circumstances, or how the various groups in these categories are more or less critical towards different types of propaganda, and what types of propaganda are more successful at making an impact on certain groups.



In the **Beta** version of the Political Propaganda, we wanted to gauge the size of the informational black hole in society. We asked questions that the propaganda machinery had concealed for a reason, as it would have been embarrassing for them to raise these issues, and we wanted to know how pervasive the lack of information about these news items was in society.

The **Gamma** version of the Political Propaganda was in part designed to gauge the effectiveness of an effort at character assassination, while at the same time it also sought to assess the impact of positive propaganda in a situation when a campaign was needed to alleviate the sense of failure stemming from parliamentary battles.

The attached figures are designed to highlight the underlying dynamics. In the following, we will present our first reading of the results and the correlations, the relationships that these suggest.

## The claims that the interviewers asked our respondents about

1. Refugee children were deprived of food in the transit zones in the border area, which had been set up and are operated by the government (Beta)
2. George Soros organizes the transportation of migrants to Europe (Alpha)
3. The European Union actively promotes immigration
4. Brussels gives migrants bank cards that they can freely use across Europe
5. Brussels has no intention of curbing immigration
6. Ca. 35,000 people died prematurely in Hungary for lack of timely access to medical care
7. There have been mass resignations in the public sector since the overtime law was adopted
8. Orbán's son-in-law, István Tiborcz, had engaged in illegal acts concerning the use of EU subsidies
9. Lőrinc Mészáros' assets are in fact Viktor Orbán's property
10. The planned new nuclear reactor will render Hungary dependent on Russia and put the country in Putin's debt
11. Hungary safeguards Europe from immigration (Gamma)
12. Brussels wants to use the European Prosecutor's Office to take away Hungary's sovereignty
13. [The opposition politician] Ákos Hadházy murdered his neighbor and is party to vast shady land deals in Tolna County
14. Expanding the number of overtime hours that employers can demand serves the interests of employees
15. An EU border protection regime would bar Hungarian soldiers from protecting the Hungarian border

In the telephone survey, the claims in the various categories were partly mixed up rather than being presented in clusters, thus trying to ensure that there is no implicit suggestion as to the correct answer. We will provide a brief background for each of the questions to our readers, to facilitate their understanding of the underlying issues and to show what kind of information was available to the audiences, what type of messages citizens could encounter as they tried to inform themselves. These will highlight what the differences are between the level of information of citizens who inform themselves from diverse sources as compared to those whose informational consumption can be regarded as average. In the Appendix, we have included articles that either serve as clear sources for the underlying

claims or are clear and effective refutations of the claims advanced by political propaganda. For the purposes of illustration, we present a collection of these, but in light of the space constraints here we only provide links that lead to more detailed information on the given subjects.

The goal of the examination is to measure the impact of political propaganda on how **informed the general public is**. We started from the assumption that the goal of political propaganda campaigns is to influence the level and content of the information known by society. Hence, the *Alpha version of the Political Propaganda Indicator* reflected how many of 10 respondents, on average, regarded a given manipulated news item that was being disseminated by political propaganda as true.

With regard to Question 2 (George Soros organizes the transportation of migrants to Europe), 81% of our respondents had encountered the claim and 44% assessed it as true. **The PPI score was hence 4.4.** It follows that if all of the respondents believed that George Soros organizes the transportation of migrants into Europe, then the score would be 10. Conversely, if none of them were to believe that this claim is credible, then our indicator would take on a value of 0. With respect to Question 2, the information profile is further nuanced by the fact that when it came to this question, the government was nearly totally alone in the political propaganda arena because the opposition soon bowed out of the campaign battles on this front, since they saw their position as hopeless. Thus, the clash was mostly limited to independent media on the one hand and the government's political propaganda machinery on the other – with the abovementioned result. Here are two illustrations:

**“A population exchange is taking place in Europe**, in part because speculators, such as George Soros, for example, can make a lot of money by ‘ruining’ the continent” – said Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Friday June 8, 2018 in the show called 180 Minutes broadcast by Kossuth Rádió, a state-owned public broadcaster. The prime minister said that they needed to be prepared for a battle with George Soros and his “army,” and that it was necessary to acknowledge openly that these forces want immigration and that they are ideologically motivated by the idea of multicultural Europe because they dislike the traditions of a Christian Europe and believe that if they mix Europeans with other people's then Europe will become more livable. “They want to destroy Europe because they hope to generate more profits by doing so; that's the way financial speculators are, after all” – said Viktor Orbán. However, “we don't want to become intermixed with others,” “we're great just as we are, both in terms of Christianity, language, culture and lifestyle, as well as our ideas of freedom of religion, family and gender relations” – the prime minister added. He also said that the EP election scheduled for the next year would revolve around these issues and the clash between the underlying values. Speaking about the constitutional amendment before Parliament at the time, he explained that his government has the two-thirds majority necessary for its adoption, and he said that in such a situation they must not hesitate: In the interests of protecting the nation, one must mobilize this power, which is why the bill in question states that it is forbidden to settle foreign populations in Hungary. The amendment of the Criminal Code, proposed at the same time as the constitutional amendment, classified efforts aimed at the organization of illegal migration as a criminal offence.

<https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/hirek/nepessegcse-zajlik-europaban>

**The Soros Plan has failed! – One might say, if such a plan had existed, that is**

George Soros wants to make Brussels settle at least one million immigrants a year from Africa and the Middle East in the territory of the European Union, Hungary included, said the first claim – which was disguised as a question – in the government's National Consultation about the Soros Plan in 2017. This was the foundation of the tale that the Orbán government weaved around the American philanthropist George Soros, all the other claims were only decorative additions to this central claim.

**The plan that never existed ...** When two years ago Viktor Orbán held up a printout of a George Soros' essay on Echo TV, as evidence of the existence of a Soros Plan, he also emphatically alleged that the Hungarian-American billionaire was scheming in the background to arrange for the settlement of Africans and Asians in Europe.

Fidesz completely disregarded the fact that Soros subsequently admitted that his original idea that Europe should accept one million people a year had not been a good one. Fidesz also failed to make clear that the accusation that immigration was being secretly organized is but a conspiracy theory. The plan had been cooked up in Vladimir Putin's quarters, and the original line of thought was distorted and turned on its head. In his essay, Soros claimed that a million refugees had left danger zones, and that the EU would be well advised to prepare for this situation in time. Putin – and Arthur Finkelstein before him – distorted this to say that Soros wants to settle a million refugees in Europe. Subsequently, the right-wing Macedonian politician Nikola Gruevski planted this idea in European discourse as part of the campaign. A few years later, Gruevski himself was imported in person.

<https://24.hu/belfold/2019/07/30/soros-terv-migracio-bevandorlas/>

With respect to Question 5 (Brussels has no intention of curbing immigration), the **PPI score** was 6.5. In other words, 65% of respondents believe that Brussels does not want to limit immigration. This particular result is not the outcome of two antithetical campaigns clashing in the arena of political propaganda and spreading their respective information, because the EU did not use campaign instruments to publicly rebut the claims that it had actually refuted, despite the fact that 77% of respondents had encountered the underlying claim. The EU found it enough to release an official response, which made barely a dent in the public perception of this issue, however.

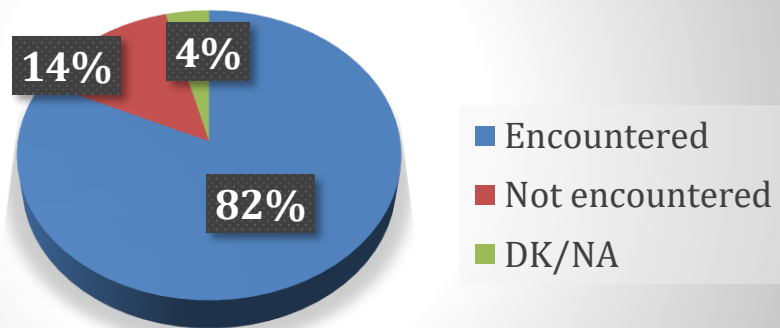
<https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20190916-magyarorszag-brusszel-meghallgatas-varga-judit.html>  
<https://fidesz.hu/hirek/orban-viktor-programot-hirdetett-a-bevandorlas-megallitasaert>  
[https://ec.europa.eu/hungary/news/20190228\\_facts\\_matter\\_hu](https://ec.europa.eu/hungary/news/20190228_facts_matter_hu)

## The results for each question

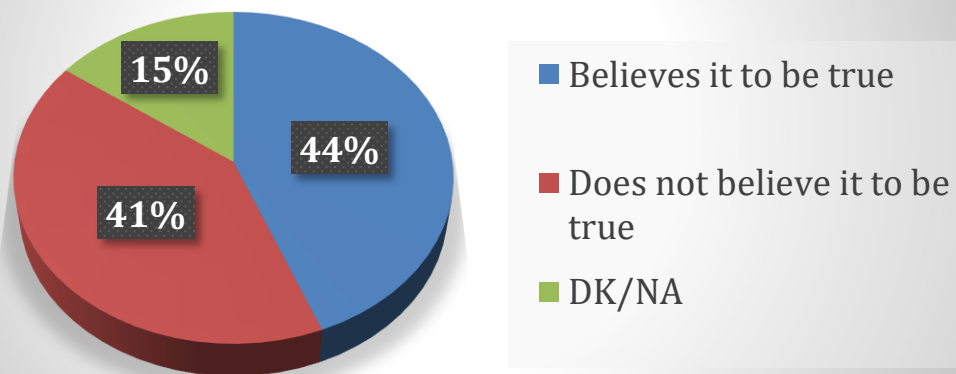
	Has encountered the claim (%)			Believes it to be true (% among those who have encountered the claim)			Believes it to be true (all respondents, %)
	encountered	Not encountered	DK/NA	Believes it to be true	Does not believe it to be true	DK/NA	
Refugee children were deprived of food in the transit zones in the border area	34	62	4	40	43	17	14
George Soros organizes the transportation of migrants to Europe	82	14	4	44	41	15	36
The European Union actively promotes immigration	56	38	7	52	35	13	29
Brussels gives migrants bank cards that they can freely use across Europe	74	22	4	70	19	11	52
Brussels has no intention of curbing immigration	77	19	4	65	24	11	50
Ca. 35,000 people died prematurely in Hungary for lack of timely access to medical care	50	46	5	72	17	11	36
There have been mass resignations in the public sector since the overtime law was adopted	46	50	4	65	22	13	30
Orbán's son-in-law, István Tiborcz had engaged in illegal acts concerning the use of EU subsidies	58	36	6	64	13	23	37
Lőrinc Mészáros' assets are in fact Viktor Orbán's property	57	36	7	57	19	24	32
The planned new nuclear reactor will render Hungary dependent on Russia and put the country in Putin's debt	54	38	7	61	25	14	33
Hungary safeguards Europe from immigration	78	17	5	61	33	6	48
Brussels wants to use the European Prosecutor's Office to take away Hungary's sovereignty	52	40	8	50	33	18	26
Ákos Hadházy murdered his neighbor and is party to vast shady land deals in Tolna County	23	72	5	34	42	24	8
Expanding the number of overtime hours that employers can demand serves the interests of employees	63	32	5	30	57	13	19
An EU border protection regime would bar Hungarian soldiers from protecting the Hungarian border	43	53	4	48	33	19	20

Below are some figures to illustrate the impact of political propaganda

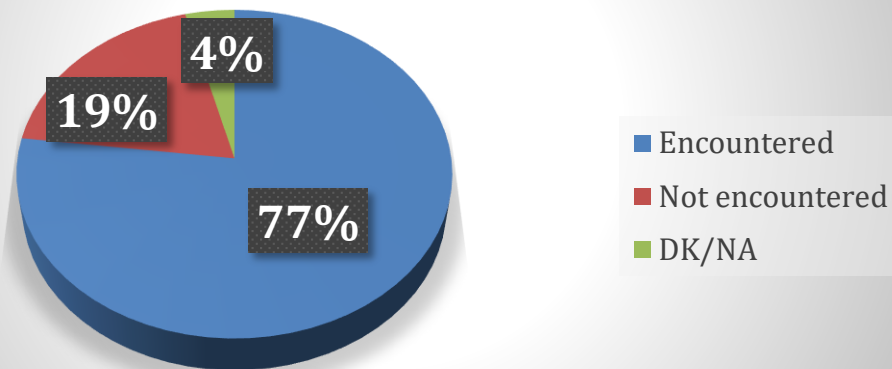
### George Soros organizes the transportation of migrants to Europe



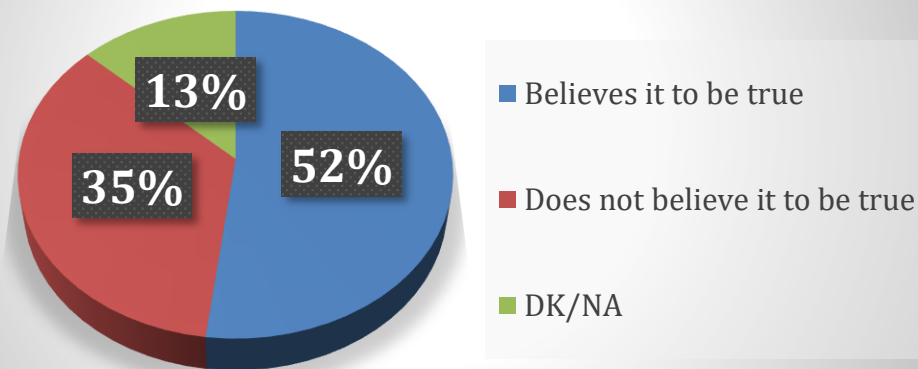
### George Soros organizes the transportation of migrants to Europe



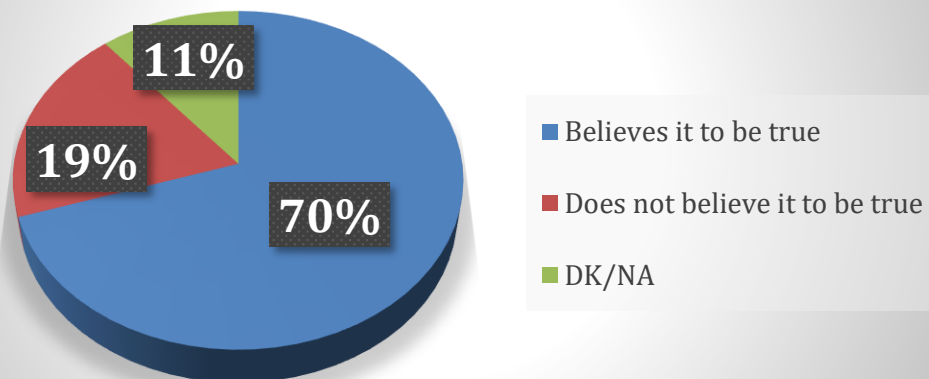
### Brussels has no intention of curbing immigration



### The European Union actively promotes immigration

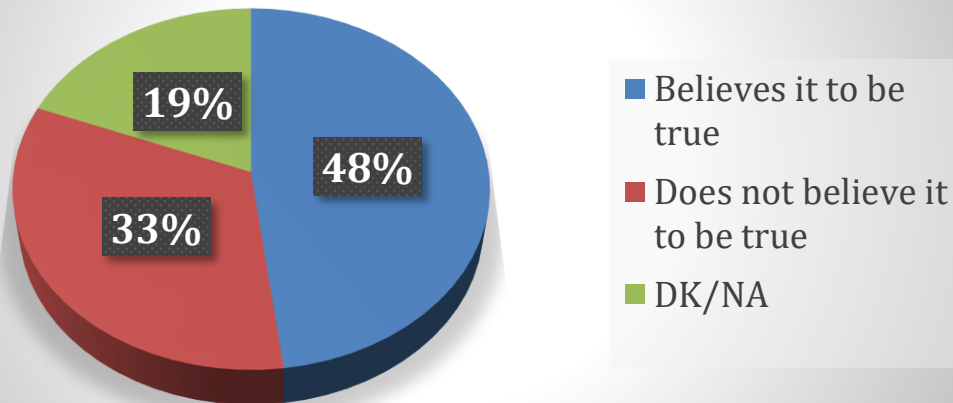


### Brussels gives migrants bank cards that they can freely use across Europe

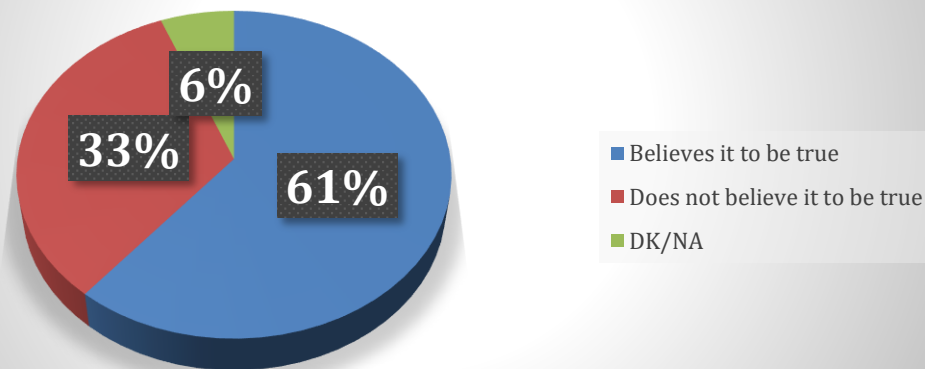




**An EU border protection regime would bar Hungarian soldiers from protecting the Hungarian border**



**Hungary safeguards Europe from immigration**



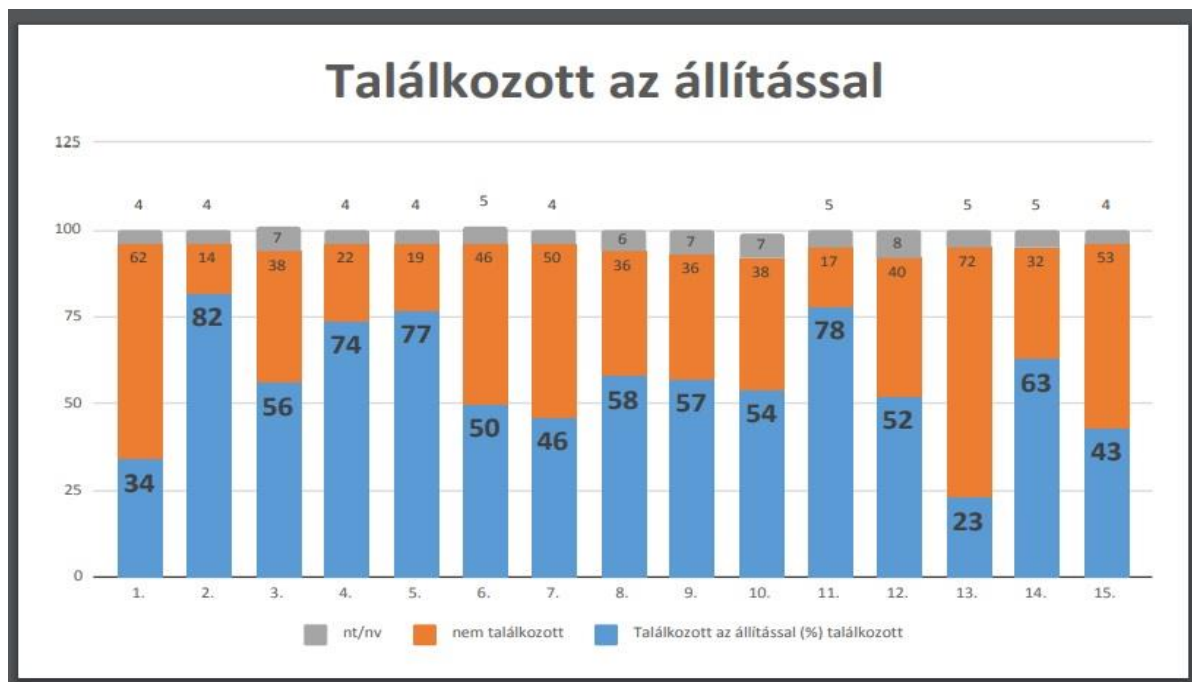
In situations when the national campaigns and the previously presented governmental communicative actions mutual reinforce one another, the impact of political propaganda is far more pronounced.

With respect to EU-related news items, the PPI score exceeds 5 points. This means that over half of all respondents believe these claims to be true even though those implicated have rebutted them in several forums (although at the same time they have failed to launch a propaganda campaign to counter the accusations levelled against them). As a result of the effective work performed by the Hungarian media system and the propaganda machine cooperating with the latter, the worldviews of over half the Hungarian population include claims that cannot be verified as true.

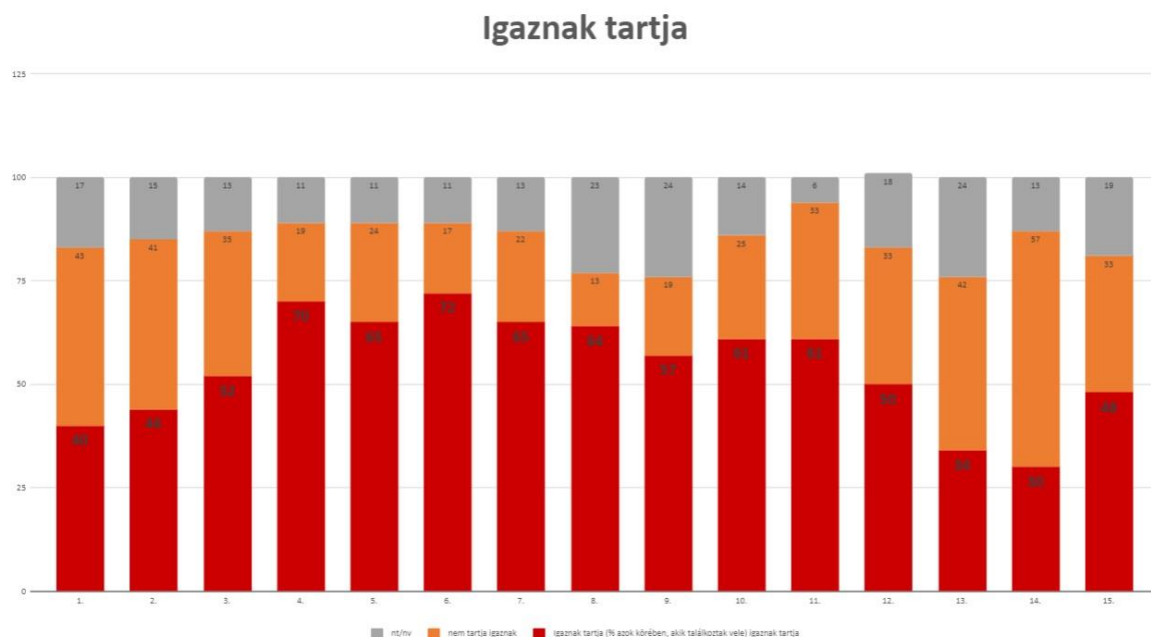
Laid out in a table, the data readily illustrate the range of issues covered by political propaganda. The columns also highlight how broadly receptive Hungarian society is towards the interpretation of reality as it is presented by political propaganda.

# Aggregate figures

Has encountered the claim (%)



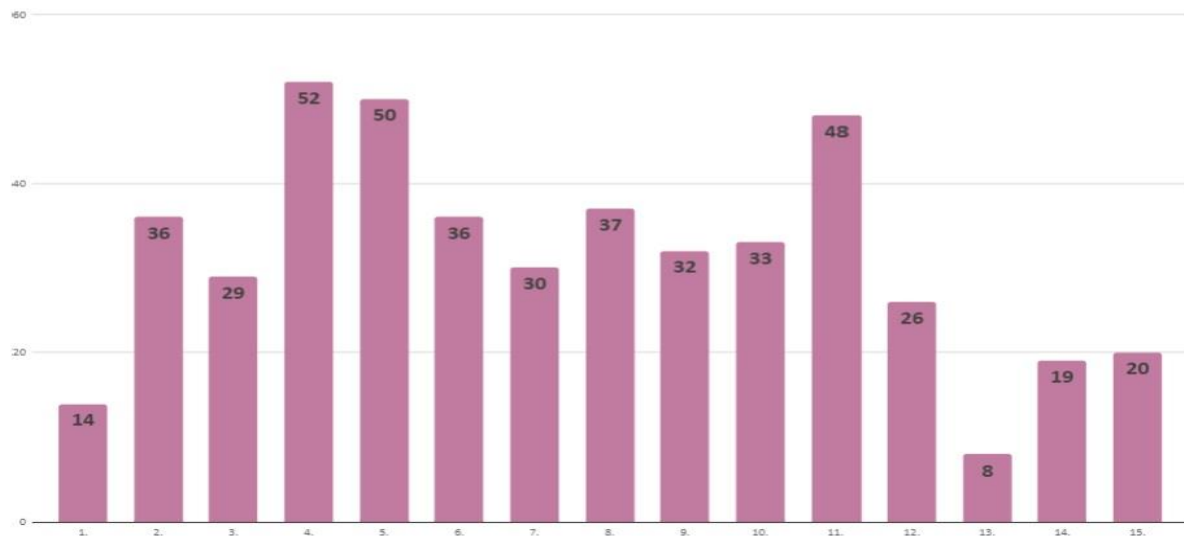
Believes it to be true (% among those who have encountered the claim)



The Political Propaganda Indicator illustrates that because of the effective use of propaganda tools, four out of ten people on average are liable to believe even claims that have been rebutted many times over. A distorted picture of reality can be generated. We do not have earlier data about this to provide a baseline of comparison, but nevertheless, going forward into the 2020s, it is essential to ascertain whether actual reality and alternative realities generated by political propaganda can be told apart. As

part of democratic decision-making, decisions are being rendered and election outcomes take shape, even as the data of our pilot project indicate that the masses are easily misled in societies in which those in power take control of a significant portion of the media.

## Respondents who believe it to be true...



The other type of Fake News Indicator reveals how many of 10 respondents do not know about news items that are embarrassing to those in power, probably because these news have been concealed from them. In other words, this indicator gauges what share of the population fails to find out about important news items. Thus, 34% of respondents did not know that children had been deprived of food at the government-operated transit zones at the border. On this issue, too, there were actions initiated by several international organizations, and the Helsinki Committee took action on behalf of the affected families in the transit zone. Moreover, as a result of infringement procedures, Hungary was called upon on several occasions to comply with international human rights conventions. There were thus ample opportunities out there to inform oneself about this issue, but as a result of the combined impact of the Hungarian information system and of political propaganda, the level of information in Hungarian society reveals striking features. And here are the numbers:

Refugee children were deprived of food in the transit zones in the border area

**There were so many people who were deprived of food in the transit zone that the Court of Human Rights has a form letter in which it obliges the Hungarian authorities to immediately provide food to the foreigners**

This is one of the form texts which is included in the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights. In these decisions, the Hungarian authorities are routinely ordered to provide food to the foreigners waiting in the transit zones. A decision like this is about one and a half pages in length, and apart from the date and the names of the foreigners affected, in most cases they tend to look exactly alike. (*Rule No. 39 in the cited text is a procedural provision which mandates that immediate relief must be provided in accordance with the Court's ruling – in the case at hand, it means that the Hungarian authorities must provide food immediately – and that no further proceedings, writs or judgments need to be handed down before the measures in question are performed.*)

The Court's decisions and other data on the authorities' failure to provide food has been collected by the independent MP Bernadett Szél. Szél filed a police report in connection with the forced starvation in the transit zone, in response to which **the police effectively asked her a week later to investigate herself**. Szél was given an eight-day deadline from the police to collect the necessary documents, and she submitted these to the National Bureau of Investigation today.

The table features data about the foreigners who had been starved in the transit zones between August last year, when the new rules went into effect, and the end of July 2019. Once again, the police asked Bernadett Szél to collect this information after she pressed charges with the police.

Furthermore, in response to the police request, Szél also attached the following:

[The infringement procedure launched by the European Commission in connection with the food deprivation](#)

[The statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants about the Hungarian situation, the transit zones and the food deprivations](#)

[The Statement of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the food deprivation of refugees](#)

And the [Report of the Council of Europe's Commissioner of Human Rights](#), which also refers to the food deprivations

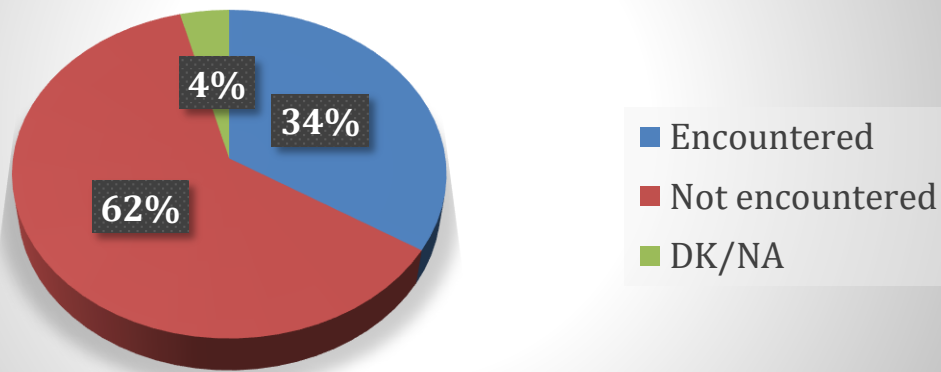
The source for the article: <https://444.hu/2019/08/07/annyi-embert-eheztek-mar-a-tranzitzonaban-hogy-az-emberi-jogi-birosagnak-formalevele-van-amiben-kotelezik-a-magyar-hatosagokat-hogy-azonnal-adjanak-enni-a-kulfoldieknek>

Another writing sheds an even more detailed light on the situation because it reveals how many children there are in the transit zones and how many of their families are not given any food, even while the children themselves are being fed – but which child would eat the daily ration of his parents? They hunger together because the entire family is given a portion of food that would not be enough even for a child. The survey question could also have noted that many children in the transit zone are not provided with medical care...

## There are two hundred people in the transit zones, 119 of whom are children

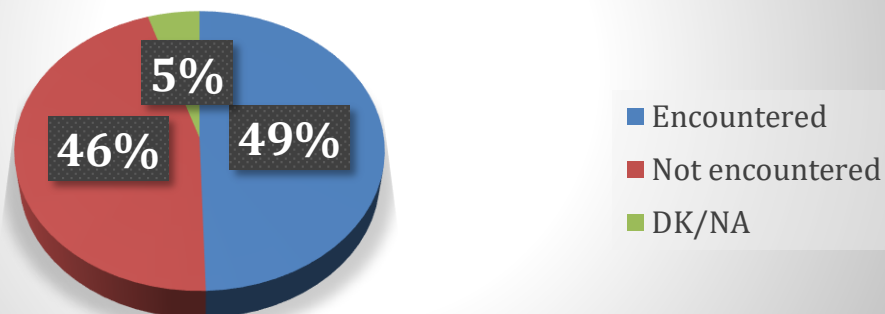
The MPs Bernadett Szél and Szabolcs Szabó turned to the Agency for Immigration and Refugee Affairs to discuss with the latter what they had learned. Fresh data showed that there were 200 people in total in the two Hungarian transit zones, 119 of whom were children. As the MPs learned, 367 foreigners were officially given permission to stay in Hungary in 2018: 68 were recognized as refugees, 281 enjoyed subsidiary protection while a further 18 received temporary asylum. At the same time, 595 requests to stay in Hungary were denied, while in 160 cases the proceedings were classified as "terminated." This year, 11 positive decisions have been rendered out of 153 petitions filed thus far. There have been 39 deportations, while in 2018 302 persons were deported, in 61 cases by air. *The teeth of refugee children are very often ruined en route, and even as we were visiting, there was a child in the Röszke transit zone who had suffered from extreme tooth pain for days – rather than treating his teeth, he was given antibiotics and painkillers because the authorities refused to allow treatment at the nearby medical facility. And why? I was told that a child who cannot verify that they have all the vaccinations prescribed by Hungarian protocols will only be provided with emergency medical care. In practice, this means that they have to spend roughly two months in the transit zone before they can access "non-emergency" care, so to speak –*thus Bernadett Szél in her [Facebook post on the subject](#). <https://24.hu/belfold/2019/04/11/tranzitzona-menedekkerok-gyerekek/>

### Refugee children were deprived of food in the transit zones in the border area



46% of respondents never encountered the news item that ca. 35,000 people die prematurely in Hungary because they are not provided with timely medical care.

### Ca. 35,000 people died prematurely in Hungary for lack of timely access to medical care



*When it comes to news items that are critical of the government, the Fake News (black hole) Indicator score is almost 4, which means that four out of ten persons miss out on important pieces of news.*

## Links to the background stories for each of the questions

1. Refugee children were deprived of food in the transit zones in the border area  
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/05/1037811> Statement of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the food deprivation of refugees
2. George Soros organizes the transportation of migrants to Europe (Alpha)  
<https://24.hu/belfold/2019/07/30/soros-terv-migracio-bevandozlas/>
3. The European Union actively promotes immigration  
<https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20181202-kovacs-zoltan.html>
4. Brussels gives migrants bank cards that they can freely use across Europe  
<https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20181202-kovacs-zoltan.html>
5. Brussels has no intention of curbing immigration  
<https://fidesz.hu/hirek/orban-viktor-programot-hirdetett-a-bevandozlas-megallitasaert>
6. Ca. 35,000 people died prematurely in Hungary for lack of timely access to medical care  
[https://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/06/12/egeszsegugyi\\_teljesitmenyertekeles/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/06/12/egeszsegugyi_teljesitmenyertekeles/)
7. There have been mass resignations in the public sector since the overtime law was adopted  
<https://lehetmas.hu/sajto/tomeges-felmondasok-kozszeraban-azonnali-illetmenyalap-novelesre-van-szukseg/>
8. Orbán's son-in-law, István Tiborcz had engaged in illegal acts concerning the use of EU subsidies  
<https://24.hu/belfold/2018/02/07/igy-csalt-orban-vejenek-cege-megszereztuk-az-olaf-jelenteset/>
9. Lőrinc Mészáros' assets are in fact Viktor Orbán's property  
[https://nepszava.hu/3023844\\_multimilliardos-lett-2010-ota-az-orban-csalad](https://nepszava.hu/3023844_multimilliardos-lett-2010-ota-az-orban-csalad)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zN2bL7RCuf4>
10. The planned new nuclear reactor will render Hungary dependent on Russia and put the country in Putin's debt  
[https://nepszava.hu/1119730\\_putyin-orzi-a-kasszakulcsot](https://nepszava.hu/1119730_putyin-orzi-a-kasszakulcsot)  
<https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20191030-orban-viktor-es-vlagyimir-putyin-budapestben-talalkoztak.html>
11. Hungary safeguards Europe from immigration  
<https://www.magyarhirlap.hu/kulfold/20190916-varga-judit-bevandozlasparti-bosszuhadjarat-volt-a-brusszeli>
12. Brussels wants to use the European Prosecutor's Office to take away Hungary's sovereignty  
<https://444.hu/2019/06/05/hadhazyek-680-ezer-alairast-gyujitottek-ossze-az-europai-ugyeszseg-mellett>
13. Ákos Hadházy murdered his neighbor and is party to vast shady land deals in Tolna County  
[https://hvg.hu/itthon/20190211\\_Ujabb\\_pert\\_nyert\\_meg\\_Hadhazy\\_fizethet\\_neki\\_a\\_kozteve](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20190211_Ujabb_pert_nyert_meg_Hadhazy_fizethet_neki_a_kozteve)
14. Expanding the number of overtime hours that employers can demand serves the interests of employees  
<https://444.hu/2018/11/24/kosa-lajos-szerint-a-munkavallalok-erdeke-hogy-a-kormany-250-rol-400-orara>
15. An EU border protection regime would bar Hungarian soldiers from protecting the Hungarian border  
[https://index.hu/belfold/2018/09/18/unios\\_hatarvedelem\\_frontex\\_europai\\_bizottsag\\_hatarorseg\\_kitoloncolas\\_](https://index.hu/belfold/2018/09/18/unios_hatarvedelem_frontex_europai_bizottsag_hatarorseg_kitoloncolas_)



## Conclusion

The difference between the dissemination of information and the actual level of information in society can be measured. The existence of diverse information, including independent media, television and online news sites with high circulation figures, many viewers and large numbers of visitors, is all for naught if the information they convey only reaches narrow segments of society, maybe a quarter of the electorate but definitely no more than half. The gap between credible information and the worldview of the majority of voters is greater than what would be acceptable, voters have less than the minimum level of information they would need to decide an election. With the proliferation of internet usage and of popular online applications, what is rising is not the level of information but rather of informational chaos. The dissemination of fake news on modern platforms is the new weapon in the arsenal of political propaganda. Drawing on the nature of fake news, it is relatively easy to use contents disseminated by robots and by fear-driven shares to engender a false consciousness in society. Anyone with even the slightest affinity for truth will notice that in the new media age lies spread far more quickly than the truth. The defense systems erected to stand in the way of false information and to facilitate the spread of credible information are now easily bypassed. This impression is supported by an extensive array of scientific research. Sooner or later, the self-defense mechanisms in society are bound to kick in, in order to ensure that communities do not render common decisions based on lies, conspiracy theories, false ideologies, but instead rely on facts when forming their opinions. The Political Propaganda Indicator could serve as an instrument to facilitate this, informing the public as to whether the national risk stemming from the deficiencies in the community's level of information is rising or declining over time. The PPI helps assess whether a national brainwashing scheme works dangerously well in a given society or whether corrective mechanisms have gradually kicked in. In 2019, the newly elected members of the European Commission also expressed their dissatisfaction with the efficacy of the efforts to combat fake news. "Large-scale automated propaganda and disinformation persist and there is more work to be done [...] We cannot accept this as a new normal" – said Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality **Věra Jourová**, Commissioner for the Security Union **Julian King**, and Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society **Mariya Gabriel** in a joint statement published on October 29, 2019.<sup>25</sup>

The masses are increasingly at the mercy of the prevailing informational processes and they are vulnerable to disinformation in the process. Today, it is technologically easy to have Barack Obama – with his actual face, his real voice – utter lines that he never actually said, and which were not made from actual recordings of him. Voice generators working based on voice samples make these easy to produce. That is what **Supasorn Suwajanakorn** discussed in his TedX presentation entitled **Fake videos of real people – and how to spot them**.<sup>26</sup> One is left breathless when watching the video, one cannot believe one's eye ...but whom to believe then? In another TedX presentation entitled **How deep fakes undermine truth and threaten democracy**, **Danielle Citron** is concerned about deep fakes and is not at all optimistic in her assessment of how long it will take the world to tackle this threat.<sup>27</sup> There are certain issues in Hungary concerning which more than four out of ten people accept the information disseminated by political propaganda, regardless of how often the information spread through the propaganda campaigns has been rebutted.

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<sup>25</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_19\\_6166](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_19_6166)

<sup>26</sup> <https://go.ted.com/CJFw>

<sup>27</sup> <https://go.ted.com/CfyU>

It is time to find out what the Political Propaganda Indicator can discern about any given issue in any given country.