

MÉRTÉK MEDIA MONITOR

DISTINCTIVE LOCAL MEDIA MARKETS – one story, multiple perspectives



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DISTINCTIVE LOCAL MEDIA MARKETS – one story, multiple perspectives

Introduction

The Hungarian media market has undergone a major transformation in the last decade, and Mérték Media Monitor has continuously tracked and analysed these changes.¹ Our previous analyses have tracked in detail how the current situation has evolved, and hence in the following, we will only briefly refer to the most important developments that have shaped the broader processes. Since 2010, foreign media investors, who had been present in Hungary ever since the regime change, have left the country and sold their stakes in the Hungarian media to domestic owners with pro-government ties. In 2018, the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) was established, and in the same year almost all major pro-Fidesz media owners voluntarily transferred their companies to this foundation; KESMA did not pay them anything for the media companies it absorbed. The Orbán government, which has been in power since 2010 and is now on its fourth term, has changed the regulatory environment of the entire media market. At the same time, it has turned the public service media into a propaganda machine. Journalists also face increasingly difficult conditions in doing their jobs. Several journalists were subjected to wiretapping in a surveillance scandal² that was publicly exposed in 2021. As a journalist noted in a report published by Mérték in 2021:³ *“The most positive feature of the situation in Hungary is that so far journalists have not been beaten, imprisoned or shot. Another positive aspect is that it is still possible to distribute a newspaper that is not pro-government [although it must be added that the interview subject’s newspaper could not be printed in Hungary at the time because no printing company would accept them as customers -- Mérték]. Another positive thing is that readers finance such a newspaper.”*

- 1 Kovács, I. - Polyák, G. - Urbán, Á (2021). *Media landscape after a long storm. The Hungarian media politics after 2010*. Mérték Media Monitor, Budapest. <https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/MertekFuzetek25.pdf>
- 2 Panyi, Sz. - Pethő, A. (2021). *Hungarian journalists and critics of Orbán were targeted with Pegasus, a powerful Israeli cyberweapon*. Direkt36. <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/leleplezodott-egy-durva-izraeli-kemfegyver-az-orban-kormany-kritikusait-es-magyar-ujsgirokat-is-celba-vettek-vele/>
- 3 Polyák, G. (ed) (2021) *Four Shades of Censorship: Freedom and Social Role of Journalists in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia*. Mérték Media Monitor, Budapest. https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Mertek-fuzetek_23.pdf

The aim of the following survey is to map patterns of local information and the state of local public discourse. We were especially interested in the challenges faced by media companies in the current political and economic environment, as well as potential policy changes that may be worth considering for municipally owned media, which tend to be the dominant players in local media markets. Our research features a distinct case study: the city of Debrecen, where an independent online newspaper operates alongside a large municipal media company. The presence of two alternative media players provides an opportunity to explore the very different perceptions of the role of journalism. Debrecen is also a good choice because, during the period of the study, a controversial battery factory construction project in the city received considerable public attention, and its coverage in the local media was illustrative of the way the local public discourse operates.



Our research was supported by the Human Rights Fund of the Netherlands Embassy.

Finding out about local issues

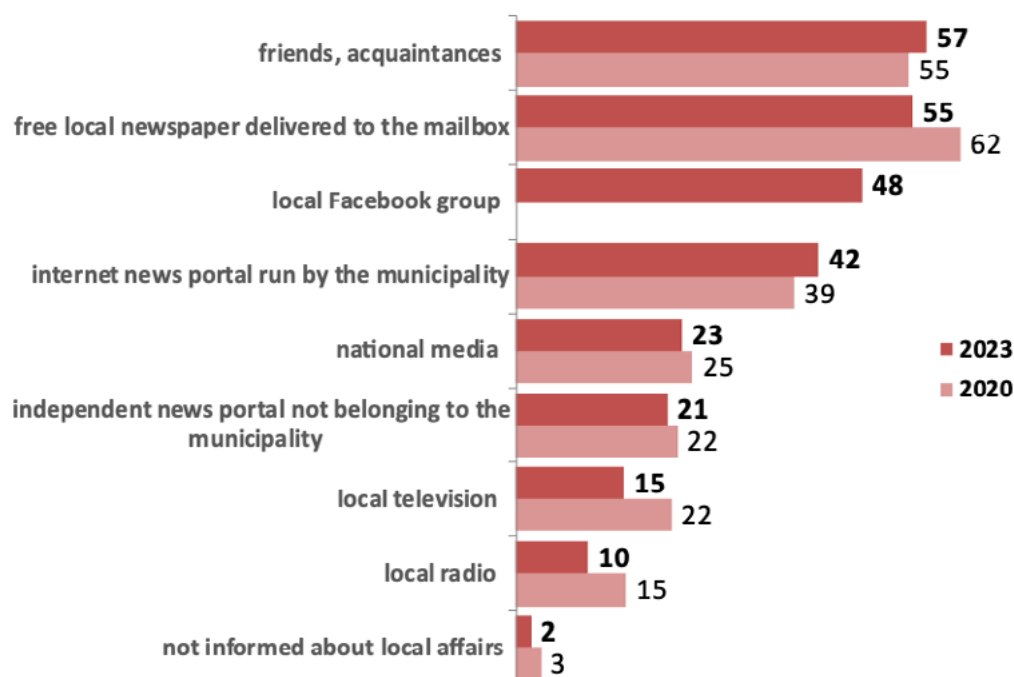


Local media, which play an important role in local communities, usually receive little attention in research. Drawing on the responses of a nationally representative sample of the Hungarian adult population, Mérték Media Monitor and the Median Public Opinion and Market Research Institute have carried out several surveys on the news consumption and information patterns of the Hungarian public. In 2020 and 2023, these also included questions about how respondents inform themselves about local affairs.

In addition to information gleaned from talking to friends and acquaintances, free local newspapers delivered to the mailboxes and local Facebook groups played a prominent role in informing respondents about local affairs. Online news sites operated by the municipality also play a significant role, with all other media types lagging far behind. Most importantly, in 2023, a mere 2% of respondents said they were not informed about local affairs; thus, practically everyone is interested in what is happening in their immediate vicinity.

Figure 1: How respondents inform themselves about local issues

How do you get local news directly affecting your place of residence?
(percent)



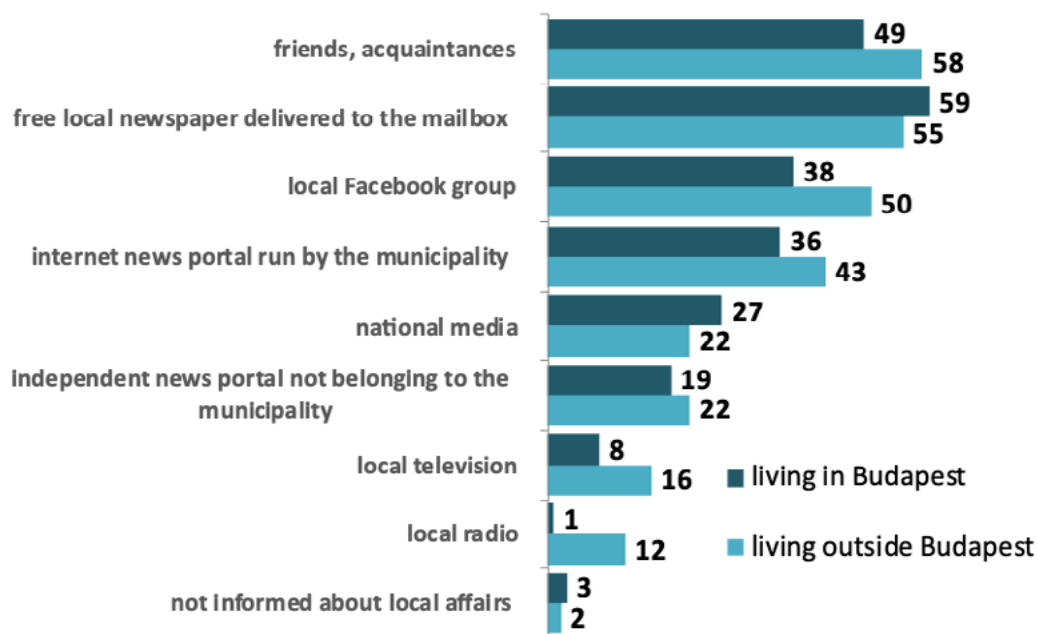
Looking at the distribution of responses by different types of municipalities, our research showed that people living outside Budapest are more active than Budapest residents when it comes to using various news sources to inform themselves about local issues. There were two exceptions to this overall trend, and both have logical explanations. On the one hand, the role of free local newspapers is greater in Budapest than outside the capital, but this may owe to availability: every district in the capital has a local

newspaper, while the same cannot be said for all municipalities nationwide. On the other hand, Budapest residents are more likely to get their local news from the national media, which is not surprising given the outsize role Budapest plays in public discourse and media coverage. Events in Budapest are much more likely to be reported nationally than events in other urban or rural areas.



2. ábra: Tájékozódás helyi ügyekről lakhely szerint

How do you get local news directly affecting your place of residence?
(by place of residence, percent)

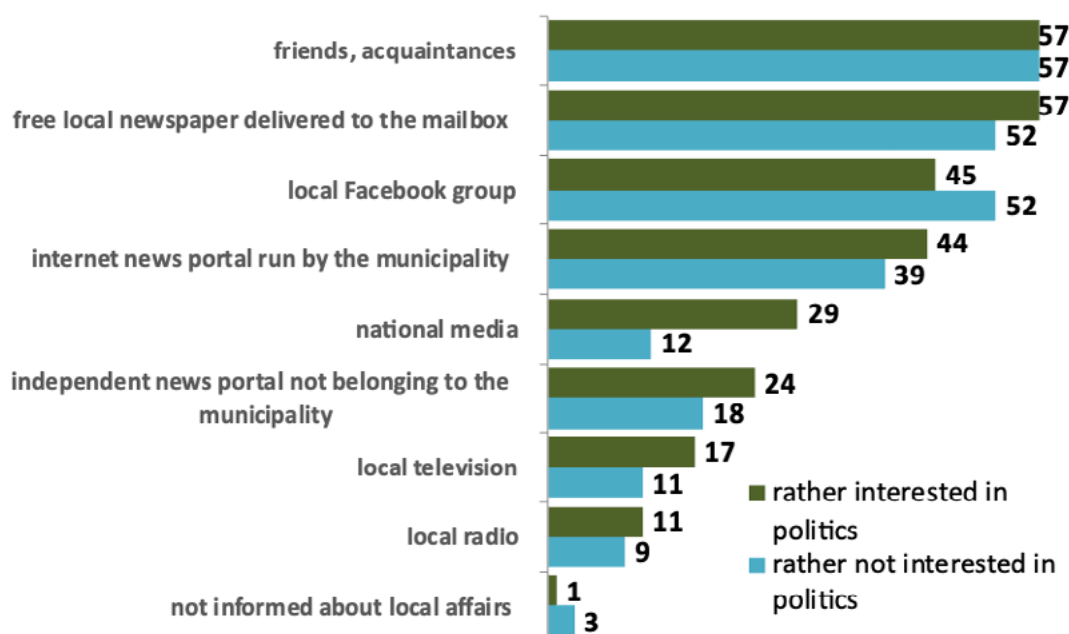


The breakdown of answers based on the respondents' political preferences also yielded interesting results. When it comes to local affairs, the information patterns of respondents who are interested in politics and those who are not are strikingly similar. However, a clear difference between these groups emerges with regard to two specific sources of information. Local Facebook groups are much more popular among those who are not interested in politics; it was the only source of news that received a higher score in this group. It is likely that those who are not interested in politics and do not tend to consume other news sources nevertheless stumble upon local news thanks to Facebook's algorithm; that may be where they often get information that others find in different media. However, consumption of national media is far more pronounced among those who are interested in politics, which is by no means surprising. The overall conclusion that emerges from Figure 3 is that even those who are not interested in politics in general are likely to consume local news sources.

Figure 3: Awareness of local issues by level of political interest



How do you get local news directly affecting your place of residence?
(by political interest, percent)



Thus, the responses show clearly that there is a strong interest in local affairs, and respondents learn information about local issues both through personal contacts – including social media – and traditional media platforms.

Local media market players

Three types of ownership and financing are typical of local media markets. There are commercial local (regional) media, municipally owned media and independent, typically online media projects.⁴

Among commercial media, county newspapers clearly play the most prominent role. Based on the 2022 data published by the Hungarian Audit Bureau for Circulation (Magyar Terjesztés-ellenőrző Szövetség - MATESZ), Magyar Hang calculated⁵ that the county newspapers owned by KESMA did not have a very good year either. One newspaper experienced a drop in circulation of over 21% (Észak-Magyarország), while others saw their circulation figures drop by over 18 percent (Dél-Magyarország, Dunaújváros Hírlap, Észak-Keleti Napló, Petőfi Népe). On the whole, 51,000 readers disappeared from the market within

⁴ Kovács, I. - Polyák, G. - Urbán, Á. (2023). *A helyi médiapiacok Magyarországon* [Local media markets in Hungary]. Mérték Media Monitor, Budapest. https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/A_helyi_mediacok_Magyarorszagon1.pdf

⁵ Lukács, Cs. (2023). *Megrángatta a lappiacot is az infláció* [The newspaper market, too, has been hit by inflation]. Magyar Hang. <https://hang.hu/belfold/megrangatta-a-lappiacot-is-az-inflacio-152486>

the span of a single year. In 2021, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty looked at county daily newspapers⁶ and already at the time it identified a similar trend. The article noted that over forty percent of county newspaper readers had disappeared in five years. Among the most established county papers, Kisalföld had the highest circulation in the first half of 2021 (35,000), while Heves Megyei Hírlap had the lowest (5,400).



County dailies still have local newsrooms, but the role of centrally provided contents, and hence of the national central newsroom, is growing. The front pages of all county newspapers feature the same national news, which span at least the first two pages. The remaining pages feature local news as well, but typically only pro-government politicians appear in this news coverage; opposition politicians do not get a say.

Local media - those published by municipalities - do not seem to follow the general media market trends. As a study published in 2021⁷ writes: *“For the time being, traditional (print) communication and communications strategies based on the role of print media continue to predominate in a large number of local governments. The disadvantage of these forms of communication is that they only have an impact – which is limited at best – on local public discourse. When a municipality publishes posters, a local newspaper, distributes leaflets on the streets of the municipality or operates a local television channel, the results won’t be known outside the local population (or rather a fraction of the local population), unless they are also disseminated online. Municipalities could make much better use of digital technology than is currently the case, both in soliciting the views of the public and in involving stakeholders in decision-making.”* In the same study, the authors point out that the Ministry of the Interior recommends the use of social media by municipalities, mainly because of its speed and cost-effectiveness. *“In particular, the Ministry of the Interior recommends that local authorities use four major social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Although municipalities today still tend to rely on traditional means to communicate with the public and manage their agencies, Generation Y and Z members now prefer online channels. Hence, if the municipality is not present in the digital world where a large part of the population is now at home, it will not be able to connect with the relevant groups. In light of the above, it is not enough for the municipality to have its own website, but it is also necessary to increase its digital presence.”*

Even today, this attitude is by no means self-evident in many municipalities, and often they also lack the necessary skills to use digital communication. One of the underlying reasons is the role of the types of media they use. In an earlier analysis,⁸ Mérték also looked at the current situation of municipal media and concluded that print municipal newspapers are quite widespread, even if nowadays, online portals and Facebook pages obviously also play a role in disseminating local news. Local weekly or monthly newspapers are free and are delivered straight into residents’ mailboxes. According to data compiled by WhiteReport, which we used for our analysis, there are 1,010 municipal print newspapers in Hungary. Based on the number of municipalities in Hungary (3,114), almost a third of all municipalities have some form of municipal newspaper. In some cases, several municipalities in a subregion jointly publish

6 Keller-Alánt, Á. (2021). *A megyei lapok Magyarországa: aktív és boldog nyugdíjasok, fejlődő falvak* [Hungary seen from the perspective of county newspapers: active and happy pensioners, developing villages].

<https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/kesma-mediaworks-fidesz-sajto-megyei-lap/31402428.html>

7 Hidegné Somogyi, G. - Hideg, M. I. (2021). *Önkormányzatok a közösségi médiában* [Municipal governments on social media]. Jegyző és Közigazgatás. <https://jegyzo.hu/onkormanyzatok-a-kozossegi-mediaban/>

8 Kovács, I. - Polyák, G. - Urbán, Á. (2023). *A helyi médiapiacok Magyarországon* [Local media markets in Hungary]. Mérték Media Monitor, Budapest. https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/A_helyi_mediacok_Magyarorszagon1.pdf

a newspaper, so the number of municipalities with local print newspapers is actually even higher. Pest County, which covers the region surrounding the capital, Budapest, stands out substantially in national comparison in terms of the number of newspapers published (170 local newspapers).



Outside Budapest, there are also many local newspapers in the agglomerations of larger cities and around Lake Balaton. The number of local newspapers appears to be higher in economically developed regions, and there are also regions of Hungary where barely any local newspapers are published. WhiteReport also identified 108 local television stations, a surprisingly high number. However, this figure also includes some small towns, where the local television is likely to be run by a lone enthusiast who enjoys making videos but offers no continuous broadcasts. In Budapest, there are several television stations since districts typically have their own television channels. Sadly, local radio stations have almost disappeared, with the radio networks like Karc FM (Hír FM) and Rádió 1 now broadcasting central contents in place of previously popular stations. Only a few local radio stations remain that are not part of these radio networks. The local radio stations in the network do not always outsource their news production to the media provider managing the network. However, independent news production is exceedingly rare. In many cases, non-networked local radio stations do not produce their own news either but instead buy news blocks from the Media Service Support and Asset Management Fund (MTVA), the public service media company.

According to the 2020 Mérték-Median survey, local radios reach an average of 15% of listeners nationally and 19% in cities. In the meanwhile, our aforementioned 2023 survey shows that digital news sources and social media are attracting a growing segment of the public who are interested in the news. At the same time, the importance of television has declined and the role of print and radio in news consumption remains low.

Local news consumption is also hampered by politically regulated content production and changes in the media market. In January 2023, Balázs Orbán, a political advisor to the Hungarian prime minister (who is not related to the latter despite the same surname), spoke at the opening day of the second international media conference organised by the state-funded Mathias Corvinus College (Balázs Orbán is also the chair of the MCC's board). This speech featured a line that has reverberated widely through the Hungarian media: *"Media is a strategic sector and it is an issue of national sovereignty because whoever controls the media of a nation controls the mindset of that nation and, as a result, of the nation overall."*⁹ "Domination" is a typical and revealing word choice because what is normally needed in a European country is transparent ownership and legal relations. At present, the media market is adversely affected not only by political influence but also by a lack of relevant legislation, especially with respect to press products published by municipalities. Mérték Media Monitor¹⁰ has formulated the policy proposals below for municipal media concerning their organisation, funding and content. These proposals could provide a good basis for future regulation.

9 HVG (2023). *Aki uralja a médiát, az uralja az országot* [Whoever controls the media controls the country]. https://hvg.hu/itthon/20230125_Orban_Balazs_MCC_media_tulajdonviszonyok_NER

10 Kovács, I. - Polyák, G. - Urbán, Á. (2023). *A helyi médiapiacok Magyarországon* [Local media markets in Hungary]. Mérték Media Monitor, Budapest. https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/A_helyi_mediacok_Magyarorszagon1.pdf

Organisational issues



- It should be possible to regulate the appointments of the executives of municipal media companies and the oversight over these companies' operations through municipal decree
- develop a solution that creates appropriate procedures to ensure the diverse information of the local public
- all management positions in municipal media should be awarded on the basis of open competition
- a municipal "media committee" should be set up, made up of a mix of municipal council members and external experts; external experts should meet the professional requirements laid down in the regulation (media, finance and management related); local NGOs should be involved in the nomination of external experts
- the municipal media committee issues the calls for applications for the position of municipal media company executives
- the executives of media companies report annually about their activities; the reports extend to both financial management and the contents disseminated
- codes should be drawn up to regulate publicly and in detail the relationship between each municipal media newsroom and the leadership of the municipality that owns the media or the municipal company exercising the ownership rights; the state also needs to safeguard the editorial independence of the local media; a statute template that can be widely employed with local adjustments should be drafted for this purpose

Funding

- as municipal media are predominantly publicly funded, their management should be based on European requirements for the financing of public service media
- task-based funding: based on a transparent estimate of the resources needed to provide information in the public interest
- transparency: the principles governing the budget spending need to be public, and all external contracts need to be publicly disseminated even without corresponding freedom of information requests
- each year, the media executives submit a draft task-based budget, which is debated by the media committee and then submitted to the Municipal Assembly
- independent control: the municipal budget committee debates the accounts of the municipal media separately each year
- in addition to funding municipal media, municipalities can also set up a joint press fund to support local news media that are not owned by municipalities, on a normative basis and according to pre-defined criteria

Content issues

- it would be useful to carry out regular research – jointly funded by local authorities – on the role of individual media outlets at the local level, which will help make decisions about the allocation of resources

- the possibility of producing a common page of national news should be considered so that it can be widely used by local newspapers; however, apart from that, local media should focus on local issues
- the distribution area of local newspapers should be expanded to include the villages surrounding urban areas
- dealing with complaints concerning the contents: complaints received should be evaluated by those experts of the local media committee who are not members of the municipal assembly
- in addition to disseminating them on traditional media platforms, local contents should be made available in an appropriate form on social media as well (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) to exploit the potential for interactivity
- communication on social media can be moderated based on publicly disseminated principles

The role of independent newspapers in local media markets

There are very few truly independent players in the local markets, and only a few large cities feature such media products. They are typically created by journalists with local ties who have been crowded out of the mainstream media (e.g. county papers) and have the entrepreneurial drive to launch their own projects.

The media projects we examined are in an extremely difficult situation; in many respects, the challenges they face are even more difficult than that of national media. On the one hand, it is usually not in the interest of the local political elite to have a truly independent local media that performs a watchdog function in the municipality, as it will be a powerful agent in terms of holding the local government accountable. At the same time, the demand side (i.e., the local public) does not always appreciate the efforts of independent journalists. As a result, such media outlets do not tend to have many readers, and the majority of citizens are either unable or unwilling to financially support local investigative projects. Naturally, such a situation does not make them attractive for advertisers either, and advertising in media critical of the municipality also carries a certain political risk for the advertiser, especially if the company has business links with the municipality.

In 2022, a substantial cooperation between independent media was launched with the creation of the joint website szabadszolg.hu and the start of an ongoing dialogue and exchange between local media outlets. Just as the present study was completed, in the summer of 2023, the szabadszolg.hu network announced that the cooperation between the eight newsrooms involved would be deepened further. Not only are they planning to produce joint articles and develop common themes, but – perhaps more importantly in terms of financial sustainability – they will also jointly apply for funding when possible.

One of the best-known local independent media outlets is *Debreciner*, which is based in Debrecen, as its name suggests. The case study we previously mentioned is about the media presentation of the building of the battery factory in Debrecen, and in that context, we also examine the articles published on the subject in *Debreciner*. Our research shows how different the approach of municipal media and independent media can be and how a small independent newspaper was able to provide a perspective on the underlying issue that would not have been otherwise available to the public. As Zsolt Porcsin, editor-in-chief of the *Debreciner*, explains in an interview (see Annex), their explicit aim was to inform the public about the civil society groups that had questions and sought explanations about the battery factory.

Presentation of the research

In the following, we present a quantitative content analysis of the articles about CATL's battery factory in Debrecen published in the first three months of 2023 in two local internet newspapers, Debreciner and Dehir. In early September 2022, the city of Debrecen and representatives of the Chinese company signed an agreement on the construction of the factory, the largest investment in the country's history in terms of capital invested and jobs created.¹¹ After the announcement of the intention to build the factory, there were lively debates and local protests about the planned battery factory in Debrecen. These were preceded in the national public arena by a similar Samsung factory in Göd, which has recently raised a number of local environmental concerns.

In fact, our content analysis examines the representation of a local environmental debate in the local media, triggered by the emergence of a globally mostly positive industry that enables the green transition of automobility. All this is linked to Hungary's second most populous city, which has long been led by right-wing politicians and is often interpreted as a rural stronghold of Fidesz, which has been in government in Hungary for more than a decade. Yet the location of our analysis, along with some other rural cities, is unique in the country, precisely from the point of view of local publicity, as Debrecen has had a public newspaper, the Debreciner, which has operated independently of the local power holders since its foundation four years ago, and its articles on the city are often quoted by independent national media. This is obviously worth emphasising because, in the last decade, the government's conscious media policy has also narrowed the space and opportunities for local publicity: local government public service media have often become local party mouthpieces, and local or regional commercial media have also been taken over by pro-Fidesz investors.¹²

In light of the above, it may be particularly interesting and important to examine how the political and social debate surrounding the establishment of the CATL factory in Debrecen, which has received a lot of national publicity, is reflected in the local independent press on the one hand, and in the local public media maintained by the local government on the other. To this end, we conducted a content analysis of articles on the Debrecen battery factory published in the first quarter of 2023 by Debreciner and Dehir 2023, a local public service news portal operating as part of the Debrecen Media Centre. During the content analysis, we examined both the genre and thematic characteristics of the articles, as well as the sources cited and the proportion of positive and negative news about the battery factory. We also analysed the social and public figures mentioned in the articles and the various arguments they put forward in relation to the establishment of the CATL plant. We also looked at the themes of the pictures illustrating the articles. At the end of our analysis, we also briefly describe how Debrecen's free monthly print magazine, Debreceni Korzó, presented the problem of the battery factory in the city during the period under review.

11 Debrecen.hu (n.d.): *Kilencezer munkahelyet teremt Debrecenben a CATL* [CATL creates nine thousand jobs in Debrecen]. <https://www.debrecen.hu/hu/debreceni/hireink/kilencezer-munkahelyet-teremt-debrecenben-a-catl>

12 On this, see Kovács, I. - Polyák, G. - Urbán, Á (2021). *Media landscape after a long storm. The Hungarian media politics after 2010*. Mérték Media Monitor, Budapest. <https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/MertekFuzetek25.pdf>

Neither the Debreciner nor the Dehir management or journalists were aware of the analysis, so it could not have influenced the presentation of events. After the content analysis was completed, Mérték sent questions to both media, and only the editor-in-chief of the Debreciner replied.



Why we chose this issue

The analysis is not a full analysis of the articles published in the first quarter of 2023 in the two newspapers but focused on a single, specific issue, namely the articles concerning the battery factory. For one, this allowed us to study the evolution in the coverage of the issue over an extended period. At the same time, the battery factory issue was not only important in Debrecen but was also of interest to the national public, and hence it gave rise to national media coverage.

Professor Dóra Györfy has recently written several studies on the emergence of battery factories in Hungary. Writing in the *Közgazdasági Szemle*,¹³ a Hungarian academic journal, she explains that “in recent years, battery manufacturing has emerged as one of the main drivers of the Hungarian economy, with the highest in-flow of foreign capital: In 2021, 60 percent of the €5.9 billion investment came from Asia, 51.9 percent was linked to battery manufacturing and 12.5 percent to automotive manufacturing. In 2022, 48 percent of the total €6.5 billion in investments came from the East, 43 percent was linked to battery manufacturing and 30 percent to automotive investment.” In a podcast,¹⁴ Dóra Györfy also talked about government support for this industry: the government contributes massively to these projects, about 10-11% of the total value as job support and infrastructure development. She said it is a very risky strategy to channel limited resources at the state level towards a single sector. Furthermore, since battery production is an environmentally very harmful investment, significantly increasing carbon emissions, it does not provide Hungary with a comparative advantage. Battery production is one of the most energy-intensive sectors, and Hungary is currently an energy importer. There are different calculations on how many kilowatt-hours of energy are needed to produce one kilowatt-hour of battery power: the author estimates these values at 60 kilowatt-hours in 2019 and 41.5 kilowatt-hours in 2022. If we multiply these numbers by the capacity of the battery factories, a staggering amount of energy will be needed: that probably explains why the government wants to maintain relations with Russia to ensure that the necessary energy can be imported from there.

Based on the formula above, CATL's planned 100-gigawatt battery plant in Debrecen has an energy demand of 4,150 gigawatts, while the annual output of the Paks plant is 16,000 gigawatts; this means a quarter of Paks' output will not be available for other purposes. The expert also expressed concerns about the water requirements of the project, saying that the Hungarian Great Plains are a desertified region of the country, and if the current drought continues, we will have to make a choice whether we use the limited water resources for agricultural irrigation or operating battery factories. The money that should be spent on investments that improve the water supply will instead be spent on by subsidies that fuel battery production. There are a lot of burst pipes in the public water supply and there is no money to fix these, just as there is no money for the rehabilitation of Lake Venice, which would cost 40 billion forints.

13 Györfy, D. (2023). *Iparpolitika és akkumulátorgyártás Magyarországon és Svédországban* [Industrial policy and battery production in Hungary and Sweden]. *Közgazdasági Szemle*. 70(3) pp. 245-273. <https://doi.org/10.18414/KSZ.2023.3.245>

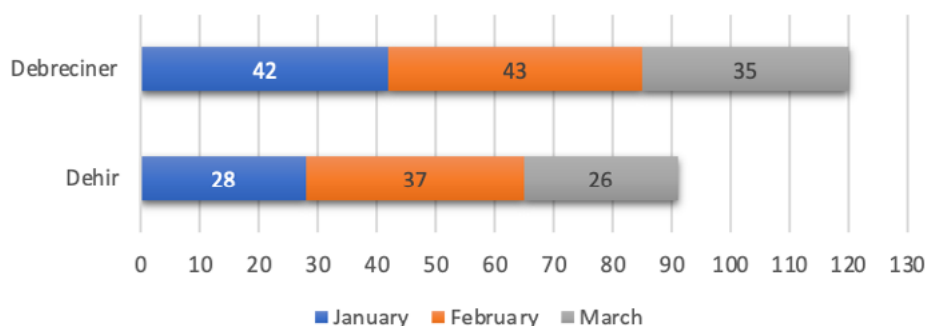
14 Magyari, P. - Mészáros, Zs. - Botos, T. (2023). *Hiába temetné Orbán a Nyugatot, a Kelet felől korrupció és erőszak jön* [Orbán may be trying to bury the West, but actually, corruption and violence come from the East]. *Létforgatag* #2 <https://444.hu/2023/01/20/hiaba-temetne-orban-a-nyugatot-kelet-felol-korrupcio-es-eroszak-jon-letforgatag-2>

As of this writing, news about new battery factories in Hungary are published in the Hungarian media almost every day: further plants are planned for Debrecen, and new plants will be built in Fót and Ács, too. There are major rifts between local residents and investors, and as a result, this is a contentious issue everywhere.

Dehir and Debreciner about the battery factories: genres, topics and source

In the three months we studied, we found a total of 211 articles about the CATL factory on the two news sites. Of these, 120 were published by Debreciner and 91 by Dehir. As Figure 4 shows, the shortest month of the year, February, featured the highest number of articles about the issue on the local news sites. This may owe to the fact that most public events concerning the factory were held in February. For example, the local election committee in Debrecen refused to certify the referendum questions on the construction of the battery factory in February. That month, the government office (the authority representing the central government locally) announced that the CATL plant had been granted an environmental permit. The issue was also debated in Parliament at the end of February. In addition, several anti-battery demonstrations were held in Debrecen during that month.

Figure 4: Chronological distribution of the analyzed articles (211)



As part of the content analysis, the 211 articles published by the two news sites were first coded by genres. Looking at Figure 5, we notice several differences between the two local media outlets with respect to the genres of articles they typically publish on the issue. Unsurprisingly, both Dehir and Debreciner were most likely to publish news items in their coverage of the planned battery factory. However, in the case of Dehir, the share of news was much higher: almost three-quarters of its articles on the topic were news reports, while in the case of Debreciner's, the share of such articles was only 55%. In addition, Dehir's coverage was less diverse in terms of the genre of articles published: for example, it is striking that the local government news site did not publish any opinion pieces on the subject. In contrast, at Debreciner the proportion of opinion articles and letters to the editor was relatively high at 15 percent of all articles on the subject. On the other hand, Dehir published a relatively high number of interviews (13%) on the battery plant. The explanation is obviously in the way the local government news site operates: the interviews were mostly taken from various local television programmes and were effectively (re)published by Dehir for its readers.

Figure 5: Distribution of the articles analysed by genres

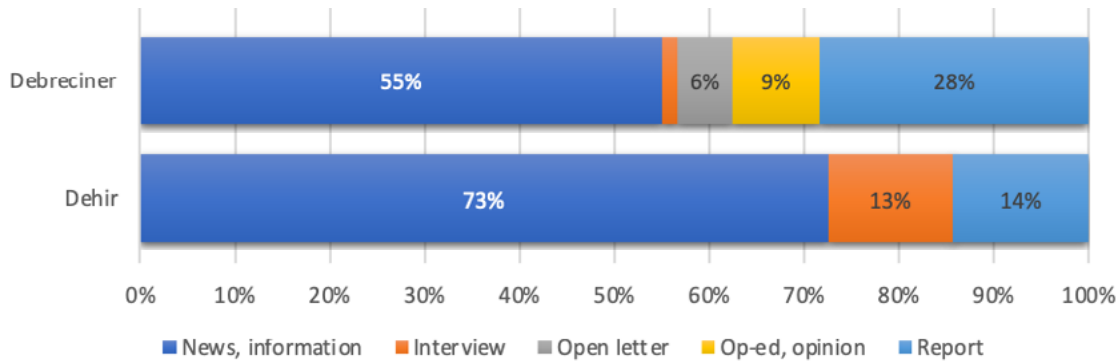
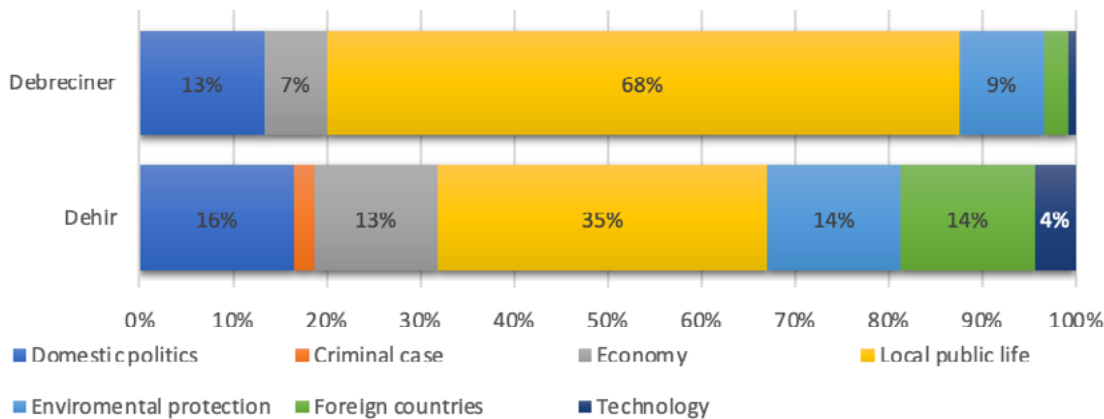


Figure 6 shows the thematic breakdown of the 120 articles on Dehir and Debreciner. The most striking feature is that the local independent news site discussed the problem of construction of the battery plant primarily as a local public phenomenon, with two-thirds of the articles focusing on this dimension (later in our analysis, we will illustrate this using specific examples). The share of articles focusing exclusively on domestic politics (i.e. national politics), such as parliamentary debates, was similar in the two media. In contrast, the municipal government news site featured more articles that emphasised the economic, technological or environmental aspects of the issue. As we will also discuss later, Dehir’s foreign policy articles were in some ways similar to the domestic coverage of the battery production issue: they mostly dealt with the international context of battery production, such as new battery factories being set up around the world.

Figure 6: Thematic distribution of the articles analysed

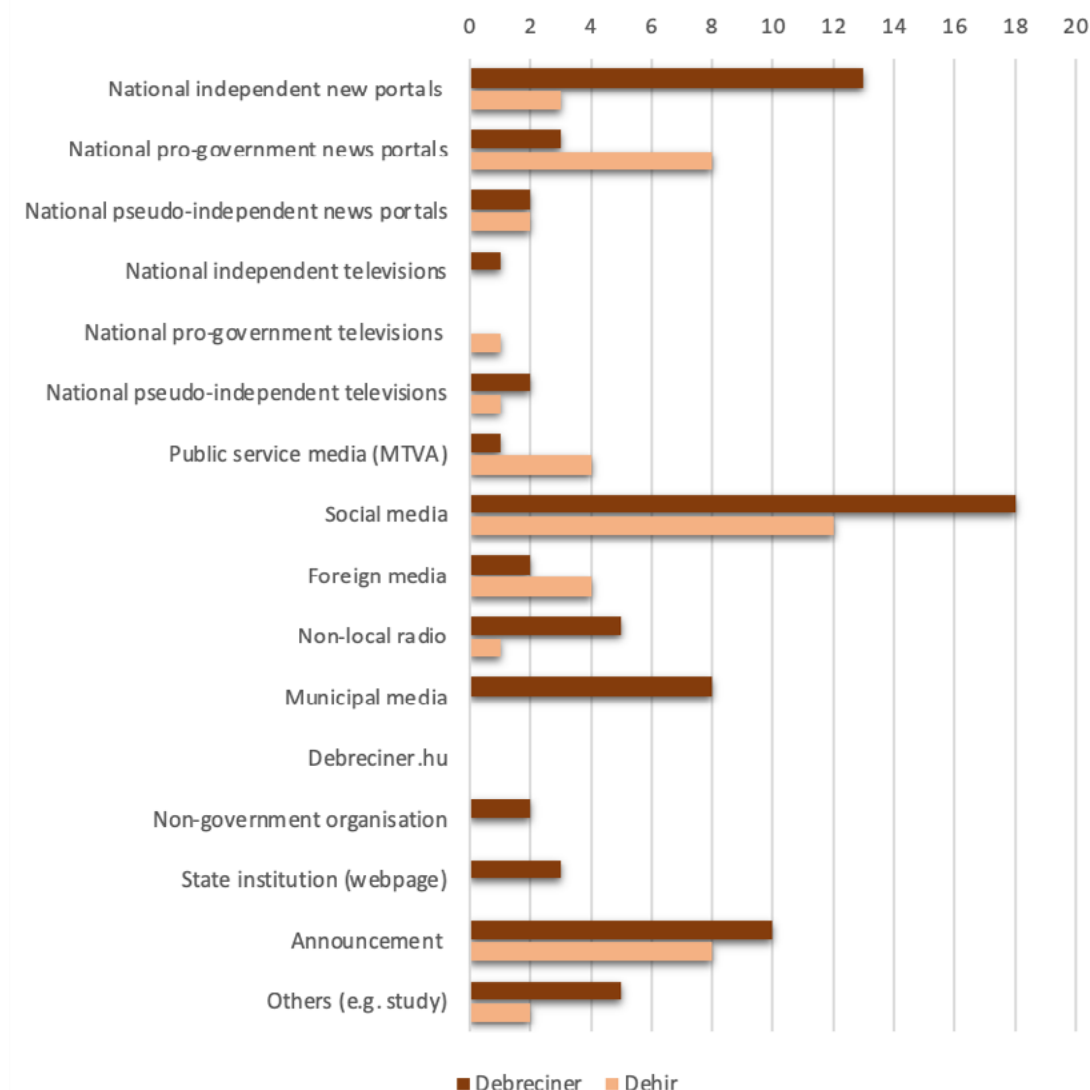


As shown in Figure 6, we found two articles on the city government’s news sites that were coded as crime related. Both were police news: one about a riot at a public hearing in January and the other about the alleged offence of “abusing the right of assembly” by a local demonstration of the far-right Our Homeland (Mi Hazánk) party at the end of February.

Figure 4 depicts the types of sources used in the two news sites’ articles. As part of this analysis, we recorded which other media were cited as external news sources in their articles. Obviously, Dehir and Debreciner most frequently referred to their own articles, but we did not include this in the figure be-

low since, in the case of Dehir, the Debrecen Media Centre (which comprises several media outlets) was treated as a single source. In classifying independent, pseudo-independent (e.g., ATV and Index.hu) and government-affiliated media, we drew on the categories used in the Mérték Media Monitor's 2021 report on the structure of the Hungarian media market.¹⁵

Figure 7: Sources mentioned in the articles analysed



Social media, and Facebook in particular, has become an increasingly important arena for contemporary political public discourse in Hungary, and it is therefore not surprising that the two local news sites were most likely to cite social media contents as an outside source, for example embedding Facebook posts by local politicians in their articles. Figure 7 shows that, as one would expect, Dehir relied far more on pro-government media – and, as part of that, on the national public service media – while Debreciner relied more on non-government media as the sources for its news coverage. The only striking data in Figure 7 is that the Debrecen municipal media seem to ignore the existence of other local news sources, including Debreciner. In 91 of their articles, there was no mention of the local independent news site, while the reverse was not true; that is, Debreciner did not ignore the other local media outlet.

15 Kovács, I. - Polyák, G. - Urbán, Á (2021). *Media landscape after a long storm. The Hungarian media politics after 2010*. Mérték Media Monitor, Budapest. <https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/MertekFuzetek25.pdf>

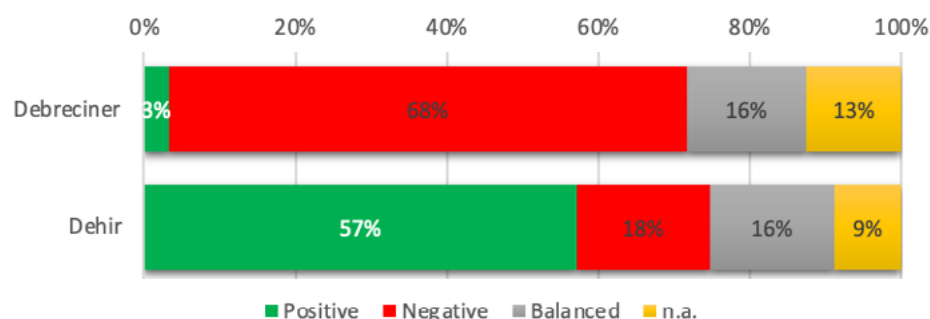
Lean of the articles analysed



As the next step in the analysis, we also coded the articles published by the two news sites based on the potential positive or negative lean and tone of the coverage. In so doing, we evaluated whether the given articles were clearly positive about the construction of the CATL factory in Debrecen; rejected or criticised it; or featured both positions, i.e. they are balanced. We also found some articles on the subject where this dimension did not apply: for example, because they only factually reported about events involving the building of the factory (e.g., the public hearing) or, say, the fact that foreign media had covered the subject.

As shown in Figure 8, the articles in Dehir and Debreciner differ strongly in this respect. Of the 91 articles in Dehir on the battery factory, 52 (57%) leaned positively towards building a battery factory in Debrecen. By contrast, 82 out of 120 articles in the Debreciner (68%) were negative in their coverage of the construction of the CATL plant. In addition to the dominance of positive articles in Dehir, there were also 16 negative articles critical of the battery plant. In contrast, we found only a negligible number of articles (4) on the Debreciner website that were clearly in favour of the battery plant. However, the two media had a roughly similar proportion of balanced articles and articles that could not be classified in terms of their lean on the issue.

Figure 8: Positive-negative tone of the articles analysed



The following figures show how the two local news sites' articles are distributed in terms of type and topic, also juxtaposing this data with the attitude towards or against the investment in the articles. For example, Figure 9 which depicts how Dehir's articles are distributed in terms of the type of articles and their lean, shows that the interviews published in the newspaper were almost invariably positive towards the construction of the battery plant, with several of them being linked to the mayor of the city. Debrecen Mayor László Papp, for example, spoke to the Debrecen Media Centre¹⁶ about the strict conditions governing the environmental permit for the factory,¹⁷ his positive experiences at the CATL plant in Germany,¹⁸ and the importance of rational debates¹⁹ in the context of the city's economic development.

16 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/papp-laszlo-a-debreceniek-aggodalma-ejjel-nappal-ott-van-a-gondolataimban-videoval/2023/02/10/>

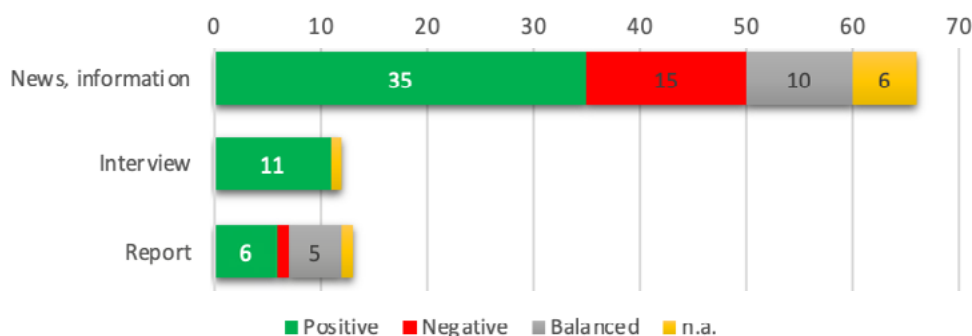
17 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/papp-laszlo-az-akkumulatorgyarl-debrecen-vezetese-egyert-a-hatosag-szigoritott-feltetelrendszerel/2023/02/13/>

18 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/papp-laszlo-ha-ez-nemtorszagban-egy-mintaprojekt-miert-ne-lehetne-mintaprojekt-debrecenben-is-videoval/2023/02/06/>

19 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/racionalis-ervekkel-nyerne-el-a-lakossag-bizalmat-az-akkumulatorgyar-irant-debrecen-polgarmestere/2023/01/24/>

His interview with Dehir, published on 10 February, was published under the title *László Papp: the concerns of Debrecen citizens are in my thoughts day and night*.²⁰ In the interview, the mayor assured the public that “the monitoring system must play an important role in allaying concerns and building trust.” And László Pósn, a Member of Parliament, said²¹ that “we should not be looking at smoking chimneys in Debrecen’s industrial parks.”

Figure 9: Dehir’s articles by tone and genres



Dehir repeatedly published summaries of interviews with experts that had been originally published elsewhere, usually the local TV station. These were generally supportive of the battery plant. Thus, for example, the interviewees included the managing director of the Hungarian Battery Association,²² a department chairman at the University of Debrecen,²³ and the climate researcher Diána Üрге-Vorsatz²⁴ spoke about the positive role of battery technology in everyday life. For example, the head of the Debrecen Infrastructure Development Ltd. commented on the city’s infrastructural investments in advance of the construction of the factory, which “can lay the foundation for the development of local society by growing the local economy.” By contrast, one of the two interviews published by Debreciner (see Figure 11) on the issue was with Benedek Jávör, a politician from the Párbeszéd party (it is one of the Hungarian green parties). Jávör spoke to the paper about the environmental risks of the Debrecen project.²⁵

Dehir often published news or reports about the process of building the factory. They usually reported on special events or general information about its alleged beneficial impact on the local economy, the development of battery technology in general, or how careful the local authorities were in issuing environmental permits. For example, Deputy Mayor Lajos Barcsa visited the municipal wastewater treatment plant²⁶ with representatives of the factory and discussed the use of greywater from the plant. The aim of the event was to reassure readers who harboured concerns about the future plant’s water use: “We can meet 70-80% of the plant’s water needs with greywater.” For example, Dehir has repeatedly reported on the inauguration of CATL’s factory in Arnstadt, Germany,²⁷ saying that “the prime minister of the German state [of Thüringen] stressed safety.”²⁸

20 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/papp-laszlo-a-debreceniek-aggodalma-ejel-nappal-ott-van-a-gondolataimban-videoval/2023/02/10/>

21 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/posan-laszlo-debrecen-ipari-parkjaiban-nem-lathatunk-fustolgo-kemenyeket/2023/03/03/>

22 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/a-magyar-akkumulator-szovetseg-ugyvezetoje-debrecenben-sokakat-megnyugtata-ha-ellatogathatnak-mar-letezo-uzemekbe/2023/02/23/>

23 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/a-mindennapi-életünk-szerves-resze-a-litium-ion-akkumulator-amit-debrecenben-is-gyartanak-majd/2023/02/14/>

24 <https://www.dehir.hu/belfold/urges-vorsatz-diana-szerint-surgosen-le-kell-szokni-az-olajrol-szenrol-foldgazrol/2023/02/16/>

25 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12862_panaszt_tesz_europai_bizottsag_nal_catl_debreciner_unikum

26 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/a-catl-kepviselo-i-ugy-latjak-s-tisztitott-szennyviz-eleg-lesz-az-akkumulatorgyar-vizigenyenek-nagy-reszere/2023/02/10/>

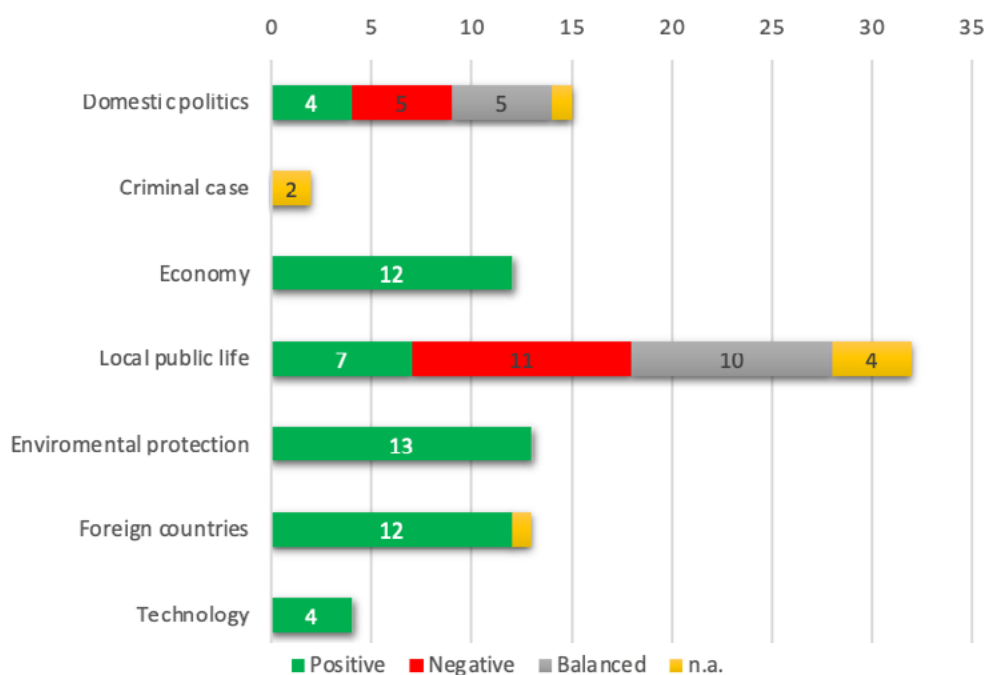
27 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/atadtak-nemetorszagban-a-catl-elso-europai-gyarat-a-debreceni-is-szoba-kerult-az-esemenyen/2023/01/26/>

28 <https://www.dehir.hu/vilag/a-biztonsagot-hangsulyozza-a-nemet-tartomanyi-ministerelnok-a-catl-ottani-gyara-kapcsan/2023/01/27/>

Both newspapers repeatedly reported on the debates in the National Assembly, the Debrecen municipal assembly and the public hearings on the construction of the battery factory. In our analysis, we coded most of these articles as balanced since they included arguments both for and against the construction of the factory. The critical articles about the battery factory in Dehir (16 out of 91) were almost exclusively relatively short news items that reported on the views of opposition parties or events connected to them, in some cases accompanied by video coverage. These included, for example, a local statement by Momentum,²⁹ a demonstration against the factory³⁰ and a public forum organised by Our Homeland.³¹

The overall impression that emerges from the examples mentioned above is also confirmed and augmented by the data in Figure 10, which shows the distribution of Dehir articles in terms of the type of article and how they lean on the battery factory. It shows that the city government's news site has published a large number of articles on the economic, environmental and technological aspects of the CATL plant, and almost all of them are positive in tone. These also included foreign reports published on the Dehir website. As mentioned above, several articles in the paper reported positively about the CATL plant in Arnstadt, Thuringia, but there were also many articles on the global spread of the concept of "green transition" and the "battery boom", with foreign cases used to illustrate the broader phenomena. "There will be at least 12 countries in Europe with battery factories"³², reported Dehir on 10 February 2023, for example. But Dehir also presented a similar investment by Honda and LG Energy Solution in the US,³³ as well as VW's new battery plant in Canada, "the largest automotive investment in Canada's history"³⁴.

Figure 10: Dehir's articles by tone and topic



29 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/szabo-bence-egy-ekkora-beruhazas-nem-lehetseges-a-helyiek-bevonasa-es-megkerdezese-nelkul/2023/01/29/>

30 <https://www.dehir.hu/videoalbum/tuntetes-volt-debrecen-belvarosaban-szombaton/>

31 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/lakossagi-forumot-tartott-a-mi-hazank-debrecenben/2023/01/21/>

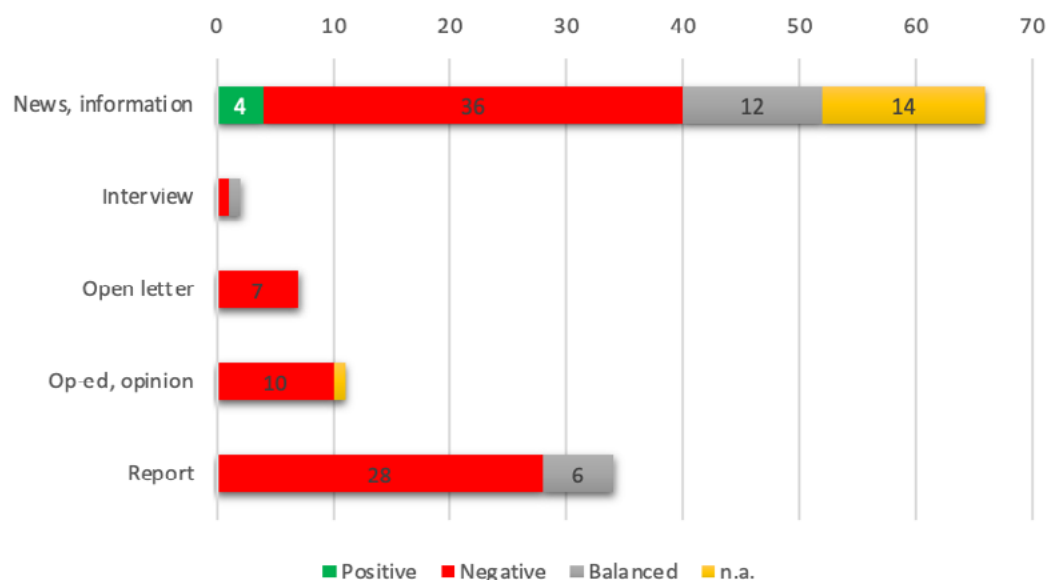
32 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/legalabb-12-oroszag-lesz-europaban-ahol-nagy-teljesitmenyu-akkumulatorgyarak-fognak-uzemelni/2023/02/10/>

33 <https://www.dehir.hu/gazdasag/akkumulatorgyarak-epit-az-usa-ban-a-honda-es-az-lg-energy-solution/2023/03/01/>

34 <https://www.dehir.hu/gazdasag/kivalasztotta-uj-akkugyaranak-helyszinet-a-vw/2023/03/16/>

As we mentioned earlier (and as Figure 11 shows), Debreciner published only four articles that were positive about building the CATL plant in Debrecen. Most of them presented the views of government politicians or CATL representatives. For example, the news site featured a brief report saying that Mayor László Papp had visited an automotive event organised by the University of Debrecen³⁵ and the local Fidesz-KDNP faction leader published a social media post³⁶ supporting the mayor's policy on the factory. In another article, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán himself was quoted³⁷ saying the plant under construction was a "real Western factory."

Figure 11: Debreciner's articles by tone and genres



The relatively large number of articles in Debreciner on the topic of the battery plant (as shown in Figure 12) during the period under investigation, many of which presented negative local opinions about the project, owing to the fact that the newspaper sought to hold local officials accountable and as a part of that effort, it criticised statements by political leaders in Debrecen about the battery factory. For example, on 17 February, the paper published a report³⁸ about a press conference held by the city's deputy mayor on the environmental spending in Debrecen's budget. However, the local independent news site was not invited to the event, so the journalist at Debreciner summarised the information for readers based on public reports about the event. In the process, he asked critical questions about the CATL plant's carbon emissions and water use, which he did not have the opportunity to ask at the event itself. Another article in Debreciner³⁹ contradicted the claims put forth by the mayor in an interview with the news site Index. The author said that László Papp was merely "repeating communication panels" citing information that was already publicly available. A February article in the independent local newspaper reported about a freedom of information request⁴⁰ submitted by the editorial board in connection with a visit by the city's mayor and a deputy mayor at a CATL factory in Germany.

35 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/13129_minden_debrecenbe_telepulo_unikum

36 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12661_elismerni_kellene_nem_becsmerelni_unikum

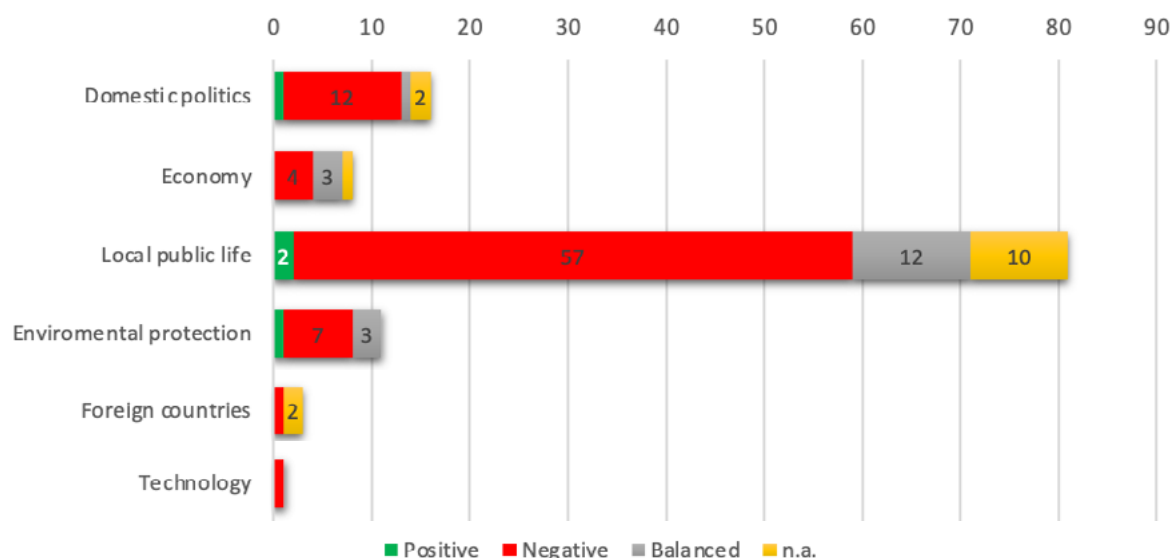
37 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12934_orban_viktor_autogyarunk_catl_unikum

38 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12736_sok_szaz_hektar_ipari_beruhazas_debreciner_unikum

39 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12901_velhetoen_titkos_vagy_valotlan_papp_laszlo_catl_unikum

40 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12649_mennyibe_kerult_debrecen_catl_debreciner_unikum

Figure 12: Debreciner's articles by tone and topic



Looking at the articles on the news site, it was also striking that Debreciner – in contrast to the positive expert voices on the Dehir website – often covered critical expert opinions which weighed in against the battery factory. One of the local scandals surrounding this issue during the three months under review involved the dismissal of the regional water director by the Minister of the Interior in response to the former's expert opinion about the water supply of the CATL plant; this controversy was also reported in the national media. The report was later published in full by Debreciner.⁴¹ On another occasion, the online newspaper reported about an expert discussion in Budapest⁴² that criticised the Debrecen investment mainly from an economic perspective. At the same time, various articles also presented negative opinions about the project, for example, by the former rector of the University of Debrecen⁴³ and a WWF expert,⁴⁴ who discussed the possible environmental problems of the CATL plant. Debreciner also published information about the legal framework of local protests with the help of an expert from the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (TASZ).⁴⁵

Debreciner also tried to present local problems caused by battery factories similar to the one planned in Debrecen, and even looked at the national public aspects of the topic, drawing on the coverage of the issue in the national press.⁴⁶ Thus, for example, based on an article published on Telex, it presented⁴⁷ the results of a poll surveying public opinion on the construction of battery factories conducted by the Ökopolis Foundation, which is affiliated with the green party LMP, and it covered an article published in Népszava⁴⁸ discussing the possibilities of challenging the factory's environmental permit. Drawing on the coverage of other local media, Debreciner also reported on the critical stances of the municipalities of Pécs⁴⁹ and Szombathely⁵⁰ concerning the construction of battery factories.

41 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/13144_ime_a_teljes_szakvelemenyn_catl_tivizig_unikum

42 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12772_professzorok_a_debreceni_akkugyarral_catl_unikum

43 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12718_szomjas_lesz_a_debreceni_akkugyar_tobb_energiat_vesz

44 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12727_elmaradt_kornyezeti_ertekeles_wwf_catl_unikum

45 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12880_politikai_nyomasgyakorlással_es_jogi_uton_is_fel_az

46 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12338_orszagszerte_tiltakoznak_az_akkumulatorgyarak_ellen

47 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12967_egy_kutatas_szerint_a_magyarok_fele_egyetert_azzal

48 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12844_februar_20_tol_szamitva_30_nap_van_a_debrecenbe

49 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12793_akkumulatorgyarakrol_is_szavaztak_pecsen_a_majd_az

50 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12544_szombathelyen_nem_lesz_akkumulatorgyar_nyugat.hu

Debreciner covered the opinions of the opposition parties, which are critical of the plans to build the factory, and the events they organised in greater detail than Dehir's relatively short news items about these. For example, Debreciner reported about a press conference held by LMP,⁵¹ as well as developments concerning the local referendum initiatives launched by Momentum, Our Homeland and representatives of local civil society.⁵² Debreciner reported the announcement of Párbeszéd (Dialogue)⁵³ that the party would appeal to the European Commission concerning the negative impact on the water supply. And the local news site also covered the – sometimes critical – opinions about the project of the leaders of the surrounding municipalities.⁵⁴

However, Debreciner's critical attitude towards the CATL plant is best characterised by the newspaper's determined efforts to publicise the efforts of local civic groups protesting against the project. For example, one of the episodes in the news site's podcast series⁵⁵ involved local civic activists who had participated in protests against the plant and voiced environmental concerns. The newspaper also published⁵⁶ a statement by a local NGO, which had been in the crosshairs of a series of attacks by pro-government media outlets because of its activities. The most prominently covered NGO on the pages of Debreciner was the group called the Mothers of Mikepércs. During the three months we analysed, we saw coverage of their activities in articles of various types. These shed light on how women living in Mikepércs, a settlement adjacent to the battery factory, turned from ordinary people into local civil activists who organised demonstrations against the project and subsequently gave their activities an institutional form by founding an association.

At the same time, the presence of the Mothers of Mikepércs group on Debreciner's pages is not only an example of a local independent news site giving a public voice to a local civic organisation that is critical of the authorities but to a certain extent also an instance of a civic group taking on the role of civic journalism – with the help of the newspaper. As authors, their names appeared in Debreciner bylines not only in opinion pieces, i.e. open letters and commentaries but also in information articles reporting,⁵⁷ for example, on the activities of the association they had founded. Another related article featured the statement of a civilian commentator – the article referred to him as a *“father from Debrecen”* – who challenged the permit issued to the plant by the authority responsible for disaster prevention.

Politicians, activists and civilians – characters and images in the articles analysed

As another dimension of our content analysis, we tracked the public and social actors whose views and comments appeared in the 211 articles of Dehir and Debreciner that we analysed. When we referred to the “voices” of these actors in coding the articles, we meant that the articles did not merely mention them but quoted them or summarised their opinions on the topic. As can be seen in Figure 13, these actors could be either organisations or representatives of organisations. For example, because of the fragmented nature of the opposition political space, we used a joint category for ‘national’ and ‘local’ opposition politicians and included instances when they expressed their views either as a local or national political organisation/party. In contrast, we treated the Fidesz party as a distinct political player because

51 https://www.debreciner.hu/caikk/13126_irasbeli_kerdesben_erdeklodik_az_lmp_catl_unikum

52 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12790_minden_nepszavazasi_kezdemenezest_catl_debreciner_unikum

53 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12862_panaszt_tesz_europai_bizottsagnal_catl_debreciner_unikum

54 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12838_aggodalom_es_kivaras_catl_debreciner_debrecen_unikum

55 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12589_nincs_olyan_akkumulatorgyar_debreciner_catl_unikum

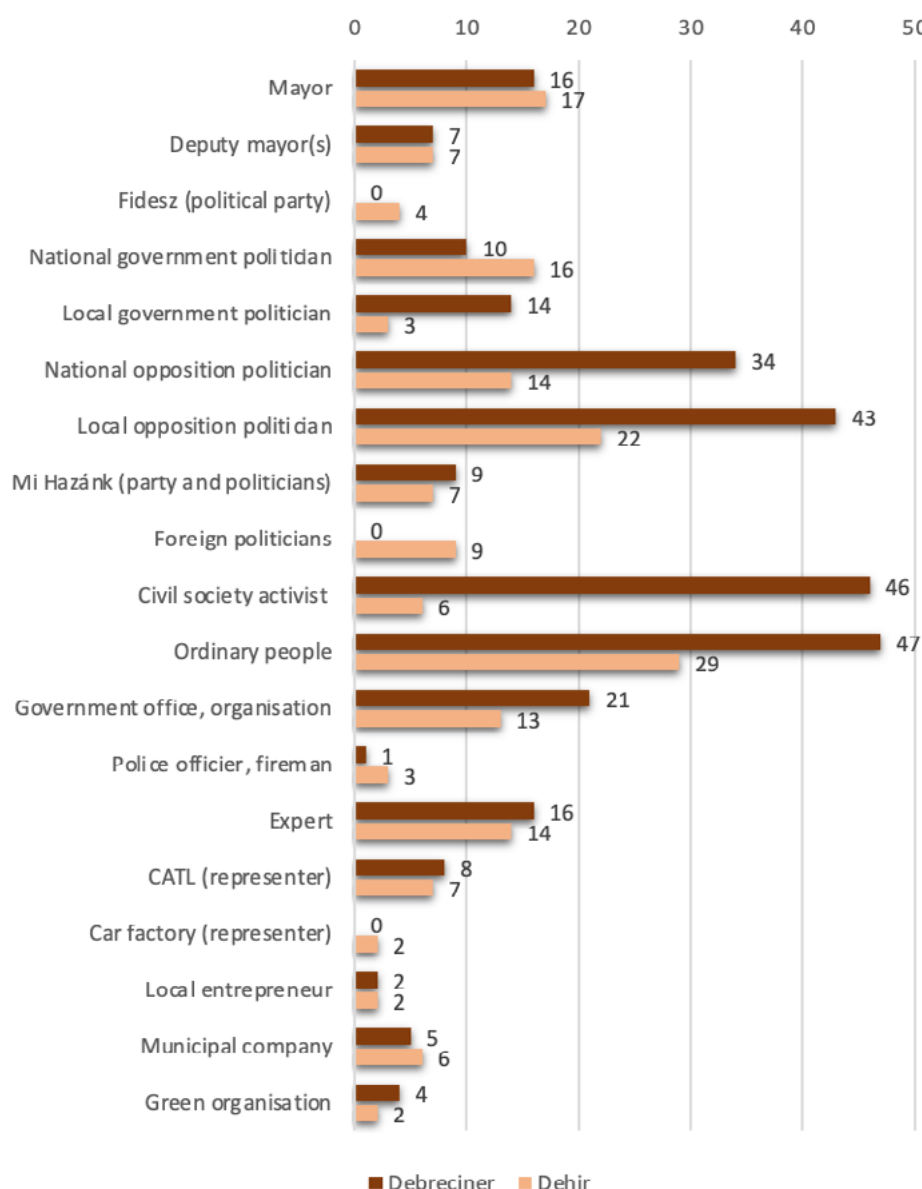
56 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12574_ok_valodi_allampolgarok_akiket_most_osszehozott_egy

57 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/13054_jogi_fellepes_a_catl_akkumulatorgyaranak_engedelye

the press releases on Dehir's pages were usually issued by the party. The representatives and speakers of Our Homeland were not classed together with the other opposition parties because of the peculiar position occupied by the party in the Hungarian political landscape.



Figure 13: Appearance of public figures in the articles analysed



The data shown in Figure 13 confirm what we have observed in the analysis thus far, namely that the two local news sites presented the topic of the CATL plant in Debrecen very differently. While Dehir's 91 articles featured more national pro-government politicians, Debreciner's 120 articles included significantly more local and national opposition politicians than Dehir's coverage. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the independent online newspaper in Debrecen also featured several municipal government politicians who were not among the city's leaders. Obviously, the latter data can be explained to a large extent by what we have already seen in Figure 6: the main focus of Debreciner's articles on the battery factory was local public life.

The biggest difference between the two local media outlets in terms of public and social actors voicing their opinions on the battery factory issue was the representation of ordinary people and civil activists. As illustrated in Figure 13, the voice of civic activists was negligible in Dehir's articles, and the proportion of ordinary people was also smaller. The latter were mostly represented in the two news portals in their coverage of public hearings, public forums and local demonstrations. In the analysis, we coded as ordinary people those who were not obviously affiliated with a political organisation and were not identified by the authors of the articles as activists or organisers linked to a public event or occasion. This was the case, for example, with the persons quoted in Dehir's coverage of the public hearing in early January,⁵⁸ who were identified by the newspaper simply as "*a woman*", "*a man*" or "*a woman with her baby*". A similar figure is the "*grandmother from Mikepércs who fears for the future of her four grandchildren*" mentioned in the Debreciner, in an article by the mothers of Mikepércs⁵⁹, whose opinion was quoted in a report about an earlier demonstration. In contrast, we have coded as a civil activist the woman from Mikepércs who, according to the Debreciner article *It's wrong to pull the wool over the mothers' eyes*⁶⁰ that reported on a demonstration organised by LMP, said in her speech that she was speaking on behalf of a "*concerned civil group*".

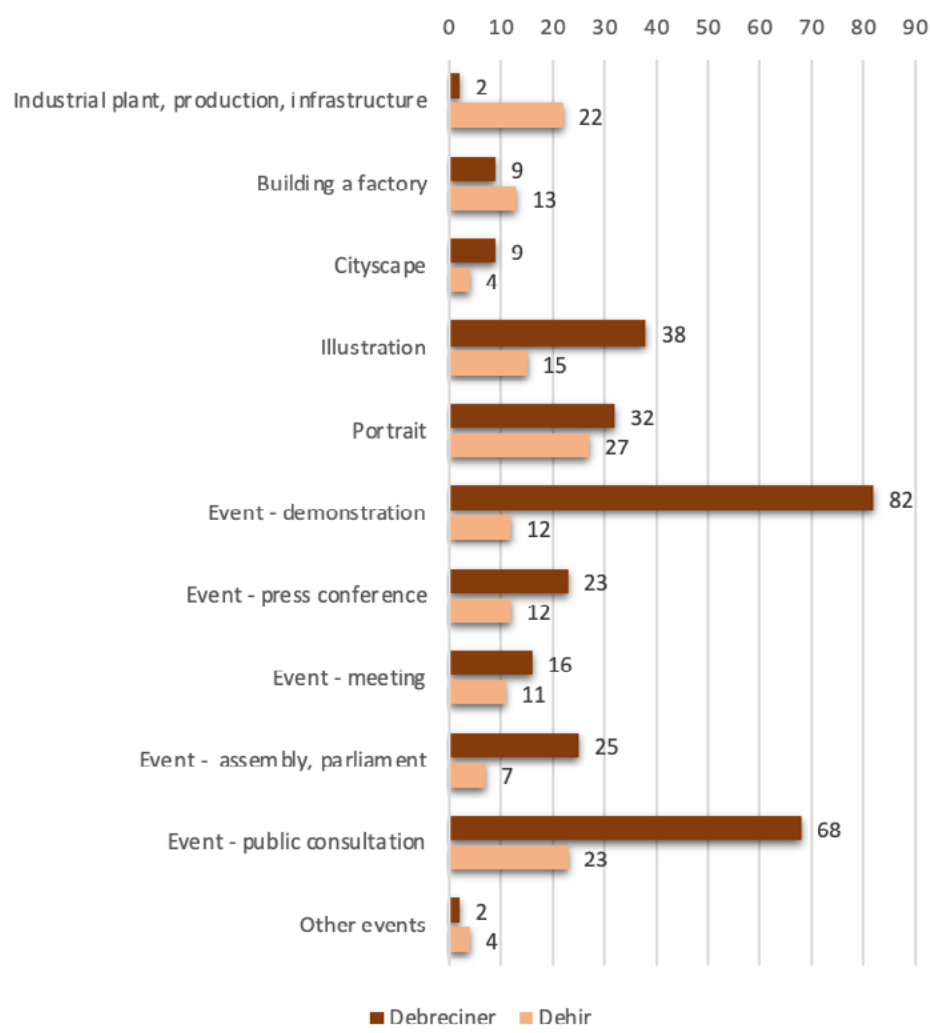
The results of the content analysis are also confirmed by the images the news sites published in the articles on the battery factory. As Figure 14 illustrates, the images were categorised according to their themes and types. As is apparent, Debreciner published roughly twice as many images in its articles on the subject as the municipal news site: 306 images appeared in its 120 articles, i.e. almost three per article, compared to 150 images in 91 articles on Dehir.

58 <https://www.dehir.hu/debrecen/a-catl-akkumulatorgyar-megepitesse-ellen-tiltakoztak-debrecenben/2023/03/04/>

59 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12886_mekkora_arat_fizetunk_catl_mikepercs

60 https://www.debreciner.hu/cikk/12667_rosszul_jar_aki_edesanyaknal_huzza_catl_debreciner_unikum

Figure 14: Theme of images in the articles analysed



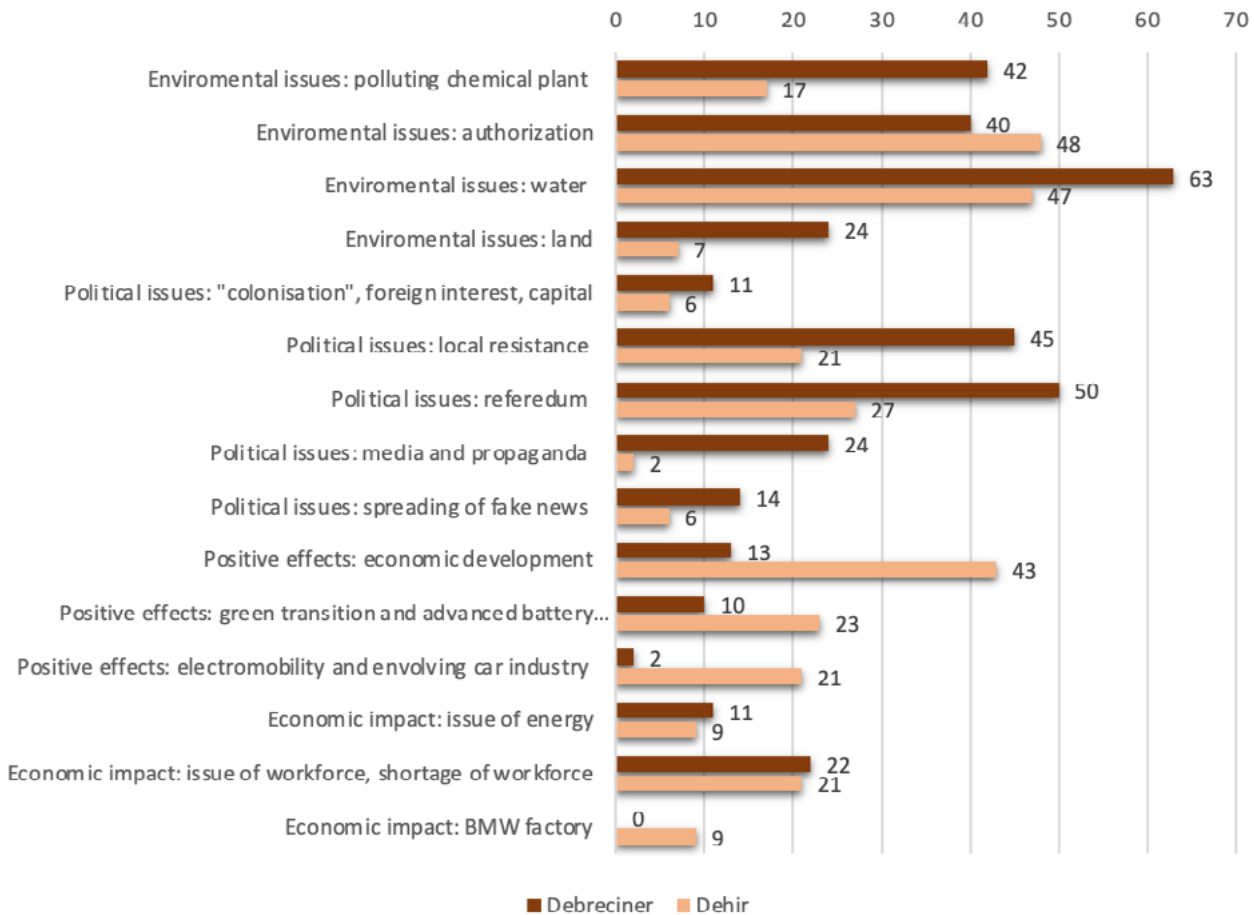
A distinctive group of images are those that show the initial work of the construction of the factory in Debrecen, such as earthmoving machinery working in the field, a completed battery plant, or the production process in a similar factory. As is apparent from the data in the figure, Dehir published more of these photos. This meshes with the fact that the Debrecen Media Centre’s news site was more interested in the economic and technological aspects of battery production. We can observe a further marked difference between the two local news sites with respect to the photos published about the demonstrations and public hearings. Debreciner was far more likely to illustrate its articles with photos of similar events; in fact, about half of the photos it publishes fall into this category.

Aruments and debates about the battery factory in Debrecen



- As part of our analysis, we also tried to identify specific themes that appeared in the opinions on the CATL factory expressed by political and social figures. In coding the content, we assigned categories not to the articles as a whole but to the specific comments in them. In many cases, this involved more than one comment since the public figures expressing their opinions in the articles spoke about several simultaneous problems concerning the battery factory. As shown in Figure 15, four major issues related to the CATL plant were identified in the analysis of the articles published by the two news sites.

Figure 15: Arguments about the battery factory in the articles analysed



- One category was the debate about environmental problems, which emphasises those activities of the battery factory that lead to pollution. In this context, the eradication and potential contamination of good quality *land* around Debrecen, the factory's extensive *water use* and the issue of wastewater treatment were specifically mentioned as problem areas, while many actors spoke in general terms about the *polluting* nature of the plant and battery production. This discourse also includes the arguments concerning *the environmental licensing of the plant*.

- Recently, the debate on the subject has been dominated by purely political arguments. The opinions on the establishment of the CATL plant included both a critique of globalisation and international corporations, while the *colonisation* by the battery factories and local *resistance* to the latter were also mentioned. One of the main goals of the resistance was to achieve a local *referendum* on the issue. Political figures, some in favour of the battery plant and some opposed to it, have sometimes been involved in spreading *fake news about the issue*, as well as *propaganda in the media*, while at the same time accusing their political opponents of doing this.
- The third theme in public debate about the CATL plant in Debrecen revolves around the arguments concerning the positive economic role of battery production. As we already mentioned, the articles in this context generally talk about the *green transition of the economy* and automobility and *electromobility* as positive phenomena. They also discuss the emergence of similar factories in Hungary as a means of *economic development* - similar to *the BMW factory in the city of Debrecen*, for example. On the other hand, the news sites also featured articles that were more critical of the standard economic arguments and raised the problems of *energy supply* and *labour shortages* due to the battery factory's location in the city.
- Figure 15, which summarises the appearance of these arguments and discourses on the Dehir and Debreciner sites during the period we analysed, shows that the environmental problems of the CATL plant were more likely to be raised by the public figures interviewed in Debreciner - this was especially true for arguments about the plant that portrayed it as a general hazard to the environment. It is striking, however, that the issue of the environmental licensing of the battery plant was also raised several times in Dehir's writings. As mentioned above, this was precisely the topic that local political leaders spoke about many times in the municipality's media outlet with the goal of reassuring the public.
- Based on what we have seen so far in the analysis, it is hardly a surprise that Debreciner has featured far more voices that raised political concerns about the factory, mostly focusing on the opposition of local people and the demand for a referendum on the issue. In contrast, the prominent figures interviewed by Dehir tended to focus far more on the role of the CATL plant as a source of economic development and battery production as a positive technological and environmental activity.

Reporting of Debreceni Korzó about the CATL factory

- We briefly reviewed the first quarter of 2023 of the free monthly city magazine Debreceni Korzó (28 or 36 pages), published by the Debrecen Media Centre. The majority of the content was cultural, leisure or sports articles, and the magazine also published a relatively large number of programme reviews and advertisements. Each issue contained 3-4 pages of public affairs. In terms of genre, these were mostly short news and information pieces, mostly about city institutions, various programmes, and occasionally events related to the city's leading politicians and the city assembly.
- In five articles in the three issues published at the beginning of the year, the battery factory being built in Debrecen was specifically mentioned. Three of these were short news items. For example, in the January issue, on pages 8 and 9, there was only one two-sentence news item each on the public hearings in the city. One highlighted the *„tense atmosphere of the debate, not without shouting, tempers running high and escalating into violence”*, while the other highlighted the *„smouldering atmos-*



phere” of the event. At the same time, readers of the ,mini-reports’, wedged between news of sports programmes, the handover of a playground and a church concert, could not read anything about the arguments raised at the public hearings, nor could they appreciate the importance of the debate on the largest economic investment the country has ever made.

- In the February issue, however, a half-page article dealt with the environmental licensing of the factory, on which the mayor was quoted, who, like in Dehir, sought to reassure readers of the paper on this point and stressed the rigour of the government agency’s procedure. A very similar point was made, also in the February issue, with the report on the visit of the city leaders to the CATL factory in Arnstadt, Germany. This not only described the „environmentally friendly” factory, but also, in the Mayor’s wake, raised the development opportunities that the increase in the city’s business tax will make possible thanks to the battery factory. *„I get a lot of requests from residents about where and what should be developed: building roads, playgrounds, renovating, rebuilding, creating things. But without revenue, these things cannot be done”* László Papp told Debrecen Korzó. And a short news item in the March issue also reported on one of the mayor’s trips to Germany, his appearance at the German-Hungarian Business Forum in Berlin, where the CATL factory was mentioned as an example of how Debrecen can become *„an attractive investment location”*.
- Attentive readers of Debrecen’s monthly city magazine may have noticed that the January and March issues of the magazine each carried a news item about investments in Debrecen’s water supply and grey water use. The name of the battery factory being built was not mentioned, only informed readers would have known that the water supply problem was a major issue in the debate on the factory. However, these two articles also show that, unlike Dehir, Debrecen’s print magazine treated the arrival of the CATL plant in the city as a marginal issue. Debreceni Korzó did not seek to inform its readers in a broad way, and various aspects of the public debate on the factory, including critical opinions, were not published in the magazine.

Summary

As the analysis showed, in the first three months of 2023, the two news portals published a total of 211 articles about CATL’s Debrecen factory: 120 by Debreciner and 91 by Dehir. These were first analysed in terms of the types of the articles and their contents. Already in that stage of the process, we found striking differences between the two news sites. The Debreciner articles were more varied in terms of their types. This was partly due to the fact that Dehir did not publish any opinion pieces on the subject, in contrast to Debreciner, which featured a relatively high number of opinion articles. At the same time, the municipal news site published several interviews on the CATL plant, mainly with politicians and experts in the city’s municipal leadership. In terms of the thematic outlook, the Debreciner focused on the battery plant as a local public issue: two-thirds of its articles revolved around this topic. On the other hand, the local government news site published more articles emphasising the economic, technological or environmental aspects of the issue. Another prominent type of article in Dehir’s coverage of the battery factory issue were foreign reports on examples of various battery factories; several of these articles were about CATL’s plant in Germany.

The differences in the types and thematic foci of the two news sites' articles on battery manufacturing visibly correlate with their broader outlook on the battery issue. The latter will be discussed in the next section of the analysis. Our analysis found that 57% of Dehir's articles about the creation of the battery factory in Debrecen were positive, while 68% of Debreciner's coverage was negative. Almost all of the interviews in Dehir took a positive view of the construction, and the same was true for about half of the news and reports published by the local government's news site. By contrast, Debreciner published many articles that were explicitly critical of the positions espoused by Debrecen's municipal leaders concerning the battery plant. Several articles featured expert criticisms of the plant, while a larger number of articles covered the opinions of opposition parties which are also critical of the factory, as well as the events these political players organised. However, perhaps the most striking feature of the writings of the independent Debrecen news site was its attempt to also cover the opinions of local civic groups. Several articles in Debreciner focused on the activities of the "Mothers of Mikepércs" (Mikepércs is a municipality in the Debrecen suburbs that is close to the factory site), a group that has organised local protests against the factory. In addition to their civic activism, their role also included civic journalism since they disseminated their opinions on the battery factory in a series of articles published by Debreciner.

In the final segments of our survey, we analysed the arguments about the battery factory along with the persons and images that appeared in the articles. We found that compared to Dehir, Debreciner was far more likely to cover the opinions not only of opposition politicians but also of ordinary people and civil activists. This also meshes with the observation that Dehir published far more pictures about the construction of the factory and the industrial process of battery production than Debreciner. Most of the pictures published in the latter were taken at demonstrations, forums and public hearings; in other words, they presented the public debate about and protests against the battery factory. As we conclude at the end of our analysis, Debreciner's articles are mainly characterised by a discussion of the environmental concerns surrounding the CATL plant and the political resistance against the planned investment.



“Without us, a lot of information would not have come out” - interview with Zsolt Porcsin, journalist and editor-in-chief of debreciner.hu

- *How important has the battery factory been for debreciner.hu lately?*
- Since the announcement was made suddenly and strangely last summer, we have been dealing with it from day one. The teachers' and students' protests took the lead in the news for a day or two, but since then it has been a constant focus of interest. When we had the public hearings in January, we did live coverage and longer reports, and that particularly boosted our attendance because others didn't really cover it.
- *What aspects of the battery factory issue have been highlighted? I am thinking of economic, social or even environmental aspects.*
- There was and is very little information available on this subject. In the government media, nationally and locally, and in the KESMA publications, there was a lot of success propaganda, but not much space was given to public questions and then protests. For us it was important to show events, opinions, civil groups who have questions, who are looking for explanations and to confront their opinions with official propaganda. The biggest problem was that there was no consultation. Negotiations with the Chinese had been going on for two years, but there was never any forum or any information. Last summer, there was the ceremonial announcement in the Ministry, and then the signing of the contract in Debrecen, with Hungarian and Chinese flags, mayors, representatives and a reception - that was the first time we were confronted with the huge investment that was being made here. Then came the environmental issues, the risks of the battery factories. What became an increasingly important aspect and a source of fear was what would happen when thousands of Vietnamese, Laotian and Chinese workers came. So what the government started in 2015, that we should be afraid of foreigners because they will take our jobs and rape our women, is now fully mature here.
- *How much has the national interest influenced the articles about the battery factory?*
- We have not dealt with the issue in any other way. At the very beginning, from 24.hu to Telex, many sites were enthusiastic about how good it would be, what a success, and then they started to wake up. We were asking questions from day one about what was going to happen here. The national media, or should I say the Budapest's media, joined in with a slight delay. They were mostly interested in the demonstration and the protest march, and then they also had colleagues from the media come to cover it.

- *Did you get feedback from readers on how important this topic was to the locals?*
- We were contacted, but of course we also contacted the NGOs. In concrete terms, we are in daily contact with them, because in the first months they didn't get publicity anywhere else but us. We are also acting as a kind of intermediary, trying to gather all the scraps of information we can. But we have also received information without the source's consent to make their name public. For example, when the director of the Tiszántúli Vízügyi Igazgatóság (Tiszántúli Water Management Directorate) was dismissed because a 5-6 point expert opinion was published on the possible problems with the water supply to the factory. This was taken down after a few hours, but we received this document and published it. It was picked up by many national media in Budapest.
- *You have already mentioned that you have reached out to local residents, NGOs, who else have you tried to reach - politicians, experts, etc.?*
- Some of the opposition politicians have taken action on this issue, especially LMP, which has organised press conferences, several events and a referendum. Fidesz has also had a closed door on this issue, but that is not surprising, as they do not answer us on anything else. When we make official enquiries, we do not get any response. We only get a reply if we send data request based on FOIA, but of course, even then, they still observe the two 15-day deadlines. There are no public briefings, no public talks where politicians sit down with interested parties. Their experts, if they have any, have no face. Only the local organisation of the Professzorok Batthyány Köre (Board of the Batthyány Society of Professors) has issued a statement, but they have not even signed who the professors are who have spoken in favour of the Chinese battery factory. Among the opponents was the former rector of the university, who has repeatedly made himself available to us and made public appearances at such professional forums. So getting answers to professional questions is out of the question. The local government media and KESMA are pushing the success propaganda and anyone they think is against the project has been hired and is being funded by the "dollar left", the "rolling dollars" - we have received a lot of abuse on Facebook from some commentators about this. They are constantly trying to discredit us. Dániel Bohár from Megafon came to Debrecen several times, he made videos.
- *A recent news consumption survey by Mérték-Media found that readers not only consume news from their own bubble, but also read the other side's media. Do you have any experience with this?*
- We don't know exactly. What we have seen is that commenters on our Facebook page have started to push pro-battery propaganda under our posts. But we have certainly seen an increase in the number of visitors to our page, and people who had not read us before have found us. We also tried to show the pro-government argument in the city, but since they did not answer our questions and the experts did not respond to our inquiries, we were forced to resort to the means of looking at the Fidesz media. But we are not experts, we are journalists, so we sought out those who had information of substance. What is certain is that if we had not been there, a lot of information would not have been revealed, would not have been published. It confirmed to us that we are needed in this city, in this country.

Disclaimer: We have also sent our questions to Médiacentrum Debrecen, but have not received a reply.

