MERTEK MEDIA MONITOR

WHEN TOO MUCH ISN'T ENOUGH

THE RISE AND FALL OF FIDESZ PROPAGANDA

SOFT CENSORSHIP 2025



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Mertek Media Monitor

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INTRODUCTION

We now know that 2025 was the last full year of the Fidesz regime. By the end of the year, change no longer seemed impossible, but few would have dared to bet on it. One reason for this was that the propaganda had been thundering throughout the year with such force that it seemed as though it would never fall silent. We now also know that on 12 April 2026, it did, after all, fall silent.

In 2025, with the "Crackdown law", political attacks on free and independent journalism and on free and independent civil society reached a new level (Officially draft law on "transparency in public life", Hungarian Parliament, Bill No. T/11923, 2025). It seemed as though the Sovereignty Protection Office, born a toothless tiger, was finally getting a set of teeth – a strong set of steel false teeth. It could hardly wait to finally take a proper bite. The "Crackdown law" would have deprived the organisations listed by the Sovereignty Protection Office of virtually all their domestic and foreign sources of income.

Then Pride – the largest civil expression of opinion ever seen in Hungary – made it clear that the threats were already backfiring. Loudly and spectacularly. Had Fidesz passed the "Crackdown law", there would have been a good chance of further mass demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of people. That is too high a political price to pay on the eve of an election campaign.

But the "Crackdown law" has shown what will happen if Orbán remains in power in 2026. Orbán has realised that a semi-autocracy will not be enough in a country that has otherwise been mismanaged to the point of dysfunction. It is not enough to ignore and stigmatise critical voices; they must also be driven out. Russia has come very close to everyday life in Hungary, whilst Europe has drifted further and further away.

And just when we thought Fidesz had nowhere left to expand in the traditional media markets, Indamedia (Index.hu) acquired Blikk and Ringier's entire Hungarian portfolio. This was done despite the parties being fully aware that the European Media Freedom Act, which had since come into force, made all such acquisitions subject to prior scrutiny by the media regulator.

We might also interpret this to mean that, by 2025, Fidesz had realised there was a real chance of defeat. It bagged whatever it could and issued threats more vociferously than ever before. In contrast, however, interviews conducted on the night of 12 April 2026 with Fidesz's second- and third-tier figures showed that they certainly had not reckoned with defeat. They believed their own propaganda and their own falsified opinion polls more than they believed the voters.

In the months leading up to the election, Fidesz dominated the public sphere just as it had before. Artificial intelligence appeared in its propaganda arsenal, generating not only war-mongering but also a fake election manifesto. Yet it had run out of things to say. Orbán staked everything on the 2026 election: there would be enough voters who believed that only Orbán was capable of defending the sovereignty of the Hungarian people against the evil machinations of Brussels and Kyiv.

In the end, there were far more people who had had enough of the lies, the fear-mongering and the propaganda.

By the very next day after the elections, the 16-year Orbán regime already began to seem a distant memory. Yet we must carry its lessons forward: civil oversight and civic courage are indispensable. That is why the end of the regime cannot mean the end of critical analysis of media policy. Even if we are confident that analyses of the Magyar government's media policy will paint a very different, truly European picture of the Hungarian media system and public sphere.

THE HUNGARIAN MEDIA SYSTEM IN 2025
A YEAR IN REVIEW

As an exception, this overview in the 2025 Soft Censorship report also covers the early part of 2026, since the period leading up to the elections forms one coherent whole. The media system in the post-election period, however, is still taking shape, so we have closed this overview as of April 12, 2026 – though Mérték's researchers continue to follow developments closely.

In our earlier reports, we have consistently found that the situation had deteriorated compared to previous years, and 2025 was no different. This year's summary shows that the work of journalists has become increasingly difficult, and during the campaign period we observed anomalies in the functioning of both social media and traditional media which may serve as a warning sign regarding political communication in the years to come. Now that the elections are over, it is our shared responsibility to ensure that the interference, distortions, and disregard for public-service values and journalistic ethics documented here are not repeated.

Making journalists' work impossible

Democracy functions healthily when the press can carry out its work freely and without fear. When journalists face threats, attacks, or unwarranted interference with their work, this violates not only that particular newsroom but the right of society as a whole to be informed.

Asking questions from a Fidesz politician was no easy task in 2025. Telex staff wanted to question Viktor Orbán, former prime minister, at the opening of the Fót film studio – the most expensive publicly funded Hungarian film investment of all time – but the counter-terrorism unit TEK, then security guards, blocked their way, and the journalists were ultimately taken into police custody at an event that had, in fact, been advertised as open to the press. Independent newsrooms had no better luck at the former prime minister's 2025 year-end speech: neither Telex, HVG, nor 24.hu was allowed to attend. Most of the domestic and international press was similarly shut out of the March 15 and October 23 national holiday commemorations. In February 2026, bodyguards and staff from Fidesz-aligned media outlets together prevented the independent press from asking the former prime minister about irregularities at the Göd battery plant – a controversial battery factory, which has since been proven to be polluting the local area; Telex published video of the chaotic scene. Furthermore, citing a lack of space and other reasons, independent media outlets were regularly denied entry to Orbán's press conferences.

No such obstacles, however, stood in the way of a Russian propagandist operating under the cover name Scarlett Karoleva, who was able to put questions to the former prime minister at press conferences under a false identity – while independent journalists who registered under their own names were often left out.

After a public forum, Máté Kocsis, the former parliamentary leader of Fidesz, dodged a question by bringing up a Telex journalist's father in a personal, ad hominem way. Partizán staff were removed by police from a firefighters' ball, where they had wanted to question former justice minister Bence Tuzson. At a forum attended by Zsolt Semjén, former deputy prime minister, a Fidesz mayor didn't even wait for the police to arrive: he used physical force to push two Telex staff members out of the venue. Balázs Hankó, former Minister for Culture and Innovation, meanwhile, tried to cancel an interview he had given to the Austrian paper Die Presse before it was even published; a colleague of him even offered to cover the journalists' travel costs if they would drop the story, and later threatened them with a lawsuit.

Government press briefings ("kormányinfó") merely give the impression of keeping the press and the public informed; in reality, however, they have been organized solely to maintain the illusion of democracy and freedom of the press. Independent newsrooms were routinely denied a voice, as the case of 24.hu clearly illustrates: they first tried to take the microphone away from journalist Gergely Miklós Nagy, and then – when he refused to hand it over – they muted his audio during the live broadcast. Government spokesperson Eszter Vitályos suggested that the newspaper send a different journalist next time, but the editorial team stated that it was solely within their remit to decide which member of journalist to send. Nagy's registration was subsequently rejected.

Politicians were not just hard to reach in person, either. One key element in the restriction of press freedom in Hungary is the obstruction of journalists' access to information. According to the data of Átlátszó, the state lost first-instance freedom-of-information lawsuits 245 times over five years. A genuine sign of successful institutional change will be if that number drops close to zero in the years ahead – since ideally, state bodies and actors managing public funds would simply release public-interest data, preferably without even being asked. But winning the lawsuits is not enough: the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office did not hand over data on its propaganda campaigns to Átlátszó even after a Kúria (the supreme court of Hungary) ruling against it. It cannot be emphasised enough that state advertising spending has become a serious problem in Hungary precisely because of its complete lack of transparency, and it is now clear that those involved in the system have used every means at their disposal to defend this mechanism.

Public-interest data could of course be concealed more creatively too, once its release had become unavoidable. KecsUp received a document from the János Neumann University Foundation that had been almost entirely redacted, in which not only the names but, in places, the titles of agenda items and even entire pages had been rendered unreadable. Meanwhile, a member of staff at Antal Rogán's ministry used his own body and paper clips to block a 444.hu journalist's view of public-interest documents.

The public broadcaster went even further by avoiding an answer. When Telex asked why, and exactly how much public money MTVA was using to fund the new movie titled "Magyar menyegző" ("Hungarian Wedding"), currently in production by film-industry government commissioner Csaba Káel, the public broadcaster responded not with a substantive answer but with a counter-demand. The MTVA called on the outlet to officially disclose which foreign or foreign-owned organizations or private individuals had supported it, and in what amounts, since January 1, 2023, as well as on whose instruction it was requesting the data, and whether doing so would violate Hungarian law. This practice can be traced back to the operation of the Sovereignty Protection Office.

Sovereignty Protection Office

The Sovereignty Protection Office continued its costly and destructive activity. We wrote in detail about this institution – set up to disable voices critical of Fidesz – in our previous Soft Censorship report[1].

Following the public broadcaster's example, an organization with close ties to Fidesz, the Foundation for Research on Central and Eastern European History and Society, likewise turned to the Office for support: it asked whether it had to release data requested by 444.hu *"if the request comes from an organization or publication financed substantially from abroad."* According to the Office's president, such data requests do not serve the purpose of informing Hungarian citizens but rather the interests of foreign powers.

The Office also attacked the EU-funded TEFI project run by 444.hu in a lengthy statement, characterizing it as an attempt by the European Commission to build its own media empire. When 444.hu asked Tamás Lánczi, the head of the office, what evidence he was basing his claims on, the Office's president answered: *"In America, you would be registered as a foreign agent."*

In the defamation lawsuit brought against it by Átlátszó, however, the Office showed far less courage – despite having accused the independent investigative outlet of, among other things, espionage, spreading false information, and conducting intelligence activities. No one appeared on the Office's behalf at the first hearing, and in its countersuit it asked for the case to be dismissed or, failing that, for Átlátszó's claim to be rejected. The first-instance proceedings ultimately ended in a complete win for the media outlet: the court granted every one of its requests and ruled that the Office's communications about Átlátszó had been false in every material respect.

1 Mérték Media Monitor (2025). Sovereigntist Media Policy. Soft Censorship 2024. https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Mertek_Fuzetek_43.pdf

The "Crackdown Law" - Law to persecute civil society

In May 2025, Fidesz's "sovereignty protection" wonder-weapon entered a new phase with a bill. In Hungary, it was commonly referred to as the so-called "Crackdown Law", but officially it was the draft law on "Transparency in public life" (Hungarian Parliament, Bill No. T/11923, 2025).

Under the terms of the bill, if the Sovereignty Protection Office had concluded that the activities of a foreign-funded organization posed a threat to Hungary's sovereignty, it could have recommended to the Government to blacklist the organization. The draft made clear that "*had it passed, it would have been easier to finance terrorism in Hungary than to run a government-critical press outlet or civil organization*."

Based on the Office's track record up to that point, it was clear that placing an organization on the list would not have required genuine argumentation grounded in that organization's actual activities. In practice, the slightest "foreign" involvement, or even a faint reference to protecting sovereignty, could well have been enough for the Office's list to expand, with new targets drawn from the media, legal advocacy, civil society, or even the business. Under this law, media outlets, journalists, and civil organizations could have been forced to operate abroad or engage in illegality.

After the bill was announced, leading independent newsrooms organized a joint live broadcast in front of the Hungarian Parliament, where, with experts on hand, they went through the draft's likely consequences for domestic newsrooms and civil organizations. Resistance was not confined to media and civil-society actors, however. Passage of the law was opposed by, among others, the Hungarian Bar Association, the Hungarian Judges Association, the National Association of Hungarian Journalists, the International Press Institute, Reporters Without Borders, the Hungarian Advertising Association, the Association of Hungarian Book Publishers and Distributors, and the Council of Europe's own monitoring committee. Eighty-five editors-in-chief and publishing directors from twenty-two countries spoke out against the draft, stating in their declaration that Fidesz was effectively placing the free press – and, more broadly, democratic public debate – outside the law, and that the bill submitted on May 13, 2025 followed the authoritarian playbook familiar from Putin's Russia.

The announced "Crackdown Law" also emboldened Fidesz politicians. *"Go on, ask whilst you still can"* was how Péter Kamarás, KDNP's chairman in Baranya county (KDNP was the smaller former ruling party), addressed Telex journalists who wanted to ask questions at a county assembly meeting. And when a journalist asked János Lázár, the former Minister of Construction and Transport, about the law, he replied that he couldn't say in advance whether they ought to fear for their livelihood or not.

LGBTQ — Hungary's biggest Pride ever

In February, Viktor Orbán told the Pride organisers not to go to the trouble of organising the parade. The parliamentary majority, resting on the votes of Fidesz-KDNP, Mi Hazánk, and Jobbik, had, in a law amendment passed in March of the previous year, revised the regulations on petty offenses, thereby making participation in a Pride march broadly punishable. Under the amendment, a fine had to be paid even if the person concerned sought legal remedy, since doing so had no suspensive effect. The same amendment allowed police to use automated facial recognition for any petty offense – plainly intended to deter people from participating in the Budapest and Pécs Pride events. The technology's introduction, moreover, was preceded by no public consultation whatsoever.

János Lázár even floated holding the march behind closed gates, at the Kincsem Park horse racecourse – though he later backtracked, citing concern for the horses' health.

Despite the legal ban, the country's largest-ever Pride march went ahead: estimates put the crowd at somewhere between one and two hundred thousand people. The public broadcaster somehow forgot to report on the massive event – just as it failed to cover the system-changing concert that broke attendance records right before the elections. Apparently, events that were independent of the government and attracted a great deal of interest were not covered by the public media. Budapest's mayor Gergely Karácsony later received several prestigious international honours for having announced the 2025 Budapest Pride as a municipal event.

Incitement to hatred and intimidation

Intimidation of journalists went on beyond the "Crackdown law", too. At a press conference, the Fidesz-linked CÖF-CÖKA civic group attacked Átlátszó, accusing the outlet of *"running an informant network that violates the foundations of statehood, financed by foreign interest groups,"* and warned the newsroom that its activities could have criminal law consequences. Meanwhile, as we have seen, Átlátszó had just won its court case against the Sovereignty Protection Office itself.

At a Digital Civic Circles (DPK) meeting, staff of independent outlets were listed by name and photograph under the heading "Top Fake-News Manufacturers". A video shared even by Viktor Orbán himself clearly showed the board, which named journalists from, among others, 444.hu, Telex, Magyar Hang, 24.hu, Népszava, RTL, and Partizán.

As part of the "Sponsored Hate" project, Telex analysed thousands of paid political ads online. The investigation uncovered nearly two hundred ads running on Meta's platforms between July 2024 and June 2025 that specifically targeted journalists and private citizens, delivering discrediting or manipulative messages to users backed by paid promotion.

In the final stretch of the campaign, Fidesz politicians and party-aligned media targeted investigative journalist Szabolcs Panyi after phone conversations between former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, and Sergei Lavrov were made public. Gergely Gulyás, the former Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, filed a criminal complaint against the journalist for espionage, and Viktor Orbán instructed the justice minister to launch an investigation without delay – not, of course, into the content of the conversation, but into the wiretapping itself. Police ultimately rejected the complaint after the elections.

Intimidation was not confined to journalists. Data belonging to thousands of Tisza Party volunteers first leaked in October, and not long after, the data of roughly two hundred thousand users of the Tisza Világ app – the app, which the party has made available not only to activists but to anyone interested – was unlawfully made public. Publishing the user data was illegal, and the news outlets that ran the list of names, or a map made from it, likewise committed a legal violation. Pro-government media, moreover, acted in a coordinated way that plainly amounted to a crime: Index was the one that brought the material into public view, but Magyar Nemzet was the loudest in stirring up hostility, while Origo followed suit and spread the stolen data further.

The phenomenon escalated all the way to the harassment of private individuals: Fidesz parliamentary group spokesperson Balázs Németh showed up with a camera in front of a Tisza activist's house and posted that he knew who in his district had downloaded the app; others filmed themselves calling people on the list one by one, and the Fidesz-linked outlet Promenád published the names of those affected in all Csongrád county.

Indamedia in the campaign

Index took a leading role not only in spreading the stolen Tisza Világ app data but also in other smear campaigns. The portal, captured by a pro-Fidesz media investor five years earlier, proved especially useful in attacks on the Tisza Party: it gave Fidesz's "Tisza tax" campaign its opening push. In September 2025, the outlet published a six-hundred-page document that it presented as Tisza's alleged tax plans. In February 2026, a court ruled that the six-hundred-page document had, in reality, nothing to do with Tisza.

At first instance, Index defended itself by arguing it had merely published an opinion – something it said the headline itself signalled, since it stated the party "might be preparing" a tax hike, not that it definitely was. It is worth stressing that one of Hungary's best-known and largest news portals proved capable of lying to the public about a party plan that did not exist, thereby deceiving its readers. Whatever Index itself called the article, the government built its "Tisza tax" campaign precisely on that piece and a handful of Tisza statements and even supplemented it with a so-called national consultation. A different court ordered other Fidesz-linked outlets, Ripost and Mandiner, which had picked up the article, to publish a correction.

There is also an important development in the media market linked to the media outlet: in autumn 2025 Index's owner, Indamedia, bought Ringier Hungary, which publishes among others Blikk, Kiskegyed, and Glamour – a significant part of the Hungarian tabloid press, women's magazines and media outlets that do not specifically cover public affairs. Ahead of the deal, Indamedia received a 13-billion-forint credit line from MBH Bank, an institution linked to the childhood friend of the former prime minister, Lőrinc Mészáros. With this transaction, the last major foreign investor has left the Hungarian newspaper market. Within weeks of the announcement, Blikk's editor-in-chief and deputy editor left, as did Ringier's head of innovation and content development. We wrote about the change of ownership[2] and its consequences[3] on Mérték's site, and our election analysis[4] examined in detail the role Indamedia's two outlets played in the election campaign.

2 Mérték Media Monitor (2025). Utolsó Blikkre [The Last of Blikk]. https://mertek.eu/2025/11/03/utolso-blikkre/

3 Mérték Media Monitor (2025). Éles teszt – A Ringier-Indamedia összefonódás megítélése az Európai Médiaszabadság Törvény alapján [Acid Test – Assessing the Ringier-Indamedia Merger under the European Media Freedom Act]. https://mertek.eu/2025/11/04/eles-teszt-a-ringier-indamedia-osszefonodas-megitelese-az-europai-mediaszabadsag-torveny-alapjan/

4 Mérték Media Monitor (2025). A propaganda árnyalatai. A 2026-os választási kampány híreinek tartalomelemzése [Shades of Propaganda. A content analysis of news coverage in the 2026 election campaign] https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Mertek_Fuzetek_45.pdf

Government communication and party campaigning: a blurred line

It has long been impossible to clearly distinguish between government and Fidesz communication expenditure; however, over the past year and a half, they have not even bothered to maintain the appearance of separation. A large-scale government campaign was launched around the previously mentioned "Tisza tax" – which a court later found had nothing to do with the Tisza Party. The government even launched a national consultation on this fictional tax plan, even the consultation forms were printed by Mediaworks, the publisher of propaganda outlets. A similar pattern emerged in advertising. According to a tally by aHang, the government advertised the national consultation across 142 news portals, 136 print publications, 33 radio stations, and 63 television channels – 374 different outlets in total – spending more than 8 billion forints (over 22 million euros) on the campaign.

The government handled the results of the "Tisza tax" consultation with conspicuous quiet – likely not unrelated to the fact that only 1.6 million people answered its heavily leading questions.

Proceedings were opened against the public broadcaster over advertising the "Tisza tax" consultation. It had previously used a similar method to promote the Voks2025 opinion poll on Ukraine's EU accession – essentially another national consultation in all but name: during Hungarian top-flight football matches broadcast on M4 Sport, the Voks2025 logo flashed in the corner of the screen, with the caption "Let's vote!" beneath it.

Companies belonging to Gyula Balásy – which we wrote about in detail in our previous Soft Censorship report[5] – received an endless string of commissions. Their work helped spread, for example, posters about "protecting" the 13th-month pension, claiming that Brussels and Péter Magyar would take that benefit away, though funds also went toward the "Family-Friendly Hungary" campaign and the country's international advertising. It is thus no surprise that the Fidesz government repeatedly raised the budget available for government communication: by 20 billion forints (almost 56 million euros) in June 2025, and by a further 4 billion (over 11 million euros) in August.

After the elections, a court ruling held that the financing of government campaigns that plainly conveyed false claims or messages discrediting political opponents must also be examined from the standpoint of breach of fiduciary duty in the handling of public funds. According to K-Monitor anti-corruption civil society organization, the ruling could set a precedent for the criminal-law assessment of public spending that the government has often justified with no specifics at all, citing only vague national-economic or child-protection interests.

Campaign at every level

No one could escape the campaign's messages – and not only because of the billboards with constantly rotating messages. The Government Information Center sent letters urging people to vote in the Voks2025 referendum against Ukraine's EU accession to email addresses submitted a few years ago for Covid vaccination registration. The government also advertised Voks2025 in JóKor, a free newspaper aimed at pensioners.

5 Mérték Media Monitor (2025). Sovereigntist Media Policy. Soft Censorship 2024. https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Mertek_Fuzetek_43.pdf

The public broadcaster failed the balance test on the very first days of the campaign – though to be fair, no one had accused MTVA's output of balance in a long time. The Media Council opened proceedings against the public broadcaster on several occasions over irregular campaigning, and even the Kúria ruled that MTVA and Duna Médiaszolgáltató had violated the basic principles of election law. In February 2026, an anti-Tisza petition appeared on the Nemzeti Sport site; the daily sports newspaper is published by the public broadcaster.

The public-service channels' Facebook pages promoted Fidesz's messages even more brazenly than that. The Tisza Party filed a complaint with the National Election Committee because the Kossuth Radio, the national public service radio's Facebook page, on the first day of nomination collection, February 21, presented almost exclusively Fidesz-KDNP among the parties – in its view, this meant MTVA and Duna Médiaszolgáltató, which run the page, had violated the basic principles of the electoral procedure law. The two broadcasters argued, among other things, that a Facebook page does not qualify as a media service, but on Tisza's appeal, the Kúria established a "flagrant disproportion" and banned them from further violations.

Fidesz-aligned media outlets likewise played an active part in the campaign. As early as November, Tények (TV2's news program) published a series of Reels on Facebook themed around the national consultation, in which TV2's newsreaders, staff, and pro-Fidesz influencers demonstrated how to fill out the questionnaire; Tények Plusz went even further, echoing a Viktor Orbán Facebook post to show viewers exactly where to mark their X. Tények's newsreader Anikó Marsi, who had appeared in videos backing Viktor Orbán in both 2018 and 2022, became head of the Women's Digital Civic Circle – a role she says is entirely compatible with her work as a newsreader and with on-screen credibility. It also remains memorable that TV2 devoted a multi-minute report early in 2025 to Péter Magyar's genitals. The Media Council additionally fined TV2's and Hír TV's broadcasters 250,000 forints (less than 700 euros) in proceedings launched over public-interest advertisements – in all likelihood concerning Voks2025 ads.

In Pécs, after a four-year gap, government propaganda wrapped in tabloid packaging returned, disguised as a local magazine. And in Budapest District 15, a periodical titled Jövőképek ("Future Visions") appeared – though produced with state funding, it was clearly a propaganda publication for the district's Fidesz candidates.

Bors, a popular Hungarian daily tabloid newspaper, published several special editions: the free issues, dealing with the alleged "Tisza tax" and the horrors of the war, were printed in a run of more than four million copies. Several newspaper deliverers refused to distribute the publication, which ran under the name "TISZA package," and the Budapest-Capital Regional Court banned its distribution with immediate effect – but Bors' publisher continued handing out the papers in several places despite the court order.

The National Resistance Movement (Nemzeti Ellenállás Mozgalom), a pro-Fidesz political initiative in Hungary, launched in late 2024 by ruling-party politicians and conservative digital opinion leaders, published a comic book titled "I, the Two-Faced" (Én, a kétarcú). The Movement had already made headlines with its AI-generated giant billboards discrediting Péter Magyar, so it is hardly surprising that the comic, too, was produced with the help of artificial intelligence – even though the illustrator and author credited was Áron Ambrózy, known from the also Fidesz-linked Pesti Srácok news site. The whole concept was based on discrediting opposition politician Péter Magyar by depicting him as a DC-inspired villain who abuses his wife and works together with the other super-villain, Volodimir Zelenskij.

Not even unsuspecting home cooks were safe from the "Two-Faced" campaign: it turned up on the Mindmegette cooking site disguised as a recipe, under the title "The Two-Faced Kitchen." Ten days after the election, this publication discrediting Péter Magyar was available neither online nor in stores.

The Russians arrived at the election campaign

In the campaign for the 2026 Hungarian elections, experts and journalists uncovered unprecedented levels of Russian attempts to influence the vote. Russian President Vladimir Putin openly echoed the Hungarian government's campaign messages. Moreover, during the campaign, the presence of Russian military intelligence officers in Budapest also came to light. Hungary's national news agency, MTI, published a statement from Russian intelligence with no context whatsoever, which points to the news agency's – and, through it, the public broadcaster's – responsibility for spreading Russian intelligence material, in effect Russian disinformation.

A leaked Mediaworks document revealed that someone within the Fidesz-linked media company requested help by phone from Russian parties with articles discrediting Zelensky – though the exact details of this remain unclear for now. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov gave an interview to the notoriously pro-Russian YouTube channel Ultrahang, an interview arranged with the cooperation of Péter Szijjártó, a devoted follower of the channel, which complemented the campaign activity of the KESMA media network, known for echoing Kremlin narratives. Origo, a tireless promoter of Russian propaganda, on one occasion published an article that still contained Russian expressions in it – an anonymous author had apparently not even checked the literal translation. Direkt36's investigative reporting also uncovered the Russian intelligence ties of Georg Spöttle, who regularly appears as an "expert" in Fidesz-linked media – ties that first came to light during a national security background check.

Lakmusz identified several Russian disinformation campaigns directed against Péter Magyar. The fact-checking outlet documents a number of well-known techniques at work: cloned websites, Facebook pages run through fake profiles, disinformation content backed by ads worth millions, and troll farms all took part in the campaign.

Digital campaigning and the EMFA

Alongside the billions spent on the offline campaign, similarly stunning sums were spent on social media. For instance, the pro-government machine – including the Sovereignty Protection Office and Századvég's new fact-checking institute – spent at least 36 million forints on a Facebook campaign against Tisza MEP Kinga Kollár.

Early 2025 saw the launch of Bence Apáti's, former Megafon influencer, new venture, the National Resistance Movement, which spread the government's messages following the Megafon model: videos advertised for millions of forints in the style Megafon has made familiar, misleading messages, opaque operations, and an anti-Brussels petition are all associated with it. Although nothing was known about its revenues, the organization was the largest political advertiser on Google between June and July in

the entire European Union. In August, over a single weekend, it spent more than 10 million forints (almost 28,000 euros) advertising three propaganda videos on YouTube, which the platform consequently played roughly seven million times. In October, Megafon's owner bought out the company behind the Movement from Bence Apáti, which then moved into Megafon's office, cementing the connection.

Neither Alphabet – the parent company of Google and YouTube – nor Meta – the owner of Facebook and Instagram – was willing to comply with the EU's new political-advertising transparency rules, which took effect on October 10, 2025, so both tech giants simply banned political advertising in the European Union. This fundamentally reshaped the experience of social media and internet use in general – and, of course, the entire world of political marketing.

Before the advertising ban took effect, Fidesz-aligned advertisers evidently wanted to spend every last forint set aside for the purpose. Over the summer, the former ruling side spent the second-most among European countries on Meta's platforms. In the three months leading up to the end of September, Hungary saw the most money spent on political advertising on the platform relative to population size anywhere in Europe, and in the final month or week, even in absolute terms: 1.3 billion forints (more than 3,6 million euros) was spent on political advertising in September, with 350 million forint (almost 1 million euros) of that in the month's final seven days, on Meta's platforms alone. Roughly a fifth of the total Hungarian spend – 426 million forints (almost 1,2 million euros) – went to Viktor Orbán's own page.

Many were relieved when Meta announced in late July that it would no longer allow political ads within the Union from October 2025 onward. It was, however, predictable that loopholes would remain in the system, and that some would look for creative ways to get around the ban. Google shut down its political ads at the end of September, quite possibly knocking out one of the most important legs of Fidesz's and the former government's communication machine – though even this did not go smoothly. The weak point of the EU's political advertising regulation (TTPA) is its enforcement[6]: no authority has been designated to enforce compliance, and unsurprisingly, the Hungarian government exploited this too.

In practice, Meta only partially enforced the ban: sometimes it took no action at all against irregular ads; sometimes it did so only days or weeks later – by which time an advertiser had already spent a great deal of money and its message had reached countless users. The National Resistance Movement advertised on Facebook for at least 24 million forints (almost 67 thousand euros) between October 6 and November 5; the AI-generated videos discrediting Péter Magyar owed some of their multi-million-view counts precisely to this paid promotion. Fidesz-linked Digital Civic Circles ran hundreds of ads for activist recruitment, and the page called "Magyarország Kormánya" (Government of Hungary) ran numerous communication ads tied to the national consultation.

Different actors adapted to the new situation in different ways. Viktor Orbán and Megafon's leading personalities, for instance, flooded social media with such a volume of content that their reach did not show a drastic decline. Balázs Németh, Fidesz's former parliamentary group spokesperson, saw the viewership of his online talk show, "Harcosok órája" ("Warriors' Hour"), collapse brutally.

The Fidesz-aligned actors tried to offset the loss of ads – or simply the campaign's need for variety – with a number of other tools. In late May 2025, Viktor Orbán announced the establishment of a "digital freedom fighter" army, with which the party prepared for the 2026 elections. A few months later, at the annual summer meeting of Fidesz in Tusványos, the former prime minister also announced the launch of the Digital Civic Circles (DPK), which apparently took over communication duties from the quickly and spectacularly failed Warriors' Club. Recruiting digital warriors was not especially successful within

6 Mérték Media Monitor (2026). Európai szabályok a politikai hirdetések átláthatóságáról [European rules on the transparency of political advertising]. https://mertek.eu/2026/01/26/europai-szabalyok-a-politikai-hirdetesek-atlathatosagarol/

the DPK framework either, despite campaigns run under names including celebrities, famous Fidesz-linked personals, and even Viktor Orbán himself. Behind the initiative stood the Digital Democracy Development Agency, founded in July of the previous year.

Fidesz-aligned troll networks operated all the more actively, by contrast. 444.hu revealed that more than a hundred people worked in an office in Budapest, managing fake profiles to boost Fidesz's online presence. Data available on Facebook suggested that the company may have sold this service both to the Hungarian government and to Balázs Orbán, the former prime minister's political director; traces of paid commenters turned up beneath posts by, among others, Viktor Orbán, János Lázár, as well as Fidesz-linked celebrities and media. Buying up existing, well-performing pages also became standard practice: 444.hu likewise revealed that "Fidesz-linked people" bought up Facebook and Instagram pages before the elections. A few days after the elections, mass layoffs began at the Fidesz-aligned troll farm.

AI in the campaign

Today's technology can already imitate reality with deceptive fidelity – to the point that we ourselves are increasingly unable to tell what we're looking at is real or not. And this shakes one of the most important values of democratic public life: the credibility of information.

During the campaign we saw an almost incredible variety of ways AI got deployed. AI-generated songs were used to discredit the opposition, but perhaps even more memorable was the sheer volume of AI-generated videos manufactured against the Tisza Party. Viktor Orbán himself shared a government-created video that showed AI-generated young Hungarian men being conscripted to the Ukrainian front, only to be brought home in coffins – and the ad never indicated anywhere that it was fictional. AI was used to put words in Péter Magyar's mouth that he never said. And the clip showing Ursula von der Leyen calling Péter Magyar on a red telephone was backed by paid advertising worth millions.

Péter Magyar, among others, filed criminal complaints over AI-generated content. The National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH), however, did not act proactively against the clearly problematic content – even though, as Hungary's designated coordinator under the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), it would have had room to act even against the platforms themselves.

AI content even seeped into public broadcasting: Híradó, the public broadcaster's news program, aired a National Resistance Movement video in which an AI-generated "man on the street" denounced the Tisza Party's supposedly leaked tax plan.

Mérték produced an analysis of the legal and ethical framework for using artificial intelligence in political communication[7], and Political Capital also examined AI's presence in the campaign as part of the HDMO project[8].

7 Mérték Media Monitor (2026). A mesterséges intelligencia alkalmazásának jogi és etikai keretrendszere a politikai kommunikációban [The legal and ethical framework for the use of artificial intelligence in political communication]. https://mertek.eu/2026/03/12/a-mesterseges-intelligencia-alkalmazasanak-jogi-es-etikai-keretrendszere-a-politikai-kommunikacioban/

8 Political Capital (2026). AI-generált képsorozatok a kormánypárt üzeneteinek szolgálatában a megyei lapok Facebook-oldalain [AI-generated image series serving the governing party's messaging on county newspapers' Facebook pages]. https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3665

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Reuters (29.10.2025.). Hungary's opposition leader to file criminal complaint over alleged deepfake video. https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/hungarys-opposition-leader-file-criminal-complaint-over-alleged-deepfake-video-2025-10-29/

Reuters (05.05.2026.). Hungary media mogul who designed Orban's campaigns offers his firms to the state. https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/hungary-media-mogul-who-designed-orbans-campaigns-offers-his-firms-state-2026-05-05/

RTL (10.12.2025.). Újabb újságkihordó tagadta meg a Bors különszámának kézbesítését [Another newspaper delivery person has refused to deliver the special edition of Bors]. https://rtl.hu/hirado/2025/12/20/bors-kulonszam-birosagi-tiltas-mediaworks-tisza-part

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Telex (02.04.2025.). Az oltásregisztrációs emailcímeken buzdít az Ukrajna EU-csatlakozásáról szóló szavazásra a kormány [The government is using vaccination registration email addresses to encourage people to vote on Ukraine's accession to the EU]. https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/04/02/kormany-vakcinainfo-emailcim-adatkezeles-tajekoztato-level-propaganda

Telex (09.05.2025.). A közpénz sorsáról érdeklődtünk, de a közmédia válasza már mély sötétségből érkezett [We asked about the fate of public funds, but the public media's response came from the depths of darkness]. https://telex.hu/velemeny/2025/05/09/a-kozpenz-sorsarol-erdeklodtunk-de-a-kozmedia-valasza-mar-mely-sotetsegbol-erkezett

Telex (15.05.2025.). „Kérdezz csak, amíg még kérdezhetsz" – mondta a KDNP baranyai elnöke a Telex pécsi tudósítójának ["Just ask whilst you still can," said the KDNP's Baranya County chairman to the Telex correspondent in Pécs]. https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/05/15/ellehetetlenitesi-torveny-fidesz-kdnp-pecs

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Telex (18.08.2025.). Hétmilliószor játszotta le a hétvégén a YouTube a Nemzeti Ellenállás Mozgalom reklámjait [YouTube played the National Resistance Movement's adverts seven million times over the weekend]. https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/08/11/hetmillioszor-jatszotta-le-a-hetvegen-a-youtube-a-nemzeti-ellenallas-mozgalom-reklamjait

Telex (26.08.2025.). Az Index szerint „brutális" szja-emelésre készül a Tisza, Magyar Péter szerint hazudik a lap [According to Index, Tisza is planning a "brutal" increase in personal income tax; Péter Magyar claims the newspaper is lying]. https://telex.hu/gazdasag/2025/08/26/tisza-part-index-feljegyzes-haromkulcsos-jovedelemado

Telex (07.09.2025.). A közmédia Híradójában is lejátszott Nemzeti Ellenállás Mozgalom-videóban még az utca emberét is mesterséges intelligenciával csinálták meg [In the National Resistance Movement video, which was also broadcast on the public broadcaster's news programme, even the man in the street was created using artificial intelligence]. https://telex.hu/zacc/2025/09/07/m1-kozmedia-nemzeti-ellenallas-mozgalom-mesterseges-intelligencia-video-kampany-magyar-peter-tisza-part

Telex (08.09.2025.). Orbán announces national consultation on Tisza's supposed "leaked tax plans". https://telex.hu/english/2025/09/08/orban-announces-national-consultation-on-tiszas-supposed-leaked-tax-plans

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Telex (23.10.2025.). Kiküldték a sajtó munkatársait a Kossuth térről [Members of the press were removed from Kossuth Square]. https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/10/23/kikuldtek-a-sajto-munkatarsait-a-kossuth-terrol

Telex (12.01.2026). Négy év kihagyás után helyi magazinnak álcázva tért vissza a bulvárba csomagolt kormánypropaganda Pécsen [After a four-year hiatus, government propaganda, packaged as a tabloid and disguised as a local magazine, has returned to Pécs]. https://telex.hu/belfold/2026/01/12/city7-mediaworks-pecs-cziraki-hoppal-fidesz

Telex (11.02.2026.). Mindent megtettek, hogy ne tudjuk kérdezni Orbánt a gödi gyárról [They did everything they could to stop us from asking Orbán about the factory in Göd]. https://telex.hu/video/2026/02/11/orban-viktor-szentendre-kampany-samsung-gyar-valasztas

Telex (03.03.2026.). Az Origo bemutatja: Amikor úgy vesszük át az orosz narratívát, hogy fordítani is elfelejtünk [Origo presents: When we adopt the Russian narrative to such an extent that we even forget to translate it]. https://telex.hu/zacc/2026/03/03/origo-iran-hadmuvelet-orosz-propaganda-forditas

Telex (12.03.2026.). We filed a complaint after our colleagues were forcibly removed from the Deputy PM's campaign event. https://telex.hu/english/2026/03/12/we-filed-a-complaint-after-our-colleagues-were-forcibly-removed-from-the-deputy-pm-s-campaign-event

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THE MEDIA MARKET IN HUNGARY

By 2025, the final full year of the Orbán regime, a highly centralised media system had emerged, dominated by pro-government actors, whilst the independent media operated under increasingly difficult conditions. Pro-government media played a particularly significant role in the print, radio and television markets, whilst the position of independent media was much stronger in the digital sector. Moreover, despite – or perhaps precisely because of – mounting political pressure, some independent digital media outlets were even able to increase their revenues: a social stratum has clearly emerged that considers it important to support independent media and civil society organisations. Alongside all this, social media played an increasingly significant role in shaping public opinion in Hungary; by 2025, both the ruling party and the increasingly strong opposition Tisza Party regarded social media platforms as a key arena for political communication.

Key developments in the media market in 2025

The most significant market shake-up took place at the end of October, when the Swiss-owned publishing house Ringier sold its Hungarian subsidiary – including the tabloid Blikk and several high-value magazines – to Indamédia, a company with close ties to Fidesz (the ruling party between 2010 and 2026). Blikk is the daily newspaper with the highest circulation, and its website has been among the most popular news portals for years. The buyer was Indamédia, the company which, in 2020, restructured the Index news portal in such a way that it led to the resignation of almost the entire editorial

team; since then, Index has repeatedly made it clear that it represents the Fidesz's narrative. As journalists have pointed out, Indamédia financed the purchase of the Ringier portfolio with a loan from MBH, a company with close ties to the government.[9]

Another significant development of the year was the publication of the draft bill on „Transparency in Public Life" in May 2025, which Parliament ultimately did not vote on. The adoption of the bill was officially postponed, but since then, in light of the results of the April 2026 elections, it has become clear that it has been definitively removed from the agenda. For a month, the publication of the draft bill completely disrupted the operations of independent media organisations and civil society organisations: owners considered the possibility of relocating abroad, and the vulnerability of the independent media became clear to everyone.

Another piece of legislation also forced media companies to rethink their business models: in November, parliament decided to reintroduce the advertising tax; the National Assembly voted to impose a 7.5 percent tax rate on revenue exceeding 100 million from 1 July 2026.[10] Following the 2026 election, the Fidesz government decided, in one of its final decrees, to maintain the advertising tax at 0 percent, as before, allowing media companies to breathe a slight sigh of relief.[11] Hopefully, the Tisza government will resolve this issue in a reassuring manner in the long term, making financial planning for media companies more predictable.

An important development in November 2025 was the discontinuation of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Hungarian service.[12] This is not strictly a market development, as RFE/RL's funding was provided by the US administration; however, the decision marked the closure of an important quality news provider, thereby narrowing the range of media supply.

A G7 journalist has found further evidence that Lőrinc Mészáros, Hungary's wealthiest oligarch (friend of former PM Viktor Orbán), is behind TV2, the market-leading commercial television channel.[13] The ownership structure of TV2 is not transparent; the company is owned by a private equity fund, but financial transactions have proved Lőrinc Mészáros's role.

There were no significant changes in the operation of the pro-government media in 2025. At that time, no one could have known that the 2026 parliamentary elections would deal a devastating blow to Fidesz's media empire, but there were already signs of cost-cutting: in the summer, the digital publication 888 ceased publication; for a long time, it had been an emblematic pro-Fidesz propaganda outlet, but in recent years it had been operating merely as a supplement to Origo news portal.[14]

A significant development was that the publisher of the weekly newspaper Magyar Hang and the Centrál Media Group lodged a complaint with the European Commission regarding the practice of state advertising expenditure. According to the calculations set out in the complaint, between 2015 and 2023,

9 Fülöp, I. (2025). 13 milliárd forintos hitelkeretet kapott a Blikk megvásárlása előtt a kormányközeli Indamedia a Mészáros-féle banktól [Before buying Blikk, the government-affiliated Indamedia received a 13 billion forint credit line from the Mészáros-owned bank] https://hvg.hu/kkv/20251103_Meszaros-Lorinc-mbh-vaszily-indamedia-kolcson-hitel-ringier-megvasarlasa-ebx

10 24.hu (2025). Komoly adóemelésről döntött a parlament: fizethetnek a médiacégek és a reklámozók. [Parliament decided on a serious tax increase: media companies and advertisers may have to pay] https://24.hu/fn/gazdasag/2025/11/24/reklamado-media-adozas-adoemeles-eu-oszi-adocsomag-parlament/

11 Domány, A. (2026). Nem kell reklámadót fizetni júliustól sem. [No need to pay advertising tax from July either.] https://hvg.hu/itthon/20260423_megsem-lep-eletbe-a-reklamado-orban-viktor-alairta

12 RFE/RL (2025). Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Hungarian Service Ceases Operations. https://www.rferl.org/a/radio-free-europe-radio-liberty-hungarian-service-closure/33597502.html

13 Jandó, Z. (2025). Közel 30 milliárd forintot adott Mészáros Lőrinc a TV2 tulajdonosának. [Lőrinc Mészáros gave nearly 30 billion forints to the owner of TV2] https://telex.hu/g7/kozelet/2025/09/15/tv2-meszaros-lorinc-vagyonkezeles-tulajdonos

14 Herceg, M. (2025). Soros győzött: a 888 kimúlt. [Soros won: 888 is dead] https://444.hu/2025/09/22/soros-gyozott-a-888-kimult

more than EUR 1.1 billion in prohibited state aid was channelled to media companies with close ties to the government.[15] The proceedings have not yet yielded any results; the European Commission's investigation is ongoing.

Although they cannot be regarded as part of the media market in the strict sense, it is important to mention the political advertisements appearing on social media, primarily on Facebook and YouTube, as these have had a significant influence on the Hungarian public. According to Political Capital's calculations, by the end of September 2025, various actors had spent more than HUF 4.1 billion (ca. EUR 10.3 million) on political advertising, 87 percent of which was paid for by pages and advertisers linked to the ruling party. A further 8 percent was spent by opposition political actors, 2 percent by independent media, 1 percent by civil society organisations and 2 percent by other, uncategorised organisations and political actors.[16] The calculation only takes into account the first nine months of the year because, from the start of October, Meta (Facebook) and Alphabet (Google) banned political adverts on their platforms within the European Union.

The financial situation of the media companies

An analysis of the companies' revenues reveals a picture similar to that of previous years; the dominance of pro-government media is striking. Below, we examine the trends in media companies' revenues, grouped according to their relationship with the government.

In this analysis, we have only taken into account those media companies that are present on the market for news and current affairs content with at least one product. We have not examined companies producing purely entertainment content. Naturally, we did not take every company into account, as it was not possible to examine the entire local market; similarly, only a portion of the virtually endless range of online content providers was included in the analysis. The lists below feature those media companies that exert a significant influence on the national public and have a substantial reach.

First, we examined the data relating to media companies that are demonstrably close to the government.

Table 1: *Revenues of pro-government corporations in 2025*

Media brand	Company	Net revenue from sales ('000 HUF)	Other revenue ('000 HUF)	Total ('000 HUF)
County dailies, national newspapers, radios, television channels, online	Mediaworks Hungary	59 657 677	886 981	60 544 658
TV2	TV2 Media Group	61 252 317	561 833	61 814 150
Index	Index.hu	1 913 864	2 211	1 916 075
Rádió1	Radio Plus	1 186 715	31 679	1 218 394

15 Lukács, Cs. (2025). Statement. https://hang.hu/info/statement-175565

16 Political Capital (2025). 2025-ös hirdetési versenyt is messze a kormányoldal nyerte a közösségi médiában. [The government side also won the 2025 advertising competition on social media by a wide margin] https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3609

Media brand	Company	Net revenue from sales ('000 HUF)	Other revenue ('000 HUF)	Total ('000 HUF)
Demokrata	Demokrata Kiadó	813 097	261	813 358
Inforádió	Inforádió (until September 30)	475 604	9 120	484 724
Inforádió	Inforádió (from October 1)	178 019	2 539	180 558
Mandiner	Mandiner Novum	1 789 206	1 132 242	2 921 448
Total		**127 266 499**	**2 626 866**	**129 893 365**

Source: annual financial reports (http://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/oldal/kezdolap)

The total revenue of the pro-government media has remained stable in recent years, just as its portfolio had already been established years earlier. Perhaps the only surprise is that in 2025, the year preceding a critical election, funding for media outlets close to Fidesz did not increase significantly; there was clearly no aim to strengthen pro-government players within the traditional media sectors. This may have been because Fidesz chose to focus on social media instead, or perhaps simply because there was no point in further increasing the already overwhelmingly strong pro-government dominance in the media market.

The next category comprises so-called 'grey zone' media companies, which are not part of the pro-government propaganda machine but have been brought under the state's control in some form, creating a strong dependency. This can happen when the owner's other business interests are heavily dependent on the state; for example, in the cases of ATV and Hetek, the links between the evangelical church leader who owns them and the ruling party are well documented.[17] In the case of Népszava, the high proportion of state advertising revenue had been common knowledge for years, just as it was well known that the pro-government company Mediaworks printed and distributed the paper. Following the 2026 election, the print edition of Népszava was the first to cease publication[18], which, in hindsight, explains why Mérték had categorised the paper as being in the 'grey zone' for years. IndaNext entered this category as a new player; it comprises the former Ringier portfolio and Blikk, which had been classified as 'grey zone' for years. Following the change of ownership in the autumn, it came under the influence of the ruling party, but looking at 2025 as a whole, it would have been unjustified to classify it alongside pro-government propaganda, so it is listed in the grey zone.

In the case of media companies in the grey zone, it is important to emphasise that they play a particularly significant role in the Hungarian public sphere. These media outlets do not disseminate propaganda, but the ruling party is able to influence the content, at least to the extent of determining which topics should be avoided. In some cases, we can even see journalistic work of a particularly high standard, of which the aforementioned Népszava is the best example; thus, the true significance of the 'grey zone' media lies in its ability to effectively reach the voters of opposition parties, as well as those who do not consume pro-government media.[19]

17 Rényi, P. D. (2018). A baloldal fellegvára volt, most bulvártévét csinálnak belőle a Fidesznek. [It used to be a left-wing bastion, now they use it to produce a tabloid television for Fidesz] https://444.hu/tldr/2018/01/10/a-baloldal-fellegvara-volt-most-bulvartevet-csinalnak-belole-a-fidesznek

18 Népszava (2026). Megpróbálják kivégezni a Népszavát. [They are trying to execute Népszava] https://nepszava.hu/3323927_megprobaljak-kivegezni-a-nepszavat

19 Polyák, G. – Szávai, P. – Urbán, Á. (2022). Information Patterns and News Bubbles in Hungary. Media and Communication. 10(3) 133-145. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i3.5373

Table 2: *Revenues of the 'grey zone' media corporations in 2025*

Media brand	Company	Net revenue from sales ('000 HUF)	Other revenue ('000 HUF)	Total ('000 HUF)
ATV	ATV	3 758 047	107 106	3 865 153
Hetek	Hetek.hu	215 555	4 837	220 392
Népszava	XXI. század Média	1 390 291	11380	1 401 671
Blikk, magazinok	Indanext Hungary	12 281 066	558 850	12 839 916
Total		**17 644 959**	**682 173**	**18 327 132**

Source: annual financial reports (http://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/oldal/kezdolap)

A new category had to be introduced amongst media companies linked to political figures, specifically because a new player had emerged with ties to the Tisza Party, which came to play a decisive role in 2025. The owner of the Kontroll online site is Márton Magyar, the brother of the party's chairman (and later Prime Minister), Péter Magyar.

Table 3: *Revenues of the media corporations related to Tisza Party in 2025*

Media brand	Company	Net revenue from sales ('000 HUF)	Other revenue ('000 HUF)	Total ('000 HUF)
Kontroll	Kontroll Média Szolgáltató Kft.	129 262	73 245	202 507

Source: annual financial reports (http://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/oldal/kezdolap)

We have classified as independent media organisations those which have no verifiable links to political parties and for which there is no evidence that a significant proportion of their revenue comes from state sources. The list includes media outlets that exert a significant influence on the Hungarian public and are capable of shaping public opinion; consequently, it does not include local media or news sources with a limited reach. Euronews and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – which ceased operations in November – are operated by foreign companies; as no financial data is available regarding their activities in Hungary, they are not included in the list either.

Table 4: *Revenues of the independent media corporations in 2025*

Media brand	Company	Net revenue from sales ('000 HUF)	Other revenue ('000 HUF)	Total ('000 HUF)
RTL	Magyar RTL	60 938 099	686 685	61 624 784
24.hu (+ magazinok)	Central Médiacsoport	14 568 640	166 299	14 734 939
HVG	HVG	5 216 954	120 268	5 337 222
Magyar Hang	Alhambra-Press Bt (until September 30)	294 282	43 948	338 230
Magyar Hang	Alhambra-Press Kft (from October 1)	136 590	47 166	183 756

Media brand	Company	Net revenue from sales ('000 HUF)	Other revenue ('000 HUF)	Total ('000 HUF)
Magyar Narancs	Magyarnarancs.hu	246 290	20 823	267 113
Élet és Irodalom	Irodalom	266 432	9 305	275 737
Forbes	Mediarey Hungary Services	1 299 619	9 113	1 308 732
Klubrádió	Klubrádió	68 118	621 363	689 481
Partizán	Partizán Foundation	84 914	989 096	1 074 010
Jólvanezígy, Fókuszcsoport	Rawfilter Media	433 062	8 358	441 420
444	Magyar Jeti	1 322 660	430 955	1 753 615
Telex	Telex.hu	1 408 423	751 937	2 160 360
Portfolio	Net Média	5 097 037	9 067	5 106 104
Válasz Online	Válasz Online	48 699	111 750	160 449
Átlátszó	Atlatszo.hu	2 562	212 046	214 608
Direkt36	Direkt36	2 000	305 108	307 108
Total		**91 434 381**	**4 543 287**	**95 977 668**

Source: annual financial reports (http://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/oldal/kezdolap)

Revenue from independent media was surprisingly stable despite an extremely hostile political environment. As can be seen, 'other revenue' plays the largest role in this category, accounting for nearly 5 percent of total revenue. 'Other revenue' encompasses a wide range of sources, the most important of which are reader support, revenue from the 1% tax donation scheme, and funding from international grants. The differences in business models are clearly reflected in the proportion of other revenue: other revenue is highest among those media outlets that offer their content for free and therefore rely on reader support (Direkt36, Átlátszó, Partizán, Klubrádió, Válasz Online). For media outlets operating a subscription model, the 'net sales revenue' category is typically high, as this is where subscription fees are recorded.

It is worth comparing the above groups, but we have also considered public service media as a separate category, as it also plays a major role in shaping public opinion. As these are not commercial enterprises, we have used the budget allocations.[20] In all other cases, we have taken into account the sum of net sales revenue and other income.

20 2024. évi LXIII. törvény a Nemzeti és Hírközlési Hatóság 2025. évi egységes költségvetéséről. https://njt.jog.gov.hu/jogszabaly/2024-63-00-00

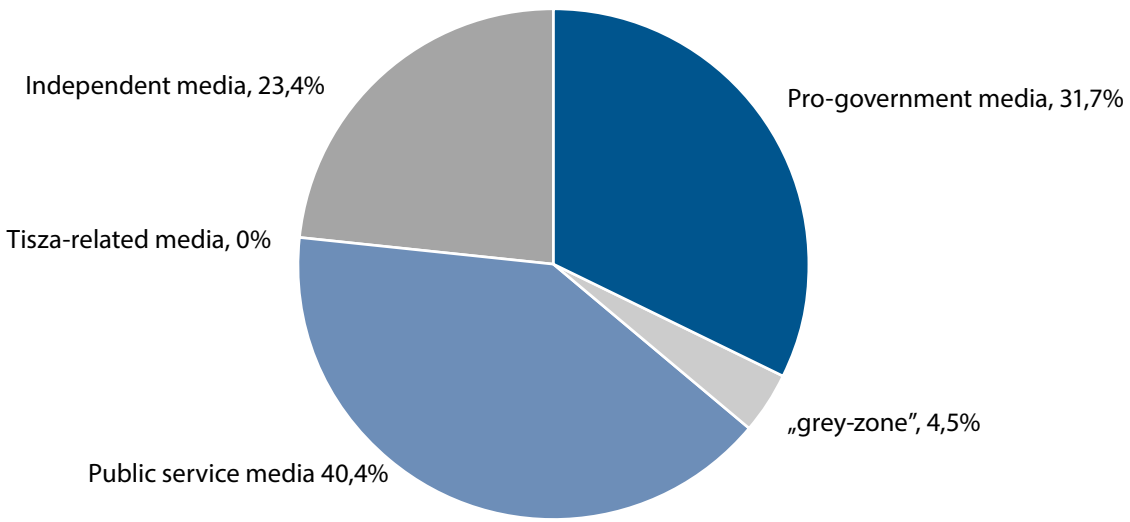
Table 5: *The revenue of various media categories in 2025*

	Total ('000 HUF)	Percentage
pro-government media	129 893 365	31,7%
"grey zone"	18 327 132	4,5%
public service media	165 611 300	40,4%
Tisza-related media	202 507	0,0%
Independent media	95 977 668	23,4%
Total	**410 011 972**	

Source: annual financial reports (http://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/oldal/kezdolap)

Including the budget for public service media, companies operating in the news market that were included in the database on the basis of their size generated revenue of HUF 410 billion (more than EUR 1 billion) Independent media accounted for a mere 23.4 percent of total revenue, in contrast to the combined 72.1 percent share held by pro-government media and public service media. This ratio has remained similar for years, which clearly illustrates the distorted conditions in the Hungarian market. The significance of the newly introduced 'Tisza-related' category is, for the time being, very small and cannot be quantified in percentage term.

Figure 1: *The distribution of market revenues by media categories (2025)*



The analysis contains data on the media outlets that have the greatest influence on public discourse; in essence, it represents the tip of the iceberg. The analysis does not include local media, including free newspapers published by local authorities, nor does it cover local radio stations; indeed, a significant proportion of regional radio stations are also excluded. Nor does the data include the vast majority of the extremely diverse range of online content providers, nor political influencers active on social media.

The study therefore does not provide a picture of the structure of the entire Hungarian public sphere, but rather of the distribution of revenue amongst the larger media companies, as interpreted from a market perspective. Given that larger companies tend to be more resistant to political influence and are able to operate as market-driven enterprises, it is almost certain that the distortion is even greater when considering the Hungarian public sphere as a whole, including the vast number of smaller content providers.

The role of media ecosystem

A well-known feature of the media capture in Hungary is that it involves not only a high concentration of ownership among media companies and market distortion through state advertising, but also interference in industries linked to content production. This applies in particular to the advertising industry and the distribution market, where the ruling party plays a very significant role, pushing market mechanisms into the background.

The Hungarian state is a dominant player in the advertising market, having centralised its communications procurement through the National Communications Office (NKOH), led by Antal Rogán. The communications system is rather complex: the NKOH entered into a framework agreement with the media agency consortium New Land Media – Lounge Design, owned by Gyula Balásy. Subsequently, state institutions (ministries, state-owned companies, etc.) entered into framework contracts with this same consortium; and whenever a specific communications task arose – such as an advertising campaign or event organisation – the state institution and the consortium would conclude an individual contract based on this framework contract. The result of this three-tiered structure (framework agreement, framework contract, individual contract) was that, by the time a specific communication task was commissioned, the consortium owned by Balásy was already in a position to dictate prices; state-owned companies had no opportunity to put the task out to tender or, potentially, to contract with another firm.[21] The extent to which the state's communications expenditure was overpriced, and the fact that political logic clearly prevailed over market logic, became apparent to the wider public following the 2026 election: Gyula Balásy, head of the media agency consortium, gave an interview in tears and, to everyone's genuine astonishment, offered his companies to the state.[22]

In September 2025, following a further public procurement procedure, the NKOH entered into a framework agreement worth HUF 75 billion (ca. EUR 188.6 million) with the New Land Media – Lounge Design consortium. The pool of competitors was narrowed by the fact that the tender period lasted only 15 days and that experience in government communications was a requirement for bidders. Even so, there were two competitors: one was disqualified for submitting a disproportionately low bid, whilst the other did not win as its bid would have been more expensive than that of the Balásy consortium.[23]

In addition to media agencies, players with close ties to the government also wield significant influence in the market for so-called 'sales houses', which sell advertising space. The largest sales house, which sells advertising time and space on, amongst others, public service media, the TV2 Group's channels

21 Mertek Media Monitor (2026). Nemzeti Kommunikációs Sóhivatal. https://mertek.eu/2026/06/18/nemzeti-kommunikacios-sohivatal/

22 Kontroll.hu (2026). Balásy Gyula önként és ingyen átadja az államnak a médiacégeit. [Gyula Balásy voluntarily and free of charge hands over his media companies to the state] https://kontroll.hu/cikk/belfold/2026/05/04/balasy-gyula-oenkent-es-ingyen-atadja-az-allamnak-a-mediacegeit

23 Katus E. (2025). 75 milliárdos keretmegállapodást kötött Rogánék hivatala Balásy Gyula cégeivel. [Rogán's office has signed a 75 billion framework agreement with Gyula Balásy's companies] https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2025/10/10/75-milliardos-keretmegallapodast-kotott-roganek-hivatala-balasy-gyula-cegeivel/

and several radio stations, is owned by Lőrinc Mészáros, a close friend of Viktor Orbán and Hungary's wealthiest man. The company's turnover in 2025 was nearly HUF 55 billion (ca. EUR 138 million), although its profits fell compared with the previous year's results.[24]

There has been no change in newspaper distribution; Mediaworks has been distributing the daily newspapers since 2021[25], and printing capacity is also in Mediaworks' hands. As is well known, the publisher prints the weekly newspaper Magyar Hang in Slovakia because it was unable to secure a contract with any Hungarian printing house. The situation in television broadcasting is also stable. Since its acquisition by Vodafone in 2023, 4iG – a company with close ties to Fidesz – has become the largest player in the television broadcasting market. This means that the ruling party was able to influence the packages in which television broadcasters' channels are made available to a significant proportion of Hungarian households, and at what price.

24 HVG (2025). Mészáros Lőrinc reklámos cége 55 milliárdot keresett, de a nyeresége nagyot zuhant [Lőrinc Mészáros' advertising company earned 55 billion, but its profits fell sharply] https://hvg.hu/kkv/20260604_atmedia-meszaros-lorinc-penzugyi-beszamolo-2025

25 Szalay, D. (2021). Ezentúl Fidesz-közeli cég viszi házhoz a Népszavát és a Blikket is. [From now on, a company close to Fidesz will also bring Népszava and Blikk to your home] https://media1.hu/2021/06/28/ezentul-fidesz-kozeli-ceg-viszi-hazhoz-a-nepszavat-es-a-blikket-is/

FINAL YEAR OF THE MTVA

The role of public service media in Orbán's media policy and the dismantling of public service broadcasting

One of the most defining elements of the Orbán regime's media policy, which took shape after 2010, was the complete political capture of public service media and its systematic subjugation to control.[26] Under this illiberal media policy model, the primary function of the public service system was no longer to support democratic public discourse, act as a watchdog over those in power, or strengthen social cohesion, but rather to disseminate centralised state propaganda and institutionally facilitate soft censorship.[27] This role was underpinned by a deliberately opaque duality in the organisational structure: whilst, by law, Duna Médiaszolgáltató Zrt. is the official public service media provider, the programme production infrastructure, financial resources and assets are concentrated in the Media Service Support and Asset Management Fund (MTVA), which is controlled by the president of the Media Council and over which no public or independent oversight is exercised.[28] Furthermore, by integrating the national news agency (MTI) into the public media and making its news available free of charge, the government has eliminated competition in the news agency market, established a state news monopoly, and channelled central political narratives directly into commercial and local media outlets.[29] The operation of Hungarian public service media has, both structurally and in terms of content, completely departed from the fundamental principles of public service as understood in Europe, which are enshrined in

26 Kovács, I. – Polyák, G. – Urbán, Á. (2021): *Media Landscape After a Long Storm. The Hungarian Media Politics after 2010.* Mertek Booklets 25., Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, Budapest, 37–47. o.

27 Lehóczki, Zs. – Mong, A. – Nagy, K. – Navratil, Sz. – Polyák, G. – Urbán, Á. – Uszkiewicz, E. (2014): *Foglyul ejtett média – Médiapolitikai írások.* [Captured media – Essays on media policy] Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, Budapest; Horváth, K. – Polyák, G. – Urbán, Á. (2024): *Media System Abandoned: The Hungarian Media under Siege and without Support. Soft Censorship 2023.* Mertek Booklets 40., Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, Budapest, pp. 4–5.

28 Kovács, I. – Polyák, G. – Urbán, Á. (2021): *i. m.* pp. 38–39.

29 Kovács, I. – Polyák, G. – Urbán, Á. (2021): *i. m.* pp. 41–42.

both the domestic media law (Section 82 of Act CLXXXV of 2010 on Media Services and Mass Communication), as well as the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) and the relevant recommendations of the Council of Europe.[30] The European regulatory framework for public service broadcasting requires editorial and institutional autonomy, political impartiality, diverse reporting, accountability, a commitment to social integration, and the fight against disinformation.[31] In contrast, in the case of Hungarian state media, there is a systematic amplification of pro-government and pro-Russian disinformation narratives, the silencing or character assassination of opposition figures, extreme distortion in the use of sources, and the opaque and unrestricted use of public funds.[32] The funding of public media has thus become, rather than a means of creating social value, an exclusive tool for the ruling political elite's power-political and campaign objectives.[33]

An empirical study of the functioning of public service media (2025–2026)

A joint analysis by the Republikon Institute and Connect Europe, covering the period from February to December 2025, examined the impartiality and balance of the M1 news channel's 7.30 pm evening news programme over 11 months, using quantitative and qualitative methodologies.[34] The aim of the research was to assess, with scientific rigour, the pro-government bias of the public service broadcaster's news programme, the screen time and framing of political figures, the linguistic frames used, the composition of expert and press sources, and the extent to which public service standards were upheld.[35]

Mertek Media Monitor's analysis of the 2026 election campaign examined two key contents of the public service media – the joint 6.00 pm news programme on the M1 and Duna television channels, and the Hirado.hu news portal – during the campaign period, as part of its sample comprising six pro-government sources.[36] The study analyses the asymmetry in the coverage of political actors, the distribution of pro-government and opposition narratives, the treatment of smaller parties, the recognition of ritualised messaging, and the specific role of the public service system in the campaign.[37]

The Republikon Institute's 2025 annual public media monitoring report, based on a detailed analysis of the 334 programmes and 281 hours of airtime examined, revealed indisputable evidence of government dominance and structural imbalance across the entire year.[38] Political news accounted for

30 Act CLXXXV of 2010 on Media Services and Mass Communications, 82. §; REGULATION (EU) 2024/1083 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 11 April 2024 establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market (European Media Freedom Act)

31 Council of Europe (2018): *Recommendation Committee of Ministers to Member States on Media Pluralism and Transparency of Media Ownership.* CM/Rec(2018)1, Strasbourg; Urbán, Á. – Polyák, G. – Horváth, K. (2023): How Public Service Media Disinformation Shapes Hungarian Public Discourse. *Media and Communication*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, pp. 62–72. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7148

32 Urbán, Á. – Polyák, G. – Horváth, K. (2023): *i. m.* pp. 64–66.; Horváth, K. – Polyák, G. – Urbán, Á. (2024): *i. m.* pp. 41–46.

33 Kovács, I. – Polyák, G. – Urbán, Á. (2021): *i. m.* pp. 39-41.

34 Republikon Intézet (2026): *Éves közmédia-monitoring. A 2025-ös 19:30-as híradók alapján.* [Annual public service media monitoring. Based on the 19:30 news programmes in 2025] Republikon Intézet – Connect Europe, Budapest, pp. 1–3. https://republikon.hu/media/174835/Ri_E%CC%81ves-ko%CC%88zme%CC%81dia-monitoring.pdf

35 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 2

36 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *A propaganda árnyalatai. A 2026-os választási kampány híreinek tartalomelemzése.* [Shades of Propaganda. Content Analysis of News Coverage during the 2026 Hungarian Parliamentary Election Campaign] Mertek Booklets 45., Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, Budapest. https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Mertek_Fuzetek_45.pdf; Hungarian Digital Media Observatory (2026). Shades of Propaganda. Content Analysis of News Coverage during the 2026 Hungarian Parliamentary Election Campaign. https://hdmo.eu/en/2026/06/18/shades-of-propaganda-content-analysis-of-news-coverage-during-the-2026-hungarian-parliamentary-election-campaign

37 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 6.

38 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 5.

211 hours of the total airtime; within this, purely domestic political topics (107 hours) and foreign policy coverage with domestic political implications (57 hours) far exceeded purely foreign policy news (46 hours).[39] The analysis of politicians' screen time reveals a marked asymmetry: pro-government figures received a total of 35 and a half hours of screen time – meaning that, statistically, a politician from Fidesz or the KDNP appeared on average every eighth second – and of this, 29 hours were spent in an explicitly positive light, with not a single minute in a negative context.[40] In contrast, opposition politicians received less than 5 per cent of total screen time (13 and a half hours), of which 10 and a half hours were in a negative context and only 1 hour in a positive one.[41] On a three-point scale (+1 to -1) measuring the perception of the figures, Fidesz (+1.00), members of the government (+0.99) and Viktor Orbán (+0.95) appeared almost exclusively in a favourable light, whilst the overall score for opposition figures was -0.84, Gergely Karácsony's was -0.80, Ferenc Gyurcsány's -0.73, and Péter Magyar's was -0.96, indicating the most intense level of disapproval.[42]

A comparison of the representation of Viktor Orbán and Péter Magyar showed that, although Péter Magyar was named or depicted more often (3,940 times) than the Prime Minister (3,158 times), this occurred almost exclusively in a negative and discrediting context.[43] Alongside Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump appeared most frequently as a symbol of peace and patriotism, whilst Péter Magyar was linked to Manfred Weber and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who were portrayed as 'Hungary-haters'.[44] In terms of vocabulary, Orbán's name was associated with the terms 'peace-loving', 'family', 'patriot' and 'strong prime minister', whilst in Péter Magyar's context, 'war', 'liar', 'Brussels', 'insider trading', as well as derogatory epithets such as 'clown', 'poseur', 'bug' or 'spy' appeared with great frequency.[45] The representation of foreign politicians mirrored the government's foreign policy framework of allies and enemies to the letter: Donald Trump (+0.83), Xi Jinping (+0.50) and Vladimir Putin (+0.30) ended up in positive territory, whilst the EU/Brussels (-0.97), Ursula von der Leyen (-0.91), Manfred Weber (-0.89), Zelenskyy (-0.84) and Ukraine as a whole (-0.89) were pushed deep into negative territory.[46]

The composition of the 1,885 politicians and experts quoted also reinforced the pro-government narrative: 74.9 per cent of those quoted were figures linked to Fidesz, whilst the proportion of opposition figures stood at 10.4 per cent and that of independents at 14.7 per cent (the latter, moreover, spoke almost exclusively on non-political, professional topics).[47] Without exception, the most frequently featured opinion leaders came from think tanks close to the government (MCC, Századvég, XXI. Század Intézet), such as Géza Sebestyén, Dániel Deák, Olivér Hortay and Szabolcs Pásztor.[48]

What is striking about the distribution of opposition voices is that the public media over-represented the Mi Hazánk Movement (43.9 per cent) and Jobbik (21.9 per cent), whilst the main challenger, the Tisza Party, accounted for only 13.8 per cent, and DK for 14.8 per cent.[49] In terms of the use of news sources, references to pro-government media (1,013 instances) were more than three times those of the independent press (324 instances), creating a closed information ecosystem (particularly regarding the 'Tisza package').[50]

39 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 5.
40 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 6.
41 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 6.
42 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* pp. 6-7.
43 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 8.
44 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 8.
45 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 8.
46 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* pp. 9-10.
47 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 10.
48 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* pp. 10-11.
49 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 12.
50 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* p. 13.

The linguistic analysis – when compared with 48 episodes of RTL Híradó – revealed drastic differences: the terms 'migrant' and 'migration' were used 2,191 times on M1, whilst on RTL they were used just 6 times (a fifty-fold difference assuming the same number of programs); the term 'war' appeared on average 11.5 times per programme on M1, whilst on RTL it appeared 3.5 times; however, mentions of 'peace' (2,076 vs. 79), 'sanctions' (517 vs. 43), 'sovereignty' (504 vs. 43) and 'Soros' (250 vs. 7) were also similarly dominant.[51] According to Republikon's summary, M1's news programme complies with neither the Hungarian Media Act nor the EMFA's regulations, whilst MTVA's budget has risen from 83 billion forints in 2019 to 166 billion forints by 2025, whilst Hungary has slipped to 68th place in Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index.[52]

Mertek Media Monitor's 2026 campaign analysis, conducted across two public service media platforms – M1's Duna's 6 pm news programme and the Hirado.hu news portal – identified public media as an integral part of the pro-government campaign strategy, highlighting the differing editorial roles of the two outlets.[53] Hirado.hu, together with Magyar Nemzet, represented the 'hardline pro-government pole': 45 per cent of its articles were directly organised by thematic narrative codes, with a high narrative density (2.99 codes per news item).[54] On the portal, 91 per cent of mentions of the Tisza Party were passive (the subjects were not given a voice), compared with a 38 per cent passive rate for Fidesz–KDNP.[55] Hirado.hu presented Viktor Orbán in a favourable context 76.8 per cent of the time, whilst Péter Magyar was presented in an unfavourable context 82.8 per cent of the time, with zero ambivalent coding.[56] The complete lack of accountability is indicated by the fact that in 97 per cent of Hirado.hu's articles, the author's name was not mentioned at all.[57]

In contrast, the M1/Duna News programme appeared somewhat more moderate, but according to the authors, this is misleading: the programme showcased almost the entire repertoire of the pro-government narrative, with the combined weight of themes constructing enemies and promoting a positive self-image reaching 40 per cent, whilst content critical of the government accounted for a mere 5.4 per cent.[58] Although in the television news programme the proportion of passive coverage of Viktor Orbán and Péter Magyar was closer (40 per cent vs. 46 per cent), and the proportion of ambivalent codes for Péter Magyar was nearly 20 per cent, the news programme as a whole remained heavily biased in favour of Viktor Orbán.[59]

According to a key finding of Mérték's analysis, whilst M1/Duna did lead the coverage of the topic entitled 'Pluralistic Campaign Arena' (T4) (accounting for 27 per cent of the topic's sources), this did not, however, reflect genuine diversity, but was the result of brief, mandatory party statements (campaign clips, studio slots) arising from a statutory obligation, which were often accompanied by negative framing during the editing process.[60]

The way the two public service broadcasters handled the smaller opposition parties was where the contrast was most striking: M1/Duna, following a deliberate strategy of vote-splitting and fragmentation, gave the second-most airtime to the small parties (50 appearances), in a strikingly favourable context (DK 53 per cent, Mi Hazánk 50 per cent, MKKP 82 per cent positive framing), with the aim of siphoning

51 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* pp. 14-15.
52 Republikon Intézet (2026): *i. m.* pp. 15-16.
53 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 5.
54 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 33.
55 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 23.
56 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 27.
57 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 20.
58 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 55.
59 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 24.
60 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 40.

votes away from the main challenger (Tisza Party).[61] In contrast, Hirado.hu almost completely ignored the smaller parties and treated the MKKP in a distinctly negative light (50 per cent unfavourable).[62] Both public service platforms predominantly conveyed pro-government narratives (in the 500–700 range), alongside negligible anti-government content (15–84), placing particular emphasis on themes designed to create an 'enemy' image (the opposition as a threat, anti-Hungarian sentiment in Ukraine and the EU) and ritualised message reinforcement (the 'utility bill protection' narrative accounted for 29 per cent of M1's airtime and 21 per cent of Hirado.hu's content, with the latter publishing articles under almost identical headlines for the purpose of conditioning the audience).[63]

Finally, MTVA itself became an active political player in the campaign when it complained in its programmes about alleged 'aggression' and 'intimidation' by the opposition against its staff, and even officially briefed the OSCE delegation on this narrative.[64]

Summary

The findings of the 2025 annual monitoring data (Republikon Institute) and the 2026 campaign analysis (Mertek Media Monitor) clearly demonstrate that the operation of the Hungarian public service media has definitively broken away from the fundamental values of European and democratic public service broadcasting, and has become a systematically constructed, publicly funded propaganda machine of the illiberal state. The radical asymmetry in screen time observable across MTVA's platforms, the dehumanisation and character assassination of political opponents, the pro-government press ecosystem's use of closed sources, and the manipulative over-representation of small parties all demonstrate that public service media does not serve to provide balanced information, but rather, through the use of soft censorship, to influence the will of the electorate and facilitate the exercise of power by the ruling party.

61 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 29.
62 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 29.
63 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* pp. 30-52.
64 Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely (2026): *i. m.* p. 49.

THE MEDIA COUNCIL'S PRACTICES

Results of radio frequency tendering

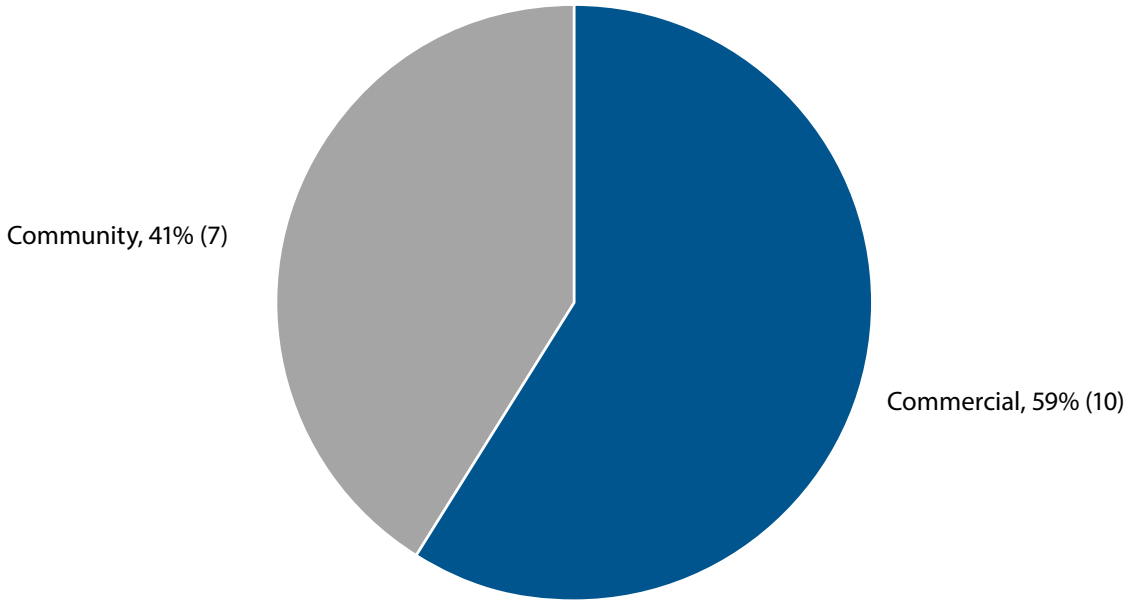
In our soft censorship reports, we pay particular attention to the tendering for radio service licences from the very beginning. This is because, following the digital switchover of television, radio is the last market segment directly shaped by the media authority. The Media Council's tendering practice determines who may broadcast radio services on local, regional and national frequencies, and what kind of content they may broadcast. The Media Council's entire tendering practice, which began in 2010, is a striking example of an abuse of power. As we have shown in our previous reports, the Media Council openly favours those actors currently close to the government, and in doing so has now not only eliminated competition in the radio market but also, to a significant extent, local and community radio broadcasting. As a result of the Media Council's practices, a highly concentrated radio network, controlled by a few large, pro-government players, dominates both the national and local media markets.

In our current analysis, we examined licence applications concluded between January 2025 and December 2025. During this period, the Media Council concluded a total of 17 licence procedures – significantly fewer than the 35 in 2024 or the 24 in 2023. In a separate sub-chapter, we also review the decisions made up to the end of May 2026.

In 2025 – as in previous years – the majority of tender procedures were aimed at securing commercial media service licences. Of the 17 procedures, the Media Council issued calls for tenders for commercial media service licences in 10 cases and for community media service licences in 7 cases. Under the law, a community media service provider is defined as a specific social, ethnic, cultural or religious commu-

nity, group, or the specific needs of people living in a particular locality, region or reception area for information and access to cultural programmes, or where the overwhelming majority of its broadcasting time is devoted to programmes serving the objectives of public service media (Section 66 of the Mttv).

Figure 2: *Proportion of commercial and community media service applications (2025)*



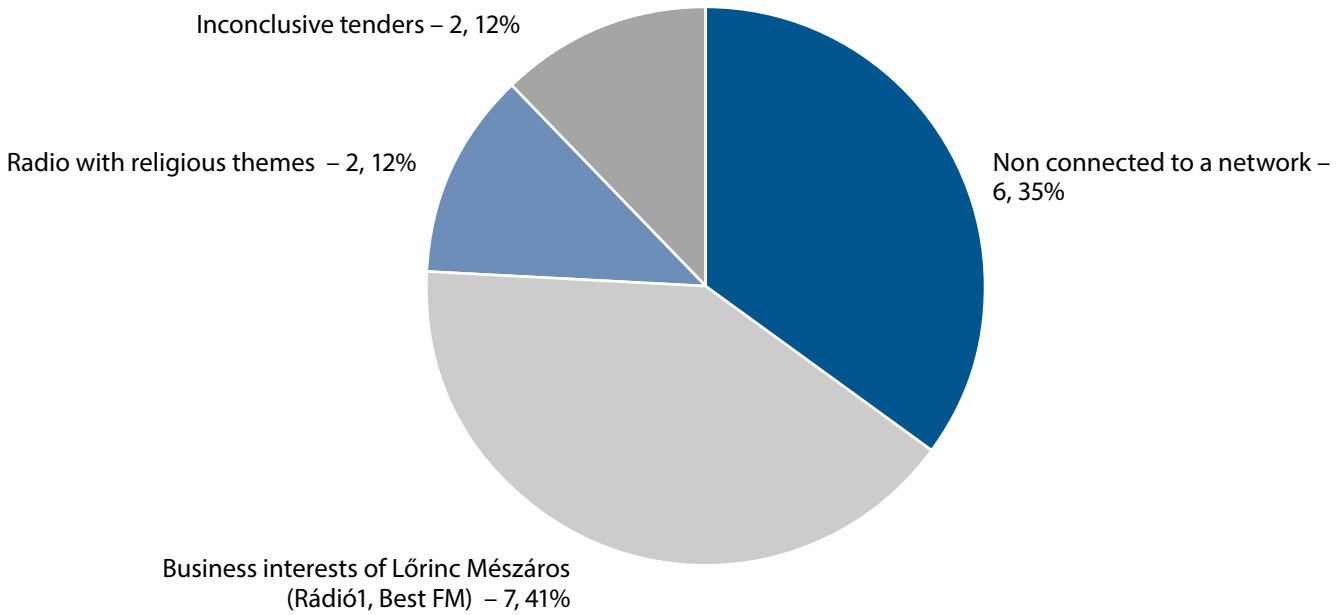
During the period under review, two tender processes were concluded without a successful outcome: no bids were received for the 87.9 MHz community frequency in Hatvan, whilst the bid submitted by the sole applicant for the 90.3 MHz community frequency in Berettyóújfalu was deemed invalid. Both frequencies were re-opened by the Media Council in 2026.

Radio 1, which is part of Lőrinc Mészáros's business interests (Lőrinc Mészáros is wealthiest Hungarian oligarch, friend of the previous Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán), won a further five frequencies this year (Abádszalók, Debrecen 95.0 MHz, Mosonmagyaróvár, Tihany and Ajka), whilst Best FM, also part of Mészáros's business interests, won one frequency (Zalaegerszeg). Added to this is the 103.1 MHz frequency in Szigetvár, which was awarded to Mambó Rádió Kft., part of the Rádió 1 network (see below) – meaning that networks linked to Lőrinc Mészáros's business interests secured a total of seven winning licences out of the 17 procedures, accounting for 41 per cent of the successful bids.

Services with a religious focus, linked to a network, were successful in two cases: Katolikus Rádió in Kaposvár and Európa Rádió in Sátoraljaújhely were awarded frequencies. Six applicants were granted media service licences as independent radio stations not affiliated with a network, according to the authority's records – including KAPUKOM Ltd., which was awarded two neighbouring frequencies in the Rábaköz region, Kapuvár and Csorna.

We have classified Mambó Rádió Kft., which was awarded the 103.1 MHz frequency in Szigetvár, as part of the networks linked to Mészáros's interests because the company is a known media service provider for the Rádió 1 network: this same company also operates, amongst others, Rádió 1 on 100.9 in Villány. However, the regulatory tender register does not indicate any network affiliation for this frequency – meaning that a classification relying solely on the regulatory register may systematically underestimate the actual share of networks with close ties to the Fidesz-government.

Figure 3: *Ownership background of successful applicants (2025)*



Commercial media service providers are required to pay a media service fee on a quarterly basis, the minimum rate of which is specified in the call for tenders for the relevant frequency. In real, competitive tendering procedures, the level of the media service fee acts as an element of competition between bids. The Media Act does not specify any criteria for determining the minimum fee; in its calls for tenders, the Media Council generally adjusts the minimum fee in line with the size of the reception area. During the period under review, the lowest amount was HUF 69,000 + VAT per year (Abádszalók 89.2 MHz), whilst the highest was HUF 4,761,000 + VAT per year (Debrecen 95.0 MHz). However, from the second quarter of 2020, the government suspended the obligation to pay the media service fee, citing the state of emergency declared first due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequently due to Russian aggression against Ukraine. This exemption remained in force throughout the year 2025 and only ceased on 14 May 2026; since then, following the elevation of the state of emergency regulations to the level of law, service providers have been required to pay the fee.

As early as the first half of the 2010s, it was already apparent that competition for radio frequencies was declining significantly. In 2025, in 15 out of 17 procedures – 88 per cent of the tender procedures – only a single bidder submitted a bid, whilst a further procedure (Hatvan 87.9 MHz) was unsuccessful due to a lack of bidders. There was genuine competition in just one tender: the one for the 105.7 MHz commercial frequency in Tihany at the Lake Balaton. Two bids were received here, but the frequency was ultimately awarded to Radio Plus Kft., the central media service provider for Rádió 1. In 2025, there was no competition in any of the community radio frequency tenders.

In 2025, too, the tender procedures primarily served to facilitate the expansion of a narrow group of businesses and programmes with a specific ideological outlook. Analyses of previous tender periods have consistently revealed a severely biased tendering practice, which has also homogenised the local radio market, replacing genuinely local media service providers with a small number of national

networks. The low number of completed tenders can be partly explained by the fact that the large networks close to the government – above all Rádió 1 – had already achieved virtually nationwide coverage, thus slowing the pace of their expansion.

Rádió 1

In our previous soft censorship reports, we provided a detailed overview of the players in the radio market; we shall not repeat that here. We shall highlight just one player – the market leader, Rádió 1, and the media companies behind it – as this network was once again the biggest winner in 2025 and has further strengthened its regional positions.

Radio 1 is a network linked to Lőrinc Mészáros's business interests: its central media service provider, Radio Plus Kft., is owned (via Radio Holding Kft.) by Zoltán Schmidt, a person close to Mészáros, whilst its advertising time is sold by Atmedia Kft. sales house, which is owned by Lőrinc Mészáros. The network was launched in 2016 as a media service of Radio Plus, which at the time was still part of the government commissioner Andy Vajna's business interests; following Vajna's death in 2019, the network came under Mészáros's influence. In addition to Radio Plus Kft., several other companies also belong to the network (such as Mambó Rádió Kft.).

In 2025, the Rádió 1 network secured five frequencies under the name of the central media service provider, Radio Plus Kft., and, together with the victory of Mambó Rádió Kft. – which belongs to the network – in Szigetvár, the total rose to six. Among the five Radio Plus victories, the expansion along the shores of Lake Balaton stands out: in 2025, Radio Plus Kft. supplemented its existing Veszprém–Siófok corridor with the 105.7 MHz frequency in Tihany and the 89.8 MHz frequency in Ajka, thereby establishing continuous coverage across the Lake Balaton region and Veszprém County. The Tihany frequency is also significant in that it was the only truly competitive radio licence procedure in 2025: the Media Council awarded the ten-year licence – which, under the law, may be extended for a further seven years, up to 2042 – to the pro-Fidesz company. FM95 in Debrecen (Médiacentrum Debrecen Kft.) also secured the Debrecen 95.0 MHz regional frequency by joining the Rádió 1 network; this was the tender with the highest base fee during the period under review.

In the months following 2025, the trend continued: in the three tender procedures concluded in April 2026, the previously unsuccessful Hatvan 87.9 MHz licence was awarded to FM 4 Rádió Kft., the Nyíregyháza 103.9 MHz regional commercial frequency to Best Radio Kft. (part of Best FM), and the 90.3 MHz frequency in Berettyóújfalu was awarded to Katolikus Rádió.

The 2026 licence applications and the end of the Fidesz-Media Council

The NMHH's radio licence application data table includes not only the 2025 procedures but also those concluded in early 2026. These deserve special attention as they fall within a specific concluding phase of the Media Council's operations. On 12 April 2026, parliamentary elections were held, leading to a change of government; the new Prime Minister, Péter Magyar, set a deadline of 31 May for public officials appointed by the Fidesz government to resign, and specifically called upon the Chair and

members of the Media Council to step down. May 2026 was thus the last month in which the members of the Media Council elected by the previous governing majority still acted as full decision-makers — we regard this date as the end of the Fidesz-Media Council era.

The three procedures concluded in April 2026 — that is, after the election but before the aforementioned resignation of the body — followed the pattern of previous years. A single bidder submitted a bid for all three frequencies. The Hatvan 87.9 MHz licence, a local community licence that had remained unallocated in 2025, was awarded to FM 4 Rádió Kft., which had entered the race as an independent bidder, whilst the Berettyóújfalu 90.3 MHz local community frequency – which also remained unresolved in 2025 – was awarded to Katolikus Rádió Zrt. — the latter marking a further stage in the expansion of religious and church networks. In the sole commercial tender, for the regional frequency of 103.9 MHz in Nyíregyháza, Best Radio Kft., the media service provider behind Best FM – which is linked to Lőrinc Mészáros's business interests – was awarded the licence, subject to a basic media service fee of HUF 2,538,000 + VAT per year.

These three decisions clearly illustrate that the Media Council's tendering logic remained unchanged until the change of government: even in the final weeks of its term, the outgoing body awarded frequencies to operators with close ties to the Fidesz-government or defined by their ideological outlook; indeed, the sole regional commercial licence allocated in 2026 further strengthened the Best FM network, which is linked to Mészáros's interests. The extent to which the tendering practices of the Media Council, with its new composition, will differ from this can only be assessed on the basis of the procedures carried out in the coming period.

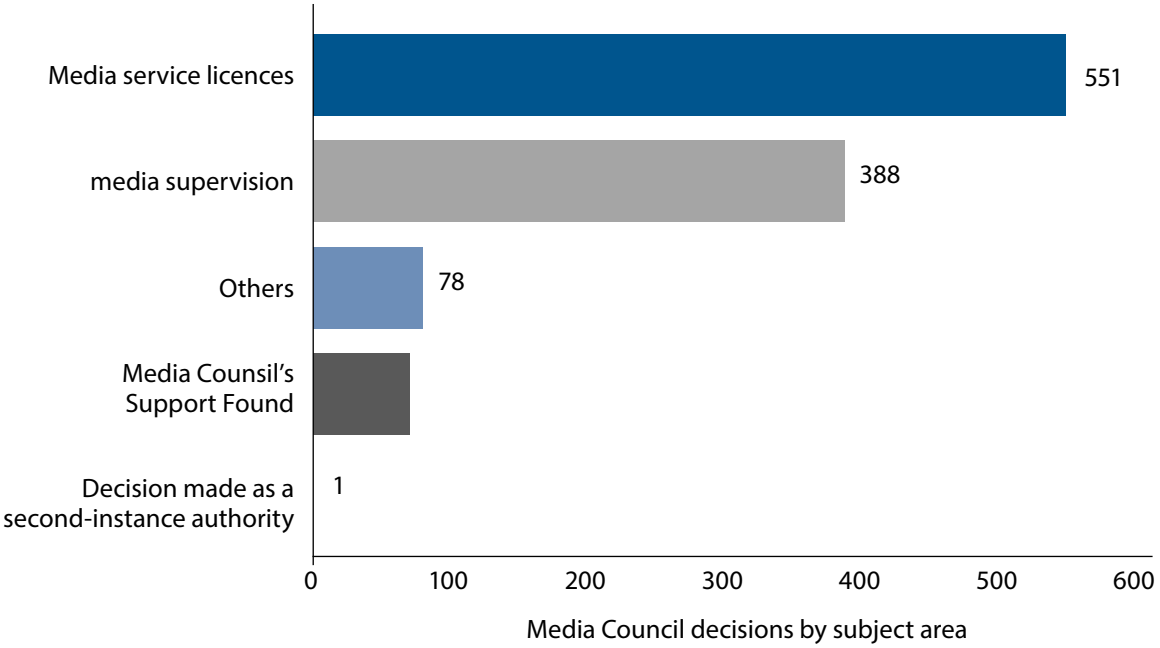
The Media Council activities in 2025 in the light of press freedom

Based on the 2025 report to the National Assembly by the Media Council of the National Media and Communications Authority (B/30, Budapest, May 2026), we summarise below the issues relevant to freedom of the press that the Authority addressed and use statistics to illustrate the focus of its decision-making and content supervision. The data below are taken from the report – that is, from the Authority's own account; the interpretation is ours.

The structure of the decisions

In 2025, the Media Council discussed 893 proposals and briefings at 43 meetings and issued a total of 1,086 decisions. The overwhelming majority of these decisions were not content-related but concerned market organisation and licensing: 551 decisions (half of the total) concerned matters relating to media service licences, 388 concerned media supervision, 68 related to the Media Council's Support Fund, 78 concerned other matters, and only 1 decision was made as a second-instance authority.

Figure 4: *Media Council decisions in 2025 by subject area (1,086 decisions in total)*



Content supervision – investigations relevant to press freedom

From the perspective of freedom of the press, content supervision is the most interesting area, as it directly affects freedom of expression and freedom of information. In 2025, the Media Council regularly examined compliance with five key content requirements: respect for human dignity, the prohibition of hate speech, the protection of minors, the requirement for balanced reporting, and the obligation to distinguish between news and opinion.

Human Dignity (Section 14 of Smtv.).[65] In 2025, the Authority investigated compliance with the provision on respect for human dignity in 60 cases; administrative proceedings were initiated in four of these cases, whilst in the remaining cases the investigation did not reveal any infringements.

Hate speech (Section 17 of Smtv.). The Media Council investigated the enforcement of the ban on content likely to incite hatred or exclusion in 39 cases – primarily following reports from citizens – and initiated proceedings in three cases; in a further case, which had been initiated in 2024, it found a breach of the law in 2025. The report explicitly describes these rules as restrictions on freedom of the press.

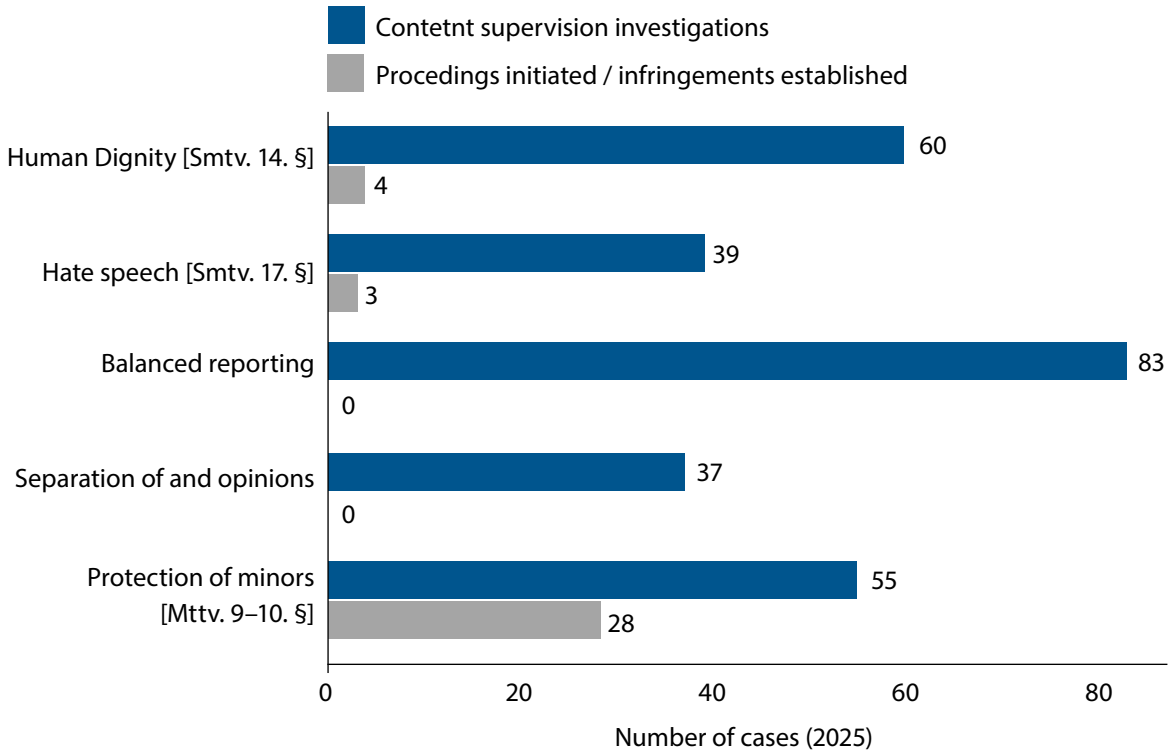
Protection of minors (Sections 9-10 of Mttv.). In 2025, 55 complaints were received concerning media service providers falling under Hungarian jurisdiction. The Media Council decided not to initiate proceedings in 34 cases; however, on the basis of 27 complaints and one ex officio investigation, it found that the rules aimed at protecting minors had been breached. It is worth noting that several thousand complaints from members of the public were received in connection with a print media publication, following which the Authority found a breach of the provision stipulating the protection of minors; in 2025, it issued four decisions on preliminary age classification.

65 It is important to differentiate the two media laws at this point: Act CIV of 2010 on Freedom of the Press and on the Basic Rules Relating to Media Content (Smtv) established the framework, while Act CLXXXV of 2010 on Media Services and on the Mass Media (Mttv) contains the specific regulation.

Balanced reporting (Section 13 of Smtv. and Section 12. (1)–(2) of Mttv.). This requirement lies at the heart of debates on political freedom of the press: the balanced reporting procedure may only be initiated upon request and is subject to specific, short deadlines. In 2025, the authority dealt with 83 cases relating to requests for balanced coverage (the Media Council issued 77 decisions and the Office issued 6). All 83 cases were concluded without a finding of infringement: in 51 cases, the Authority rejected the application, whilst in 32 cases it terminated the proceedings by order.

Separation of news and opinions (Section 12. (3)–(4) of Mttv.). This requirement is intended to ensure that the public can form their own views on news and political current affairs programmes free from the influence of the media service provider. In 2025, the Media Council acted on 5 cases following reports and 32 cases following applications; of the proceedings initiated following applications, 4 were discontinued and 28 resulted in the rejection of the application – in other words, none of the applications led to a finding of a breach of the law.

Figure 5: *Content supervision investigations and the number of proceedings initiated / infringements established, by main requirements (2025)*

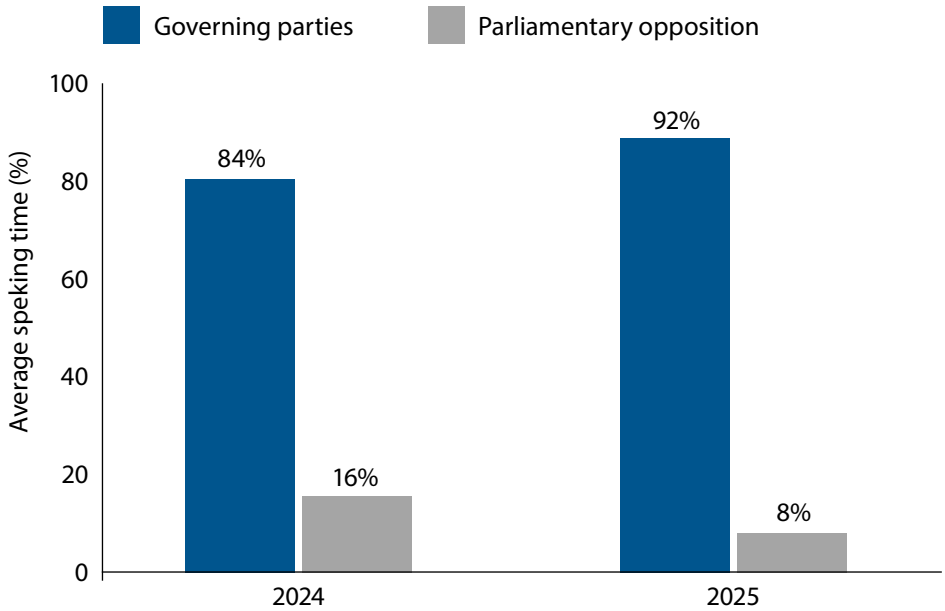


One of the key lessons of the data is that the two mechanisms directly linked to political information – balanced reporting and the separation of news from opinion – generated a combined total of 120 cases or submissions in 2025, yet the authority did not establish a single infringement. This reflects the duality highlighted in Mérték's previous analyses: on the one hand, the balanced reporting procedure imposes a procedural burden on media service providers; on the other hand, it does not substantially restrict the reporting practices of media outlets close to the government.

Inequality in political reporting as revealed by the authority's own monitoring

The Media Council's own monitoring also documents the inequality in the provision of information within the media market. According to an analysis of news and political current affairs programmes in 2025, domestic political issues once again took centre stage, whilst in domestic political life, the conflicts between the government and the new opposition Tisza Party received the greatest coverage; the former opposition parties lost ground in every news programme. In terms of speaking time allocated to participants, the government's dominance continued to grow: amongst parliamentary parties in 2025, the government accounted for approximately 86 per cent of speaking time (compared with approximately 14 per cent for the parliamentary opposition), whilst taking all politicians into account, this figure stood at 76 per cent. According to the report's own chart, the government's monthly share in 2025 ranged between 86 and 95 per cent – an annual average of around 92 per cent, compared with around 84 per cent in 2024.

Figure 6: *Speaking time allocated to the government and the parliamentary opposition in news and political current affairs programmes (annual average, as a percentage of total speaking time)*



Judicial review

In 2025, 34 court (administrative) cases were brought against the decisions of the Media Council; by the end of the year, 22 proceedings were pending and 20 had been concluded, 17 of which ended in favour of the Media Council. Among the concluded cases, the majority – 10 cases – concerned issues relating to balance and the views of newsreaders (of these, 7 were concluded in favour of the authority), indicating that requirements relating to political reporting represent the most contentious area of the authority's application of the law.

Summary

Overall, the focus of the Media Council's activities in 2025 – based on the distribution of decisions – was on frequency management and licensing, and, within content supervision, on quota obligations, the protection of minors and the monitoring of commercial communications. The authority applied measures directly affecting the balance of political coverage in many cases, but found no substantive infringements in any of them, whilst its own monitoring recorded a further increase in the dominance of pro-government political programmes. The picture emerging from radio licensing and content regulation is thus consistent: the Authority's practices strengthen the market and communication positions of pro-government actors, whilst the measures designed to protect press freedom fail to have any substantive restrictive effect.

THE IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON HUNGARIAN JOURNALISM

Artificial intelligence did not arrive in journalism as a single dramatic moment but crept in quietly. Text-editing software, translation tools, image generators are already present in most newsrooms, but mostly unlabeled and unregulated.

AI has by now evolved to a point where it has gradually seeped into everyday life - and journalism is no exception. This trend was particularly visible during the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary election campaign, which brought an explosive spread of AI-generated content. According to an analysis by Political Capital[66], AI-based visual content became a key element of political communication in the pro-government media space: County newspapers and national online news portals linked to the Fidesz government coordinated their use of AI-generated illustrations in their Facebook communications, following a coordinated distribution strategy built on mutating variations. This affects journalists as well: they now have to hold their ground in this ecosystem not only as producers of content but also as its filters and gatekeepers.

In this chapter we examine how and for what purposes Hungarian journalists use artificial intelligence, and how newsrooms are adapting to the phenomenon. To this end, we interviewed journalists at three wide-reaching, national online news portals (444, HVG, Telex), three local news portals (Debreciner, KecsUp, and Szegeder), and one investigative outlet (Direkt36). We selected interviewees with the aim of gathering as much experience with AI use as possible; the sample therefore includes editors-in-chief,

66 Political Capital (2026). AI-generált képsorozatok a kormánypárt üzeneteinek szolgálatában a megyei lapok Facebook-oldalain [AI-generated image series serving the governing party's messaging on county newspapers' Facebook pages]. https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=3665

newsroom leaders, journalists covering technology, and specialists responsible for AI development. We also reached out to staff at leading online outlets linked to Fidesz (Magyar Nemzet, Mandiner, Index, Origo), including some who had themselves actively taken part in spreading AI-generated content. One colleague from Index responded to our request, but after we had successfully arranged a time, they unexpectedly cancelled the interview and did not respond to any further contact attempts.

What can artificial intelligence be used for in newsrooms?

Public discourse about the relationship between AI and journalism generally focuses on the most dramatic issue: content generation. Several interviewees recalled the embarrassing incident in which a Hungarian journalist accidentally left a ChatGPT response in a published article - an episode that has become something of a cautionary tale among journalists.

Based on the interviews, AI use in the newsrooms in Hungary is considerably more conservative than in international examples. We see less systematic experimentation and less active knowledge-sharing than in the European cases[67]. According to the interviews, AI use in Hungarian independent newsrooms occurs at three distinct levels.

"There's no such thing as AI creating any content" - the taboo

The use of generative artificial intelligence – that is, the technology capable of creating new content, such as text, images, or audio, based on its training data and in response to written instructions[68] – for content production is banned or heavily restricted at every newsroom we studied. This is usually an unspoken consensus rather than a written rule. In some places there is a verbal instruction to this effect; elsewhere it exists only as an internal understanding.

We don't create content with AI — there's no such thing as AI creating any content. (444)

Whether stated or unstated, there is broad consensus that AI does not replace journalists in content production within the newsroom. 24.hu and Telex take a very strict line on not letting images and graphics be produced with AI help – a stance explained by the presence of a strong in-house graphics team. HVG experiments more with artificial intelligence in graphics, but even there, a skilled professional always supervises and refines the output, and the accompanying text is entirely the work of journalists.

At smaller local newsrooms, which cannot afford to employ dedicated graphic designers, the editorial stance is more permissive, but our respondents said they, too, prefer to work "real" human whenever they can. Although some experimentation has begun with covers and explanatory graphics, the images illustrating articles strictly come from "real" photographs.

67 Cools, H. & Diakopoulos, N. (2024). Uses of Generative AI in the Newsroom: Mapping Journalists' Perceptions of Perils and Possibilities, Journalism Practice, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2024.2394558

68 L. A., Dalen, van A., & Skovsgaard M. (2025). A Little of that Human Touch: How Regular Journalists Redefine Their Expertise in the Face of Artificial Intelligence, Journalism Studies, 26:1, 84-100, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2024.2412212

Newsrooms that operate some form of subscription model, or that rely heavily on reader donations, place particular emphasis on asking readers for money only in exchange for "artisan journalism".

> *I think that even if this kind of change happens at the publisher, the response will still be: let's not ask for money for something someone could put together with three good prompts in their chatbot. (HVG)*

At 24.hu, it is emphasized strongly that, in future, the content intended for subscribers will consist solely of material produced entirely by journalists, however AI develops further. At HVG there is an informal but strong expectation that only human work stands behind paid content. Telex takes a similar position: the question of trust and credibility is inseparable from the question of readers' financial support.

Some newsrooms are experimenting with „outsourcing" smaller tasks to artificial intelligence in order to save time. They use AI to help write article-opening leads and promotional texts shared on social media, but this is not yet established practice, and the experimentation is allegedly accompanied by very thorough checking.

At newsrooms that run professional trainee programs for entry-level journalists, whilst there is no specific AI training module, they are nevertheless told that they must not use artificial intelligence to generate text.

"We never said the text was written in Word, either" - AI-based support tools

Transcription, translation, text-to-speech – nearly every newsroom we spoke to uses these, but almost no one considers it „using AI." At Debreciner, they explained:

> *Just as we don't note what camera or what computer we work with – where it's not a matter of contributing to original content, of something that itself creates or manipulates the original content, it hasn't occurred to us to label it. (Debreciner)*

Other interviewees likewise frame the growing use of AI-based tools in newsrooms to lighten workloads as a natural stage in the evolution of technical tools. These tools – from transcription to translation – are by now so embedded in the daily workflow that for most journalists they are not "AI" but simply a "tool".

This is the level of artificial intelligence at which acceptance has become absolute: the tool has been absorbed into newsroom workflows and has itself become invisible. Asked whether they disclose the use of these tools to readers, every newsroom said no, arguing that just as they don't flag the use of a dictaphone, Photoshop, or a digital camera, they don't flag these either. At KecsUp, the first few AI-generated images were labeled as such, but the practice was later dropped – no reader feedback followed the change.

"This could take them a whole week; the program pulls it together in half an hour" – experimental AI

On another level, artificial intelligence tools are deliberately applied to specific tasks, though the use is neither regular nor a newsroom-wide decision.

This mainly covers research and the collating of sources: extracting data from vast databases, for instance, or organizing and compiling foreign media coverage for an in-depth investigative piece.

According to the interviews, Direkt36 appears to be particularly active in this respect, but journalists remain cautious and wary of AI even at this level: they brought in an AI developer to help build the research needed for their articles, and in every case they manually checked the results AI produced.

> *We realized there was no way we could reliably build this into a table on our own. I found an AI developer who built something that could extract this information from the text and put it into a table. But there, too, the AI got it wrong quite a few times – so the result was that we had to check everything one by one. But if we'd done it by hand, we would have had to check it too. (Direkt36)*

In the case described, according to the journalist, five people spent three days checking the work the AI had done – but the end result was still faster and more accurate than if everything had been done manually.

Several respondents said they also call on artificial intelligence to generate story ideas. Newsrooms build their own topic-gathering prompts – sometimes refined over the course of weeks – that pull together local, international, or thematic sources.

> *It reads through and reviews hundreds, sometimes even a thousand pages, and usually comes back with 8 to 12 story ideas. Of these, usually 3 or 4 are genuine gold, things I never would have thought of myself. The rest are either weaker or completely forgettable. (Szegeder)*

Some newsrooms also draw on what AI offers after articles are written, for fact-checking, automatic tagging, and content organization alike. At 444, they use a tool developed specifically in-house for automatic hashtagging – according to the interviewee, this not only reduces workload but also visibly improves traffic arriving from Google.

"There isn't really an AI policy at the newsroom" – informal norms

None of the newsrooms has a formal, written AI policy. An informal consensus operates in its place – though this, too, has its limits.

There isn't really an AI policy in the newsroom – that is, there's no policy setting out what's allowed and what isn't, and along with that, there isn't any centrally provided infrastructure for it either. (HVG)

I wouldn't say it's laid out in a hardcore set of rules – it's more of an internal shared understanding, more like a contract-like agreement. (444)

At HVG, for instance, the ban isn't written down precisely because it is „taken so much for granted" – but this symptomatic absence carries its own risks. Anonymous surveys conducted in international newsrooms show that in reality almost everyone uses some AI tool, but few dare admit it: they fear being fired, losing professional standing, or being sanctioned by their boss for using it[69]. Our interviewees, too, generally agreed that most members of a given newsroom most likely use some AI tool.

Every outlet strongly opposes the use of generative AI, but this has no written policy, is not formally built into trainee programs, and has become the subject of a formal newsroom discussion almost nowhere. 444.hu and Szegeder experiment most actively with what AI can be used for, though there is no written policy at either of them. A leader's own attitude directly shapes the organizational norm – not just in terms of formal rules, but also in terms of how the tools actually get used.

How actively a given newsroom experiments with these tools shows no clear correlation with the newsroom's size or the age of the journalists working there. Some smaller newsrooms treat bringing in AI as a way of optimizing resources – as they put it, „outsourcing smaller tasks leaves more time for real journalism". But this cannot be generalized to every newsroom: how much artificial intelligence gets used depends far more on how open individual people are to new technology.

As the leader is, so is the organization. I, for instance, am something of an early adopter, and naturally the people I've hired tend to resemble me. Where the leader is more conservative about technology, it's only natural that the newsroom will be too. (Szegeder)

There was, however, consensus among our interviewees that whether or not they use AI at present, it brings and will keep bringing major changes, and every newsroom would do well to prepare for that.

"It said things, without so much as a hiccup, that were clearly false" – reliability and hallucination

A term that has entered public discourse is that AI „hallucinates". In reality, this means that large language models confidently produce facts, names, dates, or references that simply do not correspond to reality. The technical reason is that these models do not draw on a genuine knowledge base but continue text based on statistical patterns: they generate the next word or sentence that seems most probable, not the one that is most accurately retrievable. AI does not necessarily acknowledge when it lacks knowledge of something, which makes it especially important to check whether an answer is

69 Cools, H. & Diakopoulos, N. (2024). Uses of Generative AI in the Newsroom: Mapping Journalists' Perceptions of Perils and Possibilities, Journalism Practice, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2024.2394558

actually grounded in real data. This phenomenon is particularly strong for Hungarian-language, local, or rarely documented topics, since far less such content appears in the models' training data.

Our interviewees' skepticism is therefore not irrational. According to the interviews, AI is particularly unreliable for work involving Hungarian-language, local topics; respondents backed this up with their personal experience.

> *There's a village called Újszentmargita in Hajdú-Bihar county, and there's a tall tower right at its edge. We asked the AI how tall it might be. It couldn't find it, and instead brought up a similarly named village across the border – it went off to a different country entirely. It said things, without so much as a hiccup, that were clearly false. After that, we decided to keep it at the level it belongs. (Debreciner)*

> *I tried it: I asked it for a biography of someone I knew – and it invented fictional parents for them, a fictional story too. It wrote up where this person, who never existed, had studied, what career they'd had. (HVG)*

The assessment of reliability is not always this clear-cut, however. A few of our interviewees took a more forgiving view of AI's mistakes and stressed the importance of careful use – while also acknowledging that humans make mistakes too and that, in some cases, AI proved more accurate than manual checking.

> *Sometimes, if the information we were looking for wasn't in the source text, it hallucinated something instead. But there were also times when the AI grasped the logic of a complicated text – a legal text, say – really deftly. It came up with a different result from what I'd first understood, and after reading it over a few times, I realized the AI was right. (Direkt36)*

> *It's true that it hallucinates, but let's be honest: people hallucinate too. People say stupid things as well – the difference is that a colleague of yours who hallucinates probably won't be operating on a completely different level within two or three years. With AI, we can see that compared to two or three years ago, it's already reached an academic level. (Szegeder)*

Interviewees all addressed hallucinations and errors, though with differing degrees of strictness. But it is not only mistakes that hold back more extensive use. The ban on generated content, for instance, is not driven primarily by fear of errors.

> *We'd rather stick with a stumbling piece of text written by a journalist than a more polished text that doesn't have a person, a journalist behind it. (Debreciner)*

> *What makes us different, what makes us special, is that we put our own brains into it, our own thinking into what we make. (444)*

Hungarian newsrooms insist that their work counts as journalism only if journalists genuinely produce it. Several respondents put it this way: the further spread of AI will, if anything, raise the value of their own work, since by taking on a kind of gatekeeper role they can help people find credible, reliable information.

> *Artisan journalism will become more valuable amid all the artificially generated content. (24.hu)*

"The editors in charge flagged that this piece needed careful handling, because it read as if AI had written it" – filtering out AI content and disinformation

When it comes to filtering out AI-generated content and impact of AI on public discourse and journalistic work, our respondents mostly see this as a quantity problem: it is not so much the quality of false content, but its sheer volume that has grown dramatically, and the resulting flood in social media and the news space makes verification very difficult.

At the level of public discourse, the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary election campaign brought an unprecedented scale of political use of AI-generated content. According to the Political Capital analysis[70], AI-based visual content became a key element of political communication in the pro-government media space: County newspapers and national online news portals linked to the Fidesz government coordinated their use of AI-generated illustrations in their Facebook communications. The quantitative growth in disinformation content burdens not just readers' media literacy but also newsrooms' verification capacity.

Obviously, if AI floods the internet, it makes it harder for us too, when we see a video, to decide whether it's real or not. (Direkt36)

The way I see it, it's simply become much easier to make things like this – whether images or text – including false information. It's a quantitative shift, not a qualitative one. (HVG)

Our interviewees said this problem shows up with less intensity at local papers: fake AI-generated images of local events did appear in local Facebook groups and chat communities too, but these were usually filtered out by commenters themselves.

Fidesz-government propaganda seeped in very strongly, but local disinformation affected us less. There may have been three or four cases at most where something happened, and instead of the real picture, people opened something invented – but that was filtered out, so to speak, by commenters. (KecsUp)

No newsroom has a dedicated tool for filtering out AI content. Editors rely on journalistic intuition, classic fact-checking methods, and news-agency photo archives.

AI text is, I think, fairly quick to spot – anyone who's used something like it a few times, even just to try it out, can simply tell when AI generated a text. (HVG)

The editors in charge flagged that this piece needed careful handling, because it read as if AI had written it. (KecsUp)

Knowledge, skepticism, and being well-informed – that settles it in maybe 80 to 90 percent of cases. (Telex)

70 Political Capital (2026). The Role of Deepfake Technology and AI in the Hungarian Election Campaign. https://edmo.eu/edmo-news/ail-based-manipulation-the-role-of-deepfake-technology-and-ai-in-the-hungarian-election-campaign/

With video and images, the situation is more complicated; journalistic intuition alone is proving increasingly insufficient, and no newsroom was able to offer a solution to this problem.

Obviously right now it's still relatively easy to tell whether a video was made with AI – there are these odd movements, and the background is oddly smooth – but I think that within a foreseeable amount of time, this will get much harder to judge. (Direkt36)

Conclusion

The newsrooms we studied present neither a picture of an AI revolution nor one of outright refusal. Rather, it is a disorderly transitional state: the tools are seeping in, internal norms based on consensus are taking shape, formal regulation is absent, and individual decisions determine actual use.

Smaller newsrooms, for one thing, cannot experiment systematically because of a lack of resources. Larger ones could, but in several cases their organizational culture changes more slowly than the technology does. Szegeder and 444 are the most openly experimental – in both cases it is clear that leadership actively welcomes attempts to work with artificial intelligence, and this meets no resistance among newsroom staff.

We did not, however, encounter knowledge-sharing between newsrooms (within the FÜLKE circle – cooperation among local newsrooms – there is some, though it hasn't specifically touched on AI), shared regulatory models, or a professional discourse specifically thinking through the future of Hungarian media and journalism in light of artificial intelligence.

I can see that both small and large newsrooms, at home and abroad, have started using this as a tool, and we can't avoid it either – but for us, it's going to be a more difficult process. (KecsUp)