



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Régis Dandoy,
Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Ecuador

REVIEWED BY

Gal Yavetz,
Bar-Ilan University, Israel
Charmaine Distor,
Université de Lausanne, Switzerland

*CORRESPONDENCE

Bálint Mikola
✉ mikolab@ceu.edu

RECEIVED 24 July 2025

REVISED 26 November 2025

ACCEPTED 10 December 2025

PUBLISHED 06 January 2026

CITATION

Mikola B (2026) Carpet bombing vs. targeting: the impact of pro-government social media influencers during the 2022 Hungarian general election campaign. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 7:1672594. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1672594

COPYRIGHT

© 2026 Mikola. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Carpet bombing vs. targeting: the impact of pro-government social media influencers during the 2022 Hungarian general election campaign

Bálint Mikola*

CEU Democracy Institute, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Hybrid media systems challenge the agenda-setting role of legacy media and political elites, and open new avenues for political parties and governments to push their narratives. Social media influencers have gained special prominence in accessing young audiences, which led to their incorporation into electoral campaigns. This paper explores how the Hungarian governing party, Fidesz, relied on social media influencers in its 2022 re-election bid, and evaluates the success of this strategy in reaching young audiences vis-à-vis other social media pages that share political content. The paper uses Facebook ad statistics to test how cooperation with pro-government influencers amplified the government's narrative, especially among young voters under 35. It finds that pro-government influencers have been less efficient in reaching their desired audience, however, this was compensated by a vast budget and a "carpet-bombing" approach. The paper contributes to an emerging literature on the role of social media influencers as political agenda-setters.

KEYWORDS

government, social media, agenda-setting, communication, campaigns, youth, political influencers, Hungary

1 Introduction

More than a decade after the notion of "hybrid media systems" was first presented (Chadwick, 2011), thinking about the interactions between old and new media logics has become a cornerstone of political communication research (see, e.g., Peruško, 2021; Reese, 2022). However, even if it has been widely demonstrated that young, digital native audiences rely on social media influencers as a reliable source of information regarding an increasing number of subjects, including political issues (Geers, 2020; Hao et al., 2014), scholarly work on their impact on young people's political attitudes remains sporadic (Schmuck et al., 2022; Suuronen et al., 2022). Consequently, the attention of political scientists studying social media has mostly focused on party and political elite communications conducted through verified institutional accounts, predominantly on Twitter (e.g., Maireder and Ausserhofer, 2014; Masroor et al., 2019; Yaqub et al., 2017), although there is increasing recognition of the importance of other platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram (Klüver, 2024). This shift in emphasis is warranted by the changing sociodemographic composition in social media platforms' followers (Laor, 2022). As several political psychologists have shown (Konstantinou and Jones, 2022; Santer et al., 2023), Gen Z and younger audiences place disproportionate emphasis on the (perceived) authenticity of the social media content they consume, which has contributed to the increasing popularity of self-selected social media

influencers on the one hand, and less mediated platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Alsharawy et al., 2025; Belanche et al., 2021) on the other.

As this paper will argue, focusing on the appropriate channels per country and per demographic group may be especially relevant in understanding political discourse in an autocratizing context (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019) where different narratives are offered to target groups that overlap to a negligible degree, allowing for the diversification of channels, messaging, and communication styles. Moreover, the paper also addresses a gap in existing literature on social media influencers, which has primarily considered them as opinion leaders who also engage in marketing brands or products (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Lee and Watkins, 2016; Munukka et al., 2019), but rarely focused on their political impact (Riedl et al., 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022; Suuronen et al., 2022).

To address the role of social media influencers in shaping political discourse and the attitudes of young voters, a definition is needed first. Following Suuronen and colleagues, social media influencers will be understood as “opinion leaders who (1) intensively use social media in their communication practices, (2) collaborate with corporations to monetise their opinion leader status, (3) establish regular two-way interactions with their followers that often lead to parasocial relationships, and (4) engage in self-branding strategies to curate a consistent public persona” (Suuronen et al., 2022: 303). Since this paper focuses on the creation of political content, the previous list of criteria will be extended with a fifth requirement: to understand political impact, we will look at social media influencers who regularly post political content on their profiles. Even though the number of social media followers may be consequential in determining influencers’ political impact, which would warrant focusing on meso- and mega influencers (with more than 100 thousand and 1 million followers, respectively) (Ali et al., 2025; Conde and Casais, 2023), since this paper focuses on institutionalised forms of advertised content, it will use ad spending as a criterion for selecting relevant influencers instead. This approach seems warranted given that the role of “nano” and “micro” influencers is also increasingly acknowledged in the literature (Woolley, 2022).

It may be further problematised what is considered as “political content,” whereby one may distinguish between content that is explicitly related to current political affairs through mentioning the names of specific political parties, actors or referring to ongoing political debates or scandals vs. those that refer to more generic or “soft” issues such as environment, human rights, identities etc. In a similar vein, Suuronen et al. (2022) make a distinction between social media content discussing “formal politics,” i.e., “issues that relate to political processes, institutions, or actors such as politicians, parties, or policies” and “lifestyle politics” understood as posts that refer to “collective concerns” that have a broad societal impact including health, travel, family, or housing. This study will exclusively focus on social media influencers who address “formal politics”; therefore, the aforementioned distinction will only be relevant on a theoretical level. However, conceptually, influencers that meet these criteria may be differentiated from the broader group of social media influencers through the introduction of the term “political influencers” (Riedl et al., 2023) understood as “content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform” (Riedl et al., 2023, p. 2). It must be noted, however, that political influencers so conceived

are not an entirely new phenomenon whose roots may be found in earlier research on “political influentials” (Dubois and Gaffney, 2014) and opinion leaders (Mangold and Bachl, 2018).

Despite the potential impact of social media influencers’ political content on young people’s political attitudes, empirical research into this area has been scarce. However, the prevalence of political content on social media influencers’ feeds was demonstrated by a non-representative survey of Finnish influencers which found that over 90 percent of the social media influencers surveyed brought up political topics at least once on their channels, even if these mostly included “lifestyle politics” (Suuronen et al., 2022). Influencers’ political content has also been found to contribute to the perceived simplification of politics, thereby making political topics more approachable to young audiences (Schmuck et al., 2022). Moreover, recent research has found that political influencers have mostly fulfilled the role of “amplifiers” in the social media information ecosystem, i.e., they commented on existing political events rather than initiated new ones (Liang and Lu, 2023), and even though they shared rich information, the share of opinionated content and self-representation remained relatively low (Sehl and Schützneder, 2023).

Notwithstanding the novelty of this research strand, it seems justifiable to assume that political content posted by social media influencers shapes the attitudes of young social media consumers, and that such opportunity is also recognised by institutional political actors who otherwise struggle to reach young voters. Furthermore, since political marketing by non-institutional actors falls outside the scope of campaign regulation in most countries (Tambini et al., 2019), it also creates a loophole for creative campaign financing, making it an even more attractive avenue for political parties that have a sizeable communications budget but are bound by legal thresholds (for a more detailed account of parties’ social media spending, see Stuckelberger and Koedam, 2022).

The sections below explain case selection and provide its context, which is followed by the description of the data used for the proceeding analysis of the findings. The paper ends with a concluding section and some thoughts for discussion.

2 Case selection: Hungary as a laboratory of outsourcing government discourse

Hungary has been a crucial case both for studying trends in de-democratization as well as media transformation during the past more than a decade. The country’s democratic backsliding since 2010 has been widely documented and discussed in academic literature, as well as in cross-national democracy indices such as V-Dem which has categorised Hungary as an “electoral autocracy” since 2018 and included it on its list of “top autocratizers” in 2022 (Papada et al., 2023). The peculiarity of the Hungarian case, especially within an EU context, has also drawn significant attention from the scholarly community and a constant search for the most appropriate label to characterise it, with authors referring to it as an “externally constrained hybrid regime” (Bozóki and Hegedüs, 2018), an “illiberal regime” (Enyedi and Whitefield, 2020; Krekó and Enyedi, 2018; Enyedi, 2024), a “diffusively defective democracy” (Bogaards, 2018), or a case of “well-managed autocratization” (Enyedi and Mikola, 2024), among others.

However, the Hungarian governing party Fidesz has not only been especially innovative with regards to the content of its populist discourse (Hegedüs, 2021), but also in terms of the methods it has chosen to distribute such messages. While its media strategy (discussed below) has been influential to the extent that it spilled over to regional allies including Macedonia under Gruevski and Slovenia under Jansa (Kazharski and Macalová, 2020), the more recent conquest of social media by Fidesz has been less discussed and even less researched (see, e.g., Hoffman and Neumayer, 2024). Some of the most recent findings indicate that Fidesz has not only dedicated vast financial resources to dominate social media, but that it also used different emotional appeals in its messaging than its competitors through primarily evoking anger and fear in their posts (Bene and Juhász, 2025). One should note that the reliance of ruling politicians on social media during election campaigns is not unique to Hungary and has been documented by research in Israel (Haleva-Amir and Nahon, 2015; Katz, 2018), Brazil (Brito et al., 2019), and Turkey (Demirhan, 2016; Yesil, 2021). At the same time, the institutionalised outsourcing of campaign messaging to an organised group of political influencers is an innovation by the Hungarian governing party (Horváth et al., 2025) which renders this a crucial case to study the use of political influencers in electoral campaigns.

The sections below first discuss the media, institutional and regulatory context of political campaigning in Hungary, then introduce a truly exceptional experiment in the field of social media political marketing which involves the establishment of a pro-government influencer agency, the implications of which will be elaborated in the empirical section.

2.1 The takeover of the Hungarian media landscape 2010–2022: from party colonization to single-party dominance

From the moment Fidesz gained a two-thirds supermajority in parliament in 2010, its ambitions to dominate the Hungarian media landscape have been clear, starting with the adoption of a new Media Act the same year, which has ensured single-party dominance over the national Media Authority (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013, 2017; Polyák, 2019). Fidesz has secured its dominance in legacy (print, TV, radio) media via three channels: 1. hostile takeovers; 2. rejecting appeals for licenses and hindering mergers and acquisitions by market actors; and 3. channelling state advertising budget to government-friendly outlets (Bátorfy and Urbán, 2020).

The perhaps most consequential move towards media dominance was the gradual and complete acquisition of regional and local outlets that were previously owned by several independent commercial publishers. This has culminated in the creation of an unprecedented phenomenon: pro-government oligarchs voluntarily “donated” these outlets to a not-for-profit association in 2018, concentrating more than 400 outlets in a single conglomerate, covering the whole regional media market. The radio market is likewise dominated by pro-government outlets, while independent radio stations routinely struggle to get licenses. Since 2021, the most relevant independent radio, Klubrádió, can only function online. The commercial television market is somewhat more pluralistic thanks to the continued presence of German RTL group which broadcasts independent news coverage.

The online media space remains relatively balanced, despite remarkable efforts from the government to extend its sphere of influence to this arena (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2022). Landmarks in this regard were the takeover of two of the most popular online news sites *Origo.hu* (in 2015), and *Index.hu* (2020) through businessmen close to the ruling party which reach more than 2 million readers combined. Despite these developments, several independent news sites remain among the most popular ones, and these outlets have increasingly relied on subscription-based or crowdfunding models to compensate for the distortions of the advertising market. Therefore, online media remains resilient and has significant reach despite enormous discrepancies in the resources available to them.

Hungary’s nosediving in terms of press freedom has also been documented by comparative indices such as Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) World Press Freedom Index in which Hungary ranked 10th in 2006 in a global sample of 180 countries, while its position has plummeted to the 85th place by 2022.¹ Although the decline already started during the 2006–2009 government crisis, Hungary still ranked 23rd in 2010, therefore, most of the backsliding occurred under the various Orbán cabinets, which also saw the country being downgraded to “Partly Free” by Freedom House (2019).

2.2 On political advertising in Hungary

Beyond creating a media sphere that is heavily biased towards the governing parties, Fidesz also introduced changes in campaign regulations that further tilted the already uneven playing field in its direction. In particular, the 2013 law on campaign financing has introduced the opportunity of SMD candidates to transfer their share of state subventions to the central party campaign budgets, which are subject to less rigorous accountability mechanisms. This formula has resulted in the centralisation of political campaigns and has facilitated the emergence of “fake parties,” i.e., business parties (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999) that contest the elections without serious political ambitions for the sake of getting access to state subventions. The emergence of such parties has contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition vote and strengthened the majoritarian effect of the mixed electoral system in favour of the governing parties (Papp and Zorigt, 2018). Moreover, in 2017, Fidesz adopted a controversial regulation on political billboard campaigns which made it illegal for billboard companies to offer discounts from their list prices, as well as constrained political ads to the duration of the official campaign period. Since this regulation does not apply neither to government advertising, nor to NGOs, Fidesz could easily circumvent it through outsourcing its messages to one of these actors.

Opposition parties’ opportunities to communicate their campaign messages are also limited by the fact that public media channels are only obliged to offer a 5-min slot to each party’s principal candidate, while they are free to dedicate the remaining airtime to cover news related to the governing parties (Hungary Today, 2022). In addition to the lack of media access, opposition parties also face severe sanctions from the State Audit Office which has in several cases recommended

¹ See: <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2022>

cutting their state subventions for failing to comply with financial reporting requirements², while it has routinely failed to detect similar irregularities in the case of Fidesz.

Moreover, as [Bátorfy and Urbán \(2020\)](#) demonstrate, the media access of the opposition is not only influenced directly by not offering them space to articulate their agendas, but also indirectly through diverting a disproportionately large share (according to [Mérték, 2021](#), 86 per cent) of state advertisement budgets to government-friendly media outlets or, more eloquently, through the “uncontrolled expropriation of the state’s financial resources in the interest of transforming the media market” ([Bátorfy and Urbán, 2020](#): 44). Such distortion of the media market creates a vicious circle in which independent outlets may either opt out from state advertising altogether, depriving themselves of a crucial source of income and the financial stability it provides, or exercise self-censorship in order to remain eligible.

However, social media has long been considered as an arena that can potentially equalise inequalities in media access ([Gibson and McAllister, 2015](#)) and thus present new opportunity structures to political challengers and incumbents alike. Beyond that, social media political advertising is also relevant in the sense that it offers a loophole to circumvent campaign financing regulations that set a HUF 5 million threshold per candidate in general election campaigns, a limit that certain candidates have outspent on Facebook alone.³ The State Audit Office that oversees the campaign spending of political parties declared in 2021 that such ads did not qualify as political advertisement, therefore exempting them from the aforementioned threshold. Moreover, in June 2025, the government decided to lift all campaign spending thresholds, therefore making the 2026 general elections a laboratory of unregulated campaign finances, whose impact will reach beyond social media.

From a broader perspective, the opportunity constituted by online political advertising is not only manifest in individual breaches of campaign limits, but also in the amount of overall spending: cumulated spending (since data was first made available in April 2019) on political Facebook ads has passed the HUF 7 billion mark in April 2022, which is more than twice of the estimated overall amount the government (HUF 3.1 billion) and opposition parties (HUF 390) million have spent on their billboard campaigns during the 2022 general election campaigns, combined ([K-Monitor, Political Capital and Transparency International Hungary, 2022](#)). Previous analysis of Facebook spending data⁴ has shown that pro-government pages’ advertisement budget exceeded that of opposition-leaning Facebook pages (by 74 per cent), however, this difference is still less pronounced than the estimated eightfold difference in legacy media and outdoor advertising budgets ([K-Monitor, Political Capital and Transparency International Hungary, 2022](#)).

2.3 On the relevance of social media influencers in Hungary

Following a global trend, the rise of social media influencers in Hungary has been uninterrupted from the second half of the last decade to the extent that the Hungarian edition of business magazine *Forbes* published its first “List of the Most Valuable Influencers” in 2023 ([Forbes, 2023](#)), symbolically elevating this scene to the same level of importance as legacy media players. The increasing weight of the sector is also demonstrated by the advertising revenue that is spent via influencers: market research company Kantar estimated in 2021 that annual overall spending on influencer marketing in Hungary has passed the HUF 1 billion mark that year, which was still below 1 per cent of overall advertising revenues but was growing steadily at the time⁵, and reached an estimated HUF 4–5 billion by 2023 ([Szabó, 2024](#)).

However, it took relatively long for political parties’ communications teams to recognise this trend and switch platforms accordingly. In particular, Fidesz has for long tried to reach young audiences via online news sites ([888.hu](#) and [pestisracok.hu](#)) as well as a TV channel (Pesti TV), however, they all fell behind their main competitors in their respective segments: based on Gemius audience data⁶, [888.hu](#) and [Pesti Srácok](#) have on average generated approximately 150–200 thousand real users per week (about 10 per cent of the leading news sites), while Pesti TV’s audience share has fluctuated between 0.04 and 0.06 per cent.⁷ Since these outlets did not live up to expectations regarding desired audience share, and generated massive financial loss even despite generous state advertising income, the governing party decided to streamline its media portfolio after the 2022 general elections.⁸ Therefore, of the three aforementioned outlets, only [Pesti Srácok](#) remains live, while from 2020, most communication towards young audiences was transferred to social media, via institutional (party or MP) accounts or outsourced to influencers, as explained in the next section.

2.4 Megafon: an unorthodox attempt to outsource political communication

Although the relevance of social media in political communication has been recognised and applied by political leaders across the globe, most notably, former US president Donald Trump ([Clarke and Grieve, 2019](#); [Ott, 2017](#); [Ross and Caldwell, 2020](#)), as well as by the “troll factories” in the service of Russian disinformation campaigns ([Jensen, 2018](#); [Zannettou et al., 2019](#)), the establishment of a professional influencer agency to support pro-government messaging in a

2 See, e.g., <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-jobbik-fine-idUSKBN1EX1JI>

3 See: https://k.blog.hu/2022/03/31/campaign_spending_hungary_billboards

4 See: <https://444.hu/2022/02/10/csak-a-fideszes-blogok-es-ujzagok-mar-1-milliard-forintot-hirdettek-el-a-facebookon>

5 See a summary of Kantar’s findings at the following address: <https://www.digitalhungary.hu/>

marketing/1-milliard-korul-jarhat-a-teljes-hazai-influencer-mediakoltes/11280/

6 <https://rating.gemius.com/hu/tree/14>

7 See <https://media1.hu/2020/12/31/hirtv-pesti-tv-nezettseg/>

8 Beyond the outlets mentioned, political daily *Magyar Hírlap*, business daily *Világ gazdaság*, political weekly *168 Óra*, and business weekly *Figyelő* were also discontinued. For more details, see: <https://ipi.media/analysis-one-year-after-election-media-freedom-in-hungary-remains-suffocated/>

non-institutionalised way is an unorthodox approach whose impact researchers have just started to explore (Bene and Juhász, 2025).

This was adopted by the Hungarian governing party Fidesz to complement institutional profiles for leading politicians on social media, most notably Facebook, which is the most popular social media platform in Hungary with 5.65 million active users in 2022.⁹ Government representatives who also play a role in international politics are also active on Twitter, however, this platform has very limited reach (450 thousand users) in Hungary and therefore is more catered towards an international audience. At the same time, since 2020, Fidesz has diversified its online communication strategy by also establishing profiles on Instagram (2.75 million users in Hungary) and TikTok (2.17 million users in Hungary) to reach young voters.

Beyond the institutional accounts, Fidesz also needed a tool to utilise discourse that was incompatible with the image of government politicians but appealed to young voters more directly through its use of more conflictive, and sometimes vulgar language. This task was outsourced to Megafon, a not-for-profit communications agency established in August 2020 by István Kovács. Kovács previously served as the strategic director of the Center for Fundamental Rights, a pro-government NGO (also referred to as a Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization, or “GONGO”; for a definition, see Çelebi, 2022) that has routinely echoed the government’s discourse on issues related to free speech, minority rights and migration (Geró et al., 2022). Megafon has stressed since its inception that it did not rely on neither public nor party funds to cover its operation costs which were allegedly financed from “right-wing businesspeople’s” donations, a claim that has often been challenged by independent outlets. Due to its strong linkages with pro-governmental narratives and actors, one could argue for also categorising Megafon as a GONGO, however, while this could faithfully reflect their mission, it would not be consistent with their organizational status, therefore, this paper refers to them as a not-for-profit company that operates as a social media “influencer agency”.

Since its foundation, Megafon has served as a hub to recruit, train, and sponsor social media influencers echoing the messages of the Hungarian governing party. In a campaign video¹⁰ that promotes the activities of Megafon and calls for the recruitment of new influencers, they defined their mission as amplifying the voice of “right-wing rebels” and claimed that “the fight for Hungary’s future will be won on the Internet.” In fact, the recruitment efforts of Megafon seem to have yielded success: the official list of influencers sponsored by Megafon rose to fourteen by 2023. Several of the supported influencers have been public figures on their own right before their affiliation with Megafon, blurring the boundaries between their roles as “political influencers” vs. GONGO representatives and legacy media actors: the team includes former anchorpersons (Philip Rákay, Kristóf Trombitás, Bence Apáti), a pro-government publicist (Zsolt Bayer), as well as a political analyst who held various positions at pro-government think-tanks (Dániel Deák). Although the team is dominated by men, one of the two female influencers (Stefi Déri) is among the top 5 in terms of

ad spending, see Table 1. At the same time, Megafon has used real personalities in its social media campaigns as opposed to fake accounts or bots (Helmus et al., 2018), which has contributed to the perceived authenticity of their messaging (see Horváth et al., 2025).

Megafon influencers’ support for the Hungarian governing parties is explicit in the content of their social media posts. Although a detailed analysis of Megafon’s discourse is beyond the scope of this paper, a few examples are due here to illustrate the extent to which posts shared by Megafon influencers mirror the government’s rhetoric. The main campaign message of Fidesz during the 2022 general elections was that left-wing opposition parties were supportive of the war in Ukraine, meaning both willingness to send Hungarian soldiers to fight on Ukraine’s side, as well as support for EU sanctions against Russia (Krekó, 2022). Mirroring these messages, one of the top ads by Megafon influencer Dániel Deák suggested that “the left-wing (opposition) would not shy away from anything to seize power” which he illustrated with quotes from opposition politicians detached from their original context in which they argued for the necessity of EU sanctions. He then went on to argue that “we cannot let left-wing politicians ruin what we, Hungarians achieved together,” a point that the video illustrated with captions from pro-government rallies where the flag of Fidesz was waived visibly. The video ended with a call to action to vote at the general elections, with the narrator saying that “Hungary’s peace and prosperity is our common interest” and that “anyone who votes for this, votes for Fidesz.” This perfect alignment with government messages and the use of elements from the visual identity of Fidesz are typical of Megafon influencers’ posts, which therefore amplify campaign messages without legally qualifying as parts of a political campaign. The close resemblance of Fidesz’s and Megafon’s narrative is also strengthened by strong personal linkages

TABLE 1 Overall ad spending by Megafon influencers (2019 April–2023 March).*

Name of Facebook page	Advertiser	Total ad spend (million HUFs)	Number of ads
Deák Dániel	Megafon	254.2	126
Rákay Philip	Megafon	251.8	125
Bohár Dániel	Megafon	192.1	112
Stefi Déri	Megafon	177.1	86
Trombitás Kristóf	Megafon	166.3	69
KonVerzió	Megafon	61.4	36
Kötter Tamás	Megafon	52.5	31
Korondy Tamás	Megafon	25.2	15
A kopsz oszt	Megafon	17.7	6
Megafon	Megafon	13.3	6
Apáti Bence hivatalos oldala	Megafon	9.6	12
Kovács István	Kovács István Megafon	3.3	91
Gerijoca	Megafon	2.1	3
SUM		1,226.5	718

*Source of data: Facebook Ad Library. Profiles with the same name or those that belong to the same person (e.g., “Bohár Dániel” and “Bohár Dániel – Reporter”) have been aggregated.

⁹ For a comprehensive overview of Internet and social media user statistics and demographics in Hungary, 2022, see: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-hungary>

¹⁰ See: <https://www.facebook.com/megafonkozpont/videos/1569670233404205>

between the two organisations, including Foreign Minister Szijjártó's 2024 presentation and call for active involvement in the 2024 European Parliament elections at a Megafon event¹¹, and the participation of several of the government's candidates in Megafon's training programs.¹²

Furthermore, what is also typical of Megafon influencers' posts is that they often use colloquial language to express their contempt with opposition figures, stylistically distinguishing their posts from those of government representatives. Typical examples of such stylistic marks are the use of derogatory adjectives to describe political opponents including "full-blown left-wing propagandists, a real left-liberal PR agency," a "traitor troll," telling them to "go to hell" or referring to them as a "joke." While Megafon posts often target specific politicians of the opposition, they also serve to discredit independent media outlets by labelling them "fake news." This strategy is in line with the diversification of Fidesz' communications machinery which appeals to various groups of consumers using different stylistic repertoires, a feature that dates to the party's foundational period when it described itself as "radical, liberal, and anti-communist," which streams were embodied by different leaders of the party (Bozóki, 1989; Enyedi, 2006).

3 Empirical data

Most research on political communication on social media either focuses on the discursive aspects of such communication (Farkas and Bene, 2021; Jungherr et al., 2019) or on its cognitive or emotional impact on followers (Duncombe, 2019; Hasell and Weeks, 2016). However, few studies address the financial aspects of political campaigns on social media (Bright et al., 2020). This paper analyses Facebook ad spending data, both in terms of its financial aspects and its impact, which is an often overlooked but increasingly relevant aspect of political campaigns (Avis et al., 2022). To analyse ad spending and impression statistics in detail, this study relies on publicly available data on political advertisement downloaded from the Facebook Ad Library that has allowed access to data from 2019 April, and which has been used for documenting campaign spending in similar research before (Bene and Kruschinski, 2021). The data provided includes information about all spending related to political advertising per individual social media post, and covers the amount spent, as well as estimated audience and impression figures on all social media platforms operated by Meta (Facebook, Instagram, Messenger). The availability of such data allows us not only to detect how much certain advertisers spent during a specific period, but also to assess the efficiency of such advertisements in terms of reaching their desired target audience, defined as the number of impressions (the number of times an individual social media post is displayed in any user's feed) generated on Facebook per the amount spent on advertising posts. Further insights may be drawn from audience

demographics, of which age will be key to our analysis. Therefore, the research design will allow us to answer the following two research questions: 1. How does increased spending on social media advertising affect the reach of the social media posts advertised?; and 2. How successful are targeted social media ads in reaching young demographics?

Theoretical expectations about the impact of social media on political competition have for long been dominated by the assumption that the online sphere would have an equalising effect in terms of giving voice to opposition and newcomers as opposed to incumbents (see Gibson and McAllister, 2015). In line with this hypothesis, previous studies found that Hungarian opposition party spending on Facebook exceeded spending by government-related pages, therefore refuting the "stealth media" thesis which postulated that the most divisive social media campaigns in the US were run by "unidentifiable 'suspicious' groups" (Kim et al., 2018: 515). During the 2019 European Parliament and municipal election campaign, the relative dominance of the opposition parties on Facebook was so strong that it led observers to conclude that "in Hungary, Facebook may rather be considered a campaign tool for the opposition, where the Orbán regime's opposition may achieve larger visibility than the governing parties" (Bene et al., 2021, *quote translated from Hungarian by the author*). However, this has changed drastically with the establishment of Megafon in 2020, and the massive outsourcing of pro-government messages to non-institutional social media actors.

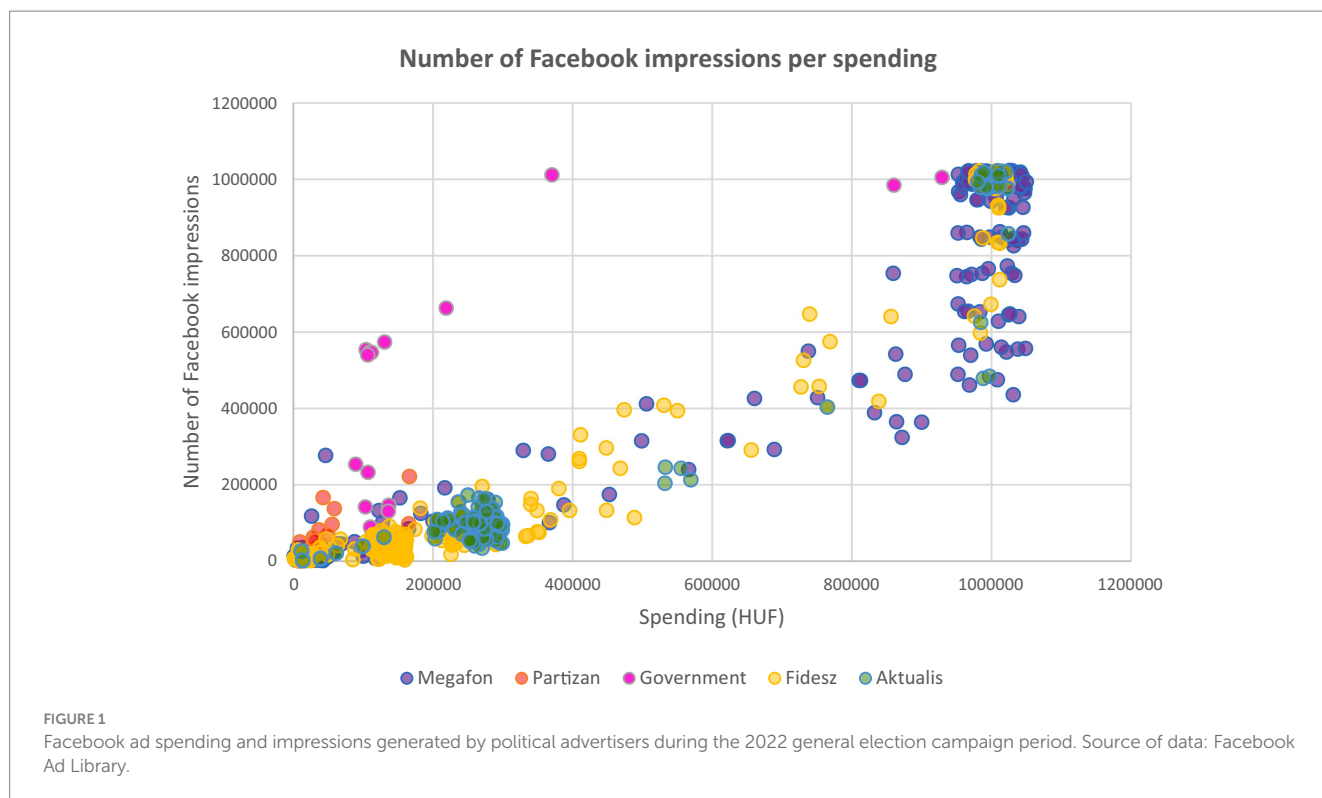
Therefore, in terms of case selection, the analysis will focus on the social media advertising of Megafon during the 2022 general election campaign period¹³, covering all individual social media influencers and pages that were sponsored by the company. Therefore, data about a total of 242 Facebook ads sponsored by Megafon have been extracted from the Facebook Ad Library for this analysis. Since Facebook's Ad Library only publishes intervals both in terms of spending, as well as regarding audience size and impressions, a mixed approach was followed in terms of estimating actual spending based on the guidelines of University of Queensland's Election and Data Dashboard¹⁴ on the one hand, and Bene et al. (2021) on the other. The former has opted for always considering the upper bound value of all intervals, although they admit that this may "overestimate short-lived ads for which the actual spend is closer to the lower bound of the range," while Bene and his colleagues (2021) have opted for a diversified approach and conducted separate analyses with lower bound as well as with upper bound values. However, since Megafon ads typically run for a short time (often one day), and they only specify one spending value (typically the lower bound) in the ad settings, it is more justifiable to use average values from each of the intervals, and

11 See: <https://444.hu/2024/05/06/szjarto-megfeszített-internetes-harcot-ker-a-megafonosoktól-a-következő-hetekre>

12 See: <https://telex.hu/techtud/2024/01/25/megafon-kepzesek-jelentkezok-szemelyes-adatok-adatszivar-gas-adatvedelmi-incidens-fideszes-politikusok>

13 Even though the *de facto* campaign period has spanned for longer than that, the analysis will rely on the legally established campaign period which according to Hungarian campaign regulation starts 50 calendar days before election day. In the case of the 2022 general election campaign, this entails that the period 12 February to 3 April, 2022 is covered. One should note that pro-government campaigns are not concentrated to the official campaign period but span the whole electoral cycle.

14 Read the UQ Election and Data Dashboard FAQ document at the following address: https://itee.uq.edu.au/files/17437/UQ%20Election%20Ad%20Data%20Dashboard_FAQs.pdf



either the lower or the upper bound whenever only one value is specified. This strategy could prevent the overestimation of values and facilitate the interpretation of the findings as opposed to running two separate analyses. Impression scores for each specific advertised post have been calculated as the average of the lower bound and upper bound values provided in the Facebook Ad Library, while the age demographic data has been calculated based on the average aggregated share of all age groups below 35 years old (13–17¹⁵, 18–24, and 25–34) who were exposed to the Facebook ads considered for this analysis.

The key focus here will be on the efficiency of the sponsored posts in reaching their desired target audience, expressed as the ratio of post impressions per spending. However, in order to put such findings into a comparative perspective, this paper evaluates how Megafon's ads perform vis-à-vis other pro-government social media channels, including institutional accounts on the one hand, as well as compared to a similar non-institutional actor that is critical towards the government. On the pro-government side, the analysis presented below includes data regarding the official Facebook page of the Hungarian government, that of the governing party Fidesz, as well as a page that distributes pro-government news and commentary (Aktuális), while opposition social media content is represented by Partizán, an independent content producer that shares political videos with an

explicitly left-wing ideological orientation and a significant organic reach among urban intellectuals.

4 Findings

The sections below introduce our findings from the social media campaigns of different political actors and influencers during the 2022 Hungarian general election, first in terms of spending, then in terms of demographics, with a focus on the case of Megafon. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the efficiency of Megafon's Facebook spending (expressed as the ratio between the amount of Facebook users reached and the amount spent on specific ads) has been uneven across individual posts. While in case of the ads that were run with a budget lower than HUF 600 thousand, the impression remained proportionate with the amount spent, this relationship was disrupted for ads with a higher budget. It is particularly striking to see how inconsistently the ads with a HUF 1 million budget performed, especially considering that this amount (approximately EUR 2500) is very large within the Hungarian social media advertising context, on par with what corporate advertisers would spend in large commercial campaigns.¹⁶ Given that social media

¹⁵ While only citizens above 18 are entitled to vote in Hungary, due to the paper's focus on "young" constituencies, 13–17-year-olds have also been included in our sample. However, in 2022, they only represented 3.5 percent of all Hungarian Facebook users, therefore, their contribution to the overall demographic group is negligible: <https://stats.napoleoncat.com/facebook-users-in-hungary/2022/04/>

¹⁶ Since commercial ad budgets are not made accessible in the Facebook Ad Library, and commercial advertisers do not have an interest in publishing them either, it is difficult to make specific comparisons. However, even though the overall size of advertising budgets may be comparable, commercial advertisers are much more efficiency-oriented, and therefore invest a larger share of their budgets in content creation (i.e., video editing, copywriting, honorary fees of influencers), while they optimise actual ad spending through making better use of the micro-targeting tools available on Facebook. Spending large lump sums on individual

advertising is often hailed for its precision and ability to micro-target campaigns, this overly generous distribution of campaign funds in bulk lends some credit to describing Megafon's strategy as "carpet bombing": individual social media posts are advertised with such an oversized budget that their ambition seems to be reaching virtually all Facebook users in Hungary, rather than appealing to certain groups of the electorate. This finding is also in line with [Bátorfy and Urbán \(2020\)](#) paper on how state advertising budgets are distributed in Hungary which found that "in a situation when the government fully expropriates the state's resources and removes social control and rule of law-based oversight over its use of these resources, then the respective costs of capturing media directly or indirectly will not matter, nor will other transactional costs" ([Bátorfy and Urbán, 2020](#), p. 47). In sum, when it comes to government-related social media spending, it seems that maximising reach prevails over efficiency concerns.

As [Figure 1](#) illustrates, this approach is rather atypical, even among political advertisers with links to the Hungarian government. The only other Facebook page that spent a comparable average budget per post during the electoral campaign of 2022 was that of the Hungarian government itself, however, as [Table 2](#) shows, these advertisements generated more impressions on Facebook, not far below the ratio that independent content producer Partizán's ads have achieved. At the same time, two other pro-government social media pages, the official party page of Fidesz, as well as the pro-government news page Aktuális did significantly worse, positioning Megafon at the middle of the range in terms of the efficiency of ad spending.

When it comes to reaching young Facebook users, Megafon also fared low in terms of the efficiency of its demographic targeting, as shown on [Figure 2](#) which shows that only a little more than a third (35.5 per cent) of the audience reached by Megafon's Facebook ads during the 2022 general election period reached the desired target group of young people, i.e., Hungarian Facebook users under 35. At the same time, this situates Megafon as the political advertiser with the second highest share of young audience among the five advertising accounts observed. This suggests that the low absolute share of young users reached by these ads is caused by the general aging of Facebook as a platform ([Laor, 2022](#)), rather than insufficient targeting. Moreover, even though top advertisers with the most generous Facebook advertising budgets during the 2022 electoral campaign (Megafon, and the government) fared better in terms of reaching young audiences, the correlation between overall spending and reach within the 13–34 age demographic group remained modest ($R^2 = 0.3559$).

The generosity of Megafon's Facebook ad budget during the electoral campaign cannot be attributed to a temporary spike though but is part of a longer trend. Ever since its launch in 2020, Megafon has featured among the top political advertisers of the country on Facebook, with an accumulated overall spending that is even superior to two other top advertisers: Fidesz and the Hungarian government.

As [Figure 3](#) shows, Megafon has been the single largest political advertiser on Facebook in Hungary between 2019 and 2023, which is even more impressive if we consider that it was only founded in August

TABLE 2 Average Facebook ad spending of Hungarian political advertisers during the 2022 electoral campaign.

Advertiser	Average spending per post (thousand HUFs)	Efficiency ratio (avg impression/HUF spent)
Megafon	595	0.88
Government	513	1.26
Aktuális	375	0.58
Fidesz	274	0.60
Partizán	38	1.46

2020. Moreover, it is also the only one that has surpassed the HUF 1 billion mark which is superior to the maximum of campaign subventions parties could receive during the general election campaign period¹⁷.

Even more strikingly, only three of the opposition parties made it onto the top 10 list: left-wing-liberal Democratic Coalition, liberal Momentum, and conservative Jobbik. Beyond political parties and the Hungarian government, the list also includes pro-government online media publisher [Origo.hu](#), as well as [EzaLényeg.hu](#), a news site with close ties to the Democratic Coalition (DK) party.¹⁸ Moreover, beyond Megafon, the list of top spenders also features two social media sites that share political news and memes, using narratives that match partisan cleavages: while Aktuális has been owned by one of Megafon's influencers¹⁹, Erősítő has been linked to the left-wing opposition²⁰. It is also worth noting that unlike opposition parties, Megafon and the Hungarian government concentrated their ad spending on a relatively low amount of Facebook posts, therefore spending more than ten times per post as the average of our top 10 sample, resulting in repetitive campaigns built around few centralised messages. In terms of budget distribution, if we only consider political party spending, then Fidesz's social media spending was 63 per cent larger than that of the three other opposition parties combined. However, if we apply a pro-government vs. anti-government distinction instead and allocate the news sites that feature in the top 10 to one of these categories, an even more disproportionate picture emerges, as shown in [Table 3](#).

Not only does [Table 3](#) reveal the threefold difference between overall pro-government vs. anti-government spending among the top 10 political advertisers on Facebook, but also the fact that Megafon alone has outspent all five opposition-related Facebook budgets combined. On top of that, Fidesz has spent four times as much as the second most affluent opposition party (Democratic Coalition). These findings point to the fact

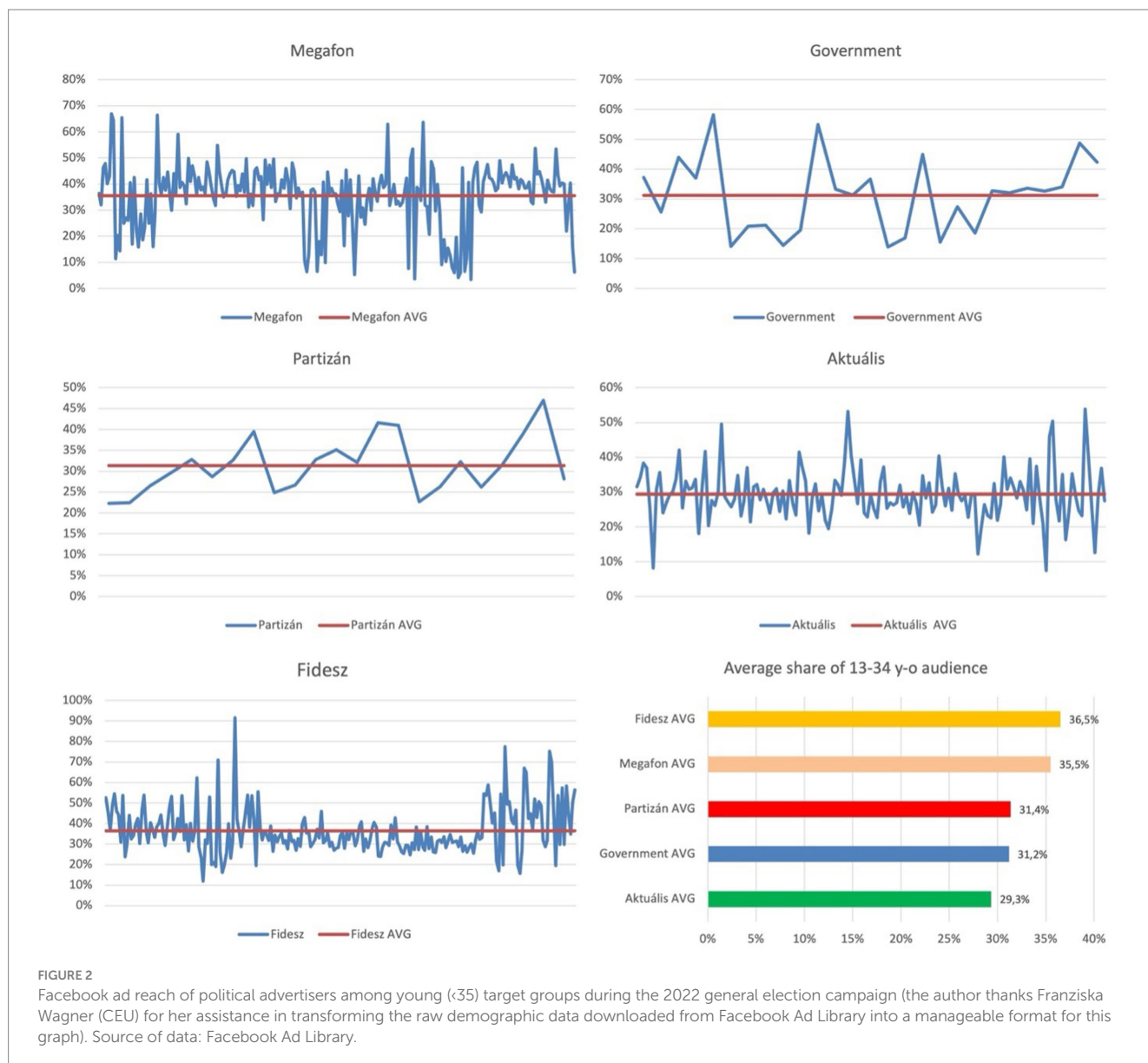
¹⁷ Parties that field 106 candidates were eligible for approximately HUF 706 million campaign subvention in 2022.

¹⁸ See independent news site HVG's article: https://hvg.hu/itthon/20230127_Nem_is_az_ellenzeki_kampanyra_kaptak_a_2_milliardot_ezek_politikamentes_szerzodesek_volt_allitja_a_DKkozeli_mediavallalkozo

¹⁹ See <https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/05/26/kopasz-oszt-filep-david-aktualis-propaganda-magyar-peter-hirdetes>

²⁰ See <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2021/04/beindult-gyurcsany-kore-milliokkal-hirdetik-az-ellenzeki-media-cikkeit-a-facebookon> and <https://444.hu/2022/03/16/a-kormanyoldal-mar-35-milliard-forintot-hirdetett-el-a-facebookon-az-ellenzeki-erok-pedig-osszesen-2-milliardot>

posts without a refined targeting algorithm (as done by Megafon) is an inefficient approach very few commercial advertisers would follow.



that not only did Fidesz “compensate” for the perceived bias towards left-wing and liberal content on Facebook it often claimed exists (also serving as a *raison d’être* for Megafon), but it also managed to replicate the dominance it has established in legacy media in the realm of Facebook, at least in financial terms. This finding supports the normalisation thesis (Gibson and McAllister, 2015) in that the specific technology in question (Facebook advertising) has reaffirmed the incumbent’s advantage over its challengers.

When it comes to engagement figures, unfortunately, no systematic analysis can be executed, since unlike in the case of political advertisement budgets, Facebook does not give access to Page Insights to external users or researchers, only to page administrators. However, the findings with regards to the performance of specific ads (as shown on Figure 2) suggest that Megafon ads delivered acceptable results in terms of reaching young (13–34) audiences, and even exceeded more professionally targeted Partizán’s reach in this demographic group, which is a counterintuitive finding that suggests that the “carpet bombing” approach of Megafon delivers the expected outcomes, even if at a disproportionately high cost.

5 Conclusions and discussion

This paper has revealed some important findings about the use of political influencers in Hungary that may inform future research. First, it has shown that social media influencers’ impact on political communication and potentially political attitudes should feature more prominently on political scientists’ radar, since innovative political entrepreneurs may increasingly outsource campaign tasks to such non-institutional actors. While a lot can be (and has been) learnt by analysing political elite discourse on Twitter, it tells us little about what shapes popular attitudes, especially among younger cohorts. From a political communication perspective, this study contributes to an emerging literature which not only considers social media influencers as brand ambassadors, but also as actors who potentially transmit political messages to their followers.

Second, this paper adds to our understanding of the Hungarian media and political communication context, especially during electoral campaigns. As the paper shows, outsourcing campaign tasks has been incentivised both by the regulatory environment on



FIGURE 3 Top 10 political advertisers on Facebook in Hungary (2019–2023)*. **Several of the advertisers shown on the graph above were associated with several dozens of Facebook ad accounts that nevertheless serve the same party/community (e.g., “Party X – District Y”; “Party X – District Z” etc.). The spending of such separate accounts was aggregated for all political parties and agencies such as Megafon. Source of data: Facebook Ad Library.

TABLE 3 Total Facebook spending of top pro- and anti-government advertisers (2019–2023)*.

Pro-government spending			Anti-government spending		
Advertiser	Sum (million HUF)	Share of all political ads	Advertiser	Sum (million HUF)	Share of all political ads
Megafon	1226.5	13.5%	Erősítő	271.8	3.0%
Fidesz	916.4	10.1%	Democratic Coalition	238.5	2.6%
Hungarian Government	623.2	6.8%	EzaLényeg.hu	227.8	2.5%
Aktuális	297.0	3.3%	Momentum	165.8	1.8%
ORIGO	163.0	1.8%	Jobbik	147.9	1.6%
Total	3226.0	35.4%		1051.8	11.5%

*Source of data: Facebook Ad Library.

campaign financing, as well as political parties’ struggle to reach young audiences through legacy media. While a lot of research has been published on the interrelation between Hungary’s democratic backsliding and the transformation of the media landscape, relatively little attention has been paid to how this has been complemented by social media communication, especially at the non-elite level. The establishment of a pro-government influencer agency (Megafon) is a unique yet enlightening case that demonstrates how party messages may be amplified by formally non-partisan actors whose budget may even exceed official party spending. Third, the analysis of such Facebook ads’ performance has shown that even though the “carpet-bombing” approach which combines high spending with non-refined targeting is inefficient in terms of delivering impressions, it is relatively successful in reaching desired demographics, even compared to competitors that apply more refined and cost-efficient advertising strategies. This finding may bring more nuance into future research on the impact of microtargeted social media campaigns on the one

hand and expand our conceptual vocabulary through using the analogy of “carpet-bombing” to describe very loosely targeted social media advertisement campaigns on the other. Lastly, the paper contributes to the emerging empirical literature on social media influencers’ political impact and provides comparable evidence to complement analysis on Duterte’s paid micro-influencers in the Philippines (Karunungan, 2022), Bolsonaro’s patriotic digital creators in Brazil (Colussi et al., 2023), and Trump’s U.S. ecosystem of “MAGA” influencers (Peck, 2025), among others.

Despite the importance of these findings, some limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, this article is not focused on the content of social media posts by Hungarian pro-government influencers, and therefore, it reveals little about which specific government narratives they adapt and how they are recontextualised in their posts. A more detailed discourse analytical approach or computer-assisted text analysis should be deployed for this purpose; however, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Second, the analysis is

limited by the fact that neither ad targeting, nor post engagement statistics are made available by Facebook beyond a certain level of aggregation. Therefore, any inferences drawn from this data are deficient in the sense that they rely on assumptions that are highly plausible but cannot be directly verified, e.g., the assumption that Megafon primarily aims at appealing to younger audiences. Third, the uniqueness of the Hungarian media environment and the governing party's social media strategy limits the generalizability of the findings.

Beyond illuminating the innovative aspects of outsourcing government communication to social media influencers, the paper also cast a new light on international debates regarding media freedom and freedom of expression in Hungary which have predominantly focused on the disparity of resources and access in favour of pro-government outlets in the legacy media sphere. As this paper has shown, such inequalities are even more pronounced in the case of social media, which may be much more consequential for shaping the political attitudes of young voters. In sum, research agendas should recognise the importance of social media influencers in political communication, since they are here to stay and are expected to become increasingly important sources of political information to social media followers who barely consume legacy news content.

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here: Facebook Ad Library (<https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/>).

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication of potentially/indirectly identifying information, in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

References

- Ali, H. L., Kasirye, F., and Ha, L. (2025). Does follower size matter? Diversity of sources and credibility assessment among social media influencers. *Information* 16:958. doi: 10.3390/info16110958
- Alsharawy, A., Anstett, R., and Landgrave, M. (2025). What is the effect of political influencers on TikTok? Early results from a field experiment with young adults. *Polit. Stud. Rev.* 1–13. doi: 10.1177/14789299251323741
- Avis, E., Ferraz, C., Finan, F., and Varjão, C. (2022). Money and politics: the effects of campaign spending limits on political entry and competition. *Am. Econ. J. Appl. Econ.* 14, 167–199. doi: 10.1257/app.20200296
- Bajomi-Lázár, P. (2013). The party colonisation of the media: the case of Hungary. *East Eur. Polit. Soc. Cult.* 27, 69–89. doi: 10.1177/0888325412465085
- Bajomi-Lázár, P. (2017). Particularistic and universalistic media policies: inequalities in the media in Hungary. *Javn. Public* 24, 162–172. doi: 10.1080/13183222.2017.1288781
- Bátorfy, A., and Urbán, Á. (2020). State advertising as an instrument of transformation of the media market in Hungary. *East Eur. Polit.* 36, 44–65. doi: 10.1080/21599165.2019.1662398
- Belanche, D., Casaló, L. V., Flavián, M., and Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2021). Building influencers' credibility on Instagram: effects on followers' attitudes and Behavioral responses toward the influencer. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* 61, 102585–102511. doi: 10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102585
- Bene, M., and Juhász, V. (2025). The long-range character assassination machine: the role of Megafon's astroturf influencers in the 2022 pro-government campaign in Hungary. *Am. Behav. Sci.* 1–23. doi: 10.1177/00027642251344210
- Bene, M., and Kruschinski, S. (2021). Political advertising on Facebook. In: J. Haßler, M. Magin, U. Russmann and V. Fenoll (eds) *Campaigning on Facebook in the 2019 European Parliament election. Political Campaigning and Communication.* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Bene, M., Petrekanics, M., and Bene, M. (2021). Ki mit költ? Politikai hirdetési aktivitás a Facebookon a 2019-es európai parlamenti és az önkormányzati választási kampányokban. *Médiakutató* 22, 49–58.
- Bogaards, M. (2018). De-democratization in Hungary: diffusely defective democracy. *Democratization* 25, 1481–1499. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2018.1485015

Author contributions

BM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. The author has received funding from the AUTHLIB-Neo-Authoritarianisms in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response project funded by the European Union (Horizon Europe, Grant No. 101060899) during the execution of this research.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

- Bozóki, A. (1989). *Mi a Fidesz és mi nem?* Budapest: Magyar Narancs.
- Bozóki, A., and Hegedüs, D. (2018). An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union. *Democratization* 25, 1173–1189. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2018.1455664
- Bright, J., Hale, S., Ganesh, B., Bulovsky, A., Margetts, H., and Howard, P. (2020). Does campaigning on social media make a difference? Evidence from candidate use of twitter during the 2015 and 2017 UK elections. *Commun. Res.* 47, 988–1009. doi: 10.1177/0093650219872394
- Brito, K., Paula, N., Fernandes, M., and Meira, S. (2019). “Social media and presidential campaigns—preliminary results of the 2018 Brazilian presidential election” in Proceedings of the 20th annual international conference on digital government research, 332–341.
- Çelebi, E. (2022). How do women’s GONGOs influence policymaking processes in Turkey? *J. Civ. Soc.* 18, 326–348. doi: 10.1080/17448689.2022.2125417
- Chadwick, A. (2011). The hybrid media system. Paper presented at the ECPR general conference. Reykjavik, Iceland.
- Clarke, I., and Grieve, J. (2019). Stylistic variation on the Donald Trump twitter account: a linguistic analysis of tweets posted between 2009 and 2018. *PLoS One* 14:e0222062. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0222062
- Colussi, J., Bayarri Toscano, G., and Gomes-Franco e Silva, F. (2023). “We swear to lay down our lives for the fatherland!”: Bolsonaro as influencer and agent of political polarization. *Anál. Polit.* 36, 113–132. doi: 10.15446/anpol.v36n106.111044
- Conde, R., and Casais, B. (2023). Micro, macro and mega-influencers on instagram: the power of persuasion via the parasocial relationship. *J. Bus. Res.* 158:113708. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113708
- Demirhan, K. (2016). “Relationship between social media and political parties: the case of Turkey” in Social media and networking: Concepts, methodologies, tools, and applications (Hershey, Pennsylvania: IGI Global Scientific Publishing), 1196–1225.
- Djafarova, E., and Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities’ Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Comput. Hum. Behav.* 68, 1–7. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009
- Dubois, E., and Gaffney, D. (2014). The multiple facets of influence: identifying political influencers and opinion leaders on twitter. *Am. Behav. Sci.* 58, 1260–1277. doi: 10.1177/0002764214527088
- Duncombe, C. (2019). The politics of twitter: emotions and the power of social media. *Int. Polit. Sociol.* 13, 409–429. doi: 10.1093/ips/olz013
- Enyedi, Z. (2006). “The survival of the fittest: party system concentration in Hungary,” in Post-communist EU member states: Parties and party systems. ed. S. Jungerstam-Mulders (Ashgate, Aldershot: Routledge), 177–202.
- Enyedi, Z. (2024). Illiberal conservatism, civilisationalist ethnocentrism, and paternalist populism in Orbán’s Hungary. *Contemp. Polit.* 30, 494–511. doi: 10.1080/13569775.2023.2296742
- Enyedi, Z., and Mikola, B. (2024). Legislative capture in Hungary: well-managed autocratization. *Ann. Am. Acad. Polit. Soc. Sci.* 712, 34–46. doi: 10.1177/00027162241307778
- Enyedi, Z., and Whitefield, S. (2020). “Populists in power: populism and representation in illiberal democracies” in The Oxford handbook of political representation in Liberal democracies. eds. R. Rohrschneider and J. Thomassen (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 582–599.
- Farkas, X., and Bene, M. (2021). Images, politicians, and social media: patterns and effects of politicians’ image-based political communication strategies on social media. *Int. J. Press/Politics* 26, 119–142. doi: 10.1177/1940161220959553
- Forbes (2023) The Most Valuable Hungarian Influencers – 2023. February 2023, Available online at: <https://forbes.hu/lists/a-legertekesebb-magyar-influenszerek-2023/> (Accessed January 4, 2024).
- Freedom House (2019) Freedom in the World 2019. Available online at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-and-media/2019/media-freedom-downward-spiral> (accessed 4 January 2024)
- Geers, S. (2020). News consumption across media platforms and content. *Public Opin. Q.* 84, 332–354. doi: 10.1093/poq/nfaa010
- Gerő, M., Fejős, A., Kerényi, S., and Szikra, D. (2022). From exclusion to co-optation: political opportunity structures and civil society responses in de-democratizing Hungary. *Polit. Gov.* 11, 16–27. doi: 10.17645/pag.v11i1.5883
- Gibson, R. K., and McAllister, I. (2015). Normalising or equalising party competition? Assessing the impact of the web on election campaigning. *Polit. Stud.* 63, 529–547. doi: 10.1111/1467-9248.12107
- Haleva-Amir, S., and Nahon, K. (2015). “Electoral politics on social media: the Israeli case” in The Routledge companion to social media and politics (London: Routledge), 471–487.
- Hao, X., Wen, N., and Cherian, G. (2014). News consumption and political and civic engagement among young people. *J. Youth Stud.* 17, 1221–1238. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2014.901490
- Hasell, A., and Weeks, B. E. (2016). Partisan provocation: the role of partisan news use and emotional responses in political information sharing in social media. *Hum. Commun. Res.* 42, 641–661. doi: 10.1111/hcre.12092
- Hegedüs, D. (2021). Rethinking the incumbency effect. Radicalization of governing populist parties in East-Central-Europe. A case study of Hungary. In *Multifaceted Nationalism and Illiberal Momentum at Europe’s Eastern Margins* (pp. 56–80). Routledge.
- Heinrich Böll Stiftung (2022) Political Affiliations of First Voters in Hungary | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Prague Office—Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary. Available online at: <https://cz.boell.org/en/2022/08/16/political-affiliations-first-voters-hungary> (Accessed January 4, 2024).
- Helmus, T. C., Bodine-Baron, E., Radin, A., Magnuson, M., Mendelsohn, J., Marcellino, W., et al. (2018). Russian social media influence: Understanding Russian propaganda in Eastern Europe. Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation.
- Hoffman, M., and Neumayer, C. (2024). Movement parties’ interactions on social media: positioning and trajectories in the polity arena. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 21, 303–322. doi: 10.1080/19331681.2023.2239817
- Hopkin, J., and Paolucci, C. (1999). The business firm model of party organisation: cases from Spain and Italy. *Eur J Polit Res* 35, 307–339. doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.00451
- Horváth, K., Polyák, G., and Urbán, Á. (2025). Outsourced political campaign: role of pro-government political influencers in spreading hostile narratives in Hungary. *Media Commun.* 13:10671. doi: 10.17645/mac.10671
- Hungary Today (2022) After Four Years of Neglect, State Media Gives Five Minutes to Each Opposition Party before Election. March 12, 2022. Available online at: <https://hungarytoday.hu/public-state-media-opposition-fidesz-bias-media-freedom-election/> (Accessed January 4, 2024).
- Jensen, M. (2018). Russian trolls and fake news: information or identity logics? *J. Int. Aff.* 71, 115–124.
- Jungherr, A., Posegga, O., and An, J. (2019). Discursive power in contemporary media systems: a comparative framework. *Int. J. Press/Politics* 24, 404–425. doi: 10.1177/1940161219841543
- Karunungan, R. (2022). The role of Facebook influencers in shaping the narrative of the Duterte era. Loughborough, United Kingdom: Loughborough University.
- Katz, Y. (2018). Israel’s social media elections. *Open J. Polit. Sci.* 8, 525–535. doi: 10.4236/ojps.2018.84032
- Kazharski, A., and Macalová, S. (2020). Democracies: ‘sovereign’ and ‘illiberal’: the Russian-Hungarian game of adjectives and its implications for regional security. *J. Reg. Secur.* 15, 235–262. doi: 10.5937/jrs15-24079
- Kim, Y. M., Hsu, J., Neiman, D., Kou, C., Bankston, L., Kim, S. Y., et al. (2018). The stealth media? Groups and targets behind divisive issue campaigns on Facebook. *Polit. Commun.* 35, 515–541. doi: 10.1080/10584609.2018.1476425
- Klüver, H. (2024). Social influencers and election outcomes. *Comp. Pol. Stud.* 58, 2973–2999. doi: 10.1177/00104140241306955
- K-Monitor, Political Capital and Transparency International Hungary (2022) Orbán’s Fidesz to overspend in Hungary’s election campaign. Available online at: https://transparency.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/KMon_PC_TI_Hu_public_billboards_EN.pdf (Accessed January 4, 2024).
- Konstantinou, I., and Jones, K. (2022). Investigating gen Z attitudes to charitable giving and donation behaviour: social media, peers and authenticity. *J. Philanthr. Mark.* 27, 1–9. doi: 10.1002/nvsm.1764
- Krekó, P. (2022). The birth of an illiberal informational autocracy in Europe: a case study on Hungary. *J. Illib. Stud.* 2, 55–72. doi: 10.53483/WCJW3538
- Krekó, P., and Enyedi, Z. (2018). Orbán’s laboratory of illiberalism. *J. Democ.* 29, 39–51. doi: 10.1353/jod.2018.0043
- Laor, T. (2022). My social network: group differences in frequency of use, active use, and interactive use on Facebook, Instagram and twitter. *Technol. Soc.* 68, 1–10. doi: 10.1016/j.techsoc.2022.101922
- Lee, J. E., and Watkins, B. (2016). YouTube vloggers’ influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions. *J. Bus. Res.* 69, 5753–5760. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.04.171
- Liang, F., and Lu, S. (2023). The dynamics of event-based political influencers on twitter: a longitudinal analysis of influential accounts during Chinese political events. *Soc. Media Soc.* 9, 1–12. doi: 10.1177/20563051231177946
- Lührmann, A., and Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization* 26, 1095–1113. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029
- Maireder, A., and Ausserhofer, J. (2014). Political discourses on twitter: networking topics, objects and people. Twitter and Society. eds. W. Katrin, B. Axel, B. Jean, M. Merja and P. Cornelius (New York: Peter Lang), 305–318.
- Mangold, F., and Bachl, M. (2018). New news media, new opinion leaders? How political opinion leaders navigate the modern high-choice media environment. *J. Commun.* 68, 896–919. doi: 10.1093/joc/jqy033
- Masroor, F., Khan, Q. N., Aib, I., and Ali, Z. (2019). Polarization and ideological weaving in twitter discourse of politicians. *Soc. Media Soc.* 5, 1–14. doi: 10.1177/2056305119891220
- Mérték, MM (2021) State advertising spending – complaint update. Available online at: <https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/State-advertising-Hungary.pdf> (Accessed January 4, 2024).

- Munnukka, J., Maity, D., Reinikainen, H., and Luoma-aho, V. (2019). 'Thanks for watching': The effectiveness of YouTube vlog endorsements. *Comput. Hum. Behav.* 93, 226–234. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2018.12.014
- Ott, B. L. (2017). The age of twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement. *Crit. Stud. Media Commun.* 34, 59–68. doi: 10.1080/15295036.2016.1266686
- Papada, E., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Gastaldi, L., Köhler, T., Lundstedt, M., et al. (2023). Defiance in the face of Autocratization. Democracy report 2023. Gothenburg, Sweden: University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute).
- Papp, Z., and Zorigt, B. (2018). Political constraints and the limited effect of electoral system change on personal vote-seeking in Hungary. *East Eur. Polit. Soc. Cult.* 32, 119–141. doi: 10.1177/0888325417736809
- Peck, R. (2025). More than money and algorithms: the cultural roots of trump's alt-media strategy. *Commun. Cult. Critique* 18, 130–133. doi: 10.1093/ccc/tcaf010
- Peruško, Z. (2021). Public sphere in hybrid media systems in central and Eastern Europe. *Javnost-The Public* 28, 36–52. doi: 10.1080/13183222.2021.1861405
- Polyák, G. (2019). "Media in Hungary: three pillars of an illiberal democracy" in Public service broadcasting and media systems in troubled European democracies. eds. E. Polonska and C. Beckett, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan) 279–303.
- Reese, S. D. (2022). The institution of journalism: conceptualizing the press in a hybrid media system. *Digit. Journal.* 10, 253–266. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2021.1977669
- Riedl, M. J., Lukito, J., and Woolley, S. C. (2023). Political influencers on social media: An introduction. *Soc. Media Soc.* 9:205630512311779. doi: 10.1177/20563051231177938
- Ross, A. S., and Caldwell, D. (2020). Going negative: An APPRAISAL analysis of the rhetoric of Donald Trump on twitter. *Lang. Commun.* 70, 13–27. doi: 10.1016/j.langcom.2019.09.003
- Santer, N., Manago, A., and Bleisch, R. (2023). Narratives of the self in polymedia contexts: authenticity and branding in generation Z. *Qual. Psychol.* 10, 79–106. doi: 10.1037/qap0000232
- Schmuck, D., Hirsch, M., Stevic, A., and Matthes, J. (2022). Politics – simply explained? How influencers affect youth's perceived simplification of politics, political cynicism, and political interest. *Int. J. Press/Politics* 27, 738–762. doi: 10.1177/19401612221088987
- Sehl, A., and Schützeneder, J. (2023). Political knowledge to go: an analysis of selected political influencers and their formats in the context of the 2021 German Federal Election. *Soc. Media Soc.* 9, 1–12. doi: 10.1177/20563051231177916
- Stuckelberger, S., and Koedam, J. (2022). Parties' voter targeting strategies: what can facebook ads tell us? *Electoral Stud.* 77, 1–13. doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102473
- Suuronen, A., Reinikainen, H., Borchers, N. A., and Strandberg, K. (2022). When social media influencers go political: an exploratory analysis on the emergence of political topics among Finnish influencers. *Javn. Public* 29, 301–317. doi: 10.1080/13183222.2021.1983367
- Szabó, Y. (2024) Ez az a cég, amely befolyásos hazai és nemzetközi támogatókkal tarolta le a hazai influencerszerpiacot. Hvg.hu, 2 January. Available online at: https://hvg.hu/360/20240102_hvg_post_for_rent_pfr_influenszer_influencer_tartalommarketing_csiszar_gergo_boros_attila_a_befolyasolok_befolyasolasa (accessed 4 January 2024).
- Tambini, D., Labo, S., Goodman, E., and Moore, M. (2019) The New Political Campaigning. Media Policy Brief 19. LSE Media Policy Project. (London, United Kingdom: London School of Economics and Political Science)
- Woolley, S. C. (2022). Digital propaganda: The power of influencers. *Journal of Democracy*, 33, 115–129.
- Yaqub, U., Chun, S. A., Atluri, V., and Vaidya, J. (2017). Sentiment based analysis of tweets during the us presidential elections. In *Proceedings of the 18th annual international conference on digital government research* (pp. 1–10).
- Yesil, B. (2021). "Social media manipulation in Turkey: actors, tactics, targets" in *The Routledge companion to media disinformation and populism* (London: Routledge), 386–396.
- Zannettou, S., Caulfield, T., Setzer, W., Sirivianos, M., Stringhini, G., and Blackburn, J. (2019). "Who let the trolls out?: towards understanding state-sponsored trolls" in *Proceedings of the 10th ACM conference on web science* (Boston Massachusetts USA: ACM), 353–362. doi: 10.1145/3292522.3326016