

Our social media

*Our news consumption habits and their impact on
the 2024 election campaigns*

ANALYSIS BY THE REPUBLIKON INSTITUTE



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SUMMARY

- Based on Eurobarometer and Ipsos surveys, as well as Facebook's public advertising database, our analysis examined where Hungarian voters primarily get their information, which news sources they consider the most trustworthy, and which political actors are expected to dominate the online space during the 2024 European Parliament and local government elections.
- Compared to the EU average, Hungarians are much more likely to view social media as their primary source of news, and they are also much more likely to trust the claims of online influencers and content creators.
- In parallel, trust in the traditional media (written press, television, radio) is extremely low in Hungary, and the opinions about the journalists and television news, in the sense of reliability are extremely bad by international standards. Public media deserve a special mention, with only 22% of Hungarians considering them to be the most trustworthy source of news, making the Hungarian public media the most distrusted in the European Union.
- The government side, also due to its financial means, clearly dominates the social media market: 13 of the 15 highest-spending political advertisers on Facebook in the 30 days before 1 January 2024 represented the government narrative as government actors, pro-Fidesz media outlets or members of the Megafon Centre.
- The government parties are deliberately undermining trust in the traditional press (e.g. through the creation of the Office for the Protection of Sovereignty and its communications), thereby increasing the reach of their own online messages and increasing political polarisation within society.

INTRODUCTION

Social media play a central role in today's political communication: apart from the fact that politicians regularly use these online platforms (in Hungary mainly Facebook) as their primary means of contacting voters and as a space to deliver their messages directly to the public, the importance of online content creators and influencers in political struggles has become unquestionable. Unlike the traditional media (written press, television, radio), social media content and its producers are not bound by written or even unwritten rules of press ethics. In contrast to traditional newspaper articles or news broadcasts, this content is not primarily intended to serve the news needs of consumers, but to express political opinions and positions, and thus does not inform as much as place political news in subjective narratives. And since the reach of social media content is primarily a matter of financial investment, the political actor with more resources is obviously more effective in shaping political-public discourse in the online space and, depending on its effectiveness, outside it.

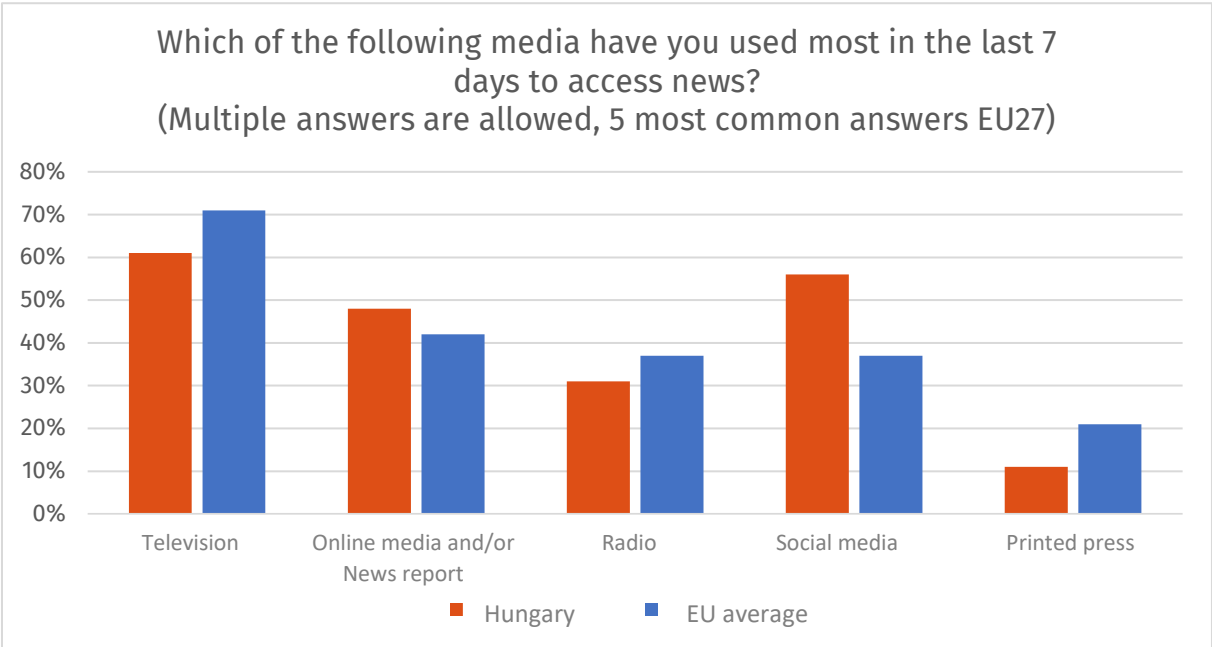
This year, two elections (European Parliament and local elections) will take place in Hungary on the same day, 9 June, so we thought it was ideal to take a look at where Hungarian voters get their information and what news sources they trust, based on recent research by Eurobarometer and Ipsos on media and news consumption habits. These data not only highlight the special situation of our country in terms of the particular importance of social media during the election campaign as a result of the crisis of confidence in the traditional media but also, after comparing with Facebook advertising data, the advantage it gives to Fidesz-KDNP in the elections. For the governing parties, the further erosion of the remaining trust in the press - which the governing side is actively doing, both in the field of communication and legislation - may be politically very beneficial in the short term, but it will lead to further polarisation of society and a further reduction of our common reality space

The success of the 2019 local elections for the then united opposition parties and their candidates is debatable, but there is no doubt that Fidesz-KDNP could not have been satisfied with the outcome. Although the governing parties got the majority in every county assembly and even managed to increase the number of county representatives, the opposition did much better in the big cities than in 2014. Compared to the previous ratio of 20:3, the ratio of county-level cities led by Fidesz and opposition mayors has changed to 13:10 (since 2019, Baja and Esztergom have also been elevated to county-level cities, so voters can now vote in 25 such settlements in this year's elections), and in Budapest the opposition has taken the lead: In addition to the mayor's office, the governing parties have won 14 of the 23 district mayor seats, and their position in the district assemblies has also weakened significantly. Among the possible reasons for the weaker-than-expected performance of the government side (in addition to the generally successful cooperation of the opposition parties and the joint candidacy), is the role of social media, especially Facebook, which was used more effectively by the opposition in its campaign than by Fidesz-KDNP, was already mentioned immediately after the elections. According to [Átlátszó's](#) calculations at the time, 159 million forints worth of opposition ads and 109 million forints worth of Fidesz-sympathetic ads were run on Facebook in the last two and a half months of the election campaign. The Fidesz-KDNP also recognised the importance of the situation, and in early 2020 the today now well-known Megafon Centre was established: an organisation employing pro-government influencers, whose primary aim is to control social media with short, primarily video content, specifically created for such platforms, which seeks to discredit the opposition and voices critical of the government. Megafon uses billions to promote messages favourable to Fidesz-KDNP. According to Facebook's [own public database](#), by the 2022 parliamentary elections Megafon had already spent more than 1 billion HUF on advertising on the social networking site, making it the biggest-spending political advertiser of the period, but in addition to the influencer centre, Fidesz and the government also spent hundreds of millions on advertising on Facebook. And the election results proved them right, as the governing parties celebrated their fourth two-thirds victory in a row in April 2022.

News consumption habits - where do we get our information, who do we trust?

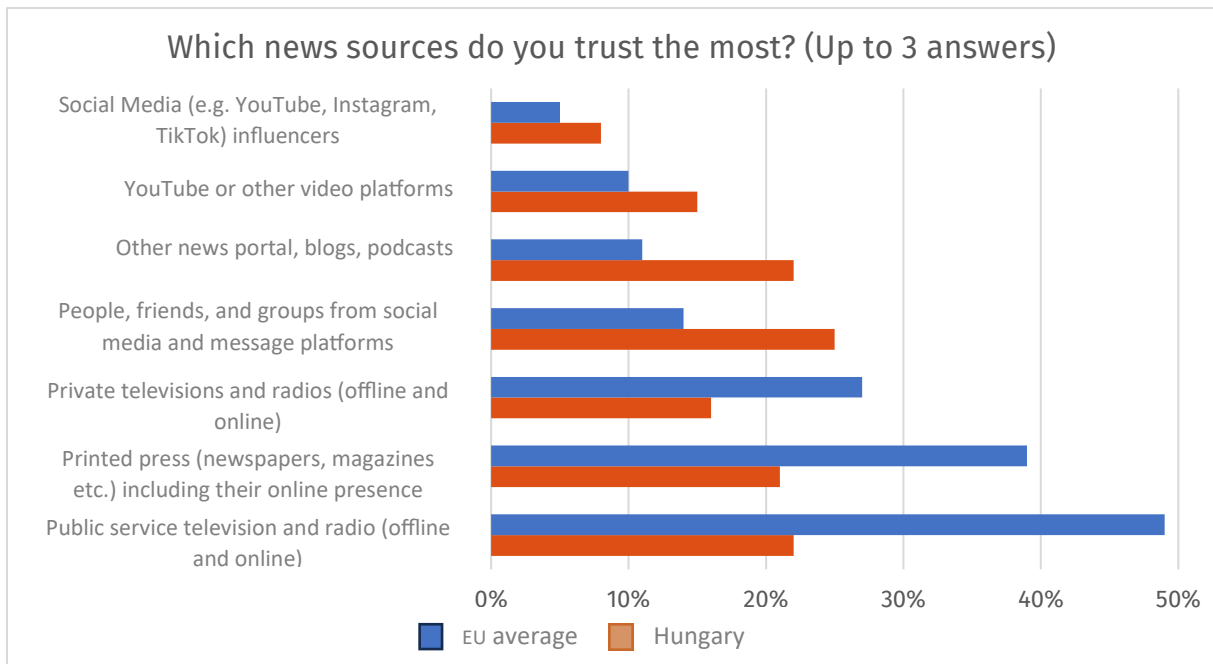
In addition to the 2022 election results, international research on media and news consumption habits and trust in news sources shows that it is worthwhile for Hungarian political forces to consider social media platforms as a primary campaign

tool, as they can play a significant role in reaching voters in comparison to other EU countries.



Eurobarometer – Media & News Survey 2023

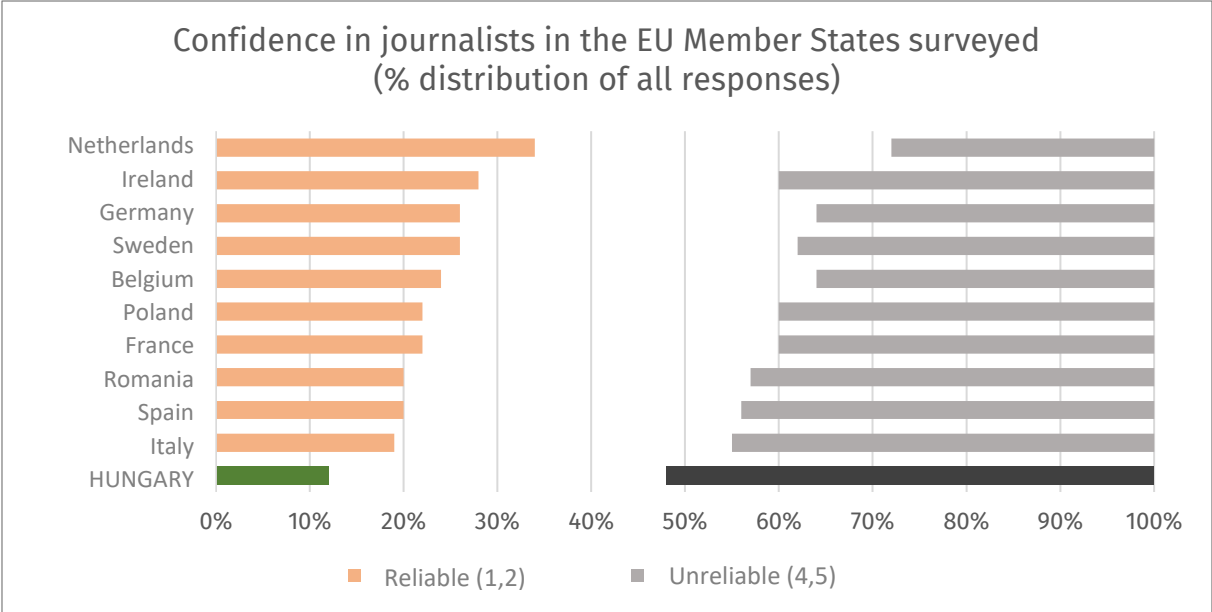
According to a Eurobarometer survey published last November, 56% of Hungarian respondents used social media and online blogs as a source of news in the seven days before the survey, compared to the EU average of 37%. This figure is particularly significant in light of a Eurobarometer survey on similar topics published in July 2022, which also showed that Hungarian respondents consider the people they follow on social media (not necessarily their own friends) to be the most trusted sources of news, with 25% of Hungarian respondents saying so, compared to an EU average of just 14%.



Eurobarometer – Media & News Survey 2022

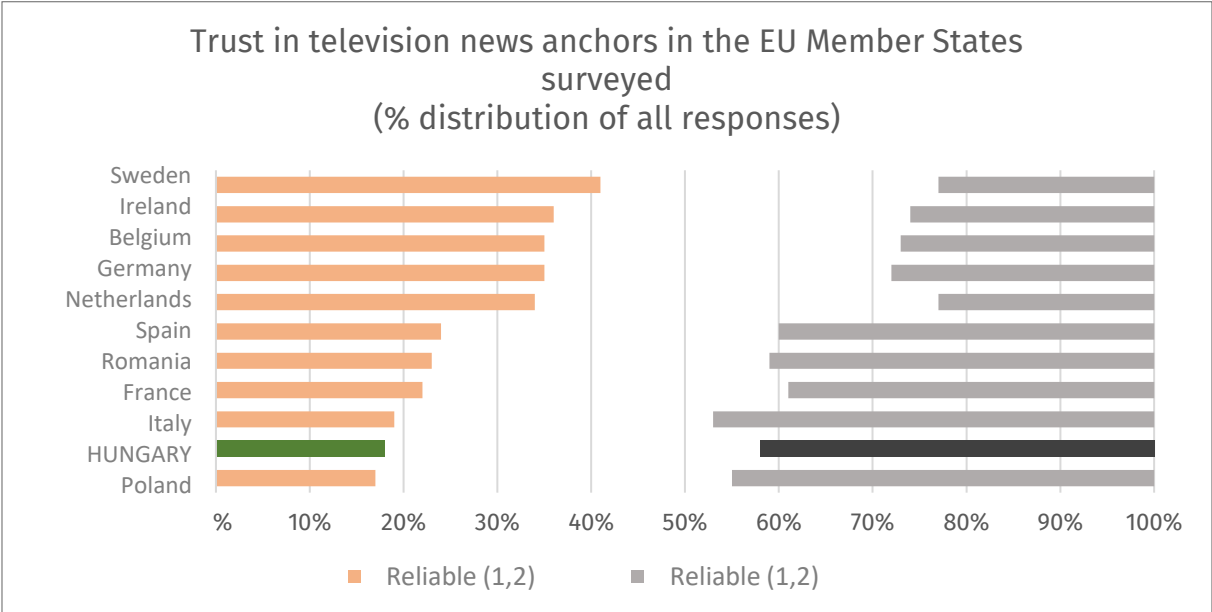
So it seems that Hungarian voters not only prefer to get their information from social media but also treat it with much less criticism than the EU average. According to data from November 2023, 46% of Hungarian respondents follow content creators and influencers on some social media platform, a much higher proportion than the EU average of 37%. Staying in the online space, it is also worth noting that online news portals are definitely more popular among Hungarian respondents than the EU average, according to the 2023 survey cited above 48% of them turned to them for news in the seven days before the survey, compared to 42% for the EU as a whole.

The outstanding popularity of online content in Hungary naturally has a victim: the traditional media, i.e. the print press, television and radio. All of these are performing significantly below the EU average, especially the print media, whose situation is dramatic, with only 11% of respondents having consulted print material in the week preceding the Eurobarometer survey. It is worth comparing these figures with the Ipsos International Confidence Index from October last year. In the Ipsos survey, respondents were asked to rate different professions on a scale of 1 to 5 according to how trustworthy they considered their representatives to be, with 1 being the most suitable and 5 the least suitable.



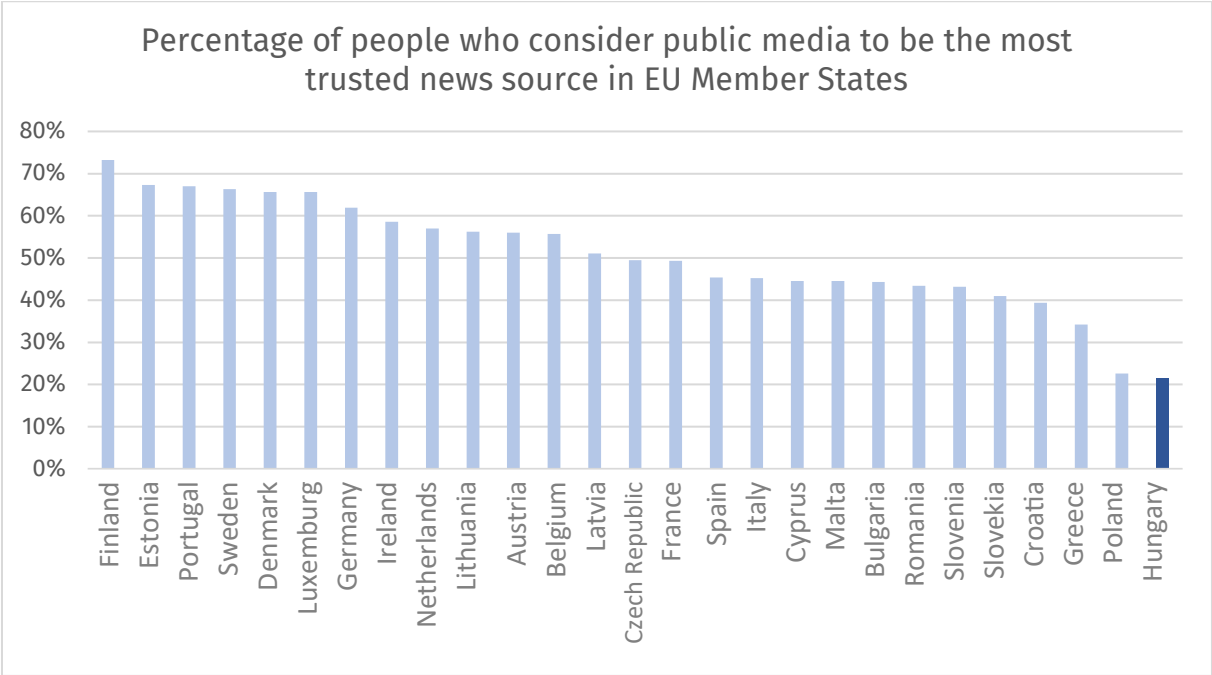
Ipsos – Global Trustworthiness Index 2023

Hungary scored below the average in each of the groups surveyed (people in Hungary have less trust in all professions and in other citizens regardless of their occupation), but also in journalists, where trust is extremely low, and in television news, where very few people trust television newscasters: Hungary is at the bottom of the list for the former and second to last among the EU Member States surveyed for the latter. As regards journalists, it should also be added that they received not only the lowest number of positive ratings (1, 2) from Hungarian respondents but also the highest number of negative ones (4, 5).



Ipsos – Global Trustworthiness Index 2023

Within the category of traditional media, public television and radio deserve special mention, as only 22% of Hungarian respondents in the Eurobarometer 2022 survey named them as the most trusted source of news, this record is also low among EU countries.



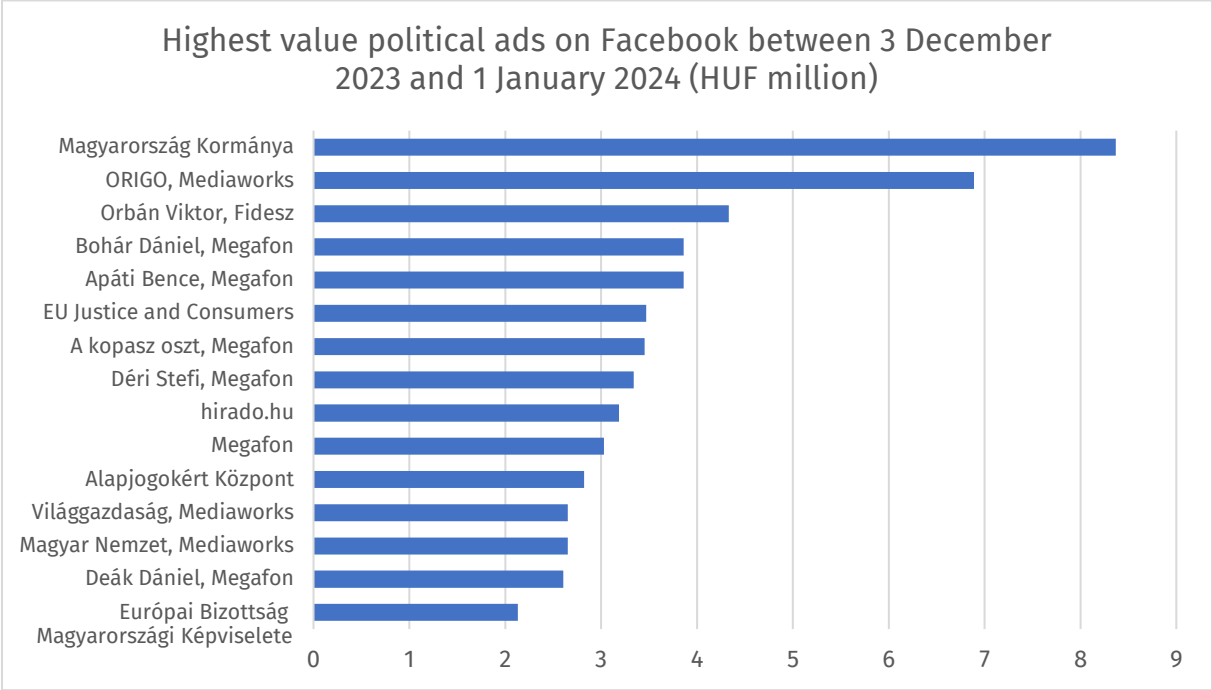
Eurobarometer – Media & News Survey 2022

It is revealing that in Poland, which is a close second in this respect in the 2022 list, one of the first moves of the Tusk government after the 2023 elections, and not coincidentally one of the first to cause a very serious domestic political stir, was the suspension - later withdrawn - of operating subsidies to Polish public media in the last days of last year, and now the restructuring of state television and radio is one of the most serious legal headaches for the Warsaw government.

From traditional to social media

Political polarisation is not just a divergence of different political views, but also a growing isolation of groups of voters who agree with them and believe in them. The reality of the government and opposition voters are increasingly divergent and, accordingly, the possibility of crossover between the two groups is narrowing. A key element in this process is the sources of information, of political and public information. Although, as the above international research shows, the presence on social media platforms can be of paramount importance for both the pro- and opposition sides, it is clear that the side that can benefit more from it is the one that has greater resources in the online space, meaning that can use a larger budget

to get its messages to a wider audience through more online actors (content creators, influencers). In this competition, the government side currently seems invincible: although there is still almost half a year to go until the European Parliament and local elections in June, Fidesz-KDNP - together with Megafon and Mediaworks - is already campaigning vigorously on social media.



Facebook Ad Library

It is in the Fidesz-KDNP's best interest that its campaign on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or even TikTok reaches as many people as possible, and that the government party content optimised for social media platforms becomes the primary source of news for as many voters as possible during the election campaign. To do this, it will not only exploit the online opportunities created by the already blatant distrust of traditional media, but will deliberately undermine trust in the press. The term "dollar media" (along with "dollar left") is one of the most typical political products of the year 2023, used almost obligatorily by government actors on a daily basis to discredit the press critical of the government on any level, giving the impression that, that the newspapers, news portals or TV channels belonging to this category (which is not specified in more detail) are attacking the government in exchange for foreign funding (which is also not specified in more detail, but which is probably linked to Brussels, Washington or George Soros). As a logical extension of the "dollar media" idea, the Office for the Protection of Sovereignty was created to further discredit voices critical of the government by an agency that claims to be an independent state body. (Although Fidesz-KDNP's communication has been

controversial about whether the Office for the Protection of Sovereignty will extend its investigations to news outlets, it is allowed to do so by law.) Although the pro-government narrative is unlikely to unsettle staunch opposition voters, it can certainly be used to distract pro-government supporters who are informed by sources other than Fidesz news sources from potentially critical content.

To sum up: Fidesz-KDNP is concentrating such huge financial resources on the production and advertising of pro-government social media content that the opposition, which is bleeding from many wounds (divided within its own ranks, fined at least 260 million forints by the State Audit Office, and has limited fundraising possibilities thanks to the law on the protection of sovereignty), is unable to compete with it. It is not only exploiting, but exacerbating the crisis of confidence in the press, thus driving voters closer to the online platforms it dominates and the messages it conveys. While this strategy is politically rewarding for Fidesz-KDNP in the short term, it contributes significantly to political polarisation and thus causes serious social damage in the long term. By discrediting the press, it narrows the space of reality independent of political sides, i.e. the range of information that can be accepted as objective fact by both the pro-government and opposition camps.