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## Viktor Orbán's Missing Affinity Towards Alternative Media on Facebook

**Abstract:** The paper<sup>1</sup> finds no liked pages by Viktor Orbán, then the Prime Minister of Hungary, on his Facebook page. Further content analysis is needed, which may help unravel the deeper connections with alternative news sites. This finding begs for alternative explanations. Was it due to a lack of interest or a need? The capture of most news media in Hungary may suggest that this might have been a plausible answer. Or was it due to a lack of time? We could identify a specific form of allocution when Orbán's FB page became a central information source for news outlets. Be that as it may, this negative finding is important for the political communication theory on social media. Populist or right-wing leaders may not publicly indicate interest or affinity to any alternative media, especially when a few alternative media may oppose their policies. Moreover, a lack of interest in public liking of other sources or institutions close to a politician may indirectly suggest contempt for them – ultimately suggesting anti-plurality and authoritarian tendencies. Finally, although Hungary may be seen as a laboratory of alternative politics, this is certainly not true for using alternative or advanced approaches to communication on social media.

**Key words:** Hungary, Orbán, FIDESZ, button “Like”, social media, alternative media, populism, self-mediatisation

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### Introduction

The media landscape in Hungary has been changing radically since 2010 when Viktor Orbán and FIDESZ-Hungarian Civic Alliance

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to express her gratitude to Dr. Gabriella Szabó and Dr. Márton Bene from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Dr. Judit Bayer as well as to Dr. Péter Bajomi-Lázár from Budapest Business School, and Adina Marincea as well as Andrej Školokay from the School of Communication and Media in Slovakia, and Dr. Jan Šír, editor of the journal, for critical comments on earlier versions of this article, and Ľubica Adamcová from School of Communication and Media in Slovakia, for creating charts from FB data. This project has received partial funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (DEMOS). Any dissemination of results here presented reflects only the consortium's (or, if applicable, author's) view. The Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

won the elections a second time and established a government with KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party)<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, online media, including social media, have played a balancing or opposition role in capturing legacy media in Hungary. On the other hand, centralised propaganda media can also gain new channels and tools through social media? This case study aims to gain insights into how the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán constructed (indirectly) his populist image and (more directly) his strategic partnerships and the tacit values that he appealed to in order to increase his popularity. Thus, this research intended to determine whether Orbán used ("liked") alternative media sources on his FB page. This area of research has been unexplored so far. A widely shared common-sense popular assumption is that since populism represents "alternative politics", it may have a close relationship to "alternative" media sources, particularly on FB.

This research is based on a common methodology and a theoretical framework described in a joint theoretical paper. Discussion about statistical data and psychological aspects of interactions on social media can be found in the introductory section.

The presentation of the research results is preceded by the analysis of the country-specific characteristics of the political party landscape, the media landscape (especially local understandings of "alternative" media), social media functions and roles in particular during political campaigns. This overview is necessary background information and contextualisation for understanding an international audience's role in social media, particularly FB, and local politics and policies.

### **The Political Party Landscape in Hungary**

Viktor Orbán is seen as the key political figure of FIDESZ. Metz and Oross (2020) support the argument made by the Czech political scientist Hloušek that Hungarian politics is the most typical example of personalisation and presidentialisation among the countries of Eastern-Central Europe. As a result, Metz and Oross support Pakulski & Körösenyi's (2012) thesis that there is a "leader democracy" in Hungary. Leaders own parties rather than representing them. Thus, there is the "oligarchisation" of the top leadership. The autonomy of party leaders has been noticed during

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<sup>2</sup> The first Orbán government was in power from 1998–2002.

electoral campaigns and within internal party management. Moreover, Metz and Oross argue that populist leaders and messages have increasingly dominated and determined politics in the last 16 years. For example, Toth (2020) found that the total number of populist messages reached a 60% share of Orbán's speeches from February to the election day in April 2018. Sükösd, (2022) suggested that right-wing populism has become the semi-official discourse that legitimises the authoritarian regime of Viktor Orbán. He compares Hungary to a successful laboratory of mature, hegemonic state populism.

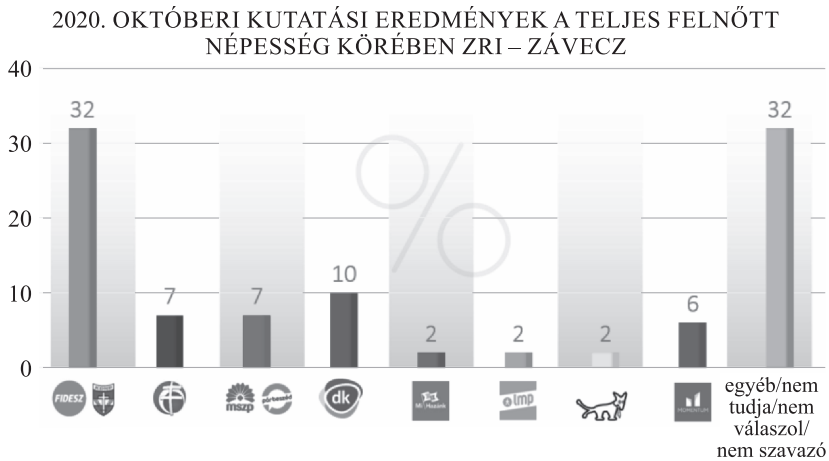
After the 2010 general election and the decisive victory of FIDESZ, the traditional left-right bipolarity slowly disintegrated (Ágh, 2018). FIDESZ has self-declared itself the strong "national centre". It is the strongest right-wing party in the country. Also, there is a coalition party KDNP (Christian Democrats People's Party) and the far-right opposition party MI HAZÁNK (Our Homeland Movement) on the right side of the political spectrum. The former far-right party JOBBIK (Movement for a Better Hungary) turned into a moderate centrist party cooperating with the other democratic parties inside and outside the Parliament. The party split of JOBBIK formed MI HAZÁNK. There are two left spectrum parties in the Parliament – MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party), which was in power for 12 years between 1990 and 2010 and DK (Democratic Coalition), which was led during this research period by the former MSZP Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány and had members from both MSZP and the former liberal party, the collapsed SZDSZ (The Alliance of Free Democrats). There are two smaller parties in the Parliament: the new left PÁRBESZÉD (Dialogue) and the green party LMP (Politics Can Be Different). Non-parliamentary opposition is represented by MOMENTUM MOVEMENT and the pirate party, the HUNGARIAN TWO-TAILED DOG PARTY. These two latter parties did not gain a seat in the 2018 general elections but Momentum succeeded in the European Parliamentary Elections in 2019. The latter party was also successful in the larger cities in the country in the municipal elections. Charts 1 and 2 show the results of opinion polls on political party preferences (Babar, 2020). The order of the parties or party-alliances on the chart from left to right are: FIDESZ-KDNP, JOBBIK, MSZP-PÁRBESZÉD, DK, MI HAZÁNK, LMP, HUNGARIAN TWO-TAILED DOG PARTY and MOMENTUM. The first is relevant for the research period (2020), and the second one is more recent (2021).

The now populist governing party, FIDESZ, was founded in 1988 as a liberal party opposing the communist government. The leader, Vik-

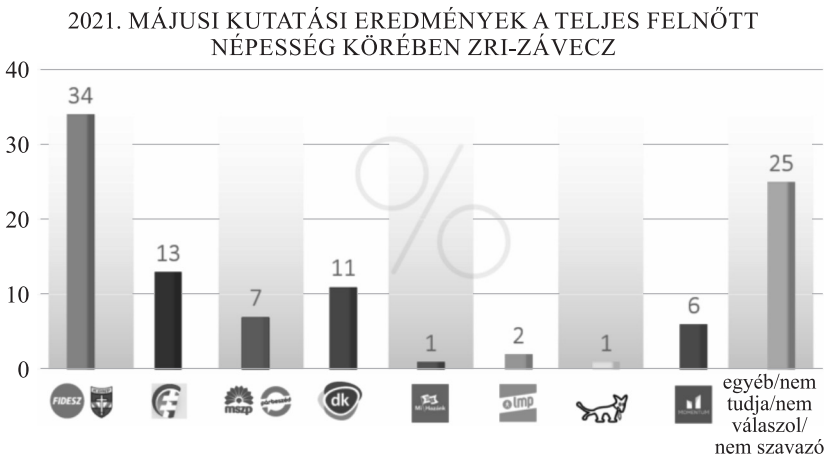
tor Orbán, had a role as a young politician in the system changes. Since 1988 it has moved from a centrist liberal to a civic-centrist, and finally, FIDESZ, under his leadership, became a right conservative populist party. FIDESZ was first in power from 1998 to 2002, and after eight years of the MSZP government, it has been ruling the country since 2010.

FIDESZ defines itself as the strong national centrist party, but most observers see it as a right-wing populist party. FIDESZ showed a very

**Chart 1. Political party preferences 2020**



**Chart 2. Political party preferences 2021**



high 9 degrees magnitude of populism on a 10-point scale (key indicators: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrism and anti-elitism) (Meijers, Zaslove, 2018). Antal argues that the key substance of FIDESZ policies is *repoliticisation* (Antal, 2018). Since both the opposition and the European Union (EU) base their politics allegedly on anti-politics and bureaucratic elements, thus, these actors cannot make political decisions. Furthermore, they allegedly endanger the (Hungarian and European) political communities. According to an alternative explanation, Orbán used the plasticity, ambiguity, and practical unenforceability of EU values to style himself as a pro-European statesman, ready to steer the EU back to its moral roots (Mos, 2020).

### **Viktor Orbán on Social Media and in Political Communication**

For success in politics, the key is to occupy the public space with his or her topics for any politician, but this is especially important for populist parties and/or parties based on extremely personalised leadership. Apparently, during our research period, Orbán was successful in this effort. As of July 2020, Orbán was the most popular politician. The majority – 57% of Hungarians – showed support for Orbán. The politicians in power were generally more popular than the opposition (Medve, 2020). Szemere (2020) believes that Orbán has established a monarch-like celebrity status, drawing on nationalist mythology, local traditions of personality cult, and media techniques to personalise politics. One could assume that this should or could be reflected in the communication activities of Orbán in his “liking” on FB. However, as it will be shown, the FB button “Like” was not at all used in political communication by Orbán. Yet Viktor Orbán is the central figure of right-wing populism following the so-called illiberal turn in Hungary. Orbán became a prototype of self-mediatization when “...the political leader is no longer only a politician, but a media personality, who is continually in the centre of the news, he is at the centre of the public attention and has become famous, and after a while, a group of sympathisers from his party become distinguished as his followers, his believers. He has become a star but also remained a politician” (Povedák, 2014, p. 154). However, as it will be shown, FB tools are not at all utilised in this communication process.

Viktor Orbán launched his FB page in 2010. FIDESZ has made FB and Orbán the centre of their political campaign (Burján, 2010). The con-

tent of Orbán's FB page is a logical continuation of the OV TV with a high ratio of video content.

Public opinion on Orbán is sharply divided. Nonetheless, he was the only Hungarian political leader who managed to gain and keep the support of a large part of the society until 2021. His personality has been "(neo)folklorised and has continuously been maintained within the folklore of the postmodern age" (Povedák, 2014, p. 156). As mentioned, he is, in a way, a more important figure than his party. According to the polls (Republikon, Median), he was the best-known politician and among Hungary's three most popular politicians (Republikon Intézet, 2020; Magyar Hírlap, 2020). János Áder (President of Hungary – from FIDESZ) was the most popular politician in 2020 according to the polls, but he had no official FB page – his page was "liked" by less than 13,000 and followed by more than 13,000 on FB in 2020 and his page has not been updated since 2014 (as of September 2021).

Comparing the numbers of followers on FB, Orbán was being followed by 1,035,000 people and was liked by 864,000 in May 2020. Other relevant politicians like Ferenc Gyurcsány (DK) had 262,000 "likes" and 282,000 followers. During the same period, Gergely Karácsony's (from PÁRBESZÉD) "likes" and followers were 257,000 and 267,000, respectively. Péter Jakab had 178,000 "likes" and 223,000 followers, while András Fekete-Győr (from MOMENTUM) had 35,000 "likes" and 38,000 followers, although according to polls, he was also among the three most popular politicians. Clearly, popularity on FB does not correlate with popularity among the population.

Yet Orbán's popularity on FB seemed unparalleled compared to his political opponents. Orbán was the most successful politician in the likes and interactions on FB in 2021 with a relatively comfortable lead despite posting far fewer posts than his main opponent, JOBBIK president Péter Jakab (704 and 1 095 posts, respectively). Viktor Orbán had 12,280,000 interactions: and a likes/posts ratio: 17,400 (Tar, 2022). Yet the messages created by Orbán's FB pages were rarely interactive, and the dialogue between the users (followers, fans) and the page was not relevant, although there were several comments by the users which remained unanswered by the page (or its owner). There were also anti-government comments that stayed visible and unanswered during the period in question. That is how allocution<sup>3</sup> be-

<sup>3</sup> A formal speech giving advice or a warning. The allocution is an information traffic pattern relevant to old, mass communication (radio, television.) "They perform important coordinating functions in society, because they are based on a pattern of al-

came important again across personalisation and self-mediatisation on the FB page of the top leader of a populist party. However, one can wonder why these perspectives and preferences did not become reflected in relatively permanent preferences given by Viktor Orbán to any media sources marked as “liked” on his FB pages?

### Social Media and Political Parties

As the total population of Hungary is 9.67 million, the number of internet users was 7.64 million, and the number of active FB users was 5.6 million. Thus, FB was the second or fourth most visited website (Digital, 2020). For Hungary, the population with populist attitudes can be estimated at 58% (Fletcher, 2019).<sup>4</sup> The social media penetration was the highest in Hungary (62%) among the analysed countries and even higher, according to another poll (the European Commission) (Kemp, 2020). The latter poll measured 69% social media penetration during the coronavirus pandemic (Eurostat, 2019). It means that communicating and promoting self-mediatisation on FB is potentially a powerful tool for politicians. Social media has significantly changed political communication. It is not just about extra communication channels. Interestingly, the average number of likes per post on a FB page proved to be useful for party preferences, showing fairly good correlations in seven of the measured 12 months (Koltai, Stefkovics, 2018). 24% of FB users consumed political content daily, 57% weekly or more often and 22% never engaged with political or public life content on FB in 2018 (Polyák, Szávai, Urbán, 2019). As Twitter is not very popular among Hungarian media consumers, and although Instagram use is increasing in the young cluster, the prioritised online social media tool for Hungarian politics is FB. Due to the captured

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location: \* the simultaneous distribution of information to an audience of local units by a centre that serves as the source of, and decision agency for, the information (in respect of its subject matter, time and speed). The new media do not enhance this pattern.” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 10).

<sup>4</sup> By asking people whether they agree (on a five-point scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’) that ‘most elected officials don’t care what people like me think’ and the second by asking whether ‘the people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken’. For the purposes of the analysis here, those that selected ‘tend to agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ for both of these statements were placed in the ‘populist attitudes’ group, with all other respondents placed in the ‘non-populist attitudes’ group.

mainstream media (Serdült, 2020; Pigl, 2020), the opposition can only make limited use of traditional campaign tools.

Politicians are placed in the same public space as non-political actors on social media platforms (Merkovity, 2018). The former communication hierarchy among such actors is diminishing. The political actor's FB page does not centralise the political message, and the activity of the unique users also fuelling the dissemination and recycling of its content across their networks. The trust in political parties is low, and instead, informal access through a network of friends is more persuasive and gives access to a wider community than the follower community of a politician or a party. The message gains credibility via the mediating influence of a friend or a personal acquaintance (Myat, 2015). Of course, given the digital divide, there are sections of society that are not involved in this process. Media theory suggests that the political agenda influences the media agenda, which influences individuals' agenda and the self-mediatisation of a political leader amplifies this process (McCombs, Shaw, 1972).

All the political parties have had their own web pages since around 2005. In 2014, all the parties and important politicians had their official FB pages. Twitter has not been popular among Hungarian politicians or social media users. Throughout the 2010s, one could see an increase in the usage of Twitter. Nonetheless, it has not become a regularly used tool for communication (Burján, 2010b).

The first noteworthy example of the successful use of social media was in 2006. Ferenc Gyurcsány, a socialist politician, launched his blog with a rather personal style (Gyuricza, 2012, p. 315). In response, the FIDESZ campaign team launched a newer version of the party webpage with a completely new channel, an online video blog or vlog, called OV TV (OV is from the initials of Viktor Orbán in Hungarian) in 2007 (Burján, 2010a; Burján 2010b; Gyuricza, 2012, p. 315). The next year, FIDESZ started a counter-blog titled "Gyurcsány a hibás" ("Gyurcsány's fault" web portal) (Mihályffy, 2010).

Indeed, the real social media turn was during the campaign period of the 2010 general elections. Social media were used to complement traditional campaign tools for the bigger parties. However, since LMP and JOBBIK had less access to the mainstream media, in their case, more emphasis was placed on social media. JOBBIK won the competition for "likes" (Myat, 2015; Burján 2010b; Barkóczi, 2010).

During the 2018 parliamentary campaign and the 2019 campaign for the elections to the European Parliament, it became clear that the online strategy



needed to be changed, but the focus on FB remained unchanged (Kemp, 2018).<sup>5</sup> FB was again at the centre of the social media campaign giving potential to more diverse messages specifically targeting selected audiences and micro-segmentation of potential voters. Increasing the number of followers and collecting “likes” was not enough, as messages should trigger interaction and encourage followers to be engaged to share and comment on them.

However, although a significant number of people live in echo chambers, both in terms of information sources and political opinions, most FB users gain political information from politically divergent sources and do not avoid contradictory viewpoints. Moreover, television remains the most important news source (Janky, Kmetty, Szabó, 2018). It reflects the overall situation in media consumption. Around a third of the population uses critical and government-friendly outlets (Inotai, 2020). One can wonder what was the role of alternative media in this communication mix?

### Alternative Media in Hungary

Alternative media are commonly understood in Hungary as those that challenge mainstream media at the level of organisation (i.e., ordinary people rather than professional journalists can control production) as well as mainstream media productions (i.e., ordinary people can express their concerns – often in a semi-amateurish way) by offering access to decentralised, democratic methods of media production and dissemination (Atkinson, 2015). Hungary is among the countries where alternative media are understood as community media, mostly community radio and user/audience generated content (mostly for webpages and/or social media platforms) (Gosztony, 2014). The expression ‘alternative media’ is not often used in the academic discourse about political communication and new media (Szakács, 2019; Barkóczi, 2010; Bene, Farkas, 2018; Böcskei, Szabó, 2018; Bene, 2020). (Although there is an example of a misinformation web page that titled itself as alternative media – “Alternatív Hírek” (Alternative News).) Thus, there is no obvious connection with fake news or disinformation directly included in the term “alternative” media in Hungary. Nonetheless, Szakács (2019) declared that among the social media sites, the dissemination of the content of disinformation websites

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<sup>5</sup> In 2018, active social media users as a percentage of the total population were 5% higher than the European average (60% to 55.25% respectively).

is mostly assisted by FB. Whenever the web page domain changes, the FB page stays the same and helps the users find the content. The websites' posts are spread via FB pages and groups that often bear names unrelated to the website. It can happen because the websites' names have changed in many cases. Yet there are indications of an underground trade of FB groups and pages (Szakács, 2019). The owners of those websites tend to build up networks, and the connections are very hard to draw because of the frequency of the changes in names, web locations and the invisibility of the intention to operate them. Presumably, money-making with click-bait websites and political agenda-setting are the most frequent purposes for such operations. The most striking feature of misinformation websites is that several of the websites appear to be controlled by the same persons or companies (Szakács, 2019).

There is a listing of all the misinformation web pages spreading fake news, hate speech and conspiracy theories (HVG, 2015). There were more than 250 items listed.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to detect the most visited ones due to the frequent disappearance, re-appearance, and name changes, but there are some clues in the Alexa 2020 ratings (Alexa, n.d.). The organisational form and prevalence of social media manipulation by major actors are to be identified among Government Agencies (Bradshaw, Howard, 2018). This process started in 2010, which was quite early among the examined 48 countries. The strategy used is messaging and valence by pro-government or party messages. The type of fake accounts are human accounts, and low-capacity teams undertake content creation. The Russian influence on social media manipulation was relevant until 2014, but since 2015, it has been replaced by local actors. Half of the internet users have encountered fake news, mainly on social media sites (NMHH, 2020).

### **Facebook Pages “liked” by the Facebook Page of Viktor Orbán**

For this research, the FB profile of Viktor Orbán, then the Prime Minister of Hungary, was selected to find out if there is any relation with “alternative media sources” – in the sense of fake news sites – by analysing their use of the “like” button for a more permanent designation.

Viktor Orbán had three times more followers than FIDESZ. His FB page had 850 346 likes and 1,018,193 followers in May 2020, and the

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<sup>6</sup> HVG is both an offline weekly magazine and an online daily newspaper.

numbers increased to 1,035,000 followers and 864,000 likes until October 2020.

As mentioned, Orbán's FB page was founded in 2010. He and his party were permanently in power for the last ten years. That can explain why the Hungarian Prime Minister did not "like" any other page or other politicians or media outlets on his official FB page. Orbán prefers no media at all on his FB page. On the contrary, he is the "medium". Since the last election and especially during the pandemic, his FB page became the main source of information about the government's measures, spreading data about the Hungarian COVID-19 situation in his video announcements. His FB page (Chart 3) is one of the best examples of self-mediatization. The format of video messages confirms the strengthening of the allocation information traffic pattern. A connection can be seen between self-mediatization, video message format and allocation, but the further content analysis is needed to prove this statement.

**Chart 3. The Analysis of Facebook Links "Liked" by Viktor Orbán with a Focus on Alternative Media**

The Theww Level Network Analysis of Viktor Orbán – Official Facebook Page "Liked Pages With Focus at the Media/Information Sources as of May 2020



Orbán's activities on his FB page were very prolific. For example, he published 59 posts in May 2020. The highest number of posts happened on May 15 (7 posts) and May 16, 2020 (5 posts), when he visited Belgrade, and there was a lot of professional video and photo content to share. The average number of posts was almost two per day. There was no day without any content in May 2020. Almost all of the content was professionally created by his crew. Among the 59 posts, only four were not original content. One was a video about the European Council on May 9, but he was also involved as one of the speakers. His FB page shared one part of the Task Force (COVID-19) press conference on May

12 and a post of the Minister of Justice, Judit Varga, on May 14, 2020. He shared a link on one of the MTVA television programmes: “Pentecost in Csíksomlyó”, May 30, 2020. On one of the page’s own posts, there was a mention of a TV show on M4 Sport television, but no link was shared.

It seems to be a strategy not to like any other page and not share too much secondary content either but to use FB as the primary publishing interface for the followers next to all the captured media interfaces. Government-friendly media often used his FB page as a source of official information. According to his speeches, he is well aware of fake news, and he uses it as a weapon against the independent media outlets, calling them “fake news factories” (video [xpatloop.com](https://xpatloop.com), [hvg.hu](https://hvg.hu), index. [hu](https://hu), 168.hu). It proved impossible to find any sign that he liked and shared alternative media (fake news from misinformation web pages) on his own FB page.

### Conclusion

After examining Orbán’s FB page, it was found that no external alternative media sources were detected, nor was fake news content permanently liked. Surprisingly, although some authors call Hungary a “Laboratory of Illiberalism” or “laboratory for improving the tools of an illiberal media policy” (Krekó, Enyedi, 2018) – thus, assuming an inclination towards rather innovative approaches in different fields regardless of their moral or political connotations, this article does not support either of these claims with respect to the advanced use of digital tools such as the button “like” on FB.

Viktor Orbán and FIDESZ show strong populist characteristics. Yet neither the FIDESZ (not analysed in detail here) nor its top leader use the FB function of “Liking” as a permanent reference to another FB page or external link either as a tactical or strategic political communication tool. Viktor Orbán’s FB page did not like any other pages at all. A possible explanation is that the chain of communication goes the other way. There is a specific form of allocution. New issues are first put on the agenda by the PM himself (for example, the conspiracy belief suggesting that George Soros is the mastermind behind migration), and only then are they echoed in pro-government (rather than alternative) news outlets. As mentioned, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, FB became a tool for the P.M. for communicating governmental messages.

It should be noted that the Jobbik movement was the first and most active on social media from its early days that coincided with the expansion of social media, including some alternative online sources. Thus, perhaps also the long-time occupation of Orbán with politics and the elimination of most of the critical voices in the mainstream media, including online-only media, did not encourage a need for additional attention to be paid to the utilisation of all functions of FB. Curiously enough, there was not even a permanent liking on the FB pages of FIDESZ and Orbán.

Similarly, from a psychological point of view, Orbán did not show much openness towards his internal outlook and personal preferences in permanently liking some individual or institutional FB pages.

In a sense, Viktor Orbán's FB page functions as a primary media-information source. It provides followers with regular, professionally prepared daily propaganda or PR content. In that sense, "alternative" media (or content) is blurred with the mainstream. Be that as it may, *repoliticisation* of politics, as presented by Orbán on his FB pages, was rather one-sided and not really taking much (or any) care or showing interest in other political, civic, or media actors.

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## Zaginiony stosunek Viktora Orbána wobec mediów alternatywnych na Facebooku

### Streszczenie

W ramach badania nie stwierdzono polubień stron na Facebooku przez Viktora Orbána, obecnego premiera Węgier. Potrzebna jest dalsza analiza treści, która może pomóc w rozwikłaniu głębszych powiązań premiera z alternatywnymi serwisami informacyjnymi. Odkrycie nasuwa także alternatywne wyjaśnienia. Czy jest to spowodowane brakiem zainteresowania, czy też potrzebą polityczną? Przejęcie większości mediów informacyjnych na Węgrzech może sugerować, że może to być wiarygodny kierunek poszukiwania odpowiedzi. A może było to spowodowane brakiem czasu? Mogliśmy zidentyfikować pojawienie się specyficznej formy narracji, gdy strona FB Orbána stała się centralnym źródłem informacji dla serwisów informacyjnych. Tak czy inaczej, to „negatywne” odkrycie jest ważne dla teorii komunikacji politycznej w mediach społecznościowych. Populistyczni lub prawicowi przywódcy nie mogą publicznie wykazywać zainteresowania lub skłonności ku mediom alternatywnym, zwłaszcza gdy kilka z nich może sprzeciwiać się ich polityce. Co więcej, brak zainteresowania publicznymi polubieniami innych źródeł lub instytucji bliskich politykowi może pośrednio sugerować pogardę dla nich – ostatecznie zaś antypluralizm i tendencje autorytarne. Wreszcie, chociaż Węgry mogą być postrzegane jako laboratorium polityki alternatywnej, z pewnością nie jest to prawdą w przypadku stosowania alternatywnych lub zaawansowanych podejść do komunikacji w mediach społecznościowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Węgry, Orbán, FIDESZ, przycisk „Lubię to”, media społecznościowe, media alternatywne, populizm, samomedytacja