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Disinformation in Hungary: perception, susceptibility, and resilience

A STRUCTURED REVIEW OF RESEARCH CONDUCTED BETWEEN 2018 AND 2026

June 30, 2026

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Contents

The research was carried out in the framework of the HDMO (Hungarian Digital Media Observatory) project, funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Health and Digital Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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Introduction

The April 12, 2026 parliamentary election brought a significant political shift in Hungary - one that may also reshape the actors, channels, and diffusion dynamics of the disinformation ecosystem. For precisely this reason, the knowledge accumulated about the preceding period does not lose its relevance: it serves as a reference point against which the changes now beginning can be measured and interpreted.

Accordingly, this review is at once a synthesis and a snapshot: it brings together the domestic and international research of roughly the past eight years (2018–2026), capturing the situation as it stood before the election. It serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it is a reference baseline against which future developments can be measured; on the other, it helps pinpoint the areas where existing knowledge is incomplete and where new research is needed. This paper summarizes the key findings; the detailed data are available in the cited studies.

The sources analyzed come predominantly from two groups. The first is the body of pan-European surveys - the studies of the European Commission and the European Parliament - which make it possible to benchmark Hungary against the EU. The second comprises the research of Political Capital and HDMO (whose consortium leader is Political Capital). In addition, we drew on a relevant survey by the NMHH (the Hungarian National Media and Infocommunications Authority). The composition of this source base is therefore itself an interpretive frame: the paper rests primarily on research measuring public perception, attitudes, susceptibility, and media literacy.

Reading the sources together also yields an important methodological lesson. The surveys on perceived exposure are largely consistent: Hungary ranks among the highest time and again. A single study stands apart - the face-to-face Protecting and Promoting Democracy survey (SP568, 2025) - which places the country in the middle of the field, a reminder that the mode of data collection can influence the results. In addition, self-reported knowledge and detection ability tend to be biased upward. We therefore always interpret the data together with the mode of data collection - online (CAWI), telephone (CATI), or face-to-face (CAPI) questionnaires.

The review follows the arc of perception – susceptibility – resilience. We first examine how exposed to disinformation the public feels (perception); then how susceptible people actually are and which groups in society are most so (susceptibility); and finally what protects against it and how real that protection is (resilience).

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Executive summary

In a cross-EU comparison, the Hungarian public is among the top-ranked in perceived exposure and is also more confident than average in recognizing disinformation. At the same time, susceptibility to disinformation is high: politically charged misperceptions and narratives are not isolated but form a coherent system, often organized along partisan lines. This vulnerability is pronounced at both ends of the age spectrum, for different reasons: among young people, overconfidence; among older adults, the limits of verification routines, specific digital skills, and supportive relationships may pose the risk. The 2026 campaign, in turn, brought an intensive, deliberately deceptive political use of artificial intelligence.

From this structured review of the research conducted between 2018 and 2026, the following four main system-level lessons, as well as directions for future research, can be identified:

1. System-level lessons

Partisan belief systems and "fake news" as a weapon: Politically charged misperceptions form an interlocking system that is strongly shaped by political conviction. In a hyperpolarized environment, the notion of "fake news" often becomes a synonym for disagreement and a tool of political stigmatization: a segment of the public is inclined to interpret the other camp's messages as disinformation.

The gap between perceived and actual ability (overconfidence): A recurring motif across the studies is the "third-person effect." The public - especially young and highly educated people - tends to substantially overestimate its own resilience while assuming that others can be deceived; in reality, confidence and actual detection ability are largely decoupled.

Factual relativism and general erosion of certainty: A particularly deep risk stems from the widespread presence of factual relativism, in which facts themselves become a matter of perspective and the logic of "this is my truth" overrides verifiable evidence. This disposition not only undermines the effectiveness of debunking but also leads to a general erosion of certainty toward news sources and to declining trust in media platforms. Encountering disinformation thus erodes the credibility of the entire news environment, weakening genuine, trustworthy information as well.

Methodological biases: The surveys are largely consistent, but the mode of data collection (online, telephone, or face-to-face) can meaningfully shift the figures, while self-reported knowledge and detection tend to be biased upward. The data therefore often reveal patterns and risk factors rather than direct causal conclusions.

2. Research gaps and post-2026 directions

The existing domestic knowledge base remains incomplete in several respects:

- experimental methodologies measuring actual (rather than self-reported) detection ability;
- longitudinal data tracking change over time;
- rigorous impact evaluation of media literacy programs;
- diffusion analyses based on platform data;
- studies measuring the detection of AI and deepfake content that can also be broken down by age group.

The April 2026 election has created a significant new situation in Hungary's political and governmental space, one that is expected to shape the disinformation ecosystem as well. In this new era, an important research task is the rapid identification and mapping of new disinformation actors,

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sources, and distribution channels, which can directly reduce society's exposure to manipulative content. Continuously monitoring this new situation - measured against the pre-election "snapshot" set down in this paper as a starting baseline - may be one of the most important scholarly and monitoring tasks for HDMO in the period ahead.

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Methodological framework

This paper is a structured review, not a full bibliometric treatment of research on disinformation in Hungary. It does not aim to exhaustively map every relevant publication, project, policy document, or media analysis; its goal is to organize the main empirically grounded lessons of the 2018–2026 period into a clear, usable structure for the purposes of HDMO's work.

The selection centers on research examining public perception, the acceptance of disinformation narratives, factual relativism, confidence in detection, and attitudes toward media literacy and digital skills. The studies were conducted using different methodologies: some are based on online (CAWI), others on telephone (CATI), face-to-face (CAPI), or qualitative data collection. These differences are not merely technical details but also conditions for interpreting the results.

The conclusions are therefore not always causal claims. At several points we can speak instead of patterns, correlations, and interpretable tendencies. It is especially important to distinguish perceived exposure, self-reported detection ability, the acceptance of disinformation narratives, and actual behavior or experimental detection performance. Where such direct measurement is unavailable, the review treats this as a methodological limitation.

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I. Perception

The starting point is how the public experiences disinformation: how exposed people feel. This perception is not the same as actual exposure, but it matters in itself, because it can shape both the willingness to defend against disinformation and trust in the media.

Perceived exposure is measured by several Eurobarometer surveys. Hungarian respondents consistently rank among the highest: second in the Fake News and Disinformation Online survey (FL464, 2018), with 77% reporting frequent exposure; likewise second in the Media & News Survey 2022 (FL011EP, 2022), at 46%; and first in the entire EU in the Social Media Survey 2025 (FL014EP, 2025), at 57%. A single survey departs from this: the face-to-face Protecting and Promoting Democracy survey (SP568, 2025), in which Hungary slips into the middle of the field (tenth place, 55%). The studies are thus largely consistent; the outlying, face-to-face result is a reminder that the survey mode can influence the picture.

Trends should only be drawn between methodologically comparable surveys. Between the two surveys using the same method (CAWI) - the Media & News Survey 2022 (FL011EP) and the Social Media Survey 2025 (FL014EP) - the sense of frequent exposure rose noticeably: from 28% to 36% at the EU level, and the Hungarian figure rose as well. At the EU level, the sense of exposure is higher among men and among younger and more educated groups; nearly half of the youngest report frequent exposure, compared with only about a third of those over 55.

It is important that exposure here is a perceived, not a measured, quantity: it shows how much respondents think they encounter disinformation, not how much actually reaches them. The high perceived exposure that emerges, however, reveals nothing in itself about how susceptible the public actually is - the subject of the next chapter.

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II. Susceptibility

Behind perception lies the question of which social and political patterns signal susceptibility to disinformation, and who is most vulnerable. The consistent picture from the research is that susceptibility in Hungary is not random: politically charged misperceptions and narratives are interconnected and, in many cases, organized along partisan lines.

II.1. Interconnected belief systems in the region

The *Conspiracy Theories, Disinformation, and Factual Relativism in Central and Eastern Europe* (2024), a comparative study covering four countries - Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and Bulgaria - measured three interrelated phenomena: conspiracy thinking, the acceptance of certain disinformation narratives, and factual relativism. On all three dimensions, Hungary consistently shows the highest values among the countries studied. Czech and Slovak society are somewhat more resilient. Bulgaria sits in the middle of the field, though closer to Hungary.

Conspiracy beliefs are strongly associated with the acceptance of disinformation, pointing to a coherent, self-reinforcing belief system. The literature often describes this as monological thinking: a closed worldview that does not subject new information to open consideration but fits it to existing convictions, and that can even hold mutually contradictory misperceptions at once. This disposition explains why individual beliefs cannot be isolated from one another and why it can be treated as a shared vulnerability of the region - with Hungary at the extreme end of the four countries studied.

The regional comparison carries a twofold lesson. On the one hand, vulnerability is detectable in all four countries, so this is not merely a Hungarian phenomenon but a shared characteristic of the region. On the other hand, Hungary's consistent first place suggests that the factors feeding self-reinforcing belief systems may be especially strong in the domestic information environment.

II.2. The Hungarian picture: susceptibility, immunity, and factual relativism

The *Susceptibility vs. Immunity* (2023) and the *Factual Relativism and Erosion of Certainty Toward News Sources* (2023) studies confirm and nuance this picture. The public is not uniform: some are distinctly resilient (immune) to disinformation, while others are open to it - and the split between the two largely follows political alignment. Susceptibility is therefore not general ignorance but selective: resistance is much lower toward messages from one's own camp.

Particularly noteworthy is the widespread presence of factual relativism: the disposition according to which facts themselves are a matter of perspective, and in which the logic of "this is my truth" overrides verifiable evidence. This is perhaps the deepest layer of susceptibility, because it concerns not a single specific misperception but one's relationship to facts - and thereby also undermines the effectiveness of debunking.

Immunity and susceptibility are not fixed but malleable states: the same person may be resilient on some topics and susceptible on others, depending on how much the topic touches their political identity. This observation is encouraging for interventions, as it indicates that resilience can be developed - but it also warns that on partisan-sensitive topics even the most effective debunking collides with existing convictions.

II.3. The interconnected system of misperceptions

That misperceptions are not isolated is shown by two mutually reinforcing studies. The *Conspiracy Theories and Superstitions* (2018), a comprehensive study, finds that different conspiracy theories

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cluster together: someone who believes one is very likely to believe another, and this co-occurrence is driven fundamentally by political conviction.

Superstitions are an instructive exception. They barely correlate with conspiracy theories and follow a demographic rather than a partisan pattern (relating more to age and education). A superstition is thus a "solitary" belief, whereas politically charged misperceptions form an interlocking system - and it is precisely this difference that shows political misperceptions are powered not by independent errors but by a common, partisan driver.

The same interconnection is confirmed by the *COVID and War-Related Disinformation* (2022) study as well, which measured the joint acceptance of coronavirus-related and war-related (pro-Russian) disinformation: those who accepted one narrative accepted the other at a substantially higher rate (the affected shares in the two groups were 42% and 11%). Susceptibility is thus driven by a coherent, partisan-organized system rather than by a multitude of independent errors.

The studies above also identify the susceptible social groups. The acceptance of disinformation narratives is typically stronger among respondents with lower education, those who rely on traditional media, and those with (then-)pro-government news orientation, though the exact composition varies by narrative. Susceptibility is therefore not the preserve of a single group but is distributed along political alignment and media consumption habits.

II.4. Partisan tribalism

Partisanship is not merely a background variable but an engine of susceptibility. According to the Polarization and Tribalism (2025) study, each political camp sees the other as "blind believers": the share viewing the other camp as blind believers is 66% among Fidesz voters and 89% among Tisza voters. In their view, the other side's voters are not interested in facts and simply believe blindly whatever their party's politicians say. The two sides also perceive each other as a threat (65% and 55%, respectively).

This mutual distrust has a direct consequence for how disinformation is interpreted: for many, the notion of "fake news" coincides with content that differs from their own opinion. One's relationship to facts thus turns into partisan perception, where credibility is decided not by the truth value of the content but by the source's camp affiliation - a pattern that recurs in the later electoral and media-literacy data.

This pattern highlights that in a hyperpolarized information environment the notions of "fake news" and "disinformation" easily lose their original descriptive-cognitive character and become political labels. Political camps do not necessarily accuse the other side of spreading fake news because they face demonstrably false factual claims, but because the charge of disinformation is well suited to delegitimizing a political opponent. This process readily draws the fight against disinformation into the logic of party-political conflict as well.

II.5. The two ends of the age spectrum

Vulnerability concentrates at the two ends of the age spectrum, but for different reasons. The two groups are covered by studies using different methods. For young people (aged 18–35), the *Young People and Disinformation* (2025) literature synthesis, which aggregates some nine surveys, provides the picture. It finds that young people are made vulnerable not by lack of information but by overconfidence: they are more confident in detection than their actual resilience would warrant, while their intensive online presence also exposes them to more disinformation.

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For older adults, the nature of the risk is different. An unpublished Idea Alapítvány study, conducted under the auspices of HDMO to prepare educational materials targeting older adults - based on 20 respondents aged 65–82, in a qualitative, asynchronous online format - showed that there are significant differences within the older age group as well: vulnerability is shaped not by age in itself but by internet-use experience gained during one's working years, source-handling routines, education, and the supportive relationships available. More aware respondents try to protect themselves by comparing multiple sources, applying source criticism, and verification, while others rely instead on a narrower set of sources, personal trust, family help, or avoidance. The practical lesson of this internal research is therefore not the importance of general warnings but the development of concrete, learnable verification skills - such as source-checking, comparing multiple sources, and cross-referencing.

Together, the two studies nuance the common assumption that disinformation mainly endangers older people. Young people navigate the digital space more adeptly but are less cautious precisely because of their confidence; older people are more cautious but have fewer tools for verification. Effective defense therefore requires different interventions for different age groups and cannot be reduced to a single "at-risk" group.

II.6. CASE STUDY: THE 2026 CAMPAIGN - DEEPFAKES AND POLITICAL MYTHS

The most current terrain of susceptibility was the campaign use of artificial intelligence ahead of the 2026 election. Deepfakes pose a particular risk because their lifelike audiovisual quality exploits the "seeing is believing" bias, they evoke strong emotions (fear, anger, outrage), and their effect persists even after they are later revealed to be fake. Moreover, an environment saturated with fake content also undermines the credibility of genuine footage - what the literature calls the "liar's dividend," where even authentic evidence can be dismissed as fake.

According to the AI-Based Manipulation (2026) study by HDMO–Political Capital, AI videos in the campaign were used intensively above all by Fidesz and organizations linked to it, and on the opposition side to any meaningful extent only by the Democratic Coalition. The study finds that the scale observed in the campaign was striking even in EU comparison; the phenomenon is not, however, a Hungarian peculiarity, with similar examples appearing in the 2024 U.S., the 2025 German and Irish, and the 2023 Slovak elections. Several AI videos also ran as paid advertisements and passed through Meta's system for screening political ads, thus generating significant reach even amid inconsistent enforcement of platform rules. The campaign's AI content often used strong emotional imagery and, as paid advertising, in many cases achieved substantial views. This clearly shows that, with inconsistent enforcement of platform rules, contested or prohibited political advertising can also generate considerable reach.

On the audience side, deepfakes have become part of everyday experience. According to the Political Myths and Foreign Interference (2026) Political Capital/Medián survey, 73% of respondents had already encountered a political video they believed to be AI-generated; perception varies strongly by party affiliation (88% of Tisza voters reported this, compared with only 53% of Fidesz voters). More than half of those who had encountered such videos (52%) had already been uncertain about a video's authenticity, and more than a third of respondents (37%) had believed to be genuine a piece of content that later proved to be AI-generated or manipulated. Overconfidence also appears in detection: two-thirds (63%) believe they themselves can screen out such videos, while assuming this far less of others; confidence is highest among young people (on a five-point scale, those aged 18–29 rated themselves on average at 4.3, and those over 65 rated themselves below 3) and among the highly educated, and it also varies by party affiliation (Tisza above 4, Fidesz 3.2). Even so, an overwhelming majority of Hungarians (90%) reject the political use of AI.

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Another feature of the same campaign period was the partisan acceptance of political myths: voters typically accept as true those narratives that support their own political side and incriminate the other. This directly confirms the partisan perception seen in II.4 and leads into the question of resilience: if judgments of credibility are partisan, then defense too is a matter not merely of knowledge but of attitude.

III. Resilience

If susceptibility is this extensive and this partisan in its organization, the key question is what protects against it - and how real that protection is. The first line of defense is confidence itself; this, however, as we will see, has serious limits, while there is strong public demand for institutionalizing defense.

III.1. Confidence in detection

In defending themselves, people first rely on their own detection ability - on how capable they feel of filtering out disinformation. Here Hungarians are more confident than the EU average. At the EU level, 61% of respondents trust that they can recognize disinformation, while nearly a third do not feel able to; there is considerable variation across countries (the share who feel unable to detect it is below 15% in Malta but 45% in Poland). Tellingly, in member states with high perceived exposure - typically in Southern and Eastern Europe - fewer people feel unable to detect it, meaning that higher perceived exposure often goes hand in hand with greater confidence.

Hungary fits this picture: first in perceived exposure and above the EU average in detection confidence (63% confident, 33% not). The Hungarian breakdown shows that confidence is highest in precisely the most active groups and those who feel most exposed: men (67%) are significantly more confident than women (59%); perceived ability decreases with age (72% among those aged 15–24 versus 59% among those over 55); there is a strong education gradient (42% of those who studied only to age 15 are confident, versus 79% of those still studying); and active, information-seeking social media users (73%) and followers of influencers (71%) stand out.

Confidence is projected not only onto oneself but also onto others: Hungarians typically consider themselves capable of detection while judging others' ability less favorably. This is the "third-person" effect - the conviction that "disinformation deceives others, not me" - a characteristic form of overconfidence that also figured prominently in the II.6 deepfake data. The question that follows is how far this confidence corresponds to actual detection ability.

III.2. The limits of resilience: perceived versus actual detection

The responses reveal that confidence and actual protection largely diverge. According to the Media Literacy and Trust in the Media (2024) NMHH study, a large share of the adult population has encountered information that later proved false, predominantly online (86% of those who saw a false news item saw it on an online news site or social media). Three-quarters of those who encountered it saw the content they deemed false in a political topic - which, according to the study, often signals disagreement rather than genuine disinformation. This chimes with the partisan perception presented in II.4: some of the statistics measuring public perception may reflect not only the actual spread of disinformation but also the degree of political distrust and mutual suspicion.

Encountering it rarely triggers active response: the most common reaction is for respondents to disregard the news they deem false or distorted and move on; on public forums, only about one in ten tries to draw others' attention to the error. An important lesson of the study, however, is that perceived awareness and actual protection do not necessarily coincide. Those with the lowest

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education, for example, find it easier than others to judge the credibility of news, but in the NMHH's interpretation this indicates confidence in their own judgment rather than greater protection. And among extreme and closed-minded thinkers, the lower rate of detecting fake news, the narrower set of sources, and the weaker inclination to verify may suggest that this group is more susceptible to false or distorted content.

Encountering disinformation may also carry a measurable cost: for every media platform examined, the level of trust is lower among those who have already come across a false news item. This must be interpreted with caution, because correlation alone does not prove a causal relationship. The result is nonetheless important, because it suggests that the experience of being deceived may damage not only the credibility of the particular content but also trust in the media as a whole - which is itself one of the possible aims and effects of disinformation.

The study itself emphasizes the central methodological limitation: self-reporting makes the population appear more aware than it is, while fake news that goes unrecognized cannot be measured by questionnaire at all. From a domestic, regulatory source this confirms the paper's leitmotif: confidence in detection (III.1) is not the same as actual resilience.

III.3. Demand for media literacy: digital skills and teacher training

Alongside these limits, the other side of the picture is that there is strong public demand for defense. According to the *Future Needs in Digital Education* (FL564, 2025) EU survey, 88% of Hungarians believe that digital skills and digital literacy protect against deception (47% completely agree), compared with the 80% EU average - so Hungarians share this view not only more often but also more firmly. Agreement is even broader that every teacher should be prepared to teach the detection of disinformation: 89% of Hungarians agree, matching the EU average.

This demand connects directly to one of the main pillars of the European network of digital media observatories (EDMO) - media literacy development - and to the teacher training provided by Idea Alapítvány, a consortium member of HDMO: the activity has a public mandate. The lesson of the previous two subsections, however, counsels caution. Because confidence in detection - and faith in the protective power of digital skills - readily exceeds actual ability, the value of media literacy development lies not in boosting confidence but in transmitting concrete, verifiable skills - in line with the lesson on older adults in II.5.

Media literacy development is most effective when it begins early and is embedded in schooling - which is precisely the aim served by the broad demand for teacher training. Reaching the adult population is harder, because the groups most in need, the closed-minded ones, are the least receptive to outside information; for them, an approach via trusted channels - through familiar sources and personal relationships - is more promising than top-down information campaigns.

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