DIACOMET

„Fostering capacity building for civic resilience and participation: Dialogic communication ethics and accountability“

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Focus Group Country Report

HUNGARY

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Summary

This report, focusing on the case of Hungary is one of eight country-specific studies in the Deliverable D3.3 presenting the results of focus group discussions conducted as part of Work Package 3 (WP3) of the Horizon Europe project *DIACOMET – Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation: Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability*.

In total, 87 focus group discussions were held across Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Over 500 participants took part in these discussions, reflecting on the ethics of public communication and the media environment in their respective countries. The findings are presented in national reports, each prepared independently by the respective country team.

In Hungary, three important cases of relevance for media and communication ethics were selected under evaluation of ten focus groups comprising educators, journalists, NGO professionals, artists, students, retired individuals, and concerned citizens. The discussions shed light on the participant's contradictory experiences with the democracy in Hungary, In principle, democratic institutions, press freedoms, and ethical codes of communication remain in place. In practice, however, participants described a public sphere marked by polarisation, distrust, and symbolic conflict, where genuine democratic dialogue is increasingly displaced by emotionally charged messaging, selective amplification, and strategic silencing.

In their view, public discourse — especially news —appeared as manipulation, casting citizen subjected to, rather than included in, public life. Social media, in turn, was characterised as a boundless public, which operates without gatekeeping or compass, which splinters the society rather than draws it into public dialogue. In this environment, public participation constitutes a major risk for citizens, as it is difficult to see when speaking up with integrity would put citizens at personal or professional risk. It was emphasised in the focus groups that in Hungary self-censorship not as cowardice, but as a survival strategy.

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Theoretical Background

A shared research framework developed collaboratively between the WP3 lead (Tampere University and national research teams draws on research into the hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2017) and the attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001; Webster 2014; Klinger and Svensson 2016). These approaches highlight that the pursuit and commodification of attention have become key logic to contemporary public communication, shaping the dynamics of information dissemination and participation in digital spaces.

In today´s hybrid media environment, where public attention functions as a scarce and unequally distributed resource (Citton 2017), the competition for visibility has markedly intensified. While some actors can convert attention into new forms of discursive influence and symbolic power, others encounter increasing limitations in their opportunities to participate in public debate or policymaking. The distribution of attention is therefore an ethical issue in itself (Bombaerts *et al.* 2024), calling for critical reflection on how different groups and their perspectives are represented—or excluded—in public discourse.

Beyond redistributing power, the attention economy also impacts the quality of public discourse. Since visibility is often achieved through emotional intensity or disruption, actors may be incentivised to adopt extreme performative strategies. These dynamics are further reinforced by algorithmic environments, which systematically amplify content that evokes strong emotional reactions (Papacharissi 2021; Phillips 2018; Phillips and Milner 2021). This often includes aggressive or hostile rhetoric, trolling, harassment, and the spread of misinformation — all of which contribute to growing mistrust and cynicism in society (Persily and Tucker 2020; Rogers 2024). As a result, we can see that conditions for dialogic communication are eroding, weakening empathy and citizens' capacity for meaningful engagement.

While grounded in theory, the framework also has practical value for empirical research**.** The concept of attention capital (Franck 2011, 2019) enables the identification of analytical actor categories operating occupying different positions within the attention economy and possessing diverse resources, strategies, or means for public participation. Rather than studying the field of professional journalism and the media, the focus in this study is set on civil society actors residing on the periphery of journalism and professional communication (Eldridge 2018; Hanusch and Löhmann 2022). Four categories were conceived to help locating them:

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1. **Attention Magnets** – Individuals or groups with high public visibility (e.g. influencers, celebrities, politicians)
2. **Attention Workers** – Content creators competing for epistemic authority without institutional status. (e.g. podcasters, citizen journalists, journalism students)
3. **Attention Hackers** – Actors strategically manipulating visibility, often from the fringes. (e.g. activists, counter-media outlets)
4. **Attention-Deprived** – Marginalised groups struggling to attain public attention. (e.g. ethnic or cultural minorities, the youth, elderly people)

While seeking correspondence with analytical categories and real actors and social groups in each participating country, the research teams were encouraged to identify locally relevant cases that had yielded public debate on communication ethics. This opened two strategies for the recruitment of participants in the focus groups. In the "intra-category" approach, focus groups discussions were held with participants from one actor category (for instance, "attention workers"). In the case approach, participants representing two or more actor categories were brought together in a single session to discuss an issue of shared interest.

A Method

Focus group discussions followed a qualitative research tradition, emphasising participants' lived experiences and subjective perspectives. Discussions were conducted using the dialogue method developed by the *Timeout Foundation*, either in person or online. Timeout is a non-profit organisation established by the *Finnish Innovation Fund* (*Sitra*), with the aim of fostering constructive public dialogue. The method promotes respectful and inclusive conversation by encouraging listening, reflection, and experience-sharing rather than argument or debate (Heikka 2018).

The analysis adopted an inductive approach and was carried out using thematic analysis, a widely used and flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data. Thematic analysis is well suited for examining how participants perceive their environment, articulate their experiences and construct social meaning – making it an appropriate tool for addressing the open-ended and ethically nuanced questions such as those addressed in WP3. The process of meaning-making typically unfolded organically from *bottom-up*, with participants contributing to the development of analytical categories. In sociological terms, this represents *emic* approach (Alasuutari 2010), in contrast to *etic* approaches, in which analytical categories are predetermined and applied *top-down* to the data.

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This shared methodological framework ensured overall coherence across country reports while allowing teams to adapt it to national contexts. In the chapter 2, each research team will explain their methodological strategies in more detail.

Research Questions and Structure of the Report

The analysis in WP3 is guided by a shared set of research questions designed to explore how non-professional or peripherical actors perceive communication ethics:

RQ1. How do participants describe and evaluate current hybrid media environment?

RQ2. How do they describe and assess the state of public communication in relation to the policies that matter to them?

RQ3. How do participants define and prioritise ethical principles in public communication and whom do they consider responsible for upholding or institutionalising these principles?

These questions reflect the project's interest in the ethical concerns, tensions, and contradictions encountered by non-professional actors in today's communication environment. They aim to shed light on what the participants in the focus groups say about communication ethics and how they understand the contexts of their arguments, concerns, and experiences. Some of the questions addressed in this Work Package, and the DIACOMET project in general, go beyond the themes analysed in the country reports. For instance, these reports do not include comparative analysis across countries.

In what follows all national reports follow a shared structure. The Introduction section provides a brief overview of the national context. This is followed by a description of the research setting: how the research team recruited participants, conducted focus group discussions and analysed the data produced in the discussions? The empirical findings are presented in three main sections: the first one explores participants' views on *media environment*; the second focuses on their reflections of *public communication*, and the third examines their perspectives to *ethical issues*, values and responsibilities. The conclusion summarises key ethical tensions and challenges identified in each national context. An annex at the end of the report provides information about the composition of the focus groups.

All quotations from the focus group discussions used in this report are pseudonymised. Pseudonymisation was carried out manually and deterministically to ensure confidentiality, with each pseudonym used consistently. A context-sensitive approach was adopted to preserve the cultural and social nuances of the data while maintaining narrative coherence. The excerpts from the focus group discussions are translated in English. The translations aim to convey what the participants meant, which means. that they include researchers' interpretations.

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1. Introduction to the country report on HUNGARY

This report presents findings from focus group discussions conducted in Hungary as part of Work Package 3 (WP3) of the Horizon Europe project DIACOMET – Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation: Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability. It focuses on how non-professional and peripheral actors experience and interpret the contemporary media environment, the dynamics of public communication, and related ethical issues.

The empirical analysis draws from ten focus group discussions conducted between March and October 2024 in Budapest, the capital of Hungary. These discussions were carried out using the Timeout dialogue method and guided by a shared European framework but tailored to national contexts. Participants were selected to represent actor categories defined in the DIACOMET framework, including attention magnets (e.g. politicians), attention workers (e.g. journalists, educators), attention hackers (e.g. activists), and attention-deprived groups (e.g. marginalised youth or rural populations).

Hungary: Political and Social Context

Hungary is a Central European country with a population of approximately 9.6 million (World Bank 2024). It is a unitary parliamentary republic with a unicameral National Assembly. Although the constitution guarantees civil liberties and freedom of expression, international organizations have repeatedly raised concerns about democratic backsliding, restrictions on media freedom, and the erosion of institutional checks and balances (Freedom House 2024). The political landscape has been dominated by the conservative-populist Fidesz party since 2010, leading to increasing centralisation of power and declining pluralism in public discourse (European Commission 2023).

The Hungarian media environment is characterised by high levels of political polarisation, shrinking space for independent journalism, and growing reliance on digital and informal channels of communication. State influence over the media has intensified through regulatory, financial, and ownership structures, raising questions about the independence of public communication and its ethical foundations (Mérték Média Monitor 2025).

This national report contributes to understanding how civic actors in Hungary navigate these tensions. It does not aim to offer a comprehensive analysis of the media system or political history. Instead, it explores participants' lived experiences and perspectives, offering insight into how ethical concerns in communication are interpreted and contested in the current Hungarian context.

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2. Research Setting: Applying the Framework

In total, ten focus groups were organised using the shared Timeout dialogue methodology developed by the DIACOMET consortium. Each session included between four and ten participants and lasted a minimum of 90 minutes, with most discussions running for approximately 120 minutes, in line with the methodological guidelines. All conversations were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis. One session with only four participants was excluded from the analysis due to insufficient interaction, in accordance with prior methodological agreements.

The recruitment process followed a category-based sampling strategy, with the explicit goal of covering all actor types defined in the DIACOMET framework: "attention magnets", "attention workers", "attention hackers", and "attention-deprived" actors. The recruitment aimed at thematic relevance, basic demographic and positional diversity, and a minimum of five participants per group. To encourage participation and increase the number of attendees, participants were offered a symbolic gift as a token of appreciation for their time and contribution. This incentive was part of our recruitment strategy aimed at enhancing engagement and ensuring sufficient group sizes for meaningful discussion.

While the methodological threshold was set on five participants, we were pleased to observe that in most cases, six to seven participants attended, reflecting strong interest and commitment to the topic. Only one session had four participants and was therefore excluded from the analysis.

Participants were educators, journalists, NGO professionals, artists, students, retired individuals, and concerned citizens from diverse geographical, professional, and ideological backgrounds. In several groups, participants had prior experience with participation to public communication, either through their professional work or civic involvement. While the actor categories often overlapped, care was taken to preserve diversity within each group. Some groups (e.g. media workers, educators) were more homogeneous in terms of occupational background, while others were intentionally mixed to encourage cross-perspective dialogue.

The recruitment process was generally successful, albeit several challenges emerged. Most notably, many individuals declined participation due to the in-person format of the discussions. Although online alternatives were briefly considered, decision was made by the research team that the dialogic methodology required physical presence, which limited accessibility for some. While no systematic data was collected on non-participation, this pattern may reflect broader motivational barriers to engaging in structured public dialogue.

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Although no overt hostility towards academic institutions was observed in the recruitment process, it did highlight a broader cultural pattern: a lack of established norms or traditions around participating in structured, reflective public dialogue. This was echoed in the focus group discussions themselves, where many participants described communication in Hungary as either polarised, performative, or avoided altogether. Rather than being actively discouraged from speaking out, there appears to be a cultural absence of spaces and expectations for dialogic and non-confrontational exchange. The recruitment process, then, seemed to reflect not a rejection, but a structural void: a form of civic engagement that has few precedents in the Hungarian context.

In terms of atmosphere, most focus groups unfolded in a respectful and constructive manner, though participants often voiced frustrations regarding contemporary communication practices. A recurring theme was the expression of anger and disappointment with the current state of public communication. Participants often reflected on feelings of disillusionment and powerlessness in the face of what they perceived as a deeply polarised and ethically compromised media and political landscape. Several participants appreciated the research setting for providing an opportunity to speak freely in a moderated, trust-based setting, especially when they felt such spaces were rare in their everyday lives.

An exception was the final focus group, where two participants explicitly identified as government supporters. Their contributions reflected an affirmative stance toward official narratives and media sources, in contrast to the dominant tone of scepticism and critique expressed by others. However, instead of escalating into overt confrontation, the discussion revealed a parallel rhetorical structure: participants often spoke past each other, invoking different reference points, assumptions, and emotional registers. The exchange remained civil, but the ideological divide was not bridged — rather, it unfolded as two coexisting but unconnected communicative worlds. This demonstrated the fragmentation of public discourse in Hungary, where even face-to-face dialogue may not guarantee shared understanding.

While the sample cannot claim representativeness in a statistical sense, the ten sessions included in the analysis offer rich and diverse insights into how civic actors in Hungary perceive and navigate ethical tensions in public communication.

The Empirical Research Setting

This report is based on the thematic analysis of ten focus group discussions conducted in Hungary between March and October 2024. All sessions were transcribed in verbatim and analysed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. An inductive thematic approach was employed, allowing for the emergence of salient themes grounded in participants' own language and frames of reference.

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The analysis was guided by the three overarching themes defined in the WP3 framework: (1) Media Environment, (2) Public Communication, and (3) Ethics and Responsibilities. Initial coding was conducted through close reading of the transcripts, followed by iterative clustering into broader themes and subcodes. Where necessary, new subcategories were created inductively to accommodate recurring patterns that extended or refined the original framework. Coding was conducted in English.

The coding focused on coherent conversational units (e.g. narrative segments or topic blocks) rather than isolated sentences for preserve the flow of meaning and rhetorical intent. The analysis also took into account the positionality of speakers (e.g. profession, location, prior communicative experience). Beyond the descriptive thematic analysis, several interpretive patterns emerged that point to deeper cultural and structural dynamics shaping communicative life in Hungary.

Firstly, a recurring thread across groups was the perception of communication as a system of control rather than connection. Public discourse — especially media content — was often described in terms of manipulation, scripting, and orchestration. One participant referred to it as a "media of power," a term that aptly captures how people feel subjected to, rather than included in, public life. This framing may help explain both the emotional intensity of responses and the strategic withdrawal observed in media consumption habits.

A second, closely related pattern concerned the absence of cultural practices for deliberative engagement. Both recruitment and in-session reactions suggested that participants were often unfamiliar with — or even surprised by — the very premise of being asked to reflect on communication as a shared civic concern. This points to a structural void: not active resistance to dialogue, but a missing habitus of civic communication, where public talk lacks institutional and cultural anchoring in the Hungarian context.

Lastly, though less widespread, one particularly striking phenomenon was the emergence of parallel rhetorical worlds, especially in politically mixed groups. In such settings, participants appeared to speak from fundamentally different epistemic and moral frameworks, leading to non-overlapping discourse fields. These situations were not marked by direct confrontation but rather by communicative disconnection — a dynamic explored in scholarship on post-pluralist societies and counter-publics (Fraser 1990).

These interpretive threads are not overarching theories, but rather they offer a conceptual lens through which to understand how participants make sense of the ethical, political, and emotional landscapes of communication in contemporary Hungary. Rather than aiming for generalisability, the goal of the analysis is to illuminate how different civic actors make sense of communication ethics, how they locate themselves within communicative hierarchies, and how they negotiate dilemmas in media-saturated environments. The thematic results presented in the next sections aim to reflect these lived experiences, situated interpretations, and tensions.

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3. Experiencing the Media Environment

Hungary's media environment has undergone dramatic transformation since Fidesz's return to power in 2010, shifting from a pluralistic but fragile landscape to one increasingly dominated by state-aligned players. In 2018, over 400 outlets were transferred into the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), a pro-government conglomerate controlling leading television channels, newspapers, radio stations, and online portals such as Hír TV, Origo, and Magyar Nemzet (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024).

In 2025, Hungary ranked 68th of 180 on the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, down from 40th in 2014. In the meantime, independent journalists report growing isolation and exclusion from both advertising revenue and distribution channels (RSF 2025). Only a small free and independent segment of the media maintains a traditional journalistic ethos in this hostile environment *(European House – Mérték, 2024).*

According to a 2025 analysis by Political Capital, political and societal advertisements on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram) in Hungary reached nearly 1 billion HUF in spending during the first five months of the year. Strikingly, 82% of this money was spent by actors affiliated with the governing party. This includes government-sponsored media (30%), proxy organizations such as Megafon (22%), Fidesz politicians and party structures (20%), and official state institutions (11%). In contrast, opposition parties, civil society groups, and independent media accounted for only 18% of ad spending. These figures reveal a heavily unbalanced communication environment, where government-aligned outlets dominated the resources well ahead of official campaign periods (Political Capital, 2025).

Legislative changes have further weakened media pluralism. The 2023 Rule of Law Report observes that "there have been no developments to address the various challenges to media pluralism highlighted in past Rule of Law Reports. Concerns persist in regard to both the functional independence of the media authority, as well as the editorial and financial independence of public service media" (European Commission 2023). The same report also notes:

> "While there have not been any physical attacks on journalists, smear campaigns have been registered and the deployment of spyware targeting certain investigative journalists and media professionals remains an issue of serious concern." (European Commission 2023.)

Hungary's media market stabilised somewhat in 2023 after a turbulent 2022, but political pressures on independent outlets intensified, notably through new "sovereignty" legislation that—while not explicitly targeting media—grants a new authority sweeping investigatory powers over NGOs and news organisations. Media capture deepened: government-aligned TV2 led ratings over independent RTL, yet an online survey found RTL ahead as a news source (36% vs. 23%)—suggesting urban audiences still seek non-aligned channels (Szakács and Bognár 2024).

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Television remains the primary weekly news source for most Hungarians, but consumption habits are shifting. Subscription-based streaming among 18–59 year-olds jumped from 51% to 59% in one year. Conversely, for the first time, less than half (44%) of respondents listed television among their weekly news diet; online and social media usage also declined, and printed newspapers reached record lows (Szakács and Bognár 2024). The attachment to television was especially pronounced among the elderly and those with lower educational attainment, while youths and highly educated respondents found the internet essential (Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, 2023).

Digital platforms play a growing role in politics and advertising. Between 2019–23 some €26.5 million was spent on political ads on Facebook—third highest per capita in the EU—with a significant share by pro-government influencers (Szakács and Bognár 2024). Meanwhile, overall online advertising remains below pre-COVID levels, and digital giants hold roughly a third of the market (34.3% in 2023).

Trust in all major news brands fell in 2023: half of respondents now distrust the public service broadcaster, and Hungary ranks lowest on brand-trust indices alongside Greece (Szakács and Bognár 2024). Only 10% pay for online news, and news-paying habits have plateaued after COVID-driven gains. Social, messaging, and email channels account for just 28% share of news distribution (Szakács and Bognár 2024).

In sum, while linear television and legacy outlets retain broad reach, urban and younger Hungarians are diversifying toward digital and subscription services. Yet mounting regulatory, economic, and trust deficits—in tandem with heavy political-ad spending online—have left independent media squeezed, even as niche and grassroots alternatives strive to persist.

Current debates on disinformation, media transparency, and state influence underscore the stakes of this environment. International bodies warn that Hungary's democratic backsliding is closely tied to its media system's capture, with independent journalism increasingly marginalised (European Commission 2023; RSF 2024). As Garamvölgyi (2020) observes, disinformation in Hungary has evolved into a systemic and ritualised communication practice that undermines critical engagement and contributes to long-term civic distrust. As pro-government messaging in Hungary has been observed to erode citizens' critical engagement and foster disengagement from pluralistic debate (see *The continued relevance of the concept of propaganda: Propaganda as ritual in contemporary Hungary*, Open Space/MET 2013).

At the same time, digital-native activism and grassroots reporting strive to contest dominant narratives, though their public reach remains limited. Among these efforts are several prominent informal and alternative media actors and platforms: the left-wing, reader-

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funded portal Mérce; the nonprofit investigative outlet Átlátszó.hu and its long-form unit Direkt36; Lakmusz, the first fact-checking site in Hungary, which plays a key role in debunking misinformation and verifying public claims; the crowd-funded YouTube channel Partizán and Róbert Puzsér's "Szélsőközép" commentary platform; early digital-first portals 444.hu and the employee-owned Telex.hu.

English-language alternatives Hungarian Spectrum and Hungary Today; and the community hub Auróra, which hosts grassroots NGOs and discussion events, just to name a few. These actors operate largely outside state-aligned or legacy media structures, mobilising distinct audiences—from urban progressives to diaspora readers—in fragmented silos that together form the backbone of Hungary's informal counter-public sphere.

Against this backdrop, focus group participants grappled with a media landscape where official channels function as vehicles of political messaging, alternative sources compete within fragmentary online spaces, and the possibility of informed public debate is under strain.

Over the course of our ten focus group sessions (plus one group left out from the analyses due to insufficient participation), we anchored our discussions around three high-profile cases that participants reviewed in advance: the CEU case, ongoing gender equality debates in Hungary, and the Imane Helif gender-verification controversy. In what follows, we will now describe each case in turn, before offering an integrated overview of how the participants in the focus groups interpreted Hungary's media environment and political communication against these cases.

LEX CEU case

In March 2017, the Hungarian Parliament abruptly amended Act CCIV of 2011 on national higher education—an effort now known as the "Lex CEU"—by inserting a requirement that any foreign-based university must maintain a bilateral inter-governmental agreement with its home state (Hungary 2017). This provision was crafted to target the Central European University (CEU) specifically, since no such treaty existed between Hungary and the United States. By spring 2024, in our focus groups on March 21 and March 26, participants had read news coverage and legal analyses illustrating that the amendment effectively forced CEU either to relocate to Vienna or to seek an extraordinary treaty—neither of which was politically palatable to the government.

- **Government propaganda angle:** The swift passage of Lex CEU was accompanied by a coordinated media campaign casting CEU as a "foreign agent" undermining national sovereignty. Pro-government outlets repeatedly framed the law as a defence of Hungarian values against "Soros' liberal agenda," deploying

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xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric to justify an otherwise legally dubious intervention in academic freedom.

- **Implications for constitutional norms:** The amendment targeted nature—retroactively singling out one institution—was widely interpreted as a breach of the constitutional guarantee of equality before the law. Participants critiqued how the government bent ordinary legislative processes (e.g., fast-track readings, minimal committee scrutiny) to achieve a political goal, signalling that no institution was beyond executive reach.

Below, we draw on the March 21 and March 26 discussions with four actor categories—for detailed list of participants, see Table 1 & 2— to examine how they made sense of media environment around the CEU debate. Excerpts illustrate both content and patterns of expression; differences in emphasis reflect participants' social positions and professional norms.

Table 1. March 21 Focus Group: Participants by Actor Category

Actor Category	Gender	Profession/Position
Attention Hackers	Male	NGO employee / activist
Attention Hackers	Male	NGO employee / activist
Attention Hackers	Male	NGO employee / activist
Attention Workers	Male	Teacher
Attention Workers	Female	Journalist
Attention-Deprived	Male	University student

Table 2. March 26 Focus Group: Participants by Actor Category

Actor Category	Gender	Profession/Position
Attention Workers	Female	Journalist
Attention Workers	Male	Journalist
Attention Workers	Male	Journalist
Attention Workers	Male	Journalist
Attention Hackers	Female	NGO employee / activist

To understand participants' experiences of Hungary's media landscape in the CEU debate, it is essential to consider both the collapse of shared information spaces and the emergence of sharply divided, power-driven communication channels. Across our two focus groups, journalists, NGO communicators, and press officers repeatedly drew on metaphors of fragmentation and enclosure to describe a media environment in which digital tools have simultaneously increased voices in the media sphere while dissolving the common ground on which dialogue once rested.

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Social media was characterised by the participants as a boundless public square—and a maelstrom. One sports journalist observed:

> *"Social media lets every private person speak publicly. Before that, you couldn't stand up in Hungary and address the masses. Now anyone can do that—but there's no compass."*
> Female, sports & culture journalist

Her "no compass" metaphor captures both the exhilaration and the vertigo of digital expression: a flood of opinions untethered from shared facts or institutional gatekeepers. Yet that flood has not democratised debate so much as splintered it. As that same journalist lamented that the once-unified "five-paper menu" of national newspapers has given way to an overload of online outlets she "simply can't follow," leaving professional communicators hungry for structured, side-by-side discussions rather than isolated echo chambers.

Over against this chaotic openness stands what participants termed the "media of power": state-aligned outlets that frame every issue as a zero-sum battle and deploy symbolic, attention-grabbing provocations to rally a disciplined base.

> *"The pro-government media scarcely covered CEU—rather, they fed us symbolic distractions instead of real issues."*
> *Female, NGO press officer*

The term "media of power" used by participants to describe state-aligned outlets, reflects a media environment where communication serves political instrumentalisation rather than public dialogue. This phenomenon can be understood as a form of collateral damage of increasing centralisation and consolidation of media ownership due to the media policy of Viktor Orbán over the past 15 year. The resulting environment favours symbolic distractions and control mechanisms that undermine pluralism and critical public engagement.

A veteran NGO press officer noted that emblematic for the governmental strategy is to polarise public opinion and drown out substantive critique. This pattern of "divide and conquer" communication, as discussed by multiple speakers, reflects an underlying assumption that citizens are more easily mobilised by fear of "the other" than by reasoned engagement with policy.

Journalists in our groups also highlighted the elite-mass disconnect afflicting coverage of the CEU case. Explaining the closure of a graduate-only institution to average readers, one veteran correspondent confessed, Orbán counted on journalists' inability to convey what CEU meant to everyday lives, pointing to a professional frustration with both the complexity of the story and the hostile media ecosystem.

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> *"It was not easy to deal with this issue from a journalistic point of view because, after all, the CEU is the top of the top. So it's an elite school… in the end, the average reader is the average reader, and of course that's what Orbán was counting on, obviously."*
> Female, journalist

In contrast, participants fondly recalled CEU's "relaxed, first-name debate culture" as a symbol of academic openness—an environment that stood in stark contrast to the "deferential halls" of their own student days under late-communist academic hierarchies.

> *"I went to one or two events at CEU, and my main impression was how much I envied these students: they talked and debated in a completely relaxed international environment, using first names, without that excessive respect for the professor. It was such an awful big contrast to my own days at ELTE in the late '70s and early '80s."*
> *Female, radio journalist*

Underlying these themes is a tension between digital empowerment and institutional capture. While social media offers unprecedented reach, it also amplifies state-sponsored narratives and fragments audiences into isolated "bubbles." As one NGO communicator put it:

> *"They put a lot of small bubbles together and made it big."*
> *Female, NGO communications head*

This image of stitched-together bubbles conveys the engineered nature of contemporary media power: not a spontaneous groundswell, but a carefully cultivated constituency.

Digital tools have liberated voices but also accelerated fragmentation. They are enabled by a state media apparatus that exploits fear and distraction to maintain control.

In sum, participants' reflections revealed a perception of the media environment driven by contradictions. Technology promises access and immediacy yet dwindles shared reference points; independent journalism aspires to bridge elite-mass divides yet struggles under coordinated state messaging. Capturing both consensus—about the crisis of media pluralism— and divergence over whether structured debate or radical systemic change

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offers a path forward, our analysis underscores the complexity of Hungary's discursive landscape in the CEU era.

Gender equality debates

Two consecutive focus groups on April 30 and May 21, 2024, centered on the status of women in Hungary with reference to Anna Flóri's overview of Hungary's performance in the 2021 EU Gender Equality Index as preparatory reading. The article by Euronews (2021) highlighted Hungary's persistent underrepresentation of women in political and economic decision-making and spurred reflections on media portrayals, workplace discrimination, and intersectional challenges.

To examine how actors made sense of Hungary's media environment around gender-equality debates, two focus groups with participants from three actor categories (Attention-Deprived, Attention Workers, and Attention Hackers, for details see Table 3 & 4) repeatedly invoked metaphors of echo chambers and walled gardens to describe a landscape in which digital platforms have simultaneously amplified every voice and eroded common ground.

Table 3. April 30 Focus Group: Participants by Actor Category

Actor Category	Gender	Profession / Position
Attention-Deprived	Female	University student
Attention-Deprived	Male	University student
Attention Hackers	Male	NGO employee / activist
Attention Workers	Female	Journalist
Attention Workers	Male	PR professional

Table 4. May 21 Focus Group: Participants by Actor Category

Actor Category	Gender	Profession / Position
Attention-Deprived	Female	NGO employee / activist
Attention-Deprived	Female	NGO employee / activist
Attention-Deprived	Female	NGO employee / activist
Attention-Deprived	Female	NGO employee / activist
Attention-Deprived	Female	NGO employee / activist

Social platforms were repeatedly cast not as modern town squares, but as maelstroms that drown out any shared orientation. A university student described logging onto Facebook only to be "bombarded with both mocking memes and moralising sermons—I can't find any middle ground." Her sense of vertigo reflected a broader complaint: digital tools have multiplied voices but eroded common facts and norms.

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Against these chaotic islands stands a state-aligned media apparatus that frames gender-equality as yet another zero-sum spectacle.

> *"They've managed to turn every mention of feminism into a caricature—'hysterical women,' 'libby propaganda,' or some Western agenda. It's all spectacle, never substance."*
> *Female, Journalist*

Journalists and PR professionals alike lamented that mainstream outlets "barely mention real issues of inequality—instead they feed us symbolic distractions," in the words of a seasoned reporter. Behind the screens of "news" programming and party-aligned tabloids, every mention of gender is cast as a crisis to mobilise a compliant base—never as a policy question inviting nuance.

> *"They spat out stories to distract us—don't talk about pay gaps or quotas, talk about who's sleeping with whom instead."*
> *Female, NGO Communications Head*

When advocates do break through the noise, they often have to pay a personal price. "If I complained about sexism, friends would tell me, 'said every feminist ever,'" one university student recalled, her frustration cutting through the group's nods of recognition. Across both focus groups, speakers described a chilling effect: to speak up means risk being caricatured or professionally sidelined. As one NGO activist put it, "It's like there's an unspoken rule: don't rock the boat—especially if you're a woman." Such social sanctions reinforce the very fragmentation participants decried, since many retreat into safe corners rather than challenge the dominant frames.

Participants' reflections sketch a media landscape riven by contradictions. Digital platforms promise boundless participation yet dissipate shared reference points; state-aligned outlets impose cohesion but only through spectacle and fear, not reasoned exchange. Independent journalists and activists try to work for inclusive, evidence-based debate—only to find themselves overshadowed by polarising narratives crafted for maximum emotional impact. These observations are closely aligned with the findings discussed in section 4.2, reaffirming that genuine engagement on issues like gender equality remains elusive, confined to isolated spaces of solidarity within an increasingly fragmented public sphere.

Imane Helif gender-verification controversy

In the final six sessions—held on September 5th, 10th, 12th and October 4th, 10th, and 11th, 2024—we discussed the Imane Helif case. Helif, an Algerian boxer born and raised competing in the women's category, was barred from the 2023 World Championships over disputed chromosome tests and then cleared for the Paris 2024 Olympics, triggering a

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national debate over biological sex, intersex athletes, and fairness in sport (Nagy 2024). For details about the participants of the last six focus groups, see Table 5.

The focus group discussions around the Imane Helif case unfolded in a media landscape that participants repeatedly described as fractured, emotionally saturated, and politically weaponised. Yet beneath this shared diagnosis, they offered diverging explanations and evaluations of what exactly is broken, who is to be held responsible, and how they themselves navigate this contested terrain.

Table 5. Focus Group Participants Placed in Actor Categories

Focus Group	Actor Category	Gender	Profession/Position
1	Attention-Deprived	Female	Translator
1	Attention Magnets	Female	Economic-social-political stakeholder
1	Attention-Deprived	Female	University employee
1	Attention Magnets	Female	Influencer
1	Attention Magnets	Female	Foreign policy expert/PA influencer
1	Attention Magnets	Female	Community leader
1	Attention-Deprived	Female	ESG expert
2	Attention Magnets	Male	Local community leader
2	Attention Magnets	Female	Politician / district council
2	Attention Magnets	Female	Politician / district council
2	Attention Magnets	Female	Political party member
2	Attention-Deprived	Female	University student
2	Attention Magnets	Male	Local community leader
2	Attention-Deprived	Male	Economist
3	Attention-Deprived	Female	University student
3	Attention Magnets	Female	Politician / district council
3	Attention Magnets	Male	Economist / influencer
3	Attention Workers	Male	Journalist
3	Attention Magnets	Male	Influencer
4	Attention Magnets	Male	Civil society representative
4	Attention Magnets	Male	Movie / film industry influencer
4	Attention-Deprived	Female	Teacher
4	Attention-Deprived	Male	University lecturer
4	Attention Workers	Female	Communication expert
4	Attention Magnets	Male	Economic influencer
4	Attention-Deprived	Female	Retired teacher

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4	Attention-Deprived	Female	University student
5	Attention-Deprived	Female	Back office worker
5	Attention-Deprived	Male	IT professional
5	Attention Workers	Female	PR / marketing professional
5	Attention Workers	Female	NGO employee
5	Attention Magnets	Male	Local municipality official
6	Attention Workers	Female	Cultural Communications Professional
6	Attention Workers	Female	EU Policy Trainee / Political Communication Graduate
6	Attention Workers	Male	Journalist
6	Attention-Deprived	Male	Sports Media and Event Coordinator
6	Attention-Deprived	Female	Historian, university lecturer
6	Attention-Deprived	Female	EC trainee
6	Attention Magnets	Female	Cultural influencer

A shared point of departure across all groups was the spectacular framing of the Helif case. Rather than seeing it as a genuine sports controversy or a matter of individual rights, many participants interpreted it as a politically orchestrated message. It was designed to provoke, mobilise, and signal ideological boundaries. As one female influencer remarked:

> *"It was never about the boxer—it was a signal sent to align the base, to say: 'look, we are protecting our values'."*
> *Female, Influencer*

This framing was especially salient among participants with professional background in media or political communication. For them, the media not simply reflected public opinion but actively shaped it, acting as an amplifier rather than a mirror. For participants in public-facing roles—such as influencers, PR professionals or politicians—emotionality was seen as a core feature of today's media logic. As one female PR professional noted:

> *"You don't win with facts. You win with emotions—outrage, pride, fear. That's what spreads."*
> *Female, PR/marketing professional*

She described the Helif coverage as a textbook case of emotional engineering, with state-aligned media pushing buttons that resonated with nationalist and anti-gender sentiments. Not all participants viewed this as inherently negative, though. A male local politician saw emotional narratives as a *necessary bridge* to public engagement: *"Most people won't read policy documents. If we want to reach them, we need stories that touch something. emotionally"* His perspective illustrates a more instrumental view of emotional communication—not as

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manipulation, but as a tool for democratic reach. Still, he acknowledged the risk of over-simplification and scapegoating.

Others—especially from marginal or publicly less visible positions—focused on what gets left out. A university student (female) pointed out that in mainstream discussions on the Helif case, *"there was no room for complexity. You were either 'with women' or 'against biology'. There was no space for trans voices, or even for 'I don't know yet'."* A male historian and lecturer similarly noted that attempts to introduce historical nuance or minority perspectives often fell flat: *"Even when you said something grounded, the comments would twist it to other direction. They didn't want explanation. They wanted to take sides."*

This sense of pre-scripted polarisation came across in many groups. Several participants described the current media landscape as "tribal," "algorithmic," or "pre-polarized," where the main goal is not to inform but to provoke. A female ESG expert reflected that:

> *"We don't have journalism anymore. We only have outrage delivery systems. That's what gets traffic, funding, attention."*
> *Female ESG expert*

Interestingly, even participants from highly attention categories—such as cultural influencers or local media figures—expressed a profound sense of constraint.

> *"I could say so much more. But I won't. Because I've seen what happens when you do."*
> Female, Cultural influencer

This silence was not just a matter of personal caution—it stemmed from structural fears: losing audience, funding, jobs, or facing smear campaigns. Self-censorship, then, was not a rare exception but rather an everyday strategy. At the same time, some civil society actors and older professionals expressed nostalgia for more centralised information flows.

> *"There used to be a common reference point. Even if you disagreed, you talked about the same things. Now? We don't even have that."*
> Female, Community leader

Others echoed this concern, emphasising a loss of shared ground as a major democratic risk. Yet not all agreed this was a problem. A younger male influencer said bluntly:

> *"Maybe that 'common ground' was just elite consensus. Maybe fragmentation is messy, but at least it's not controlled."*
> *Male social media influencer*

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Digital tools have liberated voices but also accelerated fragmentation. They are enabled by a media apparatus that exploits fear and distraction to maintain control.

These excerpts highlight a generational and ideological divide: while some longed for coherence, others welcomed multiplicity—even if it came with chaos. Social media itself was seen as both liberating and disorienting. A male local municipality official described it as *"a battlefield where nuance goes to die."* Yet an economist and digital activist argued that *"it's still the only space where certain truths can be said. Just not without cost."* References to "costs" ranged from online harassment and reputational damage to actual institutional retaliation—especially for those outside dominant political or media circles. Ultimately, the focus groups did not speak in one voice about the media environment. But what emerged was a complex ecosystem of ambivalent visibility:

- More people than ever can speak publicly, yet many feel that no one listens.
- The media circulate more contents than ever, yet the credibility of those contents and trust in their producers erode.
- Emotion fuels audience reach but drives social division.
- Participants are called to speak to perform compliance and punished if stepping out of line.

4. Engaging with Public Communication

Hungary's institutional and legal framework can be classified increasingly as an electoral democracy exhibiting significant authoritarian tendencies. International indices, such as Freedom House, have highlighted consistent democratic backsliding, categorising Hungary as only "partly free." Despite formally democratic structures, recent electoral processes have raised concerns about fairness and transparency, significantly impacting the legitimacy of democratic outcomes (Freedom House 2024).

As a result of systematic and serious breaches of democratic values and human rights in Hungary, and building on the earlier Tavares and Sargentini reports, the European Parliament declared in 2022 that Hungary can no longer be considered a full democracy but has become an "electoral autocracy" (European Parliament 2013; 2018; 2022). Constitutional protections, especially regarding civil liberties like freedom of speech, remain superficially intact, yet in practice, these rights have been systematically eroded through restrictive media

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legislation, regulatory capture, and increasing governmental control over formerly independent institutions (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024).

The integrity of electoral processes in Hungary is a critical concern. Reports by the Electoral Integrity Project have consistently placed Hungary in the lower ranks of electoral fairness among European nations. The manipulation of electoral boundaries (gerrymandering), imbalanced media access favouring ruling parties, and opaque campaign financing contribute to an electoral landscape that substantially favours incumbent power structures, thereby undermining genuine democratic competition (OSCE/ODIHR 2023).

According to the Electoral Integrity Project's Global Electoral Integrity Index, Hungary consistently ranks among the lowest in the EU in terms of electoral integrity, scoring particularly poorly on media coverage and campaign finance transparency (Electoral Integrity Project 2023).

Constitutional protections for freedom of speech and civil liberties, while formally robust, face considerable practical restrictions. Governmental influence over media outlets, especially through the establishment and control of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), has significantly narrowed the space for independent journalism. Legal instruments such as the controversial "Stop Soros" laws further illustrate a legislative environment designed to limit critical voices, restrict NGO activities, and constrain the public sphere, thus weakening Hungary's overall democratic fabric (Human Rights Watch 2024).

Hungary's political culture exhibits active but polarised participation. Recent elections, despite systemic limitations, have recorded a relatively high voter turnout—70.2% among domestically registered voters and 69.6% including postal votes—suggesting robust citizen engagement in formal political processes (IPU Parline 2022). However, the quality of participation remains questionable given the highly polarised media environment, where state-aligned narratives dominate and opposition voices struggle for visibility.

Public trust in institutions in Hungary is generally low, exacerbated by high levels of political polarisation. Both government-aligned and opposition-aligned citizens demonstrate limited trust in national institutions, although for different reasons—government supporters often influenced by official narratives that highlight external threats, and opposition supporters driven by perceptions of systemic corruption, erosion of checks and balances, and declining governmental accountability (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024).

Union activities and other forms of collective political mobilisation, though active, face considerable obstacles, including restrictive labour laws and limited institutional support. Nevertheless, significant protests, notably regarding education policy and labour rights, underscore continued public willingness to engage in political activism, reflecting both

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frustration with governmental policies and persistent aspirations for democratic accountability (European Civic Forum 2023).

Opportunities for public engagement in Hungary exist but are increasingly constrained. Civil society organisations and citizen-led initiatives continue to mobilise around various issues, including education, human rights, and anti-corruption efforts. However, these activities frequently encounter significant governmental and administrative barriers, ranging from restrictive legislation to administrative harassment, which limits their impact and operational freedom (European Civic Forum 2023).

The voting culture in Hungary tends towards strong party-system loyalty rather than issue-based decision-making. This entrenched polarisation, reinforced by a media landscape dominated by government-aligned narratives, significantly reduces the potential for nuanced public debate and issue-based electoral campaigns. Consequently, electoral outcomes often reflect identity-based and partisan allegiances rather than detailed policy considerations, further entrenching existing political divisions (Freedom House 2024).

Civil society remains active despite facing significant challenges. Organisations dedicated to human rights, environmental protection, and democratic advocacy continue their work under increasingly adverse conditions, including financial restrictions, stigmatisation campaigns, and legal pressures. Their resilience underscores persistent societal commitment to democratic norms and civic engagement, even as their operational scope is severely limited by governmental strategies designed to curtail independent civic voices (Transparency International Hungary 2024).

Key actors shaping Hungary's public debate include dominant government parties, particularly Fidesz, which leverage extensive media resources to shape public opinion. Opposition parties struggle for public visibility and influence due to the heavily skewed media environment. Non-governmental organisations, such as the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and Transparency International Hungary, remain vital actors advocating for democratic standards and government accountability, albeit facing constant institutional pushback (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2023).

Citizen movements and grassroots initiatives play an essential role in mobilising public debate around critical issues. Significant demonstrations, particularly regarding educational reforms, LGBTQ+ rights, and systemic corruption, illustrate the continuing capacity of citizen movements to influence public discourse and challenge governmental narratives. However, these movements frequently encounter significant resistance and suppression efforts by state actors aiming to limit their impact (Civic Space Watch 2023).

Recent developments indicate significant democratic backsliding marked by rising populism, particularly characterised by government-led campaigns against perceived external threats

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such as migration, war in Ukraine, and gender issues. These campaigns effectively mobilise public support through fear-based narratives, further polarising the public sphere and undermining nuanced democratic debate (Freedom House 2024).

Public protests and civil dialogue initiatives remain prominent, underscoring persistent public resistance to democratic erosion. Notably, extensive protests against governmental policies in education, judicial independence, and media freedom reflect ongoing societal engagement with critical democratic issues. These activities highlight both societal resilience and continued demands for democratic accountability in the face of increasing authoritarian tendencies.

Recent controversies in public communication, notably regarding media independence, disinformation, and gender identity issues, vividly illustrate the polarisation and challenges facing Hungary's democratic discourse. Governmental exploitation of these issues to mobilize electoral support further exacerbates societal divisions, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive, transparent, and fact-based public debate to preserve Hungary's democratic institutions and civic health.

LEX CEU case

Across both focus groups, the CEU case was not primarily discussed as a legal or educational issue but as a deliberately crafted public communication manoeuvre by the Hungarian government. Participants repeatedly emphasised that the move against CEU had symbolic power, targeting the values it represented—cosmopolitanism, academic freedom, and liberal internationalism. As one participant explained:

> *"You know full well that there is a broad section of society in Hungary that resonates with these gestures. It is, moreover, their favourite method of pursuing objectives that are not precisely stated, and this will be very associative, but you will understand that when, many years ago, the citizen was named as the ideal, they did not say what it was, and it was easy to identify with that, because it is a nice word. Now, here too, they did not say exactly what was wrong with the CEU, so that it could resonate with those who who are liberals haters cosmopolitan haters, the anti-Semites, the ethnics and the rural people who felt uneducated and oppressed."*
> *Male, journalist*

This deliberate ambiguity served the function of allowing different segments of the government's voter base to project their own hostilities onto CEU, thus reinforcing an image of it as diffuse but potent enemy. The university itself became a stand-in for broader grievances, serving as a "designated enemy":

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> *"The university exists, but the designated enemy has been defeated… it's satisfying to say that we have won a victory here."*
> *Male, NGO communications professional*

Some participants framed this as a case of political revenge or even personal vendetta by Orbán himself. Others interpreted the move as part of a larger *culture war*, embedded in the Orbán regime's longer-term political vision:

> *"So I think that he was carrying out his personal revenge… struggling with feelings of inferiority for 60 years and they come out in places like this."*
> *Male, journalist*

> *"Part of the culture war."*
> *Female, civil society professional*

In this sense, the CEU attack was not isolated, but read as an early signal of authoritarian consolidation:

> *"I saw it as a step forward in terms of power politics… It is indeed going in the direction we suspected, towards dictatorship."*
> *Male, journalist*

Several participants across both groups described the government's communication style as deliberately superficial, aimed at creating noise and confusion rather than substantive engagement. This discursive style was understood not only as demeaning but as a strategy to polarize and de-legitimise:

> *"With such superficial communication they distract attention and, in addition, divide society."*
> *Male, journalist*

> *"That's how communication becomes superficial… we are not talking about what the system is like… instead, society is divided."*
> *Male, journalist*

This strategy was interpreted as calculated and effective:

> *"They're measuring this and they said it really doesn't make much difference… while this was happening, they bought a county, and we didn't notice because we were busy with that."*
> *Female, NGO communications professional*

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Beyond criticism of official rhetoric, many participants shared their personal emotional responses to the CEU case. These reactions included anger, disillusionment, and helplessness, often intertwined with a sense of ontological shock that such an act could take place in an EU member state:

> *"So it was such a shocker, which I don't know how to handle it communicatively, that I've really been thinking about it, but obviously we'll get to that. I'm just saying that the shock, the shock was that it was a completely unexpected or unexpected move from an EU member."*
> *Female, NGO communications professional*

One participant, reflecting on the moment CEU announced its relocation, said:

> *"When I found out that it [the institute] was going to Vienna, it was so shocking to me that with a university here, you can do this and this can happen and everything."*
> *Female, NGO communications professional*

The government's communications approach was interpreted as not only manipulative but deeply demoralising, as it reinforced the perception that public protest was ultimately futile. The CEU affair also prompted reflection on the broader erosion of democratic communication. Participants remarked on the absence of real debate, the loss of a shared public sphere, and the difficulty of engaging with divergent viewpoints:

> *"We don't really know in many cases... this democratic public sphere has been lost, if it ever existed at all."*
> *Female, NGO communications professional*

The government's avoidance of dialogue was seen as a *systemic feature* of Orbán's regime. This was reinforced by the *deliberate construction of antagonistic binaries*, as one participant put it:

> *"Such a really anger that they were trying to isolate us not only by the media invasion from reality but also from the next generation."*
> *Female, journalist*

The focus group discussions reveal that the Lex CEU case was not merely perceived as an institutional crackdown, but as a deliberate and performative act of communicative power. Participants interpreted the government's actions as symbolically targeting liberal, academic, and cosmopolitan values. They did not present CEU just as an educational institution, but as a stand-in for broader ideological adversaries. They emphasised the strategic ambiguity and aggression embedded in official rhetoric, which allowed the government to mobilise

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resentment without explicitly stating what the university had done wrong. This form of messaging, participants suggested, inflicted emotional harm on democratic-minded citizens, who experienced the event as a public declaration of exclusion.

More broadly, the discussions pointed to a deepening crisis in Hungary's democratic discourse, where dialogue is displaced by spectacle and critical voices are rendered both hyper-visible and politically marginal.

These insights position the Lex CEU affair as not just an attack on a university, but a key moment in the ongoing transformation of Hungarian political communication—from democratic pluralism toward authoritarian spectacle.

Gender equality debates

Across the two focus groups held on April 30 and May 21, participants reflected on how gender equality—and feminism more broadly—is communicated (or deliberately distorted) within Hungary's polarised media landscape. Drawing from multiple actor categories, including journalists, NGO workers, PR professionals, and university students, this discussion surfaced recurring themes of superficiality, de-legitimisation, and performative hostility. While the framing of gender issues as "controversial" is not unique to Hungary, participants described a particularly entrenched dynamic in which public communication is structured to provoke emotional reactions, not invite public understanding**.**

A common view was that gender topics are not treated as legitimate policy concerns, but rather as symbolic triggers used to sustain a culture war. Participants emphasised that such representation serves a polarising communication strategy, whereby even neutral or fact-based input is framed as ideological provocation.

The critique here is not only about *what* is communicated, but *how*. Participants noted that political actors benefit from shallow, emotionally charged messages that divert attention from structural critiques or nuanced realities. Feminist issues, they argued, are often the most susceptible to this pattern—regularly displaced by moral panic, jokes, or character attacks. This was echoed by a university student, who described how the fear of misinterpretation, ridicule, or backlash suppresses authentic dialogue on social media:

> *"If I say anything about feminism online, it's like I've asked to be mocked. People don't engage—they screenshot, mock, and move on."*
> *Female, university student*

Another line of critique focused on the state's ability to frame debates in pre-scripted, zero-sum terms. Gender equality is presented not as a legitimate area of social development, but as part of a broader ideological threat, a "Soros influence" triggering a breakdown of tradition. As one activist put it:

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> *"With such superficial communication they distract attention and, in addition, divide society."*
> *Female, NGO professional*

Participants repeatedly described this dynamic as a form of discursive sabotage. Rather than addressing actual disparities (like pay gaps or political representation), dominant narratives focus on who is "allowed" to speak, what labels apply, and how those speakers can be framed as politically deviant, as out-of-touch elites or agents of foreign values. This helps explain why even professional communicators tended to disengage from the debate: not due to apathy, but because the terms of engagement are rigged to delegitimise dissent. This points to a chilling effect even in so-called "safe" professional settings. While civil society may champion gender justice behind the scenes, its public face is often muted by fear of political retaliation, reputational risk, or simply being ignored**.**

One of the most consistent themes across both sessions was the paradox of public visibility: gender is everywhere in public discourse—mocked, feared, symbolised—but almost never *engaged* with substantively. Participants expressed a deep sense of fatigue from navigating this environment, where public attention does not correspond to impact**,** and where speaking up often leads to distortion rather than dialogue**.**

In summary, participants saw the public communication of gender issues in Hungary as highly scripted, emotionally manipulative, and structurally unequal**.** Feminist voices, rather than being silenced in a traditional sense, are given hypervisibility—only to be caricatured, mocked, or discredited. This subtle form of marginalisation aligns with broader patterns seen in the CEU case, suggesting that public communication in Hungary is less about dialogue than containment—a discursive field in which opposition is not banned, but performed into irrelevance.

Imane Helif gender-verification controversy

While earlier chapters already explored the Imane Helif case as a lightning rod for public controversies around gender, fairness, and media ethics, the final two focus groups added a set of more nuanced and politically sharpened reflections. In particular, participants moved beyond reactions to the media scandal and delved into structural problems around regulation, international inconsistency, and the politicisation of sport itself.

Multiple participants expressed disillusionment with the Hungarian Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Committee, highlighting systemic failures in establishing and transparent rules for communication. One speaker noted:

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> *"The problem here is the Hungarian Olympic Committee's decision making and consistency… it went against previous international standards. I think the problem is the decision-making issue."*
> *Female, Press officer (municipal government)*

Beyond institutional critique, the group also reflected on the media ecosystem's failure to de-escalate the conflict, questioning whether the Hungarian press had a genuine interest in fact-checking or calming public outrage. Several participants called for stronger regulatory frameworks and a more ethically grounded journalism practice. One particularly reflective comment tied the scandal to broader populist narratives in Hungary:

> *"This whole communication… has fallen victim to this populist, heteronormative pseudo-Hungarian narrative… because we had to fear refugees, we had to fear genders, we had to fear the forint…"*
> *Female, NGO professional*

Another participant, a female athlete and communication specialist, challenged the gendered moral double standards at play:

> *"I think it's unsportsmanlike to say, 'I said I would stand up to him, but then I didn't really mean it'… if someone has got the qualification… then Imane Helif has the same right to be there at the Olympics."*
> *Female, Athlete & Communication specialist*

These reflections complicate the earlier focus on Hungarian media sensationalism, showing how ethical, legal, and affective uncertainties intersect in a highly politicised communication environment. Participants called for better preparation by governing bodies, more consistent public messaging, and recognition of individual dignity beyond nationalistic spectacle.

At the same time, the discussion also highlighted how patterns of public communication shaped the case's reception. Participants noted that the rapid spread of misinformation, the hunger for outrage, and the symbolic use of Helif's identity in populist narratives reflected deeper fractures in the Hungarian media environment. Rather than simply failing to report accurately, certain outlets appeared to instrumentalise the case to reinforce ideological divisions and generate emotional responses. This process was seen as not merely accidental, but as part of a broader logic of enemy construction and spectacle in Hungarian public discourse.

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5. Reflecting on Communication Ethics

Hungary's public communication landscape operates within a formally democratic but increasingly constrained media environment, where institutional safeguards exist in principle but are often undermined in practice. Since 2010, a series of legislative reforms have reshaped the regulatory architecture governing media freedom, journalistic ethics, and public discourse—transformations that have sparked domestic and international concern over the erosion of democratic accountability and ethical norms.

A cornerstone of this transformation was the establishment of the National Media and Info-communications Authority (NMHH) and its Media Council under the 2010 *Act CLXXXV on Media Services and Mass Communication*. While tasked with regulating the media in accordance with European standards, the NMHH has been widely criticised for lacking independence, with its leadership appointed by the ruling party for nine-year terms (Venice Commission 2012). This has led to accusations of regulatory capture, especially concerning the allocation of broadcast licenses and the handling of media complaints (Financial Times 2025).

This concern has only deepened in recent years. According to the 2025 Media Pluralism Monitor, Hungary presents a *very-high risk* in terms of political independence of media authorities. The NMHH—now also acting as the Digital Services Coordinator (DSC)—is described as "heavily politicised," maintaining biased frequency allocation practices, favoring pro-government mergers, and operating under non-rotating nine-year mandates (Bleyer-Simon et al. 2025).

Earlier, in the 2020 Media Pluralism Monitor it had already been pointed out that the legal framework did not prevent the ruling party from nominating all five members of the Media Council, rating Hungary at *medium risk (53%)* regarding the body's independence and effectiveness (European Commission 2020).

Freedom of expression is protected under Article IX of the Hungarian Fundamental Law. However, in practice, legal instruments such as the "Stop Soros" law (2018), defamation suits, and criminal investigations into critical voices have had a chilling effect on public discourse.

In 2023, the Hungarian Parliament passed the so-called "law on the transparency of public life" (Közélet átláthatóságáról szóló törvény, Act XXV of 2023). While framed as a measure to increase accountability, critics argued that it primarily serves symbolic and strategic purposes, reinforcing state control over civil society and the media rather than fostering genuine transparency. Its introduction must be understood within a broader landscape of populist political communication and narrowing spaces for independent civic discourse.

Hungary does have multiple journalistic codes of ethics, promoted by various organisations—most notably by the National Association of Hungarian Journalists (MÚOSZ). Its code is the most widely known, but not the only one. These codes together emphasise

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accuracy, fairness, the separation of fact and opinion, and the avoidance of hate speech. Yet, the enforcement mechanisms remain weak, as Hungary lacks a strong, independent press council with binding authority. Complaints procedures often lack transparency, and decisions rarely lead to substantive consequences for breaches (Helsinki Committee 2023).

While there have been past attempts to strengthen self-regulation in journalism, these efforts have remained weak, and currently there is little prospect for meaningful progress in this area. The recently adopted European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) could bring improvements to media regulation across the EU, particularly in ensuring transparency, editorial independence, and protection against political interference. However, Hungary stands out as the only EU member state that has filed a legal challenge against the EMFA, taking the Council and the European Parliament to court in an effort to block its implementation. (Politico 2024).

In the digital sphere, platform regulation remains fragmented. Hungary has not adopted a robust national framework for countering disinformation or regulating political advertising online, though the EU's Digital Services Act (2022) may introduce a step towards minimal harmonisation. Platform moderation remains largely outsourced to tech companies, with limited domestic oversight or civic participation in content governance (Digital Services Act 2022).

The ethical responsibilities of non-traditional communicators—such as influencers, NGO communicators, and political content creators—remain undefined. As these actors gain increasing prominence in public discourse, participants in focus groups pointed to a growing ethical vacuum: these voices operate outside the professional standards that bind journalists but wield comparable, or greater, influence on public opinion.

Hungary has made limited investments in media literacy or civic education, particularly at the secondary or adult education level. While civil society organisations run sporadic campaigns on critical thinking and digital literacy, there is no national curriculum framework that systematically addresses the ethical dimensions of public communication (Freedom House 2024).

In this regulatory and moral terrain, ethical responsibility becomes not only a professional standard but a political act. Journalists, activists, and public communicators must navigate not only the normative ideals of transparency, accuracy, and fairness, but also the strategic risks of surveillance, defamation, and reputational targeting. As the case studies in the following sections illustrate, the struggle for ethical public communication in Hungary is both systemic and deeply personal.

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LEX CEU case

Beyond the polarised media ecosystem and symbolic messaging examined above, participants in the March 21 and March 26 focus groups also engaged in self-reflexive discussions about professional responsibility, ethical journalism, and the moral ambiguities of public speech under illiberal conditions. The analysis under the theme "ethics and responsibilities" capture a subtler, yet no less significant, dimension of the CEU case on how those working in journalism and advocacy navigate complicity, silence, and expressive limits in an environment increasingly hostile to dissent.

One persistent theme was the articulation of ambivalence. Several participants, particularly journalists and NGO professionals, admitted to not covering the CEU story intensively, not out of apathy but due to structural disincentives or editorial constraints.

> *"I remember that I personally had no professional responsibility to write an article about it."*
> *Male, journalist*

This candid admission points to the constrained agency of public communicators, even those who oppose the regime's agenda. Instead of investigative depth, participants described a shift toward symbolic gestures—brief statements of solidarity, online banners, and public signatures:

> *"Yes, we did put up one of those signatures on the list. I remember one of those stood something like '#IstandwithCEU'... which was good thing to do."*
> *Female, NGO communications professional*

However, these gestures were often acknowledged as insufficient, bordering on ritual. As one NGO communicator put it, even when outrage is felt, effective platforms to express it are missing, or they involve a professional risk. This fatigue was compounded by recognition of generational shifts in maneuver, which further alienate traditional communicators:

> *"There really is a younger generation that basically doesn't look at the newspaper... what I would probably encourage... is that there should be a pro and con debate... The two should be juxtaposed and somehow managed."*
> *Male, journalist*

Here, the ethical dilemma is not only about *what* to say but *how* and *where* to say it—raising fundamental concerns about the viability of shared forums for reasoned exchange.

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Ethical silence is not apathy, but strategy.

What emerges from these reflections is not a simple abdication of responsibility, but an ethics of measured presence—where choosing not to speak can reflect strategic caution rather than indifference. In Hungary's illiberal media context, remaining silent, or opting for symbolic rather than substantive gestures, often signals not disengagement but a form of negotiated resistance.

Crucially, this ethics of negotiated speech diverges by actor position. NGO professionals, often more exposed to international scrutiny, framed their limited action as a compromise between public visibility and vulnerability. Journalists—especially those working in non-partisan or commercial outlets—tended to describe themselves as institutionally hamstrung, caught between editorial indifference and audience fatigue.

None of the participants fully disclaimed responsibility. Rather, they expressed a shared discomfort with the performative constraints of their roles: the expectation to speak, but only within narrow, depoliticised registers. Even those who supported CEU felt that real, substantive coverage was systemically blocked—not through explicit censorship, but through what one might term editorial containment: quiet and accumulative ways in which topics are rendered non-urgent, non-profitable, or unrelatable to the public.

In sum, the CEU case did not just test the public's democratic resilience—it tested the ethical reflexes of Hungary's communicative professions. What we observed is neither heroic resistance nor passive complicity, but something more complex: an uneven landscape of constrained expression, cautious signalling, and silent dissent. Participants' reflections illuminate the hollowing out of public discourse—not through overt bans or propaganda alone, but through routinised disengagement, selective amplification, and the slow erosion of ethical confidence in public voice.

Gender equality debates

In both the April 30 and May 21 focus groups, discussions on gender equality frequently turned to the ethical responsibilities of public communicators—journalists, NGO staff, and PR professionals alike. Rather than understanding ethics in narrowly professional terms (e.g. balance, sourcing, or accuracy), participants spoke about the *moral costs of silence*, the pressure to sanitise complex topics, and the dilemma of *how* to act ethically in a system that punishes nuance.

While journalists and NGO staff may feel a duty to address inequality, they are simultaneously subject to organisational and political constraints that reward strategic

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quietism over principled disruption. Ethics, in this light, is not only about *what is said*, but also about *what is left unsaid—and why*. A PR specialist highlighted this dilemma directly:

> *"You do it because you want to make an impact—but if you tell the truth in full, you would lose the audience. So you simplify. But then you feel fake."*
> *Male, PR professional*

This quote speaks to the *instrumental ethics* of contemporary communication: practitioners are expected to balance honesty with effectiveness, often bending toward what is palatable rather than what is accurate. In gender-related topics, this often results in oversimplification or avoidance, especially when the audience is presumed to be unsympathetic or politically sensitive.

Another recurring theme was the ethical cost of emotional manipulation. Several participants noted that even well-meaning campaigns fall into the trap of using sensational imagery or outrage framing, because it's the only way to secure visibility:

> *"You don't win with facts. You win with emotions—outrage, pride, fear. That's what spreads."*
> *Female, PR/marketing professional*

Participants reflected on whether this dynamic undermines the very values they aim to promote, especially when it comes to feminist communication. A journalist remarked:

> *"If you exaggerate to get attention, they say you're hysterical. If you don't, they ignore you. It's a trap."*
> *Female, journalist*

This "double bind" illustrates the ethical precarity of gender-related communication in Hungary. Female communicators reported being caught between expectations of professionalism and accusations of bias or emotionalism, regardless of how carefully they framed their arguments. Importantly, students in the "attention-deprived" category also voiced an internalised s ethical dilemma. They felt that even *consuming* gender-related content came with risk, and sharing it publicly could backfire:

> *"Sometimes I want to share something, like an article about women's rights, but then I think—am I ready for the comments?"*
> *Female, university student*

This comment underscores that ethical navigation is not only a professional concern. Everyday users also engage in cost-benefit analyses around political speech, which in turn shapes who participates in public dialogue and under what terms. One of the most striking

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ethical insights across both focus groups was the ethical weight of absence: the decision *not* to speak, *not* to cover, *not* to provoke. Participants described this not as indifference, but as a forced compromise between moral responsibility and reputational risk. Feminist communication in Hungary thus takes place in a field where ethical action often means navigating silence, not speech.

In conclusion, the ethics of public communication around gender equality in Hungary is not defined by professional codes alone, but by an ongoing negotiation between visibility and vulnerability. Participants—particularly women and younger actors—described a fragmented moral terrain where transparency, courage, and responsibility often clash with institutional caution, hostile audiences, and performative expectations. Like in the CEU case, ethics here is not about neutrality, but about strategic risk-taking under constrained conditions.

Imane Helif gender-verification controversy

Across the six focus groups discussing the Imane Helif controversy, participants voiced a range of ethical dilemmas facing communicators in Hungary's polarised media landscape. Unlike earlier cases, where ethical concerns centered on institutional pressure or editorial logic, here participants focused on the personal and professional costs of speaking out in morally charged debates.

> *"I could say so much more. But I won't. Because I've seen what happens when you do."*
> *Female, cultural influencer*

This statement was emblematic of a broader theme: self-censorship not as cowardice, but as a survival strategy. Participants explained that even thoughtful, well-argued contributions could easily be taken out of context and turned into material for smear campaigns or online attacks. In this kind of environment, it becomes very hard to separate speaking up with integrity from putting yourself at serious professional risk.
Several journalists and public professionals acknowledged that remaining silent on Helif's case felt ethically fraught, but also professionally rational. Speaking out—especially in defence of the athlete—meant entering a field where one's legitimacy could be undermined not by facts, but by targeted disinformation or political framing.

> *"That's how communication becomes superficial… we are not talking about what the system is like… Society is divided."*
> *Female, NGO press officer*

This reflection points to the erosion of systemic critique as a key ethical loss. Participants repeatedly emphasised that the Helif story was less about sport and more about the

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instrumentalisation of bodies and identities for moral signalling. But admitting this openly would have required a level of honesty that many felt they simply as risk they couldn't take. Others noted the ethical costs of compliance. A male local official reflected:

> *"You're expected to repeat the message, or at least not to contradict it. That's the price of staying publicly visible."*
> *Male, municipality employee*

This sentiment was echoed by NGO workers and communications professionals, who described themselves as walking a tightrope—trying to maintain relevance while avoiding controversy that could threaten their funding, jobs, or institutional standing. Participants' testimonies revealed a media field where emotion dominates reason, and ethical speech must be pre-cleansed for performative acceptability. In this environment. facts alone no longer suffice—they must be entertaining, morally resonant, and algorithmically safe. In this context, the ethical burden on communicators is immense: not only must they get the story "right," they must also manage its emotional reception, strategic risk, and covardice reputational fallout. Interestingly, not all participants saw emotionality as ethically problematic. One PR strategist noted:

> *"If you want to get through to people, you can't just give facts. You need feeling. Ethics also means making people care."*
> *Female, marketing professional*

This instrumentalist view on ethics—as persuasion, not just truth—highlights a generational and professional divide in how responsibility is understood. For some, ethics is a question of factual integrity. For others, it's about narrative framing that moves people, even at the cost of simplification. Still, many felt that the Helif case crossed a moral line: targeting a person's identity for symbolic gain. As one university lecturer put it:

> *"She [Helif] became a screen for everyone's projection—what we fear, what we hate. That's not journalism. That's theatre."*
> *Male, academic*

Ultimately, participants described a communication climate where the most ethical choice is often the most dangerous, and where ethical restraint can be read as complicity. The Helif case served as a particularly vivid example: a media firestorm where the ethics of speech, silence, and spectacle were continuously negotiated—but rarely resolved.

In sum, the ethics of public communication in the Helif case were not abstract—they were embodied, personal, and politically fraught. Participants revealed a deep ambivalence about what it means to act ethically in a system that rewards alignment over accuracy, emotion over evidence, and performance over principle. Like in the CEU and gender-equality cases,

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moral clarity did not guarantee moral safety. Instead, communicators had to weigh their responsibility not only to truth, but to their own survival in an increasingly adversarial public sphere.

Conclusion

Hungary's public communication landscape, as described by participants across ten focus groups, reflects a deeply paradoxical condition: a high degree of formal incentives for public visibility paired with substantive fragmentation. In principle, democratic institutions, press freedoms, and ethical codes of communication remain in place. In practice, however, participants described a public sphere marked by polarisation, distrust, and symbolic conflict, where genuine democratic dialogue is increasingly displaced by emotionally charged messaging, selective amplification, and strategic silencing.

The media environment was repeatedly characterised as "contradictory." On one hand, digital platforms have expanded opportunities to speak publicly; on the other, increasing communications on various platforms have undermined shared frames of reference and mainly empowered state-sponsored narratives. The concept of a "media of power"—used by participants to describe government-aligned outlets that dominate public discourse — encapsulates a key tension: technologies once seen as democratising communication now serve to consolidate political control.

Journalists and NGO professionals alike pointed to the erosion of pluralism, the rise of performative distraction, and the gradual loss of an audience capable of shared deliberation. Fragmentation was not perceived as an accidental outcome of technological change but as a politically instrumentalised phenomenon that undermines trust, coherence, and accountability in public life.

The public communication dimension revealed that participants across actor categories experience a narrowing of expressive possibilities. Citizens are called upon to speak—but often only in pre-scripted, risk-laden ways. The Lex CEU case, for example, was widely interpreted as a communicative performance designed to rally anti-liberal sentiments through strategic ambiguity and emotional provocation. Similarly, gender-equality debates and the Imane Helif case were framed by many participants not as substantive policy questions but as episodes in a broader culture war, where the aim was to mobilise, distract, or polarise rather than to inform. Even when participants disagreed about specific issues, they consistently expressed unease with the collapsing distinction between news, narrative, and propaganda.

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The question is no longer just who gets to speak,
but who gets to be heard and under what conditions.

Finally, in discussing ethics and responsibilities, participants confronted limits of institutional and professional safeguards. While legal and ethical frameworks formally govern media conduct, enforcement mechanisms were widely perceived as weak or politically co-opted.

The rise of influencers, NGO communicators, and political content creators has further complicated the picture, as these actors increasingly shape public debate without being bound by the ethical norms of journalism. Across groups, participants described a growing vacuum of accountability, where the burden of ethical communication shifts from systems to individuals—often under conditions of reputational risk or self-censorship. Media literacy, civic education, and independent oversight were all flagged as crucial but underdeveloped tools for rebuilding communicative trust.

Taken together, the findings highlight a fundamental democratic dilemma: in an era of widespread connectivity and symbolic saturation, who gets heard—and under what conditions—matters as much as who gets to speak. Hungary's case underscores that threats to communicative integrity rarely take the form of outright censorship. Instead, they unfold through fragmentation, strategic ambiguity, emotional engineering, and selective public visibility.

Restoring ethical, pluralistic public discourse requires more than institutional reform; it demands renewed social investment in the norms, literacies, and solidarities that make genuine dialogue possible.

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Annex 1. Overview of Focus Group Discussions

	Involved actor categories	Description of the case/ discussion	Participants (n)/ Gender (M/F/X)	Session date
1.	Attention Workers and Attention Hackers	"Lex CEU"	N=6 5-1-0	21 March 2024
2.	Attention Workers	"Lex CEU"	N=5 3-2-0	26 March 2024
3.	Attention-Deprived and Attention Workers	Gender equality debates	N=5 2-3-0	30 April 2024
4.	Attention-Deprived	Gender equality debates	N=5 0-5-0	21 May 2024
5.	Attention Magnets and Attention-Deprived	Imane Khelif gender-verification controversies	N=7 0-7-0	5 September 2024
6.	Attention Magnets and Attention-Deprived	Imane Khelif gender-verification controversies	N=7 3-4-0	10 September 2024
7.	Attention Magnets	Imane Khelif gender-verification controversies	N=5 3-2-0	12 September 2024
8.	Attention Magnets and Attention-Deprived	Imane Khelif gender-verification controversies	N=8 4-4-0	4 October 2024
9.	Attention Magnets and Attention-Deprived	Imane Khelif gender-verification controversies	N=5 2-3-0	10 October 2024 (online)
10.	Attention Workers, Attention Magnets and Attention-Deprived	Imane Khelif gender-verification controversies	N7 2-5-0	11 October 2024