

BILLBOARD COMPETITION: LINGUISTIC AND VISUAL ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL BILLBOARDS OF THE 2022 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN HUNGARY

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Abstract

On 3rd April 2022 parliamentary elections were held in Hungary. Both the governing coalition and the opposition parties campaigned to get into government, and the campaign could be followed through billboards as well. This paper focuses on billboards of both the government and the opposition side. The study seeks to answer the question of what specific linguistic and visual means are used to achieve the desired effect of influencing voters and what communication methods are used by billboard makers. The study interprets the billboards as multimodal texts and analyses the combined meaning of the textual message and the visual world. The comparison of the billboards shows that the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition was more successful to identify the leader of the opposing coalition, Péter Márki-Zay with the negative past and itself with the positive future. Based on the results of the 2022 election we can say that the visual, easy-to-understand representation of the simple message of FIDESZ-KDNP had a greater impact on voters than the textual messages of the United for Hungary coalition.

Keywords: political communication, multimodality, election billboards, text and composition analysis.

Introduction

In Hungary, since the first free elections after the fall of communism in 1990, parliamentary elections have been held every four years, and in 2022, they were held on 3 April. The stakes were high: the election decided whether the governing coalition of FIDESZ-KDNP (FIDESZ stands for “Alliance of Young Democrats”, KDNP stands for “Christian Democratic People’s Party”) would win for the fourth time since 2010 or lose after 12 years of consecutive government. The right still wanted to keep what it had built and gained. The opposition coalition of six parties “United for Hungary” were calling for a change of government, a change of regime and a change of era. They wanted to bring about the restoration of constitutional democracy and the rule of law.

It is worth noting here that, as in the Hungarian media space in general, the opposition did not start on equal terms. During the campaign the governing coalition took maximum advantage of its existing media dominance. According to a joint report by K-Monitor, Political Capital and Transparency International Hungary¹, a poster campaign worth more than HUF 3 billion was launched in March to support the governing parties. The FIDESZ-organized NGO called CÖF (Civic Alliance Forum) and the ruling parties together spent on advertising eight times more than the opposition and three times more than the legal limit. In contrast, the opposition coalition led by Péter Márki-Zay had only 1,564 billboards at a much lower cost of HUF 390 million.

This research focuses on one channel of communication, the election billboards produced by the two political sides during the 2022 election campaign. By interpreting the billboards as multimodal texts, we will carry out a multimodal analysis and examine the components with a particular focus on the interplay between text and image. In this paper, we will answer the

¹ https://politicalcapital.hu/hirek.php?article_read=1&article_id=2981

questions how election billboards achieve the desired effect of influencing voters and which modes of communication are used by billboard makers.

Political Communication

According to Kumin (2005, p.106), in postmodern politics political communication, i.e. the medium, displaces the political content [...] the message itself. [...] [T]hus the public's attention is not focused on the examination of the values assumed to be appropriate in politics - *was the decision taken just or wise?* -, but on seemingly cynical speculations, calculations of the chance of political gain - *to whom and how did the decision-maker want to send a message, and how did he thereby weaken the position of his political rival?*

It is evident that all communication has a goal: in the case of political communication, the goal is to keep or gain power. This is supported by Mazzoleni's formulation that says: „*political communication [...] has become a source of power, an object of political competition, a means and a site of conflict between political forces*” (Mazzoleni, 2002, p. 9).

Political communication therefore presupposes communication that expresses power but also influences power. It should be noted here that in post-2010 Hungary political communication has become increasingly exclusionary and hateful. Many vulnerable social groups such as refugees, the homeless, Roma and sexual minorities have fallen the victim to this communication.

Political communication can be understood as a generic term that includes the political message and the political language as well as the different channels of communication. According to Szabó and Szűcs (2010), the interpretation of the linguistic aspects of politics can be summarised in five paradigmatic approaches: the symbolic, the linguistic, the rhetoric, the communicative and the discursive approach to political language. In our paper, we will focus on the communicative approach to political communication. Its main characteristic is that it describes the use of political language primarily as a behaviour, which is on a par with other forms of action, and even – as a result of the development of modern mass communication technologies – it has perhaps become the most important form of political action. The use of language here is purely instrumental: political action takes place in a preformed communication space, the goal of it is successful manoeuvring, and language is the tool and object of this series of actions. The idea that all political action is only interesting insofar as it plays a role in communication has become dominant in this approach.

According to Merkovity (2008), political communication has three legs: the political system, the citizen-voter and the media system, i.e. the mass media. The majority of people encounter politics through the media, and this is no different during elections.

Political forces use every possible means to sway, influence, persuade and even manipulate voters to their side. Parties pursue two types of campaign strategy: political media campaigns and paid advertising campaigns. They address voters directly, through different channels: in addition to traditional media, they are increasingly using the internet and social media. However, the visibility and reach of all these electoral advertising tools is surpassed by a classic electoral campaign tool, the election billboard.

Election Billboard as a Political Communication Tool

„*The election campaign is the time for billboards*”, writes Langguth (2015, p. 12). Their aim is to attract people's attention over a relatively large area, in the busiest places, and to encourage people to vote. Artinger (2000, p.15) defines the political billboard as „*a mass communication medium that conveys ideas and emotions in text and images with the aim of persuading viewers in some way and influencing their actions.*” Its political communication functions have changed little over the years: it conveys highly condensed information in text and/or images and updates political issues and actors (Geise, 2011).

In the age of modern mass communication, there is an increased presence of visibility. „*Visual texts in election campaigns are usually designed to evoke emotions [...], to create a*

shared identity” (Richardson and Wodak, 2013, pp.250 – 251). The image is in fact a condensed message; it is quicker to understand than language and easier to recall. As little as 1/100 of a second is enough for the viewer to understand the subject of the image or billboard and its most important piece of information. Two seconds are enough to memorise the image. In this time, depending on the difficulty of the text and the reading skills of the recipient, five to ten words can be grasped (Kroeber-Riel, 1993). The image is able to convey the message in a single perception, acting mainly at the level of deeper motivations; it can influence the subconscious. The message can, of course, be conveyed by purely linguistic signs, but it cannot be conveyed by visual representation alone. If the main message of a campaign cannot be visualised, language is the medium that takes over from images. The great potential of linguistic communication is that the sender of the message is able to make arguments for and against a case. Language is able to focus, to isolate certain aspects of a whole and to illuminate them more or less accurately.

The most common election billboards contain both textual and visual elements, and combine them into an overall message. This is explained by the fact that complementary image-text messages are much more successful to memorise, as double-coded information is easier to retain.

Analysis of Multimodal Texts

Communication scholars agree that more attention needs to be paid to the multimodal nature of communication when analysing the communicative acts of our time (cf. Fairclough, 2000; Wodak, 2009; van Leeuwen, 2014). According to Kress and van Leeuwen’s definition (2006, p. 177) „*any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic code is multimodal*”. The authors also refer to these texts as complex texts. They argue that the meaning of these texts is not simply the sum of the meanings of the parts, but that these parts should be seen as interrelated and interacting. Schierl (2001) uses another term to express the specific relationship between these elements: „*[the] image and the text form a supersign that carries the meaning of the message to be conveyed*” (2001, p.251). Hart (2018, p. 195) also links language to visual images when says that „*[t]o study the meaning of language in social and political discourses [...] entails studying patterns of visual representation within the same discourse*”. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) further say that there are lots of types of semantic relations which can be more easily expressed either visually or linguistically. It is backed up by Machin and Mayr (2012), who argue that visual and textual elements act together, but their functions differ. They claim that the content conveyed by verbal elements is provided with background, context and specific connotations by the visual elements.

To establish the framework of our analysis of the election billboards we agree with Klymenko, who says „*[a]s a genre of communicative action, a billboard or poster is a multimodal text*” (Klymenko, 2018, p. 442).

Methodology

When analysing the *texts* found on the election billboards, the main categories used are: thematising the opposing parties, syntax, addressing the recipients, arguing and frames. Under the category of *thematizing the opposing parties* we examine how political parties deal with each other on election billboards and whether this thematisation is linguistically implicit or explicit. Under *syntax*, the main focus is on the sentence structures and the punctuations used on the election billboards. When we look at how the *recipients are addressed*, we analyse whether the election billboards establish contact with the recipients directly or indirectly and which linguistic means are used for it. The next main category of analysis is *arguing*: here we analyse how the respective parties argue for their advantage through their election billboards to present themselves in the best light to the recipients. The focus here is on whether this argumentation happens explicitly by naming the arguments or making promises or implicitly, e.g. by using high-value words. The last category of analysis is the *frames* that are activated by each election billboard.

They are analysed primarily to determine which content-related focal points are used as ‘threads’ through the campaign and which impressions the parties want to consolidate in the minds of the recipients.

When analysing the *compositions*, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) it is necessary to consider the interplay of three interrelated systems. These are information value, salience and framing. *Information value* is carried by the zones in which the elements are located: right or left, top or bottom, centre or edge. The positioning of the elements gives them a specific information value. *Salience*, e.g. prominence is given by the foregrounding or backgrounding of the elements, their size in relation to each other, the contrast in tone or colour of their presentation and the differences in sharpness. Finally, *framing* refers to the presence or absence of framing devices that divide or frame, connect or separate linguistic and visual elements.

Machin and Mayr (2012), mentioned above, examine the social messages conveyed by the images with a particular focus on the *posture and positioning* of the figures: whether they are looking at the viewer, what they are doing, what is being foregrounded about them and what metaphors apply to them. When applicable, we will also use their approach.

In our analysis, we will work with the above categories and, in addition to describing the texts and visual images on the billboards, we will also try to explore the underlying communicative intentions.

Analysis of Billboards

In our paper, we analyse 8-8 election billboards from both the right and the left which represented the parties’ campaigns the best. We deliberately looked at billboards that did not touch on the theme of the Russian-Ukrainian war although some of the election billboards reflected on it.

Analysis of the Billboards of the Opposition Coalition, United for Hungary

The billboards analysed under this section are shown below.



Text Analysis

The *thematization* of the governing parties plays an important role in the election campaign of the coalition. Criticism of the opposing party is both implicit and explicit on the billboards. The headline ‘Wage increases instead of price increases!’ (Billboard 2) implicitly tries to appeal to the electorate. The use of the preposition ‘instead of’ conveys the message to the recipients that the actions of the governing parties only lead to price increases. The opposition parties are both criticising the government side and promoting the content of their own party platform with this message, i.e. if they come to power, instead of price increases, they will have wage increases. Some opposition billboards (Billboards 3 – 4) directly attack the ruling parties. In the message ‘43,000 dead because they stole from the epidemic, too’, the adverb ‘too’ should be highlighted, implying that theft is a common and natural thing for the ruling parties. In addition to communicating the facts, the headline also aims to appeal to the emotions of the recipients by mentioning the dead, one of the most painful losses, as an example. The fourth billboard – ‘He lies, so he is afraid to argue!’ – openly attacks the current prime minister, questioning his credibility.

In terms of *syntax*, the billboards studied contain examples of complete simple sentences, incomplete sentences and complex sentences. ‘He does not tolerate theft, that’s why he is attacked!’ (Billboard 1), ‘He lies, that’s why he is afraid to argue!’ (Billboard 4) and ‘43,000 dead because they stole from the epidemic, too’ (Billboard 3) are compound sentences that indicate cause and effect relationships. In the headlines of Billboard 1 and 4 the name of the politician is not given in both of the juxtapositional phrases, but the image makes it clear that the one who does not tolerate theft is the candidate for prime minister of the six-party coalition and the other one who lies is the current prime minister. Billboard 3 also lacks a subject in its causative subordinate clause, but the image (Viktor Orbán) makes it clear who the opposition parties hold responsible for the high death rate. The absence of the end-of-sentence punctuation allows the headline to be expanded at will. The headline of the second billboard – ‘Wage increases instead of price increases!’ – is an ellipsis, the sentence lacks both a subject and a predicate, but the meaning can be deduced from the context. It is an attempt at linguistic economy which does not affect comprehension. Billboard 1, ‘Only upwards!’, is also an ellipsis. With this message, the opposition wants to reflect the ‘forward-backward’ message of government billboards: for the forces calling for a change of government, there is no other way but up, the way of improvement. Billboards 5–8 form a series in that each of them displays a slogan in the imperative mode (‘Let Hungary belong to all of us!’) and the message is expressed by a simple sentence on each of them. The consonantal alliteration of the slogan (*Magyarország mindenkié*) reinforces the message and helps to keep it in mind. The simple sentences in the headlines are antithetical and are intended to argue positively in favour of the United for Hungary. In all cases, the first sentences of the parallel structures are short statements, ‘Orbán is going.’, ‘People privileged by Fidesz are going.’, which end with a full stop. The second sentence on all billboards is the promise of the opposition parties, punctuated by an exclamation mark: ‘Border fence stays!’, ‘Overhead cuts stay!’, ‘Hungary for all of us is coming!’ and ‘Independent ministries of health and education are coming!’. These phrases are personifications by action, which endow the product to be promoted with human qualities or actions specific to humans.

Only four billboards (Billboards 5 – 8) *address* the voters. The slogan ‘Let Hungary belong to all of us!’ is indirectly addressed to the people. The use of the pronoun ‘all of us’ implies that Hungary should not belong only to a privileged class, but to the whole population of the country. The message is intended to reinforce that we are all part of a community, responsible for our country.

The communication and *argumentation* method of the United for Hungary coalition – in addition to criticising the opponent – focuses on creating its own image and emphasising its own electoral programme. Positive keywords on billboards such as ‘wage increase’ (Billboard 2), ‘upwards’ (Billboard 1) or ‘all of us’ (Billboards 5-8) are arguments in favour of the left-wing

coalition: if they win the election, they will raise wages, and the country will prosper to the satisfaction of all. In the headlines of Billboards 3, 4 and 7 the verb and adjective phrases have negative connotations: 'They stole' (Billboard 3), 'He lies' (Billboard 4) and 'People privileged by Fidesz' (Billboard 7). These are implicit arguments for the need to replace the ruling government parties. The antonyms 'go' – 'stay' and 'go' – 'come' draw attention to themselves on four billboards. The left-wing coalition keeps what it considers to be good to 'remain', but supplements it with decisions it considers important. It is essential that the words used to influence the target audience not only arouse interest but also encourage action.

The six parties of the left coalition are using a series of themes in their election campaigns to address the electorate and to evoke *frames* of meaning. One such frame is corruption. This lexeme does not appear explicitly on the billboards, but the headlines of billboards 1, 3, 4 and even indirectly of billboard 7 activate this frame of interpretation in the mind of the recipients. They suggest that corruption is an existing practice in Hungary that needs to be abolished. Another frame is belonging together. The slogan 'Let Hungary belong to all of us!' (Billboards 5–8) and the message 'Hungary for all of us is coming!' (Billboard 7) are intended to evoke and reinforce the feeling in citizens that if the left wins, privileges will be abolished and everyone will be equal in the country.

Analysis of the composition

Moving on to the analysis of the *composition*, we will first look at the *information value* of the billboards. In terms of the positioning of the elements, the billboards are divided into two groups. The first group includes Billboards 1 – 4, where the left side always shows the image of one or more persons: Péter Márki-Zay alone, or politicians associated with the opposition parties (Billboards 1 – 2), and Viktor Orbán (Billboards 3 – 4). The left side is reserved for the old, given information content, the politicians, while the right side of the composition is reserved for new, unknown information, the messages. The upper and lower halves of the billboards have an informational value similar to the former: the upper half is the essential, most visible part of the billboard and represents the ideal, while the lower half represents the real: realistic, practical information. On the first four billboards, the text messages are located in the upper, most important part of the billboards, while on billboards 1 and 2, the placement of the parliamentary election date and the pictogram of the valid vote in the lower right quadrant adds the new and real values to the information displayed.

As regards *proportions and dimensions*, the billboards with one-person portraits of politicians are slightly out of proportion, so that the text section occupies not only the right-hand side but also the centre of the billboards, roughly 2/3 of them. This further highlights the new information, the message. The only exception to this is the billboard of the five politicians of the coalition, where the image and text are equally divided between the left and right sides of the billboard, which highlights the visual element more. The font sizes of the billboards are proportional to the importance of the message. When comparing the four billboards, it can be seen that the word with the largest size is 'lying', followed in size by words that function as additional call words such as 'stole' and 'wage increase'. In general, a billboard will have three different font sizes for text information, helping to emphasise the most important messages.

The *colours* clearly distinguish between billboards promoting opposition unity and those denigrating Viktor Orbán. The colours of the opposition billboards are blue, green (sometimes turquoise) and white, while the billboards depicting Viktor Orbán use orange, black and white. Each of these colour combinations contains bright and contrasting colours, making the text messages easy to read and highly visible.

Finally, as regards *framing*, there is a high degree of consistency between the opposition coalition's billboards with different contents, so in addition to the colours, the repetitive shapes help voters to identify the billboards. On Billboards 1 – 4, the background of the images is accentuated by a colour bar running upwards from left to right, framing the message. In addition,

all other text elements appear on the billboards in the same direction, facing upwards to the right and similarly framed. The only exception to this editorial principle is the name of the party alliance, which is displayed horizontally at the bottom of the billboards (except for Billboards 3 and 4, which depict Viktor Orbán and do not show the name of the party alliance).

Looking at the *posture and positioning* of the politicians, we can conclude that the billboards of the opposition coalition use very different means to depict their own politicians than the current Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán. The images of the opposition politicians are colourful and lifelike, the politicians are smiling, their whole upper body is visible, they face the viewers and look them in the eye, which is inviting and gives the impression of openness and friendliness. On the billboard of Péter Márki-Zay, the politician is looking outwards and upwards, which suggests optimism and upward aspiration. Viktor Orbán is depicted in black and white, with a distorted smile (Billboard 4) and a face that reflects negative emotions (Billboard 3), and in both images he looks away, backwards and sideways. Neither portrayal is appealing, but rather intimidating and frightening, and the avoidance of eye contact and the sideways glances also give the viewer the wrong impression.

Billboards 5 – 8 form another group in terms of *composition*. There are no photos of politicians, so the billboards are entirely made up of text messages, so the *information value* is linked to them. There is a top-bottom contrast, and the top left-hand corner is given special emphasis by the placement of the party slogan. In the upper part of the billboards, the substantive, ideal content is placed, promising the replacement of the current power, while the realistic, practical information area contains the actions for the future. The party alliance's logo is placed in the ideal-knowledge information square, while its name is at the bottom of the billboards.

The dichotomy described above is reinforced by the *colours* used: the information on Viktor Orbán is highlighted on an orange background, while the future actions of the party alliance are highlighted on a green background. The slogan of the party alliance is in the usual blue-green colour combination. In all cases, the text is highlighted in white, and the alternating font sizes are used to emphasise key phrases.

The *framing* is strikingly different in size and shape around the information content of the two parties: the orange arrow points to the left, downwards, and is always narrower, while the green arrow points to the right, upwards, and is visibly wider. This tilted, coloured, framed representation of the textual content creates unity between the billboards of the opposition coalition. It also serves to reflect the backwards-forwards division of the government side but with a different meaning, and reinforces the slogan of the opposition side: 'Only upwards!'

Analysis of the Billboards of FIDESZ-KDNP

The billboards analysed under this section are shown below.

Text Analysis

The *thematization* of the opposition coalition, United for Hungary and its permanent attack is the main line of the government parties in the election campaign. The billboards sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly criticise the left, almost discrediting it. At the start of the election campaign, the billboard saying 'The boss has a new clone: Little Feri' (Billboard 16) was among the first to be displayed. The slogan – 'The new Gyurcsány show' – sends a clear message to the audience that the 'boss' is the former Prime Minister (2004 – 2009), Ferenc Gyurcsány (Feri means Ferenc). The billboard's creators intended to discredit the opposition's candidate for Prime Minister by using a scene from the 1999 Hollywood film *Little Me – Austin Powers 2: The Spy Who Shagged Me*: a caricature of the world-conquering mad scientist Dr. Evil (Ferenc Gyurcsány) and his short clone Little Me (Péter Márki-Zay). The aim of the government side was to make the electorate believe that if the opposition candidate for Prime Minister was elected, the "Gyurcsány era", the source of all the bad things would return. However, after a short while the Little Feri billboards disappeared from public spaces due to copyright concerns. Of the

government billboards examined, all but one (Billboard 9) feature Ferenc Gyurcsány, which suggests to voters that if the opposition wins, real power, will be in the hands of the former Prime Minister. Two billboards, ‘Hungary goes forwards! Not backwards.’ (Billboard 9) and ‘Not backwards, let’s go forwards’ (Billboard 10) implicitly send the message that only the current government’s staying in power will ensure the country’s further development.



Billboard 9



Billboard 10



Billboard 11



Billboard 12



Billboard 13



Billboard 14



Billboard 15



Billboard 16

Looking at the *syntax* of FIDESZ-KDNP billboards we can say that the messages of these political advertisements are typically expressed in simple sentences, but there are also examples of incomplete and complex sentences. In terms of punctuation, the headlines include an exclamation mark and a full stop, as well as a colon in one case. In the headline of Billboard 16 – ‘The boss has a new clone: Little Feri’ – the colon is used to logically connect the first and second clauses. The colon has a significant function in this case: it defines that Little Feri is the boss’s clone. The headline of Billboard 9 consists of a simple sentence and an ellipsis. The personification ‘Hungary goes forwards!’ implies the message that if the current government remains in power, the country will develop. This message is reinforced by the exclamation mark at the end of the sentence. The ellipsis, ‘Not backwards.’, on the other hand, is intended to convey to the electorate that if the government side loses, there will be regression. Billboard 10 is intended to convey the same message to the recipients, but in a different form, as an exhortation. Billboards 11 – 14 are one of a series of billboards designed to reinforce the negative campaign against the candidate for Prime Minister of the left side. Each of the billboards, stamped ‘100% Gyurcsány’, contains a simple sentence stating that the left-wing parties would ‘Abolish overhead cuts’, ‘Take away the 13th month pension’, ‘Privatise hospitals’ and ‘Let immigrants in’. Sentences beginning with a conditional verb imply, in the absence of an end-of-sentence punctuation, that the sentence would end in this way: if they won the elections. The above statements are short, easy to remember, and excellent for manipulating voters. The ellipses

combined with a simple phrase on Billboard 15 ('They are dangerous! Let's stop them! Only FIDESZ!') are easy to decode, and the aim is to maximise the reception and memorability of the message by using the fewest words possible.

Only two billboards examined *address* the voters explicitly. Billboard 10: 'Not backwards, let's go forwards! Vote for FIDESZ on 3 April!' and Billboard 15: 'Let's stop them!' are specific invocations. The plural form of 1st person, imperative verbs express that 'we' should be the ones to do it. Recipients feel stronger as part of a group; the message is intended to reinforce togetherness.

FIDESZ-KDNP's communication and *argumentation* are dominated by attacking the opponent and arguing that he is the heir to the Gyurcsány-led past. This is underlined by the use of the adverbs 'backwards' and 'forwards' (Billboards 9-10). Backwards means regression, and this is what is waiting for Hungary in the event of a left-wing victory, the government propaganda claims. On Billboards 11–14 the governing parties give concrete reasons why people should vote for them. The conditional verbs 'would take away', 'would privatise' and 'would abolish' are all intended to create negative associations with the past in the minds of the recipients, in order to prevent the left from coming to power. 'Dangerous!' (Billboard 15) is an adjective that evokes negative emotions and in the present election ad it is used to demonise the opponent, to portray him as a danger. The modifier 'only' in the message 'Only FIDESZ!' (Billboard 15) is an affirmation, certainty, emphasis in favour of the party in power. Only FIDESZ ... and no one else – the sentence could be continued. The stake, according to FIDESZ, is to prevent the return of the Gyurcsány era, which in some people has negative associations.

The main theme of the government's election campaign, which it intends to use to influence the electorate and thus create a *frame* of reference, is Ferenc Gyurcsány himself. The name and image of him appears explicitly in seven of the eight billboards examined (Billboards 10–16), implying to voters that he will be the real leader if the opposition wins. Another frame linked to this is regression. The lexeme itself is implicit; the government billboards 11 – 14 list what could be lost if the opposition forms the government. The government side aims to put the electorate with an equal sign between Gyurcsány and regression. They hope that the negative campaign will mobilise people's emotions and get them on their (FIDESZ-KDNP) side. The governing parties position themselves as the guarantors of the future, going 'forwards' (Billboards 9 – 10) and guaranteeing the country's further development if elected. This is the feeling that the stability frame is supposed to evoke in voters.

Analysis of the composition

The billboards of FIDESZ-KDNP and its supporters are not uniform in *composition*. That is why we will look at them alone or in smaller groups but will follow the previous analysis of visuals and talk about the *information value*, the *colours*, the *proportions* and *dimension*, the *framing* and the *positioning of the figures*. Despite the differences, these billboards do have something in common, and it is the portraits of the opposition coalition's candidate for Prime Minister, Péter Márki-Zay and the former Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, which appear on all but one billboard.

The most striking billboard is *Billboard 16*, which is the last element of a previous billboard campaign with which the government intended to associate and confuse politicians who they saw as their opponents with Ferenc Gyurcsány. The billboard analysed here thus evokes the imagery that was characteristic of that campaign. The colours are garish, reminiscent of the ostentatious world of the circus or show business, and the purple background and the colourful, colour-transparent lettering are associated with a shabby, worthless quality. The costumes and sets, borrowed from the aforementioned film (*Little Me – Austin Powers 2*) also convey, albeit in a coded way, the frivolity of the politicians portrayed, but also their evilness. The portrayal of Péter Márki-Zay as a dwarf makes his figure ridiculous and insignificant, and the metaphor of him being dwarfed by Ferenc Gyurcsány, the main villain, is easily decoded. The heads mounted

on the bodies are lifelike, the former Prime Minister looks away and his expression is sly, while Péter Márki-Zay faces the camera. The message encloses the figures, and the information about them is clearly visible on their sides in large font size. The old information (Ferenc Gyurcsány) is on the left of the billboard, while the new information (Péter Márki-Zay) is on the right.

Of the eight billboards analysed, two are based on the ‘backwards-forwards’ message of the government side, both in terms of content and visual appeal. On *Billboard 9*, the textual content is located in the upper-central part of the billboard, in the zone displaying the ideal, the essential, with the text tilted upwards to the right. This message is reinforced by the arrow above it, also pointing upwards and to the right, and the uniform blue background depicting the skyline of Budapest. The blue colour is familiar to voters from government communication billboards of previous years. In the lower left corner of the billboard, the message ‘Backwards’ is separated by a red colour, which is represented in the graphic as an earlier page, covered by a blue page symbolising the future. All the lettering is white, which stands out and is easy to read thanks to the contrasting backgrounds painted in strong colours. The font sizes are proportionately large, and the central message and arrow are further emphasised by their size. The information on the very top states that the billboard contains government information, which is confirmed by the national coat of arms between the two words ‘government information’. The billboard was put on the streets in October 2021, which was not yet a campaign period. This indicates that, disguised as government information, the election campaign was in fact started earlier by the government.

The other billboard, based on the ‘backwards-forwards’ contrast, is *Billboard 10*, where the content, which was obscure until then, is given a clear, explicit expression through the visuals. This billboard is visibly divided into left and right sides, with a black and a national-coloured arrow pointing outwards from the billboard. On the left side of the billboard are the black and white portraits of Péter Márki-Zay and Ferenc Gyurcsány, representing the old, given informational value. On the right side, representing the new information value, is the coloured picture of Viktor Orbán. The national colours behind him suggest that Viktor Orbán represents the nation, while the black background is used to identify the opposition with the dark, evil side. At the bottom right, in front of an orange background, is an encouragement to vote for FIDESZ-KDNP, and all messages on this side of the billboard are in white. The message on the left side of the billboard is also in black, and is separated from the black background by a white border. The overall colour scheme of the two sides is very different: while the right side is serene, bright and colourful, the left side is sombre, almost completely black and grey. The relative positions of the three figures show the dominance of Viktor Orbán, whose photo is about half a head taller than that of Ferenc Gyurcsány, and even taller than that of Péter Márki-Zay. Viktor Orbán faces the camera and smiles modestly, Ferenc Gyurcsány looks worried and also looks at the viewer, and Péter Márki-Zay looks indifferently, somewhat coldly, contemptuously from top to bottom.

Billboards 11 – 14 form a series, as mentioned above. They are clearly discrediting the opposition’s candidate and the coalition itself. Their imagery is uniform: in the absolute centre, in a prominent position, is a black and white portrait of Péter Márki-Zay, to the left of him, in the known area, is the message, while to the right, in the part reinforcing the new information, is a red seal with a black and white image of Ferenc Gyurcsány in the middle, all this against a white background. The portrait is exaggeratedly large and the top part of the image is left off the billboard. Although the facial expression does not reflect negative emotions, the size of the portrait makes the politician somewhat threatening, as he oversteps his boundaries. The colours are uniform and black dominates, even the message is in black letters. In stark contrast, the red stamp, which stigmatises the candidate, stands out as a warning. This metaphor is well expressed by the visuals. Finally, yellow also plays a role: the name of Péter Márki-Zay is written in yellow letters against a black background, and his black photo is also framed in yellow. The combination of black and yellow is widely used to draw attention to toxic and dangerous substances. The text contents on the billboards are displayed in different font sizes: the number and text on the stamp are at least twice the font size of the message on the left, suggesting that the real danger is the

person of Ferenc Gyurcsány. The name of Péter Márki-Zay can be read in a much smaller font size below his portrait.

The message of the billboard series analysed above is further reinforced by *Billboard 15*, which hit the streets last. The billboard can be divided into right and left zones: Ferenc Gyurcsány and Péter Márki-Zay can be seen in the background on the left, and the framed message reads on the right. This distribution also fits into the old-new information system observed so far. The images of politicians on the left are now not entirely black and white, their complexion is yellowish, which might be associated with illness or envy. The familiar grey-black background from *Billboard 10* makes the image gloomy and ominous. The danger, previously expressed only through the yellow colour, now appears at the level of the words: 'They are dangerous!'. This warning is in the largest white letters against a highly contrasting red background. The new message appears on a white background on the right side of the billboard. The call to stop the two politicians is at the top and can be read in slightly larger black letters, and the call to vote is at the bottom and is shown in slightly smaller orange letters. The pictogram of the valid vote cast also confirms the action.

Conclusion

The election billboard plays a significant role in the election campaign. First of all, it can reach out to voters easily, furthermore its message is concise and through the combination of linguistic and visual elements it can present contents that parties consider important. The billboard expresses persuasion in different ways: it often operates with promises or threats reinforced with the diverse means of visual language the effect of which is not usually conscious in the recipient. All this can be traced in the case of the billboards we examined.

Our analysis showed that despite significant differences in content between the two sides, their language strategies had common features. The implicit or explicit thematisation of opposing parties and concise, short sentences were important linguistic elements that could be observed on almost all election billboards. In addition, specific or implicit addressing of recipients, targeted keywords and reasoning, often coupled with interpretive frameworks, also appeared. On the billboards of both sides the conscious use of a wide range of visual grammar tools to compose visual worlds could be recognized, such as assigning specific information values to text and graphic elements, setting people in a specific way, and the purposeful application of colours, sizes and proportions.

Naturally, each side had its own priorities, which were also reflected on their billboards. The left coalition campaigned for "Hungary for all of us" to sweep away the corruption and lies attributed to the ruling parties. At the level of slogans, it wanted to present programs such as wage increases, an independent Ministry of Health and Education and maintaining border fences and overhead cuts. All this was framed by a unified, easily identifiable world of shapes and colours. In contrast, FIDESZ-KDNP built its billboard campaign on the dichotomy of the past and the future, envisioning the return of the past by blurring the politicians of the opposition and identifying the leader of the opposition coalition, Péter Márki-Zay with Ferenc Gyurcsány, the representative of the past 8 years of the socialist-liberal coalition. They campaigned primarily with the expiration of the opponent, with malicious intentions attributed to them, and did not display a clear program on their own. Their billboards were connected by the visual presentation of the backwards-forwards theme and the recurring depiction of and mixing the opponent's politicians.

Quoting from Political Capital's study entitled „*Disinformation in the Election Campaign – Hungary 2022*”, it can be stated that the disinformation narratives spread by the governing party and the far right undeniably dominated the 2022 Hungarian election campaign. The intensity of the spread of these messages with virtually no external control caught the Hungarian society completely unprepared, which probably contributed to the electoral success of the Orbán government and the new two-thirds majority of FIDESZ-KDNP. The billboard

competition was also won by the governing coalition: the visual representation of FIDESZ-KDNP's main and only message was easy to understand and remember and seemed to be more convincing for the majority of the voters than the textual explanations which dominated the billboards of the United for Hungary coalition.

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