

## Viktor Orbán's Battery Troubles

Article by Benedek Jávör

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Over the past decade, the Hungarian government has staked the country's economic future on the battery industry, providing generous subsidies for its expansion and the development of giga-factories. However, a major scandal involving systemic pollution at a Samsung plant near Budapest has raised questions about the industry's practices. In response, the government has escalated the rhetoric of an already polarised election campaign.

The stakes of Hungary's parliamentary elections on 12 April extend far beyond the country's borders. If Viktor Orbán remains in power, he will continue to distance Hungary from Europe and deepen his increasingly autocratic political order. If he loses, Hungary might finally turn back towards its European allies, restoring the basic criteria of democratic governance, and breaking with its strategic alignment with Russia. The outcome could therefore have significant implications for the broader struggle between liberal and illiberal forces, both in Europe and globally.

Against this highly polarised background, it is particularly striking that an environmental conflict has emerged as a factor capable of influencing not only the dynamics of the campaign but potentially even the election result.

In February, the news portal *Telex* published an in-depth [investigation](#) presenting clear evidence of systemic problems at Samsung's battery plant in the town of Göd, located just 15 kilometres from the administrative boundary of Budapest. Much like the election itself, the meaning of the investigation extends far beyond the immediate local context.

### A state within the state

Samsung began producing batteries in Göd in 2017 at the site of a former TV-screen factory. After undergoing several phases of expansion, the plant has reached its current annual capacity of 40 GWh, making it one of the largest battery manufacturing facilities in Europe. In recent years, Samsung's Hungarian subsidiary has consistently ranked among the country's largest companies by revenue.

These developments were not financed solely through private investment. As part of its aggressive strategy to develop the battery sector, the Hungarian government [has provided](#) nearly 500 million euros in direct subsidies to Samsung's Göd plant. These subsidies form part of a broader pattern. Since the early 2020s, the Orbán government has identified the battery industry, alongside automobile manufacturing, as a strategic pillar for Hungary's economic future. To this end, it has taken extensive measures to attract battery manufacturers, primarily from East Asia, and especially from China, to invest in the country.

Direct state subsidies have been exceptionally generous: over the past seven to eight years, battery-related companies operating in Hungary have [received](#) nearly one billion euros in investment support. However, they are only one component of the government's strategy. Even more important has been the extraordinarily favourable regulatory and administrative environment provided for the sector. Hungary

has not maintained a dedicated Ministry of Environment since 2010; environmental authorities have been weakened and placed under political control; and meaningful oversight of the battery industry has effectively ceased at the national level.

As a result, the more than 50 battery-related plants currently operating in the country have repeatedly violated regulations without facing serious consequences. In most cases, these violations have either been concealed or resulted only in minimal fines that lack any deterrent effect. Samsung's Göd factory, for example, operated for nearly seven years without the environmental permit clearly required under Hungarian law – an issue that environmental authorities never addressed.

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Regulations have also been relaxed in several rounds. In response to pollution incidents associated with Samsung's operations, the government introduced provisions allowing authorities to refrain from imposing penalties or suspending production – even in cases of confirmed legal violations and pollution, where Hungarian law would otherwise mandate such measures. Instead, authorities may conclude so-called “administrative agreements” with polluting companies, outlining future remedial steps while allowing production to continue uninterrupted in the meantime.

In effect, the battery industry has become something akin to a state within the state, whose interests override all other considerations. Civil society organisations and journalists who exposed pollution and regulatory violations have been subjected to administrative harassment and targeted by hate campaigns. Companies operating in this environment gradually adopted increasingly irresponsible practices, knowing they could count on the state's protection.

Leaked internal documents revealed discussions among Samsung executives suggesting that a critical environmental NGO and the investigative outlet *Atlatszo.hu*, which had published reports documenting pollution, should be silenced using state instruments. Shortly thereafter, both organisations became the target of an investigation by the controversial Sovereignty Protection Office, whose report labelled them as foreign agents in language closely resembling government propaganda.

The establishment of battery plants across the country has triggered significant local protests, yet none have achieved lasting success. Government backing has consistently proved strong enough to push the planned investments through. As a result, Hungary has become one of Europe's leading battery producers. Though this development has generated considerable social tensions, they have not been strong enough to influence national political dynamics. In the 2024 municipal elections, the ruling Fidesz party won comfortably in nearly all affected localities. Now, however, things might be starting to change.

## **A political earthquake**

The revelations by *Telex* illustrated how Samsung's lax environmental and workplace safety practices led to a series of accidents at the plant, and to several instances in which workers were exposed to carcinogenic chemicals at levels 500 to 1,000 times higher than permitted limits. They also documented the plant's close ties to the highest levels of government, and showed that the executive was fully aware of the conditions within the factory.

According to the investigation, Orbán's close aide and "propaganda minister" Antal Rogán had even suggested at a government meeting that the factory should be shut down, fearing the political consequences of a possible scandal if its internal conditions became public.

The revelations triggered a political earthquake. For days, the Samsung affair dominated public discourse, pushing the ongoing election campaign into the background. Political parties were forced to respond and adapt their campaign strategies to the unfolding crisis.

The reaction of the Tisza Party – the largest opposition force and current poll leader – was predictable. On the one hand, Tisza's leader and prime-ministerial candidate, Péter Magyar, presented the scandal as evidence that the government is corrupt and prioritises the interests of large corporations over those of Hungarian citizens and workers. On the other hand, he framed the affair as proof of the Hungarian state's dysfunction: the authorities, he argued, are incapable of enforcing even the most basic environmental and workplace safety standards.

This framing proved fairly effective. It resonated not only with the Tisza Party's broader campaign messages but also with the prevailing public mood. Consequently, the scandal likely strengthened the opposition's criticism of the government, even if its precise electoral impact cannot be quantified. Although the scandal probably did not sway Fidesz's core supporters, it may have intensified negative perceptions of the government among undecided voters.

The government's initial response was characterised by confusion and denial. Péter Szijjártó, the minister of foreign affairs and trade, who had long been the government's chief advocate for Samsung, dismissed the allegations as fake news, blatant lies, and the work of foreign agents. He also threatened legal action against anyone publishing or spreading the information.

However, the toothpaste could no longer be pushed back into the tube. The strategy of denial failed to contain the scandal; indeed, it only intensified it. The government's reaction was widely interpreted as further evidence of cynicism and dishonesty, particularly since the original investigative article relied on numerous official and by then publicly available documents.

## **Firefighting and escalation**

In the wake of the investigation, Fidesz withdrew from the campaign certain public figures who had been on the front line until that moment. Previously, the party had relied heavily not only on Viktor Orbán but also on the prominent presence of Péter Szijjártó and Transport Minister János Lázár. After the scandal broke, this arrangement abruptly changed. Szijjártó effectively disappeared from public view, as if he had never been part of the governing party's campaign.

Another figure connected to the affair also modified his public presence. Bence Tuzson, the minister of justice and the incumbent member of parliament for the constituency that includes Göd, had any reference to Fidesz removed from his campaign materials – posters, public stands, and other promotional content. Now his messages depict a green and flourishing future for voters, while no link is visible between him and the government, despite the fact that he himself serves as minister. This strategy also conveniently circumvented Facebook's restrictions on political advertising, allowing Tuzson to present his campaigning as quasi-"civic" activity.

Then Fidesz went on the offensive. The day after the publication of the article, a website suddenly appeared on platforms close to the party, registered under the name of the vice-president of the Tisza Party. The site displayed only a single image: an empty bed. Soon, it became apparent that the real

target was Péter Magyar. Government-aligned propaganda outlets began suggesting that a compromising sexual video involving the opposition leader would soon be released.

For days, increasingly wild theories circulated, including allegations of a homosexual relationship and the involvement of a minor. Eventually, Magyar himself clarified that the video likely depicted a consensual sexual encounter with a former partner – someone whom Fidesz had previously used in attempts to discredit him. The video was ultimately never published.

It remains unclear why the material was withheld. Perhaps internal polling suggested that releasing it would harm Fidesz more than Magyar, raising concerns about violations of privacy and illegal surveillance. Or perhaps the website had already served its purpose: diverting attention from the Göd scandal. According to media analyses, Google search statistics initially showed intense interest in the Samsung revelations, but these searches were soon overtaken by queries related to the alleged sex tape.

As a first firefighting measure, the diversion proved effective. Yet public interest in the story gradually faded, Fidesz's polling numbers did not improve, and the Samsung scandal remained on the public agenda, though at a lower intensity.

Fidesz therefore escalated its campaign tactics. On 19 February, the Budapest Fidesz released an AI-generated video on its Facebook page, depicting a young girl waiting for her father to come home. The imagery is rendered in bleak, grey tones. Meanwhile, in a muddy battlefield under pouring rain, the father, blindfolded, is executed with a gunshot to the head. The perpetrators remain unidentified. The message, however, is clear: Brussels, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and the Hungarian opposition want to drag the country into war, while only Fidesz can protect Hungarian families.

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Although the mass distribution of AI-generated content – fabricated videos, images, and messages – had already been part of the Fidesz campaign, this video marked a new and troubling low point.

By March, as polling data continued to deteriorate, Fidesz adopted even more dramatic measures. The party replaced its earlier anti-war rhetoric with a narrative emphasising the immediate military threat allegedly posed by Ukraine, thereby laying the groundwork for potentially radical measures justified by a supposed state of emergency. In effect, the campaign shifted from calls to remain outside the war to the cultivation of a direct war psychosis.

This shift was accompanied by provocative actions that appear to violate both international and Hungarian law. One such incident involved the seizure of a Ukrainian cash-transport vehicle legally transiting through Hungary. Authorities confiscated 35 million euros and 40 million US dollars in cash, as well as nine kilograms of gold bars.

According to reports by the investigative outlet *VSquare*, three agents of Russia's GRU intelligence service also arrived in Hungary to assist the government in influencing the elections, following tactics

previously observed in Romania and Moldova. Such developments make Hungary appear increasingly similar to Russia rather than to other EU member states.

While these events cannot be attributed solely to the scandal surrounding Samsung's Göd battery factory, they clearly indicate that, in the final weeks of the campaign, the government has shed any remaining restraints. As Viktor Orbán fears for his hold on power, virtually any radical step now appears conceivable.

## **Shaping public discourse**

The emergence of an environmental conflict in the campaign does not mean green politics in Hungary is overcoming the deep crisis that followed its earlier success. It is highly likely that no Green representative will enter the Hungarian parliament after the elections in April. Environmental issues in general play only a marginal role in national politics. The government pursues a strongly anti-green agenda in both policy and political communication.

Moreover, the stakes of the 2026 election are exceptionally high. The campaign has not been dominated by policy debates but rather by propaganda in the style of Russian political communication: disinformation, smear campaigns, and intimidation. The opposition, for its part, has focused not on sectoral policy issues but on Hungary's geopolitical orientation (EU versus Russia), corruption, and the collapse of public services.

Yet even in this environment, the pollution at Samsung's battery plant managed to break through the overcrowded communication landscape and temporarily shape both the campaign and public discourse in Hungary, forcing both Fidesz and the opposition to respond.

The Tisza Party incorporated the issue skillfully into its campaign, but the scandal did not fundamentally alter its strategy. The Fidesz campaign, by contrast, was affected far more deeply, with the party launching diversionary actions to contain the damage. These may have been prepared in advance, but they were likely intended for a later stage of the campaign. Deploying the short-lived sex-video scandal so early in the campaign could hardly produce the same effect as it might have had one or two weeks before the election.

Finally, persistently unfavourable polling numbers – partly shaped by the Samsung scandal – pushed Fidesz to escalate its anti-war narrative to unprecedented levels. The party reframed its message from keeping Hungary out of the war to emphasising an immediate wartime threat and cultivating a broader atmosphere of war hysteria.

The Samsung affair demonstrates that even under conditions highly unfavourable to green politics, an environmental conflict can exert a significant influence on an ongoing election campaign – and may even affect its outcome.



Benedek Jávor is a Hungarian Member of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament for Párbeszéd Magyarországért (Dialogue for Hungary), and was a founding member of the environmental NGO Védegylet (Protect the Future!).

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