

Who Owns the Nation?

Poster Wars, Political Graffiti and Semiotic Resistance in Hungary and Serbia

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Abstract

This paper compares two semiotic conflicts unfolding within electoral campaigns in Hungary and Serbia throughout March, April and May 2026. Drawing on ethnographic observation of political poster and graffiti landscapes in both countries, it analyses the mechanisms of vernacular resistance under conditions of media capture. During the Hungarian parliamentary election campaign of 2026, the ruling Fidesz party's monopoly over outdoor advertising infrastructure was met by citizen-led interventions that inverted government messaging. In Serbia, the student activists challenged the SNS government's slogans by rewriting them and strategically positioning their posters and stickers. In both cases, physical interventions in shared public spaces were disseminated through social media, where algorithmic logics of engagement-based ranking amplified the semiotic resistance, constituting a form of hybrid activism in which the physical and digital realm operated as a single communicative circuit. The paper argues that resistance in both cases operated through antagonistic mirroring: the appropriation and reversal of the governing party's own semiotic forms, working within the populist grammar of the opponent rather than against it. The ultimate stakes of these battles were not merely political but ontological as both movements contested the governing party's claim to exclusive ownership of the nation, declaring that it belongs to all its citizens and not just to the supporters of the ruling party that had monopolised its symbols.

Introduction

Election campaign in Hungary in March and April 2026 was marked by an unprecedented poster war within which government's billboards were being reworked in a form of a semiotic resistance through various interventions with sprays, taped slogans and stickers. Quickly after the Hungarian election resulted in victory of the opposition party Tisza, a similar semiotic battle commenced in Serbia when president Vučić announced that parliamentary elections may be called until the end of the year. In both cases, resistance focused on semiotic manipulation of the political narrative of the government. The aim was to dismantle the propaganda machinery by reaching citizens who have no access to independent media and, ultimately, to invert the government's messaging while using the same populist toolkit and national symbols.

In Hungary and Serbia, the governing parties' dominance of public visual space is not accidental but structurally engineered through the capture of media infrastructure. With the goal of creating a narrative monopoly, the ruling parties in both states strived to silence oppositional

voices by systematically reducing their visibility and limiting access across privately owned public spaces. Even the outdoor advertising slots such as billboards were not an open communicative field, but monopolies. Arguably, this particular form of governance has elements of what Guriev & Treisman (2019) call “informational autocracy” (Guriev & Treisman, 2019), “hybrid regime” or “illiberal state” (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). The specificity of these regimes is not simply to dominate the media space, but to consolidate a monolithic narrative across the entire public sphere, creating an opaque semiotic layer that masks reality through “mythologisation” (Barthes, 1972) and a form of “simulation” (Baudrillard, 1994). This ideological layer can be cracked through the narratives emerging from independent media that are typically marginalised and underfunded or social media, but also through street-level actions where the battle for the dominant discourse can occur in the form of protests, but also graffiti, posters, street art, and performance.

In Hungary, the governing party's domination of outdoor political communication was not a campaign-period improvisation but the accumulated outcome of more than a decade of media capture. Bátorfy and Urbán (2020) have documented how state advertising was systematically deployed as an instrument of market transformation, concentrating media ownership in the hands of government-aligned actors across broadcasting, print, and online outlets. By the time of the 2026 election campaign, this logic had extended fully into the outdoor advertising market with more than half of all commercial billboard surfaces controlled by a corporate network linked to the Orbán government. Enyedi and Mikola (2024) describe this broader pattern as legislative capture extended into civil and commercial infrastructure: a well-managed project of resource concentration that by 2026 had rendered the outdoor public space captured by the state.

In Serbia, the parallel process has operated primarily through media ownership, though its effect on the available surface for counter-messaging is fully comparable. Vladislavljević and Krstić (2023) document how competitive authoritarianism under Vučić has been sustained in part through systematic control of the information environment, with pro-government media consistently conflating the president's political survival with the national interest. By 2024, the great majority of Serbian television channels, tabloid newspapers, and online portals were either directly state-controlled or dependent on government advertising revenue that could be withdrawn for editorial non-compliance, a mechanism of soft censorship well documented in the literature on clientelism and media capture in the Western Balkans (Kapidžić, 2022).

In both countries, the streets, along with social media and online portals became the primary remaining platforms for political communication that escapes regime control. The boundary between the physical and the digital public sphere is not fixed, and the poster war in both Hungary and Serbia demonstrated that the two registers are mutually amplifying rather than separate. This hybrid resistance manifested through the altered billboards and graffiti, the stickers and strips of paper redirecting slogans. did not remain local acts visible only to those who happened to pass by. These semiotic alterations did not remain local because they were photographed, shared, and circulated on social media platforms where the algorithmic amplification worked in favour of resistance movements as automated sorting systems boost content that draws engagement. (Tréré, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

Four Acts of Semiotic Reistance

Én, a kétarcú (I, the Two-Face)



ÉN, a Kétárcú (I, the two-face) is a graphic novel published as an official element of the Fidesz election campaign: a populist artefact that gamifies a smear campaign against the opposition candidate Péter Magyar. The election campaign has stepped into the realm of mass entertainment, when it introduced the comic book manufactured with the assistance of artificial intelligence and sold at bookstores across the country. The cover depicts Péter Magyar as a diabolical two-faced figure, with one half of his face painted in the blue and yellow stars of the EU flag, and the other presenting his allegedly authentic Hungarian self. This is a visual reference to Two-Face, the DC Comics supervillain and alter ego of Harvey Dent, a recurring antagonist in the Batman franchise, a figure whose disfigured duality has come to emblematisé political duplicity and the irreversible corruption of an ostensibly good man. The speech bubbles emerging from his divided personality confess what the novel claims he truly thinks but cannot say publicly: that he secretly serves the interests of Brussels, Ukraine, and oil companies. The graphic novel format is doing substantial ideological work here. By placing these confessions in Magyar's imagined interior monologue, the poster claims not to be making an argument but revealing a truth, granting the viewer privileged access to what the opponent really is beneath the public performance.

The deployment of this cover page as a campaign poster within the billboard network initially appears puzzling. A graphic novel cover is not conventional electoral advertising. But it makes precise sense when the full sequence of Fidesz poster collection is understood as episodes of a serialised narrative, each instalment telling a story about Hungary's enemies, their foreign allegiances, their hidden corruption, and their threat to the peace. The graphic novel is the most concentrated expression of this narrative logic as it takes the campaign's underlying story and makes its genre explicit, presenting political propaganda in the idiom of entertainment, conspiracy thriller, and moral fable simultaneously. In this sense it is the most explicit of the Fidesz campaign materials, because it makes visible what all the other posters were also doing while pretending to be doing something else.

The citizen counter-response was the most semiotically sophisticated intervention of the entire poster war. Activists produced exact replicas of the book cover's visual format, typeface, compositional logic, and colour scheme, substituting Orbán's face for Magyar's and placing in his imagined interior monologue with the same confessions of Eastern loyalty and material corruption the original had attributed to the opposition leader. The speech bubbles say: *A főnököm keleten van* (My boss is in the East), *Istenem a pénz, hűségem nincs, csak anyagi érdek* (My god is money, I have no loyalty, only material interest). The technique is an example of what this paper calls antagonistic mirroring, but it accomplishes something more radical than simple reversal. The original poster had used the graphic novel idiom to naturalise its accusations, presenting fabricated claims in the form of documentary revelation, as though the thought-bubble were a window onto fact rather than a rhetorical construction. The counter-poster dismantles this naturalisation by demonstrating that the identical form is equally available for the opposite attribution. If the format can be redirected, the format is not evidence. The accusation is not discovered in its subject. It is constructed by its author. And once that construction is made visible, the original poster cannot unsee it.

Serbia is winning...

...because students are winning.



In Serbia, the semiotic battle over national belonging condensed into a single grammatical confrontation between two slogans. The student movement's *Studenti pobeđuju* (Students are Winning) emerged organically from months of sustained protest, a simple, declarative claim of moral and political confidence from a movement that had been subjected to extraordinary pressure. The governing SNS party's response was swift and, as the Serbian independent press observed with some derision, characteristically unoriginal: SNS banners, stickers, and billboards bearing the words *Srbija pobeđuje* (Serbia is Winning) appeared across cities and towns within days, the party's apparatus having recognised in the student slogan an energy it needed to neutralise and an idiom it needed to occupy (Danas, 2026; Vreme, 2026). The copy-paste mechanism was transparent to everyone, including those it was aimed at. A party that

controls the resources of the state but not the authenticity of a genuine social movement can imitate the form of that movement's communication but cannot replicate its source.

The context that made this semiotic confrontation so charged was the eighteen months of protest that preceded it. On 1 November 2024, the canopy of the newly renovated Novi Sad railway station collapsed, killing sixteen people. The renovation had been completed four months earlier, opened with full ceremonial fanfare and presidential endorsement as a symbol of Serbian modernisation. Rather than accountability, what followed was obstruction, and when students began organising peaceful protests and silent vigils, what followed that was violence (Dinić, 2025). Unidentified individuals, widely suspected to be government-aligned actors, carried out a campaign of physical intimidation against student activists: hit-and-run car incidents, beatings, and the deployment of sound cannons against peaceful gatherings. The yellow visibility vests that students adopted as their collective uniform were not merely a safety measure: they were a declaration of deliberate vulnerability, the fragile body made visible and therefore impossible to attack without the attack itself becoming visible.

By June 2025, the student movement was explicitly calling for elections, having concluded that the demands for institutional accountability could not be met without a change of government. It was in this pre-electoral context, with the SNS deploying its *Srbija pobeđuje* (Serbia is winning) banners as a counter-campaign, that activists produced the intervention that most precisely captured the semiotic logic of the entire conflict. By placing beside the SNS slogan an adjacent strip reading *zato što studenti pobeđuju* (because the students are winning), they transformed *the* ruling party's slogan from a party claim into an admission. The full sentence now reads: *Serbia is Winning Because the Students are Winning*. In one syntactic addition, the governing party's appropriation of the national signifier was not refuted but redirected: the students accepted the premise that Serbia was winning and specified its cause, locating the source of national victory not in the party that claimed it but in the movement the party had been trying to destroy. As the political scientist Marko Vujić observed, the SNS narrative had always rested on a total identification of leader, party, and nation: if Vučić wins, Serbia wins; if Vučić loses, Serbia loses (N1 Info, 2026). The student intervention made that identification visible as a choice rather than a fact.

We stand together against

the war

Viktor Orbán



The final poster in the Fidesz campaign sequence was, in retrospect, the most revealing. After weeks of serialised smear campaigns depicting Péter Magyar alongside Volodymyr Zelensky and Ursula von der Leyen as co-conspirators in a plot to drag Hungary into war, after the *Én, a Kétfarcú* (I, the two-face) graphic novel had attributed to the opposition leader a secret interior life of foreign servitude and moral corruption, after the *Nemzeti Petíció*¹ series had positioned the governing party as the potential victim of a smugly scheming challenger, the campaign arrived at its logical destination: Orbán himself. His face filled the billboards across the country in the final weeks before the 12 April election flanked by the Hungarian national flag and the slogan *Fogjunk össze a háború ellen!* which reads as: let us stand together against the war, (444.hu, 2026).

The poster's semiotic architecture was the distillation of the entire campaign's logic. The preceding series had constructed the threat: Magyar as foreign agent, Brussels and Kyiv as Hungary's enemies, the opposition as the instrument of external aggression. This final poster harvested the affective residue of that construction, presenting Orbán not as a politician seeking votes but as a protector seeking solidarity. The first-person plural grammar of *fogjunk össze* (let us stand together) constituted a collective subject, a unified Hungarian people, and positioned its speaker as already inside that collective rather than above it, asking not for

¹ The *Nemzeti Petíció* (National Petition) was the “petition” of the Hungarian government against war. It was a campaign launched in October 2025, through which Hungarian citizens were asked to declare opposition to the EU’s financial support for Ukraine. Framed around rejecting financing of the Russia-Ukraine war, long-term economic aid to Ukraine, and war-induced utility price increases, it possessed no legal force but served as an instrument to legitimise the government's foreign policy stance.

obedience but for support in a shared danger. The war, the poster implied without stating, would arrive if the wrong choice was made. The peace was conditional on the correct vote. The slogan was a promise and a threat simultaneously, wrapped in the grammar of togetherness.

The citizens of Hungary dismantled this narrative through semiotic resistance. Within days of the posters appearing, the modifications began. The most widely circulated was syntactically minimal: the word *háború* (war) was covered by a printed strip bearing the words *Orbán Viktor*, transforming *Fogjunk össze a háború ellen!* (Let us stand together against the war) into *Fogjunk össze Orbán Viktor ellen!* (Let us stand together against Orbán Viktor). Every element of the original was preserved: the imperative mood, the first-person plural, the call to solidarity, the identification of an adversary. What had changed was the identity of the adversary. The poster's own grammar, its emotional appeal, its collective subject, its urgency, was turned with surgical precision against the man whose face it bore. This is Hall's (1980) oppositional decoding in its most literal form: not a rejection of the message from outside but a reactivation of its signifying potential from within, producing through the existing chain of signs a meaning the original code was constructed to prevent. Additional modifications layered further interventions onto the same surface: stickers depicting Putin's skull-and-crossbones, blue Tisza campaign roundels, photographs of war damage taped over Orbán's cheekbone, each adding a new semiotic agent to the frame and each contributing to the progressive denaturalisation of the poster's preferred reading. By the final days of the campaign, the billboards across Hungary had become dense palimpsests, material records of a month-long argument conducted in tape, paper, and sticker adhesive over the question of who the real enemy was.

The blockaders are Ustašas (have risen)

and won



Walking through any Serbian city since the protests began in November 2024 has meant moving through a landscape in continuous transformation, its walls, pavements, underpasses, and façades serving as a living archive of the conflict between the governing party's hegemonic discourse and the resistance movement contesting it. The grammar of this urban semiosphere shifted week by week, sometimes day by day, as new interventions appeared, were painted

over, reappeared, and accumulated into layered palimpsests whose very density was itself a message about the duration and intensity of the struggle beneath them.

Among the earliest and most widely reproduced symbols of the student movement was the stencilled bloody hand, a direct reference to the corruption that students held responsible for the deaths of the sixteen Novi Sad victims, the government's hands stained by the procurement opacity and infrastructural negligence that had made the collapse possible. Alongside it appeared a more ambiguous image: a bloody raised middle finger, whose authorship was disputed and whose meaning was correspondingly productive. Students read it as the government's response to their demands, the regime's contempt made visible; government supporters read it differently. Its very ambiguity made it a more effective provocation than any unambiguous slogan could have been, circulating across social media with competing captions that each activated a different interpretation of the same image (Barthes, 1977).

The governing party's response to the student movement drew heavily on a technique with deep roots in Serbian political culture: the attribution of the opposition's actions to historical enemies, specifically to the Ustaše, the Croatian fascist movement of the Second World War whose name functions in the Serbian symbolic lexicon as the most concentrated available accusation of national betrayal and genocidal intent. The label was applied to the students from the earliest days of the faculty blockades, which began in earnest in December 2024 following the attack by government-aligned individuals on students who had gathered in silence outside the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade to pay their respects to the Novi Sad victims. As the blockades spread to nearly every university in Serbia, the government developed an increasingly elaborate narrative of external orchestration, identifying Croatia as the primary foreign instigator and presenting as its principal evidence the so-called *Blokadna kuharica*, (the Blockade Cookbook)², a handbook on organising student occupations produced by Croatian students in the early 2000s. That a decades-old document of civic pedagogy could be presented as evidence of a contemporary foreign conspiracy says something precise about the epistemological standards of SNS counter-messaging: the accusation did not need to be plausible, only loud enough and repeated enough to saturate the information environment (Pomerantsev, 2014).

It was in this context that one of the most linguistically precise interventions of the entire Serbian poster war appeared on the streets of Belgrade. A graffiti inscription read: *Blokaderi ustaše*. The phrase was the governing party's own accusation, the label it had been applying to the student movement for months, now written in its own hand on a public wall. But *blokaderi ustaše* is phonetically unstable in Serbian in a way that the government had apparently failed to notice, or had noticed too late. The word *ustaše* sounds nearly identical also refers to the verb *ustati*, to rise up, to stand up, to revolt. Students and citizens seized on this ambiguity immediately, adding to the graffiti the words *i pobediše* (and they won). The full inscription now read, in one of its available meanings: the blockaders rose up, and they won. The government's insult had been transformed, through a single phonetic slip and a three-word addition, into a declaration of victory. The accusation had become a battle cry. The enemy label had become a name the movement could wear with pride, in the tradition of what Eco (1979) would recognise as a radical resemanticisation: the appropriation of a hostile sign and its reinvestment with the opposite affective charge, so that the term meant to wound becomes the term that mobilises.

² Studenti Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu (2009). *Blokadna kuharica, ili kako je izgledala blokada Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu*. Zagreb: Centar za anarhističke studije.



The semiotic confrontation between slogans and counter-slogans is representing, in Laclau's (2005) terms, a contest over the empty signifier. Both slogans reach for the same - nation as a signifier. What both cases of Hungary and Serbia illuminate is a structural condition of late competitive authoritarianism: when the conventional media infrastructure has been captured, the public spaces such as the streets and transnational internet platforms the primary available terrain for political communication that escapes regime control. De Certeau (1984) describes the practice of the tactician as the making of opportunistic use of the terrain that belongs to the stronger party. In both Hungary and Serbia, the physical infrastructure of outdoor political communication such as walls and billboards, election banners was the stronger party's terrain. Citizens in both countries discovered that this terrain was not impregnable: its very visibility, its occupation of shared public space, made it available for the kind of intervention that no amount of structural ownership can finally prevent. To affix a sticker to a billboard, to hang a transparent on a bridge, to place an adjacent banner beside a party poster, requires no media licence, no advertising budget, no party membership. It requires only the willingness to act in public, and enough tape.

This is not to claim that poster wars win elections or topple governments by themselves. Hungary's election was decided by the accumulated effect of a vast number of factors of which the poster war was one relatively small element. Serbia's protest movement, despite its unprecedented scale, over 350,000 people on the streets of Belgrade on 15 March 2025, has not yet produced a change of government, and the semiotic contest over *Srbija pobeđuje* continues with no settled resolution. The point is not efficacy in the narrow sense. The point is what the poster war reveals about the nature of the political contest: that hegemony is never complete, that every sign is contestable, and that the street is a medium that authoritarian capital has not yet found a way to fully own.

Conclusion

The four cases analysed in this paper disclose a single underlying logic. In both Hungary and Serbia, governing parties claimed exclusive ownership of national signifiers. Laclau (2005) theorises this as the characteristic operation of populism: the empty signifier, a term like *the nation* or *the people*, drained of particular content precisely in order to function as the name of a totality, is occupied by a particular political identity that then presents its own content as the universal interest. The poster or a graffiti wall is the surface on which this occupation is daily materialised, renewed, and circulated.

The citizen interventions in both countries refused the appropriation of the national identity. Instead of arguing against nationalism, they contested the party's right to monopolise the national symbols and the nation itself. *Fogjunk össze Orbán Viktor ellen* (Let us stand together against Viktor Orbán) accepts the grammar of solidarity but redirects it. *Studenti pobeđuju* (the students are winning) accepts the grammar of national victory but installs a different winner. *Blokaderi ustaše i pobeđiše* (Blockaders have risen and won) accepts the accusation and transforms it into its opposite. None of these interventions abandons the national register. All operate from within it, occupying the same semiotic space the governing party claimed as exclusively its own, and demonstrating by that occupation that the space was never exclusively anyone's. This is what Barthes (1972) calls the counter-mythological operation: not the rejection

of the myth's signifier but the exposure of its arbitrariness, the restoration of history to what had been presented as nature.

The semiotic theory of the sign is relevant here in a strict sense. Saussure's (1916) foundational argument that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, rather than natural or necessary, is the theoretical condition of possibility for everything the poster interventions accomplished. The arbitrariness of the sign means that the same signifier can be redirected toward a different signified. This makes the meaning relational and differential rather than intrinsic, and a change in the context of a sign changes its meaning without altering its material form. The strip of paper that covered the word *háború* (war) recontextualised the sentence and produced a new meaning from the existing material. Peirce's (1931) account of semiosis as an endless process of interpretation, in which signs generate further signs in an open chain, is equally applicable. The modified poster did not terminate signification but accelerated it by sending the altered image into the digital public sphere via social media where it generated further interpretations, further modifications, and further acts of meaning-making.

De Certeau (1984) describes the practice of the tactician as the making of opportunistic use of the terrain that belongs to the stronger party. The billboards in Hungary were Fidesz's terrain, as they were produced and placed by Gyula Balásy's New Land Media and Lounge Group, the advertising firms that held a near-monopoly on government communications contracts and were responsible for the blue billboard campaigns that regularly blanketed the country. In Serbia, the SNS banners and graffiti were the party's terrain, and yet both became the primary sites of the counter-campaign precisely because their visibility made them available for intervention. The governing party's investment in the surface guaranteed the counter-campaign's audience. What could not be prevented was the act of meaning-making itself: the citizen who approaches the glass panel with a strip of paper, a roll of tape and a spray paint is not primarily a political activist in the conventional sense. She or he is, in that moment, the rewriter or the secondary author, performing in public the operation that semiotic theory describes as the production of meaning through interpretation which is never fully controlled by the original author.

This is, finally, what distinguishes a genuine hegemonic contest from a mere act of protest. Protest addresses power from outside; counter-hegemony works to displace the terms on which power constitutes itself (Gramsci, 1971). The semiotic wars in Hungary and Serbia, fought across poster surfaces and bridge railings and social media feeds, are not simply expressions of discontent. They are arguments, conducted in the grammar of nationalist political imagery, about who gets to say *we*, and about what that *we* is standing together for. The answer that both resistance movements returned, in four distinct semiotic registers, was the same: the nation belongs to all its citizens, and the sign that names it can always be reclaimed by those it was designed to exclude.

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