

## CHAPTER 2

# Perceptions of Hungarian Political Elites of the EU's Foreign and Security Policy during the War in Ukraine

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### Abstract

The outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war as a geopolitical confrontation between the East and the West has necessitated a reconfiguration of the EU's global role and actorness and its foreign and security policy priorities. Such a recalibration necessarily involves defining how the EU is perceived by national political elites. Therefore, this chapter examines how Hungarian political elites perceive the EU's actorness and foreign and security policy priorities concerning the specific challenges of the Russia–Ukraine war. To this end, it conducts a critical discourse analysis of the minutes of parliamentary debates to consider statements uttered by elected members from both the opposition and the government within the Hungarian national parliament. The selected timeframe of the analysis covers the period from the outbreak

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of the crisis, 24 February 2022, to the Hungarian national consultation on EU sanctions against Russia, 15 January 2023.

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## Introduction

The EU faced the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war against a background of its international actorness already having been disrupted because of the rising expectation–capability gap stemming from other recently experienced crises. Moreover, the previous initiatives of the EU vis-à-vis the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 led to growing doubts about its capabilities in relation to regional and global governance (Gehring et al., 2017). In this context, while the crisis has provided leeway for the EU to prove its commitment to its normative values, ensuring its global actorness depends heavily on the reconfiguration and redefinition of its global role and security policy priorities and preferences. Given that the EU is conceptualized as an ‘elite project’ in the making (Risse, 2010) and that the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) does not intervene in national foreign and security policies of its member states, which would result undermining the EU’s adopted common policies (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017), such a reconfiguration is closely associated with how the EU is perceived by the national political elites within the realm of foreign policy-making. However, member states’ mediation of their relations with the EU in the face of divergent national foreign policy priorities has recently appeared as one of the sources of contestation, especially within the European periphery. To fully understand these dynamics between the EU and its periphery, an outside perspective on the EU periphery needs to be completed by ‘an inside gaze’ on how political elites in the EU periphery define their relationship with the EU and the way that they problematize the meaning of ‘periphery’ in the context of the last decade’s challenges to the European integration process.

Among those peripheral countries within the Union, Hungary presents a unique case due to its deteriorating relations with the EU under the leadership of nationalist-populist leader Viktor Orbán, exacerbated by its deepening rapprochement with Russia, which has often culminated in its relations with the EU becoming entrapped in

a quagmire. In addition, its geographical proximity to and Hungarian ethnic minority population in Ukraine put it in a particular position within the Union in the specific context of the Russia–Ukraine war. Therefore, as its main research question this chapter deals with how the EU, its actorness, and its foreign and security policy priorities with respect to the specific challenges of the Russia–Ukraine war are perceived and approached by Hungarian national political elites.

To this end, in our research we conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the minutes of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament as complementary to an overview of official documents and scholarly articles. The analysis relies on the discourse historical approach (DHA) to CDA. CDA is usually concerned with analysing how social domination is (re)produced by discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Therefore, it is focused on revealing the use of language by those in power. Moreover, since it regards the context of language use as crucial (Wodak, 2015), it will be valuable in grasping the larger socio-political and historical context within which the EU's foreign and security policy is debated and communicated by the Hungarian political elites.

In this way, this chapter contributes empirically to debates revolving around national elites' perceptions of the EU from an 'insider's gaze', thereby surfacing EU foreign policy-making dilemmas and challenges during the period of the crises, which have restrained EU's transformative power and global actorness to a great extent. To this end, we first briefly address EU–Hungary relations with a particular focus on how Hungary has been contesting the EU and its perspectives for formulating a unified foreign policy direction in light of its relations with Russia. This contextualization of the EU political scene with respect to Hungary's impactful transformation in its relations with the Union will help us to fully understand the dynamics of fluctuating relations with the EU within the specific context of the Russia–Ukraine war. Then, we discuss the method and discourse-analytical tool of DHA as a framework. The chapter concludes with the main findings of the analysis.

## Hungary's EU Membership and the Outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war

The 2004 wave of EU enlargement signified crucial political, economic, legal, and social changes in the ten acceding post-communist Central Eastern European countries. The normatively justified notion of 'one of us' within the pan-European identity (Friis, 1998) has been the main driving factor of the EU's Eastern enlargement, intended to overcome the division of 'Iron Curtain' (Sjursen, 2002). Yet the crises and challenges that the EU has faced over the last decade have transformed the unity and coherence of the Union; after a few years of membership the new East-Central European member states entered a period of poly-crisis together with the old member states, which did not help to overcome the traditional East/West divide within the EU. The literature has thus handled these issues alongside discussions of a 'differentiated EU' (Dyson & Sepos, 2010; Schimmelfennig et al., 2023), 'multi-speed Europe' (Chrysogelos, 2017; Craig, 2012), or 'two-speed EU' (Piris, 2011).

In this process of Eastern enlargement and the history of the political and policy processes of the enlarged EU, Hungary presents an interesting case for several reasons. First, its fluctuating relations with the EU provide an opportunity to observe the transformation of a member state's position from 'permissive consensus' to 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Accordingly, while Hungary maintained its obligations and major initiatives to achieve high democratic standards, rule of law, and market economy under the conditions of EU membership throughout its accession process and the early years of its membership (Arató & Koller, 2018; Jenne & Mudde, 2012), it entered a period of backlash following the victory of Viktor Orbán's Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz) party in the 2010 national elections and the formation of the second Orbán government (Enyedi & Benoit, 2010). Since then, Orbán's power base has grown in subsequent elections, and fundamental rights, the rule of law, freedoms, checks-and-balances systems, and the liberal democratic space have incrementally shrunk (Batory, 2016). The deteriorating trend of Europeanization has been termed a U-turn by Kornai, referring to the country's estrangement from the fundamental principles of democracy and rule of law (Kornai, 2015). Hungary has been called the 'worst-case' scenario of the 'post-communist success story' by the mainstream literature (Ágh, 2016; Herman, 2016).

Second, apart from the democratic backsliding process, there has been a remarkable shift within the Hungarian government's references to and construction of the EU, which has incrementally put Hungary in the position of an 'internal Other' in the EU. After the system change in 1989/1990, there had been an all-party consensus about EU membership and belonging to the West, but the post-2010 move in an illiberal direction has been accompanied by the Orbán government's increased nationalist-populist sentiments, with the EU described by Orbán himself as an 'external dictate' comparable to the communist-era dictatorship on various issues (Kormányzat, 2010). Through such a representation, the Hungarian government has contested the EU by claiming that its national sovereignty, values, and identity have been 'threatened' by the EU's interference (Butnaru Troncotă & Ioniță, 2023). In this way, the Hungarian government has constructed an intra-group differentiation within the in-group of the European communities.

Third, apart from the rhetorical construction of the EU as Hungary's 'Other', several policy-level decisions show a detachment of the Hungarian position from the EU majority. While after the breakout of the refugee crisis, several East-Central European member states sought common solutions in the face of their diverging policy priorities (Arató & Koller, 2018), Hungary was left alone in several EU foreign policy decisions (common foreign policy declarations and international agreements) (Euractive, 2023).

It is against this background that the Russia–Ukraine war broke out following the Russian invasion of the Ukrainian territory on 24 February 2022. Hungary occupied a unique position within the Union, appearing to adopt a contesting role in the formulation of a common European response to the situation. This stemmed mainly from factors such as Russo-Hungarian rapprochement under the Fidesz government, Hungary's geographical proximity to Ukraine and the presence of ethnic Hungarians living in the border region of Transcarpathia.

Within the framework of its renewed foreign policy agenda of 'Eastern opening' which was launched in 2010, Hungary has deepened its relations with non-Western countries in order to decrease its dependency on the EU/the West (Végh, 2015). Prime Minister Orbán stated his vision of Hungary as an 'illiberal democracy' and presented Turkey, Russia, China, India, and Singapore as the role models to follow (The Prime Minister, 2014). In this direction, Hungary's relations

with Russia have been particularly reinforced, signifying the country's estrangement from Euro-Atlantic community policies (Ágh, 2016) already before the Russia–Ukraine war. The rationale behind the Russo-Hungarian rapprochement was often explained in terms of securing economic interests and keeping energy and trade relations stable with Russia, since 85 per cent of Hungarian gas supply and 65 per cent of its oil supply are provided by Russia (Euronews, 2022). Moreover, the Orbán government has commonly used rapprochement with Moscow as a bargaining chip in shaping and maintaining relations with the EU. As a result of the close bilateral ties, Hungary, in contrast to its European partners, has not seen Russia as a threat to European security (Hungary Today, 2021). This stance in turn seriously limited Hungary's room for manoeuvre during the several rounds of EU sanctions against Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Due to its attempts to block the sanctions, the Orbán government was accused by both its European partners and the opposition of having a pro-Russian attitude. The government declared that it would neither supply military aid and troops to Ukraine nor agree on the transition of any lethal weapons to Ukraine through its territory (Politico, 2022). Moreover, it initially blocked the EU package of financial aid for Ukraine worth €18 billion, leading to another source of tension between the country and its EU partners (Tidey, 2022). Although it later agreed to lift its veto in exchange for €5.8 billion of post-COVID recovery funding and a reduction in the amount of the funds it had frozen from €7.5 billion to €6.3 billion (Tidey, 2022), Hungary became the key actor in contestation among EU member states.

Another notable reason behind Hungary's critical position during the Russia–Ukraine war stems from its being a neighbouring country to Ukraine. Because of its geographical proximity, it has faced an influx of Ukrainian refugees. Since the beginning of the war, more than 2,000,000 Ukrainians have entered Hungary either directly from Ukraine or through other nations (UNHCR Hungary, 2022). Moreover, it has accepted 787,000 refugees from Ukraine (Januzi, 2022).

The Hungarian government's readiness to accept Ukrainian refugees is explained by its kin-state politics (Erőss et al., 2018). Located on Ukraine's border with Slovakia and Hungary, the Transcarpathia region has a population of around 150,000 ethnic Hungarians (New York Times, 2022). Accordingly, the region has close cultural and historical ties with Hungary (Makszimov, 2022). The nature of this

kin-state politics and the rising 'Transcarpathian Question' have thus shaped relations between Hungary and Ukraine. With the aim of ensuring the safety of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community, the Hungarian government has long aspired to be an active agent in any geopolitical tension in the region (Erőss et al., 2016).

In some cases, it has even reached beyond the improvement of cultural, political, and social ties within the Transcarpathian Hungarian community. For example, in 2010, the Hungarian parliament introduced an amendment to the Hungarian Citizenship Law to issue dual citizenship for Hungarian communities abroad without actual residency in Hungary (European Parliament, 2011). With the Electoral Act of 2012, non-resident Hungarian citizens were also enabled to participate in Hungarian parliamentary elections. In this way, trans-border Hungarian communities were included in Hungarian home affairs (Pogonyi, 2014). The Hungarian government has also aspired to exert influence within the internal affairs of the Ukrainian state. For example, when the Ukrainian parliament introduced a new education law in 2017 to restrict the use of historic minority languages in school education, Hungary reacted fiercely, leading to a souring of relations between the parties to a great extent. Because of this 'Ukrainian anti-minority practice', Hungary has since 2018 blocked ministerial-level political meetings between NATO and Ukraine in protest over what it regards as Ukraine violating the human rights of its ethnic minorities (Embassy of Hungary Washington, n.d.). In sum, all of these briefly explained factors affected the Hungarian response to the Russia-Ukraine war. Thus, a full-fledged analysis of Hungarian elite perceptions of the EU's actorness and foreign and security policy-making was based on an analysis of the identity and the kin-state politics of the Hungarian government.

### **The Data, and the Methodological Framework of the Discourse Historical Approach**

The analysis of the research relies mainly on data collected from the minutes of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament as complementary to an overview of existing findings in official documents and scholarly articles. The relevant data was obtained mainly through the official website of the Hungarian parliament ([www.parlament.hu](http://www.parlament.hu)) within the designated timeframe from the outbreak of

the crisis, 24 February 2022, to the Hungarian national consultation on EU sanctions against Russia, 15 January 2023. All of the published minutes of parliamentary debates during this period were collected. In total, the number of text corpora collected and analysed was 47. The excerpts selected to be illustrated here are representative discourse fragments within the main body of data according to the representativeness criteria of DHA (Jäger & Maier, 2009).

DHA argues that language serves as a means of acquiring and sustaining power for social actors from various social groups (Wodak, 2015). In this respect, discourses are regarded as social practices that legitimize or delegitimize the power relations within the society (Wodak, 2015). Such power relations are analysed through DHA's topoi and argumentation schemes. While both of these are defined as content-related warrants conveying a specific conclusion regarding a case that is applicable to any rhetorical cases (Rubinelli, 2009, p. 84; see also Wodak 2013, p. 529), topoi cover both rhetorical and dialectical schemes according to Aristotle. Accordingly, topoi refers to both devices for finding relevant arguments within the set of conceivable arguments known as *endoxa* and probative formulae, which give the plausibility of the step(s) from the argument(s) to the conclusion (Kienpointner, 2001, p. 18). Thus, as a persuasion device, topoi convey the argumentation or assertion to the conclusion, which can be refuted or defended. Therefore, they are often constructed through the proposition 'if one ... then the other' (Rubinelli, 2009).

The political discourse employed by political elites often contains argumentation in its presentation of the normative rightness or truth of their assertions. Thus, we regard using argumentation strategies as a suitable choice to reveal elite representations of EU foreign policy during the Russia–Ukraine war and methods of justification and (de)legitimization of the political behaviour and foreign policy orientations adopted by elites with respect to the necessities of the war. [Table 2.1](#) shows the content-related topoi used within the discourse analysis of the research.



**Table 2.1:** Content-related topoi

Topoi	Warrant
Burden/weighing down	'If a person, an institution or a country is burdened by specific problems, one should act in order to diminish those burdens.'
Threat/danger	'If there are specific dangers or threats, one should do something against them.'
Responsibility	'Because a state or a group of persons is responsible for the emergence of specific problems, it or they should act to find solutions to these problems.'
Reality	'Because reality is as it is, a specific action/decision should be performed/made.'
Definition	'If an action, a thing, or a person (group of persons) is named/designated (as) X, the action, thing, or person (group of persons) carries or should carry the qualities/traits/attributes contained in the (literal) meaning of X.'
Finance	'If a specific situation or action costs too much money or causes a loss of revenue, one should perform actions that diminish those costs or help to avoid/mitigate the loss.'

Source: authors' construction based on Reisigl and Wodak (2001, pp. 74–80).

## Analysis

Previous research has found that the relations of the political parties in Hungary with the EU are basically determined by whether they are in a ruling or opposition role (The Prime Minister, 2014). In parallel to this finding, the extensive qualitative analysis of this research found that this trend is maintained in constructing elite perceptions of the EU's actorness and foreign and security policy-making. Accordingly, methods of construction diverge between the three main factions in the national political system, namely the government (Hungarian Civic Union/Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party/KDNP), the opposition (the United for Hungary coalition), and the far-right nationalist Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom). Thus, the analysis that follows will separately address the main concerns raised by these three factions. While on each side of the political spectrum the common refrain is highlighted as 'We prioritize our national

interests at all costs' and 'We are on the side of the peace', the construction and interpretation of reality to achieve these endeavours differs greatly.

### *Perceptions of Hungarian United Opposition Party Elites*

The opposition parties, i.e., Dialogue, Politics Can Be Different (LMP), the Democratic Coalition (DK), Momentum, Jobbik, and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), are observed to generally attribute a positive role to the EU's actorness and foreign policy-making. The exception to this is the Our Homeland Movement, which has employed national-interests-based discourse implying neither pro-EU nor pro-Russian sentiments; therefore, the statements of Mi Hazánk will be analysed separately following the analysis of the united opposition parties. The political communications of the opposition parties within the specific context of the Russia–Ukraine war construct them as the representatives of the interests of the Hungarian people and their desire for Europe, freedom, and security while positioning the government as a threat to these values. Accordingly, national security is often constructed as hinging on Hungary's EU membership and compliance with EU-wide decisions as a reaction to the war.

Bence Tordai: Every well-informed, well-intentioned person in this country knows exactly that security is not guaranteed by the Putin-friendly government of Viktor Orbán, but by our membership in NATO and the European Union ... He knows that the Hungarian people chose Europe and freedom, not Putin, Russia, and the dictatorship. We, in the united opposition chose freedom before and now, we choose the European Union ... Viktor Orbán said that there is life outside the European Union. We know he's already thinking about it. We, in the opposition, on the other hand, choose the West and not the East, we choose EU membership and not Russian colonialism, we choose freedom and not a dictatorship. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022a)

Péter Jakab: In recent years, they have betrayed Hungary, and they have also betrayed Europe when they have continuously kicked our own Western allies with even feet; they weakened the European Union, while they wooed Putin for some power. Somehow they never wanted to stop Moscow, they always wanted to stop Brussels – it turned into a

bloodshed war. April 3 has acquired a new meaning, fellow representatives: Putin or Europe, war or peace, East or West, ruble or euro. We choose the West, we choose Europe, we choose peace, and they choose Putin and war. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022d)

Bertalan Tóth: All signs indicate that the world, including Europe, is facing difficult years. With Putin's senseless war, the aggressor Russia not only threatens the countries of the European community but also puts Transcarpathian Hungary in immediate danger. The effects of this war, whatever the Fidesz people try to make us believe, together with the suffering of Ukrainian people, we all feel it, because as a result of the war, food shortages, shortages of raw materials, lay-offs, unemployment, rising prices, impoverishment may develop in the countries of the region, and starvation in the African countries that need Ukrainian grain. The resulting dissatisfaction may lead to many new local conflicts and wars, and humanitarian crises may arise, which must be dealt with. We could say that, despite the many difficulties, Hungary is safe, and as a member of the European Union, together with the other states, it will be easier to cope with the difficulties. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022d)

In the first excerpt above, parliament member Tordai aligns the united opposition with the West, EU membership, and freedom, while contrasting this with Russian colonialism and dictatorship. Accordingly, he constructs the EU as the safeguard of Hungarian national security and freedom by employing the topos of definition which is based on the conditional of being a 'well-informed, well-intentioned person'. Tordai aligns the opposition with this conditional, suggesting a moral high ground over the government. At the same time, he represents Russia as the 'ultimate Other' by portraying Putin's government as a dictatorship via the topos of threat. In addition, Russia is portrayed as a 'colonialist' country through the topos of history, which refers to the past negative legacy of Hungarian victimhood stemming from Russian interference in the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 and the Communist regime after the Second World War. This construction is reinforced by forming a solid dichotomy between 'us' (the West, EU, freedom, and the Hungarian united opposition) and 'them' (the East, Putin, Russia, dictatorship, and the Orbán government). In this way, the member of parliament (MP) justifies and legitimizes the united

opposition's anti-Russian sentiment while simultaneously delegitimizing the Orbán government's alignment/rapprochement with Russia.

In the second excerpt, MP Jakab puts forward his accusations against the Fidesz government for its pro-Russian foreign policy preferences aimed at wooing Putin. In addition, he constructs in-group favouritism for the united opposition as defenders of the West and peace, promoted as the 'right choice', while portraying the ruling elites as aligned with Putin and war in a way that has weakened Hungary's ties with the EU – utilizing the topos of definition and reality. In this way, he positions the government and Putin's Russia as a threat to Hungary and the EU, via the topos of threat. This is further achieved by forming a juxtaposition between war and peace, East and West, ruble and euro, which is instrumentalized to claim political credit and support in the Hungarian national elections of 3 April 2022. Moreover, while the metaphor of 'Father Europe' provides a frame of reference for the EU as a family, the Hungarian government is portrayed as the betrayer child and recipient of his favours that should have complied with the norms of obligations and solidarity derived from its family membership. The evaluative aspect of this scenario is correlated with the topos of reality, appealing to the Hungarian voters with the sentiment, 'If you choose peace and the West, you should vote for us', implying the distinction of the in-group of united opposition from its political Others, i.e. the ruling elites.

While constructing the emphasis on the EU's importance as a source of support for Hungary's safety in a similar way to the previous excerpts, the third excerpt from MSZP member Tóth reveals the sense of urgency and danger associated with Putin's war and Russia's aggression, the potential negative consequences of the war, through the topos of danger/threat. This construction relies on the motif of victim and suppressor, representing the Ukrainian and the Hungarian people as victims and Russia as perpetrators. Within this differentiation, the Fidesz government is represented as aligned with Putin. In the face of Russian aggression, Hungary's potential vulnerability in the power relations between Russia and Hungary is balanced by Hungary's EU membership. Accordingly, in an anti-Russian manner, utility-based considerations of Hungary's EU membership are highlighted via the topos of definition, based on the conditional that EU membership makes coping with the difficulties easier, providing a secure space. This finding is very much in line with previous research which

has found that pro-EU discourse often advocates EU membership as a positive-sum game by emphasizing the national benefits in various areas, including security and international relations (Özoflu, 2022).

### *Perceptions of the Our Homeland Movement's Party Elites*

The radical right party, Mi Hazánk Mozgalom, the Our Homeland Movement, is observed to employ nationalist discourse while communicating about the EU's actorness during the Russia–Ukraine war that reflects a critical stance towards the Hungarian government, the EU, and Ukraine. Thus, it offers an alternative portrayal of the EU's actorness which is aligned neither with the opposition nor with the government. Yet, its discourses have sometimes overlapped with the government's argumentation of 'war inflation', blaming the EU for economic setbacks. Moreover, it is interesting that it does not address war/peace or democracy/dictatorship but shares the government's opinions on opposing the oil embargo on the basis of the national interest of Hungary.

László Toroczkai: instead of declaring a state of emergency, it would be of much greater help to Hungary if the government changed its previous, in our opinion, very dangerous and very harmful position, which supported Ukraine's almost immediate accession to the European Union. We see that it is not simply a matter of the European Union taking on an extremely corrupt and dangerous country with its oligarchs – who built a private army in Mariupol, for example, like Ihor Kolomojsky – but it is also simply a matter of someone having to rebuild Ukraine. If the Hungarian government supports this crazy idea of almost unconditionally and almost immediately admitting Ukraine to the European Union, then this also means that we will have to pay for the restoration and reconstruction of Ukraine. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022b)

László Toroczkai: while the government is now quite rightly opposing the oil embargo, at the Versailles summit Viktor Orbán did not speak out against the series of sanctions launched at the time, but instead gave assurances of his support for this series of measures. Moreover, in perhaps one of the most serious cases, the Hungarian government, Viktor Orbán, and Fidesz support the globalist intention of Brussels to admit Ukraine to the European Union quickly, very quickly, out of line,

and almost without conditions, which practically means the end of the European Union. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022c)

In the first excerpt, Toroczkai, the president of Mi Hazánk, evaluates the EU's response to the war through calculations based on Hungarian national interests. Accordingly, he raises concerns regarding Ukrainian accession to the EU through the topoi of danger and burden. This is further suppressed by the topos of finance with the argument that since Ukraine's accession to the EU would result in the financial responsibility for its restoration and reconstruction, which costs too much money, it should be avoided. This anti-Ukrainian stance is also legitimized by portraying the country as corrupt and dangerous, emphasizing the existence of oligarchs and private armies, via the topos of threat/danger.

In a similar manner, in the second excerpt, Toroczkai questions the EU's response to the Russia–Ukraine war and the government's decision to support it. He formulates a critical perspective on Ukrainian accession to the EU, which is connoted as detrimental to the existence of the EU through the topos of danger/threat. In this way, he legitimizes Mi Hazánk's antagonist position towards the EU and the government while simultaneously constructing them as allies under the 'globalists' labelling. Through such an understanding and reconstruction of the external reality, the distinction between us (the nationalists) and them (the globalists) is formulated. Within the dichotomy, Ukraine is covertly portrayed as the Other of Europe as well. Toroczkai also points out the inconsistency between the government's stance on the oil embargo and its support for EU sanctions against Russia. His statement implies Mi Hazánk's critical stance against the European Union's ban on the export of Russian oil product. When intertextually evaluated, the party's opposing position is found to be legitimized by the construction of discourses which are reinforced with a strict emphasis on the prioritization of Hungarian national interests. The recurring discourse fragments within the wide range of discursive strategies employed by Mi Hazánk follow the logic that 'The embargo against the Russians still caused incalculable damage to the Hungarian economy, which is why prices continue to rise, inflation increases, and all of this can also cause supply disruptions. Now finally let the Hungarian interest come' (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022e).

Accordingly, the EU's response to and its actorness regarding the war are read through the 'Hungarian lenses' of national economic interest by using a combination of the topoi of reality, finance, and responsibility. Thus, Toroczkaï supports the government's argumentation of 'war inflation' and blames the EU for economic problems.

### *Perceptions of Hungarian Ruling Party Elites*

The ruling Fidesz–KDNP Party alliance perceives the EU's actorness and its foreign and security policy priorities based on national security and economic interests. Its arguments have been constructed upon nationalist sentiments accompanied by Eurosceptic tones to justify and legitimize policy responses and political behaviour of the government, which has been called 'national interest Euroscepticism' by Szczerbiak and Taggart (2000).

Hajnalka Juhász: Russia produces more than 40 per cent of the natural gas used in the European Union, as well as a quarter of the crude oil. It is also a fact that Europe does not have enough piped natural gas of non-Russian origin, and it is also a fact that, due to the lack of a coastline, our country cannot build floating terminals, so currently Russian or any crude oil can only arrive in Hungary via pipelines. The Brussels proposal would destroy our country's stable energy supply. So far, we have supported five Brussels sanctions packages. Five. But the Hungarian government has emphasized from the beginning that ensuring Hungary's energy supply is a red line. The Hungarian people should not be made to pay the price of the war, as is already the case. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022c)

Viktor Orbán: The war and the European sanctions policy in response caused an energy crisis ... Today, Europe does not have any means to deal with the conflict taking place in its neighbour. Lacking power and means, the continent's leaders are convinced that with the help of European sanctions, Russia can be brought to its knees. For the sake of European unity, the country of Hungary will not prevent sanctions until they cross the red line of self-defence of the Hungarian economy, i.e. as long as they do not endanger Hungary's energy security ... It is true that Brussels today seeks to suppress the sovereignty of the member states, including Hungary. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022d)

László Kövér: The war taking place on the territory of Ukraine is a European war in a geographical sense, which the European Union did not have the moral and diplomatic power to prevent, just as it does not have sufficient authority and political power to promote the end of the war as soon as possible. The European Commission, which has arbitrarily transformed the decision-making system of the European Union in its own favour, seems to have sufficient bureaucratic power only to destroy the economies of European countries with economic sanctions intended to punish the aggressor Russia, which have proven to be ineffective in this regard ... The politics that define the European Union today do not want to recognize, dare not declare, and are not able to enforce European self-interests, therefore Europe is not a shaper of world politics, but a victim. Europe is not the master of itself, but the slave of democratic control mechanisms and economic and political interest groups outside the continent. (Parliamentary Diary of the Hungarian Government, 2022d)

In the excerpt above, MP Juhász emphasizes Russia's critical role in supplying natural gas and crude oil to Hungary and the EU. This fact, which is used to criticize the sanction policy of the EU, combined with the lack of alternative sources, supports the notion of Russian dominance over the EU in constructing the power relations between the two through the topos of reality. In addition, the government's cautious stance towards Brussels' sixth sanctions package against Russia is justified through the topoi of threat/danger and burden. The topos of burden is further reinforced by invoking a populist dichotomy between ordinary 'Hungarian people' and Brussels elites through which a victim/perpetrator relation is constructed. Accordingly, the EU and its sanction policy as the response to the war are portrayed as the bogeyman in terms of the financial consequences of the war.

The second excerpt presents the archetypal example of how the Hungarian government prioritizes utilitarian considerations while interpreting the EU's actorness and foreign policy preferences regarding the war. This stance is legitimized through the topoi of reality, finance, and burden, acknowledging the conditional, 'We adopt EU-based positions if they do not minimize our national economic interests'. This is further supported by the undermining of the EU's ability to tackle the conflict taking place in its neighbour's territory. This is conducted via the combination of the topoi of reality, burden, and finance.



In this way, Orbán constructs his government as a national interest maximizer. This portrayal is firmly associated with and supported by his intergovernmentalism, understanding the European integration process as one that disassociates Hungary from the EU-wide interpreted and constructed necessities of foreign policy-making priorities which might appear a zero-sum game ('until they cross the red line') that clashes with national energy security interests. Yet, regardless of Orbán's critical stance, the government's self-contradictory official support of EU sanctions against Russia up to that point is justified by highlighting that this support is given for the sake of European unity, via the topos of definition, to claim internal legitimacy within the Hungarian national political setting.

In the third excerpt, MP Kövér adopts a Eurosceptic discourse and criticizes the EU's insufficient power and foreign policy abilities in responding to the war, which is framed as 'European' through the use of the topos of definition. In this way, by evoking a sense of belonging, increased expectations of in-group members of the European community within the EU are constructed that the war should be prevented/ended. The fact that the EU is highlighted as not capable of ending even its 'own' war covertly degrades its external actorness and legitimizes the Hungarian government's intergovernmentalist stance via the combination of the topoi of threat/danger and responsibility. Kövér further undermines the EU's weight in world politics as a legitimate and recognizable actor by representing it as the victim of its own institution, i.e. the European Commission. Here the constructed power relations are evident in the critique of the bureaucratic power of the European Commission, which is represented as imposing economic sanctions on member states via the topoi of burden and finance. In addition, the intergroup differentiation between the in-group as victim and out-groups as perpetrators helps to form two-faceted Othering at both intergroup and intra-group levels. At the intra-group level, Kövér represents the Hungarian government as the gatekeeper of European self-interest, contrary to the Others of the in-group, i.e. EU institutions, while at the intergroup level he evokes in-group favouritism through the constructed dichotomy of 'us versus "economic and political interest groups outside the continent"'. This reinforces his portrayal of the government as the national and European front.

## Conclusion

This research examined how Hungarian political elites perceive the EU's actorness and foreign and security policy priorities in relation to the specific challenges of the Russia–Ukraine war. To this end, by adopting a discourse historical approach, we conducted a critical discourse analysis of the minutes of parliamentary debates within the Hungarian national parliament from 24 February 2022, i.e. the outbreak of the Russian occupation till 15 January 2023, when Hungarian national consultation on EU sanctions against Russia was organized.

In parallel with previous research, the analysis revealed that the political parties' perceptions of the EU's actorness within the realm of foreign policy-making are shaped in accordance with their party-political position as government or opposition. While both sides firmly advocate their positions as the national front and as the maximizer of national interest and communicate about the EU's actorness to justify their own respective political behaviour and cause, their definitional standpoints regarding how perceptions of the weight of the EU are highly divergent. Thus, the analysis discussed the perceptions of the government, the united opposition, and the Our Homeland Movement separately. As a 'third side', the latter opted out of discussions on the war itself and detached itself from both the government and the united opposition discourse while claiming to represent national interests.

Accordingly, the united opposition has adopted a pro-European stance, acclaiming the EU as the guarantor of Hungarian economic and security interests. This political position is further fine-tuned through anti-Russian sentiment, which is simultaneously instrumentalized to delegitimize the ruling elites' alignment/rapprochement with Russia. This construction of the opposition's pro-Europeanist stance versus the government's pro-Russian has been used to claim political credit.

On the other hand, Mi Hazánk, the far-right political party in Hungary, which positions itself as the defender of Hungarian national interests, culture, and identity, has pointed to an alternative construction in interpreting EU's actorness in the Russia–Ukraine war. Its Eurosceptic tone, derived from its nationalist and anti-globalist ideologies, overlaps with the position of neither the united opposition nor the ruling elites. Accordingly, it evaluates the EU's response to the war through calculations based on Hungarian national interests, which are associated with

financial concerns regarding prospective Ukrainian accession to the EU through the topoi of threat/danger, burden, and finance.

The ruling coalition of Fidesz and KDNP has communicated about the EU's global actorness through a nation-centric ethos operationalized as a tool of justification for their prioritization of 'sovereign positions' over EU-oriented positions with respect to the Russia–Ukraine war. Through propounding national security and economic concerns, the government undermines the EU's global actorness with the aim of generating room for political manoeuvre in mediating its relations with Russia. Therefore, the EU's foreign policy decisions are represented as the reason for the financial instability of the continent in the wake of the war.

Perceptions of the EU's global actorness among Hungarian political elites have been found to be operationalized and instrumentalized in accordance with the political aims and causes of the opposition and the government respectively. While the former associates its perception of the EU's actorness with its aim of claiming political credit and power, the latter uses the construction of its perceptions to claim justification for its political decisions and behaviour. This finding offers a critical point of reference for further research studies aiming to compare government and opposition elites' perceptions of the EU.

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