

# Populist foreign policy in Central and Eastern Europe: Poland and Hungary and the shock of the Ukraine crisis

Akos Kopper, András Szalai, Magdalena Góra

## I. INTRODUCTION

Victor Orbán of Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland are symbols of successful, long standing populist leaders in power. Therefore, within populism studies, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) enjoys special attention as an interesting case study of a disrupted (successful) democratisation but also in its role as a source of inspiration (and know-how) for other movements particularly within the European Union (EU)<sup>1</sup>. The past decade has shown considerable similarities in the ways in which these two populist actors attack democratic institutions, solidify their hold over domestic audiences, and appear as disruptors of the European status quo<sup>3</sup>. This paper problematizes this apparent uniformity of CEE populisms in the realm of foreign policy (FP) and highlights differences between Hungary and Poland that characterized their FP already before Russia's war on Ukraine. These differences, we argue, are rooted in the ideological depth of these actors. Whereas Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán is not bound by ideology and therefore can flexibly take opportunistic political actions and construct narratives that give meaning to these moves, Poland's populists are much more (self)constrained in their decisions as these have to be ideologically consistent.

When it comes to the interlinkage of foreign policy and populism, we see the role of the latter as a discursive tool that is used to justify (foreign) policy actions domestically and give them coherence<sup>4</sup>. As a discursive style that "features an appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite', 'bad manners' and the performance of crisis,"<sup>6</sup>, populism cannot 'cause' a specific type of foreign policy, but can rather act as a discursive toolkit for constructing narratives that give certain foreign policy

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<sup>1</sup> Lenka Bušítková and Petra Guasti, "The State as a Firm: Understanding the Autocratic Roots of Technocratic Populism:," *East European Politics and Societies: And Cultures* 33, no. 2 (September 20, 2018): 302–30; Monika Brusenbauch Meislova and Steve Buckledee, "Discursive (Re)Construction of Populist Sovereignism by Right-Wing Hard Eurosceptic Parties in the 2019 European Parliament Elections: Insights from the UK, Italy, the Czech Republic and Slovakia," *Journal of Language and Politics* 20, no. 6 (January 5, 2021): 825–51; Mitchell A. Orenstein and R. Daniel Kelemen, "Trojan Horses in EU Foreign Policy," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 55, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 87–102; Mihai Varga and Aron Buzogány, "The Foreign Policy of Populists in Power: Contesting Liberalism in Poland and Hungary," *Geopolitics* 26, no. 5 (2020): 1442–63.

<sup>3</sup> Poland and Hungary have a track record of intense policy learning both before and after their accession to the EU. The trend continues under Orbán and Kaczyński. Mutual imitation also includes domestic discourse as Poland adopted the rhetoric and othering practices that Hungary championed, propelling it down the road of de-democratization.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Christophe Boucher and Cameron G. Thies, "'I Am a Tariff Man': The Power of Populist Foreign Policy Rhetoric under President Trump," *Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (April 1, 2019): 712–22; Jonny Hall, "In Search of Enemies: Donald Trump's Populist Foreign Policy Rhetoric:," *Politics* 41, no. 1 (July 8, 2020): 48–63.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, "The Populism/Anti-Populism Divide in Western Europe," *Democratic Theory* 5, no. 2 (December 1, 2018): 4.

moves meaning<sup>7</sup>. The separation of populism-as-style and foreign policy proper does not mean that CEE populists show no similarities in their foreign policy: both have had numerous conflicts with EU elites, tried to repair their relations with the US during the Trump presidency, and have gradually moved closer to China (albeit to a very different degree). Rather we illustrate that these foreign policy moves do not flow solely from populism, but from the domestic and European contexts these governments find themselves.<sup>9</sup> In other words, even though in our opinion the 4<sup>th</sup> school of FPF captures the characteristics of CEE populism the best, discourses must resonate with local experiences, such as resentment to West-European tutelage (more specifically resentment to Germany in Poland), or certain ideological elements that the potential powerbase of the populists find appealing. Still populists do not merely follow the ‘mood of the people’, but are also shaping and moulding it, which is increasingly feasible as they get on power and change the state apparatuses to their liking. This regime building, however, frequently leads CEE populist governments to conflict with their European peers on numerous domestic policies concerning liberal democratic norms, which makes it reasonable for them to search for alternative sources of stability for their regime, which partially explains Hungary’s and Poland’s (limited) pivot to China, and Hungary’s turn towards Russia. At the same time conflicts with the EU allows governments to target the EU for othering, thereby re-establishing populism’s ‘the elite’ vs. ‘the people’ vertical antagonism where these populists in power no longer appear as ‘the elites’, but as representatives of ‘the people’ against European elites.<sup>10</sup>

The Polish and Hungarian cases demonstrate that foreign policy is a useful arena for populists that allows the performance of crises and the construction of threatening external others. As scholars from Laclau to Moffitt highlight, populists thrive on crisis<sup>11</sup>, or as Hall stated: “a sense of crisis is an inherent part of populism”<sup>12</sup> as it provides useful conditions to stress the need and urgency of actions and allows clearly define enemies.<sup>13</sup> Populists capitalize on external crises by offering themselves as the only solution for protecting the people from the crisis, while scapegoating political elites/opponents. But they also *produce* crises (see endogenously created crises) that they then dominate. This was done to great effect during the migration crisis<sup>15</sup> when CEE populists

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<sup>7</sup> Frank A Stengel, David B Macdonald, and Dirk Nabers, “Introduction: Analyzing the Nexus Between Populism and International Relations,” in *Populism and World Politics*, ed. Frank A Stengel, David B Macdonald, and Dirk Nabers (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1–22, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04621-7\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04621-7_1).

<sup>9</sup> While it seems that Hungary is openly pivoting toward China (see [Christiansen 2022](#)), Poland’s policies do not amount to a pivot primarily due to the traditional foreign policy role of “loyal US ally” which limits Polish options vis-à-vis China. ([Chappell 2012](#)).

<sup>10</sup> There have also been attempts at ‘transnational populism’, i.e. establishing ‘the people’ on the CEE level. These attempts have largely failed though. See Jonathan Kuyper and Benjamin Moffitt, “Transnational Populism, Democracy, and Representation: Pitfalls and Potentialities,” *Global Justice : Theory Practice Rhetoric* 12, no. 02 (November 15, 2020): 27–49, <https://doi.org/10.21248/GJN.12.02.208>.

<sup>11</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, New York: Verso, 2005); Benjamin Moffitt, “How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism,” *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (2014): 189–217.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Andrea L.P. Pirro, Paul Taggart, and Stijn van Kessel, “The Populist Politics of Euroscepticism in Times of Crisis: Comparative Conclusions;,” *Politics* 38, no. 3 (July 4, 2018): 378–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718784704>.

<sup>15</sup>

exploited the securitized events of the summer of 2015 in ways that it could be used to generate continued support and to win elections.

Yet not all crises are necessarily a blessing for populists as not all crises allow for the easy construction of populist narratives. External crises that were not constructed by the populist can fall into this category. Specifically, Russia's war on Ukraine created the biggest crisis for CEE countries since the end of communism and it was far from trivial how populists would deal with it. The war not only cooled down the Polish-Hungarian partnership, but also highlighted differences between the two regimes, revealing the significance of the ideological elements of the Polish regime, in addition to turning foreign policy into a priority for the EU. Due to the war in Ukraine, populist foreign policy narratives that were previously successful now became contradictory. How the two governments narratively navigate the war and make sense of their policy responses is the focus of our case study. Notably, divergence across our cases cannot be explained away through historical trauma since societal reservations about Russia are deeply entrenched in both countries. In Hungary both emblematic revolutions (1848 and 1956) were crushed by Russian/Soviet troops, and Poland not only was partitioned by Russia in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and its eastern territories were exposed to heavy russification, but the country became a victim of Bolshevik aggression in a war in 1920/1921 and attacked by the Soviet Union in September 1939 together with the Nazi Germany.

The chapter is organized as follows. Before our two case studies focusing on how Hungary and Poland reacted to Russia's war against Ukraine, we highlight that the EU provides a context specific to European populism: it acts as a quasi-abroad, supranational environment. The EU is in some sense part of the foreign yet is also deeply intertwined with domestic politics via numerous channels, making the separation of the two domestic/foreign difficult, except for the narrative level, where domestic narratives can differ radically from narratives offered externally (especially in the case of Hungary). As numerous policies of populists automatically produce conflict with the European Union, populist regimes frequently relied on careful manoeuvring to avoid confronting the EU head on

Also, we highlight the role 'crisis talk' and 'war rhetoric' played in the regime building of populists both in Hungary and Poland, by continuously identifying enemies to fight. Still, with Russia's war on Ukraine a real war hit the region with fighting taking place in the neighbouring Ukraine. This made foreign policy a top priority, which we argue was previously subordinate to domestic regime building. The fundamental difference between the two populist regimes lied in the nature of the regime they wanted to create. Whereas for Polish populists' ideology was a guide for the norms and values the Polish state should represent, for Hungarian populism ideational elements were but fig leaves for buttressing and justifying the rule of the Fidesz elite.<sup>16</sup> As the result of this, Hungarian

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Ákos Bocskor, "Anti-Immigration Discourses in Hungary during the 'Crisis' Year: The Orbán Government's 'National Consultation' Campaign of 2015," *Sociology* 52, no. 3 (June 1, 2018): 551–68; András Szalai, "Securitizing Migration in Contemporary Hungary: From Discourse to Practice," in *Migration, Integration, Disintegration*, ed. Alexandra Prodromidou et al. (London: Routledge, 2020); Michał Krzyżanowski, "Discursive Shifts and the Normalisation of Racism: Imaginaries of Immigration, Moral Panics and the Discourse of Contemporary Right-Wing Populism," *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (August 7, 2020): 503–27.

<sup>16</sup> We disagree with the interpretation offered by Varga and Buzogány (2021) that the ideological underpinnings of Orbán's populism influenced policy choices. Instead, we see Orbán's regime building pragmatic, using ideology in an *à la carte*

(foreign) policy was much more the outcome of ad-hoc tactical decisions and pragmatism and was characterized by greater flexibility.

The CEE region was for that last two decades a laboratory of democratisation, in the recent years the pro-Western tendencies and mimicking patterns following the Western templates of political, economic and social developments became growingly contested domestically. Such tendencies were also externally supported by powerful actors such as Russia or China. The selected cases of Hungary and Poland demonstrate how populist were able to capitalise on this and solidify in power. Even if other countries in the region were less prone (due to variety of reasons) to have long-lasting populist governments, many had populist episodes (such as Slovenia, Slovakia or Czechia) or witness growth of populist parties on domestic scenes, with factors responsible for this being similar across the region<sup>18</sup>, particularly regarding the EU<sup>20</sup>. In this chapter we will not provide analysis beyond these two cases, yet the findings will shed the light at the overall tendencies in the region.

## II. POPULISM IN THE CEE – MANOEUVRING AND THE OVERLAP OF DOMESTIC/EU AND FOREIGN POLITICS

For CEE countries EU membership creates a particular structural context in which the EU's normative underpinnings and the fact that the EU is often depicted as a paternalistic institution dictating policies for weaker member states and especially those of the CEE<sup>22</sup> creates the setting for certain types of narratives rooted in victimization and collective narcissism that are at times invoked to lend meaning to foreign policies<sup>23</sup>.

For capturing the particularities of CEE populism, we offer a framework that moves beyond the domestic/foreign policy dichotomy and incorporates the European (EU) level as a context specific to the foreign policies of CEE populists.<sup>24</sup> The extension of the traditional dual framework to three

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fashion. The renaming of the *Foreign Ministry* to *Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade* suggests this transactional, pragmatic attitude to all policies, including foreign affairs.

<sup>18</sup> Buštíková and Guasti, "The State as a Firm: Understanding the Autocratic Roots of Technocratic Populism:"; Robert Csehi, "Neither Episodic, nor Destined to Failure? The Endurance of Hungarian Populism after 2010," *Democratization* 26, no. 6 (August 18, 2019): 1011–27; Bolesław Domański, "West and East in 'New Europe': The Pitfalls of Paternalism and a Claimant Attitude:," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 11, no. 4 (July 25, 2004): 377–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776404046272>; András Körösenyi, Gábor Illés, and Attila Gyulai, "The Orbán Regime : Plebiscitary Leader Democracy in the Making," *The Orbán Regime: Plebiscitary Leader Democracy in the Making*, 2020; Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi, "Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 1, 2018): 39–51; Michał Krzyżanowski, "Discursive Shifts in Ethno-Nationalist Politics: On Politicization and Mediatization of the 'Refugee Crisis' in Poland," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (April 3, 2017): 76–96; András Szalai, "The Construction of the Refugee Other in Hungary During the 2015 'Migration Crisis,'" in *Along the Balkan Route: The Impact of the Post-2014 'Migrant Crisis' on the EU's South East Periphery*, ed. Alexandra Prodromidou and Pavlos Gkasis (Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2019), 104–17

<sup>20</sup> Magdalena Góra et al., "Who Owns Sovereignty? Visegrad Four Eurosceptic Narratives on the Future of the European Union," 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Bolesław Domański, "West and East in 'New Europe': The Pitfalls of Paternalism and a Claimant Attitude:," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 11, no. 4 (July 25, 2004): 377–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776404046272>.

<sup>23</sup> Agnieszka Golec de Zavala and Oliver Keenan, "Collective Narcissism as a Framework for Understanding Populism," *Journal of Theoretical Social Psychology* 5, no. 2 (April 1, 2021): 54–64, <https://doi.org/10.1002/JTS5.69>.

<sup>24</sup> It is crucial to underline that 'foreign policy' may refer both to populists' policies towards the EU, while it may also refer to policies outside to the EU, where the EU (including its member states) has its foreign policy.

policy levels helps to highlight the unique setting in which the CEE countries formulate their foreign policies. For CEE member states, the EU is both an external actor against which domestic politics needs to be formulated, because EU institutions can and do constrain domestic actors,<sup>25</sup> while the EU also represents a quasi-international realm for member states: something external to the nation state yet still more internal and controllable than world politics outside of the EU. Thus, whatever happens within the EU context is not truly *foreign* policy, as CEE member-states are not candidate countries anymore but are true participants in EU decision-making.<sup>27</sup> This in-between-ness of the EU has a fundamental effect on how member states conduct their foreign policies, when it suits populist politicians, the EU could be portrayed as a faraway entity, but at the same time EU politics could also be used to portray CEE politicians as equal to those of France or Germany and EU politics in this sense could be turned into a stage on which ‘the Leader’ perform the role of an influential figure, a maverick, a trickster, or a freedom fighter<sup>28</sup>. While for populist regimes like those in Poland and Hungary the EU offers an ideal external ‘elite’ to other, and its institutions offer an arena where populist leaders could readily perform their ‘struggle for the people’. Meanwhile, the EU membership also offers a platform through which CEE states can increase their reach in global politics. As EU foreign policy still manifests the intergovernmental characteristics of the Union, and as full-fledged members of the Council, EU states can shape or even block common measures.

### 2.a. Regime building and manoeuvring

Despite frequent condemnation from the European Parliament (EP), the EU did not stop populists from dismantling democratic institutions., the last decade has shown a gradual, but steady decline in democracy scores in both countries under investigation<sup>30</sup>. Talks about illiberal democracy could be interpreted as merely a narrative strategy to make the dismantling of democratic institutions and centralization acceptable, by obscuring the fact that majoritarian democracy without liberal elements is an oxymoron.<sup>31</sup> The reasons for the EU’s lack of firm action against de-democratizing tendencies in the CEE are many. Partly the EU does not yet have mechanisms against member states that violate its basic norms, contrary to the power it had towards candidate countries. Even though the Union sought to curtail de-democratization by trying to limit financial support to mis-behaving governments, these attempts have largely been unsuccessful due to a lack of political will, and populists’ skilled navigation within the EU’s vague values<sup>33</sup> and its formalized bureaucracy.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, the lack of EU

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<sup>25</sup> As Bozóki and Hegedűs argue, the EU both constrains, but also provides support and legitimation for Hungary’s. See in András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs, “An Externally Constrained Hybrid Regime: Hungary in the European Union,” *Democratization* 25, no. 7 (October 3, 2018): 1173–89.

<sup>27</sup> Populists in their narratives tend to simplify the numerous ways in which EU and domestic politics overlap, suggesting a clear separation between these. One example for this is when sovereignty is invoked without clarifying in any sense what ‘national sovereignty’ means within the EU, or referring to the EU as an external other, without acknowledging that it is comprised of its member states, thus it is not an external and foreign entity, but it is constituted with us being included.

<sup>28</sup> Körösnéyi, Illés, and Gyulai, “The Orbán Regime : Plebiscitary Leader Democracy in the Making.”

<sup>30</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule ” (New York, 2021).

<sup>31</sup> Tímea Drinóczi and Agnieszka Bień-Kacała, “Illiberal Constitutionalism: The Case of Hungary and Poland,” *German Law Journal* 20, no. 8 (December 1, 2019): 1140–66.

<sup>33</sup> Martijn Mos, “Ambiguity and Interpretive Politics in the Crisis of European Values: Evidence from Hungary,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 267–87.

instruments allowed for populist CEE leaders to use the resources the EU provided for solidifying their rule, The fact that populists identified the ‘elite’ in Brussels created an awkward situation for the EU to put forward its critique. every critical comment made by the EU could be fitted into the populist narrative about the EU trampling national sovereignty as Enyedi and Krekó observed: “The Fidesz regime benefits not only from the EU’s carrots, but from its sticks as well”<sup>36</sup>

Viktor Orbán just like Jarosław Kaczyński started his career as committed supporters of the West,<sup>37</sup> but as their policies were increasingly diverging from European norms and values both domestically and in the field of foreign policy, it became necessary for them to find ways of manoeuvring to avoid confronting the EU head on. Orbán’s actions epitomize how despite of frequent debates with the EU, when needed he was mostly ready to backtrack—or to make token gestures at the right moment to avoid direct confrontation that could lead to countermeasures<sup>38</sup>. Manoeuvring included the crafting of policies in a way to confirm to EU norms in form but hardly in substance.<sup>39</sup> Also, Orbán frequently relied on to legalese discussions and to twist procedures and inherently ambiguous procedural norms to have his way.<sup>41</sup> His declared aim was to create the National System of Cooperation (NER), by the introduction of a wide range of institutional changes. Although these institutional changes followed examples that existed elsewhere in the EU – thus they were difficult for the EU bodies to criticize given their checklist approach – yet once added together these created what Scheppele called a Frankenstate (2013), a monster that hardly confirmed to democratic standards in any meaningful sense.<sup>43</sup> Creating a political regime that assures continued electoral victories or at the least a strong veto position in opposition included the ambition to achieve overwhelming control over the public media. Media control leads to control over narratives, and enables the creation of multiple, often contradictory narratives for various audiences. When it comes to EU politics as foreign policy, the story told to the EU could radically differ from the one produced for domestic consumption. The outcome was a permanent double-talk, leading to an institutionalization of dual reporting on foreign policy that allowed to frame changes in positions or compromises as victories or simply to omit them in the domestic press. A revealing example for this is the way Hungary responded to Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea. Although the international press made frequent analogies between Hungary’s 1956 revolution that was crushed by the Soviet Union, as well as to the occupation of Crimea by Russia, Hungarian public media controlled by the

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<sup>34</sup> Ana E. Juncos and Karolina Pomorska, “Contesting Procedural Norms: The Impact of Politicisation on European Foreign Policy Cooperation,” *European Security* 30, no. 3 (2021): 367–84.

<sup>36</sup> Krekó and Enyedi, “Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism,” 45.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.eurozine.com/two-faces-european-disillusionment/>

<sup>38</sup> Mos, “Ambiguity and Interpretive Politics in the Crisis of European Values: Evidence from Hungary”; Péter Visnovitz and Erin Kristin Jenne, “Populist Argumentation in Foreign Policy: The Case of Hungary under Viktor Orbán, 2010–2020,” *Comparative European Politics* 19, no. 6 (December 1, 2021): 683–702, <https://doi.org/10.1057/S41295-021-00256-3/FIGURES/2>.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion on fake compliance see Ákos Kopper et al., “The ‘Insecurity Toolbox’ of the Illiberal Regime: Rule by Law and Rule by Exclusion,” *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences (PARISS)* 1, no. 2 (December 18, 2020): 216–42.

<sup>41</sup> Mos, “Ambiguity and Interpretive Politics in the Crisis of European Values: Evidence from Hungary.”

<sup>43</sup> Kim Lane Scheppele, “The Rule of Law and the Frankenstate: Why Governance Checklists Do Not Work,” *Governance* 26, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 559–62.

populists did not even allude to this parallel.<sup>45</sup> Still, internationally, along with the other V4 leaders, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2014, Viktor Orbán signed a statement condemning the occupation, including a clear reference to 1956: “*The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are appalled to witness a military intervention in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe akin to their own experiences in 1956, 1968 and 1981.*”<sup>47</sup> This dominance over the public media is unique to Hungary and partly explains why PM Orbán can be more flexible in making its policy-changes and detours.<sup>49</sup>

Although elements of manoeuvring were also present in the case of Poland such as obtaining control over public media and attempt of dismantling check-and-balance between judiciary and executive, the domestic context for this manoeuvring radically differed for the two countries. Orbán’s regime was characterized by an opportunistic flexibility that was not guided by any fixed ideology, whereas Prawo i Sprawiedliwość’s (PiS, Law and Justice) politics had a strong ideological core, still conveyed through a populist style.<sup>50</sup> Initially after creation in 2001, PiS views were moderate as regards foreign policy with stress on national interest but rather in a conservative manner with more focus on market and its benefits and preventing deepening integration and federalisation as regards the EU<sup>51</sup>. With time however PiS established a strategic alliance with more right-wing parties (most notably Solidarna Polska – SP, United Poland) and ultra-conservative circles. Most of them – such as anti-Semitic and ultra-conservative Radio Maryja or civil society organisation Ordo Iuris – were ideologically much more conservative and anti-European. In 2015 PiS came to power forming an electoral coalition Zjednoczona Prawica (ZP, United Right) with radical right-wing formations such as SP as well as with more centrist minor coalition partners as Porozumienie (P, Agreement). Within and around ZP coalition these various groups are necessary for PiS and its leader to govern the country and have a significant impact on formation’s ideological stance. The PiS itself however was always internally diverse with many groups maintaining the more centrist and moderate outlook as regard domestic and external issues including the EU. For many observers such internal diversity as well as three-headed governing system with party, government and president offices led by separate politicians is maintained strategically by the party head Jarosław Kaczyński to diversify the party electoral base<sup>53</sup>. Nevertheless, one of such centres was gathered around the

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<sup>45</sup> Véleményvezér, “Orbán Feloldozza a Baloldalt,” *Véleményvezér*, 2014. Available at <https://velemenyezer.444.hu/2014/03/03/Orban-feloldozza-a-baloldalt/>

<sup>47</sup> Prime Ministers of the Visegrad 4, “Statement of the Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Countries on Ukraine” (Vienna, 2014), <http://vienna.io.gov.hu/accessibility/statement-of-the-prime-ministers-of-the-visegrad-countries-on-ukraine>.

<sup>49</sup> Even though propaganda is a strong word, it still captures how Fidesz’ control over the Hungarian media landscape results in a monopoly on information, enabling the governing party to decide what news and in through what framing should reach the people.

<sup>50</sup> The ideological difference between Poland’s and Hungary’s populists is described in detail by Brasa and Hesova (2021), including the different roles the Catholic Church played in the two countries also contributing to the shallower ideological underpinnings of Hungarian populism. Pavel Barša and Zora Hesová, “Afterword,” in *Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism and Populism*, ed. Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová, and Ondřej Slačálek (Prague: Humanitas, 2021), 325–53.

<sup>51</sup> Natasza Styczyńska, *Więcej Czy Mniej Europy? UE i Integracja Europejska w Dyskursie Polskich Partii Politycznych* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2018).

<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that in the case of PiS since 2015 electoral victory party controls both government (with Prime Minister Beata Szydło governing between 2015-2017 and Mateusz Morawiecki since 2017) and the residency. PiS party leader Jarosław Kaczyński has only occasionally taken a governmental positions since 2015

President of the Republic Andrzej Duda elected in 2015 and re-elected in 2020. Since his first term in office President occasionally was using his veto powers to constrain some of the far-going party attempts in dismantling judiciary independence. Such tendency intensified in his second term when he also constrained attempts in harnessing media freedom or in ideologically motivated educational reform. After the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022, President Duda tried also to respond to the Commission concerns about the controversial juridical reforms, with proposal to smoothen relations with the EU.<sup>54</sup> Still, for Polish populists the major challenge of manoeuvring came with the war, being both to act as a leader of Europe, but at the same time also to remain a critic. In the war circumstances Kaczynski tried by emphasizing at the same time European solidarity remaining critical of the current forms of European institutions, and especially of Germany.<sup>56</sup>

Internationally manoeuvring for Orbán was about making a shift towards an increasingly pro-Russia and pro-China policies, balancing this reorientation with the country being a member of the EU. Although Orbán constantly talked about the decline of the West, and the pragmatic benefits of building good connections with Russia – among others to secure the country's energy needs – when the EU called for a united stance, such as introducing sanctions against Russia, Orbán always supported the collective European position, albeit with gestures to Russia.<sup>58</sup> As Enyedi and Krekó pointed out in 2018, the strategy of Fidesz foreign policy was to balance in a way to “make the most out of EU membership”, while at the same time to buttress Hungary's regime by also relying on predominantly Russian, but also on Chinese, Turkish or Azeri partners<sup>59</sup>.

In Poland, no such clear shift happened. Despite some possible links between ultra-right wing circles the official relations with Russia remained cold and rather hostile. There were some openings toward China within 16(17)+1 format and bilateral links but traditional Polish Atlanticism and the US growing concern over China strategies toward the CEE region contributed to cautious relations. Ultimately it was Polish and Croatian initiative to build Three Sea Initiative in the region that has clear aims at countering Russian and Chinese influence in the region<sup>60</sup>. Therefore, when it comes to content of the relations with main EU adversaries there has been significant difference between Poland and Hungary as was when it came to relations with key global power – the US.

## 2.b. Crisis talk and war rhetoric

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focusing rather on ruling the party itself. There is little doubt however that he is controlling the governing formation.

<sup>54</sup> Aleks Szczerbiak, “Intuition or Grand Plan? Explaining Andrzej Duda's Rise to Prominence during the War in Ukraine,” EUROPP, May 17, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/05/17/intuition-or-grand-plan-explaining-andrzej-dudas-rise-to-prominence-during-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Higgins, “War in Ukraine Prompts a Political Makeover in Poland,” the New York Times, March 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/world/europe/poland-jaroslaw-kaczynski-ukraine-eu.html>.

<sup>58</sup> few example for pro-Russian gestures, like handing over spies; during the COVID crisis – sputnyik; faltörő kos - as Istrate et. al. (2021 dec

<sup>59</sup> Krekó and Enyedi, “Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism,” 49.

<sup>60</sup> Agnieszka Bieńczyk-Missala, “From Intermarium to the Three Seas Initiative – The Meanders of Poland's Foreign Policy in Central Europe,” *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 54, no. 1 (June 16, 2020): 95–115.



As we stated in the introduction populist politicians tend to portray themselves as saviours of the nation fighting for the people,. The fight – against enemies both outside and within<sup>62</sup> - justifies populists' ambitions to introduce wide-ranging systemic changes that go beyond simply governing within the limits of the existing political framework turning populist projects into regime building.

Orbán's populism has been anchored in warlike rhetorical tropes, War metaphors just like populism are based in an antagonistic relationship: crisis talk where "crisis" signifies conflict and war needs new enemies and threats. The migration crisis was a "blessing"<sup>63</sup> for CEE populists that offered an ideal enemy through a diffuse and therefore vague threat. Within the image of the migrant, a roster of new enemies could be introduced: the EU itself, US billionaire George Soros, civil society actors, local opposition, and many more. The narrative construction of crisis does not necessitate a physical component to the threat. In fact, hegemonic narratives on crisis can be more flexibly developed, maintained and adapted if the audience does not have direct experience with the threatening Other: like with the continued securitization of migration after the construction of militarized borders, or the moral panic promoted around "gender ideology" invading Hungarian kindergartens.<sup>65</sup> This war narrative was also linked to criticizing mistaken Western policies, in fact arguing that Fidesz was representing the true Europe, with Orbán's efforts of finding new allies within Europe being part of this alternative Christian Europe, especially once Fidesz could not count on the European People's Party's support.

In Poland the winning electoral campaign of 2015 was marked by the populist shift in PiS narratives in many instances borrowed from Orbán famously framed by Jarosław Kaczyński as "bringing Budapest to Warsaw"<sup>66</sup>. There were several key elements detected in this period that ZP and PiS skilfully implemented. Firstly, they concentrated focus on external threat and specifically on migration crisis and employed known tropes in constructing the enemy and threat, utilising anti-immigrant and Islamophobic narratives and strengthening its position as saviour of the nation from such threat. Secondly, similarly to Hungarian case in response to the multiple crises toppling the EU PiS's developed a narrative of a weak and failing EU unable to deal with crises. This was coupled with established narratives, present since 1990s at least, of a failing West due to its moral decay caused by departure of conservative values such as protection of family, anti-abortion or anti-LGBTQ+<sup>68</sup>. The tensions as regards the perception of normative order in Poland and the West was characterising right-wing and conservative circles since pre-enlargement period in Poland and the value alignment (such as for instance erasing capital punishment) were perceived as a significant cost that Poland had

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<sup>62</sup> This identification of the enemy both outside and within is an additional characteristic that complicates the definition of the 'foreign' in the case of populists.

<sup>63</sup> Csehi, "Neither Episodic, nor Destined to Failure? The Endurance of Hungarian Populism after 2010."

<sup>65</sup> As Kovács points out about the "gender war" in Hungary: "These are (...) imported threats in the Hungarian context" used the uphold the sentiment of "being under constant threat". Eszter Kovács, "Post-Socialist Conditions and the Orbán Government's Gender Politics between 2010-2019 in Hungary," in *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond*, ed. Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), 92.

<sup>66</sup> tvn24.pl, "'Przyjdzie Dzień, Że w Warszawie Będzie Budapeszt' - TVN24," tvn24.pl, October 9, 2011, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/przyjdzie-dzien-ze-w-warszawie-bedzie-budapeszt-ra186922-3535336>.

<sup>68</sup> Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik, "Symbolic Thickening of Public Culture and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland:," *East European Politics and Societies: And Cultures* 33, no. 2 (April 16, 2019): 435–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325419826691>.

to pay in order to benefit from the EU enlargement<sup>70</sup>. These formed a basis for more populist in tone and style othering of the EU (and the West) that was employed by ZP since 2015 with additional familiar (and similar to Hungary) tropes of attacking Brussels bureaucrats or fuelling anti-German sentiments. It is especially visible in Polish case that Germany – Polish significant other and former aggressor – is used by politicians from ZP (PiS and SP alike) to undermine the EU and unity depicting it as dominated by Germany and threatening to Poland and its national identity<sup>72</sup>.

In the Polish case the populist othering practices were deeply intertwined with concrete and developed ideological plan pursued by Jarosław Kaczyński and his partners that was based on strong statism with significant spendings for social benefits for vast groups of beneficiaries mixed with very conservative counterrevolution aimed at repositioning of country progressive elites, certain professional groups such as judges and curbing the media landscape. The strengthened, sovereign nation state was located in the center of the PiS and ZP programme. This soon led to significant clashes with the European institutions over the rule of law crisis resulted from the judicial overhaul by PiS initiated in 2015 including such elements as the reforms to the Constitutional Tribunal and public service broadcasters. In contrast to the Hungarian case however PiS was more strict and less ready to backtrack especially in ideologically loaded issues. Importantly, in both cases the core of conflicts with the EU and its institutions concerned the long-term strategies of new regime – of illiberal democracy as Victor Orbán coined it – building by organising an overhaul of key liberal democracy institutions. As Sadurski claims the main aim in legal reforms introduced by the PiS government was to dismantle the checks-and-balances system and create a new disciplinary regime allowing judges to be sanctioned based on the content of their ruling<sup>74</sup>.

Despite the differences, in both countries' populists' main objective was regime building with the major difference that whereas Hungary's populism operates without stable ideological underpinnings – which means that Orbán could relatively freely steer public opinion and was able to gradually mould his supporters to turn increasingly favourably to Russia and by 2018 his supporters so a greater threat in the EU than in Russia,<sup>76</sup> – the Polish populist regime had much firmer ideological convictions. This, put differently means, that whereas for Polish populists the ideology is a guide for the type of regime they desire to create in terms of norms and values, for Hungarian

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<sup>70</sup> Zdzisław Góra, Magdalena Mach, "Between Old Fears and New Challenges. The Polish Debate on Europe," in *European Stories: Intellectual Debates on Europe in National Contexts*, ed. J Lacroix and K Nikolaidis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>72</sup> David Cadier, "Populist Politics of Representation and Foreign Policy: Evidence from Poland," *Comparative European Politics* 2021 19:6 19, no. 6 (September 14, 2021): 703–21; David Cadier and Kacper Szulecki, "Populism, Historical Discourse and Foreign Policy: The Case of Poland's Law and Justice Government," *International Politics* 2020 57:6 57, no. 6 (June 19, 2020): 990–1011; Agnieszka K. Cianciara, "Between EU's Aspiring Saint and Disillusioned Rebel: Hegemonic Narrative and Counter-Narrative Production in Poland," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 30, no. 1 (2021): 84–96.

<sup>74</sup> Wojciech Sadurski, *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown, Poland's Constitutional Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>76</sup> "In that sense, Visnovitz and Jenne show that populist rhetoric neither amounts to 'cheap talk' nor functions as way to signal policy intent in line with constituents' preferences, since the Fidesz electorate's views on the EU, NATO, China or Russia had been at odds with that of their government." ...hardly so...

Destradi, S., Cadier, D. & Plegemann, J. Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction). *Comp Eur Polit* (2021).

populists the ideational elements are simply useful tools for the Fidesz elite. The term mafia-state used for Hungary captures this lack of Fidesz's ideology,<sup>77</sup> highlighting that the regime's priority is to guarantee the well-being of its leaders and its cronies and their firm grip on power, with nationalistic and sovereigntist narratives simply offering a decoration to make it marketable domestically.

### III. HUNGARY AND RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

In February 2022 Russia attacked its smaller and weaker neighbour. The massive and cruel war that ensued devastated the security architecture of the continent and shaken the sense of security of leaders and citizens alike. Two CEE populist governments responded differently to the unprecedented challenge.

The war started just six weeks before general elections were scheduled in Hungary. Many had the impression that the kind of manoeuvring, antagonistic, disruptive, and maverick foreign policy that characterized Hungary had to end with the EU facing its biggest international challenge for decades calling for a common stance. Some believed that the crisis would force Orbán to show his "true face",<sup>78</sup> that the manoeuvring had to end, and it was the time for the regime's lack of normative underpinnings to become blatantly visible. Especially those of his supporters who were sceptic about the pivot towards Russia could find a warning sign in the analogy between the outbreak of the war and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the challenge for Orbán was both domestic, that is, to win the elections even though Russia's War on Ukraine could bring up memories of 1956 for Hungarian voters; and international, that is, whether the balancing that characterized the regime for over a decade could continue under the new circumstances.

#### 3.1 Courting Russia before its war on Ukraine<sup>80</sup>

The Hungarian pivot to Russia following 2010 was unexpected. In 1989, during the transition Orbán became a nationally known politician when in his talk at the re-burial of Imre Nagy – the Prime Minister of the 1956 revolution - called on Soviet troops to leave the country. Even in 2007 Orbán was yet sceptic about Russia and said that he did not want Hungary to become the "happiest barrack of Gazprom," in reference to an old socialist era joke that claimed Hungary was the happiest barrack of the Soviet bloc.<sup>81</sup>

He changed his mind following a visit to the Kremlin in 2009. What caused the change is unclear, but there are a few likely candidates. First, Russia was seen as a source of funding at a time when the EU and the IMF were criticizing Orbán's economic policies and the former even suspended

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<sup>77</sup> Twenty-Five Sides of a Post-Communist Mafia State edited by Bálint Magyar, Julia Vasarhelyi

<sup>78</sup> Lucan Ahmad Way (2022) The Rebirth of the Liberal World Order? - Journal of Democracy Volume 33, Number 2, April 2022; <https://jelen.media/hirsarok/le-figaro-Orban-kenytelen-szembenezni-azzal-hogy-vege-a-pavatanacnak-2948>

<sup>79</sup> <https://24.hu/belfold/2022/03/07/orosz-ukrn-haboru-ner-Orban-viktor-ellentmondas/>

<sup>80</sup> We believe this longer section on Hungary's pivot to Russia is necessary, even if it makes the chapter somewhat 'imbalanced' as no similar account is given of Poland as there has been no such a pivot. It is only by discussing this in detail that it could be shown, that Orbán's the pivot to Russia was not limited, and showing sympathies with Russia go far beyond the securing of cheap oil and gas for Hungary.

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.szeretlekmagyarorszag.hu/szempont/Orban-es-putyin-kapcsolatanak-tortenete-realpolitikai-bolcsesseg-vagy-elvtelen-kompromisszum/>

funds for Hungary for three months in 2012. As the country was in dire financial conditions,<sup>82</sup> funds without any conditionality from Russia or China had an enormous appeal. (These were the times when Orbán likened EU's practices to that of Soviet times).<sup>83</sup> Second, it seemed reasonable to make friends with a likeminded leader of a self-styled illiberal state, whose policies in many aspects inspired Orbán in building his regime, from homophobic policies to acts against civil society.<sup>84</sup> Third, believes about the decline of the West inspired the government's "Eastern Opening" strategy.<sup>85</sup> Finally, fourth, better relations with Russia could be capitalized by creating a better bargaining position vis a vis the EU, as Orbán argued privately to his followers.<sup>86</sup>

The shift towards Russia required careful manoeuvring in memory politics, as Russia's image was negative among conservatives, with the memory of 1956 strongly alive. As Miklóssy<sup>87</sup> highlights, both Russian sensibilities had to be taken into consideration (about the Second World War and 1956), while for domestic supporters it was essential conserving the freedom-fighter image of Orbán and his government. The narrative juggling included both making Putin's Russia acceptable – in fact raising it as an appealing example of a strong man ruling its country– while the negative memories about Soviet aggression of 1956 were reconfigured, with an analogy made between the Soviet aggressors of 1956 and those in Europe aspiring for a deeper European integration at the present, with the task being for Fidesz and its followers to save Brussels from *Sovietization* (Orbán 2016).<sup>88</sup> Keeping the media under control played a crucial role in strengthening anti-Western and pro-Russian foreign-policy attitudes<sup>89</sup>. Although critical media still existed – so formally the norm of the freedom of speech was not violated – it only reached parts of the population – thus it hardly existed in substance.

Many believe that Orbán already had an action plan how to shape Hungarian politics – including the revamping of the constitution – in his favour, if he succeeded in the 2010 elections.<sup>90</sup> Still, the exact policy-moves were frequently made ad-hoc and were about seizing opportunities (For example, the conflict with the EU and IMF in 2012 were unforeseen and pushed Orbán closer to Putin). The fact that ideological elements seem to have arrived frequently post-hoc makes it clear that there was no clearcut blueprint how policy changes would be promoted. Claims about the

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<sup>82</sup> János Kornai. "Hungary's U-Turn". Society and Economy. In Central and Eastern Europe, Journal of the Corvinus University of Budapest 3:279-329; footnote 47; Bod Péter Ákos p.123 (in: International Debt. Economic, Financial, Monetary, Political and Regulatory Aspects, eds.: Constantine A. Stephanou); also: Abby Innes:

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2022/05/17/intuition-or-grand-plan-explaining-andrzej-dudas-rise-to-prominence-during-the-war-in-ukraine/>

<sup>83</sup> <https://euobserver.com/eu-political/115613>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/vladimir-putin-and-viktor-orbans-special-relationship/a-45512712>;

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39640474>

<sup>85</sup> Végh Zsuzsanna (2015) Hungary's "Eastern Opening" policy toward Russia, International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs, Vol. 24, No. 1-2, EUROPE AND RUSSIA (2015), pp. 47-65 / referring to: "Magyar külpolitika az uniós elnökség után," [Hungarian foreign policy after the EU presidency] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011.

<sup>86</sup> <https://444.hu/2018/03/11/orban-jatszomaja-feltarul-a-putyinnal-kiepitett-kapcsolat-titkos-tortenete>

<sup>87</sup> Katalin Miklóssy, "Memory and Leverage : Russia's History Policing and the Remembrance of 1956 in Hungary," in *Conservatism and Memory Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. Katalin Miklóssy and Markku Kangaspuro (London: Routledge, 2021), 110–29, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003251743-7>.

<sup>88</sup> Európa szabadságszerető népeinek ma az a feladatuk, hogy megmentse Brüsszelt az elszovjetesedéstől - <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedekek-publikaciok-interjuk/Orban-viktor-unnepi-beszede-az-1956-os-forradalom-60-evfordulojan>

<sup>89</sup> Krekó and Enyedi, "Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism," 47.

<sup>90</sup> Deák, András (2013) Hungarian Dances -The Origins and the Future of Viktor Orbán's Revolution, Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review, p.153.

decline of the West, illiberalism, anti-migration (and the protection of Christianity), identifying civil society actors as foreign agents and later anti-LGBTQ ideas came to the fore gradually, as these – and related policies - were the next tactical moves of regime building, always involving the identification of a new enemy to fight against. Still, all these, one way or another could be linked up with the country's pivot to Russia<sup>91</sup>, or were in fact copies of Russian policies (such as attacks against foreign funded activists,<sup>92</sup> or the anti-LGBTQ law that even the European Parliament found to be the copy of a similar Russian law<sup>93</sup>)

Despite the pivot to Russia, Orbán supported all the sanctions the EU introduced against Russia, although it always voiced its criticism,<sup>94</sup> While hostile moves were always balanced by making gestures to Russia, which included from not expelling Russian spies, to offering citizenship to members of the Russian elite, welcoming Putin in Budapest in 2015 (while the EU had its sanctions against Russia),<sup>95</sup> buying the Sputnik vaccine, allowing the International Investment Bank to have its centre in Hungary (the bank is suspected to be tied to Russian secret services).

Hungarian-Ukrainian relationship were strained before the war, not completely independently of Orbán making gestures to Russia. The actual conflict was about the Ukrainian education law that gave preference to the use of Ukrainian in education. Although the target of the law was Russian language, it also effected negatively the Hungarian minority living in the Western part of Ukraine. Criticizing this law Hungary vetoed Ukraine's high-level meetings and joint military exercises with NATO. Although this move could be seen to have been made purely out of concern for the well-being of the Hungarian minority, participants at the NATO discussions had the impression that the Hungarians real intention was rather to serve Russia than to protect the Hungarian minorities(Panyi 2020)<sup>98</sup> The opinion that Hungary served as Russia's battering ram in the EU and NATO were shared by many, with Russia using Hungary not necessarily for stalling sanctions, but for revealing EU's internal disagreements and its weakness (check Istrate et. al. (2021 dec).<sup>99</sup>

### 3.2. The outbreak of the War – the challenge for Orbán

The first challenge after the outbreak of the war for Orbán was to win the upcoming Hungarian national elections. The strategy he took was again the epitome of populism, revealing blatantly: “The emptiness of the populist discourse [that] allows its protagonists even to switch from one ideological programme to its opposite (Pavel 2021: 327).”<sup>100</sup> Whereas until the outbreak of the war Orbán's rule was about constantly identifying enemies, suddenly Orbán transformed himself into a dove of peace,

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<sup>91</sup> Keating, V.C., Kaczmarek, K. Conservative soft power: liberal soft power bias and the 'hidden' attraction of Russia. *J Int Relat Dev* 22, 1–27 (2019).

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/vladimir-putin-and-viktor-Orb%C3%A1n-s-special-relationship/a-45512712>

<sup>93</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/hungary/hu/aktualis/2021-hirek/2021-julius/az\\_europai-parlament-hevesen-tiltakozik-az-lmbtiq-ellenes-torveny-ellen.HTML](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/hungary/hu/aktualis/2021-hirek/2021-julius/az_europai-parlament-hevesen-tiltakozik-az-lmbtiq-ellenes-torveny-ellen.HTML)

<sup>94</sup> András Rácz (2021) Authoritarian Ties: The Case of Russia and Hungary, October 22, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/authoritarian-ties-case-russia-and-hungary>

<sup>95</sup> Mitchell A. Orenstein and R. Daniel KELEMEN (2017) TROJAN Horses in EU Foreign Policy, p.97. – although other EU states also acted as 'Russia's Trojan Horses'

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/bement-egy-tucat-diplomata-a-magyar-kulugybe-fesztult-vita-lett-belole-ukrajna-miatt/>

<sup>99</sup> Istrate Dominik, Takácsy Dorka, Krekó Péter (2021) FALTÖRŐ KOS AZ EU ELLEN? - Magyarország az orosz propagandisták szemével, at: [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/faltoro\\_kos\\_az\\_eu\\_ellen\\_2021\\_12.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/faltoro_kos_az_eu_ellen_2021_12.pdf)

<sup>100</sup> Afterword Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová, in: CENTRAL EUROPEAN CULTURE WARS: BEYOND POST-COMMUNISM AND POPULISM Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová, Ondřej Slačálek (eds.)

as the only actor to provide security opposed to the war-mongering opposition and Western allies. He said that “...if the opposition...] won, we could be certain that the next day arms shipments would start to Ukraine, gas and oil contracts would be terminated and Hungary would be ruined”<sup>101</sup>

Populist rhetoric worked and Fidesz won the elections with an overwhelming majority with the quote capturing two decisive aspects that defined Orbán’s rhetoric following Russia’s war on Ukraine. One element of this was to talk about peace, invoking people’s fear of war, promising to keep the country out of the war, while the second element referred to the country’s supply of energy, which was dominantly secured by Russia.

Hungary’s energy dependence on Russia was to a great extent Orbán’s making, as during his rule the country became even more reliant on Russian energy than before. Rising energy costs were, however, not simply about rising prices, because guaranteeing cheap energy was one of THE core messages of Orbán’s populism ever since he got on power, and thereby it had important symbolic qualities. But this needs to be explained a little bit in detail. Keeping utility prices low was one of the crucial messages of Orbán before the 2014 elections, when he declared the ‘battle of the utility bills’ (rezsiharc), protecting voters from rising energy prices.<sup>102</sup> The battle, however, was populism pure, because the narrative about government guaranteeing cheap energy prices for the people was questionable, because in reality Hungarians for many years paid more for energy than the market price.<sup>103</sup> Also, gaining control over the energy sector was crucial for Orbán’s regime building, thus one of the first moves of the newly elected Orbán government in 2010 was to bring the sector into state ownership, which in fact automatically meant putting the regime’s crony’s into positions, including deals with Russian partners.<sup>104</sup> Again, critics from Brussel and the subsequent infringement procedures in 2015 for the way energy prices were calculated only offered the opportunity for Orbán to turn Brussels into an enemy, for taking away the benefits of the *utility battle* from the people.<sup>105</sup>

Russia’s war against Ukraine was framed again,<sup>106</sup> with the EU making wrong choices by sanctioning Russia and undermining the government’s efforts to secure cheap utility prices for the people.<sup>107</sup> Hungary did not offer weapons to Ukraine and did not allow military equipment to be shipped to Ukraine directly through Hungarian territory. When Russia tried the pressure the EU by demanding payments for gas and oil in Rubel, Hungary first claimed that if that is what Russia wants, that is what Hungary would do (for which it received warnings from the EU, from Von der Leyen).<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> <https://index.hu/belfold/2022/04/02/Orban-marki-zay-haboru-es-valasztas-magyarorszagon/>

<sup>102</sup> Stefan Bouzarovski (2017) The European Energy Divide, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-69299-9\\_4](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-69299-9_4)

<sup>103</sup> <https://g7.hu/vallalat/20220421/brutalisan-dragan-jon-az-orosz-gaz-magyarorszagra/>  
<https://g7.hu/vallalat/20211001/most-latszik-igazan-miert-nem-csokkentette-a-kormany-meg-jobban-a-rezsit/>  
<https://24.hu/fn/gazdasag/2018/03/24/rezsicsokkent-es-energia-arszandek-szemfenyvesztes/>

<sup>104</sup> <https://mfor.hu/cikkek/befektetes/igy-epithette-ki-titokban-Orban-a-putyinhoz-fuzodo-kapcsolatat.html>

<sup>105</sup> <https://24.hu/fn/gazdasag/2018/03/24/rezsicsokkent-es-energia-arszandek-szemfenyvesztes/>

<sup>106</sup> Here a caveat is necessary. This is an ongoing process and refers to the first months of the war. Given the extremity of the situation with a parallel economic crisis unfolding (which was made partly by the war, but partly by Orbán’s populist economic policies before the election) it is impossible to foresee how events would unfold.

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.napi.hu/magyar-gazdasag/Orban-viktor-interju-2022-junius-10-energia-szankcio-oroszorszagon-haboru.754042.html>

<sup>108</sup> <https://index.hu/belfold/2022/04/08/haboru-oroszorszagon-szankciok-ursula-von-der-leyen-Orban-viktor-gaz-energia-rubel/>

Next, when the EU was planning to introduce sanctions on oil from Russia, Orbán said that Hungary would veto the sanction, arguing that these would have the effect of an ‘atomic bomb’ on the Hungarian economy. These could all be explained as rational moves by a leader of a country dependent on Russian energy imports. Yet, the same moves could also be interpreted as acts in favour of Russia, keeping-on the balancing between the EU and Russia just as before. While European leaders tried to convince Orbán to change his mind, Dmitry Medvedev (Russia’s Security Council Deputy), praised the wisdom of Orbán’s acts.<sup>109</sup> Double talk continued to such an extent that an observer watching Hungarian media noted the absurdity that: “*we condemn Russia’s aggression, while the public media looks as if its content was created in Moscow,*”<sup>110</sup> Thus, Orbán kept on manoeuvring, trying to secure EU funds while showing clear sympathies with Russia.

#### IV. POLAND AND THE UKRAIN CRISIS – BACK TO EUROPE?

For Polish foreign policy leaders, the situation was much clearer. The war posed an unprecedented threat, and the answer was to firstly “gather around the flag” and suspend domestic conflicts in the face of such a direct external threat and secondly, to repair and restore alliances, primarily with the US and NATO, but a lesser extend also with European partners within the EU.

Polish government did not hesitate long in how to interpret and position itself in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The reaction was resulting immediately in instinctive almost interpretation of the existential and threatening nature of the crisis – for Ukraine, for Poland, for Central and Eastern Europe, and Europe as a whole. The country witnessed not only immediate results of the war with millions of Ukrainians – mostly women and children - seeking refuge in Poland but also extraordinary in recent years unity of political elites, PiS and opposition alike in reacting to the Russian aggression. It was primarily based on widespread and rather uniform understanding of Russian motivations being of imperialistic nature recurring in the region in 1920s, 1940s and now and of which Poland was previously a victim. The instinctive almost reaction that “we will be the next” was not only the popular instinct but also the elites’ reaction. To whom you then turn in such a dark hour. Firstly, the deep layered of Polish foreign policy motivations and roles kicked in with strong Atlanticism and focus on the US and NATO response<sup>112</sup>. Since PiS government relations with the Joe Biden administration was not the smoothest – the decision was to engage in response President of the country Andrzej Duda, also linked to PiS but certainly representing its more moderate wing.<sup>113</sup> Duda became a key recipient of acknowledgments from country opposition as well as from US political actors. In the Ukraine crisis, Duda and his office -

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<sup>109</sup> <https://www.tylaz.net/2022/05/06/russia-praises-viktor-Orbán-for-opposing-eu-sanctions-against-russian-oil-medvedev-a-brave-step/>

<sup>110</sup> <https://24.hu/belfold/2022/03/07/orosz-ukrn-haboru-ner-Orbán-viktor-ellentmondas/>

<sup>112</sup> Chappell, L. (2012) *Germany, Poland and the Common Security and Defence Policy, Germany, Poland and the Common Security and Defence Policy*. Palgrave Macmillan UK; Zaborowski, M. (2019) ‘Poland: Nato’s Front Line State’, in *Security in Northern Europe: Deterrence, Defence and Dialogue*. Routledge, pp. 88–97.

<sup>113</sup> Since we know that the US government was warning European allies on Russian plans for aggression in the end of 2021 - the new light is shed on Duda’s decision to veto on 27th of December 2021 a meticulously prepared by PiS media law aimed at limiting the broadcast rights for private TV station TVN owned by American concern DiscoveryLex TVN. *Prezydent Andrzej Duda zawetował ustawę anty-TVN - relacja i komentarze ekspertów - TVN24* (no date). Available at: <https://tvn24.pl/polska/lex-tvn-prezydent-andrzej-duda-zawetowal-ustawe-anty-tvn-relacja-i-komentarze-ekspertow-5540366> (Accessed: 4 July 2022).

which in Polish for parliamentary cabinet system has rather strong prerogatives concerning foreign policy and significantly is a chief commander of Polish Army – became a key actor representing the state toward allies. This strategic move alone allowed to regain a position of key actor in Western alliance (both in NATO and the EU) and gave Poland a seat at many significant tables and political gatherings. Significantly however, that seat was filled by President and not by prime minister or minister of foreign affairs or defence (all of whom had its issues with Western partners originating from the previous clashes with the EU and US administration).

In the mending of relations with Europe also Jaroslaw Kaczynski took its role, by increasingly putting the emphasis on European solidarity. It seems that in PiS assessment the threat coming from Russia was multiple (be it a direct military threat, energy security crisis, long lasting economic consequences or further political destabilisation of the region) as well as in medium- and long-term, devastating for their rule and prospects in parliamentary elections in 2023. It is also important to note that since 2020 centrist Porozumienie left governing coalition and Kaczyński is perpetually engaged in stabilizing the ad hoc majority for his government (since PiS and SP are not having majority in Sejm). Furthermore, in current parliament PiS controls only lower chamber while Senate – that has a significant say in external relations – is controlled (by one vote) by opposition parties. It seems that Kaczyński usually focusing solely on domestic politics and being known of disregard (and lack of interest) for foreign policy also wanted to signal his position for growingly concerned domestic audiences. Although the crisis did not make EU-critical voices to fade away, the attempt was clear in taking a distance from pro-Kremlin European populists like Le Pen or Orbán, with whom Kaczynski used to try to create a common front to oppose the direction in which the EU was heading.<sup>115</sup> The dramatic events in Ukraine revealed a deeply rooted contradictions in PiS's approach to European integration. On the one hand, as stated above the formation was attacking the EU's elites and was attempting to construct an alliance with other Eurosceptics (even the most right-wing) primarily to promote a sovereignist vision of European integration focusing on economic aspects and limiting the impact of the EU on crucial areas of national sovereignty<sup>116</sup>. On the other hand, when it comes to security aspects the EU was perceived among PiS elites – albeit to a different degree – as a provider of some important attributes especially crucial for stabilising and securing eastern neighbourhood. Therefore, the criticism of EU efforts within its external relations was significant but not as much as other areas of European integration<sup>117</sup>.

In the meantime, government leadership maintained – mitigated but still visible – populist tropes aimed primarily against German and French leadership and their reactions toward Russia and hesitated aid to Ukraine. Prime Minister Morawiecki engaged in direct criticism of President Emmanuel Macron in the midst of presidential campaign in France, while criticism of Chancellor Scholtz is delivered daily by governmental actors. In the meantime the government was negotiating with the European Commission rule of law concerns particularly concerning removing the disciplinary

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<sup>115</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/world/europe/poland-jaroslaw-kaczynski-ukraine-eu.html>

<sup>116</sup> Góra M., Zielińska K (2022), Sovereignist narratives and European integration: does religion matter and how?, Manuscript under review.

<sup>117</sup> Góra, M. (2021) 'It's security stupid! Politicisation of the EU's relations with its neighbours', *European Security*, 30(3), pp. 439–463.



chamber in the Supreme Court that was positioned as a precondition of unlocking the New Generation Europe funds for Poland. Significantly, the moderated and accepted in principle by the EC proposal was issued by the presidential office again strengthening Duda's role as a centrist politician fixing the conflicts with key allies, engaging in a manoeuvring between pleasing the EU while also keeping its domestic allies on board. Currently, the consensus on that solution within ruling minority coalition is broke by SP politicians with Zbigniew Ziobro blackmailing the PiS leadership with pre-term elections.

It seems that in the situation of reality check when it comes to foreign policy and in circumstances bringing the international order to the most danger moment since the Second World War PiS decided to curb its populist rhetoric and through an institutional manoeuvre of pushing to the front PiS president representing more moderate and pro-Western stance regain a position of key western stakeholder and partner. At the same time, governmental actors are still engaged in othering some western partners, but it seems PiS leaders strategically silenced the most radical voices (within own ranks and on a political scene) for the sake of bigger aims of repairing relations with allies and strengthening the country's security guarantees. It is relevant to note that this may be a temporary strategy to suspend the populist attempts to regime changes described in the paragraphs above. It may also however be that within already heterogenous ranks of PiS the more moderate and centrist option prevails leading to abandoning the ultra-right wing coalition partners and seeking for still conservatist but more centrist partnership ahead of Autumn 2023 election (or the pre-term elections earlier).

The key observation is however that the existential nature of an external threat - imminent and so familiar and known to Poles – was a gamechanger determining a change in PiS's approach to foreign policy. For the past couple of years foreign and security policy – as in many other populist instances across the globe – was utilised for internal purposes and was a useful source of manufactured crises and repository of enemies useful in populist rhetoric. In February 2022 foreign and security policy issues were elevated to the front and became (again) responsible for safety and well-being of people, the nation and the country. It became an everyday concern for ordinary Poles and forced populists to reconsider previous strategies. One may conclude that in cases where populism is primarily a discursive articulation such as in the case of PiS it proves to useful in fair weather conditions but needs to be reconsidered while the storm hits.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we argued that CEE populists are in a particular position with their countries being member states of the EU, where the EU creates both a structural impediment, while also offers an enabling context where careful manoeuvring offers ample opportunities for populists to exploit, with the EU being ill-prepared to regulate those members violating its values. Although the context is similar, we argued that country specific characteristics play a defining role in how populists can act. Comparing Poland and Hungary we have highlighted that Poland's populists are more constrained in their manoeuvring both for ideological reasons (Hungarian populism is ideologically shallow), but

also for the domestic political context in which Polish populists are more in need to seek compromises.

Concerning their foreign policy, we argued that conflicts with their European peers offer an incentive for these actors to find allies and resources elsewhere, which they could use to buttress their rule, which goes beyond governing within the given institutional setting as they both aimed at radical changes domestically. Orbán's words clearly reflected this when he was talking about a '*revolution in the election booths*', following his triumph in 2010.<sup>118</sup> As Nadia Urbinati observes, populism "escapes generalization" as "its language and content are imbued with the political culture of the society in which it arises".<sup>119</sup> These specificities impact on foreign policies and foreign policy discourses as well, and differences most strikingly come to the fore at the time of external crisis, which crisis hit these two states with Russia's War in Ukraine.

At the time we are concluding this manuscript Russia's war against Ukraine has been going on for months. The war radically changed the context in the way CEE populists need to manoeuvre, turning foreign policy into a foremost priority, both directly, but also how to act together with the other EU states. Although problematic policies (both domestic and foreign) had created clashes for over a decade with the EU, the war made policies and sanctions against Russia the cornerstone of relations and here Poland and Hungary parted apart both in rhetoric and policy.

Poland invested in repairing its relations with Western partners, especially the US, and the President took the stage with a narrative to pass beyond differences and debates between Poland and the EU. This led to a split of roles between the President and the government that could keep on singing the populist note, again creating a form of manoeuvring. In Hungary populists changed their rhetoric and transformed their image of fighters battling the enemies of the people into doves of peace trying to avoid involvement in the war. The rhetoric remained as populist as before, with the EU and domestic opposition remaining to be 'stopped' from dragging the country into the war. Manoeuvring went on, which includes regularly challenging EU initiatives. Still, it needed to take place in a radically different environment. First, the war put a freeze to Polish-Hungarian populist-comradery, which means that Hungary cannot – or only conditionally – may count on Poland's support in the future. Second, as foreign policy is at the forefront and is imbued with urgency, thus former tactics of postponing issues and obscuring disagreements – like the legalizing of conflicts – are increasingly unfeasible options, especially as the ensuing crisis in Hungary made European funds promised to the country but kept on hold extremely desirable to secure. Finally, the fact that on foreign policy member states have the say makes the European Commission and Brussels less and less a suitable strawman to bash for inaction, although remains a target to be criticized. Still, the Polish example seem to have been inspiring, thus Hungary's new President took a critical tone against Russia (visiting Poland first to somewhat mend relations), while several high-level Fidesz politicians' words were resonating Russian propaganda.

For answering the core question of the volume concerning the link between FP and populism we believe that there is a reflexive relationship between populism and foreign policy, that is, there is no causal connection. While populism is used to make sense of and sell foreign policy moves, foreign

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<sup>118</sup> <https://444.hu/2015/05/02/jo-hir-Orbán-viktor-szerint-megiscsak-forradalom-volt-2010-es-14-kozott>

<sup>119</sup> Nadia Urbinati, "Political Theory of Populism," *Annual Review of Political Science* (Annual Reviews Inc., May 11, 2019), 4.

policy actions can be used symbolically to give ammunition to (domestic) populist discourses. Of the four models of FPF we found the 4<sup>th</sup> one most applicable to the region, although elements of the others could be identified. We highlighted that what make CEE populism distinct is that these are populists in power in a context where their countries as member states are tied, and as beneficiaries of EU funds are dependent on the EU. This created a conducive environment for manoeuvring, but also offered an ideal 'elite' in Brussels to be constantly criticized and to define the regime to protect the people against. The fact that the nature of the two populist regimes differ – with Poland's being more ideological and Hungary's more opportunistic – partially explains the divergence in their foreign policy.

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