

# Attack of the critics

## Metaphorical delegitimisation in Viktor Orbán's discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic

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This paper presents a case study of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's delegitimisation discourse on the European Union in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. We focused on how the EU and its member states were depicted metaphorically in PM Orbán's weekly radio interviews. Relying on the discourse dynamics approach, we identified the metaphorical expressions the PM used to legitimise the crisis management of the Hungarian government and delegitimise critical comment from international voices in the context of the European Union. Our results showed that supranational bodies were depicted as authority figures and this image was reinforced by the use of particular verbal motifs. Rhetorical ambiguity was also found regarding Western Europe, whereas the notion of friendship was propagated when referring to the relationship between Hungary and the Visegrád countries Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, delegitimisation, discourse dynamics approach, metaphorical language

### 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic presented a significant challenge to political actors. The initial uncertainty about the threat of the virus, the rising number of casualties, and the implementation of lockdowns were all difficult to communicate to the public. The pandemic also redefined the role of the European Union's institutions and member states, i.e., its responsibility in terms of managing the pandemic. The European Commission, for example, was criticised for its initial passive attitude towards the impending health and economic crisis (Bennett, this issue, 2022; Lichtenstein 2021). In turn, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, also denounced the crisis management approach of certain –

unnamed – member states in one of her speeches: “When Europe really needed to be there for each other, too many initially looked out for themselves. When Europe really needed an ‘all for one’ spirit, too many initially gave an ‘only for me’ response”.<sup>1</sup> Although von der Leyen avoided explicit negativity towards specific member states, Western European governments openly condemned Hungary’s emergency legislation because it allowed Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to rule by decree until the government decided that the virus crisis was over (Lichtenstein 2021). With the new circumstances presented by Covid-19 in terms of domestic (e.g., healthcare crisis) and foreign issues (e.g., the unilateral closure of borders; Lichtenstein 2021), the question arises how these conflicts are addressed in political discourse by key institutional actors within Europe. In this paper, we explore how Viktor Orbán made use of figurative language to talk about the European Union and its member states to Hungarian national audiences at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, and we speculate on potential implications for legitimisation/delegitimisation dynamics.

In line with Bennett (this issue, 2022), we consider legitimisation the discursive process through which institutions (including the EU and member states) establish their legitimacy. The opposite of legitimisation is delegitimisation (Chilton 2004). Consequently, delegitimisation involves challenging the legitimacy of institutions. Van Leeuwen (2007, 92) determined four main categories to analyse the legitimisation process in discourse: authorisation (reference to a person/entity with authority), moral evaluation (reference to values), rationalisation (reference to the aims of institutionalised social action), and mythopoesis (legitimisation through narratives; see Bennett, this issue, 2022). These categories were further expanded by Reyes (2011), who claimed that legitimisation can be achieved via the appeal to emotions by creating two groups: the “us-group”, to which the political actor belongs, and the “them-group”, which consists of the opposition to the political actor (Chilton 2004; Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). These two processes require distinct strategies: the legitimisation of the self implies the portrayal of a positive face (e.g., self-praise), whereas delegitimisation assigns a negative image to the other (e.g., blaming, scapegoating the other; Chilton 2004, 47). We explored which entities belong to the “us-group” and the “them-group” in Orbán’s communication and how these groups were portrayed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research therefore asks who or what is (de)legitimised and how.

To answer these questions, we investigate the metaphorical representation of the EU and member states. Analysing figurative language in politics is fruitful because metaphors are frequently exploited by politicians to make abstract

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1. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_20\\_532](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_532)

notions (such as supranational political institutions) more available to the general public (Mio 1997). More importantly, metaphors as persuasive devices can serve as means of legitimisation and delegitimation (Hellín-García 2013). BUILDING<sup>2</sup> as a source domain was shown to be a legitimising tool in Spanish political discourse. It was used in former Spanish prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's communication in the form POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS ARE BUILDING FOUNDATIONS, said in relation to the government's anti-terrorist initiative (Hellín-García 2013, 315). Zapatero contrasted the solid foundation of anti-terrorist measures with terrorism's lack of ground. Experiments involving a political protest in a fictional city showed that in the absence of competing images, the CIVIL DISORDER IS FIRE metaphor succeeded in legitimising police use of water cannons in multimodal news texts (Hart 2018).

To contribute to the literature, our study takes its data from transcripts of PM Orbán's weekly radio interviews on a public service radio station, Kossuth Rádió's morning programme *Jó reggelt, Magyarország* ("Good morning, Hungary") between 4 March 2020 and 27 November 2020. The results indicated that the PM primarily depicted the EU as an authority figure and portrayed Western European countries with much irony. However, neighbouring Central and Eastern European countries were introduced as allies in combating the Covid-19 pandemic. The positive attitude towards Central and Eastern Europe is possibly based on their similar position to Hungary within the EU and the fact that these countries include the members of the Visegrád Group, the alliance of the Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia within the EU. The aim of this grouping is to represent the interests of the four countries. Hence, our results provide a more nuanced understanding of the PM's crisis communication at the time of Covid-19 (Bene and Boda 2021) by demonstrating how he created ambivalence, legitimising the EU by referring to it within the authority frame and delegitimising it by creating a division between Eastern and Western EU members.

## 2. (De)legitimising the European Union in the rhetoric of Fidesz and PM Orbán

Hungary joined the European Union with the support of 83.76% of eligible voters on 1 May 2004. In 2020, approximately 85% of the voting population still favoured Hungary's EU membership, even though the relationship between the EU and

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2. In line with cognitive linguistic traditions, conceptual metaphors are marked with small capitals and metaphorical language use is marked with italics (Kövecses 2010).

the governing Fidesz party had always been ambivalent.<sup>3</sup> The Orbán-led Fidesz continues to have a “clear pro-European policy in practice and it has always supported the deepening of the European integration” (Dúró 2016, 44). At the same time, Batory (2008) characterised Fidesz’s political position between 2002 and 2006 as soft Eurosceptic by arguing that Fidesz often used “yes, but” stances in the EU accession referendum campaign in 2004. This strategy placed the party between the uncritically pro-EU parties and the extremely Eurosceptic political groups in Hungary (Batory 2008, 272). In this sense, Orbán’s articulation resembles the ambivalent discourse on Europe of many similar sovereignist or right-wing parties (see Maccaferri and Newth, this issue, 2022; Forchtner and Özvatan, this issue, 2022).

In the 2014 EU parliamentary campaign, Fidesz’s rhetoric changed significantly, and the party became openly hostile towards the EU political elite. According to Koller (2017, 172), the central message of the new strategy was to define Hungary as “us” while the EU (commonly referred to as “Brussels”) was framed as “them”. This alienation was further deepened by the subsequent migration crisis, which reached its peak in Hungary in the summer and autumn of 2015 (Bocskor 2018). The Hungarian government suggested that the European Union’s “liberal”, “cosmopolitan”, and “incompetent” elite should be blamed, as these ideologies made it impossible for the EU to defend itself against the migration crisis (Glied and Pap 2016). However, PM Orbán usually praised Hungarian people as “virtuous” and the Visegrád countries as “solid partners”. This contrast is continuously used to agitate against the EU elite and to delegitimise the claims of international voices about the issues of pluralism, rule of law, and media freedom in Hungary. Delegitimation manifests in various ways, including negative representation and character assassination of leading EU political figures such as Jean-Claude Juncker, Judith Sargentini, Rui Tavares, and Manfred Weber. It involves attacking the moral character and sanity of anyone who criticises the actions of the Orbán-led government. However, while the attitude of the Hungarian government towards the EU is generally negative, speculations about a “Huxit”<sup>4</sup> (Hungary’s exit from the European Union) have officially been rejected multiple times.

The confrontational rhetoric and the aggressive tone are products of the dominant political communication style in Hungary, which is built on an adversarial political culture (Szabó and Kiss 2012) and the maintenance of constant crisis (Körösényi et al. 2020). The antagonistic attitude to politics is also manifested in the fact that the structure of governmental communication at the time of

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3. Record Support for Hungarian EU Membership, says Medián Survey. hungarytoday.hu, December 9, 2020.

4. <https://lexiq.hu/huxit>

the pandemic changed little compared to the communication in “time of peace” (Bene and Boda 2021). While the government’s preferred topics of communication before the pandemic revolved around the fight against international interest groups’ interventions, the Covid-19 crisis required the adjustment of these themes to the new situation (Bene and Boda 2021). The images of crisis also manifested in Orbán’s metaphorical language at the time of the first wave of the pandemic. Based on the analysis of Orbán’s interviews and speeches between 4 March 2020 and 18 June 2020, Szabó found that most of his metaphorical language use (92%) was based on the domain of WAR. The images of war further deepened a sense of crisis in people, as he referred to the virus itself as the “enemy”, to hospitals as “front lines”, and to the measures against the virus as “battles” (Szabó 2020, 128).

### 3. Metaphors and political communication

The prevalence of metaphors in the context of politics is evidenced by the numerous studies on how political actors talk about the abstract topics of the economy (Benczes and Benczes 2018), society and nations (Musolff 2016), and even politics itself (Mio 1997; Semino 2008). Metaphors can function as persuasive devices because they can simplify the complex notions of politics, offer “solutions” to existing problems, and trigger emotions in the audience (Mio 1997). Metaphors are also reasoning devices, as they often imply a sequence of events and include “latent information” (Burgers et al. 2016, 4). Accordingly, portraying a vaccine against Covid-19 as a “weapon” implies that it can eliminate the enemy (in this case, the coronavirus) relatively quickly. The choice of source domains, which help us conceptualise the more abstract target domains, highlights certain aspects of the target domain (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003). In the example of the Covid-19 vaccine metaphor, the potential effectiveness of the vaccination is foregrounded, but the fact that reaching immunity takes time is backgrounded. Thus, by providing a “template for sense-making”, metaphors function as (de)legitimizing devices (Hart 2018). Since metaphorical language use transfers various connotations of the source word or phrase to the metaphorical target, it can be considered as a key strategic device in political discourse (Charteris-Black 2011). This is exemplified by the George W. Bush administration’s use of the term *tax relief* for tax cuts (Lakoff 2014). The use of *tax relief* evokes the TAXATION IS AN AFFLICTION conceptual metaphor, which frames taxation as a burden from which people should be relieved (Lakoff 2014). Furthermore, metaphorical language use allows for what Engel and Wodak (2013) refer to as “calculated ambivalence”, the formulation of two contradictory messages targeting different audiences. By way of illustration, Wodak (2015) analysed a 2010 election poster of the Hungarian

right-wing party Jobbik. The poster depicted a mosquito embedded in a stop sign with the text “Would you end parasitism?” The ambivalence of the poster is related to the possible reading of the abstract noun *parasitism*, as it fits into the NATION AS A BODY metaphor routinely conceptualising minorities as “parasites” who live off the nation (Wodak 2015).

In light of the dominance of metaphors of warfare in relation to illnesses, it is not surprising that the most prevalent metaphor during the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic was WAR (Musu 2020; Semino 2021; Szabó 2020; Wicke and Bolognesi 2020, 2021). The symbolism is particularly well-suited to address the pandemic because it is based on our physical experience: as we face an entity threatening our existence, we see the situation as a “struggle” and the intimidating entity as an “opponent” who we need to “defeat” (Semino 2021). Consequently, images of war may reinforce the seriousness of the pandemic, as the scenes of battles and soldiers may evoke strong emotions from addressees.

Another typical means of political communication is personification, which is viewed as a metaphor conceptualising non-human entities as human entities (Kövecses 2010). Personification generates an emotional response to the former because it activates the same feelings people have towards other people (Šarić 2015). In political communication, countries are often personified, and this manifests in their characterisation as having physical and mental states, for example (Šarić 2015). Thus, in the case of Viktor Orbán’s statement, the “mental state” of the country is personified as being in *shock* as in Example (1). Moreover, Example (2) shows that Hungary’s “physical state” was also referred to through personification. Thus, personification enables politicians to describe a country or any other entity (e.g., institutions, organisations, etc.) using human traits.

(1) *az első hullám sokként érte az egész világot, így Magyarországot is*  
‘the first wave *shocked* the whole world, including Hungary’<sup>5, 6</sup>

(2) *Nem engedhetjük meg, hogy a vírus újra megbénítsa Magyarországot.*  
‘We cannot let the virus *paralyse* Hungary again’<sup>7</sup>

Hungarian political communication frequently relies on personification to conceptualise the European Union. One example analysed by Benczes and Szabó (2020) was the personification of Brussels between 2015 and 2017, which as the administrative centre of the EU was present in contemporary political communication through the CAPITAL FOR GOVERNMENT metonymy (Brdar and Brdar-

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5. Jó reggelt Magyarország, 11 September 2020.

6. All translations and emphases are our own.

7. Jó reggelt Magyarország, 11 September 2020.

Szabó 2011). Four possible metaphorical scenarios were outlined regarding the portrayal of Brussels: *AUTHORITY FIGURE* (who acts in line with their role as an authority over member states), *PARTNER* (with the member states), *BULLY* (who abuses their power), and an *OPPONENT* (in a battle). The results indicated that Brussels (and through Brussels, the EU) was personified in most cases as an *AUTHORITY FIGURE*, followed by *PARTNER*, *BULLY*, and *OPPONENT*. In the present study, these conceptualisations served as a frame of reference to explore how the EU was depicted at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our dataset is not comparable with Benczes and Szabó's (2020), as our article involves the communication of a single actor, Viktor Orbán, while theirs investigated various governmental sources. Additionally, we do not claim that there is a direct relationship between the pandemic and the way the conceptualisations of the EU evolved. Instead, we offer a portrayal of the potential (de)legitimising dynamics from the first wave of the pandemic. Our point of departure is that as the language of war has become preeminent in communication about the pandemic, the *OPPONENT IN A BATTLE* scenario remains prevalent in Hungarian political communication. This idea is based on the so-called "pressure of coherence" concept, which means that "speakers try (and tend) to be coherent with various aspects of the communicative situation in the process of creating metaphorical ideas" (Kövecses 2009, 18).

#### 4. Corpus and methodology

The corpus in this study consisted of weekly interviews with PM Orbán on the morning show of the public broadcasting radio station in Hungary. These 30-minute interviews are conducted every Friday and the current issues of the week are discussed. The transcripts of the interviews are available on the prime minister's official website. The observed period was between 13 March 2020 (which marks the first interview after the first officially identified Covid-19 case in Hungary) and 27 November 2020. The corpus consisted of 78,500 words and 28 interviews.

To identify the metaphorical expressions in the transcripts, we relied on the discourse dynamics approach to metaphors (Cameron et al. 2009). The phrase "metaphorical expressions" indicates that we did not analyse individual words but considered multiword expressions, based on Charteris-Black's (2018, 219–220) assertion that metaphors can be found in collocations and phrases rather than in individual words in political communication. Thus, in the case of *military operation*, we did not count *military* and *operation* as separate examples of the *WAR* domain but as one unit. We did not search for predetermined metaphorical

expressions or domains, which ensured that we observed each metaphorical phrase found in the text. Following Cameron et al. (2009), we began by collecting each metaphorical word or phrase found in the interviews. This is illustrated by the word *battle plan* (“haditerv” in Hungarian) in Example (3).

- (3) *Na, most a magyar kormánynak most már van egy haditerve.*  
Well, now the Hungarian government already has a *battle plan*.<sup>8</sup>

According to the *Concise Explanatory Dictionary of Hungarian* (CEDH; Pusztai 2011), the primary meaning of *battle plan* is “the plan of military operations”. Therefore, *battle plan* was marked as metaphorical in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic since the discussion was not about an actual war or military operation (in which case *battle plan* would not be metaphorical). The identification of metaphorical expressions was followed by their labelling, namely, determining the underlying metaphor. Accordingly, at this point *battle plan* was labelled ACTION PLAN IS A BATTLE PLAN. The discourse dynamics approach is flexible in that it allows researchers to work with specific labels (e.g., ACTION PLAN IS A BATTLE PLAN) and general labels (e.g., THE ACTION AGAINST CORONAVIRUS IS WAR), depending on the purposes of the inquiry. Therefore, the categories were organised so that words or phrases belonging to the same domain constituted a common group (Cameron et al., 2009). Consequently, expressions such as *front line* or *fighting a battle* were grouped under the more general THE ACTION AGAINST CORONAVIRUS IS WAR metaphor. The identification and categorisation of metaphorical expressions enabled us to determine the main domains around which the prime minister built his communication concerning the Covid-19 pandemic and foreign affairs.

## 5. Viktor Orbán’s (de)legitimising rhetoric through metaphors

### 5.1 Allies and enemies in the war on Covid-19

We set out to explore the (de)legitimising strategies in PM Orbán’s use of metaphor with reference to the EU and its member states in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Altogether, we identified 86 metaphorical expressions related to European issues. Of these, 43 (50%) were connected to an aspect of Hungary’s foreign affairs related to the EU, while 43 (50%) were personifications, assigning human traits and activities to entities such as countries or the EU itself.

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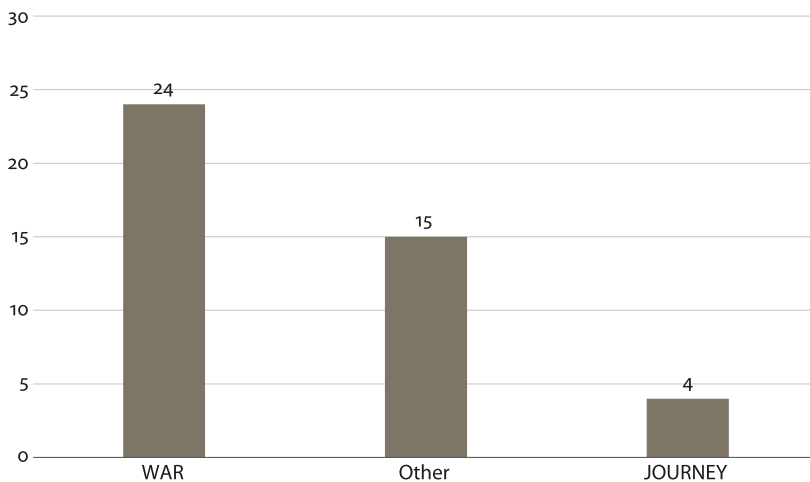
8. Jó reggelt Magyarország, 11 September 2020.



The 43 metaphorical words and phrases related to foreign affairs included the remarks Orbán made about the European Union, the Visegrád Group, and neighbouring countries in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. As revealed in Figure 1, the war metaphor was dominant in the discussion of European affairs (56%). We also designated a category (“Other”) for types with a low token frequency, which included expressions relating to the COMPETITION domain (Example 4) and the BUILDING domain (Example 5).

- (4) *Európában két egymással versengő nézet van a jövőről*  
‘there are two competing views about the future in Europe’<sup>9</sup>
- (5) *kialakult egy közép-európai építkezés lehetősége*  
‘the possibility of a Central European construction developed’<sup>10</sup>

This category comprised 35% of the overall metaphorical expressions concerning the topic of the European Union. Finally, the domain of JOURNEY appeared in 9% of the observed metaphorical expressions.



**Figure 1.** Metaphorical domains of European affairs in Viktor Orbán’s radio interviews, 4 March 2020–27 November 2020

First, the language of war appeared with reference to the debate surrounding the long-term EU budget to tackle the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was negotiated in the summer of 2020. This language manifested in phrases

9. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 24 July 2020.

10. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 21 August 2020.

such as the *battle at Brussels* (Example 6), the *beating off the attack* of a *liberal international brigade* (Example 7), and an *army of brainpower* (Example 8).

- (6) *a legutolsó brüsszeli csatában négy nap alatt mégiscsak hárommilliárd euróval, [...] növeltük meg azt az összeget, amit be tudunk vonni a magyar gazdaságba.*  
‘in the latest *battle at Brussels*, we increased the amount of money we can bring to the Hungarian economy by 3 billion euros [...] in four days’<sup>11</sup>
- (7) *Ha magyarul vagy közép-európaiul mondjuk, akkor azt mondanánk, hogy a magyar és a lengyel erők Brüsszelnél megállították a liberális nemzetközi brigádok támadását.*  
‘If we said it in Hungarian or in Central European, then we would say that the Hungarian and Polish forces beat off the attack of the *liberal international brigades* at Brussels’<sup>12</sup>
- (8) *de mögöttem ott szürkeállományból meg intelligenciából meg magyar találékonyaságból azért egy egész hadseregnyi áll ilyenkor*  
‘there is a whole *army* of brainpower, and intelligence, and Hungarian inventiveness standing beside me there’<sup>13</sup>

As Examples (6–8) demonstrate, Orbán metaphorically framed the whole negotiation process of the budget in terms of a war. In this war, the actual discussions are conceptualised as “battles” between nation-states, more specifically Hungary and other Central European countries, and the “liberal international brigades” operating in Brussels. Furthermore, a contrast was drawn between Hungary and its Central European allies, who fought for the same ideas in the European Union. Finally, the experts behind the negotiating table were portrayed as an “army”, which further deepens the idea that the prime minister goes into battle when he negotiates in Brussels. Thus, the war motif was strongly present (in 57% of the metaphorical expressions) in Viktor Orbán’s radio interviews regarding issues in connection with the European Union.

The second group we delineated consisted of metaphorical expressions involving the JOURNEY domain. Our results showed that Orbán’s journey metaphors focused on the starting point and the subsequent journey. The utterances were connected to his vision of migration policies, which diverges from the Western European/EU standpoint as shown in Example (9) and Example (10).

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11. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 31 July 2020.

12. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 24 July 2020.

13. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 24 July 2020.

- (9) *Nyugaton a helyzet rosszabb, ugyanis ott már ráléptek erre az ösvényre, és abból visszafordulni, nem is tudom, lehet-e egyáltalán.*  
 ‘The situation is worse in the West, as they have already *taken this path*, and I am not certain whether it is possible [for them] to turn back at all’<sup>14</sup>
- (10) *Tehát hiába fognak bennünket Brüsszelből nyomni, hiába zsarolnak, hiába erőszakoskodnak, mi nem fogunk arra az ösvényre lépni, amin ők haladnak, mert szerintünk az az ösvény nem való nekünk.*  
 ‘Thus, they will push us, blackmail us, bully us from Brussels in vain, we will not *take the path* they are following, because we think that that *path* is not right for us.’<sup>15</sup>

Orbán talked about possible “paths” that can be taken (in terms of migration policies). Even though the JOURNEY domain does not presuppose violence and opposing parties as the domain of WAR does, the prime minister noted that Western countries and “Brussels” were taking a different path to Hungary. Furthermore, highlighting that the situation is “worse in the West” can be considered a simultaneous act of self-praise and self-legitimation (Szabó and Kiss 2012). Hence, journey metaphors were also used to show the contrast between the European Union and Hungary.

## 5.2 Personification: Brussels and the member states

In addition to metaphors in the discourse surrounding foreign affairs in general, we focused on personification specifically. The decision to concentrate on personification was based on previous research showing that the political communication of the Hungarian government routinely conceptualises the EU (via Brussels) as a person (Benczes and Szabó 2020). Thus, we aimed to reveal whether the personification in the prime minister’s interviews reflected the tension with the EU. Additionally, we collected each instance of personification to map all the personified entities. Altogether, there were 43 personifications in the corpus. The following entities were personified: BRUSSELS (11 examples),<sup>16</sup> WESTERN EU STATES (13 examples), and HUNGARY and CENTRAL EUROPE (8 examples).<sup>17</sup> In the case of these metaphors, our focus was not on the ratio of the personification of each

14. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 27 November 2020.

15. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 30 October 2020.

16. We also included three hits which included the European Parliament, rather than Brussels in this category, (e.g., “European Parliament has just thought now”; Jó reggelt, Magyarország 27 November 2020) because they stand for the same entity.

17. The remaining 11 hits were of low token frequency or included countries outside of Europe, e.g., the United States.

entity (e.g., the European Union or Hungary) but the way these entities were depicted.

The first category we identified was the personification of the city of Brussels and the European Parliament. Within this category (and in line with Benczes and Szabó 2020), to reflect the ambivalence in the political rhetoric, we established which conceptualisation of Brussels and the European Parliament was the most prevalent, namely *AUTHORITY FIGURE*, *PARTNER*, *OPPONENT IN A BATTLE*, or *BULLY*. The results showed that within the observed period, Brussels and the European Parliament were most frequently conceptualised as *AUTHORITY FIGURE* (8 occurrences), followed by *BULLY* (2 occurrences) and *OPPONENT IN A BATTLE* (1 occurrence). The *PARTNER* conceptualisation did not appear in our corpus. These results confirm that the relationship between Fidesz and the EU is ambiguous and not always conflictual. Instead, Orbán highlighted Brussels' role and responsibility as a leader of the European Union. This is evident in Example (11).

- (11) *Én megértem Brüsszelnek azt a törekvését és ösztönrendszerét, hiszen mégiscsak alapvetően egy gazdasági közösségről van szó, hogy minél hamarabb újra akarja indítani a gazdaságot.*

'I understand *Brussels'* effort and system of instincts that they want to restart the economy as soon as possible, since it is [the EU] an economic community, basically'<sup>18</sup>

In this case, *Brussels* had the right to restart the economy, as it had the authority to do so. Authorisation is an example of legitimisation: a person (in this case, a personified institution) is considered a legitimate authority because of their status in an institution (van Leeuwen 2007, 94). This role of Brussels is in opposition with the *BULLY* scenario, which incorporates examples of Brussels abusing its power. Orbán encapsulated this notion in Example (12), referring to the negotiations about the EU's budget.

- (12) *Áll is a bál Brüsszellel egyébként.*

'Hell has been raised by *Brussels*, by the way'<sup>19</sup>

He explained that it was a complicated matter to restart the European economy, as there are many countries involved, which can lead to debates between Brussels and the member states. Orbán added that it was Brussels' idea to pour money into southern countries' economies and accept certain credit conditions in this connection, which was not in line with Hungarian people's will. Finally, Brussels was also portrayed as an *OPPONENT* (Example 13).

18. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 3 July 2020.

19. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 3 July 2020.

- (13) *Ezt Brüsszel megtámadta, mármint a bizottság, a brüsszeli bürokraták ezt megtámadták, és a brüsszeli bürokraták támadása oda vezetett, hogy most egy bíróság elé kell mennünk.*

‘Brussels attacked this, namely the Commission, the bureaucrats from Brussels attacked this, and the result of the attack of the Brussels bureaucrats is that we need to go to court now.’<sup>20</sup>

Example (13) refers to refugees’ application procedure to enter Hungary, as they need to apply for a permit in so-called external hotspots. Thus, they can enter Hungary once their application is approved. The EU also appeared as a BULLY and an OPPONENT in our corpus, implying that it occasionally oversteps the authority vested in it. Hence, a tension is created by the OPPONENT and BULLY portrayals, which are towards the delegitimising end of the scale (cf. Chilton 2004).

Orbán described the EU and various countries, mainly in Western Europe, as an AUTHORITY in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although he offered no exhaustive list of the countries that acted as AUTHORITY figures, he mentioned France and Germany. He also mentioned the UK, as they “gave an answer” to the economic challenges of the EU “because they left the Union”. Thus, Western Europe was portrayed as the “them-group” (as it did not include Hungary), and an AUTHORITY that is supposed to find a solution to the economic problems the European Union may face in the future. Orbán encapsulated this in Example (14).

- (14) *Most az igazság az, hogy az európai szintű választ a nagyfiúknak kell megtalálni.*

‘Now the truth is that the solution on a European level has to be found by the big boys.’<sup>21</sup>

According to the CEDH, the word *big boy* has a pejorative meaning in Hungarian. The word refers to an older son who is almost an adult and also to an inexperienced person suddenly promoted to a higher position at work (CEDH). Therefore, the conceptualisation of Western Europe is not based on the FAMILY domain. Rather, the expression *big boys* draws on the WORKPLACE domain, with the cognitive implications of a hierarchical structure (as *big boy* implies a promotion) and business goals. Nevertheless, Western European states do have authority over the EU, according to the corpus. Moreover, they can abuse their power and become a BULLY. This is shown in Example (15).

20. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 6 November 2020.

21. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 4 September 2020.

- (15) *Kik a legközelebbi nagyok, és azok a nagyok rá akarnak-e lépni a torkunkra, vagy nem akarnak?*  
'Who are the most immediate big [countries] and do they *want to step on our throat* or not?'<sup>22</sup>

The question was uttered from a historical perspective, as it referred to the first 850 years of Hungary and Hungarian politics when the country was a more powerful force in Europe. Finally, the topic of migration also surfaced in connection with the West, as seen in Example (16).

- (16) *Ha nem védik meg a saját polgáraikat, bizony bajba hozhatják a mieinket is, ez a helyzet.*  
'The thing is, if they do not *protect* their own citizens [from migrants], they can get ours in trouble too.'<sup>23</sup>

As Example (16) shows, the WAR domain appeared in connection with migration, as countries must "protect" their people from migrants.

In the majority of cases, the personification of Central European countries occurred through the domain of FRIENDSHIP (Example 17).

- (17) *A magyar külpolitika arra épül, mióta én vagyok érte felelős, hogy barátokat gyűjtünk a világban, tehát mi nem ellenségeket gyűjtünk, ezért nem is minősítgetünk senkit.*  
'Since I am responsible for it, Hungarian foreign politics is based on collecting *friends* in the world; thus, we are not collecting *enemies* and therefore, we are not carping at anyone.'<sup>24</sup>

The conceptualisation of certain countries as FRIENDS evokes the "us-group", as friends usually belong to one's inner circle. In the radio interview transcripts, these FRIENDS include the Visegrád Group countries and Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia. Therefore, the results suggest that Orbán considered Central European countries as Hungary's "friends", thereby separating the region from the rest of Europe.

In line with previous research, Orbán's metaphors personified Brussels as an AUTHORITY in most cases. Additionally, it was framed as a BULLY and an OPPOSITION, but the PARTNER scenario did not occur in the corpus. Our results suggest that in his radio interviews, Orbán attempted to create a division between Western and Central Europe and depicted the EU as an AUTHORITY, OPPONENT, and even a BULLY, but not as a PARTNER in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and

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22. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 21 August 2020.

23. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 30 October 2020.

24. Jó reggelt, Magyarország 6 November 2020.

the subsequent economic challenges. Moreover, the analysis of personifications in the interviews showed that Orbán spoke about two categories within the European Union: Western Europe (the “them-group”) and Central Europe (the “us-group”). The conceptualisation of the countries that belong to these groups was very different. Western countries appeared as entities that were supposed to solve particular challenges faced by the EU. Central European countries were portrayed as FRIENDS in the sense that foreign affairs linked to these countries were conceptualised within the FRIENDSHIP domain.

From the perspective of (de)legitimation, the results imply a tension of legitimisation and delegitimation in Orbán’s rhetoric. While he legitimised *Brussels* as an AUTHORITY, the BULLY and OPPONENT depictions cast doubt on the intentions of *Brussels*, which he implied may overstep its rights and even attack member states. A strong antagonism between different EU blocs can also be found in the texts, which may ultimately hinder the integration process. Whereas Western Europe was unambiguously portrayed as the “them-group”, Central Europe, including the V4 countries, was designated as the “us-group”. The “them-group” of the West was depicted ironically as the “big boys”, for example, and negativity can also be detected in accusations that the West is on the wrong path and cannot protect its citizens. However, the “us-group” is conceptualised as FRIENDS, a domain that generally has positive connotations. This divide within the EU is towards the delegitimising end of the spectrum (cf. Chilton 2004).

## 6. Conclusions

In this research, we explored the Hungarian PM’s discursive strategies for the (de)legitimation of the European Union in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. First, we observed the metaphors referring to EU affairs. The results indicated that the war metaphor was prevalent in the interviews, in line with the international trend of conceptualising the pandemic. However, war metaphors were not the only ones used to emphasise the differences between Hungary and Europe, as metaphors of a journey also highlighted the different paths taken by Hungary and Western Europe. Journey metaphors are conventional in political communication with reference to “leadership and political action” (Chilton 2004, 52). The conceptualisation of the JOURNEY domain in language rests on the physical experience of motion: it involves a starting point, the path that leads to a destination, and the direction of movement (Semino 2008, 92). Owing to its “self-propelled goal-oriented motion”, the JOURNEY domain is generally frequent in political communication (Koller and Semino 2009, 20). It seems that conflicts over fundamental political values are key to Orbán’s interpretation of the conflict-

ing roads taken by Hungary and Europe. One can observe a long-lasting competition to interpret the “right ways” of being European and doing European politics. In this debate, Orbán often claims that the EU has drifted from its roots and should return to its original path, which was defined by Christian democracy and respect for national sovereignty. Orbán’s metaphorical speeches align with his well-documented vision of altering the liberal and progressive interpretation of European values. The EU’s fundamental moral principles are very complex and not clearly defined, which invites critics to demand changes in the direction of EU policymaking by delegitimising opposing views and policies (Mos 2020).

We also analysed the personification of the European Union and EU states in the corpus to reveal who Hungary’s “allies” and the “enemies” were in the fight against Covid-19. Our results showed that Brussels was depicted as an **AUTHORITY FIGURE** rather than a **BULLY**, **OPPONENT**, or **PARTNER**. Whereas Benczes and Szabó (2020) found that the second most frequent conceptualisation of *Brussels* was within the **PARTNER** domain in Hungarian governmental communication, we found no example that referred to a partnership between the EU and its member states in Viktor Orbán’s radio interviews. Apart from the EU’s depiction as a legitimate authority, the main delegitimising narrative was that it was a power-abusing “bully” and an “opponent” with whom Hungary had to fight. Orbán accused the top EU politicians of increasing the tension within the European Union, claiming that instead of managing the pandemic and reducing the impact of the disease, they launched political attacks against Hungary and Poland “under the mask of the rule of law”. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic did not become a “common enemy”, leading to wider cooperation within the EU. The health crisis strengthened the adversarial political communication culture, not consensual communication.

Additionally, we explored the way member states of the EU were depicted. The analysis of metaphorical language revealed that, based on their shared position within the EU, Central European countries were seen as allies, in contrast to Western European members. The analysis of personification showed that Orbán conceptualised the relationship between Hungary and Central European member states as a **FRIENDSHIP**, whereas Western Europe was portrayed as having more authority and responsibility than the rest of the EU. Equating the building of foreign partnerships with making friends aligns with the simplifying function of metaphors in politics (Mio 1997). In the case of the relationship between Central European countries, the complex processes of building and maintaining foreign relations are conceptualised through the domain of **FRIENDSHIP**. The use of human relationships as source domains in metaphors is not new in politics: according to Lakoff (2002), US politics can be conceptualised in terms of the parent-child relationship, while Musolff (2010) showed that the relationships between states of the EU are framed as a marital relationship by the German and



British press. Thus, Orbán's language reflected a divide between the two regions of the EU, which may deepen the division of the two areas and hinder the European integration process.

Our research showed that the rhetoric of war and human relationships was used to highlight the divide between Hungary and the EU and Hungary and the West, while Hungary's friendship with Central European countries was emphasised. The results highlight the two sides of Orbán's communication: the EU is depicted as an *AUTHORITY* and, simultaneously, as an *OPPONENT* and a *BULLY*. Delegitimisation is also reflected in the metaphorical creation of a differentiated Europe, which undermines the EU's unity. Whereas the legitimisation of the "us-group" (Central Europe) is strengthened by the generally positive conceptualisation of Central European countries as *FRIENDS*, the West is delegitimised by irony (being referred to as "big boys", for example) and weakness (as it cannot protect its citizens). As to why Orbán represented the EU and Western countries in a way that acknowledged their authority but also criticised them, the answer may lie in the notion of calculated ambivalence as mentioned in Section 3 (Engel and Wodak 2013; Wodak 2015). The radio interviews are addressed to a broad audience, and Orbán therefore needs to refute the idea of breaking away from the EU. However, with the *BULLY* and *OPPONENT* metaphors, he also appears as a protector of national sovereignty, which fits the government's nationalist rhetoric.

These findings support similar insights advanced in other studies of this issue. For example, while the abstract idea of Europe as a supranational arrangement is generally supported and the EU is invested with authority to an extent that legitimises domestic actors (Beciu and Lazar, this issue, 2022), a clear discursive contestation emerges around perceived power asymmetries between member states whether that be the North/South (Filardo-Llamas and Perales, this issue, 2022) or the West/East divide as we have highlighted.

It is noteworthy that ambiguous but still controversial communication involving legitimising and delegitimising can be a successful medium. It seems that ambivalence and conflict-generation are effective due to the contingent nature of politics (Körösenyi et al., 2016). In a crisis situation such as the Covid-19 epidemic, when there is an extraordinarily high level of contingency and uncertainty, political leaders tend to send messages with open meanings and stir controversy to maintain their agency (Körösenyi et al., 2020). The strategic combination of ambivalence and conflictual language serves multiple purposes. On the one hand, it tests the limit of acceptable rhetoric and the reception of the messages (Engel and Wodak 2013). On the other hand, it allows policy shifts and discursive manoeuvres without losing the agitated tonality that is believed necessary to keep Fidesz's political camp together. However, in other European crises, the language of ambivalence has played out differently. In the case of Brexit, for example, it

arose from an intra-party struggle over the idea of Europe, and it effectively paved the way for the UK's departure from the EU while leading the Labour Party to a major electoral defeat (Zappettini, this issue, 2022). Further research is therefore needed to assess whether other political leaders use the fusion of ambivalent figurative language and controversy, or if it is peculiar to Viktor Orbán's discourses.

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