

Bordering and Crisis Narratives to Illiberal Ends: The Politics of Reassurance in Viktor Orbán's Hungary

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This paper draws lessons from security and populism studies to theorize how right-wing populism utilizes borders as a symbolic resource in crisis narratives to clearly frame an Us and a threatening Them. By analyzing the Hungarian Orbán regime's evolving rhetoric on borders, the paper illustrates how populists employ crisis narratives not to mitigate, but exacerbate ontological insecurities, and thereby facilitate de-democratization by (re)shaping voter attitudes. The paper suggests that populists-in-power rely on crisis and bordering narratives beyond voter mobilization: such narratives are in fact designed to legitimize and affirm illiberal practices that undermine liberal democracy itself, and contribute to regime building. Border crises, and crisis politics hence become a template for the manipulation of individuals' security-of-being, and thereby a tool in the politics of reassurance and control at the broader, societal level.

Keywords: bordering, populism, crisis narratives, Hungary, migration, de-democratization

1. Introduction

Populist actors thrive on crises: they both capitalize on structural conditions perceived as crisis, and are actively triggering crises through discourse (Moffitt 2014). One of the most emblematic aspects of right-wing populist crisis talk is a sovereigntist bordering discourse about the need for a return of state borders, both as material protection for the people and symbolic barrier to regain state sovereignty. Right-wing populist bordering narratives provide reassuring, reified dichotomies of in/out, order/disorder, security/threat, and (re)create the imagined community within these borders (Brubaker 2020; Kallis 2018; Lamour and Varga 2017). Secure state borders thus become co-constitutive of state sovereignty and can provide ontological *security* as the People "take back control" over national borders. Meanwhile, constructed crises around threatened borders create ontological *insecurity* through apocalyptic visions of imminent danger, while offering the populist's agenda as the only sensible solution. In both cases, the border becomes the stage where sovereignty-as-control and self-determination can be enacted. Since populists frame themselves as representatives of the People's sovereignty, borders for right-wing populism are also co-constitutive

of the political agency of the populist leader (Richardson 2020), who can demonstrate their ability to act (in the Schmittian sense) as a protector of ethnic, cultural, and civilizational boundaries.

This paper draws on lessons from security and populism studies to explore the following research question: how does right-wing populism utilize borders as a symbolic resource in crisis narratives? Using the Hungarian Orbán regime's evolving rhetoric on borders the paper illustrates how populists employ crisis narratives not to mitigate, but exacerbate ontological insecurities, and thereby legitimize illiberal practices. The manipulation of ontological insecurities is not unique to the Orbán government (see e.g. Homolar and Scholz 2019; Béland 2020; Merino and Kinnwall 2023), neither is the symbolic use of borders and sovereigntist tropes (see e.g. Baldini, Bressanelli, and Gianfreda 2019; Meislova and Buckledee 2021; Cooper, Perkins, and Rumford 2016). Nevertheless, the paper suggests that Orbán's Hungary can still be used as a "laboratory case" for investigating the interlinkages of bordering, ontological security, illiberalism, and nationalist populism in uniquely interesting ways.

First, the specific content of right-wing populist bordering discourses varies across issues and contexts. One of the most crucial differentiating features across these discourses is whether the populist is speaking from power or opposition. Though the majority of case studies on contemporary European right-wing populism do not emphasize this, there is still an ontological difference between the populist in power and the populist in opposition (Casaglia et al. 2020; Bartha, Boda, and Szikra 2020). Once the populist has been in power for a number of years, it namely becomes increasingly difficult to maintain populism's signature anti-elitism without new elite Others. Orbán, as the longest serving populist head of government in Europe, presents a perfect target for investigating the kind of adaptive anti-elitist discourse that populists in power mobilize to maintain legitimacy.

Second, the Hungarian case illustrates that securitized borders, sovereigntism, and nationalist populism do not always readily coalesce: where state borders and historical borders that connect the national community do not overlap, *nationalist* and *populist* discourses often clash. Here, national borders are contradictory: on the one hand, they act as a sites "where categories of belonging and becoming are questioned and remade" (Richardson 2020, 44); in a dramatized conflict between sovereigntist forces and threatening migrants. Yet on the other hand, current state borders are also spatialized artefacts of historical trauma (the dissolution of the Kingdom of Hungary after WWI) that separate politically (Waterbury 2010) and symbolically (Pogonyi 2015) important kin-communities in neighboring states from the Hungarian kin-state (Szalai and Kopper 2020; Scott 2018; Merabishvili 2022).

This dual paradox, i.e., the clash between nationalist and sovereignist discourses and the adaptive anti-elitism of populism-in-power, presents a unique problem for Orbán's bordering narratives. On the one hand, borders are obstacles that need to be overcome since Orbán's nationalism emphasizes the need for national unification. For Orbán, "only the state has borders, the nation has none" (Orbán 2020h), so state borders are in essence anti-nationalist. On the other hand, however, securitized, and militarized borders require a more limited framing of national territory, one that is more in line with those very same state borders that divide the expanded national territory that the nationalist rhetoric embodies.

The paper makes two interrelated arguments. First, it departs from the observation that the dual paradox creates a constant need for a flexible and rapidly adaptable (re-)bordering narrative in different territorial contexts, which highlights the "chameleonic nature" of populism (Taggart 2000). The paper then argues that borders are a crucial component of a constantly evolving "mega-narrative"—a narrative that structures and frames narratives and imaginaries (Krasteva 2020)—of crisis and war with a declining West. Hungary's borders create consistency in the mega-narrative as they are reimagined to encapsulate identities on multiple scales. The dynamic rescaling and reimagining of borders then offer a solution to the paradox of transnationalism by offering concentric spatialized identities that incorporate both kinstate and kin-communities. Borders in this symbolic sense also enable the vertical othering of new elites that threaten these borders, supplying enemies to the populist in power.

The second argument that the paper makes concerns the practical use of said bordering narratives. Crisis narratives, crisis governance, and a need for the reaffirmation of charismatic legitimacy have become integral to the Orbán regime and are routinely used to legitimize the use of "unorthodox" policies, and the development of a uniquely Hungarian "national path". The paper demonstrates that the above flexible, multi-scalar bordering narrative is central when Orbán instrumentalizes external crises like Russia's war on Ukraine (Kopper, Szalai, and Góra 2023), but also when he creates endogenous crises around securitized borders. Bordering in this sense transcends the issue of borders, migration, and sovereignty as it becomes a template for the discursive manipulation of individuals' security-of-being, and thereby a tool in the politics of fear at the broader societal level. The goal of Orbán's bordering discourse is therefore not just about representing the antagonistic power-geometries involving the People, Brussels elites, and migrants struggling on the issue of human flow mobility. It is equally a discursive strategy revealing his struggle for power/control in Hungary as a political space. This control induces the spreading and acceptance of illiberal values among voters hence the continued antagonism and articulation of tensions in space at different spatial scales.

The paper illustrates the logic of bordering narratives as instruments of control and as legitimizing tools for illiberal practices through a framing analysis (Goffman 1974; Entman 1993) of Orbán's public response to rule of law-based criticism that his government received throughout 2020 for the use of emergency powers during the pandemic, anti-civil society legislation, human rights violations at the border, and for the mishandling of EU funds. The analysis traces the instrumental, symbolic use of borders in Orbán's framing through a corpus that consists of transcripts of the PM's speeches and interviews from early 2020 until the acceptance of rule of law conditionality regulation on 16 December 2020. Special emphasis is placed on three stages where the PM maintains proximity to the People (Müller 2016): recurring symbolic speeches on special occasions (most notably the commemorations of the 23 October 1956 uprising), Orbán's annual appearance at the Băile Tușnad festival in Transylvania, and a weekly interview on state radio.

The paper is organized into two main parts along the two interrelated arguments: section two discusses the Hungarian PM's evolving mega-narrative on a hostile, declining West, focusing on how this narrative is constantly expanded to establish consistency across diverse issues, but also to navigate the aforementioned dual paradox. Meanwhile, the third section illustrates the use of bordering narratives as legitimizing tools for illiberal practices in action through a case study of Orbán's framing of the 2020 debate on rule of law conditionality in the EU, which threatened to become the first practically effective European tool to control Orbán's politics and hinder further de-democratization. The fourth, and final section offers concluding remarks.

2. Navigating the dual paradox: Vertical othering and the scalar expansion of borders

After more than a decade in power, crisis talk and the crisis governance it enables have become part and parcel of Orbán's regime. The domestic political agenda is continuously framed by his conspiratorial crisis narratives that speak of cultural and demographic survival, clandestine global networks, a scheming George Soros, corrupt bureaucrats, conspiring great powers, traitorous "left-liberal" Hungarian politicians, and "fake NGOs". He "taps into the Romance of the Hungarian soul" (Fekete 2016, 40) and builds on collective narcissism as he invokes images of past national greatness where Hungarians appeared as protectors of Europe against foreign Others (Mongolians, Turks, Soviets), only to be betrayed and abandoned by those they protected. All this othering couched in terms like "illiberalism", "the Hungarian way", or the "Christian national idea" (Brubaker 2017) that are meant to offer ontological security through biographical continuity.

Orbán nests his crisis narratives into an evolving mega-narrative about "the end of the modern West" that suggests that Hungary's geopolitical position has radically changed because Western

institutions, most importantly the European Union, are no longer able to provide answers to “the historical challenges that Europe is facing” (Orbán 2013). This mega-narrative received a crucial update when migration became its central theme in 2015. Orbán claims that Western institutions are failing because of inapt leadership, Western elites’ deafness to the plight of ‘the People’, and a “progressive ideology” that underplays global challenges. Meanwhile, Orbán is aware of the need for a new direction, yet any action he takes is hindered by the opposition in Western elites who act against the will of the (European) People, and are therefore anti-democratic. In response, Orbán’s governance becomes a “freedom fight” against the declining, Liberal, decadent, and increasingly imperialistic West as the Leader responds to a historic call to action and guides ‘the People’ on a unique Hungarian “national path”.

Under the storyline of a “national freedom fight”, Orbán tells a tale about Western elites’ continued political attacks on Hungary. Meanwhile, every contentious policy, every anti-democratic measure can be framed as just another necessary tool to preserve national independence and ensure cultural survival. The narrative presents identities as a multi-scalar Russian nesting doll: attacks target Hungarian sovereignty, but they do so because Hungary heads a group of “true European” states (Central and Eastern Europe [CEE], but mostly Kaczyński’s Poland) that embody and protect “true European values”. With Western Europe under the control of Liberal elites, this group of states also needs to represent the European People as a whole.

This jump from national to regional to European builds on the success of the anti-immigration campaign, and synthesizes two logics. First, Orbán capitalizes on fears of migrants and shifts these towards “European Liberal elites” and “EU bureaucrats” as he re-characterizes these spaces in civilizational terms. Hungary becomes the protector of European civilization, understood as Christian (anti-Muslim), and militarizing national borders becomes a civilizational mission (Brubaker 2017; Richardson 2020; Scott 2018; Merabishvili 2022). Meanwhile, the narrative also moves the focus from migration proper to *political* threats as it turns migrants and refugees from subjects into objects that elite Others use instrumentally.

Second, the shift has equally been facilitated by growing disillusionment with EU accession in the “new member states” (Krekó and Enyedi 2018; Krastev and Holmes 2020). Orbán stokes these negative sentiments through an identity politics of recognition (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). As a populist of the semi-periphery of the liberal order Orbán can draw on resentment towards the status quo as it is now clear that attempts to move up in a Western-dominated hierarchy through assimilation cannot achieve the desired level recognition, as it was in the case with CEE state’s accession to and membership in the European Union. This idea of an open rejection of a passive, secondary status within the EU is fused with the civilizational mission that Hungary gained in 2015, or as Orbán

put it: “thirty years ago we thought Europe was our future. Now we think that we are the future of Europe” (Orbán 2018b). On the other hand, semi-periphery populists can also make claims that echo those of right-wing populists of the Western core about “taking back control” from progressive elites that favor out-groups like migrants at the detriment of the People (cf. Scott 2018; Brubaker 2020). Here, European integration becomes forceful assimilation by a “European Empire”, and invites open resistance.

Since 2015, this gradually updated mega-narrative could be mobilized to resolve the aforementioned dual paradox by expanding populism’s vertical othering to new Elite Others (EU bureaucrats, “liberal elites”, and transnational networks), and by respatializing the referent object of security from the transnation-separating national borders of Hungary to the borders of (Central and Eastern) Europe. This gradual scalar expansion has not been unidirectional: the PM still crosses the three scales (national, regional and European) depending on the context.

Within the mega-narrative borders remain cohesive as Orbán continuously rewrites identities as he links scale, region and boundaries (both physical and cultural). Notably, the current system of narrative boundaries has moved beyond the dichotomy that Orbán utilized to turn Hungary’s borders into those of “European-Christian civilization” to legitimize the erection of the border fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border against a Muslim cultural-civilizational threat (see Brubaker 2017; Richardson 2020; Lamour and Varga 2017; Lamour 2022). The new iteration of Orbán’s bordering narrative still relies on civilizational tropes, but moves those across three different scales (domestic, regional, and European), and links these with sovereigntist tropes about taking back control.

The idea of a civilizational mission, and the perception of misrecognition and humiliation by a liberal “core” of Europe are synthesized through a storyline of heroism and betrayal building on collective narcissism, an “enduring belief and a feeling of emotional resentment that our own group (the in-group) is unfairly treated and insufficiently recognized, despite having exceptional qualities that should entitle it to privileged treatment” (Forgas and Lantos 2020, 269). In the Hungarian case this translates into narratives about Hungarian underdogs fighting a larger foe (migration, “globalist networks”, COVID-19 etc.) to protect all Europeans, only to be betrayed/abandoned by them. This narcissistic exceptionalism is invoked through historical analogies that emphasize Hungary’s position as a vanguard of Christian Europe against the Ottomans, and through the analogy of Hungary’s resistance to the Soviet Union in the 1956 revolution and its subsequent “betrayal” by the West. Common to these narratives is that they emphasize Hungary’s borders, and Hungary *as a border*. This self-styled protective role itself suggests a need for strong borders, which in turn are symbolized by the border fence itself, a contemporary version of Hungary’s 15th century system of fortresses against the Ottomans. The fence thereby acts as a securitizing tool: rather than a reactive policy

response to a securitized threat, it is a non-discursive tool that itself *securitizes* the border (Balzacq 2007).

According to the mega-narrative, ongoing attacks on Hungary and its allies take migrants—now mere objects—as its primary weapon. Every criticism, every condemnation that Orbán and his government receive is merely a political attack aimed at forcing migration on Hungary to reshape its identity. Enemies exist on both the national and EU. European “left-liberal forces” or “Brussels elites” are *both* incompetent accessories to the original invasion of migrants (the “migration crisis”) across Hungary’s borders, and are actively complicit ideologues who welcome and further promote this process. Together with civil society actors of the “Soros network” they seek to capitalize on the crisis in order to gain new voters, weaken Christian culture, and thereby dominate the EU (Merabishvili 2020, 59–60). These enemies are both responsible for Europe’s continued crisis of borders and are the antithesis of what Hungary through its Leader represents: they are “post-Christian” and “post-national” (Orbán 2018a).

The narrative then depicts European politics as a never-ending political struggle about migration between “migrant states” (*bevándorlóország*) and “anti-migration states” that will “decide the future of Europe”. According to Orbán, major events in today’s Europe can be understood from this point of departure, that there are those who support migration, and those who oppose migration (Orbán 2018d). Since the first group dominates the European Union, the EU’s goal now is to infringe on the sovereignty of nation states. The Union thereby turns into a tyrannical “multicultural empire”, akin to the Habsburg Empire or the Soviet Union—both external Others that victimized Hungarians.

Though Islam has been historically a threat, Orbán thus suggests that now the threat comes from the West through its ideology, its meddling into domestic affairs, its stance against state borders in support of migration, its infiltration of Hungary through local proxies (i.e. Orbán’s parliamentary opposition and civil society), and its imperialism. Thus, after turning most Hungarians against migrants, the narrative can build on this rejection to paint critics of Orbán’s illiberal politics negatively, as migration-supporting elites who need to be resisted on a daily basis. Due to infiltration, this “migration conflict” (Orbán 2018c) also requires a constant search for traitors, moles, and internal enemies of the People, which establishes continuity in Orbán’s othering of his opposition. Crucially, since millions of migrants exert constant pressure on Hungary’s borders, this war can never be decisively won, and each battle poses another, increasingly dangerous win or lose everything scenario, since what saw in 2015 “was just the warmup” (Orbán 2015).

With the rescaling of both the threat and the referent object, the mega-narrative circumvents the aforementioned tension between a Westphalian security logic and the logic of transnationalism.

Within the vertically expanded spatial narrative the Hungarian border, represented by the fence, remains the central referent object: an instrument of discursive ordering and differentiation between Us and Them on multiple scales. So even though the border fence separates physically, it unifies culturally for both the Hungarian transnation and “the European People”. The fence thus remains a vivid illustration of bordered spatiality that can be employed to reify space and dramatize crisis on all three scales. For Hungarians, the rhetorical invocation and omnipresent imagery of barbed wire, guard towers, patrolling soldiers, roaming “border hunter” (*határvadász*) paramilitaries, and groups of non-white migrants become part of the everyday. On the European level, the object of security is no longer Hungary alone, but Europe as a whole, including its many distinct nation states. Hence national borders became the site of contestation between Orbán’s sovereignist vision of “a Europe of nation states”, and the “liberal” vision of multiculturalist Europe that welcomes migrants and refugees.

3. Legitimizing illiberalism: Rule of law conditionality as political attack

Throughout the past thirteen years Orbán has received countless criticisms about his government’s anti-democratic policies. Criticism from the EU received new impetus with the 2020 negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) that also included the creation of the EU’s post-pandemic economic recovery package (NGEU). These negotiations were dominated by a new instrument proposed by the European Parliament that protects the budget in cases when “breaches of the rule of law principles affect or risk affecting the EU financial interests” (European Commission 2022), allowing the EU to take preventive measures, including suspension of payments. Orbán’s framing of rule of law-based criticism in 2020 highlights how bordering narratives embedded in the mega-narrative on malevolent Liberal elites could be utilized to reframe concerns about the state of Hungarian democracy as a political attack on sovereignty, and thereby affirm illiberal practices.

Throughout the debate Orbán claimed that, since Hungary is a flourishing democracy, rule of law concerns cannot be the subject of debate. He thus rejected all criticism as “political” and “ideological” (Orbán 2020i), a “well-coordinated attack” that is also “irresponsible” because it detracts from pandemic mitigation. (Orbán 2020b). The PM framed the pandemic as a war where Hungarians are the best at fighting, are winning, and therefore should be seen as a role model all across Europe. This exceptionality served as the starting point for the framing of economic recovery (helping others) and rule of law conditionality (betrayal and political attack) along the logic of collective narcissistic historical narratives about a Hungary betrayed by the very (Western) Europeans it selflessly protects at its borders.

The mega-narrative of an ongoing war with Western elites once again gave a sense of constant crisis where failure would be catastrophic. With these heightened stakes, the search for enemies—both internal and external—needs to continue. Opponents become enemies that cannot be reasoned with, and the conflict cannot be ended short of victory. This ideological struggle also suggests a secret enemy agenda that only Orbán could uncover: “Brussels” is not truly concerned with the rule of law, but with the forced ideological conversion of pure, Hungary-led CEE. This East-West dichotomy is borrowed from the mega-frame and builds both on exceptionalism and resentment towards secondary status within the liberal European order. Meanwhile the idea of a continuous migration-centered conflict of borders establishes links to diverse policy issues, offers ready-made framing, assigns blame, (re)identifies enemies, and paints the PM as the wartime leader.

In the investigated time period, the first invocation of the above East-West antagonism came with the January 2020 vote in the EP on the Commission’s rule of law report, and more specific criticisms about Orbán’s invocation of emergency powers during the pandemic. In reaction Orbán suggested that the EP opposes Hungary because it has “a pro-migrant majority” that includes the Hungarian opposition, who “hate us for our stance on migration” (Orbán 2020a). This vote and the “attacks” the PM identified all instantiate the “historic debate” between Brussels bureaucrats and Hungary about “who decides who us Hungarians have to live with in our own country”. Brussels bureaucrats demand this right for themselves to “trick Hungary” into accepting migrants. The enemy is supported by Orbán’s domestic opposition, against the will of “the overwhelming majority of people” (Orbán 2020d).

According to Orbán, “the true warring parties” are the “Soros network and Hungary with its few Central European allies like Poland” (Orbán 2020d). Orbán claims the Soros network put its people into the EP, the Commission, and, through some governments, the Council (Orbán 2020a). The enemy is once again omnipresent, and the frame joins all criticism from any EU body (i.e. “Brussels bureaucrats”) into one coherent image of an ongoing clandestine war on Hungary that now has an easily recognizable figurehead. The goals of this network are the same as those of Western European elites: “to create a new, modern, mixed Christian-Muslim Europe (...) that is beyond Christianity, and national pride” (Orbán 2020a). The two sides are engaged in a “life or death struggle” over the destruction of “the sovereignty of national governments, the independence of nation states”, and their subjugation under “a system of global governance run by international financial interests” (Orbán 2020b). With the plot uncovered, criticism of Orbán’s politics becomes mute.

This complete rejection of rule of law conditionality is depicted as a classic technique of “attaching political conditions, their own ideological angle to economic issues in the European Union”: *Those*

who are *not pro-migration* like they [Brussels elites] are, *are attacked*. Those who like their nation (...) are also attacked. (Orbán 2020f, emphasis added). The rule of law is thus in the same category as politics and ideology: it is anti-normal, it is relative, subjective, and interest-driven.

As the negotiations intensified, Orbán linked the above framing with the mega-narrative's generative metaphor of "the EU-as-empire". The West is in decline due to its liberal ideology which makes it internally weak, and unable to keep up with its illiberal competitors. But this is no passive decline: the West—meaning liberal elites—still wants to promote its ideas toward the East, against the will of the people. This fundamentally anti-democratic hegemonic project, Orbán suggests, harks back to the era of empires: external powers that are much stronger than Hungary, and seek to promote a homogenizing project, to "dissolve" nation states in a larger, borderless (both in the physical and cultural sense) whole that is antithetical to Hungarian identity. Building on the historical narrative his audience was socialized in, Orbán can invoke a list of historical analogies. Meanwhile, in the present, the new imperial project is "run by global, international, supranational organizations and businessmen who (...)consider themselves above nations" (Orbán 2020e). These historical analogies invoke the logic of sovereignism and securitization through a list of national tragedies familiar to all Hungarians, from the country's 150 year-long Ottoman occupation to its series of failed revolutions against the Habsburg Empire and the Soviet Union.

The analogies transform critics of the state of the rule of law in Hungary into oppressive empire builders like the Turks or the Soviets, while suggesting a national war for independence (*szabadságharc*), like that in 1956, as the solution. Note that the dominant historical narrative depicts such—usually failed—wars for independence as the embodiment of national pride and identity: to be Hungarian is to be the underdog, fighting larger, border-dissolving oppressors against all odds. Hungarians "do not want to be dissolved in any kind of empire" (Orbán 2020c), including a new, European one.

The analogy of the Soviet Union as an oppressive, *anti-Christian* empire serves a dual role: it translates the contemporary political debate as an existential threat to national independence, and it also reinforces the divide between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, i.e. between those who have had to suffer under Communism, and those that did not. Having learned from this trauma, Eastern Europeans "will protect [their] national sovereignty" but also the Christian "way of life" at all costs—something that is "no longer in fashion in the West" (Orbán 2020k). Western Europeans simply do not share the same historical experience, and therefore do "not understand us" (Orbán 2020j). Without understanding, there cannot be a dialogue. But if this is not a dialogue between equals,

then criticism from a clueless yet arrogant West has to be baseless, and must be outright rejected as a political attack.

To sum up, the problem that the frame depicts has multiple facets: it includes a secret plan to force states like Hungary to relinquish border control and accept migrants, West European arrogance, and a liberal-imperial project that is antithetical to Hungarian values. These elements together produce all the recent “attacks” on Hungary, which are topically linked by their perpetrators’ baseless criticism of Hungarian democracy. “Clandestine powers” [*háttérhatalmak*] (Orbán 2020e) attack the Hungarian government because it is national, it is anti-migration, and it is democratic. Hungary is led by a wartime PM that has been successful in the budget negotiations and in those leading up to NGEU, but is still forced to fight such important battles alone in Brussels, all for the honor of Hungarians and other Eastern member states. Due to its ideology, arrogance, and dishonest methods, Western Europe “can no longer act as a role model” for Hungarians and Central Europeans (Orbán 2020e).

By the time of the vote in December 2020, Orbán successfully linked rule of law conditionality with pandemic mitigation and economic recovery under the “war of independence against a European Empire” frame. Highlighting conditionality as a *liberal* as well as a *financial* political tool, he once again brought back the figure of George Soros who has the same plan he had in 2015-16: those who do not let migrants in need to be punished through financial means. If Hungary does not let migrants in, it risks losing some of its share of the EU budget. With the roster of enemies complete, the war could culminate in a crucial battle, the vote on conditionality at the end of the year—a battle that Orbán framed as a great personal victory. The final vote left Europe with “two competing visions about the future in Europe. One is beyond Christianity, beyond the era of national cultures”. But this has been merely a battle in the ongoing war, so Hungarians need to prepare for “the Hungarian Prime Minister having to continuously fight these battles not in the upcoming one or two years, but for another decade. (Orbán 2020g)

The framing of rule of law conditionality demonstrates the flexibility of Orbán’s crisis talk. He used the mega-narrative on a permanent cultural war with Western elites to establish consistency across time, space, and subject matter. Meanwhile, he employed bordering narratives to instantiate recurring high stakes battles with an atmosphere of crisis and urgency. Illiberal measures like anti-NGO legislations became misrepresented policies of a true democracy. Since their vision of a migrant-filled Europe with porous borders puts Western elites in stark opposition to the will of the European People, they have to resort to imperialism, which the political attacks masquerading as rule of law concerns exemplify. The only way forward is through a reaffirmation of national

sovereignty (border control), which means business-as-usual for Orbán's regime even as the rule of law conditionality instrument is employed to block the flow of EU funds to Hungary in 2022-23. Hungarians should continue to turn to their Leader for security as "the ramparts at the border can only stand for as long as we are in government" (Orbán 2022).

4. Concluding remarks

Populist leaders talk about a power struggle on the management of flows: capital, goods, services, human beings, but also ideas. Borders are key to managing these flows, but also to representing antagonistic relationships. This paper offered contributions to the study of right-wing populism by exploring how populists use multi-scalar bordering narratives to a) navigate the contradictory symbolism of state borders, and b) to maintain an atmosphere of crisis, and thereby affirm anti-democratic politics within state borders. It used Hungary as a "laboratory case" to illustrate the ways in which populists-in-power can maintain an anti-elitist discourse as the de facto elite; and to assess conflicting geographies of securitized state borders and borderless transnationalism. This dual paradox—the paradox of elite anti-elitism and that of (trans)nationalism—lies at the core of Orbán's bordering narratives. The paper argued that the Hungarian PM has been able to navigate this paradox through an evolving mega-narrative that offers territorial visions which reify state borders as coterminous with sovereign control. Crucially, the mega-narrative renders the meaning that these borders carry fluid. To illustrate this fluidity the paper traced the evolving symbolic meaning and significance of three particular bordered spaces as stages for performative sovereignty in Orbán's bordering narratives: the nation state, the region (Central and Eastern Europe), and the continent.

The analysis of Orbán's mega-narrative shows that a sovereignist logic centered on the symbolic role of Hungary's borders is present on all three scales: the country's securitized state borders protect it from the outside Other (the migrant), but the very same borders also protect the continent as a whole. This protective role is not simply about hard security, but about identity: Orbán's Hungary embodies true Europeanness and thereby becomes antithetical to the "Muslim invasion" vividly illustrated through historical analogies. This civilizational mission has also enabled Orbán to circumvent the paradox of transnationalism as Hungary's borders symbolically protect Europe as a whole, including kin communities. Even though state borders separate physically, they unite culturally.

As the paper showed, this central narrative has moved beyond its 2015, Hungary-focused civilization mission (see Brubaker, 2017). The idea of Hungary as Christian Europe's bulwark has namely permitted Orbán to successfully perform anti-elitism beyond the domestic as he continues to

identify internal enemy Others that threaten his exclusionary understanding of European civilization. This vaguely delineated, expanding roster of enemies include Western European Liberal elites and “Brussels bureaucrats” (the ‘inside Other’ that is *external* to Hungary), as well as elite proxies like Orbán’s domestic opposition and Hungarian civil society actors (the *internal* ‘inside Other’)—both linked to the outside migrant Other that was gradually turned into a mere object that elites wield as a weapon. Within the mega-narrative the threat now comes both from the East and the West, and both threaten Europeanness that Hungary’s borders embody.

For Orbán the populist, Europeanness equals the will of the European people whom these elites betray. Dissent and criticism thus can be labeled as anti-European: migration, “gender ideology”, a strong civil society, the rule of law, and even aid to Ukraine become suspect, things that should be rejected. The only way to resist the anti-European project is through a reaffirmation of national sovereignty against elites and their proxies through “a Europe of nation states”. This vision is represented primarily by Hungary, but also by fellow Central and European states depicted through an intra-European East-West dichotomy. Thus, national borders (“Hungarians”, “Hungarian borders”, “Hungarian families”), the “Hungarian transnation”, Central (and Eastern) Europe, and Europe itself alternatively become rarified as objects of security, yet the solution always reverts back to sovereigntist slogans about strong national borders. European civilization, the will of the European people, Hungarian sovereignty, and Orbán’s leadership become coterminous.

The Orbán government has near-total control of the information flows on the issue of migration in Hungary, and it is through this control of information in the Hungarian space that Orbán can promote the normalization of illiberal values and practices that are key to his re-election. The paper illustrated this logic using Orbán’s framing of the 2020 rule of law conditionality debate. The case study expanded the literature on right-wing populist crisis talk and bordering narratives as it demonstrated that borders as symbolic resources can become much more than mere rhetorical tools: these very same narratives can systematically be used to legitimize illiberal practices and delegitimize their criticism—both domestic and external. Crisis talk on sovereignty-as-borders enables a transfer of the language of crisis to previously depoliticized issues, and facilitates their extreme politicization, even securitization, as has been the case with migration. Narratives about threatened borders in turn justify radical policy measures, and due to the constancy of crisis, newer and newer measures need to be introduced which can propel a state like Hungary down the road of de-democratization.

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