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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Political thinking in action: realism as ideology in the discourses of Macron, Orbán, and Scholz about Ukraine

Attila Gyulai [a,b] and Artúr Baranyai [a]

aHUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary; bDepartment of Political Science, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

Despite growing attention to realism in political theory, there remains a notable gap in understanding how politicians adopt, interpret, or contest the realist approach. This gap is particularly striking given that realist theory fundamentally hinges upon grounding theoretization in the realities of politics. This article turns to the political discourse surrounding the war in Ukraine to examine the role of realist argumentation in justifying and guiding political action. In contrast to the rejection or critique of ideologies in contemporary realist theory, our analysis, adopting a morphological approach of the discourses articulated by Emmanuel Macron, Viktor Orbán, and Olaf Scholz, revealed the substantive and ideological nature of realism. Our findings underscore the potential for starting realist theorizing by considering the realities of political practice, namely that realism must be situated between fidelity to reality and the uncertainties of dissimulation.

Introduction

Once again, realism is gaining ground and it is more and more used to explain, justify, denounce, and guide politics. This tendency is more than evident when one considers how the main divides within political theory have been reshaped by the emerging realist movement. However, while much has been said about the differences between realist and moralist theorizing and the different ways of being realist in theory, what we know about realist political practice and how it might enrich theoretical accounts is far from exhaustive. The limited attention to realism as it appears in political practice is all the more surprising when one considers that contemporary political realist theory claims to be more relevant than mainstream political philosophy by incorporating the features of practical politics into theorizing. Our aim is to fill this gap and take thinking about realism seriously by looking more closely at political practice.

The ambitions of this study are mainly exploratory. Our aim is to find and analyse patterns of argumentation that adopt, reject or discuss realism in political discourse. Specifically, our question is whether realism can become an ideology, or, to put it more

modestly, whether realism can serve as an argumentative resource for political actors. On the one hand, we attempt to identify realist elements in the speeches of selected political actors, and on the other hand, we determine whether these elements are arranged in such a way that they form a reasonably coherent ideological argumentation.

Certainly, realism cannot be discussed as an ideology in the same way as liberalism, conservatism or socialism. Even if there is a realist canon, just as there is a liberal, conservative or socialist canon, there is no ideological reflection on it. Nevertheless, the realist canon exists, and many concepts are constantly present in the realist tradition. One can turn to Carl Schmitt (2007) and Chantal Mouffe (2005) to understand the inevitability of conflict in politics. There is a long history of concepts such as power, reason of state, necessity or national interest (Gilbert 1984; Haslam 2002; Morgenthau 1982; Viroli 1992). Realist theory offers compelling arguments for how the Hobbesian principles of stability and security are crucial to social and political coordination (Williams 2005). Examining the recent resurgence of this tradition, we find that these concepts form the backbone of realist thought, but also that the idea of realism as a substantive position akin to an ideology is rejected (Rossi and Sleat 2014; Sleat 2013, 9). We consider it an issue and a gap in the literature that realism in political thinking, i.e. realism in political practice, as proposed by Michael Freeden (2012; 2013a), has not appeared on the horizon of realist political theory.

In this article, our aim is to examine realist ideological argumentation in the rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz and Viktor Orbán in the first year after the outbreak of open armed conflict in Ukraine. We believe that this case is exemplary: Russian aggression against Ukraine has often been discussed by these politicians as a clash between moral principles and brute force, between democracy and autocracy, between global values and imperialistic power-seeking, or as a case where interests and necessities prevail over abstract values. The case provides an opportunity to see how the realist approach is elaborated, justified or even rejected in political discourse.

In the next section, we begin with a review of this broader tradition of realism in political theory. We identify the main concepts and elements that characterize the realist account of politics. Although, given the disagreement not only between realists and moralists but also between the different approaches to realism, it would be futile to find a unified conception of realism, our aim is to describe realism in theory in a way that makes it comparable to realism in practical political discourse. In this context, we discuss both the advancements and the blind spots of realist theory in relation to ideology, relying on the morphological and rhetorical account of ideological analysis. In our analysis, we discuss the occurrence of realist (or anti-realist) elements and patterns of argumentation in the discourse of the three political leaders. In the discussion, we address two questions: first, whether the discourse of the three politicians can be explained as an ideological morphology of realist argumentation, and second, how representations of realism in political discourse can contribute to realist theorizing. In the concluding part, we suggest that realism inherently encompasses an ineliminable ideological layer, and that realist political theorizing could benefit from paying more attention to political practice for guidance.

Realist theory versus realist ideology?

To ground our analysis, in this section, we describe what contemporary theorists mean by realism and then move on to the concept of ideological argumentation to argue that

realism can indeed be considered on this conceptual level. We do not claim that there is a direct influence of political theory on practical discourse, or that there is an elaborated realist ideology to be found in a library of grand works on realism to be implemented in politics. Rather, we want to emphasize that realist theorizing should pay more attention to political discourse as a source for addressing theoretically relevant questions. Furthermore, when we ask how realism can be an argumentative resource, we do not have the realist paradigm of IR in mind. Although realism in political theory and realism in international relations have overlapping conceptual foundations and the Ukrainian case can be approached from different realist schools within IR (Smith and Dawson 2022), the aim of this study is not to explain political behaviour by adopting the realist toolkit characterized by a 'desire for science' (Molloy 2006, 2; 23), but to explore how realism can be found as a resource for political thinking and how political thinking can enrich realist political theory.

Our goals are in line with the presuppositions of realist political theory. Reacting to the mainstream Rawlsian political philosophy in which 'justice is the first virtue of social institutions' (Rawls 1999, 3) and that 'moral philosophy sets the background for, and the boundaries of, political philosophy' (Nozick 1974, 6), realists refuse to give primacy to moral principles developed in disregard of the characteristics of the domain in which they are supposed to function. Such principles, which follow an 'ethics first view' (Geuss 2008, 9) and an 'applied morality' (Williams 2005, 2), are not based on an adequate knowledge of politics and therefore provide poor or even dangerous guidance for political practice (Favara 2024; Rossi and Sleat 2014, 689). In the most general sense realism is a 'view about the normative autonomy of the political' (Rossi 2019, 639; Williams 2005, 8). Autonomy is best understood as 'non-reducibility', which means that 'politics is not reducible to other fields or domains', i.e. that politics is not reduced to the application of moral principles (McQueen 2018, 246; Sleat 2016, 254; 2022, 471).

Taking the non-reducibility and autonomy of the political seriously means that theorizing about politics is 'better suited to the nature of the political itself' (Sleat 2018, 6). To conform theorizing to actual politics, realists emphasize a few features that characterize politics. Importantly, these are not abstract principles, but empirical conditions that are not fully subject to a rationally coherent approach; political realism has an a-theoretical core (Szűcs 2019, 36). The empirical features of politics that political theory must consider include the ineliminable disagreement and conflict, the necessity of authoritative decisions, the fragility of political order, that political order is legitimated order and coercion, and the rejection of utopianism that denies the specificities of politics (McQueen 2017, 10–12; Sleat 2016, 257). Realism rejects moralism also because of its claim to universal validity, whereas a realist approach should always pay attention to and start from the local and the contextual (Williams 2005).

Although by considering the characteristics of actual politics contemporary realists aim to move beyond methodological debates within political theory, it is difficult to specify the content of a realist stance for at least two reasons. On the one hand, realists generally do not understand their position as a substantive one, still less as an ideology. On the other hand, however, realists want to deepen their substantive understanding of realism in order to find ways in which theory can become normatively relevant to politics by finding non-moral sources of normative standards and action-guidance.

Based on this distinction, realists approach the problem of ideology from different angles, ranging from the outright rejection of any ideological affiliation to the recognition of certain ideological positions and to direct participation in ideological struggles. In the following, we summarize how the different currents of realism view the role and meaning of ideology and argue that they remain insufficient in two respects. Firstly, they distance themselves from ideological affiliations and limit the relevance of ideology (even if some substantive positions are recognized), and secondly, they barely touch on the ideological relevance of realism in practical political thought.

Reinforcing the fundamental opposition within political theory, realists claim that realism differs from moralism in that it is not ideological. In contrast, since moralist political philosophy aims to guide and constrain politics by disregarding political realities, the principles they set out are inevitably ideological. Thus, by embedding political theory in the realities of politics, realism can be less ideological (Rossi and Sleat 2014, 689). While we subscribe to the idea that political theory should be grounded in political reality, drawing on the specific account of ideology that we adopt in this article, we argue that this does not mean that realism is any less ideological, nor that it should be. The assumption that there is an inverse proportionality between fidelity to reality and ideological character mischaracterizes the political relevance of ideology.

Turning from the ideological nature of realist theory to ideological positions realists may hold, some realists claim that their position is not ideological because it lacks fixed and substantive content. This claim regards ideology as a more or less closed set of views but 'realism is itself politically indeterminate […] realism is not itself a substantive political position (one is not a realist in the same way that you are a liberal, socialist, conservative, etc.)' (Rossi and Sleat 2014, 695). Elsewhere, Matt Sleat (2013, 9) writes that realism is not a political ideology, 'with a recognizably distinct set of recommendations for the political design of a society's institutional structure, practices, or values'. While one can agree that realism is not comparable to the major ideologies, it is arguable to what extent realism is indeterminate, and even if it is, whether the lack of coherence and distinctiveness prevents it from being understood as a form of ideology, provided that the requirement of coherence is accompanied by contextual and conceptual flexibility.

Other accounts of realism, however, problematize the ideological character of the various strands of realist theory. Allegedly non-ideological opponents of moralism who adhere to the principle of 'fidelity to the facts' might be questioned as to whether they are not subject to a bias towards the status quo and an unrevised form of – conservative – ideological inclination (Finlayson 2017; Rossi 2019). From a radical realist perspective, realists centred on Hobbesian-Williamsian notions of order and stability are most likely to be guided by the status quo and an ideological form of realism. In contrast to this 'ordorealist' approach, 'contextual realism' considers different, but always practice-dependent ways to achieve legitimate coercion, so that the bias towards the status quo is less pronounced (Rossi 2019, 643). However, a third variant, radical realism, which focuses directly on the epistemic critique of legitimation stories, proposes to distance realism from unrevised ideological reasoning (Rossi 2019, 642). More precisely, radical realism sees itself as an instrument of ideology critique aiming to expose self-justifying ideologies that conceal themselves as settled and undisputed – moral or, as in the case of status quo bias, even realist – principles. By subjecting legitimation stories to epistemological

critique, radical realism distinguishes between flawed and non-flawed ideologies in order to evaluate political arrangements and debunk those that achieve acceptance through manipulated ideologies (Aytac and Rossi 2022; Prinz and Rossi 2017). Undoubtedly, among the variants of contemporary realist theory, the radical realists pay the most attention to the problem of ideology. However, the path of radical realists is not followed here, because both the aim of our endeavour and the approach to the phenomenon of ideology are different. Unlike radical realists, who are concerned with debunking flawed ideologies, our aim is interpretive and disregards the opposition between flawed and non-flawed ideologies. Relatedly, we approach the problem of ideology as a form of political thinking and, due to the ubiquity of ideologies, we see no external position from which it would be possible – and necessary – to practice epistemological critique of forms of self-justifying ideologies. Nevertheless, despite the opposing premises of Freedenian and radical realist accounts, our analysis opens up avenues that can contribute to the radical realist approach – for instance regarding the consideration of the examined material as forms of power self-justification.

We contend not only that realism can indeed be an ideological problem, but also that it can be an ideological position in practical politics which theorists should investigate precisely to secure their theoretical goals. When realist theorizing claims to be non-ideological, or when realism is turned into an instrument to debunk ideologies, a dubious separation between political practice and political theory is presumed. Given the image of politics in realist theory, however, this does not seem tenable; if realists hope to remain realists, they will find such boundaries conceptually but also practically impossible (cf. Sleat 2023). As we have seen, the main concern of realist political theory is to avoid the abstraction that distances moralism from the political practice it seeks to influence, shape, and constrain. Most realists do not give up action-guidance, they just hope to be better at it by adapting to the general features and characteristics of politics.[1] At the same time, by limiting and eliminating the ideological layers of realism, realists seem to unnecessarily break links with political practice by missing the opportunity to start theorizing by first looking at actual politics where substantive argumentative positions are unavoidable. Focusing on realism in political practice (Freeden 2012; 2013a) thus remains conspicuously absent within the realm of realist political theory.

To address this shortcoming, drawing on the existing literature, we outline a concept of ideology and ideological argumentation that enables scholars to search for realism in political practice and thereby establish a stronger link between realist theorizing and actual politics.

Of course, realism does not necessarily have to appear in the form of a coherent ideology in political discourse. Not every concept, discussion, or even justification that is conceivable as realist is meant to be a building block of an ideology. Invoking a broader realist framework, Andrew Sabl's analysis of how political offices engage different levels of reflection highlights further connections between principles and persuasion (Sabl 2002). However, in questioning whether realism can be understood as a set of concepts and their configuration, ideological analysis has a methodological advantage in focusing on argumentative patterns and, more importantly, their potential contestation. It is the contestation (and decontestation) of argumentative patterns that enable the emergence of new (or resurgent) forms of political thinking and the observation of the use and elaboration of meanings of political concepts. For this reason, coherence is not a prerequisite or

a precondition for our ideological analysis, but the potential – and always temporary – outcome. Ideological analysis is advantageous precisely because it points to argumentative patterns without expecting them to be perfect, self-contained and definitive.

The ever-growing literature and theoretical refinement of the investigation of ideology allows us to now talk of 'Ideology Studies' as a separate field of political theory and interdisciplinary social science (Freeden 2022; Freeden, Sargent, and Stears 2013; Leader Maynard 2017). Instead of regarding it as an abstract dogma or abandoning the use of the term altogether, ideologies are viewed as 'ubiquitous, permanent form[s] of political thinking' (Freeden 2013b, 149) and 'it is [this] emphasis on the ubiquity of ideology […] that is at the heart of contemporary approaches to the question of ideology' (Norval 2000, 316).

The conventional way in which we can set out distinct theories and paradigms of ideological analysis is by differentiating between neutral/descriptive/inclusive and critical/pejorative/restrictive conceptions of ideology (cf. Humphrey 2005; Leader Maynard and Mildenberger 2018, 565; McLellan 1995; Turner 2016). The neutral approach 'sees ideology as representing the omnipresent and inescapable forces and views that structure society, without any recourse to illusion' (Turner 2016, 3). Therefore the task of the analyst is to investigate the different meanings and empirical formations of ideological structures 'as they are found in the wild' (Finlayson 2012, 751). In contrast, according to the critical approach 'ideology is a pervasive epistemic distortion that helps maintain and reproduce bad social arrangements in virtue of its distorting character' (Sankaran 2020, 3).

For the purposes of this paper, we subscribe to a broad and neutral definition of the term (cf. Leader Maynard 2017, 300). We advocate the view that an ideology is best understood as 'a wide-ranging structural arrangement that attributes decontested meanings to a range of mutually defining concepts' (Freeden 2003, 52) and that ideologies are 'necessary, normal and they facilitate and reflect political action' (2006, 19). The action-guidance function of ideologies is crucial to our understanding as they 'seek not merely to describe the world but also to mold it. […] Even where an ideology is not officially or openly articulated, its intent is still prescriptive (or, if you prefer, "programmatic") in that the holder of the ideology is enjoined by his or her ideology to act' (Gerring 1997, 972). The justification function is of equal importance to our definition of ideology. Complementing the Freedenian account we acknowledge that ideologies are not only 'inward-facing structures' that condition actors' political thinking but are also 'outward-facing expressions' characterized by 'specific rhetorical repertoires, arguments, and justifications', from which political actors draw upon to respond to external events, persuade others, or legitimize their perspectives (Finlayson 2012, 758; Leader Maynard 2017, 303).

Our conception can be contrasted with the aforementioned realist strands of grasping ideology. Firstly, the realist claims of being non-ideological and politically indeterminate stem from a restrictive classical understanding of ideology, lending the term an acontextual and doctrinaire connotation. On the contrary, the conceptualization applied in this paper aligns with the premises of contemporary ideology studies, accounting for the contextual flexibility of ideological configurations and enabling the capturing of realism's notorious variety. Secondly, as opposed to radical realist ideology critique, we agree with Matt Sleat's (2023, 13) argument that viewing ideologies as 'necessarily distorting and to be overcome' undermines any theory claiming to be realistic. Consequently, we adopt a non-pejorative definition that takes the ubiquity of ideologies into account

and propose to identify if realism is itself entangled in ideological discourses, if it can be turned into a resource for ideological reasoning, and what, if any, consequences all these might imply for realist theorizing.

Realist argumentation and ideology in practice: the case of Ukraine

We have argued that contemporary realist theory misjudged the relevance and meaning of a realist ideology; it has been wrongly rejected on conceptual grounds and left unexplored at the level of political practice.[2] In line with the argument of 'renouncing our academic contempt for politicians' and taking their 'acting, speaking and thinking seriously' (Finlayson 2012, 754; Palonen 2005, 8), the aim of this study is to identify elements and patterns of realist argumentation in the practice of three European leaders in the context of the war in Ukraine. Our main question is whether realist elements, concepts and problems addressed by contemporary realist political theory are translated into an ideological morphology in the practice of political actors.

For the purposes of this paper, in line with the literature discussed above, we take realism as a position that rejects abstract idealizations in politics, is suspicious about universalized values and utopian attempts, prefers interests over (moral) principles, acknowledges the role of conflict and power, and values order, security, and stability as a result of state-centred, coercive but legitimated politics.

We do not pursue quantitative goals or want to measure the frequency of realist elements to check whether this era is more realist than the previous one. Our aim is not to prove that realist argumentation has become more frequent, but to show that realism can be an ideological position and that realist elements, concepts and problems can form a network of meanings, that enables coherent ideological argumentation.

The study covers three European leaders, the chief executives of France, Germany and Hungary. We have assumed that Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz and Viktor Orbán, given their different political and ideological orientations, their different positions in domestic politics and their different relations with Russia, have reasons to adopt different positions in terms of moralist and realist politics. We have assumed, and the first reading of the texts has confirmed this, that the case is exceptional in that it provokes not only the direct application of realist and anti-realist arguments, but also self-reflexive political thinking. However, given the exploratory aims of the study, neither the presence nor the absence of specific realist or moralist elements was assumed. Moreover, the cases were not intended to cover all possible configurations of ideological argumentation, but to establish an initial link between political thinking and realist political theory. The data was taken from the media and the official websites of the selected political leaders. Longer, coherent texts were selected to enable the reading of a more detailed argumentation. Speeches, statements, and interviews from the first year of the war (after 22 February 2022) were analysed after checking whether or not they were related to the topic of Ukraine. Only official English translations of the texts were used to ensure that the conceptual specifics reflect the actual understanding and position of the leaders.

First, we analyse the presence of realist elements in the texts by discussing the leaders individually. Second, we apply the morphological analysis of ideologies to determine whether the related meanings identified in the texts correspond to the morphological concept of ideology.

The morphological analysis is based on the categories of core, adjacent, and peripheral concepts, that describe their relative positioning within an ideological configuration (Freeden 1996, 77–81). In a conceptual and historical perspective, the approach thus attempts to uncover and interpret the conceptual morphology of ideological configurations and the 'decontested' meanings of its components. Resting on the essential contestability thesis articulated by Walter B. Gallie (1955), decontestation refers to the temporal fixation of the meanings of ideological conceptual elements. Core concepts (Freeden (2005) emphasizes that there can be several of them within an ideology) are what hold a particular ideology together and signal its constancy. Adjacent concepts are not as pervasive as core concepts, but they stabilize them and contribute to their decontestation. Finally, on the periphery are concepts that are marginal, diachronic and culturally changing, or concepts that form the interface between an ideology and its environment. Beyond methodological considerations Freeden's notion of decontestation is compatible with realist presuppositions, namely the acknowledgment of the conflictual logic of political life. The morphological approach thus utilizes non-pre-politically determined meanings in its conception of ideology. Moreover, both Michael Freeden's conceptual morphology and the rhetorical approach share with realist theory the critique of 'ideal theory's' acontextuality, its application of methods derived from ethics, and the resulting political irrelevance of such analysis (Humphrey 2012, 242).

Macron

In the context of the war in Ukraine, characteristic of Macron's moralist argumentation are the frequent and quite extensive references to universality. Universality functions as a core concept in the French president's discourse. The decontestation of the notion of universality has two layers: it is both a substantive value and a metanormative condition that enables moral prescription. The war in Ukraine is the violation of universal norms and the unsettling of the universality of norms. For Macron, universality makes the difference and provides politics its moral character, so maintaining universality and universal justification is the political problem to be addressed. There are unquestionable universal norms to be reinforced in politics and there is the universality of moral norms that provide boundaries for political action. Of the three leaders, examined here, Macron seems to be the most committed to the role of morality in politics by directly addressing this issue when he acknowledges but also subjects realist values to moral norms.

In the context of the war in Ukraine and in relation to France's role in the situation, Macron invoked a well-established set of values. Freedom in general, freedom of expression, equality and fraternity, the rejection of imperialism and revisionism serve to underpin Macron's justification and vindication of the international order (Macron01; Macron02; Macron03). Regarding these values, Macron summarizes universality as being linked to humanism and the Enlightenment (Macron02). More concretely, Macron refers to the shaken universality of democracy as a value and even more concretely to political liberalism ceasing to be an 'undisputable model' and the 'culmination of humanity' (Macron02). The value of universality was invoked less concretely in a speech to the UN Assembly, where the French president defended it as an underlying norm of the organization, describing it as the opposite of 'hegemony' and 'geopolitical oligarchy' and the not 'adaptable' alternative to the law of the strongest (Macron03). By this, Macron

established relations between normativity, universality, and hegemony to contradict Russian calls for a new international order which, in this framework, necessarily lack a normative basis and are thereby void. This is how universality fulfils both a substantive-political and a metanormative-political role in in Macron's discourse.

'Just stating that this is a reality' (Macron02), Macron announces the disruption of universality and the substantive values supported by universality. In two respects, despite the crucial role of universality, Macron admits that fundamental values are contested. Firstly, that 'our freedom and the freedom of our children are no longer a given' and that we must fight for them (Macron01) is a common rhetorical device to call for action, yet the call demonstrates the dynamic and political nature of contestation and decontestation as well as the shifting position of the values within the discourse. Second, and more importantly, moral principles and actions are entwined, and the former can even derail the latter if not understood properly in politics. In justifying the French policy of maintaining diplomatic relations with both warring parties, Macron rejects 'any form of false morality' that would render the country powerless (Macron02).

In directly addressing contestation, however, Macron is also posing a political problem and claim. 'Contesting', 'disrupting', and 'violating' universal values are not only a problem in relation to the values directly under attack (e.g. the territorial integrity of states or the rejection of imperialism), but also at the metanormative level of undermining the normative foundations of the international order. In Macron's discourse, questioning universality amounts to depriving the international order and peace of their only effective legitimacy. Macron claims that there was a previous 'universally established consensus' that is now being called into question by China and Russia, leading to a 'competition of universalism' (Macron02). According to Macron, the undermining of universality, for example as a fundamental principle of the UN, means a return to the 'law of the strongest' (Macron03), whereby universality is equated with (moral) normativity as such. By stating that the universality of the UN ensures that no 'hegemony' or 'geopolitical oligarchy' is served, Macron aims to refute any attempt to challenge the status quo. The international order is by definition universal and the ongoing 'war of narrative and of interpretation' creates 'a contemporary relativism' and 'the undermining of the universalism of our values' (Macron02). The dual nature of the French president's discourse also becomes clear when openly arguing for the status quo. In his speech to the French foreign service corps, Macron claims that his country is 'a nation with a universal perspective' and 'a force in the world' (Macron02). This candid moment reveals that decontestation of universality is supplemented, but not replaced, by non-moral principles.

Even in Macron's morality-driven discourse, principles can be weighed not just according to their substantive content, but to their usefulness as well. The sovereignty of states and territorial integrity may also have to do with moral positions, but when it comes to the current war, they are important because they are the 'best argument against Russia' (Macron02). Practicality, however, seems to be only a partial justification. 'When I hear Russia say that it is ready to work on new cooperation, on a new international order, without hegemony, which is great, but based on what principles?' – Macron asks in his speech to the UN in 2022, pointing out the lack of justification for Russian aggression. The role of directly non-moral values remains complementary, without guiding and structuring the argument, precisely because their legitimacy requires an anchoring in pre-existing norms.

For Macron, realist values such as order, stability or security are of secondary importance compared to the underlying normative considerations that give them legitimacy. Mentioned only as supplementary, the canonical realist principles and values do not correspond to an argumentative pattern. Occasionally, the French president refers to his country's interests, but the term remains unpacked and is not woven into a meaningful conceptual web. France's interests are 'served' or 'defended' by those who represent the country abroad (Macron02). Macron puts forward a status quo argumentation when he refers to Russia as a 'destabilizing power' and the interests of China, which although 'remains in the shadows', aims to 'effect a split' in the international order (Macron02). In this context, 'international stability', 'international security', and 'international order' have an intrinsic value that must be protected against a 'new imperialism' (Macron03). In Macron's case, the underlying argument is that stability and security are preferable to any attempts to undermine the international order, as these attempts lack a principled basis. Macron condemns not only the 'imperialistic' violations of the principles of 'national sovereignty' and 'the integrity of borders' (Macron02; Macron03), but more importantly the lack of any principles behind such moves.

To summarize, The French president's argumentation is moralist on the surface as it is anchored in the language of moral values with the concept of universality occupying a central position. At the same time, however, the universality that Macron puts forward requires more than just the reiteration of a set of shared values and carries with it a meta-normative character. Universality is of crucial importance because it is itself a substantial value. However, by challenging relativism and particularity, it also serves as a precondition for any normative standard in politics. Added to this, the realist concepts of interest, order, stability, security nevertheless fall short of assembling into a stabilized conceptual structure or coherent argumentative pattern. Firstly, because the meanings of these realist concepts are decontested in the light of pre-existing norms. Secondly, due to their complementary nature, they fail to merge into a structure of core, adjacent, and peripheric concepts, or put differently are unable to achieve mutually constitutive links and connections.

Olaf Scholz

Chancellor Scholz's rhetoric in the context of Ukraine is an attempt to reconcile morality with the constraints of political reality. Instead of a clear hierarchy between norms and necessities, political action and its justification is a continuous reconciliation, a pragmatic back and forth that does not follow a pre-determined conceptual path and is not built around a conceptual core. Of course, Chancellor Scholz invokes abstract values, but they do not stabilize an ideological pattern. This also applies to realist norms such as order, stability or necessity. While Scholz's rhetoric is distanced from a pure and doctrinaire moralism, it does not provide an ideological argument for realism either. While there is realism in Scholz's rhetoric, it is not a substantive value but an argumentative way to justify the pragmatic reconciliation of norms and realities.

A key strategic goal for Scholz is to 'strike a balance between providing the best possible support for Ukraine and avoiding an unintended escalation' (Scholz04). Weighing up conflicting values or opposing extremes seems to be both the method and the content of the German Chancellor's position. With regard to the sanctions against Russia and the arms deliveries to Ukraine, maintaining unity is said to be crucial because it gives an

advantage over Putin, who has misjudged the possibilities of a lasting and united European and Atlantic effort (Scholz05). On the other hand, to stay both ahead of Putin and in control of events unity can be preserved by doing more than just enough, but not too much. When asked about the further course of action in Ukraine and pressed about doing more, Scholz speaks of a 'difficult balancing act' and the associated 'responsibility' towards allies (Scholz01) and towards German citizens who question both the sanctions and the arms deliveries (Scholz05). Regarding European Commission decisions, it is also important to find 'the right balance between representation and functionality' (Scholz02). For Scholz, balance is therefore policy, but it is also the problem of reconciling principles and necessities, morality and politics, without dissolving one into the other.

In the case of Scholz, the fundamental problem is whether there is a source that can provide standards for the adaptation of principles and their compatibility with realities. Chancellor Scholz occasionally referred to the war in Ukraine as a situation that could not be dealt with by deductive means. In view of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the financial and military support provided by Western states, being perceived as a 'war party' is not something that comes from the 'textbook' (Scholz01) and there are no 'blueprints' (Scholz04) to guide action. Under these circumstances, 'abstract discussions' cannot help (Scholz02), 'caution must take priority over hasty decisions' (Scholz04), especially as it is wise 'to be prepared for a long war' (Scholz05). For Scholz, it is about being prepared to change course and find ways that do not follow directly from the previous stance. In the case of Germany, supplying weapons to a war would mean breaking with 'decades-long principles of German policy' (Scholz04).

The question arises as to what extent the principles can be changed depending on the circumstances. Realities seem to enjoy a certain primacy, but not without limits. In connection with supporting Ukraine, when talking about the EU accession of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and six Western Balkan countries Scholz argues for a 'principled Realpolitik' that does not sacrifice its partners 'on the altar of lazy compromises': 'Realpolitik must mean involving friends and partners with shared values and supporting them in order to be strong in global competition through cooperation' (Scholz02). Thus, even if Scholz argues for a certain degree of realism, it must be distinguished from a rule without shared norms. For Scholz, Realpolitik cannot mean unlimited power, and it must not be allowed 'to prevail over the law' (Scholz04). The present problem is not the lack of rules, but 'the lack of willingness to abide by and enforce them' (Scholz03). This is where Scholz's rhetoric moves away from realism, although the focus is still on maintaining a global order. Order must be based on rules, because the alternative is not anarchy but 'the dominion of the strong over the weak', and it is not possible to remain indifferent in the conflict between 'the rule of power' and 'the power of rules' (Scholz03). The fact that the rejection of 'the law of the strong' implies a universal requirement (Scholz04) indicates that Scholz ultimately speaks the language of a politics constrained by morality.

The German Chancellor did invoke the canon of universal moral values in the year after the Russian invasion. Human rights, human dignity, freedom and democracy, the rule of law, the recognition of diversity, pluralism, development were the values praised in various speeches and interviews (Scholz02; Scholz03; Scholz04; Scholz05). Justice has been assigned a fundamental role in achieving lasting peace (Scholz04) and solidarity has been identified as a core value in resolving the EU energy supply crisis (Scholz02).

Justice was also named even more explicitly as a norm on which the global order of a multipolar world can be 'based' (Scholz04). On the negative side, the German Chancellor frequently condemned Russian aggression as a form of imperialism that violates the obligations and agreements made between the world's nations (Scholz02; Scholz03; Scholz04; Scholz05).

On the other hand, Scholz's rhetoric also contains realistic considerations. For example, even if, in his opinion, the international order should be based on justice, it 'doesn't happen by itself' and must be protected and preserved (Scholz03). Stability is a crucial value to ensure survival in times of energy crisis (Scholz05). Furthermore, supporting Ukraine follows not only from a commitment to universal values, but it is in the interests of the parties either within the framework of the United Nations or the European Union (Scholz02; Scholz04). Necessity as a criterion for political action was used at two different levels. First, it shows that support for Ukraine has no intrinsic limit and should continue 'as long as necessary' (Scholz04; Scholz05). Secondly, it is necessity that justifies the change of established institutions (European Treaties, cf. Scholz02) and the adjustment of principles (e.g. vote for a $600 billion fund to supply the army, cf. Scholz05). While realist concepts such as stability, interest, necessity and order are identifiable in Scholz's discourse, they do not formulate a cluster of concepts that would create an internal hierarchical conceptual structure of realist ideology. Their role remains accidental. At the same time, the perimeter concepts – 'the social practices, events, and contingencies that occur in [an ideology's] environment' (Freeden 2013b, 161) – are indeed linked to some realist concepts in a way that gives them a substantive role. For example, in the case of the energy crisis stability is decontested as a must for survival; similarly the concept of necessity is connected to the 'support of Ukraine' and the 'adjustment of principles'.

To sum up, realism in Scholz's argument is not primarily about the content, but the method, or, more precisely the means of politics. However, from a rhetorical perspective 'argumentational form is inseparable from ideological content' and 'how an ideology makes arguments is part of what it is' (Finlayson 2013, 245). Scholz's political reflexivity signifies that norms cannot exhaustively determine realistic elements, and moralist norms and principles need to be brought into dialogue with the realist necessities of political action. 'Striking the balance' is about how to adapt norms and how to apply them in a political context, which suggests that realist ideological argumentation predominantly means the ideology of application and reconciliation.

Viktor Orbán

Realist argumentation comes closest to what Freeden (2003, 52) would define as an ideological morphology in the case of the Hungarian Prime Minister (cf. Illés 2022). Forming an interrelated structure of decontested concepts, Viktor Orbán's discourse on Ukraine is arranged by and around the core concept of interest.[3] Interest occupies the highest hierarchical position, against which further concepts acquire their place within the argumentation and from which further meanings are derived. While the concept has many layers, interest in Orbán's case is primarily decontested as national interest although in some circumstances – in the perimeter cases of V4 cooperation or EU's strategy – it is decontested as common interest.

To begin with, the national interest, not only of Hungary but also of other countries has epistemic value. Understanding others' interests is necessary to maintain agency; to act, to solve problems, one must know and say what the Hungarian, German and European interests are (Orbán03). It is also necessary that interest excludes universality as point of view. Since war is not fought 'between the armies of good and evil' (Orbán06), it can only be understood from the perspective of the actors, and it is a mistake to expect a 'peace proposal that satisfies everyone's interests well in advance' (Orbán08). Knowledge value and action-guidance are interlinked and cannot be differentiated according to their political relevance.

Interest is never singular: in order to know one's own interests, one must also understand other, perhaps conflicting interests. National interests guide action when recognizable interests come into conflict with each other: 'We shall not ruin ourselves in the interests of anyone' (Orbán08). At the same time, a request from the European Commission can be fulfilled if it 'doesn't run counter to Hungarian interests' (Orbán04). However, even if the national interest is obviously high up in the hierarchy of values, it is not the only interest guiding Orbán's actions. Visegrád cooperation, shaken by the divergent approaches towards Ukraine and Russia, is based on 'common interests and many common positions' (Orbán05). The EU countries also have a common interest in preventing Russia from being a threat (Orbán04). In terms of energy policy, the EU even has its own interest in regaining its capacity to act and becoming independent not only from Russia but also from the USA: 'It's not in Europe's interest to replace Russian energy dependence with American energy dependence' (Orbán03). Following a differential logic, Hungary's interests can be reconciled with non-EU countries that pursue their own national interests and see the war in Ukraine as having 'limited significance' (Orbán06).

Orbán's argument suggests that instead of the conjunction of morality and politics (interests), a subordination takes place and the primacy of politics prevails. Consequently, moral considerations are limited and constrained by interests. The former 'need to be addressed' when it comes to helping Ukraine, but they should never be 'above us and before us' (Orbán08). Support for NATO enlargement stems from the obligation created by Hungary's earlier admission in 1999 but only if 'that doesn't harm Hungary's interests, and there's no significant damage to Hungary's national interest' (Orbán07). At one point, Orbán even gives conceptual support for the hierarchy between morality and politics on the basis of their different standards of evaluation. By contrasting intentions and being a good person to performance, he links the pursuit of national interests with accountability. 'We're accountable for whether or not we solved something, not for whether our thinking was right or wrong' (Orbán03).

This is not to say that Orbán does not invoke moral justifications. For example, he is convinced that staying out of war is 'the only morally right thing' to do (Orbán06). Morality and politics can also be reconciled: It is right to side with the attacked in the conflict, but the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine is not only a moral issue, but also a European interest (Orbán04). The Hungarian government's 'pro-peace' stance has a dual, seemingly conjunctive justification: 'it's right from a general human viewpoint, and it's right from the viewpoint of Hungarian national interests' (Orbán01). Foreign policy cannot be 'conducted solely on the basis of morality and values', but it is also wrong 'when moral considerations are completely ignored' (Orbán04). As we have seen

above, however, while arguing for 'striking the right balance' (Orbán04), Orbán's contrasting of moral considerations with the real world of politics seems to tilt in favour of political considerations and the norm of national interest.

Orbán's decontestation of the meaning of realism highlights the interconnected nature of the notions of power, action and agency which form the adjacency of the argumentative structure. According to his statements, realism is both a normative standard for evaluating political action and a means of measuring one's own potential room for manoeuvre, a feeling out of the available political space. For Orbán, approaching a situation 'realistically' means that 'we can only cook with the ingredients we have' (Orbán04), which decontestation connects his argument to the concept of power. Even if, for example, Hungary wants an end to the war, it does not have the capacity to do so, as the country is 'not in that league' (Orbán06). However, limited options for action should not mean a complete retreat, and even if mere 'advice' cannot influence the course of the war, it is 'a matter of honour and a moral principle' to try to 'persuade the West to develop a new strategy' (Orbán02). Assessing a situation realistically therefore requires, on the one hand, the objectification of the events and detached self-reflection. For example, one can 'understand' Russian policy without 'accepting' it, but this is precisely why one should make this 'moral distinction' in order to be able to develop a course of action (Orbán02). On the other hand, the weighing up of one's own power and capacity to act is of means that those who have no 'illusions' and are not 'naïve' or 'the flower children of '68 or dreaming pacifists' know that peace depends on negotiations not between Ukrainians and Russians, but between Americans and Russians (cf. Orbán03; Orbán06).

Realism in Orbán's argument means avoiding both the 'overestimation' and 'underestimation' of available power in actual circumstances that can never be fully subjected to action and agency. Realism is not about claiming the capacity to act but about measuring one's situation. The underlying problem revealed by the war in Ukraine is that the West 'is losing its power, its performance, its authority, its capacity to act' (Orbán02), an assertion Orbán has been making for several years. 'Troubles' are not random or outside of human activity; not a 'divine decree' but 'human decisions causing conflicts' (Orbán01). However, there are more general laws of politics, and realist politics in particular, that undermine agency as the key standard. According to Orbán, what makes war particularly 'risky' is that it cannot be supervised, managed, or calibrated even by the most powerful agent (Orbán06).

The specificity of Orbán's case of realist argumentation allows us to, in Freedenian spirit, also conceptualize ideological morphology from the periphery towards the core (cf. Freeden 2015, 96). From this perspective we can understand how the core concept of interest constrains moral considerations in particular circumstances, further underpinning the claim that Orbán's case presents a somewhat coherent realist argumentative structure. The war in Ukraine (perimeter concept) is interpreted by Orbán as the West losing its power and capacity to act. It is thus linked to the concepts of power and agency, the former decontested in the light of the need for an estimation of available power, while the latter as a constrained capacity to act. Continuing this chain of concepts towards the core, particularity (i.e. the exclusion of universality) connects the periphery and adjacency to the conceptual core. By stating that 'war is not fought between the armies of good and evil', the concept of universality is excluded and the primacy of

politics over morality is fixated. Here the perimeter notion of war decontests the core and links it to conflict – as there are conflicting interests of the parties involved. Simultaneously the common interest of the EU is specified in connection to viewing Russia as a threat. As we can see the perimeter (through links between peripheric and adjacent concepts) temporarily fixes and partially reiterates the meaning of the core. At the same time, the core concept of interest affects the perimeter in turn – the independence of Ukraine is viewed by Orbán not only as a moral issue but a European interest. Hence the moral obligation of Ukraine is constrained by national interest – the core of the conceptual-argumentative structure.

Discussion: if realism is ideological what can theorists learn from it?

In the remainder of the article, we consider the implications of our analysis both for understanding the ideological nature of contemporary political discourse and the discussion of realism in political theory. Thus, we address, whether the argumentative patterns of the three leaders help us in understanding the ideological nature of realism (or the lack of it) and consider a few lessons that realist theory can learn from political practice.

As for the role of realist argumentation in politics, we argue that in a morphological and rhetorical sense, realism can be turned into an argumentative resource that provides politicians with a structured arrangement of concepts through which justification for political action can be attempted. That we are speaking about argumentation implies that the coherence of the morphological pattern is always adjusted to the rhetorical situation. Our analysis also demonstrated that realist arguments can be recognized and rejected by political opponents as realist arguments thereby contributing, albeit negatively and in the mode of contestation, to the coherence of a conceptual pattern.

Emmanuel Macron's discourse demonstrates the rejection of realism as a valid justificatory framework. Macron is not moralist in the sense that he puts forward the exact moralist opposite to the realist position, it is rather about contesting its supposed main tenets. We have demonstrated that for Macron the questioning of universality is the main normative problem to be addressed by politics, and that the concept appears both as an explicit substantive value and an implied condition for normatively regulated politics. Universality is a value because as an alternative to the law of strongest, it is a superior point of view linked to progress and humanity. At the same time, the key morphological role of universality is demonstrated by links between universality and further values (e.g. freedom, democracy, humanity) being threatened by the aggression but championed by Macron. The implication is that only when universality remains uncontested can key values underpinning the global order be safeguarded. Once competing universalities emerge, relativism undermines the normative arrangement of peace and security depriving them from their grounding principles allowing the law of the stronger to prevail.

Let us note that realism cannot be reduced to the law of the strongest (Sleat 2014), nor to the rejection of universal values, and the French President does not even advocate a coherent ideology vis-à-vis realism. Yet, the insistence on universality clearly distances Macron's position from the common conception of realism as a contextual understanding of politics legitimated by potentially altering norms (cf. Williams 2005, 10). Certain, liberal, realist accounts indeed allow for the pursuing of universal goods (e.g. sympathy for the suffering) or at least the avoidance of some universal wrongs (e.g. cruelty) (cf. Sleat

2013, 93; 100). Macron's discourse is however more straightforward as it is arranged around the rejection of particularism, relativism, and norms depending on relations of power, and while an outright moralist alternative is also avoided, the French President unambiguously advocates a politics that is guided by moral values. Whether this latter results in an alternative ideological morphology does not concern us here.

Macron, however, does not oppose relativism and the power of the strongest as a moral philosopher. Since we are discussing political thinking, we need consider his words as already embedded in political action and not preceding it, and this is where our second question concerning the lessons realist political theory can learn from political practice can be addressed.

As it was seen, Macron advocated universality as a requirement for security, order, and stability – norms usually associated with realist thinking. Moreover, the very norm of universality is claimed to be maintained by national (i.e. particular) political forces elevated to a universal perspective to fend off emerging hegemonies. Given the overall moralist context of Macron's argumentation, a clue for realist political theory appears, as it is possible that the French President is merely dissimulating the moral requirement of universality. The idea, that 'who does not know how to dissimulate, does not know how to reign' has a long history in the reason of state literature even beyond Machiavelli and Botero (Bakos 1991). Perhaps one cannot be a realist without mantling moralist principles, so it is imaginable that moralists are better realists than realists themselves (cf. Schmitt 1995, 153). However, our point is not to collapse the moralism-realism distinction but to reconsider this intertwining from the perspective of realist political theory. Notwithstanding classic and recent realists' epistemic and non-ideological commitments to political realities, the latter might be surprisingly difficult to uncover either for practical politics or theory. Macron's seemingly straightforward but potentially twofold discourse points to two different realist presuppositions. First, political action should be guided by political realities and not by ideals such as abstract universalizations. Second, a realist must always consider the difficulties of knowing political realities given, among other issues, the role of dissimulation as a requirement for successful political action. This duality can be presented but not solved here by noting that dissimulation is also the reality of politics precisely via a moralist ideology.

Olaf Scholz's rhetoric is centred around the question of the reconciliation of norms and necessities, morality with the constraints of political reality. On the one hand, there is an acknowledgment of universal moral values (human rights, freedom, democracy, pluralism, justice, solidarity) and a rejection of such rule that lacks shared norms. On the other hand, it is about the need for the adjustment of principles, the active protection and preservation of the international order, the importance of stability considering the energy crisis, and the role of interest regarding the support for Ukraine. Thus, both moralist and realist concepts and arguments identifiable in the discourse fail to merge into clusters of substantive arrangements. Consequently, realism in Scholz's rhetoric is better understood as an argumentative mean for the justification of the pragmatic balancing of moralist and realist elements.

Despite the lack of a clear and coherent conceptual pattern we need not entirely cast off the applicability of the concept of realist ideology in Scholz's case. Although the Chancellor's argumentation irrefutably falls short of a morphological interpretation, a softer, Finlaysonian, rhetorical understanding does have analytical utility, allowing for greater

space in regard to context-sensitivity and the interconnected nature of content and form. From this perspective, Scholz's discourse is best understood as a conceptualization of the problem of accommodation and reconciliation of the two sides, thus the Chancellor's realist argumentation denotes a justification of placating moralist and realist concepts and modulating norms aligning them with the contexts and specificities of political reality.

Implications of the German Chancellor's balancing position concern the problem of political judgement, a concept closely intertwined with realism and investigated by a wide range of authors (Berlin 1996; Geuss 2009; 2016; Philp 2007; Williams 2005). Understood as 'grasp[ing] the unique combination of characteristics that constitute a particular situation' (Berlin 1996, 45), 'judgment requires us not merely to use given categories but to modify and amend them as circumstances change, as they are doing continually' (Geuss 2016, 50).

Political judgement appears in Scholz's case as a clear refusal of mechanistic application of rules and a continuous reconciliation of principles and the realities of political action instead

As demonstrated above, the Chancellor rejected a 'textbook' or 'blueprint' approach to rules application and instead argued for a need of changing principles depending on the circumstances, a 'principled Realpolitik'. This is however contrasted by the promotion of a rule-based order and a consequent politics partially constrained by morality. Context-sensitivity is thus present but limited. This becomes obvious when Scholz argues for weighing up principles 'against reality on a daily basis' accompanied by the declaration that those principles 'themselves do not change' (Scholz01). It certainly does raise some issues from a theoretical point of view, as according to Geuss (2009; 2016) political judgement begins beyond application, in a realm where there are no rules or norms pre-given. 'Political action takes place in an arena in which the standards for evaluating […] what is a desirable outcome, are themselves […] always in principle up for renegotiation' (Geuss 2009, 42).

There are multiple inferences to be derived from the above. For one we could consider a less radical conception of political judgement (cf. Williams 2005, 63) which is closer to Scholz's position, at least inasmuch as there is a clear rejection of a mechanistic application of rules and an attendant context-sensitivity to be found in his discourse. Or from an alternative viewpoint, we may possibly argue that Scholz's case highlights the often overlooked affinities and overlaps between realism and pragmatism (cf. Festenstein 2016). Both being parts of a broader stream of perspectives seeking to redirect political theory towards practice (Fossen 2019, 303), they share an inclination towards contextual individual judgement as contrasted to antecedent theory, approaching political values as presumptions subject to revision, whose consequences are explored through real-world application (Festenstein 2016, 43). The lesson from such implications for realist theory could perhaps be that realism is always situated on the margins of substance and method – be it in the form of a rhetorical account of ideology, a moderate interpretation of political judgement, or a pragmatist approach to rule application. Hence, realism cannot remain completely politically indeterminate, and at least in some measure any realist approach inevitably transforms into a substantive position despite claiming to be anti-ideological.

Finally, let us turn to Viktor Orbán's discourse first to evaluate its realist ideological character and second to consider its implications for realist political theory. As mentioned

above, the Hungarian PM's realist rhetoric provides the closest case for a full-fledged ideological morphology. We demonstrated how interest functions as a core concept in Orbán's discourse, and how the relation between moral values and political considerations follows a determined hierarchy with the latter on the top.

Seemingly, Orbán's rhetoric is only sparsely substantive, avoiding the frequent use of realist concepts and instead focusing on the realistic evaluation of one's capacity to act. That is, the normative demand he advances is not so much about adhering to a set of – realist – values but to be realistic about what is achievable for a political actor by acknowledging the constraints of a particular context. Coupled with the occasional mentioning of moral values, Orbán's discourse might be comparable to Scholz's balancing position: realism is not a predominantly substantive position but a methodological stance, a guide for judgement.

However, the concept of interest anchors Orbán's discourse, establishing a pattern and hierarchy of additional terms. The concept of interest is vague enough to allow for the adoption of various positions yet, at the same time, it is decontested as national interest to guide and justify decisions within his rhetoric on Ukraine. For example, moral considerations and obligations (aid for Ukraine; the vote on Finland and Sweden joining NATO) are not disregarded by Orbán, but having no absolute value they must be weighed against the guiding principle of interest. Thus, dealing with moral values is not the same back-and-forth movement as in Scholz's case, and instead there is a hierarchy of moral values and interests set in stone. That is, the ideological nature of Orbán's rhetoric is reinforced by the conceptual arrangement that establishes a stable ordering of moral and political values. Moreover, occasionally this arrangement does not seem to follow from the evaluation of the actual political context but, quite the opposite, Orbán's discourse gives precedence to the principle of (national) interest before rhetorically assessing the problem at which it is to be applied. The aphoristic style and the frequent uses of maxims and proverbs often associated with his speeches support Orbán's realist rhetorical abstraction.

Although the concept of interest is mentioned in a wide range of contexts, it is also important that the pattern of Orbán's realist argumentation is established of a set terms, such as power, action, or agency. If there is a realist ideology in Orbán's discourse, it is mainly about the ideological understanding of politics. Since for Orbán, interests are necessarily plural, and a universal level of reconciliation is not attainable, the clash of interests is the default condition of politics. The concept of interest acquires a normatively higher position over conflict; the latter is not itself a value but an adjacent term in the realist argumentative pattern.

As it was seen, the meaning of the concept of interest, beyond its value as national interest, fulfils epistemic functions for the Hungarian PM. Realism understood as following one's interests is an epistemic good in politics. Thus, realism acquires a normative layer as it guides political actors towards decisions that are in accordance with their position, capacities, powers, and opportunities. Despite the 'technical' language he adopts, Orbán's silence about the possible differences between declared and genuine interests might be of relevance for realist political theory. What does realist action-guidance amount to if facts and interests remain inaccessible due to the inability to fulfil the epistemic desiderata of realism or there is uncertainty about them (cf. Medearis 2018)?

The problem is similar to Macron's possible dissimulation; however, Orbán's case points to broader theoretical issues (provided one disregards the related problem of dissimulating realism while being moralist). The relevance of fidelity to reality and even epistemic normativity is widely discussed in contemporary realist political theory (Aytac and Rossi 2022; Burelli and Destri 2022; Favara 2024; Sleat 2016). Of course, being a realist implies basing theoretical or practical efforts on the realities of the political situation at hand, rather than illusions or dreams. However, as our reading revealed, it is highly difficult to attain a position from which the complex web of interests can be accounted for – not only for the critical position of a theorist but especially for the political actor.

Defending his position, Orbán proposed a distinction between 'understanding' and 'accepting' Russian policies, where understanding refers to the epistemic commitment that any realist should adhere to, while accepting stands for moral approval and disapproval or even condemnation. However, the distinction holds only if interests are observable and explorable for what they are, and in most situations, 'understanding' turns into 'accepting' interests in a normative sense, even if this normativity does not necessarily follow from moral principles. It is not only a problem for realist theory that advocates the fidelity to reality but demonstrates the margins of normativity in politics that follows directly from the situational uncertainty that any political theory or practice should consider.

Realism is substantively wrong for Macron, but arguing openly in favour of the opposite could be a way of doing politics in a truly realistic sense. Perhaps Macron's position can be translated into a liberal ordorealist position, albeit one that remains hidden behind a moralist parlance. For Scholz, realism was revealed as a methodological means of arriving at a cautious, balancing politics that allows him to make judgement on how to reconcile substantive values with the context. However, this stance proved to be on the fringes of substantive – ideological – positions and the method of politics, which always implies a turn towards substantialization. Although realism was a way of looking at the world for Orbán, it was broken down into substantive concepts. Realism is touted here as an alternative to ideological politics but given that all cases remain contingent and unstable in terms of their epistemic certainties to be considered in political practice, whenever realism is suggested to be one's own position, it is also implied that it is an ideology, of how dissimulation, uncertainties, and contingencies are disregarded and eliminated. Of course, claiming to be a realist does not necessarily exclude the option of dissimulation, which means that fidelity to reality on the one hand and dissimulation and epistemic uncertainty on the other determine political action simultaneously.

Conclusion

Our aim was to explore realist argumentative patterns in the discourse of three European leaders on the Russian aggression against Ukraine. We were interested in whether the concepts and arguments prevalent in emerging contemporary realist political theory are also prevalent in political practice as well and whether realism in the latter field can be turned into a Freedenian ideological morphology. Our hope was to contribute to the political theoretical discussions on realism and ideology studies, and to link realist political theory to political thinking. In line with realist presuppositions, we did not expect political practise to be a derivative of theoretical considerations, but that the former can contribute to theorizing.

Looking more closely at the speeches of Macron, Orbán and Scholz, we have identified three forms of engagement with realism. The French President adopted a rhetoric that was moralist on its surface centred on the idea of universal values threatened by the relativistic principle of the law of the strongest. By defending a set of universal moral values but subjecting them to specific political actions, Macron's case showed that moralist rhetoric and the rejection of realism can indeed serve realist goals. Olaf Scholz also advocated some values that can be questioned from a realist point of view but openly argued for their context-dependent realization and pleaded for a balancing politics between abstract values and political circumstances. Interestingly, the German Chancellor's focus on judgement and methodological realism proved that realism can be a substantive underlying position without becoming an ideological morphology, even without adherence to a set of realist values. Viktor Orbán seemed to take a thoroughly realist position based on a pattern of related concepts. In Freedenian terms, placing the idea of (national) interest in the position of a core concept and linking it to other ideas of reason of state thinking (e.g. power, agency, survival, stability) as adjacent and peripheral concepts via the principle of adherence to reality, he came closest to a realist ideological morphology. However, even though our study has shown that realism can be a resource for ideological argumentation, the results are inevitably limited by the focus on the particular case of Ukraine. It is an exceptional situation that tends to invite both justification and rejection of realism. Moreover, it is too focused on the international terrain and neglects small-scale politics. Therefore, it is a task for further research to explore the role of realist ideological argumentation in different political contexts and to determine how circumstances shape ideological argumentation.

At the same time, we have demonstrated the link between realist political theory and the Freedenian advances in political thinking. While such a connection has already been touched upon (cf. Humphrey 2012), we aimed to go beyond theoretical arguments and provide an empirical basis to ground our claim more systematically in hopes of providing ample substance for political theory to be informed by political practice. Our approach could also help to overcome the opposition between descriptive and prescriptive strands of realism (Freeden 2012; Horton 2017) by suggesting a division of labour in which empirically oriented political theory can provide the basis for prescriptive endeavours, but without necessitating the latter.

As for our aim of contributing to contemporary realist political theory, as our analysis shows, the ideological vindication or rejection of realism should be taken by adopting a realist stance on the part of the interpreter. More specifically, we argue that contemporary realist theory, in conjunction with practical political discourse, shows that realists must not forget that political realities can be subject to political manipulation and epistemic uncertainties that are often driven or exploited by realist political endeavours. Contemporary realist theory seems too preoccupied with the main principle of fidelity to reality. While this is understandable given that realist theory was revisited in the first place to counter the abstract moralism of mainstream political philosophy, connecting realist theory to political thinking reveals that grounding theory in reality requires the addition of the problem of dissimulation and epistemic uncertainty, which are also important building blocks of the broader realist tradition.

Let us finish by turning back to our main question regarding the ideological nature of realism. Initially, we assumed that realism can be an ideology as a resource for political

argumentation, and our reading demonstrated both the presence and the contestation of realism thus understood. Our reading of the political discourse, however, revealed a further layer of the problem. Realism, both as a theory of politics and a framework and guidance for political actors has two main crucial elements that provide its inner dynamic. While following the epistemic desideratum pushes theorists and politicians to remain as close to real politics as possible, there is an opposite tendency that acknowledges such efforts as futile since one cannot ever be realistic enough. Thus, realism seems to be a futile necessity. In our reading, realism both as theory and practice, and both as method and substantive position are encompassed by a common ideological approach. What thus might be called the ideology of realism is the claim about the arrangement, hierarchy, and patterns of epistemic commitments and their impossibility, be it either in the form of an openly expressed dissimulation or the declared realism about it.

Notes

1. Not everyone associated with realist thought thinks, however, that political theory in any form should strive for action-guidance. John Horton (2017, 497) suggests that political theory should give up any aspiration to influence politics and remain on the level of description. Michael Freeden (2012, 3–4) differentiates between interpretative and prescriptive realisms and argues that political theory should focus on the former by studying political thought instead of formulating principles for political practice.
2. While realist political theory indeed took a step towards taking politicians' words and actions seriously (cf. Sabl 2002) we propose to offer a more nuanced perspective, providing an extensive ideological examination of politicians' speeches and allowing for a grasp on the reflection between practical and theoretical levels.
3. Although it is important to note that an ideology (in the Freedenian sense) by definition has more than one core concept (cf. Freeden 2005).

ORCID

Attila Gyulai http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2471-6049
Artúr Baranyai http://orcid.org/0009-0004-4044-3612

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