

The Hungarian Government's Game of Russian Roulette: Between Brussels and Moscow



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PAPP

The Brussels sanctions will destroy us!’ was a slogan featured on billboards (with the sanctions depicted as bombs) paid for by the Hungarian government, which have been displayed across the country since the second half of 2022. The campaign was introduced as a reaction to the European Union’s decision to impose sanctions against the import of Russian products – most prominently energy resources.

The rhetoric around the billboards directly suggests that it is the EU, and its sanction packages, that should be blamed for the high inflation and the energy crisis – and not the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The Hungarian government has used the rising prices to delegitimize EU policies while not discussing the role of Russia in the situation. Even though this discourse against the EU by the Fidesz government is not a new phenomenon, Hungary’s anomalous position in the middle of unanimity among other member states proves to be an interesting puzzle that should be unpacked. The aim of this article is to offer a deeper understanding of Hungary’s ambiguous standpoint by looking at the governmental discourse that has successfully convinced Hungarian voters repeatedly.

Social values diverged even before the war, as Hungary has been committed to ‘protecting’ conservative, Catholic, ‘illiberal’ values¹ from Western liberalism in terms of migration, gender questions, and liberal democracy. Over the past year, it has become apparent that this gap has not decreased, but that the EU has shifted its focus from domestic issues to Russia.

¹ <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>

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However, the divergence of these values is still significantly present in the agenda of the EU, as Hungary threatens to obstruct the EU’s policies to punish Russia and support Ukraine. The phenomenon described here had also applied to Poland before the war, as it allied with Hungary on conservative values and violation of democratic institutions.

Notwithstanding, since the outbreak of the war, Poland proved to be a crucial geo-strategic asset to the European Union. The country’s rather negative historical and political experience (such as the Soviet invasion or the circumstances of the Smolensk air disaster) with Russia might have urged the Polish government to strengthen ties with its European partners.

There is an important element of referring to the Hungarian nation's history which can be attributed to Fidesz's nationalist values and communication. It drew on Hungarian historical elements – both from the distant past and the more recent events. These references include Hungary's efforts to fight back the muslim Ottomans in the 15-17th centuries and the country's eventual division between the occupation of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, or the Soviet occupation in the 20th century. This rhetoric builds on the viewpoint that during its 1000 years of existence Hungary has always been fighting with external (mostly much stronger) powers which aimed to control the Hungarian 'nation'^{2,3}.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

During late socialism, Viktor Orbán was one of the most prominent anti-Soviet voices in 1989, which is the reason why he regards himself as a 'freedom fighter'⁴. During the conferences of the South Stream Pipeline in 2009, Orbán and his party, who were in opposition back then, heavily criticized the then left-wing government for signing an agreement about the construction of a new pipeline, arguing that it would make Hungary vulnerable to Russia and Russian interests⁵.

² Bocskor, Á. (2018) "Anti-Immigration Discourses in Hungary during the 'Crisis' Year: The Orbán Government's 'National Consultation' Campaign of 2015", [in]: *Sociology*, Vol. 52, No. 3, pp. 551-568.

³ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktors-ceremonial-speech-on-the-170th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-of-1848/>

⁴ <https://miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-opening-of-cpac-texas/>

⁵ Gyóri, L., Hunyadi, B., Juhász, A., and P. Kerkó (2015) "Domestic Political Context Since 1989: Hungary, Russia, Ukraine", [in]: J. Kucharczyk and G. Mesežnikov (eds.), *Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, Warsaw: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, pp. 52-68.



AFTER FORMING A GOVERNMENT IN 2010, ORBÁN HAS CHANGED HIS RHETORIC ABOUT STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC TIES WITH RUSSIA ALONG WITH THE EASTERN OPENING POLICY

Still in opposition, he clearly condemned the Russian aggression in Georgia: "*when an independent state is attacked by the Russians with military aggression, we should speak out clearly, directly and with a local moral standpoint*" and "*let us be clear and straightforward: military aggression is military aggression*"⁶. However, after forming a government in 2010, Orbán has changed his rhetoric about strengthening economic ties with Russia along with the Eastern Opening policy. The main argument today against cutting ties with Russia completely and supporting the sanctions is based on the necessity of energy supply for the country and most of Europe.

Hungary-Ukrainian relations in the post-socialist period can be most accurately described through the question of the

⁶ Orbán, V. (2008). Oroszország agressziójáról. Available [online]: https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20140902_orban_viktor_orszorszag_agressziojarol_2008 [in Hungarian]

140,000-150,000 ethnic Hungarians living in Western Ukraine⁷. Advocating Hungarians' rights in neighboring countries have been a central feature of Fidesz's nationalist policies. The language law of the 2010s introduced by the Ukrainian government has caused a derailment of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, as the Hungarian government expressed its concerns about the curtailing of ethnic Hungarians' rights to use the Hungarian language in public spaces.

It is worth outlining, however, that constructing Ukrainian national identity in the post-Soviet period was seen as a security issue⁸ and the worsening Ukrainian relationship with Russia could imply that any efforts to strengthen Ukrainian national identity in contrast to minorities' attachment to their home country might have been more focused towards Russia than towards Hungary. Nevertheless, other problems in the bilateral relations emerged even before the language law, when the newly elected Fidesz government introduced the Act on Dual Citizenship, which allowed ethnic Hungarians in the neighboring countries to obtain Hungarian citizenship – beside their Ukrainian one. This policy went against the Ukrainian constitution, which states that Ukrainian citizens are allowed to have only one citizenship⁹.

⁷ Waterbury, M. A. (2018) "Friends in High Places? The Externalization of Hungarian Minority Rights Claims", [in]: A.-M. Biró, K. Lantos Swett, and M. Fischer (eds.), *The Noble Banner of Human Rights: Essays in Memory of Tom Lantos*, Nijhoff: Brill, pp. 150-182.

⁸ Denber, R. (2022) "New Language Requirement Raises Concerns in Ukraine: The Law Needs Safeguards to Protect Minorities", [in]: *Language Rights*. Available [online]: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/19/new-language-requirement-raises-concerns-ukraine>

⁹ Fedinec, C. (2015) "Some Aspects of Hungarian-Ukrainian Relations in Our Time", [in] V. Padiak, and P. A. Krafcik (eds.), *A Jubilee Collection: essays in Honor of Professor Paul Robert Magocsi on his 70th Birthday*. Uzhhorod - Presov - New York: Valerii Padiak Publishers, pp. 185-192.



ADVOCATING HUNGARIANS' RIGHTS IN NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES HAVE BEEN A CENTRAL FEATURE OF FIDESZ'S NATIONALIST POLICIES

Identity and ideology are key elements of the governmental discourse to reach voters and gain legitimization in the international arena. Identity politics is increasingly present in the discussion about Orbán's Hungary. Populism and Euroscepticism can also be associated with identity construction that increasingly rejects Western liberal values and aims to establish a different path, in which Hungary is often seen as a 'trendsetter' after quitting the 'social mobility' strategy of aligning with Western values^{10,11}. Moreover, Fidesz draws its program on historical experiences of the Hungarian nation and puts great emphasis on the protection of Hungarians – not only in the state of Hungary, but also across borders.

¹⁰ Shevchenko, A. (2018) "From a Follower to a Trendsetter", [in]: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 1).

¹¹ Körtvélyesi, Z., & Majtényi, B. (2017) *Game of Values: The Threat of Exclusive Constitutional Identity, the EU and Hungary*, [in]: *German Law Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 7.

AMBIGUOUS PEACE PROMOTION

It should be clearly stated that the Hungarian government *did* condemn the Russian aggression and expressed “Hungary’s commitment to NATO and the EU”^{12,13}. However, beside these short statements of condemning the war (which seem to be a mandatory element of the government’s communication as an EU and NATO member state), the emphasis has always been on their ‘peace promotion’ and blaming the West for the economic hardships and their efforts to “drag Hungary into the war”^{14,15}.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Hungarian government has been at the forefront of advocating ‘peace’ and opposed any aid in providing arms to Ukraine. They focused on the possibility of the escalation of the war that would bring a third World War. Therefore, the focus has shifted to Hungary’s reluctance to wholeheartedly support Ukraine, which is often seen as efforts to weaken the Western alliance and promote a pro-Russian standpoint.

Hungary repeatedly emphasized its refusal to allow arms through the country or any other military support for Ukraine¹⁶ – instead, they focused on helping refugees arriving from Ukraine. One interesting point that should be mentioned is the

¹² Gulyás, G. (2022) *Magyar katonáknak ebben a konfliktusban nem kell részt venniük!*. Available [online]: <https://kormany.hu/hirek/magyar-katonaknak-ebben-a-konfliktusban-nem-kell-reszt-venniuk> [in Hungarian]

¹³ Magyar Közlöny (2023) *Magyar Közlöny 2023. évi 47. Szám*, Budapest: Magyar Közlöny. [in Hungarian]

¹⁴ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/we-will-not-allow-the-left-to-drag-hungary-into-this-war/>

¹⁵ Szijjártó, P. (2022) *Ez nem a mi háborúnk*. Available [online]: <https://kormany.hu/hirek/szijarto-peter-ez-nem-a-mi-haborunk> [in Hungarian]

¹⁶ Szijjártó, P. (2022) *A legfontosabb az, hogy kimaradjunk ebből a háborúból*. Available [online]: <https://kormany.hu/hirek/szijarto-peter-a-legfontosabb-az-hogy-kimaradjunk-ebbol-a-haborubol> [in Hungarian]



IDENTITY POLITICS IS INCREASINGLY PRESENT IN THE DISCUSSION ABOUT ORBÁN’S HUNGARY

difference in governmental rhetoric between Ukrainian refugees and refugees coming from the Middle East since 2015. While people escaping the war in Ukraine are called ‘refugees’ and the government focuses its discourse on helping Ukraine around refugee support, providing them with the necessary needs, during the 2015 migration crisis, people escaping the civil war in Syria were considered as ‘illegal migrants’, who would not only threaten European Christian culture but were also seen as terrorists¹⁷.

In contrast however, the Hungarian government put great emphasis on helping Ukraine through humanitarian channels, which allowed them to claim they are on the “side of peace”¹⁸. Fidesz not only constructed the concept of ‘refugees’ according to their own ideology, but also constructed a narrative over how they contextualize support for Ukraine as well as persist their opposition to war and display a lack of commitment to stronger action against Russia.

¹⁷ Bocskor, Á. (2018) “Anti-Immigration Discourses in Hungary during the ‘Crisis’ Year: The Orbán Government’s ‘National Consultation’ Campaign of 2015”, [in]: *Sociology*, Vol. 52, No. 3).

¹⁸ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/interview-with-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-hir-televizio-programme-daily-update-extra/>



THE DISCOURSE AROUND THE MIGRATION CRISIS WAS HEAVILY BUILT ON THE CONCEPT OF HUNGARY BEING THE 'BASTION OF EUROPE'

The discourse around the migration crisis was heavily built on the concept of Hungary being the 'Bastion of Europe', referring to the country's historical role in repulsing the Ottoman Empire's expansion to Europe¹⁹. The concept is often overstretched to viewing Hungary as the protector of Europe being torn between great powers.

'BASTION OF EUROPE'

In a speech delivered by the Prime Minister at a national commemoration of the 1848 revolution, he stated that *"Hungarian history has accustomed us to fighting for that which is the natural prerogative of more fortunate peoples"* and that *"it was never easy, but still in the end we always won. In the end we sent the Sultan home with his Janissaries, the Habsburg emperor with his accomplices and the Soviets with their*

*comrades"*²⁰. These statements by Orbán contain historical inaccuracy, as foreign powers contributed to these Hungarian 'victories' in all three cases. However, in terms of constructing a sense of Hungarian greatness in the middle of great 'European civilizational struggles'²¹, Orbán can position Hungary as a country with common sense and utter importance in the international arena.

The Hungarian established position for 'pro-peace' is strongly argued on the grounds of the considerable ethnic Hungarian community living in Western Ukraine. Fidesz has repeatedly used the discourse of protecting those Hungarians lives as of the utmost importance to them^{22,23}. Therefore, the government has refused to take a clear stance on the war, despite the repetition of the short declarations of condemning the Russian aggression in official statements aiming to reassure their Western allies.

Apart from this compulsory condemnation to satisfy the minimum expectations of the EU and NATO, they have failed to state their unwavering support for Ukraine, even when asked – as, for example, Péter Szijjártó, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, did while on BBC's HARDtalk, when asked whom Hungary wants to see win the war. Instead, the governmental officials maintain their discourse about the destructing humanitarian crises the war produces, repeat their message of the 'war

²⁰ Orbán, V. (2018, March 15). Orbán Viktor's ceremonial speech on the 170th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. Retrieved March 5, 2023, from <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktors-ceremonial-speech-on-the-170th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-of-1848/>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Szijjártó, P. (2023) *Vádak és/vagy kérdések - BBC HARDtalk*. Available [online]: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=790069862147395> [in Hungarian]

²³ <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-2023-02-18/>

¹⁹ Bocskor, Á. (2018) 'Anti-Immigration Discourses in Hungary during the 'Crisis' Year: The Orbán Government's 'National Consultation' Campaign of 2015', [in]: *Sociology*, Vol. 52, No. 3.



THE GOVERNMENT HAS REFUSED TO TAKE A CLEAR STANCE ON THE WAR, DESPITE THE REPETITION OF THE SHORT DECLARATIONS OF CONDEMNING THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN OFFICIAL STATEMENTS AIMING TO REASSURE THEIR WESTERN ALLIES

to be stopped' – *"immediate ceasefire to be established, peace talks to take place and a peace agreement to be reached finally which would stop killing innocent people"*^{24,25,26}. Here, they usually refer to their responsibility over the safety of the Hungarian community in Ukraine and,

²⁴ Szijjártó, P. (2023) *Vádak és/vagy kérdések - BBC HARDtalk*. Available [online]: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=790069862147395> [in Hungarian]

²⁵ <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-hungary-is-pro-peace-and-urges-an-immediate-ceasefire-and-peace-talks>

²⁶ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-5/>

therefore, they once again mobilize history to underpin their argument.

In certain cases, government officials diminish the war with sentences like *"every country outside Europe is aware of the limited significance of the war in Ukraine"* or *"the war in Ukraine is not a war between the armies of good and evil, but a war between the troops of two Slavic countries"*²⁷. These statements belittle Ukrainians' efforts and struggles to defend their homeland and go against not only the Western perception of the war, but also against Hungary's closest political allies in the region – such as Poland.

NAVIGATING INTERNATIONAL ALLIES

In contrast to Ukraine, the cordial relationship between Hungary and Russia is the product of long years of cooperating on various issues. Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Hungarian government has taken various ambivalent steps regarding Hungary's relationship with Russia and the European Union. Orbán flew to Moscow just weeks before the invasion, on February 1, 2022, which was later promoted as a 'peace mission'²⁸ to soften both the domestic and international critical voices.

The Hungarian position, according to the government, is clearly balanced – *"we have developed and are operating a Hungarian model. We are members of NATO and the European Union, and at the same time we have balanced political and economic relations with Russia. The Hungarian example proves that this is possible"*²⁹. This statement is also present in the government's

²⁷ <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-2023-02-18/>

²⁸ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-5/>

²⁹ Ibid.



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actions taken in the past year, with Minister Szijjártó visiting Moscow multiple times to secure various deals – including gas and oil – as well as resources necessary to expand the nuclear power plant of Paks³⁰. While the government actively shapes the Hungarian position in the situation and claims clear agency over shaping Hungary's position and interest, in the case of the energy imports from Russia, they argue that structural reasons do not allow Hungary to break with Russian energy resources (such as being landlocked and the existing infrastructure³¹).

The alleged fear of Russia being a bad loser leading to nuclear war is reflected in the construction of the argument that NATO countries should, therefore, not send

weapons or any other military resources to Ukraine. Instead, the Hungarian government turns its focus towards the EU and other Western institutions, whom the government argues to have continuously failed to listen to Hungarian voices – like in the case of a European army³². Hence, the Hungarian government flips every criticism of Russia back to the West in their rhetoric. It implies that, in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, Hungary's outlier role in the European Union can be attributed to the longstanding dispute-ridden relationship between the EU and Hungary about Hungary's Eurosceptic attitude.

An important cornerstone of Hungary's relation with the West can be found in Hungary's repeated threats to use its veto power against sanction packages developed by the EU and in its carefully weighing Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership applications. The fact that Finland's application has been accepted before that of Sweden shakes the Hungarian government's discourse of promoting peace and not angering Russia further due to geostrategic reasons of increasing the border of NATO with Russia. Rather, it implies political factors to be present in the background, which can be traced back to Sweden's continued criticism of the Orbán regime³³. This hesitation could be interpreted as exercising Hungary's power over Sweden's future, while constructing a discourse about genuine concerns about the Swedish accession.

This situation targeted both international and domestic audiences. The government managed to exert power to discourage Western actors from criticizing Hungary,

³⁰ Szijjártó, P. (2023) *Vádak és/vagy kérdések* - BBC HARDtalk. Available [online]: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=790069862147395> [in Hungarian]

³¹ Ibid.

³² <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-2023-02-18/>

³³ Kövér, L. (2023) *Napi aktuális* - Kövér László (2023-03-03) - HIR TV. Available [online]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNLUeuhRGA8> [in Hungarian]

while depicting Orbán as a responsible leader who steps up in a time of need and leads the government. Hungary has not yet vetoed any EU sanction package at the time of writing despite the continuous threats. Instead, the government exploited its veto power not only on the grounds of their backfiring effect, but also to gain leverage, for instance, to gain exception from the oil embargo by referring to Hungary being a “landlocked country with an infrastructural network that makes us [Hungary] cooperate with the Russians”³⁴.

THE LONG-STANDING CENTRAL EUROPEAN MARTYRDOM

Along with references to events of Hungarian history, the complex concept of ‘Central Europe’ is present in the formulation of the Hungarian position. The argument which expresses Hungary’s constant fight for independence from great powers also relies on the claim that the idea and meaning of Central Europe is the center of not only Europe, but also of great power struggles.

PM Orbán often argues that Central Europe is different from the West and serves as a bridge between the East and the West, and when “*there has been conflict between the East and the West, Central Europe has always been the loser*”³⁵. This claim by Orbán of Central Europe being exposed to great power interests serves as a “*chessboard and Hungary is simply a piece in their game*”³⁶ and allows the gov-

³⁴ Szijjártó, P. (2023) “Vádak és/vagy kérdések - BBC HARDtalk”, Available [online]: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=790069862147395>

³⁵ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-his-talks-with-president-of-the-russian-federation-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin/>

³⁶ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-174th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-and-war-of-independence-of-1848-49/>



THE HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT FLIPS EVERY CRITICISM OF RUSSIA BACK TO THE WEST IN THEIR RHETORIC

ernment to legitimize its argument of pursuing a double game policy between Russia and the EU. They argue that because of this ‘chessboard’, “*if it serves their [great powers] purposes, and we [Hungarians] are not strong enough, they will even sacrifice us*”³⁷.

The historical references are present in this kind of rhetoric also, as grievances of the aftermath of the Second World War and the division of Europe by the winners are pulled into the discourse to remind people that the West is unreliable and had already ‘betrayed’ the Hungarians before – not only after World War Two, but also in 1956, during the Hungarian revolution against the Soviet oppression^{38,39}. Therefore, Hungarians should not follow anyone who is under foreign influence – instead, they should only trust those who “*represent our [Hungary’s] own interests – calmly*

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Kóvér, L. (2023) *Beszéd a kommunista diktatúrák áldozatainak emléknepján*. Available [online]: <https://www.orszaggyuleselnok.hu/archivum/-/cikkek/64424860> [in Hungarian]

³⁹ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-174th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-and-war-of-independence-of-1848-49/>



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*and courageously*⁴⁰. According to Fidesz, this trustworthy actor is the national government, as it has been accentuated by the government multiple times both indirectly, through accusing the domestic opposition, and directly with sentences like: *“ever since Hungary has been led by a national government, every crisis has seen us coming out of it stronger than when we went into it”*⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-opening-ceremony-of-the-mindszentyneum/>

A related thought-provoking observation is that the link between historical injustices and the current international political situation is inconsistent in the governmental rhetoric. While the governmental communication blames and often attacks the collective West and its institutions for Hungary’s oppressed past, they are relatively soft on the contemporary ‘East’ in the same regard. This Western-blame-heavy rhetoric is present in two phenomena.

Firstly, even during discussing the revolution against the Soviet Union in 1956, the government highlights the ‘betrayal’ of the West and accuse them of the failure of the revolution (even the death of hundreds of Hungarians), while not putting much emphasis on the fact that the mass killings were carried out by the Soviets. Secondly, the Hungarian government seemingly still holds a grudge against those empires and alliances whose successor states today belong to the West – such as the Habsburgs, the West of both post-world war era, and the 1950s United States.

On the other hand, this attitude cannot be seen in the cases of Turkey and Russia. Orbán’s government has managed to overcome the atrocities carried out by their ancestors towards Hungary. The Russian president, for example, can be directly linked to the Soviet state apparatus and, if we follow the governmental argumentation, to the Soviet oppression of Central Europe as he worked for the Soviet KGB in Eastern Europe during late socialism⁴². This behavior reflects the contemporary political and ideological relationship of Hungary’s government with the government of these countries and values they represent and shows the power of history used by language to become a mobilizing force.

⁴² Knight, A. and B.A. Ruble (2000) “The Two Worlds of Vladimir Putin”, [in]: *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 2.

Despite the threatening rhetoric of vetoing sanction packages in the EU, constantly emphasizing the Hungarian sovereignty in decision making and resisting Western pressure to ‘get involved with the war’, the actions taken by the government in the international arena were often not in line with the discourse. In April 2023, for instance, the United States sanctioned certain individuals who were involved in the International Investment Bank (IIB), based in Budapest, but controlled by the Russians. The U.S. ambassador to Hungary expressed U.S. concerns about the cordial relationship the Hungarian government has with the IIB and the wider Russian government⁴³.

The sanctions against individuals involved in the bank (including a former Hungarian ambassador) was a clear message to the Hungarian government to cut ties with the bank and stay in line with the Western alliance. The Fidesz government responded by pulling out of the bank the next day. They placed their decision on the argument that *“there was no sense in carrying on with its operations following the US sanctions”*⁴⁴. Consequently, while they rhetorically project the image of a strong state resisting foreign pressure, thereby eulogizing the Hungarian nation as far as Western alliances are concerned, they also try to stay part of the team and not to alienate themselves completely from Western partners.

DOMESTIC ADVANTAGE FORGING

In April 2022, parliamentary elections took place, which brought challenges to both political sides. After 12 years of Fidesz government, six opposition parties agreed on



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a coalition and organized primary elections to choose the most adequate candidates against Fidesz for most positions. In the period preceding the elections, polls of various institutes showed that the two main blocs were head-to-head, some even prognosed an oppositional win⁴⁵. However, the results eventually brought another term for Fidesz with supermajority.

The electoral campaign was heavily built on what position Hungary should take in the war, with the opposition hoping to delegitimize Fidesz’s close ties to Russia and linking the Orbán’s government to Putin’s aggression. The debate is still heavily influenced by historical experiences of the country. Fidesz has accused the opposition parties of being controlled and financed by foreign actors – most specifically donors from the United States.

⁴³ <https://hu.usembassy.gov/news-ambassador-press-mans-remarks-at-a-press-conference-announcing-sanctions-designations/>

⁴⁴ <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-2023-04-14/>

⁴⁵ Közvéleménykutatók (2022) *Kutatócégenkénti havi eredmények: Legfrissebb kutatási eredmények*. Available [online]: <https://kozvelemenykutato.hu/havipart-preferenciak/page/7/> [in Hungarian]

However, according to the Fidesz rhetoric, Hungarians have managed to resist the “huge international power centers and organizations [that] have acted against us”, and this huge victory “like never before” stems from the Hungarians’ ‘unity’ and ‘passion’⁴⁶. This is a reference to the heroic Hungarian past and the Hungarian nation that has always resisted interference from great foreign powers as mentioned in the previous chapters, connecting to the concept of the ‘Bastion of Europe’.

Through this kind of rhetoric, they not only portray the West and liberal organizations as ‘Other’, but also the voters of the opposition side, who are excluded from the ‘unity’ described by the government. Moreover, the government constantly refers to the parties that were part of the coalition before the parliamentary elections of 2022 as the collective ‘Left’, even though some of the parties do not have a leftist agenda – either socially or economically. However, by including all these parties under the umbrella of the ‘Left’, the government manages to project that Fidesz is the one true party representing conservative values.

SCAPEGOATING THE ‘LEFT’

The label ‘Left’ is a historical reference used consciously by the government to discredit the opposition through constantly reminding the voters about socialism and that the successor party of that era continues (Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, MSZMP) to be present in the current political sphere (Hungarian Socialist Party, MSZP). By doing so, they have managed to build up a campaign in which the opposition is linked to a shameful part of Hungarian history. Thereby the opposition is discredited, and other right-wing parties are removed from



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competition at the same time. They constructed the term ‘Left’ to be disgraceful, to which no one would want to belong because they promote non-Hungarian interests and aim to destroy what the Hungarian nation has achieved.

The government managed to link the Hungarian ‘Left’ to the EU and foreign powers who pressure Hungary into a destructive war. During the electoral campaign Orbán formulated his March 15 speech around the ‘Left’ and compared them to threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic, migration crisis and Russia’s war in Ukraine directly claiming that an electoral victory of the opposition would mean ‘destruction’, ‘back[wardness]’, and ‘nightmare’⁴⁷. After

⁴⁶ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-the-election-victory-of-fidesz-kdnp/>

⁴⁷ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-174th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-and-war-of-independence-of-1848-49/>



BLAMING THE OPPOSITION AND THE EU FOR THE HARDSHIPS CONTINUED AFTER THE PARLIA- MENTARY ELECTIONS

listing the challenges that the Fidesz government had overcome, he says *“if all this were not enough, here we also have the Hungarian left”*⁴⁸, which portrays the opposition as another problem endangering security and wellbeing.

SUPERFICIAL MEASURES AS LEGITIMIZATION TOOLS

Blaming the opposition and the EU for the hardships continued after the parliamentary elections. In the autumn of 2022, the government launched the 12th National Consultation, most of which discussed the ‘erroneous’ steps taken by the EU. This time, the National Consultation included the Hungarian people aiming to *“correct the erroneous Brussels sanctions”*⁴⁹. It consisted of seven questions, all explaining in detail the governmental stance and why the given sanctions are harmful.

The questions directly accused ‘Brussels’ and the European Parliament for the negative consequences, linked the opposition parties to the Brussels standpoint. Two questions included references to migration and the COVID-19 pandemic, and other sensitive topics. Besides, terms that can evoke strong emotions such as ‘famine’, ‘migration wave’, ‘threaten’, or ‘fight’ were also included to build on people’s fears and encourage them to express their support for the government.

In general, the National Consultations fulfil various purposes. The answers made public usually allow the government to build legitimization for its actions. They also appeal to people, as they feel included and heard in serious decision-making processes, which reinforces the argument that the ‘national government’ works *for* the people⁵⁰.

An excellent example that illustrates the most recent developments is drawn from the Hungarian parliament, which is ruled by supermajority by the governmental parties. On March 31, 2023, the parliament passed a resolution marking the *“1 year anniversary of the Russo-Ukrainian war”*. In the resolution, the parliament states eight points about the inefficiency of the EU sanctions, promoting ceasefire, and peace⁵¹.

The resolution also states the condemnation of the *“Russian military aggression”* and *“recognizes Ukraine’s right to self-defense”*, but it is the shortest point and only comes after the one that states the unwavering promotion of peace, which indicates an order of priorities. The point also includes the word ‘repeatedly’ before ‘condemnation’,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Magyarország Kormánya (2022) *Nemzeti Konzultáció: hét kérdés a brüsszeli szankciókról*. Available [online]: <https://kormany.hu/hirek/nemzeti-konzultacio-het-kerdes-a-brusszeli-szankciokrol> [in Hungarian]

⁵⁰ Bocskor, Á. (2018) “Anti-Immigration Discourses in Hungary during the ‘Crisis’ Year: The Orbán Government’s ‘National Consultation’ Campaign of 2015”, [in]: *Sociology*, Vol. 52, No. 3.

⁵¹ Magyar Közlöny (2023), *Magyar Közlöny 2023. évi 47. Szám*, Budapest: Magyar Közlöny. [in Hungarian]

which implies the parliament's (or rather government's) goal to draw attention to their claim that they have already condemned the aggression⁵². This resolution was passed by the Hungarian parliament. Notwithstanding, the MPs of the 'Left' either did not vote in favor or refrained from voting, which provided the governmental media and communication with a useful tool allowing them to stigmatize the 'Left' as being 'pro-war' and that wishes for the death of more people and promotes the sending of Hungarian soldiers to Ukraine⁵³.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE GOVERNMENTAL PROPAGANDA

Through their rhetoric, they managed to convince people that the 'Left' would "*drag Hungary into this war*"⁵⁴. The success of the governmental rhetoric can be measured in a representative survey conducted by the IDEA Institute. They asked the Hungarian population (in July 2022 and then May 2023) who they held responsible for the prolonged war and then compared the results. According to their findings, seeing Russia as the main responsible actor increased from 24% to 37%, Ukraine stayed at 9%, NATO decreased from 26% to 18%, and the EU increased from 5% to 15% among the whole adult population.

These results indicate that the governmental discourse has managed to convince the electorate about blaming the European states for providing weapons to Ukraine. It is most significantly present in the results among Fidesz-KDNP voters. Among them, blaming Russia only increased by



THE GOVERNMENTAL DISCOURSE HAS MANAGED TO CONVINCE THE ELECTORATE ABOUT BLAMING THE EUROPEAN STATES FOR PROVIDING WEAPONS TO UKRAINE

3 percentage points (pp), Ukraine by 8pp and the EU by 33pp, while among the opposition voters, only the Russia-blame percentage increased, by 26pp. The 'pro-peace' campaign conducted by the Hungarian government has hence proved to be successful mostly among governmental voters. However, even among the whole adult population, the fear from a nuclear war has increased substantially, from 9% to 24%⁵⁵.

One of the key variables that has been exploited by the government as the basis of their ambivalent 'pro-peace' argument is the ethnic Hungarian community living in Western Ukraine as the result of the Trianon

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-642a98cebdb74>

⁵⁴ <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/we-will-not-allow-the-left-to-drag-hungary-into-this-war/>

⁵⁵ IDEA Institute (2023) *Az orosz-ukrán háborúval kapcsolatos vélemények a hazai felnőtt népesség körében: 2023. júliusban és márciusban elvégzett, a magyarországi felnőtt népességre nézve reprezentatív, kérdőíves felmérés.* Available [online]; http://ideaintezet.hu/uploads/docs/38/az-orosz-ukra--n-ha--boru--val-kapcsolatos-ve--leme--nyek-a-hazai-felno--tt-ne--pesse--g-ko--re--ben_ideainte--zet_2023_ma--jus.pdf [in Hungarian]



THE PROTECTION OF ETHNIC HUNGARIANS ABROAD AND PROVIDING THEM WITH HUNGARIAN CITIZENSHIP HAS BEEN A CORNERSTONE POLICY OF FIDESZ THROUGHOUT THE PARTY'S LIFE

Treaty established after the First World War. Relying on the argument that they are part of the Hungarian nation and Fidesz promoting itself as *national* government, the ruling party is empowered to not only refuse Hungary's support towards any action that could lead to the prolongation of the war, but also to criticize Ukraine for curtailing the ethnicities' rights during war⁵⁶.

HISTORICAL GRIEVANCES USED FOR POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

The protection of ethnic Hungarians abroad and providing them with Hungarian citizenship has been a cornerstone policy of Fidesz throughout the party's life, especially in the last 13 years. They have built their current war rhetoric heavily on their

responsibilities to protect Hungarians – both within and beyond borders. The variable of ethnically defined nationhood not only serves as a tool against the domestic opposition who can be accused of not being true patriots by representing foreign interests instead of Hungarian ones, but also on the international stage, as they refer to protecting the members of the Hungarian nation as a legitimizing strategy for upholding their ambivalent position towards Ukraine, towards the West, and consequently towards Russia.

Once again, the historical grievances come to the foreground by being sensitive to foreign powers pressuring Hungary. The argument of great powers tearing the country apart that resulted in today's situation in which Hungarians are dying at the frontlines in Ukraine is a very strong discursive tool that can mobilize many Hungarian citizens to agree with the government. March 15 is one of the most significant Memorial Days commemorating the Hungarian revolution and war of independence of 1848-1849 against the Habsburg Empire. It is usually heavily politicized in the annual speeches of the politicians, placing the historical events into contemporary context.

In the governmental speeches of the commemoration in 2023, they used such statements as: *"Hungarians were right in 1848, as they were in 2010, when we recognized the value of Hungarians abroad and began to reunify the nation, and we were right to unite the nation", "we are right when we stand up for national unity, and every day we work to ensure that our Hungarian communities abroad feel that the motherland will not let their hand go, even in the most difficult times"*⁵⁷ or

⁵⁶ Szijjártó, P. (2023) *Strasbourg - napirenden Kárpátalja*. Available [online]: <https://www.facebook.com/szjijarto.peter.official/videos/577836434362737> [in Hungarian]

⁵⁷ Szilágyi, P. (2023), *"Clevelandi megemlékezés az 1848/49-es forradalom és szabadságharc tiszteletére"* Available [online]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTzEL38oWXA> [in Hungarian]

"[March 15] is a birthday: a great shared birthday. (...) This is how the day on which Hungarian freedom was born lives on in our memory"⁵⁸. Through this discourse, they emphasize the unity of the Hungarian nation, with special attention to people living abroad, thereby reaching the support of the voters.

In its communications, the Fidesz government has consistently based its legitimacy on the concept of 'nation' rather than 'state', which implies the important ideational content and the role of values in its rhetoric. They draw a parallel between themselves and the heroes of 1848, who fought both for civil rights, as well as the freedom of the nation. They depict themselves as the guardians of freedom that the ancestors of 1848 fought and died for: "we have demonstrated that we can stand together and are ready to fight for our independence with two great powers at the same time"⁵⁹, referring to the then alliance of the Habsburg and Russian Empires and the Western pressure today consisting of various influential powers.

This rhetoric has seemed to appeal to many voters – both within the borders of Hungary and beyond. 1.1 million people have received Hungarian citizenship abroad since 2010, when the newly elected Fidesz government legally allowed people of Hungarian ancestry to become Hungarian citizens, that allowed them to feel included. It has benefited Fidesz because most of these new voters tend to back Fidesz-KDNP at the elections. 94% of the votes arriving

⁵⁸ <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-175th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-and-war-of-independence-of-1848-49/>

⁵⁹ Szilágyi, P. (2023) *Clevelandi megemlékezés az 1848/49-es forradalom és szabadságharc tiszteletére*. Available [online]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTzEL38oWXA> [in Hungarian]



IT HAS LONG BEEN SAID THAT HUNGARY IS RUSSIA'S TROJAN HORSE IN THE EU

from these areas was for Fidesz-KDNP at the last parliamentary elections⁶⁰.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, as the war in Ukraine has prolonged, the quick Russian victory did not come about. While the Western powers increasingly supported Ukraine, it can be observed that domestically, the Hungarian government and the media close to Fidesz still aim to sell their 'pro-peace' standing enduring all foreign pressures, while strongly criticizing the opposition parties for placing foreign interests above Hungarian ones and accusing them of being 'pro-war'.

On the international stage, however, the government was cautious about vetoing sanctions proposed by the European Union and rejected the claims of vetoing the common EU standpoint in support of the arrest warrant of Vladimir Putin. They also focused on placing a sentence on condemning the Russian aggression in official documents to strengthen their commitment to "our [Western] allies".

⁶⁰ Nemzeti Választási Iroda (2022) *Országgyűlési képviselők választása-Levélszavazatok*. Available [online]: <https://vtr.valasztas.hu/ogy2022/valasztasi-informaciok/levelszavazas?tab=results> [in Hungarian]

Throughout all the arguments brought up by Fidesz, they claim to protect the Hungarian nation, in which ethnic Hungarians across the border are included, as well as Hungarian soldiers, families, and farmers whose work and wellbeing are threatened by the EU sanctions and policies and the overall Western ‘pressure to join the war’. Regardless of whether there is an ideological support for Russia and Putin from Fidesz’s side or just material considerations, this rhetoric managed to convince the Hungarian voters again to put their trust in Fidesz, which in turn gives a strong base for legitimization when standing up against EU policies.

Domestic politics is a crucial player in governmental communication, as proved by the 2022 parliamentary elections. The government was highly successful in reaching voters and convincing them to vote for Fidesz. Even though the elections are over, Fidesz continued the rhetoric of portraying the ‘Left’ as being ‘pro-war’, but also became slightly more cautious on the international stage.

It will be interesting to follow the upcoming European parliamentary elections of 2024 and see the Hungarian government’s tactics to blame the hardships on the opposition and the West. What can be concluded at this stage is that Fidesz has been successfully functioning for over a decade with the strategy of constantly fighting a real or imagined enemy, who is usually foreign or has alleged ties to foreign organizations and individuals (such as George Soros, ‘Brussels’, or ‘dollar-fueled left’⁶¹). In this construction of the enemy, the long-standing metaphor of Hungary being the ‘Bastion of Europe’, thereby protecting European values based on Christianity and conservatism, is very

present. PM Orbán and his government portray the Hungarian nation with themselves at the helm as the saviors of Europe and protectors from immoral liberal ideas, as the continuation of the glorious Hungarian past.

Constant references to the past and drawing on both the times of glory and of vulnerability mobilize domestic support, which enables the government to pursue their current policy. The Orbán government politicizes history, thereby exploiting the population’s feelings to pursue their agenda. They abuse historical grievances, with great emphasis on the Trianon Treaty and the Revolution of 1956 against the Soviets, both when the West can be blamed for ‘betraying’ the Hungarian nation, to strengthen their power.

It has long been said that Hungary is Russia’s Trojan Horse in the EU, weakening the institution from the inside with its veto powers, which could change in the foreseeable future. As the war prolongs and the world is increasingly polarizing (with the West on the one side and Russia and China with their allies on the other), Hungary might no longer be able to continue with its ambivalent rhetoric, trying to ride two horses at the same time.

The war has drastically changed the current European security structure and, therefore, the latter will need to be reconstructed. The EU will, therefore, need to rethink their own role and responsibilities in it – along with Hungary.



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⁶¹ <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-5/>

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