

# Public Attitudes and Societal Influences on Hungarian Foreign Policy

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Politics in Central Europe (ISSN 1801-3422)

Vol. 21, No. 4

DOI: 10.2478/pce-2025-0024

**Abstract:** *This study examines Hungarian foreign policy attitudes and assesses the influence of public perceptions and societal interests on policymaking. Using theoretical frameworks, secondary sources and an opinion poll, it analyses Hungary's foreign policy orientation since 2010, decision-making structures, the patterns of public perceptions and the impact of societal influences. Findings reveal a multi-layered model of foreign policy formation in which institutional centralisation, control over policy networks and dominance in communication enable the government to monopolise decision-making. This top-down control coexists with selective representation of public preferences and limited pluralism, allowing the government to pursue its strategic interests while maintaining the appearance of majority consensus. Theoretically, the article challenges the binary notion that democratic systems promote pluralism while autocracies suppress alternative policy ideas. Instead, it argues that Hungary's competitive authoritarian regime represents a hybrid configuration in which diverse foreign policy preferences exist across both elites and the public, but have limited influence on policymaking due to high levels of centralisation and constrained participation.*

**Keywords:** *Hungary, foreign policy, public attitudes, public influence, policymaking*

## Introduction

Since the early 2020s, the emergence of multiple global and regional crises, the increasing unpredictability of the international order and the incoherence of great power strategies have forced EU member states to adapt their foreign policies to a more volatile international environment. While most addressed this challenge by strengthening their Euro- Atlantic partnerships, Hungary

adopted a controversial, multidimensional strategy. Since taking office in 2010, the government led by Viktor Orbán has pursued the doctrines of Global Opening (first through the introduction of Eastern Opening in 2011, followed by the Southern Opening in 2015), aimed at strengthening relations with non-Western powers (Tarrósy & Solymári 2022). Initially presented as complementary to EU and NATO commitments, the strategy soon generated tensions due to its alignment with autocratic regimes, particularly with Russia and China (Orenstein & Kelemen 2017).

In the exchange of mutual accusations that followed these tensions, EU and NATO partners portrayed Hungarian foreign policy as a threat to the West's collective security. Regarding Russia, criticism predated the pandemic, accusing Hungary of deepening ties with Moscow through projects like the Paks 2 nuclear power plant and the establishment of the International Investment Bank in Budapest (Waisová 2020). Since 2022, criticism has intensified, accusing Hungary of maintaining its energy dependence on Russia, blocking Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership, spreading Kremlin disinformation and vetoing aid packages to Ukraine (Gizińska & Sadecki 2023). Closer ties with China have also been criticised. In this area, notable projects such as the Budapest-Belgrade railway, Huawei's 5G technology and plans for a Fudan University campus in Budapest have sparked controversy (Venne 2022).

The Hungarian government responded to the criticism through communication campaigns (Dudlák 2023). On the one hand, these campaigns sought to explain foreign policy choices based on geopolitical imperatives, arguing that the proximity of great powers forced Hungary to maintain pragmatic positions vis-à-vis different power centres (Orbán 2023). On the other hand, the government also countered critical opinions with influence operations. These domestic and international operations utilised a wide range of platforms, including opinion pieces, television interviews, online advertising, billboard campaigns, targeted political lobbying and social media tactics. The campaigns portrayed the West, and the EU in particular, as an expansionist power block seeking to change traditional Hungarian values, exploit its economic advantages and interfere with domestic politics (Schlipphak & Treib 2017).

While the government's foreign policy agenda has been extensively analysed (Bartha 2018; Schmidt & Glied 2024; Varga & Buzogány 2021), public sentiment and its impact remain underexplored. Repeated electoral successes of FIDESZ certainly indicate a degree of societal support, suggesting that the majority of Hungarian voters have tended to approve of the foreign policy orientation since 2010. Opinion polls seem to support this trend, showing an increasingly positive view of emerging powers such as Russia and China, particularly among government voters (Bíró-Nagy et al. 2023; Rényi 2022). However, there has also been widespread criticism in public discourse. Not only the opposition, former foreign ministers (e.g. Géza Jeszenszky, Péter Balázs), academics and

civil society representatives, but senior FIDESZ officials have also expressed their disapproval, mainly in the context of deteriorating relations with Euro-Atlantic partners (Krekó 2015; Stumpf 2024). Surveys also show time-resistant majority preferences for Western orientation, suggesting that public attitudes may be multi-layered (Bíró-Nagy et al. 2023; Krekó 2018).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the Hungarian public's attitudes toward foreign policy and assess the extent to which societal interests and public perceptions have influenced foreign policymaking. The central research question asks whether Hungary's controversial foreign policy decisions are aligned with public opinion. Based on the theoretical background outlined in the following section, the study tests three competing hypotheses that offer possible explanations:

H1: The government's foreign policy is broadly aligned with public approval.

H2: Foreign policy decisions lacked clear public support but did not provoke significant dissatisfaction, due to widespread indifference and the electorate's primary focus on domestic issues.

H3: Foreign policy decisions differed from public preferences and faced widespread opposition yet were implemented through centralised control of policymaking.

To test these hypotheses, the paper first outlines theoretical frameworks and reviews Hungary's main foreign policy orientations and policymaking structures. These governmental dynamics are then compared with the foreign policy preferences and influence capacities of main interest groups and the general public. The comparison is based on both secondary sources and data from a primary N=800 opinion poll conducted between 2 and 14 February 2024. The findings are interpreted in the discussion section, which maps the structure of public attitudes, assesses their potential impact on foreign policy outcomes and identifies conceptual implications.

## **Theoretical background: The nexus between foreign policy and public attitudes**

This section explores theoretical perspectives on foreign policy attitudes and examines how societal preferences may influence policymaking. Starting with attitudes, the public has traditionally been viewed as an outer layer of political society, primarily concerned with domestic well-being, with limited interest or understanding of international affairs. This perspective, synthesised in the 1950s by the Almond-Lippman consensus, argued that public opinion on foreign policy was uninformed, indifferent and volatile (Almond 1956; Lippmann

1955). Dominant realist and neo-realist theories of the era reinforced this view, portraying the state as a unitary entity led by elites who represent the public by defining and protecting national interests (Morgenthau 1948; Walt 1998). The public was thus seen as a marginal, disconnected and uniform part of international affairs that neither influence nor should influence foreign policy actions (Kertzer 2023).

This conventional view was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s as public dissatisfaction with foreign policy directions emerged during protests in countries such as the US and France. Emerging neoliberal approaches acknowledged these developments, recognising that increasing globalisation had empowered non-state entities, allowing them to establish individual foreign policy views and interests (Rosenau 1980). As a result, these entities, including corporations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media outlets, gained the ability to independently assess international affairs and form complex perspectives on national foreign policies. Constructivism has also acknowledged this transformation. Their theoretical argument, however, focused more on the public, arguing that societies have their own, though often shifting, norms, identities and cultures (Flockhart 2016). According to Adler (2008), this cognitive environment is also reflected in the foreign policy views of elites who externalise domestically embedded social principles through the decision-making process and adopted policies.

Empirical studies have also challenged the Almond-Lippman consensus, showing that public attitudes toward foreign policy tend to be stable rather than volatile (Holsti 1992; Page & Shapiro 1992). However, perspectives differed on the origins of these attitudes. Given the prominence of state-centred realist theory, the first argument proposed a top-down configuration in which the public takes foreign policy cues from elites (Efimova & Strebkov 2020). In this context, elites can refer to a variety of actors, including political, economic, religious and academic figures, the press or foreign powers (Eichenberg 2016). These actors have agenda-setting and explanatory capacities and provide foreign policy narratives to the public, which accepts recommendations because it lacks a deeper understanding of international affairs (Almond 1956; Lippmann 1955). Although the top-down model suggests considerable power, elite influence varies across regime types. In pluralist democracies, competing elite views shape public attitudes; in authoritarian systems, the ability to shape societal perceptions may be centralised around the political leadership (Zimmerman 2002).

While the top-down model was more consistent with realist theory, the bottom-up model aligned with liberal and constructivist theories, emphasising pluralist tendencies in the formation of foreign policy attitudes. Zaller (1992) observed that individuals selectively accept or reject elite narratives based on personal experiences, values and social factors such as education, ideology and party affiliation. Kertzer (2023) conceptualised these findings by arguing that

individuals' foreign policy perceptions are shaped by two principal models. First, through a horizontal approach driven by ideological attitudes ranging from militant to cooperative internationalism, with the former emphasising security and deterrence, and the latter favouring cooperation and multilateralism (Holsti 1992). Second, through a vertical model, whereby attitudes toward specific foreign policy challenges are determined by hierarchically structured values. These include personal experiences, general worldviews, political leanings, party affiliations and the collective judgment of policymakers. Together, these factors guide people in forming specific foreign policy attitudes (Kertzer 2023).

Similar to the traits of attitudes, the extent to which public perceptions influence policymaking remained debated. Theories of international relations were again divided on this issue, with realists arguing that the public has limited influence, liberals seeing foreign policy as a pluralist product and constructivists regarding it as the externalisation of domestic norms (Walt 1998). Top-down and bottom-up models also took different positions. The top-down model was more sceptical about the magnitude of societal influence, arguing that policymakers and elites determine the public's choices. Nonetheless, this model also recognised that the division of elites provides indirect opportunities to influence decision-makers. As Efimova and Strebov (2020) described, public opinion has a greater impact on foreign policy when elites are divided and seek voter support. Ideally, this would allow not only the selection of more popular foreign policies, but also the constraint of unpopular ones (Baum & Potter 2015). This was also the main argument of the bottom-up model, which, however, argued that public perceptions influence policymakers constantly, not just occasionally. The constant influence may derive from the relatively stable foreign policy perceptions of individuals and the public scrutiny of decision-making, with the ability to shape foreign policy outcomes through checks and balances and the collective public efforts (Risse-Kappen 1991).

To bridge these perspectives, the literature has proposed a combined approach emphasising three domestic factors: the nature of political institutions, the degree of societal fragmentation and the control over policy networks (Gourevitch 1986; Katzenstein 1985). According to Risse-Kappen (1991), the prevailing arrangements of these domestic factors collectively determine the ability to impose policies on the public. For example, strong states with a high degree of institutional centralisation have more capacity to control society and overcome domestic opposition, whether it comes from the public or the elite. On the other hand, weak states with fragmented institutions have a limited ability to impose policies on the public, as decentralised units may be subject to pressure from non-state interests. In addition to institutions, social structure has a major influence on the competition between state and society. Following the previous logic, a polarised or fragmented society has limited potential to mobilise social organisations, while a less heterogeneous population has a greater chance of

exerting collective pressure. Based on the previous two, the final factor of the combined approach is the question of who has dominant control over policy networks – i.e. whether the state, society or both have access to shape foreign policy decisions. Depending on the configuration (strong state + polarised society; strong state + homogeneous society; weak state + homogeneous society; weak state + polarised society), the outcome is determined by the relative strength of the dominant factor or bargaining process among comparatively weak domestic components (Risse-Kappen 1991),

Empirical evidence indicates that foreign policy formation is an integrated phenomenon influenced by both bottom-up and top-down models (Eichenberg 2016; Kertzer 2023). Governments are generally in the most comfortable position when elites and the public find consensus; thus, decisions align with both societal and elite attitudes. However, a more challenging situation arises when the public actively oppose policy orientations, undermining the unity of foreign policy orientation. According to Almond's mood theory (1960), these oppositional sentiments are triggered when events directly threaten the normal conduct of affairs, and the public develops an assertive and self-confident mood. Powlick and Katz (1992) further note that the public opinion against official strategies may be amplified when disagreeing elites produce alternative policy orientations and effectively disseminate competing views. Nonetheless, the probability of public opinion activation in opposition to government policies is largely influenced by regime types. Liberal democracies, with pluralistic communication networks, allow alternative views to reach the public and shape policy, whereas autocratic regimes limit such opportunities through centralised control, monopolisation of media and disempowerment of non-governing elites (Efimova & Strebkov 2020; Tang 2005).

## Foreign policy orientation and policymaking in Hungary

To establish the contextual background, this section outlines Hungary's foreign policy orientation and formation. Beginning with the first, the victory of FIDESZ in 2010 represented a shift in geopolitical thinking. The new doctrine predicted the politico-economic rise of Asian powers and the decline of Euro-Atlanticism (Matolcsy 2023), framing the consequent structural transformation as both a threat and an opportunity. A threat, because the country's location on geopolitical fault lines was seen as a liability in a bloc-based global order. And an opportunity, because systemic positions allow Hungary to act as an intermediary between East and West, potentially gaining hub benefits (Orbán 2023).

This geopolitical interpretation has been reflected in a fragile and often incoherent balancing act, shaped more by the Hungarian government's ad hoc political interests than by any coherent strategic design. Since 2010, these political interests have nonetheless influenced foreign policy and produced recurring

patterns in three loosely defined areas: maintaining Western embeddedness while engaging alternative power centres; remaining as neutral as possible and mediating between competing geopolitical interests; and supporting like-minded politicians abroad to strengthen Hungary's international position. In the past 15 years, these objectives have influenced many of the foreign policy actions. The first goal was realised through the Eastern and Southern Opening, both sought to legitimise Hungary's balancing as an attempt to navigate between Eastern and Western interests (Pap & Kitanics 2014). The second goal was particularly, but not exclusively, reflected in the Russo-Ukrainian War, in which the government acknowledged the aggression but opted for relative neutrality (Koenen 2023). The realisation of the third goal was seen before elections in the West and beyond, with the Hungarian government providing support to allies such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Giorgia Meloni, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders or Robert Fico (Higgins 2023).

Assessments of the foreign policy orientation are rather mixed. From an economic perspective, authors framed the shift as a pragmatic response to the EU's slow recovery from the 2008 financial crisis, yet highlighted the absence of concrete benefits, profitability and sustainability (Deregözü 2019; Farkas et al. 2016). From a political standpoint, the orientation has been characterised as a policy of aligning Hungary's historical and cultural ties with Eastern and Western influences, as an attempt to balance Eastern partnerships and Western commitments, or as a populist foreign policy (Balogh 2022; Pap & Kitanics 2014; Varga & Buzogány 2021).

Whatever the viewpoint, understanding the shift requires the examination of policymaking. In this area, the FIDESZ governments' departure from the principles of good governance in favour of the good government model is certainly the first point of reference. Since 2010, the new approach has distanced itself from the neoliberal argument of limited state intervention, liberalisation, decentralisation and privatisation. Instead, it embraced the good government model, in which the state has been seen as an active, intelligent and strong entity that uses problem-based decision-making to effectively represent the interests of the majority (Stumpf 2009). In the adopted paternalistic approach, the government assumed responsibility for defining the strategic guidelines and selecting the optimal decisions to achieve the best results at the lowest cost (Gazdag 2018).

The resulting centralised system has shaped foreign policy and its institutional framework (Stumpf 2016; Visnovitz & Jenne 2021). Foreign policymaking has been influenced mainly by the institutional reforms taking place in the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the highest level, the establishment of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in 2011 and the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister (COPM) in 2015 provided oversight over lower-level government units (Müller & Gazsi 2023). This was also the case in foreign affairs, where key portfolios were transferred to the PMO and COPM,

giving them control over areas such as grand strategy, EU affairs, international development and foreign intelligence. As these units were also responsible for defining government communications, the highly centralised system gave the prime minister extensive powers to define foreign policy and its official narrative.

Institutional changes in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reinforced this centralisation. Following the appointment of Péter Szijjártó in 2014, the ministry shifted from the moderate Western-leaning orientation to prioritising pragmatic politico-economic factors. These factors constituted two major transformations. Firstly, the downgrading of the Euro-Atlantic orientation in favour of foreign policy diversification, which was achieved through the formation of vice-undersecretaries specialising in larger entities in the global East and South, and the replacement of experienced diplomatic staff with political loyalists (Müller & Gazsi 2023; Varga & Buzogány 2021). Secondly, within the renamed Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), the newly appointed diplomatic staff were primarily assigned the responsibility of expanding economic relations beyond the EU (Rényi 2015).

These reforms were implemented through strict control and centralisation, a process that not only increased the politicisation of foreign policy but also eroded the ability of ministry personnel to pursue independent initiatives (Müller & Gazsi 2023). The consequent multi-layered centralisation has tied decision-making to the political interests of FIDESZ and the prime minister (Hettyey 2022). As a result, foreign policy has been defined by a top-down formula that has monopolised strategy and policymaking at the highest level, while delegating implementation to highly controlled subunits.

## **Public attitudes on Hungarian foreign policy**

This section examines foreign policy perceptions focusing on attitudes revealed by secondary sources and primary findings. To start with general principles, foreign policy discourse in Hungary has historically been dominated by political and intellectual elites (Pritz 2006). In simplified terms, predominant discourses adapted to specific historical requirements and produced competing foreign policy ideas. These concepts ranged from integration with Western states (e.g. the Habsburg Empire) and organisations (e.g. the EU), through the establishment of an independent and sovereign Hungarian power centre against or in cooperation with other Central European states (e.g. Visegrád cooperation), to accepting and accommodating the penetration of Eastern empires (e.g. the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Union) (Ablonczay 2006; Jeszenszky 2002; Pritz 2002). Although most of the public was in no position to comprehend the geopolitical, ideological, economic or cultural implications of these competing orientations, historical Hungarian societies had varying degrees of foreign

policy consciousness. Due to historical experiences, elite divisions and the lack of consensus culture, this consciousness has rarely been unified but has instead been polarised and fragmented. Depending on the historical period, support for nationalism and independence, or the rationale of accepting the subordinate position and using it to seek security, diplomatic leverage and economic progress have been at the epicentre of this polarisation (Bibó [1946] 2015).

Following the Cold War, these historical legacies continued to shape not only Hungary's foreign policy orientation but also public attitudes toward it. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the traumatic legacy of the Rákosi and Kádár eras reinforced a broadly shared preference for Western integration, generating a brief period of rare elite and societal agreement on foreign policy goals (Gazdag 2018). Euro-Atlantic accession enjoyed widespread public support, and successive governments aligned with this consensus, leading to NATO membership in 1999 and EU accession in 2004. However, escalating political crises after 2006 and the global financial crisis of 2008 disrupted this unity and led to the re-emergence of competing foreign policy narratives. Sensing these shifts, the emerging Fidesz party responded by shaping a foreign policy rhetoric rooted in its domestic political interests, drawing on societal grievances and mobilising populist techniques. This narrative adopted typical features of populist foreign policy: ideological inconsistency, a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, dramatised and personalised communication, and centralised, leader-driven decision-making (Wajner & Giurlando 2023; Visnovitz & Jenne 2021). The resulting foreign policy has sent mixed signals not only to international but also to domestic audiences. Although it incorporated elements that resonated with a wide range of historical attitude groups (e.g. national sovereignty, Western embeddedness, criticism of Euro-Atlanticism and engagement with Eastern powers) it ultimately reflected inconsistent and often contradictory directions.

While the unfolding foreign policy has been extensively analysed in terms of its political and economic dimensions (Balogh 2022; Pap & Kitanics 2014; Varga & Buzogány 2021; Schmidt & Glied 2024), the way the public has perceived its contradictory directions has remained underexplored in the literature. Nevertheless, the few available opinion polls on foreign policy have provided valuable insights, revealing contemporary manifestations of historical preferences (Bíró-Nagy et al. 2023; Krekó 2018).

Regarding attitudes toward Western alliances, surveys conducted by TÁRKI in 2000 indicated that approximately two-thirds of Hungarians supported joining the EU. A similar proportion (64.8%) endorsed Hungary's membership in NATO (TÁRKI 2000). About a decade later, in 2009, some 57% of Hungarians surveyed had a positive view of NATO (Pew Research Center 2009), and in 2011, 69% would have voted to reaffirm the country's membership in the

EU (Bíró-Nagy 2017). Globsec's surveys confirmed these positive attitudes in 2017 and 2024. According to their polls, in 2017, 61% of Hungarians believed

EU membership was beneficial and 81% considered NATO vital for their safety, while by 2024, 86% wished to stay in the EU and 91% favoured continued NATO membership (Hajdu et al. 2024; Milo et al. 2017). These and other examples indicate a time-resistant pro-Western public attitude (Krekó 2018).

Nevertheless, polls also show changing perceptions towards emerging powers. Indicatively, Pew Research revealed that the percentage of Hungarians with a negative view of Russia's influence dropped from 56% in 1991 to 42% in 2009 (Pew Research Center 2009). The shift demonstrates a growing polarisation in attitudes towards Russia, which continued in the following years. In 2017, 48% of Hungarian respondents viewed Russia unfavourably, while 39% held a positive opinion. By 2023, this division had deepened, with 47% opposing close ties with Moscow and 48% supporting them (Bíró-Nagy et al. 2023). Similarly, following the Central European trends, favourable views of China have recently improved. According to Krekó (2018), sympathetic attitudes towards China, measured on a scale of 0 to 100, have followed an upward trend, starting at 34 in 2007, rising to 46 in 2014 and reaching 51 in 2018. Subsequent surveys underline the improvement in recent years (Bíró-Nagy et al. 2023).

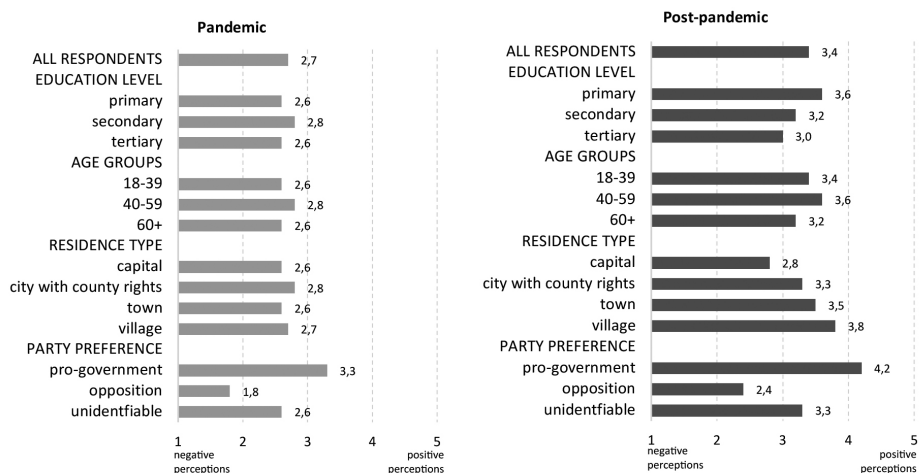
The polls cited above measured specific preferences for country orientations but neglected to assess approval ratings.<sup>1</sup> To test this, we conducted our own foreign policy survey. Based on the methodological practice of previous studies (Gaston & Aspinall 2021; Kleinberg, 2022), we measured an N=800 sample with the aim of examining satisfaction levels during and after the pandemic using a complex methodology. The online self-completion questionnaire was completed between 2 and 14 February 2024,<sup>2</sup> hence opinions about the pandemic period were collected retrospectively. The survey targeted respondents aged 18 and over and was representative of the Hungarian population in terms of age group, education level, type of municipality and gender. Respondents were selected randomly to ensure that all Hungarian citizens over age 18 had an equal chance of completing the survey. The poll included questions about the performance of Hungarian foreign policy and asked respondents to evaluate separate statements related to the pandemic period and the time of data collection (i.e. February 2024). The questions measured opinions on a scale from three to five.

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1 The data was collected by Fishermen's Online Ltd, which conducted the online survey through paid advertising on the Meta platforms.

2 The data was collected using an online questionnaire. The questions were available on a separate website, and respondents could select them on this interface. The questionnaire was completed anonymously, and no information was requested or collected during the survey that would allow the respondent's identity to be identified. Respondents to the questionnaire were recruited through Meta ads. No data was transferred from Meta's system to the questionnaire data.

**Figure 1: Average perceptions of Hungarian foreign policy during and after the pandemic**



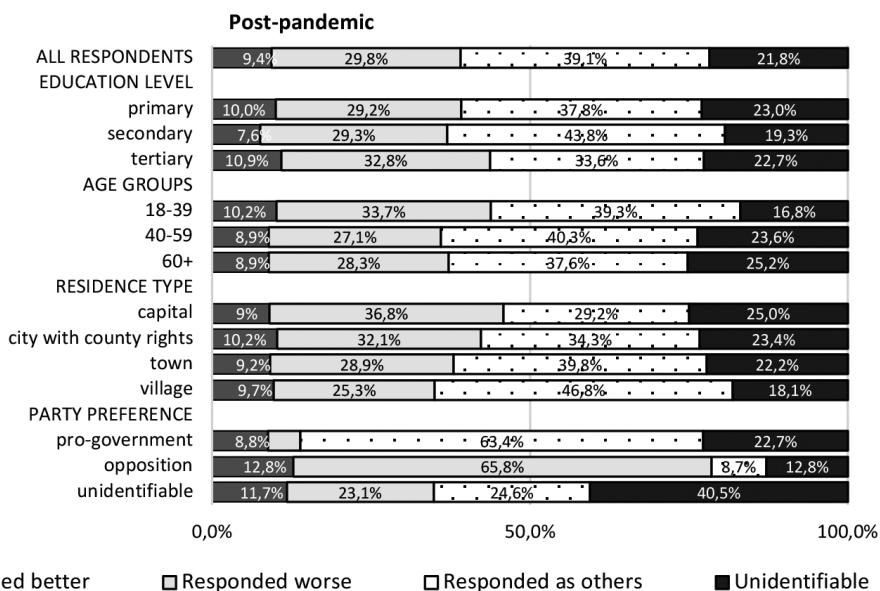
Source: Author's own editing, data collection conducted by Fisherman's Online Ltd.

Measures of direct satisfaction are presented in Figure 1, indicating an overall improvement in satisfaction levels between the sample periods. As theoretical references argue for stable and rational foreign policy perceptions (Holsti 1992; Page & Shapiro 1992), our analysis quantified changes by calculating scale averages of socio-demographic dimensions. Results confirm trends of improvement and indicate an overall divergence between sample periods. Measured on a five-point scale, perceptions during COVID-19 were rated at 2.7, slightly below average, while afterwards measured at 3.4, slightly above average. The difference between the two scores is statistically significant.

Socio-demographic patterns also differed significantly between the two periods. During the pandemic, opinions were relatively uniform across education, age and residential groups, but party preference showed a notable divide.<sup>3</sup> Pro-government voters rated foreign policy performance slightly above the mean (3.3), while opposition supporters rated it much lower (1.8). Those with uncertain party affiliations gave ratings slightly below average, reflecting the overall population trend. In the post-pandemic period, satisfaction improved across all groups, but intragroup differences became more apparent. Perception of foreign affairs deteriorated steadily with increasing educational level, falling from 3.6 points for primary educated to 3.2 and 3.0 points for those with secondary and tertiary education, respectively. Age also played a role, with 40–59-year-olds the most satisfied and 60+ the least. The largest intragroup divergence appeared in the residence scale, showing modest perception improvement among residents

3 Opinion differences were tested by Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), a statistical method used to determine whether there are significant differences between the means of three or more groups.

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of the capital (2.8) and significant in the villages (3.8). Party preference continued to strongly influence perceptions. Pro-government voters rated foreign policy performance significantly higher (4.2), while opposition supporters rated it lower (2.4). Among undecided voters, satisfaction remained slightly below average, mirroring the general population.

The analysis of scale averages confirmed general improvement in perceptions but indicated a dynamic change with divergences in many points. To get a more detailed picture, multivariate statistical methods were used to identify attitudes. In this evaluation, the study attempted to examine relative attitudes. Resulting findings are presented in Figure 2, which show indirect perceptions by comparing respondents' evaluations of Hungarian foreign policy with their individually assumed EU average.

The results again indicate fragmented and polarised views. Most respondents rated foreign policy as performing worse or equal to the EU average, with only a minority considering it better. During the pandemic, unfavourable opinions were highest among tertiary-educated respondents (39.5%), individuals aged 18–39 (40.4%), residents of the capital (42.4%) and opposition voters (66.2%). While attitudes in these groups improved slightly after the pandemic, they remained predominantly negative. In contrast, respondents who equated Hungarian foreign policy performance with the EU average were primarily secondary-educated (32.4%; 43.8%), aged 40–59 (29.2%; 40.3%), rural residents (31.9%; 46.8%) and pro-government voters (45.9%; 63.4%). This relativising response was therefore more common among respondents with generally positive views, reflecting sympathy towards foreign policy.

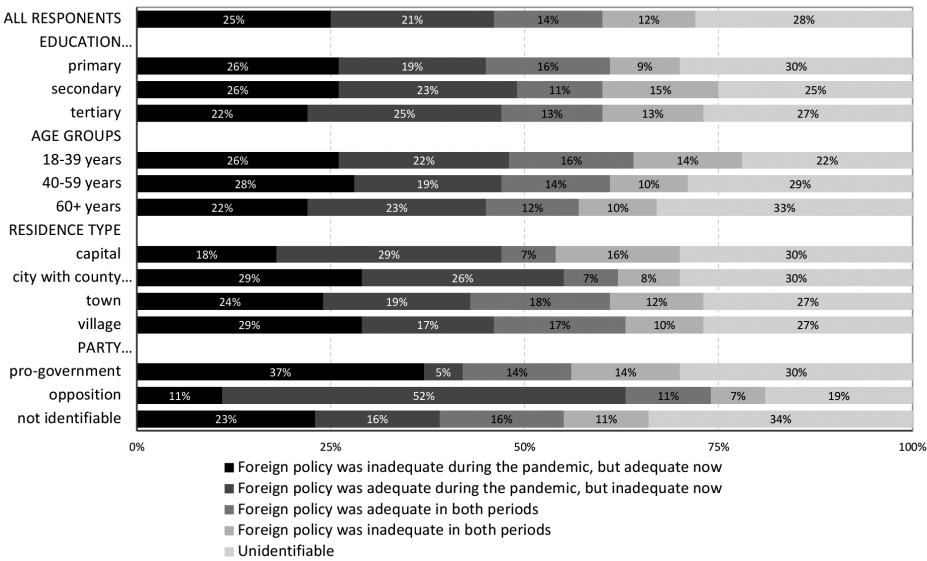
Questions on the direct (Figure 1) and indirect (Figure 2) evaluation of foreign policy were also combined into a single multivariate analysis. First, we used principal component analysis (PCA) to reduce the number of dimensions, thus creating an indicator for both sample periods that jointly addresses direct and indirect evaluation of foreign policy, creating a dimension that captures hidden patterns of opinion.<sup>4</sup> Then, cluster analysis was used to identify the possible combinations of the two opinion dimensions and the prevalence of these combinations among the population.<sup>5</sup> As a result, four opinion groups could be identified (Figure 3). These clusters reflect the latent opinion structure of respondents better than the average of individual variables or their pairwise relationships alone, thus allowing for more comprehensive analyses.

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4 PCA offers an advantage over simple distribution or mean analysis by effectively reducing data dimensions, while preserving correlations between variables and the information they contain. By revealing the hidden structure within the data, PCA condenses the most important characteristics and phenomena into a single new variable, enabling more efficient analyses.

5 Integrating PCA allows cluster analysis to identify natural clusters that would not necessarily be evident in cross-tabulation or mean comparison approaches, which have limited ability to deal with the internal interactions of different opinion dimensions.

**Figure 3: Perceptions of Hungarian foreign policy during the pandemic and now (Clustering using principal component and cluster analysis)**



Source: Authors' own editing, data collection conducted by Fisherman's Online Ltd.

The largest group (25%) represents those who think that Hungarian foreign policy performed poorly during the pandemic but are satisfied with its current conduct (February 2024). On the other hand, 21% think the opposite, attributing good performance in the first period but poor in the second. Smaller groups showed consistent attitudes, with 14% satisfied in both periods and 12% maintaining a negative outlook throughout. Notably, 28% of respondents had no structured opinion, reflecting either indecision or disengagement.

The findings also reveal that while socio-demographic factors such as age and education level had a marginal impact, geographic location and political affiliation played a more dominant role. Respondents from the capital were more likely to approve the foreign policy of the pandemic era but were critical of current efforts (29%). Political affiliation had the strongest impact. Among pro-government respondents, 37% thought that Hungarian foreign policy had problems during COVID-19 but is working well now. The groups with a consistently positive or negative opinion are around the average, as is the proportion of those who cannot be identified. Thus, a significant proportion of government voters are perceived as sensitive to foreign policy during the pandemic, but passive afterwards.

Among the opposition, the opposite is true. A majority (52%) thought that foreign policy worked well during the pandemic but expressed dissatisfaction

with its current performance. This confirms that the government's actions during the pandemic have had a highly polarising effect. Among those with no identifiable political affiliation, the distribution of opinion is in line with the average for the total voting age population.

Overall, the primary and secondary results indicate that the Hungarian public has developed complex foreign policy attitudes, which show both stability and change. In terms of regional preferences, the Euro-Atlantic orientation has remained stable since the 1990s, while there has been a growing polarisation vis-à-vis emerging power. Approval rates seem to be less stable, showing divergences across sample periods and socio-demographic scales. Importantly, political preferences appear to be the most important determinant of attitudes, indicating persistent divisions in public sentiment. In this division, minority views are more coherent, tending to reject FIDESZ's foreign policy and openness to emerging powers, while majority views are contradictory, likely to approve the foreign policy and Euro-Atlantic orientation.

## **Societal influence on foreign policy**

Following the review of attitudes, the paper examines the influence of interest groups and the public as a whole. As outlined previously, Hungarian foreign policymaking is characterised by a top-down formula that is centralised, politicised and personalised. While these patterns are not uncommon in chancellor-type systems, institutional checks and balances should ideally retain influence over foreign policy (Gazdag 2018). The Hungarian case differs from these ideal cases as actors below the highest level had limited ability to influence policy directions. This applies to both the opposition parties and parliamentary committees, neither of which had the political and legislative majority to exert pressure on the ruling party. The same is true of the few critical voices within FIDESZ. These critical opinions have emerged mainly in the context of Euro-Atlanticism, as different interpretations of relations with the emerging autocratic powers have been a source of disagreement since the introduction of Eastern Opening (Stumpf 2024).

Beyond formal political representatives, various interest groups can exert influence on foreign policy. Skonieczny (2017) categorises these entities into ethnic associations, foreign government lobbies, religious organisations, non-governmental groups and corporate lobbies. Focusing first on the domestic layer, Hungarian interest groups had only limited impact on foreign policy. Among these, privileged business circles can be considered the most influential, given their ability to directly impact tendering and decision-making (Boda 2020). Nevertheless, their lobbying capacity was not independent of the government and largely depended on clientelist favouritism (Panyi 2020). A similar but less influential symbiosis characterised the relationship between the diaspora

and the government. In this partnership, the government was still the more powerful counterpart, providing citizenship, voting rights, state subsidies and grants to the diaspora (Herner-Kovács 2014). In return, Hungarian minorities were expected to support Fidesz's policies and candidates domestically and to represent the motherland's interests abroad, with the latter role involving only limited ability to influence the overall direction of foreign policy. Like the diaspora, religious groups, the academic community and professional associations had limited ability to influence decisions. Their typical role was to support specific diplomatic processes on a primarily bilateral basis.

Among the interest groups, NGOs were in a particularly disadvantageous position. Compared to Western European standards, the number of politically active NGOs in Hungary was relatively low and showed a decreasing tendency since 2010. The decline was caused by several factors. These include the establishment of the National Cooperation Fund in 2011, which centralised state funding and the distribution system (Kákai 2013). The financial difficulties were further complicated in 2017 by the government's introduction of strict regulations to curb foreign funding. These decisions reduced the number of politically active yet independent organisations, leaving the few that remain largely incapable of influencing foreign policy (Kákai & Glied 2017). At the same time, political advocacy became increasingly party-affiliated. On the pro-government side, this activism has tended to involve the promotion of official policy line by government-organised and supported GONGOs,<sup>6</sup> with no ability to influence foreign affairs (Deák 2022). On the opposition or independent side, activism allowed promotion of alternative policy views at the local and national levels yet was unable to impact policymaking.

Although not included in Skonieczny's (2017) list of interest groups, the domestic media environment should be examined. In this sector, centralising tendencies began with the loyalisation of public broadcasters, changing the legal, organisational and personnel frameworks of state channels. The second step was the domination of the pro-government press and broadcasters and the acquisition of majority stakes in opposition or neutral media (Adamczyk 2023). The third step expanded these practices to regional and local outlets, allowing the government to control about 80% of the Hungarian market for political and public affairs news (Griffen 2020). To manage this vast media conglomerate, the government set up the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), which controlled 476 media products as of November 2018 (TASZ 2024). While these centralising tendencies allowed the Foundation to exert significant national influence, their role was limited to the implementation of communication directives, with no ability to influence policy decisions. In

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6 GONGOs are non-governmental organisations set up at the initiative of the government and/or indirectly supported by the state, the governing party or another GONGO.

this respect, the remaining critical and independent media found themselves in a similar situation. Nevertheless, despite their inability to directly impact foreign policy, emerging digital media platforms (Telex, Partizán), acting as *de facto* public broadcasters through the online space, became crucial actors in shaping a government-free foreign policy discourse.

While the dominance of FIDESZ largely limited the influence of domestic interest groups, Hungary's structural weaknesses as a small state have occasionally forced the government to accommodate certain foreign interests. The actual extent of these influences remains unclear due to the lack of publicly available evidence. Nevertheless, the interests of some countries – such as Israel, China, Russia and Turkey – have frequently coincided with the positions that Hungary has taken in the EU or NATO (Gizińska & Uznańska 2024; Orenstein & Kellermen 2017). With different objectives, the US and the EU also successfully pressured Hungary to change its positions, leading to the lifting of vetoes on aid packages for Ukraine or Sweden's bid for NATO membership (Higgins 2024). Foreign lobbying has also helped large corporations to secure tangible benefits. Rosatom obtaining a construction license – despite competition from several Western firms – for the Paks 2 nuclear power plant, and Chinese BYD and CATL's establishing large factories are examples of such corporate achievements (Wu 2024). Nevertheless, these impacts remained modest compared to the contribution of German automotive manufacturers, which accounted for approximately 4–5% of Hungary's GDP in the second half of the 2010s, with 2018 marking a peak where the vehicle manufacturing subsector alone contributed 9.02% to industrial output (Braun et al. 2020). These corporations have not only benefited from tax benefits and state subsidies, but through their direct reach to ministerial level, secured Hungary's support in EU legislations (Panyi 2020).

When analysing societal impact on foreign policy, it is worth looking at the influence of the broader public. In this regard, public influence can be either direct, with mass movements pressuring the government to take majority-preferred actions, or indirect, with influencing the leadership through public attitudes and electoral votes (Forgas & Williams 2016). Despite the legacy of 1956 and 1989, there has been no major mass movement on foreign policy issues in Hungary in the last two decades. Although there have been occasional mass demonstrations on domestic issues, protests on foreign policy have remained relatively rare and have taken the form of short marches in front of specific foreign embassies based in Budapest.

Unlike direct pressure, indirect influence can be somewhat identified in the foreign policy. Its impact may be observed by comparing public perceptions and election results with foreign policy priorities, decision-making practices and policy outcomes. In this respect, policy priorities were embodied by the Eastern Opening doctrine, decision-making practices by top-down efforts and policy outcomes by the Hungarian balancing act that maintained Euro-Atlantic mem-

berships while being highly critical of them. A rather complex profile emerges when these are compared with public preferences. The government broadly reflected majority preferences by preserving the appearance of a Euro-Atlantic stance, but disproportionately prioritised minority positions that aligned with its own interests, particularly strengthening relations with non-Western powers. This approach proved divisive, with notable opposition not only from opposition voters, urban residents and the higher-educated but also from portions of government supporters, rural populations and less-educated groups.

Despite neglecting these preferences, FIDESZ still won four elections with two-thirds majorities. This indicates that foreign policy played a marginal role in influencing elections: While dissatisfaction with foreign policy fuelled discontent among certain groups, most voters appeared unconcerned about their overlooked preferences. Consequently, the government has effectively limited opportunities for indirect public influence and monopolised foreign policy by conforming to stable majority preferences but centralising the policy-making approach.

## Discussion and implications

This section interprets the results by analysing the attitude profile and influence potential of the Hungarian public and then comparing findings with research questions. Proceeding with the first, results revealed a complex picture. As a basic pattern, the secondary literature identified consistent support for the Euro-Atlantic orientation, even among FIDESZ voters, and despite the government's critical rhetoric. This apparent contradiction reflects the diverse voter base of the populist ruling party, which comprises different political clusters. This diversity also explains why pro-government voters expressed not only support for the Euro-Atlantic stance but also more favourable attitudes towards emerging authoritarian powers, demonstrating a duality in their preferences. In contrast, opposition voters were more consistent in opposing the government's foreign policy direction and expressing negative views of Euro-Atlantic competitors.

This political fragmentation was particularly evident during the pandemic, when support for foreign policy was lower even among FIDESZ voters. This suggests that the pandemic brought foreign policy decisions, such as the rapid purchase of vaccines, into direct contact with citizens and triggered more critical reactions. This highlights the crucial role of domestic affairs in shaping public attitudes towards foreign policy: The domestic electorate was more responsive and critical when threats affected them directly.

The second period of the approval survey further illustrated the nexus between domestic and foreign policy perceptions, coinciding with another major threat, the Russo-Ukrainian War. Compared to the pandemic, the war posed

a significant security threat, but had limited direct impact on the daily lives of Hungarians. This relative remoteness, combined with government rhetoric consistent with public preferences – distancing itself from the conflict – led to increased approval of foreign policy. This period also revealed important socio-demographic trends: Higher levels of support were observed among the primary educated, the rural population and older generations, and even opposition voters improved their opinions.

These general observations enable us to profile foreign policy perceptions of the Hungarian public during the survey periods. This should be based on theoretical considerations that outlined complex attitude formations, with top-down models emphasising elite-driven agenda-setting and narrative control, and bottom-up approaches focusing on the role of personal factors in shaping individual opinions (Kertzer 2023; Zaller 1992). Compared to these principles, the Hungarian case reflects a multi-layered dynamic, with foreign policy interpretations shaped by three interrelated levels: elite narratives, societal priorities and individual perceptions.

At the elite level, foreign policy attitudes were framed by competing narratives rooted in historical discourses such as Westernisation, independent power seeking or accommodating on Eastern roots. These narratives were relatively stable and provided the dominant framework for interpreting foreign affairs. Elites used these narratives to legitimise foreign policy actions and shape public opinion, but the extent to which they could influence voters' perceptions was moderated by societal and individual factors. At the societal level, foreign policy was secondary to domestic concerns, where public discourse was dominated by internal priorities. The resulting indifference led to fragmented and more volatile opinions, as societal focus on domestic issues reduced the importance of aligning foreign policy attitudes with political affiliations. At the individual level, several personal preferences shaped the filtering of elite-defined foreign policy discourses. The priority given to foreign policy shifted depending on the level of personal involvement, increasing when individuals felt that international affairs directly affected them and decreasing when such relevance was absent. These dynamics influenced preferences: Under indirect involvement, abstract factors such as general worldview, ideology or political affiliation were more influential, while direct involvement led to the prioritisation of concerns like security, stability and well-being. The process contributed to further volatility of perceptions, explaining why a notable proportion of respondents changed their attitudes within a short period.

Despite differences, these levels collectively determined perceptions, resembling an integrated attitude formation influenced by top-down and bottom-up models (Eichenberg 2016). The top-down formula played a crucial role in providing a stable framework of foreign policy narratives that shaped societal and individual perceptions. The vertical version of the bottom-up formula fragmented

the coherence of these foreign policy narratives due to societal prioritisation of domestic affairs and frequently shifting individual perceptions (Kertzer 2023). The resulting attitude profile was therefore shaped by stable preferences for the most important principles, but volatility in the case of less central issues.

After interpreting attitudes, the analysis proceeds to assess the public's potential influence on policymaking. The assessment applies the combined model outlined in the theoretical section and examines the level of influence by reviewing the nature of political institutions, the degree of societal fragmentation and the control of policy networks (Gourevitch 1986; Katzenstein 1985). With respect to the state of political institutions, the results indicated a highly centralised system. Since 2010, this system has been characterised by top-down policymaking, with key planning and decision-making powers concentrated in the offices of the Prime Minister (Müller & Gazsi 2023). With this high degree of centralisation, pressure from decentralised or lower-level government units has had limited ability to gain momentum, and even the role of the MFAT appeared to be more implementative than proactive.

The absence of social homogeneity, identified as the second factor in the analytical model, reinforced centralising tendencies by limiting the public's ability to exert collective influence. As noted in the previous section, this influence can be either direct or indirect. In Hungary, direct influence by non-governmental grassroots movements on purely foreign policy issues, such as applying pressure through mass demonstrations, remained rare. This is partly due to the secondary importance of foreign policy among the electorate, and partly because the government has not questioned Hungary's Euro-Atlantic memberships, thereby preserving a core consensus between the majority of the public and the governing elite (Dreher 2023). Apart from support for EU and NATO integration, however, Hungarian public opinion has not developed a cross-party consensus on other foreign policy matters. As a result, mass movements initiated by independent or opposition actors typically targeted both domestic and foreign policy directions with criticism, while government-organised GONGOs marches (e.g. Peace March) supported official positions. This polarisation, fuelled by a weak consensus culture and the marginal role of foreign policy, has limited not only direct but also indirect public influence. Consequently, the government has been able to selectively interpret and represent public preferences. Thus, Fidesz has aligned itself with the majority preference on Euro-Atlantic integration, while using societal fragmentation to legitimise minority positions that served its own strategic interests.

The combination of strong state and fragmented society has also enabled the government to gain control over policy networks. The only real evidence of pluralist involvement can be found among economic actors and external lobby groups that have occasionally managed to influence decision-making (Boda 2020). Nevertheless, these influences were usually driven by economic interests,

international political pressures or both, and did not fundamentally affect the top-down decision-making framework. Nonetheless, the overcentralised system did not prevent interest groups from developing their own foreign policy narratives. These policy alternatives became part of the public discourse, had agenda-setting and explanatory capacities, and could be identified in voters' preferences, but had limited ability to influence foreign policy. Thus, foreign policy networks, from planning through decision making to implementation, were predominantly controlled by the government, leaving very limited opportunities for non-state actors to incorporate their interests.

Overall, the results indicate that the Hungarian public had limited potential to mobilise pressure directly from social organisations or to influence foreign policy indirectly through unified attitudes or voting preferences. Although the government was constrained by the need to uphold certain fundamental principles, such as EU and NATO membership, it retained considerable autonomy to monopolise foreign policy. This was accomplished by consolidating control over political institutions and policy networks, and by exploiting the historically fragmented and currently polarised society.

These findings allow the evaluation of hypotheses which sought to determine whether Hungarian foreign policy was driven by (H1) societal views, (H2) enabled by public indifference or (H3) pursued despite opposition due to centralised decision-making. The results indicate that H1 and H3 are only partially supported, while H2 is strongly validated. In the case of H1, the government's foreign policy aligned with public preferences only selectively. While Hungary's Euro-Atlantic membership remains a long-standing majority preference and was maintained in practice, many of the government's more controversial foreign policy directions, particularly its engagement with authoritarian powers, lacked broad societal approval and were shaped more by political interests than public demand. By contrast, H2 is strongly supported. The limited attention of foreign policy among voters, combined with their dominant focus on domestic issues, enabled the government to pursue a multidirectional strategy without facing significant electoral or societal backlash. Even where disapproval existed, it remained fragmented and failed to generate meaningful resistance. This also suggests that H3 can only be partially confirmed. While the centralised nature of decision-making clearly allowed the government to act autonomously in foreign policy, this control was never seriously challenged by cohesive public opposition. Critical societal forces remained scattered and lacked the organisation or institutional channels necessary to influence policy outcomes. Consequently, the results indicate that Hungarian foreign policy during the sample period was shaped by a combination of political selectivity, public disengagement and centralised executive control.

Evaluation of the hypotheses enables the identification of broader theoretical implications. In this regard, the most important theoretical argument is that

the characteristics of the political system fundamentally affect both public perceptions and foreign policy decision-making (Eichenberg 2016; Kertzer 2023; Steenbergen et al. 2007). The literature argues that, in pluralist democracies, competing elite views shape public attitudes through top-down mechanisms, while individuals selectively accept or reject narratives based on personal values and experiences. This process is facilitated by pluralistic communication networks that allow alternative viewpoints to circulate, reach the public and influence policymaking (Zaller 1992; Efimova & Strebkov 2020). By contrast, in autocratic systems, the ability to shape societal perceptions is often centralised around the political leadership, limiting the space for alternative narratives and public influence (Zimmerman 2002, Tang 2005).

According to our results, the Hungarian case does not fit neatly into the binary categories of liberal or autocratic systems, as it displays the characteristics of a mixed, hybrid configuration. In this model, public attitudes are shaped by both pluralistic and centralised mechanisms: While formal democratic institutions and free expression remain in place, foreign policy decision-making is highly centralised, government communication dominates the public sphere, and non-governing elites and alternative narratives are increasingly marginalised. On the one hand, this constrains the government to respect the most fundamental public preference, namely, the preservation of Euro-Atlantic memberships. On the other hand, it allows the selective representation of less central foreign policy preferences, guided primarily by political interests.

This configuration reflects the typical characters of competitive authoritarian regimes, where public influence is constrained by executive dominance, limited media pluralism and fragmented societal opposition (Levitsky & Way 2002). In such systems, policy responsiveness is not entirely absent, but it tends to be symbolic and selective, focusing on widely supported issues while sidelining more contentious or divisive preferences (Bieber 2018; Esen & Gumuscu 2016). In this context, foreign policy emerges as a crucial policy area through which governments can maintain both international flexibility and domestic legitimacy: Core public values are upheld, but meaningful public participation in policymaking is largely excluded. The Hungarian case illustrates this configuration by demonstrating how the structural logic of competitive autocracy extends into the foreign policy sector, shaping both the formation of public attitudes and the extent to which those attitudes are reflected in actual policy decisions.

## Conclusions

This study has examined Hungarian public attitudes toward foreign policy and their potential influence on policymaking, focusing on whether controversial government decisions reflect societal preferences, public indifference or centralised control. The findings indicate an integrated foreign policy formation

model, in which public attitudes are shaped by both elite-driven narratives and individual-level factors, while policymaking remains predominantly top-down. Thus, in Hungary's competitive authoritarian system, foreign policy has been dominated through institutional centralisation, the government's control of political communication and the fragmentation of non-governing actors, while consensual and key public preferences such as support for Euro-Atlantic integration have been preserved.

As a broader implication, the paper demonstrated how the structural logic of competitive autocracy extends into the foreign policy sector. It shapes both how public attitudes are formed and the limited extent to which these are reflected, if at all, in actual policy decisions. Building upon these findings, future research should examine how foreign policy in hybrid regimes evolves when political competition or international pressure increases. The Hungarian case has already shown signs of such shifts since the time of data collection, underlining the importance of future research.

## Acknowledgments

The work was supported by the National Research Development and Innovation Office of Hungary through NKFIH (OTKA) Grant PD 138100.

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