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CONTENTS

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Concepts and Dangers of Authoritarian Law and Politics

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Abstract: *The rise of authoritarian populism and hybrid regimes has become a pressing challenge to liberal democracy, raising urgent questions about the role of law in these political transformations. This paper examines how authoritarian regimes reshape legal systems by creating and deploying what will be termed 'authoritarian law'. The study applies a comparative and theory-oriented approach, systematically engaging with major conceptual frameworks to examine how authoritarian regimes manipulate legal structures for the purpose of political consolidation. The paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the process of how authoritarian regimes manipulate legal structures and legislative processes, the aim is to identify the specific ways in which populist governments bypass or erode democratic norms. The paper is based on the theoretical investigation on five conceptual traditions: authoritarian legalism, which highlights the emergence of a distinct authoritarian conception of law; the dual state theory, which distinguishes between normative and prerogative forms of law; populist constitutionalism, which uncovers constitutional paradigms departing from liberal norms; the Unitary Executive Theory, which reveals transatlantic dimensions of authoritarian law; and the concept of constitutional dictatorship, which emphasises the use of exceptional measures. Results indicate that authoritarian regimes use law not to safeguard democratic institutions but to erode them through political instrumentalisation and weaponisation of legal processes. The paper concludes that law itself becomes a central institutional framework for stabilising authoritarian rule, undermining its own normative integrity.*

Keywords: *authoritarian populism, exceptional governance measures, autocratic legalism, dual state, populist constitutionalism, unitary executive theory, constitutional dictatorship*

Exceptional measures of governance in the era of polycrisis

Liberal democracies in Western and Eastern Europe, as well as in North America, have experienced numerous shocks. The second half of the 20th century was marked by a prolonged crisis of liberal democracy and its constitutional paradigm, lasting several decades. Authoritarian populist forces (especially in Europe, the US and Latin America) have exploited the political and constitutional crises that have torn liberal democracy apart to build their own systems in opposition to liberal democracy. Mainly in Europe (above all in Hungary and Poland) have hybrid regimes emerged that have clearly triggered a wave of de--democratisation. However, in the case of authoritarian populisms (although they learn from each other), we cannot speak of any kind of general recipe. In this study, I examine the legal and political solutions developed by authoritarian populist forces to dismantle liberal democracy.

The acute crisis of liberal democracies has been further exacerbated since 2008–2009 and the political systems and societies have been shaken by major, interconnected crises that often overlap. This interconnectedness – what Adam Tooze aptly terms a polycrisis (Henig & Knight 2023) – includes the economic and financial crisis beginning in 2008, the refugee and immigration crisis from 2015, the pandemic starting in 2020 and the war in Ukraine from 2022, resulting from Russian aggression. These crises are global in nature and have affected not only liberal democracies but also authoritarian regimes, both old and new democracies, and countries at the core and (semi-)periphery of global capitalism. These developments highlight the increasing prominence of the executive as a crisis manager and the fundamental transformation of power-sharing paradigms by populist political leaders – paradigms that have traditionally defined liberal constitutionalism. This shift is also significant in the context of the global ecological and climate crisis, as climate movements push climate emergency thinking to the forefront. As a result, these trends are driving a reconfiguration of the traditionally limited constitutional and political role of the executive in liberal democracies – a transformation catalysed by a Zeitgeist shaped by authoritarian populist forces. This part of the study highlights how contemporary emergencies have reinforced existing, new types of authoritarian tendencies. The exploitation of emergencies by authoritarian political forces is a long-standing phenomenon, but contemporary authoritarian populists have used new legal and constitutional (Landau 2013) tools to exploit the weaknesses of liberal democracies and create permanent crisis management regimes, thereby eliminating the remnants of the rule of law.

The rise of the exception

There are few theoretical attempts to address the deep structures underlying the rapidly changing legal-political culture of our time – such as imperial thinking,

Concepts and Dangers of Authoritarian Law and Politics   Attila Antal

new security paradigms and the re-emerging privileges of executive power. In three defining works – *Homo Sacer*, *Remnants of Auschwitz* and *State of Exception* – Giorgio Agamben (1998, 1999, 2005) sought to lay the foundations for a comprehensive theory that attempts to fill this gap. It is particularly timely to examine the state of emergency, as it relates to the enduring problem of sovereign power, which dates back to the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages.

Agamben analyses the state of emergency as a modern institution with roots in the French Revolution and the World Wars. By the mid-20th century, however, it had become a dominant and paradigmatic form of governance (Humphreys 2006: 677). His theory offers a legal explanation that applies to relational systems of human existence that are not subject to law. In defining the state of emergency, law is constantly attempting to 'colonise' life itself. Agamben outlines two main trends regarding the legal relationship of a state of emergency to law. According to the first – represented by figures such as Santi Romano, Maurice Hauriou and Costantino Mortati – the state of exception falls under positive law, as it is considered an autonomous source of law (Agamben 2005: 23). This approach is accepted by international law and, in many cases, domestic legal systems. When a public crisis (such as an environmental or economic catastrophe) threatens the 'life of a nation', international treaties and many constitutions allow for the temporary suspension of certain fundamental rights guaranteed by the state. Clauses of this kind, which codify derogations from the normal legal order, authorise the state to take unavoidable emergency measures (Hickman 2005: 655). According to those who interpret the state of emergency within the framework of the legal system, this development represents the highest achievement of contemporary international (and domestic) law. While this conception of the state of emergency remains grounded in law, it simultaneously violates individual rights – thus, according to Hickman (2005: 659), creating a two-tier constitutional system. This perspective views the state of emergency as a natural or constitutional right of the state to defend itself.

The other trend explored by Agamben – represented by Paolo Biscaretti di Ruffia, Giorgio Balladore-Pallieri and Raymond Carré de Malberg – conceives of the state of emergency as fundamentally outside the legal order, as something that precedes and is essentially distinct from law. From this perspective, constitutional approval of a state of emergency is merely a pragmatic acknowledgment of the limits of constitutional rule. As Alexander Hamilton famously stated: 'The circumstances that endanger the safety of nations are infinite, and for this reason no constitutional shackles can wisely be imposed on the power to which the care of it is committed' (Madison et al. 1987: 185). In this sense, it is neither possible nor desirable to constrain executive power through judicial accountability mechanisms during emergencies. Rather, a legal vacuum – or exceptional legal space – must be created in which the state can act without restriction until constitutional order is restored. However, under such circumstances, the

normal structures of legal protection come into conflict with the demands of an exceptional state, which requires extreme flexibility (Humphreys 2006: 679).

The problem of state of exception is the political and legal sovereignty in the framework of constitutional institutions and, more precisely, the state of exception relies on the rise of the executive power. There is a complex relationship between the state of emergency and the presidentialisation with regard to the rise of the executive power. The (excessive) dominance of the executive power is a general trend in today's political systems, and the characteristic is that this dominance is embodied in a single political leader, even if it is not accompanied by significant changes in public law in the given public law system (Poguntke & Webb 2005: 1). At first glance, one might even think that populist leaders are pioneers of the new type of the presidentialisation process, but the application of the state of exception shows that it is different indeed. The main components of the presidentialisation process are: the head of the executive is not accountable to the legislature; the head of government is elected by the people; the head of implementation is empowered to govern and therefore also bears political responsibility (Poguntke & Webb 2005: 2–3). In contrast, in classical parliamentary systems, the relationship between the legislature and the executive is much closer and the parliament has strong powers of accountability and responsibility and enforces them. In presidential systems, the head of the executive acquires extremely strong executive powers and resources, giving him unparalleled political autonomy vis-à-vis the legislature as a whole, so the head of the executive has the necessary political leadership. For all these reasons, Poguntke and Webb see presidentialisation as a developmental process that enhances the control and autonomy of political leadership over power within the governing party(ies) and the executive branch, and promotes electoral processes that focus on political leadership (Poguntke & Webb 2005: 4–5). That is, presidentialisation transforms the exercise of democratic power in three main respects: executive, partisan and electoral. However, it is not necessary for these trends to take the form of changes in public law.

In my view, the process of presidentialisation has undergone a dramatic transformation, with executive power increasingly relying on the unlimited authority granted through the state of emergency. However, the global ecological and climate emergency places this dynamic in an entirely new context. This unprecedented, long-term crisis cannot be addressed through conventional extraordinary measures alone. Unlike other emergencies – such as economic or security crises – the climate crisis is ongoing, diffuse and systemic, thereby challenging the traditional logic of short-term emergency governance.

Authoritarian populism and exceptional measures

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that the separation of war from politics was a fundamental objective of modern political thought and practice, shared

Concepts and Dangers of Authoritarian Law and Politics   Attila Antal

by both liberal and non-liberal theorists (Hardt & Negri 2004). This consensus has since collapsed, as authoritarian populist regimes increasingly implement the kind of permanent states of exception theorised by Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005). As Michael Head observes: 'The early years of the twenty-first century have seen increasing resort to emergency-type powers or claims of supra-legal executive authority, including by the Western countries regarded as the world's leading democracies' (Head 2016: 1). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing global social crises, the expansion and normalisation of emergency powers has become one of the defining features of our time – perhaps more than ever before.

The clear boundaries of war have eroded; war and peace have, to some extent, merged, and the expansion of emergency powers reflects this shift. Authoritarian populist regimes recognise these tendencies and increasingly rely on emergency governance. These regimes often wield the punitive power of the state to manufacture political enemies and eliminate them – effectively producing modern iterations of *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998). In this context, emergency measures and the emergence of marginalised social groups – cast as contemporary homo sacer – have become defining features of today's authoritarian populist systems. These developments reveal how states of exception are no longer temporary responses, but integral tools of governance and control.

Authoritarian populism can be understood as the use of exceptional measures to maintain political power, and the COVID-19 crisis has further fuelled this phenomenon. According to Agamben (2014), there has been a fundamental transformation in the concept of governance – one that 'overturns the traditional hierarchical relation between causes and effects. Since governing the causes is difficult and expensive, it is safer and more useful to try to govern the effects' (Agamben 2014). Authoritarian populist regimes exploit objective crises – such as wars, public health emergencies and migration – for their own political purposes. They shift focus to internal, subjective crisis management, in which resolving the social problems caused by these crises is no longer the priority. Instead, as Agamben argues, the central political aim becomes the permanent management of crises – to sustain and govern the exceptional situation, often without pursuing meaningful social outcomes. These regimes increasingly manage the effects of crises they themselves have helped create, marking a profound shift in political strategy. As Agamben puts it:

> The ancien régime aimed to rule the causes; modernity pretends to control the effects. And this axiom applies to every domain, from economy to ecology, from foreign and military politics to the internal measures of police. We must realize that European governments today have given up any attempt to rule the causes; they only want to govern the effects. (Agamben 2014)

In such a context, purported or manufactured exceptional situations provide authoritarian populist regimes with an opportunity to criminalise political opposition. They portray targeted groups as internal enemies and claim to protect the public from threats they themselves have constructed. This represents a shift from traditional governance to a form of rule dominated by police power, where the normal becomes exceptional and, as Antal (2019: 29–30) observes, anything becomes conceivable.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique opportunity to observe the functioning of emergency legal regimes during a global crisis. One of the most comprehensive studies in this area was conducted by Ginsburg and Versteeg, who compiled a substantial dataset documenting the responses of approximately 106 countries from the outbreak of the pandemic through mid-July 2020 (Ginsburg & Versteeg 2020). The authors analysed emergency governance during the pandemic within the conceptual framework of existing emergency models, with particular attention to the roles of legislatures and courts. Their findings revealed that the most common governmental response involved the legislative model: 52% of the countries surveyed relied on legislation to address the pandemic. This approach was adopted by several established democracies, including Germany, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, the United States, Australia, Belgium, Taiwan, South Korea, South Africa and Japan (Ginsburg & Versteeg, 2020: 25). While 89% of the surveyed countries had detailed constitutional emergency provisions, only 43% of them actually declared a constitutionally grounded emergency. In total, 40% of the full sample – including countries without such constitutional protocols – declared an emergency. This group included Spain, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Armenia, Sierra Leone and Senegal (Ginsburg & Versteeg 2020: 25). Importantly, the study also found that the decision to activate constitutional emergency provisions was not strongly correlated with the authoritarian or democratic nature of the regime. In fact, 42% of democratic regimes and 33% of authoritarian regimes made use of such provisions (Ginsburg & Versteeg 2020: 25). However, there were notable exceptions where emergency governance was exercised solely through executive measures, without a clear legal or constitutional basis. Countries such as China, Cuba, Cameroon, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Cambodia, Rwanda, Laos and Tanzania fell into this category (Ginsburg & Versteeg 2020: 25).

Concepts of legislation in authoritarian regimes

In the following, I will attempt to demonstrate that the role of law and constitutionalism is crucial in the establishment and development of modern autocracies. As David Landau argues: 'constitutional change needs to be viewed as a core part of modern authoritarian projects' (Landau 2013: 213). However, authoritarian regimes dismantle liberal constitutionalism in various ways and

on the basis of different theoretical constructs. This study attempts to summarise the theoretical approaches on which autocracies base their legal and constitutional frameworks. I will outline what I consider to be the five most significant historical and contemporary trends shaping the impact of authoritarian political regimes on law and its normative content.

The general analytical framework for this review is authoritarian legalism, which posits that authoritarian regimes develop a distinct conception of law – one that serves the consolidation of power while maintaining a façade of legality. The second framework is the dual state theory, which highlights the coexistence of normative (rule-based) and prerogative (arbitrary) forms of law within authoritarian systems. Third, the concept of populist constitutionalism helps uncover the constitutional paradigms that underpin populist political thought and justify its departure from liberal democratic norms. Fourth, the Unitary Executive Theory draws attention to the transatlantic dimension of authoritarian law, emphasising how executive power is increasingly concentrated – even within democratic systems – under the guise of constitutional legitimacy. Finally, on both historical and theoretical levels, the concept of constitutional dictatorship captures the central paradox of this investigation: the possibility that authoritarian regimes may establish legal and institutional frameworks that are formally constitutional and widely accepted as legitimate, yet fundamentally incompatible with democratic constitutionalism.

Autocratic legalism

The emergence of authoritarian regimes raises fundamental questions about the legality and legitimacy of these political systems. It is no coincidence that these issues have gained prominence amid the ongoing crisis of liberal democracies and the rise of populist parties and movements. The legal challenges posed by authoritarian regimes are central to the concept of autocratic legalism, developed by Kim Lane Scheppele (Scheppele 2018). Scheppele employs the notion of autocratic legalism to describe how, beyond the inherent constitutional tensions found within liberal democracies, a charismatic autocratic leader can exploit a political majority to construct a constitutional and political order that appears democratic in form but is authoritarian in substance. As she explains:

> There is a wide but normatively justifiable variation in the institutional forms and substantive rules that one can find among constitutional-democratic states. Within those legitimate variations, some combinations of these forms and rules prove toxic to the continued maintenance of the liberal forms of constitutional democracy. And the new autocrats are finding those combinations.... Intolerant majoritarianism and plebiscitary acclamation of charismatic leaders are now masquerading as democracy, led by new autocrats who first came to power

through elections and then translated their victories into illiberal constitutionalism. When electoral mandates plus constitutional and legal change are used in the service of an illiberal agenda, I call this phenomenon autocratic legalism. (Scheppele 2018: 548)

Scheppele highlights the dichotomy that characterises authoritarian regimes and approaches – a theme that will be central in what follows – and traces it back to the political history and history of ideas of the interwar period (Scheppele 2018: 562–563). She argues that the leaders of contemporary autocracies operate within a framework of legalism rather than liberal constitutionalism. Liberal constitutionalism, as a normative political theory, is committed to the protection of rights, the separation and limitation of powers, the defence of the rule of law and the promotion of liberal values such as tolerance, pluralism and equality (Scheppele 2018: 562–563). According to Scheppele, what fundamentally distinguishes the constitutional and political design of liberal democracy from authoritarianism is its substantive (i.e. normative) relationship to law and constitutionalism. She characterises authoritarian legalism as a form of exaggerated legal positivism – concerned solely with legal formalism, devoid of any substantive constitutional commitments. As she puts it:

> Legalism's requirements are simply formal: law meets a positivist standard for enactment as a technical matter when it follows the rules laid down, regardless of the content or value commitments of those laws. Laws that meet the test of legalism are enacted according to law; laws that meet the test of constitutionalism must substantively comply with the principles of a liberal legal order. (Scheppele 2018: 562–563)

For this reason, Scheppele argues, the constitutional court is typically the first political target of authoritarian leaders in liberal democracies – since it acts as a guardian of constitutional values and is empowered to strike down laws that violate them. Authoritarian legality – i.e. legality without constitutional normativity – undermines constitutionalism itself. Yet paradoxically, autocratic leaders continue to seek formal legality and legitimacy (Scheppele 2018: 563). This helps explain why the grey zone of extraordinary measures and the dual state – themes discussed below – are particularly significant for contemporary autocracies. It is also important to note that beyond legal formalism, the (re)public law system constructed according to a regime's own constitutional paradigm plays a crucial role for populist leaders. The concept of populist constitutionalism will help illuminate how authoritarian populism affects legal normativity not only in form but also in substance. In other words, the authoritarian turn does not merely dismantle the legal systems of liberal democracies – it replaces them with an entirely new legal order.

Concepts and Dangers of Authoritarian Law and Politics Attila Antal

Dual state

The paradigm of the dual state (der Doppelstaat) was originally developed by Ernst Fraenkel to analyse the legal order of National Socialist Germany under Hitler. He elaborated this concept in detail in his seminal work, *The Dual State: A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship* (Fraenkel 2017). More recently, the concept has been revisited and expanded upon by Jens Meierhenrich in *The Remnants of the Rechtsstaat: An Ethnography of Nazi Law* (Meierhenrich 2018), which builds on and reinterprets Fraenkel's theoretical framework.

A key aspect in understanding the National Socialist legal order is the Nazi takeover itself (*Machtergreifung*). The primary objective of the National Socialists was to legitimise the processes of 1933–1934. Crucial steps in this process – most notably, the suspension of fundamental rights following the Reichstag fire and the passage of the Enabling Act, which transferred legislative power to Hitler – were designed to create the appearance that these developments conformed to the legal norms of the Weimar Constitution (Vinx 2023: 101). However, from a legal-historical perspective, this process cannot be regarded as legitimate.

For Carl Schmitt, the prominent theorist of the exceptional legal order, the transition was both legally valid and revolutionary in substance. He explicitly rejected the notion of legal continuity, arguing that the Nazi seizure of power was lawful in form but revolutionary in content, and that the Enabling Act of 1933 constituted not only a legal measure but also a revolutionary act. According to Schmitt, the legal constraints imposed on legislative and executive power by the Weimar Constitution no longer bound the new regime – even though a new constitutional order was never formally introduced. Ernst Fraenkel, a German jurist who experienced and later critically analysed these events, concurred that the Weimar Constitution was no longer in force under the National Socialist regime. He, too, rejected the premise of legal continuity. Fraenkel referred to the Reichstag Fire Decree of 28 February 1933 as 'the constitutional charter of the Third Reich' (Meierhenrich 2018: 2). This decree suspended several fundamental rights guaranteed by the Weimar Constitution, including habeas corpus, freedom of expression and of the press, freedom of association and assembly, the secrecy of postal communications and protections against search and seizure.

Fraenkel, however, rejected Schmitt's claim that the Nazi takeover constituted a revolution – namely, that it had successfully established a new legal order with its own legitimacy. In Fraenkel's view, the regime change represented nothing more than an 'illegal coup d'état' (Fraenkel 2017: 4). He argued that the Nazis deliberately sought to preserve the fiction that Germany remained a state governed by the rule of law, while in reality their true objective was the complete eradication of legality in any meaningful sense (Vinx 2023: 103). This produced a deliberately ambiguous situation in which legality and illegality were

interwoven – a condition that suited the regime's purposes perfectly. The powers claimed by the Nazi leadership had no grounding in the Weimar Constitution (which had already been sidelined by rule through emergency decrees), yet no new constitutional framework was established. Instead, the existing constitutional order was gradually supplanted by a permanent state of dictatorship.

Fraenkel developed the dual state framework to describe an impossible yet essential condition for political power under National Socialism. At the heart of Fraenkel's concept is the idea that the Nazi legal order can best be understood as a dual state – comprising a normative state and a prerogative state. The prerogative state was led by the political leadership, whose sole objective was the implementation of Nazi ideology. It operated entirely outside the bounds of positive law and was not subject to judicial oversight. In contrast, the normative state was administered by a (nominally apolitical) bureaucratic apparatus, responsible for maintaining the ordinary functions of the state. This sense of perceived 'normality' encompassed the administration of criminal justice in non-political cases, private law affairs and aspects of economic regulation. According to Fraenkel, it was the prerogative state that became the principal instrument for maintaining and expanding the absolute dictatorship (Fraenkel 2017: 5).

Lars Vinx summarises this concept by highlighting the constitutional and legal 'no man's land' that has consistently characterised the extraordinary exercise of power:

> The dual state thesis points out that the governance of Nazi Germany still did rely, in large part, on established legality. A normative state, governed by law, continued to exist. But the agents of the Nazi regime, of the prerogative state, were at liberty to disregard that normative order and to intervene by the use of extra-legal, dictatorial measures whenever they saw fit. The resulting dictatorial power, however, was not used to build a new constitutional order but simply to secure the permanent ascendancy of the Nazi party, which was unable or uninterested (or both) in reestablishing the rule of law. (Vinx 2023: 103)

The concept of the dual state, however, has not remained confined to its original association with National Socialist Germany as described by Fraenkel. In his analysis, Bas Schotel argues that the legal systems of liberal democracies themselves exhibit characteristics that resonate with the dual state model. Schotel specifically identifies features within administrative law that, while not inherently authoritarian, make it particularly susceptible to authoritarian uses. As he explains:

> I do claim that administrative law is distinctly better suited to cater for authoritarian rule than civil and criminal law. If constitutional and fundamental rights constraints are lifted then one finds little to no legal resources within

administrative law to resist authoritarian rule. To put it differently, it seems that the authoritarian tactics of regimes in democratic decay only violate constitutional and fundamental rights law, but are completely in compliance with administrative law. (Schotel 2021: 197)

In other words, Schotel highlights that authoritarian tendencies are not entirely alien to liberal democracies. Administrative law, in particular, can embody both the normative and prerogative aspects of Fraenkel's dual state. While judicial review of administrative actions is formally available, Schotel emphasises that in practice this review is often limited or ineffective, thereby creating space for prerogative-like governance even within systems nominally committed to the rule of law (Schotel 2021: 197–198). Schotel thus draws attention to the fact that, on the one hand, the law can be a tool in the hands of authoritarian political regimes, while on the other hand, political domination over administrative law in declining democratic systems carries with it the possibility of a further authoritarian turn:

> Under administrative law almost all administrative decisions are susceptible to judicial review covering all relevant aspects of a decision (points of law, facts and policy). This allows authorities to claim a legality bonus as all their decisions are subject to judicial scrutiny. By the same token, administrative law also grants regimes in democratic decay ample leeway to target and marginalize opponents. (Schotel 2021: 221)

Populist constitutionalism

Today, the constitutional paradigm of liberal democracies – legal constitutionalism – has come under increasing criticism from various perspectives. One of the most significant critiques, while remaining within the normative framework of liberal democracy, is political constitutionalism, as explored by scholars such as Richard Bellamy (Bellamy 2007). Political constitutionalism challenges the primacy of judicial review and legal formalism, emphasising instead the centrality of democratic deliberation and political accountability. However, populist constitutionalism moves beyond the bounds of liberal democratic theory. It offers a more radical critique that calls into question the previously taken-for--granted nexus between liberalism, democracy and constitutionalism. Within this framework, authoritarian populist parties and movements have begun to articulate alternative constitutional paradigms. These paradigms are informed by political agendas that explicitly oppose liberalism and, by extension, the liberal conception of democracy and constitutional governance.

One of the most influential experts in the study of populist constitutionalism is Paul Blokker, who has argued that authoritarian right-wing populism has

a conceptual constitutionalism paradigm (Blokker 2019: 535). The main starting points of populist approaches to constitutionalism are a general critique of liberalism, in particular its depoliticising tendencies, and a rejection of the idea that citizens will be distant from institutions and potentially alienated under the constitutional structure of liberal democracy. Thus, according to Blokker, one of the main messages of populist constitutionalism is, in principle, to bring constitutionalism closer to society, to reduce the distance between institutions and the people in order to make democracy more tangible (Blokker 2019: 536). In other words, populist constitutionalism cannot be seen as anti-establishment at all, but on the contrary – a specific strategy of institutionalisation is characteristic of these political forces.

Blokker argues that populist constitutionalism is grounded in the principles of popular sovereignty and majority rule – both of which are core elements of modern constitutional democracy – and can, at least initially, be viewed as a democratic project. However, drawing on his analysis of post-2010 constitutional changes in Hungary and Poland, Blokker highlights the substantial authoritarian potential embedded within populist constitutionalism. While populism appeals to democratic ideals, it often leads to their distortion through the adoption of extreme and one-dimensional interpretations. This process undermines fundamental tenets of democratic constitutionalism, including pluralism, inclusiveness and genuine civic participation in constitutional processes (Blokker 2019: 536).

According to Blokker, the populist conception of law is marked by a distinct instrumentalism, whereby law is mobilised in the service of a popular-collectivist political project (Blokker 2019: 545). In this framework, the populist elite maintains dominance over the political agenda by continuously invoking constitutional issues and norms, thereby eroding the boundary between ordinary politics and constitutional governance. This blurring results in the frequent rewriting and reinterpretation of constitutional provisions and the systematic reshaping of constitutional court jurisprudence. Such practices, Blokker argues, precipitate a crisis of the rule of law as understood within the liberal constitutionalist tradition. The consequence is a growing arbitrariness in governance: institutional checks on executive power are weakened, legislative processes become less transparent and more unpredictable and the accountability of populist governments to the broader public is significantly diminished.

Blokker characterises populist constitutionalism's relationship to law as one of 'legal scepticism' or even 'a dislike of law' (Blokker 2019: 549). This perspective provides a crucial lens for understanding how populist constitutionalism transforms the function of law, particularly in resisting its traditional role as a safeguard against authoritarian tendencies. Drawing on a lineage of critique that can be traced back to Carl Schmitt's constitutional and political philosophy, populist legal thought emerges as a reaction against the law-centred and

court-centric model of liberal constitutionalism. From the populist viewpoint, liberal constitutionalism is not only a normative framework but also a concrete institutional regime that systematically curtails political agency – especially that of executive leadership – through judicial review and fundamental rights protections (Blokker 2019: 549). Importantly, populist constitutionalism does not reject law or legal normativism per se. Rather, it challenges the liberal notion of law as a neutral, autonomous and apolitical construct – an idea also central to the critique underlying the dual state paradigm. As Blokker observes:

> The populist understanding of the law denies its closed, self-sufficient, and self-referential nature, and emphasizes the ultimately always already political nature of the law. Hence, the law in the populist view becomes inseparable from extra-legal sources, such as political power and the societal community, and is in this repoliticized. As such, for populists the law always needs to be the expression of the "national interest". (Blokker 2019: 550)

Consequently, populist critiques of the liberal rule of law also target its foundational emphasis on individualism, which is seen to undermine political unity and the collective identity central to populist ideology. In this framework, law is legitimised not through procedural neutrality or institutional autonomy but by its alignment with the will of the people as interpreted by populist leaders. The authority of the rule-makers themselves becomes the primary guarantee of legitimacy, rendering liberal notions of impartiality and bureaucratic restraint not only unnecessary but ideologically suspect (Blokker 2019: 550).

Unitary executive theory

In the constitutional theory and political practice of the United States, the Unitary Executive Theory (UET) has emerged as a significant step toward authoritarianism, primarily due to its radical reinterpretation of the separation of powers and the elevation of the executive branch above both the legislature and the judiciary. The UET asserts that the president, as the singular head of the executive, must retain comprehensive control over all executive operations, thereby severely constraining the capacity of Congress and the judiciary to exercise meaningful oversight. This shift is not merely theoretical; it reflects a broader contemporary trend toward the centralisation of executive power – a tendency that has been markedly intensified by successive crises, including terrorism, public health emergencies and economic disruption. Although the consolidation of executive authority is not unique to the American context – parallels exist in various parliamentary systems – the distinctly American articulation of the UET has provided a framework for legitimising expanded presidential power even outside the context of exceptional circumstances. As

such, it signals a deeper transformation in the understanding of constitutional democracy, in which the balance of powers is reconfigured in favour of an increasingly autonomous and dominant executive.

Importantly, the strengthening of executive power cannot be adequately explained solely through the concept of presidentialisation as identified in earlier scholarship; rather, it marks a more fundamental transformation in classical theories of the separation of powers. The ascent of authoritarian right-wing populism, coupled with an increasing reliance on exceptional measures for governance, has entrenched this trend, frequently under the formal veneer of legal and constitutional legitimacy. The historical trajectory of the Unitary Executive Theory (UET) in the United States – particularly during the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations – demonstrates how the ideological foundations for executive supremacy have been systematically developed within the democratic constitutional order itself. This evolution effectively blurs the boundaries between liberal constitutionalism and authoritarian legalism, as legal forms and constitutional rhetoric are repurposed to justify and solidify concentrated executive authority.

The theory of unitary executive power serves as a conceptual bridge between the radicalising American Right and broader international trends in authoritarian populism, underscoring the transatlantic diffusion of Schmittian approaches to concentrated political authority – an issue central to this volume. A seminal articulation of this theory emerged in Morrison v. Olson (1988), where Justice Antonin Scalia issued a lone dissent that has since become foundational for proponents of the unitary executive. In that case, the majority upheld a statute that allowed for the appointment of special prosecutors with a degree of independence from the president and the attorney general. Scalia, however, grounded his dissent in a literalist reading of the Constitution, quoting the first line of Article II: 'The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States'. He then asserted, 'this does not mean some of the executive power, but all of the executive power' (Millhiser 2020; Dorf 2023). Scalia's position foreshadowed the intensifying push for a dominant executive, unconstrained by internal fragmentation or external oversight – a trend with profound implications for liberal constitutionalism.

Since then, numerous debates have emerged regarding the centralisation of executive power in the United States. The Unitary Executive Theory (UET) has a long-standing history, with presidents from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush consistently defending the continuity of executive authority, rejecting claims that the US Congress has been permitted to encroach upon the executive domain (Yoo, Calabresi & Colangelo 2005). A central issue is whether the Constitution establishes a 'unitary executive' – vesting all executive power solely in the president (Yoo, Calabresi, & Colangelo 2005: 601) – or whether it provides for a more limited executive authority. Ahmad Chehab argues that

'The "Unitary Executive Theory" (UET), underlying current presidential logic, seeks to effectively liberate the President from legislative or judicial constraint. The result is a self-styled conception of emergency constitutionalism' (Chehab 2007: 1499). While the unitary executive theory is a distinctly American concept, its underlying rationale resonates with broader trends in governance, both in Europe and globally. This was particularly evident in the context of the extraordinary governmental measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Constitutional dictatorship

Emergency governance is a much more indirect means of centralising executive power and building autocracy than an open military coup d'état. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the literature on the legal and political-philosophical aspects of emergency rule has long placed emergency rule within the concept of 'constitutional dictatorship', expressing concern that governments might undermine democracy by abusing their powers to unconstitutionally utilise the apparatus of exceptionalism. The theory of constitutional dictatorship became intertwined with the state of emergency. Between 1933 and 1948, during the collapse of European democracies (Weimarisation), this became apparent, and the discourse became linked to Carl Schmitt's emerging theory of the state of exception. It took shape in Schmitt's book *Dictatorship*, first published in 1921 (Schmitt 2014). Legal decisionism, following Schmitt's influence, has evolved into a political strategy based on the idea that the sovereign possesses unlimited and total power – not only because the principle of the separation of powers is invalid (since they are concentrated in one hand) but also because the separation of powers is not valid in time. The dictator's power, which may have initially been limited to a certain period, becomes unlimited.

From both an ideological and historical perspective, the contradictions of exceptional government become evident in the work of Clinton L. Rossiter, who openly attempted to justify constitutional dictatorship (Rossiter 2009). He argued that democratic constitutionalism, based on the separation of powers, was suitable for normal circumstances, but in a crisis, the rules of democratic government could be temporarily altered to whatever extent necessary (granting more power to the government and reducing rights for the people) in order to overcome dangers and restore normality (Rossiter 2009). Rossiter was aware that constitutional dictatorship, like the state of exception, had already become a paradigm of governance in the interwar period. Echoing Walter Benjamin's observations, Rossiter explained that exceptionalism had become the rule: the dictatorship of the executive and legislation by administrative means were not temporary but had become widespread even in peacetime. Agamben criticises Rossiter, whose 1948 remarks foreshadowed the increased dangers to democracy posed by the paradigm of the state of exception, which remains relevant today:

'no sacrifice is too great for our democracy, least of all the temporary sacrifice of democracy itself' (Rossiter 2009: 306). At the same time, Rossiter recognised the power of the 'genie out of the bottle' and argued that exceptional governance should be confined within constitutional limits (necessity test, time limit) (Ginsburg & Versteeg 2020).

The dangers of authoritarian law

Based on what we have seen so far, we can see how the suspension of the rule of law in the era of polycrisis has led to the rise of authoritarian populism. Next, we witnessed the concepts and practices that authoritarian populism relies on to establish the constitutional foundations of their own authoritarian legal systems. Among other things, this study aims to contribute to the examination of the effects of authoritarian populism by providing a comprehensive and interrelated overview of the various forms of authoritarian legalism, since the analysis of individual trends can be found separately, but their coordinated presentation can contribute to a deeper understanding of authoritarian populism. In this section, we supplement this by examining how the legal approaches of authoritarian regimes undermine liberal constitutionalism and the rule of law, and beyond that, how they damage the normative frameworks that hold the law together. First, I examine how the pragmatic, formalistic and overly positivist approach of authoritarian legalism irreversibly damages the normative content of law and how this is exacerbated by the use of law as a weapon of the political system. The weaponisation of law means that authoritarian law will not only damage the legal systems of liberal democracies, but will generally strip law of all moral content, thereby eliminating the normality based on legal predictability.

Law without morals and weaponisation of law

With the crisis of liberal democracy and the legal and political responses to exceptional circumstances, authoritarian regimes have begun to reinterpret constitutional democracies both politically and constitutionally. At the heart of this transformation lies the redefinition of political sovereignty,[1] now increasingly concentrated in the executive branch and elevated to a hegemonic position. This process entails the abandonment of the core assumptions of prior constitutionalism – assumptions that were designed to prevent the concentration of

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1   In authoritarian regimes, this reinterpretation of sovereignty often involves claiming the perceived/real interests of the people by appealing to a nationalist political identity. This was the case in Hungary, among others, where sovereignty became a central issue in the Orbán regime after 2010 due to the shift of numerous debates with the EU towards a sovereigntist direction. The Orbán regime placed sovereignty within the framework of national constitutional identity and deduced from this that, despite various criticisms, it had been granted virtually unlimited constitutional powers due to its two-thirds majority (Maes 2024).

power – and the subordination of law as a mere instrument of politics. As the 'Weimarisation' tendencies of the interwar period demonstrate, the excessive and sustained dominance of politics can easily lead to the totalisation of political power. When politics is unbound from its legal – and, consequently, moral – constraints, it can hold a political community in a state of permanent exception. In other words, even in this transformed landscape, shaped by ongoing crises and the suspension of normalcy (a condition that will likely become inescapable in the wake of global ecological and climate crises), it remains crucial to uphold the core moral constraints of constitutionalism. The permanent state of exception, employed by governments, severely damages the democratic immune system of both society and the individual. It undermines any mechanisms of social self-defence – something governments are quick to exploit. As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, the promise of security became a political rallying cry under which freedom-restricting measures were introduced – not to protect society, but to secure the position of those in power. Drawing on both twentieth-century and contemporary parallels, we can learn a great deal from how totalitarian politics emerged in the past – and perhaps even more from the ways in which societies responded.

It is therefore worth recalling the consequences of the constitutional and legal abuses of National Socialism, as previously discussed, and the responses that followed the Second World War. One of the most significant of these responses is Gustav Radbruch's famous formula, articulated in his 1946 essay 'Statutory Lawlessness and Supra-Statutory Law' (Radbruch, 2006). In this work, Radbruch argues that unjust laws must be regarded as 'flawed law' when the conflict between law and justice becomes intolerable (Bix 2011). His critique is directed primarily at German legal positivism: 'Positivism, with its principle that "a law is a law," has in fact rendered the German legal profession defenceless against statutes that are arbitrary and criminal' (Radbruch 2006: 6). He frames his analysis around the tension between justice and legal certainty, and proposes a now-classic principle to address it:

> The conflict between justice and legal certainty may well be resolved in this way: The positive law, secured by legislation and power, takes precedence even when its content is unjust and fails to benefit the people—unless the conflict between statute and justice reaches such an intolerable degree that the statute, as "flawed law," must yield to justice. (Radbruch 2006: 7)

Radbruch also refers to a qualified case in his formulation, for in his view, when there is not even an attempt to enforce the truth in the creation of a particular law, that is, when, in his view, equality is deliberately betrayed by the enactment of the act, it is not only flawed, but lacks legal quality (Bix 2011: 46). Radbruch puts it this way:

It is impossible to draw a sharper line between cases of statutory lawlessness and statutes that are valid despite their flaws. One line of distinction, however, can be drawn with utmost clarity: Where there is not even an attempt at justice, where equality, the core of justice, is deliberately betrayed in the issuance of positive law, then the statute is not merely "flawed law," it lacks completely the very nature of law. For law, including positive law, cannot be otherwise defined than as a system and an institution whose very meaning is to serve justice. (Radbruch 2006: 7)

In my view, when law is instrumentalised by the executive as a means of concentrating power – what we might term authoritarian law – we are witnessing a shift beyond Radbruch's notion of 'defective law' toward a form of legality that is increasingly morally and professionally questionable. In the 21st century, it is essential to critically reassess our understanding of what constitutes law, as politics is ever more frequently producing (exceptional) situations in which political decisions are granted legal normativity without sufficient scrutiny, public controversy or professional deliberation. This trend not only undermines the quality of legislation but also threatens the very existence of law as envisioned by Radbruch's formula. Moreover, the consequences are equally damaging for politics itself: when policies are imposed through legal means devoid of deliberation and negotiation, politics loses its democratic and dialogic character – its very political quality. As Radbruch rightly observed in relation to National Socialist Germany, the so-called legal order that arose under the dual state was not a genuine legal system at all: 'Measured by this yardstick, the coherent parts of national socialist law never acquired the dignity of valid law' (Radbruch 2006: 7).

Exceptional legal measures and authoritarian law, rather than safeguarding the normal functioning of legal and political systems – as they were historically intended to do – have increasingly become tools for dismantling that very normality. A key dimension of this trend is the instrumentalisation of law itself, where law is no longer a shield but a weapon. In this context, it is useful to cite David Kennedy, whose concept of lawfare captures this transformation: 'law as a weapon, law as a tactical ally, law as a strategic asset, an instrument of war'. Kennedy points out that law can now achieve what once required bombs and missiles: the seizure and control of territory, the demonstration of political resolve and even the breaking of an opponent's will (Kennedy 2016: 258). This fusion of law and warfare has a dramatic effect: the boundaries between normality and exception, between war and peace, become increasingly blurred. Kennedy also references a revealing observation within the US military – that law can often serve as a more effective instrument of warfare than direct combat. As he explains:

Concepts and Dangers of Authoritarian Law and Politics   Attila Antal

When the military buys up commercial satellite capacity to deny it to an adversary – contract is their weapon…. When the United States uses the Security Council to certify lists of terrorists and force seizure of their assets abroad, they have weaponized the law…. It is not only the use of force that can do these things. Threats can sometimes work. And law often marks the line between what counts as the routine exercise of one's prerogative and a threat to cross that line and exact a penalty. (Kennedy 2016: 258)

All of this demonstrates that the weaponisation of law is closely tied to the erosion of the moral content of law – a concern famously articulated by Gustav Radbruch. The institutionalised form of this phenomenon is what may be termed authoritarian law. In such a context, the political instrumentalisation of lawmaking – examples of which, both historical and contemporary, have been explored throughout this volume – inevitably undermines the integrity of law itself. When law becomes merely a tool of political management, its moral and normative foundations are destabilised. As we have seen, law that lacks normative embeddedness may still qualify as law in a purely formal or procedural sense, but it cannot be regarded as law in a substantive or ethical sense.

Normativity and normalcy

This paper has sought to provide a comprehensive overview of the key challenges confronting the systems of law and democracy in the early decades of the 21st century. These challenges can be grouped into three interrelated clusters: (1) the long-standing crisis of liberal democracy, marked most prominently by the rise of authoritarian populism; (2) the emergence of an era of governance through extraordinary measures, wherein authoritarian tendencies are increasingly embedded in practices of emergency management; and (3) the consequent transformation of legal normativity itself under authoritarian pressures. Taken together, these developments signal a gradual erosion of the normative foundations traditionally associated with law and democracy in the historical and geographical context of liberal constitutionalism. The central question for contemporary legal and political theory, then, is whether a return to 'normality' is possible – more specifically, whether law can still serve as a guarantor of normality – or whether, in a persistent state of polycrisis, we must come to terms with the primacy of politics and its capacity to continuously (re)construct what is considered normal.

The question of normality – and the role of law in sustaining or disrupting it – has become increasingly central in contemporary social science research. A particularly compelling contribution to this debate comes from Mark Neocleous, who challenges the conventional liberal distinction between normalcy and emergency. According to Neocleous, these categories are not truly sepa-

rable but should rather be understood as interdependent aspects of the same political reality (Neocleous 2006). He writes: 'In separating "normal" from "emergency", with the latter deemed "exceptional", this approach parrots the conventional wisdom that posits normalcy and emergency as two discrete and separable phenomena'. This liberal framework, he argues, assumes the existence of a 'normal' order governed by rules – characterised by the separation of powers, entrenched civil liberties, deliberative public policy and the rule of law – while casting emergencies as temporary aberrations requiring strong executive authority and the suspension of legal norms and rights. However, Neocleous identifies two underlying ideological assumptions in this view: first, that emergency rule is a deviation rather than a structural feature of liberal democracy; and second, that the emergency/normalcy dichotomy neatly maps onto a division between constitutional and nonconstitutional action. In this way, liberalism attempts to preserve the idealised integrity of the constitutional order by treating emergencies as exceptional breaks, even as it simultaneously empowers the executive to override constitutional constraints in moments of perceived crisis (Neocleous 2006: 207).

Petr Agha explores the question of the 'state of the norm' in the context of the EU's economic policy and legal paradigms, particularly in relation to the integration of Central and Eastern European states (Agha 2024). He argues that one of the primary manifestations of the EU's pursuit of normalcy is the emphasis on the rule of law (RoL) as a foundational principle. The discourse surrounding the RoL often centres on notions of 'good governance' and 'democratic values', which are presented as essential components of post-crisis stability and institutional legitimacy. This pursuit of normalcy, Agha contends, has been central to the EU's legal-constitutional turn since 1989 – a shift that introduced counter-majoritarian institutions, promoted juridification across policymaking domains and entrenched a model of 'legal constitutionalising'. This model recalibrated the political landscape by elevating the role of law and establishing a network of legal institutions commonly referred to as the 'juristocracy'. In this system, normalisation is pursued through the harmonisation of legal frameworks across member states, aiming for regulatory consistency and predictability. However, Agha is critical of this legalist trajectory. He argues that it has contributed to a neglect of the structural conditions that underpin social inequality, a technocratic bias in governance and an overemphasis on institutional integrity during crises – often at the expense of addressing underlying social factors (Agha 2024). Furthermore, in the context of exceptional situations, Agha notes that 'the normalization narrative frames emergencies as abnormalities, reinforcing established institutions' authority and perpetuating the sense of inevitability surrounding existing power dynamics' (Agha 2024). In this way, the legal-constitutional order, rather than mitigating crises, may instead entrench dominant political and institutional configurations by defin-

ing them as the natural baseline for democratic governance. It is worth adding that the crisis of the rule of law in the EU has contributed to the failure to take adequate and timely action against authoritarian tendencies within the EU. R. Daniel Kelemen argues that this delay cannot be attributed to the EU's lack of adequate tools to prevent the establishment of autocracies in member states (Kelemen 2022).

Whichever interpretive approach one adopts, it is clear that the three clusters of challenges to liberal democracy and the legal system explored in this volume cast serious doubt on whether legal normativity can continue to serve as a guarantor of normality within the liberal democratic framework. One might argue that liberal democracy – at both the national and EU levels – is undergoing a radical transformation, or that the distinction between normality and exceptionalism is increasingly obsolete, necessitating a unified understanding of the two. However, what we cannot afford to abandon, in my view, is the foundational guarantee offered by legal normativity. Regardless of how we conceptualise the relationship between exceptionalism and normalcy, a legal order that maintains a degree of autonomy from political power – and thereby serves to constrain it – must continue to play a corollary and indispensable role in preserving the integrity of democratic governance.

Conclusions: The rise of the executive and its limits

In times of emergency – whether driven by ecological, public health or social crises – the strengthening of executive power is both a historically and politically natural phenomenon. Equally natural is the constitutional and political desire to limit the use of extraordinary governance measures. In modern constitutional systems, the temporary suspension of normalcy, or the suspension of the constitutional state of affairs, cannot, in principle, be deemed undemocratic, as its ultimate aim is often to protect the established order. As the literature review demonstrates, however, the democratic nature of governance through exceptional means remains a deeply complex question, particularly in situations where societies – both at the national level and within their own communities – may legitimately disagree on the balance between civil liberties and the common good, such as public health. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has underscored the need for a fundamental rethinking of the exceptional governance paradigm, making it clear that we cannot rely on rigid absolutes. In essence, while the concentration of executive power is not inherently anti-democratic, the absence of active (and, by necessity, extraordinary) controls risks rendering it so.

Prior to the pandemic, Anna Lührmann and Bryan Rooney, in their V-Dem analysis, concluded that exceptionalism was not only a cause but also a consequence of the decline of democracy (Lührmann & Rooney 2019: 19). However,

the analysis of the extraordinary legal regimes introduced during the pandemic reveals that both democratic and authoritarian regimes utilised extraordinary governance measures. Importantly, democracies generally managed to implement various control mechanisms. Thus, one of the key conclusions of both Lührmann and Rooney (2019: 19) and the studies on COVID-19 is that it is insufficient to focus solely on the undemocratic effects of exceptionalist governance. Instead, the first step in the analysis should be to examine the specific regime in which executive power is strengthened. In other words, the potential undemocratic consequences of exceptional governance depend heavily on the regime in which these extraordinary measures are introduced. The democratic quality of the normal state is, therefore, strongly influenced by the exceptionalist situation.

It is also promising for democratic controls that studies by Ginsburg and Versteeg have shown that, despite the exceptional and pervasive nature of the pandemic, executive power in democratic systems has not become unconstrained. Their analysis highlights how the various interactions between branches of power, along with the constraints they face, demonstrate the functioning of Madisonian, horizontal and vertical mechanisms of power-sharing (Ginsburg & Versteeg 2020). The authors argue that the extraordinary governance regimes introduced in the context of COVID-19 – despite their complexity and contradictory nature – show that a system of checks and balances, along with mutual cooperation between government institutions, can help strike the right balance between individual interests and broader societal concerns. Of course, they emphasise that there is no single, objectively correct solution to this balancing act (Ginsburg & Versteeg 2020). It is also encouraging, and indicative of the viability of the remnants of democratic rule of law, that in many cases courts, professional organisations, trade unions and civil society at the member state level have stood up to authoritarian tendencies and defended the rule of law against governments.

However, it is also clear from these experiences that complex control over the executive is necessary for the democratic legitimacy of governance by exceptional means. The state of emergency acts as a 'predisposing' factor for authoritarian reversals. As Lührmann and Rooney have explained, reversals toward authoritarianism are nearly 60 percent more likely to occur in years when a state of emergency is declared (Lührmann & Rooney 2019: 18). However, it is important to note that the state of emergency itself should not be seen as the main cause of authoritarian turnarounds. Rather, emergency government instruments provide a convenient structure for leaders to dismantle democratic institutions and reduce resistance to authoritarian shifts. In other words, states of emergency are not necessarily the cause or agent of authoritarian reversals or democratic collapse (Lührmann & Rooney 2019: 18). This is particularly important in the era of ecological and climate crises, where we are increasingly

confronted with deep, accumulating crises. The historical and contemporary experiences of extraordinary governance, such as those during the COVID-19 pandemic, show that it is both necessary and possible to return to the original purpose of extraordinary governance: defending the democratic status quo. However, this requires the effective operation of extraordinary checks on the executive beyond the normal state of affairs.

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Converging Narratives on the European Green Deal: Polarised Homogeneity in Central European MEPs' Facebook Discourse

PIOTR WALEWICZ

Abstract: *This study examines political narratives surrounding the European Green Deal (EGD) in seven Central European countries, revealing four separate dominant framings of the EGD, as well a pattern of strategic narrative convergence and interpretative polarization. Analysing 351 Facebook posts from 82 MEPs from 2019 to 2024, I identify four distinct meta-narratives: a strongly anti-EGD narrative, an uncritical pro-EGD narrative, a critical pro-EGD narrative advocating for greater ambition, and an opportunistic, pragmatic pro-EGD narrative that strategically co-opts populist and far-right themes. Despite varying national contexts, all narratives converge within these four dominant framings, indicating a strategic focus on mobilization rather than intergroup engagement and dialogue. The method used was an original synthesis of framing analysis, narrative analysis and affective analysis, focused on the general stance towards the EGD, the characterizations used, and emotional appeals of the posts. This research contributes to understanding the nuanced dynamics of climate policy discourse and the challenges of fostering constructive debate.*

Keywords: *European Green Deal, political narratives, framings, Central Europe, political communication, emotions*

Introduction

The European Green Deal (EGD) is a milestone policy project that has numerous political challenges yet to overcome (Thalberg et al. 2024). At the same time, it is also a subject of competing narratives just like any other environmental

policy (e.g. Tyagi, Uyheng & Carley 2021; Falkenberg et al. 2022). Different narrators, or storytellers, roughly fall into two distinct camps – proponents and opponents of the EGD. They employ distinct narrative strategies and framings, constructing the EGD as either a source of opportunity and progress or a threat to established values and interests. While one might expect distinct political cultures of different countries to significantly diversify the debate on the EGD, this article reveals a striking convergence in the narratives employed by both proponents and opponents across seven Central European (CE) countries. Despite the widely varying socio-economic conditions and political landscapes of Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, the online public discourse of Members of European Parliament (MEPs) from these countries reveals a surprising degree of uniformity. It seems that supranational challenges and interconnectedness of political actors lead to a convergence of political narratives across diverse political and cultural contexts.

The analysis was designed to investigate the extent to which EGD narratives from different CE countries converge or diverge. The seven chosen countries have enough of a common geographic, historical and cultural context, as well as contemporary economic and geopolitical significance, that a comparative analysis of narratives originating there should provide significant conclusions. It resulted in the formulation of four broad meta-narratives – one strictly supporting the EGD, one strictly opposing and two others that are mostly supportive, yet critical in their own ways. This revealed a significant overlap, suggesting strong strategic convergence of narratives and the transnational character of interpretive polarisation, particularly concerning EU climate policy. These interconnected political phenomena, explored through the lens of political narratives, offer novel insights relevant to political science.

The study draws on or complements some closely related research. Existing studies have extensively examined online debates around climate change and climate policy as both causes and effects of increasing polarisation (Tyagi, Uyheng & Carley 2021; Van Boven & Sherman 2021; Falkenberg et al. 2022). There is also important research on the efficacy of narratives of supporters and opponents of climate policies and shifting the focus from communicating climate science to communicating specific policies and addressing public needs and concerns (van Eck 2024; Haas 2024; Davies 2020). Because the data for the analysis comes from politicians, it builds on the assumption that their narratives have actual electoral or policy impact (Van Boven & Sherman 2021; Hahnel, Mumenthaler & Brosch 2020).

This analysis is founded on a theoretical and methodological framework synthesising different approaches to analysing political narratives within their cultural and material contexts (Feindt & Oels 2005; Finlayson 2007; Johnstone 2001; Poletta 2015; Schlaufer et al. 2022; Stibbe 2015). By focusing on recurring features rather than individual narratives, this study shifts the focus from

the individual agency of single storytellers to broader structural factors (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). It follows a transparent, qualitative, interpretive and critical methodology with strict orientation and organisation in order to identify, demonstrate and interpret significant themes emerging from the source material (Montesano Montessori 2014). The analysis examines overarching EGD framings, narrative elements and embedded emotional appeals to identify convergent and divergent narrative strategies across the seven countries. The corpus consists of Facebook posts published from the official accounts of MEPs from the chosen CE countries in specific time-frames relevant to important steps of implementing the EGD.

The author hopes to contribute to political science and offer practically significant insights in light of numerous challenges to pro-EGD narratives (Thalberg et al. 2024). The narrative analysis serves as a tool to identify whether the stories of the politicians relate to structural and cultural conditions and constraints present in their countries. The aim is to enhance understanding of the construction, strategic use and efficacy of broad meta-narratives on climate policy, ultimately contributing to a more informed and productive debate by exploring the links between narrative strategies and polarisation in different political and cultural contexts (Lockwood 2018; Margalit 2019).

Theoretical framework and methodology

The study of narratives, discourse and framings has become increasingly prominent in political science, offering valuable insights into how meaning is constructed and transferred or how power is exercised through non-material relations. Several key developments in late 20th and early 21st century social sciences – including the argumentative, interpretive, narrative and affective 'turns' (Fischer & Forester 1993; Finlayson 2007; Kułakowska 2020; Rhodes 2018; Czarniawska 2004; Bouza García 2017; Hoggett & Thompson 2012) – highlighted the crucial role of language, stories and emotions in shaping political beliefs, identities and actions. Drawing inspiration from fields like sociology, linguistics and literary theory, political scientists began to explore how narratives shape our understanding of the world, influence political behaviour and contribute to the construction of social and political order. This study follows such a transdisciplinary approach in an attempt to draw scientifically valid and relevant conclusions by way of critical interpretive policy analysis (van Hulst et al. 2024).

The methodology used in this study incorporates three perspectives on how discourse influences action. The first one, serving as the core method for establishing whether the analysed text is supportive or critical of the EGD, is framing analysis as understood by Stibbe (2015). As a cornerstone of many interpretive studies, it allows for the identification of recurring frames – distinct ways of understanding, explaining or perceiving an issue with the use of specific cues

(Goffman 1974; van Hulst et al. 2024). Stibbe's (2015) approach somewhat simplifies framing analysis for efficient use in environmental politics research by providing concise and not overly complex definitions of both 'frame' and 'framing'. The focus is to look for 'trigger words' that bring to the reader's mind stories about different areas of life, each with its own emotional and ontological weight (e.g. 'terrorist' when describing environmental activists or politicians advocating for ambitious environmental policies). This is supplemented by also analysing 'salience patterns', which are textual representations of areas of life that the author deems worthy of attention (e.g. clean air or restored marshland versus car industry or freedom of land appropriation). These are utilised here to create a clear demarcation between pro- and anti-EGD stories before proceeding to a more in-depth analysis of narrative elements and emotional appeals.

The second choice is narrative analysis, which provides some much-needed formalisation absent from typical text analysis common in political science, while avoiding the narrow focus on linguistic features characteristic of many quantitative corpus studies. It provides insights into narrative and affective strategies employed by political actors to influence policy attitudes (Linde 2020). Similar to how professional translators prioritise meaning and emotion over a literal word-for-word rendering, this study focuses on the core narratives and their affective impact, rather than purely linguistic features. It seems especially useful for climate policy research, as both climate change and climate policy implementation are highly emotive phenomena for the people involved (Brosch 2021; Brosch & Sauter 2023). The narrative analysis focused on the roles of different characters, examining how they are portrayed as protagonists, antagonists or other key actors in order to understand the power dynamics at play (Polletta 2015). It was the best fit for the study's emphasis on meaning and emotional impact through interpreting thematic content and rhetorical strategies, rather than a literal word-for-word rendering.

The third pillar is thus the study of emotional appeals embedded in the stories and used by the authors to address the perceived psychological needs of their target audiences. Recognising the increasing importance of emotions in political mobilisation, persuasion and polarisation, this kind of analysis reveals how political actors employ affective storytelling to evoke specific emotions in their audiences. While the study of emotions in climate policy is still developing, research from related fields suggests their crucial role in influencing climate action (Kovács et al. 2024). Thus, drawing on works by Brosch (2021), Brosch and Sauter (2023) and Kovács et al. (2024), the study explores how the emotional appeals are designed to address audience needs for security, belonging, agency, moral responsibility, etc.

The qualitative, interpretive research based on these three approaches allowed for the examination of the applicability of key concepts in the context of climate policy. One of these is strategic convergence of narratives which

results from focusing on electoral success (Laver 2005). The study aims to reveal whether the pro- and anti-EGD narratives from different countries differ substantially or are rather homogenous. This is achieved by deciding on a comparative analysis which has been thought through in regards to its validity and practicality. It was decided that qualitative comparative research in political science is indeed both possible and may prove valuable even with an interpretative approach and without controls (Simmons & Smith 2021). The similarities between the seven chosen CE countries allow for revealing patterns common to the whole region. The differences exclude the possibility of being good controls for each other, yet the common background allows for focusing on narrative strategies in contexts that are similar enough. The lack of controls transforms the research into a non-traditional case study, transcending the conventional conception of a case focusing on time or geography (Wedeen 2002). The case becomes the practice of political actors narrating a specific political process in relation to national material conditions and power relations.

The second theoretical concept verified in the study in the context of EU climate policy is interpretative polarisation (Kligler-Vilenchik, Baden & Yarchi 2020). It refers to the phenomenon where seemingly factual information is interpreted differently depending on pre-existing beliefs or group affiliations, directing narratives around an issue in increasingly divergent directions. The EGD is a good case study, it being a real and publicly available policy project, legislated in visible and transparent conditions, and with measurable (economically, geophysically, etc.) outcomes. Yet its interpretation and understanding remains highly contested and polarising. By way of framing, narrative and affective analysis, the study aims to reveal how the interpretative polarisation on climate policy extends beyond merely disagreeing on policy preferences. Importantly, this connects directly to the issue of strategic narrative convergence. If both phenomena are observed, it will contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of political discourse surrounding the EGD, demonstrating how narrative homogeneity stems from not only similar communication styles but also from exploiting pre-existing interpretive biases.

The study introduces the concept of 'polarised homogeneity' in order to capture the situation where, despite a convergence in structure and types of narratives employed by political actors across different countries (the 'homogeneity' part), these narratives are simultaneously designed to reinforce existing beliefs and deepen divisions between opposing political forces (the 'polarised' part). The concept should be able to describe circumstances under which similar communication styles within converging narratives can lead to deeper ideological divides as long as their implementation remains polarised.

In order to empirically verify the above assumption appropriate research material had to be gathered, balancing scientific relevance with the practical constraints of a single researcher. The corpus consists of Facebook posts pub-

lished by the official profiles of CE MEPs within four different time-frames: December 2019–January 2020, July–August 2021, July–August 2023 and February–March 2024. They correlate chronologically with: the introduction of the EGD; introduction of the Fit for 55 policy package; introduction of the Nature Restoration Law (NRL); final voting on the NRL as well as intensified farmer protests caused in part by this process. Post selection prioritised those that explicitly mention the EGD and its related policies, supplemented by posts on general EU environmental policies or events caused by their implementation (e.g. the farmer protests). They were gathered from the official profiles of MEPs, focusing on their personal accounts of the events and processes unfolding. The total number of profiles searched was more than two hundred. Eventually, 351 posts were chosen, authored by 82 politicians with 48 different party affiliations or independent. Importantly, social media content fits the criteria for research material even for a traditionally understood narrative inquiry and can be conceived of as stories (van Hulst et al. 2024). The posts published on public Facebook accounts, although sometimes brief, are personal accounts of events as experienced by the authors, revealing their personal perceptions and interpretations. While each individual post eludes traditional definitions of a 'story' (having a clear beginning, middle and end, and an orientation to the past), they nonetheless function as narrative instances within a broader discursive landscape and a broader, yet structurally and ideologically framed political context. Even if a short post is not a full story by itself, it becomes a representation of such a story when taking into account the phenomena it describes, the political circumstances of its publication, the author's previous content, their affiliation, as well all the 'sense-making cues' used to invoke specific stories or emotions in the audience. This interpretation of Facebook posts as stories allows the analysis to maintain focus on the strategic use of narrative elements within political communication on the EGD.

Key findings

The analysis began with establishing the dominant framings of the EGD. The two most visible, top-level framings coalesced into, not surprisingly, a pro-EGD framing and an anti-EGD framing. The first one presented the policy project as something positive – either a chance or a great success – or something inevitable, the only possible way forward. Conversely, the EGD was also framed as a mistake, an unnecessary burden or straight malevolence. These framings are very much disjointed, yet a further narrative and affective analysis provided some important nuance. It continued with finding relevant characterisations: heroes and martyrs; villains; pawns and false idols; victims. These characterisations are either explicit, or implicit but visible when taking each post into a larger context – i.e. other posts by the same author or other authors with the same party affiliation, the

specific moment of the EGD's implementation, concurrent events, etc. Although not every story contains at least one of each, they all have at least two different characterisations as it is the power relations between those that constitute the plot. The emotional impact of these unequal power dynamics, and the associated threats and struggles, serves as the primary vehicle for the political influence each narrative seeks to exert. Thus, the last step of the analysis was to look for emotional appeals embedded in the stories in order to establish what needs or concerns of the target audiences were the focus of the storytellers.

The narratives, when looked at synthetically, eventually coalesced into four dominant meta-narratives, with three of those being connected by an overall pro-EGD framing and the fourth one being the one strictly anti-EGD meta-narrative. These were coded as: Pro-EGD (Embrace), Pro-EGD (Reform), Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) and Anti-EGD. Their general overview is presented in Table 1. The differences between the three supportive ones come down to specific characterisations and emotional appeals, described below.

Table 1: Overview of meta-narratives

Meta-narrative	Dominant stance on EGD	Key characterisations	Primary emotional appeals	Typical party affiliations
Pro-EGD (Embrace)	Uncritically supportive EGD as positive opportunity of inevitable progress	Heroes: EU, EU institutions, MEPs Villain: impersonal climate change Victims: Europe, nature, economy	Optimism, hope, sense of success	Centre-left to centre-right liberal, technocratic
Pro-EGD (Reform)	Fundamentally supportive, but wants more ambition and higher pace	Flawed Heroes: EU institutions and leaders Main heroes: authors (MEPs) Victims: environmental issues, socio-economic justice	Hope, optimism, anxiety, uncertainty	Most left-oriented green parties
Pro-EGD (Pragmatic)	Supportive, but critical of radicalism/ideology Has economic focus	Faulty heroes: EU institutions and leaders Main heroes: authors (MEPs) False idol: radical/green/leftist ideology Victims: economy, jobs, way of life	Economic insecurity, food insecurity, job insecurity	Centre-right Christian-democratic some right-wind populist
Anti-EGD	Strict opposition EGD as mistake, burden, or malevolence	Villains: EU and its institutions and leaders, pro-EGD MEPs Heroes: authors (MEPs) Martyrs: farmers Victims: economies, jobs, food security, way of life, sovereignty	Fear, anxiety, uncertainty, loss of sovereignty, solidarity against villain	Eurosceptic right-wing populist some centre-right

Source: Authors

The Pro-EGD (Embrace) meta-narrative is conveyed by posts uncritically supporting the EGD, which frame the EU, its institutions and themselves as the heroes fighting against the threat of climate change in order to protect Europe from its devastating effects, protect nature and its elements (e.g. forests, species), and protect or enhance the economy, as only making it 'greener' will ensure its competitiveness and continuous development. These stories utilise a non-human, non-personal threat instead of an identifiable villain; additionally, they evoke emotions of optimism, hope and a sense of success after reaching every important milestone in EGD legislation and/or implementation. The national party affiliations of these stories' authors fall into close proximity to the centre – from centre-left to centre-right – or reflect a liberal and technocratic orientation of the party. This is consistent with these types of parties being the most supportive of the EU as a project and being the driving forces behind further integration (Ladrech 2002; Hooghe et al. 2002). Examples of such stories are:

> The #GreenDeal is not a threat, but big change on the time horizon, of a better life for new generations. (Facebook, Danuta Hübner, 24 January 2020)

> Today, the European Commission presents its #EUGreenDeal. It will pave the way globally for solutions that will enable us to turn the fight against climate change into an opportunity. It is important to note that we will tackle climate change ambitiously, together with tradespeople and medium-sized companies. We must not stir up fear and we must support the backbone of the German economy. (Facebook, Daniel Caspary, 11 December 2019)

> Great news for the environment! We have supported its restoration in Europe.
> I am very glad that the majority of the European Parliament has resisted the politicisation of the issue and decided to take action.
> The environment really needs it. It is slowly dying out, about a million species of plants and animals are threatened with complete extinction, and the pace is unfortunately accelerating.
> Yet we depend on the environment. Without pollinators, i.e., butterflies and bees, there will be no food on our tables.
> It really is time to act, and I believe that the Wildlife Restoration Act is the answer. It will ensure the protection of forests and rivers, encourage the creation of more green spaces in cities, and help to combat the drought that is increasingly plaguing us in the Czech Republic. (Facebook, Marcel Kolaja, 17 July 2023)

The next two meta-narratives are both fundamentally supportive, yet occasionally critical or sceptical of specific elements or decisions made by the EC. The

Pro-EGD (Reform) mostly shares the victim characterisations with the previous one, focusing on environmentalist issues and socio-economic justice, yet differs when it comes to other characterisations and emotional appeals. In this meta--narrative the institutions and leaders of the EU are not undisputable heroes, but flawed heroes who drive the EU in the right general direction, but don't do so radically or ambitiously enough. The authors of these stories become the main heroes, as mentors pointing out mistakes or missed opportunities, appealing to a mix of emotions – from hope and optimism to anxiety and uncertainty if the institutions act too conservatively. These MEPs always vote for the EGD and its related policies and represent the most left-oriented of all parties involved or green parties – groups traditionally optimistic about the EU, yet critical of some of its aspects (Wang & Keith 2020; Bomberg 1998). Examples of these stories are:

> The climate crisis requires profound and radical changes. If the European Green Deal is to be a defining moment for the EU, it must commit to implementing these changes. We have the knowledge, technology, and resources to do so. However, given the EC's cautious approach, there is a concern that the most crucial element — political will — may be lacking. (Facebook, Sylwia Spurek, 9 January 2020)

> THE TRANSITION TO A GREENER ECONOMY CANNOT BE PAID BY THE POOR
> The fight against climate change and the overall transition of the EU economy to a greener and more digital one dominated today's discussion with MEPs in Bratislava. I have repeatedly emphasized that any transformation must be accompanied by measures that ensure adequate alternative solutions, decent living and working conditions for the countries concerned, industries, and especially people. We must prevent the worsening of energy poverty, which is not a mythical concept, on the contrary, it currently affects up to several tens of millions of Europeans. The transformation cannot be carried out at the expense of the weaker social classes. That is why I consider it necessary and try to promote in my political group, as well as in the ITRE Committee for Industry and in the plenary, that the different starting positions of the Member States are respected and, for example, gas and nuclear have played an important role at least in the transitional period and have been accepted as part of the energy mix for a long time.
> In the afternoon, I fly to Brussels, where we will have meetings of working groups, committees and on Wednesday also an extraordinary plenary session, at which the new European Commission will officially present the key strategic document of this legislative period, the so-called Green Deal for Europe. (Facebook, Robert Hajšel, 9 December 2019).

Competition for ever stricter climate rules will not get us anywhere if these demands are neither technically feasible nor socially viable.

It is high time to remove the green blinkers. Because people no longer know how to afford life. Ideas such as additional CO2 taxes are clearly out of place. (Facebook, Günther Sidl, 27 August 2023)

The other type of critique, embedded in the Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) meta-narrative, leans closer to the Anti-EGD argumentations. Like in the Pro-EGD (Reform), it is also based on a characterisation of EU institutions and leaders as heroes that are trying to do the right thing, yet mistakenly follow a false idol. This 'false idol' is not a literal concept, but refers to a perceived adherence to an overly ambitious or ideologically driven path that neglects economic realities. These are stories about the authors – being mentors to the faulty heroes just like in the previous meta-narrative – warning against following an ideology that is too radical, too 'green' or too 'leftist'. If adhered to, this kind of false idol will bring about the downfall of the victims, although the EU itself has not yet crossed a point of no return. The dominant victim characterisations in these stories are economy, jobs or elements of a way of life and the stories come from centre-right or Christian-democratic MEPs, who mostly voted for the introduction of the EGD, yet tend to vote against some of its more ambitious policies like the Fit for 55 package or the Nature Restoration Law. This often brings these narratives close to the Anti-EGD meta-narrative through similar emotional appeals to economic insecurity, food insecurity or job insecurity, aligning with the observed trend of right-wing populism affecting mainstream parties (Pirro & Taggart 2018; De Vries 2018; Wodak 2015). However, the stories differ visibly in their characterisation and do not paint the EU and its institutions as a villain, thus staying within the larger pro-EGD framing. This supportive yet conservative meta-narrative is exemplified by the following stories:

Climate protection is important, but the competitiveness and jobs of our local companies are just as important. Climate neutrality by 2050 is feasible, but does it also make economic sense? We need intelligent solutions to achieve sustainable change. The EU also has an opportunity here to act as an example to other regions of the world, because when all is said and done, the EU cannot stop climate change on its own. (Facebook, Angelika Niebler, 11 December 2019)

Nature conservation is important, but not the only consideration.

When faced with an economic crisis and a significant increase in food prices, we cannot make decisions that cause further inflation and difficulties.

That is why I do not support the Nature Restoration Law! (Facebook, Márton Gyöngyösi, 11 July 2023)

Frans Timmermans introduced a grand plan in the form of the Green Deal, which was supposed to address not only climate protection, but also environmental protection, biodiversity, or reducing the amount of waste and better recycling.

However, he focused only on climate-related issues and deal with them in a way that did not take into account the citizens of the Member States and the competitiveness of European industry. The other pillars of the Green Deal were barely addressed.

However, with his departure, nothing will change as the Commission's term of office draws to a close. Most of the proposals are already in the legislative process and only need to be finalised.

I hope that someone more rational will be in charge of the agenda in the next term. (Facebook, Veronika Vrecionová, 21 July 2023)

The most drastic change in characterisations and emotional appeals comes with the strict Anti-EGD meta-narrative, where the EU and its institutions, as well as any who vote for European climate policies, are the villains who threaten European economies, jobs, people's food security or their way of life (e.g. using a car indiscriminately). These villains do this in the name of a wrong ideology or in the name of some interest that conflicts with the interest of the specific state or its people, and the only ones who can stop them are the authors of the stories (MEPs voting against the EGD and their whole parties), sometimes assisted by martyrs, fighting and sacrificing heroically for the good of all (e.g. the farmers during their protests). This is the traditional, straightforward attitude of Euroscepticism (Vasilopoulou 2018; De Vries 2018) or an emanation of the 'politics of fear' (Wodak 2015; Pierzchalski & Golinowski 2016), visible in the following examples:

Left-wing climate fanaticism is leading Europe further and further into the abyss. Instead of finally dumping the utopian "Green Deal" on the dung heap of history, climate targets are being tightened even further. This is destroying agriculture in Europe. The result will be a massive surge in meat and food prices. Let's stop this policy in the EU elections on 9 June with a vote for the FPÖ. (Facebook, Harald Vilimsky, 7 February 2024)

The EU is planning to take away land belonging to the farmers! This is some kind of misunderstanding! How could the Polish MEPs from the opposition vote in favour of the nature restoration regulation??? (Facebook, Anna Zalewska, 13 July 2023)

Coal and steel are the roots of the EU! Ursula von der Leyen's Green Deal is severing these roots. Over 400,000 people in Germany and millions across

Europe will lose their jobs. We must steer away while we still can! (Facebook, Guido Reil, 22 January 2020)

Interestingly, a single MEP does not always stay within the same meta-narrative. This suggests a strategic storytelling, where the authors start implementing the characterisations and emotional appeals in different ways, depending on a larger context outside of the narratives. This is mostly visible in two cases. The first one is when Pro-EGD (Embrace) authors with mostly centre-left or green affiliations switch to a Pro-EGD (Reform) type of stories, possibly disappointed with the EC conservativeness or backing away from more radical policy elements under pressures from the right. The second one is when Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) authors lean the other way, towards the Anti-EGD meta-narrative, this time probably trying to opportunistically appeal to loudly voiced concerns from specific groups in order to translate it into electoral results. This was visible first after the introduction of the Fit for 55 in July 2021 package which includes many car-related policies, thus receiving backlash from groups that are either economically or emotionally connected with cars. Later it was more pronounced after the introduction of the Nature Restoration Law in July 2023, where some authors initially uncritical of the EGD began following the narrative of threat to food security. It culminated during the February-March 2024 farmer protests, when many of the Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) authors explicitly switched their narrative strategies and even started painting the EU institutions and leaders as villains, just like in the strict Anti-EGD meta-narrative. This is a process not entirely unlike the strategic 'hijacking of victimhood', where political leaders narratively construct threats to groups they want to mobilise (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss 2024). The dynamic of the discourse on the EGD revealed within the collected data is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The narrative significance of the discourse dynamic within chosen timeframes

Timeframe	Correlated milestone/event	Narrative significance
December 2019–January 2020	Introduction of EGD	Initial optimistic framing of EGD; Establishment of core Pro- and Anti-EGD meta-narratives
July–August 2021	Introduction of the Fit for 55 package	Observed shifts in some Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) narratives leaning towards Anti-EGD arguments
July–August 2023	Introduction of the Nature Restoration Law	Further shifts in Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) narratives, adopting concerns from and aligning with anti-EGD themes
February–March 2024	Final voting on NRL; Intensified farmer protests	Culmination of narrative shifts, with some Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) authors even explicitly adopting Anti-EGD narratives strategies, like portraying EU institutions as villains

Source: Authors

To conclude, the synchronisation and confluence of narratives of these four variations is difficult to miss even without looking at the data through a specific methodology. Looking closer at the characterisations and emotional appeals used, however, allows for revealing more than a cursory analysis. Firstly, the convergence of anti-EGD narratives is stronger than the convergence of any of the pro-EGD narratives. The stories of the strict opponents of the EGD have very similar structure despite different places the authors' parties take up on the political spectrum. Research demonstrating the almost universal climate-sceptical stance of right-wing actors is mostly confirmed, although some exceptions do appear, as in the case of non-right-wing populist parties, e.g. the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Forchtner 2019; Wagner 2022). The sufficient common denominator is that the author's party is more or less sceptical towards the EU.

On the other hand, the three pro-EGD meta-narratives are mostly parallel to each other, yet intersect at some story moments either with each other, or, in the case of Pro-EGD (Pragmatic), with the Anti-EGD one. Nevertheless, the hero and victim characterisations in all three remain the same, but appear in distinct contexts. More differences appear when focusing the analysis on other characterisations and on the stories' affective aspects. The major one is due to how the opponents and proponents frame the most important, most emotionally evocative power dynamics of the stories – the threats to the victims. For the pro-EGD side the threats are usually impersonal, 'natural' forces, e.g. floods, heat waves, water shortages. They can have a personal aspect when reflecting internal political or policy missteps that could undermine the EGD's effectiveness or social acceptance. However, the opponents of the EGD frame the main threats – to the economy, jobs, agriculture, food, fuel or car prices, etc. – as being always human-driven, caused by specific people and institutions out of some ill intent. These stories, apart from being more structurally complete by always featuring villains, have the added emotional weight of revealing these villains' motivations. Those are interpreted as trying to make life harder for the common people in the name of a perceivably harmful ideology, geopolitical interests, personal gain or simply malevolence (attributed without much explanation).

What is also very visible is the disproportion in the amount of different positive and negative emotions evoked by the meta-narratives. The three pro-EGD narratives express a wider range of positive emotions compared to anti-EGD narratives, which primarily focus on solidarity against a villain. This suggests that pro-EGD stories aim to build broader support by appealing to a wider spectrum of positive feelings, while their adversaries focus on reinforcing in-group cohesion among those who already share their views or those most commonly experiencing economic insecurity, identity insecurity or looking for someone to blame. Importantly, the overlapping negative emotional appeals are of different character, as they address different narrative elements. The fear, anxiety, uncer-

tainty or disappointment in the pro-EGD stories pertain to what could happen if climate change is not addressed properly, whereas in the anti-EGD stories it is fear of specific institutions and people, anxiety and uncertainty in regards to short-term economic conditions, loss of sovereignty, unwanted changes in the way of life, etc. Moreover, the use of so many different and strong negative emotions in the anti-EGD narratives implies that the EGD is being framed not just as a policy disagreement but a moral wrong.

Discussion

While direct data on Europeans' attitudes towards the EGD specifically is limited – some conclusions can be drawn from indirect questions in existing surveys and research (European Comission 2023; Wittels & Traczyk 2024; Zachová 2022; Chabada et al. 2023) – this analysis still offers valuable insights on the strategic convergence of the political narratives across seven CE countries. Interestingly, the similarity of narratives coming from each country contrasts with observations of different environmental attitudes of their citizens, which are strongly correlated with per capita GDP as well as the Gini Index of the specific state (Urban & Kaiser 2022; Aral & López-Sintas 2023). The disconnect highlights the strategic nature of political communication surrounding the EGD.

The convergence of narratives across diverse national contexts suggests that political actors are primarily focused on mobilising their core supporters rather than engaging in persuasion or attempts at swaying the opponents, which seems to fit the 'polarised homogeneity' concept. Despite the seven CE countries having multi-party systems, the discourse coalesces into a race of four isolated meta-narratives. Apart from very few localised stories (i.e. those detailing the exact number of industry jobs threatened or a specific amount of financing received), the vast majority of the posts analysed are practically interchangeable between countries if deprived of specific proper nouns. This can be attributed to the electoral logic of following or anticipating voter preferences (Laver 2005). The proponents of the EGD (either full supporters or those critical for various reasons, yet voting for it) target those already committed to pro-environmental values, which seems consistent with the observed activities of climate change communicators (Hine et al. 2017). At the same time the opponents attempt to mobilise either working-class voters through the appeal to economic anxiety or nationalist-leaning voters by appealing to their sense of sovereignty, aligning with the research on the relationship between these values and scepticism towards environmental policies (Lockwood 2018; Walewicz 2024). This 'preaching to the choir' approach contributes to interpretative polarisation, as the narratives are designed to reinforce existing beliefs rather than foster dialogue. This means that the MEPs' discourse surrounding the EGD is not a 'narrative arms race', as there is no real engagement between the two sides. The emotional ap-

peals involved only further contribute to the polarisation. The anti-EGD stories are more narratively complete and emotionally overwhelming, often leaving them in control of the narrative space. However, the emotional appeals and moralisations on both sides are troublesome, as some research suggests that even positive emotions can fuel polarisation through glorifying one's group in opposition to the outgroup (Garzón-Velandia, Barreto-Galeano & Sabucedo-Cameselle 2024).

The fact that the heroes of the three pro-EGD meta-narratives become villains in the anti-EGD meta-narrative, with indisputably evil intentions ascribed to them, might also one-sidedly strengthen the effect of false or misperceived polarisation (Lees & Cikara 2021). This 'villainisation' moralises the issue, framing the EGD not as a policy disagreement but as a moral conflict, further hindering compromise. On the anti-EGD side the meta-perceptions of outgroup beliefs are being engineered to be overly pessimistic. Fortunately, Lees and Cikara (2021) show that there might be ways of overcoming the stereotypes about the 'other side', as the meta-perceptions do not result from a lack of knowledge, but rather the inability or unwillingness to apply it.

More insights can be gathered when taking a specific political stance towards the EGD and acknowledging the challenges it faces in the face of rising right-wing populism in Europe (Thalberg et al. 2024). Firstly, the domination of threats to the economy in the Anti-EGD and, partially, in the Pro-EGD (Pragmatic) meta-narrative is an attempt to engineer anxiety about its state and fits into the observable trend that populist parties achieve better electoral results in times of increased economic insecurity (Guiso et al. 2024). Projecting a vision of the economy as being damaged or outright destroyed by further implementation of climate policies seems to be aimed at increasing the economic insecurity of the audience for electoral results. This strategy exploits the well-documented observation that potential losses skew opinions more strongly than potential gains even in the most affluent countries (Van der Duin et al. 2023). Secondly, the isomorphism of the right-wing narratives is especially interesting considering their nationalist ideologies. When the perceived threat is supranational (the EU in this case), other hostilities – like those against neighbouring nations – take a backseat in the narrative or disappear completely. This suggests that the debate on the EGD is not simply about the merits of the policies themselves but also about broader political and cultural conflicts (Norris & Inglehart 2019).

Lastly, the consistent portrayal of EU institutions and European political elites as villains in the Anti-EGD meta-narrative presents an interesting contrast with the research suggesting that anti-establishment attitudes are weakly or negligibly correlated to climate change denial. Jylhä and Hellmer (2020) find that exclusionism, anti-egalitarianism and willingness to protect existing power relations correlate most strongly with climate change denial. It seems that it is not the supranational character of the EU that is the inherent cause of its vil-

lainy, but, once again, rather the perceived liberal and cosmopolitan leaning of its most important institutions (Norris & Inglehart 2019). This suggests that trying to bridge the interpretative gap between the two sides might require one of two approaches. It would be either decoupling the EGD from these broader social and cultural issues in order to sway people opposing ambitious climate policies or, conversely, explicitly demonstrating its interdependence with social policies in order to better mobilise those with pro-environmentalist attitudes. Unfortunately, the separation of the meta-narratives combined with the 'echo chamber' effect of social media presents a significant challenge. It discourages intergroup contact, which is one of the few known and proven ways of reducing polarisation at least under some conditions (Thomsen & Thomsen 2023). The struggle for depolarising climate policy – or repolarising it along different social divisions and unequal power relations as suggested by the concept of 'green populism' (Haas 2024; Davies 2020) – will eventually be won in the realm of policy and material conditions, yet it needs to start by finding ways to foster engagement between opposing narratives to counteract the divisive and isolating strategic narrative convergence coupled with interpretative polarisation. Lastly, these reflections must always be put into material contexts of the people involved, as it would be pointless to hope for higher acceptance for climate policies without addressing the fundamentals of economic security.

Conclusions

The transnational polarised homogeneity of EGD narratives shown by this study is not an isolated phenomenon. It reflects a broader pattern of convergence in policy discourse observed in response to perceived common threats, such as the discourse on terrorism after 2001, austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis or the 'follow the science' narrative during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several factors contribute to this convergence. Firstly, a perceived common threat – in the case of the EGD, either the threat of climate change or the threat of outside constraints on the economic and social foundations of the status quo – drives the adoption of similar narratives. Secondly, the homogenising influence of international institutions and norms, often cast as heroes or villains, provides a central point of reference. The third factor is the interconnectedness and interpenetration of the ideological structures of political systems of states that are close to each other not only geographically, but also culturally, economically and politically. This explains why MEP narratives on the EGD are often indistinguishable across the seven countries, and are identifiable only by specific names, locations, numbers, etc. Finally, social media facilitates the rapid dissemination of highly emotional narratives, often overshadowing more nuanced and complex perspectives. Politicians tend to follow these trends in order to translate social media presence into electoral results.

The observed homogeneity of meta-narratives on the EGD, despite differences in national affluence, energy mixes, dominant industries, geopolitical ties and influence within the EU, reinforces the argument that climate policy is not inherently polarising. While public opinion polls demonstrate broad European support for climate action, the EGD has become a vehicle for existing political divisions, transforming it into a highly partisan and polarising issue. This is exemplified by the initial dominance of pro-EGD narratives, filling the discourse with optimistic messages right after the introduction of the EGD, followed by the near-complete takeover of the discourse by opposing narratives during the 2024 farmer protests, when anti-EGD MEPs propagated fear and uncertainty and opportunistically engaged in demonstrations of solidarity with the protesters – often opportunistically joined by authors whose stories had supported the EGD in the past. The lack of meaningful engagement between the many sides during any of those periods, likely due to political risk aversion and a desire to avoid inadvertently antagonising some groups, only exacerbates interpretative polarisation, probably contributing to other types of polarisation as well.

Due to the limitations of the study and the methods used, further research – including quantitative linguistic research – will be needed to explore the generalisability of the findings. Another possible avenue for following up on this study is determining how/whether climate policies can be depolarised or how they can assist in depolarising European politics. Are we doomed to blunting the policies as the only way of bridging the gaps, or can we initiate the depolarisation through coming up with more compelling stories and facilitating constructive dialogue (Jackson Inderberg & Bailey 2019)? Future research should focus on empirically assessing the persuasiveness of existing narratives in different social contexts, examining their impact on both competing authors and target audiences. It would be particularly valuable to study how the audiences react to narratives that they are not usually exposed to, including both existing (but less dominant and more nuanced) and engineered narratives. Finally, future research should consider the normative implications of depolarising climate policy and repolarising it along the axis of socio-economic justice. Should the acceptance of climate policies be contingent upon, or at least deeply intertwined with, the prior establishment of fundamental economic security for all, and if so, what ethical obligations does this impose on policymakers and advocates of the EGD (Papermans & Maeseele 2016; Haas 2024; Davies 2020)?

Data availability statement

All raw data containing the translated Facebook posts of Central European Members of European Parliament containing narratives on the European Green Deal is freely accessible at the on-line open repository RepOD: https://repod.icm.edu.pl/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.18150/GQKX9O.

Acknowledgments

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How Czech Politicians and Parties Securitise Refugees: Comparing the MENA and Ukrainian Crises

ZDENĚK ROD AND MIROSLAV PLUNDRICH

Abstract: *This comparative analysis scrutinises the distinctive features of the 2015 MENA and 2022 Ukrainian refugee crises in the Czech Republic, revealing notable differences in threat perceptions and stakeholder engagement while answering who was finally portrayed as the victim and by whom. Hence, the MENA crisis prompted EU-level action and migration system reform, and the Czech government was the leading securitisation actor; meanwhile, the Ukrainian crisis differs. Cultural and religious dimensions influenced negative perceptions of Muslim migrants, contrasting with the positive reception of Ukrainian refugees rooted in cultural affinities with the West rejection of Russian aggression. Despite that, during the Ukrainian case, the shift in threat perceptions from sovereignty to socio-economic concerns marked the latter. Our study shows that this was not done by the Czech government but by the opposition party groups. With a potential new MENA crisis on the horizon, both opposition and government persist in securitising migration. The 2025 parliamentary election is expected to spotlight migration, necessitating further exploration of evolving securitisation in Czechia.*

Keywords: *securitisation, Czechia, refugee crises, MENA, Ukraine*

Introduction

Czechia, a relatively small state, has experienced two unprecedented refugee crises, starting with the so-called MENA (Middle East and North Africa) crisis[1]

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1   The EU, including Czechia, was mainly facing a massive influx of refugees fleeing from the Middle East as a consequence of the Syrian Civil War and general instability in the region (author's note).

in 2015 and ending with the refugee crisis caused by the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022[2] – both refugee crises shaped Czech society and political representation. In 2015, MENA refugees were refused entry to Czechia, partially politicised and considerably securitised by the Czech government. MENA migrants were generally displayed as a security threat to Czech society and EU relocation quotas as a threat to Czech sovereignty. The Czech government did not have the familiar feeling of accepting the MENA refugees as other EU states do (i.e. Germany and France). Together, in summary, the Czech government portrayed the Czech citizens, nationality and sovereignty as victims in the context of incoming MENA migrants.

On the contrary, in 2022, Ukrainian refugees experienced unprecedented support from the Czech government and Czech society. The securitisation process was not against Ukrainian refugees but toward Russia since the US considerably securitised Russia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the dawn of the US securitisation of Russia, when the US and NATO designated Russia as the ultimate threat to the West, together with the Czech rapprochement to Atlanticism, it was understandable that the Czech government accepted a tremendous number of Ukrainian refugees. The Czech government portrayed Ukrainians as victims of Russian aggression who we must help. In April 2023, Czechia hosted approximately 325,000 Ukrainian refugees (Ministry of Interior 2023) – during the MENA refugee crisis, Czechia accepted only a few hundred of them.

Even though Ukrainian refugees were in general warmly welcomed, some opposition parties, such as ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) or SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy), were somewhat sceptical about accepting such a massive amount of people for a long-term stay. They first started to politicise and then securitise Ukrainian refugees, which turned into portraying them as a threat to Czech identity and sovereignty.

This article aims to grasp the differences in the securitisation of refugees between the MENA refugee crisis in 2015 and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022 in Czechia.[3] As mentioned above, governmental reactions differed considerably. The Czech government generally refused MENA refugees. On the contrary, Ukrainian refugees were, in sum, welcomed by the Czech government but not by the whole political spectrum. Hence, the article aims to provide answers to three questions:

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2   MENA refugee crises occurred in the 2015–2019 period. The Ukrainian refugee crisis began in February 2022 and is still ongoing, with its peak occurring in Spring 2022.

3   It is important to note from the outset that different political parties were in power during the two refugee crises examined in this paper – i.e. two distinct governments led Czechia in 2015 and in 2022 – shaping divergent political discourses and responses (Author's note).

Q1: *Which anti-Ukrainian refugee politicisation and securitisation discourses emerged during 2022, and who were the main actors of the Czech political sphere spreading those discourses?*

Q2: *Did the analysed politicians frame incoming Ukrainian refugees as a threat to Czech sovereignty, national identity, the state's economic system or individual welfare?*

Q3: *In which way did the politicisation and securitisation discourses that emerged during the MENA and Ukrainian crises differ, and why?*

The article will draw on the securitisation theory, the method-focused, structured comparison and the hefty empirical corpus of securitisation discourses to answer the presented research questions.

The article contributes to the debate on the politicisation and securitisation of refugees in domestic affairs, with an example from the Czech context. In the Czech context, one can primarily encounter research articles concerning the securitisation of Muslim refugees after 2015. To illustrate this, Kristýna Tamchynová (2017) analysed the interplay between securitisation and Europeanisation in Czechia after the MENA refugee crisis. Michal Tkaczyk (2017) studied speech acts related to migration in Czechia and sought to distinguish between politicisation and securitisation speech acts. Furthermore, Aliaksei Kazharski (2019) assumed that the Eurooptimist securitisation of peripherality, delineated by German domination, directly competes with the Eurosceptic securitisation of the EU as a sovereignty-infringing entity. Additionally, Clarissa Tabosa (2020) analysed the speech acts of the Czech and Slovak prime ministers to apprehend how both countries discursively constructed their foreign policy vis-à-vis the refugee crisis and how they were re-positioning themselves concerning refugee and the core-periphery spectrum of the EU. Oldřich Bureš and Robert Stojanov (2022) offer an exploratory analysis of experts' perceptions of the securitisation of immigration in the Czech Republic and its impact on Czech refugee policy in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 MENA-European refugee crisis. However, none of the above research discusses the novelty of the Ukrainian refugee crisis vis-à-vis securitisation discourses that emerged in society.

As outlined above, there is an evident absence of articles in the Czech context which analyse the politicisation and securitisation processes. Stepping out of the Czech context, studies trying to understand both processes concerning migration appeared. First, Alessandra Buonfino (2004) wrote about the circumstances under which politicisation and securitisation emerged, mainly in the UK and Italy. Later, Pietro Castelli Gattinara and Laura Morales (2017) looked in some detail at the link between public perceptions and issue securitisation, focusing on discursive choices of politicisation, issue framing and public opinion on immigration.

The following text is organised into five parts. The first presents the theoretical foundations for politicisation and securitisation based on its understanding within the Copenhagen School (CS). The second part outlines the research design. The third part then presents the basis of the MENA refugee crisis in Czechia in 2015–2019. The fourth part analyses the Ukrainian case. The Czech government's stance is then presented, followed by an analysis of the speech acts of the representatives of the Czech parliament's two opposition political party groups. The final part discusses the politicisation and securitisation discourses detected during the analysis of the Ukrainian refugee crisis and compares the MENA and Ukrainian refugee crises in Czechia.

Politicisation and securitisation

The theoretical basis of politicisation and securitisation, first introduced in the 1990s by the Copenhagen School (CS), can be regarded as one of the most widely known theoretical assumptions. The CS offers a constructivist operational method for distinguishing the process of securitisation from that of politicisation for understanding what is and what is not a security issue (Buzan et al.: 1998: vii, 19). Said otherwise, the CS can help the analyst draw the line between processes of politicisation and processes of securitisation since not all issues are security issues (ibid.: 21).

The CS outlines that 'security is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitisation can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicisation' (ibid.: 23). On the contrary, politicisation revolves around issues that are part of public policy, requiring government decision, resource allocations or another form of communal governance. Politicisation means making the issue appear open, a matter of choice/something that is decided upon and that, therefore, entails responsibility. Those issues are still not viewed as security issues; they are too distant to lead to securitisation. However, once the issue is perceived as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure, that is when securitisation occurs. Moreover, between politicisation and securitisation, the state does not tackle non-politicised issues and is not even an issue of public debate. Additionally, politicisation and securitisation are essentially intersubjective processes; hence, it is always difficult to approach them objectively without knowing the context of the given issue in detail (ibid.: 23–24, 29–30).

Figure 1: Process of politicisation and securitisation
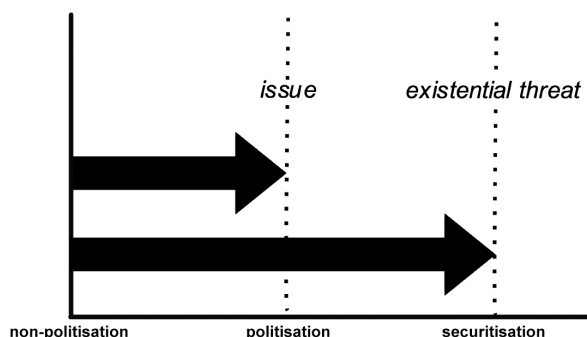
Source: Authors

The CS also points out that the speech actor producing the politicisation and securitisation discourses does not always have to be the government or a state. The CS postulates that politicisation and securitisation can also be enacted in other ways. Moreover, different social entities can raise an issue to the level of general consideration or even to the status of sanctioned urgency among themselves. Very often, politicisation and securitisation occur in the media and in public debates (ibid.: 24, 72).

Moreover, beyond the confines of the CS, it is imperative to briefly elucidate the relationship between politicisation, securitisation and democratic decision-making – particularly in light of the Czech Republic's post-1990s integration into the liberal-democratic milieu. It is generally acknowledged that much of the theoretical edifice, especially concerning securitisation, emerges from the context of Western liberal democracies (Roe 2012: 251; Neal 2019; Williams 2015), wherein the very foundations of the discipline of International Relations are situated (cf. Drulák&Rod 2025).

Turning specifically to the process of securitisation, one might contend that it constitutes a form of 'extraordinary politics' – that is, political interventions or decisions which deviate markedly from the normative procedures and expectations of liberal democratic governance. In contrast, 'normal politics' is typified by procedural regularity, transparency and institutional oversight. The exceptionality of security politics is thus rendered intelligible only in juxtaposition with this democratic normativity, wherein policymaking is subject to deliberation, public debate and legislative scrutiny, particularly of executive authority (Roe 2012: 251; see also Aradau 2004).

Furthermore, with respect to securitisation, scholarly debate reflects a tension. On one hand, critics have argued that securitisation can be inimical to democratic practice. It tends to impose rigid epistemological boundaries on what is to be perceived as negative or threatening, thereby eroding the openness

and accountability that underpins legislative deliberation in liberal democracies (Roe 2012: 250–251; Stefan 2009: 9). On the other hand, it has also been suggested that securitisation has become a legitimate and embedded component of democratic governance. In this view, the domain of security – once cloaked in secrecy and marked by exception – has increasingly become routinised within the fabric of everyday democratic politics (Neal 2019: 1).

Research design

The research focuses on the principal parliamentary opposition actors, such as ANO and SPD. Those political parties became the leading politicisation--securitisation actors on the Czech scene. Speech acts[4] from ANO and SPD were collected from their official websites, press conferences and political proclamations, Czech media news sites and social media (Facebook and Twitter/X).

For data collection from Twitter/X, the tool *TwEportly* was used. Facebook posts were downloaded from the page of each member of parliament manually. Czech media news sites were analysed via manual content analysis. In this manner, tens of thousands of Facebook, Twitter and media posts and articles were gathered. However, most speech acts evolved on Twitter, where Czech politicians are tremendously active.

Moreover, a speech act – consistent with other research on securitisation (see Rod 2024) – was identified only when a direct quotation could be clearly attributed to the politician in question. In other words, paraphrased statements were excluded, as they cannot be reliably linked to a specific speech act. As a result, most speech acts were found on social media, where politicians speak in the first person, rather than in newspapers or on political websites, which predominantly featured paraphrased content.

The selected speech acts were subsequently analysed through a content analysis by using the following combinations of keywords related to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, which have been since used in Czech: 'the name of the securitising actor', 'blahobyt' (welfare), 'migrace' (migration), 'uprchlík' (refugee), 'Ukrajina' (Ukraine), 'Ukrajinec' (Ukrainian), 'hrozba' (threat), 'riziko' (risk), 'suverenita' (sovereignty), 'ne/bezpečí' (in/security), 'the given year' and 'problém' (issue). Besides this, the research solely analysed direct speech since the speech act is recorded verbatim in them and thus cannot be paraphrased.

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4   A speech act refers to the idea that saying something can bring about a change – in security studies, this means that labeling an issue as a security threat can socially construct it as such, regardless of whether the threat is objectively real. Securitisation is a discursive process in which an actor claims that a referent object faces an existential threat, demands the right to take extraordinary measures and convinces an audience that such measures are justified. This process elevates issues from non-politicised or politicised domains into the realm of emergency politics, legitimising actions that may bypass normal democratic procedures (Munster 2012).

Additionally, as outlined above, the research distinguishes the politicisation and securitisation process based on the presumptions of the CS, similar to what Tkaczyk (2017: 104) presented in his study, which sought to understand the differences between politicisation and securitisation. On the one hand, to designate a speech act as a politicisation act, the speech actor portrays Ukrainians as an issue for the political, societal or economic sector concerning the state or individual. In this case, the speech actor does not frame Ukrainians with a threat but with an issue that should be discussed in the political forum. On the other hand, to designate a speech act as a securitisation act, the speech actor has to portray Ukrainians as a threat, security risk or danger, potentially justifying an extraordinary measure to deal with the threat for the political, societal or economic sector.

The empirical corpus eventually revealed approximately seven thousand speech acts referring to the Ukrainian refugee crisis between the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 and the end of 2023. On the one hand, 71 ANO MPs produced nearly 1500 speech acts related to Ukrainian refugees. However, only nine speech acts contained moderate partial securitisation (politicisation), and two were marked as having securitisation discourse. On the other hand, 20 SPD MPs produced roughly 5500 speech acts related to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Fifty-six included partial securitisation (politicisation) and 33 were marked as having securitisation discourse. Hence, the subsequent analysis mainly focused on the detected securitisation discourses needed to compare with the precedent refugee crisis from the Middle East and Africa.

Moreover, the analysis also focused on whether the given speech actor emphasised what incoming Ukrainians pose a threat to. As mentioned in the previous section, the political, societal and economic sectors play a vital role in analysing the politicisation and securitisation of refugees. Hence, the research will specifically zoom in on whether the speech actors accented that the incoming Ukrainians seek to harm the Czech nation's identity (societal sector), Czech sovereignty (political sector), Czech state economic system or Czech individual welfare (economic sector).

The next step is to find the distinctions between the 2015 and 2022 refugee crises. Since the article aims not to provide a comparison analysis, it draws on the method of focused, structured comparison (SFC). SFC is ideal for scholars seeking to compare cases systematically yet avoiding standard comparative analysis. While not aimed at direct case comparison, it captures minor differences incidentally. SFC enables conditional generalisation of data, aiding practitioners in identifying new situations (George&Bennett 2004).

The 2015–2019 MENA-European refugee and Czechia

The 2015–2019 refugee crisis highlights two key surprises in Czechia: the government's shift to a strict anti-migration stance despite previous openness, and

its conflict with the EU despite being a pro-European government. European countries' responses to the crisis varied based on their refugee experience and location along refugee routes. Countries with previous experience were generally welcoming, while those without experience, like Czechia and other Visegrad countries, rejected refugees. Frontline and destination countries supported pan-European redistribution of migrants, while transit countries and bystanders, including Visegrad countries, opposed it. The European Commission's refugee quotas faced strong opposition from the Visegrad group (Czechia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary), which gained new legitimacy as a resistance force against Brussels. The crisis increased Euroscepticism and mistrust towards Germany, which advocated for refugees and quotas. Pro-European parties faced pressure to reassess their positions, causing internal tensions. Several factors explained the Visegrad countries' clashes with Brussels, including nationalism, illiberalism, populism, value differences with Western societies, self-interest and public opinion pressure. The literature covering the 2015 refugee crisis tends to oversimplify the Visegrad countries' perspectives and treats them as a unified bloc despite essential differences among them (Drulák 2024: introduction).

Moreover, if one shifts the analytical lens away from the governing coalition and turns attention to the principal opposition forces of the time – namely the Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS) and TOP 09, a conservative-liberal party with pronounced pro-European commitments – a degree of ambivalence, if not scepticism, towards migration policy also becomes discernible. This position stands in notable contrast to the response evoked by the Ukrainian refugee crisis, during which a divergence in approach between governing and opposition parties became increasingly pronounced, as evidenced throughout the subsequent analysis.

In the case of the Syrian refugee influx, ODS, under the leadership of Petr Fiala, articulated a position of qualified humanitarianism. Fiala asserted that refugees fleeing the conflict should be offered temporary refuge, particularly on medical grounds, but should ultimately return once hostilities subsided. He cautioned against conferring permanent residency absent clear prospects for successful integration and critiqued what he perceived as a prevailing atmosphere of political correctness stifling open discourse. While this stance elicited disappointment from segments of the party's voter base, ODS leadership closed ranks in defence of Fiala's position, grounding their rationale in appeals to cultural coherence, civic responsibility and the necessity of maintaining control over migratory processes. Detractors, however, accused the party of veering towards populist posturing, a charge Fiala refuted by invoking the imperative of safeguarding both national identity and the core values underpinning the European project (Kálal 2015).

By contrast, Karel Schwarzenberg, former chairman of TOP 09 and a prominent figure within the Czech liberal-conservative tradition, adopted a markedly more humanitarian framing. In a speech delivered in 2015, Schwarzenberg identified the refugee crisis as a defining moral test for his generation, urging a response informed by empathy and historical consciousness. He reminded his audience that Czechs themselves had sought asylum abroad on several occasions – following the Munich Agreement in 1938, the Communist coup in 1948 and the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968 – and thus bore a moral responsibility to reciprocate the hospitality they had once received. Rejecting fearmongering and the politics of resentment, Schwarzenberg called instead for principled leadership grounded in European norms of solidarity, rule of law and human dignity. For him, these values were not merely rhetorical devices, but foundational principles worthy of defence – even at the expense of short-term political popularity (iRozhlas 2015).

As mentioned above, Czechia was one of the Visegrad countries rejecting incoming migrants from the Middle East. Key figures in the government between 2015 and 2019 considerably securitised the incoming migrants. For instance, in 2016, Minister of Interior Milan Chovanec provided one of the toughest securitisation discourses when he indicated that there could be paedophiles, psychopaths or terrorists among the incoming migrants (Martínek 2016). Other ministers also very often used very harsh rhetorical proclamations. Furthermore, the research conducted by Zdenek Rod (2024) examined how refugees were securitised in the Czech discourse. Distinguishing two strategies of the threat construction, he argues that the refugee was presented as a threat to the state rather than the nation. Therefore, the leaders called for reforming the EU migration framework rather than reaching for the restoration of national sovereignty. In addition, the government, in essence, skipped the politicisation phase and began to securitise from the beginning of the crisis; politicisation discourses played a marginal role.

Table 1: 2015–2019 MENA-European refugee crisis summarised

2015–2019 MENA-European refugee crisis	
Discursive Process	Prevailing securitisation
Threat to	Sovereignty and Identity
Victim	Czech citizens due to migrants from the MENA
Speech Actor(s)	Government (ANO and Social-Democrats)

Source: Authors

The 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis and Czechia

The Ukrainian refugee crisis, in contrast to the MENA crisis, differed from the beginning. The coalition government led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala from ODS (Civic Democratic Party) welcomed Ukrainian refugees and served as the desecuritisation actor. Fiala often declared that 'these people, people just like us, must have at least a minimum opportunity from us to get things for themselves and their children' (Fiala, according to Kopecký 2022). A supportive stance was declared by Minister of Interior Vít Rakušan from STAN (Mayors and Independents) when he repetitively mentioned that the Czech state is ready to integrate Ukrainian refugees into Czech society and to ensure them a satisfied life in Czechia (Švihel 2023).

However, despite the open arms of the Czech government and Czech solidarity with Ukrainians, the securitisation process of refugees occurred. As presented in the following analysis, the leading actors became the opposition groups, such as ANO and SPD.

Analysis of ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens)

Within the Czech political landscape, ANO serves as a catch-all party, recently shifting its focus to appeal to the traditional social-democratic voter base (Jelínek 2022).[5] As the largest opposition party, ANO commands 71 members of Parliament out of 200 and boasts the most substantial parliamentary club. Despite securing a *de facto* victory in the 2021 parliamentary elections, ANO found itself in the opposition due to limited coalition possibilities, aligning with the SPD. Notably, ANO MPs previously held government positions in 2013–2017 and 2017–2021, with crucial figure Andrej Babiš serving as prime minister in the latter term. ANO MPs played pivotal roles in addressing security aspects of the 2015–2019 MENA refugee crisis. In December 2023, a survey revealed ANO's significant 34.5% public support, double that of the second most supported party, ODS, currently holding 15% public support in the government (ČTK 2023).[6] This widespread support and visibility highlight ANO's influential position in traditional and online spaces.

As mentioned by Rod (2024), ANO was, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a significant securitisation actor of MENA refugees, displaying migrants as a threat both to Czech sovereignty and identity. Hence, it could have been assumed that ANO would follow its anti-immigrant rhetoric during the Ukrainian refugee crisis after 24 February 2022. However, the opposite happened. ANO did not securitise the incoming Ukrainians at all. Mostly, the

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5   Some even suggested that they may have been attempting to attract former voters of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) (see Naxera 2024).

6   As of June 2025, public support for ANO stands at 30.1% (iDNES, 2025).

politicisation of some topics discussed below appeared only marginally. The empirical corpus also includes just two securitisation discourses that occurred in 2023. The politicisation of incoming Ukrainians prevailed over the securitisation. Hence, politicisation, which played a leading role in ANO speech acts compared to securitisation, will be first discussed.

The first series of politicisation discourses evolved around the Ukrainians living at the expense of Czech citizens, thus causing issues to Czech people's economic prosperity. The main speech actors supplementing these discourses were ANO leading figure Andrej Babiš and his parliamentary colleagues Romana Fischerová and Hubert Lang. Babiš generally framed the incoming migrants positively and expressed support for them. However, Babiš often used the Ukrainian refugees and ongoing energy crises to increase ANO's political gains. Throughout March and April 2022, Babiš accused Petr Fiala's government of completely forgetting about the Czech citizens afflicted by the energy crisis while helping the Ukrainians (Babiš 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d) fleeing war zones, often without any material possessions. Babiš's speeches suggested that the Ukrainians are stealing too much from economic benefits at the expense of Czech citizens.

Similarly to Babiš, on the one hand, Hubert Lang mentioned that 'we don't even have apartments for our people, and there is a tendency for Ukrainians to have priority' (Kopecký 2023). On the other hand, Romana Fischerová stated that she does not understand why the Czech Ministry of Interior is closing post offices for Czechs – the ministry's approach to reducing public spending – and opening post offices for Ukrainians (Fischerová 2023a). Fischerová was referring to the opening of the first branch of the Ukrainian post office, *Nova Post*, in Prague, which allows Ukrainians living in the Czechia to easily send post to Ukraine, as well as receive parcels, documents and even cargo (Echo24 2023).

Babiš, Lang and Fischerová, however, did not portray incoming Ukrainians as a threat to sovereignty or identity but as an issue to economic prosperity to the detriment of Czechs, thereby positioning Czech citizens as the primary referent object of intimidation. They did not even propose concrete measures to tackle the whole situation. All of them offered accusations without solutions. However, it is essential to say that Babiš, Lang and Fischerová's speeches were lauded merely within the margins of politicisation. They did not seek securitisation.

Moreover, completely unrelated politicisation discourse was further postulated by Pavel Růžička. Růžička, during the ongoing Ukrainian refugee influx, began reminding people that 'we must not forget Volhynia and Halych, where Ukrainian nationalists unleashed a massacre in which tens of thousands of Poles and Ukrainians died, as well as hundreds of Volhynian Czechs' (Růžička 2022). He reacted to the tweet of ODS MP Pavel Žáček, who said that we must not forget the victims of Russian aggression (ibid.). Although Růžička was stating a historical fact, the tweet's timing was unfortunate, considering the

heavy fighting in Ukraine during the first year of conflict when Ukrainians needed resolute support. Just a couple of months later, in Prague in March 2023, during antigovernmental demonstrations that sometimes carried anti--Ukrainian narratives, Růžička tweeted 'I would never put a Ukrainian flag on my house because my grandfather, a Volyn Czech, would be turning in his grave' (Růžička 2023). This tweet can also be considered a politicisation move since Růžička has served as an MP since 2017 and only mentioned this topic for the first time during the heated periods of the Ukraine War and anti-government demonstrations which combined opposition to the government and support for Ukraine. However, Růžička did not react to the threat to sovereignty, identity or economic prosperity.

Besides exceeding politicisation discourses, two particular securitisation discourses were produced by (aforementioned) Romana Fischerová and Jana Mračková Vildumetzová (JMV). On the one hand, Fischerová, known for her rhetoric concerning threats to economic prosperity, tweeted 'Guaranteeing loans to Ukraine and paying back their interest will drive us broke!' (Fischerová 2023b). Fischerová clearly stated that financial support to Ukraine could bring Czechia severe financial problems, mainly threatening the economic prosperity of the Czech state as a referent object, without supporting this statement with data or statistics. Although financial support to Ukraine is not negligible, there is no analysis showing that financial support to Ukraine would result in a broken Czech economy.

On the other hand, JMV was concerned with the security consequences of having Ukrainians, who had fled the war zones, in Czech territory. She first criticised Minister of Interior Vít Rakušan for mismanaging the migration flows and for not knowing how many Ukrainians resided in Czechia (Vildumetzová 2022), implicitly signalling it could be a security risk not to have all newly arrived Ukrainians under control. Later on, JVM stated that due to the Rakušan incompetencies and chaos creation regarding the management of the migration flows 'Czechia is setting itself up for a big problem with its lax approach and chaos' (Vildumetzová 2023).

JVM also added that this particular problem can result in security problems connected to the criminality of Ukrainians in Czechia (ibid.). Shortly after this statement, Minister Rakušan sought to desecuritise JVM's statement and reacted that:

> We keep repeating that the security situation in the Czech Republic has not deteriorated despite the large number of Ukrainian refugees. I am glad that the BIS conclusions confirm this and thus refute the fears that some irresponsible politicians are feeding. (Šmejkal 2023)

Rakušan then added a link to the BIS (Czech civilian counterintelligence agency) report, which says:

> The BIS did not record a deterioration of the security situation in the Czech Republic last year despite the massive migration wave from Ukraine. The disinformation scene the previous year returned from the topic of COVID-19 to support Russian activities after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (ibid.)

JVM not only securitised the Ukrainians but also used false narratives to legitimize her messaging. One can read from the paragraph mentioned above that JVM securitised incoming Ukrainians to Czechia as a threat to societal security and, thus, to Czech society.

ANO political party analysis showed that compared with previous years when ANO was in the government and securitised MENA migration, ANO MPs generally did not securitise incoming Ukrainians. However, politicisation emerged, as discussed above. A few securitisation discourses evolved around two securitisation discourses. First, securitisation discourses concerned financial support to Ukraine, potentially causing severe economic issues for the Czech state's economic prosperity. Second, securitisation discourses dwelled on severe problems stemming from mismanaged migration flows from Ukraine and Ukrainian criminality in Czechia, threatening Czech societal security. In conclusion, ANO did not see any risk in incoming Eastern European refugees compared to MENA in 2015.

Analysis of SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy)

SPD is a political party in the Czech Republic that currently serves as the opposition to the ruling 5-party coalition government. Nowadays, the SPD party has a total of 20 parliamentary seats out of a total of 200. SPD's political platform emphasises direct democracy, strained relations with the UN and NATO, and a steadfast anti-EU stance. This includes policies aimed at anti-migration, particularly from the Middle East and Africa. With its attitudes, presentations, communication and campaigns, the party earned the epithet 'populist' in the specialist community (see, e.g. Charvát, Charvátová & Niklesová 2022). In December 2023, the survey showed 8.5% support for SPD,[7] which put it in fourth place and even ahead of the other three parties from the governing coalition (STAN, TOP 09 and KDU-ČSL) (ČTK 2023), which in the end represents almost one-tenth of Czech voters. It is not surprising that due to the anti-migration party stance, their attitude towards Ukrainian refugees differs from the Czech government's official strategy.

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7   As of June 2025, public support for SPD stands at 13.1% (iDNES 2025).

Although the Russian invasion had not yet occurred, Tomio Okamura, leader of SPD (and its most key actor), was already laying the groundwork for his party's politicisation and securitisation narratives about Ukrainians with a speech in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of Czechia. Okamura warned of a potential mass wave of migration crises from Ukraine, which could have two negative consequences if it were to happen: worsened security and undercut wages for Czech citizens in manual professions (c.a. to Stuchlíková 2022). As the Russian invasion and the ensuing Ukrainian refugee crisis unfolded, Okamura and SPD took a firm stance and began to solidify their position. SPD's approach to Ukrainian refugees differs from its traditional approach to Muslim migrants and differs from the official approach of Fiala's government. What initially seemed like a case of careful tiptoeing of politicisation speech acts shifted into considerable economic prosperity politicisation (the spring of 2022), followed by prosperity-societal politicisation and a few examples of societal securitisation (summer of 2022), then transformed into prosperity-societal securitisation (the end of 2022/beginning of 2023), fired into economic and societal and national security securitisation speech acts (the middle of 2023), and ended in persistent stagnation (the end of 2023). Our research proved that the socio-economic sector came first and was intertwined throughout time; therefore, it will be discussed first.

In the early stages of the crisis (February to May 2022), the SPD party, known for criticising migration from Muslim countries, approached culturally similar Ukrainians differently. Initially, SPD members aligned with Okamura's stance of 'Help the Ukrainians, but not at the expense of our people' (c.a. to Žabka 2022). SPD used the setup of 'we' vs 'they' in economic prosperity politicisation to blame the governing coalition. From the beginning, the main speech actors using such socio-economic discourse were mostly Tomio Okamura and Radovan Vich, and to a lesser extent Radek Rozvoral and Karla Maříková. Vich is a rare example of someone who politicised the Ukrainian situation in two ways, as he noted: 'Until now, our citizens could not have more apartments, but for Ukrainians, so suddenly it is possible.' (Vich 2022a).

However, Okamura became the key speech actor. Okamura used the same stand with an example of his widely used expression method (using surveys and polls): '[Due to Reality.idnes.cz] the reason is the influx of Ukrainian refugees. This rapidly increased rent prices and worsened the lack of apartments for our citizens. Fiala's government is not solving the situation' (Okamura 2022a). This was followed by another tweet, where he referred to a survey taken by STEM, citing: '70% of the population believes that the arrival of Ukrainian refugees will lead to a weakening of the social security of Czech citizens' and adding himself, 'I share the citizens' concerns and repeatedly warn the government about it. However, Prime Minister Fiala pretends not to listen, and even after two months, the government has no plan' (Okamura 2022b). In this phase, SPD

did not portray incoming Ukrainians as a threat to sovereignty or identity but as a threat to the socio-economic prosperity of Czech citizens. Czech citizens were used as the primary referent object being intimidated.

Okamura would use the following speech acts to more adeptly politicise and amplify the economic issue by citing other financial data on the support provided to all Ukrainian refugees (see, e.g. Okamura 2022c, 2022d). Such a move could deepen the gap between Ukrainians and Czech citizens, namely SPD supporters. Also, from the middle of 2022, SPD started to add the first bits of securitisation speech acts regarding polio, HIV cases and Roma-Ukrainian (see below). Despite this, the SPD's attitude towards Ukrainians was less antagonistic in the following six months (July 2022 to January 2023). There were only a few exceptions, such as socio-economic remarks from Okamura's side or comments from Vich like 'This government are going to bust us because of Ukraine!' (2022b). SPD focused more on the securitisation of migration from the south (MENA) and mainly on supporting their candidate, Jaroslav Bašta, for the presidential post because of the approaching Czech presidential elections in mid-January 2023.

At the outset of 2023, the SPD party appeared to make a strong start after the presidential elections. During a press conference in late February, Okamura (2023a) made remarks about the 'Ukrainization' of the Czech nation, which sparked a new phase of discussion around Ukrainian politics and security. However, subsequent SPD internet posts appeared to be disorganised and lacked coherence. The posts aimed to draw attention to (1) the amount of money spent by the Czech Republic on supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians, (2) the Fiala government's support for the EU migration pact, which the SPD alleges would result in the Czech Muslim/Islamic Republic and (3) their resistance to Ukraine's entry into the EU, or (4) unregulated inflation in the CR. This trend, combined with the politicisation of the decline in the welfare of Czechs at the expense of Ukrainians, persisted until August 2023. However, throughout 2023, SPD already carried more security narratives in the speech acts. Subsequently, we will examine when and how the security of the individual and the nation was added next to the socio-economic issue.

As mentioned, the first bits of securitisation that expanded the economic scope and narratives occurred in the middle of 2022. Okamura brought forth a new health topic during the ongoing discussion on social welfare (supporting Ukrainians and not Czech citizens) for the first time in May 2022. He pointed out that Czech public health officials were aware of the reemergence of polio among Ukrainian refugees (Okamura 2022e). Later in the month, he referenced renowned Czech epidemiologist Roman Prymula's findings on the rising cases of HIV infections (Okamura 2022f). Other party members, including Rozvoral (2022) and Maříková (2022b), spoke about the Ukrainian impact on national and societal security but failed to provide concrete examples or solutions when

both said: 'By failing to manage the wave of migration, the government threatens the safety of citizens and their social and health security. We want our decent, hard-working citizens to continue living a peaceful, contented life.' At the same time, it was evident that SPD leader Okamura dominated the conversation on Twitter, frequently discussing the issue of Ukrainian migration and utilising targeted speech acts. Okamura then began to expand the migration issue with Roma-Ukrainian refugee cases, characterising them as unadaptable and asserting that Czech citizens had no desire for them to live among them (Okamura 2022g). Meanwhile, the Fiala government was compelling Czech municipalities to accept them (Okamura 2022h). This was, along with Rozvoral and Maříková, the first time politicisation shifted into societal securitisation.

However, the discernible shift in the SPD's security discourse towards Ukrainians didn't appear until 8 August 2023, during the Pilsen rape case. Despite the perpetrator being a long-standing Ukrainian immigrant in the Czech Republic, SPD leveraged this incident within their evolving securitisation narrative against current refugees. Rozvoral and Maříková reflected the SPD's standpoint, indicating a denial of automatic immigration rights for Ukrainians in the Czech Republic, saying 'anyone who is a security risk should be deported' (Rozvoral 2023a, 2023b; Maříková 2023). The emphasis on labelling individuals as immigrants rather than refugees underscored SPD's deviation from Czech intrastate policies. Such discourse was once again bolstered by Radovan Vich's (2023) tweet, highlighting the perceived improvement in the Ukrainian refugees' situation at the expense of Czech citizens with the blame pointed at the Czech government. Okamura (2023b) even further implicated the EU in SPD's rhetoric by asserting that criminal Ukrainians could not be deported due to EU policies. Okamura blamed not only Fiala's government but also EU policy. However, the speech act again did not offer an alternative or solution, only stating 'The SPD advocates that the residence permits in the Czech Republic be terminated for foreigners who have been convicted of a crime' (ibid.).

In mid-August 2023, Okamura deliberately combined all the mentioned politicised and securitised aspects above. Together with a citation of the PAQ Research Agency, he claimed that more than half of the Ukrainian refugees wanted to stay in Czechia, reminding us that it was the government's fault and citing his own words: 'due to their [government] lies, we [Czech citizens] will pay for it [Ukrainians], and also, we will suffer from increasing criminality' (Okamura 2023c). Later, he tried to highlight a statement from a Novinky.cz survey, purporting that 81% of Czechs correlated nationality with the propensity for criminality (Okamura 2023d). Okamura continued to position his stance against the government, accusing it of prioritising Ukrainians over its citizens, especially in the wake of subsequent assaults in Prague and Brno. As August unfolded, Okamura's rhetoric intensified, employing more provocative language to depict Ukrainian refugees as 'demoralised elements' (Okamura 2023e, 2023f). He amplified fears about the

deteriorating security situation concerning Ukrainians, framing it as a failure of Fiala's government. This 'us vs. them' narrative, emphasising that the country belonged to Czech citizens rather than 'foreigners' (Ukrainians), became a recurring theme in Okamura's speeches throughout the rest of August.

As one can tell, Okamura emerged as a distinctive figure within SPD, employing compelling storytelling techniques to convey his messages. This ability was evident in September 2023 when he capitalised on reports of harassment and attacks attributed to Ukrainians. His succinct narratives painted Ukrainians as aggressors needing to return to Ukraine due to inherent cultural differences which led to increased conflicts with Czech citizens. He wrote:

> The time has come for Ukrainian 'refugees' to start returning home to non--combat territories. Ukrainians have a different mentality, and logically – clashes with Czech citizens will increase. Unfortunately, not solving the problem with the vast number of Ukrainian immigrants in our territory will only increase mutual animosity. (Okamura 2023g)

Such speech acts were strategically intertwined with the Pilsen case from August.

However, October 2023 witnessed a shift in focus for SPD as final negotiations on the new EU migration pact and its approval by the Czech government dominated discussions. The narrative veered away from Ukrainians and towards migration from the MENA region, aligning with SPD's anti-EU stance and its inclination towards border closure and self-determination. November did not bring any shift – the discussions around the EU migration pact and MENA migration overshadowed the earlier securitisation of Ukrainians. Furthermore, geopolitical concerns related to Ukraine, such as the ongoing war and responsibility for oil pipelines, took precedence over the refugee discourse. Only at the end of November did Okamura present a new slogan prioritising the financial needs of Czechs over Ukrainians, which was kind of a reminder of economic securitisation and political divergence from Ukraine.

In December 2023, the SPD trajectory concerning Ukrainian refugees showed no substantive deviation, maintaining a politicised stance pivoting toward economic concerns. Okamura's recurrent (2023h) slogan, 'Not even a haler for the Ukrainians! Zero. Funds for Czech citizens!' underscored this continued socio-economic narrative. Concurrently, there was an observable intensification in rhetoric regarding migration from the MENA region, mainly linked to Okamura's foreign engagement during his visit to Italy, where he met with Italian Vice Prime Minister Matteo Salvini. This development marked the inception of SPD's aspirations towards the European Parliament, aiming to advocate for preserving the Czech Republic's sovereignty, opposition to illegal migration and Islamisation, and resistance against initiatives such as the Green Deal or measures perceived as censorship.

The analysis of the SPD political party reveals that, despite apparent efforts to develop meaningful strategies of politicisation and securitisation, the discourse presented above actually comes across as somewhat incoherent and inconsistent. From a comprehensive perspective, the discourse of the investigated SPD MPs can be characterised as a cautious alignment with or reinforcement of Okamura's approach. Okamura, in turn, assumed a *sui generis* role in the broader process of politicisation and subsequent securitisation. The initial framing of the issue as one of prosperity and well-being transformed into a security concern prompted by criminal cases involving Ukrainians. The initial stages of politicisation and securitisation primarily revolved around financial assistance for Ukrainian refugees, raising concerns about potential adverse economic repercussions for the Czech state and its citizens. Subsequently, securitisation discourses shifted focus to the significant challenges posed by criminal incidents involving Ukrainians and the influx of refugees from Ukraine to Czechia. These developments were portrayed as threats to Czech societal security, as well as to Czech nationality and the nation. Notably, the discourse lacked any association with comprehensive solutions. Instead, the predominant stance advocated for the deportation of Ukrainians with a criminal background. In summary, SPD's approach to Ukrainian refugees differs from its traditional approach to MENA refugees.

Comparison of the 2015 and 2022 refugee crises

The next part involves comparing the characteristics of the 2015 MENA migration crisis and the 2022 refugee crisis. Notably, these two crises differ in various aspects of analysis, including threat perception and the actors involved in the discourse (see the following paragraphs and Table no. 1).

On the one hand, politicians began securitising incoming MENA refugees from the beginning of the MENA crisis in 2015. Politicisation occurred sporadically. However, politicians often proposed concrete measures to reduce the threat of incoming MENA refugees, especially by calling for reform in the EU migration framework. On the other hand, during the Ukrainian refugee crisis, politicisation and securitisation acts were predominantly represented. Their focus was primarily on instilling fear among Czech citizens about the arrival and settlement of Ukrainians in Czechia. However, they failed to present any concrete solutions.

Furthermore, the crises exhibited differences in their perception of threats. In the MENA refugee crisis, politicians emphasised that incoming refugees posed a significant threat to the Czech identity due to their diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. They argued that accepting the EU relocation quotas directly jeopardised Czech sovereignty. However, in the subsequent crisis, considerations of sovereignty and identity played a marginal role, if any. As

Ukrainians entered Czechia, discourses portrayed them as a threat to the Czech population's economic prosperity, social welfare, social security or national security, with a particular emphasis on the socio-economic aspect. Politicians contended that after receiving humanitarian aid, housing and economic benefits, Ukrainians were better off than the average Czech citizen. Consequently, the focus shifted from the state to society. In this latter case, politicians predominantly asserted that Ukrainians posed a threat to Czech society rather than the Czech state.

Finally, as alluded to in the introduction, the third and ultimate distinction lies in the involvement of speech actors. In the MENA refugee crisis, the primary speech actor was the government, with limited support for incoming MENA refugees in the parliament. The dynamics shifted in the context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Ukrainians enjoyed comprehensive governmental support, but the opposition did not share the same sympathies for incoming Ukrainians. Consequently, the securitisation discourse gained traction in the parliament, particularly among opposition parties such as ANO and SPD. Those above can be succinctly encapsulated by delving into the fundamental identity of the victim in question. Amidst the MENA crisis, the governmental narrative delineated Czech citizens as victims, attributing this status to the influx of migrants from said region. Conversely, in the milieu of the Ukrainian crisis, the opposition portrayed Czech citizens as victims, attributing this status to the presence of Ukrainian refugees, who are concurrently depicted as victims by both the Czech government and the opposition within the broader context of Russian aggression.

Table 2: Comparison of 2015–2019 MENA-European and 2022–2023 Ukrainian refugee crisis

2015–2019 MENA-European refugee crisis	
Discursive Process	Prevailing securitisation
Threat to	Sovereignty and Identity
Victim	Czech citizens due to migrants from the MENA
Speech Actor(s)	Government (ANO and Social-Democrats)
2022–2023 Ukrainian refugee crisis	
Discursive Process	Politicisation and securitisation
Threat to	Economic prosperity, social welfare and social security
Victim	Czech citizens due to Ukrainian victims due to Russian aggression
Speech Actor(s)	Parliamentary opposition parties (ANO and SPD)

Source: Authors

Conclusions

In the end, it is vital to ask – what do both the MENA and Ukrainian refugee crises tell us about the Czech government and society? The first characteristic lies on the cultural-religious level. On the one side, incoming MENA, mostly Muslim refugees, were not only unwelcome by the political representation at that time (after 2015) but they were also not generally welcome by society. The apprehension of the unknown might have shaped the initial perception of Muslim migrants as a security concern (refer to Carleton 2016). Alternatively, this perception could have been influenced by the November 2015 Paris attacks, which remained fresh in people's memories and resulted in the tragic loss of over 130 lives and injuries to approximately 400 individuals.[8] Early surveys during the migration crisis revealed that 45.5% of Czech respondents expressed discomfort with the idea of having Muslims as neighbours. Muslims were identified as the second least-favoured group in Czechia, following the Roma minority (Hafez 2018: 439).

On the other side, while the parliamentary opposition parties (ANO and SPD) took a securitised approach to incoming Ukrainian refugees, the Czech government and the majority of Czech society generally extended support to Ukrainian refugees, particularly in the initial months of the conflict in Ukraine. The reason behind this lies in the fact that, before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, almost two hundred thousand Ukrainians lived and worked in Czechia (Ministry of Interior 2021: 1). People were accustomed to having Ukrainians as neighbours or colleagues, albeit often in lower-paying jobs. Furthermore, Ukrainians share Slavic and Christian origins with Czechs, minimising cultural and religious differences. However, by the latter half of 2023, surveys indicated a slight decline in support for Ukrainian refugees. Most individuals expressed a desire to continue supporting them but only until the conclusion of the war, as noted in a survey conducted by STEM Institute for Empirical Research (Tvrdoň 2023). Sociologist Jaromír Mazák explains that the Czech public tends to be conservative and resistant to change, preferring to adhere to familiar norms. This inclination is evident in the overall attitude towards migration, where the current positive reception of Ukrainian refugees is not always rooted in the belief that their arrival brings tangible benefits such as a new workforce or incentives. In this context, people in the region generally do not view the narrative of migration positively (Mazák, as reported by Český rozhlas 2023).

Last but not least, as evidenced in the text, politicisation and securitisation carry practical implications. Currently, politicisation itself is not inherently perilous. However, it harbours the risk of fostering conditions conducive to further

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8   Afterwards, other Islamist terrorist attacks took place in Nice, Berlin, Brussels, Barcelona, Manchester and London in the 2016–2017 period.

securitisation endeavours. Politicisation acts as a catalyst for securitisation. The more protracted the politicisation, the more profound the subsequent impact of securitisation. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise that one actor's politicisation narratives can bolster another's securitisation narratives. The analysis indicates that ANO was predominantly subject to politicisation, whereas SPD was characterised by securitisation. As ANO constitutes the largest parliamentary party, it played a role in maintaining the topic of refugees and migration in the public discourse, thereby inadvertently aiding SPD. Consequently, SPD was able to utilise the segment of public discourse that negatively portrayed Ukrainian refugees to propagate its securitisation narratives.

Lastly, one cannot overlook the recurring refugee crisis blooming in the Sahel and Northern Africa, creating pressure in the South European states such as Spain and Italy. During the analysis, the authors noticed that the opposition parties were simultaneously securitising the new migration threat from MENA and how the EU approached it. The same goes for the current government run by Prime Minister Petr Fiala. Although the government supports Ukrainian refugees, it perceives recurring MENA migration as a danger to both European and Czech Security. According to Prime Minister Petr Fiala, more than the European migration policy is needed to counter northern Africa's migration flows (iRozhlas 2023). Hence, a new series of various securitisation narratives towards MENA refugees appear once again, like in 2015. Czechia faces an upcoming parliamentary election in October 2025. Migration, especially MENA, is highly expected to be one of the leading topics. Further research on the securitisation of migrants in Czechia will be needed then.

Acknowledgements

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Dimensions and Effects of Poland's Socio-Economic Support for Ukrainian Women in the Face of the War in Ukraine

MAŁGORZATA KAMOLA-CIEŚLIK AND MUZAFFER BIMAY

Abstract: *The article explores Poland's socio-economic support for Ukrainian women during the war in Ukraine, emphasising how this assistance has enabled their integration into the workforce. The article explores Poland's socio-economic support and presents the socio-economic dimension of Poland's support for Ukrainian women amid the war in Ukraine, highlighting how this support has facilitated their participation in the workforce. The aim of the article is to analyse the decisions of the Polish government and local authorities, as well as the actions of employers, nongovernmental organisations and the Polish public in providing assistance to Ukrainian women who fled the war in Ukraine. It addresses the following research questions: What actions have the Polish government and other entities taken to provide socio-economic support for Ukrainian women? What factors have influenced the establishment of sole proprietorships in Poland by Ukrainian women? Were there any barriers hindering the professional activity of Ukrainian women in Poland? The research reported in this paper covers the years 2022–2023 and focuses on Ukrainian women, who represented the largest demographic group among refugees. Due to various barriers, most were employed below their qualifications. However, some demonstrated significant creativity by establishing their own businesses.*

Keywords: *refugees, labour market, entrepreneurship, Poland, Ukraine*

Introduction

After 24 February 2022, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Ukrainian citizens seeking refuge have begun arriving in Poland. The majority of these refugees were women and children. Men of conscription age (18–60 years) were prohibited from leaving Ukraine, with exceptions granted to men with three or more children, single fathers or those unfit for military service (Centre for Documentation and Counter Extremism 2024). Those Ukrainian War refugees joined the Ukrainian migrants already residing in Poland, who had arrived primarily for work-related reasons.

The Polish government, local authorities, nongovernmental organisations, employers and Polish citizens provided support to the new arrivals. Assistance for Ukrainian women focused on helping them adapt and integrate into the society and the labour market in Poland.

This article explores Poland's socio-economic support for Ukrainian women during the war in Ukraine, emphasising how this assistance has enabled their integration into the workforce. It asks the following research questions: What actions have the Polish government and other entities undertaken to provide socio-economic support for Ukrainian women? What factors influenced the establishment of sole proprietorships in Poland by Ukrainian women? Were there barriers hindering the professional activity of Ukrainian women in Poland?

The article proposes and tests the hypothesis that Ukrainian women, who made up 77% of war refugees, demonstrated strong career aspirations and integrated relatively quickly into the Polish labour market in 2022–2023. Support from the Polish government and local authorities contributed to increasing the professional activity of Ukrainian women, although most of them worked below their qualifications. To verify this hypothesis, the study employed dogmatic, decision-making and comparative methods, along with analysis of desk research and statistical data. The dogmatic method was applied in the analysis and interpretation of the Act of 12 March 2022 on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of that Country, including its amendments from 2022 to 2023. This method enabled an illustration of the institutional support provided to Ukrainian women. Subsequently, the decision-making method was used to analyse the outcomes of decisions made by the Polish government, local authorities, employers, nongovernmental organisations and citizens regarding assistance offered to Ukrainian women fleeing the war.

Comparative analysis was employed to assess and compare the scope and quality of support provided by local authorities, employers, Polish citizens and NGOs. This included an evaluation of the diversity of forms of assistance and their effectiveness. Through a desktop-based qualitative analysis, the participation of Ukrainian women in the Polish labour market was examined, including

their involvement in various economic sectors and the establishment of sole proprietorships. At the same time, descriptive and numerical data on Ukrainian war refugees were obtained from reports and documents published by the National Bank of Poland, the Polish Economic Institute, Statistics Poland, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the International Organisation for Migration.

The analysis of these sources focused on the professional activity of Ukrainian women in the Polish labour market and identified barriers limiting their potential for professional engagement. To illustrate the situation of female war refugees from Ukraine in Poland – taking into account their family circumstances, age structure and the impact of these factors on employment in 2022–2023 – a quantitative data analysis was also conducted.

The selection of this research period is justified by the observed increase in the professional activity of Ukrainian female refugees in Poland during that time. It was during this period that many of them entered the labour market, launched sole proprietorships and became actively involved in economic life. This timeframe also witnessed intensified support efforts from the state, local governments, employers, nongovernmental organisations and citizens. As such, it enables a comprehensive analysis of the outcomes of this support and an assessment of the degree of professional integration of Ukrainian women.

The issue of refugees – particularly Ukrainian women – has attracted the attention of numerous researchers both in Poland and internationally. Notable among them are Jane Freedman (2016), who examines the gendered dimensions of migration; Monika Chmielewska and Krzysztof Pawłowski (2022), who focus on refugee integration policies; and Karolina Sowińska (2020), who explores the challenges of migration-related trauma and its effects on women. However, there is still a limited body of research specifically addressing the support provided by Poland to Ukrainian women in the context of the war in Ukraine. Therefore, the subject explored in this article is both timely and relevant, contributing to the ongoing academic discussion and offering an opportunity for further exploration of this critical issue.

The article is divided into the following sections: Characteristics of war refugees from Ukraine, Socio-economic support for Ukrainian women in Poland resulting from the legal basis, Professional activity of Ukrainian women in the Polish labour market.

Characteristics of war refugees from Ukraine

According to Eurostat, Poland was an attractive destination for foreigners, particularly Ukrainians, as early as 2019. It admitted the highest number of non-European Union (EU) nationals among all member states of the EU. In 2019, approximately 3 million residence permits were issued to non-EU citi-

zens across the EU, with Poland granting 724,000 permits. Of these, 551,000 were issued to Ukrainian citizens. The next leading EU countries issuing the most residence permits to non-EU nationals were Germany (460,000), Spain (320,000) and France (285,000) (Eurostat 2022). The choice of Poland by labour migrants from Ukraine was influenced by cultural, linguistic and geographical proximity between the two nations. Ukrainian labour migrants had a positive impact on the Polish economy. Between 2013 and 2018, they mitigated Poland's labour shortage problem and thus contributed to generating a 13% growth in Poland's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

By the end of 2021, approximately 1.5 million Ukrainian citizens were working in Poland, of whom 55% were women (National Bank of Poland 2023a). Poland had not previously experienced an influx of war refugees on a scale as massive as that of 2022. Among all countries worldwide, Poland hosted the largest number of war refugees from Ukraine. It is important to emphasise that, unlike labour migrants, war refugees did not leave Ukraine voluntarily but were compelled by circumstances, including violations of their universal rights (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk 2022).

According to data from the Polish Border Guard Headquarters, from the beginning of the war in Ukraine until 30 September 2023, 16 million people crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border. During the same period, 14.2 million people traveled back to Ukraine. Between 2022 and 2023, over 1.7 million Ukrainian war refugees received a Polish PESEL (Universal Electronic System for Registration of the Population) number, granting them access to employment as well as social, healthcare and family benefits. As of October 2023, approximately 957,000 Ukrainian war refugees (mostly women) were residing in Poland under the Special Act on Refugees, holding active PESEL numbers (Huczko 2023). An important factor influencing Ukrainian women's choice of Poland as a refuge from the war was cultural proximity (36%) between the Ukrainian and Polish nations. This, along with other reasons for choosing Poland as a host country, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Between 2022 and 2023, the Ukrainian refugees in Poland were predominantly women (77%), with the remaining portion consisting of children (12%) and men (11%). Considering the age structure of the refugees, the dominant group among Ukrainian women were those aged 27–44 (53%). War refugees over the age of 60 accounted for 8%, which was higher than in the same age group among labour migrants in 2021 (National Bank of Poland 2023b). The family situations of Ukrainian women in Poland also varied. The majority were single mothers raising children alone (26%) (National Bank of Poland 2023a). The age structure of Ukrainian female war refugees residing in Poland between 2022 and 2023 is illustrated in **Figure 2**, while **Figure 3** presents the family situations of Ukrainian women in Poland during the same period.

Figure 1: Reasons Influencing Ukrainian Women's Choice of Poland as a Refuge from the War in Ukraine in 2022

- Having friends in Poland 24%
- Cultural proximity 36%
- Having family in Poland 21%
- Friendly attitude of Poles towards Ukrainian citizens19%
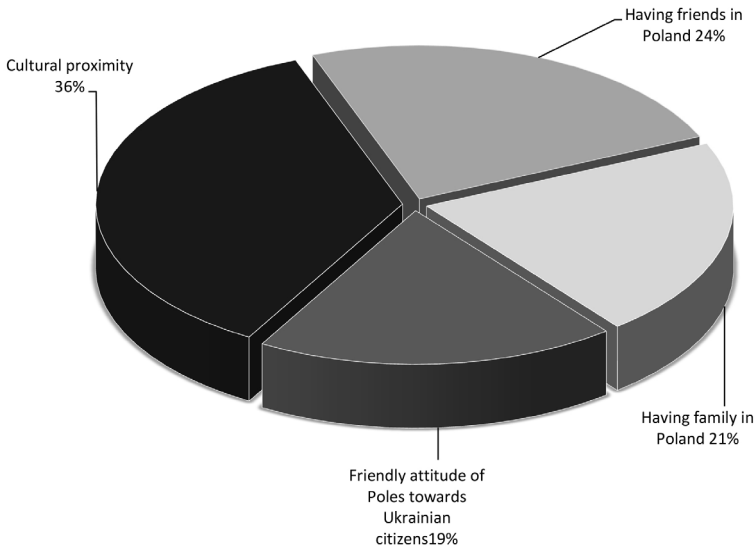
Sources: Authors' own compilation based on ELW & Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw (2022)

Figure 2: Age Structure of Ukrainian Female Refugees in Poland in 2022–2023

- Women aged 27-44 53%
- Women aged 45-59 20%
- Woman aged over 60   8%
- Women aged up to 26 19%
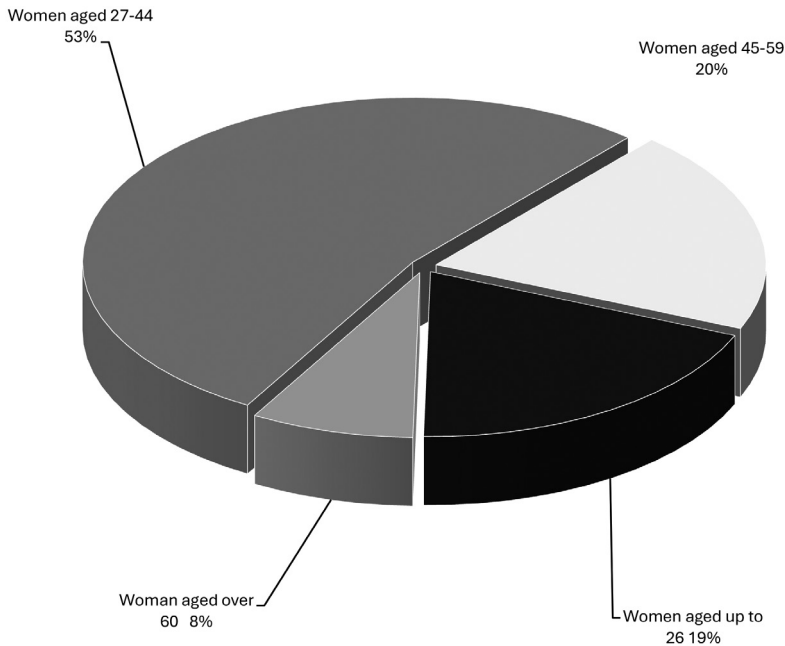
Sources: National Bank of Poland (2023b)

Figure 3: Family situation of Ukrainian women in Poland in 2022–2023*

Women only with
other family 18%

Women without
family 18%

Women with
partners and with
children 16%

Women with
partners without
children 13%

Men without family
9%

Women without
partner and with
children 26%
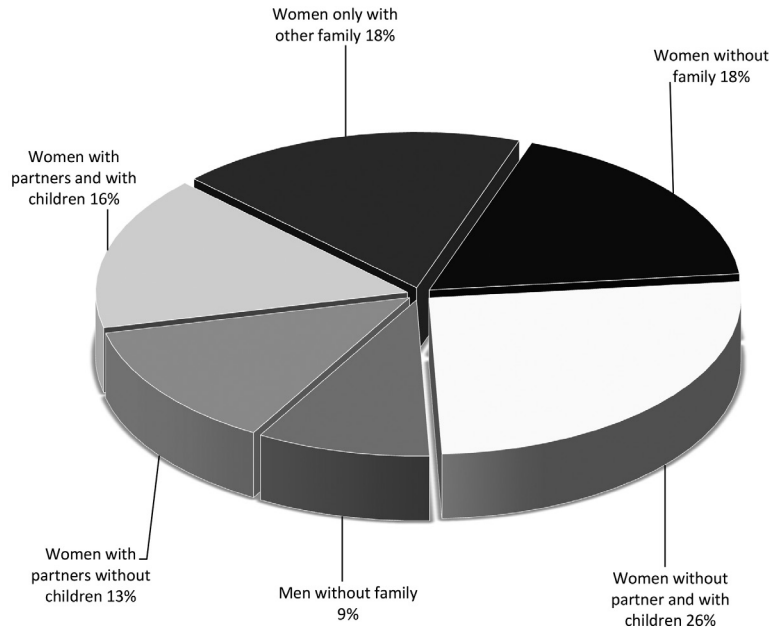
From 24 February 2022, to December 2023
Sources: National Bank of Poland (2023a)

According to the 2023 report of the National Bank of Poland, the presence of family and children in Poland had a significant impact on the professional activity of female refugees during the initial months of their stay. As of July of that year, 62% of Ukrainian refugees were employed, with men more likely to hold permanent jobs (44%) than women (33%). Stable employment among Ukrainian women was less common, partly due to childcare responsibilities, which increased the risk of unemployment. One of the responses to this challenge was the introduction of flexible working arrangements by employers, particularly in professions such as teachers, translators, administrative staff and nurses. It is worth noting that women rarely filled positions in sectors traditionally occupied by Ukrainian men.

In June 2022, the minister responsible for social integration, Agnieszka Ścigaj, stated that the government would encourage Ukrainians to move from large cities to rural areas, as housing and jobs are available there, and there are significant needs, given that the Polish countryside is experiencing some depopulation (Bankier 2022a). The minister emphasised that 'it is easier to find work in smaller towns than in large cities. Ukrainian women who came to us have great potential to be utilized, for instance, in social services or elder care, where there is a shortage of workers' (Bankier 2022a). Between 2022 and

2023, nearly 75% of female refugees who arrived in Poland from Ukraine did not speak Polish. According to Polish employers, the language barrier was the greatest obstacle preventing Ukrainian women from quickly integrating into the Polish labour market.

In their report *Refugees from Ukraine in the Polish labour market: opportunities and obstacles,* experts from the Polish Economic Institute recommended, among other measures, Polish language courses combined with childcare support and programmes promoting employment aligned with the refugees' qualifications (Polish Economic Institute 2024a). Consequently, support from the government and local authorities in the form of free Polish language courses and vocational training proved crucial for Ukrainian women during the initial months of their stay in Poland. At both the national and local levels, specific integration measures were implemented to enhance the employability of Ukrainian refugees, particularly women, through free language instruction and childcare provision. According to the Polish Economic Institute (2024), approximately 32% of Ukrainian women in Poland participated in language courses funded by public institutions or delivered by nongovernmental organisations.

For instance, in Warsaw, programmes organised by the City of Warsaw in cooperation with the Ocalenie Foundation enabled participants to simultaneously access language courses, psychological support and childcare (Fundacja Ocalenie 2023). In Gdańsk, as part of the 'Gdańsk Helps Ukraine' initiative, the Immigrant and Immigrant Women Support Center was established, offering comprehensive integration services – from language education to career counseling – which has benefited over 3,000 women (*Gdańsk Helps Ukraine* 2024). In Kraków, the Municipal Social Initiative Support Center launched the 'Together at Work' programme, in which around 800 Ukrainian women took part in vocational and language training. According to data from the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, more than 60% of refugees who entered legal employment in 2023 had previously benefited from at least one of the support programs available in Poland (Polish Agency for Enterprise Development 2024).

Socio-economic support for Ukrainian women in Poland resulting from the legal basis

In Poland, support for Ukrainian refugees involved the government, local authorities, nongovernmental organisations, employers and citizens. Utilising his powers, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki initiated actions to ensure the conditions for implementing tasks aimed at supporting Ukrainian citizens even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. On 18 February 2022, the Polish prime minister established two interministerial teams to manage the reception of people from Ukraine (Polish Monitor Official Journal of the Republic of Poland 2022a) and to develop a programme for accommodating injured and

affected individuals arriving from Ukrainian territory (Polish Monitor Official Journal of the Republic of Poland 2022b). The teams were tasked with, among other things, monitoring the readiness of public administration to receive Ukrainian citizens, proposing solutions for transportation and relocation, and analysing the needs and capabilities to provide essential assistance to Ukrainian refugees on Polish territory. Additionally, Prime Minister M. Morawiecki appointed a Government Plenipotentiary for Refugees (Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2022a; Zalewski 2022). The position was assumed by Deputy Minister of Administration and Internal Affairs Paweł Szefernaker. The primary responsibilities of the plenipotentiary included coordinating the activities of government and local administration bodies aimed at assisting Ukrainian citizens. The plenipotentiary was authorised to propose amendments to legal regulations for consideration by the government. These proposals were intended to streamline the provision of aid to Ukrainian citizens and to adapt support measures to the evolving needs of refugees.

The Polish government, aiming to regulate the situation of people fleeing Ukraine, prepared a draft of a special law concerning assistance to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the ongoing armed conflict. On 12 March 2022, the Polish Parliament passed the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of that State. Colloquially, this legislation is referred to as 'the special law on Ukrainian refugees'. The act was subsequently signed by President Andrzej Duda.

The legislation introduced a range of rights for Ukrainian citizens, including women, who sought shelter in Poland from the war. It has since been amended several times, resulting in changes to the scope of rights granted to Ukrainian nationals. One of the key provisions of the 2022 special act was the introduction of an 18-month residency permit in Poland, with the possibility of extension – currently valid until 30 September 2025. Additionally, Ukrainians were entitled to obtain a PESEL number, which enabled them to access various benefits, such as employment without the need for an additional work permit, access to family benefits, free public healthcare and education, and the ability to register a business. Ukrainian refugees were also granted the right to obtain a trusted profile, allowing them to handle administrative matters online (Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2022b). Analysing the forms of support provided by the Polish government to Ukrainian women, it is important to note the financial assistance and childcare support offered to them. Under the special law on refugees, Ukrainian women were entitled to a one-time financial benefit of PLN 300 to cover living expenses, particularly for food, clothing, footwear, personal hygiene products and housing costs. This provision was repealed by an amended special law on refugees as of 1 July 2024.

According to data from Statistics Poland (GUS), by the end of 2022, this benefit had been granted to 1,070,300 individuals. Further data from the Ministry

of Family and Social Policy, as of August 2023, indicate that a total of 1,066,453 people received this support – approximately 84% of those registered in Poland with a PESEL number and 'UKR' status. Although Statistics Poland does not provide gender-disaggregated data on recipients of this benefit, it can be reasonably assumed that the majority of beneficiaries were women with children, as they constituted the dominant group among war refugees from Ukraine (Statistics Poland 2023a; Ministry of Family and Social Policy 2023).

In addition to the one-time support of PLN 300, Ukrainian students continuing their education in Poland were eligible to apply for low-interest student loans, disbursed in monthly installments, with repayment starting no earlier than two years after graduation. These benefits were available regardless of gender. However, according to data from the Office for Foreigners, approximately 63% of Ukrainian nationals under temporary protection in Poland are women, and among adults, women account for as much as 75%. Moreover, studies indicate that Ukrainian refugees in Poland are primarily well-educated women with children. Therefore, it can be assumed that a significant portion of student loan recipients were women who arrived in Poland following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (Statistics Poland 2023b).

They could apply for low-interest student loans disbursed in monthly installments, with repayment starting no earlier than two years after graduation. Ukrainian students demonstrating excellent academic performance could also qualify for partial loan forgiveness. These support measures remain in effect. Although detailed statistics on the number of Ukrainian female students who benefited from low-interest loans or university assistance are not publicly available, data from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education indicate that 1,280 student loan agreements were concluded in 2022 among students and doctoral candidates who met the income criteria, suggesting that the programme continues to be utilised (Ministry of Science and Higher Education 2023).

Moreover, most universities in Poland introduced aid programmes enabling Ukrainian students, including women, to apply for full or partial tuition waivers or reductions in dormitory fees. Refugee women were also eligible for grants and scholarships. The Ministry of Education and Science prepared a guide to assist Ukrainian women in applying to Polish universities and submitting the required documents. In addition, the Polish legislator ensured that Ukrainian women caring for a child under the age of 18 (as a parent or temporary guardian) could receive a childcare benefit of PLN 500 under the Family 500 Plus programme. As of January 2024, the amount of this benefit was increased from PLN 500 to PLN 800. Additionally, from September 2024, Ukrainian children residing in Poland were subjected to compulsory education, which was tied to the payment of family benefits under the Family 800 Plus programme (Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2022b). Furthermore, refugees who were parents or temporary guardians were granted access to family allowances and supple-

ments, special caregiving benefits, a one-time birth allowance, parental benefits and educational allowances. The Ministry of Education and Science prepared resources for teachers and educators to provide psychological and pedagogical support to Ukrainian mothers and students currently studying in Poland. Until the end of June 2024, Polish citizens who provided accommodation and meals in their homes to Ukrainian nationals received a monetary allowance of PLN 40 per day. According to data from the Polish Economic Institute, 77% of adult Poles participated in aid efforts for Ukrainian citizens. They engaged in volunteer work and, in some cases, offered housing to Ukrainians left without shelter (Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2022b).

In the first weeks of the war in Ukraine, aid for refugees was funded by the state budget, the EU, private businesses, international organisations and the generosity of Polish citizens. In 2022, Poland spent approximately PLN 20 billion on aid for Ukrainian refugees, and in 2023, around PLN 5 billion. During the same period, the state budget received revenue from taxes paid by Ukrainian refugees in Poland, amounting to approximately PLN 15 billion in 2022 and PLN 22 billion in 2023 (Demagog 2025).

Support for Ukrainian women: Governments, citizens, employers and NGOs

The burden of the refugee crisis was most acutely felt by municipalities that received thousands of Ukrainian refugees, particularly in the first weeks after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Local governments in Poland provided Ukrainian women refugees with various forms of assistance, establishing information points. Women with children, who constituted the vast majority of refugees from Ukraine after the outbreak of the war in 2022 (about 63% of all beneficiaries of temporary protection in Poland and 75% among adults), were the main recipients of assistance at information points (Office for Foreigners 2025). At these points, they received information regarding procedures for legalising residence in Poland, obtaining a PESEL number, locations for collecting and distributing donations, psychological support, hotlines for foreigners, accommodation options, Polish language courses, vocational activation programmes and rules for running a business. However, this support was available to all refugees – regardless of gender, age or disability – and was primarily provided by local governments, nongovernmental organisations and state institutions.

Initially, a significant problem for local governments was the language barrier between Ukrainian women and the aid providers. This barrier was overcome by appointing coordinators fluent in both Polish and Ukrainian. Another major challenge for local authorities was finding suitable conditions for the long-term accommodation of Ukrainian citizens. In response, city authorities in Poland

established residential centres specifically for women from Ukraine fleeing the war (Rynek Infrastruktury 2022).

In social assistance centres, women could benefit from psychological support, career counseling, Polish language lessons and activities for children aimed at supporting their development and mental health. Polish language courses were not immediately available following the first wave of refugees in February 2022 but were gradually introduced in the following weeks and months as the support system developed. Participation in these courses was voluntary but highly popular, especially among women for whom learning Polish was key to gaining employment and integrating into Polish society (Ministry of Education and Science 2023).

Local authorities also undertook various actions to facilitate the daily functioning of refugees. Free public transportation was organised to accommodation centres and support points, hygiene and cleaning supplies were purchased, and one-time financial aid and family benefits were provided (Infotrans 2022). Furthermore, the war in Ukraine prompted Polish local governments to offer broad assistance to refugees and led to business decisions by Polish companies supporting Ukrainian women. The charitable activities of these companies included organising fundraising campaigns, providing transport for refugees across Poland's eastern border, meals for people stranded at train and bus stations, and creating job opportunities.

As a complement to government programmes, local governments also allocated funds from local budgets for financial aid dedicated to women with children and families. Thus, support for Ukrainian refugee women was multifaceted and included formal and administrative assistance as well as social support and integration into the labour market.

In the first weeks of the war in Ukraine, financial support specifically targeted at female refugees was offered by the supermarket chain Biedronka, amounting to PLN 10 million (in the form of shopping vouchers) (Jeronimo Martins Polska SA 2022), and by Poland's largest meat producer, CEDROB SA, contributing PLN 3 million (Grupa CEDROB 2022). These funds were allocated to foundations and municipalities involved in assisting women and children from Ukraine. Among other examples of support provided by Polish companies to Ukrainian citizens was the deployment of 1,000 cars by Panek CarSharing to the Polish-Ukrainian border at the end of February 2022 to transport women and children to refugee information centres (PAP 2022).

At the same time, the courier company InPost supported the Package for Ukraine campaign by transporting around 200,000 parcels donated by individuals to Caritas warehouses, which were then sent to Ukraine. Meanwhile, LOT Polish Airlines offered discounted ticket prices specifically to newly arrived war refugees from Ukraine.

Adults received a 30% discount, children 50% and infants traveling on an adult's lap were granted a 99% discount. The offer applied to travel from Ukraine to Poland, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia and was valid from 25 February to 31 May 2022. Ukrainian passengers were also allowed to change their reservations free of charge, even in the case of a no-show (Rynek Lotniczy 2022). The initiatives described above demonstrate that the support provided by Polish companies to Ukrainian women and children was extensive. Assistance was also offered by the discount chain KiK, Sphinx restaurants and Poczta Polska SA. KiK stores donated a large number of clothing items from their inventory. Poczta Polska SA decided to provide seven armoured cash transport vehicles. Meanwhile, the Sphinx restaurant chain launched the Family Community Center programme, which offered Ukrainian women with children safe and quiet spaces for meetings, sharing experiences, play or learning. Additionally, Sphinx restaurants provided complimentary refreshments to their guests (Bankier 2022b).

The largest job portals in Poland, OLX and Pracuj.pl, created dedicated sections with job offers in Ukrainian to meet the needs of potential candidates from Ukraine. A similar recruitment solution was also implemented by the fast-food chain McDonald's.

By the end of 2022, more than 220,000 Ukrainian female war refugees had found employment in Poland. According to available data, women accounted for approximately 64% of all employed Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Poland after the outbreak of the war (Ukrinform 2025; Polish Economic Institute 2024b). It is worth noting that the assistance provided to Ukrainian women and children involved not only local authorities and employers but also citizens and nongovernmental organisations. Grassroots engagement by Polish society began even before formal procedures for aiding Ukrainians were implemented. In the first weeks of the war, Poles demonstrated significant commitment to helping war refugees. The support offered to Ukrainian citizens included financial and material donations, volunteering and sharing private homes or apartments. According to data from the Polish Economic Institute, 77% of adult Poles participated in aid activities for Ukrainian citizens.

A significant portion of this assistance was directed toward women with children, who accounted for approximately 77% of all Ukrainian refugees in Poland between 2022 and 2023. This support included, in particular, free accommodation, material aid (such as children's clothing, strollers and toys), psychological support and childcare services (Polish Economic Institute 2022a).

Polish nongovernmental organisations were significantly more active in supporting Ukrainian refugees in Poland (98%) than in Ukraine (7.8%). In the early weeks of the war, nongovernmental organisations were particularly involved in providing legal and psychological assistance to refugees, primarily women. Legal aid for Ukrainian citizens focused on issues related to the

documents required for entry, residency conditions, employment and education in Poland. According to the 2023 *Report on Polish non-governmental organizations' support for Ukraine* by the Polish Non-Governmental Initiatives Confederacy, the following organisations demonstrated notable engagement in providing legal support: the Legal Aid Coordination Center, the Halina Nieć Legal Aid Center, the Legal Intervention Association and Żyglicka & Partners Law Firm. Ukrainian women and children required psychological support to adapt to their new reality and cope with the trauma of war. Nongovernmental organisations such as the Polish Red Cross and the Polish Migration Forum Foundation provided psychological assistance and integration support. It is important to note that, in addition to psychological support, these organisations assisted Ukrainian women by providing food and hygiene packages, organising integration activities, offering employment counseling, Polish language courses and social assistance (Polish Red Cross 2022; Polish Migration Forum Foundation 2022).

One of the nongovernmental organisations providing assistance to Ukrainian women was the Ukraine Foundation, established in 2016 in response to the growing number of Ukrainians settling in Poland. In 2022, the Ukraine Foundation launched the 'Ukrainian Woman in Poland' project, aimed at supporting the integration of Ukrainian refugee women who arrived in Poland after the outbreak of the war. The project was exclusively dedicated to women, particularly those who had come to Poland due to the armed conflict, and included organising regular meetings in Lower Silesia. These meetings provided refugees with access to psychological support and sessions on topics such as 'first steps in Poland', 'crisis situations', communication with children in crisis conditions', 'adaptation', 'discovering personal potential' and 'personal development' (Ukraine Foundation 2022).

As part of the Ukrainian woman in Poland project, Ukrainian women were also offered support in areas such as legal advice, accounting, starting their own business and website development. On 8 March 2022, the Support Fund for Women and Girls from Ukraine was established as part of the Hi Girls! initiative launched by the Kulczyk Foundation. Funds raised for the initiative were allocated to urgent needs of Ukrainian women, such as medications, hygiene products, language lessons and career counseling. Dominika Kulczyk, president of the Kulczyk Foundation, contributed PLN 1 million to the Support Fund for Women and Girls from Ukraine Hi Girls!. In mid-April 2022, thanks to funds raised through the Support Fund for Women and Girls from Ukraine, the Hi Girls! Ukrainian Women's Assistance Center opened in Warsaw (Kulczyk Foundation 2022). The centre offered free Polish language lessons, group sessions with psychologists and stress management training.

Professional activity of Ukrainian women in the Polish labour market

Adaptation of Ukrainian women to the conditions of the Polish labour market posed a socio-economic challenge. Proficiency in the Polish language, access to childcare, and employment enabled Ukrainian women to become full-fledged and equal participants in public life in Poland. In 2023, the employment rate of war refugees in Poland reached 65%, the highest among the member states of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which can be considered a significant achievement for Poland in the integration of refugees (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2023). For women, the employment rate was slightly lower, at 61%, yet Poland remained a leader among OECD countries in integrating refugees into the labour market (Polish Economic Institute 2024a).

Furthermore, Poland has been and remains an attractive workplace for Ukrainian women in terms of safety and the employment conditions offered compared to their home country. According to research, most Ukrainian refugee women in Poland have found employment, which reflects successful labour market integration (Marczuk 2022). Additionally, a significant proportion of them rate working conditions in Poland as good and fair, likely in comparison to the situation in Ukraine (International Organization for Migration 2017).

It is worth noting that many refugee women from Ukraine who arrived in Poland had no previous experience working abroad, often held higher education degrees (about 50%), came from large urban areas, lacked financial resources and showed a strong interest in upgrading their skills. According to refugee labour market reports, approximately 46% of Ukrainian women worked in positions unrelated to their former professions and below their qualifications (Polish Economic Institute 2024b). To address this mismatch and improve their employability, around 60% participated in language, vocational or integration courses. While only 45% had knowledge of the Polish language, communication was sufficient for less demanding jobs, whereas more specialised positions required technical competencies and familiarity with professional terminology (National Bank of Poland 2023a).

Despite the language barrier and challenges related to understanding Polish regulations and procedures regarding employment, taxes and social insurance, Ukrainian women began entering the Polish labour market relatively quickly. Cultural proximity facilitated their integration, enabling them to participate in local communities and build lasting relationships with Poles. According to a 2023 report by the National Bank of Poland, 80% of Ukrainian refugee women supported themselves through work in Poland, while only 7% relied on funds provided by the Polish government. In addition to the language barrier, a significant challenge for these refugee women seeking employment in Poland was

arranging childcare, particularly for children under the age of three. Ukrainian refugee women also expressed concerns about interacting with Polish administrative systems, viewing procedures in Poland (such as opening a bank account or diploma recognition) as more complex than those in Ukraine.

In 2022–2023, the majority of Ukrainian women were employed in industry (22%), trade (12%) and the service sector (33%). A notable portion of refugees, more often than pre-war migrants, worked in high-skilled service roles such as healthcare, IT and finance. Ukrainian women frequently sought employment offering flexible working hours and childcare services to balance their professional and family lives (Bankier 2024). In 2022–2023, Ukrainian citizens established 44,500 sole proprietorships in Poland. During this period, women accounted for 17,000 of these businesses (6,500 in 2022 and 10,500 in 2023). Businesses founded by Ukrainian women differed in their industry structure from those established by men. This group constituted a significant portion of the 44.5 thousand businesses founded by Ukrainian citizens in Poland during this time. Ukrainian women most often operated businesses in the service sector (32%), information and communication (12%), trade, administrative services and support activities (10% each), as well as other sectors (26%) (W Gospodarce 2022; Polish Economic Institute 2022b).

Effective integration of Ukrainian refugee women into Polish society required not only the ability to communicate in Polish, but also access to employment aligned with their qualifications. However, many faced difficulties finding jobs that matched their skills. According to the Polish Economic Institute, nearly 46% of Ukrainian refugee women worked in positions below their qualifications in 2022–2023. This underemployment hindered their sense of professional fulfillment, slowed their social integration and represented a significant underutilisation of human capital from the perspective of the Polish economy.

Although only 45% of these women declared proficiency in Polish, as many as 90% were fluent in Russian and 55% in English (National Bank of Poland 2023a). This multilingualism improved their employment prospects, especially in sectors requiring foreign language communication, such as customer service, logistics, IT and healthcare. According to a 2023 report by the Polish Economic Institute, employers in these industries actively sought refugee women who spoke Russian and/or English to support international client relations, particularly in eastern regions of Poland and in large cities with diverse populations.

Their language skills and adaptability also contributed to the rise of female entrepreneurship. Out of the 44,500 sole proprietorships established in Poland by Ukrainian citizens in 2022–2023, 17,000 were launched by women – most of whom arrived after the outbreak of the war. Foreign language proficiency particularly supported self-employment in fields such as online marketing, translation, e-commerce and education.

Conclusion

The results presented in this article lead to several key conclusions regarding the socio-economic support provided to Ukrainian refugee women in Poland in 2022–2023, and their professional activity. First, in response to the first research question, the coordinated actions of the Polish government, local authorities, nongovernmental organisations, employers and civil society ensured effective support for women fleeing the war. The legal framework established through the special Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens created favourable conditions for their rapid legal, social and economic integration, providing access to healthcare, social benefits, education and the labour market.

Second, in addressing the second research question, concerning the factors influencing the establishment of sole proprietorships (JDGs) by Ukrainian refugee women, the analysis indicates that these motivations went beyond just the economic desire for independence. A key factor was the mismatch between available job offers and the needs and qualifications of many refugees, as well as the necessity to balance work with childcare responsibilities – especially for young children. Entrepreneurship offered greater flexibility and autonomy compared to wage employment, making it an attractive solution in the context of post-war displacement. A high percentage of women with higher education and language skills (e.g. English, Russian) also facilitated their entry into sectors such as trade, services and IT.

Third, with regard to professional barriers, the main obstacles included limited knowledge of the Polish language, difficulties navigating administrative systems and challenges related to arranging childcare. These factors often hindered access to stable employment and qualified positions, leading some women to opt for self-employment as a more accessible solution.

In light of the conducted analysis, the hypothesis presented in the article is confirmed: Ukrainian refugee women demonstrated strong professional aspirations and relatively quickly integrated into the Polish labour market, particularly through establishing their own businesses. While some barriers remain, institutional support and their own initiative played a crucial role in the process of socio-economic integration.

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Public Attitudes and Societal Influences on Hungarian Foreign Policy

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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.[1] 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,[2] 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
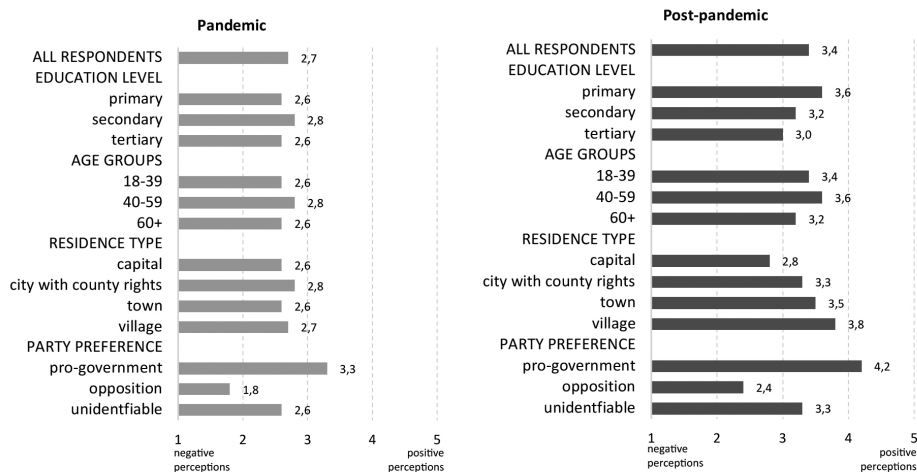
Source: Author's own editing, data collection conducted by Fisherman's Online Ltd.

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.[3] 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

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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.

Figure 2: Did Hungarian foreign policy perform better or worse than the EU average during and after the pandemic?

Pandemic

	Responed better	Responded worse	Responded as others	Unidentifiable
ALL RESPONDENTS	17,4%	36,0%	27,7%	18,9%
EDUCATION LEVEL				
primary	17,4%	36,2%	26,7%	19,7%
secondary	16,4%	34,4%	32,4%	16,8%
tertiary	19,3%	39,5%	21,0%	20,2%
AGE GROUPS				
18-39	19,6%	40,4%	26,3%	13,7%
40-59	17,1%	32,3%	29,2%	21,4%
60+	15,1%	34,9%	27,9%	22,1%
RESIDENCE TYPE				
capital	16,7%	42,4%	19,4%	21,5%
city with county rights	17,0%	41,5%	22,2%	19,3%
town	15,5%	33,9%	30,7%	19,8%
village	20,4%	31,9%	31,9%	15,7%
PARTY PREFERENCE				
pro-government	19,3%	15,8%	45,9%	19,0%
opposition	14,2%	66,2%	6,8%	12,8%
unidentifiable	16,0%	30,8%	15,2%	38,0%

0,0% 50,0% 100,0%

■ Responed better   ☐ Responded worse   ☐ Responded as others   ■ Unidentifiable

Post-pandemic

	Responed better	Responded worse	Responded as others	Unidentifiable
ALL RESPONDENTS	9,4%	29,8%	39,1%	21,8%
EDUCATION LEVEL				
primary	10,0%	29,2%	37,8%	23,0%
secondary	7,6%	29,3%	43,8%	19,3%
tertiary	10,9%	32,8%	33,6%	22,7%
AGE GROUPS				
18-39	10,2%	33,7%	39,3%	16,8%
40-59	8,9%	27,1%	40,3%	23,6%
60+	8,9%	28,3%	37,6%	25,2%
RESIDENCE TYPE				
capital	9%	36,8%	29,2%	25,0%
city with county rights	10,2%	32,1%	34,3%	23,4%
town	9,2%	28,9%	39,8%	22,2%
village	9,7%	25,3%	46,8%	18,1%
PARTY PREFERENCE				
pro-government	8,8%		63,4%	22,7%
opposition	12,8%	65,8%	8,7%	12,8%
unidentifiable	11,7%	23,1%	24,6%	40,5%

0,0% 50,0% 100,0%

■ Responed better   ☐ Responded worse   ☐ Responded as others   ■ Unidentifiable

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

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.
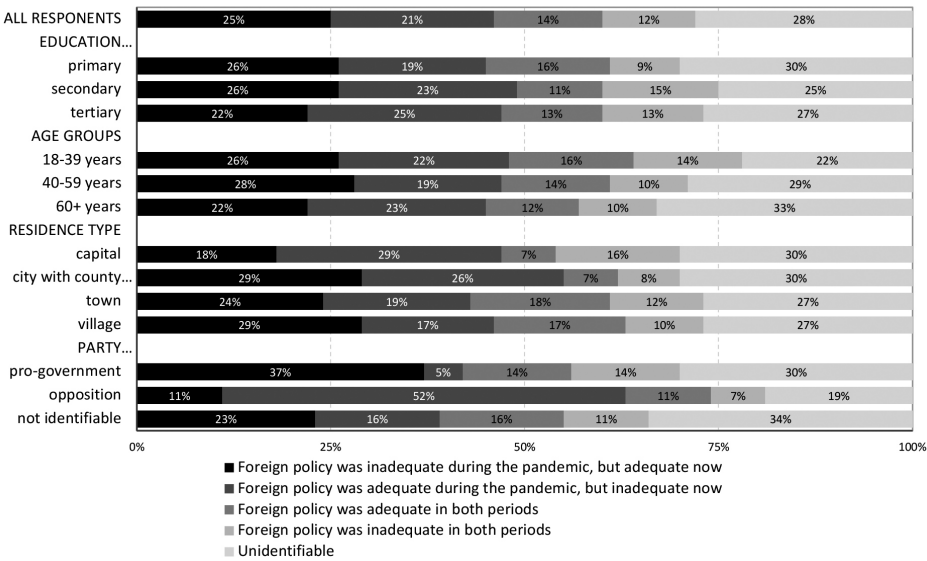
The results again indicate fragmented and polarised views. Most respondents rated foreign policy as performing worse or equal to the EU average, with only a minority considering it better. During the pandemic, unfavourable opinions were highest among tertiary-educated respondents (39.5%), individuals 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.[4] Then, cluster analysis was used to identify the possible combinations of the two opinion dimensions and the prevalence of these combinations among the population.[5] 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)

	Inadequate during pandemic, adequate now	Adequate during pandemic, inadequate now	Adequate in both periods	Inadequate in both periods	Unidentifiable
ALL RESPONENTS	25%	21%	14%	12%	28%
EDUCATION…					
primary	26%	19%	16%	9%	30%
secondary	26%	23%	11%	15%	25%
tertiary	22%	25%	13%	13%	27%
AGE GROUPS					
18-39 years	26%	22%	16%	14%	22%
40-59 years	28%	19%	14%	10%	29%
60+ years	22%	23%	12%	10%	33%
RESIDENCE TYPE					
capital	18%	29%	7%	16%	30%
city with county…	29%	26%	7%	8%	30%
town	24%	19%	18%	12%	27%
village	29%	17%	17%	10%	27%
PARTY…					
pro-government	37%	5%	14%	14%	30%
opposition	11%	52%	11%	7%	19%
not identifiable	23%	16%	16%	11%	34%

- ■ Foreign policy was inadequate during the pandemic, but adequate now
- ■ Foreign policy was adequate during the pandemic, but inadequate now
- ■ Foreign policy was adequate in both periods
- ▨ Foreign policy was inadequate in both periods
- ▢ Unidentifiable

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,[6] 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 & Kelemen 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 grassroot 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.

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Gradual EU Integration of the Western Balkans in Times of War in Europe: Security and the Politics of EU Enlargement in the 2020s

CHRISTOPHER WALSCH

Abstract: *This article contributes to debates on the politics of European Union (EU) enlargement to the Western Balkans (WB) in the 2020s. During the 2010s, the enlargement process stalled due to a lack of progress on the EU's fundamental requirements of 'rule of law' and 'democracy'. Since 2022, Russia's protracted war against Ukraine suggests that geopolitical considerations have become more important in the politics of EU enlargement. In order to overcome the enlargement impasse, the EU has recently proposed a gradual approach to integration, particularly with regard to market integration, which is to be facilitated by a new growth plan for the Western Balkans. This article argues that this 'carrot' and greater flexibility in general are intended to re-legitimise the EU-WB relationship. The EU can demonstrate its ongoing commitment to the region in a political process that remains open-ended, while WB governments can benefit from new opportunities and new budgets. Despite the 'new momentum' in EU enlargement policies, I argue that Serbian political discourse and action have become more violent in recent years and that a negligence of the security needs of the most fragile WB states has the power to derail the enlargement process. Reinforced commitments to KFOR and EUFOR Althea as well as reinvigorated EU assistance efforts in the fundamental requirements are needed to make full WB EU membership eventually happen.*

Keywords: *EU enlargement, Western Balkans, Kosovo, Serbia, gradual integration*

This article first describes changes in the politics of European Union (EU) enlargement in the Western Balkans (WB) since 2022 (section one). Section two highlights key events and issues in the six candidate countries of the region in

the same period. There are signs of a 'new momentum' in the EU enlargement process. Russia's continued war against Ukraine is the reason for the new dynamic, along with Ukraine's persistent self-defence and quest for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. The new dynamic makes the previous ten years of enlargement policy in the Western Balkans look pale. Given the success of earlier EU enlargements, and despite the EU's long-standing commitment to the Balkans, the failure to integrate the six Southeast European states, with a total population of 16 million, looks in retrospect like a failure of the EU as a polity. How can the EU credibly address global issues and be considered a global player if it is unable to integrate these six marginal states in its immediate neighbourhood?

The hypotheses of this article focus on the geostrategic and security aspects of the EU enlargement process, which have moved centre-stage since 2022, but also on rational cost-benefit calculations. The EU's new political will to integrate the Western Balkans has its origins in Russia's war against Ukraine and Ukraine's quest for EU integration. Since 2022, the EU has been much more willing to invest political, financial and administrative resources to speed up the integration of the six WB states. I argue that the relative cost of anchoring the six WB states in the Western and EU orbit is relatively low compared to the financial and humanitarian support required for a war-torn country like Ukraine. In terms of communication, I note that the EU is sticking to the discourse of 'tough but fair' conditionality in order to remain credible. At the level of concrete forms of cooperation, however, the EU shows flexibility and openness, particularly when a government in a candidate country considers non-EU alternatives. The 2024 Serbia-EU cooperation agreement on lithium mining gives evidence of the implementation of an option that skilfully bypasses local protests in the name of an environmentally and socially acceptable deal in the name of Serbian and European interests.

I also discuss the security dimension, arguing that European and Western partners are at risk of not taking enough measures to ensure the security of all WB states. Revisionist Serbia under President Aleksandar Vučić and the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina led by Bosnian Serb nationalist Milorad Dodik are seeking domestic and international political alliances that threaten the territorial integrity of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The role of European actors and the second Trump administration will be crucial in this regard throughout the 2020s. In these cases, fragile statehood combined with Serbian and Bosnian Serb revisionism has the power to take EU enlargement in the Western Balkans back to where the process started some twenty years ago. Section three of this article discusses the security dimension. Section four elaborates on the concepts of gradual integration and differentiated enlargement. The conclusions (section five) highlight the most pressing challenges that European actors face in the area.

The arguments in this article profit from three theoretical concepts that help understand the actors involved. The long-dominant concept is liberal intergovernmentalism. Driven by rational considerations weighing the costs and benefits of enlargement, the WB area seemed negligible from the EU's perspective in terms of being fully integrated into the EU. However, the war in Europe has changed these calculations. Social constructivism provides insights into the debate of EU enlargement, a crucial variable in times of rising nationalisms. Finally, differentiated integration – a concept rather than a theory – can improve our understanding of the process. Differentiation is a useful tool that outlines options for association with the EU that can or should eventually lead to full integration. This study will use a qualitative method based on analysing primary documents and reviewing the research literature on the subject.

'New momentum' in EU enlargement policy since 2022

This section captures the 'new momentum' (European Commission 2023: 4) in EU enlargement policy.[1] It examines the reasons for the impasse in the 2010s. It then points to one internal and one external factor that triggered the new momentum and provides more detail about the changes. The EU's enlargement policy scored low in the 2010s. The EU's main argument was that WB candidate countries were not making progress in fulfilling basic conditionalities on the rule of law and human rights. They lacked reforms in the independence of the judiciary and the fight against corruption. With the rise of populist and anti--European parties, public opinion and governments in EU member states have become more sceptical about enlargement. The management of the financial and sovereign debt crisis led to inward-looking policies, contributing to enlargement fatigue. The process almost came to a halt. The culmination of the non-enlargement rhetoric was the announcement by the then newly elected president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, that there would be 'no' enlargement during his term of office, 2014–2019.

Two factors have contributed to a new dynamic in the early 2020s. The first is internal to the EU. In response to the near standstill of the enlargement agenda and to criticism from WB actors, the new European Commission presented a 'revised' methodology that allowed for more flexibility. The 33 negotiating chapters were reorganised into six thematic clusters. The focus on 'fundamentals' remains, as all negotiations must still be opened and closed with 'fundamentals' chapters (now to be in the cluster of that name). What is new is that the fundamentals, whose standards and benchmarks the EU could define exclusively, no longer function as exclusive gatekeepers. The five clusters

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1   From the perspective of EU member states, the analysis of Buras & Engjellushe 2023 provides an overview. For tactical EU enlargement strategies, see Radić Milosavjević and Petrović 2024.

on the single market, inclusive growth, green transformation, agriculture and cohesion, and external relations can be opened and worked on in parallel. Progress in each specific area (i.e. each 'chapter' within each cluster) can lead to accelerated integration and funding. The second factor is external: Russia's war against Ukraine since February 2022 (for an overview of the war's impact on the geopolitics of the Western Balkans, see Džankić, Kacarska & Keil 2023). This led to the EU's decision to accept Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as new candidates. The EU is providing substantial financial assistance and has opened negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova in 2024.

The new dynamic is visible in the debates, issues, budgets and recent achievements (see 2023 and 2024 European Commission reports). Academics made suggestions for how flexibility can be translated into concrete policies, recommending a gradual approach to membership. An influential early contribution referred to this as 'staged' accession (Emerson & Lazarević 2021). A staged approach involves the candidate's greater involvement in the relevant EU policy area prior to formal membership. Gradualism means that the candidate is willing to reform legislation and policies in order to be able to participate in, for example, the internal market. In return the EU is willing to reward the candidate's efforts immediately through involvement and subsequent integration into that policy area and polity. This new pragmatic approach focuses mainly on integrating the economies of the Western Balkans into the EU's internal market.[2]

The latest achievement is that the EU has created a budget for this purpose, mobilising within a short time-frame (roughly one year) six billion euro for the period 2024–2027. The 'New growth plan for the Western Balkans' is to act as an incentive for 'countries to accelerate the adoption and implementation of the *acquis*' (European Commission, New growth plan 2023: 3). The plan includes support for seven priority actions for integration into the EU single market: free movement of goods, free movement of services and workers, access to the Single Euro Payments Area, facilitation of road transport, integration and decarbonisation of energy markets, integration into the Digital Single Market, and integration into industrial supply chains (ibid: 3–5). Alongside this new facility, the established Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III, 2021–27, budget 14 billion euro) is also in operation. Both the New growth plan and the third version of IPA are organised around the six thematic clusters (fundamentals plus the five clusters mentioned two paragraphs above).

The EU's new growth plan has already entered the implementation phase. Five beneficiary countries have submitted their reform agendas, which were approved by the Commission in October 2024. In addition, the four most

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2   For a debate on the difficulties of integrating WB economies into the highly regulated EU Single Market, see the contribution 'Acceding Countries' Gradual Integration into the EU Single Market' (Becker & Lippert 2024).

advanced candidate countries were included in the EU's annual 'Rule of Law Report' in 2024, also to underline the 'fundamentals' as the most important cluster. Summits and high-level meetings have become more frequent. The WB-6 is also present in the European Political Community format, which holds summits twice a year. The sixth summit, which was held in Tirana in May 2025, was hosted by Albania. Co-operation in the Berlin Process format is intensifying and aligning with the agendas of the growth plan. The content of the tenth anniversary meeting of the Berlin Process in 2024 gave evidence of the revitalisation process. The regular annual EU-WB summit at the December European Council produced more substantial results than previous meetings: never as detailed as in the form of the 'Brussels Declaration' of December 2024 (European Council 2024). It is important that the new president of the European Council, Antonio Costa, and the re-elected president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, are committed to enlargement. In the Commission, the questionable Orbán appointee Olivér Várhelyi is no longer in charge of enlargement and has been replaced by the centrist and pragmatic Marta Kos (on Várhelyi, see López Domènech 2024). The main novelty of the 2024–29 Commission, however, is that all commissioners and – subsequently in terms of administration – the Commission directorates consider the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU as a central goal of the entire European Commission College and the 2024–29 work agenda (Baccini & Wölfl 2024).

European politics in the six Western Balkans candidate states

This section provides an overview of recent European policy developments in the six Western Balkans candidate countries. The annual assessments focus on each country's performance in meeting the EU's conditionalities in all 33 negotiating chapters. Recently, the EU has introduced a scoreboard of readiness in five categories. Preparedness ranges from 'early stage' (zero points), 'some preparation' (one point) and 'moderately prepared' (two points) to 'good preparation' (three points) and 'well advanced' (four points). According to this scale, a candidate meets EU standards once it has reached the level of 'good preparation' in all chapters, i.e. to reach an overall score of at least 99 points (33 chapters multiplied by three; the maximum that can be reached on the scoreboard is 132, i.e. 33 chapters multiplied by four). Upon reaching level three, accession negotiations can be provisionally closed. As of October 2024, Montenegro leads all candidate countries with 73 points, followed by Serbia (70), North Macedonia (69), Turkey (63), Albania (60), Ukraine (43), Georgia (38), Moldova (33), Kosovo (32) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (22) (European Stability Initiative, Scorecard 2024).

The best performer in the WB is currently Montenegro, where presidential and parliamentary elections in recent years have ended the rule of the

long-dominant political actor Milo Djukanović and his party. An important achievement of the current Montenegrin government coalition under Prime Minister Milojko Spajić is Montenegro's fulfilment of the interim benchmarks of the rule of law chapters, as assessed by the European Commission in June 2024. Montenegro could meet 83 interim benchmarks. Critical voices see this assessment only as a political signal and point to reforms that were still being implemented throughout 2024 (Muharemović & Usvatov 2024: 4–6). Montenegro has been capable of opening all negotiation chapters. Three chapters (Science and Research, Education and Culture, External Relations) were provisionally closed long ago. In 2024, the new efforts proved successful with the provisional closure of another three chapters: Intellectual Property Rights, Information Society and Media, Enterprise and Industrial Policy. In terms of scores this means that Montenegro has provisionally closed six chapters (score three, 'good preparation'). The country is 'moderately prepared' (score in the range of two) in some 20 chapters. The seven chapters where Montenegro has only 'some level of preparation' (score in the area of one or one and a half) are 'Fight against corruption' and 'Freedom of expression' (these two are in the important 'fundamentals' category), as well as 'Free movement of workers', 'Fisheries', 'Social policy and employment', 'Environment and climate change' and 'Financial and budgetary provisions'.

Serbia is next, with 22 chapters open. Unlike Montenegro, eleven chapters could not be opened. Like Montenegro, Serbia managed to close the two chapters of 'Science and Research' and 'Education and Culture' long ago. The dominant political party SNS manoeuvred Serbia into a difficult situation. Democratic deficits and a backsliding in the rule of law led to an almost total state capture of the country. The most appalling corruption scandal, caused by a collapsing canopy at the Novi Sad railway station on 1 November 2024, killed sixteen people. This sparked widespread protests which have been ongoing ever since and which may lead to President Aleksandar Vučić's eventual downfall. Earlier in 2024, Serbia undertook some pragmatic steps towards economic integration. In a later section I will argue that it is only the relative size and political and economic importance of the country in the region that keeps Serbia in the EU enlargement process at all (on Serbia's options see Dimitrov 2024 & Bechev 2025). Albania and North Macedonia come in third and fourth. In 2023 and 2024, the European Commission screened their preparedness. The two candidates have responded by submitting their roadmaps on the fundamentals cluster. Albania was able to start negotiations in October 2024. North Macedonia could not because of Bulgaria's insistence on the recognition of a Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia's constitution (a condition that Bulgaria invented in 2020), or, in the words of the European Commission's 2024 annual progress report: 'The adoption of the action plan on the protection of minorities is still pending' (European Commission 2024: 5). The outgoing centre-left government failed

to secure a two-thirds majority for the recognition of a Bulgarian minority in the constitution, while the incoming nationalist VMRO-DPMNE–led government (as well as the country's president from the same party) hardened North Macedonia's position in this regard.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the two laggards of the six countries in the region. With some political goodwill, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations in December 2023. The screening process started in Spring 2024, but is currently stalled due to numerous legislative acts in the Republika Srpska entity that undermine the functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state. The enforcement of an arrest warrant against Milorad Dodik failed in East Sarajevo in April 2025. The incident proved that the special police forces of the Republika Srpska entity remained superior to Bosnia's regular state police. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the only one of the six WB countries that has not yet submitted a reform agenda that could activate funds from the EU's New growth plan. Kosovo is the most fragile state in the WB region. An important symbolic step was the submission of its EU application in December 2022. Kosovars have enjoyed free travel to the EU since 2024. The Kosovar government was able to present a reform agenda in the framework of the WB growth plan, but the activation of the growth plan budgets depends on the success of the 'Normalisation' dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Due to uncompromising positions, Kosovo is trapped in tensions with autocratic and revisionist Serbia over the administration of the Serb-majority north of the country. Since June 2023, Kosovo's EU policy has been dominated by the EU's measures against the Kosovar government, the violent actions of Serbian nationalists in the Banjska/Banjskë incident of 24 September 2023 and its aftermath, and the postponement of Kosovo's admission to the Council of Europe in May 2024. The impasse is ongoing, not least because a government could not yet be formed following the parliamentary elections of February 2025.

Territorial integrity and possible violent alternatives in the context of the *Serbian World* concept

In this section, I argue that that the territorial integrity of the fragile states of Kosovo and of Bosnia and Herzegovina is under threat. These states are in danger of falling victim to violent Serb nationalism or even to Trump-Vučić deals that could revive the idea of territorial exchange. For over a decade, the EU has tried to be an impartial actor in the intended 'Normalisation' process between Serbia and Kosovo. However, the EU's role as a neutral interlocutor and mediator has only very limited influence because it is based on the false assumption of symmetry between Serbia and Kosovo. This symmetry exists in the narrow frame of the EU-led 'Normalisation' process. Outside that format, however, the reality is highly asymmetrical. Serbia is a fully recognised state

within the international system. As a recognised member, Serbia is doing everything it can to block Kosovo's accession to international institutions. However, as a non-member, Kosovo has no choice but to seek support from like-minded states in multilateral organisations such as the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Kosovo is therefore completely dependent on external support to eventually achieve the same status as Serbia and the 27 EU member states.[3]

The issue that has hindered Kosovo's EU integration efforts in the 2020s is the question of the legitimacy of governance in the four Serb-dominated municipalities of northern Kosovo. Following the 2013 Brussels Agreement and the Ohrid Agreement of March 2023, Kosovo is obliged to establish the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM). This institution is intended to advocate the interests of Serbs in northern Kosovo more effectively. However, Kosovo did not comply. Consequently, the EU imposed sanctions on the country in mid-2023. These measures are still in place two years later, despite the EU's High Representative at the time, Josep Borrell, recommending that they be lightened and eventually lifted in 2024.[4] The decisive EU members France and Germany are insisting that Kosovo implement the Ohrid Agreement (Bechev et al. 2025). This is also why, at the request of France, Germany and Italy, Kosovo's application to the Council of Europe (COE) was removed from the agenda of the COE Committee of Ministers for the May 2024 meeting.[5] This is all the more regrettable given that France itself has neither signed nor ratified the highly important COE Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.[6] French and German insistence on the implementation of ASM can also be read as fulfilling the nationalist goals of the Vučić regime, as it disproportionally highlights the interests of Serbs in northern Kosovo and implicitly tolerates a legacy of violent resistance to the state of Kosovo. This is in contrast to Serbs living in

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3   It is precisely thanks to the goodwill of like-minded partners – the approximately 100 states that have recognised Kosovo, including most European states and the US, who are its most active supporters – that Kosovo has been able to join certain international organisations. These include global and regional organisations specialising in economics and finance, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Regional Cooperation Council.

4   In June 2024, the Pristina-based think-tank Group for Legal and Political Studies concluded: 'The path forward to the withdrawal of the restrictive measures goes through more coordinated and well-explained policies by the Kosovar government and a more balanced approach by the EU vis-à-vis the parties to the dialogue. Retaining them after a full year, even after all the conditions of the Bratislava Agreement were fulfilled, is wrong and damages both the reputation of the EU and the Kosova's integration prospects. Therefore, the EC should lift the measures as soon as possible and speed up the integration process' (Group for Legal and Political Studies 2024: 5).

5   A month earlier, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe had voted overwhelmingly in favour of Kosovo's membership, based on the 27-page report of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy (Council of Europe 2023) and opinions (available at https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33404) on it.

6   Aside from the ASM issue, the needs of the Serb minority are inadequately addressed by the Kosovo government in many aspects of their daily lives, particularly with regard to health, education and pensions (International Crisis Group 2024).

eastern and southern Kosovo, whose record of coexistence with non-Serbs is far more peaceful.

A specific institution of minority governance of Serbs in Northern Kosovo is a political and a legitimacy issue in Kosovo. For France and Germany, this is a reason to exclude Kosovo from the COE, the institution with the greatest leverage to handle minority rights. For Vučić's Serbia, however, tolerating, if not encouraging, violent acts is part of Serbia's strategy in handling the matter. Tensions were growing in mid-2023 between Kosovo Serb protesters, Serbian militia and Kosovo special police, which Serbian president Vučić described on Serbian public television on 6 July 2023 as follows: 'The pogroms, persecution and ethnic cleansing that the regime in Pristina is carrying out against the Serb population are well organised.' Serbian President Vučić's charges are entirely unfounded. In a February 2024 analysis entitled 'Invented pogroms. Statistics, lies and confusion in Kosovo' the European Stability Initiative think-tank rightly points out that Vučić's accusations are palpably untrue:

> None of the many international observers with staff on the ground in Kosovo – from KFOR to EULEX, the EU Rule of Law Mission, from UNMIK to the OSCE – have seen or described 'ethnic cleansing of Serbs' or Albanian 'terror' in recent years in any of their copious reports. But absence of evidence has not stopped incendiary claims being made. (European Stability Initiative 2024: 3)

During the same broadcast, President Vučić urged NATO and the UN to disarm the Kosovo police. He claimed that if this recommendation was ignored, 'someone else' would do it. The Serbian president was right. Two and a half months later, on 24 September 2023, a close associate of Vučić, the Kosovo Serb entrepreneur and politician Milan Radoičić, and 44 other suspects staged an attack on the Kosovo police in Banjska/Banjskë (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo 2024: 2, 5, 17; International Crisis Group 2024: 9–12). This was a violent attack on Kosovo's territorial integrity. Meanwhile, on the Serbian side of the border, 8,000 Serbian troops were waiting for instructions on how to proceed (Le Monde 2023). The swift action of the Kosovar police in Banjska/Banjskë discouraged a potential Serbian military invasion of northern Kosovo, as did the reaction of US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, who telephoned Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to urge 'immediate de-escalation and a return to dialogue' (Binley 2023). A press statement issued by the US secretary of state on 25 September, one day after the attack, emphasised the importance of the rules-based order by stating that 'perpetrators of this crime must be held accountable via a transparent investigative process' and calling on Serbia and Kosovo to 'refrain from any actions or rhetoric which could further inflame tensions' (Blinken 2023).

By 2024, Serbian revisionism ranked prominently in political discourse in Serbia. It was closely linked to the discourse of Milorad Dodik, the *spiritus rector* of the destructive domestic veto policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska. In early 2024, together with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, he signed the 'All-Serbian Declaration' on cooperation between the Bosnian Serb entity and Serbia (Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Joint Future of the Serb People 2024) on behalf of their governments. Seven weeks later, on 31 July 2024, the Serbian Parliament confirmed the decision and adopted the declaration by an overwhelming majority.[7] The 'Srpski Mir' ('Serbian World') declaration seeks to give the Serbian nation a dominant role in areas where Serbs live, which is similar to Slobodan Milošević's nationalist vision in late Yugoslavia. If realised, this would mean the end of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in their present political and territorial dimensions.[8] It remains to be seen whether the EU is preparing a contingency plan in case 'territorial exchange' re-emerges on the agenda, as happened previously during Donald Trump's first presidency. In terms of discourse, the EU as a whole, including the new commissioner and EU member states, is committed to Kosovo's territorial integrity. Within the EU, Hungary's autocratic leader, Viktor Orbán, is currently the only figure to unanimously support the ideas and policies of Vučić and Dodik.[9]

Gradual EU integration in practice

This section applies the concept of gradual integration to long-standing issues between the EU and its candidate countries. The subsequent four paragraphs focus on the following themes: 1 inclusion *versus* exclusion models of integration, 2 the recent EU-Serbia lithium deal as an important case in the EU's new pragmatic approach to enlargement, 3 the EU's handling of member state vetoes in the case of Bulgaria and North Macedonia in 2024, and 4 the concept of 'WB as a region' *versus* individual merits. Conceptually, gradual integration can be viewed as a strategy of differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig & Tekin 2023: 109–113). Gradual integration also raises the question of whether a stage of integration could function as an alternative to full integration. The EU rejects this idea, claiming that gradual integration is an offer and a useful tool to bring candidate countries closer to the *acquis* in the respective policy area, thus fa-

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7   A total of 139 parliamentarians voted in favour, nine voted against, and six abstained (Hungarian Human Rights Foundation 2024).

8   Srpski Mir is modelled on the anti-Western, anti-liberal and imperialist concept of 'Russki Mir' (Russian World). There are also Serbs living in Croatia and Montenegro. The territorial integrity of the two states is much more secure because they are NATO members.

9   Orbán's Hungary supports Serbia's authoritarian leader, Aleksandar Vučić. This support extends to the anti-Kosovo policies. In April 2024, Orbán's Fidesz party voted against Kosovo's prospective membership of the Council of Europe.

cilitating full integration. On the other hand, given that candidates have been struggling for decades to meet the basic criteria, it could also be argued that the process is not accelerating quickly enough or is slowing down again. This would make alternative models, such as 'associated membership' instead of full membership, more relevant. These models would roughly correspond to stages II (intermediate accession stage) and III (new member state stage) of the 'staged accession' model (Emerson & Lazarević 2021: 2, 4–6, described in section one).

The issue of candidate inclusion or exclusion is an old and new story of enlargement. After almost two decades in the waiting room, it is a legitimate observation that the WB countries have been excluded from the EU. Since 2022, the EU has slowly revived its inclusion strategy, as evidenced by the central enlargement issue of 'fundamentals', with the EU including four WB countries for the first time in the 2024 Rule of Law Report. Following the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, the rule of law became the central conditionality of a 'new approach' to enlargement (launched in 2011). At the time, many argued that the two countries had been admitted (included) too early. Consequently, the EU introduced the 'Cooperation and Verification Mechanism', which defined and enforced the fulfilment of conditionalities during the first fifteen years of EU membership. Meanwhile, democratic backsliding and violations of the rule of law occurred in other EU member states. Formal rule of law proceedings, including sanctions, have been initiated against Poland and Hungary.[10] To avoid focusing solely on the offenders, reporting was extended to all member states in 2020. By including the candidate countries in this system, the EU is sending an important signal and demonstrating its willingness to treat the more advanced WB candidate countries in the same reporting system as the member states. The Brussels Declaration of December 2024 states that the four included candidates could participate in the September 2024 General Affairs Council to discuss trends in the rule of law within the EU (European Council 2024: 16). This example of inclusion is likely to be extended in the coming years (see Conclusions, political dimension).

The EU's flexibility is evident in its approach to autocratic Serbia. It is the most important of the six WB candidates, both economically, due to its size, and politically, due to its influence on the politics of neighbouring WB states. The current regime in Serbia is a typical populist nationalist government, for which the EU is only one of several actors in a cost-benefit calculation. Due to Serbia's relative weight, EU actors have so far turned a blind eye to the 'stabilitocrat' Vučić, driven by the belief that Serbia's inclusion would benefit the Serbian public and the WB region as a whole. Criticism from the EU regarding electoral abuses, the suppression of opposition and restrictions on free

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10   Unlike Hungary's Orbán regime, the pro-European Tusk government in Poland was able to overcome them.

media, as well as the promotion of an overly nationalist, all-Serbian discourse, has been muted or non-existent. At the core of the new EU-Serbia 'strategic partnership' (Memorandum of Understanding between the European Union and the Republic of Serbia 2024) is an agreement on cooperation exploiting lithium.[11] Notably, this was followed by an agreement for Serbia to purchase French military fighter jets. Serbian and EU business interests guide these partnerships. The events demonstrate the EU's pragmatism. The EU is adopting a transactional approach to integration, offering more advantageous deals to the Serbian regime than China or Russia.

Gradual integration could potentially bypass the notorious veto power of EU member states in enlargement policy. The EU has a history of siding firmly with its identity-politics oriented blocking members, which are usually neighbouring states of candidate countries. North Macedonia has experienced this during twenty years and more in the EU waiting room. Bulgaria insists on the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority as a constitutionally recognised nation. The 2024 edition of the EU enlargement report on North Macedonia provides some results from the most recent screening process, which took place in 2023, and demonstrates an improved understanding of North Macedonia's political processes within this bilateral dispute (European Commission, North Macedonia 2024: 22). Concrete economic measures within the framework of the new WB growth plan are also being implemented, thus ensuring that the minority conflict with Bulgaria does not bring the whole EU approximation process to a standstill. Nevertheless, the minority issue is fundamental, and formal accession negotiations must be opened with this cluster.

Gradualism could undermine the 'region' principle that the EU applies in dealing with the Western Balkans. There are several reasons to consider the WB as a group, such as the small size of the states and the legacy of conflicts during the disintegration process of former Yugoslavia. However, for many years, the 'region' principle meant that the EU's enlargement policy was lenient towards laggards. Today, Angela Merkel's strategic assumption that the path to Brussels for the Western Balkans could only be through the inclusion of the most important WB-6 power, Serbia, has backfired. The idea was that a Europe-oriented Belgrade would pave the way for the other five Western Balkan states. The opposite happened: Vučić and the SNS-led government of Serbia have drifted away from EU values over the past decade. Serbia's foreign policy positions on Ukraine and Russia/Belarus have highlighted the differences between Serbia and the other five WB states as the latter are fully aligned with the EU. The EU's WB growth plan and the EU-Serbia lithium deal suggest that the EU has become

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11   A previous contract with the Anglo-Australian mining company Rio Tinto sparked fierce protests from the Serbian public and was eventually withdrawn. Both the EU and Serbia claim that their deal addresses the environmental and social issues that were raised during the earlier protests (see also Dzihic 2024).

more flexible and has partially abandoned the group imperative. Economic integration, accompanied by a few financial incentives, could potentially serve as a pragmatic, face-saving intermediate option for Vučić's regime.[12]

Conclusions: Reinvigorated EU engagement in security and in rule of law paramount

This article argues that the EU adopted innovative measures to bring the candidate countries closer to membership, and that the WB candidates are responding to the new opportunities. There is a sincere interest on both sides in integrating the six economies into the EU's common market. However, beyond the economic dimension, the region has developed at different paces. Of all candidates, Montenegro is the closest to becoming a full EU member before the next European Parliament elections in 2029. The other candidates all face serious difficulties in meeting the 'fundamentals' criteria. It remains to be seen whether the EU will be willing to move forward with sectoral integration, in line with its criteria for individual negotiation chapters, in order to achieve sectoral or associated membership. In terms of external actors, Russia and Belarus will continue to present themselves as partners to Serbia and Republika Srpska. The EU's economic rival, China, will continue to offer WB governments significant financial incentives, as will Turkey and the wealthy Gulf states. It remains to be seen whether Trump's United States will turn away from the region and leave a vacuum, or engage in state-threatening deals in the style of Trumpism or Trump-Putin, which have the flavour of divide-and-rule imperial practice. Either scenario poses a threat to the territorial integrity of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and would represent a worst-case scenario for the European integration of the three WB states involved.

More specific conclusions should be drawn regarding the security and political aspects of the EU. Security in Kosovo is provided by the NATO-led KFOR. Its current strength is 4,300 troops. Italy and the United States are the more important nations in command positions and together provide 1,500 troops. In terms of security policy, European NATO partners may face a reduction in US KFOR commitments. A greater commitment from EU states to provide additional KFOR troops would mitigate security risks. The provision of more international troops could be coordinated with more states who already engage in KFOR, like Great Britain, Turkey and Switzerland. All these EU and non-EU states have a profound interest in the stability of Kosovo. Security in Bosnia and Herzegovina is based on a UN mandate that must be renewed annually. The mission, known as EUFOR Althea, is politically led by the European Union and comprises 600 troops. In light of Republika Srpska's secessionist ambitions, it is

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12   On the EU's unequally conciliatory position towards Serbia, see also Dopchie & Liridon (2024).

essential to deploy more troops to the strategically important Brčko area (Wölfl 2024). This could effectively limit the realisation of Milorad Dodik's secessionist ambitions. However, all parties recognise that reducing tensions between the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires a political solution (see below) whereas a military force can only serve as a security provider.

In terms of security, the cost-benefit calculations underpinning the EU's enlargement policy have also changed as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine. For a variety of reasons, showing full solidarity with Ukraine is and remains a top priority for Europe and the EU. Setting aside the loss of life and the suffering of the wounded and displaced, who deserve full support, backing a country at war is very costly. In comparison, EU enlargement to the Western Balkans would be much cheaper.[13] Therefore, investing in the security of fragile states such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina would help keep costs down.

In terms of politics, the EU could play a more decisive role as a proactive institutional actor and integrate the WB states. Analyst Christophe Hillion suggests 'accession preparations by anchoring the candidates in its governance' (Hillion 2025: 4). The EU is the main agent of change. It is the EU that has the financial resources and administrative capacity to include the candidate countries in its governance. One tangible reward for those that meet the criteria in the respective negotiating chapters could be the integration of their experts and politicians into the EU institutions. The 2024 enlargement reports show an increased participation compared to previous years.[14] The reports praise Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia for aligning with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. So why not involve these countries in decision-making at all institutional levels? Full participation by candidate countries in selected policy areas could demonstrate gradual and differentiated integration into the EU. At the same time, this would demonstrate the EU's commitment to the candidate countries.

Hillion rightly highlights the ongoing challenges faced by WB states in meeting fundamental criteria. The lack of progress over the last fifteen years suggests that only a more proactive approach by the EU will lead to the changes it demands. Minority rights in Kosovo may serve as an example. The EU has the

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13 The EU's humanitarian and financial aid to Ukraine, excluding all bilateral aid and excluding all military aid from all actors and allocated through the European Commission and the European Council amounts to 45 billion euro in the period 2022–2024. The budgets for IPA III and the WB growth plan amount to 20 billion euro. These two spending figures can be roughly correlated with the population figures of Ukraine and the six WB states (45 and 20 billion euro). The crucial difference lies in the time frame of the expenditure: less than three years for Ukraine *versus* seven years for the Western Balkans. Consequently, EU funding for the Western Balkans is approximately half that for Ukraine. Note that the distribution over the years in the WB is uneven due to the novelty of the WB growth plan. In other words, expenditure is proportionally lower in 2021–23 and proportionally higher in 2024–27.

14 This applies to analyses of individual enlargement negotiation chapters in the country reports (classified as 'Commission Staff Working Documents'). The 2024 versions are available under https:// neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en.

power to set the agenda. The EU can champion minority protection in Kosovo by providing expanded financial and administrative support. If the European perspective becomes credible and produces tangible results, including improvements to the socioeconomic situation of Kosovar citizens belonging to national minorities, the revisionist rhetoric of Kosovo Serbs will also fade. Similarly, the EU could act as a mediator between Bulgaria and North Macedonia regarding their respective minorities. Evidence shows that taking the side of a member state simply prolongs the impasse for years.[15] A more proactive and creative approach is also needed to overcome the impasse between the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, domestic stakeholders often hinder progress. The EU delegation in the country is right to urge the finalisation and submission of the reform agenda, which would enable the EU to activate its growth plan, as has already happened in the other five WB states (Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025).

Finally, is there a Central European dimension to EU enlargement in the Western Balkans? Yes, because the Central European states have undergone similar transformation processes and have long since achieved what the Western Balkans are striving for, namely EU integration. This is why the Central European EU members have always fully supported the EU integration of the WB. However, Central European states are also those where democratic backsliding in the EU is most pronounced. Hungary is the most notable case, followed recently also by Fico's Slovakia, and previously by Poland. Most of Romania's and Bulgaria's government parties have long-standing issues concerning state capture and the rule of law. This is linked to autocratic leadership and in Hungary's case Viktor Orbán's consistent use of a member state's veto power. EU leaders are pushing for reforms to the EU decision-making process ahead of the next enlargement in order to ensure that the organisation remains functional. They do not aspire for more Viktor Orbáns, i.e. more persistent veto-players, in the EU. As with the previous eastward enlargements, diversity will increase. However, the legacy of autocratic rule in the WB region presents an additional challenge. In times of war, decision-makers in Brussels and major EU capitals have concluded that perpetual EU waiting room status for the Western Balkans linked with the inability to reform the EU as an institution is either too risky or too costly, or both.

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15   There are many other examples of the potential positive impact of a proactive EU role in protecting the rights of national minorities. 2025 could be a pivotal year for Moldova with regard to resolving the Transnistria conflict. Transnistrians and Gagauzians alike may claim rights that will be difficult for Moldova to address satisfactorily. In the context of the Serbian anti-Vučić protests, tensions are rising between EU member Croatia and candidate Serbia in 2025. This could have a negative impact on their shared national minority. Croatia may find political reasons to veto Serbia's steps towards EU integration. Orbán's Hungary constantly claims that the Hungarian minority in Ukraine is being discriminated against. The EU could act as a trusted mediator in such cases.

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