

THE PLACE OF HUXIT IN HUNGARIAN ELITE DISCOURSE. LESSONS FROM A Q-ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: *This study summarizes research experiences regarding the views on the EU of the Hungarian political and media elite. Using Q-analysis, we tried to clarify the weight of these views and the relationship between them. The interviewees were asked to rank statements from the media according to their degree of agreement and then to justify their choices. The two dominant factors – Integrationist and Sovereignist – were joined by two marginal ones: Multi-Speed and Huxit. The factors were clearly interpretable according to the polarization position and nature of the discourse. Huxit emerged normatively among the far-right elite, which was critical of the government. Otherwise, it was discussed in a more contemplative manner or strongly critically rejected.*

KEYWORDS: *elite, integrationism, sovereignism, multi-speed, Huxit, Q-analysis, normative and contemplative modes of discourse*

INTRODUCTION

Regarding the European Union and the Europeanization process a variety of views prevail both in the media and among the elite. ‘Elite’ here is used to refer to those who, due to their position or prestige, are able to significantly influence nationwide reproduction processes through their personal opinions and decisions (Higley-Burton 1998, Higley-Lengyel 2000). In terms of ideological orientation, the literature often distinguishes between hard and soft forms of Euroscepticism (and optimism) (Szczerbiak-Taggart

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2008). Pragmatic, rational-calculative EU criticism can be described as soft, while identity-based EU skepticism can be described as hard EU skepticism, as the former is easier to change and the latter more difficult (Lengyel-Göncz 2010). As regards forms of governance, there are also a number of distinctions between supranational and – old and new – intergovernmental solutions (Stone-Sandholtz 1997, Lengyel-Ilonszki 2008, Lengyel-Göncz 2009, Ilonszki 2010, Bickerton et al. 2015, Schimmelfennig 2015). Due to the endogenization of international policies and interference of national political forces, Europeanization is not only a concern for EU politicians (Mair 2004, Radaelli 2004, Mérand 2021). The literature on European integration convincingly argues that functionalist and pluralist views tend to crystallize around political standpoints and are arranged along identity-based or pragmatic considerations. Our research aims to examine these views among the Hungarian political and media elite by utilizing – like Robyn (2005) – Q methodology.² In the first step, we selected 25 statements that frequently appear in Hungarian media outlets, and we asked the interviewees to evaluate them according to their acceptability and level of agreement. The paper is exploratory in nature. We do not test hypotheses but are interested in how elites interpret media claims and how these views are shaped. The statements used in the study are presented in abbreviated form in the figures, and their full text is available in the Appendix.

In the following section, we shall first briefly describe the methodology and the sampling. Afterward, with the quantitative approach, we elucidate the factors that were formed on the basis of statements. Then, the report will introduce and interpret the comments connected to the statements with specific reference to the Huxit discourse.

Quantitative Q factor analysis complements the qualitative discourse analysis well, and the techniques are mutually strengthening. In fact, the Q-set comprised 25 statements based on the content and discourse analysis of the EU-related information that prevailed in the Hungarian media between July 2021 and March 2022. Our Q-based research took place between 2022 November and

2 Q methodology is especially applied in attitude research to investigate subjective views. Its application appeared first in the works of William Stephenson in the 1930s (Brown 1993, 1996). The method can be utilized to unfold and analyze the particular attitudes that form in a group concerning a certain topic or issue, and it works well in relatively small groups as well. Stephenson's work was further developed by his disciple Steven R. Brown, who had a major role in the method gaining popularity in sociology and political science research. The study of C.M. Dieteren and her colleagues (Dieteren et al., 2023) confirmed the latter process when, in an overview of the publications from the last two decades, they found that in addition to the more extensive application of the Q method, the variation in its applications has also increased.

2023 March with the participation of 60 interviewees, including 31 members of the Hungarian media and 29 members of the Hungarian political elite.

We asked the participants to place the 25 statements in a grid containing 25 cells; thus, they could place one statement in each cell. The cells were displayed in seven rows and seven columns in the form of a reverse pyramid. The numerical value of each column appeared on the top of the columns in increasing order from left to right (from -3 to +3). The participants were asked to award a point to each statement and place them accordingly in the grid. They established this ranking based on how much they agreed or disagreed with the statements and the level of importance they attached to them. Participants were not allowed to divert from the grid pattern when placing the statements, so the pattern would be uniform according to the research design.

Due to the reverse pyramid format, the participants could place two statements at the two endpoints (marked by -3 and +3, respectively). At the same time, they could insert more statements at the locations of other values. For example, the largest number of statements – seven – could be placed at value 0. Participants could move around the statements until they established the final statement pattern that fully reflected their preferences. Afterward, they commented and explained their selection pattern, particularly the extremes located at the +/-3 and +/- 2 values. It was a fundamental stipulation that the interviewer should not influence the participants in arranging the statements and the follow-up discussion. As the arrangement is subjective, it cannot be contextually wrong from the perspective of the analysis if the grid arrangement formally matches the requirements.

For the statistical analysis of the data, we used the desktop version of the KADE (KEN-Q Analysis Desktop Edition version 1.2.1, Banasick 2019) computer software, which provides fast and precise analysis and allows the researcher to make refined decisions at a number of points. In the process of the Q analysis, following the instructions in the methodological section, we opted for the principal component method (QPCA). The principal component analysis started from a correlation matrix and investigated the correlation between the participants' subjective opinion patterns, creating factor groups that included the participants themselves. Thus, this method, by ranking and prioritizing the pre-defined statements and identifying similar thought patterns, reduced them to a smaller number of factors and diminished the multitude of individual opinions that would be challenging to analyze using statistical methods. In contrast to traditional factor analysis, where latent variables are formed from the variables and their meanings unfolded by researchers, here, those respondents whose views correlated were grouped (Brown, 1993). Thus, the interviewees were sorted into different factors, the goal being to identify the commonalities

and central leitmotifs of their opinions that defined the groups and were central enough to distinguish the latter – at least partially – from the other groups.

The sample reflects the two-thirds versus one-third proportion of the government–opposition divide. The political elite sample included members of the Hungarian Parliament (MPs), members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and high-ranking ministerial civil servants (heads of departments and similar or higher positions). The media elite comprised chief editors and leading journalists of printed and online papers, television, and radio, in addition to members of the boards representing the owners. We wrote an invitation letter to 60 members of the political and media elite describing the purpose and references underlying the research. We applied the snowball method to reach more respondents. Twelve interviewers took part in the process. They followed up on the additional interview suggestions until the third contact point, when – after adjustment with the research leader – they met the interviewees according to the quota requirements. We ensured anonymity throughout the process; both the interviewers and the interviewees were assigned a code number. At the end of the interviews, we asked for socio-demographic data. Due to the small number of interviews and anonymity criteria, we cannot provide accurate party affiliation data beyond distinguishing between the governing elite, opposition, and far-right opposition in the case of the politicians and a pro-government, neutral, or government-critical classification of the media elite. However, we also asked the respondents to describe their political orientation on a seven-point left-right scale. These data, together with the results obtained from the KADE factor analysis, were processed with the SPSS 22 program package. We later relied on these when briefly describing the social profile of the elite members representing the factors. Here, we would like to preliminarily note that the 60-member sample consisted of 49 men and 11 women; half of the sample was over 50 years old, 29 belonged to the political group and 31 to the media elite. Education was not a differentiating factor, as all but one participant had a university degree. A more detailed review shows that MPs and MEPs were represented by 17 and civil servants by 12 persons, while editors and journalists were the largest group, including 24 persons, and 7 interviewees represented the media owners. Fifty-five individuals were active in their positions at the time of the interview. In terms of political self-classification, 60 percent belonged to the right and roughly a quarter to the left, while the remainder belonged to the center (marked as ‘4’ on a 7-point scale). If the center category is extended to the values of 3 to 5 on a 7-point scale, roughly two-thirds of the sample belonged to this category, a quarter to the right, and a tenth to the left according to their own understanding.

PRESENTATION OF THE FACTORS

Factor analysis

As a result of the principal component analysis, we identified eight unrotated factors. Fewer factors can improve interpretation capacity; thus, we applied Varimax rotation, which maximizes the factors' eigenvalues and the sum of the variance explained. The aim was to place each individual into one factor only, with a large weight, and for the factors to have the largest possible information content (each variable appears in a standardized form in the analysis, with 0 average and 1 standard deviance). After applying this technique, we identified four factors that describe the opinion groups within the Hungarian political and media elite. A screen plot also supports our decision. These four factors do not correlate with one another, and they contain the largest proportion of information content. After rotation, the four factors together explain 70 percent of the variation (that is, of all the information). The program grouped participants in the relevant factors at a statistical significance of $P < 0,05$. The weight and direction of factor values explain how the variables shape the factors. A variable can be rightly regarded as an element of the factor if its factor weight is larger than 0.25 (Székelyi, Barna 2008 pp.47-48). This requirement is fulfilled for all four factors. In the first three factors, the variables that define the factors all belong to the factor with a positive weight, while in the fourth factor, one of the two defining variables has a negative weight. Although this is an important variable that defines the factor, its opposing direction should be taken into consideration in the analysis.

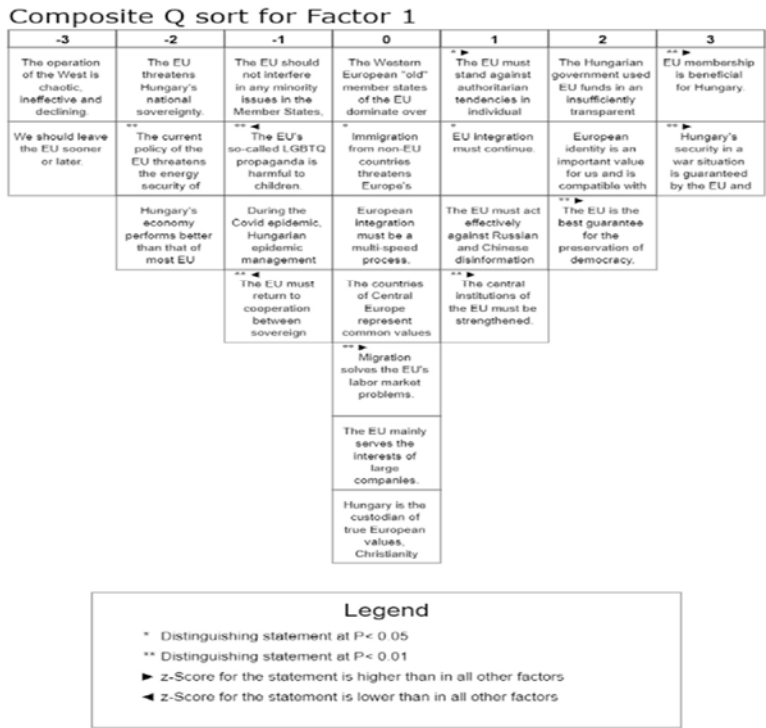
The analysis identified four main factors, which we call *Integrationist*, *Sovereignist*, *Multi-Speed*, and *Huxit standpoints*, described in detail below, complemented with information from the thematic interviews.

We presume that the following descriptions pinpoint the characteristic views of the Hungarian political and media elite about European integration. This presupposition is not self-evident; we cannot simply argue that the factors reflect the authentic opinions of the elite groups as the interviewees – due to the methodology of Q analysis – were obliged to choose between the statements. Nevertheless, two substantive arguments support the view that the findings closely describe elite opinion patterns. First, the statements themselves were imported from media discourses where elite opinions dominate. Second, the interviewees commented on their choices, and their arguments convincingly supported and refined the decisions relating to the factor classification.

Integrationism

The first factor represents those who share the *integrationist* standpoint. This is the strongest factor that explains one-third of the variance. Some elite members attribute symbolic historical importance to European integration. Defining features are that EU membership is advantageous for Hungary, European identity is important, NATO and the EU ensure the safety of Hungary, and the EU is the best guarantor of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the Member States. In contrast, this perspective opposes the idea that the EU might threaten the energy safety of Hungarian households or pursue LGBTQ propaganda, which is harmful to children, and it also rejects that the EU should return to a situation of cooperation between sovereign nation-states. Integrationists criticize the government in several areas and reject stereotyping aimed at the West.

Figure 1. Structure of the 'Integrationists' factor



Source: MEDEU, authors' compilation

The views of those represented in this factor are weakly significant in terms of believing that migration may solve the labor shortage problems in the EU. This factor does not involve a firm standpoint either about the multi-speed alternative or about the asymmetries within the EU – that is, about the dominance of big firms and Western states. Although members have a firm negative view of Huxit, this is not a distinguishing feature because they share this view with members of two other factors. What can be seen as a distinguishing feature of the Integrationist factor is the positive view about strengthening the EU's central institutions, in contrast to the other three factors (although this view is not shared by everyone within the Integrationist position either).

Arguments supporting the typical claims associated with the factor may be highlighted with the following statements:

We receive 4% of Hungary's GDP from the European Union; without EU support, there would be a very serious recession in Hungary, which is also to be expected if we could not agree very quickly on the original funds – and then we did not discuss the next seven-year cycle of the funds. So, we are absolutely, a net beneficiary of the European Union financially. This is one, the financial side, and the social side is mobility. The fact that anyone can go to the West to learn, to learn, to live. The boundaries have become more or less formal ... So, the world opened up (member of the political elite, opposition).

For Hungary, EU membership is beneficial, and being a small, weak country, its security can only and exclusively be guaranteed by its Western allies, so this is out of the question. (member of the political elite, government).

The integration of the EU should be continued... I put it here among the strongest 'yeses' because I think that European integration was one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century. (member of the government-critical media elite).

If there were no EU [here], it would be a hybrid democracy of the 1930s and a mixture of the Putin era. (member of the government-critical media elite).

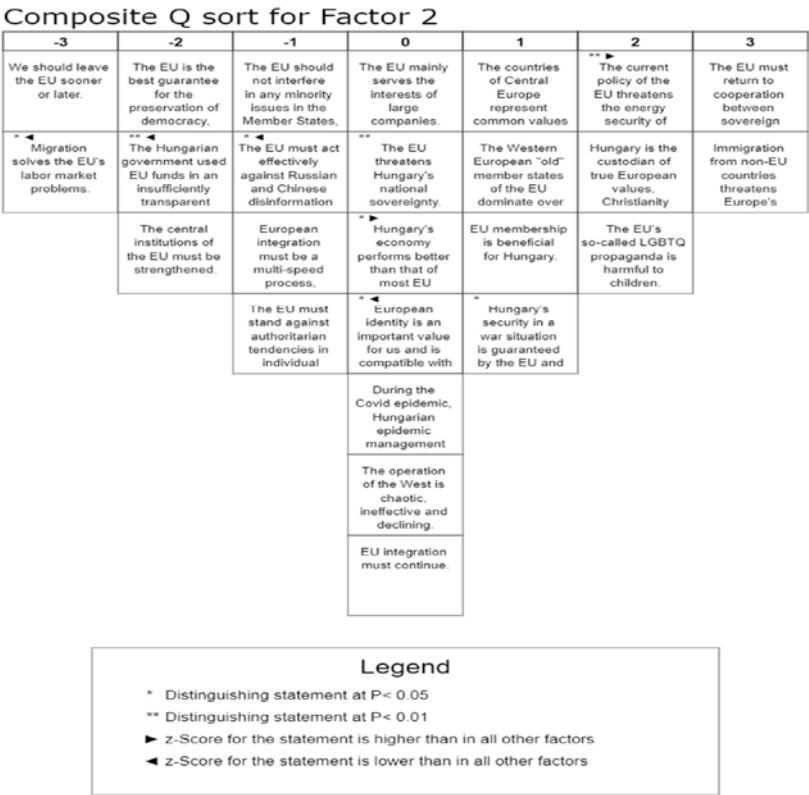
Among those who hold integrationist views, younger individuals, men, and those born in the capital were slightly overrepresented, although these associations were not significant.

In contrast, there was a strong and significant correlation between integrationist perceptions and political attitudes. Left and centrist attitudes were significantly over-represented among those with integrationist views. There was also a weak significant correlation between the integrationist factor and elite position, with members of the media elite being slightly over-represented among those holding these views. In contrast, civil servants were under-represented among those who took an integrationist stance. Almost half of the 60 elite members interviewed (29 persons) held integrationist views. Among them, 19 belonged to the media elite and 10 to the political elite. Two of the latter group were (former) civil servants. It should be noted that the vast majority of the sample were active incumbents: of the 60 respondents, only five were no longer in their positions at the time of the interview. In other words, the majority of opposition politicians and government-critical media elites hold positions similar to the integrationist view. On the other hand, only a minority of governing politicians and the pro-government media elite shared these ideas.

Sovereignism

In the *second* factor – which explains 23% of the variance – the respondents gather around *sovereigntist* standpoints representing views about national defense. One key statement that represents this position is that the EU is threatening the energy safety of Hungarian households, and another one is that the EU should return to a format of cooperation between sovereign nation-states. *Sovereigntists* think that immigration threatens Europe's cultural identity, that the EU is engaged in LGBTQ propaganda, and Hungary is the custodian of traditional European values. At the same time, they positively value the statement that NATO and the EU guarantee safety in the context of war. They think more highly – above average – about the economic performance of Hungary and vehemently oppose the criticism that the Hungarian government does not use European resources in a transparent way. Furthermore, they reject – again, above the average level – the view that migration can solve the labor shortage problems in the EU or that the EU should step up against Russian and Chinese disinformation in the Member States. At the same time, the statement that European identity is an important value and can be compatible with national identity does not appear negatively, although the intensity of the identification with this statement is below average. We should note that the sovereigntist standpoint receives an explicitly positive interpretation here, while it is negated in the Integrationist factor.

Figure 2. Structure of the ‘Sovereigntists’ factor



Source: MEDEU, authors' compilation

The option of Huxit receives a strong negative evaluation by members of the Sovereigntist group. On the other hand, statements like “the EU is the best guarantee for democracy in the Member States” and “the central institutions of the EU should be strengthened” are also strongly rejected.

The defensive position of the Sovereigntist point of view is presented in the following interview excerpts:

This is a debate between two concepts, the Europe of nations and a federal Europe, and I firmly believe that , as the founders of the European Union and coal and steel community, and the founders of the European Community in the 1950s Christian-democratic politicians

thought that the right path was the Europe of nations and nation-states, and this federal Europe, this is a non-existent fiction and nothing good will come out of it. (member of the political elite, government).

On the part of the European institutions, the two very common accusations are the rule of law accusations in general, and especially the use of European Union funds... not so much their transparency, because I think this transparency is clear, as the Hungarian laws, such as the Public Procurement Act, is one of the strictest... in the entire European Union. So, it cannot be said that resources are used in a non-transparent manner. ... the EU institutional system launches political attacks against Hungary. (member of the political elite, government).

I don't think the EU uses its existing power well in economic matters, and it does use it terribly in political matters. (member of the political elite, government).

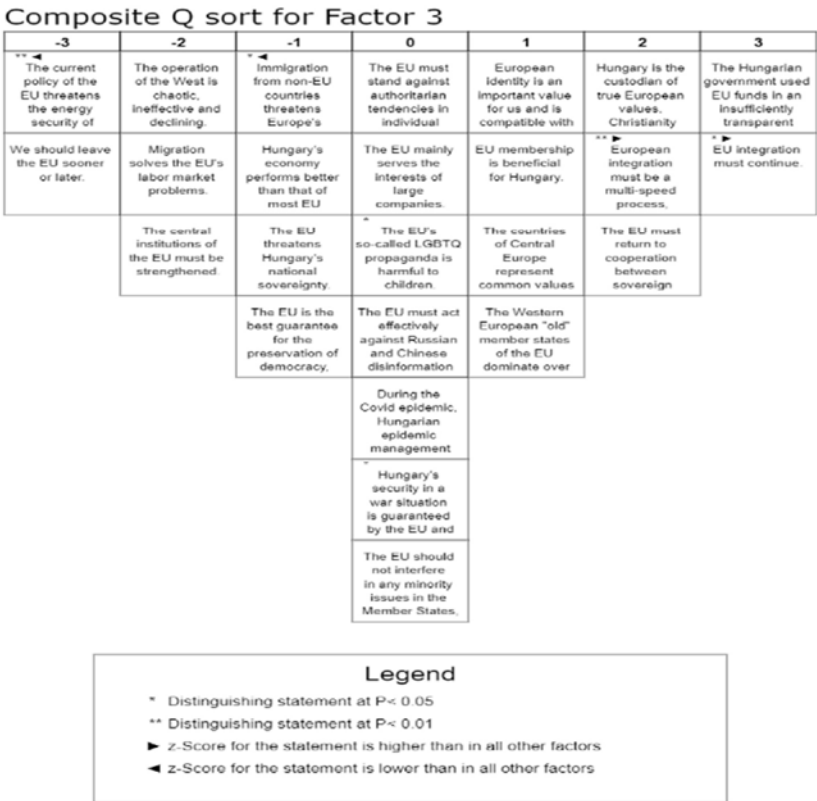
Sovereigntists are the second largest opinion camp. Of the 60 respondents, 25 (that is, more than two-fifths) belong here. A more accurate picture emerges if we look at the composition of the political and media elite separately. We can observe that Sovereigntists are the absolute majority within the political elite. This is not surprising, given that active civil servants are unanimous in this view, and two-thirds of MPs are pro-government. Those who define themselves as right-wing are significantly-, while women, the elderly, and those born in smaller municipalities are not significantly over-represented among the Sovereigntists. In other words, we can say that the majority of the governing politicians and pro-government media elites support the sovereigntist position.

The Multi-Speed view

It appears as a defining statement in the *third factor* – which explains 8% of the variance – that European integration should be a *multi-speed* process and thus should continue according to the preparedness and interests of the Member States. Similarly, it is considered positive and accentuated that European integration should endure.

It is of defining significance that the representatives of this factor do not agree with the statement that the EU's current policy threatens the energy safety of Hungarian households.

Figure 3. Structure of the Multi-Speed factor



Source: MEDEU, authors' compilation

Also above the average but at a somewhat lower level, the members of this factor oppose the idea that immigration threatens the cultural identity of Europe and that the safety of Hungary is ensured by NATO and the EU. Thus, overall, the representatives of the Multi-Speed perspective support the integration process but are skeptical about the EU's performance on a number of policy issues. They share the views that "Hungary is the custodian of true European values" and "the EU must return to [a system of] cooperation between sovereign nation-states." Relatively few respondents represent this factor, and the explanatory value of this factor is also smaller than that of the Integrationist and Sovereigntist factors. The following quotes shed light on the tone of the interviews related to the Multi-Speed factor.

I think European integration should be multi-speed because the state, preparedness, attitude, history, and past of the Member States are very different. (member of the neutral media elite).

I think that the current energy policy of the European Union has not been thought through and that the energy policy apparently puts the entire European Union at a competitive disadvantage and causes very serious problems for some Member States... Not only is it specifically stated in the rule of law procedure that the European Union subsidies are used in a transparent manner, but it is also important from the point of view of the government's acceptance, legitimacy, and people's well-being that new measures are now being taken, such as an integrity authority, I don't know what, what it will be able to change, we will see, but I think it is a step in the right direction. (member of the political elite, government).

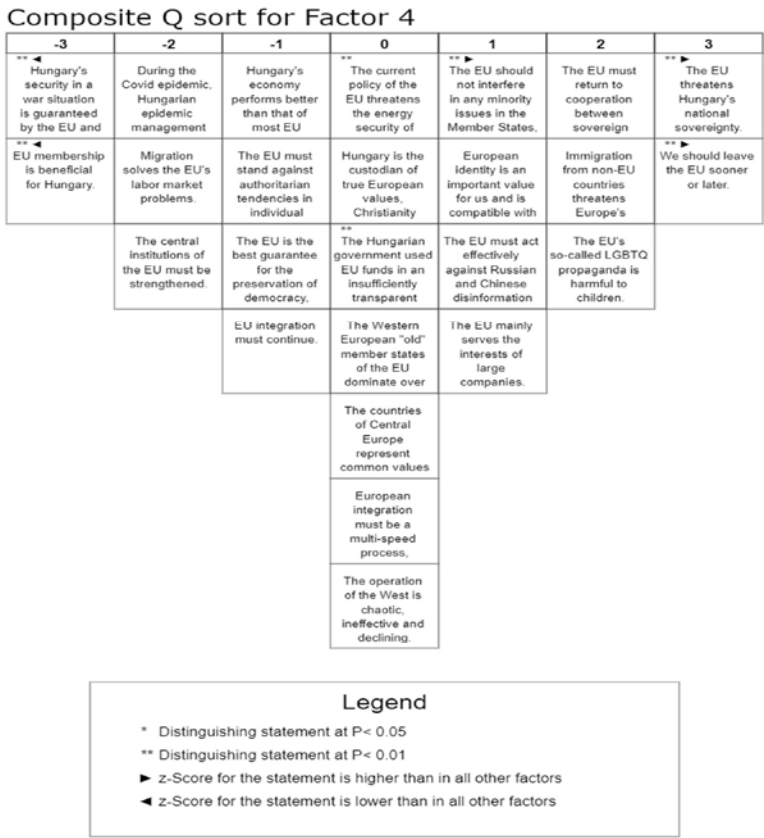
Now there is a very, very big difference between paying in Euros three years from now or never paying in Euros. And that this is an existing goal that we want to achieve, we are working on it, we just don't know yet. The first one is obviously an understandable, multi-speed process, there are more speeds because there is a constraint, but they will grind together somehow. The other one says that it's good that way, that it's here there it is. [...] It's really not good. (member of the pro-government media elite).

The Huxit factor

In the period leading up to the 2022 elections, the media research suggests that the possibility of Huxit was only marginal and conditional. In the campaign, Fidesz, which was in government until then, based its criticism of the EU on a sovereigntist viewpoint, but left no doubt that it saw the country's future within the European Union. The elections not only saw the governing party win another two-thirds of the vote but also saw the entry into parliament of a small far-right party, Mi Hazánk, which does not reject Huxit. This is not the most important item on their agenda, but there is no doubt that they could represent this alternative if necessary. With this parliamentary legitimacy, however marginal, it seems justified to analyze the elements of the Huxit discourse in their own right.

This discourse is based on the assertion that Hungary’s exit from the EU is a realistic and desirable alternative. It contains, and as we shall see, links criticism of the EU and criticism of the government. Representatives of this position doubt the benefits of EU and NATO membership, and these are the main ideological and pragmatic discourses that characterize the Huxit discourse. Few people hold this view, but elements of it also appear in the comments of many other interviewees. Sometimes, it appears as a way of calculating the odds, but in other cases, mostly as a form of rejection, as a bad, unrealistic, or only a negative vision of the future.

Figure 4. Structure of the Huxit factor



Source: MEDEU, authors' compilation

The defining statement in the *fourth* factor is that sooner or later, *Hungary should exit* the EU. This view – contributing 6% of the explained variance – is represented by a small number of respondents from the extreme right opposition. They regard the EU as the embodiment of negative trends and tendencies; therefore, they oppose it. Further important elements of this factor are that the respondents think that the EU is threatening the independence of Hungary and the energy safety of households. They contest that EU membership is advantageous for Hungary or that it is a guarantee of safety. They argue that the EU should not intervene in minority issues within the Member States. The opinions that are prevalent in this factor are close to some of the Sovereigntist standpoints, especially in the areas of migration and gender issues, but they represent a more radical version. At the same time, its proponents also advocate views that are critical of the government, and particularly, they posit that the government does not handle EU resources in a transparent way.

PROS AND CONS CONCERNING HUXIT

Arguments in favor of Huxit

The views of those who would support Huxit are illuminated in the following interview passages.

They are colonizing us, I think, especially Germany. The Prime Minister also tends to dwell [on] this, that they take more money out of the country than comes here as EU support...

Well, if we talk about the Union, then the princely winner should be that European Union membership is beneficial for Hungary, –I really cannot identify with that. ...even the policy of Fidesz, which is very critical of the EU, accuses Brussels of bureaucratization, places all responsibility on Brussels, and makes Brussels the scapegoat, ultimately says that [Hungary] is much better within the Union and there is a completely excluded, absurd idea that [Hungary should leave the Union]. However, the example of Great Britain also shows that there is life outside the EU. Even after the Union, I think you should mostly prepare for that. (member of the political elite, far-right opposition).

The claims that make up this discourse often apply geopolitical analogies to a stylized historical past. Both the EU and the Hungarian government are criticized for inefficiency and for their turning away from ‘real’ values.

- Well, we should leave the EU sooner or later, that's obvious to me ... I don't want to be a reformer of the EU, I want to be a survivor of the EU ... I think the EU has no future for the most part, so I would prepare for life after the EU, on the other hand, it colonizes us, it exploits us. Not to our advantage...

- Is there any aspect that is salient about how it is exploiting us?

- Mostly economically. But at the same time, the most powerful lobby in the world is the homosexual lobby, or the LGBTQ lobby, whatever lobby, because of that they interfere in our other internal affairs. (member of the political elite, far-right opposition).

An important element of support for the Huxit view is the emphasis on how the old Member States, the big ones, the ones in a central geopolitical position, take advantage of the new, smaller countries on the European periphery.

One could say it's a cliché, but nevertheless, because of the seriousness of the problem, I would still affirm that the old Member States dominate the new Member States. ... not to mention the fact that what comes in is for specific purposes, for multinational companies, which is why they can take it out, or for spectacular investments, So we do not have it ourselves, these are not so much job-creating investments, in my view, as they are often for multinationals, and then this is the next point I would like to make here, that the EU serves the interests of large companies, and certainly not, let us say, those of small and medium-sized enterprises, which provide two-thirds of the jobs. (member of the political elite, far-right opposition)

The old Member States are the ones that got the horrific money on entry. This money was not given to the central and eastern European Member States. What is an important Commissioner in the European Union will never be given. Eastern and Central Europeans have never been asked to lead the European Union. (member of the government-critical media elite)

In this narrative, the Brexit solution is used as a good example of exit, and the claims are that the current EU plans were not outlined at the time of entry and that arguments for the benefits of EU membership have been given one-sided emphasis in international communication.

... The EU public communications foundation only financed the campaign for the 'yes' vote, even though the name of the foundation implies that it could have provided balanced information before the referendum, Now we can feel it on our own skin and make a more realistic decision, and now it is no longer legally possible to hold a referendum on leaving the EU, and I think it is a little absurd that it was possible to hold a referendum on entering the EU, and then, when people wake up from their own experiences, they are prevented from doing so. But I think the campaign for a yes vote was already quite one-sided. (member of the political elite, far-right opposition)

The arguments in favor of leaving are not always coherent ideologically, but one such point of coherence is the far-right view of the EU as an exploiting, decaying empire that destroys national traditions. Therefore, one of the representatives of this view wants the EU to 'survive, not reform'.

When weighing up the pros and cons, the Huxit politician is not operating in the pragmatic field. He doubts the existence of the benefits offered by the EU because he sees the EU as an empire that subjugates the sovereignty of the nation-state and the individual. Yet there is a pragmatic aspect to the ideological argument against the EU, and that is the issue of security. In this respect, too, the EU is seen as a rather disadvantageous constraint, as is NATO, which is unable to guarantee peaceful conditions in this evaluation.

Well, taking all the above into account, it is obviously not only a question of monetizable aspects, but it is also an emotional issue that – representing the desire for freedom and national independence of the youth of March of 1848 and the young guys of 1956 in Pest – I consider it important that they do not take away our self-determination and that we do not become part of a world empire, we then see the Russian crisis dragging us into [some]thing along the lines of great power interests....

...the alarm bells should be sounded because there is not monetizable cost, so when the EU balance sheet is drawn up, whether we are net contributors or subsidized, most of the time it does not include, this can include those priceless values that we cannot even decide for ourselves

how much they are worth. At the level of the individual, it is worth so much that, okay, we get a salary, but it is worth so much that I can decide whether – in the context of the provision of health care, we can talk here about the COVID dictatorship, or anything else – individual freedom, that is also a difficult thing to monetize, but it is still valuable...

I think that when there is a threat of war, it is mostly NATO members [involved], and the Turkish-Greek conflict shows that NATO is helpless there, so I would like to bring in a little NATO criticism. (member of the political elite, far-right opposition)

Some of those who share this view see an irreconcilable conflict between supranational and national identities. Others, however, do not dispute the possibility of multiple identities but reframe the topic as a primordial racial issue.

...it may cause a little confusion in the coordinate system, but European identity is important for us. It is an important value; it is not only European, but we also call it Nordic civilization. I think that saving white humanity could also be a value, it is not correct to talk about today, but if the alarm bell can be sounded for the endangered great white shark, I think it can also be sounded for the white man.... (member of the political elite, far-right opposition)

The interviewee uses the synonyms of patriotism, local patriotism, and pride to interpret European identity. He softens his radical critique with the phrase “a bit.” In an analogy, he refers to Budapest, which, under the leadership of its liberal mayor, proclaimed a vision of a metropolis. The effect was, according to this interpretation, to strengthen local patriotism in the districts and weaken the sense of metropolitan pride. By analogy, he feels that the European Union is not strengthening European identity but destroying it due to the opposition of nation-states.

...because it's a bit of a declaration of war on nation states, so I think that the EU [implies] also a bit of destruction of the European identity [...it] embodies that, I mean, Karács... – [...] Gábor Demszky was the mayor of Budapest and he was building a bit of a world city then too, perhaps this was one of his slogans, and, if this is not offensive to him, then he has more or less squeezed the local patriotism out of the patriots. I don't see many people in Hungary, in Budapest, who are proud Budapesters. There

are proud people from [the districts of] Kőbánya, Újpest, Ferencváros, and Belváros, but there are very few who are proud of being a Budapest citizen and have the identity of a Budapest citizen. Now, I have a similar feeling that there is less local patriotism or patriotism or identity at the EU level, although otherwise, it would be important for us. (member of the political elite, far-right opposition)

Structure of arguments against Huxit

The arguments against Huxit are multi-faceted, ranging from economic disadvantages and geopolitical isolationism to the challenge of values. Most often, the economic disadvantages and the negative experience of Brexit emerge (although, as we have seen, there were also pro-Huxit voices that saw positive lessons in Brexit). Economic and geopolitical concerns are intertwined in this set of arguments; isolationism would increase the chance of exposure to Eastern autocracies. The other part of the counterarguments is linked to the extreme escalation of internal divisions within the country that Huxit could lead to, which may be comparable in impact to the trauma of the post-World War I period. It would lead to serious social conflicts and mass emigration.

I think it would be an orbital mistake. Hungary clearly belongs in the European Union and NATO. Our place is clearly in the West. That is why we should break with this 'ferry' position between East and West. It is essential, not only financially but also in terms of social mobility, for Hungary to be a member of the European Union. Otherwise, what is left? Moldova? Russia? The despots of the East? So, I think we should definitely stay in the EU. (member of the political elite, opposition)

The moment Hungary leaves the European Union, it will be broken. It is an economy that is fully exposed to international processes, that depends on international relations for a thousand strands, economically. I'm talking primarily about, at this moment, so a very open economy. The moment these doors close, the moment it is back among the poorest ... European countries. (member of the government-critical media elite)

I think that Hungary's exit from the EU..., well, for those who are thinking about it, I'll put it in a way that they can understand, would be a second Trianon. In every way. It would cause such a terrible national

trauma, even in the medium term, that...now incidentally, the country would go bankrupt, but let's leave aside these silly economic aspects... so it would be such a national trauma in every way, and it would further divide an already very divided society so irreparably, not to mention I am convinced that there must be more than 1 million people who would leave Hungary, which would be a fateful event in history, again in a negative direction, I would venture to say more tragic than Trianon, and I find it totally absurd in every respect. There was an article ... a few weeks ago, or 2-3 months ago, about how during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the entire Hungarian intelligentsia constantly criticized the Monarchy, but they did not even think of leaving because everyone knew that the Monarchy was the only chance to catch up, yet they constantly criticized it. My view is that anyone who leaves the EU is a traitor. But this is also absurd. I know I am a bit of an idealist, but obviously, as we see it here today, towards the end of November 2022, we have a Ukraine that is pulling towards Europe; it may even become a candidate country, maybe in 20 or 30 years, I do not think sooner. Does anybody really think that we should be surrounded on all sides by EU Member States and we would have customs and everything? People don't even think about what that means. The British don't think about it either, and it is a rich country. It would be tragic in every way. A lot of people have already left, so how many people would leave this country? We have one and a half million people who have emigrated to America; I can absolutely understand them. I don't think it is something that would occur to any normal person. (member of the neutral media elite)

Some claim that it is dangerous that even the idea of Huxit has been raised on the margins of political discourse. They consider that this could contaminate public thinking. For some, it is an alternative that threatens democracy and the rule of law. Others see it as a “*departure from a thousand years of St Stephen's Way*”, who led the country towards the adoption of the Roman Catholic religion and accession to the West.

I think it's a terrible thing; I think it's a terrible thing that it has entered the political discourse and the vernacular at all; I think it's a bad thing because it's [the EU is] not perfect, it has many flaws, every institutional system, every structure has flaws, but without it, we would be living in a much worse world if the European Union didn't exist. ... So we should not even raise the possibility of that. (member of the government-critical media elite).

There are two ways of arguing the case against Huxit. One is normatively based, rejecting the possibility of Huxit from an alternative ideological position. Proponents of this stance are emphatically negative and sometimes dramatic. The other viewpoint is more contemplative-analytical, seeking to consider the likely effects and unintended consequences of exit. This position is also negative about Huxit but more restrained, and the formulated thoughts are based on reflection about the chances of this. An important aspect of this consideration is the chance to influence public opinion.

I think there could easily be a format where the majority of people... how shall I put it... will be persuaded by the government. Or a mood could develop where a narrow majority decide to, say, quit. I think that's basically conceivable. But obviously, a lot depends on the economic situation...a lot can change, and if you look at how much the attitude of Hungarians has changed on a lot of issues, not with the EU but with, say, the FIDESZ voters, who would obviously be the most receptive to such an argument. That say FIDESZ voters have become Russian friends within a couple of years...so if you can make such a turnaround on both sides in a couple of years...then anything can happen, I think.. (member of the pro-government media elite)

Another set of arguments invokes geopolitical conditions and their possible effects. Among these, the fiscal crisis and, as a consequence, an internal political crisis is one element. The other is the threat of falling under the influence of the East, especially Russia, and of a repeated loss of independence.

Since the end of the Second World War, we have seen a global struggle between West and East on the planet. The European Union has, in fact, annexed Hungary to the Western sphere of interest, even if there is Eastern influence in Hungary. And this status quo, which I think is optimal, would be upset if we were to leave the EU. But there would be other serious consequences of leaving the Union, such as, in my opinion, state bankruptcy or serious exposure to countries that would otherwise cause a serious democratic deficit for the country, and there is a danger that after decades of great independence, we could again be under the hand of a foreign power, if we think about the ambitions of Russia, Hungary could easily come under serious Russian influence. (member of the government-critical media elite)

A further form of reflection considers the reality of exit. By all inferences, the reality of this is minimal in the short to medium term, although there are many residual uncertainties. Intertwined with this, but different in nature, is the rational perspective that involves weighing up the pros and cons. Due to the nature of the interview situation, this is not systematically explained, but its structure follows the logic of cost-benefit analysis. There are elements of the EU that can be criticized in this, but the balance of pros and cons ultimately leads to the conclusion that the EU is the less disadvantageous option.

I put this at 'minus three' because I don't think it's realistic, so I don't think Hungary really has any room for maneuver in this respect among the current large federal systems. And I have obviously included statements in the columns on agreement that are negative for the EU, but I still think it is the lesser of two evils. (member of the pro-government media elite)

In addition to the economic benefits, there are other aspects to consider such as the protection of democracy and the convergence of values. All this fits in with the fact that the interviewee interprets the Hungarian government's vetoes in EU referenda and the conditionality of EU budget funds as mutual blackmail maneuvers and condemns them from both sides.

I categorically disagree with this [that we should leave]. You know, the European Union has only brought positive things, including the fact that we expected more in terms of catching up, but Hungary did receive European funds. Without European money, there would have been far less construction and modernization here, and I'm not just talking about construction. Well, education is not a good example, but even in education, without which the money would not have been so much, or in health care. Or let's say modernization in the broad sense, so I wouldn't limit it to paving roads and buildings, but this is the most visible part, and this is one of the economic parts. Yes, the European Union does not represent negative values in terms of democracy or values, so that is progress. In a European sense, the common market creates economic opportunities for us and the possibility of joint action. I am saying this, of course, despite the fact that I do not agree that the money for catching up or, heaven forbid, for the post-pandemic reset is subject to political conditions, and there are rules for that. I do not agree with that, but I do agree that the European Union should represent fundamental values, just not like this way. Well, that is blackmail; that is what it is called.

And Orbán says I'll veto it. They're blackmailing each other; it's going too far! But the European Union is also doing well because sooner or later, we really will veto them, and this European Union is not lacking in that.. (member of the political elite, government)

The rejection of Huxit can also be linked to a kind of criticism of the government. In this, the exit alternative becomes a possibility when the government elite can no longer channel EU funds to their clientele without interference. However, from this analytical point of view, the chances of Huxit are also small because the loss of the fraudulently acquired wealth that is being extorted would be associated with international isolation and a loss of prestige.

We don't need to leave the EU, we will only leave if staying endangers the criminal ... criminality of the current ruling party, of its individual members. Yes, I think that's what it's all about, after the money has been skimmed off... Yes, I think there is propaganda going on, and there is a kind of preparation already... And several people have said the referendum presented by Orbán, the migration referendum, for example, which was already a test of leaving the EU, and I heard comments like that from the delegates of the governing party. It is conceivable that if this Russian-style propaganda is successfully pushed on Hungary, it is conceivable that the EU will be portrayed as the enemy and that people in the countryside will vote for it if a referendum is called... but I don't think it's a realistic chance, because watching this... let's say this peacock dance, or this swing policy of the government, they know very well when they can turn a part of the citizens against them, and when this reaches a certain preponderance or mass, they tend to dance back. And I don't think Orbán would dare to do that... What I have seen is that they are trying to bail out wealth, and I see and hear these efforts from many places. I'm reminded a little bit of Fujimori ... our current regime... it is very similar to the way the regime was set up and the way the Prime Minister behaved... I think that, in practice, leaving would be about exempting a certain class of people from certain criminal consequences – having robbed the EU – who have benefited very well from that. I think it would obviously be very damaging to a lot of people. (member of the government-critical media elite)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper was written to sum up the main findings of interviews conducted with 60 members of the Hungarian political and media elite between November 2022 and March 2023. Besides the dominant discourses of Integrationism and Sovereigntism, Multi-Speed and Huxit discourses also appeared in the elite interviews. The majority of the Hungarian political and media elite had a positive evaluation of EU membership, and Huxit was perceived as a marginal alternative.

We can refine our analysis here by recalling that we can observe two types of utterances in elite interviews: contemplative (analytic, descriptive) and normative. Although one might expect that the contemplative type would characterize the journalists and the normative approach the politicians, we found that the differences were not attached to such group differences. Rather, these are contrasts between habits and are connected to how the respondents think about the task, that is, the interview situation itself. Thus, one type of perspective is demonstrated by the analysis of what is seen as feasible and the other by a consideration of the ‘right’ behavior. The reflexive interview situation and the limited time span guided the interviewees toward adopting one of the two approaches. Huxit is occasionally associated with the contemplative approach when participants who have a critical view of the government speak about for how long it would be in the interest of the governing elite to remain in the EU or for how long the EU will tolerate veto and EU-critical propaganda. Sometimes, these approaches are connected: a normative conclusion might be built on gauging opportunities in addition to moral, religious, identity-based, or emotional considerations. They may be connected in a reverse sequence when a pro-government sovereigntist or a government-critical integrationist member of the elite begins to weigh the potential causes and chances of leaving the European Union.

The most important indicator of the pragmatic perspective is the degree to which the respondents regard EU membership as advantageous for Hungary. Those with integrationist views highly esteem the advantages of EU membership, and – although less enthusiastically – those with sovereigntist and multi-speed views also think positively in this regard. The arguments span investment and finance to mobility issues at the macro level, and in relation to mobility, even personal and microlevel viewpoints appear. In contrast, the political extreme right regards membership as disadvantageous; they advocate exit and claim their goal is to “*survive the EU*.” The arguments are abstract and appear in a macro-level economic and social frame. Identity-based interpretations are less divisive than pragmatic ones.

An interesting lesson from our analysis is that, although polarization typically relies on the identity-forming dichotomy of “them and us”, in these elite interviews, the relation to supranational identity did not prove to be divisive compared to the pragmatic aspects. European identity and its compatibility with national identity are not negatively evaluated by members of the Sovereignists. Even the views of the advocates of the Huxit alternative appear positive regarding supranational identity, but they understand supranational identity in a primordial, racial frame. European identity is most strongly favored among the Integrationists. In their case, identity frequently attracts a civic interpretation that emphasizes individuals’ choices and decisions. Cultural and historical discourse fragments also emerge regarding the compatibility of the two identities, similar to macrolevel pragmatic and security considerations.

Overall, despite all the strident criticism by the government of the EU, the Hungarian political and media elite was characterized to a greater extent by recognition of the EU’s benefits and EU identity and, to a lesser extent, by soft EU skepticism. Until 2024, Huxit appeared only on the periphery of the political elite. In that summer, however, in a contemplative speech, the Prime Minister, for the first time, considered the possibility that if we received an offer from the US (which he said was unlikely), Hungary could consider leaving the EU.³ Huxit thus became an imaginable alternative for the governing elite. The question is whether its media dominance will enable the governing elite to change the public mood until the next elections in 2026, or whether an alternative political elite can emerge that is more in tune with public mood and international conditions.

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APPENDIX. Q-STATEMENTS

- 1 Hungary is the custodian of true European values, Christianity and the institution of the family.
- 2 The EU threatens Hungary's national sovereignty.
- 3 The central institutions of the EU must be strengthened.
- 4 The EU must return to cooperation between sovereign nation-states.
- 5 Immigration from non-EU countries threatens Europe's cultural identity.
- 6 The Western European "old" Member States of the EU dominate the Eastern European "new" Member States.
- 7 The countries of Central Europe represent common values and traditions that the EU should respect.
- 8 We should leave the EU sooner or later.
- 9 European integration must be a multi-speed process, according to the readiness and interests of the Member States.
- 10 The EU's so-called LGBTQ propaganda is harmful to children.
- 11 Hungary's economy performs better than that of most EU countries.
- 12 Migration solves the EU's labor market problems.
- 13 Hungary's security in a war situation is guaranteed by the EU and NATO.
- 14 The current policy of the EU threatens the energy security of Hungarian households.
- 15 During the Covid epidemic, Hungarian epidemic management performed better than that of most EU countries.
- 16 The EU is the best guarantee for the preservation of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in the Member States, including here.
- 17 The EU should not interfere in any minority issues in the Member States, including issues related to gender, race and sexual orientation.
- 18 The EU must stand against authoritarian tendencies in individual Member States, regardless of the economic interests of national or international actors.
- 19 European identity is an important value for us and is compatible with national identity.
- 20 The EU must act effectively against Russian and Chinese disinformation in all Member States.
- 21 EU membership is beneficial for Hungary.
- 22 The Hungarian government used EU funds in an insufficiently transparent manner.
- 23 The operation of the West is chaotic, ineffective, and declining.
- 24 EU integration must continue.
- 25 The EU mainly serves the interests of large companies.

