

INTRODUCTION. THE EU IN HUNGARIAN MEDIA AND POLITICS: POLITICIZATION, INSTRUMENTALIZATION, POLARIZATION

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ABSTRACT: *A research team from Corvinus University studied the image of European integration in Hungarian media and among the elite between 2021 and 2024. This volume presents selected results from this research. The introduction first outlines the social and institutional background and then analyses the phenomena of politicization, instrumentalization, and polarization, with a special focus on asymmetric polarization. It describes the methods used and the logic of the volume and concludes with questions about the social implications of polarization.*

KEYWORDS: *asymmetric polarization, politicization, instrumentalization, media pluralism, elite*

In this volume, we aim to shed light on the image of the EU in the Hungarian media and among the elite in the first half of the 2020s. The lessons of the Hungarian case go beyond local experience: they offer perspectives on an emerging authoritarian regime within the EU. The Hungarian regime represents a test for the EU, and how domestic public actors perceive external constraints as a challenge is also an important issue.

Between 2021 and 2024, in the framework of international cooperation, we conducted an empirical study,² the main components of which involved content and discourse analysis of the domestic media, elite interviews, and a representative public opinion survey. In this volume, we present some of the experiences from this research.

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The introductory chapter has two purposes. The first is to contextualize the contributions of the volume, drawing on the research background, and the second is to give a brief overview of the research methods and the structure of the volume.

FRAME AND BACKGROUND

The peaceful and smooth institutional transformation during the systemic change in the early 1990s was paved by three features of the Hungarian version of state socialism. *First*, the dominant political discourse of the 1980s was that of pragmatic liberal market reforms, which helped to persuade reluctant politicians and public opinion of the necessity of institutional change and highlighted the advantages of entrepreneurship. The *second* political component was that elite change preceded systemic change: the pace of cadre changes accelerated in the second half of the 1980s, especially in ministries and banks. The *third* aspect was that the oppressed democratic opposition kept the human rights version of liberal discourse that had existed since the 1970s on the agenda.

The consensual unity of the elites associated with the roundtable discussions that accompanied the system change meant that the main political forces (the governing socialists as well as the populist and liberal camps of the political opposition) accepted each other as legitimate partners and agreed upon the rules of the game of regular, free and fair elections, Euro-Atlantic geopolitical priorities, and institutional guarantees of human rights and property rights. What happened reveals that the systemic change followed the pattern of elite settlements (Higley-Burton 2006; Higley-Lengyel 2000). By elites, we mean here those who, through their personal choices and opinions, can exert a decisive influence on social reproduction processes.

In spite of the fact that the first free elections in 1990 were won by the conservative MDF and the second in 1994 by the socialist MSZP, the dominant political discourse in the 1990s was liberal, most clearly represented by two parties that emerged from the democratic opposition: SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats), with a decade of experience in political life, and the freshly formed FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats). SZDSZ reached an agreement with the first conservative government in exchange for the presidency, while in 1994, it entered into a coalition with the winning socialists. The socialist-liberal coalition achieved a two-thirds majority but refrained from changing the constitution and the cardinal laws.

Liberal political discourse with the slogan of “the third way leads to the third world” pushed aside “third-way” ideology, the recently reactivated but marginalized discourse frame associated with the populist tradition (Gombos 1992). In the liberal vision, European integration and the virtualization of borders were supposed to provide answers to other favorite topics of populists: problems of detrimental historical decisions, repressed national conflicts, and the grievances of the Hungarian minority in neighboring countries.

In addition to building new institutions, the political elite faced the challenges of inherited debt burdens and a rolling economic crisis. It also had to deal with the fact that, in addition to the desire for the promised freedom, insecurity, a fear of unemployment, outrage at economic crimes, and dissatisfaction with growing inequalities also gained ground in public thinking.

The general trend in support of European integration that has been identified (Haller 2008; Best et al. 2012; Hooghe-Marks 2005) is that national political elites are more supportive of integration, find it more useful, and are more attached to Europe than the populations of the respective countries. This is why experts talk about the “Europe of elites” and describe the integration as an elite-driven process. The picture is somewhat nuanced by the Hungarian experience. This shows that the elite and the public were closer to each other in terms of their European attachment than in the average of EU countries. Furthermore, in the case of both the elite and the population, European attachment was stronger than average in the Hungarian case. This was also true of trust in European institutions. Research on collective identity has helped to clarify one more thing: supranational and national attachment are not contradictory but are positively correlated. Therefore, it is merely the result of a special cognitive construction of collective identity that presupposes an image of the enemy in relation to which it defines itself, consequently assuming that various collective attachments are mutually exclusive. There are social conditions when the latter situation prevails, but they are frequently traps created by mobilizing elite ideology.

Although the pre-accession period can rightly be seen as a period of “under-politicization” – a time when the elite did not address society or the EU either in terms of its practical or identity aspects – the 2004 issue of the journal *JEL-KÉP* is noteworthy for its portrayal of social knowledge, expectations, and opinions. For example, concerning knowledge of the EU, it found that, while knowledge of the functioning of the EU was at a low level, knowledge of the related institutions was better (Tardos, 2004, p.16). International comparisons also provide important information. Fifty-eight percent of Hungarian respondents knew how many Member States made up the EU, above the international average.

Research on accession-related expectations has found (Lengyel-Blaskó 2002) that a more favorable social situation was generally associated with more positive expectations, while a disadvantaged social situation did not explicitly imply a rejection of accession. It also showed that material resources played a more important role in explaining expectations than cultural resources. However, material and cultural resources together generally had weaker explanatory power than orientation efforts and political engagement, i.e., cognitive and political mobilization skills.

A comprehensive media survey in 2000 (three national dailies, six regional dailies) showed that the media were generally dominated by news about the EU, with barely a tenth of the coverage dealing with general and substantive issues or past experiences (Terestyéni, 2002). The domestic internal debate was also reported in the press: one view was that over-emphasis on the national interest could be an obstacle to accession, while the other side claimed the lack of protection of the latter. However, there was a clear desire for balanced information, which is of paramount importance in society's image of the EU. It is worth recalling Viktor Orbán's comment in 2002 that "there is life outside the European Union," although it should be added that this was motivated and justified as much by frustration at the delay in accession negotiations as by criticism of the EU.³

Before EU accession, the expectations of the Hungarian population about this process were strongly positive. A much larger proportion of Hungarians than the EU average thought that EU membership would be a good thing and would benefit the country. After accession in 2004, this proportion started to decline and fell below the EU average. In 2001, 59% of Hungarians thought membership could be a good thing, and 71% thought it would benefit the country. Five years after accession, in 2009, 31% and 38%, respectively, thought that accession was a good thing and benefitted the country. It should be added that in this critical year, a period of economic crisis, there was still a significant gap between the two indicators: 52% thought that the benefits of accession were not visible, but only a minority (22%) thought that accession was a bad thing overall. Euroscepticism was negatively correlated with cultural resources, trust in domestic institutions, personal expectations for the future, and overall satisfaction (Lengyel – Göncz 2010).

In 2007, 2009, and 2014, empirical surveys of Members of the Hungarian Parliament (MPs) investigated the pragmatic and symbolic aspects of the political elite's views on European integration.⁴ Regarding the political

3 <https://uj szo.com/velemen y/orban-van-elet-az-eu-n-kivul-is>

4 The technical information and results of these surveys are available in Best et al. 2012 and Vogel-Teruel 2016.

background, it should be noted that in 2007 and 2009, a socialist-liberal coalition was in government, and the conservative-populist FIDESZ was in opposition, which party at that time was already denying the legitimacy of the incumbent government. Due to the economic crisis and the deteriorating elite consensus, the 2010 elections led to a two-thirds majority for FIDESZ, which eventually used this majority to change the constitution, the electoral law, and media law – among others. Analysts identified the chance of an emerging electoral authoritarian regime (Kornai 2016; Körösenyi-Patkós 2015; Lengyel-Ilonszki 2016; Magyar 2013; Magyar 2019; Ilonszki-Vajda 2021) whereby incumbents misuse their position to concretize their power. While in 2007 and 2009, the proportion of governing and opposition, left- and right-wing MPs, was more balanced, in 2014, the overwhelming majority of MPs were associated with the governing right-wing conservative-populist FIDESZ and its Christian Democrat satellite. Among the opposition parties was a newly emerging (at that time) extreme-right populist formation called Jobbik. FIDESZ leader Viktor Orbán, in a secret speech in Kőtcse,⁵ declared that the aim was to establish a “central field of force,” and he seemingly succeeded concerning this tactical step. The 2014 elite survey context was thus different from the earlier two. This should be kept in mind in relation to the results of the surveys, briefly summed up below. We may rightly conclude that both the changing composition of the elite and the changing elite discourse are reflected in the evaluations of the EU.

In 2007 and 2009, the vast majority (85-89%) of Hungarian MPs thought that the country benefited from EU membership. Although there were differences between left and right in this respect, the differences were not statistically significant due to the ceiling effect. By 2014, the positive evaluations had dropped to 79%, and the differences between parties became significant. However, this did not involve the governing FIDESZ MPs changing their mind, as one might expect – the vast majority of them still thought that EU membership was beneficial for the country. The drop in the average was due to the (at that time) opinions of hard Eurosceptic extreme-right party (Jobbik) representatives. In 2014, with regard to pragmatic elite orientation, the dividing line was drawn between the extreme-right populist opposition party Jobbik and the rest of the parliamentary parties.

As mentioned already, such divergence may be traced to the solutions preferred for crisis management. In 2009, the majority of MPs sought the intervention of international financial institutions and the EU. By 2014, however, the majority already stated a preference for the autonomous action of the national government and the intergovernmental coordination of national governments. In this respect,

5 http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/cikk/megorizni_a_letezes_magyar_minoseget

both the changing composition of the political elite and the changing discourse of FIDESZ had an impact. While previously, roughly only one-third of MPs preferred a sovereigntist solution, this proportion had grown to over three-quarters of MPs. Socialist MP's preferences did not change in this respect, but their overall proportion decreased in the parliament, and among FIDESZ MPs, the sovereigntist discourse became the dominant expressible version. This was the period when the prime minister could proudly declare that the government had repaid the IMF loan and got rid of this undesirable constraint.

In 2007, a 52-58% majority of Hungarian MPs (just like other East-European ones) favored economic competitiveness above better social security. At that time, in this respect, there was no significant difference between conservative and socialist political elites; both preferred competitive economic liberalism to solidarity and social welfare. In 2014, however, 78% of FIDESZ and 13% of socialist MPs agreed that sustaining competitiveness was the most desirable function of the EU.

In 2007, a 56% majority supported further unification, and differences between the parties were visible but statistically insignificant. In 2014, only 26% of Hungarian MPs supported further unification. The proportion was 86% among socialists and 7% among FIDESZ MPs.

In 2007, in terms of tax redistribution, the Hungarian political elite considered it would be fair to distribute 17 euros of a 100-euro tax at the EU level. This proportion had decreased to 13% in 2014, but the figure was still six times as high as the actual EU-level redistributed tax. In this respect, again, there were differences between FIDESZ and the socialists, but these were not statistically significant.

As for identity-related components, in 2007, almost half of the Hungarian political elite felt "very attached" and slightly fewer "somewhat attached" to Europe. The proportion of those who said that they were "not attached" remained below 10%. In this respect, there were no statistically significant differences between the socialists and conservatives.

In 2014, 32% of Hungarian MPs declared that they were "very attached," 54% said that they were "somewhat attached" to Europe, and 14% said that they were "not attached." This means that the majority of the Hungarian parliament still remained engaged in terms of identity, although the intensity of attachment had decreased somewhat. This was mainly to do with the changing composition. Two-thirds of socialists (and a tiny liberal fraction) declared their high level of attachment, and in this respect, Christian Democrats had the same attitude. High-level attachment characterized 25% of FIDESZ MPs (and a further 65% were "somewhat attached." More than half of Jobbik politicians declared that they were "not attached" to the EU.

After the fourth electoral victory of FIDESZ in 2018, one could observe some new developments in the elite framework and related media discourses (Janky 2020; Kolosi-Hudácskó 2020). FIDESZ had created a dominant sovereigntist discourse in the public media and externalized the source of threats. All the opposition parties tried to build up a rival and joint discourse in the understanding that separately, as individual parties against the powerful governing force, they would be unable to change the discourse or even influence it to some degree. Their strategic aim was to usher in a new regime change to overcome the authoritarian one. Jobbik moved toward a center-right populist position, accepted that European integration was beneficial for the country, and stated that the party was ready to join a coalition of unified opposition to challenge FIDESZ in the 2022 elections (Göncz-Lengyel 2021). In contrast, FIDESZ strengthened the sovereigntist ideology and tried to create an international platform that discredited liberal values and blocked integration.

POLITICIZATION, INSTRUMENTALIZATION, POLARIZATION

In the following section, we will first discuss international trends in the politicization of the EU and then discuss its domestic developments. Following Kriesi (2016), the process of politicization can be characterized by three features: the phenomenon becomes *more visible*, more and more *actors* are involved, and opinions and positions become increasingly *polarized*. Kriesi also adds that in the case of full politicization, all three dimensions of the latter phenomena can be observed. It is fair to say that the EU is attracting significant international and domestic attention in all three areas and thus undergoing a comprehensive politicization process. The presentation of the changing views of political elites and media discourse is crucial in this respect, as these actors are determining the extent and tools of politicization.

Although the EU is being politicized at the level of the Member States, and this phenomenon is the focus of most research, the EU itself is also being transformed, which is a crucial part of the politicization process. Comparison with our previous research allows us to assess the impact of politicization on European identity and pragmatic opinions and expectations about the EU. In many places, including Hungary, the issue of European integration is becoming a tool of domestic political battles associated with varying degrees of intensity. Based on our research results, we predict that, although the consequences of this politicization and instrumentalization process are visible, they are leading

more to the narrowing of Hungary's options in relation to the EU than to a fundamental change in society's perceptions of the EU.

The starting point for recognizing the new phase of the EU's transformation may be the Maastricht Treaty when it became clear that solutions initiated by the elite would not necessarily (or not at all) obtain support – the failed and dubious fate of national referenda can be seen as a response to this. Years of permissive consensus became replaced by the escalation of conflicts around European integration (Hooghe-Marks 2009), and the importance of domestic political processes, including the perceptions of political actors and public opinion, increased. This highlights the importance of identity in contentious issues; the conclusion is that it is a mistake to look solely at rational economic considerations as the background to disputes and conflicts, as was the case in the earlier phase of integration. In the past, national political elites might rightly have felt that voters were less concerned about European integration than rationally calculating business groups. Since the 1990s, integration-related issues have become more important in public opinion, and conversely, the *vox populi* in integration policy has become more important.

The gap between elite and public support for the EU has widened in many Member States, and this is part of the populist turn. Along with the transformation of the national party-political scene, populist parties have become the vehicles of the politicization process internationally, on both the left and the right. In line with research that has highlighted the differences between left- and right-wing critiques of the EU (Braun et al. 2019), it can be said, with some simplification, that the former have tended to be critics of pragmatic implementation, while the latter have been advocates of national and identity-based reservations. The literature points out that the degree of politicization varies from country to country. Although there is a growing recognition of the EU's role, this is not always accompanied by increasing polarization and an expansion in the number of agents.

As outlined above, crises have led to increased politicization and institutional responses beyond economic instruments. These crises have involved the explicit threat and risk of disintegration (Schimmelfenning 2018). However, they have also marked the way for reform through 'more integration,' and the EU has continued to move in this direction.

At the European level, the EU has gradually become a political issue for political actors and society. Reasons include the series of crises that have (also) shaken the EU, as EU responses to European (and sometimes global) processes made the EU's role increasingly clear to society. The EU has had to respond to the financial crisis, the migration problem, the COVID-19 epidemic, and Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

As far as the domestic political process is concerned, the overall picture is that the elite consensus that existed during the 1989-90 regime change regarding the main institutions and values, including freedoms, consolidated parliamentary democracy, and Euro-Atlantic orientation, has eroded since the mid-2000s.

The elites first pretended to follow the patterns of liberal democracy, but then some even questioned whether they needed to do this at all (Lengyel—Ilonszki 2010, 2016). Political elite groups questioned each other's legitimacy regarding important issues. Even these areas were permeated by the rhetoric of the ruling elite based on conflict ideology.

Our study provides a cross-section of a context in which the incumbent political elite seeks to adapt the institutions of parliamentary democracy to the conditions of electoral autocracy, creating a media environment and thematizing public opinion accordingly. However, these efforts are complicated by the fact that, as a member of the EU and NATO, the ruling elite's capacity for action is limited, so their words and actions can often be out of sync. The institutional transformation of the media is the subject of a separate chapter below, but we simply anticipate that, using Hallin and Mancini's (2004) terminology, the media has become polarized in parallel with politics.

The politicization phenomenon has been identified in international literature in several other countries. The specificity of our case is the strong presence of instrumentalization. Its content is that the EU is seen as an instrument of domestic political power and election, subordinated to these goals. Politicization can also include this content itself since the broad focus on a particular issue can lead to increased political confrontation between different positions and political exposure to the latter. However, instrumentalization is more than this: it can become dominated by power and party politics, while public policy issues can become marginalized, government communication can become dominated by the propagandistic treatment of the EU, and the use of fake news can become entrenched.

Three distinct phases of politicization can be distinguished. We do not consider the year of accession as the end of the first phase, but rather 2002. The second, short but more turbulent phase ended in 2010 and marks the beginning of the third phase, which continues to this day. The dates point to the permanent internal political fixity of the relationships, with varying content: both 2002 and 2010 were years of changes in government. The decade after the regime change was one of duality. On the one hand, an identity discourse was present: What are Hungary's options in the new political situation? What does EU accession mean in terms of historical heritage and national identity? Could there be other paths? On the other hand, the pragmatic aspects of reform-applicability or, as it was often called, reform-necessity, were often present (Ágh 2004). Overall,

however, the EU was a terrain for the continuation of domestic conflicts regarding one aspect or another and often became a means of transferring responsibility: it was easier to refer to the expectations, norms, rules to be fulfilled in relation to EU accession than to argue, debate and explain (Lakner 2004). This dual discourse – i.e., identity-based versus pragmatic, involving weighing up advantages and disadvantages and social and economic impacts – is still dominant in the public policy perspective on the relationship with the EU. It concerns what political actors and decision-makers emphasize and what citizens consider important when they formulate their views on the EU. We will see that identity aspects dominate in the toolbox of politicization and especially instrumentalization. This is true of the image of the EU that the media presents to the public. Because what emerges from the elite interviews is that when the elites interpret the relationship with the EU for themselves, in their own terms, the identity issues are less divisive.

This dichotomy – the relationship between pragmatic and symbolic aspects – and the changes we have noted in relation to the EU did not escape the attention of domestic analysts of the period. The asymmetrical duality of politics and public policy had to change because the politicization of the EU also affects public policy insofar as emerging European governance can make public policy practice more effective (Ágh 1999). What seemed to be decided at the European level was, therefore, a question on the domestic scene – the emphasis on this would be decisive in the relationship between Hungary and the EU. However, it is particularly crucial for the subsequent and still ongoing processes that the historically changing role of Hungary in Europe and its relationship with Europe have not been ‘discussed’ and interpreted.

Apart from the general processes of European politicization, which are based on events related to crises or political reforms within the EU, the literature argues that the internal political processes of the Member States prominently impact politicization, and from this point of view, the Hungarian situation is necessarily a case in point. What is decisive from this point of view, therefore, are the responses and proposals for solutions to the problems facing the EU at the country level.

The accession negotiations – and the intervening elections and change of government in 2002 – are particularly noteworthy regarding the subsequent processes. Looking at the background, there were two changes in the behavior of the elites: the 1990s were characterized by a pattern of conformity with democratic consolidation, which was replaced by a kind of norm-breaking behavior from the end of the decade onwards, and became predominant among leading elite groups after 2010. This process, with elite change as the dominant background, is a good description of the dichotomy, although the authoritarian

regime that is emerging goes beyond norm-breaking, both in its motivation and process.

From 2006 onwards, the elite consensus in domestic politics broke up, but the shared position on the EU still persisted. From the perspective of domestic politics, the change in parliamentary behavior is noteworthy, for example, as it has led to a change in the behavior of relevant political elite actors (Várnagy–Ilonszki, 2018). This has been reflected in a significant decrease in the willingness of government and opposition actors to vote in unanimity and a radical decrease in activity (bills, interpellation) in parliament.

International experience has shown that one of the first signs of politicization is the polarization of the elite and the consequent emergence of new party political fault lines due to the rise of populist parties. This process has also become visible in our country. The opinions of the parliamentary elite show that the position of FIDESZ, which came into government in 2010, changed between 2007 and 2014 (Göncz-Lengyel, 2016), shifting towards a sovereigntist position on several key issues, such as competitiveness, the economic crisis, and migration, but remained positive in terms of its recognition of the benefits and usefulness of the EU.

The first truly politicizing moment could have been the referendum prior to accession in 2004, but this did not become a cornerstone of politicization; there was no governmental interest or will for this. In any case, the referendum attracted a much more modest turnout than others have in recent years – although it may be added that it was still relatively high (at 38.5%) compared to the post-socialist accession countries. This two-fifths turnout rate fell below 30% in 2014 but then increased significantly, reaching three-fifths in 2024.⁶ Thus, in terms of politicization, visibility, multiple actors, and polarization are prominent. National consultations and the instrumentalization of media and poster campaigns reinforce this trend.

The inclusion of the EU in national consultations is an example of instrumentalization. In the 2023 national consultation, all the questions were linked, if not to the EU, then to Brussels. In the pro-government media, Brussels is presented as an eponym for a bureaucratic EU elite. In this interpretation, Brussels poses a threat in two contradictory ways. *As a strong threat*, Brussels represents the oppressive European empire. In this narrative, the Hungarian ruling elite is represented through a David-and-Goliath analogy. *As a weak threat*, Brussels is a helpless, ineffective scapegoat, a symbol of the disintegrating, decaying West.

6 <https://www.valasztas.hu/europai-parlamenti-valasztasok>

RESEARCH METHODS AND STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

As mentioned above, the papers published here provide an insight into *the Hungarian experience of* an international research project.⁷ The methods and sources of the research are briefly described below. Following an extensive literature review, we first conducted content and discourse analysis of the media. We collected articles (and, in the case of TV, transcripts of talks and interviews) on the EU from eight media sources from 1 July 2021 to 31 March 2022. The sources were *Magyar Nemzet* (MN); *Népszava* (NSZ); *Heti Világgazdaság* (HVG); Origo.hu (ORIGO); Magyar Televízió Esti Híradó (M1); RTL Klub Esti Híradó (RTL); ATV Egyenes beszéd (ATV); Hír TV Híradó, and Csörte (HÍR TV).

From these sources, all items were collected that included one or more of the following keywords: *European Union, EU, Brussels, European Parliament, European Commission, European Council*. The corpus consisted of 14,424 units from the above-mentioned four newspapers and four TV stations. Within this, the proportion of information provided by TV-based sources was one-fifth. About half of the items appeared in two pro-government newspapers, MN and ORIGO. If we add to this the news and talks on public television (M1) and on HÍR TV, we find that about *two-thirds* of the items were published in *pro-government* and one-third in government-critical or neutral *outlets*.

Because of the use of keywords to drive the selection process, all pieces in the corpus are related to the EU. However, we were also interested in how this topic is intertwined with other issues of interest in the domestic media. In other words, how the EU emerged as a main theme and at the intersection of other discourses that were of particular concern to the public. Behind these intersections, the agenda-setting intentions of the ruling elite can be discerned, as well as how they reflect on international political events and their political communication.

In the next step of the media analysis, we made further selections by using additional keywords per macro-topic. While micro-topics are discernible from the texts, macro-topics enable the analysis of the relationship(s) between the text and the social context (Wodak-Meyer 2016, 27). The macro-topics were ascertained based on preliminary research and test coding among the issues of public interest in the examined period. These macro-topics (analyzed in detail below) are the following: European identity, the future of Europe, migration, the pandemic, environment, varieties of war (including geopolitics, disinformation, and hybrid war), and “child protection” according to the LGBTQ issue frame.

⁷ The Mediatized EU research was conducted in seven countries – Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Hungary, Estonia, and Georgia.

Table 1. *Structure of the corpus used in media analysis*

Media Outlets	Abbreviated name	Television	News-paper	News-paper online	Political position (pro-government: G; government-critical: C; Neutral: N)	Distribution of articles/talks (%; N=14,424)
Magyar Televízió Esti Híradó, V4 Híradó, Unió27	M1	+			G	10
RTL Klub Esti Híradó, Fókusz	RTL	+			N	4
<i>Magyar Nemzet</i> , magyarnemzet.hu	MN		+	+	G	31
<i>Népszava</i> , nepszava.hu	NSZ		+	+	C	14
<i>Heti Világgazdaság</i> , hvg.hu	HVG			+	C	16
origo.hu	ORIGO			+	G	18
ATV Egyenes beszéd	ATV	+			C	3
Hír TV Híradó, Csörte	HÍR TV	+			G	4

Source: MEDEU Research, authors' compilation

On average, the corpus contains around 1,600 articles and talks per month, and the topics had a certain periodicity over the nine months under study. Treatment of LGBTQ, the environment, and the COVID-19 epidemic was more frequent at the beginning of the period, in the summer of 2021, while that of disinformation and war was more frequent at the end of the period. The problem of hybrid war came to the fore in November 2021, with the wave of migrants emerging on the Belarusian-Polish border. Migration as a separate issue was present in high density throughout the whole period of investigation.

The distribution of macro-topics varied according to media outlets as well. Migration aroused significant interest in both the pro-government and the government-critical media, and compared to other topics, it was also covered by TV in relatively large proportions. Still, COVID-19 preoccupied public television even more than migration. Disinformation was the only macro-topic that was analyzed, and this was dominated by the government-critical press, but it could not break through and did not significantly influence the political agenda. The pro-government ORIGO and HÍR TV covered the disinformation topic only sporadically. Although disinformation and hybrid war are content-related in many respects, they still attracted the interest of different media

outlets. The hybrid war was an especially frequent topic in the pro-government MN. War and LGBTQ-related topics were somewhat overrepresented in the pro-government press as well. HÍR TV was particularly (above average) interested in the latter topic, being as preoccupied with it as much as with the future of Europe. About three-fifths of the analyzed articles dealing with the discourses of *identity and the future of Europe* appeared in MN and ORIGO, two strongly pro-government newspapers. These newspapers, therefore – at least in terms of the number of articles – dominated the media discourse dealing with the symbolic issues associated with the EU.

The research included 60 interviews with members of the political and media elite carried out between November 2022 and March 2023 using so-called Q-methodology. Interviewees were confronted with statements about the EU derived from the media and asked to indicate how much they agreed with each one and to justify their answers. The sources and methodology are described in more detail in the article on elites. In addition, a national survey was conducted in July-August 2023 on a sample of 1,022 adults, measuring public attitudes towards the EU, elites, and the media.

The structure of the book follows the order and logic of the research. The majority of the papers deal with the discourse on the EU in the domestic media. The institutional conditions of discourses taking shape in an asymmetrically polarized media structure are presented in the first study, which describes the process of media capture and thus helps to interpret the actors' room for manoeuvre. The subsequent discourse analysis opens with a paper that directly addresses the symbolic and pragmatic aspects of discourses on European integration. One natural apropos of this is the domestic confluence of international debates about the future of Europe. This helps to make sense of how sovereigntist and integrationist views are articulated in an asymmetrical media space and how instrumentalized identity-based views eclipse pragmatic arguments. Subsequent studies relate to the EU by cross-linking at the intersection of priority public issues: they focus on the macro-topics that were of particular interest to the domestic media in the period 2021-22. These include migration, pandemics, varieties of war, LGBTQ, and the climate crisis. Their emergence, as we have seen, occurs with different periodicity and intensity in terms of the contribution to asymmetric media polarization. In each case, these macro-themes must be interpreted here in the context of the metaphors of EU-related discourses, bearing in mind that the first filter of the corpus was generated by the keywords associated with the EU. The question is, therefore, how these macro-topics are linked to EU discourses, how the EU appears in the interpretations of macro-themes, and how this shapes the public sphere of domestic media. The paper that discusses

the experiences of the elite survey, based on Q methodology outlines the characteristics of dominant and marginal EU discourses, with a particular focus on the pro and con arguments associated with Huxit and the emergence of normative and contemplative discourse styles.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our content analysis of two dailies (MN and NSZ) in 2021 highlighted the instrumental role of EU discourse in the politicization and polarization of the media. We examined the positive, negative, neutral, or balanced character of articles in which the EU is a dominant theme. It is clear from this comparison that *the difference is not in the proportion of positive images*; this is equal in the two outlets and characterizes a minority (8%) of the pieces of writing. The *main difference lies in the negative EU representations*. The absolute majority (55%) of pro-government MN articles that dealt with the EU as a dominant topic *had a negative framing*. In the government-critical NSZ, the absolute majority of the pieces adopted a neutral or balanced character (56 and 24%, respectively), while a negative framing represented a 12% minority of the articles.

A further important aspect that we must mention is that the presence of EU politicians in the media analyzed is asymmetrical. They are present as *actors* whose actions and decisions are discussed, but they are rarely present as *speakers* – principals whose words are quoted and animated. The same can be said about the representatives of international NGOs, such as the Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros, whose name appears in the Hungarian pro-government press in a negative context as the eponym of globalization. Incumbent Hungarian politicians, on the other hand, often appear as speakers whose words – even on websites or Facebook posts – are presented in newspaper articles. Their actions are relatively rarely subjected to critical analysis, and if so, this occurs almost exclusively in the opposition press. The public intellectuals and journalists who appear in the analyzed corpus mainly have pro-government attitudes. Their positions are, therefore, close to those of incumbent politicians, in relation to whom they use an apologetic tone. Their criticism is mostly sharp in their assessment of the EU and international partners and devastatingly sharp in relation to the opposition and civil organizations. The opportunity for opposition politicians to speak was significantly constrained by the asymmetrically polarized media. Furthermore, they had to simultaneously demonstrate unity and present their specific image within the electoral alliance, which meant an additional limitation.

The Hungarian media conditions fit the classification of *polarized pluralism* (Hallin-Mancini 2004; Bátorfy-Urbán 2020; Urbán 2022; Martin 2019; Mancini, 2015). A specific feature is that the current Hungarian media conditions are *asymmetrically* polarized: public media has been captured, and a significant proportion of the resources are in the hands of the governing elite. Opportunities for the opposition (socialists, liberals, greens, and right-wing populists) to appear in the mainstream media, especially on public TV, are much more limited. Due to the politics-media parallelism, the political views of newspapers, TV, and radio stations are clearly identifiable, which strengthens the external pluralism of the media. All in all, *external pluralism is strong and asymmetric, while internal pluralism is weak and also asymmetric*.

Epistemic trust – the expectation that the communicated knowledge will present social reality faithfully (Campbell et al. 2021) – in the media has plummeted in Hungary: in 2016, more than half of the population rejected the proposition that national media provide trustworthy information.⁸ Hungarians have thus become the fourth most skeptical in this respect, following Greek, French, and Spanish audiences.

Another survey concerning the war in Ukraine adds to this picture. The majority of EU citizens, including Hungarians, trusted the European authorities regarding information about the ongoing war. However, the majority of Europeans also trusted their own authorities, but the relative majority of Hungarians did not. Further, the majority of Europeans did trust journalists, and the majority of Hungarians did not.⁹

According to our population survey in August 2023, more than two-fifths of the population is dissatisfied with the government's management of EU affairs, and half of the population is dissatisfied with the state of the economy. The majority think that the media is polarized and distorts reality. The media consumption patterns of the public are divided along government versus non-government lines, and this divide reappears in their EU-related attitudes: those who are exclusively informed by pro-government media are more likely than average to think that EU membership is not beneficial for the country.

Developments in the first half of the 2020s can be interpreted as a political experiment, with the ruling elite systematically criticizing European integration in order to turn public opinion around and align it with their own ideological orientation. According to this ideological framework, the EU is an empire whose center dictates without legitimacy and oppresses and exploits sovereign

8 Special Eurobarometer 452, 2016 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/media-pluralism-and-democracy-special-eurobarometer-452>

9 Flash Eurobarometer 506, 2022 https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA7871

nation-states. The empire imposes on us – so the claims go – aliens, migrants, and LGBTQ customs that are alien to national traditions and public taste. If the ethnicization of crime and the reinstatement of the death penalty were also on the agenda, the populist far-right rhetoric would be almost complete. There is no doubt that far-right groups outside parliament, less visible to the public during the illiberal years of order and discipline, could now re-emerge. Expressions of xenophobia, discrimination against minorities, and homophobia may be amplified in public discourse and action.

In this discourse, the ruling elite cast themselves in the role of freedom fighters, reactivating the traditions of the 1848 and 1956 revolutions, which generate widespread positive sentiment in memory politics. However, there are glaring gaps and contradictions in this interpretation. One is the narrow interpretation of the ultimate goals: unlike the historical examples, the ultimate goal is not to achieve independence but to maintain a sovereign position within the EU. The call is for an EU structure based on sovereign nation-states with veto power over strategic issues (it is for this reason that the governing elite wants to delete the phrase “ever closer union” from the founding documents). Another confusing factor in this discourse is the relationship of the Hungarian ruling elite with the Russian ruling elite. The ruling elite of the former Russian empire played a decisive role in the suppression of the 1848 War of Independence. In family traditions, there is a typically negative image of Soviet soldiers’ behavior during World War II, and the Soviet elite played a decisive role in the suppression of the 1956 revolution. It is true that historical reminiscences are not the only determinant of current mass sympathies. But for opinion formers, the contradiction may be disturbing, especially because the Hungarian ruling elite, according to the press, has such intimate relations with the Russian elite that it has received devastatingly sharp criticism even from the Polish political elite, which was otherwise sympathetic to the Hungarian governing forces.

International research and theories point to the negative impact of European integration on domestic party convergence and elite-public congruence (Devine-Ibenskas 2021). In this respect, the Hungarian experience may shed light on the other side of the coin: how the polarization of domestic party politics affects efforts towards (and perceptions of) European integration and how incongruence between a government and its voters affects dissatisfaction with politics. The researchers recall that, in addition to the static aspect of elite-public congruence, responsiveness can help bridge the gap between elites and the public. It may be assumed that elites resonate intensely with the needs of the public. Again, the Hungarian experience is different: instead of changing its position more responsively, the governing elite is trying to change the hard identity-related attitudes of the population towards European integration.

Conflict-driven agenda-setting, illiberal framing, communication traps for the domestic opposition and fellow European politicians, and redefining what is sayable – these are the key elements in the toolbox of the political experiment.

How agenda-setting and government can influence public opinion is illustrated by the sentiment towards other countries. In 2018, Hungarians' sympathy for Western countries (the US, UK, Germany, and France) still exceeded their sympathy for Russia and China. However, compared to a decade ago, sympathy for Western countries has decreased, while sympathy for Russia and China has increased. The explanatory models clarify that historical panels associated with collective memory and socio-demographic background had little to do with the changes. The Hungarian public's sentiments towards Russia have been more directly influenced by party politics, with a significant improvement in the latter's image among supporters of the ruling party (Krekó 2019).

Will the incumbent elite be able to transform these wavering attitudes – initially enthusiastic, then softly Eurosceptic, then cautiously Euro-optimistic – into hard Euroscepticism? Will they manage to increase the proportion of those who do not care about European identity and think that Hungarian and European identities exclude and do not reinforce each other? By what means are they trying to achieve this goal, and what role does the media play in this? Our research tried to answer these questions. The ruling elite can mobilize its followers, clients, and supporters, for whom the internal compulsion to support their leader has not conflicted with a positive attitude towards the EU. If the prime minister's statements clarify the picture and stress the division between whether one supports either the leader or the EU, this could erode the commitment to European integration among the ruling party's supporters. However, the reverse may also happen, and opposition to EU decisions may reduce public support for the ruling elite.

Reactivating the rhetorical arsenal of the freedom fighter image may also be effective among those susceptible to emotionally based politics. Others are more receptive to the street fighter image articulated by the Prime Minister. However, the mixing of freedom fighter and street fighter roles can lead to confusion, especially if the street fighter tactic is used exclusively against those who are used to mutually beneficial arrangements, while the relationship with strong autocrats is characterized by the erosion and relativization of the values of the freedom struggle. Will a counter-discourse emerge that can effectively shape the agenda and a counter-elite emerge that can credibly represent a balance between responsivity and responsibility?

The question is whether social actors are aware that the challenge lies with the EU discourse. Can the political elite thematize the public discourse so that it is clear to the electorate that the stakes are *isolation or EU integration*?

The symbolic and pragmatic starting points of this process may be the fact that, as our survey from 2023 shows, only a minority (19.5%) think that Hungary should leave the EU sooner or later, a majority (59%) think that EU membership is beneficial for the country and an absolute majority of 72% of the population is still attached to the EU.

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