

## IDENTITY, PRAGMATISM, AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE. AN EXPLORATION IN HUNGARIAN MEDIA DISCOURSES

BORBÁLA GÖNCZ – GYÖRGY LENGYEL – GABRIELLA ILONSZKI<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** *In this paper we summarize the experiences of Hungarian media discourse analysis related to different symbolic and pragmatic aspects of Europeanization. First, we review the discourses concerning national identity and different understandings of Europe. Secondly, we present the lessons learned from the Hungarian debates on the future of Europe shading more light on how the European Union should develop and the representation of these debates in the media. In our analysis we rely on the corpus of articles selected within the MEDIATIZED EU project between July 2021 and March 2022. In a highly polarized discursive field our results identified opposing media discourses depending on the media outlets: the government's discourse about national sovereignty with constituting elements of a cultural/ primordial identity based on Christianity, the importance of the nation and family, placing member-states at the heart of the European construct with different degrees of rejection of the EU; and one, less prominent discourse presents in the independent media about European values and a rather integrationist stance.*

**KEYWORDS:** *national sovereignty, identity, European Union, , European values, integrationism, intergovernmentalism*

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<sup>1</sup> Borbála Göncz is research fellow, György Lengyel and Gabriella Ilonszki are professor emeritus/emerita of CUB (e-mail: gyorgy.lengyel@uni-corvinus.hu). This work was supported by the European Union H2020 research and innovation program under the grant agreement 101004534 – Mediatized EU – H2020 – SC6 – Transformations – 2020.

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the current paper is to study the media framing of the symbolic and pragmatic elements related to Europeanization. It analyses media discourses about national identity different understandings of Europe, and different conceptions about the European Union, its institutional construct. The topics are obviously interconnected, but they are linked to different conceptual contexts. Issues related to the connection between national identity and the meanings of Europe are part of a tradition that deals with issues of collective identity and multiple identities and often result in a symbolic discourse. Questions related to the actual or ideal functioning of the European Union on the other hand are more of pragmatic character, although often shaped by the previous ideas and ideals.

National and European identity began to attract academic interest in the 1990s, and the impact of affective attachment to Europe or the nation on attitudes towards the European integration project has been investigated (e.g. Duchesne-Frogner 1995, Hooghe-Marks 2005, Bruter 2005, Risse 2010). According to the post-functionalist approach to European integration, group membership or loyalty provides a successful alternative framework for understanding and interpreting European integration, as opposed to the complex task of rational evaluation, where a certain level of cognitive ability, knowledge and effort would need to be mobilised in order to relate to an abstract construct such as the EU (Hooghe and Marks 2009). The different understandings of the European Union draw on the tradition of deliberative research and is informed by the EU-wide debate on the issue during the period under review. Between March 2021 and May 2022, a series of deliberative events based on a multilingual digital platform was held to ask questions and make suggestions about the future of Europe (Council of the European Union 2022). The proposals received were discussed and processed in panels of mixed composition of citizens, following the methodology of balanced deliberative debates. Our media corpus covered a significant part of this period and therefore the macro-themes that emerged in the press reflected the events indirectly, as the deliberative initiative itself did not receive much press coverage.

According to previous studies on discourses on the EU in the Hungarian media, the pre- and post-accession period was characterised by a more pragmatic and technocratic approach to the topic (Terestyéni 2004). Nevertheless, discourses on Hungary's 'return' to Europe, the debates around Hungarian land, the Hungarian ethnic minorities or the EU issue, the defender of certain norms and values, but also the EU challenged by the identity crisis, were present as more symbolic discourses from the beginning (Vidra 2006). However, the change

of government in 2010, together with the change of the political and economic context, also brought a symbolic change in symbolic discourses, with the rise of populism and the characteristics of ‘illiberal democracy’ (Körösi and Patkós 2015, Enyedi 2015). The technocratic rhetoric gave way to revolutionary metaphors about Hungary not becoming a colony of the EU or the opening to the East (Martin 2013). Identity, and even more so national identity, became a very important theme that framed the general perception of Europe. However, despite these negative, governmental campaigns targeting the EU, positive public perceptions of the EU still managed to increase. Data show a general tendency of ‘disillusionment’ of the Hungarians until 2012, while since then the share of positive perceptions follows an increasing trend. In 2004 Hungary was around the EU average in terms of positive perception of the EU, it dropped below the EU average and became one of the less positive one and by 2012, just to increase around the average again by 2020. In terms of the attachment to the European project Hungarians were among the most Europhile countries together with Poland, Latvia, and Luxemburg by 2021 (Göncz-Lengyel 2021). In order to better understand how public perceptions were seemingly not affected by negative media discourses it is important to study media discourses on the subject in detail.

Our results reflect the polarized character of the Hungarian media landscape in general as opposing media discourses were indeed identified on the themes of national identity and different understandings of the European Union depending on the media outlets. Two main discourses were identified, the government’s discourse about national sovereignty with constituting elements of a cultural/primordial identity based on Christianity, the importance of the nation and family, placing member-states at the heart of the European construct with different degrees of rejection of the EU; and one, less prominent discourse in general, present in the independent media about superior European values and a rather integrationist stance.

The samples were based on a corrected quota of the MEDIATIZED EU corpus, filtering out mere news items and repetitions if they did not contain substantial new information. The sample on national identity and different understandings of Europe contained 71, and the sample on the future of Europe, i.e. different understandings of the European Union 120 items. Two thirds of the items on identity issues and three quarters of the items on the future of Europe appeared in the pro-government media.

## NATIONAL IDENTITY DISCOURSES AND DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF EUROPE

The problem of European identity raises the question of how attachments to different territorial levels are interconnected. Do national and European identities reinforce or weaken each other, or can European identity be understood as a ‘thinner’ identity, a secondary attachment, which is shaped by universal norms, political and legal principles, democratic rights, as opposed to ‘thick’, inherited contents (Habermas 1998; Delanty 1995; Cederman 2001 Bruter 2004, Favell 2005, Risse 2010, Göncz and Lengyel 2016).

Perceptions of Europe are embedded in national contexts, so the meaning of Europe may vary from nation to nation. The ‘frame’ in which Europe appears is based on the different cultural reserves of nations, including knowledge, habits, histories, memories and worldviews that follow national specificities of state-building (Díez Medrano 2003).

Risse argues that beyond a Europeanism based on modernist values and inclusiveness, which remains the prerogative of a highly educated minority, exclusive nationalism does not necessarily lead to anti-Europeanism, but to a more exclusive, ‘nationalist’ concept of Europe (i.e. ‘Fortress Europe’). He refers to this ‘transposition’ of the concept of the nation when he argues that European identities are increasingly embedded in national identities (Risse 2010).

In addition to historical theories of nation and state formation, group theories in social psychology also provide a way of interpreting certain aspects of national identity issues. Social identity theory (Tajfel 1981) defines social identity as that part of the self that arises from belonging to a group and the values and emotions associated with it.

Two *main discourses* were identified, the government’s discourse about *national sovereignty* with constituting elements of a cultural/ primordial identity based on Christianity, the importance of the nation and family with different sub-discourses, and one, much less prominent in general, present in the independent media about *superior European values*. Part of the articles in the independent media could not break out of the frame of the dominant discourse and developed a critical stance towards its elements.

Discourses on national or European identity were often triggered by certain events: a national or international conference on the subject, a book launch, a decision of the European Court of Justice, a declaration of a European party, the publication of the European migration strategy, but there was also the Hungarian elections with a referendum attached (03/04/2022), the war in Ukraine, references to different public opinion polls. Pro-government media rather commented on public opinion polls of pro-government polling institutions (KINCS or

Századvég), whereas independent media mentioned international sources such as the Eurobarometer, nevertheless, placing the results in a European context was present both in origo.hu and hvg.hu. From May to November 2021 Hungary was president of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (which is not an EU institution) with the main mission to promote national minority rights together with the importance of family and Christianity. The French elections were also referenced several times.

Identity-related discourses were very often a communication of politicians, public intellectuals, professionals, especially in the television, and the pro-government media (MN, ORIGO), whereas journalists' articles were more common in the independent media. Independent media also referenced more international or European experts. However, identity-related discourses in pro-government media were often present in independent media as well publishing very similar content that often remained unreflected.

Reasoning based on economic kind of rational cost-benefit analysis, gathering pros and cons or references to specific policy questions stands for a pragmatic or utilitarian logic. On the other hand, discourses based on culture, history, an ideological or an emotional approach of the subject is understood as a symbolic way to relate to it. Direct discourses about national or European identity are also symbolic ones. Nevertheless, different understandings of the nation and Europe or what values they stand for can also be grasped through discourses that use more subtle ways of communication such as placing the subject in a European context or the selection of the subject (decision of the ECJ, what topics are presented from a public opinion survey for example). Such indirect mentions of European values were rather present in the independent media sources (NSZ, HVG) just as a pragmatic approach of the subject in the pro-government ORIGO.

### ***Defence of national sovereignty and identity***

The main characteristic of the government's discourse about national sovereignty is that it puts forward elements of cultural identity, and with its primordial character can be considered as a "thick" identity. The main elements are the importance of religion and more particularly Christianity, while family and traditional gender roles are key and recurring components of this discourse. The triangle of "God, homeland, family" are referred often. It is a government discourse about national identity, where Europe remains an important point of reference. While the essence of the national identity remains similar, three sub-discourses exist depending on the perceived nature

of Hungary's relation to Europe. Conferences on the subject, book launches, national holidays are all opportunities to activate this discourse. This discourse, and sub-discourses appear in the propaganda media *MN* was the main media outlet that communicated this dominant, mainly symbolic national sovereignty discourse with varying intensity of anti-EU sentiments from mutual respect and co-existence through Hungary saving the idea of Europe and Europe itself to direct opposition and self-defence. It has also integrated more technical, pragmatic, policy-related elements into this symbolic dominant discourse to form a coherent one. Indirect or pragmatic aspects of this discourse, such as the successful economic performance of the country were rather present in *ORIGO*. In the analysed period, identity-related discourses seldom appeared in television (*M1* and *HÍR TV*): these discourses appeared related to presentation of what has been said in conferences (about questions of national identity) that included several speakers or new elements in the EU's migration strategy – all of which gave possibility to reinforce the main content of the dominant government discourse about national sovereignty.

*The EU as equal: "A strong Europe can only be built based on strong nations" (Defence of national sovereignty and identity sub-discourse)*

This sub-discourse has a neutral stance towards Europe and the EU and is based on an intergovernmental approach rejecting a European "superstate" or a federalist idea of the EU. Hungary and the EU are seen as equals, their relation based on mutual respect where they can both learn from each other. Hungary, with its different kind of national identity, based on traditional values is seen as an "alternative" that the EU should accept. This is a discourse often held for a foreign public or at an EU event.

*[...] it is not a superstate that there is a need for, but a strong Europe of strong nations – declared the minister of justice [...] we can see that those are the natural communities that constitute a nation, that are at the roots of national identity, such as the family, the nation, and regional cooperation like the V4. These strong communities carry the sovereignty of a nation and form the basis of strong member states, while a strong European Union is based on the mutual cooperation of the latter (HÍR TV 2021.07.22.)*

*Hungary as the saviour of a mistaken EU/ Europe: "We will restart Europe" (Defence of national sovereignty and identity sub-discourse)*

Hungary, with its values (Christianity, the family, importance of the nation and traditions) stands as the holder of the “real” values. The general idea of EU or Europe is not rejected, only “false” Europeanness is rejected. Europe is going through an identity-crisis in the sense that it abandoned its Christian roots and traditional values. In this sub-discourse, the EU and Europe needs to be saved – and Hungary appears as saviour, has a mission, in this sense Hungary is seen as superior.

In another version of this discourse, the EU is said to lack a common European demos and a common language, thus needing reinforcement in its cultural dimensions.

*To get stronger, Europe needs to return to the traditional values...– declared Péter Szijjártó, minister of foreign affairs and trade in Strasbourg on Tuesday. At the interfaith conference organised by the Hungarian presidency of the Council of Europe the minister emphasized that Hungary leads the way in protecting traditional European values. He highlighted that the international liberal mainstream leads serious attacks against families, freedom of religion and rights of ethnic minorities resulting in an opinion dictatorship and opinion hegemony. If someone dares to defend these values defining Europe they face exclusion, criticism, being considered a joke or someone who lives in the past. Péter Szijjártó declared: there is a need to take actions against this, because Europe is weakened, is losing its population and its weight in world economy. If action is not taken, Europe will be in great trouble, as it will lose everything that connects it with its identity and heritage – he stated. ... – We protect families, just like Pope Francis, we are clear about that a family consists of a father, a mother, and children [...] we dare to defend Christian communities [...] due to our historical heritage we are sensitive to protection of the rights of ethnic minorities – he said. – Traditional European values seem to hold more importance in the East of the Iron Curtain [...] (MN 2021 09 29)*

*National identity under attack: “Who gets mixed up with bran is eaten by pigs”<sup>2</sup> (Defence of national sovereignty and identity sub-discourse)*

In this sub-discourse, the EU (or other enemies) is intentionally working on cultural alienation, spreading individualism and the deconstruction of strong communities such as the family or Christianity. Hungary is in constant battle

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2 „Aki korpa közé keveredik, felfalják a disznók”

to preserve its identity, the “attacks” are diverse (see the section on out-groups). This discourse is intended for pro-government local audience. This discourse is very much in line with the idea of symbolic threat and the fear of loss of Hungarian cultural identity. This sub-discourse is rather present in MN and much less in ORIGO.

*Who are “We”? (the in-group within the defence of national sovereignty and identity discourse)*

Several understandings of the in-group exist within the dominant government discourse about national sovereignty, which are all some kind of “extensions” of the nation. These diverse forms of in-group definitions can be found throughout the different sub-discourses. Often not made explicit who the “we” stands for, it is implicitly assumed that the “we” are the “Hungarians”. Nevertheless, sometimes Central Europe appears as the regional community where Hungary belongs as opposed to a wider Europe. Central Europe is seen as a region distinct from both the East and the West in terms of their worldviews, their similar history and their national identity based on shared values which lead to similar responses towards the migrant crisis for example. With their pragmatic cooperation based on similar needs and interests these countries became an unavoidable political factor within the EU. When using a pragmatic argumentation, they are rather referred to as V4 countries. Mentions of Central Europe and V4 countries were rather present in ORIGO.

During the analysed period, however, out of the V4 it was rather Poland and Hungary that were in the focus, especially with regards to questions related to Christianity and the rule of law where these countries felt and were challenged by the EU with similar sanctions. Discourses related to Central Europe or the V4 contain both pragmatic and symbolic elements, sometimes these countries are considered as the driving force of the EU, but they can also be perceived as threatening to the EU due to their superiority.

Similarly, the boundaries of the Hungarian nation in certain sub-discourses include Hungarian minorities outside the country. Hungarian ethnic minorities are important part of the nation where the EU’s role is to preserve this. Often referred to as Hungarians from the Carpathian Basin.

When with Russia’s war in Ukraine discourses about Eastern opening and closer relations with Russia became difficult one of the incoherence to deal with was the suffering of the Hungarian minority living in Ukraine. To resolve this incoherence holders of this discourse pointed to the fact that Hungarian minorities already suffered before the war because of the Ukrainian government and its restrictive measures as well.



Furthermore, the importance of ethnic minorities is extended to other nations as well, protection of German minorities in Hungary is also considered important, should be considered as part of human rights.

*Who are “Them” (the out-group within the defence of national sovereignty and identity discourse)?*

Various out-groups or sources of threats exists within the national sovereignty discourse. Similarly, to the various in-group definitions, these are also to be found across all of the mentioned national sovereignty sub-discourses. Brussels stands for the institutions of the EU that are threatening Hungarian sovereignty when concrete pragmatic, policy measures are taking place. Less often threats are coming from international and national NGOs such as Amnesty International, Helsinki Bizottság, TASZ, Transparency International. When overall values are scrutinized the out-group takes the form of “western leaders”, the “decadent West”, globalization, the European/ globalized left or even atheists undermining national identity and its constituting elements (Christianity, family). George Soros is a general threat. Sometimes ideologies are blamed when identity conflicts presented as “war of ideologies” where Hungarians are under the attack of Marxist or liberal ideas. Migrants, illegal migrants are also a very important threat that can destroy Europe’s cultural identity, in some cases population replacement is an intended phenomenon. Sometimes migrants also specifically refers to Muslims (undermining Christian universalism). With regards to migration Europe is sometimes compared to the decline of the West-Roman Empire.

These outgroups are always threatening Hungarian national identity and try to undermine its elements (Christianity, traditional values, family). Families, traditional gender roles and children more specifically are threatened by the homosexual propaganda/ LGBTQ and gender ideology that falsely declare themselves as European values. Beyond the cultural threat, the West is also threatening the Hungarian way of life with its decadent materialism. Western materialism, a very pragmatic threat, is, however, denounced with a very symbolic reference to a Hungarian poem where the West is called a “Pig-headed Lord”<sup>3</sup> with an intention of “killing us”.

The EU is often compared to the Habsburg Monarchy (supranational and globalized), as opposed to national values (note the incoherence: Muslims are reproached to challenge Christian universalism the very same universalism that is criticized in another context). Beyond historical comparisons, present-time comparisons include the case of Canada as far as critique of the liberal system is

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3 Ady Endre: *Harc a Nagyúrral*

concerned, with Justin Trudeau who is said to admire Eastern, not democratic, political systems, and France an example of “Muslim invasion”. France was a recurring point of reference over the period: the case of the French right’s critique with the display of the EU flag supposedly replacing the French flag at the country’s taking up of the EU Council presidency. References to France is even more interesting with presidential elections in France in the spring of 2022 where Marine Le Pen, leader of France’s far-right with similar sovereigntist message, is supported by the Hungarian government.

### **Pragmatic elements**

National sovereignty discourses have pragmatic or pseudo-pragmatic elements as well, both present in MN and ORIGO. Legal questions having an important level of technicality seem pragmatic. As a response to the EU critiques of the rule-of-law in Hungary, the concept of “*constitutional identity*” has been created. In its name it shares similarities with Habermas’s concept of “constitutional patriotism” (Habermas 1992) (referring to a “thin” identity based on a civic kind of attachment to a political entity that enables the formation of identity at the supranational level, such as the EU, beyond the ethnicity and shared cultural or historical traditions), however, in Hungary’s case it stands for quite the opposite, the right of Hungarians to preserve traditional elements and reference to Christianity (a “thick” understanding of identity) in their constitution despite the EU, as an affirmation of their national identity.

Discourses related to Hungary’s economic performance and economic interests can also be considered as more pragmatic approaches, the “opening to the East” discourse about Eastern countries economic superiority is a discourse with a global orientation, EU is sometimes not even mentioned, or it is considered as weightless. Within this discourse Hungary’s superiority is confirmed as the country is seen to be performing well, better than other EU countries with regards to economic indicators (growth, employment), the health system and vaccination (in the context of the covid crisis). National sovereignty is threatened within this discourse when the achievements of “utilities reduction” or Hungary’s energy-dependence from Russia come into play. Hungary’s economic performance is especially mentioned in ORIGO.

A (pseudo-)pragmatic discourse is the demographic sub-discourse when Hungarian sovereignty is dealt with through population dynamics, migration, birth rates, etc. Conferences are being organised about this topic in reaffirmation of national identity as it entails family and traditional gender roles as well as protection of children. It is another opportunity to talk about

migration questions and the identity-crisis of Europe (in Europe there is a lower birth rate because women chose career over their role as mother). Hungary outperforms other EU countries in terms of population dynamics and their handling of immigrants as well.

*Counter-discourse: discreditation of the dominant government discourse*

The discourse that appears in the independent media (NSZ, HVG) is often a reactive one: the aim being to discredit, to criticize or to provide counter-examples to the governmental one, but always remaining in the frame set by the latter.

Discreditation happens by taking an important element of the governmental discourse and providing another interpretation. NSZ, for example, argues that discourse based on Christianity is a “post-Christian” one: they draw the attention to the fact that the right is not using Christian symbols but ancient Hungarian ones instead, the discourse in reality uses elements of new paganism. In an identity-building, constructivist logic it uses history to create a national narrative and spread these through previously reliable sources such as the National Museum, or at event such as the 2018 inauguration of the National Riding Hall (with horses being key elements in discourses promoting the ancient Hungarian way of life). According to a social psychologist

*[...] it is obvious that the prime minister tries to create a conservative tradition, but, as he lacks creativity, he uses past clichés and references to traditions that have nothing to do with socialism or democracy. He builds on that faith is important to Hungarians, that we think ourselves and our history to be special. He appeals to this with a communication strengthening self-confidence through historical references. [...] Just as János Kádár was the father of the people, he also tries to fill this role. The message of the expensive decor is that we, Hungarians, are better than anyone else, that the whole West learns from us and praises us (NSZ 2021.09.19.)*

Another example for discreditation is when NSZ takes the “Eastern opening” discourse, that is seemingly a pragmatic one putting forward Hungary’s economic interests and shows how it is instead a value-based discourse. Similarly, they argue that despite the government declared objective to preserve national sovereignty in the name of (anti-liberal) democracy, it leads to less democracy, and they are presenting identity as a constant war.

## *European superiority, European values discourse*

The independent media did not present a real alternative to the dominant primordial-cultural governmental discourse on national sovereignty. In fact, mentions of national sovereignty or national identity were very seldom in HVG. In much less prominent, rather indirect discourses present in the independent media (NSZ, HVG) Europe appears as an example, the guardian of certain values that are threatened or have disappeared in Hungary, although Hungary accepted these values when joining the EU (for example that no negative discrimination will occur towards the LGBTQ community).

We can see what they consider as such values through the presentation of the results of public opinion polls, through what aspects are presented. The elements put forward are what people think of the preservation of democracy, the protection of human rights, but also what they think about migration, and the importance of national identity, gender equality. In these articles Hungarian public opinion appears in a European comparative context, and it is not that much the actual share of supporters of these values that count, but dimensions of opinion that are presented or not, as there is no mentions of opinions about Christianity, family or national minorities. It must be noted though that it is not clear whether the lack of these subjects comes from the survey itself or these are topics omitted by the article, in this sense, public opinion surveys also have the capacity of framing discourses.

Another indirect manifestation of the belief in existence of European values is when, to discredit the governmental discourse about the identity crisis of Europe, NSZ admits that Europe is indeed in crisis although for different reasons. It is not the decreasing importance of the family or Christianity that show the identity crisis of the European nations or Europe, but the crisis in the rule of law, the increasing appearance of illiberal systems, and the spread of populism all over Europe. If the EU, that stands for and should preserve values of democracy and the rule of law let all this happen without an answer that leads to a loss of authority.

Perceived European values are also to be grasped through concrete examples in an indirect way. As concrete examples are cited, this approach is a rather pragmatic one.

The lack of corruption is presented as a European value when describing the case of the city of Kaunas, Lithuania, Cultural Capital of Europe is evoked as a counter-example of Hungary where Pécs, when it was Cultural Capital in 2010 was associated with several cases of corruption. It is furthermore an occasion to cite the Lithuanian organizers when stating that European Cultural Capitals also stands for the reinforcement of European identity and let the focus on the cultural field beyond the economic cooperation.

This discourse in government-critical media (NSZ and HVG) often compares and links Orbán to Putin. Especially in terms of their anti-liberal struggles for national self-determination that serve only to take away the opportunity to the same self-determination from the people.

## THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

In the following we briefly present the key elements of discursive strategies concerning alternative visions of the EU. Two main discourses can be identified, which contradict each other: the sovereigntist and the integrationist discourse. These are alternative visions of the ways of relating the nation to the supranational entity and third parties, which have a number of pragmatic problems and may also involve important symbolic content. They are complemented by fragments of discourse, one type of which deals with the intensity of integration and another type which questions the necessity of integration and membership in general.

The description touches upon the intersections with the representation of the West, and with other dominant discursive topics (like pandemic, migration, security). Where necessary, references to political statements and social media sources are provided.

*What is needed is not a super-state, not the United States of Europe, but a strong Europe of strong nations, said Judit Varga, the Minister of Justice. By representing this position, Hungarian politics can also set an example for voters in other countries, she added. (HÍR TV 2021.07.22). While there is a need for a constructive dialogue on the future of Europe, it is the EU institutions whose conflicts make the future of the EU unpredictable today – she referred to the conflict between the EP and the Commission (ORIGO 2021.07.24).*

The sovereigntist position – emphasizing the nation-state perspective – appears in the pro-government press often, in a uniform and simple way of expression, with positive content. The integrationist position does not receive a similarly structured explanation in any observed forum. It appears as a counter-discourse in the pro-government media.

In this interpretation, integrationism appears as an imperial threat, intertwined with the positive expression of a sovereigntist position. Its representatives are mostly politicians, whose speeches and social media entries are taken over by the

media analysed here. The representation of the EU as an empire – although it has several variants – is often a characteristic part of Eurosceptic critical discourse. The other type of the commentators are public intellectuals who fit critiques of the integrationist concept into the discursive topics of the disintegration of the EU and the declining West. The multi-speed Europe discourse appears as the opposite of federalism, as an intermediate pragmatic solution based on the intergovernmental cooperation of sovereign nation-states.

The Prime Minister called it “legal hooliganism” that the EU had initiated infringement proceedings against the Hungarian government over the so-called Child Protection Act, which banned NGOs dealing with sexual education from appearing in schools. The argument says that education and family law are national competences, the EU has no right to have a say in them, and the sexuality of a child is the sole responsibility of the parent. The case was reported without comment by the independent RTL Klub tv station and with critical commentary by the opposition ATV in a political talk show. In the latter, the critical context has drawn attention to the government’s desire to arm Brussels as an enemy image due the approaching elections. Furthermore, with this debate, the PM wanted to divert attention from the government’s failure to respond to EU-initiated corruption investigations according to this critical interpretation (ATV 2021 0716). The topic will be further discussed in the chapter dealing with disinformation.

Radio and TV statements, social media notes often become a source of news in the pro-government media outlets. Intergovernmental cooperation as the model to be followed was explained in a radio show by analysts of a pro-government think tank. The EU is very popular among Hungarians, they added, but the central institutions of the EU are not. That is why coordination between national institutions with strong legitimacy is needed, the argument said (MN 2021.07.14).

One of the arguments of the political analyst outlining the vision of a crumbling EU was that the politicians elected to lead the countries struggling with the crisis were experts with international economic experience seconded by the EU and the IMF. The Greek and Italian examples were mentioned here, as opposed to the Hungarian case, in which the Hungarian government took unorthodox steps to deal with the economic crisis and reduce the influence of international organizations (MN 2021.07.26).

The integrationist position appears in the independent press as well, but less frequently, with less weight and listing pros and cons. Such are the news describing the results of public opinion polls, which report that the vast majority of the Hungarian population considers EU membership to be a good thing and feels that national and supranational ties are compatible.

On the other hand, one of the basic arguments for the Huxit coincides with government rhetoric accusing EU decision-makers that the European Union since the Maastricht Treaty continued to be marked by stealthy federal aspirations, during which efforts were made to elevate various areas and policies to the supranational level.

In this perspective, Huxit is a marginal topos of the sovereigntist discourse. Although its original wording (“*there is life outside the EU*”) came from the PM’s statement before the EU-accession (<https://uj szo.com/vele meny/orban-van-elet-az-eu-n-kivul-is>), nowadays, if it is mentioned at all, it is discussed by public intellectuals referring mainly to pragmatic aspects.

– *[The Huxit] should be discussed because this union is far from the union, which we have entered, and they are currently preparing for... to punish us...*

– *[S]eeing the British experience, seeing the struggle of the average citizen, what Brexit has caused, we cannot with common sense say that we have to leave...*

– *The Hungarian government’s position is precisely that those countries that want to deepen integration should be able to do so, go ahead calmly, leave the door open for latecomers, such as Hungary. And if it is good, serves the national interest, and is supported by the majority of people, then obviously the Hungarian government will also join. Such is the European army...*

– *The acceptance of the European Union is high, but it has been very, very eroded, and in many, many ways, people are unsure of what kind of Europe they want. And I would raise another thing... I think that it is a lie that the Hungarian government wants to take action against capital and multinationals, and that it represents a uniquely Hungarian position. If we look at the past ten years, there has never been a Hungarian government that served capitalist interests so much. Let’s look at the case of the global minimum tax, Hungary and the Orbán regime insist tooth and nail on being a tax haven. (ATV 2021 08 16)*

It is instructive to observe how Huxit – which is rejected by both the conservative, pro-government, and critical left-wing journalists – fits into the frameworks of multi-speed Europe and globalization respectively and how it sinks into them. The claim about eroding EU-acceptance doesn’t match the facts

but fits both narratives well. The symbolic argument referring to a community of values appears only sporadically, referring to the necessity and difficulties of reconciling Christian-conservative and anti-globalist values.

It is raised in pro-government speeches that EU decision-makers (“Brussels bureaucrats”) discriminate on an ideological basis and apply a double standard. On the other hand, the EU representatives are talking about the lack of functioning of the rule of law standards, freedom of the media and transparency conditions that reduce the possibility of corruption against the Hungarian government.

At a conference bringing together NGOs supporting large families, the Deputy Secretary of State for Justice argued that the values of children determine the values of the future. This should not be based on “abstract and dangerous” ideologies, and demographic challenges should not be addressed through immigration. The solution is a strong Europe based on strong nations that respects traditional communities, the family and the nation. (MN 2021 11 04)

Another feature of the set of information is that it contained, to a large extent, statements by politicians, directly or indirectly. This phenomenon can be explained by several factors. One is that the polarization of the press is strongly intertwined with the polarization of party politics (Hallin-Mancini 2004). The second factor is that questions about the future of Europe, by their very nature, involve less pragmatic and more symbolic aspects. Add to all this the fact as mentioned above that the period examined here fell into the pre-election period, which may have increased the proportion of politicized statements.

The news on EU issues in the non-governmental RTL Klub television outlet was relatively rare. In the campaign period of the Hungarian elections, two MEPs spoke on the proposal on EU-level actions against oligarchic influence. The main argument was that they could buy an important part of the media and thus influence democratic elections. Government sources have responded to the proposal by “*hoping to start the tightening with George Soros, the world’s number one oligarch, and his network*” (RTL, 2022.02.10).

On the same EU-related issue, the opposition NSZ notes that the report of the EP Committee on Budgets mentions Viktor Orbán and Hungary by name. Hungary received the most recommendations from the EU Anti-Fraud Office for the period 2015-2019. There are systemic weaknesses in public procurement and the proportion of public tenders awarded to a single tenderer was exceptionally high. This problem has been exposed before, and the Prime Minister himself mentioned in a press conference, ahead of criticism, that the proportion of single-bid public procurement has been declining recently. Here we encounter the co-emergence of several research problems. One is the phenomenon of sinking and re-emerging topics. It illustrates that sinking and reappearance can occur in the



policy toolbox, not only in longer historical periods but within relatively short period of time as well.

The other phenomenon is the problem of the triple division of media framing, rational-legal discourse of bureaucracy and that of political will. The distinction essentially is due to the difference between the language of policies and politics. Media framing here refers to bureaucratic discourse, and it is less mobilizing than framing that directly targets perceived or real political will — familiar to populist rhetoric. It is so although pragmatic way of speaking may involve strong statements in their own way. They state, among other things, that the Hungarian Prime Minister has centralized and redistributed wealth to a clientele using EU agricultural subsidies.

The opposition press relied on NGOs to link corruption and oppression of personal freedom. The leader of a Hungarian non-governmental organization (TASZ), as a guest of the European People's Party faction meeting, stated that the permission of secret service surveillance in Hungary was illegal. The question arises, he said, if there are such differences in the application of the law by EU Member States, whether the EU can guarantee freedom, security, and justice for its citizens at all.

An alternative way of interpreting relations between the EU and the member states appears in a post of the PM, where he praised the decision of the Hungarian Constitutional Court to consider the right to human dignity not only for migrants but also for those living here. Furthermore, if the EU is unable to enforce the law, national authorities must do so. *"Europeans today have no right to their homeland, language, culture, family and God"* he wrote before Christmas (<https://miniszterelnok.hu/szamizdat-15>) and the blog – in positive or critical framing – was widely quoted by both the pro-government and opposition media.

Another problem is related to how the EU is thematised at the intersections of specific discourses. It is clear that the EU is seldom praised. Rather, it is the subject of criticism, but there are several ways and directions of criticism. There is a pragmatic, glaring criticism that the EU's otherwise desirable effects are not being felt enough, the procedures are inefficient or misled. The other kind of criticisms is the one, that questions the EU's *raison d'être* based on ideological values, stating that national and supranational sentiments are incompatible.

There are also differences in terms of discursive strategies and the tone of communication. On the one hand, there are those who assume that a solution that guarantees mutual benefits for the participants is possible. On the other hand, there are those who believe in the rhetoric of the struggle and assume that one must be careful and cunning, because others want to cheat them. Those who, because of their convictions, interests, or simply because of their habitus, think so, try to apply the rhetoric of struggle in bargaining as well, and this

finds mixed reception. Such behaviour is very unpopular with negotiators for understandable reasons. In part, it questions the sincerity of the partners' intent to negotiate, and it often seems simple blackmail.

Among voters, however, this kind of discursive performance can be framed as the case of a leader who stands up for the interests of the country to the extreme. And for the international viewer of the political scene, he may appear to be pursuing a value-based and effective policy despite his rough style. However, this style is not equally rough in all areas of international politics. It is remarkably militant where the language of compromises is spoken and ready to compromise where the language of brute force dominates.

Evaluating the Madrid meeting of right-wing parties, a think tank close to the Hungarian government discussed the formation of a Euro-realist conservative alliance. It has been argued that the Brussels elite is unfit to deal with crises, as demonstrated by the economic crisis of 2008, the migration crisis, and the pandemic. It is also losing its relevance in world politics and represents the interests of the elite, not the citizens. According to this view there is a need for a new conservative alliance in which Christianity, the family and national sovereignty are paramount. They therefore oppose any attempt that would call into question the primacy of national legislation. At the same time, they argue that a strong Europe is needed, which they believe is guaranteed by strong nation states. This approach reflects the views of the Hungarian Prime Minister, who, relying on a kind of duty ethic, envisioned the foundations of a strong Europe based on strong nation-states representing a wide range of perspectives.

This long-held view of the Hungarian governing elite leaves it open what can guarantee a strong Europe if its decision-making is limited by the bargain of strong national elites. What is emphasized, however, is the need to restore a culture of mutual *respect* between the EU and the nation states. Fight and respect are recurring keywords in the rhetoric of the Hungarian PM.

At the same time, the “*there is life outside the EU*” anti-EU rhetoric of previous years was replaced by a sovereigntist internal criticism around the last quarter of 2021. This could be related to the fact that the vast majority of Hungarian voters are attached to the EU. It should be added that – as revealed above – this proportion has increased despite the EU-critical rhetoric of the governing elites. The replacement of the floating exit option with a sovereigntist critical discourse was summed up by the PM's following statement:

*The functioning of the European Union has taken the wrong direction in recent years. We Hungarians see it as a creaking and creaky union structure. But we will stand there until the last moment and hold the last beam. Our Western European friends must also understand that*

*the Central European countries did not come to the union with open hands, but rather represent with all their might the policy for which the electorate authorized their administrations. Whether Brussels likes it, or not. National independence, protection of our identity, support for families and protection of children are basic principles that we will not compromise for anyone's sake. The analysis also discussed in the Polish parliament clearly shows that we do not receive support from the West, but that Western European countries look to us and take the profits out of our countries. And in the meantime, they want to educate us in European values. Stop the march!... We consider pragmatic, mutually beneficial economic cooperation that respects each other's sovereignty to be desirable. Instead, today neo-Marxist ideology has captured the institutions of Brussels, and crises follow one another. In the meantime, the conservative forces of the old member states withered away. Our task is to restore the balance: return to the original European ideal, focus on well-functioning and rational areas of cooperation, such as economic and military cooperation. We should cut back the Brussels bureaucracy, returning authority to the member states from institutions that politicize and create senseless tensions. (<https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-interjuja-az-info-cz-csehorszagi-hirportalnak/> 2021 11 04).*

The pro-government media voiced the fact that the Hungarian government's (from that perspective: the country's) foreign image is distorted. The foreign press claims that the Hungarian political system is a dictatorship, which is a false image – argued the pro-government media. This is partly because the foreign press is influenced by George Soros' network and NGOs professing liberal principles according to this view. Partly because the majority of foreign journalists do not speak Hungarian, they receive information only from secondary sources, and these sources are narrow and distorted. In the interpretation of pro-government media international NGOs like Freedom House do not do independent analyst work, but rather propaganda, applying a double standard and discriminating against those on the same ideological platform as them. NGOs influence journalists by bringing them to the right interviewees.

Social media is directly related to traditional journalism in many respects. The pro-government press regularly and immediately broadcasts Facebook posts of Justice Minister Judit Varga, who has a fan base around ten thousand. On February 10, 2022, she noted that the number of EU infringement proceedings against Hungary was 60, which is low by international standards, and the figures for Ireland and Luxembourg, among others, exceed this. The procedure for non-

transposition of directives is particularly low, with only German and Danish data being more favourable. It is therefore unfair that the left-liberal opposition is portraying Hungary in the wrong colours.

The more than a thousand comments, which reflect the real-time reactions of the internet public, have some distinctive features. Most of the comments represent condensed, emotionally saturated and polarized opinions. A significant portion of the entries are expressions of sympathy and antipathy. A smaller part of them contains opinions, only a fraction of the opinions refers to arguments. *“It is a shame that the European representatives of our own country are spreading lies about their homeland”* – argued a pro-government comment. The answer suggested a distinction: *“Here’s the basic misconception! The left-liberal side is not attacking our country, but criticizing the government.”* Or in a harsh version: *“The union has no problem with our country, but with its thieving leaders”* (<https://www.facebook.com/VargaJuditMinisterofJustice>).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Using media articles covering issues of national identity and the European Union, and a series of deliberative events about the future of Europe, the current paper aims to analyze media discourses about national identity, different understandings of Europe, and different conceptions about the European Union and its institutional construct.

As opposing media discourses on national identity and varying interpretations of the European Union were identified depending on the media outlet, our results do indeed reflect the polarized nature of the Hungarian media landscape in general. There were two main discourses that were identified: one, much less prominent, that was present in the independent media about superior European values and a rather integrationist stance; the other, the government’s discourse about national sovereignty with elements of a cultural/primordial identity based on Christianity, the importance of the nation and family, and placing member-states at the heart of the European construct with varying degrees of rejection of the EU.

Despite negative governmental campaigns targeting the EU since 2010 building on very symbolic messages, positive public perceptions of the EU still managed to increase. Results of our analysis suggest that despite their critical stance, outright rejection of Hungary’s EU-membership appears rarely in the national sovereigntist media discourse and critics are mainly formulated in a European frame against the current European institutions and their performance, based on

“real” European values, and without rejecting the idea of European integration. These ideas are rather in line with the concept of “soft Euroscepticism” (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002) or represent a “diffuse support” (Kopecky and Mudde, 2002) instead of a “hard” form of Euroscepticism.

Furthermore, our results shed light on a specific characteristic of current media that also shapes the nature of the content that appear in the media. Comparative analyses show that audio-visual media consumption (vs. newspaper reading) increases receptivity to personalized (vs. program-based) politics. The proliferation of social media may have similar effect, and it is associated with the hybridization of media consumption (Mancini 2015). We are witnessing a related phenomenon in the analysed Hungarian media. The content of social media infiltrates the traditional media, and the adoption is selective and asymmetric. Public media also selectively and asymmetrically take over articles from online journalism. Politicians’ websites and Facebook posts contribute to the personalization of political life. The politician’s personal qualities, appearance, and gestures amplify affective reactions, leaving less room for the content of the programs and rational reasoning. Being on social media usually causes simplistic and divisive reactions. All this contributes to polarization and the spread of populist politics. Politicians’ social media posts are asymmetrically transferred to newspaper websites. They do not include the comments of fans and critics but transfer the communication style of the personalized political milieu for which they were created. In principle, social media is supposed to provide a real-time, balanced relationship between the sender and receiver of the message. However, according to the experiences it does not meet this possibility in its current form. Neither the genre nor the style of online political communication contributes to the spread of rational political communication, but instead reinforces the phenomena of personalization, polarization and populism.

The distinction between the EU and the “Brussels bureaucratic elites” overlaps with a core issue of the future of Europe discussion: the perception of integration. Those who believe that the integration has already gone too far may think within the framework of the EU or reject the EU. The analysed corpus largely represents criticism within the framework of the EU. However, the set of arguments are mixed with the conceptual apparatus of views that completely reject the EU, like the arguments about the declining, powerless West.

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