




Pragmatic foreign policy of Hungary in the shadow of the Russian–Ukrainian war

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Abstract

The steps of the foreign policy of the Hungarian government are considered a series of interest-driven, super-pragmatic decisions that consist of ideology-based considerations, but mainly serve pure political and economic interests to broaden the room for international manoeuvres. This study explains the driving forces of pragmatic Hungarian foreign policy thinking, especially how this idea shifted in the light of the Russian–Ukrainian war as the most overwhelming crisis for Europe. The consistent behaviour of Hungarian diplomacy and mutual distrust increased the tension between Hungary and its allies, the EU, and NATO. The analysis used the elements of critical discourse analysis to introduce and help understand the foreign policy strategy of Hungary.

Keywords: pragmatism, Hungary, foreign policy, Russian–Ukrainian war

Introduction

Steps of the foreign policy of Hungary after the Christian Democratic coalition (FIDESZ-KDNP) returned to power in 2010 are referred to as a series of national interest-driven, super-pragmatic decisions by the Hungarian government's communication machinery. A general characteristic of this decision-making process is that the moral factor either does not appear or only emerges as a reference point in asserting the Hungarian position and interests. This, on the one hand, poses a serious challenge for political scientists because, in many cases, it is difficult to unravel the real motivations of the government behind foreign policy decisions. On the other hand, the government's narrative usually communicates on the same topic in various ways, and these communication panels sometimes completely contradict each other or create parallel realities, as both communication and real actions do. The ideological considerations, namely the support of populist right-wing, Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, pro-Trump, and in several cases pro-Russian political forces, also fit into the series of pragmatic foreign policy and diplomatic steps. The essence of this is the changing tactic followed by the leader of the Hungarian right-

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wing coalition Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who summarized his strategic thinking: “If you understand earlier than others what will happen, you can react first and you can win” (Nolan, 2024). These actions can be interpreted in both sports and politics. Viktor Orbán often uses expressions used in sports for fights and tactics.

The Hungarian foreign policy is frequently identified as *pragmatic*, where the national interest is standing behind the government’s decisions. The pragmatist foreign policy is not ex ovo an idea that must be persecuted and criticized, as there is an alternative version, the principled pragmatism which is a foreign policy approach that combines realism and idealism when a country acts in its national interests and security while at the same time upholding its values and principles. In other words, principled pragmatism is a flexible, adaptable approach to foreign policy that varies depending on the challenges and the context. This paper also observes the Hungarian pragmatic foreign policy to put it into a larger context by pointing to the sequence of crises, that was accompanied by the increase of populism and in the meantime the rise of the idea of the illiberal democracy (Everett, 2021).

However, there is hard to answer the question of whether decision-making based on pragmatic foundations is consciously made through deliberate considerations, or whether there is indeed confusion in government communication due to unexpected events disrupting the usual communication panels. This study attempts to introduce the elements of changes in government positions about foreign policy and the reasons behind them, primarily concerning the approach to the relations with the EU and Russia, moreover to the case of the Russian–Ukrainian war. It focuses on those factors that underpin the “super-pragmatic”, interest-based policy.

From a methodological aspect, the paper utilizes elements of discourse and speech analysis, with a particular focus on the national and EU statements of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and other prominent politicians from the ruling party FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats) between 2010 and 2024, primarily investigating the semantic and rhetorical elements of words, sentences, statements in context. Authors attempt to unravel how meaning is conveyed through language and how interpretations may vary based on contextual factors focusing primarily on those rhetorical elements that underpin the pragmatic approach of the government of Hungary, highlighting the role of the Prime Minister who shapes the steps of the Hungarian diplomacy. Furthermore, constructive discourse analysis would be used to examine larger units of language, such as speeches to understand how meaning is constructed and negotiated over extended stretches of communication. (Fairclough, 1995). For this, Wodak’s (1989) and Kress’s (1990) theories on discourse were used which introduce dominance, power, and control as manifested in language; moreover, social structures affect discourse patterns, relations, and models including the form of power relations and ideological effects as it can be read in this paper together with the interpretation of the socio-cultural environment, political interests, and ideologies behind linguistic expressions. Although our aim was not to examine the international framework of the Hungarian

foreign policy narrative, we tried to place the elements of Hungarian communication in a broader context, and therefore we also examined the communication panels of the Orbán regime from an international perspective, pointing out the extent to which they differ from or coincide with the statements of leading European politicians.

1. Elements of the pragmatic foreign policy of Hungary

Pragmatism regularly appears in analyses of international relations as a factor determining foreign policy decisions. Pragmatism is only rather an attitude that describes the individual rational thinking solving real problems, and rational decision-making. Moreover, pragmatism is a method of reflection that is guided by constantly holding in view the purpose of the ideas it analyses whether these ends be of nature and uses of action or thought. Dewey (2015) analysed the foundations of pragmatism in detail. Pragmatic has multiple synonyms like practical, expedient, and useful human experience shapes the unique essences of objects in the world around us, therefore this interaction involves human adjustment, adaptation, and growth. Pragmatic leaders accept that knowledge is not a static relation between words and objects, rather it is the output of dynamics and experimental process of inquiry and discovery – to reach the foundation of knowledge (Kratochwil, 2009a; Rorty, 1982).

According to the modern approach, pragmatic foreign policy – as one element of neorealism – fundamentally amounts to decision-making avoidance of moral and ethical considerations, wherein only short-term political and economic interests play a role. Interpreting reality and interests naturally raises debate, as the motives have numerous triggers, such as reference to national interests, which override all other interests, or interests dictated by international cooperation (military, economic, political cooperation), as well as simple economic interests (trade, energy policy, military procurement). In this regard, statesmen shape policies according to national interests, acknowledging the facts of existing conditions, and paying close attention to power dynamics and possible future developments. This approach is part of the realist direction in international relations, which assigns moral value only to responsible actions and pragmatically adjusts its policies to circumstances. Like thinkers of realism/neorealism, pragmatists also refrain from applying genuine moral absolutes to issues of international relations (Dewey, 1929). Rational decision-making always raises questions, because logical and interest-oriented decisions have a completely different meaning for other actors. In addition, the usual utilitarian considerations also call attention to the fact that not everything that may be logical is practically useful, feasible, or allowed (Kratochwil, 2009b).

1.1. Special elements in focus

Based on the government narrative, Hungary's national strategic interest is to establish mutually beneficial relationships with all great powers, respecting each

other's sovereignty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2011). To achieve this, the government pursues an interest-based foreign policy that enhances its political and economic room for manoeuvres. This strategy has been consistently followed by the government ever since Viktor Orbán underlined it in 2010 referring to the new Hungarian foreign policy approach: "We are sailing under a Western flag, though an Eastern wind is blowing in the world economy" (Magyari, 2010, para. 4). After 2010, the Eastern Opening (2010) and Southern Opening (2015) foreign policy initiatives, that consist of crucial elements of a new, pragmatic model was based on seeking economic advantages for the emerging powers (Greiling, 2023).

Continuous manoeuvring has characterized Hungarian foreign policy since 2010. Elements of this include expanding economic opportunities to increase governmental room to move. As we mentioned in the introduction, the adequate motivations behind decisions and the political considerations often cannot be precisely tracked, as they contain elements that are not made public, and therefore, scientifically-based conclusions cannot be drawn. However, analyses can be made from the patterns and consistent governmental communication. In December 2023 Viktor Orbán stated in a conference speech that Hungarian foreign policy has never been as active as it is now. "When at times in its long history Hungary has been able to pursue a sovereign and independent foreign policy, it has always been a foreign policy centred on the Prime Minister" (About Hungary, 2023, para. 5). As the leader of the Hungarian foreign policy, the head of the government is the most valid source to make us understand the steps of Hungary in the international space. According to Mr. Orbán, although Hungary is not a great power, they have the right to shape its independent foreign policy even if this policy is confrontational, or offensive. The reason for this stance is to represent the interests of Hungary based on mutual respect as Budapest respects other states' interests. The precondition of national interest-based foreign policy is to construct mutually beneficial relations with all great powers that respect each other's sovereignty (Nagy, 2021). In the spirit of this, the Orbán government pursued an interest-based foreign policy in the last 14 years that seemingly increased Budapest's political and economic room for manoeuvre until February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine (MTI, 2023). At the centre of this thinking is the sovereign nation-state, which decides on issues independently, without the pressure of external entities. The FIDESZ-led government – similarly to other populist governments – usually applies the concept of the protection of sovereignty in a particular way when it primarily considers it a domestic political tool and does not mean external independence and defence referring to pure national interests like ensuring energy security.

The political campaign for the 2022 general elections coincided with Russia's attack on Ukraine. Despite the preliminary signs and analyses, the aggression against Ukraine shocked the Hungarian society and Viktor Orbán himself, who visited the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin earlier. While Orbán called his trip a 'peace mission', Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that: *We are very impressed by*

the independent approach with which Hungary asserts its interests and chooses its partners (TASS, 2022, para. 2). Peskov confirmed the necessity of pragmatic, ideology-free foreign policy, and Viktor Orbán his readiness to a reasonable agreement arguing that no EU leader wanted war. Part of this is that the EU and NATO are examining Putin's proposals to halt enlargement and suspend accession negotiations with Ukraine. It was also mentioned that Russia "provides security and long-term stability to Hungary with the Russian–Hungarian gas contract until 2036", based on which Budapest purchases natural gas cheaper than the world market price (Euronews & MTI, 2022, para. 5). In addition to these, Paks II. nuclear power plant expansion project was also discussed, which essentially halted completely after 2022. The same argument has been used by Viktor Orbán, when the Hungarian Prime Minister met Vladimir Putin in Beijing on 17 October 2023. At the meeting, Viktor Orbán underlined the importance of peace, explaining that it is crucial for the entire continent, including Hungary, to put an end to the influx of refugees, sanctions and fights; moreover, he referred to the war as a *special military operation*, adapting the Russian vocabulary (HVG.HU, 2023b). The narrative also can change to serve the interests of the given partner– as in the case of a pragmatic leader. Péter Szijjártó visited his Ukrainian colleague Dmytro Kuleba in Ukraine on 29th of January and declared that "Hungary's position is consistent: we stand for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity" (HírTV, 2024, para. 5). The policy, which for the government narrative means the unconditional representation of Hungarian interests and use of the elements of doublespeak in other contexts – according to the weight of the statement – means 'peacock dance, betrayal of the allies, serving Moscow' by those who condemn the Hungarian stance.¹

During its history, Hungary was often defined as a ship, a ferry, or a bridge by prominent members of the literature and by politicians, referring to the fact that the Carpathian Basin was a pivot between East and West. For years, the Hungarian Prime Minister has been balancing between the EU and NATO and the Eastern partners, openly befriending the Russian President despite the European Union's reproaches. When Russia attacked Ukraine, Viktor Orbán could no longer mime and Hungary's membership of the EU has forced him to say that he condemns the Russian military attack and supports Ukraine's sovereignty and the imposition of sanctions against Russia. Although the political communication of the FIDESZ-led government was at least ambiguous, until 2024 all the 13 sanctions imposed by the EU were supported by the Hungarian government. However, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister wanted to delay or soften these decisions until the end. When there was a decision about the acceptance of the candidacy of Ukraine to the EU and the decision required unanimous decision, Viktor Orbán left the room at the voting, therefore did not oppose, however, did not support the decision, either.

¹ Peacock dance (2024).

Nevertheless, when it comes to financial aid to Ukraine, Hungary expressed its desire to make bilateral agreements instead of common decision.

The importance of the topic is also emphasized by the fact that FIDESZ elevated the protection of sovereignty to the most important topic of the 2024 European Parliamentary elections saying whether it shall be possible to elect a European Parliament strong enough to free the Brussels bureaucracy from the non-governmental organizations and international financiers who own the mainstream media (Wheaton, 2024).

The basic elements of the pragmatic Hungarian foreign policy can thus be observed through various aspects:

I. Political

a) Hungary is a member of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance, a member of the NATO (1999) and the European Union (2004). However, Hungary seeks to maintain a *balanced and pragmatic approach in its diplomatic relations* which often seems biased, especially about Russia. The Hungarian government claims that *energy security* is a primary concern for Budapest, i.e. it rejects any steps that might threaten it to refer to the protection of national sovereignty. Hungary, although it has repeatedly expressed its reservations and hesitation – including the possibility of a veto – regarding the sanctions against Russia, finally has supported successive EU sanctions packages against Russia, the thirteenth in February 2024 (European Commission, 2024). Thus, energy security in the Hungarian context was equal to strong reliance on Russian oil and gas and although the EU started to reduce its dependence on Russian resources, instead of following the European trends, Hungary preserved its Russian partner.

b) The Hungarian Prime Minister announced the birth of the deeply stuck slogan in 2014, namely the theory of the illiberal democracy and the new foreign policy attitude of the *nation-state* (Kim, 2023; Wilkin, 2018). The most significant elements of this long-term thinking are the following:

- The West declines, and the East rises. The Hungarian government narrative claimed that since cultures and civilizations have a limited lifespan according to Spengler's (1926) and Huntington's (1996) theory, after 2000 the decline of Western civilization and the rise of the East has arrived. This means that Europe and North America will lose their dominant positions, and the rest of the world will overtake the West and will take over its knowledge, technological innovations, and cultural patterns. In the new 21st century world order that is gradually emerging, the hegemony of the West has ceased. (Szabó, 2024) We are entering a new era of geopolitical dynamics, marked by the rise of China, a politically and militarily active Russia, and a United States grappling with internal conflicts. (Tarrósy & Vörös, 2020);
- The (illegal) migration is harmful and dangerous;

- Brussels technocrats make decisions over the heads of the member states, without consulting them, they do not respect the member states, including Hungary;
- Instead of solving problems, Brussels generates substitute actions and carries out extreme liberal LGBTQ and gender propaganda;
- Brussels is attacking Hungary because of its anti-migration, anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ position, not because of violations of the rule of law structures.
- Sanctions against Russia are not working;
- Hungary supports peace above all, does not support Ukraine with weapons, but at the same time maintains good relations with Russia.

II. Economic

The so-called *connectivity* as the key element of the Hungarian globalisation strategy was born as a unique consequence of the global economic and financial crises in 2008. Eventually, through this approach, Europe weakened and Asian countries became stronger. The newly emerged bloc logic has sharpened the tension between the East and West and also endangered the vulnerable Hungarian economic positions. As Balázs Orbán, the political advisor of the Prime Minister, clarified in 2023:

Hungary has a realistic chance of escaping the middle-income trap in the 2020s and increasing its economic growth by maintaining the features of connectivity from the neoliberal order but countering its disadvantages through increased involvement of the state. This connectivity-based economic model offers an alternative to both the neoliberal world order and the model of globalisation based on international blocs (Orbán, 2023, Hungary's connectivity model section).

This “new” strategy emphasizes:

- As the new world economy will be driven by the Eastern powers like China, South Korea and Turkey, being a part of the Western world Hungary should broaden its economic perspectives and opportunities.
- Foreign capital investments, and thus foreign trade relations, were strongly concentrated towards the European Union. Since 2010 with the establishment of the “Eastern Opening Strategy” towards Asia, the main goal of this new direction has been focusing on strengthening foreign capital investments and Hungarian exports, by opening up to new markets (Braun, 2022).
- This new foreign policy strategy ensures the reorientation to the East, ‘from where the ancient Hungarian tribes came’: “*When we go to Brussels, we do not have any relatives there. But when we come to Kazakhstan, we have close people here*” – Orbán said on a 2015 visit to Kazakhstan (Fejes, 2015, para. 2). Hence

this is not only an economic chance, but an ideological and socio-cultural determination at the same time.

- Being a member state of the EU, Chinese leaders also consider the Hungarian partnership as a strategic interest and the Central European countries like Hungary might represent the Chinese interest within the Union (Irimescu, 2019). The role of China and other Central Asian countries in Hungarian foreign trade has also strengthened (Gáspár et al., 2023).

III. Ideology- and value-based elements

Foreign policy issues in Hungary – similar to several other countries in the world – have implications for domestic politics and identity politics, hence communication also strives to strengthen the existing narratives. Behind the interest-based political and economic decisions, the ideology-based influence-building considerations have gradually appeared in the Hungarian government’s image. The cooperation among nationalist, populist, radical right-wing, ultra-conservative, religious actors and international organisations rests on similar political and ideological foundations (Table 1). The quasi and real alliance is fundamentally focused on similar topics like anti-immigration policy, anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ policy under the catchy phrase of protection of traditional family values and children, the protection of the nation-state against the globalist forces, and the protection of Christianity. A sharp anti-establishment, anti-liberal sentiment can also be observed through the judgment of exaggerated political correctness and equality and furthermore, criticizing the traditional liberalism as an ideology that is unable to protect the European-Christian values and traditions. Since 2022, a new fault line has also divided the EU member states: the issue of support for Ukraine.

Table 1. Support for right-wing, national, populist, anti-immigration parties and politicians (ruling power in 2024 +; non-ruling power -)

Country: names and parties’ names	(+)/(-)	Main topics
Hungary: Viktor Orbán - FIDESZ–KDNP (2010-)	(+)	Anti-immigration, anti-establishment, anti-gender, anti-LGBTQ rhetoric; Euroscepticism; against war sanctions; traditional family values; Stop war, peace talks, pro-Russian attitude
Poland: Beata Szydło, Mateusz Morawiecki - PiS (2015-2023)	(-)	Anti-immigration, anti-establishment rhetoric; traditional family values; abortion policy; anti-German and anti-Russian sentiment; unconditionally stand with Ukraine
Czech Republic: Andrej Babiš - ANO2011 (2017-2021)	(-)	Anti-immigration rhetoric; Euroscepticism; anti-corruption and transparency; pro-Ukraine attitude, peace talks
Slovakia: Robert Fico - Smer-SD (2006-2010; 2012-2018; 2023-)	(+)	Anti-immigration rhetoric; moderate Euroscepticism; moderate pro-Russian stance; unclear position towards the war, anti-Ukraine statements, peace talks
Italy: Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Salvini, Giorgia Meloni - right-wing populist coalition (2022-)	(+)	Anti-immigration rhetoric; traditional family values; stand with Ukraine; moderate anti-establishment rhetoric; moderate Euroscepticism and pro-EU stance in the case of Ukraine and sanctions against Russia; Divisive positions regarding war, recently

pro-Ukraine attitude		
Austria: Sebastian Kurz - ÖVP (2017-2021)	(-)	Criticism of immigration and integration policies, stricter border control; reform-oriented but pro-EU stance
The Netherlands: Geert Wilders - PVV	(-)	Anti-immigration sentiment and criticism of Islam; Euroscepticism (EU); pro-Israel stance; pro-Ukraine attitude
Slovenia: Janez Janša - SDS (2012-2013; 2020-2022)	(-)	Anti-immigration stance; nationalism
France: Marine Le Pen - National Rally	(-)	Economic patriotism; criticism of globalization and multiculturalism; Euroscepticism; reform-oriented policies on immigration and illegal migration; unclear, changing attitude regarding the war and belligerents
Portugal: André Ventura - CHEGA	(-)	Anti-immigration sentiment, stricter border control; Anti-corruption and anti-establishment rhetoric; flip-flopping attitude regarding the war, moderately pro-Ukraine attitude
Spain: Santiago Abascal - VOX	(-)	Anti-immigration rhetoric; Anti-separatism; Euroscepticism; pro-Ukraine stance
USA: Donald Trump - Republican Party (2017-2021)	(-)	Anti-immigration and anti-establishment rhetoric; peace in the Middle East and Ukraine; Stop war, peace talks, moderately pro-Ukraine stance
Spontaneous/random support in particular issues		
United Kingdom: David Cameron (2010-2016), Boris Johnson (2019-2022) - Conservative Party	(- ; +)	Reform-oriented policies on immigration and illegal migration; criticism of multiculturalism
Germany: Angela Merkel - CDU-CSU (2005-2021)	(-)	Criticism of multiculturalism
France: Emanuel Macron - La Republique en Marche-LREM	(+)	Reform-oriented policies on immigration and illegal migration; criticism of multiculturalism; pro-Ukraine, anti-Russian attitude
Outside the European Union and Euro-Atlantic collaboration		
Serbia: Aleksandar Vučić - SNS (2014-)	(+)	Suppression of civil organizations; Euroscepticism; State control over the institutions and media; Declining democratic values; Stop war, peace talks, pro-Russian attitude
Israel (Benjamin Netanjahu)	(+)	Suppression of civil organizations; judicial reform attempts; Balancing attitude about the war
China, Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Qatar, Vietnam		Suppression of civil organizations; Violation of human and political rights and freedom rights; Full state control over the institutions and media

Source: authors' representation (2024)

“Instead of liberal democracies that ran aground, we built a 21st-century Christian democracy that guarantees people’s freedom, dignity and security.” – said Orbán in the Parliament in 2018 (MTI, 2018, para. 18). Based on this narrative people are living in an age of danger, in which the logic of the Cold War prevails, i.e. geopolitical blocs are created, which narrows the room for manoeuvre of the nation-states. In this regard, the sovereigntist nation-state position is difficult to enforce, therefore Hungary aims to strengthen its relations across the emerging blocs. The basic principle of the government’s foreign policy is that it is not possible to unilaterally commit to any bloc, because this is what really threatens the country’s sovereignty, and therefore Hungary’s long-term strategic interest is to build mutually beneficial relations with all great powers. In the past decades, supporters of

globalism tried to threaten the stability of Hungary by making the disputes between the great power blocs the subject of internal political debates, whether it is about Chinese or Russian investments, the decisions about which were made without meaningful consultation and their financing strongly divided public opinion. This approach resonates with the opinion of Krastev and Holmes (2019), who emphasize that the Hungarian political turn after 2010 and the Polish political turn after 2015 stems from the loss of faith in liberal institutions and the imitation, the pattern-following fuelled resentment rather than a genuine illiberal turn.

Right-wing populist forces have used this grievance, disillusionment with regime change and aversion to Western liberal models, to pursue a policy of defending sovereignty and prioritising nation-state interests rather than unconditional servitude to the old EU member states.

The FIDESZ-led government gradually became more EU-critical and confrontational, which, however, took shape primarily in the field of communication. The increasingly sharp tone was characterized by double-speak, i.e. while there was a “freedom fight” against Brussels in Budapest, the discussions between the heads of state and government took place in a generally more lenient and less tense tone in the Belgian capital (Glied & Zamecki, 2021). In the subsequent period (2016-2018 and 2018-2024), parallel processes took place. The Hungarian government called the EU’s overly liberal migration and gender policies to account, while the European Parliament and the Commission brought attacks on the state of the rule of law, media, courts and civilians against the Orbán government. All of this extremely escalated the debate between Brussels and Budapest. As a sort of response, Hungary, taking advantage of the consensus foreign policy decision-making mechanism, blackmailed the EU on several occasions by using the institution of the veto. About the trade agreements concluded with other continents, the packages of sanctions against Russia, as well as the support to Ukraine, it was Hungary that did not want to contribute to the unanimous EU decision or sounded objections. These efforts are underpinned by the fact that between 2016 and 2022, member state blocs, threats of veto, and delays occurred 30 times, and 18 of these opportunities were used by Hungary, primarily in matters related to Russia and China. Because of this and the issues of the rule of law, it can be said that Hungary has become a misunderstood member, or more drastically, a ‘black sheep of the EU’ in the last decade.

Recently it is already clearly outlined that Viktor Orbán could already become a determining factor on the European scene, a kind of reference point, which means that if the EU leaders are not willing to implement drastic reforms, they must be forced to do them. As Viktor Orbán announced in March 2024: “We are the sand in the machine, the stick between the spokes, the thorn under the nail. We are the ones into whom the tooth and the knife break, and the axe also gets stuck. We are David who is better avoided by Goliath.” (Magyar Nemzet, 2024, para. 9). It means that although Hungary’s economic and political weight – in total it accounts for 1% of

the EU's GDP – is insignificant, Budapest has the opportunity to temporarily block the EU and NATO decision-making process, threaten with a veto, or alter the text of resolutions. But to achieve real and longer-term success, friends and allies are needed. The fight between David and Goliath has come up several times in Viktor Orbán's speeches. David is the smaller, the weaker, but he is cunning and clever, he "can always make do". But above all, Hungary is proud of its sovereignty and defends it against global interests. This idea also leads to the constant factor of the complex argument of government communication, the struggle between globalists and sovereigntists, which forces the government into a continuous struggle for freedom (Auer, 2022).

Another peculiarity of the double speech is that the Orbán government does not cross certain boundaries. If the Prime Minister feels that the political tailwind is too strong, he simply votes for decisions that he did not support at first, because that is his pragmatic aim. However, this constant factor of uncertainty has made Hungary an unreliable partner for other member states of the European Union. The western leaders might consider Hungary as Putin or Beijing's Trojan horse, an extended hand of Eastern despots, and all of this leads to isolation and ultimately marginalization (Ablonczy, 2023a).

2. Hungarian foreign policy and the war in Ukraine

2.1. Beliefs on war – the peace envoy

Viktor Orbán had an earlier experience as Prime Minister about having war in the neighbourhood because two weeks after Hungary's NATO accession in 1999 March, NATO started a bombing campaign against Yugoslavia (Serbia). As a new ally, Hungary had to be loyal to NATO, which had begun air strikes, while somehow considering the interests of the 350,000 Hungarians in the Vojvodina region who were threatened by NATO. Not to mention that while Hungary was the only NATO country bordering Serbia, it was also isolated, as it had no NATO neighbours. The Prime Minister used an entirely different tone in his communication about war and peace arguing that "there is no room for any kind of tactical, smooth-talking, waffling. In the current situation, Hungary is preparing to decide as part of a federal system of its choosing" (Rovó, 2019, para. 5). Paradoxically, since the second Orbán government, the clear Western-oriented foreign policy was replaced with the interest-based pragmatic foreign policy (Maaten, 2023).

Tensions between Ukraine and Hungary started in the mid-2010s and are rooted in Hungary's position on the question facing the Ukrainian government about whether to give "full collective rights" and dual citizenship to Hungarians living in the *Zakarpattia Oblast*. Orbán has himself expressed his support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine; in the context of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, this aligns with Russian rhetoric since it suggests that the government in Kyiv is undemocratic

and guilty of discriminating against ethnic minorities in Ukraine (Sadecki, 2014). Then the Hungarian Prime Minister emphasised Hungary's neutrality as regards the conflict and tried to avoid any friction in relations with Russia since Hungary is building closer cooperation regarding the energy sector.

Hungary's attitude towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been ambivalent since the beginning of the war. In his first statements, the Prime Minister called for "*strategic calm*", his key statement was that Hungary should stay out of the conflict. Although Hungary, a member of the European Union and NATO, was one of the few European states that did not provide military aid and completely excluded aid from other countries (Inforstart, 2023). The Hungarian government has come in for much criticism for its attitude to the war, both at home and abroad: while Viktor Orbán, the President and other prominent FIDESZ politicians have condemned the war, many of his statements have sought to blame the attacked Ukraine for the prolongation of the war and its economic consequences, rather than the aggressor Russia. Furthermore, the Hungarian government has consistently advocated for peace since 2022. They support this argument by stating that neither side can win in Ukraine by military means, therefore efforts should be made to achieve peace, essentially at any cost. By 2024 the government's opinions, which initially criticized both sides, clearly shifted to criticizing Western powers (EU, USA, NATO), emphasizing that the European populist right-wing supports peace, leaders of the EU are pro-war: "I've been thinking about whether we're approaching European politics correctly. It seems that the crucial question today is who supports peace and who supports war" (Kovács, 2024, para. 6).

When Russian invaders attacked Ukraine and the refugees crossed the Hungarian border, their appearance rewrote the Hungarian narrative on migration. By the beginning of 2024, more than two million refugees have crossed the Hungarian–Ukrainian border (Spirk, 2023), and of these, 65,000 people have applied for refugee status in Hungary, primarily people from the Hungarian minority in Ukraine (UNHCR, 2024). They gave up talking about migrants and started talking about people in trouble, refugees. Viktor Orbán personally visited the border, welcomed the refugees over there and promised that "not a single person in trouble will be left without help in Hungary" (Orbán, 2022). This narrative was the exact opposite of the previous one, expressing that Hungary unreservedly helps Christian European and foreigners from Ukraine.

Since 2015, refugees (who were called migrants) and their threat have been on the agenda of the Hungarian government's political discourse; fostering the fear of migrants was even the topic of the National Consultation that was held in 2015 (Hungarian Government, 2015). Orbán has been particularly fond of the Christian theme and remains steadfast in his commitment to 'keep Europe Christian', because, reportedly, the 'European identity [has been] rooted in Christianity' (HVG.HU, 2018). But the masses of Ukrainian refugees, who were mostly Christians, looked like most Europeans and were speaking in Slavic language, had an entirely different appearance

than it has been envisioned since 2015. The average ‘migrant’ in the government’s rhetoric was a man from a Middle Eastern country, possibly Asian, mostly young, standing for a completely different culture, mostly Muslim but certainly not Christian, speaking a different language, and from whom women and girls had to be rescued, and whom ‘Brussels’ wanted to impose on us. Discussion about refugees was different if they belonged to the Hungarian ethnic minorities from the Transcarpathian region or came from other regions of Ukraine (Batka, 2022).

In my political thinking, ideas and principles are combined with pragmatism. Naturally, Hungary is always ready to make good agreements [...]. I usually categorize emerging dilemmas into three categories: historical, strategic, and tactical – said Viktor Orbán during an interview he gave to the French newspaper *Le Point* at the end of 2023. All the aforementioned elements appeared in the decision made by the Hungarian foreign policy concerning Patriarch Kirill. In the summer of 2022, with the sixth package of sanctions, when Hungary was exempted from the oil embargo, it again showed that it would veto the sixth package of sanctions against Russia, namely because of Patriarch Kirill. The Hungarian government has previously stated that it does not support the inclusion of church dignitaries on the sanctions list, as this would also affect the religious freedom of communities in Hungary, which is both sacred and inviolable (historical). Even if the Patriarch and the Orthodox Church are among President Putin’s main allies and supporters (strategic). While Hungary removed him from the list of those banned from EU territory, he awarded the Hungarian Prime Minister the Order of Glory and Honour, First Class, on his 60th birthday in early June 2023 (tactical) (HVG.HU, 2023a).

In June 2022, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, the former chairman of the Department for external church relations, was appointed governor of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Budapest and Hungary, shortly after Viktor Orbán defended Patriarch Kirill (Dezső, 2022). Hilarion, considered Kirill’s right-hand man, is well-connected to security and intelligence officials in Moscow. In 2023 April, Pope Francis met Hilarion in Budapest in a private meeting and that was accepted with suspicion among the Ukrainian refugees (Somogyi, 2024). During a press conference on his way home, the Holy Father urged the help the two churches had given during the war. He did not give any details, but also referred to the possibility of prisoner-of-war exchanges (Kulifai, 2024).

2.2. FIDESZ–EU relations

Until 2019, the Hungarian ruling parties were the reliable members of the European People’s Party Group of the European Parliament. They had tensions with the EPP politicians, and in 2021, to prevent its exclusion from the EPP, FIDESZ decided to leave the EPP fraction. According to the FIDESZ communication, the party is moving towards the leftist direction and since the migration crisis and its consequences the strengthening of the right-wing, more radical tone was visible.

Until 2022, Viktor Orbán strongly relied on Salvini’s Italy and supported Marine Le Pen’s election campaign (even with financial support), but finally Giorgia Meloni was elected Prime Minister in Italy and started to share the mainstream EU standpoint by supporting the Ukrainian claims; in 2023 sent clear signs to Orbán that with his reluctant behaviour the FIDESZ would not be a welcome member of the ERC group. Jarosław Kaczyński’s Law and Justice Party group as a member of the ERC faction also has preconditions. The tension appears in the difference of the standpoint towards Ukraine and Russia. Kaczyński and the late Polish Prime Minister together with the Slovenian and Czech colleagues were among the first politicians who paid a visit to Ukraine in March 2022, while Orbán remained one of the last EU PMs who visited Zelenskyy.² As for the 2024 campaign, Hungary faced a political crisis with the resignation of the President of Hungary and the scandal around the former Minister of Justice, who previously was appointed to the first position on the FIDESZ list of EP member candidates. Three weeks after the EP elections there is still the question of how and where the group of approximately almost a dozen EP members from FIDESZ will join, if so, or remain independent members, which will leave them in isolation.

Apart from Hungary’s position in the European Union and NATO, those regional integrations, such as the Visegrad Group also suffered from the two-faced Hungarian standpoint. Although the pragmatic approach emphasized the interest-based foreign policy towards those partners who could provide Hungary with oil and gas, it did not impress the Polish friends. The Polish–Hungarian historical friendship was widely accepted, the war in Ukraine however built a cleavage between the two allies. While Poland’s government stood from the first moment on the side of Ukraine, Hungary was playing a dubious game. This behaviour gave an extra layer to the tension within the Visegrad Group member states. Right before the war, the Polish, Czech, and Slovakian governments became supportive of Ukraine’s efforts to strengthen its ties with EU and NATO; the Hungarian standpoint towards Ukraine remained at least controversial (Schmidt, 2022). Budapest extended citizenship to all Hungarians living outside, but in the territory of historical Hungary. However, the Ukrainian constitution does not recognise dual citizenship. According to the Hungarian government, it affects approximately 150,000 ethnic Hungarians; however, having preferential citizenship, this number decreased as many of them moved to Hungary. On the first anniversary of the war at the session of the parliament, Orbán repeated Hungary’s standpoint expressing the “*recognition of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, denying the recognition of the results of elections in the occupied territories*”, but again tried to divide the heroism of Ukrainians from

² The former President Katalin Novák and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó visited Ukraine, however, the latter travelled only to Uzhhorod, the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, to meet his Ukrainian counterpart. Orbán visited Zelenskyy on 2nd July 2024.

the suffering of ethnic Hungarians. He repeated the necessity of a ceasefire, the unconditional peace negotiation (Országgyűlési Napló, 2023).

2.3. The UN and Hungary

Ukraine has previously called on the European Union to help it draft a resolution for a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace, building on the 10-point peace plan put forward by the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2023. All EU Member States have been involved in the work, including Hungary, which actively contributed to the drafting of the resolution, together with Ukraine and 39 other countries as co-authors.

On 28 February 2022, the UN General Assembly opened its 11th Special Session on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By February 2023, the General Assembly had adopted six resolutions, all of which Hungary voted in favour (Rostoványi, 2023). It is clear from the documents available that when it comes to pressing the button in the world body, rather than making a press statement, i.e. assuring the Ukrainian side of support, data show that Hungary is in the same league as Western Europe, moving closer to the United States and further away from Russia, China and other non-Western countries. It is worth mentioning that, despite the permanent rhetorical war with the European Union and some of its member states, Hungary votes in global affairs in roughly the same way as Western Europe and at the extent to which the foreign policy preferences of individual countries in UN votes align with the idea of a ‘liberal world order’ (Mészáros, 2023). In a similar vein, Hungary voted in the UN together with about half a hundred countries, including all EU Member States, to condemn the Russian “elections” in the occupied Ukrainian territories (Ukrainska Pravda, 2024). While it is commonly argued that these decisions do not carry much weight in the UN, in international diplomacy, many political scientists still like to watch votes in the UN General Assembly, as in the longer term they provide a good picture of the principles and interests of a particular state and its leadership, its consistency on certain issues, and its identity of principles and interests with other states.

Conclusion

“I am radicalized” so am I – this can be the motto of the Hungarian foreign policy. The magic word of the Hungarian foreign policy is “connectivity” which gradually dissolves in pragmatism (Ablonczy, 2023b). It is worth examining whether the desired respect can be guaranteed if Hungary repeatedly confronts two of its allies, NATO, and the European Union. As Viktor Orbán often emphasizes, it is not the threat of marginalization that Hungary must face, rather the reality is the intensive Western and Eastern relations, fastness, investments, and connectivity. Hungary, such as the previous Polish government, emphasizes the necessity of

respect and dignity (Schmidt, 2022; Szlapka, 2019). The Hungarian government frequently responds to this criticism with anger, sometimes in the form of placards, sometimes in the form of vetoes, but also in its attempts to shame the Union, for example by describing it as a ‘pathetic paper tiger’, by predicting that it will freeze up under sanctions, or by constantly questioning whether the Union (and its Member States) are functioning democratically. Today, the emphasis on belonging to a community has been replaced by a sense of insularity: it is no coincidence that one of the government slogans of recent months has been Hungary as a *local exception*, which escapes the difficulties of war and other complications and continues to develop while others are struggling with crises. The EU has constantly attempted to publicly shame the various Orbán governments while the Hungarian leadership has never been criticised by the Eastern countries. It feels good to travel to the East as a Hungarian government official: red carpets, pragmatic discussions, tangible results, and a positive atmosphere characterise these meetings, unlike those in Brussels. However, instead of pragmatic foreign policy, there are more signs of dogmatism and ideologism. The increasingly popular Hungarian narrative is to join and negotiate with every partner to increase the influence. Speaking about the decline of the West can heal the sensitive spirit of the isolated politicians; however, Western dominance cannot be neglected.

In our thesis, we have tried to highlight the many aspects of the pragmatic Hungarian foreign policy, its specific variations, placing its communication elements in an international perspective. Overall, the Ukrainian war that broke out in 2022, and the reaction of the European Union to it, further intensified the separate and detached nature of Hungarian foreign policy, and in the longer term, increased the government’s isolation in the West. The response to this, in its own way, was not an attempt to break the blockade, but a turn towards new partners chosen under the aegis of pragmatism. However, the pragmatism of a sovereign Hungarian foreign policy has not brought many advantages, as it did not increase the respect towards Hungary and did not even open more doors. The sympathy towards Hungary drastically decreased, and – as usually happens – this lack of sympathy can gradually lead to a turn away from Hungary even from the group of investors, which will also be a bitter experience for the government and the Hungarian citizens; moreover, the constant hesitation and double-speak results in an increasing international separation.

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