

Make Europe Great Again: Viktor Orbán's framing of Europe

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Abstract

This paper examines the framing Viktor Orbán uses to mobilize his supporters by depicting the European Union as an adversary, despite recognizing the strong domestic support for EU membership. To address this, a frame analysis was conducted on Orbán's radio interviews from 2020 to 2022. Over this period, 85 interviews were reviewed, identifying 128 instances of framing, which were categorized into eight distinct groups. Similarly to Trump's framing of decline in the USA, Orbán's discourse portrays Europe as being in retreat, both culturally and in policy areas such as pandemic management and the economy, while presenting Hungary as having outperformed the EU in these domains. He characterizes the European Commission as biased against Hungary, serving foreign financial interests by promoting migration into the EU rather than supporting families. Orbán distances his voters from the EU and disassociates the values of economic development, freedom and security from Europe while offering an alternative modernization based on Christianity, traditional family and sovereignty.

Key words: Euroscepticism, populism, frame analysis, Viktor Orbán, European Union, Hungary

Introduction

Viktor Orbán is regarded as a prominent figure among Eurosceptic political forces in the European Union, despite being the prime minister of a country where the vast majority supports EU membership. According to the pollster Median, in March 2023, 84 percent of Hungarian respondents fully or rather agreed with the country's EU membership.¹ Nevertheless, the Hungarian government employs a populist Eurosceptic narrative, referring to 'Brussels', an abstract image of the European Union's political institutions, as an adversary.² At the same time, one of the slogans of Hungary's presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2024 was *Make Europe Great Again*, a clear reference to Donald Trump's campaign. This paper aims to understand the rationale behind these seemingly contradictory messages and

it investigates how Hungary's illiberal regime uses Eurosceptic rhetoric to mobilize voters despite high public support for EU membership.

With the deconsolidation of democracy in Hungary since 2010, Orbán's governments have had frequent conflicts with major EU institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament. In 2018, the European Parliament voted to trigger Article 7 of the Treaty on the European Union, aiming to suspend Hungary's voting rights in the European Council due to rule-of-law concerns. While the Article 7 process was not fully implemented, and Hungary's voting rights were not suspended, Orbán's regime continued to depict the EU as an adversary in political communication. Before the 2019 European Parliamentary election, billboards featuring then-European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker alongside George Soros suggested that the two were part of a conspiracy against Hungary.³ In 2022, the Hungarian government launched a so-called 'national consultation,' a politically biased survey, accompanied by a communication campaign that portrayed EU sanctions against Russia as bombs.⁴

The European Union, or as it was put in the Hungarian government's communication, "Brussels" did not react to the democratic backsliding in Hungary. However, in late 2020, the European Parliament and the European Council adopted a regulation establishing a general conditionality mechanism to safeguard the EU budget. In 2022, the European Commission activated the "rule of law conditionality regulation," allowing it to block the payout of EU funds to Hungary.⁵

Despite these conflicts, the prospect of Hungary leaving the European Union (HUXIT) has not seriously emerged as a viable option. Beyond widespread public support for EU membership, European funds are essential for maintaining the stability of Orbán's illiberal regime.⁶ At the same time, Orbán leverages his veto power within the EU to gain influence and position himself as a model for other populist politicians.⁷ While confronting the European Commission and most member states in the Council, Orbán must carefully communicate these conflicts to the domestic public due to the aforementioned support for the EU and because, as discussed in the following section, values such as modernization, economic development, and reducing backwardness are closely linked to Europe in Hungarian political culture. Accordingly, the paper itself interprets the findings relying on the European values related to modernization, where Europe refers to the Western part of the European Union.

This paper explores the framing Viktor Orbán employs to mobilize his supporters by portraying the European Union as an adversary, despite his awareness of the strong domestic support for EU membership. These narrative strategies include the challenge to European values as the discussion section of this paper demonstrates. Before that section, the study first reviews the role of Europe in Hungarian political culture and the positions of Hungarian political parties

on European integration. After this review, the paper applies frame analysis of Orbán's radio interviews from 2020 to 2022 to address the research question. The final section concludes the paper by highlighting that Orbán's framing of Europe suggests the Hungarian government is not opposing the European Union itself but is instead fighting against "elite groups" that have allegedly occupied the Union, while safeguarding Hungarian interests within the EU.

Previous studies of Viktor Orbán's rhetoric found evidence of a growing euroscepticism, othering and distancing from the European Union, yet there is little understanding of how that narrative is related to Hungarian political culture, European values and voter mobilization.⁸

European values and the Hungarian political culture

Core values of the European Union, such as human dignity, political freedoms, democratic rights, the rule of law, and solidarity, are enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Moreover, a broader set of less legally interpretable values, such as lasting peace, secularism, and multiculturalism, can also be associated with Europe.⁹ However, as Weymans noted, values like democracy, the rule of law, and human rights only emerged as defining European values in the 1990s.¹⁰ During the Cold War era, European politicians instead emphasized peace, reconciliation, and a conservative vision of Europe based on a shared civilizational foundation such as Christianity.

For countries in East-Central Europe, values linked to Europe are conceptualized within the context of their semi-peripheral status, which has fostered a perception of backwardness. As a result, Western Europe is both seen as a model to follow and blamed for the region's perceived inferiority.¹¹ In Hungary, as in other countries in the intermediary East Central European region, belonging to Europe is a political project linked to aspirations for modernization, catching up with economically more developed Western European countries, and committing to Western social and political organizational principles. However, this modernization approach is periodically interrupted by crises and alternative, third-way perspectives. Such third-way perspectives argue that Hungary cannot and should not fully adopt foreign Western models. This belief is further fueled by the unequal economic transactions between core countries and the European semi-periphery, to the latter's disadvantage.

Hungary's intermediate status has been aptly captured by the widely referenced metaphor of a "ferry country," coined by the poet Endre Ady during the interwar period. The country's perceived backwardness compared to Western Europe has been interpreted by notable scholars, such as István Bibó and Jenő Szűcs, as a consequence of the region's distinct historical development, caught between East and West.¹² While during the Soviet occupation and communist rule, it appeared that the "ferry country" had anchored in the East, democratization

and systemic transformation gave many hope that Hungary could finally arrive in Europe. As Dénes Csengey, a prominent figure in the anti-communist opposition, declared in 1989: “To Europe, but all of us!” At the same time, as in Poland, “Europe” was not merely a political slogan but also symbolized higher standards, greater civilizational development, and social distinction in everyday life.¹³

“Europe” has also functioned as a collective action frame, an overarching interpretative scheme, during anti-government protests against the Orbán administration in 2014–2015, initially sparked by a proposed tax on internet traffic.¹⁴ Similar symbolic uses of “Europe” and the EU flag occurred in other Central and Eastern European countries, such as Ukraine during the 2014 Maidan protests and Georgia during the pro-Western demonstrations of 2023–2025. The status of “Europe” as a collective action frame stems from its associations with values like modernization, higher living standards, and more developed societal organization.¹⁵ The intra- and extra-parliamentary opposition in Hungary has been able to mobilize around “Europe” due to ongoing criticism of state capture, corruption, and the dismantling of democratic institutions by the EU’s institutions. In 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution stating that Hungary could no longer be considered a fully functioning democracy but rather a “hybrid regime of electoral autocracy.”¹⁶

While Hungary’s position in Europe has been a contested issue in the history of political thought, EU membership has been clearly supported by the Hungarian public. In the 2003 referendum on EU accession, 84 percent voted in favor. However, despite this overwhelming support, attitudes toward EU membership have varied based on social status and political orientation. Support for EU membership in East Central Europe was largely shaped by the economic transition of the 1990s and 2000s. Both the so-called “winners” and “losers” of economic transition viewed EU membership as an extension of free-market reforms and supported or opposed it accordingly.¹⁷

In Hungary, pre-accession opinions on the EU were also shaped by the information available to voters, which was influenced by media coverage, party preferences, ideological commitments, and perceptions of the EU’s performance.¹⁸ Despite generally high public support for European integration, Central and Eastern European societies exhibited low interest in EU politics or politics in general, reflecting a pragmatic stance toward EU membership.¹⁹ Hungarians are supporting the country’s EU membership as indicated in the introduction, yet the enthusiasm declined in the years following Hungary’s entry into the EU in 2004. Among the contributing factors were unfulfilled high expectations and the 2008 economic crisis.²⁰ A later study reaffirmed that economic conditions are closely linked to EU support. Subjective well-being significantly reduces anti-EU sentiments, while economic grievances and fears of social decline fuel Euroscepticism. Additionally, authoritarian attitudes correlate with Euroscepticism,

whereas cosmopolitan values align with pro-EU stances. Furthermore, Euroscepticism is strongly associated with support for Fidesz and right-wing political views.²¹

European integration and political party positions in Hungary

After the regime change in 1989, newly sovereign Hungary's first democratically elected government set three priorities in its foreign policy.²² These were: the protection of Hungarian ethnic minorities in neighboring countries; maintaining cordial relations with these states, which included post-communist countries such as Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, and the then-existing Yugoslavia; and, finally, the country's integration into Western Europe. These goals reinforced each other since Western integration strengthened Hungary's negotiating position with its neighbors, while good relations helped secure the cultural and political rights of ethnic Hungarians.

The country's economic integration into Western systems preceded its political integration. To receive Western loans and overcome the economic recession of the early 1980s, communist Hungary joined the International Monetary Fund in 1982, becoming the second Soviet bloc country to do so.²³ The last communist government, which had a largely technocratic and reformist identity, began negotiations in late 1988 to lift trade restrictions with the European Economic Community. Hungary officially applied for EU membership in 1994, and accession negotiations began in 1998. In the meantime, the country joined NATO in 1999. After the conclusion of accession negotiations, Hungary became a member of the European Union in 2004.

As this brief overview demonstrates, Hungary's Western integration was supported and implemented by both right-wing conservative and socialist-liberal governments after the democratic transition. While there was broad political consensus on EU accession, parties' positions on the EU were largely shaped by ideology, whether in supporting European integration or opposing aspects of the EU itself. However, to some extent, strategic considerations also played a role.²⁴ In Hungary, parties were constrained by their past narratives, electoral competition, and potential coalition formations.²⁵ In the 2000s, Fidesz adopted a soft Eurosceptic position, while the radical right-wing MIÉP and later Jobbik pursued a hard Eurosceptic agenda.²⁶ The latter parties opposed integration, viewing it as a threat to national interests while advocating for a "Europe of nation-states."²⁷

Hungarian parties' positions on Western integration reflected long-standing traditions of political thought regarding Western Europe. A central element of these traditions is the tendency of certain political actors to emphasize Hungary's distinct identity and interests in contrast to the West, a pattern observable across Central and Eastern Europe.²⁸ Ervin Csizmadia differentiates

between “pattern-following” and “pattern-forming” approaches to Western Europe.²⁹ According to the latter view, Western integration should not involve uncritical adoption of Western political institutions. As the Fidesz party’s 1994 election manifesto stated, when the party was still a member of the Liberal International: “Our negotiating attitude is therefore not one of accommodation at any price, of accepting all demands and recommendations, but of the consistent and constantly changing formulation and representation of Hungarian interests in various fields, in accordance with changing circumstances.”³⁰

Euroscepticism, a concept first used in the 1980s to describe the position of the UK’s Conservatives toward the EU, takes different forms, with the literature distinguishing between hard and soft Euroscepticism or Eurorealism.³¹ Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party, which governed between 1998 and 2002, was described as soft Eurosceptic, a stance that shifted after 2010 when Orbán secured a supermajority in the Hungarian legislature.³² While Orbán does not explicitly advocate for leaving the EU, since 2010, Fidesz politicians and cabinet members have regularly floated the idea.³³ Contrary to left-wing populists’ Euroscepticism, which is based on socio-economic arguments, like in the case of the Spanish Podemos, the Fidesz’ Euroscepticism has a socio-cultural dimension.³⁴ The frequent reference to Europe’s Christian tradition is one of these, which is, according to Orbán, is not protected by Brussels’ liberal decision makers.³⁵

As also a quantitative text-mining analysis demonstrated, Fidesz’s soft Euroscepticism evolved into Eurosceptic populism after 2010, particularly following the 2015 summer of migration.³⁶ The Orbán government framed “Brussels” as representing a corrupt elite, in contrast to Hungarians, who were portrayed as the “pure” people. According to this narrative, the European Union sought to curtail Hungary’s sovereignty with imperialist intentions.³⁷ EU interventions in response to democratic backsliding in Hungary were used by the Orbán government to reinforce this narrative, framing such actions as violations of the country’s sovereignty.³⁸ To reconcile the contradiction between government Euroscepticism and the Hungarian public’s pro-EU stance, Orbán distanced himself from the EU by emphasizing the alleged cultural and civilizational decline of Western Europe, contrasting this with his government’s policies on family and immigration.³⁹ Furthermore, Orbán has skillfully exploited the ambiguity of EU values to present himself as a pro-European leader who seeks to restore the EU to its traditional values and Christian heritage.⁴⁰

Method

The discursive strategies Viktor Orbán uses to mobilize his voters is the central point of investigation here. A frame analysis of the Hungarian prime minister’s radio interviews between 2020 and 2022 helps elucidate how Orbán portrays the European Union as an adversary, in spite

of the fact that Fidesz voters support Hungary's EU membership. Frames' main function is to interpret social reality in a way that enables social movements to make sense of their environment, recognize allies and adversaries, and establish objectives.⁴¹ Their primary role is to construct a meaningful context that facilitates mobilization and collective action, making them inherently action-oriented. Snow and Benford classify frames into three main types: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational.⁴² The diagnostic frame focuses on identifying problems and attributing blame. The prognostic frame outlines the movement's strategy and proposed course of action. The motivational frame, in turn, inspires and justifies collective action. Additionally, frames play a crucial role in defining key actors and opponents within a given conflict.

Frame analysis is predominantly used in social movement studies; however, its focus on mobilization makes it a suitable method for analyzing an institutionalized actor, in this case, the Hungarian prime minister. This paper aims to identify the interpretative frames Viktor Orbán applies to Europe. Given the exploratory nature of this analysis, a rigid, pre-defined coding scheme was not employed, as some frames emerged during the process despite initial insights from the literature review. For instance, it was expected that more explicit references to Christianity will be identified in the corpus, yet the analysis found different main topics. Accordingly, the exact frame types, presented in Table 1, were determined inductively during the analysis. The content analysis of the interviews primarily focused on identifying and examining the distinct frames. Additionally, the type of frame (diagnostic, prognostic, or motivational) was analyzed, though nearly all were diagnostic. Coding was conducted manually by a single coder, the author. To ensure reliability, the frames were re-evaluated after coding, however a clear limitation is the one-person coding of the corpus and interpretation of the results. The latter limitation was mitigated by the detailed presentation of the identified frame topics.

For the frame analysis, radio interviews with Viktor Orbán on the public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió were used. Kossuth Rádió regularly interviews Viktor Orbán on Friday mornings about current political issues. For the interviews in 2020 and 2021, the database of the Hungarian Comparative Agendas Project has been used, while the interviews in 2022 were accessed through the prime minister's homepage.⁴³ During the interviews Orbán gives a more detailed explanation of the political context and goals of his government's actions, hence the analysis of the interviews offers a deeper understanding of the prime minister's framing. Kossuth Rádió is a political public radio station featuring news programs, reports, and political talk shows. Between July and September 2022, with a daily audience of one million listeners, Kossuth Rádió was the third most-listened-to radio station in Hungary.⁴⁴ However, following the Media Act of 2010, Orbán's government took full control of public media, which now primarily serves the political communication goals of the government.⁴⁵ During these interviews, the journalists of Kossuth Rádió tend to support Orbán's framing. For instance, one interviewer commented on the

government's vaccine policy during the coronavirus pandemic: "The Hungarian government is under constant attack from Brussels and from the left at home as to why it is necessary to negotiate with China and Russia on vaccines, while we read in the press that Chancellor Merkel is also negotiating with Putin on the production of a joint vaccine."⁴⁶

Despite the biased nature of these interviews, Kossuth Rádió's content remains suitable for frame analysis, as this paper does not aim to fact-check but to understand Viktor Orbán's framing of Europe. For the analysis, the period between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2022, was selected. This timeframe includes major political events such as the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Fidesz's secession from the European Parliament's conservative European People's Party, and Russia's attack on Ukraine. Over these three years, 85 interviews were reviewed, and a total of 128 frames were identified, almost all of which were diagnostic. Statements were coded as frames if they provided an interpretation of Europe suitable for explaining, justifying, or planning political action. In the prime minister's interviews, the terms Europe, Western Europe, European Union were used interchangeably, and consequently the frame analysis also included the examination of all three categories.

Findings

During the content analysis, eight frames were identified (Table 1). Among them, the most frequently recurring was the frame of "Europe is in retreat." This perceived retreat manifests in various dimensions, including demographics, traditions, the economy, and security. In a March 2020 interview during the pandemic, Orbán spoke about a retreating Europe. He deliberately avoided the term "declining," as it had been used by the communist regime before 1989 to describe the West and capitalism, an assessment he found inaccurate, given that Western shops were well-stocked and people appeared happier compared to Hungary at the time.

One indicator of this retreat, according to Orbán, is the rise in crime in Western Europe, including gang wars and the toppling of statues by antiracist movements. He also claimed that Hungary is safer for Jews than Western countries, where Jewish communities face frequent attacks and atrocities.⁴⁷ Statements about Europe's economic downturn following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine were also categorized under the "retreating Europe" frame. Orbán argued that sanctions against Russia were not aiding Ukraine but instead causing inflation and economic decline across Europe. Additionally, he suggested that certain business circles and figures, symbolized by George Soros, were benefiting from these circumstances.⁴⁸

Frame	No. of frames
Europe is in retreat	29

Hungary has better policies	29
Bulwark of Europe	17
Brussels supports migration	14
The EU builds an empire	14
EU is biased against Hungary	9
Strong East Central Europe	7
Soros agents in the EU	6

Table 1. Interpretation frames by Viktor Orbán

The Hungarian prime minister's stance on children's sexual education also falls under the "Europe is in retreat" frame. Before the referendum on sexual education in Hungary, held alongside the 2022 general election, Orbán claimed in interviews that parents in Western Europe no longer have control over their children's upbringing.⁴⁹ Instead, he argued, NGOs and LGBTQ organizations funded by George Soros were actively campaigning in schools.⁵⁰ According to Orbán, the West and the European Parliament aim to transfer control over children's education in Hungary to activists as well.⁵¹

Despite Europe's retreat in various domains, Orbán emphasizes that Hungary remains part of the European Union and must contribute to strengthening the community.⁵² At the same time, he argues that in a changing world, where China is gaining influence, Europe needs an independent foreign policy.⁵³

In contrast to a retreating Western Europe, Central Europe, including Hungary and other Visegrád countries, like Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, is portrayed as being in a stronger economic position, prepared for further development, and capable of protecting its Christian culture.⁵⁴ This perspective aligns with the "Strong East-Central Europe" frame. Orbán highlights a key difference between Central and Western Europe: in Central Europe, citizens expect politicians to make decisive choices, whereas in the West, uncertainty prevails.⁵⁵

While Orbán frames Europe as being in decline, Hungary's policies are presented as successful under the "Hungary has better policies" interpretation frame. During the period under investigation, this frame was most commonly applied in relation to the pandemic and later to the war in Ukraine. In the first half of 2020, Orbán highlighted Hungary's swift declaration of a state of emergency and its rapid implementation of lockdown measures, as well as the temporary suspension of loan payments for individuals.⁵⁶ Later, he emphasized Hungary's higher vaccination rate compared to Western Europe.⁵⁷ The country's better pandemic policies and higher vaccination rate, according to Orbán, also enabled Hungary to lift lockdown restrictions earlier than Western EU member states.⁵⁸

The “Hungary has better policies” frame contrasts not only Hungary’s epidemic control measures with those of Western Europe but also highlights the broader East-Central European approach. Orbán criticized the slow approval of Eastern vaccines, condemned the incompetence of the EU’s epidemiological agency, and argued that the EU hindered effective virus protection efforts. Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, he also claimed that Hungary had superior policies in climate protection and led Europe in providing financial protection to families amid rising utility costs after the pandemic.⁵⁹ Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Orbán positioned himself as the only European politician advocating for peace, though he expressed hope that pro-peace voices would grow stronger in other European countries as well.⁶⁰

Migration has been a central issue for Orbán’s governments since the 2015 summer of migration. The “Brussels supports migration” frame asserts that the European Union actively promotes migration and seeks to bring migrants to Europe, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶¹ According to Orbán, some countries, such as Germany, are “migrant countries” that view immigration as a solution to demographic challenges, particularly labor shortages.⁶² In contrast, East-Central European countries, including Hungary, prioritize family support and aim to increase birth rates, while most parties in the European Parliament, he claims, support migration over family policies.⁶³ Additionally, he argues that by encouraging migration, Europe imports problems rather than addressing the root causes of migration in the countries of origin.⁶⁴ Orbán has referred to the mixing of native Christian and Muslim populations as an “experiment” and has consistently maintained that migration is not a solution for Europe but a problem.⁶⁵

The “Bulwark of Europe” frame draws on a longstanding theme in East-Central European political culture, portraying the region as a defender of Western civilization against expansionist, non-Christian forces from the East. In Orbán’s interpretation, Hungary serves as Europe’s frontline against migration, given its geographical position on the EU’s external border.⁶⁶ He also reminds his audience that the West abandoned Hungary to the Ottoman Turks and later to the Soviets to avoid conflicts and wars in Western Europe.⁶⁷ According to this frame, Western European countries did not endure communism, which Orbán argues is the primary reason for East-Central Europe’s economic underdevelopment. This, he contends, justifies the region’s access to EU cohesion and development funds as a means of compensation.⁶⁸

Viktor Orbán has frequently employed the “EU is biased against Hungary” frame during the analyzed period, suggesting that Hungary faces prejudice despite its policy successes and the historical injustices it has endured, such as the Ottoman occupation in the Middle Ages and the Soviet occupation in the 20th century.⁶⁹ He claimed that “Brussels” does not respect the democratic decisions of Hungarians, applies double standards, lectures Hungary, and continues to focus on the country even during the pandemic.⁷⁰ As part of this frame, Orbán interpreted the EU’s rule of law conditionality for funding as an attack against Hungary in response to its child

protection law, which in reality contradicted European standards on sexual education and child protection.⁷¹

At the core of the conflicts between Hungary and the European Commission, according to Orbán, is the Commission's ambition to transform the EU into an empire, a "United States of Europe," whereas the Hungarian government advocates for a union of sovereign nation-states.⁷² This notion aligns with the "The EU builds an empire" frame, in which Orbán argues that the Hungarian opposition serves this empire just as it once served the Soviet empire before the democratic transition.⁷³ He further asserts that the West seeks to impose its views on Hungary and behaves like former colonial powers.⁷⁴ A key instrument of this empire-building, he claims, is the expansion of the EU's bureaucracy.⁷⁵ Moreover, the "Soros agents in the EU" frame suggests that agents of George Soros operate within the institutions of the European Union, representing the hedge fund owner's interests rather than those of European citizens.⁷⁶

Discussion

Based on the findings, Orbán's discursive strategy can be identified as distancing Hungarian voters from the EU and challenging European values linked to modernization. As the literature review has shown, in East Central Europe, including Hungary, "Europe" is understood as a more developed, wealthier, and better-organized form of state and society. European integration and EU accession were seen as becoming fully European, representing the opening of the path to European-style modernization, after decades of unsuccessful Soviet-era modernization. Orbán frequently refers to "Brussels" rather than directly naming the European Union, constructing an image of an abstract, alien bureaucracy. This creates a distinction between the adversary and the broader European community, to which Hungary belongs. A further crucial element of his framing is the invocation of historical grievances. Orbán suggests that Hungary and other Central European countries did not join the European Union as a gift from Western Europe but rather claimed their rightful place, having suffered as victims of historical conflicts that largely spared the West. By emphasizing Central Europe, Orbán can extend and generalize his claims about Western Europe's decline and historical injustices. At the same time, he positions himself not as fighting against Europe or the European Union but rather as defending Hungarian interests within the EU. In this struggle, the European project itself is not rejected; rather, elite factions, who, according to Orbán, have captured the European Union and dictate policies to nation-states from Brussels, are the true adversaries.

The findings do not indicate that Orbán would move to a harder Euroscepticism and would propagate Hungary's secession from the EU, however he continues to contradict the current EU leadership with Europe's Christian heritage. Nevertheless, by highlighting perceived

failures of Western policies, particularly regarding demographics and migration, Orbán presents an alternative path to modernization for his voters, one that links the traditional family model, anti-immigration sentiments, national sovereignty and European integration. This alternative modernization challenges the values connected to Europe as an agent of modernization of Hungary, like policy efficiency, economic development, freedom, security and peace.

Orbán's narrative on an alternative modernization also exploits anti-Western sentiments among Hungarians, compensates for perceived economic and welfare deficits, and simultaneously draws on long-standing political thought regarding the "decline of the West," a term Orbán himself, however, rejects. This narrative is very similar to Donald Trump's framing of a USA in decline, which connection is illustrated by the use of the Make Europe Great Again slogan by Orbán during the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the European Union.⁷⁷

Conclusion

The analysis identified eight interrelated framings of Europe by Viktor Orbán based on his radio interviews between 2020 and 2022. While Europe is portrayed as being in "retreat," both culturally and in policy areas such as pandemic protection and the economy, while Hungary, according to the Hungarian prime minister, performed better during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis and inflation period. In Orbán's interpretation, the European Commission is biased against Hungary, seeks to build an empire, and aims to serve foreign financial interests by bringing migrants into the European Union instead of supporting families and increasing the birth rate of native children. Nevertheless, Central Europe is depicted as stronger, upholding true European values despite historical disruptions, and continuing to defend Western Europe, as it has in the past.

Hungarian voters are not directly challenged by Orbán to reject EU membership, given its evident benefits. Instead, he distances his voters from the European Union, while presents himself as an advocate of Hungarian interests. This discursive strategy allows him to dissociate the EU's political institutions, including the Commission and the European Parliament, from the EU itself, and enables him to redefine European values on his own terms, disassociate the values of economic development, freedom, security from Europe and offer an alternative modernization path to Hungarians based on Christianity, traditional family and sovereignty.

While Fidesz voters are more skeptical towards the EU, it is unlikely that the Hungarian society's overall attitudes toward the EU can be substantially transformed. Nevertheless, Orbán's framing of Europe as being generally in decline and the devaluation of "European modernization" concept makes it harder to challenge his stance on European integration and to appeal to Hungarian voters with a generally Europhile political message. Nevertheless, the

discursive opportunity structure for Orbán was created by political and economic developments in Europe, including the post-accession fatigue, the 2008 financial crisis and the sustained semi-peripheral statuses of the Eastern member states.⁷⁸ In light of the declining U.S. engagement with Europe in 2025, strengthening the European Union, and the European values rooted in the Enlightenment tradition and the expansion of political rights, requires the development of an inclusive value framework that takes into account the historical and contemporary experiences of the Eastern Member States.

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Notes

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⁶⁵ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” November 6, 2020; Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” December 10, 2021.

⁶⁶ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” January 31, 2020.

⁶⁷ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” October 15, 2021.

⁶⁸ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” July 3, 2020.

⁶⁹ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” March 13, 2020.

⁷⁰ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” March 13, 2020; Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” May 8, 2020; Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” May 15, 2020; Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” July 16, 2021.

⁷¹ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” July 23, 2021; Takács, Fobear, and Schmitsek, “Resisting Genderphobia in Hungary”.

⁷² Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” April 2, 2021; Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” February 4, 2022; Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” June 10, 2022.

⁷³ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” March 5, 2021.

⁷⁴ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” July 2, 2021; Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” July 23, 2021.

⁷⁵ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” December 2, 2022.

⁷⁶ Orbán, “Orbán Viktor Interjúja a Kossuth Rádió ‘Jó Reggelt, Magyarország!’ Című Műsorában,” May 22, 2020.

⁷⁷ Biegon, “A Populist Grand Strategy?”

⁷⁸ McCammon, “Discursive Opportunity Structure”.