

Euroambivalent and Equivocal Euroscepticism: Two Shades of Strategic Ambiguity in the 2024 European Parliament Elections in Hungary

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of Euroscepticism in the context of Hungary's 2024 European Parliament elections, focusing on the discourses of two outright Eurosceptic parties – the populist right-wing Fidesz and the far-right Our Homeland Movement – and the newly formed TISZA Party, which also incorporates certain Eurosceptic elements. Employing a qualitative, single-country case study approach, our analysis draws on party leaders' speeches, manifestos, campaign statements and other public communications spanning from February 2022 to December 2024. The findings reveal that despite a predominantly pro-European public, the three selected parties espoused moderated and ambiguous Euroscepticism, which proved electorally successful, securing 19 of Hungary's 21 European Parliament seats and over 80% of the vote. Behind this paradox, our analysis distinguishes between two elite-level strategies: *Equivocal Euroscepticism*, which strategically oscillates between soft and hard Euroscepticism on the integration dimension without advocating full withdrawal, and *Euroambivalent Eurosceptic* approach, which navigates between soft

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Euroscepticism and pro-EU stances on institutional design or certain policies while clearly endorse EU membership. This theoretical innovation provides a novel conceptual framework with broader relevance for comparative analyses of Euroscepticism, offering deeper insights into how domestic political contexts shape distinct party positions on European integration.

Keywords: euroscepticism; populism; 2024 EP elections; Euroambivalence; Fidesz; Our Homeland Movement; TISZA Party

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1. Introduction

Hungary's political environment is undergoing a profound transformation, unprecedented since the Orbán government took office in 2010. Driven by substantial domestic, foreign, and economic pressures, this shift raises a central question: How do these changes influence the stance of Hungary's key party-political actors toward the European Union (EU)? While our analysis focuses on these actors, we also consider broader public attitudes as an essential backdrop to understanding the evolving political context.

This article examines the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, focusing on two outright Eurosceptic parties – the populist right-wing governing *Fidesz* (Alliance of Young Democrats – Hungarian Civic Alliance) and the far-right *Our Homeland Movement* – and the newly established *TISZA Party* (Respect and Freedom Party), which also employs certain Eurosceptic elements. Together, these three parties captured 19 of Hungary's 21 EP seats in 2024. Founded by former *Fidesz* insider Péter Magyar, *TISZA* garnered nearly 30% of the EP vote – eventually surpassing *Fidesz* in popularity by the autumn. This investigation traces these three parties' evolving approaches to the EU from February 12, 2022 – encompassing the parliamentary campaign and the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war – to the end of Hungary's EU Council Presidency on December 31, 2024.

Despite the generally pro-European orientation of Hungarian public opinion, these parties – each of which employs some degree or form of Euroscepticism – together secured over 80% of the EP vote on June 9, 2024. This paradox highlights a discrepancy between political supply and demand. The already weak pro-European left-liberal parties effectively vanished after the elections, leaving Euroscepticism as the dominant narrative. Nevertheless, none of the leading forces advocates a complete withdrawal from the EU ('HUXIT'), reflecting the broader softening of hard Euroscepticism observed by Havlík and Hloušek (2025) in the Visegrád Group since 2015.

Our findings suggest that the key differences among the three parties lie not only in the extent to which they utilize Eurosceptic discourses, but also in the nature of their rhetoric. While Fidesz and Our Homeland focus their intense populist critiques primarily on the EU, TISZA integrates limited Eurosceptic elements alongside certain pro-European stances, channeling its full-scale populism toward Fidesz's 15-year rule. These distinctions underscore the need to disentangle different strands of populism and Euroscepticism, especially within Hungary's transforming political context.

Our qualitative, single-country analysis proceeds as follows. First, we outline our theoretical and conceptual framework, followed by a brief overview of Hungarian Euroscepticism, situating the three selected parties in their historical and contemporary context. We then detail our data and methods before presenting an in-depth analysis of the parties' EU-related discourses. Finally, we summarize our findings and discuss their broader implications.

2. Conceptual framework

Euroscepticism has long been recognized as a spectrum of critical perspectives on European integration. One of the earliest and most influential formulations comes from Taggart (1998, p. 336), who defines Euroscepticism as 'the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration'. Expanding on this conceptualization, Taggart and Szczerbiak distinguished between hard Euroscepticism – principled opposition to EU membership and the broader project of European integration – and soft Euroscepticism, which entails more limited objections while accepting membership, advocating only for reforms to better align EU policies with national interests (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004, p. 4).

However, Kopecký and Mudde (2002) challenged the emerging literature on Euroscepticism, arguing that the hard/soft dichotomy was overly simplistic. In response, they introduced a two-dimensional framework that distinguishes between attitudes towards European integration and support for the EU as an institution, yielding four categories – Euroenthusiasts (support both integration and the EU), Eurosceptics (support integration but criticize the EU's current form), Europragmatists (support the EU for practical reasons without endorsing deeper integration), and Eurorejects (oppose both) – thus providing a more nuanced framework than the conventional binary.

Building on these debates, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008a) refined their own conceptualizations while criticized this rival typology, arguing that the category of Eurosceptics was too narrow and that of Euroenthusiasts was too broad. They reaffirmed that hard Euroscepticism entails principled opposition to EU membership (potentially advocating withdrawal), whereas in the case of soft Euroscepticism:

There is NOT a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas leads to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that 'national interest' is currently at odds with the EU trajectory. (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008b, p. 2)

They also emphasized attitudes toward continued EU-membership as the key litmus test for distinguishing hard from soft Eurosceptic parties. This adjustment aligns Kopecký and Mudde's Eurosceptics with Taggart and Szczerbiak's soft Eurosceptics, while their Eurorejects are more in line with hard Eurosceptics.

Subsequent scholarship has noted that political and economic crises (Csehi & Zgut, 2020; Pirro & Taggart, 2018) and cultural anxieties, particularly those linked to real and perceived pressures from immigration (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), can prompt new, more fluid Eurosceptic expressions. To address this complexity, Heinisch et al. (2021) introduced the notion of 'equivocal Euroscepticism', a strategic ambiguity in which actors seek to bridge hard and soft constituencies by proposing wide-ranging reforms without explicitly calling for EU withdrawal (Heinisch et al., 2021, p. 191). This strategic positioning enables supporters and coalition partners to interpret their stance as either a moderate or radical form of Euroscepticism, making these parties appealing to both hard and soft Eurosceptic voters (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025).

Following Heinisch et al. (2021) characterization of equivocal Euroscepticism as strategic ambiguity between soft and hard Euroscepticism along the axis of integration, this study introduces a complementary form termed *Euroambivalence*, focusing on strategic ambiguity related to EU institutions and specific policies rather than integration itself. Drawing on Kopecký and Mudde's (2002) two-dimensional framework - which differentiates support for integration from attitudes toward EU institutions - we conceptualize Euroambivalence as an institutional counterpart to Heinisch et al.'s 'integration-equivocal' Euroscepticism. Unlike equivocal Eurosceptics, who occasionally suggest potential withdrawal or advocate extensive reforms, Euroambivalent actors maintain their selective institutional or policy ambiguity strictly within the boundaries of continued EU membership, actively endorsing the EU's broad benefits. They consciously avoid the Eurosceptic label and eschew the explicitly reform-oriented critiques typical of soft Euroscepticism, opting instead for carefully calibrated messaging designed to appeal simultaneously to pro-European voters and soft Eurosceptics. If equivocal Euroscepticism can be considered a 'hard' form of strategic ambiguity, Euroambivalence represents its 'soft' counterpart.

The term Euroambivalence draws conceptual inspiration from existing literature analyzing media and far-right political discourse, where actors publicly support the EU yet consciously avoid firm commitments to ongoing integration measures (Startin, 2015; Leruth et al., 2017; Lorimer, 2021). This form of strategic ambiguity allows media outlets and political actors to flexibly adjust their

EU-related positions according to electoral contexts and audience expectations. Startin (2015, p. 321) categorizes British newspapers into three distinct groups: *Europositive* (explicitly supportive of further EU integration, consistently endorsing pro-European positions), *Euroambivalent* (generally supportive of the EU but strategically non-committal regarding deeper integration, often refraining from taking clear stances on ongoing integration debates, and not necessarily covering EU-related issues with regularity or as a priority), and *Eurosceptic* (explicitly critical of further EU integration or opposed to EU membership, frequently advocating a halt to deeper integration or even withdrawal). This categorization highlights the fluidity of Euroambivalence as a position that can overlap or intersect with other stances, enabling actors to adapt their positions according to shifting political and public contexts.

We therefore refine our conceptual schema by clearly delineating two distinct forms of strategic Euroscepticism: integration-oriented *equivocal Euroscepticism*, which tactically blurs the boundary between soft and hard Euroscepticism on deeper integration; and *Euroambivalence*, which bridges pro-Europeanism and soft Euroscepticism. The latter enables a more inclusive narrative – affirming strong commitment to European integration and the EU itself, while selectively criticizing perceived EU grievances yet carefully avoiding Eurosceptic labeling. These distinctions result in a sophisticated five-category typology, integrating Taggart and Szczerbiak’s soft-hard Euroscepticism distinctions, Kopecký and Mudde’s two-dimensional institutional and integration approach, and Heinisch et al.’s (2021) concept of strategic ambiguity. The proposed typology thus distinguishes clearly between three static positions – pro-European, soft Euroscepticism, and hard Euroscepticism – and two dynamic, strategically ambiguous categories situated between these static poles: integration-oriented equivocal Euroscepticism and institutional-oriented Euroambivalence:

- 1) **Equivocal Euroscepticism** (Heinisch et al., 2021): parties adopting this stance do not openly advocate EU withdrawal but occasionally hint at the possibility of existing outside the Union (‘there is life outside the EU’). Simultaneously, they propose extensive reforms that may fundamentally challenge the fundamental principles underpinning European integration. This strategic ambiguity allows them to move fluidly between conventional policy critiques and near-complete rejection of the *integration*, appealing to both soft Eurosceptics seeking limited reforms and more radical voters open to contemplating exit.
- 2) **Euroambivalent Euroscepticism** (our proposal): parties holding this position unequivocally support the principle of European integration, explicitly ruling out the prospect of EU withdrawal. Nonetheless, they selectively criticize specific EU practices or policies, occasionally endorsing

moderate reforms without adopting a clear Eurosceptic label. This strategic ambiguity enables these parties to resonate with both pro-European voters (Euroenthusiasts), and soft Eurosceptics who desire moderate institutional adjustments. This form of strategic ambiguity is analogous to equivocal Euroscepticism but operates on a different axis: Euroambivalence moves on the *institutional* rather than integrative dimension, balancing between full endorsement of European integration and selective critique of institutional performance.

Together, this refined integration- and institution-focused framework provides a nuanced analytical lens for understanding contemporary Euroscepticism dynamics, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1:
A five-category typology of party positions on European integration

Position	Description	Appeals to...	Example
Hard Euroscepticism	<i>Principled opposition to EU membership and deeper integration, often advocating withdrawal</i>	<i>Voters seeking exit or radical disengagement</i>	<i>'Leave the EU!'</i>
↑ Equivocal Euroscepticism ↓	<i>Strategic ambiguity between soft and hard Euroscepticism, hints at possible exit without full commitment</i>	↑ <i>Both soft and hard Eurosceptics</i> ↓	<i>'We need reforms – maybe exit is necessary'</i>
Soft Euroscepticism	<i>Supports membership but critiques EU's policies or trajectory</i>	<i>Reform-minded, stay-in voters</i>	<i>'Let's stay, but change direction'</i>
↑ Euroambivalent Euroscepticism ↓	<i>Strategic ambiguity between pro-EU support and soft Euroscepticism, hints at reforms but avoids Eurosceptic labeling</i>	↑ <i>Both pro-EU and soft Eurosceptic voters</i> ↓	<i>'The EU is our future – maybe reforms are necessary'</i>
Pro-European	<i>Full support for EU membership and continued or deeper integration</i>	<i>Strongly pro-EU electorate (Euroenthusiasts)</i>	<i>'The EU is the answer'</i>

Source: The authors.

As we will demonstrate later, the TISZA Party exemplifies a Euroambivalent Eurosceptic stance: it explicitly rejects the possibility of leaving the EU, emphasizes the broad benefits of membership, yet selectively critiques specific EU policies and perceived institutional overreach. Crucially, it strategically avoids the Eurosceptic label and deprioritizes EU-related issues. Moreover, as a newly established and still-evolving political force, its EU-related positions remained fluid during the 2024 EP elections, reflecting an ongoing process of opinion formation that cautiously responded to public sentiment rather than presenting

voters with definitive stances. In contrast, Fidesz and Our Homeland align more closely with the classical integration-oriented equivocal positions, strategically balancing between soft and hard Euroscepticism.

2.1 The populism-Euroscepticism nexus

In Hungary, as in much of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Ágh, 2016), Euroscepticism surged after the 2008 financial crisis, fueled by unmet economic expectations and sluggish convergence with Western Europe (Molnár, 2017). Recent studies reveal that challenges and perceived threats to social status have amplified Hungarian anti-EU sentiments (Bíró-Nagy & Medve-Bálint, 2024; Bíró-Nagy & Szászi, 2024b), consistent with the ‘silent counter-revolution’ (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), whereby certain groups feel threatened by the empowerment of marginalized populations. Against this backdrop, populist actors channel economic grievances and cultural insecurities, portraying themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against perceived EU overreach (Santana, Zagórski, & Rama, 2020).

These trends underscore the need to clarify the link between populism and Euroscepticism, two increasingly prominent yet distinct phenomena. Although research has long explored their intertwining (Taggart, 2002, p. 69), recent crises have intensified their convergence (Pirro et al., 2018, p. 379). Both populism and Euroscepticism are deemed ‘thin-centered’ ideologies (Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019), readily attaching themselves to broader host ideologies. Populism’s critique of complex and impersonal institutions align with Eurosceptic objections to the EU’s bureaucratic structure (Roch, 2024), which is often seen as elitist and detached from citizens (Canovan, 1999; Leconte, 2015). These dual critiques are frequently articulated by Eurosceptic populists.

Our article follows Mudde’s classical ‘ideational’ definition of populism as a binary division between two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: a morally ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt elite’, asserting that politics ‘should be an expression the “volonté Générale” (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This ‘autocratic interpretation of democracy and political representation’ is characterized by people-centrism, anti-elitism, and a Manichean, morally dichotomous outlook (Benedek, 2024a). The result is a quasi-democratic yet deeply exclusionary political logic, wherein populist leaders claim sole legitimacy as the representatives of the morally superior people.

We can see that populism is the broader and more abstract concept, within which Eurosceptic populism specifically targets European integration and EU’s distant elites, casting them as undermining national sovereignty (Csehi & Zgut, 2020; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019). Ágh (2016) even suggests that populism and Euroscepticism function as interchangeable critiques of the EU mainstream, a convergence captured by the term ‘Europopulism’. Yet populism and Euroscep-

ticism need not always coincide (Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019): left-wing populists may advocate for deeper European integration to combat inequality and neoliberal elites, while certain pro-EU populists simply challenge specific policies (Roch, 2024). While populism represents a broad critique of democratic representation, Euroscepticism is specifically concerned with European integration. Conceptually, their interplay can be classified into four configurations: Eurosceptic populism, non-populist Euroscepticism, non-Eurosceptic populism, and non-populist/non-Eurosceptic positions, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2:
Conceptual configurations of populism and Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism	Populism	
	Populist	Non-populist
Eurosceptic	<i>Eurosceptic populism</i>	<i>Non-populist Euroscepticism</i>
Non-Eurosceptic	<i>Non-Eurosceptic populism</i>	Non-populist & non-Eurosceptic

Source: The authors.

While Eurosceptic populism empirically dominates, other categories – such as early Green critiques of the EU (non-populist Euroscepticism) and non-Eurosceptic or even pro-European populist parties – though less common, also exist (Pirro et al., 2018). Nevertheless, populists often portray the EU as elitist and incompatible with national interests, resulting in a significant empirical overlap between populist and Eurosceptic actors (Pirro & van Kessel, 2017, p. 405).

3. Contextualizing the 2024 EP election: Euroscepticism and the transforming political landscape in Hungary

Before examining the detailed EU-related positions of the three selected parties, it is crucial to briefly contextualize them within the history of Hungary's Euroscepticism and the country's transforming political landscape.

Euroscepticism in Hungary can be traced back to the late 1990s with the radical-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP), which broke the previous elite consensus on EU and NATO membership (Batory, 2002; Neumayer, 2008) and decried European integration as a threat to national sovereignty – likening it to a 'second Trianon Treaty' (Mudde, 2007; Petrović, 2019). MIÉP combined a pro-European stance with anti-EU rhetoric through nationalist and anti-Semitic language and advocated for a 'Third Way', promoting a uniquely Hungarian model of social and economic development, distinct from both Western and Eastern

influences. Although the hard Eurosceptic party lost its parliamentary presence by 2002, its discourse significantly influenced subsequent right-wing Euroscepticism (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002).

Concurrently, Fidesz shifted from an initial unambiguous pro-EU orientation – once advocating for ‘the quickest possible’ accession – to a more cautious Europragmatic approach (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002). During its early coalition years (1998–2002), Fidesz emphasized Hungary’s national interests and the concerns of Hungarians abroad, adopting a ‘yes, but’ rhetoric evident in the 2003 EU referendum and the 2004 EP elections (Batory, 2008, p. 272). Despite its conditional support and growing populist rhetoric toward the EU, Fidesz endorsed major European treaties (Dúró, 2016), a stance that Enyedi (2006) categorizes as ‘non-Eurosceptic populism’.

Public support for EU accession was robust in the pre-accession (2004) period, with 83.76% voting in favor in the 2003 referendum – driven by an elite consensus on ‘return to Europe’ and campaigns promising material benefits (Fölsz & Tóka, 2006), aligning with Hungary’s utilitarian, individualistic political culture shaped by its socialist legacy (McLaren, 2006). However, post-2004 public disillusionment, driven by unmet economic expectations (Molnár, 2017; Pörzse, 2004), led to a rise in negative and neutral EU attitudes. Between 2001 and 2009, the share of Hungarians with a negative view grew from 7% to 22%, neutral views from 23% to 42%, and those seeing no benefits from 13% to 52%. However, this shift reflected soft rather than hard Euroscepticism, as overall commitment to the EU remained above average (Lengyel & Göncz, 2010, p. 535).

This shift in the supply side of Euroscepticism, combined with political and economic crises since the mid-2000s, contributed to the rise of green critiques of the EU (i.e., *Politics Can Be Different* – LMP) and, more intensely, a resurgence of hard Euroscepticism among the elites (Molnár, 2017, p. 75). The emergence of the new far-right party Jobbik in the late 2000s, even prior to the global financial crisis, exemplified this trend.

After its 2010 electoral victory resulting in parliamentary supermajority, Fidesz began to incorporate Eurosceptic elements from Jobbik – even during Hungary’s first EU Council Presidency in 2011 (Leconte, 2012). Fidesz’s constitutional reforms and media laws triggered conflicts with EU institutions, which the party framed as necessary defenses of national sovereignty against external interference. Despite Hungary receiving substantial EU funding during the 2007–2013 cycle and thereafter, Fidesz’s Eurosceptic populism became more pronounced in the mid-2010s (Danaj, Lazányi, & Bilan, 2018).

Following its second parliamentary supermajority in the 2014 elections and the catalytic impact of the 2015 refugee crisis, Fidesz solidified its soft Eurosceptic, sovereigntist populist stance (Ágh, 2015; Dúró, 2016; Körösenyi & Patkós, 2015; Molnár, 2017). During this period, the EU was framed as an elitist, globalist force undermining Hungarian sovereignty, accused of imposing mass migration to

dilute national identity. Opposition parties, critical journalists, and civil society were portrayed as ‘fifth column’ collaborators, while figures such as George Soros and a global left-liberal ‘bizarre coalition’ were depicted as existential threats (Bozóki & Benedek, 2024; Jenne, Bozóki, & Visnovitz, 2022). In contrast to the EU, depicted as a tool of the ‘global elite’ promoting the ‘reverse colonization’ of Europe through Muslim migration (Batory 2016; Coman & Leconte, 2019, p. 863), Orbán and Fidesz presented themselves as defenders of national identity and Christian values, embedding their narrative within a broader critique of the ‘decline of the West’ (Jenne et al., 2022).

By the late 2010s, under mounting EU criticism and electoral pressure from Jobbik, Fidesz shifted from soft ‘dual language’ Euroscepticism (Dúró, 2016) to a harder stance. Meanwhile, Jobbik moderated its initial hard Euroscepticism (Ágh, 2021; Molnár, 2017), and Fidesz’s accommodative strategy – seen in the ‘Let’s Stop Brussels!’ campaign and the 2016 migrant quota referendum – aligned it with Jobbik’s evolving position (Csehi, 2019; Hargitai, 2020). This two-way convergence (Enyedi & Róna, 2018) or even replacement dynamic (Ágh, 2021, p. 27) pushed both parties toward equivocal Euroscepticism. As Jobbik further softened its position after 2018 general elections, the new far-right Our Homeland Movement, led by László Toroczkai, emerged to take advantage of Jobbik’s repositioning, adopting an initially hard Eurosceptic with a nativist agenda (Goldstein, 2021).

Furthermore, building on a broader CEE trend in the 2000s, when rebranded pro-European social democrats promoted economic reforms and EU integration, right-wing parties found fertile ground for culturally conservative yet economically left-leaning positions (Vachudova, 2008). This convergence deepened after the 2015 migration crisis, as Hungary and other Visegrad countries resisted EU-imposed quotas and deeper integration, framing themselves – especially Hungary and Poland – as defenders of national sovereignty and cultural identity (Petrović, 2019; Schmidt, 2016). This sovereigntist stance aligned with a broader populist ‘freedom fight’ against the liberal international order, allowing leaders like Orbán to engage with regional institutions while challenging core EU principles (Söderbaum et al., 2021). Reversing the traditional West-East norm-setting dynamic (Krastev & Holmes, 2018), Hungary and Poland positioned themselves as alternative models for European identity, rooted in sovereignty and traditional values. Drawing on historical grievances (Petrović, 2019), Fidesz and PiS adopted a ‘two Europes’ narrative, promoting a ‘Europe of nations’ with strong national competences, in stark contrast to a liberal, multicultural EU seen as elitist and weak (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Hargitai, 2020, pp. 192–193).

Notably, Orbán’s rhetoric expanded ‘the people’ to encompass all Europeans, depicting Brussels as detached from ordinary people (Csehi & Zgut, 2020; Hargitai, 2020). Casting its ‘freedom fight’ as a defense of ‘illiberal democracy’ and the ‘true European identity’, Fidesz avoided outright Europhobia while proposing a nationalist alternative to the EU (Coman & Leconte, 2019). This fully-fledged

Eurosceptic populism portrayed the EU as a corrupt elite ('homo brusselicus'), epitomized by the 2019 Soros–Juncker posters, and opposed EU migration, rule-of-law, and cultural policies, positioning itself as the savior of Christian Europe (Csehi & Zgut, 2020; Scott, 2020).

Nevertheless, public sentiment revealed a paradox: despite growing elite-level Euroscepticism in the 2010s, the share of Hungarians seeing EU membership as beneficial rose from 38.6% in 2009 to 88.9% in 2019 – the largest increase among member states (Kolosi & Hudácskó, 2020, p. 455). However, the COVID-19 crisis triggered a 10-point drop, and deepened polarization: over 80% of opposition voters remained pro-EU, while support among pro-government voters fell to 64%. Similarly, 67% of Fidesz voters viewed Russia favorably and 62% China, compared to just 64% for the EU, while 84% of opposition voters supported the EU in early 2022, and only 20% and 27% had favorable views of Russia and China (Tóth, 2022, p. 448). These reactive trends suggest that Hungarian Euroscepticism is an elite-driven rather than a grassroots phenomenon.

3.1 Cracks in the wall:

The Orbán regime under strain

Following our overview of Euroscepticism in Hungary, this section provides the specific political context for the 2024 EP election. Drawing on Benedek's (2024a) framework, we describe the Orbán regime as a populist electoral autocracy (PEA). It is a hybrid regime that blends populism (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Müller, 2016) with electoral authoritarianism (Schedler, 2013), a regime type that upholds formal multi-party elections while eroding meaningful democratic competition (Coppedge et al., 2020). In our interpretation, populism is an inherently anti-pluralist view of democracy (Benedek, 2021), where leaders claim moral supremacy on behalf of a single 'people', disregarding diversity.

Although Hungary began drifting from the liberal-democratic path after 2010, it was only in the mid-2010s that a true 'critical juncture' (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007) occurred, shifting the country from an electoral democracy to a PEA (Bozóki & Benedek, 2024). This transition encompassed institutional restructuring, repression of civil society (Csehi, 2019), and restriction of media plurality (Benedek, 2024b; Polyák, 2019). Fidesz legitimized these changes through its strengthening populist narratives, which became a systemic feature after the 2015 refugee crisis, while its populism increasingly adopted a Eurosceptic character.

By 2018, the regime had consolidated into a full-fledged PEA, sustained by a mutually reinforcing cycle of populist rhetoric and autocratic structures (Bozóki & Benedek, 2024). While autocratic conditions institutionalize political inequality and shape voter perceptions from above, populist narratives secure societal support through identity-based polarization. This interplay created

a resilient autocratic system that enabled Fidesz to navigate the crises of the early 2020s, integrating challenges into its discourse to further entrench its rule and suppress the emergence of credible internal alternatives. Even amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, Fidesz secured 54% of the vote in 2022, maintaining its two-thirds parliamentary majority.

However, the day after the 2022 election, the European Commission triggered the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism, suspending funds and constraining Hungary's fiscal room. In response, Fidesz escalated its obstruction of EU decisions, frequently wielding or threatening its veto, particularly on the Russia-Ukraine war. Between 2016 and 2022, Hungary was responsible for 60% of all vetoes, threats of veto, or deliberate delays in EU foreign policy decision-making, particularly on issues related to China and Russia. However, its leverage diminished as the EU-27 signaled readiness to bypass Hungary if necessary. As a result, Orbán remained largely isolated internationally until Donald Trump's reelection. Simultaneously, a fleeting post-pandemic recovery gave way to recession in 2023 – GDP shrank 0.9%, inflation topped 25%, and dependence on Russian energy plus a weakening forint magnified economic woes and eroded household budgets and real wages. Fidesz's once-powerful narrative of economic progress, embodied in its 2022 slogan 'Hungary is going forward, not back', gradually lost its resonance. Despite these pressures, Fidesz stayed popular until 2024, aided by a fractured opposition that struggled to harness public dissatisfaction.

The turning point came in February 2024, when a presidential pardon was granted to a figure convicted of covering up paedophilia, prompting the resignation of President Katalin Novák and Justice Minister Judit Varga – who had been set to lead Fidesz's EP list. This crisis exposed weaknesses within the regime. While the traditional opposition proved ineffectual, Péter Magyar, a former second-tier Fidesz insider and Varga's ex-husband, seized the moment. He unveiled evidence of system-level corruption, including leaked recordings implicating Varga in suppressing investigations. Disillusioned voters, fed up with both Fidesz and the 'old opposition', rallied behind Magyar. He converted his grassroots 'Rise Up, Hungarians!' movement into the TISZA Party in April 2024, named after Hungary's second-largest river and symbolizing its core values of 'Tisztelet' (respect) and 'Szabadság' (freedom). Addressing systemic domestic problems such as health-care, education, and poverty, TISZA's populism targeted government corruption rather than the EU, and resonated with the frustrations of the 'dissatisfied crowds' (Szabó & Sebestyén, 2024). Magyar cast Fidesz as an entrenched elite betraying Hungarian interests, pledging transparency and competence to channel public outrage. The party emerged as a viable alternative to the Orbán regime.

4. Methodology and data

Our analysis of the EU-related positions of Fidesz, Our Homeland, and TISZA follows a qualitative approach inspired by the Sussex School tradition (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008a; Taggart, 1998). Our single-country analysis examines party-level strategies, prioritizing electoral manifestos, party statements, and public communications, in line with recent Euroscepticism research (Vasilopoulou, 2017). As Marzi (2024) notes, Sussex School approaches diverge from the quantitative emphasis of the North Carolina school (Hooghe & Marks, 2007) by providing in-depth, context-sensitive insights into Euroscepticism's evolution in specific national settings.

Our dataset is derived from the EU&I transnational Voting Advice Application (Garzia, Trechsel, & De Sio, 2017), the largest academic initiative on the 2024 EP elections, in which we participated as experts for Hungary. The EU&I project initially assessed party positions up to end-April 2024 via dual evaluation – expert assessments and party self-assessments supported by textual evidence (Cicchi et al., 2023). However, we broadened this analytical and temporal scope to include developments dating back to the 2022 general elections and forward through the entire 2024 EP campaign, concluding on December 31, 2024, at the end of Hungary's EU Council Presidency. This extended two-and-a-half-year window enables us to capture shifts in party positions and contextualize how changing political dynamics shape – or are shaped by – Eurosceptic rhetoric.

Following the EU&I methodology, we conducted a systematic content analysis (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011) using multiple source types, including election manifestos, party statements, media appearances, and social media content (van Klingeren et al., 2013). To capture each party's authentic voice, we relied only on official manifestos and direct political statements, excluding partisan outlets and second-hand interpretations. Our source hierarchy placed EP and the latest national election manifestos first, followed by media statements and public communications from party leaders, with older manifestos and other materials as supplementary sources. In practice, only Our Homeland published a detailed 2024 EP manifesto, while Fidesz and TISZA's positions were primarily reconstructed from their leaders' public statements.

5. Euroscepticism in the 2024 EP elections in Hungary: Fidesz, Our Homeland Movement, and TISZA Party

For our analysis, we focus on 21 dimensions specifically selected to measure Euroscepticism. Of these, 18 align with the original EU&I project, while three (statements 1, 2, and 6) address issues particularly relevant to the Hungarian context. We categorize them into six thematic sub-dimensions – organized

under two main dimensions: European integration and the EU itself and specific EU policies. The first dimension covers EU membership, integration, and institutions; the second covers democracy, economic affairs, migration and asylum, and foreign and security policy. Table 3 presents the numerical positions of the three parties over three periods: the *pre-campaign phase* (February 12, 2022–December 31, 2023), the *campaign and election period* (January 1–June 9, 2024), and the *post-election phase* (June 10–December 31, 2024). Each stance is measured on a scale from -1 (complete disagreement) to +1 (complete agreement), with shifts highlighted in bold. Since some statements are negatively worded, a negative score consistently indicates rejection of the corresponding statement. For example, Fidesz’s increasingly negative scores on the statement ‘Hungary must leave the EU’ (#1) reflect a softening stance on the prospect of leaving.

The next sections detail how these shifts unfolded, illustrating the evolving dynamics of Hungarian Euroscepticism with textual evidence.

Table 3:
Positions of Fidesz, Our Homeland, and TISZA on the 21 statements in the pre-campaign, campaign, and post-election phases

Thematic dimensions	Statements on which party positioning is based	Party positions								
		Fidesz	Our Homeland	Fidesz	Our Homeland	Tisza	Fidesz	Our Homeland	Tisza	
		Pre-campaign period (February 12, 2022 – December 31, 2023)			Campaign period and elections (January 1, 2024 – June 9, 2024)			Post-election period (June 10, 2024 – 31 December, 2024)		
European integration and EU										
<i>EU membership and integration</i>	1. Hungary needs to leave the EU.	0.5	1	-0.5	0.5	-1	-1	0.5	-1	
	2. The EU undermines national sovereignty.	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	1	0.5	
	3. European integration is a good thing.	-0.5	-1	-0.5	-1	-0.5	-1	-0.5	-0.5	
<i>EU institutions</i>	4. The single European currency (Euro) is a bad thing.	0.5	1	0.5	1	-0.5	0.5	1	-0.5	
	5. The European Parliament should be given more powers.	-1	-1	-1	0.5	0.5	-1	0.5	0.5	
	6. Hungary should join the European Public Prosecutor's Office.	-1	-1	-1	-1	1	-1	-1	1	
Specific EU policies										
<i>Democracy policy</i>	7. Individual member states of the EU should have less veto power.	-1	-0.5	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	
	8. The EU should sanction member states whose governments undermine the rule of law.	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	
<i>Economic policy</i>	9. The EU should rigorously punish Member States that violate the EU deficit rules.	-1	-1	-1	-0.5	No opinion	-1	-0.5	No opinion	
	10. The EU should acquire its own tax raising powers.	-1	-1	-1	-1	-0.5	-1	-1	-0.5	
	11. The EU should provide financial assistance to member states in economic and financial difficulties.	0.5	No opinion	0.5	No opinion	No opinion	0.5	-1	No opinion	
	12. The EU should protect European farmers from external competition even if this leads to higher food prices.	1	0.5	1	0.5	0.5	1	0.5	0.5	
<i>Migration and asylum policy</i>	13. Immigrants from outside Europe should be required to accept our culture and values.	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	1	1	
	14. Immigration into Hungary should be made more restrictive.	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	1	1	0.5	
	15. All foreigners legally residing in Hungary should receive the same social security benefits as nationals.	No opinion	-1	No opinion	-1	No opinion	No opinion	-1	No opinion	
	16. Asylum-seekers should be distributed proportionally among EU Member States through a mandatory relocation system.	-1	-1	-1	-1	-0.5	-1	-1	0.5	
	17. To fight the problem of illegal immigration, the European Union should take responsibility in patrolling its borders.	1	-0.5	1	-0.5	No opinion	1	-0.5	1	
<i>Foreign and security policy</i>	18. On foreign policy issues the EU should speak with one voice.	-1	-1	-1	-1	-0.5	-1	-1	-0.5	
	19. The European Union should strengthen its security and defence policy.	0.5	No opinion	1	-0.5	No opinion	1	-0.5	No opinion	
	20. The European Union should continue providing military aid, such as weapons and ammunition, to Ukraine.	-1	-1	-1	-1	-0.5	-1	-1	-0.5	
	21. The European Union should be enlarged to include Ukraine.	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	

Source: The author.

5.1 Fidesz, the ‘Patriot for Europe’: Occupying the EU from within

Fidesz’s Euroscepticism intensified in the early 2020s, as the party grew more vocal about perceived threats to Hungary’s sovereignty and cultural identity emanating from the EU. This narrative was promoted through contentious issues such as the government’s ‘unorthodox’ pandemic response (e.g., procuring Chinese vaccines) and its Child Protection Act, which Fidesz portrayed as defending national values against EU ‘LGBTQ+ advocacy’.

The Russia-Ukraine war, which erupted at the start of the 2022 election campaign, further amplified the party’s Eurosceptic populism by leveraging a “Rally-Round-the-Flag” effect. Fidesz vigorously criticized EU sanctions on Russia as disproportionately harmful to Hungary’s national interests, using phrases such as ‘a dwarf imposing sanctions on a giant’ and ‘shooting itself in the foot’ (Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, 2022). The party portrayed itself as a guardian of Hungarian traditional values against ‘tyrannical’ EU interference (Kiss, 2024). Emphasizing a moral dichotomy between the ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt Brussels elite’ (Plesz & Körösi, 2024; Szabó, 2024a), Fidesz deepened the polarization on EU-related issues (Ágh, 2021). In contrast, opposition parties like the Democratic Coalition endorsed EU unity, some advocating a more federalist approach to counter Russian influence (Arató, 2020; Bíró-Nagy & Szászi, 2024a; Özoflu & Arató, 2024). Meanwhile, joint opposition candidate Péter Márki-Zay criticized Fidesz for being detached from democratic principles and Western alliances (Szabó, 2024b).

Still, Fidesz successfully blended realist geopolitics, economic pragmatism, and populist moralization (Özoflu & Arató, 2023), aligning with Taggart and Szczerbiak’s (2004, p. 4) ‘national-interest Euroscepticism.’ Orbán repeatedly invoked Hungary’s ‘will of the people’ in defense of peace and national sovereignty, condemning Brussels as out of touch with ordinary Hungarians. This ‘discursive maneuvering’ (Özoflu & Arató, 2023) allowed Fidesz to oscillate between hard and soft Eurosceptic elements, employing equivocal Eurosceptic populism. However, the inherent tensions between moral and realist interpretations were exemplified in autumn 2024 when Balázs Orbán, Viktor Orbán’s political director, praised Hungary’s 1956 uprising on moral grounds while dismissing Ukraine’s similar resistance as unrealistic.

Turning to specific party positions, Fidesz remained largely consistent across 2022–2024, except for evolving rhetoric on a possible Hungarian exit (HUXIT). After Brexit, the party briefly left open the possibility of leaving the EU, but gradually pivoted toward a firm anti-exit stance, citing Hungary’s deep economic ties to Europe and long-term interests. In January 2023, Orbán acknowledged that while membership felt ‘painful’ due to perceived EU ‘bullying’, withdrawal was not an option as Hungary’s ‘economic prosperity depends on it’ (HVG360, 2023).

By late 2023, Orbán advanced the idea of ‘occupying the EU from within’ to restore what he characterized as the Union’s original mission of intergovernmental cooperation and mutual benefit:

Inwards! So, we are going inwards, toward the center (...). Our plan is not to leave, but to occupy. Our vision is that the basic idea of the European Union is good. It serves Hungary’s interests well; it could serve Hungary’s interests well. In other words, the cooperation of the European peoples, the creation of a common market, the pooling of each other’s strengths and the elimination of each other’s weaknesses. These are all good things. (...) What we do not need is the creation of a superstate that takes away the powers of the member states, punishes them, blackmails them, lectures them. It simply treats them as provinces. That is what is happening in the European Union today. But that doesn’t mean throwing away the instrument; it means making it fit again for what it was invented for. (HírTV, 2023)

At the outset of Hungary’s 2024 EU Council Presidency, Orbán reaffirmed this equivocal stance, stating that Fidesz had ‘no intention of leaving’ but aimed instead to reform, not destroy, Brussels, because ‘we are patriots for Europe’ (Márton & Nyilas, 2024).

Despite publicly ruling out HUXIT, Fidesz hardened its position on certain aspects of European integration. It continued to reject the idea of a centralized EU ‘superstate’, intensifying calls for reasserting the nation-state model across policy fields. He argued that while Western Europe was unlikely to revert to the nation-state model, Eastern Europe could preserve and defend it (INFOSTART/MTI, 2024). In a September 2024 speech, Orbán advocated ‘economic neutrality’, urging direct bilateral trade based on national values and interests rather than reliance on centralized EU frameworks. As Orbán said, ‘nothing comes before the aspect of economic efficiency and competitiveness’ and ‘we negotiate only based on our own values’ (Miniszterelnöki Kabinetiroda, 2024b). This approach echoed earlier far-right rhetoric, especially that of MIÉP, which had championed a distinct ‘Third Way’ development path for Hungary. Fidesz’s appropriation of MIÉP’s ideas was symbolically underscored in late 2024 when the government erected a statue of MIÉP’s controversial founder, István Csurka, and organized a conference in his honor.

Throughout the period, Fidesz has maintained consistent criticism of EU institutions, opposing euro adoption – arguing it would hinder convergence with wealthier members (VG-Világ gazdaság, 2024) – and rejecting participation in the European Public Prosecutor’s Office, which it sees as an instrument of Brussels’ overreach (Portfolio.hu, 2022). The party also dismissed any expansion of the European Parliament’s competencies, describing it as a ‘dead end’ for European democracy, favoring stronger roles for national legislatures (e.g., a ‘red card’ system to halt EU laws violating national sovereignty) (Czirkos, 2021).

Fidesz's specific EU policy stances also remained relatively stable across the pre-campaign, campaign, and post-election phases, with one noteworthy change. As Hungary's Council Presidency approached, the party showed a brief uptick in willingness to engage with common security and defense arrangements (Ritó, 2024). Even so, Fidesz continued to oppose unified EU foreign policy measures, particularly those extending military aid to Ukraine or integrating Ukraine into the Union. During the 2024 EP campaign, Orbán portrayed the EU as 'incapable of managing' the conflict and criticized Western Europe for what he considered self-defeating support of Ukraine. In a July 2024 post-election speech, he declared that the EU had 'lost the war', predicting American disengagement and a future for Central Europe as a cohesive bloc within the Union on its own sovereigntist way:

The United States will withdraw its involvement, and Europe is neither capable of financing the war nor the reconstruction or governance of Ukraine. (...). For us - Europe as a peripheral condition - it follows that the European Union will take note of the fact that the countries of Central Europe will remain in the European Union, while remaining based on nation states and pursuing their own foreign policy. They may not like it, but they will have to accept it. Especially as the number of such countries will increase (Miniszterelnöki Kabinetiroda, 2024a).

Ultimately, Fidesz maintained an 'EU-minimum' position throughout 2022-2024, urging the bloc to confine its tasks primarily to border protection and trade, while eschewing deeper intervention in member states' economic, political, or migration policies. This stance reflects the party's belief that its brand of sovereignty-based Eurosceptic populism offers a counter-model to liberal, multicultural norms of Western Europe. By declaring itself a 'patriot for Europe', Fidesz claims to uphold genuine European values while pursuing greater autonomy by reshaping the Union from within, rather than resorting to outright withdrawal - a textbook example of equivocal Eurosceptic populism.

5.2 Our Homeland:

From HUXIT to pragmatic sovereigntism

Founded as a splinter from Jobbik after the 2018 elections, the far-right Our Homeland Movement initially advanced a distinctly hard Eurosceptic populist stance, criticizing EU integration and globalization. In the 2022 general election campaign, party leader László Toroczka advocated even a referendum on EU membership and a potential exit from the Union by 2030 (Mihazank, 2022, p. 55), arguing that Brussels exploited Hungary's labor force and treated the country as a 'dumping ground', as evidenced by the transport of substandard

food products into Hungary (Baranya, 2019). This position resonated with core voters who viewed the EU as threatening Hungarian sovereignty and culture.

By the 2024 EP elections, however, Our Homeland had moderated its rhetoric on integration, shifting from hard Euroscepticism to a more conditional and equivocal stance.

The party's new manifesto acknowledged the possibility of radically reforming the EU, proposing a 'United Nations of Europe' centered on intergovernmental cooperation instead deeper integration. Though the party still insisted Hungary prepare for life outside the bloc, it framed withdrawal as less self-evident and less immediate:

It must be considered that it is not possible to leave the Union overnight (or even in a year). We need to take stock of our EU membership, take stock of other options (building bilateral economic cooperation with other countries, strengthening other federal systems). There is life outside the Union, and there will be life after the Union is gone. We must be prepared for this, but the decision must be taken by the people in a referendum. (Mihazank, 2024)

Prioritizing sovereignty, independence, and mutually beneficial cooperation, Our Homeland rejected any compromises deemed harmful to national interests. Yet it acknowledged the possibility of a mutually beneficial EU framework, contingent on substantial reforms:

The Our Homeland Movement believes there is still a chance for radical change by putting the EU on a new footing. (...). Like the national-conservative political parties of many European countries, the Our Homeland Movement also envisions the European Union as a 'Europe of Nations', where countries retain their independence, sovereignty, and the right to make free decisions on as many issues as possible. The alliance must function as a win-win partnership, ensuring that no member state is forced to accept humiliating compromises. (Mihazank, 2024)

This repositioning proved electorally advantageous, earning Our Homeland its first European Parliament seat. The party subsequently joined the Europe of Sovereign Nations group, led by Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), aligning with ultranationalist and sovereigntist forces. Nonetheless, opinion polls suggest the majority of Hungarians – and most Our Homeland voters – still favor remaining in the EU, encouraging the party to maintain an equivocal position on HUXIT. In this context, it is worth noting that a party explicitly advocating for EU withdrawal does exist in Hungary: the Huxit Party, founded by former Jobbik and Our Homeland politician János Volner. Originally launched as the Volner Party in 2020, it was renamed in 2022 to signal its primary objective – Hungary's exit

from the EU – but did not participate in either the 2022 parliamentary or 2024 EP elections, and is widely regarded as a marginal actor, possibly functioning as a satellite of Fidesz.

In terms of EU institutions, Our Homeland consistently opposed adopting the euro throughout 2022–2024, citing previous crises and austerity as evidence of the currency's failures, and contended that euro membership would undermine Hungary's financial autonomy and expose the country to Brussels' 'financial dictatorship' (Mihazank, 2024). The party likewise rejected joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office, portraying it as a mechanism for arbitrary proceedings, extortion, and the withholding of EU financial aid (Mihazank, 2024). However, the party's position on the European Parliament has undergone a notable shift during the 2024 campaign. Initially mirroring Fidesz's skepticism of the institution as overly centralized, the party later began highlighting the EP's strategic utility for nationalist objectives, softening its earlier rhetoric. Rebranding the European Parliament as a venue for advancing sovereigntist cooperation (Mihazank, 2024), Our Homeland signaled a pragmatic willingness to leverage EU structures for its own agenda.

On most EU policy issues, the party's stance paralleled Fidesz's, including opposition to migrants' proportional relocation, unified EU foreign policy, and military aid to Ukraine – policies it perceived as infringing on national sovereignty. However, Our Homeland placed heavier emphasis on border protection as a national responsibility, insisting that migration costs be equitably shared among member states (Mihazank, 2024). In economic matters, Our Homeland took a less stringent view on penalizing deficit-rule violators and supported measures to protect farmers from external (i.e., Ukrainian) competition – while generally blaming the Hungarian government for economic shortfalls (Exterde, 2024).

Finally, its negativity towards reducing member-state veto powers intensified in 2024, aligning it more closely with Fidesz. Concerns about EU enlargement, specifically Ukraine and Serbia, drove this shift; the party demanded guarantees for Hungarian minorities in Transcarpathia and southern Hungary as a prerequisite for future expansion. Furthermore, similarly to the government, Toroczkai's rhetoric highlighted the counterproductive impact of EU sanctions on Russia, emphasizing their harmful effects on Hungary, including 'war inflation' and economic strain. However, the party positions itself as a vocal defender of Hungarian interests, opposing both EU policies and domestic government actions it perceives as undermining these values (Bíró-Nagy & Szászi, 2024a; Özoflu & Arató, 2024). In sum, Our Homeland's shift from hard Euroscepticism to a more conditional approach exemplifies another case of equivocal Eurosceptic populism in Hungary.

5.3 TISZA Party: Redefining opposition through Euroambivalent Euroscepticism

From its inception in 2024, the TISZA Party lacked firm positions on several EU-related issues, partly due to its recent formation and the need to quickly gauge public opinion within a limited timeframe. Although labeling itself as ‘not Eurosceptic’, the party nonetheless voiced concerns about the EU’s perceived overreach and questioned its role in addressing Hungary’s internal problems. Party leader Péter Magyar consistently emphasized the principle of sovereign member states, criticizing the opposition for ‘expecting Brussels to overthrow Orbán’, adding that ‘of course, we aim to establish a constructive and sometimes critical relationship’ (Botos, 2024). Indeed, from his meteoric rise onward, Magyar expressed reservations about Europeanization and European integration, while showing moderate agreement with the view that the EU’s current functioning undermines Hungary’s national sovereignty:

Basically, I would go back to the plans and dreams of the founding fathers. Europe is an economic community, and it was not created to protect or control the member states in everything. (...) I firmly believe in sovereign member states, and I strongly oppose European Commissioners, elected by essentially no one, interfering so extensively in a member state’s sovereignty. (Puzsér, 2024)

Nevertheless, throughout the period of analysis, Magyar consistently confirmed that Hungary’s place is within the EU, declaring that ‘whatever the faults of the Union, we are members of this club’ (RTL, 2024). Thus, regarding EU institutions, unlike Fidesz and Our Homeland, TISZA advocated Hungary’s accession to the European Public Prosecutor’s Office, citing corruption linked to the Orbán regime as a serious concern (Papp, 2024). Magyar likewise supported the euro for its potential to bolster economic stability (Takács, 2024) and favored modest increases in the European Parliament’s powers (Puzsér, 2024).

However, TISZA aligned with Fidesz and Our Homeland on certain EU policies, particularly in condemning the withholding of funds over rule-of-law concerns, framing it as unjust pressure from older member states. Magyar emphasized the importance of treating CEE countries, including Hungary, as equal partners within the EU and opposed external imposition of policies deemed best for the country (Mizsur, 2024). By portraying EU sanctions and funding cuts as politically motivated, TISZA echoed elements of Fidesz’s sovereigntist rhetoric, though from a distinctly reformist angle. For voters accustomed to Fidesz’s sovereigntist discourse, this message likely resonated more strongly than the unconditional pro-EU stance and Western orientation of the “old opposition.”

On migration, the party broadly aligned with Fidesz on rejecting quotas and insisting on secure borders, though it placed more emphasis on targeting illegal immigration rather than immigration overall. After the election, TISZA hardened its cultural-integration stance, demanding that migrants honor Europe’s

and Hungary's 'Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian roots' (Magyar, 2024). Yet the party's approach remained slightly more permissive than Fidesz's, reflecting a readiness to accommodate certain categories of immigrants or asylum-seekers under appropriately regulated conditions. This nuance surfaced in October 2024, when TISZA MEPs voted in favor of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, distinguishing themselves from the more stringent stance of Fidesz.

On foreign policy, TISZA adopted a moderately Eurosceptic view. It opposed Ukraine's EU accession on the grounds that Kyiv lacked alignment with fundamental EU standards and norms, arguing that such a step would burden existing members (Kaufmann, 2024). TISZA also cautioned against fast-tracking Ukraine's NATO membership prior to a peace settlement with Russia (Botos, 2024). While condemning Russian aggression, Magyar insisted that the EU alone could not resolve Ukraine's crises via military aid, calling instead for diplomatic negotiation:

Ukraine has received the money, and I think we can agree that it is neither Hungary nor the European Union that will save Ukraine with arms transfers, various funds or other measures to bring peace. (Kassai, 2024)

Overall, while Magyar adopted a somewhat ambivalent stance on international affairs, navigating complex expectations, he sought to distance himself from Hungary's role in the war – sharply contrasting with the 'old opposition'. Similarly, while not adopting a fully radical stance, TISZA generally avoided endorsing a unified EU foreign policy, arguing that European history does not inherently favor unity. Although the party demonstrates a stronger commitment to Hungary's EU membership and integration than the other two party in this study, its vision also diverges from that of contemporary pro-European parties. Instead, it advocates a return to the EU's original foundational objectives.

Thus, by rejecting the idea of leaving the EU while still criticizing certain policies, TISZA exemplified a stance best described as Euroambivalent Euroscepticism: it stands firmly behind integration with pro-European messages but remains regularly critical of how Brussels exercises power. Unlike the old left-liberal opposition, which largely aligned itself with Kopecký and Mudde's 'Euroenthusiast' category by supporting both European integration and the EU itself, the TISZA Party maintains unequivocal support for European integration while adopting an equivocal position toward the EU. This stance makes it readable for both Euroenthusiasts and (soft) Eurosceptics, while at the same time creating overlaps with the positions of Fidesz and Our Homeland, thereby diluting the distinctions that had previously allowed these parties to stand out. As a result, Fidesz and Our Homeland have lost their advantage in presenting a distinctive Eurosceptic narrative to their core voter bases. By adopting a non-populist, Euroambivalent – rather than equivocal – stance, the TISZA Party positions itself to attract both the pro-EU voters of the old left-liberal opposition and to more

critical, even pro-government, voters who are skeptical of the EU, reflecting the wide-reaching strategy of a newly formed catch-all party.

By partially aligning with Fidesz on certain EU positions, TISZA successfully managed to shift the political competition onto domestic issues. It employed strong populist critiques of Fidesz's entrenched rule, focusing on governance failures in corruption, healthcare, and education, and framed the June 2024 EP election as a referendum on national mismanagement rather than Orbán's usual 'Hungarians vs. globalist forces' narrative. By stepping outside the conventional pro- vs. anti-EU dichotomy that benefits Fidesz, TISZA thwarted attempts to label it as a 'foreign agent' and positioned itself as a sovereign political actor, redirecting debate toward systemic corruption and incompetence at home. In doing so, it drew on populist rhetoric to mobilize voters, but TISZA's fire was aimed at government shortcomings instead of Brussels. As a result, it remains relatively impervious to Fidesz's EU-centered populist narratives.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Our study aimed to examine the 2024 European Parliament elections in Hungary, with particular focus on two outright Eurosceptic parties – the populist right-wing governing *Fidesz* and the far-right *Our Homeland Movement* – and the newly formed *TISZA Party*, which incorporates certain Eurosceptic elements. Through a qualitative single-country case study examining party leaders' political speeches, party manifestos, campaign statements, and other public communications, spanning from February 2022 to December 2024, we traced how key parties articulated their positions on the EU and European integration within a fundamentally transforming domestic political context.

Our findings indicate that Euroscepticism remained as the dominant narrative in the 2024 Hungarian EP elections. Despite Hungary's still largely pro-European public, the elections resulted in an overwhelming victory for parties espousing some degree or form of Eurosceptic discourse, collectively securing 19 out of 21 Hungary's seats in the new European Parliament and over 80% of the vote. Behind the paradox of a pro-EU society electing somewhat EU-critical representatives lies a shift in the elite-level strategies. Notably, none of these parties openly advocated full withdrawal from the EU (HUXIT); instead, they adopted moderated and deliberately ambiguous forms of Euroscepticism, reflecting a broader trend where outright anti-EU positions have softened into reformist critiques from within.

The central conceptual innovation and empirical finding of our research is the distinction between what we term 'Equivocal' and 'Euroambivalent' Eurosceptic positions. Equivocal parties stop short of calling for exit but occasionally hint that 'life outside the EU' is possible, advocating sweeping reforms that pose

nearly insurmountable challenges to the current integration framework. By contrast, Euroambivalent parties firmly affirm the value of EU membership and integration in principle while still criticize certain EU policies or perceived overreach – thus straddling the line between soft Euroscepticism and a pro-EU stance – in a way that remains open to interpretation by both camps. Beyond this, our study clarifies the complex and contingent nexus between populism and Euroscepticism, emphasizing that not all populist parties rely on hardline anti-EU rhetoric and highlighting the diverse ways political actors engage with EU-related issues within their broader domestic contexts.

Therefore, our research not only illuminates the specific context of Hungary's 2024 EP elections but also offers a conceptual framework with broader applicability. By distinguishing between equivocal and Euroambivalent Euroscepticism, the study offers a more nuanced lens for analyzing how political actors dynamically calibrate their EU stance in response to domestic pressures and public sentiment, moving beyond the hard-versus-soft dichotomy. This theoretical contribution can be applied to other countries with other political contexts, enhancing comparative analyses of Euroscepticism. Recognizing these gradations of Eurosceptic rhetoric helps explain how Euroscepticism can become a dominant political force without advocating outright anti-EU rejection, thereby reshaping political discourse both within member states and in the European Union as a whole.

6.1 The impact of the strategic use of Euroscepticism in Hungary: a political realignment in the making

Finally, a brief discussion on the Hungarian case offers a compelling illustration of how Equivocal and Euroambivalent elite strategies shaped electoral dynamics, party competition, and broader political realignments in a specific case. In Hungary, the governing Fidesz and the far-right Our Homeland Movement exemplified equivocal and populist Euroscepticism, whereas the new TISZA party adopted a non-populist Euroambivalent Eurosceptic approach. By delineating these categories, we showed how different shades of Euroscepticism were strategically employed: equivocal messaging broadened a party's appeal to both moderate reformists and hardline skeptics, while Euroambivalent positioning allowed a party to appeal simultaneously to pro-EU voters and more skeptical audiences – precisely the balance needed by TISZA, which has since emerged as the Orbán regime's main and most potent challenger. Furthermore, by partially aligning with Fidesz on EU issues, TISZA successfully redirected the political competition to the domestic arena, using intense populist rhetoric to target government

failures in corruption, healthcare, and education rather than Brussels, making it less vulnerable to Fidesz's EU-centered populist narratives.

Recent public opinion polls provide empirical evidence on social attitudes that underpins our analysis of Hungarian elite-level strategies. Nationwide surveys from spring 2023 indicate that 72% of Hungarians support EU membership but left-liberal voters showing much higher approval (~90%) compared to 60% among Fidesz and 62% among Our Homeland supporters (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023). Notably, substantial minorities within these groups – 28% of Fidesz supporters and 22% of Our Homeland voters – favor leaving the EU, which may help explain these parties' equivocal Euroscepticism. Post-election survey data from the 'European Election Study 2024' reveals that while only 40% of Fidesz and Our Homeland electorates consider EU membership a 'good thing' (18–21% holding negative views and 35–39% remaining neutral), TISZA voters are overwhelmingly pro-EU, with 84% viewing membership positively and 81% regarding it as a 'good thing'. This is a much higher proportion than the 58% observed among other opposition EP voters, suggesting that TISZA effectively attracted pro-European voters dissatisfied with the old left-liberal opposition. In terms of specific EU policies, TISZA voters display a distinctive pattern. On immigration, 46% favor restrictive policies – a figure comparable to 58% among Fidesz voters and 44% among Our Homeland supporters, yet markedly higher than the 27% among traditional opposition voters. Regarding military assistance to Ukraine, TISZA's electorate is more divided, with 40% opposing and 35% supporting aid, aligning them more closely with the preferences observed within the traditional opposition.

By combining a pro-European stance on integration with Euroambivalent views on institutional design and policies, TISZA effectively bridged Hungary's broadly pro-European public sentiment with both public and elite-level Euroscepticism. This strategy expanded its support base and shifted political competition from EU issues to domestic concerns. Capitalizing on rising social discontent and breaking from Fidesz's populist 'international freedom fight' narrative, TISZA reshaped Hungary's political landscape. The 2024 EP elections marked a turning point, as its nearly 30% vote share challenged Fidesz's dominance, eliminated the fragmented old opposition, and reintroduced a two-bloc dynamic reminiscent of the early 2000s. By year-end, polls showed TISZA surpassing Fidesz, while its alignment with the European People's Party (EPP) and key committee roles in the European Parliament reinforced its domestic and international legitimacy, in stark contrast to Fidesz's growing international isolation.

In parallel, Viktor Orbán escalated his Eurosceptic rhetoric, increasingly framing the European Union as an unsustainable project. As he stated, 'Hungary does not need to leave the EU, it will collapse on its own if things continue like this' (Magyarország kormánya, 2025). His international maneuvers further strained Hungary's relations with EU and NATO allies. The creation of the Patriots for Europe (Pfe) group, co-founded by Fidesz and other nationalist parties, exemplified

this shift. His self-proclaimed ‘peace mission’ to Kyiv, Moscow, and Beijing, along with a controversial ceasefire proposal at the NATO Summit in Washington, drew sharp criticism. Hungary’s EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2024 highlighted its growing isolation, as key member states boycotted events over rule-of-law violations and perceived alignment with Russia. However, Orbán’s meeting with Donald Trump, then a U.S. presidential candidate, signaled a potential shift in geopolitical outlook – one that gained momentum after Trump’s late 2024 victory. Trump’s return to power provided Fidesz with a crucial diplomatic lifeline, bolstering its leverage against Brussels and reinforcing its sovereignty-driven ‘third way’ foreign policy. Yet in 2025, this strategy faces a critical test as growing societal pressures, rising TISZA, and shifting international dynamics intersect.

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