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Old Wine in New Bottles: Hard Euroscepticism in the 2024 European Parliament Elections

Vít Hloušek,
Vratislav Havlík¹

Abstract

The article addresses the conceptualisation of hard Euroscepticism, which must reflect current crises and challenges facing European integration, such as the war in Ukraine. The conceptualisation of party-based Euroscepticism remains problematic, particularly in delineating a clear boundary between hard and soft variants. Szcerbiak and Taggart's dichotomous typology is regarded as highly useful, offering two fundamental ideal types. However, its practical application proves more complex. Since Brexit, explicit calls to leave the EU have declined, supplanted by reformist narratives that blur traditional categories. Nonetheless, many political parties maintain fundamental objections to European integration, often concealed by strategic ambiguity. This article argues for the continued – but recontextualised – use of the ideal type of hard Euroscepticism, accounting for contextual and strategic variation and focusing not on the 'essence' of each type, but on the trajectory individual parties take in relation to the EU. It offers a theoretical and empirical framework for analysing manifestations of hard Euroscepticism in the 2024 European Parliament elections, drawing on both case studies and broader regional trends.

Keywords: Hard Euroscepticism; ideal types; party Euroscepticism; European Parliament elections 2024

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1. Introduction

The current world of party Euroscepticism is not at all easy in terms of trying to grasp it conceptually. While Szczerbiak and Taggart's (2008) classic hard and soft Euroscepticism divide is still a useful (because not entirely overcome) tool for distinguishing between qualitatively different currents of politicians who question more or less aspects of European integration, the problem is that when applied to specific political parties, this dichotomy can appear insufficient. Treib (2021, p. 180) notes in this context that the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' Eurosceptic parties '*has thus become less and less useful for categorizing anti-EU parties*'. Moreover, from a certain point of view, hard Eurosceptics may appear to have 'disappeared' after Brexit, as rhetoric about exit has been replaced by narratives about reforming the Union (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025).

We have thus seemingly seen a rise of the category of soft Eurosceptics, which, hypothetically, includes also any politicians who originally presented themselves as radical. This is, of course, just a problem of outdated perception of conceptual categories. Already Kaniok and Komínková (2022, p. 80) note that Euroscepticism is a '*vague, elastic umbrella term*'. Ideally, this should lead researchers to seek to understand conceptual categories in the context of contemporary politics and thus continuously recontextualise them. Not only do we need to continuously work on defining hard and soft Euroscepticism in such a way that they are applicable in terms of the changing rhetoric of political parties. We also need to consider what types of sources to include in analyses of Eurosceptic attitudes so that they reflect as closely as possible the real positions of the party.

As Havlík and Hloušek (2025) show, 'exit' is not fashionable, and yesterday's hard Eurosceptics talk about EU reform or a referendum on remaining in the EU. But as they also show, these allegorical shortcuts should not mislead us into thinking that the parties in question have abandoned their 'principled objection' to European integration. Thus, there is typically a manoeuvring between the officially declared need for reform the EU and the less officially (e.g. through social media) presented readiness to consider leaving the Union. Thus, more than ever, the study of hard Euroscepticism today requires the inclusion of a wide range of different data and reading them 'between the lines'. Despite the seeming disadvantages of Szczerbiak and Taggart's typology (2008), we argue that it should still be employed, but its use should be recontextualized. We propose to retain hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type – one that may take a range of specific forms depending on local and temporal contexts, as well as on strategic and tactical considerations.

The ambition of this text is to provide a contextual and theoretical basis for a special issue on the manifestation of hard Euroscepticism in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Thus, on the background of the results of the individual articles included in this issue and also the examples of some other parties in the

region, the aim is to systematically describe the patterns of behaviour of hard Eurosceptics today and thus further contribute to the debate on hard Euroscepticism.

This article is structured as follows. The second chapter discusses the plausibility and applicability of the hard and soft dichotomy from a theoretical perspective. The following section then defines hard Euroscepticism as an "ideal type." The fourth chapter presents theoretical expectations based on conceptual definitions and the context of the EP elections. The fifth chapter summarizes the results of the individual articles in this special issue and discusses them in the context of other similar Eurosceptic parties in the region.

2. Soft and hard: Do the ideal types still matter?

Practically speaking, the object of Eurosceptic criticism is seldom any imaginary alternative, but rather the actually existing EU with its institutions and policies. Therefore, party Euroscepticism can be defined as a '*negative party position on European integration and the European Union*' (Vasilopoulou, 2009, p. 3). Despite various criticisms (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002; Nicoli, 2017, p. 314; Treib, 2021, p. 176), Taggart and Szczerbiak's distinction between soft and hard forms of Euroscepticism continues to represent the mainstream of conceptual debate.

Taggart and Szczerbiak (2024) have consistently employed the definitions of both forms that they initially presented in their edited volume from 2008:

Hard Euroscepticism is where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived. Party-based soft Euroscepticism (...) was where 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, 2008a, p. 2)

However, they later simplified the criteria for both forms: soft Euroscepticism as '*being opposed to the current trajectory of deeper European integration but stopping short of opposing European integration through the EU in principle*', and hard Euroscepticism as '*opposing EU integration in principle, generally expressed through opposition to a country's EU membership*' (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024, p. 1174).

As ideal types, the categories of soft and hard Euroscepticism as defined by Szczerbiak and Taggart are functional. Their distinction is clear, and there is no

logical overlap between these two ideal types. More problematic, however, is the application of this distinction in contemporary European politics, where a series of crises – the economic crisis in and beyond the Eurozone (2008–2010), the migration crisis, the Brexit crisis, the COVID-19 crisis, and the war in Ukraine – have substantially transformed both the European and global contexts.

Moreover, certain criticisms of EU institutions or policies have become part of the political mainstream (Leconte, 2015; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2013). Thus, the crucial question arises: can any criticism of the EU, its institutions, or its policies still be labelled a manifestation of soft Euroscepticism? As Conti (2003) aptly observed, the boundary between soft Euroscepticism and a pragmatic yet cautious pro-integration stance is, at best, blurred – if not entirely absent.

Simultaneously, in the face of the multiple crises unfolding almost continuously since 2008, European voters have remained loyal to the very idea of the EU and have consistently expressed greater trust in EU institutions than in their national governments (European Commission, 2024). This reality makes life more difficult for hard Eurosceptic politicians, as openly advocating for withdrawal from the EU entails considerable political risk.

The first problem pertains to the assertion that ‘policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived’ (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008a, p. 2). For some authors, such a principled opposition represents a more important clue to label a party as hard Eurosceptic than the direct call for leave (Pareschi, 2025). What kinds of policies fall into this category? Are they the same today as they were in the early 2000s, or in 2008 when this definition was first coined? In the early 2000s, we might expect hard Euroscepticism to have entailed rejecting the transformation of the European Communities into the European Union. But does that mean that advocating for limiting supranational institutions in favour of intergovernmental decision-making constitutes hard Euroscepticism?

Indeed, the reinforcement of intergovernmental institutions and the repatriation of powers to the member states are themes commonly invoked even by member parties of the soft Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists Group in the European Parliament. Their intention, however, is not to dismantle the EU, but rather to improve its functioning (Steven, 2025, p. 12).

Therefore, we cannot rely solely on the parties’ surface-level statements. To determine the nature of their Euroscepticism – whether soft or hard – we must consider the deeper context of their narratives and relate those narratives to their political performance. Who are a party’s fellow travellers? Which European Parliament group and European party family does it belong to? In a manner analogous to the criteria used for assessing party families (Hix & Lord, 1997, pp. 25–27), factors such as a party’s origins, historical allegiances, and developmental trajectory help us distinguish its fundamental identity as either a soft or hard Eurosceptic party.

For example, Meloni's party, Brothers of Italy, originally entertained ideas such as abandoning the Eurozone (FdI, 2014, p. 1). However, it soon repositioned itself as a 'Euro-realist' (i.e. soft Eurosceptic) party (Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022), and has behaved even more constructively since entering government (Moury & Pritoni, 2024).

On the other hand, if a party seeks to exit the Eurozone following the Eurozone crisis and the experience of the Greek debt crisis – where the idea of leaving the Eurozone effectively equated to leaving the EU altogether (Sotiropoulos, 2020) – this would indicate the adoption of a hard Eurosceptic stance. Similarly, the outright rejection of any supranational forms of cooperation within the EU would amount to advocating the dismantling of the entire institution. Thus, a purely intergovernmentalist position can easily overlap with hard Euroscepticism, whereas a moderate preference for intergovernmental solutions – such as accepting the adoption of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in certain key policy areas – reflects a soft Eurosceptic position.

The second problem relates to the desire to leave the EU, which has become more problematic in the meantime. Brexit, in particular, demonstrated how costly and unattractive such an option can be for voters, especially those with even partial alignment to the political mainstream (Martill, 2021). While comparing the attitudes of EU-27 citizens before and after Brexit, Catherine de Vries (2017) found increasing support for EU membership, linked to expectations of a negative impact of exiting the EU on the British economy and the country's political standing. Moreover, European media reported Brexit in terms of crisis undermining stability and prosperity (Krzyżanowski, 2019). Consequently, the boundary between soft and hard Euroscepticism has also become increasingly blurred. Even hard Eurosceptic parties have sought to soothe voters unsettled by their previously pro-exit stance, employing softer and more ambiguous narratives. Some parties float between the two types (Franzosi et al., 2015), while others adopt ostensibly unequivocal positions (Heinisch et al., 2021), which nevertheless remain ambiguous and allow for tactical manoeuvring both in relation to their electorates and, even more so, to potential coalition partners.

In current day-to-day European politics, the clear distinctions between soft and even hard Eurosceptic behaviour are being eroded. Many political parties operate in line with the basic assumption of the North Carolina School of Euroscepticism studies, which conceptualises pro- and anti-EU positions as existing along a continuum (Mudde, 2012; Bakker et al., 2015). While such an approach captures the complexity and fragility of empirical party positions, it does not provide a sufficiently robust conceptual or typological framework for understanding the phenomenon of Euroscepticism.

Without denying the value and significance of the Chapel Hill Survey and the North Carolina School, we argue that there is no need to abandon the hard-soft typology of Euroscepticism, provided it is treated as a set of Weberian ideal

types (Weber, 1949). Ideal types distil a colourful and diverse empirical reality into its essential elements. They represent abstract constructs composed of the most distinctive and internally coherent features, enabling the interpretation of complex realities in a comprehensible manner (Bouckaert, 2022, p. 2). Drawing inspiration from the use of ideal types in the study of populist parties (Zaslave, 2008) and reactions to crises in European integration (Glencross, 2023), we propose to retain hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type – one that may take a range of concrete forms depending on local and temporal contexts, as well as on strategic and tactical considerations.

For instance, small, non-parliamentary radical right populist parties, such as Tricolour (Trikolóra), openly advocated for Czexit prior to Brexit exposing the negative consequences of leaving the EU. Thereafter, they shifted to promoting a referendum with an open-ended outcome (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025, p. 357). Conversely, large radical right parties such as the National Rally (RN) in France, which aim to attract mainstream voters, have substantially softened their originally explicit hard Eurosceptic rhetoric (Ivaldi, 2018; Lorimer, 2022). Does this mean that these parties have moved entirely from hard to soft Euroscepticism? In the case of the RN, already established as one of the major poles of the French party system, the answer is most likely yes. In the case of small extra-parliamentary challengers, which compete not only with the mainstream but – perhaps more intensely – with one another, the answer is most probably no.

The Czech Tricolour can serve as an example once again. Its leader, Zuzana Majerová Zahradníková, commented on the referendum regarding the Czech Republic's exit from the EU. While she did not explicitly state a desire to leave, she framed the entire debate around the referendum in a manner that portrayed the current European Union as detrimental to Czech national interests. After outlining the complex procedure required to hold a referendum, she added: 'So much for the road map. What does that mean? Does that mean we should give up on Czexit? Not at all!' (Majerová Zahradníková 2022). This quote aptly illustrates a subtle rhetorical shift from an openly declared desire to exit, to advocating departure framed within the narrative of direct democracy.

Looking beyond the official party materials into the broader communication of particular leaders and top politicians allows as most probably seeing more examples of hard Eurosceptic stances. There is also a possibility that the parties will revert to openly calling for an exit from the EU, thereby facing yet another crisis of integration. The shadow of Brexit can hardly persist indefinitely.

Therefore, it is first necessary to outline the contours and clarify the content of hard Euroscepticism as conceived in the form of an ideal type. It is equally important to examine its contemporary modifications and topical manifestations.

3. Hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type

To retain the concept of hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type requires the delineation of its fundamental features. The principal point of departure is that hard Euroscepticism entails opposition to the European Union itself, rather than to the general idea of cooperation among European states. Typically, the argument of a hard Eurosceptic party against the EU combines a sovereigntist narrative with criticism of the elitist and bureaucratic nature of the so-called ‘Brussels’ institutions (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025). While there may be support for cooperation among culturally and historically similar European countries, this is usually expressed through advocacy for a loose framework of inter-state collaboration – one in which no sovereignty is ceded to either supranational or even intergovernmental institutions. The ultimate aim of an ideal-typical hard Eurosceptic party is not merely to dismantle but to crush the existing institutional structure of the EU and to significantly reduce the current level of supranational cooperation, except perhaps in the domain of the free market.

When turning from the ideal type to its empirical variants, the clearest expression in political practice is the call for a country’s exit from the EU. However, as previously noted, such an explicit stance does not always prove politically advantageous, prompting some hard Eurosceptics to adopt more equivocal or ambiguous positions. As a result, an explicit call for withdrawal is no longer the only means of expressing hard Euroscepticism. Alternatives such as proposing referenda or advocating for a radical, revolutionary overhaul of EU institutions may now serve as more palatable and strategic forms of articulating irreconcilable opposition to the current model of European integration.

Geopolitical considerations may also shape these stances. Even sovereigntist parties often favour certain forms of international cooperation – for example, engaging in trade with China or aligning strategically with Russia. In particular, nationalist populist movements in the Balkans or in Eastern European countries still aspiring to EU membership may offer such narratives as plausible alternatives to their domestic electorates (Belloni, 2016; Panagiotou, 2020; Jaćimović et al., 2023).

Let us now briefly examine the contemporary reframing of hard Euroscepticism, using the examples of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Taggart and Szczerbiak (2019) are correct in noting that Brexit did not have the same profound impact on party systems across Europe as the Eurozone or migration crises. Nevertheless, it significantly influenced the strategies and rhetoric of hard Eurosceptic parties. The consequences of Brexit, the arduous nature of the subsequent UK-EU negotiations, and especially the economic downturn experienced by the UK since its departure, all contributed to problematising the rhetoric of continental Eurosceptics. These actors had previously advocated notions

such as ‘Frexit’ or ‘Czechit’ without hesitation. Prior to the clear emergence of Brexit’s negative consequences, hard Eurosceptics presented it as a window of opportunity to undermine the EU (Kaniok & Hloušek, 2018). As the realities of Brexit deteriorated, strategic guises emerged – such as proposing referenda as proxies – enabling parties to discuss potential exits without alienating voters increasingly aware of the economic fallout associated with leaving the EU (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025).¹

A more typical response was demonstrated by the German AfD, which intensified its criticism of the EU while avoiding an explicit call for withdrawal. Instead, it adopted a flexible approach, allowing the party to remain sharply critical of the EU’s capacity for reform, without openly promoting departure (Roch, 2023). Brexit, therefore, did not present a viable window of opportunity for advancing hard Eurosceptic arguments in favour of exit, although it also did not lead to a broader decline in criticism of the EU (van Kessel et al., 2020).²

The COVID-19 crisis and associated anti-pandemic measures created fertile ground for politicisation and contestation (Bobba & Hubé, 2021). The prominent role played by the EU in managing the crisis (Boin & Rhinard 2023) invited critical responses from Eurosceptics. The temporary suspension of key institutions, such as the Schengen border regime (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021), revealed the fragility of integration. Nonetheless, the pandemic did not give rise to an overt hard Eurosceptic agenda. Rather, soft Eurosceptic criticism prevailed, at times even manifesting in complaints of some hard Eurosceptics that the EU was insufficiently proactive in coordinating vaccine procurement and other critical measures.

Hard Eurosceptic parties in Central Europe, for example, developed narratives alleging that the EU exploited crisis management to advance a progressive agenda and to accrue power at the expense of member states (Hloušek & Havlík, 2024). Familiar sovereigntist themes were thus repackaged in light of the pandemic, albeit only partially, and without openly promoting exit – an option perceived as too risky even by some of their own voters.

An ideal type deserves conceptually clear definition or at least a dense description of its main features. According to Andrea Pareschi (2025, p. 5): A party as hard Eurosceptic if it systematically demonstrates principled opposition towards the EU as an integrated common market, the legitimacy of its supra national layer, the possibility of expanding its competences or any core value expressed in the TEU and the Copenhagen criteria. A party need not endorse any such elements, but manifest, consistent rejection translates into hard Euroscepticism.

Even if we set aside the argument that there is no such thing as a historical mainstream of European integration (Kný & Kratochvíl, 2015), we should

exercise caution when working with Pareschi's definition. Does it imply that if a party fundamentally opposes one of the identified elements, it is automatically categorised as hard Eurosceptic? Or is a full-fledged combination of such oppositions required?

The examples of Fidesz and Lega Salvini cited by Pareschi seem to support the former interpretation, as neither of these parties targets the integrated common market. Moreover, opposition to the values enshrined in the TEU and the Copenhagen criteria is often associated with nativism and populism (Pirro & Stanley, 2022). Even though empirically, there are clear overlaps between nativism, populism, and Euroscepticism (Pirro & Taggart, 2018), there is no necessary intrinsic liaison among these concepts. The concept of hard Euroscepticism should not be overstretched. Instead, attention should be given to its core political argument when constructing the characteristics of hard Euroscepticism as an ideal type.

The key characteristic of a hard Eurosceptic party is its intention to alter its country's status quo in relation to the European Union – either through advocating for withdrawal from the EU, or through promoting a fundamental transformation of the Union based on the rejection of supranational institutions and organisational structures, in favour of a vision of fully sovereign states forming only a loose intergovernmental '*Europe des patries*'. This constitutes the definition of the core beliefs and foundational principles of an ideal-typical hard Eurosceptic party – principles that are continually reaffirmed and reformulated, following the changing context of European integration and its domestic politicisation.

Recognising that hard Euroscepticism possesses a substantial ideal-typical core, alongside its more contingent and temporally framed manifestations, we may now proceed to analyse its status in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections in Central and Eastern European countries. What is the current context in which the ideal type of hard Eurosceptic political parties operates? What are the opportunities and constraints for hard Euroscepticism in the period surrounding the 2024 elections? What are its current manifestations? And, considering the previously discussed tendency of hard Eurosceptics to adopt guises, what are its most recent façades?

4. What trajectory of Euroscepticism can be expected from the EP elections in 2024?

European Parliament elections, which are the focus of this special issue, are typically considered second-order elections (Reif & Schmidt, 1980). This entails, among other things, several characteristics, such as lower voter turnout or addressing issues of rather national importance. However, this standard view has been confronted by a series of crises in the last two decades, which in turn have

led the literature to speak of Europeanisation (Braun, 2021) and continuous politicization of European integration. Yet politicization does not happen all the time, but rather in the context of ‘politicizing moments’ (Hutter et al., 2021; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019) that have the potential to polarize. The 2024 European Parliament elections coincided with the sharp phase of the war in Ukraine, which had considerable potential to polarize. It is therefore to be expected that Eurosceptic parties took advantage of the potential offered by the security crisis to sharply criticise the EU for aid to Ukraine (financial, arms, material) that only ‘prolonged the war’ and ‘prevented peace’.

At the same time, we know Brexit has had a specific effect on the Eurosceptic parties. While it has led to the politicisation of European issues, in the long run it has led parties to a real or at least apparent shift away from hard Eurosceptic positions, which have been replaced by more moderate positions calling for EU reforms, possible referendums on remaining, etc. (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025). The underlying assumption is that the war in Ukraine and the accusations of war-mongering against the EU have not been enough incentive for the Eurosceptic parties to move to hard Eurosceptic positions, because (a) the financial disadvantages for Britain of Brexit were still fresh in the minds of those parties’ voters, (b) many European economies had fallen into recession after the Covid crisis and the idea of much greater economic hardship in the event of a departure from the EU seemed unacceptable. Therefore, we can expect the opposite of radical positions, i.e., a continuation of the post-Brexit trend and a softening of exit rhetoric.

5. Features of Hard Euroscepticism in EP elections 2024

The topic of leaving the EU is clearly not attracting attention, at least not as much as it used to be. This is what some of the texts of this issue suggest in their contributions. Petrúšek et al. (2025) show very strong support of Czechs for remaining (only 9.4% are in favour of ‘Czexit’). Similarly, Hungarians clearly support staying in the Union, as shown by the text of Horváth (2025) as well as Benedek and Sebestyén (2025). According to the 2023 poll (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023), 72% of Hungarians are in favour of staying in the Union, and although support for membership is as expected higher among voters of liberal-left parties, a clear majority of Fidesz and Mi Hazánk voters are also supporters of EU membership. At this point, 2 things are interesting from a theoretical point of view. Hard Eurosceptic Mi Hazánk voters support membership more (62%) than Fidesz voters (60%). This data supports first of all the assumption that some hard Eurosceptic parties might be less engaged with the exit issue because there is simply not much interest in it among voters. It also explains why Fidesz members or supporters oscillate between soft and hard Euroscepticism, because according

to this survey it is Fidesz that has the most sympathisers (albeit still a minority) who support ‘Huxit’.

Moreover, as shown again by the research of Petrúšek et. al. (2025), voters’ position on Czexit is only weakly correlated with their choice of political party, and it cannot be said that Czexit supporters clearly support hard Eurosceptic parties and vice versa. Based on this finding, we can deduce that the issue of leaving the EU may be a cross-cutting one for political parties in terms of existing cleavages, which is risky and may lead to a loss of voters. This suggests, at least verbally, a more cautious stance, a necessity of manoeuvring between soft and hard Euroscepticism, rather than ‘putting the cards on the table’. This conclusion is confirmed by Horváth (2025) in his analysis of the 2024 EP election campaign of the Hungarian party Mi Hazánk. It is a remarkable finding that the oscillation between more or less hard Eurosceptic positions has finally led to a general downplaying of European attitudes in the party’s programmatics, when Eurosceptic positions on the party’s Facebook account were far from being one of its main themes in the EP elections campaign.

The tactic of reducing the salience of ‘unpleasant’ European issues was not used by all parties, of course. Bulgaria’s Vazrazhdane party (Lyubenov & Stoyanov, 2025) did not shy away from the topic of Bulgaria’s exit from the EU, with party chair Kostadinov talking about a referendum on leaving the EU if the terms of the country’s membership are not renegotiated. However, the party’s presentation reminds one of the classic tactics of hard Eurosceptics after Brexit. In particular, Stoyanov, the leader of the MEP candidate, used less radical language than the leader of the party, putting the need to solve problems at the forefront and framing leaving the EU as a last resort.

Similarly, Horváth (2025) said Fidesz used European themes visibly more than Mi Hazánk as an issue of contestation in the election campaign. Thus, we certainly cannot talk about the sidelining of European questions when it comes to Fidesz. Havlík and Hloušek (2025, pp. 357–358) have previously described the tactics of this party, which officially denies the consideration of ‘Huxit’, yet its leaders and personalities affiliated with the party (e.g. Magyar Nemzet, 2021) do here and there clearly call for the possibility of leaving the EU, which the party nevertheless denies the next day. Thus, Vazrazhdane, Fidesz and indeed also Mi Hazánk can be used to show that parties with the aim of avoiding splits within their own electorate do not necessarily have to abandon their hard Eurosceptic positions, they just translate them into a vocabulary ‘less stressful’ for the voters.

While the war in Ukraine has clearly had an impact on the rhetoric of the Eurosceptic parties, it must be said at the same time that attitudes towards the war cannot be clearly considered a predictor of hard Euroscepticism. We see a close link between radicalised Eurosceptic attitudes and the war in Ukraine, particularly in case of Fidesz in Hungary and Varazhdane in Bulgaria. Fidesz has repeatedly attacked the EU over sanctions against Russia and for its failure

to manage the conflict, all of which the party has described as inconsistent with Hungarian national interests (Benedek & Sebestyén, 2025). Similarly, Varazhdane has presented itself with strongly pro-Russian positions and has seen the EU as an American puppet in this context (Lyubenov & Stoyanov, 2025). In contrast, Mi Hazánk, despite its positions tending towards hard Euroscepticism over the long term, limited itself more to criticism of military aid to Ukraine and its positions can be described as at most mildly pro-Russian (Horváth, 2025). Similarly, while some Lithuanian parties have adopted a ‘peace narrative’ (but not a pro-Russian one), this has not resulted in a new wave of Eurosceptic rhetoric (Rakutienė, 2025).

Let us complete the picture with the Czech examples. Far right Freedom and Direct Democracy (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD) of Tomio Okamura prefers to talk about peace but, simultaneously, offers relativisation of Russian aggression and Russian claims. NATO is responsible for triggering the war, according to SPD, while Russia was manoeuvred into war by the conspiracy of the USA, NATO and West in general (Kopecký, 2022). Moreover, Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia are Russian, full of people wanting to ‘*leave corrupted Ukraine*’ (Rozsypal, 2025). SPD stresses that Russia is not a danger for Czechs, and the Czech national interests are related to reaching the peace in Ukraine, at any (Ukrainian) costs.

Czech populist Andrej Babiš has remained wishy-washy about Ukraine. He confirmed Russia is the aggressor, rejected to be pro-Russian, and preferred to talk vaguely about peace ‘*because we do not want war*’ (Bartoníček, 2025). For Babiš and Okamura, Russian narrative might be risky and they prefer to stress their traditional topics of migration as a threat to Czech society. For hard Eurosceptic anti-establishment SPD, however, Russia is a sort of proxy how to express general dissatisfaction and deep distrust to the Western institutions of NATO and European Union. Russia does not constitute an independent element of the Czech (hard) Eurosceptic narrative, yet it ‘flavours’ existing ones, adding a new argumentation line against ‘*idiots from the Brussels*’ (SPD undated). Moreover, ‘peace’ can work as the same proxy of pro-Russian Euroscepticism, as referendum does for exit.

An important observation relates to prevalence of cultural issues in the toolboxes of Central and Eastern European (hard) Eurosceptic parties and politicians. Nativism, related to cultural and identitarian narratives, alongside the populism and hostility to liberal democracy, are typical for them (Lyubenov & Stoyanov, 2025). Sovereignist discourses are much more bases in alleged EU attacks on traditional values, traditional family, or traditional division of the gender roles. They have remained much more important discursive issues than elements of economic Euroscepticism (Rakutienė, 2025).

At the same time and despite the proxies mentioned above, the gradual tendency to downplay or guise the exit of the EU does not constitute a universal pattern of Central and Eastern European hard Euroscepticism. There are still undoubtedly parties that have maintained their unquestionably hard Eurosceptic positions not only shortly after Brexit but also later in the EP elections. The Czech

SPD (2024, p. 3) clearly devoted the majority of its election programme to the EU, and there is still a clear ‘principled objection’ in most of its programme points, including the planned Czexit, ‘We will prevent further devolution of powers to Brussels and try to regain maximum powers until the European Union is dissolved and an organisation of closely cooperating European sovereign nations is established.’ Similarly, the Czech non-parliamentary, hard Eurosceptic party Svobodní, known for its unequivocal support of Czexit, maintained its position in the EP elections (Svobodní, 2024).

6. Concluding remarks

The original typology developed by Taggart and Szczerbiak, distinguishing between hard and soft forms of Euroscepticism, remains both relevant and analytically useful – provided it is understood not as a perfect reflection of a complex reality, but as a set of Weberian ideal types that constitute a logical opposition in theory and point towards divergent directions in political practice. The definition of hard Euroscepticism takes into consideration only its basic ideal-typical features and remains open for re-contextualisation vis-à-vis the current EU politics. Hard Euroscepticism refers to a principled opposition to the European Union as a political entity, rooted in a sovereigntist perspective and often critical of the EU’s perceived elitism and bureaucratic centralisation. While not rejecting the notion of *any* form of European cooperation, hard Euroscepticism advocates for a very loose intergovernmental framework that preserves ‘full’ national sovereignty and seeks to dismantle the EU and its supranational institutions.

In this context, it is more productive to examine the trajectory of empirically existing political parties as they drift towards either a soft or hard Eurosceptic course, rather than seeking to define their fixed ‘essence’.

In the ever-changing landscape of contemporary Euroscepticism, trajectory and general context is key, due to the inherent contextual fluidity of party positions. A succession of contemporary crises – economic, migratory, geopolitical – has blurred the once-clear boundaries between hard and soft forms of Euroscepticism, just as already the pre-2008 development of the EU complicated the distinction between soft Euroscepticism and pragmatic pro-Europeanism. A more flexible analytical framework, combining ideal types with a trajectory-based approach, is thus well suited to examining contemporary Euroscepticism, particularly as manifested in Central and Eastern Europe in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Interpreting such trajectories requires both methodological rigour and interpretative openness. It is essential to consider not only what appears in party materials and what it signifies, but also what is omitted and why. In many cases, proxies have replaced unequivocal statements. Hard Euroscepticism may be concealed behind discourses centred on ‘referenda’ or ‘peace’, rather than

articulated through direct calls for withdrawal. In contexts where exit from the EU is not electorally resonant, hard Eurosceptic parties often avoid explicit exit narratives, embedding their opposition instead in critiques of EU bureaucracy, cultural homogenisation, or perceived threats to national sovereignty and identity. At first glance, this puts them in the waters of soft Euroscepticism, but this may just be a matter of temporary tactics. In the final assessment, it is necessary to read 'between the lines' and take into account the quality and long-term nature of individual positions, as well as verbal 'manoeuvring' etc.

The results of individual studies included in this special issue mostly confirm the expectations formulated in this article. The trend toward a 'softening' of originally pro-exit attitudes that emerged in the post-Brexit period persisted in the 2024 European Parliament elections, and there was no new wave of open-voiced hard Euroscepticism, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine and the 'pro-peace' positions of many Eurosceptic parties. A direct call for withdrawal is no longer the sole or even primary expression of hard Euroscepticism. Rather, appeals for a profound reconfiguration of the EU into a looser framework of cooperation between 'fully' sovereign nation-states may prove a more effective discursive strategy – particularly in a global context where voters may perceive complete isolation as impractical or undesirable. Hard Eurosceptic positions frequently intertwine with populism, nativism, and opposition to liberal democratic norms. This does not preclude the use of additional themes, including references to external crises (such as the war in Ukraine) or external actors (such as China or Russia). However, such elements tend to amplify existing narratives – for instance, those concerning migration or cultural issues – rather than introduce entirely new dimensions to the Eurosceptic discourse.

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Endnotes:

- 1 One exception from the rule constituted Václav Klaus junior in 2016. Later leader of the small Tricolour party and back than Czech MP for soft Civic Democratic Party said 'I see no other way than to get out of the European Union and tightly control our own borders. Even if it means becoming a third poorer' (Kopecký, 2016).
- 2 Brexit was not a one way track, though. For example, British Conservatives radicalised their approach to implementation of Brexit, being pushed by competition of UKIP (Alexandre-Collier, 2018), although in the long-term perspective, getting Brexit done subdued importance of the traditional Eurosceptic agenda in Britain in general (Usherwood, 2018).

Hard Euroscepticism in the Shadow of Fidesz: the Our Homeland Movement in Hungary

Attila Horváth¹

Abstract

The article investigates manifestations of hard Euroscepticism in Hungary, with a particular focus on the Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom), a radical right-wing populist party founded in 2018. While the party's manifestos articulate a deeply critical position on the European Union and explicitly propose holding a Huxit referendum within approximately five years – justifying its classification as hard Eurosceptic – an analysis of its online communication and parliamentary activity reveals a notable absence of EU-related contestation. The study also considers the case of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség), which has, since coming to power in 2010, exhibited traits that transcend the soft Eurosceptic category. The article contends that the conventional hard/soft Euroscepticism dichotomy is insufficient for capturing the complex and evolving nature of Hungary's ruling party's relationship with the European Union.

Keywords: Hungary; Our Homeland Movement; hard euroscepticism, Fidesz; soft euroscepticism; 2024 EP election

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1. Introduction

Despite Hungary being regarded as one of the most pro-EU countries in Eastern Central Europe during the 1990s (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002; Fölsz & Tóka, 2006; Batory, 2008), the country has not been immune to the presence of Eurosceptic voices. Although hard Euroscepticism has always been marginal to soft Euroscepticism, there have been three (parliamentary) parties since the fall of communism that can unreservedly be classified in the former category. The study demonstrates that these three far-right parties, the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (*Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja*, MIÉP), peaked between 1998–2002, followed by the Movement for a Better Hungary (*Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom*) and most recently, the Our Homeland Movement in Hungary (*Mi Hazánk Mozgalom*) have been successively at the vanguard of hard Euroscepticism, occupying this position in a rotating pattern.

As the *Mi Hazánk* is currently Hungary's only genuinely hard Eurosceptic force, our case study focuses on this party. Not only does *Mi Hazánk* have a devastating view of the EU, but the party also calls for a Huxit referendum, earning it the label of hard Eurosceptic. The use of the adverb 'genuinely' above is not accidental: as will be demonstrated in greater detail, since assuming power in 2010, Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance¹ (*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*, Fidesz) has exhibited a number of characteristics that extend beyond mere soft Euroscepticism. In light of the aforementioned considerations, the study not only presents *Mi Hazánk* but also examines the differences between the Eurosceptic stances of the two parties.

This article aims to contribute to the theoretical discourse on hard Euroscepticism in two ways. First, we examine how the concept of Huxit appears in the party manifestos and communication of *Mi Hazánk* and whether this case supports the narrative suggesting that the rhetoric of hard Eurosceptic parties is becoming softer or more ambiguous (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025). To assess *Mi Hazánk*'s stance toward the EU, we analysed not only party manifestos and statements by leading politicians but also conducted a content analysis of more than 800 Facebook posts from 2024. Additionally, we examined the parliamentary activity of *Mi Hazánk*'s MPs between 2022 and 2024. By analysing more than 500 parliamentary submissions, we assessed the salience of the EU in the party's agenda – specifically, whether it urges the government to prepare for Huxit or otherwise criticises the EU. Mapping the party's communication and parliamentary activity contributes to the analysis of 'issue salience', which is 'the Achilles heel of Euroscepticism studies' (Mudde, 2012). As Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008b, p. 253) underscored, even a Eurosceptic party may barely mention the EU issue in its programme, and it may hardly feature either as an election campaign issue. More recently, Down and Han (2021, p. 75) concluded, 'Despite far right parties being closely associated with an anti-EU orientation, there remains substantial

variation both in the extent of their opposition and the extent to which they emphasise the issue’.

Secondly, the article also addresses the terminological challenges surrounding Euroscepticism and seeks to validate, using the example of Fidesz, Taggart and Szczerbiak’s (2008b) assertion that the terms hard and soft Euroscepticism are not ‘universally applicable conceptual tools for explaining the phenomenon of Euroscepticism’ (pp. 361–362). In parallel, also in relation to Fidesz, we discuss the concept of ‘equivocal Euroscepticism’ (Heinisch, McDonnell, and Werner, 2021). Since our article seeks to provide an in-depth scrutiny of a single party (Mi Hazánk), it is fundamentally structured as a case study (Hague & Harrop, 2010, pp. 79–82), complemented by a comparative analysis with Fidesz.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 briefly outlines the story of hard Euroscepticism in Hungary, demonstrating that the idea of not joining or leaving the EU has a decades-long tradition in Hungary. The following section provides a closer overview of Mi Hazánk, which we term a populist radical right ‘purifier’. Although ‘not all radical right parties put forward extreme Eurosceptic positions’ (Vasilopoulou, 2018, p. 127), Mi Hazánk does not fall within the exceptions. Section 4 is devoted to the underpinning of the anti-EU stance of the party: as evidenced by the party’s election manifestos and the statements of its leading politicians, Huxit is perceived as a viable and, in some instances, preferable (although not an immediately feasible) alternative to Mi Hazánk. Then we highlight the background of the 2024 European Parliamentary election, which was predominantly shaped by the Russia–Ukraine war, largely due to Fidesz’s notably intensive campaign. As the content analysis of Mi Hazánk’s Facebook activity confirms, the party concentrated its efforts primarily on domestic issues, and the criticism of the EU was largely embedded in a broader anti-globalist perspective. Section 6 seeks to delineate Fidesz’s attitude towards the EU, drawing on a range of terminologies associated with Euroscepticism. It will be argued that none of the terms proposed by researchers can adequately capture the stance of the Hungarian governing party towards the EU.

2. Antecedents: the story of hard Euroscepticism in Hungary

It is no exaggeration to assert that Euroscepticism has been a persistent feature of Hungarian politics since the country began its European integration process. However, hard Euroscepticism has consistently remained marginal compared to soft Euroscepticism. Following the democratic transition, the European Union was widely regarded as a ‘promised land’ by both politicians and citizens. Consequently, in the 1990s, no major political party opposed integration outright, although some voiced cautious reservations as the integration process advanced.

As accession drew closer, ‘the previous, and to some extent romantic and illusory, consensus concerning Europe has evaporated’ (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, p. 298), and positions explicitly opposing EU membership began to surface (Batory, 2008). During the 2003 membership referendum campaign, only one political party, the far-right nationalist MIÉP – represented in parliament from 1998 to 2002 – encouraged voters to reject accession. MIÉP argued that joining the EU would compromise Hungary’s national sovereignty and subject the country to neo-colonial subjugation: ‘We should not join an organisation that, in contradiction to its own constitution, treats our country, the Hungarians, as second-class citizens (...)’ (Csurka, 2003).

Even the minor extra-parliamentary orthodox communists Workers’ Party (*Munkáspárt*) claimed that ‘Hungary’s accession to the EU is inevitable’, meanwhile also expressed significant reservations: ‘The EU is not an alliance of workers and wage earners, but an organisation of capital and monopolies’ (*Munkáspárt*, 2003). By this time in opposition, Fidesz exhibited ambivalence toward Hungary’s EU accession. While the party formally supported Hungary’s entry, it made minimal efforts to mobilise its voters to participate in the referendum (Ilonszki & Kurtán, 2004, p. 1023). This approach was primarily driven by tactical considerations, as Fidesz sought to avoid bolstering the legitimacy of the left-wing government through a high voter turnout.

With the decline of MIÉP, the prominence of hard Eurosceptic sentiment in Hungarian politics also diminished. A significant turning point occurred with the emergence of Jobbik, a radical far-right party that originated from a university student association. By the late 2000s, Jobbik had gained attention primarily for its anti-Roma rhetoric and activities (Kovács, 2013; Bíró-Nagy, Boros, & Vasali, 2013; Varga, 2014). The party achieved notable electoral success, securing 14.77% of the vote and three seats in the 2009 European Parliament elections, followed by its entry into the Hungarian Parliament in 2010 with 16.67% of the vote. In its 2009 manifesto, Jobbik characterised the EU as an ‘empire run from Brussels’ and asserted that ‘national sovereignty lost by joining the EU must be regained, primarily by changing the current rules of the Union, and if that fails, then ultimately by withdrawing from the EU’ (Jobbik, 2009, p. 26). The party manifesto prepared for the 2010 parliamentary elections confirmed the party’s anti-EU position (‘We firmly believe that Hungary’s long-term future cannot be envisioned within the framework of an EU following its current trajectory’ [Jobbik, 2010, p. 75]). Four years later, the referendum as a means to exit was also included in the party’s manifesto (Jobbik, 2014, p. 81).

In light of the aforementioned quotations, it is unsurprising that in the early 2010s, Jobbik was identified as one of the most anti-EU parties in Europe, according to Chapel Hill expert surveys (Vasilopoulou, 2018, pp. 127–128). However, since the end of 2013, mainly for strategic reasons, there has been a marked change in Jobbik’s position, which may be termed as ‘process of becoming a people’s party’²

(Mandák, 2015; Róna & Molnár, 2017) or ‘deradicalisation’ (Hyttinen, 2022). This shift is also reflected in the party’s approach to the EU: party leader Gábor Vona has already made the statement in 2016 that ‘leaving the EU is not on the agenda’ (24.hu, 2016); thus, the party’s attention was directed towards the ‘enhancement of Hungary’s bargaining position’ *within the EU* (Jobbik, 2018, p. 58). In sum, the initial fierce anti-EU sentiment (manifested, among other things, in the public burning of an EU flag in 2012) has been tamed into a soft Euroscepticism by the end of the 2014–2018 cycle.

3. The rise of Mi Hazánk: a populist radical right ‘purifier’

The deradicalisation strategy employed by Jobbik in the 2018 elections proved unsuccessful. Not only did the party fail to achieve the anticipated breakthrough, but its electoral performance (19.06%) was more than 1% below its share of the vote four years earlier. (Nevertheless, the party managed to secure three additional seats compared to 2014.) Following the failure of Jobbik in 2018, party leader Gábor Vona resigned. Subsequently, the radical faction within Jobbik sought to assume control of the party. When this endeavour proved unsuccessful, a number of politicians (including one MP) departed from Jobbik and subsequently established a new party, the Our Homeland Movement. Studying the factors to which the foundation and electoral success of a new party can be attributed, Lucardie (2000, p. 175) distinguished the so-called ‘purifiers’, ‘which refer to an ideology that has been betrayed or diluted by established parties’. In our view, Mi Hazánk perfectly fits into this category, as the party’s main aim was to return to the radical roots which, in their opinion, were ‘betrayed’ by Jobbik. Although Mi Hazánk was hardly a ‘genuinely new’ in the sense developed by Sikk (2005), it brought a new colour to Hungarian politics, or in other words, brought back the ideology of the ‘original Jobbik’, including the ultranationalism, traditionalist conservatism, the fierce anti-LGBTQ, anti-immigration and anti-roma sentiment, and most importantly for our topic, the hard Euroscepticism. According to Mudde (2007, p. 22), nativism, authoritarianism, and populism are the core ideologies of populist radical right parties – and these labels align seamlessly with the ethos of Mi Hazánk (e.g. Goldstein, 2021). The nativism manifests itself in the party’s strident nationalism (e.g. revision of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon [Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 9]) on the one hand, and its xenophobia (e.g. one of the headlines of the 2022 election manifesto reads as follows: ‘0% immigrant, 100% Hungarian country’ [Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 38]). As for authoritarianism, the party takes a strong law-and-order stance; penal populism, which has a long tradition in Hungary (Boda, Szabó, Bartha, Medve-Bálint, & Vidra, 2015), can also be mentioned: among others, the party urges to establish labour camps and calls for the death

penalty to be restored (Mi Hazánk, 2022, pp. 37–38). The party's manifesto and the rhetoric of its politicians also bear the hallmarks of populism, especially the opposition between 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2007, p. 23). Mi Hazánk holds the view that the governments that have been in power over the past decades have 'embezzled the regime change and sold out our homeland' (Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 9), in addition, the party tries to lump together former left and right governments, claiming that both political sides are cut from the same cloth (Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 9). The anti-political stance is also reflected in the party's submission of several bills to restrict certain privileges of MPs (e.g. abolition of parliamentary immunity, tightening of housing allowances). In line with several radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe (Bušítková, 2018), Mi Hazánk is rather left-leaning on the economy, calling for the protection of 'Hungarian interest' and clamping down the multinational corporations. It is noteworthy that the voter base of the party does not align with the characteristics typically associated with radical right parties. Less than half of Mi Hazánk voters (42%) identify as moderate right-wing or right-wing (compared to 77% for Fidesz). Additionally, 29% of Mi Hazánk voters surveyed indicated that they align with liberal or moderate liberal ideologies (Fidesz: 13%) (Policy Solutions, 2022, pp. 18–19).

The party's first contest was the 2019 European Parliament elections, in which it secured 3.29% of the vote, failing to win a seat (Table 1). Mi Hazánk was not far behind Jobbik, which exhibited a notable decline in electoral strength compared to the 2018 parliamentary elections (6.34%). Four years later, however, Mi Hazánk achieved 5.88%, winning six seats in the Hungarian parliament. Meanwhile, Jobbik stood in the 2022 elections as a member of the six-party opposition alliance, cooperating with the left-wing parties. This latter fact has indeed been for many Jobbik voters tantamount to a 'betrayal' of Jobbik's ideology, and it opened the way for the further strengthening of the 'purifiers'. Various studies have indicated that a not insignificant number of former Jobbik voters, who were unable to align themselves with the party's deradicalisation, have subsequently joined the Mi Hazánk camp (Republikon, 2022; Böcskei, 2022a). During the campaign, there was one issue that the party effectively thematised: the anti-Covid measures, primarily the compulsory vaccinations. The party, similarly to other far-right social movement organizations (cf. Volk & Weisskircher, 2023) constantly talked about a 'Covid dictatorship', meanwhile party president László Toroczkai repeatedly referred to himself as 'Hungary's only unvaccinated candidate for prime minister' (Hungary Today, 2022).

The 2024 European Parliament elections demonstrated the relative positions of the two parties with considerable clarity. While Mi Hazánk received almost seven times as many votes as Jobbik (thereby gaining one seat), with a result of less than 1%, Jobbik was on the verge of being entirely eliminated from the political landscape (for the details, see Section 5).

Table 1:
Election results for Mi Hazánk and Jobbik

Elections	Mi Hazánk		Jobbik	
	Votes	%	Votes	%
2018 parliamentary	did not exist		1 092 806	19,06%
2019 EP	114 156	3,29%	220 184	6,34%
2022 parliamentary	332 487	5,88%	n. a.*	
2024 EP	306 404	6,71%	45 404	0,99%

* Run as part of a broad opposition coalition

Source: Author based on <https://www.valasztas.hu/>

A review of the party splits led Ibenskas (2019, p. 57) to the conclusion that ‘most parties withstand the electoral competition after party splits relatively unscathed’. While it is not accurate to assert that Jobbik’s free fall is wholly attributable to the party split, it is evident that numerous prominent Jobbik politicians have continued their activities in Mi Hazánk. Finally, the joint candidacy with the left-liberal opposition in 2022 proved to be a fatal mistake for Jobbik.

4. Mi Hazánk’s hard Euroscepticism: Huxit, but not immediately

It is relatively straightforward to ascertain Mi Hazánk’s stance on European integration by examining its manifestos and statements made by its leading politicians. In line with Szczerbiak and Taggart’s (2008a, p. 7) seminal definition (which, however, had been reformulated later [Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008a, p. 3]), it could be argued that the party represents a textbook case of hard Euroscepticism. In the author’s view, the key element of the hard Euroscepticism is ‘a principled opposition to the EU and European integration’, which can manifest itself in two beliefs (which are of course not mutually exclusive): ‘withdraw from membership’ or policies towards the EU that is tantamount ‘to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived’.

As for the latter criterion, Mi Hazánk has a devastating view of the EU: in its 2022 parliamentary election manifesto, the party states that ‘The EU currently functions as a globalist empire, pushed into a colonial status’, and its aim is ‘the complete elimination of the European nation-states and thus of resistance’ (Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 51). The party is not immune to the influence of conspiracy theories: ‘It is practically irrelevant whether there is [...] a People’s Party or a Social Democrat-Liberal politician at the top of the European Commission, the real leadership is always in the hands of the Deep State, and the financial, economic and political processes are controlled by this globalist power, the Deep State,

according to its own interests' (Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 52). As is widely acknowledged, 'radical right parties tend to articulate their anti-EU argument primarily from a sovereignty perspective' (Vasilopoulou, 2018, p. 124; cf. Sørensen, 2008). In this respect, Mi Hazánk is no exception: 'For the sake of Hungary's sovereignty, we need to end the subordinate role we have been in since our accession to the European Union' (Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 53). At this point, the manifesto poses the question: 'Should we be members or free?', which recalls the lines of the famous 19th-century Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi: 'Should we be prisoners or free?'

In addition to the particularly critical view of the European Union, the party openly raises the possibility of leaving the EU, since 'The goals set by Mi Hazánk could not be achieved in the current EU'. In the party's view, 'There are two ways forward if we want to restore Hungary's independence: 1. change the current European Union, 2. exit' (Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 54). In its manifesto, the party emphasises that Mi Hazánk is the only party that would hold a referendum on our EU membership:

If the EU's spiritual, economic and moral destruction proves irreversible once and for all, Mi Hazánk would hold a referendum in 2029 – as was the case with Brexit – on whether we should remain in the EU. In case of a negative majority, the exit process could start in 2030 (Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 55).

To complete the picture, it should be noted that the party also makes some very vague 'pro-European' references, claiming that 'We are not against sensible cooperation within Europe', 'We are happy to work in an alliance of equal, peer countries, in a Europe of nations' (Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 55) and 'Of course, there is still some chance to change the current EU' (Mi Hazánk, 2022, p. 54). The 2024 European Parliament election manifesto provides further insight into the nature of European cooperation that the party advocates:

Mi Hazánk also considers a 'Europe of Nations' type of EU to be the goal to be pursued, in which countries retain their independence, sovereignty and free decision-making rights in as many issues as possible. The nature of the alliance is such that it can only be a win-win situation, i.e. one that does not force any party to make humiliating compromises. Instead of a centralised, Soviet-style system, which the current EU leadership is fully committed to, a European federal system should be operated in which national self-determination is fully preserved (Mi Hazánk, 2024a, p. 4).

Despite Mi Hazánk's staunch opposition to the EU, it cannot be claimed that the party would 'immediately' withdraw Hungary from the EU. Firstly, the party is willing to give the EU one 'last chance'. As noted above, Mi Hazánk posits that 'there is still some chance to change the current EU', although it is rather sciep-

tical about whether the EU can be put on the right track. Secondly, the party has consistently taken the position that EU membership should be decided by referendum. (It is noteworthy that the Brexit referendum is often used as a reference point for the party when it comes to Huxit.) According to party vice-president Előd Novák, the Fundamental Law (the Constitution of Hungary) should first be amended to allow for a referendum on the country's EU membership,³ and then a review of the eighteen years since 2004 should be held, followed by a referendum (Presinszky, 2022). Thirdly, the party itself does not envisage Huxit in the short term. As president Toroczkai declared shortly after the party was founded, 'If we left the EU tomorrow, we would be bankrupt. And we have so much responsibility that we cannot bankrupt our country' (Baranya, 2019). The party leader maintained this statement in May 2024: 'It is indisputable that if Hungary were to leave the EU tomorrow, the country would collapse, and bankruptcy would ensue' (Czene, 2024). Novák also made it clear that the referendum should be preceded by years of public debate (Czene, 2023). Zsuzsanna Borvendég, the quasi-leader⁴ of the party's list in the European Parliamentary election 2024, also acknowledged that 'There is no reality for Huxit *at the moment*' (Ultrahang plusz, 2024, emphasis added). In a more recent interview, she admitted that

If I had to vote today, it would be with a heavy but responsible heart that I could only vote to remain, but there is also a scenario in which the processes that seriously threaten national self-determination accelerate and there is no other option but to escape - in a well-prepared way - from an increasingly dictatorial EU (Márton, 2024).

In conclusion, the party has consistently maintained that Huxit is not a pressing issue that must be carried out immediately, nor within a few years. Mi Hazánk's stance aligns with the assertion made by Havlík and Hloušek (2025, p. 351) that 'political parties in the post-Brexit period are less likely to call for an immediate exit from the EU'.

While Szczerbiak and Taggart's hard/soft distinction (elaborated in 2001) remains the most influential conceptualisation of Euroscepticism, a number of alternative frameworks have been developed to capture the diverse anti-EU positions held by political parties. Kopecký and Mudde (2002) set up two dimensions ('support for the ideas of European integration' and 'support for the European Union') to distinguish four ideal-type categories of party positions on Europe ('Euroenthusiast', 'Eurosceptics', 'Eurorejects' and 'Europragmatists'). As for the first dimension, Mi Hazánk may be marked as 'Europhobe' as not only does the party not support the general ideas of European integration, but it is outright opposed to it. Concerning the second dimension, the label of 'EU-pessimist' fits the party perfectly, given its devastating view of the direction of the EU's development. In the authors' framework, the combination of Europhobe

and EU-pessimist positions results in the Euroreject category, which denotes that ‘They subscribe neither to the ideas underlying the process of European integration nor to the EU’ (p. 302).

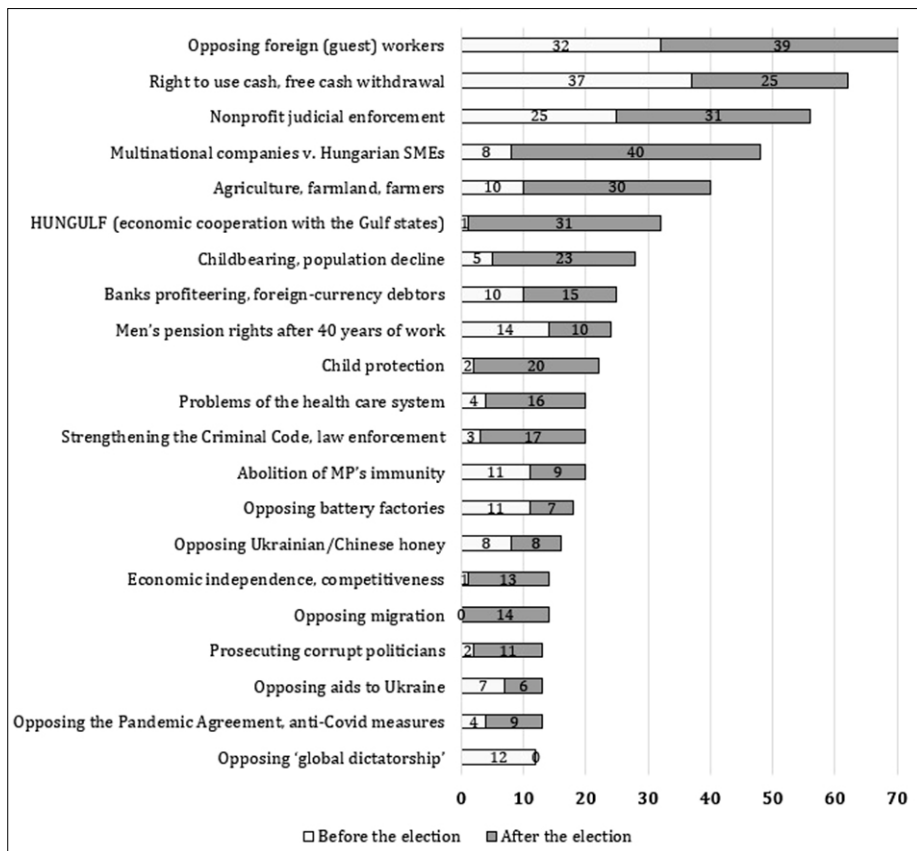
Rovny (2004) expanded upon the conceptualisation of the hard/soft distinction proposed by Szczerbiak and Taggart by incorporating the internal party motivations for the adoption of Eurosceptic stances. In his view, ‘predominantly ideologically driven Eurosceptics are likely to take up Euroscepticism because it is somehow implied in their original ideological positions’ (p. 36), while ‘predominantly strategically driven Eurosceptic parties use Euroscepticism as a pragmatic addition to their original program’ (p. 37). In light of the party’s historical origins, its election manifestos, and the statements of its prominent politicians, there is no doubt that Mi Hazánk takes up Euroscepticism because it is firmly implied in its original ideological positions.

Vasilopoulou (2011) argues that radical right Euroscepticism can be categorised into three patterns. While each stance implies acceptance of common cultural, historical and religious European characteristics, they oppose some other aspects of European integration. The ‘compromising’ Euroscepticism supports the principle and the practice of integration but opposes the future building of a European polity. The ‘conditional’ Euroscepticism is one step more ‘stringent’ as it approves only the principle of European cooperation but expresses hostility to the current policy practice as well as the future building of a European polity. Finally, the ‘rejecting’ Euroscepticism comprises rejection of the principle of cooperation within the EU framework, disagreement with the European institutional and policy status quo and resistance to the future building of a European polity. A closer review of Vasilopoulou’s criteria indicates that Mi Hazánk can be classified with reasonable certainty in the latter ‘rejecting’ category. As noted above, the party is not against ‘sensible cooperation within Europe’, and they are ‘happy to work in an alliance of equal, peer countries, in a Europe of nations’. The 2024 European Parliament election manifesto puts the founding of the European Economic Community and its *initial* objectives (mainly economic and trade agreements for the benefit of all member states) in a positive context, but things went wrong in the 1990s, as ‘after the earlier economic and security cooperation, the member states gave up their political sovereignty in more and more areas and transferred it to the Community (Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice Treaties)’ (Mi Hazánk, 2024a, p. 3). However, in one respect, Mi Hazánk does not fit into the ‘rejecting’ Euroscepticism, as the party has no intention to ‘withdraw from the EU at any cost’, which is one of Vasilopoulou’s (2011, p. 232) criteria for this kind of Euroscepticism.

As discussed above, Mi Hazánk’s hard Euroscepticism is nuanced by the fact that both the party’s programs and its leading politicians express caution regarding a potential Huxit. However, how does the party engage with the EU issue in its online communication and parliamentary activities? To identify the most salient issues promoted by Mi Hazánk, we examined the party’s Facebook posts between

1 January and 31 December 2024. We employed the method of content analysis for our study, as it is particularly well-suited for the systematic, objective, and quantitative examination of message characteristics (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1). From the Facebook posts within the analysed period, we excluded those without policy-related content (e.g., holiday greetings or general calls to vote). The remaining 864 posts were then categorised based on their content, specifically their main message. Posts with similar content (e.g., encouraging childbirth and addressing population decline) were assigned to the same category to avoid an unmanageably high number of categories.⁵ The examined period, the year 2024, was divided into two phases, separately analysing the periods before and after the European Parliament elections. This approach allowed us to identify which topics were most emphasised during the pre-election campaign. To interpret the results, we utilised the most common method of presentation: simple descriptive frequencies (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 172). Topics mentioned 12 or more times are summarised in Chart 1.

Chart 1:
Frequency of mention of issues in Mi Hazánk's Facebook post



Source: Author based on <https://www.facebook.com/mihazankmozgalom2022/>

As the chart shows, domestic issues clearly dominated the party's Facebook posts, even before the election. However, the most prevalent issue, that of foreign (guest) workers, has some connection to the EU and is more aligned with the ideologies of far-right political parties. In the party's view,

Liberal political forces at home and in Europe are seeking to respond to the problems of a Europe hurtling towards demographic catastrophe with masses of illegal migrants and legal immigrants disguised as guest workers (Mi Hazánk, 2024a, p. 21).

When browsing the results, it is striking that the second and the third most frequently mentioned topics may be regarded as 'niche issues'. The guarantee of cash use/free cash withdrawal was the most salient issue for the party in the four months preceding the election, while this topic came second overall. In the autumn of 2023, the party initiated an amendment of the Fundamental Law to include the right to use cash. The submitters of the bill advanced the argument that, among others, 'cash is the last bastion of human freedom' and that it is the only means of avoiding 'total surveillance' (Bill No. T/5907).⁶ As for nonprofit judicial enforcement, Mi Hazánk constantly maintains that court bailiffs operate like a mafia and in their greed for profit, have on numerous occasions collected unjust or time-barred claims from citizens (including evictions).

The topic most closely related to the EU ranked only 21st. The party has consistently referred to the EU as a 'globalist dictatorship', which was also reflected in the party's election slogan: 'A Hungarian future instead of a globalist dictatorship!'. As is widely acknowledged, the issue of globalisation is a central theme of propaganda and agitation for far-right parties worldwide (Zaslove, 2008; Bornschier, 2018), and globalisation fuels right-wing populism (Rodrik, 2021). As Grumke (2013, p. 17) puts it, 'Right-wing extremists thus see the process of globalisation as a deliberately controlled destruction of cultures, traditions and values (and, ultimately, of nations and peoples) by the above-described powerful "globalists"'. Mi Hazánk's narrative fits perfectly into this framework: the term 'global' and its derivatives are referenced on more than 20 occasions within the party's 2024 European Parliament election manifesto (and 57 times in the 2022 manifesto), all of which are presented in a negative context. In the party's ideology, anti-globalism and Euroscepticism are intertwined, as the EU is a 'neoliberal political organisation where real decisions are made behind the scenes by globalist companies and transmitted through their lobbyists to the Brussels bureaucrats chinovniks who claim to be the leaders of Europe' (Mi Hazánk, 2024a, p. 3). The party's anti-globalist stance was also reflected in other issues during the campaign:

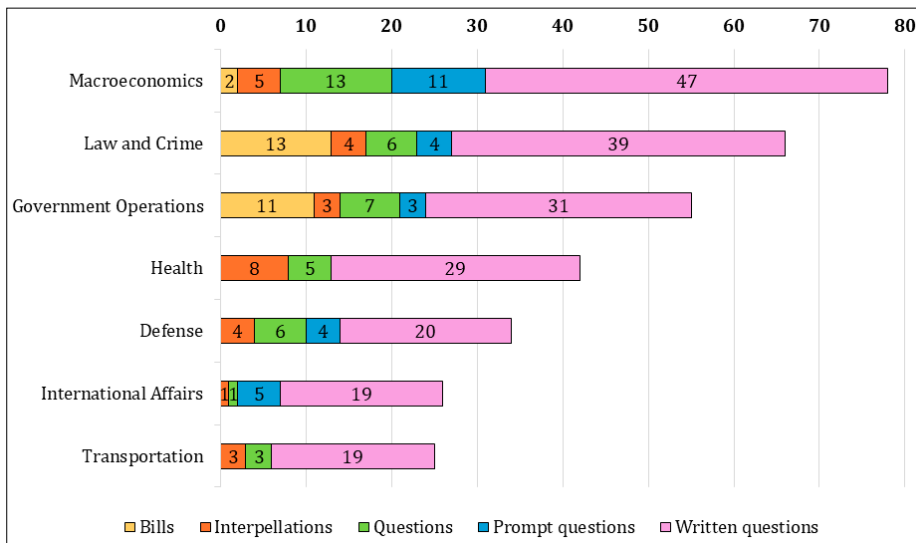
- opposition to foreign investment (especially battery factories)
- opposition to imports of Ukrainian and Chinese honey

- strong criticism of multinational companies and banks
- opposition to the pandemic agreement to be concluded under the auspices of the WHO

On the Russia–Ukraine war, the party has taken a soft pro-Russian stance, criticising aid to Ukraine and opposing the country’s accession to NATO and the EU.

Regarding the party’s parliamentary activity, our analysis draws on the examination of agenda-setting and policy agenda dynamics (Sebők & Boda, 2021). We analyzed 37 legislative proposals (bills), 47 interpellations, 66 questions, 50 prompt questions, and 312 written questions submitted by the party’s MPs between May 2022 and December 2024 to identify the policy issues on which the party is most vocal.⁷ Chart 2 presents the topics the party has addressed most frequently.

Chart 2:
The most frequent topics of Mi Hazánk’s parliamentary submissions (2022–2024)



Source: Author based on the dataset of the HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences poltextLAB

As the chart indicates, Mi Hazánk has not been particularly active in international affairs (which, according to the Comparative Agendas Project codebook, also includes the EU). Moreover, the majority of the 26 submissions related to international affairs focus on NATO, Ukraine, and ethnic Hungarians beyond Hungary’s borders, with the EU appearing only tangentially. Overall, it can be concluded that not only did Mi Hazánk fail to raise the issue of Huxit in any of its more than 500 submissions, but its MPs also addressed the EU only in a very marginal manner.

5. The 2024 European Parliamentary election: 'A Hungarian future instead of a globalist dictatorship!'

Thanks to an amendment of the Hungarian Fundamental Law in 2022, the European Parliamentary election and the election of local councillors and mayors must be held on the same day from 2024. The confluence of the two elections and a particularly intense campaign resulted in a record-breaking voter turnout (59,46%), significantly higher than in 2019 (43,48%) (and the fifth highest in the EU).

Fidesz has built its entire campaign on the Russia-Ukraine war, strongly emphasising that the stakes of the elections are nothing less than war or peace. The ruling party's campaign suggested that only Prime Minister Viktor Orbán could end the war, meanwhile 'Brussels is in a war spiral, and the decisive issue in the European parliamentary elections will be who is pro-peace and who is pro-war' (Miniszterelnok.hu, 2024). As the joint report of research institute Political Capital, the fact-checking site Lakmusz, and the media watchdog Mérték Media pointed out, the key narrative was that 'European pro-war politicians and their Hungarian servants want to start World War III'. This narrative gradually grew in importance as the elections approached, overtaking all other narratives in the final weeks (Political Capital, 2024). As Csehi (2024, p. 213) puts it,

The campaign of the governing party appealed to the most basic fear of the population and constantly pictured the European Parliamentary elections as a decisive battle where people had to decide about war or peace, life or death, whether one was willing to send his/her sons, grandchildren into the war.

The intensity of the campaign was also increased by the emergence of a new player: Péter Magyar, ex-husband of former Justice Minister Judit Varga, came to the stage after Katalin Novák's (President of the Republic until her resignation in February 2024) pardon scandal. Magyar extensively criticised the government, accusing key Fidesz politicians of serious abuse of power, and organised mass demonstrations against the regime. In April he joined the hitherto utterly unknown dormant party, the Respect and Freedom Party (*Tisztelet és Szabadság Párt, Tisza*),⁸ which became Fidesz's main challenger in the elections.⁹ Magyar went on a tour around the country and visited nearly 200 municipalities in less than two months, successfully mobilising anti-Fidesz voters who had become disillusioned with the opposition parties.

Under these circumstances, the remaining parties received limited attention during the campaign, and Mi Hazánk was no exception. Despite publishing a comprehensive manifesto titled '*Mi Hazánk's Europe*' for the 2024 European

Parliament elections – a nearly 30-page document – its content largely mirrored an extended version of the party’s 2019 programme. The simultaneous scheduling of the European Parliament and municipal elections made it difficult to clearly distinguish between EU-related and local issues. This overlap, combined with the party’s primary focus on the municipal elections, contributed to a greater emphasis on domestic topics (Csehi, 2024, p. 214). As Chart 1 revealed, during the campaign, the party’s most prominent issues were the protection of cash, opposition to foreign guest workers, and the reform of judicial enforcement.

In May 2024, Mi Hazánk organised its biggest political demonstration of the campaign under the name ‘anti-globalist protest’. The slogan of the mass rally was the following: ‘Say NO to the WHO treaty! NO to guest workers! YES to the use of cash!’. Dóra Dúró, vice-president, stated that

The globalists’ local governors in Hungary and the Hungarian government, which continually submits to them, are financing Ukraine with our money, bringing in immigrants under the guise of guest workers, handing over Hungary’s precious land to fetus-poisoning battery factories, surrendering our freedom to digital tech giants, and attempting to dismantle the last bastions of our self-determination and liberty (Németh, 2024).

Asked by a journalist, ‘What is the difference between the anti-globalism of Mi Hazánk and Fidesz?’, Toroczkai replied a few days before the elections that of the parties that have a chance of getting into the European Parliament, ‘we are the only anti-globalist party’. According to the party leader, ‘Fidesz has always supported global corporations. [...] Fidesz is perfectly implementing the demands of the global agenda while doing its own business’ (Czene, 2024).

The outcome of the 2024 European Parliamentary election is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2:
Results of the 2024 European Parliamentary election in Hungary

	Votes		Votes		Seats	
	N	Change compared to 2019	%	Change compared to 2019	N	Change compared to 2019
Fidesz-KDNP	2 048 211	+223 991	44,82%	-7,74%	11	-2
Tisza	1 352 699	new	29,60%	new	7	new
DK-MSZP-Párbeszéd	367 162	-419 470	8,03%	-14,63%	2	-3
Mi Hazánk	306 404	+192 248	6,71%	+3,42%	1	+1
Momentum	169 082	-175 430	3,70%	-6,23%	-	-2
MKKP	163 960	+73 048	3,59%	+0,97%	-	0
Jobbik	45 404	-174 780	0,99%	-5,35%	-	-1
LMP	39 646	-35 852	0,87%	-1,31%	-	0

Source: Author based on <https://vtr.valasztas.hu/ep2024>

Compared to the 2019 election, Fidesz expanded its voter base and achieved the highest number of votes ever recorded in Hungary's European Parliament elections. However, its share of the vote declined significantly from 2019, resulting in the loss of two seats. The Tisza party, under the leadership of Péter Magyar, garnered nearly 30% of the vote despite Magyar entering the political arena only four months before the elections and the party commencing substantive operations in April. While the left-liberal opposition parties and Jobbik suffered significant setbacks, Mi Hazánk nearly tripled its voter base compared to 2019, securing its first-ever seat in the European Parliament. The party also saw substantial gains in the local elections, achieving the second-highest vote share in 18 of 19 counties (typically ranging between 15-20%) and increasing its representation in county and municipal assemblies approximately fivefold. In its post-election

communication, Mi Hazánk notably prioritised its local government successes, overshadowing the significance of its European Parliament results.

Prior to the 2024 European parliamentary election, the far right was expected to be the big winner (Mudde, 2024a). Events subsequently bore out this expectation, as far-right parties won roughly a quarter of the vote across the EU, yet it does not appear that the elections were the game-changer many feared (Mudde, 2024b, p. 132). Although the ‘continued trend’ in party-based Euroscepticism has been clearly detected (Jeong, 2024), the unified right-wing Eurosceptic front has not been formed this time either, as Eurosceptic parties (be they either hard or soft) are clustered in three political groups (Becker & von Ondarza, 2024). Mi Hazánk made its intention to cooperate with the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) clear weeks before the elections (after AfD MEPs had been expelled from the Identity and Democracy Group) with the objective of creating ‘a new anti-globalist’ group in the European Parliament (Mi Hazánk, 2024b). Against this background, it was only natural that the only MEP from Mi Hazánk should join the Europe of Sovereign Nations Group (ESN), the smallest and most extreme faction. As Becker and von Ondarza (2024, p. 5) put it, ‘the ESN currently seems to be a catch-all for those right-wing MEPs who, for various reasons, have not joined the ECR or PflE’. Indeed, 14 of the group’s 25 total MEPs come from the AfD, while the remaining 11 seats are shared by seven other parties. Regarding the activities of MEP Borvendég, her contributions to plenary debates are in line with the ideology of Mi Hazánk. Her speeches centred on the sovereignty of Hungary, meanwhile demonstrating a pro-Russia and an anti-LGBTQ stance.¹⁰

In conclusion, it can be stated that Mi Hazánk’s influence on the European stage will be limited, as it is a member of the smallest group, with only one MEP.

6. Mi Hazánk and Fidesz: who is harder?

Although the present study focuses on Mi Hazánk as the sole ‘genuine’ hard Eurosceptic party in Hungary, it would be erroneous to view the party as operating in a vacuum. From the outset, it has had to compete for political space on the right of the political spectrum with Fidesz, Hungary’s largest party, and Jobbik, which has meanwhile been completely marginalised. In the following, we try to capture the Eurosceptic nature of Fidesz and outline the relationship between Mi Hazánk and Fidesz, emphasising the challenges in determining which party serves as the more outspoken critic of the EU.

While no author or research definitively classifies Fidesz as a hard Eurosceptic party, two aspects suggest the governing party should be included in our study. Firstly, over the past 15 years, Fidesz has been engaged in a persistent and ongoing clash with the European Union, which centres on contrasting positions on the status of national sovereignty (Furedi, 2017). This conflict is not limited

to policy debates but is also evident in a sustained ideological confrontation that could sometimes be perceived as ‘a principled opposition to the EU and European integration’, at least at the level of communication. Csehi and Zgut (2020) apply the term ‘Eurosceptic populism’ to grasp Prime Minister Orbán’s stance towards the EU, arguing that ‘Eurosceptic populism is a distinct type of populism where critique against the EU is used to crystallise anti-elitism and people-centrism’ (p. 54). As Havlík and Hloušek (2025, pp. 357–358) demonstrated, even leading Fidesz politicians (e.g., Orbán’s former chancellery minister or the speaker of the parliament) regularly take up the topic of Huxit. In December 2023, however, Orbán stated ‘We don’t want to leave the EU, we want to occupy it’ (Portfolio, 2023). During the 2024 European Parliament election campaign, the Prime Minister maintained his plan to overtake Brussels (Scheppelle, 2024).

In light of the party’s markedly adversarial stance towards the EU for a decade and a half now, particularly evident in the strongly anti-EU government-funded questionnaires sent to every Hungarian citizen on behalf of the government known as ‘national consultations’ (Bocskor, 2018; Oross & Tap, 2021), the question arises as to what categories could be employed to characterise Fidesz’s Euroscepticism? Prior to assuming power in 2010, Batory (2008) had already designated Fidesz as a party with a soft Eurosceptic stance. Taggart and Szczerbiak (2013) maintained this label in their comparative study, and a similar view was articulated by Arató (2020) with respect to the 2010–2014 period, while, as she argues, ‘in the post-2014 period Fidesz has definitely turned towards hard Euroscepticism in its views and actions’ (p. 113). Somewhat surprisingly, Dúró (2016, p. 44) claims that ‘By and large, Fidesz cannot be considered as Eurosceptic but rather pragmatist due to its clear pro-European policy in practice, i.e. it has always supported the deepening of the European integration’. Taggart (2019) himself, the father of the term ‘hard Euroscepticism’, did not classify Fidesz as a hard Eurosceptic party in the wake of the 2019 European Parliament elections. In Hargitai’s (2020) view, Fidesz is not only Eurosceptic; but there is a form of ‘inverted soft Euroscepticism’ characterising the party’s vision and policies towards the EU.

However, despite the harsh rhetoric and the rock-bottom Hungary–EU relations, Huxit is not included in the *official* agenda of the Fidesz. At first glance, the term ‘equivocal Euroscepticism’ offered by Heinisch, McDonnell and Werner (2021) seems suitable for grasping Fidesz’s ambiguous stance. According to the authors, equivocal Eurosceptics ‘espouse an inherently ambivalent stance that, in terms of rhetoric and behaviour, includes aspects that are both hard and soft eurosceptical’. The ‘equivocality’ manifests itself in the fact that on the one hand, there is the criticism of ‘European integration, the EU, its officials and policies in ways that are often as harsh in tone and even substance as that of hard eurosceptics’, while, on the other hand, equivocal eurosceptics ‘are careful to avoid the most extreme manifestation of these positions, such as calling either for an outright exit or for the unambiguous acceptance of the EU and its competencies

in their current form' (p. 191). However, Havlík and Hloušek (2025) have reservations about the applicability of equivocal Euroscepticism to Fidesz, as they find it impossible to disentangle the party's strategy, i.e. 'gradual preparation for withdrawal and testing the public through placed party representatives or a purely pragmatic strategy of threatening the EU with eventual Huxit' (p. 362). At this point it is important to note that the 2010 parliamentary election was the last time the party published an official election manifesto (Dobos, Gyulai, & Horváth, 2018); since then, no such document has been made available, meaning that the party's 'official' position regarding the EU/Huxit cannot be ascertained in this manner. In the absence of an election manifesto, it is necessary to rely on the statements of politicians and the pursued politics of Fidesz (i.e. the Hungarian government), which are often inconsistent with each other. As Heinisch, McDonnell and Werner (2021, p. 191) put it, 'behavioural inconsistencies or perceived gaps between rhetoric and position are typically expressions of the ambivalence of equivocal eurosceptics' position'. In terms of rhetoric, Fidesz probably meets the criteria for hard Euroscepticism (cf. Agoston, 2024; for the rhetorical de-Europeanization of Hungarian foreign policy, see Hettzey, 2021), but can the party be labelled as hard Eurosceptic regarding its position?

In Taggart and Szczerbiak's (2008a, p. 7) (original) concept, a party does not necessarily have to advocate leaving the EU to be labelled a hard Eurosceptic. It is crucial to underscore this point, as there is a tendency to assess the degree of Fidesz's (and maybe other party's) Euroscepticism based (solely) on its stance on the potential departure of Hungary from the EU. Even Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008b) have conceded that too much importance has been attached to the withdrawal from EU membership in the assessment of hard/soft Euroscepticism: 'a party's stance on its country's EU membership is not, in fact, such a caesura as described in our original Hard-Soft conceptualization' (p. 243). According to the authors' definition, even parties 'whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived' may be qualified as hard Euroscepticists.¹¹ If we move beyond Fidesz's strident anti-EU rhetoric (which includes the vilification of the two most recent Commission Presidents, Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen, on billboards, as well as the permanent removal of the EU flag from the Hungarian Parliament) and direct our attention to the actions and measures undertaken by Fidesz (i.e. the government) over the past decade and a half, it seems reasonable to conclude that the hard Euroscepticism still stands. Although it would go well beyond the scope of the current study to analyse the Hungary-EU relationship, it is worth recalling Végh's (2016, p. 73) insight that 'the common perception of Hungary is that it is a troublemaker, reaping the benefits of its EU membership while undermining the EU's unity and cohesion'. While more than eight years have passed since this statement, the Hungarian government has continued its disruptive activities in the EU, including provoking further infringement pro-

cedures, taking a pro-Russia stance in the Russia-Ukraine war or sacrificing EU funds to Hungary on the altar of sovereignty politics. The ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union of June 2024 marks another low point in EU-Hungary relations: the Court imposed a €200 million fine on Hungary since the government deliberately refused to comply with the judgment of the Court on asylum rules. As the Court noted, ‘this failure to fulfil obligations constitutes an *unprecedented and exceptionally serious breach of EU law*’ (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2024, emphasis added).

Whether or not it can be concluded from the above that Fidesz opposes ‘the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived’, is partly a matter of interpretation. However, if one emphasises the phrase ‘as it is *currently* conceived’, we tend to think that hard Euroscepticism is a better description of Fidesz’s politics than soft Euroscepticism. Yet, it must be stressed once again that despite the robust nature of Fidesz and Orbán’s anti-EU sentiments, their objective is not to expel Hungary from the EU, but rather to pursue fundamental reforms within the Union. As Orbán often states, ‘Hungary is not only a member of the EU, it has an interest in remaining a member’ (Bíró-Nagy, 2021, p. 221). Mos (2020), based on an analysis of 36 Orbán’s speeches delivered on matters related to European integration, concluded that the Prime Minister styles himself as a pro-European statesman who is ready to steer the Union back to its moral roots. Similarly, while contextualising the Hungarian antipolitics of Europe as an element of radical conservative nation-building, Scott (2018, p. 659) argues in his essay that ‘Hungary’s official Euroscepticism has taken shape not as an attempt to dismantle or exit from the EU, but rather as a form of anti-politics that challenges liberal and cosmopolitan understandings of European Union’. The inapplicability of the dichotomy is also a problem for Agoston (2024): having investigated how Orbán uses Eurosceptic rhetoric to move the largely pro-EU Hungarian public towards an EU-critical position, he concluded that ‘the soft/hard heuristic cannot fully capture Orbán’s position and dynamic positioning’ (p. 271). As he points out, ‘Orbán takes a “not at all” or hard Eurosceptic position on political integration but remains economically pro-integrationist’ (Agoston, 2024, p. 271).

The second reason for examining Fidesz in this study lies in its relationship with Mi Hazánk. This dynamic bears similarities to the earlier relationship between Jobbik and Fidesz before Jobbik’s ‘deradicalisation’. Krekó and Mayer (2015) argued that Fidesz deliberately utilised Jobbik as a strategic tool – a ‘pioneer’ – to explore new ideological and political directions that Viktor Orbán could later adopt. A similar narrative holds nowadays, with Fidesz allegedly using Mi Hazánk as a ‘litmus test’ to gauge public reception to controversial issues, such as extreme anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, that might initially seem too radical (Dezső, 2022).¹² Furthermore, as Goldstein (2021) highlights, some opposition politicians perceive a tacit collaboration between Fidesz and Mi Hazánk. This perception is

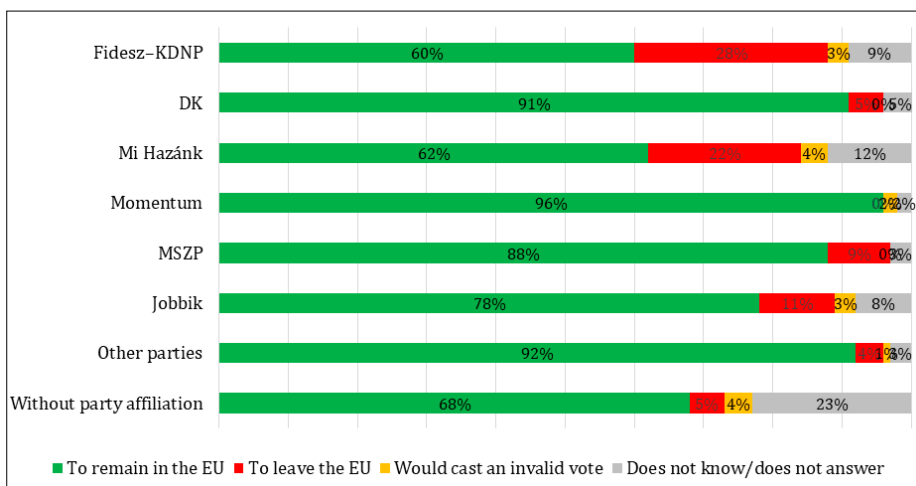
reinforced by the apparent reluctance of both Fidesz and Fidesz-controlled public media to openly criticise Mi Hazánk.

To answer the question posed in the title of this section, it should be pointed out that the two parties are not in the same league: Fidesz is a political force with essentially infinite resources and has been running the country with full control for 15 years, while Mi Hazánk is a party with 6-7% support and no real influence on the future of the country. In these circumstances, we believe that it is not unfounded to speak of a kind of ‘magnifying effect’ in the case of Fidesz. Although official agendas suggest that Mi Hazánk has taken a harder stance by calling for (not instant) Huxit, the Euroscepticism of Fidesz is significantly exaggerated by the fact that the party is a dominant force in Hungarian politics without a significant counterweight, whose anti-EU stance has increased significantly since coming to power in 2010 – i.e. Fidesz does not show the ‘moderating effect’, which is precisely the concept that government participation tames a party’s Euroscepticism (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2013; Treib, 2021, p. 180). To sum up, as far as the official party positions are taken as a point of departure, Mi Hazánk takes a harder stance against the EU as a result of the proposed Huxit, whereas Fidesz is considerably more vocal in expressing its Euroscepticism.

When comparing the two parties, it is also worth noting their voters’ attitudes towards the EU. Research conducted in 2023 by Policy Solutions, a Hungarian political research institute, on Hungarian society’s attitudes towards the EU yielded unexpected results: Fidesz voters were more likely to support Huxit than those of Mi Hazánk (see Chart 3)

Chart 3:

If a referendum were held tomorrow on Hungary’s membership of the European Union, what would you vote for? (All respondents, %)



Source: Policy Solutions (2023, p. 16)

It is notable that in 2021, only 17% of Fidesz voters indicated support for leaving the EU in a hypothetical referendum, whereas by 2023, this figure had risen to 28%. Additionally, Fidesz voters display greater scepticism toward the adoption of the euro compared to Mi Hazánk voters. Specifically, 40% of Fidesz voters oppose joining the eurozone, compared to 29% of Mi Hazánk voters (Policy Solutions, 2023, p. 80). These findings suggest that Fidesz voters hold more negative attitudes toward the EU than Mi Hazánk voters.

7. Summary

As this study has demonstrated, Mi Hazánk can be regarded as a kind of third-generation far-right party in Hungary. In the 1990s, MIÉP was the dominant force on the far right, followed by Jobbik from the second half of the 2000s. Mi Hazánk, by contrast, was founded only seven years ago and has been a parliamentary party only since 2022. The analysis of the party's programs, statements by its leading politicians, online communication, and parliamentary activity reveals an interesting duality. Based on its manifestos, the party can be unequivocally categorised as a hard Eurosceptic party, as it not only expresses outright condemnation of the EU ('opposing to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived') but has also explicitly embraced the goal of EU withdrawal. However, three factors nuance the party's strong anti-EU stance.

Firstly, the party has exhibited a degree of pragmatism, recognising that a referendum on Huxit would only be realistic several years from now, as even its leaders acknowledge that an immediate Huxit would lead to the country's economic collapse. Secondly, in its online communication throughout 2024, the party devoted remarkably little attention to the EU. Although our empirical analysis focused exclusively on the party's Facebook posts, it clearly emerged that neither Huxit nor general EU opposition ranked among its key topics. It is noteworthy that during the European Parliament election campaign, the party produced significantly more posts on issues such as the right to use cash, foreign guest workers, judicial enforcement, and men's retirement than on EU-related topics. Importantly, Mi Hazánk's criticism of the EU is largely framed within a broader anti-globalist narrative. Rather than targeting specific shortcomings of the European Union, the party's critique is directed at globalism as a whole, encapsulated in the slogan, 'We are the only anti-globalist party'. Consistent with its anti-globalist position, Mi Hazánk grounds its anti-EU rhetoric primarily in arguments about sovereignty. As its manifestos repeatedly stress, the party views the EU as eroding Hungary's national sovereignty to an unacceptable extent. Thirdly, an analysis of the parliamentary activity of Mi Hazánk's MPs further confirms that neither Hungary's EU membership nor the EU more broadly is a central issue for the party in parliament – so much so that none of the more than 500 examined

submissions directly addressed the EU. Overall, it can be concluded that in the nearly three years since entering parliament, the party, to borrow the phrase of Down and Han (2021, p. 66), has not sought to ‘exploit the EU for electoral gain’. Our research revealed that Mi Hazánk has its own ‘well-established’ issues that it prominently represents both in its online communication and in parliament; however, the EU is not among them. (The party’s efforts to play down the Huxit issue are probably also influenced by the fact that 62% of its voters would vote to remain in the EU in a possible referendum.)

While Mi Hazánk can be unambiguously classified as a hard Eurosceptic party, identifying an appropriate categorisation for Fidesz is more complex. The characterisation of ‘national interest is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory’, often used as a criterion for soft Euroscepticism, does not fully encapsulate the nuances of Fidesz’s (and by extension, the Hungarian government’s) anti-EU stance, which is evident in both rhetoric discourse *and* policy actions. The term ‘equivocal Euroscepticism’ could arguably apply to Fidesz, but this categorisation is not without its challenges (cf. Havlík & Hloušek, 2025, p. 362). The ‘behavioral inconsistencies’ and ‘perceived gaps between rhetoric and position’ that Heinisch, McDonnell, and Werner (2021, p. 191) associate with equivocal Euroscepticism are not uniformly applicable, as Fidesz’s harsh rhetoric is often matched by decisive political actions – thus, we can talk more about *consistency*. Whether Fidesz is classified as a hard or soft Eurosceptic party – or described using terms such as ‘phoney Europhiles’ (Henderson, 2008) or ‘disguised hard Euroscepticism’ (Havlík & Hloušek, 2025, p. 362) – it is clear that the party’s anti-EU stance is significantly reinforced by its unparalleled political dominance, having been in government for 15 years, and by Viktor Orbán’s considerable influence within the EU arena.

In the view of Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008a), an analysis of Euroscepticism must consider not only the broad underlying position that political parties take on Europe but also ‘whether they use the European project as an issue of contestation’ (p. 9). Mi Hazánk’s hard Euroscepticism is somewhat dampened by the fact that the EU is not a prominent issue for the party and, as shown above, the European Parliament election campaign was no exception in this regard. To put it another way, whereas the potential for Huxit is explicitly outlined in the party’s manifesto and the statements of its politicians, it would be a significant overstatement to suggest that Mi Hazánk use the Huxit (or Europe in general) as an issue of contestation. On the other hand, Fidesz, partly due to its governmental position, uses the EU much more forcefully as an issue of contestation. The rhetorical strategy employed by Fidesz over the past 15 years has been largely based on ‘enemy construction’ (Hegedüs, 2019; Csehi & Zgut, 2020; Böcskei, 2022b; Geró & Sík, 2022). Fidesz’s anti-EU stance has also altered the pattern of contestation over Europe in Hungary. While Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008b) identified Hungary as an example of constrained contestation (‘European issues play a role and where Euroscepticism is certainly present, but where there appears to be less

likelihood of European issues affecting domestic party competition directly'), it is more accurate to describe the current situation as one of open contestation. The first two of the authors' three criteria are undoubtedly met: Fidesz, which has governed the country for nearly 15 years, is undeniably Eurosceptic (be it either hard or soft), and the issue of European integration is a much more significant component of party competition than it was in 2008 (see e.g. Vachudova, 2019). This shift is not surprising given that Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008b, p. 361) initially assumed that 'the category of constrained contestation may well be a transitional category itself'.

Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008b) themselves acknowledged the need for caution when applying the terms hard and soft Euroscepticism, stating that 'we do not now believe them to be universally applicable conceptual tools for fully explaining or illuminating the phenomenon of Euroscepticism' (pp. 361–362). We believe that the case of Fidesz supports the caution advised by the authors, as discussed above, since the hard/soft Euroscepticism dichotomy appears to be inapplicable to the Hungarian governing party. From this perspective, the Hungarian party system presents a certain paradox. Although Fidesz is not typically classified as a hard Eurosceptic party, its outspoken opposition to the EU – extending beyond mere rhetoric – has been one of its most distinctive features for over a decade. In contrast, Mi Hazánk, at least judging by its party manifestos, can be seen as a paradigmatic example of hard Euroscepticism; yet its political strategy shows little evidence of a fiercely anti-EU stance.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Although the Hungarian governing party is usually referred to as Fidesz, since 2006 Fidesz has been running for parliament together with the Christian Democratic People's Party (*Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*), which is nothing more than a satellite party lacking any political autonomy. For the sake of simplicity, we use the term Fidesz, instead of Fidesz-KDNP.
- 2 Here, by a people's party we mean 'a political party representing or claiming to represent the great majority of the inhabitants of a territorial unit (as a nation) as opposed to a particular class or group' (Merriam-Webster, n. d.).
- 3 According to the current wording of the Fundamental Law, no national referendum may be held on any obligation arising from international treaties.
- 4 Despite the fact that Borvendég (a non-party historian and researcher, previously unknown in the political sphere) came only third on the party's list, the two candidates placed first and second had made it clear from the outset that they would not take up their seats.
- 5 The categories applied were developed inductively, based on a review of the Facebook posts – that is, there was no predefined coding scheme.
- 6 It is noteworthy that the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) takes a very similar position, and in the summer of 2003 launched an online petition with the slogan 'Cash is freedom in printed form and prevents the control and surveillance of people!' (OTS, 2023).
- 7 The dataset was manually annotated using the adapted Comparative Agendas Project codebook. For the current version of the codebook see <https://www.comparativeagendas.net/pages/master-codebook>.
- 8 Tisza is also the name of Hungary's second-largest river.
- 9 This was an improvised solution from Magyar, as only parties registered by the day the elections were announced (12 March 2024) were eligible to participate in the European Parliament elections.
- 10 For the speeches made during the plenary session see the website of the European Parliament: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/257457/ZSUZSANNA_BORVENDEG/main-activities/plenary-speeches#detailedcardmep.
- 11 In their reformulation of the definition, the authors have accorded greater emphasis to this criterion (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008a, p. 3).
- 12 The role of Mi Hazánk as a 'litmus test' is further reinforced by a recent development: in February 2025, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán announced that the right to use cash would be constitutionally guaranteed and that the Budapest Pride, scheduled for June 2025, would be banned – thus fulfilling two of Mi Hazánk's key demands.

Voting for Hard Eurosceptic Parties in 2024 European Parliament Elections in the Czech Republic: The Role of Salience and Attitude toward Czexit¹

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Abstract

In this article, we test the applicability of the EU issue voting model to the case of the 2024 Czech European Parliament elections. Given the increasing importance of the issue of leaving or remaining in the European Union, we examine whether voters' attitudes towards this issue affect their electoral behaviour. Furthermore, research on individual-level salience's effects on EU issue voting is limited. To address this gap, we leverage post-election survey data on the importance voters attribute to the issue of leaving the EU to assess whether salience influences turnout and moderates the effect of voter preferences on party choice. We show that voters who judge the issue of Czexit to be highly salient are less likely to abstain. Additionally, we find that in general, voters' attitudes regarding Czexit exert only a weak effect on their decision to support parties that reflect their views on this issue. However, we find that this effect is moderated

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to a large degree by the salience that voters attribute to the issue, in that voters considering the question of Czexit to be highly salient are considerably more likely to support parties that match their preferences (i.e. Czexit supporters vote for hard Eurosceptic parties and remain supporters for non-hard Eurosceptic parties). Thus, the study concludes that voter behaviour largely follows an EU issue voting logic, highlighting the key role played by issue salience in this process.

Keywords: European Parliament election; EU issue voting; salience; hard Euroscepticism; EU membership; voter behaviour; Czech Republic

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1. Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections occurred amidst a political atmosphere marked by Euroscepticism across the European Union, with membership debates especially salient in Central and Eastern European countries. In the Czech Republic, where Eurosceptic sentiment among political parties has gradually been rising, this context provides a unique opportunity to examine the influence of the issue of leaving or remaining in the EU (which we term the ‘Czexit issue’) on voter turnout and party choice in the EP elections.

This article uses literature on EU issue voting as a theoretical framework for understanding how citizens’ attitudes toward European integration may influence their voting behaviour in these elections. Historically, EP elections have been conceptualized as ‘second-order’ elections characterized by low turnout and driven more by national-level issues (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), often encompassing expressions of dissatisfaction with incumbent governments, rather than issues directly related to the EU. However, recent trends, such as the rise of Eurosceptic parties (Treib, 2021) and major political crises such as Brexit, have led some scholars to challenge this view, suggesting that as the EU has been politicized, the nature of individual countries’ EU membership has emerged as an issue capable of shaping voter behaviour.

Although turnout in EP elections is traditionally lower than in national elections, recent research links rising participation to support for both Eurosceptic and pro-EU parties (Carrieri, 2024). With hard Euroscepticism – conventionally defined as the rejection of the entire European integration project and opposition to the respective country remaining a member of the EU (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004) – gaining attention, the impact of the particular issue of whether to leave the EU on electoral behaviour warrants closer examination. For voters with hard Eurosceptic views, EP elections provide a unique opportunity to express opposition to their country’s membership by supporting parties committed to EU

withdrawal. Conversely, EU supporters have an opportunity to vote for parties defending EU membership or even supporting deeper EU integration.

In addition, while the very idea of voting to express one's preferences inherently relies on the concept of issue salience, in that voters must consider this issue to be highly important to use these particular preferences to guide their vote choice, little previous research has examined individual-level salience as a factor in electoral behaviour at EP elections. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of both salience and support for either Czexit or remaining in the EU on voter behaviour in EP elections in the Czech Republic in 2024. We test hypotheses about the role of salience attributed to the Czexit issue as both a predictor of voter turnout and a moderator of voter support for political parties.

This article is structured as follows: we begin by introducing issue voting theory, with a particular emphasis on previous literature regarding EU-related issues and highlight the debate around leaving the EU as taking on increasing importance in this regard. We then introduce the case of the Czech Republic, presenting political parties' positions on the Czexit issue, and outline our three hypotheses. This is followed by a description of the post-election survey data, measurement, and analytical strategy employed in our study. The results section then presents our findings, and, finally, we discuss the implications of these results.

2. Issue voting theory

In theorizing about the effects of mass-level hard Euroscepticism on voter behaviour in the 2024 EP election in the Czech Republic, we draw upon the considerable literature on EU issue voting (e.g. Hobolt et al., 2009; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; van Spanje & de Vreese, 2011). Issue voting models, in general, suggest that issues matter to voters when choosing who to vote for. In line with a spatial understanding of voter behaviour, voters are thus understood to favour the parties that best match their own ideological preferences (Adams et al., 2005; Downs, 1957). While this logic is highly intuitive, however, it raises the question of which specific issue preferences matter for voters in this regard. Consistent with the literature on issue salience, we may consider voters to be guided by their compatibility with parties concerning the particular issue or issues that they consider to be of primary importance (Lachat, 2011; RePass, 1971). It therefore may not matter to a voter if a party is ideologically distant on an issue of minor importance to them, so long as it remains congruent on more salient issues. As we discuss below, a range of scholars have applied this logic of voter behaviour to understand the outcomes of EP elections, arguing that the election campaign raises the salience of European integration in the minds of voters, thus encouraging them to vote for parties that closely represent their views on this particular issue.

3. Issue voting in European Parliament elections

Historically speaking, in explaining the results of European elections, particularly the generally poor performance of governing parties, the most widely held conception of voter behaviour has been the ‘second-order’ model. From this perspective, voters in EU elections follow a similar logic to other ‘mid-term’ domestic elections (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005). That is, voters tend to make their party choices based on salient national-level issues and cleavages, along with evaluations of the performance of the incumbent national government. Voters’ attitudes towards the European Union, meanwhile, are seen as a minor consideration at best.

More recently, however, based on growing support for Eurosceptic parties in recent years, several scholars have made the case that, at European elections, ‘Europe matters’ (Hix & Marsh, 2007). To the extent that the issue of the European Union has previously been a ‘sleeping giant’ (van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004) - that is, a potentially polarizing political issue which does not (yet) guide voter behaviour - there is strong reason to expect that the giant has since awoken. As Hooghe and Marks (2009) argue, whereas the EU (and previously the European Economic Community) was once considered too complex and distant from most citizens to be a salient political issue, European integration has since become politicized at the mass level, with many voters holding clear and ingrained positions on the topic and numerous parties (particularly those on the Eurosceptic side) making it a central aspect of their policy platforms. Indeed, crises taking place over the past decade, including Brexit, the Euro crisis and the migration crisis, have likely increased the salience of the EU and thereby encouraged voters to take positions on questions of integration (Carrieri et al., 2024). Therefore, there is widespread recognition that Euroscepticism has entered the political mainstream (Leconte, 2015).

As a result of the politicization of European integration, voters’ attitudes regarding the EU may influence their vote choice in any election. However, the salience of this issue is likely to peak during European elections (Hobolt et al., 2009), providing voters with a specific opportunity to support parties that reflect their stance on European integration and express their support or opposition to it. In contrast to the previously dominant view of European elections, then, the EU issue voting model holds that voters’ ideological positions vis-à-vis the European Union are of considerable importance in understanding how they choose between the parties on offer at these elections (Hobolt, 2015; de Vries et al., 2011). As Brack and Hoon (2017, p. 175) neatly put it, per the EU issue voting model, ‘the eurosceptic vote can best be explained by euroscepticism’.

Of course, to cast a Eurosceptic (or indeed Europhile) vote in EP elections requires not only choosing a party that reflects these preferences, but also turning

out to vote in the first place. Turnout at EP elections is consistently far lower than 'first-order' national elections, a fact that proponents of the second-order model have reasonably put down to there being 'less at stake' in these elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Yet this still leaves open the question of what motivates some voters to turn out despite these lower stakes. Per an EU issue voting logic, we can understand the decision to turn out, like the decision to vote for a particular party, to be informed by voters' willingness (or lack thereof) to express their opinion on the matter of European integration (Mattila, 2003; Braun & Schäfer, 2022). All else being equal, those who feel less strongly about the EU are thus seen as more likely to abstain from voting in European elections than those who consider the issue to be of considerable importance. Thus, in offering an alternative means of understanding the outcomes of European elections to the previously dominant second-order model, the EU issue voting model provides a framework for understanding both how voters choose between parties and whether they vote at all.

Indeed, the EU issue voting model has received considerable empirical support. For example, Hobolt et al. (2009) find that supporters of governing parties are more likely to defect to other parties or abstain entirely at European elections when they hold Eurosceptic attitudes. Van Spanje and de Vreese (2011) show that several different aspects of voters' attitudes towards the EU influenced their likelihood of supporting Eurosceptic parties at the 2009 European elections, findings which have been broadly corroborated by analyses of subsequent European elections (Goldberg et al., 2024; van Elsas et al., 2019). De Vries and Hobolt (2016), meanwhile, find that dissatisfaction with the EU's handling of the ongoing economic crisis informed the decisions of voters who defected from mainstream pro-EU parties to their Eurosceptic rivals in 2014. Indeed, issue voting is not necessarily confined to anti-EU voters; strong pro-EU sentiments likewise encourage turnout and support for ideologically compatible parties on this issue at European elections (Carrieri, 2024; Carrieri et al., 2023; Carrieri et al., 2024). Several studies of voter behaviour in individual countries have also found support for the issue voting model (Brack & Hoon, 2017; Morini, 2017; Partheymüller et al., 2020; Reher, 2017; Schüberl et al., 2020).

4. EU salience and voter behaviour in European Parliament elections

Voter positioning on the issue of European integration is central to the EU issue voting model. The typical approach used to test the EU issue voting model is thus to examine the extent to which individuals' vote choices at European elections can be predicted by such positioning. Alongside this, however, the salience attributed to European integration is an equally important aspect of EU issue voting, despite often being referred to only implicitly in the literature.

Inherently, the idea of EU issue voting only makes sense if the EU is sufficiently salient in voters' minds that they are willing to use their vote to express their preferences on this particular issue. As we have discussed, the development of the EU issue voting model in explaining voter behaviour at European elections is based on the view that European integration has begun to take on more importance in the minds of voters; hence, the issue is no longer a 'sleeping giant'. Studies often invoke this view to explain European election results in specific countries, arguing, for example, that voting patterns followed an EU issue voting logic because of the high salience of European integration at that point in time (Tillman, 2004; de Vries, 2007). Consistent with this, researchers have highlighted associations between aggregate-level measures of EU issue salience and levels of issue voting at European elections. Studies of contextual variation in EU issue voting find such voting to be more prevalent in cases where greater media attention has been paid to the European Union and greater political conflict between parties on this issue exists (de Vries et al., 2011; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016).

This logic should also apply at the individual level. Individual voters who consider the issue of European integration to be of considerable importance to them are more likely to favour a party that accurately represents their view on this issue than those who care little, regardless of their actual positioning. However, little previous research has examined the effect of individual-level salience on EU issue voting, despite the strong theoretical reasons to expect such an effect. In this paper, we fill this gap by investigating the moderating role of issue salience in the relationship between individuals' attitudes towards their country's membership in the EU and their party choice at European elections. Taken together, then, to fully assess the degree to which the issue of EU membership affects individuals' vote choices, we argue it is necessary to consider the importance individuals place on this issue and their stance on it.

5. Hard Euroscepticism: the issue of leaving the EU

Thus far, we have discussed the theoretical and empirical bases for the broad expectation that attitudes towards the EU influence voter behaviour in European elections. To be more specific, however, we theorize that voters should be motivated by the question of whether to leave the European Union as a whole. In this sense, while the EU issue voting model suggests that Euroscepticism (broadly understood as the opposition to EU integration or certain aspects of it) encourages support for Eurosceptic parties, we note that prior studies have distinguished 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism.

As Taggart and Szcznerbiak (2004) argue, soft Eurosceptics tend to display hostility towards particular aspects of European integration, such as the adoption

of the single currency, or advocate for the preservation of one's own national interest amidst EU policymaking, but stop short of arguing for the total disintegration of the EU or their own country's withdrawal. In contrast, hard Eurosceptics are inherently opposed to the idea of European integration, viewing it as ideologically incompatible with their own values; Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004, p. 3) give examples of the EU being perceived as too liberal, capitalist or socialist, as potentially underpinning hard Eurosceptic attitudes.

Although this conceptualization of different varieties of Euroscepticism was developed in the context of explaining party positions on the EU, it can likewise be applied to voters' attitudes. Despite most of the studies highlighted above, which test EU issue voting hypotheses, examining the effect of general attitudes towards the EU on vote choice, we argue that hard Euroscepticism, in particular, should constitute a key aspect of EU issue voting. If, as the EU issue voting model suggests, voters use European elections as an opportunity to express their opinions on the EU, those who vehemently oppose the European Union will have a clear motivation to do so. Although it could be argued that hard Eurosceptics may not wish to legitimise the elections by turning out at all, this is less likely to apply in a context where prominent hard Eurosceptic parties are competing for support, as is the case in much of contemporary Europe (Treib, 2014). Under these circumstances, voting for such parties can offer a far greater rebuke to the EU than abstaining.

Indeed, hard Euroscepticism across Europe should be particularly influential in the post-Brexit era. Where previously, the idea of individual member states leaving the European Union would likely have been seen as a remote prospect, hard Eurosceptics now have a clear precedent for their country to emulate. As such, we expect the issue of potentially leaving the EU altogether to occupy particularly high salience in the minds of contemporary voters at European elections, and therefore serve as a key determinant of voter behaviour.

Moreover, the issue of leaving need not motivate only ardent opponents of the EU. As already noted, Carrieri et al. (2024) find clear evidence of issue voting among pro-EU voters. As with hard Eurosceptics, the issue of leaving the EU is likely to be a strong motivating factor among such Europhile issue voters. Both Brexit and the presence of prominent parties advocating either direct withdrawal or a referendum on the subject should thus focus the minds of those who consider it highly important that their country remain in the EU, thus leading them to favour non-Eurosceptic parties at European elections. As such, we theorise that the issue of leaving, and the salience attributed to it, should comprise key aspects of general EU issue voting, capable of motivating both hard Eurosceptic and Europhile voters.

5.1 The case of the Czech Republic

While the argument we have set out above may apply to a wide range of European cases, we note that there is reason to expect it to apply to the specific case of the 2024 European elections in the Czech Republic we analyse in this paper. For one thing, although analyses of earlier Czech European elections have suggested voter behaviour to be dominated by domestic issues consistent with the second-order model (de Vries & Hobolt, 2016; Hloušek & Kaniok, 2020), recent studies indicate that the Czech Republic has become a candidate for widespread EU issue voting. Braun and Schäfer (2022) find the Czech Republic to be one of only two countries (the other being Slovakia) in which European integration was most commonly cited by voters as the issue that made them turn out to vote in the 2019 European elections. Similarly, Maier et al. (2021) show the salience of the European issues among both government and opposition parties in the Czech Republic during the 2019 election campaign was well above the average for all 27 analysed member states.

Indeed, concerning hard Euroscepticism and the leave-remain issue, it is important to note that as of 2024, several Czech parties have either supported leaving the EU or a referendum on the Czech Republic's membership as part of their official platforms. Specifically, we note four parties active during the 2024 campaign have taken such positions. As Havlík and Hloušek (2025) note, the far-right party Freedom and Direct Democracy (*SPD*) had long favoured withdrawal from the EU. It did not moderate this position even in the aftermath of Brexit when other hard Eurosceptic actors were doing so. As such, in their shared European election programme with Tricolour (*Trikolora*), the *SPD* favoured reclaiming national sovereignty from the EU to the point that the union was 'dissolved' (*SPD & Trikolora*, 2024). Another right-wing party, the Freedomists (*Svobodní*), have similarly committed to 'a timely separation of the Czech Republic from the Union' through a referendum vote (*Svobodní*, 2024). The Communists (*KSČM*) have also been consistent opponents of the Czech Republic's membership of the EU. As of 2024, a referendum on withdrawal remains a central pillar of the party programme (*KSČM*, 2024). All these hard Eurosceptic parties, or their respective electoral coalitions, gained more than one per cent of valid votes cast (with the parties together obtaining 17.05% of valid votes). As noted below, further hard Eurosceptic parties competed at the election, but each won less than one per cent of the vote. Beyond this, several other parties took generally Eurosceptic positions during the 2024 campaign, including the electoral coalition between Oath and Motorists (*Přísaha a Motoristé*) and the right-wing populist party *PRO* (Law, Respect, Expertise). However, as they stopped short of outwardly supporting withdrawal or a membership referendum, we do not identify these parties as *hard* Eurosceptics.

Party supply is a key component of issue voting. For voters to vote in a way that expresses their attitudes on the EU, they must have parties that represent

these attitudes. Evidently, this is the case in the Czech party system, even for hard Eurosceptic voters, who have multiple options to choose between in this regard. Consequently, there is good reason to expect voters' attitudes towards leaving or remaining in the EU to have played a substantial role in determining the outcome of the 2024 European election in the Czech Republic, particularly the sizeable support won by hard Eurosceptic parties.

6. Hypotheses

Based on issue voting theory and previous findings, we introduce hypotheses regarding the role of the Czexit issue in the 2024 EP election. Starting with turnout, we expect that issue salience will be related to voters' decision to vote or abstain, which leads us to the following hypothesis:

H1: *The greater the salience attributed to the issue of leaving or remaining in the European Union, the lower the probability of abstention.*

Turning to party choice, we expect voters' positioning on the issue of Czech membership in the EU to affect their electoral behaviour. The strongest supporters of Czexit should be most disposed towards supporting hard Eurosceptic parties as the best means of conveying their hostile feelings towards the EU, while those who most favour continued membership in the EU should be the least willing to support such parties. As such, we hypothesize the following:

H2: *Voters' position on Czexit will influence their party choice in alignment with their stance.*

In addition, we theorize the salience of the Czexit issue to act as a moderator in the relationship between voters' attitudes and their party choices. If, as the literature on EU issue voting discussed above has suggested, voters have generally become more likely to cast their vote based on EU (as opposed to domestic) issues as a result of European integration having become more salient, then individual voters should be more likely to follow an issue voting logic when they consider such issues to be of high importance. In contrast, those who consider the issue of EU membership largely irrelevant should be more likely to vote based on other issues, and may therefore end up supporting parties that do not reflect their attitudes on the EU. Indeed, we consider this an important test of the applicability of the EU issue voting model: if the effect of EU attitudes on vote choice is not moderated by salience, it raises the possibility that voters are selecting parties based on general ideological similarities, which include but are far from limited to EU issues, rather than specifically opting for parties that will convey their support for, or opposition to, the EU. We therefore hypothesize the following:

H3: *The effect of voters' Czexit attitude on their party choice will be moderated by the salience they ascribe to this issue.*

7. Data, measurement and analytical strategy

Sample

We analyse data from the post-election wave of the *Czech Attitude Barometer*, (Kudrnáč et al., 2024) a longitudinal panel survey using multistage stratified random sampling (strata are NUTS 3 regions and size of the place of residence). The sample is largely representative of the Czech-speaking adult population living in the Czech Republic and includes 1609 respondents (57% female, average age of 51.1 years).

The fieldwork started on Monday, 11th June 2024, right after the 2024 EP election in the Czech Republic (7th and 8th June). Most of the respondents (95% of the sample) completed the CAWI survey by 25th June, whereas the remaining respondents provided their answers by 30th July. Respondents who were not eligible to vote in the 2024 EP election (due to being below 18 years of age or not being eligible to vote in this election due to other reasons) were excluded from the analysis.

Operationalization

Dependent variables. Based on issue voting theory, we consider voter turnout and party choice as two stages of electoral behaviour. Hence, we create two outcome variables for the regression models. Following our first hypothesis, the first outcome variable is a binary variable measuring abstention (0 = turnout, 1 = abstention).

Since our remaining two hypotheses refer to party choice, the second outcome variable is a binary indicator of voting for a non-hard Eurosceptic party and a hard Eurosceptic party. Respondents who reported voting for a party or coalition which did not campaign for direct withdrawal from the EU or a referendum on the Czech EU membership are coded as 0. Respondents who reported voting for a hard Eurosceptic party/coalition are coded as 1. The following subjects belong to the hard Eurosceptic party choice outcome variable category: *Enough!* (a coalition led by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, i.e. *KSČM*); *SPD and Tricolour*; *Freedomists*; *Alliance for the Independence of the Czech Republic*; *Czech Republic in First Place!*; *FOR EU Withdrawal*; and *the Right Bloc*.

Attitude toward Czexit is the key explanatory variable from the EU issue voting model used in explaining party choice in the Czech 2024 EP election. We measure attitude toward Czexit using a semantic differential. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a continuum ranging from the quote ‘*The Czech Republic should remain a member of the EU*’ (coded as 1) to ‘*The Czech Republic should leave the EU*’ (coded as 6). In contrast to previous studies of Eurosceptic voting, which have tended to use questions such as ‘*Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion?*’ as a measure of general attitudes towards EU integration (Camatarri & Zucchini,

2019), our measurement directly targets the essence of hard Euroscepticism (i.e. leaving the EU).

Subjective salience attributed to the Czexit issue is the second key explanatory variable. We operationalize salience by a follow-up question to that measuring attitude toward Czexit: ‘How important is this issue to you?’ Respondents had three answer options to express the subjective importance of the issue: very important (1), moderately important (2) and little important (3). Because 52% of respondents consider the issue of the Czech membership in the EU highly salient (i.e. ‘very important’), whereas only 7% of respondents consider this issue to be of low salience, the subjective salience enters regression models as a dichotomous variable with two values: high salience (coded as 1), and other (i.e. low or moderate salience, coded as 0).

Control variables were selected based on theoretical expectations and empirical evidence from previous studies. Socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, education, and income, have been identified as critical factors influencing both turnout and Eurosceptic party preferences. For example, research on Brexit and Euroscepticism has consistently demonstrated that voters with lower income and education levels are more likely to support Eurosceptic positions (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2017). Including interest in politics accounts for variations in political engagement, which could otherwise confound the relationship between salience and turnout. Similarly, we control for gender-based differences in electoral behaviour, though prior research suggests these effects may be less pronounced in the context of Euroscepticism (Vogel, 2021). By controlling for these variables, the analysis ensures that the observed relationships between EU issue salience, attitude toward Czexit, and voter behaviour are not spuriously driven by socio-demographic or attitudinal confounders.

In testing the EU issue voting model, it is also commonplace to control for factors relating to domestic political matters in line with the second-order model (van Elsas et al., 2019; Goldberg et al., 2024). While our data does not include a direct measure of respondents’ satisfaction with the national government, arguably the key predictor of voter behaviour as per the second-order model, to proxy this measure, we control for respondents’ views regarding the state of the national economy. It is well-established that voters’ economic perceptions are central to their judgements of the performance of the incumbent government (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000), and has further been demonstrated that economic conditions are a key determinant of voter behaviour in second-order elections (Schakel, 2015). As such, we consider this variable an appropriate means of controlling for the domestic factors that may influence voter behaviour at EU elections beyond the issue voting model.

The control variables are measured as follows. *Interest in politics* is measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all interested) to 3 (very interested). Interest in politics is included as it is a well-documented predictor of turnout

and electoral engagement (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). *Economic perceptions* are measured by asking how the economy changed over the previous six months, with responses ranging from 1 (improved a lot) to 5 (worsened a lot). *Gender* is a dummy variable coded as 1 for females and 0 for males. *Age* is measured in years, as younger voters tend to participate less in elections, while older voters may lean toward more conservative or Eurosceptic preferences (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). *Educational attainment* is a binary variable coded as 1 for tertiary education and 0 for lower levels of education. Prior research has consistently associated lower educational attainment with higher Euroscepticism (Krouwel & Kutziyski, 2017; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2017). *Subjective household income* is used as a proxy measure for household income. We opted for subjective household income to address the high proportion of missing data (42%) in direct income measures. This control variable is coded as 1 for households living comfortably on their present income and 0 for those experiencing difficulties. Lower income levels have been linked to higher support for Eurosceptic parties and abstention (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2017).

Analytical strategy

We begin by analysing contingency tables, presented as stacked bar charts with column percentages in Figure 2 and Figure 3, to examine bivariate associations between voter behaviour in the 2024 EP election and two key explanatory variables. We also use the Pearson chi-square test of independence and Cramér's V coefficient for this exploratory analysis. Next, we apply regression models to examine these bivariate associations further while controlling for additional individual-level variables. Specifically, we use binary logistic regression modelling for each of the two binary dependent variables.

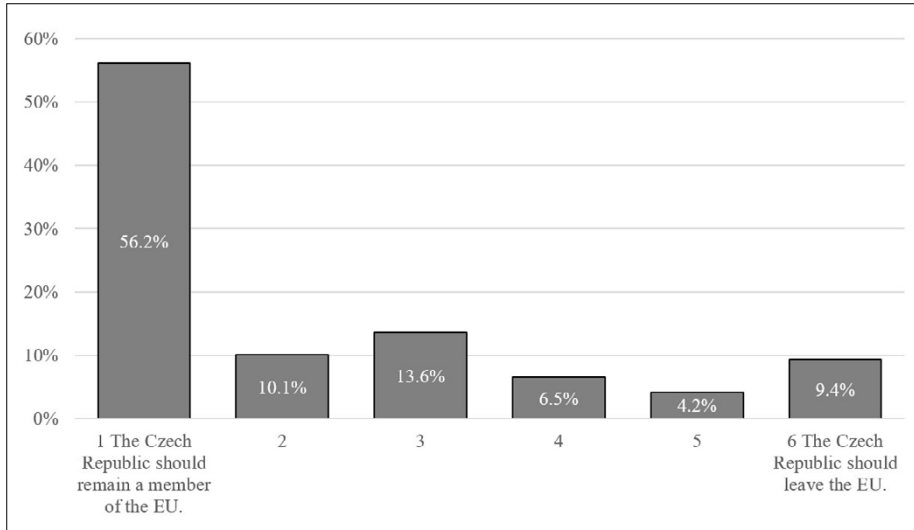
8. Results

Descriptive statistics

Starting with descriptive statistics of our two dependent and key independent variables, 41.9% of respondents reported not voting in the analysed EP election. Of the respondents who cast their vote (58.1% of the entire sample), 82% voted for a non-hard Eurosceptic party/coalition (i.e. all parties which do not explicitly favour leaving or a referendum), and the remaining 18% respondents voted for a hard Eurosceptic party/coalition.

Figure 1 demonstrates that more than half of respondents (56.2%) are very pro-remaining (i.e. against Czexit), having selected the answer option 1. On the other hand, only 9.4% of respondents are strong Czexit supporters, having chosen option 6 on the semantic differential scale. As for the subjective salience attributed to the Czexit issue, 52% of respondents consider the issue to be of high salience, 41% of moderate salience and only 7% of low salience.

Figure 1:
Bar chart of attitude toward Czexit (n = 1580)

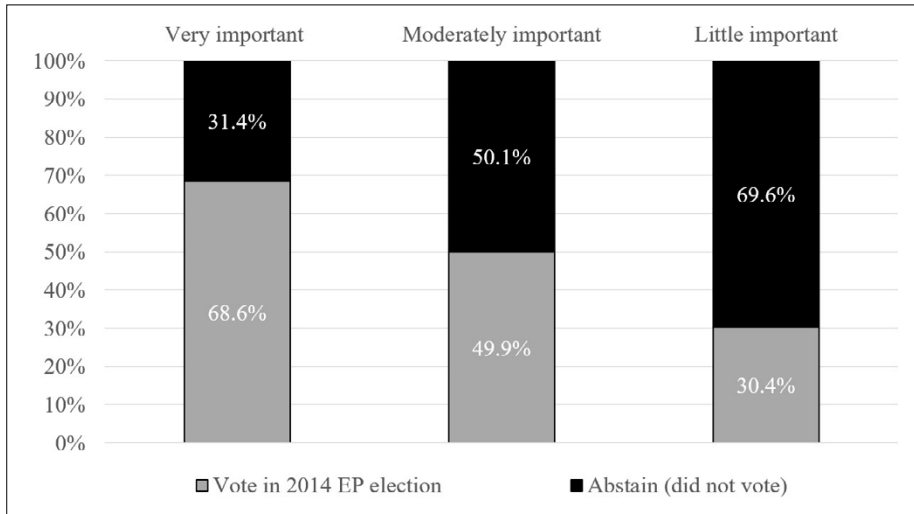


Source: The author.

Bivariate associations

Figure 2 illustrates the association between turnout in the Czech 2024 EP election and the subjective salience assigned to the Czexit issue. The EU issue voting model predicts that voters use EP elections to express their opinions on the EU project. Figure 2 lends empirical support to this prediction. Less than a third of respondents who ascribed high salience to the issue abstained from the election (31.4%). Conversely, seven out of ten respondents (69.6%), considering the issue to be of low salience, abstained from the EP election. Hence, Figure 2 supports our first hypothesis, which postulates an association between salience and probability of abstention.

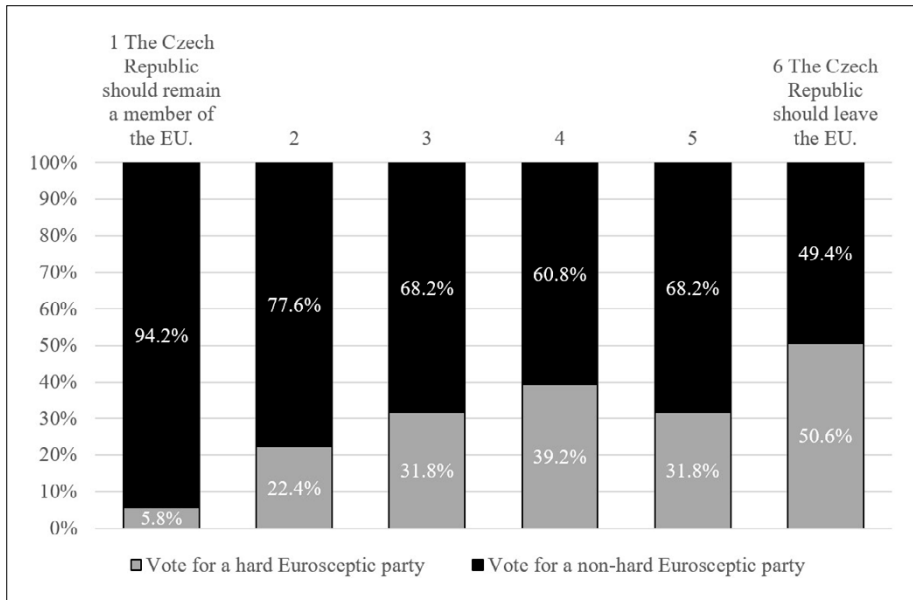
Figure 2:
Voter turnout and the subjective salience of the Czexit issue (n = 1597)



Notes: $\chi^2 = 92$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.24$
 Source: The author.

Figure 3 cross-tabulates the party choice and attitude toward Czexit. Two key observations emerge. Firstly, in line with our second hypothesis, the greater the support for leaving the EU, the higher the proportion of respondents voting for a hard Eurosceptic party. Whereas only 6% of the respondents who strongly support remaining voted for a hard Eurosceptic party, up to 51% of those who believe the Czech Republic should leave the EU voted for a hard Eurosceptic party. Secondly, the greater the support for the Czech Republic remaining in the EU, the higher the probability of voting for a non-hard Eurosceptic party. Almost all respondents (94.2%) strongly favouring remaining in the EU voted for such parties, compared with only half of strong Czexiteers. Consequently, Figure 3 provides strong bivariate evidence for our second hypothesis.

Figure 3:
Party choice and attitude toward Czexit (n = 922).



Notes: $\chi^2 = 155$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.41$

Source: The author.

8.1 Binary logistic regression models

Turnout

Moving to the results of our multivariate analyses, Table 1 presents the binary logistic regression model of turnout. Since our first hypothesis (H1) predicts that high salience attributed to the Czexit issue is associated with a lower probability of abstention, we use electoral participation as a reference category in the model.

In line with our first hypothesis, the high salience of the Czexit issue is associated with a lower predicted probability of abstention. Based on Model 1, the predicted probability of abstention for respondents with high subjective salience attributed to the Czexit issue is 0.36 (with 95% CI [0.33, 0.39]). On the other hand, the predicted probability of abstention for respondents with low or moderate salience is significantly higher, at 0.45 (95% CI [0.42, 0.48]). Although the effect size presented in Figure 2 decreases after controlling for other predictors, the effect of salience on abstention remains substantive. Voters' attitude toward Czexit does not predict abstention.

Table 1:
Binary logistic regression model of abstaining in the 2024 Czech EP election.

VARIABLES	Model 1		SE
Czexit attitude	-0.00		(0.01)
Salience	-0.42	***	(0.12)
Political interest	-0.91	***	(0.09)
Economic perception	0.07		(0.07)
Household income	-0.39	**	(0.16)
University education	-0.01		(0.13)
Age	-0.02	***	(0.00)
Female	-0.03		(0.12)
Constant	1.80	***	(0.32)
Observations	1,513		
Pseudo R-squared	0.127		

Note: reference category = participated in the election, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
Source: The author.

The model explains almost 13% of the variability in voter turnout in the Czech 2024 EP election. The effects of the controls in predicting voter turnout mostly align with theoretical expectations and earlier findings. Interest in politics is positively associated with turnout, such that the lower the political interest, the higher the probability of abstention. High-income people have a significantly higher likelihood of turning out to vote. Younger voters were less likely to participate in the 2024 EP election. Views regarding the state of the national economy, educational attainment and gender had no notable effect on voter turnout in the analysed EP election.

Party choice

Since our remaining two hypotheses postulate associations between party choice and attitude toward Czexit (H2) and the interaction effect of the attitude toward Czexit with the salience attributed to this issue (H3), Table 2 reports coefficient estimates from two binary logistic regression models estimated only on respondents who voted in the 2024 EP election. Model 2 uses the same explanatory variables as Model 1. Consequently, model 2 tests our second hypothesis.

Model 2 provides limited evidence for the hypothesis that voters' position on the Czexit issue correlates with their party choice. When controlling for relevant variables, strong supporters of Czexit are marginally more likely to vote for hard Eurosceptic parties (than supporters of Remain, with the respective predicted probabilities at 0.19 vs. 0.17). Meanwhile, the strong supporters of the Czech Republic remaining an EU member show only a slightly greater tendency to vote for non-hard Eurosceptic parties (compared to the strong Czexiters). Although

the coefficient estimate for the attitude toward Czexit is statistically significant (at the 0.01 significance level), the effect size is tiny.

To test the moderation of salience on the effect of Czexit attitude on party choice (H3), model 3 contains an interaction term between salience and Czexit attitude. In doing so, the model provides clear-cut statistically significant evidence for hypothesis H3, demonstrating a moderation effect which importantly applies to support for both hard and non-hard Eurosceptic parties. Strong Czexit supporters attributing high subjective salience to the issue tend to vote for hard Eurosceptic parties more often than those attributing moderate or low salience to the Czexit issue. At the same time, strong remain supporters considering the issue highly salient are more likely to vote for non-hard Eurosceptic parties than those attributing moderate or low salience to the issue.

Table 2:
Binary logistic regression models of voting for hard Eurosceptic party in the 2024 Czech EP election

VARIABLES	Model 2		SE	Model 3		SE
Czexit attitude	0.02	**	(0.01)	0.02	*	(0.01)
Salience	-0.13		(0.19)	-1.47	***	(0.29)
Czexit attitude*salience				0.48	***	(0.07)
Political interest	0.10		(0.13)	0.12		(0.14)
Economic perception	0.81	***	(0.11)	0.55	***	(0.12)
Household income	-0.52		(0.28)	-0.38		(0.29)
University education	0.36		(0.20)	0.47	*	(0.21)
Age	0.02	**	(0.01)	0.02	**	(0.01)
Female	-0.18		(0.19)	-0.24		(0.20)
Constant	-5.45	***	(0.59)	-4.66	***	(0.61)
Observations	903			903		
Pseudo R-squared	0.137			0.195		

Note: reference category = vote for a non-hard Eurosceptic party, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: The author.

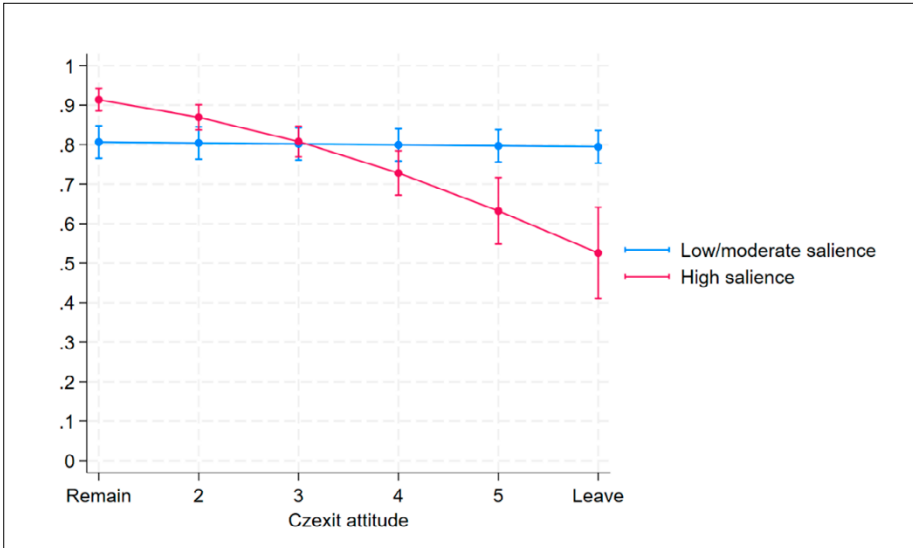
Beyond this, the relatively strong effect of voters' economic perceptions on their decision to support a Eurosceptic party is also worth noting. In other words, those who perceived the economy to have worsened were more likely to favour hard Eurosceptic parties. Notably, none of the parties we identified as hard Eurosceptic were participants in the national government at the time of the election. As such, this finding indicates that alongside the salience-dependent EU issue voting we have presented, second-order election dynamics may also have been at play in the 2024 EP election, with voters who perceived a downturn in domestic economic conditions turning to smaller opposition parties (who tend to hold more Eurosceptic positions) to express their discontent at this situation.

To better visualize the substantial effects of our two key explanatory variables on party choice, Figure 4 and Figure 5 present the predicted probabilities of voting for the respective party type. These figures visualise the moderation of high salience on the effect of attitude toward Czexit tested in model 3. The sample space consists of two events (i.e. vote for a non-hard Eurosceptic party and vote for a hard Eurosceptic party). Hence, the predicted probabilities reported on the vertical axes add up to one for these two outcomes.

Figure 4 provides empirical support for the moderation effect concerning voting for non-hard Eurosceptic parties. Strong remain advocates who attribute high salience to this issue are significantly more likely to vote for a non-hard Eurosceptic party than strong remain advocates with only moderate or low salience. Moreover, Figure 5 demonstrates a strong moderation effect of issue salience on voting for hard Eurosceptic parties. The predicted probability of a strong Czexiteer with high subjective salience to vote for a hard Eurosceptic party is 0.47, whereas for a strong Czexiteer with only low or moderate subjective salience it is just 0.2. The interaction term is statistically significant despite the low number of strong Czexiteers in the analysed sample (as demonstrated by Figure 1 and the width of respective confidence intervals for answer options 5 and 6).

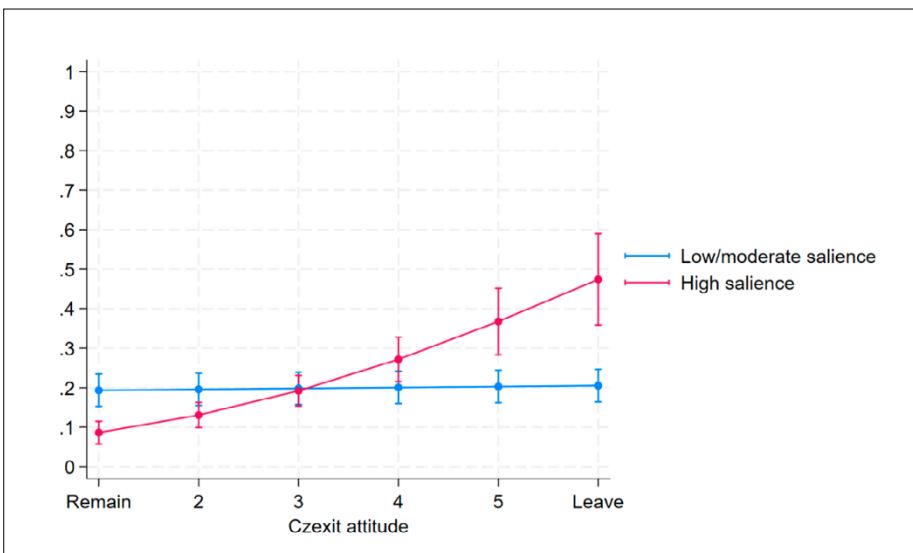
Furthermore, these two figures demonstrate that if the attributed salience of the Czexit issue is not high, then the probability of voting for non-hard Eurosceptic parties and hard Eurosceptic parties is the same for all answer categories on the attitude toward the Czexit. This null effect of the attitude toward Czexit on party choice is demonstrated by the flat straight lines for the low/moderate salience in these figures. In other words, only when voters ascribe high salience to the Czexit issue is their party choice in the EP elections associated with their stance. Consequently, our results provide evidence consistent with the EU issue voting model. Nevertheless, the voters' economic perceptions hint that 'second-order' dynamics are also relevant in explaining party choice in the EP elections.

Figure 4:
Predicted probabilities of voting for a non-hard Eurosceptic party
and attitude toward Czexit moderated by salience (Model 3)



Source: The author.

Figure 5:
Predicted probabilities of voting for a hard Eurosceptic party
and attitude toward Czexit moderated by salience (Model 3)



Source: The author.

9. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the Czexit issue's role in the behaviour of Czech voters in the 2024 EP elections. Based on the EU issue voting model, we examined the role of voter attitudes and the salience attributed to the Czech Republic's EU membership as correlates of turnout and party choice. We hypothesized that the greater the salience attributed to the Czexit issue, the lower the probability of abstention (H1), that voters' positioning on the Czexit issue influences their party choice in alignment with their stance (H2), and that the effect of this issue on party choice is moderated by the salience they attribute to this issue (H3).

Turnout and issue salience

Our analyses showed that the subjective salience ascribed to the EU membership is related to voter turnout. Consistent with H1, higher salience attributed to this issue significantly reduced the likelihood of abstention. This finding aligns with the EU issue voting model, which posits that voters are more likely to participate when they perceive a given issue as central to their preferences or identity (van der Brug et al., 2007; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016).

Party choice and attitude toward Czexit

The relationship between EU membership attitudes and party choice provided only weak evidence for H2. Respondents generally favouring Czexit were slightly more likely to vote for hard Eurosceptic parties, while those favouring remaining showed a slight preference for non-hard Eurosceptic parties. This pattern is consistent with prior studies emphasizing the general role of EU attitudes in structuring party competition in EP elections (de Vries, 2010; Hobolt et al., 2009). However, as we noted, the effect size in this regard was tiny, meaning that based on our evidence, examining only voters' attitudes on this issue without considering their interaction with salience only explains a small amount of the variation in Czech voters' party choice.

Moderation of salience

Notably, our analyses of the interaction between voters' Czexit attitudes and the subjective salience they attributed to this issue strongly supported hypothesis H3. As we have shown, voters' attitudes on the issue of leaving the EU exerted no discernible effect on their decision to support a hard Eurosceptic party or not when they considered this issue to be of low or moderate salience, but a substantial effect when they judged the issue to be of much importance. Voters' decision to support parties that broadly reflect their attitudes depends on considering this question to be of high importance. These results thus highlight the centrality of individual-level issue salience in determining voter behaviour at European elections.

Contributions and limitations

Surprisingly, no previous empirical research had examined the effect of individual-level salience attributed to the issue of the country's EU membership on individual voter behaviour in EP elections. This study thus tests crucial predictions implied by the EU issue voting model using a unique dataset designed to study the interplay between subjective issue salience and attitude towards the leave-remain issue. Our findings highlight the dual role of salience as a mobilizing factor for turnout and a moderator capable of amplifying or downplaying the effect of voters' EU attitudes on their party choice. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on EU issue voting by extending its application to the Czech context, a country where EU-related issues have become increasingly divisive.

Despite its contributions, the study has some limitations. First, like other post-election surveys (cf. McAllister & Quinlan, 2022), the analysed data suffers from turnout over-reporting. Whereas 36.45% of the electorate voted in the 2024 EP election in the Czech Republic, the reported turnout in the analysed data is 58.1%. Both nonresponse bias (i.e. non-voters being less likely to participate in surveys) and misreporting (i.e. abstaining respondents reporting turnout due to social desirability or other psychological processes) contribute to turnout over-reporting (Dahlgaard et al., 2019; Sciarini & Goldberg, 2017; Selb & Munzert, 2013). While turnout over-reporting presents a limitation of this study, we refrained from weighting the data based on the election results in the presented results. We are studying associations between attitudinal variables stemming from the EU issue voting model and voter behaviour. The overrepresentation of voters of hard Eurosceptic parties in our sample thus enables us to achieve more robust results about this relatively small group. Nevertheless, weighting the sample based on election results does not change the substantive effects of the two key explanatory variables reported here.

Second, we could not fully control for second-order factors, as usually operationalised by variables capturing satisfaction with government. While we consider our use of economic perceptions to be an appropriate proxy in this regard, we recognise that this is not the only means by which voters judge incumbent governments, meaning it is plausible that other domestic determinants of voter behaviour, in line with the second-order model, are not captured by our analytical approach. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow for causal inferences, suggesting a need for longitudinal studies to explore how salience and attitudes concerning the issue of leaving the EU evolve over time, ideally along with voter behaviour over several EP elections. Future research could also examine the interplay between individual attitudes towards a country's EU membership and other EU-related issues, such as migration or environmental policies (e.g. the European Green Deal), to provide a more comprehensive understanding of electoral behaviour in the EP elections and further test the explanatory power of specific factors of the EU issue voting model.

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Political Polarization as a trigger of Hard Euro scepticism: The case of Bulgarian 2024 EP Elections

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Abstract

In Bulgaria, where most of the population supports the European membership of the country, the space for Eurosceptic parties (hard or soft) is not very large. At the same time, as the case of Bulgarian 2024 European Parliament elections demonstrate a variety of political parties resort more and more often to Eurosceptic rhetoric.

Our article focuses on the most vocal Eurosceptic party in the country the political party Vazrazhdane (Revival). Vazrazhdane is a populist radical right party that can be classified as a hard Eurosceptic party. In our article we argue that the hard Euroscepticism of Vazrazhdane is a result not only from the party ideological positions but also of the party strategic considerations. Another important aspect of the observed hard Euroscepticism of the party is the fact that is nurtured by the long-lasting political crisis in the country and the significant political polarisation observed in Bulgaria.

The article explores the hard Eurosceptic discourse of Vazrazhdane during the 2024 European Parliament Elections that happened simultaneously with snap general elections in the country. Our analysis is based on party documents, party manifestos and leaders' and other officials' speeches and interviews in the course of both EP and general elections in 2024.

Keywords: hard euroscepticism; polarization; EP elections; Vazrazhdane

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1. Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament elections have been identified by several observers as key elections for the European integration project. If European elections are usually perceived as ‘wars fought with dummy rounds in which many are wounded but nobody is killed’ (Krastev, 2024), this time the situation was different. The elections took place at a turning point for Europe. The war in Ukraine dramatically changed the European agenda. Russian aggression has made the topic of EU security and defense a central focus of the debate over the past three years. Other European citizens’ fears are fueled by a general sense of insecurity due to rising prices, the international situation and migration problems (Eurobarometer, 2024). All these issues are the fuel that drives Eurosceptic parties, whether they are soft or hard Eurosceptic.

But the expectations that far-right populist parties would increase their calls to leave the EU after Brexit have not materialized (van Kessel, Chelotti, Drake, Roch, & Rodi, 2020). Instead, they have shifted their strategy, softening their hard Euroscepticism with a ‘lite version’ that has ‘indirect effects by pushing many of the West’s political systems and the mainstream further to the right...’ (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018, p. 284). This strategy proved successful. For example, the Freedom Party in the Netherlands won the parliamentary elections at the end of 2023, and the National Rally in France took first position in opinion polls. Thus, on the eve of the 2024 EP election campaign, the European Council on Foreign Relations issued a forecast of a significant increase in the representation of the far right (Cunningham, Hix, Dennison, & Learmonth, 2024).

If populist radical right parties in Western democracies adopted a moderate course, their Eastern European counterparts adopted a different strategy. The political crisis in recent years in countries such as Slovakia, Romania or Bulgaria has led to the formation of new populist radical right parties such as the Slovak Republican Movement, S.O.S. Romania and the Bulgarian party Vazrazhdane (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023). These parties are characterized by their hard Euroscepticism, which is also evident in the campaign for the European Parliament elections (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2024).

Hard Euroscepticism in Bulgaria is associated mainly with Ataka (Attack), part of the Bulgarian National Assembly for 16 years (2005-2021) and Vazrazhdane (Revival), which can be considered as the successor of Ataka. Vazrazhdane’s electoral rise began in 2021 and developed simultaneously with the unprecedented political crisis in the country, which led to 7 parliamentary elections within three and a half years. It is this political crisis that makes the Bulgarian case particularly interesting to study. The aim of the article is to examine the features of Vazrazhdane’s hard Euroscepticism during the campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections. The main research question is to what extent the party system polarization in Bulgaria triggers the hard Euroscepticism.

In the sections that follow, we first outline the theoretical framework of our study based on the literature of party system polarization and party Euroscepticism. Then we describe the characteristics of our methodological tools, which is qualitative content analysis. The next section is dedicated to our analysis, starting with domestic political context. We find that the unprecedented political crisis in Bulgaria has exacerbated party polarization, leading to the emergence of new populist radical right parties, some of which, like Vazrazhdane, are hard Eurosceptic. The analysis continues with a section dedicated to the political discourse and leading priorities of Vazrazhdane during the 2024 EP campaign, related to hard Euroscepticism. Finally, we discuss how the polarization of the party system in Bulgaria influenced the electoral success of Vazrazhdane. We also make some assumptions about the future perspective of the party.

2. Theoretical framework: Party system polarization and Euroscepticism

In recent years, the polarization of party systems in European democracies has increased significantly. Thus, Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2021, p. 211) argue that ‘almost two-thirds of the most polarized elections have taken place in the twenty-first century’. One of the most common explanations for this trend is the electoral rise of the populist radical right parties, which are largely anti-political-establishment oriented (Abedi, 2004).

Polarization is a widely studied phenomenon, whether it refers to political cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) or ideological struggles (Sani & Sartoti, 1983). As argued in the party system literature, party system polarization depends on higher levels of fragmentation, greater ideological distances between parties and the presence of relevant anti-system parties (Sartori, 1976). If in the times that Sartori studies, European party systems with polarized pluralism were more of an exception, the last decade has seen the opposite dynamic (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). In their latest contribution, Emanuele and Marino (2024: p. 1) argue that the ideological polarization in Western Europe has been intensifying in recent years because of a ‘progressive shift in electoral support from ideologically moderate mainstream parties to more extreme challenger parties’. This type of parties, whether populist radical right (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2024) or radical left (Wagner, 2022), have changed the political landscapes in Europe and increased the polarization of party systems (Poguntke & Holfmeister, 2024). This process is even more distinct in Eastern European democracies, where the initially weakly institutionalized party systems are much more open to new anti-establishment party contenders (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021). Many of them are both populist radical rights and Eurosceptics (Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo & Ostiguy, 2017; Mudde, 2019).

Party polarization is most often studied through Downsian spatial model (Downs, 1957; Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011; De Vries et al., 2021). It looks at the individual preferences of political actors, whether they are parties or voters, considering how large the distances are between them - the larger they are, the greater the political differences between them. In recent years, much of the research on this topic has sought a connection between polarization and voter turnout. Dalton et al. (2011, p. 72-73) argue, that 'higher levels of party polarization within a system increase turnout, but decrease campaign activity'. This is confirmed by other research. Ellger (2024) studies that the polarization of the party system increases voter mobilization. Muñoz and Meguid (2021, p. 8) pay attention to the fact that polarization stimulates voter turnout when one party is close to the voter's preferred policies and another party is ideologically too distant. On the other hand, if voters feel that the parties do not meaningfully represent their preferred policies or that there is no significant difference between the parties, they may abstain from voting (Muñoz & Meguid, 2021). Rossteutscher and Stövsand (2022) show another pattern. They prove that the polarization of the party system suppresses voter turnout. Their research confirms the hypothesis that 'party-system polarization decreases turnout among moderate citizens and non-partisans and increases turnout of more extreme voters and partisans' (Rossteutscher & Stövsand, 2022, p. 916). These arguments would be even more valid for the European Parliament elections, which are perceived as second-order national elections (Reif & Schmidt, 1980). Lower voter turnout in European Parliament elections increases the absolute weight of radical anti-establishment parties from the far left or far right spectrum, whose voters are much more motivated to participate in these elections than moderate voters.

Following these theoretical assumptions, we consider that party system polarization in Bulgaria after 2020 radicalized political discourse. The political crisis led to a drop in voter turnout to 34%, which was recorded in the 2024 snap elections (Central Electoral Commission [CIK], 2024). The lower voter turnout increased the chance of smaller protest formations to overcome the 4% electoral threshold. There are no signs that the major parties in the country are winning elections with over 1,5 million - 2 million votes, as has happened in the recent past (Lyubenov, 2011). Shrinking voter turnout and fragmentation encapsulated the parties around only the narrowest core of supporters. Having lost the electoral periphery of moderate voters, the parties radicalized their speech, directing their messages only to the hard and most radical cores, which further intensified polarization. Thus, the political crisis in Bulgaria opened space for new anti-establishment and Eurosceptic formations.

The first academic article discussing the party-based Euroscepticism was 'A touchstone of dissent: Euroscepticism in contemporary Western European party systems' (Taggart, 1998). Soon this article has been followed by other academic publications discussing the new phenomenon of Euroscepticism. Academic re-

searchers tried to approach this new problematic by first looking for a definition of the problem. In 2002 Taggart and Szczerbiak proposed definition of two types of Euroscepticism, which they described as ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ form of the party-based opposition to the EU (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002). In their next publications (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004, Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008) the authors sharpened their definition but the two-dimensional approach towards party-based Euroscepticism remained. In a publication Kopecký and Mudde (2002) criticized the two-dimensional approach of Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002) by defining four types of party approach to EU (Eurorejects, Eurosceptics, Europragmatists and Euroenthusiasts). The same year, Flood (2002) contributed to the debate defining six approaches to European integration among which rejectionist, revisionist, and minimalist. Over the years other social researchers attempted to define this phenomenon, but the most widespread definition remained Szczerbiak and Taggart one. They define hard Euroscepticism as a principled opposition to the EU and European integration, expressed by political parties that believe that their countries should withdraw from the EU, while soft Euroscepticism is expressed in ‘qualified opposition’ to the EU policies and decisions of European institutions. (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008: pp.7- 8). In a recent study covering 30 European democracies and 77 parties, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2024) found a strong association between anti-establishment discourse and Euroscepticism. They find that despite the dependence between the two categories, there are also political parties that are Eurosceptic but not anti-establishment and vice versa.

Although we do agree with Heinisch, McDonnell and Werner (2021) observation that in some cases is difficult to define one party as unequivocally hard or soft Eurosceptic, we argue that the case of Vazrazhdane is an example of the first. The hard Euroscepticism came for the first time, in the Bulgarian party competition, right before the accession to the EU in the face of far-right party Ataka. Norris and Inglehart (2019, p. 239) define the party as authoritarian populist, positioning it close to Jobbik, due to its xenophobic and ultra-nationalist positions. Fifteen years after the birth of Ataka a new hard Eurosceptic party entered the party competition – Vazrazhdane. The party can be described as a twin party of Ataka. The party’s positions largely echo those articulated by its far-right predecessor in the past. The perception that Bulgaria has become a ‘colonial state,’ losing its sovereignty with its membership in NATO and the EU, the insistence on renegotiating the conditions for EU membership, the calling of a referendum on leaving NATO, the pro-Russian orientation, are all common features of both political parties. Even in symbolic political gestures, many similarities can be seen. Vazrazhdane displays a disrespectful attitude towards the symbols of the European Union. The party’s MPs always sit down demonstratively while listening to the European anthem at the opening of each parliamentary session of the Bulgarian National assembly, a practice Ataka started after 2005. As a classical PRRP Vazrazhdane succeeded to mobilize party support, addressing issues as migration, LGBT rights, ethnic

minority groups in the country, and EU integration (Vazrazhdane, 2021). The party insists on a referendum for the Bulgarian membership in the Union. Thus, this type of Euroscepticism was developed in a strong pro-European environment and referendum call was used as a '*the discursive "proxy" of a referendum to hide away that they want to exit*' (Havlík & Hloušek 2025, p. 4).

Referendum democracy is a specific feature of the populist radical right (Mudde, 2007). However, referendums are sometimes used as a tool to increase political polarization. For example, Enyedi (2016) introduces the concept of populist polarization by anti-establishment parties for purely strategic purposes. Following this categorization Casal Bértoa & Musiał-Karg (2025) introduces the term 'populist polarizing referendum,' which resembles cleavage referendums. These types of referendums 'aim to exacerbate existing political divisions, reinforce divisive narratives, marginalize the opposition, and consolidate power' (Casal Bértoa & Musiał-Karg, 2025, p. 2). If Casal Bértoa and Musiał-Karg view polarizing referendums as a tool for ruling parties to consolidate their power, the opposition could also initiate referendums to strengthen its electoral influence and support. This was the case with the attempt of Vazrazhdane to organize a referendum against the adoption of the euro in Bulgaria, by organizing a petition supported by over 600,000 people. This initiative was declared unconstitutional by the Bulgarian Constitutional Court, but it deepened the division in society on this issue.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a critical juncture that has exacerbated the historical divisions in Eastern Europe between pro-Russian and anti-Russian attitudes. The war has provoked mixed reactions among populist radical right parties in the EU (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023). Parties such as the French National Rally (RN) or Salvini's Lega in Italy, which maintain close ties to the Kremlin, are distancing themselves to avoid potential damage considering the upcoming general elections in both countries (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023). However, some populist radical right parties from Eastern Europe reacted differently. Political parties such as Bulgarian Vazrazhdane and the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) 'have become even more avid defenders of Putin, maintaining or even growing their electoral support' (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023, p. 349). Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Vazrazhdane held openly pro-Russian positions, which often sounded like official Russian propaganda. The war did not change the image and behavior of Vazrazhdane. This is no coincidence and has its own simple explanation, related to the widespread historical sympathies towards Russia in Bulgarian society (Zankina, 2023; Otova, 2024). The foreign policy cleavage 'West vs. Russia' has always occupied a central place in Bulgarian politics (Todorov, 2007; Stoyanov, 2019).

Following these categorizations, we suggest that a new indicator of hard Euroscepticism should be added, and this is the assessment of the war in Ukraine and Russia's contemporary policy towards the EU. We consider this to be par-

ticularly important in the current geopolitical context. The war in Ukraine has not only changed the security environment but also turned Russia into a major strategic adversary of Europe, which, through targeted actions such as hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns, seeks to weaken the EU, disrupt its unity. Therefore, we believe that a particularly important indicator in the study of hard Euroscepticism will be the positions of political actors which justify Russian aggression in Ukraine, blame Ukraine or the West for the war, or express support for the Putin regime.

3. Methodology and Operationalization

The subject of analysis in this article will be primarily the election campaign of the Vazrazhdane party. After Ataka did not register to participate in the elections on June 9, Vazrazhdane is the only one of the relevant parties in the country that can be defined as a hard Eurosceptic. The remaining parties on the radical right spectrum such as VMRO- Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO-BND) or new parties such as Velichie (Greatness) and Morality, Unity, Honour (MECH) are characterized by soft Euroscepticism. They are neither advocating for Bulgaria to leave the EU, nor are they calling for a referendum to decide on this issue.

The main research method we use in the article is qualitative content analysis. Through it, we analyze the Vazrazhdane anti-European narrative discourse from the supply side. According to Capano, Galanti and Barbato (2023, p. 238) ‘political narratives are “grand” stories that political leaders tell directly to the public and the electorate. Through these narratives, political leaders shape the preferences of public opinion by telling a story in which they propose a political vision, relevant political goals and how they will perform better than others in leading policies towards reaching the proposed political ends’. Following this concept, we consider narrative analysis in two senses: 1) as a methodological approach that helps explain various aspects of political processes by deriving different understandings and interpretations of political messages and practices (Groth, 2019, p. 11), and 2) as a strategy by which political actors ‘intentionally or intuitively to further relatively specific goals’ (Groth, 2019, p. 8).

Holding the European Parliament elections together with the snap parliamentary elections imposes a preliminary factual limitation of the study, due to the shift of the pre-election debate to predominantly domestic political topics. To compensate for this shortcoming, we focus mainly on the analysis of the positions of the party candidates for members of the European Parliament, expressed in their interviews, statements or publications on social media during the official election campaign period in Bulgaria from June 9 to June 7, 2024. Vazrazhdane did not present a special election program for the European Parliament elections. Therefore, we analyze the two programs available on the party’s website – Vazrazh-

dane's Governance Platform - 2021, entitled 'Who are we and what do we want?' (Vazrazhdane, 2021) and Vazrazhdane's Election Program for the Parliamentary Elections (Vazrazhdane, 2024). The pre-election debates for the European Parliament elections on the three national television channels BNT, BTV and NOVA are also a source of analysis (BNT, 2024a; BTV, 2024b; NOVA, 2024b).

Following the discussion of the theoretical part of the article, we examine hard Euroscepticism from the perspectives of political positions as a principled opposition to the EU and European integration according to 3 main variables, operationalized and presented in Table 1.

Table 1:
Operationalization of the hard Euroscepticism

Indicators	Party positions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire to leave the EU; Principled opposition to the EU and European integration; • Strengthening cooperation with countries like Russia that view the EU and its member states as enemy countries; • Strengthening cooperation with countries, unions and organizations that are competitors of the EU. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calls to leave the EU; calls for a referendum to leave the Union; • Appeals to lift sanctions against the Kremlin; calls to end military, economic and humanitarian aid to Ukraine; positions to strengthen economic cooperation with the Kremlin; positions that consider the West and Kiev to be guilty of the war in Ukraine; • Strengthening cooperation with China and the BRICS countries.

Source: The author.

As noted in the theoretical framework of the article, party polarization can be measured by examining the distances between parties through spatial models. For this purpose, we analyze data from the CHES expert study on the war in Ukraine (Hooghe, Marks, Bakker, Jolly, Polk, Rovny, Steenbergen, & Vachudova, 2023). The dataset is relevant and, above all, up to date, including the new Bulgarian parties established after 2021. We examine the positioning of political parties in a multi-dimensional spatial model the economic left-right and GAL/TAN scales. Through them, we determine whether there are large distances between the parties. We also analyze the positions of the political parties, whether they support or oppose European integration, and whether they support or oppose strengthening ties with the Kremlin.

4. Domestic political context in the eve of EP elections

4.1. Party system polarization in Bulgaria

Following these theoretical assumptions, the article examines the parliamentary crises in Bulgaria in the period 2021-2024 as a specific case of polarization of the party system. During this period, Bulgaria held 7 parliamentary elections due to the inability of the parties to find a sustainable coalition formula for governance. This is the clearest evidence of party system polarization in the country. The nearly 10-year rule of GERB led to the creation of a model of illiberal democracy, characterized by a high degree of corruption, lack of rule of law, and placing the judiciary, the prosecutor's office, and the media market in political and/or oligarchic dependence, leading to the state capture and repressive actions against political opponents and business competitors of the ruling party (Kanev, 2021, p. 61; Stoyanov & Lyubenov, 2024). Thus, in the summer of 2020, a wave of anti-corruption protests broke out, which lasted several months and paved the way for a change in the party system after the parliamentary elections next year. The fight against corruption and the need for reforms in the judiciary emerged as the main dividing line between new parties such as We Continue the Change (PP), Democratic Bulgaria (DB), There is Such a People (ITN) on the one hand, and GERB-SDS and Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) on the other. The attempt to build an anti-GERB and DPS coalition in late 2021 proved short-lived. The government of Kiril Petkov, which united the PP, DB, ITN and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in a ruling coalition, lasted only 8 months and was overthrown by a vote of no confidence after ITN withdrew from the government. Thus, after two more consecutive early parliamentary elections, a compromise was reached between PP-DB and GERB-SDS to form a government, which collapsed after 9 months due to disputes over appointments to the Anti-Corruption Commission and the adoption of an amendment to the Judiciary Act to complete the reform of the prosecutor's office (Lyubenov & Stoyanov, 2025).

Frequent early parliamentary elections led to a large decline in voter turnout - from 50.6% in the first elections in 2021 (Kanev, 2021) to 34.4% in the ones held on June 9, 2024 (CIK, 2024). The lower voter turnout increased the chance of smaller protest formations to overcome the 4% electoral threshold. Thus, about 100 thousand votes became sufficient to enter parliament. In 2023, the winner of the elections, GERB-SDS, received 660,000 votes. A year later, GERB-SDS won again, but shrank to a record low of 550,000 votes for the right-wing coalition (CIK, 2024). The decline in turnout because of frequent elections is due to voters' disappointment with the inability of political elites to form a stable majority. This encapsulates parties around the narrowest cores of supporters. The loss of the electoral periphery, including neutral and more moderate voters, led to the

radicalization of political discourse. Parties simply began to speak primarily to the hard and most radical cores of activists. And this further polarized the party system. One explanation for this process can be found in studies on affective polarization (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2019). Evidence for strong affective polarization in Bulgaria shows the research of Zahariev and Stoychev (2025). Analyzing data from public opinion surveys, the authors present why it is so difficult to find an appropriate coalition formula and form a stable government. They argue that ‘the dividing lines that make majorities impossible are rooted deep enough in the political preferences and expectations of voters themselves’ (Zahariev & Stoychev, 2025, p. 7). Zahariev and Stoychev argue that ‘voters of both PP-DB and Vazrazhdane perceive each other as very distant from each other but perceive GERB-SDS as even more distant’ (Zahariev & Stoychev, 2025, p. 9). Thus, the political crisis opened space for new radical formations such as Vazrazhdane. As Cunningham et al. (2024) noted ‘this level of instability has contributed to the rapid acceleration of the anti-system vote, which the far-right and pro-Russia party, Revival, has greatly benefitted’.

[Vazrazhdane] was established in 2014. The founder of the party and its current leader is Kostadin Kostadinov, a former VMRO-BND’s deputy chairperson. He played a major role in the development and electoral breakthrough of Vazrazhdane. In the 2017 parliamentary elections, the party passed 1% of the vote. Vazrazhdane gained greater visibility during the anti-corruption protests in the summer of 2020, when it joined the opposition’s calls for the resignation of the Boyko Borisov-led government coalition between GERB-SDS and the United Patriots (Bankov, 2022). Vazrazhdane took advantage of the collapse in the United Patriots, composed of three far-right parties - VMRO-BND, Ataka and the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), which after its joint government with GERB (2017-2021) did not enter parliament in the April 2021 general elections. This opened space for a newcomer like Vazrazhdane. Thus, in the snap parliamentary elections in November 2021, Vazrazhdane entered the Bulgarian National Assembly for the first time, collecting 4.8% of the vote (CIK, 2021). The party’s success is the result of two main factors. First, the inability to form a government led to three parliamentary elections in 2021, which increased the chances of an anti-establishment contender like Vazrazhdane making a breakthrough. On the other hand, Vazrazhdane focused on an anti-vaccine campaign, and restrictions imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Toneva, 2021). Thus, the party exploited the resentment of many citizens who reacted hostilely to the restrictions on movement in public places.

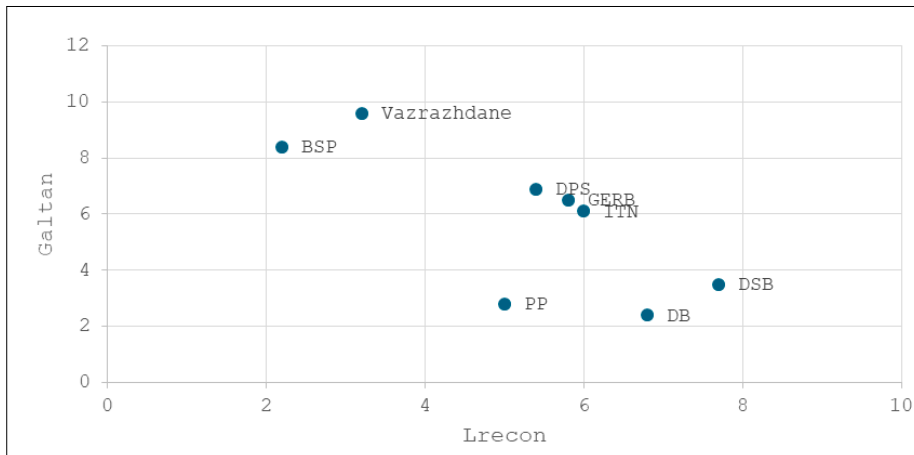
After entering parliament, Vazrazhdane took on an extremely destructive role, turning into an anti-system opposition that refuses any cooperation with the other parliamentary parties (Stoyanov & Lyubenov, 2024). In each subsequent election, the party increased its electoral support, reaching 14% of the vote or over 358,000 voters in the snap elections on April 2, 2023 (CIK, 2023). Thus, the party became the third largest parliamentary group for the first time.

4.2. Party positions and distances in the political space

As we noted in the theoretical framework of the article, distances between parties in the political space are one of the most appropriate measures of polarization. To show the current political distances between Bulgarian parties, we refer to the expert study of CHES (Hooghe et al., 2023). It reflects the dynamics of the positions of parties in Europe after the Kremlin's invasion in Ukraine, which makes it appropriate and relevant for the purposes of the article.

The data in Figure 1 show significant distances between several groups of parties – BSP and Vazrazhdane are located close to each other in the authoritarian-nationalist and far-left economic spectrums. On the opposite spectrum are the two parties united in the Democratic Bulgaria coalition – ‘Yes, Bulgaria’ (DB) and DSB. PP is close to the DB party and DSB on the GAL/TAN scale, but distances itself from them on the economic left and right, positioning itself as centrist party. DPS, GERB and ITN stand in a relatively right-centrist position and at approximately equal distance between the other two groups of parties.

Figure 1:
Positions of Bulgarian political parties in political space GAL/TAN – economic Left/Right¹



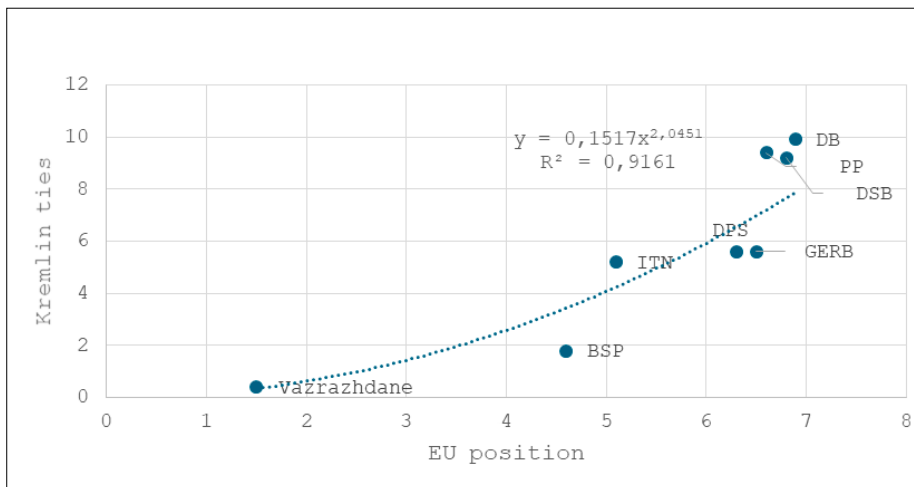
Source: Hooghe et al. (2023). CHES dataset

The largest distances in terms of economic left-right are between the successor to the former communist party BSP and Democrats for strong Bulgaria (DSB). The liberal and pro-European parties PP, DB and DSB stand furthest from Vazrazhdane on the value axis between liberal-oriented progressive parties and the authoritarian-nationalist forces.

The distances between Vazrazhdane and the pro-European parties PP, DB and DSB become even greater when it comes to support or opposition to Euro-

pean integration policies and the attitude towards the regime in the Kremlin. Evidence of this is the data presented in Figure 2. The power regression model shows that the increase by one unit of the variable on the horizontal axis leads to a proportional increase in the variable on the vertical axis - in this case, the attitude towards the Kremlin. Although the cases in this model are few in number, the dependence is substantial ($R^2 = 0.8345$). What is more interesting in this case is the great distance in the positioning of Vazrazhdane from the other parties, standing alone in the lower left quadrant of the figure.

Figure 2:
Positions of Bulgarian political parties regarding the attitude towards the Kremlin and European integration²



Source: Hooghe et al. (2023). CHES dataset.

The data in Figure 1 and Figure 2 show that the presence of Vazrazhdane on the political scene in Bulgaria strengthens party's polarization with its hard-Euro-sceptic positions, combined with a desire for closer ties with the Kremlin.

5. The Vazrazhdane's EP election campaign: hard Euro-scepticism and issue salience

According to Zankina (2024, p. 81), 'Vazrazhdane ran an aggressive anti-EU campaign with the slogan "Out of the EU and NATO"'. The party appeals that European integration has gone too far. The EU must be reformed by returning to the idea of a 'Europe of nations' and thus each nation-state should preserve its sovereignty. The party views the current European political elites and the Europe-

an Commission as harmful to the European peoples. The party's leader, Kostadin Kostadinov declared that 'sovereign states must determine the policy of Europe, not the anonymous European Commission. We believe that the EU must reform and become what it was intended to be - an economic and cultural community, because now it is clearly failing Europe' (Zhivkova, 2024). Kostadin Kostadinov argues that the European Union should not become a political superstate and a United States of Europe (Btv Media group, 2024).

Vazrazhdane believes that Bulgaria has suffered several economic damages since its membership in the EU. For example, according to party the closure of two of the nuclear reactors of the Kozloduy NPP between 2002 and 2006, a step that the Bulgarian government made during the negotiations for EU membership, has caused economic losses, and Bulgarians have paid a high social price, depriving themselves of a cheap energy resource. Therefore, the party now categorically opposes the Green Deal and the closure of coal-fired power plants in the country. The MEPs candidate Stanislav Stoyanov defines the Green Deal as 'a conceptually ill-conceived project, a problem for the European economy. Bulgaria must request a derogation and allow Bulgarian coal-fired power plants to continue operating' (NOVA, 2024a).

Kostadin Kostadinov considers that 'with its entry into the EU, Bulgaria became a raw appendage of the Western European countries, which drained our demographic resources and colonized our economy. That is why it is necessary to renegotiate our membership in the EU, because in this form it is literally suffocating and killing the Bulgarian state and economy' (Kostadinov, 2024). Although such renegotiation is practically impossible in a legal sense, this idea is used purely for propaganda purposes. On the other hand, Vazrazhdane is insisting on renegotiating certain quotas in agricultural production, which would allow the country to return to a traditionally strong economic sector in the field of vegetable production and livestock farming. Although these topics have been present in the party's program since 2021, they are articulated even more strongly in 2024 for purely strategic reasons. The increase in prices in recent years has made inflation a key issue, not only in Bulgaria, but also in the EU.

5.1. Vazrazhdane and Bulgarian referendum

During the election campaign, Vazrazhdane's leader Kostadin Kostadinov stated that the party would initiate a referendum on Bulgaria's exit from the EU if the terms of membership were not renegotiated. He believes that 'at the current moment, Bulgaria's membership in the EU harms Bulgarian national interests in every sector, without exception. If we are not allowed to do this (i.e. renegotiation), then we will organize a referendum on leaving the European Union' (Info-mreja, 2024). Among the negative consequences of EU membership, Kostadinov

also lists the demographic crisis. He pointed that after the country joined the EU in 2007 and the opening of the European labor market, an unprecedented emigration of 1.2 million Bulgarians left the country to look for work in Western Europe (Kostadinov, 2024). According to him, in the long term this could leave the country without a workforce and lead to economic collapse (Kostadinov, 2024). These fears are also typical of other countries in Eastern Europe. This ‘demographic panic’, as Ivan Krastev defines it, is ‘one of the least discussed factors shaping eastern Europeans’ reaction toward refugees’ (Krastev, 2017, p. 50). According to Krastev, however, this problem is significant and can explain the reasons for the growing Euroscepticism in Eastern Europe. That is why Vazrazhdane categorically opposes the Migration Pact. The leader of Vazrazhdane Kostadin Kostadinov hyperbolizes this problem, trying to influence the fears of Bulgarians. For example, in his speech in the Bulgarian National Assembly, he claims that ‘planes with migrants arrive every week. Almost all of them are convicted recidivists and criminals with multiple criminal acts’ (BTA, 2024).

Vazrazhdane declared that they will work to reform the EU, which will remain only an economic union, but not develop as a political union in the direction of federalization. If this does not happen, then they will insist on holding a referendum on leaving the European Union. Such a position was presented by the leader of the party’s list in the EP elections Stanislav Stoyanov. According to him, the goal of Vazrazhdane ‘is not to take Bulgaria out of the EU, but to solve the problems. If the EU does not change, the hypothesis remains, to ask the people whether they want to remain a member of the EU’ (NOVA, 2024a). During the campaign, Vazrazhdane once again declared itself against Bulgaria’s membership in the eurozone. The collected signatures for a referendum to postpone Bulgaria’s entry into the eurozone were blocked by the Constitutional Court, since the adoption of the euro is a commitment that Bulgaria made with the signed EU accession treaty. The argument is that the acceptance of the euro would lead to an increase in prices and the country would lose its monetary sovereignty. Vazrazhdane rejects any positive arguments that will bring benefits to the country from the adoption of the Euro. The party argued that accepting the euro could push Bulgaria down the path of the Greek debt crisis (Vazrazhdane, 2024).

5.2. Through pro-Russian propaganda against the EU

The war in Ukraine was one of the most articulated topics during the campaign. One of the reasons for this was the criticism of Vazrazhdane by its political rivals. Opponents of Vazrazhdane viewed its pro-Russian orientation as a national security problem and therefore attacked it mainly on this basis (Raikova, 2024). This turned the attitude towards Russia and the war in Ukraine into the

dominant political discourse during the election campaign. Vazrazhdane has always denied accusations of being a pro-Russian party. They define themselves as a 'nationally responsible party,' and the qualifications given to them as a pro-Putin or pro-Kremlin party come from the liberal establishment. (BNT, 2024a)

A key role in the Vazrazhdane campaign was played by the journalist and radio host Petar Volgin, who has been nominated as a candidate for the European Parliament. In recent years, he has gained scandalous popularity for his one-sided coverage of the war in Ukraine, approaching the Russian propaganda position and using anti-European and anti-liberal theses and statements (Angelov, 2022). In the election debate on Nova TV, Volgin argued that the roots of the war in Ukraine can be traced back to the 1920s. Like Kremlin propaganda, he defined the Ukrainian nation as artificially created. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, „the West gradually began to transform Ukraine, purposefully fueling anti-Russian sentiments (NOVA, 2024b). Volgin pointed out that the West is primarily to blame for the war in Ukraine with NATO's expansion to the East. He described the Maidan protests in 2014 as a coup by the West, which overthrew the legally elected president and government, and Russia's response was to protect the Russian-speaking population in Donbas. (NOVA, 2024b).

The pro-Russian theses of Vazrazhdane are also expressed in the anti-NATO and anti-American attitudes that were clearly expressed during the campaign. The party again develops its usual theses for holding a referendum on Bulgaria's exit from NATO. The party has considered NATO more as a problem for global security than as a guarantee for the national security of the Alliance countries, including Bulgaria (NOVA, 2024b). Strong anti-American sentiments are salient issues of Vazrazhdane which was presented as a distinctive discourse during the election campaign. In the pre-election television debates, Petar Volgin described the EU as an 'American puppet on strings' (BTV, 2024b), and the European Commission as a 'dependent institution, subordinate to the will of the USA' (Karbovski, 2024).

5.3. Other integration projects

The Vazrazhdane election program focused on 'conducting a balanced foreign policy and building partnerships, both in the East and in the West' (Vazrazhdane, 2024). The party believed that the country should also seek other opportunities for economic cooperation. For example, in the summer of 2024, Vazrazhdane participated in a delegation at the BRICS forum in Moscow. The leader of Vazrazhdane, Kostadin Kostadinov, sees BRICS as 'the future of the world'. Therefore, Bulgaria should develop economic ties with the East and countries of the global South, countries that represent enormous potential for development for purely demographic reasons (Kostadinov, 2024).

6. Results of the 2024 EP elections in Bulgaria

The European Parliament elections in Bulgaria recorded a low turnout of 33.78%. Lower than this was the turnout in 2007 at the first partial elections in the year of accession - 28% and in 2019 - 32%. Six parties and coalitions passed the 5.88% electoral threshold. The European People's Party (EPP) has the most representatives in the European Parliament from Bulgaria, with a total of 6 (5 representatives from GERB-SDS and 1 from Democratic Bulgaria (DB)). 5 MEPs join the Renew Europe group - 3 from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) and 2 from We Continue the Change (PP). The Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria adds 2 MEPs to the Socialists and Democrats group. There is such a people (ITN) announced during the election campaign that it would join the European Conservatives and Reformists group. Vazrazhdane with its 3 MPs also became co-founders of a new parliamentary Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group, in which the Alternative for Germany will play a leading role. The remaining members of the group are far-right parties, primarily from Eastern Europe.

Table 2:
European Parliament election results in Bulgaria

Party/Coalition	Number of voters	% of the vote	MEPs	Affiliation with EP groups
GERB-SDS	474 059	23.55	5	EPP
DPS	295 092	14.66	3	Renew
PP-DB	290 865	14.45	3	Renew/EPP
Vazrazhdane	281 434	13.98	3	ESN
BSP for Bulgaria	141 178	7.01	2	S&D
ITN	121 572	6.04	1	ECR
Velichie	81 955	4.07	-	NI
MECH	51 076	2.54	-	NI
VMRO-BND	42 022	2.09	-	ECR

Source: CIK.

These results confirm the dominance of pro-European parties in the country. Ataka last found a place in the EP in 2009 as a representative of hard Euroscepticism from Bulgaria. The low voter turnout gives a greater relative weight to Vazrazhdane. The party's results are comparable to those of Ataka in the 2007 and 2009 EP elections (Georgieva, 2007; CIK, 2009). This leads to the conclusion that a result of around 300,000 votes seems to be the maximum for the anti-European national populist right in the country. The rise of the new populist and anti-establishment parties such as MECH and Velichie, who showed electoral potential in the 2024 elections, means that the competition for the protest vote against the political status quo is great, especially in a weakly institutionalized party system like the Bulgarian one.

7. Conclusion

Vazrazhdane's election campaign was marked by several narratives. First, the party is trying to recreate a narrative based on the feeling of a deep sociopolitical crisis - the main reason for this is the lost sovereignty due to membership in the EU and NATO. Second, the narrative that Bulgaria is losing from its EU membership in socio-economic terms. Third, the need for reforms in the EU and renegotiation of the country's membership conditions. If this does not happen, the party will initiate a referendum on leaving the EU. Fourth, the West is to blame for the war in Ukraine, Russia is a friend, and Bulgaria should seek ties and economic cooperation with the BRICS countries.

This type of discourse is not unique. Vazrazhdane largely repeats the theses of its predecessor, the Ataka party. And these narratives were also observed during the campaign for the European Parliament elections in other Central and Eastern European countries (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2024). However, the Bulgarian case is interesting and unique in something else - this is the unprecedented political crisis in its duration, which led to 7 parliamentary elections in the period 2021-2024 and the party system polarization because of this process. The European Parliament elections in Bulgaria are being held with traditionally low voter turnout. The combination of the European Parliament elections with another consecutive snap parliamentary election further polarized the political discourse during the election campaign. Low voter turnout stimulates parties to speak primarily to their narrowest party core of supporters, to mobilize them to the maximum extent. This leads to radicalization in the political discourse, which in the case of anti-European parties such as Vazrazhdane is expressed in strengthening hard Euroscepticism.

The elections showed that Vazrazhdane reached its electoral ceiling. Whatever the political future of Vazrazhdane, anti-European attitudes as an electoral potential in Bulgaria remain relatively weak, but stable. This raises the question of whether the party should change its strategies in the future. In general, there are three paths before the party. The continuation of radical anti-European rhetoric, combined with the promotion of pro-Kremlin positions, would put the Vazrazhdane party in permanent political isolation and this could lead to its gradual marginalization. Another path for Vazrazhdane is the one taken by some national-populist parties in Europe. By softening their radical rhetoric, they increased their electoral support and became more acceptable partners for part of the political mainstream. The third path for Vazrazhdane is the chameleon's behavior, expressed in the pursuit of opportunistic benefits and the alternation of soft and hard Eurosceptic positions depending on the political situation.

Calls for a referendum on EU membership are not something to be taken lightly. For now, this seems more like an opportunistic call by niche parties like Vazrazhdane for additional electoral support. However, such rhetoric could lead to further political polarization, which can be dangerous for democracy in times of multiple crises, public fears and uncertainty.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Lrecon: 0 = Extreme left; 10 = Extreme right Galton: 0= libertarian/postmaterialist; 10 = traditional/authoritarian.
- 2 EU position: How would you describe the general position on European integration that the party leadership took over the past three months? 1 = strongly opposed; 7 = strongly in favor
Kremlin ties: How would you characterize the party's position towards the government of Russia? 0= Strongly seek ties with Kremlin; 10= Strongly opposes ties with the Kremlin.

Features of Euroscepticism in the Euro-Optimistic Society: Mapping Lithuanian Party-Based Euroscepticism

Sima Rakutienė¹

Abstract

This article examines the political manifestations of Eurosceptic Lithuanian political parties and their degree of Euroscepticism in the context of a rather euro-optimistic Lithuanian society. The Eurobarometer surveys (2024) indicate that more than 77% of Lithuanian citizens (higher than the EU average) consider the EU a very important institution. However, there has been an increased number of Eurosceptic party lists in the European Parliament elections in 2024 and increased number of elected representatives joined Eurosceptic political groups in the EP. The aim of this paper is to analyse the extent and characteristics of Euroscepticism among Lithuanian political parties. The research includes an analysis of the data on the 2024 EP elections results, as well as content analysis of the manifestos of Eurosceptic political parties. The study covers cultural, identity, economic, nationalist and pro-Russian aspects of the ideological orientations of political parties. It is argued that in Lithuania, party-based Euroscepticism are diffused and do not have a major influence on the national political agenda yet. Lithuanian Eurosceptic parties are characterized by a soft Euroscepticism and a similar 'anti-genderist', 'pro-traditional family' campaign.

Keywords: Lithuania; soft euroscepticism; EP elections; identity; integration; euro-optimism

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1. Introduction

Since its accession to the European Union in 2004, Lithuania has been considered one of the most Euro-optimistic societies among the EU Member States with lower level of Euroscepticism compared to other EU countries (Vitkus, 2018; Rakutienė & Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė 2020; Vilpišauskas, 2021). According to a Eurobarometer survey (2024), Lithuania is among the countries that consider the EU to be an important rule of law institution. More than 77% of citizens believe this to be the case, above the EU average (72%).

Despite this quite high degree of euro-optimism and trust in EU institutions, only 28.35% of Lithuanian voters turned out to elect Lithuanian representatives to the European Parliament in 2024. This is quite a drop compared to the turnout in the previous year (2019), which was 53.48%. Although there is a logical explanation for this, as in previous years the EP elections were held together with the presidential elections, while the last time the EP elections were held separately from the presidential elections - in 2009 - the turnout of the Lithuanians was only 20.98%. On the one hand, this indicates that there is not a strong correlation between a higher level of public trust in the EU institutions and a higher level of turnout in the election of the European Parliament for the Lithuanian case. On the other hand, this EP election was characterized by a longer list of Eurosceptic political parties.

Lithuania elects 11 representatives to the European Parliament. Most of them joined the traditional EP political groups, but 3 of them joined the Eurosceptic political groups. This represents around 27% of the Lithuanian MEPs and shows their increased interest to work in EP Eurosceptic teams. The question is whether this reflects the growing Euroscepticism among the country's political parties and what is the nature and extent of the Euroscepticism they express? Therefore, this article focuses on party-based Euroscepticism.

In the article by analysing the data of the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, as well as by investigating the electoral political programs of Eurosceptic political parties in Lithuania, it will be aimed to identify and group their manifestations and features of party-based Euroscepticism. The research includes 5 (both elected and non-elected) Eurosceptic political parties (The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union; Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance or EAPL–CFA; The People and Justice Union; The National Alliance and Peace Coalition), who took part in the European Parliamentary elections in 2024. This is because the electoral voting gap between several of these political parties is very small with fluctuating elections results (EP, national parliament) during the same year (2024). Also, an analysis of the programs of all the Eurosceptic political parties will better reveal the similarities and/or differences between them in their approach to EU integration and the degree as well as focus of Euroscepticism within Lithuanian political parties.

The study covers cultural, identity, economic, nationalist and pro-Russian aspects of the ideological orientations of Eurosceptic political parties in their political manifestos. It is argued that in Lithuania, Eurosceptic political parties are diffused and do not have a major influence on the national political agenda yet. It is also noted that Lithuanian Eurosceptic parties are characterized by a soft Euroscepticism and a similar ‘anti-genderist’, ‘pro-traditional family campaign’. Thus, more attention among parties is paid to articulating the cultural-identity aspects of Euroscepticism. In the context of research on Central and Eastern European countries (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002, 2004; Kopecký & Mudde 2002; Tabata-dze, 2022; Havlik & Hloušek 2025), Lithuania has not been extensively analysed in studies on Euroscepticism to compare the attitudes of different Eurosceptic political parties. This study is also new and contributes to the existing literature on Euroscepticism in Lithuania (Vilpišauskas, 2021; Vitkus, 2018; Matonyte, Šumskas & Morkevicius, 2016; Unikaite-Jakuntaviciene, 2014) by analysing the latest data from the recent EP elections (2024) and current trends in party-based Euroscepticism in the country.

First, the paper reviews academic literature explaining the characteristics of Europeanness focusing on a spectrum from Euro-optimism to hard Euroscepticism. The paper then analyses the political situation in Lithuania and the electoral data, distinguishing between Eurosceptic MEPs elected in Lithuania, the extent of Euroscepticism and the favourability of voters towards them. The fourth part examines and compares programmatic preferences, manifestos of Eurosceptic political parties, identifying their links to various forms of Euroscepticism.

2. Literature Review: the spectrum of Europeanness - from euro-optimism to hard euroscepticism

Researchers studying the characteristics and spectrum of Europeanness – from euro-optimism to hard euroscepticism (see Table 1) – point out that citizens’ attitudes towards the EU are multifaceted, multidimensional and vary across Europe (Hooghe & Marks, 2007). Euro-optimism, political support for the European integration can be associated with both: *utilitarian* and *affective* reasoning (Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas & Vreese, 2011). The former refers to the concrete benefits of EU membership and the latter to a certain emotional attachment and ideals defined by the EU identity and unity (Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas & Vreese, 2011). The scholarly literature on Lithuanian case study also points out both reasonings. Polls show that most people believe that Lithuania's EU membership is beneficial (Unikaite-Jakuntaviciene, 2014). Lithuanians, too, from the very beginning of their independence, have wanted to adopt a European identity and associate it with Europeanism what is the contrast to post-Sovietism (Mato-

nyte, Šumskas & Morkevicius, 2016). Although Euroscepticism in the country has increased slightly, Lithuanians remain among the Europhiles compared to other EU countries.

Given the political trends in EU member states in recent decade regarding the rise of the populist and radical right (in Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Hungary and elsewhere) with the 'surprising scope and intensity', studies of Euroscepticism are exploding (Hooghe & Marks, 2007, p. 119). Scholars studying the relationship between political parties in EU Member States and EU integration (Baerg & Hallerberg, 2016) have identified several forms of Euroscepticism, and the inherent features of this political phenomenon suggest that Eurosceptic voices should not be ignored (Williams & Spoon, 2015; Usherwood & Startin, 2013). Economic interests and identity are generally seen as the main sources of Euroscepticism, with party competition, public opinion and media influence exacerbating the process (Hooghe & Marks, 2007).

Two types of Euroscepticism are most recognized: soft and hard (Williams, & Ishiyama, 2018). The latter, in its extreme form, focuses on disrupting and destroying the EU as a project, and conducting a national campaign for leaving the EU. Meanwhile, soft Euroscepticism is characterized only by criticism of specific EU policies and decisions. However, overt, extreme forms of hard Euroscepticism are quite rare, such as the campaigns in the UK (Havlik & Hloušek, 2025), while in other countries hardline Euroscepticism has other characteristics than a campaign to leave the EU. As Taggart and Szczerbiak explain:

'Theoretically, hard Eurosceptics include those who object in principle to the idea of any European economic or political integration. In practice the abstract notion of 'hard Euroscepticism' is expressed by a principled objection to the current form of integration in the EU on the grounds that it offends deeply held values or, more likely, is the embodiment of negative values. Examples of this would be the objection that the EU is too liberal/capitalist/socialist' (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004, p. 3).

Therefore it is pointed out that hardline Euroscepticism can also include those political parties that do not necessarily openly advocate or campaign for the country's exit from the EU, but have a principled negative attitude towards the current form of the EU integration model, which can be related to either a very strong disapproval of the promotion of certain values, EU federalism or of the further development of the integration model in a particular political sphere. According to the scholars, if a Eurosceptic political party is characterized by a persistent advocacy of a particular 'single issue', it is usually a hard Eurosceptic (Taggart & Szczerbiak 2004, p. 3).

Francesco Nicoli (2017) examining the different causes and forms of Euroscepticism states that Euroscepticism is most often caused by economic reasons in the context of certain crises that make countries 'losers' of integration. Similarly,

N. Brack and N. Startin (2015, p. 239) underlines that ‘Euroscepticism has become mainstream’ after the Eurozone crisis. Economic Euroscepticism can take both milder and hardline forms, with, for example, the suggestion to leave the eurozone being classified as ‘hardline’ Euroscepticism (Nicoli, 2017). By contrast, soft Euroscepticism is usually characterized by a tendency to highlight and promote the importance of ‘national interests’ and criticism of a particular EU policy area, but at the same time expressing principled support for the project of European integration (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004, p. 4). In the context of Euroscepticism, the economic effects of integration are one of the main areas of research (Hooghe & Marks, 2007).

In the EU and especially in Central and Eastern European countries, Euroscepticism also arises from social identity and cultural aspects (van Elsas, Hakhverdian & van der Brug, 2016), criticizing the EU’s policies on minority issues (Hlatky, 2021). As R. Hlatky explains: ‘...minority advancement realized through EU funding drives voters toward Eurosceptic electoral options’ (Hlatky, 2021, p. 348). Previous comparative studies of party-based Euroscepticism in Central and Eastern European countries have shown that Lithuanian parties are characterized only by soft Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002).

The research also indicates a correlation between hard Eurosceptic far-right populist parties and pro-Russian approach, helping to develop various pro-Russian narratives in Western societies (Snegovaya, 2022; Arridu & Molis, 2019). Such construction of pro-Russian narratives (e.g. ‘*For Peace*’) and protesting the provision of more arms to Ukraine or opposing the EU’s eastern enlargement and sanctions against Russia is evident among hardline Eurosceptic parties (Gigani, 2024).

Table 1:

Literature review. The spectrum of Europeanness: from Euro-optimism to Hard Euroscepticism

	Identity/ cultural	(Pro) National (anti) federalist	Economic	Foreign policy orientation
Euro-optimism	Support (<i>affective</i>) for the development of a common EU identity, unity, EU values, emotional attachment to EU <i>Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas & Vreese 2011</i>	Support for further EU integration and 'deepening'; satisfy with status and direction of EU; Support for strengthening the EU's role in the world <i>Kopecký & Mudde 2002</i>	Support (<i>utilitarian</i>) for further development of the economic integration in relevant sectors (energy, etc.) <i>Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas & Vreese 2011</i>	Support for common EU position; More likely anti-Russian - supportive for Ukraine
Soft Euroscepticism	A critique of the EU's cultural/values model, For preserving traditional family values. 'Cultural threat' <i>Hlatky, 2021; Hooghe & Marks, 2007</i>	For stronger defence of national interests; No to more federalization of EU <i>Hooghe & Marks, 2007</i>	Criticism of a specific policy area (Agricultural, Migration, Green Deal policies) 'Losers of integration' <i>Nicoli, 2017; Brack & Startin, 2015 Hooghe & Marks, 2007</i>	Different, diverse positions More likely - supportive for Ukraine <i>Tabatadze, 2022</i>
Hard Euroscepticism	'Very strong anti-genderism' 'Single-issue party', <i>anti-establishment</i> ; <i>negative</i> campaigns <i>Nai, Medeiros, Maier & Maier, 2022; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024</i>	Rejecting the EU project or a particular integration model outright; campaigning to leave EU <i>Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024</i>	Rejection of EU liberalism, capitalism and socialism; 'Rejecting the global elite' <i>Taggart & Szczerbiak 2004</i>	More likely suppressing military aid to Ukraine; 'overt' or 'covert' pro-Russianism <i>Snegovaja, 2022; Arridu & Molis, 2019; Gigani, 2024</i>

Source: compiled by the author based on literature review.

Furthermore, scholars studying Eurosceptic electoral campaigns note that hardline Eurosceptics tend to use much tougher, harsher campaigns (Nai, Medeiros, Maier & Maier, 2022). Their campaigns are more likely characterized by populism and aggressiveness, trying to generate stronger negative voter emotions towards the current government's actions through *anti-establishment* campaigns (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2024). While Euro-optimists are more likely to use more

positive campaigns, soft Euroscepticism is also often characterized by more polite, moderate electoral campaigns towards opponents compared to hardline Euroscepticism, which is largely characterized by negativity and political attacks on opponents (Nai, Medeiros, Maier & Maier, 2022).

3. Methodology: party-based Euroscepticism

The main research focus of this study is party-based Euroscepticism in Lithuania. Researchers distinguish the influence of political party attitudes on public opinion and often categorize political parties according to their degree of Euroscepticism, based on a qualified typology and their political ideologies towards the EU project (Mudde, 2012; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008; Conti & Memoli, 2012). An analysis of the manifestos of political parties reveals their ideological approaches (Lees, 2002; Tabatadze, 2022; Lees, 2008).

Similarly, this study mainly adapts qualitative research methodology (see Table 2) based on the documents analysis and content analysis to reflect party-based Euroscepticism in Lithuania. In addition, a secondary analysis of statistical data based on the election results is also carried out. First, to show the extent, scope of Euroscepticism, the (un)popularity of Eurosceptic parties and the electoral trends in Lithuania in recent years, the statistical data are analysed. The author reviews and compares the data on the election results in the form of tables and graphs, using data from the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) of the Republic of Lithuania and the European Parliament's website on the number of MEPs joining Eurosceptic groups in the EP. In this way it is aimed to show whether and how the extent of Euroscepticism has changed among political parties in the country. This defines those parties that self-identify as Eurosceptic Lithuanian political parties by joining Eurosceptic political groups in the European Parliament. While recognizing that other parties may also have some politicians who express criticism of certain EU policies or leadership, most mainstream Lithuanian parties (which participated in EP elections 2024 and are not included in this analysis) can be classified as pro-European Consensus political forces.

Table 2:
Operationalization of the research

Focus of research	Data	Method
Share of votes for the Eurosceptic parties	Electoral statistical data of EP election results (2024) in Lithuania (data of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) of the Republic of Lithuania); European Parliament website (Lithuanian representatives in EP Eurosceptic groups since 2004)	Secondary analysis of statistical data; comparative graphs and tables
Forms, types, features of party-based Euroscepticism	Short programs of political parties (data of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC); political programs/ manifestos of political parties on their websites (5 parties included: 1. The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union; 2. Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance or EAPL-CFA; 3. The People and Justice Union; 4. The National Alliance; 5. Peace Coalition.	Documents analysis; Content analysis (manual and Word Cloud); comparison on parties' programmatic approaches towards cultural/identity; national/EU federalism; economic integration and foreign politics.

Source: The author.

Further analysis of the election manifestos of the Eurosceptic political parties (which participated in the 2024 EP elections) is carried out by analysing the documents. Both - the short manifestos of the political parties distributed to the voters by the parties themselves and the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) of the Republic of Lithuania, and the long manifestos of the Eurosceptic political parties, which are posted by the political parties on their own websites are involved into the analysis. The reason for analysing the short and long programs of political parties is that in the short programs which were read by the voters, the political parties highlighted the most essential aspects, showing the identification of the political parties to attract voters. As the short programs were distributed by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) of the Republic of Lithuania, they could be seen by all voters. By contrast, the long programs, which were read only by the most interested electorate, highlighted the parties' programmatic positions on various issues more broadly and helped to identify the directions and features of their Eurosceptic approaches.

All five political parties (or political movements, coalitions) that took part in the EP 2024 elections and can be classified as Eurosceptic parties in Lithuania are included in this study. The reason is that the electoral vote gap between several of these political parties is very small, and the election results in the same year (2024) fluctuate (EP, national parliament). Moreover, an analysis of the programs of all the Eurosceptic political parties provides a better indication of the similarities/

differences in their attitudes towards EU integration and the extent of Euroscepticism among Lithuanian political parties. By analysing the programs of political parties, the study seeks to identify links with various types of Euroscepticism (soft and hard Euroscepticism) and other forms, features of Euroscepticism, distinguishing the programmatic attitudes of political parties towards cultural/identity and economic aspects of integration, attitudes towards nationalism, EU institutions and foreign policy orientation, and looking for a correlation with forms of Euroscepticism highlighted in academic literature. The analysis of the political parties' programs explains and maps their attitudes towards the EU integration project in general and links to the specific aspects: cultural/identity, economic, nationalism/euro-federalism and foreign policy orientation.

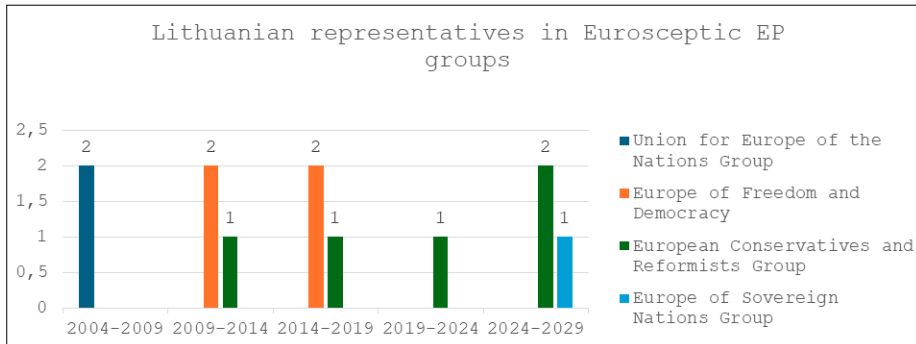
Using the Word Cloud tool and manual reading, the manifestos were analysed for the frequency of mentions of 'EU institutions', 'EU policy', 'Green Deal', 'EU values', 'identity', 'EU federalism', and 'EU integration', examining the contexts in which EU institutions and specific EU policies were mentioned, identifying programmatic proposals related to the EU perspective, as well as assessing criticism of the EU – whether it was directed at the functioning of institutions, specific policy areas, or the overall direction of integration.

4. Political map of Lithuania - Eurosceptics in the European Parliament

Lithuanian electorate currently elects 11 representatives to the European Parliament. In the early years of Lithuania's EU membership (since 2004), the number of representatives reached 14, but this number has gradually decreased as the EU has enlarged. Lithuania's political and party system is characterized by relatively strong fragmentation, with 7–8 different political parties representing citizens at national level (after the last elections in October 2024, 7 fractions and one mixed group in the Parliament was formed). The coalition Cabinet is usually formed by at least three political parties (currently a left-Centre coalition). Similarly, in the EP, elected Lithuanian MEPs join EP political groups by political ideology and split between different European political families. Most of them join the traditional EP political groups.

Although Lithuania has emerged as one of the most euro-optimistic countries within the EU, as depicted in Chart 1, it has had representatives in Eurosceptic political groups during every term of the European Parliament since joining the EU.

Chart 1:
Lithuanian Eurosceptics in the EP



Source: The author, data retrieved from EP websites.

During the first terms of Lithuania's representation in the European Parliament, Eurosceptic members made up 10–15% of the country's total representation. However, following the 2024 European elections, this percentage rose to 27%, with three out of eleven Lithuanian MEPs joining Eurosceptic political groups. The question now is whether this increase reflects a growing trend of Euroscepticism in Lithuania, or if it's more related to the personal characteristics of the elected MEPs.

As illustrated in Table 3 and Chart 1, two of the Lithuanian MEPs (Aurelijus Veryga and Waldemar Tomaszewski) became members of the *European Conservatives and Reformists group* (ECR), while one (Petras Gražulis) joined the *Europe of Sovereign Nations Group*. It is particularly notable that Aurelijus Veryga, a member of the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (as shown in Table 3), chose to align with a Eurosceptic political group in the European Parliament, marking a departure from his predecessors who had previously joined the *European Greens* in earlier parliamentary terms.

Waldemar Tomaszewski has been a member of the ECR since his first term in the European Parliament in 2009. This shows rooted Euroscepticism and the constant support from its voters. Similarly, Aurelijus Veryga, who was elected to the EP for the first time, also joined the ECR. This political group, established in 2009, is considered a soft form of Euroscepticism, opposing European federalism and advocating against the creation of a supranational state while aiming to preserve the identity of individual Member States (ECR, 2024). Petras Gražulis, also elected to the EP for the first time, joined the newly formed Eurosceptic group, the *Europe of Sovereign Nations Group*, which was established after the 2024 elections. While still developing a distinct political identity, this group is associated with hardline Euroscepticism. It is the smallest political group in the current EP term, with only 25 members, the majority of whom come from *Alternative for Germany* political party (European Parliament, 2024). Although this Lithuanian MEP aligns

himself with hardline Euroscepticism by joining this political group, it raises the question of whether such form of Euroscepticism (hardline party-based Euroscepticism) exist in Lithuania.

Table 3:
Data analysis - EP elections 2024

MEP	Political party/ number of seats a party has in the national parliament (2024-2028)	EP political group/ number of party members in a group (2024-2029)	Term of office in the EP	Party list Electoral EP elections 2024
1.Petras Auštrevičius	The Liberals' Movement /12	Renew Europe/1	Term III MEP since 2014	5,31%
2.Dainius Žalimas	The Freedom Party/0	Renew Europe/1	I Term	7,94%
3.Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis	The Social Democratic Party of Lithuania/ 52	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	I Term	17,63%
4.Vilija Blinkevičiūtė			IV Term MEP since 2009	
5.Rasa Juknevičienė	The Homeland Union - Lithuanian Christian Democrats/ 28	European People's Party (EPP)/ 3	II Term MEP since 2019	20,92%
6.Andrius Kubilius (after he became Commissioner - Liudas Mažylis)			II Term MEP since 2019	
7.Paulius Saudargas			I Term	
8.Virginijus Sinkevičius	The Union of Democrats 'For Lithuania' /13	Greens/European Free Alliance/1	I Term	5,84%
9.Aurelijus Veryga	The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union/11	European Conservatives and Reformists Group/1	I Term	8,95%
10.Waldemar Tomaszewski	Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania - Christian Families Alliance/ 3	European Conservatives and Reformists Group/1	IV Term MEP since 2009	5,67%
11.Petras Gražulis	The People and Justice Union/	Europe of Sovereign Nations Group	I Term	5,34%

Source: compiled by the author based on the data of the Lithuanian High Electoral Commission, 2024(a).

4.1 Lithuanian Euroscepticism – diffused and on the margins

Researchers observe that Euroscepticism in Lithuania has largely remained on the margins of the country's political landscape (Vilpišauskas, 2020; Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė, 2014). Recent European Parliament elections reflect a similar trend. Analysing the list of Eurosceptic political parties in Lithuania (see Table 4), it becomes evident that party-based Euroscepticism is diffused, political parties are divided and often critical of one another. In the 2024 EP elections, at least five political groups (or lists, coalitions) with strong Eurosceptic tendencies took part.

Table 4:
Lithuanian electoral votes for Eurosceptic political parties and lists, 2024

Political party	Party leader	EP leader/seat on the electoral list	Number of votes EP elections, 2024 (June)	Number of votes National parliamentary elections, 2024 (October)	Number of votes in EP elections, 2019
Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union	Ramūnas Karbauskis	Aurelijus Veryga/ 1	61 907/ 8,95%	87 374/ 7,02%	158 190/ 11,88%
Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania	Waldemar Tomaszewski	Waldemar Tomaszewski/1	39 202/ 5,67%	48 288/ 3,88%	69 347/ 5,21%
The People and Justice Union	Petras Gražulis	Petras Gražulis/1	36 958/ 5,34%	17 218/ 1,38%	-
National Alliance	Vytautas Radžvilas	Vytautas Sinica/0	25 726/ 3,72%	35 726 / 2,87%	42 228/ 3,17%
Peace Coalition (Lithuanian Christian Democracy Party, Samogitian Party)	Viktor Uspaskich	Mindaugas Puidokas/0	23 777/ 3,44%	27 362 / 2,20%	-

Source: compiled by the author based on data from the Central Electoral Commission.

For many of them, the national parliamentary elections held just a few months later (2024, October) were less successful than the EP elections (see Table 4). One reason for this was the emergence of more populist political parties (e.g. 'Dawn of the Nemunas') that did not participate in the EP election. This further fragmented the voters' support. Therefore, two political parties ('The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union' and 'Electoral Action of Poles in Lith-

uania') decided to combine their efforts by working together in a joint fraction in the Lithuanian Parliament. According to their press release, 'this will be the only group that will consistently represent traditional values and the policy of traditional family' ('The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union', 2024c). However, these parties' representatives hold little political influence at the national level and remain in opposition. The political party 'Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania' has a stronger presence only in the Vilnius region, where the Polish minority resides and traditionally supports the party. Therefore, at present, Lithuanian Eurosceptic parties represented in the EP are not shaping policy and have yet to gain significant influence on the national agenda.

5. Analysis of the manifestos of Eurosceptic political parties in Lithuania

Next, to evaluate the expression and extent of Euroscepticism in publicly stated political positions, we examine the political programs and manifestos of Lithuanian Eurosceptic parties (Table 5).

Table 5:
Programmatic attitudes of Lithuanian Eurosceptic political parties

Political party	Main slogan, leitmotif	Key provisions	Foreign policy dynamics-Russia/US
The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union	‘Equal Europeans’ Defending traditional values	Public figures must advocate for the interests of Lithuanian agriculture within EU institutions; Support for strengthening the EU’s military industry; A strong, traditional family is essential for the survival of the EU.	Will help Ukraine fight Russian aggression; Will maintain strategic partnership with the US
Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania	FOR FAMILY AND PEACE! FOR A JUST LITHUANIA FOR ALL	For the traditional family, for Christian values, for a Europe of the Nations; For the protection of children from harmful gender ideologies; For the rights of minorities.	Russia is not mentioned in the programme; For improving relations with neighbouring Belarus; Lithuania’s security conditions are ensured by its membership of NATO and the EU; For peace in Europe and the world.
The People and Justice Union	Get up Lithuania! For God! For the Family! For the Nation! For the State!	Schools without genderism; Healthy environments without the madness of the Green Deal; stopping the federalization of the EU that has already begun.	Lithuania’s NATO membership is a necessity for survival;
The National Alliance	Becoming a political nation, let’s take back our country	Christianity, nation, natural family, church, state Lithuanian language, anti-genderism; independent monetary policy of EU member states; oppose the creation of an EU army - do not duplicate NATO;	Western structures have increased Lithuania’s security and act as a deterrent (44); the US is the guarantor of Lithuania’s security;
Peace Coalition	WITH US there will be peace!	Promote traditional values, regional cultural identity, local politics, and the customs of communities and ethnic groups.	‘Will refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other countries’; ‘will support peace efforts in Ukraine through diplomatic means’; ‘will not oppose external forces’; ‘will advocate for halting the increase in defence spending’. Russia is not mentioned in the program.

Source: compiled by the author based on political party programs.

Based on the analysis of the political manifestos, the key characteristics/arguments of Lithuanian party-based Euroscepticism can be identified, which are reflected in the political programs of all Lithuanian Eurosceptic political parties:

- *Cultural/identity-based Euroscepticism* - is the most strongly expressed form of Euroscepticism in Lithuania. It is a common and strongly uniting feature of all Eurosceptic political parties in Lithuania. In the political programs and public media, usually it is manifested in the slogan that 'The EU is disrupting the traditional family', and united by 'anti-genderism campaign';
- *Economic Euroscepticism* - is the most critical towards the EU agricultural policy, the EU's Green Deal policy and migration policy, but varying degrees of criticism is expressed in the programs of the different political parties;
- *Pro-national Euroscepticism* (national/ethnic Euroscepticism) - refers to criticism of EU institutions, Eurocentrism and EU bureaucracy of specific EU personalities and leaders. The manifestos point out that the EU violates the national sovereignty of the Member States, 'orders' too much, 'interferes' in national affairs, and that it is necessary to strengthen the defence of national sovereignty, national interests, and the preservation of nationality and ethnicity. However, as far as the aspect of nationality/ethnicity is concerned, this is manifested quite differently in the rhetoric of individual Eurosceptic political parties. For example, the Eurosceptic *Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania* political party, which represents Polish (and Russian) minorities, advocates a limited multiculturalism based on historical 'Grand Duchy of Lithuania' and multi-ethnicity.

The following sections will separately analyse the attitudes and characteristics of Euroscepticism in the specific areas mentioned above.

5.1 Cultural/identity-based Euroscepticism: family, Christianity, tradition and the anti-LGBTQ campaign

Cultural/identity-based Euroscepticism is most prominently expressed in Lithuania, uniting all the Eurosceptic political parties mentioned above. It is characterized by the belief that 'the EU is undermining the traditional family'. All five political parties explicitly support 'traditional values' and oppose 'genderist policies' in their political programs. This is a clear unifying feature across all of them, with the only difference being in the way they communicate - specifically, the extent and form of their criticism of the EU on this issue.

For instance, P. Gražulis has long established himself as a prominent figure in the anti-LGBT campaign in Lithuania. The political program of this party states:

'In recent years, there has been an erosion of the natural family and Christian values, with the introduction of LGBT, genderism, and transgender ideologies in schools, the media, and public life, which undermine constitutional freedoms' (The People and Justice Union, 2024, part IV). The political party's program is highly critical of EU institutions, emphasizing that the EU is interfering with the national concept of the family by attempting to 'legitimize the ideology of genderism', 'funding genderism propaganda', and 'leading to moral decline', as well as 'destructing the natural family model, which poses a threat to the very existence of the state' (The People and Justice Union, 2024, parts IV and XI). In this way, EU institutions and 'pro-gender' EU policies are portrayed as a 'threat' and can therefore be linked to a more hardline form of Euroscepticism.

The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union similarly supports the traditional family and values, although in a much more moderate manner. In its program, the party emphasizes that: 'The traditional family is the foundation of the EU's survival. Member States must have the right to constitutionally define what constitutes a family' (The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, 2024, part 3). The party's political program also highlights the educational aspect, stressing that each EU member state should have the right to decide its approach to sex education, moral education, and family rights and duties (The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, 2024, paragraph 3).

The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania places significant emphasis on the importance of Christian education and, like the previously mentioned political parties, highlights the value of the traditional family and founding principles in its manifesto: 'The post-modern culture prevailing in Europe is causing increasing confusion... <...> We will not allow the redefinition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman, nor will we allow the promotion of gender ideology in Lithuanian schools' (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, 2024, p. 14).

The National Alliance, like other Eurosceptic political parties in Lithuania, strongly opposes genderist policies, emphasizing that EU institutions should not interfere in national policies regarding the definition of family concepts. In its political program, the party even refers to this trend as the 'neo-communist propaganda of gender ideology in the EU member states' (The National Alliance, 2024, 43.11). The party's political program explicitly rejects the socialization and education of homosexuality and transsexuality in schools.

The Peace Coalition's political manifesto also highlights 'genderist ideology and propaganda', stressing that it will work to improve the 'Life Skills Programme in Lithuania' and 'strengthen traditional family values' (Peace Coalition, 2024, part 23).

Thus, when comparing the manifestos of Lithuanian Eurosceptic political parties in terms of cultural/identity aspects, they are all united by an anti-LGBT stance, the promotion of the traditional family, and the preservation of Christian values. On one hand, this reflects a unified aspect of Lithuanian party-based Eu-

roscepticism and a clear criticism of the EU's specific cultural/identity policies. On the other hand, each of these parties presents very similar formulations of these policies and attitudes, meaning none of them offers unique programmatic proposals to voters.

5.2 Economic Euroscepticism: criticism of the EU's agricultural, migration politics and European Green Deal

Lithuania, like other EU Member States, is characterized by economic Euroscepticism. The most common criticisms in Lithuania focus on the EU's agricultural policy, the EU Green Deal, and the EU's migration policy. However, Lithuanian political parties express their Euroscepticism in these areas quite differently in their manifestos, with migration policy and the Green Deal being less prominent compared to other EU countries.

The most critical of the EU's Green Deal is the People and Justice Union (MEP P. Gražulis), which describes the European Green Deal as 'madness' that needs to be stopped, claiming it is 'completely unrealistic' and 'reduces the competitiveness of EU companies on the global market' (The People and Justice Union, 2024, IX). It is the only Eurosceptic party in Lithuania openly opposed to the development of alternative energy resources. Another political party, The National Alliance, although less critical of the EU's Green Deal, highlights that energy policy and the development of renewable energy should be cost-effective, 'without becoming an unbearable burden on communities' (The National Alliance, 2024, 36.2).

Other Eurosceptic political forces in Lithuania are more moderate regarding the EU Green Deal. The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania views the Green Economy as an opportunity for economic and social development and supports the development of renewable resources (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, 2024, p.11). Similarly, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union advocates for renewable energy to achieve energy independence in Lithuania (The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, 2024, part 6). However, this party is very critical of how the European Green Deal applies to agricultural policy, tying it to the national interests of Lithuanian farmers and positioning itself as the primary defender of farmers' interests. The program of the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union calls for 'the immediate implementation of the EU accession treaty and the equivalence of direct payments to Lithuanian farmers with those received by older EU member states' (The People and Justice Union, 2024, X). This party, along with other Eurosceptic forces, critiques the EU for the continuing disparity in payments to farmers in the older and newer EU member states. They argue that EU terms such as 'solidarity', 'non-discrimination', and 'EU single market' are

meaningless in this context (The People and Justice Union, 2024, X.). ‘In a Union where everyone is equal, there can be no second-class farmers!’ (The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, 2024, Part 6). This is a clear example of soft Euroscepticism, where strong criticism of specific EU decisions and policies is made, but the fundamental EU integration model is not questioned.

The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania and the Peace Coalition also highlight similar critiques of agricultural policy. Thus, when comparing the programs of different Lithuanian Eurosceptic political parties, it is clear that a unifying feature of their economic Euroscepticism is their criticism of the European Green Deal’s impact on agriculture and their objection to what they see as the EU’s ‘unfair’ agricultural policy towards Lithuanian farmers, with ongoing disparities in support for Western and Eastern European farmers. This reflects the concept of the ‘losers’ of integration in the agricultural sphere (as reflected in academic literature on Economic Euroscepticism, Nicoli, 2017).

EU migration policy is also tied to the economic sphere, as migrants affect jobs, the economy, and social policies. However, Lithuania’s Eurosceptic political parties do not focus on migration policy as much as their counterparts in Western Europe. The most critical in this area is the National Alliance, which is strict on migration issues. It argues that immigration should be linked to national security, stating that ‘mass integration of foreigners is incompatible with <...> the survival of the Lithuanian nation and state’ (The National Alliance, 2024, 43.13). The party opposes ‘the dictatorship of international organizations in the field of migration policy’ (The National Alliance, 2024). Similarly, the People and Justice Union states: ‘We will put a stop to the policies of multiculturalism, which threaten to make nations a minority in their own countries’ (The People and Justice Union, 2024, XI. Item 4).

Meanwhile, other Eurosceptic political forces do not view migrants as a major threat and some even advocate for welcoming them: ‘Through a system of incentives and tax exemptions, we will support and encourage citizens of EU Member States to come to Lithuania and pay their taxes here... We will strive to admit only enough migrants to Lithuania to meet the need for labour, and only from those countries that are close to us in culture and worldview’ (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, 2024, p. 9). Thus, once again, the significance of cultural identity is highlighted. The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union focus on the need to change EU migration policy by strengthening the protection of the EU’s borders, resisting instrumentalized migration, and focusing on managing the causes of migration rather than the consequences (The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, 2024, part 1).

In assessing the significance of EU migration policy, it is noticeable that it has not become one of the central issues (to attract electorate) for Lithuanian Eurosceptic political parties as is the case in Western Europe and other EU member states. The reason is that traditional pro-European Lithuanian political parties

also have a critical stance on migration and have pursued an active policy in this regard. For instance, the Homeland Union-conservatives, the leading party in the Lithuanian government (2020–2024), with Interior Minister Agnė Bilotaitė at the helm, quickly ‘securitized’ the influx of migrants at the Belarusian border, labelling them as instrumentalized attacks against Lithuania. They made push-backs of the migrants and built concertinas/walls on the border, despite criticism from EU institutions, including Frontex, at the time (Jakučionis, 2021). In this way, the traditional parties, while also regulating mass migration and linking it to national security, have taken away this ‘key card’ from Eurosceptic forces in Lithuania compared to their Western European counterparts.

5.3 Pro-national Euroscepticism: defending the nation and sovereignty, anti-EU federalism

Pro-national Euroscepticism primarily targets EU centralism, ‘bureaucratism’, and the federalization of Europe. A common theme within this movement is the argument that this ‘EU is not what we joined’, with the key slogan being ‘No to EU dictatorship.’

The National Alliance party offers the strongest critique of the EU's federal integration model in its manifesto. This political party explicitly supports the strengthening of nationalism and strongly opposes EU centralization, warning that it could reduce Lithuania to ‘a periphery and a second-class province of the Union.’ It advocates for limiting the influence of unelected EU institutions, such as the ECJ, over the sovereign powers of Member States. The party also argues that the *globalist EU elite*, pushing for deeper integration, is exacerbating the crisis and undermining the unity of Europe. Furthermore, The National Alliance calls for a shift in the approach to education in Lithuania, from a ‘Eurocentric’ to a ‘Lituanian-centric’ one. This party is the only Eurosceptic group to propose reviewing and reforming the EU’s monetary policy, reflecting strong criticism of the current EU integration model. However, despite its severe critique, the party does not advocate for Lithuania to leave the EU, positioning itself as a more extreme form of Euroscepticism.

Other Eurosceptic political parties tend to criticize EU institutions and their leaders, particularly unelected bodies, which they believe have no right to interfere in national sovereignty. For instance, the People and Justice Union argues that the Lisbon Treaty (2007), which granted the EU legal status, has transferred too much power to EU institutions, leading integration in the wrong direction. The Peace Coalition contends that the supremacy of the Constitution of Lithuania and the law should prevail over EU law.

The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union represents a more moderate form of Euroscepticism. They aim to preserve the EU's foundational principles

and values while ensuring Lithuania's national identity and traditional values are respected within the EU. Their main criticism is directed at EU agricultural policy, but they do not reject the EU integration model or its current political direction.

The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, in contrast, embraces the EU integration model in its political program, emphasizing the need for legal protections for traditional national and linguistic minorities, particularly the Poles living in Lithuania. This party seeks to consolidate the rights of historical national minorities, including the Polish minority, even if it means supporting aspects of EU law that align with their programmatic goals.

The contrasting attitudes of Eurosceptic political parties towards nationalism and ethnicity are evident. The National Alliance advocates for education to be conducted in the national language only in Lithuanian schools, while the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania supports maintaining schools for national minorities, particularly those with a long-standing presence, such as Polish schools in Lithuania. These opposing views highlight the diverse approaches on national/ethnic policies within party-based Euroscepticism in Lithuania.

5.4 The linkage between Euroscepticism and pro-Russian stance

In Lithuania, the connection between Euroscepticism and pro-Russian stance is not as clear or strong, as more Eurosceptic political parties and their representatives openly express support for Ukraine rather than advocating for cooperation with Russia (see table 5). Both the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union and the highly Eurosceptic the National Alliance identify Russia as an aggressive state in their political programmes, emphasizing the importance of supporting Ukraine and Lithuania's NATO membership, as well as strategic partnerships with the US to ensure national security (The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, 2024; The National Alliance, 2024, 44).

However, other Eurosceptic political parties adopt a *peace-oriented* narrative without being explicitly pro-Russian. The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (2024, p. 10) does not mention either Russia or the USA in its political programme, but it highlights Lithuania's EU and NATO membership as crucial for the country's security and refers to NATO as a 'well-established multilateral cooperation with allies'. P. Gražulis (who has joined the more hardline Eurosceptic political group in the European Parliament, which includes *Alternative for Germany*) openly supports Ukraine and considers Russia to be an aggressive country. The party's short programme stresses the importance of NATO and strengthening Lithuania's military (The People and Justice Union, 2024, part 13). Therefore, unlike in Germany, where *Alternative for Germany* is seen as a pro-Russian party and categorized as hard Eurosceptic, the Lithuanian party in this EP group is not

explicitly openly pro-Russian and does not mention either Russia or the USA in its political programme.

The most pro-Russian Eurosceptic party is the Peace Coalition, which, while not mentioning Russia or the US in its programme, echoes the Russian narratives (e.g. 'For peace') and emphasizes resolving the military conflict through diplomatic means and advocates for less defence expenditure in Lithuania: 'Achieving peace is of utmost importance and priority for Lithuania. We believe in nation-building based on national interests as an alternative to liberalism, globalism, and war' (Peace Coalition, 2024, part 1).

Therefore, in Lithuania, when comparing the manifestos of Eurosceptic political parties regarding their stance on pro-Russianism, no very clear correlation emerges. As just some of the five parties are subtly pro-Russian, promoting Russian narratives and advocating for halting the strengthening of national defence by populistically proposing that defence funds be redirected to increase pension payments. However, this campaign by the Peace Coalition has not gained significant public support (with over 80% of the population backing Ukraine's NATO membership, Spinter research, 2024) and has not secured any mandates in the European Parliament, despite being led by longtime politician and former long-term MEP Viktor Uspaskich.

However, when examining the correlation between Euroscepticism and pro-Russian sentiment, certain limitations arise, as some political figures do not openly express pro-Russian views, and therefore, this is not reflected in their political manifestos. This requires alternative methods and research into their funding.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the extent and scope of Euroscepticism in Lithuania shows that it remains stable and diffused. Although more than a quarter of Lithuanian representatives (3 out of 11) joined Eurosceptic political groups in the EP after the recent EP elections in 2024, electorate's support for their (Eurosceptic) political parties dropped significantly in the national parliamentary elections held a few months later. Thus, their success in the EP elections could be seen more as the effectiveness of their personal political campaign and the extremely low turnout in the EP elections (28.35%). As Eurosceptic political forces in Lithuania are strongly dispersed, they are characterized by harsh political competition.

An analysis of the manifestos of the five Eurosceptic political parties (lists) that took part in the EP elections in 2024, and an assessment of them along the spectrum of Euroscepticism, reveals that none of them exhibits the characteristics of extreme, hard Euroscepticism, with a political campaign to leave the EU. These political parties are characterized by soft Euroscepticism, with proposals

to reform the EU or criticism of the current EU leadership and specific policy or orientations. All Eurosceptic political parties in Lithuania have similar features of cultural/identity-based Euroscepticism. It is the strongest form of Euroscepticism in Lithuania, creating a narrative that 'the EU is disrupting the traditional family', and are united by an 'anti-genderist campaign'. In this way, the EU is even 'shamed' by pointing out that the EU is interfering and encroaching with the traditional notion of the family and has chosen the wrong social and political direction.

The other forms of Euroscepticism are linked to economic and pro-national reasoning. Economic Euroscepticism is directed at the EU's agricultural policy, where Lithuanians are portrayed as the 'losers' of integration in this area, as farmers still do not receive equal payments. While the EU's Green Deal and migration policy receive a lot of attention and criticism in the context of Euroscepticism in other EU countries, in Lithuanian party-based Euroscepticism this is less relevant and less frequently expressed. Finally, pro-national Euroscepticism, which is associated with Eurocentrism, criticism of the EU bureaucracy, and the exaltation of nationalism and ethnicity, is not typical of all Eurosceptic political parties in Lithuania and is emphasized by them to varying degrees.

Looking at the linkage between Euroscepticism and pro-Russianism, it can be argued that some Eurosceptic political parties (e.g. Peace coalition) and actors create and follow pro-Russian narratives, but most of them do not openly express pro-Russian stance. An analysis of the political manifestos suggests at least three out of five Eurosceptic parties and their leaders openly condemn and criticize Russian aggression in Ukraine. Other parties often do not mention Russia and Ukraine in their political programs. However, this study faces the limitation as their political strategy may not be overtly pro-Russian due to the clear pro-Ukrainian stance of most of the public. To establish a clearer link, the financial aspects of political parties, which are not included in this study, should also be investigated.

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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 & Körösenyi, 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-Világgazdaság, 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 Toroczkai 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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