Lund University
Department of Political Science

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Supervisor: Rola El-Husseini Dean

The Discursive Construction of Europeanisation as a Source of Resentment: A Comparative Study of Populist Leaders in Hungary and Poland

Dario Ostojic
Szymon Piotr Szacht

Abstract

Europeanisation refers to a process through which member states undergo social, economic and political changes to its domestic institutions that align them with EU norms and rules. In essence, it involves not only the adoption of EU policies, laws and regulations, but also incorporates EU governance structures and practices into the logic of domestic institutions. Following the EU's largest enlargement to date in 2004, countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) became increasingly exposed to this process, which brought with it its benefits, but also its drawbacks. Existing research has extensively examined the challenges of this process, by trying to establish a correlation between Europeanisation and populist backlash. However, few studies have took this examination further and tried to systematically analyse the discursive mechanisms through which populist leaders in CEE states, most notably Poland and Hungary, have constructed Europeanisation as a threat. Even fewer studies have compared Hungary's and Poland's relationship with Europeanisation through a unified postfunctionalist framework that incorporates with it a dependency theory, as unequal power dynamics are central to this relationship. This is precisely what this research aims to examine. By addressing this gap, the study has found that populist leaders in both countries have deployed a strikingly coordinated rhetorical strategy, exploiting a shared resentment which is rooted in Europeanisation's implicit positioning of Central Europeans as permanent imitators of a "superior" Western model of governance.

Keywords:
Europeanisation, Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary, Poland, Rule of Law, National Sovereignty, Populism, Populist backlash, Core-Periphery, Post-Functionalism, Dependency Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis

Word count: 9997

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1. Introduction and Background

In 2004, the largest expansion of the European Union took place, often referred to as the "Big Bang enlargement," when ten new states were admitted to the EU, most of which were former Soviet-periphery states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Before accession, these states had to fulfil specific EU criteria through a lengthy accession process. This initiated a broader transformation known as *Europeanisation*, which involved social, political and economic changes to state institutions to align them with EU standards and norms. However, over the past decade, the European Union has faced increasing political contestation from within. Countries such as Hungary and Poland have witnessed the rise of populist actors who have openly challenged the authority and legitimacy of EU institutions. They have depicted these institutions as distant and unaccountable to local publics, arguing that they infringe upon national sovereignty and actively limit policy choices that national governments are able to pursue (Fasone, Gallo and Wouters, 2020).

1.1 Research Question and Aim

The purpose of this research is to examine how populist leaders in Hungary and Poland discursively construct Europeanisation, which this study understands as the process through which EU policies, governance practices and norms influence and transform domestic political institutions, as a source of resentment towards the European Union.

The study explores the nature of this resentment via a discourse analysis, focusing on how populist leaders frame EU membership and Europeanisation in their political communication. With this in mind, the following research question guides this study:

"How do populist leaders in Hungary and Poland discursively construct Europeanisation as a source of resentment towards the European Union?"

1.2 Relevance to Development Studies

Development Studies envisions development as a multifaceted process which encompasses economic growth alongside political and social transformations. Crucially, it is attentive to questions of power: it asks who benefits from integration into the unequal political and economic systems through which development is pursued and what forms of pushback these arrangements can produce. The case of Central Europe is one such representative example. When Hungary and Poland joined the EU in 2004, they received significant economic assistance from the bloc but were simultaneously required to adopt specific governance norms and institutional standards which the more powerful Western European countries overwhelmingly shaped. This study is therefore relevant to Development Studies because it points out a simple but uncomfortable observation: the mechanisms that were meant to help these countries "catch up" with Western European economic and governance standards, were experienced by many Central Europeans as a form of external imposition and ended up producing the very political instability they were designed to prevent.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hungary and Poland as Semi-Peripheral States in the EU

Caraveli (2016) identifies core and peripheral EU member states based on GDP per capita, distinguishing between countries performing above or below the EU average. This division became more pronounced following the 2004 enlargement, which incorporated Eastern European economies into European production networks and relocated labour-intensive industries eastward (ibid., pp. 35-38). However, this integration into European production networks came at the cost of reduced economic independence. Medve-Bálint and Szabó (2024) argue that CEE states remain dependent on trade with core EU countries. They also rely on foreign direct investment, facilitated by accession-era regulatory reforms such as financial deregulation and capital account liberalisation, which functioned as incentives to align domestic policies with EU requirements. CEE states also rely on the EU's financial assistance, which similarly comes with conditions attached. Together, these factors reinforce their peripheral position and have left their growth models largely unchanged since 2004 (Medve-Bálint and Szabó, 2024, pp.1-3).

While there is broad consensus in the literature that core–periphery structures exist within the EU, scholars differ on the nature of these dynamics. Kalmar (2022) offers a structural explanation for why those dependencies proved so resistant to change. Drawing on Wallerstein's world-systems theory, he argues that Central Europe's semi-peripheral position inside the EU is not a transitional phase that EU investment and structural funds will eventually help these countries grow out of, but a condition that European capitalism itself continuously reproduces because the EU's core countries economically depend on Central European countries remaining peripheral. It is the core's reliance on cheap Central European labour and its markets as outlets for Western goods that keeps this arrangement in place, and with it, Central Europe's subordinate position within it (ibid., p. 5). Thus, the very economic structures that tie Central Europe to European prosperity, namely foreign investment, multinational production chains and deep trade integration with the core, are also the same ones that keep it in a subordinate position.

Bruszt and Vukov (2024) argue that a member state's location in the EU's core or periphery does not, in itself, produce conflict. Such tensions tend to emerge through political processes. Core states may attempt to externalise the costs of negative economic developments onto weaker members, while governments in peripheral countries often respond by directing blame at Brussels (pp. 851-852). This, in turn, has allowed Eastern European member states that entered the EU in 2004 to more openly challenge their dependent position and resist EU influence during moments of political disagreement (ibid., p. 852).

Kalmar (2022) expands upon the economic and political concept of core-periphery to argue that Central Europe also occupies an inferior position in the EU's social and cultural order. Although phenotypically white and formally European, CEE states nonetheless face a form of civilisational othering, whereby the West often treats them as culturally inferior and less than fully European, something Kalmar claims is not accidental, as it justifies their subordinate role and normalises their function as a source of cheap labour for the Western core (pp. 5, 36, 44)

This combination of economic dependency and cultural subordination left many Central Europeans feeling like second-class members of a union they had formally joined as equals, yet as the next subsection shows, this was never really the case, as the very process of Europeanisation they have embarked upon to close the gap with the West carried with it the implicit assumption that they were inferior to it and positioned them as permanent imitators of the West rather than equals to it (Krastev and Holmes, 2018, p. 118; 2019, p. 70; Kalmar, 2022, p. 194).

2.2 Europeanisation as a Mechanism for Institutional Integration

This research therefore adopts the definition offered by Saurugger and Radaelli (2008, p. 213), who are considered foundational scholars in Europeanisation studies. They argue that Europeanisation is far more than member states adopting EU laws and regulations. Instead, Europeanisation is a phenomenon in which EU rules and norms become a 'way of doing things' and incorporated into the logic of domestic institutions of EU member states (2008, p. 213). However, there is no full scholarly consensus on how this process unfolds. Saurugger and Radaelli (2008) note that scholars often frame Europeanisation as a process in which the EU puts pressure

on national actors, who then try to hold onto their autonomy (pp. 214-215). Kauppi (2022), by contrast, draws on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence to argue that Europeanisation works through the subtle adoption of norms rather than direct coercion (p. 218). This makes Western European standards appear universal, masking power differences and making them harder for Central European states to challenge.

This imbalance between those who set the norms and those who follow them is, according to a separate body of scholarship, what created political and social friction between Western and Central Europe in the first place. Krastev and Holmes (2018) capture this through what they call the "imitation imperative". The post-communist transformation of Central European states, they argue, was built on governments trying to gain legitimacy by copying Western liberal norms and institutions, by making the Western European "way of doing things" their own.

Initially, this process was embraced voluntarily, as the Central European elites saw it as "a well-travelled pathway to normality", as they wanted to imitate the way of life that was taken for granted in the West and return CEE states back to the mainstream of Western modernity from which decades of communism had cut them off (Krastev and Holmes, 2019, pp. 24-25). However, drawing on René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, Krastev and Holmes argue that imitation of this kind carries a built-in problem: when you are not just asked to copy someone's institutions but to genuinely adopt their values and ways of thinking as your own, you are implicitly being told that your own ways of conducting social and political life are inferior.

Additionally, a mimic, by its very definition, can never perfectly imitate the structure of the model that it wants to become. This implies that Central Europeans were not being invited into a partnership of equals. Instead, they were expected to imitate a Western European model that they could never fully become. Even well-intentioned Western advisers could not hide the assumption that CEE states were unable to fully live up to the standards of the supposedly "superior" Western European model (Krastev and Holmes, 2018, p. 120). Thus, the more faithfully Central European states tried to emulate the Western European standards, the more the relationship started resembling that of a student who can never quite satisfy the teacher and reach their expectations, producing a sense of failure in the student and subsequently feeling of resentment towards the teacher.

Lewandowski (2021) captured this dimension well, arguing that the politics of imitation rested above all on a "power asymmetry" as the transformation was not simply carried out in the image of the West but also "under the watchful eye of the West", meaning that Central European societies were under constant external scrutiny and judgment. This also meant that they abandoned what Lewandowski calls a "sacred past", their own histories, traditions and ways of conducting their public affairs. Instead, they adopted a new liberal-democratic identity defined elsewhere, but one they could never fully live up to. In this way, Europeanisation emerged not merely as an institutional but also as an identity-forming process, shaped by normative and psychological forces that collectively transformed how Central European states understood and organised their socio-political life.

2.3 Pushing Back: Populism as a Response to Europeanisation

According to Zielonka (2004), countries in CEE are generally reluctant to hand over significant authority to the EU following their emergence from nearly half a century of communist rule (p. 28). Having only recently escaped a system in which political decisions were made in Moscow rather than at home, many people in the region were understandably wary of once again ceding control over their own affairs to an external authority. This apprehension to foreign intervention, together with the economic frustrations accumulated through an uneven transition to market economy and a sense of being culturally inferior to the West described in the preceding section, created a fertile ground for politics of resentment to develop in those states.

The politics that emerged from this feeling of resentment took the form of populism. Mudde (2004, p. 543) describes it as a political ideology that divides society into two opposing groups, the pure people versus the corrupt elite, and argues that politics should reflect the will of these people against the elites who have betrayed it. Populism is also a "thin-centred" ideology that can attach itself to very different political doctrines depending on the context, which makes it attractive across the political spectrum. In Central Europe, that doctrine took the form of conservative nationalism and was framed as the defence of Christian identity against what was portrayed as a liberal Western agenda being imposed from Brussels (Cabada, 2021, pp. 294-296).

Vachudova (2020) argues that this framing had direct institutional consequences. Once the EU, domestic opposition or critical civil society organisations could be portrayed as enemies of

the people and the nation, removing them from positions of influence became justified in the name of protecting the people. In practice, this logic leads populists in power to "colonise" the state by placing party loyalists in positions that should remain non-partisan, such as courts and media. (Müller, 2016, pp. 44-45).

Bernhard (2021) confirms that this is precisely what unfolded in Hungary and Poland. Both Fidesz and Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość or PiS) parties used their election victories to systematically reshape the institutional landscape in their favour, with the judiciary being the most important target in both cases, before moving on to capture the media and civil society under their control, and in doing so removing the key institutional checks that had previously stood between the governing party and unchecked executive power (Müller, 2016, pp. 44-45; Bernhard, 2021).

Understanding the domestic mechanics of populism in power is, however, only one part of the picture. The other is how this domestic logic became directed outward, towards the EU. Csehi and Zgut (2021) show that in both Hungary and Poland, populist leaders developed what they call a distinctly "anti-imperialist" form of Euroscepticism, which sets them apart from their Western European counterparts. In Western Europe, Eurosceptic parties tend to criticise the EU primarily on economic grounds, arguing that free trade and free movement of labour drive down wages and put pressure on national welfare states. In Hungary and Poland, by contrast, Orbán and Kaczyński have framed the EU as an external imperial power that is imposing a foreign liberal agenda, at odds with their nations' history, culture and Christian identity.

Orbán made this logic explicit when he declared that *"we did not let Vienna dictate us in 1848, we did not let Moscow dictate us in 1956, and we won't let Brussels or others dictate us now"* (Orbán, 2011, cited in Csehi and Zgut, 2021, p. 58).

Every time the EU raised concerns about the rule of law or state of institutions and civil society in Hungary and Poland, and enacted procedures against their governments, both Orbán and Kaczyński used those actions as further evidence that Brussels was acting as an imperial power against the will of their people. Kaczyński extended this logic to the migration crisis as well, arguing that the EU's demand that Poland accept refugee quotas was a form of colonial imposition. Western European states had spent centuries colonising other parts of the world, and in his view

the refugee crisis was a direct consequence of that history. Poland, who bore no historical responsibility for those actions, should in his framing, not be made to adopt the multiculturalist policies that have already destabilised Western European societies. As he put it, Poland would *"not be infected with the social diseases that prevail"* in Western Europe (Kaczyński, 2018, cited in Csehi and Zgut, 2021, p. 62).

What makes this dynamic particularly revealing is the contradiction at its heart. Both governments depend on Brussels's criticism to pursue their anti-EU narratives politically. Every time the EU raises concerns about the independence of courts or media, Orbán and Kaczyński reframe that criticism as foreign interference (Csehi and Zgut, 2021, pp. 57-62). This strengthens their political position at home by reinforcing the narrative that the EU is an imperial power trying to override people's democratic will. On the other hand, they depend on Brussels economically, as they rely heavily on EU cohesion funds to finance the public spending and welfare transfers that keep their voters loyal to the government. So, despite the criticism, they cannot leave or fundamentally break ties with the EU (Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018, p. 1181). This is what Csehi and Zgut (2021) call a "dual dependency": both governments need the EU both as an enemy to justify their grip on power, and as a financial patron to sustain it. While such dynamic might appear to be a cynically calculated political strategy for these governments to keep themselves in power, Csehi and Zgut (2021) note that the anti-Brussels rhetoric draws on something deeper than just political opportunism. As Krastev and Holmes (2018, p. 118) argue, Central European societies were never simply invited to join the European project on equal terms but were from the outset placed in the position of permanent apprentices, where they were told for decades that their institutions, values and ways of doing things are falling short of (Western) European standards.

The populist demand to defend national sovereignty against Brussels is therefore not simply an expression of political opportunism. It also reflects genuine grievances rooted in Central Europe's subordinate position within the European order, economically, politically and culturally. The fact that Orbán and Kaczyński have exploited this frustration to consolidate their own power does not invalidate the reasons behind it. Real socio-cultural wounds and deliberate political opportunism can coexist, and in the Central European case, the two are often difficult to separate.

Research Gap: Scholars have carried out extensive work linking Europeanisation to a populist backlash in CEE after EU accession. There is also existing theoretical knowledge on the broader motives of populist leaders in gaining and maintaining power, as well as on the EU's internal power dynamics that enable this process, particularly in CEE, where the EU is often portrayed as an illegitimate or overreaching authority. However, few have systematically analysed the discursive mechanisms through which populist leaders have constructed Europeanisation as a threat, and even fewer have compared Hungary and Poland through a unified theoretical framework that draws on both postfunctionalism and dependency theory to understand how Europeanisation becomes constructed as a source of populist resentment in both cases.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Postfunctionalism

This study uses postfunctionalism as its primary analytical framework. Introduced by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks in 2009, the theory argues that European integration passed through two distinct phases. In its early phase, when the EU was primarily based on economic cooperation, European integration took place under conditions of "permissive consensus," in which integration was largely elite-driven and public attention to EU politics remained limited. Since the early 1990s, in what the authors term the "constraining dissensus" period, the process of European integration became increasingly politicised and subject to public scrutiny (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 5). The tipping point of this process was the Maastricht Treaty of 1991, which "opened a complex elite bargain to public inspection" and expanded the EU far beyond its initial economic focus (ibid., p. 21). Following this, citizens began questioning the process of EU integration not because its economic policies were failing, but because questions of national identity and sovereignty became increasingly salient. These issues became further politicised by populist parties which were critical of European integration as they believed that it weakened national sovereignty and introduced foreign ideas that were antithetical to the values of local communities (ibid., p. 17).

To understand what drives this contestation, postfunctionalism identifies three logics through which citizens form preferences over European integration, namely efficiency, distribution and identity (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 1) and in this study they serve as the primary coding framework for examining political speeches of populist leaders in Hungary and Poland.

To understand what each logic means in practice, it helps to briefly look at two earlier theories, neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, which offer the clearest definitions of what efficiency and distribution consist of, before postfunctionalism added identity as the third explanatory logic for understanding the process of European integration.

Both neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism recognised that the EU integration process is often driven by necessity, since problems such as cross-border trade or financial crises can become too large for any individual state to handle alone. However, while both theories incorporate elements of efficiency and distribution, each gives greater importance to one of these logics when explaining how such problems are addressed.

Neofunctionalism, for example, assumes that once cooperation begins in one area of concern it would organically spread to neighbouring areas, with progress in one domain giving rise to pressures for integration in others (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 4). It therefore places efficiency at its centre, viewing integration as a process that produces better collective outcomes than when each state acts alone. Because integration was seen as delivering on this promise during the era of "permissive consensus," supranational institutions were able to accumulate authority gradually and expand into policy domains well beyond what was originally envisioned under their economic mandate (ibid., p. 4). At the time, this process was largely met without public resistance, since the benefits of international cooperation seemed to outweigh the costs of ceding parts of national sovereignty to supranational institutions like the EU. The efficiency logic therefore asks whether EU-level governance produces better outcomes than national-level governance, across both economic and policy spheres. In the context of this study, this logic will be used to identify speech where populist leaders argue that it does not, for instance by claiming that EU policies have failed in practice, that Brussels imposes decisions that produce worse outcomes than national governments themselves would, or that EU institutions have expanded into areas where they lack the legitimacy or competence to govern efficiently.

Intergovernmentalism, by contrast, explains European integration as a process of bargaining between states (Hooghe and Marks, 2019, p. 1115). Here, the main question is not whether integration is functionally necessary, but rather what each state stands to gain or lose from any given treaty or deal. Governments negotiate over things like budget contributions, voting rights and how much national sovereignty they are willing to cede to enjoy the benefits of EU membership, which gives them access to a common trading market and greater influence over political decisions that affect Europe as a whole. In this sense, intergovernmentalism reflects a distributional logic, because process of EU integration is shaped by how the benefits and costs of

each agreement get to be distributed between states. Some states may gain more from a deal, while others may have to carry greater financial or sovereignty related costs, with the outcome depending largely on which governments have enough bargaining power to secure the best terms for themselves. However, for states with less bargaining power, the terms of membership do not always feel like a fair deal. In this study, the distribution logic will be used to identify rhetoric that frames the Hungary-EU or Poland-EU relationship as unfair, for instance arguments that note how EU structural and cohesion funds, which were previously understood as unconditional entitlements of EU membership, now became conditioned on compliance with EU norms, turning EU funds into a political bargaining tool.

What neither theory accounted for, though, is that people don't make political choices based on rational self-interest alone. They also care about who governs them, and whether those in authority feel like genuine representatives of their community rather than outsiders. Such concerns are based on identity and values and cannot be explained by material or economic factors alone. Hooghe and Marks argue that when the process of European integration started touching upon sensitive policy areas it started triggering resistance amongst certain groups of people, as it affected their values and sense of cultural identity (2009, pp. 12-13). In their later work they argue that this dynamic has become even stronger as EU integration continued to deepen and expand into areas that touch on national identity and social values, producing a growing divide between those who embrace transnational governance and those who reject it in defence of their national community and way of life (Hooghe and Marks, 2018, pp. 122-123). Their research shows that voters who feel a strong sense of attachment to their national community and see European governance as a threat to it, have become increasingly prone to Euroscepticism, providing the social base upon which nationalist parties have built their opposition to European integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2019, p. 1117). In the context of this study therefore, the identity logic will be used to identify rhetoric that frames European integration as a threat to national sovereignty, cultural identity and the right of a community to govern itself.

3.2 Dependency Theory

The three logics discussed above help explain how citizens respond to the process of EU integration, but do not account for why the distribution and identity logics generate such acute resentment specifically in CEE. To address this, the study incorporates dependency theory as a mid-range theoretical framework. The tradition originates in the work of Raúl Prebisch and was developed by Andre Gunder Frank, who argued that development in core countries structurally produces underdevelopment in the peripheral countries (Conway and Heynen 2014, pp. 111-116). Wallerstein developed this further by introducing the concept of semi-periphery countries. These countries are exploited by the core countries while simultaneously they exploit more peripheral zones themselves, a category often used to describe much of Eastern Europe (Wallerstein 1974, pp. 349-350).

Applied to the EU, this framework helps explain Hungary and Poland's unequal position within the bloc. Both countries remain tied to a dependent growth model based on foreign investment, EU funds and access to the EU's common market, which limits how far they can realistically distance themselves from Brussels. With this, the EU exercises what Medve-Bálint and Szabó (2024) call an "EU-leash", keeping CEE economies tied to a dependent growth model and restricting the range of alternative domestic policy choices. It is precisely this structural position that explains why the distribution and identity logics carry such weight in Hungary and Poland, since their dependency on the EU is real, but so is the resentment that this generates, and it is that tension which populist leaders have proven adept at exploiting.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The following research follows a qualitative methodology, utilising a critical discourse analysis of Hungarian and Polish populist politicians' speeches to examine how Europeanisation is framed and mobilised, ultimately contributing to the rise of populism in the region. The study uses a comparative case study approach, focusing on Poland and Hungary as two post-communist countries that joined the EU in 2004 and have since experienced populist developments.

4.2 Data Collection

This study selects relevant speeches based on four main criteria. The first is a *time-based indicator***,** focusing on speeches delivered over an eight-year period between 2015 and 2023, when both Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland, often characterised as populist parties, were in power. While Viktor Orbán has held office for a longer period, PiS governed Poland for eight years during that time, making the timeframe the most suitable for comparison. Following 2015, anti-EU rhetoric in Poland and Hungary intensified during the migration crisis and continued with opposition to the Migration and Asylum Pact's relocation measures. Tensions further escalated through Article 7 procedures (2017-2018) and the EU's 2022 suspension of funds over the rule-of-law violations.

The second is an *actor-based indicator*, which limits the speech analysis to selected political figures. Although both Hungary and Poland have multiple prominent political figures associated with populist rhetoric, this study focuses on key party leaders. For Hungary, the analysis will focus on Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister and leader of the Fidesz party, which is often characterised as a Christian-nationalist right-wing party. For Poland, although Jarosław Kaczyński is the chairman of PiS, his limited public appearances lead this study to focus on speeches of Prime Ministers Beata Szydło (2015-2017) and Mateusz Morawiecki (2017-2023). While Poland is formally governed by a prime minister, scholars argue that real political power has been

concentrated in the hands of Jarosław Kaczyński, who operates as an informal leader behind the scenes (Zgut, 2022). Thus, analysing prime ministerial speeches still captures the government's core political rhetoric, as both largely followed his agenda.

The third is an *event-based indicator*, limiting the speeches analysed to those addressed towards domestic audiences. Since populist backlash primarily entails building and legitimising support domestically, speeches delivered in international arenas, such as the European Parliament, will be excluded, as they are more closely related to foreign policy than domestic politics.

The fourth is a *content-based indicator*, where speeches are identified based on their relevance to themes associated with Europeanisation. Specifically, speeches containing key terms such as "European Union", "Brussels,", "European institutions" and "EU policy".

Only speeches published on official government websites will be analysed, as these provide verified transcripts and translations. This reduces the risk of misinterpretation and translation bias, which can otherwise lead to misleading results. For Hungary, speeches will be identified from the official Prime Minister's website (Prime Minister's Office, 2026), which archives many of Orbán's speeches and provides English translations that are produced in-house.

One researcher will focus on speeches given by Viktor Orbán, while the other will analyse speeches given by Polish Prime Ministers. Since one of the researchers is a native Polish speaker, Polish speeches will be analysed in their original language, with relevant excerpts subsequently translated into English for analysis. The number of speeches analysed in this study will be determined by thematic saturation, defined as the point in data collection at which no new themes emerge from the data (Rahimi and Khatooni, 2024).

4.3 Data Analysis

4.3.1 Coding

Coding is a key component of qualitative analysis, involving the labelling and categorising of data. This research uses a deductive approach, assigning codes based on pre-determined categories derived from the theoretical framework. As Table 1 shows, the coding scheme is structured around the three logics of postfunctionalism identified by Hooghe and Marks (2009): efficiency, distribution and identity, which are used to identify rhetorical strategies in populist discourse on the EU.

Post-functionalist logic	Thematic Category
Efficiency	EU governance failure (bureaucratic incompetence)
Distribution	Economic injustice (unfair costs and benefits)
Identity	Threats to national sovereignty and cultural identity

Table 1: Thematic coding scheme for analysing political framing of EU influence.

Since both researchers' code speeches separately, intercoder reliability (ICR) is an important methodological consideration. ICR ensures agreement on how the data should be coded by using predefined codes with clear definitions. Researchers then independently code a subset of the material, typically 10-25% of the dataset, to assess consistency (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). However, because this study relies on thematic saturation rather than a fixed dataset size, a couple of speeches from both Poland and Hungary will be used for the reliability test.

The coded material will then be presented in the findings section, organised into emerging themes. The analysis then examines these themes through the lens of the theoretical framework, drawing on postfunctionalism and dependency theory. The analysis applies the postfunctionalist lens through its three main logics: efficiency, distribution, and identity.

4.3.2 Discourse Analysis

The second stage of the analysis uses discourse analysis on coded speech segments, based on the idea that political speeches do not merely reflect reality but actively construct it through framing. When populist leaders in Hungary and Poland present the EU as a threat to national sovereignty, they are not simply stating facts but shaping a political reality aimed at mobilising anti-EU sentiment and legitimising that resistance. Discourse analysis is used to examine how this narrative is constructed, including which arguments are made against the EU, what language is used to justify them, and why this language resonates with domestic audiences. This study applies two complementary approaches, Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

PDA focuses on the internal logic of political arguments, by evaluating how a certain political problem is being constructed, what do the political actors claim is at stake and what action is necessary to resolve that claim (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012, p. 11). In this case, it involves analysing how leaders construct the argument that the EU represents a threat to national sovereignty (claim) and that resistance to it is therefore necessary (resolution). CDA, by contrast, focuses on the relationship between language and power, arguing that the way in which we describe something is never neutral. It examines how political actors use language to make certain ideas appear legitimate and persuasive. Thus, where PDA tells us what arguments the populist leaders use and in which way they construct them, CDA tells us why those arguments work politically and how language itself becomes a source of power that populist leaders utilise to mobilise domestic audiences in Hungary and Poland against the EU.

More specifically, the CDA component of this analysis will draw on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which treats every political speech as simultaneously a text, a discursive practice and a form of social practice (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, pp. 67-68). At the textual level, attention will be paid to specific word choices and rhetorical framings. At the level of discursive practice, the analysis will examine how these speeches draw on existing political traditions, which promote nationalism, sovereignty and anti-elitism, to construct a coherent populist narrative which criticises the relocation of political authority from the nation state towards the EU. And at the level of social practice, the analysis will situate these arguments within the

structural context and process of post-communist Europeanisation, where Central and Eastern European states were expected to adopt rules and institutional models they had little say in shaping, which generated resentment that populist actors have since successfully exploited (Krastev and Holmes, 2019, pp. 6-7).

To situate this evaluation practically, the analysis will unfold in two steps:

In the first step, each researcher will apply PDA to the speeches from their respective country-case. For each speech, the aim is to map out the argument that those speakers are making in the following order:

1. What social, economic or political problem are they identifying?
2. Consequently, what do they claim is being at stake because of that problem?
3. And lastly, what response do they present as necessary to successfully grapple with the problem that they have identified?

In the second step, CDA will be applied to examine how those leaders deliver their argument:

4. What specific words and framings do they choose and what association (negative or positive) does each of these word choices help construct in the minds of the public?
5. What political traditions and memories do they draw on?
6. And how do these word choices and invocations of historical and political traditions make the argument feel justified and resonant to domestic audiences?

After identifying the main emerging themes in the speeches, both country cases will be analysed and compared across these themes to assess whether Orbán and Polish leaders rely on the same rhetorical logic when challenging EU authority or whether national context shapes their strategies differently. This addresses the central research question by examining how populist discourse constructs Europeanisation and whether this pattern is consistent across both cases.

4.4 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a practice through which researchers self-critically evaluate how their subjectivity affects the research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). This includes researcher's background, experiences, beliefs and social position. In the context of this research, these factors can shape how researchers interpret EU membership, which may lead to different readings of the speeches. When differences arise during coding, disagreements will be resolved through discussion until a shared interpretation is reached.

4.5 Limitations

One limitation of the study is its focus on three political figures, which are Viktor Orban for Hungary and Beata Szydło and Mateusz Morawiecki for Poland. While they are the dominant voices of respective parties, it is important to acknowledge that other active and vocal politicians from the same parties are not included in the analysis, to avoid elite bias. However, it is important to consider that leader of the governing party plays a central role in shaping the country's overall political rhetoric. In *The Populist Zeitgeist*, Cas Mudde argues that direct communication between leaders and "the people" reflects a broader trend in modern politics rather than a feature unique to populism (2004, p. 545). Individual politicians generally have limited influence over party narratives, which are shaped primarily by party leaders. Baylor (2025) also argues that voters often use party labels as political shortcuts, voting for the party they traditionally support rather than carefully evaluating the policy positions of each individual candidate.

Furthermore, while the study focuses on speeches given to domestic audiences to examine Europeanisation and populist backlash as domestic political mobilisation, the exclusion of speeches delivered in international arenas constitutes a limitation. Although speeches delivered in arenas such as the European Parliament are not primarily aimed at domestic mobilisation, they may still include important insights into populist leaders' perceptions of the EU, which can help understand their political rhetoric.

Another important limitation of this discourse study is the "dual dependency" of populist governments on the EU. Poland and Hungary both rely on EU funds, as well as benefit politically by vocally criticising EU and mobilising domestic support as a result of that. Their discourse may

therefore reflect both genuine resentment towards the EU and strategic communication aimed at gaining political support at home, and this study cannot definitively distinguish between these two motivations. For this research question, however, this distinction ultimately does not matter. Populist leaders construct Europeanisation as a source of resentment regardless of whether they personally believe what they say. Hence, what is analytically significant is the discourse itself and its political effects.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

This research utilises speeches made by political figures, which are publicly available on official government databases. Hence, the study involves minimal privacy concerns. Nevertheless, several ethical considerations remain relevant. First, speeches must be read and analysed fully to ensure that statements are interpreted within their full context. Second, because political speeches are inherently normative, the analysis should be aware of potential interpretive bias and avoid allowing moral judgments to shape the findings. Afterall, this research does not assess the EU's governance style but examines how populist politicians present conflicts with the EU to domestic audiences.

5. Findings and Analysis

The following section presents the main themes identified through the coding process of speeches by Viktor Orbán, Mateusz Morawiecki and Beata Szydło. Building on these findings, the section further analyses the themes through the application of the theoretical frameworks outlined above, particularly postfunctionalism theory and dependency theory.

5.1 Migration

The first major theme identified from the speeches is migration, which remains one of the most contested policy areas in Europe and a recurring focus of populist discourse. This stems from the 2015 migration crisis, resulting in an influx of around one million refugees from war-affected countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of Western European countries adopted an open humanitarian stance towards immigration from the Middle East (Gallegos Torres, 2023). Eastern European states, by contrast, took a markedly different position, with Hungary and Poland emerging as the most vocal critics of non-European migration, as reflected in the speeches made by their leaders. Under the rule of Kaczynski's PiS and Orbán's Fidesz parties, both countries tightened their border controls and refused entry to migrants. A decade on, migration remains one of the most divisive issues within the EU. Both countries continue to oppose European Commission's proposed relocation scheme under the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which aims to redistribute migrants across member states to ease pressure on countries receiving the largest inflows (Kabata and Jacobs, 2022).

As a result, migration is consistently addressed by populist politicians in Poland as a threat to national security, culture and identity. This framing is reflected in the following statement:

> *"This is no migration pact, it is a dictate. It is a dictate that also aims to change Europe culturally. Let us be frank here - it is aimed at destroying, violating existing European structures"* (Morawiecki 2023).

Through PDA, Morawiecki constructs migration as both a cultural and security issue. In his criticism of the EU Asylum and Migration Pact, he argues against non-European migration to Poland while portraying the migration policies of other EU member states as self-destructive. This rhetoric securitises migration. By using terms with negative or threatening connotations such as *"destruction"* and *"violation,"* he seeks to portray migrants as a disruptive force to the social cohesion of European societies. Morawiecki also refers to the EU Asylum and Migration Pact as a "dictate," emphasising that it is being forcibly imposed on Poland by the EU. The word *"dictate"* evokes the experience of communist rule, when directives were passed down from Moscow, and most Poles still carry that association. It is also evident that Poland framed the migration policy not as a cooperative European initiative, but as a form of coercion, portraying the EU as an external aggressor imposing its will on member states.

> *"There will be no yielding to any blackmail. We are determined to defend Polish sovereignty, to defend Polish security"* (Morawiecki 2023).

The Polish Prime Ministers have repeatedly invoked the help Poland has provided to Ukrainian refugees to deflect accusations that the country is unwilling to accept and help refugees. They specifically point out that little financial assistance was offered to them while they were taking in large numbers of Ukrainian refugees, yet under the EU Migration Pact they are now also expected to provide financial support to other member states that bore the burden of receiving non-European migrants following the crisis in 2015:

> *"...what this 22,000 euros really means when compared to the money we have received to support refugees from Ukraine. This is, in fact, discrimination... how the European Union treats Muslim immigrants ... versus migrants from Ukraine"* (Morawiecki 2023).

When examining these speeches from the perspective of the three logics of postfunctionalism, it becomes apparent that migration is framed primarily through the logic of identity, while also drawing on the other two logics to reinforce this identity-based framing. By contrasting *"refugees from Ukraine"* with *"Muslim immigrants"* and pointing out that Poland received limited financial support for taking in Ukrainian refugees yet is now expected to pay over

20,000 euros for every non-European migrant it refuses to host in order to relieve the burden other member states took on after 2015, Morawiecki constructs the EU relationship as unequal and exploitative. This reinforces the image of Poland as a peripheral state expected to bear costs imposed by stronger member states, reflecting the distributive logic while also invoking the core-periphery hierarchy central to dependency theory. Furthermore, by specifically referring to migrants as *"Muslim,"* he uses a religious framing that resonates with Poland's predominantly Catholic population, suggesting that Islam has no place in Europe, and shifting the issue away from a purely political matter towards a defence of Christian identity.

Polish leaders also frequently pointed to what they perceived as the failure of the open-door policies adopted by several Western European states, as reflected in the following statement:

> *"Today, many countries of the European Union admit that it was a dreadful mistake. A fatal error, the face of which today is Chancellor Angela Merkel and her faithful aide, her faithful ally Donald Tusk"* (Morawiecki 2023).

By describing other Member States' hospitality towards migrants as a *"dreadful mistake,"* Morawiecki delegitimises the Migration Pact on grounds of the efficiency logic. Furthermore, naming Donald Tusk transfers the negative effect of Merkel's open-door response onto Morawiecki's main domestic rival ahead of the 2023 election. The *"faithful aide"* framing casts Tusk as subordinate to foreign interests rather than a representative of the Polish people, performing the populist move of denying opponents legitimacy.

In Hungary, Orbán makes similar arguments but frames the EU more vehemently as an antagonist. Through PDA, he does not merely frame migration as a security threat but constructs a conspiratorial narrative in which EU elites, whom he describes as *"citizens of the world"*, stand in stark contrast to ordinary citizens who exhibit *"a strong sense of nationhood"*.

In his 2016 State of the Nation address, he frames this elite outlook as a greater threat to Europe than migration itself:

> *"The real problem is not outside Europe, but inside Europe. Those who do most to endanger the future of Europe are not those who want to come here, but the political,*

economic and intellectual leaders who are trying to reshape Europe against the will of the people of Europe" (Orbán, 2016).

He further characterizes the migration crisis not as a spontaneous humanitarian emergency, but as something that was actively facilitated by those same leaders, describing what he calls *"the most bizarre coalition in world history"* between *"people smugglers, human rights activists, and Europe's top leaders"* united around *"the planned transport to Europe of many millions of migrants"* (Orbán, 2016).

Through CDA, this framing delegitimises EU governance and NGOs which try to help migrants, by conflating their activity with criminality. It also allows Orbán to frame the EU's mandatory relocation quota system as an illegal *"offense"* that is being *"launched"* against the member states and providing justification for calling for a national referendum on it:

"If it is true that the people do not want the current insane immigration policy from Brussels – and indeed they oppose it – we should make room for their voice, and listen to what they have to say. After all, the European Union is based on the foundations of democracy" (Orbán, 2016).

By presenting the referendum as an expression of the *"people's voice"* and that voice as *"the ancient source of European democracy"* (Orbán, 2016) Orbán also lends his resistance to the EU's mandatory relocation quota system a veneer of democratic legitimacy.

Like Poland, Orbán also draws on all three of the postfunctionalist logics, but in Hungary the identity logic gets pushed to its existential extreme. Where Morawiecki names migrants as *"Muslims"* in order to invoke religious animosity towards them and signal their cultural incompatibility with Catholic Poland, Orbán escalates this framing to a civilisational level, declaring that countries accepting mass migration are *"no longer nations"* but rather *"a conglomeration of peoples"* (Orbán, 2022b) as they become completely stripped off of their national and cultural identity. In Orbán's worldview it is the EU's misguided liberal globalist outlook that drives these policies, prioritising global over national interests.

This indifference to nationhood is also what Orbán uses to equate EU governance with Soviet rule and to conclude his 2016 State of the Nation address: *"The European Union must not*

be a kind of Soviet Union reloaded" (Orbán, 2016). For a Hungarian audience that either lived through Soviet occupation or grew up hearing about it, the comparison requires no elaboration and creates a powerful metaphorical association. The word ”reloaded“ also implies revival in a new form, a warning that this is not merely an analogy but a pattern that is repeating itself. It frames EU's liberalism as structurally totalitarian, an ideology that, like Soviet communism, subordinates the nation in pursuit of an abstract collectivist project.

5.2 Power Imbalances / Political Discrimination

The second theme to emerge from the Polish speeches concerns power imbalances within the EU. Key political figures from PiS party portray the EU as an institution characterised by unequal power dynamics. While the European Union is formally committed to treating all member states equally, PiS party argues that stronger states receive *"preferential treatment"*. This view is reflected in Morawiecki's 2017 exposé speech, where he stated:

> *"Increasingly someone in the EU gets preferential treatment, and not the weaker party, but the stronger one, and that is not right."*
>
> *"We do not want a two-speed Union. We do not want divisions again and leaving some behind. We do not agree to dividing Europe into better and worse" (Morawiecki 2017).*

Poland is deliberately portrayed as weaker, to evoke a sense of victimhood and depict the EU as an unfair "bully." Through this framing, Morawiecki aims to mobilise public distrust towards the institution that is meant to protect all member states equally, particularly those in weaker positions. This narrative reinforces the broader logic of dependency theory by presenting Poland as politically disadvantaged within the EU structure while still dependent on the Union for its economic and institutional benefits. Morawiecki further develops this argument by warning that, if these policies continue, the EU risks creating even deeper divisions between member states and a shift towards a *"two-speed Union."* The use of the term *"divisions again"*, however, evokes historical associations with communist-era Europe and the Iron Curtain, which divided Europe into a prosperous West and a politically and economically constrained East.

This theme was often used in relation to EU proposed regulation that would allow member states to receive EU funds under the condition that they respect the rule of law, which both Poland and Hungary opposed (Łacny 2021). In response, they argue that such mechanisms represent unequal treatment within the EU and should therefore be resisted. This is reflected in a 2020 speech by Mateusz Morawiecki, who rhetorically asked:

> *"Isn't it the case that today it could be a stick used, for example, against Poland or against Hungary […] And we will not let ourselves be blackmailed."*

The populist actors' language portrays rule-of-law conditionality not as a legitimate legal mechanism for upholding shared values, but as a tool of political pressure and control. This is evident through their use of words. The term *"blackmail"* delegitimises the regulation by framing it as coercion, while the word *"stick"* further weaponizes it, portraying the measure as a punitive instrument used to maintain leverage over weaker states rather than as a neutral legal tool. The underlying conflict within the theme of power imbalances is closely tied to the logic of distribution, based on economic unfairness. While the dispute over the rule-of-law mechanism appears political on the surface, it is largely economic in nature, since non-compliance can result in the suspension of EU funds. At the same time, despite its economic dimension, the conflict also reflects the logic of identity, as PiS party leaders claim that the EU is using the mechanism as a political tool to pressure member states to alter their institutions.

But whereas Polish leaders contest the fairness of the rule-of-law mechanism, Orbán takes an entirely different approach. Rather than positioning Hungary as being a victim of political coercion, he seeks to rhetorically dissolve the dependency relationship altogether, by arguing that Hungary had already repaid any financial obligations it might owe to the EU, by opening its markets to Western European companies following the fall of communism:

> *"We do not owe each other anything – not a single penny... Western companies repatriated as much money from Hungary as the European Union sent here. We are quits" (Orbán, 2016).*

In doing so, he repositions Hungary as an equal, debt-free trading partner and pre-emptively weakens the financial leverage that the EU might seek to use against Hungary through

its rule-of-law conditionality mechanism. This difference is analytically significant since it shows how Morawiecki and Orbán use the dependency argument in different ways. Where Morawiecki mobilises it to evoke a feeling of victimhood and a sense of unfair treatment, Orbán seeks to deny its legitimacy altogether.

Interestingly, both leaders also use the same word, *"blackmail"*, to describe the conditionality mechanism, with Orbán further pushing the word's use and inverting its meaning, by phrasing it as the *"rule of blackmail"*:

> *"Such organisations are inevitably prone to a despotism which they tend to call 'the rule of law' but which is simply the 'rule of blackmail'" (Orbán, 2020a).*

Such phrasing simultaneously functions both as an accusation and as a show of defiance as it strips the mechanism of any claims to legitimacy and justifies Hungary's reluctance to accept its authority. By 2020, this framing had escalated further, with Orbán warning that Hungary would not accept sanctions, and punitive policies such as *"withdrawal of funds, starving us out and other assorted torments"* (Orbán, 2020b). Together, both formulations activate the distribution logic, by casting the EU's actions as not merely being illegitimate but also as being actively hostile to the wellbeing of Hungarian people.

That both leaders independently reached for the same word *"blackmail"* in response to this mechanism is also unlikely to be coincidental, but points to the fact that both Warsaw and Budapest are following a coordinated rhetorical strategy. This is consistent with Csehi and Zgut's (2021) observation that Poland and Hungary have built a deliberate political alliance within the EU to pursue common goals and resist Brussels pressure, but here that alliance is also visible rhetorically, through a shared framing that presents both states as common targets of Brussels, which strengthens their narrative of joint resistance.

5.3 Sovereignty / National Autonomy

In the final theme, Polish populist leaders portray the EU as a threat to national sovereignty. It is evident that they recognise some benefits of the European project, particularly the terms under which it was originally supposed to function, but argue that recent trends towards centralisation have made it increasingly political, undermining the autonomy of member states. Morawiecki (2023) in particular highlights concerns about centralisation, stating that:

> *"...Only within the European Union can we counteract the centralist tendencies which, if continued, will sooner or later destroy it."*

At the same time, Beata Szydło (2015) emphasises support for the EU while calling for reform:

> *"We value everything that membership in the European Union brings us. Therefore, we will strive to increase the effectiveness of the Union."*

They argue that the only way for the European Union to survive and maximise the benefits it provides to member states is to reduce the level of authority it currently holds. Hence, it is evident that they do not seek to leave the EU entirely, but rather to reform it and make it more *"effective"*, as pointed out by Beata Szydło. In this framing, *"centralist tendencies"* also carry historical resonance, evoking memories of external domination over Poland, most notably Soviet rule, when political authority was exercised in a highly centralised manner from Moscow.

To reinforce this idea, the emphasis is placed on *"A Europe of fatherlands, not a Europe without fatherlands"*, while also calling for a Europe that would *"....safeguard what made it a great project and a great success…rich in its diversity, grounded in dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation"* (Morawiecki 2017). The word choice is deliberate. Morawiecki is using the EU's very own branding. Terms such as *"dialogue," "mutual respect,"* and *"rich in diversity,"* which echo the EU's official motto *"United in Diversity,"* are used not to attack the EU itself, but rather to defend its original ideals. In doing so, he strengthens the argument against increasing centralisation within the Union.

Populist politicians claim Poland is losing its sovereignty and declaring that the country will *"...not consent to reducing the scope of matters that fall under the Polish state, in particular such matters as foreign policy, security, taxation, or family law, and many other areas"* (Morawiecki 2023). The reference to *"family law"* is particularly significant, as it frames resistance to European liberal norms on issues such as same-sex marriage, gender equality and reproductive rights, while also invoking Poland's Catholic traditions.

As Mateusz Morawiecki (2023) once stated, *"we are not children who must hold on to Brussels' apron"*. The *"Brussels' apron"* metaphor shows the EU as a controlling mother figure and Poland as a child, suggesting that Poland is now ready to become independent after decades of external constraint, once again invoking memories of Soviet occupation.

The final theme of national sovereignty resonates with two logics described in the postfunctionalism, identity and efficiency. Populist leaders argue that the increased political power granted to the EU in recent years has contributed to the weakening of the Union itself. Szydło's call for greater *"effectiveness"* and Morawiecki's warning that centralisation will lead to the EU's *"destruction"* both suggest that authority concentrated in Brussels makes it less effective. Reducing centralisation is therefore not framed as a rejection of the EU, but as a way to preserve what made it successful. Furthermore, rather than critically engaging with the debate over centralisation, populist leaders bypass it through claims that national sovereignty is under threat. By drawing on memories of communism and Catholic tradition, they seek to mobilise the public through emotional rather than substantive arguments.

Orbán's sovereignty argument operates at a fundamentally different level than Poland's. While Morawiecki grounds his policy positions in institutional and legal language, refusing to cede control over *"foreign policy, security, taxation or family law"* to the EU and employs the EU's own language and stated values to argue against the centralisation of power in Brussels, Orbán constructs a grand civilisational counter-narrative to the very concept of European liberal order itself. Through PDA, he draws a fundamental division between how Eastern and Western Europeans understood the post-1989 political transformation. While Western Europeans were never *"invaded by the Soviets"*, Central Europeans were forced to *"fought for"* their freedom rather than have it given to them (Orbán, 2022a). This created two very different understandings

of what the concepts of sovereignty and liberty meant, making Central Europeans much more protective of their sovereignty while Western Europeans became more comfortable in ceding parts of it to the *"global organisations, institutions and networks"* (Orbán, 2022a) in exchange for benefits of globalization.

This also explains the fundamental clash between the EU's and Hungary's understanding of the rule of law, where Brussels sees it as an adherence to commonly agreed upon democratic norms while Orbán frames it as a tool of ideological imposition. Through CDA, this is most visible in his choice of language, where he calls it a *"rule-of-law jihad,"* and argues that Hungary must respond to it, by defending and reclaiming its sovereignty through a *"Reconquista"* (Orbán, 2022a). This framing recasts EU's oversight as a form of conquest, drawing on religious and medieval imagery that resonates with Hungary's self-representation as a defender of Christian civilisation.

In his 31st Bálványos Summer Free University speech (Orbán, 2022b) he further argues that Western Europe, by accepting mass migration and becoming what he describes *"a conglomeration of peoples,"* has forfeited its claim to Western identity and that countries that have accepted large swathes of migrants *"are no longer nations."* He accuses Brussels that they *"simply want to force migrants on us"* and that this is a *"fate which we do not see as simply a fate for a nation, but as its nemesis."* Thus, Orbán claims that Central Europe by resisting migration quotas, has preserved its Christian European identity which is, paradoxically, the very identity the West itself has abandoned:

> *"If it were not somewhat confusing, I could say that the West – let's say the West in its spiritual sense – has moved to Central Europe: the West is here, and what is left over there is merely the post-West"* (Orbán, 2022b).

It is here where identity logic reaches its culmination. Unlike Morawiecki who uses the metaphor of Poland as one of a growing child breaking free from its controlling mother, Orbán inverts this hierarchical, centre-peripheral relationship and metaphor completely on his head. He declares that *"the West has moved to Central Europe"* and appropriates the mantle of Western identity by repositioning Hungary not as a peripheral imitator or "child" of Western culture but as a "grown-up" and authentic guardian of its values that the West itself has since left behind.

6. Conclusion

Existing scholarly work has established a connection between Europeanisation and populist backlash in CEE, yet relatively little attention has been paid to the discourse of populist politicians themselves, which reveals how they construct Europeanisation as a source of resentment towards the European Union and mobilise domestic audiences around it.

The research conducted in this study shows that this resentment is rooted in the way Europeanisation has positioned CEE countries as permanent imitators of a supposedly superior Western model of governance. The more faithfully CEE states tried to emulate Western norms and political practices, the more they were implicitly told that their own ways of organising political life were inferior. Populist leaders have exploited this structural wound, by drawing on historical memories of Soviet domination to frame EU oversight as just one of the latest iterations of external control and by invoking anxieties about cultural displacement to frame liberal governance norms as a civilisational threat.

This has significant implications for policy and future research. It suggests that Europeanisation as currently practised generates the very resentment it was designed to prevent, and that rule-of-law conditionality becomes difficult to enforce once governments have successfully reframed it as a form of foreign pressure or blackmail. Brussels cannot win a normative argument against governments whose political survival depends on proving that argument wrong. Future research should attend more closely to the affective and historical dimensions of EU-CEE relations, to ascertain whether the EU could engage with CEE countries in a way that does not trigger their identity wound, while still holding them accountable to the shared legal and democratic obligations of EU membership.

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