

War, Peace, and Brussels

A discourse analysis of Viktor Orbán's construction of the European Union



Johanna Strand

SIMZ11

VT2026

Department of Sociology

Supervisor: Bo Isenberg

Abstract

This study examines how the European Union is represented in Viktor Orbán's political speeches. It is based on a qualitative analysis of sixteen speeches and interviews delivered between 2022 and 2025. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, the study investigates how the EU is constructed across societal, political, economic, and military dimensions, guided by insights from populism and securitization theory.

The findings show that the European Union is consistently framed as an external actor that challenges Hungarian sovereignty, identity, and decision-making. In the societal and political dimension, the EU is associated with migration and liberal values, which are constructed as threats to national identity and social cohesion. In the economic dimension, EU policies related to war, sanctions, and funding are presented as harmful to Hungarian households and as limiting national autonomy. In the military dimension, the EU is linked to escalation in the war in Ukraine, while Hungary is positioned as pursuing peace.

Overall, the study demonstrates how populist and securitizing logics interact in Orbán's rhetoric to construct the EU as both an elite and a threat. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how populism and securitization can operate together in political discourse to shape perceptions of threat, legitimacy, and political authority.

Keywords: *Viktor Orbán, European Union, Populism, Securitization, Political Discourse*

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor, Bo Isenberg, for his valuable guidance, support, and constructive feedback throughout the writing process.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	5
1.1 Background.....	5
1.2 Aim and Research Questions.....	7
1.3 Delimitations.....	8
1.4 Disposition.....	8
2. Previous Research.....	10
2.1 Populist rhetoric about the EU.....	10
2.2 Populism and securitization.....	12
2.3 Research gap.....	13
3. Methodology.....	15
3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis	15
3.2 Data Collection	17
3.3 Data analysis.....	18
3.4 Ethical considerations	19
3.5 Validity, Reliability, Reflexivity and Generalizability	20
3.6 Limitations	21
4. Theoretical Framework	23
4.1 Populism	23
4.2 Securitization	25
4.3 Combining Populism and Securitization	27
5. Analysis.....	28
5.1 The EU as a societal and political threat.....	29
5.1.1 Migration.....	29
5.1.2 Identity and values	32
5.1.3 Europe, Hungary and “we”	34
5.2 The EU as an economic threat	37
5.2.1 War, sanctions and energy.....	37
5.2.2 EU money and control	41
5.3 The EU as a military threat	44
5.3.1 War vs Peace	44
5.3.2 War and escalation	47
6. Conclusion.....	51
7. References	54
7.1 Literature.....	54
7.2 Speeches and Interviews	56
8. Appendix	59
8.1 Coding scheme.....	59

1. Introduction

In recent years, tensions between Hungary and the European Union have increased. Legislative changes and political reforms introduced by the Orbán government have been widely criticized not only by the European Union, but also by international organizations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Court of Human Rights (Medin, 2019, pp. 175–176). These tensions have often been described as a conflict between different values and ways of understanding politics, where competing ideas about identity, authority, and the role of the state have come into opposition (Medin 2019, p. 176). During the leadership of Viktor Orbán, Hungary has repeatedly been positioned in contrast to the European Union and its policies.

In April 2026, this political development reached a turning point when Orbán lost the national election after 16 consecutive years in office, stating that his party had lost the trust of the electorate (Malmén, 2026). While this marks a significant political shift, it also draws attention to how the relationship between Hungary and the European Union has been constructed over time, and how political conflicts have been framed.

To examine this, it is relevant to analyse political discourse. This study therefore focuses on how the European Union is represented in Viktor Orbán's political speeches and interviews. More specifically, it examines how the European Union is positioned in relation to Hungary and the Hungarian people, and how these representations construct the EU as a potential source of threat.

1.1 Background

The political development of Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz reflects a broader shift from the liberal model to a more nationalist and illiberal political model. Fidesz was founded in 1988 as a liberal, anti-communist youth movement by university students in Budapest. Orbán gained national recognition in 1989 when he demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops, positioning himself as a strong advocate of national sovereignty (Sükösd, 2022, pp. 180–185). During the 1990s, Fidesz gradually transformed into a national-conservative party, shifting its focus from liberal values to nationalism, tradition, and sovereignty (Medin, 2019, p. 18).

Hungary joined the European Union in 2004, and it was widely seen as confirmation of its successful democratic transition (Bos, 2023, p. 21). In the following years, Hungary remained a relatively cautious member, despite occasional independent actions such as its support for the United States in the Iraq War (Hettyey, 2021, pp. 164–165).

An important turning point came in 2010, when Fidesz won a two-thirds parliamentary majority amid economic crisis and political dissatisfaction. This enabled Orbán to implement major reforms which increased executive power while weakening institutional control. These domestic developments marked the beginning of growing tensions with the EU. While remaining formally integrated, the government increasingly emphasized national sovereignty. Conflicts intensified during the 2015 refugee crisis, when Hungary opposed EU migration policies and framed the Union as an external actor interfering in domestic decision-making (Enyedi, 2020, pp. 363, 368–369; Medin, 2019, pp. 22–26).

As democratic backsliding deepened, Hungary's relations with the EU became increasingly strained. The EU responded to this development with a series of enforcement procedures addressing specific violations of EU law. In 2018, the European Parliament initiated the Article 7 procedure against Hungary, which is used when there is a clear risk that a member state is violating the EU's core values, such as democracy and the rule of law (Lorenz & Bos, 2023, p. 3). However, the procedure has faced obstacles in the Council and has not led to significant concrete consequences (Hegedűs, 2023, pp. 177, 179).

Overall, the EU's response has remained limited and inconsistent. While legal actions have been taken in specific cases, no comprehensive strategy has emerged, and the continued EU funding has indirectly strengthened the Hungarian government. At the same time, Hungary has adopted to a more confrontational approach within the EU, including the use of vetoes, which has reduced trust among member states. As a result, Hungary's position within the EU has become more isolated, with weakened alliances and declining influence (Hegedűs, 2023, pp. 176–180).

Despite these conflicts, Hungary has not pursued withdrawal from the EU. Instead, Orbán has maintained a strategy of remaining within the Union while advocating greater national autonomy and resisting deeper integration. This has resulted in a relationship characterized by ongoing tension between national sovereignty and EU norms (Medin, 2019, pp. 175–176).

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to analyze how the European Union is represented in Viktor Orbán's political speeches and interviews. The study focuses on how these representations are shaped through the interaction between populism and securitization, and how the EU is constructed as both an elite actor and a potential source of threat. While previous research has examined populist rhetoric about the EU and the relationship between populism and securitization, fewer studies have combined these perspectives to analyze how the EU is constructed within political discourse. This study addresses this gap by examining how potential threat constructions are articulated in Orbán's rhetoric and how they are linked to broader political narratives.

By bringing together insights from populism and securitization, the study contributes to a more integrated understanding of how political actors construct both opposition and threat within the same discourse. In doing so, it highlights how representations of the European Union can function not only to assign political responsibility, but also to legitimize positions of authority and responses to perceived risk.

Research Questions:

- How is the European Union represented in Viktor Orbán's political speeches and interviews?
- How is the European Union positioned in relation to "the Hungarian people" in these speeches and interviews?
- To what extent is the European Union constructed as a security threat in Orbán's political speeches and interviews?

The research questions are analytically interconnected and are therefore examined together throughout the analysis rather than as separate parts. How the European Union is represented in Orbán's rhetoric is closely linked to how it is positioned in relation to "the Hungarian people," and these constructions together contribute to how the EU is articulated as a potential threat. The analysis therefore examines how representations, political positioning, and constructions of threat are co-constructed within the same discourse across societal and political, economic, and military dimensions.

1.3 Delimitations

This study is subject to several delimitations that define its scope and analytical focus.

First, the empirical material is limited to a selection of Viktor Orbán's public speeches and interviews that explicitly address the European Union or closely related themes. Other forms of communication, such as social media posts, informal statements, or internal political discussions, are not included. This means that the analysis focuses exclusively on official and publicly articulated discourse.

Second, the study is limited to a specific period (2022–2025), which is considered analytically relevant due to important political developments in Europe and Hungary, as well as its overlap with an electoral cycle. While the broader electoral period extends to 2026, material from that year is not included, as it falls too close to the time of writing and may reflect ongoing and incomplete political developments. While Orbán's rhetoric is continuously evolving, this time frame provides a manageable and coherent dataset. However, the findings cannot be generalized to all periods of Orbán's political career.

Third, the study is analytically delimited to a focus on discourse and representation. The purpose is not to assess whether the claims made in the speeches correspond to actual political or economic conditions, but to analyse how meaning is constructed and communicated through language.

Finally, the study is theoretically delimited to the concepts of populism and securitization. Other potentially relevant perspectives are not included. The purpose is not to explain Hungary–EU relations in general, but to analyse how the European Union is discursively constructed within political rhetoric, particularly in relation to constructions of threat and political conflict.

1.4 Disposition

This thesis is structured into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the study, including background, aim, research questions, and delimitations. The second chapter reviews previous research and identifies the research gap. The third chapter presents the methodological approach, including Critical Discourse Analysis, the process of data collection and analysis, as well as ethical and methodological considerations related to the study. The fourth chapter outlines the theoretical framework, focusing on populism and securitization, as well as how

these perspectives are combined into a shared analytical framework for the study. The fifth chapter contains the analysis of how the European Union is constructed in Viktor Orbán's speeches and interviews. The final chapter summarizes the main findings, presents the conclusions of the study and discuss possible future research.

2. Previous Research

This section reviews existing research on how populist actors construct the European Union and how these constructions relate to broader processes of threat framing and securitization. It is divided into three parts. First, it examines how populist rhetoric portrays the EU as an external elite and a symbolic opponent to “the people.” Second, it explores the relationship between populism and securitization, focusing on how political actors frame issues, including the EU, in terms of threat and security. Finally, it identifies a research gap by highlighting the limited integration between these two strands of literature, particularly regarding how the EU is simultaneously constructed as both an elite and a potential threat.

2.1 Populist rhetoric about the EU

Research on populist rhetoric consistently show that the European Union is constructed as an external elite that stands in opposition to “the people.” A defining feature of this literature is the emphasis on the “us versus them” logic, where political actors mobilize support by framing the EU as distant, technocratic, and disconnected from national interests. Building on this antagonistic logic, Wodak (2015) argues that right-wing populist discourse relies on the construction of scapegoats, through which various “others” are blamed for societal problems. These “others” are not limited to specific groups, but may include minorities, political opponents, and institutions such as the European Union. By attributing responsibility to external actors, complex political and social developments are simplified into clear antagonistic relationships. This process enables populist actors to construct a polarized division between “the people” and those portrayed as responsible for perceived threats or failures.

Empirical studies on Hungary provide a more specific illustration of how these dynamics operate in practice. Drawing on Szalay and Rakovics (2025), the construction of political actors as hostile “others” is closely linked to the production of so-called “enemy images,” that is, recurring representations of specific actors as dangerous threats to the nation. They show that Orbán’s communication consistently portrays actors such as “Brussels,” migrants, and liberal elites as dangerous, thereby reinforcing a clear division between “the people” and various “others.” This process strengthens collective unity while positioning the government as the protector of the nation. In this sense, populist rhetoric operates not only through ideological claims but also through emotional and strategic framing.

Within this broader construction of “others,” several studies highlight how the European Union is positioned as a central antagonistic actor in populist discourse. More specifically, this antagonism is often articulated through a geopolitical and cultural divide between Central Europe and the liberal West. Lamour (2022) demonstrates how Viktor Orbán constructs “true” Central European identity in opposition to a Western liberal elite, portraying EU institutions as part of a broader external force that undermines national sovereignty and traditional values. While Lamour emphasizes this civilizational and identity-based framing, Csehi and Zgut (2021) show how this opposition is translated into a more concrete political narrative, in which “Brussels” is described as a corrupt and distant elite undermining democratic self-determination. More specifically, they show how the EU is portrayed as acting against the will of the people, which allows national governments to present themselves as defending sovereignty and national interests. Taken together, these studies show that the EU is framed not only as an external “other,” but also as a central political opponent in populist discourse. In this way, the European Union becomes more than a political institution within populist rhetoric. It is instead constructed as a broader symbolic representation of external influence, liberal values, and supranational authority. This allows different forms of dissatisfaction and political conflict to be connected to the same actor, making the EU a particularly effective target within populist narratives.

This is also highlighted by Danaj et al. (2018), who show that Orbán’s criticism of the EU goes beyond conventional Euroscepticism and is instead rooted in a broader populist logic. Rather than focusing only on specific policies, the EU is framed as part of a wider elite that stands in opposition to “the people,” integrating Eurosceptic elements into a general anti-elitist narrative. Importantly, this framing is not limited to rhetoric. Visnovitz and Jenne (2021) demonstrate that such representations of the EU help justify political action. By portraying the EU and other international actors as limitations on national sovereignty, this discourse is used to legitimize concrete political decisions and shape foreign policy positioning.

Overall, the literature points to a strong consensus that right-wing populist rhetoric frames the EU as an elite, external, and antagonistic actor. However, while these studies provide detailed insights into how such representations are constructed, they primarily focus on political and discursive dynamics. As a result, they pay limited attention to how these constructions may also involve elements of threat construction and security logic, which is the focus of the next section.

2.2 Populism and securitization

A growing body of research highlights that populist rhetoric not only constructs political oppositions but also frames issues in terms of security and existential threat. One way of understanding this relationship is through the concept of securitization. As Kurylo (2022) argues, populism can be interpreted as a form of securitization, in which the identity of “the people” is continuously shaped through the identification of threats. From this perspective, elites and external actors are not only political opponents, but are portrayed as dangers to the survival of the nation, its identity, or the social order.

Empirical studies further illustrate how this connection between populism and securitization operates in practice. Agoston (2024) demonstrates how Viktor Orbán constructs the migration crisis through political, cultural, and democratic frames, which function to create distance between Hungarian citizens and the European Union. These frames portray the EU as a political threat to national sovereignty, a cultural challenge to a Christian and homogeneous Hungary, and a democratic actor that undermines the will of the Hungarian people, thereby legitimizing a more Eurosceptic stance. Similarly, Szalai and Göbl (2015) show how migration is framed as a broad threat, encompassing security, identity, and social order. More specifically, their analysis demonstrates how the Hungarian government securitizes migration by portraying it as an existential danger, linking migrants to terrorism, economic burden, and cultural disruption. This multifaceted threat construction legitimizes extraordinary political measures and reinforces a populist “us versus them” logic, where migrants and, by extension, supranational actors are positioned as threats to the nation.

While these studies focus on migration, other research suggests that securitization operates on a broader level within populist politics. Enyedi (2020) argues that right-wing populists in Central and Eastern Europe construct narratives in which liberal Western values are portrayed as undermining national identity and traditional social norms, thereby positioning the West itself as a source of cultural and political threat. This resonates with Lamour’s (2022) analysis of how Orbán constructs a Central European identity in opposition to a Western liberal elite, although his focus lies more on identity formation than on explicit threat construction. In a similar way, Szalai (2024) highlights how crisis narratives and bordering practices frame politics as a continuous state of emergency, allowing governments to justify restrictive and illiberal measures as necessary responses to ongoing threats. Together, these studies indicate that

securitization is not limited to specific issues, but can become a general feature of populist governance.

At the same time, scholars differ in how they conceptualize the relationship between populism and securitization. While Kurylo (2022) presents securitization as an inherent feature of populism, Slaven (2021) offers a more nuanced perspective by conceptualizing securitization as a dynamic and contested process. According to Slaven, populist actors can contribute to securitization by framing issues as urgent threats and portraying elites as weak or unresponsive, thereby pressuring political actors to adopt securitizing policies. In this view, securitization is not always a top-down process initiated by political elites, as suggested in traditional securitization theory, but can also emerge from political competition and public discourse. This shifts the focus towards a more complex understanding of how threats are constructed and politicized.

In addition to discursive processes, several studies show how the combination of populism and securitization translates into broader institutional and political change. Populist governments do not only construct threats, but also use securitization to legitimize concrete policy outcomes, including legal reforms, restrictive measures, and shifts in governance (Özer et al., 2023; Canveren & Akgül Durakçay, 2017). However, this relationship is not without limitations. Moody (2025) argues that while populist actors rely heavily on securitization strategies, these may lose effectiveness in situations that require coordinated and multilateral responses, such as the war in Ukraine. This suggests that the relationship between populism and securitization is not fixed, but varies depending on context, which contrasts with Kurylo's (2022) argument that populism can be understood as a form of securitization.

2.3 Research gap

Despite the research on populist rhetoric and the relationship between populism and securitization, an important gap remains. Studies on populist rhetoric provide detailed insights into how the European Union is constructed as an elite or external constraint, emphasizing anti-elitism, sovereignty, and the “us versus them” divide. At the same time, research on populism and securitization shows how political actors construct threats, often in relation to specific issues such as migration, identity, or crisis.

However, these perspectives are often applied to particular issues or analysed at a more general level. As a result, there is still limited analysis of how these processes are combined in the construction of specific political actors within concrete discourse. In particular, fewer studies examine how the European Union is simultaneously constructed as both an elite actor and a source of threat across different domains through the interaction between populist and securitizing logics.

This thesis addresses this gap by combining insights from both strands of literature and applying them to a discourse analysis of Orbán's political speeches and interviews. It examines how populist and securitizing logics interact in practice, showing how constructions of the EU as an elite actor are closely linked to the articulation of societal, political, economic, and military threats. In this way, the study contributes to a more precise understanding of how political conflict and threat are co-constructed within contemporary populist discourse.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach of the study. It outlines the use of Critical Discourse Analysis and explains how the empirical material has been collected and analyzed. It also discusses how the methodological approach relates to the aim and research questions of the study, particularly in relation to analyzing representations, constructions of threat, and political conflict within discourse. Finally, the chapter also addresses ethical considerations as well as the broader methodological limitations of the study.

3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how the European Union is constructed in Viktor Orbán's political speeches and interviews. CDA is an interdisciplinary and problem-oriented approach within the social sciences that focuses on the relationship between language, power, and social structures (Fairclough et al. 2011, p. 357). This makes the approach relevant from a sociological perspective, as it allows for an analysis of how language contributes to the construction of social relations, identities, and power structures. It is particularly suitable for analysing political discourse, as language in this context is often used strategically to shape how social and political reality is understood (Fairclough et al. 2011, p. 357). In this study, CDA is used as a tool to analyse how meanings about the European Union are created and communicated in Orbán's rhetoric.

Within CDA, discourse is understood as a form of social practice. This means that language both shapes and is shaped by broader social structures and political institutions (Fairclough et al. 2011, pp. 357–358). Political discourse can therefore both reflect existing political conflicts and influence how these conflicts are framed, interpreted, and legitimized within a broader political context. Language is therefore not treated as a neutral way or objective way of describing reality, but as something that actively contributes to creating meaning by shaping how political issues, social relations, collective identities, and boundaries between actors are understood and communicated.

Moreover, as discursive practices can shape how reality is understood, they may therefore contribute to maintaining unequal power relations. These effects are often not obvious, as

certain ways of describing the world may be presented as natural or self-evident (Fairclough et al. 2011, pp. 357–359). In this study, this means examining how particular representations of the European Union are presented as obvious or taken for granted, and how this contributes to constructing political conflict and portraying the EU as a potential threat. CDA therefore makes it possible to analyse not only what is said about the EU, but also how certain meanings become dominant while others are left out.

To carry out the analysis, this study uses Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which includes text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 2010, pp. 131–135). These three dimensions are used together in the analysis to understand how meaning is constructed at different levels.

At the textual level, the analysis focuses on vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical features (Fairclough, 2010, pp. 131–133). In this study, this means examining how the European Union is described, which words are used, and what associations these descriptions create. Particular attention is given to recurring terms, categorizations, and metaphors, as these can show patterns in how the EU is constructed, including whether it is presented as a threat.

At the level of discursive practice, the analysis focuses on how meanings are produced and understood in the texts (Fairclough, 2010, pp. 131–135). This includes analysing how certain interpretations of the European Union are made to appear natural or taken for granted, and how the message is directed towards an audience. It also involves examining how broader narratives about the EU are created and maintained within the discourse.

At the level of sociocultural practice, the analysis connects these descriptions to wider social and political contexts (Fairclough, 2010, pp. 131–135). This means analysing how representations of the European Union relate to broader power relations and developments in society, and how they contribute to shaping ideas about identity, authority, and political conflict.

Taken together, this approach makes it possible to analyse how meaning is constructed across different levels in Orbán's speeches. By combining analysis of language, interpretation, and context, CDA provides a clear framework for examining how the European Union is represented, how it is positioned in relation to the Hungarian people, and how it is constructed as a potential threat.

3.2 Data Collection

The empirical material for this study consists of a selected number of political speeches and public interviews delivered by Viktor Orbán between 2022 and 2025. The material includes both formal speeches and interview settings.

The material was selected based on its relevance to the research questions. This means that only speeches and interviews in which the European Union, EU policies, or closely related themes were explicitly discussed were included. Relevance was determined by whether the EU was a central topic of the speech or interview, rather than only mentioned briefly. This ensures that the selected material is directly connected to the analytical focus of the study.

All speeches and interviews were retrieved from an official Hungarian government website (About Hungary), which serves as the Hungarian Government's official English-language platform for publishing speeches, interviews, and political statements. This supports the authenticity and reliability of the material. A total of sixteen speeches and interviews were selected, with four from each year. This provides a relatively balanced and consistent dataset across the selected time period and makes it possible to examine both consistency and change in Orbán's discourse over time. The relatively even distribution across the selected years also reduces the risk that the analysis becomes overly shaped by a single political event or short-term development during the period studied. Given the scope of the study, this amount of material is considered sufficient to allow for in-depth analysis while remaining manageable within the time and resource constraints of the thesis.

The chosen time frame is also analytically motivated, as it captures a period marked by significant developments in Europe that are likely to influence political discourse about the European Union. These include the war in Ukraine, economic challenges, and broader political shifts towards more right-wing and populist positions. This context is relevant for the study, as it shapes how the EU is represented and debated.

In addition, the selected period corresponds to an electoral cycle in Hungary, where parliamentary elections are held every four years, including the election that took place in April 2026. However, the analysis does not include material from 2026, as speeches from this period are very close to the time of writing and may reflect ongoing political developments that are not yet fully established. Excluding this material helps ensure analytical distance and consistency in the dataset.

3.3 Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted as an iterative and interpretive process inspired by Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In this approach, analysis is seen as developing interpretations grounded in the empirical material, rather than discovering theory already present in the data.

While the coding process was inspired by Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach, the interpretation of the material was guided by Critical Discourse Analysis. This means that the analysis did not only focus on identifying recurring themes, but also on examining how meanings, identities, and relations of power were constructed through language. Particular attention was therefore given to rhetorical features, categorizations, metaphors, distinctions between "we" and "they," and how certain interpretations were presented as natural or legitimate within the discourse.

The analysis began with repeated and careful close readings of the material. The purpose was to identify recurring topics, patterns of argumentation, and analytically relevant formulations. Attention was given to both variation and repetition across speeches and interviews, including how similar issues were framed differently in different contexts.

The coding process followed Charmaz's distinction between initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 46, 57–58). In the first stage, the material was coded closely to capture a wide range of themes and expressions. These included central topics such as migration, war, sanctions, identity, and family, as well as recurring rhetorical patterns like references to crisis, protection, external pressure, and distinctions between "we" and "they." No predefined analytical categories were imposed on the material.

As the analysis progressed, the coding became more selective. Some codes appeared more analytically relevant and were developed further. This included recurring constructions of the EU in terms of pressure, loss of control, ideological influence, escalation, and economic vulnerability. This stage marked a shift from identifying patterns to organising them into more coherent analytical categories (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 57–58).

To further structure these categories, the analysis moved between what Orbán talked about and how these issues were presented. This was inspired by Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) concept of analytic bracketing. It made it possible to examine both the topics themselves, such as

migration, war, or sovereignty, and how they were framed through metaphors, moral contrasts, categorizations, crisis language, and the use of collective identities like “we” and “they.” This was particularly useful in relation to recurring themes that appeared across different contexts. Issues such as migration, sovereignty, and war were not always framed in the same way but could instead be connected to different types of threats, political conflicts, or constructions of identity depending on the context in which they appeared. The focus was therefore on how meaning was constructed in the discourse.

Throughout the process, notes were written to develop interpretations and explore relationships between codes and emerging categories (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 72–73). This made it possible to identify patterns across speeches and trace how broader themes developed over time. For example, references to “Brussels” were linked to sovereignty, elite construction, and external pressure. This helped move the analysis from descriptive coding toward a more analytical understanding of the material.

In the final stage, the material was organized into broader themes, including economy and energy policy, identity, sovereignty, the future of the EU, war and peace, and antagonism and populism (see codebook in Appendix). In the analysis, these themes are used in combination with Buzan’s (2016) framework of threat construction, which provides the overall structure through different types of threats. This means that the themes are not analysed in isolation, but are instead integrated into these analytical categories. Themes such as war and peace are primarily analysed in relation to military threats, while economy and energy policy are examined within the context of economic threats, and identity is mainly analysed in relation to societal and political threats. Other themes, such as the future of the EU, sovereignty, antagonism, and populism, move across these categories and appear in several dimensions of threat construction, where they contribute to shaping how different threats are constructed and communicated.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The study is based exclusively on publicly available political speeches and interviews that are already part of the public domain. As such, the research does not involve human participants, and issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, or anonymity are not applicable.

Ethical considerations instead concern how the material is interpreted and presented. Since the study focuses on political discourse, the analysis involves interpreting how meaning is constructed through language, which requires careful and accurate representation of the empirical material, as well as transparency in how interpretations are made. These considerations are in line with general principles of good research practice, such as honesty, accuracy, and responsibility in the conduct and presentation of research (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024, pp. 10–11). In this study, this has been addressed by grounding the analysis in direct references to the empirical material, by selecting examples that reflect broader patterns in the data, and by clearly outlining the analytical steps taken throughout the process.

Furthermore, the researcher's positionality is acknowledged as an important aspect of the research process. As qualitative research is inherently interpretative, it is not possible for the researcher to be fully neutral or free from personal values, as these may influence different stages of the research process, including the analysis and interpretation of data (Bryman, 2018, pp. 44–45). This makes it important to reflect on how interpretations are produced and to remain aware of how theoretical perspectives and analytical choices shape the analysis. Efforts have therefore been made to remain close to the empirical material, to justify interpretations through textual evidence, and to maintain transparency throughout the research process.

Although the study does not involve direct interaction with participants, it remains guided by general principles of responsible research practice, including accuracy, critical reflection, and transparency. This also includes being attentive to how political actors are represented in the analysis and ensuring that interpretations are not taken out of context or presented in a misleading way, but instead reflect the material in a fair and balanced manner.

3.5 Validity, Reliability, Reflexivity and Generalizability

The quality of the study can be discussed in relation to validity and reflexivity, as well as reliability and generalizability, while taking into account the characteristics of qualitative research.

Validity and reflexivity are closely connected in this study, as the analysis is based on interpretation. In qualitative research, validity concerns how well the interpretations reflect the empirical material, while reflexivity highlights the role of the researcher in shaping those interpretations (Bryman, 2018, pp. 44–45, 354). Since discourse analysis is interpretative, it is

not possible to fully separate the findings from the analytical perspective used. This also means that there is a risk that the researcher may focus primarily on patterns that support prior assumptions. In this study, this has been addressed through repeated close readings of the material, by developing themes directly from the data rather than through predetermined categories, by grounding interpretations in the empirical material, and by maintaining transparency throughout the analytical process.

Reliability and generalizability are also closely related, as both concern the extent to which the findings can be reproduced or applied beyond the specific case. In qualitative research, it is not possible to fully replicate a study in the same way as in quantitative research, since the analysis depends on interpretation and on a specific empirical context (Bryman, 2018, p. 43). Similarly, the findings are not intended to be generalizable in a statistical sense, as the study is based on a limited selection of speeches and interviews. However, the study aims to increase transparency by clearly describing the selection of material, the coding process, and the analytical steps taken, making it possible for other researchers to follow and assess the analytical process.

Furthermore, the study has a degree of analytical transferability. The material is drawn from a defined time period leading up to an election, during which Orbán is in power, which provides a consistent political context for the analysis. This makes it possible to compare the findings with other time periods, or to apply a similar analytical approach to other political leaders in comparable contexts. While the results cannot be directly generalized, they may therefore be useful for understanding broader patterns in political discourse, particularly in relation to how the European Union is constructed and how threats are articulated.

3.6 Limitations

This study is subject to several methodological limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings.

First, the analysis is based on officially published English translations of Viktor Orbán's speeches and interviews. While this provides access to material intended for an international audience, it may affect the accuracy of the analysis. The original speeches are delivered in Hungarian, and certain linguistic nuances, meanings, or rhetorical elements may be lost or altered in translation. This may influence how specific concepts, tone, or rhetorical strategies are interpreted.

Second, the study focuses on discourse and representation rather than on policy outcomes or the practical consequences of Orbán's rhetoric. This means that the analysis is limited to how meaning and threat are constructed in discourse and does not allow for conclusions about their correspondence with empirical reality. Similarly, the study does not examine how Orbán's rhetoric is received or interpreted by different audiences. The analysis is therefore limited to the construction of meaning within the discourse itself, rather than its potential effects on public opinion or political behavior.

Finally, the scope of the study is limited by time and resources, resulting in a relatively small selection of speeches and interviews. This allows for an in-depth qualitative analysis, although it may not fully capture the variation and development of Orbán's rhetoric over time.

4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of the study. It first outlines populism and securitization as two separate analytical perspectives, before combining them into a joint framework. The purpose of this combination is to analyse how the European Union is represented in Viktor Orbán's political speeches and interviews, particularly in relation to constructions of threat, and how these are embedded in broader political narratives.

4.1 Populism

Populism has become one of the most widely used concepts in contemporary political research, applied to a broad range of political actors across different regions and ideological contexts (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 1). Despite its widespread use, the concept remains contested, and there is no single agreed-upon definition. Different approaches to populism exist within the literature. For example, Laclau (2005) understands populism as a discursive logic through which political identities are constructed, while Müller (2016) emphasizes its anti-pluralist and moral dimensions of politics.

In this study, populism is understood through the ideational approach developed by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017). From this perspective, populism is seen as a thin-centered ideology, meaning that it contains a limited set of core ideas and therefore typically appears in combination with other, more comprehensive ideologies rather than on its own. This “thinness” helps explain why populism can take different forms depending on context, as it is often combined with other ideological elements such as nationalism or conservatism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 5–7). This is particularly relevant in relation to Viktor Orbán's rhetoric, where populist ideas are closely connected to nationalism, sovereignty, and the protection of traditional values. The ideational approach therefore makes it possible to analyse how populist divisions are combined with broader ideological and cultural narratives. This perspective is also particularly sociologically relevant, as it highlights how political ideas are shaped by social context and how different ideological elements are combined to construct meaning.

According to this perspective, populism is structured around three core concepts: *the people*, *the elite*, and *the general will*. The people are constructed as a unified and morally pure group, often presented as the legitimate source of political authority, while the elite are portrayed as

corrupt and acting against the interests of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, pp. 9–16). The general will refers to the idea that politics should reflect the collective will of the people, often in opposition to existing institutions (ibid.). This structure frames politics as a moral conflict between opposing groups, providing a framework through which political actors can assign responsibility, construct blame, and justify political positions. From a sociological perspective, this reflects how social groups are socially constructed and positioned in relation to each other through discourse, and how moral distinctions are used to define belonging, exclusion, and collective identity.

At the same time, populism can play a dual role in democratic systems. On the one hand, it can function as a corrective by mobilizing groups that feel excluded from political decision-making and by bringing attention to issues that are not addressed by mainstream actors. On the other hand, it may challenge key principles of liberal democracy by questioning the legitimacy of institutional constraints and minorities. In particular, right-wing populism tends to define “the people” as a more limited group, linked to national identity, culture, and tradition. (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 84, 93–95, 116–118).

Moreover, populism is also closely connected to the politicization of issues and the construction of crisis. Populist actors often seek to redefine political questions as urgent problems by framing them as threats caused by corrupt or unresponsive elites. By doing so, they create a sense of crisis that strengthens the perceived need for political change and reinforces their own position as representatives of the people. This ability to construct and amplify crisis narratives plays an important role in how populist actors mobilize support and shape political agendas (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 105–107).

In this study, populism is used to analyse how political conflict is constructed in Viktor Orbán’s rhetoric. More specifically, it is used to examine how *the people* are defined, how opposing actors, such as the European Union, are positioned in relation to them, and how questions of sovereignty, authority, and national interest are articulated through these divisions, and how such constructions contribute to shaping social identities and political conflict.

4.2 Securitization

In addition to populism, this study draws on the Copenhagen School of security studies, particularly the work of Barry Buzan. It draws on his framework as presented in *People, States and Fear*, which broadens the concept of security beyond the military dimension and enables a systematic analysis of different types of threats in political discourse. This framework is also sociologically relevant, as it allows for an analysis of how threats are not given but are constructed through interpretation and shaped by social and political processes.

As argued by Barry Buzan, national security issues can extend across several sectors, such as military, political, economic, societal, and ecological. Examining threats within these sectors helps to clarify the broad range of issues that may become part of the national security agenda. In Buzan's framework, national security ultimately concerns the ability of states to maintain their independent identity and functional integrity. In this study, the ecological sector is not included, as it is less directly relevant to the types of threats examined here. The study therefore focuses on the military, political, societal, and economic sectors (Buzan, 2016, p. 107).

Military threats are traditionally seen as the core of national security because the use of force can endanger every part of a state and quickly destroy political, cultural, and economic achievements. However, what counts as a military threat is not only determined by material capabilities but also by political interpretation. This highlights how what is understood as a threat depends on how situations are interpreted, rather than on objective conditions alone. Actions such as military presence near borders, naval patrols, or territorial claims may be perceived differently depending on political context and strategic interests. Military threats can vary widely in scale, ranging from minor incidents such as harassment to territorial invasions. They may also be indirect, targeting allies, shipping routes, or strategic resources. Because the use or threat of force signals a shift from normal political competition to the possibility of war, states tend to treat such situations with high priority. At the same time, external military threats may strengthen internal unity, as political elites can frame such threats in ways that increase cohesion (Buzan, 2016, pp. 107–108).

Political threats are primarily directed at the organizational stability of the state and at the ideas and institutions that define it. Threats to ideology, legitimacy, or governing structures may therefore be perceived as equally serious as military threats. Political threats can involve attempts to influence policy, undermine legitimacy, or promote ideological change. What

constitutes a political threat is often shaped by interpretation rather than purely objective actions. The diversity of political systems means that the existence or success of alternative ideologies may itself be perceived as threatening. Political threats may also target national identity by encouraging internal divisions or challenging the unity of the political community. These threats can be both intentional, such as propaganda or support for opposition groups, and structural, arising from broader ideological competition in the international system (Buzan, 2016, pp. 109–111).

Societal threats concern risks to collective identity, including language, culture, religion, and shared traditions. Because identity is closely tied to the political organization of the state, societal threats can easily overlap with political threats. External cultural influence, migration, and the spread of ideas may be interpreted as threats if they are seen as challenging established social values or patterns of life. As a result, societal threats are often constructed around the protection of identity and the preservation of social cohesion (Buzan, 2016, pp. 111–112).

Economic threats are more difficult to define within the framework of national security, as risk and competition are inherent features of a market economy. Most economic challenges remain part of normal political and economic processes. However, economic issues may become security concerns when they affect other sectors. Economic capability is closely linked to military strength, as access to resources, industrial capacity, and technology underpins defense capabilities. Economic performance also influences a state's position in the international system, meaning that shifts in economic power can be perceived as threats. In addition, economic vulnerability may affect domestic political stability, particularly in states that depend on international trade or external resources. Because economic competition is a normal feature of the system, defining economic issues as security threats requires careful consideration, as such claims may be used to justify protectionist policies (Buzan, 2016, pp. 112–117).

By distinguishing between these sectors, securitization theory makes it possible to analyse how different types of threats are constructed and how they interact within political discourse. This also highlights how certain interpretations of risk, security, and political conflict become dominant, while others are marginalized. This provides a structured framework for examining how the European Union is discussed and represented across different dimensions in Viktor Orbán's speeches and interviews.

4.3 Combining Populism and Securitization

While populism and securitization are distinct analytical perspectives, this study combines them in order to analyse how the European Union is represented in Viktor Orbán's rhetoric, and how such representations may be linked to constructions of threat.

Securitization makes it possible to analyse how certain issues are framed as threats across different sectors, while populism helps explain how these threats are embedded in a broader political structured around distinctions between "the people" and various opposing actors. In this way, securitization identifies what is constructed as a threat, while populism clarifies how responsibility is assigned and how conflict is organized. The combination of these perspectives makes it possible to analyse how the construction of threat and the structuring of political conflict reinforce one another. The identification of threats can strengthen populist divisions, while populist narratives can intensify and politicize perceptions of threat. In this way, threats are not only presented as dangers in themselves, but are also linked to broader narratives about who belongs to "the people" and who is positioned outside the national community. At the same time, the construction of political opponents as external or threatening actors may strengthen the perception that conflict and protection are necessary.

Bringing these perspectives together allows for a more nuanced analysis of how the European Union may be positioned in Orbán's rhetoric.

5. Analysis

The analysis draws on four dimensions of threat construction based on Buzan's (2016) framework: societal, political, economic, and military threats. However, in the structure of the analysis, the societal and political dimensions are examined together, as questions concerning identity, sovereignty, authority, and collective belonging are closely intertwined in Orbán's rhetoric. The analysis is therefore organized into three broader sections: societal and political threats, economic threats, and military threats.

Within these sections, the analysis is further organized through recurring themes identified in the data analysis. These themes are not treated as separate analytical categories, but rather as ways of structuring and interpreting how different forms of threat are constructed in the discourse.

The analysis also draws on Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, with attention given to textual features, discursive constructions, and broader sociopolitical contexts. This makes it possible to examine both how threats are constructed in the discourse and how these constructions are connected to wider political narratives and forms of conflict.

Based on this analytical approach, the research questions are treated as analytically interconnected throughout the chapter. Representations of the European Union, the relationship between the EU and "the Hungarian people," and constructions of the EU as a potential threat are therefore analysed together across the different sections of the chapter. The conclusion then provides a summary of how the research questions are answered.

Research questions:

1. How is the European Union represented in Viktor Orbán's political speeches and interviews?
2. How is the European Union positioned in relation to "the Hungarian people" in these speeches and interviews?
3. To what extent is the European Union constructed as a security threat in Orbán's political speeches and interviews?

5.1 The EU as a societal and political threat

This section explores how the European Union is framed within societal and political contexts in Viktor Orbán's rhetoric. Drawing on Buzan's securitization framework, it highlights how perceived threats can target both collective identity and political authority (2016, pp. 111–112). The section is divided into three parts: Migration, Identity and values, and Europe, Hungary and “we”, each focusing on how societal and political threats are constructed.

5.1.1 Migration

The connection between societal and political dimensions becomes particularly clear in Orbán's framing of migration. Although the migration crisis peaked in 2015, migration continues to play a central role in Orbán's speeches and interviews during the period analyzed here (2022–2025) with statements such as “even the blind can see that migration is a security risk” (Orbán, 2024a) or “our problem is how to keep Hungary a migrant-free country “ (Orbán, 2025c). This suggests that migration remains central to Orbán's rhetoric, where it is consistently framed not only as a political issue, but also as a broader question of security and national protection.

According to Buzan (2016, pp. 111–112), societal security concerns the preservation of collective identities, where the primary referent object is the continuity of a community and its shared cultural, religious, and social practices. This perspective is reflected in Orbán's rhetoric, where migration is constructed as a threat to Hungary's cultural identity and social cohesion. In particular, Orbán frames migration as a source of negative and long-term societal consequences, thereby reinforcing the idea that the continuity of the national community is at risk. This is illustrated in statements such as:

A mixed society has serious consequences. Now they have societies that are half Christian and half Islamic. Their unified legal systems will fall apart. Public safety will be lost. They'll become targets for terrorist attacks [...] their future is gone, because it's like toothpaste: once you squeeze it out of the tube, it's out (Orbán, 2025a).

Here, “they” refers to Western European states that, according to Orbán, have not opposed migration. These countries are presented as examples of what happens when migration is not resisted. By pointing to their situation, Orbán creates a contrast in which Hungary appears as the actor that has understood the risks in time and acted accordingly. This establishes a clear

sense of right and wrong, while also positioning Orbán as someone capable of identifying and responding to the threat.

In Orbán's rhetoric, migration is also described through a series of severe consequences. References to terrorism and the loss of public safety present it as a direct threat to the population, while the statement that “their future is gone” intensifies this by suggesting that the effects are long-term. Migration is therefore not framed as a manageable political issue, but as something that fundamentally threatens the stability and continuity of society. This reflects a broader pattern in Hungarian government rhetoric, where migration is consistently linked to security risks and social instability (e.g. Szalai & Göbl, 2015; Szalay & Rakovics 2025). It can also reflect how populist rhetoric constructs political issues as urgent and as existential threats, thereby creating a sense of crisis that reinforces the need for strong political action (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 105–107).

This is further reinforced through the metaphor introduced earlier, where migration is compared to toothpaste that cannot be put back into the tube. As highlighted in Fairclough's textual dimension (Fairclough, 2010, pp. 131–133), metaphors and rhetorical features play an important role in shaping meaning within discourse. In this case, the comparison of migration to toothpaste presents migration as an irreversible process, suggesting that once change has occurred, it cannot be undone. The consequences are therefore framed as permanent and difficult to control.

At the same time, Orbán's rhetoric does not construct all forms of migration as equally threatening. This becomes particularly visible in statements concerning migration from Western Europe, where Orbán argues that “more and more Western Europeans will move to us, because Hungary is a safe, Christian country” and states that “we don't see this as a bad thing, but rather as a very good and welcome thing” (Orbán, 2022d). He further emphasizes that “citizens who treat us and our traditions with respect will continue to be welcome in Hungary” and concludes with the statement: “Western Refugees Welcome!” (Orbán, 2022d). Here, migration is not framed as a threat in itself, but rather evaluated in relation to cultural belonging, Christianity, and compatibility with Hungarian traditions and society. In this way, the discourse constructs migration selectively, where certain groups are presented as capable of integration while others are framed as threatening to the continuity of the national community.

These distinctions also make questions of authority and political control increasingly central within Orbán's rhetoric. While certain forms of migration are presented as compatible with Hungarian society, Orbán emphasizes that Hungary itself must retain the right to decide who is allowed to enter the national community. In this way, migration is also framed in political terms, where questions of authority and sovereignty become central (Buzan, 2016, pp. 109–111), a pattern also identified in previous research on Orbán's migration rhetoric (Agoston, 2024). The issue therefore becomes not only migration itself, but also external influence over how migration is managed. This becomes particularly visible in statements where the European Union is presented as pressuring Hungary to accept migrants and limiting its ability to control its own borders:

Our problem is how to keep Hungary a migrant-free country despite pressure from Brussels. Brussels has decided that we should build – or should have already built - a refugee camp capable of accommodating 30,000 migrants. And we should accept that if large numbers of migrants arrive in Europe, Brussels will decide how to distribute them [...] We're resisting [...] and our reward for this is that we have to pay Brussels one million euros a day as a punishment. But we're still better off paying this than letting in the migrants (Orbán, 2025c).

Here, the European Union is presented as an actor that not only influences migration policy, but actively imposes decisions on member states. References to distribution mechanisms and financial penalties frame the EU as limiting Hungary's ability to control its borders and decide who is allowed to enter the country. Rather than migration being something Hungary can manage independently, it is described as something shaped by external authority. The issue becomes not only who belongs to the nation, but who has the authority to make that decision and by emphasizing that Hungary is willing to bear economic costs rather than accept migrants, Orbán reinforces the idea that migration represents a fundamental threat, one that justifies resistance even under pressure. This is a pattern identified in previous research, where migration is framed as an existential danger that legitimizes strong political responses (Szalai & Göbl, 2015), and where representations of the EU as limiting national sovereignty are used to justify political action (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021).

Taken together, this shows how migration is constructed as a multidimensional threat to Hungary, where concerns about identity are closely linked to political control. The European

Union is portrayed as both enabling this process and limiting Hungary's ability to respond, making it part of the threat itself.

5.1.2 Identity and values

The construction of the European Union as a threat is further developed in Orbán's rhetoric through references to ideology, identity, and values. In contrast to migration, where the threat is linked to external actors entering the country, the perceived threat here is less tangible and instead concerns the influence of ideas. This makes the construction of threat more dependent on interpretation, as what is presented as dangerous is not a physical development, but a set of norms and values associated with the European Union. This reflects Buzan's (2016, pp. 109–111) argument that political threats are often shaped by perception rather than objective actions. Because these threats are not material or directly observable, their construction relies more heavily on rhetorical framing. This requires stronger linguistic and symbolic strategies to make them appear convincing, such as sharp contrasts, moral distinctions, and emotionally charged language. In this sense, the abstract nature of the threat makes discourse itself central to its construction.

In Orbán's rhetoric, the European Union is closely associated with broader Western actors and value systems. The values attributed to the EU are presented as part of a wider Western framework, where liberal norms, social change, and cultural transformation are linked together. This becomes visible across Orbán's speeches and interviews, where the EU is not only discussed as a political institution, but as representing a particular set of ideas. In this context, Orbán constructs a clear distinction between Western Europe and Hungary, where differences in values are presented as a source of conflict, a pattern also noted in previous research (e.g. Enyedi, 2020; Lamour, 2022). This becomes visible in statements such as:

From here, it seems as if freedom for Westerners is some kind of escape: "Break free from yourself, break free from what you were born as – or at least change what you were born as! Grow out of your past, like a childhood disease! Change gender! Change nationality – or at least leave it behind and change your identity! change every component of yourself, reassemble yourself according to the latest fashion, and you will be free [...] For us freedom is not escaping from ourselves, but the opposite: freedom is

an arrival, a homecoming. A commitment: be who you are! Accept that you were born Hungarian, born Christian, born a woman or a man (Orbán, 2023d).

Here, Orbán presents two different understandings of identity and freedom. Western Europe is associated with change and fluidity, while Hungary is linked to stability, tradition, and continuity. This distinction does more than describe difference, it defines what is considered legitimate and desirable. Change is associated with instability and loss, while continuity is linked to order and coherence. In this way, identity is framed as something that must be maintained over time.

The contrast between Western Europe and Hungary is also reinforced through references to religion. Orbán repeatedly emphasizes Christianity as a defining feature of Hungarian identity, which becomes particularly clear in statements such as “Hungary – alongside Poland – has become the last Christian, conservative bastion of the Western world” (Orbán, 2022b) and “The idea of my not being a man, not being Hungarian and not being a Christian is like having my heart ripped out.” (Orbán, 2023d). These statements highlight how religion is closely tied to identity in Orbán’s rhetoric. Christianity is presented as a defining feature of belonging, where national, cultural, and personal identity are closely intertwined. This makes the perceived threat more profound, as it is directed at what is understood as the core of the community.

Furthermore, Orbán also constructs gender as a threat to Hungary. This is particularly visible in statements concerning family and child protection: “we shall protect our families, we shall not let gender activists into our schools [...] our children shall be left alone” (Orbán, 2022b) and: “because gender propaganda is not just an entertaining caper, not just rainbow chatter, but the greatest threat stalking our children” (Orbán, 2023a). Here, gender-related issues are connected to their perceived impact on society. At a textual level, this construction is reflected through specific vocabulary and rhetorical choices. Expressions such as “we shall protect,” “we shall not let,” and “greatest threat” position Orbán and his government as actors responsible for defending the nation, while references to children and families evoke ideas of vulnerability and protection. At the level of discourse, these statements contribute to narratives in which gender-related issues are associated with questions concerning social stability, national identity, and the future of society. Through repeated references to children, education, and the nation, gender is linked to broader concerns about cultural and moral change. At a sociocultural level, this discourse connects gender to wider debates about identity, authority, and political conflict. The construction of gender as a threat is therefore tied to broader narratives in which the government

presents itself as protecting traditional values and national cohesion in relation to perceived external influences. In this way, gender becomes connected to both societal and political dimensions of threat, where questions concerning family, identity, and state authority are closely intertwined within the discourse.

Taken together, this shows how ideological differences are constructed as a threat to Hungary. The threat is not tied to a single actor, but to a broader set of values and influences associated with Western Europe and the European Union. These are presented as challenging social cohesion, identity, and national continuity, which reinforces the need for protection and resistance.

5.1.3 Europe, Hungary and “we”

The threat constructions discussed in the previous sections are further reinforced through Orbán’s flexible use of collective identities, particularly the distinction between “we” and “they.” Rather than referring to fixed groups, these categories shift depending on the context, allowing Orbán to construct multiple layers of opposition that together contribute to a broader perception of conflict. This flexibility is important because it allows different issues, like migration, values, and political authority, to be linked through a shared sense of opposition.

As seen in earlier sections, “we” often refers to Hungary, for example in statements such as “we shall not let” and “we shall protect our families.” In these cases, Hungary is positioned as the threatened community, defined in relation to external actors and developments. The use of “we” here contributes to a sense of collective unity, where political decisions are framed as shared responsibilities and defensive actions taken on behalf of the nation. In other contexts, however, “we” refers to a broader European community, for example when Orbán states that “our war strategy isn’t working” (Orbán, 2022a). Here, Hungary is positioned as part of a wider European collective rather than as fully separated from it. This illustrates how the boundaries of “we” shift depending on the political argument being made.

A similar flexibility can also be seen in Orbán’s construction of “they”. In some cases, “they” refers to migrants, in others to the European Union or “Brussels,” and in some contexts to Western European states or liberal political actors more broadly. These actors are not always clearly distinguished, but are instead brought together as part of a wider category of external “others”. This reflects a broader and recurring pattern identified in previous research. As Wodak

(2015) argues, the category of “others” in populist discourse is not limited to specific groups, but can include a range of actors such as political elites, institutions, and social groups. This is evident here, where migrants, the European Union, and Western actors are incorporated into shifting constructions of “them”, depending on the context. In this way, the boundaries between different “others” become less clearly defined, which allows multiple sources of perceived threat to be combined within a single narrative.

Orbán’s use of “we” and “they” also shows how populism can work together with securitization to strengthen the construction of threat. By shifting who is included in “we” and who is positioned as “they,” different actors can be linked to developments that are understood as harmful. In this way, political boundaries are continuously redrawn, while a sense of conflict is maintained. As Kurylo (2022) highlights, the identification of threats plays a central role in shaping collective identity. This is visible here, where the construction of “others” not only defines who belongs to “the people,” but also frames certain actors and developments as risks. Through this process, identity and threat become closely connected, as perceptions of danger help shape who is included and excluded.

At the same time, the relationship between Hungary and the European Union is not presented as entirely antagonistic as he states:

We are members of the European Union not because of what it is, but because of what it could be [...] we see Hungary in the European Union, determined to fight for its rights and to seek allies to renew the Union (Orbán, 2022b).

Here, the European Union is presented as something that can be shaped and contested. Orbán distinguishes between its current form and a potential alternative aligned with Hungarian interests, which allows him to position Hungary as both part of and opposed to the EU. This enables criticism of the EU without requiring a full rejection of membership and reinforces the idea that Hungary must actively defend its position within the Union.

Orbán also explicitly distances himself from the idea that Hungary is opposed to the European Union itself. As he states, “there’s no basis for the constant insinuations that we’re enemies of the EU. The truth is the exact opposite: we have no doubts about the EU, or even of our membership of the EU” (Orbán, 2022d). Similarly, Orbán argues that Hungary wants “strong European cooperation, not against Europe, but for the benefit of our own country” (Orbán, 2024d). These statements suggest that the criticism towards the EU is not directed towards the

existence of the European Union itself, but towards how the Union currently functions and exercises authority. This becomes particularly visible in statements such as: “the EU should be an alliance of strong nation states” (Orbán, 2022d), where European cooperation is presented as compatible with national sovereignty rather than opposed to it. In this way, Orbán’s rhetoric constructs the EU less as something that should be rejected entirely and more as a political project that requires reform. This suggests that Orbán’s relationship to the EU is more nuanced than what is often implied by portrayals of his rhetoric as strongly anti-EU.

Taken together, this shows how the distinction between “we” and “they” functions as a flexible tool for constructing political conflict. By shifting collective identities, Orbán maintains a consistent sense of opposition while adapting who is included or excluded depending on the context. In this way, different actors are linked to developments perceived as threatening, reinforcing a populist logic in which political reality is structured around conflict and the identification of risk.

5.2 The EU as an economic threat

This section examines how the European Union is constructed in economic terms within Viktor Orbán's rhetoric. Using Buzan's securitization framework, it highlights how perceived threats relate to economic stability, the distribution of resources, and their links to political authority (Buzan, 2016, pp. 105–107). The section is divided into two parts: War, sanctions and energy and EU money and control, each addressing how economic threats are constructed.

5.2.1 War, sanctions and energy

In Orbán's rhetoric, the European Union is constructed as an economic threat through its support for the war in Ukraine, its sanctions policy, and its broader prioritization of resources. These issues are not presented as separate policy questions, but as interconnected elements of a wider economic and political crisis. What is at stake is not only the performance of the economy in abstract terms, but the allocation of money, access to energy, and the ability of the Hungarian state to protect households and act according to its own interests. In this way, economic questions are translated into questions of security, sovereignty, and political legitimacy. Rather than being treated as technical or administrative matters, economic decisions are framed as having direct consequences for the survival and stability of the national community.

A central part of this construction concerns what Orbán presents as the EU's war-oriented economic approach. In his rhetoric, Brussels is associated with an ongoing commitment to the war in Ukraine, where economic resources are continuously mobilized to sustain it. Rather than being framed as a temporary response, this is presented as a long-term direction in which financial contributions from member states are expected to continue or increase. In this sense, the EU is described as operating in a form of war economy, where economic decisions are shaped by the needs of the war. As he puts it:

Brussels is asking Member States for money to send to Ukraine. If it can't get its hands on Russian assets, in order to continue the war it will have to ask Member States for even more money. We shall not give any money: the Hungarian Right shall not give any money, it shall not send any money to Ukraine, and it doesn't care if this leads to conflict with Brussels (Orbán, 2025d).

This particular framing helps justify Hungary's refusal by linking EU demands directly to the continuation of the war. Rather than being presented as general financial support, the request for money is framed as contributing to the war effort. This allows Orbán to position refusal as a clear and deliberate choice.

Orbán also emphasizes how Europe's involvement in the war affects the Hungarian economy, which becomes particularly visible in his discussion of sanctions. In this context, the EU's role in the war is not only linked to financial support, but also to economic measures that directly impact member states. While financial contributions are presented as sustaining the war, sanctions are framed as another way in which the EU actively participates in it. In this sense, the EU is not only funding the war, but also intervening in it through its economic policies, with consequences that extend beyond the geopolitical level and into domestic economic conditions. This becomes visible when he states "Sanctions are the weapons in Brussels' war policy. They target Russia, but they hit Europe [...] they promised they would not extend the sanctions to energy. But then they did" (Orbán, 2023a). Here, sanctions are not described as neutral economic measures, but as active tools within the war itself. At a textual level, the metaphor of sanctions as "weapons" is particularly important, as it connects economic policy to war and conflict and reinforces the idea that the EU is contributing to escalation rather than peace. At the same time, the claim that sanctions "hit Europe" establishes a contrast between intention and outcome, suggesting that these measures ultimately harm the EU and its member states rather than achieving their stated goals. In this way, sanctions are framed both as evidence of EU involvement in the war and as a source of economic damage for Europe.

This is also linked to concrete economic consequences, particularly in relation to energy. Orbán repeatedly emphasizes how sanctions directly affect energy supply and prices, especially given Hungary's dependence on Russian oil and gas. In this context, sanctions are presented as decisions with direct and immediate effects on domestic economic conditions. This becomes visible when he states:

What will happen to Hungarian households, what will happen at Hungarian gas stations? That's what's important to us. [...] We must fight to the end to have access to Russian oil and natural gas. Firstly, because we can't replace it from elsewhere, so there would be a shortage [...] And secondly, prices would go up. [...] It's therefore in the fundamental, vital interest of every Hungarian household that we have access to Russian energy (Orbán, 2025c).

Here, Orbán shifts from policy to impact. Instead of focusing on institutional decision-making, he highlights everyday economic realities such as fuel prices, household expenses, and access to energy. In doing so, the discussion is simplified and brought down to a level where complex political and economic processes are understood through their effects on ordinary people. This reflects a pattern identified by Wodak (2015), where responsibility for complex developments is attributed to external actors, making it easier to present them in clear and opposing terms. In this case, EU sanctions are directly linked to rising costs and economic pressure, presenting them as the reason why Hungarian households are affected. This construction also introduces a temporal dimension, where EU policy is associated with long-term geopolitical commitments, while Hungary's position is framed in relation to immediate and practical concerns. By focusing on present-day consequences, such as energy access and household costs, Orbán's rhetoric prioritizes short-term stability over long-term strategy, reinforcing the legitimacy of his position as grounded in everyday reality.

At the same time, this argument is closely tied to questions of dependence and sovereignty. Orbán stresses that Hungary relies on Russian energy, and that EU sanctions fail to take this into account. As he puts it:

But not everyone in Brussels seems to understand this, because in Brussels they don't understand or see this geographically based argument, the practical argument about where Hungary obtains its energy from. Incidentally, it's Hungary's sovereign right to decide this (Orbán, 2025c).

Here, the conflict is framed as one between EU decision-makers and Hungary's specific economic conditions. By emphasizing geography and energy dependence, Orbán presents EU policy as disconnected from reality, while Hungary is positioned as acting in accordance with practical needs. The mention of Hungary's "sovereign right" strengthens this idea by connecting economic vulnerability to political authority and emphasizing Hungary's right to make its own decisions instead of giving in to outside pressure. This is identified in previous research, where Orbán's rhetoric links EU policy to questions of sovereignty and external interference (e.g. Lamour, 2022; Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021).

Orbán also constructs the EU through a more explicitly populist distinction between elites and "the people." This becomes visible in statements such as "Brussels has abandoned the people of Europe" (Orbán, 2024a) and "the people of Europe were lied to by Brussels" (Orbán, 2022c).

Through these formulations, Brussels is presented as a distant elite actor that fails to understand or represent the interests and realities of ordinary people, which can also be connected to Orbán's earlier argument that EU decision-makers fail to understand Hungary's geographical and economic conditions. This creates a clear division where "the people" are portrayed as grounded in these realities, while EU decision-makers are constructed as disconnected and unresponsive, reflecting the populist distinction between "the people" and "the elite" described by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, pp. 9–16).

Moreover, this argument is extended into the broader economic domain, where Orbán presents EU policy as failing to act in the interests of Europe. He argues that sanctions and the war weaken the European economy as a whole, stating that "today, sanctions and the war – especially the war – are blocking the European economy" (Orbán, 2025c). This argument is further developed through claims about declining competitiveness. Orbán suggests that Europe's economic strength is being undermined by war-related policies, arguing that "European competitiveness has been enfeebled by war, sanctions and the emergence of rival blocs at global level" (Orbán, 2024a). Here, economic consequences are placed within an international context, where reduced competitiveness is associated with a loss of influence and a more vulnerable position in the global system.

These developments are also linked to questions of prioritization. By emphasizing that resources are directed towards the war, Orbán presents EU policy as neglecting domestic economic needs. This also becomes particularly visible in statements such as "Brussels cares more about Ukraine than about European farmers" (Orbán, 2024b), where economic problems are directly linked to political choices. The issue is therefore framed as an economic problem and as a question of whose interests are prioritized, with EU policy portrayed as redirecting resources away from its own population.

Finally, this can be understood as part of a broader construction of economic threat. As Buzan (2016, pp. 112–117) argues, economic performance is closely tied to a state's position in the international system, and economic vulnerability may affect both external strength and internal stability. Orbán's rhetoric reflects this logic by linking rising energy costs, economic slowdown, and declining competitiveness to EU policy, thereby framing them as risks to both national and European stability.

Taken together, this illustrates how economic policy is reframed as a source of threat. By linking EU decisions to economic decline, energy vulnerability, and reduced sovereignty, Viktor Orbán

constructs a narrative in which political and economic developments are understood in terms of risk and insecurity. This framing follows a clear populist logic, portraying Brussels as a distant elite acting against the interests of “the people.” It also contributes to a process of securitization, where economic and political issues are presented as threats that require protection.

5.2.2 EU money and control

In Orbán’s rhetoric, the European Union is not only constructed as an economic actor that contributes to and sustains the war, but also as an actor that actively controls and restricts access to economic resources. This becomes particularly visible in his discussion of EU funding, where economic relations are presented as shaped by political conflict and power rather than neutral or rule-based processes. This is clearly expressed in the following statement:

The Brussels bureaucracy, with well-considered bad intentions, has not given Hungary or Poland their share of the European Recovery Programme. In 2022, in the most difficult year, we did not receive money that the Member States took out as a joint loan, according to which we Hungarians will have to pay back our share (Orbán, 2023a).

Here, Orbán presents the situation as fundamentally unfair. Hungary is described as contributing to and being responsible for repaying joint EU loans, while at the same time being denied access to the corresponding funds. This creates a situation where obligations remain, but rights are withheld. In this way, the EU is not only portrayed as failing to support its member states, but as actively disadvantaging them economically.

Moreover, the argument goes beyond unfairness and moves into a question of vulnerability. By emphasizing that Hungary has not received their entitled money, Orbán presents the country as dependent on resources that are being withheld, creating a situation where external decisions have direct consequences for economic stability. As Buzan (2016, pp. 112–117) argues, economic issues become security concerns when they affect a state’s ability to function or maintain stability. Economic performance also influences a state’s position in the international system, meaning that shifts in economic power can be perceived as threats. In this case, the withholding of EU funds is constructed not as a normal political disagreement, but as something that puts pressure on Hungary’s economic capacity and autonomy. This pressure is, in Orbán’s rhetoric, closely linked to political control. This becomes visible in statements where he claims

that Brussels is “looking for nits to pick out of Hungary’s rule of law” (Orbán, 2023a), suggesting that legal concerns are used selectively rather than consistently. In this way, the issue develops from economic vulnerability into a question of control, where access to resources becomes dependent on alignment with EU expectations. Economic governance is therefore framed as politically motivated and used to exert pressure on member states. This suggests that formal rules and procedures are not applied consistently, but are used as tools in political struggles over authority.

The argument develops further when Orbán explicitly describes EU funding as a form of pressure:

Given that we’re political rivals, the EU institutions are now being used as a weapon against us. They’re punishing us and openly blackmailing us with EU money. But there’s no legal basis for this – it’s blackmail, pure and simple (Orbán, 2022d).

Here, economic relations are framed as a form of intentional pressure. By describing EU funding as a “weapon” and “blackmail,” Orbán constructs economic resources as tools used to influence political decisions. This shifts the meaning of EU governance, as it is no longer about coordination between member states, but about the ability to discipline and control them. The threat becomes more concrete. If access to financial resources depends on political alignment, economic stability is uncertain and Hungary’s ability to act independently is limited. Economic pressure is thus directly linked to political control. This framing makes the situation seem more threatening by presenting economic relations as conflict rather than cooperation.

At the same time, this framing reinforces a strong elite dimension. By presenting EU institutions as actors that “punish” and “blackmail,” Orbán constructs them as exercising power from above rather than representing member states. This is also identified by Danaj et al. (2018), where criticism of the EU becomes part of a wider anti-elitist narrative. Similarly, Csehi and Zgut (2021) show how such narratives portray “Brussels” as a distant and self-serving elite, which allows national governments to position themselves as defenders of democratic self-determination. In this case, economic tools are used to illustrate how authority is imposed, while Hungary is positioned as resisting that pressure. This also reinforces a moral dimension, where the conflict is framed not only in terms of interests, but in terms of legitimacy and justice.

This dynamic is further expanded through Orbán’s broader ideological framing. He contrasts Hungary’s political direction with what he describes as a “liberal, globalist mainstream” (Orbán,

2022b), arguing that “Brussels strives for absolutism” (ibid.), and “demands uniformity among member states”. In this context, economic pressure is presented as a mechanism for enforcing a particular political direction, he states “Anyone who does not march in step will be punished by the evening. Hungary is rebelling against this. We will not be brought to heel!” (ibid.).

Here, the EU is constructed as promoting a single acceptable model, while Hungary is positioned as resisting external pressure. Economic measures, such as the withholding of funds, are therefore framed as part of a broader attempt to influence how member states govern themselves. This reinforces the idea that the conflict is not only about money, but about who has the authority to decide. This also connects to Orbán’s broader argument about fairness within the European Union. By claiming that denying Hungary and Poland access to EU funds “will inevitably lead to distortions in competition” (Orbán, 2022d), he suggests that EU decisions not only disadvantage individual member states, but also undermine the principles of the Union itself. In this way, the EU is not only criticized for its treatment of Hungary, but for failing to act according to its own rules. This allows Orbán to reposition Hungary not only as a victim of unfair treatment, but as a defender of the original principles of the Union.

Taken together, these elements show how economic relations are reframed as a site of political conflict. What could be understood as technical decisions about funding and regulation is instead constructed as a struggle over power, control, and sovereignty. Through this framing, the EU is positioned as limiting Hungary’s options, making it a central actor in the construction of economic threat. At the same time, this construction highlights how economic governance becomes a key arena through which broader conflicts over authority, legitimacy, and political direction are articulated.

5.3 The EU as a military threat

This section examines how the European Union is constructed as a military threat in Viktor Orbán's rhetoric, particularly in relation to the war in Ukraine. It builds on Barry Buzan's framework of securitization to highlight how perceived threats are linked to military escalation, exposure to conflict, and the risk of external violence (Buzan, 2016, pp. 107–108). The section is divided into two parts: War vs peace and War and escalation, each examining how military threats are constructed in Orbán's rhetoric.

5.3.1 War vs Peace

Building on the previous discussion of the European Union as supporting and sustaining the war, this becomes even more explicit in Orbán's rhetoric, where the conflict is constructed through language and interpretation. Rather than focusing on specific policy actions, the emphasis here lies in how the war is framed and how this framing shapes political meaning. This shift in focus highlights how political actors not only respond to events, but actively construct their significance through discourse. Central to this is the construction of a clear opposition between the European Union's position and Hungary's own stance, where actors are positioned as either supporting the war or opposing it. Orbán frequently reduces this to a simplified distinction, at times summarized as a basic dilemma between "war or peace" (Orbán, 2025b) through which the European Union becomes associated with war and Hungary with peace.

This distinction also shapes how the conflict itself is understood within the discourse. Rather than presenting the war as a complex geopolitical situation, Orbán reduces it to a simplified choice between opposing positions. This is important, as it removes nuance and places political positions into clear opposing sides. Within this framework, disagreement is no longer about strategy or alternative approaches, but about fundamental positions, making it more difficult to express nuanced or intermediate views. In this way, complex political developments are simplified into clear oppositions, as described by Wodak (2015), where responsibility is attributed in ways that construct antagonistic relationships. Such a simplification also reflects a broader populist logic. By reducing the conflict to a limited set of positions, it becomes possible to divide actors into opposing groups, where alignment signals not only political preference but a broader meaning. As Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, pp 9-16.) argue, populism is structured

around a moral distinction between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” In this context, the distinction between “war” and “peace” can function in a similar way, where positions are not only evaluated politically, but also interpreted as markers of alignment with or against the interests of “the people.”

The distinction also shapes how “peace” is understood within the discourse. Rather than referring to a neutral or passive condition, peace is defined in relation to non-involvement. It becomes associated with staying out of the conflict, avoiding escalation, and rejecting participation in collective action. This construction can be seen when Orbán states: “Can Hungary afford to remain on the side of peace in such circumstances, in a way that is directly opposed to that of our allies? Of course we can” (Orbán, 2023a). Here, peace is linked to Hungary’s ability to maintain an independent position despite external pressure from allies and the broader international community. The war is therefore not only presented as a geopolitical event, but as a political narrative through which legitimacy and identity are constructed.

Within this framework, the distinction between “war” and “peace” is constructed not only through positions on the conflict itself, but through competing definitions of involvement, responsibility, and participation. A central aspect of this construction is how the European Union is represented as defining the war as Europe’s own conflict. This becomes particularly visible when Orbán describes the EU’s framing of the war:

By its own definition, Europe is at war. So European leaders – including the leaders of the largest nation states and the leaders of European institutions – talk about the Russo–Ukrainian war as if it is our war, and as if Europe is at war (Orbán, 2025b).

Here, Orbán challenges not only what the EU does, but how it defines reality. By emphasizing the use of “our war,” he suggests that the EU is actively constructing a shared European identity around involvement in the conflict. This shifts the meaning of the war from an external event to something that implicates Europe itself, making deeper engagement appear both natural and necessary. At the same time, this allows Orbán to reject that framing and position Hungary outside it. In this way, competing interpretations of the conflict become central to political positioning, where different actors not only disagree on what should be done, but on what the situation itself represents. This illustrates how political conflict increasingly operates at the level of interpretation, rather than solely at the level of action. As Buzan (2016, pp. 107–108)

argues, what counts as a military threat is not only determined by material conditions, but also by how situations are politically interpreted.

This dynamic becomes even clearer in Orbán's more extensive critique of EU leadership: "This clearly shows that there's a kind of war psychosis, a kind of competition in Europe for who can represent pro-war positions the most belligerently" (Orbán, 2025b). In this passage, the EU is described as supporting Ukraine and as actively driving escalation. The idea of "war psychosis" suggests that political actors are no longer acting rationally, while the notion of competition implies that escalation is being reinforced through internal political dynamics rather than strategic necessity. In this way, the EU is not framed as containing or managing the conflict, but as contributing to a self-reinforcing process that moves Europe closer to deeper involvement. This aligns with Slaven's (2021) understanding of securitization as a dynamic process, where political actors amplify and reinforce particular interpretations of threat in order to justify stronger positions. In this sense, the construction of threat is not reactive, but actively produced through political discourse.

Against this construction of the EU as driving escalation, Hungary is consistently portrayed as opposing the war, as Orbán states "How do we overcome the danger of war? [...] we must stay out of the Russo-Ukrainian war [...] everyone there is on the side of war – or at least acts as if they are" (Orbán, 2023a). Here, Orbán constructs Hungary as resisting both external pressure and dominant narratives within the EU. By presenting "everyone" else as aligned with war, Hungary's position appears not as isolation, but as resistance. The emphasis is on independence and responsibility, where Hungary is positioned as taking a more cautious and controlled approach in contrast to others.

A central element in the discourse is how different levels of collective identity are constructed and negotiated. In some cases, Orbán refers to Europe collectively, as when stating: "This war we are in – and despite what Hungarians want, I have to speak in the first-person plural, because we are members of the EU" (Orbán, 2025b). Here, Hungary is positioned within a broader European framework due to its membership in the European Union. At the same time, Orbán repeatedly distinguishes Hungary from the position adopted by the EU, for example in statements such as "we're keeping our distance, this isn't our war" (Orbán, 2025a). Rather than presenting these positions as contradictory, the discourse constructs a distinction between formal belonging and political alignment. Hungary is represented as part of Europe

institutionally, while simultaneously positioned outside the collective involvement in the war associated with the EU.

Although this discourse frequently positions Hungary outside the war and in contrast to the EU's approach, Orbán's rhetoric does not present Hungary as entirely opposed to Ukraine or indifferent to the consequences of the conflict. In several statements, he expresses sympathy for Ukrainians affected by the war, stating for example that "Every human life lost is an irreplaceable loss, and therefore the Ukrainians' losses are our losses" (Orbán, 2023b). This illustrates how Orbán carefully shifts between different positions within the discourse, distancing Hungary from direct involvement in the war while still expressing identification with those affected by it.

Taken together, these elements show how the meaning of the conflict is constructed through language before it is understood as a concrete threat. Through simplified distinctions, shifting identities, and constructed oppositions, Orbán creates a narrative in which the European Union is associated with war and escalation, while Hungary is positioned as aligned with peace and restraint. In this way, the framing of the war becomes central to how political positions are justified. The identification of threat does not emerge only from external developments, but from how those developments are interpreted and presented. This highlights how populist and securitizing logics are closely intertwined, as the construction of meaning shapes how risk is understood.

5.3.2 War and escalation

In addition to the political positioning discussed in the previous section, the war is also constructed as a direct and escalating security threat. The focus now shifts from how Orbán frames the political divide between war and peace to how the war itself is presented as a concrete risk to Hungary. This risk is closely tied to Hungary's geographical location. The conflict is described as unfolding in Hungary's immediate environment, which makes distance difficult to maintain and shapes how the danger is understood. This geographical closeness becomes central to the argument through repeated emphasis on Hungary as a neighbouring state "so the threat of war is immediate [...] we're neighbours of the country where the war is taking place, and this poses a constant and permanent threat of war" (Orbán, 2025a). Here, the war is made directly relevant to Hungary's security through geography. The emphasis on being a

neighbour transforms the conflict from an international issue into a national concern. Words such as “immediate,” “constant,” and “permanent” are important because they remove any sense that the threat is temporary or distant. At a textual level, these linguistic choices make the threat appear continuous rather than temporary. The war is presented as an ongoing condition that Hungary must continuously respond to. This construction can also be understood in relation to insights from populism research. Populist actors often seek to politicize issues by framing them as urgent problems caused by unresponsive or misguided elites. By doing so, they create a sense of crisis that reinforces the need for action and strengthens their own position as representatives of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 105–107). In this context, presenting the war as immediate and directly threatening contributes not only to describing a security situation, but to reinforcing its political significance.

The geographical argument also creates a distinction between different parts of Europe. Orbán presents the war as something experienced differently depending on location. He states, “But we live here, and the war is on the soil of a neighbouring country” (Orbán, 2023a) and “I usually tell our friends here in the sheltered world of Western Europe that the world wars started in Central Europe” (Orbán, 2024b). Here, proximity becomes a form of authority. Those closer to the war are presented as having a more direct understanding of its risks, while those further away appear more detached. This creates a hierarchy of experience, where Hungary’s position is framed as more grounded in reality than decisions made further from the conflict. EU-level decisions can therefore be portrayed as disconnected from the situation of those most exposed to the consequences. In this way, geography is used not only to explain vulnerability, but also to challenge the legitimacy of EU decision-making.

Within this geographical framing, the war is also described as a process of escalation. Orbán does not present the conflict as stable, but as developing step by step. He says “The danger of the war spreading to EU countries is growing by the day. [...] Small steps are taking us ever closer to direct involvement in the war” (Orbán, 2022d) and: “It started with sanctions, it continued with arms supplies, and now we’re training Ukrainian soldiers. This is an extremely dangerous spiral” (ibid.). These formulations connect different political decisions into a single direction. Sanctions, arms supplies, and military training are presented as stages in the same movement towards deeper involvement. This is analytically important because it turns separate policy decisions into signs of a larger process. The reference to “small steps” suggests that escalation may occur gradually, while the metaphor of a “spiral” suggests that the process becomes increasingly difficult to control. The threat is therefore constructed through the idea

that political decisions are moving Europe closer to direct participation in the war. This sense of escalation is reinforced further when Orbán warns that “we’ll soon be up to our waist in a war in Europe” (Orbán, 2024c). The metaphor intensifies the perception of gradual involvement by presenting Europe as already entering the conflict step by step, rather than remaining outside it. This escalation logic also changes the meaning of involvement. Orbán expands what counts as participation in war by including forms of indirect support:

If you supply weapons, if you provide the satellite information for military action, if you train the soldiers of one of the belligerents, if you finance the entire state apparatus of one of the belligerents and impose sanctions on the other, then, no matter what you say, you are at war – indirectly for the time being”(Orbán, 2023a).

Here, the boundary between participation and non-participation is shifted. Activities that may otherwise be understood as support for Ukraine are framed as forms of involvement in the war itself. This allows the European Union to be constructed as already participating in the conflict, even if this participation remains indirect. Hungary is then positioned differently, as a state that is exposed to the consequences of war but refuses to contribute to its escalation. This reinforces the distinction between being affected by the war and being responsible for deepening it.

Through this redefinition, the EU becomes part of the threat construction. The danger is no longer linked only to Russia’s actions or to the existence of the war itself, but also to the way the conflict is handled politically by European actors. EU decisions are presented as increasing the likelihood of deeper involvement, making the Union part of the escalation process. This connects to Buzan’s (2016, pp. 107–108) argument that military threats are not defined only by material conditions, but also by political interpretation. In Orbán’s rhetoric, the issue is therefore not simply whether Europe is formally at war, but whether its actions are moving it closer to such a condition. The scale of the threat is then expanded further as Orbán argue that “the threat is immediate” (Orbán, 2025a) and even that “the threat of world war is not a literary exaggeration” (Orbán, 2023c). These statements raise the stakes significantly. The war is no longer framed only as a regional conflict or even as a European concern, but as something that could develop into a global confrontation. This amplifies the urgency of the argument and reinforces the idea that the situation must be treated with caution.

This broader framing also creates a sense of ongoing crisis and preparedness. If the threat is both immediate and expanding, then it cannot be understood as temporary or limited. Instead,

it requires constant attention and vigilance. Orbán's rhetoric thus presents the war as part of a continuous state of insecurity rather than a contained event. This reflects what Szalai (2024) describes as a crisis narrative, where politics is framed as a continuous state of emergency and threats are presented as urgent and persistent. It also connects to Slaven's (2021) understanding of securitization as a dynamic process. In this sense, the expansion of the threat to a global level reinforces and intensifies the earlier framing of immediacy and permanence.

At the same time, this construction highlights an important tension in relation to previous research. Moody (2025) argues that conflicts such as the war in Ukraine often require coordinated and multilateral responses, which can strengthen cooperation between states and contribute to greater internal unity. Similarly, Buzan (2016, pp. 107–108) notes that external military threats may reinforce cohesion, as political actors frame them in ways that mobilize collective support. In Orbán's rhetoric, however, this dynamic is reversed. Rather than strengthening alignment with the European Union, the war is used to reinforce division. Instead of presenting the EU as a necessary partner in managing the threat, it is incorporated into the threat itself. Its actions are framed as contributing to escalation, thereby transforming what could be a source of unity into a source of conflict. This allows the distinction between Hungary and Brussels to remain central, even in a context where shared responses might otherwise be expected.

Taken together, these elements show how the military threat is constructed through proximity, escalation, and political interpretation. Hungary's geographical position makes the war appear immediate and difficult to ignore, while EU actions are presented as moving Europe closer to direct involvement. The threat is therefore not only tied to external developments, but is actively constructed through the interpretation of political actions, where the European Union becomes part of the process that is understood to increase the risk of escalation.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how the European Union is constructed in Viktor Orbán's political speeches and interviews through the interaction between populism and securitization. The analysis shows that the EU is represented not only as a political institution, but as a broader actor associated with developments that are framed as threatening to Hungary's identity, sovereignty, economy, and security. At the same time, the EU is not always constructed as a direct or explicit threat in itself. In many cases, Orbán instead presents the EU as enabling, encouraging, or intensifying processes that are described as dangerous, such as migration, war involvement, or economic pressure. The EU thus becomes a threat not only through what it is, but through what it allows, supports, or imposes.

A central finding is that the EU is consistently positioned in relation to Hungary through a strong oppositional logic. Across the material, Orbán repeatedly constructs contrasts between Hungary and Brussels, between national interests and supranational decisions, and between "the people" and distant elites. This aligns with populist theory, particularly the way Mudde and Kaltwasser understand populism as structured around a moral distinction between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." In Orbán's rhetoric, Brussels is frequently placed in the latter category, as an actor that does not represent the will, interests, or security of ordinary people. At the same time, Hungary is presented as the actor that resists these pressures and seeks to defend its own path.

However, this oppositional structure is not static. One important pattern throughout the analysis is Orbán's strategic and flexible use of "we" and "they." At times, "we" refers to Hungary alone; at other times, it refers to Europe more broadly, or to a morally defined community of those who supposedly see the situation correctly. Similarly, the EU can appear both as something Hungary is part of and as something fundamentally external to Hungarian interests. This flexibility is politically useful because it allows Orbán to shift between inclusion and distance depending on what strengthens the argument. In this sense, "we" and "they" are not fixed categories, but rhetorical tools used to construct legitimacy, assign responsibility, and intensify threat perceptions.

The analysis also demonstrates that an East-West distinction runs through several of the themes examined. In the discussion of war, proximity to Ukraine is used to argue that Central and Eastern Europe are more exposed to danger than Western Europe, and therefore understand the

threat more clearly. In relation to identity and values, Hungary and, more broadly, Eastern Europe are positioned as culturally distinct from a liberal Western Europe associated with Brussels. In the economic dimension, Orbán similarly suggests that decisions taken at the EU level affect member states unevenly, with countries like Hungary facing more direct and serious consequences. Across these themes, Western Europe is often discursively linked to the EU itself, while Eastern Europe is positioned as more vulnerable, more realistic, and more attentive to national interests. This East-West divide is therefore not incidental, but a recurring structure in Orbán's rhetoric.

In relation to securitization, the findings show that Orbán constructs threats across several of Buzan's sectors. The societal and political dimensions are visible in how migration, gender, and liberal values are framed as threatening to Hungarian identity, culture, and national self-determination. The economic dimension is visible in how sanctions, war-related spending, and EU funding are described as undermining Hungary's economic stability and autonomy. The military dimension appears in how the war in Ukraine is presented as an immediate and escalating danger, especially because of Hungary's geographical proximity and the risk of being drawn into wider conflict. Taken together, these constructions show that Orbán's rhetoric is not limited to one isolated threat, but instead builds a broader picture in which multiple developments are linked to a shared narrative of vulnerability and external pressure.

At the same time, the study shows that these threat constructions are strengthened through populist strategies. Threats are not only identified; they are intensified through moral binaries, simplified choices, crisis language, and recurring distinctions between Hungary and external actors. This supports Kurylo's (2022) argument that populism can function as a form of securitization, in which the identity of "the people" is shaped through the identification of threats. It also supports Slaven's emphasis on securitization as a dynamic and contested process, where political actors contribute to escalating threat narratives rather than simply reacting to objective dangers. In Orbán's rhetoric, populism and securitization therefore do not operate separately. They reinforce one another. Populist divisions make threats easier to personalize and politicize, while securitizing language gives urgency and weight to these claims. At the same time, the relationship also works in the opposite direction: securitized narratives can themselves politicize issues, while the construction of urgency and crisis becomes a key tool through which populist actors mobilize support and justify political decisions.

Moreover, the findings also suggest a more nuanced relationship between these logics. In the context of the war in Ukraine, previous research such as Moody (2025) has suggested that multilateral crises may challenge populist narratives that rely on hostility towards supranational actors, since cooperation can become necessary. Orbán's rhetoric does not remove this tension, but works around it. Rather than denying the seriousness of the war, he redefines the EU itself as part of the problem. In this way, supranational coordination is not framed as necessary protection, but as a source of greater danger. This suggests that populist securitization may remain effective even in contexts where collective action might otherwise appear unavoidable, provided that supranational institutions can be incorporated into the threat construction itself.

Overall, the study contributes to previous research by showing more clearly how populism and securitization interact in the construction of the EU within political discourse. Rather than treating these frameworks separately, the analysis demonstrates how Orbán uses populist rhetoric to define who belongs to "the people," while simultaneously securitizing political, economic, and military developments linked to the EU. The case of Hungary and the EU is therefore not only relevant in itself, but also illustrates more broadly how political actors, institutions, and international organisations can be transformed into objects of distrust, opposition, and threat through the combined use of populist and securitizing strategies.

Future research could develop this analysis in several ways. One possible direction would be to compare Orbán's rhetoric with that of other European leaders in order to examine whether similar constructions of the EU appear across different national contexts. Another would be to study how these threat constructions change over time, particularly across electoral cycles or major geopolitical events, and how shifts in political leadership or government priorities may influence the way the EU and other actors are constructed in political discourse. It would also be valuable to examine how these discourses are received by audiences, and whether the strategic use of "we" and "they" shapes public understandings of the EU. Finally, further research could explore whether the interaction between populism and securitization observed here is especially strong in relation to the EU, or whether similar patterns emerge in rhetoric directed at other international actors and institutions.

7. References

7.1 Literature

Agoston, G. (2024). Playing on distance: a relational rhetorical analysis of Viktor Orbán's Euroscepticism. *East European Politics*, 40(2), 256–276.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2023.2261129>

Bos, E. (2023). Functional deficiencies of democracy and instrumentalization of democratic procedures in Hungary. In E. Bos & A. Lorenz (Eds.), *Politics and society in Hungary* (pp. 21–50). Springer.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-39826-2_2

Bryman, A. (2018). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Buzan, B. (2016). *People, states and fear*. ECPR Press.

Canveren, Ö., & Akgül Durakçay, F. (2017). The analysis of the Hungarian government's discourse towards the migrant crisis: A combination of securitization and euroscepticism. *Yönetim ve Ekonomi: Celal Bayar Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 24(3), 857–876.

<https://doi.org/10.18657/yonveek.307339>

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.

Csehi, R., & Zgut, E. (2021). We won't let Brussels dictate us: Eurosceptic populism in Hungary and Poland. *European Politics and Society*, 22(1), 53–68.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1717064>

Danaj, A., Lazányi, K., & Bilan, S. (2018). Euroscepticism and populism in Hungary: The analysis of the prime minister's discourse. *Journal of International Studies*, 11(1), 240–251.

<https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-8330.2018/11-1/18>

Enyedi, Z. (2020). Right-wing authoritarian innovations in Central and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics*, 36(3), 363–377.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787162>

Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Fairclough, N., Mulderrig, J., & Wodak, R. (2011). Critical discourse analysis. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (2nd ed., pp. 357–378). Sage.

Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (1997). *The new language of qualitative method*. Oxford University Press.

- Hegedűs, D. (2023). *Hungary's self-peripheralization in the European Union: Background and prospects*. In E. Bos & A. Lorenz (Eds.), *Politics and society in Hungary* (pp. 173–188). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-39826-2_11
- Hettyey, A. (2021). The Europeanization of Hungarian foreign policy and the Hungarization of European foreign policy, 2010–18. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29(1), 125–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1828076>
- Kurylo, B. (2022). The discourse and aesthetics of populism as securitisation style. *International Relations*, 36(1), 127–147.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211059410>
- Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.
- Lamour, C. (2022). A radical-right populist definition of cross-national regionalism in Europe: Shaping power geometries at the regional scale beyond state borders. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 46(1), 8–25.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.13058>
- Lorenz, A., & Bos, E. (2023). (De-)democratization, party competition and structural constraints in Hungary. In E. Bos & A. Lorenz (Eds.), *Politics and society in Hungary* (pp. 1–20). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-39826-2_1
- Malmén, J. (2026, April 12). Orbán erkänner sig besegrad efter 16 år vid makten i Ungern: ”Smärtsamt”. *Omni*. <https://omni.se/orban-tydligt-vi-har-forlorat/a/aJO4eA>
- Medin, J. (2019). *Orbánistan: Rädsla och avsky i det illiberala Ungern*. Verbal Förlag.
- Moody, M. (2025). *Under threat, overwhelmed: How national security crises impact support for right-wing populism* [Conference paper]. BYU Mary Lou Fulton Mentored Research Conference 2025.
- Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What is populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Özer, S., Güneş Gülal, A. G., & Polat, Y. K. (2023). The rule of law in the grip of populist authoritarianism: Hungary and Poland. *Politics & Policy*, 51(5), 936–959.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12557>
- Slaven, M. (2021). Populism and securitization: The corrosion of elite security authority in a US–Mexico border state. *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6(4), ogab005.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab005>
- Szalai, A. (2024). Bordering and crisis narratives to illiberal ends: The politics of reassurance in Viktor Orbán's Hungary. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 23(3), 391–415.

<https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.23066.sza>

Szalai, A., & Göbl, G. (2015). *Securitizing migration in contemporary Hungary* (CEU Center for EU Enlargement Studies Working Paper No. 1/2015). Central European University. <https://cens.ceu.edu/sites/cens.ceu.edu/files/attachment/event/573/szalai-goblmigrationpaper.final.pdf>

Szalay, A., & Rakovics, Z. (2025). Tuned to fear: Analyzing Viktor Orbán's state of the nation addresses, focusing on the enemy images identified in the National Consultation. *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 11(1), 165–184. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v11i1.1226>

Sükösd, M. (2022). Victorious victimization: Orbán the orator—Deep securitization and state populism in Hungary's propaganda state. In A. Oswald, M. Johann, & C. Obermaier (Eds.), *Populist rhetorics: Case studies and a minimalist definition* (pp. 165–185). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87351-6_7

Vetenskapsrådet. (2024). *God forskningssed*. Vetenskapsrådet

Visnovitz, P., & Jenne, E. K. (2021). Populist argumentation in foreign policy: The case of Hungary under Viktor Orbán, 2010–2020. *Comparative European Politics*, 19(6), 683–702. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00256-3>

Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. Sage.

7.2 Speeches and Interviews

Orbán, V. (2022a, July 29). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme Good morning, Hungary! [Speech transcript]. About Hungary. <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-6347f5e6d59bf>

Orbán, V. (2022b, May 16). Speech given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after swearing his prime ministerial oath [Speech transcript]. About Hungary. <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-given-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-after-swearing-his-prime-ministerial-oath>

Orbán, V. (2022c, September 30). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme Good morning, Hungary! [Speech transcript]. About Hungary. <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-6347f919dba61>

Orbán, V. (2022d, October 26). Interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in the biweekly magazine Budapesti Zeitung [Interview transcript]. About Hungary. <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/interview-with-prime-minister-viktor-orban-in-the-biweekly-magazine-budapesti-zeitung>

Orbán, V. (2023a, February 18). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" address [Speech transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-63f319616e193>

Orbán, V. (2023b, May 5). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme Good morning, Hungary! [Speech transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-64590cf5cd659>

Orbán, V. (2023c, March 31). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme Good morning, Hungary! [Speech transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-642a98cebdb74>

Orbán, V. (2023d, October 24). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's commemoration speech on the 67th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight [Speech transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-commemoration-speech-on-the-67th-anniversary-of-the-1956-revolution-and-freedom-fight>

Orbán, V. (2024a, February 17). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" address [Speech transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-65d1111228cc6>

Orbán, V. (2024b, March 22). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme Good morning, Hungary! [Speech transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-66013b3c4ebdd>

Orbán, V. (2024c, June 10). Exclusive interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Hungarian public TV channel M1 [Interview transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/exclusive-interview-with-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-hungarian-public-tv-channel-m1>

Orbán, V. (2024d, July 1). Interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on M1 public television [Interview transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/interview-with-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-m1-public-television>

Orbán, V. (2025a, September 12). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme Good morning, Hungary! [Speech transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-68db8c5df2abb>

Orbán, V. (2025b, October 16). Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 23rd session of the Hungarian Standing Conference (MÁÉRT) [Speech transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-23rd-session-of-the-hungarian-standing-conference-maert>

Orbán, V. (2025c, October 27). Exclusive interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Hungarian television [Interview transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/exclusive-interview-with-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-hungarian-television>

Orbán, V. (2025d, December 5). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme Good morning, Hungary! [Speech transcript]. About Hungary.

<https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-695f9ed08d5a6>

8. Appendix

8.1 Coding scheme

Code/analytical theme	Definition	Example	Source
Antagonism/populism	Statements that construct a conflict between “the people” and opposing actors such as elites, institutions, or political opponents.	Never before has the distance between Brussels politics and the interests and will of ordinary Europeans been this large.	(Orbán, 2024a)
War and peace	Statements related to war, peace, security, or international conflict.	So the danger of Europe stepping in, getting involved, stumbling, getting lost, and marching into a war that will then bring with it ever deeper involvement, is now at its highest since the outbreak of the war.	(Orbán, 2025b)
Economy and energy policy	Statements concerning economic conditions, energy policy, or material living standards.	Perhaps everyone in Hungary already knows that there will be tragic economic consequences if gas and oil don’t come to Hungary from Russia.	(Orbán, 2025d)
Sovereignty	Statements emphasizing national self-determination and resistance to external influence.	We Hungarians are freedom-loving people, and we don’t like outsiders telling us how to live. The fight against external interference in our internal affairs is a leitmotif throughout Hungarian history.	(Orbán, 2022d)
Identity/migration/gender	Statements related to national identity, migration, cultural values, or gender and family.	Accept that you were born Hungarian, born Christian, born a woman or a man. Accept that you are the child of your father and mother, the spouse of your husband or wife, the parent of your daughter or son.	(Orbán, 2023d)
The future of the EU	Statements about the development, direction, or role of the European Union.	When we look ahead to the next decade, we see Hungary in the European Union, determined to fight for its rights and to seek allies to renew the Union.	(Orbán, 2022d)