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**Orbán's three perspectives on the
Russian-Ukrainian War**
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Tbilisi 2023

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Executive Summary

Hungary stands out from other Eastern and Central European states in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian War. While Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic have provided plenty of political and military support to Ukraine and significantly reduced economic ties with Russia, Hungary's Fidesz-led government has tried to maintain trade and diplomacy with Moscow while showing only tepid solidarity with Ukraine. This article explains the reasons behind Hungary's particular position by analyzing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's discourse.

By categorizing Orbán's discourse into local, national and global geographical scales, the article identifies three main factors shaping the Hungarian response to the war:

1. The distrust between Hungary and Ukraine derives from the several years of politicization of the Hungarian transborder community in Ukraine's westernmost region of Transcarpathia.
2. Hungary's reliance on the Russian oil and gas led to Orbán's decision to stick with Russia as an economic partner. Simultaneously, the April 2022 election period encouraged his populist narrative, prioritising Hungary's economic needs over solidarity with Ukraine.
3. Orbán's long-existing geopolitical vision of a multipolar world led him to view the Russian-Ukrainian War as a materialization of the great power rivalry between the US and Russia, where each seeks to expand its zone of influence. This geopolitical view then justifies Hungary's neutral role. Orbán reframes Hungary's neutrality in the discourse of peace versus war, whereby Hungary represents an "island of peace" and himself – a promoter of peace. At the same time, the great powers and their local proxies are only interested in continuing the war.

Introduction

When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Hungary was in the midst of an electoral campaign, with elections scheduled for 3 April. The primary challenger of Viktor Orbán, Péter Márki-Zay, promptly reacted to the news of the invasion. He recalled Hungary's own historical experience of the anti-communist revolution crushed by the Soviet army: "In 1956, we learnt what it's like when Russia invades an independent country. Now the same thing is happening in front of our eyes: Vladimir Putin's Russia has attacked Ukraine" (Cseke 2022). In contrast, the sense of solidarity with Ukraine was largely absent in the discourse of government officials, including Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. They did express support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and condemn Russia's invasion, but overall, the government's communication remained cool and reserved. Orbán emphasized the need for "strategic calm" and prioritized staying out of the war.

This was unusual. Previously, Orbán constantly used the Hungarian experience of 1956 to frame his foreign policy challenges. Now that Ukraine faced a similar military threat from Moscow, it seems surprising that the Hungarian Prime Minister refrained from using this historical analogy to guide Hungary's policy toward the war. Orbán's stance is further puzzling because it differs from the solidarity shown to Ukraine by other

European countries, especially three other members of the Visegrad Group – Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic.¹

Furthermore, while joining the EU sanctions on Russia, Hungary has simultaneously made several goodwill gestures at Russia. The government removed Russian Patriarch Kirill from the list of sanctioned individuals, agreed to pay Gazprom in roubles, postponed the ratification of the Finnish and Swedish membership into NATO, and refused to participate in joint EU financial aid to Ukraine or to allow arms transit to Ukraine through its territory. These all show that Orbán’s government tries to maintain good relations with Russia. As Orbán himself admitted in February, a few weeks before the invasion, “[o]ne has to do a lot of work to have good relations with Russia. I’ve put a lot of work into this: thirteen years of work. And I see that it’s having an effect” (Orbán 2022a). It seems that the shock of the invasion at the end of February had little impact on Orbán’s Russian policy. For example, while many European countries expelled Russian diplomats for their alleged work as spies, the Russian diplomatic corps in Budapest expanded from 46 to 56 in the past year (Csonka 2022).

This paper aims to explain the Hungarian government’s position towards the Russian-Ukrainian War by outlining and categorizing geopolitical assumptions shaping the Hungarian discourse. The article finds that despite Hungary’s contrasting position with the European mainstream, it is consistent with Orbán’s previous decade-long geopolitical discourse and policy positions.

This article analyzes the Orbán government’s position by categorizing the Hungarian discourse into three geographical scales: local, national and global. Each scale presents a particular topic or a policy perspective that shapes the Hungarian government’s discourse.

The local scale refers to the Ukrainian region bordering Hungary, Transcarpathia, and the topic of local Hungarians in the relations between Hungary and Ukraine. The national scale refers to the government’s inward-looking position and prioritization of the economy and, by extension, trade and energy relations with Russia. Finally, the global scale refers to Orbán’s geopolitical narrative, which broadly frames Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a rivalry with the US. This narrative explains the Russian military aggression as a reaction to the NATO expansion by which Moscow protects its security interests rather than an unprovoked war of territorial expansion and imperialism.

The article represents a discourse-analytical study of Viktor Orbán’s geopolitical reasoning. The methodological approach adopts a critical geopolitical perspective which aims to unpack the geographic and political assumptions behind governmental policies and discursive practices. In addition to textual analysis of Orbán’s speeches during the first several months of the Russian-Ukrainian War, the paper also relies on newspaper articles and news stories on key Hungarian decisions and political developments regarding the war.

1. The local scale: Transcarpathia

¹ In November, the meeting of the parliament speakers of the Visegrad Four was postponed after the Czech, Slovak and Polish officials refused to meet their Hungarian colleague due to his views and his government’s policy regarding the Russian-Ukrainian War (Fábián 2022).

Transcarpathia (Zakarpattia) is Ukraine's border region with Hungary. The region has a geopolitically complicated history. It belonged to Hungary and, by extension, the Habsburg Empire, until the end of WWI. The 1920 Trianon Treaty, imposed by the Great War's victors on Hungary, transferred the region to the newly established Czechoslovakia. Hungary regained control over Transcarpathia during WWII with the help of its ally, Nazi Germany. Still, the Red Army had occupied the region at the war's end. Finally, the Soviets forced Czechoslovakia to cede the territory to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and, therefore, to the USSR. These geopolitical, violent events significantly altered the region's population makeup, but to this day, it remains perhaps the most ethnically diverse region of Ukraine.

According to the last official census, conducted in 2001, approximately 150,000 residents of Transcarpathia identify as Hungarian; however, due to continuous out-migration even before the current war, the number most likely has substantially decreased to about 130,000 (Tátrai et al. 2018). Still, the region has played an important role in the Hungarian state's regional and foreign policy.

Since the change of the socialist regime, Hungary has pursued a policy of integrating ethnic Hungarians beyond the border into Hungary's cultural, economic and political space. According to the guiding documents of the policy, which in Hungarian is called *nemzetpolitika* (nation-politics), the goal is to protect Hungarians beyond the border from neighbouring states' nationalizing programs and sustain Hungarian culture and language within these transborder communities. Accordingly, the Fidesz government, in power since 2010, has granted Hungarian citizenship and voting rights to the ethnic Hungarian residents of Ukraine and other neighbouring countries. Moreover, over the past decade, the government has provided at least 115 million euros to Transcarpathia's ethnic Hungarian civic society groups, media, cultural and educational institutions, the business sector and even political parties (Yehoshyna 2021). The funds create a political patronage network which advances not just Hungary's nationalist goals but, more narrowly, Fidesz's political influence. As a result, Viktor Orbán's party received more than 90% of the votes cast by ethnic Hungarian dual citizens of neighbouring countries in every election since the government legally established this voting practice.

Ukraine prohibits its citizens from acquiring a second passport; hence, Hungary's extension of citizenship to ethnic kin in Ukraine contradicts Ukrainian law. The issue of dual citizenship exemplifies the clash of two countries' nationalizing programs in the community of the Transcarpathian Hungarians. Hungary's *nemzetpolitika* aims to unify Hungarians across borders into a single political community. In contrast, since gaining independence, particularly since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Donbas War in 2014, the Ukrainian state has aimed to strengthen the single Ukrainian national idea (Polese 2011; Kulyk 2016; Arel 2018). Although Ukraine has been mainly concerned with Russian-inspired secessionism and territorial issues in recent years, Kyiv has also shown unease about the ethnic Hungarian community. For example, in 2020, Ukraine's security services raided a leading Hungarian civil society organization in response to the latter's alleged promotion and dissemination of material violating Ukraine's territorial sovereignty (Wesolowsky 2020).

Still, the clash of Hungarian and Ukrainian nationalisms mainly manifests in cultural and educational sectors but has also spilled over into more geopolitical areas. For example, in 2017, Ukraine adopted an education law constraining the teaching in minority languages in public schools from the fifth grade (Tulup 2017). The law primarily targeted the country's Russian-speaking regions. It represented a nation-building measure in the context of the geopolitical crisis that started in 2014 to promote the knowledge of Ukrainian. The education law, together with the subsequent 2019 language law, which covered broader aspects of public life beyond

education, aimed to integrate the Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine into the society and erase the linguistic divide between regions (Kudriavtseva 2018). However, the education law also affected the Hungarian-language schools in Transcarpathia. In response, the Hungarian government threatened to block Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration process (Panyi 2020). Hungary's Foreign Minister even went as far as accusing Ukraine of "stabb[ing] Hungary in the back" (Wesolowsky 2017).

Since the start of the invasion in February 2022, Orbán declared that due to the war, his government would not press Ukraine on "the way the Ukrainians have treated the Hungarians in Transcarpathia" (Szalma Baksi 2022). Yet, the distrust between Budapest and Kyiv has continued, and the issue of Transcarpathian Hungarians has remained the central cause for the interstate tensions.

Following the start of the invasion, the Hungarian government instantly set up an aid program for the refugees fleeing Ukraine. Still, as the program's title – Bridge for Transcarpathia – suggests, the Hungarian authorities perceived the threats to Ukraine narrowly as a local/regional problem of the safety of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia. According to the government spokesperson, "Hungary wants to help Transcarpathia and the Hungarians living there" through this aid program (F. Nagy 2022). Furthermore, Orbán and government officials constantly highlighted that while the entire Ukraine was under heavy shelling and bombardment, Transcarpathia remained outside "a theatre of operations" (Orbán 2022d) and it was essential to keep Transcarpathia out of it and avoid civilians casualties in the region (Szalma Baksi 2022).

The government also decided against allowing the transportation of military aid to Ukraine through Hungary. One of the main reasons for the government officials was the safety of Transcarpathia. While it was unlikely that Russia would target these logistical operations inside the Hungarian territory, the military aid could become Russia's target after crossing the Ukraine border and, therefore, would pose a threat to the Hungarians in Transcarpathia (Fódi 2022). In addition, Orbán speculated that the weapons might be used "against Hungarian people" (Orbán 2022b). Miklós Soltész, the State Secretary for Minority Affairs, who also oversaw the Bridge for Transcarpathia program, expressed a similar opinion: "anyone who declares that we must take [a more] active part commits a huge crime against Transcarpathian Hungarians" (Government of Hungary 2022a).

So far, neither Orbán nor Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó has visited Kyiv since the start of the war in contrast to other European leaders, especially those from Ukraine's neighbouring countries.² The only time Minister Szijjártó travelled to Ukraine was in the early days of the invasion, when he met the Governor of Transcarpathia in Chop, a small Ukrainian town on the border with Hungary. The visit further highlights the regional prism through which the Hungarian government views the war.

The issue of the Hungarian ethnic minority in Transcarpathia also shapes the views of the broader public in Hungary. An independent public opinion survey found that almost half of the Hungarians believe that the Ukrainian nationalists threaten ethnic kin in Ukraine. Furthermore, more than a third of the Hungarian respondents (37%) agreed that Ukraine committed genocide against the Russian minority (Krekó and Molnár 2022). The finding shows that the government-disseminated trope of the transborder Hungarians under threat

² President Katalin Novák did travel to Kyiv and met Ukraine's Zelensky but only at the end of November, nine months into the war.

has made the Hungarian public more susceptible to accepting conspiracist narratives with which Russia justifies invasion.

2. National scale: Economy

Hungary's post-socialist development model relies on attracting foreign investment to stimulate export industries. Its geographic location in Europe's Eastern periphery created a particular advantage in offering cheap labour to German and other Western European companies but also created a dependency on Western money (FDI, EU structural funds, remittances) (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Simultaneously, to power the industrial economy, Hungary required uninterrupted energy import, which led the country to dependency on Russian gas, oil, and atomic energy. Hungary gets most of its gas and oil from Russia, although the share of Russian oil imports has decreased in the past decade. Still, the Fidesz government have not made any effort to reduce dependence on Russian energy and diversify its sources, unlike, for example, Poland or the Baltic states. This economic background provides the context to understand Orbán's relations with Russia and his reluctance to take a robust anti-Russian stance since the beginning of the invasion.

While most European countries limited their trade with Russia due to the war, the Hungarian government has strengthened links with Russia. From the outset, the government intended to maintain strong trade with Russia. Despite Russia's flagrant violation of a neighbouring country's sovereignty, Orbán saw "no good argument for ending our energy cooperation with Russia" (Orbán 2022c). Since the start of the invasion, Hungary's Foreign Minister Szijjártó travelled to Russia three times. In contrast, he has not spoken to his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, since February 24 (Interfax 2022). Instead, Szijjártó has been concentrating on persuading Russia to deliver more gas to Hungary even if Russia cuts off gas to Europe (Szabó and Panyi 2022). Meanwhile, Orbán expects to continue the bilateral relations in the future because "after the war, Russia will continue to exist. And after the war, Hungary and the EU will have interests" (Orbán 2022c).

Orbán defined these interests in strictly economic terms. When discussing dangers deriving from the war in early March, the Prime Minister argued that sanctioning Russian banks that operate in Hungary (e.g. Sberbank) would hurt the Hungarian economy; sanctions on Russia, in general, would increase energy prices in Europe; and the rise of energy prices would push inflation higher and increase other costs for ordinary citizens. Overall, Orbán identified the main medium-term danger of the war as lower economic performance (Orbán 2022d). Furthermore, Orbán compared sanctions on Russian energy to "dropping a nuclear bomb on the Hungarian economy" (Szalma Baksi 2022).

Thus, Orbán prioritized the economy at the expense of solidarity with Ukraine and framed this position in populist terms, insisting that the Hungarian state's primary goal was to protect the Hungarian people's well-being:

[I]t's not sensible to propose steps which would result in harming ourselves, to initiate sanctions which would end up with the cost of the war being paid by us Hungarians. [W]e need to find [a decision] that best serves Hungarian interests because Hungary's interests come first, Hungary before else (Orbán 2022b).

If we were to end energy cooperation with Russia, the energy bills would triple in a month. The price of the war should not be paid by Hungarian families (Orbán 2022c).

Crucially, such framing emerged during the electoral campaign. The general election was set for 3 April 2022. The government quickly incorporated the war as an election topic in two main ways. First, Fidesz labelled the opposition as warmongers who would drag Hungary into war by sending Hungarian soldiers to Ukraine (Orbán 2022c; 2022d). This was untrue and based on speculative reinterpretations of the opposition politicians' expressions of solidarity with Ukraine. Second, inflation had been rising for months, even before the full-scale war. And yet, the Fidesz campaign introduced a new term – “war inflation” [*háborús infláció*] – to shift the responsibility away from the government's previous economic policies and blame inflation on the war, and by extension, on the opposition, who, according to the Fidesz propaganda, would bring the war to Hungary. In this way, the election had a crucial effect on the government's position on the Russia-Ukraine War. The campaign structured the discursive field and encouraged Fidesz to adopt a “Hungary First!” approach as a winning electoral strategy and reframe the opposition's solidarity with Ukraine as harmful to Hungary. In the Fidesz discourse, the main casualty of the war was not Ukraine but the Hungarian economy and the Hungarians. “We're suffering, and we're suffering most – from both the war and the sanctions,” insisted Orbán already in March (Orbán 2022d).

As the war continues, the replacement of the Ukrainian victimhood with the Hungarian becomes clearer. In the domestic political discourse, war as the primary danger has almost gone, and sanctions on Russia have become the main threat. In the evolving geopolitical storyline, the problem is no longer the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the possibility of war's geographical expansion but rising grocery and utility costs, which harm ordinary Hungarians. This new narrative emerged over the summer as the government has started what it calls a “national consultation”, a non-binding referendum regularly used by the Fidesz government to sway public opinion towards a particular policy and justify the government's already formed position. The latest ‘national consultation’ targets what the government terms the “Brussels sanctions” (*brüsszeli szankciók*), i.e. the EU's war-related sanctions on Russia, which were voted by all member states, including Hungary. The government's political campaign describes the sanctions against Russia as “flawed”, and “introduced [by] Brussels... without consulting the people”. The government further asserts without evidence that the sanctions do not work towards ending the war and only “make the lives of Europeans, including Hungarians, more difficult” (Government of Hungary 2022b).

The anti-sanctions campaign also includes TV and social media advertisements and street billboards, with an image of a bomb dropping and the word “sanctions” (*szankciók*) written on it. The campaign slogan informs viewers that “the Brussels sanctions are ruining us” (*a brüsszeli szankciók tönkretesznek minket*). The bomb in question is no longer the Russian one hitting Ukrainian cities. Russia, Ukraine and the war no longer feature in the storyline. Instead, the discourse is all about sanctions, Brussels and Hungary. The term “war inflation” has been replaced by a new term, “sanctions inflation” (*szankciós infláció*). Solidarity with Ukraine is no longer relevant in the new storyline; what matters is to protect Hungary from harmful sanctions. This narrative serves to justify the Hungarian government's narrow economy-centric position and disregard of the Ukrainian interest to fight off the Russian invasion with all possible means, including international sanctions on Russia.

3. Global scale: The great power rivalry

On 8 November 2022, Orbán invited Professor John Mearsheimer to his office in Budapest and spent three hours discussing international politics (Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister 2022; Chotiner 2022). It was

symbolic that the Prime Minister hosted the famous International Relations scholar. Mearsheimer gained notoriety in recent months for his particular view of the Russia-Ukraine War and its origins, which aligns with the official Russian narrative and puts much of the blame on the NATO expansion. Mearsheimer explains Russia's militarism as a reaction to protect its security interests (Mearsheimer 2022). He has held this view for almost a decade (Mearsheimer 2014). It has become clear since the start of the full-scale war in February that Orbán shares a similar opinion of the geopolitical crisis and the war in Ukraine. The following quote succinctly distills Orbán's geopolitical narrative of the war:

How did the war come about? NATO has been expanding eastwards, and Russia has become less and less comfortable with that. The Russians made two demands: that Ukraine declare neutrality and that NATO would not admit Ukraine. These security guarantees weren't given to the Russians, so they decided to take them by force of arms. The Russians are redrawing the security map of the continent. Russia's security policy vision is that to feel safe, they must be surrounded by a neutral zone. Hitherto they've seen Ukraine as an intermediate zone and, having failed to make it neutral by diplomatic means, they now want to make it neutral by military force (Orbán 2022c).

Orbán's long-time ally since his early Fidesz days and the Speaker of Parliament, László Kövér, phrased the narrative even more bluntly:

What if the empire-building policy is, in fact, being pursued from West to East & Ukraine is another prospective province of the Euro-Atlantic Empire? [...] Russia has legitimate security requests (Rényi 2022).

This geopolitical narrative emphasizes the great power rivalry as the defining context of the war.³ This storyline almost entirely erases Ukraine as an active agent and its interests. Instead, Ukraine becomes merely a geostrategic space where great powers clash but also a buffer zone for Hungary. According to Orbán, "the essence of Hungarian tactical thinking is that the area between Russia and Hungary should be of adequate width and depth. Today, this area is called Ukraine" (Orbán 2022c).

In this geopolitical setting, Hungary has a special place as a small country "caught in the crossfire between major geopolitical players" (Orbán 2022c). Therefore, according to Orbán, Hungary should direct its effort towards avoiding getting dragged into war. The Prime Minister and other government officials refer to the strategy as "strategic calm" (Orbán 2022b; 2022d; Nagy N. 2022). "Hungary must stay out of this war!" became a political slogan as soon as the Russian invasion started in February (Orbán 2022b).

Despite Hungary's membership in NATO, a political-military alliance, which Russia openly considers hostile, Orbán still presents his country as a detached, impartial party with no interest in supporting either side. Weeks before the invasion, Orbán lauded Hungary's cooperation with Russia despite its membership in the EU and NATO and underscored the country's role as an "icebreaker [...] between East and West" (Orbán 2022a). More recently, for example, in a July speech, when comparing the different positions of Hungary and Poland, the Prime Minister described the Russian-Ukrainian War as "a war between two Slavic peoples, and as one which we want to stay out of" (Orbán 2022e). He reiterated a similar point during his October visit to Germany:

³ Among the Hungarian public, only a minority views the war in Ukraine as Russia's defensive action and a two-thirds majority classify it as Russian aggression. However, among the Fidesz supporters the Russian aggression narrative is less popular (shared only by 46%) than among the opposition voters (88%) (Czene 2022).

“Hungary will not get involved in any conflict, we will not supply weapons [...] to Ukraine, and Hungary will certainly be an island of peace – whatever happens in the upcoming period” (Orbán 2022f). Orbán even offered to the Ukrainian and Russian leaders to conduct peace negotiations in Budapest, further emphasising the government’s perception of Hungary as a neutral actor (BBC 2022; Than and Komuves 2022). The Orbán government’s active cooperation with Russia and lax control of Russian spying activities have led the NATO members to refrain from fully sharing sensitive intelligence information with Hungary (Panyi and Szabó 2022; Bogar 2022; Panyi 2022).

Hungary’s neutral position is hard to understand without considering Orbán’s global vision of the war and world politics which emphasizes the great power rivalry in which Ukraine is merely a battlefield and a minor actor rather than the primary victim of Russian aggressor. Since both great powers, USA and Russia, fight over the spheres of influence, Hungary’s neutral position is justified. Furthermore, such framing allows Orbán to portray the active supporters of Ukraine not as contributors to Ukraine’s legitimate cause of self-defence but as warmongers who benefit from war. In contrast, Hungary represents an “island of peace”.

As the war continues, a new narrative has gained ground in the Hungarian government’s discourse. The new dividing line is no longer between Russia, the aggressor, and Ukraine, the victim, but between the parties of war and peace. The war camp includes not just Russia but all those who support Ukraine’s fight against Russia with economic sanctions or arms deliveries. In doing so, they lengthen the war in Ukraine and economic misery in Hungary and Europe. On the other side, the peace camp includes those who want Ukraine to immediately negotiate a peace deal with Russia, even if it means making territorial and political concessions. This group contains Orbán himself and other mostly far-right and far-left European politicians, such as France’s Marine Le Pen or Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi, but no acting government leader of an EU country (although some have shown sympathy for Orbán’s views) (Mészáros 2022).

Initially, this narrative emerged as a domestic political discourse in the pre-election period to label the opposition as pro-war and present Fidesz as pro-peace. Later, the framing extended to reject international sanctions on Russia and weapon delivery to Ukraine as contradictory to the goal of making peace. Orbán even calls himself “the only prime minister today who speaks with the voice of peace [while] [a]ll the other European prime ministers speak in the voice of war” (Orbán 2022f).

What is left unsaid in his moralistic plea for peace is any moral judgement of Russia as an initiator and conductor of the same war that Orbán wants to end. Also missing in Orbán’s peace vision is the primary responsibility of Russia to de-escalate and withdraw its army from Ukraine as the easiest, quickest and just path towards peace. Instead, Orbán’s peace vision primarily mandates the US to engage diplomatically with Russia towards ending the war:

America is providing the weapons, the training and the information from space on where to target. [T]he Ukrainian-Russian war is open today because the Americans want it to be open. Therefore they’re the ones who can also bring it to an end. This is why the Americans must reach an agreement with the Russians; then, the war will be over (Orbán 2022g).

Russian responsibility for the flagrant violation of international law and the unspeakable war crimes committed in Ukraine is also left unsaid. Orbán’s peace process does not entail Russian accountability. Peace is stripped of any substance of morality and justice, and instead, as the previous section demonstrates, it is defined by economic interests. Fidesz has narrowed “a moral and humanitarian catastrophe” down to a “heating issue”

(Omolesky 2022). Thus, when Orbán speaks about peace, he means the right to unhindered cooperation with Russia; he means business as usual.

Conclusion

So far, Viktor Orbán has refrained from taking sides between Russia and Ukraine but not from the political struggle. The Hungarian Prime Minister has been promoting a particular viewpoint that he labels pro-peace and has tried to reframe the entire discursive structure around the war.

Orbán downplays the standard view that defines the war as a struggle between Russia and Ukraine. Instead, the Hungarian Prime Minister promotes an entirely different axis of struggle to explain the ongoing situation: war versus peace. The critical problem here is not about who wins the war but the struggle between those who want war and those who want peace. Hungary is in the peace camp, while Ukraine, Brussels, the US and Russia constitute the war party. This narrative has already shaped Hungarian public opinion: more than two-thirds of the Hungarians have equally negative views about Putin, Zelensky and Biden (Leitner 2022; About Hungary 2022).⁴ This is striking, but it is consistent with Orbán's narrative that all these leaders want war.

In this storyline, sanctions on Russia are not simply a part of the war-making but the most significant problem of the ongoing war. In Orbán's war narrative, Ukraine and Russia are no longer relevant. The victim in this story is no longer Ukraine which has been invaded by Russia but Hungary and ordinary Hungarians who struggle due to the sanctions on Russia. Orbán's populist narrative, once again, presents himself as a heroic, uncompromised defender of ordinary people against international elites. Yet, while 'fighting monsters' in Brussels or Transcarpathia, Hungary has gradually become a Russian client state. The outcome is not news; it has been years in the making. The difference is that the joint Western support for Ukraine and pushback against Russia brought Hungary's transformation into Russia's client state to light.

Acknowledgement Research for this publication has been conducted within the project "Peripheral Geopolitics" (PD 139188), supported by the National Research, Development, and Innovation Office (NKFIH) via Postdoctoral Excellence Programme.

⁴ The polls were conducted by the Századvég Foundation, which is closely allied with Fidesz. Therefore, the findings cannot be fully trusted. Still, the results are indicative of the discourse that the government tries to promote.

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