Europhile Public vs Eurosceptic Governing Elite in Hungary?

Hungary was perceived to be the “good student” among EU candidate countries in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, over the past decade, the relationship between the EU and Hungary has deteriorated. Hungary and specifically its Prime Minister since 2010, Viktor Orbán, are continually criticised for violating EU values and breaking rules of EU membership. On multiple occasions, Orbán and the Fidesz regime have implemented measures that question democracy, the rule of law, freedom of the press, academic freedom and minority rights among other things. The confrontational politics were accompanied by a very symbolic domestic communication about the EU based on populist anti-EU rhetoric; most recently, this dynamic led to Fidesz quitting the European People’s Party in March 2021.

Confrontations and negative domestic campaigns accompanied all stages of the EU’s multidimensional crisis starting in 2008 with the global financial meltdown that lead to the eurozone crisis, followed by the 2015 migrant crisis, the subsequent challenges of illiberalism in Hungary and Poland and the most recent adversities around the COVID-19 pandemic. Different facets of the crises brought about different obstacles to European integration: supranational vs national solutions, the politicisation of the question and whether identity politics were activated (Börzel and Risse, 2018) – all of which were well reflected in the Hungarian government’s anti-EU campaigns.

At the time of Hungary’s accession to the EU in 2004, there was a wide societal consensus about the benefits of EU membership for the country, while the general public discourse remained technical and pragmatic. Neverthe-

© The Author(s) 2021. Open Access: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Open Access funding provided by ZBW – Leibniz Information Centre for Economics.

* This article was written in the frame of the MEDIATIZED EU project funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant nr. 101004534).

Support for the European integration project in Hungary

The legitimacy and the stability of a political system partly comes from the general support for it. System theorists distinguish between specific support based on the perception of the performance of a system and diffuse support representing a reservoir of positive attitudes towards a system that make people accept non-favourable outputs (Easton, 1965; Harteveld et al., 2013; Ringlerova, 2015). Scholarly work supporting the European integration project mirrors this distinction as the main explanatory models elaborated so far revolve around utilitarian logic and explanations based on identification that could
be considered manifestations of specific and diffuse support respectively. In utilitarian logic, attitudes are defined by a rational evaluation of the EU’s advantages and disadvantages at the individual or at the country level (e.g. Gabel, 1998; Brinegar and Jolly, 2005; McLaren, 2006), or explanations focused on the perception of the functioning of the EU, i.e. how efficient one finds European institutions (e.g. Opp, 2005). Starting from the 2000s, identity-based explanations appear to challenge the utilitarian ones, with a focus on the impact of affective or emotional attachment to Europe based on perceptions of the European integration process (e.g. Duchesne and Frognier, 1995; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Opp, 2005; Bruter, 2005; Risse, 2010). According to studies focusing on concepts such as identity, belonging to a group or loyalty, identity-based explanations have an increased relevance among the general public due to a lower level of cognitive capacities, knowledge of or interest in the issue (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Nevertheless, the concept of European identity is very much contested in the academic community in terms of its content, plausibility or possible measurement (Favell, 2005).

Similarly, those arguing that the European integration process is too complicated or remote for ordinary people to understand or be interested in should remember that people might rely on familiar proxies in order to form an opinion. The domestic political arena and the perception of national political and economic performance is thus important as they create the party’s stance and messaging (e.g. Gabel, 1998; Anderson, 1998; Carrubba, 2001; Steenbergen et al., 2007; Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

Attitudes of the general public

During the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a wide societal consensus in Hungary about its accession to the EU. This period was characterised by a broad public discourse about the “return” of the country to Europe. However, general positive attitudes were paired with widespread ignorance. About one-third of the population had a positive perception of the EU’s objectives and activities, another one-third held a neutral opinion, and the remaining third was divided between those without an opinion (21%-34%) and those opposed to the EU (6%-11%). Support for the country’s EU membership reached its peak in 2002 and began a steady decline thereafter (Lengyel and Göncz, 2010). Nevertheless, after a successful referendum on the accession in 2003 with 84% in favour (albeit with a turnover of 46%), general support was still above the EU average at the time of the accession in 2004.

Data show that this decreasing tendency prevailed up until 2012, but since then the share of positive perceptions follows an increasing tendency besides a steady share of neutral opinions (38%-45%). Figure 1 shows that 46% of Hungarians had a positive image of the EU in 2004 as opposed to 24% in 2012; most recently, positive perceptions climbed up to 49% in 2020. Similarly, 14% had a negative perception of the EU in 2004. This sentiment peaked in 2012 when it went up to around one-third of the population and then decreased by 2020 to 12%. As we can see, while Hungary was among the most Eurosceptic countries in 2012, it was one of the most supportive ones by 2020.

Previous studies seem to confirm that the elections might have a positive impact on the perceptions of the EU, opinions generally being more positive in the year of elections – and this was the case in 2002 and 2006 (Lengyel and Göncz, 2010). However, with the change in government in 2010, this relation appears to be more blurred, perhaps due to the intense negative campaign against the EU after Fidesz took power in 2010. Despite the constant presence of negative discourses and campaigns from the governing elite since 2010, positive public perceptions of the EU increased. This raises several questions about the mechanisms behind public opinions. While it has been suggested that utilitarianism had a more individual character in Central and Eastern European countries (McLaren, 2006), utilitarian evaluations might have become even stronger after the financial and subsequent economic crises (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015), which may be the reason why the Hungarian
After the post-socialist transformation of Hungary, there was an elite consensus about the Euro-Atlantic orientation. A large consensus accompanied the whole negotiation process and accession of the country to the EU – only Fidesz, then the opposition party, expressed reservations. Nevertheless, the Hungarian Parliament voted unanimously for accession. The 2010 elections, however, mirrored citizens’ dissatisfaction with the political elite and led to significant changes in party structures and the national parliament. Fidesz won the elections while a right-wing extremist party Jobbik got into the parliament, and parties of the transition like the liberal SZDSZ and the conservative MDF disappeared. The change of the political and economic context resulted in a significant shift in public discourse about the EU as well as the EU increasingly appearing in a negative light based on symbolic messages.

Previous studies point to the fact that either due to their higher exposure to EU matters or their status, European political elites hold more positive opinions about the EU than the general public. Hungary was not an exception to these trends up until the change in governance in 2010. However, by 2014 the views of Hungarian parliamentarians changed to resemble those of the general public. In a political and economic context characterised by rising public Euroscepticism and an increasing gap between the public and their elites after the financial and economic crisis, Hungary showed very different tendencies, as seen in Figure 3a. The gap first increased and then strongly decreased by 2014 (Vogel and Göncz, 2018).

Although previous studies suggest that the polarisation of political elites in political issues should be higher than the polarisation of the general public (McAllister, 1991), in terms of variation of opinions about European integration matters, elites are generally less polarised than the general public, but Hungary was an exception in 2014 (Vogel and Göncz, 2018). Besides these general tendencies, preferences for supranational institutional design prevailed in 2007 and 2009, while Hungarian parliamentarians became rather state-centred by 2014 adopting a more intergovernmental idea of the European construct. Representatives of the dominant governing party, Fidesz, believed that European integration had gone too far, that the EU endangered Hungarian culture and generally trusted EU institutions less than the small oppositional groups of socialists and greens. In this respect, the dominant governing party differed sharply even from its almost invisible pro-EU Christian Democrat satellite. Nevertheless, even after the change in government, in 2014 the majority of parliamentar-
The fact that the negative symbolic governmental messages and campaigns in Hungary did not have a deteriorating effect on the general support for the European integration process since 2012 may eventually be due to utilitarian logic, which might have prevented a significant impact of symbolic messages and could represent the relevant frame of reference when evaluating the European integration process (McLaren, 2006; Lengyel and Göncz, 2010).

It seems that the Hungarian general public is engaged with the European project even if the government – supported by the same public – is very critical about it. Taking into account the important embeddedness of the subject in the domestic political arena, this might seem a contradiction.

Looking at trust in institutions, a possible measure of perception of the performance of a system and a measure of its legitimacy, one can see that trust in the EU is somewhat higher than trust in the national government in general; however, this is even more pronounced in Hungary, at least in the period leading to the change in government in 2010 (see Figure 4). This gap closed, however, in the period 2017-2018, when trust in the two institutions was even. Trust in government has rather stagnated around 47% since then, while trust in the EU increased somewhat. Looking at the period before 2010, it seems that trust in the government and trust in the EU follow similar tendencies, with trust a little higher around the elections to 10, where “0” means “unification has already gone too far” and “10” means “it should be pushed further”.

The wording of the questions measuring attachment is: INTUNE/ENEC: “People feel different degrees of attachment to their region, to their country and to Europe. What about you? Are you very attached, somewhat attached, not very attached or not at all attached”. EES: “For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion. You feel attached to Europe”. Answers: Yes, totally/ Yes, somewhat/ No, not really/ No, not at all. Values have been recoded so as to have the averages on a 0-3 scale, where 3 stands for “very attached”/ “Yes, totally” and 0 stands for “not attached at all”? “No, not at all”.

Source: INTUNE (2007, 2009) and ENEC (2014) projects and the 2014 Voter Study of the European Election Study for the general public in 2014 (Vogel and Göncz, 2018).
This raises a question about the outcome of the upcoming Hungarian elections in 2022 as during all elections since 2010: Can the Fidesz government be voted out of office? Despite high hopes from the united opposition, the level of public trust in the actual government suggests caution.

It seems that the change in the political elites’ structure and rhetoric has not affected public attitudes towards the EU significantly. Although previous research confirmed the effect of media news on attitudes in questions related to the European integration project (Bruter, 2003), these do not seem to be reflected in the Hungarian case. While anti-EU rhetoric started around 2010, Euroscepticism started to increase earlier and seems to be decreasing from 2012, although there were no changes in communication or political preferences of the government. Several possible explanations arise. The most probable one is the suggestion that public opinion about the EU is very volatile; still, according to the most recent data, it exceeds the point of view of the EU? How long will this gap be maintained? What will be the implications of the outcome of the next elections of this question? And could the question of EU membership lead to an eventual change in governance?

It depends on how successfully Fidesz pursues blame-game tactics concerning the EU, diverting attention from government failures and strengthening the clientele, and how functional the opposition coalition will be. The threat of an epidemic narrows the scope for political competition. As Fidesz’s position within the EU has weakened significantly with the withdrawal from the European People’s Party, and the COVID-19 crisis is generating serious social tensions, the questions seem to be more open in the spring of 2022 than during the previous three elections.

References

Börzel, T. A. and T. Risse (2018), From the euro to the Schengen crises: European integration theories, politicization, and identity politics, Journal of European Public Policy, 25(1), 83-108.

Brinner, A. P. and S. K. Jolly (2005), Location, Location, Location. National Contextual Factors and Public Support for European Integration, European Union Politics, 6(2), 155-180.

Bruter, M. (2003), Winning hearts and minds for Europe: the impact of news and symbols on civic and cultural European identity, Comparative Political Studies, 36(10), 1148-1179.

Carey, S. (2002), Undivided Loyalties. Is National Identity Obstacle to European Integration?, European Union Politics, 3(4), 388-413.

Carrubba, C. J. (2001), The Electoral Connection in European Union Politics, The Journal of Politics, 63, 141-158.

Duchesne, S. and A.-P. Frognier (1995), Is there a European Identity?, in O. Niedermayer and R. Sinnott (eds.), Public Opinion and Internationalized Governance, Oxford University Press, 193-228.

Easton, D. (1965), A Systems Analysis of Political Life, John Wiley and Sons.

Favell, A. (2005), Europe’s Identity Problem, West European Politics, 28(5), 1109-1116.

Gabel, M. (1998), Public Support for European Integration: An Empirical Test of Five Theories, The Journal of Politics, 60(2), 333-354.

Göncz, B. and G. Lengyel (2016), Changing attitudes of Hungarian political elites towards the EU (2007-2014), Historical Social Research – Historische Sozialforschung, 4(6), 106-128.

Harthoorn, E., T. van der Meer and C. E. De Vries (2013), In Europe we trust? Exploring three logics of trust in the European Union, European Union Politics, 14(4), 1-24.

Hoooghe, L. and G. Marks (2005), Calculation, Community and Cues, Public Opinion on European Integration, European Union Politics, 6(4), 419-443.

Hoooghe, L. and G. Marks (2009), Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration – from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus, British Journal of Political Science, 39(1), 1-23.

Lengyel, G. and B. Göncz (2010), A magyar EU-tagság a közvéléményben [The perception of Hungarian EU-membership in Hungarian public opinion], Társadalmi Raport, TÁRKI, 527-548.

McAllister, I. (1991), Party Elites, Voters and Political Attitudes: Testing Three Explanations for Mass-Elite Differences, Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique, 24(2), 237-268.

McLaren, L. M. (2006), Identity, Interests and Attitudes to European Integration, Palgrave Macmillan.

Opp, K.-D. (2005), The EU and National Identifications, Social Forces, 84(2), 653-680.

Ringlerova, Z. (2015), Weathering the crisis: Evidence of diffuse support for the EU from a six-wave Dutch panel, European Union Politics, 16(4), 558-576.

Risse, T. (2010), A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres, Cornell University Press.

Steenbergen, M., W. Edwards and C. De Vries (2007), Who is Cuing Whom? Mass-Elite Linkages and the Future of European Integration, European Union Politics, 8(1), 13-35.

Vogel, L. and B. Göncz (2018), European integration in the view of political elites and citizens – an increasing gap?, in N. Conti, B. Göncz and J. Real-Dato (eds.), National Political Elites, European Integration and the Eurozone Crisis, Routledge, 88-114.