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Personalized Alliances and Informal Networks in Populist

Foreign Policy: The Case of Viktor Orbán

Secção

Investigação Científica / Scientific Research[*]

Personalized Alliances and Informal Networks in Populist Foreign Policy: The Case of Viktor Orbán

Alianças Personalizadas e Redes Informais na Política Externa Populista: O Caso de Viktor Orbán

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Abstract: Populist leaders increasingly challenge alliances by prioritising personal ties over institutional commitments, thereby undermining the effectiveness and core purposes of collective organisations. Through the illustrative example of Hungary, this paper examines how prime minister Viktor Orbán constructed international partnerships within the context of his foreign policy discourse. Using network and discourse analysis of his posts on X between June 2023 and June 2025, the study identifies central actors, their characterisation, and patterns of partnership-building. Findings indicate that Orbán's discourse on international entities was shaped by politicisation, personalisation and structural constraints. Politicisation projected domestic friend–enemy narratives internationally, personalisation privileged leader-to-leader ties and links to popular non-state figures, while structural constraints weakened partnerships by exposing them to the interests of larger powers and the opportunistic behaviour of populist allies. Overall, results indicate that these factors shifted Orbán's discourse from the 'Eastern Opening' doctrine towards Euro-Atlantic populist networking, with figures such as Donald Trump emerging as a key reference point.
Keywords: foreign policy, populism, politicisation, personalization, Hungary

Resumo: Os líderes populistas desafiam cada vez mais as alianças internacionais ao privilegiarem laços pessoais em detrimento de compromissos institucionais, enfraquecendo assim a eficácia e os propósitos fundamentais das organizações coletivas. Através do exemplo ilustrativo da Hungria, o presente artigo examina a forma como o primeiro-ministro Viktor Orbán construiu parcerias internacionais no âmbito do seu discurso de política externa. Recorre-se a uma análise de redes e de discurso das suas publicações na plataforma X, entre Junho de 2023 e Junho de 2025, identificando-se os atores centrais, a sua caracterização e os padrões de construção de parcerias. Os resultados indicam que o discurso de Orbán sobre entidades internacionais foi moldado pela politização, pela personalização e por constrangimentos estruturais. A politização projetou para o plano internacional as narrativas domésticas de amigos e inimigos; a personalização privilegiou laços diretos entre líderes e conexões com figuras não estatais de grande visibilidade pública; e os constrangimentos estruturais fragilizaram as parcerias ao expô-las aos interesses de potências maiores e ao comportamento oportunista de aliados populistas. Em termos gerais, os resultados evidenciam que estes fatores deslocaram o discurso de Orbán da doutrina da "Abertura a Oriente" para uma lógica de redes populistas euro-atlânticas, emergindo figuras como Donald Trump enquanto ponto de referência central.
Palavras-chave: política externa; populismo; politização; personalização; Hungria

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Introduction

Over the past decade, populist governments have frequently disrupted the functioning of institutionalised alliances. This behaviour is rooted in a preference for personalising foreign relations rather than relying on established institutional mechanisms, as well as a tendency to redefine cooperation based on opportunistic agendas.[3] On the one hand, this approach reinforces the unpredictability of existing alliances and weakens established international structures.[4] On the other hand, new partnerships that emerge under populist leadership typically remain fragile, shaped by populist foreign policies, transactional alignments and opportunistic behaviour.[5]

The literature explains unconventional practices of populist foreign policy through politicisation, personalisation, and structural constraints[6]. Politicisation refers to the de-institutionalisation of foreign policy institutions and their alignment with the political agenda of the ruling party, which weakens the autonomy of foreign ministries and limits their ability to uphold alliance commitments[7]. Concurrently, personalisation centralises foreign policy decision-making around the leader, placing alliance formation in the hands of an opportunistic actor who may lack diplomatic experience[8]. These processes reinforce each other, erode expertise, weaken institutional trust, and increase the volatility of international partnerships[9]. Nevertheless, populist leaders are still subject to external structural constraints. Security concerns, economic

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[3] PLAGEMANN, Johannes and DESTRADI, Sandra, 2019. Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India. *Foreign Policy Analysis.* 15(2), 283–301. DOI 10.1093/fpa/ory010; DESTRADI, Sandra, CADIER, David and PLAGEMANN, Johannes, 2021. Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction). *Comparative European Politics.* 19(6), 663–682. DOI 10.1057/s41295-021-00255-4.

[4] BOUCHER, Jean-Christophe and THIES, Cameron G., 2019. "I Am a Tariff Man": The Power of Populist Foreign Policy Rhetoric under President Trump. *The Journal of Politics.* 81(2), 712–722. DOI 10.1086/702229.

[5] PLAGEMANN, Johannes and DESTRADI, Sandra, 2019. Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India. *Foreign Policy Analysis.* 15(2), 283–301. DOI 10.1093/fpa/ory010.

[6] GIURLANDO, Paul, 2021. Populist foreign policy: the case of Italy. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal.* 27(2), 251–267. DOI 10.1080/11926422.2020.1819357; TAŞ, Hakkı, 2022. The formulation and implementation of populist foreign policy: Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. Mediterranean Politics. 27(5), 563–587. DOI 10.1080/13629395.2020.1833160.

[7] DESTRADI, Sandra, PLAGEMANN, Johannes and TAŞ, Hakkı, 2022. Populism and the politicisation of foreign policy. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations.* 24(3), 475–492. DOI 10.1177/13691481221075944.

[8] CHRYSSOGELOS, Angelos, 2017. Populism in Foreign Policy. In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.467.

[9] CADIER, David, 2023. Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means: Pathways and Patterns of Populist Politicization. *Foreign Policy Analysis.* 20(1). DOI 10.1093/fpa/orad035; ZÜRN, Michael, 2014. The politicization of world politics and its effects: Eight propositions. *European Political Science Review.* 6(1), 47–71. DOI 10.1017/S1755773912000276.

dependencies, and the strategic interests of great powers impose systemic limits on populist leaders to independently shape alliances. As a result, partnership strategies of populist governments remain vulnerable to structural pressures[10].

While the literature highlights politicisation, personalisation, and structural constraints as defining factors of populist foreign policy, it remains unclear how these processes shape populist partnerships. This paper seeks to fill this gap by analysing how Viktor Orbán has framed his foreign policy discourse towards other international actors. Hungary provides a fitting case given its recent tendency to politicise and personalise foreign policy, resulting in a disruptive orientation.[11] This orientation is characterised by a highly critical stance towards Euro-Atlantic allies, evidenced by repeated attacks on the EU's integrationist agenda, opposition to NATO's core security priorities, and adversarial relations with Western leaders.[12] Conversely, Orbán has proactively cultivated relationships with like-minded leaders that has positioned him as a central node in a transnational network of populist actors.[13]

This study examines how Viktor Orbán constructed and communicated his foreign policy partnerships. Using a network-based analysis of his foreign policy discourse, the paper identifies key entities in Orbán's narrative and explores patterns about Hungary's international positioning and its populist diplomacy. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. Which entities are most central in Orbán's foreign policy discourse?

RQ2. How are these entities characterised in terms of sentiment?

RQ3. How do changes across the two sample periods reflect broader trends in Hungary's international positioning?

RQ4. What do these findings suggest about the partnership patterns of populist

[10] GIURLANDO, Paul, 2021. Populist foreign policy: the case of Italy. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal.* 27(2), 251–267. DOI 10.1080/11926422.2020.1819357.; PLAGEMANN, Johannes and DESTRADI, Sandra, 2019. Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India. *Foreign Policy Analysis.* 15(2), 283–301. DOI 10.1093/fpa/ory010.

[11] HETTYEY, András, 2024. Unique, better, model, leader: Claims of exceptionality in Hungary's foreign policy and beyond. *New Perspectives.* 32(4), 368–385. DOI 10.1177/2336825X241282597.

[12] DUDLÁK, Tamás, 2023. Béke minden áron: Oroszország ukrajnai inváziója a magyar kormány diskurzusában. *PÓLUSOK.* 4(2), 56–79. DOI 10.15170/PSK.2023.04.02.04.

[13] MOS, Martijn and MACEDO PIOVEZAN, Isadora, 2024. Leadership in international populism: How Viktor Orbán's Hungary shows the way. *New Perspectives.* 32(4), 329–346. DOI 10.1177/2336825X241282599.

foreign policy?

The paper analyses the foreign policy discourse of Hungary's PM on X (formerly Twitter), a platform that has become central to foreign policy communication.[14] Methodologically, it adopts a mixed model, combining network and discourse analysis of Orbán's digital diplomacy between June 2023 and June 2025. This allows the study to identify key actors, classify their roles and sentiment, and map the links between formal and informal ties. To unfold the findings and their implications, the paper first outlines the theoretical framework; then examines Hungary's foreign policy dynamics; presents the methodology and results; and concludes with a discussion and key implications.

Theoretical background

Traditionally, alliances emerged as products of statecraft, negotiated and managed through institutionalised diplomacy regulated by customary law or codified treaties. Classical theories explain their formation as balancing against external threats,[15] securing asymmetric benefits from stronger powers[16], or institutionalising cooperation to enhance credibility[17]. Their durability has been linked to treaty design, institutionalisation, and regular consultation mechanisms, which reduce uncertainty and facilitate conflict management[18]. From this perspective, stable alliances are products of historical experience, built on formal commitments, rule-based arrangements, and established diplomatic protocols.

Populism inherently conflicts with these principles, as it is characterised by Manichaean worldview, anti-elite discourse, flexible policies, and opposition to established parties, multilateral institutions, corporate interests, and minority rights[19]. When translated to foreign policy, these opportunistic and highly emotional policies are

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[14] BCW TWIDIPLOMACY, 2021. Twiplomacy Study 2020. https://www.twiplomacy.com/twiplomacy-study-2020

[15] WALT, Stephen M., 1987. *Origins of Alliances.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[16] LAKE, David A., 1999. *Entangling relations: American foreign policy in its century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[17] MORROW, James D., 1991. Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances. *American Journal of Political Science.* 35(4), 904–933. DOI 10.2307/2111499.

[18] SNYDER, Glenn H., 1984. The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics. *World Politics.* 36(4), 461–495. DOI 10.2307/2010183.

[19] SNYDER, Glenn H., 1984. The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics. *World Politics.* 36(4), 461–495. DOI 10.2307/2010183; MUDDE, Cas, 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563. DOI 10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

just as chameleonic as in the domestic context[20]. They appear to follow a realist logic of pursuing national interests and power, yet often display strategic inconsistency through incoherent policies[21]. They also typically adopt a critical stance on globalism and international institutions, promote multipolarism and diversified alignments[22]. These tendencies are reinforced by an oversimplified and dramatized communication style that politicizes foreign policy narratives[23].

Recent findings indicate that these inconsistencies result from the politicisation and personalisation of foreign policy, combined with international structural constraints imposed on populist-led states[24]. Politicization refers to the transformation of foreign policy from an independent, professional, consensus-driven area of public policy into a strategy motivated by the domestic dynamics of illiberal mobilization, ultimately serving the interests of the ruling party. As a central driver of populist foreign affairs, the constant need for mobilisation organises how issues are framed, which institutions are bypassed, and how partners are selected[25]. This mobilisation operates through systematic deinstitutionalisation: appointing loyalists to key posts, reframing international issues to match the government's domestic agenda, and prioritising short-term electoral gains over longer-term interests[26]. Consequently, international interactions – including the prioritisation of partners – are defined less by bureaucratic procedures and more by image management: populist governments favour external partners who reflect domestic narratives, signalling to their domestic audiences that

[20] SCHMUCK, Desirée and HAMELEERS, Michael, 2020. Closer to the people: A comparative content analysis of populist communication on social networking sites in pre- and post-Election periods. *Information, Communication & Society*. 23(10), 1531–1548. DOI 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1588909.

[21] GIURLANDO, Paul, 2021. Populist foreign policy: the case of Italy. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*. 27(2), 251–267. DOI 10.1080/11926422.2020.1819357.

[22] PLAGEMANN, Johannes and DESTRADI, Sandra, 2019. Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India. *Foreign Policy Analysis*. 15(2), 283–301. DOI 10.1093/fpa/ory010.

[23] SCHMUCK, Desirée and HAMELEERS, Michael, 2020. Closer to the people: A comparative content analysis of populist communication on social networking sites in pre- and post-Election periods. *Information, Communication & Society*. 23(10), 1531–1548. DOI 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1588909.

[24] DESTRADI, Sandra, PLAGEMANN, Johannes and TAŞ, Hakkı, 2022. Populism and the politicisation of foreign policy. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. 24(3), 475–492. DOI 10.1177/13691481221075944.

[25] GRESKOVITS, Béla, 2020. Rebuilding the Hungarian Right through Conquering Civil Society: The Civic Circles Movement. *East European Politics*. 36(2), 247–266. DOI 10.1080/21599165.2020.1718657; SONNEVEND, Júlia and KÖVESDI, Veronika, 2024. More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook. The International Journal of Press/Politics. 29(4), 891–918. DOI 10.1177/19401612231179120.

[26] ÖZDAMAR, Özgür and YANIK, Lerna K., 2024. Populist hyperpersonalization and politicization of foreign policy institutions. *International Affairs*. 100(5), 1835–1856. DOI 10.1093/ia/iiae181.

positions such as sovereignty, friend–enemy distinctions, anti-elitism and culture wars are not extremist views, but internationally recognised standards[27]. As populism is a 'thin-centred ideology', these partnerships do not require deep, dogmatic commonalities[28]. Instead, they rely on high-visibility gestures, such as summit[29], endorsements, memoranda of understanding and leader-to-leader photo opportunities, that reinforce domestic narratives and the leader's political image[30].

While politicization aims to deinstitutionalize public policy structures to align foreign policy with the priorities of illiberal mobilization, personalization takes this process a step further by concentrating authority in the hands of a single leader. It positions the leader as the principal architect and public face of foreign policy, while formal institutions retain limited consultative functions or, in hyper-personalised cases, are reduced to mere execution[31]. In this over-centralisation process, foreign policy becomes more volatile and less predictable, and foreign relations are defined by personal interests[32]. In practical terms, a performative diplomacy emerges, in which constant visibility and agenda-setting are key drivers of international action[33]. Traditional diplomatic responsibilities are overshadowed by the primacy of foreign-policy communication, while internationally active government officials are expected to amplify centrally defined narratives across platforms[34]. Additionally, the charismatic leader plays a central role, serving as both reference point and chief communicator,

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[27] CADIER, David, 2023. Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means: Pathways and Patterns of Populist Politicization. *Foreign Policy Analysis*. 20(1). DOI 10.1093/fpa/orad035; ZÜRN, Michael, 2014. The politicization of world politics and its effects: Eight propositions. *European Political Science Review.* 6(1), 47–71. DOI 10.1017/S1755773912000276.

[28] MUDDE, Cas, 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563. DOI 10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

[29] Viktor Orbán's attempt in October 2025 to broker a Trump–Putin 'peace summit' in Budapest, ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections, is an emblematic example of this dynamic.

[30] EIRAN, Ehud, ISH-SHALOM, Piki and KORNPROBST, Markus, 2025. Populism in international relations: champion diplomacy. *Journal of International Relations and Development*. 28(1), 80–104. DOI 10.1057/s41268-025-00344-x; WOJCZEWSKI, Thorsten, 2024. *The international cooperation of the populist radical right: building counter-hegemony in international relations. International Relations*. DOI 10.1177/00471178231222888.

[31] TAŞ, Hakkı, 2022. The formulation and implementation of populist foreign policy: Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. Mediterranean Politics. 27(5), 563–587. DOI 10.1080/13629395.2020.1833160

[32] ÖZDAMAR, Özgür and YANIK, Lerna K., 2024. Populist hyperpersonalization and politicization of foreign policy institutions. *International Affairs.* 100(5), 1835–1856. DOI 10.1093/ia/iiae181.

[33] TERRY, George Spencer and MAKARYCHEV, Andrey, 2021. Performative Diplomacy and Popular Geopolitics: The Case of Russian Anti-COVID Assistance to Italy. *Problems of Post-Communism*. 69(1), 83–91. DOI 10.1080/10758216.2021.1890998.

[34] KACZIBA, Péter, 2023. Magyar kormányzati szereplők digitális diplomáciai tevékenysége a Twitteren (2021–2022). *PÓLUSOK.* 4(1), 2–26. DOI 10.15170/PSK.2023.04.01.01.

shaping the discourse through personal authority and popularity[35]. Performative diplomacy also emphasises digital diplomacy and social media activity. High-frequency posts, live-streamed meetings, staged photo opportunities and hashtag campaigns generate engagement metrics, media coverage and agenda-setting capacities. Performative diplomacy thus reinforces personalization tendencies and further strengthens deinstitutionalisation tendencies.

Beyond domestic drivers, external conditions also play a decisive role in shaping populist foreign policy, as politicization and personalization not only seek domestic but also transnational legitimation[36]. In this area, the underlying logic resembles the domestic one: regime security motivates the creation of a broad transnational network to counter international and domestic criticism[37]. This network can include ideologically proximate heads of government and parties, movement entrepreneurs, media platforms, business and diaspora representatives, and segments of foreign public opinion, whose support both strengthens domestic mobilisation and functions as diplomatic currency. This is achieved through transnational infrastructures of legitimisation, such as party-to-party linkages, movement networks, think-tank and conference circuits, media partnerships, billboard campaigns and PR projects. These infrastructures provide stages, audiences and resources for coordination outside of formal treaty frameworks[38]. Despite this broad array of opportunities, transnational actions of populist foreign policies are constrained by interdependence in security, trade or investment[39]. These structural limitations influence populist partnerships, as

[35] SONNEVEND, Júlia and KÖVESDI, Veronika, 2024. More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook. The International Journal of Press/Politics. 29(4), 891–918. DOI 10.1177/19401612231179120.

[36] WAJNER, Daniel F., 2022. The populist way out: Why contemporary populist leaders seek transnational legitimation. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. 24(3), 416–436. DOI 10.1177/13691481211069345.

[37] CADIER, David, 2023. Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means: Pathways and Patterns of Populist Politicization. *Foreign Policy Analysis*. 20(1). DOI 10.1093/fpa/orad035.

[38] CHRYSSOGELOS, Angelos, 2017. Populism in Foreign Policy. In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.467; MOS, Martijn and MACEDO PIOVEZAN, Isadora, 2024. Leadership in international populism: How Viktor Orbán's Hungary shows the way. *New Perspectives*. 32(4), 329–346. DOI 10.1177/2336825X241282599; PLAGEMANN, Johannes and DESTRADI, Sandra, 2019. Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India. *Foreign Policy Analysis*. 15(2), 283–301. DOI 10.1093/fpa/ory010.

[39] WAJNER, Daniel F., 2022. The populist way out: Why contemporary populist leaders seek transnational legitimation. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. 24(3), 416–436. DOI 10.1177/13691481211069345.

disruptive foreign policy directions must consider long-standing allies, security commitments, and economic interdependence[40]. Consequently, existing findings indicate that populist leaders tend to forge politicized and personalized partnerships that serve short term interests, yet remain fragile due to limited institutional depth and binding structural constraints.

Recent Trends in Hungarian Foreign Policy

Following the regime change of 1989–1990, Hungary was able to develop an independent foreign policy, characterized by small-state diplomacy, bandwagoning and balancing[41]. Successive governments prioritized Euro-Atlantic integration, achieving accession to NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004, while simultaneously developing cooperative ties with Western partners[42]. Although the subsequent Europeanization process was far from flawless, participation in NATO and the EU compelled Hungarian diplomacy to adapt to institutionalized, treaty-based forms of cooperation[43]. This orientation delivered tangible benefits until the 2008 global financial crisis, which struck Hungary particularly hard. In the aftermath, Europeanization took a sharp turn in 2010, when the populist Fidesz party secured a two-thirds parliamentary majority. This overwhelming electoral mandate, repeated in 2014, 2018, and 2022, enabled FIDESZ to initiate structural reforms that redefined not only Hungary's foreign policy orientation but also its institutional framework[44].

The politicisation of Hungarian foreign policy began in 2011 with the introduction of the 'Eastern Opening' doctrine. Although the policy formally upheld Hungary's Euro-Atlantic commitments and presented its objectives as an economic shift towards

[40] CHRYSSOGELOS, Angelos, 2017. Populism in Foreign Policy. In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.467; WAJNER, Daniel F., 2022. The populist way out: Why contemporary populist leaders seek transnational legitimation. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. 24(3), 416–436. DOI 10.1177/13691481211069345.

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[42] BÉKÉS, Csaba, 2023. Hungary and the Dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (1988–1991). *Journal of Cold War Studies.* 25(4), 4–23. DOI 10.1162/jcws_a_01168.

[43] ÁGH, Attila, 1999. Europeanization of policy-making in East Central Europe: The Hungarian approach to EU accession. *Journal of European Public Policy*. 6(5), 839–854. DOI 10.1080/135017699343414.

[44] SCHMIDT, Andrea and GLIED, Viktor, 2024. Pragmatic foreign policy of Hungary in the shadow of the Russian-Ukrainian war. *Eastern Journal of European Studies*. 15(SI), 247–267. DOI 10.47743/ejes-2024-SI12.

alternative partners, the foreign policy rhetoric increasingly resembled the style and themes of domestic political campaigns[45]. By 2014–2015, this had evolved into a sovereigntist agenda that challenged the normative and institutional foundations of Hungary's Euro-Atlantic embeddedness. At the discursive level, the government pursued a dual strategy: while diplomatic messages and official documents continued to reaffirm Euro-Atlantic commitments, the political communication of top-level leadership consistently portrayed EU, NATO, and liberal leaders as adversaries undermining Hungarian sovereignty[46]. Following the government's second consecutive electoral victory in 2014, the politicisation extended to institutional restructuring. This was most evident in the appointment of party loyalists to key diplomatic and ministerial posts, and the marginalisation of professional diplomats[47]. Through these orientational, discursive, and institutional shifts, foreign policy ceased to function as a relatively autonomous, expert-led public policy and became increasingly subordinated to Fidesz's political agenda[48].

In parallel, Hungarian foreign policy has undergone significant personalisation. This was associated with the transfer of key responsibilities from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) to the PM's organizational apparatus. In this area, two major turning points were the establishment of the PM's Office (PMO, 2010) and the Cabinet Office of the PM (COPM, 2015), both of which were elevated to ministry-level bodies. Their creation enabled the PM to strengthen control over other governmental units, including those traditionally responsible for foreign affairs. In practice, key portfolios were transferred from the MFAT to these central offices, including the development of international strategy, EU affairs, international development, and strategic

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[45] DUDLÁK, Tamás, 2023. Béke minden áron: Oroszország ukrajnai inváziója a magyar kormány diskurzusában. *PÓLUSOK*. 4(2), 56–79. DOI 10.15170/PSK.2023.04.02.04.

[46] KACZIBA, Péter, 2023. Magyar kormányzati szereplők digitális diplomáciai tevékenysége a Twitteren (2021–2022). *PÓLUSOK*. 4(1), 2–26. DOI 10.15170/PSK.2023.04.01.01.

[47] MÜLLER, Patrick and GAZSI, Dániel, 2023. Populist Capture of Foreign Policy Institutions: The Orbán Government and the De-Europeanization of Hungarian Foreign Policy. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*. 61(2), 397–415. DOI 10.1111/jcms.13377.

[48] VISNOVITZ, Péter and JENNE, Erin K., 2021. Populist argumentation in foreign policy: the case of Hungary under Viktor Orbán, 2010–2020. *Comparative European Politics*. 19(6), 683–702. DOI 10.1057/s41295-021-00256-3.

communication[49]. While some of these competences occasionally shifted between institutions, the overall trend of centralised control over foreign policy highlighted the PM's central role in strategy, decision-making, and international rhetoric. [50]

Along with the institutional transformations, personalisation also manifested in establishing digital presence for the top leadership. The digitalization of populism was not unique to Hungary: social media has become a key platform through which populist leaders expressed their foreign policy ideas, categorise allies and adversaries, and create identity-based narratives [51]. In Orbán's case, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok served primarily domestic politics, while X – the only channel he used in English – has become the main platform for promoting foreign policy narratives[52]. The main messages and rhetoric were largely consistent across his various social media platforms. These narratives drew a sharp divide between the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite,' applied Eurosceptic language based on morality and insecurity, and embraced homogenous people and conservative, traditional, Christian values[53]. Orbán also framed 'Brussels' and George Soros as vaguely defined enemies, portrayed himself as a guarantor of peace, emphasised paternalistic values, and highlighted ties with right-wing politicians[54].

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[49] MÜLLER, Patrick and GAZSI, Dániel, 2023. Populist Capture of Foreign Policy Institutions: The Orbán Government and the De-Europeanization of Hungarian Foreign Policy. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*. 61(2), 397–415. DOI 10.1111/jcms.13377.

[50] HETTYEY, András, 2024. Unique, better, model, leader: Claims of exceptionality in Hungary's foreign policy and beyond. *New Perspectives*. 32(4), 368–385. DOI 10.1177/2336825X241282597.

[51] RIVAS-DE-ROCA, Rubén, Concha PÉREZ-CURIEL and Mar GARCÍA-GORDILLO, 2022. Building extreme right discourses on Twitter for non-campaign periods: insights from populist leaders across Europe. *Observatorio (OBS) Journal*. 16(4), 23–41; LONER, Enzo, 2023. Enemies and friends: The instrumental social construction of populist identity through Twitter in Italy at the time of COVID-19. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*. 10(2), 279–308. DOI 10.1080/23254823.2022.2148780; MENDONÇA, Ricardo F. and CAETANO, Renato Duarte, 2021. Populism as Parody: The Visual Self Representation of Jair Bolsonaro on Instagram. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. 26(1), 210–235. DOI 10.1177/1940161220959552.

[52] SONNEVEND, Júlia and KÖVESDI, Veronika, 2024. More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook. The International Journal of Press/Politics. 29(4), 891–918. DOI 10.1177/19401612231179120; FARKAS, Xénia and BENE, Márton, 2022. Orbán Viktor vizuális és verbális populista stílusa a Facebookon. *Politikatudományi Szemle*. 31(3), 82–108. DOI 10.30718/POLTUD.HU.2022.3.82.

[53] CSIGÓ, Péter and MERKOVITY, Norbert, 2016. Hungary: Home of Empty Populism. In: AALBERG, Toril, ESSER, Frank, REINEMANN, Carsten, STRÖMBÄCK, Jesper és de VREESE, Claes H., eds. *Populist Political Communication in Europe.* New York: Routledge, 299–310; MUDDE, Cas, 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563. DOI 10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

[54] SONNEVEND, Júlia and KÖVESDI, Veronika, 2024. More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook. The International Journal of Press/Politics. 29(4), 891–918. DOI 10.1177/19401612231179120.

All in all, the relational dynamics of Hungarian foreign policy during the sample period were defined by a combination of politicization, personalization, and structural constraints. The first two tendencies manifested, on the one hand, in attempts to cultivate ties with actors opposed to the Western mainstream, and, on the other, in rhetorical campaigns against Euro-Atlantic allies critical of the Hungarian government. This approach reinforced partnerships with illiberal powers such as Russia and China and fostered closer relations with populist figures including Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Marine Le Pen, while at the same time provoking strained relations with the Biden administration and several European allies. Despite these confrontations, structural constraints such as Hungary's economic reliance on Germany, vulnerability to EU funding cuts, and dependence on NATO security guarantees continued to keep the country within the Euro-Atlantic framework. The end result was a complicated and controversial foreign policy orientation, which the government itself sought to explain by the concept of "connectivity". Based on the principles of network theory, the strategy sought to explain the Hungarian orientation as an attempt to develop relationships with a variety of partners, thereby strengthening Hungary's position as a central node for political and economic cooperation[55]. In the following section, beyond addressing the research questions, the paper tests this explanation by analysing the network of entities that Viktor Orbán's foreign policy narrative constructs (Appendix Figures 2–3).

Methodology

This paper employs a leader-centric discourse and network analysis built on two assumptions. First, in Hungary's politicised and personalised system, Viktor Orbán is the primary source and architect of foreign policy. Second, although foreign policy discourse does not directly equate to implemented policy, in personalised systems, it nonetheless reflects the leader's intended directions, key priorities, and sentiments toward other international actors. Based on these assumptions, the analysis selected a two-year sample of Viktor Orbán's foreign policy discourse on X. Although X plays only a minor role in Hungarian domestic politics, it has become an important arena for

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[55] ORBÁN, Balázs. 2024. *Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity.* MCC Press, Budapest.

international foreign policy communication[56]. Orbán joined in 2022 and has since posted regularly in English to over 617,000 followers (as of August 2025), signalling that this content is primarily aimed at an international audience and forms part of Hungary's official foreign policy narrative.

To capture the most recent developments, the dataset covers the period from 1 June 2023 to 31 May 2024, supplemented with posts from 1 June 2024 to 10 June 2025. Within this timeframe, the retrieval process identified N=638 posts, which were compiled into a dataset containing the message text, posting date, and engagement metrics (shares, likes, comments). Data was retrieved manually and coded independently by two coders. After initial organisation and cleaning, the coding process identified individual and institutional entities to determine who appeared in the PM's discourse and how frequently. Based on these entities, posts were classified into three categories: (1) references to official state representatives holding office during the posting period, (2) references to non-official actors without government positions, and (3) posts that did not identify concrete entities or were unrelated to relational dynamics (e.g., Christmas photos).

Posts in the first two categories were subjected to discourse analysis to identify both sentiments and content categories. Sentiments (positive, negative, or neutral) were coded according to the rhetoric used, with mixed tones classified by the overall stance toward the mentioned entity. Content categories were derived from semantically connected keyword clusters and assigned to thematic groups by coders: *Celebration/Commemoration (C/C)*; *Condolence/Prayers (C/P)*; *Congratulations (C)*; *Defending/Supporting interests, ideologies, and alliances (D/S)*; *EU Membership (EU)*; *Meeting (M)*; *Migration/Security (M/S)*; and *War/Peace (W/P)*. While some overlap between categories was inevitable, classification was based on the post's main message. Finally, identified entities, post categories, and sentiment data were converted into network files, enabling the visualisation and mapping of the main results using Gephi[57].

The paper treats the PM's X posts as intentional foreign-policy signals of a politicised and personalised system, whereby the charismatic leader's public, English-

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[56] BCW TWIDIPLOMACY, 2021. Twiplomacy Study 2020. https://www.twiplomacy.com/twiplomacy-study-2020

[57] BASTIAN, Mathieu, HEYMANN, Sebastien és JACOMY, Mathieu, 2009. Gephi: An Open Source Software for Exploring and Manipulating Networks. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media.* 3(1), 361–362. DOI 10.1609/icwsm.v3i1.13937

language discourse represents the central direction of international strategy. We test these signals against our research questions by assessing whether the observed patterns fit them. Support for RQ1 and RQ3 is indicated when the same actors recur across both periods and rank high on network-centrality metrics compared to others. RQ2 is supported when the tone toward these actors is consistently positive, negative or neutral. RQ4 is supported when posts frequently reflect the theoretical principles of populist foreign policy, thus feature signs of illiberal mobilisation, performative diplomacy, and transnational networking. Claims are weakened if patterns are driven by a single event or brief anomaly, if the tone toward actors shifts substantially from one month to the next, if formal, traditional diplomacy dominates instead of performative diplomacy, or if non-official actors are rarely mentioned.

Results

The analysis identified 638 posts between June 2023 and June 2025, with 228 in the first sample period (SP1) and 410 in the second (SP2). The increase in activity during SP2 expanded the overall number of mentioned entities from 85 to 118. Within this, the number of official actors declined from 53 in SP1 to 48 in SP2, while the number of unofficial actors grew, from 32 to 70. Sentiment remained predominantly positive across both periods. In SP1, 66% of all posts were positive, 32% were neutral, and 3% were negative. By SP2, the share of positive posts rose to 87%, while neutral mentions fell to 4% and negative references increased to 9%. Overall, the dataset shows a clear tendency toward increasingly affirmative messaging, with 79% of posts coded as positive, 15% as neutral, and 6% as negative across the entire period.

Figure 1 indicates the distribution of key themes. Across the whole period, the most frequently mentioned themes were *Meetings (M)*, *Defend/Support Interests/Ideology/Alliance (D/S)*, and *War/Peace (W/P)*. Category *Interests/Ideology/Alliance (D/S)* represents the distinction between allies and adversaries. Posts of this category portray partners as sovereigntist and peace-oriented, while casting 'Brussels' and its 'liberal elites' as hostile. In the category *Meetings (M)* in SP1, topics were dominated by bilateral visits, summits, and diplomatic exchanges, often framed as opportunities to strengthen cooperation on migration, security, and peace, and Hungary's role in EU affairs. In SP2, these were supplemented by high-profile events such as CPAC Hungary or the Patriots' gatherings. *Condolence and prayer (C/P)* messages mostly addressed to leaders after

terrorist attacks or disasters, reinforcing Hungary's security-focused narrative. *Congratulatory (C)* posts celebrated electoral victories and the inaugurations of populist allies. Posts on migration and security policy were linked to EU debates, with Orbán contrasting Hungary's firm stance with 'Brussels' failed' approach. In the *war and peace (W/P)* category, Hungary presented itself as a peace-seeking actor, distancing itself from Brussels' alleged 'war agenda' and aligning with partners supportive of peace negotiations.

Figure 1. Topic cluster distribution by category (June 1, 2023 – June 10, 2025)

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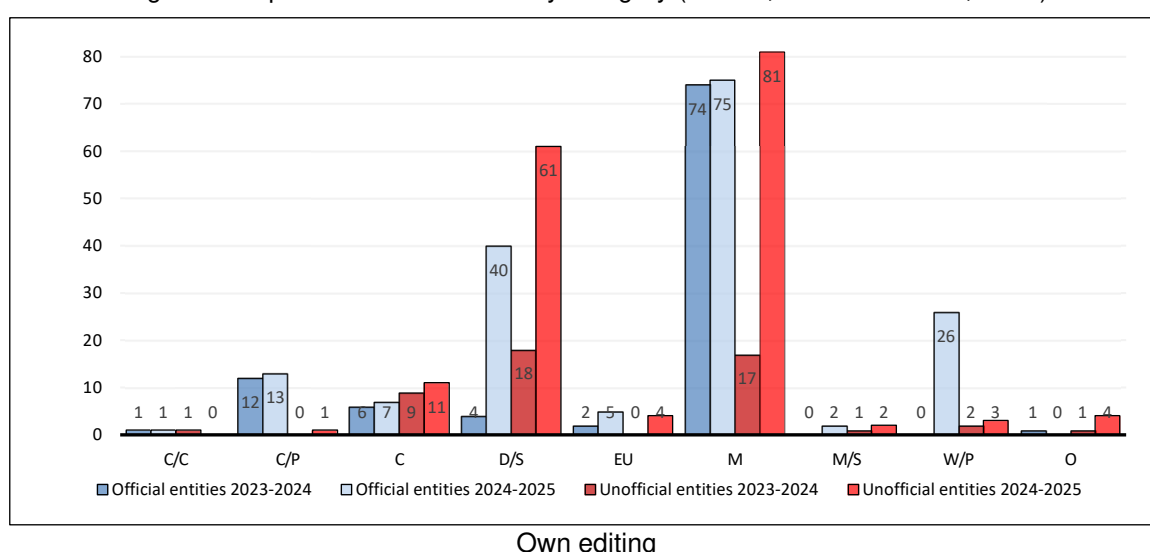
References to official actors accounted for about one-third of the dataset. In SP1, the analysis identified 53 individual leaders representing 38 states, plus the EU and NATO, while in SP2 the number was 48 leaders representing 39 states and the two organisations. As displayed in Figure 2 in the Appendix, 49.4% of all mentions in SP1 referred to EU and NATO allies, while 50.6% referred to actors outside these organisations. By SP2, the share of EU and NATO allies increased to 56.6%, with only 41.4% referring to external states. Across the two periods, the most frequently mentioned leaders were Donald Trump, Aleksandar Vučić, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Matteo Salvini and Robert Fico, with Trump becoming a central figure since SP2.

Sentiment toward official actors was predominantly positive, though with important shifts. In SP1, more than half of the references were coded as positive[58].

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[58] An illustrative example of a positive post:*"ᴴᵁᴿˢ Met with President @avucic in Serbia today to boost our energy partnership. Serbia plays a vital role in Hungary's gas supply, delivering 20 million cubic metres every day. Our next steps: building a new oil pipeline and doubling our electricity capacity. Progress is in motion. Thank you for your friendship and support, Aleksandar!"* Posted on May 23, 2025, https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1925973025880420698.

Aleksandar Vučić appeared most frequently in favourable terms (7), followed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (5) and Robert Fico (4). Most of the remaining references were neutral[59], while negative sentiment was absent. By SP2, positive references rose sharply to more than four-fifths of the total. Trump dominated the positive category with 34 favourable mentions, followed by Matteo Salvini (11), Vučić (7), Erdoğan (6), and Fico (6). At the same time, neutral mentions declined, and negative sentiment[60] grew. The main targets of criticism were Ursula von der Leyen (7), Olaf Scholz (2), and Volodymyr Zelensky (2).

Thematically, references to official entities were dominated in both periods by meetings and bilateral visits, often framed as opportunities to strengthen cooperation on migration, security, and peace. In SP1, these were primarily traditional diplomatic exchanges, while in SP2 they were supplemented by high-profile international events, including Hungary's EU presidency and Orbán's participation in transnational conservative gatherings. Smaller clusters of congratulatory and condolence posts reinforced narratives of solidarity and shared values, while the category of *War/Peace (W/P)* gained greater prominence in SP2, with Orbán presenting Hungary as a mediator and distancing it from Brussels' alleged 'war agenda'.

References to unofficial actors represented about one-fifth of the dataset, though the category expanded by SP2. In SP1, the analysis identified 32 individual actors, the overwhelming majority (68.7%) were political figures. By SP2, the number of actors more than doubled to 70, and the composition shifted: while politicians still formed a majority (52.9%), the category diversified to include organisations, activists, influencers, and intellectuals (Appendix Figure 3). Across the full period, the most frequently mentioned unofficial actor was Trump, whose dual presence as both an official and unofficial figure further reinforced his centrality[61]. Other key actors included George Soros, Marine Le Pen, Alice Weidel, and Santiago Abascal, alongside emerging movements such as PatriotsEU.

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[59] A typical example of a neutral post: *"Meeting with President @EmmanuelMacron. To be continued tomorrow in Brussels."* Posted on March 5, 2025, https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1897424441736302946.

[60] An example of negative-toned content: *"President @vonderleyen wants to cut off affordable energy and send the bill to European families. Enough is enough, Hungary won't cover the cost of Brussels' reckless agenda. "* Posted on May 8, 2025, https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1920489384651973102.

[61] The research regarded Donald Trump as an 'unofficial' entity between January 21, 2021 and January 19, 2025 (when he held no US government office), and as an 'official' actor from January 20, 2025 onward, following his inauguration as President of the US.

Sentiment toward unofficial actors was again positive, though with clear differences. In SP1, 86% of mentions were coded as positive, with Trump (13) on the top, followed by smaller numbers for Marine Le Pen, Alice Weidel, and Santiago Abascal. Negative sentiment was limited almost exclusively to George Soros (3), who was consistently framed as hostile. By SP2, the volume of references grew considerably and the positive share rose to 89%. Trump again dominated (29), while Le Pen, Weidel, and Abascal each received ten favourable references. Entities of negative sentiments increased slightly compared to SP1, targeting mainly Manfred Weber (7) and George Soros (5).

Thematically, references to unofficial actors focused on ideological positioning and identity politics. In SP1, most posts focused on the role of populist leaders and movements as ideological allies, reinforcing narratives of sovereigntism and opposition to Brussels. By SP2, this network expanded considerably, with a more diverse cast of actors. Along with party leaders, references highlighted transnational forums such as CPAC and PatriotsEU, media figures like Tucker Carlson and Eva Vlaardingerbroek, and intellectuals including Jeffrey Sachs and Anatol Lieven. These additions illustrate the growing importance of informal networks in amplifying Hungary's narratives beyond traditional diplomacy.

Discussion

After the presentation of results, the discussion addresses the research questions, linking empirical findings with the broader literature on populist foreign policy. The first research question (RQ1) asked which entities were most central in Orbán's foreign policy discourse. In SP1, the most central figures were Aleksandar Vučić, Ulf Kristersson, Xi Jinping, Charles Michel, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Donald Trump. During the second period, Donald Trump became the leading figure, followed by Matteo Salvini, Ursula von der Leyen, Olaf Scholz, Aleksandar Vučić, Marine Le Pen, Alice Weidel, Santiago Abascal and the PatriotsEU network. The distribution is quite significant, as despite Hungary's membership of the EU and NATO, the most prominent figures in Orbán's discourse were neither the leading politicians of these organisations' member states, nor Hungary's traditional Visegrád allies. Instead, Orbán prioritised populist leaders, demonstrating that although he utilises conventional state-to-state diplomacy, he bases his foreign policy discourse on like-minded rather than mainstream allies. This marks a shift away from the Europeanised, institutional model

towards a more politicised and personalised, leader-to-leader foreign policy style.[62]

Similarly, the centrality of certain non-official entities is also crucial. In SP1, Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Marine Le Pen emerged as key figures, while in SP2, up until his electoral victory, Trump was joined by Alice Weidel, Santiago Abascal and Herbert Kickl. These patterns indicate that Orbán supplemented his populist-oriented diplomacy with an expanded transnational network, in which like-minded politicians, parties and movements played a symbolic role in reinforcing his rhetoric and projecting Hungary as a hub within the broader sovereigntist network. Importantly, these patterns extended beyond politicians. In SP1, 69% of non-official entities were political figures, while in SP2 this share dropped to 53%, reflecting a broader range of categories. These included business leaders, media personalities, academics, public intellectuals, entertainers, and athletes. Orbán was highly selective in these choices, focusing on figures who were internationally popular, respected, and whose public profiles reinforced his own agenda. This explains why figures such as Tucker Carlson, Jeffrey Sachs, Chuck Norris and Evander Holyfield were included: by showing affinity with them, Orbán aimed to strengthen his image and rhetoric, signalling both personal connections and political agreement. Overall, these findings illustrate how politicisation and personalisation shaped Orbán's discourse across a broad range of entities, indicating that priorities were driven by political interests rather than by the norms and diplomatic expectations of institutionalised alliance politics.[63]

The second research question (RQ2) examined how entities were characterised in terms of sentiment. The analysis revealed a clear dominance of positive references, with most entities mentioned portrayed favourably. The most frequent positive references across the two sample periods were directed at Donald Trump, Aleksandar Vučić, Matteo Salvini, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Robert Fico, Pope Francis and Irakli Kobakhidze. In contrast, explicit negative references were rare, mainly focusing on George Soros, Ursula von der Leyen, Volodymyr Zelensky and Olaf Scholz. This distribution suggests that Orbán was generally reluctant to single out individual

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[62] DESTRADI, Sandra, PLAGEMANN, Johannes and TAŞ, Hakkı, 2022. Populism and the politicisation of foreign policy. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations.* 24(3), 475–492. DOI 10.1177/13691481221075944; ÖZDAMAR, Özgür and YANIK, Lerna K., 2024. Populist hyperpersonalization and politicization of foreign policy institutions. *International Affairs.* 100(5), 1835–1856. DOI 10.1093/ia/iiae181.

[63] CADIER, David, 2023. Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means: Pathways and Patterns of Populist Politicization. *Foreign Policy Analysis.* 20(1). DOI 10.1093/fpa/orad035; ZÜRN, Michael, 2014. The politicization of world politics and its effects: Eight propositions. *European Political Science Review.* 6(1), 47–71. DOI 10.1017/S1755773912000276.

opponents for sustained criticism. Instead, he adopted a populist friend–enemy distinction that relied on vaguely defined or abstract adversaries. Rather than naming specific rivals, his discourse repeatedly invoked 'Brussels', 'liberal elites', 'bureaucrats', 'migration' and 'war supporters' as the corrupt and hostile 'them', in contrast to the virtuous 'us' of Hungary and its allies[64]. The content analysis reinforced these findings, revealing that positive mentions were often paired with moralising and justifying language. Orbán and his allies were presented as peace-seekers and defenders of traditional Christian values, whereas their opponents were framed as warmongers who undermine national sovereignty. This suggests that the discourse was less about balanced diplomatic engagement than about establishing a moral hierarchy in which Orbán and his allies embody legitimacy and morality, and opponents are an ever-present but undefined external threat.

Answers to RQ2 demonstrate that Orbán's foreign policy discourse was influenced by personalisation, politicisation and structural constraints. Personalisation drove the selective promotion of allies, while politicisation projected domestic friend–enemy narratives onto the international sphere. However, the rarity of explicit negative references reflected structural limitations: even when presenting himself as a critic, Orbán maintained a largely positive diplomatic tone towards opponents. His discourse thus illustrates a populist balancing act of pursuing disruption while being held back by systemic pressures.[65]

The third research question (RQ3) investigated how changes between SP1 and SP2 reflected broader trends in Hungary's international positioning. The findings indicate that posting activity increased sharply, rising from 228 to 410. The network of referenced entities also expanded from 85 to 118. Concurrently, sentiment changed, with positive references rising from 66% to 87% and negative references increasing from 3% to 9%. The balance of mentioned entities also shifted: SP1 was relatively even (49.4% EU/NATO vs. 50.6% external), whereas SP2 tilted toward Euro-Atlantic entities (56.6% vs. 41.4%). Another striking development was the broader inclusion of non-

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[64] CSIGÓ, Péter and MERKOVITY, Norbert, 2016. Hungary: Home of Empty Populism. In: AALBERG, Toril, ESSER, Frank, REINEMANN, Carsten, STRÖMBÄCK, Jesper és de VREESE, Claes H., eds. *Populist Political Communication in Europe.* New York: Routledge, 299–310; MUDDE, Cas, 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition, 39*(4), 541–563. DOI 10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

[65] CHRYSSOGELOS, Angelos, 2017. Populism in Foreign Policy. In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.467; GIURLANDO, Paul, 2021. Populist foreign policy: the case of Italy. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal.* 27(2), 251–267. DOI 10.1080/11926422.2020.1819357.

political actors, rising from 31% to 47%. Finally, rhetoric shifted from an emphasis on bilateral cooperation, migration, and security toward portraying Hungary as a peace-broker, with Orbán framing allies as defenders of peace against Brussels' alleged 'war agenda.'

These quantitative and qualitative shifts are discursive reflections of a broader recalibration of Hungarian foreign policy during SP2. They illustrate how Orbán has toned down the ambitions of the 'Eastern Opening' by placing greater emphasis on promoting populist agendas and allies within Euro-Atlantic structures, thereby seeking to strengthen his own position within Western alliances. This recalibration was shaped by two key developments. Firstly, Hungary's increasing confrontation with moderate Western leaders urged Orbán to seek allies who could potentially replace his critics in government. The EU presidency provided symbolic opportunities in this regard, allowing the Hungarian PM to be presented as a central figure in European politics. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the re-election of Donald Trump – into which the Orbán government had invested significant political capital – was interpreted as an opportunity to bolster populist movements across the Euro-Atlantic sphere. Coupled with Trump's more cautious stance toward China and his unpredictable approach to Russia, this slowed the momentum of the 'Eastern Opening' and prioritised ambitions within the Western populist camp. Nevertheless, the results also indicate that these policies remain dependent on the endurance of populist alliances[66]. This is clearly indicated in our sample by the limited references to Giorgia Meloni. Although publicly she appeared as a close ally, her visibility in our sample declined after she assumed the role that Orbán had sought to achieve in Trump's core network of European partners.

The fourth research question aimed to identify the implications of these findings for populist foreign policy partnerships. The analysis shows that Orbán's partnership patterns on X were shaped by the combined effects of politicization, personalization, and structural constraints. The agenda was provided by politicisation, driven by intention of illiberal mobilisation: partners were chosen for their ability to reinforce

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[66] DESTRADI, Sandra, PLAGEMANN, Johannes and TAŞ, Hakkı, 2022. Populism and the politicisation of foreign policy. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations.* 24(3), 475–492. DOI 10.1177/13691481221075944; ÖZDAMAR, Özgür and YANIK, Lerna K., 2024. Populist hyperpersonalization and politicization of foreign policy institutions. *International Affairs.* 100(5), 1835–1856. DOI 10.1093/ia/iiae181.

FIDESZ's domestic friend-enemy narratives rather than for their bureaucratic utility. This produced an asymmetric sentiment strategy in which praise was personalised and blame was abstracted. While positive references focused on specific leaders (e.g. Vučić, Erdoğan and Trump), criticism was aimed at vague entities such as 'Brussels' or 'war sympathisers'. In practice, positive messages clustered around high-visibility moments – meetings, congratulations, 'peace' messaging – while negative cues were framed as issue-based objections rather than direct attacks on particular leaders. The approach served mobilisation at home and diffusing blame abroad: it maximised relational gains with prioritised allies, while avoided bilateral costs with EU/NATO leaders through indirect criticism. This illustrates that politicisation produced messages based on the classic logic of claiming credit and diffusing blame.

Personalisation shaped the priorities and style of foreign policy discourse. It presented Orbán not only as a leader who manages Hungary's external relations wisely, but also as a 'globally important' figure. Within this framework, two categories of discursive partners emerged. 'Operational partners' were entities (e.g. Vučić, Erdoğan, Fico) with whom Orbán engaged repeatedly and directly through high-visibility acts, such as meetings, congratulatory notes, peace-themed posts, often accompanied by photos or short clips and leader-to-leader phrasing. In our sample these are mainly coded to *Meeting (M)*, *Congratulations (C)*, and *Celebration/Commemoration (C/C)* categories.[67] By contrast, symbolic partners (e.g., Tucker Carlson, Jeffrey Sachs, Arnold Schwarzenegger) were featured in content aimed at broad reach, amplified by hashtags and cross-platform sharing to extend the audience beyond formal politics.[68] Personalisation combined the two categories: repeated posts with operational partners simulated routine cooperation and leadership within the populist camp, while symbolic partners lend visibility and cultural context to the same narrative. Personalisation thus relied on performative diplomacy to legitimise the Hungarian prime minister as a central international actor.

These combined efforts also sought transnational legitimation, which not only

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[67] A typical example of an operational post: "🤝 *Pleasure to meet with President @RTErdogan at the @AntalyaDF. In these challenging times, Turkey's support is crucial. As Brussels pushes for war and threatens our energy supply, our partnership is vital. We'll stand firm in defending Hungary's sovereignty. Teşekkür ederim, President Erdoğan!"* Posted on April 11, 2025, https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1910758986288132433.

[68] An illustrative post for engaging with symbolic partners: *"It was good to catch up with my old friend Arnold @Schwarzenegger in Budapest today. Stay tuned for more details. I'll be back! 😎 "* Posted on September 14, 2024, https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1835015446052872385.

supported Orbán's international positioning but also constrained it. Three forms of structural restraints are evident. First, although conflicts were dramatized around the values embodied by EU/NATO elites, references to Euro-Atlantic actors remained largely positive, reflecting Hungary's security and economic dependence. Second, when the costs of naming specific leaders increased, contention shifted from individuals to issues (e.g. Ukraine's accession, the 'war agenda', migration), enabling confrontation without endangering bilateral ties. Third, although populist allies were prioritised, total exposure to a single camp was avoided by making gestures towards mainstream leaders (e.g. Scholz and Macron) and respected figures (e.g. Pope Francis and Katalin Karikó). Together, these mechanisms produced partnerships that could be adjusted over time. However, the growing reliance on unofficial partners also highlights a structural vulnerability: as fewer state leaders endorsed ties with Orbán, the PM turned to informal actors and platforms to sustain visibility and legitimation.

Conclusion

This study revealed that Viktor Orbán's foreign policy discourse on X between 2023 and 2025 was shaped by politicisation, personalisation, and structural constraints. Politicisation projected domestic friend–enemy narratives onto the international arena, personalisation privileged leader-to-leader ties and symbolic links to prominent non-state figures, while structural constraints prevented open confrontation with EU and NATO leaders. Orbán's strategy of 'connectivity' thus appeared less as multidimensional and neutral networking – necessary for a true hub position – and more as a politicised, selective effort to reinforce populist allies and elevate Hungary's profile within a Euro-Atlantic populist camp. These patterns suggest that his disruptive behaviour toned down the representation of 'Eastern' interests and, following Trump's election victory, rather began to focus on how to reshape institutionalised alliances from within by partnering with like-minded actors. Overall, the findings indicate that Orbán's approach to alliances exemplifies how populist leaders seek to capture and redirect institutional partnerships through personalised and selective networks yet remain ultimately bound by structural limits.

Appendix

Figure 2. Networks of mentioned official entities, their countries of origin, and international affiliations: June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024)
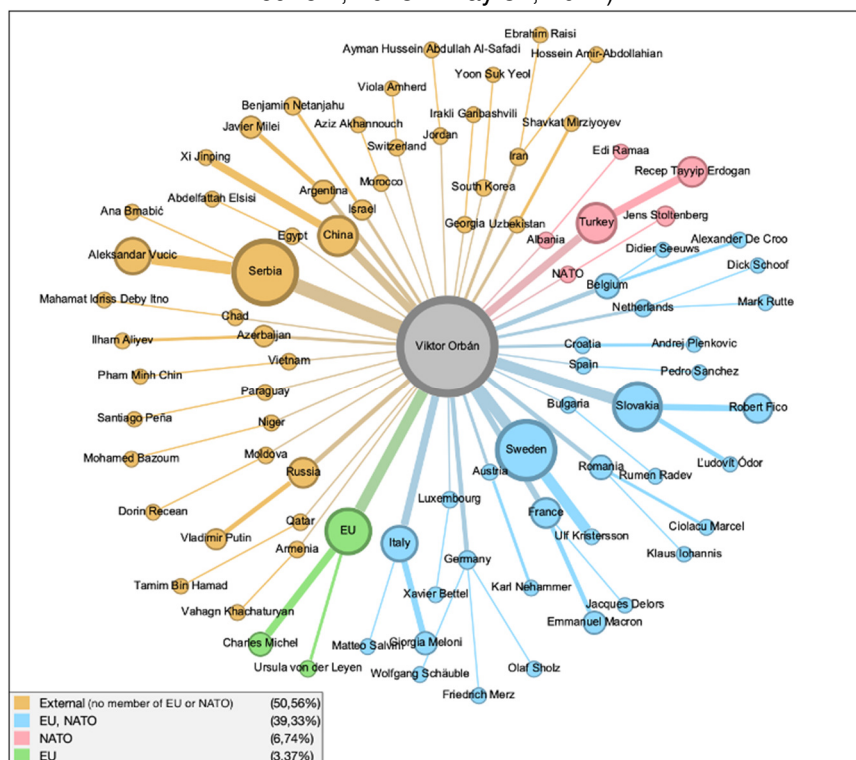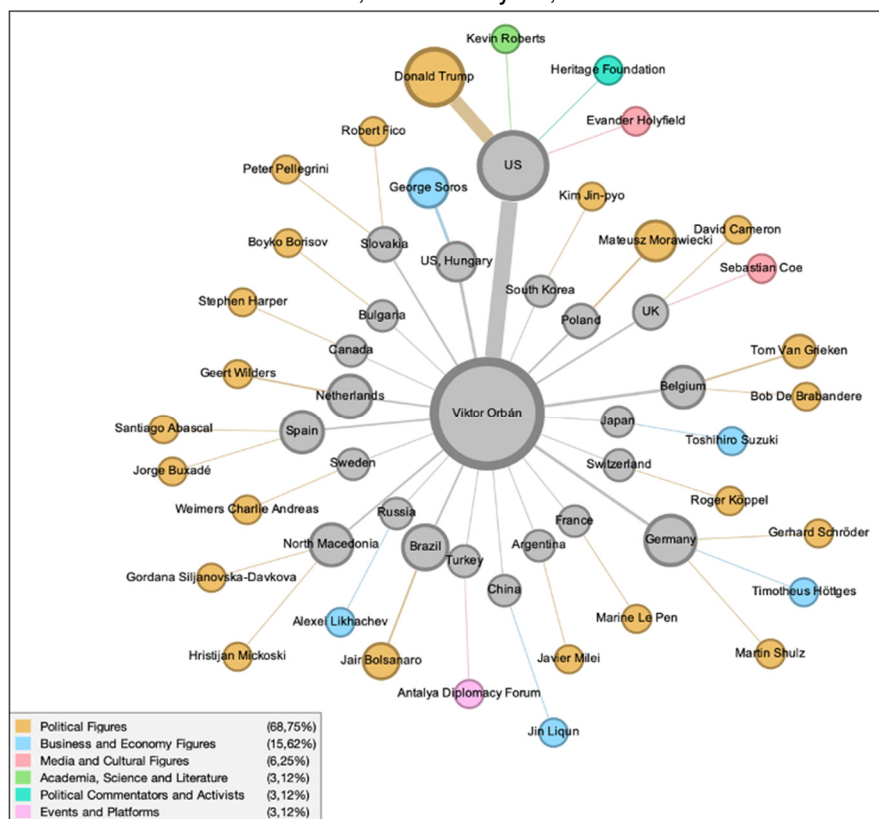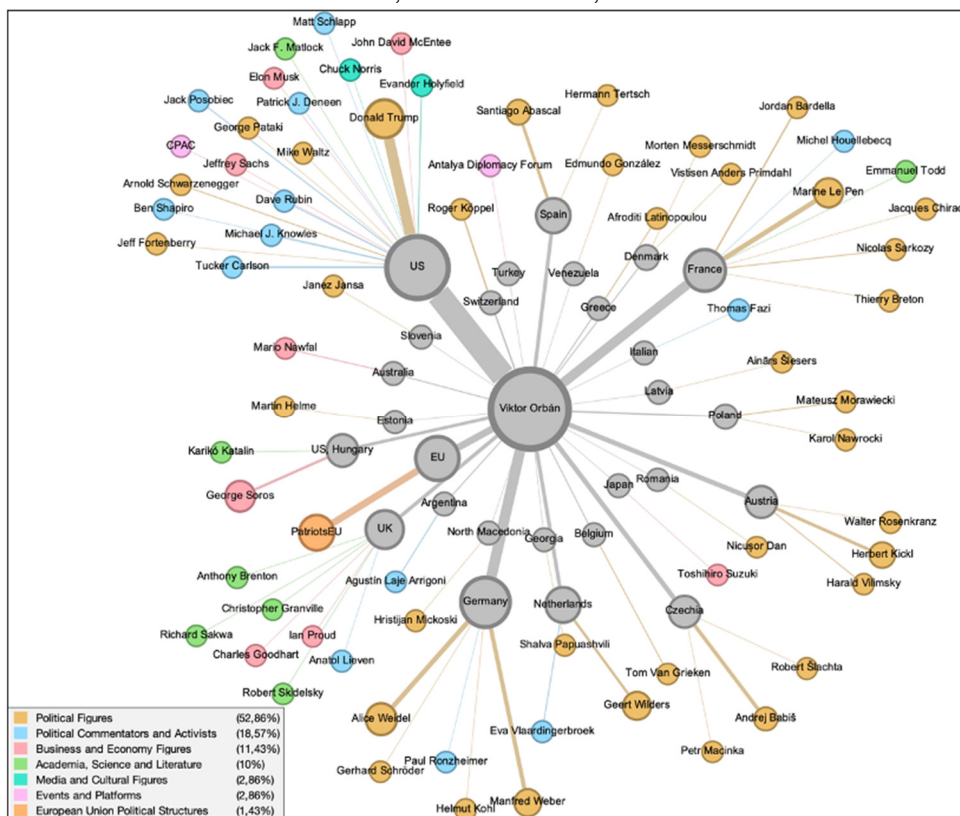

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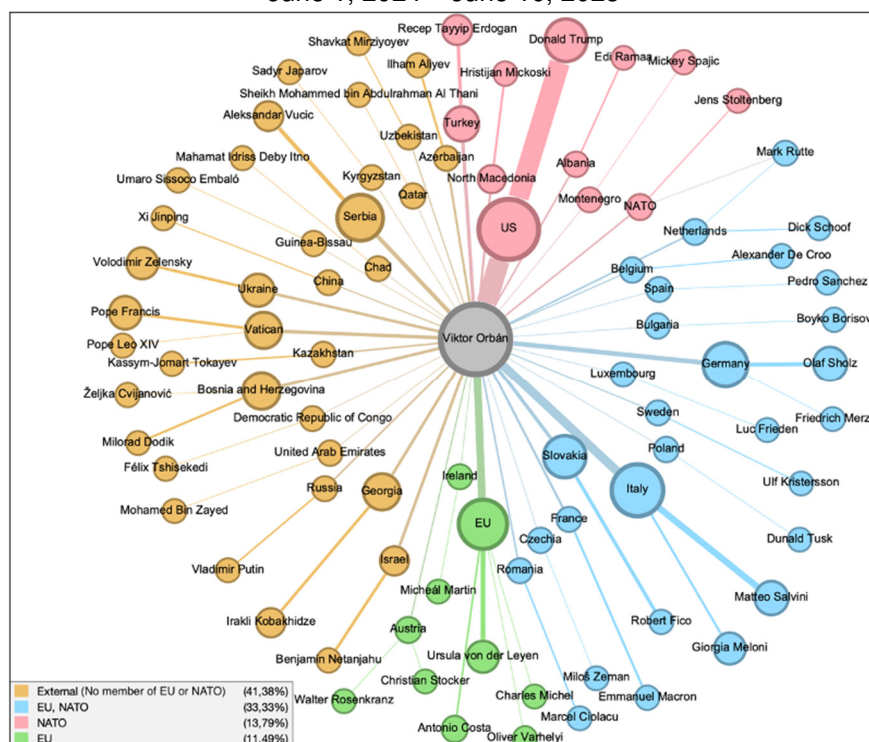
Node size represents frequency of mentions. Own editing in Gephi, Bastian et al., 2009.

Figure 3. Networks of non-official entities and their role:
June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024

June 1, 2024 – June 10, 2025

Node size represents frequency of mentions. Own editing in Gephi, Bastian et al., 2009.

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