

# Populist-patriotism in Hungary: 'A Conservative Island in this Liberal European Ocean'<sup>1</sup>

SIMON BRADFORD AND FIN CULLEN

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**Abstract:** *The growth of illiberal and authoritarian political parties and governments has given the notion of patriotism fresh political impetus. This article explores how Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, used patriotic discourse during Hungary's Presidency of the Council of the European Union from July to December 2024. It draws from an analysis of Orbán's speeches and interviews from this period that shows patriotism was used as a powerful signifier of illiberal ambition. We ask whether the Presidency was utilised by Orbán to further his stated aim of 'conquering' the EU on behalf of a European political right. The example of Hungary, though historically, culturally and geographically specific, provides insights into permutations of patriotism and its use in political discourse. The analysis contributes to understanding the intersection of nationalism and populist-patriotism in illiberal and authoritarian states.*

**Keywords:** *Hungary, patriotism, Fidesz, myth, populism, illiberalism, nationalism*

## Introduction

Hungary assumed the rotating Member State Presidency of the Council of the European Union from July to December 2024. The Presidency was important in giving a prominent platform to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his politics as well as firmly positioning him within the populist political right.<sup>2</sup> Orbán is represented by supporters and others as a key actor in the transnational populist right, the model 'illiberal' politician and Hungary epitomising

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1 Orbán's description of Hungary, (Orbán 2024 | 14).

2 In Hungary a governing coalition of FIDESZ (Hungarian Civic Alliance) and KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party), has been in power since 2010. The coalition has 135 seats in the 2022 Parliament (of which 18 are from KDNP) and the various opposition parties have 64 seats.

the illiberal nation-state in transnational populist politics, arguably influential beyond its size (Political Capital 2022).<sup>3</sup>

This article draws on research on populist politics in Hungary (Bradford & Cullen 2021; Bradford & Cullen 2022; Bradford & Cullen 2025). In that work, we had become aware of Orbán's (and others on the global political right) frequent use of so-called 'patriotic' discourse. We were struck by the term's fluidity and its ambiguity, yet its apparent power to excite, inspire and legitimise. We wanted to understand how Orbán used patriotic discourse during his Presidency and what it meant especially in his often-troubled relations with the EU. Our guiding question in the article asks what part patriotic discourse played in this and how it fostered Orbán's illiberal politics locally and transnationally. In the article, we analyse Orbán's frequent use of patriotism in his speeches and interviews during the Presidency period.

As an invocation of attachment and devotion, patriotism relies on 'nation' as a boundary (the *patria*) on which it is dependent. Moffat (2017) points out that transnational populism struggles to construct a politically workable notion of 'the people'. We wonder whether Orbán's commitment to Patriots for Europe (PfE) (in Hungarian, *Hazafiak Európáért*), a transnational grouping within the EU Parliament, is similarly undermined by his fundamental commitment to a singular and pure Hungarian nation. However, patriotism's sheer abstractness, its ambiguity, seems to endorse its generalisable political currency. Importantly, Orbán's invocation of patriotism counters liberal or 'cosmopolitan' iterations of patriotism that embrace a duality of local identity with acknowledged moral obligations to a wider humanity (see, for example, Appiah 1997). Indeed, Orbán seeks to further a singular ethno-cultural Hungarian national identity. During the Presidency, and given his inward-focused perspective, Orbán attempted to share and export his patriotic politics and ideology across the European populist right using the EU as a networking and bridging mechanism. In that, patriotism seemingly provides a discursive cement. We explore this in the article.

The current strengthening of global illiberalism, fostered through transnational alliances of political actors, for example, the Conservative Political Action Conference CPAC), the US Heritage Foundation or Hungary's Institute of Foreign Affairs, renders patriotism especially important as a discursive baseline shared with actors in the transnational political right (Camus 2022; Abrahamson et al. 2024, Caiani & Eren 2025). This article aims to contribute to the broad literature on the intersection of nationalism and populist-patriotism in illiberal politics. In particular, this work adds to the literature on the emotional

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3 We understand illiberalism as an umbrella term that challenges three main principles of liberal democracy: limited power (e.g. rule of law), neutral state (e.g. impartiality, non-discrimination) and open society, (e.g. universalism, tolerance), (Enyedi 2024).

and symbolic politics of belonging, the Hungarian case showing how these are mobilised and woven into political discourse.

The article first establishes the political context of Hungary's Presidency. We then theorise populist-patriotism followed by an overview of methodology before presenting our data analysis. This is followed by a concluding discussion that identifies the significance of patriotism for Hungary and for transnational illiberal politics.

## **Hungary's (populist) Presidency of the European Union Council, July–December 2024**

The rotating EU Council Presidency, chaired by member states, is intended to contribute to progressing and ensuring continuity of the Council's work on EU legislation, promoting good legislative processes and enhancing cooperation among member states (European Council 2025). Perceptions of the Presidency offering opportunities for a member state to promote national issues ('agenda setting') is contested, some analyses suggesting the entrepreneurial aspect of the Presidency (Vaznonyte 2022; Gonzatti & Völker 2025) while others identify this as potentially undermining its mediating functions that necessitate impartiality (Harwood 2025: 720). Accounts of Orbán's Presidency included elements of both these interpretations. In September 2024 the EU Parliament Research Service noted that the priority areas of Hungary's priorities for the Presidency partially 'overlap with the [Council's] Strategic Agenda... but its approach is idiosyncratic.... It does not list among the priorities climate action, equal opportunities, and democracy (including rule of law)' (EPRS 2024: 4). These were priorities for Hungary's 'Trio partners', Spain and Belgium, involved in taking forward the Council's Strategic Agenda but are areas that are deeply contested by right-wing populist politicians.<sup>4</sup>

Hungary's Presidency occurred amid difficult political circumstances for the government: the ongoing war in neighbouring Ukraine, contentious dependencies and relations with Russia and China, recurrent conflict with the EU over migration and 'rule-of-law' matters, challenging economic indicators, accusations of political corruption, sexual abuse scandals in public and religious settings and the sudden rise of an emboldened political opposition.<sup>5</sup> The significance of Hungary's Presidency is difficult to quantify. Outcomes consistent with the view that the Presidency should contribute to progressing the EU Council's work were achieved. These included expanding Schengen, matters concerned with EU enlargement and the Western Balkans accession, and the

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4 By the beginning of the Presidency some EUR 21 billion of EU funding had been frozen (under the conditionality mechanism) because of concerns about, inter-alia, rule of law matters in Hungary.

5 Interestingly, patriotic discourse appears regularly (though differently) in the campaigning of the main opposition party 'Tisza'.

adoption of the Budapest Declaration on New European Competitiveness Deal (Political Capital 2025).

In contrast, Orbán's spectacular and much-publicised series of diplomatic meetings in Ukraine, Russia and China, characterised as 'peace missions', though with no EU mandate, were controversial – especially the meeting in Moscow. They risked overshadowing the Presidency and were regarded by some as undermining the EU's position. In geopolitical terms, especially in contributing to any resolution of Russia's war on Ukraine, the meetings had little apparent impact. Critics of the Hungarian government took a negative view of its Presidency. German Green Party MEP Daniel Freund claimed that 'Viktor Orbán delivered the worst performance in EU history' (Freund 2024), another analyst suggested that 'Orbán used his presidency to gain visibility rather than to attempt advancements towards common European goals' (ECA 2025), whilst one supporter described it as 'one of the most remarkable and successful presidency semesters in recent years' (Scheffer 2024). Though gaining admiration from some, Orbán's Presidency challenged extant EU diplomatic norms, attracting criticism for aggravating already strained relations with EU institutions and other member states.

The Presidency can be understood as a key period in attempting to legitimise Orbán's international standing. It undoubtedly raised Hungary's international profile, contributing to strengthening Orbán's identity as 'statesman' and further established him as a leading light amongst far-right politicians in Europe, Russia and the MAGA movement in the USA. The Presidency also corresponded with Orbán's ongoing attempts to foster a 'European patriotism' now institutionalised in the trans-EU right-wing parliamentary group Patriots for Europe, whose formation was announced by Orbán on 30 June, the day before the Hungarian Presidency began. Orbán contends that PFE are 'the representatives of common sense' (Orbán I 20). Characteristically populist, this claim of common sense suggests that PFE symbolises the 'natural' order, reflecting the interests of 'the people' rather than a liberal elite allegedly represented by Brussels. PFE is based on *ethno-nations* notionally forming a European *ethno-region*, and encompassing the group's manifesto commitments to national sovereignty, identity, tradition as well as freedom and peace. It is now the third largest grouping in the European Parliament, comprising members from thirteen right-wing European parties and described by one analyst as an 'undemocratic organisation of illiberal states' (Hoeksma 2024: 4). The group's manifesto lies under the rubric of 'patriotism', a seemingly virtuous positioning yet obscuring a sometimes-crude nationalism exemplified by long-standing antipathy to migration. Orbán defines Patriots for Europe in binary terms 'as we are patriots this means right wing... Leftists are internationalists' (Föld 2024). Despite PFE's apparently shared ('internationalist') commitment to a European 'patriotism', tensions are evident within the group on policy including EU enlargement, relations with

Russia, NATO membership, support for Ukraine, free movement within the EU and rights issues. Whether Orbán's 'right wing' patriotism can reconcile these differences is an open question.

In the following section we contextualise Orbán's populist-patriotism.

## **Populist-patriotism in Hungary**

As a form of strategic political practice, populism is neither intrinsically politically 'right' nor 'left' but fundamentally concerned with acquiring and sustaining political power on behalf of 'the people', as in Fidesz's version of Hungarian populism. Hungary's prime minister has been described as 'the role model of international right-wing populism' (Mos & Piozevan 2024: 329). Importantly for our argument here, populism can be understood as a political form highly amenable to absorbing content in order to 'signify', to create representations (and, therefore, meaning), through different language forms: textual, visual and so on. Some scholars have argued that populism is 'an empty form to be filled with meaning' (Szebeni and Salojarvi 2022: 815). During his EU Council Presidency, Orbán had much to say about patriotism and its importance for the nation-state and its place in Europe. He constructed narratives of patriotism aimed at both domestic and transnational audiences and supporters, these being disseminated widely through Hungarian and transnational hybrid media sources (broadcast, digital and traditional press). We interpret these as constituting attempts to buttress illiberal political and far-right cooperation across borders. Transnationalism has various permutations and can be defined as the 'multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states' (Vertovec 1999: 447). This multiplicity forms an important site of political engagement for the global far-right. A body of empirical and theoretical work has focused on the growing significance of transnational far-right networks (Caiani 2018; Fangen & Weisskircher 2024). This scholarship traces multiple on and offline transnational practices and political alliance-building developed to counter the alleged erosion of 'traditional' values by left-liberal politics (Calani 2018; Ettliger 2025). The EU provides a rich networked cross-border eco-system for organising cooperation between illiberal populist parties (Zúquete 2015), clearly evident in the EU's Patriots for Europe group, launched as the Hungarian Presidency commenced.

The extensive literature on populism (see, for example, Canovan 1981; Hunger & Paxton 2022) identifies multiple approaches and perspectives. However, we suggest three principal characteristics shaping populist politics, each clearly evidenced in Hungary, contextualising Fidesz's populist-patriotism and forming its underlying logic. First, populism emphasises 'the sovereignty of "the people"' (De Cleen 2017). This entails an antagonism between infinitely malleable and ambiguous discourses of an imagined entity, 'the people', whose interests

populist politicians claim to represent and, similarly ambiguous, corrupt ‘elites’ *against* whom they purport to act on the people’s behalf (Mudde 2004). This purity/corruption binary is central to populism and especially salient in Hungary whose government’s self-representation is symbolic of a pure and *essential* Hungarian-ness (*Magyarság*).

Second, and contrasting with liberal-constitutionalism’s alleged bureaucracy and its agonistic and endless debate (for example, its ‘due diligence’ in relation to environmental and social consequences of policies and their implications for ‘rule of law’), populist ambition seeks to ‘get things done’. This generates antipathy to ‘intermediate’ institutions, networks and actors, (for example, in Hungary NGOs, the EU and the ‘European central state’, the UN, George Soros’s Open Society Foundations<sup>6</sup> and multiple civil society actors) which, these politicians claim, constrain political action (Osborne 2020; Lanczi 2015) and block their unhindered relationship with the people. Orbán’s contempt for EU institutions, as we show in the article, reflects this view.

Third, right-wing populism is often predicated on discourses of nation. So-called ‘origins’ iterations of nation and nationalism rely on appeals to ‘blood and soil’, often drawing on ancient symbolic or cultural forms or invoking elemental ties of race and ethnicity in underpinning nationalist discourses (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991; Smith 2010). A national membership’s apparent *naturalness* encourages cohesion and identity whilst demanding loyalty and allegiance. It necessitates nation as a bounded and reified social form imagined (by populists) as a fixed and ethnically homogenous entity set in separated geographic and cultural space. Nationalism (and patriotism, we argue) is always focused on matters of boundary, inclusion and exclusion, centred on the nation discursively constructed as ‘imagined community’ with an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ and usually coterminous with the nation-state. Hungary’s loss of substantial parts of its territory and population following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 renders this partially problematic. For some, Hungary’s historically *imagined* national boundary (and its national ‘soil’) remains consistent with pre-Trianon geography, thus integrating lost territory and Hungarians ‘beyond the borders’ into the nation, the context for Orbán’s patriotism. In drawing a boundary around the Hungarian nation, Orbán celebrates homeland, an imagined common history and culture in a ‘Europe of nation states’ (Orbán 2025). However, a nation’s imputed historical and cultural commonality is always open to contestation, revision and reinterpretation.<sup>7</sup> Orbán has argued that the future of nations is determined by ‘which community loves its homeland more...

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6 George Soros, Hungarian, liberal, Jewish financier-philanthropist has long been demonised by Fidesz because of his ‘globalism’, ‘open borders’ and promotion of migration into Europe allegedly threaten Hungary’s security.

7 In Hungary this occurred as a consequence of its own historically complex multi-ethnic and religious identity and the idea of an ethnically singular Hungary is illusory (Berend 2001; Molnár 2001).

the most important thing is patriotism' (FEOL 2021). According to Orbán, for Hungarians 'the homeland is immanent, the nation's origin, without patriotism there is no healthy emotional life'. He suggests that Hungarian patriotism (in Hungarian, *hazafiasság* or *hazaszeretet*) is 'in-dwelling', inseparable from a romantic imaginary of the homeland and distinct from the 'post-Christian and post-national state' as he describes much of Europe (Orbán 2021).<sup>8</sup>

Declarations of a political patriotism have become common in populist and illiberal politicians' accounts and defences of their ambitions and programmes. Political communication using appeals to patriotism denotes the expressive power inhering in myths of the pure nation and the nation-state that underlie patriotism and upon which it is dependent and variously mobilised in everyday, routine and 'banal' ways (Brubaker 2004: 120; Billig, op cit: 6).<sup>9</sup> Some of the literature draws a binary distinction between patriotism and nationalism as either 'virtue' or 'vice' (Keller 2005). However, patriotism is broadly theorised in three, sometimes overlapping, forms. First, patriotism's nineteenth century expression in romantic European thought disparages 'national egoism', emphasises devotion and love of country, a way of life and tradition often formed abstractly yet also engendering a spiritual compact between the national and the universal, the particular and the general (Viroli 1995: 125).

Second, patriotism purportedly fosters an affectionate and expressive relationship between members of a (national) community and its 'homeland' (construed as geographic, cultural or social space), abstract values, material cultural practices and imagined history (Tinsley 2021). These are invoked and accredited as superior in comparison with those of (inferior) cultural others. The use of patriotic discourse thus entails the potential exclusion of those unable to share or access that history. In that sense, patriotism's current political utility may lie in bolstering national identities whilst simultaneously excluding or disparaging those categorised as abstract others, suggested in Hungary's pre-occupation with migration questions.

Third, patriotism is understood as a potentially positive moral force (Anderson 1991; Mestrovic 1994). For Durkheim, patriotism includes the capacity for enhancing social solidarity (Turner 2019: 18) and he argues that *patria* can exist in concrete form (e.g. one's own country) or more abstractly and universally as a European or even world *patria* (Pendenza 2014: 160). Durkheim warns of

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8 Christianity is a powerful underlying signifier that offers Fidesz a language of 'historical imagination' emphasising the authority of continuity and tradition (Heller 1999) despite religiosity in Hungary being relatively low (Pew Research Center 2018).

9 Importantly, patriotism is not solely reducible to discourse. It can include instances of embodied 'effervescence' during collective emotional experiences, in politicised form in national commemorations, celebrations or elections. An example is Budapest's ritualised patriotic public performance of nation, the so-called *Békemenet* (*Peace March*), a mass march and political rally, intermittently organised by the Fidesz-supporting *Civil Összefogás Fórum* (CÖF: Civil Unity Forum). Prior to the 2022 parliamentary election, for example, *Magyar Nemzet* daily reported that *Békemenet* attracted half a million marchers.

patriotism's potential for dangerous transformation into its *other*, an unfettered aggressive, militarised and exclusionary nationalism, apparent in the run-up to the First World War (Durkheim 1915). Bellah, reflecting Durkheim's position, similarly proposes a binary between (virtuous/rational) patriotism, 'love of country', and (bad/irrational) nationalism as 'idolatrous worship of country' (2006: 307). For Bellah, nationalist ideology is fundamentally exclusionary and contrasts with patriotism's alleged appeal to shared universal civic values. In current political circumstances, the binary's instability is evident. Patriotism's parasitic dependency on nation (as in Hungary) suggests that it always contains the potential for the identification of 'the other' and its exclusion.

This literature illustrates the ambiguity (and tension) surrounding the idea of patriotism, crucial in understanding how its political utility is mobilised. We argue that the distinction between positive or virtuous patriotism and negative destructive nationalism is overemphasised and unhelpful. The potential for patriotism's negative or positive effects is constantly present. As part of strategic political practice, patriotism is often deployed instrumentally by political elites soliciting identification, compelling loyalty or compliance from patriotic subjects and, as now in the Hungarian context, encouraging struggle or resistance against some *other*. As Orbán recently observed, 'in Europe, in the Western world, in the internal struggle, the liberals are losing, and the patriots are winning. The biggest victory in this regard is the victory of US President Donald Trump' (Magyar Nemzet 2024). Though patriotism claims an implicit virtue framed in terms of affection, allegiance, identification and sacrifice in the name of 'patria', it is used, in common with nationalism, to largely further the political aims and interests of elites. Both nationalism and patriotism's linguistic forms and associated claims-making practices may work on different registers but, currently at least, they exist within broadly similar discursive spaces. They may emphasise different attributes or tendencies, yet both are primarily attuned to boundaries delineated by nation or nation-state implying either inclusion or exclusion. This means that nationalism and patriotism are most usefully understood as overlapping and flexible political languages denoting insider/outsider-ship (Brubaker 2004) and deployed in different forms and settings to appeal to and mobilise loyalty and allegiance in the pursuit of power. In this article, we approach our data from that perspective.

## Methodology

Our research interest in this article lies in analysing Viktor Orbán's discursive use of patriotism during the 2024 Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council. We understand this as part of Orbán's project of disseminating his worldview domestically and transnationally. Rotating member state presidents, it is argued, have 'significant agenda-setting powers... and are able to obtain policy outcomes

closer to their ideal preferences' (Van Gruisen 2019: 694). It is difficult to know the extent to which of Orbán's 'ideal preferences', as expressed in speeches and interviews during the Presidency, were translated to policy. Turbulent EU politics and Orbán's reputation due to Hungary's persistent EU rule of law and corruption deficiencies are likely to have had a bearing. However, as a defined period in which Orbán's ideas were made very clear, the Presidency offered a specific case study for analysing his political discourse and especially his use of patriotism. The expression of political aims during the Presidency was, we argue, especially significant for transnational constituencies within Europe and elsewhere with whom Orbán seeks to further relationships. Our analysis identifies Orbán's understanding of patriotism and how multiple strands of a fluid discursive patriotism were mobilised to establish and further political agendas. As well as being aimed at transnational audiences, extracts from his speeches and interviews were widely distributed throughout Hungary's domestic hybrid media landscape in various forms: radio, television, newspapers, magazines, billboards and so on. In this article we present a thematic analysis of the transcripts of these speeches and interviews, exploring discourses of patriotism, its meaning and performative political potential in Europe and beyond. We suggest that the co-option of patriotism is becoming plain in the transnational right's political script, and our analysis of this in Hungary offers insights into patriotism's political utility.

Speeches and interviews (and their texts) are pervasive forms of political communication, important components in political 'fields of action' (Wodak 2001: 66). As texts they are *performative* in the sense that they are not simply accounts or descriptions of some extant reality; rather they work to organise knowledge and construct the terms in which their objects can be understood. They comprise groups 'of statements which provide a language... a way of representing... a particular kind of knowledge' (Hall 1992: 44) which shapes meaning and conduct within the realities constructed by their discourse. As well as positioning Orbán, these interviews and speeches (and their texts) position audiences (domestic and other audiences) through various narrative devices, for example the use of symbols and metaphors, analogy, myth, voice and the emotional appeal of 'deep stories' (Hochschild 2016).

Throughout the process we endeavoured to stay reflexively aware of our own assumptions and any biases that might shape our understanding of the texts, our analysis of them and our interpretations of their contents (Trundle et al. 2025). A broad critical discourse analysis approach was adopted as methodologically appropriate to the task of analysing such texts because of its emphasis on the performativity of language in the realisation, exercise and reproduction of political power (Fairclough 1995; Wodak & Meyer 2001). We began by obtaining transcripts of 27 interviews and 36 speeches given by Viktor Orbán during Hungary's 1 July to 31 December 2024 Presidency. These are

available on the Hungarian government website in Hungarian, English and German. Each official English transcript was searched for references to 'patriot', 'patriotic' and 'patriotism', and the corresponding Hungarian transcripts for 'patrióta', its close associates, 'hazafi', its associates and 'hazaszerető' and its associates. We examined the context of the terms in the transcripts to understand how they were being used. Of the 27 interviews conducted during the Presidency and available on the government website, 15 contained references to 'patriot' or associates (either in Hungarian or English) and of the 36 speeches, 11 contained references to 'patriot' or associates (either in Hungarian or English). These references increased towards the end of the Presidency period, perhaps encouraged by the election of Donald Trump who was represented in the texts as emblematic of Orbán's notion of patriotism. It was evident that the key terms identified above were used in very similar ways in the speeches particularly, perhaps because they drew on similar sources and content. Interviews, on the other hand, necessitate a speaker responding to questions in real-time and they showed evidence of more diverse and reflective statements.

Having traced the location of terms in the transcripts we read and re-read the sections of the transcripts in which they appeared. This enabled contextualisation and consideration of the 'problems' that were being created in their representations of the world, the underlying assumptions, how subjects and institutions were positioned, 'absences' and how all these were represented and articulated in political space, raising inevitable questions about political interests (Bacchi 2012). From the original key words, we identified initial codes emerging from our data, similar to a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967), and informed deductively by our theoretical interest in patriotism as political discourse. We systematically compared these codes and collated them to form analytic themes which we understand as recurrent clusters or patterns of meaning distributed throughout the data. These were reviewed and refined to construct a discursive topography – that is, a thematic map of the data set (Ripley 2011: 274). The analysis in the following section is presented as four themes. In this article we draw on data from 15 interviews and three speeches.

We should note that working across two different languages raises particular methodological challenges. Translation of terms from one language to another must recognise porous and sometimes problematic boundaries, as meaning is culturally made and re-made (Tyulenev 2023: 212). For example, knowing what counts discursively as 'patriotic', either in English or Hungarian, is not always entirely clear. Acknowledging these terms' shifting cultural meanings, we were sensitive to the potentially different associations that they have in the two languages. In practice we relied on the speaker's contextual use of language to guide us. One of the article's authors is a non-native intermediate-level Hun-

garian speaker but guidance was taken from a native speaker, informing our approach and understanding of meaning and significance. Although the data are specific to the Hungarian context, we suggest that they can contribute to developing exemplars which enable generalisation to other settings (Flyvbjerg 2001: 73–74) in which discourses of patriotism are deployed politically by the transnational populist illiberal right.

## Data analysis: Hungary's patriotic EU Presidency

We present our analysis under four sub-headings which derive from the themes identified in the data analysis and constructed from the coding process. They map a political ontology of Orbán's populist patriotism that was evident throughout his Presidency. Of course, these themes as 'materialised' linguistic forms extracted from Orbán's talk were present prior to and following the Presidency period. Indeed, patriotism has become an almost ever-present motif in his discourse. The Presidency gave an opportunity to *formally* or *officially* disseminate these ideas, the point being that the Presidency should be understood as an institutionalised source of power, albeit time-limited and temporary, that facilitated Orbán's presentations.

The four themes through which we organise our data are interconnected and mutually referential but not, we suggest, overlapping in the sense that one theme simply repeats or negates another. The themes interlace, appearing and reappearing through the data, forming an underlying structure and rationale to Orbán's patriotic discourse. In reading the texts and listening to his speeches and interviews, one is struck by so many elements being skilfully integrated under the rubric of patriotism or rendered in some way patriotic. Hence, patriotism's identification here as a 'floating signifier', which we discuss as part of the first theme, below. Perhaps inevitably, patriotism's dependence on nation evokes notions of boundary, insides and outsides, belonging and otherness, and we discuss aspects of these in the data. The idea of home and a homeliness under attack is, as we show here, central to Orbán's patriotism and the necessity of protective battle and struggle against hostile and predatory (external and internal) monsters and the monstrous is made clear. Finally, we think it possible to detect Orbán's sense of hope in his patriotism, again marked by boundaries, in this instance between a liberal dystopia and a utopian future marked by developments, real, anticipated or imagined, in transnational illiberal politics.

Data extracts are referenced with either 'Interview' (I) or 'Speech' (S) and a number. So, (Orbán, 2024, I 01) is interview number 1 and (Orbán, 2024, S 06) is speech number 6. They are included in the article's bibliography.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> All are accessible on the Hungarian Government Cabinet Office website: <https://kormany.hu/miniszterelnoki-kabinetiroda>

## a) Orbán on patriotism

Orbán's speeches and interviews contain references to patriotism as a sometimes abstract, ambiguous, yet invariably virtuous, idea as well as it being part of the title of his political affiliation within the EU, 'Patriots for Europe'. It is often difficult to comprehend precisely what Orbán (like others) understands or means by patriotism as there is slippage between usages. Orbán's patriotism slides from 'romantic' notions to patriotism as a tool for stimulating politically adversarial discourse and practices. That capacity for shifting meaning empowers patriotism as political discourse, rendering it highly malleable.

In an interview with Hungarian state television at the start of the Presidency in July 2024, Orbán was asked whether patriotism undermines commitment to an international alliance – PfE, for example. Though not responding to the suggestion of tension between the particular and the universal implicit in the question, Orbán attempted to pin down the idea of patriotism. 'The starting point is that we love our country, we love our country passionately. This is patriotic feeling. It's also called nationalism. There are two kinds: the good and the bad.' This mirrors the binary identified in the literature between virtuous patriotism which includes a commitment to 'universals', and destructive nationalism which, for Orbán, is the 'bad' kind characterised by those 'who love their country while trampling others underfoot... who love their own country against others are usually considered chauvinists and bad nationalists'. Authentic (virtuous) patriotism, it seems, is non-transactional; patriots love their country intrinsically, for its own sake, for

its culture, language, achievements, land, geography, family, history... cemeteries... churches... our children, and our future; this is what we love. This isn't aimed against anyone. And we don't want a Europe that takes away, diminishes, erases everything that is important to us as patriots. (Orbán I 01)

Contradictions exist between the neo-romantic patriotism expressed here and Fidesz's ethno-nationalism, the latter easily, it seems, accommodated by the former. This suggests patriotism's inexorable potential for the creation and exclusion of the *other* (Tinsley 2021). For example, migration and migrants are represented as a primary threat to the nation and the national 'home'. Orbán explains that inward migration would erode Hungarians' identity as migrants will

change the cultural context of the country, we will lose our sense of homeliness... One does not want to be a tourist in one's own country, but rather to be at home, and this is very strong in Hungarians. Hungarians are a very patriotic and family-loving people, and therefore solving the demographic problem in Hungary with foreigners or strangers is unthinkable. (Orbán I 14)

These expressions are set in cultural space where this patriotic imaginary is threatened not only by migration, but by an imperious EU and the political left seeking to encourage inward migration to Europe. George Soros is, of course, the principal adversary here. We return to this point.

Throughout these interviews and across Orbán's speeches, patriotism emerges as a dynamic yet ambiguous *signifier*, a locus from which Orbán's politics can be tracked, either domestically or in the context of transnational/trans-EU settings. It is difficult, however, to understand this discourse of patriotism as having any 'anchored' form. It occupies no singular space and, apparently, contains no clear or fixed 'signified'. In Orbán's usage, the idea of patriotism can be almost infinitely extended, stretched to legitimise political aspirations and projects deriving from populist iterations of 'the people':

since people want peace instead of war... People want migration to be stopped... People don't want their families to be made into jokes, and the family bond that is important to them, which organises life around a man, a woman, and raising children, is ridiculed by all sorts of other forms of coexistence that have been raised to the same level, let's call it simply gender. (Orbán I 03)

Discourses of patriotism absorb and circulate these political messages and almost anything can apparently be construed as having patriotic possibilities.

In his discussion of the social production of political meaning, Laclau (2005: 305) suggests that 'the plurality of discourses interrupting each other' renders some signifiers unfixed, unanchored or indeterminate. Patriotism is one such. This is especially marked in contemporary media eco-systems where signifiers – like patriotism – proliferate, transmute and become repositioned. Laclau refers to these indeterminate entities as 'floating' signifiers, unfixed yet absorbing meaning from different sources and, potentially, recirculating meanings that rarely remain static or stable. These meanings are never simply the property of the signifier; patriotism is not a fixed essence or entity. Patriotism's meaning is formed in practices – in discourse – in which it is appropriated, redefined and used by actors to create meaning in a signifying field (Hall 1997: 24). Orbán's patriotic discourse can, we suggest, be understood as such a floating signifier, difficult to define yet having adequate traction, especially at an expressive level, to be of political utility.

In recent years, appeals to patriotism have become more frequent in Hungarian government discourse, precisely because it appears to have become a powerful and emotive discursive tool in the realisation of political power. Patriotism's pliability, its elusiveness, its resistance to fixed definition and absence of anchorage becomes a politically valorising feature in its signifying capacity. Its expansive and ambiguous status leads almost naturally to a further chain of signifiers that colonise diverse political and policy territories (peace, migra-

tion, gender, family and so on) constituting a discourse of patriotism, whose value emerges in a range of settings. Of course, it is not only in Hungary where patriotic discourse's political utility is evident. Trump, the MAGA movement and others also sequester patriotism as their own, whilst similarly claiming to reflect the authentic voice of the people.

## **b) On boundaries and binaries**

Throughout these interviews and speeches, we find references to different kinds of boundaries as social, cultural, spatial and temporal borders. Late modernity's uncertainties, fears and anxieties create multiple boundary crises. Questions of precarity and inequality, financial and economic challenges associated with neo-liberalism, the politicisation of migration, terrorism, competing ideas of identity, challenges to custom and individualisation suggest the contingency of contemporary social life (Bauman 2007). Temporally, much of Orbán's analysis of the present-day world expresses a sense of longing or lament. It relies on a nostalgic version of a historical past in which navigating the social world is imagined as having been simpler, the social bond characterised by a shared morality and similarity rather than difference. The texts here suggest that the Fidesz political world is shaped by boundaries (drawn implicitly from 'tradition') that offer certainty, fixity and binaries that enable the world to be represented and understood in relatively simple terms. As an attempt to evade modernity's ambiguities this creates conditions in which population – society – becomes the object of *government*, the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault 1983: 221). As part of the broader exercise of political power these interviews and speeches (and their texts), thus, have pedagogic functions,<sup>11</sup> they distribute discourses of what is 'thinkable' (and 'unthinkable') in Hungarian identity and culture. Within this, the ritualised media-disseminated vilification of *others* (as actors, institutions or ideas: liberals, 'Brussels' or 'gender', for example) is performatively juxtaposed with a version of normative cultural expectations and obligations, often represented as tradition and purportedly embodied by Fidesz and Orbán. Patriotism is the discursive medium in which these binaries and boundaries are constructed and through which they are distributed. They rest on a popularised version of 'global crisis' – exemplified by Huntington's post-cold war 'clash of civilisations' argument, exhaustively critiqued elsewhere (e.g. Orsi 2018; Said 2001). However, its re-deployment in Orbán's (and others on the radical-right) sometimes apocalyptic utterances attests to an enduring influence, especially in the capacity to justify and legitimise illiberal and authoritarian politics in simple bounded terms.

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11 They are intended to influence audiences within Hungarian society's 'expressive' domain, dealing with the transmission of moral order, especially matters of consensus and difference.

The texts pose a range of dualities which, Orbán asserts, underlie politics in Hungary and more broadly signify a ‘great civilisational struggle... taking place in the Western world’ (Orbán I 25). The binaries include reductive abstract entities: leftist/rightist; liberal-progressive/patriotic forces; westerners/patriots; west/central Europe; nation-state/post-nationalism; loyalty/betrayal. Equally attenuated yet *embodied* binaries emerge around fixed notions of sexuality or ethnicity, crystallised in ‘gender’ and ‘migration’ discourses. On one side of each binary a discourse of patriotism is located in relation to its *other*. Sometimes specific actors are identified as the bearers and defenders of patriotism.

Everything we hold dear is under full-spectrum attack... including in politics, but also in sport, the media, entertainment, everywhere.... As patriots, we must stand up for our country and our national identity, otherwise it will be devoured by attacks. (Orbán I 04)

Alongside this is a view in which patriotic discourse absorbs elements beyond a simple spatialised romantic patria and in which a patriotic politics is organised ‘against migration... [which] protects families and children... that’s pro-peace and not pro-war... that finally brings order to the economy’ (Orbán I 22). For Orbán, Hungary exemplifies this as ‘an island of difference... conservative, Christian, national... not part of the liberal [European] ocean’ (Orbán I 13). Clearly, binaries ensure that ‘otherness’ can be made to exist in multiple forms, suggesting a view of an ambiguous yet bounded patriotism under threat by a range of ‘liberal’ others.

Metaphors of battle and warfare have long been normalised in Orbán’s media communications (Szabó 2020) and are evident here. In an October 2024 speech to the Lega per Salvini Premier in Italy, Orbán explained that PfiE’s aim is to defeat ‘the Empire’: Brussels. The spaces of the EU’s central powers, both geographical and discursive, enmesh the struggle, at the utopian end of which ‘Paris will turn around, we will take back Warsaw.... Then we will take Brussels politics into our hands and make Europe great, strong, secure, rich and free again. We, Patriots, can do this!’ (Orbán S 06). PfiE ‘have a war plan... how we will develop cooperation with European conservatives... the real Christian democratic right and tradition are with the patriots’ (Orbán I 27). The task is to resist and eliminate ‘Brussels’ liberal, bureaucratic, centralising ambitions’ (Orbán I 24). As Orbán’s Presidency advanced, Donald Trump’s parallel election focused further attention on the patriotism of struggle. Trump is a ‘determined actor, prepared for a civilizational struggle, a struggle for the soul and future of the West... [he] has stepped on the side of the patriots... on the side of life’ (Orbán I 26). The struggle between binaries is presented as rooted in destiny,

a battle between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’, between life and, Orbán implies, death.<sup>12</sup> These references suggest how transnational links have capacity for nurturing illiberalism and authoritarianism, patriotism as a discursive catchall, sufficiently ambiguous yet also retaining adequate signifying traction to focus the struggle. It is easy to see how, given the drama of Orbán’s account of battle, oppositional forces can readily be understood as monstrous and monsters. We now turn to consider Fidesz’s monsters.

### **c) Patriotism’s foes: Multiple monsters**

We explore here the figure of the monster and the concept of haunting, both present in these texts. This uncanny turn arises in the mobilisation of neo-nationalist/populist discourse reproduced both in the delivery of and repurposing of tropes from ‘imagined’ pasts, but also significantly in the rendering of the monstrous *other* in the present to be repelled from the nation/home. The *monstrous* takes a variety of forms: from the globalist demon Soros to the nameless Muslim hordes massing as unwanted and unwarranted refugees and economic migrants at the border fence (Barna & Koltai 2019; Kalmar 2020; Sata 2023). Fortress Europe is besieged; Hungary is her protector. The role of the ‘good’ patriot becomes that of valiant knight, as embattled protector of an ethno-nationalist kinfolk and tradition. Such discourses are threaded through populist-patriot leader speeches globally, Orbán’s being no exception.

Freud’s concept of *das unheimliche* is helpful here (Freud 2003). Whilst in English this is often translated directly as ‘the uncanny’, in German it contains a play on words and *heimlich* can mean the homely or familiar. Thus, *unheimliche* would suggest something that upends or challenges the boundaries of the home: the metaphorical ‘haunted house’. Orbán repeatedly returns to representations of the nation as home, and the importance of the creation of homeliness. The battle posed is to drive out the ‘unfamiliar’ presence, people, cultural practices and discourses that pose an uncanny abject threat to the ‘known’ familiar homeland, ‘Hungarians think, and they’re right – they’ll [migrants] displace us from our own country. They’ll change the cultural context of the country, and we’ll lose our sense of home’ (Orbán I 14). Thus, to be patriotic is to sustain and nurture the known-familiar or risk intergenerational cultural dilution and erasure. As Orbán observes:

The issue of home is at the heart of the domestic political problem that is straining Westerners in the whole migration pact. There are two ways to lose your home. One is that you are being dragged away from your home. The other is

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12 The absent reference here to death is, we suggest, a reference to Russia’s war with Ukraine. The pro-Fidesz slogan ‘Nem fogunk meghalni Ukrajnáért’ (‘We will not die for Ukraine’) has been evident in Hungary during the war.

that you stay at home, but suddenly everything around you changes without your consent. You realize that the sense of homeliness in which you lived your life and which you wanted for your children and grandchildren has disappeared. And what's more, it has disappeared irretrievably. There is no greater political problem than this. (Orbán S 12)

As we see here, the crisis posed by these monstrous others is fundamentally existential. By repeating the multitude of threats, one might question the underpinning frailties anxiously evoked. Whilst the good, European, patriotic Hungarian is culturally and morally righteous in such language, peril lurks everywhere threatening the erosion of this fragile normality. Thus, politics becomes a hegemonic struggle framed in existential terms.

Invocation of the monstrous other renders populist-patriotism both normative and exclusionary (Puar & Rai 2002). Drawing on Foucault's work on the *abnormal* (see Foucault 2016), Puar & Rai argue that patriotism is often constructed as a heteronormative moral bulwark against the monsters within and at the gate, sexual deviants engaging in non-procreative sex, sexuality and gendered difference. Throughout these texts Orbán reaffirms such immutable sex-gender binaries, traditional family relations and a fixed and 'traditional' gendered and sexual division of labour.

It's the same with gender. I was born in a world – and Hungary is still in a world – in which we know that someone is either a man or a woman. In the West it's already thought that people are not binary beings. But then what are they? There are huge problems here. If we don't put our foot down and stand our ground, we'll see the overthrow of the world in which we can live lives most worthy of humans, in which a woman is a woman, the French are French, Hungarians are Hungarian and Americans are American. There's a worldwide campaign being waged against our values. Well, this is where we must resist. (Orbán I 04)

Humanity and a liveable life for good patriots is at risk. 'Putting our foot down' is necessary in resisting this creeping confusion about gendered and national identity, seemingly at risk of flux. Patriots have entered the transnational culture wars raging against gender ideology and 'foreign' deviant desiring bodies and practices in a series of moral panics (Bogaards & Pető 2022; Takács Fobear & Schmitsek 2022; Szelewa & Szikra 2024). The triple peril of 'gender ideology', LGBTQ+ rights and the dangers of miscegenation<sup>13</sup> must be repelled for the purity and

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13 In a July 2022 speech in Băile Tușnad, Transylvania, Orbán warned about the perils of racial mixing between Europeans and non-Europeans suggesting that where 'races' mix, the nation's existence is eroded. This echoes the Great Replacement theory voiced by transnationalist and US Far Right groups. See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/27/viktor-orban-mixed-race-cpac/>

safety of the nation's children.<sup>14</sup> It is the citizen's patriotic duty to ensure a heterosexual future for the ethnic-kin-nation repelling unnatural desires to ensure the ethnic purity of the nation and of Europe (Glass & Fodor 2022; Rasmussen 2023). This speaks to how concepts of patriotism are deployed strategically in the construction and maintenance of illiberal democracy. Themes of dystopian monsters, boundary flux and cultural demise frame the vivid imaginary of a conjured disgust (Ahmed 2004). The patriot is constructed via what they are not, by what is absent. But this in turn requires much discursive graft in maintaining fraying and anxiety-ridden boundaries guided by utopian-dystopian haunting potentialities.

#### **d) Patriotism, utopias and dystopias**

Utopias and dystopias have long captivated sociological, political and literary imaginaries. Kafka, Orwell, Krasznahorkai and Atwood's alarming depictions of dystopic worlds contain cultural currency as frightening visions of an imagined future. Dystopia especially seems to lend itself to framing existing real-time crises: climate change, Covid-19, multiple wars, cultural, economic and political breakdown. Populist politicisations of dystopia simultaneously arouse and frame utopian desire and longing and have a metaphorical relationship with perceived social conditions and change. Utopias are screens 'for modernity's self-consciousness' (Beilharz 1989: 151), defining a 'politics which wishes to change the system radically' (Jameson 2004: 35). Orbán's utopias, emerging at a time of political and economic crisis, express radical desires for a 'patriotic' world of peace and prosperity free of accumulated liberal detritus. However, it is not simply the content or object of utopia that is important, rather the form of its desire; utopians 'have a radical implausible desire to negate something in the world' (Rose 2022: 27). That negation is intended to shape a society depicted in terms of how it *should* be. We encounter expressions of such desire throughout these interviews and speeches.

For Orbán, the 'great dystopia' undermining Hungarian patriotism can be traced to the pre-1989 period.

The communist ravages eliminated the very environment that makes this patriotic lifestyle possible, taking responsibility for oneself and one's community... the communists... wanted to force down our throats that the nation is not a value, there is no God, and the homeland, like everything else, is for sale. (Orbán S 31).

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<sup>14</sup> Fidesz policy has long been antagonistic to LGBT rights on the grounds that this is a corrupting influence on the nation's children. This anti-LGBT strategy has taken the form of a range of legal measures curtailing rights, from the 2021 Child Protection Law restricting media content on LGBT issues and banning their depiction in schools, a referendum focusing on the LGBT threat in 2022 and, more recently, outlawing Pride events (18 March 2025). Such measures have been critiqued by the European Commission and advocates for the European Court of Justice.

In this account communist tyranny was later supplanted by a liberal-imperialist European Union dramatically epitomising fresh dystopia that all patriots oppose. However, Brussels has become ‘the liberals’ last bridgehead, stronghold or citadel – to which they’ve been pushed back... the land of Mordor, the Dark Lord has withdrawn behind his battlements here, and now it’s the only place where liberals can be found’ (Orbán I 24). The reference to ‘the land of Mordor’ may be read as a reflection of far-right politicians’ (Giorgia Meloni and JD Vance, are examples) contested capture of Tolkien’s ‘Lord of the Rings’ narrative (Eaton 2024; Wren 2024), a mythologised traditionalist world, a potent symbol of unambiguous ontologies and pure identities allegedly almost eradicated through (liberal) modernity’s claims to progress. Orbán’s narrative hints at a kind of Nietzschean tragedy, the loss of a mythic homeland (see references in the previous section) and desire for return to a simpler, better and, perhaps for him, rather more *enchanted* world. Earlier references to civilisational struggle and change align with this. References in some interviews to Manfred Weber,<sup>15</sup> a ‘notorious Hungary-hater, pro-war [in Ukraine], pro-migration person’ (Orbán I 03) may also cast the anti-patriot Weber as the powerful manipulative Dark Lord, Morgoth or Sauron. In this respect, Weber doubtless competes with Soros. Though suggesting the potency of myth, these references may also acknowledge Orbán’s place in a transnational patriotic political constituency (including Meloni and Vance), an imagined community holding shared myths of dystopia/utopia codified through explicit references to Tolkien’s fantasy novel.

In an interview with Austrian Television, Orbán skilfully juxtaposed dystopic and utopian narratives, suggesting that Hungary is already a utopian space that threatens liberal European politics because ‘we are successful’. Patriotic Hungary is compared with liberal, progressive (dystopic) ‘Europe’. Hungary has no migrants, therefore

there is no terrorist threat... because migration always goes hand in hand with crime and terrorism. Migration also means higher levels of anti-Semitism, which we do not have in Hungary... [and] no homophobia in Hungary either, and the threat to women’s equality is also a problem of migration: this is not the case in Hungary either. (Orbán I 13)

This politicised (and imagined) utopia/dystopia dyad framed as Hungary/Europe, is a potentially powerful narrative form that relies on simple binaries and ambiguous yet appealing signifiers. Its imputed *patriotic* themes are consistent throughout: the primacy of homeland, anti-migration, anti-war, pro-peace, anti-

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15 Leader of the EU’s European People’s Party Group, a competitor group to PFE and with whom Orbán has had a long-running hostility.

-gender, family-friendly, Christian, Europe of nations are grounded in a politics which will, according to Orbán, instigate a utopia,

a change within Western civilisation... of historic proportions: moving our lives from war to peace; from a world of economic misery, suffering and high inflation to economic success; from a sense of insecurity to security; from a world of gender madness to a world of protecting families; from a policy of supporting migration to a policy of protecting borders instead of a demented policy. (Orbán I 23)

During the EU Council Presidency period, and despite the disclaimer that ‘President Trump isn’t our saviour, but our brother-in-arms, a patriot who’s fighting for the same values in his world as we’re fighting for here in Hungary’ (Orbán I 25), Orbán depicted Donald Trump as the messianic agent of political and civilisational change. His unquestioning faith in Trump’s election, signalling the ‘the biggest victory of the patriots over the liberals’ (Orbán I 24), reappears throughout these interviews and speeches. Trump ‘has made it clear that he’ll end this war in Ukraine within twenty-four hours. So if he wins there will be a ceasefire at the very least’ (Orbán I 01). Trump is the key to civilisational transformation, the co-agent and catalyst for new utopian times. As Mannheim long ago observed, a ‘state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs’ (1936; 1979: 173). Desire, it seems, often wins out over reason.

## Concluding discussion

In this article we have explored Orbán’s use of patriotic discourse in his speeches and interviews during his Presidency of the European Union Council. Our work suggests that patriotism was used to underpin and legitimise an illiberal worldview to both domestic and transnational audiences. Importantly, patriotism was often deployed antagonistically, instrumentalised against the imputed ‘left-liberal’ EU. The irony here was striking as it suggested that the prime minister of an EU member state, as rotating president of the EU Council, used a central institution of the (liberal) EU to castigate the EU itself in the pursuit of illiberal ends.<sup>16</sup> This warrants further research.

We acknowledge the methodological limitations of the work and we cannot claim to be able to generalise directly from the Hungarian case. Nevertheless, analysis of patriotic discourse’s emergence and political use in Hungary and its

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16 In Hungary’s 21 years of EU membership, it has received some EUR 68 billion in EU funding (although currently frozen), contributing annually up to 3.5% of GDP (GKI 2025). Orbán’s deployment of patriotic discourse during a high-profile period offers an interesting example of a prime minister seemingly biting the hand that feeds them.

dissemination through illiberal and far-right alliances sheds light on its importance in transnational contexts. Patriotism, as we have shown in Hungary's case, and we believe elsewhere, is a powerful, flexible and appealing political signifier. Allegedly innocent of the accusations levelled at nationalism, it has considerable potential for legitimating populist illiberal politics.

The Hungarian Presidency had mixed policy outcomes including some acknowledged successes. However, and more importantly, Viktor Orbán exploited the opportunity to draw from and use the symbolic capital that accrues to the Presidency to disseminate his worldview, emphasising his political identity domestically and transnationally and strengthening relationships with other illiberal politicians. We have shown that the Presidency gave Orbán a platform to further his populist-patriotism, in effect to promote his 'ideal preferences' outlining a world of patriotic politics and contrasting that with a dystopian imaginary of a liberal order. The Presidency provided opportunities for Orbán to further his criticism of The EU and 'Brussels', for Orbán the 'Land of Mordor',<sup>17</sup> in the context of launching the Patriots for Europe group in the European Parliament. Patriotic discourse was used to condemn EU institutions, facilitated by the institution of the Presidency itself. As such, and reflecting Durkheim and Bellah, for example, patriotism forms a shorthand for commitment and allegiance to a shared yet imagined *national* community which, in Hungary and for Orbán, is the ethno-cultural nation on which patriotism relies.

Orbán's Presidency can also be understood as an example of the *paradoxical* retreat from global liberalism into local nationalism/patriotism which is discursively and strategically mobilised *transnationally* via local deployment of 'global culture wars'. As Orbán demonstrates, the patriot remains curiously parochial yet discursively global. This productive tension between local and global/transnational 'patriotism' is also highlighted in the PFE group. Our data analysis suggests that patriotism seems to act as a kind of 'code' adopted by these actors, representing what they share, ignoring or glossing over what is not shared and differentiating the content and mode of their politics from other political perspectives. However, as patriotism relies on underlying discourses of a bounded nation, one wonders how stable this code, its associated community and its politics might be beyond the single nation. This may have implications for the PFE group and warrants further research.

We have shown that patriotism as discourse has potential as a powerful and enduring political tool. Theoretically, we share the analysis that understands patriotism and nationalism as being languages of political practice. Patriotism is important as a language through which popular, and especially *populist*, politics is conducted, framing 'political arguments by appealing to the patria,

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17 Orbán's appropriation of Tolkienesque intertextual references can be read as a possible signalling, an acknowledgement of shared membership in the transnational illiberal imagined political community.

the fatherland, the country, the Nation' (Brubaker 2004: 120). Its historically embedded appeal to spiritual unity and the preservation of nation's common culture carries deep emotional resonance (Viroli 1995: 114) and is readily amenable to political exploitation. Its capacity as a language to create identification and solidarity, understood as morally virtuous, is mirrored by its ironic facility for initiating and furthering political conflict, implying patriotism's exclusionary potential. Thus, and paradoxically, patriotism is often currently deployed antagonistically, making and marking political boundaries between, for example, a *patriotic* Hungary and (in Viktor Orbán's estimation) a 'left-liberal' globalised EU. Transiting between virtue and vice, patriotism can simultaneously exploit the language and practice of inclusion and exclusion. We have identified numerous examples of Orbán using this language in the effort to inspire or incite. As we have seen, the boundary between patriotism and nationalism is blurred and porous due to the inherent ambivalence of both. Orbán apparently recognises that 'patriotic feeling [is]... also called nationalism. There are two kinds: the good and the bad'. In this he echoes much of the literature, but the point here is that patriotism and nationalism imply both inclusion and exclusion. Virtuous ('good') patriotism always has the potential for transformation to something sinister.

The patriot (and patriotism) as an ideological vessel is overloaded with shifting and multiple meanings, constituting it as a floating signifier absorbing and disseminating meaning ('signifieds') across the political field. We teased out how its discursive strands were mobilised in attempts to legitimise Orbán's local and transnational political ambitions during the Hungarian Presidency. Our analysis of Orbán's recent use of nationalist patriotic-political discourse suggests that patriotism is freighted with contextual meaning yet is perpetually slippery. Understanding patriotism's emotional loading is vital. In his discussion of the nation-state's successful emergence as central to modernity, Eagleton suggests this

is not least because it harnesses the most tenaciously 'imaginary' sentiments, in the name of which men and women will readily surrender their lives, to the impersonal symbolic order of law, commerce, justice and citizenship. (2009: 52)

So it is with patriotism. It can best be understood as shifting and pliable, absorbing and reflecting meaning and, as we have noted, almost anything can be placed under the rubric of patriotism and designated patriotic: Elements from gender, to ethnicity, to peace, to landscapes, to traditions, to religion and so on can apparently be shaped and used as patriotic symbols. Patriotism's power derives from its ambiguity, matched by its capacity for irony and paradox, its status as a floating signifier denoting a symbol sufficiently flexible and open to multiple contextual interpretations yet concrete enough to enable it to be used

to political advantage. Thus, the patriot becomes a figure both curiously static yet perpetually in flux. It is constantly made and re-made, its relation to the nation-state partly determined by the re-formulation of old and newer binary borders and foes. Indeed, the certainty and proximity of the constructed *other* is vital in shaping the patriot and patriotism. Populist politicians, it seems, need their monsters to mark boundaries.

Patriotism matters because it has great political utility. As discourse it is versatile and flexible. It underpins aspects of the organising logic of contemporary illiberal democracy within and across transnational contexts, nourished via connection and contrast with the pervasive dystopian other whilst expressing aspects of a contrasting utopian desire. Yet whether destiny, tradition, religion, common-sense or patriotism forms the legitimising power, utopian desire's shadow is ever-present in the face of contingency and the evident impossibility of realisation. Disappointment emerges in the space between an imagined utopian future and the constraints of the empirical 'here and now'. The rapid growth in support for the political opposition in Hungary, for example, at the time of writing ahead in the polls, suggests growing popular disappointment with both Fidesz's political achievements and its utopian ambitions. Of course, the anxieties and uncertainties that emerge in late modernity reflect real human concerns and needs, experiences and questions surrounding 'home' and 'homeliness', for example. However, utopian fantasies of radical 'civilisational change' as response, though seductive for some, seem illusory and destined to further disappoint. When accompanied by radical populist interventions in the economy, as in Trump's United States or Milei's Argentina, for example, it is difficult to see how these can offer a stable reflection or resolution of 'the people's' real interests or needs. Despite this, iterations of 'new' utopian patriotisms are emerging globally, presently exemplified by 'Patriots for Europe', and in some places seem to lead to political success. The reshaping of the transnational or global 'patriot' as symbolic carrier of political discourse is a vital area for further research in understanding and re-imagining the cultural fabric of illiberal and authoritarian states.

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**Dr Simon Bradford** was Reader in Social Science at Brunel University of London until he recently retired. He is now a research affiliate at Brunel. His research interests are connected with the sociology of youth and education, the sociology of professions, and politics and society in Hungary. He has published widely in journals including *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, *Politics in Central Europe*, *Populism*, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *Journal of Education Policy*. E-mail: [simon.bradford@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:simon.bradford@brunel.ac.uk); ORCID: 0000-0001-9980-7637.

**Dr Fin Cullen** is Senior Lecturer in Education at St Mary's University, Twickenham, UK. Her research interests include youth and social policy and the sociology of youth and education. She has published in a range of journals including *Pedagogy*, *Culture & Society*, *Gender & Education*, *Politics in Central Europe* and *Populism*. E-mail: [fiona.cullen@stmarys.ac.uk](mailto:fiona.cullen@stmarys.ac.uk); ORCID: 0000-0001-5077-9671.