

Leveraging Crises: How the Russian Aggression in Ukraine Benefited the Populist Government in Hungary's 2022 Election Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the literature focusing on the relationship between crises and populism. It argues that the timing, the crisis type, and the contextual factor of whether populists are in power, matter for changes in the discursive strategies of populists and their ability to turn crises into opportunity structures. Guided by the constructivist literature on external shocks and a thematic content analysis of 561 online media news reports on the 2022 Hungarian national elections before and after the outbreak of the Russian aggression in Ukraine (RAiU), the article shows that this crisis helped to refresh the people-centrist elements of Fidesz's populist discourse while slightly downgrading its anti-elitist aspects. The absence of any material impact of the RAiU on Hungarian society at the time of the elections, combined with the dominance of Fidesz's 'pro-peace vs. pro-war' discourse, transformed the RAiU into an opportunity structure for Fidesz during the elections.

KEYWORDS

russo-ukraine war, Hungary, elections, populism, crisis exploitation, competitive authoritarianism

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.827>

PUBLISHED ONLINE

23 September, 2024

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Viktor Orbán secured his fourth consecutive term as Hungary's prime minister as his party, Fidesz, maintained another supermajority in the parliamentary elections. This election occurred under extraordinary circumstances, just one month after the onset of the *Russian aggression in Ukraine* (RAiU hereafter). This aggression prompted a strategic shift in both the campaign discourse of the Fidesz-led government and that of the oppositional parties, which had united their forces in a national election to challenge the government for the first time. The elections unfolded amid a bitter competition between these two forces within the framework of an unusual 'external shock', which ultimately led to results in favor of Orbán's ruling bloc.

This article aims to shed light on why and how the RAiU created an advantage for the Fidesz government and a subsequent disadvantage for the united opposition in their election campaigns. Although the scholarship on populism acknowledges a close relationship between crises and populist politics, more research is needed to shed light on how populists respond to crises that happen in the form of *external shocks* and how they transform them into opportunity structures. The literature on populism understands crises as often being conducive to the surge of populism and or as even being an integral part of populism. Yet, it often defines crises as structural problems of the system that serve as opportunities for populists to trigger pre-existing feelings of frustration in the given society against the political elites. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, some studies started approaching crises as 'external shocks' in populism research but we still lack an understanding of under which conditions populists choose anti-elitist or people-centrist frames, why they make such choices and how they manage to transform external shocks into opportunity structures. Contrary to the prevailing arguments that populism often shifts the blame to the political elites and triggers anti-elitism during a crisis time period, this article reveals that crises can also prompt populists to downplay their anti-elitist rhetoric against the establishment and cultivate a new form of people-centrism. As the case of the Hungarian national elections demonstrates, the *timing*, the *crisis type*, and the *contextual factor of whether populists are in power*, matter for what choices populists make and whether the crises turn into opportunity structures. This article concludes that these

three factors should be considered when scholars attempt to build a relationship between crises and populism.

The crisis under scrutiny in this article is the *external shock* of the RAIU that emerged amid the 2022 Hungarian electoral campaigns. External shocks are exogenous events that are “*not fully controlled by actors*” (BROWNE ET AL. 1984: 180). They may occur in the form of sudden disasters, nuclear catastrophes or wars (SKIDMORE – TOYA 2002; HARMEL – JANDA 1994). Presenting a qualitative content analysis of 561 online media news articles covering the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, the article reveals how the Fidesz government manipulated the discursive field in its favor. The RAIU occurring in the form of an external shock disrupted Fidesz’s ongoing discursive strategy, which could have led to its electoral defeat. But Fidesz was able to transform it into an opportunity structure by preserving a novel form of people-centrism and downgrading anti-elitism in its populist discourse. The absence of a visible material impact of the RAIU on Hungarian society, and Fidesz’s ability as a populist party in power to manipulate the media discourse, were the main factors in the transformation of the RAIU into an opportunity structure.

The article is structured as follows. We first present our overview of the literature regarding the role of crises in the surge of populism and introduce our contribution to this literature. In doing so, we also borrow the analytical toolkits of the literature on constructivist analyses of crises and external shocks. Second, we present the RAIU, which started amid the Hungarian national elections in 2022, as our case study. Third, we introduce the data and methods of our research. Fourth, we present the research findings and our discussion on these findings. We then conclude by deliberating the implications of our research for future studies.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULISM AND CRISES

The existing literature highlights the positive relationship between the emergence of crises and the growth of populism, despite certain deviations and nuances in this relationship due to divergent conceptual approaches to populism. The most established definition of populism sees it as a Manichean content that considers society to be ultimately separated

into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (MUDDE 2004; MUDDE – ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2013; STAVRAKAKIS ET AL. 2017). Yet, around this definition, the literature embodies different approaches to the question of whether populism is a strategy, a discourse, an ideology or a performative act. In an excellent review of this literature, Moffitt (2015) summarizes the relationship between crises and populism from the viewpoint of all four approaches. Weyland (2001) and Roberts (2006), who study populism as a political strategy, focus on the choices of personalistic leaders that seek or exercise government power based on unmediated and uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers. Within this approach, crises of popular representation or economic crises provide an opportunity structure for the populists to build a strategy of blaming the authorities and presenting themselves as the true guardians of the people (LEVITSKY – LOXTON 2013). The second, discourse-theoretic approach shifts the focus from the contents of populism to how populism articulates those contents, inspired by the Essex School or more traditional definitions of discourse (LACLAU 2005; HAWKINS 2009; DE CLEEN – STAVRAKAKIS 2017). Within this approach, Laclau (2005) links the root of populism with the emergence of a social crisis or a crisis of the dominant ideological order, while Stavrakakis (2005) similarly associates the rise of populism with the crisis of previously hegemonic discursive orders. The third, ideational approach defines populism as a thin ideology and primarily seeks to understand the populist elements in public attitudes or party programs (MUDDE 2004, 2007; MUDDE – ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2017). The ideational approach is the one that is most critical of the relationship between crises and populism. It does not really reject the concept of a crisis, as Moffitt (2015: 193) argues, but notices the significant correlation between the variables that are associated with a crisis – for example, economic instability, unemployment and political dissatisfaction – all of which are utilized to explain the surge of populism. It therefore questions the ambiguity embedded in the definition of a crisis, which cannot be used to explain the surge of populist actors by itself.

Finally, a fourth approach studies populism from the performative-stylistic perspective. According to this perspective, the communication style or discourse is emphasized, and the politico-cultural and relational aspects of populism take precedence over others; it sees populism as

something performed in verbal, behavioral or postural aspects (MOFFITT 2016; OSTIGUY ET AL 2020). As Moffitt (2015) argues, while the other three approaches see crises as being external to populism, positing an either weak or strong causal relationship between them and it, the performative approach sees crises as integral to the concept of populism. More specifically, he puts the key focus on populist actors' ability to *construct* a sense of crisis and perpetuate it to underline the Manichean content of their message. He creates a framework of the populist performance of crises. According to him, the performance starts with the populists' identification of the failures of the political elites, then moves on to an elevation of these failures to the level of a crisis, continues with framing the people's interests against those responsible for the crisis and ends with a heavy usage of media (or social media) to propagate this performance (MOFFITT 2015: 198).

While this article follows Moffitt's steps in understanding a crisis as something constructed by the populists, it highlights that *the type and timing* of the crisis as well as *the contextual factor of whether populism is in power or not* matter for their choice of how to construct it, hence ultimately affecting the success of their performance. A crisis in the literature on populism is often understood as something structural, i.e., a crisis of representation, political dissatisfaction or economic emergencies. The literature rarely sees it as an exogenous shock or an external event that happens outside of the control of the politicians (BROWNE ET AL. 1984: 180; CALCA – GROSS 2019). An environmental catastrophe, an earthquake and an outbreak of war in a neighboring state are examples of such exogenous shocks. Yet, the meaning attributed to these exogenous events by populists also has the potential to influence their performance in transforming them into opportunity structures. This is in line with the agent-centered constructivist analyses of wars and crises which put a greater focus on persuasion as an intersubjective contestation among both elite and mass public agents. The extant research has shown that wars or crises cannot be defined simply in terms of their material effects, but also by agents' intersubjective understandings of such material changes (WIDMAIER ET AL. 2007). Wars and crises can create a profound sense of threat or uncertainty among the people and impact their understanding of both policies and politics. These events have the potential to undermine or consolidate the authority of those in power, or lead to no significant change, depending on how they are interpreted by both the elites and the masses. For instance, the Bush administration

received high levels of public support for sending American troops to Iraq after framing the 2003 war in Iraq as an extension of the 'war on terror' following the 9/11 attacks (GERSHKOFF – KUSHNER 2005). Some have even argued that the prolonged effect of 9/11 on American politics (through the war in Iraq) helped Bush to get re-elected in 2004 (NORPOTH – SIDMAN 2007). On the flip side, certain crises can erode the power of incumbents, as exemplified by the Spanish prime minister who experienced a significant electoral defeat in the immediate aftermath of the Madrid train bombings in 2004.

Although the populism literature has seldom addressed crises as external shocks in this manner, recent research on the global Covid-19 pandemic has provided insights into how populists might perform during such external crises. For instance, highlighting some key coverages from journalists and academics during the Covid-19 pandemic, Galanopoulos and Venizelos (2022) argue that certain dichotomies emerge in public discourse. During the Covid-19 crisis, for example, a dichotomy between a science and an anti-science position emerged, whereby the populist heads of government such as Trump and Bolsonaro were often associated with the latter position. There was also a dichotomy of responsible vs. irresponsible leadership. While some populist leaders were categorized in the latter category, thus intensifying the polarization between the populist worldview and scientific evidence, some others were categorized in the former category (WONDREYS – MUDDÉ 2022). Some studies also showed that many right-wing populist leaders chose to downplay the severity of the crisis in the beginning in order to confront their political adversaries (TARAKTAŞ ET AL. 2022). In various cases, it was reported that the populists in power used expertise instrumentally to bypass institutionalized channels to combat crises and thus reinforced their personalized ties with the voters (BUŠTIKOVÁ – BABOŠ 2020; LASCO 2020). Yet, a review of all such analyses showcases that the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and populism was much more complex and there was not just one single way of handling the crisis among populists (ZULIANELLO – GUASTI 2023). Despite presenting thought-provoking inferences on why populists cope with external crises in the way they do, this recent body of research on the Covid-19 pandemic does not draw attention to the types or timing of the crises, which could potentially help us understand the variance in populist responses to crises. It merely underlines why populists try to bypass the mechanisms of institutional accountability, and create new 'anti-elitist' perspectives directed against

scientific institutions. Not all external shocks prompt populists to adopt a new anti-elitism discourse and, as evidenced by the electoral loss of Trump, not all crises confer electoral advantages to them (MENDOZA – SEVI 2021). Just as in the cases of other politicians, the way the populists ‘exploit crises’ for their own political purposes depends on the types and timing of the external shocks and on whether they are in power or in the opposition.¹ Depending on the type, timing and context, populists may interpret an external shock positively, as an opportunity, or negatively, as a threat. Under some circumstances, they may not frame it as a ‘crisis’ at all, which can affect their future political success (BOIN ET AL. 2009).

Contrary to the earlier accounts which underline populists’ construction of anti-elitist discourses pitting the people against the elites during crises, this article shows that crises can also lead the populists in power to downgrade their “anti-elitist” approach in order to transform the crises into opportunity structures. As the case of the RAIU during the Hungarian national elections will illustrate, the emergence of such different discursive strategies is attributable to the timing, type and context of the crisis.

THE CASE OF THE 2022 HUNGARIAN NATIONAL ELECTIONS

While the post-2010 Hungary is presented as a genuine case of populist governance in the existing literature (JENNE – MUDDÉ 2012; BATORY 2016), there is also an emerging consensus that Hungary is not a democracy anymore, but a competitive authoritarian hybrid regime (BOZÓKI – HEGEDŰS 2018; LEVITSKY – WAY 2020). In such a context, the political agency of the party leaders and their populist discourse play a major role in the mounting polarization (ENYEDI 2016; VEGETTI 2018). While negativity, character attacks and fear messages oftentimes constitute an established pattern in the electoral campaigns of populist actors (NAI 2021), the centralization of power in the hands of a populist government, and the abolishment of institutional checks and balances, transform an electoral process into an even more aggressive form of contest under competitive authoritarianism (ARBATLI – ROSENBERG 2021).

By the time of the 2022 national elections, the Hungarian government composed of the coalition of Fidesz and the KDNP (Christian Democratic People’s Party) had already been controlling a substantial proportion of the media market (BÁTORFY – URBÁN 2020). Yet, alternative sources

of information still existed and reached out to the supporters of the opposition through social media in Hungary. Amidst a strong wave of politicization within Hungarian society, a stark division emerged in the media landscape between the pro-government and independent (and often pro-opposition) outlets. Indeed, throughout the majority of the 2022 national election campaigns, the popularity of the opposition paralleled Fidesz's popularity, although polls consistently recorded a notable count of "undecided" votes (SCHEPPELE 2022).

This situation lends greater significance to the case of Hungary in terms of understanding when and how populists can transform crises into opportunity structures. The RAIU created an external shock over the campaign strategies of the populists in power and the united opposition that was close to defeating the populists just a few weeks before the election. How did the populists create an advantage out of this crisis for themselves? The battle of constructing the RAIU between the populist government and opposition outlets in the weeks leading up to the national election provides important insights into this question. The RAIU could also have been an opportunity for the opposition to transform the competition into a 'Putin or Europe?' referendum. By then, all entities associated with Western liberal alliances (the EU and NATO) were scapegoated as 'out-groups' by the populist government, especially in relation to the Hungarian nation-state (LAMOUR 2023: 8–9). Prime Minister Orbán was a close ally of the Russian president Vladimir Putin. Yet, in this crisis, it was Russia that was the aggressor while Ukraine, allying itself with Europe and liberal alliances, was the so-called 'victim.' Orbán could have paid the price for siding with the aggressor as he had visited Moscow just two weeks before the war. Indeed, a poll conducted between February 28 and March 3 found that 72 percent of the population considered Russia's attack unjustified, including two-thirds of Fidesz voters (MADLOVICS AND MAGYAR 2023: 270). Hence, how and why did the RAIU turn into an opportunity for Fidesz but not for the united opposition?

Existing accounts of the relationship between the RAIU and the Hungarian elections show that Fidesz-KDNP government propounded national security concerns and presented its electoral promises as expressions of the will of the Hungarian people during the elections (ÖZOFLU – ARATO 2023). Orbán portrayed the Russian invasion as a Slavic internal affair

which Hungary had nothing to do with (MADLOVICS – MAGYAR 2023). A recent study analyzing the social media accounts of Orbán and key oppositional leaders also found that Orbán owned the issue of the RAIU vis-à-vis the opposition leaders during the campaign and stressed it much more than the opposition in the weeks leading up to the elections (FARKAS ET AL. 2024). All these accounts are worthwhile in shedding light on how the Fidesz government created an opportunity structure out of the RAIU for their electoral gain. However, they do not delve into the populism literature; most importantly they do not investigate how and why the main elements of populism – anti-elitism and people-centrism – change direction during a time of crisis. The following sections, providing the data and methods of the research, fill this gap.

DATA AND METHODS: THEMATIC CONTENT ANALYSIS

In our research, we studied the changing theme of the electoral campaigns on the part of the pro-government and the pro-opposition media outlets in the pre-RAIU and post-RAIU phases. To break down the campaign rollercoaster Hungarian voters experienced, we examined the time period of the six months leading up to the elections in April 2022. More specifically, we conducted a thematic content analysis of the relevant Hungarian online news media articles and items published between October 16, 2021, which was the last day of the 2021 Hungarian opposition primary, and April 3, 2022, which was the day of the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections.

As detailed in Appendix I, the 105 media outlets included in the analysis were selected through a multi-step process. The online news sites were chosen on the basis of the following criteria: The news sites had to (1) have a readership statistic of a minimum of 20,000 visits per day, and (2) feature quotes or campaign messages from the governing Fidesz-KDNP coalition and its related organizations (communication agencies, public opinion polling institutes) as well as from United for Hungary and its related organizations. The search was conducted between February and May 2022 by using a search string on Google. The search included keywords referencing the two competing political blocs, the elections, and the war in Ukraine. This study utilized data from the initial page of Google search results, as these entries are typically the most widely viewed and accessed by users and thus represent the most encountered information on the

given topic. It also included posts from Facebook and video speeches as long as they contained direct references to one of the popular electoral campaign themes. This data collection included only original content posted for campaign purposes by the politicians and excluded shared posts and content that was not created by the owner of the given social media profile. One exception to this, however, is the inclusion of the “*Számok – a baloldali álhírek ellenszere*” Facebook page, which distributed Russian disinformation since the Covid-19 pandemic and quickly became one of the most visited pro-Fidesz fake news sites on social media, and was even occasionally cited by government-affiliated television programs (TV2, Pesti TV) as well (CZINKÓCZI 2022). Altogether only four Facebook posts are included in the study as these posts featured important aspects of the campaigns of both sides; namely these are the main campaign message of Marky-Zay Peter (about the anti-corruption fight), the campaign video of Fidesz disseminated throughout all social media platforms (primarily on Facebook and YouTube) and two posts representing how the government has outsourced its anti-Ukrainian messages to third parties such as Balázs Németh (a former correspondent of the national television channel M1) and the “*Számok – a baloldali álhírek ellenszere*” page. The inclusion of these posts gives a more nuanced picture of the campaign messages most often encountered by the voters. However, we avoided a more comprehensive examination of social media platforms for two reasons: First, our primary focus is on online media outlets, and social media is regarded as an extension of traditional media formats. Second, the content of traditional media frequently incorporates references to social media posts, thereby enabling us to indirectly capture relevant social media data without the need for a dedicated analysis of social media platforms. This approach helps us to maintain a focused examination of the core online media landscape, while still accounting for the interplay between traditional and emerging digital media channels. After all, a mixed-media thematic content analysis “*is a reflexive style of content analysis that aims to be ‘systematic and analytic, but not rigid’*” (ALTHEIDE 1987: 68).

Following the selection of these news sources, we categorized them according to their affiliations (independent, government-aligned, opposition-aligned). This categorization was based on an assessment of each outlet’s editorial line, ownership structure, and prior reporting patterns, which were cross-referenced against existing media bias ratings and expert

assessments of the Hungarian media landscape. In Appendix II, we provide some illustrative examples of the content and messaging from a subset of these media outlets, representing the coding scheme captured in the analysis.

Manual coding was deemed necessary for the study, as not all the displays of campaign messaging were explicit and searching for a limited number and combination of keywords could miss more subtle information. Human coding allowed us to filter out spam messaging, grey-zone news (often containing gossip) and duplication of data. For the last category, we narrowed down the sample; hence, the comparative analysis of different news outlets did not generate significant differences. In the newspaper articles published by sites owned by the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), we often found – word-by-word – the same content, and therefore these repeated articles were eliminated from the study. Moreover, the analysis took into account each code for each indicator only once per article, even if it occurred multiple times in the news item. This process enabled us to more accurately capture the complexities and multifaceted nature of the campaign coverage, particularly since the majority of the news articles analyzed contained multiple messages as both the united opposition and Fidesz were regularly coupling together various campaign messages.

The final sample for coding included a total of 561 news stories (see Table 1). Each news story was treated as a single unit of analysis. These news stories were coded according to the four main code categories explained in Appendix II. First, the context of the news story, whether it was focusing on domestic or international issues, was examined within the **Code 1** category. This code allowed us to compare Fidesz and the united opposition in terms of their respective media outlets' coverage of international affairs before and after the RAiU. The **Code 2** category included the anti-elitism aspect of populism. It coded whether the electoral coalitions (the government and the opposition coalition) embraced a strategy of negative campaigning against the other side, and therefore measured their anti-elitism (Codes 2a and 2c). These codes were then divided into sub-codes regarding the specific ways Fidesz and United for Hungary condemned one another. In instances where Fidesz and United for Hungary were not engaged in negative campaigning, they embraced their 'own

agenda' (Codes 2b and 2d), which were then divided into subcodes pertaining to specific programmatic issues or promises.

TABLE 1: QUANTITY OF MEDIA NEWS ITEMS SUBJECT TO ANALYSIS

	Before the RAiU (16/10/2022–23/02/2022)	After the RAiU (24/02/2022–03/04/2022)
Pro-Government Outlets	141	128
Pro-Opposition (Independent) Outlets	123	169
Total	264	297

We also separated messages adhering to the concept of people-centrism (i.e., safeguarding the national interests), labeling them as Code 3. Both the opposition and the government's positions as defenders of the 'Hungarian people' and their 'interests' were coded to highlight the contrast in the 'people-centric' messages from both sides before and after the RAiU. The biggest challenge of the coding process was to balance the pro-government and oppositional/independent news items due to the large imbalance of the Hungarian media landscape (POLYÁK 2019; POLYÁK ET AL. 2022). Another challenge was the careful categorization of grey-zone media, which is not yet pro-government but financially dependent on the government. Appendix I provides the details of each news source and the categories that they fall under.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: THE SHIFT IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF THE RAIU

The results of the thematic content analysis of 561 online news items approximately six months before the national elections (264 before and 297 after the RAiU), show significant changes in the campaign messages of both Fidesz and United for Hungary, as is evident in both the pro-government and the independent media outlets. First of all, as demonstrated by Table 2, during the four months of the pre-RAiU stage, Fidesz's dominant strategy was to intimidate United for Hungary and their PM candidate Péter Marki-Zay. Yet following the RAiU, there was a marginal decline in the proportion of Fidesz's negative campaign targeting of the opposition (i.e., anti-elitism) and a noticeable effort on its part to amplify the volume of messages promoting its own agenda. On the other hand, while United

for Hungary was paying equal attention to promoting its own agenda and delivering negative messages against Fidesz before the RAIU, after it, there was a noticeable shift toward increasing the number of negative messages against Fidesz while downgrading the emphasis on its own agenda.

TABLE 2: NEGATIVE VS. OTHER CAMPAIGN MESSAGES DURING THE ELECTIONS

	<i>Fidesz's Negative Messages against the United for Hungary</i>	<i>Fidesz Promoting Its Own Message</i>	<i>United for Hungary's Negative Messages against Fidesz</i>	<i>United for Hungary Promoting Its Own Message</i>
Before the War	44.07 (%) 119/264	8.1 (%) 22/264	32.59 (%) 88/264	33.3 (%) 90/264
After the Outbreak of the War	35.88 (%) 108/297	29.57 (%) 89/297	46.18 (%) 139/297	28.57 (%) 86/297

Table 3 below compares the types of negative campaigning (i.e. attacks against United for Hungary) on the part of the Fidesz-KDNP government before and after the outbreak of the war. What is particularly significant in these findings is the noticeable decline in the number of attacks by the government against key opposition figures based on their personality characteristics (especially the PM candidate Péter Márki-Zay). Prior to the war, Fidesz's negative campaigning strategy included choosing a target within the coalition of parties and demonizing all members of the coalition based on this target. The opposition coalition included the DK (*Demokratikus Koalíció* – Democratic Coalition), which was established by the deeply unpopular former prime minister of Hungary Ferenc Gyurcsany. Gyurcsany's continuing activism through the DK, as well as his wife Klara Dobrev's participation in the primaries as one of the top three candidates for the premiership in 2022, had given an advantage to the Fidesz campaign. When Dobrev took an early lead in the primaries vis-à-vis the liberal Budapest mayor Gergely Karacsony and Marki-Zay, who was a mayor in the rural south-east of the country in October 2021, the Fidesz government was quick to cast aspersions on the entire opposition, stating that it had become a puppet of Gyurcsany. When Marki-Zay won the nomination against Dobrev in the oppositional bloc, Fidesz continued with this strategy. Within the frame of the approaching elections, it dominated all the pro-government media outlets, which portrayed the oppositional candidate Marki-Zay as a "mini-Feri", in other words, a puppet of Gyurcsany.

TABLE 3: TYPES OF NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING BY THE FIDESZ-KDNP COALITION DURING THE ELECTIONS

	Before the War	After the Outbreak of the War
Attacking the Personality of an Opposition Figure	62.18 (%) 77/119	47.2 (%) 51/108
Equating the Opposition with the Former PM Gyurcsány	21.84 (%) 26/119	23.15 (%) 25/108
Equating the Opposition with Liberal Internationalists	13.4 (%) 16/119	12.96 (%) 14/108
Attacking the Liberal Values of the Opposition	14.29 (%) 17/119	18.52 (%) 20/108
Criticizing the Political Program of the Opposition	41.18 (%) 49/119	46.30 (%) 50/108
Labeling the Opposition as 'Supporters of the War'	2.5 (%) 3/119	51.85 (%) 56/108

Table 3 shows that this strategy did not end following the outbreak of the war. Fidesz was consistent in highlighting this message in its electoral campaigns and there was a visible continuity in its anti-elitist discourse describing the opposition members as those that 'serve' Brussels or liberal internationalists. Five months before the war started (in October 2022), the government was initiating a campaign stating that 'sanctions from Brussels are destroying us.' After the outbreak of the war, it started promoting a language that labels the entire opposition as 'the supporters of the war.' This was a novel frame that built upon Márki-Zay's statements in the media regarding the support for NATO during the war. His statements was interpreted by the pro-government media as 'the opposition dragging Hungary into the war in Ukraine,' which appeared in approximately 51 per cent of the news items that were attacking United for Hungary in the post-RAiU phase, as shown in Table 3.

However, the continuity within Fidesz's anti-elitist discourse is less significant than the noteworthy increase in its people-centrism after the outbreak of the war. Within this period, Orbán rolled the Ukrainian war along twin tracks, portraying the EU sanctions and other threats against Hungary's reliance on Russian gas and energy as paramount dangers while numbing millions of Hungarians to the humanitarian and geopolitical catastrophe next door. Media sources with more direct ties to the ruling party, such as the online sites of the state-owned television channels, the newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* and the government's official site (kormany.

hu), demonstrated a less overt pro-Russian position. Conversely, media outlets with looser connections to the governing party attacked the opposition candidate's personal life and character more aggressively and displayed an overtly anti-Ukrainian stance, as observed on the Facebook pages of Fidesz members, the organization Megafon and pro-government tabloid-style outlets (*Blikk* and *Bors*) in the former case, and in HírTV, *Mandiner* and *Pesti Srácok* in the latter. However, it is important to note that occasionally, a seemingly looser connection to the government does not mean less governmental control, as it rather represents an effort on the part of Fidesz to diversify its own media landscape (see *Origo's* more balanced reporting or *Propeller's* pro-opposition articles). Furthermore, a divergence was noted between regional pro-government publishers and national-level pro-government publishers, as regional media under KESMA consistently displayed the narratives of the ruling party, while simultaneously giving no visibility to the program of the opposition.

Following the conflict, Fidesz adeptly established a distinct agenda, positioning Viktor Orbán as a defender of Hungarian interests by maintaining a non-participatory stance regarding the war (see Table 4). Orbán refrained from overtly endorsing either side of the conflict, asserting Hungary's non-involvement in the ongoing war, and stating: *"It's in our interest not to be pawns in someone else's war. In this war we have nothing to gain and everything to lose"* (COAKLEY 2022).

TABLE 4: FIDESZ PROMOTING ITS OWN MESSAGE DURING THE ELECTIONS

	Before the War	After the Outbreak of the War
Political Program	100% 22/22	48.3% 43/89
Pro-Transcarpathian and Anti-Ukrainian Agenda	-	46.07% 41/89
Peace: "Hungary must stay out of the war"	-	57.3% 51/89

Code 3, which measures the people-centrist aspect of populism, allows us to show that after the onset of the RAIU, Fidesz turned into a 'protector of Hungarian interests.' Prior to the war, Fidesz was mainly focusing on its own political program in terms of serving the people. Following the RAIU, it started representing itself as a champion safeguarding Hungarian national interests by promoting a "Hungary must stay out of the war" agenda that included Hungarians living in Ukraine's Transcarpathian region.

This marked a fresh agenda for Fidesz, which unveiled rapidly after the war's outbreak. Initially, the strategy revolved around a negative campaign against the opposition rather than emphasizing Fidesz's own aspirations.

On the other side, Table 5 illustrates the evolution of the opposition's negative campaign against the government, showcasing notable shifts in its focus and messaging. Prior to the outbreak of the war, the opposition primarily directed its campaign towards highlighting the government's corruption and its authoritarian tendencies. Following the occurrence of the war, the opposition's discourse retained its emphasis on the authoritarian practices of the Orban government, but a significant alteration occurred as these criticisms were now intertwined with a portrayal of the government as 'Putin's puppet,' and notably, the emphasis on government corruption diminished in the opposition's discourse.

Table 5: Types of Negative Campaigning by United for Hungary during the Elections

	Before the War	After the Outbreak of the War
Referring to the Government as 'Putin's Puppet'	15.91 (%) 14/88	35.97 (%) 50/139
Underlining Government Corruption	45.45 (%) 40/88	15.83 (%) 22/139
Underlining the Authoritarian Practices of the Government	44.32 (%) 39/88	47.48 (%) 66/139
Accusing the Government of Lying	17.05 (%) 15/88	28.06 (%) 39/139
Criticizing the Political Program of the Government	23.86 (%) 21/88	36.69 (%) 51/139

Instead, the opposition increasingly accused the government of aligning with Russia and deviating from democratic norms and the rule of law. This shift in messaging was likely prompted by the government's attempts to portray the opposition as 'supportive of the war.' The opposition found itself compelled to counter these allegations and defend itself. There was a noticeable surge in accusations against the government stating that it was 'disseminating lies.' Márki-Zay, in particular, repeatedly clarified that his intentions did not involve deploying Hungarian troops to Ukraine.

TABLE 6: UNITED FOR HUNGARY PROMOTING ITS OWN MESSAGE DURING THE ELECTIONS

	Before the War	After the Outbreak of the War
Support for Democracy & Constitutional Reform	27.78 (%) 25/90	34.88 (%) 30/86
Support for the EU & NATO	13.33 (%) 12/90	38.37% 33/86
Support for Liberal Values & Human Rights	31.11 (%) 28/90	39.53 (%) 34/86
Addressing Economic Issues & Unemployment	15.56 (%) 14/90	18.6 (%) 16/86
Addressing Gas & Utility Prices	2.22 (%) 2/90	11.63 (%) 10/86
Support for Ukraine	1.1 (%) 1/90	25.58 (%) 22/86

The opposition also shifted its focus toward the escalating gas and utility prices, while also taking a decisive pro-Ukrainian, pro-NATO and pro-EU stance within the ongoing conflict. In fact, the opposition's pro-EU and pro-NATO stance was not that salient in the pre-RAiU phase of the campaigns even though the discourse on the support for democracy and rule of law persisted in both periods. This discourse emerged as a result of the opposition's endeavor to reshape the electoral landscape into a referendum, vividly outlining the high-stakes choice between the Orban-Putin alliance and the values represented by the West and Europe. In other words, while the pro-Fidesz media propagated a discourse emphasizing the government's commitment to peace and contrasted it with the alleged pro-war stance of the opposition, the opposition crafted a message portraying the government as an ally of the aggressor Russia, while positioning themselves as being in alignment with Ukraine and the West.

In this respect, the fact that the war had not yet created a material impact on Hungary and Fidesz's control of its media channels warrants attention. A thematic analysis of the RAiU's media presentation on five Hungarian television channels demonstrates that on the three pro-government channels, especially the public service channel M1, Viktor Orban and other governmental figures were overrepresented (NMHH 2022: 14). Moreover, the main discourse about the conflict revolved around the refugee influx and the government's peace message. The combat between the pro-government and pro-opposition sides over how the RAiU would affect the energy prices remained salient at the discursive level, but since the RAiU had not yet created any visible effect on the society, it was not

clear to what extent the criticisms of the opposition were approved of by the public. The opposition's PM candidate criticized the Hungarian government's utility price reduction policy (*rezsicsökkentés*) and proposed viable alternatives, while Fidesz positioned itself as a vocal proponent of *rezsicsökkentés* without adjustments and made the policy a part of its recurring campaign themes even after the outbreak of the war. The Fidesz-KDNP administration had implemented a price-freezing approach to utility cost reduction since 2013, and on occasion even profited from it when global market prices fell down. In general, however, the utility price reduction policies disproportionately benefited higher-income population segments relative to low-income households, as was typical of the Orban government's financial nationalism. This dynamic was attributable to the latter group's reliance on lower-quality, market-priced fuels as well as their residence in less energy-efficient homes, which limited the impact of the regulated price decreases (WEINER – SZÉP 2022). Yet, Fidesz was able to spin the narrative in a way which depicted the government as a protector of low energy prices amid an international conflict. According to the Government Information Center, 64% of Hungary's crude oil imports originated from Russia. Furthermore, 85% of the country's natural gas consumption was supplied through Russian imports. The significance of this reliance was underscored by the fact that 85% of Hungarian households utilized natural gas in March 2022 (BRÜCKNER 2022). This substantial domestic dependency on natural gas, a commodity heavily sourced from Russia, can be argued to influence the government's cautious positioning on the RAIU.

On the whole, Fidesz adeptly incorporated the public's desire for security and stability into its campaign. By portraying the opposition as a potential catalyst for war, it steered the discourse towards themes of peace, security, and accessible energy. In an interview one month before the elections for the pro-government news outlet *Mandiner*, Viktor Orban accused the opposition of being not only incompetent but also supportive of the war: *"The opposition wants to send weapons to shoot at the Russians, or soldiers to fight the Russians. This shows that they have no routine, no knowledge, and no sense of responsibility. They are adding fuel to the fire with their irresponsible statements, and this is against Hungary's interests. Instead of adventurism, we need responsible politics, security and stability"* (KEREKI – SZALAI 2022). Through articulating that everything else is secondary to Hungarian interests, Fidesz's campaign unequivocally conveyed the message that an

opposition victory could draw Hungary into the Ukrainian war. In summary, during the post-RAiU phase, Fidesz effectively refreshed its agenda centered around ‘the Hungarian people,’ while subordinating its anti-elitist rhetoric against the opposition to this people-centrism associated with stability, security and prosperity of the Hungarians amid an international conflict.

DISCUSSION: HOW THE TYPE AND TIMING OF A CRISIS AND BEING IN POWER MATTER FOR POPULISTS

The analysis of the campaign discourses during the 2022 Hungarian elections reveals distinct shifts in focus within the pro-government and pro-opposition camps prior to and following the outbreak of the RAiU. In essence, the RAiU was an external shock for both the opposition and Fidesz, and it led them to change the momentum in their favor within a deeply polarized electoral landscape. Notably, Fidesz’s discourse exhibited a downgrading of its anti-elitism (even though it persisted) while introducing novel elements of a people-centered approach based on Hungarian interests into that discourse. By portraying the opposition as a catalyst for war, the incumbent party effectively set itself apart by championing peace, security, and affordable energy. In contrast, United for Hungary’s pro-EU and pro-NATO stance was coupled with a strong emphasis on the ‘authoritarian practices’ and ‘lies’ of the Orban government.

Our findings correspond with a research conducted on Viktor Orban’s public speeches and statements that underlines how he invokes illiberal versions of sovereignty, namely extra-legal and organic sovereignty (PARIS 2022). However, in contrast with the existing literature that underlines the resilience of anti-elitist strategies such as blame-shifting (i.e., shifting the blame to the elite technocrats and scientists during the Covid-19 pandemic) in populist discourse, our analysis has shown that people-centrist elements of populism can be of more value to populists during certain crises. Hence, populists’ ability to transform external crises into successful opportunity structures depends on the type and timing of the crisis as well as the contextual factor of whether they are in power or not. In this case, the crisis was an external shock, the onset of an international conflict between what Orban called ‘liberal internationalists’ and Hungary’s ally Russia. One must consider that Fidesz took a cautious approach to it without publicly

favoring a clear pro-Russian stance against its long-time 'liberal internationalist' enemy. Instead, it highlighted a message of neutrality, peace and stability vis-à-vis taking sides, while also extending a protection over the Hungarian population living in the Trans-Carpathian region of Ukraine. Perhaps this was because Fidesz could neither side with Russia nor fully reject the EU in this war situation.

These critical issues held significant weight for undecided and economically challenged voters who did not yet know but only assumed the upcoming effects of the war. In this sense, the timing of the crisis, which took place only four weeks before the pre-determined election date, also mattered. The refugee wave and the increase in energy prices did not yet have time to affect the election result. This possibly makes the Hungarian case less comparable with other cases - for instance, those of Poland and Slovakia, whose national elections were held in October 2023 and March-April 2024 respectively, as the material effects of the RAIU on their societies were much more visible in those periods (ŠITERA – KOCHLÖFFEL 2024). In Hungary, the concerns over energy prices could not go beyond a discursive battle between the pro-government and pro-opposition forces, and the uncertainty about the future more or less favored the Orbán government. According to a survey published by the pro-government Nézőpont Institute (2022), 61 percent of Hungarians believed that PM Orbán could stand up for Hungarian interests better than Péter Márki-Zay, the opposition frontrunner in the 2022 election. The war was a relatable concern for a substantial portion of the voting population (BOJAR ET AL. 2022). Ultimately, foreign policy decisions based on morality (as the opposition framed the war in moral terms) were outweighed by those based on the perceived impact of the war on voters' own material well-being.

Finally, the overrepresentation of Fidesz's messages and its high visibility in the media landscape are attributable to its status as the ruling party. Fidesz's ability to transform the discursive field into a battle between a pro-war and a pro-peace position (with Fidesz representing the latter and the united opposition representing the former) in such a short period should not be neglected. Fidesz's control over the discourse on the RAIU in the media often placed the opposition in a defensive position leading to an increase in its negative campaigning tone and also leading it to accuse the government of lying more often. This might have given relatively less

energy to the oppositional camp for coming up with novel frames regarding people's interests during the time of an international conflict. Hence, in order to pursue a correct reading of the relationship between crises and populism, scholars must pay attention to whether populism is in power or in opposition during the outbreak of the given crisis, which is ultimately related to the populists' ability to control the dominant discourses.

CONCLUSION

Our article aimed to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between populism and crises, highlighting that the populists' performative success in transforming a crisis into an opportunity structure depends on the type and timing of the crisis as well as the contextual factor of whether they are in power. As demonstrated in the Hungarian case, by refreshing the 'people-centrist' elements of its discourse and spreading such new frames as 'peace' and 'security' as a party in power, Fidesz maintained an advantage in the 2022 national elections during the onset of the RAIU. It paid attention to highlighting 'neutrality' in its electoral campaign even though one side of the conflict was its outspoken ally (i.e., Russia) and the other side was Ukraine, which was receiving support from the 'liberal internationalist' enemy. Due to the difficulty of taking sides, Fidesz paid more attention to people-centrism than anti-elitism. This finding contrasts with the prevailing arguments in the existing literature, namely that populism often shifts the blame to the political elites and triggers anti-elitism during a crisis time. The RAIU was an unexpected external shock which ultimately led to the adoption of this novel strategy by Fidesz. It should further not be forgotten that the timing of the RAIU and Fidesz's ruling party status also mattered. The war had not produced any material impact on Hungarian society at the time of the 2022 national elections and Fidesz was easily able to transform the discursive field into pro-war and pro-peace positions. Hence, Fidesz' performance regarding the construct of the RAIU may not be the same as those of populists in other electoral contexts.

It is important to underline a few implications of this election for the future of Hungarian politics. With the material effects of the RAIU currently being much more visible than at the time of the 2022 national elections, we observe that PM Orbán reinforced his anti-elitist messages targeting

the EU and liberal internationalists in the months after the elections. For instance, in his speech on the CPAC in Budapest, May 2023, PM Viktor Orbán called on his international allies to follow his populist strategy as “U.S. and Hungarian conservatives must join forces in the 2024 elections to ‘take back’ the institutions in Washington and Brussels from liberals who threaten western civilization,” and “there will be the European Parliament (EP) elections, where we can finally topple the progressive elite and drain the Brussels swamp” (CABINET OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER 2023). Perhaps the escalation of the people-centrist aspect of Fidesz’s populism was only specific to the 2022 national elections; yet there is a need for more research that would analyse the discursive strategies maintained in the 2024 European Parliament and local elections and how they differed from those of the 2022 national elections. As Krisztián Ungváry, a chronicler of the 1956 rebellion, put it: “Orbán says that for us Hungarians, Hungarian interests are the most important thing and all else is secondary. Many people are all right with this concept” (THE GUARDIAN 2022). This discourse of Orbán being a ‘freedom fighter’, a ‘defender of traditional conservative values’, and a ‘defender of Hungarian interests and sovereignty’ was not only well-integrated into the established populist discourse of the ruling party, but it transformed into the main message of Fidesz’s campaign during the 2022 Hungarian national elections.

ENDNOTES

Crisis exploitation is defined as “the purposeful utilization of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for public office holders and public policies” (Boin et al. 2009: 83).

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NOTE

The authors would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback, which significantly improved the paper.

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