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## **Opposition Discourse About National Recovery and Resilience Plans. Poland and Hungary Compared**

### **Abstract**

Although the governments of Poland and Hungary seem to similarly contest the conditionality mechanism that requires one to respect the rule of law when using EU funds, there are differences between these countries. They become visible in the framing of political communication as regards the opposition parties. This article seeks to identify the grounds of the competition from parliamentary opposition of the governments in relation to the EU Recovery and Resilience Fund.

An analysis of 2021's parliamentary debates on national recovery and resilience plans revealed three communication frameworks: the financial frame (the policy dimension), the quality of governance frame (the politics dimension), and the European integration frame which shaped domestic political rivalry (the polity dimension). Differences within these framings between the narrative of the Polish and Hungarian opposition resulted from different institutional and structural contexts.

The study confirms the importance of national opposition parties for the analysis of the process of European integration. The existence of a liberal opposition may promote the salience of the topic of European integration in domestic political debate.

**Keywords:** Recovery and Resilience Facility, National Recovery and Resilience Plans, European Integration, Conditionality Mechanism, Rule of Law, Intergovernmentalism, Poland, Hungary

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## Introduction

The populist governments of Poland and Hungary have long been regarded as *enfants terribles* in the European family (Bakke, Sitter, 2022). This became particularly visible after the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted the regulation on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget which had introduced the rule of law conditionality in 2020 (Regulation, 2020). However, placing both countries in the same frame has been a subject of discussion for some time (Karolewski, Benedikter, 2016; Tosiak, 2019). Despite shared concerns about the rule of law and seemingly-friendly relations, policy towards Russia and regional ambitions in the Eastern Bloc have always been different. Previous research has also identified different political opportunities and constraints in political developments in general (Csehi, Zgut, 2021) and in opposition behaviour in particular (Ilonszki, Dudzińska, 2021).

While the governments' activities at the EU level are well known, the role of the domestic opposition actors tends to be overlooked – this in spite of the fact that they wield the ability to replace governments, and that their attitudes and behaviour are closely related to government actions. This was evident, for example, in the final votes on the ratification of the decision of the Council of the European Union (Council Decision, 2020) that had established the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), a key part of the EU post-pandemic Recovery Fund (Next Generation EU), which followed different patterns in the two countries. As opposed to the split and differentiated opposition vote in Poland, the vote in Hungary was unanimous; both government and opposition parties voted in favour. Anticipating such patterns prompted governments to be more inclusive (in Poland's case) or less so (in Hungary's) as regards of other actors in the development of national plans.

Our contribution might add to the ongoing analysis of EU integrity. The increased attention paid to the new intergovernmentalism (Bickerton, Hodson, Puetter, 2015; Hodson, Puetter, 2019) as arguably the most pertinent development at the EU level, requires a more careful analysis of the processes at the national level. Since 2008, EU integration has been driven by intergovernmental bargaining under supreme emergency conditions, which is a major institutional change (Tesche, 2022). Such a perspective makes it necessary to include national actors who can challenge the government by promoting an alternative vision of relations with the EU, thus providing an empirical contribution to new intergovernmentalism.

Our analysis specifically addresses new intergovernmentalism's claim as regards the existing consensus on closer policy coordination at the EU level among the governments of the EU Member States and on the gap between integrationist elites and an increasingly sceptical public. The elite consensus on transnationalism is waning and a new split within the EU is becoming apparent between governments that accept the existing integration consensus and a new kind of so-called "challenger governments", critical of the current trajectory of integration (Hooghe, Marks, 2018; Hodson, Puetter, 2019). These challenger governments are likely to mobilise opposition parties around the issue of European integration.

This article aims to analyse how the opposition parties behave and, particularly, how they speak in relation to the Recovery and Resilience Facility. We expect to fill a hiatus in this regard as discourses receive limited attention in EU studies in the CEE (Dawson, Hanley, 2019). The aforementioned RRF would offer substantial resources for the Member States' recovery after the coronavirus crisis.<sup>1</sup> To benefit from the Facility, each country had to submit a national recovery and resilience plan (NRRP), indicating the reforms and investments to be implemented.

We took into consideration those parties which had their parliamentary representation and had voted against a confidence vote on a new prime minister (or boycotted the vote in the case of Hungary) in 2018 for Hungary and in 2019 for Poland. Our main research question was, on what grounds do the government and opposition actors compete in this particular case in relation to the RRF in Poland and in Hungary?

We expect that differences between the two countries will come to the fore, exceeding the diverging parliamentary voting pattern. The differences would concern the polity, politics, and policy dimensions.

Firstly, the transparency of decision making, political competition, and previous experiences with EU funds, as well as public participation and media freedom are measures of the general state of polity structure. How the governments have incorporated a variety of actors in the preparation of the NRRP and how they have relied on the opposition in forming

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing this analysis (January 2023), neither Poland nor Hungary were yet able to apply for funds from the RRF. The Polish National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) was endorsed by the European Commission on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, and the Council of the EU approved its assessment on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022. On December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Poland and the European Commission signed the Operational Arrangements necessary to submit the first payment claim. Hungary's plan was endorsed by the European Commission on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022 and the Council of the EU approved it on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Both countries faced serious rule-of-law concerns from the EU that blocked the release of EU funds, including the RRF.

its content can also be regarded as a polity feature. Due to the fact that the Hungarian government has gone further in the mismanagement of former resources and in non-transparent decision-making, we can expect more vehement opposition action in Hungary than in Poland. The autocratisation of Hungary seems to be limited only by EU safeguards (Bozóki, Hegedűs, 2018).

Secondly, we expect that because the RRF is focused on policies, pragmatic considerations should rule both that of government and opposition narrative. Due to existing differences in the extent of democratic regression between the two countries, policy-related debate should be livelier in the discourse of opposition parties in Poland than in Hungary, where the opposition might focus more on the quality of institutions as a key state problem.

Thirdly, Poland and Hungary differ in a number of institutional aspects that structure opposition (and government) behaviour, so we expect differences in the dimension of politics. Previous research has shown substantial differences between opposition behaviour in Poland and Hungary, due to the greater number of institutional actors in Poland as opposed to the fragmented and polarised opposition party frame in Hungary, resulting in greater opposition activity and more effective action in Poland's case (Ilonszki, Dudzińska, 2021). Furthermore, the dynamics of non-party agents have also been found to be different in the two countries. A richer, non-party opposition scene prevails in Poland with well-working interaction between opposition-party and opposition-non-party actors, while these types of cooperative activities have developed more slowly and with lesser force in Hungary. We can expect some transformation of these previous findings. Firstly, in face of the nature of the RRF – that is, its strong, policy-related component – non-partisan actors might have an extended role in the process. In addition, the implementation of cooperative strategies among the opposition parties in Hungary<sup>2</sup> might point towards more prominent activity as compared to our previous results, while in Poland, opposition parties behave more ambivalently and the internal opposition within the ruling coalition came to the fore. The parliamentary majority in Poland (the Law and Justice party, in Polish, “PiS”) was not only smaller in share than their Hungarian counterpart, but is, in addition, composed of the main party PiS and some small allies who emphasised their own ideological identity.

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<sup>2</sup> By the time of the parliamentary debate, the Hungarian opposition parties decided on a joint electoral strategy and planned joint primary in bid to unseat Prime Minister Orbán in 2022. Ultimately, however, partly due to an amendment to the electoral law, this strategy failed in the 2022 elections.

As a contrast, the governing Fidesz and its satellite KDNP enjoyed a two-thirds majority.

We first introduce the context of the parliamentary debates in the two countries, and then the history of developing the NRRP in Poland and Hungary, followed by an analysis of the debates. In the conclusion, we highlight the differences and similarities of the opposition discourse reflecting on the three potential explanatory dimensions.

## The Context – Politics in the EU Frame

There was a difference in balance between the government and the opposition in Poland and Hungary. In Poland, the government had only a small majority and there was a real opposition rival, while in Hungary the government had two-thirds majority in parliament, and the opposition was more evenly dispersed. Table 1 below presents a comparison of the distribution of power in the parliaments of both countries after the last elections preceding the discussed debate.

**Table 1. The Parliaments' Party Composition – Directly After the Elections Relevant from the Perspective of the NRRP Debates**

Party	Poland post 2019*	Share of seats as a %	Hungary post 2018	Share of seats as a %
Government	PiS (incl. SP)	51.1	Fidesz	59.0
			KDNP	8.0
Opposition	KO	29.1	Jobbik	13.0
	SLD	10.7	MSzP	7.5
	PSL	6.5	DK	4.5
	Konfederacja	2.4	LMP	4.5
	German Minority	0.2	P	2.5

\* The party composition of the Sejm has changed several times within the term. At the moment of the debate, there were eight formal groups. The table presents the distribution of seats immediately after the election.

Party acronyms for Poland: PiS = Law and Justice, SP = Solidary Poland, KO = Civic Coalition, SLD = Democratic Left Alliance, PSL = Polish Peasant Party, Konfederacja = Confederation Freedom and Independence; for Hungary: Fidesz = Hungarian Civic Alliance, KDNP = Christian Democratic People's Party, MSzP = Hungarian Socialist Party, DK = Democratic Coalition, LMP = Politics Can Be Different, P = Dialogue

In Hungary, the governing Fidesz-KDNP belonged to the Eurosceptic parties. This has become more explicit in its governing period since 2010 – turning from soft to hard Euroscepticism. As Szczerbiak and Taggart

(Szczerbiak, Taggart, 2008) argue, soft Euroscepticism is based on pragmatic aspects, rooted in the interests, benefits or drawbacks of integration that might change according to the conditions, while hard Euroscepticism is mostly value, ideology or identity-based. This transformation has been confirmed by former analyses (Lengyel, 2011; Göncz, Lengyel, 2016).

This turnaround became explicit in the past decade as early as at the Fidesz XVI<sup>th</sup> Congress on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2002 when the word “Brusselite” (paraphrasing Moscovite) was used by V. Orbán. Ever since, double talk features Fidesz party and government politics, and the EU card is played out in the domestic party competition with a strong nationalist-sovereignist agenda. Until more recently, however, in terms of the EU general policy agenda, the Hungarian government followed suite, although the national slogans in parallel with a turn towards the East (Russia and China) became more explicit. There was a clear turn in the EU/Fidesz relationship when Fidesz found itself suspended from the European People’s Party (EPP) in spring 2019, and went on to leave it two years later. As an illustration of the party’s transformation, one should note that the number 1 party card holder of Fidesz and Speaker of Parliament said in an interview that if an EU referendum were to be held now, he would vote no (*Index*, 2021).

Poland’s PiS never belonged to the EPP. Its affiliation to the Eurosceptic group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) made the party more vulnerable to the criticism from the European institutions. The positions on European issues between the two government coalition partners diverged: while the PiS position from the very beginning has been pro-European (Master, 2014), its minor partner Solidary Poland (SP) was more Eurosceptic. The leader of SP, Zbigniew Ziobro, was the minister of justice, and the main concern of the European Commission regarding the rule of law situation in Poland was exactly the reform of the judiciary, for which he was responsible. In December 2021, in an interview for the German daily “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, he declared that he wanted Poland in the EU, but then went on to say that “an independent Poland that will not be relegated to the status of a federal state”. He stressed that “sovereignty was not for sale” (Gnauck, 2021). The leader of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, five years earlier had expressed his disappointment with Brexit: “Brexit is not a good event. I would like to strongly emphasise that Poland’s place is in the European Union, regardless of the result of the vote in Great Britain” (Interia.pl, 2016). In an interview for “Rzeczpospolita” at that time he declared: “Europe should be a superpower and nation states should have more internal sovereignty, which is very limited today. Of course, this is truer of the new Member

States” (Szułdrzyński, 2016), the last sentence following the concept of differentiated integration (Bellamy, Kröger, Lorimer, 2022).

The PiS electoral program from 2019 (at that time, PiS offered SP politicians places on its lists) included the concept of “Eurorealism”, as opposed to “colonialism” and “clientelism” in foreign policy. The program declared: “Law and Justice is a Euro-realist party”, “Poland is the heart of Europe” but also “membership in any international organisation should not be detrimental to Polish statehood”. They emphasised that Europe’s strength lay in its cultural diversity and criticised both the pursuit of the unification of cultures and the domination of a single state’s culture. PiS politicians often pointed to Germany as a country trying to subordinate other EU members.

On the side of the opposition, two aspects in Hungary need reflecting upon from the perspective of our analysis. Firstly, except for Jobbik, all opposition parties are pro-EU. Jobbik used to be strongly Eurosceptic but, in parallel with its move from the extreme right towards the centre, it began to occupy a softer Eurosceptic stance. Secondly, in face of the authoritarianisation of the Hungarian polity and while being aware of the fact that a single party alone would not be able to challenge the Orbán regime, the opposition parties built up a common strategy. Referring in a sense to the experience of the communist period followed by democratic transition, in 2021 this “cognitive change” (Bermeo, 1992) made them agree to join forces and talk together in all important political matters. This became apparent in the NRRP debate, as we shall see below.

Similarly to Hungary, the left and centrist opposition parties in Poland are pro-European, which should be understood as support for integration. In 2019, PSL even proposed codifying the EU-membership in the Constitution. This idea was developed in 2021 by the leader of PO, Donald Tusk, who proposed changes to the Constitution, stipulating that only by referendum or by a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament could a decision be made to leave the EU, as the PO attributes to right-wing politicians the eagerness to Polexit.<sup>3</sup> The opposition party on the right wing of the political party scene, Konfederacja, is Eurosceptic, although does not call to leave the EU. Their electoral program from 2019 included the EU membership among the issues of national security and declared: “We will not allow our sovereignty to be lost further (sic) to the benefit of the European Union. The current model of its functioning has run out. We

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<sup>3</sup> After the analysed period of the article (in January 2022), the unified opposition in Hungary in fear of HUXit also proposed a change to their Constitution so that only a referendum could decide on leaving the EU. The amendment was rejected and the Constitution still does not allow for referendums on international treaties.

stand for the voluntary cooperation of European countries instead of the current dictatorship” (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość, 2019, p. 16).

The clear division of the opposition parties’ attitudes towards European integration corresponds to the evidence from the Chapel Hill expert surveys pointing to a positive relationship between opting for European integration and being a GAL (green/alternative/libertarian) party and a negative relationship in the case of a TAN (traditional/authority/national) party (Hooghe, Marks, 2018).

At the same time, both Hungary and Poland belong to the countries with high levels of public support for EU membership. The attitudes of voters towards the EU were measured in an Eurobarometer survey in December 2021 (European Parliament, 2022): 79% of Hungarians and 82% of Poles said that their country had, on balance, benefited from being a member of EU while the European average was 72%. The main reasons were that the EU brought people new work opportunities, contributed to the economic growth of the country and improved people’s standards of living.

In another study (a post-election survey conducted in all 28 EU Member States after the elections to the European Parliament between 23<sup>rd</sup>–26<sup>th</sup> May 2019; Schmitt, Hobolt, Wolter van der, 2022), a question on preferences towards leaving the EU or remaining was asked (see Table 2a and Table 2b). Both in Hungary and in Poland, the “remain” option prevailed, albeit with Poles being slightly more in favour of membership. The level of support for remaining depended on which party a respondent had supported in the last parliamentary election. In both countries, the electorates of the ruling party were most likely to leave, as well as their right-wing opposition: Jobbik in Hungary and Kukiz’15 in Poland (the politicians of this group were later on the lists of today’s Confederation). In Hungary, both a polarisation of electorates in this respect and the preference for leaving were stronger than in Poland.

**Table 2a. “Imagine there was a referendum in Hungary tomorrow about the membership of the European Union. Would you vote for Hungary to remain a member of the European Union or to leave the European Union?” (only those who had an opinion)**

Party voters in parliamentary elections 2018	Remain (%)	Leave (%)
DK	99	1
MSZP-P	97	3
JOBBIK	79	21
Fidesz-KDNP	76	24
Average	86	14

Source: European Parliament Election Studies, Voter Study 2019.



**Table 2b. “Imagine there was a referendum in Poland tomorrow about the membership of the European Union. Would you vote for Poland to remain a member of the European Union or to leave the European Union?” (only those who had an opinion)**

Party voters in parliamentary elections 2015	Remain (%)	Leave (%)
PO	97	3
United Left	96	4
Kukiz'15	86	14
PiS	85	15
Average	90	10

Source: European Election Studies, Voter Study 2019.

More recent academic research warns that although polls show that Hungarians are still generally in favour of EU membership, political polarisation may undermine the stability of this support, and the pragmatic component (benefits) outweighs the identity component in explaining it. This may be a warning sign that support for membership may wane in the face of limited fund allocations for Hungary (Bíró-Nagy, Szászi, Varga, 2022).

## **Developing the Hungarian and Polish Recovery and Resilience Plans**

In both countries, due to the requirement of ratification of the Council's decision, parliamentary debates were held in which parliamentarians also referred to the NRRP. Nevertheless, neither the Polish nor the Hungarian government held a dedicated debate in parliament before sending the plans to the European Commission. Before going into the details of the debates, Table 3 below provides some basic information on them.

In Poland, the debate on NRRP took place on the occasion of the formal proceedings of the ratification act (Sejm, 2021): the first during the meeting of joint committees and then at the plenary session of the Sejm, followed by the final vote. The latter debate was the subject of analysis.

As for the Polish NRRP, its first assumptions were sent to the European Commission in early March 2021, and then the government consulted the Commission on individual provisions. The deadline for submitting the final version was April 30th, 2021 (Regulation, 2021, Article 20). The document was adopted by the government on April 27th, 2021 after postponing several times due to the position of the minor coalition partner, the radical, right-wing Solidarity Poland, opposing the ratification. The adoption of the bill by the government became possible only after securing additional votes from the Left. During the debate, the

**Table 3. Overview of the Debates**

	Poland		Hungary	
Date	May 4, 2021 (committees)	May 4, 2021 (plenary session)	March 22, 2021 (plenary session)	April 8, 2021 (plenary session)
Length of the debate	5 hours 5 minutes	4 hours 50 minutes	8 hours	2 hours 10 minutes
Number of speeches (incl. government officials)	48	50	56	16 (incl. 2-minute remarks)
“Yes” in the final vote; party	53; no record on party	290 PiS, Left, KP, Polska 2050, single others	no vote	vote on May 26, 2021*: 170 yes votes Fidesz, KDNP, Jobbik, DK
“No” vote; party	3; no record on party	33 a fraction of PiS (SP), Konfederacja, single others	no vote	0
Abstained; party	25; no record on party	133 KO, PS, single others	no vote	0
Did not vote; party	unknown	4 PiS, PO	no vote	29 (abstained at the session) MSzP, LMP, P

Additional party acronyms for Poland: KP = Polish Coalition (led by PSL), PS = Polish Affairs.

\*The formal vote occurred at a separate formal occasion without debate.

leader of the Eurosceptic coalition partner Solidarna Polska, Zbigniew Ziobro, who was also a member of the government, was not allowed to speak despite making several attempts.

According to the government, public consultations of the plan lasted from February 26<sup>th</sup> to April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. Public bodies, local governments, entrepreneurs, academicians and experts as well as civil society were invited to participate. The draft document was available online, accompanied by an on-line form for submitting comments. In total, over 750 subjects submitted more than 5,500 comments via the form on the website, and many were additionally submitted beyond the online form. According to the government, all the comments were analysed, including some which were sent after the deadline.

As part of the consultations, online debates with experts were also organised, during which questions could be asked and comments sent (three debates on individual components of the plan were held between March 2nd-9th, 2021). Another form of consultations were the public hearings, convened at the request of NGOs (five hearings were held between 24<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> March 2021, one for each of the five components of the NRRP) and then five so-called “reverse hearings” in July 2021, during which representatives of public administration responded to the demands submitted during public hearings. The NRRP also consulted with the Joint Commission of the Government and Local Government (five meetings) and with the Entrepreneurship Council to the President of the Republic of Poland, the Council for Social Dialogue and the Council for Public Benefit Activities.

Detailed reports on the course of consultation are available on the government website (Serwis Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej, 2021). About half of the comments were signed by the new political movement Polska 2050, registered at the time (March 26, 2021) as a political party.

In Hungary, the NRRP was discussed in two different debates. As the government did not initiate a proper consultation of the plan, the opposition proposed a so-called “parliamentary debate day” for March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.<sup>4</sup> Parliamentary debate days can be initiated by the government, by government MPs, or opposition MPs – if supported by one-fifth of their fellow MPs – and they tend to occur around a dozen times within a four-year parliamentary cycle. Formally, the suggested title of the debate referred to EU funds in general but, in effect, its main subject was the RRF and the national plan. We decided to analyse this debate due to its scope. It began with a statement from a government representative within the allotted 40 minutes, followed by a speech by the keynote speakers of each political group in 15 minutes. Finally, a representative of the government responded in 20 minutes to what had been said in the debate.

The official debate, on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021, served to prepare for the required vote on the ratification of the Council’s decision. It included only eight substantive contributions as the others were just two-minute remarks. Significantly, on both occasions, only state secretaries were present; not a single minister nor the Prime Minister appeared, while in Poland, the ratification debate was initiated by a long speech from the Prime Minister and was concluded by a secretary of state responsible for the NRRP preparation and by the minister of the European affairs. The two Hungarian debates were the only occasions when NRRP was on the parliamentary agenda – the attempts of the opposition to place the RRF

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<sup>4</sup> Motion for a political debate V / 15298.

planning on the agenda of committees remained futile as the government MPs did not attend the committee meetings.

Overall, the MPs were underinformed about the planning process and the text itself. The Hungarian government published the first 13-page-long document in December 2020, followed by short drafts of some of the components in March and April 2021. The full plan was published on April 13<sup>th</sup> (432 pages). The government claimed they had approached 467 organisations for consultation, but it was not made clear which ones exactly or even when this happened. The full plan also stated that 59 organisations had provided opinion. A government website was set up wherein public comments on the NRRP could be placed. Altogether, 88 opinions appeared on the website, many of them substantial, critical, and policy related. The government was “answering” them with a single summary response each week. Altogether, five such documents with “answers” were issued (Palyzat, N.D.). We can rightly call this a fake consultation platform.

Poland submitted its NRRP to the European Commission on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021, with Hungary following suit on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (European Commission, 2022).

Before the vote on the ratification of the Council’s decision, the Polish government had to appeal to other parties for support, due to its uncertain majority. Finally, a part of the opposition (the Left) backed the government in exchange for a promise to introduce amendments. The Polish People’s Party also voted for it, although it criticised the Left for breaking the unity of the opposition. The ratification was also supported by the small PPG of Polska 2050, a new centrist party. Radical right-wing MPs voted against, including not only the opposition party Confederation, but also MPs from the coalition partner Solidary Poland (formally members of the PiS PPG). The main opposition party group, the centrist Civic Coalition, abstained, as well as the small PPG Polish Affairs and three individual MPs from different PPGs.

In the Hungarian parliament, the law was adopted unanimously. At first glance, this seems to be a perverse decision in the face of the deep, dividing lines between government and opposition parties and polarised politics.

### **Parliamentary Discourse**

The research material comprised of the full transcripts from the Hungarian parliamentary debate from March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021 and the Polish debate from May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The Hungarian debate contained 56 speech acts, and the Polish debate 50 (see Table 3 above). The texts have been coded using the MAXQDA software. The original deductive coding

scheme has been modified several times in the course of the analysis. The frequency analysis was approached with caution due to the different formal structure of the debates. The main method was therefore the qualitative interpretation of statements taking into account their context. The parliamentary debates were analysed as a tool of political communication addressed to a wider audience, not as a real debate with political rivals.

The discourse analysis revealed three distinct but interrelated communication frames shaping the debates. We discuss them in relation to our initial expectations.

### *Policy*

The first and obvious frame of discourse, due to the subject of the debate, related to money and consisted of the complex evaluation of redistributive policy issues; an exceptionally high amount of funds and a unique, historically new way of collecting it, as well as its allocation on specific policies. The intensity of the use of this framework in parliamentary communication on RRF funds confirmed our initial expectation that the debate would be policy related and pragmatic. This framework was developed around the process of negotiating the amount of funds for the country, their allocation, and the previous performance in spending European funds. The debate in Poland concerned the ratification of the Council Decision establishing a partly loan-based Recovery Fund, so the framework of the debate also included a loan mechanism, the risks related to the repayment of loans by the country, and the fears of the commonality of the debt, expressed typically by the right-wing opposition (Konfederacja):

“The Sejm wants to give up the power to indebtedness to the European Union. The British vetoed it 10 years ago, as there was a crisis in the eurozone, and it did not pass. Now it will pass. A conditionality mechanism will come in. Brussels will keep track of what it will give this and future governments money for. We will spend the funds for 7 years and give back for 37 years. We will pay it back for 35 years after this man ceases to be prime minister. There will be new EU taxes that no one has mentioned: plastic, carbon footprint, digital, financial transactions. PiS has betrayed Polish patriots, it strengthens the European Union, not Poland”. (PL Krzysztof Bosak, Konfederacja)

Money as a means of implementing policy involved a big discussion on its allocation on specific policies and target groups. Even if in the context of the NRRP, the goals had to be limited to the six pillars of the European Recovery and Resilience Facility.

As might be expected, the subject of money was useful for the governments to present their visions of spending funds while the

opposition primarily reacted to the governments' plans. In Poland, the opposition submitted its own proposals although, in most cases, it was too late to include them in the NRRP.

In both countries, the opposition parties were recalling past spendings, and pointing to money-related abuses. Although the track records were criticised in both countries, it is in Hungary that this issue was particularly rich in examples of abuse, corruption, nepotism, and theft mentioned by all parties of the opposition, as in this example by Jobbik:

“Where is this money? Who knows? It is there in the concrete of the stadiums, on the decks of luxury cars and luxury yachts, it is in the Lőrinc Mészáros hotel and his new woman's diamond ring, it is in the Fidesz palaces and Fidesz's wallets” (HU Péter Jakab, Jobbik).

### *Governance*

The second frame of discourse was the quality of governance, strongly related to the political dimension. There were two main aspects within it: the current quality of governance and past performance. The subject was built primarily around the issue of the rule of law, described on a continuum between the logic of protecting the Union budget from misuse and the alleged ideologisation of the rule of law. This framework was strengthened by the new conditionality mechanism concerning the respect for fundamental values of the European Union, which in the meantime, as a result of negotiations, was reduced to aspects that could potentially jeopardise the EU budget. The quality of governance was particularly important for the liberal opposition.

“The European Union only pays these subsidies to countries where the rule of law applies. Although Fidesz is trying to present the criteria for the rule of law as some kind of obscure attack, this is easy to refute. We just need to clarify what the rule of law is and not some abstract concept. These questions are very specific and mundane. For example, the rule of law means that the spending of EU funds is controlled by independent authorities. The rule of law means that everyone is equal before the authorities. And that the Attorney General is launching an investigation into a minister or even prime minister involved in a suspicion of corruption. The rule of law is that they do not attack the courts but enforce their sentences. The rule of law is that independent newspapers and radio stations will not be abolished. The rule of law is that universities do not lose their independence. The rule of law is where the labour code does not make workers vulnerable. The rule of law is when no one must photograph how he voted for in a vote”. (HU Dr. Bertalan Tóth, MSzP)

The quality of governance comprised the transparency and inclusiveness of the process of policymaking which reflected the constitutional role of opposition: to control the government and to fairly compete for power. This required access to information on public matters, so the issues of public participation and consultation of the NRRP were also included in this issue. In this regard, the opposition parties were indicating that local governments and civil society organisations had been left out of the consultation process and were stressing the role of national parliaments in EU decisions. Since, as expected, non-parliamentary actors (civil society and local governments) were more involved in the process of developing the plan in Poland, criticism from Polish opposition was general and limited to the insufficient scope of public consultation and the lack of a regular parliamentary debate on the NRRP:

“NGOs have done a tremendous job of carrying out public consultations, actually conducting a public hearing that the government should have done. Now they are asking for a week or two more to arrange a reverse hearing for the government to answer questions” (PL Agnieszka Ścigaj, *Polskie Sprawy*, former Polish Peasant Party).

“The fact that you did not organise a debate in the Sejm on the final shape of the National Recovery Plan before sending it to Brussels is proof of your littleness and partyism. The place of the debate on the National Recovery Plan is here, in the Sejm, in the plenary hall, and not in the PPGs’ or ministerial offices” (PL Paulina Hennig-Kłoska, *Polska 2050*, former KO).

The main Polish parliamentary opposition party, KO, was also pointing to the unequal treatment of partners through a government’s agreement with the Left on voting, which gave the Left better access to the government’s plan:

“It is the parliament that is the place where you need to talk about principles and values, but most of all to look for a consensus. We rejected your behind-the-scenes games, we rejected getting along behind the backs of other opposition partners. The National Recovery Plan could not share the fate of the Local Investment Fund, but unfortunately it did. It happened because my colleagues from the Left took your word for it” (PL Borys Budka, KO).

In Hungary, the problem of the lack of consultation and keeping the plan secret from the public and even from the parliament was much more intensely articulated by the opposition:

“We can no longer express our opinion because it is not possible to know this plan itself. The only thing that was made public is a 13-page summary from last December. So once again: 13 pages on how they would spend HUF 6,000 billion, between HUF 3,000 and 4,000 million a day” (HU Bence Tordai, P).

“Ladies and gentlemen! This parliamentary debate is about the shame of Fidesz. In a normally functioning, democratic country, it is not the opposition that initiates the debate on EU funds, but the governing parties, after extensive social dialogue on the country’s plans. Such a dialogue, Secretary of State, no matter what it refers to, does not exist” (HU Bertalan Tóth, MSzP).

“We know that the government must submit a plan for the use of the money to Brussels before 30<sup>th</sup> April, which must be preceded by a social consultation. However, I would like to point out that this social consultation has been rather superficial and quiet, precisely because the government has only published an outline plan (...). That is why we expect the government to publish its detailed plans, because a meaningful debate can only take place in the knowledge of these detailed plans, and we also expect the government to provide a real opportunity for people to participate” (HU Erzsébet Schmuck, LMP).

The frame of the quality of governance also comprised past performance i.e., previous actions taken by the government – or governments, because the perspective of the past concerned earlier periods of budgeting of European funds, too. Past performance not only served as an indicator of the credibility of the government, but also of the credibility of the opposition, and thus naturally included mutual references of speakers in the debate. Since the Hungarian government was fully responsible for the previous budgetary term of the EU, the government MPs were praising their performance and promising a continuation.

“It is important for us that the distribution of EU funds for the period 2021–2027 is as efficient as in the previous period, 2014–20. The figures show that Hungary is one of the most dynamically developing countries in Europe. We are working to ensure that the upward path continues in the future, so that Hungary can be in the most prominent place among the European Union Member States”. (HU Erik Bánki, Fidesz)

The response on the side of opposition was sharp and forceful, and the arguments often cited empirical evidence.

“Ladies and gentlemen! After such a background, we can rightly think that the EU and the people of the European Union would not want the EU subsidies to be stolen in the coming years, but that the Fidesz regime will want to steal it as it has done so far” (HU Bertalan Tóth, MSzP).

“The way the blatter and nonsense has been weighed down here regarding the support provided to small enterprises and micro-enterprises in the framework of the EIDHR could even be appreciated but nobody could even understand what it was all about. And it is true, Mr Secretary of State, that when you refer to the TOP program you certainly know that



the Fidesz members who were pushing and scuffling in the distribution process are in fact walking towards prison for exactly what and how they did it. This is what you want to build upon and continue”. (HU László Varju, DK)

“What are the sins that should not be committed? Yes, corruption, the defrauding of EU funds. Secretary of State Dömötör readily spoke about the period before 2010, apparently burdened by the corruption of these funds. The defrauding of EU funds has become industrial under the Orbán government”. (HU Zoltán Balczó, Jobbik)

In Poland, the government and its MPs were referring rather to the past consensus on the EU accession, and also emphasised historical continuity and appealed for similar unity in the vote.

“We have the experience of three full financial perspectives of the European Union. These funds have always been spent in accordance with their intended purpose, and settled in accordance with the law”. (PL Teresa Wargocka, PiS)

The opposition in Poland criticised the past allocation of funds and its arbitrary nature. They submitted amendments aimed at fairness and transparency of spending.

“There is a chance, thanks to these amendments, to guarantee an honest recovery plan, guarantee funds for local governments, a monitoring committee, but above all, to guarantee transparency and fairness in relation to these funds. They cannot divide the fate of the funds that have been thrown down the drain, for your investments in Ostrołęka, for the Central Communication Port, for propaganda on state television, for the purchase of private media for propaganda purposes”. (PL Borys Budka, KO)

“We are also proposing amendments so that the Supreme Chamber of Control controls the National Recovery Plan every year, so that a report is submitted to the Sejm so that we join the European Public Prosecutor’s Office. These are guarantees of the fairness of spending these funds and they should be included in the act, not only remain as verbal declarations”. (PL Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, Koalicja Polska, led by PSL)

### *The European Union*

The third frame of discourse during the debates was European integration (although the term itself was rarely used). It raised concerns among some parties that it would be a one-way process towards ever deeper integration, aimed at federalising Europe. This issue was shaped by state-related concepts such as sovereignty, *raison d’état* or national interest, along with EU-related concepts of superstate, federation or the general

term “Brussels” (just as names of state capitals are used as a synonym for the governments of these states). The subject of European integration revealed controversies regarding the scope of state competences that could be delegated to the European Union under the treaties and the general principle of subsidiarity.

**Table 4. Framing the Discourse During the Parliamentary Debates by Party**

	Money/Policy	Quality of governance/Politics	EU integration
<b>Hungary</b>			
Government (Fidesz, KDNP)	Successfully fought for, mutual advantages and serving the Hungarian people	Rule of law perceived as mere EU ideology, past performance highly rated for the period since 2010, criticized for the period before 2010	Eurosceptic
<b>Opposition</b>			
Jobbik	Risky loans still to be accepted and reduced with time	Rule of law acceptable requirement if reduced to a budgetary threat, past performance criticised	Soft Eurosceptic
MSzP	Beneficial for Hungary	Rule of law acceptable requirement, past performance criticised for the period since 2010	Integrationist
DK	Beneficial for Hungary	Rule of law acceptable requirement, past performance criticised for the period since 2010	Integrationist
LMP	Beneficial for Hungary	Rule of law acceptable requirement, past performance criticised for the period since 2010	Integrationist
P	Beneficial for Hungary	Rule of law acceptable requirement, past performance criticised for the period since 2010	Integrationist
<b>Poland</b>			
Government	Mixed: Beneficial for Poland – PiS, risky – SP	Ambivalent towards rule of law (SP: EU ideology), past performance highly rated, with some reservations for the pre-2015 period	Mixed: PiS – soft Eurosceptic, SP – Eurosceptic
<b>Opposition</b>			
Konfederacja	Risky	Rule of law perceived as EU ideology, past performance irrelevant	Eurosceptic

The Left	Beneficial for Poland	Rule of law acceptable requirement, past performance irrelevant	Integrationist
PO	Beneficial for Poland	Rule of law acceptable requirement, past performance criticised for the period since 2015	Irrelevant in the debate
PSL	Beneficial for Poland	Rule of law acceptable requirement, past performance criticised for the period since 2015	Integrationist

Source: the authors' own study.

The attitude to European integration polarises both politicians and voters. It can be argued that it has become a political issue and an element of ideological identity (Taggart, 2020). The difference between Poland and Hungary in this respect is connected with differences at the level of politics, i.e., the political system, institutions, extra parliamentary political actors and media freedom. As a result, while the Hungarian government is a typical, so-called “challenger government” in the sense of contesting the normative foundations of the EU (Hudson, Puetter, 2019), the Polish government has not gone as far and is less Eurosceptic, delegating the role of contestants to its coalition partner SP and the radical right-wing opposition. The arguments of the liberal opposition parties in Poland sometimes turned against the Left that was accused of collaborating not with PiS as such, but specifically with the Eurosceptic Solidary Poland and its leader Ziobro – even if the latter became a tactical opposition of PiS in this vote.

“You said here today on behalf of the Left that this is a push for Poland to deepen European integration. Thanks to your vote, today, next week, they would push Poland’s integration with the European Union (...) the other way. You said it was a train to Europe. Sir, this is a kibitka,<sup>5</sup> not a train. You have mistaken a kibitka for a train”. (PL Sławomir Nitras, KO)

The Left explicitly distanced itself from Solidary Poland while supporting the government in the vote:

“I heard that Minister Ziobro said today in the Sejm that he will vote against, because this fund is the federalisation of Europe, it is a step towards a European superstate. I reply to Minister Ziobro; you are right, Minister. This is a deepening of European integration. And it is very good that it is so, because the new joint public investments will bind us more strongly with Europe and the European rule of law mechanism will make

<sup>5</sup> Kibitkas – wagons used by Russian invaders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to deport Poles to Siberia.

it difficult for you, Minister, to destroy Polish courts with impunity”. (PL Adrian Zandberg, Left)

The right wing opposition in Poland proved its hard Euroscepticism: “Mrs. Marshal! High – but ever lower – Chamber! Today’s session is Poland’s partition Sejm. Today we will decide whether Poland will surrender itself to an even deeper slavery to Brussels; whether it will sell another piece of its sovereignty for beads”. (PL Dobromir Sośnierz, Konfederacja)

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to explore on which grounds the governments and opposition parties competed in relation to the RRF in Poland and in Hungary.

The qualitative framing analysis of the parliamentary debates revealed three interrelated frames structuring the political discourse: money (the policy frame), the quality of governance (the politics frame) including the evaluation of past performance as well as the system’s democratic credentials, and a third frame that we identified as the parties’ political views on European integration beyond national politics (the polity frame). Political parties made different use of those frames. Referring to our initial expectations and our previous analysis, we found significant differences between Poland and Hungary in the discourse on National Recovery and Resilience Plans.

The money frame appeared substantively in both countries, albeit unsurprisingly as the debates concerned the funds and important redistributive issues. This confirmed our expectation that the debate would be pragmatic and policy related. And yet, we still observed differences. In Poland, opposition parties submitted their own policy proposals, effectively (in the case of the Left) using their bargaining position. In the Hungarian debate, the policy dimension was limited to the fierce criticism of the abuses related to the formerly arbitrary allocation of funds and which favoured entities associated with the government, and the opposition focused less on their own policy proposals. However, it should be kept in mind that in Hungary the opposition had no opportunity to influence the plan. The consensus of the opposition and the government in Hungary during the vote on the ratification of the Council’s decision, although surprising, can be interpreted as an attempt to unite around the strategic goals of the state, although this was obviously just a token gesture due to the fact that the opposition had zero chance of having any influence on political decisions.

The quality-of-governance frame corresponded to the politics dimension. It concerned the rule of law and the conditionality mechanism, forcing the Member States to follow fundamental EU values and norms, as well as the transparency of decision making and inclusiveness. It also referred to the past performance of governments, and the opposition criticised the results of the past actions of government, especially in Hungary. In Poland, the opposition parties criticised the very process of creating the plan, becoming spokesmen of non-party actors and promoting greater participation, while in Hungary the opposition's criticism was focused more on state capture and corruption.

The European integration frame was shaped by arguments concerning the relationship between the state and the European Union. The tension between deeper integration and protecting state sovereignty led to a polarisation between parties. Some differences between the two countries could be observed in this respect. In the case of Hungary, the Fidesz government was the most Eurosceptic, while the right-wing opposition Jobbik was inclined to compromise based on the instrumental use of EU membership. In Poland, the ruling PiS was soft Eurosceptic (they called it Eurorealism), but there was an internal hard Eurosceptic opposition within the coalition, regardless of the fact that there was another Eurosceptic party on the side of the opposition – Konfederacja. This corresponds to the thesis of Hooghe and Marks which states that conservative parties may be prone to internal dissent over the issue of European integration (Hooghe, Marks, 2018).

The attitude to European integration became an element of the ideological identity of political parties in Poland and Hungary. As expected, this dimension differentiated the Polish and Hungarian opposition due to a different balance of power among political actors. Polish opposition parties had a stronger position in the political structure, as well as a stronger relationship with civil society and local governments. Opposition parties in Hungary were deprived of influence on domestic politics, not only because of their proportionally smaller share of seats in the parliament, but also because of the elimination of independent media and weakening civil society organisations. These institutional and structural differences became even more visible in the debate on the National Recovery and Resilience Plans.

The Hungarian government has gone much further than its Polish counterpart in distancing itself from the EU due to foreign policy reasons and also due to power considerations at the national level. At the same time it badly needs EU resources – as was put forth in the debate by a Jobbik MP; to feed the clientele. EU funding has, in fact, been a resource

of feeding national oligarchies in several backsliding countries (Sitter, Bakke, 2019). While Kaczyński's project seems to be driven primarily by populist, anti-EU ideology, Orbán's regime is based on pragmatic-and-power-based considerations. The discourse frames of the opposition clearly highlighted this.

In Poland, the internal Eurosceptic opposition within the government made a radical decision to vote against its own government's position. PiS, the main ruling party, was soft Eurosceptic but focused on winning a majority in the vote, and therefore inclined to be conciliatory. The liberal, and especially the left-wing opposition in Poland was pro-integrationist, but the main parliamentary opposition party, the Civic Coalition, did not refer directly in the debate to the issue of integration or sovereignty, focusing on criticising the tactical alliance between the Left and PiS on the vote on ratification. In Hungary, the supporting vote both on the government and the opposition side was built on different grounds. The pro-EU opposition supported the new EU initiative on substantive grounds while the national sovereigntist government could not vote against it as this resource (and EU resources in general) would provide the basis of its domestic political dominance. To sum up, the differences between Poland and Hungary could be explained on the one hand by the governments' performance and, on the other hand, by the persisting institutional and social differences between the two countries.

Despite polarisation, the gap between the elite and popular EU support seemed to be small both in Poland and Hungary. On the people's side, one of the reasons might be the still-appreciated, tangible benefits of membership (Szczerbiak, 2021). The European Union has been long perceived as the embodiment and the guarantee of the values of democracy and a free market, in direct contrast to the communist system. This would suggest that the Eurosceptic narrative would rather be generated by the elite and their communication framework, not necessarily responding to the popular spirit, at least as long as both countries are net beneficiaries of European funds.

The analysis confirmed the need to take the domestic opposition parties into account when analysing the process of European integration. The existence of the liberal opposition in Poland opens a scenario of a change in government that will not separate the national interest from European integration. In Hungary, this type of a scenario seems unlikely in face of the 2022 elections that again brought about a 2/3 majority to the populist-right government. And yet, opposition behaviour can be a warning sign to international actors in the forms of a larger number of policy fields under EU authority, a crisis ridden context, not to mention conditionality

concerns requiring that EU authorities consider the behaviour of non-governing domestic actors in decision-making.

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