Shaping European Politics: Far-Right Populist Narratives in the 2024 EP Elections in Austria and Hungary

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Abstract

This article analyzes the 2024 European Parliament campaign speeches of Austria's Herbert Kickl (FPÖ) and Hungary's Viktor Orbán (Fidesz) through a comparative discourse analysis to examine how far-right populist rhetoric adapts to national contexts. Drawing on Cas Mudde's concept of populism and A. James McAdams's notion of Far-Right Newspeak, the study identifies key rhetorical strategies: nationalist framing, fear-based appeals, and the politicization of religion. While Kickl targets domestic elites and immigrants, Orbán positions Hungary as a Christian bulwark against "globalist" forces. The analysis shows how both leaders construct moral binaries, normalize exclusionary rhetoric, and redefine democratic norms while operating within formal democratic structures. By highlighting both convergence and divergence in their

rhetorical approaches, the piece contributes to the broader literature on populism and provides insights into the evolving role of illiberal populism in reshaping European political culture.

Keywords

Austria – Hungary – Herbert Kickl – Viktor Orbán – FPÖ – Fidesz – Far-Right Newspeak

1   Introduction and Theoretical-Methodological Framework

Over the past few decades, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 so-called refugee crisis – as unprecedented levels of immigrants, particularly coming from crisis-affected areas of the Middle East and Africa, have arrived in the EU – far-right populism has emerged as a dominant political force in Europe, reshaping national debates and influencing electoral outcomes. The 2015 moment is crucial because it not only transformed EU asylum and border policies but also marked the entry of explicitly exclusionary rhetoric into the political mainstream across Europe. While far-right populism has spread across the continent, Austria and Hungary present particularly instructive cases. The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections marked a pivotal moment, with the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and Hungary's Fidesz securing victories and becoming founding members of the new far-right populist alliance in the EU, Patriots for Europe (PfE).

This paper analyzes the final campaign speeches of Herbert Kickl, leader of the FPÖ, and Viktor Orbán, leader of Fidesz and Prime Minister in Hungary since 2010, in the 2024 EP election campaign season to identify and compare their use of far-right populist rhetoric.[1] Although neither was an EP candidate, both delivered high-profile speeches to rally support for their parties. Focusing on these two leaders allows for comparison between a governing case (Orbán) and an opposition case (Kickl), illustrating how similar rhetorical repertoires adapt to divergent political contexts. Although FPÖ and Fidesz co-founded the PfE with the Czech party ANO, ANO represents a more centrist populist formation

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1   OE24.TV, "EU-WAHL: Wahlkampfabschluss der FPO," June 7, 2024. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPLvgTmRu3Q. Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, "Speech by Prime Minister Victor Orbán at the "Peace March"," June 1, 2024. Retrieved from https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/speech-by-prime-minister-victor-orban-at-the-peace-march/.

whose rhetoric relies less on explicitly nationalist discourse.[2] Including ANO would have added a third opposition-level case without a governing counterpart, complicating the comparative design. Moreover, the authors' proficiency in German and Hungarian ensured accurate engagement with the speeches in the original languages, which was critical for detailed rhetorical analysis.

This article employs Cas Mudde's definition of populism as an ideology that views society to be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", with populist politics meant to reflect the people's collective will.[3] Populist dynamics in Austria and Hungary align with Mudde's definition, as voters increasingly view society as divided into two antagonistic groups. Though various forms of populism exist, far-right populism reflects a focus on nativism, aiming to uplift only the majoritarian ethnic group of the nation and rejects progressive values like globalization and cultural pluralism.

While Mudde's framework captures populism's binary moral structure, this article adds three further concepts to analyze discursive strategies: Far-Right Newspeak, politicization of religion, and fear-based appeals. A. James McAdams defines "Far-Right Newspeak" as a strategy under which far-right leaders portray themselves as champions of free speech and national sovereignty while simultaneously undermining human rights and democratic norms; blaming the liberal institutions of the political system only intensifies the polarization. These narratives often evade legal restriction, as leaders publicly profess support for democratic norms while pursuing illiberal aims – they frequently call for the use of more institutional constraints when using political power, as well as calling for free and fair elections.[4]

Gionathan Lo Mascolo and Kristina Stoeckl highlight the politicization of religion, where far-right actors invoke Christianity to promote their populist messaging, effectively creating a sphere of unaccountability. This politicization of religion attaches societal 'moral erosion' to any scapegoat and to promote exclusionary ideologies while appearing legitimate because of their supposed roots in faith.[5] Far-right populists refer to Christianity to promote patriarchal

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2   Saxonberg, S., and R. Heinisch, R. "Filling the Demand Gap: The Success of Centrist Entrepreneurial Populism in the Czech Republic." *Europe-Asia Studies*, 76(3) (2022): 363–387. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2136624.

3   Mudde, C. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, 39(4) (2004), 541–63.

4   McAdams, A. J. "Far-Right Newspeak and the Fragility of Liberal Democracy." In *Far-Right Newspeak and the Future of Liberal Democracy*, eds. McAdams, A. J., and S. Piccolo (Routledge, 2024), 2:3–47.

5   Lo Mascolo, G., and K. Stoeckl. "The European Christian Right: An Overview". *The Christian Right in Europe: Movements, Networks, and Denominations*, ed. G. Mascolo (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2023), 11–42.

family structures and advocate for Christianity's enhanced role in the state. In the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis, far-right populists have strategically invoked Christianity when constructing Islam and immigration as challenges.[6] This strategic use of religion to revoke or hinder human rights is typically independent of institutional churches.[7]

Lastly, fear-based appeals further amplify these strategies. They are rhetorical devices that heighten perceived threats and frame them as existential, mobilizing emotions rather than rational debate through urgency, exaggeration, and scapegoating. Many of the previously mentioned points, including opposition to immigration and gender politics, are framed as rejections of globalization. Far-right leaders exploit anxieties about globalization as a dual threat: economically, through intensified job competition and widening inequality, and culturally, through the perceived erosion of national identity.[8] By reducing complex phenomena – such as immigration, globalization, or war – into simplified dangers requiring immediate defense, and by portraying progressive policies like secularization, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ inclusion as existential threats to traditional hierarchies, they foster a stark binary worldview that pits "patriots" against "elites" and "outsiders".[9] These concepts provide a lens to analyze how Kickl and Orbán mobilize support through nationalism, religious rhetoric, and fear.

To understand how far-right populist rhetoric operates in different national contexts, this study conducts a comparative discourse analysis of Kickl's June 7, 2024, speech in Vienna and Orbán's June 1, 2024, speech in Budapest, selected for their prominence as final addresses in the 2024 EP election campaign. The analysis employs critical discourse analysis (CDA), following Norman Fairclough,[10] to deconstruct how language constructs power, ideology, and exclusionary narratives in far-right rhetoric. CDA is well-suited for examining how Kickl and Orbán's speeches reinforce populist ideologies and for examining how both leaders frame immigration, national sovereignty, and cultural identity, and construct enemies through scapegoating or dog-whistling. The

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6   Lo Mascolo and Stoeckl. 2023.

7   Limacher, K., A. Mattes, and B. Urbanic. "The Christian Right in Europe: Austria". *The Christian Right in Europe: Movements, Networks, and Denominations*, ed. G. Mascolo (Transcript Verlag, 2023), 129–146.

8   Teney, C., O. P. Lacewell, and P. de Wilde. "Winners and Losers of Globalization in Europe: Attitudes and Ideologies." *European Political Science Review* 6(4) (2013), 575–95.

9   Gonzales, M.G., and R. Delgado. *The Politics of Fear: How Republicans Use Money, Race, and the Media to Win* (Routledge, 2016); Teney, Lacewell, and de Wilde. 2013

10   Fairclough, N. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 2013).

study deliberately focuses on two final campaign speeches because both were delivered at the climactic moment of the 2024 campaign. These speeches condense the leaders' central rhetorical strategies, serving as paradigmatic texts for their campaigns. Given the qualitative depth required for CDA, this narrow focus prioritizes intensity of analysis over breadth of material.

Ethical considerations were central, following Michał Krzyżanowski and Mats Ekström's guidelines for ethical discourse analysis.[11] To avoid amplifying harmful rhetoric, the analysis focused on deconstructing rhetorical strategies rather than reproducing inflammatory quotes verbatim. When quoting sensitive content, such as antisemitic (e.g., Orbán's Soros references) and Islamophobic (e.g., Kickl's anti-Muslim framing) tropes, these were acknowledged, with our analysis emphasizing a deconstructive intent. Furthermore, researcher bias was mitigated through peer debriefing to ensure balanced interpretation.

The article concludes with a comparative analysis of Kickl's and Orbán's rhetoric, supported by a table (Table 1) summarizing their key strategies, revealing both shared populist tactics and distinct framings. Finally, by comparing rhetorical overlaps and context-specific differences, the article assesses how populist rhetoric adapts to Austria's and Hungary's distinct political landscapes while reinforcing a shared far-right ideology. This study considers rhetorical overlap and difference – the national context of the two political leaders differs, impacting the presentation of their messages – to assess how populist rhetoric adapts to different political landscapes while maintaining core ideological similarities. Amid the increasing mainstreaming of far-right discourse, this study contributes to the broader discussion on how populism connects with today's voters. But before delving into the two speeches, the following section introduces far-right populism in Austria and Hungary as exemplified by Kickl, Orbán, and respective political parties, FPÖ and Fidesz.

2   Austria and Hungary: National Contexts of Far-Right Populism

Both FPÖ and Fidesz began as minor, non-establishment parties, advocating for economic liberalization and democratic reform. In the case of Austria, which used to be dominated by the center-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the center-left Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) after the founding

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11   Krzyżanowski, M., & Ekström, M. "The normalization of far-right populism and nativist authoritarianism: discursive practices in media, journalism and the wider public sphere/s." *Discourse & Society*, *33* (6) (2022), 719–729.

of the republic in 1945, the FPÖ first found a governing role as minority partner in a coalition with SPÖ in 1983, upholding its free-market positions. Its ascent into far-right territory began in 1986 under the leadership of Jörg Haider, who repositioned the party by appealing to nationalism and anti-immigration fears. This transformation resonated with voters disillusioned with the political establishment, leading to a surge in electoral support.[12]

In 1999, the FPÖ entered government in coalition with the ÖVP, however, internal disputes in 2002 led to the resignation of key FPÖ ministers who opposed Haider's radical agenda, triggering early elections.[13] In 2005, internal conflict resurfaced, when Haider departed from FPÖ to create a new political party, the Alliance for the Future of Austria.[14] The FPÖ eventually regrouped under Heinz-Christian Strache, who revitalized its appeal by sharpening its anti-Muslim and anti-immigration rhetoric in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis. During this period, Kickl became a central figure. First elected to Austria's parliament, the National Council, in 2006, Kickl served as general secretary and chief strategist, crafting the FPÖ's increasingly nationalist public messaging. His influence grew further when he became Minister of the Interior in 2017 during the FPÖ's second coalition with the ÖVP with Strache serving as Vice Chancellor.[15]

During Kickl's two-year tenure as Minister of the Interior, he drew criticism for questioning Austria's human rights obligations toward asylum seekers. The 2019 Ibiza Affair, which exposed Vice Chancellor Strache's alleged corruption, led to Strache's ousting from the party and the dismissal of Kickl and other FPÖ ministers from their positions.[16] This triggered a snap election, in which the FPÖ suffered a major defeat. However, this setback proved temporary: after becoming party chairman in 2021, Kickl revitalized the FPÖ, rallying over a quarter of Austria's electorate by criticizing the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation, and its defense of Ukraine following Russia's invasion.

In Hungary, Fidesz followed a similar trajectory from the center to the far-right, but Orbán has led the party since its inception. As the Hungarian People's Republic declined, Orbán organized Fidesz (*Fiatal Demokraták*

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12   Luther, K.R. "From Populist Protest to Incumbency: The Strategic Challenges Facing Jörg Haider's Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)." Unpublished, 2001.

13   Meret, S. *The Danish People's Party, the Italian Northern League and the Austrian Freedom Party in a Comparative Perspective: Party Ideology and Electoral Support.* (SPIRIT PhD Series: Aalborg Universitet, 2010), Thesis 25.

14   Meret, S. 2010

15   Eberl, Jakob-Moritz, Lena Maria Huber, and Carolina Plescia. 2020. "A Tale of Firsts: The 2019 Austrian Snap Election." *West European Politics* 43 (6): 1350–63.

16   Eberl, Huber, and Plescia, "A Tale of Firsts."

Szövetsége, Alliance of Young Democrats) in 1988 as a liberal, anti-communist youth movement opposing the socialist regime. During Hungary's transition to democracy in 1989, the party was firmly situated on the liberal end of the political spectrum, advocating for individual rights, democratic reforms, and European integration. But Fidesz struggled in the 1990 and 1994 elections, which prompted Orbán to push out liberal co-founder, Gábor Fodor. Several other Fidesz members followed Fodor and joined the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats. Ahead of the 1998 election, Orbán repositioned Fidesz as a broad conservative party, rewriting its platform to appeal to the middle class by criticizing taxation and inflation, and formed a coalition government with the agrarian Smallholders Party and the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum.[17]

A more decisive shift occurred following the 2008 financial crisis. Fidesz shifted its focus from middle-class constituents to a broader electoral base of rural, elderly, and working-class voters marginalized by Hungary's rapid transition to neoliberalism.[18] The 2008 financial crisis, coupled with center-left Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's admission of deceit for political gain, propelled Fidesz to a supermajority in 2010, controlling over two-thirds of parliamentary seats,[19] and Orbán instrumentalized these feelings to frame his policies as the only way to safeguard Hungarian interests.[20]

In 2012, Fidesz introduced a new constitution, leveraging its two-thirds parliamentary majority to bypass opposition parties.[21] The retirement age for judges was lowered to replace opposition appointees, electoral laws were rewritten to favor Fidesz, and suffrage restrictions were introduced.[22] These changes, while technically legal, reduced institutional checks and balances.[23] Additionally, Orbán has strategically fused nationalism with Christian identity

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17   Andor, L. *Hungary on the Road to the European Union: Transition in Blue* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), 69.

18   Hockenos, P. "Hungary's Descent into Dictatorship: How Viktor Orbán Pulled Off the Unthinkable." *Foreign Policy* (2024).

19   Kalb, D. "Theory from the East: Class without Class and the Making of the Illiberal Right in Eastern Europe." In *Value and Worthlessness: The Rise of the Populist Right and Other Disruptions in the Anthropology of Capitalism*, ed. D. Kalb (Berghann Books, 2025) 147–175.

20   Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar, "Kaczyński's Poland and Orbán's Hungary Different Forms of Autocracy with Common Right-Wing Frames in the EU," in *Journal of Right-Wing Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2023), 2–36.

21   Kaiser, Hans. "Hungary: One-Time Poster Child Now Under Closer Scrutiny." *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung* (2012).

22   Scheppele, K. L. "Autocratic Legalism." *The University of Chicago law review* 85(2) (2018), 545–584.

23   Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR. *Draft Opinion on the Act on the Elections of Members of Parliament of Hungary* (*Act CCIII of 2011*). CDL (2012)033 (Council of Europe, 2012).

to reinforce Fidesz's ideological foundation and legitimize his policies. The new constitution tied Hungarian nationality to Christianity, despite demographic diversity, including nearly half of the population identifying as non-religious.[24]

Public mobilization efforts like the Peace Marches (*békemenet*) further demonstrated Fidesz's dominance. Launched in 2012 to counter EU criticism of Hungary's new constitution, subsequent marches have been timed to energize Fidesz voters ahead of elections and reinforce Orbán's nationalist messaging. While presented as grassroots mobilization, Fidesz-affiliated organizations provide significant logistical and financial support. Critics argue that the Peace Marches reflect organized political mobilization designed to shape public perception.[25]

Taken together, the development of FPÖ and Fidesz illustrates how far-right populist parties in Europe can evolve from the political margins into mainstream power. While FPÖ's trajectory has been shaped by fluctuating leadership and coalition constraints, Fidesz's path under Orbán reflects the sustained consolidation of power through legal, institutional, and ideological means. As the following analysis demonstrates, both parties exemplify how strategic populist rhetoric can mobilize mass support and reshape national and European political dynamics.

3   Austria: The Populist Opposition and the Rhetoric of Herbert Kickl

On June 7, 2024, at Vienna's Viktor-Adler-Markt – a location symbolically tied to working-class Austrian identity – Herbert Kickl delivered his final campaign speech before the EP elections. In his address, Kickl exploits his audience's nostalgia for an idealized Austria they believe is slipping away. By adopting the title *Volkskanzler* or "People's Chancellor" – a term notably used in Nazi propaganda to refer to Adolf Hitler[26] – and referring to the FPÖ as "the Austrian family," Kickl emphasizes the unity that exists between the populist party and its supporters. He strengthens the perception that he alone can protect Austria, describing himself as "fit as a fiddle, full of drive, and full of optimism," claiming that the FPÖ agenda is "good news for all Austrian patriots, for those

24   Langer, A., Z. Ádám, and A. Bozóki. "Religion and Authoritarian Legitimacy: The Hungarian Pentecostal Faith Church." In *The Christian Right in Europe: Movements, Networks, and Denominations*, ed. G. Mascolo (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2023), 105–28.

25   Gárdos-Orosz F. and Z. Szente. "The role of populist NGOs in building a populist democracy in Hungary." *International Journal of Law in Context* 20(3) (2024), 346–359.

26   Wildt, M. *Hitler's* Volksgemeinschaft *and the Dynamics of Racial Exclusion: Violence Against Jews in Provincial Germany, 1919–1939* (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 83.

who care about our homeland and our freedom – and bad news for the political system that wants to continue to govern against the people." This populist positioning sets the stage for one of Kickl's core rhetorical strategies: constructing a binary opposition in line with Mudde's conception of populism as a moral binary.

3.1 Nationalism and Sovereignty

Throughout his speech, Kickl reinforces the core framework of "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite,"[27] characterizing the Austrian political establishment as a unified entity working against the interests of ordinary citizens. He mentions "the political system" nearly thirty times in his speech:

> We are waging a true fight for freedom – all of you are fighting this fight against the system, against these self-proclaimed elites. These are the political snobs and know-it-alls – whether they sit in the Vienna City Hall, in the federal government, in the *Hofburg* [the residence of the Austrian president], or in Brussels.

Kickl accuses his competition of being disconnected from the people, suggesting that they "are the arrogant elites who think they know better than you what is good for you." This populist framing extends into direct voter mobilization: he urges the audience to take full part in this fight by insisting that "this system fears the power you hold in your hands – with a pen and a pencil in the voting booth." In doing so, he not only rallies his base but aligns civic engagement with rebellion against alleged authoritarian overreach.

To homogenize his political opponents, Kickl groups the other major Austrian parties – the ÖVP, the SPÖ, the Greens, and the liberal NEOS party – together as "the gang of four," and declares them to be one "system party, which, in truth, only differs in colors but is otherwise all the same." He claims Federal President Alexander van der Bellen to be the product of this cross-party alliance, installed to rubber-stamp their alleged corruption: "they all have the same program: to serve Brussels or the EU, and the program is simply to prevent the will of the people and to block the opposition." Expanding on his nationalist vision, Kickl shares his longing for an Austria of the 1970s and 1980s, which had existed as "a safe haven for its own people." In this narrative, Austria's golden age had been built up by nationalism and since eroded by globalism, immigration, and progressivism. He singles out the pro-EU NEOS party, accusing them of openly

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27   Mudde, C. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, 39(4) (2004), 541–63.

advocating to "dissolve Austria." Their slogan promoting a "United States of Europe," he argues, exemplifies a broader elite project to erode national sovereignty. Kickl suggests that while the entire "group of four" is working to diminish Austrian sovereignty, it is only NEOS which is open about it.

3.2 *Politicization of Religion*

This depiction of political betrayal seamlessly transitions into cultural anxieties, as Kickl portrays Austria's national identity as fundamentally Christian, under siege from outside forces. While Kickl does not explicitly invoke Christianity, he appeals to its Christian population to advocate for traditional family structures and pro-life policies. In this context of claiming a Christian national identity, Kickl uses provocative rhetoric to depict immigration from Muslim-majority societies as direct threat to national security and identifies himself as the sole defender of Austrian interests.[28] He casts Muslim migrants as both cultural and physical threats, claiming they "sneaked in," and portraying them as a violent threat to native women – a tactic common in far-right campaigns aiming to evoke fear and moral panic.[29] Such language taps into concerns tied to gender, ethnicity and race, presenting the state as having failed to protect its citizens. This framing portrays immigration as a violent invasion, while simultaneously absolving the FPÖ from past responsibility and assigning blame to the political establishment for Austria's supposed decline, arguing that their inaction has led to rising crime and social instability. Kickl invokes the memory of Haider and his 1992 *Austria First* anti-immigration referendum[30] to legitimize his stance on migration:

> If they had listened to Jörg Haider with his 'Austria First' referendum, then today we wouldn't have knife attacks happening constantly, we wouldn't have Islamists in the country, no one would be demonstrating for a caliphate here, and our schools would still be places of education

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28   Limacher, K., A. Mattes, and B. Urbanic. "The Christian Right in Europe: Austria". In *The Christian Right in Europe: Movements, Networks, and Denominations*, ed. G. Mascolo (Transcript Verlag, 2023), 129–146.

29   Mehran, W., Rami, L. and Enwereazu, O. "Comparative analysis of gendered frames in far-right rhetoric in the West." *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2024), 1–26.

30   Reisigl, M., and R. Wodak. "'Aliens' and 'Foreigners': The Political and Media Discourse about the Austria First Petition of Jörg Haider and the Austrian Freedom Party in 1992 and 1993." In *Discourse and Discrimination*, eds. M. Reisigl and R. Wodak (Routledge, 2001), 158–218.

instead of places of violence and multicultural experiments, where our children pay the price because their future is stolen from them.

3.3   *Fear-Based Appeals*

Kickl constructs a counterfactual narrative in which stricter immigration policies following Haider's aspirations would preserve public safety and social cohesion. By portraying multiculturalism as an elite-driven project that endangers Austrian youth, Kickl frames politicians from the other parties as complicit in the country's decline, effectively merging anxieties about immigration with discontent toward his political rivals. It is worth noting that Kickl's statement that "they have systematically replaced their own population" plays into fears of demographic change, echoing the conspiratorial Great Replacement theory. This belief posits that liberal elites are deliberately altering the national demographic makeup through immigration to consolidate political power by replacing conservative white voters.[31]

Beyond immigration, Kickl broadens his critique to include progressive social changes, linking concerns about migration to anxieties over gender identity and societal transformation and casting progressive social policies as yet another imposition by the elite: "Young and old, workers, pensioners, employees – everyone is here! Only people who don't have to think about whether they are a man or a woman – because that is no longer a given these days!" Kickl strategically conflates anxieties about migration, gender identity, and social change, presenting himself as the protector of 'ordinary Austrians' against an allegedly negligent establishment.

3.4   *Far-Right Newspeak*

To deflect accusations of extremism, Kickl ridicules "the usual Nazi accusations" and dismisses concerns of far-right extremism. "Austria has been pushed so far to the left," he says, "that only a rightward shift would bring the country back to the center," providing an apt example for Far-Right Newspeak. In a rhetorical maneuver, Kickl reinterprets liberal democratic values while portraying his political opponents as the real threat to democracy, asserting that "they are the true totalitarians, who believe that democracy only works when their parties are in power, and otherwise, it does not." He deliberately addresses and attempts to redefine the extremist label:

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31   McAdams, A. J., and S. Piccolo, eds. *Far-Right Newspeak and the Future of Liberal Democracy* (Routledge, 2024).

> And today, if you stand up for your own people, for your homeland, then you're labeled a right-wing extremist. It's that simple. When the citizen becomes inconvenient, they call him a right-wing extremist.

Kickl outlines the FPÖ agenda as a necessary corrective rather than as extremist, while aligning himself with other radical politicians who are "pushing back against liberalism after having experienced it." At the same time, Kickl accuses the cultural-political elite of being undemocratic and authoritarian, casting himself and the FPÖ as the true guardians of democracy, providing another example for Far-Right Newspeak: "We are not the ones leaving the constitutional framework – you are. And we will teach you democracy!" His rhetoric blends constitutional defense with a call for radical change, depicting the political elite as a threat to national integrity. He argues that "shifting the balance of power away from the establishment parties and their cronies, and toward freedom-loving people and patriots" is essential for restoring true democracy. In doing so, Kickl's speech not only mobilizes his immediate base but also contributes to the gradual normalization of exclusionary nationalist rhetoric within Austria's broader political discourse. Kickl's speech demonstrates how far-right populist rhetoric weaves together anti-elitism, nationalism, cultural nostalgia, and moral panic into a cohesive political vision. Through carefully crafted language and emotionally charged appeals, he redefines democratic participation as resistance, frames authoritarianism as liberation, and positions himself as Austria's last bulwark against an allegedly declining West.

4   Hungary: Viktor Orbán's Illiberal Nationalism and Religious Mobilization

Six days before Kickl delivered his speech in Vienna, a similar event unfolded in Budapest. On June 1, 2024, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán addressed hundreds of thousands of supporters at that year's Peace March, the final major rally before the EP elections. Speaking to his base, Orbán celebrated Fidesz's unprecedented fourth consecutive supermajority victory since 2010, referring to the national parliamentary election in 2022. Orbán's speech conflates the EU, global elites, and domestic opposition into one unified enemy:

> The last time we met was at the height of an election campaign. What a victory we won, My Friends! The greatest victory ever, and the greatest defeat ever inflicted on the combined forces of the Left. [...] Our victory, Dear Friends, was not only seen from the Moon: our victory drove

up the value of Hungary on the political stock market of every European capital. But there is no point in them wanting to buy it: it is not for sale. It is not for sale: it cannot be bought by Brussels, by Washington, or by George Soros.

4.1   *Nationalism and Sovereignty*

Orbán constructs a stark "us versus them" dichotomy, casting Hungary as a nation under siege defending itself against corrupt "globalist" threats embodied by Brussels[32] – standing in for EU leadership, Hungarian-American Jewish philanthropist George Soros, and US President Joe Biden's administration in Washington D.C., representing American liberal politicians. He depicts Brussels as a weak, pro-war, and pro-migration entity, contrasting it with his vision of a strong, sovereign Hungary. Framing the upcoming EU elections as a pivotal moment, he positions his government as the sole guardian of peace in a continent increasingly bent on confrontation. In the meantime, he accuses Soros of fueling the EU's involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war:

> The Hungarian Left are in the pay of George Soros. He finances their media, and their electoral lists are full of his people. Anyone there who marches out of line will not be in line for their dollars. And the Hungarian Left are willingly marching, even betraying their own pro-peace voters, just to get into power. But we on the national side have no intention of obeying the Soros Plan's generals in Brussels. [...] The time for exorcism has come. Either we win or they win. There is no third way – only a third world war. Let us show Soros where the God of Hungarians lives!

4.2   *Fear-Based Appeals*

Soros is not merely a political opponent but a metaphysical evil requiring "exorcism" – a trope laden with antisemitic undertones, given the long-standing far-right portrayal of Soros as a Jewish puppet master. Orbán's rhetoric mirrors transatlantic extremist discourse, where Soros functions as a catch-all scapegoat for liberal democracy, migration, and perceived cultural decay."[33] Orbán's invocation of Soros exemplifies Far-Right Newspeak: while claiming to

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32   On the trope of "globalist", see: Langer, A. "Populist conspiracy myths in far-right terrorist manifestos: A transnational perspective." *ELAD-SILDA* (9) (2024). https://doi.org/10.35562/elad-silda.1390.

33   Langer, A. "The Eternal George Soros: The Rise of an Antisemitic and Islamophobic Conspiracy Theory." In *Europe: A Continent of Conspiracies: Conspiracy Theories in and about Europe*, eds. A. Krouwel and A. Önnerfors (Routledge, 2021), 163–184.

defend democracy, Orbán vilifies a philanthropist who is known for supporting democratic institutions and civil society in societies with less developed democratic systems.

By personalizing and mystifying the threat, Orbán sets up a broader rhetorical tactic: the flexible use of ambiguous enemies to cast any dissent as dangerous to the nation. This rhetorical move of using ambiguous enemies and portraying dissenters as existential threats exemplifies Orbán's strategy to justify extraordinary internal unity behind him and his party – a unity that is especially relevant before elections. Like Kickl's address, his speech employs loaded language to be explicit in characterizing those who conform to his nationalist vision as "good," "us," and "friend," while labeling dissenters as "them," "the enemy," or "bad".[34] Orbán's repeated invocation of vague terms like "they" and "them" enables him to blur distinctions between external critics and domestic opponents, unifying them into a single threat.

Having painted a picture of internal and external enemies, Orbán then pivots to a message of national pride and defense, invoking Hungary's obligation to protect its own. This perceived duty to "protect" their nation includes ethnic Hungarians beyond its borders. The Hungarian prime minister expresses sympathy for ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine, in particular – about 150,000 people largely concentrated in the area along the Ukrainian border with Hungary[35] – depicting them as trapped in the "shadow of the war's horrors" and deprived of their ethnic minority rights in light of Ukrainian assimilationist policies.[36] Presenting himself as their sole advocate, he declares that the Hungarian people will not allow their "children and grandchildren to be wagoned[37] to the Ukrainian front."

In another reference to children's rights, Orbán asserts that his government has "rescued" Hungarian children "from the hands of dangerous, repugnant gender activists," proclaiming that Hungarians must "stop gender," alluding

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34   Drinóczi, T., and A. Bień-Kacała. "The Transition from Liberal to Illiberal Constitutionalism in Poland and Hungary." In *Far-Right Newspeak and the Future of Liberal Democracy,* eds. A. J. McAdams, A. J, and S. Piccolo (Routledge, 2024), 87–105.

35   Katalin Miklóssy, "Illiberal Advantages of Migration," in *Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe*, ed. Anna-Liisa Heusala, Kaarina Aitamurto, Sherzod Eraliev, 35–74 (Helsinki University Press, 2024), 59.

36   Jeszenszky, Géza. "Ukraine and Hungary: The Key to Relations is Sub-(Trans)Carpathia." *Hungarian Cultural Studies. Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association*, Volume 17 (2024): 91–107. DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2024.563

37   The term "wagoned" is used in the official English translation published on the Hungarian Prime Minister's website. It reflects a literal rendering of the Hungarian verb "vagonírozni," which evokes being loaded into railway wagons or cattle cars. Alternative idiomatic translations might include "shipped off" or "sent off in cattle cars."

to his socially conservative policies on women's and LGBTQ rights. Through this reference, Orbán simultaneously attacks progressivism and addresses his party's support of the patriarchal family structure. Orbán crafts a narrative of cultural defense against progressive threats, using simplistic explanations to bolster his authoritarian control. Through employing this strategy, Orbán transforms public fear into political capital and legitimizes his agenda.

4.3 *Politicization of Religion*

This populist defense of "family values" is rooted not only in nationalism but also in an overtly Christian narrative – unlike Kickl, Orbán is direct in claiming to uphold "traditional Christian values." The prime minister has frequently utilized churches and a Christian-nationalist narrative to promote his populist ideologies and further ingrain his regime into the Hungarian government.[38] For example, in his Peace March address, Orbán states,

> We are the only pro-peace government in the EU. The Vatican is also on the side of peace, but it represents a kingdom that is not of this world – and in an apostate Europe, that alone will not be enough to put the brakes on the speeding pro-war train.

This religious-nationalist narrative employed by Fidesz positions Hungary not just as politically sovereign but spiritually superior, comparable only to the Vatican. Orbán ignites a sort of nationalist holy war, where the Vatican – and by relation, God – are on the side of Fidesz. Orbán ties peace to religion to inadvertently state that an irreligious Europe is the reason for the Russo-Ukrainian War and general moral decline. This framing mirrors older traditions of sacralized nationalism in Hungary, as exemplified by Regent Miklós Horthy's regime between 1920 and 1944, where divine favor was invoked to legitimize political authority.[39]

4.4 *Far-Right Newspeak*

After transforming geopolitical conflict into a moral struggle between good and evil, casting himself and his movement as the final defense against chaos – both spiritual and political – Orbán concludes his speech by urging his audience to mobilize in the final stretch of the campaign. Depicting political

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38   Langer, A., Z. Ádám, and A. Bozóki. "Religion and Authoritarian Legitimacy."

39   Kaiser, W., and H. Wohnout. "Collaborating with Horthy: Political Catholicism and Christian Political Organizations in Hungary." In *Political Catholicism in Europe* 1918–1945, eds. W. Kaiser and H. Wohnout (Routledge, 2004), 167–184.

engagement as both a civic and moral duty, he declares with a final religious invocation, fusing spiritual and nationalistic imagery:

> God created the world in six days, and He decreed the seventh to be a day of rest. Unfortunately, we cannot rest on the seventh day. We have to push all the gas that can come out through the pipe. There will only be victory if we all go out and vote. Only for peace! Only for Fidesz! God above us all, Hungary before all else! Go Hungary, go Hungarians!

Orbán's 2024 campaign speech demonstrates the full arsenal of far-right populist communication: the construction of existential enemies, the fusion of religious and national identities, and the emotional mobilization of fear. By ending his speech with a direct appeal to divine authority, Orbán integrates religious symbolism into his political vision, transforming civic duty into a religious mission. This sacralization of politics presents illiberal rule not as a betrayal of democracy, but as its sacred fulfillment in defense of the nation. Rather than rejecting democracy outright, employing Far-Right Newspeak, Orbán redefines it on his own terms: a system reserved for those who embody the 'true' Hungarian people, while he casts dissenters as enemies of both the nation and of God. Through reframing democracy as exclusive to a morally pure, religiously defined nation, Orbán reconfigures liberal democratic ideals into instruments of authoritarian rule.

5   Comparative Analysis: Shared Strategies, Divergent Contexts

Herbert Kickl and Viktor Orbán, despite differing in political status and national context, employ remarkably similar rhetorical strategies grounded in far-right populism. Table 1 below distills these rhetorical and contextual distinctions, offering a side-by-side overview of how far-right populism caters to Austria and Hungary's political landscapes: Both cast the EU as an external force imposing unwanted policies on sovereign nations, threatening national identity, and encouraging unchecked immigration. Ironically, Orbán keeps referring to the EU elite as "Brussels" – the seat of the European Council, of which Orbán, as the head of government of an EU member state, is also a member of. This irony highlights a broader populist technique: portraying oneself as an outsider while occupying positions of power. Because Orbán, unlike Kickl, has been the sitting head of government since 2010, he cannot credibly position himself against the domestic establishment. Instead, he shifts the focus outward, presenting external elites as the true oppressors of the Hungarians.

At the same time, Kickl attacks the domestic elite at home. Despite this difference, both men end up accusing the elite of being out of touch with the common voter, entrenching a sharp 'us versus them' worldview, framing their opponents as not simply wrong, but as dangerous enemies of the people.

Both speeches rely on nationalist rhetoric, emphasizing the importance of national identity, sovereignty, and traditional values. This rhetoric is often framed as protecting the nation against perceived threats of globalization and foreign influence. Anti-immigration sentiments link immigration to crime and violence, positioning immigrants as threats to national security and identity. While Kickl is much more assertive in his rhetoric against immigrants, as Austria, and Vienna in particular, boast a significantly larger immigrant population than Hungary, Orbán refers to immigration as a potential threat to Hungary's Christian heritage and values. The appeal to traditional values, particularly related to the patriarchy, allows Kickl and Orbán to present themselves as the defenders in the fight against progressivism, especially against LGBTQ+ and women's rights as the native-born population numbers are decreasing.

Furthermore, a core discursive strategy shared by both politicians is Far-Right Newspeak. They often reinterpret liberal democratic concepts like 'democracy,' 'peace,' and 'patriotism,' to justify illiberal policies and demonize opponents. By using these terms vaguely, they tap into a wide range of anxieties, allowing them to appeal to a broader base. They present their supporters as victims of a hostile system or conspiracy, silenced or marginalized. Both seek to control public narratives by dismissing legitimate criticism they have received as 'fake news' or attacks on 'free speech' – another liberal democratic value they claim to uphold in the spirit of Far-Right Newspeak. This tactic discredits concerned voices and maintains control over public discourse.

Lastly, both Orbán and Kickl exploit existing social anxieties while identifying and amplifying new ones. They present fears of cultural erosion, democratic upheaval, moral decline, and geopolitical instability to consolidate political support. Their strategy relies on three key tactics: framing threats in urgent terms; identifying immigrants, "globalists," and liberals as convenient scapegoats for the source of societal ills; and promoting conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement to offer simplified explanations for complex phenomena. Through emotionally loaded language, they mobilized societal fears for political support.

Despite their shared strategies, major differences arise based on national context and political status. Both actors lean further into certain claims depending on what their political standing is, the exact political climate of their respective country, and what feelings they are aiming to elicit from their listeners. Orbán incorporates an overt religious dimension in his speech, as

he exerts major control over Hungary's religious landscape and uses it to his benefit. The Hungarian prime minister frequently references his country's Christian culture and presents himself as the protector of Christian Europe. Kickl's rhetoric, by contrast, adopts a more secular tone, relying on provocative slogans, idealized Austrian past, and cultural conservatism rather than explicit religious appeals. Another difference is the emphasis on the domestic vs. global scope of the EP elections: Where Orbán broadens the scope and calls for Hungary to lead the West, Kickl refers to more domestic issues in Austria, especially regarding immigration. Kickl focuses specifically on Austrian concerns about EU integration and perceived loss of sovereignty, while Orbán's criticism is much broader and encompasses a wider range of "globalist" forces.

The speaking styles mirror their positions. Kickl speaks from opposition and is hoping to gain power. Meanwhile, at the time of his speech, Orbán had been Prime Minister for 14 years and had already implemented the illiberal policies he advocates. While Orbán uses strong rhetoric, his delivery is more moderate, less confrontational, presenting his government and country as a stabilizing force in Europe. Kickl, as an opposition leader, is still fighting for power and his rhetoric focuses more on mobilizing support and attacking the current government. His speaking style is more outright and provocative, using jokes to demonize his opponents, infusing his speech with performative levity despite the gravity of its themes. This distinction reflects broader differences in their political positioning and electoral strategies, as shown in Table 1.

Taken together, Kickl's and Orbán's speeches demonstrate how far-right populist rhetoric contributes to the movement's broader rise while reflecting distinct national contexts. As their narratives gain traction across Europe, they signal a shift in the continent's political landscape – one in which populist leaders increasingly claim to speak for the "real Europe" while undermining the very liberal democratic principles that the EU was founded to protect. Understanding how these rhetorical strategies operate, and how they are adapted to different national contexts, is essential for assessing the evolving threat posed by the far-right to liberal democracy in Europe.

6   Discussion: Patriots for Europe – Europe for Patriots?

Herbert Kickl's and Viktor Orbán's 2024 EP campaign speeches demonstrate how far-right populist rhetoric – rooted in nationalism, fear-based appeals, politicized religion, and Far-Right Newspeak – reshapes European politics. Kickl's secular nostalgia contrasts with Orbán's Christian moralism, reflecting

TABLE 1   Comparative Analysis of Far-Right Populist Rhetoric – Kickl vs. Orbán
(2024 EP Elections)

Category	Herbert Kickl (FPÖ)	Viktor Orbán (Fidesz)
Core Narrative	Austria is in decline due to betrayal by establishment parties and mass immigration	Hungary is under siege by "globalist" and liberal forces threatening Christian civilization
Main "Enemy"	Domestic political mainstream ("the gang of four"), Brussels, political system, immigrants	Brussels, George Soros, human rights activists, domestic opposition
Populist Framing	"The pure people" vs. "corrupt elites;" calls voters "freedom fighters"	"Us vs. them;" Hungary as a righteous minority fighting evil forces
Tone Toward EU	Anti-federalist; attacks "United States of Europe"	Paints the EU as warmongering, pro-migrant, irreligious
International Framing	Primarily national in scope, EU as external threat	Broad transnational themes – Christian Europe vs. global liberal order
Religious Rhetoric	Implicit Christianity (cultural values, traditional family, anti-Islam)	Explicit Christian nationalism; aligns with Vatican; invokes God, evil, exorcism
Fear-Based Appeals	Fear of demographic change, crime, Islam, cultural loss, "gender ideology"	Fear of war, cultural erasure, gender ideology, EU intervention, Soros conspiracy
Use of History/ Nostalgia	Longs for Austria of 1970s–80s; praises Jörg Haider's legacy	Horthy-era imagery, national Christian destiny
Gender & LGBTQ+ Rhetoric	Attacks gender identity politics	Attacks "gender activists;" claims children were "rescued" from LGBTQ+ influence

Austria's and Hungary's distinct cultural histories. These differences, highlighted in Table 1, underscore the adaptability of far-right rhetoric.[40]

Populism has substantial implications for the EU as the democratic institutions themselves are facilitating the far-right's integration into the political structure. Ultimately, it is the people who accept and support the transformations brought about by populist politics.[41] The continued success of parties like FPÖ and Fidesz demonstrates how populist movements adapt their rhetoric to maintain an anti-establishment appeal, even as their leaders become entrenched in power, maintaining the populist challenge to the status quo.

The EU struggles to counter the populist challenges of its foundational principles, primarily due to its lack of direct enforcement mechanisms over member states. The phenomenon of "illiberal legality" – where leaders undermine democracy through legal means – represents the most significant challenge yet to the shared political values of the bloc.[42] The EU's attempted invocation of Article 7 against Poland and Hungary for judicial overreach, requiring unanimity to suspend member rights, failed when Hungary and Poland shielded each other from sanctions. The Visegrád Four's defiance of EU refugee quotas after the 2015 Syrian War, led by Orbán's strategic defiance, further exposed these limits.[43] Financial sanctions, such as withholding Hungary's funds for rule-of-law violations, falter too: when Hungary threatened to block EU military aid to Ukraine, the EU released some of the frozen funds.[44]

After the 2024 EP elections, the creation of Patriots for Europe by Fidesz, FPÖ, and Czechia's ANO, marks a pivotal strategic consolidation of far-right populist forces. Driven by a desire to overcome years of fragmented influence from within smaller groups, leaders like Orbán and Kickl orchestrated this alliance to yield greater leverage in the EP. A remarkable sixteen members constitute the PfE, making it the third-largest parliamentary group in the EP, the largest being France's National Rally, enabling them to hold more power to sway the EP on topics such as regarding the Russo-Ukrainian War and immigration policy. This coalition lacks the numbers to control legislation

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40   McAdams, A. J., and S. Piccolo, eds. *Far-Right Newspeak and the Future of Liberal Democracy* (Routledge, 2024).

41   Drinóczi, T., and A. Bień-Kacała. "Illiberal Legality." In *Rule of Law, Common Values, and Illiberal Constitutionalism: Poland and Hungary Within the European Union*, eds. Drinóczi, T., and A. Bień-Kacała (Routledge, 2020).

42   Drinóczi, T., and A. Bień-Kacała. "Illiberal Legality."

43   Éltető, A., and T. Szemlér. "Hungary in the European Union – Cooperation, Peacock Dance and Autocracy." *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 71(3) (2023), 272–99.

44   Genini, D. "How the War in Ukraine Has Transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy." *Yearbook of European Law* (2025). https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003.

but wields influence through "path shaping," introducing radical ideas and gradually shifting mainstream policy debate.[45] For example, these far-right parties' advocacy for border controls has prompted centrist governments in Denmark, France, Germany, and Sweden to reinstate restrictions, undermining Schengen's open-border principle.[46] By mainstreaming ideas like nationalism and anti-immigration policies, far-right populists pressures centrist parties to adopt once-marginal positions, amplifying the far-right's impact despite lacking legislative majorities.[47] Furthermore, the PfE alliance serves as a crucial tool for domestic legitimization; it allows Orbán to counter accusations of isolation by framing himself as a central figure in a pan-European movement, while offering Kickl's scandal-tainted FPÖ a veneer of statesmanship through alignment with a sitting prime minister.

Although this study's focus on Kickl's and Orbán's final 2024 EP campaign speeches provides rhetorical insights, it is limited by its narrow scope by relying on two single speeches. The qualitative approach prioritizes depth over generalizability, and the focus on Austria and Hungary does not fully capture Europe-wide far-right dynamics. Future research could address these limitations by analyzing broader campaign materials, conducting longitudinal studies to trace rhetorical evolution, or incorporating multimodal analysis to examine non-verbal cues like gestures or staging. Quantitative methods, such as word frequency or sentiment analysis, could complement qualitative findings. Additionally, analyzing other European far-right leaders, or examining mainstream party adaptations would enrich the study's framework of Far-Right Newspeak, politicized religion, and fear-based appeals. These avenues would enhance understanding of far-right populism's mechanisms and inform strategies to bolster liberal democracy against its challenges.

As the far-right populist rhetoric exemplified by Kickl and Orbán, and amplified through the PfE, continues to challenge European liberal democracy, further research is essential to understand the mechanisms through which such populist narratives gain traction and influence policy. By expanding the scope of analysis, research can better assess the resilience of democratic institutions and the effectiveness of strategies to uphold the EU's core values of democracy and pluralism in the face of rising far-right influence.

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45   Torfing, J. "Towards a Schumpeterian workfare postnational regime: pathshaping and pathdependency in Danish welfare state reform." *Economy and Society* 28(3) (1999), 369–402.

46   Bechev, D. "Despite Schengen's Expansion, Europe's Borders Are Hardening." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025).

47   Gressel, Gustav. "Divided But Dangerous: The Fragmented Far Right's Push for Power in the EU after the 2024 Elections." *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, 2024.

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