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Euro sceptic narratives in the age of COVID-19: the Central European states in focus

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ABSTRACT

This text examines the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the Euro sceptic narratives of Central European leaders. By conducting a narrative analysis of statements made by the Visegrád Four government leaders, the text concludes that the individual leaders were for the most part unable to create new Euro sceptic narratives due to the specific nature of the coronavirus issue. Except for Slovakia, the leaders built on existing narratives from the polycrisis period and subsequently thematically linked these to the new crisis. Viktor Orbán was proficient in consolidating most of the previous Euro sceptic narratives of various thematic provenances within his coronavirus rhetoric.

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Introduction

The coronavirus crisis is another in a series of crises, called in the literature the “polycrisis” (Hutter and Kriesi 2019), that have shaken European politics. The acute need to find solutions to the coronavirus pandemic led to efforts to coordinate national activities at the European level. As in the Euro crisis and the migration crisis, the potential for the development of Euro scepticism was obvious (e.g. Bortun 2022; Fontana 2020; Nelipa and Balinska 2022; Wondreys and Mudde 2022). The reason is clear: the actions of the European institutions clashed with the ideas of Euro sceptic leaders about their right to apply autonomous solutions (Nelipa and Balinska 2022) that would be “effective” and “in line with national interests”. The fact that the EU sought to jointly purchase vaccines or to coordinate the subsequent recognition of vaccination certificates triggered criticism from some Euro sceptic leaders who pointed to unacceptable interference by Brussels in the national sphere. Wondreys and Mudde (2022) speak in this context of the potential for a Euro sceptic discourse. Their analysis shows that far-right parties connected the pandemic with their traditional issues, immigration and ethnic minorities, and advocated for the closing of borders (Wondreys and Mudde 2022, 97). In a similar context, Bortun (2022, 1417) speaks about the potential for disobedient Euro scepticism, which could

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“become a strategic choice for Eurosceptic governments regardless of their ideological orientation”. The link between COVID-19 and Euroscepticism is also supported by concrete, albeit still rather anecdotal, examples from EU countries such as Poland, France (Bortun 2022), Italy (Fontana 2020) and Romania (Anghel and Jones 2022).

Central European states are a good case for the study of this issue. The politics of all four Visegrád countries have been labelled as Eurosceptic at various times and under various circumstances in the past. Examples include the delaying of the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in Czechia; opposition to migration quotas in Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia; reluctance to introduce the Euro in Czechia, Poland and Hungary; and generally different visions and narratives in Hungary and Poland of the direction European integration should take (Csehi and Zgut 2021; Göncz and Lengyel 2021; Guerra 2020). We have included all four V4 countries in the analysis, even though we know that the level of cooperation among these Central European countries has changed over the years, and of late it has made less and less sense to talk about a Central European “Eurosceptic coalition”. It is true, however, that the countries of this region have developed a reputation as Eurosceptic “troublemakers” within the polycrisis, and therefore all four members are examined to maintain the possibility of following the continuity of narratives (although Slovakia observably departed from Eurosceptic positions after 2017; see Mravcová and Havlík 2022).

It is for this reason that in the Visegrád States (or V4) it is reasonable to expect a Eurosceptic reaction to the COVID-19 crisis, specifically the development of narratives criticising the solutions coming from Brussels. As Cilento and Conti (2021, 16) demonstrate, “CEE elites are more cautious of the EU than their counterparts in Western Europe, especially of deepening integration, a process (...) that creates anxiety because of the possible threat it poses to national sovereignty and culture”. The series of recent crises helped Eurosceptic parties and politicians to fix their positions, given that “their ability to profit from moments of (real or perceived) crisis instinctively elevated them to potential beneficiaries of these particular events” (Pirro and Taggart 2018, 254). The pandemic crisis created a window of opportunity for CEE Eurosceptic politicians (Berti and Ruzza 2022) to reinforce the general critique of European integration with fresh narratives focusing on the hesitant and inefficient reactions of the EU institutions.

However, we will demonstrate that the coronavirus crisis did not result in new Eurosceptic narratives. With few exceptions, the V4 leaders used already existing narratives, some stemming from the migration crisis, some even older. The coronavirus crisis proved to be a difficult topic to grasp, not fitting into the dominant cleavages of Central European party systems. COVID-related narratives were fit into existing frames of Euroscepticism (Pirro and van Kessel 2018) and confirmed the differences in Eurosceptic narratives in the region. Czech Euroscepticism remained technocratic-populist; in Poland the narrative derived from nationalism and rejection of the rule of law principle; and Hungarian nativist and authoritarian Euroscepticism also disputed the rule of law principle during the pandemic crisis. Only in Slovakia did no significant manifestations of Euroscepticism occur.

This text is structured as follows. The first part deals with the debate concerning the politicisation of European issues in the post-crisis period, especially the mobilisation of Eurosceptic parties and Eurosceptic narratives in general. The second and third parts review the literature on the impacts of polycrisis and COVID on political rhetoric. The

fourth part presents the data collection and narrative analysis as a method of interpretation. The fifth part presents an overview of the empirical findings from our four case studies. The sixth part compares the Eurosceptic narratives of Central European leaders and their Eurosceptic frames. Finally, we discuss the findings in relation to our theoretical expectations.

Euroscepticism in times of polycrisis

Our conceptual departure point is Euroscepticism. In order to summarise the literature on the development of Euroscepticism during the crisis period (since the European debt crisis around 2009), it is worth mentioning at the beginning some conclusions concerning the debate on the politicisation of European issues during the polycrisis by Eurosceptics, among others (Grande and Hutter 2016; Hoeglinger 2016; Pirro and Taggart 2018; Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan 2019; Zürn 2019).

The politicisation of European issues does not necessarily happen all the time, but primarily in “politicizing moments” (Hutter, Grande, and Kriesi 2021; Hutter and Kriesi 2019) that have the potential to polarise political actors (Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan 2019). The coronavirus crisis had such a potential to provoke a wave of Eurosceptic debate in the V4 region. Indeed, the coronavirus crisis had unprecedented effects on the economies in the region and on daily life, and many of the proposed policy solutions had their origins at EU headquarters (dealing with vaccine procurement, COVID-19 passports, restrictions on movement etc.). These circumstances may be expected to have led not only to a general politicisation of the COVID-19 crisis but, more specifically, to the activation of Eurosceptic narratives and their inclusion into existing Eurosceptic frames, as the EU’s coordinating role had a polarising potential.

The literature shows the impact of the EU economic and refugee crises on Euroscepticism (Brack and Startin 2015; Leconte 2015; Leruth, Startin, and Usherwood 2018; Serricchio, Tsakatika, and Quaglia 2012; Vachudova 2021, 477–478; Vasilopoulou 2013). Brack and Startin (2015) demonstrate that Euroscepticism, nurtured by the Eurozone crisis in 2009, has remained a strategy, position, or ideology widely shared by mainstream political parties. This description applies very well to our Central European cases. Analysis of the impact of the economic crisis on Euroscepticism shows an interesting phenomenon: the economic crisis did not bring the economy back to the fore of Eurosceptic discourses and narratives. It is national identity and identity politics that explains the tendency of the European public to express Eurosceptic attitudes (Serricchio et al. 2012). As Tanja Börzel (2016) puts it, the combination of the economic and migration crises boosted politicisation along the EU cleavage (Emanuele, Marino, and Angelucci 2020; Hooghe and Marks 2018) by radical right populist politicians and parties, who are particularly good at “advocating illiberal, nationalist ideas of Europe that do not principally oppose the EU but promote an EU that is different from the liberal modernisation project that has been constitutive for European integration so far” (Börzel 2016, 17). Santana, Zagórski, and Rama (2020) show the importance of Euroscepticism as a factor in attracting the electorate of the Central Eastern European (CEE) radical right parties. Bojinović Fenko et al. (2019, 400–403) describe the triggering effect of the financial crisis for fostering Eurosceptic mobilisation by the CEE radical right populists. Some Eurosceptic shifts occurred even among the mainstream parties in CEE in the follow-up to the financial crisis

(Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2016). Taggart and Szczerbiak (2018) show the strength of the impact of the migration crisis on reinforcing the position of Eurosceptic parties in Central and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the impact of the Brexit crisis was contradictory, and, in some countries, the Brexit uncertainty even stimulated pro-European stances (De Vries 2017). All in all, most of the crises were significant in terms of strengthening CEE Eurosceptics and feeding them with new impulses.

The current debate on the impact of the pandemic crisis

There is already a bulk of literature on pandemic-related public policies (Aidukaite et al. 2021; Löblová, Rone, and Borbáth 2021; Nemeč, Drechsler, and Hajnal 2020; Nemeč, Maly, and Chubarova 2021). Boin, McConnel, and 't Hart (2021, 65–86) demonstrate that the COVID-19 crisis provided space for many diverse political narratives and counter-narratives making sense of and contextualising anti-pandemic measures or expressing opposition to the pandemic policy measures. Paul (2020) explains the trade-offs between restrictive anti-pandemic regimes and migrant worker policies, showing the prominent role migrants played in the pandemic measures discourse and a certain ambiguity in the rhetoric of local politicians who were pressed between the necessity to protect “our people” and to secure economically vital labour force migration.

As a special issue of *East European Politics* titled “East Central Europe in the Covid-19 crisis” (Bohle and Eihmanis 2022) shows, pandemic governance impacted various aspects of Central European politics, such as illiberalism (Guasti and Bílek 2022; Guasti and Bustikova 2022), authoritarianism (Batory 2022; Bohle et al. 2022), and the balance of power (Anghel and Jones 2022). Petra Guasti (2020; 2021) analyses the impact of anti-pandemic policies on the resilience of democracy in the V4 countries, showing the fostering of populist executive aggrandisement in Hungary and Poland and the more resilient democratic institutions in Czechia and Slovakia. She indicates that Orbán utilised the “pandemic moment” to speed up the erosion of democracy (see also Bohle and Eihmanis 2022). Meanwhile, Polish ruling politicians incorporated the anti-pandemic measures into their long-term illiberal turn through the aggrandisement of executive power and further decline of accountability (Guasti 2020, 100). Guasti and Bustikova (2022) detect some shifts in Czechia and Slovakia, yet the local democratic institutions, courts, and media proved able to maintain functional democratic safeguards. Although they don't find a causal link between the pandemic and the erosion of democracy, they stress that the pandemic was fertile ground for increasing polarisation. We can preliminarily assume a similar effect of the pandemic for reinforcement of Eurosceptic voices in the region. Apart from some isolated contributions in recent years (e.g. Bortun 2022; Wondreys and Mudde 2022), the topic of the impact of the pandemic crisis on Euroscepticism, especially Central European Euroscepticism, remains unaddressed, thus prompting our research.

Operationalisation, data and method

In terms of operationalisation, Pirro and Taggart (2018) offer an analytical framework for interpreting the Eurosceptic use of crises in terms of the “supply-side”. A Eurosceptic reaction to any crisis might include (1) an “inward” aspect of changing ideology; (2) a “functional” aspect of the stances taken by the respective party towards the crisis; and (3) an

“outward” aspect of new narratives that penetrate the broader arena of party politics. In our research, we analyse the first aspect, changes in Eurosceptic ideology, and how the leading Central European politicians responded rhetorically to the pandemic crisis using already existing Eurosceptic frames. Therefore, we do not focus solely on Eurosceptic narratives based purely on the pandemic, its treatment, and mitigation of its impact. We examine other Eurosceptic narratives used by four Central European prime ministers during the period of the pandemic crisis (specifically, only statements made in the context of the pandemic) to assess the persistence and change in the main narratives of Central European Euroscepticism. We examine how the pandemic crisis impacted the framing of Euroscepticism alongside its traditional socioeconomic, cultural (including migration), sovereignty, and legitimacy frames (Pirro and van Kessel 2018, 329–330). In doing so, we expect, for example, that the closure of national borders reinforced the sovereignty frame, and critique of actual or alleged slowness of the EU in taking joint action strengthened the legitimacy frame, as did criticism of the conditionality mechanism of the recovery funds. The issue of procurement of vaccines might impact the socioeconomic frame. We do not expect much innovation within the cultural frame because of the very nature of the pandemic crisis, which can hardly be framed in cultural terms in general.

Central European leaders, especially the Eurosceptics, have created simple yet reasonably coherent narratives about the EU and the relationship of their countries to “Brussels”. Knowing how vital the previous crises in Europe have been for Eurosceptic narratives (Brack 2020), we can expect the incorporation of the pandemic crisis into the political narratives of Central European Euroscepticism. The task of the following analysis is to discover whether our expectation fits reality and, if so, what kind of incorporation or “enrichment” occurred.

We collected data covering all the prime ministers serving in the years 2020 and 2021. Andrej Babiš in Czechia, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland served during the entire period. In Slovakia, Igor Matovič was appointed premier in March 2020 and was replaced by Eduard Heger in April 2021. For Poland, we included the Law and Justice party chair, Jarosław Kaczyński, in our analysis. He served as the vice-prime minister from October 2020 and was the most influential politician in his party, regardless of his official position. We collected all the official communications issued by the Prime Minister’s Offices on the official web pages of the PMs or governments from 1 March 2020 to 31 December 2021.

Further, we analysed the public press conferences, speeches, interviews with diverse media, and the oral communications of Morawiecki and Babiš on social media (YouTube for Morawiecki, and Facebook for Babiš) and Kaczyński on the web page of the Law and Justice party. Most of the documents we analysed were in the local language and addressed to the domestic public. We selected the documents bearing a Eurosceptic message in the pandemic context, which means all the documents criticising the EU generally, the EU institutions or EU-directed policies. Further, we excluded the documents that only referred to other documents already included in our sample. Based on these criteria, we included 26 documents from Orbán, 25 from Babiš, 18 from Morawiecki, 11 from Kaczyński, seven from Matovič, and five from Heger (see Appendix 1). Of the materials included in our final sample, we selected those parts devoted to the EU-related dimension of the pandemic crisis.

We examined the documents through the lens of narrative analysis (Shenhav 2015), allowing us to demonstrate what kind of “story” (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 315–316) each individual political leader offered his citizens as an explanation for and interpretation of the situation and politically relevant issues, including the interpretation of the context and discourse preferences of the speaker, and mode of communication (Czarniawska 2004). Narratives have “power” not only to communicate the interpretation of the politician, but to serve as influential justifications for policy preferences and practical actions (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019).

“Narrative” can be defined as a subcategory of discourse (Patterson and Monroe 1998) “with a clear sequential order that connects events in a meaningful way” and which “offers insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it” (Hinchman and Hinchman 2001, xvi). We follow the definition of Nordensvard and Ketola (2021, 1), understanding narrative as “the presentation of a series of events in such a way as to promote a particular point of view or set of values”, a specific sort of political activity. It is important to distinguish between narrative and non-narrative elements of discourse (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos 2000, 66–68). Therefore, we focused on those parts of the selected documents that did not deliver purely isolated information but created a more coherent “story” by adding interpretations and explanations of the issues, typically with normative connotations.

The narratives developed by prime ministers play a unique role among political narratives (Grube 2012). Prime ministers play a crucial role in the V4 states as the heads of the most powerful institutions of executive power. Therefore, the rhetoric of prime ministers expresses not only their private framing of policy-relevant issues but is a way of articulating their personal views for public consumption since they represent the executive power.

Overview of the narratives

The words and actions of the populist leaders and parties we are studying have exhibited similarities and differences in terms of long-term shifts in Euroscepticism. In Slovakia, Matovič’s Ordinary People party, OĽaNO, does not offer any significant Eurosceptic appeal, being almost enthusiastic about the EU but keeping a low profile on EU-related issues (Rybář 2020, 240). Babiš and his ANO movement in Czechia represent a technocratic-populist version of Euroscepticism based on vague rhetoric of defence of “our people” and “our country”, criticising the EU as an inefficient, overly bureaucratic institution harmful to the interests of domestic industry and imposing an unacceptable migration policy (Hloušek and Kopeček 2022, 37–39).

Hungarian and Polish Euroscepticism is deeply rooted in the policies and discourses of the main ruling parties, Fidesz and Law and Justice, respectively. Accenting “traditional” values and the Christian roots of Europe, both parties reject the EU mainstream understanding of human rights and minority protection, and both disclaim any further deepening of EU integration. They seek to turn the EU into a “Europe of nations” instead. Anti-Muslim and, generally, anti-migrant rhetoric is as strong as their alleged defence of the “traditional family” against sexual minorities (Arató 2020, 108–113; Szczerbiak 2020, 180–183). Discourses of economic nationalism are matched in both cases with identity-based socio-cultural discourses, replacing the former narrative of modernisation through Europeanisation (Ágh 2019, 140–145).

In the long-term perspective, all Eurosceptic leaders in the region have used strong socioeconomic and sovereignty frames. Polish and Hungarian leaders have utilised cultural frames in a nationalist or (in Orbán's case) nativist fashion, as well as legitimacy frames when denying accusations of breaching the rule of law. Babiš used cultural arguments more sparingly and only in reference to migrants, and the same applies to the legitimacy frame.

Now we analyse how the COVID crisis impacted the use of Eurosceptic narratives in the region. Looking at our findings, it is evident that the Slovakian leadership remained an outlier from the general Eurosceptic trend in formulating pandemic narratives. Both Matovič and Heger didn't develop Eurosceptic narratives per se. On the contrary, both stressed the positive impact of the EU coordination efforts and tried to depict Slovakia as a reliable and cooperative partner. As Matovič put it in March 2020:

It is important that the European Commission and European finance ministers have also taken swift action. These steps take the wind out of the sails of all those who would like to chronically question whether the Union is capable of responding swiftly in a crisis. (Pravda 2020)

The only remarkable clash between the Slovak PM and European Union institutions occurred in spring 2021 when Matovič urged the EMA to certify the Russian Sputnik vaccine (Lidovky 2021). Matovič wanted to use the Sputnik vaccines during the period of shortage of EMU-certified vaccines. When, in late March 2021, he was replaced by Eduard Heger, the Sputnik issue calmed down. Heger only stressed that the "supply must be reliable and fair for all member states, otherwise, we are at risk of new outbreaks" (TASR 2021), without criticising the EU institutions any further. Although the Slovak government repeatedly introduced strict border controls in connection with the spread of COVID, it did not frame this move in terms of "sovereignty" or the fear of migrants spreading COVID (as Orbán did).

Czech Prime Minister Babiš continuously accented the following topics in his discourse related to the EU during the period of the pandemic. He did not abandon his "classical" Eurosceptic topics, such as the migration crisis and vulnerability of the Schengen Area that has to be protected, or his attacks on "Brussels bureaucrats" detached from "normal life". He talked about the Green Deal reform (Babiš 2020c), stressed maintenance of unanimous voting in the European Council (on foreign policy), support for the single market, as well as his favourite issue, drawing financial resources from EU funds. He flavoured this repertoire, of course, with his opinion on the distribution of the vaccines, and he supported vaccination in general. Babiš repeatedly disputed the ability of the EU to coordinate the anti-COVID measures; he said in spring 2020 that the Czech Republic "cannot wait for the EU" (Babiš 2020d), and that Czech unilateral solutions were quicker and better ("Best in COVID" – and in early September 2021 he said that the V4 were the best in COVID again) (Babiš 2021). He repeatedly criticised the financial assistance being provided by the EC (iRozhlas 2020).

Most of his speeches about international cooperation to handle the pandemic crisis mentioned the V4 as the main platform for meaningful cooperation in general, and his personal political friendship with Viktor Orbán. Babiš stressed the "excellent" condition of the Czech economy while talking about the Multiannual Financial Framework and Recovery Fund (Babiš 2020e). He criticised the plan of the Recovery Fund, saying that it

had “nothing in common” with the COVID assistance programme and was only another way to give money to countries “that were not as responsible as we are in terms of debt, in terms of budgetary discipline, in terms of unemployment” (Babiš 2020f). In March 2021, however, he expressed thanks to the EC for setting aside 100,000 vaccines for Central European countries (Aktualne 2021). Only ten days later, Babiš attacked the EC proposal for the distribution of vaccines as unjust (iRozhlas 2021). Overall, Babiš maintained his narrative depicting the EU as an arena of conflict between national interests and “Brussels”, in which he, as a skilled and rational manager, was protecting the Czech national interest.

The Eurosceptic narratives of Viktor Orbán followed rather stable and traditional patterns, and the pandemic situation did not contribute much to the creation of new narratives. One of the few new narratives developed and deployed by Orbán was the claim that Hungary had “won the race” in purchasing vaccines (Hungary Today 2021b), and, therefore, he was protecting Hungarian citizens. In February 2021 Orbán said that Hungary could have 3.5 million more people vaccinated than any EU country of similar size “because we don’t rely solely on the EU’s slow vaccine distribution but also use our own resources to procure more” injections (Hungary Today 2021c). All this was achieved despite “slow Brussels bureaucrats”, and, typically, in close cooperation with the V4 countries (Hungary Today 2020c). Orbán remained very critical of the EU vaccine distribution policy all through spring 2021.

Another new narrative, though marginal, addressed the issue of the EU Recovery Fund. Orbán remained far more critical and sceptical than the other three V4 prime ministers. He labelled the project as risky because Hungarians would have to stand surety for money going to other member states:

And these 750 billion euros are not created by work, because what usually happens is that people work, we all work, and we pay a sum of money into the European Union, and we put it together, define common goals and distribute it. So, there is work behind every euro or forint distributed. Now, however, the EU has decided that this should not be the case, but that we should borrow the EUR 750 billion together. (...) So, let’s say you, as a Hungarian citizen, have to take responsibility for the repayment of the Greek, Italian or French loan (Orbán 2020).

Orbán, however, masterfully modified his traditional narratives to the new pandemic context. George Soros, the Brussels bureaucracy, and migration remained his focus. Migrants served as a key reference point: it was necessary to protect Hungarian borders because migrants and migration in general increased the health risks related to COVID. He said that it would be wrong to “paint all migrants as biological bombs”, but “some are exactly that” (Hungary Today 2020d).

The narratives of Polish PM Mateusz Morawiecki resembled in some ways those of Orbán. COVID was far from being the only EU-related concern of the Polish government in the period we are analysing. In December 2021, the EC launched an infringement procedure over rulings by the country’s constitutional tribunal in July and October that challenged the primacy of EU law over national law. As in the Hungarian case, the disputes and clashes with the EU institutions framed the local Eurosceptic discourses in the long-term perspective.

As far as COVID-related narratives are concerned, similarly to Babiš and Orbán, Morawiecki stressed that Poland coped very well with the economic impact of the COVID crisis (KPRM 2020a). He claimed Poland had the best COVID response in Europe. Morawiecki sometimes, typically at V4 summits, framed this “supremacy” with the argument that the entire V4 was a trend-setter, a strong group and serious contender within the EU, which could show the way forward (PAP 2020). Some established features of Polish Euroscepticism remained part of Morawiecki’s narrative, such as migration and rejection of the EU relocation mechanism. This anti-migration position was, however, not reframed in the COVID context, in contrast to Orbán’s use of the theme.

Morawiecki also criticised the EU for a lacklustre reaction, but differently from Orbán, in that it was not tinged by Euroscepticism. According to Morawiecki, the EU needed to be the key instrument for solidarity and had to increase its resilience in the face of global challenges (KPRM 2020b). Criticism of the slow progress of joint procurement of vaccines was present in Morawiecki’s narrative, too. Still, it was framed as an appeal for the EU to be strong and efficient in joint purchases for the member countries (KPRM 2021a).

Morawiecki was also very enthusiastic and supportive of the EU Recovery Fund, which became the most frequent and important topic referenced in his COVID-related EU narrative:

Today, we need a real stimulus for economic growth. (...) The most important task is to create a strong investment impulse in the European Union. Investments are intended to be the aforementioned lever for economic growth. The European Commission’s proposal, consisting of the creation of a EUR 750 billion recovery fund, provides a good starting point for achieving this goal. These are no longer half measures that seek a muddled compromise. This is an ambitious proposal that may build a solid future for the European Union. (Morawiecki 2020)

As the recovery policy was being hammered out, Morawiecki repeatedly supported the Fund idea in general as a tool of vital importance for Polish post-COVID reconstruction. After the above-mentioned infringement procedure was launched, the PM’s formerly enthusiastic discourse on the Recovery Fund turned into a Eurosceptic discourse. Morawiecki criticised the EC for maintaining double standards while binding the financial aid to rule of law principles. He repeatedly said that the EU was “using this only against us and circumventing the treaty”, and talked about the “European oligarchy” that was bullying weaker member states (Gotev 2020). He recalled the position of member states as “masters of treaties” and called for “constitutional pluralism” within the EU, posing limits to “European centralism” (KPRM 2021b).

The pandemic was even less of a factor in the Eurosceptic narrative of Kaczyński, who addressed EU-related topics less frequently than Morawiecki. We can detect his assessment of Poland as a country that coped comparatively well with the economic consequences of the COVID pandemic and appreciation for the contribution expected from the EU Recovery Fund. He made no direct connection between COVID and Eurosceptic politics. Kaczyński’s narrative worked with the concept of Polish sovereignty as a critical value endangered by the EU institutions, mainly the EC and CJEU. He compared EU policies in general to the Soviet Union (Kaczyński 2020) and used the “Fourth Reich” metaphor to describe Germany’s alleged push for federalisation of the EU (Kaczyński 2021). He framed this criticism as a never-ending Polish battle for sovereignty, calling for a

new architecture of the EU as a “union of fatherlands” (Kaczyński 2020), and as a cultural fight for Polish national and Christian values.

The Central European leaders communicated about the coronavirus crisis in terms of its connection with European issues to varying degrees. The rhetoric of Slovak Prime Ministers Igor Matovič and Eduard Heger and that of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán lie at opposite poles. Both Slovaks were rather restrained in terms of using European narratives in this period and appreciated the coordinating role of the EU. Overall, Slovakia serves as a kind of control variable among the four countries, showing that the Central European Euroscepticism of recent years cannot be seen as a black box. Conversely, Viktor Orbán used COVID-19 to its full potential and, in addition to some new narratives, significantly reinforced his old working narratives from the Eurozone and migration crises. Andrej Babiš, Jarosław Kaczyński, and Mateusz Morawiecki stood in between these two poles, as the following table shows (Table 1).

Eurosceptic narratives and frames: a comparison

Having summed up and listed the main topics and narratives of the Central European Eurosceptic leaders during the pandemic, we can proceed to compare them to determine whether the pandemic crisis saw additions to the socioeconomic, cultural, sovereignty, and legitimacy frames commonly used prior to COVID (Pirro and van Kessel 2018, 329–330).

The sovereignty framework was invoked to justify the unilateral closure of national borders. No other COVID-specific Eurosceptic sovereignty frames emerged outside these specific moments.

As far as the cultural frame is concerned, the pandemic-era discourse was based mostly on migration issues. We can find it used by Babiš, Morawiecki, and Orbán, yet in different ways. Morawiecki and Babiš simply repeated their established anti-migrant and anti-Islam narratives developed during the migration crisis. Orbán, referring to this topic significantly more often, reformulated it to stress that migrants posed a pandemic risk to the domestic population. Orbán also referenced migration when criticising the introduction of political conditions for accessing money from the EU Recovery Fund (Hungary Today 2020a). Although other elements of cultural critique remained sometimes present in the narratives of Morawiecki and Orbán (such as anti-liberal stances and the Eurosceptic critique of LGBT rights and related policies), COVID did not penetrate these issues. Only Kaczyński (2020) referred to other culturally framed issues, such as the preservation of Christian values and rejection of the LGBT and abortion agendas.

Most impacted were socioeconomic Eurosceptic narratives in response to the EC measures intended to mitigate the economic consequences of the pandemic, in which the EU Recovery Fund featured prominently. The leaders of all four countries expressed at least indirect criticism of the EU’s inability to act swiftly and efficiently, which manifested in claims that national protective measures were faster and more effective. Related to this, leaders in three of the countries (Babiš, Kaczyński, Morawiecki, and Orbán) each claimed their country was the “EU champion” of pandemic response. Sometimes the coronavirus crisis seemed to be framed as a kind of competition. The Czech, Polish and Hungarian leaders all emphasised the speed and effectiveness of their countries in designing and implementing anti-coronavirus measures. Prime Minister Babiš highlighted the Czech Republic’s initial successes (low numbers of COVID-19

Table 1. Prominent topics of the V4 prime ministers.

Andrej Babiš (CZ)	Igor Matovič and Eduard Heger (SK)	Mateusz Morawiecki (PL)	Jarosław Kaczyński (PL)	Viktor Orbán (HU)
The Czech Republic was the fastest and most efficient EU country in terms of implementing anti-epidemic measures.	Pressured the EMU to certify the Sputnik vaccine. Light criticism of the EU for leading a geopolitical battle. Matovič was a defender of the safety of Slovaks, which is the first priority.	Poland was a leader on anti-COVID policy implementation.	Poland coped comparably well with the economic challenges of the pandemic.	Hungary criticised Brussels' vaccination policy and the slow approval of vaccines. Hungary protected its citizens quickly and effectively.
Questioned the coordination skills of the European Commission.	Heger (PM since April 2021) cannot be associated with any Eurosceptic narratives regarding COVID.	Poland coped very well with the economic impact of the COVID crisis; Poland was the best in Europe.	Poland is a sovereign country endangered by the federalisation and centralisation efforts of the EC and Germany. Poland fights for its national and Christian conservative values.	Hungary as the opposite of "Brussels bureaucrats".
Criticism of European vaccine allocation policy. Criticism of the export of vaccines produced in the EU outside the EU.				Illegal migrants should be treated as potential sources of COVID infection.
Criticism of the Recovery Fund. The Czech Republic is a responsible country with low overall debt. In contrast, there are less responsible member states and Czech solidarity towards them should be limited.		Poland supports the EU Recovery Fund but rejects the rule of law conditions. "Double standards are being used in assessing the standard of democracy".	Poland supports the EU Recovery Fund but rejects the rule of law conditions.	Condemnation of the EU Recovery Fund's rule of law conditions for Hungary. The states criticising Hungary are "pro-immigration states".
Europe should now forget about the Green Deal and really focus on the coronavirus.		Stressed the "Europe of fatherlands" and questioned the scope of the competencies entrusted to the European Union.	Stressed the "Europe of fatherlands" and questioned the scope of the competencies entrusted to the European Union.	Kept Hungary safe via preventive measures agreed to with the other three Visegrád countries.
Criticism of Brussels "Eurocrats" and progressive political forces in major EU countries (a general narrative with no direct link to COVID).				George Soros is the corrupting force behind the Brussels bureaucrats blackmailing and threatening Hungary.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

cases in spring 2020), using this track record to complain about the European Commission's allegedly poor coordination skills, which he said were not reliable (Babiš 2020a). Morawiecki, on the other hand, highlighted that Poland was the best at managing the economic effects of COVID-19 (PAP 2020), while Orbán repeatedly highlighted Hungary's rapid problem solving (especially on the issue of vaccine procurement), in contrast to the work of slow "Brussels bureaucrats" (Hungary Today 2021a). Thus, all three leaders used an "us and them" formula, extolling their own policies and deprecating the EU's (less effective) policies. The Slovak narrative was the mildest version of this, developed only by Matovič and used only in reference to the issue of Sputnik vaccine approval.

Critical narratives about the Recovery Fund were developed by Babiš, Morawiecki, and Orbán, yet their motivations differed. Prime Minister Babiš (2020b) was critical of forced solidarity with other member states that were not as fiscally responsible as the Czech Republic. On the other hand, the Hungarian and Polish leaders complained that access to the rescue fund was conditional on rule of law requirements. In this context, Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki stated that "Our main concern is that this mechanism can be used very arbitrarily and for political reasons. Today someone doesn't like the Polish government, and we put them in a pillory" (Gnauck 2020). Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán was harsher and spoke directly about "the international attack of the liberal brigades" (Hungary Today 2020a).

We found that in Hungary and Poland, the issues of the Recovery Fund and rule of law compliance were connected to the socioeconomic frame and the legitimacy frame. Otherwise, the classic Eurosceptic narrative of the "ineffective" and "malicious" Brussels bureaucracy was often used, most typically in connection to joint measures or slow vaccine procurement or approval. Orbán was the most active here, "flavouring" his Eurosceptic legitimacy framework with a favourite target, Soros, who he has for years portrayed as a man in the background, as "the corrupting force behind the Brussels bureaucrats blackmailing and threatening Hungary" (Hungary Today 2020b).

Table 2 compares the Eurosceptic frames used by the V4 PMs during the pandemic crisis.

Table 2. Eurosceptic frames during the pandemic crisis.

Frame	Babiš	Matovič and Heger	Morawiecki	Kaczyński	Orbán
Socioeconomic	Strong (Recovery Fund and narrative of Czechia as European "champion")	N/A	Strong (narrative of Poland as European "champion")	Weak	Strong (Recovery Fund and narrative of Hungary as European "champion")
Cultural	Indirect (migration)	N/A	Subdued, mainly indirect (migration)	Strong	Strong (migration), subdued in other categories
Sovereignty	Limited (to the closure of borders)	Limited (to the closure of borders)	Limited (to the closure of borders)	Strong (but not related to COVID measures)	Limited (to the closure of borders)
Legitimacy	Subdued (narrative of "Brussels bureaucrats")	N/A	Strong (Recovery Fund and narrative of "Brussels bureaucrats")	Strong (Recovery Fund)	Strong (Soros, Recovery Fund, and narrative of "Brussels bureaucrats")

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Conclusions

Our goal was to assess the impact of the pandemic crisis on Central Eastern European Eurosceptic narratives. Did incorporation of or “enrichment” by COVID-related themes occur? Was the COVID crisis a “politicising moment” (Hutter et al. 2021) that would provoke a Eurosceptic critique of the EU in the V4 countries? Was it a “focusing event” (Pirro and Taggart 2018, 258) transforming the dominant issues already on the Central European Eurosceptic agenda?

Our answer cannot be an unequivocal “yes” or “no”. It depends significantly on the country, since the V4 doesn’t constitute a coherent group. There were two Slovak PMs making almost negligible use of Eurosceptic narratives, and there was Orbán, who was systematically critical of the EU, although even for him, it was not easy to base Eurosceptic narratives on the coronavirus crisis exclusively. Next to him were Kaczyński and Morawiecki, and slightly more moderate was the Czech PM Babiš, in terms of the general intensity of Eurosceptic narratives employed during the pandemic crisis.

Our analysis confirms Pirro and van Kessel (2018, 338), who stress that a Eurosceptic reaction is not automatic for all populists, no matter the crisis. Only Orbán seemed to fully exploit the “focusing event” to renew and strengthen his Eurosceptic rhetoric in promotion of his generally anti-liberal policies. Kaczyński, Morawiecki and Babiš, in some ways, continued “business as usual”, employing their traditional soft Eurosceptic narratives and only “flavouring” them now and then with pandemic topics and motives.

It is even more interesting to compare our results with the expectations inspired by the literature. Contrary to Serricchio et al. (2012), we conclude that the V4 leaders most frequently utilised the socioeconomic frame. Except for the Slovakian MPs, the V4 leaders used the rhetoric of success and being a “winner” to validate their unilateral policies as more efficient than any concerted EU-level effort. We detected the motive of protecting “our people” (Paul 2020) from the socioeconomic impact of the COVID crisis, as well. Cultural and legitimacy frames were used as expected by Cilento and Conti (2021), yet not identically in all four cases. Again, Slovakia was an “outlier”, since these two frames were not represented at all in the narratives of Matovič and Heger. Migration remained at the centre of culturally framed Euroscepticism, yet only Orbán connected this topic directly to COVID-19, depicting migrants as a health risk. Our research did not indicate any new elements of nativism connected to the management of the pandemic, contrary to expectations (Wondreys and Mudde 2022). The legitimacy frame was subdued in Babiš’s case and limited to well-worn slogans condemning the “sluggish” Brussels bureaucracy. Kaczyński and Morawiecki initially spoke similarly, but their criticism reached its highest intensity only after the EC issued the infringement procedure against Poland in December 2021. Orbán used the legitimacy frame very intensively and consistently throughout the pandemic.

Overall, COVID-19 neither broke the recent pattern of mainstreaming and reinforcing Eurosceptic narratives in Central and Eastern Europe (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2016; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018) nor added qualitatively new narratives to the previous ones. It was not a “politicising moment” with a capital “P”, but a showcase of the ability of Central-Eastern European Eurosceptic leaders to connect previously established frames and narratives with new challenges and topics. Another important takeaway from our research is that the pandemic crisis itself was not a sufficient condition for launching or intensifying Euroscepticism. All four

cases show clearly that the presence of a Eurosceptic narrative before the crisis was the necessary condition for employment of such rhetoric during the crisis.

Our most important contribution is the finding that path dependency matters more than the particulars of any given new crisis. The long and well-established tradition of local Central and Eastern European Euroscepticism (or the lack of it in the case of the two Slovak PMs) meant that powerful and coherent Eurosceptic frames pre-existed the pandemic that started in 2020. No matter how deep the crisis was, the specificities of COVID contributed little to the development of new frames and narratives. The Hungarian and Slovak cases illustrate our conclusion. Orbán did not downplay the intensity of his criticism of the EU, but instead used the crisis as an opportunity to reinforce existing Eurosceptic frames and adapt his narrative to the needs of the moment. Matovič and Heger did not change their pro-integration positions simply because the pandemic crisis presented new challenges. Although some of Matovič's practical steps, like procurement of the Russian Sputnik vaccine, contradicted the effort of the EU institutions and member states to cooperate, but he did not blame the EU when justifying his actions.

Our findings are, of course, limited. The first caveat is based on the geographical scope of our research. More countries of the Eastern enlargement area should be included to give a more complex picture, as should more types of actors such as political parties, parliamentary opposition, civil society movements etc. Therefore, the generalisability of our research results is bounded; we cannot draw conclusions about the general level of Euroscepticism in each country as a result of COVID-19, since we only examined the statements of government representatives. Also, a comparison with Western and Southern European countries would produce more nuanced and comparative results. The second caveat stems from our focus on governing leaders, since Euroscepticism is a powerful tool in the hands of opposition parties and politicians, who could have been even more creative in framing the pandemic crisis to serve Eurosceptic aims.

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