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Role Theory and Small States' Foreign Policy: Explaining Hungary's China policy under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán

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Role Theory and Small States' Foreign Policy
Explaining Hungary's China policy under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán

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Abstract

Small states' roles in international relations have often been overlooked but the dynamics have changed in recent times. With the creation of international organizations, small states can punch above their weight and exert influence, making them important actors to consider. Their foreign policy choices can have significant impacts, however, traditional theories cannot always explain them. Constructivism based role theory is a new approach to foreign policy analysis with the potential to establish the link between size and behaviour. This paper aims to test whether role theory can explain Hungary's foreign policy behaviour between 2010 and 2021. Despite being a small state, Hungary has received disproportionately significant attention in recent years due to its baffling foreign policy shifts. Amid the increasing geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, Hungary often blatantly supported the latter at the expense of its EU and NATO allies. Through an inductive, latent content analysis of the Hungarian Prime Minister's speeches, this research shows that role theory is a useful approach to make sense of puzzling foreign policy outcomes, especially regarding small states. The identified national role conceptions of the Prime Minister establish a direct link with the country's confrontational foreign policy with Western allies and explain Hungary's efforts to strengthen relations with China.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>1.Introduction.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>2. Literature Review</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>3. Theoretical Framework</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>4. Research Method.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>4. Analysis.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>7. Results & Discussion</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>8. Conclusion.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>32</i>

1.Introduction

In the international relations literature, small states have often been marginalized based on generally assumed correlations between size, capability, and influence. Small states were seen constrained by the dynamics of the system and the will of more powerful actors (Browning, 2006). However, transnational efforts such as the creation of the EU, NATO or free trade agreements altered these tendencies and helped to elevate small states' diplomatic and legal status (Hey, 2003). Following the end of the Cold War, scholars started paying attention not only to the structural weaknesses of small states, but their successes, strategies, and diverse interactions (Cooper & Shaw, 2009; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017).

Although similar in size, the observations revealed that small states do not necessarily follow similar paths in their foreign policies. Gigueux (2016, p.27) highlighted that small states are not a homogeneous category and "significant differences exist in their perceptions, interests and external strategies." These findings generated an intense focus on the field, but in-depth case studies are still lacking (Wong & Hill, 2011). Several scholars have recently called for addressing this gap and stressed the value of analysing small states.

Understanding small states' opportunities and choices better is not merely interesting from a theoretical perspective but, as Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017) note, small states have an increasing influence on world politics. Both policy-making and the field of IR can benefit from small state studies. The analysis of their unusual foreign policy choices offers valuable contribution to alliance crafting and to the management of multilateral relations. In the context of the European Union (EU), for instance, a small country's opposing views on foreign relations can derail unity and bring about consequences much larger than the country's size suggests.

With the focus on Hungary's foreign policy, this study aims to contribute to small state studies. Hungary's case is particularly interesting as the country has been singled out multiple times for its outright advocacy for closer ties with China at the expense of its regional alliances. Next to the efforts to boost bilateral ties, Hungary vetoed EU joint statements uncomfortable for the Chinese leadership. At the same time, China was designated as a systemic rival by the EU (European Commission, 2019) prompting a more cautious approach by the Union and its member states. The Orbán government's China policy is even more surprising considering the remarkable continuity in Hungary's European-North Atlantic orientation since its modern history (Varga, 2000). Scholars attempted to account for this shift by examining the economic aspects of the Hungary-China relations (Szunomár, 2018). While the proposition is logical, the studies did not yield the expected results.

Hungary's behaviour of alienating allies and moving closer to the rival of its traditional partners is puzzling. How can these developments be explained? Amid the increasing geopolitical rivalry between China and the US, these processes led Hungary to be heavily featured in international media (Hettyey, 2021a), quite unusually for a small state. It sparked questions among academics (Szunomár, Völgyi, & Matura, 2014), in the media ("Why is Hungary siding with China", 2021) and in policy circles (Paszak, 2021) about the rationale behind this behaviour. Despite all the interest, however, there is still no clear answer.

Hungary's case appears to defy traditional approaches analysing small states hence, this study will test a rather new theory. Building on previous works and through an inductive, within-case analysis, it will test the explanatory power of role theory. To establish the causal mechanism between role theory and foreign policy, and operationalize the two concepts, it will focus on national role conceptions (NRCs). NRCs are a useful tool in explaining foreign policy outcomes and linking state size to behaviour (Gigleux, 2016; Aggestam, 1999). By using it as

an independent variable, NRCs were found to explain foreign policy actions that other approaches could not clarify (Catalinac, 2007).

The research question is the following: **Can the national role conception of PM Orbán explain Hungary's foreign policy shift towards China?** Using textual content analysis, this paper looks at the PM's annual 'State of Nation' address in which the country's direction and priorities are outlined. A set of terms and expressions are delineated and categorised whether they appear in the speeches between 2010 and 2021. The study puts forward the following hypotheses:

H1: The Prime Minister's independent actor role conception has led to seeking closer relations with China to challenge the EU.

H2: The fighter role conception compelled Hungary to break with traditional allies and move towards previously unlikely partners such as China.

The core objectives of the paper are to define small states, outline the main approaches to their foreign policy choices and review the applicability of role theory. It is expected that through the NRCs of the PM, a comprehensive account can be given of the country's intensified relations with China.

After reviewing the general approaches to small states' foreign policy studies and applying role theory to the case of Hungary, the study concludes that the effort to strengthen ties with China was rooted in the genuine conviction of economic gains but has later become part of the Prime Minister's strategy to gain leverage in the EU. By going against joint positions and defying the EU and US, Hungary elevated its role as a small state and gained disproportionate influence. This behaviour was also used to display Hungary's independence, a clear change for a country that had been subjugated to the will of others through its history.

This paper unfolds in 7 chapters. The first chapter discusses the analysis of small states and reviews the general approaches testing them against Hungary's case. The second chapter looks

at the theoretical framework of role theory after which the methodology is described. In the subsequent chapters, Hungary's case is analysed through role theory followed by the presentation of the results and their implications. It concludes with a chapter reviewing the main findings.

2. Literature Review

The starting point of this study is that small states have unique characteristics making them different from major powers (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017) thus, they should not be analysed through the same approaches. As the field of IR has traditionally concerned the study of big powers, the literature on small states is limited in comparison. One primary constraint is the lack of a generally accepted definition of small state (Maass, 2009, p. 65). The most common indicators of smallness that scholars use are population size, territory, GPD, military capacity and other absolute markers. It is important to realize that these distinctions are arbitrary, and the implications of a certain size can vary widely depending on context and relations (Thorhallsson, 2018, p. 19).

Despite the definitional issue, there is a strong rationale to study small states (Keohane, 1969, p. 310) and some scholars consider the elusive notion an advantage. According to Maass (2009), the field has greatly benefitted from the definitional flexibility allowing different characterizations to meet different research needs. In the context of Europe, the general threshold has been set at the population of maximum 16 million (Browning, 2006, p. 670). Population size is the most often used defining variable, and in line with that, this paper relies on this distinction. Accordingly, Hungary, with a population of 9.5 million¹ is considered a small state.

When analysing foreign policy outcomes, it is crucial to understand the difference between small states and major powers and acknowledge that what is surprising from a small state could be the expected behaviour from a big power. Small states are unique in the external challenges and security threats they face, have distinct capabilities and needs, and clear structural vulnerabilities (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017). It is accepted that they face certain

¹ Latest data on retrieved from Worldometer <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/hungary-population/>

constraints when forming foreign policy because of their limited resources in terms of diplomatic force and military might (Corbett & Connel, 2015). With these assumptions, the literature has varied highlighting their limitations or their resilience (Long, 2016).

Recent studies focused on the ways small states advance their positions (Bailer, 2004) and exert influence on regional and global levels (Jakobsen, 2007). Empirical observations show that small states can behave in very different ways and can punch above their weight (Panke, 2012). The identified differences led scholars to pay more attention to domestic factors, next to systemic constraints, as potential determinants of foreign policy choices (Szalai, 2017; Kakachia, Minesashvili, & Kakhishvili, 2018).

Traditionally, the study of small states has been approached through the prominent IR theories; realism, liberalism, and constructivism (Adigbuo, 2007). The realist view has been dominating until the Cold War, seeing small states as highly dependent on the systemic dynamics. It describes small states' behaviour as first and foremost shaped by great powers with whom they bandwagon or balance against (Mearsheimer, 2001). Walt (1987, p. 17) refers to balancing as aligning against a threat with others, while bandwagoning means alignment with the source of danger. If the small state is strategically important for a great power, cooperation is possible through the formation of alliances (Waltz, 1979). Generally, this approach stresses the importance of the system to the detriment of domestic-level variables.

In Hungary's case, realism does not provide a sufficient explanation of the country's China policy. Its behaviour cannot be described as balancing because Hungary does not take a clear side with the US, the Western great power, in the face of Chinese influence and potential threat to the rules-based international order (Lee, 2019). This is a notable difference from characteristically similar small states such as the Czech Republic or Norway, whose foreign policies reflect that the US is the main security guarantor, in contrast to potentially rival states such as China or Russia (Haugevik et al., 2020). While China is geographically distant from

both countries, the differences in ideology and vision for global leadership make it a potential rival on the same lines with Russia. If one were to consider China as the source of danger from the Hungarian perspective, resulting in bandwagoning, the theory cannot account for the inconsistency in Hungary's vetoes. In 2021, Hungary voted for EU sanctions targeting Chinese officials in connection with human rights abuses; a decision that is in stark contrast with the previous vetoes (European Council, 2021). In the security dimension, Hungary continues to deploy troops on NATO missions and despite hosting the Chinese Defence Minister in the spring of 2021 ("Hungary quietly hosts", 2021), there is no indication of any military alignment with China (Budai, 2021). Furthermore, the realist assumption of the size-induced limitations is not reflected in Hungary's often daring foreign policies.

Another traditionally applied theory is liberalism. According to this, international institutions have crucial importance in determining the foreign policies of small states (Keohane, 1969). Small states seek membership in international institutions and cooperate with major states to alleviate their weaknesses. These relations, however, also create constraints on their behaviour. Liberals maintain that all states are driven by practical gains and ideological affinity when cooperating (Keohane & Nye, 2011; Haugevik & Rieker, 2017). For example, scholars of Nordic countries maintain that the decision to join the EU was influenced by the economic benefits the country anticipated from the membership (Gstöhl, 2002; Ingebritsen & Larson, 1997). A state's behaviour is essentially the reflection of its purposes and preferences (Moravcsik, 1997).

Similarly to realism, the applicability of liberalism to Hungary's case is limited. In 2012, the Orbán government launched the so-called 'Opening to the East' strategy as part of the new foreign economic policy. The aim was to lessen Hungary's dependence on Western markets and boost exports and foreign direct investment (FDI) flows from Asian countries (Völgyi & Lukács, 2021, p. 173). It meant to take advantage of the geographical location of Hungary and

exploit its access to Asian and post-Soviet states. Based on this, Hungary's approach towards China appears to be of economic nature, however, it soon became clear that the relationship did not deliver. Although trade relations between Hungary and China have experienced a notable increase, in 2019 it was still only 5% of the total Hungarian export that went to China in contrast to 80% going to EU countries (Prague Security Studies Institute, 2019). Investment figures show a similar trend, 75% of FDI to Hungary originates from EU countries, while only 2.4% comes from China (Szunomár, 2018).

According to Matura (2020), a leading expert on Hungary-China relations, despite the promises of high economic gains, both trade and investment volumes fell well below the expectations. Even after seeing the lack of economic benefits, the Hungarian leadership continued to cultivate the relations at the expense of its economically more important partners. This behaviour defies the liberal logic of pursuing relations for practical gains.

Some scholars such as Rohac (2018), suggested a potential ideological affinity towards authoritarian regimes as a factor in Hungary's China policy. While plausible, there is no evidence of ideological similarities, other than nationalism. The Hungarian PM repeatedly uses communism with negative connotations and calls liberal, opposition politicians "communists with degrees" (Szamizdat 10, 2021). Affiliation with the communist ideology of the Chinese leadership is very unlikely and nationalism, by its nature, does not imply sympathy towards other states.

The previous two theoretical foundations provided valuable insights but were unable to shed light on Hungary's puzzling decisions. The third approach to small states has been the application of the constructivist framework. Constructivism suggests that states are driven by identities and ideas about themselves and others in the system. Small states can move up in the hierarchy and ease their vulnerabilities by seeking higher status through excelling in a particular field (Wohlforth, de Carvalho, Leira, & Neumann, 2017). Based on their perceived

identities, states determine their role in the system and make their foreign policies accordingly (Hedling & Brommesson, 2017). This approach offers the most promising start to analyse unusual foreign policies of small states. It combines both the structural and domestic level variables which Hey (2003) identified as an important point of departure. After looking at the most common foreign policy behaviours identified in small states, she found contradictions and variations and concluded that it is insufficient to analyse variables on a single level.

Building on these findings, this study will test the applicability of a rather new method that uses multi-level analysis. Based on constructivism and sociology, role theory has the potential to explain an anomaly in a small state's foreign policy behaviour. This approach recognizes the individual's part in the policy-making process. It maintains that changes in small states' foreign policies can occur as the individual's capacity for action is based on perception and understanding of the situation (Gigleux, 2016, p.30). Before testing its pertinence, however, it is important to consider other alternative explanations of Hungary's policy.

Reviewing the causes of policy shifts, Adams (2012) identified that political parties often change their positions to react to past election results. Political parties are likely to shift on the left-right spectrum according to whether votes were gained or lost (Budge, 1994). The political elites use past election results to infer voters' preferences. In Hungary's situation, a major change occurred in its foreign policy after the second supermajority of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in 2014. Visnovitz and Jenne (2021) describe how the PM undertook a radical set of reforms and structural changes, including the reshuffling of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). As Orbán governed the country with a "veto-proof parliamentary supermajority" (p.5), the MFA became directly answerable to him, and Hungary's diplomacy became personalized and politicized. Until the 2014 elections, the MFA was led by János Martonyi who advocated for closer transatlantic unity and an accommodative style towards Hungary's allies ("Foreign Minister Martonyi", 2014). Shortly after the victory, Martonyi was replaced by Péter Szijjártó

who reorganized the foreign policy-making institution and broke with the accommodative style. The previous ministerial cabinet and the communications team were fired, and all state secretaries were replaced. Visnovitz and Jenne (2021) highlight that Orbán increased the Prime Minister's Office (PMO)'s responsibilities by taking on significant foreign policy competencies which stayed under the PMO even after Szijjártó's appointment. As they put it, from this point it became evident that Hungary "went from a position of solid trans-Atlanticism and EU integration to a vocal stance of suspicion and hostility toward multilateral organizations like the EU and the UN, selectively activating Hungary's veto rights to back up his confrontational foreign policy practices" (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021, p. 11).

These empirical observations may lead one to conclude that the supermajority victory emboldened the PM to undertake significant changes. However, it does not explain why these changes meant turning towards China at the expense of Hungary's allies. While the high percentage of the votes for the party has certainly been a factor, this approach does not shed light on the nature of the foreign policy shifts, consequently, it cannot explain Hungary's China policy. As none of the approaches were applicable, the next chapter will discuss role theory's potential to shed light on the case.

3. Theoretical Framework

Role theory was introduced to foreign policy analysis (FPA) with Holsti's seminal work in 1970. He suggested that foreign policy decisions and actions can be explained through policy-makers' perception of the nation's role and defined 17 NRCs (Holsti, 1970). Based on this, scholars began paying attention to leaders' definition of the state's role (Breuning, 2011; Catalinac, 2007).

Gigleux (2016) maintains that the role approach can explain why certain states play different roles despite facing similar systemic constraints and opportunities. Roles are understood as "patterns of appropriate or expected behaviour of an actor, which are drawn from its social position within an organized group" (Wehner, 2015, p.438). Small states can choose the role they wish to pursue given that it is encapsulated in the 'master role' (Gigleux, 2016). A master role is an overarching position defined by the international system which designates the boundaries of the state's behaviour (Thies, 2001). The differences in small states' behaviours show that their role is not solely generated by the distribution of power. The size-induced limitations are not the only point of self-identification. Role theory challenges the general assumption of this size-based vulnerability and puts forward a multi-level examination (Gigleux, 2016).

When using role theory, studies rely on NRCs. In Holsti's description (1970, p.246), NRCs are "policymakers' definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions, suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or subordinate regional systems." NRCs are a mixture of the actor's view of its role (ego) and of the social recognition by others (alter) (Chafetz, Abramson, & Grillot, 1996, p. 732). As they are rooted in history, culture and societal characteristics which are constantly in flux, NRCs can alter (Gigleux, 2016, p.37). Although

they are not fixed, Krotz (2002, p.7) maintains that they tend to endure which makes them a useful analytical tool.

Recently, NRCs are being used to analyse confusing foreign policy outcomes (Adigbuo, 2007, p. 90). Catalinac (2007) stresses that as the independent variable, NRCs can explain outcomes that other approaches cannot. They are particularly useful to establish the link between size and behaviour (Gigleux, 2016, p. 28). With the focus on the individual's perception, the role approach can shed light on why a state acts differently from what its size and capabilities suggest. These characteristics make this theory suitable to answer the research question.

4. Research Method

This paper aims to test the applicability of role theory for explaining puzzling foreign policy outcomes. It aspires to add to the reliability of the theory through a single case study. Levy (2008) notes that single case studies are an efficient way to examine theoretical propositions. Hungary was chosen as a most-likely case, given that no alternative explanation was plausible. The case selection was based on the known outcome, a puzzling foreign policy choice of a small state, and inquiry was led into the value of the theoretical interest; the presence of certain NRCs that could provide an explanation. Under PM Orbán, Hungary has been drawing closer to China at the expense of its EU and NATO membership for no apparent advantage. This development prompted a detailed analysis to shed light on the case.

As there were no prior expectations but an observation, the paper took an inductive approach. For case-based research, the qualitative method is usually seen as the most fruitful (Gerring, 2017, p.21). After identifying the puzzling foreign policy choices of Hungary as a case of interest, its background and context were examined to establish the tentative hypotheses and research question. The general IR approaches were unfit to provide an answer, therefore alternative frameworks were selected from the literature. Role theory appeared to have high potential to be applicable as several scholars implied its plausibility, but it has not been directly used for FPA of small states.

The causal mechanism between role theory and foreign policy action was established using NRCs. NRCs are used as the independent variable that led to Hungary's policies towards China which is the dependent variable. While studies often focus on one particular policy, I looked at the entire dynamics of the Hungary-China relations in the bilateral and the EU context to come to a comprehensive conclusion.

NRCs are generally obtained through the analysis of statements by presidents and prime ministers as it is assumed that leaders speak on behalf of the state (Brummer & Thies, 2015).

Some scholars claim that this approach misses the societal origins of NRCs, and the focus should be extended to opposition politicians and the public (Krotz, 2002; Brummer & Thies, 2015). While it can be useful, it is not a necessity in all cases. In Hungary, as power is concentrated in the hands of a few, opposition politicians and public opinion have limited impact. PM Orbán has been governing with a “veto-proof supermajority” leaving little space for opposition ideas (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021, p. 5). Moreover, the public is remarkably neutral towards foreign policy (see: Center for insight in survey research, 2017). As the presidential role is largely ceremonial in Hungary, this study concentrated solely on the PM. This is in line with previous studies on the country, noting that neither the opposition nor the civil society can contest the role taken by the government (Hettyey, 2021b; Simon, 2019).

To delineate the NRCs, a latent content analysis was performed. This analysis is regarded as the most appropriate way to uncover role conceptions in speeches, as it seeks to understand the underlying meaning of the text (Berg, 2012). It followed the main stages in content analysis: the decontextualization, the recontextualization, the categorisation, and the compilation (Bengtsson, 2016).

For this purpose, 11 speeches were selected on a thematic basis. I analysed PM Orbán’s annual ‘State of Nation’ address between 2010 and 2021 because this speech is consistently available and portrays the key concepts and their variation over the years. The ‘State of Nation’ address gives an overview of the country’s achievements as well as outlines the key objectives and challenges for the next year which makes it a suitable source for identifying role conceptions. Orbán gave the first analysed speech in 2010 as the leader of the Fidesz party, then in opposition. This speech was included because it happened just before the elections and outlined the party’s vision about Hungary’s role, its current state and future. In 2021, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the speech was cancelled.

The speeches are traditionally held in February in Hungarian in front of a broad audience. The scripts are available on the PM's website and for the purpose of this paper, I translated the relevant parts into English. I paid careful attention to ensure that the words and phrases retain their unique qualities, and their meaning is captured in the translation. The analysed sample contained over 47 thousand words.

Primarily, I focused on words and phrases that indicated an independent state as well as a fighter, rebellious role conception in line with the tentative hypotheses. Next to that, I concentrated on indications of role status and motivation to ensure that I do not miss any potential NRCs. First, I divided the scripts and marked all indications of role conceptions. Then, I decontextualized the marked phrases and listed them separately. This was followed by the establishment of categories based on the words and phrases with similar meanings.

Once the categories were created, I had an overview of the NRCs present in the speeches. I removed those that only appeared once, in line with Holsti (1970) and Wish (1980), as these cannot be considered a sufficient indication of commitment and are too probabilistic to be useful in the analysis. After these steps, five NRCs were identified. Two of these were relevant for the study's purpose and were analysed in light of Hungary's foreign policy attitude.

A weakness of this method was the limited sample given the limited space. While the 'State of Nation' address contains the indications needed to establish the NRCs, interviews by the PM and press conferences with foreign counterparts could have increased the findings' reliability. Nevertheless, this study provides a strong indication that further research in that direction is likely to yield results and thus can be considered an effective contribution.

5. Analysis

This chapter starts with a detailed description of the hypotheses before analysing the selected speeches. In the period following Fidesz's victory in 2010, Hungary has gone through extensive changes. These invoked scrutiny by international observers as well as Hungary's allies. What was evident to many (Djankov, 2015; Sadecki, 2014; Kelemen, 2020), is that Hungary broke with EU norms and values and the government presented the EU in opposition to the country (Palonen, 2018). Hungary started to take an increasingly confrontational approach "consciously choosing to enter high-level diplomatic conflicts with its Western allies" (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021, p. 9). It began to exercise its veto power both in the EU and in NATO. Budapest rejected a joint statement on Ukraine by NATO ambassadors ("Hungary vetoes", 2019) vetoed an EU statement on Israel (Rettman, 2019) and condemned the EU sanctions on Russia (Janjevic, 2018). These developments took place as PM Orbán announced the need for a new, independent foreign policy. He emphasized that Hungary's foreign relations should be guided by the sole aim of Hungary's prosperity ("Orbán: Józan ésszel és bátorsággal", 2014).

Yoshimatsu (2018) suggests that a shift to confrontational foreign policy from an accommodative style can be derived from an independent NRC. Through the example of Japan, he highlights the connection between this NRC and a situation where the state's core interests are not guaranteed resulting in provocative, confrontational behaviour. Holsti (1971, p.262) describes this NRC with foreign policy choices made to serve national interests and enhanced efforts to maintain relations with as many states as possible. It is indicated by active strategies to extend diplomatic and economic relations and a focus on self-determination. Significant links have also been found between independent NRCs and high participation in the international fora (Wish, 1980). This leads to:

H1: The PM's independent actor role conception has led to seeking closer relations with China to challenge the EU.

There is a strong indication that the presence of the independent NRC can explain Hungary's foreign policy decisions that went against the EU and courted China. While the geopolitical tensions have been rising between the US and China, the differences between Hungary and several other EU member states began to show. This prompted Hungary to look elsewhere to secure its interests and rationalize it by stressing its independence.

As previously described, the government tried to strengthen ties with China as part of the 'Opening to the East' strategy in the hope of economic gains. The switch from value-driven to a pragmatic foreign policy modus operandi was justified with the goal of Hungary's prosperity and economic growth. As it soon became clear that the strategy did not deliver and the geopolitical tensions between China and the US have increased, the Hungarian government's efforts began to evoke questions.

Hungary took multiple steps that went against its EU and NATO allies' interests and were interpreted as gestures towards China. The most notable choices were the ones where Hungary opposed EU moves that were critical of the Chinese leadership, such as in 2016, when it vetoed a joint statement on the South China Sea (Gotev, 2016). A year later, Hungary opposed the EU petition against the mistreatment of human rights lawyers (Matura, 2020) and in 2018, the Hungarian ambassador tried to dissuade the EU ambassador in China from criticizing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's global infrastructure development strategy (Matura, 2020). Most recently, Hungary blocked the EU statement condemning China's Hong Kong policy (Chalmers & Emmott, 2021).

As an EU member state, Hungary's vetoes had important consequences for the bloc's foreign policy. With this behaviour, Hungary received attention much larger than its size would suggest and effectively elevated its status in international politics. Some analysts began to refer

to Hungary as China's most important ally in Europe (Rohac, 2021) which only contributed to giving Hungary greater leverage in the EU context. The vetoes implied that it was in Hungary's interest to safeguard Chinese objectives, which begs the question why?

The Hungary-China relations did not bring the economic prosperity Hungary expected and yet the Orbán government kept strengthening the bilateral ties. In 2015, Hungary was the first European country to join the BRI (Tuan, 2019) which led to the Budapest-Belgrade railway flagship project. The meetings between high-ranking politicians became more frequent and the Hungarian PM and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, met or talked over the phone seven times since 2010 (Political and Diplomatic Relations, 2021). In comparison, during the same period, there was only one meeting with the American Counterpart. The Hungarian government had plans to open a Budapest campus of the Shanghai-based Fudan University, but the project met with significant societal resistance (Kőműves, 2021). This is in stark contrast with how Hungary previously broke EU law to force out the highest-ranking research university in the country because of its US affiliation (Thorpe, 2020).

Next to these, it is noteworthy that Hungary was the first, and so far the only, EU country that approved the Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccine, Sinopharm, and went against the bloc's vaccine procurement strategy (Simon, 2021). Moreover, Hungary and the Chinese technology firm Huawei have signed a Memorandum of Understanding, further deepening their long-term cooperation (Pai, 2021). Huawei enjoys a stable environment in Hungary, making it again an outlier as several EU countries banned or highly restricted the firm's participation in their 5G networks over security concerns (Murphy & Parrock, 2021).

There is mounting evidence to show that PM Orbán did not spare efforts to visibly boost the Hungary-China relations but there is one crucial development that reveals the answer to the aforementioned question. In March 2021, Hungary voted for EU sanctions to be imposed on Chinese individuals and entities for serious human rights violations in Xinjiang (European

Council, 2021). This decision meant that Hungary's vetoes of previous EU initiatives aiming at China were not, in fact, gestures towards China. The fact that Hungary vetoed statements that were critical of the Chinese Communist Party but did not have actual consequences, but voted for a punishing measure that severely strained the EU's ties with China, shows that the primary driver of Hungary's approach towards China was not the consideration of the Hungary-China relations.

In fact, Hungary's China policy must be considered in the context of the country's EU membership. Vetoing such a significant policy action by the EU would have lowered Hungary's reputation inside the Union, in contrast with the previous vetoes of joint statements that many analysts saw as giving Hungary bigger leverage (Brattberg, Le Corre, Stronski, de Waal, 2021). These inconsistencies in Hungary's China-related policy demonstrates that the main motivation was to challenge the EU. While it did not result in meaningful gains from China, opposing the joint statements have had an impact on the EU's credibility (Schuette, 2019).

The deepening rift between the EU and the Hungarian leadership due to Hungary's democratic backsliding (Szemere, 2020) has led to an increasingly open hostility which Hungary even displayed by placing anti-EU billboards in the country (Szakács, 2019). Hungary's fight with the EU leads to the second hypothesis:

H2: The fighter role conception compelled Hungary to break with traditional allies and move towards previously unlikely partners such as China.

Derived the two hypotheses, the next section looks at the analysis of the 'State of Nation' speeches with special attention to the indications of the two expected NRCs. The content analysis of the speeches identified five NRCs of the Hungarian PM, namely: Independent Actor, Fighter against Western Europe, Stable Partner, Member of Central Europe and the Defender of Europe. The table below summarizes the NRCs and their appearance.

Table 1*The identified NRCs presence in the 'State of Nation' speeches*

	Independent Actor	Fighter Against WE	Stable Partner	Member of CE	Defender of Europe
2010		X			
2011	X				
2012		X	X		
2013	X		X		
2014	X	X		X	
2015	X	X		X	
2016	X	X	X	X	X
2017	X	X		X	X
2018	X		X		X
2019	X	X	X	X	X
2020	X				X

The first two NRCs (Independent Actor, Fighter against WE) are of major interest for this study. The following part contains examples of the two NRCs identified in the speeches.

Independent Actor

This NRC was identified in the majority of the examined speeches. The PM repeatedly stressed Hungary's independence in its foreign policy actions and emphasized the country's own and unique path. This role appears as the 'other way' in comparison to Hungary's previous accommodative foreign policy (2002-2010) which prioritized following Western ideas.² As described in the script from 2015:

We made the necessary organizational and personnel changes, focused on the foreign economy, and threw young, talented, and ambitious people into the deep waters. The elderly was put on the council and the youth in the battle! For many, of course, this

² 2010-2014.kormany.hu (2014) 'Orbán Viktor évértékelő beszéde', available at <https://2010-2014.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/felivelo-korszak-kuszoben-allunk>

sovereign and proactive foreign policy is astonishing, our new and independent European policy is surprising as the era of the accommodative, accession focused foreign policy is over. (Orbán, 2015)

PM Orbán highlighted that the “...nation’s job is to give its own, independent answers to foreign policy questions.”³ He referred to historical experiences of “...being told what to do” which is irresolvable with the Hungarian spirit.⁴ This overly pronounced need for independence can be rooted in the assumed psychological need of Hungary for self-determination due to the long history of being subjugated (Hettyey, 2021b, p.9). From being suppressed by foreign powers, through leading an accommodating, follower foreign policy, the current ‘independence’ is displayed as a significant change and achievement.

Multiple times, especially in more recent years, there are direct references to an independent foreign policy aiming to serve Hungary’s interest above everything. “We don’t like or tolerate if others want to tell and decide for us why we are in this world, what, how, and why we should or should not think.”⁵ In 2020, Orbán stated that “...we (Hungarians) either find or make our path. And since the paths designated by Brussels and Washington did not suit, we had to carve our own.”⁶

The frequency of this NRCs implies that the independent, autonomous role conception was dominating in the observed period. The state’s attitude was largely derived from this core NRC. Hettyey (2021b, p.18) calls this the “illusion of autonomy” and debunks that despite this

³ 2015-2019.kormany.hu (2015) ‘Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde’, available at <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/a-kemenyen-dolgozo-emberekrol-szolnak-a-kovetkezo-evek>

⁴ 2015-2019.kormany.hu (2017) ‘Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde’ available at <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-19-evertekelo-beszede>

⁵ 2015-2019.kormany.hu (2017) ‘Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde’ available at <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-19-evertekelo-beszede>

⁶ Miniszterelnok.hu (2020) ‘Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde’, available at <https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-evertekelo-beszede-4/>

rhetoric, Hungary is deeply integrated, interdependent and one of the most open countries. In the PM's view, acting unlike the others is synonymous with being independent. The objective behind this behaviour is to show the country's independence to the domestic audience and ensure the marked difference from the previous government.

A key sentence that reflects the essence of the PM's beliefs is the following, "we live in our own way, according to our own rules and our own decisions."⁷ It encompasses Hungary's 'different role' in world politics, necessarily different from that of Western Europe because of the unique experiences and objectives of the Hungarian people. There are direct references to this perceived uniqueness of Hungary:

The debate on how to evaluate our economic and social model, which we have built in Hungary, has been ongoing for ten years. It is called an illiberal, a post-liberal, a Christian Democrat, a democracy, an authoritarian and hybrid system, and only God knows what else. No wonder they are in agony because there is no such thing as our state system anywhere else in Europe today. (Orbán, 2020)

This NRC can also be understood as a reaction to accusations of democratic backsliding by the European Commission (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2019) and several observers. Articles started to appear urging stricter action from the EU against Hungary (Guttenberg & Buras, 2020) and questions emerged about how Hungary fits in the European community of values (Bayer, 2020). In 2019, the Freedom House downgraded Hungary as "partly free" ("Freedom in the World", 2019). In the same period, the relations between Hungary and US also deteriorated. In 2014, President Obama harshly criticized Hungary for repressing and undermining civil society

⁷ Miniszterelnok.hu (2020) 'Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde', available at <https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-evvertkelo-beszede-4/>

(Carpenter, 2017) and most recently, Hungary was the only EU country that did not receive an invitation from President Biden to the “Summit for Democracy” (Bayer, 2021). These developments further highlight Hungary’s increasing isolation from its traditional partners which the Prime Minister sought to present as the country’s path to independence.

Fighter against Western Europe

This NRC sees Hungary as a fighter whose role is to challenge the elites of Brussels. Orbán stated that “we are Europe and we do not have to comply with the tired elite of Brussels, who are slowly becoming disillusioned with themselves.”⁸ The root of this role is to be found in Orbán’s perception of the decline of the ‘West’, its norms and value system.⁹ He regularly uses war-like rhetoric frames in speeches such as ‘battle’, ‘combat’, ‘front line’, ‘ammunition’. Hungary is figuratively fighting a battle against ‘Brussels’ for its independence. ‘Brussels’ primarily indicates the European Commission which started legal proceedings against the country on several occasions (see: “Commission refers Hungary”, 2017; “Migration: Commission refers Hungary”, 2021). In 2014, the PM made direct references to the so-called attacks:

Or let us remember when the bureaucrats in Brussels harshly and aggressively attacked Hungary. Just because we dared to tax banks and big business, because we did not want to take the money from those who are in need. Hundreds of thousands marched into the streets peacefully and told the world with dignity: Hungary is not a colony, nor will it allow it to be one. (Orbán, 2014)

⁸ Miniszterelnok.hu (2020) ‘Orbán Viktor évértékelő beszéde’, available at <https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-evertekelo-beszede-4/>

⁹ Miniszterelnok.hu (2020) ‘Orbán Viktor évértékelő beszéde’, available at <https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-evertekelo-beszede-4/>

The speech stressed that in this fight, Hungary “...no longer backs off but attacks.”¹⁰ Orbán repeatedly refers to fights and the war which is yet to be won. In 2015, he stated that “today it is commonplace in the capitals of the world that Hungarians continuously fight for their independence.”¹¹ More recent examples are the following statements “We have to stop Brussels”¹², “We were first to rebel when we sent away the IMF, taxed the multinational corporations and liquated foreign currency loans (...) while Western Europeans are just starting to wake up.”¹³ In this role, Hungary is an uncompromising, brave actor who rebels against the mainstream and fights for its own good.

Orbán puts forward what he opposes, the Western value-based foreign policy which he describes as “... boastful, pathetic and based on a false sense of moral superiority.”¹⁴ In the media, this fight against liberal democracy has been referred to as a ‘culture war’ (Kakissis, 2021). Orbán has been quoted saying that “Brussels politicians live in a bubble. They’re creating a Brussels bureaucratic elite, which has lost touch with reality” (Anderson, 2019), a statement that further highlights the distance and the difference between Hungary and the ‘West’.

¹⁰ 2010-2014.kormany.hu (2014) ‘Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde’, available at <https://2010-2014.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/felivelo-korszak-kuszoben-allunk>

¹¹ 2015-2019.kormany.hu (2015) ‘Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde’, available at <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/a-kemenyen-dolgozo-emberekrol-szolnak-a-kovetkezo-evek>

¹² Miniszterelnok.hu (2016) ‘Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde’ available at <https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-evertekelo-beszede/>

¹³ 2015-2019.kormany.hu (2017) ‘Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde’ available at <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-19-evertekelo-beszede>

¹⁴ Miniszterelnok.hu (2016) ‘Orbán Viktor éwertékelő beszéde’ available at <https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-evertekelo-beszede/>

7. Results & Discussion

The NRCs identified from the analyzed speeches confirm the hypotheses derived from the literature and empirical observations. This study finds that role theory is a valuable approach to explain small states' unusual foreign policy decisions. There is a clear correlation between Hungary's behaviour and the NRCs identified from the PM's speeches, therefore, the research confirms the applicability of role theory. It maintains that specific NRCs lead to specific attitudes and once the NRCs are identified, valuable predictions can be made about a state's foreign policy behaviour. The theory's potential to enrich small state studies is notable. Through its focus on the individual, it does not limit the outcomes and provides a multi-level analysis that challenges the general notion about small states' vulnerabilities.

As the analysis showed, PM Orbán has put great effort into stressing the country's independence from its Western partners. The speeches did not contain explicit references to Asia or China in particular, but there were several allusions of 'Brussels' and 'Washington' which signifies the designated audience. It shows that Hungary's behaviour is primarily aimed towards the EU and the US.

The confrontational foreign policy attitude is derived from the independent NRC as Hungary struggles against what the PM just calls 'Brussels'. The vetoes can be understood as a means to gain greater leverage in the Union and elevate Hungary's small state status. As an EU and NATO member, having opposing views elevates Hungary's status because foreign policy decisions often require unanimity (Unanimity, 2020) thus one veto is enough to change the course of foreign policy for the entire bloc. For this reason, behaving in a way that results in cooling relations with its traditional allies is not a negative development for Hungary.

While not the primary objective, the gestures towards China serves the secondary aim of protecting the Hungary-China ties. Although the relations did not lead to significant economic advantages, the Orbán government recognized that there is no trade-off in vetoing EU

statements in favour of China. As the rationale was to display the fight against the EU and highlights its importance, it was seen as an opportunity to, at the same time, gain favours from the Chinese leadership. At the time of the introduction of the ‘Opening to the East’ policy, the government had a genuine conviction about the economic prosperity the relations with China will bring. It did not happen, but the PM realized that building ties with a rising great power (China) can be beneficial in a situation where the state is increasingly isolated from its allies including the other great power (US).

The independent and the fighter NRCs together thus provide a sound explanation of Hungary’s China policy. The portrayal of Hungary as an independent actor and fighter against Western Europe entails the confrontational foreign policy the country led in the observed period. By presenting Hungary as China’s ally and trying to visibly display the strong ties, PM Orbán justified the country’s independence to the domestic audience while also increasing Hungary’s influence in global politics. From this analysis, it can be implied that Hungary’s foreign policy is driven primarily by domestic considerations and the core objective of maintaining the current government’s power.

The case study of Hungary supports the proposition that the role approach is suitable for small states and can be applied in cases that seem to defy the more common theoretical foundations. This study implies that cases that appear puzzling can be explained through role theory. It also suggests the framework’s relevance for policy-making as researchers and analysts can predict a state’s behaviour based on an accurate identification of the NRCs of the decision-makers.

8. Conclusion

This paper aimed to shed light on the unusual foreign policy behaviour of a small state. It explored the general assumptions present in small state studies and reviewed the traditional approaches to foreign policy analysis to establish a puzzle through the case study of Hungary.

Hungary's foreign policy behaviour in the period between 2010 and 2021 presents an anomaly that traditional IR theories cannot account for. Despite being a small state, Hungary took an active and confrontational role towards the EU, its most important organization, and defied allies such as the US. Being geographically distant, ideologically different and delivering little of the economic gains Hungary hoped for, strengthening the relations with China at the expense of its traditional allies demands an explanation.

Building on constructivism, I applied role theory to explain Hungary's behaviour through Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's national role conceptions. Having reviewed Hungary's foreign policy behaviour and the theoretical propositions of the role approach, the study put forward two hypotheses which are explained in detail in chapter 5.

The hypotheses were examined through the analysis of the PM's annual 'State of Nation' address from which five NRCs were identified. Two NRCs confirmed the expectations. The independent actor and the fighter against Western Europe NRCs are in line with what the empirical observations of Hungary's foreign policy decisions implied. The role approach suggests that a shift to confrontational foreign policy from an accommodative style is often derived from the presence of the independent NRC. This NRC has been identified in the majority of the speeches and can be considered the core NRC of the PM during the observed period.

The study found that Hungary's foreign policy attitude has been the result of the PM's independent and fighter national role conceptions. The rationale behind Hungary's decision to seek close relations with China was to challenge the EU and elevate Hungary's status as a small

state. Opposing EU and NATO joint actions gave Hungary bigger leverage as foreign policy decisions tend to require unanimity. By defying, Hungary gained greater influence over the EU's foreign policy than by going along, as it could claim a direct correlation between its objective and the bloc's action. Due to Hungary's democratic backsliding and shift away from the foundational values of the EU, the Orbán government found itself in a fight with the European Commission. The PM justified this fight for the domestic audience as demonstrating the country's independence.

Although the sample is admittedly limited, as it only includes speeches from the PM, this research shows that role theory is a useful approach to make sense of puzzling foreign policy outcomes, especially regarding small states. The multi-level analysis and the focus on the individual address the core weakness of the major theories, the assumed vulnerability of small states, and open the prospect to gain a more comprehensive and accurate understanding. Through this approach, the paper was able to explain a puzzling foreign policy outcome and shed light on the decision-making process of small states.

By providing an in-depth study of Hungary's case, this study hopes to call attention to the influence small states can yield by being members of international organizations and going against them. It aims to highlight that small states can rely on their membership while undermining it at the same time to gain more leverage and offset their inherent limitations. Future studies could explore whether role theory can be applied in highly democratic small states with coalition governments where traditional approaches cannot explain the state's foreign policy. The explanatory power of NRCs could be further investigated in European countries which are not yet members of the EU and balance between Western and Eastern orientations. Next to that, this paper proposes that this approach can effectively contribute to predictive analysis and can be useful for foreign policy-making and alliance crafting.

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