

**Precarious Politicisation:
Media Frames of Legitimacy and the Hungarian Council Presidency's Strategic Agenda-Setting**

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Abstract

This paper examines how politicisation affects the agenda-setting capabilities of the Council Presidency, particularly through the use of framing and the media's perception of legitimacy. The Presidency must formally follow the idea of being an 'honest broker' and follow the neutrality norm. However, the actions of Hungary during its Presidency were condemned by several stakeholders and the media. Through conducting a document and media analysis, the study demonstrates that successful agenda-framing is not only dependent on how the country has strategically balanced EU-wide priorities with their interests but also on the perceived legitimacy of the actor deploying these frames. However, the Presidency has remained a politicised tool to enhance domestic political expression even for countries that have been perceived negatively in the sphere of EU politics. Thus, the findings have important implications for EU policy reform aimed at strengthening institutional neutrality. Lastly, this study offers a qualitative perspective on using framing in agenda-setting and on the role of the media as a legitimiser of agenda-setting power.

Keywords: agenda-framing, politicisation, agenda-setting, institutional legitimacy, media framing

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
EU	European Union
GMO	Genetically Modified Organism
GSC	General Secretariat of the Council
IR	International Relations
PM	Prime Minister

Introduction

The rotating Council Presidency must formally follow the idea of being an ‘honest broker’ and adhere to the neutrality norm to ensure that domestic politics do not affect the agenda presented by the Presidency (Szabó, 2011). Nevertheless, this formality has not eliminated the potential for politicisation. Building on Heclo’s (1978) definition of politicisation as the process of exploiting administration for political interests, in this thesis politicisation is defined as the increasing influence of domestic political interests on the Presidency’s agenda-setting power. The varying understandings of politicisation have made the conceptualisation of it across scholarship challenging. Additionally, many definitions of politicisation are overlapping, adding to the confusion (Limbocker et al., 2022). In general terms, politicisation refers to taking hold of the administrative machinery of government to please voters and make a historical mark (Moe, 1985). Politicians’ ability to achieve this, however, is limited by institutional and political factors, which means that they must strategically pursue incremental changes to attain their intended purposes (Limbocker et al., 2022). Based on this, the research aims to comprehend how the politicisation of the Presidency’s agenda-setting – particularly through agenda framing – affects the perceived legitimacy of the Council Presidency.

There has been a contradicting assumption regarding the politicisation of the Council Presidency. Leconte (2012) argues that the Treaty of Lisbon affected the use of the Presidency for national interests by Eurosceptic countries. According to them, the formal depoliticisation of the Council Presidency in this treaty reduced incentives for EU countries to use the Presidency to their own advantage. However, since Leconte’s paper in 2012, there has been an increasing focus on how the role is still used by countries to consolidate political gains and achieve their domestic goals (Hage, 2017; Hernández, 2024; Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2012; Vaznonyte, 2020; Deters and Falkner, 2020; Tallberg, 2003). This contradicts Leconte’s (2012) assumptions which suggests that the Lisbon Treaty has reduced incentives for politicisation. This balance between pursuing national interests and European Union-wide priorities also affects how countries are perceived, as countries that noticeably push for their domestic priorities during their Presidency are deemed less legitimate; in turn, this leads to less efficiency in achieving their goals (Whitman, 1998; Tallberg, 2003). This thesis aligns with the perspective that the Council Presidency remains a politicised tool even in a post-Lisbon context. Specifically, it will focus on how this balance is strategically navigated. As the Council Presidency may influence EU policy outcomes, which directly affect the lives of European Union (EU) citizens, the study is even more relevant societally.

Recent developments of the Hungarian Presidency in 2024 further challenge the assumption that politicization efforts would decline over time (Leconte, 2012). Despite the formal constraints on the role, Hungary’s leadership actively sought to ‘*re-politicise*’ the Council Presidency to leverage it for

national objectives. Specifically, Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister (PM) of Hungary, made two unannounced trips during the Presidency, one to Ukraine with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and later to Russia with President Vladimir Putin. Orbán stated that he views the Presidency of the EU Council as a “peace mission”. Essentially, the Hungarian PM hoped to act as a peace mediator, representing the EU. His politicised actions, that do not reflect the neutrality of Presidency’s role, were condemned by Eric Mamer, the spokesperson of the European Commission, the EU’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, and many others (Spike & Isachenkov, 2024). This case raises questions about how member states continue to use the Presidency to their advantage to influence EU policy. Research on the institutional politicisation of the Council Presidency is even more crucial since, as Buromenskiy and Otenko (2019) pointed out in their study on the politicisation of the EU Commission, such processes of politicization may lead to the deterioration of the fundamental values upon which the EU was founded.

The theoretical foundation of the research and the framing categories is based on the continuum of politicisation by Hooghe and Marks (2009). Although the model is originally rooted in a domestic understanding of politicisation, this thesis brings it to the international level by exploring the way agenda-setting reflects domestic priorities. In doing so, this paper expands on the model by exploring the way in which certain framing techniques may increase the salience of issues in the media, thereby influencing EU stakeholders’ perceptions of the Council Presidency. Additionally, as research on specifically the politicisation of the Council Presidency is limited, this thesis also contributes to the existing literature on politicisation in EU agenda-setting, as well as its implications for EU policy-making, domestic politics, and EU cohesion.

The paper critically examines Leconte’s (2012) findings and illustrates how politicisation of the Presidency does still occur within Eurosceptic countries despite the formal constraints. However, the study also addresses the theoretical gap regarding the influence of agenda framing and the media coverage on the legitimacy of the Presidency. By focusing on a singular case, this thesis provides an in-depth analysis of how Presidencies navigate domestic political pressure while also maintaining, or losing, perceived legitimacy within the EU. As most of the literature on agenda-setting has focused on quantitative measures, such as allocation of time to topics, this research takes a qualitative approach, analysing the toolbox of strategies used by nations to promote their national interests through framing. This qualitative method provides a unique and innovative contribution to understanding politicisation, policy-making, and institutional legitimacy, by applying framing theory on agenda-setting.

This research is structured as follows. Firstly, the study will focus on agenda-setting and politicisation, which together lead to the research’s understanding of agenda-framing. This will be followed by a section on the case study, operationalisation of the data, data selection choices, and the analytical process. The thesis further consists of two analytical components: the first one aims to uncover the framing choices of the Hungarian Council Presidency through a qualitative ‘frame analysis’

(Goffman, 1974), using coded categories aligned with the conceptual framework, to examine how politicisation has affected the agenda-setting of the Presidency. The second section illustrates the media's perception of the Presidency and its agenda framing through a qualitative media content analysis of the EU media landscape, specifically focusing on Euractiv and Euronews. Finally, in the discussion section, these two segments will be brought together to give a comprehensive image of how politicisation affects the agenda-setting capabilities of the Council Presidency, particularly through the use of framing and the media's perception of legitimacy.

2. Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical components are introduced in the following sections. Firstly, the thesis will describe varying understandings of politicisation and agenda-setting in an EU context. Following this, the Council Presidency's limits -, as well as its influences on agenda-setting will be discussed. Based on these, the last section will illustrate the theoretical argumentation of this research.

2.1. Politicisation in European Union Governance

De Wilde (2007) states that "politicisation structures political conflict over issues related to European integration in a pluralist setting" (p. 4). This means that the politicisation process is critical in determining how different actors compete over European integration in a diverse political background. Ongoing debates concerning the institutional structure, decision-making, and democratic legitimacy of the EU have made the politicisation of European governance a significant topic (de Wilde et al., 2016). Depending on the specific research and empirical focus of a study, there are different interpretations of what politicisation refers to (de Wilde et al., 2016). Heclo (1978) defines politicisation as a process where instead of supporting people's interests, political actors exploit administration for their own gains. According to some, politicisation occurs when geopolitical objectives and strategies lead to actions that are taken for reasons unrelated to the nonpolitical goals of an international organisation (Reich, 2005). Adding to this, Buromenskiy and Otenko (2019) focus on the institutional politicisation of the Commission of the EU. Particularly, their definition of politicisation highlights the decreasing technocratic role of Commissioners, which are now shaped more by national governments and political actors. They further argue that political forces affect the way the Commission operates and how it is becoming increasingly politicised. These definitions demonstrate how politicisation has been interpreted in the EU, particularly concerning its institutional structure and decision-making processes. In this paper, politicisation refers to how the Presidency's role is increasingly shaped by political forces, specifically domestic politics, thus becoming more politicised.

Zürn (2019), meanwhile, highlights the distinct academic understandings of politicisation from an EU studies, national, international institutional, and international relations (IR) perspective. EU studies emphasise the disintegrative effects of politicisation and how it leads to less unity. On the other hand, within national, international institutional, and IR perspectives the normative positive aspects are highlighted, as politicisation can exacerbate the salience of issues and lead to further mobilisation and democratisation. Importantly, EU studies and IR view politicisation as a recent phenomenon, while from a national context politicisation is a response to de-politicisation with deeper history and structural changes. Accordingly, from an EU studies perspective politicisation is seen as a threat to unity. Due to this, there is more contestation and debate surrounding the conceptualisation of politicisation (Zürn, 2019).

Another aspect of politicisation that remains contested is how politicisation unfolds in varying contexts and levels, capturing its key dimensions and processes. De Wilde et al. (2016) differentiate between three conceptual dimensions to aid in analysing politicisation in a wide range of settings. Issues are deemed fully politicised if they are politicised on all of the three dimensions (Kriesi, 2016). They argue that politicisation can be empirically observed through salience, the increasing importance of European decision-making, polarisation, the growing political divides on EU-related issues that lead to more visibility, and the expansion of actors who are becoming more engaged in monitoring EU affairs (de Wilde et al., 2016). This emphasises that politicisation has shifted EU decision-making towards a broader public debate, which can make it subject to national political debates.

Additionally, De Wilde (2007) categorises three different groups of manifestations of politicisation: institutions, decision-making processes, and issues. Institutions may become sites of political contestation, while decision-making processes, like voting or negotiations, can become politicised, and issues could generate political debate and polarisation. Significantly, when issues gain salience, they become politicised and more visible, thus forcing governments and institutions to respond.

Ultimately, understanding politicisation is essential to analyse agenda-setting, as political motives could directly affect how certain issues are presented by the Council Presidency. This concise overview of the varying interpretations, perspectives, levels, and manifestations of politicisation, serves as the foundation for the following chapter on agenda-setting.

2.2 Agenda-Setting in European Union Governance

This section will provide an overview of the various perspectives and explanations of agenda-setting. The chapter will end by discussing the constraints and influences of the Council Presidency's agenda-setting power.

'Agenda-setting power', as described by Häge (2017), is "the power to influence decision-making outcomes through privileged suggestions regarding the content of new policy" (p. 696). Agenda-setting procedures are essential because they establish which topics are brought up for discussion and decision-making. As a result, these procedures establish the scope of issues and options within a political system. The fact that political actors try to keep issues off the agenda if they want to preserve the status quo, or put them on when they want to change policy, shows that agenda-setting is a political process. Setting the agenda is centred on the "conflict of conflicts," wherein political actors decide which issues should be discussed and how. This further emphasises the disparities in the likelihood of issues being raised on the political agenda (Princen, 2007).

2.2.1 Agenda-Setting in the European Union

Princen (2007) moves beyond the European Commission's agenda-setting power (Haverland et al., 2016), and highlights the inter-organisational structures that influence agenda-setting within the EU. The Commission's work does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is influenced by various actors within and outside the EU, as the wider political context has to be taken into account. Accordingly, Princen (2007) traces the process of agenda-setting by examining the 'first' origin of an issue and the conditions of successful agenda-setting. Issues that show up on international agendas come from two primary sources. First, issues may originate from outside factors, such as pandemics or changes in the economy, that are not deliberately brought on by the actions of actors. According to this view, externalities, not political processes, influence the agenda-setting process. The actors themselves are the second source, as states or individuals may purposefully add or change topics on the agenda. This viewpoint emphasises how political rivalry and agency shape agenda priorities (Princen, 2007). These two sources may be intertwined, as actors use external sources to support their positions and to create a "window of opportunity" (Cairney and Zahariadis, 2016), emphasising their own agendas. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for this research, as it underscores how Presidencies can frame and politicise issues to align with their national interests.

2.3 Agenda-Setting as the Council Presidency

2.3.1 Limits of the Agenda-Setting Power of the Council Presidency

Scholarly literature and the formal role of the Council Presidency after the Lisbon Treaty illustrate the role's limited power in agenda-setting. Council Presidency is viewed more as a 'chairman' and not as a 'President'. This means its role should not be misunderstood as executive; instead, it serves merely as a temporary chair of an EU institution (Corbett, 1998). The Council Presidency is also said to have limited capacity to set policy and agenda priorities in the EU (Tallberg, 2003), as the Presidency is

still dependent on the Commission to initiate legislation (Hage, 2017). Additionally, the Presidency has limited opportunities to further its priorities due to issues already on the agenda (Tallberg, 2003), a limitation which is further reinforced by the short-term office of the Presidency (Hage, 2017). These all underscore the formal constraints the Council Presidency faces when pushing its ideas. On the other hand, we have seen with Sweden's Presidency in 2001, that the country highlighted conflict prevention as an addition to the EU's security agenda, which later became institutionalised (Björkdahl, 2013). This shows that there are cases where short-term agenda-shaping has led to long-term policy changes (Tallberg, 2003).

The Council Presidency must also function as an impartial and neutral "honest broker" (Szabó, 2011; Hage, 2017). Tallberg (2003) asserts that states have been conditioned to avoid prioritising their national demands during the Presidency and to act neutrally out of fear of social disapproval. When countries freely pursue their national objectives, EU media and stakeholders criticise them harshly, and their Presidency periods are challenging (Whitman, 1998). Notably, this deprives nations that would push for their agenda of the chance to effectively prioritise their policy goals. However, these restricted views on agenda-setting undermine the conception of agenda influence that the Council Presidency can utilise (Tallberg, 2003).

Next to these formal limitations, it is said that Eurosceptic Presidencies are even more restricted in their power to push domestic priorities (Leconte, 2012). Their efforts are complicated by these countries' lack of unity, intra-coalition infighting, political instability, and strained ties with other EU institutions. Eurosceptic-led Presidencies may successfully slow down EU integration, but these efforts are only effective when there are other EU-wide factors or political deadlocks. Due to the reduced formal power of the Presidency, it makes it less tempting for Eurosceptic governments to push their national interests (Leconte, 2012). On the other hand, the increasing literature on the agenda-setting power of the Council Presidency demonstrates that Presidencies do have an influence (Hernández, 2024; Hage, 2017; Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2012; Vaznonyte, 2020; Deter and Falkner, 2020).

2.3.2 Agenda-Setting Influences of the Council Presidency

Tallberg (2003) discusses agenda-shaping and categorises it into three different forms of influence: agenda-setting, agenda-structuring, and agenda exclusion. Agenda-setting refers to the introduction of new agenda points. Agenda-structuring means emphasising or de-emphasising certain issues that are already present on the agenda. Lastly, agenda exclusion defines the active exclusion of issues on the agenda. Tallberg (2003) emphasises that although formally, the Presidency is limited, and there is no mention of its formal powers to initiate policy within treaties, it still possesses agenda-

shaping powers through informal institutional practices. Member States are viewed as strategic actors that seek to satisfy their national preferences within the confines of the Presidency's formal limitations. Although all member states possess agenda-shaping abilities, the following activities vary depending on countries' preferences and proximity to the status quo (Tallberg, 2003). To shape the agenda, member states may raise awareness of problems that have been previously overlooked by including them in their programme, setting the theme of informal meetings, and developing proposals for action. Presidencies exercise agenda-structuring control by determining the frequency of meetings about a policy, holding informal meetings and shaping its theme, and structuring the meeting agendas, which decides the top items on the agenda. Agenda exclusion, meanwhile, could take the form of remaining silent on a subject or not recognising an issue, excluding items from the decision agenda, or presenting impossible compromise proposals that cannot gather enough support, effectively stalling the progress of decision-making (Tallberg, 2003).

In addition to Hage's (2017) initial definition of agenda-setting power, which outlines the Presidency's ability to make "compromise" proposals that bring the final negotiation outcome closer to its preferred policy, he also provides a second definition that more specifically addresses the role of the Council Presidency: "(...) agenda-setting power as the power to influence the allocation of the Council's political attention over specific policy issues by distributing limited time and space resources for meetings." (pp. 696). This is what Hage (2017) describes as scheduling power: since the Presidency determines whether a topic will be discussed and how much time will be devoted to it by creating the agenda and presiding over meetings, it possesses scheduling power. Presidencies may divert some discussion points from the agenda by regulating the conversations and setting aside time for particular subjects. Additionally, the scheduling of special summits allows flexibility to address particular issues that the Presidency deems significant (Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2012). Therefore, although the Presidency possesses limited direct policy-setting influence, it still retains agenda-management tools, like its scheduling power, which allows it to allocate time and structure discussions (Hage, 2017).

The interconnection of the Council Presidency's national interests and EU-wide priorities is a contested subject. The line between a country's domestic political interests and the formal responsibilities of the Presidency have been blurred (Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2012), despite the EU's intention to depoliticise the Council Presidency. The concepts combined highlight that governments have various means of techniques at their disposal to put forward their interests. This study builds on Tallberg's (2003) focus on what is placed on the agenda, Hage's (2019) research on when topics are discussed, and Alexandrova and Timmermans' (2012) emphasis on how the Presidency functions procedurally, by adding a discursive element that examines how topics are framed as EU-wide issues to ensure their priorities are addressed successfully (Princen, 2007; Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2012).

2.4 Theoretical Argumentation: The Politicisation of Agenda-Setting in the Council Presidency

2.4.1 National Interests in the Council Presidency

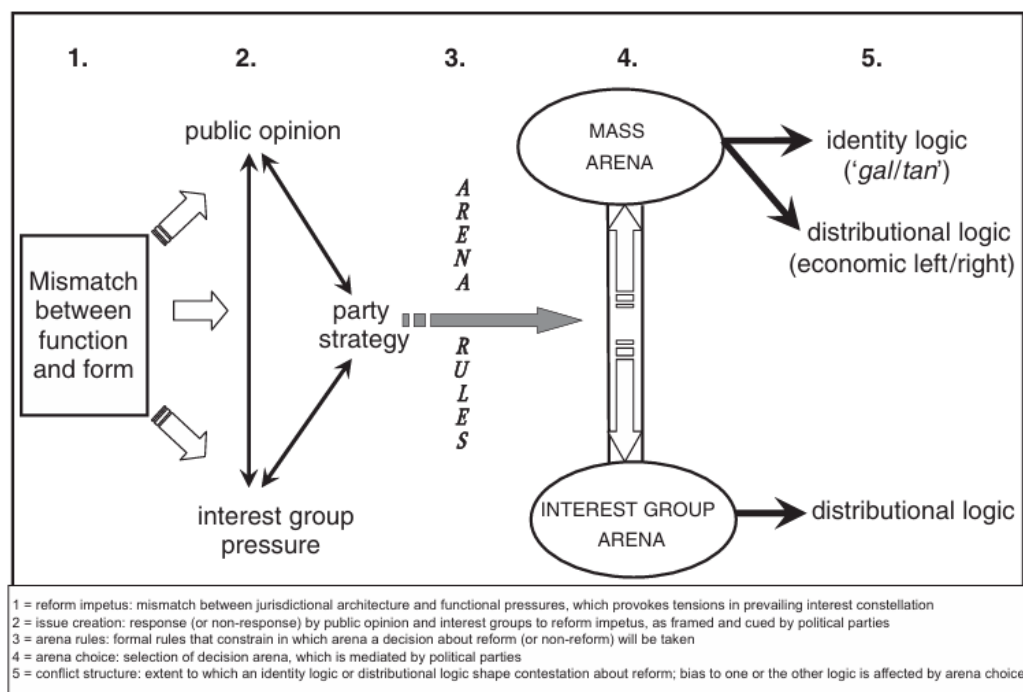
Building on the previous sections of the Presidency's formal agenda-shaping powers and their politicisation, the following discussion develops a theoretical argumentation to explain how national interests are advanced through politicisation and how reactions to politicisation affect the legitimacy of the Council Presidency.

The thesis argues that the politicisation of the Council Presidency is an example of a similar process occurring at the EU level, building on Hooghe and Marks' (2008), originally a model of politicisation in domestic contexts (Figure 1). According to the model, when there is a mismatch between how the system is structured and how efficiently it functions, there is pressure to reform, triggering the reform impetus. In the case of the Council Presidency, at times when member states are dissatisfied with the effectiveness of the existing legislation or feel that the status quo does not represent their interests, they initiate the issue creation phase. Here, the Council Presidencies, through framing the agenda, respond to their domestic political parties' and citizens' interests to address their concerns. Their choices are constrained by the formal restrictions of the Presidency, which they work around by strategically aligning these initiatives through framing to balance domestic and EU concerns. The arena choice, i.e. selection of decision area, is dependent on the way countries wish to frame the debate. If the issue enters mass politics, it may be framed in terms of national identity or other broader political struggles and/or EU values. If it remains in the interest group arena, it may be framed in more technical ways, focusing on resource allocation (Hooghe and Marks, 2008). The kind of conflict that arises depends on the arena selection. It could be interpreted as a conflict between national sovereignty and EU influence if the issue is framed around identity issues. Alternatively, the discussion may focus on the economic advantages or preferred policies that benefit particular member states if it is framed around distribution (Hooghe and Marks, 2008).

This model describes the process how countries push their national interests through the constrained role of the Council Presidency by strategically framing the agenda to achieve policy change. The effectiveness of this mechanism is dependent not only on the framing by the presiding Member State but also on how other actors respond to these efforts. Political actors, EU institutions, and crucially, the media, may either support or resist the agenda framing of the Presidency. Media reactions can amplify the salience of the issue, thereby legitimise the Presidency or dilute its legitimacy. However, the process of politicisation ensures the heightened attention on the issue regardless of the position of the Presidency. This process will be further discussed in the following sections, starting with the assumption that member states want to advance their positions while in the Presidency role.

Figure 1

Model for Domestic Politicisation



Source: Model from Hooghe and Marks (2008) in *A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: from Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus*. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 1–23.

All in all, countries use agenda-framing to shape their ideas while balancing EU-wide interests to keep their legitimacy (Princen, 2007; Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2012). At the same time, the media's reaction plays a crucial role in determining the perceived legitimacy of the Presidency. The following section will illustrate the framing strategies of the Council Presidency in constructing their priorities, based also on the model by Hooghe and Marks (2008), particularly on their concept of arena choice, which discusses how actors frame issues in terms of identity or technical aspects.

2.4.3 Nations frame their priorities

Nations must frame the agenda in a way that balances their national interests with the EU-wide ones; otherwise, if they lean too much towards their priorities, it undermines their legitimacy in the Presidency role (Princen, 2007; Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2012). Too much focus on EU-wide interests means that they will not be able to push their ideas. Thus, framing must be strategically calculated, balancing EU interests with domestic ones. The research focuses on different strategies of

framing that can be used in the Council Presidency. Member states may emphasise different sides of a debate or issue. For example, in the debate surrounding nuclear energy, countries emphasise different aspects of it. Nuclear energy can be seen as either a threat to the environment and humans or a sufficient energy supply. In Germany, the frame that nuclear energy is unsafe is more dominant, while in France, it is the opposite (Princen, 2018). This highlights that by emphasising varying components of an issue, agenda-setters can make it more appealing to certain audiences and push their interests accordingly.

When framing certain issues, member states connect their frame to more or less uncontested values like economic growth and sustainability (Princen, 2018) or to EU values, for example, democracy, equality, or sustainability, to make it more appealing. Council Presidencies, by linking their frames to these values, can balance their domestic interests within the EU debate by making them resonate with wider EU priorities. Next to this, countries may frame the issue by connecting it to values and beliefs tied to questions about identity or technical concerns, like resource allocation (Hooghe and Marks, 2008). When a major political event occurs, like a terrorist attack, it can create a 'policy window' or 'window of opportunity' (Cairney and Zahariadis, 2016). This means that there is more attention on an issue, making it a top priority for decision-makers and making it more likely that the issue is debated and addressed in government policies and agendas. How this issue is framed during this policy window can affect the solutions and the decision-making outcomes (Princen, 2018). Within the EU, the war in Ukraine could be considered an event that has opened a 'policy window' regarding defence and security, which has been part of the top priorities of Council Presidencies in the past years (Polish Presidency Council of the European Union, 2025; Hungarian Presidency Council of the European Union, 2024). This suggests that framing could influence how these issues are addressed based on the nation holding the Council Presidency.

Lastly, member states may also raise awareness of problems that have been previously overlooked by including them in their programme and setting the theme of informal meetings, effectively framing certain issues in a way to prioritise them over others. Finland, for example, developed the 'northern dimension' programme during its 1999 Presidency to raise awareness of specific northern issues. Sweden, in 2001, highlighted conflict prevention as an addition to the EU's security agenda, alongside military and civilian crisis management. Both countries held meetings devoted to these initiatives and began raising awareness on these topics before their Presidency period. These efforts by Sweden and Finland resulted in the adoption of their domestic interests in EU policy-making (Tallberg, 2003), highlighting the importance of agenda-framing efforts in shaping policy outcomes.

Next to the varying strategic efforts of the Presidency outlined above, as the informal Council meetings usually reflect the priorities of the Presidency (Tallberg, 2003), informal meetings can be

strategically used to emphasise and frame domestic interests. For example, with the latest Hungarian Presidency, one of its top priorities was competitiveness, which was also the theme of one of the informal meetings they held (Hungarian Presidency Council of the European Union, 2025). Countries can also avoid certain topics or prioritise other issues by strategically structuring the meeting agenda, as the German Presidency did in 1999 during agricultural meetings to avoid decisions that could negatively affect East German farms (Tallberg, 2003), demonstrating the Council Presidency's agenda-structuring power and ability to prioritise its ideas.

In summary, countries frame their agenda to fit within the status quo and their domestic interests in a way that maximises the Member States' intended outcome by emphasizing specific aspects of an issue, linking their perspective to EU values, using major events to justify their solutions, raising awareness of domestic problems, and establishing the theme of informal meetings. By framing issues in this manner, Member States seek to align the status quo with their position while still representing the collective interest of the Union and remaining neutral. To balance this, Presidencies use strategic framing that enhances certain interpretations of issues while aligning them with EU-wide, broad values. The research identifies four different types of frames - technical, value, opportunity, and identity – that member states may utilise to present their priorities. These frames are derived from Hooghe and Marks' (2008) politicisation model, particularly from their understanding of mass and interest group arenas, from Alexandrova and Timmermans' (2012) focus on EU value-based legitimacy, and from Cairney and Zahariadis' (2016) concept of „policy window” that creates an opportunity for agenda enhancements. The technical frame focuses on effectiveness, efficiency, and problem-solving, which often resonates with experts. The value frame aims to appeal to EU norms such as justice, sustainability, democracy to give legitimacy to the Presidency's proposals. Opportunity frames strategically use events and crises to create urgency. Identity frames link debates to narratives that invoke a sense of shared Europeanness. The distribution of these frames within documents produced by the Council Presidency reflects the strategic balance between national priorities and EU-wide interests to remain legitimate.

2.4.4 Increased reaction and legitimacy of Council Presidency

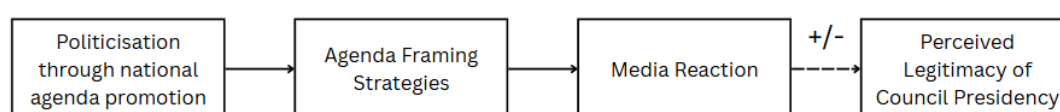
Agenda framing is not without reaction. As certain issues are prioritised over others by the Member State presiding, the issue gains more attention, thus forcing a reaction from the media. This study makes the case, building on the model proposed by Hooghe and Marks (2008) that issues become more salient through these responses of actors and media. Given the media's influence on public opinion (de Vreese et al., 2010), it plays a primary role in shaping how the Presidency is observed, therefore contributing to its perceived legitimacy.

Several stages of increased issue salience can happen simultaneously after the Council Presidency puts more emphasis on certain issues through agenda framing. First, the actions and decisions of the Council Presidency become more visible in the media. For example, we have seen with the Hungarian Presidency in 2024 that Prime Minister Orbán Viktor went on ‘peace mission’ visits as the President, representing the EU, to Ukraine and Russia. This case highlights how certain issues, such as the peace talks over the war in Ukraine, could be emphasised by the Presidency and brought to the mass arena through increased media coverage.

At the same time, other actors, countries, stakeholders, and the media reacts to the Council Presidency’s actions. As countries prioritise their national interests the media responds, which results in increased salience, polarisation, and contestation. Next to this, the way the media interprets the Council Presidency’s actions, agenda-setting, and overall performance also deeply matters. As the media can shape the opinion of the public (de Vreese et al., 2010) it also affects the Presidency’s perceived legitimacy. Thus, building on the idea of Whitman (1998) and Tallberg (2003), who argue that visible pushes towards national interests paradoxically result in a lower sense of legitimacy, the thesis argues that the reaction of the media plays a crucial mechanism in determining – or reducing – the legitimacy of the Presidency. Figure 2 visualises this dynamic sequence by mapping how politicisation of the Council Presidency through agenda framing strategies increases the salience of certain topics. This leads to the increased media reaction, which shapes the perceived legitimacy of the Presidency.

Figure 2

Conceptual Model



In summary, as countries have pushed for their national interests, the Council Presidency became a site for political contestation. In this context, issue salience generates political debate, exacerbates polarisation, and invites increased media scrutiny. When these issues gain momentum, they become more visible, thus encouraging stakeholders (de Wilde, 2007) and the media to respond. Negative reactions from the media may undermine the neutrality of the Council Presidency, therefore weakening its legitimacy, while positive reactions may strengthen it. Figure 2 has captured this interactive process and provides a theoretical foundation for the empirical research that follows.

The following section will illustrate the operationalisation of the previously described theoretical elements, outlining how framing strategies and the media reactions will be measured and analysed in this thesis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research utilises a qualitative content analysis approach, using coding categories aligned with the conceptual framework, to examine how politicisation has affected the agenda-setting of the Council Presidency. The analysis will focus on a single case – the Hungarian Council Presidency in 2024 – and examines the politicisation of the role through an analysis of the Presidency's agenda framing strategies and its perceived legitimacy by the media. Coding is applied to the official documents and media coverage using abductive codes and categories. Additional details regarding the case's justification, the operationalization of the theoretical section's concepts, and methods for data collection and analysis will be addressed in the section that follows. Lastly, the chapter will end with a discussion on the validity and reliability of the research.

3.2 Case Study

Hungary took over the Council Presidency from Belgium in July 2024 under the motto “Make Europe Great Again”. Some of its priorities included adopting a new European Competitiveness Deal, reinforcing European defence policy, stopping illegal migration, and shaping the cohesion policy (Hungarian Presidency Council of the European Union, n.d.). Viktor Orbán, PM of Hungary, made two unannounced trips during the Presidency, one to Ukraine with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and later to Russia with President Vladimir Putin, which have been heavily criticised in the media (Spike & Isachenkov, 2024).

As theorised by Tallberg (2003) and Princen (2007), the Hungarian case follows the expected logic of countries using the role to further their national agendas, therefore it can be regarded as a typical case, as the mechanisms of politicisation and agenda-framing are evident. Although Leconte (2012) has argued that Eurosceptic countries have been de-incentivised to politicise the Council Presidency and push their own narratives, Hungary, under Orbán in 2024, challenges this assumption. This makes it an even more salient typical case to highlight how these processes may occur during other Presidency periods when countries may use these mechanisms (Seawright, 2008), and how

politicisation undermines the perceived legitimacy of the Presidency, the core element of the theoretical framework and the outcome of interest.

The aforementioned case builds on the existing literature on the previous Hungarian Presidency periods and gives a re-evaluation of these findings (Leconte, 2012). While also building on the model, the case may also be used to test the overall applicability of Hooghe and Marks' politicisation model, expanding the arena choices and party strategy elements, on the EU level (Hooghe and Marks, 2008). It also serves as a case for the role of agenda-setting and framing under institutional constraints. As the Hungarian case tests the limitations of the Presidency through challenging the neutrality norm, it makes the case theoretically significant to understanding institutional resilience. Additionally, as much of the literature has specifically focused on the agenda-shaping power of the Council Presidency, the research gives a new dimension to studies on agenda framing in the Council Presidency. By focusing on the Presidency's agenda framing initiatives, the study improves understandings of framing strategies at the EU level, as well as of the Presidency's politicisation process.

3.3 Operationalisation

Data will be coded using qualitative software (Atlas.Ti), based on the coding frame obtained from the conceptual framework. During the analytical process, codes will be redefined, thus, the research will be using abductive coding. The study will operationalise each component of the theoretical model (Figure 2). This model, based on the literature, assumes that politicisation is present in the study and serves as the foundational condition rather than a variable to be investigated. Importantly, the reactions of the media will be used as also an indicator of perceived legitimacy as the thesis understands legitimacy through the media's portrayal of the Presidency. For this reason, the following section will focus on agenda framing and perceived legitimacy as our indicators.

3.3.1 Agenda Framing

Entman (1993) describes framing as the action "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). Building on this definition, we describe the framing processes of the Council Presidency as *the strategic selection of particular national priorities within EU-level discourse for the promotion of a certain problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or policy solution while aligning these priorities with broader EU values to maintain legitimacy*. The following

tables illustrate the operationalisation of agenda framing. Turning the theoretical concept into a measurable variable, which serves as the base of the analytical section:

Table 1

Operationalisation of Agenda Framing

Indicators	Justification of programme and priorities using values, technical arguments, references to identity, or presenting it as urgent issue affected by external events.
Data Sources	Presidency Programme and Priority documents, Informal Council meeting sources (website, background papers, press kit), Formal Council meeting sources (quotes, draft conclusions, Presidency notes).
Interpretation	The different framing strategies reveal how the Council Presidency positions its agenda. Each of them serves a different function: value framing indicates normative alignment, technical conveys neutrality, identity framing expresses a sense of belonging, and opportunity framing emphasises urgency.

Table 2

Overview of coding frame; Strategic framing of the Council Presidency

Frame Name	Description	Example of Keywords / Phrase / Rhetorical Indicators
EU Value Frame	Framing using EU norms and values	„Fundamental rights” „promoting sustainability” „social inclusion” „freedom” „justice” „rule of law” „equal opportunities” „freedom of expression” „gender equality”
Technical Frame	Framing as a matter of efficiency, effectiveness, procedure	„Promote efficient implementation” „better connectivity” „ease regulatory burden” „most cost-effective way” „improving quality of legislation”
Identity Frame	Appeals to shared EU identity	„minorities” „cultural heritage” „Pan-European” „unity” „role of EU” „common”
Opportunity Frame	Presentation of an issue as urgency, affected by external events	„(amidst the) challenges” „(due to) crises” „must take action” „emerging conflicts” „(we see an) opportunity” „demand immediate response”

Note: Frames (Categories)

3.3.2 Legitimacy

The thesis defines legitimacy as *the extent to which the Council Presidency is perceived to be a neutral, 'honest broker'*. The following tables illustrate the operationalisation of legitimacy:

Table 3

Operationalisation of Legitimacy

Indicators	Tone of reporting (positive, negative) in media, what the media has emphasised with regards to the Presidency
Data Sources	Articles from EU media (EurActiv, EuroNews)
Interpretation	Positive portrayals of the Presidency indicate high levels of perceived legitimacy, while negative and critical portrayals signal low levels of legitimacy

Table 4

Overview of coding frame; Perception of Media

Frame name	Description	Example of Keywords / Phrase / Rhetorical Indicators
Positive Frame	Portrays the Presidency in favourable way, suggesting legitimacy	Emphasising success; indicating move forward, indicating closeness between EU and Hungary; showing support for Presidency; using positive lexicon (e.g. „successful”, „constructive”, „achievements”)
Negative Frame	Portrays the Presidency in critical way, suggesting illegitimacy	Emphasising controversy; indicating step back; indicating distance between EU and Hungary; indicating criticism; using negative lexicon (e.g. „rogue”, „weak”, „problematic”, „slow”)

Note: Frames (Categories)

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The research design combines two components. Firstly, to research the Hungarian Presidency's agenda framing strategies, the research will begin with a qualitative frame analysis of Presidency-produced texts and documents. The period of study will be from the start of the Presidency period, the 1st of July 2024, until the last day of the period, the 31st of December 2024. Trio programme will not

be considered as it is formulated together with Spain and Belgium, thus reflecting the overall priorities of the trio instead of just the Hungarian Presidency.

Informal and formal meeting documents will be extracted from the Consilium Europa website (General Secretariat of the Council, n.d.). Informal meetings are organised by the Council Presidency to discuss initiatives related to a particular topic or Council configuration, therefore providing a great sample of how the Presidency could frame its priorities. Formal meetings are chaired by the Hungarian Presidency. The website, background briefs, and agendas are prepared by the Press Office of the General Secretariat of the Council (GSC). Presidency notes can be prepared by the Presidency itself or with the support of the GSC, which could entail fewer framing opportunities for the Hungarian Presidency. Although the Presidency may suggest what gets on the agenda, formal meeting documents also reflect impartiality when it comes to framing, as the GSC must remain neutral. Hence, they will not be included in the analysis. On the other hand, public Presidency notes will be included as these still represent the priorities of the Presidency. Lastly, draft conclusions will also be incorporated in the analysis as these are also prepared by the Presidency with the GSC's support, reflecting the priorities of the Presidency. Through negotiations, member states may modify the draft, thus the final conclusions reflect Member States' consensus. However, the draft conclusions could provide adequate data on Presidency framing strategies. Appendix B1 illustrates the types of communication tools and their categorisations. The research will select documents that represent high levels of framing based on the assessment described in Appendix B1.

Secondly, to assess the reception of the framing strategies by the Presidency, a qualitative media content analysis will be conducted on EU-level media outlets. This will illustrate the media and stakeholders' perception of the Presidency period and its legitimacy. Purposive sampling will be applied in this section to collect articles that have mentioned Hungary's role as Council President. The study will utilise the LexisNexis database to acquire data from Euractiv and Euronews, as the main readership of these news portals is found within the EU institutional environment. These outlets capture EU news and stakeholder reactions on issues within the EU, and disseminate information towards EU stakeholders, thus shaping their perceptions. Examining these portals will provide a comprehensive image of stakeholder reactions and media perception, as well as the perceived legitimacy of the Presidency. Based on Capati's research (2024), to obtain relevant data, this thesis will use the following search string syntax:

Hungary OR Hungarian "Council Presidency"

The time sample will be from the beginning of the Council Presidency (2024-06-30) until the end (2025-01-01).

In this study, the qualitative content analysis will be conducted as a "frame analysis." (Goffman 1974). Entman (1993) describes framing as the action "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and

make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). In this research, the aforementioned definition will be adopted to examine how the Hungarian Council Presidency frames its priorities in a technical, value-based, opportunity, and identity-focused manner to promote its domestic interests and shape its perception of legitimacy.

In conducting the analysis, initially four deductive frames were developed based on the theoretical framework, which served as the foundation for the coding system. During the initial coding the research utilised descriptive coding to capture the main themes of the data. However, this approach did not contribute meaningfully to the frame analysis. On the other hand, the descriptive codes showcased the overarching patterns and themes within these documents, which closely corresponded to the deductive frames. This abductive approach allowed the researcher to re-code the documents in a meaningful manner, demonstrating how deductive frames could be based in empirical patterns drawn from the literature.

Within each frame analysis, for most coded phrases a comment was written to summarise the framing and identify the theme associated with it. Using Excel, after extracting the data from Atlas.ti, I used COUNTIF() function to count the frequency of specific keywords within these notes (Appendix C). These keywords I looked for were based on my estimation of what the most prominent themes were that emerged from the data.

The second part of the analysis focused on the perception of the Hungarian Presidency within the media. I extracted 61 articles using LexisNexis with a time sample from 2024/06/30, the start of the Presidency, until 2025/01/01, the end of the Presidency. EurActiv and EuroNews were the examined sources that were available on the database. Articles that were duplicates were only counted one time in the analysis.

During the second analytical process, this study aimed to look at the positive and negative perceptions of the Hungarian Presidency by the media. During the coding process the study found that many of the articles not only assessed the work of the Presidency but also evaluated Hungary as a country and the actions of PM Viktor Orbán. In the categorisation of the analysis, I separated sections that framed either the Presidency or Hungary/Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, to assess what comments were directed towards the Presidency itself and which were directed towards outside factors. The latter was labelled as 'About Hungary' while the former as 'About Presidency'. All comments were either rated as negative or positive. The study did not incorporate defying degrees of positivity and negativity.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

As the thesis focuses on one case the findings may not be broadly generalisable. Specific geopolitical events, like the war in Ukraine, may also affect the specific case, making it less generalisable. On the other hand, it provides an in-depth and context-specific comprehension of the Hungarian Presidency. Additionally, the case choice may have a certain bias due to the researcher's Hungarian nationality and political orientation. As the main frames for the analytical section are deductive it also enhances the objectivity of the research. Next to this, the decisions made during the collection of data, as well as the analytical process, will be thoroughly documented to reflect impartiality and ensure internal validity.

Regarding the analytical process, framing and agenda-shaping could be up to people's interpretations. As the research will be utilising a mixed method of inductive and deductive coding, it may not be a completely objective process due to personal interpretations of codes. However, the initial deductive codes extracted from the conceptual framework provide a more theoretical, objective starting point for the coding process. In terms of the studied data, the selected sample of articles in the second component of the analysis are from EU media, which may already have a negative bias against Hungary due to the country's Euroscepticism, as opposed to Hungarian domestic media. Nevertheless, as the research applies triangulation, the utilisation of various data sources within both analytical sections ensures internal validity. Lastly, while this thesis does not measure the outcome in the sense of policy adoption, it contributes to the understanding of discursive mechanisms that reinforce agenda-setting power and legitimacy construction within the Council Presidency.

4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

4.1 Agenda Framing

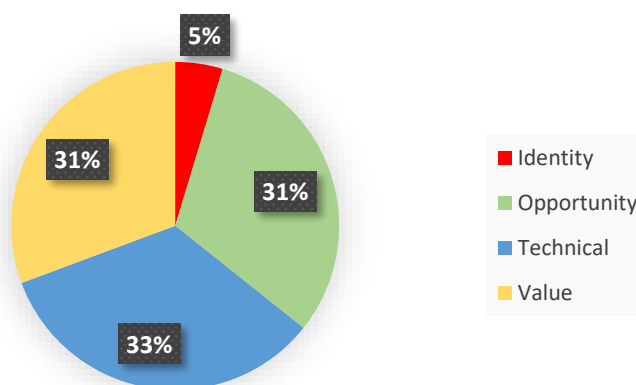
In the first analytical section, the study examined 84 documents and writings produced by the Hungarian Presidency that were categorised as utilising high levels of Presidency framing (Appendix B).

Importantly, within the analysis the strategic use of frames is understood as a mechanism of politicisation. These framing choices are deliberately chosen by Presidencies; thus, they reflect political decisions on how to present national priorities to fit within EU-level discourse. The distribution of frames represents how politicisation shapes agenda-setting: technical framing conveys neutrality by focusing on effectiveness, while opportunity, value, and identity frames strategically frame priorities as collective EU concerns, indicating underlying politicisation. Thus, an analysis of the type and frequency of these frames within Council Presidency documents reveals how politicisation is embedded in their communication strategy. The following sections will discuss the frames emphasised in Hungarian

Council Presidency documents and quotes. The analysis will commence with an overview of each frame, starting with technical and ending with identity, their frequency, emphasised themes, and their implications, as well as a section on the differences between the data sample texts.

Figure 3

Frame Frequency in Hungarian Council Presidency Produced Documents and Data



4.1.1 Technical Frame

As illustrated, the dominant frames include technical, opportunity, and value framing (Figure 3). Technical framing is one of the highest percentages of the frames utilised by the Hungarian Presidency. Within the technical frame the emphasis was on enhancing efficiency, effectiveness, focusing on the policy, implementation, frameworks, and funding. Based on the collected data, it is visible that the Hungarian Presidency emphasised its priorities in terms of effectiveness, technical aspects, efficiency, and policy focus the most (Appendix C1).

*„To increase the **effectiveness of capability development**, we need to maximise the potential of existing EU defence initiatives”* (Hungarian Presidency Council of the European Union, n.d, p. 17).

Aligning the priorities in terms of these themes provides a more neutral way of framing. These terms/themes are not controversial in nature and are used in most legislative texts and documents connected to the EU. The Hungarian Presidency framing its priorities along these lines makes them seem neutral and goal-oriented, maintaining a de-politicised appearance. This finding ties back into our theoretical argumentation that Presidencies will try to appear predominantly neutral, as they would be deemed less legitimate if they push their agenda more explicitly (Whitman, 1998; Tallberg, 2003).

4.1.2 Opportunity Frame

The next most used frame found in the analysis was the opportunity frame. Within this frame, the Hungarian Presidency formulated its priorities by emphasising ongoing challenges, crises, accentuating urgency, and by stressing the need to act now (Appendix C2). The usage of the opportunity frame suggests a strategic effort of the Presidency to boost its priorities by embedding them within narratives of shared challenges and crises. By using language that suggests necessary and urgent action and response, such as linking it to war, external threats, or other pressures, the Presidency's agenda is positioned not just as a national interest, but also as a collective EU imperative. By framing challenges as opportunities for decisive action, the Presidency can heighten their significance by increasing emotional engagement and the perceived need for intervention. Through this approach the Presidency may legitimise specific priorities by making them appear as both timely and essential in a wider EU context. Through politicisation, agenda framing shifts the justification by increasing the significance of the topic. These findings confirm the ideas of Cairney and Zahariadis (2016) that political actors use external sources to create a 'window of opportunity' through what this thesis calls 'opportunity framing'. This effort can be seen in the following examples from the Programme and Priorities (2024) documents:

*“European agriculture may have never faced as many **challenges** as it does today”* (Hungarian Presidency Council of the European Union, n.d, p. 6).

*„**Amidst the challenges, crises and armed conflicts**, the Hungarian Presidency considers it a key task to advance the EU's external relations and partnerships in close cooperation with the EU institutions and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy”* (Hungarian Presidency Council of the European Union, n.d, p. 12).

4.1.3 Value Frame

The value frame represents 31% of the total frame frequency. Within the value frame, the Hungarian Presidency formulated its priorities by emphasising fundamental rights of citizens in the EU, equality, inclusivity, sustainability, health, and citizen-orientedness (Appendix C3). Relying on the value frame suggests strategic alignment with the goals and ideals of the EU. By framing their priorities in terms of EU values the Presidency can strengthen its message. Relying on this framing legitimises their priorities and their embeddedness in EU values makes them more challenging to question and scrutinise. Therefore, the study indicates that the Hungarian Presidency's reliance on the value frame illustrates a key mechanism of politicisation wherein the Presidency uses EU value framing as a normative shield for its possibly contested priorities.

4.1.4 Identity Frame

Lastly, within the identity frame the Hungarian Presidency presented its priorities by highlighting the importance of culture, cultural heritage, unity as a shared group of membership, and European identity (Appendix C4). Unity is represented both in the value and identity frame but distinctively. Within the value frame, 'unity' is meant as a value while in the identity frame 'unity' is referred to as the shared membership of a group. Part of the identity framing included quotations that enhanced a sense of European unity, for example the following quote:

*„The European Union has long been engaged in ensuring a **European perspective** for the Western Balkans, as the **Community cannot be complete without the accession of this region**” (Hungarian Presidency Council of the European Union, n.d, p. 5).*

On the other hand, many of the identity-focused framing emphasised the importance of focusing on minorities within the EU. Interestingly, this shift to more focus on minority rights, as opposed to the expected national or ethnic identity suggests a more inclusive approach. Instead of highlighting the 'sameness' of European identity, it frames unity as solidarity with the vulnerable. In a politicisation context, the Hungarian Council Presidency's effort to emphasise the rights of vulnerable groups over European identity, highlights national identity over a Pan-European one. This mechanism ultimately serves as a tool to embed national ideals in a collective EU image.

4.1.5 Text differences

One of the most important documents within this analysis was the Programme and Priorities document of the Hungarian Presidency, due to the text's length and its incorporation of all the goals of the Presidency. The framing within this document reflects the agenda framing strategy of the Presidency the most. Interestingly, the document is themed around the different Council groupings and each section provides the programme and priority of the Hungarian Presidency for each Council meeting groups. Each section starts with an introduction paragraph, where opportunity framing is the most prominently, if not the solely, used. This illustrates the Presidency's goal to convince the reader, as the opportunity frame tends to provide more emotional and stronger language, invoking urgency. This is also illustrated by the first sentence of this document:

*“Hungary takes over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union **at a time of extraordinary circumstances and challenges**” (Hungarian Presidency Council of the European Union, n.d, p. 4).*

Following the introduction paragraphs, the texts employed a variety of framing techniques from the four we have outlined. Additionally, frames were more visible in the speeches and priority documents, or the informal background documents, than in draft conclusions or notes for the formal meetings, which contained more legislative lexicon. This could be explained by the nature of these documents

and/or the role of GSC in ensuring objectivity within these documents. However, framing was also visible in these documents, but less explicitly so, due to the overwhelming technocratic language.

Bringing all the analytical components together, the thesis has illustrated how politicisation affects the agenda setting strategy of the Hungarian Presidency by influencing how priorities and messages are communicated and framed. Comparing the usage of different frames suggests that the Hungarian Presidency balanced its priorities by aligning its messages with three dominant frames: technical, opportunity, and value. Each of these serve a different strategic purpose. The technical framing offered a more neutral and policy-oriented approach that preserved the institutional legitimacy of the Presidency. The opportunity frame, by stressing urgency and action through formulating national priorities in terms of crises, accentuates the need for collective action. Value framing, i.e., enforcing alignment with EU principles, helped legitimise the priorities of the Presidency. Identity framing was only used sparingly and mostly focused on emphasising the rights of minorities, which suggests highlighting themes of solidarity and inclusivity, but less focus on Pan-European identity. This framing technique illustrates how politicisation pressures Presidencies to balance institutional expectations, national interests, and EU values, which supports the theoretical model introduced (Figure 2).

Specifically, the technical frame's neutrality, the opportunity frame's urgency, and the value frame's strategic EU alignment created a balance. Using the opportunity frame, the Hungarian Presidency emphasised urgent action in order to advance its goals. This effort, however, must be balanced in order to preserve the Presidency's legitimacy. This was accomplished by relying on technical framing, which emphasised efficiency and effectiveness, as well as value framing, which was based on undisputed EU principles. The identity frame focused on the total European identity. However, the absence of identity framing suggests that the Hungarian Presidency did not set its goals in terms of Pan-Europeanism, but rather upon solidarity and inclusivity with minority groups, also highlighting their emphasis on national identity.

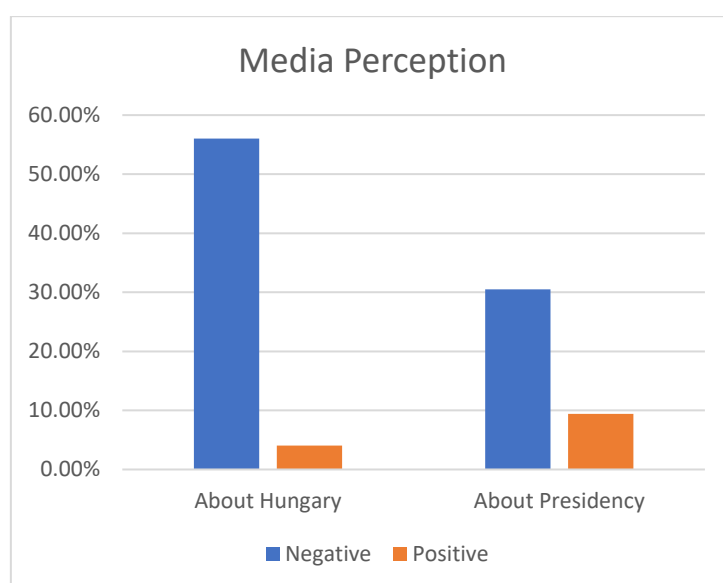
In the end, the framing strategies of the Hungarian Presidency show how politicisation influences not only what is prioritised but also how such priorities are justified and legitimised in a delicate institutional and political context, leading to the increased salience of national priorities. The mainstream narratives of the media illustrate how successful these framing strategies have been in affecting the perceived legitimacy of the Hungarian Presidency, as will be discussed in the following section.

4.2 Perceived Legitimacy

In the following chapter, the research will include the analysis of the media perceptions of Hungary and the Hungarian Council Presidency. The chapter is divided into five sections, the first four of which include the findings on positive and negative perceptions of Hungary and the Hungarian Presidency. In the last section, the research will bring the four categories together and highlight what the mainstream narrative has been regarding the Hungarian Presidency, and how this has affected its legitimacy.

Figure 4

Percentage of coded text in each category



As illustrated in Figure 4, the overall perception of both the Presidency and Hungary were negative. Majority of the articles perceived Hungary more negatively than the Presidency itself. More positive comments/framing was present when discussing the Presidency than Hungary. Only a small fraction of positive perception could be noticed when writing about Hungary. In the following sections, the study will elaborate on each category.

4.2.1 Negative Media Perceptions of Hungary

When it comes to the negative comments about Hungary, many centred around PM Orbán's visit to Moscow, framing Hungary, and PM Orbán specifically, as engaging in isolated politics or as a disruptor of unity, as illustrated by the following quotes:

*„EU member states lash out at Hungary over **rogue** Ukraine diplomacy” (Euractiv, 2024).*

*„Orbán's politics is **isolated** here," he added"" (Alipour, 2024).*

Some articles additionally contrast the neutral role of the Council Presidency with PM Orbán's actions. Specifically, they highlight the fact that Orbán does not represent the EU itself and cannot act as representative of the Union. Additionally, some even mention how PM Orbán's behaviour goes against the objectives of the Presidency and their intended goals. Bringing up further issues related to Hungary can also lead to a more negative image that may influence stakeholder's perspective. This indicates a certain importance to the image of a country, their perceived legitimacy holding the Council Presidency, and its connection to having a successful Presidency period with reached objectives. Lastly, some articles also offer general criticism of PM Orbán, which also leads to less perceived legitimacy of their Presidency due to country's action:

*„However, European partners were not buying it, especially against the **background of Orbán's track record**" (Matura, 2024).*

The media's overwhelming negative perception of Hungary in this case, and its portrayal of PM Orbán as an isolated actor and disrupter of unity, illustrate how national politicisation can undermine the Presidency's agenda-framing role. Although the Presidency may influence the agenda through agenda framing, the success of this also depends on perceived legitimacy. The role of the media is crucial in defining this perception. In the case of the Hungarian Presidency, the politicised actions of PM Orbán, both his 'peace mission' and his overall 'track record', overshadowed the neutral image that is expected of the Presidency. Due to this, the media shifted its focus more towards the credibility of Hungary than towards the actual substance of the agenda. This erodes the legitimacy of the Presidency, effectively weakening their authority in building consensus and setting priorities. The negative media perceptions also undermine Hungary's agenda since a positive image within the media could have helped advance their goals. Thus, politicisation may backfire by reducing the trust of the media and stakeholders, ultimately de-legitimising the Council Presidency.

4.2.2 Positive Media Perceptions of Hungary

Interestingly, the positive perception of Hungary and PM Viktor Orbán within the articles stem from the need for constructive dialogue. Although this category contains the least amount of framing, these sections are even more defining. They frame Hungary and PM Orbán as a challenging force to the EU's status quo and to the Presidency's neutrality, but at the same time an indispensable actor. This paradox reflects that politicisation may enhance some member states' position in terms of perception in the media even when their actions are controversial.

*“But Costa's admiration is on record: in an interview with Italian newspaper Corriere Della Sera last month, he complimented Orbán's summit approach, saying **"even when he is isolated, I have always seen him having a constructive position"**” (Nielsen, 2024).*

4.2.3 Negative Media Perceptions of the Hungarian Presidency

The negative perceptions of the Hungarian Council Presidency in the media centred around three main themes: subjectivity, i.e. pushing for national agenda, obstructionism, and failure to foster consensus on key points. The coverage often criticised the Presidency for prioritising national interest over being a neutral broker, thus undermining the institutional expectation of being an impartial Presidency. This was evident in reference to the advancement of Hungary's domestic agenda, such as its position on genetically modified organisms (GMOs), being embedded in EU-wide discussions:

*„Nagy's opposition to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is well-known **and rooted in Hungary's 2012 constitution**, which enshrines the principle of "GMO-free" agriculture” (Manzanaro, 2024).*

Next to highlighting the subjectivity of the Presidency it was also portrayed as a disruptor, being accused of delaying policy process and prolonging the legislative process. This raised questions about the Presidency's motivations, but also about its competence, especially in its ability to be a neutral broker among member states. Additionally, some articles also included comments that mentioned the Hungarian Presidency delaying policy, i.e., acting as a disruptor. Articles have also emphasised the Presidency's inability and its failure in promoting consensus, highlighting their incompetence.

All in all, these criticisms suggest that politicisation, driven by national political agendas and controversial leadership can erode the Presidency's legitimacy, credibility, and effectiveness. Rather than being a neutral facilitator, a politicised Presidency can be perceived as a partisan, rogue actor, which may weaken its capacity to set and advance unifying EU agenda.

4.2.4 Positive Media Perceptions of the Hungarian Presidency

Successful brokering and fostering open discussion were the most important themes within the positive media perceptions of the Presidency.

Firstly, the Presidency was praised for its brokering efforts and breaking legislative deadlocks, as shown by the following quotes. Interestingly, the first quote also mentions the controversy that has hung around the Presidency, illustrating that even with its successful efforts, the actions of PM Orbán and the country's 'track record' overshadowed its achievements. On the other hand, the second quote discusses how geothermal energy has been as issue 'close to the heart' of the Hungarian Presidency. Accordingly, the success of the agreement discussed during the Presidency reflects good agenda

framing that enhanced Hungary's effectiveness in brokering for its own domestic goals. The following quotes also shows us that not all instances of politicisation are perceived or portrayed the same way in the media.

*„Today's intergovernmental agreement – which saw Hungary's environment minister Anikó Ráisz **widely praised for brokering a deal** - came despite broad antipathy directed towards Budapest throughout a six-month EU Council presidency that has been mired in controversy from day one” (Hodgson, 2024b).*

*„In a separate debate, **ministers agreed that Europe must boost deployment of geothermal energy, an issue close to the heart of outgoing EU Council presidency holder Hungary**, which chaired today's summit and is famously rich in thermal waters” (Hodgson, 2024a).*

Comments also discussed how the Presidency has provided a sphere for open discussion, that topics introduced in the Presidency are a 'fresh start', and that the Presidency tried its best. This suggests a more positive framing of the Presidency with a specific focus on its efforts.

Importantly, a more balanced view is offered by notable comments related to the rehabilitation of the Hungarian Presidency's image in the face of external factors. These suggest that although media narratives are often shaped by politicisation, they are not consistently critical. This illustrates that the media perception is not only influenced by the Presidency's framing but also by broader context and perceived fairness in this case.

In line with the research's theoretical framework, it reinforces the idea that legitimacy is produced by the media: the Presidency may frame its agenda to shape perception but the media also has the power to interpret and create an image of the Presidency and Hungary. In this section on the positive perceptions of the Presidency the media has shown that it may also resist the dominant politicised narrative, i.e. that Hungary's 'track record' tainted the Presidency, by recognising that there are structural limitations to the position.

4.2.5 Perception Together

Bringing together the four perceptions, the findings suggest that politicisation affects the agenda-setting and perceived legitimacy of the Council Presidency significantly, particularly through how the media frames both the Presidency and the country presiding.

The overwhelming negative comments towards Hungary as a country and its PM Orbán underscore the extent to which domestic politics may overshadow the performance of the Presidency. Although the Hungarian Presidency was acknowledged for its procedural competence, this was often obscured by the political controversy, i.e. Orbán's actions, Hungary's 'track record', and accusations of pushing own national agenda. This negative perceptions of Hungary in the media have an immense

effect on the portrayal of the Presidency and therefore its legitimacy, effectively de-legitimising Hungary's role in the Presidency.

The aforementioned accusation of Hungary pushing its own agenda also indicates alignment with this study's theoretical framework, which shows that the Presidency is not just a passive facilitator but can also engage in agenda framing. However, the success of this depends on its legitimacy, which is shaped by external perception, with media narratives being key among these. Thus, the Hungarian case highlights that excessive national politicisation can undermine the legitimacy of the Council Presidency, weakening its credibility and neutral image (Whitman, 1998; Tallberg, 2003).

Next to this, the research observed some acknowledgement towards the successes of the Presidency, attempting to balance the narrative, even if these comments were rare. This indicates the role of the media in being an interpreter, and the dynamism of the Presidency's efforts in framing its agenda and the way the media frames the Presidency itself. Thus, a co-construction of legitimacy can be observed. However, politicisation may also backfire and turn the media into a delegitimising force instead of an amplifier of agenda-setting power.

Negative portrayals of Hungary undermined the broader image of the Presidency, even when the latter was framed more positively. This disconnect shows how politicised actions of national leadership can overshadow the Presidency's formal neutrality. This means that politicisation not only challenges internal framing strategies but it also erodes external credibility, which can weaken the effectiveness of the Presidency in driving and legitimising its agenda.

5. Discussion of Framing and Perception

This case underscores the theoretical argument that politicised agenda-framing leads to media reaction, which contributes to the perceived legitimacy of the Council Presidency. As it is outlined in the theoretical framework, the Presidency's agenda framing led to overall negative media reception, which affected the Presidency's perceived legitimacy in a negative way. Politicisation, therefore, affects the legitimacy of the Council Presidency. In this case, a politicised Presidency, especially with a controversial leader and a negative 'track record', led to losing legitimacy needed for effective agenda-setting. The media acted a mediator of this relationship, functioning as a constructor of political legitimacy in the EU, shaping how the Presidency can act in its agenda-setting role.

Most importantly, the study has illustrated that the Hungarian Presidency's agenda-framing, balancing between domestic interests and EU-wide priorities and appearing neutral, was not sufficient in overcoming the effects of national-level politicisation. The Presidency's politicisation embedded into its communication strategy, through the heavy emphasis of technical, value, and opportunity frames, was negatively received in the media and the push towards the Hungarian agenda was criticised. Based

on these findings, it could be argued that over reliance on technical, opportunity, and value frames lead to a negative media response, as the media has also pointed out that it is clear that the Hungarian narrative is being pushed, ultimately delegitimising the Presidency.

On the other hand, the dominant narrative within the media centred around Hungary's and PM Orbán's actions, which overshadowed the work of the Presidency. As a result, this has delegitimised the Hungarian Presidency. This points to the fact that other politicised acts, not just agenda framing, affects the legitimacy of the Presidency. Thus, media response is triggered not only by the frames the Presidency puts forward, but also by the actions of the country holding the Presidency. From the data, the actions of the country were the main drivers of the media's negative reaction, which indicates that national level politicisation, i.e. actions of the country holding the Presidency, is what determines the legitimacy of the Council Presidency.

In sum, framing is one mechanism of politicisation when it comes to agenda-setting in the EU. The research aimed to understand how politicisation may affect the agenda-setting of the Council Presidency through analysing agenda-framing, and how media perceptions may (de)legitimise the Presidency. The study has shown that the legitimacy of the Presidency is not only about the balance between the frames that are used, but also about how different aspects of politicisation shape the media receptivity to the Presidency and the country.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The thesis aimed to understand how politicised agenda-setting affects the legitimacy of the Council Presidency, particularly through analysing agenda-framing and the media's perception of the Presidency. Based on a qualitative analysis of documents produced by the Hungarian Council Presidency, and on a qualitative media analysis, it can be concluded that Member States frame their priorities to fit within the EU status quo. However, the media's perception of the Presidency is heavily influenced by external factors, thus not just by the workings of the Presidency itself but also by the track record of the country and its leadership. These results indicate that these narratives are re-enforced within the media by already pre-determined indicators and preconceived opinions based on the actions of the country's leadership.

The research set out to examine the framing strategies of the Hungarian Council Presidency during its latest term in 2024, particularly due to the strong criticism it received. The objective of the thesis was to illustrate a comprehensive picture of the agenda-framing toolbox. However, to fully understand the dynamism, I decided to also analyse the media's perception of the Presidency and its response to these framing efforts. The results were not particularly expected: the media focused less on the content of the Presidency's agenda-framing and more on other external factors, specifically the

controversies surrounding the country's leadership and its political track record. Importantly, these findings highlight that successful agenda-framing is not only dependent on how the country has strategically balanced EU-wide priorities with their interests but also on the perceived legitimacy of the actor using these frames. Overall, while the study only focuses on the Hungarian case, thus limiting generalisability, this approach provides new insights into politicisation efforts in the formally restricted role of the Council Presidency.

Building on Leconte (2012), the research has shown that Eurosceptic countries still try to push their agenda through the Council Presidency, even after the Lisbon Treaty. The research has also challenged Leconte's (2012) argument that Eurosceptic countries have been discouraged to push their domestic interests during their rotation period. On the other hand, according to the results, the research has also strengthened Whitman's (1998) and Tallberg's (2003) arguments that discuss that noticeable push for national goals leads to paradoxically less legitimacy, thus less efficiency in reaching intended policy goals. The study adds to this and argues that the role of the media and the perception of the country itself is also crucial in determining legitimacy. These underline that the Presidency has remained a politicised tool to enhance domestic political expression even for countries that have been perceived negatively in the sphere of EU politics.

Based on these conclusions, academics should focus on understanding how the perception of a country within the media may affect its agenda-setting abilities in the Council Presidency to understand the alignment between perceived image and agenda-setting power. While the study has extended on the existing literature on agenda-setting, by formulating categories of agenda-framing, there should still be more emphasis on the strategic construction of agenda priorities and their position towards EU and domestic interests.

Due to the issue's importance on EU policy-making and agenda-setting, the study highlights the emphasis on strengthening the neutrality of the Presidency. The Hungarian case has been a relevant and important example of how politicisation may lead to curbing the neutrality of the role, even if it led to negative response and overall delegitimization. Politicisation, as also argued by EU studies academics, emphasises disharmony within the EU (Zürn, 2019), which is why more action to enhance this role's impartiality through increased regulation is needed. Neutrality could be addressed through increasing the role of the GSC in ensuring impartiality within Presidency produced documents. On the other hand, agenda framing is within the rights of countries. It is a way to express and communicate within the institutional bounds of the Council Presidency. In the end, as also evidenced by this thesis and the theoretical framework, the media will play its role to determine how much of this expression is condoned and regulate the legitimacy of the Presidency.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Operationalisation of Codes

Preliminary coding frame used during coding of first analytical sections' sample. Frames are derived from the literature (see Table A1).

Table A1

Preliminary coding frame

Frame/Category	Expected code/Sub-category	Operationalisation
EU Value Frame	EU-values Lexicon	Reference to specific values (justice, security, peace, stability, rule of law, freedom, democracy, equality)
Technical Frame	Technical	Reference to numbers, statistics
	Bureaucratic language	Reference to experts, technocratic jargon, institutional processes
	Effectiveness/efficiency	Narrative formed in a way to express need to innovate for better effectiveness and efficiency
Identity Frame	Inclusive identity	Reference to the common European identity, inclusive language
	Solidarity	Reference to minority groups, minority rights, expressing solidarity and inclusiveness
Opportunity Frame	Policy window	Using urgent language, expressing action is needed now
	Crisis narrative	Using external events, crisis, threats, and narrative points

Appendix B

Types of Communication Tools for Framing

Table B1

Category	Source Category	Source Sub-category	Producer	Presidency Framing: How much say does the Presidency have in framing
Official Website	Documents	Programme and Priorities	Hungarian Presidency	High
Informal meeting	Website	Informal meeting page	Hungarian Presidency	High
	Background paper		Hungarian Presidency	High
	Press Kit	Agenda	Hungarian Presidency	High
		Background information	Hungarian Presidency	High
Formal meetings	Website	Main results	GSC	Low, managed by GSC Press Office; Presidency input limited, may reflect Presidency priorities, but not a stage for framing
		Quotes	Hungarian Ministers	High, but GSC picks quotes from Hungarian Chairs, may reflect priorities (or HRVP)
	Recordings	Public Recording Press Conference		Low, the Presidency has no influence, but speech can reflect priorities High, the Presidency controls its own messaging (within Q&A constraints)
	Draft Conclusions		Hungarian Presidency/GSC	High, GSC technical support (later, Member States negotiate)
	Presidency Note	From GSC	Hungarian Presidency with GSC	Medium, Presidency frames, but GSC ensures technical and legal quality, ensuring neutrality

<i>From</i>	<i>Hungarian</i>	<i>High, the Presidency owns framing</i>
<i>Presidency</i>	<i>Presidency</i>	

Note: High Presidency framing: The Presidency controls the programme heavily; Medium Presidency framing: Presidency influences but shares control, either with GSC, member states, or the Commission; Low Presidency framing: The Presidency has little control, GSC or others ensure neutrality

Appendix C

Most used keywords within framing categories

For most coded phrases a comment was written to summarise the framing and identify the theme associated with it. Using Excel, after extracting the data from Atlas.ti, I used COUNTIF() function to count the frequency of specific keywords within these notes. These keywords I looked for were based on my estimation of what the most prominent themes were that emerged from the data. To enhance the search, I used the asterisk (*) as a wildcard character in the formula (see Table C1; Table C2; Table C3; Table C4).

Table C1

Most used keywords within technical category

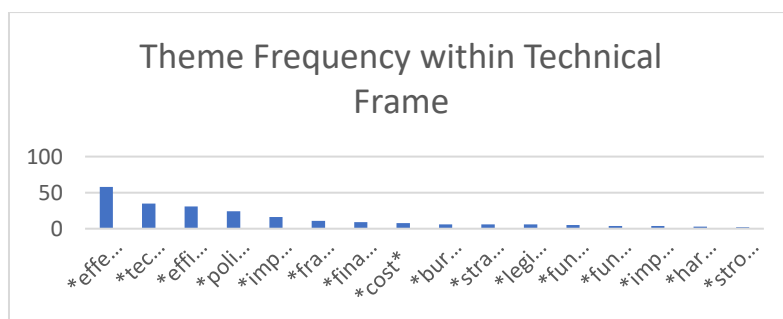


Table C2

Most used keywords within opportunity category

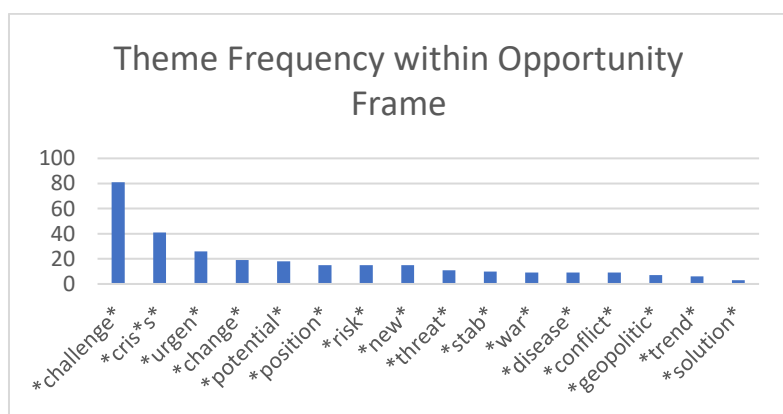
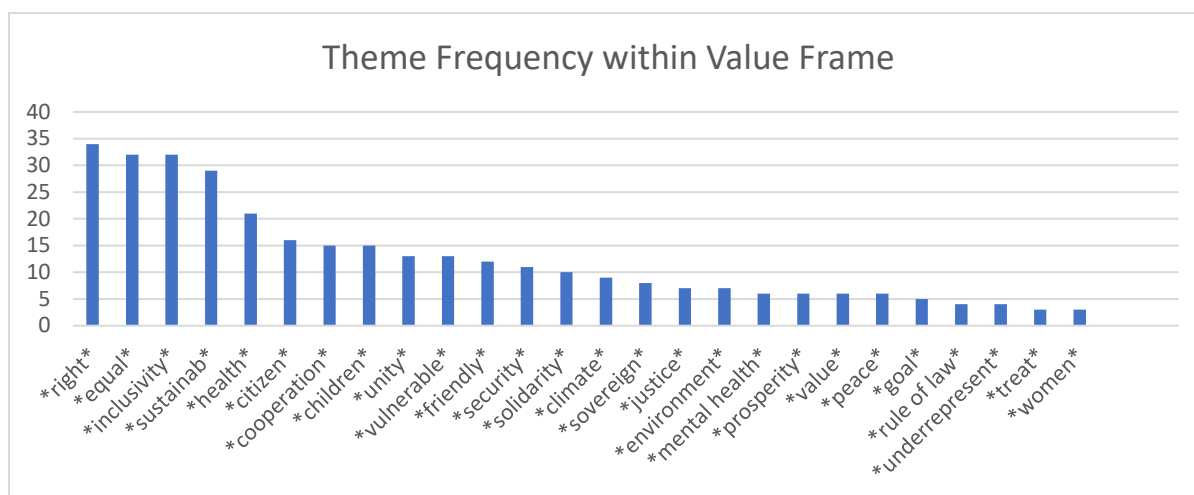
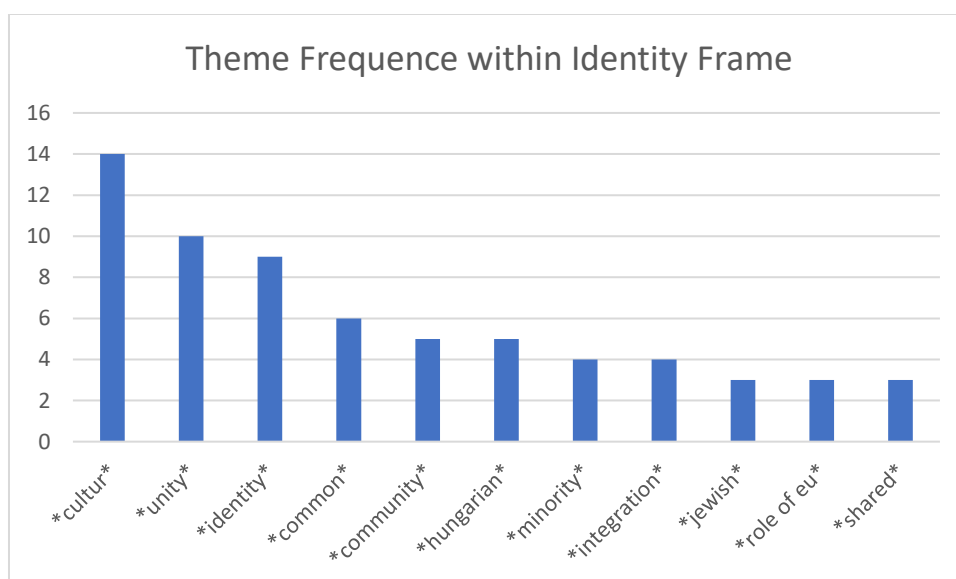


Table C3

Most used keywords within value category

**Table C4**

Most used keywords within identity category



Appendix D

Table D1

Number of comments in each category in media analysis section within the selected data sample

	About Hungary	About Presidency
Negative	125	68
Positive	9	21

Appendix E

Media Analysis Data

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Appendix F

Rotating Council Presidency Data: Hungarian Presidency

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