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THE STRONGMAN'S FOREIGN POLICY:
VIKTOR ORBÁN
AND HUNGARY'S ANTI-IMMIGRATION AGENDA

Virginia Sherin, S.Sos., M.Sc.

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Virginia Sherin

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Park 10th A Floor Jl. TB Simatupang No 18, Kel. Kebagusan, Kec. Pasar Minggu
Kota Adm. Jakarta Selatan, Prov. DKI Jakarta
publicaindonesiautama@gmail.com

PREFACE

Politics is often discussed through institutions, laws, and national interests. Yet, behind every major political decision stands a leader whose beliefs, convictions, and personality help shape the direction of a nation. In recent years, few European leaders have attracted as much attention and debate as Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary. Admired by some as a defender of national sovereignty and criticized by others for his illiberal tendencies, Orbán has become one of the most influential figures in contemporary populist politics.

This book, *The Strongman's Foreign Policy: Viktor Orbán and Hungary's Anti-Immigration Agenda*, began with a simple but important question: To what extent do a leader's personal characteristics influence foreign policy decisions? While discussions on Hungary's anti-immigration stance often focus on domestic politics, security concerns, or broader European dynamics, this study invites readers to look at the issue from a different perspective—the personality of the leader himself.

By exploring Viktor Orbán through the lens of Leadership Traits Analysis (LTA), this book examines how the personal qualities of a populist leader can shape the way he perceives challenges, interprets events, and responds to political issues. The analysis reveals a leader who is highly self-confident, strongly task-oriented, and driven by a clear sense of purpose. These characteristics provide valuable insights into the development of Hungary's anti-immigration policies, particularly during a period when migration became one of the most contested issues in European politics.

More broadly, this work contributes to a growing conversation about the role of leadership in international affairs. In a world where political personalities increasingly dominate headlines and influence public discourse, understanding the individuals behind policy decisions has never been more relevant. Viktor Orbán offers a fascinating case study not only because of his longevity in power, but also because of the impact his ideas have had on debates surrounding populism, nationalism, and migration across Europe and beyond.

This book is written for students, researchers, and readers who are interested in international relations, foreign policy analysis, political psychology, and contemporary populism. At the same time, it is intended to remain accessible to anyone curious about how leadership and personality can shape political outcomes. Rather than presenting foreign policy as an abstract process, this study highlights its deeply human dimension.

It is my hope that the discussions presented in these pages will encourage readers to think more critically about the relationship between leaders and the policies they pursue. Understanding the motivations and characteristics of political leaders does not necessarily mean agreeing with their decisions, but it does help us better understand why those decisions are made and why they resonate with certain audiences.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the completion of this work. Any limitations that remain are solely my responsibility. May this book serve as a meaningful contribution to the study of leadership, populism, and foreign policy in the contemporary world.

Author
2026

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Before making proper decisions, leaders have to deal with complex internal and external situations by, for instance, learning and making predictions from past experiences/histories so that they are less likely to make mistakes. Consequently, leaders' political perspectives are crucial factors in decision-making that influence them to choose diplomacy over coercion or vice versa. However, since traditional approaches to international relations tend to overlook the role of leaders as individual agents (Grove, 2007; Kaarbo, 2021), research on the connection between leaders and foreign policy has been intensifying recently (Grove, 2007; Preston, 2017). Breuning (2007) claims that leaders can impact their country's status and position. Among many reasons, the historical contexts of the leaders can be the significant influence that shapes leaders' perspectives whenever they have to make decisions. Hermann (2002) argues that political leaders' personal characteristics and leadership styles considerably influence foreign policy processes and results.

The growing trend is also apparent in the study of populism in international politics (Chryssogelos, 2020). Some scholars argue that populism does not affect foreign policy significantly since populists utilize it merely as political mobilization to gain mass support (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Roberts, 1995). However, others find that populist rhetoric affects foreign policymaking and is not only "cheap talk" (Plagemann & Destradi, 2019; Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021). Studying the impacts of populism on foreign policy

has been a popular topic among scholars of international politics since there has been a worldwide increase of populist leaders in recent times (Destradi et al., 2021).

One prominent populist leader is Viktor Orbán of Hungary. After winning the election in 2014, Orbán delivered a speech on “illiberal democracy,” addressing it as his governing system while continuously demonstrating immigrants as a security threat to the country (Thorpe, 2018). In the period of the European immigration crisis, Orbán contended that the liberal system of Europe would reach an end and predicted that Europe would accept Orbán’s “Christian and national” political vision (Mueller, 2016). Existing literature (Kim, 2023; Mueller, 2016) suggests that adopting illiberal democracy means counteracting liberal-democratic norms and institutions. As a right-wing populist leader and prime minister, Orbán has received much attention from scholars regarding his foreign political attitudes (Lamour, 2024; Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021). The attention on Orbán has also growing as he wins political elections and gains political support using populism rhetoric (Bíró-Nagy, 2022).

In terms of populist leaders, Visnovitz and Jenne (2021) demonstrate that a certain set of behaviors influences populist leaders in terms of performing their tasks to ensure their countries have the desired status within the international sphere. Thiers and Wehner (2022) contend that personality traits of populist leaders may contribute to the understanding of such leaders’ non-cooperative manners internationally. Hermann (2002) suggests that leaders’ preferences, beliefs, goals, and decision-making methods can impact people’s lives. Therefore, leaders’ personality traits are worth studying, including the personality traits of populist leaders.

Academically, there has been existing research seeking to explain leaders concerning their foreign policy. Specifically, research on Orbán as Hungary's prime minister has been conducted using various conceptual frameworks and theories. Most of the extant works explain that Orbán is a statesperson who conducts foreign policy based on the populist portrayal of "us" or "the people" versus "them" or "the elite" while bringing the security and stability discourses to the public (Sonnevend & Kövesdi, 2023; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022; Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021). Toomey (2018) finds that Orbán's populist foreign policy is motivated by historical backgrounds, which drive him to turn Hungarian political attitudes into more ethno-nationalistic ways.

While within the context of a leader's behavioral traits, previous investigations examine Orbán's characteristics in a comparative manner (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023; Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2019). Through the Leadership Traits Analysis (LTA) approach, Orbán is argued as a populist foreign policy maker who has different personality traits that contribute to his chosen decisions (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023). Earlier, Özdamar and Ceydilek (2019), by utilizing operational code analysis (OCA) and comparing European populist leaders with the OCA's norming group, the result determined that Orbán is a cooperative European populist leader in terms of achieving his political goals (Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2019). Leaders' national identity conceptions and emotional aspects are also examined to understand leaders' preferences in foreign policy (Friedrichs, 2022). Those previous studies explore leaders' characteristics through content analysis of foreign policy speeches and interviews. However, as Orbán is notable for his policy of anti-immigration (Amnesty International, 2018; Bíró-Nagy, 2022), this study particularly attempts to present Orbán's personality traits that influence his foreign policy against immigration.

Understanding Hungary's foreign policy, particularly its stance on immigration, requires close attention to the figure of Viktor Orbán. Although the Hungarian government is not composed solely of Orbán as an individual leader, many government officials have maintained close political relationships with him (Scheppele, 2022). This proximity has placed Orbán not merely as the head of government, but also as the central political force shaping the direction of the state.

Hungary's anti-immigration policies, such as the Stop Soros Law and the installation of razor wire along its borders, illustrate how political decisions can move in line with Orbán's leadership vision. Such policies have been possible because more than two-thirds of the Hungarian parliament has been controlled by Fidesz, a nationalist right-wing party led by Orbán (Batory, 2002). This parliamentary dominance has enabled Fidesz to hold an exceptional degree of political authority, including the capacity to amend or alter constitutional provisions according to its political interests (Scheppele, 2022). In both the 2014 and 2018 parliamentary elections, Fidesz disproportionately secured a supermajority of seats. This political arrangement strengthened Orbán's decision-making capacity, as the majority of the parliament maintained a strong relationship with him (Gati, 2014; Scheppele, 2022).

For this reason, Hungary's foreign policy, especially on immigration, cannot be understood only through the lens of institutions such as parliament or government bureaucracy. It must also be read through Orbán himself, as both the leader of the government and a central decision-maker. His character, leadership style, political beliefs, and worldview are important elements in explaining why Hungary adopted such a firm position on immigration.

Orbán's political personality became particularly significant between 2014 and 2020. During this period, he openly promoted the idea of "illiberal democracy" as the political direction of Hungary. At almost the same time, Europe was facing a growing influx of immigrants. This situation provided an important moment for Orbán to sharpen his political stance on immigration. For him, immigration was not merely a humanitarian question or a matter of population movement. It was framed as an issue of security, national identity, and the survival of Hungary's political and cultural values.

One of the clearest expressions of this stance was the introduction of the Stop Soros Law in 2018. This regulation explicitly reflected the Hungarian government's view of immigrants and of those who provided assistance to them. Through this law, the Hungarian government emphasized its position that immigration and support for immigrants could be seen as threats to sovereignty, stability, and national identity. The policy therefore became one of the clearest examples of the close connection between Orbán's political perspective and the direction of state policy.

Orbán's anti-immigration policy did not emerge in a vacuum. It was shaped by historical background, political ideology, and the position of Fidesz as a party carrying a nationalist agenda. Existing studies suggest that Orbán has been influenced by history, ideology, and the political party he represents (Sonnevend & Kövesdi, 2023; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022; Toomey, 2018; Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021). Yet beyond these factors, the internal characteristics of the leader also deserve attention. The way a leader perceives threats, constructs political narratives, responds to international pressure, and makes strategic decisions can help explain why a state chooses a particular policy path.

In Orbán's case, his political personality helps illuminate why anti-immigration policy became a central part of Hungary's foreign policy orientation. Orbán has presented himself as a leader who emphasizes national sovereignty, the protection of Christian-European identity, and resistance to what he regards as the intervention of international liberal elites. From this perspective, anti-immigration policy is not merely an administrative measure. It is also a political symbol. It is used to draw a boundary between "the Hungarian people" and "external forces" perceived as threats to the nation's security, culture, and future.

The period leading up to early 2020 is especially important. After that point, Hungary closed its borders due to the Covid-19 pandemic and restricted almost all transnational movements, except for Hungarian citizens (Kovács, 2020). This border closure marked a shift in the political context of international mobility. Before the pandemic, Hungary's anti-immigration policy operated within a highly charged political atmosphere, shaped by the European immigration crisis, Fidesz's parliamentary dominance, and the consolidation of Orbán's populist leadership.

Seen from this broader context, the discussion of Orbán is not merely about the personality of a political leader. It is also about how leadership character can shape the direction of a state's foreign policy. Anti-immigration policy becomes an entry point for understanding the relationship between leadership personality, right-wing populism, nationalism, and foreign policy. Through this lens, Orbán stands as an important example of how a populist leader can direct state policy by combining domestic political support, parliamentary dominance, national identity narratives, and a hard-line stance toward immigration.

This discussion also broadens the understanding of international relations, particularly foreign policy analysis. States do not always act simply as abstract institutions. Behind state

policy, there are leaders with particular worldviews, beliefs, characters, and decision-making styles. In the case of Hungary, Orbán demonstrates that the political personality of a leader can become a significant factor in shaping a state's response to global issues, including immigration, border security, and relations with the liberal international order.

CHAPTER II

POPULISM

A. Populism in international politics

The recent rise of populism has received significant attention from scholars of international politics, especially regarding populism's impacts on foreign policy and the declining liberal democracy (Pintsch et al., 2022). Current research examines the relationship between populism and foreign policy. It focuses on how populist movements affect a country's relations with other countries since populist parties often express distinct foreign policy preferences and challenge the liberal world order (Lammers & Onderco, 2020). The other existing literature investigates the nexus between populism and religion while discovering that emotions also connect with those two, especially in how emotions increase popular support for populism (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021). Jawad et al. (2021) focus on exploring the interactions among populism, religion, and social policy, as the concepts share common interests. Studies have also examined media populism and its potential consequences (Krämer, 2014). However, despite receiving significant attention, the concepts and manifestations of populism remain contested, with scholars ranging in geographical focus, methodologies, and underlying ideologies (Hunger & Paxton, 2022).

According to Mudde (2004), populism is “a thin-centered” ideology that places *the people* at the center of its priority, or in the opposite manner to *the elite* who is perceived as opponent, enemy, or foe. Populism, as an ideational approach, has definite fundamentals about *the people*, *the elite*, and *the general will*.

This fundamental view of populist leaders is used to justify their performance and the foreign policy they make during the mandate (Wehner & Thies, 2021). In the populist view, “the people” is socially constructed as the common people as sovereign, excluding the elite. However, this abstract definition of *the people* allows leaders to commit manipulation. More often than not, populist leaders tend to put aside *the people* instead of placing them on center stage. While “the elite” consists of the political and economic elite of the country, it can also refer to global elites such as the other countries’ leaders or stakeholders of international organizations. “General will” refers to the populist leader’s perception of people’s needs and desires (Wehner & Thies, 2021).

As a thin-centered ideology, right-wing populism is prominent for promoting illiberal views, ignoring minority rights, shared norms, and pluralism. Whereas pluralism accounts for protecting minorities’ rights to pursue majority will and harmony, populism sees different or unpopular opinions as dangerous threats in an antagonistic world (Hawkins et al., 2012). According to Eatwell and Goodwin, populism is a way of doing politics by leaders who claim that they make decisions on behalf of the public desires. Anti-plural populist leaders are less likely to perform any program related to minorities, immigrants, newly established politicians, mass media, and any other that they perceive as “enemies of the people,” “them,” or “others.” During the process, such leaders involve cultures, ideas, and values used to collect people’s thoughts; hence, they can construct perceptions of “us versus them” as they wish (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mudde, 2016).

Although populism has been viewed as ideological content alongside socialism, liberalism, or nationalism, others argue that populism is also a political strategy (Thiers & Wehner, 2022). Generally, political strategy is used by political leaders to enforce

authoritative decisions. To be more specific, the leaders will use political strategy to create the sustainability of their power, maintain public support, and reduce the disobedience of citizens (Weyland, 2017). Contrasted to populism as an ideology, populism as a strategy contends that populism is a form of political organization used by leaders with a highly personalized leadership style to mobilize voters to secure political power and influence (Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2019).

Besides political campaigns (Bocskor, 2018), another striking tactic of populist leaders to maintain power is having control over the mass media (Gati, 2014). Mediatization of politics has been an effective way to maintain power, even though the media can create populist discourses without being influenced by populist actors. Even so, the media can be the space that allows the populists to promote themselves and their political parties to articulate populist discourses (Manucci, 2017). The emergence of right-wing populism, according to liberal values, threatens democracy in which mass media should act as a domain for people to exchange opinions, have discussions, and make deliberation. In countries led by populist leaders, mass media may be used to silence the opposition parties and influence the opinions of the public (Manucci, 2017).

Such tactics used by strategic populists are expected to promote the distinctive nexus between “the leader” and “the mass followers” (Weyland, 2017). According to Weyland (2017), populism’s strategy is made up of ‘*the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power*’. In order to win, maintain, and strengthen *the people’s* support and loyalty, a populist leader often appears in quasi-direct identifications such as through the mass media and social communications media. For a populist leader, the use of intermediation may limit the leader to gain practical political appeal to *the people*. Since such a leader has a direct

relationship with *the people*, he/she is likely to involve the mass public in confronting what is perceived as a “dangerous adversary,” constructing the adversary as “the enemy of *the people*.” Therefore, the leader can present himself or herself as a courageous leader who constantly looks out for enemies and tackles them directly, representing populist rhetoric (Weyland, 2017).

Concerning the relationships between populism and foreign policy in international politics, there is existing research (Bíró-Nagy, 2022; Bocskor, 2018; Toomey, 2018; Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021) shows that the use of populism rhetoric affects foreign policy, political shifts of a country. Populism provides high political rewards where leaders can dominate the political arena while having freedom in decision-making at their discretion. Populist leaders can have perpetual power engagement by changing institutional systems or even applying authoritarian measures (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023). By doing so, populists can be regarded as a threat to liberal democracy (Galston, 2018). Nevertheless, populism-oriented narratives are successful in several countries in gaining public support, especially during elections in Hungary, Poland, Greece, and Italy (Akbaba, 2018). Özdamar and Ceydilek (2019) study populist leaders from seven European countries, and each leader brings immigrants and refugees-related issues as one of the significant foreign policy aspects. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán-led right-wing populist party gained popularity in the 2018 national election by bringing up populist rhetoric on immigration, which represents an anti-plural view (Akbaba, 2018; Bíró-Nagy, 2022; Chrysosgelos, 2021; Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2019). Therefore, this study focuses on the behavioral traits of Orbán as a populist in relation to his anti-immigration foreign policy, as immigration has been a prominent issue since 2014 in Hungarian politics (Bíró-Nagy, 2022).

B. Populism and personality traits

Fouquet and Brummer (2023) describe that the connection between populism and leadership personality is not apparent. On one hand, it is believed that personality is not the fundamental reason for leaders being populist. Leaders are considered populist based on their perceptions of “people versus elite” dichotomies regarding how they articulate, regard, and interpret political issues through those antagonisms. Populists are also observable as they frequently use “the people” to mobilize the public mass to gain sustainable power and personal influence in the political sphere (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023). On the other hand, Hawkins (in Fouquet & Brummer, 2023) believes that the three populism dimensions mentioned above about how populists articulate, regard, and interpret issues can only manifest themselves through individuals’ traits, cognitions, and motivations. Until recently, little has been known about which people adopt populist ideas or how such ideas are performed at the individual level, which can lead to mass outputs (Hawkins et al., 2012). Thus, analyzing populist agencies’ characteristics while not only focusing on structural circumstances within which populism occurs and various meanings attached to *the people*, may provide an alternative to connecting populism and leadership personality (Tarchi, 2008). However, Hawkins et al. (2012) suggest to not address populism as a personality type or trait, as populism may be affected by essential traits such as ones connected to authoritarian attitudes. Populist characteristics may also rely on the environment and whether the condition supports populists’ actions (Hawkins et al., 2012).

Anti-pluralism, anti-liberalism, or anti-democratic, several populist rhetorics, are considered to undermine the international order, thus uncovering how the personality traits of such anti-plural political actors or leaders inform their international choices become significant (Thiers & Wehner, 2022). While scholars