Populism, familialism, and borders: the interplay of family and anti-Muslim immigration policies in Hungary

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Immigration and the defense of national borders have played a vital role in European right-wing populist discourses since the European border crisis in 2015. Western European populist anti-immigration policies are often intertwined with gender politics (as in femonationalism and homonationalism). Research on Central and Eastern Europe offers the opportunity to examine the relationship between populist, "illiberal" family mainstreaming and anti-immigration policies. The aim of this article is to fill a gap in literature, addressing a direct connection between the Hungarian government's family politics and anti-Muslim immigration policies. How has an ideological understanding of "family" legitimated the Hungarian government's border politics since 2015? This question is addressed using qualitative content analysis and framing analysis to examine government material dated 2015–2023 (Modifications of the Fundamental Law, National Consultations, and material related to the Budapest Demographic Summit). The article demonstrates how border politics are informed and legitimated by discourses around Christian "families." An antagonism between "illiberal" family policies and "liberal" immigration policies is forged around two discursive frames: economics and human rights. According to the government, pro-immigration border policies threaten the sustainability of its family policies—and indirectly the Hungarian "families" —as both are fighting for finite economic resources. Besides, it is argued that mass Muslim immigration threatens Hungary's national self-identity, which is strongly rooted in Christianity and familialism. The results suggest that family politics, beyond serving as a biopolitical tool, provide an ideological platform on which nationalism, populism, and illiberalism are effectively merged as the foundation of the Hungarian government's "illiberal" politics. In its ideological sense, "family" acts as a signifier for the "illiberal" political community. In this context, immigration is framed not solely as a biopolitical threat, but is used by the Hungarian government to discursively constitute a frontier of "us." This frontier is primarily drawn between "us" and the European Union's pro-immigration policies, and only indirectly between "us" and the immigrants themselves.

KEYWORDS

migration, familism, illiberalism, populism, Hungary, discourse analysis

1 Introduction

Immigration and the defense of national borders have played a vital role in right-wing populist discourses in the 2010s and 2020s. The tension between national identities and unifying certain decisions though supranational institutions have been present in Europe since the beginning of the European Union (Hazard 1989, as cited by Postelnicescu, 2016). However, after many decades of integration, the collapse in the management of the European Union's

borders since 2015 fueled new forms of nationalism among populist politicians. Whereas conservative nationalism is a "response to the irregularities of modernity" (Postelnicescu, 2016), mass immigration and the related crisis of the European borders evoked a new form of European nationalism. Populist nationalism targeting mass immigration aims to counterattack the alleged anti-modernism that mass immigration is considered to pose to the continent and introduces a division between a "European nation" and non-European others.

In Western Europe, right-wing populists have redefined national identity through what concepts such as "femonationalism" (Farris, 2017) and "sexual nationalism" (Puar, 2018) capture the best. These frameworks portray the nation as being an advocate for women's and LGBTQ+ rights, while characterizing Muslim culture as an inherently misogynistic and homophobic threat to gender equality rights (Mancini and Palazzo, 2022). Conversely, in Central and Eastern Europe, including Hungary, nationalism has been reshaped via familialism. Familialism prioritizes "the rights and normative needs of families over women's rights" (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018, p. 164) and is grounded in the essentialist belief that women are naturally more suited to caregiving roles than men. This anti-modernist political idea is often presented as an alternative to both the European Union's gender mainstreaming policies and the individualized neoliberal agenda (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018), associated with the "liberal elite." As this paper demonstrates on the example of Hungary here, although nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe undeniably has roots in and similarities to conservative, anti-modernist nationalist movements in Europe, it also exhibits a strong focus on Europe as a "nation" and a form of familialism that incorporates significant modernist and liberal elements.

Furthermore, turning to the theoretical concept of ideological familialism which views family as "a sort of ideal (though rather unattainable) model for other social institutions" (Tóth and Dupcsik, 2011, p. 153), it is argued that family mainstreaming policies are also used in an ideological sense to strengthen new notions of the nation (Linnamäki, 2022). By relying on traditional patriarchal structures when framing the nation under threat as an extension of family and kinship relations, threats to the nation are often equated with threats to the patriarchal family brought about by changing values and feminism (Norocel, 2010; Saresma, 2018). This article maps out how the Hungarian government has used its family mainstreaming policies and discourses to justify its nationalistic border politics, through a rhetorical blending of physical and metaphorical borders of the nation (cf. Mancini and Palazzo, 2022). The article explores the question of how an ideological understanding of "family" has legitimated the Hungarian government's border politics since the European border crisis in 2015. Through examining the relationship between populist, "illiberal" family mainstreaming and anti-immigration policies, the article argues that the government's family mainstreaming policies do not just function as a form of biopolitics, but as an ideological space for populist identity building.

2 Post-foundational political theory

Populism is often defined as a unique way of making politics, characterized by its movement-like features, antagonistic rhetoric, and the fundamental role of emotions in mobilizing supporters. In academic discussions, populism is defined through a set of attributes (Taggart, 2004), antagonistic ideas (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), or populist performative practices (Moffitt, 2016). Common to these views is the definition of populism as a form of politics based on a "people" versus "elite" dichotomy, with populists allegedly standing up for the neglected demands of "the people" against the "elite." This article's theoretical foundation is a post-foundational understanding of populism, which questions the literal validity of the "elite" versus "people" division, viewing it instead as a rhetorical device (cf. Laclau, 2005). A post-foundational perspective rejects essentialist ideas and the "referential theory of meaning" (Marttila, 2019, p. 21), whereby meanings pre-exist their linguistic expressions. Instead, it posits that meanings and identities are discursively created and can be contested (Glynos and Howarth, 2019). From a post-foundational perspective, the meaning of a certain object is determined through its relation to other objects, and the relationships that constitute meaning are being solidified through practices of "articulation" (DeLuca, 1999, p. 335). Consequently, scholarly work theorizing populism from a post-foundational approach highlights that "the people," and their political demands did not exist before to be neglected by "the elite," but are constituted though populist discourses. As Laclau (2005, p. 33), a key figure in postfoundational populist studies puts it, "political practices do not express the nature of social agents but, instead, constitute the latter" through discursive articulations.

From the post-foundational perspective, populism is a discursive political practice which aims to constitute political identities, appealing to the voters, like "the people" and "the elite." Thus, populist politics is seen as a process of "us-building/community-making" (Vulović and Palonen, 2023, p. 547). Populism is theorized as a political ontology (Vulović and Palonen, 2023), through which antagonistic political identities are discursively constituted, solidified, and contested to mobilize voters. An antagonistic "other" is understood as a constitutive outside of a political community, essential for its emergence and existence. Various political demands within the community align against this antagonistic "other," providing the community with unity and a temporary political identity which is discursively signified. Thus, populist identities can only exist in opposition to their antagonistic "other," which delineates the community's boundaries. Due to their discursive and contingent nature, the signifiers that mark "us" and the boundaries of "us" are floating concepts, meaning they can be re-articulated in new political contexts. According to post-foundational theory, "us" as a political identity is not pre-existing but is constituted by governmental discourse in Hungary. This article focuses on diverse discourses, particularly those related to the Hungarian government's process of constituting an "us."

This approach offers a fresh view on the interplay between nationalism and populism by treating the concepts of "people" and "nation" as discursively constructed categories (cf. Anastasiou, 2020; Vulović and Palonen, 2023). A post-foundational perspective disentangles how contemporary populist nationalism is based on merging the borders of the "nation" with the boundaries of "us," which this article seeks to examine. Feminist political research similarly argues that the "nation" is a fictive "correspondence between the boundaries of the nation and the boundaries of those who live in a specific state" (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 11). This implies that nationalist discourses do not just reflect but constitute the national community and its borders. Ethnicity is perceived as "primarily a political process which constructs

the collectivity and 'its interest,'" in which "[g]ender, class, political, religious and other differences play central roles in the construction of specific ethnic politics" (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 44). Thus, discourses about the "nation" blend the boundaries of "us" as a political community with the national borders. This article aims to explore how "us" is articulated through the discursive use of borders of the "nation."

3 "Illiberal" Hungary

Hungary and Viktor Orbán's politics came to the fore of international political interest, especially after 2010, when an "illiberal turn" happened in the country (Rupnik, 2012). The government managed to stabilize their hegemonic position in the Hungarian political scene and won subsequent parliamentary elections with a two-thirds majority in 2014, 2018 and 2022. Since 2010, Hungary and Orbán are regular examples in populism research, and many political theorists see Orbán's politics as a threat to democracy and as a shift towards authoritarianism (cf. Müller, 2017). The Orbán regime's anti-democracy is associated with the institutional elimination of political checks and balances, monopolization of media and education. A poster country for populism due to the government's actions and discourses, in his 2014 agenda setting speech, Orbán himself called the new regime "illiberal nationalism," which in opposition to the global neoliberal hegemony is based on the values of national majoritarianism, religious traditionalism, and a work-based society (Orbán, 2014).

In this "illiberal" regime, the "other" is defined as "liberal." However, the interpretation of liberalism shifts depending on the context, making "illiberal democracy," a floating concept (Laclau, 1983; see also Laruelle, 2022). This means that the antagonistic frontier is never fixed; it can and must be re-drawn in relation to the different meanings of that antagonistic "other." In 2008, following the political failure of the then-governing left-wing coalition, the "illiberal" political force led by the now-governing Fidesz primarily targeted the failed domestic left-wing government as "liberal," and sought to "define the Hungarian and European liberals as the enemy" under the label "liberalism" (Palonen, 2018, p. 9). This effort extended its political "us"-building process from a domestic to a European scale (cf. Linnamäki, 2021). In its first governing period, amidst the global financial crisis, Orbán characterized the "illiberal" state as a work-based society, contrasting it with liberal loan institutions and leftist ideologies of social equality. Later, in response to the European border crisis, "illiberalism" referred to a nationalist democracy that prioritized national authorities over supranational ones, justifying anti-immigration rhetoric and policies (cf. Laruelle, 2022). During the 2022 national elections, "illiberalism" was defined through anti-LGBTQ stances and gender conservatism (Linnamäki, 2022).

Since the "illiberal turn," one of the more important political programs of Orbán's conservative Fidesz-KDNP coalition, with its "illiberal" logic (Palonen, 2018), was to strengthen its family politics, on both the policy level (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018), and as an ideological value (Linnamäki, 2022). The government introduced policies of "family mainstreaming" (Moghadam and Kaftan, 2019) and sought to defend Hungarian families through the constitution (Fundamental Law of Hungary) (Küpper, 2012). Apart from being a marker of its biopolitics, the government also used family as a rhetorical trope to mobilize its electorate to defend "us families" affectively: the notion of "family, and sexual politics are heavily loaded with emotions—fears, passions, impulses to protect" (Dietze and

Roth, 2020, p. 11). Conceptualizations of and debates around family function as constitutive elements of the "illiberal" political community ("us") and its antagonistic pair ("them"). I argued elsewhere (Linnamäki, 2022) that at the ideological level, "family" signifies the political community that the Orbán government fosters. That is, the Hungarian government's gender politics, (that is, its family politics), has been crucial in shaping a new "illiberal" political identity. In Hungary, debates around family address issues not only directly related to reproductive and sexual rights, but "family" is also subverted to antagonism in the community building processes. For instance, the "illiberal" work-based political identity was ideologically supported by the employment-tied family incentives in which both unemployed and people with temporary employment, as well as the liberal welfare states who would support them, served as an antagonistic outside. Later "family" was also used to legitimize anti-LGBTQ sentiments, and as this article aims to examine, "family" has also played a big role in legitimizing the Hungarian government's anti-immigration policies.

Between 2015 and 2018, the government's main political focus was on the domestic politicization of immigration and the crisis at Europe's borders. Over time, the government's articulation of the "threat" that immigrants pose to the "nation," shifted. Initially, immigrants were associated with terrorism[1] and depicted as an economic threat, suggesting they would overwhelm Hungarian and European job markets, leaving Hungarians unemployed (Bocskor, 2018; Szalai, 2016; Glied and Pap, 2016). Later, the narrative evolved to present migrants as an identity-based threat, claiming they would reshape Hungarian and European culture, leading to the decline of Judeo-Christian traditions and the rise of Islam globally (Szalai, 2016, p. 22; Bocskor, 2018; Glied and Pap, 2016).[2] This political and "constitutional othering" of asylum seekers also took on a sexualized dimension (Majtényi et al., 2019, p. 183), expressed through fears of a cultural and political demise, whereby ethnic Hungarians would be outnumbered by Muslim immigrants. Consequently, the Hungarian government's discourse and policy on migration play directly into its ethnocentric efforts to construct a national "us" by inciting "demographic and biopolitical hysteria and panic" about migration (Melegh, 2016, p. 102). Such conclusions may imply a rather straightforward similarity between the Hungarian government and national conservative parties who often use pro-natalist family

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1   Immigration has been associated with terrorism and elevated to a national threat (Szalai, 2016; Bocskor, 2018; Glied and Pap, 2016). This securitization enabled the government to limit political discussion around immigration, to divert public attention from problematic domestic areas, to appear as the "defender" of the nation, and to gain "political capital [which] can be used to discredit opposition" (Szalai, 2016, p. 11). Hungary has not been a destination country for asylum seekers; politicization of them as a national threat was a political opportunity for the government to position itself as the strong leader that repelled this threat (Szalai, 2016, p. 12). Taking the migration threat as their main political mobilizational strategy, the government successfully appropriated a key topic of the crisis-ridden far-right party Jobbik (Szalai, 2016), some of whose supporters voted for Fidesz in the 2018 elections.

2   Such articulations were widely propagated by the Hungarian government's nationwide billboard campaigns. Television commercials, a referendum campaign (Glied and Pap, 2016), and a National Consultation on migration in 2016 (Bocskor, 2018).

politics as a biopolitical tool to reproduce the dominant culture, which they perceive as being threatened by mass immigration (cf. Samers and Rydgren, 2024). However, as this article argues, in the Hungarian case, family politics is not just a biopolitical tool, but it also serves as an ideological instrument to define the in and out groups. "Family" functions as a signifier of "us," and through its discourses around the "family," the government can re-articulate its various and shifting frontiers, such as unemployed groups, LGBTQ+ communities, and as highlighted in this article, mass immigration. Instead of merely focusing on conservative nationalism, which advocates for heteronormative family models as being essential to upholding cultural and religious traditions and resisting social change, this article seeks to analyze how discourses around the "family" enable the government to establish antagonistic frontiers to "us" during the political moment of mass immigration to Europe, when the borders of the "nation" and the political community of "us" are intertwined.

4 Materials and methods

The material analyzed comprises three types of documents designed to establish a political antagonism by effectively articulating an "illiberal" "us" and its boundaries.

The first type includes texts, amendments and parliamentary debates about the amendments to the Fundamental Law, which serves as the Hungarian constitution. The current Fidesz-KDNP government, with the help of its two-thirds parliamentary majority, significantly altered the Fundamental Law in 2010 and has made 10 subsequent amendments to establish and expand the "conservative ideological foundations" of its "illiberal" politics (Szikra, 2018, p. 8). The material analyzed includes proposals, final texts, justifications, and the parliamentary debates of three relevant amendments to the Hungarian Fundamental Law that focus on family or migration (Amendment Seven from 2018; Amendment Nine from 2020; and Amendment Ten from 2022).

The second type of material comprises texts from the National Consultations, which are national surveys sent by the Hungarian government to citizens, accompanied by a letter from Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. This analysis includes the official letters and questionnaires from the National Consultations conducted between 2015 and 2023 that focus on migration or family issues, a total of six consultations.[3] Last, the material includes Orbán's political speeches at the Budapest Demographic Summit between 2015 and 2023, as well as the available opening remarks, event concepts, and historical context provided by Katalin Novák from the 2021 and 2023 summits.[4] In total, the material consists of 26 documents.

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3   In theory, when answering yes or no questions, respondents can voice their opinions on key political questions; in practice, the questions are often framed as hidden political messages from the government. Between 2010 and 2023 the government has sent out 12 such "consultations" to the people.

4   The biannual Budapest Demographic Summit (BDS) was intended to be an international meeting to enhance motographic growth in Europe. The main organizer has been Katalin Novák, former Minister of Human Resources, who was elected President of Hungary in 2023, when she also chaired the BDS. In the subsequent year, she was involved in a child protection scandal, after giving a presidential pardon to an accomplice of a convicted child abuser. Shortly after the scandal, she resigned from office and withdrew from politics.

The article utilized the qualitative content analysis method (Drisko and Maschi, 2016), using *Atlas.ti* software. Initially, I conducted a round of deductive content analysis to familiarize myself with the material, identifying 340 quotations relevant to the themes of family and migration politics. In the second step, I applied inductive codes derived from the populist framework, focusing on the concepts of "us" and "frontier." I then organized the quotations into two categories: "us" (124 quotations) and "frontier" (216 quotations). The "us" category includes quotations describing the political community favored by the government, while the "frontier" category encompasses quotations that reference "others" who are perceived as threats to the existence, survival, or prosperity of "us." In the final step, I used the inductively coded content themes within these two main categories as sub-codes, illustrated in Table 1.

The concept of "us" as a political community is articulated around traditional family values, Christianity, and a commitment to preserving the "nation" through pro-natalist family policies. The boundaries of "us" are articulated through perceived threats to families, national sovereignty, children, and Christianity. These threats are primarily perceived to stem from pro-immigration and pro-LGBTQ+ policies, and the Europeans Union's stand on Russia's war in Ukraine, with significant economic implications.

The article employed framing analysis (Entman, 1993; Matthes and Kohring, 2008) to investigate how the Hungarian government uses an ideological understanding of "family" to legitimize its anti-immigration border policies as a means of protecting the "nation." Framing analysis is commonly used to examine "processes of meaning construction," which aligns well with the discourse theory of Laclau's (2005). Framing analysis is a methodology for focusing on the rhetoric that articulates a particular problem and solution. In this context, neither the problem nor the solution is viewed as objective or neutral; instead, they result from

TABLE 1 Codes and sub-codes extracted from the material.

Sub-codes	Nr of codes		Total
	"Us"	"Frontier"	
Economy-related stances	35	20	55
Family as value vs. taboo	24	24	48
Political strategies to tackle an existential threat	14	12	26
Pro-migration politics as a threat to families	0	22	22
Migration as terrorism	0	7	7
Attacks on national sovereignty	0	62	62
Anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments	0	34	34
Ideological differences on family	8	13	21
Survival of the "nation" through family politics	15	2	17
Russia's war in Ukraine	0	12	12
Protection of the "home"	9	0	9
The children are the "future" of "us"	8	0	8
Making politics in the name of the "people"	0	7	7
Christianity	6	1	7
Women's role in the family politics	5	0	5
Total	124	216	340

specific frames that "highlight certain aspects while omitting others" to shape public opinion and influence policymaking (Entman, 1993 as cited by van Hulst et al., 2024, p. 6). The results section demonstrates how the government has articulated the problem of immigration as a threat to Hungarian families and proposed solutions through antagonistic discourses, in which two frames have become particularly significant over time. The citations used were translated by the author.

5 Results

The primary theme emerging from the material is the notion of an alleged existential threat, framed as the central "problem" that the government seeks to address. This existential threat is portrayed as a matter of life or death for the Hungarian nation and Europe, which are experiencing severe demographic decline. Europe's leading liberal politicians chose to counter this decline with pro-migration policies. According to Orbán, these pro-migration policies result in a "replacement of inhabitants," leading to the "dying out" and "disappearance" of "our" political community (Orbán, 2019). In contrast, "we" are characterized as a "family-friendly country," the survival of which is contingent on the success of pro-natalist family policies. An antagonistic division is thus drawn between pro-immigration and pro-natalist family policies to replace demographic losses:

> There are those who perceive the problem of population decline but want to respond with the means of migration. It is believed that population decline can be stopped by settling foreign populations in remote regions. But mass migration, the millions brought here by the Willkommenskultur [German: culture of welcoming immigrants], is actually a global plan for the settlement of the new working class (Orbán, 2021).

In the material, pro-natalism and pro-immigration are frequently depicted as antagonistic policy solutions to the problem of demographic decline. For instance, migration is linked with terrorism, thereby presenting a direct threat to the rights of Hungarian families and their children to live peacefully. Orbán points to terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, and Manchester as evidence that immigration poses an antagonistic threat to the safety and well-being of families and children in Hungary (Orbán, 2017). He also argues that for "a peaceful functioning of societies, it is important that our communities are able to reproduce themselves" (Orbán, 2015). Thus, he positions the government's family policies, which encourage reproduction, in opposition to the dangers posed by mass immigration.

In addition, the 2018 National Consultation concludes with a final question: "Do you agree that population decline should be remedied not by immigration, but by stronger support for families?" Speculations about possible "replacement of the population" are often intertwined with the notion of the "nation dying out" (Orbán, 2019). Nationalism emerges as a central element in the government's demographic policies, serving as the primary mechanism to ensure the survival of the "nation."

> This vision is not a morbid dread, not an imaginary sense of danger, it is a real, mathematically modellable danger that the number of people in these nations will be reduced to such a small

number that the maintenance of national identity will eventually become impossible (Orbán, 2019).

The term "nation" does not simply function as a metaphor for the residents of the Hungarian state. Instead, as indicated by the reference to "national identity," it operates as a signifier for a broader cultural and political community that the government seeks to define and support. This "us"—comprising "Hungarians" or the "nation"—refers to a more expansive political and cultural community than just Hungarian citizens, to include Christian Europe, which is also grappling with a demographic crisis:

> [R]estoring natural reproduction is a national issue, not one of many national issues, but the national issue. And also, a European issue: not a European issue, but the European issue (Orbán, 2017).

> Who will populate Europe?—this is the key question here (Orbán, 2015).

This broad and flexible definition of "us" as the "nation" extending to "Europe" allows the government to reshape its nationalism into a form of "illiberalism" countering a "liberal" ideology. This newly articulated "illiberal" nationalism is built on the antagonistic rejection of liberal values, which are linked to the consumer-driven societies of the "West." These societies, due to their consumerism, are seen as incapable of sustaining their own population:

> The world of mind-altering drugs, the life of addiction, drinking and consumption, with which we can remove and keep from ourselves the question that if life is finite, then what is its meaning. This solution addresses the unpleasant fact of life's finitude by answering by denying the question itself (Orbán, 2019).

> The West, which is ahead in many aspects, especially in material prosperity, simply does not want to reproduce itself (Orbán, 2021).

The "liberal" versus "illiberal" antagonism, however, encompasses not only biopolitical but also ideological differences. A recurring theme in the material is the "liberal" attack against the survival of "Hungary" in cultural terms:

> [T]hose who believe in the end of history are actually trying to destroy our natural self-image consisting of our faith, culture, and love of our country, in order to replace it with identities crumbled into as homogeneous colors as possible along global economic and ideological expectations (The Hungarian Parliament, 2022a, Dr. Judit Varga).

As such, according to the argument made in the 2017 Stop Soros National Consultation, mass immigration threatens the survival of the "illiberal" nation to achieve a global liberal hegemony:

> The goal of the Soros plan is to push the language and culture of European countries into the background in order for the integration of illegal immigrants to take place sooner ("[Here is the complete National Consultation Questionnaire]," Itt a teljes Nemzeti Konzultációs kérdőív, 2017).

5.1 "Family" as a biopolitical tool: the economic frame

The government's family policies and politics are frequently framed within an economic discourse. First, the government's pro-natalist stance is closely linked to improving the financial conditions of the families it seeks to support:

> We in Hungary drew the conclusion from all of this, we came to the conclusion that we have to implement a policy that removes these obstacles from the path of young people. The more strongly we support our families, the more children are born; small grant—slightly more children, larger grant—many more children. We have come to this simple truth (Orbán, 2017).

Second, the government views reproductive, Christian, and working families as essential for ensuring economic stability. Within the framework of the "illiberal nation" as a political community, "family" and "work" are considered foundational. Therefore, migration is not only perceived as a threat to Hungarian culture from a nationalist perspective but also exposes the underlying mechanisms the "illiberal us" uses for reproduction and economic survival. One such mechanism is feminized and naturalized unpaid care work, which supports not only the unrecognized reproduction of families but also the intergenerational reproduction of the "nation." This system allows the state to avoid investing in social expenditure on early childhood and elderly care:

> [W]e have come to the conclusion that it is an important element of our family policy to make preschool care available and mandatory for children from the age of three, from which, of course, you can request an exemption. But Hungary is a country where public education for children actually starts at the age of three or maybe four (Orbán, 2019).

> [T]hey [the children] will still take care of us in our old age, they will produce what we need, […]. There is no continuation without children, and there is no security for the elderly (Orbán, 2015).

Since most unpaid care work falls disproportionately on women, it is not surprising that the government explicitly targets women and bases its pro-natalist family policies on mothers (Orbán, 2021). Beyond the often implicit and feminized nature of unpaid care work, another central element of the "illiberal" state and "us" is work, specifically obligatory paid employment, accompanied by significant cuts in state social spending (Szikra, 2018). The government's family policies reflect this criterion by linking family support directly to employment. While framed as a strategy to boost employment, this approach is effectively a mechanism to exclude socially vulnerable groups, such as unemployed people, from family support. Since 2010, family support has been one of the more generous social benefits, yet it is narrowly targeted. The "us" supported by the government is strictly limited to those with stable employment, while those requiring social benefits are viewed as potential threats to the Hungarian economy, the family support system, and indirectly to working families (Szikra, 2018).[5] The purportedly generous family support incentives are intended to encourage employment, assuming that lack of personal motivation is the primary barrier to paid work:

> [F]amily support benefits in Hungary must always be linked to employment. Because we are humans, and we very easily bend in the direction that if we see that it is possible to live on social benefits and other things, then we prefer to live on that, a lot of us choose to live on that instead of work, which causes the economy to decline, and we are at the point of financial disruption, and austerity measures (Orbán, 2015).

> Do families believe that the measures introduced by a government are ones that can be counted on in the long term? After all, taking care of children is not the work of a single moment, children have to be brought up. A predictable family support system has been needed for many years, but if finances are not in order, if financial disruption sets in, austerity measures will come, and sooner or later all budget rationalization will be lost from the family support system (Orbán, 2019).

The government presents its family polices as encouraging employment, because children are articulated as naturally motivating their parents to "achieve more" at work.

> Through children, we will be able to do more and achieve more. That's what we think. Therefore, the child is such a stimulating force, such a positive stimulating force in the life of society, that we do not know anything like it (Orbán, 2015).

This perspective may help explain that despite Orbán's assurances that women would have the choice between paid employment and unpaid family care, most women continue to bear the double burden of both. The scarcity of flexible and part-time employment options, combined with family policy incentives that are primarily linked to employment through tax reductions or exemptions, forces many women with young children into precarious full-time jobs. Consequently, the government's "illiberal" state effectively becomes a "care-fare" state, relying on women's precarious working conditions and unpaid care work (Fodor, 2022). This model diverges from strictly conservative gender politics, which seek to relegate women to the private sphere of the home. One could argue that this difference is why allegedly gender-conservative immigrants are perceived as a potential threat to the Hungarian "illiberal" system. In this context, immigration is presented as a long-term, albeit indirect, economic challenge for the "care-fare" state (Fodor, 2022):

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5 On a broader scale, Hungarian sociologist Dorottya Szikra points out that according to the Family Protection Act (The Government of Hungary, 2011) "the promotion of families is distinct from the system of social provision for the needy" (2018, 8). The reasoning for this in the Act is that government family policy is nor aiming to tackle poverty but to "support primarily […] the responsible upbringing of children" (Szikra, 2018, p. 8). Responsibility is thus connected to work, which leaves families without permanent employment or with other social difficulties (who are disproportionately of ethnic Roma background) unqualified for the benefits (Szikra, 2018).

It [migration] installs a culture and a way of life among us, whose way of thinking, outlook on life, and habits are completely different from ours. This culture has a different approach to work, it says something different about human relationships, and last but not least, it thinks differently about the basis of our social organization, that is the family (Orbán, 2015).

Third, the government frames the success of its family policies as being contingent on the country's economic stability. The 2017 Stop Soros National Consultation perceives immigration as a direct threat to the government's family policies and to Hungarian families benefiting from these policies. From this perspective, like unemployment benefits, the financial burden associated with supporting immigrants would negatively impact the resources available for family incentives:

Based on the Soros plan, Brussels should oblige all member states, including Hungary, to pay a million forints in state aid to all immigrants ("[Here is the complete National Consultation Questionnaire]," Itt a teljes Nemzeti Konzultációs kérdőív, 2017).

This connection between increased immigration and reduced family support is further underscored by the Let us Stop Brussels National Consultation in 2017, the same year as the Stop Soros Consultation. This document claims that Brussels has an alleged "plan" for Hungary that involves two key measures: increasing the acceptance of immigrants and eliminating the government's utility subsidy measures,[6] which are frequently mentioned together:

Brussels came up with several plans that threaten our national independence and the country's security. Bureaucrats want to force us to eliminate the utility subsidy and let in illegal immigrants (Domschitz, 2017).

5.2 "Family" as an ideological space: the human rights frame

As the Hungarian government claims, their pro-family policies cannot succeed if they support mass immigration or any other form of minority politics. This is not only due to economic competition between families and immigrants, but according to the government, also because immigrants pose a threat to the human rights of Hungarians and the "nation." First, the government asserts its right to define Hungary as a predominantly Christian nation using a human rights discourse, particularly by appropriating the minority-focused gender and identity discourse. Christianity in Hungary is not merely presented as a religion, but as stated in the Seventh Amendment of the Fundamental Law, as "a historically rooted national identity" (The Government of Hungary, 2018). By invoking traditionally liberal human rights and identity politics discourses, the government positions itself as exercising a fundamental right to self-definition and national constitutional identity:

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6 This refers to the government's (contradictory) political program, launched in 2013, that introduced residential prices fixed by the authorities instead of free-market tariffs in the sector of energy and utility providers (see Weiner and Szép, 2020).

Defining the national identity of a member state is, by definition, the most basic, indisputable right of the given state and the political community that constitutes it, which appears primarily, but not exclusively, in its constitution (The Government of Hungary, 2018).

According to the Hungarian government's argument as outlined in the Seventh Amendment of the Fundamental Law, Hungary's self-identity, grounded in Christianity, is perceived endangered by mass immigration. Consequently, the government frames its xenophobic and frequently anti-Muslim immigration and border policies as a defense of its national identity. In this context, the human rights of asylum seekers are considered secondary to Hungary's national constitutional right to define itself as a Christian nation. This right to self-definition extends beyond the Fundamental Law's designation of Hungary as a Christian country; it also encompasses the right to preserve Hungary's Christian demographic majority. Thus, national sovereignty and the government's anti-immigration stance are presented as essential to maintaining the country's Christian majority and upholding its constitutional identity:

[S]tate sovereignty immanently includes the inalienable right to allow foreign people to enter the state territory. […] The purpose of this [amendment to the Fundamental Law] is to protect national sovereignty and prohibit the settlement of foreign populations in Hungary (The Government of Hungary, 2018).

Effective action must be taken against masses of immigrants illegally crossing the borders of our country, […] or, in case of permanent settlement, radically changing the country in which we live (The Hungarian Parliament, 2018, Dr. László Trócsányi).

In later modifications to the Fundamental Law, the government emphasizes that Hungary's constitutional national identity can only be preserved through Hungarian families. These families are seen as essential for passing on traditional values from one generation to the next, ensuring their continuity:

[O]ur Fundamental Law is an alliance between the Hungarians of the past, present and future, and as such, I translate this into everyday language that what our forefathers, grandfathers, grandfathers and fathers perceived as truth, we also, children, descendants, we believe to be true […] (The Hungarian Parliament, 2022a, Dr. Judit Varga).

In accordance with the above, the proposal ensures that children are raised according to the value system based on Hungary's constitutional identity and Christian roots, creating clear foundations for all members of the rising generation to learn about, protect and pass on the country's Hungarian identity, sovereignty, and the role of Christian culture in preserving the nation (The Government of Hungary, 2020).

Second, the government portrays the European Union's pro-immigration policies as a threat to Hungary's right to constitutional self-identity, arguing that these policies are being imposed on the country. This perspective is reflected in the aim of the

Seventh Modification to the Fundamental Law, which has been framed as follows:

> [T] o prevent the implementation of authorized decisions […] regarding the forced placement of foreign populations on the territory of our country, ignoring the will of the Hungarian people. At the same time, it protects the constitutional identity defined by the population's living conditions and linguistic, historical and cultural traditions (The Hungarian Parliament, 2018, Dr. László Trócsányi).

Through this frame, the existential threat discussed above is articulated as cultural and ideological domination over Hungary, which would equal the "final termination" of Hungary:

> Hungary's constitutional self-identity is a fundamental value that is not created by the Fundamental Law, it is only recognized by the Fundamental Law. Therefore, constitutional self-identity cannot be renounced even by international treaty, it can only be deprived of it by the final termination of sovereignty and independent statehood in Hungary (The Hungarian Parliament, 2018, Dr. László Trócsányi).

In later modifications of the Fundamental Law, the government portrays this national self-identity as being under threat and emphasizes the need to protect it against the ideological and political domination of the European Union, similarly to a political dictatorship. Most importantly, the protection of the national identity is manifested in the protection of families and children—from liberal ideologies and policies allegedly imposed on the country:

> For a thousand years, the Hungarian nation has continuously expressed its will to live in a Christian national form. Therefore, only occupation or total dictatorship could override this (The Hungarian Parliament, 2022b, Dr. István Simicska).

> The Fundamental Law of Hungary is a living framework that protects the self-identity of Hungarians, expresses its value system, embodies its will, and defines the most basic public law forms of its existence. As a value to be protected, it defines, among other things, the family as the most important framework for our coexistence, our offspring, for whom we bear responsibility (The Hungarian Parliament, 2020, Dr. Judit Varga).

In this context, Hungarian "families" and the government's family policies serve not only as a biopolitical tool against mass immigration and strategy to address Hungary's demographic decline among ethnic Hungarians as research suggests (Melegh, 2016; Grzebalska and Pető, 2018), but also as an ideological tool to demarcate "us." As constituted in the Hungarian government's family mainstreaming policies, "family" embodies the Hungarian government's "illiberal" values and ideologies. As a result, any perceived threat to these "families," whether economic or existential, is viewed as a threat to the Hungarian "illiberal" "nation." This article argues that mass immigration is primarily framed to reinforce the "liberal" versus "illiberal" antagonism, where "liberalism" is depicted as cultural and political dominance, while "illiberalism" is associated with nationalism, Christianity, and most importantly, with "families."

6 Discussion

This article argued that there is a direct discursive and political connection between the Hungarian government's family policies and its border politics. The connection is articulated on the discursive level when the government articulates the political community it supports, "us," as "family," whereas mass immigration is articulated as threat to "us." Between 2015 and 2022, this connection was particularly prominent as the government used scaremongering about mass immigration and the EU's border crisis to mobilize political support. The government portrays this border crisis as an existential threat to both Christian Europe and the Hungarian nation. It presents two conflicting political responses: its own "illiberal" pro-natalist family policies versus the EU's "liberal" pro-immigration policies. This antagonism is framed through economic and human rights perspectives. The government argues that pro-immigration policies undermine the sustainability of its family policies and the Hungarian families benefiting from them, as immigrants and families are competing for the same limited economic resources. Besides, it claims that mass immigration, particularly from Muslim countries, threatens Hungary's Christian national identity. Mass immigration is framed not solely as a tangible biopolitical threat; instead, the Hungarian government uses it to constitute a discursive frontier of "us." This frontier is mainly drawn between "us" and the European Union's pro-immigration policies, rather than directly between "us" and the immigrants.

The article contributes to the understanding of how familialism intersects with immigration politics, filling a gap in the existing literature. While previous studies have examined how right-wing populist and "illiberal" parties use gender politics for broader ideological and political purposes, few have addressed the impact of this on immigration policy. A post-foundational approach considers both right-wing populism and illiberalism as context-dependent manifestations of populist logic centered around the "frontiers" of "us." Post-Soviet right-wing populist and "illiberal" parties conceptualize gender differently: the former views gender as a form of Western colonization, while the latter sees traditional gender roles as natural and commonsensical (Korolczuk, 2023). These parties often mobilize their electorate around the slogans of freedom and safety. In a national populist context, "freedom" refers to the nation's autonomy against supranational elites, while "safety" to the protection of the "white national body" provided by anti-immigration, pro-natalist, and anti-LGBTQ+ politics (Dietze and Roth, 2020; Linnamäki, 2022; Korolczuk, 2023).

The Hungarian Fidesz-KDNP government effectively combines these conceptualizations of liberal gender politics, attributing both "freedom" and "safety" to the "families" it aims to defend. In this context, "freedom" is framed as resistance to what the government perceives as European Parliament initiatives harming Hungarian family well-being. Thus, the article demonstrates that right-wing populism and illiberalism can be seen as compatible, context-dependent manifestations of populist logic. Anti-gender discourses and family politics intertwine nationalism, populism, and illiberalism within the Hungarian government's policies, as reflected in its border policies.

Further research could use similar framing techniques to explore in detail how the Hungarian government has rearticulated the boundaries of "us" post-2022. This includes examining how

immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, and the war in Ukraine are integrated into the government's discourse on "family." Such research would enhance understanding of the Hungarian "illiberal" regime and assess how its family politics legitimize an "illiberal" (majoritarian) conception of democracy to underpin its nationalist agenda.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

KL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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