

# When David Fights Goliath: A Two-Level Explanation of Small-state Role-taking

Simon, Eszter

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**Eszter Simon**

## **When David Fights Goliath: A Two-Level Explanation of Small-state Role-taking<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Why do small states sometimes defy the behavioral expectations of powerful allies? Realism would suggest that they would not only ally themselves with more powerful states to ensure their security, but would maintain that security through an accommodative strategy towards their protector once an alliance had been formed. Yet, this does not always happen; and the present article, building on Harnisch's (2014) pioneering effort to integrate role theory and the two-level game metaphor, investigates why. It offers and tests the hypothesis that, when small states prioritize their domestic role conceptions in formulating their foreign policy, they defy the behavioral expectations of more powerful allies. The 2014 visa revocation crisis between Hungary and the United States is used to illustrate this process: and contrary to what the literature suggests, the finding is that ego-dominated role-taking in international relations remains possible today even for small states.

### **Introduction**

Small and medium-sized states sometimes disregard the behavioral expectations of a more powerful ally on whom they depend for their security. This phenomenon represents a serious challenge to the Realist approach to International Relations (IR). Realism asserts that states act on the basis of their own interest in survival and security. Accordingly, small states that are too weak to defend themselves should ensure their security by allying themselves with more powerful states. Once linked in this way, small states are expected to fulfill the behavioral expectations of their more powerful allies (e.g. Vital 1971). However, small states sometimes act to *resist* these realist expectations and, thus, seemingly, act against their own interests. Rationalist explanations that relax the unitary actor assumption of realism and consider domestic political factors as important sources of state behavior offer a better guide to such small-state

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<sup>1</sup> *Author's note:* I am grateful for the helpful comments of Stefan Wolff, Nicholas Wheeler, Marijke Breuning, Agnes Simon, Gabriela Pleschová, the editor, and the anonymous reviewers on various versions of this article.

behavior when small-state role-taking is the result of domestic constraints (negative public opinion, precarious governing coalition, threat of a coup etc.). However, they are much less likely to explain a particular outcome when domestic (and international) conditions are less restrictive and leave many policy choices possible. This inadequacy also plagues research into the horizontal and vertical contestation of foreign policy roles (e.g. Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; 2016a).

The purpose of this article is to examine the puzzle of small state behavior that contradicts both realist and rationalist expectations, and to do this by building upon Harnisch's (2014, 2016) pioneering attempt to integrate role theory and the two-level game metaphor developed by Putnam (1988). The article advances and tests the hypotheses that under permissive international and domestic conditions, reversals of previously accommodating role-taking by small states vis-à-vis more powerful and significant ones can best be explained by small-state leaders giving primacy to their domestic role conception. This finding challenges existing role theory scholarship on two counts. First, it questions the practice of prioritizing international factors as the principal determinants of small-state role-taking. Second, it suggests that role theory should acknowledge the existence of separate domestic roles and their relevance for foreign policy choices, instead of considering domestic politics alone as the determinant of international role conceptions.

This article relies on an "explain-outcome" process-tracing methodology (Beach and Pedersen 2013) to investigate its hypotheses. After a concise review of the role-theory literatures on small states' role-taking and on domestic role contestation, it summarizes the basic tenets of two-level games and the symbolic-interactionist variant of role theory. It then delineates a process whereby small state leaders' domestic role conception leads to the uncooperative

behavior by their states and describes the expected evidence in support of this process. The research focuses on one particular role conception, the role conception of the leader, which is then enacted by each member of a united leadership. Roles are seen as comprehensive and multidimensional, consisting of several distinct components. Some of these components are more dominant, and are supported by less central, or auxiliary, roles (Harnisch 2015, 6; Nabers 2012, 79). The Hungarian visa-ban crisis, which was a major event of US-Hungary relations in fall 2014, is used to test the above proposition (Gerring and Seawright 2007, 122-131). Given the scarcity of available government documents, the research will focus on the Hungarian government's public discourse and behavior, analyzing it with the help of records of parliamentary debates, press statements, interviews, newspaper articles, memoirs, and secondary sources.

### **A Two-level Process of the Role-Taking by Small States**

Similarly to most of the literature investigating the influence of state size on foreign policy behavior (e.g. East 1978; Neack 1995), structure-dominant role-theory scholarship stresses the predominance of systemic factors and/or discounts the significance of domestic politics in the role-taking of small states. Holsti's (1970) distinction between ego-dominated and alter-dominated role conceptions has been challenged, because of its untenability in a post-Cold-War setting (Beneš and Harnisch 2015). The role location efforts of small states have been seen as a process of dissonance reduction in cases when other—more powerful—members of the international system disagree with their role conceptions (Thies 2012, 33). Finally, it has been claimed that small states necessarily see the international structure as the overwhelming determinant of their interactions with other states (e.g. Kojala and Ivanauskas 2014; Wehner and

Thies 2014). In contradiction to these claims, this article posits that, under particular circumstances, small states may act primarily on the basis of their own domestic role conceptions rather than in accordance with alter expectations.

Agency-centered role-theory research has investigated the domestic determinants of roles, role behavior and national role contestation, and has considered history (e.g. Beneš 2010; Bruening 1997), ideational factors (e.g. Breuning 1995; Aras and Görener 2010) and structural domestic conditions as possible determinants of the international role-taking of states (e.g. Kaarbo and Cantir 2013; Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; 2016a; Müller 2012, 57). Only a few role theorists have considered that agents interact on the basis of two different identities and play different roles in two parallel social contexts during a foreign policy event. Consistent with Putnam's (1988) two-level game metaphor, both issue areas (Breuning 1998), and the domestic and international arenas, have been emphasized as impactful social contexts (Harnisch 2014, 2015; Beneš and Harnisch 2015). The existence of a government's distinct domestic and international roles has made it necessary to understand the "preferred domestic roles and how they relate to the expectations towards national role conceptions" (Harnisch 2014, 21). However, because past attempts (Harnisch 2014; 2015) at integrating role theory and two-level games have generally prioritized the international level, they have fallen short of explaining the uncooperative behavior of small states. In contrast, this article argues that, under specific conditions, i.e. no or minimal domestic and international constraints, it is small-state leaders' domestic role conception that best explains their state's uncooperative behavior.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hey (2003) suggested something similar about small-state behavior *albeit* not in connection with roles: individual factors impacted foreign policy under lax domestic constraints and domestic constraints influenced foreign policy choices when international constraints were missing.

To account for the complex interplay between interstate bargaining and domestic politics, Putnam (1988) not only proposed to conceptualize international negotiations as a process whereby state leaders simultaneously played at two tables—one domestic, one international—, but also argued that, of the two games, domestic politics enjoyed the primary attention of leaders. This was so, because their vision for their states could only influence policies if they remained in power (Putnam 1988, 457). As a result, leaders sought and agreed to international outcomes that would be both acceptable to their domestic supporters and within the bounds of their personal political preferences (Putnam 1988, 456-457). However, a set of domestically acceptable options might change. First, international pressures sometimes reverberated domestically and realigned coalitions at the domestic table. This suasive reverberation, in turn, might influence international outcomes (Putnam 1988, 454; Harnisch 2014). Second, leaders sometimes deliberately attempted to enhance the domestic position of a counterpart by intervening in the domestic politics of the other state. Much ambassadorial activity and, on occasion, state visits served this purpose (Putnam 1988, 454). Such interventions were more likely to be accepted from allies than from enemies, and their overall impact was likely to be positive, as actors could forgo pressure when it appeared to be counterproductive (Putnam 1988, 456). Finally, the number of options available might be increased through linkage: that is, deals across issue areas, each of which could be presumed to have its unique two-level dynamic (Putnam 1988, 447-448).

Despite having evolved from a different intellectual tradition, symbolic interactionism shares two-level games' commitment to an interest-based, interactionist view of human behavior. Human interaction, during which participants (individuals, groups, or states) interpret and give meaning to each other's actions stands at the core of symbolic interactionism. It is interested in how the "process of designation and interpretation is sustaining, undercutting, redirecting, and

transforming the ways in which the participants are fitting together their lines of action” (Blumer 1986, 52). Instead of mere responders, individuals are seen as active participants of unfolding events in the course of which they interpret the meaning of others’ individual actions, define their own situation, and select their response (Charon 2001, 38).

Roles, which are defined as social positions that consist of ego and alter expectations about the forms of behavior appropriate in particular situations (e.g. Harnisch 2012, 8; Beneš and Harnisch 2015, 151), are a central concept of symbolic interactionist theory. Through role-taking, agents assess others in terms of both the general intent they perceive in them and the particular responses they receive from them, and they come to understand what others expect of them (Charon 2001, 114-116). Depending on whether agents see alter expectations as furthering or hindering their own interests, they comply with or act contrary to these expectations. Since role-taking gives clues about how to manipulate or direct the other agents, it also makes possible altercasting, that is, the conscious changing of one’s own role in an attempt to make another agent act in accordance with one’s interests and expectations (Charon 2001, 115-117. 140; Harnisch 2012, 13; Thies 2015).

To account for the fact that “not all others are equally significant” (Wendt 1999, 327), symbolic interactionists single out “significant others”, who have influence over another because of their power, and “generalized others”, an abstract category through which an actor relates to a group and adopts a common identity (Beneš and Harnisch 2015, 150; Harnisch 2012, 11; Charon 2001, 109).<sup>3</sup> “Historical others” are significant or generalized others located in the past, and are of interest to role theorists, because agents’ interpretation of their past often plays an important role in the definition of their situation in the present (Charon 2001, 138; Harnisch 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> Role-taking also plays an important role in developing a sense of self or identity, which is about “who we are” and, unlike roles, does not entail “specific prescriptions for action” (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b, 18).

To be able to explain the defiant behavior of a small state vis-à-vis a powerful ally by using the small state's domestic role conception, two scope conditions must be met, which stem from the theoretical puzzle: the small state should operate in permissive (1) international and (2) domestic environments. Evidence for the former would be a combination of no imminent security threat to the small state's existence, as perceived by its leaders, and an indication that despite the political dispute at hand, the security guarantees offered by the large state were not in danger. The latter expectation is consistent both with the situational nature of symbolic interactionism and with Putnam's (1988) claims and Breuning's (1998) findings about different games being played in different issue areas and the possibility of linkage between issue areas. Thus, during a political dispute between a powerful large state and its small ally, the security dimensions of the interstate relationship should not be mentioned at all or, if issue linkage is made, the ongoing security cooperation should be cast in a positive light. Under no circumstances, however, should the powerful state use security guarantees as bargaining chips or threats in its interaction with the smaller state. The lack of meaningful vertical (e.g. negative public opinion) or horizontal (e.g. precarious parliamentary majority) constraints at the onset of the political dispute under consideration should provide proof of a relaxed domestic context (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b).

The present research starts from the observation that small-state leaders play two roles at the same time:<sup>4</sup> while they are acting out a role internationally, they are also acting one out domestically (Harnish 2015, 8); and the nature of leaders' domestic role conception influences their international behavior. Leaders who see their domestic leadership role as one of arbitrator, bargainer, partner or democrat, or who have had a positive experience with outside actors, are

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<sup>4</sup> In reality, state leaders interact with many international and many domestic audiences, acting out a multitude of roles; but for analytical simplicity only the relevant domestic and international roles are considered here.



more likely to be open to meeting outside expectations than leaders whose self-image is that of a loner, a dictator, or a fighter, or who see past interaction with outsiders in negative terms (e.g. Harnish 2014, 2016, 8). This suggests that not all domestic role conceptions, but only those that do not easily lead to cooperative attitudes are likely to result in defiant behavior by small states on the international front. Therefore, when the domestic role conception of a small-state leader results in uncooperative international role-taking vis-à-vis a powerful ally, the small-state leader's domestic role conception is most likely to be non-accommodative in nature. Evidence of this would be aggressive and/or non-compromising elements in the small state's domestic role conception. Such evidence should preferably be drawn from events preceding the case under investigation or, when strict chronology cannot be maintained, from events and discourse that are unrelated to the case. At the same time, it must also be demonstrated that small-state leaders' role-taking is consistent with this role conception in the case under investigation.

The process of international role-taking by a small state in line with its domestic role conception is likely to be triggered by a powerful alter state's action. The notion that a government is playing an international and a domestic role simultaneously (Harnisch 2015, 8) makes it possible for outside actors to engage with that government in terms of either of these roles. Putnam's (1988, 454) proposition that an outside actor may deliberately try to influence the domestic politics of another state suggests that representatives of a powerful, significant other state will primarily engage with small-state leaders along the latter's domestic self. Thus, for a small state to act out its domestic role internationally, and in defiance of a powerful alter state's expectation, the powerful alter state has to start interacting with the small state in the context of the latter's domestic role-taking, and in a critical fashion. Disapproval of the small state's policies in connection with an issue that traditionally falls within the spectrum of domestic

politics (e.g. human rights, judicial independence, or corruption in the ego state) would indicate that the powerful state was engaging with the small-state leader's domestic role-taking.

Role theorists (e.g. Harnisch 2015, 6; Nabers 2012, 79) contend that not all roles are equally important for decision-makers, and Putnam (1988, 457) argue that domestic politics become leaders' central focus because their vision for their states can only influence policies if they remain in power. It therefore follows that, for small-state leaders, acting out their preferred domestic role conception will take priority. Small states act in opposition to their power ally's expectations when their leaders interpret the initial role-taking of the friendly and significant alter state as threatening their ability to continue to act out their favored domestic role.

In the absence of government memorandums recording the decision-making process, a combination of factors should be found to substantiate small-state leaders' threat perception. First, it should be demonstrated that no intent behind criticisms made by the powerful state could account for the small state's reaction, but rather that the powerful state's disapproval must have touched the core of the small-state leaders' role conception and identity. Second, that fulfilling the role expectations of the powerful alter state would most likely set in motion events that would result in the small-state leaders' loss of power and, thus, their ability to take domestic roles in line with their preferred role conception. Third, it should be established that the small-state leaders do not indiscriminately show the same behavior in every situation where their domestic role-taking is criticized. If role-taking is indeed situation-specific, then the same role conception should prescribe different interpretations of outside criticism and warrant different responses in other situations.

Threat perception can be expected to lead small-state leaders to act strategically to defend their ability to pursue their preferred domestic role conception. Strategic behavior should be

manifested by inconsistencies and (deliberate) ambiguities in the use of ideologies and personal pronouns with regard to the referent agent. For example, instead of the collective “we” referencing the nation, “we: either refers unequivocally to a different group (e.g. the leadership); or the interpretation of “we” seems ambiguous both to domestic and international others. The non-ideological nature of the government’s role conception should also underwrite strategic role-taking. Furthermore, if role-taking is defensive and, as a result of the government’s domestic role conception, non-accommodative, this role-taking should continue until the powerful alter state’s criticism is withdrawn, irrespective of whether the powerful alter state engages in altercasting by changing its role-taking in an attempt to make the small state act in accordance with its expectations (Harnisch 2012, 13). Two kinds of evidence can be expected to confirm the defensive nature of small state leaders’ role-taking. First, to make sure that defensive role-taking was the result of a choice, it should be demonstrated that another adequate but non-defensive solution was also at the disposal of the small state’s leadership. Second, small-state leaders should act to create a space for themselves domestically so as to counteract the powerful alter state’s intrusion into domestic politics. Concomitantly, small-state leaders can be expected to use any vulnerability of the powerful alter state that has resulted from its intervention into the domestic life of the smaller state. As part of their efforts, small-state leaders are likely to engage in normative persuasion, i.e. linguistic engagement in order to assess the appropriateness of roles in a situation of uncertainty (Harnisch 2012, 13). To denounce and contest an outside agent’s role-taking is one way to do this (Harnisch 2012, 13). For example, in this context, a discourse on the rights of small states can be efficient against more powerful states (Müller 2012, 66), who, because of their power-surplus, are more vulnerable to having their intentions interpreted negatively. Finally, the outcome of the process is recalcitrant small-state behavior. The predicted

evidence is incompatibility between the actions of the small state's government and realist/rationalist expectations concerning the behavior of small states vis-à-vis their major ally. In addition, it should be demonstrated that other, less defensive or more fruitful options were at the disposal of the decision-makers.

### **The Background and Outcome of the Visa Ban Crisis**

In the decades prior to the visa-revocation crisis in October 2014, the United States had been the most significant alter state for Hungary. During the twilight years of the Cold War struggle, many Hungarians, rejecting Communism and condemning Soviet domination, looked on the United States as the model of democracy, freedom, and capitalism (Bugajski and Teleki 2007, 137). After the fall of Communism in 1989, Hungary's desire to ensure its security by joining NATO gave the United States the opportunity to foster democracy in Hungary by insisting that the North Atlantic alliance was not only a security but also a political community. Thus, the United States significantly contributed to Hungary's socialization into the Western military and political order.

For 25 years, Hungarian governments, regardless of their composition, remained faithful allies, generally meeting US expectations (e.g. Meszerics 2004). In 1995, three years before it was granted NATO membership, Hungary consented to US use of the Taszár Air Base for peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Viktor Orbán's first government immediately conveyed its sympathies and offered Hungary's assistance (Bugajski and Teleki 2007, 137). More recently, in 2012, the Orbán government provided additional troops for the US surge in Afghanistan at a time when other NATO partners

were withdrawing their troops (Kounalakis 2015, 269). Generally, when a choice had to be made between European and Atlanticist commitments, Hungary has tended to choose the latter. Support for the US in the 2003 Iraqi war was a case in point. Along with other Central European states, Hungary stood by the United States in the face of German and French opposition (Magyarics 2014).

Yet, on October 6, 2014 the United States took an unprecedented step against a NATO ally when it applied Presidential Proclamation no. 7750 to Hungary and banned six government employees from entering the United States because of alleged corruption. Behind the decision lay a dispute over the interests of an American agribusiness company, Bunge, which in 2012 had handed over to the Hungarian National Tax and Customs Administration (NAV) a thick file with detailed information about rival businesses based in Hungary and the practices whereby they circumvented compulsory VAT payments and gained an unfair advantage in the Hungarian market. Instead of investigating the illegal practices, NAV officials approached Bunge for a bribe to decrease the company's own VAT payments, which Bunge reported to the US Embassy. Between 2012 and 2014, the US Embassy in Budapest repeatedly approached the Hungarian Foreign Ministry to request an investigation into corruption, but received no response (US Embassy 2014). Finally, on October 6, 2014, after linking corruption to six officials in the NAV, the US Chargé d'Affairs and temporary head of the US Mission in Budapest, André Goodfriend, privately informed the Foreign Ministry of the ban, but not of the identity of the six officials, and advised the Hungarian government to take serious measures against corrupt government officials.

The Orbán government reacted to the confidential information by leaking information about the revocation of the officials' visas through the government-friendly online business

magazine, *Napi Gazdaság* on October 16, 2014. This started a three-month long public relations battle, which resulted in a general loss of confidence in the government and a 12 percentage point drop—the greatest in Hungary’s post-Communist history—in the popularity of the governing party—FIDESZ (Hann and Lakatos 2014; Tárki 2014). During the crisis, the government consistently denied charges of corruption, and although the Hungarian government insisted on the existence of zero tolerance for corruption in Hungary, it declined to comply with alter expectations and refused to start an investigation, claiming that there was a lack of evidence. At the same time, it demanded that the United States disclose the information that had led to the revocation of the visas despite the latter’s insistence that visa-related issues were not for the public domain.

The Hungarian government’s reaction, including its decision to leak the story, had major negative repercussions. Not only did it result in a major loss of popularity for the government, but, more importantly for this article, it ended twenty-five years of domestic consensus about Hungary’s role as a compliant and constructive ally of the United States (e.g. Meszerics 2004). This role-taking also defies realist/rationalist explanations, because Hungary refused to comply with the role expectations of an allied nation on whose good will its defense and territorial integrity depended. Nor could the Hungarian government’s role deviation from realist assumptions be explained by domestic constraints. As discussed below, the government faced few, if any, domestic constraints that would have made other policy options domestically untenable.

Indeed, Prime Minister Orbán and his circle had other—potentially superior—policy options at their disposal, which would not have resulted in a public rejection of US role expectations and would have been compatible overall with the government’s pursuit of its own

economic and political interests. For instance, the Hungarian government could have elected to do nothing other than keep the crisis out of the spotlight.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, it could have pretended to carry out an investigation, thereby demonstrating a seemingly willing and cooperative posture and democratic conduct, which had been the Orbán government's standard practice in cases of past US criticism regarding their undemocratic practices (e.g. Kounalakis 2015; see also Magyar 2016, 211). At worst, the government could have investigated a few government officials, censoring or sentencing them for corruption.

Finally, it may seem that the Hungarian government's aggressive posture was due to its perception of US criticism as a violation of its national sovereignty and, therefore, an affront to a core role. However, as I show below, defending national sovereignty was not a dominant role conception for the government. Rather, in accordance with the postulates outlined above, this role was assumed strategically and selectively, when the government's domestic role conception, and thus part of its underlying identity, was perceived to be under attack. The Orbán government's narrow conception of the nation as applying only to the governing elite, and its desire to resist any constraints, foreign or domestic, provide further evidence that the government's behavior was not primarily motivated by a desire to defend the country's sovereignty.

## **The Process of Hungary's Two-Level Role-taking in the Visa Revocation Crisis**

### *Scope Conditions*

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<sup>5</sup> The Hungarian government had no reason to fear that the US government would publish the revocation of visas and thus put it in a disadvantaged position, because US federal law defines visa-related issues as private matters (Vannak korrupt kormánytisztviselők 2014; Folk 2014).

In the visa revocation crisis, both scope conditions were met: in fall 2014, the Hungarian government faced few, if any, constraints on either the international or domestic front. The only international event that, in the light of the Soviet occupation of Hungary in 1945-1991, could have given concern was Russia's intervention and westward expansion in Ukraine from the spring of 2014 onwards. However, available evidence suggests that the Orbán government did not see Russian action as a threat. Not only had it developed quite close ties with Russia by then, but it was to welcome Russian President Vladimir Putin warmly in Budapest in February 2015 and criticize European attempts to isolate Russia (Soldatkin and Than 2015). Moreover, Hungary was also the only Central European state that, in September 2014, suspended the reverse flow of gas that Ukraine depended on to meet its energy needs while the latter was locked into an energy dispute with Russia's Gazprom (Hungary suspends gas supplies 2014).

The only serious international constraint that could have made the Hungarian government meet US role expectations would have been Hungary's expulsion from NATO. Despite US concerns with illiberal leaders in Central Europe potentially undermining the NATO alliance (Rettman 2014), Hungary's exclusion from NATO was a remote possibility in the light of the country's importance for on-going military-security cooperation. In accordance with this, the temporary leader of the US mission in Hungary, Chargé d'Affairs André Goodfriend, only mentioned the security domain in a positive light during the crisis. He praised Hungary's past performance as an ally. Hungary was a "good ally", Goodfriend said, and the United States continued to count on Hungary within NATO (Balogh 2014; Goodfriend újra megszólalt 2014).



Viktor Orbán and his government faced similarly few constraints domestically. The governing party, FIDESZ<sup>6</sup>, had dominated Hungarian politics since 2009. It had won the European Parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2014, and the local government elections in 2010 and 2014. More importantly, it had won the national parliamentary elections, held in the same years as the local government elections, with absolute, or two-thirds, majorities in parliament.<sup>7</sup> FIDESZ used its political power to fundamentally restructure the political system and codify the decision-making practices of the political family it had created into law (Magyar 20016, 43, 67, 70, 73-74). The FIDESZ government has instituted a new constitution, passed retroactive laws that supersede previous legal interdictions, redrawn electoral districts to FIDESZ's advantage, limited the constitutional court's jurisdiction, put people who can be relied on to be loyal to Orbán at the head of institutions that are supposed to have oversight of the legislative and executive branches of government (e.g. the Ombudsmen and the State Audit Agency), and taken total control of the public service state television and radio channels.

As a result, the political opposition and civil society have completely lost their power and influence. Domestic role contestation is no longer possible despite the fact that the government is at odds with the opposition and civil society, because the latter is unable actively to contest the government's interpretation of Hungary's role vis-à-vis other countries. The political system concentrates power in the hand of one person, Viktor Orbán, who as prime minister, makes all major political decisions himself (e.g. Bozóki 2015, 3; Magyar 2016, 42). For example, he personally selects the winners of government tenders before the publication of those tenders (e.g. Kounalakis 2015, 253), making sure that only members of his loyal circle win. Although Prime

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<sup>6</sup> This article does not differentiate between FIDESZ and the KDNP. The latter is technically another party, but has run on a common platform with FIDESZ and shows no sign of independence.

<sup>7</sup> FIDESZ lost its absolute majority after the Veszprém by-election in February 2015.

Minister Orbán is the principal agent of the government and the chief determiner of the government's actions and role conception, the analysis below makes no distinction between him and his government, given the loyalty and unity of his political family, and their acceptance of a common identity.

### *The Orbán Government's Domestic Role Conception*

The Hungarian government that was in office during the visa revocation crisis had an aggressive domestic role conception that can best be described by referencing the mafia (Magyar 2016). The mafia analogy is inspired by similarities between the underlying identity, purpose, structure and methods of the Sicilian mafia and those of the Orbán regime. This role conception is rooted in the patriarchal values of rural Hungary and is based on a traditional family model in which the *pater familias* wields all power within the family and on behalf of the family so as to increase its wealth (Magyar 2016, 94-96). Politics and political power are used to promote the business interests of Orbán's own family and his political family (FIDESZ) (Magyar 2016). To this end, the government seeks the greatest freedom of action, which it sees as personified in the role of the 'freedom fighter'. Indeed, the Prime Minister frequently casts himself in this role, which indicates the importance he ascribes to it (Kounalakis 2015; To Viktor Go the Spoils 2012; Orbán describes Hungarians 2014).

The ruling political circle's welfare depends on Viktor Orbán, who expects one thing in return—unquestioning loyalty. The political family protects loyal members regardless of the offense they may commit, which is important, because the regime regularly uses extra-legal means to achieve political and economic ends (Magyar 2016, 156-157). On the other hand,

Orbán punishes disloyalty with exclusion, and mercilessly eliminates any challenge to his power, whether from within the family or from outside, through the traditional underworld techniques of blackmail, intimidation, and, if necessary, open violence (Magyar 2016; Bozóki 2015; Kirchick 2012; Pethő 2010). However, open violence is relatively rare, because its two-thirds parliamentary majority allows FIDESZ to wield the power of the state in its own favor in a way the organized underworld cannot (Magyar 2016, 74, 324). Thus, violence is mostly used figuratively in the form of character assassination.

The fates of Lajos Simicska, András Horváth and Ferenc Gyurcsány are illustrative of this last point. Simicska, who had been Orbán's college roommate and friend, built a media empire, thanks to the lucrative deals facilitated by his friendship with Orbán. However, when Simicska accumulated too much wealth and influence and started to use it to undermine Orbán's power, he was quickly expelled from Orbán's circle and his media empire was decimated (Magyar 2016, 82-88). The Orbán regime took advantage of the legal system to discredit András Horváth, a former NAV employee, who had been the first to publicize evidence about corruption in the NAV. He was made a suspect—not a witness—in corruption-related investigations (Herczeg 2017). Finally, Orbán, who lost the prime ministerial debate and the subsequent election to Gyurcsány in 2006, systematically and successfully connived at the character assassination of Prime Minister's Gyurcsány over the next four years, not shrinking even from encouraging public riots to this end (Debreczeni 2009, 289-359; Embassy Budapest 2007).

The mafia analogy already suggests an uncompromising role conception; and an auxiliary role underwrites the overall aggressiveness of the Orbán government's conceptualization of its leadership role. This auxiliary role is based on the Prime Minister's understanding of politics and his consequent self-definition as a political warrior. In spring 2015, Orbán explained to law

students that politicians were warriors, fighting a new battle against character assassination every day. Anyone, who took an attack personally or translated it into “the language of their own moral values” was “a loser” and was unfit for the job. “This is war. [...] When I stand on the battlefield with a sword in hand and three people are attacking me, I don’t moralize,” but “slash the three [attackers]” (Orbán körülírta az utódját 2015). Interestingly, the US Embassy in Budapest had accurately summarized Orbán’s view of politics as a zero-sum game as early as 2006 (Embassy Budapest 2006; see also Magyar 2016, 67). Orbán reinforced this interpretation in June 2011 when he categorically rejected (“I couldn’t possibly do that”) a suggestion from Ed Meese, a former aid to Ronald Reagan, that he compromise with his political opponents (Kounalakis 2015, 178).

What is striking in Viktor Orbán’s view of politics is its amorality: values are seen as a liability. This resonates with an earlier remark of his that the age of ideology was over (Bozóki 2015, 15), his definition of politics as “reality without ideology” (Magyar 2016, 230), and his political career, which has seen him move from supporting liberalism to advocating illiberal democracy. More importantly, his amoral approach to politics sits well with the notion of the mafia state, which is an economic and not an ideological venture. No ideology, including nationalism, form an integral part of FIDESZ politicians’ identity or the government’s domestic role conception. Rather, ideology is used strategically to communicate different messages to different audiences (Magyar 2016, 230-233).

### *The Role-taking Process*

In a process parallel to the one discussed above, the role-taking in the visa revocation incident started with the US government engaging with the Hungarian government over its domestic role-taking. The United States chose to address the Hungarian government on the issue of corruption, which generally falls within the domain of domestic politics. The US also expressed its disapproval by banning six Hungarian government officials from its territory, and clearly communicated the line of action it expected, i.e. the clearing up of corruption. Despite the fact that US criticism was conveyed in private, and that the banned individuals could still enter the United States when travelling on official business (Zubor and Makai 2014), the Hungarian government interpreted this US role-taking as a threat. This perception, as well as the subsequent role assumption, was situation specific.

As a socializing agent, the United States had interacted with the domestic aspect of Hungarian governments many times in the previous 25 years, criticizing them for undemocratic behavior. The Orbán government was no exception. In July 2011, Secretary of State Clinton expressed US concerns, and called for “a real commitment to the independence of the judiciary, a free press and governmental transparency” (Clinton questions Hungary’s democratic credentials 2011). In October of the same year, Ambassador Eleni Kounalakis emphasized the same points to Prime Minister Orbán after working tirelessly behind the scenes to convince him and his colleagues to correct the most worrying legal digressions from democratic norms (Orbán megkapta az amerikai kritikát 2011; Kounalakis 2015). Just three weeks before the visa revocation crisis, President Obama joined the chorus, chastising the Hungarian government for “endless regulations and overt intimidation [that] increasingly target civil society” (Obama 2014).

Like previous Hungarian governments, the Orbán government had tended to respond to such concerns in a cooperative manner. For example, it responded positively to many concerns the United States raised about its new constitution in 2010-2011. It either took legal action to make corrections, or at least tried to convince the United States of the appropriateness of provisions the latter objected to by patiently and privately explaining the rationale behind these (Kounalakis 2015). The government's role-taking was also selective in similar situations involving other actors. For instance, in 2016, the government proved that it could give up aggressive posturing when its economic interests were at stake. Facing certain defeat in its quarrel with the European Union over the administration of EU money, and the suspension of European Union structural funds – a major source of systemic corruption – the government abandoned its anti-EU rhetoric and quickly changed regulations to fit European expectations (Megháttrált a Miniszterelnökség 2016).

Nor, to return to our hypothetical process, could US intentions realistically have accounted for a perception of threat by the Hungarian government. US criticism of the Orbán government's corrupt practices in 2014 was in line with earlier criticism from Secretary Clinton, Ambassador Kounalakis and President Obama about the state of democracy in Hungary. Indeed, Chargé Goodfriend interpreted US concerns with corruption in the framework of his government's earlier concerns with democratic norms—transparency, rule of law, good governance, and the freedom of the press (Goodfriend újra megszólalt 2014; Vannak korrump kormánytisztviselők 2014). The goal of the United States in Hungary, he said, was stability, for which democracy was the best guarantee (Jöhet még kitiltás 2014). In other words, as far as the US was concerned, the visa bans were simply another expression of US concern regarding the deterioration of democracy in Hungary. Furthermore, Goodfriend also rejected any speculation

that the US wanted to overthrow the Hungarian government as belonging to the “realm of fantasy” (Jöhét még kitiltás 2014).

Instead, it was the Orbán government’s mafia-like domestic role conception that defined both its interpretation of the visa bans and its response. The revocation of the visas was seen not as general criticism of the government, but as a personal attack on six loyal members of the political family. Moreover, the visa bans represented an existential threat to the family as whole, because they targeted the very foundation of the regime (Magyar 2016; Mong 2016). In order to respond cooperatively, Orbán and his circle would have had to investigate themselves, uncovered their own corrupt practices, and punished members of the political family, disregarding completely the family’s loyalty norm. Moreover, given that corruption was systemic and sanctioned from the top, an investigation would have implicated the prime minister and the government as a whole. This could have triggered the only event—mass protests—that could have brought the government down. The loss of power would not have only barred the political family from the private economic benefits of governance, but would have made them vulnerable to, and most likely found guilty in, any investigation that inquired into their acquisition of wealth. Consequently, the government’s role assumption in the fall of 2014 was restrained by one factor: it could not admit to corruption, which would have exposed its governing practices. Thus, from the Orbán government’s point of view, it was impossible either to fulfill US role expectations as a faithful ally or to deal with the criticism with a semblance of democratic effort, as had often been the practice with past US criticism (e.g. Kounalakis 2015; see also Magyar 2016, 211).

In its role-taking, the Orbán government relied on normative persuasion to defend its dominance in the domestic sphere, suggesting that Hungary’s legitimacy had deeper roots

historically than that of the US, and that that the intervention of the United States into Hungarian domestic politics belied its commitment to democratic norms and was a result of sinister ulterior motives. The Hungarian government insinuated that the United States was acting in an undemocratic manner: it was disregarding the rule of law and due process, because an accuser needed to provide proof. Evidence was necessary for a case to merit legal pursuit (e.g. Folk 2014; Interview with Antal Rogán 2014; Minutes of the 37th Meeting 2014). The pro-government magazine, *Napi Gazdaság*, and the parliamentary faction of FIDESZ, asserted—falsely—that American companies were under tax investigation in Hungary and the ban was intended to make the NAV’s investigation in the United States more difficult (Magyari 2014). Prime Minister Orbán brushed aside the US claim that American visa policy did not allow the US government to impart any further information by saying that “we also have laws” (Folk 2014). Later, the Orbán government accused both Chargé Goodfriend and the US of meddling in Hungarian domestic politics. On December 5, Prime Minister Orbán proclaimed that Hungary’s independence was under attack because those [the United States] who had benefited from Hungary’s dependence before 2010 now disliked the country’s energy, financial, and commercial independence. Then he added that “I personally am not willing to be the viceroy of any foreign power.” Instead, his duty was to “always defend Hungary’s independence” (Interview with Prime Minister 2014a).

János Lázár, head of the Prime Minister’s office, continued this theme on December 22 in an interview with the conservative daily, *Magyar Hírlap*. Trying to discredit alter expectations in part by asserting Hungary’s legitimacy based on its long-term statehood, he called attention to what he suggested was a problematic role definition by the US Embassy, which had acted “as if it had taken over the role of domestic opposition in Hungary [...]. They take sides in issues that



diplomats usually don't. They want to tell us how to behave, what we should believe about the world. They tell us how we should live. [...] The Americans should respect our thousand-year long history, and traditions which cannot be changed by force" (Pindroch 2014). Before Christmas, it was Orbán's turn again. This time, he questioned US motives, claiming that the corruption charges were a cover, a typical intelligence ploy so that "the United States can pursue its new-found interests in the region, gain more influence" (Interview with Prime Minister 2014b).

Besides normative persuasion, two additional points about the government's discourse are noteworthy. First, many—but not all—of the Orbán government's statements were openly sanctified by nationalism, pointing toward an understanding of the "freedom fight" as vital to defending national independence from the United States. Thus, the Hungarian government not only alluded to the United States as a meddler, but also chose to see and describe it as a deceitful and dominating great power. That is, although the United States remained a significant other for Hungary in the military-security domain, the Hungarian government had recast it as a negative generalized and historical other in the political-diplomatic sphere. As a result, the US was not perceived as a close friend or NATO ally. Instead, American politicians and diplomats were represented as foreigners whose views obtruded (Kounalakis 2015, 254-255).<sup>8</sup>

In line with this representation, during the visa ban crisis, the Hungarian government looked upon the United States as the latest in a series of great powers who had tried to dominate Hungary during its long history. In this process, the US – the current "other" – was equated with occupying powers whose dominance in Hungary started in 1541 with the Turkish occupation. In 1686, the Habsburgs replaced the Turks. Hungary regained its independence with the dissolution

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<sup>8</sup> The redefinition of the political relationship with the United States had started before the visa ban crisis (see Kounalakis 2015).

of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, but the shock of territorial loss following World War One, and a subsequent climate of revanchism and nationalism, led the country to ally itself closely with Hitler's Germany, which influenced the direction of Hungarian domestic politics first informally and then formally. The Soviet Union liberated Hungary in 1945, replacing German domination with Soviet influence until 1990. (Bozóki and Simon 2010). This historical experience of oppression resulted in a national self-identity of rebelliousness and victimhood (László and Ehmann 2012).

Third, while the government's rhetoric appealed to nationalist sentiments, the inconsistencies in its discourse suggest that nationalism was not one of its deeply held beliefs, but was used strategically. First, a few statements of FIDESZ politicians during the crisis—especially, Orbán's insistence that “we also have laws”—were not explicitly associated with the national experience. Other statements—that about the Prime Minister's unwillingness to be a viceroy, in particular—testify to a curious use of personal pronouns, which allowed for multiple interpretations of the government's words. The use of “we” in the former statement could be interpreted in more than one way, according to one's definition of the “ego” and “alter”. Just like the term, “nation”, “we” could refer to the population of Hungary in the context of interaction between nation states. Accordingly, the United States continued to see the Orbán government's discourse as nationalistic and indicating a struggle for freedom from foreign influence (Kounalakis 2015, 255, 259). Ideologically conservative FIDESZ voters, for whom the national historical experience of oppression and victimhood is the most important interpretative framework, but who usually do not include the opposition in their concept of the nation, could also see such statements as nationalistic. Meanwhile, for a leadership that equated the nation with the family, “we” could refer to the family, and “I”, to a Godfather figure. In this context, the

government's statements simply signaled a commitment to defending the family's interests, that is, to fighting for the political family's freedom to advance its private goals without restriction from either domestic or international others (Magyar 2016, 231-235; 241, 249).

Even more tellingly, the government's victimhood narrative did not reference the national historical experience with oppression, at all. The government argued that its members were victims of the United States, as the US had unjustly accused six officials without providing any evidence of such serious charges. In this situation, the role of the government was to protect its citizens (e.g. Minutes of the 23rd Meeting of the Parliament 2014). That is, victimhood was narrowly understood to refer to the members of the political family, and the government's task was defined as focusing on their defense.

As political warriors, Orbán and his circle took to heart the notion that the best defense is a good offense, and chose an aggressive strategy, reassigning blame to the United States, in order to defend itself and its ability to shape government decisions and Hungarian domestic politics without constraint. Moreover, the vehemence and directness of the government's attacks would increase—not decrease—over the course of the crisis, despite the fact that, by issue linkage and acknowledgement of Hungary's contribution to the NATO alliance, the United States then engaged in altercasting to channel the conflict in a friendlier and more cooperative direction. Indeed, the Hungarian government rejected US attempts at altercasting, and, as the crisis unfolded, continued its non-cooperative behavior. As part of this, the Hungarian government increasingly directed its aggression towards the US Embassy staff, and towards Chargé Goodfriend, in particular.

In a move that was reminiscent of how Orbán and his circle destroyed domestic opponents through character assassination, the Embassy staff's proficiency, as well as

Goodfriend's competence, personal motives, manhood, and importance as a diplomat, were called into question. On November 6, the Embassy published a document summarizing the steps it had taken to promote democracy and call the government's attention to corruption in the previous two years in a diplomatic non-paper that also documented the Orbán government's failure to take action (US Embassy 2014). The prime minister led the government's campaign to discount the document as a meaningless "scrap of paper," because it bore no stamp or signature and was not presented on letterhead paper (A NAV is fecninek tartja 2014).<sup>9</sup> As for Goodfriend, it was implied that he was a maverick actor who did not represent the true views of his government (Magyari 2014). Orbán questioned Goodfriend's competence, describing his remarks as "foggy and confusing gobbledygook," (Minutes of the 37th Meeting of the Parliament 2014). Goodfriend was also called an agent of the Hungarian opposition parties and a fifth-rate-CIA-agent-turned-agent-provocateur (A NAV is fecninek tartja 2014; Ötödvonalmeli CIA-ügynök 2015). The government-controlled public service television channel, M1, repeatedly suggested that in his previous position at the Bureau of International Organization Relations, Goodfriend had learned ways of overthrowing post-Soviet governments, and his purpose in Hungary was to do just that (Újra múltjával próbálta támadni 2014). When it became clear that the only banned government official who came forward, NAV President Ildikó Vida, would not be able to sue the US Chargé, who enjoyed diplomatic immunity, for slander, Orbán demanded in the Parliament that Goodfriend "be man enough to take responsibility for what he says" and stop hiding behind diplomatic immunity (Minutes of the 37th Meeting 2014). Finally, Goodfriend's importance as a worthy opponent was discounted, because he was likely to be recalled from Hungary soon (Újra múltjával próbálta támadni 2014).

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<sup>9</sup> These are compulsory elements of official documents in Hungary, which delights in bureaucratic formalities.

Overall, the behavior of the Hungarian government in the visa ban crisis illustrates how, under permissive domestic and international conditions, the seemingly irrational behavior of a small state can be explained by the domestic role conception of small state leaders. As might have been expected, the Orbán government, which had built its governing practices on corruption, perceived the US charges as a threat to its existence, and reacted on the basis of an aggressive domestic role conception. This role conception directed the behavior of the Hungarian government throughout the crisis, because the US never withdrew its criticism, but only sought—unsuccessfully—to change the Hungarian government’s role behavior through altercasting. Meanwhile, the Hungarian government engaged in normative persuasion to discredit the US and its representative, Chargé Goodfriend.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this article question the current wisdom in role theory research that looks at domestic politics only as a determinant of states’ international role conception, and that does not consider ego-dominated role-conception by small states possible. The evidence presented in this article suggests that, when discussing states’ international role-taking, role theorist should look not only to domestic politics to identify constraints pushing leaders to assume certain roles internationally, but should also examine leaders’ domestic role conception. Considering the domestic role conception of leaders when explaining their international role-taking improves upon existing role theory accounts, because it makes it possible to explain at least some of the international role choices of small states under permissive international and domestic conditions.

Furthermore, the findings of this article also lead to the conclusion that ego-dominated role conceptions are highly possible. Of course, these may involve substantial costs if a role

conception runs counter to the role expectations of significant alter states, and so they may not always be practicable. Nevertheless, when dominant allies are not ready to sacrifice their working relationship entirely, small states may at least partially ignore alter expectations. These findings confirm Müller's (2012, 66) claim that there is power in powerlessness for small states. The example of Hungary also suggests that, alongside appeals to powerful states' moral obligation to defend small ones (Müller 2012, 66), an emphasis on national sovereignty may be just as helpful when small states want to stave off pressure from great powers. A nationalist stance appears to be even more useful when it is not a central component of the user's identity and role conception. In such circumstances, various audiences can be strategically manipulated by making use of the different interpretative frameworks that domestic and international others apply to make sense of a government's message. Additionally, the Hungarian government's domestic role conception suggests that, while an ego state's discourse may heavily rely on national history or nationalism, such discourse may be intended to manipulate audiences rather than to be the determinant of policy (cf. Breuning 1997; Harnisch 2014).

Overall, Hungary's foreign policy behavior can contribute to an understanding of the behavior of small and mid-sized states with semi-democratic or authoritarian leanings. The Orbán government's role conception is particularly useful for comprehending the workings of small and mid-sized states that observers have likened to the mafia. Such states include Bulgaria, Montenegro, Ukraine, Mexico, and, most notably, Vladimir Putin's Russia (Naím 2012; Harding 2012). Perhaps the most useful practical lesson of the visa revocation crisis is the realization that, just like Viktor Orbán in the fall of 2014, Vladimir Putin is unlikely to back down in an international confrontation as long as a compromise is the only way for him to stay in power domestically.

From a theoretical point of view, the overall conclusion of this article is that a two-level extension of role theory can provide important insights into interstate behavior, and, therefore, it represents a productive direction for future research. Moreover, an integration of these two approaches offers valuable conclusions not only for role theory, but also for two-level games by helping to clarify the most undertheorized aspect of that metaphor, namely, the preferences of the chief negotiator. Establishing the role conception and interpretative role-taking process whereby decision-makers choose from various foreign policy options would allow researchers to narrow down the alternatives decision-makers believe to be among their winning combinations. Finally, the interpretative nature of role-taking suggests that role-taking is, in part, one kind of cognitive bias or framing effect that influences decision-makers' subsequent choices. Indeed, the Hungarian government's threat perception, and its rather risky strategy to defend its domestic sphere of influence, in the visa revocation crisis are compatible with the notions of prospect theory (Kahnemann and Tversky 1979).<sup>10</sup> This reinforces Breuning's (2012, 27-28) observation that an integration of role theory and prospect theory would be a fruitful avenue of research if the focus were on uncovering the link between interpretation and action in the role-taking process and not on the two-level nature of role-taking.

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<sup>10</sup> Prospect theory is also consistent with the Hungarian government's accommodative behavior in the light of certain loss in its dispute with the EU over the administration of structural funds.

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