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Korkut, Umut; Gyollai, Daniel

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Policy Brief 4

Crisis Governance and the Quest for Alternative Europeanisation in Hungary

The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has ascended to power in 2010 and entrenched his hold on Hungarian politics thanks to the financial, migration, and recently coronavirus crises that hit the European Union and Hungary after 2008. Despite what appears to be his anti-EU narrative all throughout, however, the EU has accommodated Hungary and has been increasingly reticent with – if any – sanctions. A technocratic leadership style aiming for public – rather than political – accountability has been Orbán’s major crisis management technique. He carved his indispensability to any crisis management by appealing to public insecurities.

This policy brief reflects on the issues of “West” and “Europe” in Hungarian political narrative and public philosophy (Mehta 2011) drawing insights from Viktor Orbán’s speeches collected for RESPOND Work package 6 (WP6) “Conflicting Conceptualizations of Europeanization” report as well as interviews with civil society actors in the country in 2018 and 2019 as part of the RESPOND project. Looking at the Hungarian case, it presents assumptions about strong leadership and Europragmatism amidst economic, political, and health crises.

Our policy recommendations are aimed for anti-authoritarian policy and ideational circles in Europe and Hungary. In order, we follow first the leadership pattern that Orbán adopted at the detriment of Hungary’s relations with the West and second how he manipulated particular crisis contexts via both formal institutions and strategic discourses so that he could entice the public opinion with anti-western political narratives. It is still noteworthy to note that Orbán’s anti-western political discourse endorsed Hungary as the main pillar of stability of Europe noting its economic, migration and recently public health policies. To this extent, his pragmatism should dispel any convictions that the Hungarian Prime Minister is anti-EU. Orbán believes in an alternative Europeanisation and that is based in Christian values that securitizes those outside the Judeo-Christian world. Hence, while we examine the structural and discursive tenets of Orbán’s crisis leadership, in this brief, we will also offer a novel interpretation of how Europragmatism and Euroscepticism can interact reflecting on RESPOND WP6 – Conflicting Conceptualizations of Europeanisation.

Both at the face of the abrupt increase in the number of irregular migrant arrivals and the coronavirus crisis, Orbán pursued a self-made moral leadership to manage a “self-declared” crisis governance. The enfeebled institutional accountability, weakened judiciary and parliamentary oversight due to the earlier constitutional changes in Hungary after 2011 have also allowed Orbán to manipulate crises in a way to first inculcate certain social knowledge structures in public philosophy and second to exploit public insecurities that are boosted via the very mechanisms of crisis governance. We can therefore emphasize the following.

- Orbán’s leadership and political success style has gained resonance both in Eastern and Western Europe. There is now a need to understand what makes this leadership successful despite the support for EU membership remaining high in Hungary.
- Given the tendency to turn to strong leaders among the public amidst crises, we need to recognize how the political leaders use public susceptibilities to inculcate new paradigms alternative to existing ones even if the latter remains popular.
- Euroscepticism has long been conceived by policy makers along the lines or at least a close term to Eurorejectionism or Europhobia. However, there is an element of a search for Europeanisation that is

Authors

Prof. Umut Korkut
Principal Investigator
Glasgow Caledonian University
Umut.Korkut@gcu.ac.uk

Daniel Gyollai
PhD Candidate
Glasgow Caledonian University
Daniel.gyollai@gcu.ac.uk

www.respondmigration.com

RESPOND is a Horizon 2020 project which aims at studying the multilevel governance of migration in Europe and beyond.

This policy brief is based on analysis of reports, political speeches, legal documents and interviews.

- Euroscepticism has long been conceived by policy makers along the lines or at least a close term to Eurorejectionism or Europhobia. However, there is an element of a search for Europeanisation that is alternative to its liberal-oriented form in Euroscepticism, and this is not necessarily Europhobic or Eurorejectionist. The Hungarian case presents inferences regarding how alternative interpretations to liberal-oriented Europeanisation emerge. This is what we qualify as Europragmatism.
- The Hungarian case shows how enfeebled accountability is prone to reproduce pragmatism to serve technocratic leadership embellished with populist undertones. It shows what happens when political leaders shift accountability from institutional control to popular control, and manipulate the latter.

Evidence and Analysis

The evidence for this policy report relies on Viktor Orbán's political narrative analysis as well as interviews with civil society actors carried out in 2018 and 2019 for the RESPOND project. Therefore, we concentrate on how the theme of Europe was dealt with at macro level, that is in political discourses, amidst the economic crisis after 2008 and the recent coronavirus crisis as well as the narrative on "migration crisis" at the macro- and meso-levels by civil society actors. A presentation of Hungary acting more morally than – what he calls – the liberal, elitist, cosmopolitan, and capitalist West/EU qualified Orbán's discourse whereas reflections on a general discrepancy between the Hungarian and European mechanisms of migration management were frequently stated in interviews with civil society organisations dealing with migration issues. In his criticism of the EU, as we noted above, Orbán has not pursued a Eurorejectionist tone. He remained committed to EU as an idea, but he called how it was managed by the Brussels elite being against the demands and wishes of the general European publics. Below, we present our evidence elaborating on three crises periods and Orbán's crisis management discourse.

1. Economic crisis and its aftermath

The economic crisis in 2008 that put Hungary's national debt to GDP ratio at highest level in the developed world, and the subsequent political quandary that Hungary found itself in presented the conditions ripe for Orbán. Since winning the office in 2010, an all-reaching conservative discourse accompanied Orbán's vision for Hungary and Europe to disparage the wrongdoings of liberalization that led country to crisis. Instead of liberalism that marked the making of national and European politics in Hungary, Fidesz adopted new discursive tools indicating an alternative modernization, based on Christian values, strong state, and nation. Thereby, Fidesz engaged in a moral revolution to re-acquire Hungary's strength vis-à-vis its liberal foes at the domestic front and international capital and bankers on the Western front (Korkut 2012). In time, Orbán adopted the image of a leader that is a hard-working, engaged in a constant fight with, first, non-Hungarian capital that puts the future of Hungarian families in danger; second, energy companies, banks, and private pension funds that usurp the meagre earnings of Hungarian households; third, the European elites that criticize his work; and finally, the domestic opposition that attempt to control his party's sway on the executive and judiciary powers.

This image aimed to show that a leader, who knows what his nation's needs serves the nation the best (Korkut 2012).

Ad hoc economic decisions at an unqualifiedly low level of economic legislation set the rules. These new rules were careless about the economic aptitude of the country, global economic changes, the requirements of international and national economic collaboration, rule of law, harmonization of stability and accountability, fiscal, monetary, and income policy, the interests of economic actors, the social impacts of economic decisions, and future outcomes (Békesi 2014). What eventually took hold was populist policy making, and voluntarist economic steps, which support a patriotic economic policy that appeals to the hearts of the Hungarian nation, to national interests and sovereignty, and the defence of families and Hungarian people. In the end, according to Békesi (2014, 8) Fidesz system is a "mafia state" where economic enterprise goes hand in hand with political enterprise. Voszka (2014) indicated that Orbán neither accepted a neo-liberal nor a welfare state and he aspired to choose another route. This suggests a neo-liberal/ultra-liberal turn in tax and social policy while remaining paternalist in the issue of decreasing utility costs, i.e., energy, water charges for families. It aspires aggressively to spread the state ownership over the economy.

Economic science does not have a name for a system that continuously limits state financial support for healthcare, education, social welfare support, yet has ambitions of state-led-capitalism in a highly confined economy. In this system the party formulates the state structures on the basis of its own reflection and partially also becomes dissolved into it (Debrezeni 2013). Laws are followed only when they are in harmony with the interests of political power while trust remains vested in persons not in institutions. This context hence avails the leader to transmit new identities and collective rationality as solutions to the crisis – especially to conceal its failure to improve the welfare of the majority (Scharle 2014). Voszka (2014) notes Fidesz’s propaganda machine, to this effect, through state controlled public media and affiliated private media outlets. To alleviate the impact of neo-liberal turn in tax and social policy on welfare, these outlets put in circulation “alibi” concepts such as “Hungary will become the center of industrial, agricultural, and building production/output”; “we have consolidated Hungarian economy on many pillars and decreased its dependence and defenselessness”; “vindication of protectionism in order to cultivate/generate “national capital” and enterprises; and strengthening of middle class and supporting families” (Voszka 2014).

2. Facing the abrupt increase in the number of irregular migrant arrivals to Europe

Ad hoc decisions and endorsing alibi concepts became a legacy for crisis management for Orbán amidst the sudden increase in the number of irregular migrant arrivals to Europe in 2015 as well. The Hungarian government then declared a “state of crisis due to mass migration” giving unfettered powers to the army and the police to quash any unrest (Gyollai, 2018). This self-defined extraordinary situation enhanced the government’s sway later over the third sector organisations active in migrant integration field and controlled everyday narrative sometimes by circulating its own fake news.¹ The migration crisis also provided Orbán with substance to define Europeanization anew. For him, Europe was the space where a conservative, Christian interpretation should rule rather than the liberal and cosmopolitan Europe that the “Brussels elite”, aka the EU Commission according to Orbán, steers. With respect to migration management, Orbán asked for respect from the EU. “We have guarded Europe's borders for a thousand years and fought for our national independence. We are a brave and warrior nation that knows well who is not respected, despised. We are not understood in Brussels today”.² Orbán still claimed a moral authority with a warning that a new népvándorlás or “the Great wandering of the peoples” put a question mark for all that was taken for granted in Europe.” Ostensibly defending the peoples of Europe, Orbán stated that “we do not want to become a nation of migrants. We do not want to see what the migrant communities of Western Europe bring: terror, public insecurities, the feeling of safety and comfort of being at home that the autochthonous nations feel at the face of migration”.³ To this extent, Orbán took one of the membership obligations of Hungary – applying the refugee settlement quota – to referendum in 2016. Orbán took this opportunity to criticize the EU and its bureaucrats for not being able to defend Europe and highlighted the righteousness of Hungary and the role that it played in the “defense” of Europe.

[... Europe] first rejected its roots and instead of a Europe that acts with its Christian roots, it turned to building Europe of open society [with reference to Soros Foundation – authors]. In Christian Europe, work had value, humans had dignity, man and woman were equal, the family was the foundation of the nation, nation was the foundation of Europe, and states in their turn guaranteed security. In today’s Europe of Open Society, there are no borders, the European people are exchanged with migrants, family became co-habitation that can vary as desired, nation, national self-awareness and national feeling are negative and it is considered to be excessive. In liberal Europe, to be European does not mean anything.⁴

In a way, standing against Brussels and common migration management became a signifier of being a true European for Orbán.

We stand against the politically correct migration policy and have decided to stand by the defense of borders [...] The situation with the bureaucrats in Brussels is the same as those who lost their eyesight: you have to pay attention to their hands not their mouths.

We, Hungarians, are one of the committed countries with the European Union. Our commitment to European common future is strong even further. This is the very reason why we want to change [the quota system] to defend Europe, which we all love, feel ourselves at home, for which we gave sacrifices.⁵

To dispel the criticisms on the treatment of asylum-seekers in Hungary and particularly their inhuman treatment and accommodation at the transit-zone (Gyollai and Korkut 2019), Orbán was equally fierce.

[W]hen we defend our borders, we do not only do something for Hungary, not only protect Hungary's interests, but the whole, everyone who is behind us, or else the whole Europe. Those EU member states, which fail to defend the European borders, are the ones that fail to maintain solidarity with the other European Union member states. We expect that they do not allege us with failing European solidarity and talking about lack of solidarity with respect to Hungary.⁶

Orbán's position is that Hungary sets the future course of Europeanization rather than the EU Commission and its liberal members. Hence, reflecting on the discrepancy between refugee reception in Hungary and the EU rules and regulations to this extent, Orbán stated that "Europe would have done better has it not rejected Hungarian solutions, which prove themselves to be operational and useful, and many other countries have adopted them from [Hungary] already".⁷ The discussion above shows how amidst the migration crisis, Orbán attempted to assume a moral leadership not only for the Hungarian public but with European publics in mind as well. He succeeded in his quest, and managed to inculcate an alternative style of Europeanization while maintaining a positive image of EU in Hungary at 52% with a 9% increase from earlier years.⁸ In this regard, our interviewees from the civil sector reflected on how Hungary managed to pursue a "hardcore" migration policy in the EU but veered away from the EU, and presented Europe as dysfunctional with over-burdened structures whereby many that failed in their asylum applications cannot be returned. In a nutshell, Hungary opposes this system of refugee reception and states that what the Hungarians wished to see happening for the rest of Europe, that is, a highly-controlled reception system, has already happened in Hungary.⁹ In this attempt, Hungary endeavored to tell both to the rest of Europe and its public that the Hungarian system is not all that different from the practices in other EU countries. In a way, raising attention to particular events in Italy or France and a form of whataboutism justified de-humanizing practices against asylum-seekers in Hungary.¹⁰ Furthermore, as a result of the differences between member-state and EU priorities and their overall disparity, the projects and services set at the EU level do not extend to member-states.¹¹ This made one of our interviewees to indicate that there is no EU-level of migration management at all and what goes on in Hungary contravenes all international migration treaties. In this muddled migration governance, Orbán consolidates his own migration and conservative Europeanisation narrative as an alternative to the liberal course of Europeanization that held sway in the EU for decades.

3. The pandemic and the coronavirus crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic provided Viktor Orbán with yet another opportunity to regulate the everyday narrative around crisis situation. Perhaps not accidentally, the PM inferred a causal link between the pandemic and migration in his regular weekly Friday radio interview on national channel Kossuth Rádió in March 2020:

There's no doubt that we're engaged in a war on two fronts: on one front there is migration, and on the other the coronavirus epidemic. And as movement spreads the disease and increases the epidemic to a global scale, and migration is itself movement, there is a logical connection between the two things. But as Hungary has so far successfully defended itself against migration, we are also protected from infections potentially being brought into the country by migrants. We're not letting in anyone, and we won't be letting in anyone.

Prior to that, the government shut down the transit zones that operate both as de facto and de jure reception centres at the Hungarian-Serbian border, claiming that most of the asylum seekers arriving to Hungary transit through Iran – one of the epicentres of the virus. This discursive cross-referencing between migration issues and the pandemic has been instrumental to the government's purpose to legitimise its own crisis management role to the public. Even what may appear as irrational moves such as donating hundreds of thousands of face masks to Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and North Macedonia in April – despite nationwide GPs' having requested the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE), were justified with obfuscated coronavirus migration connection. Péter Szijjártó, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, rubber-stamped the decision as necessary and indicated that this was necessary to support Hungary's southern neighbours in their fight with irregular migration. Szijjártó argued that if these countries were incapacitated by the virus, they would not be able to overcome a potential future migratory pressure.¹⁴

Furthermore, the Orbán government also received a rule by decree power from the Hungarian Parliament effectively indefinitely in mid-March 2020¹⁵ in order to enhance salience in crisis management but essentially to assist Orbán consolidate his role central to crisis management. In order to guarantee continuity of control in the Parliament, Fidesz also introduced a clause that whilst the crisis situation continues there could be no by-election or referendum. This was an attempt to hinder the Hungarian opposition from any attempts to tarnish the parliamentary control of the Fidesz government and won against the government thanks to building electoral alliances. However, despite having assumed an unprecedented and exclusive power to handle the crisis thanks to rule-by-decree, the government dodged responsibility for care home deaths as an example in Budapest. Orbán exploited the situation for electoral purposes, and blamed the opposition mayor of the capital Gergely Karácsony for deaths.

I want to underline that we can move on to the second stage of defence if everyone acts responsibly. This is true for mayors, and also for the Mayor of Budapest – because running care homes still places a huge burden of responsibility on his shoulders. This is not an easy position. You, too, know this type: there are people who are somehow innately theoretical, and there are people who are innately practical. How shall I put it? If such a person marries into your family, you can be sure that when they buy some flat pack furniture, you'll have to go around to assemble it for them. Or to put what I'm talking about into a rural context, when there's a traditional pig slaughter this is someone who only turns up right at the end for dinner; but this doesn't bother anyone, because at least he's not in the way throughout the rest of the day while everyone else is working. So theoretical people write excellent studies, and no doubt the Mayor of Budapest will also write an excellent study about infections in the Pesti street care home; but in the meantime more than forty people have died. So if, say, someone like [former pro-government mayor of Budapest] István Tarlós was mayor, he [would have gone] to the front, steps forward to take control of the defence and restore order.

After two months of emergency rule, Orbán signalled that he was ready to relinquish his extraordinary powers at the end of May 2020 while his government was looking to shift from “crisis governance” to play “a modest role in pandemic preparedness” according to the government spokesperson Gergely Gulyás. There are some, who may consider this a sign of well-functioning democracy in Hungary. However, if we approach his crisis governance amidst the pandemic and particularly his discursive style, we can grasp the legacy of the rule by decree will leave in Hungary.

At the time of writing the government revealed the questions of the forthcoming “national consultation” about public opinions on its crisis management. Similar to other crises, national consultation is Orbán's strategy to keep crisis mood alight in order to justify continuity in his technocratic leadership style. National consultation has been a governmental tool of manipulation, which predominantly consists of leading questions prompting answers favoured by the Fidesz-KDNP government (Gyollai, 2018; Gyollai and Korkut, 2019). Although framed around the coronavirus crisis, the current consultation merges the measures introduced during the pandemic with the earlier anti-immigrant, Europhobic and anti-Soros discourse of Orbán, thus attempts to gain legitimation of the government's extraordinary crisis management techniques.

Further anti-EU political message was embellished into crisis management since Orbán stated that the coronavirus crisis has exposed the EU's "weaknesses" and failure to help in times of need.²² Orbán justified his anti-westernism with a trope that "help does not really come from here". Alleging the EU's institutional structures having deficiencies in responding to the crisis, he continued "there are times when you can't be polite" and he "made it clear to EU "squeakers" that now is not the time to "reason" with legal, theoretical issues because there is an epidemic, lives need to be saved". He continued to say that "the high-salaried EU epidemiology office staff" i.e., the European Centre for Disease Prevention, failed in January and February months to prevent the pandemic in Europe.²³

Instead, he chose to endorse the Chinese credentials of the fight against the coronavirus. He and the Chinese Ambassador to Budapest met a Chinese plane with medical supplies at the Budapest Airport earlier in the crisis while the Hungarian media provided the images of Orbán and the Ambassador of China meeting each other with elbow greetings to emphasise the conviviality between the two regimes.²⁴

While Orbán's move to rule by decree has been condemned by several international actors including EU officials and institutions, Orbán commented on their criticisms as the "most hideous and hypocritical" attack amidst his efforts to save Hungarian lives.²⁵ As he later phrased it in a radio interview:

They're (the EU) preoccupied with us, even though they should be concentrating on the virus and the disease. [...] In Brussels they're sitting in some sort of bubble; and instead of saving lives, they're busy telling other people what to do [...] So the claims being made by our opponents – whom in this situation I can unhesitatingly describe as our enemies – are factually false... So it's absolutely obvious that these are political attacks. And the truth is that this is a network. I'm loath to repeat this mantra, but Hungary has opponents who are only too eager to sink their teeth into this country: they want to plunder it and appropriate its resources. George Soros stands at the centre of this network. His people are in Brussels, in the positions from where the present criticisms are being aimed at us.²⁶

Thereby, similar to economic crisis and the period after the sudden increase in the number of irregular migrant arrivals to Europe, Orbán once again has placed alibi concepts at the heart of his crisis management strategy and attack against the Brussels elite.

To conclude the Hungarian case shows how amidst crises, rather than ensuring the accountability of their decisions, governments can seek full executive control amidst a crisis narrative that alleges external alibis and foes with economic, humanitarian, and health challenges and failures. Political leaders can stimulate the processes by which their followers' understanding of the world is produced (van Leuwen 2007, 95) during crises. Leaders have a stake in social knowledge production, legitimation, and inculcation of such knowledge among their followers (van Leuwen 2007; Reyes 2011) to foster collective rationalities. Since being elected to power in 2010, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has remained an effective force of social knowledge creation regarding an alternative economic system to face the aftermath of the financial crisis (c.f. Korkut 2012), a protectionist and security-oriented migration regime (Gyollai 2019 and Gyollai and Korkut 2019 and 2020), and finally a technocratic leadership orientation to face the coronavirus crisis (Korkut forthcoming). What is crucial for our purposes is to understand how he could maintain a convergent anti-elitist, anti-liberal, and anti-western tone in all throughout, while inculcating that Hungary is the pillar of stability and the future of Europe. This necessitates an understanding of how public philosophies operate.

Public philosophies entrusting crisis management to authoritative executive action can become a kind of meta-problem resolution mechanism for the public. When a new issue arises, these meta-ideas provide a heuristic that tells political actors what aspects to emphasize and what side to take. These meta-ideas may also provide a way for political actors to gain legitimacy on specific topics that for the audience might be unfamiliar terrain (Mehta, 2011, 42). In this way, across the economic, migration, and coronavirus crises Orbán

set the parameters of a shared vision between the public and the leader while himself as the sole change agency to face upcoming challenges.

Public philosophies matter particularly when many citizens uphold simplistic and pragmatic opinions about complex matters such as economy, migration, and pandemic. In the cacophony of simplistic opinions, expert opinions on complex matters can go amiss and political leaders as entrepreneurs may appeal to hearts much easier. At the same time, while accountability remains absent or hindered, political leaders can pragmatically juggle foes and enemies (migrants, international forces, the EU elite, domestic opposition to name a few) as it fits with their crisis-management techniques. While one can say that it is lack of media freedom that presents the opportunity to political entrepreneurs to manipulate, it is also noteworthy that neither during the migration nor the coronavirus crisis, the Hungarian opposition managed to present alternatives to manipulative discourses of the government. This policy brief shows the importance of producing alternative paradigms in order to contravene authoritarian narratives rather than cynicism that has determined the political course of action that liberal politicians and citizens have pursued for too long.

We also showed that rejecting the liberal course of Europeanisation is not necessarily Euroscepticism or Eurorejectionism, but can operate as a quest for an alternative Europeanization – one that pragmatically serves conservative politics. In this way, Orbán can even emerge as a true pro-EU figure. Considering this case, the European Parliament and European Commission have a duty to consolidate the public narrative that endorsing democracy, equality, and human rights is not a characteristic of what their foes allege as a liberal agenda. These are at the fundamentals of the European project. The EU will otherwise be running the danger of adopting an image that it takes sides in highly politicized debates affecting European futures and fundamental rights as its foes diminish the democratic element as barely liberal and self-serving for a distant elite. What the Hungarian case continuously shows is how their narrative operates as a pragmatic branding tool to endorse a crisis-managing government with the sole aim to deliver consistently while fighting against its domestic and external liberal foes. Considering our analysis above, we have the following policy recommendations.

It is with urgency that European Union should concentrate on following its member states' political accountability structures as it does with financial accountability for structural funds. The EU should develop measures for political accountability in its member states in order to safeguard the standards for democratic governance is met and maintained. Political accountability is the main pillar of democratic governance. There is a relationship between enfeebled accountability, manipulation of public opinion, and EU member states' political, economic, humanitarian tendencies contravening Europeanisation. Therefore, similar to vigilance with financial accountability, the European Commission needs to make sure that political accountability is in order in its member states.

An issue that commonly appeared in Hungarian narratives is using alibi concepts and alleging external foes with responsibility for crises. It is unacceptable that the PM of a member state can target the EU Commission calling it continuously "the Brussels elite". It is even more puzzling that the EU Commission does not come out straightforward against these allegations and support civil society in a public campaign in Hungary to present to the Hungarian public where the EU stands on democratic governance clearly. The EC should commission a task force or start a public inquiry to find innovative ways for engaging with European publics with the aim of encountering the nativist populist challenge and promote democratic governance in member states. In the absence of such frank engagement with European publics, it is no wonder that the national politicians with populist tendencies continue to allege the EU with Brussels-based elitism.

End-Notes

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Policy Brief 4

Crisis Governance and the Quest for Alternative Europeanisation in Hungary

Project Identity

Project name:	RESPOND: Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond
Acronym:	RESPOND
Project coordination:	Uppsala University Önver Cetrez and Soner Barthoma
Website:	www.respondmigration.com
Funding:	Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020), H2020-SC6-ENG-GLOBALLY-2016-2017
Project no:	770564
Duration:	December 2017 – November 2020 (36 months)

For more information about the brief:

Prof. Umut Korkut, Principal Investigator, Glasgow Caledonian University
Contact: Umut.Korkut@gcu.ac.uk

Daniel Gyollai, PhD Candidate, Glasgow Caledonian University
Contact: Daniel.gyollai@gcu.ac.uk

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