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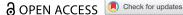
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ABSTRACT

Despite their similar contexts, the Czech and Slovak memberships in the EU have developed in fundamentally different ways. Whilst Czechia has cast itself as a somewhat half-hearted, reluctant EU member state, Slovakia's approach to the union has been more positive, with enthusiasm for deepening integration with the EU. Our analysis reveals that, despite some similarities, these differences also pertain to the patterns of discursive legitimisation of the EU within the official Czech and Slovak governmental discourses, underscoring the complexity and multifaceted nature of these processes in post-communist contexts. Working with a comprehensive dataset of official Czech and Slovak government documents, we investigate how, and interpret the ways in which, the EU has been discursively legitimised in the two countries between 2004 and 2023. To that end, we draw on insights from discursive institutionalism theory and adopt the general orientation of discourse historical analysis. We show that while the procedural legitimisation of the EU is a key element in the discursive practices of both the Czech and Slovak governments, the ideational dimension of legitimisation manifests especially within the Slovak discourse.

1. Introduction

The literature identifies two primary modes of legitimisation of European integration: the ideational mode, which emphasises shared values and common identity, and the procedural mode, which centres on operational aspects such as efficiency (Weiss 2002, 62–63; Wodak 2018, 11–13). Considering the specific conditions in post-communist countries propelled by the vision of a 'return to Europe', we can expect that both dimensions will play a crucial role in the official discourses aimed at legitimising EU membership. The historical experience of Central and Eastern Europeans, marked by geopolitical vulnerability (Wandycz 2001), coupled with the Europeanisation and catching up with the West supported by the EU's 'transformative power' (Grabbe 2006), enabled local elites to benefit from the almost 'natural' legitimacy of the EU. After the completion of the Eastern enlargement, however, Europeanisation proved to be somewhat shallow and the original optimism was replaced with increasing politicisation of the EU in an environment of rising populism in domestic politics. Such developments led to the anticipation of a dual shift in the legitimisation discourse: a movement towards techno-cratisation and instrumentalisation, in the sense of weakened emphasis on the original focus

on identity and belonging, and questioning of the efficiency of the EU by the local elite, as was the case during the pandemic crisis (Havlík and Hloušek 2023). This raises an intriguing question: does the discourse in post-communist countries conform to these theoretical expectations?

We seek to explore this through an empirical investigation of the discursive practices in Czechia and Slovakia legitimising the EU as a polity between 2004 and 2023. By scrutinising how these two countries have articulated their relationship with the EU, we aim to discern the extent to which the anticipated trends in legitimisation strategies have materialised, as well as the patterns of convergence and divergence across the two countries. Our analysis reveals that while procedural legitimisation of the EU constitutes a key element in the discursive practices of both the Czech and Slovak governments, the ideational dimension of legitimisation manifests especially within the Slovak discourse.

Working with a comprehensive dataset of official Czech and Slovak governmental documents on the EU, we investigate how, and interpret the ways in which, the EU has been constructed in the discourse in the two countries in the period 2004–2023. We adopt the general orientation of the discourse historical approach to critical discourse analysis (Reisigl and Wodak 2000; Wodak 2011) and draw on insights from discursive institutionalism theory (Schmidt 2010, 2013). As such, this linguistically informed contribution provides critical insights into how the Czech and Slovak governments have ascribed legitimacy to the EU and, through language, have legitimised their perspectives on the union.

The selection of Czechia and Slovakia was driven by several considerations. Both countries are CEE EU and NATO member states in the 'small state' category. Both also fall under the 'core member states' category of small states, which includes those 'affected most by EU integration in the sense of having their action space most severely limited by EU rules and regulations, but also enjoying the best chance of influencing the EU through multiple formal and informal channels' (Wivel and Baldur 2018, 266). There is a long-shared history, a similar geopolitical situation in Europe, linguistic proximity and dense political and personal contacts that create a high level of mutual trust between the Czechs and Slovaks (Gyarfášová 2013, 104–106). Both countries struggled with compliance with EU law at the start of their membership (Falkner 2010).

Simultaneously, however, there is remarkable variation in their approaches to the EU (for a detailed discussion of the differences, see below), including reservations against the deepening of European integration widely shared amongst Czech mainstream parties ever since entering the EU in 2004 (Hloušek and Petr 2020). Also, Eurobarometer surveys consistently reveal Czechia as manifesting more sceptical attitudes to the EU than Slovakia. For instance, the latest survey highlighted that only 43% Czechs feel attached to the EU, the lowest level in the EU, compared to 56% in Slovakia (European Commission 2023, 13). The comparison of the Czech and Slovak positions within the EU thus conforms to the most-similar-systems-design (MSSD) model, based on the path-dependence of EU policies set in motion in Czechoslovakia before 1993. As such, it is the contrasting nature of the countries' membership stories that makes this analysis especially appealing.

At the same time, examination of the Czech and Slovak cases also provides valuable insights for a broader context. As will be illustrated below, EU legitimisation strategies in the 'post-communist' region are far from unified. There is divergence in emphases on economic and political topics, mirroring a broader divergence between the two countries: in one, the mainstream discourse is rather reserved while the other is more pro-integration. Concentration on the economic aspects of integration often predicates the legitimisation of the EU based on national interests, while a focus on the political dimension tends to work more with the values and patterns of behaviour that EU membership brings. Furthermore, there is a link between legitimisation discourses and a country's approach to Europeanisation, which either entails a top-down strategy of downloading values and patterns of behaviour from the EU, or a bottom-up approach in which reform ideas are uploaded, regardless of the actual level of passive or active engagement the member state exhibits. Czechia

and Slovakia represent almost ideal cases across all the dimensions linking their legitimisation discourses to the broader context of EU politics.

We begin by situating the enquiry in the wider context of research on Czech and Slovak EU membership and explaining its contribution to current knowledge. The next part outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the article. Following this, we present the data and explain our methodological approach. The subsequent part is devoted to the empirical analysis and the concluding section summarises our key arguments.

2. Literature review and context

By providing an exploration of the Czech and Slovak official discursive legitimisation of the EU, we aim to make an empirical contribution to the literature about the two countries' discourses on the EU, and to the scholarship on the discursive legitimisation of the EU in member states generally (Kutter 2020; Vaara 2014; Wodak and Angouri 2014). There is a lack of comparative literature on Czechia and Slovakia. Kazharski (2019) demonstrated that although the point of departure is the same for official discourses on the 'EU core' in both countries – a feeling of geopolitical marginality – their geopolitical imaginaries differ.

Despite the lack of comparative material, it is possible to build on the literature that treats Czechia and Slovakia as case studies. Neumayer (2011) explains why a soft Eurosceptic position (EU? Yes, but. . .) is a good fit for the Czech political tradition and geopolitical settings. Focus on securitisation of Czech sovereignty limits will to get closer to the 'EU core' (Kazharski 2019, 434). Differences concerning the future and finality of the integration process have remained a vital feature of Czech party discourse on the EU (Kovář 2019). The migration crisis and the general unwillingness of Czech political elites to bear the burden and ignore the harsh opposition to any compulsory or voluntary relocation mechanism undermine Czech commitments to some core EU values, such as solidarity (Tabosa 2020). Even though the current foreign policy preferences were realised mainly within the EU, many Czech politicians had started to look farther eastwards to China and Russia (Hloušek and Kaniok 2021) until the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

In contrast to Czechia, Slovakia has been 'building, quite successfully, the image of a good and unproblematic European' (Láštic 2007, 14) and became a 'good member' (Malová et al. 2010, 171) with strong continuity in the priorities and preferences of its EU-related policy since the last phase of the accession process. The limited capacity of Slovak institutions to create an official position on the EU has led to a reactive approach focused on downloading EU priorities (Bilčík 2008, 22–25). The economic crisis triggered some politicisation of EU issues in the Slovak domestic political debate, but the official position of the Slovak government did not substantially change (Bilčík 2010, 38–39). The economic crisis and Slovak support for the political and economic measures taken in response placed the country at the core of the EU (Bilčík 2014).

After joining the EU, the increasing politicisation of EU issues did not trigger rifts within the policy-making elite. Although the Slovak public disagreed on EU issues, the elites were firmly devoted to a pro-European course (Pisklová 2022, 18–19). Even the populist Prime Minister Robert Fico confirmed Slovakia's position at the core of the EU in 2017 (Mravcová and Havlík 2022). On the other hand, as Gál and Malová (2018) argue, Slovakia has remained a somewhat passive 'policy-taker', able to adopt EU laws technically and to participate in the Single Market. Slovakia, for instance, outperforms Czechia in transposing Single Market directives, with deficits of 0.6% versus Czechia's 0.9%, compared to the EU average of 0.7% (European Commission 2024). But Slovakia is hampered by the lack of internalisation of EU cultural and social norms by the Slovak political elite.[1]

The literature that directly addresses the discursive legitimisation of the EU espoused by Czech and Slovak political actors and institutions is outdated and limited (Braun 2008, 2010; Gabrižová 2014; Haughton 2009). Current research focuses more on the subversive discursive strategies of CEE opponents of European integration (Coman and Leconte 2019; Vermeersch 2019). However, several authors have studied issues related to the creation, maintenance and changes to discourses

justifying EU membership. Haughton (2009) highlights the combination of perceived shortcomings and vulnerabilities as the vital source of the Czech 'choice for Europe'. He stresses the difference between Czechia and other CEE countries (including Slovakia), based on the fact that Czech authorities have looked at the EU mainly through the prism of (self-)interest and are concerned about the future development of the EU, to preserve the economic gains of integration. Haughton's analysis corresponds with the findings of Braun 2008, 2010), who works with the assumption that domestic discourse is crucial for the legitimacy of the EU. In the Slovak case, the level of EU politicisation has remained low, and the reputation of Slovakia as a simple follower of EU policies has remained uncontested (Gabrižová 2014).

3. Theoretical framework

The broad orientation of this article reflects an argumentative turn in EU studies (Lynggaard 2019) and increasing interest in the role of discourses in shaping political outcomes. Falling into the category of country-specific research on the discourses of member states about the EU (MacMillan 2015), our exploration starts from the core assumption that the EU policy of member states is not driven solely by material factors, but is also socially constructed (Adler 1997; Hopf 1998). It is part of 'a constructivist understanding that all social practice is meaning-based', with policies – as part of social practice – always 'constructed in meaning through a system of representation' (Larsen 2018, 68). Naturally, we do not promote a monocausal explanation for countries' EU policies, realising that these are shaped by a rich mixture of causal factors of which discourse is only one.

Having adopted the general orientation of the discourse historical approach to critical discourse studies (Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2008; Reisigl and Wodak 2000), discourse analysis is understood here both as 'a theory and a method' (Larsen 2018, 62; for more specifics on the method, see below), which over the last three decades has 'achieved mainstream status in European integration studies' (Diez 2014, 320; cf.; Christiansen, Erik Jørgense, and Wiener 2001; Kutter 2020). Studying discourse is 'crucial for an understanding of member states' European policy' (Diez 2001, 6).

In addition, we draw on insights from discursive institutionalism theory (Schmidt 2010, 2013), which emphasises the importance of ideas and discourses in institutional processes and conceives of discourse as a key element that interacts with formal and informal rules within institutions and enables or constrains political action. Our work is thus in line with the long history of research on discursive contests over EU legitimacy (Kutter 2020; Vaara 2014; Wodak and Angouri 2014). Following Weber (1978), we take an empirically oriented approach to legitimacy as a social activity that can be analytically observed and tested. At the same time, we understand the process of legitimisation as 'a crucial use of language in society' (Reyes 2011, 781–782) and, together with Steffek, conceive of discourse as a key legitimising tool, since '[e]mpirically, the legitimacy of governance and authority can only be established through a public discourse' (Steffek 2009, 315). Language is perceived as 'having an important independent status' and as 'a rich source of analysis rather than "just" words' (Larsen 2018, 62). In the words of Larsen (2018, 62), 'struggles over social meaning as they are played out in declaratory diplomacy are seen as just as central to international relations as they are to other domains of social life' (Larsen 2018, 62). To operationalise the above-mentioned distinction between ideational and procedural legitimisation (Weiss 2002; Wodak 2018), we understand them respectively as legitimising the EU through ideational evaluations emphasising shared values, common identities and a collective sense of belonging within the EU, and as legitimising the EU through procedural evaluations that focus more on the efficiency, outcomes, and functional benefits of European integration.

4. Data and methodological framework

Aiming to capture the official strategic level of the discourse on the EU, we constructed a dataset of all the official documents on EU strategy or policy adopted by the governments of each country since

accession in 2004. As is documented in the Appendix, this included foreign policy[2] and EU policy concepts, the countries' foreign policy priorities, government programme statements, reports on foreign policy etc., amounting to 56 documents, evenly distributed between the two countries (28 documents for each). In line with Schmidt's (2010) distinction between coordinative and communicative discourse, our target was the latter type – discourse between policy actors and the public. Using this category of data, our research focused exclusively on the discourse as 'sold' by political agents (in this case, the Czech and Slovak governments). The selection process for the documents involved careful screening to ensure that each document met the criteria of relevance and comprehensiveness to confirm that it contributed to a holistic understanding of the governmental discourse on the EU.

Our decision to focus only on official documents was informed by five key considerations. First, the documents communicate governmental viewpoints in their 'pure' form, without the constraints of media gatekeeper rules or conventions. As such, they represent the Czech and Slovak governments' deliberate choices of how to present their strategic thinking on the EU to the public. Serving as 'preconditions for action' (Çelik 2022, 1026), they are often exploited for signalling purposes (Jönsson 2016), acting as a signal of the government's commitments to certain policies and its constraints. Second, unlike speeches or media pronouncements, which might be influenced by the need to address immediate concerns or cater to specific audiences (Boréus and Bergström 2017), these documents are designed to articulate the government's long-term vision (Rapley 2007, 13). This makes them invaluable for understanding the underlying principles and objectives that guide member states' interactions with the EU. Third, in line with insights from discursive institutionalism, documents of this type play a critical role in setting expectations and drawing boundaries for member states' engagement with the EU (cf. Schmidt 2010, 2013). They delineate what is considered acceptable or desirable in terms of policy directions, priorities, and modes of engagement, and influence actors' perceptions of the scope of legitimate policy outcomes. Fourth, official documents, by their nature, offer a standardised form of communication that allows for direct comparison of the strategic orientations of different countries. This is particularly important in studies that aim to identify patterns or shifts in discourse over a longer period of time or across different political contexts. Fifth, this type of government-provided information tends to be heavily scripted and controlled and as such is generally perceived as rich in clarity and coherence. This, in our view, limits the potential for data misinterpretation and reinforces the validity of the comparative analysis.

That being said, the data selected for our study are not without their limitations. First, it is crucial to acknowledge that our dataset represents only a segment of the broader discourse on the EU within each country (albeit an essential one, as explained above). There is also a discrepancy between the official institutional discourse and that of political leaders. We recognise that incorporating politicians' rhetoric into our analysis could open up another level of understanding; however, it is important to note that such discourse tends to fluctuate in response to different audiences (domestic versus the EU), is typically policy-sensitive, and is dependent on the political cycle (Dostál and Hloušek 2015; Mravcová and Havlík 2022). By contrast, and as already highlighted, official documents present a more consistent picture, providing insight into long-term perspectives, priorities and discourse topics. What is more, certain types of documents, such as the Reports on the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic, were published only for a limited period before being discontinued. Yet, we believe that the number of documents consulted provides a robust foundation for our analysis.

To explore the national institutional production of discourse on the EU, we use Krzyżanowksi's (2010) analytical operationalisation of the discourse historical approach with an emphasis on thematic analysis. This is a qualitative, content-oriented analysis that zooms in on the ideational content in the sense of the embedded discourse topics that define the Czech and Slovak official discourses on the EU (Krzyżanowski 2010, 81–83). From the conceptual point of view, the discourse topics 'summarise the text and specify its most important information' (see van Dijk 1991: 113 as cited in Krzyżanowski 2010, 81).

Our approach was inherently qualitative, focusing on the ideational content and thematic undercurrents that permeated these official discourses over two decades. In navigating through the corpus of text, we focused on the identification of stable and recurrent broad discourse topics that consistently emerged across the timeframe under scrutiny. This endeavour required a meticulous examination of the textual material, as we sought to discern patterns, repetitions, and variations in how the EU was represented and legitimised by the Czech and Slovak governments. Our analytical process was iterative and reflexive, involving continuous engagement with the textual data and the literature. This involved multiple rounds of reading the documents to identify recurring themes and patterns. By revisiting the texts several times, we were able to refine our understanding and ensure that the discourse topics we identified were both comprehensive and accurate. Through this process, we were able to distil the complex discursive constructions of the EU into three key discourse topics for each country, which then served as the basis for our comparative analysis. This qualitative approach made it possible to capture the rich ideational content and provided insights into the thematic patterns that developed across the two decades of the countries' EU membership (for a similar qualitative approach, see, for instance, MacMillan 2015 or Mikalay and Neuman 2023).

5. Findings: key discourse topics in Czech and Slovak official governmental documents on the EU

For each national corpus, we identified three key discourse topics on the EU. For Czechia, these encompass: 1) the EU as a means to an end, 2) the EU as primarily an economic project, and 3) the EU as in need of remodelling, whereas for Slovakia they are: 1) the EU as a means to an end, 2) the EU as a community of values, and 3) the EU as a role model. These topics collectively reveal intricate patterns of convergence, divergence, and direct contradiction in the two countries' approaches to EU legitimisation, serving as lenses through which these can be understood and compared. In what follows, we therefore highlight a trio of discourse topics demonstrating convergence (the EU as a means to an end), divergence (the EU as a primarily economic project versus the EU as a community of values), and opposition (the EU as in need of remodelling versus the EU as a role model). In comparing the cases, we will now explore these topics in depth, whilst also providing textual examples to illustrate the particular ways in which the official discourse has legitimised the EU through language use.

5.1. Converging discourse topics: the EU as a means to an end

Ever since the countries joined the EU, a constant and stable feature of their official governmental discourse has been the strong embeddedness of EU membership in line with national interests (cf. Haughton 2009). Both countries have legitimised the EU by praising its efficiency, strongly embracing membership in the union not as a goal in itself but as a tool, which aligns with procedural legitimisation (Wodak 2018). Numerous examples from the Czech and Slovak corpora show that the promotion of the national interest has provided a robust contextualisation factor for Czech and Slovak thinking on the EU ('European integration cannot be seen as an end in itself, but as an instrument serving the interests of all EU member states and their citizens' [GOV CZ 2011: 3]; 'The government's priority in the European Union will be to rigorously promote the interests of the Czech Republic' [GOV CZ 2010: 13; also GOV CZ 2004: 1, 2005: 3, 2014: 4, 51, 2015a: 1, 2018a, 2018b: 24]); 'Membership in the EU creates a new space for actively promoting the Slovak Republic's interests' [MFA SK 2004: 2; '[I]nstitutional anchoring in the common political and economic space of the European Union represents not only new opportunities for promoting the foreign policy interests of the Slovak Republic' [MFA SK 2005: 2; also GOV SK 2023b: 4]). Yet, it is not just the EU as an entity but also its specific policies which are portrayed as primarily serving to fulfil/protect national interests and satisfy the demands of the two countries. For instance, the Common Foreign and Security Policy has been particularly conceived of as a platform for promoting national interests (GOV CZ 2011: 11;

GOV SK 2006: 54; GOV SK 2012: 5; GOV SK 2016: 3; GOV SK 2020: 114; MFA SK 2004: 2; MFA SK 2007: 3; MFEA SK 2017: 3; cf. MFA CZ 2019).

At the same time, however, there are two slight differences in the countries' discursive representations of the EU on this topic. First, unlike Slovakia, Czechia has cast respect for its national interests not only as an expectation but as a 'requirement' ('The Czech Republic demands that other EU member states respect its interests' [GOV CZ 2011: 8]), which indicates a higher level of rhetorical assertiveness and confidence as a member state.

Second, the Czech assessment is that the EU is a 'pragmatic project' – a problem-solving entity which has proven itself, for instance, in 'building a common economic space and maintaining a peaceful Europe' (GOV CZ 2011: 8; prominently also GOV CZ 2018a, 2018b: 25–26, 2022: 27–28). Implied here is a clear expectation that the EU must 'prove itself' in terms of delivering practical benefits to Czech citizens. Indeed, the EU as an efficient policy-machine supporting Czech interests and delivering tangible benefits has become an important lens through which the country looks at the EU. Whilst Slovak documents also describe the benefits of membership as 'indisputable' (MFEA SK 2020: 2; GOV SK 2020: 112; GOV SK 2023a: 3; GOV SK 2023b: 81), they do not place the burden of proof on the EU to demonstrate its efficacy or contribution to Slovak economic progress and political stability.

5.2. Diverging discourse topics: the EU as primarily an economic project versus the EU as a community of values

A key point of divergence is the topic of the EU as primarily an economic project, as detected in the Czech corpus, aligning with the procedural type of legitimisation, and the EU as primarily a community of values, as identified in the Slovak corpus, which distinctly reflects ideational legitimisation. However, this is not to imply that the Slovak discourse entirely omits the concept of the EU as an economic entity (see, for instance, GOV SK 2023b: 81–82), nor does it suggest that the Czech discourse wholly neglects the aspect of the EU a community of values (as aptly illustrated in the agenda of the 2023 Czech EU Presidency, which placed a significant emphasis on values [GOV CZ 2022a]). These notions are present, but are comparatively subdued and far less prominent than the other discourse topics identified in the respective corpora.

The concept of the EU as primarily an economic project highlights that Czech EU membership is motivated mainly (though not exclusively) by pragmatic economic considerations. In this sense, Czechia shows a stable preference for the EU doing business, in contrast to the EU doing politics (cf. Reisigl and Wodak 2000). A persistent feature reflected in this view of the EU is a utilitarian concern related to economic evaluations of EU integration – that is, the EU's ability to generate economic prosperity and the Czech capacity to profit from it. Whilst this discourse topic was to some extent sidelined at the time of accession, it became much more pronounced later on (prominently for instance in CZ GOV 2014: 16, 51; for the key role of economic matters, see also MFA CZ 2013a: 10–11, 2013b: 2–3), even featuring as the number one topic of the Czech EU Presidency in 2009 (GOV CZ 2009a). With an increasing tendency since the 2010s, the Czech government has put forward an image of the EU as an economic entity whose key raison d'être lies in economics and trade, with the single market depicted as a matter of utmost importance (as in 'The main tools for the success of the European project are to harness the potential of the EU internal market' [CZ GOV 2015a: 3]). The 'functioning of the European market', in terms of providing economic security and boosting trade, has been systematically foregrounded as a 'key interest' for the country. This tendency of the Czech official discourse to qualify EU membership in terms of economic values, rather than political ones, and to mainly advocate the economic case for membership is well captured in excerpts that put the economic dimension ahead of politics: '[The EU] has proven itself in building a common economic space and maintaining a peaceful Europe' (GOV CZ 2011: 8).

Another key feature of the Czech governmental discourse is its conspicuous emphasis on efficient exploitation of EU funds as a central pillar in achieving the country's overarching goals, viewing these

resources as absolutely crucial for improving 'the quality of life' and raising economic standards (GOV CZ 2007, 2014: 17, 51; also GOV CZ 2009b: 5; GOV CZ 2015b). This, too, reflects the highly pragmatic approach to EU membership, positioning the utilisation of EU funds as key to translating EU integration into tangible, quantifiable economic and infrastructural advancements.

The Slovak perspective diverges notably from the Czech one in that it lacks the overly pragmatic framing. While there are, as evidenced in the previous sub-section, instances of the instrumentalisation of the EU, the salience of EU values and norms far outweighs any emphasis on economic advantages. Indeed, the characterisation of the EU as a community of values, which Slovakia wants to belong to, is a persistent element in Slovak EU discourse (GOV SK 2006: 3; GOV SK 2010: 50–51; GOV SK 2020: 112). While the Czech documents seek to achieve economic stabilisation and advancement through EU membership, the Slovak ones prioritise political (and, to some extent, even cultural) internalisation of the values and norms of the EU community.

Often, the EU is conceptualised as part of a broader 'Euro-Atlantic space' endowed with specific values, serving as a crucial point of departure for Slovak policies (MFA SK 2007: 3; GOV SK 2012: 5; GOV SK 2023a: 62) and the most substantial 'value anchoring' of the country's politics (MFA SK 2008: 3). Accordingly, the EU has been long identified as the 'first pillar' of Slovak foreign policy (MFEA SK 2016b: 2; MFEA SK 2019: 4; MFEA SK 2020: 2), primarily implying Slovakia's anchorage within the EU's value system. Slovakia puts considerable emphasis on its position within the core of the European integration process (MFEA SK 2013: 2; MFEA SK 2016b: 5), particularly after its accession to the Eurozone and Schengen area. Since then, the affirmation of belonging to the core and sharing the same values – such as democracy, the rule of law, a social market economy, human rights and freedoms (MFEA SK 2014: 2) – has become more intense, as illustrated by the following excerpt: 'Even in 2018, the European Union represented a basic living space and value anchoring for Slovakia. The space of freedom, quality of life, peaceful coexistence, economic strength and common rules that the EU includes remain constant advantages of EU membership' (MFEA SK 2019: 3–4). At the same time, however, these values remain vaguely defined and somewhat general in nature.

5.3. Opposing discourse topics: the EU in need of remodelling versus the EU as role model

A prominent example of contrary discourse topics is that of the EU as in need of remodelling, foregrounded by Czechia, indicative of a procedural legitimisation focus due to its emphasis on enhancing the EU's functional efficiency and responsiveness to member states' needs. This approach inherently seeks to adapt the EU's structures and mechanisms to better serve Czech national interests, underscoring a prioritisation of tangible benefits and operational improvements. Conversely, the discourse of the EU as a role model, prevalent in Slovak official discourse, aligns with ideational legitimisation, as it lauds the EU's value system and aspirational standards, and advocates domestic alignment with these ideals. This view persists even after two decades of EU membership, although the intensity of its expression has slowly decreased over time. While the fundamental idea of modelling is common to both the Czech and Slovak discourses, the logic of its exploitation is diametrically opposed in the rhetoric of each country.

The assertion that the EU needs remodelling aims to redefine the status quo (i.e. reform the existing state of the EU, which could function better) and create pressure for change (as in 'There is no dispute that the EU badly needs reform' [GOV CZ 2018a; also GOV CZ 2018b: 24]). Driven by an effort to maximise economic, political and other benefits stemming from Czech membership, calls for EU reform include a strong element of pragmatism and national interest promotion in the sense that the proposed changes are intended to make the EU more amenable to Czech interests. This underscores the procedural approach to EU legitimisation.

In substantive terms, the Czech documents were initially rather vague as to delimitation of the reform issues. In the first decade of its EU membership, these amounted mostly to 'further deepening and broadening Europe's economic and political integration and strengthening its democratic character' (GOV CZ 2003: 6; similarly also GOV CZ 2013: 2) and

'optimising the political and economic costs' of the internal market (GOV CZ 2011; similarly also GOV CZ 2010: 14, 2013: 2; cf. MFA CZ 2005b, 2006, 2007). The calls for EU reforms became more specific with time, amounting to a host of areas, ranging from reforms to the Economic and Monetary Union (especially in terms of the efficient regulation of the financial sector to prevent excessive speculation and a repeat of the economic and financial crisis), improving the environment for public and private investment, strengthening measures against tax evasion, legislative regulation at the EU level, strengthening democratic legitimacy, the development of agriculture etc. (GOV CZ 2014: 16–17; GOV CZ 2015a; GOV CZ 2018b: 25; GOV CZ 2022b: 27; MFA CZ 2019; cf. GOV CZ 2022a). Although one can find occasional similar calls for EU reform in the Slovak discourse (MFA SK 2005; MFEA SK 2022: 45–46), they are infrequent and rarely go beyond the reform plans of the EU itself.

Of special significance here is the use of the imperative 'must', present in the Czech discourse but conspicuously absent from the Slovak one, as in 'the EU must take action to improve the environment for public and private investment' (GOV CZ 2015a: 5) or 'The European Union must do less, but much better. It must emphasise the strengthening of the role of Member States' (GOV CZ 2018b: 25; also GOV CZ 2018a). There is a clear tendency to use the deontic modal verb 'must' more frequently with increasing length of membership. Making the EU an explicit agent of obligation and instructing it what to do points to the growing sense of self-confidence of Czechia as a member state.

The discourse topic of the EU as in need of remodelling stands in stark contrast to the topic of the EU as a role model, as foregrounded in the Slovak discourse – an element noticeably missing in the Czech case. The Slovak official discourse portrays the EU as showing the trajectory to be followed and the example of quality to be caught up with, and its standards as those to be internalised and emulated (MFEA SK 2018: 3–7). The EU and its member states are seen as benchmarks and objects of desired convergence, indicating the scale of upgrade that Slovakia still needs to achieve (MFEA SK 2022: 38–40). Emphasis has been placed on the 'catching-up' discourse, often concomitant with self-affirmations that Slovakia is now unequivocally a member of the family of EU nations and a normal European state. The following excerpt illustrates this tendency well: 'The educational and cultural environment in Slovakia is comparable to other European countries. Existing democratic political conditions, respect for human rights and the rule of law guarantee political stability and equal chances for all. [...] A functional market economy, together with the successful completion of the necessary reforms, provides a prerequisite for sustainable growth in the standard of living in Slovakia' (MFA 2006: 1).

To narrow the gap with the EU, the official discourse frames as essential Slovakian participation in all key policies, initiatives and institutions of the EU in such a way that does not contradict the political orientation of the EU mainstream (MFA SK 2006a: 5–7; MFA SK 2006b: 6–8; MFEA SK 2016: 2).

In line with this, official documents depict Slovakia as an active follower and supporter of EU initiatives (MFA SK 2008: 13–18; MFA SK 2009a: 9; MFEA SK 2016a: 5; MFEA SK 2020: 2–5) rather than as a member state seeking to upload any substantial reform ideas of its own beyond the EU mainstream (GOV SK 2020: 114). Strengthening the EU itself is seen as a means of automatically reinforcing Slovak foreign policy (MFA SK 2009a: 4), with Slovakia expected to be active in its engagement with the EU. Yet, most of the government's policy priorities have been downloaded from the EU (MFA SK 2011: 2–4; MFA SK 2012: 1–3), sometimes giving the impression of a technical list of items to be accomplished (MFEA SK 2017: 8–12). The official discourse under Pellegrini's government (2018–2020) interestingly reframed the catching-up discourse to include an indirect critique of Slovakia's lack of broad societal consensus concerning the positive aspects of Slovak membership. Such criticism, however, does not fuel any criticism of the EU per se. Instead, the government emphasises the need for more effective communication strategies (GOV SK 2012: 5; GOV SK 2020: 115; MFA SK 2005; MFEA SK 2017: 9; MFEA SK 2018: 5). Even the current government led by populist Robert Fico stresses that membership in the 'unique and exceptional' EU is 'irreplaceable' for Slovakia (GOV SK 2023b: 81).

6. Discussion and conclusion

In the foregoing analysis, we provided novel empirical research results that complement earlier findings on Czech and Slovak EU membership. As anticipated, our findings indicate that both dimensions of EU legitimisation – ideational and procedural – play roles within the official governmental discourses of Czechia and Slovakia, albeit to starkly varying degrees. In particular, our analysis has demonstrated that both the Czech and Slovak governments legitimise the EU by referencing procedural aspects, demonstrating concern for national interests as a key rationale for EU membership and recognising the tangible benefits stemming therefrom.

At the same time, however, we identified notable differences in how the two countries articulate their legitimisation of the EU beyond this shared perspective. In Czechia, the interplay with ideational legitimisation is severely subdued. Reflecting clear emphasis on procedural legitimisation, the Czech discourse is characterised by a transactional approach to Europe, in which the EU membership is evaluated largely through the economic lens and operational efficiencies. At the same time, the Czech discourse often challenges the efficiency of the EU, invoking discussions around the necessity for reforms, thereby partially confirming the expectation of questioning the EU's efficiency. Conversely, the interplay between ideational and procedural legitimisation in Slovakia is more balanced. Contrary to the expectation of a diminished focus on ideational elements, the Slovak discourse more profoundly embraces the ideational legitimisation of the EU, strongly constructing the EU as a space of shared values and emphasising the EU's role in confirming Slovak political and economic maturity as well as successful transformation. Our findings thus confirm those of the existing literature, which highlights Czech self-interested pragmatism driven by economic concerns (Haughton 2009) and the Slovak desire to be perceived as a 'good European' (Malová et al. 2010).

How to account for these differences? Do they emanate solely from the divergent trajectories of historical political discourse, as Kazharski (2019) suggests? Our perspective acknowledges the presence of path dependency; however, we argue that this dependency does not necessarily trace back to the 19th or early 20th centuries. Official governmental legitimisation discourses are products of already discussed mainstream positions in the EU-related domestic political debates in both countries. The reserved Czech stance and reluctance to extend Europeanisation beyond the direct advantages to the country stemming from the single market are reflective of findings from the analysis of Czech documents.

In the Slovak case, the country's more difficult transition to democracy (because of the Mečiar period in the 1990s) and symbolical connection between democratisation in general and Europeanisation in particular, has created a mainstream mindset stressing values and a feeling of belonging, as well as the deliberate depiction of the EU as a sort of blueprint for development (Gál and Malová 2018).

Our research has highlighted the presence of both ideational and procedural legitimisation in both countries, although with varying intensity and specific topical combinations. These divergent patterns of interplay between ideational and procedural legitimacy in Czechia and Slovakia only underscore the complexity and multifaceted nature of EU legitimisation strategies in post-communist contexts, whilst also underscoring that such interplay is essentially fluid and context-dependent.

Noteworthy also is the stability of the legitimisation patterns in both countries over time. Despite the turbulent development of the EU since 2004 and governmental changes in Czechia and Slovakia, the tone of the governmental documents has remained remarkably consistent. This applies even to governments led by populist politicians like Robert Fico and Andrej Babiš. One explanation, on the edge of the historical and discursive institutionalist approach, is that the official governmental discourse legitimising the EU is path-dependent and not prone to any quick changes. This is not so surprising, given the relatively general focus of the government documents, the absence of hard Eurosceptic parties as major governmental partners in both countries, and the rather technical nature of the documents, as well as the fact that such documents are often produced by professional

officers of the ministries of foreign affairs, where stability of opinion can be expected. Further research could delve deeper into the motives behind the consistency of the legitimisation discourses.

Let us briefly discuss also the policy implications of our research. Both the longevity of the discursive legitimisation patterns and predominant focus on efficiency (Czechia) and ideas (Slovakia) pose some doubts about the unintended consequences that may result. Overemphasis on (economic) efficiency carries the risk of generating collective overly high expectations of the EU's capacity to produce this type of desired legitimating output. These hyper-expectations are dangerous as they set unreasonably high standards for the EU to meet that may not be feasible or realistic. Overemphasis on values can result in disappointment or disillusionment when an illiberal politician (such as Prime Minister Fico after the 2023 elections) starts to contest the EU value base. Our assumption is that a more complex legitimisation discourse fully utilising the potential of both ideational and procedural legitimisation (Wodak 2018; Weiss 2022) would ensure a safer strategy in the current stormy weather. Indeed, even Fico did not dare to abandon the value-based arguments altogether in the face of the rather pro-integration opinions of the majority of the Slovak public.

As a concluding note, there is much potential for further research. A multi-agent analysis that involves other discourse agents such as political leaders, civil society organisations and the media could reveal additional layers of complexity in the construction, legitimisation and engagement with the EU in these two countries. Moreover, a broader cross-comparative analysis involving other CEE countries, covering the entire time period of the countries' EU memberships, and assessing how their discourses align or diverge from the Czech and Slovak perspectives, might provide a broader regional understanding of the dynamics of EU membership.

Notes

1. It is important to note that the Slovak coalition government, including Fico's Smer, Hlas-SD (The Voice – Social Democracy), and the Slovak National Party, profoundly changed the domestic rhetoric on Slovak foreign policy vis-à-vis Russian aggression towards Ukraine, and stressed Slovak sovereignty as its main goal. Domestic reforms of an illiberal bent (transformation of public broadcasting, reforms of public prosecution, personnel changes in state administration, including the police forces) might be countered by measures that, among other things, provoke changes in official discourse on the EU and legitimisation of Slovak membership.
2. It is noteworthy that in both Czechia and Slovakia, the relationship with the EU has been long conceptually framed as part of foreign policy.

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