Wake the Sleepwalkers!

An Exploratory Analysis of Ontological (In)security in Czechia and Slovakia

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Acknowledgements

It is hard to put into words the gratitude I feel for all of those whom without, writing this thesis would not have been possible. I would like to thank my dear friends, both foreign and domestic. Your unwavering support and loving words have lightened my burden and given me hope for a brighter future. Thank you for the friendship, the laughter, and when necessary, the occasional shoulder to cry on.

Thank you to my family, who even 4,230 miles (or 6,807.5km) away, have never felt closer to my heart. For the generations of my family that are no longer with us, including Arthur P. Dolan, Mary A. Dolan, Mary J. Gellert, and Roland R. Gellert. It is through their hard work, determination, and encouragement that I was provided the opportunity and privilege to complete this research.

Special thanks to my bachelor's university professor, Dr. Renee Buhr, for inspiring me to take my first academic steps into European politics and travelling with me to Northern Ireland in 2019 to study the economic and political effects of Brexit. Without her guidance, I would not be here.

To my professors at Lund University, especially Ian Manners and Catarina Kinnvall. Without their wisdom and teachings, this thesis would not exist. Thank you for opening the academic door of ontological security studies and encouraging me to dare to try something new.

Finally, to those who I do not mention above but are still worthy of recognition. I might not remember why, but I am eternally thankful for your help.

Abstract

In light of the current situation in the EU, after the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine, Europe is undoubtedly facing a critical situation. This thesis conducts an exploratory analysis of ontological (in)security in Czechia and Slovakia to investigate a region where very few academics have analyzed it from an ontological security perspective. By using a mixed method multiple case study including discursive analysis and secondary analysis of public surveys from the Eurobarometer and the Visegrad Fund, the research identifies key effects on Czechia and Slovakia's ontological security using the theoretical framework developed by Kinnvall and Mitzen, outlining the three effects that define ontological insecurity. First as individuals trade their freedoms for perceived security. Second, the development of 'risk societies' where threats are prioritized provides security but limits creativity in the policy-making process. Thirdly, the public becomes vulnerable to violent political discourse that uses scapegoating and othering. When applied, the analysis reveals significant effects on Czechia and Slovakia's support for policies on transitioning to renewable energy, digital security and governance, and protection against nationalist rhetoric. The thesis concludes by providing an exponential amount of potential future topics for further research.

Key words: Ontological Security, Critical Situations, Biographical Narrative, Czechia, Slovakia
Words: 18,034

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1 Research Question

1.1 Introduction

On September 12th, 2022, Maroš Šefčovič the Slovakian Vice-President of the European Commission for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight, delivered the keynote speech at the Raw Materials Security of Europe Conference. In his address, Šefčovič underlined that the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine had caught the European Union (EU) 'sleepwalking' by allowing reliance on third countries in strategic areas of policy. (Šefčovič, September 12th, 2022) In truth, the EU has experienced significant exogenous shocks in the past few years that have brought up anxieties that many thought to be a thing of the past, anxieties of insecurity due to physical conflict in the European continent, food security, and energy security. Along with past anxieties, the EU has begun to perceive new anxieties in an increasingly technologically developing world. Increases in the need for digital security and governance, green transitions to renewable energy, and defense against threats to democratic values from radical nationalism have all surfaced as the next frontier of EU policy. These continuous exogenous shocks on the European and National level have drastically ruptured the everyday routine of European citizens yet again, challenging us to question the way we think about security in the EU.

In recent years, a new sub-field of political science, ontological security studies, has emerged to explain this chain-reaction of sorts. Since its creation, it has been applied to several regional case-studies in Europe including the Franco-Germanic project in the 1950's and the Balkans during the 1990's. To date, there has been little to no ontological security analysis of Central-European post-communist states, specifically Czechia and Slovakia. Given their unsettled past as first Imperial, then Soviet, then Czechoslovakian, and now EU member states, there is likely an immense amount of ontological insecurity in this region waiting to be examined. The purpose of this research is to peer behind the still perceived iron curtain and explore through

public and political discourse what effects ontological (in)security in Czechia and Slovakia are manifesting today and propose them for further research.

The structure of the research is as follows, first an introduction to the background of ontological security studies and the use of biographical narratives and critical situations in the context of Czechia and Slovakia. Secondly, an explanation of the design and methods of the research as a parallel mixed method analysis of public and political analysis. Thirdly, the findings of the analysis are presented and discussed, dissecting the key themes that emerged through an ontological security perspective. Finally, the results of the analysis and discussion are summarized in the conclusion with suggestions for future topics of inquiry for other academics to research going forward.

1.2 Motivation

Ontological security studies has been in development since the early 1990's with the work of Anthony Giddens *"Modernity and Self-Identity"*. His work focuses on the search for a sense of security at the individual level, how humans are innately anxious beings and are constantly attempting to reach a level of completeness. (Giddens, 1991) In the existentialist approach to ontological security studies, humans are likely to fall into states of existential dread when faced with their own mortality. To avoid this anxiety, individuals place themselves into the routines of daily life. These routines give them a sense of security and comfort from the otherwise intimidating conclusions of their existence being meaningless in the face of their impending deaths. (Giddens, 1991)

Building on the work of Giddens at the individual level, Jennifer Mitzen was one of the first scholars to apply this approach to the state level. By treating states as actors, the shared experiences of citizens create a collective identity. This identity over time builds into a biographical narrative within groups of individuals and subsequently the state. (Mitzen, 2006) The creation and continuance of the biographical narrative allows not just for a sense of comfort in individuals but also a strong sense of belonging within their specific group. Within this group there's a normative bottom-up development of shared values, which provides ontological security for the group but can isolate perceived

"others" leading to a clear distinction between "our" memory and "their" memory. (Mitzen, 2006)

The European Union is a unique point in ontological security studies given its *sui-generis* nature, meaning it is a unique institution with both supranational and intergovernmental aspects, consisting of twenty-seven different member states with competing national narratives. The foundational narrative of the EU as a collective body traditionally comes from the post-World War II *"war is unthinkable"* that establishes healthy basic trust between the member states. (Rumelili, 2018) For decades, the EU has been a successful peace project in that it has been able to prevent mass violence between the member states. The several crises the EU has faced in the last fifteen or so years has created significant disruption to the everyday routines of the member states. When faced with disruptions to the normal routine, from an ontological security perspective, member states tend to return to the comforts of their own national narrative. (Browning and McDonald, 2013) More often than not, the member states that are more likely to enact such policies are the ones that are experiencing the most ontological insecurity. (Subotic, 2021)

The field of ontological security studies has often employed the use of regional analysis in conducting research. Initially, the Franco-German relationship in the early stages of the European Project, following the end of World War II and later in the Balkan States during the 1990's with the dissolvement of Yugoslavia. In the case of Central-European states, like Czechia and Slovakia, there is scarcely any research into this region with an ontological security focus, if any at all. The goal of this research is to explore this region using public and political discourse, through the lens of an ontological security perspective, to expose any implications of ontological insecurity and its potential effects on security policies.

1.2.1 Research Question

Can changes in public and political discourse in Czechia and Slovakia be explained from an ontological security perspective, and if so, what emerging effects on security policy can be identified?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Ontological Security Studies

2.1.1 Foundations of Ontological Security Studies

Emerging from the work of Anthony Giddens and, subsequently, R. D. Laing in the early 1990s, ontological security studies is a relatively new and rapidly developing subsection of critical security studies. Focusing on Giddens use of an existentialist approach, it takes into account the role of anxiety in security studies. Individuals inherently have anxiety, particularly over existential dread and a loss of purpose or meaning in their lives. According to Giddens, this anxiety places individuals in a state of ontological insecurity that inhibits their ability for agency. (Giddens, 1991) To avoid these feelings of anxiety, individuals seek comfort in the routines and narratives of everyday life. (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020) Groups of individuals create these routines and narratives to give them a sense of belonging and identity. (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020)

Without a sense of belonging or identity, individuals are left with an incomplete sense of self, and their anxiety significantly impacts their agency. As noted by Kinnvall and Mitzen, *"anxiety and emotions of individuals have important social and political effects."* (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020) Kinnvall and Mitzen identify three specific effects that are most evident in this position of insecurity. First, individuals trade their freedoms for perceived security. Second, the development of 'risk societies' where threats are prioritized provides security but limits creativity in the policy-making process. Thirdly, the public becomes vulnerable to violent political discourse that uses scapegoating and othering. (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020) These criteria are outlined in Figure 1 below.

Social and Political Effects of Anxiety on Ontological Security		
Individuals trade their freedoms for perceived security	Development of 'risk societies' where threats are prioritized provides security but limits creativity in the policy-making process	The public becomes vulnerable to violent political discourse that uses scapegoating and othering.

Figure 1

In these cases, we observe a society of anxiety avoiders rather than security seekers, implying that proper ontological security might never be achieved. (Browning, 2018) Anxiety avoidance also explains why long-term conflicts exists. When conflicts endure long enough, it becomes the new narrative over time and individuals attempt to avoid the insecurity they would otherwise experience if the conflict were to end. (Mitzen, 2006a)

In earlier stages of ontological security studies development its application was almost exclusively on the individual level. Jennifer Mitzen was the first to apply ontological security studies to the state level under the assumption that the state could be identified and studied as an aggregate body. Mitzen explains that states encounter spatial security concerns in terms of physical territory and structures of governance that they must protect. (Mitzen, 2006a) Furthermore, Mitzen argues that the collection of routines of individuals within a state stabilizes the state's sense of self. (Mitzen, 2006a) States would then have to maintain this collective sense of self, which is done with the use of consistent biographical narratives. (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020) Croft additionally supports Mitzen, by furthering Giddens's notion that individuals are *"embedded into an intersubjective whole and cannot be understood separately."* (Croft, 2012) Over time the biographical narrative becomes linked with the state's history and political memory, which extends past the individual level as it continues from generation to generation within the collective group. (Rumelili, 2018) The generational passing of biographical narratives furthers this idea that political memory constitutes state identities. (Olick and Robbins, 1998)

2.1.2 Biographical Narratives, Political Memory, and Critical Situations

In the case of the EU, most scholars would argue that there is an existing collective identity. In fact, they would argue that there are multiple existing biographical narratives within the EU. Manners and Murray have suggested that there are at least six identifiable narratives. (Manners and Murray, 2016) All of these narratives include the underlying purpose of the EU to be that of a security union to prevent physical conflict in Europe. This intention between the member states creates a *sui-generis* collective biographical narrative that's not unlike a national narrative. (Rumelili, 2018) There's a distinct collective EU narrative that individuals within the EU have shared and developed for the last 70 years. It has established itself at the individual level, providing a sense of meaning and belonging within the European community.

Some scholars have expressed concern over the existence of multiple narratives within the EU. Often, they have suggested that these narratives are competing with each other and are simultaneously a remedy and cause of ontological insecurity in EU member states. (Subotic, 2018) However, it is for this specific reason that Bottici and Challand have argued that the collective EU biographical narrative has been strengthened over time. (Bottici and Challand, 2013) In addition to the multiple EU narratives there is also the 27 different national level narratives to consider when analyzing a collective European identity. The presence of multiple narratives supports the continuation of the EU narrative with a pillarized system. (Rumelili, 2018)

In addition to the biographical narrative, the use of political memory is another discussed facet of ontological security studies. Similar to biographical narratives in its ability to bring individuals together within a group by creating a sense of belonging, over time political memory creates a strong political community. (Berenskoetter, 2014) This creates a strong link between the past, present, and future of the community. By providing individuals with a sense of where "they" in their respective group come from and what "they" have been through. (Berenskoetter, 2014) In doing this, as Brent Steele has noted, political memory personifies the state as an actor by creating its own identity. (Steele, 2008) Maria Mälksoo explores further into this distinction between "our" memories and

"their" memories and how it can become securitized and in doing so leads to the introduction of new security dilemmas. (Mälksoo, 2015) In securitizing memory, she categorizes two different kinds of security, the 'security-as-survival' and 'security-as-being.' (Mälksoo, 2015) The first, security-as-survival, is the protection of the physical aspects or the 'body' of the states. The second, security-as-being, is the protection of historical memory and the states biographical narrative. (Mälksoo, 2015) This places ontological security on the same priority level as physical security.

The use of political memory is not so much about the past itself, but rather it is about the present political project that the memory maintains. (Halbwachs, 1992) It can be used deliberately as an ontological tool to shape and mold the construction and dissemination of past traumas to control how individuals act in the present. (Subotic, 2018) Kinnvall identifies the use of memory, symbols, myths, and imagery in this practice. (Kinnvall, 2018) This practice, as noted by Subotic, allows for states to contain some of their ontological insecurity when they have the ability to take full control of the construction of a hegemonic narrative. (Subotic, 2018)

Perhaps the greatest catalyst of ontological insecurity that scholars have identified is the emergence of 'critical situations.' These situations are distinct events that rupture the established routines of individuals, subsequently increasing anxiety and ontological insecurity. Once the routines have been disrupted it brings fundamental questions of the state's sense of self to the forefront, which as Ejdus describes, creates stress, anxiety, and ontological insecurity. (Ejdus, 2017) This process is visualized in Figure 2 below. What determines a critical situation is not necessarily whether or not the situation is in fact critical to state security, but rather if policymakers have decided to prioritize it as a critical situation. (Ejdus, 2018) The politicization of critical situations has been branded by Browning and McDonald as "panic politics." (Browning and McDonald, 2013) To measure the use of panic politics and the effects of critical situations, Ejdus argues for the use of discursive consciousness. The collective anxieties of individuals that are voiced through political discourse on fundamental questions is a strong indicator of ontological insecurity. (Ejdus, 2018)
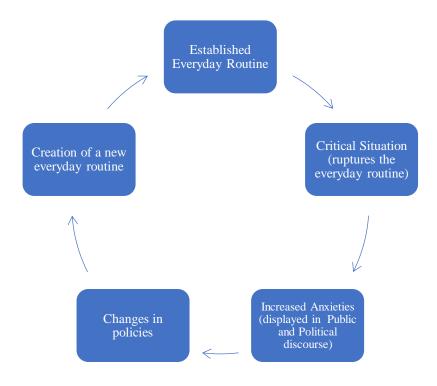
Figure 2

2.1.3 Ontological Security in Czechia and Slovakia

In the case of the V4 region, specifically Czechia and Slovakia, the presence of biographical narratives, political memory, and critical situations is quite salient. Nicknamed the *'enfants terrible'* or 'terrible children' their ascension and membership in the EU has been dominated by crises of economic, physical, and ideological nature. Even prior to their ascension into the EU as member states, Czechia and Slovakia were faced with the ontological conundrum of incorporating their shared pasts as communist states into the present EU narrative of promoting values of democracy, freedom of movement, and human rights.

The incorporation of the EU collective narrative into the national collective narrative, as Rumelili urges, is crucial for a smooth integration into the EU. (Rumelili, 2018) While the entirety of the EU has experienced several critical situations since the addition of the V4, alongside Hungary and Poland, Czechia and Slovakia are the most likely of the member states to act out either discursively or politically due to their unresolved identities in the EU and their continuously perceived peripheral status amongst the member states. (Zarakol, 2011)

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There are several conflicting sources of ontological insecurity in Czechia and Slovakia. The first of them being the anxiety experienced by these states due to their questionable perception as 'fully European' member states. Czechia and Slovakia struggle with their biographical narratives, as they've undergone several radical revisions in the last century; from Austria-Hungarian imperialism, to Stalinism, to the division of the former Czechoslovakia, to their ascension into the EU, and now the most recent crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. These states have been forced to silence or actively forget their pasts prior to EU membership, otherwise they become the odd ones out of the group of 'fully European' states. (Subotic, 2018)

The second source of ontological insecurity identified is that Czechia and Slovakia have severely unsettled mnemonic pasts. (Subotic, 2018) How these member states are choosing to remember their past injuries and traumas varies, but it has strong correlations with ontological insecurity. (Subotic, 2018) Rumelili strengthens this point by arguing that separating Czechia and Slovakia's collective memory from the EU's collective memory of the past, the EU illustrates itself as morally superior to their biographical narrative. (Rumelili, 2018) This sense of superiority squelches any engagement with other past narratives, which poses the threat of an eventual return of past narratives. (Rumelili, 2018) These past narratives, when they re-emerge, they are often romanticized or whitewashed and can cause further anxieties and ontological insecurity. (Rumelili, 2018)

The effect of disruptions to the political memory and narratives in Czechia and Slovakia has been notably seen in the recent crises in the EU. Specifically in the migration crisis in 2015, that affected both the physical borders of these member states but also the cultural integration of refugee narratives, presenting a challenge to their ontological security that they hadn't experienced before. (Alkopher, 2018) When faced with the conflict between national and EU identities, especially in times of conflict, individuals will prioritize their national identities to protect themselves from disruption to the national narrative. (Mitzen, 2018)

Alkopher identified this reaction to the refugee crisis as an example of 'securitize the self' where states turn their interests inwards. In this strategy, the member states reaffirm

their individual national biographical narrative using political discourse and practices. (Alkopher, 2018) The states reframe their collective identity, first by utilizing the tools of images, symbols, myths, and heritages, that were identified earlier by Kinnvall. (Alkopher 2018, Kinnvall 2018) Following the introduction of these symbols, the second aspect is the societal construction of an outside 'other' or 'enemy other.' (Alkopher, 2018) The outcome of this practice of securitizing the self can be identified in political discourse and the introduction of rigid national policies. (Alkopher, 2018) While prioritizing their national narratives by implementing policies in their best national interest does aid these member states in resolving ontological insecurity, it comes at the cost of implementing policies on the EU level. (Alkopher, 2018) In turn, it comes at the cost of other member states ontological security outside of Czechia and Slovakia. (Subotic, 2018)

2.1.4 What do we mean by 'Security Policy'?

Ontological security is not the same as physical security studies, in that it is not so much about whether threats to the state physically exist. Ontological security studies is rather the study of the perception of insecurity from the public and political leaders that these threats exist, and how they react to those anxieties. (Ejdus, 2018) By using ontological security theory, the definition of security goes beyond just physical security and developments of defense policy. Any area of policy can be securitized from an ontological security perspective. The spill-over of securitization into other areas of policy is one of the greatest manifestations of ontological insecurity. (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020)

Having said that, the surrounding literature has identified an established relationship between ontological and physical security. Mitzen has ascertained that relationship relies heavily on the link between civilian and military powers. *"Routines centered on external actors that lead to a sense of self rooted in the EU's normative power are not likely to change if it were to adopt a military architecture."* (Mitzen, 2006a and Della Salla, 2018) Physical security in the EU goes hand in hand with perceived ontological security, and Rumelili hints at a correlation between the politicization of security measures, European integration, and bouts of ontological insecurity. (Rumelili, 2018) After establishing this

linkage we can then apply this to a comparative case study of post-communist member states within the V4, specifically Czechia and Slovakia, to determine the effects of ontological security on the development of security policy.

3 Research Design and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The main goal of this research is to explore the different levels of public and political discourse to unearth any connections between the two. My hypothesis is that there is a translation from the public level to the political by influencing how they act discursively at the EU level. I further hypothesize that this translation is elevated during and after critical situations. These critical situations not only rupture the everyday routines of the public but also bring previously taken for granted relationships back into the political discourse. (Ejdus, 2018) From the surrounding literature on ontological security, the strongest signifier of ontological security is in political and public discourse. (Alkopher, 2018 and Ejdus, 2018) The hope of this research is not necessarily to establish causality between the two levels of discourse, but to identify any existing phenomenon and reference the findings for further research, as the field of ontological security studies in Czechia and Slovakia is still quite diminutive.

The structure of the research follows a comparative design in the form of a multiple-case study of Czechia and Slovakia. The chosen design is due to two specific reasons. The first being that there has been expressed need for comparative case-studies, including more than one subject/case to support the reliability, replicability, and validity of the research outcomes. (Clark, Foster, Sloan, and Bryman 2021, Eisenhardt 1989, and Yin 2017) The second being, that it addresses a common critique in the field of ontological security studies that using single a case study constricts the research so that the theories and research outcomes are only applicable to the specific context it is applied to. (Della Salla, 2018) Using both Czechia and Slovakia as subjects will increase the stability of the findings in the analysis.

3.1 Opening the Toolbox: Research Methods as Tools

The research follows a mixed method structure including both discourse and cross-sectional analysis. The mixed-method structure was chosen due to the multi-level analysis of the public and political discourses, and suggestions in the surrounding literature that a multiple case-study is preferred in analyzing ontological security. By incorporating multiple methods, this will generate a more complete data set to analyze in the later stages of the research and identify the connections between public opinion and political discourse at the EU level. Furthermore, by analyzing both groups in this way, the findings will likely bridge the gap in our understandings of the linkage between ontological insecurity and public opinion and political discourse.

Using a multiple case-study, the research employs the process of parallel concurrent analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative aspects but will place an emphasis on the sequential connections between the two during the integration and analysis stages. The deep significance of the use of biographical narratives in ontological security studies, requires the research to take into account the context of the data collected in terms of time and place. Therefore, the data findings will be presented in one of three chronological timeframes. The first being pre-COVID-19 pandemic between the spring of 2019 and 2020. The second timeframe is set between spring of 2020 at the start of the pandemic and the spring of 2022 with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The third timeframe is set after the invasion in February of 2022 to the spring of 2023. It is most likely that any identifiable linkages between the public and political level will be found through patterns of chronological translations.

3.1.1 Generally Speaking: General Thematic Discourse Analysis

To analyze the discourse at the political level, the research utilizes a general thematic discursive analysis of speeches made by the political actors from both Czechia and Slovakia at the EU level. These actors include:
- Slovakian President Zuzana Čaputová

- Slovakian Commissioner and Vice President of Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight, Maroš Šefčovič
- Czech Commissioner and Vice President for Values and Transparency, Vera Jourová
- Czech Prime Ministers Andrej Babiš and Petr Fiala

Using the discourse in the context of the EU will provide insight into the significance of the messages of these political actors due to the location of the delivery of the discourse. The constructive nature of discourse analysis, as well as ontological security studies, would suggest that the themes, ideas, and meanings they choose to communicate at the EU level are the manifestation and representation of the opinions of their states at the public level.

In this chosen method, there are five main features that have been identified by Fairclough and Wodak that guide the motivation behind using discourse analysis. The first being that discourse is a reflection and creation of the social, cultural, and structures of any given group. Discourse allows the researcher to expose the linguistic dimensions of the social identities and relations that construct the everyday routine. (Chouliaraki 1999, Van Dijk 1991, Wodak et. Al 1999) The second feature is that discourse is both constitutive and constituted, it shapes and is shaped by societal forces. (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002) Discourse is seen as a form of action through which actors attempt to change their perceived world and act socially and historically in a specific place in time.

The reflexive relationship between public and political discourse suggests that identifiable phenomena of ontological insecurity will be found through a discursive analysis. The third theme is that the language studied should be used empirically within its specific social context. Similar to ontological security studies, there is a significant importance to the application of context to discourse analysis. The fourth theme is that discourse analysis functions ideologically, in that it constructs representations of the world but also furthers the interests of particular social groups. (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002) In this case, it will attempt to identify what interests from the public level are being vocalized in the political discourse delivered at the EU level. The fifth, and final theme, is that discourse analysis is critical research that is not politically neutral, rather it seeks to identify the use of discourse as a tool for social change. (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002)

Due to the nature of ontological security studies mentioned earlier, discourse analysis appears to be naturally the logical method of choice.

3.1.2 Better the Second Time Around? Secondary Analysis of Cross-Sectional Public Surveys

Given the time frame of the research, performing interviews or other forms of qualitative methods in Czechia and Slovakia to collect enough data for a complete and reliable data set reflective of public opinion isn't feasible. To address this issue, a secondary analysis of currently existing cross-sectional public surveys was conducted. These surveys included the Eurobarometer and recent publications from the Visegrad Fund, a regional foundation based in Bratislava, Slovakia. By doing so, the data collected will be of considerably high quality as it has already undergone rigorous sampling and control procedures. (Clark, Foster, Sloan, and Bryman, 2021) Additionally, by utilizing this method it will provide the opportunity for cross-cultural analysis between Czechia and Slovakia.

The use of public surveys greatly assists in the focus on the context of the public and political discourse. The majority of the polling options release new data on a regular basis that can be easily traced back to a specific place in time. The expressed importance of the biographical narrative makes this strategy ideal, as it will be relatively easy for the researcher to place the survey responses in correspondence with well-known critical situations. This further assists in deciphering themes between the public opinion surveys and the discourse of political elites.

3.2 Gathering the Evidence: Data Collection

3.2.1 Political Discourse Collection

The discourse analyzed was selected from an assortment of speeches expressed at the European level from both Czechia and Slovakia. The reason for this selection is two-fold; the first being that the speeches and texts are already translated into English using reliable translation services and will save time for the researcher. Some speeches had to be eliminated from the selected discourse due to unreliable language translations, including remarks from Slovakian Prime Minister Eduard Heger. The second reason for the chosen discourse selection, is that the context of these member states speaking at the European level opens pathways to analyzing their self-perceived role in the EU and its biographical narrative. The use of speeches and rhetoric from the political elites at the European level provide the opportunity to analyze the strategies and tactics used by Czechia and Slovakia to promote their own interests within the EU.

These documents were selected from the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the offices of the President of Slovakia. In filtering through the available discourse, the searches were limited to speeches previously labeled in the policy areas of defense, foreign affairs and security, Ukraine, regional policy, borders and security, and international partnerships. The results of this collection were found to be quite fruitful as Czechia held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the fall of 2022, and Slovakia's Commissioner, Maroš Šefčovič currently holds the office of Vice-President of Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight in the European Commission.

3.2.2 Public Survey Collection

When selecting which surveys to include in the analysis, there were several factors considered. An important factor is the source of the surveys and their reputation and

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credibility. Standardized surveys such as the Eurobarometer were ideal examples as they are well established and continuously updated on a regular basis. For that reason, those surveys were prioritized in the data collection and analysis stages of the research. Another factor in the selection process was the frequency with which each survey is updated. Surveys that are regularly updated are more likely to accurately reflect the interests and values of the public opinion. Furthermore, the consistent coverage of public opinion over time will assist the research in the analysis stage by allowing the opportunity for longitudinal analysis of potential sub-categories. Other surveys such as from the Visegrad Fund that conduct regular non-governmental surveys will supplement the discourse analysis. These additional surveys will provide a different perspective to the data set and accommodate for any bias that might emerge from using only EU funded surveys.

Eurobarometer's Analyzed

- Spring 2019 (Eurobarometer 91)
- Fall 2019 (Eurobarometer 92)
- Summer 2020 (Eurobarometer 93)
- Winter 2020/2021 (Eurobarometer 94)
- Spring 2021 (Eurobarometer 95)
- Winter 2021/2022 (Eurobarometer 96)
- Summer 2022 (Eurobarometer 97)
- Winter 2022/2023 (Eurobarometer 98)

4   Data Analysis

4.1.1 Framing the Picture: General Thematic Analysis

The selected speeches and texts were manually coded using the six-stage process of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke. (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Due to the importance of context in this analysis, it was preferred to use a manual coding process to factor in underlying meanings and references that would be missed using a purely textual automatic coding system. Additionally, from an efficiency point of view, the use of a manual coding system was preferred due to the use of automatic coding systems being quite cumbersome. It has also been suggested that in the case of discourse analysis the discourse is best grasped when considered in its empirical manifestation through textual material or talk among political actors. (Crespy, 2015)

1. Familiarization

The first stage is familiarization, in this stage a thorough review of the selected speeches occurred. The speeches were reviewed in textual format, as in this format they had already undergone the process of translation to English through the EU's translation services. In this review, maintaining detailed field notes was essential for conducting the analysis. The field notes taken at this stage and the presence of any potential themes and sub-categories were marked down for further review.

2. Initial Coding

At this stage in the analysis, the field notes taken during the initial familiarization stage were reviewed alongside the discourse collected. This stage was to further edit the existing index by removing duplications and adding in more relevant themes for a better result. Furthermore, it was during this stage in the process where initial connections between topics started to emerge.

3. Identifying Themes

During this stage, the focus turned to identifying the emerging themes, connections, and patterns. Braun and Clarke suggest looking for elements such as repetitions, typologies, metaphors and analogies, transitions in positions, theory-related material, and missing data. (Braun and Clarke, 2006 and Clark, Foster, Sloan, and Bryman, 2021) Once these themes were identified, the themes were then linked to their level of significance within the discourse. The challenge then became to connect not just the significance of these themes, but also what kind of implications they carry. (Clark, Foster, Sloan, and Bryman, 2021) To assist in transparency and established a 'red methodological thread' this stage also included creating an audit trail of the analytical process. The result of this audit trail is the reported findings from the discourse in the first section of the analysis.

4. Reviewing Themes

Once the themes were identified and processed through the third stage, the next step is to evaluate which themes hold a higher significance either in value or repetition. Once the higher themes have been sorted out, then the research went into separating potential sub-categories. How the themes and sub-categories are selected depended on the data yielded but were also customized in the specific context of the subjects of the study, Czechia and Slovakia.

5. Defining Themes

At this stage in the process, the themes and sub-categories are placed into the context of a narrative where the connections between the themes can be demonstrated. Additionally, these themes were then supplemented with the reported findings from the secondary public survey analysis. The sub-categories were then laid into a sequential order, which was preferred in this case.

6. Evidencing Themes

In the final stage of the process, the themes and the findings are brought together and are used to portray the connections and underlying significance in an evidentiary argument. Here the themes were tied together with the research question and the surrounding literature, explaining the outcome of the process. The result of this stage can be found in the discussion and conclusion sections of the thesis.

The use of a general narrative thematic analysis is beneficial to the research question in that the themes and sub-categories are sensitive to the temporal order of the discourse and public surveys. Extra attention was paid to the overall narrative that emerges between the two levels and their emergence in time. The public perception of issues such as security along interest and trust in the European Union are likely to be indicators of the level of ontological (in)security within the EU. Acting as a supplement to the discursive analysis, this can provide supporting evidence to any observable correlations between public opinion and political discourse in Czechia and Slovakia.

4.1.2 The Calm Before the Storm? Pre-COVID Pandemic Discourse

Czechia Pre-COVID Discourse

When collecting discourse prior to the pandemic at the European level, there was one recorded statement made that was published before 2020 by the Czech Commissioner Vera Jourová. This statement was in December of 2016, while she was serving as European Commissioner for Justice, Consumers, and Gender Equality. This was a joint statement with Commissioners Avramopoulos and King on terrorism financing, the Schengen Information System (SIS), and visa reciprocity. The proposal from Jourová was designed to prevent terrorist groups from obtaining funding through the common practice of drug trafficking by enhancing financing mechanisms to freeze their assets and therefore, preventing acts of terrorism from occurring. In this statement Jourová emphasized the need for stronger mutual recognition procedures to identify, freeze, and confiscate terrorism funding within the EU. In strengthening these procedures, she expressed that *"the fight against terrorism in Europe will only be successful if police and judicial authorities cooperate more intensely."* (Jourová, 2016) This cooperation, was proposed to reinforce the relationship between member states as well as Czechia's role within the EU as a member. Jourová's constant expressions of defending *"Europe"* and "*the EU"* across borders support this claim. (Jourová, 2016) This is the last recorded statement from Czechia at the European level that labels the threat of terrorism in the EU.

Slovakia Pre-COVID Discourse

The selection of recorded statements from Slovakia using the search parameters listed above dates back to March of 2020 at the earliest. Meaning that there were no recorded speeches with

policy topics in the field of defense, foreign affairs and security, security union, Ukraine, regional policy, borders and security, or international partnerships before the COVID pandemic at the European level. However, when the policy parameters were adjusted to include all policy areas, the results of the search were found to be quite revealing. Including overtures in the areas of a green transition to renewable energy using batteries and trilateral talks on gas transit with Russia via Ukraine.

As the EU Commissioner for Energy until December of 2019, Maroš Šefčovič took on a leading role in the EU Battery Alliance (EBA) and the Batteries Europe Governing Board. Šefčovič championed the success of the development of the technology and infrastructure of *"a new European Battery ecosystem from scratch."* (Šefčovič, 2019a) The types of batteries Šefčovič refer to power various forms of renewable energy, most importantly electric vehicles. This kind of technological development would create *"strong collaboration between the automotive and energy sectors." (*Šefčovič, 2020)

In his statement at the EU battery Alliance, Šefčovič applauded the Commission and the EBA for their launch of new partnerships and investments to *"build our long-term vision for Europe's industrial policy."* (Šefčovič, 2019) Šefčovič predicted that the expansion of electric vehicles in the EU would increase *"policy developments linked with the electrification and roll-out of renewable energy that will further push the demand for batteries."* (Šefčovič, 2020) The role of the EU as a leader in battery technology, would allow the EU to take the lead in the race to transition to renewable energy by revving *"the engine of our research and innovation agenda."* (Šefčovič, 2020) Šefčovič saw the EBA as a *"key enabler for the EU's long-term vision for a climate neutral economy, particularly for the mobility and clean energy sectors transformation."* (Šefčovič, 2020) The future of the EBA as a part of the EU's fight against climate change is bright, as he said, *"this is only the tip of the iceberg."* (Šefčovič, 2019a)

In late October of 2019, following the fourth round of trilateral talks between the EU, Ukraine, Russia on the transit of Russian gas via Ukraine, Šefčovič, made remarks on the outcome of the talks. From the outset of the statement, Šefčovič, expressed a *"clear sense of urgency"* for these trilateral talks to come to an agreement. (Šefčovič, 2019b) At the end of this round, it was clear that Šefčovič, was *"disappointed at the outcome."* (Šefčovič, 2019b) As outlined in the remarks, the European objective going into the talks were to create a contract "based on EU legislation", setting tariffs "in line with EU practice", and an interconnection Agreement between Ukraine and Russia should be signed as soon as possible. (Šefčovič, 2019b) After the

talks failed to reach these outcomes Šefčovič, made it clear that Ukraine was accepting of their proposals and *"were ready to engage on the basis of our proposal."* (Šefčovič, 2019b) Unfortunately, from the Russian delegation it was clear that they "*were not prepared to do the same at the time."* (Šefčovič, 2019b) The rejection of a deal based on EU legislation and practice from the Russian delegation was not surprising and is most likely a signifier of growing tensions between Russia and the EU. However, it was clear from Šefčovič, that he set on continuing the trilateral talks as *"we feel where solutions lie but we need a political will."* (Šefčovič, 2019b)

4.1.3 Living in 'Unprecedented Times' – COVID-19 Discourse

Czechia COVID-19 Discourse

There were two recorded statements from Czechia during the COVID pandemic, both were given by the Prime Minister at the time, Andrej Babiš. In the first on March 25th, 2021, Babiš spoke during a videoconference of members of the European Council. Here Babiš expressed the great need for the production, and even more urgently the proper distribution of vaccinations amongst the Member States in the EU. Stating *"I am concerned… about the imbalances in the actual deliveries of vaccines in different Member States."* (Babiš, 2021a) It was quite clear from his statement that Babiš placed a hierarchy of need for vaccines as Czechia first, the EU second, and outside countries last. *"Sharing will not be possible until we have enough vaccines in the EU for our citizens."* (Babiš, 2021a) Babiš further voices support for a European response to the pandemic in the form of the digital green certificates as a *"welcome step forward"* however, he urges to protect the sovereignty of Member States as *"The question of how exactly we will use the certificates should be left for the Member States to decide."* (Babiš, 2021a)

The second recorded statement during the pandemic was also by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš at the Calls for Transatlantic Relations Conference on June 17th, 2021. Babiš opened the speech with a clear message that *"The EU is here to stay and the Czech Republic is staying within the EU."* (Babiš, 2021b) Despite this message of devotion, Babiš expressed determination to not allow Czechia to be a silent or overlooked by other Member States, saying that *"we are very active members of the EU and if necessary, we will have to have the courage to be critical….We have to continually fight for our national interests in the EU"* (Babiš, 2021b) Babiš connected

this later in the speech to the regional cooperation of the V4, and Czechia's hesitancy towards progressive policies. *"From openness to migration to all aspects of political correctness and climate issues."* (Babiš, 2021b) Babiš directly correlates this hesitancy to their shared history of communism, perhaps suggesting to us that Czechia is experiencing ontological insecurity in areas of border security and climate policy.

Regarding security and defense policy, Babiš outlined the importance of increasing trade and cooperation with the US and North America in the NATO Alliance. Additionally, Babiš promoted Czechia's involvement as *"The Czech Republic is a responsible and active member of NATO."* (Babiš, 2021b) The extension of NATO, Babiš expressed should flow into new areas of technology and in the development of new areas of technology come new areas of security. Babiš anticipated that the future success of Atlantic cooperation depends on cooperation in the security areas of *"technology, artificial intelligence, cyber security, and data protection."* (Babiš, 2021b)

Slovakia COVID-19 Discourse

From the discourse collected amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the overarching theme was that of resilience. Resilience in not just the economy, but also in climate policy, digital governance security, and democratic values. From Slovakian President Zuzana Čaputová, the best way to achieve a higher level of resilience and preparedness for the next crisis is through the protection of the rule of law. At the Munich Security Conference on February 16th of 2020, Čaputová opened a panel discussion on "A Europe that Protects" and she emphasized that it should be "*A Europe that protects, our citizens but also our values."* (Čaputová, 2020) Accentuating that the protection of European values is just as important as protecting European economies, Čaputová contends that it is *"the everyday respect and observance of the rules"* that uphold the rule of law. The clear message Čaputová sends is that the protection of Europe, and the rule of law, "*Simply put is about responsibility."* (Čaputová, 2020) The responsibility to protect the rule of law lies in Europe's political leaders' ability to address corruption, authoritarianism, and the social threats. The largest of these threats Čaputová forewarns, is that of *"populism, extremism, and irresponsible narratives that divide our societies and attack our rules and values."* (Čaputová, 2020) The danger in these narratives that Čaputová expresses is that they are *"lies and manipulation wrapped in empty promises"* aimed to divide societies into an "us" and them." (Čaputová, 2020) To protect against the threat of extremism, Čaputová urges is respect

for the truth which is the very essence of the rule of law. Without a respect for the truth *"the rule of law can be undone by false narratives about the rule of law."* (Čaputová, 2020)

As the most dangerous threat to the protection of European citizens and values, extremism and disinformation is commonly referred to in the discourse that continues today. Čaputová has noted that the dissemination of this dangerous rhetoric is commonly through digital platforms. To address this issue, Čaputová strongly encourages an increase in European digital security and digital governance. *"The rule of law must be applicable online, not just offline."* (Čaputová, 2021a) At the 2021 Bratislava Forum, Čaputová urged for new and effective digital governance, *"one that strengthens transparency and accountability."* (Čaputová, 2021b) To allow effective governance and prevent future 'infodemics', as Čaputová describes them, she urges the necessity for "*a shared perception of reality on rules if we have truthful information and facts."* (Čaputová, 2021b) Without this shared perception, *"Populism attempts to undermine public trust in our democratic systems through to disinformation, to questioning the rule of law, or our values."* (Čaputová, 2021b) In strengthening digital governance, it not only protects from extremism but also protects Europe from economic exploitation from big tech companies. By allowing large tech companies to slide by on regulating content on digital platforms, several countries have become vulnerable to extremism at the cost of economic benefit. Čaputová indicates the delicate balance between digital governance and economic benefit, and supports further development of European digital platforms, *"As long as it does not undermine our democracies through propaganda and disinformation or exposes our vulnerabilities to foreign adversaries."* (Čaputová, 2020)

The need for digital governance and security is tightly linked to the area of climate policy. The transition to renewable energy sources comes with the additional developments in technology to support them. In October of 2020, Vice-President Šefčovič spoke on the importance of increasing climate and digital transitions. He stressed the fact that *"the green transition goes hand in hand with the digital one"* and that if more deliberate action was taken, the 2020's could become *"Europe's Digital Decade."* (Šefčovič, 2020b) Presenting the newly proposed Digital Compass from the European Council, he identified three fields of significance for continuing digital development. These were the establishment of a true digital single market through the enforcement of EU rules, fair and regulated competition to limit the power of large global tech companies, and the development of the capacity of the European digital industry. (Šefčovič, 2020b) Šefčovič proposals were in support of developing digital infrastructure and

governance, but less explicitly on digital security. The expressed importance of these policies was to improve the recovery and resilience of Europe economically through leading the climate and digital policy. By implementing these actions, Šefčovič argues that in parallel with institutional development it will also work towards creating *"a common European digital identity."* (Šefčovič, 2020b)

There were several references in the Slovakian discourse that were in favor of further developing security and defense policy. There were three major points regarding security and defense policy in the discourse, re-enforcing relationships between the EU-NATO-US, opening discussions on evaluating and re-imagining EU defense policy, and increasing defense budgets and investment in digital security infrastructure. The discourse would first suggest that Slovakia was keen on increasing investment and participation in a collective security and defense partnership. However, prior to the invasion of Ukraine the discourse only refers to Slovakia's relationship with NATO, there is little to no mention of developing the CSDP. In a Trans-Atlantic Forum in May of 2021, President Čaputová expressed great relief that with the election of US President Joe Biden, the US would remain an active partner, saying that *"It sends a powerful signal that America and Europe will work together to protect the values we share and our joint security."* (Čaputová, 2021a)

In the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, like several other Member States, Slovakia was forced to re-evaluate several policy areas including security and defense policy as well as their foreign policy. Slovakia remained steadfast in their membership in NATO, while continuing to increase their defense spending by 120% since 2014. (Čaputová, 2021a) Additionally, President Čaputová promised to the Trans-Atlantic Forum that *"all of the new money goes to the modernization of our military."* (Čaputová, 2021a) While Slovakia was quite firm in their continued contributions to NATO, Čaputová voiced that the next great challenge for the EU was adapting the current security and defense policies in a post-pandemic Europe. The *"rulebook"* of security and defense policy based on democracy, human rights, and other core European values is something that Čaputová refers to as something that needs to be a *"shared reality"* across the EU. (Čaputová, 2021b) At the Bratislava Forum, Čaputová appealed to the forum that the EU should be willing to *"adjust our own foreign policy rules"* and later went so far as to say that the unanimity requirement should be replaced, *"If we have consensus and a qualified majority, we should be allowed to act."* (Čaputová, 2021b) Her argument for this was

that *"Violations of international rules endangers everyone…expressing grave concern should be our first but not our final step."* (Čaputová, 2021b)

The final theme of the Slovakian discourse during the COVID pandemic was the declaration and dedication to the protection and practice of European values and solidarity. Given Slovakia's past, as discussed in earlier sections, their membership in the EU has been relatively short. The perception of Slovakia, as well as other V4 states, as a Members of the EU appears to still be haunted by their soviet past. Their perception as fully integrated Member States is still under scrutiny as *"some debate whether we are too conservative, too liberal, too federal or not enough European."* (Čaputová, 2021b) Their integration into the EU wasn't based in normative values, it was based on institutional adaptation that was conditional on their membership in the EU. There are still worries over Slovakia's continued integration into the EU, especially in their ability to uphold the rule of law. President Čaputová labeled this challenge for the Slovakian judicial authorities as the "*defensive formalism of post-communist justice"* where the preservation of past deformations threatens to halt further integration. (Čaputová, 2020)

In response to these perceptions of Euroscepticism in Slovakia, both President Čaputová and Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič have made it abundantly clear in their discourse that Slovakia considers itself a fully integrated and active Member of the EU. Commonly referring to the EU as *"we", "our",* and *"us*", they assume the European identity in all statements. Additionally, they encourage stronger cooperation amongst the Member States *"when we're united, we have the power to address many challenges that surround the European Union."* (Šefčovič, October 2022b) The emphasis of European solidarity is not just at the institutional level, it is also expressed at the normative level *"Europe's strength lies in our joint determination to protect freedom, democracy, and mutual respect."* (Čaputová, 2020) During the pandemic, it seemed as though Slovakia was going through a rebrand of their perceived "westlessness" at the periphery of the EU. Čaputová took this point head on by challenging these questions of belonging by answering that *"we are a community of values whose strength stems from our ability to live by these values and to defend them."* (Čaputová, 2020) At this point in the discourse, Slovakia is all in and they are ready.

4.1.4 War Again in Europe: Post-Invasion of Ukraine Discourse

Czechia Post-Invasion of Ukraine Discourse

The majority of the discourse from Czechia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 comes from the current Prime Minister Petr Fiala. On July 1st of 2022, Czechia began their second ever term in the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Fiala described the Russian attack on Ukraine as a point of disjuncture for Europe, something that many *"didn't believe"* as *"Ukraine was not threatening anyone and was not attacking anyone."* (Fiala, 2022a) Taking on the Presidency only a few months following the invasion, Czechia was forced to *"significantly change"* their original priorities *"to reflect this new situation"* of the war in Ukraine. (Fiala, 2022a and 2022b) The discourse from Czechia post-invasion of Ukraine revolves around these new priorities. The five pillars proposed are outlined below.

> *The Proposed Five Pillars of the Czech Presidency:*
> 1. *Managing the refugee crisis and the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine*
> 2. *Increasing the EU's energy security*
> 3. *Increasing European defense capabilities and cyberspace security*
> 4. *Strengthening the strategic resilience of the European economy*
> 5. *Protecting the EU's democratic institutions and its values.*
>
> *(Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, July 2022)*

On July 6th, 2022, the Prime Minister addressed the European Parliament to outline further these five pillars and these points remained present in the discourse following. First and foremost, using the motto of *"rethink, rebuild, and repower"* the initial response from Czechia was to provide support to Ukraine through *"supplying arms, humanitarian aid, and money for day-to-day operations."* (Fiala, 2022a and 2022b) This showed that Czechia was ready to put their money where their mouth was by recognizing that *"a substantial part will be on the shoulders of the European States and the European Union."* (Fiala, 2022a) The migration crisis of Ukrainian refugees flooding into the EU weighed heavily in the discourse as it was the largest refugee wave since World War II, outnumbering the refugee crisis following the Syrian war in 2015. (Fiala, 2022c) Special attention was paid to the preparations for the reconstruction of Ukraine *"so that people can return home."* (Fiala, 2022a) At this point it was evident in

statements from Czechia that the response to the war in Ukraine would be one of solidarity, that would make the whole of Europe *"stronger, safer, and more resilient."* (Fiala, 2022a)

The concern of energy security was evident in every statement given by Czechia post-invasion of Ukraine. The dependence on Russian gas and oil, was not just prevalent in Czechia but across the entire EU. In attempt to 'de-Russify' their energy supply, Fiala suggested that states also consider *"the long-term goal of decarbonizing the European economy."* (Fiala, 2022b) The transition to renewable energy sources had become what Fiala designated as *"a condition for independence and energy security"* (Fiala, 2022c) The Czech Presidency would therefore focus on "*accelerating the implementation of REPowerEU"* to diversify energy resources to provide the EU with greater energy autonomy. (Fiala, 2022b) It's at this point in time and place that Czechia starts to securitize their climate policy, no longer allowing the economic costs to outweigh the need for all Member States to reach their climate goals. As Fiala stated later on July 13th *"decarbonization is no longer only about climate protection. It is now, above all a condition for our independence and energy security."* (Fiala, 2022c)

Acknowledging that the Russian invasion introduced physical conflict in the European continent for the first time in several decades, only this time the threat of Russian invasion wasn't just physical, *"the combat had entered the digital sphere."* (Jourová, 2022) This time Russia was waging a "*hybrid war*". (Fiala, 2022b) This hybrid war, fought through disinformation spread through social media and technological vulnerabilities of key infrastructures including EU institutions, exposed all of Europe to Russian attacks. (Fiala, 2022b) In building defenses to these threats Fiala relies on future collaborations with NATO for technology and equipment development, as it is a *"natural partner."* (Fiala, 2022b)

The continued reliance on the EU's partnership with NATO was heavily present in the discourse during the Czech Presidency. Not just in digital security but in physical security as well since *"providing military support for Ukraine is in the vital interest of the entire Union, with fundamental implications for the future of the continent."* (Fiala, 2022b) This cooperation is something that the Czech Presidency expressed is a long-term goal to facilitate the development of *"strategic military systems."* (Fiala, 2022c) Moreover, in response to the initial military support from Member States to Ukraine the Czech Presidency urged for *"budgetary support for the renewal of the armaments of European armies,"* to assist Member States that are struggling to meet their Helsinki Headline Goals. (Fiala, 2022c)

The economic resilience of the EU from the war in Ukraine are a grave concern in the Czech discourse. The focal points in their plan to address these concerns was to make the EU a technological and industrial leader by deepening, digitalizing, and diversifying free trade with other partners. Something notable from Czechia was the expressed need for securing supply chains to *"ensure the availability of strategic raw materials and parts."* (Fiala, 2022b) Possession of strategic raw materials would allow for further development and manufacturing of new technology and infrastructure necessary for economic resilience.

Overall, the most common theme in the Czech discourse after the invasion of Ukraine is the urgent and present need to defend the EU's democratic institutions and values. *"Freedom and security are as threatened today as they were in the past."* (Fiala, 2022c) The war in Ukraine is not just a war over land, it is a war over morals. The threat of Russian influence is something Czechia has experienced before as a former member of the Soviet Union. As Fiala put it bluntly, *"We know what Russia's aggressive policies can do."* (Fiala, 2022b) The greatest defense to threats against democratic values raised by Czechia was protecting the EU from disinformation through increased cyber security. Vice-President Jourová spoke on this issue at the EU DisinfoLab conference in October of 2022. *"The pro-Kremlin disinformation machine promotes false narratives."* (Jourová, 2022) These false narratives not only attempt to justify Russia's brutality but attempts to weaken support for the EU's response. (Jourová, 2022) The authoritarian use of disinformation from the Kremlin is a way to "*sow panic among residents and the Ukrainian population.*" (Jourová, 2022) In response to the threat of disinformation, Czechia proposed the European Democracy Action Plan that sets out a toolbox to fight *"demonetization, addressing manipulative behaviors, user empowerment or fact-checking."* (Jourová, 2022) In implementing this plan, Jourová called for an increase of cooperation between Member States as *"The risk in one country can appear in another… we need all hands on board."* (Jourová, 2022)

At the end of the Czech Presidency on January 1st, Prime Minister Fiala made a statement on the 30th anniversary of the dissolvement of the former Czechoslovakia. Weighing heavily on the biographical narrative of who "we" are as Czechia and what "we" have been through in the last thirty years. Their relationship with Slovakia remains strong as they had managed to negotiate their split with mutual respect. Fiala highlighted the importance of Czechia joining NATO and the EU as a "*poor country that had only recently broke free from the communist*

block" and that in 2023 that relationship was now *"taken for granted."* (Fiala, 2023) Admitting that Czechia *"did not fulfill sufficiently promises to our NATO allies"* Fiala announced that Czechia would be *"increasing and will continue to increase our defense expenditure."* (Fiala, 2023) In hopes that a strong collective defense will be *"the only way to maintain peace in the long term."* (Fiala, 2023)

Slovakia Post-Invasion of Ukraine Discourse

Following the Russian invasion in February of 2022 there is a clear shift in the discourse away from recovering from the pandemic, towards mitigating this next crisis of the war in Ukraine. After decades without physical conflict in the European continent, the war instigated a new *"emerging era of disorder."* (Šefčovič, 2022c) The introduction of physical conflict exposed several existing vulnerabilities in policy areas that were previously taken for granted. When addressing the Raw Materials Security of Europe Conference in September of 2022, Vice-President Šefčovič illustrated this problem as *"both the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's immoral invasion of Ukraine have further underlined that we cannot sleepwalk into another overdependence in a strategic area"* (Šefčovič, 2022e) These 'sleepwalkers' Šefčovič refers to being EU political actors and institutions, were forced to rethink existing strategies to adapt to this new reality. As Šefčovič has defined this point in time as *"an era when literally everything – from technology to large-scale disinformation can be used and an instrument of power."* (Šefčovič, 2022c) Areas of Energy and Digital policy, Critical Raw Materials, Defense and Security, and the very core of European values now required serious rejuvenation. From the discourse, the evidence is clear that Slovakia is determined to be at the frontline of the European charge to tackle energy and digital security, increase investment in defense and security policies, and defend common European values against Russian threats.

The violation of Ukraine's sovereignty by Russia incited an unprecedented and unanimous decision from the EU to implement severe sanctions on several imports from Russia. The reliance of several Member States on Russian gas and oil created a crisis. The proposed REPowerEU from the Commission, was the solution to the energy crisis supported by Slovakia. This comprehensive package was designed to *"accelerate our diversification from Russian fossil fuels."* (Šefčovič, 2022d) In direct response to the economic effects of the energy crisis at the everyday level, the package was aimed at prioritizing households and businesses by *"expanding the toolbox."* (Šefčovič, 2022b) This toolbox included measures such as *"capping*

electricity and gas prices and mitigate the increase in electricity prices for consumers." (Šefčovič, 2022b)

Slovakia viewed the energy crisis as a direct consequence of the *"underinvestment into diversification of our energy suppliers."* (Čaputová, 2022a) The ongoing efforts in climate policy to transition to renewable energy sources was now inescapable, *"this is not a choice, it is a necessity."* (Čaputová, 2022a) Europe now faced the challenge of turning away from Russian gas and move towards a sustainable future. Slovakia urged for full strategic autonomy so that *"the EU should never again be dependent on one supplier, and our economic model and prosperity should never be dependent on fossil fuels."* (Čaputová, 2022c) Continuing their position from the pandemic, the economic costs of transitioning to renewable energy were now outweighed not just the impending anxieties of climate change but the immediate threat of being cut-off from their supply Russian gas. Šefčovič insisted to "*increase domestic production while also diversifying our external suppliers"* with a focus on strategic geopolitical partners. (Šefčovič, 2022c)

A significant aspect of the transition to renewable energy sources and further development of digital infrastructure identified in the discourse was the securitization of critical raw materials (CRM's). CRMs are rare materials that are typically metal based that hold both economic importance and risk to its continued supply to the EU. As the Vice-President of Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight, a substantial amount of Šefčovič's statements was on the importance of CRMs. Arguing that *"critical raw materials are strategic commodities, and their supply can no longer be governed by market forces alone"* he outlines key reasons for increased prioritization of CRMs. (Šefčovič, 2022e) The most pertinent being that *"Critical raw materials are the building block of any decarbonized and digital economy that we collectively aim for."* (Šefčovič, 2022e) The regulation and possession of CRMs are essential for the proposed development of a "Common Digital Europe" and green transition. To put it quite simply, *"There is no green and digital transition without them."* (Šefčovič, 2022e) Additionally, CRM regulation easily spills over into the security dimension as they are necessary for the development of *"military and defense capabilities, be it for communication systems, satellites or night vision equipment."* (Šefčovič, 2022e) Controlling the mining and use of CRMs is essential in the context of Ukraine, as there is a significant deposit of CRMs located in Ukraine. Preventing Russian access to these CRMs, as well as Ukraine *"can also prevent CRMs from being weaponized."* (Šefčovič, 2022f)

The reintroduction of physical security concerns in Europe has had significant influence on the development of defense and security policy. Particularly, in strengthening the relationship between the EU and NATO as *"the transatlantic bond – now reinvigorated remains the most natural"* (Šefčovič, 2022c) Both Čaputová and Šefčovič heavily reference the need to increase defense spending Member States, as *"peace and freedom are not free, our defense budgets cannot be the first to be cut and the last to go up."* (Čaputová, 2022a) Šefčovič promoted the new Strategic Compass on Security and Defense, particularly in the efforts to replenish the *"Member States that have transferred huge amount of equipment to Ukraine."* (Šefčovič, 2022d) Additionally supporting the creation of a platform *"so that Member States can coordinate their purchases and replenish their stocks and upgrade technologies."* (Šefčovič, 2022d)

The most significant theme from the Slovakian discourse, post-invasion of Ukraine, was the overwhelming condemnation from Slovakia of Russia. What the discourse has started to reveal is that this flagrant violation of another state's sovereignty is more than just a physical war, it also *"an ongoing battle of narratives."* (Šefčovič, 2022c) This normative battle has split the conflict into a dichotomy of Russia's authoritarian attacks against western values of human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech. *"The Russian regime is waging a war on our democratic values"* and their tactics are both physical and digital in nature. (Čaputová, 2022a) Using the tools of social media platforms, Slovakia accused Russia of infiltrating the EU with attacks of disinformation regarding the war and blaming the EU for the subsequent crises. *"Russian disinformation threatens the war and democracy – false claims that the Western sanctions that are responsible for the knock-on effects on. Global food supplies."* (Šefčovič, 2022c) The Russian weaponization of disinformation on social media did not come as a surprise to Slovakia and the invasion of Ukraine was rather *"only an intensification of the war that has been waged for many years, first through disinformation and propaganda."* (Čaputová, 2022c) To address the threat of Russian disinformation on social media platforms, President Čaputová called for an *"increase of the responsibility of the platforms themselves for the content they provide."* (Čaputová, 2022c) Čaputová urged for the EU to strike a balance between freedom of speech and digital governance, warning of the dangers of allowing social media to go unregulated. *"Our democratic tools – including freedom of speech – cannot be used to destroy democracy itself… If we don't start defending democracy, it will cease to exist."* (Čaputová, 2022c)

Furthermore, by invading Ukraine *"Russia has created the biggest threat to peace and stability in Europe since the second World War."* (Šefčovič, 2022b) Shattering the collectively shared narrative of 'Never again to war' in Europe, this violation by Russia exposed several other relationships and policies that were previously taken for granted. According to Šefčovič the EU was "sleepwalking" and Čaputová stated that the *"warning signals appeared long before February 24th and we misread them as unrelated episodes rather than symptoms of a bigger challenge."* (Šefčovič, 2022e and Čaputová, 2022a) This challenge Čaputová refers to is providing the resources and governance necessary to protect Europe and its neighbors from Russian influence. By *"leaving countries in between the EU and Russia leads to more instability."* (Čaputová, 2022a) Šefčovič agreed that *"it is equally critical that we take care not to lose our other neighbors – especially in the Western Balkans – to the political influence or assertive economy of China, Russia, or other systemic rivals."* (Šefčovič, 2022c) Supporting Ukraine is a matter of European security both physically and ideologically as the EU continues to collaborate with Ukraine, as *"Ukraine was attacked for daring to be different from Putin's Russia. For improving the rule of law and democracy, for fighting corruption or having an open society."* (Čaputová, 2022a)

Finally, the last note from this period is that in their efforts against Russia, *"the proper solutions should be European, shared and unified."* (Čaputová, 2022c) Slovakia is keen on further integration by strengthening the Supranational aspects of EU institutions. Advocating for "*open strategic autonomy across the board – so that we can also defend our core values and strengthen our clout in the world."* (Šefčovič, 2022e) Whatever steps the EU takes in the future it must be done together in solidarity.

4.2 Survey Says? Secondary Analysis of Public Polling

4.2.1 Eurobarometer Survey Findings

Pre-COVID19 Pandemic Data

Top Issues Facing the EU?

In the spring and fall of 2019, the Slovakian public opinion expressed overall concern for the economic status of Slovakia and the EU. With the majority of respondents stating that the economic situation in Slovakia is "bad" at 46% in the spring and 59% in the fall. (Eurobarometer 91 and 92) These financial concerns have been a discernable pattern long before the pandemic, and the data suggests that it will continue through the pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine, and beyond. Aside from financial concerns, the top reported issues facing the EU from Slovakia are immigration at 35%, terrorism at 20%, and the state of member state's public finances and inflation at 18%. (Eurobarometer 92 and 93) Before the pandemic, Czechia was very similar to Slovakia in that their top policy priorities at the European level were immigration, terrorism, and financial concerns. In the spring of 2019, immigration was the outstanding issue on the agenda with a response of 53% of Czechs listing it as a top priority for the EU. (Eurobarometer 91) Terrorism was the next highest with 32%, and concern over the state of member state's public finances with 17%. (Eurobarometer 91) In the fall of 2019, there were similar reports with immigration still at the top with 48% and terrorism at 31%. (Eurobarometer 92) The only difference in the fall was that climate change had emerged as the third highest issue with 15%. (Eurobarometer 92)

How do you view the EU?

In each Standard Eurobarometer, respondents were asked questions pertaining to their levels of trust in EU and National institutions as well as their perceived image of the EU. In both 2019 publications, the response from Slovakia remained between 45 and 50 percent. (Eurobarometer

91 and 92) At the national level, there was a remarkable amount of distrust in the National Government at 65% in the spring of 2019 that increased to 70% in the fall. (Eurobarometer 91 and 92) The reported image of the EU from Slovakia is more or less one of mild support, but more likely indifference. In the spring of 2019, 36% of responses were positive and 33% in the fall. (Eurobarometer 91 and 92) Neutral responses reported at 47% in the spring of 2019 and 55% in the fall. (Eurobarometer 91 and 92) Despite the high levels of reported indifference, when asked about the perceived future of the EU, the majority of respondents were optimistic.

The reported trust and image of the EU in Czechia was lower than that of Slovakia, but not by very much. With 36% of Czechs responding they held trust in the EU institutions in the spring of 2019, and 39% in the fall. (Eurobarometer 91 and 92) The respondents also expressed a similar amount of neutrality regarding the image of the EU, but with slightly less optimism. In the spring of 2019, only 29% had reported a positive image of the EU and only 31% reported the same in the fall. (Eurobarometer 91 and 92)

Do you feel like an EU Citizen?

One routine question in each of the Eurobarometer's analyzed asked respondents about their perceived role in the EU. Asking "Do you feel like an EU citizen?" In Slovakia, an overwhelming majority of the population reported yes, in the spring of 2019 at 80% and 79% in the fall. (Eurobarometer 91 and 92) Noticeably distinct from Slovakia, the expressed feelings of being an EU citizen were significantly lower in the Czech Republic before the pandemic. Only 58% of Czechs responded that they felt like an EU citizen in the spring of 2019. (Eurobarometer 91) That percentage did increase slightly in the fall of 2019 to 65% responding 'yes'. (Eurobarometer 92) The findings of a majority of Czechs and Slovaks identifying feelings of being EU citizens has significant implications of their continuing integration into the EU collective narrative. The relationship of these findings with the political discourse will be further explained in the discussion.

Support for a Common Security and Defense Policy?

In addition to other areas of key policies, the survey asked respondents whether they were for or against a common defense and security policy. Slovakia responded with significant approval, reporting at 77% in the spring of 2019 and 82% in the fall. (Eurobarometer 91 and 92) Czechia's

feelings in regard to a common defense and security policy was similarly in agreement with Slovakia. Reporting with a high approval of 75% in the spring of 2019 and slightly increasing to 78% in the fall. (Eurobarometer 91 and 92) It is important to note, that the question posed to respondents only refers to the general idea of a common security and defense policy, rather than a proposed plan to strengthen the CSDP and any implications that may come with it.

COVID-19 Data

Top Issues Facing the EU?

In the Eurobarometer publications following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a noticeable increase in concern over economic stability in Slovakia. Not just at the national level, but at the EU level as well. In the 2020 and 2021 publications, the state of the member state's public finances was listed as a top issue facing the EU at 31% in the summer of 2020, 23% in the winter of 2020 and 29% in the spring of 2021. (Eurobarometer 93, 94, and 95) Immigration remained a salient issue in Slovakia reporting at 25% in the spring of 2021. (Eurobarometer 95) For obvious reasons, Health policy became a top priority at both the EU and National level in the summer of 2020, reporting at 23% in Slovakia and 10% in the EU. (Eurobarometer 94) At this point in the research findings, the policy area of terrorism starts to be put to the back burner of the agenda and it has stayed there for the foreseeable future.

Amid the pandemic, there were a few distinguishable deviations in the responses received from Czechia. Immigration remained a high priority for Czechs in the EU, as it was reported in the top three policy areas from summer of 2020 to spring of 2021. (Eurobarometer's 93, 94, and 95) The remaining policy areas listed at the top by respondents consisted of policy areas of financial concerns. The economic situation ranked at 26% in summer of 2020, 35% in winter of 2020, and 23% in the spring of 2021. (Eurobarometer 93, 94, and 95) In the responses for winter of 2021, the financial concerns became inflation at 70% and government debt at 31%. (Eurobarometer 96) In response to the pandemic, health became a brief point of concern in the winter of 2020 at 50%. (Eurobarometer 94) Similar to Slovakia, terrorism became significantly less prominent at the start of the pandemic and has not returned as a high priority in the Czech public opinion.

How do you view the EU in COVID?

Initially, the pandemic had little effect on Slovakian public opinion in regard to trust, image, and the future of the EU. There are some slight decreases, but overall trust in the EU institutions is consistently around 45-50% from summer of 2020 and winter of 2021. (Eurobarometer 93, 94, 95, and 96) The ambivalence of Slovakia's response to the image of the EU is still notable, as more respondents are indifferent rather than negative. In Czechia, expressed trust in the EU and its institutions in the Eurobarometer have steadily increased during the pandemic. In the the summer of 2020, 35% of Czechs had responded they had trust in the EU. That has increased to 48% in winter of 2020 to 49% in spring of 2021. (Eurobarometer 93,94, and 95) The reported image of the EU had remained relatively stable during the pandemic, with some staggered growth between summer of 2020 to winter of 2021 from 30% to 45%. (Eurobarometer 93 and 96) The interesting change in the reports is that the observed neutrality started to stray away from what we've seen in the Czech Republic's past. Rather than the amount of respondents reporting neutral being similar to that of positive, it has become more in line with those responding negative. (Eurobarometer 94, 95, and 96)

Do you feel like an EU citizen?

Feelings of EU Citizenship reported during the pandemic remained relatively high in Slovakia. With one exception in the summer of 2020 with a light dip down to 62%. (Eurobarometer 93) That being said, it quickly rose back up to 83% in the winter of 2020 and leveled out in spring of 2021 at 77%. (Eurobarometer 94 and 95) While respondents in Czechia did not have an overwhelmingly positive response to this question in the pre-pandemic Eurobarometer's, there was a stagnated increase in 'yes' responses during the pandemic. In summer of 2020, 60% reported feelings of being an EU citizen. (Eurobarometer 93) In the winter 2021/22, that number had risen to 74%. (Eurobarometer 96)

Support for a Common Security and Defense Policy?

Public support for a common security and defense policy remained high during the pandemic. In the summer of 2020, 77% of Slovaks reported being for a common security and defense policy. (Eurobarometer 93) This high level of support continued to increase to 84% in winter of 2020 and 80% in the spring of 2021. (Eurobarometer 94 and 95) A remarkable change in

Czech support for a Common Security and Defense Policy occurred during this time period. In summer of 2020, public support sharply dropped down to a mere 54%. (Eurobarometer 93) This quickly changed as support for a common defense and security policy rose back up to 89% in the winter of 2020 and 83% in the spring of 2021. (Eurobarometer 94 and 95)

Top Issues Facing the EU?

There have been two publications of the standard Eurobarometer since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022. In both publications, for Slovakia, the top three issues expressed as a top priority for the EU by respondents were inflation (69%), energy supply (31%), and the economic situation (21%). (Eurobarometer 97) Inflation and the economic situation both increased greatly in salience amongst Slovakians, reaffirming that financial insecurity remains an ongoing issue in Slovakia. The emergence of energy supply as a top challenge facing the EU further emphasizes the Slovaks concern of overdependence on Russian fossil fuels. In comparison, the concerns of Czechia remain mostly economic in nature with inflation ranking high at 42% in the summer of 2022 and 62% in the winter of 2022. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98) Other concerns such as energy supply at 46% and the international situation at 36% have taken over other salient positions in Czechia's public opinion. (Eurobarometer 97)

How do you view the EU post-invasion of Ukraine?

Unlike during the pandemic, the Slovakian public opinion of the image and levels of trust in the EU has seen a decrease since the invasion of Ukraine. Perceived trust in the EU dropped to 44% in the summer of 2022 and continued to fall to 37% in the winter of 2022. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98) However, it appears that increasing levels of distrust in Slovakia is not exclusive to the EU as trust in the national government has also decreased to 18% in summer of 2022 and even further to 14% in the winter. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98) The overall image of the EU declined as well, to only 39% reporting positive in summer of 2022 and 32% in the winter of 2022. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98) The notable neutrality of Slovakia has also decreased since the invasion of Ukraine at 36% in summer of 2022, and 33% in winter of 2022. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98) Negative responses increased by 10% between summer and winter of 2022 as well. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98)

Apart from Slovakia, between the covid pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, there has been little change in the reported trust and image of the EU in Czechia. With just above 40% of Czechs reporting trust in EU institutions in summer of 2022. (Eurobarometer 97) Between the summer and winter publications in 2022, the image of the EU decreased from 39% positive to 33% positive. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98)

Do you feel like an EU citizen?

Negative imaging and decreasing trust aside, Slovakia is still reporting higher percentages of feelings of EU citizenship. Slightly lower than before the war in Ukraine, 76% of respondents in the summer of 2022 expressed feelings of EU citizenship and 67% in the winter. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98) Unlike Slovakia, there was a decrease in Czech feelings of EU citizenship following the invasion of Ukraine with 65% of respondents still report feelings of being an EU citizen during the summer of 2022. (Eurobarometer 97) We will explore later in the discussion, these declines of trust and image in the context of ontological security.

Ukraine Specific Responses

The standard Eurobarometer added issue specific questions in the context of Ukraine, asking respondents how satisfied they were with the EU's response to war. In summer of 2022, 50% of Slovakians responded that they were satisfied with the EU's response. (Eurobarometer 97) This number declined to 39% in the winter of 2022/23. (Eurobarometer 98) The amount of Slovakians responding "don't know" increased from 1 to 6% between these two publications, potentially signifying insecurity. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98) In summer of 2022, they asked Slovakians which consequences of the war they feared the most. The top responses were inflation and problems in energy and other goods supply at 31%. (Eurobarometer 97) A close second was an economic crisis at 30%, and thirdly the war spreading to our country at 29%. (Eurobarometer 97)

In Czechia's response to being asked how satisfied they were with the EU's response to the war in Ukraine, 50% had responded that they were satisfied. (Eurobarometer 97) This number slightly decreased to 48% in the winter of 2022. (Eurobarometer 98) When asked what possible consequences they feared most from the war in Ukraine, 34% of Czechs responded 'spread to other countries', 33% responded with inflation, and 30% responded with concern over the

supply of energy and other goods. (Eurobarometer 97) Similar to Slovakia, the Czech Republic expressed financial concerns, but the note of spreading conflict to other member states suggests a higher level of perceived threats from the war in Ukraine to disrupt the physical security of the EU member states. This is something we will address later in the discussion section.

Support for a Common Defense and Security Policy?

Slovakia still demonstrates significant support for a common security and defense policy, reporting at 79% approval in both summer and winter of 2022. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98) In the winter of 2022 publication, Eurobarometer added another Ukraine specific question. This asked respondents whether or not they supported EU financing for the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine. There was a notable rejection of the proposal with only 38% responding in support and 56% against. (Eurobarometer 98) Reported support for a common security and defense policy in the Czech Republic remains quite high. With a small increase in the summer of 2022 to 80% before going down to 76% in the winter of 2022. (Eurobarometer 97 and 98) This response is likely due to the perceived economic costs of sending financial and military support to Ukraine but will discuss it further in later sections.

4.2.2 Past Experience and Future Challenges: The Visegrad Fund Survey

The Visegrad Fund survey was conducted, between March and April of 2021, a year into the pandemic and one year before the invasion of Ukraine. As a continuation of similar surveys last published in 2015, there was a sample of about 1,000 respondents from Czechia and Slovakia. The fieldwork was conducted by FOCUS, the Center for Social and Marketing Analysis and was coordinated by the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) in Bratislava. The reported findings were written by Oľga Gyárfášová Grigorij Mesežnikov.

The survey had included a historical background to the V4 from the last thirty years. The creation of the V4 was quite like the European Project post World-War II as its objective was to create a "*regional system that would guarantee a sufficient level of stability based on mutual trust between individual states.*" (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, pg. 10, 2021) Unlike other examples of regional cooperation in Europe, the V4 was significantly different as they had to

undergo significant revisions of their socio-economic and security policies after the collapse of their previous communist-regimes. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, pg. 10, 2021) The V4 emerged as a group of closely knit states with a shared history of intense social reform over the last thirty years.

In contrast to the narrative of a collective V4 with shared histories and social reforms, that was not always the case. When the former Czechoslovakia split at the end of 1992, the Slovakian government had turned towards authoritarian means of government that violated basic principles of the rule of law. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) So much so that it had *"de facto disqualified them from accession negotiations."* (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, pg. 11, 2021) The Slovakian elections of 1998 changed their position in the V4 drastically and with the help of the other three states, Slovakia and the other V4 states, officially joined the EU in 2004.

After reviewing the findings of the survey, it became apparent that while the V4 remains a group of four tightly connected states, there are some discrepancies appearing between the member states. After the refugee crisis in 2015, the V4 was united in their position of a non-solidarity approach to handling the wave of incoming migrants. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) However, in the wake of the COVID pandemic, that united stance had started to fragment the V4 into two sides with Czechia and Slovakia on one side and Hungary and Poland on the other. One affect that the survey results suggested was that respondents' preferences were being influenced by politicians' motivations to either strengthen the V4 platform towards common EU values or further away from them. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) In the case of Czechia and Slovakia it appears that they are moving towards the EU together, as they share the highest level of mutual trust of the V4 with 78% of Czechs trusting Slovaks and 84% of Slovaks trusting Czechs. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021)

Questions Asked by the Visegrad Fund

There were three specific questions from the survey asked to Czechs and Slovaks that were included in the analysis. These questions were based on their perceptions of challenges that the V4 faces, their state's membership in the EU, and challenges that faces the EU.

Q1: "In your opinion, what are the most important priority areas of the V4 cooperation?" (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021)

In response to this question, Czech and Slovaks identified Mutual Trade Relations, Foreign Policy, and Security and Defense as important areas of policy facing the V4. As identified early in the study, the most important area of policy in both Czechia and Slovakia is in socio-economic issues. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) Given that, ranking Mutual Trade Relations as the highest priority in both states does not come as a surprise, as can be seen in the figure below. Support for foreign policy was notably high in both Czechia and Slovakia. While the question prompt does not specify an area within foreign policy, the study suggests that the high level of public interest was due to the ongoing COVID pandemic. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) The language of question 1 does not specify which level of security and defense it's concerning. Without specifying whether it's national security and defense, EU security and defense, or NATO security and defense, it can be hard to determine which level the public is thinking of in their response. It should be noted that regardless of the source of security and defense the public opinion expresses a level of anxiety over the mere perception of security and defense policy.

Question 1:	Czechia	Slovakia
Mutual Trade Relations	44%	41%
Security and Defense	38%	32%
Foreign Policy	30%	28%

Figure 2

Q2: "Generally speaking, how do you feel about your country's membership in the European Union?" (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021)

The response from Czechia and Slovakia on their feelings of EU membership was overwhelmingly indifferent. Around half of respondents from both states, Slovakia at 57% and Czechia at 41%, answered that EU membership was a good thing, The survey noted that there was higher level of indifference in all of the V4 states regarding EU membership. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) Reporting *"Neither Good nor Bad"* at 29% (Slovakia) and 25% (Czechia) that noted indifference appears to be the case. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021)

Question 2:	Czechia	Slovakia
Good Thing	41%	57%
Bad Thing	29%	12%
Neither Good nor Bad	25%	29%

Figure 3

Q3: "European Union currently faces multiple challenges and problems. I will read you some of them. For each, please indicate how serious do you see it for the EU?" (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021)

Much like the issues facing the V4, both Czechia and Slovakia reported similar responses when asked about challenges facing the EU. The survey noted a few categories of particular interest, specifically immigration, terrorism, and cyber threats. In Czechia, immigration was listed as the highest priority by the public. As suggested by the survey report, the lingering anxieties of the migration crisis remain despite that "*there is hardly any inflow of refugees into V4 countries.*" (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, pg.23, 2021) While Slovakia listed immigration as an area of high priority, it was only Czechia that listed Immigration as the highest priority. Both Slovakia and Czechia listed terrorism as their second highest priority which like immigration has had very little effect on the V4, if any at all, in recent years. Corruption was listed below immigration and terrorism with both states reporting with just over 50% of respondents. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) It is unusual that corruption was noted at the EU level and not the national level in either state. The survey also noted this finding as corruption in both Czechia and Slovakia "*continues to be generally rampant and its negative political, social and economic effects are undeniable.*" (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, pg. 23, 2021) On a somewhat neglected note, the reporting's of concern over hybrid wars and cyber threats appears to be largely ignored by the public. This conclusion from the survey is intriguing as there had been significant intensification of cyber activity from authoritarian states, including Russia, in Europe and Czechia and Slovakia. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021)

Question 3:	Czechia	Slovakia
COVID-19 Pandemic	64%	76%
Immigration to the EU from Middle East and North Africa	68%	58%
Terrorism	63%	58%
Corruption	51%	54%
Hybrid Wars and Cyber Threats	45%	37%
Rise of Political Extremism and Radical Nationalism	46%	45%
Climate Change	37%	48%

Figure 4

While the survey was conducted during the height of the second largest wave of COVID cases, in Czechia and Slovakia healthcare was not a high-ranking issue facing the V4. In response to question 1 Czechia had listed healthcare as the eighth most important at 18%, and in Slovakia it was tied for sixth most important at 21%. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) In the context of the EU, both states reported the COVID pandemic as one of the highest areas of priority.

The survey concludes that the most important thing is preserving a position of an active co-creator of pan-European space consisting of commonly shared European values of freedom of speech and democracy. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) The V4 member states ability to preserve this position is vital for the continued success of the V4 and their positions in the EU and NATO. Fortunately, the study was also able to conclude that *"the present survey clearly indicates that public support for this vision exists in all V4 member states"* (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, pg. 43, 2021)

5   Discussion

5.1   Pull up a chair: Roundtable Discussion

It can be quite easy to look back on these last two crises that Czechia and Slovakia have faced and agree that these are critical situations, and these states are in a state of severe anxiety. The discourse and public surveys have indeed displayed a significant amount of changes in the everyday routine and identified numerous emerging anxieties. Instead of just simply acknowledging that these anxieties exist, it is vital for the analysis to also apply the framework of ontological security to understand the true depth of influence these insecurities and anxieties are effecting the changes in the discourse. Therefore, using the three effects of insecurity outlined by Kinnvall and Mitzen we'll explore deeper into the anxieties of Czechia and Slovakia.

1. *Individuals trade their freedoms for perceived security.*

When it comes to this first effect, it is important to note that in the context of Czechia and Slovakia as the 'individuals' analyzed, trading in their freedoms can be interpreted as recognizing EU sovereignty in additional areas of policy. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was common knowledge that the V4 states had voiced strong overtures of protecting member state sovereignty. Specifically in response to the refugee crisis following the Syrian war in 2015. Their united stance against a common EU migration policy set them apart from the rest of the EU and labeled them as Eurosceptic states. From what we learned from earlier sections, a crack between Czechia and Slovakia away from the other V4 member states has formed in their response to the war in Ukraine. Today, at both the public and political level, the concerns over immigration from the Middle East and North Africa have significantly decreased in both Czechia and Slovakia. In terms of state sovereignty, both Czechia and Slovakia have turned

towards a common European response to the war in Ukraine. Themes of European solidarity and working towards European security together, expresses that Czechia and Slovakia might be willing to put aside some areas of their state competence in submission to EU competence.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the prioritization of health policy was prevalent in both the public and political response. Czechia's expression of a clear need to prioritize Czech and EU citizens to receive vaccinations at the cost of third countries displayed an administrative urgency. At the public level the sharp increase of health policy in prevalence only affirms what Prime Minister Babiš stated in March of 2021, that *"sharing will not be possible."* (Babiš, 2021a) Czechia reaffirmed the trend of tendering additional competences to the EU in times of crisis by showing support for the common digital green certificates. (Babiš, 2021a) Following the invasion of Ukraine, it was evident in both Czechia and Slovakia that their political priorities had taken a considerable change in direction. Instead of immigration and terrorism it was now energy security, digital security from cyber threats, increases in physical security measures, and defending common European values as their highest priorities.

Between the two countries Slovakia took the more radical direction of promoting the rule of law, increased digital EU governance, lowering the CSDP's unanimity clause to a qualified majority, and deepening relations with the US and NATO. Since the COVID pandemic, Slovakia urged for an increase in the rule of law, particularly in holding political leaders responsible for upholding the existing rules and have a willingness to change the rules if limitations of power are necessary. (Čaputová, 2020) Additionally, in direct response to the invasion of Ukraine, Slovakia went so far as to say that the unanimity clause in the CSDP, requiring consensus amongst all 27 member states to take action, should be replaced with a qualified majority. Arguing that replacing the unanimity clause would help condemn *"violations of international rules that endangers everyone"* with more than just expression of great concern. (Čaputová, 2021b) Like transferring additional competences to the EU, strengthening the rule of law and enforcement mechanisms is a big step towards further integration into the EU.

In dealing with Russia, both Czechia and Slovakia were eager to support the development of additional digital infrastructure for the EU. Not just to increase the digital capacity of member states but to also to increase cyber security against disinformation and Russian hacking. The introduction of "combat in the digital sphere" and hybrid threats to the EU's existing digital

infrastructure were just a few of the warnings voiced by Czechia. (Jourova, 2022) Slovakia's largest reasons for increasing digital governance were to provide protection against Russian campaigns of disinformation. (Šefčovič, 2022c) Slovakia's aim was to increase restrictions on social media platforms while maintaining a balance between freedom of speech and digital regulation. (Čaputová, 2022c)

Their calls to strengthen partnerships with NATO and the US to share military and technological support is another trade in for perceived security. Not to say that being an active member in NATO would limit their freedom, but rather that by increasing the power of NATO in numbers and funding inherently limits further developments of the CSDP in terms of hard power capabilities. By relying on NATO for military power, Czechia and Slovakia along with the rest of the EU put themselves at the mercy of the whims of the US and the political party of the President at the time. The damage of the Trump administration in NATO is not lost on the EU, Slovakia especially as they expressed "great relief" at the election of President Biden. (Čaputová, 2021a) However, when given the option between the US and Russia, leaning towards the US and NATO is the perceived safer option for Czechia and Slovakia. Otherwise, they run the risk of being once again at the mercy of Russian influence and control much like Ukraine and other non-EU countries in the European continent.

2. *Development of 'risk societies' where threats are prioritized provides security but limits creativity in the policy-making process.*

It's quite clear from the analysis that this stage is prevalent in the reactions from Czechia and Slovakia at both the public and political level. During the COVID pandemic, prioritization of vaccine distribution and investments in digital infrastructure were at the top of the policy agenda. After the invasion of Ukraine, almost every area of policy became securitized to protect energy, supply chains, and the economy. The use of 'panic politics' is everywhere in the discourse and the volatile changes of public prioritization of policy areas. Šefčovič's analogy of the EU 'sleepwalking' into their current position of reacting to the current crises instead of preparing for the next one is spot-on. (Šefčovič, 2022e)

Amid the COVID pandemic, the target action of the EU was to distribute vaccines as efficiently and equitably as possible. Czechia critiqued the EU's disbursement plan and requested that the distribution be based on the pro rataper of citizens in each member states, regardless of how

many they were capable of purchasing. (Babiš, 2021a) The creation of the green digital vaccination certificates, while beneficial in its implementation and overall considered a step forward by Czechia, left questions of member state competences in their use of data. (Babiš, 2021a) While a global health epidemic was difficult to foresee, the preparedness of Europe was severely lacking, especially in the existing digital infrastructure. The strains of exponential use of digital solutions for professional and social connections exposed the sluggish technological developments in the EU, but especially Czechia and Slovakia. (Šefčovič, February 2022a)

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, several member states in the EU, like Czechia and Slovakia, drastically changed their policy agendas. The largest changes we saw in the analysis was the securitization of transitioning to renewable forms of energy, increases in digital governance to prevent disinformation, and the securitization of supply chains of energy, food, and critical raw materials. While transitioning to renewable energy was a prevalent topic in both states before the war had started, the transition was no longer about climate protection, but a condition for independence and security. (Fiala, 2022c) Prior to the war in Ukraine, Czechia had expressed hesitancy over climate policies, but once they took on the Presidency of the Council of the EU in July of 2022 it had become one of their five central pillars. The solution from both Czechia and Slovakia was to push through and implement the current existing plan, REPowerEU. (Šefčovič, 2022d) Considerations of other potential political strategies to address the issue of energy security was not noted in the discourse, at any level.

The improvement of digital infrastructure and governance was something that went hand-in-hand with the transition to renewable energy. To achieve the goals on improving the EU's digital platform, securing supply chains of CRM's was the top priority of Slovakia. These CRMs were such a high priority, and still are, because they hold significant implications of security in supporting the production of new forms of technology and military supplies. (Šefčovič, 2022e) Additionally, by securing the supply of CRMs from Ukraine they held a strategic advantage in preventing Russia from acquiring and weaponizing them in their fight to gain control of Ukraine. (Šefčovič, 2022e)

3. *The public becomes vulnerable to violent political discourse that uses scapegoating and othering.*

Due to the lack of existing digital governance and regulations on social media platforms, it came as no surprise that concerns of disinformation were prevalent in the discourse. A warning from both Czechia and Slovakia over digital security was that Russia had been using disinformation as a weapon in the digital sphere. Even before the invasion of Ukraine, Russian was targeting Czechs and Slovaks with false narratives, blaming the negative effects of the war including food and energy insecurity on EU institutions. (Jourová, 2022) The threat of public vulnerability to disinformation and extremist rhetoric comes not just from Russia, but also from nationalist groups from within Czechia and Slovakia.

In the context of the recent crises, it is apparent from the discourse analyzed that the labeled "other" is Russia. According to the narrative constructed by Czechia and Slovakia surrounding the war in Ukraine, they are engaged in a battle between 'Russia and the West' and between 'Democracy and Authoritarianism.' (Šefčovič, 2022c) Both Czechia and Slovakia make numerous mentions that the actor to blame for the energy, food, and economic crises is Russia and their actions were an attack on the common European values of freedom of speech, democracy, and human rights. (Šefčovič, 2022c) The use of this narrative by Czechia and Slovakia perfectly explains why both states have expressed more need for improving their relationships with the EU, NATO, and the US.

A phenomenon identified in the Visegrad Fund survey, was the existence of nationalist groups within both Czechia and Slovakia. In Slovakia specifically is the movement of Slavic solidarity has had considerable influence in the social narrative. Slavic solidarity places an emphasis on the importance of Slavic languages and cultures with Russia acting as the superpower protector of the smaller Slavic states. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) The danger of the Slavic solidarity rhetoric is that it prioritizes the cultural importance of Slavic nations over the current existing social orders. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) Regardless of EU or NATO membership Slavic states should gravitate towards Russia and away from traditional western values. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021) In Czechia there are similar groups of radical nationalists, but with slightly less pro-Russia tendencies. This is mostly due to Czechia's perception of their past narrative as a soviet state. (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2021)

5.2 Beyond these Pages: Suggestions for Future Research

Given that the existing field of ontological security studies is still so small, especially in the context of the V4 region, it's important to highlight emerging topics for future research. For starters, Czechia and Slovakia are only half of the V4 states. The application of ontological security studies to Hungary and Poland is highly likely to bring up remarkable results in comparison to Czechia and Slovakia. Analysis of the entire V4 region, similar to what has been done in the Baltics and the Balkans would be beneficial for the continuation of the field. Additionally, given the delayed integration of Slovakia into the EU mentioned earlier, the relationship between Slovakia and the other V4 member states will likely identify important findings that could prove beneficial in future EU expansion negotiations.

The second suggestion for further research is the reactions from Czechia and Slovakia to the migration crises from the Syrian war and the war in Ukraine. In 2015, the response to the wave of refugees entering from the Middle East and North Africa was to protect state sovereignty and strengthen border security in the Schengen zone. The notable public concern over immigration reported in both the Eurobarometer and the Visegrad Fund survey confirmed that migration from the Middle East and North Africa was a severe concern. (Eurobarometer 91, 2021) Fast forward to the invasion of Ukraine, and the response from the political level is to welcome refugees from Ukraine with open arms by providing humanitarian aid and a reconstruction plan once the war is over. (Fiala, 2021a) At the public level reported levels of immigration dropped off significantly in lieu of the economic and energy crisis. (Eurobarometers 93, 94, and 95) Applying an ontological security perspective to this question will likely identify key insights, especially in terms of the collective EU narrative and what groups are excluded from this narrative.

Lastly, but certainly not the least, is further exploration into the emerging dichotomy in security and defense policy between NATO and the CSDP. Finding the balance between European hard power and Trans-Atlantic relations is proving to be difficult for the EU. The more member states call for increases in financial and military support to NATO the further away the EU seems to be from achieving strategic autonomy in collective defense. Additionally, applying a

specific lens to the V4 states who were once members of the now dissolved Warsaw Pact, could explain further their current position as pro-NATO but still Eurosceptic in the CSDP.

6   I'll leave you with this: Conclusion

Returning to the introduction, the statement of Maroš Šefčovič in September of 2022, that the EU had been sleepwalking into yet another crisis, has proven to be true. (Šefčovič, 2022e) Using the ontological framework provided by Kinnvall and Mitzen, the reaction from Czechia and Slovakia to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine is a prime example of ontological insecurity. Prior to the pandemic, several areas of policy including the green transition to renewable energy, digital infrastructure and governance, and investment in military capabilities were woefully unprepared for these exogenous shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic ruptured the everyday routine of citizens and placed significant stress on the existing digital infrastructure and healthcare systems in Czechia and Slovakia. Once the routine was ruptured, anxieties emerged at both the public and political level calling for investment in digital infrastructure and health policies. Then, almost as soon as Czechia and Slovakia had established a new everyday routine, Russia invaded Ukraine and initiated physical combat and a new rupture to the everyday routine. This time the anxieties that surfaced carried much more severe consequences, with threats to energy supply, digital security, another economic crisis, and violent nationalist rhetoric. Czechia and Slovakia were no longer sleepwalking, they were shaken awake by these crises to a political system woefully underprepared to address the anxieties of the public.

As predicted by the ontological security framework, all these anxieties began to materialize in the public and political discourse. To address these anxieties, political actors began to engage in panic politics. First by trading in freedoms for perceived security by transferring additional competences to the EU and supporting additional strengthening of the rule of law. Second by securitizing increasingly more policy areas creating a makeshift risk society by pushing for adoption of REPowerEU to invest in digital infrastructure and transitioning to renewable energy as well as protecting supply chains of food and critical raw materials. Finally, by constructing a new narrative in the context of the current situation of the war in Ukraine using Russia as a scapegoat for the current crises and labelling them as a dangerous 'other'. In an 'EU vs. Russia' battle of narratives that threatens Czech and Slovak economic and physical security, both states are pushing for a united European response.

This application of an ontological security framework to the context of Czechia and Slovakia has taken a significant step in the further development of the academic field. We have gone where very few, if any, academics have dared to go before. The findings of the analysis have discovered an immense amount of potential topics of inquiry for further researchers to take on. Including a comprehensive analysis of the V4 group, responses to the 2015 migration crisis from the Syrian War and the migration crisis from the ongoing war in Ukraine, as well as the emerging security dichotomy between the CSDP and NATO. The themes defined in the analysis and evidenced in the discussion have massive implications for the future of Czechia and Slovakia, the V4 region, and the entire EU.

The days of living in a post-conflict Europe are behind us, and we are now entering a new era in which a new biographical narrative is currently being written. Attention must be paid to the influences of ontological insecurity in Czechia, Slovakia, and the other V4 member states. Especially as they are member states in the EU whose integration process has been labeled by some academics as a process of "failing forwards." (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier, 2021) What will be written in this next chapter of the biographical narrative is up to us, the public and political actors, as the authors to decide. With further development of ontological security studies, we can determine if this narrative will be written by panic politics caused by political actors 'sleepwalking' into the next crisis, or by decisive action using critical foresight.

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