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NARRATIVE WEAPONIZATION: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A BATTLEFIELD IN THE IRAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT

Najwa AlSaeed¹, Jonathan Matusitz²

Abstract

This study investigated how Iran and Israel construct and disseminate competing digital narratives on X within the context of the ongoing geopolitical rivalry. Using computational discourse analysis combining automated sentiment analysis, descriptive engagement analysis, and qualitative interpretation of official X posts, the research analyzed tweets posted between 2021 and 2024 from six official state-affiliated accounts: Iran's Supreme Leader (@khamenei_ir), the Government of Iran (@Iran_GOV), and Fars News Agency (@EnglishFars), alongside Israel's Prime Minister (@netanyahu), the Government of Israel (@Israel), and the Israel Defense Forces (@IDF). A purposive sample of tweets related specifically to the Iran-Israel rivalry, regional military developments, and political messaging was collected and analyzed using Hume AI's expression measurement tool to identify emotional valence and narrative framing. The study suggests that both nations utilize emotional messages to shape international opinion, enhance domestic support, and present competing claims to legitimacy. The data of engagement indicate a high degree of asymmetry: Israeli accounts have a demonstrably wider global readership, and Iranian accounts are fully ideologically sealed in their supporters' circles, which has direct implications for the soft power and diplomatic legitimacy. The study has counterintuitive implications. It showed that a parallel asymmetry exists in the digital domain, which is determined by the architecture of the communication model employed.

Keywords: *Diplomacy, International relations, Iran-Israel conflict, Narrative weaponization, New media, Soft power*

INTRODUCTION

The nature of media conflict has been drastically altered by the new generation of information warfare, making it impossible to compare current events to conventional propaganda from the 20th century (Maass et al., 1989, Semin and Fiedler, 1988). The modern battle is no longer a physical one, but an integrated strategic communication campaign, where nation-

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states use digital infrastructure to mold narratives both at home and abroad to promote legitimacy and a positive image (Zhang, 2017). Social media have become key fields where the narratives of state actors are produced and spread with the aim of shaping public opinion and geopolitical discussion (Tusa, 2013). Today, deliberate manipulation of facts and messaging is an important aspect of modern interstate conflict, this “weaponization of information” is a strategy that has been adopted in many instances and has been used to influence political opinion, identity and interpretation (Lazar, 2023, Krieg, 2023).

The Iran-Israel conflict exemplifies this trend, where both nations have stepped up their military activities alongside a coordinated information campaign on digital platforms since the 2023 Israel-Hamas war and escalation into 2025 (Laila Rizky, 2025, Seung-Hyun, 2024). Iran has been using anti-Israeli rhetoric to unite its people around its policies and to project itself as the leader in the region, whereas Israel has been promoting and using security-oriented narratives that are geared to international markets (Roomi, 2023a). The parallel military and information escalations leave social media as a key arena of geopolitical competition (Corps, 2024).

This causes a Digital Power Imbalance, where social media is not just a mirror of the existing geopolitical power dynamics, but it creates and reinforces asymmetries in narrative power (Wahab, 2024). Platforms like X (previously known as Twitter) deliberately champion content that attracts high engagement, giving an edge to people with English language access and audience who are western oriented (Sah and Sahani, 2026). States that have a higher degree of penetration in international social media have unfair access to international legitimacy, regardless of the basis of their claims (Yaqub and Tabassum, 2025).

The Iran-Israel interplay is one such situation that shows empirically that such an asymmetry exists, but it remains theoretically under-explored. Traditional international relations theory is not well equipped to identify the differences between propaganda, diplomacy, and soft power in a platform fashion (Siddiqui, 2025). Both states compete in the narrative game, but it remains to be seen whether and how there are measurable asymmetries in the reach and engagement of audiences (Alim et al., 2025).

Empirical research in the field of digital conflict has been largely concerned with great power relationships (US-China, US-Russia), while the Iran-Israel information competition remains under-researched. Despite the presence of existing literature that recognizes that nation-states use social media for conflict, there are relatively few quantitative studies that

reveal the differences certain communication logics provide in terms of measurable asymmetries in relative visibility. The current methods are sentiment-based, which are good at determining the emotional tone, but not necessarily the communication strategies and their impact on international engagement. The need for research that establishes empirical connections between emotional framing strategies and engagement metrics, and between platform structural features and these asymmetries is urgent.

The purpose of the study is to explore how Iran and Israel use narratives on social media as a weapon and what mechanisms are involved in platform structures to increase asymmetry in narrative reach. Computational discourse analysis indicates that there are two types of communication logics: Iran’s is ideological-moral and relates to regional solidarity, while Israel’s is security-legitimacy and relates to international recognition. It also explores how and whether these different logics are reflected in engagement asymmetries (as measured by views, retweets, and likes) on X platforms. Table 1 shows how the study contributes to the existing literature.

Table 1: What Existing Studies Do vs. What This Study Does

Existing Literature	This study
Focuses on US–China and US–Russia information rivalry	Examines the Iran–Israel digital conflict
Studies propaganda and disinformation broadly	Analyzes emotional framing patterns systematically
Often descriptive or qualitative	Uses computational discourse analysis
Focuses on narrative construction	Links narratives to engagement outcomes
Rarely addresses platform-driven asymmetries	Develops the concept of digital soft power asymmetry

Source: Own Elaboration

The concept of digital soft power asymmetry is new to the digital conflict research field, and this research shows that the intensity of narrative (how emotionally charged content is) does not correspond with the penetration of narrative (how far it goes into the audience). Drawing from Nye’s (2004) idea

of soft power, this study contends that digital platforms are important sites where states try to influence the international preference and legitimacy (Nye, 2019). The most recent conceptualization of digital diplomacy is that of using social media to further foreign-policy goals and shape the perceptions of global audiences (Manor, 2019). This study contributes to the theories of soft power, digital diplomacy, and strategic communication in the under-researched Middle Eastern conflicts by connecting emotional framing to measurable engagement outcomes and elucidating platform mechanisms that facilitate the emergence of asymmetries. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the emotional framing patterns in Iranian and Israeli official social media (X) construction of the past (2021-2024) and how do they differ in quantity?
2. What are the engagement asymmetries (views, retweets, likes) between Iranian and Israeli official accounts in these emotional framing patterns?
3. How do engagement patterns differ between official Iranian and Israeli X accounts, and how do these patterns relate to differences in their strategic communication approaches?

The next section reviews the related theories to the study. This is followed by the methodology section, which outlines the research design, data collection process, sampling strategy, and analytical tools used in the study. The subsequent section presents the empirical findings, focusing on sentiment patterns, narrative framing, and engagement asymmetries between the selected accounts. The discussion section then interprets these findings in relation to existing theories and highlights their implications for digital diplomacy and international relations. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing key insights, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

1 METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research Design

This study uses computational discourse analysis using combination of sentiment analysis and engagement metrics analysis. The study explores emotional valence as an indicator of strategic communication choices in tweets. Sentiment analysis acts as the analytical prism and engagement metrics (views, retweets, likes) were used as observable indicators of audience interaction and relative content visibility.

1.2 Data Collection and Sampling

The tweets of the six verified official X (formerly Twitter) accounts of the main governmental, political and military bodies of Iran and Israel were manually retrieved from 2021 to 2024. The accounts were chosen as the main English-language means of each state conveying official narratives to the world. The resulting English-language data set consisted of 306 native English tweets, with 142 tweets from Iranian accounts and 164 tweets from Israeli accounts. Only posts that were original, regarding interstate relations, regional security, diplomacy, military operations, or geopolitical developments were included, reposts, duplicate posts, multimedia-only posts with no substantive textual content and non-English tweets were excluded. The Iranian accounts are from the country's top political body (the Supreme Leader), the official government press office, and a major state-sponsored English-language news agency which has a large international reach. The Israeli accounts also include the main players in Israel's digital diplomacy ecosystem: the Prime Minister, Israel's official Government account and the Israel Defense Forces. The uneven geographic distribution of tweets is not the result of a set number of samples being set aside for each account; it is due to differences in posting rates over the course of the study. Later in the manuscript, there are posts in Hebrew and Persian (which were not subjected to computational sentiment analysis) included for illustrative purposes to communicate an idea of communication strategy.

1.3 Sentiment Analysis Tool

The emotional analysis was performed with an emotion measurement system based on text, which identifies emotional valence from linguistic features contained within textual data, provided by Hume AI. The unit of analysis was each English-language tweet, with no attempt to modify the text content of the tweets. Hume AI produced a valence score ranging from -100 (strongly negative emotional expression) to +100 (strongly positive emotional expression), which was then used to make comparisons between the levels of emotional expression in official communications. Emotional scores generated by Hume AI were used to measure overall evaluation of emotion, it did not automatically assign political positions or to determine the sentiment target. Discourse analysis of the content of the tweets was performed using a contextual qualitative interpretation of references to anti-Israel or anti-Iran narratives, not automated sentiment classification.

The average engagement scores for each account were then compared to see if there were any differences between the reach of the narrative across countries.

1.4 Computational Discourse Analysis

The study used computational discourse analysis which combines automated sentiment analysis and qualitative discourse interpretation and descriptive engagement analysis. The unit of analysis was the individual tweet. Emotional valence of each tweet was quantified by computational sentiment analysis, and engagement metrics (views, re-posts, and likes) were used for recording observable audience interaction. Qualitative interpretation was then carried out, which aimed to illustrate regularities in strategic narratives and rhetorical patterns. Themes were identified by iteratively analysing the content of the tweets and were informed by the literature on strategic communication, soft power and digital diplomacy, which led to the two categories of ideological, moral and security legitimacy. The categories were employed to interpret the impact of emotional framing on the overarching state communication strategy, and were not automatically classified categories.

1.5 Comparative Sentiment Mapping and Strategic Communication

Simultaneously, comparative sentiment mapping is conducted across content produced by state-affiliated coordinated communication networks and non-official users. Emotional framing patterns are analysed through the theoretical lenses of soft power, digital diplomacy, and strategic communication to assess how social media posts are adapted for domestic and international audiences.

Additionally, the analysis examined the use of affective linguistic forms associated with intergroup representation, which can be used to strengthen the national identity, weaken the legitimacy of the opponent, and shape international perception. Such a methodological combination allows for exploring greater depth in how X is being used not only as a medium of communication but as a strategic ground of psychological influence and geopolitical narrative.

1.6 Selected X Users/Official Accounts

Selected accounts were the main governmental and military actors that have played a role in the official English-language communication during the study period. They were selected for their institutional authority, regular activity, and their key position in disseminating the state narratives to the outside world. While there may be other governmental institutions involved in public diplomacy, the chosen cases offer a representative picture of governmental public diplomacy in each of the states.

Table 2 identifies the number of Iranian and Israeli official accounts of different organisations and/or governmental entities/apparatuses whose tweets are analysed using Hume AI's expression measurement feature:

Table 2: Official Iranian and Israeli Accounts

The Islamic Republic of Iran		
User Identification	Position	Account Handle on X
Ali Khamenei	Supreme Leader	@khamenei_ir
The Governmental Cabinet	The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran	@Iran_GOV
Fars News Agency	State-owned news agency administered by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps	@EnglishFars
The State of Israel		
User Identification	Position	Account Handle on X
Benjamin Netanyahu	Prime Minister of Israel	@netanyahu
The Governmental Cabinet	The Government and the Ministry of Affairs for the State of Israel	@Israel
Israel Defence Forces (IDF)	The armed forces of the State of Israel	@IDF

Source: Own Elaboration

The analysis delves into the methods used in the official Iranian and Israeli narratives, including strategies of emotional framing, and how these narratives affect international readers. The study does not identify cause-and-effect factors of audience engagement, but rather observes patterns of emotional expression and engagement in order to make sense of how alternative state actors assert their legitimacy, security, and ideologies in the digital information landscape.

1.7 Limitations

The study has a number of limitations. First, it was limited to X, while other platforms like Telegram are also a crucial element in Iran–Israel digital communication and could show different dynamics. Second, the analysis was only focused on English-language Tweets, and Hebrew and Persian were not included for methodological consistency. Third, the sample consisted of tweets from six official accounts from 2021–2024, and may not reflect the entirety of state-affiliated messaging. Therefore, the results are to be read with great care and should not be extrapolated to other platforms, languages, actors or conflict situations without additional comparative studies. Moreover, the systematic and consistent analysis of emotional valence with Hume AI involved the dataset, but the automated classifications were not independently coded by human experts. This is because the results must be understood as computational measures of emotional framing, not as actual measures of political intent.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The academic investigation of narrative weaponization, the theory of framing, and propaganda theory provides a holistic approach to understanding the tactical use of social media in the current geopolitical struggles, especially the Iran-Israel conflicts. These overlapping theoretical waves come together in order to shed light on how states strategically use digital narratives to package events, gain domestic backing, and influence foreign audiences.

2.1 Narrative Weaponization

Narrative weaponization has turned into a prominent approach in hybrid warfare. Opposed to the classical theories of war in which material

resources like military power take center stage, modern conflicts are fought in the realms of the mind created by the exploitation of mass perceptions (Nawaz, 2025, Putra et al., 2024). Theorists like Krieg and Freedman argue that narrative weaponization transforms the very concept of sovereignty, where control of frameworks of meaning-making is more important than control of territory alone (Avramov, 2024).

Digital platforms, such as X, Facebook, and YouTube, are used as the stage where the narrative is rapidly spread, with algorithms prominently furthering engagement and virality over truthfulness. These ecosystems have fertile environments where narrative weaponization can operate to take advantage of the structural characteristics of social media, such as speed, interactivity, and reach, to extend the conflicts beyond the physical space into global ideational competitions (Weinberg, 2023).

2.2 Framing Theory as an Operations System

Framing was described first by Erving Goffman and then developed by Robert Entman as a method of how certain elements of reality are emphasized to influence perceptions of the audience (Mehamli, 2025, Syahril et al., 2026). Frames provide ways of organizing popular understanding about complicated occurrences in simplified and resonant language (Santoso et al., 2024).

These frames get magnified through the interaction between state actors, non-state actors, and the actors in the social-media arena (Myhre and Berg-Nordlie, 2016). Another salient extension of the theory of framing to the digital age is the theory of cascading activation (Aruguete and Calvo, 2018, Landis and Allen, 2022). Zhang (2025) proves the ability of frames to spread in hierarchical forms when the narratives flown by states impact the media coverage that impacts the conversation between social-media users. The cascading model highlights the ability of platforms to reduce the time and space of narrative consumption to real-time feedback loops, registering more frames and less scrutiny exponentially.

2.3 Understanding Propaganda Theory: How Digital Narratives Shape Public Perception

Focusing on the manipulative interactions disclosed by the theory of framing, propaganda theory describes social-media platforms as arenas of mass opinion, determined by the mass information of numerous information channels (Chomsky, 1988).

The networked platforms can now allow state actors to coordinate propaganda across various channels, not to control the critical faculties of audiences but to overwhelm them using a firehose of falsehoods approach (Wang et al., 2023). This overload saturation kills social-media users with fast, affective, and frequently contradictory messages, which creates a state of cognitive dissonance leading to passive acceptance (Fuchs, 2018).

2.4 Digital Conflict: Hybrid Warfare to Diplomacy

Together these theories create a paradigmatic shift in modern conflict. Social media is now in the middle of the conflict between diplomacy, media communication, and warfare. Modern War is not a war of force, but a war of narratives that must be pursued, spread, and controlled through interconnected networks (Patrikarakos, 2020). This digital warfare breaks the old dichotomy between soft power diplomacy and information warfare. There is a growing trend in states to use a mixed discourse style, combining emotional appeals, the use of cultural symbolism, and ideological framing in order to acquire legitimacy both domestically and internationally (Haile, 2024). This theoretical triad, backed by data-driven analytics, has its roots in the concept of “beyond public diplomacy” as state actors customize, and weaponise narratives to address specific vulnerabilities in the global information ecosystem (Muller Mirza and Dos Santos Mamed, 2019).

Nye’s theory of soft power is an explanation of how states can shape others by attraction, legitimacy and credibility in their actions without resorting to coercion (Nye, 2019). In the digital diplomacy field, scholars like Bjola and Manor (2019) believe that social media has become a key tool for governments to communicate their national narrative, connect with foreign audiences, and promote their international legitimacy (Manor, 2019). This research builds on these ideas by looking at the ways in which emotional framing is manifested in the unequal distribution of narrative reach in interstate conflict.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Iranian Accounts Sentiment

In the analysis of tweets made by the official accounts of Iran, including Ali Khamenei (khamenei_ir), the Iranian Government (Iran_GOV), and Fars News Agency (EnglishFars), the data show that there is a low degree of self-

positivity that ranges from 1% to 10%. At the same time, these accounts feature an overwhelmingly negative orientation against Israel. As Ali Khamenei tweeted on 7 October, *"Dictatorial Zionists, you cannot recover from the defeat of October 7. You brought this calamity upon yourselves"*. This frames Israel as a defeated aggressor deserving punishment.

Figure 1: Tweet Khamenei.ir



Source: @khamenei_ir, X.com, 2026

Sentiment analysis shows that 49 -75 % of the emotive information on them is highly negative. For instance, the 7 May 2024 tweet was "Since creation of Israel, pure land occupied by vilest people, racists slaying, looting... Zionist enemy plots... delegitimized as a security threat ". This statement has been using very strong pejorative terms, which put Israel and its people as illegitimate aggressors, trying to delegitimize the state by use of emotional language. This kind of framing supports a negative feeling and continues a story that Israel is an unfair occupier. This state of constant negativity is evidenced by the portrayal of Israel as committing mass violence, which portrays the Palestinians as oppressed, sparking the emotion of revenge. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of Iranian accounts.

Table 3: Emotional Framing Categories and Aggregate Engagement Metrics for Iranian Official Accounts

Account	Tweets	Replies	Reposts	Likes	Views	Self Positive	Anti-Israel Negative	Neutral
@khamenei_ir	10	7,473	18,576	64,100	4,585,000	10%	75%	15-17%
@Iran_GOV	34	282	1,112	4,305	200,961	7%	72%	18%
@EnglishFars	98	114	348	1,784	171,925	23%	48%	26%

Source: Own Elaboration

3.2 Israeli Accounts Sentiment

Conversely, the State narratives of Israel, especially those of the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu), the Israeli Government (Israel), as well as the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), portray a slightly high sentiment of self-affirmation of between 3 -12% across these pages. However, these sources portray a significantly negative framing of Iran, where 53% to 92 % of emotive content is framed very negatively. Israeli official narratives construct a self-image of legitimacy and responsibility while portraying Iran as an illegitimate security threat.

Figure 2: Tweet Netanyahu

← Post

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu:

To the proud people of Iran,

We are in the midst of one of the greatest military operations in history,
Operation Rising Lion.

The Islamic regime, which has oppressed you for almost 50 years threatens
to destroy our country, the State of Israel.



Source: @netanyahu, X.com, 2026

The messages of the Israeli government emphasize the self-imposed status of the Israeli government as a protector of civilization against an existential threat from Iran. There is a common use of titles that include the “Islamic regime” and “characterized as posing existential threats” that keep on building the narrative that the Iranian leadership is a danger to the peace and security of the region. The tweet by the IDF, “This strike is part of the effort to damage the Iranian regime’s surface-to-surface missile production industry, which is intended to manufacture thousands of missiles in the coming years”. As Israeli military operations occurred prior to public disclosure of intelligence assessments, the IDF wanted to make it a defensive attack through their statement. The story, which is supposed to be morally justified, becomes a tactic of dominance and an advertisement of power. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of Israeli accounts.

Table 4: Emotional Framing Categories and Aggregate Engagement Metrics for Israeli Official Accounts

Account	Tweets	Replies	Reposts	Likes	Views	Self Positive	Anti-Israel Negative	Neutral
@netanyahu	10	49,759	82,369	411,100	29,941,000	24%	53%	23%
@Israel	64	81,866	79,566	379,656	34,025,000	3%	92%	7%
@IDF	92	131,169	209,109	1,068,500	130,814,100	10%	54%	36%

Source: Own Elaboration

These results highlight the relevant importance of narrative weaponization in modern conflicts, specifically through the channels of digital diplomacy and strategic communication on social media.

3.3 Emotional Tone Analysis

The Twitter activity that is filtered through both Iranian and Israeli official accounts can be seen to have a negative emotional tenor that is pervasive to support the strategic needs of such countries.

There is 49-75% negative content in Iranian accounts, including the accounts of Khamenei, the government of Iran, and of the English Fars. This sentiment is heavily accusatory of Iran, which represents Israel as a genocide aggressor and oppressor of Palestinian nationals. These sentimental statements aim to stir anger towards Israel and brotherhood with the Palestinians. This framing is also intensified through the anti-Western discourse, which supports the representation of an illegitimate, Western-funded colonial nation.

However, the Israeli sources, such as @netanyahu, @Israel, and IDF, have a similar degree of negativity, with 53- 92 % of their emotional output directed at Iran. The Israeli emotional framing is more of a defensive, alarmist position, which foregrounds the right of Israel to self-defence against an existential threat by the Iranian regime. This rhetoric appeals to fear and urgency, portraying Israel as a civil-defensible nation against a barbaric conqueror. These sentiments are also strategically designed to justify the use of Israeli military force, like air strikes and missile defense, as a morally right move. The Israeli tweets often highlight how accurate and

morally superior their attacks are, and they form part of a greater totality to protect Israeli citizens and the stability of the region.

Overall, although both actors use very negative emotional material, the difference is in the type of emotional appeals. The rhetoric of Iran is centered on the depiction of Israel as an illegitimate, genocidal oppressor to gain international support. Instead, the discourse of Israel focuses on how it portrays itself as a civilizer, which explains its actions as a defensive measure against an existential threat from Iran.

3.4 Engagement

The statistics reveal that Twitter posts by Israeli accounts are more engaging, securing more views, likes, retweets, and replies. This significant disparity in engagement rates indicates that Israeli tweets are more successful in reaching a wider audience, especially in the Western and pro-Israel realms. Conversely, the Iranian tweets are less viral, which is reflected in the lower rate of engagement. This implies that Iran is prolific in printing, but its stories are not disseminated as much on the world platforms, probably due to increased suspicion or opposition on international stages.

Figure 3: Tweet IDF



Source: @netanyahu, X.com, 2026

Figure 4: Tweet Iran_GOV



Source: @Iran_GOV, X.com, 2026

The comparison example of both tweets, where Israel and Iran are highlighting the same event, but it can be observed that the Israeli tweet has a more widespread international coverage, which is an indicator of a stronger involvement in the defensive Israeli narrative. On the other hand, Iran Post has a similar amount of emotional power; it has a lower level of engagement metrics, indicating a limited scope and a lower impact on the global community. This can be reasoned with differences in political orientation and audience preferences within the foreign environment. This sharp inequality highlights the power of narrative framing over international backing and coverage by demonstrating that posts made by Israeli social media pages always have a greater following worldwide than Iranian posts.

This disparity in engagement is a substantive and not a descriptive finding. Higher engagement can best be described as a proxy of observed engagement, the extent to which a built message cuts, sticks, and is intensified by an audience that goes beyond the immediate constituency of the sender of the message. In this metric, Israeli accounts gain much more international presence: the total impressions of the three accounts of the profiles belonging to @Netanyahu, @Israel, and @IDF were more than 160 million, whereas the total impressions of the three accounts belonging to the analyzed Iranian ones were approximately 5 million. This is not a mere measure of popularity, but rather a structural benefit in the global information space, where the algorithms of the Western platform, English content, and existing audience networks radically increase the communicative ability of Israel. Whereas Iranian tweets are mostly ideologically well-focused, they are effective in aligned circles but very weak in their ability to alter the world opinion. This implies that, in the digital sphere, the narrative power is not symmetrical even in cases when both the rhetorical intensity is similar.

3.5 Domestic Support Mobilization

The hashtags and posts of both the Israeli and the Iranian representatives on social media are an effective tool to engage domestic support; for instance, on the Yemeni issue, both countries were tweeting to gain domestic support.

The official account of Netanyahu (@netanyahu) tweeted with video on December 19, 2024,

החות"ים לומדים וילמדו בדרך הקשה, שמי שפוגע בישראל - משלם על כך מחיר כבד מאוד

(The Houthis are learning and will learn the hard way that whoever harms Israel pays a very heavy price for it). Netanyahu's statement employs deterrent language emphasizing consequences.

Figure 5: Tweet 2 Netanyahu



Source: @netanyahu, X.com, 2026

The aggressive and powerful tone is aimed at mobilizing support in the country to strengthen the national pride and cohesion in Israel. These metrics represent a high degree of activity among the Israeli users, which demonstrates strong support of the local audience. This can be seen as great acceptance by the masses, as the likes are remarkably high, and this is also backed by the fact that the message was not only read, but also has 1,290 reposts, which makes the message reach even more people. Moreover, the use of domestic language as a means of communication makes the issue more personal as specific terms and dialects encourage patriotism and a sense of belonging.

On the other hand, Iran was also discussing the same war and stressing their support for Yemen on December 26, 2024, and tweeted that, "Iran denounces Zionist regime's military aggression against #Yemen...

Figure 6: Tweet Foreign Ministry Islamic Republic of Iran



Source: @EnglishFaras, X.com, 2026

The Iranian tweet appeals to national pride by showing Iran as a morally right country against Israeli aggression. It presents the problem of justice and opposition and urges the Iranians to stand with the position of the government and express solidarity with Palestine and Yemen. The continuous reposts and thousands of views on the Iranian accounts, especially on the Persian-language channels, prove that this tweet attracted the attention of the masses back home. Even more active interactions are observed in Persian platforms by Iranian accounts since they are well aligned with the messages of the government. This reveals the role that social media plays in mobilising people in Iran, as it enhances the spirit of anti-Zionism and the spirit of unity as Iranians converse against perceived foreign aggression.

The data challenges the assumption common in early social media scholarship that digital media forms democratize geopolitical voice by

giving all actors equal communication access. Whereas, the case of Iran and Israel demonstrates that equal access to a platform does not guarantee the equal audience interaction narrative penetration. This finding supports the theories of digital power in international relations that structural inequalities in the world are not neutralized online; they are encoded into algorithmic reach and engagement patterns. In digital conflict environments, the most consequential strategic variable is not what you say, but whom your message architecture is designed to reach, and whether the platform's structural affordances amplify or suppress that reach. The Iran-Israel case thus functions as a paradigmatic illustration of what might be termed "digital soft power asymmetry": a condition in which one actor's communicative infrastructure produces systematically greater international legitimacy, not because its claims are objectively stronger, but because its narrative model is more effectively optimized for the structural realities of global digital platforms. Iran's ideological-moral logic aimed at regional solidarity through emotional outrage and religious imagery, whereas Israel's security-legitimacy logic aimed at Western institutional audiences through defensive and rights-based rhetoric.

4 DISCUSSION

The findings point to analytically important information that the two states are not simply using social media in different ways: Iran and Israel do not act based on the logics of communication that are structurally different; they are the expressions of geopolitical identities and strategic needs. The same concept has already been highlighted in Krieg and Freedman, where they suggested that narrative weaponization is framing to influence the masses and achieve political objectives (Zarnadze, 2025). It has been empirically verified that both the Iranian and Israeli social media structures use these strategies.

The Iranian tweets were referred to as an ideological-moral narrative, where the content is flooded with moral indignation, symbolism, and anti-imperialist framing, and is aimed at an audience that is ideologically inclined instead of appealable neutrals. It creates great solidarity among communities with Iranian, Palestinian, and larger Muslim majority populations, but with little global amplification, which is a result of the rhetorical architecture of those models, which assume rather than develop ideological consensus. Israel, in its turn, adopts a security-legitimacy narrative paradigm, where the military operations are presented as the means of self-defense, as

proportionate, as well as morally justified reaction to the existential threat, a rhetorical logic tailored to the interests of Western democratic audiences, which value the international law, civilian protection principles, and security discourse. This model has a much more elevated engagement, expanded geographical coverage, and more resonance in the international institutions and media ecosystems, which create diplomatic legitimacy. It shows that digital narrative weaponization is not a mass practice but rather a situational strategic decision based on an ideological stance of each actor, the audience it targets, and the soft power calculus, which has important implications for the study of power in the information era, digital diplomacy, conflict communication, and other related areas.

Irani rhetoric exposes Israel as a genocidal aggressor and an imperialist regime that implies Western affiliation (Ilyas and Sajjad, 2024, Rouabah and Mullin, 2025).

On the contrary, the Israeli narratives describe Iran as a destabilising force that threatens the stability in the region, highlighting Iran's missile development and patronisation of terrorist proxies like Hezbollah and the Houthis (Leslie, 2022).

In general, Iran and Israel use social media tactically to reach specific foreign audiences; Iran appeals for anti-imperialism, and Israel to attract the favor of the West and Europe. This is in line with the existing literature that highlights how the countries have been determined to influence the international perception through digital diplomacy and narrative control (Sampson and Annor, 2024, Hedling and Bremberg, 2021).

The use of social media by both states serves to increase morale at home, strengthen national identity, and justify decisions made in policy through the use of emotionally fuelled content. The Framing Theory by Erving Goffman and Robert Entman argues that the media shape the way the masses perceive issues by highlighting and downplaying certain aspects of a story (Zaklama, 2025). In the case of Iran and Israel, the strategic framing of the social media platforms used by both states is aimed at shaping the domestic perception and the international attitudes to the existing conflict, creating different images of the state. The tweets of Iran focus on the stories of resistance, martyrdom, and religious power and portray Iran as the protector of Palestinians and the oppressed nations (Joffre, 2023). The tweets shared by the account of @khamenei_ir frequently portray Israel as a rogue state that ought to take advantage of Zionist and Western sentiments to mobilize internal support for whatever the government does (Numan, 2024). A strong interaction among the Persian-speaking communities in

terms of views and reposts is an indicator of how Iran successfully employed social media to develop internal unity and mobilize the citizens' support for its resistance agenda.

Conversely, the tweets of Israel predict a national defence discourse where the state activities are morally right and necessary in ensuring security (Tramontano, 2021). Tweets by governmental bodies portray Israel as a champion of democracy and human rights against foreign threats. The tweets of the IDF often focus on military actions with an emphasis on the moral restraint of Israel, but the necessity to defend (X, 2026)

In this way, Iran lays emphasis on national resistance or religious solidarity, whereas Israel prefigures self-defence and moral superiority. Both make use of emotional stories meant to rouse the masses' opinion so that their respective governments are guaranteed domestic backing.

The results also indicate that the two sides conduct parallel digital campaigns to legitimise one another in a framing, as mentioned by Edward Bernays and Noam Chomsky in propaganda theory that emphasizes moral and ideological aspects to shatter the legitimacy of the other. Iran declares Israel to be a terrorist nation, which emphasizes its conformity to Western imperialism (Sariolghalam, 2022). This narrative aims to delegitimise the actions of Israel in the international arena and make Iran the champion of Palestinian rights and anti-imperialism.

Israel, in return, refers to Iran as a rogue state due to its nuclear weapons and sponsorship of terrorist proxies. Delegitimation of Iran is given in the form of a regional menace and a threat to the existence of Israel (Roomi, 2023b). This policy aims at not just weakening the international legitimacy of Iran but also presenting Israeli actions as morally limited reactions to the Iranian aggression.

Both countries successfully use social media as a platform of legitimisation struggle, where the core of the campaign consists of emotional and ideological narratives. Moral framing and ideological foundations are among the main tools of forming international understanding, as presented in Van Bavel et al (2019), calling on emotional appeals in social media as the main tool used in discrediting opponents (Van Bavel et al., 2019). The results have brought Nye's idea of soft power into the digital communication context and highlight that international influence relies on platform affordances, audience networks, as well as algorithmic amplification, aligning with current academic studies on digital diplomacy (Manor, 2019).

4.1 Implications for Diplomacy and International Relations

The findings of this study highlight the transformative role of social media, particularly X, in contemporary diplomacy and international relations. The strategic use of digital platforms by Iran and Israel demonstrates that states now engage in a parallel battlefield where narrative control, emotional framing, and ideological positioning are as consequential as physical military actions. This development signals a shift in the traditional understanding of statecraft: influence is no longer limited to formal diplomatic channels, treaties, or military deterrence, but extends into virtual arenas where public perception, legitimacy, and reputational power are contested in real time.

For diplomacy, these insights underscore the necessity for states and international organisations to integrate social media monitoring and narrative analysis into their foreign policy strategies. Understanding how adversaries and allies shape sentiment, deploy moral rhetoric, and appeal to transnational audiences can inform more nuanced responses, conflict mitigation efforts, and negotiation tactics. The dual functionality of platforms like X, as both instruments of public diplomacy and arenas of psychological warfare, requires diplomats to adapt to a context where messaging can preemptively influence international opinion and mobilise domestic support.

In international relations theory, these findings support a reevaluation of power dynamics, emphasising soft power, digital diplomacy, and strategic communication as critical dimensions of contemporary conflict. Social media-driven narratives can accelerate polarisation, exacerbate ideological divides, and influence multilateral decision-making, making perception management a core component of state strategy. Moreover, the study illustrates that legitimacy is increasingly constructed and contested online, implying that international norms, alliances, and reputational authority are vulnerable to digital influence operations.

Overall, this study suggests that future diplomatic and security frameworks must incorporate digital narrative analysis, sentiment tracking, and coordinated counter-messaging as essential tools for managing interstate conflicts, sustaining credibility, and mitigating the risks of online escalation. The Iran-Israel case exemplifies the broader trend of social media as both a strategic instrument and a battleground in global geopolitics.

CONCLUSION

The current paper shows that social media, and especially X, has become a critical battlefield of strategic communication and narrative warfare between the conflicting states, in the case of Iran and Israel. The degree of emotional appeal, ideological context, and orchestrated symbolic and rhetorical content indicated that statements on digital platforms are not merely reactive but are also tools of forward action to influence both national and international perceptions. The engagement data further reveals that Israel's security-legitimacy framing demonstrably achieves greater visibility narrative penetration in global digital space, translating into a measurable soft power advantage. It is this imbalance rather than the presence of online aggression that makes this conflict special in the digital realm, and that scholars and policymakers need to consider.

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ECONOMIC CYCLES AND ELECTORAL DYNAMICS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA (1992–2023)

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between economic cycles and electoral dynamics in the Czech Republic and Slovakia during 1992–2023. It explores the extent to which simple synthetic macroeconomic indicators capture mechanisms of democratic accountability, particularly the rewarding and punishing of governments by voters, while also explaining government continuity or change and levels of electoral mobilization in post-transformation parliamentary democracies. The study contributes to the literature by providing a long-term comparative analysis of the Czech Republic and Slovakia and by comparing the explanatory performance of two established composite macroeconomic indicators within a common analytical framework. The main objective is to compare the explanatory value of two indicators: the Misery Index (MI = inflation + unemployment) developed by Okun (1973) and the Voter Unpopularity Index (VUI = inflation – 3 × real GDP growth). Methodologically, the study employs a quantitative comparative research design based on time series of macroeconomic variables and electoral data, including both regular and early elections, complemented by descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, and exploratory regression models. The findings indicate that the Misery Index better reflects long-term socio-economic pressure, whereas the Voter Unpopularity Index to appears to be more sensitive in short-term cyclical deterioration associated with higher voter turnout and a greater likelihood of government change. These relationships should be interpreted as probabilistic rather than causal, reflecting the interaction between macroeconomic conditions and broader institutional and political factors. Overall, the results confirm a systematic but non-deterministic relationship between economic development and electoral dynamics and highlight the usefulness of combining complementary macroeconomic indicators in the analysis of economic voting in post-transformation parliamentary democracies.

Keywords: *Economic voting, Electoral accountability, Political business cycles, Electoral behaviour, Czech republic, Slovakia*

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between economic performance and political dynamics represents one of the central research topics in political economy. Political business cycle theory primarily explains how electoral incentives may influence governments' economic policy decisions, whereas economic voting theory focuses on how voters subsequently evaluate governments on the basis of observed macroeconomic outcomes. Although these approaches are closely related, the present study empirically examines the latter while using political business cycle theory as its broader theoretical framework.

This relationship becomes particularly relevant in post-transformation economies of Central Europe, especially in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, both countries entered independent political and economic development with broadly similar institutional and economic starting points. From a methodological perspective, the comparison follows the logic of a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) (Lijphart, 1971), since both countries share a common historical and institutional background while differing in subsequent economic development and political evolution. Over the subsequent decades, however, their economic trajectories diverged. The Czech Republic gradually stabilized its monetary policy and maintained relatively low unemployment rates, whereas Slovakia experienced persistently higher unemployment and, after adopting the euro, faced structural constraints resulting from the loss of independent monetary policy.

Despite this extensive body of research, relatively little attention has been devoted to long-term comparative analyses of post-transition democracies employing transparent composite indicators over an extended period. Rather than introducing a new macroeconomic indicator, this article compares the explanatory performance of two established indices—the Misery Index and the Voter Unpopularity Index—in explaining electoral dynamics in the Czech Republic and Slovakia between 1992 and 2023. By linking these indicators with electoral outcomes and voter turnout, the study seeks to contribute to the literature on economic voting in post-transition parliamentary democracies.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework linking political business cycle theory with the economic voting approach adopted in the empirical analysis. The following section describes the data and methodology. The subsequent

sections present the empirical results, discuss them in relation to previous empirical findings, and conclude with the main implications, limitations and directions for future research.

1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PREVIOUS EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The theory of political business cycles suggests that voters evaluate incumbent governments largely through the lens of macroeconomic outcomes such as inflation, unemployment, and economic growth (Nordhaus, 1975; Hibbs, 1987). As a result, governments face a dual incentive structure: while they seek to maintain long-term macroeconomic stability, they may also adapt economic policies in ways that increase the probability of electoral success. The interaction between economic performance and electoral accountability therefore constitutes a fundamental mechanism through which democratic competition operates. Classical political economy models further suggest that electoral incentives may influence fiscal and monetary policy decisions prior to elections (Rogoff, 1990; Alesina, Roubini & Cohen, 1997; Havrilesky, 1988; Aidt et al., 2020).

Within the broader framework of economic voting, voters reward or punish incumbent governments depending on the perceived economic environment and the distribution of economic outcomes across society (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000; Duch & Stevenson, 2008). Early empirical research demonstrated that macroeconomic indicators such as unemployment and inflation exert a measurable influence on electoral support for incumbent governments (e.g. Goodhart & Bhansali, 1970; Mueller, 1970; Fair, 1978; Hibbs, 1979; Whiteley, 1984). Fair (1978) further demonstrated that combinations of macroeconomic indicators can explain electoral support for incumbent governments and introduced the Voter Unpopularity Index (VUI), which subsequently became one of the indicators employed in economic voting research. The present article applies this established indicator to the Czech and Slovak context rather than introducing a new measure. Later theoretical contributions refined these findings by distinguishing between retrospective voting, where voters assess past economic performance (Fiorina, 1981), and prospective voting, where expectations about future economic developments influence electoral choices (MacKuen, Erikson & Stimson, 1992). Cross-national studies further confirm that negative economic indicators significantly reduce the probability of government re-election, although the strength of this relationship depends on institutional contexts and political accountability mechanisms (Powell & Whitten, 1993).

The importance of institutional arrangements for the functioning of economic voting has been widely emphasized in the literature. Comparative research shows that political institutions, electoral systems, and constitutional arrangements shape the degree to which voters attribute responsibility for economic outcomes to incumbent governments (Persson & Tabellini, 2003). In parliamentary systems with coalition governments, economic accountability may be diffused across multiple political actors, thereby affecting electoral punishment or reward mechanisms (Duch & Stevenson, 2008). These institutional differences are particularly relevant for interpreting macroeconomic conditions within post-communist parliamentary democracies.

Previous studies focusing on post-communist economies highlight that voters in these contexts often react strongly to economic shocks due to the relatively unstable nature of party systems and the still-evolving institutional environment (Fidrmuc, 2000; Roberts, 2008).

Empirical studies focusing specifically on Central European democracies further show that macroeconomic indicators, particularly unemployment and economic growth, influence electoral support for political parties and government coalitions. These findings suggest that economic performance and broader socio-economic conditions play an important role in shaping electoral dynamics in the region, although the strength and direction of these effects may vary across institutional contexts (Domonkos & Domonkos, 2011; Garaj & Bardovič, 2021; Svačinová, 2013; Doležalová et al., 2017; Douša, Koreňová & Džunová, 2026; Turečková, 2015). Taken together, these studies provide a strong rationale for examining the Czech Republic and Slovakia as comparable post-transition democracies in which the relationship between macroeconomic conditions and electoral dynamics can be analysed over the long term.

One of the most widely used composite indicators in political economy research is the Misery Index, originally proposed by Okun (1973), which combines inflation and unemployment into a single measure of economic hardship experienced by households. Alongside the Misery Index, this study also employs the Voter Unpopularity Index (VUI), originally developed by Ray C. Fair within his research on economic voting. Unlike the MI, the VUI combines inflation and real GDP growth and is intended to capture short-term macroeconomic conditions relevant to electoral support for incumbent governments. Empirical studies demonstrate that the combined effect of these indicators often correlates with electoral dissatisfaction and declining political trust (Fair, 1978; Hibbs, 1987). In the context of Central

European democracies, the concept of economic distress has also been extended through alternative composite indicators capturing the broader macroeconomic costs of government policies (Cabada, Hloušek & Jurek, 2014; Doležalová et al., 2017).

Recent research further highlights the increasing complexity of the relationship between economic conditions and electoral behaviour. Studies suggest that subjective economic perceptions may sometimes exert a stronger influence on electoral support than objective macroeconomic indicators (Bartkowska & Tiemann, 2015; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2019). At the same time, geopolitical uncertainty and external shocks increasingly shape both macroeconomic conditions and electoral dynamics (Caldara & Iacoviello, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic further reinforced interest in these relationships by demonstrating how sudden macroeconomic disruptions and heightened economic uncertainty can influence voter preferences and electoral participation (Baker et al., 2023). Together, these developments indicate that contemporary research increasingly views economic voting as a process influenced not only by objective macroeconomic performance but also by broader institutional and contextual factors.

2 METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to analyse the relationship between economic and political cycles in the Czech Republic and Slovakia during the period 1992–2023. From a comparative perspective, the study follows the logic of a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) (Lijphart, 1971). The Czech Republic and Slovakia share a common historical, institutional and socio-economic background while differing in subsequent macroeconomic development and selected institutional arrangements, making them suitable cases for examining long-term patterns of economic voting. The study is based on a quantitative comparative research design that links time series of macroeconomic indicators with data on electoral outcomes, voter turnout, and changes in governing power. This approach makes it possible to identify long-term patterns of political–economic interaction in two post-transformation parliamentary democracies that share a common historical background but have experienced different institutional and monetary policy developments.

Political data, including election results, voter turnout, and information on changes in government, were obtained from the official electoral statistics

of both countries. Macroeconomic data were collected from the databases of Eurostat, the World Bank, and national statistical offices, and include annual values of inflation, unemployment, and real GDP growth.

To capture the overall macroeconomic conditions relevant to electoral behaviour, two composite indicators were employed. Both indicators are established measures adopted from the existing literature. The first is the Misery Index (MI), originally proposed by Okun (1973), defined as the sum of the inflation rate and the unemployment rate, reflecting the combined macroeconomic burden associated with inflation and unemployment. The second is the Voter Unpopularity Index (VUI), originally developed by Ray C. Fair (1978) in his empirical research on economic voting, calculated as the difference between the inflation rate and three times the real GDP growth rate. Accordingly, this study does not introduce new indicators but applies these established measures in a comparative analysis of parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Negative values of the Voter Unpopularity Index indicate relatively favourable macroeconomic conditions, whereas positive values indicate less favourable macroeconomic conditions associated with a higher likelihood of voter dissatisfaction. The use of these complementary indices enables a comparison of two distinct dimensions of macroeconomic performance: while the Misery Index captures accumulated economic distress arising from inflation and unemployment, the Voter Unpopularity Index reflects short-term macroeconomic dynamics by combining inflation with real GDP growth. Rather than validating these established indicators, the study compares their relative explanatory capacity with respect to government continuity, government turnover, and voter turnout in two post-transition parliamentary democracies.

Electoral outcomes were operationalized using a binary variable indicating government continuity or change (1 = government change, 0 = continuity). Voter turnout was included because previous research suggests that adverse macroeconomic conditions may influence not only electoral choice but also the willingness of citizens to participate in elections. The unit of analysis is the election year of parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The dataset includes all regular and early parliamentary elections between 1992/1993 and 2023. Observations are therefore discretized at the level of individual electoral events, enabling the analysis of the relationship between the current macroeconomic situation and the probability of political change. This approach also reflects the nature of political-economic cycles, which tend to manifest themselves most clearly at the time of elections.

The analytical procedure was conducted in three interconnected steps. First, a descriptive analysis of the development of the MI and VUI indices over time was performed, including a comparison between the two countries. Second, a correlation analysis was applied to examine the relationship between the values of the composite indices, voter turnout, and the probability of government change. To complement this exploratory analysis, a simple inferential framework based on regression models was employed. The probability of government change was analysed using logistic regression with MI, VUI, and voter turnout as explanatory variables, while voter turnout was examined using a linear regression model with the same macroeconomic indicators. The objective of these models is not to deterministically predict electoral outcomes but rather to identify probabilistic macroeconomic patterns that may contribute to explaining political continuity, government turnover, and the level of electoral mobilization.

The results are interpreted in the context of major political and economic events, particularly the crises of the late 1990s, the global financial crisis, and the post-pandemic developments after 2020. Given the limited number of electoral observations, the findings should be interpreted primarily as an exploratory identification of long-term political-economic patterns rather than as a fully generalizable causal model.

Accordingly, the regression models are intended to identify probabilistic associations between macroeconomic conditions, electoral participation, and changes in governing power rather than to provide precise predictions of electoral outcomes. Nevertheless, the combination of a comparative research design, established composite macroeconomic indicators, and probabilistic regression modelling provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining the relationship between economic conditions and electoral dynamics in post-transition parliamentary democracies.

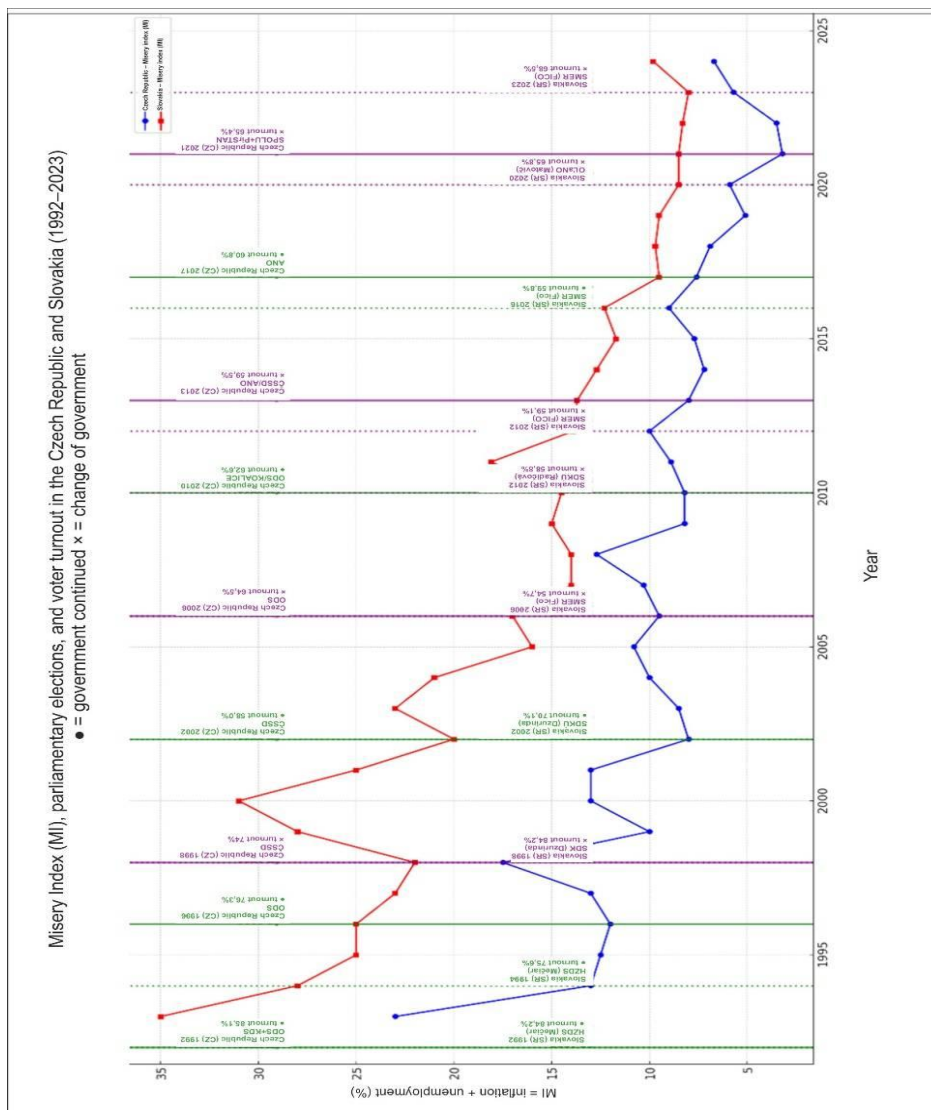
3 EMPIRICAL RESULTS

3.1 Misery Index

The development of the Misery Index (MI) in the Czech Republic and Slovakia since the early 1990s provides an empirical basis for analysing economic voting, democratic accountability, and electoral mobilization in post-transformation democracies of Central Europe.

As the MI combines inflation and unemployment into a single composite indicator, it captures the accumulated macroeconomic burden that may influence electoral behaviour through the mechanisms of economic voting. In the comparative context of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the index makes it possible to assess whether changes in macroeconomic conditions are associated with government continuity, government turnover, and the level of voter turnout.

Graph 1: Development of the Misery Index in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (1992–2023)



Source: Authors' own processing

In the first years following the dissolution of the federation, Slovakia exhibited significantly higher values of the Misery Index than the

Czech Republic. This was primarily related to the combination of high structural unemployment and inflationary pressures associated with the transformation period. Such conditions generated considerable social uncertainty and weakened public confidence in the ability of governments to ensure economic stability. The fact that the government of Vladimír Mečiar remained in power in 1994 illustrates, however, that economic factors do not always have an immediate or linear impact on electoral behaviour. This outcome may reflect delayed electoral accountability, whereby economic dissatisfaction is translated into political change only after reaching a certain intensity and in combination with broader political and societal factors. The 1998 elections were consistent with this interpretation economic hardship intersected with political polarization and high voter mobilization, ultimately resulting in a change of government.

In the Czech Republic, the trajectory of the 1990s was comparatively more moderate. After the initial deregulation-driven increase, inflation gradually declined, while unemployment remained relatively low, keeping the Misery Index substantially below the levels observed in Slovakia. The more stable macroeconomic environment was associated with relative political continuity, although the 1998 elections demonstrated that even a moderate deterioration in economic indicators—combined with the banking sector crisis and rising political dissatisfaction—could lead to government change. This pattern suggests that, under relatively favourable macroeconomic conditions, even modest economic deterioration may be associated with political change when accompanied by broader political and institutional developments.

The beginning of the new millennium brought contrasting developments. In the Czech Republic, the Misery Index remained predominantly in single-digit values, indicating low economic pressure and coinciding with a weaker need for electoral mobilization. Consequently, the 2002 elections resulted in government continuity with relatively low voter turnout. In Slovakia, unemployment remained high and the Misery Index continued to exceed Czech levels; nevertheless, voters confirmed the reform-oriented government of Mikuláš Dzurinda.

This outcome is consistent with the interpretation that expectations of future economic benefits—particularly in the context of European integration—may have moderated the relationship between current macroeconomic conditions and electoral behaviour.

The year 2006 represents an important deviation from the general pattern observed in the data. In the Czech Republic, a change of government

occurred despite favourable Misery Index values, a fragmented party system and complex coalition negotiations. This outcome suggests that favourable macroeconomic conditions alone may not be sufficient to explain government continuity and that institutional and political factors should also be taken into account. In Slovakia, by contrast, a higher Misery Index coincided with increasing public dissatisfaction during the period of economic reforms and was followed by a shift towards a more redistributive policy orientation. This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that higher levels of macroeconomic burden may create conditions conducive to political change when a credible political alternative is available.

The global financial crisis of 2008–2009 led to a temporary increase in the Misery Index in both countries, although the subsequent period of economic consolidation was accompanied by its gradual decline. Between 2013 and 2019, the Misery Index in the Czech Republic reached historical lows, characterized by extremely low unemployment and stable inflation. During this period, government continuity was maintained, while voter turnout remained comparatively moderate. Slovakia experienced a similar trend of improvement, although MI values remained somewhat higher; the 2016 elections nevertheless confirmed the continuation of the incumbent government. Overall, developments in both countries are consistent with the interpretation that lower levels of macroeconomic burden are generally associated with greater political stability and a lower propensity for electoral change, although this relationship is not uniform across all electoral cycles.

The pandemic shock after 2020 marked a major turning point. Rising inflation and a deterioration in labour market conditions led to a renewed increase in the Misery Index in both countries. This period was also characterised by higher voter turnout and changes of government in both countries. These developments are consistent with the interpretation that economic voting mechanisms may become more pronounced under conditions of heightened macroeconomic uncertainty. Although macroeconomic conditions alone cannot fully explain electoral outcomes, the observed patterns suggest that increasing economic pressure coincided with stronger electoral mobilization and government turnover during the post-pandemic period.

Table 1: Electoral outcomes, voter turnout, and MI values in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, 1992–2023

Country	Year	Leading coalition party	Misery Index (MI)	Voter Turnout (%)	Result
SR	1992	HZD	15.0	84.2	Continuation of government
	1994	HZDS	28.0	75.6	Continuation of government
	1998	SDK	22.0	84.2	Change of government
	2002	SDKÚ	20.0	70.1	Continuation of government
	2006	SMER	17.0	54.7	Change of government
	2010	SDKÚ	14.5	58.8	Change of government
	2012	SMER	13.9	59.1	Change of government
	2016	SMER	12.3	59.8	Continuation of government
	2020	OĽaNO	8.5	65.8	Change of government
	2023	SMER	8.0	68.5	Change of government
CR	1992	ODS + KDS	15.0	85.1	Continuation of government
	1996	ODS	12.0	76.3	Continuation of government
	1998	ČSSD	17.5	74.0	Change of government
	2002	ČSSD	8.0	58.0	Continuation of government
	2006	ODS	9.5	64.5	Change of government
	2010	ODS	8.2	62.6	Continuation of government
	2013	ČSSD	8.0	59.5	Change of government
	2017	ANO	7.6	60.8	Continuation of government
	2021	SPOLU	3.2	65.4	Change of government

Source: Authors' own processing based on the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and the Czech Statistical Office (2025)

A synthetic comparison of the descriptive results indicates that periods characterised by lower MI values generally with government continuity and comparatively lower voter turnout, whereas higher MI values were more frequently associated with government turnover and higher electoral participation. Overall, these descriptive patterns are broadly consistent with the theory of economic voting, suggesting that deteriorating macroeconomic

conditions may increase electoral dissatisfaction with incumbent governments. At the same time, several electoral cycles demonstrate that macroeconomic conditions alone cannot fully explain electoral outcomes. Institutional arrangements, party competition, coalition dynamics, and broader political developments also influence government continuity and electoral behaviour in both countries. These findings therefore support the use of the Misery Index as a useful descriptive indicator of accumulated macroeconomic burden, while also highlighting the need to complement its interpretation with broader political and institutional factors.

3.2 Unpopularity Index

The trajectory of the Voter Unpopularity Index (VUI) since the early 1990s provides a complementary perspective on the relationship between macroeconomic conditions and electoral dynamics compared with the Misery Index. The VUI is defined as the difference between the inflation rate and three times the real GDP growth rate. Unlike the Misery Index, which reflects accumulated macroeconomic burden, the VUI is designed to capture short-term macroeconomic dynamics by combining inflation with economic growth. Because the index may assume both positive and negative values, it distinguishes between periods of relatively favourable and less favourable macroeconomic conditions. Accordingly, the VUI complements the Misery Index by providing an additional perspective on cyclical economic developments that may be associated with electoral behaviour.

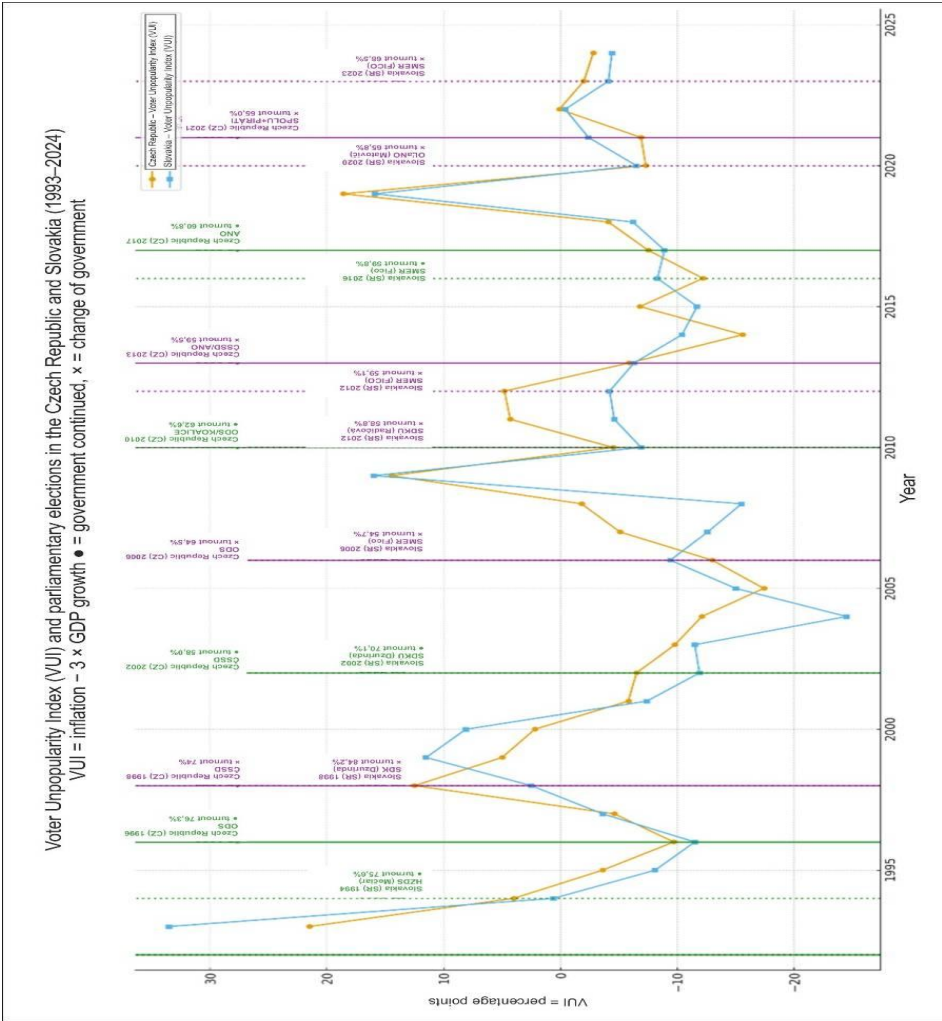
The first years following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia were characterised by pronounced macroeconomic volatility, which was clearly reflected in the development of the Voter Unpopularity Index (VUI). Although the Czech Republic experienced temporarily higher inflation, relatively strong economic growth resulted in predominantly negative VUI values, coinciding with a period of comparatively stable political development. Slovakia, by contrast, experienced weaker economic growth and more persistent positive VUI values, reflecting less favourable macroeconomic conditions. The 1998 parliamentary elections represented the culmination of this period, when unfavourable VUI values coincided with high voter turnout and a change of government. These developments are broadly consistent with the interpretation that prolonged adverse macroeconomic dynamics may contribute to conditions associated with political change.

The beginning of the new millennium brought a marked improvement in macroeconomic conditions, particularly in the Czech Republic, where

the VUI remained predominantly negative. Similar developments were observed in Slovakia, although the improvement was less pronounced. Most elections during this period resulted in government continuity. The 2006 parliamentary elections in both countries, however, demonstrate that favourable macroeconomic conditions alone cannot fully explain electoral outcomes. In the Czech Republic, government change occurred despite highly favourable VUI values, suggesting that coalition formation, party competition and other institutional factors also influenced the electoral outcome. Similarly, political change in Slovakia in 2006 indicates that macroeconomic conditions should be interpreted together with broader political developments.

The global financial crisis after 2008 caused a substantial deterioration in the VUI in both countries as economic growth slowed while inflationary pressures persisted. This deterioration coincided with government turnover in Slovakia in 2010 and weaker electoral support for incumbent governing parties in the Czech Republic. As economic conditions gradually improved, the VUI returned to predominantly T favourable values. Between 2013 and 2019, relatively low VUI values coincided with government continuity in Slovakia (2016) and the Czech Republic (2017), suggesting that favourable short-term macroeconomic dynamics were generally associated with greater political stability.

Graph 2: Development of the Voter Unpopularity Index in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, 1992–2023



Source: Authors' own processing

The period between 2013 and 2019 represents a contrasting phase of economic stability. In the Czech Republic, the VUI remained deeply negative due to strong economic growth and moderate inflation, which corresponded with the confirmation of government continuity in the 2017 elections. A

similar, though less pronounced, trend was observed in Slovakia, where favourable macroeconomic conditions contributed to the continuation of the government in 2016. In this phase, the VUI functioned as an indicator of political satisfaction and governmental stability.

Table 2: Electoral outcomes, voter turnout, and VUI values in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (1992–2023)

Country	Year	Leading coalition party	Misery Index (MI)	Voter Turnout (%)	Result
SR	1994	HZDS	0.6	75.6	Continuation of government
	1998	SDK	2.5	84.2	Change of government
	2002	SDKÚ	-11.9	70.1	Continuation of government
	2006	SMER	-9.4	54.7	Change of government
	2010	SDKÚ	-6.9	58.8	Change of government
	2012	SMER	-4.2	59.1	Change of government
	2016	SMER	-8.3	59.8	Continuation of government
	2020	OLaNO	-6.5	65.8	Change of government
	2023	SMER	-4.1	68.5	Change of government
CR	1996	ODS	-9.7	76.3	Continuation of government
	1998	ČSSD	12.5	74.0	Change of government
	2002	ČSSD	-6.5	58.0	Continuation of government
	2006	ODS	-13.0	64.5	Change of government
	2010	ODS	-4.5	62.6	Continuation of government
	2013	ČSSD	-5.9	59.5	Change of government
	2017	ANO	-7.5	60.8	Continuation of government
	2021	SPOLU	-6.9	65.4	Change of government

Source: Authors' own processing based on the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and the Czech Statistical Office (2025)

The pandemic shock after 2020 and the subsequent inflationary wave represented another major macroeconomic disruption. The sharp increase in the VUI in both countries coincided with higher voter turnout and government turnover. Slovakia experienced a change of government in

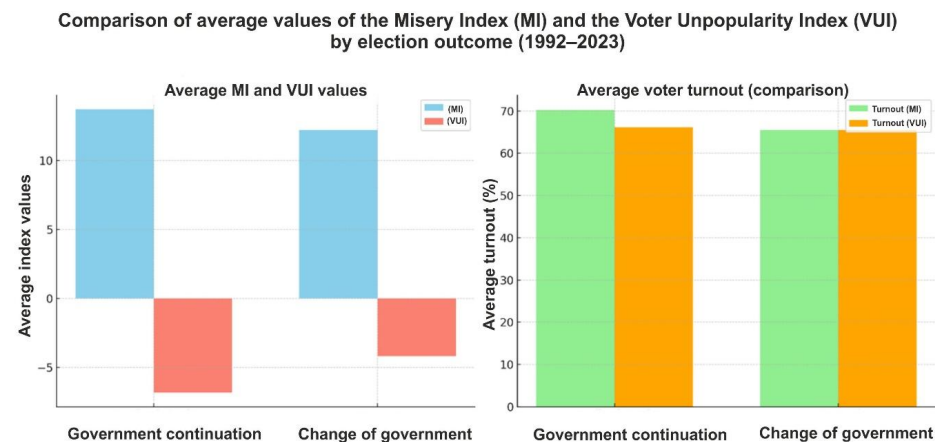
2020 and the return of an alternative governing coalition in 2023 under still relatively unfavourable VUI values. These developments are consistent with the interpretation that the VUI captures short-term macroeconomic dynamics associated with electoral behaviour during periods of heightened economic uncertainty.

Voter turnout during the analysed period generally evolved in line with the VUI. Higher values of the index were associated with greater electoral participation, whereas lower values were generally accompanied by lower voter turnout. Overall, the descriptive findings suggest that the Voter Unpopularity Index provides a more sensitive measure of short-term macroeconomic dynamics associated with electoral behaviour than the Misery Index. While the Misery Index reflects accumulated macroeconomic burden arising from inflation and unemployment, the VUI combines inflation with real GDP growth and therefore appears to respond more rapidly to cyclical changes in the macroeconomic environment. Taken together, the two indicators provide complementary perspectives on the relationship between macroeconomic conditions and electoral dynamics in post-transition parliamentary democracies. Their explanatory value, however, should be interpreted alongside institutional and political factors that also influence electoral outcomes.

4 DISCUSSION

The empirical analysis demonstrates that the Misery Index (MI) and the Voter Unpopularity Index (VUI) capture different but complementary dimensions of the relationship between macroeconomic conditions and electoral behaviour in post-transition parliamentary democracies. Rather than representing competing measures, the two indicators reflect distinct mechanisms through which economic developments may influence electoral outcomes. While the MI primarily captures the accumulated socio-economic burden associated with inflation and unemployment, the VUI reflects short-term macroeconomic dynamics arising from the interaction between inflation and economic growth. The comparative analysis of the Czech Republic and Slovakia therefore suggests that combining both indicators provides a more comprehensive perspective on economic voting than relying on either measure separately.

Graph 3: Comparison of average MI and VUI values by electoral outcome



Source: Authors' own processing

The findings are broadly consistent with the literature on economic voting, which argues that voters evaluate incumbent governments according to perceived macroeconomic performance (Fair, 1978; Hibbs, 1987; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000). At the same time, the results confirm that the relationship between economic conditions and electoral outcomes is neither linear nor deterministic. Elections held during the analysed period demonstrate that favourable macroeconomic conditions do not necessarily guarantee government continuity, while adverse economic conditions do not automatically result in electoral defeat. These findings support comparative research emphasising that economic voting is mediated by institutional arrangements, party competition, coalition formation and the clarity of political responsibility (Powell & Whitten, 1993; Duch & Stevenson, 2008).

One of the principal findings concerns the differing explanatory capacities of the two composite indicators. The MI proved to be more suitable for capturing long-term socio-economic pressures associated with inflation and unemployment. This observation is consistent with previous research indicating that unemployment and inflation often influence electoral behaviour through cumulative social effects rather than immediate electoral reactions (Hibbs, 1987). Historical developments in Slovakia during the 1990s illustrate this mechanism particularly well, as persistently high unemployment coincided with gradually increasing political dissatisfaction that culminated in government change only after several years. In contrast,

the comparatively favourable labour market conditions in the Czech Republic were generally associated with greater political continuity.

By contrast, the VUI appears to provide a more sensitive measure of short-term macroeconomic dynamics associated with electoral behaviour. Because the indicator combines inflation with real GDP growth, it responds more rapidly to changing macroeconomic conditions than the MI. This finding is consistent with theories of retrospective economic voting, according to which voters place particular emphasis on recent economic developments when evaluating incumbent governments (Fiorina, 1981; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2019). Episodes such as the transformation shocks of the 1990s, the global financial crisis, and the post-pandemic inflationary period illustrate that sudden deteriorations in macroeconomic performance were frequently accompanied by higher voter turnout and government turnover. Although these relationships should not be interpreted as causal, they suggest that the VUI captures short-term macroeconomic signals that are politically salient during periods of heightened economic uncertainty.

The comparative perspective also highlights the importance of institutional context. Although the Czech Republic and Slovakia share a common historical origin and broadly similar political institutions, their subsequent economic trajectories differed in important respects. The Czech Republic retained an independent monetary policy, whereas Slovakia adopted the euro and consequently relinquished autonomous monetary policy instruments. While the present study does not directly evaluate the effects of alternative monetary regimes, the observed differences between the two countries are consistent with the broader literature suggesting that institutional arrangements influence how macroeconomic developments are translated into electoral accountability (Persson & Tabellini, 2003; Roberts, 2008). This finding further supports the argument that economic voting should be analysed within its institutional context rather than through macroeconomic indicators alone.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates the limits of purely economic explanations of electoral behaviour. Several elections examined in this study indicate that political developments—including coalition negotiations, party system fragmentation and changes in political competition—may outweigh favourable macroeconomic conditions. Consequently, macroeconomic indicators should be understood as probabilistic rather than deterministic predictors of electoral outcomes. Economic voting therefore represents one component of a broader process of democratic accountability in which institutional, political and historical factors jointly shape electoral behaviour.

Several limitations of the study should also be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on a relatively limited number of parliamentary elections, which constrains the statistical power of the inferential analysis. Second, both composite indicators rely on aggregate macroeconomic data and therefore do not capture regional disparities, individual economic perceptions or heterogeneous voter responses. Third, electoral behaviour is influenced by numerous factors beyond macroeconomic performance, including political scandals, leadership evaluations, campaign dynamics and institutional characteristics. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as identifying systematic long-term associations rather than establishing causal mechanisms. Future research could extend the present analysis by incorporating survey-based measures of subjective economic perceptions, regional economic indicators or multilevel analytical approaches that combine macroeconomic and individual-level data.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that simple composite macroeconomic indicators remain analytically useful for examining economic voting in post-transition democracies, provided that they are interpreted within their broader political and institutional context. The comparative analysis indicates that the MI and the VUI capture complementary dimensions of macroeconomic performance and together provide a more comprehensive explanation of electoral dynamics than either indicator alone. Rather than replacing existing approaches to economic voting, the combined use of both indices offers an analytically transparent framework for understanding how long-term socio-economic pressures and short-term macroeconomic dynamics jointly shape democratic accountability in Central European parliamentary democracies.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to examine the relationship between macroeconomic conditions and electoral dynamics in the Czech Republic and Slovakia during the period 1992–2023 by comparing the explanatory value of two established composite indicators: the Misery Index (MI) and the Voter Unpopularity Index (VUI). The results indicate a systematic, although non-linear, relationship between macroeconomic developments, government continuity, government turnover, and voter turnout. At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that the explanatory value of both indicators depends on the broader institutional and political context in which electoral competition takes place.

The comparative analysis suggests that the two indicators capture different dimensions of economic voting. The Misery Index proved to be more suitable for describing the accumulated socio-economic burden associated with inflation and unemployment, whereas the Voter Unpopularity Index provided a more sensitive measure of short-term macroeconomic dynamics by combining inflation with real GDP growth. Less favourable values of both indicators frequently coincided with government turnover and, in several electoral cycles, with higher voter turnout. These findings support the interpretation that long-term economic hardship and short-term macroeconomic fluctuations influence electoral behaviour through different, yet complementary, mechanisms.

At the same time, the results demonstrate that macroeconomic conditions alone cannot fully explain electoral outcomes. Several elections in both countries show that favourable economic conditions may coexist with government turnover, while adverse macroeconomic developments do not necessarily prevent government continuity. Electoral outcomes therefore reflect the interaction between economic conditions, institutional arrangements, party competition, coalition formation, political responsibility, and broader historical circumstances. The findings are thus consistent with contemporary theories of economic voting, which view macroeconomic performance as an important—but not exclusive—determinant of democratic accountability.

The study also highlights the analytical benefits of combining two established composite indicators when examining electoral dynamics in post-transition parliamentary democracies. Rather than representing alternative measures, the Misery Index and the Voter Unpopularity Index provide complementary perspectives on the relationship between macroeconomic conditions and electoral behaviour. Their joint application allows both accumulated socio-economic pressure and short-term macroeconomic dynamics to be considered within a single comparative analytical framework.

Several limitations of the study should nevertheless be acknowledged. The analysis is based on a relatively limited number of parliamentary elections and employs aggregate macroeconomic indicators that do not capture regional disparities, individual voting behaviour, or subjective economic perceptions. Furthermore, electoral outcomes are influenced by numerous political factors beyond macroeconomic performance, including leadership evaluations, campaign dynamics, political scandals, and institutional characteristics. Consequently, the findings should be

interpreted as identifying systematic long-term associations rather than establishing causal relationships.

Future research could extend this comparative framework by incorporating additional Central and Eastern European democracies, combining aggregate macroeconomic indicators with survey-based measures of subjective economic perceptions, and employing multilevel analytical approaches that integrate macroeconomic and individual-level data. Such extensions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which economic developments are translated into electoral behaviour.

Overall, the findings support a conditional and probabilistic interpretation of economic voting in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Macroeconomic conditions constitute an important component of the environment in which voters evaluate incumbent governments, but their electoral consequences emerge only through interaction with institutional arrangements, political competition, and historical context. The combined application of the Misery Index and the Voter Unpopularity Index therefore provides a useful analytical framework for examining the relationship between economic performance and electoral dynamics in post-transition parliamentary democracies.

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ENERGY SECURITY AFTER DIVERSIFICATION: IS THE EUROPEAN UNION ENTERING A POST-CRISIS VULNERABILITY TRAP?

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Abstract

The European Union's response to the energy crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been widely regarded as a policy success. Russian gas imports declined from over 40 per cent of EU supply in 2021 to below 15 per cent by end-2023, while LNG import capacity expanded by more than 30 per cent. Yet as the acute phase recedes, less attention has been paid to the longer-term structural vulnerabilities emerging from this transformation. This article examines whether the EU's post-2022 energy strategy risks entrenching a new form of structural fragility — conceptualised here as a post-crisis vulnerability trap. Drawing on a structured qualitative analysis of EU policy documents, market data from the IEA, ACER, and Eurostat, and comparative assessment of national implementation patterns between 2022 and 2024, the article argues that diversification has reconfigured rather than resolved energy insecurity. New exposures have emerged in the form of LNG price volatility, fiscal asymmetries among member states, infrastructure lock-in, and growing social contestation over energy costs. The analysis identifies a systemic pattern of EU reactive crisis governance that transcends the energy domain.

Keywords: EU energy security, Post-crisis vulnerability trap, LNG diversification, Infrastructure lock-in, Fiscal asymmetry, Energy justice, Path dependence

INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 constituted a critical rupture in the European energy order, fundamentally challenging long-standing assumptions about the relationship between economic interdependence and security. For decades, energy relations between the European Union and Russia had been interpreted primarily through the lens of liberal interdependence theory, which posits that dense economic linkages reduce incentives for coercion by increasing the mutual costs of disruption (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Within this framework, the integration of Russian hydrocarbons into European markets was widely understood as

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both economically rational and politically stabilising (Goldthau and Sitter, 2015; Natorski and Herranz Surrallés, 2008; Yergin, 2006).

The EU's response to the resulting energy shock has been widely portrayed as a policy success. Faced with an abrupt reduction in Russian gas supplies — from approximately 155 billion cubic metres (bcm) in 2021 to around 27 bcm by 2023, a decline of over 80 per cent (IEA, 2023) — the EU rapidly diversified import sources, expanded LNG infrastructure, and deployed emergency market interventions to stabilise prices and ensure supply continuity. By the winter of 2022–2023, fears of widespread shortages had largely receded, storage levels exceeded 90 per cent of capacity before the heating season, and Russian energy dependence had been sharply curtailed. The EU demonstrated an unprecedented capacity for collective action under crisis conditions, a pattern consistent with the bloc's broader reactive integration dynamic (Niemann and Speyer, 2018).

Yet the dominant narrative of resilience risks obscuring a more complex reality. Crisis management, by definition, prioritises speed, flexibility, and short-term stability. While such measures are indispensable during acute shocks, they may also generate longer-term structural consequences that are less visible in the immediate aftermath (Helm, 2017). As the emergency phase of Europe's energy crisis subsides, critical questions emerge regarding the sustainability, distributional effects, and strategic implications of the post-2022 energy transformation. The central concern is not whether diversification worked in the short term, but whether it has produced a durable and equitable foundation for long-term energy security — a distinction that existing scholarship has only partially addressed (Siddi and Prandin, 2023).

Existing analyses of European energy security since 2022 have focused predominantly on supply substitution, infrastructure deployment, and regulatory innovation (Goldthau and Youngs, 2023; IEA, 2023; Tagliapietra, 2020). This literature has provided valuable insights into how diversification reduced exposure to Russian leverage and restored market stability. However, it has paid comparatively less attention to the second-order effects of these changes: altered cost structures, reconfigured fiscal burdens, accelerated infrastructure lock-in, and intensified social contestation over energy affordability (Sovacool and Mukherjee, 2011). These dynamics raise the possibility that short-term resilience may coexist with, or even conceal, emerging forms of structural fragility.

This article introduces the concept of a post-crisis vulnerability trap to capture this condition. A vulnerability trap arises when policies that

successfully mitigate an immediate shock simultaneously entrench economic, infrastructural, or political constraints that undermine long-term stability. In the European energy context, the rapid expansion of LNG capacity, heavy reliance on emergency fiscal support, the systematic under-investment in demand-side efficiency measures, and uneven national implementation of diversification strategies may generate new dependencies and internal asymmetries that narrow future policy choice.

The central research question guiding this article is: has the European Union's post-2022 energy diversification strategy reduced strategic vulnerability, or has it laid the foundations for a new form of structural fragility? The article advances three interrelated arguments. First, diversification has increased exposure to price volatility and fiscal strain by embedding European energy security more deeply in global LNG markets. Second, emergency infrastructure investment risks creating path dependence and lock-in that complicate the EU's decarbonisation objectives. Third, uneven national capacity, rising social costs, and the marginalisation of demand-side governance threaten the political legitimacy and cohesion of Europe's energy strategy.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 1 situates the argument within debates on energy security, crisis management, and post-crisis vulnerability, and specifies the two organising concepts of the post-crisis vulnerability trap and reconfigured dependence. Section 2 outlines the methodology. Sections 3 through 7 analyse five interconnected dimensions of post-crisis vulnerability: diversification trade-offs, economic and fiscal fragility, infrastructural lock-in, demand-side governance, and social legitimacy. Section 8 compares this experience with prior EU crisis episodes. Section 9 synthesises the analysis, confronts alternative interpretations, and presents conclusions.

1 ENERGY SECURITY, CRISIS MANAGEMENT, AND POST-CRISIS VULNERABILITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Energy Security: Dimensions and Debates

Energy security is a polysemic concept whose analytical meaning varies significantly across traditions. Classical formulations centred on the 'four As' — availability, accessibility, affordability, and acceptability — have been refined by scholars seeking to capture the multi-dimensional and politically contested nature of energy security in complex modern systems (Chester,

2010; Sovacool and Mukherjee, 2011). Cherp and Jewell (2014) advance a tripartite framework encompassing sovereignty, robustness, and resilience, each corresponding to distinct threats and governance responses. More recent contributions emphasise systemic interdependence, governance architecture, and the interaction between security imperatives and low-carbon transition goals (Goldthau and Sitter, 2015; Scholten, 2018; Overland, 2019). Müller-Kraenner (2008) underscores the geopolitical dimension, while Aalto (2008) situates European energy security within a multi-level governance architecture that shapes both policy response and structural outcomes.

The post-2022 European crisis adds a further layer: the interaction between geopolitical rupture and structural transformation at a moment of deep uncertainty. Within this expanded framework, energy security is understood not as a static condition but as a dynamic process shaped by infrastructure trajectories, political economies, and institutional capacities. Correljé and van der Linde (2006) argue that the geopolitics of energy supply cannot be decoupled from the institutional frameworks through which supply relationships are managed — a proposition directly confirmed by the post-2022 transformation, in which the collapse of EU–Russia supply arrangements immediately revealed the limits of market-centred energy governance.

1.2 Crisis Management and Reactive Governance

Energy security scholarship has traditionally oscillated between two analytical poles: crisis management and long-term transition. In periods of disruption, research and policy analysis tend to prioritise immediacy — supply adequacy, price stabilisation, and emergency coordination — while longer-term studies focus on decarbonisation pathways, technological change, and structural reform. Neither approach fully captures the vulnerabilities that emerge after a crisis has been successfully managed.

Crisis management frameworks emphasise speed, flexibility, and exceptional governance. In the European Union, this logic has been evident in responses to financial, migration, and public health crises, where temporary measures were adopted to restore stability under conditions of uncertainty (Niemann and Speyer, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Energy policy since 2022 has followed a similar trajectory. Emergency interventions — ranging from coordinated gas storage obligations to price caps and accelerated infrastructure permitting — were designed to avert immediate shortages

and market collapse. Evaluated against these objectives, the EU's response was largely effective. However, crisis-centred analysis tends to treat success as an endpoint rather than a transition, leaving the structural consequences of emergency measures insufficiently examined.

1.3 Path Dependence and Infrastructural Lock-in

Path dependence provides an important theoretical lens for understanding post-crisis vulnerability. Pierson (2000) demonstrates that political and institutional decisions are shaped by increasing returns dynamics, whereby early choices constrain future options and make reversal progressively costly. In the energy domain, capital-intensive infrastructure investments typically exhibit strong path dependence: assets constructed under crisis conditions carry long operational lifetimes, high sunk costs, and embedded commercial interests that resist early retirement (Helm, 2017; Markard et al., 2012). The rapid expansion of LNG regasification capacity in Europe illustrates this dynamic. Pierson identifies two reinforcing mechanisms: increasing returns, which reward continued use of established systems, and exit costs, which make departure from entrenched configurations economically and politically irrational even as superior alternatives emerge.

1.4 Economic and Social Dimensions

Economic and fiscal dimensions further contribute to post-crisis vulnerability. Crisis responses frequently rely on extraordinary public spending to shield consumers and industries from price shocks. While effective in maintaining social stability, these interventions can exacerbate fiscal divergence among member states and distort market signals, raising questions about long-term affordability and competitiveness (CEPS, 2024; IMF, 2022). Social legitimacy constitutes an additional, often overlooked dimension. Energy security strategies that impose sustained cost burdens or bypass participatory processes may encounter growing public resistance once the immediacy of crisis fades. Research on energy justice highlights how distributional effects influence public acceptance of energy policy, particularly during periods of high prices and rapid change (Bouzarovski and Simcock, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2016; Sovacool and Dworkin, 2015).

1.5 The Demand-Side Governance Gap

A dimension that has received insufficient attention in post-2022

analyses is demand-side governance: the set of policies aimed at reducing energy consumption through efficiency improvements, behavioural change, and structural transformation of energy-intensive sectors. In the immediate post-crisis literature, the emphasis has overwhelmingly fallen on supply-side measures — diversification, new infrastructure, alternative sourcing — with demand reduction treated as secondary or supplemental (IEA, 2021; von Malmborg, 2023). Yet the IEA (2022b) estimates that demand-side measures could contribute as much as 30–40 per cent of the emission reductions required by 2030 targets, and that gas demand reduction in Europe was the single largest contributor to supply–demand rebalancing during the 2022–2023 winter. The marginalisation of demand-side governance in the post-crisis environment — driven partly by political resistance to restrictions and partly by the institutional momentum of supply-side investment — represents a structural vulnerability in its own right, reinforcing lock-in by increasing utilisation of fossil infrastructure and reducing the scope for decarbonisation-consistent transition paths.

1.6 Conceptualising the Post-Crisis Vulnerability Trap

This article conceptualises post-crisis vulnerability as a distinct condition in which energy systems remain exposed to structural risks despite the resolution of immediate threats. Post-crisis vulnerability does not imply policy failure; rather, it reflects the trade-offs inherent in emergency governance. Measures that prioritise speed and scale — such as rapid LNG deployment or expansive fiscal support — can entrench economic, infrastructural, and political dynamics that complicate future adaptation. Vulnerability thus persists in transformed rather than eliminated form.

Conceptually, post-crisis vulnerability differs from traditional notions of energy insecurity in two key respects. First, it is temporal: it emerges after the apparent resolution of crisis, when attention shifts from emergency response to normalised governance. Second, it is structural: it reflects embedded constraints arising from infrastructure, fiscal commitments, and institutional arrangements rather than immediate supply threats. This distinguishes it from both acute insecurity and long-term transition risk, positioning it as an intermediate condition with distinct analytical and policy implications. The concept of a post-crisis vulnerability trap builds on this foundation, capturing the feedback loop through which crisis-management success generates structural constraints that limit future policy choice. The post-crisis vulnerability trap is related to, but distinct from, several adjacent

concepts. Unlike the resource curse, which links resource abundance to institutional underdevelopment, it concerns the structural after-effects of crisis response rather than of endowment; unlike carbon lock-in (Unruh, 2000), which is a general property of fossil-based techno-institutional systems, it is temporally bounded to the post-crisis interval; and unlike a generic transition or resilience trap, it specifies a feedback mechanism in which successful emergency governance itself narrows subsequent policy choice. Table 1 synthesises the five analytical dimensions through which this trap operates.

Table 1: Five Dimensions of Post-Crisis Vulnerability: Analytical Framework

Dimension	Core Mechanism	Theoretical Lens	Post-2022 EU Evidence
Market & Supply Reconfiguration	Bilateral dependence replaced by global spot-market exposure	Complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1977); supply adequacy (Cherp and Jewell, 2014)	Russian gas: >40% to <15% of EU imports; US LNG: ~47% of EU LNG; TTF peak €340/MWh
Fiscal & Economic Fragility	Emergency spending deepens inter-state fiscal divergence	Path dependence (Pierson, 2000); energy affordability (Sovacool and Mukherjee, 2011)	€700 bn+ national support; Germany >€200 bn; inflation peaked 10.6%
Infrastructural Lock-in	Capital-intensive investments generate multi-decade asset lifetimes and exit barriers	Path dependence (Pierson, 2000); stranded asset risk (Helm, 2017; IEEFA, 2023)	EU regasification +30%; LNG contracts to 2030s; mismatch with 2030 targets
Demand-Side Governance Gap	Supply-side bias sidelines efficiency and demand reduction, sustaining fossil throughput	Demand governance (IEA, 2022b; von Malmborg, 2023); carbon lock-in (Unruh, 2000)	EU gas demand -13% in 2022 yet demand policy receded; REPowerEU supply-weighted
Social & Political Legitimacy	Sustained cost burdens generate public contestation	Energy justice (Bouzarovski and Simcock, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2016)	9%+ EU households unable to heat homes; energy protests; Green Deal pressures

Source: Author's compilation based on Pierson (2000), Cherp and Jewell (2014), Keohane and Nye (1977), Goldthau and Youngs (2023), Bouzarovski and Simcock (2017), Jenkins et al. (2016), and Markard et al. (2012).

1.7 Reconfigured Dependence: A Conceptual Specification

A second concept requires specification alongside the post-crisis vulnerability trap: reconfigured dependence. Reconfigured dependence denotes a condition in which the resolution of one concentrated dependency generates a new, structurally distinct pattern of dependency rather than the elimination of dependency as such. It is defined here by three properties: first, the substitution of a single dominant supplier relationship with a more dispersed but still externally contingent portfolio; second, a shift in the locus of vulnerability from bilateral political leverage toward systemic market exposure — price volatility, global demand competition, and financial transmission; and third, the persistence of asymmetric adjustment capacity among the actors managing the new dependency. So defined, reconfigured dependence is distinct from strategic dependence, which denotes reliance on a specific and potentially adversarial supplier, and from supply diversification, which describes the policy instrument of broadening sources. Diversification is the mechanism; reconfigured dependence is its structural outcome when the diversified portfolio remains exogenously governed.

Conceptually, reconfigured dependence extends the complex-interdependence tradition (Keohane and Nye, 1977) and its recent revision in the literature on weaponised interdependence (Farrell and Newman, 2019). Where classical interdependence theory treats dense economic linkages as mutually constraining, and weaponised interdependence emphasises how asymmetric network positions can be exploited coercively, reconfigured dependence identifies an intermediate condition: the diffusion of dependence across a market network reduces any single actor's coercive leverage while simultaneously exposing the dependent party to non-agentic systemic risks that are harder to attribute, anticipate, or govern. In the European case, replacing pipeline dependence on Russia with exposure to globally traded LNG did not restore autonomy so much as relocate vulnerability from a geopolitical relationship to a market structure (Goldthau and Witte, 2010). This distinction underpins the analysis of diversification trade-offs developed in Section 3.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design and Analytical Logic

This article employs a qualitative research design centred on document analysis and structured comparative case assessment. The empirical focus is on the European Union's energy governance trajectory from 2022 to 2024 — a period spanning the acute crisis phase and its immediate aftermath. The analytical logic is that of a structured, theory-guided interpretive case analysis. It draws on the logic of mechanism-oriented process-tracing (George and Bennett, 2005) in connecting crisis-management decisions to post-crisis structural conditions — tracing how specific emergency choices, such as FSRU commissioning, emergency permitting, and fiscal support instruments, generate observable downstream constraints. It does not, however, constitute full process-tracing in the strict sense: the design does not test competing within-case mechanisms against systematically specified causal-process observations, and it makes no claim to have eliminated rival explanations through such tests. Rather, it applies an explicit analytical framework to interpret a bounded case — an approach appropriate for understanding how emergency choices create path-dependent outcomes that are not easily reversed once circumstances change (Pierson, 2000). The designation is therefore best understood as structured analytical case interpretation informed by process-tracing logic rather than as process-tracing per se.

The article does not claim causal sufficiency — multiple factors shape European energy outcomes — but argues that the mechanisms identified are theoretically coherent, empirically observable across the five domains examined, and consistent with a well-established pattern of EU reactive crisis governance. The unit of analysis is the EU's energy governance system as a whole. Member-state material performs a deliberately bounded illustrative function: national cases are introduced to demonstrate the presence and variation of the structural dynamics identified at EU level, not to generate cross-national causal claims. To make this function transparent, the illustrative cases are selected to span the principal axes of variation relevant to the argument — fiscal capacity, geographic and infrastructural exposure, and political orientation toward diversification. Germany exemplifies high fiscal capacity combined with rapid supply-side build-out; Bulgaria and Romania represent lower fiscal capacity and acute energy-poverty exposure; Hungary illustrates a politically divergent trajectory of

maintained Russian contracts. Where Sections 4 and 7 engage national detail more closely, they do so to evidence the mechanism at work rather than to explain cross-national outcomes, and the interpretive weight of the argument remains at the systemic level.

2.2 Data Sources

Primary sources include official EU policy documents — notably the REPowerEU Plan (European Commission, 2022), the Fit for 55 legislative package (European Commission, 2021), and the Recovery and Resilience Facility implementation reports (European Commission, 2023) — alongside statistical data from Eurostat, the International Energy Agency (IEA, 2022a; 2022b; 2023; 2024), ENTSO-E, and the Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER, 2023). Secondary sources include peer-reviewed scholarship on energy security, European integration, and political economy, as well as policy-oriented analyses from the Bruegel Institute (2023; 2024), the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS, 2024), and the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA, 2023). All secondary data sources were assessed for methodological transparency and institutional credibility. Statistical figures relating to fiscal support, energy prices, and supply volumes were cross-referenced across multiple sources to mitigate reliance on any single institutional narrative.

2.3 Analytical Strategy and Limitations

The article's analytical framework identifies five interconnected dimensions of post-crisis vulnerability: (1) market and supply reconfiguration, (2) fiscal and economic fragility, (3) infrastructural lock-in, (4) demand-side governance gaps, and (5) social and political legitimacy. Each dimension is examined through a combination of primary documentary evidence and published empirical data. Where quantitative evidence is cited, it is drawn from verified institutional sources; where qualitative judgements are made, they are grounded in the documentary record and theoretical reasoning. The five dimensions were derived deductively from the conceptual framework set out in Section 1 rather than inductively from the data: each corresponds to one of the mechanisms — reconfigured dependence, fiscal path dependence, infrastructural lock-in, demand-side governance failure, and legitimacy erosion — through which the post-crisis vulnerability trap is theorised to operate. Evidence was assembled

for each dimension by triangulating three source types: primary EU policy documents for stated objectives and instruments, institutional statistical series for magnitudes and trends, and peer-reviewed and policy-analytical literature for interpretation and contestation. Within each dimension, salience was weighted toward indicators that were both documented across more than one institutional source and anticipated by the framework, so as to limit reliance on any single narrative. It should be acknowledged that the evidentiary base leans substantially on secondary and tertiary institutional reporting — notably the IEA, Bruegel, ACER, and CEPS — rather than on primary market microdata or elite interviews; while these sources were selected for methodological transparency and cross-referenced against one another, this reliance is a limitation appropriate to a framework-building rather than a hypothesis-testing study. Limitations include the relatively short timeframe under examination (2022–2024) and the difficulty of distinguishing crisis-induced from pre-existing structural conditions. Future research should extend the analysis longitudinally and incorporate primary interview data from national energy ministries and major infrastructure operators.

3 DIVERSIFICATION AS SUCCESS — AND CONSTRAINT

The European Union's diversification strategy following Russia's invasion of Ukraine achieved its primary objective: the rapid stabilisation of energy supply. By the end of 2022, Russian gas imports had fallen from approximately 155 bcm in 2021 to around 80 bcm, and by end-2023 to approximately 27 bcm — a cumulative decline of over 80 per cent in two years (IEA, 2023). EU gas storage levels exceeded 90 per cent capacity before the 2022–2023 heating season, and systemic shortages were avoided despite severe disruption to established supply routes. From a crisis-management perspective, diversification represented a clear success.

Gas substitution lay at the centre of this transformation. EU-wide LNG imports approximately doubled, from roughly 80 bcm in 2021 to over 160 bcm in 2023, with the United States emerging as the dominant supplier — accounting for approximately 47 per cent of EU LNG supply by volume in 2023, up from around 13 per cent in 2021 (IEA, 2024; ACER, 2023). Emergency deployment of floating storage and regasification units (FSRUs), expedited permitting procedures, and flexible contractual arrangements enabled a rapid expansion of import capacity, particularly in Germany (five FSRUs commissioned within six months), the Netherlands, and Southern Europe.

Yet the speed of diversification introduced trade-offs that extend beyond the immediate crisis. LNG-based substitution embedded European energy security more deeply within global spot markets, exposing consumers and governments to heightened price volatility and external competition. Unlike pipeline gas supplied under long-term contracts, LNG prices are shaped by global demand fluctuations, shipping constraints, and financial market dynamics (Boersma and Johnson, 2012). Dutch TTF benchmark prices peaked at approximately €340 per megawatt-hour in August 2022 — approximately fifteen times the pre-crisis average — before moderating in 2023 (IEA, 2023). Even after moderation, prices remained structurally higher and more volatile than pre-2021 levels, reflecting the EU's increased exposure to global LNG markets and competition with Asian demand centres.

Infrastructure expansion further illustrates the dual character of diversification. Emergency investment prioritised speed and capacity over strategic optimisation, resulting in a concentration of new regasification facilities in a limited number of coastal hubs. Member states with existing infrastructure and access to maritime terminals benefited disproportionately, while landlocked or infrastructure-poor countries remained dependent on cross-border transit and solidarity mechanisms (IEA, 2025). The contractual dimension also carries long-term implications: medium- and long-term LNG contracts extending into the 2030s sit uneasily alongside the EU's commitment to reduce fossil gas consumption by 55 per cent by 2030 (European Commission, 2021). In replacing one form of concentrated dependence with a more dispersed but still politically contingent supply portfolio, the EU has traded a known risk for a more diffuse set of external exposures — the condition of reconfigured dependence specified in Section 1.7.

4 ECONOMIC AND FISCAL FRAGILITY

The economic consequences of Europe's post-2022 energy diversification constitute a central dimension of post-crisis vulnerability. While emergency interventions succeeded in preventing immediate supply shortages, they did so at significant economic and fiscal cost. Between September 2021 and early 2024, EU member states collectively allocated more than €700 billion in national fiscal measures to shield households and firms from energy price shocks, including price caps, tax reductions, direct transfers, and subsidies (Bruegel, 2024). Germany alone accounted for over €200 billion, while several Central and Eastern European countries deployed packages an

order of magnitude smaller relative to GDP. Table 2 presents a comparative overview across seven member states.

Table 2: EU Member State Fiscal and Demand-Side Responses to the Energy Crisis (2021–2024)

Member State	Support Package	% GDP	Primary Instruments	Demand-Side Measures
Germany	>€200 bn	~5.5%	Gas price brake; 5 FSRUs; electricity cap	Gas demand –14%; insulation subsidies
Italy	~€100 bn	~5.0%	Price caps; VAT reductions; bilateral deals	Saving campaign (–8% target)
France	~€45 bn	~1.8%	Tariff shield; nuclear stabilisation	Sobriety plan (–10% energy demand)
Spain	~€25 bn	~1.9%	Iberian gas cap; bono social; VAT cut	4.5 GW+ solar installed (2023)
Poland	~€25 bn	~3.8%	Price controls; coal subsidies; Baltic Pipe	Limited demand management
Romania	~€3 bn	~1.3%	Price caps; grid modernisation	Neptun Deep approved; limited efficiency
Hungary	<€5 bn	<1.5%	Price freeze; Gazprom contracts maintained	Minimal demand-side effort

Source: Bruegel (2024), IEA (2023), ACER (2023), European Commission (2023).

This divergence reflected differences in fiscal capacity rather than differences in energy price exposure, deepening asymmetries within the internal market. Following Russia’s invasion, European wholesale gas prices surged to unprecedented levels, with the TTF benchmark peaking at approximately €340 per megawatt-hour in August 2022 — approximately fifteen times the pre-crisis average (IEA, 2023). Although prices moderated in 2023 and 2024, they remained structurally higher and more volatile than pre-2021 levels. This volatility transmitted into higher electricity prices and into inflation more broadly: euro-area inflation peaked at 10.6 per cent in October 2022, with energy prices contributing disproportionately (Eurostat, 2023; IMF, 2022).

The macroeconomic effects were uneven but significant. Energy-intensive industries — chemicals, metals, fertilisers, and glass manufacturing — experienced production declines ranging from 10 to 25 per cent in several member states during 2022–2023, with some capacity reductions becoming permanent (IEA, 2023; Bruegel, 2023). These developments raised concerns about industrial competitiveness and the risk of structural deindustrialisation under prolonged high-cost energy conditions. Sustained energy cost differentials between the EU and competitor regions — particularly the United States, where the shale gas revolution has maintained low domestic gas prices (Boersma and Johnson, 2012) — risk accelerating the relocation of energy-intensive production, with long-term implications for the fiscal base that sustains energy transition investments.

Market distortion constitutes a further dimension of economic fragility. Price suppression mechanisms dampened incentives for demand reduction and efficiency improvements during the crisis. While politically necessary in the short term, these interventions delayed behavioural adaptation and increased cumulative fiscal exposure. As emergency measures are gradually withdrawn, governments face a politically sensitive recalibration process, raising the risk of renewed social discontent and policy reversal (Goldthau and Youngs, 2023). From a post-crisis vulnerability perspective, these economic and fiscal pressures function as amplifiers rather than temporary side effects — constraining industrial competitiveness, weakening solidarity mechanisms, and eroding social legitimacy simultaneously.

5 INFRASTRUCTURE LOCK-IN AND TRANSITION TENSIONS

The rapid expansion of energy infrastructure after 2022 addressed immediate security imperatives but also introduced a structural tension between short-term resilience and long-term decarbonisation objectives. Emergency-driven investment decisions, taken under conditions of uncertainty and political urgency, carry long asset lifetimes and high sunk costs. From a post-crisis vulnerability perspective, this raises the risk of infrastructure lock-in, whereby measures adopted to stabilise supply constrain future policy flexibility and complicate the EU's climate transition.

Liquefied natural gas infrastructure illustrates this dilemma most clearly. Between 2022 and 2024, the EU expanded regasification capacity by more than 30 per cent, largely through the deployment of FSRUs and accelerated terminal construction (IEA, 2023; ACER, 2023). While these assets enhanced supply security during the crisis, many are expected to operate well into the

2030s, creating a temporal mismatch with the EU's commitment to reduce fossil gas consumption by 55 per cent by 2030 and achieve climate neutrality by 2050 (European Commission, 2021). Even where infrastructure is formally described as 'transitional', commercial incentives and contractual obligations create pressure to maximise utilisation.

Path dependence deepens this tension in a theoretically predictable way. Pierson (2000) identifies two mechanisms through which early choices foreclose alternatives: increasing returns and exit costs. Both are present in the post-2022 European energy context. The concept most directly applicable here is carbon lock-in, developed by Unruh (2000, 2002), which describes how techno-institutional complexes organised around fossil energy become self-reinforcing through co-evolving technological, organisational, and institutional increasing returns, systematically disadvantaging low-carbon alternatives even when the latter are economically superior. The post-2022 expansion of gas-import infrastructure represents precisely such a techno-institutional commitment, extending carbon lock-in under the political cover of security necessity. Emergency permitting procedures, streamlined environmental assessments, and public financial guarantees lowered barriers to fossil-related infrastructure during the crisis. Once established, reversing these precedents becomes politically and legally challenging, particularly if future projects face stricter scrutiny under normalised governance conditions (Helm, 2017; Markard et al., 2012).

Stranded asset risk represents a further dimension. If gas demand declines in line with climate targets, newly built LNG terminals and associated infrastructure may become underutilised or economically unviable before the end of their intended operational lifespans. Such outcomes would impose financial losses on operators and public authorities, generating political resistance to rapid decarbonisation and increasing the cost of the transition (IEEFA, 2023). Infrastructure lock-in also operates through political narratives: the success of emergency infrastructure deployment has reinforced the perception that energy security challenges can be resolved through rapid supply-side capacity expansion, marginalising demand-side measures that are less visible but essential for sustainable resilience.

6 THE UNDEREXPLORED DIMENSION: DEMAND-SIDE GOVERNANCE

One of the structural weaknesses of Europe's post-crisis energy strategy is the relative marginalisation of demand-side governance. During the acute crisis phase of winter 2022–2023, demand reduction played a quantitatively

significant role in balancing supply shortfalls. The IEA (2022b) reported that EU gas demand fell by approximately 13 per cent in 2022 relative to 2021, contributing more to supply-demand rebalancing than any single new supply source. National 'energy sobriety' or saving campaigns — most prominently France's plan de sobriété énergétique — demonstrated that behavioural and structural demand management can be mobilised rapidly when political leadership is clear (IEA, 2022b).

Yet as the supply crisis stabilised, demand-side measures receded from the policy agenda. EU energy governance frameworks have historically prioritised supply adequacy over demand management (Natorski and Herranz Surrallés, 2008; Aalto, 2008), and the REPowerEU Plan (European Commission, 2022) — while including a demand-reduction target — devoted the large majority of its investment provisions to supply diversification and renewable deployment. The post-crisis environment has reinforced this supply-side bias. Emergency price support mechanisms, by shielding consumers from the full cost of energy, reduced the economic signal for efficiency investment and behavioural adaptation, creating a structural gap: the very interventions that preserved social stability also delayed the structural demand transformation that would reduce long-term exposure to global commodity markets.

From the perspective of post-crisis vulnerability, this demand-side governance gap has two compounding effects. First, it increases the EU's residual dependence on gas — and therefore on LNG imports and their associated price volatility — beyond what would be required under a more aggressive demand-reduction trajectory consistent with Fit for 55 targets (Vezzoni, 2023). Second, it reinforces infrastructure lock-in by sustaining demand levels that justify the continued operation and financial viability of newly installed regasification capacity. Closing this gap requires integrating efficiency standards, building renovation programmes, and industrial heat electrification into the EU's post-crisis strategic framework as primary instruments rather than supplemental additions.

7 SOCIAL LEGITIMACY AND POLITICAL RISK

The durability of Europe's post-2022 energy strategy depends not only on physical supply and economic sustainability, but also on its social legitimacy. Crisis governance prioritised rapid stabilisation and protection against immediate hardship, often through extraordinary fiscal intervention and accelerated decision-making. While effective in preventing acute disruption,

these measures have produced distributional effects and political tensions that increasingly shape the post-crisis environment. From a vulnerability perspective, erosion of public consent constitutes a significant risk, constraining policy autonomy and undermining the long-term coherence of energy security strategies.

Rising energy costs represent the most visible source of social tension. Despite the easing of wholesale prices after 2022, household energy bills remained elevated in many member states due to lagged pass-through effects, reduced fiscal support, and persistent market volatility. Eurostat data indicate that energy expenditure as a share of household income increased disproportionately among lower-income groups, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities (Eurostat, 2023). Energy poverty, already a structural challenge in parts of Southern and Eastern Europe, intensified: more than 9 per cent of EU households could not adequately heat their homes in 2022, with the share exceeding 15 per cent in Bulgaria, Romania, and several other Central and Eastern European states. Bouzarovski (2018) situates these patterns within a broader analysis of infrastructural divide — the spatially uneven distribution of energy infrastructure quality that compounds the affordability challenge for peripheral populations.

Research on energy justice underscores that perceived procedural unfairness can be as destabilising as material costs, particularly when communities feel excluded from decision-making (Jenkins et al., 2016; Sovacool and Dworkin, 2015). Accelerated permitting procedures and emergency exemptions reduced opportunities for consultation and environmental assessment, generating local opposition to energy projects. While these processes were justified by security imperatives, their continuation in the post-crisis phase risks eroding trust in institutions and fuelling resistance to future infrastructure development — including renewable energy projects essential for long-term transition.

Political contestation over energy policy has broader implications for democratic governance. As energy costs became a salient electoral issue, governments faced pressure to prioritise short-term affordability over long-term transition goals. In several member states, energy-related grievances contributed to the rise of populist narratives that framed diversification and climate policies as elite-driven or socially regressive (Lockwood, 2018). Such dynamics threaten to politicise energy security in ways that undermine policy continuity and long-term strategic planning. The relationship between social contestation and the EU's decarbonisation agenda is particularly salient: the Green Deal depends on sustained public and political support

across twenty-seven member states with divergent energy systems, fiscal positions, and social preferences (Giddens, 2009).

8 COMPARATIVE CRISIS GOVERNANCE: EU PRECEDENTS AND THE VULNERABILITY TRAP PATTERN

To assess whether the dynamics identified represent an energy-sector anomaly or a systemic feature of EU crisis governance, it is instructive to compare the post-2022 energy trajectory with three prior EU crisis episodes: the eurozone crisis (2010–2015), the migration crisis (2015–2016), and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021). Table 3 presents a structured comparison across five dimensions.

The selection of these three episodes is deliberate rather than arbitrary. They constitute the three most consequential EU-wide crises of the post-2009 period in which an external or systemic shock triggered emergency collective governance at Union level, and together they span the principal domains of EU crisis activity — monetary and fiscal (eurozone), external and security (migration), and public health with a major fiscal dimension (COVID-19). This variation-maximising logic permits a demanding test of whether vulnerability-trap dynamics recur across substantively dissimilar policy fields. The 2008 global financial crisis is not treated as a separate case because its EU-governance phase is precisely the eurozone crisis included here; still earlier episodes are excluded because they predate the emergency-governance repertoire — joint borrowing, agency creation, and cross-border solidarity instruments — that defines the comparison.

Table 3: Comparative EU Crisis Governance: Post-Crisis Vulnerability Patterns

Crisis Episode	Emergency Instruments	Structural Residues	Post-Crisis Vulnerability	Parallel to Energy Crisis
Eurozone (2010–2015)	ECB bond purchases; ESM bailouts; fiscal rules suspension	Banking Union; reinforced Stability Pact; permanent ESM	Sovereign debt asymmetries; austerity fatigue	Fiscal capacity divergence; solidarity gap
Migration (2015–2016)	EU–Turkey deal; Frontex expansion; emergency relocation	Permanent EBCG; border securitisation	Governance fragmentation; contested solidarity	Emergency exceptionalism normalised
COVID-19 (2020–2021)	NextGenerationEU; SURE; ECB PEPP; joint procurement	€800 bn+ RRF; permanent borrowing precedent	Public debt accumulation; uneven recovery	First EU joint debt; fiscal divergence
Energy (2022–present)	LNG deployment; FSRUs; price caps; gas storage; REPowerEU	Fossil lock-in; LNG contracts to 2030s; €700 bn+ fiscal legacy	LNG dependence; fiscal asymmetries; stranded asset risk; social contestation	ALL prior patterns present

Source: Author's compilation based on Niemann and Speyer (2018), Hooghe and Marks (2001), Tagliapietra (2020), and IEA (2023).

As Table 3 illustrates, each crisis episode generated structural residues — institutional arrangements, fiscal legacies, or infrastructure commitments — that constrained subsequent governance choices. The eurozone crisis produced the Banking Union and expanded ECB mandate but left sovereign debt asymmetries and constrained peripheral fiscal space that deepened fragility during the COVID-19 crisis. The migration crisis institutionalised border securitisation through a permanent European Border and Coast Guard, while governance fragmentation and contested solidarity persisted. The COVID-19 pandemic produced the EU's first joint borrowing instrument — NextGenerationEU — creating a new institutional precedent but also a substantial debt legacy whose distributional effects are still unfolding (Tagliapietra, 2020).

The energy crisis of 2022 combines all four vulnerability trap dynamics identified across earlier episodes: the normalisation of emergency exceptionalism (migration crisis pattern); fiscal capacity divergence (eurozone pattern); institutional lock-in through emergency instruments (COVID-19 pattern); and procedural exclusion generating social contestation (migration crisis pattern). This convergence supports the theoretical proposition that the post-crisis vulnerability trap reflects a systemic feature of EU reactive integration rather than a sector-specific phenomenon. It also implies that resolving energy-specific vulnerabilities requires governance reforms that address the structural conditions of EU crisis management more broadly (Niemann and Speyer, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2001).

Two caveats guard against reading Table 3 as self-confirming. First, the comparison is heuristic rather than a formal test: because the vulnerability-trap categories were derived from the energy case, their recurrence elsewhere should be treated as suggestive corroboration rather than independent proof. Second, the fit across cases is uneven, and the differences are analytically informative. The COVID-19 episode fits only partially: NextGenerationEU created a genuinely novel and arguably positive-sum integrative capacity — joint borrowing and redistributive transfers — that expanded rather than merely constrained future policy choice, complicating any straightforward lock-in reading. The migration crisis, conversely, produced durable institutional residues in the form of a permanent border agency but far weaker fiscal-divergence effects than the energy or eurozone cases. Recognising these partial and disconfirming elements strengthens rather than weakens the central claim: the vulnerability-trap pattern is a recurring tendency of EU reactive integration, not a deterministic law, and its intensity varies with the fiscal and distributive stakes of the emergency instruments deployed.

CONCLUSION

9.1 The Post-Crisis Vulnerability Trap in EU Energy Governance

The preceding analysis confirms that the European Union's post-2022 energy strategy has generated a complex and ambivalent outcome. On the one hand, diversification, emergency governance, and rapid infrastructure deployment succeeded in neutralising an acute supply shock and reducing structural exposure to Russian leverage. On the other hand, these same measures have restructured Europe's energy system in ways that embed

new economic, infrastructural, and political constraints. The concept of a post-crisis vulnerability trap captures this condition: a situation in which short-term resilience masks the emergence of longer-term fragilities that narrow policy choice and complicate future adaptation.

The vulnerability trap is reinforced by interaction effects across domains. Economic fragility amplifies social contestation, which in turn constrains political willingness to withdraw support measures or pursue deeper reforms. Infrastructure lock-in increases fiscal exposure and intensifies distributional conflict. The demand-side governance gap sustains gas consumption at levels incompatible with decarbonisation targets. These feedback loops suggest that vulnerability is not episodic but cumulative, shaped by how emergency measures become embedded in normalised policy frameworks.

9.2 Alternative Interpretations and the Robustness of the Argument

The argument advanced here — that diversification has produced a post-crisis vulnerability trap — must be weighed against several plausible alternative interpretations, three of which merit explicit confrontation. The first holds that the fragilities identified are transitory frictions that market self-regulation will progressively resolve: as global liquefaction capacity expands through the mid-2020s, prices should soften and stabilise, eroding the volatility exposure emphasised above. This is a serious objection, and the partial price moderation observed after 2022 is consistent with it. Yet it speaks only to the price dimension; it does not dissolve the fiscal asymmetries, infrastructural commitments, or legitimacy deficits that operate through slower-moving institutional channels, and it presupposes a benign supply environment that the same global-market integration renders contingent on Asian demand and on geopolitical stability beyond EU control.

A second interpretation concedes the side-effects but maintains that diversification remains a substantial net security gain relative to pre-crisis dependence on a single coercive supplier. This article does not dispute that claim: its argument is not that diversification was mistaken but that its structural by-products are under-examined and cumulatively consequential. A net improvement in one dimension — reduced bilateral coercion — is fully compatible with the emergence of new vulnerabilities in others, and the concept of reconfigured dependence is designed precisely to capture this simultaneity. A third interpretation holds that new LNG infrastructure

need not entail carbon lock-in if assets are built 'hydrogen-ready' and later repurposed. This possibility is acknowledged, but the evidence for credible conversion at scale remains thin: hydrogen-readiness is frequently a design aspiration rather than a binding commitment, retrofit economics are uncertain, and the commercial incentive to maximise gas throughput persists across the assets' payback horizon. On balance, these alternatives qualify the severity of the trap in specific dimensions without displacing the central finding that emergency success has generated durable structural constraints.

9.3 Original Contributions

Three original contributions flow from this analysis. First, the concept of post-crisis vulnerability is established as a theoretically distinct analytical category — temporally differentiated from acute crisis and structurally differentiated from long-term transition risk. This conceptual advance fills a gap in energy security scholarship, which has tended to treat post-crisis periods as residual rather than analytically significant. Second, the article develops a five-dimensional framework for evaluating post-crisis energy governance — encompassing supply reconfiguration, fiscal fragility, infrastructural lock-in, demand-side governance, and social legitimacy — that provides a structured basis for future comparative research and extends existing frameworks (Cherp and Jewell, 2014; Sovacool and Mukherjee, 2011). Third, the concept of reconfigured dependence — specified in Section 1.7 and distinguished there from both strategic dependence and supply diversification — is introduced to capture the specific mechanism through which diversification generates new structural vulnerabilities. Rather than treating dependence as a quantity to be reduced, the concept reframes it as a structure that can be relocated: the EU lowered its bilateral exposure to Russian coercion while raising its systemic exposure to globally governed market risk. Positioning this mechanism within the complex- and weaponised-interdependence literatures (Keohane and Nye, 1977; Farrell and Newman, 2019) clarifies why diversification, though necessary, could not by itself restore energy autonomy. The comparative analysis of Table 3 further establishes that post-crisis vulnerability trap dynamics reflect a systemic pattern of EU reactive crisis governance, validating the broader theoretical claim.

9.4 Policy Implications

For policymakers, the analysis highlights three priorities. First, the EU should develop a systematic framework for managing infrastructure inheritance — the accumulated legacy of crisis-era investment — including clear asset retirement pathways, fiscal provisions for stranded assets, and regulatory norms that prevent emergency permitting precedents from becoming permanent features of energy governance. Concretely, this requires the Commission to publish quantified stranded-asset risk assessments for all FSRU deployments and LNG terminal expansions commissioned post-2022, with mandatory review gates aligned to 2026 and 2030 decarbonisation milestones.

Second, addressing fiscal asymmetry requires enhanced EU-level solidarity instruments that go beyond the current partial redistribution provided by the Recovery and Resilience Facility, ensuring that member states with lower fiscal capacity are not systematically disadvantaged in the post-crisis adjustment. A reformed Energy Solidarity Mechanism — modelled on the COVID-era SURE instrument but calibrated for energy transition costs — would address both the distributional challenge identified in Table 2 and the political legitimacy deficit documented in Section 7.

Third, demand-side governance must be elevated from supplemental to primary instrument status. The EU's post-crisis strategic framework should establish binding demand-reduction trajectories at the member-state level, with dedicated financing mechanisms for building renovation, industrial electrification, and digital demand management — measures that reduce long-term fossil exposure, generate employment, and address energy justice concerns simultaneously (Jenkins et al., 2016; von Malmborg, 2023).

9.5 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The empirical focus on 2022–2024 means that longer-term outcomes — particularly regarding LNG contract expiry, renewable energy integration, and fiscal consolidation — remain uncertain. The qualitative methodology does not permit precise attribution of causal weight across dimensions. The heterogeneity of member state contexts is compressed within an EU-level analysis, and future research would benefit from comparative national case studies tracing how post-crisis vulnerability manifests differently across varying institutional and economic settings. Quantitative assessment of the distributional

effects of EU energy transition funding on household-level energy poverty, and longitudinal tracking of stranded asset materialisation, represent particularly promising areas for future investigation.

For scholars of energy security and European integration, this article contributes a framework for understanding how successful crisis management can generate new constraints that shape future policy trajectories. By extending path dependence from institutional to infrastructural and fiscal domains, and by identifying demand-side governance as a systematically undertheorised dimension of post-crisis vulnerability, it advances conceptualisation of how short-term emergency decisions cumulate into medium-term structural conditions. As geopolitical uncertainty persists, the challenge for the EU will be not only to withstand shocks, but to ensure that the instruments of resilience do not themselves become sources of the vulnerability they were designed to eliminate.

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DIVERGING VIEWS ON RUSSIA AND THE WEST: A SOCIOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF CZECH AND SLOVAK PRE-INVASION ATTITUDES

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Abstract

This study investigates the sociodemographic and ideological variables associated with endorsement of pro-Russian/anti-Western and pro-Western/anti-Russian political statements in Czechia and Slovakia. Utilizing data collected in the summer of 2021, prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we examine popular attitudes in both countries through responses to twenty-five political statements regarding Russia, the EU, and NATO. Sociodemographic and ideological variables, such as authoritarianism and conservatism, were analyzed to determine their predictive power. Czech respondents had higher scores on the pro-Western/anti-Russian index and lower scores on the pro-Russian/anti-Western index than Slovak respondents. Notably, sociodemographic variables accounted for relatively little variation in the two index scores, while ideological variables show significant predictive differences between the two countries. This study highlights the complex interplay of education, ideological orientation, and identity self-definition in shaping public opinion in Czechia and Slovakia, providing valuable insights into the variables associated with responses to political statements concerning Russia and Western institutions.

Keywords: Czechia, Slovakia, Central and Eastern Europe, Geopolitics, Pro-Russian attitudes, Pro-Western attitudes, Ideological predictors

INTRODUCTION

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which were once part of the Eastern/Soviet bloc, have integrated into Western political and military structures

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like the EU and NATO. Despite this shift, Russian influence in this region has persisted. Moscow, under the Putin regime, has actively sought to maintain its presence, using various narratives and techniques, including propaganda and fake news, to win over the citizens of these countries (Gerber, Zavisca, 2016). This agenda has become even more critical in the post-2014 period, in the context of the Russian annexation of Crimea and against the backdrop of the accelerating potential for information influence in cyberspace, enabled by social media and artificial intelligence; culminating, so to say, in 2022, when Russia started its war against Ukraine.

This study investigates sociodemographic and ideological correlates of responses to pro- and anti-Russian and pro- and anti-Western political statements among citizens of Czechia and Slovakia, based on data collected in the summer of 2021, thus reflecting attitudes prior to the war in Ukraine. We utilized twenty-five political statements related to Russia, the EU, and NATO, with respondents indicating their levels of agreement. Sociodemographic and ideological variables served as independent variables, and linear regressions were employed to explore differences between the two countries.

This research aims to fill the gap in examining how social and ideological factors correlate with pro- and anti-Russian and Western attitudes, providing novel insights into geopolitical perceptions in Central and Eastern Europe. By providing this comparative analysis, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the social and ideological correlates of pro- and anti-Russian and Western attitudes in Czechia and Slovakia, offering valuable insights for policymakers and scholars interested in the political realities of Central and Eastern Europe.

Originally, the aim of this research was to investigate socio-demographic, social, and ideological correlates of geopolitical orientation, which is, to our best knowledge, under-researched in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Due to swift geopolitical developments, the data also serve as testimony to the pre-war period, having been collected shortly before the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Analyzing data from the pre-war period gives us the advantage of studying a time that is not biased by open conflict. Even though this was not expected, we gain retrospective insight into the pre-invasion attitudes relevant to the interpretation of subsequent political developments.

Focusing specifically on Czech and Slovak societies offers several advantages and insights. Both Czech and Slovak societies have unique historical experiences, including their shared history as Czechoslovakia

(which translated into being satellites of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, involving all the negative aspects of Warsaw Pact membership) and subsequent separation into two independent states in 1993. The dataset enables comparative analysis within a shared context of Central and Eastern Europe and exploration of regional dynamics. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are geographically close and have similar geopolitical constraints and opportunities, yet they may exhibit variations in attitudes due to differences in economic development and political orientation.

We examined variables associated with Czech and Slovak popular attitudes towards Russia (statements expressing favourable or critical positions toward Russia) vis-à-vis attitudes towards the EU/NATO and the USA (statements expressing favourable or critical positions toward the EU, NATO, and the USA). The terms “pro-Western” and “anti-Western” are far less tangible than “pro-Russian” and “anti-Russian.” In our study, they are represented by both institutional components (EU/NATO-wise) and state-related ones. The EU/NATO level is particularly important part of the “pro-Western” attitude, as the 1990s and incorporation of CEE countries into those organizations were often labeled as the “Return to the West” in the Central European region (Tulmets, 2014).

The following section summarizes the research on the topic, followed by information on the technical details of our survey and a discussion of the results of our study, complemented by concluding remarks.

1 STATE OF THE ART

The terms pro-Russian, anti-Russian, anti-Western, pro-Western, pro-European/EU, and anti-European/EU are used as labels in the media and political studies, highlighting ideological preferences of governments, political parties, as well as leaders following specific goals and trajectories in their actions on the political scene. However, when it comes to whole societies characterized by multitudes of political and ideological attitudes, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish if individual attitudes may indeed fit into one of the ideological categories mentioned above. This is where the importance of our study lies, as it complements similar research and is welcoming further research in the given area.

To the best of our knowledge, no academic deliberations discuss the popular views of citizens of Czechia and Slovakia in the manner of this article. There are, however, numerous studies that, to a certain, chiefly minor degree, mention or consider popular views in these countries mainly as a

secondary element in their exploration of other issues, some being related to the ones we discuss, such as

a) the macro-level analyses of EU and Russia, mainly though not exclusively foreign policy-wise (Kratochvíl, et al., 2006; Bechev, 2015; Maxine, et al., 2015; Ušiak, et al., 2021), entertaining the ideas of (1) - failed rhetorical actions on the part of Russia as aimed against Czech membership in NATO while at the same time considering successful rhetorical turn of Kremlin diplomatically advocating the need to institute normal relations with Prague (Kratochvíl, et al., 2006), (2) - Russian otherness allowing Moscow to not only compete with EU but also providing legitimation for the continuation of the Putin regime that sees Russia and EU as rivals, particularly in the shared neighborhood (Bechev, 2015; Tyushka, 2022), (3) - the pre-conflict pragmatism in relations of Central Europe with Moscow, whereby 'attitudes to Russia still tend to be rather ambiguous and difficult to capture in terms of 'national perspectives' precisely because, as in the case of most of the ex-socialist bloc countries, relations are dense, complex and multifaceted and key actors involved often have contrasting perspectives and can often lack consistency' (Maxine, et al., 2015), as well as those highlighting the geopolitical importance of said region and past energy dependence on Russia (Ušiak, et al., 2021);

b) the studies where, apart from others, various security-related issues are treated, with their authors discussing an image of Russia that the Czechs have so far had, pointing that 'a process of discursive construction of Russia qua threat is underway in the Czech public sphere', with Moscow perceived as a threat to democratic order (Gazda, Šaur, 2020);

c) the deliberations on (not only) Russian propaganda and hybrid warfare contributing to the ever-increasing East-West divide, where the growing need to tackle hybrid warfare that may significantly undermine democratic foundations is underscored (Filipec, 2019; Daniel, Eberle, 2021), highlighting not only collective (state-owned) but also individual (citizen-owned) responsibility, and the importance of fact-checking information in the age of growing (dis)information and manipulation techniques reflected in the ever-increasing number of alternative media offering illiberal accounts and narratives (Mlejnková, Gregor, 2021).

We additionally acknowledge non-academic sources, such as public opinion surveys, because they serve as an important litmus test of attitudes in society. A survey from 2016 took into consideration the V4 context (Visegrád Group: Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary) and found that the citizens of these "countries differ in their attitudes towards Russia and

the USA", showing considerable support for Russia in Slovakia at that time that attributed mostly, though not entirely, to nationalist politics and the country's legacy of past leaders with views of Bratislava being close to Moscow (Spectator.sme.sk, 2022). The second survey, conducted in 2017, considered, apart from other perspectives, the closeness of the Central European countries to Russia and the citizens' views on the differences between Russia and the West (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2017). The poll took into consideration different standpoints when compared to the previously mentioned one, from security to identity to political news and the trust in the political system to the national and regional context, indicating a considerable portion of Czechs and, more importantly, Slovaks seeing, among other things, Russia standing for traditional European values, being a possible ally in the future, and refusing anti-Russian slander within accusations on Moscow secretly funding alternative and conspiracy media channels (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2017).

Additional polls done in 2021 found Russia either a 'security threat' (Kafkadesk, 2021), particularly with the Czech public, the result of which was echoed in an additional survey conducted in the same year (Morning Prague, 2021), or as in the case of Slovakia, indicated quite a different view, with Slovak popular support and approval of Moscow being relatively high: for instance, the international think-tank Globsec in 2021 claimed that 'as many as 55% of Slovaks view Russian President Vladimir Putin positively and for 47% of respondents, Russia is Slovakia's most important partner' (EURACTIV, 2021). What distinguishes this article from these polls is that while the polls show numbers for certain attitudes, our study examines which ideological variables are associated with those attitudes.

There are just a few academic studies that operate with pro-Western/anti-Western or pro-Russian/anti-Russian stances of the Czech and Slovak population or the political parties. Havlík and Kluknavská's article (2023) is a recent example of this, pointing to the fact that pro-Russian and anti-Western stances are often connected with populist politics in Czechia. For his part, Marušiak (2023) refers to an 'old-new pseudo-Pan-Slavism' as the source of the pro-Russian stance of Slovaks in the post-2014 period, coinciding with the increased Russian involvement in Ukraine.

As for the broader European/Central European context, Diesen (2020) writes about the relation between conservative values at the very heart of the political activity of (not only) European right-wing populists, most of whom advocate pro-Russian stances, stressing the importance of the preservation of one's national identity, values, and culture that need to be protected in

the Russia-like manner. Those who vote for the populist political actors tend to have anti-liberal views, being largely uncritical of Russia. Accordingly, Enyedi (2020) approaches the issue of the quality of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, showing how anti-EU and anti-Western agendas and political platforms have transformed this part of Europe, colored by the ever-developing anti-Western resentment that, to a varying degree, still plays a political role. Fisher's case study (2020) tends to the public opinion on Putin, Russia, the USA, and NATO in selected European states, claiming that the views on, for instance, Putin are affected by the voting preferences of anti-establishment voters more than the opinion on Russia itself.

As suggested by the 2022 poll by the Pew Research Center, those Poles who hold more liberal social and political views tended to have a much higher acceptance of the pro-Western path their country has taken since 2004 and its entry into the EU, with those who were less liberal in terms of values tending to support more conservative political agendas, seeing the EU and the West in less favorable terms (Pew Research Center, 2022). All things being equal, the case of Polish public opinion on Russia is specific, now perhaps more than ever, with most of the population holding negative views on Russia, reflecting the results of the previous poll (Pew Research Center, 2022).

We herein argue a connection between socio-economic variables and the opinion of Czechs and Slovaks on Russia and the West, respectively. There are studies using the same variables but focusing on other countries, such as Dall'Agnola's work (2021), which uses age, education, gender, social class, and additional socio-economic variables in her research on national identity, concluding that education has played a minor role in the post-Soviet space than in the West. For their part, Turkina and Surzhko-Harned (2014) inspect the Central and East European context, addressing generational differences in the context of EU entry, while Turkina (2015) additionally addresses the Russia-Ukraine conflict, focusing on the characteristics of the value-based and generational perspective in this regard.

The main aim of this study was to examine patterns of endorsement of political statements concerning Russia and Western institutions in Czechia and Slovakia shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, we investigated cross-national differences in the two PCA-informed indices, the association between these indices, and their sociodemographic and ideological correlates.

Based on previous research indicating comparatively more favorable views of Russia and more critical views of Western institutions in Slovakia

than in Czechia - mostly NATO, where the difference was 61 % trust in Czechia while only 43 % trust in Slovakia, while trust in the EU was similar 43 % to 44%, a bit below an EU average (Eurobarometer 2022), we formulated the following hypothesis:

H1: Slovak respondents will have higher scores on the pro-Russian/anti-Western (PR/AW) index and lower scores on the pro-Western/anti-Russian (PW/AR) index than Czech respondents.

Because favourable evaluations of Russia are frequently accompanied in political discourse by critical evaluations of the EU, NATO, and the USA, whereas support for Euro-Atlantic institutions is frequently accompanied by critical evaluations of Russia, we formulated a second hypothesis:

H2: PR/AW index scores will be negatively associated with PW/AR index scores.

Although previous studies suggest that sociodemographic and ideological variables are related to geopolitical attitudes, the available evidence did not provide a sufficiently strong basis for predicting the relative importance of the individual variables in the two countries. We therefore addressed these associations using exploratory research questions:

RQ1: Which sociodemographic variables are associated with pro-Russian/anti-Western and pro-Western/anti-Russian index scores in Czechia and Slovakia?

RQ2: Which ideological variables are associated with pro-Russian/anti-Western and pro-Western/anti-Russian index scores in Czechia and Slovakia?

2 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The structure of the dataset used in this study can be divided into the following sections:

- Sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables of gender, age, level of education, size of (the place of) residence, and income.
- Ideological measures included social conservatism: SC, three items (Everett, 2013); authoritarianism measured by child-rearing values: CRV, four items (Feldman, Stenner, 1997); authoritarian aggression and submission subscale of the right-wing authoritarianism scale: RWA, seven items (Rattazzi et al. 2007), national identity: three items, European identity: three items (Leach et al. 2008), nationalism: three items (Kosterman, Feshbach, 1989), five questions related to

attitudes toward communism, capitalism, democracy, liberalism, and authoritarianism, respectively, and commonly used standalone questions on left-wing and right-wing preferences and liberalism-vs.-conservatism self-evaluation (Gries, 2014). The full wording of the questions and their scaling is in Supplement 1.

To investigate responses to political statements concerning the principal Eastern and Western geopolitical actors (Russia, NATO, EU, USA) in our region of interest, we gathered a number of political statements that appeared recently (2020-2021) in the public discourse of both countries. We favored this approach rather than the one based on the statements created in an ad-hoc manner due to the higher ecological validity of the research. We approached social network profiles, press announcements, and webpages of political parties, political movements, and individual politicians from all segments of the political spectrum, gathering positive and negative statements related to Russia, the EU, and NATO. The statements were initially classified and evaluated by eight experts in political science from Czechia and Slovakia. Those that were out of the scope of the research and those we considered too complex for respondents to evaluate on a response scale sensibly were discarded.

We ended up with 25 statements, such as 'Russia doesn't need to wage wars of conquest. It is just protecting its independence and sovereignty' (pro-Russian), 'Russians do not deal with other Slavs as brothers, but dishonestly and selfishly' (anti-Russian), 'Czech/Slovak diplomacy must try together with its European partners to prevent the USA from leaving the European space and succumbing to isolation' (pro-Western), or 'EU is a fascist organization, NATO is a criminal organization' (anti-Western). It must be noted that some of these statements can have multiple semantic elements, such as 'We need to exit NATO - It drags us into provocations against Russia' which has both an anti-Western and pro-Russian meaning, and 'Neither East, nor West, but Czechia/Slovakia!' which has anti-Western, anti-Eastern, as well as nationalist components. Respondents indicated their answers on a six-point Likert scale (1= Strongly disagree, 6= Strongly agree, including an 'I don't know' option). The list of the statements can be found in Supplement 1.

Data for this study was collected in August 2021 by a marketing research agency tasked to gather representative samples of at least 600 respondents aged 18-64 in Czechia and Slovakia. We employed quota sampling concerning gender, age, education, size of (the place of) residence, and the region. The quotas were set based on statistics of the Czech Statistical Office and the

Statistical Office of Slovakia and were valid in the data-gathering process (see the respective sheet in Supplement 2).

The agency we hired conducted elementary data cleaning, and responses from 603 Czech and 602 Slovak respondents were gathered. We performed additional checks for monotonous answers in the dependent variable (Statements) to remove the data from respondents who may have needed to dedicate more attention to the questionnaire administration. The logic of this step was done knowing that the Statements possess opposite semantic valence (e.g., pro- and anti-European). If a respondent proceeded routinely (e.g., giving extraordinarily high or low scores), this would be reflected in the central tendency of a mean of all Statements combined. We performed an outlier analysis of the overall mean and removed all participants with scores outside of 1.5x IQR limits. This resulted in removing 73 cases/respondents (the clean version of the dataset is in Supplement 2).

To ensure that the items measure the same construct and that the results are comparable across the samples, we conducted a measurement invariance analysis of two multi-item scales: SC and RWA (Čeněk, Urbánek 2019; Van de Vijver, 1998). SC is based upon the SECS scale (Everett, 2013) of social and economic conservatism initially developed for the US population. In SECS items, participants evaluate on a 0-100 thermometer scale how positive or negative they feel about an issue. In an unpublished analysis, we adapted the scale for the European samples by removing items (i.e., 'gun ownership') that most probably would not measure well in our social and political context or modifying items to make them more understandable European setting-wise (i.e., 'abortion' changed to 'abortion rights'). We also added several items we thought might perform well in measuring the social and/or economic dimensions of conservatism. (i.e., 'green energy').

The full 13-item scale was then administered, with the measurement invariance subsequently analyzed using the multi-group factor analysis approach (MGCFA). After testing multiple models, we established scalar invariance for both samples only concerning the three-item social conservatism subscale ('traditional values,' 'traditional marriage,' and 'patriotism'). The subsequent reliability estimation showed acceptable reliability coefficients of SC (Czechia: $\alpha = 0.773$, $\omega = 0.775$; Slovakia: $\alpha = 0.750$, $\omega = 0.772$). The same procedure was applied to seven RWA items. Scalar invariance was established across all items with good reliability ($\alpha = 0.865$, $\omega = 0.866$; Slovakia: $\alpha = 0.813$, $\omega = 0.813$). The invariance analysis, including the full R-code, is available in Supplement 3.

The analyses were organized according to the hypotheses and research

questions. H1 was examined by comparing the mean PR/AW and PW/AR index scores of the Czech and Slovak samples; Cohen's (d) was used to quantify the magnitude of the country differences. H2 was evaluated by examining the association between the two indices. RQ1 was addressed using separate regression models for the two countries and the two indices, with sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables entered as predictors. RQ2 was addressed using an analogous set of regression models containing the ideological variables. Because RQ1 and RQ2 were exploratory and included multiple predictors, the corresponding (p)-values were adjusted using the Holm procedure.

We used the following R packages to analyze the data: faoutlier (Chalmers, 2015), lavaan (Rosseel 2012), psych (Revelle, 2021), reshape2, semPlot, semTable, semTools (Jorgensen et al. 2022), and tidyverse. Supplementary materials can be accessed at the OSF repository at: https://osf.io/enkch/?view_only=3e59293a9d8444d9ae222f472c91b36b.

2.1 Sample description

After the data cleaning procedure, 1,132 cases (579 Czechs, 553 Slovaks) were analyzed. The descriptives of the sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables of both samples are summarized in Table 1. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test was calculated for differences in proportions in the sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables. Both samples showed no statistically significant differences in distributions, except for the municipality size $\chi^2(4, 1132) = 34.366, p < 0.001$, with a higher proportion of Slovak respondents from the smallest category of municipalities between 0-999 inhabitants and a lower proportion from the highest category of above 100,000 inhabitants, as only two Slovak cities, Bratislava and Košice, have over 100,000 inhabitants.

Table 1: Sociodemographic variables

	Category	Czech	Slovak
		N (%)	N (%)
Gender	male	294 (50.8%)	274 (49.5%)
	female	285 (49.2%)	279 (50.5%)
Age	18-24	56 (9.7%)	62 (11.2%)
	25-34	119 (20.6%)	116 (21.0%)
	35-44	137 (23.7%)	140 (25.3%)
	45-54	124 (21.4%)	112 (20.3%)
	55-64	143 (24.7%)	123 (22.2%)
Education	no elementary/high school diploma	231 (39.9%)	238 (43.0%)
	high school with diploma	227 (39.2%)	217 (39.2%)
	vocational or university	121 (20.9%)	98 (17.7%)
Income	below 20,000 CZK/600 EUR	79 (13.6%)	71 (12.8%)
	20,001-40,000 CZK/601-1,330 EUR	223 (38.5%)	227 (41.0%)
	over 40,000 CZK/1,331 EUR	187 (32.3%)	157 (28.4%)
	not reported	90 (15.5%)	98 (17.7%)
Municipality size	0-999	107 (18.5%)	156 (28.2%)
	1,000-4,999	111 (19.2%)	110 (19.9%)
	5,000-19,999	114 (19.7%)	135 (24.4%)
	20,000-99,999	116 (20.0%)	81 (14.6%)
	over 100,000	131 (22.6%)	72 (12.8%)

Source: Own creation

3 RESULTS

We first present preliminary country-level descriptive comparisons of the ideological variables. We then report the construction and descriptive characteristics of the two PCA-informed indices and the results concerning H1 and H2. Finally, we present the sociodemographic regression models addressing RQ1 and the ideological regression models addressing RQ2.

Reported p-values were adjusted using the Holm method (Holm, 1979). The entire dataset with all of the responses was published as a data paper in Data in Brief (Čeněk et al., 2024).

3.1 Preliminary descriptive comparisons

No significant differences at the national level were found in social conservatism, liberalism vs. conservatism, authoritarianism, right-wing authoritarianism, national and European identity, and attitudes to authoritarian regimes. Significant differences were, however, detected in nationalism, attitudes to communism, capitalism, democracy, liberalism, and left-wing-vs.-right-wing preferences (see Supplement 2, the 'ideology' sheet). The Czechs expressed slightly more positive attitudes towards capitalism (Czechia: $M = 46.64$, $SD = 24.96$, Slovakia: $M = 39.13$, $SD = 24.86$; $p < 0.0001$, $d = 0.30$), democracy (Czechia: $M = 71.77$, $SD = 22.99$, Slovakia: $M = 64.49$, $SD = 27.41$; $p < 0.0001$, $d = 0.29$), and liberalism (Czechia: $M = 52.07$, $SD = 21.63$, Slovakia: $M = 43.88$, $SD = 26.39$; $p < 0.0001$, $d = 0.34$). They are also moderately more nationalist (Czechia: $M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.83$, Slovakia: $M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.27$; $p < 0.0001$, $d = 0.46$) and comparatively (i.e., both values are close to the political center) slightly more right-wing oriented (Czechia: $M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.95$, Slovakia: $M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.99$; $p = 0.019$, $d = 0.18$). On the contrary, the Slovaks have moderately warmer feelings toward communism (Czechia: $M = 26.80$, $SD = 25.39$, Slovakia: $M = 41.47$, $SD = 29.17$; $p < 0.0001$, $d = 0.54$).

3.2 PCA-informed indices

Evaluations of the political statements related to the East vs. West political entities are in the position of dependent variables. As mentioned, our respondents indicated a degree of agreement with the 25 statements. Because the items were sampled to cover a broad domain of publicly expressed positions rather than developed as interchangeable reflective

indicators of a prespecified latent scale, we used principal component analysis as an exploratory data-reduction procedure. The objective was to identify dominant patterns of covariation among the observed responses and construct a smaller number of interpretable summary indices; the analysis was not intended to establish or validate latent ideological constructs (Abdi & Williams, 2010; Jolliffe & Cadima, 2016). We conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) with oblimin rotation (the resulting components were not expected to be independent) as an exploratory data-reduction procedure to identify dominant patterns of covariation among responses to the 25 statements. Based on eigenvalues, scree plot, and substantive interpretability of the solution, we retained two components: The first component contained 14 statements whose predominant content reflected favorable or accommodating views of Russia, criticism of the EU, NATO, or the USA, or related sovereignty-oriented narratives. The second contained 11 statements whose predominant content reflected support for Euro-Atlantic institutions or criticism of Russia and Russian geopolitical narratives. For brevity, we refer to these item sets as the pro-Russian/anti-Western (PR/AW) and pro-Western/anti-Russian (PW/AR) indices. These labels summarize the predominant content of the respective item sets and should not be interpreted as validated latent traits or as mutually exclusive classifications of respondents. The retained two-component solution accounted for 63.3% of the variance in the item responses. The two indices were substantially negatively correlated, ($r = -.66$), indicating that respondents who more strongly endorsed one set of statements generally tended to endorse the other set less strongly. However, this association does not establish a single bipolar continuum and does not preclude mixed response profiles. Supplement 2, the 'PCA' sheet, provides the detailed results with component loadings. Responses of "I don't know" were treated as missing values. Respondent scores were calculated as the arithmetic means of the valid responses to the items assigned to each index serving as the main dependent variables in the following analyses. The Czechs, when compared to the Slovaks at the aggregated level, higher mean pro-Western (Czechia: $M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.06$, Slovakia: $M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.20$; $p < 0.0001$, $d = 0.35$) and less pro-Russian scores (Czechia: $M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.16$, Slovakia: $M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.16$; $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.23$), as the 'item-level' sheet in Supplement 1 indicates. Although both differences were statistically significant, their magnitudes were small.

3.3 Sociodemographic and ideological correlates of the indices

Next, we conducted a series of eight regression analyses to determine what sociodemographic and ideology variables remain related to evaluating statements on Russia and Western entities, respectively. We calculated separate models for both samples (four models each), and these were calculated for pro-Russian (and anti-Western) and pro-Western (and anti-Russian) attitudes as dependent variables. Additionally, we calculated separate models for sociodemographic and ideology variables due to the high number of predictors. P-values of predictors in each model were again adjusted by the Holm method, and only significant post-adjustment predictors were reported. All the models, including coefficients, standard errors, and adjusted p-values, are in Supplement 2.

At first, we addressed the relationships between sociodemographic variables and pro-Russian attitudes. A significant regression equation was found in the Czech, $F(22, 464) = 5.465$, $p < 0.001$, multiple $R^2 = 0.206$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.168$, and the Slovak sample alike, $F(22, 431) = 4.845$, $p < 0.001$, multiple $R^2 = 0.198$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.157$. After the p-value adjustment, the only significant association with the pro-Russian attitudes was the level of education ($p < 0.001$, PctExp = 10.32). After inspecting the results, we concluded that the respondents with the lowest education ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.98$) were the most pro-Russian, with these sentiments dropping with the rising level of education with high school ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.12$) and university-educated groups ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.20$). The same pattern applies to Slovakia ($p < 0.001$, PctExp = 7.97). Again, the group of respondents with the lowest education ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.93$) is was the most pro-Russian, followed by those with high school ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.15$) and university education ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.33$). Income level was Slovakia's second significant association with pro-Russian attitudes ($p = 0.028$, PctExp = 2.04). While there are only marginal differences between the lowest (below 600 EUR per month; $M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.99$) and middle (601-1,330 EUR per month; $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.11$) income groups, the highest income group means less pro-Russian attitudes ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.19$).

In the second step, we analyzed the relationship among the same sociodemographic variables and attitudes to the pro-Western political statements. Even though a significant regression equation was found in Czechia, $F(22, 444) = 1.648$, $p = 0.033$, multiple $R^2 = 0.075$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.029$, no association was significant after the significance level correction. The model for Slovakia was also significant, $F(22, 417) = 1.763$, $p = 0.018$,

multiple $R^2 = 0.085$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.036$, with the size of one's municipality as the only significant association ($p = 0.029$, $\text{PctExp} = 2.57$). Taking a deeper look by comparing the results across the five municipality size categories, we can see that the most pro-Western are the relatively small municipalities between 1,000 and 4,999 inhabitants ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.18$), followed by cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.38$), 5,000 - 19,999 inhabitants ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.15$), 20,000 - 99,999 inhabitants ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.16$), and the smallest municipalities below 999 inhabitants ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.15$). Only the difference between the first and last category is significant.

After examining associations with the sociodemographic variables, we addressed the relationships among ideology scales and pro-Russian political statements. The regression models were significant in both Czechia, $F(13, 563) = 45.180$, $p < 0.001$, multiple $R^2 = 0.511$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.499$, and Slovakia, $F(13, 537) = 42.240$, $p < 0.001$, multiple $R^2 = 0.506$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.594$. Coefficients, as well as adjusted p-values and the percentage of explained variance, are summarized in Table 2. Several ideological variables were significantly associated with the evaluation of the pro-Russian statements in both countries. While right-wing authoritarianism and attitudes to communism correlate positively with the evaluation of statements, the European identity and attitudes to capitalism and democracy correlate negatively. However, some differences between both countries are observed as well. In Czechia, evaluation of the pro-Russian statements is positively related to social conservatism. At the same time, in the case of Slovakia, there are significant positive relationships between the dependent variable and national identity and authoritarianism and a negative one with liberalism in this country.

Table 2: Significant predictors of the pro-Russian statements' evaluation

Variable	Czechia			Slovakia		
	Coefficient	p-value	PctExp	Coefficient	p-value	PctExp
Social Conservatism	0.0069	0.006	4.53		n.s.	
Right-wing authoritarianism	0.2735	< 0.001	16.24	0.0989	0.031	0.28
National identity		n.s.		0.1928	< 0.001	0.47
European identity	-0.1765	< 0.001	7.58	-0.1508	< 0.001	10.04
Communism	0.0087	< 0.001	6.35	0.0113	< 0.001	12.65
Capitalism	-0.0086	< 0.001	5.22	-0.0075	< 0.001	4.44
Democracy	-0.0096	< 0.001	3.25	-0.0045	0.031	1.72
Liberalism		n.s.		-0.0086	< 0.001	1.83
Authoritarianism (CRV)		n.s.		0.0047	0.042	0.57

Source: Own creation

Finally, we analyzed the relationships among ideology variables significantly associated with the pro-Western and anti-Russian statements. The regression models were significant in both Czechia, $F(13, 541) = 21.870$, $p < 0.001$, multiple $R^2 = 0.345$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.329$, and Slovakia, $F(13, 520) = 34.320$, $p < 0.001$, multiple $R^2 = 0.462$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.448$. The test statistics are summarized in Table 3. As in the previous case, several variables are significant predictors of evaluating pro-Western statements in both countries. More specifically, European identity, attitudes to capitalism, and liberalism are positively related, while social conservatism, national identity, and attitudes to communism are negatively related to the pro-Western statements. In Slovakia, for that matter, both right-wing authoritarianism and nationalism are positive predictors of the dependent variable.

Table 3: Significant predictors of the pro-Western statements' evaluation

Variable	Czechia			Slovakia		
	Coefficient	p-value	PctExp	Coefficient	p-value	PctExp
Social Conservatism	-0.0065	0.002	1.72	-0.0101	< 0.001	9.94
Right-wing authoritarianism		n.s.		0.2234	< 0.001	7.48
National identity	-0.1346	0.003	0.01	-0.1502	< 0.001	0.07
European identity	0.2707	< 0.001	16.30	0.1196	0.003	6.35
Communism	-0.0080	< 0.001	5.12	-0.0068	< 0.001	5.23
Capitalism	0.0078	< 0.001	6.27	0.0093	< 0.001	6.10
Liberalism	0.0073	0.007	1.38	0.0076	0.002	1.38
Nationalism		n.s.		0.2288	< 0.001	2.38

Source: Own creation

4 DISCUSSION

The analysis confirmed all four hypotheses and provided insight into the ideological and socio-demographic predictors of geopolitical attitudes in Czechia and Slovakia shortly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As expected, Slovak respondents had higher pro-Russian and lower pro-Western index scores than compared to Czech respondents. This pattern is consistent with previous evidence of comparatively more favorable views of Russia in Slovakia (e.g., EURACTIV, 2021; Spectator.sme.sk, 2022) and can be interpreted in light of Slovakia's domestic political landscape, particularly the presence of actors such as SMER-SD or the Slovak National Party, which in the period under study promoted more positive narratives about Russia (Havlík, Hloušek, 2021; France24, 2023).

The PCA of 25 political statements identified two interpretable clusters of observed responses: one comprising predominantly pro-Russian and anti-Western statements and the other comprising predominantly pro-Western and anti-Russian statements. The corresponding indices were substantially negatively correlated ($r = -0.66$), supporting the expectation that endorsement of the two sets of statements would be negatively associated. This negative association is consistent with theoretical accounts

in which Russia and Euro-Atlantic institutions are presented as competing geopolitical and value-based reference points. The present analysis does not directly measure such civilizational models (Bechev, 2015; Diesen, 2020).

In terms of socio-demographic predictors, education showed the most consistent sociodemographic association with index scores. For pro-Russian and anti-Western attitudes, education was a significant predictor in both countries with the respondents in the lowest education category having the highest index scores. pro-Russian. This aligns with existing research on the role of education in political and media literacy (Henderson, 2001; Hlatky, 2021). Income was also a significant predictor in Slovakia where respondents in the lowest- and middle-income categories had the highest mean had the highest pro-Russian/anti-Western index scores.

Interestingly, pro-Western and anti-Russian statements index scores showed fewer consistent associations with socio-demographic variables. In Slovakia, municipality size was the only significant predictor, with respondents from the smallest settlements (under 1,000 inhabitants) having lower pro-Western index scores than those from mid-sized towns. This echoes some findings from studies on peripheralization (Dvořák, Zouhar, Treib, 2022), but the effect was not particularly strong and not replicated in the Czech sample.

The ideological regression models accounted for considerably more variance in both pro-Russian and pro-Western indices than the sociodemographic models. In both countries, pro-Russian and anti-Western index scores were positively associated with right-wing authoritarianism and favorable views of communism, and negatively predicted by European identity and positive evaluations of capitalism and democracy. In Czechia, pro-Russian sentiment was also positively related to social conservatism, whereas in Slovakia, national identity and authoritarianism were stronger predictors, along with a negative relationship to liberalism. These findings are consistent with the idea that Russia is perceived by certain respondents as a symbol of stability, tradition, and resistance to liberal values (Diesen, 2020; Marušiak, 2023), while the EU is seen as aligned with political liberalism and progressive reforms (Enyedi, 2020; Gries, 2014).

Pro-Western and anti-Russian index scores showed a partly mirrored ideological pattern. In both countries, they were positively associated with European identity, liberalism, and support for capitalism, while negatively associated with communism and (to a lesser extent) national identity. In Slovakia, pro-Western attitudes were also positively associated with right-wing authoritarianism and nationalism. This combination may at first

seem contradictory, but similar results have been observed in other Central European contexts (e.g., Hungary), where segments of the population combine support for strong leadership with continued endorsement of EU membership, often based on perceived economic and institutional benefits (Boros, 2016). In such cases, the EU is not necessarily seen as a liberal-democratic ideal, but rather as a source of security, prosperity, and order, which can be reconciled with authoritarian political preferences as long as they do not threaten material gains.

We also observed notable cross-national differences in the ideological landscape. Czechs scored higher on capitalism, democracy, and liberalism, and were also more nationalist and slightly more right-wing on average. Slovaks, by contrast, expressed more favorable views toward communism. These attitudinal differences likely reflect divergent national experiences with political and economic transformation since 1989 and should be considered when interpreting the ideological bases of foreign policy orientation (Todorova, Zsuzsa, 2010; Buzalka, 2018).

Lastly, as for the both right-wing authoritarianism and nationalism as positive predictors, this may be explained by the fact that, as in the case of the EU-sceptic government, but mostly pro-EU population, as in Hungary (Boros, 2016), the Slovaks deem authoritarianism as not automatically excluding pro-European orientation and identity, associating the EU membership with the rule of law, economic benefits, social order, and interestingly strong political leadership. The willingness to stay in the EU will likely remain high due to the (economic) benefits enjoyed, as long as Brussels does not somehow directly condition these over the issue of political elites deemed (un)acceptable.

Overall, responses to the Russia- and West-related statements were closely associated with broader ideological variables in both countries. While education remains an important socio-demographic factor, significant associations involved variables concerning identity, democracy, capitalism, communism, and ideological orientation. These results highlight the need to consider not only geopolitical developments but also internal ideological cleavages when analyzing public opinion in Central Europe.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the ideological and socio-demographic variables associated with pro-Western and anti-Western, as well as pro-Russian and anti-Russian, attitudes in Czechia and Slovakia shortly before the Russian

invasion of Ukraine. The data, collected in the summer of 2021, allow for a comparison between the two countries in a context unaffected by the open conflict that followed. In doing so, the study contributes to the relatively under-researched area of popular geopolitical orientations in Central and Eastern Europe.

Both H1 and H2 were confirmed. (H.1): Slovak respondents had higher average pro-Russian and less pro-Western index scores than Czech respondents. Both differences were statistically significant but small in magnitude, indicating modest average differences between the national samples rather than a sharp attitudinal divide. (H2): two main indices were substantially negatively correlated, indicating that greater endorsement of one set of statements was generally associated with weaker endorsement of the other. In the exploratory part of the analysis, we explored sociodemographic and ideological correlates of the indices. Among the socio-demographic variables, education proved to have the strongest association with the index scores. Respondents with lower education levels tended to have more pro-Russian and anti-Western views, and this pattern was consistent across both countries. Finally, several ideological variables were associated with pro-Russian and anti-Western index scores in both countries, although the pattern of associations differed. In Czechia, higher social conservatism and right-wing authoritarianism were associated with higher pro-Russian and anti-Western index scores. In Slovakia, higher scores were associated with national identity, authoritarianism, more favorable attitudes toward communism, and lower levels of liberalism. These country-specific patterns may reflect differences in the historical and political contexts of the two societies and should be considered when interpreting their responses to Russia- and West-related political statements.

The positive association between positive views of communism and support for Russia highlights the continued relevance of post-communist nostalgia, especially among those who may feel economically or culturally excluded from the post-1989 transformation. European identity, in contrast, was positively associated with pro-Western attitudes and may function as a broader marker of liberal-democratic orientation.

The study has some limitations. Most importantly, the data reflect attitudes from the pre-invasion period. It is likely that the war in Ukraine, along with subsequent political developments in both countries, has had a significant impact on public opinion. Future research should explore how these attitudes have changed, to what extent ideological cleavages have persisted or intensified, and how new events shape political identification

and geopolitical orientation.

Despite this, the findings provide a useful baseline for understanding pre-war views in Czechia and Slovakia and suggest that ideological factors — particularly value-based conservatism, national identity, and European orientation — are crucial in understanding how citizens position themselves toward Russia and the West.

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CYBERCRIME AS A COMPONENT OF EUROPEAN SECURITY POLICY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SECURITISATION OF DIGITAL THREATS IN EUROPE

Libor Klimek¹

Abstract

This article analyses cybercrime as a component of European security policy, examining how digital criminality is constructed as a security threat within the political discourse and governance practices of the European Union and the Council of Europe. Rather than approaching cybercrime as a purely legal or technical problem, the article conceptualises it as a politically constructed issue embedded in broader processes of securitisation and security governance. The main objective is to explore how cybercrime is framed as a transnational and systemic threat and how this framing legitimises specific models of security intervention at the European level. The research is guided by the question of how cybercrime is securitised by different European institutions and what political implications follow from these securitisation strategies. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative interpretative approach grounded in securitisation theory, combining political discourse analysis with a comparative institutional perspective. The analysis demonstrates that the European Union advances an integration-oriented model of securitisation based on regulatory harmonisation and resilience-building, while the Council of Europe promotes a norm-driven approach centred on treaty-based cooperation, human rights safeguards and capacity-building.

Keywords: Cybercrime, European security policy, Securitisation, Security governance, European Union, Council of Europe

INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation has profoundly transformed the social, economic and political foundations of contemporary European societies. The expansion of networked infrastructures, data-driven governance and digitally mediated forms of interaction has created new opportunities for economic growth and social connectivity, while simultaneously generating novel forms of vulnerability. Within this evolving environment, cybercrime has emerged as

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a particularly salient phenomenon, not only as a form of criminal activity, but as a challenge that increasingly intersects with broader questions of security, governance and political authority.

In the European context, cybercrime has become closely intertwined with debates on internal security, resilience and the capacity of political institutions to govern transnational risks. Unlike traditional forms of crime, cybercrime operates in a deterritorialised digital space that undermines the effectiveness of state-centred enforcement mechanisms and exposes the limits of nationally bounded security responses. As a result, cybercrime has been progressively reframed as a transnational threat with systemic implications for critical infrastructure, economic stability and democratic governance. This reframing has unfolded particularly over the past two decades, coinciding with the European Union's deepening integration in the field of internal security and the Council of Europe's consolidation of treaty-based cooperation on cybercrime.

From a political science perspective, the growing prominence of cybercrime within European policy agendas cannot be explained solely by reference to technological change or rising crime rates. Rather, it reflects a broader process through which cybercrime has been constructed as a security-relevant issue requiring exceptional attention, coordinated action and new forms of governance. This process has been especially visible since the mid-2010s, as European institutions increasingly linked cybercrime to strategic vulnerability, societal resilience and the protection of the digital single market, situating it firmly within the evolving architecture of European security policy.

The main objective of this article is to analyse how cybercrime is constructed as a component of European security policy through political discourse and institutional practice. Specifically, the article seeks to examine how cybercrime is framed as a security threat by the European Union and the Council of Europe, and how these framings translate into distinct models of security governance. In addition to this primary objective, the article pursues two secondary objectives: first, to compare the securitisation strategies employed by these two organisations, and second, to assess the political implications of their respective approaches for legitimacy, authority and governance in the digital domain.

The central research question guiding this analysis is formulated as follows: How is cybercrime constructed as a security threat within the political discourse of the European Union and the Council of Europe, and what role does this construction play in shaping European security governance?

This question is justified by the observation that cybercrime increasingly serves as a justificatory resource for expanding regulatory, institutional and cooperative frameworks at the European level. By focusing on securitisation processes rather than on legal definitions or technical measures, the article seeks to uncover the political logic underpinning contemporary cybercrime governance in Europe.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative and interpretative research design grounded in political discourse analysis and institutional comparison. It draws on securitisation theory as a conceptual framework to examine how cybercrime is framed as an existential or systemic threat and how such framings legitimise specific policy responses. The empirical material consists of key strategic documents, policy communications and legal instruments adopted by the European Union and the Council of Europe, supplemented by relevant academic literature. Rather than evaluating policy effectiveness, the analysis focuses on meaning-making processes, governance rationales and legitimacy claims.

Existing scholarship provides important insights into both European security governance and the political construction of digital threats, yet it remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries. Research on European security governance has highlighted the EU's increasing role as a security actor and the expansion of integration-driven security policies beyond traditional domains (Kaunert and Léonard, 2013; Biscop, 2016; Galbreath, Mawdsley and Chappell, 2019). At the same time, legal and policy-oriented studies have examined the regulatory dimensions of cybersecurity and cybercrime governance within EU law (Porcedda, 2023; Karathanasis, 2024; Chiara, 2024), while criminological literature has explored the evolving nature of cybercrime as a social and technological phenomenon (Klimek, Záhora and Holcr, 2016; Rüdiger and Bayerl, 2020; Wernert, 2021).

Despite these contributions, there remains a relative lack of political science research that systematically compares how different European institutions securitise cybercrime and translate threat narratives into governance models. In particular, the contrast between the European Union's integration-oriented approach and the Council of Europe's norm-driven, treaty-based model has received limited analytical attention. This article contributes to the existing literature by addressing this gap and by demonstrating how cybercrime functions as a site of competing securitisation logics within Europe's fragmented yet interconnected security landscape.

The article is structured as follows. Section 1 conceptualises cybercrime as a political and security-relevant phenomenon from a political science

perspective. Section 2 introduces securitisation theory and discusses its relevance for analysing digital threats. Section 3 situates cybercrime within the broader framework of European security governance. Section 4 examines how cybercrime is framed and governed within the European Union's security discourse and regulatory practice. Section 5 analyses the Council of Europe's approach to cybercrime, with particular attention to normative constraints and external governance. Section 6 provides a comparative discussion of the two models of securitising cybercrime in Europe.

1 CYBERCRIME AND SECURITY: A POLITICAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

From a political science perspective, cybercrime cannot be reduced to a category of unlawful behaviour addressed exclusively through criminal law. Rather, it should be understood as a broader socio-political phenomenon emerging from the structural transformation of contemporary societies driven by digitalisation. The expansion of digital infrastructures, transnational networks and data-dependent economies has fundamentally altered the context in which security threats are identified and governed. Within this environment, cybercrime increasingly transcends the boundaries of traditional criminal justice and enters the realm of security politics.

Unlike conventional forms of crime, cybercrime operates in a deterritorialised space where geographical borders lose much of their regulatory significance (Wernert, 2021). These characteristic challenges state-centred models of security and law enforcement, which were historically premised on territorial sovereignty and clearly defined jurisdictions. As a consequence, cybercrime becomes politically salient not merely because of its criminal nature, but because it exposes the limitations of existing security arrangements and generates pressure for new forms of political coordination and governance beyond the nation-state.

In contemporary studies, cybercrime is commonly conceptualised as a non-traditional or emerging security threat. Its defining features, including anonymity, speed, scalability and cross-border reach, distinguish it from classical military or criminal threats and complicate both attribution and response (Stephenson – Gilbert, 2004; Klimek – Záhora – Holcr, 2016; Rüdiger – Bayerl, 2020; Wernert, 2021; Bhushan – Jamshed, 2025). These characteristics contribute to the perception of cybercrime as an unpredictable and potentially systemic risk rather than as isolated instances of unlawful behaviour. As a result, cybercrime is increasingly framed as a

threat to economic stability, critical infrastructure, democratic institutions and societal trust in digital systems, thereby expanding its relevance within political security agendas.

Cybercrime becomes a security issue through narratives that link digital criminal activity to existential vulnerability and loss of control. Political actors, institutions and expert communities play a central role in shaping these narratives by presenting cybercrime as a pervasive and escalating threat that requires extraordinary attention and coordinated responses. Through such discursive framing, cybercrime is elevated from a technical or legal problem to a matter of security policy.

The securitisation of cybercrime has important implications for governance structures. Responses to cybercrime typically extend beyond traditional policing and judicial mechanisms and involve a wide range of actors, including security agencies, regulatory bodies, private technology companies and international organisations (Klimek – Záhora – Holc, 2016). This reflects a shift towards networked and multi-level forms of security governance in which authority is dispersed and responsibility is shared across institutional boundaries. From a political science perspective, these arrangements raise critical questions about power, accountability and legitimacy within contemporary security policy.

Framing cybercrime as a security issue also carries significant normative consequences. Security-oriented approaches tend to prioritise effectiveness, anticipation and risk management, which may generate tensions with principles such as individual privacy, data protection and democratic oversight. Measures justified in the name of cyber security often expand institutional capacities for surveillance, information sharing and preventive intervention (Kaunert – Léonard, 2013; Biscop, 2016; Fahey, 2022; Porcedda, 2023; Karathanasis, 2024; Bhushan – Jamshed, 2025). In the European context, cybercrime occupies a particularly prominent position within security debates due to its inherently transnational nature. European political actors frequently invoke cybercrime to justify coordinated responses at the supranational level, arguing that individual states lack the capacity to address digital threats effectively on their own. In this sense, cybercrime functions not only as an object of security policy but also as a political resource that facilitates deeper cooperation and integration in the field of European security governance. From a political science perspective, cybercrime thus represents a constructed security threat that contributes to the evolving architecture of security policy in Europe and sets the stage for further analysis of its securitisation within European institutions.

2 SECURITISATION THEORY AND DIGITAL THREATS AND CYBERCRIME

Securitisation theory provides a particularly useful analytical framework for examining how cybercrime is transformed from a technical or criminal issue into a matter of security policy. Developed within political science and security studies, this approach shifts attention away from the material characteristics of threats and towards the political processes through which certain phenomena come to be framed as security concerns (Balzacq, 2010; Floyd, 2019). In the context of digitalisation and cybercrime, securitisation theory allows for a systematic analysis of how political actors construct digital threats, mobilise legitimacy for extraordinary measures and reshape governance structures at both national and European levels.

At its core, securitisation theory conceptualises security as the outcome of a political process rather than an objective condition. Issues become security issues when they are presented as existential threats that require urgent action beyond the normal bounds of politics. This process typically involves authoritative actors who articulate a threat narrative, an audience that accepts or tolerates this framing, and a set of proposed measures that are justified by reference to the perceived urgency of the threat.

From a political science perspective, securitisation is therefore understood as a performative act. By declaring something a security issue, political actors seek to legitimise particular policy responses and to prioritise certain values, such as protection and stability, over others, such as openness or procedural restraint. This insight is especially relevant in the digital domain, where threats are often abstract, invisible and difficult to verify, making them particularly susceptible to discursive construction.

Digitalisation has profoundly altered the environment in which security narratives are produced and disseminated. Cyberspace is frequently depicted as a domain characterised by uncertainty, vulnerability and constant exposure to risk. Within this context, cybercrime is not merely described as illegal activity but as a symptom of a broader loss of control over digital infrastructures, data flows and technological systems.

Cybercrime is portrayed as capable of causing systemic disruption, undermining critical infrastructure, destabilising economies and eroding public trust in democratic institutions (Rüdiger – Bayerl, 2020; Wernert, 2021; Bhushan – Jamshed, 2025). These narratives contribute to a sense of urgency and exceptionalism, which is central to the logic of securitisation.

By framing cybercrime as a threat that transcends traditional boundaries and capacities, political actors create a discursive environment in which extraordinary coordination, regulation and intervention appear both necessary and legitimate.

Within securitisation theory, cybercrime can be analysed as a paradigmatic example of a securitised non-traditional threat. Unlike conventional security challenges, cybercrime lacks a clearly identifiable enemy and operates through dispersed networks rather than hierarchical structures. This ambiguity enhances its suitability for securitisation, as the absence of a concrete adversary allows threat narratives to remain broad and flexible. The securitisation of cybercrime typically involves linking digital criminal activity to wider security concerns, such as national sovereignty, public order and geopolitical stability. Cybercrime is often discursively associated with hostile state behaviour, organised crime or hybrid threats, even when empirical evidence remains limited or contested. From a political science standpoint, the significance of this association lies not in its factual accuracy but in its political effects. By embedding cybercrime within broader security narratives, political actors expand the scope of security policy and justify the mobilisation of resources and authority.

A crucial element of securitisation is the role of the audience. For securitisation to be effective, threat narratives must resonate with relevant audiences, including political institutions, expert communities and the wider public. In the case of cybercrime, audience acceptance is often facilitated by widespread perceptions of technological vulnerability and limited public understanding of digital risks.

The securitisation of digital threats has far-reaching implications for policy-making and governance. Once cybercrime is framed as a security issue, policy responses tend to prioritise prevention, resilience and risk management. This often leads to the expansion of surveillance capacities, data-sharing arrangements and regulatory frameworks that extend beyond traditional criminal justice mechanisms.

From a political science perspective, these developments raise important questions about the boundaries of security policy and the normalisation of exceptional measures. Securitisation can blur the distinction between routine governance and emergency politics, making it more difficult to subject security measures to democratic scrutiny. In the digital context, where threats are ongoing rather than episodic, securitisation risks becoming a permanent condition rather than a temporary response.

3 EUROPEAN SECURITY POLICY AND THE GOVERNANCE OF CYBER THREATS

European security policy has undergone a gradual but significant transformation in response to the proliferation of cyber and digital threats. Cybercrime, in particular, has become a central reference point in debates on security governance, as it challenges traditional assumptions about territoriality, authority and the division of competences between national and supranational levels. The governance of cyber threats in Europe illustrates how security policy increasingly operates through coordination, standard-setting and strategic framing rather than through classic coercive instruments alone.

Historically, European security policy was shaped primarily by concerns related to military conflict, interstate relations and, later, internal security issues such as terrorism and organised crime. The rise of digital technologies has progressively expanded this agenda by introducing new categories of risk that are not easily addressed through existing security frameworks. Cybercrime exemplifies this shift, as it combines elements of criminal activity, economic risk and systemic vulnerability. In the digital age, European security policy has increasingly emphasised resilience, prevention and preparedness. Rather than reacting to isolated incidents, policy discourse focuses on the anticipation of threats and the management of long-term risks associated with digital dependence. This evolution reflects a broader reconceptualisation of security as a continuous process of governance rather than as an episodic response to clearly identifiable dangers.

The governance of cyber threats in Europe is inherently multi-level. Cybercrime operates across borders, affects multiple policy sectors and involves a wide range of public and private actors. As a result, security governance in this area cannot be monopolised by individual states (Rüdiger – Bayerl, 2020; Wernert, 2021). Instead, it is characterised by overlapping competences, shared responsibilities and coordinated action across different levels of authority. From a political science perspective, this multi-level governance structure raises important questions about who defines security priorities and how policy coherence is achieved. Cybercrime-related policies often emerge from complex interactions between national governments, supranational institutions, expert networks and private actors. European security policy thus functions as a space of negotiation in which different interests, threat perceptions and normative commitments are reconciled.

The EU has increasingly positioned itself as a central coordinator of cyber security policy, framing cybercrime as a shared security challenge that requires collective responses. Political discourse at the EU level frequently highlights the inadequacy of purely national approaches and emphasises the need for harmonised strategies, information sharing and common standards (Klimek – Záhora – Holcr, 2016). The EU's involvement in cyber security governance is not merely functional but also political. By defining cybercrime as a European security issue, EU institutions strengthen their role as legitimate security actors and expand the scope of supranational governance. Cyber threats thus become a vehicle through which the EU reinforces its capacity to act in areas traditionally associated with state sovereignty, including security and criminal justice.

European security policy addressing cyber threats relies on a diverse set of governance instruments. These include strategic frameworks, action plans, coordination mechanisms and regulatory initiatives that seek to align national policies and facilitate cooperation. Importantly, these instruments are often justified through a security-oriented rationale that emphasises urgency, interdependence and shared vulnerability. Cybercrime occupies a strategic position within this rationale because it can be linked simultaneously to internal security, economic stability and external relations. This multifunctional character allows cybercrime to serve as a bridge between different policy domains and to legitimise integrated approaches to security governance. This illustrates how security policy increasingly operates through cross-sectoral coordination rather than through isolated policy silos.

The expansion of European security policy into the domain of cyber threats also raises questions of legitimacy and accountability. Governance arrangements that rely on expert knowledge, technical coordination and preventive action tend to reduce the visibility of political choice and contestation. Cyber security policies are frequently presented as technical necessities rather than as politically contingent decisions. This depoliticisation poses a challenge for democratic governance. While coordinated responses to cybercrime may enhance effectiveness, they can also obscure lines of responsibility and limit opportunities for public debate. Political science analysis therefore pays close attention to how security governance balances efficiency with transparency and how legitimacy is constructed in the absence of direct democratic engagement.

4 THE EUROPEAN UNION: CYBERCRIME IN SECURITY AND POLICY DISCOURSE

The European Union's engagement with cybercrime is best understood as a discursive and institutional process through which digital criminality is positioned within a wider European security agenda (Kaunert – Léonard, 2013; Biscop, 2016; Galbreath – Mawdsley – Chappell, 2019). Rather than treating cybercrime primarily as a narrow criminal justice problem, EU-level policy discourse increasingly presents it as a structural threat, intertwined with economic stability, critical infrastructure protection, societal resilience, and the integrity of democratic institutions. This section analyses how that framing is produced and stabilised through key EU strategic texts and legal instruments, and how these outputs collectively contribute to a particular model of cyber threat governance.

4.1 Preliminary descriptive comparisons

A pivotal reference point for the contemporary EU security framing is the *Security Union Strategy for 2020–2025*², which explicitly adopts an integrated understanding of security across physical and digital environments and emphasises coordinated action at EU level (Porcedda, 2023; Herlin-Karnell – Conway – Ganesh, 2021). The strategy's underlying political logic is that the interdependence of Member States – especially in digital infrastructures and data flows – creates shared vulnerabilities that cannot be addressed effectively through nationally bounded approaches. Cybercrime, within this framing, functions as a paradigmatic cross-border threat that both justifies and requires deeper cooperation in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice. This is visible in the Commission's own articulation of the Security Union approach as responding to a rapidly changing threat landscape through coordinated and integrated action.

This security framing is not merely descriptive. It implicitly redefines the legitimate scope of EU action by positioning cybercrime as a threat that is simultaneously internal and external, criminal and geopolitical, technical and societal. The consequence is a narrative in which cybercrime becomes a political resource: it legitimises not only operational cooperation, but also

² European Commission (2020) Communication from the Commission on the EU Security Union Strategy, COM(2020) 605 final. Brussels: European Commission. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0605> (Accessed: 5 February 2026).

regulatory initiatives and institutional strengthening at EU level. In that sense, cybercrime is discursively mobilised to support the EU's broader claim to be a security actor capable of producing collective protection.

the European Commission explicitly situates cyber threats and cyber-attacks alongside other evolving risks in the digitally mediated security environment. The strategy notes that "cyber-attacks and cybercrime continue to rise" and underscores that the connectivity of physical and digital systems increases vulnerabilities, as digital infrastructures underpin essential services such as energy, transport and finance. The Commission's analysis further highlights that malicious cyber activities exploit the blurring of boundaries between digital and physical domains, enabling criminals and hostile actors to act swiftly across borders and complicating traditional security responses. In particular, cybercrime is framed as part of a broader transformation in the threat landscape that demands coordinated action at EU level, recognising that reliance on national responses alone is insufficient to protect citizens and critical infrastructures effectively. This framing supports the strategic priority of enhancing EU-wide cooperation in prevention, detection and response to digital threats, and positions cybercrime as a central element of the Security Union's integrated approach to contemporary security challenges.

4.2 Strategic Narratives Linking Cybercrime, Resilience and European Capacity to Act

The *EU's Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade*³ of 2020 further consolidates mentioned logic by embedding cyber threats within a comprehensive agenda centred on resilience, capability-building, and European strategic autonomy in the digital domain. The strategy frames cybersecurity as a foundational condition for the functioning of contemporary European societies and economies, thereby expanding the meaning of security beyond traditional categories. Within such a framework, cybercrime is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader environment of malicious activity targeting digital systems and trust in digital governance. The political implication is that "security" becomes increasingly intertwined with governance of technology, standards, and systemic resilience, rather than confined to reactive enforcement.

³ European Commission (2020) EU Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade, JOIN(2020) 18 final. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0018> (Accessed: 5 February 2026).

The Cybersecurity Strategy further consolidates the framing of cybercrime as a core component of the European security agenda by explicitly linking malicious cyber activities to systemic risks affecting the Union's economy, democratic institutions and societal resilience. The strategy identifies cybercrime as a persistent and evolving threat that exploits the increasing digitalisation of public and private sectors, emphasising that criminal actors benefit from anonymity, scale and cross-border reach in cyberspace. Importantly, the document situates cybercrime within a broader threat environment that includes state-sponsored activities and hybrid threats, thereby blurring the distinction between criminality and security in the traditional sense. This discursive move reinforces the securitisation of cybercrime by embedding it within a narrative of strategic vulnerability and collective exposure, which in turn legitimises enhanced coordination, capacity-building and regulatory intervention at EU level. By framing effective action against cybercrime as essential for safeguarding trust in digital transformation, the strategy positions cybercrime governance as a prerequisite for the Union's long-term security and competitiveness, rather than as a narrow issue of criminal enforcement alone.

A complementary strand of EU discourse is visible in the *EU Strategy to tackle Organised Crime 2021–2025*⁴, which explicitly identifies cyber-enabled criminality as a structural component of contemporary organised crime markets. The strategy frames cybercrime not merely as a discrete category of offences, but as an enabling infrastructure that facilitates a wide range of criminal activities, including fraud, money laundering, trafficking and illicit financial flows. By emphasising the convergence between traditional organised crime and digital tools, the document constructs cybercrime as a multiplier of criminal capacity and a key driver of cross-border criminality. This framing situates cybercrime within a broader threat environment characterised by adaptability, networked organisation and exploitation of technological innovation, thereby reinforcing its security relevance beyond the confines of criminal justice. Crucially, the strategy links the cyber dimension of organised crime to the necessity of enhanced EU-level operational and judicial coordination, arguing that fragmented national responses are structurally ill-suited to address digitally mediated criminal ecosystems (Pilniok – Dietrich, 2024). In political terms, this discursive move embeds cybercrime within an expansive “threat ecology”

⁴ European Commission (2021) EU Strategy to tackle Organised Crime, COM(2021) 170 final. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0170> (Accessed: 5 February 2026).

that connects economic harm, societal vulnerability and internal security risks. As a result, cybercrime is mobilised as a justificatory element for deepening cooperation, approximation and capacity-building within the Security Union framework, supporting an integrated vision of European security governance in which digital criminality is treated as a systemic challenge requiring collective action at Union level.

4.3 Legal and Regulatory Instruments as Security Governance

While the EU's strategic texts articulate the security framing, legal instruments operationalise it by translating threat narratives into governance requirements. Here, it is crucial to note that the political function of these instruments is not reducible to their technical provisions. They also signal a particular understanding of how security should be produced: through harmonised obligations, standardised reporting, and institutionalised coordination across Member States and sectors.

The *Directive (EU) 2022/2555 on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union*⁵ (also known as NIS 2 Directive) is illustrative in this respect. By setting out EU-wide measures aimed at achieving a high common level of cybersecurity, it embeds cyber threats within a governance model that relies on mandatory risk management, incident reporting, and supervisory frameworks across a broad set of entities (Durand – Gilbert-d'Halluin, 2024; Chiara, 2024). From a political science perspective, this reflects a shift towards preventive and managerial forms of security, where compliance and resilience obligations become core tools of security policy. Such instruments contribute to the normalisation of “security-by-regulation” as a mode of governing cyber risk in Europe.

A related logic is visible in the *Regulation (EU) 2022/2554 on digital operational resilience for the financial sector*⁶ (also known as Digital

⁵ Directive (EU) 2022/2555 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union (NIS 2 Directive). Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2022/2555/oj/eng> (Accessed: 1 February 2026). See also: Cybersecurity of network and information systems: Summary of Directive (EU) 2022/2555 on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the EU. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/LSU/?uri=CELEX:32022L2555> (Accessed: 1 February 2026).

⁶ Regulation (EU) 2022/2554 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on digital operational resilience for the financial sector. Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2554/oj/eng> (Accessed: 5 February 2026). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2554/oj/eng> (Accessed: 1 February 2026). See also: Digital operational resilience for the

Operational Resilience Act), which focuses on the financial sector and institutionalises digital resilience as a regulatory priority. Although it is not a cybercrime instrument in a narrow sense, it aligns with the EU's broader security framing by treating digital disruption and cyber incidents as systemic risks to economic and societal stability. The political meaning lies in expanding the security agenda into sector-specific regulatory regimes, thereby extending security governance through the architecture of the internal market.

4.4 Access to Data, E-evidence and the Politics of Effective Enforcement

Alongside resilience-oriented governance, EU discourse also develops a distinct enforcement-oriented strand centred on operational capability and access to data. This becomes particularly salient in debates about encrypted communications, cross-border data access, and the evidentiary demands of digital investigations. In this area, the EU's framing often relies on the argument that effective law enforcement must adapt to the digital environment, and that the EU level can add value by enabling cooperation and interoperability.

The *EU's progress reporting on the Security Union Strategy*⁷ of 2020 points to practical steps aimed at strengthening law enforcement capabilities, including initiatives linked to Europol and the broader law enforcement training ecosystem. The political significance lies in the normalisation of capacity-building and technical tooling as integral components of security policy, presented as necessary adaptations to an environment in which digital investigations increasingly depend on access to data.

The e-evidence package, particularly *Regulation (EU) 2023/1543 on European Production and Preservation Orders*⁸ represents a further

financial sector: Summary of Regulation (EU) 2022/2554 on digital operational resilience for the financial sector. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/LSU/?uri=CELEX:32022R2554> (Accessed: 1 February 2026).

⁷ European Commission (2020) Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council – First Progress Report on the EU Security Union Strategy, COM(2020) 797. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0797> (Accessed: 5 February 2026).

⁸ Regulation (EU) 2023/1543 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 July 2023 on European Production Orders and European Preservation Orders for electronic evidence in criminal proceedings and for the execution of custodial sentences following criminal proceedings. Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/1543/oj/eng> (Accessed: 5 February 2026).

institutionalisation of this enforcement logic. Although formally a legal framework for cross-border access to electronic evidence, its political rationale is rooted in the idea that digital criminality and cybercrime require faster, more direct channels of cooperation that reduce dependence on slower mutual legal assistance processes. From a governance perspective, this instrument illustrates how the EU seeks to reconfigure the practical conditions of enforcement in response to digitalisation, and how cross-border data access becomes a central site where security, sovereignty, and rights-sensitive governance intersect.

4.5 Cybercrime, Hybrid Threat Narratives and Institutional Role Expansion

A further dimension of EU discourse is the tendency to situate cybercrime within a broader landscape of hybrid threats, sabotage, and hostile influence. This is politically consequential because it blurs the boundary between “crime” and “security” in the stronger sense, allowing cybercrime to be linked to geopolitical contestation and systemic destabilisation. This, in turn, supports arguments for expanding the mandates and operational roles of EU agencies and for strengthening EU-level internal security capacities.

Taken together, strategic and legal developments indicate that the EU’s approach to cybercrime is constructed through an interplay of securitising narratives and governance instruments. Cybercrime is framed as a cross-border security problem requiring coordinated European action; resilience is institutionalised through regulatory obligations; and enforcement capacity is enhanced through cross-border evidence tools and institutional strengthening (Karathanasis, 2024). In political science terms, this produces a distinctly EU-style model of cyber threat governance in which security is achieved through a combination of integration, regulation, and capability-building – a model that can be contrasted with the Council of Europe’s more explicitly normative approach in the next section.

5 THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE: NORMATIVE SECURITY AND CYBERCRIME

The Council of Europe’s approach to cybercrime is anchored in a distinctive model of European security politics in which “security” is articulated through norms, standards, and rights-sensitive governance. Unlike the European Union, which often frames cybercrime through the lens of a Security Union logic and capability-driven security governance, the

Council of Europe tends to construct cybercrime as a challenge to democratic order and fundamental rights that must be addressed through legally and institutionally constrained cooperation. In political terms, the Council of Europe's cybercrime agenda exemplifies "normative security", that is, a security practice premised on the diffusion of common standards, the consolidation of rule-of-law commitments, and the management of cross-border threats through treaty-based cooperation rather than supranational authority.

5.1 The Budapest Convention as a Normative Infrastructure of Cybercrime Governance

The Council of Europe's central contribution to cybercrime governance is the *Convention on Cybercrime*⁹ of 2001 (also known as the Budapest Convention). As a treaty-based instrument, it has long functioned as a normative infrastructure that shapes how cybercrime is defined, discussed, and governed across Europe and beyond (Carr, 2009; Funta, 2021). The Convention's political significance lies not only in its substantive catalogue of cyber-related offences and procedural tools, but also in its underlying governance rationale: it frames cybercrime as a transnational threat that requires rapid and effective international cooperation, while situating that cooperation within a framework compatible with rule-of-law standards. From a political science perspective, this treaty-based approach produces a specific form of authority. Rather than centralising enforcement powers, the Council of Europe stabilises cooperation by promoting a shared baseline of expectations and practices among states. Cybercrime, in this model, becomes a policy domain where legitimacy is generated through common standards and mutual trust, rather than through institutional capacity at a supranational level. The Convention thereby contributes to the construction of cybercrime as a governance problem that is solved through harmonised norms, coordinated procedures, and institutionalised cooperation.

The *Second Additional Protocol to the Cybercrime Convention*¹⁰ further illustrates how the Council of Europe responds to digital threats by adapting normative instruments to the realities of platform-driven communication

⁹ Convention on Cybercrime, Council of Europe, ETS No. 185. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680081561> (Accessed: 5 February 2026).

¹⁰ Second Additional Protocol to the Cybercrime Convention on enhanced co-operation and disclosure of electronic evidence, Council of Europe, ETS No. 224. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680a49dab> (Accessed: 5 February 2026).

and cross-border data. Politically, the Protocol can be read as an attempt to reconcile two pressures that define contemporary cybercrime governance: the demand for faster and more direct forms of international cooperation in obtaining electronic evidence, and the demand for credible safeguards grounded in human rights and data protection standards. The Council of Europe explicitly presents the Protocol as providing tools for enhanced cooperation, including forms of direct cooperation with service providers, while simultaneously emphasising the embedding of these tools within a safeguards framework.

The Protocol's drafting history is also politically revealing. The Council of Europe highlights the prolonged and consultation-intensive nature of the negotiation process, signalling an effort to build legitimacy through procedure, stakeholder engagement, and deliberation. In political science terms, this can be interpreted as a throughput legitimacy strategy: the Council of Europe seeks to defend the acceptability of more intrusive cooperation tools by demonstrating that their design emerged from a constrained and participatory process rather than from executive urgency alone.

5.2 Human Rights, Rule-of-Law Framing and Normative Constraints

A further distinguishing feature of the Council of Europe's cybercrime agenda is its consistent integration of human rights concerns into its broader approach to digital governance. While cybercrime governance often tends towards securitising dynamics that normalise exceptional measures, the Council of Europe's normative ecosystem provides discursive and institutional resources that can constrain such dynamics. The Committee of Ministers' *Recommendation on the roles and responsibilities of internet intermediaries*¹¹ of 2018 exemplifies how the Council of Europe frames digital governance through an explicit human rights lens, insisting that regulatory and policy measures in the digital environment should effectively safeguard rights and maintain guarantees against arbitrary application.

In the context of cybercrime, this rights-oriented framing has an important political implication: it reshapes what can be presented as legitimate policy action. Rather than treating effectiveness and speed as overriding imperatives, the Council of Europe's discourse keeps open the normative question of proportionality, safeguards, and accountability. This does not

¹¹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the roles and responsibilities of internet intermediaries, Council of Europe, CM/Rec(2018)2. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680790e14> (Accessed: 5 February 2026).

eliminate securitisation dynamics, but it alters the justificatory terrain in which cybercrime policies are debated, designed, and implemented.

5.3 Capacity Building and the Externalisation of European Cybercrime Governance

The Council of Europe's cybercrime activities also demonstrate how European security governance increasingly extends beyond Europe in practice, even when it remains normatively anchored in European legal and political standards. Through the work of the *Cybercrime Programme Office of the Council of Europe* (also known as C-PROC) and its associated initiatives, the Council of Europe has positioned itself as a key global actor in the governance of cybercrime. Capacity-building programmes such as GLACY+ and related regional projects illustrate how the Council's cybercrime agenda operates well beyond the geographical boundaries of its membership, targeting regions including Africa, Latin America, the Asia-Pacific and Eastern Europe. These initiatives focus on strengthening legislative frameworks, enhancing institutional capacity, and improving international cooperation mechanisms in line with the standards of the Budapest Convention system.

From a political perspective, this outward-oriented capacity-building strategy is highly significant because it frames cybercrime governance primarily as a process of institutional development and norm socialisation rather than as a matter of coercive enforcement. By emphasising training, technical assistance, legislative alignment and peer-to-peer cooperation, the Council of Europe promotes a model of security governance that relies on persuasion, expertise and shared standards. Cybercrime is thus constructed not only as a threat to be countered, but as a governance challenge that can be addressed through the diffusion of best practices and the gradual internalisation of normative frameworks.

This approach reinforces the Council of Europe's identity as a standards-setting organisation whose influence is exercised through knowledge production, treaty-based cooperation and sustained engagement with domestic institutions in partner countries. Unlike security actors that derive authority from operational capacity or enforcement power, the Council of Europe builds legitimacy by presenting its cybercrime framework as compatible with the rule of law, human rights and democratic accountability. In doing so, it seeks to stabilise a particular understanding of legitimate cybercrime governance that balances effectiveness with normative restraint.

These activities can be understood as a form of external governance. European norms related to cybercrime, electronic evidence and procedural safeguards are translated into templates that are adopted, adapted and localised in diverse political and institutional contexts. This externalisation of European cybercrime standards contributes to the construction of a broader transnational governance space in which European security norms exert influence without formal supranational authority. As such, the Council of Europe's cybercrime activities illustrate how security governance in the digital domain increasingly operates through normative projection and capacity-building, complementing the more integration-driven and regulatory approaches characteristic of the European Union.

6 COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: TWO MODELS OF SECURITISING CYBERCRIME IN EUROPE

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that both the European Union and the Council of Europe treat cybercrime as a security-relevant phenomenon that necessitates coordinated responses extending beyond the capacities of individual states. In both institutional settings, cybercrime is framed as transnational, complex and capable of generating systemic harm, thereby justifying governance arrangements that operate across borders and policy sectors. This shared framing reflects a common European threat environment shaped by digitalisation, interdependence and the growing reliance of societies on networked infrastructures. In securitisation terms, both organisations participate in the construction of cybercrime as an urgent and exceptional problem, even though the intensity and form of that exceptionalism differ significantly.

Despite this shared threat narrative, the two organisations securitise cybercrime through distinct political and institutional logics. The European Union's approach is grounded in an integration-oriented model of security governance in which cybercrime is positioned as a policy problem requiring supranational coordination, regulatory harmonisation and the strengthening of European-level capacities. Cybercrime is discursively mobilised to support the expansion of EU action in areas traditionally associated with state sovereignty, particularly internal security and criminal justice (Klimek – Záhora – Holcr, 2016). In this model, securitisation operates as a mechanism that legitimises deeper integration and the consolidation of EU authority through regulatory and operational instruments.

By contrast, the Council of Europe's approach is rooted in a treaty-based and norm-driven model of governance. Cybercrime is framed as a serious challenge to democratic order and the rule of law, but the preferred response emphasises convergence around shared standards rather than the centralisation of enforcement powers. The Council of Europe securitises cybercrime in a manner that foregrounds legal certainty, procedural safeguards and compatibility with human rights obligations. In political terms, this produces a form of securitisation that seeks to contain security imperatives within a normative framework designed to preserve institutional restraint and legitimacy.

These divergent approaches are also reflected in the legitimising strategies employed by each organisation. The European Union tends to rely primarily on output-oriented legitimacy, presenting its cybercrime policies as necessary to deliver effectiveness, resilience and operational capability in the face of cross-border digital threats (Fahey, 2016; Fahey 2022). The promise of efficiency and coordinated action serves as a central justificatory narrative for expanding EU involvement in cyber security governance. Where concerns about democratic accountability arise, they are often addressed through references to necessity, urgency and the technical complexity of digital threats.

The Council of Europe, by contrast, places greater emphasis on throughput legitimacy and rights-sensitive governance. Its cybercrime discourse consistently highlights the importance of inclusive procedures, deliberation and safeguards as sources of legitimacy. Rather than framing security effectiveness as the overriding value, the Council of Europe's approach insists that cybercrime governance must remain embedded in rule-of-law commitments and subject to normative constraints. This does not eliminate securitisation dynamics, but it reshapes the political conditions under which security measures can be justified and accepted.

A particularly revealing point of comparison concerns the politics of cross-border access to electronic evidence and the role of private actors. In both models, cybercrime governance increasingly depends on cooperation with service providers and technology companies, reflecting the centrality of private infrastructure in the digital environment. The European Union approaches this challenge through mechanisms designed to accelerate and standardise cooperation, emphasising operational effectiveness and the reduction of procedural barriers. The Council of Europe similarly seeks to enhance cooperation but places stronger discursive emphasis on safeguards, proportionality and compatibility with human rights standards.

This difference highlights how similar governance problems are addressed through distinct normative vocabularies and institutional strategies.

Taken together, these contrasting approaches suggest that European security politics in the digital domain is characterised by institutional pluralism rather than convergence around a single security model. Cybercrime governance emerges from the interaction of integration-driven and norm-driven securitisation processes, each shaping how threats are understood, managed and legitimised. This underscores that Europe cannot be treated as a unitary security actor; instead, it is a fragmented yet interconnected security space in which multiple institutions contribute to the construction of digital threats and responses. The comparison illustrates that securitisation is not a uniform or deterministic process, but one that is deeply shaped by institutional design, authority structures and legitimising practices. Cybercrime thus provides a particularly instructive case for analysing how security governance evolves under conditions of digital interdependence and how European institutions navigate the tension between security imperatives and democratic legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

The article examines how cybercrime is constructed and governed as a security issue within the European political space, focusing on the European Union and the Council of Europe as two central, yet distinct, institutional actors. Drawing on securitisation theory, the analysis has shown that cybercrime does not enter European security policy merely as a response to technological change or rising criminal activity, but as the outcome of political processes through which digital threats are framed as systemic risks requiring coordinated intervention beyond the nation-state.

The European Union and the Council of Europe securitise cybercrime through different, though partially overlapping, governance logics. The EU predominantly advances an integration-oriented model of securitisation, in which cybercrime is embedded within a broader Security Union agenda and addressed through regulatory harmonisation, resilience-building and sector-specific governance instruments. In contrast, the Council of Europe promotes a norm-driven model centred on treaty-based cooperation, human rights safeguards and the diffusion of common standards, extending its influence through capacity-building and external governance rather than supranational authority. These divergent approaches reveal that European security governance in the digital domain is characterised by institutional

pluralism rather than convergence around a single security paradigm.

By framing cybercrime as a transnational and cascading risk, European institutions justify preventive, managerial and regulatory forms of intervention that reshape the boundaries between security, regulation and rights. At the same time, the comparison underscores the importance of legitimacy strategies, showing how different institutional designs produce distinct balances between effectiveness, accountability and normative restraint. Cybercrime offers a revealing case for understanding broader transformations in European security politics under conditions of digital interdependence.

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