

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 ($p = 0.029$, $PctExp = 2.57$). 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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