

Constructing Foreign Policy vis-à-vis the Migration Crisis: the Czech and Slovak Cases

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Abstract: The study examines contemporary discourses in two small Central European states, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The aim is to analyze how key domestic political players discursively construct foreign policy vis-à-vis the migration crisis. Securitization, a concept developed by the Copenhagen School, serves as an analytical framework for revealing the kinds of discourse being produced in the two countries. The analysis of the discourse of the Prime Ministers from 2015 to 2018, indicates that in the Czech Republic and Slovakia foreign policy is being constructed around the issue of Europeaness (belongingness) and accommodation in the core-periphery spectrum. The article shows that the construction of external threats is done in different security sectors in each country, but in both it seems to promote the in-group coherence needed to affirm their belongingness to Europe, and it no longer happens on grounds of ethnically defined nations, but on grounds of the broader idea of civilizational Europe.

Keywords: Czech Republic, European Union, migration, securitization, Slovakia.

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Before 2015, for two decades the Central European countries attempted to prove that they belonged to the core, to the West. This was done by transforming national policies to conform to the European Union (EU) *acquis*, but it also included an identitarian dimension. In Milan Kundera's (1984) words, Central Europe was the "*kidnapped West*," and with the fall of the Communist regime, it could return home. In practice, *returning home* meant a high degree of emulation through which these countries would transform themselves, in terms of policy and identity (re)affirmation, to conform to the core, the West, epitomized by the EU. However, in the migration and refugee crisis, whose apex was in 2015, these countries promptly showed their lack of commitment to the principle of solidarity and burden-sharing by opposing the mandatory quota system put in place by the Union. Their emulation in terms of policy and identity was put into question. The migration crisis in Europe seems to be one of those moments in which the concepts of core and periphery were contested and redefined in the geopolitical imaginaries of, not only, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Since 2015, there has been a shift in the discourse in these countries: a shift away from the post-Cold War conformity. The position of the Visegrad countries distanced them from the core of the Union, whose position was symbolized, at that point, by the kind of solidarity and burden sharing advocated by Germany. The migration crisis together with

the illiberal turn happening in Poland and Hungary led to the diffusion of a strongly securitized discourse in the Visegrad countries that portrays migration and a particular type of migrant as a threat. At the same time, the Central European countries started being portrayed by the political elites (not only) in the core countries, and also started to be researched, as a subgroup (Stepper 2016; Kazharski 2017; Brubaker 2017) within the structures of the Union. In this way, their discursive particularities, including those regarding securitization moves, have not been analyzed in-depth.

What is particularly interesting is that in contrast to Western European countries, where the constructed fears of migrants can be related to already existing immigrant communities with a particular cultural background, the referent subject (Balzacq 2011) of securitization in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (and more broadly in the Visegrad countries) is an *imaginary migrant*. Data from the Pew Research Center (2018) shows that Ukrainians, Russians, and Vietnamese form the majority of non-EU nationals residing in the two countries. From this, one would expect that if migration were to be securitized in the two countries, it would also include migrants from these countries of origin. Nevertheless, the facts on the ground are different and form an interesting puzzle which deserves further scrutiny.

The study critically examines contemporary discourses in two small Central European states, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The aim is to analyze how key domestic political players discursively construct foreign policy vis-à-vis the migration crisis and show how the two countries' different securitizing discourses have, nevertheless, led to similar policies. In order to do so, through discourse analysis, the research focuses on the speech acts of the Prime Ministers in both countries from 2015 to 2018.

The paper contributes to our understanding of how identity and securitization interplay in the foreign policies of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and how securitization can operate in different security sectors but still share the common feature of threat creation in relation to the same type of migrant. It challenges the positioning of the Central European countries in regard to migration policies as homogenous, especially after 2015 when they, as a group, articulated their opposition to the mandatory quota and relocation scheme proposed by the Union. Securitization theory is applied to show how the discourses in both countries converge and diverge both in relation to the EU and in relation to the national contexts. By looking at the discourses of the Prime Ministers, we will see that securitization in this region is a process that should be analyzed by taking into consideration each country's specificities, as it is a trend happening in the entire region, but the countries show different constructions of external threats. Genuinely understanding how these countries construct foreign policy vis-à-vis the migration crisis requires that we go beyond treating the Visegrad countries as a single object of analysis and move towards uncovering each country's specificities.

The following text is organized into five sections. The first section provides an overview of the securitization theory and how it contributes to the understanding of foreign policy construction in these countries, mainly the approach developed by the Copenhagen School, and how we can apply it to the study of the Czech and Slovak foreign policies towards migration. The second section proceeds to review the hitherto research on securitization of migration in Central Europe, and the third section introduces the method of analysis that has been applied in this study. The fourth section analyses the Czech and Slovak securitization of migration between 2015 and 2018, and it contains four subsections that focus on the language and actors of securitization, societal and political sectors of securitization, the accommodation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the core-periphery spectrum of the EU, and, finally, the hierarchy of Otherness in the Czech and Slovak discourses. The article ends with a discussion and the main conclusions drawn from the empirical analysis.

SECURITIZATION THEORY AND FOREIGN POLICY

The way that the discourse about migrants is framed plays a role in the legitimization of the kind foreign policy that is adopted. This is my initial social constructivist assumption, and hence, as a starting point, I rely on the theoretical framework elaborated by the Copenhagen School to examine practices of threat production.

The Copenhagen School defines securitization as a situation in which through a speech act an *“issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure”* (Buzan et al. 1998: 23–24). Security, in this way, is not to be understood in purely objective terms, as something given, but as something that is intersubjective (an idea shared by individuals) and socially constructed. Moreover, for the Copenhagen School it is through the speech act that an issue is placed in the realm of security – *“security is thus a self-referential practice because it is in this practice that security becomes a security issue”* (Buzan et al. 1998: 24).

Furthermore, Buzan et al. (1998), in an attempt to expand the agenda of security studies beyond *political* and *military* sectors, introduce three other commonly used sectors where we can speak of security and through which we can conduct analysis on security: the *societal*, *economic*, and *environmental* sectors (see also Buzan – Little 2000). Security sectors are *“seen as analytical devices that are used to shed light on the diverse practices and dynamics of securitization”* (Albert – Buzan 2011: 415). Jef Huysmans (2006: 2) sustains that *“insecurity differs depending on the nature of the threat and the referent object that is threatened”*. This, in turn, enables us, at least for analytical purposes, to organize security into these different sectors as proposed by Buzan et al. (1998).

In the societal sector, which is particularly relevant for this present analysis, identity is the key *“organizing concept”* (Buzan et al. 1998: 119) around which insecurity is created. Insecurity occurs whenever there is a potential threat to the survival of a social group, for the survival of the community. The community in this sense is seen as a homogenous one – formed by citizens who share the same culture and values. Buzan et al. (1998) point out the three most common issues connected to societal (in)security: cultural and linguistic influence from neighboring countries, migration, and integrational processes (such as those of the EU). Another relevant sector for this present study is the political sector. *“The political sector is about relationships of authority, governing status and recognition”* (Buzan – Little 2000: 73) – here, a key organizing concept around which insecurity is created and articulated is sovereignty.

The current state of affairs in Europe, as will be shown throughout the paper, places countries like the Czech Republic and Slovakia in a double process of insecurity: one where too much integration is seen as a threat against their ability to decide on matters that have historically been limited to the nation states (who is allowed to enter and stay in a particular territory), and one where the Muslim “migrant other” is framed as a threat against “us”, “Europeans”. In this double process of insecurity, securitization may serve as an instrument for identity creation. Jef Huysmans (2006) argues that processes of securitization help to create a sense of community where this is absent – as in the case of the EU. Huysmans (2006: 52) argues that *“creating a political domain of insecurity in which fear of Islam becomes a political currency can consolidate identity without requiring revisiting explicitly the sources that unite a people.”* Buzan et al. (1998) go further in their analysis and point to three *facilitating conditions* for securitization. These conditions enable one to explain why some issues are more easily securitized than other issues, but are not part of the speech act *per se* (Buzan et al. 1998: 32). The first condition is the adoption of a language of security; the second is the position of authority of those speaking that increases the chances of the discourse becoming legitimized; and the third

is the “*historical resonance of particular ‘threats’*” (McDonald 2008: 567). It is through intersubjective processes that only certain threats resonate.

Treating security as a self-referential practice was not accepted by other scholars without some revisions. Among the main voices in this regard is Thierry Balzacq (2005: 172), who claims that “*securitization can be better understood as a pragmatic practice*” or as “*discursive techniques*” that enable the securitizing agents to make up the audiences’ minds in relation to what is presented to them. Securitization is to be understood as “*a set of interrelated practices, and the processes of their production, diffusion, and reception/translation that bring threats into being*” (Balzacq 2011: 48). For Balzacq, his approach increases the explanatory power of the securitization theory by including a social context that is “*independent from the use of language*” (2005: 173).

The social context independent from the use of language, is a crucial aspect of securitization that was not properly developed by the Copenhagen School. At the same time, I also agree with Hansen (2011: 360), who points out that “*the self-referentiality of security does not imply that it is disconnected from intersubjective processes.*” However, we must acknowledge Balzacq’s contribution to strengthening securitization theory by focusing on an issue that was not thoroughly addressed by the Copenhagen School. Hence, throughout the article security is to be understood as both “*a self-referential activity [and] an intersubjective process*” (Balzacq 2005: 179; Balzacq 2011). For me, as for Balzacq, every act of securitization is immersed in a historical process that occurs before the speech act and this is reflected in the empirical analysis presented later in the article. Securitization also benefits from the context – such as the event of a ‘migration crisis’ – and the analysis also takes this into consideration. In this way, the context and how each country positions itself vis-à-vis the European Union provide a different framework for the articulation of foreign policy, and enable us to identify particular differences in the securitizing discourse of each country.

Presenting an issue as an existential threat is the central aspect of securitization. However, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia the securitizing actors direct their discursive practices to introducing a new issue, migration as a threat, that, prior to that, had been almost absent from public debates on security in these countries, or, at least, it had not been systematically framed as a severe security issue by the political establishment. What I aim to make sense of throughout the paper is that instead of securitizing migrants coming from other EU member states, Ukrainians, or Russians, who form the vast majority of migrants in the two countries, the political elites’ discourses address a kind of migrant that is nearly absent from the two societies: the Muslim migrant from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Securitization of migration in the European Union has been studied by several scholars such as Huysmans (2000; 2006), who addressed how migration policy developed in the EU and how it became a security issue, or Didier Bigo (2002: 71), who discusses the interconnection of the terms migrants and security, which must be understood not as a phenomenon, but as concepts that are constructed “*to mobilize political responses*”. Léonard (2010: 232) did not study the EU as a monolith, but FRONTEX, in particular, and its contribution “*to the securitization of asylum and migration in the EU*” and, based on that, further developed securitization theory by pointing out two core criteria to identify securitizing practices: activities that are implemented to address issues that are perceived as threats, and the extraordinary character of such activities.

More recently, studies have focused on the responses to the 2015 migration crisis. Ceccorulli (2019) looked at how the Schengen regime was securitized since 2015, producing an internal crisis in the EU. She shows how securitization in the case of the

Schengen regime did not call for the adoption of extraordinary measures, as is usually the case in securitization moves, but rather called for a return to normalization, where European internal security measures would be preserved. Léonard and Kaunert's (2019) comprehensive study looks at securitization of asylum-seekers and refugees on the Union level in a very detailed manner – by differentiating between asylum and migration policies and also by differentiating between “*EU asylum policy [...] and EU's policies towards asylum-seekers*” (Léonard – Kaunert 2019: 8). The latter involve a broad range of policy areas that go beyond asylum but affect the lives of asylum-seekers.

Roger Brubaker (2017) attempted to understand and highlight some of the similarities and differences between populist movements in Northern and Western Europe, and those in Central and Eastern Europe. He claims that Northern and Western European populist movements are distinct from the Central and Eastern European movements in some particular ways. In Northern and Western Europe, in response to Islam, populism has a strong focus on Christianity not as a religious practice *per se*, but as a form of “*cultural and civilizational identity*” (2007: 1198). There has also been a focus on secularism, and on the populists' commitment to freedom of speech, LGBT rights, gender, and philosemitism in these parts of Europe. This makes their type of national-populism less nationalistic and more civilizationist. Brubaker briefly looks at the case of Hungary and Poland and claims that the mainstream political discourse in Central and Eastern Europe is still grounded in a nationalist, rather than civilizational, rhetoric. He also claims that the liberalism so much promoted in Northern and Western Europe has been challenged in Central and Eastern Europe – a Central and Eastern Europe that Brubaker seems to associate too much with the image of Viktor Orbán. He goes further and points out another difference between West and East: anti-Muslim sentiment in Northern and Western Europe has developed over a long period of time and reached its apex after 9/11 while in Central and Eastern Europe it arose abruptly and has been more “*opportunistically exploited*” (2017: 1209) since the refugee crisis. Slačálek and Svobodová (2018) argue, on the other hand, that the Czech populist movement shares many of the features of the Northern and Eastern European populist movements. It expresses forms of secularized Christianity and “*defense of liberal and secular values*” (Slačálek – Svobodová 2018: 3).

Kristýna Tamchynová (2017) looks at the interconnection between processes of securitization and Europeanization in the Czech Republic in a period after the refugee crisis and claims that in the Czech case, securitization of migration seems to serve as a tool for strengthening the “*notion of Europeaness*” (2017: 108), even though it is in a country known for its Euroskeptic stances. She also claims that in the Czech case, the EU is criticized for some of its actions, but the sense of belonging to a higher European civilization (that is nowadays epitomized by the EU) is still present in the mainstream discourse.

Moreover, Aliaksei Kazharski (2019), in a recent study, showed that the Czech Republic and Slovakia, although sharing a common history and statehood, and having similar languages, position themselves differently in their relations to the core of the EU. Both are small states but build their geopolitical imaginaries of core-periphery relations differently. Kazharski (2019) argues that in the Czech Republic, the securitization of peripherality that Eurooptimists attempt to perform, directly competes with the Euro-skeptic securitizations of the EU's breach of national sovereignty, epitomized by the German domination. The Czech discourse, he argues, shows a tendency towards an intended form of self-marginalization when the discourse is framed in a way that shows the country's attempt to stay away from the “*EU 'core' through various opt-outs*” (2019: 11) without, however, leaving the EU as such. He goes further and shows that the Slovak mainstream dominant discourse is marked by a fear of marginalization that plays a key role in supporting what he calls a “*Euroenthusias*” attitude towards the EU. In this way,

EU peripherality is securitized more vigorously in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic. For Kazharski (2019: 11), the Slovak soft Euroscepticism focuses more on opposing certain policies rather than on creating “*grand geopolitical narratives [like those] one discovers in the Czech Klausite discourse*”.

Throughout the paper, I draw on both Tamchynová (2017) and Kazharski (2019) by showing that the two countries’ articulations between not conforming to some EU policies, and at the same time affirming their *belongingness* to Europe, epitomized by the EU, facilitate both countries’ accommodation in the core-periphery spectrum. The article moves beyond these authors by indicating more specifically how migration is securitized, and by providing a more in-depth view of the differences and similarities of how the securitizing discourse is produced in the two countries – in regard to the EU and in the national contexts. Securitization, rather than being the focus of the analysis, reveals the kind of discourse being produced in the process of the Czech and Slovak affirmation of belongingness to Europe and accommodation in the core-periphery spectrum. I will show that the discourse produced following the migration crisis indicates that even if the Czech political class has been more prone to being selective regarding European integration, and to conducting a deliberate form of self-marginalization (Kazharski 2019) than its Slovak counterpart, both countries have a mainstream consensus on EU membership. What differs is the sector in which securitization occurs in each country. The Czech discourse securitizes more often in the political sector, posing the EU policies following the migration crisis as a threat to Czech sovereignty and European security. The discourse produced in Slovakia more intensely concerns the societal domain, with identitarian references to migrants as threats to “us”.

The findings are relevant for the broader academic discussion (or rather contestation) of the Central European countries as a homogenous group within the European political sphere, at least in regard to migration policy. This kind of discourse that frames the Visegrad countries as a monolithic and consistent group when it comes to migration policies is produced mainly by key actors in the four countries in an attempt to create an imagined community in the region, for instance by releasing joint declarations on the issue (The Czech Government 2015b). On the EU level, this was broadly implied since the four countries formed the loudest voice and rejected the EU-proposed quota system back in 2015. Several scholars have also worked with the Visegrad countries as a group in their analysis (Stepper 2016), or as a “subregion” (Kazharski 2017) when it comes to migration policies – suggesting some congruence between these countries, while a few scholars have pointed to the existence of differences between the countries (Nagy 2017; Nič 2016), but without going deeper into the discursive particularities of each.

ANALYZING THE CZECH AND SLOVAK SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION

I use *securitization theory* in order to explain how the issue of migrants coming from MENA countries, mainly Muslims, is being constructed and framed in the Czech and Slovak contexts. I do so by identifying the context in which securitization occurs and by providing an “*understanding of who securitizes, on what issues (threats), for whom (referent objects), why, with what results, and under what conditions*” (Buzan et al. 1998: 32). I look at the languages of security used by the main securitizing actors by doing a qualitative analysis of the discourse of the Slovak and Czech Prime Ministers between 2015 (the beginning of the European migration crisis) and December 2018. The aim is not to systematically compare the two countries, but to analyze and contrast the discursive articulations regarding migration in two countries with a shared history and similar languages that can be understood by the publics in both countries. Securitization and its correspondent sectors are operationalized through a search for speech acts

referencing the particular security sectors outlined by the Copenhagen School. References to migrants through the use of words such as *infiltration*, *problems/issues*, *terrorism*, and *risks* denote threats, and justify the adoption of extraordinary measures situated beyond the bounds of ordinary politics. References to *Muslims* and *radical Islam* denote the identitarian boundaries between “us”, Christian Europeans, and “them” – the others. Threat to sovereignty can be operationalized in references to *mandatory* policies imposed upon member states, and to Brussels’ strong interference in domestic affairs. An inductive data-driven approach was used in the construction of the coding scheme that led to the identification of several codes: anti-Muslim sentiment; externalization of migration policies; the EU quota scheme as a threat to sovereignty; the EU quota scheme as a channel for “invasion”; civilizational Europe (us vs. them); Eastern neighborhood migrants as “lesser” others; and pro-EU discourse.

For this study, I gathered the original samples through a search engine by using the following combinations of keywords:

- a) ‘migration Bohuslav Sobotka,’ the Czech Prime Minister in 2015 (until January 2017);
- b) ‘migration Andrej Babiš,’ the current Czech Prime Minister who replaced Sobotka but who was also part of his government as a minister of finance;
- c) ‘migration Robert Fico,’ the Slovak Prime Minister in 2015 (until March 2018);
- d) ‘migration Peter Pellegrini,’ who replaced Fico as Prime Minister in March 2018.

The search was also repeated in the Czech and Slovak languages (here the keywords were ‘Migrácia/Migrace’ plus the name and surname of the given Prime Minister). The most common sources of speech transcripts were the official webpages of the respective governments. All speeches regarding migration from the particular analyzed period that were found on the official websites of the two governments were carefully processed and analyzed. Nevertheless, the sources were *not* limited to these websites and, as mentioned, the combinations of keywords were entered into a search engine in order to find further speech acts that matched the combinations of words. All the retrieved text sources were processed in full scope during the analysis – about 200 sources were analyzed.

I considered the fact that foreign policy is not only informed by Prime Ministers, and in matters related to migration the discursive acts coming from Ministers of Interior, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Presidents and other actors are also relevant. However, following Buzan et al.’s (1998: 32) approach that points out that “*in concrete analysis [...] it is important to be specific about who is more or less privileged in articulating security*” I decided to narrow down the object of analysis to the Prime Ministers. This is due to the fact that I am interested in analyzing the discourse produced at and towards the national level as well as at the European Union level, where migration policy is decided on in the European Council with the participation of the Prime Ministers – the more privileged actors articulating security at the EU level. Also, the discourse of the most privileged actors in liberal democracies (in this study the Prime Ministers) is usually not totally disconnected from the discourses circulating among the larger public. Such disconnection is unlikely because it involves political risks.

This methodological choice, however, limits my ability to make more general claims about securitization, for example by claiming that Eastern migration is not being securitized in the Czech Republic in general, or that anti-Russian sentiments are not present in the country. Nevertheless, I can still make claims in regard to the particular discourse produced by those more privileged in articulating security – in this case, the countries’ Prime Ministers. Still, the article contributes to the deconstruction of the discourse that frames the Central European countries as a homogenous group within the EU when it comes to issues revolving around migration.

THE CZECH AND SLOVAK SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION

By opposing the quota system proposed by the Union in 2015, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (together with the other Visegrad countries) distanced themselves from the political mainstream of Western Europe. By doing so, they reproduced the discourse of the rising right-wing parties that are present in Western Europe but whose anti-migrant claims have been, at best, only partially legitimized by the broader public. What is paradoxical is that the Czech and Slovak political elites have been reproducing a Western-like (Ciftci 2012) anti-Muslim discourse in the absence of Muslim immigrant communities on their own territories that would be comparable to those in Western Europe. This section will analyze the securitization processes in the Czech Republic and Slovakia by first focusing on the facilitating conditions for securitization of migration in the language and actors of securitization, and then on the societal and political resonance of migration as a threat (Buzan et al. 1998: 32). The following section will discuss the similarities and differences in the Czech and Slovak relationships with the core of the EU as another kind of condition that arguably shaped the Czech and Slovak securitizations of migration. Finally, this section will also discuss the hierarchies of Otherness in the Czech and Slovak discourses on migration.

The Language and Actors of Securitization

When we consider the question of *what* is being securitized in the discourse, throughout the analysis we see that different referent objects of security are present in the Czech and Slovak Prime Ministers' discourses and are evoked differently on different occasions: sovereignty, identity, and European values are among the issues often evoked and framed as being threatened. In relation to European values, it is epitomized by the idea of Christianity (for instance, by only accepting Christian migrants as these can integrate into our societies). Yet, it is important to mention that in the two cases (although more among the Czechs than the Slovaks), the concept is evoked in the sense of *secularized Christianity* that Brubaker (2017) points out in relation to national populist movements of Northern and Western Europe. Christianity here "*is embraced not as a religion but as a civilizational identity understood in an antithetical opposition to Islam*" (Brubaker 2017: 1194).

Turning back to the language of securitization (Buzan et al. 1998: 32), in the following analysis we will see that migration has been linked with security by the use of expressions such as *infiltration* and *wave* to describe the influx of asylum-seekers arriving in Europe. Kristýna Tamchynová (2017: 115) has found similar results in her analysis of the Czech media coverage of the migration crisis and points out that references to a wave or a flood, and the focus on statistics suggest "*an apocalyptic vision of Europe being submerged and destroyed*".

Regarding the position of authority of those speaking, which is seen as a factor increasing the chances of the discourse becoming legitimized, we can note that the Czech and Slovak Prime Ministers are the actors who articulate the discourse on the two levels: domestic and European. They are the ones producing the securitizing moves that, at times, turn into a securitization that has an impact on the broader European context. This is not to say that Miloš Zeman and Tomio Okamura in the Czech Republic, or Štefan Harabin and Marian Kotleba in Slovakia play no role in securitizing migration. They do impact on the process of securitization of migration – however, when it comes to foreign policy one can argue that the position of authority of the Prime Ministers increases the chances of a successful securitization of migration. In the Czech Republic's foreign policy, Babiš uses his position of authority to balance between his political supporter Zeman's strong anti-Muslim discourse and a discourse that accommodates the Czech Republic as part of the European Union project.¹ Slovakia, on the other hand, has always

adopted more pro-EU stances than the Czech Republic and regardless of its anti-migrant discourse, it has continued to reaffirm its position as part of the EU core, as we will observe later in the analysis. Moreover, in Slovakia, the former president Andrej Kiska held strong pro-migrant stances but this has had little impact on *desecuritization* of the issue because, as one can observe in the Eurobarometer surveys from 2015 until now, concerns about the migrant Other have been increasingly present in the public.

The Societal and Political Sectors of Securitization

If we look at data from the Eurobarometer survey, we see that in regard to the question “*What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?*” there is a major increase in the number of citizens who perceive *immigration* as one of the main issues facing the Union nowadays, from 11% and 26% in 2014 to 48% and 58% in 2018 – in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, respectively (European Commission 2014, 2018). When the question asked was “*What do you think are the two most important issues facing (our country) at the moment?*”, until the year 2014, immigration was not mentioned as being a major issue for either Slovakia or the Czech Republic. In the autumn of 2015, however, immigration became the most frequently mentioned issue in the Czech Republic and the third most mentioned issue for Slovaks. These numbers have decreased since then but were still higher in 2018 than they were in 2014 (European Commission 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). The Eurobarometer numbers tell us that in the period following the migration crisis immigration has become a growing area of concern for the citizens (audience) in both countries, particularly if more recent data is compared to data from before the crisis. Mapping and analyzing all the variables affecting the way the public perceives immigration falls outside of the scope of this paper. However, we can in fact hypothesize that a highly securitized discourse emanating from the main political elites in these countries affected the way the public perceives immigration, but also that the presentation of migration as a threat indeed resonated quite strongly in the Czech and Slovak public.

Political parties that have strong anti-immigrant (anti-Muslim) voices formed major parts of the governments in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia in recent years. Nevertheless, the anti-migrant discourse was stronger in Slovakia during Robert Fico’s government (though it was more intense between 2015 and June 2016, before the country assumed the presidency of the European Council) than in the Czech Republic under Bohuslav Sobotka’s government at the beginning of the crisis. In Slovakia, especially during Fico’s government, anti-Muslim and fear-based stances dominated the official discourse substantially more often than in the Czech Republic. Slačálek and Svobodová (2018: 1) have pointed out that the Islamophobic movement in the Czech Republic “*did not manage to enter party politics,*” even though Tomio Okamura and his Freedom and Direct Democracy party profited from the Islamophobic movement. In addition, the Islamophobic protests that happened in the country in the wake of the migration and refugee crisis did not find large support – reaching a maximum of 10 000 people (Slačálek – Svobodová 2018), despite the negative attitude of Czechs towards immigration as shown in the Eurobarometer surveys.

In the Czech Republic, it was initially said that the country would be willing to help by voluntarily accepting a few hundred asylum-seekers coming from Africa and neighboring countries (Pravda 2015). Sobotka stated, in the same year, that “*in the past, the Czech Republic has always acted in solidarity with refugees and contributed to resolving refugee crises and our Government is continuing along this path during the current immigration crisis. We have decided to assist 152 Christian refugees from Erbil in Iraq, who have approached our country with a request for help*” (The Czech Government 2015a). However, by looking at the speech acts, we can reasonably argue that soon policy mimicry

was put in place, and Sobotka started aligning himself with and reproducing the anti-migrant, anti-Muslim discourse of other V4 leaders – including Robert Fico. Sobotka, again less often than Fico, stated that *“honestly speaking, we [the Czech Republic] do not even wish that a strong Muslim community be formed here, in the light of the problems we see [elsewhere]”* (Pravda 2016) and that *“when we look at the problems in other European countries, we in Czechia do not want more Muslims”* (Visegrad Post 2017). Sobotka’s rhetoric was based on a specific selection of migrants, in which mostly Christians were selected, as evidenced by the quote above. It is important to understand that especially in the Czech case, where most Czechs do not believe in God (Pew Research Center 2017), Christianity is not stressed in terms of its religious content, but in terms of being a sign of a civilizational identity (Brubaker 2017) which the Czechs are part of.

In Slovakia, Robert Fico argued that the terrorist attacks that happened in Paris were a result of the *“infiltration of the Islamic State in the migratory wave”* (Petrovič 2015). The word infiltration, *per se*, is a term used in the security realm to indicate the act of penetrating an enemy territory – having, therefore, a bad connotation. Fico intensified his securitizing discourse based on fear and on framing migrants as a threat, especially after the sexual attacks in Cologne, Germany. Right after the attacks, he claimed, *“they [asylum-seekers] cannot be integrated naturally; they would have to be kept in one place, which would lead to security risks. The situation is extremely serious”* (The Slovak Government 2016).

Portraying an issue as an existential threat is a core step towards its securitization, as identified by Buzan et al. (1998). By framing an issue as an imminent threat, political elites can justify the adoption of extraordinary measures that would not otherwise be justifiable, such as the rejection of the quota scheme and the closing of borders regardless of the Schengen agreement. Fico also wrote a comment for *Hospodárske noviny* in which he stated, *“we know that 80 percent of the migrants are men, the overwhelming majority of them aged 25–35, not women with children fleeing war. Today, it is clear to everyone that if we do not stop this wave, Europe has no chance of coping with the crisis. If the president, opposition and media are treating this threat and these security risks lightly, it is their decision. We talk about these things openly and truthfully, and especially, we act”* (Fico 2016). He continued, on another occasion, by further associating asylum-seekers with terrorists by stating, *“there is a link between migration and terrorism, and terrorists can use the migration to transfer weapons and explosives, so the probability of attacks is very high”* (Novinky.cz 2016). He has also claimed that *“Islam has no place in Slovakia. It is the duty of politicians to talk about these things very clearly and openly. I do not wish there were tens of thousands of Muslims [in Slovakia]”* (Matharu 2017).

My claim that the Czech discourse was based less on the spread of fear of one particular type of migrant than that in Slovakia is not only based on the quantitative analysis of the data gathered. At the same moment when Robert Fico was associating migrants with terrorists, Sobotka was claiming that *“[t]he refugee wave is the result of the outbreak of radical Islam in large areas of Syria and Iraq. It is not possible to put two things together and to affirm that refugees are terrorists”* (Pravda 2016).

When we look at Robert Fico’s discourse, we see that from 2015 until the time he left office, in March 2018, there is a continuation of his rhetoric that further legitimizes securitization of migration. There were no attempts to fully *de-securitize* migration under Fico, even though he moved a bit towards a more pragmatic approach during the Slovak presidency of the Council from July 2016. It is here, for example, that the connection between securitization as a self-referential and securitization as an intersubjective (context-based) practice, can be made. At the national level, Fico’s discourse was, most of the time, based on fear and on portraying the types of migrants arriving in Europe as incompatible with European societies. Pellegrini adopted a different stance. In 2018, he

stated that “*the government continues to refuse the quotas and mandatory redistribution of migrants [...] [but it also refuses] the abusive and unreasonable spread of fear among citizens in regard to migration by some opposition parties as part of the ongoing campaign for the municipal elections*” (Pravda 2018a).

Therefore, in Slovakia, especially during Robert Fico’s government, anti-Muslim and fear-based stances dominated the official discourse substantially more often than in the Czech Republic. With the migration crisis, the rejection of the (historically) Hungarian “Other” in Slovakia seems to have lost importance in the mainstream discourse, giving way to quite the opposite: Slovakia and Hungary strengthening their ties through the structures of the Visegrad group.

In the Czech Republic, this identity-based discourse was also produced, but it was only secondary in Babiš’s rhetoric, while in Slovakia it dominated the discourse on migration. Babiš, on the other hand, has adopted a stricter stance that was not so often specifically on the grounds of ethnicity or religion, but that rather stressed the Czech Republic will not comply with *any* kind of mandatory quota scheme (Voice of Europe 2018). Robert Fico, in contrast, became known for his hard stances towards migrants and was often put in the same category as Viktor Orbán in connection with his harsh discourse. The same did not happen to Sobotka or to Babiš, who, at least in the speech acts analyzed within the scope of this paper, focused less on fear-spreading and more on a pragmatic stance against the EU mandatory quotas and in favor of border security and externalization of migration policies.²

During the period from 2015 to 2018, *opposing the quota scheme*, and focusing on *border control* and *externalization* dominated the discourse in the Czech Republic and this tendency was also very present in Slovakia, especially since the Slovak presidency. First, if the discourse is securitized on an identitarian basis, then we can justify the support for externalization measures regarding EU migration policies. In various circumstances Robert Fico has argued “*that the fight against illegal migration is the most effective protection of the Schengen external borders, and a clear open cooperation with the countries from which the migrants come and with the countries that can help us in the regions [is preferred]*” (The Slovak Government 2017c). Similarly, in Brussels Pellegrini has stated that Slovakia supports the fight against traffickers, addressing the root causes of migration and protecting the external borders (Pravda 2018b).

The rejection of the mandatory quotas, the increase in border security and externalization of migration policies were the most discussed issues regarding migration in the Czech Republic for the period analyzed. There is a continuation between Sobotka’s rhetoric and the one adopted by Babiš, who has claimed that “[i]t is absolutely unacceptable that someone else wants to decide on who will work and live here” (The Slovak Spectator 2018), that “[w]e are resolutely against anybody dictating to us who should live and work in our country” (Voices of Europe 2018) and that “[t]he real solution lies outside of Europe. That is where Europe must be stronger, more active in talking with the representatives of these states, and in the fight against smugglers and organized crime” (The Czech Government 2018).

The opposition to the quota scheme seems to be led by different motivations in each country. In Slovakia, the discourse is framed around the fear of an Islamization of the country. In the Czech Republic, the key motivation for opposing the quota scheme seems to have less to do with the asylum-seekers and more to do with the Czech tradition of only a partial acceptance, in a kind of stubbornness, of whatever seems like an imposition “*from Brussels*”. In other words, or speaking with the language created by the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al. 1998), in Slovakia securitization predominantly (but not exclusively) happened in the societal sector, where the referent object was identity. In the Czech Republic, the quota scheme was framed as the predominant (but, again, not exclusive)

threat to the Czech Republic and its sovereignty – therefore, as fitting in the political sector, where security is organized around the concept of sovereignty.

The Accommodation in the Core-Periphery Spectrum

Following the migration crisis, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but also Poland and Hungary, “*have adhered to a more culturalist and particularist interpretation of European nations, which increased these countries’ inclination towards national sovereignty and their partial rejection of the liberal universalism advocated by the Western countries in the core of the EU*” (Kazhraski 2017: 2). This opposition from what comes “from Brussels,” as illustrated above, symbolized a break with the “*return to Europe*” discourse – an instance of reaffirmation of being the “*kidnapped west,*” in Kundera’s (1984) words, that has been in place since the fall of the Soviet regime.

In-group coherence and the processes of othering are particularly relevant in situations in which “*overwhelming events [...] sufficiently disturb held ideas, [and as a result] the stories and the views of self and other may collapse, not able to maintain their hegemony*” (Reinke de Buitrago 2012: xviii). In such circumstances, new ideas are created, and the process of othering is reinitiated. The migration and refugee crisis seemed to be one of these moments in which a new other, “*the migrants,*” was created.

One may argue that the Czech Republic and Slovakia form a bridge between the EU and the other two more problematic Central European countries, Poland and Hungary, as a consequence of the illiberal turn the latter two are facing. This has a particular impact on foreign policy because both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have to adapt to two different positions – the position of the EU, and the position of Poland and Hungary as it is in the interest of Slovakia and the Czech Republic to keep the alliance of the Visegrad Group alive. The articulations related to conforming to both the EU and the position of the V4 are reflected in the foreign policy discourse of both countries.

Potočárová (2018) has shown that Slovak foreign policy is strongly based on a fear of marginalization, or what she calls “*the fear of being left behind*”. She argues that this was a result of changes in the international scenario – such as Brexit and the discussion on multi-speed Europe – and that it led Slovakia to constantly attempt to make sure it is part of the EU core. For the Czech Republic, there seems to be no such necessity to systematically reaffirm that it belongs to the EU, and issues of sovereignty appear more often in its discourse. This helps to explain the meaning and purpose of securitization in the two countries and why securitization is articulated in different sectors and in different ways in them.

Slovakia is found on a much deeper level of integration than the Czech Republic. This can be traced back to the period following the Mečiarism era and the necessity for Slovakia to go through higher degrees of policy emulation at a faster rate in order to join the Union together with the other candidates in 2004, as well as to the adoption of the Euro as the country’s currency. Additionally, assuming the rotating EU Council presidency in mid-2016, when important decisions on matters of migration were being taken, placed Slovakia in a very puzzling position in which it was strongly institutionally immersed in the EU structures. The securitization constructed around the political sector and organized around issues of sovereignty would not receive the support of the audience that is necessary for the sustainability of politics of emergency and exception. The context and the fact that the country is institutionally constrained by its links with the Union pose barriers for the production of a securitizing discourse in the political sector.

In fact, we can see that during the Slovak presidency of the Council Euroscepticism softened in Slovakia, and the country’s increasing support for the EU project became more evident. In October 2017, during a speech at the University in Nitra, Robert Fico stated: “*People can think anything of the EU, but there is no better project for us*” (The Slovak

Government 2017a). In a different speech, he also affirmed that “*a clear continuation of the pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation is in the strategic interest of the Slovak Republic*” (The Slovak Government 2017b). Right before leaving office, he stated that “*we are the European Union [...] there is nothing better than the EU*” (The Slovak Government 2018). This kind of rhetoric saw a continuation with Prime Minister Pellegrini, who, in his first EU summit as PM, stated that his first task was to reaffirm to other EU leaders that his “*government will maintain a strong pro-European course*” (Reuters 2018).

Similarly, in the Czech Republic, the Prime Ministers maintain a clear pro-EU discourse, but there seems to be less language of security, in Buzan et al. (1998) terms. The less eminent pro-EU discourse, although less central in the Czech Republic, still appears there on some occasions. In August 2018, Babiš affirmed that “[*w*]e are a solid part of the West, we are members of the EU, and we are allies within NATO, and no one can question it [...]. If someone talks about a Czexit, it threatens our future” (Tyden.cz 2018). Thus, even if the Czech political class has been more prone to being selective in regard to European integration, and to conducting a deliberate form of self-marginalization (Kazharski 2019), both countries have a mainstream consensus on EU membership, as we could see in the narratives of both Babiš and Pellegrini. While the securitization of migration has been successful in both countries since 2015, the same kind of discourse was not systematically sustained by the Prime Ministers vis-à-vis the EU.

Foreign policy is articulated in a two-level game in the absence of an audience in Brussels. The pro-EU rhetoric was most of the time presented when the political actors were speaking in the EU institutions. This is because, as we saw earlier, there is no successful securitization without an audience to legitimize the threat narrative of the securitizing actors. With the already mentioned position of the two countries as bridges, plus the fact that without an audience in Brussels the threat narrative could not achieve securitization, the two countries started adopting a more pragmatic narrative – especially in comparison to Hungary and Poland, which have not softened their tone since 2015. These articulations between not conforming to some EU policies and at the same time affirming their *belongingness* to the EU were common in the countries’ positioning vis-à-vis the EU.

Finally, the congruency between the anti-immigrant position of the political elites and the societies can be explained by cultural and historical aspects. This is another point where Balzacq’s (2005) argument about contextualizing securitization discourse is shown to be of extreme relevance to understanding the securitization of migration in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. A discourse that has been historically constructed and often reproduced is that these countries have been culturally and ethnically homogenous societies with little or no tradition of immigration, although they have been significant emigration countries for a very long time (Lahav – Guiraudon 2007). It is said that their lack of experience with (im)migration generates fear – a fear of the unknown or a fear of an *otherness* that would disrupt the homogeneity and jeopardize the national identities of Slovaks and Czechs, but also of Europeans in general.

However, the irony is that the implicit assumption of cultural homogeneity which is threatened by the cultural *other* is, in itself, a selective exercise in collective memory construction. The region that is usually referred to as Central Europe has historically been one of the most culturally diverse and multi-ethnic regions in Europe. The fate of the Eastern European periphery is closely tied to the multiethnic empires, in particular, the Habsburg Empire. The Eastern European pattern of a delayed modernization preserved cultural heterogeneity on a scale which was absent from the more rapidly modernizing Western European core. Therefore, in this case, in historical terms, it is not entirely accurate to speak of culturally homogenous societies that lack the experience of accommodating

cultural otherness. On the other hand, here cultural otherness itself is organized as a kind of a hierarchy, where the Ukrainian other, for instance, is a lesser other than people arriving from MENA countries. The process of identity formation in the region has been historically characterized by a sense of insecurity, which tends to be a characteristic of small nations. In Kundera's (2006) definition, a small nation is one whose existence can be jeopardized at any moment.

The Hierarchy of Otherness

We are, then, left to ask, *why* is securitization of migration selective in the two cases analyzed? As we observed, the Czech securitization, analyzed through the discourse of the Prime Ministers, occurs in the more traditional political sector of security, mainly framing migration as a threat and advocating the rejection of the mandatory quotas, more border control, and further externalization of migration policies. In the Slovak Prime Ministers' discourse, there is a congruency to the Czech stances towards border control and externalization of migration policies, but what dominated the discourse in the period analyzed was the rejection of the mandatory quotas though the anti-Muslim and fear-based discourse. Thus, the Slovak discourse stays more within the societal sector of security.

The empirical analysis further shows that an absolute majority of the discursive acts produced by the Czech and Slovak leaders thematize solely the asylum-seekers and refugees coming from the MENA countries. In fact, all the speeches and comments published in the section *speeches* of the official webpage of the Government of the Czech Republic from the year 2015 until December 2018, show *no* (zero) negative references to migration/migrants from Ukraine, Slovakia, Russia, Vietnam or Poland – the top five countries of origin of the majority of migrants in the country. Nearly the same thing occurs in Slovakia. Except for one reference by Pellegrini in 2018 (see below), both governments referred to Ukrainians only before the EU agreement on the visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens, in which they showed support for this initiative. In fact, in a joint declaration in June 2016, the V4 as such declared their full support for the visa-free regime with Ukraine (The Czech Government 2016), which was then approved by the EU one year later (Denník N 2017). The single further indirect reference to Ukrainian migrants in Slovakia was made in late 2018 by Prime Minister Pellegrini when he declared his intention to facilitate conditions for “*good quality migration*”. He claimed “*the lack of labor is now the most prominent problem and that is why now comes the time for us to talk about managed migration very openly. A migration that will have a certain level of quality and that will bring people to positions we need*” (Pellegrini in Gdovin 2018). From this, we can assume that “*bad quality migration*” in his discourse probably refers to Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees while “*good migration*” comes from the countries that have traditionally contributed to the workforce in Slovakia – including Ukraine. Formerly, the construction of otherness revolved around questions of ethnicity (the Roma Other, the Hungarian-Other, etc.), while now it is constructed in civilization (European) terms.

What happens is that when the Muslims are framed as a cultural other, the “*Ukrainian other*” and the “*Hungarian other*” are inevitably placed as lesser “*others*”. A hierarchy of “*otherness*” is created. Social constructivists (see Neumann 1999a, 1999b) have shown that this is a common feature of identity formation; to forge a common identity, we always need to find an outgroup. Otherness helps not only to differentiate “*us*” from “*them*”, but also to increase the in-group coherence. Processes of securitization also serve the purpose of forging in-group coherence. However, securitization of migration seems to promote in-group coherence not on the grounds of ethnically defined nations, but on the idea of civilizational Europe.

This hierarchy of otherness, nevertheless, does not just fall from the sky. Didier Bigo (2002) builds a strong argument about the fact that migrants and security are concepts that are constructed “to mobilize political responses” (2002: 71). He claims that in each country the political discourse works to build the image of the migrant as an inversion of “the image of the good citizen” (2002: 70). However, this would imply that the image of the migrant other differs from country to country and no Europeanization of migration would be possible at the EU level. How could we, Europeans, manage migration if each of us has a different understanding of who the migrant is? Bigo (2002: 71), then, claims that harmonization is reached “if each security service uses the word *immigrant* as a sign of danger”. The migrant is then framed not as the Czech other, or the Slovak other, but as the European other, in civilizational terms, that comes here to jeopardize the European values (whatever this might mean). There is a process of Europeanization of *migrants* (not of migration!). In this way, the Ukrainian, Russian, or Polish migrants are not the Czech and Slovak others because they share at least some European values. Interestingly, the Vietnamese migrants are not portrayed as the inverted image of the good European citizen either – at least not the way that Muslims are portrayed to be.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined how contemporary foreign policy discourse is constructed through securitizing discourses in the Czech Republic and Slovakia vis-à-vis the migration crisis. I focused on foreign policy discourse about migration in these two small states to understand how they have been positioning (and re-positioning) themselves in relation to migration and the core-periphery spectrum of the European Union. By analyzing the discourse of the Prime Ministers from 2015 to 2018, I found out that their foreign policy is being constructed around the issue of *Europeanness* (belongingness) and accommodation in the core-periphery spectrum, where securitization reveals the kind of discourse being produced in this process.

The analysis reveals that securitization in the two countries happens mainly in two different sectors, in Buzan et al.’s (1998) terms. In the Czech Republic, even though the migrant Other was also posed as a threat in identitarian terms, what dominated the discourse was the framing of the quota scheme as a threat to sovereignty, and the need to externalize migration policies. Therefore, the country more often expresses its discontent with decisions taken in the core of the EU. In Slovakia, especially under Robert Fico, securitization was predominantly done in the societal sector – where migration was securitized as a threat to identity. The Slovak criticisms towards the quota scheme (and towards the EU as such) were later softened, but still very present, especially after the Slovak presidency of the Council. Yet, the criticisms appeared more often as a consequence of articulations done at the Visegrad level. The findings contribute to the contestation of the mainstream discourse that implies that the process of securitization of migration in Central Europe is homogenous, especially after 2015 when the Central European countries, as a group, articulated their opposition to the mandatory quota and relocation scheme proposed by the Union.

One may argue that the Czech Republic and Slovakia form a bridge between the EU and the other two more problematic Central European countries, Poland and Hungary, as a consequence of the illiberal turn the latter are facing. This has a particular impact on foreign policy because both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have to adapt to two different positions – the position of the EU, and the position of Poland and Hungary as it is in the interest of Slovakia and the Czech Republic that the alliances within the Visegrad Group be kept. The articulations related to conforming to both the EU and the position of the V4 are reflected in the foreign policy discourses of both countries.

Between the two countries, there is also a uniform view in regard to who the migrant Other is – the migrant Other is the figure of Islam, one that is the antithesis of, and threatens the European civilization in this view. There is a process of Europeanization of *migrants*. In the hierarchy of Otherness, in today's scenario, the migrant Other is framed not as being the figure of the Czech Other, or the Slovak Other, but as being the European Other, in civilizational terms. In the kind of discourse that is produced, this migrant comes to Europe to jeopardize the European values and the European project – as the quota scheme has divided the Union. The Ukrainian, the Russian, and the Polish Other are not the Czech and Slovak identitarian antitheses in this way because they do share at least some European values. Nonetheless, the European project, in turn, is subject to criticism (especially by the Czech Republic) but it is still framed as part of who we are, and where we want to be. Therefore, the analysis indicates that these countries' articulations between not conforming to some EU policies, and at the same time affirming their *belongingness* to Europe facilitate both countries' accommodation in the core-periphery spectrum. In a broader sense, we can claim that securitization of migration seems to promote the in-group coherence needed to affirm the in-group's *belongingness* to Europe, epitomized by the EU. The two cases analyzed suggest that in-group coherence will be more commonly built not on grounds of ethnically defined nations, but on the broader idea of civilizational Europe.

¹ Slačálek and Svobodová (2018: 10), by conducting interviews with participants in the Islamophobic movement in the Czech Republic, show that “with a few important exceptions, such as the president, the political class is perceived in the Islamophobic discourse [...] as consisting of traitors to their own society, and as [an] essentially obedient long arm of ‘Brussels’”.

² David FitzGerald (2019) shows that liberal democracies tend to create what he calls an “architecture of repulse”, in which they use remote control (externalization of asylum policies) and hidden techniques to repel migrants while at the same time reinforcing the rhetoric of compliance with human rights and international law. In this way, they do not violate the principle of *non-refoulement* in its *stricto sensu*, but still create a complex apparatus to keep asylum seekers from reaching their territories.

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