The Good, the Bad and Something in Between: Blame Assignment in Czech and Slovak Political Discourse on Brexit

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Abstract

This article engages in the emerging scholarly debate about the instrumentalization of Brexit for internal political purposes within EU27 domestic contexts. More specifically, it investigates the extent to, and the ways in, which the Czech and Slovak governments conveyed, interpreted and evaluated blame in the context of Brexit. In doing so, due attention is paid both to the linguistic aspects, in the sense of topical structures, discursive strategies and linguistic devices, as well as to the empirical assessment of more general patterns of blame occurrence vis-á-vis Brexit and how these differ between the two cases. To this end, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis and the discourse-historical approach to discourse studies. The critical-analytic exploration concludes that some similarities notwithstanding, the Czech and Slovak governments exhibited significant differences in how they used Brexit for blame assignment, made sense of it and used it to (re)produce shared meaning(s).

Key words: *Brexit, blame, content analysis, Czech Republic, discourse-historical approach, Slovakia*

1. Introduction

Brexit is a crisis event in the history of European integration, with notable and unpredictable long-term impacts (Caporaso, 2018; Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019). With a crisis defined as 'an event for which people seek causes and make attributions' (Coombs & Holladay, 2004, p. 97), the interpretation and the instrumentalization of Brexit, however, differs across EU27 member states. In Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, just as in other EU member countries, Brexit has been framed by the political elites as a crisis and a loss-imposing event/process that poses risks of various intensity, in particular to the countries' economies and citizens. As such, Brexit, like any crisis, 'opens up semantic and political space for actors to redefine issues, propose new policies, foster public reflection, or simply to gain popularity and strike at opponents' (Boin et al., 2008, p. 285).[1] Indeed, previous research has shown that assigning blame is one of the 'essential building blocks of public narratives about crises' (Hansson, 2015, p. 299), with government actors making use of various rhetorical and communication devices to discursively portray a crisis in ways which deflect potential blame from themselves, in the hope of improving their chances of re-election (Coates

& Tognazzini, 2013; Hood, 2011; Tilly, 2008; Weaver, 1986). Put differently, attribution of responsibility, and hence blame, is a central issue in politics, as it concerns efforts to identify what factors give rise to what outcomes (Fiske & Taylor, 2007, p. 134; Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl, 2019; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014, p. 9). Blaming as a constitutive part of conflict talk is an especially useful rhetorical strategy here, as it allows political figures to deflect fault for policy failures and rally support for their own policy proposals (Hansson, 2015; Hood, 2011). This invites an intriguing question: Was blame attributed for Brexit to a country or institution outside of the UK? The central aim of this article is to look for answers in two CEE EU countries: the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The central research question that the article attempts to answer is: How, to whom, when and why was blame for Brexit attributed by the Czech and Slovak governments? More specifically, the study is guided by two sub-questions: (1) What are the main topics drawn upon when assigning blame? (2) What are the main discourse-analytical strategies used by the two governments to assign blame?

Selecting the Czech Republic and Slovakia for analysis was driven by a number of considerations. Both countries share important similarities in terms of their political and social systems: both are small central European, former communist states, part of the Visegrad group and members of the 2004 EU enlargement wave, acting as followers rather than leaders within the EU. Moreover, neither country's bilateral relationship with the UK stands out in any way, and both of them face a similar level of exposure to the economic consequences of Brexit (Chen et al., 2017; Department of Finance, 2018). At the same time, however, there is an important difference between the two countries. First of all, they differ substantially in terms of their policies towards the EU. The Czech Republic has a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the EU, frequently but cautiously criticising the EU, being fully aware of how much it depends on the Union (Hloušek & Kaniok, 2021). By contrast, Slovakia's approach towards the EU has 'been highly positive, and it has been enthusiastic about deepening its integration with the Community' (Szent-Iványi et al., 2018, p. 31). Unlike the Czech Republic, Slovakia has also been, since 2009, a member of the Eurozone. Another difference pertains to the fact that the Czech Republic is slightly more Eurosceptic than the Slovak population, with Czech trust in the EU being the fourth lowest in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2020). Last but not least, both countries also vary slightly when it comes to the strength of their relations with the UK, with the Czech Republic having closer ties with the UK than Slovakia. Essentially, all these reasons make the comparison of these countries an interesting and worthwhile undertaking.

Curiously enough, one would not perhaps expect these two countries to assign blame for Brexit to anyone other than the UK. There are three main, intimately related, reasons for this. First of all, Brexit constitutes somewhat of a distant crisis for these countries in the sense that it originates from outside of the country, is externally induced and while its effects are potentially large, they are neither overwhelming, nor immediately apparent (Brusenbauch Meislová & Szent-Iványi, 2021; cf. Boin et al., 2008). Secondly, despite being recognized by domestic politicians as an out-of-the-ordinary issue of both national and international significance, the extant research points to a relatively low level of politicization of Brexit in Czech and Slovak domestic

politics (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2019b; Kaniok & Brusenbauch Meislová, 2020, 2021). Thirdly, both countries have been rather low-key, low-profile actors in the Brexit context. Nevertheless, Brexit did provoke – perhaps somewhat surprisingly – domestic blame games in both countries, and herein lies our research puzzle.

By subjecting the Czech and Slovak cases to empirical scrutiny, the article contributes to four strands of scholarship. In a broad sense, it adds to the extant scholarship on the domestic exploitation of various EU-level crises (see, for instance, Krzyżanowski et al., 2018 on the migration crisis; Ntampoudi, 2014; Papadimitriou & Zartaloudis, 2014 on the Eurocrisis). Secondly, and more specifically, this enquiry adds to scholarly debates on blame-related behaviour in the context of Brexit (especially Hansson, 2019; on discourses of Brexit more generally see Koller et al., 2019). Yet, it differs from previous work, which has tended to focus on blame avoidance strategies, in a number of ways. Most importantly, the Czech and Slovak governments were not directly responsible for Brexit as they neither planned nor executed it. As a distant crisis not of their making, Brexit does not threaten these governments with acute blame risk and, unlike British policymakers, they were not motivated to engage in blame games in order to obfuscate responsibility and reduce the likelihood of suffering public blame (Hansson, 2019; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014, pp. 102-103). To the best of my knowledge, the insights from the blame-attribution literature have not yet been applied to the Brexit context outside of the UK, and thus this linguistically informed study makes a start in filling that gap. Thirdly, this study contributes to the body of academic literature on CEE behaviour within the multi-level governance system of the EU polity, which has long been rather ambiguous (Marek & Baun, 2010; Nič, 2016; Schmölz, 2019). As such, it helps transcend the sometimes rather broad-brush image of CEE countries' engagement in EU policy-making. The fourth and last contribution concerns the literature on CEE policy-making in response to Brexit. While Brexit in general has been a compelling focus for scholarly attention, there has been comparatively little detailed academic analysis of the Brexit policies of CEE states (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2019b; Kaniok & Brusenbauch Meislová, 2020; Kaniok & Csehi, 2021; Szent-Iványi et al., 2018).

As such, this article responds to Hansson (2019, p. 203; see also Hansson, 2015), who urges critical analysts of political (linguistic) behaviour to 'try to improve public understanding of the discursive strategies used by officeholders to deflect blame and evade accountability for loss-inducing policies'. The basic thrust of my argument in this enquiry is that it is just as necessary to get a better understanding of blame discourses and practices related to policy issues (events, processes) that do not necessarily impose much of an acute loss, as is the case of Brexit for the two countries under scrutiny here. Further still, a comprehensive, comparative approach is all the more needed at a time of fragile democratic legitimacy of the EU itself and increasing politicisation (Börzel & Risse, 2000; Statham & Trenz, 2015).

Importantly, I am not only interested in the linguistic aspects in the sense of topical structures, discursive strategies and linguistic devices that have been employed by those at the highest level of administration to assign blame for Brexit, but also in the empirical assessment of more general patterns of blame occurrence vis-á-vis Brexit in terms of the blamers, blame targets, context and specificity of blame attributions, and in how these differ between the two

cases. To this end, the article adopts a mixed-methods research approach: whilst working primarily within the tradition of the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to discourse studies, the study also draws on insights from qualitative content analysis.

Before proceeding, let me contextualize the study and provide, very briefly, some basic information about Czech and Slovak politics. During the period under scrutiny here, there were no dramatic changes in the composition of the national governments in either country. At the time of the British in/out referendum, the Czech government was led by PM Bohuslav Sobotka and consisted of the centre-left Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the centre-right populist ANO party and the Christian Democrats. In October 2017, Andrej Babiš, a billionaire media tycoon, and his ANO party won the general election and formed a minority coalition government with the ČSSD, which relies on the tacit support of the Communist Party (KSČM). That government was approved by the Czech parliament in June 2018. In Slovakia, parliamentary elections were held in March 2016, and again in late February 2020. The ruling left-wing populist Direction – Social Democracy (SMER–SD) party, headed by Robert Fico, remained the strongest party, but lost its majority after having fallen from 44.4% to 28.3% of the vote (Brunnbauer & Haslinger, 2017, p. 338). As a result, a four-party coalition government – led by Robert Fico – was formed, holding a combined 85 of the 150 seats and comprising SMER-SD, the Slovak National Party, Most-Híd and Network. It was a rather unlikely alliance, as it brought together centre-left and right-wing parties, nationalists and a Hungarian party (Gabrizova, 2016).

The remainder of the study unfolds in the following manner: the next section introduces the data along with the methodological approach. The subsequent part is then devoted to the empirical analysis, which entails two levels: a thematic analysis and an in-depth analysis of discourse-analytical strategies and related linguistic features. Lastly, a brief contextualization of the empirical findings is provided, before some concluding remarks are given.

2. Data and Methodology

In an attempt to detect and interpret key macro-conversational practices in the Czech and Slovak Brexit-related blame discourse, the article adopts the general orientation of the discourse-historical approach in critical discourse analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 2011), which is especially useful here, as it has been 'designed for dissecting and demystifying power relations in political life in terms of discursive strategies of self- and other-presentation' (Hansson, 2015, p. 298). For Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 258), discourse is understood as 'language in speech and writing that constitutes a form of social practice'.

My approach to data collection was as follows: I constructed a qualitative dataset of news releases (including speeches, interviews and other pronouncements) on Brexit by executive government actors in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the period between 24 June 2016 (the date on which the result of the British in/out referendum was announced) and 31 January 2020 (the date of the UK's withdrawal from the EU). The focus on government actors is justified by the central role they have played in Brexit, as it is, essentially, national governments that bear the primary responsibility for

national 'Brexit' policies (Jensen & Kelstrup, 2019). Working with the repositories of the official government websites and individual ministry websites of the two countries, I engaged in a full text search using several keywords, which included 'Brexit', 'United Kingdom', 'Britain/British', 'Ireland/Irish', 'referendum', 'withdrawal', 'exit', 'negotiations' and 'Czexit' to identify all Brexit-related news releases. Based on this, a dataset encompassing 162 and 175 news releases from Czechia and Slovakia, respectively, was developed. Afterwards, I went through all of them and manually extracted all blame-related utterances. Altogether, blame attributions were identified in 14 news releases for each country (28 in total). I analysed all the texts in their original versions, with my fluency in both Czech and Slovak allowing me to work on original data.

In order to provide a complex, aggregate and contextualized study of the extent to, and ways in, which the highest levels of the Czech and Slovak administrations conveyed, interpreted and evaluated blame in the context of Brexit, I adopted a mixed-methods research approach, combining qualitative content analysis and Krzyżanowksi's (2010) operationalization of the DHA. The mixed-method approach adopted here is well in line with a key feature of the DHA, which – unlike other schools within Critical Discourse Studies – accentuates the commitment to triangulate the data to try to minimise the risk of biased results (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 1996). This article therefore integrates a variety of data, methods and background information, whilst integrating knowledge from the disciplines of both linguistics and political science. No less importantly, Fairclough and Wodak's (1997) understanding of discourse that this enquiry relies upon emphasises context, i.e. the relationship between the discursive event and the wider contexts in which it occurs. Hence treating blame discourse on Brexit not as an isolated entity but as part of a broader picture, the article not only addresses the *how* question, but also endeavours to provide some (necessarily limited) answers to the *why* question. Of particular interest will be the reasons for differences between the two cases.

Based on Hood's (2011) typology, the focus here will be on direct presentational strategies, looking into how national governments attribute blame retrospectively, after an event has occurred. Unlike other authors (most prominently, Hobolt & Tilley 2014), only blame-assigning and not credit-claiming will be considered.

In the first step, this article employs content analysis, the main strength of which is that it 'provides a means of quantifying the contents of a text, and it does so by using a method that is clear and, in principle, repeatable by other researchers' (Denscombe, 2014, p. 285). I chose to conduct the coding and data annotation by hand, instead of using automated coding software, as it is 'still the "gold standard" in content analysis, and allows for a more nuanced analysis' (Krippendorff, 2004; similarly also Scharkow, 2013, p. 762).

Having created the dataset, the data analysis proceeded along the following steps: utterances were considered codable as blame assignments if they assigned explicit blame for Brexit. The number of single blame utterances amounted to 64 in the Czech sub-corpus and 19 in the Slovak sub-corpus. All 83 blame utterances were coded using a prescribed theme/subcategory coding scheme. The coding instrument consisted of the date, the name of the blaming actor, the political function of the blaming actor (Office of the Government/Prime Minister, line minister, state secretary, etc.), the

directness of the blame (a specific person/institution specifically named, or not named, as the blame target), the blame utterance and the code itself. In line with the deductive approach to content coding, each blame utterance about Brexit was coded into one of nine categories, as shown in Table 1. For blame targets, the typology of critical actors in the Brexit process was used, comprising the EU, the UK and other EU member states. For the Brexit context, three key distinctive stages in the Brexit and Article 50 negotiations were used: the referendum and/or its result, the post-referendum pre-negotiation phase and the withdrawal negotiations. Ultimately, the categories of blame attributions were operationalised as illustrated in Table 1. Notably, it was only in one occurrence in the Czech sub-corpus that EU member states were assigned blame for Brexit, namely the large ones for having failed in their migration policies.

Blame target / **Blame context**	**UK**	**EU**	**Others (individual EU member states)**
Blame for the referendum and its result	Blame assigned for initiating, planning the referendum and/or its result	Blame assigned for causing/contributing to the referendum and/or its result	Blame assigned for causing/contributing to the referendum and/or its result
Blame for the post-referendum pre-negotiation state of affairs	Blame assigned for causing/contributing to a negative post-referendum state	Blame assigned for causing/contributing to a negative post-referendum state	Blame assigned for causing/contributing to a negative post-referendum state
Blame for the execution of withdrawal negotiations	Blame assigned for poor execution of withdrawal negotiations	Blame assigned for poor execution of withdrawal negotiations	Blame assigned for poor execution of withdrawal negotiations

Table 1. Operationalisation of blame attributions for Brexit

Each separate blame utterance was registered as a single unit independent of the number of words (an utterance could be a sentence, part of a sentence or several successive sentences). The above-mentioned categories are mutually exclusive, which means that no utterance fell into two or more categories, and could therefore be assigned to only one of them.

In the second dimension, guided by Krzyżanowski (2010), the analysis operated along a two-step procedure, entailing (1) a thematic analysis and (2) an in-depth analysis of argumentation and related linguistic features. The thematic analysis, functioning as an initial examination of the data, focused on the embedded, easily identifiable dominant narratives that characterise the blame attributions made towards the two main blame targets, the EU and the UK, and dissected the core themes which formed their structure (Krzyżanowski, 2010, pp. 81-83). The topics were defined by means of indicative analysis, i.e. via 'decoding the meaning of text passages – usually taking place via several thorough readings – and then ordering them into lists of key themes and sub-themes' (Krzyżanowski, 2010, p. 81). The second level of the analysis then investigated the structure of the discourse underlying said contents and focused on the discursive strategies of blame attributions (Krzyżanowski, 2010, pp. 83-89), with particular interest in how they differ

from blame-avoidance strategies that blame-makers usually use to minimize the blameworthiness of their deeds (Hansson, 2015, 2018, 2019). According to Hansson (2015, pp. 299-300, 2019, p. 193) there are six discursive strategies, which are of relevance to this paper. First, the argumentation strategy entails using argumentation schemes to back the view that the negative event has been brought about by someone else. The framing/positioning strategy represents someone else as guilty, implying that they could have made different policy choices (Hansson, 2015, pp. 300-301, 2019, p. 193). What also belongs here is the exclusionary rhetoric of othering and positioning oneself as being part of the in-group together with the audience. The strategy of characterising social actors is usually applied in the form of nominalizing blame targets and ascribing negatively connoted expressions to them (Hansson, 2015, pp. 299-300, 2019, p. 193). The legitimation strategy encompasses 'explanations and justifications of possibly blameworthy actions by using references to authority, moral evaluations, rationalization and mythopoesis' (Hansson, 2019, p. 193; see also Hansson, 2015, pp. 303-304). Moreover, while the denial strategy involves reflection of agency and counter-accusation in response to accusations, the sixth and last strategy, manipulation, entails efforts to impair the understanding of blame-related information (Hansson, 2019, p. 193).

Below, I will refer to concrete textual examples derived from the governments' public statements to illustrate how they facilitate blame for Brexit.

3. Empirical Analysis: Patterns of Brexit-related Blame Attributions in Czechia and Slovakia

When it comes to the general intensity of blame-attributing news releases, the empirical analysis produced rather similar findings for both countries, with blame assigned in 8.6% and 8% of all news releases on Brexit in Czechia and Slovakia, respectively. The density of blame was much higher in the Czech case, however, with the average number of blame utterances per one news release standing at 4.6 in Czechia and 1.3 in Slovakia.

In the Czech case, blame attributions in the context of Brexit were clearly discernible in the government's discourse in the immediate wake of the referendum, and were quite prominent until early July 2016 but later subsided. The patterns of blame attributions followed an opposite trend in Slovakia, which started to engage in blame behaviour only after the UK's invocation of Article 50 of the Treaty on the European Union on 29 March 2017. The first instance of blame behaviour occurred on 11 April 2017.

Furthermore, as indicated in Table 2, the Czech government's blame attributions were much more heavily directed at the EU (65.6% of all blame utterances) than the UK (37.8%), while the exact opposite was the case in Slovakia (73.7% at the UK versus 26% at the EU). Additionally, while the Czech government generally assigned responsibility mostly to the referendum and its result (75% out of all blame utterances in the Czech sub-corpus), the Slovak government cast blame primarily in the context of the poor execution of the withdrawal negotiations (73.7% of all blame utterances in the Slovak sub-corpus). Moreover, as evident from Table 3, in Czechia, sectoral/line ministries were more active in making blame attributions (76.6%) than the

Office of the Government/Prime Minister (23.4%), while the respective results are more balanced in the case of Slovakia (47.4% of blame attributions made by the ministries and 52.6% by the Office of the Government).

	Number of blame utterances	UK			EU			Others			Total		
		21			**42**			**1**			**64**		
		32,8%			65,6%			1,6%			100,0%		
		Referendum and its result	Post-referendum pre-negotiation state of affairs	Execution of withdrawal negotiations	Referendum and its result	Post-referendum pre-negotiation state of affairs	Execution of withdrawal negotiations	Referendum and its result	Post-referendum pre-negotiation state of affairs	Execution of withdrawal negotiations	Referendum and its result	Post-referendum pre-negotiation state of affairs	Execution of withdrawal negotiations
CZE	**64**	**10**	**4**	**7**	**37**	**4**	**1**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**48**	**8**	**8**
		15,6%	6,3%	10,9%	57,8%	6,3%	1,6%	1,6%	0,0%	0,0%	75,0%	12,5%	12,5%
		14			**5**			**0**			**19**		
		73,7%			26,3%			0,0%			100,0%		
		Referendum and its result	Post-referendum pre-negotiation state of affairs	Execution of withdrawal negotiations	Referendum and its result	Post-referendum pre-negotiation state of affairs	Execution of withdrawal negotiations	Referendum and its result	Post-referendum pre-negotiation state of affairs	Execution of withdrawal negotiations	Referendum and its result	Post-referendum pre-negotiation state of affairs	Execution of withdrawal negotiations
SK	**19**	**0**	**0**	**14**	**5**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**5**	**0**	**14**
		0,0%	0,0%	73,7%	26,3%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	26,3%	0,0%	73,7%

Table 2. Distribution of blame utterances according to blame target and context

3.1 Thematic Analysis

To answer the first sub-question 'What are the main topics drawn upon when assigning blame?', the first level of the analysis looks at the topical structure of the blame attributions whilst making an analytical distinction between those targeted at the EU and the UK and, simultaneously, identifying those that are common to both governments as well as those that are unique to Czechia. (The Slovak government addressed a smaller number of topics, with none of them being exclusive.) Whilst reporting these narratives separately for reasons of analytical clarity, it is worth noting that, in reality, these macro-areas do not function completely independently, and instead are often closely interrelated.

3.1.1 EU as a blame target

As is apparent from Table 2, in the context of Brexit, the blame is primarily laid at the feet of the EU for contributing to the referendum and its result (88.1% of EU-directed blame attributions in the Czech sub-corpus and 100% in the Slovak sub-corpus). Yet, whilst the Czech government also blamed the EU in the context of the post-referendum, pre-negotiations state of affairs (9.5%) and the poor execution of Article 50 negotiations (2.4%), the Slovak government abstained from that completely.

In general, the analysis reveals three narratives (understood in this article as macro-topics, rather than stories) related to the discursive attributions of blame to the EU: (1) the narrative of general dysfunctionality; (2) the narrative of failure; and (3) the narrative of incompetence. While the first narrative is common to both sub-corpora, narratives 2 and 3 were identified only in the Czech sub-corpus. The analysis below explores each macro-topic, with textual examples of each.

Narrative of general dysfunctionality

The narrative of general dysfunctionality serves a number of closely related purposes. In both sub-corpora, the main topic includes the *gap* between EU citizens and EU governance, implying that the EU's leadership has come to epitomize a technocratic elite detached from the concerns of the ordinary public. In example (1), for instance, the speaker explicitly makes a direct connection between the perception of the EU as something 'alien', 'complicating life' and 'sometimes even hostile' on the one hand, and the lack of popularity of the President of the European Commission in the UK on the other.

(1) *Lidé vnímají Unii a její orgány jako cosi cizího, komplikujícího jim životy, někdy i nepřátelského. Není divu, že předseda EK nebyl před referendem na britských ostrovech vítán.*
[People perceive the Union and its institutions as something alien, something that complicates their lives, sometimes hostile. It is no wonder that the EC President was not welcomed on the British Isles before the referendum.]

Another prominent topic is that of *inefficiency* (in a rather general sense, as opposed to the narrative of failure), which conveys an image of the EU as an

inefficient actor that directly contributed to creating the dire Brexit situation. As partially demonstrated by excerpt (2), the EU is depicted as an actor that is neither operational, nor flexible, nor responsive enough; it is seen as too bureaucratic and indulges in 'endless theoretical debates on whether more or less Europe is appropriate' and is accused of playing 'a dangerous game with the public'.

> (2) *Evropská unie se musí změnit [...] Evropa musí být akceschopnější, pružnější, méně byrokratická a mnohem vnímavější k různorodosti, kterou přirozeně představuje 27 členských států.*
> [The European Union must change. [...] Europe needs to be more operational, more flexible, less bureaucratic and much more receptive to the diversity that 27 member states naturally represent.]

Additionally, the Czech government, unlike the Slovak one, also foregrounded the topic of the EU's alleged *unreformability*, as in example (3), evoking the lack of courage and political will on the part of the European Commission to suggest that the institution is virtually incapable of any reforms.

> (3) *Navíc se domnívám, že pro vážně míněnou reformu potřebujeme mít schopnou a dobře vedenou Evropskou komisi. Jen za takové podmínky bude možné jakékoliv smysluplné reformní kroky připravovat a realizovat. Na rovinu si myslím, že nynější Komise ve stávajícím obsazení to být nemůže. Od jejího předsedy Junckera nelze očekávat ani politickou odvahu, natož vůli k jakýmkoliv kredibilním posunům, které by Evropskou unii učinili přijatelnější a srozumitelnější pro občany.*
> [For seriously meant reform, we need a capable and well-run European Commission. Only under such a condition will it be possible to prepare and implement any meaningful reform steps. To put it bluntly, I think that the current Commission, in its current composition, cannot do that. Its president, Juncker, cannot be expected to have the political courage, let alone the will, to make any credible moves that would make the European Union more acceptable and comprehensible to its citizens.]

Narrative of failure

Intimately related to the narrative of general dysfunctionality is the narrative of failure. The narrative of failure functions in two major ways. First, the imaginary employed here evokes a picture of an incapable (unwilling, even) EU which failed to influence David Cameron's 2015-2016 renegotiations of EU membership. This theme conveys an image of strong controllability and intentionality on the part of the EU, which is depicted as an actor in (full) control of how the renegotiations with the UK were conducted. Brexit is thus cast as 'solely the consequence of the failure on the part of the European Union leaders'. As illustrated by example (4), the Czech government exploited this topic in a bid to send the message that the EU, with its inadequate interventions, failed to do enough to keep the UK in, almost putting the UK into a powerless position. The referendum result is depicted as only the consequence of the failure of the European Union leaders.

> (4) *EU nebojovala dostatečně za to, aby Velká Británie zůstala a obyvatelům ostrovů dávala najevo, ať si klidně jdou, když chtějí.*

[The EU has not fought hard enough for the United Kingdom to remain and has made it clear to the people on the islands that they can go, if they like.]

Second, the narrative of failure served to cast the EU, ex negativo, as a failed, unsuccessful actor who did not succeed in respect to the post-referendum state of affairs, especially in the sense of having responded in an offended way to the result, as in example (5), and also for not knowing how to proceed with the Article 50 procedure because of its flawed treaties, as typified by example (6). Likening the EU to a 'prissy young lady' serves to intentionally discredit it and convey the image of immature, moody, silly and entirely inappropriate behaviour.

(5) *Velmi silně jsem ale zaznamenal uraženou reakci Evropské komise s Junckerem v čele. Požadavek na okamžitý odchod Velké Británie z EU v prvních okamžicích po zveřejnění výsledků referenda mi připomínal spíše chování uražené slečny, než uvážlivé a diplomatické vyjádření politické figury, která je za negativní výsledek referenda minimálně spoluzodpovědná. Zcela jasně to vypovídá o nedostatku sebereflexe jeho i instituce, které předsedá.*
[I have noticed very strongly the offended reaction of the Juncker-led European Commission. The demand for an immediate withdrawal of the UK from the EU in the first moments after the referendum results reminded me of the behaviour of a prissy young lady, rather than of a thoughtful and diplomatic statement of a political figure who is, at the very least, co-responsible for the negative result of the referendum.]

(6) *...teďka je vidět i jak jsou uzavřený smlouvy. Nikdo neví jak se aktivuje článek 50.*
[...one can even see now how the treaties are concluded. No one knows how to activate Article 50.]

Narrative of incompetence

In contrast to the narrative of general dysfunctionality, the narrative of incompetence involves a higher degree of specificity and explicitness. Notably, it contains arguments about flawed policies, built around the topic of *mismanagement*. With emphasis put on the harmful nature of the EU's past and present policies, it is especially the EU's mismanagement of the migration crisis (which reached its height in 2015) that is portrayed as the major cause of Brexit. Example (7) illustrates this usage rather well, with the Czech government professing no doubt that it was the EU's migration policy that solely decided the in/out referendum.

(7) *Co hůře, téma migrace rozhodlo britské referendum. Nezvládnutá migrační politika ze strany Evropské komise a řady velkých unijních členů prohrála klíčovou volbu voličů za kanálem. A rozhodně to nemusí být prohra poslední.*
[What is worse, the issue of migration decided the British referendum. The failed migration policy on the part of the European Commission has lost the key vote of voters across the Channel. And it certainly doesn't have to be the last loss.]

At the same time, however, it is not only its migration policy that the inept EU was blamed for. Instead, Brexit was also used as a tool to blame the EU for

policy failings in other related and indeed unrelated areas, especially in the context of its management of the financial crisis and relations with Russia. As illustrated by example (8), the Czech PM Andrej Babiš even evoked, in the context of Brexit-related blame, his own 'unpleasant experience' with the Commission during the 2.5-year long fight for the 'reverse charge' (the accrual of the value-added tax).

(8) *A já mám s komisí velice nepříjemnou zkušenost, když jsem 2,5 roku bojoval za ten náš plán, za ten reverse charge, za to, že každý rok Evropské unii se nezaplatí 170 miliard euro na DPH.*
[And I had a very unpleasant experience with the Commission, when I fought for 2.5 years for our plan, for the reverse charge, for the fact that the European Union is not paid 170 billion euros in VAT every year.]

3.2.1 UK as a blame target

Moving onto the UK as the blame target, in the Slovak case, all blame for the negotiations was assigned to the UK and all blame assigned to the UK concerned the negotiations. By contrast, the blame attributions in the Czech case were more balanced (47.6% of blame utterances were for the referendum; 33% for poor execution of the withdrawal talks and 19% for the post-referendum state of affairs). The systematic analysis uncovered three semantic macro-topics related to the discursive construction of blame targeted at the UK: (1) the narrative of misjudgement; (2) the narrative of indecision and (3) the narrative of lost control. Whereas narratives (1) and (2) appeared in both sub-corpora, narrative (3) was identified only in the Czech one.

Narrative of misjudgement

The narrative of misjudgement, more salient in the Czech sub-corpus than the Slovak one, creates an impression of Brexit as the responsibility of an individual, especially David Cameron. Here, emphasis is put on the contentious and harmful nature of individual choices and lack of professionalism. As illustrated by example (9), it was primarily David Cameron who was systematically depicted as an untrustworthy political figure who misjudged the situation, intentionally chose to take a gamble and play 'a game that was too complicated'.

(9) *Bohužel Cameron se podílel na vytváření obrazu EU, s níž srdnatě bojoval, načež teď se snažil lidem říci, že je to jinak. A oni ho uviděli jako nevěrohodného pro takové poselství. Pravděpodobně si představoval, že to uhraje, že přijdou s přesvědčivými argumenty ekonomickými a dalšími, a že to Britové pochopí. Tyto předpoklady se nepotvrdily.*
[Unfortunately, Cameron was involved in creating the image of the EU, which he fought valiantly against, and then he was trying to tell people that things stood differently. And they saw him as untrustworthy to deliver such a message. He probably imagined that he would play it off, that they would come up with convincing economic arguments and other arguments too, and that the British would understand. These assumptions were not confirmed.]

Narrative of indecision

The second main topical focus was on indecision, which was particularly salient in the context of the Article 50 withdrawal negotiations and in the Slovak blame discourse, according to which the UK was conceptualized as responsible for delaying the withdrawal process. As excerpt (10) exemplifies, especially in the Slovak sub-corpus we find frustration stemming from Brexit stalling the EU-level agenda. The headings found most relevant for the analysis of the construction of the indecision narrative were *irresolution, delay* and *impatience.*

(10) *Přestává nás už bavit, že každý summit je věnovaný z větší části Brexitu a zapomínáme mluvit o dalších agendách, které máme na stole.*
[We are getting increasingly bored by the fact that each summit is mostly dedicated to Brexit and we forget to talk about other agendas that we have on the table.]

In this respect, in the Slovak sub-corpus there was also more emphasis on the withdrawal negotiations being demanding, absorbing a huge amount of government effort and stalling the European agenda. To this effect, as is illustrated by excerpt (11), the Slovak government repeatedly reiterated its preference for a positive agenda, implying that Brexit was, essentially, a burden.

(11) *Mnohem raději bychom měli na stole pozitivní agendu. Ale toto je politická realita.*
[We would much rather have a positive agenda on the table. But this is a political reality.]

Narrative of lost control

Another semantic macro-topic was the narrative of lost control, applied especially by the Czech officeholders, in a bid to portray the UK government as having lost control over its territory and certain policies, as demonstrated in example (12), but also, later, over the Brexit process as such. Central to this construction was the picture of the UK government as impotent – unable to govern capably and protect national interests vis-á-vis the EU. Suggesting the UK government's failure to fulfil one of the principal duties of a sovereign state as a political entity, this narrative also foregrounded the issue of losing national sovereignty within the multi-level EU polity, which tapped into the widespread Euroscepticism of the Czech population.

(12) *Silným motivem pro brexit se stalo vědomí, že stát by měl mít určitou kontrolu nad svým územím, třeba v takové věci, jako je rozhodování o tom, kdo může a kdo nemá přijít na jeho území. Příliv lidí odjinud lidem připadá jako ohrožení. A oni nevěří, že to vláda zvládne.*
[What was a strong factor motivating Brexit was the sense that the state should have certain control over its territory, for example, in such a matter as deciding who can and who cannot enter its territory. The influx of people from elsewhere seems like a threat to people. And they don't believe that the government can manage that.]

3.2 Strategies of Blame Assignment

The second research sub-question asks: 'What are the main discourse-analytical strategies when assigning blame?'. Drawing on Hansson's discursive strategies, the analysis reveals that in their public communication, the Czech and Slovak government actors used, albeit to varying degrees, (a combination of) four discursive strategies to assign blame in the context of Brexit, namely the strategies of (1) argumentation, (2) framing/positioning, (3) characterising social actors, and (4) legitimation. They refrained from deploying the strategies of denial and manipulation.

Argumentation

As mapped out above, both governments used various argumentation schemes to claim that the referendum, its unfortunate (yet respected) result, and its adverse effects were brought about intentionally and knowingly by others, implying that both the principal blame targets, the EU and the UK, had the capacity (or even the obligation) to prevent Brexit from occurring and the withdrawal negotiations from stalling. In both cases (but more intensively on the part of the Czechs), blame constructions were employed to convey an image of Brexit as a preventable crisis.

One distinct finding apparent throughout the data is the manifest absence of doubt in the Czech Brexit-related blame discourse. Indeed, in trying to convey a strong sense of self-confidence, the Czech government used neither hedging techniques, nor modality to tone down its blame attributions. Instead, it often utilized expressions signalling certainty, (seemingly) functioning on the basis of rationality, certitude and reliability, such as 'the fact is that', 'frankly', 'honestly', 'clearly', 'there is no wonder', and 'of course', as in example (13).

> (13) *A faktem je, že to, co nastalo, je jenom důsledek selhání lídrů Evropské unie.*
> [And the fact is that what has happened is only a consequence of the failure of the leaders of the European Union.]

Framing/positioning

It was, indeed, especially the Czech blame discourse where the functional means of othering were marked by an us-them person deixis, with the communicating individuals using more commonly the first-person plural pronoun 'we' in their blame attributions, as illustrated by example (14).

> (14) *Navíc jsme v praxi viděli, jak nevyzpytatelné je referendum jako politický nástroj.*
> [What is more, we have seen in practice how unpredictable a referendum is as a political tool.]

Through close analysis of the context, it becomes clear that most often the referential range included the general public (and was therefore used metonymically to stand for all Czech citizens, creating the impression that the government was voicing the people's concerns and experience[s]), and less often for the Czech political representation as a whole. Here, the first-person

plural pronoun helped construct and negotiate a collective political experience and validate the government's (in-group's) own action(s).

Importantly, a key expression of difference was made through the use of the exclusive 'they/them' personal pronoun (including all the corresponding possessive pronouns). As is clear from the section above, this pronoun had a number of different referents, depending on the context, but it usually referred to the collective (most often, the Czechs). Primarily, as in example (15) the status of 'them' is ascribed to EU elites, a convenient use, as it replaced the various differences and nuances within the blame target with a simple 'they'.

> (15) Brussels institutions, in particular the European Commission, share some of the blame. The bodies that are meant to instil a sense of common purpose have become symbols of alienation. Instead of protecting the unity of the EU, they have contributed to national division and public mistrust, especially in their response to the refugee crisis.[2]

Such exclusionary rhetoric of othering helped create group-internal homogenisation of the blame target(s) and, in doing so, strengthened distinct shared experiences and built internal consensus around the in-group's (the government's) actions (cf. De Cilla et al., 1999; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). In parallel, it also served to make the context favourable towards credit-claiming strategies, which proved to be frequent complementary discursive acts, often following the blame attributions.

Characterising social actors

Furthermore, the Czech government constructively and reproductively employed the strategy of characterising social actors. As seen above, the blame discourses were replete with references to the other(s) (the EU and the UK), which were constructed not in terms of similarities, but differences from the given in-group. Significantly, the Czech government (and especially the individual line ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Defence) was much harsher and more dramatic in its blame attributions than its Slovak counterpart, not hiding its reservations (sometimes hostility, even), especially towards the EU.

The traits attributed to the EU as the blame target included heterogeneous stereotypical qualities such as *inflexible, unresponsive, bureaucratic,* and *inefficient* in the Czech sub-corpus and *not understandable* and *distant* in the Slovak sub-corpus, with all of them constructed as being obstacles to reasonable decision-making. By way of comparison, the attributive qualifications ascribed to the UK were mostly *unpredictable, unrealistic* and *less responsible* (in comparison to other EU member states, rather than wholly irresponsible) in the Czech sub-corpus and *not rational* (rather than irrational) and *hectic* in the Slovak. As we can see, the evaluative adjectives foregrounded by Slovakia were milder, suggesting a more restrained and sober approach to Brexit as such.

In the Czech sub-corpus, EU leaders were sometimes referred to as 'leaders of Europe' or 'those leaders of Europe', with the demonstrative pronoun in the latter acting as a distancing device. An additional, but important, point is that to express negative affect and convey an image of the EU as the non-liked

Other, the Czech government often named the EU pejoratively, using the metonymy 'Brussels' (eight instances in the Czech sub-corpus as opposed to none in the Slovak). In the Czech context, this term is sufficient to perform 'the othering act' on its own insofar as this form of address connotatively conveys negative meanings, with no need for any other attributive qualifications. Yet, the EU was mostly pictured as a non-radical Other that, while different, is not an enemy (van Dijk, 2006; Wenzl, 2019).

That being said, as illustrated in Table 3, both governments differed starkly in terms of the specificity of attribution when it came to the blame targets, with the Czech being significantly more direct: 28.1% of all blame attributions in the Czech sub-corpus were direct, with the respective figure for Slovakia standing at only 5.3%. Interestingly enough, though, whilst the Czech direct blame assignments were aimed primarily at the EU (66.7% of all direct blame attributions), the Slovaks blamed only the UK directly (100%).

	Number of blame utterances	PM/ministries; Direct blame/Indirect	Blame utterances (absolute numbers; %)	UK	EU	Others
CZE	64	PM	15	6	9	0
			23,4%	40,0%	60,0%	0,0%
		Ministries	49	15	33	1
			76,6%	30,6%	67,3%	2,0%
		Direct	18	6	12	0
			28,1%	33,3%	66,7%	0,0%
		Indirect	46	15	30	1
			71,9%	32,6%	65,2%	2,2%
SK	19	PM	10	10	0	0
			52,6%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%
		Ministries	9	4	5	0
			47,4%	44,4%	55,6%	0,0%
		Direct	1	1	0	0
			5,3%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%
		Indirect	18	13	5	0
			94,7%	72,2%	27,8%	0,0%

Table 3. Distribution of blame assignment according to the blamer and specificity of the blame attributions

It is especially the Czech Brexit-related blame discourse that attacked certain people *ad hominem*: in the case of the EU, it was the European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker; in the case of the UK, the British Prime Ministers David Cameron and, to a lesser extent, Theresa May. The criticism was especially harsh concerning Juncker, who was portrayed as a man 'not in the right place', 'living in his Brussels bubble' who 'did not support the Prime Minister Cameron in any ways, in his efforts to convince British voters'. On some occasions, Juncker was even depicted as 'playing the Master of Europe' and being 'in such a position to be able to decide the fate of all Europeans'.

Legitimation

In the cases under scrutiny here, the strategy of legitimation was used, especially by the Czech government, mainly in terms of moral evaluation as a form of legitimation. Indeed, it was especially the blame attributions in the Czech discourse that included a higher degree of moral judgment, foregrounding evaluations of the wrongness of others' behaviour, especially that of the EU, as in excerpt (16), as deviating from the blaming moraliser's

own norms. The Czech sense of disapproval was mostly realised via the explicitly negative evaluative adjectives *wrong, bad*, or, less often, negations of explicitly positive adjectives (e.g. *not right, not good*).

> (16) The mere fact that its president, Jean-Claude Juncker, was discouraged [by the UK itself] from taking part in a referendum campaign in a member state, for fear that his presence would backfire, suggests that something is wrong.[3]

In parallel, the Czech government also more frequently brought an emotional angle to its blame-related presentation of Brexit, with its discourse permeated by more emotionally charged expressions such as 'push into the corner' (intimidation), 'offended' (offence), 'unfortunately' (regret) etc.[3]

4. Concluding Remarks

Exploring the two cases of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this article has provided an empirical illustration of the complex, multi-faceted processes connected to blame-related practices in the context of Brexit. As shown above, despite some similarities Czechia and Slovakia exhibited significant differences in how they used Brexit to assign blame, made sense of it and used it to (re)produce shared meaning(s). The Czech government exploited Brexit more intensively and systematically in its argumentation against European integration and EU institutions. Indeed, the analysis demonstrated the government's readiness – notable especially in the immediate wake of the Brexit vote – to attribute blame to the EU, its leaders, institutions (especially the Juncker-led European Commission) and policies, and to thereby delegitimize them. By contrast, Slovakia primarily blamed the UK to suggest how much damage it has done to the EU project.

The first research sub-question was concerned with the main topics drawn upon when assigning blame. The analysis showed that unlike the Czech government, Slovakia engaged in a smaller number of semantic macro-topics, with none of them being exclusive and with its blame tactics used in a more subtle way. The three central semantic macro-topics related to the discursive construction of blame attributions to the EU were (1) the narrative of general dysfunctionality; (2) the narrative of failure; and (3) the narrative of incompetence, with only the first one being common to both sub-corpora and the other two identified only in the Czech sub-corpus. In terms of the discursive construction of blame targeted at the UK, three semantic macro propositions entailed (1) the narrative of misjudgement; (2) the narrative of indecision and (3) the narrative of lost control, with the first two appearing in both sub-corpora and the last one identified only in the Czech one. The second research sub-question focused on the main discourse-analytical blame attribution strategies. Here, it was revealed that both governments applied (a combination of) four discursive strategies: argumentation, framing/positioning, characterising social actors and legitimation, to assign blame in the context of Brexit. When compared to the strategies identified by Hansson they refrained from deploying the strategies of denial and manipulation.

In summary, the critical-analytic exploration of typical themes and discourse strategies, and the examples presented, all underscore the importance of context in the construction of multi-level Brexit-related blame assignments. Even though Brexit – as a distant crisis not of their making – is not a policy/process in the context of which one would typically expect the highest level of the Czech and Slovak administrations to play blame games, the evidence has shown that Brexit did provide these two national governments with both opportunities and incentives to point the finger of blame, albeit to varying degrees, with varying foci and in quite different ways at other actors, all of them located at the international level. Although in the Czech and Slovak contexts engaging in blame behaviour was not primarily motivated by a desire to pre-empt condemnation of the governments' own Brexit-related policy failures or by self-preservation, political elites in both countries pragmatically and proactively adapted their discursive positions on Brexit on the grounds of their political agenda on the European question.

Finally, let me briefly sketch some of the interrelated reasons for the significant variation in Brexit-related blame behaviour across the two cases. First of all, a chief reason pertains to the nature of the countries' EU policies. As already hinted at in the case selection section above, the Czech Republic was long hailed as one of the most pro-Western new EU members, but the more recent political discourses on the EU have been characterised by a predominantly critical tone, 'at both the level of political elites and that of the public' (Kovář & Sychra, 2001, p. 61). Therefore, recent Czech EU policy has tended to be 'reactive, pragmatic, non-ideological, and very transactional' (Dostál & Nič, 2018, p. 4), at the same time that PM Babiš has been charged with defrauding the EU of a €2 million subsidy. By contrast, the Slovak government pledged to stay firmly on a 'pro-European' course, with PM Robert Fico memorably declaring in August 2017 that the foundation of his policy was 'being close to the [EU] core, close to France, to Germany' (Reuters, 2017). That said, Czech EU policy is not devoid of serious ambiguity, with PM Babiš – true to his self-portrayal as a 'pragmatic businessman' – accentuating the importance of the EU to the Czech Republic, valuing the single market and Schengen, and declaring that membership in the EU 'has no alternative' (Babiš, 2018). This can also explain why, as time progressed, Czech officeholders became more conscious of, and refrained from, extensive blame games with the EU. Crucially, another partial explanation for the differences in the governments' discourses relates to the fact that Slovakia held its first-ever rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2016, the mandate of which calls on the presiding country to be a neutral, unbiased, impartial and fair honest broker (Fabbrini & Puetter, 2016). This helps elucidate why Slovakia started to engage in Brexit-related blame behaviour later than the Czech Republic. A final point to consider here is the differing nature of the two countries' bilateral ties with the UK. For the Czech Republic, the UK has been a more important partner – not only in terms of trade relations, but also in terms of cooperation within the EU (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2019a; European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

To conclude, the paper has touched upon the intriguing subject of the instrumentalisation of Brexit for internal political purposes within EU27 domestic contexts. It foregrounds the argument that the UK's withdrawal from the EU, recontextualized within EU27 domestic politics, bears a specific political function, thereby only adding to the complexity and the overlapping

nature of the Brexit-related processes. As such, the discourses of Brexit are neither arbitrary nor capricious, but deliberate and intentional, with EU27 domestic political actors exploiting Brexit to justify their approach(es) to EU politics.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. In tandem with this, by shaping public opinion about who is responsible for causing (or solving) Brexit, which is essentially an EU crisis, national political actors also signal their positions on the EU to their supporters, who then 'use these signals as information shortcuts' for how they perceive, locate and identify with the EU (Schlipphak & Treib, 2017, p. 3; on the broader societal implications of blame-related practices, see, for instance, Hansson, 2015).
2. English in the original.
3. English in the original.

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