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*The Journal of the Central European*
*Political Science Association*

## ESSAYS

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# Politicisation of the European Union in Slovenia in the Twenty Years of its Membership

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## sciendo

**Abstract**: *Ever since Slovenia became independent, the European idea has been viewed fondly by the political elite and the public. The absence of any successful Eurosceptic parties has meant the main goals concerning European integration became national projects. Euroscepticism has remained limited, although in more recent years politicisation has steadily grown through political parties' positions on EU issues. At the same time, the country's political elite has lost sight of the specific strategy Slovenia should play in the EU. Moreover, alignment with other EU member states has begun to vary depending on the ruling party. After twenty years of membership, this has led to Slovenia being seen as one of the more submissive actors in EU policymaking. In the article, by applying an analytical framework of politicisation, we consider the changing attitudes to the EU in Slovenia through the twenty years of its membership. The central research question is: in which ways have European issues become politicised over the last twenty years in Slovenia? The research question is addressed by considering a chronological approach and analysis of events, participation in European elections and public opinion data. We argue that, as a newer member state, Slovenia politicises European issues to a limited extent.*

**Keywords:** EU politics, politicisation, membership, challenges, Slovenia

## Introduction: Politicisation of European integration

European integration literature uses the concept of politicisation in different ways. In general, politicisation means denoting an issue as relevant, naming it as political, an object of politics and debatable (Wiesner 2023), while the 'politicisation of European integration' means the public's stronger interest in

and criticism of European Union (EU) affairs. In other words, politicisation manifests as the polarisation of opinions, as conflict and controversies with respect to EU policymaking and European integration (De Wilde 2015).

The concept of politicisation of the EU remains complex. The analytical framework of politicisation on one side describes the EU's effects on domestic politics, party cleavages, public opinion and representation (*top-down politicisation*), while, on the other, the visibility, polarisation and engagement of domestic actors (*bottom-up politicisation*) with regard to the EU (Bressanelli, Koop & Reh 2020: 330–331). European Union institutions, European integration and European issues started to become politicised in the 1980s with growing awareness, criticism and dissatisfaction with the EU (Kauppi & Wiesner 2018), but has been especially present since the 'polycrisis' period (Zeitlin, Nicoli & Laffan 2019), the sequence of crises facing Europe (economic, migration, Brexit, health, energy, inflation, security – e.g. the war in Ukraine), representing the grounds for different member states and actors to adopt their own positions on European policies and the basis for new political conflicts to arise around European policies (Bressanelli, Koop & Reh 2020). A notable role here is played by national political parties and their leaders, which by way of politicisation try to benefit in elections and avoid internal conflicts (Hooghe & Marks 2009). Apart from them, interest groups and media often act as additional agents and promoters of politicisation by exposing and articulating different positions on the EU (Krašovec & Lajh 2024). They may be seen as 'windows of observation' of the politicisation of European integration (Kriesi 2016: 33) and actors involved in the 'controversiality of decision-making' (Hooghe & Marks 2009: 6).

Neofunctionalists define politicisation as an outcome of further European integration that has also engaged the public, namely, at the micro level (Hooghe & Marks 2009). The EU and European integration are becoming more important and more salient while a rising number of citizens and actors are engaging with the EU (Kauppi & Wiesner 2018). Along these lines, the politicisation of the EU may be observed through three main dimensions: 1) increased *visibility* of the EU and its policies, 2) increased *polarisation* and 3) increased *engagement* with the EU (De Wilde, Leupold & Schmidtke 2016; De Wilde 2015). The majority of scholars detect the greater politicisation of the EU over time (Hutter & Grande 2014; Hoeglinger 2016) due to the EU having stronger exposure in the public and the media (Krašovec & Lajh 2024).

The concept of the politicisation of European integration was previously largely connected with Eurosceptic positions and the change in attitudes, from acknowledging the benefits of European integration to growing opposition and criticism (De Wilde 2015). However, some authors clearly state that politicisation does not necessarily mean Euroscepticism and that it can also derive from pro-European positions (Turnbull & Dugarte 2019). Even Euroscepticism can appear in different forms: From soft Euroscepticism where concerns in certain

policy fields are expressed to hard Euroscepticism that indicates general opposition to European integration; ranging from rejection of the EU, rejection of EU policies, criticism of EU policies to various degrees of criticism (Wiesner 2023). Although politicisation has changed the content of European integration and the content of EU policymaking, this is not directly connected with increased Eurosceptic positions among the public (Hooghe & Marks 2009). Wiesner (2023) warns that criticism should not be understood simply as populism or Euroscepticism. Nevertheless, it remains vital to answer the question of what the increased politicisation means for the future of European integration (De Wilde 2015). It should not be overlooked that even though politicisation can negatively impact the European integration process and governance of the EU it can also raise public discourse, trigger people's interest in the EU and add to the quality of democracy (Wiesner 2023).

## Research Puzzle

Slovenia's relationship with the EU is as long as the history of its independence. In fact, in 1991, when Slovenia gained its independence, support for the EU among the Slovenian public was at its highest (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024). The process of Slovenia's transition was from the start characterised by the ambition to join the EU with the aim of becoming an economically successful and internationally recognised democratic country (Lajh 2012). In this regard, EU membership was defined as a national project even before Slovenia formally became independent (Krašovec & Lajh 2009). Fink-Hafner went so far as to claim that Europeanisation had 'become a kind of substitute for the old ideology' (Fink-Hafner 1999). Before the accession period, a general consensus existed among the country's elite that Slovenia's membership in the EU was a national goal. Eurosceptic positions could hardly be found[1] (Lajh 2012) although some academics, cultural elite and trade unions warned about economic costs of accession (Bojinović Fenko & Svetličič 2017; Svetličič 2015; Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024). Euroscepticism was also absent from media while criticism of Slovenian membership in the EU was addressed mostly by pro-EU media (Bernik & Uhan 2005). The strong support in Slovenia for EU membership was seen in the results of a referendum on EU membership. In March 2003, 60.4% of the electorate participated in a referendum on accession to the EU, with almost 90% of voters supporting it. Such high support was probably also a result of the accession campaign 'Slovenia at Home in Europe' since after the referendum the support failed again (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024).

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1    The only exception was the Slovenian National Party, which openly expressed (relatively soft) Eurosceptic stances (Lajh 2012).

At the same time, the Europeanisation process underway in national institutions in Slovenia was not radical. Fink-Hafner and Lajh (2005) demonstrated that national institutions, processes, traditions and politico-cultural contexts remained flexible and pragmatic in their adaptations. No radical change ensued; instead, political structures only rearranged their setup to meet the demands arising in the accession process.

The most radical effect of the Europeanisation process was amending the Constitution. In 2003, such constitutional amendments included Article 3.a. to allow the delegation of part of Slovenian sovereignty to the EU, while Article 8 was altered to regulate the relationship between the national and EU political systems. The Constitution saw certain other changes after 1997 to harmonise the national legislation with that of the EU. Article 68 was amended to allow foreigners from EU member states to own property, Article 80 to reflect changes to the electoral procedure and Article 47 to permit the extradition of Slovenian citizens under international agreements (Nations in Transit 2004).

The European integration process was for Slovenia as a newer member state not the same as for the member states that had joined the EU prior to the Treaty of Nice. While older member states experienced the EU's development and expansion from the inside, Slovenia as a newcomer state joined the EU with a status that has remained largely stable until today. This includes the growing powers of European institutions, a larger number of member states and a higher number of policy areas in which member states renounced their sovereignty and the EU expanded its jurisdiction (Börzel 2005). As a newer member state, Slovenia to a lesser extent has experienced the functional spill-over effect (Schmitter 1969) where the EU has increased its collaboration in new policy fields during the period of its membership. Simultaneously, our focus is on a small state within the EU that has witnessed its political and administrative structures being fundamentally altered in the past few decades (Steinmetz & Wivel 2010: 3). Although small states have long been largely neglected, the present world order has at least to some extent led to renewed interest in how small states respond to various challenges. At the same time, the challenges and dilemmas small states have traditionally faced are now to some degree also being encountered by other states in the international system (Steinmetz & Wivel 2010: 8).

In this article, we are concerned with how attitudes to the EU have changed in Slovenia from the accession period over the 20 years of its membership, noting that EU policymaking has undergone relatively minor changes in this period. Even though Slovenian political parties and citizens generally supported EU membership in the accession stage, the membership period has been marked by an increase in soft Euroscepticism, distrust in the EU as well as heightened criticism. For the analytical purpose of understanding these changes, we apply the concept of politicisation. Our thesis is that although the relationship

between Slovenia and the EU has become more politicised, this politicisation remains limited and has not provoked opposition or any threat to the very idea of European integration.

We first provide a quick overview of the politicisation concept and the accession process followed by Slovenia that provides context for understanding the politicisation of European integration in Slovenia. Analysis of the change in attitudes to the EU is then followed by considering four periods of EU membership and by observing four dimensions of politicisation: public opinion on the EU, increased visibility of the EU and its policies, stronger engagement with the EU and greater polarisation. The sources of our data are events, strategic documents related to the EU, level of participation in elections to the European Parliament and public opinion data. In the conclusion, we discuss the observed dimensions of politicisation in a newer member state and summarise the main findings.

## A Shining Star Begins to Twinkle (2004–2009)

### *Public opinion on the EU*

Slovenia became a member of the EU on 1 May 2004. Along with the broad agreement on EU membership, several other EU-related issues from 2004 onwards also enjoyed general support and were viewed as national projects, including introduction of the euro, joining the Schengen Area and the first Slovenian presidency of the Council of the EU (Krašovec & Lajh 2009). The image of the EU held by the public was very positive. Slovenian citizens had high, above-average trust in the EU (see Figure 1). Slovenian citizens (in 2005) also expressed the absolute highest share of knowledge about the EU compared to other EU citizens (Mamić & Strmšek Mamić 2005). This attitude to the EU characterised the first membership period until the country held the presidency of the Council of the EU in 2008, and was also evident among the political parties that had agreed not to take advantage of inter-party competition on EU matters (Krašovec & Lajh 2024).

For comparison we added data on trust in political parties (see Figure 1). In general, Slovenian citizens express lower levels of trust in political institutions, even European institutions (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024). But trust in political parties is at the lowest level. Slight increases and decreases in trust mostly reflect the changes in trust in the European Union through time, except for the period of the COVID crisis when trust in the EU increased, while trust in political parties further decreased. With the change of government in 2022, trust in parties slightly increased despite a decrease in trust in the EU.

**Figure 1: Trust in the EU ('tend to trust' in percentage)**
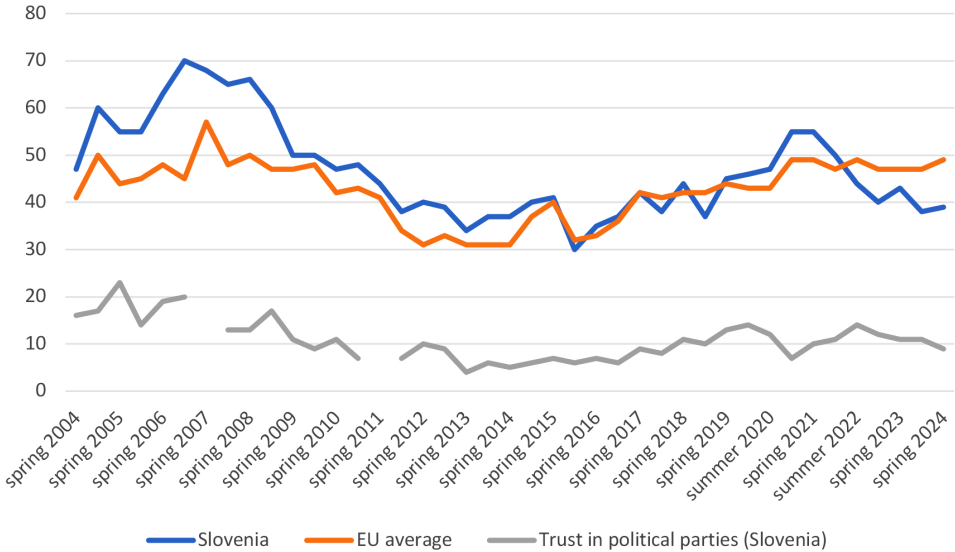


Source: Eurobarometer 2004–2023

## Visibility of the EU and its policies

In the first elections to the European Parliament in 2004, Slovenia voted for seven members of the EP (MEPs). Parties' programmes were adapted to the EU membership by including more European topics, which revealed the earliest signs of politicisation notwithstanding that they did not take a prominent position in the manifestos. EU topics were more strongly emphasised in the manifestos of parties that had some EU specialists among their leading members (Krašovec & Lajh 2009). The manifestos of their European counterparts were frequently simply copied and translated into the Slovenian language (Lajh & Krašovec 2019). Moreover, like in other countries, EU-related topics and issues generally remained marginal during the electoral campaign (Krašovec & Lajh 2010). Given that the first elections to the EP took place only a few months before the national parliamentary elections (October 2004), they were perceived as preparation and a forecast for the national elections with the politicisation of national topics (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). The politicisation of national issues during European election campaigns became a strategy for national interparty competition. The proximity of national and European elections affected the election results and put the popularity of political parties to the test even in all future European elections (see Table 1). Voter turnout at these elections was 28.35% (DVK 2024).

**Table 1: Overview of European and national elections throughout the period of EU membership**

| European elections | Voter turnout | National elections | Voter turnout |
|---|---|---|---|
| June 2004 | 28.35% | October 2004 | 60.65% |
| June 2009 | 28.37% | September 2008 | 63.10% |
| | | December 2011 | 65.60% |
| May 2014 | 24.55% | July 2014 | 51.73% |
| May 2019 | 28.89% | June 2018 | 52.64% |
| June 2024 | 41.60% | April 2022 | 70.97% |

Source: DVK 2024

## *Engagement with the EU*

Soon after Slovenia had joined the EU, the country continued with its aim of presenting itself as a 'good student' (a position already established during the accession process) and sought to became part of the core of older EU member states. In January 2007, after having met all the Maastricht convergence criteria, Slovenia was the first new EU member state to adopt the common currency euro and, in December, to enter the Schengen Area.

Accession to the EU coincided with a change in government in autumn 2004, while the central point of political coordination in the hierarchy of the domestic management of European affairs shifted to the prime minister, where it was finally consolidated during Slovenia's presidency of the Council of the EU (Lajh 2010). Following Slovenia's formal entry to the EU, European affairs became 'internalised' as a domestic matter (Lajh 2010). The lack of 'European' cadre became one of the weakest links in managing EU affairs in Slovenia. This shortage of EU specialists was evident during both the phase of Slovenia's accession to the EU and the period of EU membership. The situation had become acute by the time Slovenia held the presidency of the Council of the EU in 2008 (Lajh 2012).

An important milestone Slovenia reached during the first mandate of EU membership was the forementioned holding of the presidency of the Council of the EU. As the first member state from Central and Eastern Europe, Slovenia took on this important role. Fink-Hafner and Lajh (2008) evaluated that, despite lacking experience in foreign affairs and diplomacy, Slovenia was efficient with the co-ordination and mobilisation of its resources during the presidency. The preparations were largely based on the pre-established structure for managing EU affairs and did not radically change the model of EU coordination in the Slovenian executive (Fink-Hafner & Lajh 2008). At the same time, surveys among civil servants involved in the Slovenian presidency disclosed that Slovenia did

not take advantage of its size which would have contributed to efficiency, but rather showed problems in internal communication and absence of informal contacts between servants (Kajnč & Svetličič 2010).

## *Polarisation*

At the time, Slovenia's foreign minister Dimitrij Rupel described the Slovenian presidency as a 'new spring' comparable to the achievements of the country's democratisation and independence (Fink-Hafner & Lajh 2008). Still, the Slovenian government was criticised in domestic circles for not having a more visible role of coordinator and persuader on specific issues, and not assuming a more proactive approach to agenda-setting during the presidency to enforce Slovenian initiatives that would have historically marked the country's presidency (Fink-Hafner & Lajh 2008). On one hand, this demonstrated the greater visibility of EU issues in the Slovenian public space yet, and on the other, considerable polarisation with respect to Slovenia's role in the EU. A more accurate evaluation of the presidency would thus be: 'A star pupil playing it safe in the EU', where Slovenia acted very shyly and subordinated its national project of presidency of the EU (Klemenčič 2007) despite acting responsibly and being successful with management of the agenda (Fink-Hafner & Lajh 2008).

After two years of membership, Slovenian citizens had learned to take advantage of the EU's multilevel structure and turned to EU institutions when national institutions had failed them. This points to the stronger EU engagement of policy actors beyond the political elite. The most noticeable was the case of the 'erased'; namely, when inhabitants of Slovenia from the former Yugoslav republics turned to European institutions to resolve their legal status (Nations in Transit 2007).

## Economic Crisis and a Drop in Trust in the EU (2009–2014)

### *Public opinion on the EU*

The next few years of the country's membership in the EU began with the global financial and economic crisis, which not only affected the EU but the relationship between Slovenia and the EU as well. After all, Slovenia was hit harder by the crisis with poor public finance conditions and increasing public borrowing compared to other new members (Svetličič 2024). The economic and financial crisis strengthened Eurosceptic feelings among Slovenians, yet also further politicised EU issues in the Slovenian public space. Additionally, the effect of overly high and naive expectations towards EU membership and the resulting disappointment was also shown. This was revealed by a sharp decrease in trust in the EU among Slovenians. While trust in the EU remained above-average, it moved closer to the EU average (see Figure 1).

## Visibility of the EU and its policies

During the 2009 EP elections, criticism levelled at the EU by some Slovenian parties was mostly related to the economic and financial crisis, austerity measures and pressures on small states, as well as the initiative for a more responsible and socially oriented market economy in the EU (Krašovec & Deželan 2014), which brought polarised views on the EU's role to the surface. In general, the campaign remained concentrated on national issues (Krašovec & Lajh 2010) and important topics like the Lisbon Treaty or attitudes regarding further EU enlargement were not debated (Fink-Hafner & Deželan 2016). Nevertheless, the visibility of EU issues remained limited given that, besides the parties, the mass media also did not frame EU topics as important during the election campaign while national themes overshadowed EU topics (Krašovec & Lajh 2009). The election results showed that voters were especially inclined to already established MEPs and voted more for the candidate than for their party. Turnout in European elections remained at 28.37% (DVK 2024).

## Engagement with the EU

The effects of the economic crisis became quite noticeable in 2012 when Slovenia began to struggle with rising public debt and a collapsing banking sector. The government was under pressure from the European Commission to accept certain austerity measures and reforms connected with managing the impacts of the financial crisis, which increased the visibility of EU institutions yet also raised further negative attitudes concerning the EU. Predictions started to circulate that Slovenia would be the sixth EU member state to require a bailout (Lajh 2013). Slovenia ultimately managed to avoid an international bailout by adopting a series of austerity measures and structural reforms, with the European Commission finally allowing Slovenia to leave the EU's excessive deficit procedure in June 2015 (Lovec 2017).

## Polarisation

The EU was nonetheless perceived as a threat by some political parties during the national electoral campaign in 2011 when parties warned that Slovenia had to solve its fiscal problems or else the European *troika,* made up of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, would impose the necessary measures (Krašovec & Haughton 2011). In this way EU affairs became exploited by political parties in their national competition and for their party interests. Although Eurosceptic positions among the public were expressed during the economic crisis, within the EU trust remained higher in Slovenia than in certain other EU member states (see Figure 1). In the next national elections in 2014, the campaign was still characterised by the Slovenia-

-EU relationship. Just prior to the elections, the European Commission issued 'recommendations' for Slovenia such as on the consolidation of public finances, further privatisation and the fight against corruption with deadlines to tackle the national debt and economic burden (Krašovec & Lajh 2020).

## Loss of Identity and Searching for a New Role in the EU (2014–2019)

### *Public opinion on the EU*

Following the economic crisis, the migration crisis further shaped Slovenians' attitudes concerning the EU and polarised both the public and the political parties. Between October 2015 and March 2016, almost 480,000 migrants crossed the Schengen border between Croatia and Slovenia. With the EU's final assistance at the border and provision of additional funds, the situation slowly began to improve and normalise with the closure of the Western Balkans corridor (Haček 2016; Lovec 2017). Civil society, however, remained critical of the EU's asylum and migration policy for being unable to cope with the crisis. Upon establishing control on the inner border between Slovenia and Austria, which continues nowadays due to illegal migration, Slovenia faced another unpleasant experience in the EU. In conversations with the EU, Slovenian politicians and MEPs (especially Tanja Fajon, the current minister of foreign and European affairs) have since been trying to negotiate an end to border control. These efforts have thus far not been successful.

With the migration/refugee wave into the EU in 2015 and the *de facto* decay of the EU's migration policy, Eurosceptic feelings developed once again (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). Trust in the EU fell. It was close to the EU average, and in autumn 2015, autumn 2017 and autumn 2018 even below EU average (see Figure 1). During the electoral campaign for the national elections in 2018, the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), a member of the European People's Party (EPP), which had received the most support but was unable to form a coalition, employed anti-migration and refugee rhetoric, aligning itself with the ideas of Hungary's leader Orban and criticising the EU's policy of quotas and liberal migration policies for their impact on the national culture and security in Slovenia (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). The party's anti-migration rhetoric continues even today.

Alongside the migration crisis, the absence of EU support for implementing the arbitration judgment concerning the border between Slovenia and Croatia (Lovec 2018), and the delegated act of the European Commission that allowed Croatia to produce and sell wine bearing the name 'Teran', even though Slovenia holds a certificate of protected designation of origin in the EU (MMC 2019a), also contributed to disappointment in Slovenia and the rise of Eurosceptic attitudes among the public (Svetličič 2024). Such instances are clear cases of

top-down politicisation (Bressanelli, Koop & Reh 2020) where attitudes held by the EU impact public opinion and national politics.

## Visibility of the EU and its policies

During the campaign for the 2014 EP elections, and contrasting with past EP election campaigns, among others, some European issues were raised that revealed the parties' polarised positions on them. Something similar could also be noticed in other countries. However, EU issues were not addressed in a substantive way (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). Both the public as well as the parties were more focused on the upcoming national parliamentary elections in July 2014. Voter turnout for these elections reached its lowest point at just 24.55% (DVK 2024).

## Engagement with the EU

Despite growing dissatisfaction with the EU, Slovenia continued with its policy of having no clear strategy in the EU except to present itself as being committed to the idea of a united Europe. The third mandate of Slovenia's membership in the EU was characterised by the absence of a clear goal for Slovenia in the European integration. It seems as if Slovenia has become lost in the EU with a lack of visions and ambitions concerning its role. Domestic circles were critical of this lack of political orientation since this has contributed to the passive role played by Slovenia and its political actors in the EU. Participation of Slovenian officials at meetings in Brussels only when necessary speaks against a proactive role of Slovenia in EU affairs (Svetličič 2024). Even today this situation has hardly changed. However, more likely than in previous periods, the Slovenian public and mass media were expressing stronger interest in EU issues and affairs, which also demonstrates the greater visibility of EU issues and the public's higher engagement and mobilisation with respect to the EU.

In the document 'Principal positions of the Republic of Slovenia regarding key substantive areas for discussion on the future of the European Union' (2017), the country declared that: 'The EU is a fundamental development environment for Slovenia. Slovenia has always been committed to a strong, cohesive and unified EU that can effectively address key challenges and threats.' Slovenia believes that the EU and its policies will need to consolidate and deepen in the near future. Meanwhile, Slovenia's strategic interest is to remain anchored to the most closely (geostrategically) connected part of the EU, namely the core EU (UKOM 2017).[2] After Jean Claude Juncker presented five possible scenarios for

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2   Apart from Slovenia's strategic interest in being close to the core of Europe, other preferences were also expressed, such as: 1) striving to continue the enlargement process in the Western Balkans region; 2) supporting the EU's joint response to the migration issue, both externally and internally; 3) the

the EU's development, Slovenia expressed its ambition to remain in the circle of more integrated member states. In early 2017, a few Slovenian intellectuals even wrote and signed the 'Ljubljana initiative' to commence the process of adopting a new EU Constitution with the aim of protecting the European idea and building it in all its dimensions. The initiative was also supported by then Slovenian President Borut Pahor (MMC 2017). Later, Prime Minister Marjan Šarec, who led the government between 2018 and 2020, showed little interest in the EU and in 2019 even rejected the EP when he was invited to give a speech at the plenary session as one of Europe's current leaders. This decision was not well accepted among the Slovenian public and media (MMC 2019b).

## Polarisation

During the 2014 European elections some soft Euroscepticism was evident among new, more radical left parties that were particularly critical of the policy of austerity (Krašovec & Deželan 2014). One new candidate list that appeared at the elections was 'Dream job' (in Slovene 'Sanjska služba'), organised as a sarcastic response to Slovenian politics and the attitude towards European elections and may be seen as indicating the stronger 'bottom-up politicisation' (Bressanelli, Koop & Reh 2020) of the EU, especially among citizens. The aim of this candidate list was to replace politicians with ordinary people who would advocate for the common good. It was some sort of social experiment that could allow a candidate to be selected in a draw for a dream job in the EP. All candidates on the election list had won their place after being drawn randomly from a set of names. Some candidates admitted they had decided to participate in this experiment just for fun (MMC 2014). Still, voters showed little support for the project, which received only 3.56% of the votes (DVK 2024).

Political affairs further politicised the EU among citizens. The first European commissioner from Slovenia, Janez Potočnik, who held this position for two mandates, was no longer on the government's radar for a third mandate. Instead, Prime Minister Alenka Bratušek saw an opportunity for a new job position and nominated herself as European commissioner, which attracted the disapproval of both the public and her political colleagues. Critics claimed that Bratušek had struck a deal with the president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker who had nominated her as a candidate for vice president of the European Commission. Yet, Bratušek did not receive national support as candidate and did not pass a hearing of the EP. The new government of Miro Cerar, despite the disagreement of other parties making up the government, nominated Violeta Bulc as the commissioner.

Schengen Area must remain an uncontrolled area along the internal borders; and 4) in the debate on the EU's future priority should be given to the question of how to tackle common challenges effectively over institutional issues.

Politicisation of the European Union in Slovenia…   Damjan Lajh and Meta Novak

# Political Instability and Effects of the Governing Party on the Relationship with the EU (2019–2024)

## *Public opinion on the EU*

The last period of EU membership has been denoted by changing governments, stronger polarisation among national political parties and the consequent shifting of Slovenia's position in the Council. In this timeframe, national politics and the results of elections exerted bigger effects on the relationship with the EU than in the earlier periods. Conflictual and polarised attitudes concerning the EU also started to be reflected in public opinion on the EU. After the initial high trust in the EU during the first years of membership, we can observe a further drop in trust in the last period under scrutiny. Since summer 2022, trust in the EU has remained below the EU average. Weaker support to EU membership is expressed by citizens with lower socioeconomic status (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024).

Nevertheless, the EU's role in eliminating the damage caused by recent natural disasters in Slovenia might again lead to increased trust in the EU. The most devastating were the biggest fire in the history of Slovenia (in the Karst region) in the summer of 2022 and the biggest floods in the history of Slovenia in the summer of 2023. In both cases, Slovenia applied for assistance from the EU Solidarity Fund and help through the European Civil Protection Mechanism. In the summer of 2023, the president of the Commission also visited Slovenia to witness the damage caused by the severe floods, which raised the visibility of the EU. At the same time Slovenian citizens felt close to the EU and express European identity regardless of their left or right political preference (Uhan & Hafner Fink 2024).

## *Visibility of the EU and its policies*

The last elections to the EP saw an increase in voter turnout compared to the previous elections to the EP. Voter turnout was the highest in 2019 at 28.9%. However, Slovenia remained one of the countries with the lowest voter turnouts, with only Czechia and Slovakia recording a lower result. The campaign for the 2019 EP elections did not feature any clear standpoint of the parties. Issues debated in the media primarily related to migration, Brexit, the arbitration agreement between Slovenia and Croatia, populism and certain other policies such as the environment, food safety, political corruption and the economy (Krašovec & Lajh 2020). The election results reconfirmed that, when it comes to European elections, Slovenians are more likely to support an individual candidate than a political party and ignore the party's position on EU affairs. In this aspect, elections to the EP are, besides the low voter turnout, also perceived very differently by voters than at national or local elections.

The nomination of Janez Lenarčič as the new European commissioner also revealed the greater visibility of EU issues in Slovenia and demonstrated the country's tendencies to become an active part of the EU, not just an observer. Namely, when Lenarčič was assigned with the portfolio of crisis management in the European Commission, which (at the first glance) was not received with enthusiasm since many had wanted 'a more important portfolio', it was shown that the Slovenian public can express stronger interest also in EU politics.

Elections to the EP in 2024 attracted record high voter turnout in Slovenia. However, 41.60% voter turnout could be attributed mainly to the simultaneous implementation of three consultative referendums on euthanasia, preferential vote and hemp. Implementation of these referendums was supposed to attract voters of left political parties to the polls. Slovenians voted for nine members of the European parliament among 11 political parties and lists (record low). Pre-election debates addressed mostly the topics of migration policy, green passage, conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, EU foreign and defence policy, Slovenian recognition of Palestine and EU enlargement (Novak 2024). The nomination of a new European commissioner again was not without complications. The Freedom Movement party nominated Tomaž Vesel, former president of the Court of Auditors, as a candidate for European commissioner before the European elections. But only in September Vesel resigned as candidate, allegedly due to Ursula von der Leyen's request for a new candidate from Slovenia. The Freedom Movement party quickly found a new, female candidate in Marta Kos, a former vice president of the party. The Slovenian candidate for commissioner was assigned a portfolio of enlargement, which the coalition evaluated as important, but the opposition evaluated as irrelevant (MMC 2024).

## *Engagement with the EU*

Throughout the country's membership in the EU, political parties have changed their attitudes to the EU. While especially in the pre-membership phase and the first periods of membership political parties acted united with respect to EU issues, the recent change in political power on the domestic level has also brought about changes in positions on the EU.

While in the early 2010s Slovenia expressed an interest in joining the 'France-German train' and between 2014 and 2018 it more strongly tried to connect with the politics of Benelux, between 2020 and 2022 the governing political elite began to show greater support for the positions of the Visegrad states (Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland) in the EU especially in relation to migration policy (Krašovec & Novak 2021). This changed again from 2022 onwards (with the win of the Freedom Movement party over SDS at the national elections), when the minister of foreign and European affairs expressed that Slovenia was returning to the core countries of Europe, its alliances with Germany, France

and Italy, as well as strengthening its relationship with countries with which it shares common European values (MMC 2023). The reason for re-orientation towards the core of Europe was also the Visegrad countries' different position on the Ukrainian conflict, where Slovenia declared clear support for Ukraine like most EU member states, while the Visegrad countries (especially Poland and Hungary) took a different stand. The new government also expressed more interest in EU affairs, also visible in renaming the Ministry of Foreign Affairs into the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, stressing the importance of the EU for Slovenia. In the latter half of 2021, Slovenia held the presidency of the Council of the EU for the second time.

For the first time, 'Declaration on the guidelines for the functioning of the Republic of Slovenia in the institutions of the European Union' was adopted for a longer period, from 2021 to 2024, covering the entire mandate of the European Commission. Previously, declarations were accepted for a period of one to two years. The document is supposed to set political guidelines for easier planning and greater stability and efficiency of the work of line ministries. Six priority areas were defined for Slovenia, which included the sustainable recovery and stability of the economy, the strengthening of economic and social cohesion in the EU, the protection of citizens and freedoms in times of crisis, the promotion of the interests and values of the EU, the strengthening of the common foreign policy, and the more effective functioning of the EU.

## Polarisation

The period of the COVID-19 crisis was predominantly marked in Slovenia by a change in government from a left to a right-wing populist government, which also brought about changes to Slovenia's position in the Council of the EU as well as the communication strategy between Slovenian politicians and EU institutions. The most noteworthy change was that political leaders started to show greater support for the politics of the Visegrad states. In August 2020, the parliamentary group of the opposition Social Democrats (SD) even demanded the convening of an emergency meeting of the parliamentary Committee for European Union Affairs to discuss the positions shared by Prime Minister Janez Janša at the EU summit in Brussels in July 2020. At the summit, Janša supported the positions of Hungary and Poland, which demonstrated a clear departure from the rule of law. The SD believed that the prime minister had represented new foreign policy orientations contrary to the declaration on foreign policy and 'a departure from the core EU countries'.

An example of the evident change in the Slovenian government's orientation in the EU also came in November 2020 when Prime Minister Janša sent a letter to the leaders of the EU where he called for a return to the agreement reached at the July EU summit on the financial framework for tackling the pandemic,

which he said was being undermined by the recent agreement between the Council and the European Parliament on making the use of funds conditional on the rule of law. Individual (almost private) letters from Slovenian politicians to the EU not familiar with the relevant national political institutions became almost a standard government practice between 2020 and 2022. In May 2020, Minister for Foreign Affairs Anže Logar sent a controversial letter to European Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders in which he drew attention to several decisions by the Constitutional Court that had not been implemented. He also warned that many lawsuits were taking an unreasonably long time.

Further, the prime minister's appearance in the debate on Slovenia within the European Parliament group for monitoring respect for democracy (March 2021) featured a dispute with the leader of the Sophie in 't Veld political group in the European Parliament regarding the broadcast of a video on attacks on journalists in Slovenia. In addition, at the start of Slovenia's presidency of the Council of the EU, Prime Minister Janša started a new conflict when showing a photo of a picnic at which Slovenian judges were present alongside two Slovenian MEPs – Tanja Fajon and Milan Brglez from the Social Democrats. The photo was allegedly used as proof that the national judicial system is connected to the SD party. Vice President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans was deeply offended by this act and refused to appear in the group photo. The situation further deteriorated when Minister of Interior Affairs Aleš Hojs made a comment on pigs in European politics. While it is unclear to whom he was referring with this remark critics all believed that this was a very inappropriate communication by the minister.

Following an accusation of the backsliding of democracy in Slovenia, a delegation of the EP Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs visited Slovenia in October 2021 to establish the facts regarding the state of democracy in Slovenia. The committee delegation expressed its deep concern with the atmosphere of hostility, mistrust and deep polarisation in the country, which had undermined trust in and between various public bodies. According to the report prepared by the committee, many interviewees had expressed concern or described government pressures on public institutions and the media, including through smear campaigns, defamation, criminal investigations and strategic lawsuits against public participation. The delegation also expressed its regret that during its visit to Slovenia it was impossible to exchange opinions with Prime Minister Janša or any of the ministers. It also highlighted the prime minister's social media attacks on the mission (MMC 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d).

The last observed period was also characterised by national elections in 2022 that led to a change in government from a populist right-wing party to the newly established populist Freedom Movement party. In their analysis of electoral programmes at the national elections in 2022, Krašovec and Lajh (2024) showed that positions on the EU had become more polarised while the exposure of EU issues and policies had grown, while they were also increasingly framed in

interparty competition in Slovenia. Such changes were noticed along with the increased Eurosceptic positions on the EU that often remained constructive criticism of the functioning of the EU. Since more polarised and Eurosceptic positions were expressed by oppositional parties, radical and populistic parties from the fringes of the party arena (Krašovec & Lajh 2024), these views did not necessarily polarise public opinion.

## Conclusion

In our analysis of the increased politicisation of the EU in Slovenia during the 20 years of its membership, we considered four dimensions: public opinion on the EU; increased *visibility* of the EU and its policies; increased *engagement* with the EU; and the state of *polarisation*. The accession stage and initial period of EU membership were characterised with considerable support for the European integration. While Slovenian parliamentary parties almost unanimously backed the country's membership in the EU, Eurosceptic parties were more the exception than the rule and hardly had any success, while Slovenian citizens were expressing one of the highest levels of trust in the EU. In the following years, Eurosceptic feelings started to appear, the EU membership gradually became more visible although national issues also dominated the European election campaign, the Slovenian public gradually began to express stronger criticism of EU affairs and demanded a more active role for Slovenia in the EU. However, the absence of a clear strategy and role for Slovenia in the EU was very noticeable as well (see Table 2 for an overview). During the latest period, frequent changes of government have led to a further polarisation of attitudes regarding the EU and changes in Slovenia's position in the Council. Slovenia moved from aligning itself with the core EU member states to the low countries, the Visegrad countries and the core EU member states once again. During the populist right-wing government, the Slovenia-EU relationship was the most conflictual. In that period, the European level was used to resolve national conflicts.

After almost 20 years of EU membership, it seems that EU affairs are being more consistently acknowledged as internal affairs. The Slovenian public is primarily interested in Slovenia's role in the EU and demands that it be more active, yet at the same time it is also more critical of the EU. This confirms our thesis that the relationship between the EU and Slovenia has become more politicised, although the level of politicisation has remained limited in that it has not led to hard Euroscepticism or questioning of the country's membership in the EU. One of the reasons for the smaller extent of politicisation is that Slovenia perceives itself as a small and newer member state and hence as not being capable of steering the EU (Kauppi & Wiesner 2018). In the future, Slovenia needs a clear and long-term strategy in the EU if it wants to establish a visible role and position in EU policymaking.

**Table 2: Overview of the politicisation of European issues in Slovenia**

| Dimensions of politicisation | 2004–2009 | 2009–2014 | 2014–2019 | 2019–2024 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public opinion on the EU | High, above-average trust in the EU | Above-average trust in the EU | Average to below-average trust in the EU | Below-average trust in the EU since 2022 |
| *Visibility* of the EU and its policies | While EU topics are marginal, the Presidency increases visibility of the EU<br><br>Turnout at European elections is low | Visibility of EU topics remains limited, the Lisbon Treaty and EU enlargement are not debated<br><br>Turnout at European elections remains low | The Slovenian public and media express stronger interest in EU topics<br><br>Lowest turnout at European elections | EU-related topics debated during the European election campaign Considerable media interest in the portfolio given to the commissioner from Slovenia<br><br>Turnout at European elections is still low, but slightly increasing |
| *Engagement* with the EU | Engagement with the EU concentrated on meeting milestones: entering Schengen, adopting the euro, holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU | Engagement with EU institutions noticeable through attempts to solve the financial crisis | Lack of a clear role for Slovenia in the EU; the passive role of Slovenian and political actors in the EU | Slovenia's position in the Council starts to depend on the governing political party<br><br>The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is renamed to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, stressing the importance of the EU for Slovenia |
| *Polarisation* | Unified support among parties for EU membership, polarised views on Slovenia's role in the EU | The EU perceived as a threat and some parties express Eurosceptic attitudes regarding the EU's financial and monetary policy | New parties express Euroscepticism and criticism of the austerity measures.<br><br>Public criticism is noticed concerning the procedure of selecting a new commissioner from Slovenia One political list at European elections sarcastically frames the MEP position as a dream job | Positions on the EU become more polarised and EU issues and policies receive greater exposure<br><br>Several instances of conflict between individual Slovenian politicians and individual EU politicians |

Source: Author

To sum up, in this article we have shown that despite Slovenia's initial strong support for the EU, the latter has become more politicised over the last 20 years. We observed growing Eurosceptic positions that strengthened especially during the global crisis and conflictual events, but also growing polarisation seen from top-down as well as bottom-up perspectives. The latter were particularly noticed through increased visibility, polarisation and engagement with European issues. This confirms that Slovenian attitudes to the EU have changed in the past 20 years, especially in the direction of increased politicisation. Still, the change in attitude could also be understood as beneficial since 'democracy without criticism is hollow' (Wiesner 2023).

## Acknowledgements

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# Waiting for a Tragedy? Exploring the Czech Republic's Ability to Detect Radicalised Individuals

MARTIN ZILVAR

**Abstract:** Radicalisation had long been seen as something foreign, belonging more to Western Europe than to post-communist Central Europe. Considering the recent events in the Czech Republic and the 2022 Bratislava shooting, the article investigates the Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026 to explore the currently involved stakeholders in its efforts to detect radicalised individuals vis-à-vis possible radicalisation-related threats emerging from its contemporary extremist landscape. As the document solely centres on the Police, Prison Service and the Probation and Mediation Service, it turns to similar institutions and services in Slovakia and Germany to outline potential inspiration and solutions for the Czech Republic. By synthesising this with the reasoning about the effective detection of radicalised individuals of predecessor Czech scholars, the article concludes that the MoI's 2025–2026 action plan should incorporate three other stakeholders, i.e. 1) teachers, 2) children, teenagers and young people, and 3) the general public, to more appropriately meet the B2-specific objective and, crucially, to more adequately address the contemporary complexity of radicalisation.

**Keywords:** radicalisation, counter-radicalisation, extremism, the Czech Republic, security

## Introduction

Radicalisation had long been considered something foreign, belonging more to Western Europe or other regions of the world, as the Czech Republic does

not have much experience with terrorism. Indeed, it does have some with non-terroristic violence of right-wing and left-wing extremists (Strnad 2023); however, the country has not encountered anything similar to its Western counterparts. A wake-up call rang on 12 October 2022 when Juraj Krajčík, a 19-year-old student, killed two and injured one in a Bratislava-based LGBT+ bar, Tepláreň. While this happened in Slovakia, the historical and social closeness between the former compatriots only indicates that the Czech Republic might not be exempt from such a threat either.

What might have been forgotten is that the Czech Republic was not far from experiencing something similar. In 2021, two Czech teenagers were arrested for planning[1] a terrorist attack in Prague to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing (Hesová 2022). Also, as much as Jaromír Balda's deed did not quite resemble traditional terrorist attacks, he became the first Czech citizen convicted of terrorism (Ciroková 2021). Despite the far-right ideological leaning of those acts, it is necessary not to forget other forms of extremism when debating potential radicalisation into violence. Aside from that, the 2023 shooting at Charles University's Philosophical Faculty also indicated the tangibility of the threat. Indeed, no existing evidence shows that the perpetrator was radicalised (Ciroková & Valášek 2024); however, the event only underscored the necessity of exploring the Czech Republic's ability to detect radicalised individuals. After all, those efforts might also have the potential to uncover non-radicalised shooters. Hence, the article answers the following research question: 'What stakeholders are involved in the Czech Republic's counter-radicalisation efforts to detect radicalised individuals?'

To do so, it proceeds as follows. In the next section, a theoretical framework anchors the inquiry in the existing literature on radicalisation. Then, the article turns its attention to the Czech Republic. It consecutively explores its extremist landscape, synthesises the Czech Ministry of the Interior's (MoI) warning about isolated online extremist communities with the author's ongoing doctoral research, and outlines the most probable radicalisation threats it might face. Afterwards, it explores the Czech Republic's Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026. The penultimate section analyses similar reports of Slovakia and Germany to indicate potential inspiration for the country, and recommendations for the MoI's 2025–2026 action plan conclude the article.

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1   They not only planned the attack but also started undertaking real-life steps, such as documenting the places of interest, mapping access roads and acquiring chemicals necessary for making explosives, which they had already started testing (Kozelka 2022).

## Theoretical background

### *Theorising radicalisation*

Although no universally accepted definition of radicalisation exists, the article approaches it as a gradual process through which people start accepting violence as a legitimate instrument for achieving political objectives (Crossett & Spitaletta 2010; Wilner & Dubouloz 2010; Borum 2011; Schmid 2016). Whereas this concerns both offline and online radicalisation, the latter likely functions as its main component nowadays (Silber & Bhatt 2007: 20), defined as 'a process by which individuals through interactions with and exposures to various types of internet content come to adopt beliefs that not only justify violence but compel it to the point where these beliefs are translated into violent action' (Mølmen & Ravndal 2023: 464). Despite this apparent straightforwardness, the concept of online radicalisation remains contested among scholars. While some admit that the internet might have the power to facilitate the process predominantly alone (Sageman 2008; Thomas-Evans 2022), others consider it redundant due to the inseparability of online and offline life nowadays (Winter et al. 2020; Valentini, Lorusso & Stephan 2020; Whittaker 2022; Herath & Whittaker 2023). In contrast, another group finds itself somewhere in the middle, suggesting that the internet serves only as one of many components influencing radicalisation whose significance is embedded in the opportunity to meet and interact with like-minded people living anywhere on the planet and access all kinds of propaganda (Precht 2007; Von Behr et al. 2013; Koehler 2014; Cherney et al. 2022; Gunton 2022).

Considering this, the article follows the latter reasoning. As much as the internet currently unquestionably dominates radicalisation, other real-life influences must not be underestimated. Imagine a firm adherent of the great replacement theory,[2] spending hours discussing and consuming it online, who lost a job to an immigrant from Africa or the Middle East. In this hypothetical scenario, which experience would influence this person's radicalisation more? Instead of asking this question, it is more critical to understand how ordinary people become violent extremists in the first place.

### *Understanding the radicalisation process*

People's lives differ, and radicalisation does as well. What compels one to extremism may have little or no impact on others. For this reason, it appears reasonable to assume that a unique pathway precedes the journey of a given

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2   Proponents of this conspiracy theory believe in a systematic replacement of White Europeans by immigrants from Africa and the Middle East orchestrated by liberal politicians and powerful elites (Ekman 2022: 1130).

radicalised individual. While this might be true, the radicalisation process can be interpreted using existing literature. From a sequential view, Silber and Bhatt (2007) put forward a four-stage model leading one to terrorism, i.e. pre--radicalisation, self-identification, indoctrination and jihadisation, derived from the experience of homegrown Islamic radicalisation in the West. Despite that, they are also very likely applicable to other forms of extremism, as the behavioural patterns of radicalised individuals are probably similar.

Whereas the latter three sequences address the active engagement with extremist ideologies, the pre-radicalisation one concerns given attributes of one's life, e.g. family ties, religion, mental health illnesses or prior experience of violence, that have the potential to make somebody more vulnerable to radicalisation. What fuels the self-identification stage when millions experience such attributes but never get radicalised? Before answering, it is essential to remember that although anyone can radicalise, some are more susceptible than others. Indeed, no universal answer exists; however, it is believed that various crises, i.e. economic, social, political or personal, experienced particularly during some critical moment combined with the aforementioned preexisting vulnerabilities may compel one to seek alternative explanations of the world. Nowadays, the internet plays an essential role in doing this as it allows compensating for existing vulnerabilities by creating new identities and constitutes a marketplace where various ideological streams intersect. While this alone does not initiate radicalisation, the convergence between internal and external factors may severely challenge one's hitherto convictions. What is critical at this point is whether people decide to ignore such alternatives or choose to explore them further. If the latter prevails, they are on the brink of the self-identification stage (Silber & Bhatt 2007: 22–30; Mølmen & Ravndal 2023: 466–477).

During this sequence, radicalised individuals intensify their adoption of newly discovered beliefs through either self-exposure or interaction with like--minded peers offline or online. While both are essential, the latter likely dominates because it offers complex opportunities to connect with peers and, crucially, a remarkably accessible and highly secure environment for expressing true feelings. By interacting in such communities and becoming more involved in their activities, radicalised individuals slowly abandon their previous identities and redefine them according to the newly adopted beliefs because they actively engage with people who adhere to shared ideas and values and, therefore, constantly validate extremist explanations. Throughout this sequence, they develop the us-vs-them mentality in which the perceived out-groups become steadily dehumanised. At this point, the internet has the significant power to fuel the elevation from the self-identification stage, serving as a virtual marketplace providing access to radicalisation-conducive materials and networking channels. By reaching the indoctrination stage, radicalised individuals fully develop

their extremist identities, leading them to growing isolation and a subsequent withdrawal from previously established social relations because the membership in online communities is strong enough to diminish the importance of their real-life existence. To proceed through the penultimate stage and enter the jihadisation sequence, radicalised individuals must not only accept violence as a legitimate instrument for achieving political objectives but, critically, accept the duty to sacrifice themselves for a greater ideological cause. What is essential to understand is that the decision to perpetrate a terrorist attack does not come out of the blue, as such conduct is often activated by some subjective action trigger, e.g. personal setback, moral outrage or inspiration from other successful terrorists, fuelling one's determination to commit violence (Silber & Bhatt 2007: 30–53; Mølmen & Ravndal 2023: 467–470).

Radicalisation models, like Silber and Bhatt's, help abstract and conceptualise the radicalisation process; however, assuming that radicalisation operates linearly would indicate only one side of the phenomenon. It is also worth paying attention to other approaches, particularly those viewing radicalisation through the lens of identity-building. For example, Berger (2018) portrays it as a relationship between mutually reinforcing components of group and individual radicalisation, in which the former almost always precedes the latter, consequently leading to the full development and adoption of the in-group identity. This reflects his definition of extremism, which represents ideological beliefs arguing that 'an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group' (ibid.: 44–45). Törnberg and Törnberg (2024) suggested, based on analysing one of the most popular online communities of the extreme right, Stormfront, that radicalisation is predominantly a socialisation process during which people steadily learn about and indoctrinate into the in-group norms and ideology advocating for intergroup violence or domination through the passive exposure to the published content on the one hand, and the active engagement with other like-minded individuals on the other (ibid.: 6–7, 74). Another role of identity in the radicalisation process was shown by Kocmanová and Földes (2024), who investigated the susceptibility of the Romani minority in the Balkans to Salafi radicalisation. In their perception, prolonged crises of original identities caused by years of anxiety, uncertainty and war trauma combined with the existence and accessibility of an alternative one might indeed lead to the creation of new vulnerabilities emerging from the loss of the previously existing barriers against radicalisation and the adoption of the new identity (ibid.: 14). Although this reasoning was derived from the experience of the Romani minority, in the article's view, such an identity transformation also appears applicable to any group suffering from actual or perceived deprivation. Whether a ghettoised descendant of Muslim immigrants or a White European believing in their systematic replacement, their susceptibility to adopting extremist identities might be alike.

That said, one critical matter must be emphasised before proceeding further. Radicalisation is not a straightforward process, even though it may seem so at first glance. Put differently, no universal timeline exists regarding its duration. While somebody may undergo it quite quickly, anyone else might do so in a couple of years or even decades (Berger 2018: 127). Aside from that, one must keep in mind that not all radicalised individuals automatically become terrorists, as the vast majority stop or abandon the process at some point before progressing to the violent stages (Silber & Bhatt 2007: 6). Hence, it is vital to distinguish between non-violent and violent radicalisation guiding the impacted ones to be either willing to engage in terrorism or remain committed to non-violent political mobilisation (Bartlett & Miller 2012).

## Deradicalisation and counter-radicalisation

Addressing radicalisation is only one side of the broader discussion. To get the whole picture, it is critical to also pay attention to deradicalisation and counter- -radicalisation. Despite their possible alikeness embedded in contradicting radicalisation, both concern different endeavours. As the former's name implies, its underlying nature lies in reversing the process after individuals become radicalised and indoctrinated into extremist ideologies to help them reintegrate into society based on two principal efforts. Whereas deradicalisation itself concerns the 'renouncement of radical beliefs and tactics', disengagement implies 'a behavioural change away from radical activities' (Lindekilde 2016: 534).

In contrast, counter-radicalisation strives to prevent the population from ever developing sympathies to extremist ideologies. Such efforts either concern community resilience or personal interventions. Whereas the former targets mitigating the risk of vulnerable groups from becoming adherent to extremist beliefs or groups through implementing various measures, e.g. social programmes or awareness campaigns, the latter aims at detecting and interrupting developing radicalisation by established monitoring networks of, among others, police, schools or youth clubs as early as possible. That said, it must be acknowledged that counter-radicalisation is not exempt from criticism, arguing that doing so might backfire and exacerbate one's radicalisation (ibid.: 543–544). While both counter-radicalisation instruments concern quite different areas, in the article's view, the expected outcomes of their implementation might potentially converge in reality. Put differently, as much as awareness campaigns or school programmes attempt to strengthen the target groups' resilience against extremist influences, they might also indirectly improve their ability to recognise radicalisation signs and, therefore, increase the likelihood of intervening. Hence, the article does not differentiate between them.

As the article centres on the Czech Republic, it is worth exploring what Czech authors have suggested regarding counter-radicalisation. Vegrichtová (2019)

argues that the timely detection of radicalised individuals is the most effective, preconditioned by the ceaseless education of professional personnel and raising the awareness of the general public on the one hand, and guaranteeing information sharing among all relevant actors and conducting coordinated and complex interventions by respective authorities on the other, because such a rigorous monitoring network has a high potential in identifying signals of those who are being radicalised, undergo the radicalisation process, radicalise others or behave in a way indicating considerable suspicion of violence planning (ibid.: 524–527). Also, she offers valuable insight into the detection of radicalised children and teenagers, as this represents a growing threat today (Pedersen, Vestel & Bakken 2018; Cherney et al. 2022; Schröder et al. 2022). In her perception, incorporating schools and families into such efforts is critical because early radicalisation signs become particularly visible at the former, and parents are very likely the first to notice personality or behavioural changes in their children (Vegrichtová 2019: 607–614). This resembles Smolík's (2020) view, suggesting that detecting radicalised individuals should not solely be expected from the personnel of the Police, Probation and Mediation Service, and Prison Service but also from other relevant stakeholders, e.g. social workers, teachers, community representatives and the general public – of those, schools and educational institutions are believed to have the highest potential to do so (ibid.: 144).

Having distinguished radicalisation, its process, as well as the differences between deradicalisation and counter-radicalisation, it is time to turn the discussion to the Czech Republic and explore its empirical readiness to face such a threat.

## Turning the discussion to the Czech Republic

### *Exploring the broader extremist landscape in the contemporary Czech Republic*

By differentiating between right-wing, left-wing and religious extremism, one can understand a broader landscape from which radicalised individuals might emerge. Beginning with the latter, the MoI's (2024) report on extremism and prejudicial hatred indicates that the Czech Republic's security apparatus encountered individual cases of Islamic radicalisation, primarily in the cyber domain, despite the moderateness of the Czech Muslim community. Regarding this current and potential radicalisation, according to the report, the most endangered groups are teenagers, converts and individuals who did not practice religion in the past (ibid.: 14). This reflects Lišková and Ťupek's (2022: 482–483) reasoning about the presence of Salafi Jihadism in the Czech Republic, mainly thanks to accessible online propagandist materials. Turning to the former two,

it shows a coinciding development between them. Whereas a growing threat of isolated online right-wing extremist communities is debated and synthesised with the author's ongoing doctoral research on Terrorgram below, both traditional edges of the political spectrum, i.e. neo-Nazis, and orthodox Communists, experience stagnation and marginalisation in contrast with their past successes (MVČR 2024: 9, 12; Mareš 2015; Charvát 2023). Notwithstanding, assuming that such sentiment disappeared from Czech society would be false. To get the whole picture, one must understand the transformed nature[3] of the contemporary Czech political system in which the so-called antisystem movement[4] replaced them (MVČR 2024: 8).

Its roots trace back to the 2015 Migration crisis, when various new anti-Islam/immigrant groups formed, and the disinformation scene began consolidating its position as an alternative to mainstream media by taking over false narratives from Western Europe without any considerable reaction, allowing them to garner followers. This proved critical as the topicality of immigration started weakening. For this reason, the platforms and remaining groups shifted their sole focus on immigration more towards the antisystem sentiment embedded in the criticism of the mainstream political parties, manifestation against the EU and animosity towards Western European liberalism and liberal democracy. This deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic when more people became more inclined to lean towards conspiracies and disinformation. During this time, the disinformation scene did not only absorb the remnants of the far-right but also began closely aligning with the so-called anti-vaccination movement. Although some abandoned such stances when the pandemic ended, others remained adherent to the scene and continued consuming disinformation and conspiracies. After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, this deteriorated even more, also due to the coinciding economic crisis, allowing the antisystem movement to exploit the widespread social fear and financial insecurity, leading to the demonstration on 3 September 2022 (Charvát 2023), attended by approximately 70,000 people (ČTK 2022). From the contemporary perspective, this is critical because the antisystem movement represents the most potent agent of the high social polarisation and radicalisation the Czech Republic faces

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3   Charvát (2023) associates the transformation with three coinciding factors: 1) the formation of 'Dawn' and 'Freedom and Direct Democracy' offering a less extreme alternative to the population with antisystem views who, however, refused to support neo-Nazi parties before; 2) the global shift of right-wing extremist actors from racism, antisemitism and authoritarianism/totalitarianism to anti-Islamism, Euroscepticism and support for direct democracy, making them more attractive to ordinary people; and 3) the socioeconomic crises in the last 15 years, ranging from the 2008 Financial crisis over the 2015 Migration crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. Moreover, such negative development has been exacerbated by the dawn of disinformation since as early as 2015.

4   By the word 'antisystem' the article understands actors challenging the current system's legitimacy with the intention of restructuring it. Notwithstanding, they are not always necessarily antidemocratic (Zilvar 2023: 35).

nowadays, taking advantage of a large group of unsatisfied people who might even be prone to accept the overturn of the currently existing political system (Charvát 2023). What also must be mentioned lies in the link between platforms of the disinformation scene and the remnants of the far-right, embedded either in significant occurrence of antisemitic and racist content,[5] presenting opinions of individuals associated with the milieu, or a direct connection to it (MVČR n.d.). Such conduct is possible by exploiting the so-called borderline content protected by the freedom of speech. Therefore, more ordinary Czechs may encounter such convictions and narratives containing extremist content, likely without recognising them based on the use of well-tried manipulative techniques of the disinformation scene (ibid.).

Why does this transformation matter when the antisystem movement and disinformation scene have the most likely potential to mainly influence social polarisation and non-violent radicalisation, as aforementioned? The answer lies in the lesson the Czech Republic learned about its dark side in 2017 when Jaromír Balda, a seventy-year-old pensioner and a firm supporter of the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD),[6] became the first Czech convicted of terrorism.[7] Although there are unknowns about his radicalisation process, according to his wife, Balda spent an enormous amount of time online, likely consuming disinformation and conspiracy theories about immigration (Svobodová 2019). What must be taken into consideration is that he has a personality disorder influencing his behaviour and judgment, as well as explosive anger and aggression converging into impulsivity (Lazarov 2020: 49), which might have made him more susceptible to radicalisation at the pre-radicalisation level leading to the self-indoctrination stage as a result of the then-ongoing migration crisis (Silber & Bhatt 2007). While Balda's action did not resemble a traditional terrorist attack, it only unveiled the potential of the antisystem movement and disinformation scene to indirectly contribute to somebody's radicalisation, especially should the individual have some preexisting vulnerabilities, as the consumption of disinformation and conspiracy theories has been associated with its initiation (Leonard & Philippe 2021; Vegetti & Littvay 2022; Moskalenko & Romanova 2022; Piazza 2022).

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5    For example, the great replacement theory, Kalergi plan, or attacks against George Soros.

6    When connecting Jaromír Balda with SPD, it must be acknowledged that the circuit court of Prague 7 complied with the latter's claim regarding its fallacious denomination as a xenophobically oriented populist political party and attributing to it a dominant role in amplifying prejudiced hatred by the Ministry of the Interior (ČTK 2024).

7    Jaromír Balda intentionally chopped down tree logs onto rail tracks between the stations Mladá Boleslav-Bakov nad Jizerou and Bělá pod Bezdězem-Bezděz, which two incoming trains collided with in June and July 2017. Besides, he left leaflets with the exclamation 'Allahu Akbar' at the crime scene and distributed materials written in broken Czech to incite public hostility against immigrants (Svobodová 2019).

## Synthesising the MoI's warning about online extremist communities with the author's doctoral research on Terrorgram

As aforementioned, the MoI considered isolated online right-wing extremist communities the most severe threat in its latest two reports (MVČR 2023a; 2024). According to them, such entities constitute an ideal radicalisation-conducive environment, particularly due to a specific subculture defined by a unique language, ideology, lifestyle and values, despite their limited number. The latter warned that the Czech Republic is not exempt from this growing transnational phenomenon based on the arrest of the two teenagers for planning a terrorist attack on three embassies in Prague (MVČR 2024). While various platforms host them, e.g. Stormfront, 4chan or TamTam (Tuters 2020; Weimann & Pack 2023; Törnberg & Törnberg 2024), Telegram, nicknamed Terrorgram[8] by the ecosystem (Katz 2022), became a prominent sanctuary of the extreme right due to high anonymity and lenient content moderation (Molla 2021). Importantly, at least one of them is known to have participated in Telegram extremist groups (Dohnalová 2023). Besides, this extremist community became infamous thanks to Juraj Krajčík, the perpetrator of the Bratislava shooting, who thanked it in his manifesto.[9] To understand and expand the MoI's warning, the author synthesises this with the hitherto knowledge from his ongoing doctoral research on Terrorgram, mainly studying the in-group interaction among members of two public groups, i.e. Sigmaland and Aryan Guild.[10]

First and foremost, such isolated online communities serve as virtual marketplaces offering their participants a highly secure and anonymous environment for engaging in various activities necessary for maintaining their transnational existence, ranging from socialising with like-minded peers, exchanging all sorts of propagandist materials and, crucially, exhibiting extremely violent behaviour embedded in fantasising about mass killing of ideological enemies, e.g. Jews, Muslims or the LGBTI+ community, facilitated by the available communication tools of the Telegram platform, i.e. textual messages and various audiovisual stimuli. That said, one must understand that they are comprised of already indoctrinated individuals into right-wing extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories. For this reason, those at the beginning of the radicalisation process would not

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8  In the author's view, the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies provides the best definition of Terrorgram, portraying it as 'a self-called collective of channels and chatrooms involved in spreading dissident ideas, glorifying terrorism, calling for violence, spreading extremist ideological materials and demonising minority groups' (ITSTIME 2022), which has no official structure and operates as a loose network (Kriner & Ihler 2022).

9  Although the author owns the manifesto, he will not cite it so as not to propagate the document.

10  It must be acknowledged and emphasised that neither study has yet been published at the time of writing the article. Whereas the former was presented at the NoPSA 2024 XX Nordic Policial Science Congress in Bergen in June 2024, the latter was submitted to a peer-reviewed academic journal Patterns of Prejudice.

very likely join them due to the aforementioned conduct, which might still be too extreme for them. What became particularly concerning regarding their membership base was the probable presence of teenagers and adolescents in the analysed groups. Although this cannot be generalised because their participants diligently protect their identity and personal information, some indeed either shared their age with others (ranging from 12-years-old to early 20s), debated topics typical for them, e.g. school or computer games, or used a language of this age group rather than adults (Zilvar & Mareš 2024; Zilvar 2024).

Considering Törnberg and Törnberg's (2024) view of radicalisation as a group socialisation process, this is concerning as such isolated online communities represent a quite easily accessible and anonymous radicalisation-conducive ecosystem where indoctrinated individuals can deepen their radicalisation by interacting with one another and potentially convert the exhibited violent fantasies into real-life violence without being detected by law enforcement or intelligence agencies. This reasoning reflects the empirical knowledge about the Bratislava shooting. According to a comment made by Jaroslav Naď[11] after the arrest of another Slovak right-wing extremist known as Slovakbro – an influential figure in Krajčík's radicalisation according to his manifesto – Slovakia had no intelligence about Krajčík beforehand (Vilček 2022).

### Radicalisation threats the Czech Republic must be ready to potentially counter

Based on the analysed extremist landscape in the contemporary Czech Republic, the following three radicalisation threats are the most probable. First, although the Czech Muslim community is moderate and small, the country cannot rule out the possibility of individual radicalisation considering the highly available propaganda online. Second, the persisting sociopolitical polarisation and economic hardship might initiate the radicalisation of vulnerable individuals, resembling the case of Jaromír Balda. Third, the existence of transnational online right-wing extremist communities, whose members are likely teenagers and adolescents, constitutes, in the author's view, the most severe radicalisation threat for the country, as the two teenagers and Juraj Krajčík indicated. The reason lies in the fact that their participants are already indoctrinated into extremist ideologies who might only accelerate their radicalisation to violence due to socialising with like-minded peers adherent to extremely violent fantasies against the out-groups.

Having said that, one must ask: What stakeholders does the Czech Republic include in its efforts to detect such radicalised individuals?

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11   A former Slovak minister of defence.

### *The Czech Republic's Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026 vis-à-vis the identified radicalisation threats*

Because the concept covers a wide range of objectives bound to three identified problem areas,[12] which the MoI considers insufficient regarding contemporary trends and developments in the field of extremism and prejudicial hatred, counter-radicalisation efforts solely constitute a narrow part of the broader endeavour targeted at strengthening the responsiveness against the contemporary threats. Of those, the B2-specific objective is the most relevant for the article's inquiry because it focuses on maximising the Czech Republic's ability to detect radicalised individuals embedded primarily in terrorism prevention, particularly the threat of the so-called lone wolves. Not only does the objective expect law enforcement and security agencies to be responsible for this agenda, but it also anticipates their cooperation with other relevant stakeholders potentially capable of assisting them. Besides, the concept foresees adopting efficient measures from other countries (MVČR 2021). Regarding particular initiatives leading to the success of specific objectives, the MoI outlines them in three two--year action plans. Since the concept's introduction, two have been published. Of them, the 2023–2024 one is particularly valuable as it not only introduces planned activities for the two-year period, but also evaluates the implemented measures from the 2021–2022 action plan. Whereas four were conducted during the latter, two are outlined for 2023–2024 (MVČR 2023b).

After analysing them, it became clear that the initiatives do not seem rigorous enough to address the complexity of radicalisation nowadays. Despite the concept's attempt to strengthen the Czech Republic's ability to detect radicalised individuals, the outlined measures concern only the Police, Prison Service, and the Probation and Mediation Service (ibid.: 9–10, 26–28). By saying that, the article does not underestimate those agencies' roles in detecting radicalised individuals. However, such a one-sided focus on state authorities appears to insufficiently react to the whole complexity of radicalisation and might leave the country vulnerable to radicalised individuals should they proceed through the process like Jaromír Balda or Juraj Krajčík, who were not detected before perpetrating their attacks. Considering the current role of the internet in radicalisation and the existence of anonymous online communities, in particular, neither the Police, Prison Service, nor the Probation and Mediation Service seem likely to identify such persons. Also, even if they were able to detect them, that would likely happen at a point when such individuals would already be indoctrinated into extremist ideologies before or after committing a crime.

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12  Thay are A) protection of crime victims, B) protection of democracy and C) building and strengthening resilience.

However, the desired intervention, in the article's view, should occur as early as possible to prevent vulnerable individuals from adopting such beliefs or joining extremist online communities.

Considering the concept's focus on the Police, Prison Service, and the Probation and Mediation Service, as well as the B2-specific objective, the article moves to Slovakia and Germany to investigate their counter-radicalisation efforts involving other stakeholders affiliated neither with law enforcement nor intelligence agencies from which the Czech Republic may learn and possibly incorporate similar plans into the MoI's 2025–2026 action plan.

## Seeking inspiration in Slovakia and Germany

The following sections investigate implemented detecting instruments in similar strategic documents of Slovakia and Germany to indicate potential lessons from which the Czech Republic might learn. Whereas the former was selected due to the historical and social closeness between both countries, which makes it the most appropriate mirror for the Czech Republic among other Central European countries, the latter constitutes the state with the most extensive experience with terrorism (Statista 2023). Therefore, Slovakia and Germany might provide the Czech Republic with not only valuable inspiration regarding how to improve its ability to detect radicalised individuals, but Slovakia also provides a feasible model due to the economic similarity between itself and the Czech Republic.

### *Slovakia*

As aforementioned, the historical and social closeness between both countries makes Slovakia the most suitable example for the Czech Republic among other Central European states. For this reason, the article explored the Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation and Extremism's Appendix No.2 to indicate stakeholders involved in Slovakia's counter-radicalisation efforts regarding the detection of radicalised individuals. Reading through the list of specified measures indicated that five of them reflect such efforts. Indeed, three do not explicitly formulate this ambition; however, in the article's view, their character may indirectly contribute to developing such an ability in the target groups.

By synthesising them, elementary and secondary school teachers seem to have a considerable role in Slovakia's efforts to combat radicalisation and extremism. This is particularly visible in the tasks 1.6, 2.3 and 2. 9. Not only does the former assign the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport together with the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights to monitor violations of human rights and expressions of extremism at elementary and secondary schools, but it also aims at utilising such knowledge for formulating

recommendations for teachers instructing them about recognising and monitoring such behavioural deviations. Also, the 2.3 measure seeks to increase the responsiveness of various actors, among others, teachers and youth workers, to radicalisation-conducive influences on the internet and social media. The latter strives to expand the awareness and foreknowledge of elementary and secondary school teachers about the threat of radicalisation and extremism online and offline. Additionally, this measure also concerns pupils and students (MVSR 2020: 3, 8–9, 11). The reason why those efforts appear relevant for detecting radicalised individuals lies in task 4.1, targeted at individual interventions at schools if pupils or students were suspected of a fundamental change in ideological views or exhibiting extremist manifestation (ibid.: 16). Although the conceptual framework does not specify the particular actors responsible for performing such monitoring efforts, teachers seem to be the most likely to consider the previous measures and the fact that the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport is the responsible authority for implementing this task.

Besides, task 2.1 aims at strengthening the activities of a comprehensive interdepartmental network of professionals, i.e. local school administrators, the municipal and state police, social workers, representatives of registered churches and religious associations, non-profit organisations, youth workers and community centres, to monitor and identify threats associated with radicalisation and extremism to protect vulnerable groups at the local level. Also, it strives to produce a manual for frontline workers to ensure and increase their awareness of violent extremism and radicalisation (ibid.: 7–8).

### Germany

Unlike Slovakia, which was chosen due to its historical and social closeness with the Czech Republic, Germany is the state with the most extensive experience with terrorism in Central Europe (Statista 2023). Hence, exploring its counter-radicalisation initiatives might provide valuable insight from which its eastern, less experienced neighbour could take inspiration. Not only has it faced Islamist radicalisation in recent years, but the country has also encountered left- and right-wing extremists (Caniglia, Winkler & Métais 2020; Böckler et al. 2020; Koehler 2023). For this reason, Germany's Federal Government Strategy to Prevent Extremism and Promote Democracy, particularly its appendix specifying undertaken and planned initiatives, was explored to indicate stakeholders engaged in detecting radicalised individuals.

First and foremost, a manual called 'Faith or extremism?' seems to constitute an excellent example of increasing the general public's awareness, mainly parents, relatives and teachers, about radicalisation and available local professional multilingual counselling. The reason lies in its aim targeted at strengthening

ordinary people's role in recognising and intervening in one's developing radicalisation without the involvement of law enforcement (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2015; BMFSFJ 2017: 40). Besides, other implemented educational and preventive measures, falling under the federal 'Live Democracy!' programme, intended for various groups, like parents, relatives or young people, might also enhance their ability to detect radicalised individuals due to their emphasis given on topics like antisemitism, antiziganism, homophobia and, critically, intervention formats in the field of Islamist and right-wing extremism, as well as left-wing militancy (BMFSFJ 2017: 34, 41).

What also deserves attention lies in the strategy's comprehensive focus on raising awareness about extremism and radicalisation trends among children and young people. Indeed, such efforts rather reflect the resilience-building domain of counter-radicalisation; however, as aforementioned, doing so might also simultaneously influence the ability of regarded groups to detect radicalisation signs. Its 'Media and Internet' section unveils rigorous initiatives targeted at educating children and young people about online radicalisation threats. For example, the Federal Agency for Civil Education was assigned to create a video campaign informing about various forms of extremism. Another called 'No Hate Speech' endeavoured to make young people more knowledgeable about hate speech online, and a measure using the 'jugendschutz.net' platform analysed extremist websites from the point of view of child protection to formulate evidence-based strategies and reports summarising the findings for the public. While the initiatives undertaken in this section centred on children and young people, the Federal Ministry of the Interior's initiative intended to inform citizens about extremism and potential preventive options (ibid.: 42–43).

## Recommendations for the MoI's 2025–2026 Action Plan

Whereas the Czech Republic's detecting efforts are rested upon the Police, Prison Service, and Probation and Mediation Service, Slovakia and Germany's concepts provided valuable insight into the engagement of other stakeholders – something that the Czech concept also anticipates, after all. Although they primarily concerned resilience-building against extremist influences, the same endeavours might also likely strengthen the detection ability as more people might recognise radicalisation signs and, therefore, intervene. Considering the current complexity of radicalisation, counter-radicalisation should likely operate in a two-level format to be efficient, i.e. law enforcement and intelligence agencies on the one hand, and other supporting stakeholders on the other. By synthesising the identified evidence from Slovakia and Germany with Vegrichtová's (2019) and Smolík's (2020) reasoning, representing the Czech research on counter-radicalisation, the MoI should include the following three stakeholders in the 2025–2026 action plan to properly address the B2-specific

objective of the Czech Republic's Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026.

## Teachers

Elementary and secondary school teachers have the potential to be a vital detecting component should they be provided with adequate training about radicalisation, extremism and instruction on appropriate monitoring and intervening. As much as the Czech concept emphasises the ceaseless strengthening of the ability of the Police, Prison Service, and Probation and Mediation Service personnel to detect radicalised individuals or recognise radicalisation signs, elementary and secondary school teachers should get similar attention, providing them with identical expertise. Teachers spend an enormous amount of time with children and teenagers; therefore, reflecting Vegrichtová's (2019) and Smolík's (2020) assumptions, it seems reasonable to consider them one of the most potent frontline stakeholders able to recognise radicalisation signs or suspicious changes in behaviour if adequately trained. Put differently, teachers might play the same role in detecting radicalised individuals as do correctional officers in prisons. Hence, the action plan should assign the MoI and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to develop an educational evidence-based training or workshop for teachers about radicalisation and extremism similar to the one, e.g., for police officers.

## Children, teenagers and young people

Paying attention to schools and educational institutions, teachers are not the only stakeholder likely capable of detecting radicalised individuals. As Ellefsen and Sandberg (2022) argue, peers bear a similar potential to do so and recognise early radicalisation signs and intervene likely without any unwanted consequences (ibid.). Such conduct was visible in the aforementioned case of the two teenagers where, according to Judge Kafka, classmates of the one played an important role in uncovering them (Kozelka 2022). Also, as Juraj Krajčík showed, this generation can easily participate in transnational extremist ecosystems due to their language skills if radicalised. Instead of joining some local Slovak right-wing extremist group, he engaged in online isolated communities on 8chan and later Telegram. Hence, the action plan should urge the MoI and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to create an evidence-based training or workshop for children, teenagers and young people to prepare them for potential encounters with extremist ideologies and recognising radicalisation signs. By doing so, they might become a vital monitoring component inside their social bubbles, likely capable of successfully interrupting developing radicalisation.

### The general public

Aside from teachers and children, teenagers and young people, the general public should also be perceived as a potent stakeholder in detecting radicalised individuals, reflecting Vegrichtová's (2019) reasoning about the effective detection of radicalisation as a society-wide problem (ibid.: 524–525). Considering its current complexity, increasing the general public's awareness of various aspects of radicalisation, mainly indicators and warning signals, is vital to raise their ability to detect radicalised individuals. This should also provide lucid guidance on when, how and where to report reasonable concerns over someone's radicalisation or engagement with extremist groups and, critically, available options for professional help. The latter might resemble Germany's 'Faith or extremism?' manual. For instance, the MoI might do this in cooperation with the Police and Czech Television, as well as social media companies, by initiating a public awareness campaign similar to other recent ones, e.g. 'Czechia on Drugs'[13] (Růžičková 2024). In particular this should centre on parents, considered a key stakeholder in the detecting efforts alongside schools (Vegrichtová 2019), and who, however, often lack the necessary knowledge about the adequate reaction to the growing adherence of their children to extremist beliefs (Sikkens et al. 2018). Should they be able to notice radicalisation signs at the beginning of the process, parents might constitute the most pivotal stakeholder in intervening in radicalisation in children without any undesirable consequences possibly caused by law enforcement (Ellefsen & Sandberg 2022).

## Conclusion

Recent years have indicated that post-communist Central Europe is not exempt from the threat of radicalisation. Therefore, the article analysed the Czech Republic's Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026 to explore the involved stakeholders in the efforts concerning the detection of radicalised individuals vis-à-vis the country's recent experience embedded in the arrest of the two teenagers for planning a terrorist attack in Prague, the radicalisation of Jaromír Balda, the 2023 shooting at Charles University's Philosophical Faculty and also the 2022 Bratislava shooting because of its historical and social closeness with Slovakia. The analysis indicated that the concept's B2-specific objective of strengthening the ability to detect radicalised individuals concerns only the Police, Prison Service and Probation and Mediation Service. Whereas those stakeholders are vital in doing so, it completely omits other relevant ones able to assist them despite the document's such expectation. The apparent weakness of this one-sided focus is that those agen-

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13    Translated from the Czech original 'Česko na drogách'.

cies often detect and work with already indoctrinated individuals into extremist ideologies before or after committing a crime. However, the desired intervention should happen as early as possible, which they likely do not have the potential to execute. Thus, the article recommended incorporating teachers, children, teenagers and young people, as well as the general public, into the MoI's 2025–2026 action plan to address the complexity of radicalisation nowadays.

Finally, yet importantly, no one should start panicking and expect a sudden surge of radicalised individuals in the Czech Republic, as only few advance through the whole radicalisation process and decide to commit a terrorist attack. Notwithstanding, this threat must not be downplayed because even a single person can cause indiscriminate violence and damage. Jaromír Balda and the two teenagers, as well as the perpetrator of the 2023 shooting at Charles University's Philosophical Faculty, who was not radicalised (Ciroková & Valášek 2024), proved that the Czech Republic does not exist in a vacuum. As the old saying goes, 'It is better to be safe than sorry'. The country was neither of those things in 2017 or in 2025 when the two teenagers planned to perpetrate their terrorist attack to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing (Hesová 2022). Will it be next time?

## Acknowledgements

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# Silent Struggles: Exploring Apathy and Civic Passivity among Czech Citizens in Debt Enforcement

VÁCLAV ŠMATERA, ANETA PINKOVÁ

**Abstract:** *This research paper presents a novel contribution to the field by addressing an important and previously neglected issue: the impact of debt enforcement actions on the political views of Czech citizens. The study employs a qualitative research design and draws on data collected through interviews with individuals who have experienced debt enforcement. Specifically, the study focuses on how these individuals perceive state power and politics, revealing a concerning pattern of alienation from the state. Notably, most participants did not seek assistance or advice from state institutions when facing debt enforcement, exhibiting apathy, critical attitudes and civic passivity. These results are significant, as they introduce a potentially important explanatory variable in citizens' political attitudes, with potential implications extending beyond the Czech Republic to other former Eastern Bloc countries.*

**Keywords:** *debt enforcement, civic disengagement, political apathy, political attitudes*

## Introduction

Many circumstances influence people's political views, some well-explored, others substantially less so. Among the latter is the experience of overindebtedness and, eventually, of facing debt enforcement action (Grossmann & Jurajda 2023). It means a situation when a person can no longer pay a debt, and a bailiff can confiscate property that the debtor does not need for dignified survival.

In the Czech Republic, this is a large group of people, as almost four million debt enforcement actions are ongoing against around 631,554 defaulters (Exekutorská komora 2021). Considering that these actions affect the families of defaulters, the number of Czechs affected by this issue is much greater than it might seem at first glance.[1] Considering the economic difficulties – and the social and health problems that stem from them – faced by people who undergo debt enforcement action, this is a significant society-wide problem (Szénássy et al. 2017). This argument is supported by the fact that many people who are or were facing enforcement have experience with moving into the grey economy (Trlifajová & Hurrle 2018; Trlifajová et al. 2018; Median 2018).

This paper examines the assessment of the rule of law by individuals experiencing debt enforcement action. It also explores how such people relate to their fundamental democratic right of choosing their elected representatives, and their attitudes towards other political rights, such as assembly, association and petition. The study also delves into their perspectives on engaging with institutions and their sense of connection or detachment from elected representatives.

The paper describes the outcomes of a qualitative analysis of data obtained from semi-structured interviews and answers the following research question: What views do Czechs facing debt enforcement action have on the rule of law, elections, the political system, political rights and other dimensions of the political process?

What do we know so far about these people's views?[2] Only 41 percent of people in the lower income groups with experience of enforcement action thought that the social system change after 1989 was meaningful. A substantial number (46 percent) took a negative position on the post-1989 social and economic transformation. Only 27 percent described democracy as the best form of government, and nearly half (49 percent) indicated that for people like them, it did not matter much whether the regime was democratic or non-democratic. Comparing this with the overall support for democracy in Czech society (56 percent), we see that the support for democracy among low-income people with experience of enforcement action was less than half. However, the quantitative data so far do not indicate that people facing enforcement action radicalise themselves politically and vote for extremist parties (Median 2018).

Corresponding to this are the results of the only research done so far on the voting behaviour of people facing debt enforcement (conducted for the 2017

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1  Regrettably, aside from Slovakia, there is a dearth of data regarding the prevalence of debt enforcement actions among the population in other countries within the former Eastern Bloc.

2  There are two sources of data for this. The first is a survey conducted by Median in 2018 and the second by NMS the following year. It needs noting that the survey samples included people who faced enforcement action in the previous five or ten years respectively. This means that the samples also included people who no longer faced action, and these can be expected to be less critical of the system than those who continued to face enforcement action.

parliamentary elections), which found that they have lower turnout and tend to vote more for populist parties (Grossmann & Jurajda 2023). Concerning support for democracy, let us recall S. M. Lipset's argument, which says that if people are doing well economically, they will also likely be mostly satisfied with democracy (Lipset 1981). The Czech case empirically supports this. Support for democracy strongly correlates with respondents' economic satisfaction (CVVM 2021b).

Looking at the other available data, we see that people facing enforcement action felt that citizens could not much influence how society works. Only 25 percent believed they could influence issues in their municipality or town, and only 23 percent thought legitimate demands would be met in Czech society. Less than half (49 percent) thought they could openly talk about these problems in society (Median 2018). Two-thirds noted that their interest in politics and public affairs had decreased since they faced enforcement action (NMS 2019). It must also be noted that these people exhibited substantially lower levels of general social trust. Asked whether other people could be trusted, only 25 percent of them answered in the positive (Median 2018). They also trusted public authorities less overall than the general population. Only 37 percent trusted the judiciary, 18 percent the government and 25 percent the European Union. We know that their mistrust of democracy is linked with their mistrust of the enforceability of the law. Only 18 percent thought that victims of fraud could obtain legal redress in the Czech Republic (Median 2018).

These data demonstrate that people facing debt enforcement are highly critical. In this paper, we follow up on these questionnaire-based surveys and investigate their findings with qualitative research. We examine how these people interpret their experiences, what conclusions they draw and how they form a perspective on these problems (Braun & Clarke 2013; Disman 2011; Merriam & Tisdell 2016). While the data so far on the views of people facing enforcement action have been expressed numerically, the qualitative study examines the issue through the respondents' words, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of their positions.

## The theoretical framework for the issue of debt enforcement action in the Czech Republic

The phenomenon of indebtedness is directly linked with that of debt enforcement action. There are two categories of indebtedness. The first is a normal indebtedness, which is not worrying in itself and can even be considered a part of our culture. A certain measure of indebtedness, whether due to loans or other financial instruments, is a normal part of contemporary life. Living on credit is taken as natural in our society, and there is nothing startling about it. However, when people fail to manage their debts, their situation is framed as immoral

indebtedness. This concept is often invoked in connection with debt enforcement action. The situation of the debtors is in most cases seen as their failure alone. Thus, the debtors are negatively affected not just by the debt itself but also by the stigma attached to the debt (Ošťádalová 2017; Szénássy et al. 2017; Hoření Samec 2021).

Let us stop for a moment to consider this perception of overindebtedness and debt enforcement action as a stigma. This is an important dimension of the investigated issue, influencing it from multiple sides. Where does this stigmatisation of excessive debt come from? Simply put, from culture and the prevailing public opinion. Over the past decades, this dominant social discourse has been influenced by two schools of thought that substantially overlap. These are privatism (Hirt 2012; Pospěch 2021; Ronald 2008) and neoliberalism (Bloom 2017; Dale & Fabry 2018).

Privatism is characterised by a notional withdrawal of citizens into the private sphere and a corresponding lack of interest in public affairs. People become privatists when their values and efforts are almost exclusively concerned with achieving objectives in the private sphere. People's identities under privatism are not so much linked with their belonging to a particular social group as with their economic status (Hirt 2012).

Although this trend can be identified in countries west of the Czech Republic, it largely concerns those of the former so-called Eastern Bloc, where it is more observable. Some scholars have described the post-communist region as privatism on steroids (Pospěch 2021). This has been explained by reference to the legacy of communism, which left people suspicious of all things public. In other words, the communist regimes very seriously damaged citizens' trust in the public sphere. Here it needs noting that the barrier that emerged under the communist regime in people's relating to the state remains standing to some extent today (Bernhagen & Marsh 2007; Linek et al. 2017; Sedláčková 2012, Sztompka 1999).

If people realise their potential almost exclusively in the private sphere, it is evident that life will not flourish in associations or fellowships, yet we have known since Tocqueville that these organisations are the imaginary schools of democracy (de Tocqueville & Jochmann 2000; Sedláčková 2012). For instance, politics is an important part of life for only 26 percent of Czechs, while the European average is 42 percent (European Values Study 2017).

How is privatism related to debt enforcement action? What matters is that if, under privatism, people are not particularly interested in public affairs, they are interested even less in complex problems such as enforcement action. As the problem of substantial numbers of Czech people facing enforcement action has been long ignored, it has simply become worse. But most importantly, since privatism extols the value of personal consumption, anyone who fails in this domain is stigmatised, plain and simple. The other connection between

privatism and enforcement action is that people are insufficiently socially connected. As they are not active in the Tocquevillian schools of democracy, they are lacking substantial social capital (Tocqueville & Jochman 2000; Sedláčková 2012). When they get into financial difficulties, they have nowhere to turn for help or advice, and hence they are more likely to face enforcement action.

Now, let us examine neoliberalism, which is characterised by the dominant role of the free market and market mechanisms in society (Bloom 2017; Dale & Fabry 2018; Lupták 2013). It could also be described by the words of Michael Sandel, who, in his book *What Money (Can't) Buy*, talks about the transition from a market economy to a market society (Sandel 2012). Additionally, neoliberalism elevates consumerism to the core of human purpose (Lupták 2013), a trait it shares with privatism (Pospěch 2021). Wacquant argues that neoliberalism leads to the expansion of the state's repressive functions. He draws on Bourdieu's division of the state's roles into the left and right hands, where the left hand symbolises social security, education and healthcare, while the right hand represents economic discipline and the state's repressive power. Under neoliberalism, Wacquant asserts, the state increasingly relies on its right hand when dealing with the lower social classes (Wacquant 2004).

Neoliberalism has undoubtedly shaped and continues to shape debt enforcement in the Czech Republic. The current legislative framework for debt enforcement has emerged from a social discourse that emphasised free market values alongside Bourdieu's concept of the right hand, which will be further discussed in the subsequent section.

## The empirical context of debt enforcement action in the Czech Republic

In order to understand the positions of people facing debt enforcement action, we also need to understand the broader context of debt enforcement in the Czech Republic. For more than two decades, the system that has been in place in the country is based on private debt enforcement officers or agents (or bailiffs). In contract to earlier times, these officers are not directly subject to state power. As a result of this systemic set-up, the relationship between the bailiff and the creditor has gained in importance. The introduction of a market – influenced by the doctrine of neoliberalism – in debt enforcement has inevitably led to competition for custom among officers. Officers are dependent on custom from creditors, and this has many negative consequences for debtors (Hábl et al. 2021; Návrh zákona o exekucích – Důvodová zpráva 2011).

In other words, many enforcement officers, not least due to competitive pressures and hoping for greater profits, have been acting unscrupulously. They often exert pressure on debtors, who are frequently not fully aware of their rights. Nearly half (45 percent) of people who had experience of debt

enforcement said that the officer had behaved incorrectly. Further, 82 percent of these people said that they believed that the officer represented the interests of the creditor, while only eight percent (!) believed they represented the state in a dispute between the creditor and the debtor (NMS 2019), as indeed the position should be according to the law.

Why is it important to examine here the relationship between debtors, enforcement officers and other important institutions that directly influence the situation of people who find themselves facing debt enforcement action? Simply because, for debtors, these are important experiences of the way the law is exercised, and ultimately of the functioning of the rule of law in the Czech Republic. Direct personal experience of the legislative set-up and the exercise of state power influences a citizen's relationship with the institutions of the state and the state itself. Here the concept of access points, proposed by Anthony Giddens who examined trust in abstract systems, is noteworthy. One of the abstract systems in Giddens's approach is the state. In this understanding, people develop trust or mistrust in the abstract system precisely through its access points (Giddens 2003). The question then is, do debtors perceive bailiffs as these Giddensian access points to the abstract system that is the state?

Let us move on to other parameters of the Czech debt enforcement system, which are also important for how the people caught in it experience the character of the rule of law and ultimately the exercise of state power. For a long time, the legislative framework was set up in a way that guaranteed attractive remuneration to enforcement agents and lawyers (Hábl et al. 2021; Hůle 2021; Gajdoš & Novák 2020). This needs to be considered in the context of the competitive system of enforcement agents described above and the other instruments, adopted under the influence of neoliberalism, that negatively impact debtors.

The first among these are arbitration clauses. Essentially, when someone wanted to take a loan from a non-bank lender, the contract commonly included a clause saying that, should there be a dispute between debtor and creditor, this would be decided by an arbitrator, who was to be chosen by the creditor (!) and derived his business profits from work provided by creditors. This meant that these arbitrators were not motivated to decide against the creditors. Ultimately, many disputes between creditors and debtors were not decided by independent judges but by arbitrators linked with the creditors (Hábl et al. 2021, Prokop 2019). Thus, some of the judiciary power was transferred to private parties, and what is more, this privatisation of state power was conducted in such a way that systemically harmed the weaker party, i.e. the debtor.

Another instrument that negatively affected debtors was that there was no cap on late-payment penalties on consumer loans. This simply meant that when people borrowed from a non-bank provider and did not pay an instalment on time, their debt increased substantially. It was common practice for a debt to grow to a multiple of the original borrowed sum. The business model of many companies

was simply based on this predatory interest on late payment (Hábl et al. 2021; Hůle 2021; Prokop 2019). To show how widespread this practice was: after the legislation rationally regulated this area by Act No. 257/2016 Coll., the number of providers of this type of loan decreased from several tens of thousands (!) to less than a hundred (Ministerstvo financí 2020).

Although interest on late payment, arbitration clauses and remuneration to enforcement officers and lawyers have been limited by law in recent years (Hábl et al. 2021; Hůle 2021; Prokop 2019; Zákon č. 257/2016), we need to bear in mind that many people who face enforcement action today have had direct experience of these neoliberal instruments. Seventy-five percent of them had experienced a substantial increase to the amount originally owed due to high enforcement officer and lawyer fees. More than half (55 percent) said that their original debt increased substantially due to immoral interest rates and penalties charged (Hábl et al. 2021; Hůle 2021; Prokop 2019; Zákon č. 257/2016 Sb.).

Experience based on legislation in force in the past continues to co-inform people's positions towards the state today. The Czech statute book contained, and to some extent continues to contain, instruments that forced many people to face enforcement action; the system as it was set up failed to help them out of the debt trap.

And then, there is the instrument of insolvency (debt relief). With so many people facing debt enforcement action, why do so few apply for debt relief? One of the reasons is that, under the insolvency regime, a greater proportion of their salary is taken each month than during enforcement action. But the most important reason is that to successfully complete the insolvency process and be debt-free at its end, people must repay for five years, during which they must make 'every possible effort' that is justifiably asked of them (Hábl et al. 2021; Hůle 2021; Prokop 2019; Zákon č. 31/2019 Sb.).

The definition of this 'every possible effort' is uncertain because it is only at the end of the entire process of debt relief (i.e. after five years) that a judge decides whether a debtor tried hard enough to pay their debts – so it's entirely up to the judge's interpretation whether in the end someone will really be rid of their debt or not (Hábl et al. 2021; Hůle 2021; Prokop 2019; Zákon č. 31/2019 Sb.).[3]

## Analysis of the views of people facing debt enforcement action

This key part of our paper describes the results and findings of our qualitative study. The source of our data is semi-structured, anonymised interviews with Czech citizens facing enforcement action. It is a non-random and purposive selection, or a criterion-based one (Merriam & Tisdell 2016; Patton 2015).

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3    There is currently an amendment in the legislative process that would make debt relief in the Czech Republic easier to access so that more citizens could start entering it.

The study sample consisted of nine respondents, across age groups, genders and municipality size. The number of respondents is lower than is typical in qualitative research[4] because it is difficult to find citizens facing debt enforcement willing to talk about the issue due to the above-discussed stigma. Additionally, resource constraints limited our ability to engage a larger sample. Future studies could benefit from a broader sample size to expand on our findings. Despite these limitations, it is essential to note that saturation was achieved using the 'saturation +1' model, ensuring the robustness of our findings.

During the data analysis, we created 30 codes, which were then merged into five categories. The analysis was conducted in part manually and in part using the Atlas.ti software. The following visualisation captures the relations among the codes.

**Figure 1. Concept map reflecting relationships between codes and categories**
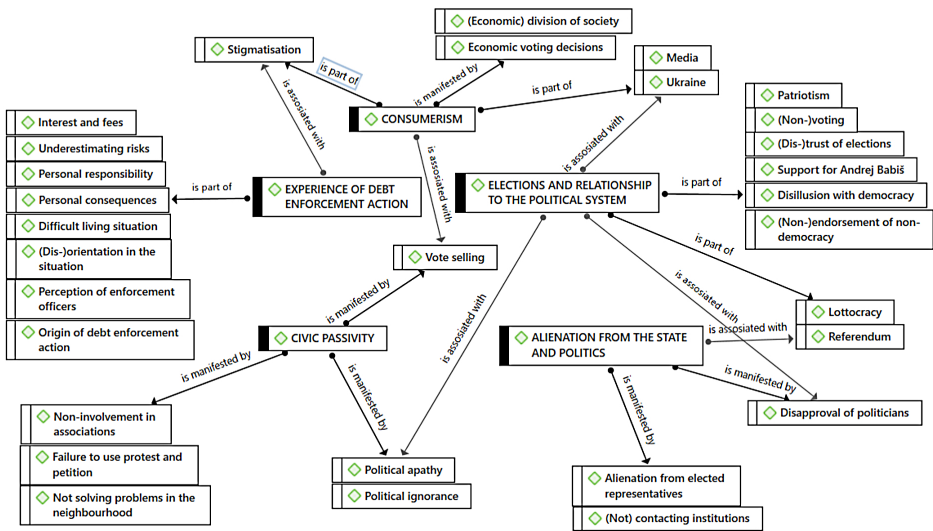


Source: Authors

As the scheme shows: 30 codes were used in the data analysis, [5] which were merged into five categories.[6] The category 'Experience of debt enforcement action' was based directly on the first group of questions asked. Three more categories, 'Alienation from the state and politics', 'Civic passivity' and 'Elections

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and relationship to the political system', were partly based on the questions asked and partially inferred inductively. The remaining category, 'Consumerism', was purely inductively derived. As the visualisation shows, this category has the largest share of the codes related to the other categories as well.[7]

## *Experience of debt enforcement action*

Respondents found themselves facing debt enforcement action in various ways. Some incurred debts in their business, others failed to pay gas bills or health insurance premiums. People took loans to buy TVs, and some lived outside the system for a long time, paying virtually none of their commitments. The unpaid debt quickly mushroomed and resulted in enforcement action. Many people failed to respond to their deteriorating financial situation in time or underestimated the consequences of defaulting. *En bloc,* the respondents indicated that once one faces enforcement action, it is very difficult to extricate oneself and get rid of the debts. Some respondents said they were at a loss as to what to do. Sometimes they did not even know how many debt enforcement actions were pursued against them or how much they owed.

'To tell you the truth, I don't even dare to get a statement from the post office telling me how much I owe, as that would hurt me' (Romana).

However, the interviews showed that most of the respondents were aware of their own failures that allowed the debt enforcement action to originate. Nonetheless, many emphasised that the system was set up unjustly and made their situation worse.

'Yeah, it's my own fault that I was lax and did not resolve this straight away, or that I did not face it head-on. I am not running away from it. I will not pity myself. But you know, the fact that the state allowed the accumulated debt to be sold to the private sector, and that they charge such a huge percentage for every day of late payment, that really annoys me very much' (Romana).

Respondents typically did not deny their own responsibility for incurring their initial debts. They did, however, emphasise that the set-up of the system was nonsensical, as in their perception it set them often inappropriately draconian penalties. In other words, respondents tended to admit that their own laxness was the cause of the enforcement action against them, but they did not foresee their debts mushrooming as dramatically as they did.

Respondents were also critical of the fact that the payments deduced from their wages were not used to pay off the principal but the interest and charges. In other words, they were unhappy that the legal regulation of debt enforcement allowed their payments to be used for interest and penalties (accessories) and not

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7    The issue of consumerism will not be discussed separately in this paper, as this field is not directly related to our research question.

on the debt itself (the principal), as the overall debt continued to increase as interest continued to be charged. Often the debts decreased only very slowly, or even increased faster than they were amortised. It should be added that this was not exceptional; indeed, as noted above, it was a fairly regular practice arising from free-market neoliberal and consumerist privatist discourse (Hábl et al. 2021).

In terms of their perception of the system as unjust, respondents most often mentioned two aspects: the methods of private enforcement officers (bailiffs) and substantial increases made to their debts. Many respondents were deeply dissatisfied with the present system, in which the officers enforcing the debt are not directly controlled by the state. Some described their unscrupulous practices.

'How they behaved and collected it and what sums they could make out of nothing, it was carnage. Totally Mafioso practices… They call themselves judicial officers, but it has nothing to do with the judiciary, nothing to do with law' (Marek).

In view of the fact that, according to the law, officers represent the state in the dispute between creditor and debtor, their actions as described by respondents seem inappropriate. Considering that these *de facto* private, but *de jure* judicial bailiffs have a certain amount of state power at their disposal and discharge this power in such a way (which corresponds to an enlargement of abovementioned Bourdieu's right hand), one can expect that people's experience of debt enforcement will be projected into their perceptions of state power.

Asked about the consequences of having to face debt enforcement action, respondents answered with such words as:

'I can't do anything, I can't afford anything, I can't even afford to live. Of the salary I make, when I receive CZK 10,000, I pay the rent and end up with 4,500 a month. I can't even afford a proper lodging house, I don't have the money. What good is it that I work as a garbage collector, I now make over 20,000 and they leave me with 10. I can't even afford a flat, I don't have the means. It's a total crisis for me' (Petr).

Another respondent said that debt enforcement action made him join the grey economy and he certainly was not alone.

'The system simply forced me into the grey economy… I am no longer the classic debtor who lives hand to mouth. I envisaged this; everything [I had] is owned by my girlfriend… I still have multiple enforcement actions pursued against me which I do not intend to pay' (Marek).

It is, therefore, clear that the fact that they face enforcement action has considerable adverse consequences for these persons. Last but not least, it should also be mentioned that enforcement action impacts people directly and indirectly, mainly because of the stigma (arising from the discourse of privatism and neoliberalism) attached to it. This is linked with the importance of the value of money in contemporary society, related to the phenomenon of consumerism uncovered by the analysis.

## Alienation from the state and politics

What positions do people facing enforcement action take on the current political and social arrangements? Fundamental in answering this question is to what extent they blame the system of debt enforcement as set by the state for their difficult life situation. As noted above, respondents did not absolve themselves of blame, but also frequently mentioned the unjust legislative framework. The assessments of the degree to which the state was at fault varied across the respondents, but nearly all were convinced that the state shouldered some of the blame. If people think that the system set up by the state is unjust and that this has very negative consequences for them, one – according to the ideal vision of the democratic citizen – might expect them to approach a state institution asking for redress. Yet asked whether they called on some state institution in connection with debt enforcement, respondents answered in the negative.

'It occurred to me many times. I wanted to write a complaint to the Ministry of Justice, but when I cooled down, I didn't bother' (Marek).

'Not at all, certainly not. Because I was the guy who screwed the system somewhat... for instance, I was off sick and registered at the job office while working cash in hand without declaring it. And now I alone pay for this mess and inconsistency' (Pavel).

Interviewer: 'And throughout that time did it ever occur to you that you could approach some public institution?'

Respondent: 'No, not at all, I don't even know which one I could approach.'

I: 'Not even, let's say, a politician?'

R: 'No, no, I wouldn't dare to do that at all.'

I: 'And why not?'

R: 'Well, the politician will say, "must go, have much to do!" And none of the people above will deal with this.'

I: 'Why not?'

R: 'Because they are such people. He's got plenty on his plate, stealing money from the state coffers; who is pure in the government? No one!' (Tomáš).

Most respondents did not approach any state institution either to ask for help in their particular case or to plead that the system was unjust in general. Asked whether they feel supported by any public institution throughout the time debt enforcement action was pursued against them, they mostly answered in the negative.

As the last quotation shows, after being asked whether they had somehow approached a state institution, respondents were asked whether they had called upon a politician. Simplifying matters somewhat, a representative democracy system is based on the idea that elected representatives act according to the will and wishes of the citizens (Pitkin 1972; Rehfeld 2005; Shapiro et al. 2009). Thus, if some social group feels that the law affecting them is unjust, they have

the right to communicate this to their elected representatives, who collectively have the power to amend the relevant legislation. Yet when asked whether they approached a politician, the overwhelming majority of our respondents answered in the negative, for example:

'No, that did not occur to me at all' (Claudie).

If politicians are ignorant of the problems and wishes of their voters, and if people do not anyhow exert pressure on their politicians by airing their grievances, it is obvious that the correspondent legislative changes occur later and are limited, if they occur at all. From this point of view, people facing debt enforcement action bear much responsibility for their own situation.[8] But looking at it again from our respondents' perspective, we see that they did not approach the politicians simply because they did not trust them and were convinced that they would do nothing anyway. Certainly, the stigma attached to financial failure in the social discourse influenced by the doctrines of neoliberalism and privatism forms a significant part of the problem.

As the last cited statements show, people facing debt enforcement action exhibit significant mistrust of politicians, though it needs to be added that criticality and mistrust of politics are present to some degree in all layers of Czech society (Buchtík et al. 2021). For our respondents, these positions were often substantially bolstered by their poor experiences of the exercise of state power.

## *Civic passivity*

The analysis of the interviews with respondents who faced enforcement action reveals the phenomenon of civic passivity (see more in Campbell 1962; Amnå & Ekman 2014: 261–281; Pietrzyk-Reeves & McMahon 2022: 1315–1334). One of its forms, mentioned above, is that, although these people felt that the system was unjust, they had not approached any state institution or politician to ask for redress. Another is that many respondents did not vote, thus failing to exercise their fundamental right to co-decide the fate of their democratic society. Those respondents who did vote said that they made their decisions not according to ideology or how they thought society should be, but purely based on personal profit.

'Babiš paid and gave to these people' (Radka).

A supreme manifestation of civic passivity, or more precisely, resignation, was that some respondents were willing to sell their votes.

I: 'If you heard that someone exchanged their vote for money, what would you think of that?'

R: 'I'd ask: where? Pretty simple.'

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8   However, it should be noted that even individuals not affected by debt enforcement rarely contact politicians or state institutions. But on the other hand, those experiencing severe socio-economic challenges, such as debt enforcement, have a stronger motivation to push for legislative change.

I: 'So you'd ask where so that you could exchange yours too?'

R: 'Yes' (Pavel).

It must be noted that those respondents who said they'd be willing to sell their vote were a minority. Yet all of the respondents thought that many of their fellow citizens would sell their votes. By saying so, respondents indicated that the value of money was the fundamental value for many in Czech society, and this was linked with the value positions that stemmed from the analysis conducted, and coded as consumerism.[9] Their saying that people might sell their votes is also a distinct manifestation of the aforementioned low measure of social trust among people facing debt enforcement action (Median 2018). Connected with this poor trust in other people is that most respondents said they did not participate in associations. Their unwillingness to exercise freedom of association is another form of civic passivity. Admittedly, people's poor engagement in civic associations of various kinds is a feature of Czech society as a whole (CVVM 2020; Linek et al. 2017; Sedláčková 2012), yet the absence of social capital this implies has greater repercussions for people facing enforcement action.

If people do not participate in associations or other civil society organisations, whose membership tends to be composed of people from various social layers, their chances decrease of having acquaintances who could help them with their problems, such as facing debt enforcement action. Their absence from civil society activities contributes to their social isolation, further exacerbating their civic passivity. It is almost redundant to add that the just-stated is entirely in line with the described doctrine of privatism.

In associations, individuals learn that many tasks can only be accomplished collectively. Through their involvement, citizens develop the ability to collaborate with others to address various issues, making these organisations crucial for fostering democracy and active citizenship (Sedláčková 2012). This is evident when respondents, when asked about 'solving problems in their surroundings', often cannot recall any such activities. Another form of civic passivity is a lack of interest in politics and public affairs. When those respondents who did not vote were asked what they thought of people who considered elections a feast of democracy, they answered in words such as the following:

'I live simply, as life has taught me and do not take any interest in these things at all. Some trust it too much. I have my own opinions, my own life, I'm not even interested; I don't go there' (Petr).

Answers such as this reveal apathy towards the fundamental democratic right – to vote – and ultimately to democracy itself. However, such ambivalence about democracy rarely shifted among our respondents into an open rejection

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9    It needs adding that these positions are likely to some extent to be linked with a feeling of an urgent shortage of money among people in this social stratum.

of the democratic system, for example, by calling for political parties and parliament to be disbanded.

We note that even those respondents who said they were following politics and thought themselves quite well-informed confidently made untrue statements. For instance, here is a respondent misrepresenting the policy of one of the parties in government:

'Of course, to some extent, the Pirate Party is close to me, but there are things with which I disagree. I understand why they're doing it. On paper, it's interesting, let's say, the business of the size of flats. Let's say you live in Vinohrady (in Prague) in a 150-square-metre flat you inherited from your grandma, and what do you care that it's 150 square metres? I am paying for it and they want to divide it up and put other people in there. I simply do not want anyone there' (Aleš).

When people do not know the major public figures involved in the issue of debt enforcement action, including those respondents who said they followed politics, it is also an important manifestation of political ignorance. All were asked whether they were familiar with the following names: Marek Výborný, Patrik Nacher and Daniel Hůle.[10] But only one respondent was familiar with these names, and for only one was able to say that the person had something to do with the issue of enforcement action. Another respondent had some notion who Daniel Hůle was. Considering that our respondents in their difficult life situations would be helped by change to the corresponding legislation, one might expect them to follow the changes in legislation concerning this area and to know the crucial actors and important changes that had recently occurred regarding debt enforcement. But they knew virtually none of these actors. The situation was a bit better concerning their awareness of amendments to legislation, but still their knowledge of this area – so important for them – was quite weak.

Our respondents were also almost entirely politically passive outside the electoral cycle; for instance, they hardly ever used the right to petition.

'I only ever signed one petition in my life' (Pavel).

Nor did they exercise the right to protest. Considering that these people often talked about their experience of injustice from the state, it is interesting that, when asked whether it ever occurred to them to protest against how the system is set up, in the overwhelming majority of cases they answered in the negative.

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10 The first two were the authors of the biggest change of legislation in this area in two decades, adopted in 2021 (Institut prevence a řešení předlužení 2022b. Daniel Hůle, a representative of the non-profit sector (Člověk v tísni/People in Need) is a prominent public supporter of people facing enforcement action.

## Elections and relationship to the political system

In terms of participation in elections, we can divide our respondents into two none too surprising categories: those who said they voted and those who said they didn't. The latter category can then be divided as to why.

The first reason given by some for electoral non-participation was that they questioned whether elections were free and fair. One respondent remarked:

'Certainly not... I believe that they are manipulated, that they are never clean, whether they buy them [voters] beers to do this and that, or directly throw the votes away. I am definitely convinced about this' (Pavel).

Obviously, if some have doubts that elections or vote counting are done properly, or, as in this case, are steadfastly convinced that the opposite is true, then understandably, their willingness to exercise their voting right, or see it as meaningful, decreases.

Another reason for non-participation that was given by some respondents was dissatisfaction with the present structural character of the representative democracy.

'Consider whom you vote for; you vote for a person who presents himself and you've never seen him in your life. I'd rather have a system according to Foglar, the election of the Great Vont [the head of a boys' organisation in a Foglar novel]. The street would have its structure [linked to] the borough, then the city etc. You know what I mean? These people know each other and are able to understand. Look, in Karlín [a Prague neighbourhood] this and that needs fixing, because it's breaking down. And overall we need to get to this, and others meanwhile will say, we need that thing over there' (Aleš).

The third and the most often cited reason was that people had essentially given up on politics and claimed that their vote would not change anything; that elections themselves even if they replaced the ruling set would not bring an improvement to their living conditions.

'Because it's meaningless…. Well, I think there'd be no change…. It hardly matters at all who sits in the government' (Claudie).

Let us now move to the second group of respondents who said they did vote, at least in first-order elections (see more in Reif & Hermann 1980; Norris 1997; Šaradín 2008). Many voted for ANO 2011, but the party name was never mentioned. Respondents talked only about its leader, which testifies to the substantial personalisation of politics (Angelovská et al. 2009; Yovcheva 2022).

'I am totally out of it here, when I look at Fiala's government. It goes from bad to worse. I didn't expect it to be like this. I voted for Babiš,[11] because during his electoral term I was doing relatively well' (Romana).

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11  The interviews were conducted in 2022, so the respondent means the 2021 parliamentary election in which she voted for ANO 2011.

This is one of the quotes showing that respondents assessed ANO 2011 or more precisely Andrej Babiš positively. From their point of view, these positive assessments were based on sufficient aid from the state during his term in government, often taking the form of direct financial transfers (pensions, welfare, Covid bonus). These respondents were strongly critical of the current government for what they saw as poor policy, which they considered inappropriately fiscally restrictive, asocial to Czech citizens and too accommodating of refugees from Ukraine.

In the context of our study, it is an interesting finding that most respondents did not mention the issue of debt enforcement as a factor that would play an important role in their deciding who to cast their votes for. Respondents were strongly critical of political leaders, emphasising how remote politicians were from the living conditions and the material level of common people.

'I think that being a politician is a very big commitment and I do not think that when someone with a degree sits there, that it is necessarily for the good. But if people sat there who, for instance, had an experience of debt enforcement action against them, who experienced something bad in their lives, then they would perhaps decide and evaluate the laws well.... They'd have to get to the level of the people, they'd have to get to know this. Also, we have the Chamber and the government, then the Senate. We are supporting all these people. So add up how much money that is. If these things weren't there, how much more money would be in the state coffers. Yeah, sure, democracy, now we want to have multiple parties there; I understand all that. But then when you see how they squabble...' (Radka).

These respondents argued that political leaders did not – and in their view, even could not – understand the needs of lower-income people or rather themselves who were facing debt enforcement action. These respondents emphasised that politicians could not understand them, as their financial situation was orders of magnitude better. And yet they voted for one of the richest people in the country; and they claimed to vote for him, not his party.

The last quotation from an interview shows that most of even the most critical respondents did not reject democracy itself. As noted above, our respondents would not have been in favour of disbanding political parties or parliament. Some, however, were dissatisfied with what they saw as an excessive number of actors in the political process. Further, some compared the present political arrangements with the non-democratic regime before November 1989.

'Nothing has changed, and it's gone worse. Because, no matter what anyone says, under communism, everyone had to work, and when you got married young, you received a flat, you received a CZK 30,000 non-repayable [sic] loan for furnishing the flat; it was a loan for the newlyweds. So people arranged this and when they wanted to build themselves a little house, they took loans, they built the house and knew they'd pay it back, that they'd be able to repay, to make

enough money to do it and held down two jobs sometimes and they paid it off. Today you've no certainty. Where's the certainty that they won't take away what you've bought?' (Tomáš).

These statements show that, in connection with the present political arrangements, some respondents accentuate unfulfilled hopes, disillusion with some of the expressions of freedom that the democratic regime has brought and the absence of social security that, in their words, the communist regime guaranteed.

Criticism of the current political system was also apparent in support for referendums. Asked what they thought about some political issues being decided directly by plebiscite, our respondents said things such as the following:

'Yet, that'd be good. The nation would be heard, or the social layer of the have-nots, and even the middle class' (Romana).

Some respondents agreed that there would be no detriment if the 200 elected politicians in the Chamber of Deputies were replaced by 200 Czech citizens randomly selected by drawing lots.

Interestingly, respondents were less critical of the media, though some were, such as the following respondent who had this to say:

'Any television is rubbish, I don't trust anything. Everything is owned by this guy or that; certainly, it's all linked' (Pavel).

Most respondents, however, were not negative or critical of the media, including public service broadcasters; for instance:

'For me, Czech Television and Czech Radio are as reputable as can be' (Aleš).

However, a consumerist approach to the media was apparent. Although respondents fairly often said that they followed politics as reported in the media, their knowledge of the legislation concerning debt enforcement action, which directly influenced them and was important for their life situation, was fairly weak. Their criticisms of public affairs did not translate into a critical position on the Czech nation. Asked whether their experience of debt enforcement action changed their thinking about their nation in some way, they tended to give answers such as following:

'No, that's about politicians, and about politicians don't understand how people end up in this. But that one is a patriot, that's a different matter. I am a proud Czech. But this is about something else, about the top which directs things' (Radka).

## Discussion and conclusion

Respondents scorned how justice and politics work in the Czech Republic. But importantly, they mostly did not see their experience with enforcement agents as a notional encounter with the state. In other words, our respondents tended not to think of private bailiffs as Giddensian access points to the abstract and comprehensive system of the state (Giddens 2003). Rather, they pointed to

injustices stemming from the legislative framework of debt enforcement. Their responses could be described as a somewhat Kafkaesque experience of justice.

Debt enforcement influenced respondents' views on democracy on multiple levels. The two most important were the just-noted negative experience of legislation (adopted under the influence of neoliberalism) that they perceived as unjust and the fact that having debt enforcement action pursued against them meant that they were short of money. This is important, because support for democracy in the Czech Republic strongly correlates with people's economic standing (CVVM 2021b).

The reality of life under the shadow of debt enforcement resulted in respondents' civic passivity, as analysed above. This is in line with the findings of other studies (NMS 2019). Respondents, in line with privatism, engaged little in associations and similar organisations, thus failing to exercise their freedom to associate, and they also tended not to use their assembly and petition rights.

Respondents were critical, and sometimes even frustrated, with elections and politicians. Their overwhelming response was apathy rather than radicalisation, which corresponds to earlier findings about the political positions of people facing debt enforcement action (Median 2018).

Here it is important to note that the finding contradict the general assumption of theory of representative democracy (Pitkin 1972; Rehfeld 2005; Shapiro et al. 2009) that, when people feel an injustice, they communicate this in some way to their political representatives, who have the power to change the relevant legislation. This is one of the manifestations of the described abandonment of the public sphere that privatism brings.

Paraphrasing de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince,* we might say that what is essential to people facing debt enforcement action has long been invisible to legislators. This has been so for quite a while – and to a certain extent, it remains true today. The reasons are multiple. The stigmatisation of financial failure is one. Our research shows that people could not sufficiently orient themselves on debt enforcement to formulate one or two concrete demands, which they would then pursue with politicians to implement. Given how complex the issue is, the fact that people do not orient themselves in debt enforcement legislation is understandable. Putting together the stigma of debt enforcement, causing people to be reticent about their problem, with the overwhelming complexity of the issue and people's negative and distrustful positions on politics in general, we can see why no strong civic initiative demanding change arose.

Our study uncovered a generally low measure of trust in the state and other people, which manifested itself in various ways. Respondents' unfavourable relationships to the state and politics (which could be described as alienation from the state) can be demonstrated variously, but perhaps most telling were their answers to the question of whether they had felt at least some support from a public institution or politician throughout the time they faced enforce-

ment action. The absolute majority responded in the negative. Their mistrust of their fellow citizens is clearly shown by their answers to the question asking about the proportion of Czech citizens willing to sell their votes.

The measures of trust people have in the various dimensions of the public sphere influence each other. In other words, if people show a low measure of trust in state institutions, they will also most likely mistrust democracy and their fellow citizens (CVVM 2021a; CVVM 2021b; Sedláčková 2012). Obviously, trust in general and in particular institutions is very important for maintaining social peace and ultimately a free society.

An important and noteworthy finding is that respondents saw Czech society as primarily divided in economic terms. Asked what segments Czech society consisted of, respondents overwhelmingly answered using an economic division of some sort. This is in line with the influence of privatism and neoliberalism.

Here it needs noting that this is the first study of its kind of the effects debt enforcement action has, as no such qualitative study of these issues has previously been undertaken. It investigated in detail the views of people facing debt enforcement action on politics and the rule of law. However, the outcomes of this or any other particular qualitative study cannot be generalised. Any potential generalisation would need to be underpinned by further robust qualitative research.

At this juncture, it is crucial to note that the results of our qualitative study are in line with the recent research on the subject (see above), which found that people who face debt enforcement action exhibit lower turnout rates and tend to vote more for populist parties (Grossmann & Juraida 2003). However, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the researched area, it would be imperative to undertake a rigorous quantitative study focusing on the Czech Republic's most recent parliamentary and presidential elections, which are also considered first-order elections.

Essential areas of further study also include the character and the measure of criticism of political representation, trust that elections are fair, the possibility of vote selling and the extent to which assembly, association and petition rights tend to be exercised.

The subject of further research on the impact of debt enforcement actions should also certainly be whether this issue is present in other former Eastern Bloc countries. Given the aforementioned form of privatism common in the former Eastern Bloc (Hirt 2012) the post-communist legacy of disconnection from the public sphere (Bernhagen & Marsh 2007; Linek et al. 2017; Sedláčková 2012; Sztompka 1999) and the manifestations of the doctrine of neoliberalism in the region (Dale & Fabry 2018; Lupták 2013), this is to be expected. However, as noted above, the data is not available.

Though more, mostly quantitative, study needs to be done on the views of people facing enforcement action, the findings of the present research suggest

that respondents relate to the state and politics in a generally apathetic and critical manner. This is not particularly positive in itself. But what is worse, it could be an important negative factor in the (perhaps not so distant) future, should really serious crises occur. In that case, the people facing enforcement action could constitute the metaphorical sensitive underbelly of the democratic system of government.

## Acknowledgements

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# Contested Statehood and EU Integration: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

HAMZA PRELJEVIĆ AND MIRZA LJUBOVIĆ

**sciendo**

**Abstract:** *This article delves into the intricate relationship between contested statehood and European Union (EU) integration, explicitly focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Since the early 1990s, amidst the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the EU's enlargement efforts, BiH has grappled with challenges to its statehood, which have impeded its alignment with EU requirements. Despite being universally recognised as an independent state, BiH faces internal contestation, evident in its consociational constitutional framework and the divergent nationalist narratives among constituent groups. Moreover, while BiH maintains external sovereignty, it coexists with significant international oversight, complicating its path toward EU integration. The EU's expansion into internally contested states like BiH necessitates a nuanced approach considering the entanglement of Europeanisation and de-Daytonisation processes. This article emphasises the complexity of BiH's governance landscape, where internal dynamics and external influences converge, creating formidable obstacles to sovereignty assertion and governance efficacy. To surmount these challenges, BiH must address internal divisions, foster inclusive governance mechanisms and balance external supervision and internal autonomy. In shedding light on how contested statehood influences the EU's role and policies, the article discusses the concept of 'complex sovereignty', particularly relevant to BiH's context.*

**Keywords:** *Bosnia and Herzegovina, EU integration, Europeanisation, reforms, contested statehood*

## Introduction

The early 1990s witnessed a significant shift in global politics as the Cold War drew close, leading to a profound transformation across Europe and beyond (Gaddis 2006). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fragmentation of Yugoslavia reshaped the region's geopolitical map, creating opportunities for new states to assert their sovereignty (Conversi 2003). Concurrently, the EU embarked on a mission to deepen integration, enhancing its constitutional, political and economic tools to strengthen its influence and consolidate its position in the region known as 'wider Europe' (European Commission 2002). However, the EU's enlargement into new territories introduced it to complex discussions and situations, including secession movements, the emergence of new aspirations for statehood and disputed territories in its immediate vicinity, setting the stage for our analysis of the challenges of EU integration in the context of contested statehood, with a focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).

The complex interplay between statehood, contestation and European integration forms the contextual framework within which the EU grapples with the complexities of its enlargement policy, particularly in the Western Balkans (Belloni 2020; Alpan and Öztürk 2022). BiH stands out as a compelling case study among the countries in this region, encapsulating the intricate challenges associated with the EU's pursuit of enlargement amidst contested statehood.

One of the primary obstacles to BiH's compliance with EU criteria is the persistent challenge of 'contested statehood'. Adopting EU criteria inherently requires strengthening statehood, a position that clashes with the prevailing narrative of contested statehood within BiH. Since the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) in 1995, discussions and policies surrounding contested statehood have intensified, making it difficult for BiH to fully adhere to EU obligations. Despite the EU's decision to approve negotiations with BiH, this milestone carries limited significance within the country's milieu. While it represents a significant step in the EU integration trajectory, it fails to address the underlying issue of contested statehood. The threat of secessionism looms large, casting doubts on BiH's prospects for EU integration. This challenge is further complicated because secessionism inherently undermines efforts towards Europeanisation. Unlike previous waves of enlargement, where alignment with EU criteria primarily focused on compliance, BiH is intricately linked to the broader context of state-building. Effective state-building requires a stance against secessionism, further complicating the EU integration trajectory for BiH.

In prior enlargement rounds, the EU predominantly guided applicant countries through the dual transition to democracy and a market economy (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005; Vachudova 2005; Grabbe 2006). However, in the context of the Western Balkans, the EU encounters an added layer of complexity in the form of state contestation or contested statehood. This phenomenon

poses a substantial challenge to the mechanisms of Europeanisation, such as conditionality and socialisation, thereby impeding the efficacy of the EU and leading to cycles of mismanaged conditionality and constitutional reform process in BiH (Vachudova 2005).

In the intricate landscape of Europeanisation, particularly within internally contested states like BiH, the EU integration process involves more than mere alignment with EU standards. Europeanisation entails the strengthening of the state through the adoption of EU conditions. In the context of BiH, this journey intertwines with the ongoing process of *de-Daytonisation*, where Europeanisation gradually transforms the original DPA framework to align more closely with EU structures, albeit without necessarily abolishing the entities established by the DPA. For BiH to join the EU, it must upgrade its Dayton-based state system to align with EU standards. It needs to resemble the EU to become a part of it.

This convergence of Europeanisation and de-Daytonisation poses a unique challenge, as it is difficult to disentangle the two processes. Their interdependence is a significant factor contributing to the weakness of reform efforts in BiH, setting it apart from previous waves of EU enlargement. In this context, EU conditions not only necessitate alignment but also demand the reinforcement of statehood.

The primary sources for this research include official documents, policy papers, press reports and the European Commission's annual reports on BiH's progress. The methodological approach employed was qualitative, focusing on analysing non-numerical data. This approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of historical and contemporary issues related to BiH's contested statehood and its implications for Europeanisation and EU integration. The qualitative analysis involved interpreting and synthesising data from diverse sources to provide a detailed understanding of the complex dynamics in BiH's Europeanisation process. Official documents and policy papers offered insights into the legal and political frameworks governing BiH's relations with the EU, including the DPA and subsequent agreements. Press reports offered a contemporary perspective on political developments and EU-related activities in BiH. The European Commission's annual reports were crucial for tracking BiH's progress in meeting EU requirements and assessing the effectiveness of Europeanisation efforts. The primary research questions are: *Can BiH comply with EU requirements despite internal contestation? Why are EU requirements internally disputed if EU membership is a foreign policy goal?*

This article argues that as long as BiH remains contested, achieving compliance with EU conditions and preparing for full membership will be arduous. The intricate dance between Europeanisation and de-Daytonisation underscores the complex journey BiH must navigate toward European integration.

## Thoughts on Europeanisation

The EU's transformative power has been described using various terms, reflecting its enlargement, external relations and global influence. Notable among these are concepts such as the EU as a 'normative power' (Manners 2002), 'soft power' (Nye 1990), 'transformative power' (Leonard 2005) and member state-builder' (Keil & Arkan 2016). These terms are prominent in EU studies and frequently appear in discussions on EU enlargement, particularly regarding the 'Europeanisation' and 'democratisation' of prospective member states. The common thread among these terms is the EU's significant 'peaceful power leverage' rather than reliance on 'material incentives' like military power and intervention.

The concept of Europeanisation has evolved to capture the EU's transformative influence. Europeanisation, which gained prominence in the mid-1990s (Ladrech 1994), examines the EU's impact on domestic changes within member and aspirant states. Scholars have extensively debated its definition (Ladrech 1994; Bulmer & Burch 2001; Hix & Goetz 2000; Cowles et al. 2001; Olsen 2002; Buller & Gamble 2002; Börzel & Risse 2003; Radaelli 2003; Graziano & Vink 2007). Robert Ladrech's (1994: 69) early definition describes it as 'an incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of national politics and policy-making'. Radaelli (2003) later refined this definition, emphasising the processes of construction, diffusion and institutionalisation of rules and norms from the EU level into domestic contexts.

Europeanisation operates through two primary mechanisms: conditionality and socialisation. Reasoning in rationalist theory, conditionality offers economic and political rewards such as EU membership and access to funds in exchange for policy alignment with EU standards. This mechanism is pivotal in driving systemic reforms and aligning national policies with EU requirements. Conversely, socialisation, underpinned by constructivist principles, emphasises the voluntary adoption of EU norms through processes of learning and internalisation. It focuses on EU norms' perceived legitimacy and attractiveness, fostering long-term institutional changes and policy convergence (Schimmelfennig 2012). In practice, the conditionality mechanism dominates Western Balkan countries (WBCs). However, ideally, combining these responses would be optimal for successful Europeanisation.

Europeanisation encompasses the dynamic responses of candidate countries like BiH to the transformative pressures exerted by the EU. Scholars such as Börzel and Risse (2003) and Radaelli (2003) provide valuable typologies to understand these responses, which range from absorption and accommodation to transformation, inertia and retrenchment. Börzel and Risse's typology distinguishes between 'absorption', where minimal changes occur in domestic

processes to maintain alignment with EU norms; 'accommodation', involving modest adjustments without altering core features; and 'transformation', necessitating significant reforms that fundamentally reshape existing policies and institutions to meet EU standards. These categories illustrate the varying degrees of adaptation and reform efforts undertaken by candidate countries like BiH as they progress towards EU accession. In contrast, Radaelli's typology adds 'inertia' and 'retrenchment' to the discussion. 'Inertia' describes scenarios where domestic practices diverge significantly from EU norms, reflecting a lack of compliance despite EU pressures. Meanwhile, 'retrenchment' signifies active resistance to EU-induced changes, often due to concerns over sovereignty or institutional resistance within the candidate country.

Europeanisation is distinct from globalisation, convergence, harmonisation and political integration. While Europeanisation pertains explicitly to the EU's impact on candidate countries' domestic structures, policies and identities, globalisation refers to broader processes of interconnectedness transcending geographical boundaries. Convergence results from European integration, whereas Europeanisation is an ongoing process. The harmonisation of national policies often results from Europeanisation, leading to varying impacts across different states. Political integration focuses on why states delegate sovereignty to the EU level, whereas Europeanisation explores the EU's domestic impacts.

In the context of the integration process, Europeanisation refers to the gradual adoption of EU norms, rules and policies by candidate countries. This adoption converges national practices with EU standards, adapting domestic institutions, policies and behaviours to meet EU requirements. This process, driven by the dynamics of European integration, provides a comprehensive lens through which to analyse the intricate dynamics of BiH's European integration process. This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how EU norms, policies and practices influence BiH's domestic structures, governance and identity and how BiH's unique historical and political context shapes its engagement with the EU.

Europeanisation emphasises the normative power of the EU in shaping the legal, political and social norms of the would-be member states. Any country aspiring to join the EU must meet the basic requirements outlined in the Copenhagen criteria. However, compared to earlier enlargement rounds, progress in EU integration for the WBCs necessitates meeting specific requirements under the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) (Noutcheva 2006). In the case of BiH, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), which is a result of the SAP, serves as a mechanism through which the EU exerts conditionality, requiring alignment with EU norms and standards as a precondition for accession. However, BiH's implementation of these reforms is complicated by internal contestation and divergent ethnic interests, impacting the effectiveness of EU conditionality.

The response of would-be member countries to the EU's requirements/conditionality is significantly influenced by their degree of sovereignty. In nations with limited sovereignty, the involvement of external actors alters the internal dynamics of decision-making regarding the acceptance of EU-defined requirements. Conversely, when a country's sovereignty is more pronounced and EU-imposed conditions encroach upon sovereign matters, these conditions may face substantial resistance and opposition from political elites. Therefore, understanding BiH's path towards EU membership necessitates considering sovereignty as an essential variable.

Moreover, Europeanisation examines how countries adapt EU policies to domestic legal and institutional frameworks. In the case of BiH, the process of policy adaptation is hindered by the consociational nature of BiH's governance, which grants significant power to ethnopolitical elites within the Federation of BiH (FBiH) and the Republika Srpska (RS) entities. This has led to inertia and resistance to EU-inspired reforms, as evidenced by delays in transposing the EU acquis and the persistence of ethnic-based governance structures. Meeting the EU's conditions requires solid and capable state institutions that can effectively transpose and implement the *acquis communautaire*.

Europeanisation also recognises the role of identity and collective memory in shaping a country's engagement with the EU. BiH's fragmented identity politics, rooted in historical narratives and nationalist sentiments, pose significant challenges to forming a unified national/countrywide identity necessary for effective state-building and European integration. The EU's role in fostering a sense of European identity in BiH is thus intertwined with its efforts to promote reconciliation, human rights and the rule of law.

A critical aspect of Europeanisation in the BiH context is the notion of complex sovereignty. BiH's sovereignty is challenged by its consociational democracy, external intervention by international bodies such as the Office of the High Representative (OHR), and the demands of EU conditionality. These external interventions often encroach upon BiH's internal sovereignty, leading to tensions between external oversight and internal self-determination.

Finally, Europeanisation considers the role of historical legacies and path dependency in shaping the trajectory of BiH's European integration. The legacy of the DPA, which established BiH's consociational democracy, has entrenched ethnic-based politics and decentralised governance structures. This path dependency complicates efforts to strengthen state institutions and promote inclusive governance, as required for EU accession.

## Bosnia and Herzegovina as a contested state

BiH stands emblematic of the intricate tapestry of contested statehood. This condition arises from diverse transitions, each laden with implications for the

state's legitimacy and governance efficacy. The contestation of BiH's statehood materialises along twin axes: its legitimacy, the dynamics between the state and its citizenry within the political domain, and its capacity, elucidating the state's aptitude in formulating and enforcing policy decisions. Unlike its counterparts in contested states, BiH's status is primarily rooted in endogenous factors, conferring a nuanced but no less substantive dimension of contestation.

In contradistinction to myriad contested states grappling with partial external validation, BiH has basked in universal recognition as an independent and sovereign state since 1992. Furthermore, its accession to pivotal international organisations underscores a high degree of external sovereignty. Tangibly, BiH maintains undisputed territorial integrity devoid of secessionist movements, thereby bolstering its external sovereignty. However, internally, BiH contends with formidable impediments to policymaking and execution. The asymmetrical federal framework, convoluted consociational arrangements, executive prerogatives vested in international bodies and centrifugal proclivities at the sub-state level collectively contribute to what scholars have termed as BiH's 'problematic sovereignty'. Internally, BiH's sovereignty may be construed as tenuous at best, diverging from Krasner's (2001) trifled conception encompassing external (international-legal), internal (domestic) and Westphalia dimensions.

Numerous authors emphasise the importance of sovereignty as a critical variable in understanding the EU's approach towards BiH on its path to full EU membership (Venneri 2010). Sovereignty, a fundamental concept in public international law, political science and international relations, is increasingly debated and reinterpreted beyond its traditional understanding post-Treaty of Westphalia (1648). The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), in its report 'Responsibility for Protection', defines sovereignty as a dual responsibility: internally towards the population (internal legal supremacy) and internationally towards the community of states (Brock 2011).

As some authors point out, this broader understanding of sovereignty leads to the emergence of two types: *internal* (based on Bodin's 'summa potestas' – 'supremacy') and *external* (international). Internal sovereignty refers to a state's ability to perform essential functions and provide services to citizens. In contrast, external sovereignty is defined by the state's equality and acceptance by other states and international organisations (Krasner 1999). Chandler (2005) argues that if sovereignty is understood as good governance, i.e. the state's ability to provide protection and essential services to citizens, external actors can intervene to strengthen this type of sovereignty through state-building processes.

In countries with complex sovereignty like BiH, external actors alter internal political dynamics in decision-making processes related to EU requirements. When a country's sovereignty is complex and limited, EU conditions can encroach on sovereignty, potentially leading to resistance from political

elites (Noutcheva 2006). Noutcheva warns that EU demands that impinge on sovereignty do not hold the same legitimacy as generally accepted Copenhagen criteria requirements.

The EU's approach towards BiH did not differ from that towards other regional countries, relying heavily on the OHR to impose laws. With its complex and limited sovereignty, BiH faced demands encroaching on constitutional competencies and state-entity relations. Although the EU did not formally insist on constitutional changes until the European Court of Human Rights 2009 judgment, demands from the early 2000s directly impacted constitutional matters, particularly regarding central government strengthening, eliciting resistance from the RS entity (Tursić 2011).

Despite external recognition, BiH's internal sovereignty struggles due to its consociational constitutional framework, which the DPA established. Designed to soothe former belligerents, this agreement layered a fragile state-level institution atop two antagonistic entities: FBiH and RS. This asymmetric federalism results in overlapping and decentralised competencies, hindering effective decision-making and policy implementation. BiH's territorial configuration safeguards collective rights and grants legislative veto powers to the three constituent peoples: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats.

BiH's governance is further complicated by lack of a cohesive vision for the state's future among its constituent groups. Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks display varying degrees of commitment to the state, influenced by historical and nationalist sentiments. These differing stances reflect deep-rooted historical narratives and a lack of unified national identity. While BiH's pluralistic institutional framework aims to prevent dominance by any single faction, it paradoxically creates a scenario where each group pursues divergent political paths.

Additionally, BiH's sovereignty faces external challenges from international bodies wielding executive authority, particularly the OHR. Initially established in the post-conflict period to enforce compliance with the peace agreement, this institution presents a continuous dilemma regarding BiH's internal sovereignty in the context of external supervision. The sustained presence of the OHR underscores the persistent tension between external intervention and internal self-governance.

BiH's contested statehood is nuanced and multifaceted, stemming from internal dynamics and external influences. Its complex institutional structure, historical legacies and international interventions present significant challenges to asserting sovereignty and governance effectiveness. To overcome these challenges, BiH must address internal divisions, develop inclusive governance mechanisms and balance external supervision with internal autonomy.

The EU's expansion following the decline of global superpowers offered an opportunity for Europeanisation, promoting EU norms and policies in neighbouring regions. However, this expansion posed challenges in contested states

like BiH, where domestic discourses and post-war narratives conflicted with Europeanisation efforts. Academic interest in this phenomenon has grown, focusing on the EU's tools, including diplomatic means and conditionality mechanisms.

Scholars have examined how contested statehood influences the EU's role and policies, leading to the concept of 'complex sovereignty' (Grande & Pauly 2007). This framework highlights overlapping governance hierarchies that challenge traditional sovereignty notions. In BiH, this concept is particularly relevant, as the country balances advanced sovereign traits with internal challenges and threats of secessionism, complicating the reform process.

## The Dayton Peace Agreement

The DPA, signed in December 1995, concluded 43 months of devastating war in BiH, marked by egregious human rights abuses and the displacement of a significant portion of the population (Bose 2002). The peace agreement, comprising 11 articles and 12 annexes, aimed to reconcile the war's belligerents and establish a framework for peace and governance in the region. Its key provisions were commitments to respect international norms, delineate military boundaries, conduct elections and develop governmental institutions. The accords recognised the Republic of BiH within its pre-war borders. The DPA introduced two autonomous entities, FBiH, primarily populated by Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, and the RS, primarily by Bosnian Serbs. Additionally, the DPA introduced mechanisms for ethnic power-sharing, including a rotating presidency and veto powers for the three 'Constitutive Peoples' (Banović et al. 2020).

The DPA order represented a departure from conventional peace treaties by incorporating elements of state-building into its framework, effectively aiming to construct a federal state amidst the post-war rubble. However, its implementation faced challenges as the *imposed federalism* grappled with domestic contestation and tensions between territorial and ethnic governance dimensions (Keil 2013). Moreover, the substantial involvement of the international community, manifested through military and civilian oversight mechanisms, underscored the accords' unique approach to peace-building. The OHR, endowed with executive powers, played a pivotal role in enforcing compliance with the peace agreement and overcoming political stalemates.

Despite initial efforts to disengage from BiH's internal affairs, the international community's continued presence, mainly through the OHR, persisted due to ongoing challenges and a lack of consensus on closure. Over time, BiH's institutional landscape evolved, transitioning from a weak confederation to a federally structured state, albeit with persisting tensions between ethnic--based power-sharing and liberal democratic principles (Bieber 2006). While the country's transition reflects efforts to address historical divisions and establish a more cohesive governance framework, it also presents challenges to meeting

EU standards. The entrenched ethnic divisions necessitate a delicate balance between autonomy for different groups and centralised reforms crucial for EU alignment. However, this balance often proves elusive, leading to political gridlock and stalled progress in EU accession. The intricacies of BiH's governance model, exemplified by cases like the Sejdić-Finci ruling, underscored the delicate balance between strict power-sharing mechanisms and respect for civil liberties.

The DPA order represents a complex blend of consociational and integrative elements to foster peace and stability in post-conflict BiH. However, its implementation has been fraught with challenges, highlighting the tensions between ethnic accommodation and liberal democratic norms. The ongoing presence of the international community and the legacy of DPA continue to shape BiH's political landscape, underscoring the enduring complexities of peacebuilding in divided societies. While the DPA has provided a foundation for stability in BiH, its limitations in fostering genuine reconciliation and promoting democratic governance pose significant hurdles to the country's EU aspirations. Additionally, the challenges in implementing the DPA underscore the tensions inherent in balancing ethnic interests with principles of democracy, rule of law and human rights – key pillars of EU integration. As long as ethnic interests continue to take precedence, it is challenging to anticipate significant BiH reforms necessary for EU membership.

## Consociational democracy: The power-sharing system in BiH

The power-sharing system in BiH within the DPA framework embodies a nuanced interplay of consociational and integrative elements characterised by a blend of ethnic and territorial federalism. Keil (2013) aptly observes that BiH operates as an ethnic federation, not due to constitutional mandates but owing to the enduring dominance of nationally exclusive parties, framing politics as a zero-sum game among ethnic groups. The intricate amalgamation of formal and informal political dynamics, encompassing institutional structures and party politics, engenders significant challenges. As Toal and Dahlman (2011) articulated, the post-conflict BiH's landscape juxtaposes an ethno-territorial spatial order with an ethnocratic political regime, a configuration criticised by international bodies such as the Venice Commission and subject to the scrutiny of EU interventions.

The institutional fabric crafted under the DPA melds elements of consociationalism and integration, embodying a hybrid model reminiscent of Lijphart's (1977) consociational democracy and Horowitz's (1985) integrative approach. Caspersen's (2004) analysis underscores the dynamic balance between these two theoretical paradigms within BiH's evolving context, noting shifts over time and the complex interplay of consociational and integrative features.

Lijphart's (1977) consociational model emphasises elite cooperation within institutions that explicitly recognise societal cleavages to safeguard group rights and foster self-determination. BiH's implementation of consociationalism is evident in features like the rotating presidency, ethnic proportionality in governance and entity-based autonomy. However, deviations from pure consociationalism are notable, such as a territorial rather than an ethnic basis for presidential elections, reflecting BiH's unique circumstances.

In contrast, Horowitz's (1985) integrative model prioritises mechanisms for multi-ethnic cooperation, emphasising electoral systems promoting cross--ethnic coalitions and federal structures encouraging integrative dynamics. BiH's integrative elements include provisions for group autonomy based on territory rather than ethnicity alongside majoritarian institutions devoid of ethnic veto powers. The evolving jurisprudence of international treaties and human rights laws further underscores the shift towards integration within BiH's institutional framework.

Moreover, BiH's experience highlights the intricate interplay of international and temporal dimensions in shaping its power-sharing dynamics. International guarantees and historical legacies influence the acceptance of integrative elements while evolving identities over time, and the intensity of past conflict impacts the system's resilience. Caspersen's (2004) analysis suggests that while challenging, BiH's complex power-sharing system may offer a viable path toward moderation and stability.

However, assessments of BiH's power-sharing model remain mixed, reflecting its successes in peace-building and its failures in state-building and democratisation. While the DPA prevented a return to the war, it also entrenched ethnic divisions and hindered democratic progress, resulting in what Florian Bieber (2017) aptly terms a *failed success*. Nevertheless, BiH's experience has spurred policy learning among international actors, shaping subsequent approaches in conflict resolution and state-building efforts elsewhere.

BiH's power-sharing system embodies a complex interplay of consociational and integrative elements shaped by historical legacies, international interventions and evolving local dynamics. While fraught with challenges and limitations, BiH's experience offers valuable insights for accommodating diversity in divided societies, underscoring the need for flexible and adaptive approaches to promote stability and reconciliation.

The Europeanisation process in BiH faces formidable challenges rooted in its power-sharing system's intricacies and veto players' presence. The country's governance framework, shaped by ethnically exclusive parties and entrenched divisions, impedes consensus-building and reform efforts necessary for EU integration. The accountability deficit, institutional complexities and external influences further compound these challenges, creating a complex landscape that requires careful navigation.

Despite these obstacles, the Europeanisation process in BiH remains a critical endeavour with far-reaching implications for the country's future. Overcoming the challenges the power-sharing system poses requires sustained efforts from both domestic stakeholders and international partners. Initiatives promoting interethnic cooperation, strengthening democratic institutions and fostering accountability are essential for advancing BiH's Europeanisation agenda.

Moreover, fostering a shared vision of European integration that transcends ethnic divides is paramount for overcoming the legacy of conflict and moving towards a more cohesive and prosperous future. By addressing the underlying issues inherent in its power-sharing dynamics and embracing EU values and standards, BiH can chart a path toward European integration that fosters stability, prosperity and reconciliation for all its citizens.

## The 2019 Opinion on BiH's application for EU membership

In May 2019, the European Commission issued its Opinion along with an accompanying analytical report regarding BiH's application for EU membership (European Commission 2019a). In evaluating the applicant country's readiness to advance within the accession framework, the Commission concluded that BiH does not adequately meet the necessary conditions. As a result, the Commission outlined specific reforms, referred to as 'key priorities', that BiH must undertake to progress. These 14 identified key priorities and the 115 sub--priorities from the analytical report form a comprehensive roadmap for phased reforms that must be satisfactorily addressed before BiH can attain candidate status and begin accession negotiations.

The Commission's appraisal highlighted deficiencies in BiH's adherence to criteria concerning the stability of institutions ensuring democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities, as established by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993. Consequently, substantial efforts are required to fortify institutions and ensure compliance with these criteria, thus safeguarding democracy, the rule of law, human rights and minority rights within the nation.

The 14 key priorities are categorised into four thematic domains: democracy and functionality, the rule of law, fundamental rights and public administration. Structural challenges, such as constitutional reforms aimed at eliminating electoral system inequalities and discrimination (notably addressing the Sejdić-Finci ECtHR ruling and the municipal elections in Mostar), alongside reforms within the judicial system, constitute pivotal aspects of these priorities. Simultaneously, concerns about civic space encompass issues such as freedom of expression and assembly.

The response from BiH authorities to the Commission's directives has been less than comprehensive, with concrete measures to amend the constitution

remaining elusive and the Action Plan addressing the key priorities remaining in a state of limbo. Notably, only one of the 14 priorities has been fully achieved concerning the proper functioning of the Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee. Additionally, progress has been partial in several key areas. For instance, advancements in democracy and functionality have been made with elections in line with European standards, particularly in Mostar, albeit with lingering challenges in electoral legislation. Similarly, strides have been made in public administration reform, albeit with significant room for improvement and tangible results yet to materialise. This underscores the slow pace and limited scope of reform efforts within BiH's political landscape. The lack of progress on crucial issues such as governance, rule of law and human rights demonstrates the ongoing challenges in reconciling ethnic-based politics with the demands of EU integration.

However, in the 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, the EU's recalibrated approach towards BiH's candidacy marks a departure from previous conditionality frameworks. Despite this, BiH must address all 14 key priorities outlined in the Commission's 2019 Opinion to progress towards EU membership. While aimed at incentivising domestic action, this paradigm shift in conditionality raises questions regarding the efficacy of such strategies in fostering substantive reform within BiH. Ultimately, the multifaceted challenges confronting BiH underscore the complexity of its Europeanisation process, prompting critical reflections on the country's readiness for EU integration. These challenges include entrenched ethnic divisions, political gridlock, institutional weaknesses and resistance to reforms from vested interests. The complexity of these challenges prompts critical reflections on BiH's readiness for EU integration and the effectiveness of current strategies in overcoming them.

The Action Plan for implementing priorities from the Analytical Report of the European Commission (BiH Council of Ministers 2019), adopted by the Council of Ministers of BiH on 15 October 2019, represented a comprehensive effort to address the reform agenda outlined by the European Commission. Formulated by the Directorate for EU Integration, the Action Plan encompassed 691 planned measures targeting 115 priorities identified in the Analytical Report. These measures spanned various levels of government, with 230 planned measures at the state level, 391 at lower governmental levels and 70 involving coordination across different levels of government. The structure of the planned measures reflected a diverse array of initiatives, including the adoption of laws, by-laws, strategic documents and efforts to enhance administrative capacities and other related activities.

Despite these concerted efforts, the Final Report on the Action Plan (BiH Council of Ministers 2020), prepared by the Directorate for EU Integration and adopted by the Council of Ministers on 22 October 2020, revealed mixed outcomes. Of the 691 planned measures, only 288, or 42%, were implemented,

while the remaining 403, or 58%, were not realised. The report highlighted the uneven progress across different categories of measures, with varying implementation rates observed. For instance, measures related to adopting laws and by-laws saw lower implementation rates than efforts to strengthen administrative capacities and other operational activities. Additionally, while the Directorate prepared an action plan for 14 key priorities for EU Integration, its adoption by the Council of Ministers is pending, indicating ongoing challenges in effectively advancing the reform agenda outlined by the European Commission.

On the other hand, BiH's commitment to align with the acquis chapters by signing the SAA underscores its determination towards European integration. The alignment rate is a crucial metric for assessing the country's membership preparedness, constituting an ex-ante evaluation. As BiH improves its alignment rate, the likelihood of eventual EU membership correspondingly increases. However, the rigorous conditionality principle dictates that the EU determines accession norms, standards and procedures, while applicant countries like BiH are expected to meet these conditions. Consequently, the European Commission's reports serve a dual purpose – introducing requirements and monitoring the pace of reform and alignment in applicant countries.

Using a five-tier standard assessment scale in its country reports, the European Commission categorises BiH's progress into stages ranging from 'well advanced' to 'early stage'. This categorisation helps BiH's readiness for EU membership be transparently evaluated. Assigning numerical values from 0 to 4 to each category further facilitates score tracking, with 0 indicating complete fitness and 4 indicating a significant gap between BiH and EU standards.[1] Therefore, the compatibility scale between BiH and the EU ranges from 0, indicating readiness for EU membership, to 132, signifying a complete lack of alignment.[2]

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1   The European Commission employs a five-tier standard assessment scale, comprising: (1) well advanced, (2) a good level of preparation, (3) moderately prepared, (4) some level of preparation and (5) early-stage. This research has assigned numerical values ranging from 0 to 4 to each of these five-tier standard assessment categories to provide transparent scoring. The numerical labels correspond to the following categories: 0 = well advanced, 1 = good level of preparation, 2 = moderately preparation, 3 = some level of preparation and 4 = early stage. In addition, when two values of the five-tier standard assessment scale are assigned to the same category/chapter of the acquis, which has happened, the mean (average) of those values is assigned as the given assessment/alignment scale. This has happened only in the case of Chapter 9 (Financial Services) and Chapter 27 (Environment) between 2019 and 2023.

2   The European Commission responded to French demands with a concise document in February 2020, titled 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans' (European Commission, 2020a). This document serves as a negotiating framework for accession talks. It emphasises that EU membership for the Western Balkans is crucial for a stable, strong and united Europe. The new negotiation methodology aims to make the enlargement process more credible, predictable and dynamic. It has led to opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The Commission has reorganised the 35 negotiating thematic chapters into six thematic 'clusters' to streamline the process, leaving Chapter 34 (Institutions) and Chapter 35 (Other issues) outside these clusters to be discussed at the end of the negotiation process. Each cluster focuses on broad themes such as good governance and economic competitiveness. Negotiations on the fundamentals, like the rule of law,

Table 1, covering the European Commission's reports from 2019 to 2023, offers a comprehensive assessment of BiH's ability to assume the obligations of EU membership. This overview provides valuable insights into BiH's progress towards EU integration, highlighting areas of improvement and identifying challenges that need to be addressed to enhance its readiness for EU accession.

Examining the compatibility scale, which evaluates the alignment between BiH and the EU, it becomes evident that BiH's capacity to fulfil the obligations of EU membership is minimal. BiH is significantly distant from reaching ZERO, indicating numerous discrepancies in policies and institutions. Within the framework of Europeanisation, this research likens BiH to a *Potemkin village*, implying a superficial appearance of progress masking underlying shortcomings. Consequently, the extent of domestic reform is constrained, and between 2019 and 2023, the process of Europeanisation in BiH fluctuated between inertia and resistance to adapting domestic structures.

Despite BiH's commitment through signing the SAA, which entails alignment with the EU acquis before obtaining candidate status, delays in transposing the EU acquis and resistance to European-induced domestic changes persist. However, as the name suggests, stabilisation should precede association, indicating the importance of assessing progress. The data presented in Table 1 highlights significant disparities between domestic and EU levels, indicating substantial incoherence or misalignment. Inertia persists when domestic changes are delayed, resulting in the continuation of the status quo.

The transition from inertia (and retrenchment) to transformation presents significant challenges due to various intervening factors, indicating that inertia remains unavoidable in BiH. Consequently, BiH needs a more adaptive capacity to effectively absorb and implement domestic changes. The EU should prioritise identifying impediments causing inertia or retrenchment rather than portraying Europeanisation as a failure. However, properly aligning domestic legislation with the EU acquis requires adopting the National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA), a critical priority in 'Democracy/Functionality'.[3]

Furthermore, the perception of BiH as being in a state-building phase rather than a mature EU candidate reflects the nuanced nature of its integration journey. This perception underscores the lingering legacies of conflict and the

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will be prioritised. Serbia and Montenegro have accepted the new negotiating structure, while BiH will follow suit upon meeting key priorities. Once negotiations for all chapters are concluded, a draft accession treaty is prepared, which requires the European Parliament's consent and unanimous approval from the Council. After ratification by all parties, the candidate country becomes a member state.

3   The challenge in developing the NPAA in BiH initially stemmed from its name, particularly the inclusion of the term 'national', which faced opposition from BiH's RS entity. Consequently, the NPAA was renamed the *Programme of EU Integration (PI)* in BiH. Croatia adopted its national programme in 2003, while Montenegro and Serbia followed suit in 2008. This timeline highlights the significance and importance of the NPAA in guiding countries on their path towards EU integration. Thus, even after more than twenty years since Croatia adopted its NPAA (as an accession condition), BiH failed to follow suit.

**Table 1: Overview of the status of BiH's ability to assume obligations of EU membership**

| LIST OF EU ACQUIS CHAPTERS | | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chapter 1 | Free movement of goods | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 2 | Freedom of movement for workers | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 3 | Right of establishment and freedom to provide services | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 4 | Free movement of capital | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Chapter 5 | Public procurement | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 6 | Company law | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 7 | Intellectual property law | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Chapter 8 | Competition policy | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 9 | Financial services | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| Chapter 10 | Information society and media | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 11 | Agriculture and rural development | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 12 | Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 13 | Fisheries | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 14 | Transport policy | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 15 | Energy | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 16 | Taxation | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 17 | Economic and monetary policy | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 18 | Statistics | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 19 | Social policy and employment | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 20 | Enterprise and industrial policy | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 21 | Trans-European Networks | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 22 | Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 23 | Judiciary and fundamental rights | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 24 | Justice, freedom and security | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 25 | Science and research | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 26 | Education and culture | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 27 | Environment | 3.5 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 3.5 |
| Chapter 28 | Consumer and health protection | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Chapter 29 | Customs union | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 30 | External relations | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 31 | Foreign, security and defence policy | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 32 | Financial Control | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Chapter 33 | Financial and budgetary provisions | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| | TOTAL SCORE | 111 | 111 | 111 | 110 | 110 |

Early stage
Some level of preparation
Moderately prepared
Good level of preparation
Well advanced
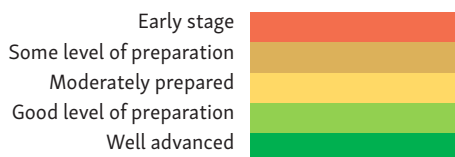
Sources: European Commission (2019b; 2020b; 2021; 2022; 2023), authors' compilation

Contested Statehood and EU Integration    Hamza Preljević and Mirza Ljubović

complex interplay of ethnic identities within the country. Addressing these legacies requires structural reforms and a profound societal shift towards reconciliation and inclusivity.

Despite these hurdles, the promise of EU integration holds significant potential for BiH. Accession to the EU could catalyse comprehensive reforms, foster economic development, strengthen democratic institutions and promote regional stability. The EU's emphasis on the rule of law, human rights and good governance aligns with the aspirations of many within BiH for a more just and equitable society.

However, realising these benefits requires a concerted effort to address the underlying issues that have long hindered progress. BiH's ethnicised reality, with its deeply entrenched divisions, poses a formidable challenge to unity and consensus-building. Overcoming these divisions will necessitate bold leadership, genuine dialogue and a commitment to national unity above narrow ethnic interests – a challenge that remains unmet in BiH.

Ultimately, BiH's path to EU membership is fraught with obstacles but manageable. By confronting the complexities of its past, embracing the diversity of its present and charting a course toward a more democratic and prosperous future, BiH can successfully navigate the intricate landscape of European integration. The journey will be arduous, but the destination – a more united, stable and prosperous BiH within the European family – is worth striving for.

The EU's decision in March 2024 to start negotiations with BiH has drawn scholarly attention, given the country's limited progress in meeting the stringent criteria for EU membership. This move, ostensibly motivated by geopolitical considerations and internal unrest within BiH, underscores the intricate dynamics shaping the EU's enlargement policy. While external factors, such as regional stability and geopolitical strategy, undoubtedly influence the EU's engagement with BiH, the fundamental measure of BiH's readiness for membership lies in its compliance with the EU acquis, which remains notably deficient. This dissonance between the initiation of negotiations and the substantive reforms required for alignment with EU standards presents a scholarly puzzle, prompting critical inquiry into the motivations and implications of the EU's decision-making process.

Moreover, a pertinent concern exists regarding the potential misinterpretation of the EU's engagement by Bosnian policymakers, wherein the initiation of negotiations may be construed as a signal of relaxed conditions for accession. This perception may inadvertently foster complacency among Bosnian political elites, impeding the imperative momentum for comprehensive reforms within the country. Consequently, the divergence between the perceived progress toward EU integration and the actual reform efforts on the ground engenders a social dilemma, whereby citizens of BiH may be misled into a false sense of advancement, undermining public trust in both domestic and EU institutions.

This academic discourse underscores the complexity of EU-BiH relations, emphasising the imperative for a nuanced analysis of the dynamics shaping European integration processes in candidate countries.

## Discussion: Europeanisation under the contested statehood

The Europeanisation process in BiH encounters a myriad of obstacles and disruptive factors, with contested statehood emerging as a significant impediment to its degree of Europeanisation. Extant literature characterises BiH as an extreme example of contested statehood within the Western Balkans region, a phenomenon recognised as obstructive to both Europeanisation efforts and EU integration. Scholars in Europeanisation research have frequently employed the contested statehood paradigm to elucidate BiH's challenges in aligning with EU norms and standards (Elbasani 2013; Ker-Lindsay et al. 2018; Džankić & Keil 2018; Bieber 2020; Lavrič & Bieber 2021). Specifically, BiH's legal sovereignty and territorial integrity face internal and external challenges, despite its international recognition. This state of contestation impedes the EU's transformative power within BiH and hampers the implementation of domestic reforms. Consequently, BiH finds itself navigating Europeanisation processes under conditions of contested statehood, a dynamic further complicated by the EU's internal divisions regarding its approach to the Western Balkans.

Furthermore, the EU's inability to effectively address the issue of contested statehood in the region underscores the persisting challenges in its external relations. The EU's internal divisions regarding its stance on the Western Balkans exacerbate the situation's complexities, preventing a unified and coherent response. This ongoing division within the EU reflects broader uncertainties and divergent interests among member states, hindering the EU's capacity to act decisively in addressing the challenges posed by contested statehood in BiH. Consequently, the entrenchment of contested statehood dynamics within BiH impedes its Europeanisation process and exposes underlying fractures within the EU's approach to enlargement and regional stability in the Western Balkans.

The persistence of contested statehood as a central issue in the context of BiH's Europeanisation underscores the profound challenges facing the country's integration into the EU, even more than two decades after the Maria de Feira European Council's declaration of full possible integration for the WBCs. Indeed, addressing the status of contested statehood is deemed a prerequisite for successfully implementing enlargement-driven Europeanisation efforts within BiH. Contested statehood dynamics engender deep divisions within BiH society, complicating the realisation of EU-inspired domestic reforms. Moreover, the contested statehood status directly intersects with key aspects of BiH's governance framework, particularly the DPA, necessitating significant changes to accommodate the aspirations of all stakeholders and mitigate internal divisions.

Unlike the Central and Eastern European (CEE) enlargement process, where misalignment with EU demands based on the Copenhagen Criteria primarily drove Europeanisation efforts, BiH faces additional hurdles stemming from its contested statehood. Consequently, BiH lags behind other WBCs in terms of Europeanisation progress due to the pervasive influence of contestation. This issue paralyses BiH's advancement toward Europeanisation and solidifies the status quo, impeding meaningful reforms and perpetuating existing divisions. Nonetheless, this research suggests that a genuine acceptance of Europeanisation principles across all segments of BiH society could serve as a catalyst for addressing underlying challenges and fostering stability. Ultimately, thriving Europeanisation efforts and eventual EU membership can mitigate variation among the WBCs and promote regional cohesion, provided that the issue of contested statehood is effectively addressed and reconciled within BiH.

The contested statehood issue in BiH is deeply rooted in historical dynamics that predate the breakup of Yugoslavia, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of historical backgrounds to conceptualise the challenges to sovereignty and statehood. Particularly noteworthy is the long-standing history of Serbian territorial ambitions aimed at uniting all Serbs in a single state, evident in strategic documents dating back to the 19th century, such as (i) *Načertanije* (1844) by Ilija Garašanin, (ii) *Serbs All and Everywhere* (1849) by Vuk Karadžić, (iii) *Homogeneous Serbia* (1941) by Stevan Moljević and (iv) *Memorandum* (1986) by the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) (Biserko 2012; Preljević 2017). These documents outlined blueprints for expanding Serbian influence through propaganda and pro-Serbian rebel networks, reflecting persistent aspirations that continue to influence political dynamics in the region. Similarly, Croatian territorial ambitions during the 1990s Balkan wars sought to realise the borders of the Croatian Banovina of 1939, aiming to reunify Croat territories within BiH under Croatian jurisdiction.[4]

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4  The ICTY rendered its final judgement in the Prlić et al. case (IT-04-74):

   The Chamber, by a majority, found that a joint criminal enterprise (JCE) existed and had as its ultimate goal the establishment of a Croatian territorial entity with part of the borders of the Croatian Banovina of 1939 to enable a reunification of the Croatian people. This Croatian territorial entity in BiH was either to be united with Croatia following the prospective dissolution of BiH, or become an independent state within BiH with direct ties to Croatia. As early as December 1991, the leadership of the Croatian Community of Herceg-Bosna (which included Mate Boban, president of the Croatian Community (and later Republic) of Herceg-Bosna) and Croatian leaders (including Franjo Tuđman, the president of Croatia) deemed that in order to achieve the ultimate goal, namely the establishment of a Croatian territorial entity as previously described, it was necessary to modify the ethnic composition of the territories claimed to be part of the Croatian Community of Herceg-Bosna. From at least the end of October 1992, Prlić, Stojić, Petković and Praljak were aware that achieving this goal went against the peace talks conducted in Geneva and would entail moving Muslim populations out of the territory of Herceg-Bosna, <accessed online: https://www.icty.org/x/cases/prlic/cis/en/cis_prlic_al_en.pdf>.

More recently, the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU), on 20 May 2022, suggested the conditions Croatia should set for BiH and WBCs during their EU accession negotiations, whereby the formation of a third, ethnic Croat entity within BiH was suggested (HAZU 2022). This proposal highlights the ongoing contestation of BiH's statehood and the persistence of geopolitical ambitions that predate the breakup of Yugoslavia. Indeed, a systematic examination of contested statehood in BiH necessitates a thorough historical background, recognising that the contestation of BiH predates the DPA and is deeply entrenched in historical dynamics. Moreover, the literature on EU integration often overlooks key historical documents and declarations that provide valuable insights into the region's geopolitical landscape and EU-BiH relations. For instance, the *European Council's Declaration on the Special Relations* between the EU and BiH, adopted in June 1998, emphasised the EU's recognition of BiH's path toward closer integration with the European structure and explicitly rejected ambitions to establish Greater Serbia or Greater Croatia, affirming BiH's territorial integrity within the European family (European Council 1998). Despite its significance, this declaration remains relatively unknown to the public and has been overlooked in scholarly discourse. However, its relevance persists, as it is a critical reference point for addressing enduring geopolitical tensions and safeguarding BiH's territorial integrity within the European context. Therefore, integrating such historical documents into the literature on EU integration is essential for comprehensively understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with BiH's European integration process.

In BiH, after 1990, ethnocratic (oligarchic) elements developed under the auspices of the existing system. The results are known today as the entity-organised Dayton State. However, the old rule also applies to it that representative democracy in the sense of the principle of popular sovereignty must establish the real possibilities of the popular rule – that is, citizens in freedom and equality – and that the shaping of electoral law, the parliamentary system, the party system, the structure of power and influence in society ('Establishment') or similar 'real' conditions of government must not turn into concealment and stabilisation of oligarchy (Pernthaler 1986). The concept of sovereignty about BiH, since in the general theory of law – according to the classic division into internal and external sovereignty – a consensus has been established on the concept of sovereignty as a property of state power that includes the ability to constitute itself internally as indivisible and supreme, and to outwardly appear as an equal subject of international relations. While external sovereignty is explicitly normed and preserved to preserve state continuity, internal sovereignty is weakened. It is lost in both essential elements, both as organic sovereignty and as the primacy of the state over entities (Šarčević 2009).

In the constitutional system of BiH, if the competencies of the OHR are excluded, no such sovereign authority is visible: state institutions have pro-

portionally narrow competencies, and the presumption of competence is transferred to the entities (Article III); the Presidency, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Ministers partly stand in an isolated circle of competences, partly they are placed in a relationship of mutual dependence, but in such a way that – as a whole – one cannot speak of a special positioning of one of the bodies as mentioned above in terms of possessing the highest competence. Since it is reserved for the High Representative, it is clear that according to Annex 4 itself, no internal authority-sovereignty is constituted (Nagan & Hammer 2004). And here, once again, the gaze is directed towards the OHR administration as the supreme sovereign and possible constitution-maker. However, the dictates coming from the most powerful countries in the world cannot be bypassed either – just one more argument supporting the thesis about the loss of internal sovereignty (Lara 2014). The relationship between the state and the entities can pose the problem of sovereignty. The Constitutional Court of BiH concludes that the entities are not states and that, according to Article III/2 of the Constitution, they are subordinate to the sovereignty of BiH. This position is also shared by part of the jurisprudence that starts from the supremacy of the Constitution of BiH over the constitutions of the entities (Woelk 2012).

However, political rhetoric and everyday political rituals, as well as domesticated names for entities that circulate in the daily press, lexicons and more serious scientific analyses identify the entity RS as Serbian property, and the Federation as property of Croatian and Bosniak Peoples – the entities, therefore, are not defined according to constitutional law status, but according to the actual positions of power. This roughly, and somewhat more accurately than the entity constitutional proclamations, determined the actual bearer of sovereignty (Cleveland 2002). As already mentioned, the DPA starts from an outwardly sovereign state; however, the agreement suspends the sovereignty of its organs in favour of the authority of the High Representative. Externally proclaimed, the loss of internal sovereignty neutralises sovereignty. If we look more closely at the paradigm of the bearer of sovereignty, then these are ethnically profiled communities of 'constituent peoples'. This is determined by the regulations on the election of members of the State Presidency, the House of Peoples, their competencies, and veto possibilities, which are transferred to the House of Representatives. Such a negotiated position of multiple competing sovereigns in a single territory must be placed in the context of mutually conflicting practical policies. This constellation shows the antinomy that springs from the Bosnian paradigm of sovereignty. It follows from the previous analysis that the characteristics of the 'Dayton Constitution' must include ethnic consensus-democracy and ethno-determinism in the competencies of parliamentary bodies, assistance from outside and the loss of state sovereignty in state affairs, the immanent violation of human rights and the establishment of legal antinomies in constitutional solutions (Šarčević 2009).

Recent events highlight RS officials' efforts to destabilise BiH by defaming state institutions, advocating for entity secession and dissolution. Those same officials vehemently come out into the public space and present their declared strategic goal, which consists of the secession of the entities and the dissolution of the state. This explicit destruction of state sovereignty is assisted by the silent and implicit permanent activity of enclosing and defining the territory and population of another ethnic group, which at this stage is trying to homogenise the population and territory and, at last, the highest level of this political game, it will have similar secessionist urges (Karović 2016).

The persistence of secessionist sentiments and politics poses a significant challenge to BiH's sovereignty and independence, threatening to destabilise the region and impede the country's Europeanisation process. The ethnic Serb and Croat populations, driven by historical grievances and aspirations stemming from the 1992–1995 war in BiH, continue to advocate for territorial reorganisation or secession from BiH, aiming to de-sovereignise the country and align its borders with Serbia or Croatia. Such secessionist tendencies not only undermine BiH's territorial integrity but also pose a grave risk to regional stability, potentially leading to conflict reminiscent of the Latin phrase 'bellum omnium contra omnes', which translates to 'the war of all against all', reflecting a state of pervasive chaos.

Threats of a referendum on secession within BiH's RS entity persisted even thirty years after the DPA, posing a threat to the stability of BiH and the wider region. Domestically, some actors within RS advocate for secession to unite with Serbia as a kin state for all Serbs in the region. Serbia's involvement in these secessionist efforts undermines BiH and aligns with Serbia's geopolitical interests, as outlined in its National Security and Defence Strategies (Ministry of Defence of Serbia 2021a, 2021b). Despite acknowledging BiH's territorial integrity and sovereignty in these documents, Serbia's explicit focus on protecting Serbs wherever they reside violates BiH's sovereignty. This breach remains profound, irrespective of any recognition of BiH's sovereignty in these official documents. Notably, BiH's RS entity is not part of Serbia. Hence, it raises questions about why another state, namely Serbia, asserts security and defence claims over BiH's territory. This scenario resembles France making claims, at the highest political level, in its security and defence policy regarding the duty to safeguard the French people in Belgium and Switzerland. BiH's potential membership in NATO could render Serbia's strategies futile.

Additionally, Serbian officials, such as the former minister of the interior and the director of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), now a current member of the Senate of RS,[5] Aleksandar Vulin, emphasise solving the national question of

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5   The Senate of the RS functions as the consultative body for the highest constitutional institutions within RS. Established by the enactment of the Law on the Senate of the entity RS on 4 April 1997, during a session of the RS National Assembly, its membership is appointed by the president of RS. It

Serbs through the 'Serbian World' project (Al Jazeera Balkan 2022).[6] BiH's Europeanisation has the potential to counteract the 'Great Serbia' narrative by strengthening BiH and preventing the formation of a singular Serbian national space. However, this depends on BiH's response and the EU's willingness to confront historical projects aiming to unify Serbs under one state.

On the other hand, the ethnic Croat community within BiH has articulated proposals for territorial reorganisation, reflecting a complex interplay of ethnic narratives and aspirations. The Croatian National Assembly (HNS) in BiH, building upon the conclusions drawn from its extraordinary session on 19 February 2022, endeavours to instigate legal and political procedures conducive to BiH's institutional and territorial restructuring. Their objective is to align BiH's governance framework with federalist principles, thereby ensuring the efficacy of the state apparatus and upholding the equitable representation of the country's three constituent peoples (HNS 2022). Noteworthy is the endorsement by Milorad Dodik, a prominent figure advocating for establishing a third ethnic Croat entity within BiH, which has injected further momentum into this discourse (Radio Free Europe 2022). Additionally, Croatian President Zoran Milanović's conditional support for Croatian secession or forming a third entity within BiH underscores the multifaceted dynamics shaping discussions surrounding the country's statehood (N1 2022). These divergent narratives surrounding BiH's territorial configuration significantly influence the country's trajectory toward European integration and prospective EU membership. It is imperative for both the ethnic Serb and Croat constituencies to exercise prudence and restraint in their territorial assertions.

As an aspiring member state, BiH grapples with the inherent challenge of existing as a contested territory, further compounded by the imperatives of ongoing EU-driven reforms. The journey towards EU accession entails navigating a labyrinth of intricate and exacting criteria, with the contentious nature

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is primarily composed of individuals hailing from both RS and Serbia, and the Senate's decisions hold no binding authority over the institutions of RS.

6   In 2011, Serbia introduced a 'Strategy of Preserving and Strengthening the Relations of the Home State and Diaspora and Serbs in the Region'. According to this document, Serbia is considered the home state of all Serbs in the region. The term 'Serbs in the region' refers to members of the Serbian nation living in Slovenia, Croatia, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Albania and Hungary. This strategy effectively implements aspects of the 1986 Memorandum aimed at preventing the perceived threat to Serbs residing outside of Serbia. It serves as an operational document with specific instructions for various activities. The strategy primarily focuses on preventing assimilation, particularly through the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), recognised as the sole legitimate cross-border institution in the region. It underscores the entity of RS as a key area of interest and a national foreign policy priority for Serbia, aiming to support the preservation of the interests of the Serbian people in RS. Additionally, the strategy outlines diplomatic support from Serbia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to uphold the entity of RS within BiH. Moreover, the strategy dictates that relevant ministries must facilitate the acquisition of Serbian citizenship for all citizens of RS who wish to obtain it. Specific tasks are also assigned to the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Sports and Ministry of Religion to further strengthen the position of Serbs, particularly in FBiH.

of BiH's statehood status exacerbating the complexity of this endeavour. The prevalence of competing territorial claims introduces layers of intricacy to the Europeanisation process, rendering the attainment of EU membership a formidable undertaking. Against this backdrop, it behoves all stakeholders within BiH to prioritise collaborative engagement and dialogue, harmonise divergent territorial perspectives and forge a collective path toward meeting EU accession prerequisites. Only through concerted efforts to foster consensus and resolve internal divisions can BiH advance its Europeanisation agenda and inch closer to realising its aspirations for EU integration.

The contested statehood status of BiH poses a significant threat to the sustainability of Europeanisation efforts, as the uncertainty surrounding its statehood status inherently undermines the process. The very nature of contested statehood implies a departure from the Europeanisation trajectory, as the strength of the state is compromised. In the case of BiH, the prevailing policy agenda tends towards weakening the state apparatus, leading to what can be termed as de-Europeanisation. This phenomenon involves reversing or resisting previously implemented reforms, effectively dismantling the alignment with EU norms and policies. De-Europeanisation, thus, represents an inversion of the Europeanisation process, with the prefix 'de-' indicating a departure from EU--inspired responsibilities and obligations.

Eduard Soler i Lecha (2008) defines de-Europeanisation as a process wherein the momentum toward convergence with EU norms diminishes, and there may even be a regression toward policies contrary to EU objectives. In BiH's context, de-Europeanisation manifests as a deliberate divergence from EU requirements, often driven by competing nationalist agendas and separatist tendencies. This approach weakens the EU's influence and relevance and hampers BiH's progress towards European integration. Ethnic Serb factions, for instance, have sought to diminish EU pressure by cultivating closer ties with Russia and China, while advocating for the secession of BiH's RS entity and unification with Serbia. Conversely, ethnic Croat groups have pushed for institutional and territorial reorganisation within BiH, further complicating the Europeanisation process. These divergent and contradictory tendencies underscore the precarious nature of Europeanisation in BiH, where the durability of EU integration efforts remains uncertain amidst persistent challenges to the country's contested statehood.

Moreover, while de-Europeanisation is not unique to BiH, its ramifications are particularly acute within the country's context. Backsliding trends observed in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs), such as democratic regression or de-democratisation, raise pertinent questions regarding the sustainability of Europeanisation efforts. Brexit stands as a stark example of radical de-Europeanisation within the EU framework (Bieber 2019), highlighting the potential for de-Europeanisation to contribute to the disintegration of the EU

itself. However, in BiH, the consequences of de-Europeanisation may manifest in more severe forms, potentially jeopardising the fragile ceasefire and stability in the region. Unlike in EU member states, where mechanisms for conflict resolution and institutional stability are more established, BiH's susceptibility to de-Europeanisation could exacerbate existing tensions and break the delicate peace maintained through the DPA.

Furthermore, the sustainability of the DPA hinges on ongoing Europeanisation efforts, which serve to update and reinforce its configurations. Any regression from this process risks plunging BiH back into uncertainty and instability. Conversely, upon attaining EU membership, BiH may follow a trajectory akin to that of Poland, Hungary, Croatia and other former CEECs, where latent political issues resurface post-accession. However, BiH's inherently complex political landscape, characterised by deeply entrenched ethnic divisions and historical grievances, presents unique challenges. The parallel process of slow Europeanisation in BiH underscores the resilience of domestic structures to EU-driven reforms, further complicating the path toward meaningful integration with European structures.

The geopolitical and regional complexities surrounding BiH render the regatta system[7] inherently disadvantageous to its interests. In the context of Europeanisation and EU integration, the competitive race for accession, as epitomised by the regatta system, fails to align with BiH's contested statehood status. This reality underscores the inherent unfairness of Europeanisation efforts in the region, where competing national interests often overshadow the broader goals of integration and stability. This can be emphasised by how Slovenia's actions significantly complicated Croatia's accession to the EU, with Croatia now reciprocating by impeding Serbia and BiH's progress. This dynamic highlights the extent to which regional events can hinder rather than facilitate BiH's integration process.

Furthermore, the potential entry of Serbia into the EU poses additional challenges for BiH, particularly for its non-Serb and non-Croat populations. With ethnic Croats and Serbs, who constitute the majority in BiH, holding dual citizenship with Serbia or Croatia, there is a risk of marginalised groups, particularly Muslims, being left without EU citizenship. This scenario exacerbates existing inequalities and further entrenches divisions within BiH. In light of these complexities, the regatta principle, which prioritises the accession of certain countries over others based on perceived readiness, should be revaluated. Considering the unique challenges posed by BiH's contested statehood status, a more nuanced and undifferentiated approach toward the accession of Serbia and BiH is warranted. Alternatively, the regatta principle should be aligned with

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7   According to the regatta system, countries will join the EU when qualified rather than as a group, i.e. they will become fully-fledged members after complying with the EU requirements.

the European Council's Declaration on the Special Relations between the EU and BiH, which unequivocally rejects ambitions to establish Greater Serbia or Greater Croatia. By opposing contested statehood narratives and policies, the EU can prioritise inclusivity and stability in its enlargement and Europeanisation efforts in the Western Balkans.

The conflicting narratives and politics surrounding BiH's statehood hinder its Europeanisation and prospective EU membership. Both ethnic Serbs and Croats must moderate their claims to facilitate BiH's integration process. BiH grapples with existential challenges amid EU-inspired reforms as a potential member state, complicating its path towards EU membership.

## Conclusions

The consociational democracy framework offers valuable insights into BiH's challenges in its Europeanisation process. BiH's consociational power-sharing system, established under the DPA, has shaped its political landscape by institutionalising ethnic divisions and ensuring political representation for all constituent groups. However, this system also presents significant obstacles to BiH's integration into the EU.

The Europeanisation process in BiH faces numerous obstacles, with contested statehood being a major impediment. The literature frequently describes BiH as an extreme case of contested statehood within the Western Balkans, obstructing both its Europeanisation efforts and EU integration. Scholars often use the contested statehood paradigm to explain BiH's difficulties in aligning with EU norms and standards (Elbasani 2013; Ker-Lindsay et al. 2018; Džankić & Keil 2018; Bieber 2020; Lavrič & Bieber 2021). Despite international recognition, BiH's legal sovereignty and territorial integrity are challenged internally and externally, hindering the EU's transformative power and the implementation of domestic reforms.

Navigating Europeanisation processes under contested statehood, BiH is further complicated by internal EU divisions regarding its approach to the Western Balkans. These divisions reflect broader uncertainties and divergent interests among EU member states, limiting the EU's effectiveness in addressing contested statehood in BiH. This dynamic hampers BiH's Europeanisation and highlights fractures within the EU's enlargement strategy and regional stability efforts.

Contested statehood remains a central issue for BiH's integration into the EU, even decades after the 2000 Feira European Council's declaration of possible full integration for the Western Balkans. Resolving BiH's contested statehood is essential for successful Europeanisation efforts. The presence of contested statehood creates deep societal divisions, complicating the implementation of EU-inspired reforms. Additionally, it intersects with BiH's governance framework, particularly the DPA, necessitating significant changes to accommodate all stakeholders and mitigate internal divisions.

Unlike the CEE enlargement process, where alignment with EU demands based on the Copenhagen Criteria drove Europeanisation, BiH faces additional hurdles from its contested statehood. Consequently, BiH lags behind other WBCs in Europeanisation progress due to the pervasive influence of this issue. This impedes meaningful reforms and perpetuates existing divisions. Nonetheless, genuine acceptance of Europeanisation principles across BiH society could address underlying challenges and foster stability. Successful Europeanisation and eventual EU membership could mitigate regional disparities, provided that contested statehood is effectively addressed and reconciled.

Historical dynamics of contested statehood in BiH, influenced by long-standing Serbian and Croatian territorial ambitions, require a comprehensive understanding of historical contexts to conceptualise challenges to sovereignty and statehood. Significant historical documents, such as the European Council's 1998 Declaration on the Special Relations between the EU and BiH, which rejected ambitions to establish Greater Serbia or Greater Croatia, offer valuable insights into the region's geopolitical landscape and EU-BiH relations. Integrating these documents into EU integration literature is essential for understanding BiH's European integration challenges and opportunities.

The Dayton State, established after 1995, allowed ethnocratic elements to thrive, weakening BiH's internal sovereignty by transferring competence to entities rather than state institutions. This external sovereignty is neutralised by the loss of internal sovereignty, further complicated by the OHR supreme authority. Political rhetoric and daily rituals often identify entities as ethnic group properties rather than their constitutional status, undermining BiH's sovereignty and independence. The presence of the OHR confirms the contested statehood of BiH. If the country were not contested, there would be no need for the OHR.

Secessionist sentiments among ethnic Serbs and Croats pose significant challenges to BiH's sovereignty, threatening regional stability and impeding Europeanisation. Ethnic Serbs seek closer ties with Russia and China and advocate for the secession of BiH's RS entity and unification with Serbia. Ethnic Croats push for institutional and territorial reorganisation, further complicating the Europeanisation process. These divergent tendencies highlight the precarious nature of Europeanisation in BiH, where EU integration efforts remain uncertain amid persistent contested statehood challenges.

The sustainability of Europeanisation efforts in BiH is threatened by de--Europeanisation, which involves reversing previously implemented reforms and dismantling alignment with EU norms. De-Europeanisation weakens EU influence and hampers BiH's progress toward European integration. Moreover, the potential EU entry of Serbia poses additional challenges for BiH's non-Serb and non-Croat populations, risking marginalised groups, particularly Bosniaks, being left without EU citizenship. This exacerbates existing inequalities and entrenches divisions within BiH.

The regatta principle, which prioritises accession based on perceived readiness, should be revaluated considering BiH's unique challenges. A more nuanced approach toward Serbia and BiH's accession is warranted. Alternatively, aligning the regatta principle with the European Council's Declaration on the Special Relations between the EU and BiH, which rejects Greater Serbia or Greater Croatia ambitions, would prioritise inclusivity and stability in EU enlargement efforts in the Western Balkans.

The Europeanisation as a toolkit is essential for analysing the impact of EU policies and norms on BiH, including the rule of law, human rights and governance. It provides insights into the mechanisms through which EU requirements are implemented and the challenges associated with adaptation. Despite BiH's commitment through signing the SAA, which entails aligning with the EU acquis before obtaining candidate status, delays in transposing the EU acquis and resistance to European-induced domestic changes persist. However, as the name suggests, stabilisation should precede association, indicating the importance of assessing progress. Examining the compatibility scale, which evaluates the alignment between BiH and the EU, it becomes evident that BiH's capacity to fulfil the obligations of EU membership is minimal. Within the framework of Europeanisation, this research likens BiH to a *Potemkin village*, implying a superficial appearance of progress masking underlying shortcomings. Consequently, the extent of domestic reform is constrained, and between 2019 and 2023, the process of Europeanisation in BiH fluctuated between inertia and resistance to adapting domestic structures.

Finally, conflicting narratives and politics surrounding BiH's statehood hinder its Europeanisation and prospective EU membership. Both ethnic Serbs and Croats must moderate their claims to facilitate BiH's integration process. BiH faces existential challenges amid EU-inspired reforms as a potential member state, complicating its path toward EU membership. Only through concerted efforts to foster consensus and resolve internal divisions can BiH advance its Europeanisation agenda and move closer to realising its EU integration aspirations. Overcoming these challenges will be crucial for BiH to advance its Europeanisation agenda and realise its aspirations for EU integration.

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# Role of Central Executive Authorities in the Formation and Implementation of the State National Memory Policy in Ukraine

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**Abstract:** *In Ukraine there is a powerful public demand for national memory policy because, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the awareness of the Ukrainian civil identity has intensified. Therefore, revising the system of public administration in the field of national memory is relevant, given the compliance with European standards for the formation and implementation of European collective memory. In view of this, this article is aimed at researching the central executive authorities that ensure the formation and implementation of the state policy on national memory in Ukraine. The achievement of this goal is carried out by determining the subjects of the state policy on national memory in Ukraine, analysing their functional duties, structural and organisa-tional characteristics, regulatory support, as well as relationships and interaction during the formation and implementation of the policy on national memory. It is established that Ukraine has an extensive multi-level system of public administration in the field of national memory, which is made up of state authorities and local self-government, as well as various institutions of civil society. Finally, an effective state policy on national memory is possible only if a strategy and clear mechanisms for its implementation by state institutions are developed with the obligatory involvement of the public.*

**Keywords:** *public administration, state policy, national memory policy, authorities, Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, executive authorities, ministry*

## Introduction

National memory is an important component of the identity of any nation, influencing its self-awareness, cultural heritage and political orientation. In Ukraine, there is currently a powerful public demand for national memory policy, which undoubtedly affects its formation and implementation. This trend has generally been observed over the past ten years, which is associated with socio-political processes in Ukraine. Central executive authorities play a key role in this process, defining the directions, mechanisms and tools of policies aimed at preserving, interpreting and promoting historical heritage.

In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, society has intensified its awareness of Ukrainian civil identity. Under the threat of losing statehood, freedom, democracy and territorial integrity, there is a consolidation of the Ukrainian political nation, despite the ethnic, linguistic, cultural, historical and other features of the peoples living in Ukraine. This can be confirmed by the results of a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in July 2022. In it, 84.6% of respondents said that they consider themselves primarily the citizens of Ukraine (Dembitskyi 2022). Thus, speaking of civil identity, it is necessary to single out the political component and to take into account the belonging of a person to a certain citizenship, regardless of ethnic origin, which determines a political nation or a civil nation. (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 1996).

Given that one of the elements of identification is the historical memory of the common past of the Ukrainian civil nation that unites all peoples living in Ukraine, the policy of national memory today plays a very important role (Boughton 2023). It is a component of national security and contributes to the strengthening of the Ukrainian state and the consolidation of the Ukrainian society. As the Ukrainian researcher Piskun (Piskun 2011: 111–112) noted, common historical memory is one of the powerful factors of social unity and social mobilisation. Considering the state policy on national memory, primarily as a direction of action, decision-making and implementation of measures, the object of this study is the organisational support of this policy. State authorities, having different duties, performing different functions and interacting with each other, form an extensive system of public administration in this area (Johnson & George 2023).

However, against the background of political, social and economic changes taking place in Ukraine, the question arises about the effectiveness of the central executive authorities in the field of national memory. Are they able to adequately respond to the challenges of the time, provide a balanced approach to historical events and figures, and at the same time contribute to the consolidation of society?

This article is focused on the study of the role of central executive authorities in the formation and implementation of state policy on national memory

in Ukraine. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to analyse the mechanisms and approaches used by central executive authorities of Ukraine and identify factors influencing their effectiveness. Particular attention is paid to the legal, organisational and sociocultural aspects of their activities.

In the context of the development of modern Ukrainian statehood and integration into the European space, the study of national memory becomes extremely relevant. This allows the authors not only to understand the historical context of modern political decisions but also to generate a common national narrative, which is necessary for the stable development of society.

The achievement of this aim is carried out by determining the subjects of the state policy on national memory in Ukraine, analysing their functional duties, structural and organisational characteristics, regulatory support, as well as relationships and interaction during the formation and implementation of the policy on national memory. The aim stipulates the following research objectives tasks:

– to define subjects of state policy on national memory in Ukraine, analyse their functional duties, structural and organisational characteristics, regulatory and legal support;
– to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the role of central executive authorities in the context of national memory, including its legal, administrative and socio-cultural aspects;
– to analyse the mechanisms for shaping the national memory policy by the central executive authorities;
– to examine the relationships and interactions in the formation and implementation of national memory policies in Ukraine.

The article offers a systematic study of the activities of central executive authorities in the field of national memory, taking into account their functions, mechanisms of interaction and tools for implementing policy. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of formation and implementation of state policy on national memory.

The article reveals new factors influencing the effectiveness of the central executive authorities in the field of national memory. This includes the analysis of the domestic political situation in Ukraine, international influences, public opinion and social movements that have not previously received sufficient attention in national studies.

Thus, the scientific novelty of the article is a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to the study of the role of central executive authorities in the formation and implementation of the state policy on national memory in Ukraine, which develops practical ways to improve their activities.

## Literature Review

Understanding the role of central executive authorities in the formation and implementation of state policy on national memory is largely based on the analysis of previous studies. These studies provide an opportunity to determine the place of historical memory in the political system and reveal the structural and functional connections of this phenomena.

Yurchuk (2014) studies changes in memory policy in Ukraine under the influence of the challenges posed by the war in eastern Ukraine. The researcher highlights the significance of symbolic aspects of memory politics, such as memorable dates and places. Yurchuk (2019) considers how the memory policy in Ukraine was formed between 1991 and 2014 in relation to the Second World War and how and why the memory of the OUN and the UPA began being used by political forces.

Klymenko (2020) demonstrates the use of historical memory in foreign policy discourse. The researcher highlights how these mechanisms unfold in different national and political contexts and how the memory policy of the state affects its foreign policy and relations with other states. She claims that in order to justify the pro-European foreign policy programme of Ukraine, the Ukrainian political leadership contributed to the understanding that Ukrainians have historical experience similar to Europeans and different from Russians. This, in turn, justifies Ukraine's desire to distance itself from Russia and become a member of the EU.

According to Kyrydon (2016), the emergence of memory studies in Ukraine began in the 1990s–2000s, while in the West there has been an 'obsession with memory' since 2011. Although the researcher claims that the stage of institutionalisation of memory studies in Ukraine has been observed only since 2011, some activities were organised before. Thus, on 22 April 2008 a scientific conference called 'Historical Memory as a Field of Competition for Identity' was held in Kyiv, resulting in the publication of 'National and Historical Memory: A Glossary of Keywords' in 2013.

Kasianov (2018) deals with the problems of historical memory, in particular the 'war of memory'. The researcher analyses the national memory formation in post-Soviet countries, in particular, in Ukraine. He emphasises the role of state institutions in creating the official narrative of history and their impact on public perception of the past. Moreover, historical narratives and varieties of collective memory (folk, official, autobiographical, historical, memorial) coexist. However, historical narratives play the role of a 'civil religion', which is closely related to the legitimacy of power (Kubik & Bernhard 2014).

Furthermore, Bakke et al. (2024) explore how political elites in Ukraine use historical memory to achieve their goals. They analyse the mechanisms of memory politicisation, emphasising the importance of state institutions'

participation. They focus on specific examples of political decisions and initiatives aimed at shaping national identity and influencing public opinion. Apart from that, the study of mnemopolitics by Pakhomenko and Hedo (2020) is interesting in the context of the formation and implementation of state policy on national memory. They demonstrate how two opposing narratives compete and coexist in Latvia and Ukraine, i.e., the official nation-centric and Soviet narratives of counter-memory.

Nekoliak (2022) draws attention to the patterns of memory legislation evolution and explains the specific processes of punitive memory law-making. The researcher dwells upon the influence of the international context and the importance of legislative initiatives in the national memory formation. In addition, Liubarets (2016) carries out the theoretical and empirical analysis of the memory policy in Ukraine by 2014. He concentrates on examining various social forms of influence, in particular, the mechanisms of development of the political system and its components in the context of transformations of the postmodern globalised world.

These studies provide important theoretical foundations for understanding these processes and help form a holistic vision of the national memory policy. However, they do not focus on studying the role of central executive authorities in the formation and implementation of state policy on national memory not only in the EU but also in Ukraine.

## Methodological framework

The methodological basis of this work is constituted by general scientific and special research methods. The integrated use of these methods allowed the authors to reveal the main aspects of the issue under study and to fulfil the aim of the research. The source base of the study is comprised of the Constitution of Ukraine, the laws of Ukraine, decisions of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, decrees and orders of the president of Ukraine, decisions and orders of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, orders of ministries and normative legal acts of other central executive bodies. These normative acts regulate the activities of central executive authorities in the formation and implementation of the national memory policy.

The source base of the research consists of the scientific works of the Ukrainian and foreign scholars in the fields of public administration, law, political science, history, as well as normative legal acts, official documents and reports regulating issues of national memory and relating to the activities of central executive authorities in the field of national memory. It helps determine certain aspects of the state memory policy implementation in Ukraine.

The study is carried out through a content analysis of normative legal acts and official documents to identify the main directions and mechanisms of

state policy on national memory. The definition of the terms used in the article (public policy, state policy, public administration, national memory, national identity, civil identity, national-patriotic education, etc.) is carried out using the logical-semantic method. Methods of systematisation and generalisation are applied to specify the essence and content of the terms used in normative acts and in modern scientific discourse in Ukraine.

Throughout the study, the legislative method is used to analyse normative legal acts and provisions on the activities of central authorities regarding the state policy on national memory in Ukraine, as well as on their subordination, formation, responsibility, tasks and functions, the organisational structure of each body.

Furthermore, the method of system analysis was applied. This contributed to the gradual study of individual elements of an integrated management system that ensures the formation and implementation of state policy on national memory in Ukraine, as well as the study of the relationship and interaction of authorities at different levels. The specifics of the functioning of individual subjects of the national memory policy and individual areas of their managerial activity were revealed using the method of specification.

Moreover, methods of comparative analysis were used to study the activities of central executive authorities and their functioning. The study of the scope of the functional requirements of various management institutions and their structural units made it possible to identify the subjects of state policy on national memory and reflect the system of their interrelations: the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, central executive bodies and local executive bodies. Particular attention was paid to the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance 2024) as a central executive body that directly ensures the formation and implementation of the policy on national memory in Ukraine.

The application of the historical method facilitated clarifying the theoretical and historical conditions for establishing state mechanisms for ensuring the national memory policy, tracking the conceptual evolution of this policy in the state-building process of Ukraine, and studying the processes of institutionalisation and legal support since the restoration of Ukrainian independence in 1991 to the present. In addition, this method allowed the authors to analyse the dynamics in the formation of national and civil identity, the development of civil society, the influence of public opinion and public demand on the state policy on national memory, etc.

The use of logical and dialectical methods, methods of systematisation and generalisation of factual and empirical information obtained during research facilitated building a system of central executive authorities that ensure the formation and implementation of the national memory policy, as well as draw

conclusions about the existing state of public administration in the field of national memory in Ukraine and consider possible ways to improve it.

These methods make it possible to comprehensively study the role of central executive authorities in the formation and implementation of state policy on national memory in Ukraine, assess their impact on society and develop recommendations to improve their effectiveness.

## Results

### *The system and legal acts of central executive authorities in the field of national memory*

Ukraine, like the EU countries, has an extensive multi-level system of public administration in the field of national memory, which is made up of state authorities and local self-government, as well as various institutions of civil society. Interacting with each other, they form and implement a public policy on national memory. Their functioning is provided by a thorough regulatory framework that regulates both structural and functional issues of the activities of state authorities and public institutions, and thus the national memory policy (Le Boulay 2023). State authorities are dominant in this management system. The formation and implementation of the state policy on national memory in Ukraine is provided by the executive authorities. Their system consists of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, central and local executive bodies.

Ensuring the formation and implementation of state policy in one or more areas, they are directly or indirectly involved in the policy on national memory (see Figure 1). The specifics of the exercise of executive authority by these bodies is regulated by Law of Ukraine No. 3166-VI of 17 March 2011 'On central executive authorities' (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2011), special laws, regulations, provisions and other legal documents.

The system of local executive bodies consists of the Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, regional state administrations, Kyiv and Sevastopol city state administrations, district state administrations in the cities of Kyiv and Sevastopol, as well as territorial bodies of ministries, state committees and central executive bodies with special status (administrations, departments). Certain authorities are delegated to local state administrations by executive bodies of the highest level and local self-government bodies, i.e., regional, district and city councils. The procedure for the activities, duties, organisation of local executive authorities is determined by Law of Ukraine No. 586-XIV of 9 April 1999 'On local state administrations' (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 1999), while the organisational and procedural issues of the activities of certain state administrations is provided for in regulations.

**Figure 1: System of central executive authorities in the field of national memory**
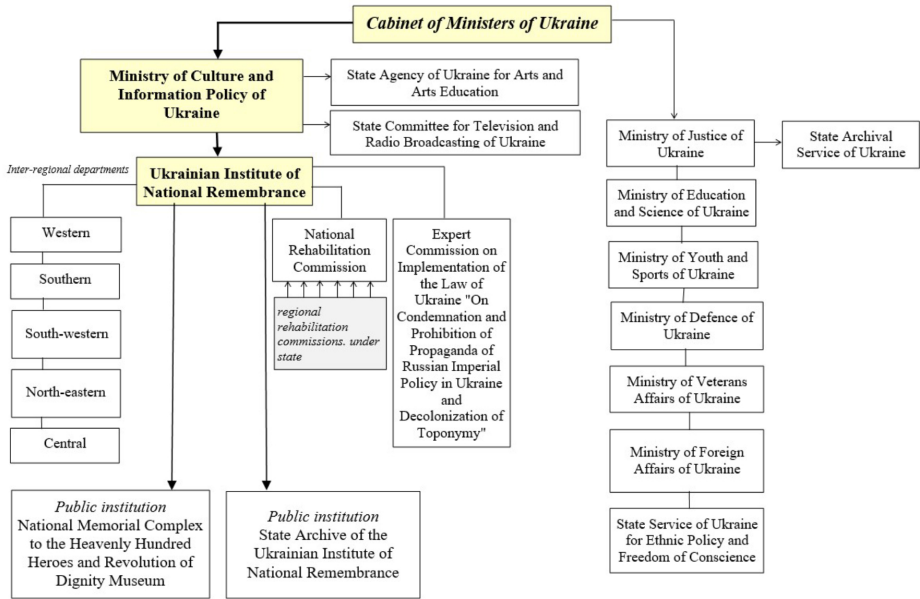


Source: Authors

The legal framework of the national memory policy consists of the Law of Ukraine 'On the legal status and commemoration of the victims of war and political repression', which defines the legal basis and establishes the procedure for organising memorial events, creating monuments and memorials, and conducting research. Resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine define specific measures and programmes implemented by central executive authorities, for example, programmes for celebrating important historical dates, and holding scientific conferences and educational events aimed at preserving national memory.

The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine is one of the main central authorities in organising the policy of national memory in Ukraine. By-laws of the Ministry regulate the activities of state cultural institutions, in particular, museums, archives and libraries engaged in the preservation of historical heritage. Through its structural units (Department of Information Policy and Information Security, and Department of Cultural Heritage) and through its subordinate central executive bodies (State Agency of Ukraine for Arts and Arts Education, State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine, and the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance), the Ministry ensures the formation and implementation of state policy in the field of culture, arts, media, museum and library affairs, restoration and preservation of national memory, language and information, etc. (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2019a).

The functions of implementing state policy on national memory are entrusted to the central executive body subordinate to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, i.e. the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (hereinafter aka the Institute). The documents of the Institute serve as the basis for shaping the national memory policy in Ukraine. They cover a wide range of issues from conceptual approaches to practical aspects of policy implementation.

## Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance

The Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance was created by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 764 of 31 May 2006 'On the formation of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance' (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2006). From 2006 to 2010 the Institute functioned as a specially authorised central executive body, whose activities were directed and coordinated directly by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. From 2011 to 2014, in accordance with the Decree of the President of Ukraine of 9 December 2010, the Institute acted as a research institution under the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (President of Ukraine 2010). It acquired the modern status of a central executive authority in accordance with the resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine of 9 July 2014 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2014a) (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Transformation of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance in 2006–2023**
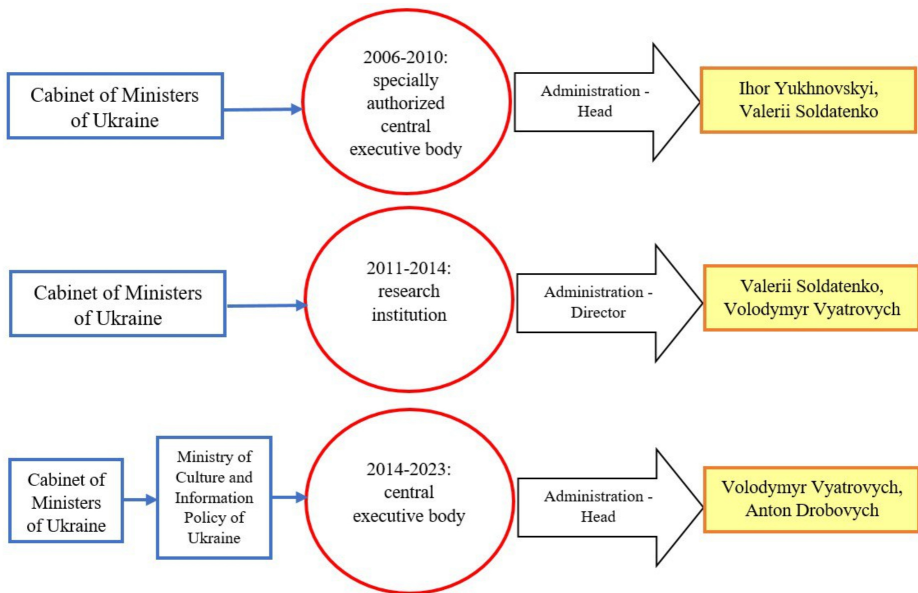


Source: Authors

The Institute has a rather extensive management apparatus covering issues of institutional, analytical, informational and educational support for the national memory policy. The authorities of the Institute extend throughout Ukraine and are exercised directly and through inter-regional territorial bodies, i.e., Western, Southern, South-western, North-eastern and Central inter-regional departments.

According to the Regulation on the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on 12 November 2014, the main tasks of the Institute are as follows:
– implementation of state policy in the field of restoration and preservation of the national memory of the Ukrainian people;
– participation in the formation of state policy in the restoration and preservation of the national memory of the Ukrainian people and the national consciousness of the citizens of Ukraine (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2014b).

Implementing the state policy on national memory, the Institute ensures the organisation of a comprehensive study of the history of the Ukrainian state and the struggle of the Ukrainian people for the restoration of statehood and the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, as well as the historical heritage of indigenous peoples and national minorities living in Ukraine. The implementation of measures to perpetuate the memory of participants in the Ukrainian liberation movement, the Ukrainian revolution of 1917–1921, wars and the victims of crimes of the communist totalitarian regime; popularisation of national history and its personalities in Ukraine and in the world, as well as overcoming historical myths are also the spheres of the Institute activities.

At the same time, providing proposals to the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine (Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine 2023), the Institute participates in the formation of state policy on restoring national memory, strengthening patriotism and national consciousness of the citizens of Ukraine. Further, it participates in the popularisation of the role of the Ukrainian people in the struggle against totalitarianism and the defence of human rights and freedoms in the world, the assessment of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century and the crimes committed by them in Ukraine, and the prevention of the use of symbols of totalitarian regimes, etc.

The Institute as a central executive authority ensures the implementation of the national memory policy at the local level through cooperation with cultural and educational institutions, the organisation and conduct of information and educational events (seminars, meetings, lectures, conversations, etc.). In particular, one of the areas of activity in the regions is to increase the professional level of officials and representatives of executive authorities and local

governments, such as officials of united territorial communities, concerning the implementation of the state policy on national memory.

In the context of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, the Institute has undergone changes in the definition of priority areas of activity, caused by the need to solve particularly important problems that threaten state security. In particular, these priorities are as follows:

– information support for the forces of resistance to Russian aggression, preserving the memory of the Russo-Ukrainian war, commemorating its victims and honouring heroes;
– countering Russian disinformation, especially overcoming historical myths spread by Russian propaganda in the world in order to justify the invasion of Ukraine;
– rethinking the Russian imperial and Soviet totalitarian past of Ukraine;
– promoting the deprivation of Ukrainian public space of colonial symbols;
– continuing popularisation of the history of the Ukrainian people in Ukraine and in the world, etc.

## *Other central executive authorities*

In addition to the Institute, the management system in the field of national memory includes other central executive authorities. In accordance with their competences, they ensure the implementation and/or participate in the formation of national memory policies in their field. This is carried out either by directing, coordinating and controlling the activities of various state institutions that act as subjects of state policy on national memory, or by introducing individual measures in their field or participating in specific activities within the framework of this policy.

The historical and cultural heritage of the Ukrainian people and indigenous peoples and national minorities living in Ukraine is an important component of national memory. Issues of preservation of cultural values and historical sources are currently within the competence of various ministries. In particular, the activities of museums and reserves are coordinated by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine. Preserving and popularising museum objects and collections, historical monuments and memorable places, museums and reserves are involved in the restoration and preservation of national memory, in the establishment of Ukrainian national and civic identity, etc.

Another element in the field of national memory is represented by state archival institutions, which preserve the documentary heritage of the Ukrainian people. Their activities are provided by the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine through the State Archival Service of Ukraine. The network of state archives of Ukraine includes central, branch, regional archives, archives in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, archives of the cities of Kyiv and Sevastopol, as well

as archival departments and sectors of district state administrations and city councils, archival units of state institutions, enterprises and organisations. They contain documents of the National Archival Fond that are related to the history of Ukrainian and other peoples, have cultural value and are the property of the Ukrainian nation. Central state archives are also located within the sphere of management of the State Archival Service of Ukraine. Sectoral state archives operate under the central executive authorities of a certain industry, while regional and city archives are structural units of the relevant state administrations. At the same time, regarding the implementation of state policy on archival affairs, all archives are accountable and controlled by the State Archival Service of Ukraine (Vlasenko 2023).

Currently, archives, museums and reserves are significant subjects of the national memory policy in Ukraine. They not only preserve the sources of national memory (documents and artifacts of Ukrainian history and culture) but take an active part in the study and restoration of historical truth, honouring and perpetuating memory, national-patriotic education of citizens and the establishment of Ukrainian national and civil identity, ensuring information events of the state in Ukraine and in the world, etc.

In our opinion, one of the most important directions in the state policy on national memory is the formation of a Ukrainian national consciousness and active citizenship. These issues acquire particular relevance in the conditions of the war, as evidenced by the growing public demand for national patriotic education. Its main components are defined in the Strategy for National Patriotic Education, approved by the Decree of the President of Ukraine of 9 May 2019. This is a public-patriotic, military-patriotic, spiritual and moral education that contributes to the strengthening of Ukrainian statehood and the consolidation of Ukrainian society, the formation and consolidation of national values in it (President of Ukraine 2019).

In this regard, the statement of Naida (2023) seems quite reasonable that patriotism is one of the main determinants of the unity of Ukrainian society; its development is the key to the socio-political development of the state and one of the factors of national security of Ukraine. Therefore, without an effective system of patriotic education it is impossible to build a country with nationally formed, identically minded citizens (Naida 2023: 47–49).

National patriotic education in Ukraine is provided by state authorities, local governments, educational institutions and public organisations. In particular, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine is among the central executive authorities whose tasks include ensuring national patriotic education and the establishment of national and civic identity. According to Law of Ukraine No. 2145-VIII of 5 September 2017 'On education', the education of patriotism and respect for the cultural values of the Ukrainian people, its historical and cultural heritage and traditions are the principles of education activity (Verkhovna

Rada of Ukraine 2017). The issue of studying the history, culture, traditions and customs of the Ukrainian people and peoples living in Ukraine is an integral part of the educational process at all levels of education and in all educational institutions of Ukraine.

Apart from that, the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine joins the national memory policy, primarily through the provision of national patriotic education for children and youth. In particular, the analysis of the tasks assigned to the Ministry and the authorities of the department of national patriotic education is necessary to determine the purpose of the national memory policy, i.e. consolidation of the Ukrainian nation, establishment of Ukrainian national and civil identity, formation of civil stability on the basis of national values, popularisation of the traditions of the spiritual and cultural identity of the Ukrainian people, the Ukrainian language, the heroics of the struggle for state independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, counteraction to anti-Ukrainian manifestations, etc. (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2014c). Since March 2023 the Ministry has been the main body in the system of central executive authorities, which ensures the formation and implementation of policies of establishing Ukrainian national and civil identity. To this end, a special Department was created within the Ministry, which include the Department of Policy Formation and Coordination and the Department of Program Implementation.

The Ministry of Defence of Ukraine also belongs to the system of central executive authorities that ensures the implementation of the state policy on national memory. Its competences include the implementation of measures to develop culture and spirituality in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the military patriotic education of citizens of Ukraine. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the task of the Ministry has also included ensuring the implementation of state policy on establishing the Ukrainian national and civil identity (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2014d).

In addition, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine is involved in the formation and implementation of policies on establishing the Ukrainian national and civic identity. It participates in events on national patriotic education, organises celebrations of memorable and historical dates, popularises military history, etc. (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2018). In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Ministry ensures the commemoration of war veterans, thus joining the state policy to form a national memory of the war and its heroes.

Given the multinational composition of Ukrainian society, the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience occupies an important place in the system of central executive authorities that ensure the implementation of the national memory policy in Ukraine. The activities of this central executive authority are guided directly by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine and relate to the formation and implementation of policies on interethnic relations, religion and the protection of the rights of indigenous peoples and

national minorities in Ukraine. Implementing the national memory policy in accordance with its competences, this service ensures cultural and linguistic development and contributes to the preservation of the identity of indigenous peoples and national minorities living in Ukraine (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2019b). In particular, in September 2023 the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the state target national-cultural programme Unity in Diversity until 2034, which provides for the implementation of this policy at the national and regional levels, taking into account the relevant international obligations of Ukraine (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2023).

The issue of national memory of the Ukrainian people in the international arena is represented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. Forming and implementing the state policy on foreign relations, the Ministry ensures the protection of Ukraine's national interests in the world and the development of relations with foreign states and international organisations. It also coordinates activities carried out by other executive authorities in this field (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2016). Such activities contribute to the popularisation of the national history and culture of the Ukrainian people and indigenous peoples of Ukraine, the development of relations with foreign Ukrainians and public associations in the world, and the expansion of the representation of the Ukrainian factor in the international arena.

Other central executive authorities can also be involved in some processes related to formation and/or implementation of the national memory policy although their direct participation in such activities is not enshrined in their regulations. They are the following: the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, the State Film Agency of Ukraine (coordinated by the Minister of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine), the State Tourism Development Agency of Ukraine (subordinate to the Ministry of Development of Communities, Territories and Infrastructure of Ukraine), etc.

For example, in accordance with its competences, the State Agency for Tourism Development of Ukraine can ensure the development of 'memory routes' by including places of memory that are outstanding for the Ukrainian people, and thus popularise national history, culture and traditions not only among the citizens of Ukraine, but among foreign tourists as well. In the academic community there are also developments on public administration in the field of tourism with proposals to isolate the socio-humanitarian vector of implementation of state policy associated with ethnographic, historical, cultural and other tourist resources of Ukraine (Havryliuk 2022). In addition, forming and implementing the state policy on national memory, the central executive authorities interact with local executive authorities.

Therefore, it is possible to claim that in Ukraine there is an extensive system of influence on the formation of the national policy of memory by central ex-

ecutive authorities. To improve the role of central executive authorities in the field of national memory policy in Ukraine, it is necessary to take a number of measures aimed at improving the efficiency, inclusiveness and innovativeness of their activities. In particular, expanding the competences of the Institute and providing it with additional resources for the implementation of more ambitious projects will increase the effectiveness of their activities. In particular, it is expedient that the formation and development of aspects of a unified memory policy for each ministry and other subordinate bodies of the central government be dealt with directly by the Institute. This will prevent legal conflicts and inconsistencies.

The creation of an interagency coordination council on national memory within the structure of the Institute will facilitate a coordinated policy and take into account the characteristics of each ministry for better collaboration between various central executive authorities. Amendments to existing regulations would help ensure more effective implementation of the national memory policy.

Moreover, it is reasonable to establish regional offices of the Institute to take into account local specifics and needs in the national memory policy implementation. This will promote the representation of different population groups in the formation of the national memory policy, including national minorities, women, youth and the historical narratives of different regions, thereby providing a more comprehensive approach to national memory.

Thus, prospects for the development and improvement of the role of central executive authorities in the field of national memory policy in Ukraine include expanding the competences of the Institute regarding the development of educational and information activities for each of the ministries. It is also important to involve the public in cooperation. This will ensure a more effective and comprehensive implementation of the state policy on national memory, contributing to the consolidation of Ukrainian society and the strengthening of national identity.

## Discussion

In the normative legal acts regulating state policy in Ukraine, there is no definition of the term 'national memory policy'. This gives rise to various interpretations in scientific and public discourse, especially taking into account the interdisciplinary nature of the concept of national memory.

The establishment of state policy on national memory in Ukraine started in the early 1990s, and in the mid-2000s its institutionalisation took place. From the very beginning, the term 'state policy on restoration and preservation of national memory' was used in legal documents (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2006). In 2013, the Institute, which at that time had the status of a research institution and carried out academic and analytical support of state

policy on national memory, prepared a dictionary of key terms which defined the concept of 'memory policy', 'state memory policy', 'memorial policy', etc., with the participation of historians (Kyrydon 2016).

Analysing the definitions available at that time in the Ukrainian academic literature, Babka (Babka 2014) defined the memory policy as a set of mechanisms, procedures and forms of interaction of subjects of the political process aimed at managing collective memory and as the purposeful activity of state authorities, parties, public organisations and individuals for managing public memory. Thus, the researcher proposed his own interpretation of the state memory policy. However, given the active participation of private structures and business in these processes, they should be added to the list of subjects of memory policy proposed by the scholar.

Furthermore, Ukrainian scientists paid attention to the analysis of definitions that are common in the academic and public discourse of other countries. So, Bondar (Bondar 2013) noted that these discourses are characterised by a wide range of issues that are related to the identity or to the search for the identity of the population, i.e., the state policy in the field of history, memorable places, culture of memory, historical consciousness, the ratio of history and memory.

Nevertheless, the formation by Ukrainian scholars of the conceptual apparatus in this area was undoubtedly influenced by national specifics and socio--political transformations. In particular, according to Kyrydon (Kyrydon 2015), the memory policy is built taking into account specific internal and external factors of the functioning of the state and the nature of political power; so, the implementation of this policy can minimise the impact of unfavourable factors for the development of the Ukrainian statehood (Kyrydon 2015). The change in socio-political reality, in her opinion, inevitably leads to the development and/ or transformation of the memory policy with the appropriate parameters for constructing an image of the past (Kyrydon 2020).

In modern conditions, researchers consider public memory policy to be a set of practices by which the state seeks to assert certain interpretations of historical events as dominant, and also performs symbolic, interpretive and identification functions (Ivanenko & Kryvoshein 2022). The importance of identification (with the national state and/or with the corresponding supranational entity) is also mentioned in the interdisciplinary analytical report of the National Institute for Strategic Studies 'Policy on historical memory in the context of national security of Ukraine' (Yablonskyi 2019). It defines the state memory policy as a system of goals and measures taken by the subject of this policy to create conditions for appropriate identification.

Thus, the memory policy constructs or sets the model and value-normative principles of identification, forms a kind of socio-cultural matrix for determining national identity, norms of national consolidation, and identification, etc.

(Kyrydon 2020). In this regard, in our opinion, it is appropriate to focus not so much on the national as on civil identity. Therefore, the national memory policy in Ukraine should aim to consolidate and develop the Ukrainian civil nation through the establishment of Ukrainian civil identity by developing the identity of the Ukrainian people and other peoples living in Ukraine, restoring and preserving their historical and cultural memory.

The situation regarding the definition of 'state policy' and 'public policy' is quite similar. In modern academic discourses in Ukraine there are significant differences in the interpretation of these terms. Due to improper attention to the essential component, these concepts are sometimes replaced by each other. According to Ukrainian scholars, one of the reasons that led to this situation was the ambiguous translation of the term 'public policy' into Ukrainian. At the same time, despite the differences, the relationship between these concepts is obvious. Therefore, Ukrainian researchers in the field of public administration use a combination 'state/public policy' (Honiukova & Kozakov 2018).

Some scholars refer to the specifics of the development of the Ukrainian society, in particular, the formation of civil society. This explains the transformation of the term 'public' from 'state' to 'public', 'civil', 'social'. In particular, back in 2000, Demyanchuk (2020) noted that the use of the term 'public policy' instead of 'state policy' is more generalising because the purpose of this policy should be to satisfy the interests of society as a whole, individual social groups and individuals, solving urgent and distressing problems, ensuring the development of components of social activity and the nation as a whole.

In the future, Ukrainian experts in the fields of public administration and political science in their scientific works continue to analyse various definitions of 'public policy' and offer their own interpretations and options for their application. For example, Puhkal and Homoliako (2017) believe that in the interpretation of the concept of public policy the term 'civil' in relation to politics is too broad and recommend using the term 'public'. They are convinced that the terms 'state policy' and 'public policy' can be both identical and different depending on the mechanisms of development.

In this context, it would be appropriate to refer to the statements of Andriyash (2013), who defines state policy as the direction of action (or inaction) of an authority or several public authorities that have the appropriate competences to solve a certain problem or a set of interdependent problems. So, public policy is the state's reaction to specific problems of society or groups of society (ibid.). In our case, this concerns problems related to national memory, which nowadays in Ukraine have an extremely high level of public interest.

The current system of public administration in Ukraine in the field of national memory ensures the formation and implementation of state policy. However, it is not stable and is constantly transforming, responding to the demands of a developing society. This causes changes in the legal acts regulating the activi-

ties of public authorities and also requires constant research, in particular the study of the experience of different countries of the world, especially the post--socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe (Preda 2023).

It is undeniable that the activities of executive authorities play a significant role in the formation and implementation of state policy aimed at meeting social needs and solving social problems (Teškevičius 2023; Borges & Ribeiro 2023). To this end, the executive authorities use the available tools and carry out various activities, while interacting with other subjects of public administration. Thus, they provide a state policy aimed at creating conditions for the most complete realisation of the functions of the state, observance of the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens, coordination of various groups of interests in society and between the state and society, and ensuring social development with appropriate resources (Kovbasiuk 2011). Moreover, exploring the rule-making activities of the central executive authorities, Baranenko (2020) emphasises their special place in the management system because they ensure the daily life of the state by implementing management activities. At the same time, he notes that each central executive authority, as part of the management system, can act effectively and perfectly realise its competences only within this system (ibid.).

However, the achievement of high-quality and effective functioning of the public administration system requires reforms, as Ukrainian scientists in the field of law and public administration Yosyfovych and Andrusyshyn (2018) constantly note. They emphasise the existence of a number of problems that prevent the creation of effective public administration, namely: insufficient legal support, legislative uncertainty about the responsibility of public authorities and their officials; lack of a mechanism for interaction and teamwork, ineffective management of innovative technologies, insufficient financial support, and low awareness of the population. These problems are gradually levelled, but the attempts to eliminate them do not completely succeed.

Many of these problems are observed in state policy on national memory. In particular, the analysis of the state and activities of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance gives grounds for arguing about the instability in financing, problems with staffing, unresolved issues regarding their own premises for the Institute and the Museum of the Revolution of Dignity, the arrangement of the building of the State Archive of the Institute, etc. For example, between 2016 and 2022, the range of funding from the state budget of the Institute's activities ranged from UAH 13.569 million to UAH 95.425 million (Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance 2024). Obviously, these problems only worsened after the beginning of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. Thus, in July 2023 the head of the Institute Anton Drobovich announced a reduction in funding and a large shortage of employees, which makes it impossible to simultaneously conduct as many projects as before the war (Myhal 2023).

At the same time, there are positive changes, for example, in the information support of management decisions, the use of innovative information technologies in the activities of authorities at different levels, etc., which is a modern world trend (Doran et al. 2023; Kawabata & Camargo 2023; Mahlangu & Ruhode 2021; Umbach & Tkalec 2022). Thus, one of the successful ones was the use of electronic applications for the implementation of decolonisation processes. In July 2022 the online application of public services 'Diia' was used to conduct a survey of citizens on the image of the coat of arms of the USSR on the shield of the Motherland Monument in Kyiv (the coat of arms was replaced in August 2023). Through the electronic application 'Kyiv Digital', the Kyiv City State Administration carried out the survey of the city residents on the changes of the names of streets, avenues, metro stations, etc., in the capital of Ukraine.

It is undeniable that constant social development requires dynamism in making managerial decisions in the field of national memory, improving the management system and innovations in regulatory and legal support. This, in turn, requires new research on the world experience and establishing cooperation with foreign institutions and international organisations operating in this field.

## Conclusions

Ukraine has an extensive system of executive authorities which ensures the formation and implementation of state policy on national memory. It is represented by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, central and local executive authorities. Since 2006 the functions of the state in the formation and implementation of the national memory policy have been entrusted to the central executive body, i.e. the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. From 2006 to 2023, the status, subordination and competences of the Institute underwent significant changes, but its main tasks regarding the national memory policy remained fundamental. Currently, the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance is the central executive authority implementing the state policy on national memory whose activities are directed and coordinated by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine through the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine.

Compliance with the provisions of regulatory legal acts that determine the distribution of competences and regulate the relationship between authorities is an integral factor in the functioning of the system of subjects of public administration in the field of national memory, like any other management system. An effective state policy on national memory is possible only if a strategy and clear mechanisms for its implementation by state institutions are developed with the obligatory involvement of the public.

This aspect concerns the relationship of public authorities at all levels with local governments and civil society institutions. This not only ensures the qualitative formation and implementation of the national memory policy, but also

facilitates adhering to the principles of openness and transparency. In addition, public involvement in strategic planning, development of the legal framework and management activities is important from the point of view of taking into account public opinion and satisfying public interests in the field of national memory. Hence, it is necessary to establish productive cooperation and build trust between the government and society.

Furthermore, the formation of a holistic understanding of national memory is important in state policy, which is based on the most significant historical events, facts and personalities for the majority of the Ukrainian society. The need for a normative definition and scientific justification of the essence and content of the term 'national memory policy' remains relevant nowadays. In addition, a prerequisite for the effective implementation of the national memory policy is the public imperative that will oblige citizens to know and remember history, observe and honour traditions. In our opinion, the existence of the state programme 'National Memory' would make it possible to improve and develop a holistic national policy on national memory in Ukraine. Moreover, the development and adoption of the Law of Ukraine on the principles of state policy on national memory is on the agenda.

In the context of socio-political changes and reforms of management taking place currently in Ukraine under the influence of internal and external factors, more and more challenges appear in the national memory policy. This, in turn, requires not only regulatory support, but also institutionalisation, financing, information, etc. In particular, it is necessary to consider the acceleration of European integration processes and the new challenges associated with Ukraine's possible rapid acquisition of membership in the European Union (on 23 June 2022 the European Parliament decided to grant Ukraine the status of candidate for EU membership).

Therefore, the question of revising the system of public administration in the field of national memory is relevant, given the compliance with European standards for the formation and implementation of European collective memory. This stipulates the need for research into the world practice of implementing memory policy with the possible further application of positive results in Ukrainian realities, with adaptation to the national characteristics of Ukraine. Further scientific research will be aimed at studying local executive authorities and local self-government bodies that ensure the formation and implementation of the national memory policy at the regional level.

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